

ICE STORMS

IN THREE PARTS

BY CHUCK BAKER

FROM STORY IDEAS

BY PAUL PRUITT

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For Monica, Erin, Katie and Jenny
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CHAPTER XII..... 165

The two girls were searching for their mother, but it was Jennifer who spotted them first. She ran up to the girls. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she said. "I know that we don't keep secrets, generally, and I'm sorry. There are just some complicated things going on right now..." 165

CHAPTER XIII 171

"You're helping us?" Anna asked. 171

CHAPTER XIV 174

"We're better off without it, anyway," Jennifer replied. "It's one of the things that can make friends turn against friends if you get too much of it. Now let's get back to town, get packed up, and get out of here without being spotted." I have much to tell you. 174

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ICE STORMS I: THE KIDNAP

PROLOGUE

Sometime in the not distant future the earth is settled into a “nuclear winter” brought on not by nuclear weapons but by comets and asteroids crashing into the earth.

To greatly compound the problems, all the men on earth appear to have died and maybe in a separate problem, women were dying not much after age 50.

ICE STORMS I

CHAPTER I

She was almost afraid to look--

But when she did, there was nothing new. The same fluffy objects that had been filling their town for weeks on end were still coming down. Snowflakes. Grey snowflakes.

She made her way downstairs to the kitchen table where Mom was fixing breakfast.

"Just cereal and coffee today, girls," Mom said, smiling apologetically.

"Again?" she and her sister Jill answered together, just a little too loudly.

"Again. You know I can't risk a trip outside right now--not when the streets are filled with raiders. Thank God for your father, bless his soul, who fortified this house before he--before he--"

"Before the accident," Anna offered.

"Before the accident. . . But it just doesn't make sense," she continued, "Women over 50 dropping like flies, and ALL the boys and men--dead! It just doesn't make any sense."

"My teacher said the snow has affected the drinking water--that something is not being filtered out. It's the gray snow, Mama. Eventually, it'll get us all!"

"Don't talk nonsense, Jill!" Mom replied. "Right now, I'm a lot more worried about those raiders than about some mystery illness--and I'M the scientist, remember?"

"Then what's causing it?" Anna asked.

"I think I know. But I need to do some more tests, and to do that, I need supplies for the lab. And you know what that means--I've got to get past those raiders. Any ideas girls?"

Jill scratched her head, wracking her brain for something, anything that might work. She looked up, and saw her sister smiling from ear to ear. Anna had a plan. This would be fun. . .

CHAPTER II

Jill and Anna searched out every balloon they could find in the house--leftovers from past birthday parties and anniversaries. One by one they were filled with water, and then popped into the fridge.

The ice cube trays were next. They unloaded the cubes--a whole tray of them into plastic bags, tying each one before popping them into the freezer again.

Time to prepare the buckets, pails, and containers. They punched two holes into each one, loaded them up with the ice packs from the fridge, and took all of it up through the attic to the roof.

They connected one piece of surgical tubing to the chimney, and the other to the big bucket. Anna volunteered to hold the other end, as she carefully stood near the edge of the roof. Jill pulled the first bucket back, and yelled,

"Now!"

Ice packs flew through the air, and their mother took off, out of the house, ducking into doorways, trying not to be seen.

The girls launched bucket after bucket of ice bombs on the raiders below. Their giant slingshot was working well.

One raider was hit directly in the head, knocking him off his motorcycle.

They hit the wheel of another, sending him into a slide, directly into a lamppost.

The street below was soon littered with ice bombs everywhere, scattering riders, sending them to other streets. The diversion had worked.

The girls made their way back into the house, secured the latch on the roof, and checked every door and boarded up window in the house.

Then they settled down to wait for the signal. It would take Mom a while to get what she needed. There was nothing else they could do at the moment, and that was the worst.

The waiting was always the worst.

It was midnight when they heard the knock. . .

“Don’t answer it!” Anna whispered to her sister. “That’s not the signal. Pretend there’s no one here, and they’ll go away.”

The knock got louder. More persistent.

A voice:

“Come on, and open up the door, girls! I know you’re in there. Your mom sent me.”

“It’s a trick,” said Anna. “Don’t open it.”

“Eclipse,” said the voice.

“WHAT did you say?” Anna screamed back.

“*ECLIPSE*. I said *ECLIPSE*.”

Anna and Jill froze. Something was definitely wrong. Mom had told the secret family password to someone, and that meant one thing and one thing only. She was in trouble.

CHAPTER III

Jennifer Kennedy was a resourceful woman. She had a lot to show for herself—brains, beauty, and two intelligent, independent girls who could think for themselves. If Ken were still alive, it'd be perfect. She'd earned everything the hard way, but it was all worth it. Except for this. Except for now. Being held against her will—and it very well could be because of her beauty or her brains. . . She hoped it was brains. . .

“Ready?” Jill asked, one hand on the doorknob, one on the latch.

“Just a sec.” Anna reached over, and grabbed a heavy table lamp with both hands. She held it over her head, then moved to one side of the door. “Ready.”

Jill flipped the latch, turned the knob, and pulled the door open wide.

A skinny blonde in jeans and a t-shirt stood there, shivering.

Jill was no longer worried. She was taller than this woman, and outweighed her by a good twenty pounds. “Come on in! You look like you’re freezing!”

“Th-Thanks.”

“Now—What’s going on? What’s your name, and how do you know our mom?”

“I’m Ingrid. But I’ll tell you about me later. Right now, your mom needs your help. I’ll explain later—we’ve got to hurry! Before they get too far away. What’s the fastest way out of town?”

“Well, right about now, that’d be a snowmobile,” Jill replied.

“Do you have one?”

“As a matter of fact,” Anna answered, “we have two. Jill’s and mine.”

“Well, grab as many supplies as you can, bundle up, and let’s go. We’ve got to find where they’ve taken her.”

“Ok, we’re all worried, but there’s no need to rush. We can track her with this—” Anna pulled open an end table drawer and took out a small gizmo.

“A locator? But they’ve been illegal for—how did you get

"Our mom's a scientist, remember? She's got friends in high places. Anyway, she taught us how to use the transponder locator GPS system for this very reason. Now, we can just hook into her microchip, and follow her wherever she goes—"

"That is," cut in Jill, "until the batteries start to go. We'll have to pick up these X-475 Lithium batteries wherever we can. They last awhile, but they're hard to find. And we'll be using it a lot. It's either that, or find a generator to charge the ones we've got."

"Ok, so we've got a bit of time to prepare. But let's not let them get too far away."

"Don't worry. We've always been prepared for this day. Our supplies are ready in the shelter downstairs. Since we packed for three, you can use Mom's stuff."

Mrs. Kennedy was getting cold. She knew she was in the back of a semi that was full of supplies, and a couple of snowmobiles, but she was handcuffed to something heavy and couldn't do much about it. No, that's not quite true. She knew what she had to do. She just hoped she wouldn't black out in the process.

The tracks of the semi were easy to follow in the fresh snow. The roads had been cleared that morning, but already a thick gray blanket covered the highway. No one else had been crazy enough to drive in these conditions, so it was easy pickings, Anna thought. Too easy. And what would they do when they caught up to them?

The driver glanced at her companion in the passenger seat for a split second, but quickly looked back to the slippery road. “This was so easy,” she said. “She never even saw us coming.”

“Yeah. Spotting her duck into that store was a real bonus,” the passenger said. “We just picked her up like you pick up groceries!”

Welcome to Washington, the sign read, as they crossed the Oregon border. “It won’t be long now,” the driver said. “We just dump our “cargo” at the Seattle docks, collect our checks, and take a well-earned vacation.”

“Hawaii sounds like a nice change,” the passenger said.

“Yeah, you’re right about that. At least for the moment. But those glaciers are moving south fast. If one of the ones near the coast hits the ocean, the forces could send a tsunami our way!”

“Always the optimist, aren’t y—”

A deer jumped directly in front of the semi. The driver swerved. The trailer jack-knifed. The entire semi started sliding sideways towards the ditch. There was nothing to stop it. . .

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Kennedy was in the trailer. She had just managed to calm her heartbeat. She concentrated on relaxing one hand, one wrist. She had tightened her fists when they slapped the handcuffs on her. Now, if she could just relax enough and then pull sharply, she might get her hand out. She might lose some skin in the process, but it was worth a try.

She was just starting to pull when the semi slid and slammed onto its side. The impact jarred Mrs. Kennedy's hand free, but she was smacked into the side of the trailer. Something heavy had her pinned, and one of the snowmobile's front skis had just narrowly missed her head. It sat wedged into the wall of the semi. She could feel the cold air rush in. She struggled to remain calm. She struggled to stay conscious. She felt a trickle of blood from her forehead slide down her brow, and she gently drifted off to sleep . . .

The girls were making good time. The tracks were harder to follow now, because the biting wind was blowing snow across

them. But the signal was coming in strong. Anna could tell they were getting closer, and gaining fast. The others must have stopped. Maybe the road was blocked up ahead. She could always hope. She had the throttle fully open now, and she blasted across the snow, kicking up a whirlwind.

Jill followed the cloud from a bit farther behind. It was dangerous driving behind Anna. If Jill fell back too much, she might lose sight of Anna and Ingrid—she was thankful for the cumulus cloud of snow Anna was kicking up behind her. . .

Inside the cab of the semi, both driver and passenger struggled to escape. The seatbelts had saved their lives, but now the clasps had bent and jammed, and the two women were fighting against the straps. The passenger reached into her pocket and pulled out a switchblade. In seconds, she cut herself free, then slid down to the driver and did the same.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, I’m alright. Stupid deer! I should’ve just mowed him down!”

They crawled out through the passenger window, and made their way to the back of the truck.

“Looks like our easy job just got tougher.”

“No kidding. Just hope our passenger is alive!”

They cracked open the back doors and saw Mrs. Kennedy lying underneath the rubble, her face covered in blood.

“She’s dead! Can you believe it? Now we’ll never get paid!”

“Never say never.” She crouched down and made her way inside the semi. Seeing Mrs. Kennedy’s hand laid out towards her, the kidnapper lifted her foot, placed the heel of her boot on the palm, and stomped down hard.

“AAAAHHH!” Mrs. Kennedy screamed at the top of her lungs.

“See?” The woman looked back. “She’s ok. . . Now help me get these snowmobiles out. We’ve got to take our prisoner for a little ride.”

CHAPTER V

We're getting close. Very close, Anna thought, as she raced her way down the I-95. *I don't have much gas left, but they can't be very far from here—should I risk it?*

And just then, she spotted it. A semi rolled on the side of the road, with the back doors snapped open. She eased up on the gas, and approached carefully. Jill soon caught up to her. The two of them stopped, about a hundred feet away from the wreck.

“Is it safe? What do we do if there's a gang of them around somewhere?” Jill asked her older sister.

“You know me,” said Anna. “I always have a plan. For now, let's just circle around the wreck and see what we can see.”

They saw nothing.

It was a bad sign. The kidnappers had gotten away.

It was a good sign. No bodies meant that everyone was still alive.

“You still got a piece of that surgical tubing in your pocket, Jill? The stuff we used for the slingshot?”

“Yeah. I brought a coil of it in case we had to do our slingshot trick again.”

“Get it out for me. We need to siphon some gas soon, or we’re not going to make it too much farther. And get me our water jug and a plastic bag.”

The jug had been tucked inside Jill’s snowsuit to keep it from freezing. She took it out, grabbed a plastic bag, and gave both to Anna.

Anna used her foot to dig out a hole in the snow. She placed the bag in the hole, and then told Jill to pour the water into the bag.

“But it’ll freeze!” Jill protested.

“Exactly!” Anna replied. If we freeze the water now, we can strap it onto something else, and use the water jug as an extra gas can. We can always melt some when we need drinking water.”

Ingrid just stood there, amazed, gaping and gawking as the two girls went into action. Jill siphoned gas into the jug, and Anna ran back and forth to the snowmobiles, filling the two tanks. She filled their jug to the brim and capped it, and then the girls strapped everything back on the snowmobiles and set off.

They were behind again.

CHAPTER VI

The air turned colder and the winds were more bracing as they headed north. The massive glaciers had moved as far down as Horseshoe Bay, just north of the U.S. / Canada border, and they were still making their way farther south. Most Canadians had already fled across the border to escape the cold. Only the most stubborn or the most hopeless and helpless remained.

And here they were, racing closer, when most people were fleeing. Just where were these kidnappers taking their mother anyway? Anna kept thinking of the crash, and the state that the semi had been in. She hoped that her mother would be able to get medical attention if she needed it. Realistically, she knew it wouldn't happen.

The signal was faint for several miles, but again, the girls were gaining ground quickly. They must be searching for gas! We can catch them!

They raced forward, but soon found what slowed down the group ahead of them—evidently, they'd cut through a dense forest,

weaving this way and that, making their way through the tall Douglas fir trees. It was getting late, and dark, and cold. Anna knew they would have to stop soon and make a fire, or they risked frostbite. She brought her snowmobile to a halt at the edge of the forest, and waited for Jill to do the same.

“What are you doing?” Jill asked. “Why are you stopping? We’re going to lose them!”

“Calm down, Jill,” Anna said. “We’ve been in the cold air for a long, long time. THEY were in a warm truck—remember? We need to stop and get warm, or we won’t be of any use to anyone.”

“But they’ll get away—”

“Not as long as we have this—” Anna pulled out the tracking device. She stared at the LCD light on it. Either her eyesight was getting poor, or the light was becoming very faint. She tucked the finder back into her pocket. Batteries. Tomorrow, they must find batteries. . . but right now, they had to get warm.

They parked the snowmobiles about six feet away from each other, and draped and tied a tarp over top. Then they piled gear near the ends to block out any cold wind that might sneak its way through the trees.

Fire was next. Finding dry material was difficult. But they gathered some twigs and small branches to dry near a fire that they

started with whatever they could find in their backpacks that would burn. When they were all warm, one by one, they drifted off to sleep. When the fire died, other noises began . . .

Something was rustling in the bushes nearby. A bear! They'd used their backpacks, with food inside to block the ends of their homemade tent—and the scent had attracted an unwelcome visitor!

“Don't move! Don't anybody move!” Jill whispered to the others. The bear ambled up to the backpacks, and pawed at one lightly. He turned, as if to go away, but then moved back and slashed at the pack with a claw. The pack rolled a few feet away, and then Anna turned to the others, wide-eyed.

“We need to move—now!”

They snuck out of their shelter as quietly as they could, and backed into the woods in the other direction. The bear gave them a passing glance, but it had other things on its mind. Bit by bit, it picked through their belongings, sniffing everything, taking bites out of what it thought was edible. It was a long time before it was safe for the girls to return.

When they did, the scene wasn't pretty: anything edible was picked through, half-eaten or completely gone. There was barely anything left for them to eat, so they'd have to scrounge for food—

and the winter woods were no place to find it. They needed to get to a city. So much for sleep.

They were a few hours from Olympia. They should be able to scrounge some food and batteries there. But it meant that they'd have to take time away from the chase to do it.

CHAPTER VII

The kidnappers had already passed through Olympia. They had gas and food—and their prisoner. They were well on their way, and their prisoner seemed to be cooperating.

They were making good time, so they decided to stop and take a rest. Mrs. Kennedy pretended to fall asleep from exhaustion. Soon, both guards were asleep, but Mrs. Kennedy was cuffed to the treads of the snowmobile. If she could just reach the gas tank . . .

She dug down deep under her blanket, until the snow she was scraping turned brown. Then bit by bit, she started putting dirt in the gas tank. She covered the hole with snow again, and went to sleep. May as well get some rest . . .

By the time they got to Olympia, the three women were exhausted. Tired, hungry, and desperate, they searched for stores that had not already been totally ransacked. They found a convenience store, snacked on what they could find, and filled their

patched up backpacks. The locator's batteries were completely dead. They'd have to search out an electronics place, and hope for the best.

Anna grabbed the yellow pages, and looked up "Electronics". She found the address of a Radio Shack not far from where they were, at least according to the map on the inside cover. They'd be able to find batteries there, and then they'd gas up and be on their way.

"Ok, get up!" The voice of the kidnapper woke Mrs. Kennedy.

"I said, get up! The sooner we get you to Seattle, the better.

"I'm ready," Mrs. Kennedy answered. "Stop pushing. And can you please uncuff me?"

"We can uncuff you from the snowmobile, but don't try anything, or we'll hurt you. They want you alive, but they didn't say we couldn't hurt you, you know."

"And just who is THEY?" Mrs. Kennedy asked.

"You don't need to know that right now. But you never know—you might be surprised."

“And just where are we headed?”

“For us, Seattle. For you, much much farther.”

“You’re just going to dump me off?”

“Something like that.”

“And what should I call the two of you? I haven’t heard you use each other’s names once yet.”

“Of course. Still digging, hmm? You want something to use on us? Well, let’s just say we’re both women, so it’s safe if you call me Frank and her George. Is that ok with you?”

“Beautiful. So tell me Frank, when do we get to eat again?”

“Be quiet and climb on. It’s time to get moving.” Frank started up her snowmobile without a hitch, but when George tried the same, it wouldn’t turn over at all. “What’s wrong? Why won’t this start? I don’t know a thing about snowmobiles.” She looked at Mrs. Kennedy. “You’re the scientist! Why won’t this go?”

“I’m a scientist, not a mechanic,” Mrs. Kennedy replied.

“Is it out of gas? I thought we just filled up.” George opened her gas cap, and looked inside. “Mud! There’s mud in my tank! You sneaky little—”

Whack! The butt of a pistol slammed into the side of Mrs.

Kennedy's face, and she was knocked unconscious.

“Come on over here, Francesca, and help me get the dirt out of this tank!”

“I’m Frank, remember? No real names, ok? Just in case she isn’t really sleeping... I already feel bad choosing names that are so close to our real ones as it is.”

CHAPTER VIII

Anna, Jill, and Ingrid were fed and rested and ready to go. The locator was working again, and they were amazed to see how close they were. With renewed energy, they set off to begin the chase again. They were gaining ground quickly—if the gauge was correct, they were only about a half-hour behind, and their target wasn't moving. If they hurried, they could catch them within the hour!

Frank and George had spent a lot of time trying to get the dirt out of the tank, but even after they'd gotten as much as they could out by scooping and sponging it up, they still couldn't start it. They piled as much gear as they could on one snowmobile, pressed the unconscious prisoner between the two of them, and set off. They had to move more slowly now, both to hold the body, and to make sure the gear didn't go flying off. Still, they didn't have any time to waste . . .

The girls could see that they were gaining ground fast. Though the target was nearing Seattle, they weren't far behind. And they were steadily catching up.

Fifteen minutes away, then ten, then only five—they were almost there. The target was somewhere along the coast. What would they do next? How could they get their mother back from the attackers? Anna searched her mind for a solution. Maybe another distraction was in order . . .

The kidnappers slid the snowmobile up to the water's edge.

“I can't believe it! We missed it! The boat's already left. We didn't even have time to get her into the container. What do we do now?” George asked.

“You know the backup plan just like I do. We can't just sit here and wait for the next ship—wait for someone to find us. The next ship might be a month or more in coming. We can't just sit still with a captive for that long. It's safer if we move.”

“But, but the other trip is so long, and dangerous.”

“It's all we can do. We have to keep moving so the daughters can't find us. Remember, the girls are almost as intelligent as their mother. Maybe we should have tried to take all of

them, waited until we had a chance to get them all. But one thing is sure—it's not safe for us to stay in one place with those girls looking for us. It's much harder to hit a moving target. So even though it means a much longer trip, we have to do it. There is no other way."

They got back on their snowmobiles, just as the girls crested the top of the hill and spotted them below. The chase was on!

Anna and Jill split into a V, one trying to head off the other snowmobile, the other trying to come up behind it.

"Look! Up on the hill! Someone's coming!"

George's shouting snapped Mrs. Kennedy awake. She looked up through blurry eyes, searching the hillside. She spotted two snowmobiles—her daughters?—coming down the hill fast towards them. Mrs. Kennedy brought her leg up and stomped on the foot behind her. George gave a yelp, then smacked her in the head again. She tried to stay awake, tried to stay alert, but the pain in her head was just too great. All she could do was hold on. She couldn't think. She couldn't fight back. All she could do was hold on and hope for the best.

Anna raced to cut them off. She came down the hill too quickly, almost losing control, and a sharp dip sent Ingrid flying off the back. A quick glance back showed Anna that she was ok, and

she had no time now to stop. Ingrid would have to find her way into the city. There was no going back for her. She increased speed a little more now, almost floating over the snow. She was gaining on them!

Jill was catching up as well. A single rider can move a lot faster than three bodies on a single machine. Frank and George saw them both coming too. Frank moved to pull into a straight line with the machines. At the last moment, she cranked the steering to the right, and Jill caught her front ski on Anna's machine. Both riders went flying into the air, skidding across the hard-packed snow. Their machines flipped end over end, scattering supplies over the shoreline. Frank's machine turned up on one side, and then slammed back down again. Their extra weight had kept them from flipping over.

She coasted to the hill, and made her way up more carefully. When she got to the top, she glanced back, seeing the two bodies still lying in the snow. Frank laughed, and headed inland. She'd have to see if she could find faster transportation. Until then, the snowmobile would allow her to go places where cars could not. She'd stick to the main roads now, since the chase was on. She didn't want anything to slow them down —now that she knew the daughters were tracking them.

CHAPTER IX

Anna, Jill, and Ingrid were bruised, tired, exhausted, but otherwise unhurt. The padded parkas they were wearing had saved them from much harm, physically. But the emotions were harder to deal with. They had been so close to getting their mother back. So close. They'd even seen her! But now they were far behind again, and in fairly rough shape. They'd need some time to heal their wounds before they got back to the chase. Time was precious, but if they were in no shape to do anything when and if they caught up with the kidnappers, they might all be captured . . . or killed.

This was life. This was real.

"Ingrid?" Jill said, looking up. "Ingrid, you know, we appreciate all you've done, but—"

"But you don't want me along as extra baggage," she said. "I know. You two are better off without me. And two can move faster than three. I get it. I'm a big girl, I can take it. I'm sick of this chase anyway. I just hope you get your mom back."

“Ok,” interrupted Anna,” and speaking of that, tell us everything you know about this, and how you found us in the first place.”

“Well, I don’t know much. All I can tell you is that I didn’t like this operation from the start. Some Swedish scientist convinced two assistants to help her capture your mom, and use her research to help solve the world’s problems. With so much wiped out from the glaciers and from disease, she says that whoever controls health, whoever has solutions to the world’s problems, will gain ultimate power. She sounds a little psychotic, bent on taking over the world or something.”

“And you? How did you come to be wrapped up in all this?”

“The other two—Francesca and Georgina? They’re my sisters.”

Frank and George were wasting no time. They took advantage of the lead they had, stocked up on supplies, and then quickly headed out into the cold again. The icy wind lapped at them, but they were well-stocked, well-padded, and prepared for almost anything. Almost.

They’d stopped for only a short time to find shelter from the cold. They couldn’t stay in the city and feel safe, so they opted for

the nearby woods. They could camp out in the middle of the woods without fear of being found. Or so they thought.

Just an hour or so of rest, and then they'd head out cross country again, zigzagging their way across the country. They settled down, supplies piled around them to block out the wind.

"Don't you think you should—" began Mrs. Kennedy—but she never got to finish her statement.

"Nighty-night," said George, who had snuck behind and clamped a chloroformed cloth over Mrs. Kennedy's nose and mouth. With her knocked out, they were free to snooze themselves.

It was the snarling, not the snoring, that woke them up a few short hours later. A pack of wild dogs, scavengers really, had found their way to them. Somehow, they'd caught their scent, or the scent of the food in their packs. And they looked hungry. Very hungry. Their eyes glistened with hate for the lives they led, lives filled with endless searching for food.

"What do we do, Frank?" George whispered. "There are so many of them. There must be fifteen or twenty dogs out there, ready to attack."

"Eighteen, actually." Mrs. Kennedy's head hurt, and her vision was a bit blurred, but she could still make out the shapes of the ravenous creatures as they came closer and closer. She leaned

over to Frank. “Now listen. I can tell you how we make it out of here, but you have to do exactly as I say. . .”

Anna and Jill were on their own. Jill was upset.

“That was stupid of me to let Ingrid go now. She could’ve helped us.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Anna replied. “I’m afraid she’s not much help—just like these two snowmobiles.”

“Neither will start?” Jill asked.

“Nope. Bent, broken, and in no shape to carry anyone anywhere, I’m afraid. But we can use these at least.” Anna held up the front skis that had been snapped off her snowmobile. Before long, both girls had the skis of the snowmobile securely fastened to their feet.

“A bit clumsy and heavy,” Jill complained.

“Yes, but watch.” Anna picked up two of the branches they had gathered, stuck them into the ground, and pushed. It was a struggle to get going at first, and to maintain control, but once they got the hang of it, the two girls made good progress, cross-country skiing toward the city, where they could find new gear. With so many shops deserted and people heading farther south, there should

be plenty of supplies to find there.

By the time they left Seattle, the signal was weak—even though they had new batteries. Frank and George were at least four or five hours ahead of them, even if they weren't moving at the moment. . .

“What do you think, George, do I trust her?”

“ Do you have a better plan?”

“No.”

“Then you trust her. She doesn't want to become dog food either, you know.”

“ I know. But it's risky. And it will cost us half our supplies, and maybe our transport.”

“We don't really have much of a choice now, do we?”

“ I guess not.” Frank reached over slowly to the ignition on the snowmobile, and slid the key in. The dogs snarled, and came even closer. In one quick movement, Frank jumped on the snowmobile and started it up. Two dogs rushed straight for her. Mrs. Kennedy and George made use of the distraction to run the other way.

Frank headed straight for the two dogs, then jumped sideways off the snowmobile. It continued in a straight line, right through the pack of dogs. Then she heard it smack into a tree. Some dogs were scared, and ran off. Others were more curious, and went for the food that was strapped to the snowmobile.

Amazingly, none of the others followed the girls. They had what they wanted, and while they were feasting, the girls searched for cover. They'd have to camp out somewhere, until they figured out alternate transport.

"Ever seen an igloo before? Or an ice cave?" Mrs. Kennedy asked. "We need to keep the cold out and insulate ourselves to keep warm. Now we'll find a spot and do it quickly—"

And just like that, Mrs. Kennedy took over the leadership of the group. She took the leadership right from her kidnappers. They were following her orders like scared school kids, who felt they better do as they were told, or they might just freeze to death.

Crashing the snowmobile was my best plan yet, Mrs. Kennedy thought to herself. It'll give the girls a chance to catch up again. And it should take us awhile to build this snow fort. I hope they're not far away.

CHAPTER X

The girls were tired and physically exhausted by the time they made it into the city. Their feet and legs were sore from their makeshift skis, and all they wanted was to soak in a hot bath, and then sleep the night away. They knew they didn't have that luxury.

The most important thing would be to find transportation. And they'd pick up some skis too—real ones, just in case. They needed to be a lot better prepared for Mother Nature if they were going to get their mom away from the kidnappers. Their strength wouldn't hold out on snowmobiles or skis or anything like that—they needed to find a vehicle—one that still hadn't been drained of all its gas.

They found it—at the local fire department.

They siphoned all the gas they could and loaded up the truck. They packed it full of food and supplies, and at last were ready to set off. They'd find their mom soon—they had to. It was a long, long way to Sweden, after all. They had time.

The blizzard came out of nowhere. Just after they'd smoothed the last block of snow into place, the winds picked up, and snow blasted around the ice cave of the three women.

"We have to huddle together," Mrs. Kennedy said. "We need to share body heat, and wait this out. Walking out there is suicide."

"I'm so tired," Frank said. She yawned, and rested her head on George's shoulder.

"You can't," Mrs. Kennedy said sternly.

"Can't what?" Frank snapped back. "I can do anything I want to. You just remember who's the prisoner here, ok?"

"You can't go to sleep. If we all fall asleep, we might sleep for a long, long time, if you know what I mean. And we have to make sure the cave isn't snowed under either. We have to be able to get out of here once the storm clears."

"Who died and made you boss?"

"It's just that you and I both know—I'm a scientist, and I've studied survival among other things. You know that I'm valuable to you. Chloroform me again, and you'll die out here—one bad decision, and it's game over. And you know that it's true!"

“Just shut your mouth and keep quiet. This storm won’t last long.”

Two hours later, the winds were still howling, and the women were starting to get stir crazy. Two hours later, Anna and Jill were making their way down the logging roads, snow chains on the tires of the fire truck. The light on the locator was growing brighter and brighter. . .

“We need to get supplies,” Jill said. “We don’t know how long we’ll be here.”

“You mean you want to go back to the snowmobile? The dogs will have eaten everything up.”

“Yeah, but there might be some supplies left, and you never know—the snowmobile may work. Eventually, we have to get out of here. How long do you think it’ll be before the girls track us here?”

“In this blizzard? No one’s going to risk driving in the mountains in a blizzard.”

They couldn’t have been more wrong. Less than an hour away, the girls were slowly negotiating curves and pullouts on the side of the mountain.

“This is crazy, Anna! We have to stop. We can’t see anything—you’re going to drive us right over the cliff!”

“Be quiet and keep your eyes open! THEY are not moving in this blizzard; that’s why WE have to—it’s our only chance to catch up!”

“I guess you’re right . . . but go slow, ok? It won’t help mom if we go tumbling over the edge.”

“We’ve been here too long, Frank They’re going to find us. We need to go get some supplies. We need to check out the snowmobile.”

“We? I’m just starting to warm up—I’m not going out there now. If you do it, you do it alone.”

“It’s suicide,” Mrs. Kennedy piped in. “If you go out into that sheet of white, you won’t come back.”

“It’s no good just sitting here. I have to try,” George said. With that, she bundled up, slid out of the shelter, and headed for the trees. They weren’t that far away. Mrs. Kennedy was just trying to scare her.

She was right about that, Mrs. Kennedy thought. And with one kidnapper gone, it was now one on one. Maybe she’d have a

chance to escape. But to where? And how?

Surprisingly, it didn't take George long to find the snowmobile. It was completely trashed, but she gathered up what she could, then tore the seat off the snowmobile, and tied a rope around it. She used it as a sled to pull the supplies back to their cave. There were still some packs of food the dogs hadn't gotten into. At least with full bellies, they'd be able to think more clearly, make a better plan for getting out of here. The last item George packed in the torn up sack was a pair of binoculars. When the snow cleared, they'd be able to pick out the best path.

The girls were almost directly above the ice cave now, a few hundred feet up the mountain. They looked down, searching the slope with binoculars. The winds had slowed, and it wasn't snowing anymore. All they saw was a sheet of white, but far below, near the lake, what was that? Float planes? Wherever the kidnappers were now, they would be sure to make for those float planes as the sky cleared more and more. They had to be here. The signal said they were. But where? In the forest? It didn't seem to be coming from that direction. Where were they?

Just as the snow cleared, George stepped out of the snow

cave, binoculars in hand. “Frank, come see this! You’re not going to believe this!” She was looking downhill, towards the lake.

“Float planes—lined up along the shore of that mountain lake! We’ve got it made. All we need to do is get down there!”

“That’s a long walk, George,” Frank said.

“But it’s a short ride,” George replied, nodding at the snowmobile seat.

“You’re not serious, are you?”

“Very.”

“Ok, but we all better be strapped in well. This promises to be a wild ride.”

CHAPTER XI

It was the break they'd been looking for. Jill and Anna spotted the two women far down the mountainside, looking at the float planes. But where was their mother? Probably knocked out somewhere. They couldn't afford to kill her, the girls knew. They needed to know how close she'd come to solving the aging problem.

Jill and Anna strapped on their skis, and grabbed a few tree branches. Maybe they could take them by surprise.

For some reason, George turned around and started to scan the mountain itself. The fire truck was easy to spot.

"They're here! We've got to get going."

Both Frank and George grabbed Mrs. Kennedy, threw her onto the flattened snowmobile seat, and pushed off. They started coursing down the hill, the extra weight helping them pick up speed, as gravity helped them go faster and faster.

Jill and Anna set off at almost the same time. They zigged and zagged, controlling their speed. A fall would be the worst thing

right now. They didn't need a fall.

The skis cut through the snow, and the girls gained speed quickly. They were catching up to the sled, and they were nearing the lake.

Frank and George tossed the packs off the back of the sled at the same time. The girls tried to avoid them, but both went tumbling over them, their skis snapping off, their bodies flying through the air. They landed close together and skidded farther down the hill. When Jill gathered the strength to lift her head to look for Anna, she saw her about fifty feet away, lying motionless in the snow. Face down. She had to hurry.

The kidnappers made quick work of checking for a gasped up plane, starting it up and soaring off. This was close, too close. But they'd make good time now. Even with stops for gas, it wouldn't be long before they reached the east coast. Much faster than going by land, anyway.

Jill knelt in the snow, afraid to move the body. Afraid not to. She held Anna's shoulders firmly, and then flipped her to her back. Anna's mouth was jammed full of snow. Jill dug it out, then took a deep breath and started filling Anna's lungs with air.

It worked. Before long, Anna sputtered, coughed, and threw

up all over the snow. Beaten, breathless, but alive. Jill checked for broken bones—nothing. She pulled Anna to the float plane and hoisted her up into it. Anna had always bailed Jill out before. It was Jill's chance to return the favor. She took out the locator, set it in front of her, and grabbed the flight manual. It took her a short time to figure out the controls, but soon, they were hot on the trail again. Now if only this weather would hold out. . .

CHAPTER XII

The trip to the coast was mostly uneventful, but the girls were far behind. Jill had trouble maintaining control, and figuring out how to land the plane—and where—when they needed gas.

But Anna was feeling better now, and she had her flight ticket. She'd only just done her first solo flight, but she was much more confident than Jill, and with her at the controls, they'd made up some time.

The locator was dead now. They didn't know whether it was the impact of the fall, or if it just needed batteries again, but they would find out when they got to New York. For now, they just had to plan their stops carefully, and make sure they didn't run out of gas.

They could see the enormity of the advancing glaciers. Whatever had caused them to grow so large so fast was unknown, but where they had dipped down into the U.S, their effects could be easily seen.

“George! Look over there—those homes have been snapped up and carried off by the glacier. It’s just shaving off the land—anything unlucky enough to be in its path is just popped off the land like a pimple!”

“Much safer to be up here, is that what you’re saying?”

“Well, they’re fairly slow, but the size of them—and the strength! I wonder how long this will last? Are we in another ice age? Will this be THE BIG ONE that finishes us all off?”

“Hey, don’t go there, Frank. We’re up for a vacation when we get this chick to Sweden.”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Don’t worry, I’m not flipping out or anything. But it makes you think, you know?”

“I know. But for now, let’s just get this woman to Sweden. Dr. Spiley awaits.”

“Speaking of which,” Anna added, “how do we get her to Sweden? Neither you or I can fly anything larger than this float plane, and it certainly doesn’t hold enough gas to make the trip. Any suggestions?”

“I think we have to deal with that when we land at the coast. But keep thinking of options. I’m sure you’ll come up with something.”

The pain Mrs. Kennedy was feeling was strange. She'd been through a lot lately, and she had bumps and bruises to show for it, but this pain was different—it was almost like arthritis. Her joints were stiffened up and some had quite a bit of pressure bearing down on them. Fatigue had also set in, and she wondered why all this was happening all at once.

Was it the virus? But so far, only women over the age of 50 had been hit by it. Was the virus mutating? Was there a stronger strain of it? This was not what she needed. On top of all of her other problems right now, she did not need this worry.

“Hurry up,” Frank told her. “It’s time to take off across the Atlantic. We have no time to waste, and this is going to be a long, long trip.”

The girls had no idea how they would make it to Sweden. The glaciers had come far southward, true, and there was probably an ice shelf between here and there that they could traverse, but how?

Snowmobiles would constantly need gas—more gas than they could carry. There was no fresh water out on the ocean, so THAT was what they'd have to take huge supplies of—that and

batteries. They'd found Battery World in the phone book, and had loaded up. If they lost the signal, it would be almost impossible to locate them in time.

"I know what to do!" Jill said.

Her comment surprised Anna, who was usually the ideas woman. "What are we going to do?"

"We'll build a catamaran—well, we don't have to build one, just borrow one, and make a few modifications. With skate blades on the bottom, and a strong sail, we can use wind power. We won't have to carry gas, and we can easily push it when there is no wind—but out in the open there usually is. What do you think?"

"I think we'd better load up on skate blades. Great idea, Sis. Even if it takes us a day to do a good job, we'll be back on their tail in no time. It's a LONG way to Sweden, so there should be plenty of chances for us to catch up!"

Mrs. Kennedy was really feeling it set in now. She was weak, very weak, but her mind was still strong. She was searching for something, anything that might save her. . . Plantain!

"We need to land!"

"What are you talking about?"

“We need to land. Look, we’ve been hugging the North American coastline for days now. I know what the problem is. I know what can make me feel better.”

“So why should we care?”

“You need me alive, remember? Dead, I’m no use to you. And if this is the virus and it’s attacking younger women now, I could infect you if I can’t stop it.”

“Okay, okay, we get it,” Frank said. “But why do we need to land?”

“To get some plantain. I don’t really care if we have to chip six feet through solid ice to get to it, we need some plantain.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a wonder herb. In the past, it’s been used for inflammation of the skin, malignant ulcers, fever—many, many illnesses. If you make a poultice out of it and wrap it over your wounds, it heals them. I only thought of it because it’s very common and found worldwide. We should be able to dig some up and give it a try. It could hold the key to one of our biggest problems right now—premature aging! I’m so stupid! I should have thought of it before. . .”

Mrs. Kennedy kept talking, more to herself than anyone else

in particular. The others thought she had gone crazy, but they decided to stop along shore anyway. They were sick of the open waterway that had become an open iceway , and their craft likely needed a break too. They could check it for damage while Mrs. Kennedy dug for her wonder drug.

CHAPTER XIII

It was just the break the two girls needed. They were gaining on the signal. Something had stopped the craft ahead of them. They hoped their mom was okay. But for whatever reason, they were gaining quickly on the signal. If they had a few hours more and a good strong wind behind them, they might just catch up! Their catamaran had already been flying across the ice, faster than the other craft, but now, they were really gaining. If all went well, they should have their mom back by the end of the day.

Frank and George had completed repairs just as Mrs. Kennedy struck frozen ground. She was right to search near what was once a marshy shore. There would have been plenty of water here, and the plantain would grow long stalks, unchecked by man. The glacier had bent the stalks over, and the ground was frozen, but Mrs. Kennedy quickly filled her knapsack and raced to the others.

“Ok, take me to Sweden. I’m ready to go! I need to get to a lab!”

The two kidnappers exchanged confused looks, but then packed up and pushed off, just as Jill and Anna spotted them.

Jill and Anna had the wind behind them, and they skimmed across the frozen surface like butter on a hot fry pan.

“Ok, Sis,” Jill screamed above the roar of the wind, “we’re going to catch them. But what do we do?”

“Aim for the center of their craft. Let’s split it in two! Even if we destroy both, they won’t get away from us this time!”

Jill steered straight for them

“We’re going to be hit,” yelled Frank. “What now?”

“Remember the snowmobiles?” George said.

“Yeah, why?”

“One pack each. Same side.”

The girls craft raced closer and closer. They could see the other three bodies clearly now. This was it! They braced themselves for a hit!

Just at that moment, Frank and George each hurled a package in front of the left pontoon of the girls’ racer. The pontoon smacked into the packages, sending the left side of their craft vertical—straight up into the air.

It narrowly missed Frank, George, and Mrs. Kennedy, then instead of settling back down, it flipped on its back, sending both girls and all their supplies skipping across the frozen surface. Frank and George aimed their craft for the narrowest passage between where they were and where they wanted to be.

“Go back!” screamed Mrs. Kennedy. “You have to go back to see if they’re okay. I’ll go with you to Sweden, but for the love of everything that’s decent, go back!”

Frank and George ignored her pleading and begging, and continued coasting across the Atlantic. They were already more than halfway there. There was no going back.

Jill and Anna were exhausted—physically, mentally, and emotionally. They knew now that by the time they got going again, they couldn’t possibly catch the others. They’d have to prepare for an ultimate showdown in Sweden.

Time passed. Depression set in.

“I can barely remember what mom looks like, you know?”

“Calm down, Jill. We’re nearly there. Now you know the plans, right? Plan A if we get to her undetected, plan B if we get

"I know, I know," Jill said. "We've only gone over it a million times."

As the girls coasted their way across the North Sea, and landed on the southwest corner of Sweden, it was obvious they'd need plan B. No fewer than twenty armed female soldiers were there to greet them.

Jill wrapped a white sweater around a ski pole and waved it back and forth.

"We surrender," the two girls said together.

CHAPTER XIV

“You’ll find your mother is a very cooperative prisoner, girls,” the guard said, escorting them down to the lab. “She too is interested in solving the problems. Especially since she is aging herself.”

“You lie! Mom’s nowhere near 50—”

But it was true. As the girls entered the lab, the face that turned to greet them was not their mother’s, but that of a much older woman.

Their mother only had a moment to whisper to them. “Girls,” she said, “pretend you know everything.”

“Stop that!” the guard said. “No whispering. If you talk, you talk so all can hear. If not, we shoot one of the young ones.”

“We get it, meathead,” Mrs. Kennedy said.

The girls smiled at each other. Same old mom. Some things had changed about her, but not her strong will.

“You know the formulas we were working on before?” Mrs. Kennedy asked.

“Yes,” the two girls quickly answered. “What about them?”

“Well, they needed some plantain, but there’s something else they need as well. And it’s a volatile liquid, so it has to be handled carefully. Can you get it for me, measure out the quantities I need, and bring it here? I’ve listed the chemical properties and formulae for you.”

“We’ll get it.” Anna snatched the paper from her mother and looked it over. It was a bunch of gobbledygook. Of course, the guards didn’t know that. It did mention a chemical their mother needed, but it was an ordinary drug used to treat psychotic patients—nothing volatile about it. As for the other formulas on the paper, it must be some kind of code. The letters e, c, I, l, p, and s were repeated in several places, all over the paper, along with other numbers and letters—ECLIPSE! Their family password! Now if she could just eliminate those letters and figure out the message . . .

“Come on then,” the guard said. “We have a huge pharmaceutical storehouse here. You should be able to find what you need quickly.” Anna walked away with the guard, leaving the other two in the lab.

“And as for you, Jill, I need your help,” Mrs. Kennedy said,

showing the guards the importance of keeping both girls there and healthy.

Anna quickly decoded the message. She read it again and again just to make sure it said what it said. Mom and whoever captured her were dying. She needed the drugs for the other woman.

“I’ve done it!” Mrs. Kennedy shouted, soon after Anna had brought her the medicine. “Take me to your boss. I have the cure.”

“Don’t trick us,” the guard said. “You take some first.”

Mrs. Kennedy had a few nicks and cuts on her hands still, so she put some of the crushed plantain mixture on a piece of gauze and wrapped it around her hand. The guards waited and watched. Not long after, she removed the bandage, and the cuts were visibly better.

“But Mom, that’s just plant—” Jill began, but her mother’s icy glare cut her off in mid-sentence. “You’re brilliant, mom! I never would have thought of that!”

“Watch these two girls while I bring their mother to Big Mama.”

Mrs. Kennedy carried the bottle of medicine with her. She had not altered it at all. The show she put on for the guards was simply the work of the plantain healing a cut. She had no clue about what was necessary to solve the problem. But somewhere deep inside her troubled mind, Big Mama did. The same Big Mama Mrs. Kennedy used to work with. The Big Mama who had now gone insane.

Mrs. Kennedy administered the drugs to Big Mama over the next three days, and her thinking was much clearer now. “Jennifer?” she asked. “Jennifer Kennedy?”

“Well, that’s a good sign,” she said. At least you recognize your old pal now.

“But, whatever are you doing here?”

“No time for explanations, Karen. I need your brain. Just how clearly are you thinking?”

The two women were inside the room for most of the day. Mrs. Kennedy said that she was monitoring the health of Big Mama, but the two of them were whispering away, trying to solve the aging

problem together. Big Mama/ Karen was feeling the effects far worse than Mrs. Kennedy. The time was urgent, but at last they thought they had it. They'd found the cure for the aging. They'd needed the plantain after all, but something else they hadn't thought of before. It, combined with the plantain, should heal both women, once and for all.

"Get me to the laboratory," Mrs. Kennedy said. "I need time to whip up a batch of our miracle cure. We need more, much more!"

Mrs. Kennedy truly needed the girls help now, to get this medicine ready soon. The three women worked hard together, and even used the extra hands of some of the guards when needed. Everyone pitched in, until finally, Mrs. Kennedy collapsed in a heap.

"She's had a stroke. We need to give her some—NOW!" Anna screamed. Jill pried open Mrs. Kennedy's lips, and Anna poured. At first, they didn't notice any change. But then, her fingers fluttered, her eyes blinked, and she stared straight at them. The gray seemed to slide right out of her hair, and her gnarled hands and fingers returned to their usual smoothness.

The aging problem had been solved, but not in time for Big Mama. Mrs. Kennedy's one-time friend, stricken by both a

psychosis and by the virus, had too much organ damage from the disease. She had died while the three women were preparing the miracle cure.

Two problems remained—reproduction, the future of the race without men, and finding a way to kill the virus, not just stop the aging. Her cure may work for awhile, Mrs. Kennedy knew. But there would eventually be more resistant strains of the virus if she didn't clean the world of it now.

And what was worse—she didn't know what these guards would do to her, now that Karen had died.

“DID YOU KILL BIG MAMA?”

Those were the final words Mrs. Kennedy heard, before the butt of the rifle met with her temple, knocking her unconscious. . .

ICE STORMS II: THE MIRACLE CURE?

Prologue

The gray seemed to slide right out of her hair, and her gnarled hands and fingers returned to their usual smoothness.

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Ice Storms II

CHAPTER I

The girls looked at each other hopelessly. Big Mama's body was rapidly decomposing. A disturbing sight for all who were in the room, it was grossly disfigured—discolored skin, slowly flaking off, fingers and joints twisting her into a mockery of a human being. Jill and Anna had read about the effects of the aging virus, but they'd never witnessed it first hand.

Jill was the first to speak. She whispered to her sister while the guards stared at the lifeless body. "I'm scared, Anna. I'm kind of sorry for her and all, but what about us? What about Mom?"

"You saw Mom, just like I did. The serum worked for her. She'll be alright."

"ENOUGH WHISPERING! Do something!" The guards were coming closer.

"Stand back!" Anna said. "I think she's far beyond saving, and we don't know how contagious this is. Do you want to end up looking like her? Give us some room to examine her!"

The guards backed off.

That Anna, Jill thought. A chip off the old block—she's just like Mom. Won't take anything from anyone.

Anna looked up at her sister—"Jill, come closer, I want you to see this." When Jill bent down near the body, Anna whispered, "We have to find a way to use this to our advantage."

"Did you see this?" Jill said loudly, pointing to an ordinary boil on Big Mama's neck.

"No, why?" Anna replied.

"It appears to be the beginnings of a malignant tumor. It could be why the disease attacked Big Mama so quickly. Say...do any of you have anything like this growing on you?"

The guards lost their cool. One felt a mole at the back of her head. "I've always had this," she said, "but now that you mention it, I think it feels bigger! Am I in trouble? Come here and take a look at me!"

"Yes, yes, hmmmmm..." Jill said, turning to Anna. "What do you think?"

"Well," said Anna, "it's a bit smaller for sure, but it's the same type I think, and it appears to be a bit raised."

“Is it that bad?” the guard yelled. “Am I dying? Help me!”

“Well, of course it’s still a bit too early to tell,” Jill replied.

“Maybe we should wait and see.”

“WAIT AND SEE? ARE YOU CRAZY? TREAT ME NOW!”

“Well, of course, we’d help you if we could,” said Anna, picking up on her sister’s lead. “But between our mom and Big Mama, we’ve used nearly all the solution we made.”

“So make some more!”

“That would work, of course, but we’re not sure exactly how Mom tweaked the solution to make it work for her. She did something right before she collapsed, and, and—I never saw it. Did you, sis?”

“Nope. Missed that part. Mom was in such terrible shape that I got distracted. By the way, is she okay? Maybe she still remembers. I hope that bump on the head hasn’t done her too much damage...”

The guards exchange worried looks. The one with the mole on her neck reached up and rubbed it again, then looked at her fingers like they too had been infected. Fear spread across her face...

CHAPTER II

Jennifer awoke and rubbed the welt on the side of her head. It felt like daggers in her skull, and she almost lost consciousness, when she heard a familiar voice...

“Mom. Mom. You need to wake up. We need your help.”

The guards were standing right behind the two girls, watching their every move.

“Can you tell us the exact concentrations you used for your serum? We missed something you did at the end, and whatever you did obviously worked.” Anna winked at her mom to show her she needed to play along.

“Well, I don’t remember exactly.” Jennifer rubbed the bump on her head long and hard for effect. You see, I’m still not thinking so clearly...what with my head pounding and all. And I’m hungry. I need something in my stomach, I can tell you, or I’m going to get a migraine. And let me tell you, if that happens, I’ll be out for the day—useless.”

“Get her some food!” the guard ordered her nearest comrade.

“Oh, and guard?” Jennifer asked, still rubbing her head.

“Yeah?”

“Bring something for my two assistants too, please. We may be awhile.”

CHAPTER III

After they'd all eaten, Jennifer made her first request. "Now that I seem to be completely healed, I need an infected sample to test our solutions on. Girls, we need to act quickly. There may still be some live virus inside Big Mama's body. Remember, viruses need living cells to inhabit, so we'll have to act quickly. Go get me some tissue samples from inside her body, but *contain them somehow*, okay? I'm not sure how powerful the pure virus is."

The girls both nodded, and Anna worked hard to suppress a smile. She knew what Mom wanted them to do.

The girls were escorted to the door of Big Mama's bedroom, but the guards would go no further. Jill and Anna slipped into the room and approached Big Mama's bed. What they saw shocked them. Big Mama's skin was back to a fairly healthy flesh color, her hands weren't gnarled at all—she appeared to be almost peaceful, like she died in her sleep.

"Don't let the guards see this," Anna whispered. "They have

to think she's still infected." Jill and Anna stepped up to Big Mama. "Now hold your breath and hold her mouth open," Anna said, loud enough for the guards to hear, "while I swab inside her cheek." The girls made a show of it, but the cotton swabs they dropped into the beaker were still completely clean.

"She's so far gone," Jill said. "I can't stand the sight, I'm afraid." She pulled the covers over the dead body, obscuring the view of the guards. "Now we just have to be extremely careful with this glass container. No telling what will happen if this virus were to escape."

"It'd likely seek out a live host immediately," Anna replied.

"What—what do you mean?" the guard asked.

"I mean it'd jump into the nearest live body it could find to survive, now that it's outside of her warm, moist, cozy mouth."

The guard backed off a bit more, and Jill and Anna made their way back to the lab.

CHAPTER IV

Inside the lab, Jennifer had been working her own magic spell on all within earshot. “Yes,” she continued, “this virus is likely the deadliest I’ve ever seen. And with the speed that it attacked Big Mama, I’d say it’s getting stronger and stronger. Why, it might even be able to live outside the body. I hope my two girls are being careful getting that sample.”

By the time Jill and Anna returned, all of the people present in the room had been worked up to a frenzy.

“Hurry,” Jennifer said. “We don’t know how much time we have. The virus may be mutating—infecting at a faster rate.”

Jill ran forward with the container, and Anna came up quickly behind, sticking her foot neatly between her sister’s legs on purpose. Jill tripped and headed for the ground, sending the jar flying through the air as she did so.

“No-o-o-o!” Jennifer screamed, as the glass container hit the floor and exploded into a thousand pieces. “We’ll all die now!” She

grabbed the neck of her shirt and pulled it up over her mouth and nose, like she was protecting herself.

The ruse worked. The guards scattered, running out the doorways in all directions, clutching clothing to their faces. The three women in the room grabbed a few supplies and headed for another room. They'd have to move fast, pack fast, and find transportation.

"But what about me?" the guard asked. "What if I'm already infected?"

"Well, you go get them then," the other replied. "I'm not going in there again, that's for sure."

"But what if I'm not infected and I get infected by going in there?"

While the guards were busy figuring out what to do, Jill, Anna, and Jennifer were assembling their packs, adding on some layers of clothing, and grabbing anything they thought would be of value to them.

"What's the plan, Mom?"

Jennifer did her best to look confident in front of her girls. "Well, we grab a plane out of here, and head somewhere nearby

where there's a lab capable of producing the serum. On the way, I'll write out specific instructions—a recipe for anyone to follow. We'll spread the news as fast as possible. It's not like the ingredients are that hard to find, and there are no magic potions—anyone can brew a batch of this if they know how.”

The girls relaxed a touch. “But how do we get out of here?”

Jennifer's answer clearly surprised them both: “We walk out the front door.”

CHAPTER V

The guards had made up their minds. Quarantine the one guard who thought she'd been infected, and watch her closely. Surround the building and wait. If the scientists came out, they were healthy, and could be taken care of quickly. If they stayed inside for a long time—well, let's just say no one would go back inside. Safer that way.

They never expected to see the three women calmly strolling their way down the path. Each woman was clearly packed up and ready for escape. How could they be so confident?

As the women came nearer, the guards soon understood. They were each holding jars filled with cotton swabs, and they each had a hand on the lid of their container. Their faces were covered with tie-on masks, like the ones doctors wear when they're operating.

"We have a few demands, or we'll scatter this virus like a wildfire!" Jennifer screamed. "We've determined that it will last at

least 48 hours outside the body, so unless you want us to infect you and yours with it, you'll listen to our demands.”

“They’re bluffing,” one guard whispered.

“Do you really want to chance it?” the other replied. “Ok, science freaks. You win. What do you want?”

“We want all the planes that you currently have on site brought out front here, and lined up neatly.”

“All of them? That must be twelve or thirteen planes we have here. You’ve only got three people. What are you going to do—torch the planes?”

“No, we won’t torch them, but we do want you to bring them to us.”

The guards didn’t see the harm. Even if the women chose three of the fastest planes, they’d still have plenty of speed left in the others to hunt them down with. They’d play along...for now.

When the planes were neatly lined up, the women went into each one, one by one, checking for supplies and equipment. By the time they loaded everything into the plane they wanted, they had quite a collection: GPS trackers, medical kits, maps of various areas and countries, emergency packs with dehydrated food pouches—they were set.

Just before Jill climbed into the plane, she shouted to the guards: “We’ve put several infected swabs in each plane that we went into. The virus stays live for 48 hours. If you feel like chancing it and following us, I hope you know that we haven’t had time to make up a new batch of serum. Death could come quickly. But ultimately, you decide. See you, ladies.”

Anna turned to her mom, who was starting takeoff procedure. “How long do you think it’ll take them to come after us?”

“Not sure, dear. They are fairly dumb. Maybe they’ll even wait 48 hours...that is, if they can count to 48. Then again, we might just see them pulling up beside us at any minute. One thing’s for certain—the faster we go, the more of a lead we’ll have.”

CHAPTER VI

“So where are we going?” Anna asked, once they were airborne.

“I have only a few ideas,” Jennifer answered. “The only active labs big enough to produce the serum with the materials we need are in Russia, I think.”

“Russia? That reminds me of something!” Anna pulled out her duotang of newspaper clippings from her backpack. “I’ve been reading about the meteorite crashes—the ones that brought on this weird weather. Let me find the article—ah, here it is--*Blast of ancient space explosion now hitting Earth*, by Tom Spears. Did you know him?”

“I knew of him and his work. What does the article say?”

“Hundreds of millions of years ago, a star exploded so far from our galaxy that the energy of the blast only just reached Earth last month. Then another blew, and another—all far from each other, yet all visible on Earth within a few weeks. Each blast of this

X-ray energy is just the second ripple of an explosion that could be visible to telescopes in the coming days or weeks... The first occurred in 1908...

“Burned out stars collapse inward on themselves, sometimes into a ball of neutrons and nothing else, becoming matter so dense that a huge star gets squashed down to only a mile wide, like an asteroid. The real danger to Earth is that the next set of explosions may be a little too close for comfort....”

“If he only knew then what we knew now—meteor after meteor slamming into the earth, creating our gray snow, our weird weather...” Anna’s words trailed off as her thoughts drifted to other matters. Finally, after a long pause, she said, “I wish Dad were with us now.”

“I know, dear, I know. I miss him too.”

“Why do all the males have to die? I mean first our baby brother when he was only two, and now Dad.”

“Life’s just like that sometimes. Sometimes bad things have to happen for good things to happen later on. We don’t control everything, you know.” Jennifer fought back the tears. She needed to stay strong right now. She needed to think clearly.

“I know, I know. It’s just a bit much to take.”

Jill, who had been silent the whole time, piped up: “Do you think, you know, that whatever is aging the women and killing the men came in on the meteors?”

“Actually,” Jennifer replied, “I have no doubt about it. But why would the men die almost immediately, while the women just age and then die? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Unless they’re two separate diseases,” Anna added.

“Unless they’re two separate diseases,” Jennifer repeated. “It makes sense. Why was I so focused on them being the same? It makes sense that these meteors could be bringing all kinds of problems to Earth, or at least disturbing our own atmosphere enough to create a huge variety of problems. I think you’re right, Anna. And I think I know where we’re going now, too.”

“Where’s that?” Jill asked.

“We’re off to Russia—for sure.”

“Of course,” Anna said. “Are you talking about TK? 1908?”

“Yes,” Jennifer said. “Site of the Tunguska Meteorite. The first place where part of this explosion happened...way back in 1908. I think your article made mention of it.”

“1908? Are you kidding me? What could that have to do with anything?” Jill rolled her eyes, raising them to heaven.

“You always go back to the beginning, girls. You always go back to the beginning. Russian scientists have studied that meteorite crash for over 100 years now. They’ve documented so much about it that we may find a key there that will help us unlock this mystery. And as for labs? One of the best left is in Tomsk.”

“Tomsk?” Anna asked.

“Tomsk, Siberia. The oldest town in Siberia. It’s been called the “Siberian Athens”—it has six universities there, and the researchers they’ve got working in that town are the best in the world. I should’ve thought of it earlier. Besides, there’s someone there I met at a conference a few times—Dr. Danuta Yevshenko. She’s an epidemiologist at their Center for Disease Control. If anyone can give us a clue about this disaster, it’s her.”

“Yevshenko?” Anna asked. “That name sounds familiar. I know I’ve got another clipping somewhere....” And she was off, thumbing through her news articles again, searching for something, anything that could help them.

Jill just sat there, at a loss for what to do. Mom was piloting the plane. Anna was doing her research, as always. What was she supposed to do? How could she help? She tried to sort of look over Anna’s shoulder without really making it look like she was. And then, a tiny clipping in the corner of one of the pages got her thinking. “I think I know why the men died so quickly,” she blurted

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out.

CHAPTER VII

Their aircraft was just over the Gulf of Bothnia now, and they were in Finland air space. They'd have to plan their trip carefully from this point on if they were to reach Siberia unscathed. Jennifer's biggest worry was supplies between here and there. Where were the cities they could touch down in to get supplies? The picture she had in her head was a bleak one. Mother and daughters run out of supplies, failing to reach Siberia. They die, and the world dies because of their stupidity. It was a picture she didn't want to paint.

Keep busy, Jennifer. Think. Don't let emotions get the better of you.

"Anna, can you put that book down, and pull out some maps? See if there's any kind of world map there that you can look at. Map out a route for us so we can replenish our supplies along the way. And Jill? What do you mean, you know why the men died so quickly?" Jennifer didn't mean to sound so rash with Jill. She just wished that Jill would be a bit more analytical sometimes and not

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jump to conclusions so quickly.

“Well,” Jill said, timidly, picking up Anna’s book. “I know Anna’s more into space science and whatnot, but my interest is more in health. And there are a few things I’ve been thinking about. Then I saw this headline—*Two killers: what men need to know.*”

“What’s the article about?” Jennifer asked.

“Well, it says here that the two major killers of men currently are lung cancer and prostate cancer. Now lung cancer has been a problem for both genders, but prostate cancer is a male thing. It made me consider the physiological differences between men and women. Whatever is killing the men has to be taking advantage of some physical difference they have.”

“I see where you’re going with this,” Jennifer said, encouraging her to continue.

“Well, first of all, there’s a huge difference in ischemic heart disease mortality. Females are protected, mostly because of the effects of female hormones. And men’s tendency to accumulate fat in the upper abdomen doesn’t help them either.”

“Go on.”

“Also, we know that there are structural differences between

men and women in the mitral valve, which separates the left atrium of the heart from the left ventricle. And men's brain cells die faster than women's as they age. And men naturally have weaker immune systems than women. As for prostate cancer, it's most common in men over 40, but the chance of it increases greatly with each new decade of life after that. What if something was taking advantage of these differences, sort of speeding up the rate that these things happen? Exaggerating these differences between men and women even more? I don't think the two diseases are related at all. Whatever's attacking the men is most likely attacking that mitral heart valve. I'll bet when we examine a body, that valve has been attacked somehow."

Jennifer looked over at Jill. Anna looked up from the map and stared at her sister. It was her mom who reacted first:

"You're absolutely right."

It wasn't much, but it was enough for Jill. She knew that somehow, in some way, she'd just earned a greater amount of respect than ever before. She'd reached a new stage. She knew she could contribute more than energy to this project.

Her moment of triumph was interrupted however, as the plane began to shake violently...

CHAPTER VIII

“Turbulence,” Jennifer said. “Just a little turbulence. We’ll be okay.” But she saw what lay ahead. She wasn’t sure that they could make it. But if they touched down now, they might not get off the ground again, and who knows how long this would last? No supplies on the ground would be a slow, torturous death. At least if the oncoming storm took them out, it would be quick.

“A little turbulence? Are you kidding me? Mom, we both fly. We can see what’s coming—how do we help?”

“Just hang on,” Jennifer said, as the plane dipped to one side.

The eyes of the girls were glued to the windows, but Jennifer’s were on the instrument panel. The instruments never lie...the instruments never lie. Don’t go by your own judgment, Jennifer. Trust the dials. Get through the storm. The storms of life-- a past sermon of her Dad’s came rushing to her mind:

The storms of life will not conquer you if you remain

focused on the word. Hebrews 13:5—“He will never leave you or forsake you. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will never leave you or forsake you. . . .” Jennifer had never really understood, but now, at this moment, she knew who the instrument panel was that she had to place her faith in. She hoped it was enough.

The weather was getting rougher. Thunder, lightning, poor visibility. She knew roughly where they were, but finding a city in this soup would be tough. And there were a lot of wide open spaces out here—plenty of chances for something to go wrong.—and then it happened.

Something slammed into the side of the plane, shaking it with a force like none Jennifer had ever experienced. Problem with the electrical system—the gauges were malfunctioning. She’d have to find a way to land. Please God, take us through this storm, she prayed, for the first time in her life. Please help us find a way.

Something told her to go up. She pulled back on the controls and trusted.

“Mom, what are you doing? We should land. We can’t fly through this! We should find a place to land. Are you crazy? We’re going higher, right into the eye of the storm!”

And then just like that, they were above it. They broke through, and the skies were clear above. Jennifer knew that the

storm was still below them—she'd fly until she had to come down, when she knew it was time. For now, they were above the storm, and Anna was frantically paging through a map book, searching for a place.

“St. Petersburg, Mom. It's a major city. We should be able to land in St. Petersburg.” She tried to focus on mapping out their route, but she knew the storm hadn't gone away. Below them, it was still raging on. And the fuel gauge she'd checked just before the instrument panel had gone out showed they would have to land this plane fairly soon. St. Petersburg was just on the left edge of Russia. If they could make it there, they'd be okay.

Ten minutes later, Jennifer said, “It's time.” She pushed the controls slightly forward, and the plane began to dip down. As the turbulence returned, she pushed heavily on the controls, and the plane dove through, like an eagle chasing some prey.

To Jill, it felt like a death plunge. “Are you crazy, Mom? You're going to kill us all!”

Jennifer stayed focused. She ignored the comments, the screams. She plunged the plane lower and lower, and then pulled it out of its dive just as the turbulence eased up. “It's alright she said,” as much to comfort herself as the girls. “Everything's going to be alright.”

Anna directed her to a spot she could land the plane safely.

“Oh no.”

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“It’s the landing gear. The hatch has been fused shut or something. The wheels won’t come down.”

“So we’re going to...”

“That’s right. Get ready—we’re landing without wheels. We’re about to do a huge bellyflop.”

Jennifer eased the plane down to within a few feet of the ground and then pointed the nose slightly up as she touched down.

Smack! The plane scraped against the ground, and they bounced up again, but it definitely at a reduced speed. She tried again. Thunk! S-c-r-a-p-e. They were almost there, but they were running out of room. If she didn’t stop the plane soon, they were about to slam into the hill ahead.

Just at that moment, the tail of the plane broke, and plane turned sharply to the left, skidding in circles, and doing a single flip over to come to a rest upside down. The women were all shaken and gear was everywhere, but with Anna as navigator and Jennifer as pilot, they had landed safely.

CHAPTER IX

The women were exhausted, but they knew they had no time to waste. They had a fair amount of supplies on board, but now, they needed information, and transportation. The tail of the plane had been broken off completely. Jill went immediately into motion. She grabbed a chunk of the metal and pried open the hatch where the landing gear was. She got Anna to help her, and the two of them pulled up the wheels and used the kit inside the plane to disconnect and then reattach them to the tail part of the plane. Then they loaded the shell of the tail with their gear, packed the rest on their backs, and set off.

“How do we know which direction to go? We took quite a jolt there, and we never did see St. Petersburg....” Jill had an answer for that too. She pulled a handbook out of her pack—*Geocaching Around the World*.

“Geocaching?” Jennifer asked. “You want to go hunt for something hidden in a log while we—oh, I get it. That’s brilliant.”

“What?” asked Anna.

“Well, as you know, your sister’s favorite activity is to go trailing off with a group of people in the woods, in search of one object—usually a hollowed out log, something near a trail, where someone’s hidden a “little treasure”—a photo, a medal, something geotrackers can take a picture with to prove they found the spot.”

“And how do they find it?”

“They key in the coordinates into a GPS system and go there the most direct route they can find.”

“Here it is! There is one near St. Petersburg. Someone’s put a laminated postcard of the Peter and Paul Fortress inside a ziplock bag about a ten-mile hike out from city limits.”

“The Peter and Paul Fortress?”

“It’s the oldest building in St. Petersburg. It says here that it was mainly used as a political prison until 1917, and that its most famous residents included Dostoevsky, Gorky, Trotsky, and Lenin’s older brother, Alexander. Best site--the cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul has—has a needle-thin spire and a weather vane on top in the form of an angel and a cross.”

Jennifer snapped to attention. *Saints Peter and Paul? A cathedral? An angel and a cross? It had to be a sign.* “We’re going

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to find that postcard,” she said, “and then we’re going to find that cathedral.”

CHAPTER X

The hike was long and cold, but the light of the GPS system grew brighter and brighter. The group could track their progress and see how close they were getting, and it spurred them on. Once they found this spot, they'd be able to get their bearings and head straight for St. Petersburg.

It wasn't easy. The forest was thick, backcountry territory. It looked as though it hadn't even been walked on before.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Anna asked Jill.

"Trust me," Jill said. I've done this a hundred times. We should be approaching the site any minute now...

And there it was—a bird feeder hung from a thickly coiled rope that had been looped around one of the tree's branches. On the side of the birdhouse, was a framed postcard of the cathedral.

"But it said it was laminated, not framed," Anna persisted.

“I’m sure we’re here,” Jill replied. “Someone probably just replaced the first one with something a little more permanent. It happens all the time. After all, how many cathedral postcards do you think there are out in the woods? And the GPS led us straight here. Now let’s warm up and eat before we make that final ten mile trek.”

Anna and Jennifer had never seen Jill like this before. She usually stepped back to let one of them take control, but on this task she seemed different. She seemed driven to succeed. And she was doing just that.

“Thank you, Jill,” Jennifer finally said.

Those three words meant the world to her. Jill quickly got a fire going, and pulled out some food for the group. This was her shot to lead, and she would make the most of it.

Those ten miles into St. Petersburg felt like fifty. The winds had picked up, and the biting cold and blowing snow was coming up off the ground, right into their faces. Visibility was getting worse and worse. Jill keyed in a location that should take them through the heart of the city, if her calculations were correct. She’d never done that before—just made up a spot and hoped it was in the right general direction, but she’d looked at the map carefully, and knew where they’d started. She’d aimed for the heart of the city, so even if she was off a bit, they’d still find it.

“You know what you’re doing, right?” Anna asked. “We’re not out here wandering aimlessly in a near blizzard, circling to our deaths? It feels like we’ve been walking for forever.”

“Trust me,” Jill said. “Trust me.” But deep inside, she began to wonder about it too. Just as she was about to doubt herself, they hit paydirt—a road leading directly into the city. The walking would be much easier from here on in, and now they knew they were headed the right direction. They picked up the pace, and before nightfall, they made it into the city.

They found an abandoned warehouse, and set up camp for the night. It should be a safe enough spot to store their supplies and to gather more and bring them here, once they found a way out. From the looks of the skies above, it likely wouldn’t be by air again.

CHAPTER XI

That night, the warehouse shook with the sounds outside—the wind howled around, echoing in the empty space. No one got much sleep. The three of them huddled together, staying warm, and Anna pulled out a flashlight and her newspaper clippings. “I knew I had it,” she said. She read:

Experts fear huge pandemic. It’s the flu to most people, a harmless flu bug, but epidemiologist Dr. Danuta Yevshenko doesn’t take it lightly. In an interview with her, reporter Carlos Boucher of the Sun has uncovered some startling developments...

“It’s a master shape-shifter, really,” Yevshenko states. “The flu virus has been evolving ways to slip past human immune systems every year to infect and kill people worldwide. It has the deadly ability to unleash a deadly pandemic and has done so with regularity for centuries. Then something happened in the early 1900’s, 1908, to be exact, that I believe altered the virus and made it more potent. Just ten years later, in 1918, the Spanish influenza killed 40 to 50 million people worldwide.

CB: And what does that have to do with the present?

DY: Well, I think that slowly, over time, another virus has been growing in size and strength. But it's largely been overlooked, dismissed as a mutant version of the flu. Without sounding like some doomsdayer, I'm worried that the conditions are ripe for a microbial "perfect storm". We may have a pandemic on our hands the size of which we've never seen before."

CB: And just what was this 1908 event that started it all?

DY: Believe it or not, a meteorite crashing to Earth. The Tunguska meteorite crash in Siberia. It unleashed or altered something that set this new virus in motion.

CB: Sounds a little bit like a sci-fi movie gone wrong. Meteorite from outer space that ends up wiping out life on Earth—

DY: It's not like that. The world is in a delicate balance. Even one small change in a system can go on to influence another change in another system, and on and on until major effects are felt.

CB: I've heard of that. It's called the Butterfly Effect. A butterfly flaps its wings in South America, setting off changes that are ultimately found around the world.

DY: Something like that, yes. And by the way, these aren't the thoughts of one lone madwoman on the loose. The World Health

Organization (WHO) is certain that a global outbreak is almost certain. It should be an urgent public priority.

CB: We've been freaking out about the avian flu, and poultry outbreaks that have not been amounting to much. We've gotten stirred up about SARS, which seems to be under control. What makes this any different?

DY: In those cases, a few extremists tried to up the ante. A few business-like scientists with a buck to make. But WHO never supported those movements. For this situation, they have clearly explained that it is difficult to exaggerate the impact of a pandemic.

CB: So if 40 to 50 million died in 1918, what kind of numbers might we be talking about now?

DY: It's difficult to predict, you can imagine. A conservative estimate is 10 million within a few weeks of the virus reaching its height.

CB: And a worst case scenario?

DY: 100 million, within the same time frame.

CB: But if that continued, you're talking about, potentially, half the world being wiped out in a year! It's starting to sound like a fantasy again...

DY: Not quite. Our estimates are that it may only go on for

six to eight weeks. But it will affect all communities simultaneously. Keep in mind that we don't want to paralyze people with fear. But we do want them to have a realistic sense of what it is that we may be facing...

Jennifer was lost in her own thoughts again. The article was dated two years before the next wave of meteorites had hit. The second ripple. If the article was on target, and she felt that it was, they'd have to act fast. It had been much more than six or eight weeks since this outbreak began, so perhaps Yevshenko had been too cautious, fearful to respond with the real numbers. In any case, they had to act fast. The world was depending on them...

"So what do we do, Mom?" Jill asked. "What's our next move?"

"Like I said before, we need to gather information and transportation. Once that's solved, we travel as quickly as possible to Tomsk, and hook up with Dr. Yevshenko...if she's still alive. But for tonight, hard as it may be, we're going to have to get some sleep and gather our strength. Tough as it is to do that, we're going to need it."

CHAPTER XII

The next morning, Anna awoke and then shook Jill awake. Jennifer was already up and had a little breakfast prepared for them. Dry cereal and coffee. Some things never change.

Storing the greatest part of their goods in a corner of the warehouse, the three set out, with much lighter packs on their backs. They were headed for the main university.

“The university? Why are we headed there? Shouldn’t we find a crew of people to help us first? What are we going to do at a university?”

“First of all,” Jennifer chimed in, “we are strangers in a strange land. Perhaps we’ll find someone in the university who knows of me or my work. At least they should be able to check me out. Second, we need to find someone who can speak English. They teach language courses, right? Someone will be able to connect us with the right person. When in doubt, go back to the origins—the roots of knowledge in the city, in this case.”

They made their way to the university and headed first to the science department. Only a few diehard scientists were still working away, in their impoverished conditions. They were trying to do what Jennifer herself was working on—a vaccine for the viruses.

Jennifer approached the first one she saw.

“Excuse me, do you speak English?”

The scientist briefly looked up from his desk, gave her a puzzled look and a frown, pointed to the door, and then went back to work. She tried another, and got the same reaction. Then, from behind, in broken English, she heard, “Dr. Kennedy, is that you?”

Paulina Peretzkova. Jennifer recognized her right away. “I’m so happy to see you,” she said. “We come with a gift.”

“What is it?” Paulina asked.

“The serum that saves women.”

“THE serum? You mean you’ve come up with it already?” Peretzkova rattled off some sayings in Russian to the workers in the room. They scrambled out and returned with, what Jennifer guessed, was the entire team that remained. Immediately, Jennifer gave them the recipe. Paulina translated it, and the crew went off to work, contacting others and gathering the supplies they’d need. Jennifer knew that now that others knew, the word—and the serum—would

spread faster. It was like having the cure for cancer, only better. The word would spread. The word. The WORD. She said a silent prayer. Job one would be taken care of.

Anna snapped into action. “Is any of the engineering department still around?” she asked Paulina.

“Sure. They more or less keep things running around here, and of course their skills are needed pretty much everywhere. What do you need?”

“Someone who’s an expert on the city. Maybe a person involved in city planning—urban and rural development—that type of thing. And a mechanical engineer, too. We might need to locate some others as well—”

“What do you have in mind, Anna?” her sister asked.

“Tell you later, once I have a moment to breathe.”

It didn’t take long to assemble the experts. In fact, nearly all of the thinktank that was left, whether they were in a related field or not, assembled in a lecture hall to plan the next moves.

It was Jennifer who was first to speak. “You know about one cure, the one that fights aging in women.” Yevshenko translated, word for word. “But we have another virus that we believe is

responsible for the deaths of the men. And if we are ever to have males on this planet again, we need to solve that problem incredibly quickly. Like within a few months or less. Some of the women who are currently pregnant will give birth to sons. As soon as they are born, they'll be infected quickly and will die. If they do, there'll be no other option in the future except artificial insemination—and we don't know how well preserved those stocks are now. It's an incredible gamble. In any case, my one daughter, Jill, has thoughts to share with you about that later. Maybe it'll spark an idea somewhere. Personally, I feel our best chances are to contact all the experts we can—and work from there.”

Jill stepped up to the mike next and explained her thoughts and theories. Heads nodded and mini-conversations erupted in the crowd. Obviously she had struck a chord with them. They were probably wondering who this precocious young kid was, but even without speaking the language, she knew that they respected what she had to say.

Anna was next. I need the engineers and city planners to help us find a way out. Obviously, the storms are increasing, and air travel is impossible. I need a team of experts to help us find a way to Tomsk, Siberia. We will go ourselves, with a few volunteers, if possible, to seek out the advice of Dr. Danuta Yevshenko.

At the mention of Yevshenko's name, more murmurs

worked their way through the crowd. They all knew of her work.

Yevshenko then gave a rapid series of orders, and they all scattered into groups, off to plot and plan the next moves.

“Now do you know why we came to the university first?”

Jennifer asked her daughters.

“Yeah, two heads are better than one. But fifty are even better.” Anna was hopeful, but frustrated. It felt like this was out of their hands now, and she hated to have to trust others to get the job done...

Good news, bad news. The serum was being produced, and it was working. People were encouraged and more willing than ever to help others. Once the weather turned, and they were able to branch out, the serum would reach those who needed it.

Bad news. Roads were obscured by gray snow. Skies were becoming even more violent and flight was impossible. Roads were impassable, and railway tracks were covered. There was only one vehicle that could take them through, and that was an old snowblower train. It wasn't working. It had been left on a side rail on the outskirts of the city. But if they could get it working, the line it was on would take them, eventually, to where they needed to go. If they could get it working.

Worse news. Also, if they needed extra cars, it would have

to go forward, at least until it reached a switch, and then turn back and plow its way back into the train yards to pick them up. More delay.

The train worked well in up to ten feet of snow—but any more than that, and the snow would have to be dug down, by hand. They didn't think it would be any deeper than that anywhere—only an avalanche somewhere could cause that. They put their faith in the team, gathered supplies, and put the word out in the community. They needed heroes—people who were willing to go on a train ride, and dig hard and fast, if need be.

CHAPTER XIII

What they saw when they reached the trainyard was encouraging. Hundreds of volunteers, packed and ready, eager to save the world—or die trying.

Jill volunteered to stay at the trainyards and organize the volunteers and supplies into traincars. Anna and Jennifer set out with the team on what was, at one time, a favorite method of transportation—snowmobile. They'd been through a lot with them before, and weren't exactly keen on having any problems with them again, but once they were riding, they regained their comfort with the machines, and easily kept up with the rest of the pack.

When they reached the snowblower, it was an intimidating sight. A massive red metal scoop the height of the train car, attached to the engine behind. What looked like a massive turbine from a generator was on front, and Anna shuddered to think the damage it could do when it was working. It must spew the snow out like a massive volcano spewed lava. It would be quite the sight to see—if they could get it working. If they could get it working.

The head mechanic was shaking her head and muttering. Anna found someone who could translate.

“She says it’s ancient technology. They don’t even make these machines like this anymore. And there’s just a single malfunctioning part—a part that if it were replaced, would have this up and running in no time. But they’ve stopped making them years ago, and chances of finding someone who could create one from scratch quickly was minimal. By and large, that was still a man’s field, and men were no longer around.”

Anna asked to see what the part was that they needed. When she saw the size and shape of it, she knew just what to do. “I don’t know where you can get one, but I know how you can make one,” she said. “I’m assuming you can find a female welder.”

The translator conveyed the message, and the mechanic nodded.

“All you need is a combustion chamber exit duct seal ring, made of waspaloy, and part of a titanium tailpipe.”

The translator just looked at her and stared. “I don’t know how to translate that,” she said. “Where are you going to get those things from, and how do you know about them?”

“I know, because they’re parts of an airplane. And I think with a little modification, they might just do the job.”

Jennifer just stared. When she'd seen her daughters become obsessed with flight, she thought it was a bit unhealthy—how much time they'd spent learning about aircraft instead of other “more important” subjects. And here, now—that knowledge might just make the difference.

Anna went back to gather the parts, and she took a few workers with her. She arrived to see that Jill had already organized everybody and everything that was needed for the journey, more or less. Anna was impressed.

In no time, they had the parts off some planes, and they again rode out to the snowblower. She'd gone overboard—brought out six times the parts she probably needed, and she was glad she had. Trial and error reigned supreme, but by the fourth attempt, the part they'd created worked and held. They'd keep the other parts and the workers too, for the journey. Just in case. But it was time to head back now, and set off on the trip of a lifetime.

Jennifer just hoped Dr. Yevshenko would still be alive when they got there. All she needed now was another “Big Mama” episode.

When the snowblower finally made its way back to the train station, Paulina was waiting for them. “Jennifer, in all the excitement, and with everything that's been going on, there's something I forgot to tell you. I'm not sure how much you know, or

how important this is, but considering what you told me about the Yevshenko article, I think you need to know...”

CHAPTER XIV

The girls busied themselves with the final preparations. Anna took along some extra parts, pieces and materials, not really knowing how they might come in handy, but she wanted to have a variety of sizes, shapes, and metals with her, just in case. The breakdown of the train had been a blessing in disguise. Can you imagine a train breaking down in the Siberian countryside with no way to repair it? It'd be a certain death for everyone.

Jennifer found a quieter spot where she could talk to Paulina. She didn't want to alarm anyone if the news was bad. "What's this all about, Paulina? What's the latest?"

"Well, I just thought you should know. There have been some more meteorite crashes over here, other than the ones you've told us about."

"And?" Jennifer said.

"And some of them are near Tomsk. You might be heading right into the eye of the storm. You might be going directly into an

area with high concentrations of who knows what—new viruses? Other contagions? And what if you head out there, only to be taken out—God forbid—by another meteorite?”

“You know I don’t have any other choice, Paulina.” Jennifer glanced down at the necklace Paulina was wearing—a bright gold cross hung at the end of it. “Pray for us,” she said. Then she hugged her friend and headed out.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Paulina asked.

“No. We need you here. We need you as command central. Be strong.”

“Same to you.”

With that, the two women said their goodbyes and set off in different directions. *Maybe we’ll never meet again*, Jennifer thought. *Then again, maybe we will anyway.*

The slow, long train journey was frustrating. They hadn’t had to shovel anywhere yet, but they were moving slowly. The engine already had a snowblower to push, but usually, that was it. That’s what it was meant for. Add the weight of some train cars packed to the brim, and it slowed down incredibly. Bit by bit, it snaked its way across a cold and desolate countryside. Biting winds and temperatures that dipped far below zero with windchill. Anna and Jill had never known cold like this—Jennifer had experienced it

only once before. It was a shock to the system, but after what seemed forever, they found their way to Tomsk.

There'd be a big party tonight—of that they were certain. The people on board were never so happy to see a city in their life—but Jennifer had other ideas. She needed to find Yevshenko. She allowed the girls to stay back and party a bit, as long as they stayed with Maria Makarenko—a woman with a clear head on her shoulders, a person Jennifer had befriended on the long train trip here. Besides, she could search faster on her own, with someone to translate. Once she found Yevshenko, she'd gather the girls and get to work.

Little did she know at that moment the impact that small decision would have...

CHAPTER XV

Spirits were up, and the vodka and beer were flowing. The town of Tomsk was overjoyed with the news that they now knew how to solve the aging problem, and everyone who heard of it pitched in to throw a banquet for their special guests, the likes of which they'd never seen.

“Can you believe this, sis? It’s like we’re big heroes or something—people welcoming us like we’re some long lost brother or something.”

“Like the prodigal son?” Anna replied.

“The prodigal son? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. Just something I’ve been thinking more and more about lately. Have you ever read the Bible?”

“Oh come on. You’re not going to get religious on me like Dad would have, are you?”

“No, nothing like that. But still, there’s this one book in the

Bible, Revelation—and it talks about destruction and end times and—”

“Snap out of it, sis! Don’t you go getting all scared on me now. You should enjoy yourself. Celebrate for once in your life. You’ve done a good job—you can enjoy a reward, you know.” Jill picked up a beer bottle and handed it to her sister. The label caught Anna’s eye.

“Can you believe it? Here we are in Russia and they’re drinking German beer! I wonder how they got this—”

Jill snatched the bottle back from her sister. She’d read about this one before, but never seen it. It was from the Neuzelle Kloster Brewery, a 400-year-old company in eastern Germany. But it was the back of the label, not the front, that had her attention. “We need to find Mom, NOW!” she said.

Jennifer lucked out. She found Yevshenko where she knew she would if the woman were alive—her laboratory at the Polytechnic.

“Jennifer Kennedy? But how? When?”

“Never mind, Danuta. I’m glad to see you too. There’s a long story behind why I’m here, but first, I have a formula to share with your staff. Then, if you’ll follow me back to pick up my girls, I can tell you all about it on the way....”

They never made it back to the girls. Jill and Anna found them first. “I think I know the secret, Mom. It might be what we’re looking for!” She held up a beer, and Danuta and Jennifer looked strangely at each other, and then laughed.

It was the first real bellylaugh Jennifer had had in a long time. “You think beer is going to save the world?”

“I do,” Jill replied, with a stern look on her face that made the others stop laughing.

“Take a look at the ingredients and tell me what you see,” she said.

Jennifer took a look at the bottle. Of course, it had all the traditional ingredients of beer—water, hops, yeast and barley—but there seemed to be much more than that added to this one. She translated the label for the girls: *Kloster Special: the Healthy Beer*. After the list of usual ingredients there was a special mix of antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. And then she saw it—undoubtedly what Jill had been talking about—SPIRULINA. Like the plantain before, maybe this ingredient held the answers to their problem...

“Spirulina, Mom. It’s an algae rich in protein, iron, and vitamins—especially A and D. D helps tissue, like the skin, and antioxidants can help reduce the risk of heart disease and some

cancers. I think we've found our solution—Spirulina may be the key. It could help build up weak heart tissue, maybe and replace some of what men may be missing--but how do we test it?"

"We won't have to wait long," Jennifer replied. "Just get us to a maternity ward and we'll see..."

Will Spirulina save the day? And what about the most recent meteorites that have crashed to the ground? Could they hold the key to other problems too, or will they create new ones? And as for the cold weather, gray snow, and advancing glaciers—what can be done? Is this the end of the world that Anna's been reading about in the Bible? Find out in *Ice Storms III*, the final book of this trilogy!

ICE STORMS III: THE LAZARUS LINK

PROLOGUE

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Ice Storms III

CHAPTER I

Pure Spirulina extract—they'd put a concentrated solution of it into an IV, and started looking for test subjects. They didn't have to search long. A wailing mother in the maternity ward drew their immediate attention. Jennifer translated for the girls.

“My baby! He's so little and so cute. But what they say is too cruel, too true—the day you're born, you begin to die.”

“There's always hope,” Jennifer said, pulling out her cross necklace from the inside of her shirt. “There is always hope.”

“What kind of hope can there be for him? A newborn male—weak, vulnerable.”

“There's something you don't know,” Jennifer replied.

“I know of God. What kind of a God would let this happen to a small child?” The woman covered her face with her hands.

“People suffer because deep down, we’re all sinners. It’s not always God’s will for that to happen. Some problems, people create all for themselves. But I wasn’t kidding about the hope. We think we’ve found an answer. We think we’ve found a cure.”

“A cure? Are you certain?”

“But we need to test it. We need a subject.” Jennifer glanced down at the young boy, already struggling—how long would he live?

“A guinea pig? You want my child to be some lab rat?” The woman raised her voice, then broke down into sobs again. *“I guess, I guess—what do you have to do to him?”*

“Just give him some natural medicine in his IV...no surgery.”

“So you don’t have to cut him up? I’m not sure I could stand to have you do that—especially if he, if he—”

“We don’t have to cut him open,” Jennifer assured her. “Besides,” she said, her voice growing stern, “without it, we know what *will* happen, don’t we? It’s all we have to offer.”

Anna glanced over at Jill. Of course, she couldn’t understand exactly what Jennifer was saying to the other woman, but to her, Mom sounded a little cruel. There was a hard edge to her voice that

Anna had never heard before. Jill just returned a look to Anna with a shoulder shrug that said *Oh well*.

The woman stopped crying. She stared straight back at Jennifer and said, finally, “*You may try your cure.*”

Jennifer went into action. She mixed the spirulina into an IV solution, and, blocking the view of the mother with her own body, Jennifer inserted the needle into the young boy, quickly placing gauze and tape over the spot of blood that appeared. By the time the mother peered around to see what was going on, the boy looked just like he’d had a scrape and nothing more.

“*How long will it take?*”

“I have no idea.” What else could she say—no use sugar-coating it. “We have never tried this before. Your son is the first.”

The woman picked up the cross from Jennifer’s neck and held it in her hands. She mouthed a few words that Jennifer couldn’t quite make out, and then gently placed the cross back down on the scientist’s chest. “*I know your God doesn’t make deals,*” she said, “*but it’s my son, you know? It can’t hurt.*”

Even though Jill’s eyes started to get watery, and Anna just kept staring at the cross, tears streaming down her face. “I don’t understand—” she began, “—I just don’t understand....”

“Do we have to stand around here, Mom?” Jill asked, just a little too eagerly. She wanted to get out of there before she made a scene like emotional Anna.

But Jennifer didn’t argue, didn’t scold her in any way. “I need to stay here to observe the boy,” she said. “But there’s no need for the two of you to stick around here. Do you want to return to the party?”

“I’m not exactly in the party mood anymore,” Jill said, “but it’s got to be better than standing around in a hospital. Anna?”

Anna glanced over at her sister. Her heart told her to stay, but she knew that Jill would take off, even if she didn’t. Then she’d worry about Jill too. The state she was in, she might overdrink, get into some kind of trouble—and even if she didn’t, Anna would worry the whole time that she was. Mom was here to take care of the baby—she wouldn’t have to worry about that. “I’m coming,” she said, and the two girls made their way to the door.

“Well, what do you think?” Anna said to Jill, holding the door open for her.

“About what?”

“Do you think he’ll make it?”

“The boy? Well, he is kind of small and puny. I guess we shouldn’t get our hopes up—”

“But you heard Mom,” Anna pleaded. “There is always ho—”

“What’s wrong?” Jill asked. She saw the fear in Anna’s eyes.

“Just don’t turn around, and keep walking with me, ok?” Anna grabbed the arm of her sister and started walking off in the other direction, not at all where they were headed.

“What’s up?” Jill asked, glancing over at the terrified face beside her.

“I just recognized someone. Someone I know from back home.”

“What? But who? Why? Are you sure? Who could be here besides us? Do you know her name?”

“I don’t, don’t know her name,” Anna stated, words tripping over each other to get out. “But I know who she is, and I recognize her jacket.”

“Her jacket?” Jill answered. “There must be a million jackets—”

“Not this one, ok?” Anna snapped. “The girl who’s following us—she’s a RAIDER!”

CHAPTER II

Jennifer glanced down at the small body. She held the shoulder of the newborn's mother with her left hand, and held the baby's arm with her right hand, covering over the IV needle and bandage. No need for the mother to focus on that.

The baby's mom was calming down. Even so, she just kept repeating, "*My baby, my baby,*" over and over again. Jennifer felt like a living link between them. *It can't hurt*, she remembered. *It can't hurt*. She closed her eyes, and began to pray. "Save him, Lord, save him, if it's your—"

"*SOMETHING'S WRONG!*" the woman shouted.
"*Something's wrong with him—just look!*"

Jennifer snapped her eyes open, and stared intently at the sight before her. The young body was convulsing, twisting this way and that, and he seemed to be having trouble breathing...

CHAPTER III

“Are you sure?” Jill asked, trying to slow down Anna’s pace just a bit.

“Of course I’m sure. I have an eye for details, you know. And why are you slowing me down?”

“Listen. YOU know that she’s a Raider. And I believe you that she’s a Raider. But as far as I know, she doesn’t know that you know that she’s a Raider. You follow?”

“What?”

“Don’t walk faster, or she’ll know you saw her. And let me think. Any ideas what we should do?”

“I’m thinking,” Anna whispered. “I’m thinking we need—”

“A plan,” Jill interrupted. “Am I ever glad I’m with you, sis. You always have a plan. So what’s it going to be this time?”

“I have no idea. For now, we keep walking. I need time to think. We need to buy some time.”

“Leave that to me, Anna. I know how to buy you some time. We split up. I go left and you go right at the next intersection. She can only follow one of us. When I head left and you go around the corner, she’ll likely follow me. After all, she can still see me, but you’ll be around the corner, temporarily out of sight.”

“And how does that buy me time, exactly?”

“Well, you wait a bit, and follow her when she follows me. You come up behind, and you don’t have to worry about me. I can run if I have to.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Anna retorted. “Don’t you think it sounds like an episode of Scooby Doo? ‘Let’s split up, gang,’ Fred always says, and then the monster always goes after the weak ones, Shaggy and Scooby. And I’m the weak one here—”

“Yeah,” said Jill, “you might be right. But they *do* get the bad guy in the end, don’t they? It always ends with them unmasking the bad guy, right?”

“Ok, let me put it another way,” Anna said, her pace quickening a step or two. “Think of horror movies. Right after the group says ‘Let’s split up,’ people start to die. Sometimes the bad guy wins, right?”

“Remember what Mom said,” Jill replied. “There’s always hope—” With that, she let go of Anna’s arm and turned sharply left,

jaywalking across the street before they even reached the corner.

“But—” Anna realized the futility of trying to argue with her headstrong sister. Instead, she did everything she could to muster up a smile, and she turned and waved to her sister. “See you later then,” she sang out.

“See you soon,” Jill replied.

Jill slowed her step a pace, so as not to lose the stalker, but when she risked a glance back, what she saw made her heart skip a beat. The Raider was a Raider all right—she’d been one of the motorbike riders they had knocked off the day they shot the ice cubes off their roof. She’d been the one who’d lost her helmet—the one the other had scooped up and motored off with.

And she wasn’t crossing the street. Instead, she took the same corner Anna was. One thing became clear--Jill would have to come up with the plan this time. Her sister needed her. What was it that Hamlet had said in that Shakespearean play she’d been forced to read? “Oh cursed spite—that ever I was born to set it right?” Something like that. And she knew how he felt right now. It was awful being the one who everything and everyone depended on. But she also knew something Hamlet never really did work out until the very end—it wasn’t about her right now, or her own weaknesses. There were bigger issues at stake. She headed off in Anna’s direction.

CHAPTER IV

“What have you done to my baby?” the woman screamed, reaching for the newborn.

“No, don’t!” Jennifer held the woman’s arms, keeping her back. “Just give it a minute. I’m watching him closely.”

“But he’s going to die! Do something.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jennifer said, seeing some color come back into the boy’s cheeks. “Trust me.”

“But it’s my boy—”

Jennifer held on, while they both stared down at the small form before them. He seemed to be struggling a little, but she thought she knew why.

Then it happened.

He turned his face to the side, and threw up all over the bedsheets. A mucousy greenish fluid emptied out of his mouth, and he sucked in great gulps of air. He started to cry loudly, and his

mother cried too. But hers were tears of joy. She could tell already he was becoming livelier, he was getting better. Whatever was inside him was out now, and she and Jennifer watched as the sobs slowly ebbed away, replaced by a peaceful breathing pattern the mother had never heard before.

“Let’s get you changed,” said Jennifer. “We can’t have the New World’s first male survivor to stay all covered in slime now, can we?” She took a clean towel, folded it into a long triangle, and placed the baby on it. She cleaned him carefully, and then wrapped him up to keep him warm. “Hmm,” she said, picking him up gently and passing him to his mother, “a newborn babe in swaddling clothes, born to save the world. It’s just like—”

“*It’s just like your Jesus,*” said the mother, her prayers answered. “*Can you tell me more about him?*”

CHAPTER V

Anna took no chances, and wasted no time. As soon as she rounded the corner, she broke into a full run down a deserted street. She scanned ahead for other people, strangers she could talk to—anyone who might happen to be passing by. But in this bitter cold, and with the party going on, no one seemed to be out walking the streets.

Then she saw it—a staircase leading down to a basement. Maybe the door would be open. Maybe she could break in and keep the Raider out. No—it was a stupid idea, and she had only seconds to decide. She kicked off her shoes, threw them to the bottom of the stairwell, and then ducked inside the doorway belonging to the next house. The wide frame around the door only just hid her skinny body, and if the Raider didn't check the stairwell and kept on coming, she'd easily be seen. And then what? The Raider was twice her size. She wouldn't be able to offer up much of a fight.

She was counting on the Raider not seeing her in the street ahead. She was counting on the Raider noticing the stairwell too. If

the woman went all the way down, it might give Anna time to race to the next house, break a window, and search for something to protect herself with. Or she could run back towards Jill.

In just seconds, she heard the footsteps approaching.

The Raider paused at the stairwell and saw the shoes at the bottom. She began taking a step down. “Did you trade in your shoes for warm winter boots, little one?” she said, and Anna pressed tighter against the door, trying not to be seen.

The door creaked loudly, and the Raider glanced her way. She stepped back up the stairs, and started moving towards Anna. “So this is where you’re hiding, hmm?”

“Get away from her,” a voice screamed from behind. The Raider turned to see Jill running at her full speed.

“Anna, just like bullies on the playground,” she shouted, and Anna raced forward, just as Jill fell down on all fours beside the Raider. Anna pushed as hard as she could, and the Raider tripped over Jill and went head first down the stairs.

“Unhhhh—ow, ow—thunk!” They heard her hit the bottom, and then a tiny voice whimpered back, “Help me, I think I’ve broken my arm.”

“Help you?” Jill screamed. “Help you? We’re supposed to

"Actually, it's not a bad idea," Anna said. "We can find out a bit of information maybe, and besides—I need to get my shoes. It's freezing out here!" She ran down the stairs, slowing near the bottom. Was the Raider actually hurt, or was she playing possum?

As she neared the final steps, though, she saw the left arm of the Raider was jutting out at an unnatural angle. "No doubt about it, sis. She's hurt. Come down here and give me a hand, will you?"

Anna took her coat off.

"You're freezing, without shoes, and you're taking your coat off? Are you crazy?" Jill asked.

Anna pretended not to hear. Instead, she worked one arm up out of her long sleeve shirt, and held tightly to the cloth where the sleeve met the shoulder. With her other hand, she began to pull. With both hands tugging, she was soon able to make a tiny tear, and then keep tugging until the sleeve came off completely. She then ripped that in half lengthwise to make it longer. "Help hold her upright, Jill, while I tie this on."

Jill said nothing more, but moved in to hold the Raider tight.

Anna firmly tied the arm tight to the girl's chest to keep it still and in one position. "Look, I know we shouldn't move you, but

I don't know where anyone is, and you'll freeze out here—”

“Which is what you deserve—” Jill interrupted.

“So we can't leave you. And we can't have that arm swinging all over the place when we walk. Are you able to walk?”

The Raider, face all scraped up, jeans torn in places, tears flowing down, glanced up with puffy eyes. “I, I think so. Just let me test my ankle...slowly.” She stood and took a step. It would be slow going, but she could manage. “I th-think I can do it,” she stammered.

Anna put on her shoes and bundled up tightly. Together, the three of them trudged back up the stairs and headed back to the only place they knew there were people waiting for them—the hospital.

CHAPTER VI

Jennifer ran through the hospital, telling anyone who looked like they had even an inkling of medical knowledge, and even those who didn't, to come meet her in the lobby. Once they were assembled, she wasted no time in telling them the good news.

“It’s a simple cure,” she said. “And it’s relatively cheap. It’s spirulina—and a pure extract of it in an IV drip will help male babies fight off the disease. We need to get working, quickly, to save as many as we can. I’m going to set up an assembly line, so we need bodies and supplies. We also need people to go out and spread the message. We need people to brave the storm and get the word out. We’ll send samples with them, ready-made, so that anyone they meet can be quickly convinced.

“You all know this hospital and what it contains. I’m just going to tell you what we need. And if we can’t find the amount of spirulina we require, we’ll just have to extract it from something you seem to have a lot of here—Kloster Special beer. Now here’s a list of what we need...let’s go save some babies!”

The assembled crowd cheered loudly, and then quickly set to work. There was plenty to be done, and every second counted. Any second saved might be a life.

Once everything was up and running, Jennifer ducked out into a small room to collect her thoughts. This was great news, but now, she was in more pain than ever. Here she was, on the other side of the world, and she had cures to both diseases—both supplied by plants that God had put on this once-green Earth—and yet people she knew by name and their families, pregnant daughters about to give birth, and some to baby boys—those children would never be saved unless she made it back. And it was a long way back...and of course, there was the *other* thing that was on her mind...the *bigger* issue.

It was something she hadn't let herself think about during this entire disastrous adventure. It was something she had kept herself safe from by focusing on other people's problems. But now the possibility excited her, got her hopes up. It was something she told herself she wouldn't let happen. But she had to make it back home.

CHAPTER VII

The girls were cold and tired. The Raider was in pain, nearly passing out from the exertion. Jill was fuming mad. Here they were, tiring themselves out, wearing themselves down, for who—someone who was stalking them! It made no sense.

Anna looked over and saw Jill's furrowed brows, downturned mouth, and sour expression, and started to say something—but decided not to. It might only make things worse. She was cold herself, but dared not complain. Her feet were freezing, but if she kept moving, she'd be fine.

The only thought that kept wandering through her mind was—a Raider? Here? How? And why follow them halfway around the globe? It just didn't make sense. Raiders were out for themselves, it was true, but they were locals. Raid for supplies, cause a disruption, and disappear. No one even seemed to know where they hung out. No one dared follow. And now they had tracked the Kennedy clan here, of all places? How had they found them? And why risk life and limb to do that?

As they approached the hospital doors, Anna snapped out of her reverie, and quickened the pace, ever so slightly.

“Easy,” said the Raider.

“YOU take it easy,” replied Jill. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

They stepped inside the doors to Emergency just as Jennifer was making her way down the hall. When she spotted the girls, she hurried toward them. Or so the girls thought. What she never took her eyes off for a second was actually the Raider between them.

“My God, what’s happened to you, Amira? Are you all right?”

“*AMIRA?* You mean you know her name?” Jill’s shrill voice attracted the attention of all nearby, but Jennifer said nothing. She didn’t even look at her daughter. Instead, she escorted the Raider to the nearest examining room, and began to assess the damage. “Stay outside while I attend to her,” was all she said, buying time for Amira, time for herself. What a stupid mistake. She was still too emotional from the baby, she guessed. She’d let her guard down, and now there would be consequences. Sloppy.

Jill didn’t know what to feel. She stood outside, her jaw still open, not knowing whether to scream or to cry. Just what was going on? As far as she knew, Mom had never kept secrets from them. Then again, if she was good at it, Jill would never know, would she?

“Just what else do you think she’s hiding?” she asked Anna. “Is she surprised it’s someone she knows? Does she realize the woman’s a Raider? Could Mom be a Raider herself?”

But Anna was speechless. She just hugged Jill tight and then said something she’d heard her own mother mutter to her time and time again: “I’m sure there’s an explanation.” Instead of counting to ten to calm herself down, Anna had been taught something else. “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.”

“What?” Jill snapped. “What’s all that about?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Anna replied. “Just something Mom taught me. It’ll be all right, Jill, honest. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Jennifer supposed it was time to come clean...but it was still too soon. Just how could she delay it until they got back home? She would take her time setting the bone, dressing the wound, and she would send for help for the cast, but she’d help the other technicians with that too. With luck, she’d have time to think of something. Or maybe it was just time to tell the truth. After all, the girls have proven that they can take care of themselves, haven’t they? But would they still think so clearly once they knew the secret? She wasn’t so sure.

CHAPTER VIII

“Did you hear, Jill? Do you see what’s going on around you? Do you realize why these people are rushing here, there, and everywhere? Your idea worked! The spirulina worked. And it was all your idea. Yours and yours alone. The boy lived, Jill, and now many others like him will live as well. Do you realize what this means? You’ve literally saved the human race!”

“Oh yeah?” Jill sneered. “That’s if this ice storm doesn’t finish us all. Or have you forgotten about that?”

Anna shrugged and went off to the maternity ward.

Jill felt awful. Her sister was only trying to help, after all. Why was she always so quick to snap? And what had Anna been saying? Something about self-control and patience. She knew those were her weak areas, her sore spots. She needed a healthy dose of both of them herself right now.

And, she had something else to remember too. It wasn’t about her. Clearly, there were bigger issues at hand. But it hurt that

Mom was shutting them out right now—sort of what Jill herself just done to Anna. She needed her sister, and she guessed that her sister needed her too. As long as she could keep from saying the wrong thing this time. She put her hands in her pockets, and with her head down, eyes scanning the floor, she made her way towards the maternity section.

CHAPTER IX

“Amira?” Jennifer asked. “Amira, what do I do?”

“Well, you can’t tell them, that’s for sure. You don’t know how they’d react. And what if it doesn’t work out? What then?”

“But what if something happens to me? To you? They may never decide to—they may never find out the truth. I’m not sure I could live with that.”

Amira moved a bit closer and lowered her voice. “Look. You did what you thought was right. Some people had to die. Some people had to live. You did what you thought was right. And it was the right decision. You need to know that. You’re not a murderer.”

“But no one has the right to play God, do they? You know, my girls and I almost died in a plane crash out here once already, and if that snow plow never made it through, we would have frozen to death. In both cases, there was one big thought running through the back of my mind the whole time—what if I die and they live? I was praying that either we’d all die or we’d all live. I couldn’t bear

them not learning the truth—unless they weren’t around to know any better.”

“You can’t beat yourself up like that. You’re a mother. You care.”

“But I always teach them to be honest—to be up front.”

“And you were. You just left out a few things,” Amira asserted.

“Sins of omission and commission are equal,” Jennifer replied. “Not telling someone the whole truth is as bad as a lie, I think. I just hope they can forgive me. Just like I hope someone ELSE can forgive me too,” she said, her eyes glancing skyward.

“You’re not thinking of—”

“I am. I think I have to tell them.”

“But we’ve worked so hard to contain our little secret. When the world finds out, what then? We’ll look really bad on this one. Have you forgotten your oath? Do you know what might happen if you break it?”

Jennifer leveled her gaze directly at Amira. She stared for a long moment, and then said slowly and steadily, “Is that a threat?”

“No, not from me, Jenn, not from me. But you know there

are others. You could be putting the girls in real danger.”

“I don’t think so, Amira. After all, if our plan works, won’t the world be a happy place? And if it fails, well, there will be a lot of work to be done—and the girls could help me with that...if they don’t disown me forever for keeping them in the dark in the first place.”

“But remember Jenn. Not all people are straightforward and logical. If the world knows our secret before we figure out how to protect ourselves, they may be resentful. Out of ignorance, jealousy, anger—they might destroy all that we have, all that we’ve done. And then what? Then you’d be kicking yourself. You’d never get over that.”

“That’s not true. That just not true. And besides, now that two cures are out and available, what’s the risk? We just spread the knowledge bit by bit. No one has to know where it came from.”

“But they will know, Jenn. They’ll know. After all, you came up with the two solutions so far.”

“Well, actually, my daughter—”

“It’s the same family anyway. They’d know it’s you. You need to make sure protection is in place before any of this leaks.” She paused to let that point sink in a moment and then continued. “I tell you what,” Amira said. “Just buy some time with them. Agree to

tell the girls in the future, but don't get into it right now. Not now. Not here. What do you think?"

"I think I need to think some more," Jennifer said.

Amira stayed quiet. She knew what was coming. She knew her own commitment to the cause was solid. And if Jennifer was about to put that all at risk, well she at least owed it to let some of the others know what she was thinking of doing.

The half-dozen of them who had made the trip over deserved to know what was happening. And Amira was a friend, but she would only go so far. If Jennifer wouldn't cooperate, she would have to find out what the others thought about that. And she'd find out about both cures and how to prepare them before she headed back herself. She'd have to talk to the other Raiders first, before Jennifer got the nerve to spill her guts to her daughters. A little knowledge could be a powerful thing. A dangerous thing.

CHAPTER X

“Look, Anna, I’m—I mean, well, you know—sometimes I just don’t—” Jill shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. She imagined this is what it felt like for a shy guy to ask a girl to the senior prom. She felt stupid, but she needed to do it.

“Never mind, Jill. I get it. It’s okay. I understand. Really, I do. I think the pressure’s getting to all of us. Sometimes people say things they wish they could take back.”

“Still, it is weird, you know?” Jill said, hoping Anna would catch on to what she was asking.

“You mean Mom? Yeah, I haven’t really seen her like that before. She was even kind of nasty to that mother, and then with the RAIDER—or should I say AMIRA—she’s all too willing to jump in and help? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Do you think it’s possible that Mom’s a Raider?” Jill tried to keep her voice calm, but was getting uneasy again.

“No. You and I know that’s impossible. Every time we’ve

seen the Raiders out on the streets, Mom has been at home with us—and besides, I don't think Dr. Jennifer Kennedy would ever join some thug's gang. There's got to be another explanation. Maybe she knew the other woman before Amira joined. You know Mom—she'd help anyone she even said "Hi" to once."

"But she wouldn't even listen to what happened. The fact that this woman was stalking us—she never even took the time to find out."

"Maybe we should make sure she does know. I think she'd better find out that her friend may not be as sweet and innocent as she thinks she is."

But when the girls returned to the examination room, the door was ajar...and empty. No sign of Jennifer—or Amira, for that matter—anywhere. What now?

CHAPTER XI

Amira was the last one there, but when she got to the meeting, she immediately took over. “I have some disturbing news, ladies. News I’m not quite sure what to do about. As you know, we’re not in the killing business, and we seek to preserve life, not destroy it. But we’ve also taken an oath to preserve our secret—at least until such time as we can adequately protect ourselves and our families. Until it’s safe to reveal the truth. But one of us is getting ready to do just that at this very moment.”

A tall blonde with Schwarzenegger shoulders stood up. You mean Kennedy? She’s a bit weak, you know. Can’t trust her. Except without her—”

“Exactly. Without her brain, we’re nowhere. Now I am working on that, and I’m hoping we don’t have to do anything to her until I understand a bit more about her latest cures, but she is about to tell her daughters our secret.”

“Tell two teenagers? So much for keeping it quiet. You

might as well broadcast it across the country and around the world. Then watch a jealous world hunt us down, one by one.”

“Yeah,” said a smaller brunette. “Did you ever read a story called ‘The Smile’? After a nuclear war and almost everything and everyone is destroyed, there is no one left who has the talent to paint like the artists of the past. They know that no one is capable of painting anything like the Mona Lisa. So what do they do? They torch all the art. They stomp on it and spit on it and tear it to pieces.”

“Or how about The Destructors?” said another. That story most of us had to read in high school. A terrible bombing—one nice house left untouched—and the local boys level and burn it to the ground, or something like that. They figure that if everyone else lost everything, so should the owner of that place too.”

“So we wait and see if we will be destroyed by the world because of our secret?” Amira cut in. “Or do we head off the problem until we know for sure that we’ve got something the world needs to know.”

“When you say ‘head off the problem,’ you mean--?” Another girl squeaked her question, clearly looking uncomfortable with the situation.

“No, of course not. We just keep her out of the way—at least

until we're totally ready." Amira may not have agreed with Jennifer's decision, but she didn't feel they could defend themselves adequately if things went from bad to worse.

"I think you've got it all wrong," Schwarzenegger shouldered said. "We don't kidnap the mother and keep her out of the way. We take the two girls. If they know something, we'll find out. If not, we have them in a safe place while we decide our game plan.

"As long as they don't get hurt," Amira said.

"Vote?" the other woman requested.

All hands shot up, and Amira reluctantly held hers up too. She had to support the group. Jennifer would be okay. The girls would be okay. They had to be.

CHAPTER XII

The two girls were searching for their mother, but it was Jennifer who spotted them first. She ran up to the girls. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I know that we don’t keep secrets, generally, and I’m sorry. There are just some complicated things going on right now...”

“Like how you happen to be chums with a Raider?” Jill asked. Anna glanced at Jill, her eyes telling the girl not to lose her cool this time. “I mean,” Jill continued, “is there anything you can tell us to help us understand?” Anna smiled and put a supportive arm around Jill, giving a gentle squeeze.

“I want to girls, but it’s just so hard. I’m not sure how much I can—or should tell.

I tell you what...let’s keep walking and we can talk. It’s probably safer to talk out here in the open. Follow me, I know where the park is. It may be cold here, but it’s beautiful.”

The girls followed her in silence. They marveled at the

winter wonderland she was heading towards—tall trees and winding paths—it seemed like something out of a childhood fable.

Everything seemed bright, shiny, peaceful. Still, the girls said nothing. They waited for their mother to speak again.

“On the one hand, it might help you understand what’s really going on. It could be good news, but it could also ending up crushing your spirit, having you resent me, or worse.”

“Mom,” Anna piped up, “with all due respect, our family is not exactly a fully functioning unit at the moment either—if you haven’t noticed.”

“Now who’s the snarky one?” Jill added in. “But she’s right Mom. I think we’ve shown you that you can trust us with the heavy stuff.”

“I know, I know.” Jennifer looked up to heaven, and then back squarely into the girls’ eyes. “Tell you what. Let’s make this easy on your old Mom. Is it okay if I just tell you a piece at a time? I’ll at least give you *something* right now—I’ll tell you about Amira. And then you can help me with something else, okay?”

The girls looked first at each other, and then both nodded.

“Well, it’s like this,” Jennifer began. “Amira and I are old childhood friends. In fact, I hadn’t seen her since high school, so when as an adult she approached me, acting like my old buddy, I

was immediately suspicious. What did this woman want? What was she selling?”

“And?” Anna asked, eager to know the answer. “What *did* she want?”

“Well, strangely enough,” Jennifer continued, “she wanted me to join a secret organization, a group that has been meeting to attack head-on some of the most serious problems of the world. They used to call themselves The Company, but recently, they’ve undergone a name change.... They now go by a name you’re familiar with—The Raiders.”

As if on cue, still at a distance, but gaining fast, three snowmobiles appeared on the horizon. And they were headed their direction.

“Head for the trees!” Jennifer shouted. “We’re not safe!”

The girls didn’t have to be told twice. By now, they knew the routine well. It seemed like they were always on the run, even now, amongst so-called “friends” of their mother. So they made for the woods as quickly as possible, with Mom trailing just behind.

The snowmobiles’ engines were loud and clear now—it sounded like they were right at the heels of the Kennedy clan. The girls were just inside the forest, but when they looked back, they saw their Mom was still in the clearing. She was a sitting duck. One

Raider was heading straight for her, and instead of running, Jennifer did something strange. She stood very still, put her arms in the air, and slowly turned around, like she was under arrest or something.

Jill looked over at her sister. “What’s going on? It’s not like Mom to just give up.”

Right at that moment, the first snowmobile approached Jennifer, and as it neared her, she kicked up a cloud of snow directly into the face guard of the driver’s helmet. Then she deftly stepped to the side, grabbing the Raider’s jacket, and pulled her off the machine. The snowmobile, still running, headed towards the trees, but then it hit a drift and the steering shifted, turning it away. It slowed down, almost to a stop, and the two Kennedy girls ran towards it. They caught up to it as it came to a standstill then climbed on and turned around to see the scene before them.

Another snowmobile was heading towards Jennifer, its driver holding one arm out, as if to grab or clothesline her or something. Jennifer saw it coming. This time, she dove down, ducking just as the snowmobile neared her. She did a face plant in the snow, but the snowmobile circled, coming back.

Jill drove up right beside Jennifer, stopping within inches of her. She jumped on, and headed for the path in the woods. Two snowmobiles trailed after her. The third driver, still a bit stunned from being knocked off her machine, rested in the snow. She was

too far back to be part of this chase any longer, and her snowmobile was gone. She'd be walking back unless the others returned with their prey in tow.

Anna shifted in her seat and took a look back. Because of the narrow path, the other two snowmobiles were forced into single file. One slowed down and slid in, right behind the other.

Twisting and turning, following the path and going as fast as she could, Jill raced down the trail. Anna was watching behind, and Jennifer was too, waiting for her moment. The other snowmobile was gaining. As they came to a curve, she shouted to Jill, "I want you to SLOW DOWN after the next curve." She wasn't sure if Jill could hear over the whine of the motor and the whip of the wind in their faces, but as they rounded the next corner, Jill slowed.

Jennifer reached up and smacked an overhead branch with her arm. Snow came coursing down, directly in the path of the first snowmobile. It dumped on the driver, and unable to see, she killed the engine instead of running into a tree. That left one to out run.

Jill raced as fast as she could, but she could see up ahead that there was trouble—a tree blocking the trail. The path was lined along both sides with skinny trees planted too close together. They would have to stop or plow their way through. Jill stopped the snowmobile.

The third snowmobile stopped about twenty feet behind them. The driver stood on the seat, took off her helmet, and waving it in the air, shouted, “Jennifer, it’s me. Let me help.”

It was Amira.

CHAPTER XIII

Amira came forward, cautiously at first, but then hopped off her snowmobile and came to help. “Sorry, Jenn. They’re a bit crazy. I volunteered for this mission when I heard about it to make sure they wouldn’t go too far, get carried away. In a way, it’s my fault that they’re after you right now. After all, the one who hacked into your tracking devices? That was me. But we’ve got to shift this tree so we can get around the end of it.” The Kennedy girls exchanged surprised looks.

“You’re helping us?” Anna asked.

“Yes,” Amira answered. “They’re going too far. They’ve lost sight of the original cause and gone power mad, this little group.”

“I have an idea,” Anna said.

“Welcome back Anna,” Jill replied. “Your ideas rock.”

“We need to drive one snowmobile under the tree—sort of wedge it underneath.” Jill brought the machine closer and drove it to

the exact spot Anna was pointing to. The front forks went under, but the tree was firmly against the windshield.

“Ok,” Anna shouted. “The three of us will push just as you gun the engine. Hopefully the four of us will be enough to budge it.” The women stepped into position, each making sure of her stance and grabbing securely onto the tree.

“3,” Anna said.

“2.”

“1!”

And the scene looked like something out of a bad slapstick movie. The end of the tree pushed forward quickly—more quickly than they had expected—and all three women pushing did face plants in the snow. Only Jill was saved that discomfort, safe and secure on the snowmobile seat. She laughed loud and hard at the other three, but when she tried to reverse, she couldn’t. The machine was hopelessly jammed underneath the tree.

“What now?” she shouted. “At least one of the others will be here any moment, I’m sure.”

“Take mine,” Amira said. “I’ll make this look like an accident, and I’ll fake an injury. I’ll give you as much lead time as you need. Oh, and Jennifer, I’m sorry. You *are* right. When you get

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a chance, tell the girls. *Everything.*”

CHAPTER XIV

Amira stayed true to her word. Before long, the girls had a healthy lead. “Where to now, Mom?” Jill shouted. “I’m not sure how long the gas will hold out.”

“We’ve got to get back to town,” Jennifer shouted. “We need supplies and we need the only plane I know that’s hardy enough to handle the journey back. I scouted it out on one of my earlier walks, and I made a deal with the town so the plane belongs to us.”

“Deal?” Anna asked. “What kind of deal did they go for?”

“I signed the rights over to them for the cures. They are solely theirs to profit from. This is going to be one wealthy town in the near future.”

“Aww...mom. After all your hard work—” Jill started. “We could have been so well off.”

“We’re better off without it, anyway,” Jennifer replied. “It’s one of the things that can make friends turn against friends if you

get too much of it. Now let's get back to town, get packed up, and get out of here without being spotted." I have much to tell you.

CHAPTER XV

The fuel was first. The plane was packed with fuel—as much as it could safely hold. The girls took only the necessities with them. It was obvious that even though they were starting out with this plane, at some point in time, they’d likely be switching transportation. Maybe even more than once.

Despite all the heart-racking adventures they had experienced to this point, the Kennedy women had a rather uneventful trip back home. The weather was severe, but they were quite certain no one was on their trail right now, and so they took their time, choosing safe places to land and spread the news about the cures. People were overjoyed to learn of them and of course helped in any way they could. Before long, the Kennedy family was back home.

“Where are we headed first,” Jill joked. “Home, maybe? Our little abode where we can crash and sleep for oh, maybe a year or

"No, I had something else in mind," said Jennifer. "I'm going to take you to the headquarters."

"The headquarters?" Anna asked. "The headquarters of what?"

"Of the Raiders," Jennifer replied. "They're the keeper of the secret, and it's time to let you in on it. After what we've been through together, I know that we can survive this too, even if it turns out horribly."

CHAPTER XVI

They drove up to a string of warehouses, long left looted and abandoned. Jennifer took the cross from the necklace she wore and fit it into the lock. It popped open, and when she slid back the door, the girls' eyes opened as wide as they could. Several warehouses had been joined together, and row after row of medical devices, equipment, and beds lined the space. It looked like a gigantic hospital.

“Welcome to my other lab,” Jennifer said. “It’s slightly better equipped than the one at home.”

They walked to a door that had Jennifer’s name on it, and she took the girls inside quickly, before anyone noticed them there. “Before we go on, I need to tell you a story,” she said, picking a Bible up off a nearby shelf.

“Aww, Mom,” Jill started.

“This is important,” Jennifer said, silencing her daughter. “It is quite a long story, but I want you to pay attention to every word.”

She read, "*John 11*,

The Death of Lazarus

¹Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

⁷Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. ¹⁰It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

¹¹After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Jesus Comforts the Sisters

¹⁷On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Bethany was less than two miles^[a] from Jerusalem, ¹⁹and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will

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give you whatever you ask."

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, ^[b] the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

²⁸And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵Jesus wept.

³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead

³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days."

⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing

here, that they may believe that you sent me."

⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

"NOW," said Jennifer, I'd like to take you to 'The Lazarus Project.'" With that, she led the girls out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII

As they neared the main floor, people came rushing up to greet Jennifer.

“Where were you?”

“What happened to you?”

“We’d heard all kinds of things about you...”

“You’ve brought your two daughters this time? Do they *know...*?”

Jennifer stood up on a chair and cleared her throat. “Ladies” she began. “It has been a long and wearisome journey to this point in time. We all know what we’ve been through. Each of you has been recruited for this organization because of your scientific or medical knowledge. Permit me now to fill my daughters—our guests—in on a bit of the background.

When the disease first struck, people were panicked. Men,

especially, were dropping like flies. There were dead bodies everywhere. Because of the terror we were facing, and because the disease is a new one, we overlooked a few things. First of all, there were no vital signs, so we were quick to pronounce men “dead.” But a talented group of medical doctors who had worked with many comatose patients started to notice things—little signs that maybe all was not lost. They experimented with some of the latest therapies and found that they could trigger reactions in some of the men’s bodies—a sort of jump-start, if you will. Now the men would be in comas, so they couldn’t function, but they would be alive—alive until a cure could be found.

“Sadly,” she said, getting off the chair, “we only have people and facilities to treat a small number. It was difficult to get the word out to others, and by the time we could have, most of the men had died for real, or been buried in this pre-comatose state, surely to die when oxygen is so restricted.

“We began to worry about the world. If people discovered that we were keeping these “zombies” alive, would they be angry? Would they lash out? ‘Why only your families?’ we could almost hear them say. We feared a backlash, but we did what we could. We used our own families as guinea pigs, mad doctor scientific experiments.

“Well now, colleagues, I am back with good news. We have

found a cure for both diseases, and I have brought them here with me.” She walked down one aisle, knelt beside the bed, and administered the serum into an IV. Slowly, almost unbelievably, the body began to stir, and when she recognized the heaving and contortions, she reached down to disconnect the mask of wires that surrounded the face of the patient. It was her husband, Ken.

“I’d like you to meet a living, breathing Lazarus,” she said, directly to the girls. “Your father.”

And despite the Ice Storms, despite all the hardships and despite the hard lies Jennifer had been forced to endure for all this time, the times were changing. Already things were better. Because all these hardships, dangers, and troubles? They could now face them together—as a family.

