

RAGING STORM

VANNETTA
CHAPMAN



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EXCERPTS FROM SHELBY'S JOURNAL

Abney, Texas

June 10

Approximately 8:20 p.m. EST

While hiking in Colorado Bend State Park, Max, Bianca, Patrick, and I watched as a massive solar flare collided with the earth's atmosphere. The subsequent solar storm affected every aspect of our infrastructure and resulted in a total collapse of the electrical grid. We were later told there were pockets of areas less affected than others, but the event was felt worldwide. Abney and surrounding towns lost all power. From the first moment I saw the aurora, my biggest concern was finding insulin for Carter. I have to find it. Whatever it takes, I will not watch my son die.

June 11

4:00 p.m. EST

In a meeting on the courthouse square, our mayor read a news bulletin she received through the nearby Fort Hood military base. According to Mayor Perkins, the president of the United States declared a national state of emergency and implemented martial law. We are not to expect help from federal or even state government agencies. At this point we're on our own.

June 15

11:34 p.m. EST

The neighboring town of Croghan attacked Abney. The attempt to overrun our town failed, resulting in fourteen casualties. Max wants us to move north, to High Fields, but I need to go south—to Austin, to find insulin.

ONE

High Fields Ranch

June 28

Shelby made her way slowly, carefully through complete darkness to the small guesthouse. Smoke drifted toward her. Max had assured her the burning structure was on the far side of the state highway. “It won’t jump the road.”

She couldn’t see it from where she stood—couldn’t see much of anything. And the silence? It was total.

No jets screaming overhead.

No television blaring in the main house.

No vehicles driving the adjacent country road.

The quiet should have been unnerving, but she took comfort in it.

She walked into the house, catching the screen door so it wouldn’t bang, but Carter heard her. He was sitting in the darkened living room.

It was a conversation she’d hoped to avoid, but she sat down across from him and waited. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could make out her son’s crossed arms and tense posture.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was ragged. “It’s dangerous for you to go alone.”

“I won’t be.”

“So Max is going with you.”

“He is.”

“And I should too.” He practically spat the words, his tone bitter and hard and still mourning.

“You’re not going.”

“I’m not a child anymore.”

“I didn’t say—”

“And it’s not as if you know everything. Our house? Gone. Kaitlyn? Dead. The town we called home my entire life is hanging on by a thread, so don’t pretend you know all the answers.”

“Carter—”

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped together. Diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when he was four years old, he had always been a thin child, but since the flare he’d lost another ten pounds. Added to that, he was still shooting up and was now a good three inches taller than her. She suspected he would top out somewhere near six feet, the same height as his father. He had her hair—black with a tendency to curl—and her dark brown eyes. It was amazing how much she could see in the darkness, how well she knew her seventeen-year-old son. Anger and regret dripped off him.

“It’s for me. You’re doing this for me. At least let me go with you.”

“You’re staying here. This place is safe.”

“I can help. I’m a good shot, and I can drive if you get tired or if...if Max has another migraine.”

She waited until the quietness from outside permeated the room—until the only thing left to hear was the chirp of crickets, a blackbird calling in the night, and the beat of her own heart.

“You make good points, but I won’t risk losing you. Max and I will take care of this. We’ll find a supply of insulin and bring it back, and I think—I think that Max’s parents are going to need you here.”

“To fish? You want me to stay here and fish while you risk your life, risk Max’s life...” He dropped his head into his hands.

Shelby stood, moved over to the couch, and sat beside him. As she’d done so many times over the years, she rubbed his back in slow, gentle circles.

She waited and prayed.

Carter didn’t turn toward her, but his voice broke when he said, “I’ve killed a man. Maybe more than one. And I watched Kaitlyn die in front of my eyes. I don’t want to stay here. I want to be doing something.”

But he must have known that his words wouldn't change her mind. Shelby understood that he was talking to himself, that he was trying to work through all that had happened and this new world they were trying to survive in.

Without glancing her way, he stood and walked out of the room.

TWO

Max waited beside the 1984 Dodge Ramcharger, holding a thermos of coffee.

The two-door SUV was a tough off-road vehicle. More importantly it provided critical storage space which could be accessed from inside. The paint was faded to gray, the cloth upholstery worn thin, and the odometer had turned over more than once. What mattered was that the engine still worked, in spite of the flare. There wasn't a computer chip on the beast, which made Max all the more comfortable about taking it to Austin.

His watch read six o'clock straight up when Shelby stepped out of his grandparents' cottage and walked toward him. She wore cargo pants, which provided plenty of pocket space—they'd also be lighter and dry more quickly than jeans. A long-sleeved shirt covered a cotton tank top. Her backpack was slung over one shoulder, she wore hiking boots on her feet, and her black curls were pulled back and stuffed into a Texas Rangers ball cap. Five foot seven and thin, she was tougher and more resilient than any woman he'd ever known.

The sky had lightened to a robin's egg blue—pale and soft and fragile. “Carter?” she asked.

Max shook his head and offered her the coffee. “What's in the backpack?”

“Stuff.” She sounded defensive and must have realized it. “A change of clothes, a first aid kit—I didn't want to pack it in the back in case we need it quick—and my writing supplies.”

“That’s a good idea, Shelby. Someone should chronicle this.”

“Our grandchildren will want to know how it all fell apart.”

“And how we put it back together again.”

She didn’t answer that. Shelby was once an optimist, but that trait seemed to have disappeared with the power grid.

“Your Ruger 22?”

“Outer pocket. Loaded, and I have one box of extra shells.”

“Good.”

They both turned to watch Max’s parents, Georgia and Roy Berkman, make their way from the main house to where the Dodge was parked. In their late sixties, they were physically fit and accustomed to a life without certain luxuries.

Georgia handed Shelby two paper lunch sacks. “You both need to eat.”

She pulled Shelby into a hug. “Don’t worry about Carter. We’ll watch after him.”

Max shook hands with his father, who nodded once and pulled him into a bear hug. Whatever needed to be said had already been tossed around not once but many times. “I called ahead on the CB to check with the night watch. Roads appear to be clear.”

“Are you sure you have everything you need?” Georgia clasped her arms around her middle.

“We’re fine, Mom. Food, water, items to trade, extra fuel.”

“You’re taking the rifle?” Pop asked.

“I am, as well as my Sig P232, and Shelby has the Ruger.”

The door to the shed banged shut, and Carter emerged—carrying a fishing rod and a bucket. He stared at them for a moment, and then he turned in the opposite direction, toward the creek.

“Six days, seven at the most,” Max said, folding his long frame into the driver’s seat of the battered Dodge.

“Godspeed, son.” His pop stepped closer to his mother, as if together they would find strength for the week ahead.

Shelby glanced after Carter one final time, and then she climbed into the SUV beside him. Max pulled away on the caliche road, headlights off, his parents a shrinking image in his rearview mirror.

“Carter will be all right.”

"I know he will." Shelby jerked off the baseball cap and stared out the front window. Dark curls framed her face, masking her expression.

"It's going to take a while."

"For?"

"Him to adjust to life on a farm? Get over Kaitlyn's death? Forgive you for not letting him go? Take your pick."

Shelby sighed and reached for the thermos. "Parenting doesn't get any easier, even with global disaster."

"Did you think it would?"

"I hoped."

They rode in silence, stopping at the roadblock for an update. Farm equipment and diesel trucks stretched across the width of the road—from fence post to fence post. Four men, aged twenty to sixty-five, perched atop the vehicles, each holding a rifle.

"Anything?" Max asked.

"It's been quiet all night." Ray Garrett hopped off the truck and walked over to where they waited. The man was a few years older than Max, six feet tall, with a wiry build and a farmer's tan. He nodded toward Shelby, who was standing next to her open door, and shook hands with Max.

"Fire's still spreading on the east side of the highway. There's only a light wind, but enough to push it south."

"Through Townsen Mills?"

"Probably. The river will stop it to the south of there."

"Any more looting?" Shelby asked.

"Hard to say. No one has attempted to come this way in two, maybe three days. But on the state road? Your best bet is not to stop—for anything."

"We won't," Max assured him.

Garrett wished him a safe trip, and then he signaled for his son, Logan, to back up one of the trucks and allow them through.

When they reached the main road, they began to see signs things had worsened.

The first vehicle they passed was burned out with no sign of its occupants. The second wasn't burned, but the car was riddled with bullet holes and the driver was slumped over the wheel. There was no need for Max to stop. It was plain enough that the man was dead.

“Looks like a war zone.” Shelby glanced right, then left—right then left, as if she needed to scan for hijackers. She’d pulled out her notebook and pen and was jotting down a few notes, but she stopped when they reached Townsen Mills. Little more than a crossroads, it had once been a quaint place to stop and fill up the gas tank, grab a sandwich, and shop for antiques. Approaching from the north, they saw a minivan stranded in the middle of their lane. Max slowed to maneuver around it.

“Maybe they broke down.”

A string of belongings stretched away from the open door of the van and to the south of the vehicle—blue jeans, a child’s shirt, someone’s pajamas. Two hundred yards from the vehicle, a suitcase lay abandoned and empty.

“They must have been running...running from someone.” Shelby leaned out her window.

There was no sign of the van’s occupants.

Everything on the east side of the road had burned. Smoke rose from collapsed dwellings, but still there was no sign of people. The few buildings that lined the road to the west had been deserted when they’d driven through the week before. Recently someone had taken a paintbrush and written across the front of the building in bold red strokes.

“The end is near?” Shelby sighed in disgust. “They could at least put something original if they’re going to bother with graffiti.”

Smoke began to drift across the road. Shelby reached into the backseat, grabbed two T-shirts from the bag she had packed, and handed one to Max. He held it over his nose and mouth. Already his throat was scratchy, and visibility had dropped to less than five feet.

Just when he wondered if they should stop or turn around, they crossed the river and drove out of the haze, the remnants of the fire giving way to a beautiful June morning.

Max resettled the ball cap on his head. “I’m surprised at how quickly we descended into lawlessness.”

“You are?”

“What? You didn’t realize I was once an idealist?”

“I’m the writer. I’m the one who succumbs to flights of fancy. You are the realist, the pragmatist.” She jerked a thumb toward the scene behind them as Max accelerated. “I thought you would have expected this.”

But he hadn't. He'd clung to the law, even when there was no way to enforce it. Less than three weeks since the flare, and already the area he'd grown up in looked like a setting for the latest blockbuster apocalyptic movie.

Sunshine spilled across fields green with summer crops—hay and sorghum and corn, precious little corn. Occasionally, Max caught light reflecting off a windshield.

"Lookouts," Shelby murmured.

"Guarding crops—more signs of the time."

They didn't stop or even slow until they approached the north side of Abney.

A billboard sign, riddled with bullet holes, hung haphazardly from a single support. "*Welcome to Abney. Enjoy the Texas Hill Country.*"

And just beyond the sign, an even bigger roadblock crossed all five lanes of the road. Max stopped the Dodge, leaving the keys in the ignition.

"Keep the rifle close." But once he began walking toward the trucks, he recognized several of the men on patrol.

"Josh." He shook hands and gestured toward the reinforced roadblock—which now consisted of an eighteen-wheeler, a tractor, four trucks, and a flatbed. "Had trouble?"

"A fair-sized group of men struck two nights ago. Frank Kelton was killed and two others injured."

Max stared toward the downtown area. Finally he shook his head. "Sorry to hear that. Frank was a good man."

Josh scratched at his face where he'd sprouted a full beard. "Perkins upped patrols after that."

"Makes sense." Max glanced back at Shelby. "We're just going through, on our way to Austin."

"Mayor wants to see you both first."

"Are you kidding me?"

Josh shrugged. "She left word. Guess she figured you'd come through eventually, on account of Carter."

"Look, we don't have time to meet with Mayor Perkins. I'll be happy to stop by on our way back—"

"Can't do it." Josh was already signaling to one of the other men

standing guard. “Get on the horn to the mayor. Tell her I’ll be by with Max in a few minutes. And get someone here to take my place.”

“What’s this about, Josh?”

“Think she told me?” Josh laughed, but it was a hollow sound. “I’m just a grunt and happy to be one. Anyone who mans a shift receives an extra portion of that week’s harvest.”

“Harvest?”

“Deer, hogs, dove—you name it.” He glanced at Shelby, who had joined them.

“What’s this about?”

“Josh was just explaining to me new procedures the mayor has implemented.”

“She sends a hunting group out every day, and what they get, well, we can’t exactly keep it in the freezer. There’s a rotating schedule for folks to receive a portion of that day’s take, but if you work a shift your name goes on the schedule twice. My nephews are growing, and they need the meat.”

“All right. We’ll go see Perkins.”

“Why would we go see Perkins?” Shelby had again donned the baseball cap, and now she pulled it down to block out the sun.

“Apparently she’s insisting we stop by.”

“Wasn’t my idea,” Josh reminded them. “I’m just the messenger here.”

“Got it. But Josh, remember that we are neighbors. I own a house three blocks over and so did Shelby before it was destroyed in the gas line explosion.”

“We’re not the enemy here,” Shelby added. “We belong in Abney.”

“Of course you do, which is the only reason I’m going to allow you to keep your weapons.” He walked away, leaving Max and Shelby impatiently waiting.

“What can she possibly want with us?”

“I’m not sure, but we don’t have time for this.”

“Agreed.” She tapped her fingers against the thermos she was still holding. “Maybe we can sneak out the south side once he lets us through.”

“Not a chance. He’s going to escort us.”

Josh made a circular motion over his head, and someone manning the

barricade jumped down and backed up the flatbed truck, leaving barely enough space for Max to squeeze the Dodge through.

“They’re being careful,” Shelby muttered.

“If they’re being this paranoid with someone they know, imagine how they treat strangers.”

Once they were on the other side, Josh jumped into a small sedan and proceeded to lead them toward city hall.

THREE

Do they think we can't find city hall?" Shelby scowled at the scene outside her window. "Or are they worried we'll make a run for it?"

"I know we're in a hurry, but this could be important."

"Important? Finding insulin for Carter is important. This is bureaucracy at its worst."

"Perkins has been a good mayor, in spite of all that has happened. How about we listen to what she has to say? I promise you we'll keep it short."

Everything about their situation grated on Shelby's nerves. The notion that they'd been detained—that it was possible for the mayor to do so, Josh Hunter's role as escort, and the fact that they were crawling along at twenty miles an hour. And all the while, the burden of Carter's need, of what she and Max would have to do to fill it, pressed in on her heart like an ever-tightening vise.

Then they passed the town's only grocery store.

Max let out a long, low whistle. A fire had taken out the majority of the structure. The roof was caved in, and the glass windows had apparently exploded out, as the parking area was littered with glass.

The gas station, which sat at the far end of the property, appeared untouched, but now there were barricades around it and an officer sitting in a patrol car at the only entrance.

"I barely recognize this place," Shelby said.

"It certainly doesn't look like the town we grew up in."

The Sonic across the street had been looted, and most of the speakers,

where you placed your order for a double cheeseburger or tater tots, had been ripped off their poles.

“Why would someone do this? Why destroy our town?”

“People are scared and some are angry. Those two things are never a good combination.”

The furniture store where Shelby had bought her couch, the pharmacy where she’d purchased Carter’s insulin, even the bank where she’d made her last withdrawal had all taken a hit—shattered windows, doors busted in, and any contents looted. She thought she could make out bloodstains on the sidewalk in front of the Western store.

Ten minutes after they’d left the barricade, they parked outside the mayor’s office. A guard checked them for weapons. Stepping back and raising his rifle, he said, “I’m going to need you to leave your handguns in the vehicle.”

Shelby’s revolver was still in her backpack. Max’s semiautomatic was in a belt holster.

Max glanced at Shelby, shrugged, and placed his Sig inside the center console. She did the same with her .22. After checking once more to confirm they didn’t have any type of weapon on their person, the guard nodded them toward the entrance to city hall, where an armed woman walked them to the mayor’s office.

Nadine Perkins looked to Shelby as if she’d landed on her feet. She wore jeans and a freshly laundered Western shirt. Her long gray hair was pulled back with a clasp, and her face was devoid of makeup.

“I apologize for interrupting your trip.”

“Then why did you?” Shelby asked, not even attempting to hide her irritation.

“Coffee?”

“No.” Max begrudgingly sat in the chair she indicated. “We need to be on our way, Nadine. There’s a reason we left before sunrise.”

They’d agreed before walking in the building that they would make this as short as possible. They needed to be on the road if they had any chance to be in Austin before the sun set.

“I need your help.”

“Any other time, we’d be happy to—”

“No, Max. You’re going to hear me out. You’re both still technically residents of this town, and right now Abney needs you.”

“My son needs me.” Shelby perched on the edge of her chair. “That’s our first priority at the moment.”

“I understand your concern for Carter—”

“Don’t do that. Don’t placate me. Tell us what you want so we can tell you no, and then we’re leaving.”

Nadine didn’t look surprised or even upset by Shelby’s outburst. “These are terrible times, and I understand that you have to put the needs of your family first. But I have to put the needs of this town first, and I’m willing to trade gasoline for your help.”

“We have plenty of—”

“Hang on, Shelby. We could always use more fuel.” Max turned his attention back to the mayor. “If we could fill up our vehicle and the two gas cans we’re carrying on our return, we might agree to help.”

“Of course.”

“I know how limited your supplies are.”

When Max glanced her way, Shelby glowered at him. She didn’t want to negotiate with this woman. She wanted to focus on their mission.

Max was once again addressing Perkins. “This isn’t just a generous offer.”

“No, it’s not.”

“What do you need?”

“First of all, I’d like to help you both get the insulin you’re looking for. Carter can’t have more than a month’s worth—”

“How do you know my son’s diabetic?”

“You gave a presentation to the council when you were petitioning for needle boxes to be placed in public restrooms.”

Shelby sank back into her chair. That had been years ago, and the mayor had remembered. *Well, the woman was a politician at heart. Any information she could use, she filed away for a rainy day.* The uncharitable thought pricked her heart. There had been a time when she’d assumed the best of people, but the flare had done more than change their world. It had changed her heart—making her jaded, suspicious. That wasn’t who she wanted to be, but she had no idea how to go back.

Nadine cleared her throat, and then she asked, "You left a week ago?"

Max nodded, walked over to the thermos, and poured them both a cup of coffee. He handed the mug to Shelby and said, "Might as well drink it if we're going to have to be here a while."

"I should start by catching you up. You both know that fourteen were killed in the fight with Croghan."

"We were here when it happened."

"They were all Croghan residents?" Shelby gulped the coffee, grateful for something to do even though it burned her throat.

"Yes. Another eighteen died in the various gas explosions. We haven't been able to determine what caused those."

"And Eugene Stone?" Max asked.

"Still pretending to be the mayor of Croghan, though we haven't heard anything else from him in the last week."

"Perhaps he's come to his senses."

"It's more likely that he's reassessing how best to get his hands on what we have."

"But you don't have that much." Shelby blew on her coffee. It was fresh and strong. The mayor had come prepared. She was surprised there weren't donuts on the desk.

"Unlimited water from the springs, some fuel reserves, and a small cache of supplies that had been stored in the basement of the courthouse. Not to mention Stanley Hamilton's gun store and the stockpile of weapons that Jake Cooper keeps in his survival shelter." She folded her hands on her desk and shifted her glance from Shelby to Max. "We've lost nine more in the last week—four at the nursing home, two at the hospital, two died in their homes, and Frank Kelton on the roadblock."

"Josh told us about Frank," Max said.

Shelby reached down, unzipped her backpack, and pulled out her notepad. She hadn't planned on keeping a casualty list, but perhaps this aspect also needed to be recorded. Would the deceased be forgotten if she didn't write down their names and how they had died? And yet there weren't enough notebooks left to include the names of all who had perished since the flare—something deep inside assured her of that truth. She clicked her pen and began to write as Perkins continued to update them.

"I've reinforced the roadblocks and made sure that someone with military experience is in each rotation."

"What does Danny think of all this?" Shelby had been staring down at her notepad when she asked about the city manager. The mayor's silence cued her in to the fact that something was wrong. "Tell me Danny Vail wasn't killed."

"Actually...he's gone."

"Gone? Where?" Max glanced at Shelby and back at the mayor.

"I don't know where. He left after the gas explosion."

"Left?" Shelby's voice rose despite her attempt to remain calm. "Danny wouldn't just leave. He's the city manager. He's a good man, and he—"

Perkins cleared her throat, shook her head, and finally sat up straighter. "He drove south, through the barricades, two days after the explosion. He never returned."

"Maybe he was hurt," Max said. "Have you looked for him?"

"I sent two officers out to his house, but Danny wasn't there. He'd cleaned out all of his food, guns, and ammo."

Shelby couldn't believe what she was hearing. Danny Vail had stopped by her house after the flare. He had offered to give her and Carter a place to stay. He wouldn't just walk away from Abney. "Anyone could have taken his things. He could have been robbed."

"Which is why we asked the neighbors if they'd seen or heard anything. One noticed Danny loading supplies into the back of his truck."

It didn't add up, didn't make any sense at all. Shelby looked at Max, but he only shrugged—apparently as befuddled as she was.

"The situation at the nursing home has stabilized for the moment," Perkins continued. "But we need antibiotics as well as maintenance drugs. If this town is going to be a safe place, we have to be able to treat people who get sick—"

"Or shot."

"Or injured doing any number of things. If we don't get more medical supplies, we're going to have a real crisis on our hands."

"Nothing from the state or feds?"

"No."

"I wish we could help. I do." Max leaned forward. "But our plan is to

get into Austin, find some insulin, and get out. We don't even know how we're going to do that or where it's going to be."

Shelby added, "We can't exactly take a shopping list and have it filled at a pharmacy."

"I know that. But I might be able to help you. Dr. Bhatti knows where—"

"Absolutely not." Shelby jumped up, nearly spilling the coffee she held. "That man is not going with us."

"It won't work, Nadine. There isn't room."

"Then you're going to make room." The mayor slapped her hand against her desk. "We need this, Max. Your town, the people you grew up with, need this. Bhatti knows what supplies are most critical. He will recognize what drug can be substituted for another, and he might have ideas where you can find it all—including insulin for Carter."

"I don't trust him." Shelby had crossed over to the windows. She stood there now, back to the mayor, arms crossed, staring down at the town square. "I don't trust him, and nothing you are going to say will change that."

"So you don't trust him. Fine. Keep an eye on him, but take him with you. Because if you don't, there are going to be a lot more deaths in Abney."