

Bella

Fortitude. Born out of adversity.

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Prologue

The world had always been big in Bella's eyes. With its vast horizons and mysteries yet to be discovered, it held promises of adventures and dreams yet to be realised. But now, it was a vast wasteland. In the blink of an eye, everything had changed, turned upside down by forces beyond anyone's comprehension.

She remembered the days before the chaos, back when her most significant concerns were the bullies at school, who always seemed to have something to say about her academic achievements or her skills in archery, swimming, and fencing, even tipped to compete at the Olympics one day. Bella was an anomaly, a beacon of excellence in a world of mediocrity. And because of that, she became a target. Yet, these tribulations at school had forged a resilience in her that would serve her well in the days to come.

It was during one of their after-school research sessions that Bella and Matt stumbled upon the warning signs. Matt, after hearing about the forthcoming solar light show and with his insatiable curiosity, had led Bella down a rabbit hole of data and forecasts. Their discoveries were terrifying. A solar flare of unprecedented magnitude was on its way, threatening to disrupt the very fabric of their existence. They spent countless hours studying the event, preparing for its arrival. But nature, ever unpredictable, had more in store than just a solar flare. Another cataclysmic event, dwarfing the flare in its potential devastation, loomed on the horizon, a CME.

The weight of this knowledge was crushing. It was one thing to anticipate and prepare for a single disaster. It was another to face the unimaginable truth that their world was on the brink of collapsing not once, but twice, in rapid succession.

Driven by a newfound sense of urgency and purpose, Bella and Matt started their planning. They began making preparations for the worst-case scenarios, gathering supplies, charting escape routes, and, most importantly, recruiting allies for the inevitable journey ahead.

Among these allies was Daz, like themselves. He was a teenager, who would play a pivotal role in the coming days. There was Alex, the enigmatic mechanic, whose skills would prove invaluable. Two friends, both who thought the other dead, and Matt's father, who bankrolled their plans with a large dose of scepticism. Together, they would face unimaginable challenges, forge unlikely friendships, and confront the darkest aspects of humanity.

In the harrowing days that followed, Bella's world was turned on its head. She had faced death not once, not twice, but thrice in a single day. These near-death experiences shattered her former perceptions and rebuilt them anew. The girl who had once been preoccupied with school bullies now grappled with life-altering decisions that would shape the fate of those around her. Choices that she would have found unimaginable mere weeks earlier became her new reality.

The journey to find a safe haven was fraught with danger. Every step they took was shadowed by threats, both from the shattered environment and from those who sought to exploit the new world order for their gain. But amid the challenges, there were glimmers of hope—moments of pure human connection that reminded them of the inherent goodness that still existed.

As the group navigated this post-apocalyptic landscape, they faced heartbreaking losses. Friends, allies, and loved ones were taken from them, leaving voids that could never truly be filled. But with each loss came new bonds, forged in the crucible of shared adversity.

Their realisation, it wasn't just about survival. It was about the transformation, of individuals and of society. The events that had transpired changed them, shaping their outlooks, beliefs, and aspirations. The world they had known was gone, but in its place was the promise of a new beginning, a chance to rebuild, to learn from the past, and to forge a better future.

Chapter one.

The Fencing Lesson.

Glistening with determination, perspiration traced a path down Bella's forehead, testament to her intense, hour-long fencing training. Weary yet alert, she cautiously stepped into the changing room, her eyes darting around to confirm the welcoming solitude of the space. Bella, though only fourteen, bore a history marred by a relentless year of bullying from two peers, driven, perhaps, by a toxic blend of jealousy and misunderstanding.

Elevated a year above due to her extraordinary academic prowess—most of her grades boasted a stellar A-plus—and her outstanding athletic capabilities, Bella had earned accolades such as the northeast champion in archery and a runner-up in the regional fencing competition. Despite these impressive achievements, or perhaps because of them, she found herself navigating the treacherous waters of teenage jealousy and rivalry, with her exceptionalities casting her in a harsh, isolating spotlight among her classmates.

Bella often sought solace in her own company, but also found an unwavering ally in Mathew - or Matt, as he staunchly preferred. He was a genuine geek, a term he wore as a badge of honour, boasting a photographic memory and an intellect that seemed to know no bounds. At a year her senior, Matt shared not just a grade with Bella, but a profound friendship, devoid of romantic entanglements, yet rich with shared interests and mutual respect.

Their hours outside of school were often whiled away in the virtual worlds of Fortnite, where they navigated adventures and battles together. Additionally, their shared artistic bent provided another platform for their camaraderie. With pencils and paper, they'd breathe life into their favourite game characters, their creations revealing their individual inclinations—Bella, lost in the delicate and ethereal strokes of Japanese art, and Matt, immersed in the intricate, mechanised world of robot soldiers.

Their friendship offered a sanctuary, a place where they could be unapologetically themselves, safeguarded from the external judgments and torments of their peers. And in that creative, digital space, they found not only an escape but a realm where their true selves could shine unabated.

Bella tread softly toward the farthest cubicle, her steps barely whispering against the cool, tiled floor, and delicately twisted the shower knob. The water, notorious for its initial chilly embrace, began its slow journey toward warmth. The delay offered her a precious window to divest herself of the sweat-soaked fencing gear, laying out her clothes meticulously for a swift escape post-shower. Her eyes darted once more across the expanse of the changing room - it remained a secluded haven.

As she shed her attire, she momentarily consulted her phone, hopeful for a message from her father. He and her brother Bobby were visiting her grandparents, and though her father knew she'd be enveloped in the fencing world until late, the lack of messages carved a tiny, anxious space in her chest. Nevertheless, she trusted he would call later when the night had fully drawn its curtain.

A towel, clutched from her neatly organised belongings, was left perched on the bench adjacent to her chosen shower cubicle. Bella willingly submitted to the cool cascade, an invigorating contrast to the heated flush still lingering from her rigorous training with Mr Crabs.

Mr Crabs, the esteemed fencing teacher, made the journey to the school biweekly to foster Bella's burgeoning talent. His eyes saw potential within her that promised not only success but a fierce competitor for the Commonwealth Games in the upcoming year. Bella had hurdles yet to clear: two crucial competitions, both local and national, lingered on the horizon. Even a secondary placement in the nationals harboured the potential to secure her a reserve spot, but Bella, in her heart, yearned for victory.

As the water gradually kissed warmth onto her skin, she allowed her thoughts to meander through the maze of future competitions, tactical decisions, and dreams gently marinated in adolescent hope. Bella allowed herself to be momentarily cocooned in the solace of the shower, momentarily insulated from the exterior world of judgment and expectation, preparing herself, unbeknownst, for whatever lay beyond the changing room's doors.

Bella, encapsulated in a world where water droplets became temporary companions, languished momentarily in the soothing warmth of the now-temperate stream. The liquid tranquillity enveloped her, presenting a brief refuge from the world outside the cascading curtain. She allowed the soap to glide across her skin, the water tenderly caressing away the suds. Although she yearned to linger, prudence whispered, urging a timely exit. As she began to rinse, an abrupt, searing pain launched an uninvited assault upon her back.

Heart lurching, Bella pivoted to confront Jill and Mandy, her persistent persecutors. Before defence became an option, a subsequent, painful blow collided with her stomach. The weapon of choice, a towel with a bar of soap cruelly entwined, was wielded mercilessly by Jill. Bella's attempt to duck resulted in a slip, plummeting her onto the harsh shower floor. Mandy, now employing a soaked towel as a makeshift whip, aimed stinging lashes at Bella's defensively folded arms.

In a pivotal moment of chaos, as Jill stooped to retrieve the slipped soap, Bella summoned strength from unseen depths and heaved herself upright. Jill, in malicious preparation for another strike, re-wrapped the soap within its towel shroud. Bracing herself, Bella extended her arms, preparing to intercept the imminent attack. Suddenly, an eruption of sparks as fluorescent tubes detonated, followed by a successive explosion of others, engendered a cascade of flickering destruction around them.

Bella's mind danced urgently to an anime film she and Matt had recently shared. Embodying a superheroine, whose power mysteriously ignited chaotic explosions, she boldly declared the uttered incantation from the film, "Out, or you are next!"

Fear congealed in the eyes of Jill and Mandy as the hand dryer violently combusted into flames. Bella, with a display of twisted fingers, invoked the illusion of control as tubular heaters forcefully detached from the walls. The bullies, now hostages to their astonishment and burgeoning terror, needed no further prompting. Fleeing, their shrieks pierced the dimming chaos, proclaiming Bella a demonic witch.

Alone amidst the smoky remnants of bewildering havoc, Bella was tethered to a troubling reality. She had no dominion over the mechanical malfunctions, prompting an unsettling question of what, or who, had invoked the chaos. Darkness, with the windows shrouded in spray paint – a protective measure following peeping incidents that were oddly commended by the headmaster – consumed the changing room.

Groping through the shadows, Bella navigated to her locker, gratefully avoiding glass shards underfoot. Gathering her carefully arranged clothes and additional belongings, she retreated to the rear toilets, ensuring refuge against a potential return of her tormentors. Once dry and clad in attire selected for potential evasion, including her sturdy boots in lieu of school shoes, she loaded her fencing gear into her rucksack. The fencing foil, however, was returned to the secure shelter of her locker, safeguarded by a lock, before she cautiously emerged into the unknown beyond the changing room.

Bella's forehead became a canvas for beads of sweat, painted not by exertion but with burgeoning dread. A nagging question etched itself into her mind: were Jill and Mandy, embodiments of her torment, lurking outside the door, concealed within the folds of the seemingly desolate school? A throbbing reminder from her kidneys echoed the pain from their previous encounter, and Bella, no

stranger to resolve, grappled with the tendrils of fear winding within her. The prospect of additional pain intertwined with a nascent nausea within her stomach: to wait or to act?

An alternative path whispered potential safety - the sports hall, despite its typically locked exit, held a small, wired glass window that promised a clandestine peek into the adjacent hallway. It was an option that weighed favourably against a potential ambush within the treacherous terrain of the changing rooms.

Carefully navigating through the glass-strewn floor, a cacophony of crunches underfoot, Bella approached the sports hall door, her movements calculated and cautious. The tentative creak of the door unveiled – emptiness. Relief briefly brushed against her anxiety as she meticulously felt her way down the unnervingly elongated, shadow-draped hall. Her fingers, gentle explorers in the consuming dark, eventually found the end door. Opening it, her eyes were met with an abrupt, dazzling brilliance as sunlight liberally poured through the sports hall windows.

After a moment allowing her eyes to negotiate with the stark contrast of light, Bella, her Doc Martens incongruently paired with bare legs protruding from her school skirt, ventured onto the wooden parquet floor. The echoes of her boots conversed with the silent vastness of the space. A sudden realisation unnerved her already heightened senses - shards of glass were scattered like threatening confetti across the floor, smoke gently curled in ominous tendrils, and above, flames quietly danced upon the ceiling. The expected urgent wail of the fire alarm was eerily absent, leaving the unfolding danger undiscovered by any potential saviours.

The door at the opposite end of the hall beckoned as a potential exit, yet the slowly descending debris, now gently kissed by flames, presented a perilous obstacle. Bella's thoughts teetered between risking passage through the quietly ferocious fire or retracing her steps back to the potential for a malicious ambush at the hands of Jill and Mandy. Her resolve, tested by the seemingly dire alternatives, began to forge a path within her, sculpted by both the physical and metaphorical fires surrounding her.

Bella's teeth clenched in resolute determination as she propelled herself towards the double doors, intending to violently herald her exit and defy any potential rebuke from the school's authorities. After all, with flames insidiously licking the ceiling of the sports hall, her unconventional exit would surely be the least of their concerns. But her forceful momentum was abruptly rebuffed by the unyielding doors, and she was sent sprawling backwards, colliding with the harsh reality and the hard floor simultaneously. Locked.

The escalating, sinister dance of the flames at the other end of the hall began to threaten her original entry point, narrowing her viable options to a perilous few. With a haste driven by mounting desperation, Bella surged to her feet, disregarding the burgeoning pain blossoming across her backside, and sprinted back through the door into the abyss of the dark corridor. In her frantic rush, her ribs became intimately acquainted with a cupboard door handle, eliciting a pained gasp that momentarily stole her breath. But this new, aching contusion had no time to be pondered, the burgeoning accumulation of bruises merely bystanders in her perilous predicament.

As Bella's hand hovered over the changing room door handle, a searing heat pressed against her palm, causing a hesitation that might have saved her life.

“Stop, think,” she quietly coached herself amidst the encroaching chaos, “it’s hot. Could there be fire lurking behind it?” Acknowledging the potential inferno behind the door, she hesitated, realising that recklessly granting access might invite a ferocious wall of flames to engulf her. Once more, her hand cautiously approached the door, recoiling with an involuntary exclamation, “ouch, that's fracking hot.”

In this heated moment of oppressive entrapment, a heavy realisation settled over Bella: she was cornered, imprisoned by the flames, and her prior inability to confront Jill and Mandy. A frustrated scream, potent and futile, escaped her, dissolving into the encroaching smoke. A convoluted soliloquy of desperation whispered from her lips, “I-I-I need to reach the other door before it's too late, then get to the double doors and somehow signal for help.”

With the plan barely formulated, she burst back into the sports hall, now a grandiose spectacle of cascading flames and descending fiery debris. Dodging the plunging fragments of the burning ceiling, she managed to reach the far side of the hall and peered through the small window, her eyes scanning for any semblance of salvation. Only emptiness greeted her, its silence punctuated only by the voracious crackling of the ceiling above.

The insidious creep of smoke began its suffocating descent, triggering coughs that wracked her frame, and Bella's thoughts fractured into fleeting musings of regret and fragments of memories never to be realised. Why had she chosen to step into the school today? The alternative - a day at her grandparents with her baby brother - now seemed an impossible dream, as distant as the silent world beyond the engulfing inferno.

Chapter Two.

Mathew.

Matthew, comfortably nestled in the cosy basement of his house—a sanctuary where his imaginative playfulness unfolded — found himself engrossed in a DVD game, his fingers dancing rhythmically across the controller. His mind momentarily dislodged from the digital world when he noticed the ticking hands of the clock nearing six. A pang of realisation hit him: Bella, his ever-so-talented fencing friend with dreams reaching the heights of the Commonwealth Games, perhaps even the Olympic pinnacles, would be over by half-past seven. Her plan to do ‘some stuff at home,’ as she casually phrased it, lingered in his thoughts.

He paused, saving his game with meticulous care before unplugging the console, suddenly conscious of time slipping through his fingers. Bella would have wrapped up her rigorous after-school fencing session and would soon be enroute. Reminding himself of a previous, slightly embarrassing incident at Bella's place, he made a quick pit-stop at the bathroom, determined to ensure that any lingering odours would have ample time to dissipate before her arrival.

Matthew harboured genuine admiration for Bella, an affection veiled by his pubescent awkwardness and the bitter realisation of his own imperfections: his blemish-speckled face, the goofy teeth he sought to hide behind tight-lipped smiles, and the large ears that he felt were perpetually on display. His heart harboured an innocent wish, albeit cloaked in the melancholy of unspoken words and the belief that a girl as radiant and determined as Bella would never gaze upon a skinny teenager like him with romantic eyes. Bella, in his eyes, embodied perfection. Her athletic silhouette, the gentle kindness that inhabited her features, and her ability to draw smiles from even the most stoic faces rendered her seemingly unattainable.

A gentle sigh escaped Matthew as he decided to meet her at her place, just in case she needed an extra pair of hands. The brief journey next door would only take a moment, but first, a few preparations were in order. With a mental checklist for their upcoming trip and the arrival of his father ticking down in his mind, Matthew whispered a question to himself, exploring the depths of his memory for the weekend plans.

“Now, what was it that I’m doing this weekend?” He pondered, furrowing his brow. Then, as if illuminated by a subtle eureka moment, he vocalised, “Ah, I know!” The thoughts of spending joyous hours with Bella, engaged in friendly battles on Fortnite, flickered through his mind. How he wished things were simpler, where his affections could be laid bare without the veils of unspoken truths and vulnerability.

In a conscientious effort to sidestep any potential disputes with his father later on, Matthew headed downstairs to the kitchen, where a modest stack of dishes awaited him. He rolled up his sleeves, in a view to dive into the suds and get this final chore out of the way.

Chors now done, Matthew retreated back to his bedroom, a familiar space where he could escape and seek solitude. He fetched the cream for his spots, taking a moment to liberally apply it to each rebellious eruption on his skin. Casting a glance at his 'comic'—as his dad teasingly dubbed it—he allowed himself a brief interlude with the magazine. PC Gamer was no comic; he’d vehemently assert in those light-hearted father-son banters. Yet, his dad's playful retorts about ‘Super Mario’ being comic-like always lingered, bouncing back with a teasing smirk that signalled an endless, amiable debate. Eventually, Matthew surrendered to the unwinnable argument, storing his magazines meticulously and then veering towards the bathroom to address his teeth.

Suddenly, an eerie crackling sound pervaded the otherwise tranquil environment, followed by a sinuous hissing akin to a serpent, and sporadic pops. His heart drummed against his ribs as he traced the sound, eyes darting until they settled upon a harrowing sight through the landing window: sparks,

like fiery serpents, dancing violently amongst the power lines. Adrenaline coursed through Matthew's veins as he descended the stairs with hurried footfalls, drawn towards another crackling echo emanating from the kitchen. Shadows flirted with the dim light, forming an ambiguous silhouette. Was that a torch? A faint light, perhaps?

Hesitation anchored him momentarily. Confronting an intruder was not within his realm of experience. The inaccessible phone, rendered useless by the still-dormant service, intensified his predicament. His eyes darted around, finally settling on a small green fire extinguisher—originally intended for the car—now conscripted as an impromptu weapon. Its weight reassured him somewhat.

Moving stealthily through the dining room, Matthew navigated past the table, pressing himself against the wall adjacent to the door, heart hammering wildly against his ribcage. His hands, trembling ambassadors of his fear, clutched the extinguisher. His entire being vibrated with a mix of adrenaline and burgeoning fear. The relief of an empty bladder offered a minor consolation, eliminating one potential embarrassment amidst the escalating tension. Suddenly, a crash shattered the apprehensive silence.

An instinctual urge propelled him forward, extinguisher raised high, a primal scream tearing from his lungs. Yet, at the precipice of confrontation, hesitation clawed him back. Terror intertwined with a poignant self-doubt, whispering inadequacy into his trembling form. "I can do this, I can do this, I can, I can," he muttered to himself, a mantra seeking to steady his resolve amidst the engulfing uncertainty.

The crackling sound intensified, each snap echoing louder and more urgently than before, reminiscent of twigs snapping beneath a heavy boot. Matthew, driven by a fusion of fear and adrenaline, surged forward, his scream piercing the atmosphere with fierce determination. As he crossed the threshold, the haze of smoke and the glowing embrace of flames met his gaze. To his shock and relief, his earlier assumptions had been amiss. There was no intruder. Instead, his father's beloved kitchen was being consumed by a ravenous fire.

He gripped the fire extinguisher tighter, grateful for the serendipity of his chosen 'weapon.' His fingers fumbled over the pin, pulling it free. Heart pounding, he aimed the nozzle at the base of the flames, squeezing the handle in an attempt to suppress the inferno. The contrast of the cool chemical mist battling the fiery beast painted a vivid scene of chaos and urgency. Matthew's focused expression, intensified by the dancing light of the flames, reflected the weight of the task before him: saving his home from the ravaging fire.

Chapter Three.

Alex.

Alex, engrossed in his demanding task, diligently worked overtime in the repair shop of the council depot, his hands navigating through the inner mechanisms of a snow plough marred by a malfunctioning part. The work was gruelling, having occupied him for countless hours already, yet the horizon still held numerous more before he would conclude. Relocating from Scotland, where he'd lodged with his uncle following the tragic demise of his parents in a sorrowful accident a year prior, Alex sought not only employment but a semblance of autonomy; he had no intention of indefinitely accepting his uncle's generosity.

His uncle, Max, was a solitary yet resilient figure, residing in an almost off-grid sanctuary on an island on Loch Loman. This homestead, a quaint croft, also hosted an ancient, meticulously restored lighthouse, a testament to many years of diligent work and perseverance. Max, bereft of children and having lost his young wife early, never found it within himself to envision life with another. A seasoned fabricator welder in the shipyards on the River Tyne, he found a sort of peace in his labour until the inevitable closure of the yard. Max was prudent with his substantial redundancy package, strategically investing it in various ventures that burgeoned prosperously, enabling him to purchase his croft and maintain a comfortable livelihood, devoid of any necessitation for further employment.

Alex, wincing slightly and uttering a muted curse, felt the familiar sting as the spanner once again betrayed him, causing his knuckles to rattle against the formidable truck. Opting to work in the antiquated inspection pit, Alex always prioritised safety, especially over utilising the unreliable, creaky four-post lift hovering ominously over the old pit. That contraption, even with its new electronic safety locks, had an unnerving tendency to gradually descend during operation – a precarious quirk Alex wisely chose to avoid, especially when solitary. The pit, despite warnings of potentially hazardous fume accumulation, was deemed the safer alternative given the vehicle was not petrol-fuelled and would remain inert during the repair. Alex's calculation of risk placed him firmly on the side of the pit's relative safety. The only snag was the need to utilise the lift to negotiate his ingress and egress from beneath the hefty snow plough.

“Time for a respite,” Alex murmured to himself, acknowledging a well-deserved break for tea and a brief sojourn to the toilet. As he meticulously washed his hands – an action necessitated before and after his relief due to his aversion to rubber gloves – his reflection in the mirror presented a familiar sight: dark, oil-soaked red hair, streaks of black smeared across what his uncle often touted as his ‘striking good looks,’ and bright, blue eyes, now bloodshot and weary from persistent irritation. He pondered his facial hair, questioning whether to allow his beard to return or to maintain a clean shave, although he conceded either choice would inevitably become equally coated in oil.

Alex relished the comforting embrace of a warm cup of tea and the satisfying simplicity of his sandwiches, a humble reprieve in the midst of a sea of aging, stubborn metal. His muscles slightly uncoiled as the nourishment began to weave through him, fuelling him for the upcoming bout against the time-worn plough. He couldn't quite untangle the reason behind his agreement to labour on a Saturday, and yet here he was, consigned to the toil, his hands destined to further blacken against the decayed innards of not just one, but two antique machines. The road sweeper loomed in his near future, a dusty spectre whose anticipated filth had Alex mentally betting against the likelihood of it having ever met a pressure washer.

A sigh sailed from his lips, yet within it lingered a note of relief. For the additional hours stitched into his week, whispered promises of being able to cradle that desired case for his compound crossbow soon. And those hunting bolts—those could now transition from mere thoughts into tangible tools. An idea, bright and promising, flickered in Alex's mind, nudging the sullen clouds of his tedious task slightly aside. He could use the upcoming hour to fashion some points on the lathe, constructing

them with the same meticulous care he'd learned during the precious moments alongside his uncle. Creating the stems and flight from dowels and feathers of crows or chickens would be an endeavour for another day, a practice steeped in memory and skill, a nod to times less permeated by cumbersome machinery.

The workshop, once populated with the clatter of tools and muffled conversations, now exhaled silence, its occupants having abandoned it to the cradle of the weekend. Alex had become its solitary inhabitant. He mentally allocated his remaining hours: one for the points, two for the truck, weaving a plan that could see him crossing the threshold of his home by eight-thirty. With his bike as his steed and the streets draped in quiet abandonment, he could traverse the other side of Leeds in a swift half-hour.

Dipping into the scrap metal bin, Alex discovered a wealth of brass rod offcuts. His hands, skilled and assured, set to work at the lathe, paring each piece down to its destined diameter, sculpting points with practiced precision. Each one, upon completion, was gently placed in his bag, a little treasure of his own making. The lathe was then cleaned, its tools cradled back into their rightful places, as Alex, a custodian of order amidst the chaos of the workshop, ensured everything was as it should be.

Raising the lift, which had surrendered to gravity in under an hour, he once again surrendered himself to the pit's confines, wrestling with the stubborn bolts of the differential. A part of him clung to a fragile hope that once disassembled, the reassembling would weave a tapestry of ease into his tomorrow, a day he envisaged having all to himself in the workshop's silent expanses.

Extraction of the last prop shaft bolt unfolded as an enduring battle, but eventually, it relented, relinquishing its stubborn hold. The diff, bathing in a lubricative sea of surrounding oil, capitulated with comparatively minor resistance. No more scuffs adorned Alex's knuckles, a small triumph in the mechanical ordeal. Positioning the cradle upon the jack, he marshalled it and its supporting base beneath the diff, elevating it until the weight was tenderly cradled. The final two bolts, now yielding effortlessly beneath his fingers, were dispatched, followed by a gentle rattling of the diff until it seceded, its mass embraced by the jack, then gingerly lowered.

Alex, fingertips caressing the lift button cable, elevated the truck sufficiently to liberate the jack and diff from beneath, withdrawing them from the lift base's vicinity. His tools, once wiped down with a diligence born of habitual care, returned to their toolbox sanctuary. The toolbox slid from under the truck, propelled with a determined push to safeguard it from the descending lift and to carve a path for Alex's exit. His hand dived back beneath to retrieve his socket set when an unexpected darkness swallowed the workshop whole.

Absent of windows, the workshop offered no refuge from the enveloping black. The lights hadn't merely extinguished – they had exploded in a shower of shattering glass, cascading down like a malevolent rain. Instinctively, Alex surged upward, his head violently colliding with a cross member of the truck. The lift, too, had succumbed, surrendering to gravity's insistent pull. At over six feet tall, the compressed space beneath the descended truck was a tight cage, and now his head, ablaze with pain, screamed in agonised rebellion. His legs faltered, crumbling beneath him, and darkness embraced him once more.

When consciousness threaded back through Alex, a frail shard of light punctured the gloom, birthed from the minuscule skylight. It painted a meagre square of visibility on the floor, casting a twilight semblance across the workshop. As his eyes adjusted, absorbing the scant light, he reached for the lift control button, an attempt met with futile silence. The workshop exhaled an eerie, profound silence, a tomb-like isolation with no salvation until Monday morning.

Confined, unable to fully stand, Alex was ensnared beneath this metallic behemoth for an impending two days. A spectral scent of smoke whispered through the dimness; its origin concealed

yet ominously present. As realisation coiled around him, a question, steeped in a chilling dread, nestled into his thoughts: just how perilous was his predicament?

Chapter Four.

Rachel.

Rachel, buoyed by the anticipatory thrill of the weekend, stepped through her front door, the remnants of her half-working Friday trailing behind her. While her colleagues in sales faced the prospect of a weekend tethered to their desks, Rachel revelled in the luxury of a free afternoon, one that promised the warm company of a cherished friend.

Brenda, her college companion and once-roommate, was slated to emerge from the train in just a few short hours, and Rachel's thoughts lingered on a special culinary preparation: a thick, hearty soup that had always found favour with Brenda. Though neither woman subscribed to vegetarianism, their palates often leaned towards a vegetarian menu, perhaps a subtle rebellion against the expected or merely a shared, unspoken preference.

Their friendship, forged amidst the collegiate chaos four years prior, had endured with a gentle constancy. According to Brenda, their initial meeting was a mere 'bump' in a corridor. In reality, it had been an exuberant collision, their pathways intersecting in the very corridor that housed their future shared dorm room.

Brenda emanated a joyful vitality, her perpetual smile persevering even through her misaligned teeth. Both women navigated the currents of life without parental anchors, raised instead by loving grandparents. They had woven a pact, one that prioritised education and sidestepped romantic entanglements with boys—a choice made easier by their own self-perceived lack of allure and resultant shyness.

Though petite in stature, both women cast significant ambitions into their futures. Their long, auburn waves cascaded down their backs, glasses perched upon their noses, plain and unadorned, mirroring their self-assessment as unremarkable. Academia was where they sought distinction, and although they both emerged with honours, their occupational dreams were dampened by a barren job market.

Brenda, whose grandmother and last familial tether was severed a year prior, scraped together a modest existence, reluctantly tethered to a job at a supermarket in York. Struggling amidst financial precarity, she had been forcefully ejected from her council house, deemed 'not entitled' to remain within its comforting walls after her grandmother's passing. Rachel, after losing both grandparents in a heart-wrenching, rapid succession, found herself in Leeds, navigating a career in an estate agency—a divergence from her dreams, yet a necessary employment.

Now, after a year apart, the impending reunion of the two friends promised a respite, a return to the familiar camaraderie that had once been their daily reality. Both resided in their own flats, the spectre of financial ruin held momentarily at bay. Yet, neither had ventured into romantic entanglements, adhering instead to a path that seemed, to them, naturally destined.

After generously serving El Gordo, her plump and perpetually insistent cat, a hearty portion of his favoured chilled, soft food coupled with a side of crispy biscuits, Rachel enthusiastically embarked on her culinary adventure, keenly chopping a colourful array of root vegetables. They tumbled into the slow cooker, a cascade of vibrant, earthy hues, mingling with a crumbled stock cube and a carefully measured amount of water. Her hands then busied themselves with the fresh, crusty French sticks, setting them aside to later bathe in the warmth of the oven after retrieving Brenda from the station.

Next, onions, celery, tomatoes, and fresh mushrooms found themselves under her meticulous knife, before joining their vegetable companions in the pot. The zesty kick of red chilli flakes and

various seasonings were sprinkled, lending their bold aromas to the concoction. Stirring vigorously, Rachel replaced the lid, her mind already drifting to her next task.

Her cosy armchair embraced her as she sipped a freshly brewed cup of coffee, her eyes scanning the pages of a free local magazine collected earlier from the nearby newsagent. It was brimming with updates and advertisements about the myriad of events sprinkled throughout Leeds in the upcoming weeks. Her heart fluttered with delight upon confirming that the antique lace exhibition, a spectacle she was certain would captivate Brenda, was still gracefully adorning the Leeds art gallery.

"Yes, yes," Rachel couldn't help but mutter triumphantly to herself, "it's on for the rest of the month. Tomorrow we go." Her fingers, wielding a yellow highlighter, danced across the pages, illuminating select ads, forming a tentative plan for their weekend adventures. Though time and finances would ultimately sculpt their itinerary, Rachel harboured a hopeful spark that they could weave through one or two of these exciting opportunities.

A gentle slumber unexpectedly enveloped Rachel, her eyelids surrendering to a brief, peaceful catnap. When they fluttered open, the clock greeted her with numbers that eased her initial pang of panic: 4:40. With Brenda's train not gracing the station until six, Rachel found solace in the abundance of time still cradled in her hands. A leisurely thirty-minute stroll to the station, plus an additional fifteen-minute buffer against any early arrival, sketched out in her mental timetable.

Nestled on her lap was El Gordo, the robust and undeniably astute ginger cat, sprang to his feet, initiating a rhythmic kneading with his paws, a persistent ritual that beckoned Rachel's attention and touch. His action bore the silent, yet poignant question: who ever said cats were unintelligent? For in the world, as perceived through feline eyes, humans were the cherished pets, not the sovereign owners. And indeed, El Gordo knew this universal truth down to his whiskers.

El Gordo, this assertively affectionate ball of fur, had been a unique inheritance from the previous tenant of the apartment. Although Rachel had never been a caretaker to a cat before, her attempts to re-home him proved fruitless, tethering them together in an unconventional companionship.

The former tenant, an elderly woman now residing in a care facility, had installed a cat flap upon the balcony door and habituated El Gordo to a litter igloo upon the balcony, a clever stratagem to quarantine any undesirable aromas outside of the living space. Rachel learned, through whispers from a neighbour, that the old woman had an unorthodox, albeit hilarious, method of discarding the contents of the litter tray. She'd nonchalantly toss it over the balcony, heedless of the unsuspecting pedestrians far below from the twenty-fourth floor.

This chunky, unapologetically pampered creature understood the art of manipulation impeccably, skilfully schooling Rachel rather than being tamed himself, even if it took a smidgen longer due to her slightly higher human intellect.

"Well, my rotund, indulged, unappreciative feline," Rachel affectionately addressed him, her voice wrapped in a gentle yet playfully exasperated tone, "I must attire myself. We are anticipating a guest, and she will undoubtedly shower you with adulation. Until then, you'll need to navigate your own diversions, Mr El Gordo." With a blend of reluctance and affection, she gently placed him down, retreating to embrace the day's attire and the forthcoming reunion with Brenda.

After mindfully selecting her evening's ensemble, laying out casual jeans, a snug sweater, playful red and white sneakers, and her cherished French cashmere maroon beret on the bed, Rachel enveloped herself in the warm embrace of the shower. Memories of her grandmother, who had lovingly bestowed the beret upon her as a college initiation gift, waltzed through her mind, adding an extra layer of warmth to the cascading water. Her attire for the evening sought to balance comfort

with a dash of playful elegance, ensuring that she could meet Brenda with a relaxed and genuine smile, unfettered by the constraints of her formal, albeit slightly sweaty, work attire.

Rachel's apartment filled with the savoury aroma of the simmering soup, a comforting scent that wrapped around her like a warm embrace. Her cat, El Gordo, his culinary needs satiated, curled up for a nap, occasionally flicking an ear in response to the occasional aroma emanating from the kitchen.

Refreshed and ensconced in her chosen ensemble, Rachel cast a final glance around her apartment, ensuring that everything was in order for Brenda's arrival. The soup, she knew, would be a welcoming aroma, greeting them both as they stepped through the door, heralding an evening – and a weekend – of cherished companionship and shared memories. Her heart fluttered with anticipatory joy, and with a final pat to El Gordo, she secured her home and stepped into the cool landing, her path leading her towards a train, a friend, and a weekend that promised the simple, yet profound, joy found in rekindled connection.

Upon Rachel's departure, El Gordo issued his standard farewell – a cryptic, perhaps begrudging meow that she never quite deciphered. She whimsically determined it was his peculiar version of a casual “see you later”. Intriguingly, he never dared to wander too near the exit.

She inserted the key into the pad, decisively inputting her passcode. The lift buttons illuminated, inviting her into the compact, ascending cube. Once inside, she pressed the ground floor button, and the doors seamlessly sealed themselves. The descent initiated, palpable in the gentle shift beneath her feet.

The lift's walls, forged of polished stainless steel, acted much like mirrors, albeit with a playful, distortion quality reminiscent of those found at a fairground. She mused, gazing at her reflection, which appeared peculiarly shortened and widened. “Why not present an elongated, slender version instead?” Surely, that aesthetic would be preferred by the masses. Concealed yet vividly bright lighting generously splashed against the ceiling and walls, dousing the lift's interior in a wash of light.

She mentally ticked off the descending floors: “Halfway,” she whispered to herself, passing the 12th floor; then, with another gentle jolt, passed the 8th. Unexpectedly, the world inside the lift was swallowed by darkness. An abrupt cessation of motion accompanied it. She thought she recalled the sound of faint popping as the light dissipated, but could not be certain amidst the surprise.

Instinctively, Rachel reached for her phone before the realisation hit her like a wave; it remained upstairs, in the sanctuary of her flat. With an internal sigh, she resolved that the power, and thus, the lift, would resume shortly. She waited, enveloping herself in the darkness, her thoughts flitting towards the upcoming reunion. And then, she waited some more, the silence and static nature of her predicament seeping into her awareness. Her internal clock rang alarm bells; she knew she was going to be tardily present at the station. A taxi, she conceded, would be her only ticket to timely arrival now, an expense she had not allowed for, but one she would willingly bear to be on time.

Anxiety began to claw at Rachel's calm demeanour as she fumbled blindly, hands searching for any semblance of an emergency phone on the lift's unilluminated walls. Though she had never noticed one previously, she conceded that, in the bustle of daily life within this building, attentiveness to such details often slipped through the cracks. Her fingers found only the familiar buttons indicating floor numbers and two more, their purpose obscured in the void, unresponsive to her pressing, offering no salvation.

Frustration swelling, she jabbed at all available buttons in a desperate flurry, but to no avail; the lift remained stubbornly immobile, entombing her in its metal belly. Suddenly, a shudder resonated through the structure, it's unsettling creak slicing through the dark silence and causing her

blood to seize in her veins. Frozen, she listened as another sound – something like an object plummeting down the shaft – preceded a further unsettling creak. The lift surrendered slightly to gravity, inching downwards before halting with a jolt once more.

The dark capsule held her captive in an eerie stillness, time stretching out, seemingly endless, until it was shattered once more. Another metallic groan, and this time the lift capitulated fully once again, plummeting downwards at a heart-stopping velocity before arresting its descent abruptly yet again.

Her pulse raced, mingling fear and disbelief intertwining in her chest, as she stood amidst the unrelenting darkness, pondering what potentially disastrous event might unfold next.

Dread enshrouded Rachel as the horrifying possibility permeated her thoughts: a freefall through all eight remaining floors. Such a plummet would surely be un-survivable. Her heart battered against her ribcage, her mouth parched dry amidst the swelling terror. Perspiration glossed her skin, hands shaking uncontrollably as salty tears traced hot streams down her cheeks.

Suddenly, a cacophony of creaking and grating, louder and more prolonged than any preceding noise, filled the confined space, assaulting Rachel's already frayed nerves. With a stomach-churning lurch, the lift once again surrendered to the unrelenting pull of gravity, but this time, it did not stop. It hurtled downward, unresisting, through the pitch-black shaft.

Rachel's scream, a raw expulsion of pure fear, reverberated within the metallic coffin, intertwining with the terrifying sounds of its unrestrained descent. Her mind spiralled into chaos, thoughts of impending doom intertwining with fragmented memories and regrets, as the dark continued to engulf her.

Chapter Five.

Brenda.

Brenda, laden with a palpable sense of eager anticipation mingled with a hint of melancholy, was embarking on a journey to see Rachel, her closest and truly only friend, for the first time since Rachel had ventured into a career with the estate agents in Leeds. The friendship they'd cultivated was deeply rooted, and for Brenda, it had been a particularly potent anchor, especially since her grandmother's departure from this world. Their bond had acquired an even more poignant significance in light of recent loneliness.

She'd exhausted the last dregs of her college funds on her grandmother's funeral, an event which unfolded revelations about sacrifices she hadn't been privy to while the elderly lady was alive. Unbeknownst to Brenda, her college journey had been financially feathered by her grandmother's own savings, depleted to ensure a future for her granddaughter. Oh, how Brenda wished she had known sooner; she would have sought a part-time job, or embarked on any venture, just to ensure her grandmother didn't have to traverse financial straits on her behalf.

A subtle heaviness lodged itself in her heart, stirred by thoughts of unspoken thanks and unseen sacrifices. Brenda's fingers softly caressed the cool, soft petals of the wallflowers and forget-me-nots she'd secured from work, as she envisioned spending a few quiet moments beside her grandmother's grave prior to her train journey. A quietude of gratitude and missed opportunities would hang in the air as she'd silently communicate her thanks to the resting spirit of her kin.

But first, Brenda's current reality beckoned – a rather dimly lit, somewhat less than cheerful flat awaited her, necessitating a bit of a spruce up. Eager to discard the acid-green uniform that felt like it kept her anchored in a mundane reality, she envisioned a brief, yet comforting pause within her humble abode to freshen up and nourish herself before embarking on her six-hour train journey. This was a trip imbued with more than mere locomotion; it was a journey to familial connections, memories once shared, and a recognition of sacrifices silently made. In the simple act of sharing flowers with her departed grandmother, she found a channel to convey unspoken words and unshared thank you, as she navigated the pathways of moving forward while cherishing what was left behind.

Brenda, shoulders slightly drooping from the day's toil, made her entrance into the modest, slightly run-down, one-bedroom flat, instantly shedding her shoes and clothes along a path that led her towards the diminutive bathroom. Her toes curled slightly against the threadbare carpet, an attempt to avoid the contact of the uneven floorboards below, evidence of a dwelling that had seen far better days. Mould-caked tiles clung desperately to the damp walls, some having already conceded and crashed to their demise below.

She stepped gingerly into the shower, extending a cautious hand towards the tap, silently bargaining with whatever deity might be listening for the luxury of hot, or at the very least, warm water. The numerous cold showers, while bracing, had long lost their novelty, and she yearned for something that spoke of simple comforts. Her financial confines, dictated by her current income, had tethered her to this dwelling in York, a city that demanded more than she could feasibly afford.

As water – blessedly more towards warm than cold – cascaded over her, Brenda allowed her thoughts to meander towards Leeds and the potential it presented. She harboured aspirations to petition for a transfer to one of the two stores there, a city that might offer a smidgen of solace from her present circumstances. The denial of a transfer within York perplexed her, though she harboured suspicions that the manager, notorious for her abrasive demeanour and formation of a like-minded clique, played a role in it.

In the isolated enclave of the bathroom, amidst the faint patter of water droplets, Brenda pondered on this woman who seemed to harbour animosity toward her, perhaps fuelled by Brenda's

college background, something the manager herself had not experienced, presumably due to limitations Brenda suspected were intellectual. Brenda cherished a flicker of hope that Rachel, kind and ever-welcoming, might offer her sanctuary while she navigated the seas of potential transfer and home-hunting. However, those waves were likely to be turbulent, given that her journey might well be marred by a begrudging reference from her current manager, a lady whose demeanour was anything but ladylike.

Sighing amidst the droplets, Brenda resolved to fight, to step boldly into a future undetermined, balancing the reality of her present circumstances with dreams of what might yet come to be.

Emerging from the shower, shivering slightly as the cold air enveloped her damp skin, Brenda hastily patted herself dry and slipped into a clean set of clothes. The absent hum of the heating system, which was perpetually silent these days, did nothing to dispel the lingering chill that clung to her skin, a subtle reminder of the austerity of her living conditions.

Efficiently, she prepared a simple sandwich, the bread slightly staler than she would've liked, and brewed a comforting cup of tea, its steam temporarily casting a warm veil in the coolness of her kitchen. Opting for an environment slightly more uplifting, she carried her humble meal out into the sun-drenched garden, a wild yet oddly comforting space that, despite its disarray, provided a momentary escape from the dank confines of her basement flat.

The sunlight, though slightly obscured by overgrown foliage, kissed her skin with a warmth that contrasted sharply with the cold she'd left inside. It was a gentle caress that provided momentary solace, a brief reprieve in which she could immerse herself.

Afterward, Brenda set to the task of packing, an act done more out of necessity than desire. She gathered what little she could - a bottle of water, an apple, and a pair of clothing changes - placing them carefully within the bag. Her clothing options were limited; many of her garments had fallen victim to the rampant mould that permeated her dwelling. She tucked her sole pair of respectable shoes beside the modest pile, adding her toiletries on top.

Her phone, a device bearing a few too many scratches, was slipped into her pocket, along with her well-worn purse and a set of keys that had long lost their shine. A beanie, slightly frayed yet beloved, was pulled snugly over her hair. Her hands, gentle yet determined, cradled a bunch of flowers, their hues a vivid proclamation amidst her sombre surroundings. With one last glance back at her abode, Brenda stepped forth, locking the door firmly behind her, and began her journey towards the cemetery, a bouquet of wallflowers and forget-me-nots held tenderly against her chest, a vivid beacon of memory and love amidst the drudgery of her current existence.

Brenda always found an inexplicable tranquillity in the cemetery. Nestled just before the graves of her grandparents was a quaint park bench, a stationary observer to the silent conversations she held with her late loved ones. Time seemed to suspend itself as she sat there, her thoughts wandering amidst a sea of gratitude and guilt while she quietly thanked her grandmother for sacrifices known too late.

Her heart often ached with a gentle sorrow, wishing she had known her grandfather, a man stolen away by lung disease when Brenda was but a toddler, a consequence of long years toiling in the coal mines. Yet, amidst the sorrow, there was a sanctuary to be found in this quiet place, a refuge far removed from the cacophony of her dim, perpetually noisy flat and the relentless hostility of her work environment.

Here, enveloped by the soft serenades of the birds that frequented the sanctuary, Brenda found a slice of peace within the world, a fleeting moment where the harshness of reality seemed to soften

around the edges. The cemetery, with its hushed tranquillity, was among the few places she cherished, a stark contrast to the rambunctious clamour of the city beyond its confines.

She and Rachel had often sought escape within the embrace of these solemn grounds, finding solace beside the gently meandering river that coursed through the heart of the serene museum gardens. Hours seemed to dissolve into mere moments as they sat together, momentarily absconded from the demanding pace of the world beyond.

Now, alone with her thoughts and the muted whispers of memories, Brenda lingered for what felt like an eternity, before gently nudging herself towards departure. She opted to embark on the brief, contemplative walk to the station a bit earlier than necessary, subscribing to the belief that it was preferable to await the train's arrival rather than hurry after it. Her steps, though measured, bore a slight weight as she navigated the path, her mind still partly adrift in the peaceful solitude she was leaving behind.

Navigating through the bustling ambiance of the station, Brenda presented the digital ticket she'd astutely purchased online a week in advance, her eyes occasionally darting upward to confirm the platform number. With a muted sense of surprise, she noted that the train, a sleek vessel designed for speed and efficiency, was already idling on the tracks, despite its scheduled departure still lingering some twenty minutes in the future.

Brenda, with measured steps and a reflective demeanour, boarded the train, her mind gently whispering the hypothetical scenarios of what might have transpired had she arrived later. Would the train, impatient and indifferent, have departed without her? She quietly nestled into her seat as the wheels beneath her began their rhythmic dance along the tracks, thus answering her question.

A subtle composure wrapped around Brenda, allowing her to sink into the journey without dispatching an urgent text to Rachel about the surprisingly punctual departure. There was an understated wisdom in deciding not to thrust upon Rachel any unnecessary panic about potentially having to hasten her own journey to the station. The Leeds station, grand in its stature and constantly awash with travellers, still offered them a familiar meeting ground where they could easily find each other amidst the tide of faces.

And even if the usual ease of their rendezvous was to be disrupted, Brenda comforted herself with the knowledge that a simple text, bearing the coordinates of her location within the station's expansive embrace, would quickly realign their paths. So, she consciously set aside the burgeoning worry, allowing the train's gentle motions and the passing scenery to lull her into a state of peaceful anticipation.

An announcement, crisp and detached, signalled their approach to Macclesfield Station, pulling Brenda's gaze towards the scene unfolding outside her window. Observing the choreographed exchange of passengers disembarking and boarding, her thoughts quietly began counting down the moments until her own departure into the familiar arms of Leeds and, subsequently, Rachel's warm embrace. A mere single stop remained a sentinel between her and the impending reunion, quietly bridging the emotional distance with every click-clack of the wheels against the rails.

As the train languidly weaved through East Garforth, Brenda's eyes were drawn to an unnerving spectacle unfolding amidst the town's power lines. Sparks, vibrant yet harbingers of danger, cascaded in a luminous shower, dancing wildly around the electric cables. With an abruptness that tugged at the pit of her stomach, the cosy illumination within the carriage was smothered by an insistent darkness.

Then, an unsettling lurch, causing the entire train to sway ominously to one side, suspended a breathless moment in time before chaos unspooled in a surreal, slow-motion cascade of events. Brenda's eyes, wide with disbelief and fear, locked onto a vehicle plummeting from the bridge above,

its descent destined to intersect with the path of the train. The inexorable collision materialised with jarring inevitability, the car's violent intrusion through the roof introducing a cacophony of shrieking metal and terrified screams.

In a dizzying upheaval of physical laws, Brenda found herself untethered from gravity, a fleeting sensation of weightless flight seizing her before a collision with something yielding—perhaps a seat—pre-empted her eventual, jolting impact against the train's wall. The world outside and within the carriage spiralled in a maddening tilt, the train succumbing to an uncontrollable roll before it inexplicably levitated, lifted by some unseen force into the trembling air.

Descending once more with a thunderous crash, waves of blinding pain cascaded through Brenda's body, igniting her senses with a fierce intensity. Agony coursed from her side, surged through her head, and infiltrated both of her arms, ensnaring her consciousness before it finally surrendered to an engulfing darkness. Amidst the echoes of pain, her perception flickered momentarily, revealing a haunting image of her own blood, a vivid crimson against the paleness of her hand, before the symphony of surrounding screams dissolved into an eerie, absolute silence, and Brenda was subsumed by the void.

Chapter Six.

Solar flare.

Mr Clap, the dedicated science teacher, had diligently spent each passing lesson weaving tales and providing exhaustive information about the imminent solar flare, one that was poised to grace the night sky soon. Matt and Bella, brimming with a concoction of anticipation and anxiety, found themselves tethered to the impending spectacle, awaiting the celestial dance of the aurora. While the extraordinary event was destined to cast its vibrant glow even across the UK sky, a fascinating treat celebrated on every news channel, it harboured a potential threat that lurked in Matt's mind.

With a heart stirred by curiosity and concern, Matt delved deep into a research spiral, navigating through the cavernous depths of information available online, absorbing theories from the ominous predictions of doom merchants to the dismissive reassurances of sceptics. The spectrum of opinions left him teetering on the edge of confusion, yet he gravitated toward a decision: it was prudent to brace for an unwelcome scenario. His beloved computer room, nestled in the basement of his home, was not just walls and wires; it was a sanctuary, a realm where he navigated digital worlds, battling foes in 'Fortnite' and forging alliances in various online games. It was a life beyond a life, a universe that whispered of adventures unbound by earthly constraints.

The potential devastation the solar flare could inflict on his electronic haven propelled him to safeguard it with a meticulously constructed Faraday cage. His usual digital escapades were shelved for the week, replaced by a hands-on mission to shield his sanctuary. Exhausting his savings, he procured mesh to enrobe the room, its metallic weave a defender against electromagnetic pulses. Persuading his father to assist was another quest in itself, as scepticism clouded his parental judgement. However, with Matt's passionate plea and the promise of a month filled with washing up and punctual lawn mowing, his father, an adept electrician, conceded, embedding a double pole power breaker for the basement's power supply.

Matt's protective endeavour was fuelled not only by the potential threat to his gaming world but also by the ghosts of past solar tumults: the Carrington event of 1859 and the 1989 blackout in Canada stood as silent warnings from history, ghastly reminders of the potential chaos that celestial wonders could sow amidst their beauty. Matt, armed with knowledge and a dash of fear, braced himself and his electronic fortress for whatever the aurora might unwittingly unleash upon them.

Bella initially cradled scepticism within her, a trait that dissolved gradually as she delved into the chilling tales of the past events. With her father and younger brother Bobby off to a weekend visit to the grandparents, a seed of cautious action took root in her mind. She, taking a resolute stance, determined to sever the power connection to the entire house by disengaging the main supply fuse, safeguarding their home in her own way.

Matt and Bella plunged into the depths of YouTube, absorbing information and strategies from various videos which showcased methods to shield electrical equipment within the household. To their surprise, the daunting task unfolded to be more manageable than anticipated. Their research, thorough and meticulous, equipped them with the skills to tamper with the security seal and navigate the fuse's removal with precision and safety.

Sunday morning greeted Bella with its quiet serenity, yet her mission was anything but tranquil. Matt, with the sunrise painting a gentle glow on his face, appeared at her doorstep. Together, they stood before the power supply, guided by the visual instructions they had previously extracted from the internet. The fuse, now their primary focus, surrendered to their determined efforts as Matt skilfully navigated his father's toolbox. Pliers in hand, and after a meticulous struggle, accentuated with the aiding slickness of super lube, they managed to remove the seal and the one to the neutral block, their hands guided by a mix of adolescent bravery and naivety, all ready for disconnection later that day.

Ensuring further protection, Bella, with a spirit imbued with cautious resilience, gathered the computers belonging to her, Bobby, and their father, entrusting them to Matt's basement sanctuary. A session of 'Fortnite' at Matt's briefly brushed away the weight of their undertaking before they severed the power, allowing the breaker to snap into an eerie silence as they departed. Back at Bella's, a modest lunch of toast was enjoyed before they, torches illuminating their path, courageously disconnected the incoming power supply. The fuse and the neutral wire were removed, their actions swift, yet weighed with the invisible burden of responsibility.

Now both their homes cocooned in a power void, a quandary emerged before them: how to spend the powerless hours ahead? Their solution manifested in a journey into town, to an internet café, where amidst the hum of active computers, they sought to further unravel the mysteries and potential perils of the impending solar flare, their young minds threading a delicate balance between the vibrant enjoyment of present youth and the shadowed caution of forthcoming celestial phenomena.

After securing refreshing drinks, Bella and Matt nestled into seats in front of the computer, their eyes alight with the eagerness of exploration. Though their initial intention was to delve deeper into the enigma of solar flares, their digital journey steered them towards a prepper site. Bella initially dismissed it as teetering on the apocalyptic edge, but as they navigated through it, enlightenment on Electromagnetic Pulses (EMPs) and Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs) dawned on them, albeit through a lens focused on the most catastrophic scenarios.

The site posed an imaginative, yet unsettling scenario: Envisioning a world enveloped in chaos—no money, no food, no communication, no power, and the whereabouts of loved one's unknown. It then unleashed a torrent of probing questions.

- How would such a situation make you feel?
- What actions would you take?
- How would you implement those actions?

Potential answers unfurled in a daunting array: enveloped in a sea of emotions. The natural inclination would be to seek out your family, likely on foot due to the absence of alternative transport. Yet, the site countered with a robust "no" in response to the seemingly logical action, citing the risk of families, mutually in search, inadvertently bypassing each other. A more strategic plan, it suggested,

would be establishing an emergency meeting place, strategically located away from congested areas. Nutritional and hydration needs for the journey were also highlighted, emphasising a minimum of 2500 calories and an allotment of two litres of water per day, per person, to accommodate the inevitable elongation of travel time.

The wealth of information and advised strategies sprawled extensively across the site, but as the café dimmed its lights in preparation for closing, Matt hastily emailed the link to himself, mindful of the absence of their phones which were securely tucked away at his home as a safeguarding measure.

Adjacent to the tranquil, River Aire, Matt and Bella, their minds entwining with the possibility of paddling canoes out of town to escape the permeating light pollution, weighed the logistics of their budding plan. The realisation that evading the luminous glow of civilisation would necessitate a significant journey gave them pause. Further complicating matters was the distinct difference in their parental situations. While Bella's dad was conveniently away, granting her a degree of unnoticed freedom, Matt's dad was merely working late, and a middle-of-the-night return on Matt's part would surely condemn him to weeks of grounding.

The resolution to their predicament lay in the welcoming confines of Bella's backyard. With a cool box generously filled with pre-prepared snacks and canned drinks, chilling alongside ice packs they had strategically placed in the unplugged fridge, they determined it to be their observational outpost for the celestial spectacle, weaving a blend of scientific curiosity and youthful adventure into the tapestry of their friendship.

As the cloak of night began to envelop the surroundings at nine o'clock, Bella and Matt, fuelled by a mixture of anticipation and teenage rebellion, hauled the pool recliners to the verdant centre of the backyard. Aligning them towards the northern sky, they nestled into the seats, their eyes reflecting the twinkling heavens above, patiently awaiting the anticipated aurora.

However, at 10 o'clock, Bella's affectionate yet firm "babysitter" from next door, Mrs Morton, emerged into the dim outdoor light, gently reminding her of the hour, and asserting that it was time for Bella to retire to her bed and bid her friend farewell. A flutter of anxious tension fluttered through Bella as she explained about the school project revolving around the aurora borealis, hoping to assuage Mrs Morton's concerns. Her minder, while hesitating slightly, finally acceded with a strict stipulation: "Midnight, no later. School awaits both of you tomorrow," before retreating back into her home.

The hands of the clock seamlessly glided past midnight, yet the northern lights remained elusive. By the time 1 a.m. painted the clock face, Bella and Matt contemplated surrendering to sleep's embrace and abandoning their celestial vigil. But then, almost as if responding to their perseverance, it commenced. Initially, mere sporadic bright flickers pierced the darkness, but soon a symphonic crescendo of light, cascading from vibrant greens to intense reds, danced vivaciously across the expansive sky.

It wasn't until well past 4 a.m. that the luminous ballet began to dim, signalling the end of their astronomical adventure. Although exhilaration pulsed through them, a tang of anti-climax lingered in the air; despite all their meticulous preparations for a power surge, not even a solitary light flickered in the environment surrounding them. With a blend of disappointment and fatigue weaving through their beings, they restored the chairs to their usual positions by the pool and wearily ventured into Bella's house. Methodically, they reconnected the neutral wire, affixed the cover securely, and reinserted the main fuse, mentally noting to attend to the seals after a much-needed sleep.

With a gentle goodnight, Matt quietly navigated next door, treading delicately to avoid disturbing his slumbering father, while reflections of the night's spectacular, yet somehow disheartening, events lingered in his thoughts.

Despite the physically draining night, Matt found himself enveloped by a restless energy that kept slumber at bay. So, he ventured down to the quietude of his basement, a haven where he could dissect the mystery of why such a pronounced solar flare had left the power supply unaffected, especially given the vehement warnings splashed across the news all week. Through the soft glow of the computer screen, he immersed himself in a series of YouTube videos, each articulating the scientific phenomena behind the spectacle they had witnessed.

An epiphany illuminated Matt's understanding: it was all intricately linked to the polar orientations of the solar flare in juxtaposition with Earth's own poles. A north-to-north alignment would culminate in repulsion, whereas a south-to-north connection would draw them magnetically together. He realised a solar flare, albeit powerful, was considerably milder than a coronal mass ejection (CME), the latter being the perpetrator behind the extensive damage wrought during the Carrington event. A sting of regret permeated him for his earlier, more cursory research. With a silent promise to delve deeper and more earnestly into his future inquiries, he wearily surrendered to his bed.

Monday. A mere hour of restive sleep later, the abrasive blare of Matt's alarm jolted him awake. A tempting thought to evade the day at school flickered through his mind, but the insistent calls from his father, echoing through the house, propelled him into motion. As he met with Bella, their steps in synchronised lethargy, he shared his nocturnal discoveries. However, Bella, her energy reserves depleted and veiled by a sheath of disappointment from the prior night's anti-climax, absorbed the information with a detached air.

Upon reaching school, Matt, with his curiosity unabated, sought Mr Clap in his classroom, brimming with questions about the northern lights and eager to delve deeper into the realm of CMEs. Mr Clap, observing the fervent intrigue in Matt's eyes, gently deferred the conversation, inviting him to return after school for a comprehensive explanation. The academic day stretched interminably before Matt, yet he found a momentary respite by artfully dodging PE, seeking sanctuary, and a stolen nap, in the medical room under the guise of a phantom headache.

The piercing ring of the school bell signalled freedom for most students, but for Matt, it was a cue to embark on a journey of elucidation. With resolute steps, he navigated the now familiar path to Mr Clap's room, a cascade of unanswered questions surging within him.

Upon entry, his voice carried a mingling of frustration and curiosity as he posed his inquiry to Mr Clap. "With all of Sunday night's palpable anticipation, why did it culminate in such an underwhelming event? The media forewarned us of power outages and potential damage to equipment, among other calamities, yet nothing transpired."

Mr Clap, leaning back slightly, inquisitively inquired, "Didn't the celestial light show captivate you in the slightest?"

"It was certainly captivating," Matt conceded, "but it fell markedly short of the cataclysmic scenarios painted by the media."

A gentle raising of Mr Clap's brow spoke volumes before he responded, "How deeply did you delve into this topic, Matt? Did your research unveil any insights?"

"I unearthed information about the correlation between Earth's poles and the charges of the solar flare," Matt replied, an undercurrent of uncertainty weaving through his words. "But it doesn't weave the entire tapestry of understanding for me."

Mr Clap, noticing the genuine thirst for knowledge flickering in Matt's eyes, leaned forward, his words measured and enlightening. "Firstly, Matt, understand that we were grazed rather than directly struck by this flare. Had the flare unleashed its might upon us this coming Sunday, the lights dancing across our night sky would have been so vivid, they would have cast shadows stark enough to read a book beneath. Secondly, the orientation of the magnetic fields within the flare indeed plays a

pivotal role. This time, the cosmic dice rolled in our favour, aligning the fields harmoniously with ours. A reversal of this alignment could well have plunged us into the chaos of power outages you mentioned."

The room, bathed in the soft glow of the afternoon sunlight, bore silent witness to the burgeoning inquiry unfolding between Matt and Mr Clap. The student, his gaze unyielding, sought deeper understanding from his teacher, while Mr Clap found himself edifying a young, avid mind with the stark realities of celestial phenomena.

Matt leaned forward, his voice a gentle murmur, betraying a confluence of curiosity and apprehension. "And what of a coronal mass ejection, a CME? How does it contrast with a solar flare?"

Mr Clap, appreciating the sincerity of the query, began, "A CME, Matt, is a distinct beast altogether. Comprising plasma, it possesses an astronomical mass—billions of tons, even if it mirrors the size of a flare. This colossal weight and mass endow it with formidable power, allowing its magnetic fields to potentially dwarf Earth's by hundreds of times. A direct hit by a CME, regardless of magnetic pole alignment, spells catastrophic outcomes. It would function like a global EMP, crippling all electronics—even those typically shielded, like vehicles. Power lines would succumb, melting under the onslaught; unprotected power supplies would falter; satellites would disintegrate; and aircraft would be profoundly impacted. A CME of significant magnitude could usher in an apocalyptic era, akin to the scenarios depicted in films regarding EMP effects."

"Indeed," Matt acknowledged. "I've encountered such scenarios in films and video games."

Mr Clap, now navigating through the intricacies of these celestial events, continued, "While such portrayals often gravitate towards the direst of outcomes, it's worth noting that while such a scenario is plausible, it remains within the realms of the unlikely. However," he paused, ensuring his words would fully permeate Matt's understanding, "it's crucial to comprehend the severity of potential consequences."

"But how," Matt interjected, "would it be world-ending? Films and games seldom delve into the 'why'."

Mr Clap, recognising the import of the question, crafted his words with care. "Let me distil this into a straightforward narrative, Matt. Imagine, first, the annihilation of power, potentially for years. The repair or replacement of transformers, assuming the requisite electricity to manufacture them was available, would be an enduring task. Next, consider our reliance on digital currency. With no access to power, digital wealth vanishes, salaries remain unpaid, and work becomes an unreciprocated effort. Even tangible cash would swiftly lose its reliability and value. Procuring essentials like food would become an impossible task when households, armed only with a week's supply of sustenance and supermarkets, hosting a mere day and a half of provisions, become barren due to halted deliveries. Those dependent on electrically powered life-preserving devices, such as dialysis machines and mechanical ventilators, would be imperilled, as hospitals, even with operational backup generators, grapple with finite fuel reserves without the means to replenish them. Society would crumble into anarchy, law and order dissipating as desperation births ruthlessness, with malevolent individuals looting, invading homes, and committing egregious acts under the motivations of hunger and survival."

He concluded with a softened tone, sensing the gravity of his words upon Matt. "These are mere fragments of the potential domino effect, Matt. I'll provide you with some material to delve further, and, while we still have the luxury of internet access, I'd recommend exploring prepper websites. Though predominantly American, you'll find a smattering of British resources as well."

In the poignant silence that followed, Mr Clap handed Matt a folder, the contents of which bore the insights and cautionary tales of a world dancing perpetually on the precipice of celestial phenomena and their far-reaching impacts. Matt, his perspective irrevocably altered, stepped back out

into the world, a new understanding coursing through him. And above them both, the cosmos whirled indifferently, a tapestry of beautiful, yet potentially catastrophic, mysteries.

“Sorry, I did not expect you to wait for me. I’m cooking tonight. How does spaghetti tickle your taste buds?”

"Spaghetti sounds perfect!" Bella replied, her upbeat tone cutting through the still, autumn air.

They ambled towards Matt's house, the crisp crunch of fallen leaves underfoot offering a simple, earthly delight amid their complex celestial contemplations. Their steps and soft conversations provided a rhythmic comfort, a reminder of the gentle, often unacknowledged beauty of ordinary moments.

While Matt navigated through the layers of details shared by Mr Clap in his mind, Bella’s persistent optimism offered a gentle reprieve from the gravitas of the earlier conversation. Her energy was like a buoyant melody, rendering a contrast to the eerie silence that previously enveloped the hallway where the unsettling, yet vital understanding of cosmic cataclysms was unpacked.

As the duo ventured through the front entrance of Matt's home, a familial warmth seeped through the walls, subtly mitigating the pervasive anxiety instilled by the awareness of celestial threats. Bella, her eyes sparkling with unwavering friendliness, nudged Matt playfully.

“Matt, you've got that distant look again,” she observed. “I hope you’re not getting sucked into the abyss of apocalyptic scenarios.”

Matt, pulling himself from the depths of his contemplation, flashed a faint but genuine smile. “It's hard not to, given what Mr Clap shared. But your company, Bella, has a way of lighting up even the darkest of musings.”

Bella beamed, her cheeks tinged with a soft blush. “Let’s not dwell in the doom and gloom. The universe has always been a mystery, and all we can do is live our best lives under its vast, enigmatic expanse.”

In the cosy kitchen, the soft sizzle of spaghetti shells dancing in boiling water melded harmoniously with the murmur of the news from the TV in the background. Bella, ever the antithesis to digital distraction, tossed a playful scowl at the screen.

“I thought we agreed—no TV during our apocalypse-planning dinner meets!” She quipped; her voice laced with jest.

Matt chuckled, “Just checking in on the world, making sure it’s still turning after our astronomy escapades. But you’re right, let’s focus on the here and now.”

The news, however, drifted into their consciousness with a report on the spectacular auroras witnessed worldwide, juxtaposed against experts working fervently to comprehend and mitigate the potential impacts of future solar activities. An ironic smile played on Matt’s lips, observing how life, in all its mundane and miraculous moments, persisted in the shadow of cosmic uncertainties.

Bella, seemingly nonchalant, tilted her head slightly, peering at Matt with a subtle, questioning look in her eyes, when she picked up on something that sounded out of place. “That was a bit too reassuring, don’t you think?” she mused, an eyebrow arched ever so slightly, hinting at the undercurrent of suspicion colouring her thoughts.

Matt nodded slowly, sinking further into the sofa, his mind churning over the information. “Yeah, something felt off. He seemed... almost too confident that there’s nothing to worry about.”

A contemplative silence settled over them, as they both processed the information. It was this curious blend of healthy scepticism and genuine concern that had, in part, fuelled their deep dive into the world of solar phenomena and its potential impacts on their world.

“You know, Bella,” Matt finally spoke, his words weaving through the quietness enveloping them, “I’m glad we did all that research and preparation, even if it was sparked by what turned out to be a non-event.”

Bella nodded in agreement. “It’s not like this knowledge and preparation is going to be useless. It’s always good to be prepared, considering how unpredictable the universe can be.”

They sat there for a moment, simply absorbing the reality of their vulnerability amidst the vast, cosmic forces surrounding them. It was a humbling realisation, but somehow, sharing it with one another lent them a strange sort of comfort.

The room, now illuminated only by the ambient glow of the city filtering through the curtains and the TV playing in the background, seemed to wrap them in a serene bubble, distant from the chaotic potentials of the cosmos.

Bella broke the silence, her voice gentle yet imbued with a quiet strength. “Whatever happens, Matt, we navigate through it together, okay?”

He nodded, the simplicity and sincerity of her words providing a solace that was far more comforting than any reassurance from a distant expert on a screen. “Together. Always.”

Suddenly they were both brought to earth, as the news anchor’s voice, a steady and practiced cadence designed to instil calm, permeated through the room. “We’ve encountered an unexpected predicament due to the loss of two vital satellites, which were our vigilant guardians, monitoring the sun’s activities,” she began, her voice a sombre mixture of alarm and reassurance. “In a precautionary measure, our astronauts, those brave souls in the space station, will be making an earlier return to earth than originally scheduled. A Coronal Mass Ejection (CME) is currently on a trajectory towards our planet, but the scientific consensus assures us it should bypass Earth without incident.”

The tension in the room thickened, an invisible fog curling around Matt as he listened, the controller clutched tightly in his hand. His mind wandered, creating vivid scenarios sparked by the science fiction films he’d seen, yet he remained anchored by the steady rhythm of the newscaster’s speech.

She continued, “For aurora enthusiasts, this solar event is unlikely to produce displays as intensely brilliant as last night’s celestial dance. Still, be on the lookout this coming weekend - whether it be Saturday or Sunday, our observatories are fine-tuning their predictions. For more detailed information, we’ll now hand you over to Professor Garth Harris. Professor, could you please elucidate the situation for our viewers?”

Professor Harris, his demeanour a picture of scientific stoicism, explained, “A rather serendipitous sequence of events has unfolded before us. Last Friday, an earlier flare nudged the satellites from their customary positions. Subsequently, Sunday’s larger flare impacted the unprotected equipment on these satellites - a region typically safeguarded from the sun’s usual wrath. The resultant effect has shifted them from their standard orbits and incapacitated their cameras. However, we anticipate having them realigned and operational in a few days, ensuring we will be able to monitor the CME as it makes its pass by Earth. I want to assure the public there’s no immediate cause for concern.”

“Your clarification is much appreciated, Professor Harris. And now, we move on to other news of the day,” the newscaster transitioned smoothly, her voice a comforting balm to the unease that permeated households tuned into the broadcast.

Matt, his mind now a whirlwind of thoughts and speculations, clicked off the TV, its screen plunging into darkness and reflecting back the ambient glow of the room. He gently placed the controller down onto the coffee table, a subdued thud echoing in the quiet. As he sank back into the embrace of the sofa, his eyes drifted into the distant, his thoughts racing, and his heartbeat an insistent

drum in his ears, all while the muffled world outside continued, unaware of the astronomical ballet taking place above.

Matt, his body propelled by a restless energy, surged up almost instantaneously from the sofa, striding towards the kitchen. His voice ricocheted off the walls, a tinged with a slight edge, "Would you like a drink?" Matt offered, his tone trying to find a semblance of normalcy despite the churn of thoughts within him.

She lifted herself gracefully from the couch, her movements fluid and gentle as she made her way to join him in the kitchen. Selecting a stool, she perched on it, leaning into the familiar comfort of the breakfast bar.

Bella's soft smile persisted, but her eyes reflected a knowing depth as she asked, "Is there any of that Ovaltine left?"

Matt's chuckle was a half-hearted attempt to mask his inward turmoil. "You know how my dad is. He never buys just one of anything. We have a whole box of those jars."

Bella's eyes lingered on him, the playful demeanour slipping away to make room for gentle concern. "Matt," she spoke softly, her voice a tender caress in the quiet of the kitchen, "What's bothering you? You seem so distant. It's not like you."

A tangible pause hovered between them, a breath held in anticipation, before Matt spoke, his voice threadbare with apprehension. "It's a mix of things, really... what Mr Clap said, coupled with that news interview featuring a professor I've never heard of before. All last week, this potential solar threat was all the media could talk about. And now, they're downplaying the return of the astronauts, brushing off the CME heading towards us. It's as if they're terrified of telling us something. I recognise I might sound paranoid again. It's probably another no-consequence event, but... what if it isn't?"

As his words, laden with concealed fear, dissipated into the room, a tense silence enveloped them both. Bella, her hands clasping her warm mug, gazed at Matt, her eyes speaking words of unspoken understanding and comfort, and Matt, amidst the enveloping quiet, found himself anchored by her unwavering presence amidst the tempest of his concerns.

Bella remained silent, her thoughts churning like a turbulent sea within her, attempting to knit together a tapestry of understanding from the fragmented concerns presented by Matt. The what-ifs twined around her thoughts, intertwining with seeds of doubt that started to sprout within her mind. Was Matt's worry just a byproduct of an overactive imagination? Yet, a niggling doubt whispered — what if he wasn't being paranoid? What if there was a stark reality, shrouded in deliberate silences and placating reassurances from those above?

The familiar reel of cinematic scenarios began to play in her mind, scenes from films where U.S. Presidents, with grave expressions, chose to withhold impending doom from the public to prevent panic, chaos, a breakdown of civil order. A potential flood of fear leading to bank runs, rampant looting, and unbridled unrest. If they – the shadowy they, the powers that be – were powerless against an impending cosmic threat, would they breathe a word of it to the unsuspecting masses? Or would they shield the truth, barricading themselves and their elite companions against the impending storm, leaving the populace oblivious and unprotected?

Her father's words, oft-repeated mantras from her childhood, echoed in the chambers of her memory, "Prepare, prepare, and prepare again," he would insist as she poised herself for a competition or tournament. Bella found herself wrestling with a burgeoning realisation that perhaps there was wisdom to be gleaned amidst the throes of potential chaos. Maybe, just maybe, preparation – even against a seemingly distant, perhaps implausible threat – was warranted. After all, what would it truly

cost them? Dedicating some time to wade through a few videos, aligning themselves with a broadly accepted viewpoint that recommended basic preparedness?

A quiet resolve began to solidify within her, mingling with the threads of anxiety that lingered in the air between them. As her eyes met Matt's, a silent agreement flickered within them – an unspoken pact that, perhaps, delving into the world of the 'preppers' might just offer them a semblance of control amidst the unknown.

"Matt, maybe there's no looming catastrophe, but getting a bit prepared 'just in case' doesn't sound like too much effort, does it? What do you say we dive into those prepper videos Mr Clap mentioned tonight instead of immersing ourselves in the gaming world? How does that sound to you?" Bella suggested, her voice carrying a lilt of earnest concern, allowing a sincere aura to envelop her words.

"Absolutely, good call," Matt responded promptly, without a hint of reservation in his voice.

Bella couldn't resist a playful tease, her lips curving into a gentle smile. "You were practically praying I'd suggest that, weren't you? Given how speedily you agreed!"

Matt's face shifted into a bashful, half-smile. "Yes, no, I mean... whatever! It's just that your question, or rather your suggestion, echoed the exact thoughts that were ricocheting inside my head. It's all been a bit unsettling; you know? The scarce official updates, the satellites conveniently 'malfunctioning', the hurried evacuation of the space station — none of the pieces seem to fit snugly together! It's almost as if the 'powers-that-be' are concealing a few secretive cards up their sleeves." His voice quivered slightly, threading the undercurrent of his lingering anxieties into the words.

Bella nodded, solidifying their plan with a determined clarity, "Alright, then, let's dive into the depths of YouTube."

"Drink?"

"Yes please, orange juice for me."

Chapter Seven.

The knowledge, four days before the event.

Matt and Bella, each nestled into their respective gaming chairs, found themselves engulfed by the subterranean comfort of the basement. Ensuring their screens mirrored the same information, they eagerly lit up the computer, its low hum gently filling the space around them. Bella's eyes flicked with a subtle yet keen spark of curiosity while Matt's fingers danced meticulously over the keyboard.

"Should we dive into the site we found at the café to kick things off?" Matt's voice held a gentle tremble, not of fear, but a reflection of the gravity of what they were exploring.

"Sounds like a perfect starting point," Bella responded, her voice steady yet displaying a mirroring trepidation.

As Matt gracefully retrieved the link from his email, a galaxy of possibilities floated in their thoughts. The website unfurled before their eyes, revealing the myriad of consequences that could cascade in the wake of a CME, its digital pages whispering untold secrets and warnings of the after-effects and survival strategies.

They navigated through a virtual sea of information that discussed 'The ways you could survive', each point a beacon of knowledge in a potential storm of chaos. And then, a questionnaire, its header bearing the ominous query, 'Are you ready for the end of the world yet?', loomed before them.

Silence intertwined with the subtle clicks of the mouse and keyboard as they tackled each question, eyes scanning, absorbing, and questioning every piece of advice and information laid bare before them. A sense of unity formed, not just between Matt and Bella, but with every reader who had pondered these very questions before them.

They concluded, their fingers hesitating for just a moment before committing to the send button, a moment suspended in anticipation, emboldened by a quiet confidence that, perhaps, they had what it took to survive.

The response was nearly instantaneous, a digital judgement cast in stark white against the black backdrop of the screen: 'You managed to live 9 days.'

Their eyes met, not in despair, but with a newfound resolve. Nine days was a start, but their journey towards preparedness had only just begun. Matt's brow furrowed slightly, while Bella's lips pursed, both contemplating the enigma of survival in a world teetering on the brink of chaos. Their adventure into the unknown realms of preparation and resilience had only just begun, and together, they knew they would face whatever lay ahead with steadfast determination.

A meticulous breakdown of their would-be failures sprawled across the screen, detailing each misjudgement and miscalculation: the disregard for potential human interference, an insufficiency of food and no solid plan for sourcing it, a lack of forethought regarding fire and cooking, inadequate water and attire planning, absence of maps, a clear destination, plans for future sustainability, considerations for weight management, weapons, and several more aspects of survivalism they hadn't pondered.

With a hint of deflation, but nevertheless fuelled by determination, they began a deep dive into each hyperlink, hoping to unravel the intricacies of where their planning had veered off course. Initially, a glimmer of scepticism lingered, considering the possibility that the program was perhaps too stringent or unforgiving. But it didn't take long to dispel that notion.

The first click, cantered on food, quickly illuminated a cascade of errors in their initial considerations. The items they had mentally packed were indeed far too heavy and impractical for any substantial journey. Glass jars, an absolute veto due to their weight and breakability. The perishability of their chosen foods was also significantly overlooked. Items like celery, while healthy, became a liability, requiring more caloric energy to consume than it provided, not to mention its short lifespan without refrigeration and its cumbersome nature. Peanut butter, a viable option, yet necessitated transferring into lightweight zip-lock bags. Breakfast cereals were permissible but only in a minimised, bagged portion. The metal-clad tins of food, besides a reluctant concession for spam or corned beef, were largely rejected - a disheartening realisation for the pair with vegetarian leanings.

Matt and Bella's brows furrowed in contemplation, realising that their dietary habits could indeed complicate their survival. The backpacks, forewarned to be substantial, could weigh up to twenty-five kilos for an average adult male and twenty kilos for a woman. Yet, it was imperative to calibrate this based on individual capacity. Considering water alone, with its one-kilo-per-litre weight, the math became a puzzle of prioritisation. If starting with a twenty-five-kilo baseline, and allocating twelve kilos for food and eight litres (kilos) of water, that left a mere five kilos for all other essentials.

Further complications arose with transportation considerations; neither of them drove. Once their meticulously calculated supplies were depleted, what would their sustenance plan become?

Engulfed in this virtual spiral of preparedness, they hardly noticed the creak of the door, nor the familiar footfall that followed. Matt's dad subtly entered the room, yet his presence remained undetected by the pair, engrossed in their newfound world of survival strategizing.

Matt's father's voice, gentle yet firm, punctuated the basement's still air. "Time to hit the hay, Matt. Make sure Bella gets home safe and head straight back afterward. You've got school in the morning."

The solemn walk back to Bella's home was serenaded by a chorus of crickets, and the moon gently lit their path, casting elongated shadows on the pavement. Bella, still digesting the torrent of information they had just sifted through, hesitated before suggesting a rebellious idea, her voice a whisper, as if fearing the night itself might betray their plans. "What do you think about skipping school tomorrow, Matt? Given our lesson schedule, it's doubtful we'd be missed."

Matt, his thoughts meandering along similar lines, nodded in agreement, his eyes reflecting a mixture of apprehension and thrill. "I was thinking the same, Bella. We can leave as we usually do and just loop back around once Dad heads off to work. Slip in through the back door and we'll have the place to ourselves to plan properly."

Bella, her eyebrows knit in a blend of excitement and unease, pondered the logistics, particularly her own physical venture. "I'm not too thrilled about the idea of scaling the fence in my skirt, but I'm in," she conceded, the gravity of their earlier discovery outshining her reservations.

And so, beneath the gentle glow of the moon, they agreed on their pact of gentle rebellion, unaware of the path that lay ahead, but united in their secretive mission to seek answers and prepare. Little did they know, the wheels of a much larger machination were already in motion, intertwining their fate with a mystery far greater than they could possibly imagine.

Bella and Matt navigated life in their almost mirror-image homes, perched only 50 feet apart, grand four-bedroom edifices, each standing stately in a refined subdivision towards the affluent side of town. They stood as near-twins, palatial and indistinguishable save for one unique feature: Matt's basement, which he claimed as his personal haven. Their homes found sanctuary amidst an enclave where opulence was the norm, providing them with a lifestyle that was objectively privileged, especially when compared to some of their school contemporaries. This affluence, however, was not

without its burdens, particularly at school where it painted a bullseye on their backs, making them the favoured prey of bullies.

Matt's father, a man of slender build yet endowed with a face carved from hard, lived experiences, found employment at the local electricity board as a supervisor. His tenure there stretched back to his own youthful days in his early twenties. Although his physical stature wasn't intimidating, he cast a wide shadow over Matt's life, regulating it with a firmer hand than Bella was accustomed to from her own parent. His visage, often etched with seriousness, mirrored the stringent way he tried to steer his son through life's obstacles, likely amplified by the family tragedy they had endured. Matt's mother, stolen from them by a hit-and-run driver when he was merely a toddler, left his father to navigate the challenges of parenthood alone.

In contrast, Bella's father exuded a gentle trust towards his daughter, confident in her capacity to weave through the complexities of adolescence with a level head and stay clear of mischief. And then there was Mrs Morton - affectionately referred to as 'The Babysitter' - a steadfast presence in Bella's life. Her father's faith in her mature disposition allowed for a gentle, amiable dynamic between them.

Both teens navigated their paths shadowed by the absence of one parent, each having only their fathers as their familial anchors. Despite the divergence in their paternal relationships, they found a mutual understanding in the singular parental units that shaped their daily lives. They had moulded their routines and expectations around this norm, each offering the other a silent understanding and companionship amidst the unsaid hardships of their respective home lives.

Tuesday. The following dew-kissed morning, Bella, with her back door key firmly in hand, met Matt at the front of their homes, in their familiar meeting spot. With casual ease, they stepped through the gate, meandering onto the road and trailing along the path framed by the robust hedge, all before stealthily slipping back through the bottom gate. They clung close to the hedge, their movements cautious and calculated as they edged along the garden towards Bella's back door, ensuring they remained invisible until the moment Matt's father departed for his workday.

Seizing the opportunity, Bella quietly transitioned into a pair of trousers she had pre-emptively stashed in the bathroom, a minor rebellion against the school's dress code. After the hum of Matt's father's car dissipated into the distance, they lingered in the quiet house, tethered by a sense of caution, wary of him potentially returning for a forgotten item. Just as they readied themselves to shift to Matt's place, a door slammed, the sharp sound arresting them in place, hearts suddenly pulsating in their ears. It took a lingering moment before they deduced it was merely Mrs Babysitter—Bella's playful moniker for her—departing for her shift at the hospital.

After watching her familiar figure disappear down the road, Bella and Matt, with a synchronised exhalation of relief, eased out the back door, locked it with care, and vaulted over the fence to navigate through the familiar terrain of Matt's backyard. Inside Matt's home, they quickly prepared drinks with an efficiency borne of familiar routine, then descended into the refuge of the basement. Here, amidst its secluded tranquillity, they found a peculiar solace, paradoxically grateful for their statuses as children of single-parent households—it inadvertently simplified their rebellious detour from school.

Enveloped in the clandestine comfort of the basement, they pored over the litany of questions that the online form had generated, a pen and pad diligently employed to catalogue items, strategies, and knowledge gleaned from their exploration into the world of survivalists. For another five engrossing hours, prepper videos flickered before their eyes, each minute packed with information that somehow straddled the line between terrifying and fascinating.

Eventually, their research left them contemplative, staring at a list now populated with resources and strategies, but also, somewhat ominously, with a quartet of lingering, glaring

questions—all variations of "what if". Questions that plunged into the abyss of uncertainties, challenging them to reconcile their newfound knowledge with the omnipresent, uneasy tendrils of adolescent fear and wonder.

Amidst the cosy, ambient light of the basement, Bella and Matt took a breather, pausing their dedicated research for a notably tardy lunch. Their meal was a quiet affair, the pair chewing thoughtfully amidst the peculiar tranquillity that enveloped them. After nourishing themselves, their exploration resumed, minds buzzing with snippets of advice, warnings, and the stark realisations borne from their newfound knowledge.

Suddenly, Bella's voice pierced through the ambient hum of the computer, a perceptible tension threading through her words. "Matt, there's a prevalent theme in every video we've watched—they all insist on the potential perils of remaining in built-up areas once, as the preppers delicately put it, 'The Shit Hits The Fan', or SHTF, for short. This leaves us grappling with an imposing question: Where do we seek refuge in such a scenario? Furthermore, if my father is absent, do I embark on this journey alone? Would your father accompany me?"

She paused, eyes reflecting the mix of determination and anxiety swirling within her. "My dad has grazed over this topic rather casually in the past, and I suspect he might join with a smidgen of persuasion. But how do we navigate to our chosen haven? We must formulate a response for every conceivable scenario," she concluded, her gaze imploringly seeking Matt's.

Matt's response was instant, his words imbued with a protectiveness that surged from a deeply rooted camaraderie, untainted by romantic implications. "One assurance I can provide, Bella, is that I would never permit you to traverse such a path alone. That's a given," he stated, his eyes mirroring her earnestness.

"So, where would our initial destination be?" Bella questioned, already shifting into a practical mindset. "Let's commence by drafting a list of potential sanctuaries and navigate our planning from that foundation."

The following hours unfolded with the fervency of youthful determination, as Bella and Matt, enveloped in the secure dimness of the basement, oscillated between focused discussion and fervent list-making. A scattering of potential destinations, strategies, and logistical considerations inked their notepad, each entry a testament to their unwavering resolve to pre-emptively answer the imposing question of "what if." Amidst the sea of unknowns, their steadfast friendship became an anchoring constant, guiding their endeavours with a potent mix of youthful optimism and burgeoning realism.

Bella's voice intermingled with the subdued hum of the basement's ambiance as the pair, deeply entrenched in their planning, found a unanimous decision veering toward a familiar, safe haven—Bella's grandparents' quaint farm. Nestled on the serene fringes of the Yorkshire Dales near Malham, it provided an isolated, yet reasonably proximal retreat, a mere 40 miles away.

"But the prevailing question remains," Matt pondered aloud, an expressive furrow marking his brow, "How do we assure our passage there?"

"The river!" Bella's eyes sparkled with revelation as she nearly leapt from her seat. "The River Aire courses within merely a mile of their farm. We could utilise the canoes! Especially the sizable one outfitted with the training floats. It's capacious enough to permit more storage, with seating for four."

"Oh, the famed trimaran," Matt retorted light-heartedly, a playful jest lighting up his eyes, making reference to the twin inflatable outriggers.

Unfazed and perhaps amused, Bella continued, "Precisely, the trimaran. Furthermore, we might also tether one of the compact inflatable dinghies behind us, laden with supplementary

provisions. This provides sufficient flexibility for it to be just us, or additionally your dad, if he is inclined to accompany us. My father, being accustomed to waterways, can manage one of the other vessels with ease. Goodness, there's a total of five; we could allocate one per person if need be! You see, everything's starting to coalesce seamlessly!"

Her hands animatedly illustrated her thoughts as she added, "And, consider the C-Trux, those robust green plastic wheel apparatuses. Should we need to extract the canoes from the water or traverse overland for any stretch, they'll function akin to trollies for our belongings."

Bella's spirit was contagiously uplifting, even as the topic of their discourse veered through territories darkened by potential despair. The room seemed to brighten, the charts and notes around them no longer stark reminders of fear, but rather beacons guiding them toward preparedness and safety.

They burrowed further into their planning, animatedly discussing each detailed nuance. Every item, every strategy, was deliberated with a fervour fuelled by their entwined fear and determination, an amalgamation that birthed a peculiarly exhilarating adrenaline. Bella and Matt, in their determined preparation, found a potent antidote to the looming unknowns—a meticulously woven safety net crafted from threads of camaraderie, youthful audacity, and an unspoken promise to persist. Come what may.

Bella, her brows knitting together in gentle concern, navigated the topic with the utmost care. "The other pervasive dilemma, one that seems to echo through all their guidance, revolves around our dietary choices. One source even coined being vegetarian as a 'death sentence' in crisis circumstances. It's feasible if you have a garden bountifully at the ready, but reality seldom aligns so conveniently. Now, my stance on consuming meat stems from choice, not necessity. I could adapt if it became imperative. But what about you?"

Matt's eyes, reflecting a tempest of contemplation and apprehension, shifted their gaze toward the scattered notes and maps below them as he mulled over her question. "I have to confess, my certainty wavers in the face of that decision. Allow me a moment to ruminate on it, will you? I'll concoct our drinks in the meantime, to aid my pondering."

His steps, slightly heavy with the weight of contemplation, ascended towards the kitchen. Pausing halfway, he hollered back, "Is a hot beverage or a cool refreshment more to your liking at the moment?"

"Ovaltine, please," Bella's voice, soft and understanding, wafted up in response.

"A thoughtfully anticipated choice, won't be long," Matt called back, his voice attempting a lightness that slightly veiled the gravitas of their conversation.

As he busied himself with preparing the drinks, Matt's thoughts swirled amidst the rising steam from the hot water, confronting the unsettling realisation that survival might necessitate compromising deeply held beliefs. He pondered the ethics of survival against a backdrop of normalcy, contrasting them against the stark, uncompromising reality they were now forced to contend with.

Meanwhile, Bella found her gaze tracing the various objects in the room, lingering on the visible wear of their frequently used items—a silent testament to the comfort and routine of their pre-crisis lives. A soft sigh parted her lips, unbidden yet laden with a melancholy acknowledgment of the stark contrast between them and the unpredictable future yawning ahead.

Their discussion, while shrouded in hypothetical scenarios, probed deeply into the values and ethics each held, forcing them to contemplate the potential surrender of principles to primal survival instincts. A contemplation neither of them had expected to face at such a tender age, yet here they were, sipping on their Ovaltine, their youthful visages belying the severity of the conversation that lingered between them.

With the gentle clinking of porcelain and the rustling of a biscuit tin, Matt re-entered the room, bearing refreshments and a modest offering of sustenance. "I thought we might appreciate these," he gently suggested, placing the biscuits between them. "Our nourishment has been somewhat neglected amidst our discussions today. Regarding the consumption of meat, I surmise that I could, albeit reluctantly, partake if it became an imperative necessity. But would it also necessitate my involvement in procuring it?"

Bella, reaching for a biscuit, let a small, reassuring smile grace her lips. "No, I wouldn't expect that of you, Matt. I'll bring my bow, and my grandfather has experience in hunting small game like rabbits. I wouldn't be surprised if there were occasional deer in the vicinity too. I wouldn't want you to compromise your beliefs by partaking in the kill. To be quite honest, I'm not entirely certain that I could bring myself to end a creature's life, either."

Nodding, Matt paused, stirring his drink with deliberate slowness as he broached the next sobering topic. "In the realm of all those prepper videos, they pose a formidable question: if it boiled down to it, if your life or the life of someone you love hung in the balance, could you kill? Could you extinguish another's life to preserve your own or that of a family member? It's not really a question one can answer, not until confronted with that dire circumstance firsthand."

A heavy silence lingered momentarily between them, weighing upon the room with the gravity of that unanswered question.

Eventually, Bella gently nudged the conversation onward. "The subsequent step is discussing this with your father. How do you anticipate he'll react? Do you reckon he'll align with our plans?"

Matt's eyes flicked upwards as he contemplated her query. Before he could formulate a response, the subtle sound of a key turning in the front door punctuated the air.

"Well, it appears that inquiry might be addressed sooner than we anticipated," Matt whispered, a nervous undertone scarcely veiling his apprehension. "He's just arrived home."

Their eyes met, a confluence of resolve and anxiety reflected in their gazes. The approaching footfalls of Matt's father grew gradually more discernible, each step echoing a steadily approaching reckoning. This was the uncharted territory, where the hypothetical met reality, and the certainties of youth were confronted by the unpredictability of a world in upheaval.

Matt and Bella exchanged a glance, the shared apprehension evident between them. It was apparent that Don was disinclined to give credence to the pervasive concerns, preferring to dismiss them as improbable nightmares contrived by fear mongers.

"Dad, we aren't concerned because of the media or because of hysteria," Matt began, choosing his words with meticulous care. "We've been doing our own research, and there seems to be some validity in being somewhat prepared, don't you think? I mean, having a basic plan doesn't mean we're succumbing to fear. It simply means we're not ignoring the possibilities."

Bella chimed in, supportive and assertive, "Mr Thompson, we don't believe in succumbing to fear either, but it's not about believing that everything is going to collapse tomorrow. It's about understanding that the world can be unpredictable and having a little knowledge and preparation could only be beneficial. After all, isn't it better to have a plan and not need it, than need a plan and not have it?"

Don regarded them both, the juxtaposition of their youth and the maturity of their words providing a momentary cognitive dissonance. After a pause, he exhaled slowly, sinking into one of the nearby chairs and gesturing for them to sit as well.

"Alright," he finally conceded, "Let's talk."

The teens settled down, exchanging another silent communicative glance, before Matt began, detailing the considerations they had outlined, their discussions on necessary resources, possible routes to Bella's grandparents' farm, and their contingency plans.

Don listened, the stoic mask of scepticism gradually softening as his son and Bella laid out their reasoned arguments and well-considered plans. He found himself unexpectedly impressed with the depth and logic with which they'd approached the topic. Sure, there were holes in their plans, and perhaps a naivety that stemmed from the optimism of youth, but their proactive mindset was more than he had given them credit for.

By the time they concluded their exposition, presenting Don with the outline of their proposed preparatory actions and plans, the atmosphere in the room had palpably shifted. The paternal dismissiveness that had been present in his initial response had ebbed, replaced with a thoughtful contemplation.

"I must admit," Don began, voice low and contemplative, "that I did not expect such a well-thought-out discussion from you two. But remember, I've lived through Y2K, the 2012 Mayan calendar, end-of-the-world predictions, and numerous other proclaimed doomsdays. We need to balance preparation with living our daily lives. We can't halt everything based on a 'what if' scenario."

A nod from Bella acknowledged his words. "We understand that, Mr Thompson. But given that, would you consider helping us be a little prepared? Just so that if the 'what if' turns into 'what now', we aren't entirely caught off guard?"

The three of them lingered in the silent aftermath of her words, the unsaid understanding threading through them all that the balance between prudent preparation and unbridled paranoia was a thin, precarious one. Don finally nodded, conceding to their rationale.

"Alright, we'll prepare, but within reason. And under one condition: this does not interfere with your schooling or daily responsibilities. Deal?"

"Deal," Matt and Bella responded in unison, a united front in the face of the unpredictable future that lay before them.

Don had listened, taking in Matt's impassioned discourse with a solemnity that belied his earlier scepticism. He thought about it some more and decided not to leave it there. The room had been silent in the wake of Matt's words, punctuated only by the soft, ambient hum of the house around them. His eyes lingered on his son and Bella, the urgency and conviction in their expressions undeniable.

Silence hung heavy for a moment longer, then Don spoke, "That's quite a theory, Matt. And I won't pretend it's entirely without merit. There's truth in the unreliability and opacity of information, especially from governmental and institutional sources at times of crisis."

"But you need to understand," he continued, voice soft yet firm, "that, in times like these, when fear and speculation run rampant, it's easy to fall down a rabbit hole of conspiracy and dread. And while it is wise to be prepared and prudent, it's equally essential to ensure that fear and suspicion do not overrun our lives."

"But dad," interjected Matt, "we aren't allowing fear to overrun us. We're trying to be practical, logical even. And part of that logic tells us that being prepared, having a plan, is better than being caught off-guard. Wouldn't you agree?"

Bella spoke up then, "Mr Thompson, we aren't planning on starting a rebellion or advocating for anarchy. We're merely advocating for awareness and a degree of preparedness. We are just a

couple of kids who are trying to make sense of what's going on and trying to be smart about it. All we're asking is that you listen to us and perhaps, help us in ensuring that, if something does happen, we have a semblance of a plan."

Don regarded them, grappling internally with the fine balance between entertaining possible theories and succumbing to possible hyperbole. After a moment of thoughtful silence, he nodded.

"Alright," he said softly, "let's say we proceed with this – with the understanding that we remain grounded and realistic. We cannot and will not let this overshadow our lives. We prepare reasonably, but we also continue to live our daily lives. We don't disregard our responsibilities or relationships because of a 'what if' scenario. Agreed?"

Matt and Bella nodded in agreement, understanding the gravity of the balance Don insisted upon.

"In that case," Don continued, "let's do this methodically and reasonably. We'll establish a plan, gather some essential supplies, and have a protocol. But we do this in a way that is balanced, ensuring we are prepared without veering into paranoia."

With a hint of determination in his voice, Matt further pressed, "Dad, you're well-acquainted with Mr Clap, aren't you? Why not give him a ring and inquire about his thoughts? You've always held his knowledge in high regard, haven't you?" His eyes searched his father's, trying to gauge his reaction.

Don, his forehead creased with lines of contemplation, made his way back upstairs, the creaky steps whispering beneath his weight, to initiate the phone call. Matt and Bella, huddled together in the partially lit basement, strained their ears, catching the muffled cadence of Don's voice above, yet the words remained elusive, a secretive murmur barely trickling through the ceiling. A knot of tension wound itself in the air around them as they waited, the faint buzz of the old lightbulbs overhead doing little to dispel the burgeoning anxiety.

After what felt like an eternity, Don reappeared, his expression noticeably altered, a shadow of concern casting a pallor over his features.

The silence hung heavily until Matt, curiosity brimming in his eyes, ventured, "Dad? You were back pretty quickly. What did Mr Clap have to say?"

Don hesitated before reluctantly revealing, "He's unexpectedly taken emergency leave and won't be back this week. Claims it's due to his sister being unwell." He paused, eyes distant, before admitting, "But something doesn't sit right. I know for a fact that he doesn't have a sister. Attempts to reach his home and mobile number proved fruitless as well..."

The words lingered in the air, unspoken thoughts weaving a tapestry of alarm between them. In the strained silence that followed, Don's eyes met Matt's, reflecting the trepidation mirrored in the young eyes staring back at him.

"So," Don began, voice quieter, "I suppose I ought to hear what you two have to say."

In that moment, the basement, once a space of leisure and recreation, transformed into a meeting place where a father, his son, and his son's friend were about to delve into a discussion far removed from the ordinary, exploring the possibility of a reality neither had expected to entertain. And as Don seated himself, preparing to listen, the magnitude of their conversation weighed heavily upon them, an unspoken understanding that the words to come would irrevocably alter their path forward.

A certain fervour glowed in Matt's eyes as he began, "Firstly, neither Bella nor I will be stepping foot in school tomorrow. In the grand scheme of what might be unfolding, there's simply no point. If all of this," he gestured vaguely around, "turns out to be for naught, we'll shoulder the burden of catching up academically. However, if our speculations bear fruit, we will be grateful for the extra

time to prepare. The amateur predictions, mind you, since professional voices have suspiciously gone silent, indicate this could commence anytime from Saturday night onwards. We've scoured the Internet looking for their insights, to no avail. I'm proposing that you, Dad, consider taking the rest of the week off. Tomorrow, make a trip to the bank and withdraw as much as possible. Then we must commence procuring the essentials should a bug out become inevitable."

Don, his brows knitting together in a blend of disbelief and rising concern, interrupted, "Essentials we need? What does that even mean, Matt? And taking time off at the drop of a hat isn't as simple as you make it out to be." His voice carried a weary edge, juxtaposing the urgency in Matt's tone.

Bella, her voice steady, joined the discourse, "If our predictions are accurate – and there is a mounting certainty in my gut that they are – we might not have an exact timeline, but the likelihood of this event transpiring within the next seven days is ominously high. Don, please ponder this - what true purpose would venturing to work serve? If catastrophe strikes, computers, digital infrastructures, they'll all be moot. Your salary comes through digital means, does it not? In a world possibly thrust into darkness, where electricity becomes a mere memory, how will they pay you, and moreover, how will you spend it? Thus, I echo your son. What really is the purpose of adhering to work?"

An unsettling quiet engulfed Don, who after a heavy pause, softly requested, "Show me. Demonstrate on the computer what you've uncovered and where your fears stem from."

Matt, with a slight nod, began guiding Don through the virtual breadcrumb trail they had painstakingly pieced together. "These are all the bookmarks. We'll entrust you to navigate through them while we prepare something to eat for all of us. Should you need us, we'll be in the kitchen."

As they retreated, Matt and Bella left Don amidst a digital sea of warning signs and alarming predictions. The gentle hum of the computer juxtaposed starkly against the swirling tempest of theories and potentially harsh futures that lay ahead. And in the kitchen, amidst the clatter of pots and pans, they shared a silent, apprehensive glance, understanding that the forthcoming decisions, nurtured by the seeds of stark warnings, might very well shape their imminent future.

Chapter Eight.

Don's eyes are opened.

The dim glow of the basement light followed Don as he emerged, casting an elongated shadow on the floor that seemed to mirror the worry etched deeply into his features. He sank heavily into his favourite armchair, the familiar creak of its worn fabric doing little to comfort him in this moment of trepidation. Matt and Bella, perched together on the sofa, exchanged uneasy glances, their hearts pulsating in a rhythm of shared anxiety as they waited, suspended in a silence that seemed to stretch towards eternity.

After a breath that seemed to last an age, Don's voice cut through, albeit shaky, yet laden with a reluctant concession. "Okay, I remain steeped in scepticism, but I've delved deep enough, read enough, seen enough to admit that this—a possibility it remains." His eyes, visibly marinating in a mixture of fear and uncertainty, scanned the room before landing back on them. "Australian sky observatory sites—what I've uncovered there aligns with your assertions. Come Saturday or anytime onwards, this disaster could unfurl its dark wings upon us. Precaution, it seems, is due."

He unfolded a piece of paper, his hands trembling slightly as he continued, "An American site provided this: a list. A comprehensive catalogue of things we'll need if we're forced to leave here—to 'bug out,' in their jargon. It's not succinct; the essentials we'd need to lug with us are manifold. I haven't crunched the numbers yet, but we're likely talking about a few thousand pounds. That's manageable on my end. Have you both drafted a list?" Don's gaze pierced through them, seeking answers.

Bella, her eyes reflecting the gravity of the situation, responded with a cautious optimism, "Yes, we initiated our preparations this morning. My finances, however, stretch thin—insufficient for such an expense. Would you be able to front the costs for me, my brother, and my father? I assure you; I'd pay back every penny."

Don nodded, his response immediate and unconditional. "Yes, of course. Hell, I had no intention of provisioning just for us. I planned to consolidate all purchases, anyway. No issue there. If we're undertaking this, we must unite our thoughts and formulate a meticulous list of essentials to acquire tomorrow."

Bella leaned forward, her voice steady, yet carrying a subtle tremor of fear. "If we're accurate, and this is indeed a gargantuan CME spawning a potent EMP, we must assume modern vehicles will be rendered futile. Earlier, Matt and I deliberated and concluded that canoes pose our best alternative. My father has five stored in his lockup near the river: a four-man open canoe, a two-man variant, and three kayaks—you know, those plastic encasements, as my brother so eloquently describes. There's also an inflatable dinghy. Using these, we could navigate to my grandparent's place, a secluded farm in the Yorkshire Dales where my father currently resides. The river could guide us directly there. It's roughly 40 miles in a direct line, but closer to 80 by river. Nonetheless, it should provide a safer passage than any road. With the canoes, we can transport more—predominantly more water. Your thoughts?" she queried, eyes searching Don's for a semblance of approval.

Don, absorbing the information, exhaled. "It seems you've charted a well-thought-out course. Let me think on that." His eyes, a blend of apprehension and admiration, scanned the detailed plan laid out before him. The room was once again veiled in a palpable silence, as they all pondered the perilous journey that potentially lay ahead.

The bitter truth lingered heavily in the room: Don harboured an unspoken aversion to water. A nearly fatal encounter with the deep, when he was around Matt and Bella's age, had left an indelible mark on his psyche, birthing an unsettling fear of the boundless, unpredictable nature of open water—its lack of lifeguards and the unforgiving absence of a reassuring shallow end. The decision gnawing

at him was one he'd rather avoid, yet the logical part of his mind, however reluctantly, conceded to their point: on the water, they could transport more, and arguably, it should be safer, especially considering the alarming reports he'd read concerning potential unrest, rampant looting, and even worse atrocities stemming from desperation and chaos.

A silent sigh escaped his lips as Matt declared, "I'll print off some maps."

"Good idea," Don responded, his voice barely above a whisper, still ensnared by the mental images of potential chaos that awaited them.

With a heavy heart, Don began to assemble a list, a compilation of essentials they would need to pack, each item a tangible reminder of the possible trials ahead. Meanwhile, Matt and Bella, submerging their own apprehensions, set about the pragmatic task of locating a suitable rucksack and evaluating just how much weight each of them could realistically bear. Their youthful vigour didn't entirely mask the undercurrent of tension that permeated through their actions—a subtle, yet ever-present reminder of the gravity of their situation.

Down in the dimly lit storage space, Matt bent over the recycling bin, his hands navigating through discarded items to retrieve juice and water bottles of various sizes—half-litre, one litre, two litres. He methodically rinsed each one, the sound of rushing water briefly overpowering the enveloping silence, before meticulously filling them, creating a tangible reserve for their impending journey.

The trio worked quietly, each absorbed in their tasks, yet bound by a collective understanding of the sombre reality they were preparing to navigate. An unsaid acknowledgment lingered in the air: they were traversing into the unknown, guided by grim predictions, yet fuelled by the intrinsic human instinct to survive, to protect, and to persevere against the unfolding chaos that seemed to edge ever closer with each passing moment.

Tenderness and apprehension intertwined as they began to load the water bottles into the rucksack, a tangible reminder of the burdensome journey that awaited them. Upon hoisting it, the harsh reality of their physical limitations became starkly apparent. A mere twelve kilos was straining their muscles to their utmost limits. If they had to journey far on foot, toning it down to ten would be more manageable. They cast sidelong glances at each other, wordlessly sharing their silent worries and unspoken fears.

"Bella, could you come here a moment, please?" Don's voice, gentle yet coated with an undercurrent of urgency, echoed through the space.

"What is it?" Bella responded; her voice steady yet betraying a flicker of concern as she approached.

A pause lingered before Don spoke again. "Your father. When is he due back?"

"Sunday. Why do you ask?" Her eyebrows drew together slightly, a subtle indicator of her growing unease.

A soft exhale escaped Don's lips before he continued, "Can you ring him and ask if we can drive up on Thursday, staying until this potential threat has subsided?"

An apologetic downturn of Bella's lips prefaced her response. "No, I can't, I'm afraid. There's no signal up there; it's a complete black spot. He typically calls me from a phone box in the village. He isn't due to call again until Friday, but sometimes he calls earlier if he happens to visit the village for some errand."

Don nodded understandingly, then added, "If he does contact you, tell him what's occurring and ask if we can come up any time before midnight Friday. If you don't hear from him, we can drive up on Friday night, anyway. The journey should take less than an hour at that time of night, perhaps slightly longer."

"I will," Bella assured, the weight of their circumstance reflecting in her eyes.

She hesitated for a brief moment before continuing, “Why not load up your van with everything and park it at the lockup on Friday? That way, if anything transpires in the meantime, everything’s consolidated in one place. Walking there won’t take long, but transporting everything down there could be time-consuming if something occurs earlier than predicted. If it’s all already in your van, and we decide to leave Friday night—possibly even before midnight—all we’ll need to do is walk down there and drive off.”

In the midst of palpable tension, a semblance of a plan began to form, weaving through their collective consciousness—a tiny ember of order amidst the potential chaos. With their course tentatively set, they continued their preparations, each action and decision a delicate balance between pragmatic necessity and the simmering undercurrent of dread that lingered perpetually in the background.

A semblance of light-heartedness, albeit faint and fragmented, danced through Don's words as he complimented, “You aren’t just a pretty face, you have brains. That's a good idea.” His attempt to weave a touch of normalcy into their unusual circumstances was almost tangible. But beneath the surface, the encroaching trepidation lingered ever-so-slightly.

He continued, “I’ll go and check the Aussie observatory website. They mentioned an update would be posted.”

Bella, attempting to match his lightness, replied, “Don’t be long; dinner will be ready in five minutes.”

With a simple, “Okay,” Don descended back into the basement, the barely lit subterranean room reflecting the dark possibilities swirling through his mind.

As he logged back into the website, his eyes flickered anxiously across the screen, absorbing every word with a growing sense of dread. Silent curses escaped under his breath. It was going to happen. The skyward threat was destined to crash into their reality come Saturday morning, around 5 o’clock, with a margin of error of half an hour.

“Dad, dinner!” Matt’s voice punctured the tense air from upstairs.

Don surfaced from the basement, his motions robotic as he moved towards the bathroom, mechanically washing his hands before positioning himself at the dinner table. His visage, once a sturdy pillar of parental assurance, now seemed fragile and pale, his heart pulsating in a wild, erratic symphony within his chest.

“Dad, are you okay?” The concern was evident in Matt's voice. “You look as white as a ghost.”

Don's voice, normally so firm and reliable, wavered as he uttered, “We are screwed.”

Matt, his voice tinged with an escalating alarm, called out, “Dad?” Then, louder and more insistently, “Dad, what is it?”

“Forget dinner, go read, see what they are saying. See for yourself,” urged Don, his words pressing them into immediate action.

With rapid, anxious footsteps, Matt and Bella dashed to the basement, where they were met with a screen that rendered them speechless, the digital words before them spelling out an unsettling truth that enveloped them in a blanket of shock and disbelief.

Chapter Nine.

Shock and awe.

Matt and Bella, hands slightly trembling, gazed into the eerie glow of the computer screen, absorbing the chilling newsflash from the Perth Observatory. "Saturday, approximately 5 AM: Expect an earth-shattering Coronal Mass Ejection (CME), hundreds of times more powerful than the notorious Carrington Event. The ensuing electromagnetic pulse will obliterate all electronic equipment," the message read, its stark words reverberating in their minds. Below, diagrams detailed the cataclysmic impact on Earth's magnetic fields, while a stark, animated video vividly elucidated the unthinkable reality. To Matt and Bella, it was no longer a distant hypothesis—it was tangible, imminent danger.

"That's why they're bringing the astronauts back home..." Bella whispered, her voice teetering on the brink of shock and understanding. Her eyes, wide and reflecting the bleak images from the screen, met Matt's. He reached over, instinctively squeezing her hand in a tight, reassuring grip, quickly retracting it when he became self-conscious of the gesture. Silently, they made their way back to the dinner table.

Don was there, his fork listlessly stirring the untouched food on his plate, his mind evidently miles away in a tumult of thoughts. His eyes lifted, toggling between his son and Bella, the profound realisation of their situation reflected in his once steadfast gaze.

"I'm sorry," Don's voice, usually robust and assured, now quivered subtly. "I admit, I was trying to lighten the mood before, indulging you without fully believing. But this... this is gravely real. We need to strategize, create a comprehensive list of essentials. And working on the assumption that your father won't call, Bella... you'll stay in the spare bedroom from tonight. School is no longer a priority."

A pause lingered, filling the room with an almost palpable tension before he continued, "We'll begin preparation tonight and I'll gather supplies tomorrow. Let's clear the garage—relocate anything non-essential to the shed, the pool house, anywhere it fits. We'll set up tables for sorting items as they're procured. You both will need to stay here while I go out. I'll inform the school that you're both under the weather, laid low by a cold. But once we've eaten, we get to work, understood?"

The stark reality of their predicament burrowed into Bella and Matt, transforming their prior sense of adventurous preparation into a sombre, life-preserving mission fraught with uncertainties about the future. After dinner, Matt methodically cleared the dishes, his movements mechanical amidst the turmoil of thoughts, while Bella and Don, ensconced in a gravely serious conversation, began formulating lists at the table.

"Mr Thompson..." Bella began, her voice tentative.

Don gently interrupted her. "Bella, it's Don. Just Don from now on. Formalities don't find a place here anymore." His tone was gentle, understanding the delicacy of the situation.

Bella nodded, a small frown of concentration forming between her brows. "Okay, Don, this might seem like an unusual question, but do you know how to shoot, like with a gun or a bow?"

"Yes, I learned in the army cadets as a youngster and did some clay pigeon shooting with old Mr Clancy until he passed away. But it's been over a year since I last fired a gun. Why do you ask?" Don's curiosity piqued; he tilted his head slightly.

"Do you still have a license?" Bella pressed.

"Indeed, I do. But again, why?"

"And a shotgun?" Bella continued; her eyes steady on Don's.

A flicker of frustration flashed across Don's face. "Bella, yes, it's locked in the cabinet in the basement. But you need to tell me why you're asking."

Without missing a beat, Bella said, "Add shotgun shells to your list, as many as you can purchase, particularly buckshot. I've watched enough apocalyptic films to know we're going to need them. If power grids collapse, they won't be producing any more, and my grandfather may appreciate the extra ammunition. Can Matt shoot?"

"I've used an air rifle, but you already know that," Matt interjected as he re-entered the room.

“That wouldn’t even fend off a cat,” Bella retorted, a slight edge to her voice. “We need to be serious about this.”

“My shotgun license doesn’t permit me to purchase another gun anyway,” Don clarified, his voice layered with a mix of resignation and concern.

“That’s not where I was heading with this,” Bella responded. “Apologies, Matt, but your skills with a bow and arrow are subpar. However, if you can shoot a gun, you might manage a crossbow effectively. They’re not cheap, but they can be as useful as a gun. Best of all, they don’t require a license. The shop where my dad bought my bow also sells them. We should also get hunting arrows, not just target ones, though having those as a fallback might be sensible. What do you think? Would you trust him with a crossbow?”

“Trust me?” Matt’s voice lifted slightly, a blend of indignation and vulnerability coming through. “What do you mean by that?”

“Matt, come with me.”

Bella gently tugged Matt’s arm, leading him back into the solitude of the kitchen, her expression a carefully crafted mask of calmness. Matt, sensing an underlying tension, followed without protest, his eyes searching hers for answers.

Before he could formulate a word, Bella spoke in hushed tones, urgency lacing every syllable. “I know how your dad operates, Matt. If he believes it’s his decision, he’ll agree. You need something, something substantial, to protect yourself. My approach back there was the best shot at getting him to say yes. Understand?” Her teeth gritted slightly, eyes imploring. “Just go along with me on this, okay? Follow my lead.”

“The jury is out on that one. Let me think about it.” Don’s voice drifted into the kitchen, a thoughtful cadence to his words. “But for now, it’s time for bed. Matt, show Bella where she’ll be sleeping, and we will revisit this conversation in the morning.”

“Good night,” Bella offered with a small, reassuring smile, her voice softer, as they retreated from the kitchen.

Bella found the unfamiliarity of the expansive double bed unsettling, a stark contrast to the snug embrace of her narrow bed back home. It was the sole bed that had cradled her dreams, aside from her dad’s childhood bed at her grandparents’ quaint house. The grandiosity of the bed before her now felt almost engulfing. In the compactness of her own bed, she found comfort, a safe enclave that tightly wrapped around her as she slept. Now she missed that security.

As she tried to drift into slumber, Bella’s mind wandered to her father, nestled in the technology-devoid environment of her grandparents’ place. They lived deliberately distant from the throbbing pulse of digital life – no TV, no internet, and certainly, no phones. She found herself grappling with how, entwined within their disconnected world, they might comprehend the impending chaos. Sure, they were technically on the grid with a generator they’d procured a few years prior, but it primarily served to banish the darkness with light. Occasionally, they even opted for the warm, flickering glow of candles instead. Her dad often described them as ‘old school.’

Wednesday. At some unperceived moment, sleep must have embraced Bella, for the next conscious moment came with a flood of sunlight seeping through the undrawn curtains. She burrowed beneath the covers, attempting to shield herself from the morning’s intrusion, but wakefulness had firmly taken hold. As she contemplated emerging from her bed, a fleeting pause of realisation hovered – the curtains remained open, the door unlocked, and her clothes were neatly folded in the en-suite bathroom from the night before. Adhering to a nightly ritual, she had slipped out of her clothes in the bathroom, making a quick, shadow-shielded dash to the bed in the dark. The soothing cascade of a pre-sleep shower always lulled her into tranquillity. Now, however, her clothing – and modesty – were bound within that brightly illuminated bathroom, its generous window offering a vantage point to two homes perched higher up the hill.

There was a palpable hesitation in the air as Bella weighed her options. She was on the precipice of taking a daring, uncovered sprint to the bathroom when an unexpected knock came at the door.

Matt's voice punctured the delicate silence, a gentle yet unexpected intrusion. "It's Matt. Do you need anything?" He queried, his voice resonating through the closed door.

A momentary irritation flickered across Bella's face. "A bathrobe would be nice," she retorted sharply, her voice carrying a dash of frustration from her predicament.

From the other side of the door came a patient reply, "There should be two at the foot of the bed."

Bella's eyes darted down, and there they were, folded neatly – one blue and one white bathrobe, offering the modesty she was currently without. An exhale escaped her, diffusing the tension that had momentarily seized her.

"Thank you, Matt," her voice softened, brushing against the previous sharpness of her words.

"See you downstairs," Matt responded, his footsteps gradually fading as he retreated down the corridor.

Bella reached for the white bathrobe, enveloping herself in its plush, reassuring fabric. With a tentative step into the bathroom, she reluctantly slipped into the previous day's attire, a slight cringe marking her displeasure at the lack of freshness. But there were bigger issues at hand, she reminded herself, and with a decisive breath, she forged onward.

Descending to the kitchen, she was greeted by a comforting sight. A warm cup of Ovaltine perched on the table, its steam curling into the morning air. Don and Matt, stationed at the breakfast bar, lifted their eyes in unison, watching as she navigated into the space. Their expressions carried a subtle inquiry, an unspoken question lingering in the quiet room.

"I'm just going to sip on this, then I need to pop next door to slip into something clean," Bella articulated, lifting the cup gently to her lips, allowing the warmth of the Ovaltine to cascade down her throat, a comforting prelude to the challenging days ahead.

Don nodded, understanding wrapped in his expression. "While you're there, Bella, gather what you might need. The offer to stay here still stands, either until we leave, or your dad comes back. It's logical, considering you'll be dining here, and we have an exhaustive list of preparations to tackle together. I'll give the school a call momentarily. Let them know you and Matt are under the weather with colds and won't make it for the remainder of the week."

Bella placed the cup down, her brows knitting slightly. "I'll need to make a brief visit on Friday. I have fencing practice and there are a few items in my locker I'd like to retrieve. I assure you, I'll return with ample time," she detailed, her tone threading a mixture of resolve and soft assurance.

Don's gaze held a considerate firmness. "I'll still inform them you'll both be out for the entirety of the week. If we opt to leave earlier, it's a safer bet than declaring you'll be fit by Friday. We don't want to raise any eyebrows," he advised, his voice holding a gentle, paternal firmness.

Bella nodded slowly, absorbing his reasoning. "That seems prudent, I suppose. Oh, and just a thought—if by any chance you head out before I return and you visit the sports shop, could you procure a dozen metal-pointed hunting arrows for me, please?"

A brief, acknowledging "Okay," was all Don offered, permitting a pause to dwell in the room.

Bella soon drained the remainder of her Ovaltine, warmth lingering as she stood, feeling Matt rise in tandem.

“No, Matt,” she softly interjected, placing a gentle hand on his arm, “I’ll return in about half an hour. I’ll be just fine, and I’ll meet you in the garage upon my return.”

Chapter Ten.

Memories.

Bella, approaching her front door, was just on the brink of inserting the key into the lock when an unexpected noise reverberated behind her, startling her into an abrupt turn.

“Where have you been?” The voice, notably perturbed, belonged to Mrs Babysitter, her eyes reflecting a mixture of concern and irritation. “You’ve been absent all night. Young lady, you’re far too young to be out like this. I do hope there isn’t a boy involved in this escapade.”

Bella, holding her gaze steady, responded, “I’ve been next door. Matt’s dad extended an invitation for me to stay, especially since I wasn’t too keen on being alone after we watched a film that turned out to be far more terrifying than we’d anticipated. I’ll be staying there until my dad returns. He’s alright with it. Actually, he’s always suggested it for times when he’d be away.”

Mrs Babysitter’s demeanour softened slightly, although a residue of her earlier disapproval lingered. “Oh, you really should have informed me. I need to head to work now. We’ll revisit this discussion tonight,” she declared, before redirecting herself, departing with a swirl of unsettled energy lingering in her wake.

Bella’s actions emanated from a deliberate nature as she entered her home, locking the door securely behind her. Following a refreshing shower, she clothed herself in cargo trousers, a dark t-shirt, and her most comfortable shoes, laying the foundation for an ensemble that spoke both to practicality and a subtle defiance.

In the silent presence of her room, she began the methodical process of packing an overnight bag for the impending week, ensuring that her school uniform and fencing attire for Friday were included. Simultaneously, she selected and arranged the clothing destined for her bug out bag upon the bed with deliberate care.

Her Doc Martens, reliable and sturdy, were pulled from the wardrobe and positioned beside the bed as a silent testament to readiness. Retrieving her rucksack from the hallway cupboard, she returned to her bedroom, her heart subtly acknowledging the sense of determined yet anxious preparation infusing the atmosphere.

The moment her eyes landed on the rucksack; reality subtly nudged at her: it would not all fit. An expanse of material lay before her, waiting to be compacted into a space that would not accommodate it all. And the addition of food and water was yet to be considered. Her mind, pragmatic yet spinning, tried to grapple with the dilemma. Something would have to be omitted, but what?

She took a moment, perching on the bed amidst the tangible remnants of planned preparedness, gazing at the assembly of items. The mental process of elimination was much harder than she’d anticipated. Her perspective pivoted, and she looked at it differently: What was utterly indispensable?

Underwear and socks claimed their non-negotiable place, while bras, with a momentary flicker of rebellion against societal norms, were deemed vanity items and thus dispensable, though she did add one to the pile with her school uniform for Friday. The comb was retained; the brush abandoned. Two t-shirts and her camo vest secured their positions; other items were dismissed. The baggy jeans remained; the skin-tight ones were discarded.

She persevered, meticulously whittling away until only a quarter of the initial selection remained, which she carefully packed, returning the rest to their respective drawers with a precision that belied the internal tempest of thoughts and emotions. An afterthought saw her adding her thick leather belt to the bag, an item that fused functionality and a semblance of armoured readiness.

Bella, feeling the weight and the significance of the items she held, found herself grounded amidst a torrent of emotions and daunting reality. The sword, a tangible link to her grandfather and his past, and a testament to her own accomplishments, was non-negotiable; it had to accompany her. Its very existence in her hands bore the echoes of victories, losses, tales of war, and family lineage. An artifact of familial history and a weapon. It was a blend of sentimental and pragmatic importance.

As Bella faced the conundrum of the steadfast display case, her mental gears turned, contemplating possible solutions. Her pride interjected at the thought of seeking assistance from Matt or Don. There was a resolute determination in her, a defiance against a perceived weakness that bridled at the thought. Meanwhile, the option of breaking the glass felt like a violation against a lovingly crafted gift from her father, a betrayal against the tender fabric of another thread of her family bond.

Finding the knives seemed fortuitous and unsettling in equal measure. The hunting knife, with its substantial blade and a bone handle, conveyed a serious, potent capability. Discovering a second knife — one that held a mirroring essence to the sword — felt like an unforeseen gift, one that brought her grandfather and father silently into the room with her.

There was an intrinsic knowledge within her, perhaps passed through generations, that these items — all of them — bore more than physical utility; they were totems of her family, symbols of strength, survival, and connectivity through time and challenges.

Drawing a quiet, steady breath, Bella's eyes, imbued with the resolve, gazed upon the knives, then shifted toward the display case once more. Her mind, adept and sharp, revisited the problem of how to carefully dismantle it without inflicting damage. Retrieving a pry bar from the garage, she patiently worked it behind the frame, releasing it from the grip upon the wall intact. Placing it carefully on the table, undamaged, she retrieved the sword.

Bella, with a tangible sense of accomplishment, delicately fingered the hilt of the sword, feeling its cool, unyielding surface against her skin. The room seemed to pulse with a silent reverence for the precious artifacts now before her, and she took a moment to immerse herself into a reflective silence.

The sword and knives carried a hefty emotional and historical load, yet they also, pragmatically, were tools that could defend and protect. With every intimate touch to the sword, she could almost feel the collective spirit of her forebears watching, guiding, and fortifying her resolve.

She carefully wrapped the sword in a thick cloth, ensuring its preservation during travel. Bella then stored the knives securely, acknowledging their quiet potency and the underlying familial connection they signified.

The certificate, bearing witness to an achievement, left behind, echoed a transition. Bella was no longer just the girl who had won a fencing competition. She had metamorphosed into a young woman shouldering responsibilities and existential decisions far weightier than a sports victory. The certificate remained, a silent sentinel to a simpler time and a chapter of life that was now abruptly and irreversibly closed.

Returning to her task, Bella began to assemble the food and water into her rucksack, thinking ahead with a maturity beyond her years. She placed the sword and knives with an almost reverent care, on top her sports bag, ready for her imminent departure.

With her bag now packed, Bella cast one final, lingering gaze around her home – a place of security and familiarity now poised on the brink of becoming a distant memory. The walls seemed to whisper tales of days gone by, of laughter, of lessons learned, of love unspoken but fiercely felt.

As Bella meticulously gathered her bows and placed the arrows into two quivers, she eased into the chair, her mind swirling in a tempest of thought, pondering what could possibly have been forgotten in this imperative mission of hers. The accumulating pile in front of her began to resemble a miniature mountain, signalling a potential burden. An internal debate echoed within her – if carrying this pile was an arduous task now, how could she manage trudging through an unyielding field or a dense forest?

After a moment of contemplative silence, she resolved that this would have to be sufficient for now; she could return later for food supplies. Then, like a light flickering on in a dim room, she remembered the photo album. If her phone were to fail her, those cherished memories embedded in the photographs would be her only visual remnant of days gone by.

With swift feet, she rushed to her father's room, clutching the album tightly against her chest when she returned, and delicately added it to the burgeoning pile. "Time to get organised," she murmured to herself, the gears in her mind visibly turning as she sorted through her belongings with purposeful intent.

Into her rucksack, she slid the two knives, followed by the two Maglite's and several packs of batteries — essential items for what lay ahead. The photo album found a safe space in her overnight bag, an old tennis bag which had seen many adventures with her.

With a gentle sigh, Bella donned her parka, the most reliable shield against the cold she possessed. She adjusted her rucksack, ensuring the straps of the quivers were adequately loosened before slinging them over her left shoulder, and tenderly placed both bows over her right. Her sword, a beacon of past accolades and familial pride, was carefully positioned between the handles of the tennis bag.

With keys in hand and a fleeting look around the familiar space, she locked the door behind her, stepping out into the unknown with a determined spirit.

Matt, amidst the clutter of what he candidly dubbed 'junk' in the garage, was nearing the end of his arduous clearing endeavour. The lawn mower now perched nonchalantly on the rear lawn, surrounded by an eclectic array of tins of paint, a fractured trestle, a selection of gardening tools, bicycles in varying states of use, discarded toys, vacant plant pots, and boxes which once housed unknown contents. Emptied shelves loomed overhead, while two picnic tables and a pasting table — which, to Bella's knowledge, had never encountered wallpaper — were erected, awaiting their purpose. The garage had been swept clean and stood ready for Don's imminent return.

Matt, eyebrows raised, cast a sceptical gaze over Bella's collection. "You're taking all that?" he inquired, a playful cynicism in his tone.

"Not the tennis bag. That's just my overnight bag while I'm here," she clarified, gesturing toward the pile. "But yeah, the rest is coming with me. Just wait 'til you figure out what you're lugging. Fitting your computer and Xbox into your rucksack? Now that'll be a sight," she teased, a playful smirk dancing across her face.

His mock laughter filled the space between them. “Ha, ha, ha. You must think you're quite the comedian,” he retorted, but his eyes twinkled with mirth. “I’ve got just the thing to erase that smirk from your face. You can help me shift that heap into the pool house.”

Her chuckle emanated light-heartedness. “Easy there, just a joke. No need to get your knickers in a twist.”

Their banter, light and familiar, wove a thread of normalcy through the impending urgency of their situation, providing a momentary, yet necessary, respite from the weight of their circumstance. Bella found a strange comfort in the playful exchange, a reminder that even in the most dire of times, moments of levity could be found. And in that, there was hope.

Having securely stored everything in the pool house, Bella and Matt retreated to the familiar warmth of the kitchen, their hands instinctively reaching to prepare soothing beverages. Their rhythmic motions in the kitchen, a dance of familiar domesticity, offered a momentary semblance of ordinary life amidst the peculiar. It wasn’t long before Don, visibly weary from his exhaustive travels, backed up to the garage and ambled into the comforting space.

He gestured toward the kettle, an unspoken plea for a drink if Matt was amenable to crafting one more. Don’s tired eyes spoke volumes of the rushing and rummaging he’d subjected himself to, yet his demeanour suggested the to-do list was still far from complete.

As they convened, they methodically sorted through the items Don had amassed during his hectic foray. From the van, he produced packs of zip-lock bags, passing them to Matt with precise instructions regarding which dried foods to portion into them – and an insistent reminder to include at least one jar of the comforting Ovaltine.

Amongst the loot Don had accumulated, there were five new rucksacks, all steeped in camo hues, available in a useful assortment of sizes: two were large, another pair medium, and a singular smaller one. They appeared considerably more robust than the ones Bella and Matt currently possessed. Bella, glancing at the bags, decided she would transfer her belongings later, in the privacy of her room. The thought of Matt possibly sifting through her undergarments was a firm no.

With a systematic approach, they laid each item out upon the table, methodically checking off each against their meticulously curated list. As each item was verified, they relocated it to the shelves, an organised array on standby. Afterwards, they reconvened in the kitchen, their hands busily repacking food and, crucially, Don’s cherished Ovaltine, their actions woven with threads of anticipation, unity, and a tangible tension, humming beneath the surface of their steadfast determination.

When Don returned again, a scant couple of hours later, he made a beeline for the kitchen, his actions spelling a succinct need for a revitalising cup of tea before anything else. After allowing himself a few moments to savour the hot beverage, he beckoned Bella and Matt toward the van, a twinkle of mischief subtly dancing in his eyes.

Curiosity arched across Matt’s features, a silent query that was met with a nudge toward the van’s back door. Don, standing back, gestured for Matt to open it, his features struggling to suppress a triumphant grin.

As Matt’s hands lifted the door, his eyes immediately flashed wide, reflecting the tantalising surprise that sat, unashamedly bold, in the middle of the van floor—a brand-new, sleek compound crossbow, flanked by three packs of bolts, lay there waiting.

“That’s the reason for your cryptic silence in the kitchen, about your haul,” Matt observed, his voice a mix of awe and understanding.

“I wanted this moment,” Don admitted, “to see your expression light up, untouched by foreknowledge. I was hell-bent on not spoiling the surprise. Your face right now...it’s the exact canvas of astonishment I envisioned. You didn’t harbour even a tiny suspicion I might snag one for you, did you?”

Matt shook his head, his gaze still fixated on the newfound treasure. “No, I didn’t. I assumed you were sidestepping the topic, so I refrained from prodding,” he responded.

A chuckle rumbled in Don’s chest as he clapped Matt on the back. “It’s good to know your old dad can still pull off a surprise or two,” he mused, his eyes shifting toward Bella. “The arrows are ensconced in the cardboard tube up front in the passenger seat, Bella. Fingers crossed, they’re the ones you need.”

He paused for a moment, ensuring he had their attention. “There’s just one more stop, the camping shop. Need to pick up a fire starter, a reliable, versatile knife, and some Paracord. Then we can dive into organising this heap. Have either of you churned up thoughts on anything I might have missed?” he queried, his gaze shuttling between them.

Bella pondered briefly before offering, “Perhaps some bungee cord? We’ll need something sturdy to secure everything if we opt to deploy the canoes. And some duffle bags, preferably the waterproof variety.”

Don nodded in agreement, his hands already moving to safely stow away the shotgun shells. “Solid thinking. I’ll get those sorted and then make a final sprint for these last few bits. Should be back by four. See you both on the flip side.”

With that, he eased the van from its position and gently closed the garage door. The muffled hum of the engine lingered for a moment before fading away, as they listened to him pull away and then dissolve into the distance.

As they commenced the methodical process of unloading the boxes and carrier bags, Bella and Matt discovered an unexpected item amongst the cache: four shotgun shell shoulder straps, each capable of holding a whopping 56 shells. Puzzlement knitted their brows together, as the need for four seemed a tad excessive. Don, cloaked with these, would resemble Mad Max more than the friendly neighbourhood electrician.

With the meticulous unpacking and segregation of items, which subsequently filled several bags with discarded packaging, the pair diligently ticked off each item off the list. Then, ensuring the rubbish sacks found temporary residence in the pool house and out of their immediate way, they trudged back up to the kitchen. The orchestration of packing the dried goods and transporting them down to the garage was well underway by the time Don re-emerged, arms laden with the final few necessary items—and a culinary surprise.

The mouth-watering aroma of three large, piping hot pizzas and portions of chips wafted through the air as Don gently set them down. “Figured you might be famished,” he said, eyes twinkling warmly. “Let’s nourish ourselves before we dive back in. A five-minute respite wouldn’t go amiss.”

“More like thirty, if you ask me,” chimed in Matt, “and a feast that comes with the joy of negligible washing up—hooray!”

A companionable silence enveloped them as they delved into their meal, hunger stifling any attempts at conversation. They sat there, savouring each bite, allowing the flavours to linger. It was only several minutes post their feast, the remnants of their dinner languishing before them, that Bella broke the hushed quiet.

“This might just be the last takeaway pizza I ever sink my teeth into,” she mused, a shadow of sorrow clouding her eyes. “And the last of chip shop fries, too. What a bleak thought to digest.”

A palpable stillness descended upon them, an unspoken acknowledgment of Bella's realisation hanging heavily in the air. No words were uttered, no glances exchanged; they simply sat there, gazes downcast into their laps, until Don's voice, gentle yet resolute, sliced through the silence.

"I think we've made enough headway for today," he began, standing and stretching slightly. "We'll resume our efforts tomorrow. Everyone appears spent. A good night's sleep is in order. I'll catch you all in the morning." With that, he disappeared into the bathroom.

Bella and Matt exchanged a silent, understanding nod, murmuring their goodnights as they ascended the stairs—Bella leading the way, followed by Matt—and melted away into their respective rooms.

Chapter Eleven.

Packing day.

Bella lingered on the bed, enveloped in darkness, a sanctuary from her reflection which, she feared, would visibly radiate the guilt she felt swelling within her. Her heart, embroiled in a tumult of regret and sorrow, wrenched with every replay of the moment that had unfolded in the kitchen. What was intended as a casual, light-hearted remark about never savouring a takeaway pizza again had inadvertently plunged the room into an abyss of silent reality, unmasking a painful truth they all knew but were desperate to cloak under the pretence of normalcy.

Her words, seemingly innocent, had coursed through the room, shattering the already fragile veil of pretended optimism. A mere utterance, which now felt like an echo of an unwelcome prophecy. It gnawed at her, this feeling of unintentional betrayal by voicing the thought that likely hovered on the edges of their collective consciousness - the notion that their old lives, those ordinary pleasures like ordering a pizza, were now irretrievably lost.

She could sense it, how her words had cascaded through their hearts, especially Don's. His usually steady demeanour seemed to flicker, even if just for a moment, revealing a vulnerability that she had not anticipated unearthing. He had been her rock, and now, his sagging shoulders and dimmed eyes mirrored a pain that her comment had unwittingly drawn out into the light.

In the sombre solitude of her room, Bella wrestled with the reality that her mere expression had imparted. The bitter truth had been unspoken until her words gave it life, making it real, tangible, and unavoidably present. As she sat in the silent darkness, the weight of that reality pressed against her, unyielding and persistent.

She thought to divert her mind by organising her new rucksack, seeking refuge in the methodical task of preparation. Perhaps the mechanical motions could somehow dilute the sting of the truth she had unleashed. But the heaviness remained, staunch and unrelenting, causing her to reconsider.

There, in the silent cocoon of the darkness, she permitted herself to marinate in the stark reality, acknowledging the irreversible changes that loomed over them, and hoping, somehow, that acceptance could spawn the resilience they would need for the journey ahead.

Bella, gently peeling off her clothes and submerging herself beneath the comforting embrace of her blankets, found solace in their now familiar softness. However, her mind, unyielding and restive, refused to be lulled into the sweet reprieve of sleep. A torrent of thoughts, racing and colliding, rendered her captive in a tempest of uncertainty and trepidation.

Would the plush comfort of a bed ever cradle her weary body again after Saturday? Her breath hitched at the thought, sparking a cascade of burgeoning panic that she hurriedly tried to quell. She conjured mental images of her grandparents' home, envisioning the warm, reassuring embrace of its walls and the abundant provisions that invariably filled its larder. The thought was a balm to her frenetic mind - the knowledge that amidst their livestock of chickens, goats, sheep, and pigs, sustenance was assured, presenting a stark contrast to the anticipated turmoil back in town.

Yet, the thought of her dreams, once vivid and tangible, now withering into a spectral mirage of what might have been, pierced through her semblance of calm. The commonwealth games, the distant aspiration of competing in the Olympics, were now phantoms, hauntingly receding into the abyss of unrealised potentials. Her fencing practice, once a rhythmic constant in her life, now loomed before her as a poignant reminder of a path forever altered. Would her sword ever dance in harmony with her movements again in a bout? What merit was there in practicing a craft when its purpose in her future had dissolved into nothingness?

Conflicted, Bella wrestled with the dichotomy of adhering to her erstwhile routines and surrendering to the impending upheaval promised by the CME. The latter, while a looming threat, still harboured an iota of uncertainty - last Sunday had been an anti-climax, an expected cataclysm that fizzled into ordinariness.

As she lay there, cocooned in the melancholy of her thoughts, Bella resolved to seek guidance from the digital archives of the internet once more. Perhaps there, in the infinite wisdom housed within its circuits, she might find the clarity to dispel the fog of indecision that clouded her mind. Tomorrow, she whispered to herself, tomorrow the path might reveal itself with a newfound clarity. And with that sliver of resolve, she attempted to tether her mind to the present, seeking refuge in the elusive arms of sleep.

Thursday. Bella jolted awake, her heart palpitating in the eerie silence that followed by a resounding knock on her bedroom door. The daylight streaming through the curtain illuminated her unfamiliar surroundings, causing a flutter of confusion to momentarily cloud her senses. Her heart gradually ceased its frenzied beating as the realisation dawned upon her: she was in Matt's house. Despite the chaotic entanglement of thoughts that had ensnared her mind before sleep, it seemed she had managed to find a reprieve in the tranquil abyss of unconsciousness after all.

The knock echoed through the room once again, more insistent this time. Blinking the sleep from her eyes and steadying her voice, she responded, "Yes, who is it?"

A familiar voice, laden with a certain calmness, answered, "Don. Breakfast in 10 minutes. It's ten o'clock. I'll see you downstairs."

Reluctantly, and surprised about the time, Bella extracted herself from the comforting cocoon of her bed, her limbs protesting the abrupt movement. In the bathroom, she attended to her screaming bladder before surrendering to the invigorating embrace of a warm shower. Dressed and marginally more awake, she descended to the kitchen, where Don, with a serenity that belied the tumultuous circumstances, was engrossed in breakfast preparations.

"No Matt?" she inquired; her voice was still gravelly from sleep.

"He's in the basement. Likely to be glued to that computer screen of his, but he knows breakfast is ready. What can I get you? I'm making eggs on toast. Perhaps some fried mushrooms to accompany it?" Don offered, his voice steady and reassuring.

"That sounds perfect, Don. Whatever you're having," Bella responded, a modicum of comfort found in the mundane normality of the exchange.

As she observed him, Bella couldn't quite decipher whether the composed demeanour Don projected was a genuine reflection of inner peace or a skilful masquerade, veiling the turbulent emotions roiling beneath. His eyes, however, betrayed no discernible clues as he handed her a

comforting cup of Ovaltine, followed shortly by a plate laden with toast, eggs, and a generous helping of mushrooms.

With a firmness that brooked no argument, Don ambled to the basement door, his voice resonating through the house. "Matt! Breakfast. Now."

Moments later, Matt emerged, his presence puncturing the contemplative silence enveloping the kitchen. Settling into a seat at the breakfast bar, he murmured, "Thanks, Dad," his voice conveying a mix of gratitude and sombre acknowledgment of the efforts to preserve a semblance of normality amidst the chaos that lurked just beyond the horizon.

The three of them sat, forks and knives scraping against plates, a tangible tension threading through the silence that enveloped them. It was an unsettling quiet, the kind that comes when words hang unsaid, suspended in the space between what needs to be spoken and the fear of giving voice to it. Bella could sense the expectation resting heavily upon Don, but his gaze remained steadfastly focused on his plate.

With a hesitant breath, she resolved to navigate the path into the unspoken, "We need to strategize about our provisions and evaluate what's practical to carry should we find ourselves on foot. Additionally, we must consider what can be compactly packed into the canoes if utilising the van isn't feasible."

Don raised his eyes, and they landed on Bella with a glimmer of unspoken gratitude for broaching the topic. Despite his stoic exterior, it was apparent he had grappled with initiating this discussion. He always referred to it as a 'van', although in actuality, it was a sturdy 2005 Mitsubishi L200, a crew cab pickup embellished with an Ifor Williams van back, that had reliably served many a journey.

Bella, her words cutting through the palpable apprehension lingering in the room, continued, "If you'd like to make a start on that, I'll tackle the washing up and join you shortly."

Matt, propelled by an earnest need to contribute amidst the suspended anxiety, interjected, "No, that's my job." His voice, though gentle, carried an underlying resolve, a silent plea to maintain some semblance of routine and normality within the confines of their present circumstances.

Don, his gaze lingered on Bella, the edges of words teetering on his lips, yet they retreated unspoken, succumbing to a sea of contemplation within. Bella, sensing the hesitance that wrestled within him, rose and strode purposefully through the door leading to the garage, her eyes scanning the organised chaos of supplies on the shelves. Methodically, she pulled zip-lock bags toward herself, gently placing her clothes inside, a barrier against the potential permeation of water should they resort to using the canoes.

Placing a rucksack upon the barren table, she unfurled its top and delicately nestled her belongings within. The rucksack, now hanging, dangled precariously from the baggage scales, an addition Matt had thoughtfully affixed to the sturdy Dexion racking. The dial quivered before settling at half a kilo. Additional eight half-litre bottles of water hoisted the weight to a modest four and a half kilos.

Don and Matt, having silently observed Bella's meticulous process, entered the garage space, the atmosphere taut with unspoken understandings and questions.

Don's voice, a gentle firmness within, broke through, "We'll allocate each shelf to a rucksack," his hand gesturing toward the stark, five-shelf Dexion metal shelving unit, which stood like a solemn sentinel against the wall.

Bella, glancing toward Don, the threads of concern weaving through her voice, inquired, “Shouldn’t we first determine how much weight you can manage? It’s paramount it’s a weight you can bear comfortably over considerable distances.”

Matt, perhaps seeking to provide his father a momentary respite from immediate response, chimed in with youthful assurance, “I’ll fetch the 2-litre bottles.”

As he departed to fulfil his self-assigned task, Bella and Don exchanged a glance, an unspoken conversation where worry and reassurance danced in delicate balance.

Matt reappeared, toting a reusable supermarket shopping bag filled to the brim with six two-litre bottles. He meticulously extracted them before darting back to fetch six more. Bella, methodically placing four into a sizable rucksack, gestured toward Don, inviting him to shoulder it. Silently, he complied, securing each strap with a quiet, intentional movement. Once Don indicated his readiness, Matt carefully slid another bottles into the pack.

"Just one more," Don suggested, his voice light yet underscored by determination. Instead, Matt added two, testing the limits just a tad. “Another,” Don’s request lingered in the space between them. Matt acquiesced, placing the requested additional weight into his father’s pack.

Don exhaled, a gentle chuckle escaping his lips. “So much for the twenty-five to thirty kilos they advocated for in that video. Seems I’m not quite the Rambo I imagined,” he reflected with a tinge of humility and rueful jest.

“Speaking of Rambo, why the four shotgun shell belts? Planning to don all four?” Matt inquired; an eyebrow arched in playful curiosity.

Don shook his head, a practical resolution in his eyes. “No, simply figured they’d be easier to transport than boxes, and more accessible in an emergency. Ready to use, as it were. I’ll store two in my pack and two in Bella’s dad’s pack - distributing them to mitigate potential loss. Canoes have been known to capsize; you realise.”

Bella, absorbing Don’s explanation, interjected, “That brings to mind, we need everything enclosed in plastic bags—sealed plastic bags, to be precise. We must distribute all our supplies across several rucksacks, ensuring every item is securely enveloped in zip-lock bags. Particularly if we can’t utilise the van, we won’t have the luxury of time to waterproof everything should we resort to the canoes,” her voice infused with a pragmatic urgency.

Don's response came a bit too sharp, “We know,” but recognising the unintended edge in his voice, he quickly softened, “Apologies for snapping.”

In that moment, amidst the tangible aroma of impending adventure and the gentle caress of trepidation lingering in the air, they collectively recognised that their emotional compasses were navigating through uncharted territories of anticipation, readiness, and subtle fear. And in that realisation, they found a silent understanding.

Bella, shifting her focus back to the task at hand, hoisted her bag onto the third shelf with deliberate care. She turned, eyeing Matt thoughtfully, and posed a gentle inquiry. “Have you sorted out your clothes for the journey yet?”

“I Will get to it right away,” Matt affirmed, his voice laced with a subtle energy.

With a nod, Matt retreated back into the house, trailed quietly by Don, who hadn’t offered any words. A momentary twinge of perplexity brushed over Bella, sensing a hint of aloofness in Don, but she chose to tuck her observation away for the time being, electing not to probe. Matt’s glancing exchange with his father, however, did not escape her notice – a silent dialogue that wove through the spaces between them.

With a muted exhale, Bella aligned four half-litre bottles with her brother's bag on the fifth shelf and orchestrated a dozen beside her father's rucksack on the fourth, judiciously allocating the first two shelves to Don and Matt. Her competition bow found a place on her shelf, while her old bow, imbued with memories and promises, nestled onto Bobby's. The bow had been promised to Bobby at Christmas, a silent vow hovering in the ether that, when he was of ample size, she would guide his hands through the dance of archery. The clothes earmarked for Bobby were ensconced in a bag and gently placed on his shelf. For her father, she had procured only gloves and socks, given that he already possessed an assortment of clothing. After meticulously extracting the photos from their album, she divided them into two symmetrical piles, sealed them into zip-lock bags, and assigned one to her shelf and the other to her father's.

The arrows, quivers, and her sheathed knife found a home on her shelf, while a matching samurai knife was cautiously positioned on her father's shelf. She turned a bucket upside down, lowering herself onto it, her eyes scanning the sundry items that still demanded their attention. A creeping sense of dread inched into her being as she considered the burgeoning question: how would they consolidate everything? How would they bear it all if foot travel became their fate?

When Matt and Don reemerged, a silent understanding passing between father and son, Bella posed a question, her voice a tender echo in the tangible stillness, "May I look something up on your computer?"

Matt acquiesced, and after depositing his sorted clothing onto his designated shelf, departed alongside Bella, leaving Don to quietly conclude his current task.

"Bella," Matt began, a gentle quiver in his voice belying his attempt at steadiness. "I apologise for my father's demeanour earlier. He's wrestling with a lot of emotions right now, and leaving the house is especially difficult for him. This place is soaked in cherished memories."

Bella, her eyes warmly meeting Matt's, offered a gentle smile, compassion radiating through her calm demeanour. "Matt, it's okay. I didn't take it personally," she assured him softly. "I sensed it wasn't really about me, so I didn't let it bother me."

The ambiance of the room momentarily shifted, with the gentle whirr of computers offering a kind of unspoken solace. The intertwining of impending chaos and the comforting familiarity of the basement stood starkly juxtaposed, and for a moment, they each took a silent, grounding breath amidst the technological hum.

Matt's eyes, still held in a softness, gazed at Bella as he spoke. "Do you want me to stay with you down here?" he inquired, his words lingering in the semi-lit room.

Bella, appreciating the genuine concern emanating from Matt, gently shook her head. "No, I'll be okay. Meet you back in the garage in a few minutes? I just need to look something up. In the meantime, could you please assist your father with the sorting? And tell him to match the weight of my father's rucksack to his own."

With a subdued nod, Matt ascended the stairs, his footsteps growing fainter until only the gentle hum of computers remained. Bella, now alone, turned her attention to the machine before her, pulling up the Australian observatory site. Her fingers deftly moved over the keyboard, and her eyes quickly scanned the updates.

The initial update made her heart flutter anxiously within her chest: 'A solar flare may impact today, but the data is still inconclusive as it necessitates darkness for verification.' The information hit her like a subtle jolt, knowing the consequences such an event could trigger. Bella leaned back slightly, a pensive look crossing her features, contemplating the unseen and overwhelming phenomenon occurring far above them, capable of changing everything.

She learned that the flare had only been detected as dawn broke, previously obscured by the radiant light of the CME, which had masked it effectively from the researchers' vigilant eyes. Bella's thoughts meandered between the immediate tangible task at hand and the celestial unknown.

Bella's eyes flickered toward the clock, its ticking, a soft, persistent reminder of the limited time they had. Just after twelve, the digital numerals emitted a steady glow in the semi-darkness. She made a mental note to check again later but not linger too long in this digital world, detached from the impending reality. Her mind registered that the Coronal Mass Ejection (CME) was still predicted to arrive around five in the early, yet unforgiving, hours of Saturday morning. No shift in that catastrophic timeline, she acknowledged, a leaden feeling settling within her.

Navigating through the digital landscape of news headlines across various major websites, she found an unsettling silence regarding the CME. This astronomical phenomenon, with its power to throw their world into chaos, was eerily absent from the public view. However, Bella noted with a raised eyebrow the suspension of Parliament until the following week, attributed vaguely to "safety issues." A clandestine meeting of global leaders in Iceland, supposedly regarding climate change, added another layer to the mysterious political manoeuvres playing out on the world stage.

"They're aware, but they're choosing silence," Bella muttered to herself, a thread of bitterness weaving through her words. "Selfish gits."

A memory flickered in her mind, recalling a film she'd seen where a president opted for silence about a looming catastrophe. What was it he had said? How would knowledge assist if it offered no avenue for action? They'd all be plunged into the chaos of awareness soon enough. While part of Bella wrestled with the ethicality of such a decision, another part acknowledged the pragmatic bleakness of it, even though her age, merely fourteen, told her that adults possessed a knowledge far beyond hers.

With a sigh, she debated internally about whether to share the knowledge of the flare tonight. Her thoughts, a tangled web of responsibility, empathy, and fear, left her momentarily paralyzed in the ambient glow of the computer screen.

After a moment, Bella peeled herself away from the machine and its intoxicating connection to a larger world and quietly made her way back to the garage. As she stepped into the more tangible reality, where practicality took precedence over ethical debates, she couldn't quite shake the sense of responsibility that hung heavily on her young shoulders.

The crisp inquiry from Matt brushed through the tensed air of the garage. "Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked, curiosity gently lacing his words.

"Yes," Bella responded, constructing a casual façade with her words, "Just checking on some school stuff for Friday. I haven't decided if I'm going yet. I think I'll wait until the last moment to decide." She found herself maintaining a semblance of normalcy, even in the face of the undisclosed celestial turmoil, an attempt to cling to the vestiges of adolescent simplicity.

As she surveyed the garage, it was apparent that Matt and his father had methodically determined what would reside in each rucksack, the items neatly apportioned on the respective shelves. With a determined breath, Bella hoisted her pack and began the meticulous process of preparing her belongings, encasing each item in its own protective zip-lock shield before nesting it within the sanctuary of her dustbin bag-lined rucksack.

Sliding her thick leather belt around her waist, she expertly threaded her sword through the loop, its weight familiar and oddly reassuring. The quiver filled with arrows was affixed next, followed by her pack being suspended on the scales; it was calculatedly laden to just over eleven kilos. A few more essentials – another packet of pasta, additional Vaseline-coated cotton balls, four

more disposable lighters, two sets of matches, and one more bottle of water - found their place within her pack.

She meticulously organised the side pockets with a lock knife, compass, a printed map of their tentative route, a compact torch, and a small cache of energy bars. Her fingers worked diligently, ensuring everything was accessible yet secure. An easily reachable multi-tool, tethered by a keyring and dog clip, clung to the rucksack's exterior, while a slimline sleeping bag was strapped securely to the bag's underbelly. The pack now kissed the scale at just over twelve kilos.

Bella, encasing her feet in her reliable Doc Martens and strapping the sword securely to her waist, hoisted the rucksack onto her back with a little assistance from Matt. Her bow, an extension of her own arms, was held firmly in her grasp. Meandering through the back garden, she completed four complete laps, the weight of her pack a constant companion against her back, before returning to the garage with a tempered resolve shimmering in her eyes.

"Not too bad," she declared, a subtle strength embedded in her voice. "I think I can carry this as far as I need to." Her spirit, resilient amidst the disquiet of uncertainty, held steadfast, anchoring them all in a silent, shared resolve.

Bella gently affixed the rucksack to an upright shelf, placing the bow and sword back onto the shelf with a mindful touch. A similar process was enacted with her brother's rucksack, the scales whispering to a halt at a cautious six and a half kilos. Observing Don, already absorbed in organising her father's gear, she elected to leave him to his focused task and meandered toward the bathroom. Afterward, she sought the comforting, momentary reprieve a simple drink of water from the kitchen could provide. The garage, draped in a tangible silence, seemed to exhale an aura of tension that Bella found herself needing a brief escape from.

Re-entering the garage, she encountered Matt, framed by the doorway leading to the garden, his eyes casting an attentive gaze upon his father. Don moved with a stoic purpose, a rucksack clinging to his back, a heavy parka coat casually thrown atop it, and a sledgehammer, serving as a makeshift shotgun, cradled in his arm. As Don traced a pathway around the garden four times, Bella lingered in a transient pause, absorbing the symbolic weight of the sight before her. Upon completion, he lowered the sledgehammer, verbally affirming his capacity to bear the weight over considerable distances. The rucksack, once a silent testament to their imminent journey, was hung up, and Don proceeded to carefully adjust the contents of Bella's father's rucksack to mirror his own.

A subtle flutter of trepidation visible in his gaze, Matt ventured into the garden. A sense of self-consciousness hovered around him as he navigated his circuitous route, though he committed to the task at hand. When he returned, the pack and crossbow were rested, and an announcement was offered to the air; he could manage another kilo. Two more bottles of water were tenderly welcomed into his pack.

In a movement bathed in thoughtful preparation, Bella transferred the remainder of her arrows into her secondary quiver, placing it on her brother's shelf. Positioned within arm's reach in the canoe, they would stand as a fallback, readily accessible should emergency beckon during their journey.

An air of introspection quietly enveloped the room over the ensuing hour, the muted sounds of packing providing a gentle accompaniment to their absorbed activities. Extra food, a crucial lifeline on their impending journey, was painstakingly encased in durable rubble sacks, their openings sealed with layers of robust brown tape, ensuring their contents remained safeguarded from potential hazards. The lingering quartet of six-packs of half litre bottles of water, their plastic wrappers still hugging them tightly, remained in their original state; a collective, unspoken agreement recognising the current practicality of their configuration.

Bungy straps, envisioned as the silent keepers of their belongings once ensconced in the canoes, found a temporary home within the folds of the tarps. These would later drape over their possessions, a protective barrier against the elements, and secure them firmly with the elasticity of the straps during their riverine journey.

A reusable carrier bag cradled the camping stove and an additional bottle of gas, exempt from the wrapping bestowed upon the other items. Their daily utility along the route, providing both warmth and a means to prepare sustenance, dictated an accessible storage method, readily available to nourish and comfort them as they navigated their path forward.

Chapter Twelve.

Don.

In the lingering, pulsating silence, Don suddenly slipped into the van, coaxing it to life with a gentle twist of the key. Matt and Bella, accustomed to his routine, anticipated him to reverse the vehicle into the garage and thus, prepared the entrance for a seamless park. To their surprise, the van, with a modest grumble of its engine, eased away into the dissipating day. Don, without uttering his intentions, had disappeared, leaving them in a veil of unanswered questions about his destination and his return.

Inside the house, Matt and Bella settled into the cosy ambiance of the basement, deciding that a distraction was welcome after the day's tumultuous activities. They nested into a comforting movie on Netflix, the flickering lights casting gentle shadows on the walls, while outside, the unspoken anticipation of Don's return lingered like an uninvited guest.

Two elongated hours ebbed away before the familiar hum of the van whispered into the driveway. Don, carrying an assortment of items with an air of accomplishment, navigated his way through to the kitchen. With a cheerful voice, oddly contrasted with his recent silent departure, he called for Matt and Bella, beckoning them toward his collected treasures sprawled across the breakfast bar.

"Missed a few essentials," Don began, his voice a mix of excitement and contained fatigue. "We've got two telescopic fishing rods here, some spare hooks, a few plastic lures, and an additional line. Picked up these large waterproof ponchos too, in case the heavens decide to open while we're canoeing, and this," he said, presenting a robust fisherman's knife with a teasing smile, "before you say it, yes, it does resemble something Rambo might wield."

He continued, showcasing their Lunch - pizzas for the kids and a hearty Chinese takeaway for himself. He shared a playful proposition of indulging in takeouts for the ensuing couple of evenings, casting a light-hearted atmosphere over the room, offering a temporary reprieve from the palpable tension that had earlier engulfed them.

Bella quietly admired Don's capacity to insert moments of levity amidst the uncertainty. They conversed, laughter echoing softly against the walls, carefully skirting around the imminent peril that lurked beyond the safety of their home. Meal plans for the following night were discussed with a faux seriousness, and amidst the jovial exchanges, they gingerly returned to the impending bug-out topic.

"Bella," Don's voice shifted to a gentle seriousness, "are there life jackets stashed in the lockup by the river?"

Bella nodded, assuring him, "Yes, there's a variety, likely ten or so, all in different sizes. We can sift through them, selecting the best-fitting ones."

"Splendid. This afternoon, before the van gets loaded, let's inspect the canoes, ensuring they're in seaworthy condition. No unpleasant surprises. Is that alright, Bella? I presume you have the keys?"

"Absolutely," she confirmed. "They're at the house, but I know their exact spot. I'll retrieve them after we have eaten. There are also a few other bits I'd like to gather while I am there. Nothing major, though."

Don nodded approvingly, laying out the plan for the afternoon, "Alright. After we have eaten, once you have the keys and whatever else you need, we'll head down to the river for a thorough check. Upon our return, we'll get to loading the van, preparing it for tomorrow's departure."

"Sounds like a plan," Matt and Bella echoed, their voices harmonising in a synchronous response, momentarily creating an illusion of a regular, carefree day amidst the brewing storm.

Chapter Thirteen.

The Silence.

Re-entering from the kitchen, washing up done, they were greeted by the futile sounds of Don flicking through the static-laden TV channels, his actions fuelled by a simmering blend of anxiety and defiance against the unexpected silence from the device. His gaze, when it met theirs, was distant, before a spark of resolve flickered in his eyes.

“Got it,” he announced, a cryptic determination in his tone. “Old school, be back in about ten minutes.”

And with that, he was out the door, keys in hand, leaving Matt and Bella exchanging glances of perplexed concern, bound by a collective confusion.

Matt, ever the steadying force, gently suggested, “I’ll finish packing the last few things. Do you want to get that stuff from your house while I do that?”

“Good idea,” Bella responded, her voice reflecting a mixture of appreciation and trepidation, “I won’t be long.”

Bella, venturing into the familiarity of her own home, hesitated for a moment, absorbing the lingering scents and memories that hung in the still air. With the front door softly closing behind her, she dismissed the absent list from her mind, relying on her internal inventory of essentials instead. Her first retrieval was the keys for the lockup, which resided on a humble hook behind the pantry door, a small yet significant safeguard against mishap.

In the gentle embrace of her own room, Bella approached her bedside table with a tender caution, fingers brushing against the small, heart-shaped box that held a myriad of sentimental treasures, which she tucked safely into her pocket. Her diary, a tapestry of thoughts and dreams, followed suit. Ski gloves, an artifact of joyful winters past, were plucked from her chest of drawers with a reminiscent smile.

Bella's footsteps echoed softly as she entered her father's room, where his old half-hunter pocket watch, a tangible connection to Christmas memories, found a place in her pocket, nestled securely beside the heart-shaped box. Her eyes, bright with a mix of memory and melancholy, scanned the room, probing for forgotten artifacts of emotional value. But nothing additional called out to her.

Her brother's room offered the comfort of familiarity and the pang of absence. Retrieving his ski gloves and the Pinocchio pencil sharpener and pencil set—a cherished gift from their father—she allowed herself a moment to breathe, absorbing the love and loss entwined within the walls.

In the living room, her fingers curled around a fencing sword-shaped pen, a gift that blended practicality with whimsy, and she lingered for a moment, enveloped by the unspoken stories residing within each item in the room.

The kitchen, once a hub of family gatherings and warmth, now bore silent witness to Bella’s careful selection of a small knife-sharpening stone, a practical addition to her collection. And with a soft exhale, she made her way back to Matt’s, her belongings a careful blend of emotional and practical necessities.

Back at Matt’s place, he and Bella had barely finished their drinks when the front door announced Don’s return. His arms, burdened with a substantial stack of newspapers, deposited the hefty load upon the breakfast bar with a muted thud.

Bella, eyebrows playfully raised, observed, “See now what you mean by old school?”

Don, with a twinkle of playful wisdom in his eyes, responded, “More than one way to skin a cat.”

The idiom hung in the air, an arcane whisper amidst the clinking mugs, skimming over Matt and Bella’s understanding without landing. Don, seizing the last two slices of toast, retreated into the living room, sinking into his favourite chair with a mixture of exhaustion and purpose.

Upon positioning the newspapers neatly on the coffee table, Don, armed with a piece of toast, began to sift through the topmost paper, eyes scanning the words that whispered tales of distant happenings. Bella, joining him in his pursuit, passed a yellow highlighter—discovered alongside its green counterpart in the kitchen—and suggested, “Mark, anything you think relevant, and I’ll do the same.”

Side by side, they navigated through the printed words, bridging the gap between the digital silence and their unyielding quest for understanding, enshrouded in the soft rustle of turning pages.

Bella, with a furrowed brow, delicately picked a newspaper from the stack, her fingers lightly grazing the coarse surface of the newsprint. Her eyes, with a discerning gaze, wandered through the pages, scanning for not only what was illuminated in black and white but also what lingered unspoken between the lines.

She was searching for a pattern, anomalies in global happenings that might indicate something more sinister beneath the surface. The U.S. president, having hastily returned from an unscheduled climate summit, was now embarking on an early holiday. The French president had seemingly vanished from the public eye for several days. The usually vocal expert solar astronomers were eerily silent, withholding their insights and analyses. Even their own prime minister had put parliament on a sudden hiatus until the following week.

Bella noticed peculiar references to unexpected troop movements in unanticipated locations worldwide, the surprisingly early launch of two ostensibly unprepared submarines, and the abrupt postponement of Friday’s COP29 meeting. And yet, the glaring omission that stood stark against the backdrop of these diverse international narratives was any mention of the incapacitated internet, mobile phones, and television services. Normally, the failure of any one of these communication lifelines would be deemed worthy of a front-page outcry.

Bella tilted her head slightly, her voice threading through the quiet room, “Do you see what I see, or rather, don’t see?”

Don, his forehead creased in concentration, lifted his eyes from the page, “What do you mean?”

As she laid out her observations, pinpointing the curious stories she’d encountered and, more importantly, highlighting the notable absences within the news narrative, a silent comprehension flickered in Don’s eyes.

“Wow,” Don whispered, an echo of realisation in his voice, “and here I thought I was the intelligent one. I see what you mean.”

Bella’s eyes, reflecting a blend of apprehension and defiance, met Don’s as she remarked dryly, “Yes, they’re likely all hunkering down in their bunkers, I expect.”

They sat for a moment, absorbing the weight of the unspoken words, feeling the gravity of the unknown implications that hung in the cool air between them. The newsprint, with its carefully selected stories, seemed to mock them with its silence on vital matters, prompting them to question not only what was being shared but why the obvious disruptions in essential services were being ignored. Together, they continued their search through the remaining papers, silently wondering what other shadows might be lurking beneath the seemingly benign headlines.

Matt strolled into the room, a tray of drinks in his hands, the clinking of the mugs subtly perforating the pensive atmosphere. His gaze oscillated between Bella and Don, curious and slightly tense, trying to decipher the non-verbal exchange that seemed to hang heavily in the room. Don, eyes still holding a flicker of the revelation sparked by Bella's observations, relayed the unsettling findings to Matt.

Matt, with furrowed brows, silently received a newspaper, his eyes darting across the pages marked with Bella's green highlighter. The ostensibly subtle undercurrents of international events played out before him, prompting a nod of understanding. Then another paper, and another, his mind quietly piecing together the covert narrative that was unfolding.

"I see what you mean," he commented, his voice steady yet edged with a hint of frustration, "So much for any help we're likely to get. It seems like they're busy securing their own futures and leaving the rest of us to fend for ourselves. Bella, are you still considering going to school? If not, we might have the option to depart today?"

Bella, her thoughts seemingly dispersed between the here and now and the imminence of their journey, began hesitantly, "I'd like to, but..."

She was abruptly interrupted by Don, his voice firm but gentle, insisting, "We have plenty of time. Let her go. We still have plenty to attend to today. We'll depart once she returns from school tomorrow. One more day won't tip the balance."

In that moment, as the three of them sat surrounded by the veiled truths and unnoticed lies littered across the newspapers, they found themselves teetering on a precipice of the unknown. Matt looked at Bella, a silent query in his eyes, while she battled with the dichotomy of normality represented by a day at school and the impending journey that loomed ahead of them.

Each of them, in their own way, was tethered to the hope that a singular day wouldn't make a defining difference. But underneath that hope, a whispering unease stirred, suggesting that the world around them was quietly slipping into a concealed chaos, while they, and likely many others, were left to navigate the unfolding enigma unguided.

The empty cups sat forgotten on the table as the trio, now embroiled in a subtle urgency, set out towards the lockup, each step echoing with unspoken apprehensions. The lockup, with its creaking metal doors and slightly musty air, held the canoes just as Bella had described, their sturdy forms a quiet promise of the journey ahead. An inspection of the canoes and the accompanying life jackets satisfied them all, and especially Don, who had harboured a small kernel of doubt. Ensuring the floats for the larger canoe were still in place, they locked everything up again, the canoes momentarily silenced in the dim light of the lockup.

Instead of heading back, Don diverted their path towards the Regent café, infusing a brief, yet comforting, semblance of normality into their day with an early afternoon tea. Conversations, light and deliberately avoiding the weighty topics that lingered at their periphery, floated among them.

Upon returning, Matt's fingers worked deftly to unlock the garage, the metallic clank of the unlocking mechanism slicing through the quiet afternoon. The garage door groaned open, permitting Don to manoeuvre the van halfway in. As they worked to load the vehicle, each item placed inside whispered of the imminent departure, and by the time the late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the garage floor, their task was complete.

An atmosphere of forced relaxation enveloped them as Matt selected a DVD, the film playing out before them more as a distraction than entertainment. Rejecting the idea of a takeaway, they

settled into the simplistic comfort of sandwiches, their minds half on the film and half on the looming journey.

Another DVD slid into the player, "Mad Max" lighting up the screen, chosen more for its ironic amusement than anything else. Bella, amidst the dystopian chaos unfolding on the television, quietly excused herself to bed. Her desire to rise early, not for school, but to spend the dawn in her own house, was rooted in a need to bid it a silent farewell. Her explanation to Matt, whispered between the lines of courage and vulnerability, seemed to float just beyond his comprehension.

Meanwhile, Matt envisioned a day awash with the distraction of DVDs, unaware of how reality might twist his plans in the quiet of their waiting.

Friday. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the kitchen as Bella shared a quiet breakfast with Matt and his father on that crisp Friday morning. Shortly after, she found herself standing in the familiar embrace of her own home, uncertain of what the hours ahead held but anchored by an intrinsic need to simply be within its walls.

With a gentle touch, Bella wafted a dusting cloth over cherished items, a subtle cascade of motes catching the slender shafts of light that slipped through the curtains. The sink, with a few neglected items, whispered of the normalcy of days gone by, and she attended to them, allowing the water and suds to envelop them briefly before setting them aside. Laundry whispered into the machine, the hum of the cycle a muted accompaniment to her thoughts as she prepared herself a drink.

The recliner chair, with its familiar embrace, cradled her as thoughts meandered through the revelations and conjectures from the newspapers she had pored over. The melancholy that began to weave around her heart nudged her towards a momentary escape. Her fingers danced over the cases of her video collection, eventually settling upon a familiar favourite - 'Alita: Battle Angel'.

As the opening scenes unfolded, Bella sunk back into the chair, her drink cradled gently in her hands, allowing the cinematic world to envelop her and, for a brief spell, disarm the troubling thoughts that lingered at the edges of her consciousness. Engrossed, time slipped unnoticed through her fingers until the credits rolled, signalling an end to her reprieve.

Dressing herself in her school uniform, the weight of her fencing bag a familiar companion, she set forth towards school; her steps a rhythmic echo in the soft haze that seemed to enshroud her mind. Her lessons, a blurred passage of time and information, gave way to the subtle anticipatory tension that always preceded fencing.

Checking the changing rooms for their emptiness, she adorned herself in the fencing attire, its familiar weight a grounding presence. Foil in hand and face guard securely tucked under her arm, she navigated the short corridor that led to the sports hall, where her instructor, an unmoving pillar amidst the gentle ebb and flow of her day, awaited. The next moments promised the clashing of foils and a different kind of focus, a welcome departure from the clouded ponderings that seemed to linger just out of sight.

Chapter Fourteen.

Thursday - Robert's day out.

The gentle creak of the aged, wooden floor announced Robert's early morning entrance into the dimly lit kitchen. The burgeoning sunlight gently kissed the earth goodbye and spilled through the window, warming the quaint space. His father, Bernard, was already engrossed in the comforting routine of lighting the fire, its initial spark sending a fleeting glow across his well-weathered face, readying it for the imminent preparation of breakfast.

Bernard, a man of solid build and unwavering habits, cherished a hearty morning meal, believing it a foundation for the day's labours. Marjory, his dedicated wife and Bella's beloved grandmother, moved about with practiced efficiency, already aligning ingredients for the morning feast.

As the antique, dark blue enamel kettle, mottled with years of service, found its place atop the steadily warming stove, its gentle hiss began to permeate the room. Beside it, a weighty cast-iron skillet and its smaller companion settled, awaiting the ingredients that would sizzle within them. Marjory skilfully cracked two eggs into a cup and adorned the larger pan with two generous rashers of bacon, a pair of homemade goat sausages, succulent mushrooms, and a plump, freshly harvested tomato, bisected to reveal its juicy interior, and deposited the eggs in carefully.

The kettle commenced its rhythmic, rolling boil, signalling Marjory to prepare a robust pot of tea, the steaming beverage finding residence within a matching, dark blue teapot. She situated the kettle toward the rear of the seasoned Rayburn stove, retrieving a fish slice from its hanging position upon the mantle, and served Bernard his eagerly anticipated breakfast. Throughout this intricately choreographed dance of morning preparations, not a single word was exchanged.

Bernard, drawing his chair nearer with a soft scrape, bestowed upon Marjory a smile that carried the weight of decades, a silent exchange of unspoken love and understanding. Their hearts had been entwined since their earliest days in primary school, and over fifty years of marriage had only strengthened the silent, devoted language they shared.

Her gaze then drifted to Robert, offering a tender, maternal inquiry. "Same for you, son?"

With a nod, Robert took his seat beside his father, enveloped by the comforting, unspoken tranquillity of the house. It was a quietude that had always cradled him in his formative years, a slow-paced life unencumbered by the incessant demands of TVs, computers, or phones. And yet, a gentle itch of obligation reminded him of the overdue call to Bella, to update her on his evolving plans. While she was aware that his return wasn't anticipated until Sunday morning, he felt an instinctual need to reaffirm it.

A softness filled his voice as he addressed his mother, "Mum, I need to make a trip into the village today. Could you manage looking after Bobby for a couple of hours?"

A knowing smile warmed Marjory's features. "Yes, he can assist me with milking the goat. He'll find joy in that. Your father is also venturing into town after tending to the animals to fetch a few items for me. It'd be best if you accompany him."

In this subtle interplay of dialogues and quiet companionship, the family found a serene start to their day, the silent understanding amongst them speaking louder than words ever could, binding them together amidst the gentle rustle of their country existence.

Among the rustic symphony of clucks and bleats, Robert and his father navigated through the morning, ensuring each animal received their nourishment. Meanwhile, within the warmth of the

kitchen, Marjory prepared a modest, yet fulfilling breakfast for herself and the energetic Bobby, the delicate aroma of cooking wafting into the budding day.

Subsequently, Robert and Bernard purposefully placed three sturdy, metal jerry cans into the back of a venerable Series II Land Rover pickup. This robust vehicle, bearing more years than Robert himself, stood resiliently against time, its well-maintained frame a testament to Bernard's meticulous care. Its reliability was crucial, particularly for navigating their track – a mile stretch of compacted dirt that, under winter's influence, transformed into a challenging mire.

Then, with gentle, practiced movements, they loaded a large, wooden, flat-topped sea chest into the vehicle. Its cavernous interior, a reliable carrier, would safeguard their groceries throughout the journey. Robert tenderly bade farewell to Bobby, his words interwoven with a promise to return, and together with Bernard, they embarked on the somewhat jolting ten-mile expedition.

The ride, while short, was noticeably bumpy, causing the Land Rover to jostle spiritedly along the path. However, it carried them steadfastly, the sturdy wheels navigating the uneven terrain with a familiar assurance, as the landscape whispered stories of journeys past and the father and son made their way toward the village, bound by unspoken camaraderie and the humble rumble of their trustworthy transport.

The beauty in the simplicity of their actions, shared glances, and the unwavering reliability of the aged Land Rover, intertwined with the peace of their rural existence, offering a delicate, yet robust tapestry of familial love and timeless tradition.

The village, nestled amidst the embrace of sprawling fields, was a quaint collection of about twenty houses, all familiar and timeless in their structures. The heart of the village beat quietly through its modest amenities: a pub, a small community-run shop with an accompanying post office, and a garage featuring a two-pump petrol station—one allocated for petrol, the other for diesel. All of these establishments sat in a neat, neighbourly row, each a testament to a simpler, tightly knit way of life.

As Robert and Bernard pulled into the petrol station, the tranquil, everyday scenes of the village enveloped them. The harmonious hum of daily life—a casual greeting exchanged between neighbours, the distant laughter from patrons at the Travellers Rest pub, and the serene atmosphere inherent to a small community, subtly interwove with their actions. Robert, with mindful hands, filled the jerry cans with petrol, while Bernard took care to replenish the Land Rover's tank. After paying, they parked in the adjoining carpark of the pub, its welcoming exterior whispering tales of vibrant evenings and community camaraderie.

Robert, stepping into the venerable red phone box with its paint gently weathered by time, lifted the receiver, expecting the familiar dial tone to greet him. Silence. He gently replaced it, then lifted it once more, only to be met with the same unsettling quiet. A soft furrow etched across his brow as he stepped into the shop, inquiring about the possibility of using their phone. The response, though anticipated, nudged a subtle unease into his chest: no phones within the village were operational.

Upon returning to the farm, Robert, despite the ever-present stability of the family land around him, felt a mild tempest of concern stirring within. He contemplated making the trek with his car to the nearest town, which lay a distant twenty miles away. A forty-mile round journey just to use a phone seemed excessive, yet his mind lingered on Bella, and his heart craved the simple reassurance of her voice.

His mother, Marjory, recognising the subtle shift in his demeanour, offered comforting words, echoing the sentiments Bernard had shared during their ride back, "Don't fret, son. That young lady, Bella, she's got a sturdy head on her shoulders. She's aware you weren't to return until Sunday. She'll be just fine. Ease your worries."

Deep down, Robert knew they were right. Bella was more than capable, a resilient spirit with a grounded nature. Yet, the father within him, whose love navigated through protective currents, yearned to hear her voice, to know her world was still firmly anchored, and she was coping alone. His thoughts, momentarily, fell on the NIMBYs, those who had obstructed the installation of the phone tower on Scar Pike, and he wondered, amidst his quiet apprehension, if they too were now wishing the invisible threads connecting voices were still intact.

Chapter Fifteen.

Bella—Present day - Flames all around.

Fires raged around Bella, a monstrous cascade of orange and red devoured everything in its path, causing the ceiling to crumble, releasing flaming debris to the floor below. The ceiling's inferno undulated, resembling an ominous body of water, with ripples cascading outward, like the aftermath of a stone plummeting into a pond. Smoke suffocated the air. Heat engulfed the space, and with each breath, Bella inhaled a scorching, acrid air that burned her lungs.

A thought, bold and desperate, flickered through Bella's mind: the vaulting horse. She could use it as a battering ram to breach the confines of this blazing prison. But doubt interwove with determination—she had never used it before, didn't understand its mechanisms, specifically, how to activate its wheels. Her eyes darted, searching for an alternative, but amidst the chaos and consuming flames, nothing else presented itself. It had to be the vaulting horse.

Desperation led to innovation. Swiftly, Bella removed her t-shirt, then her bra, and redressed in just the shirt. She manipulated one of the bra cups, placing it over her nose and mouth, tying the straps behind her head to create a makeshift mask. A silent lament passed through her for not possessing a larger chest, which would have meant a larger bra—and thus a more protective mask.

Pressing herself against the wall, Bella sidled toward the vaulting horse, navigating through a treacherous downfall of flaming detritus. Once she reached it, her fingers fumbled, feeling around for the elusive lever meant to release the wheels. Finding it, but not without difficulty due to its unresponsiveness, she knelt for a closer inspection. A revelation — the lever needed to be pulled out to enable foot operation. After managing to engage the mechanism, she rose, surrounded by a fiercer and more menacing inferno.

Bella hesitated for just a heartbeat, then, summoning every ounce of strength and courage within her, pressed down on the lever. The horse lifted slightly, a distinct click slicing through the roar of the fire. To her surprise, a gentle push set the horse into a smooth motion.

With an urgency propelling her actions, Bella worked to align the horse with the gymnasium door, a path that meant traversing through the heart of the fiery maelstrom. As she lifted her eyes, she noted a sizable, teetering piece of the ceiling, suspended precariously, threatening to plummet. Time was an even scarcer resource. Bella's cough rattled her frame as she pulled her t-shirt tighter over her makeshift mask. The padding from the bra cushioned her inhalations, providing a sliver of defence against the acrid smoke.

With gritted teeth and a resolve forged from the very flames that sought to entrap her, she pushed. Steering and turning the horse towards the heart of the blazing hall, Bella aligned it with the doors, a mere fifteen feet, yet a chasm, away. Accelerating her push, she propelled the horse forward just as the ceiling surrendered its hefty load. The vaulting horse collided vehemently with the doors, which, in turn, capitulated, flinging open under the impact.

Bella, against the insurmountable, emerged—free. The roaring inferno behind her, her silhouette momentarily eclipsing the blinding fury, represented an unwitting triumph against calamity. Her escape was as much a testament to her resilience as it was to the indomitable spirit that so often reveals itself in moments of despair and chaos.

Bella's footfalls echoed down the hallway, a rapid tattoo that punctuated her desperate flight, even as coughs wracked through her, each one slicing through the tense atmosphere. At the junction, options unfolded before her: to the left, the front door and potential salvation, but beyond it, the changing rooms, now a churning maelstrom of fire and devastation. Her safety, seemingly so close,

was tantalisingly barred by an infernal barrier. Rightward lay the promise of an emergency exit, the back route that beckoned with the sweet allure of escape.

Weakened and lungs burning, Bella's run had dwindled to a brisk, determined walk. The unlit exit sign, a gleaming beacon amidst the smoke and chaos, encouraged her onward, offering a silent promise of the fresh, unspoiled air that lay just beyond its threshold. Her legs, propelling her towards it, were fuelled by both desperation and an insatiable desire for survival.

But in a cruel twist, a violent explosion of flames surged into the hallway as a door halfway down, blasted open—the science lab, succumbing to the fire's rapacious appetite. Heat and violent embers confronted her path, a fiery beast denying passage. A pang of dread settled heavily within her; the exit, so agonisingly close, now an unattainable haven, merely taunting her.

In a pivot of desperation, Bella spun on her heel, intending to retrace her steps, yet the sight that greeted her was a formidable wall of smoke, an impenetrable veil that obstructed the way back. Every path seemed barred by the malevolent dance of destruction.

Her back, slick with sweat and trembling with exertion, pressed against the cool wall, offering a meagre respite from the chaos. Slowly, Bella slid to the ground, succumbing to a seated position amidst the turbulent symphony of fire around her. Despair enveloped her, and, for a moment, she cradled her head in her hands, a solitary figure ensnared between paths of ruin.

Through the veil of her hands, her eyes flickered in both directions, assessing the dual threats that loomed. Her gaze, almost absent, then fixed on the opposing wall, pondering the cruel irony that mere feet away, separated only by bricks and mortar, lay the safety that seemed as distant as another world.

A surge of emotions churned within her—fear, regret, and an acute awareness of the life pulsating through her veins, a life that recoiled against the impending threat of its extinguishment. Desperation and determination intertwined, and as she lifted her head, gazing once more upon the walls that encased her perilous predicament, the seeds of a daring, yet unfathomable idea began to germinate within her mind.

Bella's heartbeat thudded relentlessly in her ears, a stark contrast to the still resolve that had settled over her as she considered her options. Memories of her father and her little brother flickered across her mental landscape, comforting yet tormenting images that straddled the line between motivation and despondency. She could picture them vividly—hopes, smiles, and love unbroken, yet here she was, amidst a labyrinthine nightmare of smoke and flames.

Minutes had languorously stretched into an eternity, amplifying every emotion, every instinct. In that ashen corridor, she found herself entertaining notions of escape anew, yet now driven by an immutable resolve. Two more rooms presented themselves in her memory — potential lifelines amidst the encroaching chaos.

Hauling herself to her feet, she felt the cold rigidity of the door to her right, a stark contradiction to the fiery maelstrom that enshrouded her. With bated breath, she turned the handle, only to meet the staunch resistance of a lock. Her scream, muffled by the damp fabric covering her mouth, barely cut through the cacophony of destruction around her.

The art room: a sanctuary of creativity and expression, now her potential saviour. Her steps, fuelled by a desperate energy, propelled her towards it. Cold. The door and handle, an icy relief under her tentative touch, promised sanctuary, but once again her hopes were dashed against the unyielding barrier of another lock. Frustration, manifesting in a visceral kick, pierced the thin plasterboard wall, revealing its weak constitution. A glimmer of hope peeked through the debris, quickly doused as she realised the formidable challenge posed by an unseen bookcase on the other side.

But still, there was the French room.

This time, Bella approached with a stratagem, envisioning the internal layout of the room through the lens of her memory, hoping for salvation on the other side of the fragile plasterboard. Her boots and hands, agents of determined destruction, tore through the wall until she was able to crawl through to the other side.

Breathless and smeared with dust, Bella sought escape through the window, yet was again foiled by a mere few inches of begrudging opening—safety protocols. A chair, hurled with every ounce of her diminishing strength, yielded no breakage, no route to freedom. Her disbelief and desperation spiralled as the chair defied logic, bouncing away from the seemingly invulnerable glass.

In a moment of pause, she surveyed the situation. A single screw, affixing the window stay, such a miniscule object, stood between her and the vast expanse of safety beyond the window. A frantic search yielded no useful tools, every potential option locked away, just out of reach. Despair encroached again, as she sank into the teacher's chair, surrounded by cruelly immobilised potential aids.

Then, an overlooked ally: the projector screen, encased in a sturdy metal cylinder, hanging innocently above the whiteboard. An idea flashed, brilliant and bold, amidst the surrounding despair. With renewed vigour, she seized it and returned to the window, attempting to batter the restricting bracket into submission. After a moment of fruitless battering, a new approach manifested: leverage. Positioning the cylinder behind the stay and exerting every ounce of strength, it gave way. The window swung open, a portal to life and freedom.

With nary a moment's hesitation, Bella discarded the cylinder, hoisted herself through the window, and fled into the embracing arms of the world beyond, leaving behind the flaming abyss.

Chapter Sixteen.

Present day – Matt – Father is missing.

Gripping the fire extinguisher with determination, Matt swiftly yanked the safety pin free, his hands steely and resolute despite the encroaching panic nipping at his composure. He directed its nozzle toward the voracious, dancing flames and, with a steady exhale, squeezed the trigger handle firmly. A powerful, white cloud erupted from the extinguisher, smothering the flames in an instant. Yet, victory came at a cost, as the smoke thickened, clawing at his throat and lungs, inducing a fit of violent coughs and desperate wheezes.

Through a haze of tears and smoke, Matt's mind raced, urging him to find an exit, to seek clean air. His legs, operating almost autonomously, propelled him outside within mere moments, his lungs hungrily devouring the comparatively fresh air. Still, the coughing persisted, a raspy reminder of the peril he had narrowly evaded.

His thoughts, still slightly scrambled from the adrenaline, somehow made a connection to the pool house. Wasn't there a larger fire extinguisher there? Even as the logical part of his brain reminded him that the flames had been thoroughly quenched, another, more primal part drove him to seek additional security. His legs carried him toward the pool house, each step punctuated by the residual echoes of his laboured breaths.

Inside the pool house, Matt's trembling hands snatched a towel from the shower room. He doused it thoroughly with water, crafting a makeshift mask, which he then secured over his face. It provided a damp, but reassuring barrier, filtering the air he inhaled as he took several, more composed breaths.

Gripping the larger extinguisher, a beacon of safety in potential further chaos, he re-entered the charred remnants of the room, his eyes scrutinising every blackened corner to ensure the fire had indeed been fully vanquished. Satisfied but shaken, he navigated towards the window, wrenching it open to invite the cleansing breeze to dilute the lingering smoke.

With cautious steps, Matt ventured into the dining room, gently closing the door behind him to isolate any residual smoke. His hands, now steadier, worked to open another window, ensuring a flow of clean air to further purge the remnants of his fiery encounter. With methodical precision, he traversed through the hallway and out the front door, leaving it agape, a silent invitation for the outdoors to cleanse his home of the recent calamity.

Once the harsh rattle of his coughs had subsided, replaced by deep, measured breaths, he ventured back inside. He moved through the house with a newfound, gentle reverence, swinging open every window he encountered, permitting light and air to kiss every inch of the space, a subtle reassurance that the danger had passed. And then, with a last lingering look, he stepped back through the front door, leaving behind the faintly smoky, but secure, sanctuary of his home.

Navigating cautiously around to the back once more, Matt peeked into the kitchen through its open door. Plumes of smoke billowed out aggressively, a stark contrast to the visible absence of any flickering flames within. With a weary exhalation, he withdrew, then sank to the softness of the lawn, surrendering to its cool embrace. Prostrate on the grass, his eyes, red and slightly watery, monitored the now gently wafting smoke from both the back door and side window.

While he lay there, his lungs performing a gentle exchange with the clean outdoor air, a peculiar absence slowly burrowed into his consciousness: silence. The perpetual, ambient hum of the city, a soundtrack so consistent it typically went unnoticed, was conspicuously absent. Even beneath the night's veil, the soft buzzing of power lines and distant, muted activities were ever-present.

His mind, still reeling from recent events, suddenly flickered to a memory of sparking power lines, a sight he'd observed right before the kitchen crisis seized his full attention. The Coronal Mass Ejection (CME)... could it have unfolded while he was preoccupied with the fire? A sense of disbelief tangled with rising anxiety as he noted the profound, unfamiliar quiet enveloping him.

Lurching to his feet, Matt meandered towards the pool house, his movements automatic but laden with a foreboding heaviness. Inside, he flicked the light switch expectantly, yet the bulbs remained lifeless, shrouded in an unyielding darkness. His eyes shifted to the sauna control panel, which typically hosted a vibrant green LED at its summit. It too, was dark, devoid of its usual electronic glow.

Refusing to yield to the budding panic, he rounded to the front of the house, traversing the path and entering through the door in a fluid, unhesitating motion. In the dim, static shadow of the hallway, his hand hovered momentarily before attempting the lights once more. Still, nothing. A wave of stunned disbelief washed over him, punctuated by a silent question hanging heavily in the air: how had they miscalculated so dramatically? The CME, according to every report and expert analysis, was not expected until the following morning. How, then, amidst the assuredness and meticulous projections, had it all gone so awry?

His mind raced, attempting to stitch together pieces of information, seeking solace in logic, while the unlit expanse of his home bore silent witness to the unforeseen reality unravelling around him.

With a deliberation edged in uncertainty, Matt stepped back outside, his gaze latching onto the façade of the house as though seeking answers embedded within its walls. But the answers were elusive, slipping through the synapses of his jumbled thoughts. Gradually, his eyes detached from the structure before him, drifting instead toward the neighbouring residences. Various individuals had emerged into the open, yet their demeanour betrayed no semblance of panic or disorder. The contrast between their seemingly placid states and the turmoil twisting within him was stark, amplifying his own disorientation.

He swivelled his attention toward the cityscape, where the sun, still diligently performing its celestial duties, cast a warm glow over the buildings. Lights, typically visible even in daylight, were absent - or at least, they appeared to be. He squinted, attempting to discern any signs of artificial illumination, but the ample daylight rendered his search inconclusive.

Retreating to the sanctuary of the back garden, Matt strained his ears for the familiar whoosh of traffic from the nearby dual carriageway, yet the auditory landscape echoed the silence he'd noted earlier. With a resigned sigh, he settled himself amidst the cool tendrils of the lawn, his body aligning with the earth as his eyes, wide and unblinking, scanned the heavens. His mind somersaulted through a turbulent sea of confusion and denial; everything he'd learned, every meticulous detail poured over on the Aussie observatory site, had explicitly pointed to tomorrow as the pivotal moment of the CME, not today. Both he and Bella had dissected the information, scrutinised the updates, and found a collective assurance in the specified timeline. Even yesterday's papers had failed to trumpet any alarms, a lack of urgency that hadn't surprised Bella in the slightest.

As his eyes adapted to the ambient light of the sky, a subtle dance of colours began to materialise above him. Faint swirls of green, delicate and ethereal, undulated across the azure expanse, their presence both mesmerising and terrorising in equal measure. There was no denying it now; the CME had occurred. Panic, previously held at bay by threads of disbelief, began to surge forth, justified in its intensity by the stark realities quietly unveiling themselves around him.

Where was Bella?

The question, suddenly sharp and immediate, punctured the disarray of his thoughts. She should have been safely ensconced at home by now. Perhaps she was, unaware of the electromagnetic shroud that had silently descended upon them. His neighbours, too, seemed blissfully ignorant, or perhaps they were simply unperturbed by the absence of their electronic lifelines. Maybe his earlier altercation with the kitchen fire had heightened his senses, made him more attuned to the subsequent anomalies.

Concern for Bella began to thread its way through his veins, intertwining with the pulsing anxiety that had taken root. He knew he needed to find her, to ensure she was safe amidst the unfurling chaos, yet a momentary paralysis, borne from the sheer implausibility of the situation, held him captive upon the lawn. The quiet ballet of the auroras above offered a silent, enigmatic performance, a celestial paradox that was both extraordinarily beautiful and a harbinger of untold disruptions below.

With an abruptness that belied his internal turmoil, Matt vaulted to his feet, his soles pressing into the grass as he hurriedly navigated around to the front of Bella's house. His fists, fuelled by both worry and urgency, pounded heavily on the door, each thud resounding with an ominous echo in the otherwise tranquil afternoon. Yet the anticipated response was absent; there was no soft footfall on the other side, no familiar voice offering reassurances. Silence enveloped the home, amplifying Matt's anxiety manifold.

Bella, where could she be?

The school – perhaps she was still there? But uncertainty gnawed at the edges of his resolve. If he ventured towards the school and she was enroute to the house, they might pass like ships in the night, each unaware of the other's movements. A leaden dread settled in the pit of his stomach, rendering him momentarily motionless on the doorstep.

Matt despised being wedged against the ramparts of decision-making. A preference for allowing others to charter the course had always been his norm, an aversion to the responsibility that came with critical choices. Yet, the circumstances demanded action, forced him into the driver's seat of determinations that, up until now, he had skilfully evaded.

First, he would need to confirm the extinguished status of the fire before embarking on any quest for Bella. Moreover, securing the house, a standard procedure yet rendered more acute in the absence of the familiar urban hum, was imperative.

Retracing his steps, he approached his house with a mind oscillating between the immediate task at hand and the whereabouts of Bella. Stepping through the front door, he proceeded into the dining room, cautiously easing open the kitchen door. A cursory survey revealed the fire's absolute surrender, the residual smoke languidly ascending in defiance of its quelled fury. It was out. A minor consolation amid the cascading concerns that bombarded him.

Deciding to shut all the windows to allow the kitchen's residual smoke a prolonged departure, Matt ascended the stairs. Methodically, he moved from room to room, securing windows and closing doors, imposing a sealed solitude upon the spaces that, only hours earlier, had been unremarkably mundane. His thoughts, sporadic and fluttering, returned repeatedly to Bella as he navigated through the familiar confines of his home.

Descending once more to the ground level, Matt stepped into the living room, the sliding glass of the patio doors whispering softly as they sealed the interior from the outside world. His final sojourn took him back to the kitchen, where the vestiges of smoke were now barely perceptible. He allowed the side window a slightly ajar concession while shutting the back door firmly, locking in the now almost ethereal remnants of the earlier chaos.

His mind, tethered inexorably to Bella's unaccounted-for status, teetered on the precipice of frantic worry and pragmatic action. He needed to find her, to ensure her safety amidst an increasingly unpredictable backdrop. But first, he allowed himself a moment, a brief interlude in which to gather the scattered fragments of his thoughts, to piece together a semblance of a plan in the newfound silence that blanketed his world.

In the living room, a space so often filled with the soft hum of everyday life, Matt found himself sinking into his father's chair, the worn upholstery enveloping him like a familiar yet impotent embrace. In this revered spot, a weight of realisation gradually dawned upon him, casting a new shadow of concern across his already furrowed brow.

His father... He was supposed to be back by now.

His mind flickered to the earlier moments, recollections of his dad, dutifully setting out to deliver some papers to his workplace, slicing through his current predicament. The van, sturdy and reliable, was meant to transport him to and fro, with a pit stop to refuel its hungry tank with petrol.

All of their stuff, all of the meticulously gathered bugout items, were packed neatly within its confines. Matt's heart tightened with the recognition of the precariousness of their meticulously crafted contingency plan.

His father could be anywhere - perhaps miles away, stranded between here and the lockup, the vehicle fallen victim to the CME's indiscriminate technological purge.

The sturdy walls of the living room, usually a cradle of comfort, now seemed to close in on him, each tick of the absent clock amplifying the silence and isolation that had become his sudden reality. Matt leaned back, his body seemingly seeking solace in the embrace of the chair that had supported so many familial moments throughout the years.

His mind raced.

Anxiety, like a persistent vine, twisted its way through his thoughts, intertwining with the steadfast resolve that had propelled him through the chaotic unravelling of the day's events. His fingers drummed absently on the armrest, each rhythmic tap a manifestation of the melding of fear and determination swirling within him.

He had to find Bella. He needed to ensure his father was safe. And yet, the pathway forward, typically illuminated by the constancy of routine and predictability, was now shrouded in an impenetrable fog of uncertainty.

Matt's eyes, tracing the familiar patterns in the room, alighted on a photograph - a frozen moment of laughter and love, a snapshot of a time when the world, with all its intricacies, had made sense.

He drew a steadying breath, allowing the familiarity of the faces to anchor him amid the tumultuous sea of his thoughts. Resilience, whispered through the memories, nudged him gently towards action.

Chapter Seventeen.

Don – Earlier that Day.

The morning unfurled leisurely, as Matt and Don manipulated their way through their customary routines, enveloped by the walls that had witnessed countless family moments. Following a quiet breakfast with Matt and Bella, Matt retreated to the basement, immersing himself in a DVD game, while Don shuffled into the living room, his eyes landing on his favourite chair. A sigh escaped his lips as he sank into its familiar, comforting embrace.

The chair, a magnificent piece upholstered in rich, ruby-red leather, wasn't just a piece of furniture, but a memory capsule. It had been acquired with the money bequeathed by his late mother, and it cradled not just Don but the cherished memories of the matriarch who had passed away a few years prior. Its reclining feature had unwittingly lulled Don into many unplanned slumbers, only to be nudged awake by the morning light, a telltale stiffness in his neck reminding him of the night spent enveloped in its arms.

As he reclined, a tinge of melancholy weaving through him, Don's thoughts wandered, unbridled, through the chambers of his memories. The day stretched ahead, unstructured and unhurried, while they awaited Bella's return from school, and Don, with a gentle exhale, decided to meander through the house one final time.

Beginning in the bedroom, he scrutinised every nook, ensuring nothing of significance would be left behind. His eyes fell on a pair of thick wool socks, designed for the confines of heavy leather boots, and a set of robust fleece gloves. He let them rest on the bed, a silent promise to return for them, as he seated himself momentarily, eyes gazing outward through the window.

It was going to be a strenuous departure.

The house was more than mere walls and windows; it was a repository of poignant memories that clung to every surface. He and Tina, Matt's mother, had together wielded paintbrushes, transforming their son's nursery into a haven of love and anticipation. It had cradled more memories than Don cared to traverse at this moment, each one woven into the very fabric of the home.

A lump formed in Don's throat as he contemplated the forthcoming farewell, for he was not just leaving behind a structure of bricks and mortar but a vessel that held echoes from the past, sweet and sorrowful alike. A heavy sigh escaped him, as he promised himself to carry these memories, carefully tucked into the recesses of his heart, into whatever lay ahead, ensuring that the essence of this beloved home would accompany them always.

Arising with a subdued heaviness, Don collected the gloves and socks, the fabric soft and comforting against his palm. He descended to the living room, his eyes scanning the space, absorbing the intimate details that had become so deeply familiar over the years. His briefcase, now seemingly out of place in this paused snapshot of their lives, caught his attention. Placing the gloves and socks delicately on the table, he reached for the briefcase, its leather cool beneath his fingers, and settled back into the sanctuary of his chair.

As he popped open the briefcase, a set of blueprints greeted him immediately, vivid lines and angles detailing the weekend's project at the museum, an endeavour designed to be undertaken during its temporary closure. Don's fingertips grazed the surface of the blueprints, contemplating the relevance of a task that seemed so imperative just days before.

Did these blueprints hold any significance now, when the future hung veiled and uncertain before them? His internal deliberations warred between the impending, uncertain future, and the normalcy of adhering to commitments. Did it truly matter? Perhaps worrying about it was superfluous

amidst the looming unknown. Yet, conversely, the normalcy of following through with the plan presented a semblance of stability, a tether to the world as they knew it.

After a shared, quiet lunch, Don, with a newfound determination, gripped the newly acquired jerry can. Informing Matt of his departure with a voice steady and assuring, he turned the key in the van, its engine humming to life beneath him. As he navigated away, the familiar landscape blurring beside him, the emotional weight of what was to come rested heavily on his shoulders, a silent companion accompanying him through the unfolding unknown.

Within this act of adhering to a seemingly mundane task, Don found a thread of continuity, a tiny defiance against the disruption that loomed ahead, and perhaps, in its own subtle way, a method to assure himself and Matt that some fragments of their previous existence could be carried forward into the shadow of the uncertain future.

Gently navigating through the uncharacteristically light traffic, Don managed to traverse to the opposite side of town with remarkable ease. The sun gently perched in the azure sky, casting long shadows upon the tranquil streets below. As he turned into the carpark, a vague sense of unease lingered in the back of his mind, noticing the scarcity of vehicles in usually bustling spots. Perhaps many had chosen to kick start their weekends early on this Friday afternoon, he thought, attempting to console his simmering apprehensions.

Opting for discretion to avoid potentially probing questions about Matt – which would undoubtedly be circulating through the office grapevine by now – Don chose the back entryway. Ascending the rear staircase, he made his way to his supervisor Danny's office, his knuckles gently rapping on the door.

From the moment Don entered, Danny's voice cascaded over him with an amalgam of frustration and distress. "Been trying to get hold of you, but these damn phones are down. They can't even predict when they'll be back up. Haven't you heard anything? Must've had the television glued to you, huh? That's my go-to when my son's under the weather, and I'm on nurse duty."

With a subtle tilt of the head, Don calmly responded, his voice dusted with a gentle lie, "No, I've been deep into reading, actually. The TV's barely been on."

A brief wave of understanding passed through Danny's eyes, then quickly eclipsed by a shade of desperation. "No matter. Listen, I need you to ferry these over to the museum. There's no one else available here; we have several people out for reasons unbeknownst to me," he almost implored, layering his request with a palpable sense of urgency and a subtle undercurrent of guilt, "You don't mind, do you, mate? Thank you."

Don, feeling a combination of resigned obligation and a hint of annoyance, replied with a faint nod, "Yes, I suppose so." His voice, barely more than a whisper, conveying a sense of compliance rather than enthusiasm.

"Good fellow. I'm pressed for time and must dash to a meeting, but I'll see you on Monday, alright?" Without awaiting a response, Danny briskly exited the room, leaving Don anchored in place, lingering amidst a swirl of thoughts and the soft echo of departing footsteps.

By the moment Don found his way out of the carpark, an emerging torrent of vehicles began to congest the roads, signalling the onset of the dreaded Friday rush hour. A subtle groan emanated from his throat as he gazed upon the burgeoning river of headlights; Fridays indeed harboured the worst of traffic. It inaugurated its crawl noticeably early, and as the minutes ebbed away, the vehicular flow thickened with an unrelenting persistence.

A quilt of anxiety gently enveloped him as he considered the potentially elongated journey to the mill museum and the inability to communicate his delay to Matt due to the pernicious technological blackouts. He could visualise his son, perhaps peering periodically through their living room window, an expectant gaze scanning for the familiar silhouette of his father's van.

Time, it seemed, was both ally and adversary, pushing Don through his commitments yet equally pulling him away from his son. And it was nearly five-thirty when he, at last, reached his destination, the museum seemingly deserted save for a lone car in the car park, its presence a quiet beacon of hope that his journey hadn't been futile.

Upon parking, he gingerly lifted the folder, its contents a payload of vital blueprints, and exited the van. After securing its doors with a resonant click, he treads across the tarmac driveway, his footsteps a soft percussion in the encompassing stillness of the early evening. Approaching the edifice, he ascended the wide, welcoming steps toward the front door, his heart enshrouded in a mingling of hope and mild frustration, eyes fixated on the entrance that held the potential continuation of his already elongated day. The door was locked.

Don's fists clenched at his sides in a subtle display of frustration, the locked doors before him symbolising an obstruction far greater than just the inconvenience of delivering blueprints. The lights inside the building emitted a taunting glow, hinting at a human presence but offering no entry. A tight sigh escaped him as his forehead gently met the cool glass of the door, the reality of his situation beginning to bear down on him with renewed intensity. The uncertainty that had settled in the pit of his stomach gnawed at him, incessant and persistent.

He stepped back, casting a discerning gaze at the windows adjacent to the entrance, contemplating his next move. His fingers nervously rapped against the folder containing the blueprints, a rhythmic beat that mirrored the thrumming anxiety beneath his stoic exterior. His mind briefly flitted to Matt, imagining his son alone in their home, awaiting a return that had been delayed by unanticipated circumstances.

The juxtaposition of mundane tasks, like delivering blueprints, against the colossal, invisible threat of the CME, bore down on Don's shoulders. He wondered how many others were continuing their days, oblivious to the gargantuan cosmic event unfolding far above their heads. In some ways, he envied them—their ignorance granting them a temporary reprieve from the potent cocktail of dread and panic that had lodged itself within him.

With a decided firmness, Don moved to the side of the building, seeking an alternate entrance or perhaps an employee who might be lingering unawares within. His steps were deliberate and purposeful, yet they carried the weight of every unanswered question, every unspoken fear about the future.

In the grand scheme of things, the importance of the blueprints, the museum project, and even his job seemed to shrink beneath the enormity of the approaching cosmic storm. And yet, here he was, bound by a sense of duty and normalcy, tethering him to the world that was even as it threatened to morph into something unrecognisable.

Don, standing somewhat impatiently on the doorstep, firmly pressed the main buzzer yet again, a slight scowl etching his features. His wait under the cool, dusky sky went unrewarded with no immediate answer, prompting a more frantic dance of his fingers across all the available buttons. His concern for any lingering politeness began to wane; he'd been tugged far enough into the evening's unexpected journey.

After an excruciatingly long series of moments, the door finally creaked open to reveal an elderly gentleman. His uniform identified him as security, and his creased, yet astute eyes regarded Don with a blend of caution and curiosity.

"How may I assist you at this hour?" The gentleman queried; his tone polite, yet laced with a detectable thread of apprehension.

"I have blueprints for the electrical work scheduled tomorrow," Don explained, his voice steady despite the ticking clock in his mind. "They're meant for your team, although I apologise. I wasn't provided with a specific name. Might I leave them with you?"

The security guard, brows furrowing slightly, responded, "No, no, I can't take them. I'll find someone for you. Please wait a moment," and with that, he promptly shut and re-locked the door, leaving Don again alone in the enveloping dusk.

Don couldn't help but feel a flash of annoyance at the curt interaction, yet he quelled it, understanding the unanticipated interruption he posed in the quiet evening. Fifteen minutes slipped by, during which Don, conceding to his weariness, slumped down on the steps, back against the wall, his gaze locked onto the dimming horizon.

He was lost in thought when the door behind him swung open with a quiet creak, surprising him. Don scrambled to his feet, turning to see a man, apparently from the reception, emerging through the door, his expression an unreadable mask.

"Apologies for the wait," a resonant voice reverberated as the door opened, softening Don's stance. The man stood in the doorway, an apologetic expression shaping his features. "I was entrenched in something. Our security should have ushered you inside to wait comfortably. I'll certainly be having a word about that. It's hardly hospitable, especially considering you've gone out of your way to be here. Please, come in. Let me fetch you a warm drink, though I'm afraid it will have to be machine made; the rest of the staff have departed for the day." The man extended a hand in introduction. "I'm Billings, Max Billings."

"Don," came the curt reply, accompanied by a handshake, "Pleased to meet you, Max."

"Come along," Max invited with a warm, if somewhat tired, smile, "I'll sort you out with that drink and then we can briefly review the plans."

Ascending through the dimly lit building, the pair traversed several flights of worn stairs, arriving at an office adorned with a vast table at its centre, around which a myriad of chairs were haphazardly arranged. Stacks of paper and other miscellaneous items claimed random spots on the surface.

"Just a moment," Max assured, stepping away to attend to the promised beverage.

Don utilised the interim to lay out the plans across the ample table, the paper whispering softly against the wood as he spread them out meticulously. A gentle clatter announced Max's return, bearing a modest plastic cup filled with steaming machine-brewed coffee.

"Here we are," Max offered, placing the cup near Don with a gentle nod, his eyes already scanning across the spread of blueprints. The aroma of the hot liquid wafted through the space, intertwining with the dusky scent of aged paper and lingering memories of long-gone conversations. Don wrapped his fingers around the warmth of the cup, a small comfort amidst the unforeseen turns of the evening, as the two men leaned into the work ahead, quietly absorbed in the intricate details of the project laid out before them.

Don and Max, absorbed in the convoluted maze of blueprints, navigated through each detailed section with a methodical precision, ensuring that every element was scrutinised and understood. Their exchange of technical language weaved through the room, occasionally punctuated by a subtle

nod or a brief pause to consider a particularly intricate segment of the plans. A clock somewhere in the room ticked methodically, though its measure of time seemed inconsequential amidst the vital discussion.

After a substantial dialogue and a thorough review that lingered for over thirty minutes, Don, his mind partially still tangled in the circuitry of the blueprints, excused himself from the office, the images of wires and schematics quietly reverberating in his thoughts.

He lumbered towards his van, the soles of his shoes echoing faintly through the vacant museum car park. Swinging open the door and sliding into the driver's seat, he initiated the starting procedure with a mechanical familiarity, his hands performing the well-practiced dance of ignition and seatbelt. But just as the belt clicked into place, a subtle stutter from the engine preceded its untimely demise, halting Don mid-movement.

And then, he saw it.

A mesmerising, yet ominous glow illuminated the power lines leading to the museum and pump house aside it, casting an eerie light across the area. Sparks, mimicking the fireflies of a distant summer memory, danced wildly from the pole insulators, their whimsical brightness belying the danger they presented. A chilled whisper of realisation snaked through Don's spine, causing a momentary shudder.

It's started, the thought emerged unbidden, a leaden weight in his mind. It's early.

Panic's sharp tendrils began to weave through his chest as he stared, entranced at the aberrant light show unfurling before him. The metal encasing him in the van suddenly seemed oppressively constricting, yet the electrified spectacle outside promised an unwelcoming environment. His mind flickered to the items in the van, to Matt, and to the unspoken promises of safety in an unpredictable world.

I'm not going to get all this home, a lament whispered through his conscience, as the uncertain horizon of the near future unfurled before him, shrouded in the ethereal glow of sparking lines and the descending curtain of impending chaos.

Chapter Eighteen.

Rachel – Trapped in a metal box.

Rachel was enveloped by a paralysing terror, her heartbeat wildly, reverberating in her ears as the lift seemingly plunged into an interminable abyss before jerking to an abrupt halt. Disoriented, she cast a desperate gaze around, the sterile, metallic confines offering no indication of what floor she might be marooned on. Her scream, a raw, piercing shriek, tore through the silence, futilely clawing at the lift's impervious walls, yearning to summon aid from beyond. Ears straining, she listened; the stark, oppressive quiet offered no solace nor indication of nearby life.

The insidious creaking recommenced, a haunting symphony heralding impending doom, prompting Rachel to grit her teeth in dread, her mind bracing for a catastrophic plunge. Yet it remained stationary, hovering on the precipice of disaster. With a shuddering exhale, she released a pent-up breath, previously unaware it had been held hostage by her anxiety.

Suddenly, the lift shifted ominously once more, a stomach-churning descent of mere moments, yet it seemed an eternity before mercifully ceasing. Rachel's scream metamorphosed into a continuous, shrill alarm, persisting even as it reverberated unanswered through the unseen expanses of the building. Her voice, hoarse and trembling, eventually succumbed to fatigue, the silence engulfing her once more.

In a surge of desperation, she yanked off a shoe, its form now a makeshift hammer in her trembling grip, and began to assail the unyielding door, each strike a percussive plea for rescue. She paused intermittently, ears acutely attuned for any semblance of response, yet was met only with the oppressive silence. Despair interwove with regret as she mused upon the alternative, she wished she had taken: the inconvenient yet benign challenge of the stairs, an infinitely preferable ordeal compared to the torturous limbo within this metallic prison.

Enveloped in the precarious tomb of the elevator, Rachel's thoughts began to wander toward Brenda, her heart intertwining with threads of worry and hope. Surely, by now, she would be at the station, brows knitted together with concern, casting glances at the ticking clock and the empty platform. Rachel clung to the hope that the absence of her timely arrival would prompt Brenda to take action, to embark on a journey towards her. Despite never having set foot in this place and possessing an infamously poor sense of direction, Rachel knew Brenda wouldn't surrender to the easy embrace of giving up.

Memories flickered through Rachel's mind, painting an amused smile on Brenda's face after being late for the third consecutive tutorial. "You'd get lost in a signpost factory," the tutor had joked, an adage that now twisted in Rachel's stomach as both an endearing memory and a source of tangible fear.

An unsettling shift in the elevator startled Rachel from her reminiscence, its descent this time accompanied by a jarring plummet before juddering to a stop once more. Rationalising that she might now be on a different floor, her throat unleashed another scream, merging with the rhythmic banging against the lift's door, all before allowing silence to creep in as she listened intently. Despite the repeated cycles of calling and listening, the oppressive quiet remained, stubbornly unwavering, shadowing the lift in unnerving isolation.

A chilling thought nestled into her consciousness: what if the world had spiralled into its end, leaving her unaware and isolated within this metal cocoon? Uncharacteristic anger began to smoulder within her, tendrils of frustration coiling around her heart as once more the lift began its descent. This time, a ghastly, metallic screech clawed at her ears, the elevator halting with such abruptness that she was unceremoniously toppled to the floor.

Pain and desperation mingling, she gathered her resolve. She **needed** to attract attention, to summon salvation. Her mind and body, weary yet determined, prepared to endure in the dimming hope of rescue.

With a grimace, Rachel hauled herself from the unforgiving metal floor, her knee emitting a sharp, excruciating outcry that echoed her physical agony into the confined space. As her hands gingerly explored the injury, her fingertips brushed against a sticky, wet warmth, her senses immediately understanding – blood. Dizziness swept over her like a dark, swift wave, her surroundings blurring and distorting before plunging into darkness as she crumpled back to the floor.

Waking into a seamless, disorienting void, Rachel had no sense of elapsed time; minutes could have morphed into hours, even days. Without the ticking hands of a clock or the natural light of day slipping through a window to guide her perception, time stretched out and contracted around her in an impenetrable fog. The lost shoe lay somewhere in the shadowy abyss of the lift, its location concealed by the darkness enveloping her.

With a shiver of trepidation and concern for her vulnerability, she gingerly bent her injured leg and removed her other shoe, gripping it tightly with determination shining through her discomfort. Her arm, fuelled by a newfound surge of adrenaline and hope, began striking the lift door with a renewed fervour.

This time, amidst the cacophony of her own desperation, a muffled response whispered through the heavy metal barrier. Her hand paused mid-air, her breath hitching as she strained her ears, hoping to discern an assurance through the thick metallic wall. She attacked the door with her shoe again, clinging to the potential promise of the sound.

Then, distinctly, a knock echoed from the other side. Her heart lurched, simultaneously questioning the reality and clinging to the belief that it was a tangible, life-affirming signal. Then, a voice, muffled but undeniably real, filtered through the enclosure.

“We will have you out soon. Hang on.”

Tears welled in Rachel’s eyes, relief and residual fear intertwining as she pressed her forehead against the cool metal of the door. A beacon of hope shimmered in the oppressive darkness of the elevator, the promise of rescue kindling a spark of resilience within her battered spirit. She would hang on, for however long it took.

Tears cascaded down Rachel's cheeks, a torrent of relief, fear, and pent-up anxiety spilling forth as the tangible promise of rescue enlivened her spirit. She had teetered on the precipice of despair, nearly succumbing to the oppressive isolation of her metallic prison. And yet, someone had pierced through the silence; her cries had not been swallowed by the void. Safety, so recently an elusive dream, now beckoned tantalisingly close.

The familiar creaking encroached once more, its sinister crescendo enveloping her with renewed dread. She braced herself, muscles coiling taut as she pressed her back into the wall of the lift, mentally preparing for another stomach-churning descent. With teeth clenched and eyes squeezed shut, she shielded her face with trembling hands, anticipating the imminent freefall. But instead of the stomach-lurching plummet, a gentle sway kissed the lift, and then the plaintive metallic groan of opening doors graced her ears.

Blinding light from a torch assaulted her closed eyelids, heralding the end of her ordeal. Gently, strong hands cradled her, coaxing her trembling form to unsteady feet and guiding her out of the suffocating confinement of the elevator.

Air, rich and sweet, caressed her lungs as she emerged, inhaling deeply the essence of her newfound freedom. A sob of gratitude escaped her lips as she enveloped the man before her in an impulsive, fierce embrace. The security guard, a familiar yet distant figure from her daily comings and goings, was now a saviour in her most desperate moment.

“Let me breathe, girl, let me come up for air, please,” he gasped with gentle chiding, his voice a warm, comforting timbre amidst her chaotic emotions. “You are safe now. Take a seat, I will get you a drink, just give me a moment.”

Her arms fell away, relinquishing their tight hold as she regarded him through tear-streaked eyes, the undercurrent of his kindness acting as a soothing balm to her jangled nerves. Her ordeal was over, the metal tomb that had imprisoned her now just a silent, defeated captor. And in this moment, with a stranger turned saviour offering solace and a seat, Rachel found a sliver of peace amidst the residual tremors of fear.

Gently, he guided her toward a chair stationed against the austere wall, his hand offering a tender yet steadfast support against her weakened frame. Slipping away through a nondescript door, he returned momentarily, cradling a bottle of water within his weathered hands.

“Apologies. It's all I have,” he confessed, a trace of regret lingering in his words. “The power’s been out for hours. You’re lucky – the lift crept down to the ground floor. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have realised you were trapped there.”

Her hands enveloped the bottle, fingers trembling as she twisted off the cap. The water cascaded down her parched throat, an unexpected oasis in her ordeal. An awareness of her insatiable thirst flooded her senses as she nearly drained the bottle in a singular, desperate gulp.

She voiced a question that had been clawing at the edges of her consciousness. “What time is it?”

His gaze drifted toward the dark, unresponsive clocks lining the walls. “I'm not entirely sure. The clocks are all electric. But I'd venture it's around two, maybe three in the morning,” he speculated.

A pang of worry constricted Rachel's chest. “My friend Brenda... I was supposed to meet her off the York train. She'll be waiting for me. I must go and find her. She wouldn't have...”

He intervened gently, his words a soft barrier to her rising panic. “You aren't going anywhere, not in your current state. You need rest. If she has waited this long, a little longer won't hurt. I have the keys to the show flat. Given the power outage and everything happening – there's a fire in the other block – I doubt they'll be conducting any viewings tomorrow. Don't fret; my wife Helen will assist you. She'll help you get settled into the flat. Please, go with her.”

He offered not just a physical sanctuary but a pause, a moment of respite in the chaos that enveloped her. Her shoulders sagged, a reluctant acceptance of her own vulnerability and a quiet appreciation for the unexpected kindness bestowed by these virtual strangers amidst the tempest that the night had become.

Rachel's realisation dawned slowly that, all along, a woman had been standing merely a few steps to her right, and she'd been utterly oblivious to her presence amidst the turmoil of her emotions and physical distress.

“Come, dear,” the woman's voice was a gentle cascade of comfort, “Let's get you settled. Greg, my husband, will fetch the doctor to give you a once-over. He won't be long.”

Helen, offering a comforting arm, she led Rachel, whose legs quivered like fragile tendrils, into the sanctuary of the flat. Guiding her through to one of the inviting bedrooms, Helen motioned towards the bed, encouraging her to lay her weary body down. Gently, she tucked her in with a maternal warmth that was both unfamiliar and deeply comforting.

Rachel's voice, now barely a whisper, flickered through the semi-darkness as her head sunk into the pillow. “If a short woman with the same colour hair as mine comes looking for me... her name is Brenda.”

Her voice tapered off into a vulnerable silence, the final words hanging in the air like a delicate, unspoken prayer. Helen, absorbing the weight of those words, paused, offering a silent reassurance that lingered in the dimly lit room. The tender refuge of the bed enveloped Rachel, as her thoughts meandered between her current safe harbour and the undeniable worry for Brenda, left alone amidst the unpredictable tumult of the night.

Chapter Nineteen.

Brenda – Rivers of blood.

Screaming pierced the suffocating darkness, a terrifying symphony that rattled Brenda from the abyss of unconsciousness. Her own breath, laboured and shaking, tried to mingle with the chaotic symphony

around her, yet it barely whispered through the oppressive dark. Her face was slick and wet, her mind dizzied, spinning in a vortex of confusion and pain. Shadows clouded her understanding. Why the screams? Why this impenetrable dark? What was this dampness streaking down her face?

A cruel pain lanced through her head, another throbbed insistently in her side, and a heavy, brutal ache was planted in her chest, as though a violent boot had found its home there. Desperation crept through her veins, forcing her mind to wrestle with the confusion. But the darkness whispered fears into her thoughts: Why can't I see?

Then, like a tidal wave, memories flooded back, dragging terror in their wake. The voyage to see Rachel, the train, the nightmarish sparks, the horrific dance of seats spiralling through the air – or was it her, spiralling over them? The truth struck her like a bolt of lightning, an icy realisation drowning her: the train had crashed. She had been ensnared in a violent ballet of metal and mayhem.

Hesitantly, she reached up, fingers gingerly dancing across her eyes, wiping away the strange wetness. A metallic scent caressed her nose, and a blurry world flickered into view before being cruelly stolen away again by a fresh wave of the liquid. A second wipe, and in the slimy residue on her fingers, Brenda recognised the thick consistency of blood - her own blood, flowing with abandonment.

Panic threaded through her veins as she realised the enormity of it. Her body felt imprisoned, confined by invisible barriers on all sides; something against her head, her legs, her chest, an oppressive force unwilling to yield. Her tongue, swollen and throbbing, prodded against an alien object, searing pain darting through her mouth with every tentative touch.

Reflexively, she tried to expel it, but the object resisted, stubbornly lodged while blood slid in. The taste, ferrous and haunting, infiltrated her senses. Her trembling hands, guided by a desperate need to know, fluttered to her face, gingerly exploring for signs of lacerations, splinters of glass, anything that might explain the relentless bleeding.

There. Something protruded from her left cheek, an unexpected invader in her flesh. Her fingers hesitated, then cautiously, tenderly explored it. It was rounded, not a long hexagon, but a simple, cylindrical object. A pencil, she realised, and an odd mix of relief and continued fear, mingled in her chest. Just a pencil. Yet it had claimed a torturous residence in her flesh.

In the distant background, the screaming continued, a horrifying accompaniment to Brenda's awakening nightmare, where pain, darkness, and loneliness presided.

Brenda's teeth throbbed, a pulsating agony that ricocheted through her jaw. Her tongue, swollen and awkward, resonated with its own pulsing pain. Gingerly, she slid a finger into her mouth, tracing the path of the intrusive pencil, finding it grotesquely embedded through to her tongue. A shiver of revulsion quivered through her spine, and she withdrew her finger with a grim determination firming in her chest: This has to happen; it has to happen now.

With a careful, yet firm grasp, she enclosed her fingers around the pencil, her mind buzzing with a mixture of fear and necessity. She began a mental countdown, attempting to prepare herself for the agony that was surely waiting on the other side of three... two... one...

With a surge of desperate strength, she yanked the pencil free. A sharp, horrendous pain exploded through her tooth, her tongue screamed in renewed agony, and unexpectedly, her cheek seemed to shy away from joining this chorus of pain, offering her a tiny respite in this moment of brutality.

Brenda spat; a spatter of blood was ejected from her mouth, accompanied by a small, solid object. Her tongue, despite its painful protest, instinctively explored the new vacancy in her mouth,

finding the fresh wound in her cheek. A smarting pain flashed as it brushed against the open sore, prompting her to retract it quickly, expelling another mouthful of bloody fluid in response.

Her mind, still reeling, slowly pieced together the sordid puzzle: the liquid was her blood, and the small object - that was one of her teeth. A tidal wave of emotion, powerful and raw, crashed over her, bringing sobs that clawed up from the depths of her being. But just as quickly as they had surfaced, Brenda stifled them, forcefully pushing them down into a place where they couldn't interfere.

"I have to get out of here," she anchored herself with the thought, solidifying her resolve, "I have to get free. I must stay focused."

The screams of the others entwined in this twisted metal nightmare still punctuated the darkness, each one a haunting reminder of the imperative nature of her situation. Brenda's spirit, battered but unbroken, steadied itself against the anguish and uncertainty, preparing to navigate through the wreckage, pain, and fear that lay ahead.

A resolve hardened in Brenda's chest; she was, above all else, a problem solver. She could navigate through this nightmare. Bracing herself against the disorienting pain and eerie darkness, she embarked on a meticulous journey to figure out her predicament. Her head was enveloped in a persistent warmth, the sensation of blood trickling down her face. What was the source of it? What object was asserting its oppressive presence against her forehead? Brenda worked to decipher her spatial situation — was she upright or inverted? A quick realisation dawned: she must be upright, for the blood navigated downwards, respecting the unforgiving law of gravity, cascading over her features, blurring her vision, and infiltrating her mouth.

Her left hand was imprisoned, shackled by an unseen force, but Brenda relegated that issue to the background of her priorities. Blood, relentless in its escape, continued its journey down her face, threatening imminent unconsciousness with every drop lost. Why hadn't she already succumbed to darkness? The relentless pressure against her head demanded immediate attention.

Gingerly, she extended her other hand upwards, fingertips dancing lightly over her forehead, anticipating the cruel revelation of a laceration and the accompanying flare of pain. But it never came. Her fingers, now sticky with her life essence, traced an unexpected shape — soft and woolly. A seat cushion, perhaps?

She delicately explored the shape further, fingers skimming leftwards until her reach met its limits, yielding no change in texture or form. A cautious journey to the right, however, brought a gut-wrenching realisation that made her hand instinctively retract. This was not an inanimate object; it was undeniably human – the distinctive feel of a nose and yielding softness of lips. A person, lifeless, was the source of her predicament, a chilling truth that cast a pallor over her already dire circumstances.

Brenda's consciousness, which had briefly departed, cascaded back into her, brimming with an unwavering fortitude. The immobile body, though a horrifying realisation, still needed to be moved; she had no choice. An involuntary retch coursed through her, her prior meal attempting a tumultuous escape, as her mind recoiled at the thought of physically interacting with the deceased. Swallowing hard, she mentally steadied herself, avoiding the precipice of despair, refusing to allow her thoughts to drift into the abyss of "or."

Her fingers assessed the obstacle pressing on her chest and discerned it was localised to her left side. It felt like a handle – flat on one side, rounded on the other, extending farther than her reach, allowed her to verify. As she nudged it away, an agonised groan perforated the stillness to her left. A pang of concern flickered within her – was her movement causing someone pain? After a moment of

contemplation, resolve overpowered hesitation; escape was imperative, regardless of potential collateral discomfort.

She exerted herself, pushing once more. Again, the groan – distinctly male – vibrated through the dark. The significance of this dwindled beneath her single-minded focus: escape. With a surge of effort, a splintering crack tore through the quiet, and she concluded it must have been something wooden. Perhaps a hockey stick? The handle relinquished its grip on her arm and chest, and as she involuntarily slumped forward, the unyielding presence on her head slid down, asserting pressure onto her back and entrapping her legs.

Her hands descended, landing on what she identified as a suitcase – one hand on the handle and the other against its body. Summoning the dregs of her strength, she hoisted it upwards. It offered minor resistance before she tipped it to the side, relegating it away from her with a final, adrenaline-fuelled push. Brenda's essence was now purely survival, a flame of determination illuminating her path, propelling her onwards to extricate herself from this metal prison.

Brenda, maintaining a delicate balance between resolve and vulnerability, carefully wiped her eyes with her left sleeve, gently, almost mechanically. Retrieving a tissue from her pocket—her habit since an embarrassingly public nosebleed in college had left her redder than the blood staining her face—she delicately wiped at her mouth, then eyes once more. A slightly clearer view revealed a nightmarish landscape: the carriage, disconcertingly upside down, must have crumpled during the crash as windows now offered mere slivers of dim light.

Attempting to stand, her footing met something soft, and with a pang of remorseful acknowledgment, she shifted her weight forward. Wiping her eyes anew, her hand exploratively caressed around her head until a sharp sting by her ear signalled a gash. A breath hitched in her chest, yet further probing yielded no other wounds. An unnerving realisation washed over her—the blood, it wasn't hers. The former presence on her head must have... Brenda forcefully cut that thought short, unwilling to tread into that mental abyss.

The groans and soft pleas for help had dwindled to an eerie near-silence, interjected only by the occasional murmur or half-whispered plea. With her veins pulsating with adrenaline, she turned, eyes locking onto a shard of light punctuating the darkness midway down the carriage. A possible escape. An unavoidable path of bodies lay between her and potential freedom—she had to traverse it, regardless of the emotional toll.

A quick self-assessment revealed no apparent breaks in her limbs or torso. The carriage seemed to tilt, the pathway to the light perceptibly uphill. Reaching up, she grasped the underbelly of a seat, utilising them as handholds toward salvation. Negotiating a path across the lifeless passengers as respectfully as possible, her heart caught in her throat at the lack of any protest beneath her steps.

Finally, she reached the light: the crushed remnants of the carriage doors. Escape would require moving a large gentleman blocking the way. His size proved an immovable obstacle. Analysing the predicament, she likened it to a macabre game of Tetris. Moving a woman and child from his left side, she slid beside him against the screen. With a surge of effort on her third try, she rolled him into the void left by the relocated bodies. An unexpected sense of accomplishment fleetingly pierced the solemnity as she thought, *It worked.*

She weaved through the shattered window; the daylight enveloping her, before she cascaded the four feet down to the stony ground below.