

DEEP SHADOWS

VANNETTA
CHAPMAN



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For Brenda and George

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Last, I would like to thank you, dear reader, for following me down this path of a different genre. My prayer is that this novel will cause you to look at your life, your neighbor, your town, and your faith with fresh eyes. If you've never been to the Texas hill country, come on down and enjoy some of the most beautiful land God created.

And finally...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:20).

So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.

PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS,
CHAPTER II, VERSE 5



*We are living on the brink of the apocalypse,
but the world is asleep.*

JOEL ROSENBERG

PRELUDE

Abney, Texas

June

Shelby Sparks couldn't breathe. Max had knocked her to the ground seconds after the explosion. She heard the *swoosh* of a home collapsing and felt the heat of the fire from where she lay in the middle of the street. None of that mattered.

She pulled in a deep breath, coughed on the smoke, and choked on the words she needed to say.

Someone screamed for help.

Another explosion ripped through their neighborhood.

A roaring fire surrounded them.

Shelby was consumed by a single thought—Carter was out there. She had to reach her son. She pushed against Max, pleaded with him to let her up, tried to jab him with her elbows. All the while, she fought the sobs tightening her throat.

“Are you okay?” he shouted.

He'd raised up enough to check on her. She didn't pause to listen to a word he said or answer a single question. A part of her mind registered the wall of flames, the destruction and death. She pushed those thoughts aside, struggled to her feet, and ran toward her son.

ONE

Bend, Texas

One week earlier

Shelby stumbled over a tree root, tried to maintain her balance, and ended up bumping into Max, who glanced back at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m fine,” she snapped.

Hiking was not her idea of fun, especially since she had an almost pathological fear of snakes. Something scurried through the underbrush. She momentarily froze, but all she could hear was the thudding of her heartbeat and the clomp of Max’s boots against the rocky trail. Resisting the urge to look behind her, she opted instead to pick up her pace and catch the group. They were heading northeast and climbing steadily up. The nearly setting sun cast her shadow in front of her—elongated and misshapen. She wouldn’t have agreed to the afternoon’s activities if it weren’t for the three friends who insisted she step away from her computer and enjoy the great outdoors.

Max Berkman, Bianca Lopez, and Patrick Goodnight gained the top of the trail a few moments before her. Max was tall and wiry, with black hair beginning to tinge with gray. Bianca was shorter than Shelby—no more than five three, curvy and beautiful. Patrick managed to keep up in spite of his size. He was a big man, with the body shape of the linebacker he had been in high school. He’d retired from the army five years ago. Shelby knew he worked at keeping himself in the same physical condition he’d sported during his years of service.

She literally collided with the group as they stood with their mouths half-opened, staring around them in amazement.

The view was a dramatic one. The Colorado River curved like a serpent, two hundred feet below. The Texas hill country stretched out in the distance, green from recent rains. The state park where they were hiking offered over thirty-five miles of trails, though they'd only covered a small portion of that—from the parking area to the Tie Slide Trail, down to Gorman Falls, and now circling back to where they had started via the River Overlook Trail. Probably less than five miles, but it felt like more. Shelby's heart raced, the muscles in her calves quivered, and sweat trickled down her neck.

She realized, with a start, that she was the only one looking at the view.

Glancing up, she at first thought she must be dreaming—that she would wake to find herself at home, in bed, and safe. She closed her eyes and attempted to calm her heart rate. When she opened them, if anything the scene had become more bizarre. What should have been a dark-blue sky was now streaked with shafts of green, pink, purple, and red. The colors of the rainbow, but more sinister.

The lights of the aurora borealis swirled across the Texas sky.

“Northern lights?” Max pulled off his ball cap and wiped the sweat from his brow. “Here?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Bianca said, her voice filled with awe. She tipped her head back and stared straight up, her mouth partially open in surprise.

Curtains of predominantly red arcs brightened the sky, reflecting off every rock, tree, and cactus. Shelby had asked someone for the time less than a mile back, and Max had said it was eight p.m. The sun had set and the sky was beginning to turn dusky. She’d picked up her pace, wanting to make it back to the truck before complete darkness fell.

But now, the sky was unnaturally bright.

“This shouldn’t be visible here,” she murmured.

“I’ve read about it, but I’ve never seen it.” Patrick leaned against a boulder and continued to stare at the sky.

Max watched Shelby.

She glanced at Max and shook her head. “We need to get back. Now.” When he only cocked his head, she said, “I need to check on Carter.”

“Can you call him?”

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and pressed Carter’s number under Recent Calls. As she suspected, the call wouldn’t go through.

Bianca and Patrick had taken out their phones as well and were using them to take pictures of the northern lights.

Max stepped closer to Shelby. “What’s wrong?”

“The call won’t go through. I need to get home, Max. I need to be there in case Carter...in case he has a problem.”

“All right. Let’s double-time it.”

Bianca had been turning in a circle, photographing the celestial event. She was a freelance graphic designer and sold many of her photos on the web. Finally tearing her gaze from the sky, she asked, “Is this a problem?”

“Yes, it is.” Shelby worked to keep the panic from her voice. Maybe she was misremembering her research. Possibly she was overreacting.

The aurora continued to bathe them in its unnatural light, even tinting their skin the color of a red rose. Patrick exchanged a questioning look with Max, who was readjusting the weight of his backpack.

“The lady says we need to hurry. Let’s go.”

It was a testament to their friendship that everyone held their questions. The group turned back toward the trail, and that was when they heard the whine of a jet engine, followed by a thunderous crash. To the southeast, black smoke rose to meet the swirling light of the borealis.

Bianca gasped, Max and Patrick stood frozen, and Shelby realized that the nightmare she feared was actually happening. Each member of the group instinctively stepped closer together.

“What was that?” Bianca swiped at her hair, and Shelby noticed that her friend’s hands were shaking. “Patrick? What was that? Did we...did we actually just see a plane crash?”

Before Patrick could respond, they heard the whine of another plane—this one smaller, probably a single engine, and headed south. As they watched, another dot approached, and then the planes collided. They tumbled to the ground as more smoke filled the sky.

“None of those planes were military,” Patrick said.

“Those people...are they all dead?” Bianca backed up against a tree and slid to the ground. “Are you telling me...did an entire plane of people...did three *entire* planes of people just die right in front of our eyes?”

"I'm fairly certain the first was a domestic flight, probably headed to the regional airport." Patrick's tone was grim, hardened—the voice of a soldier assessing a situation. "The other two could have been private jets."

Shelby glanced at Max, who had once again pulled out his phone. "Nothing. I can't access 9-1-1, there are no emergency notifications, there's nothing."

She fought the urge to vomit, covered her mouth with her hand, and tried to think clearly. This could not be happening. Not now.

Plane crashes. People burned alive. The borealis.

The thoughts spun and collided in her mind, and beneath those more selfish, more urgent ones rose to take their place.

They weren't ready. Probably they never would have been ready, but Shelby's life had finally begun to resemble something normal. Carter was to leave for college at the end of August.

Please, not now. The words were a prayer coursing through her heart.

Max's expression had settled into a hard, straight line. "We can't help those people. It's farther away than it looks."

"So we just leave them?" Bianca's voice cracked. She stood and swiped at the tears running down her cheeks.

"Yeah. We do." Max repositioned his backpack.

Without another word, the four best friends rushed back down the trail, retracing the path they had covered a few hours earlier. Only now everything was different.

They stayed closer together, though darkness had refused to cloak the hillside. Picking out the trail was no problem. It was eerily bathed in the pulsing light of the borealis. In twenty minutes they covered the distance back to where they'd parked. As they turned the last corner and caught sight of Max's truck, another explosion shattered the evening's silence.

TWO

That sounded different,” Shelby said. Her legs trembled, and her right arm had begun to shake.

“Probably a train.” Max led the group and Patrick brought up the rear. Bianca was breathing heavily when they stopped.

The parking area was deserted. There was no sign of park rangers, emergency vehicles, or other hikers.

Patrick stored their packs in the bed of Max’s old Ford pickup. When he’d bought the truck, it had been used but in pristine condition. He’d liked it because it didn’t have any gizmos—no backup cameras or computers that would require replacing. Now it was twenty years old and showing the wear of travelling down a few too many country roads.

Max pulled out his keys and unlocked the doors, muttering, “Let’s hope it starts.”

“It would. I mean, it will,” said Shelby.

She started to climb into the backseat of the extended cab pickup, but Max nodded toward the front. She hesitated, and then she stepped up on the running board and grasped the grab bar, pulling herself into the passenger seat.

Patrick and Bianca hopped into the back.

They were all buckled by the time Max started the truck. He put it in drive and sped down the caliche, white rock road.

Patrick tapped on the back of the seat. “Someone want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Yeah, what is happening? Planes falling out of the sky? A possible train

derailment? Are we being attacked?” Bianca attempted to drink from a water bottle, but her hands were shaking too badly. She recapped it and asked, “Can you get anything on the radio?”

Max turned it on and cycled through his preset stations. They heard nothing but static.

“Does this have anything to do with the aurora?” she asked Shelby.

“I think...that is, I’m sure the northern lights are caused by a solar flare. Probably the flare disrupted the electrical systems on the planes and the train, and even the radio and phones.”

Silence filled the truck, and then everyone started talking at once.

Max accelerated as he turned right onto the blacktop. The back tires of the truck slipped and spun before gripping the road. He held up a hand and said, “Shelby, tell us what you know.”

“We’re not supposed to see the aurora. It’s never been this far south. The fact that we can see it means that this is a solar event of unprecedented proportions.”

“Unprecedented?” Max continued staring at the road, gunning the truck, his hands wrapped tightly around the wheel.

“No one knows how...” She stopped, closed her eyes, and prayed fervently that she was wrong. “We can’t be sure what an event of this magnitude will do.”

“The truck started.” Max continued driving with his left hand and pulled out his phone with his right. He split his attention between the screen and the road. “Why does my truck work but not the phones? I thought electromagnetic pulses fried anything with a circuit board.”

“You’re thinking of an EMP. A solar flare is different. It’s...” She thought again of the notes in her study. Maybe she had the details mixed up. Perhaps this was a nightmare, and she’d wake in a moment. “Some of the effects are similar, but it’s not the same. In many ways, it’s worse.”

“How long will it last?” Max asked.

“Who knows? Twenty-four hours? Thirty-six?”

“Tell me why the truck works.”

“Because it’s older, would be my guess. The newer ones—anything with an advanced circuit board, keyless ignition, any vehicles with GPS integrated into the system—might not.”

“So why does my phone work?” Bianca sat forward, shoving the phone

toward Shelby. “See the pictures? I took them a few minutes ago. Why does it work? Maybe you’re wrong. Maybe—”

“I’m not wrong. Solar flares cause power surges. If you’d had your phone plugged in to charge it, then a flare would have fried the circuits. No one actually knows what would happen to automobiles during a major solar flare because it hasn’t happened in the last hundred years.”

“And the planes?” Patrick asked. “We have had solar flares before.”

“Minor ones.”

“But we’ve had them. Air traffic was diverted from the north and south poles, but the flares didn’t actually harm any of the navigational systems.”

“Because they didn’t fly straight through one. With this event—if it’s as big as I think it is—there would have been no flying around it.”

“The train explosion...” Max glanced her way and then back at the road. “Train switches are all electrical. This flare...it would have fried those as well?”

“Maybe. I guess so.”

“How do you know all this, Shelby?” Patrick was now practically in the front seat, hanging over the space between her and Max.

“I did some research, for a book—”

“You write romance stories.”

“Yes, but they’re historical. For last year’s release, I researched the Carington Event, the last major CME—”

“CME?” Bianca pushed into Patrick’s space, so that both of their heads were comically hanging over the seat back. “I thought you said it was a solar flare.”

“A CME is a coronal mass ejection.”

“Sounds bad.” Patrick sank back against his seat. “God help us if what you’re saying is true.”

“So it’s not a solar flare?” Bianca asked.

“Not all solar flares produce CMEs, and not all CMEs accompany solar flares.” She hesitated, and then she added, “That’s about all I remember. I need to get home and make sure Carter is all right.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Max asked. He’d been relatively quiet, focusing on the road, but now he turned his attention to her.

“I don’t know. I...I need to be sure.”

Shelby glanced back at her friends.

Patrick stared out the window, his large shoulders tense and his expression unreadable. Whatever they were in for, Patrick would be a port in a storm. Actually, everyone in the truck would be.

Bianca was still trying to make a call.

“It won’t work,” Shelby said. “Every call is routed through a satellite, and the satellites are almost certainly fried.”

Max tugged the bill of his ball cap lower, possibly trying to block out the aurora. As for the catastrophe they faced, he drove as if he could outrun it.

THREE

Max knew he couldn't elude what was happening, but the urgency to get his friends back home spurred him to push the old truck. He was an intelligent guy. You didn't make it through four years of college and three years of law school if you were even marginally slow. But what Shelby was suggesting—well, it was difficult to wrap his mind around.

He kept glancing toward her, but she stared resolutely out the window. The cab was oddly quiet, each person lost in images of a world turned upside down. The fear in Shelby's eyes had convinced him of the seriousness of their situation. He'd lived next door to her most of his life, long enough to know that she didn't spook easily. If she thought the aurora was a problem, then he would treat it as such.

His mind shifted to the planes. If all air flight was suspended, it would affect their economy drastically. They'd seen that after September 11. Not to mention the loss of life from those planes caught en route at the time of the flare.

Some would make it, though. Pilots were trained in how to land aircraft without instrumentation. If they could find a safe spot to set down, they would be okay. A field, parking lot, even roadways would work if they were cleared.

The situation was drastic, but they would find a way to deal with it. He didn't for a minute question the validity of what Shelby had described. She might be stubborn and increasingly silent about her feelings, but she wasn't one to overreact.

The truck practically sailed over the last cattle guard, and they flew

past the sign that read “You Are Leaving Colorado Bend State Park.” He might have sped right past Sad Sam’s Bait Shop, but the sheer number of cars caused him to slam on the brakes.

“We’re stopping?” Patrick asked.

“Looks like we have to.”

The normally vacant store was brimming with people. A few cars were double-parked next to the building, and some even spilled out onto the road. Max slowed to maneuver around a particularly long sedan.

“Maybe we should go in.” Patrick rolled down his window. “Might be better to know what we’re driving into.”

That would be Patrick’s military training kicking in. He’d been out five years, but old habits died hard.

“And they might know something about the planes,” Bianca said.

Max glanced at Shelby, who shrugged.

“I suppose a few minutes wouldn’t hurt,” Shelby said. “I’m worried about Carter, but I’d also like to know what these people have heard. As long as we can make it a quick in and out.”

As they exited the truck, Max noticed Patrick hanging back. He pulled his pack from the truck bed, unzipped it, and removed his pistol, which he then slipped into a paddle holster.

“Do you really think you’re going to need that?”

“Certainly hope not.” Patrick’s shirt had been tucked into his hiking pants. He pulled it out, then checked to be sure it covered his firearm.

“I think you’re overreacting.”

“I don’t.”

“We want to keep this low-key. I’m hoping no one will even notice we’re here.”

The girls had stopped walking toward the store and turned to watch them. So instead of arguing, Max shrugged and they hurried to catch up.

The four walked together in a tight group, and Max heard Bianca ask Shelby, “Do you think my parents will be okay?”

A year earlier her father had suffered a broken hip and was currently living in their town’s only rehabilitation and retirement center, Green Acres. Miguel Lopez had healed from the hip replacement, but other health issues kept him at Green Acres. Currently his main problem seemed to be decreased lung capacity due to years of firefighting in the Houston area.

“*Mamá* is fragile and old, but she doesn’t seem to realize it.”

“Still rising early every day to bake fresh tortillas?” Shelby asked.

“Yes. When they’re ready, she climbs into the old Buick, which she’d never driven before *Papá* was hospitalized, and she takes him breakfast. *Mamá* claims he would waste away to nothing eating the food at the rehab facility.”

Max was thinking that it helped to speak of something normal, to calm their nerves so they didn’t feel like they were flying apart.

Once they reached the door of the small store, Max glanced at Shelby, who was running her thumbnail back and forth across her bottom lip. Bianca continued to clutch her phone in her right hand. Patrick’s eyes scanned left to right and then back again.

“They’ll be okay,” Patrick assured Bianca. “Your mom will be home by now.”

“But *Papá*—”

“Green Acres has a generator.” Max reached for the handle of the old screen door. “With any luck, that will be working.”

Bianca nodded once, and then they pushed their way through the store’s squeaky door. They had stopped there a few times before, always after hiking at the Bend. The place had not been updated since its construction more than a hundred years before. Faded wood siding greeted customers, and the shelves held a surprising variety of goods. Max enjoyed stopping at the old place. For one thing, it wasn’t crowded like the large gas stations on the major roads.

Usually.

Tonight the place was packed with people. Every person’s attention was trained on the man at the front of the room—Sam Collins, the owner of Sad Sam’s.

Max slid along the back wall, just inside the door, and the rest followed.

“Quiet down. Toby’s been able to get some news over his ham radio. It’s high frequency, so he’s heard reports from as far away as Houston.”

“He should be able to reach a lot farther than that,” someone grumbled.

“Yeah, I should, but I can’t.” A man with a giant belly extending over his belt and tattoos dancing down his arms stood up. “Y’all know me—Toby Nix. My place is up on the hill to the south of the Pecan Bottoms. Normally I can pick up transmissions from all over the US. What I’m getting since the aurora hit is mainly static.”

“So you can’t tell us anything.” This from a woman who was sitting on top of the ice-cream cooler, a shotgun resting across her legs.

Max surveyed the room. About half the people were openly carrying either shotguns or rifles. Several others were wearing paddle holsters with pistols. Texas had recently become an open carry state, which allowed citizens with a concealed carry license to openly carry handguns as long as they were in a shoulder or belt holster.

“I didn’t say that. I’ve picked up a few transmissions from Abney, Austin, even Houston. The news is all bad.”

FOUR

The room went deathly quiet, and Max questioned the wisdom of their having stopped. This situation could turn ugly very quickly. Too many people, too many weapons, and fear were not a good combination. Shelby stepped closer to Bianca, who clasped her hand. Max and Patrick stood on either side of the women, as if they could protect them from what this man was about to say.

An old man at the back was the first to break the silence. “Tell us about the planes.”

“From what I can put together, air traffic control is down completely.”

“Everywhere?”

“Seems that way—Houston Hobby, George Bush Intercontinental, DFW, even the regional airports like Killeen. It’s mostly chatter. There’s been no official word, but when you hear the same thing from several different sources, you can trust it’s correct.”

Max wasn’t sure he agreed with that statement. Lies spread as quickly as truth. But in this case, he was afraid Toby was right.

“So they’re crashing? Falling into our fields and highways?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Bowman. I realize your son is a pilot. It’s possible that he found a safe place to land or that he wasn’t in the air at the time.”

The old man nodded and stared at the floor.

“That last explosion wasn’t a plane.” This from a middle-aged woman in the middle of the room. “I heard it all the way from my place on the east side. Folks are saying two of the freight trains collided. What would cause that? And what if those trains were carrying hazardous materials?”

Toby looked to Sam Collins, who stood and cleared his throat.

“I believe it was two trains, and I can’t tell you why they crashed into each other. I’ve owned this shop since I was a twenty-two-year-old pup. Never went to college and sure couldn’t fly a plane or drive a train.” Sam ran a weathered hand up and down his jaw. “There’s going to be a lot of questions about this thing and precious few answers. I can’t tell you what was on those trains or why they collided. We’re going to have to deal with problems one at a time, as we receive information about them. But if we focus on what we don’t know, this thing is going to beat us before the first night has passed.”

He sat down, indicating that Toby should continue.

“In some places power is out completely. Other places it fades in and out.”

“We’ve been without power before,” someone called out.

“From what I’m hearing—the big transformers are going down, one by one. That has never happened before, and according to the experts it means the power could stay down for some time.”

“Because of this?” Another elderly man pointed out the window. Though it was now nearly ten in the evening, the cars were bathed in the red light of the aurora.

“There’s all sorts of theories,” Toby said. “Solar flares, grid overload, EMP attack...”

“Who would attack us?” the woman with the shotgun asked.

From the opposite side of the room, Max heard someone mutter, “Want a list?”

“Could be domestic, could be foreign.” Toby hitched up his pants. “I can’t tell you, and there are too many theories coming over the ham to make any sense of it.”

“Could be the aliens have come to fetch D.J. back to their ship.”

This was said by a tall, gangly boy, who was apparently standing next to D.J. The teenager beside him slapped the first on the back of the head, and then they both laughed.

It eased some of the tension in the room, but not much.

Sam stood back up. “I suggest everyone go home and try to get a good night’s rest. Tomorrow is apt to be...challenging. Keep a watch out for strangers.”

“Any strangers appear on my place, and I won’t bother with a warning shot.” The woman sitting on top of the cooler patted her shotgun. “And don’t bother telling me I can’t. I know my rights.”

“We have a right to defend ourselves,” Toby agreed, trying to quiet the group.

But suddenly everyone was talking, and it all sounded reactionary to Max. He glanced at Patrick, who shook his head once, his eyes still scanning the crowd.

“Calm down, folks.” Sam raised his voice to be heard over the crowd. “The last thing we need is for everyone to panic and start shooting the first person they see. More than likely that will be one of your neighbors coming to ask to borrow something.”

“Best make yourself known before you step on my place.” An old man from the back stood and walked to the front of the room. He wore faded dungarees and a soiled ball cap. “I’ve been warning you all for years, but no one would listen to me. You made fun and talked about my conspiracy theories.”

He paused to spit into a cup. “Mind you, there are those who will take advantage of this situation, and you have a right to protect yourself. That’s what the castle law says, and I for one plan to take full advantage of my rights if need be.”

“That is not what the castle law says,” Max said.

Patrick put a hand on his arm, as if to pull him back.

“And who are you?” The man’s tone and expression were far from friendly.

“Max Berkman. We live over in Abney, and I’m a lawyer.”

“Is that so?”

“It is, and you should each realize that the castle law is basically a stand-your-ground law. It means you do not have to retreat if you feel threatened in your place of residence.”

“Or my truck or my place of work.”

Everyone started talking again, but this time Max silenced them by taking another step toward the center of the room.

“You’re right about that, Mr.—”

“Jim. That’s all you need to know.”

“All right, Jim.” Max glanced around the room. He’d meant to stay

quiet, but he'd never been able to abide people misinterpreting the law. "You are only authorized to use deadly force if there is imminent danger. That doesn't include someone passing across your field."

"How do I know they're not coming to kill me?"

"Stop stirring the pot, Jim." Toby glanced out the window and then back at the group. "Hasn't even been a couple of hours, and you sound like you're making a second stand at the Alamo."

"Maybe I am, and maybe you need to take this a little more seriously. You know as well as I do that there are folks who wait for situations like this so they can prey on the weak."

"Which we are not," Toby muttered.

"No, but some of us can be gullible." Sam stepped forward, shouldering Jim out of the limelight and throwing a pointed look at the teenagers. "This ain't the zombie apocalypse. It's real and it's happening now. If the electricity comes back on, even for a few minutes, use the time to fill what containers you can find with water—"

"My well has never gone dry," said the woman with the shotgun.

"True, but unless it's hooked up to a windmill, you won't be getting any water out of it. Most of the wells around here are basically small pipes dug deep into the ground and operated by electrical pumps. Without electricity, we're going to have a problem." This caused a smattering of conversations to erupt.

Max could only make out what the people standing closest to them were saying, and they were debating everything from ammunition to water supply to anarchy.

"Go home," Sam said more loudly, his tone silencing everyone in the room. "Watch for strangers, don't trust anyone you don't recognize, and we'll meet back here at six tomorrow evening. By then we should know more."

A few folks had additional questions. One or two on Max's side of the room turned and glanced their way.

Max touched Shelby's arm and motioned with his head toward the door. He didn't want to still be in the building when the impromptu meeting broke up.

"Not exactly a welcoming group," Patrick said. "And I thought we were going to play it low-key."

Max shrugged. "That was the plan."

"Well, someone forgot to follow it."

"I was clarifying the law."

"You could have picked a better time."

The four of them hurried toward the truck, piled in, and pulled back onto the two-lane.

"People need to understand that the law doesn't change simply because there's an emergency." Max pushed the transmission into drive and accelerated as fast as he dared. He'd feel better once they were within the town limits of Abney.