

Long Preview Edition

We Have Each Other —

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We Have Each Other

Chapter 1: The Three Brothers

The sun had risen, high over the town of Ruddingham. This town was a town like any other. The birds were singing and flying over the tops of the buildings.

But, nothing on the ground was stirring. In fact, very little had happened there for a long time. Meanwhile, as the birds swooped down low searching the ground for food, a figure stirred in the window of a building near the town centre. This building was a hotel, a former 5-star hotel, before the town became vacant. The towns vacancy occurred very suddenly, after sightings of the northern lights had appeared in the sky. Within hours, the power grid supplying the town and the nearby cities failed, as did most of the communications.

Most of the occupants fled, fleeing on foot or boarded the trains, most of which broke down shortly after, so they had to continue their journeys on foot.

But, not everyone had fled. In the Oasis Hotel, the figure, who had just woken up rose from his bed. Ben, who was 14 years old had stayed behind in the town with his two brothers, Joshua and James, having fled from their abusive parents 5 years prior during all the chaos, taking refuge in the hotel.

They had been treated by their parents as if they were criminals; bullied and harassed by them, taunted by them, forced to do all the chores from morning until night, while their parents had lolled around watching TV. While the family were running, having failed to start the car, the three brothers, who knew the town well from having to do all the shopping and other chores had fled into the hotel which was vacant by the time they got there. The doors were unlocked, the keys for the front doors were still hanging on a hook behind the reception desk.

Ben was quite a short boy, with a very straight face, a long stubby nose, had average skin colour, and a very light build. He wore a pair of rectangular glasses. He was the youngest of the three brothers, being aged 14. He had neat brown hair, which grew very slowly, had Hazel coloured eyes, and looked naturally smart. He wore a tee shirt and pyjama bottoms, most of the time.

James, in contrast to Ben, had a slack face, but the same stubby nose as Ben, had a light brown skin colour and had very untidy brown hair, which was described as “coconut-like”, and his eyes were also brown. He was the tallest of the three, however was not the oldest, being 15 years old. He wore a tee shirt and light jogging bottoms most of the time.

Joshua, just like his brother Ben, very white skinned, and had an average build. He was taller than Ben, but not by much. He was 15 years old, had the same smart hair as ben, but had piercing blue eyes. He dressed light, preferring a pair of jogging bottoms, combined with a tee shirt.

Chapter 2: Just another day

Ben yawned. He picked up his glasses from the bedside table, and

put them on. He then went to the bathroom, and filled the sink, using the cold tap. The brothers had modified the water tank, cutting off the top, and making a hole in the roof of the top floor where the tank was located, made a large makeshift funnel, so it would fill with rainwater. The water pressure was very low, so the sink took several minutes to fill. He washed his face, using just the water, picked up a toothbrush from the side of the sink, and after cleaning it in the water, brushed his teeth with it. When he had finished, he pulled out the plug, and watched the water drain away. He used the toilet, which contained no water. The only toilet with running water in the building was on the ground floor.

Ben went from the bathroom back into the bedroom, and opened the door into the hallway. Each of the brothers slept in separate rooms. Ben slept in Room 25, which was located on the third floor. Each floor had 5 rooms. He heard Joshua cough from inside room 24. James slept in 23. Ben approached room 24, and knocked. “come in” came Joshua's quick voice. Ben turned the doorknob, and pushed the door open. Joshua was sat on the side of the bed reading a book, he usually woke up during the early hours of the morning. Unlike Ben's room, which contained very little apart from a few magazines, an old shoebox-type cassette player (which was one of few electrical devices they had found which still functioned), and a battery powered lamp. Joshua had stacks of books, which he had taken from a local book shop after everyone had fled, a small analogue clock, which was mounted on the wall, a few plants on the window sill, and an old fashioned bell telephone. The telephone was for decoration; no dial tone was present on the phone lines.

“morning” said Ben, in his soft voice.

“morning Ben” Replied Joshua.

“Did you sleep well?” Joshua asked Ben.

“the usual, did you?”

“Yes, I slept well thanks, been awake about an hour, James is still sleeping”

“Just got up 10 minutes ago” Said Ben, yawning again.

Joshua placed a sheet of paper in the book he was reading, and shut it. It was titled: “The law of attraction”

“Well” Joshua began in a business like tone, “We need to go to Kieran's place soon, and also we need some more water, the tank is running dry.”

“I need to find some more batteries” Ben replied quietly.

“For the Lamp or the Cassette player?” Joshua replied, placing his book on the bedside table.

“The Cassette player” Ben replied.

“We can go to the run down ASDA and get a few sets while we are there” Joshua replied. “But, at the rate we are going, we will not have many left there. I was thinking, we need some way of charging the rechargeable types, short of scavenging for diesel for the generator out back, or charging them at Kieran's place.”

“Shall I wake James?” Ben asked.

“Go ahead” Joshua replied, picking up another book, titled “Electronic components for dummies”

Ben turned away, and left the room. Back in the hallway, he walked up to James' door, and had just placed his hand on the doorknob, when a voice issued from inside. “I'm getting up, hold your horses!” came James' muffled yells. “I will be back in 5 minutes!” Ben yelled back, and returned to his own room, and

opened his bedside cabinet, withdrawing a purple shoulder bag. He swung it over his shoulders, left the room, and headed down the stairs.

The elevator for the hotel did not function, apart from when the generators at the back of the hotel were powered up, either for heating water to have the odd luxury hot bath, or heating the hotel during times of cold. They used the generator sparingly, having found the ignition key hanging in the key cupboard behind the reception desk.

Ben arrived on the ground floor, into the entrance hall, where the reception desk was. He checked the thermometer which was on the wall by the front doors. It read 19 degrees C. A warm enough day. He tried the front doors, but they were locked. Thinking Joshua had locked them, He deposited his shoulder bag by the front doors, and headed to the toilet, the only toilet which was connected to the water tank on the 4^h floor.

James meanwhile, had already washed by the time Ben returned upstairs, knocking on his door, just as James had returned to his room from the bathroom. James' room was again, different. He had a battery powered lamp on the bedside table, with a stack of books beside it, most being sagas such as Lord of the rings, A cassette walk-man with a set of headphones was by the lamp, a set of 3 working walkie talkies on the side of the bedside table, and 3 boxes of cassettes, which were by the books, a pile of folded jogging bottoms, and Assorted tee shirts. The other two kept their clothes stored in the bedside cabinet of room 22, washing them in the bathroom.

“For once you are up and out” Ben said in a surprised voice, as James opened the door.

“Yeah, got a busy day ahead” James replied.

“Heading to Kieran's place and visiting the run down ASDA store.” Ben began. “I will also suggest that we visit the garden of that posh house near the shell petrol station where we had planted all our stuff”

“They are not ready for picking yet” James said, smiling. “No, not yet. The apples on the tree on the lawn out front as you know don't grow until around Autumn time, that is when the stuff will be ready for picking”

“We have enough stored?” Ben replied.

“Yes, we do. The basement floor here is a lifesaver for storing st...” James began to say

“I know I know you keep saying” Ben cut across him.

“okay... okay... Lets go to Joshua's room” James said quickly.

James left the room, walking quickly to Joshua's room, Ben at his heels.

“Morning James” Joshua said, looking up from the book as James entered.

“Morning” James replied, yawning.

“Got quite a bit to do today” Joshua said, shutting the book so suddenly that Ben jumped.

“Shall we go now?” James asked.

“Yes, I think so” Joshua replied.

“Why did you have to lock the front doors?” Ben asked Joshua,

frowning.

“There have been a few looters who have come and gone from the town. Not a big problem, but we don't want to be disturbed. Kieran has a spare key also.”

“We should lock our rooms then” Ben said, a note of panic in his voice.

“You can if you want, the keys are still hanging down stairs. 2 for each room. Come to think of it, we should lock our clothes room, as other towns nearby have gone the same as this. but don't worry. I just thought we should be on our guard.”

Joshua opened the bedside cabinet, and withdrew a key on a ring, labelled “Main doors”, and shut it again.

“what did you make of them walkie-talkies you thought worked?” Joshua asked.

“One was dead” James replied. “Three worked perfectly, the range is unknown though”

“They will come in useful, no doubt.” Joshua said, getting to his feet and handing James the key.

James left the room. Joshua and Ben followed suit. Joshua shut the door behind him and followed James down the stairs. “we can prepare some food when we are back” Joshua said quietly to Ben, who's stomach gave a huge rumble. “Will be much better when we eat when we relax”

They walked quickly down the stairs after James and stopped in the entrance hall.

“Can I go to the basement and get something to eat now? “Maybe a pack of peanuts?” Ben asked.

“Here” Joshua said, removing a freezer-bag of cut carrot from his pocket and handing it to him.

“Thanks” Ben replied, as he opened the bag and gobbled down the carrot hungrily.

James left the entrance hall through a side door, behind the reception desk, returning with their coats, and 3 full water bottles.

“Filled them last night, save us waiting until we have arrived at Kieran's place” James said.

“Good thinking” Joshua replied, taking one of the bottles from James' outstretched hand. Ben took one too, taking 2 gulps of water, before taking his coat from James and putting it on. Then he went over to his bag which he had left by the doors, and put the water bottle in it.

Joshua put on his coat, too. He put his water bottle into his inner coat pocket. James had already drank half of his water, and placed it on the ground, putting on his coat and stowing the bottle away inside it. Then they all pulled on their shoes, which were by the doors.

“Ready to roll” Ben said happily

“Yeah, lets go” Joshua replied.

James went to the doors, withdrew the key from his pocket, and unlocked them.

They stepped out onto the front lawn. They were near the centre of the town, a big ASDA store visible 100 yards away, Kieran's place was just beyond it, in a small tower block of flats.

“Shall we go to ASDA first?” Ben asked Joshua, looking hopeful
“Yes, I think that's best.” Joshua replied

The three of them made their way towards the ASDA store, passing the 2 apple trees which were planted on the hotels front lawns. The sun had risen now, and the skies were clear.

The walk which they had made so many times before, took less than 5 minutes. In no time at all, they were at the front doors of the ASDA store.

“Finally” James said, rubbing his hands together.

“Didn't take so long” Joshua replied, with a grin.

Ben ran forwards, and attempted to open the main doors. But they would not budge.

“What's happened?” Ben asked, confused.

Joshua tried the doors, too. They did not open.

“They are locked” Ben said, looking annoyed.

“Can't be” Said Joshua, but as he spoke James examined the doors and found the bolts had not gone across, and wondered why the door would not move.

“Someone else has been” James said quietly. “but it is not locked. The bolt hasn't gone across I can't see through the one way glass though”.

“The side door might be still unlocked” Joshua suggested.

They made their way around the front of the store, down to the

side, where the staff car park was, three cars still parked there from 5 years prior.

Ben ran up to the side door, and tried it. It would not budge.

“Joshua, this is locked too” Ben said sadly.

As Joshua and James approached the door there was a click, the doorknob turned, and the door opened.

Chapter 3: Ralpsa

Someone was standing there. A tall, skinny boy, who wore a green shirt, shorts, and glasses. His eyes were a piecing blue, like

Joshua's.

Joshua approached, cautiously. "Hello" Joshua said quietly.
"Hello" Said the boy, standing back to let Joshua in.

The other two approached, and walked in after Joshua. The boy closed the door. They were in the Manager's office.

"Who are you?" Ben asked the boy, surprised. "I have not seen many other people here for a long time".

"My name is Ral" said the boy quietly. "My Proper name is Ralpsa, it is not an English name though. I Prefer to be called Ral for short."

"Nice to meet you Ral" Joshua and James said together, both holding out their hands. Ben was shy but he stepped forward and held out his hand.

"My name is Joshua, These are my brothers, James and Ben." Joshua explained, indicating Ben and James.

"Nice to meet you too" Ral said, a smile appearing on his face.

After shaking hands, the boys stared at one another for a few minutes, then James said slowly "How come you are here?"

Ral's smile vanished like a light bulb blowing. "Chased" Ral said.

"Chased?" Joshua said, surprised. By who?

"This group, around 10 people. I think they are looters". Ral said.

"Where were you before?" Joshua asked.

"In the neighbouring city" Ral replied.

"You came on foot?" Joshua asked, although he thought he knew

the answer already.

“Cable car” Ral began. “By the army barracks, there is a cable car, leads to the other army barracks.

“And it powered up?” James asked surprised.

“Yes. Most electrical devices were blown during the light show though.” Ral said flatly.

“And that wasn't?” Joshua started. “We have found a few things which still work, but...” His voice tailed away, Ral seemed to know what he was thinking.

“Unable to power them for too long without the power grid eh?” Ral asked.

“Not just that, I cant explain for the life of me why most things stopped working, its as if the light show had a lot of solar energy with it”

“You got it quite right” Ral replied. “Energetic surge. Damaged most electrical devices in its path. Simpler electronics survived” Ral explained.

“How did you power up the cable car?” Joshua asked. “We wouldn't mind using it to get to the city, our friend Kieran had solar panels installed before the disaster, so he has some p...” Joshua stopped speaking, and a split second later, The others knew why. They were in a side office, but they heard a disturbance coming from the main shop. Ben went up to the door that came out on the main shops food isle, and opened it. At once, a loud crumbling sound reached their ears. Ben proceeded carefully inside. James, Ral and Joshua followed him.

The sight that met them, was total devastation. The isles had all fallen down on their side; all the items that had been left on them were all over the floor. A grand piano which had been advertised before the disaster in the front windows was on its side, it's keys littering the floor.

The light fittings had all fallen down; broken glass littered the floor.

“What happened here?” Joshua asked Ral. “How long have you been here?”

“Two nights” Ral replied. “And one of the gang did it.”

“How? If they were looting stuff, why damage it?”

“One of the gang who had chased me, had sat on top of the cable car, and as soon as I got out he began to chase me again, I ran down the road, arrived here and went inside through the main doors, and he followed.” Ral paused then continued.

“he then threw something inside and it went a fair distance, before I had time to roll the doors shut and attempt to lock them.” Ral explained. “Next thing I know, there was a big explosion, and the building shook. The guy who had thrown it followed me inside, but he ended up being struck by a falling pillar” Ral pointed to a big fallen pillar between the food and the stationary isles.

“I cant explain why he didn't turn and run” Joshua said, still gazing in horror at the damage.

“He had aimed it to where I had ran, but I had changed direction after he had thrown I think, he was confused and stood still a bit too long.” Ral replied, in a shaky voice.

“It was dangerous to stay here, did you lock the main doors? We didn't think they were locked” James asked.

“No” Ral said simply. “There is rubble in front of the doors, come and look”.

“Is it safe?” Ben asked cautiously.

“It hasn't collapsed yet. I thought I would stay here for a couple of nights before moving location, to make sure no one else had followed.” Ral said, slowly moving towards where the main doors were.

But as he spoke, James leaned on another pillar, and it began to crumble. James had just managed to dive out of the way as the pillar came crashing down.

“RUN!” James bellowed at the others. Ben sprang backwards, his hands over his eyes, while Joshua and Ral ran forwards. The pillar crashed into the ground, blocking the exit. Ben had managed to run back through to the office, before the pillar had crashed down.

“BEN!” Joshua bellowed.

“I am okay” Ben said, his voice shaking.

“We will...” Joshua opened his mouth to say, but he never even got started. At that moment, the building shook violently, rubble started raining down from the ceiling.

“BEN GET OUT, QUICKLY!” Joshua bellowed. “GO GO GO!”.

Ben ran through the manager's office side door entrance and back into the car park. The ground was shaking violently as the side walls began to cave in.

He continued to run as far from the side wall as possible, and sat by a lamp post on the side of the car park.

Meanwhile, Joshua, James, and Ral were all running towards the front shop windows. The roof had begun to fall inwards, as two

more pillars began to collapse. Joshua seized Ral and James by the scruff of their necks, and pulled them along with him, going right through the sheet glass window beside the piano. Shards of glass flew everywhere as the three of them crashed through it, just as the beams from the roof fell to the ground, many of them hitting the floor with a heart stopping CRASH. There was a creak and a groan of metal as the three of them got quickly to their feet outside. Covered in glass shards, they ran through the main car park, and round to the side of the building, where they found Ben, who was holding onto the lamp post for support. They ran towards him at top speed.

“BEN! Are you okay?” Joshua bellowed at the top of his lungs, coming to a halt in front of him, his face full of concern. “I.. I am fine!” Ben replied, coughing and spluttering. He had inhaled a lot of dust.

The ground shook with the force of a small earthquake, as the building collapsed inwards on itself. The telephone wires were pulled along with it, the telegraph pole nearby falling on its side with a thud.

There was a crumbling sound, one last groan of metal, and all was silent.

“That, was a close...” Ral began

“Your not kidding” Joshua replied, Breathing really fast. “Are you and James okay?”

“Yes I think so”, Ral and James replied in unison, also breathing fast. James had bit his lip in the hurry to get out.

“Sorry, I think it was me” James said, looking at Joshua. I leaned on the pillar, you know like we always have done, and it began to

crumble...”

“Don't be sorry” Joshua said. “It was an accident. You only made what was going to happen faster anyway.”

“Let's Get to Kieran's Place” Ben said.

“Who is Kieran?” Asked Ral with mild surprise.

“A friend of ours” James explained. “He lives with his mother in the block of flats behind the ASDA building, about 100 yards behind it. You can see it, now anyway” James continued, pointing a shaking finger at the building showing behind the remains of the ASDA store.

“Shall we go there now?” Ral asked.

“Yes I think so” Joshua said, still breathing very fast. “I will need a bandage” He held up his right hand, which had a cut going down it. He had caught it on the glass of the front window they had smashed through in their hurry to escape.

They all began to walk together, through the staff car park then behind the remains of the ASDA building, and went through an iron gate, along a path, which led to an apartment complex.

“I thought we had had it” James said finally.

“So did I” said Ral. Good thing your brother is quick on the uptake

Joshua smiled.

A few minutes later, they had reached the biggest apartment building of the three in the little complex. Ben ran ahead, and went through the green front door of the building, and arrived at a hall and staircase. The others followed. Ben rushed up to the 4th floor, and knocked on the door. The others came up behind Ben as footsteps were heard from the other side of the door.

“Who is it?” Came a Woman's voice.

“Ben” Ben replied, louder than he normally would have done.

The door opened at once. Kieran's mother was standing in the doorway smiling. “Ben! ” she said, pulling Ben into a hug. However her smile vanished when she saw Joshua's hand. “What happened to you?, you weren't by the ASDA...”

“We were not by it, we were inside it” Ral explained who was standing behind Joshua and James.

“Who are you?” Kieran's mother asked Ral.

“Ral for short, or Ralpsa. I only have been in the town 2 days”

“You were the one that tall person was chasing into the store 2 nights ago?” She asked, open mouthed.

“Yeah, that's me. The person who was chasing me is dead, though. He threw a makeshift explosive which caused a lot of damage, and then the building was accidentally finished off today”

“Was my mistake” Piped up James. “I lent on a crumbling pillar out of habit”

“You had all better come in” Kieran's mum said kindly.

“Kieran is just listening to music.”

They all stepped in. Kieran's mum indicated the sofa in the living room. They all walked into the living room, and sat down on the sofa.

Chapter 4: Kieran's place

Unlike the brother's hotel, Kieran's house had power. They had

had solar panels installed on the roof, weeks before the disaster happened, but after the disaster, they only supplied half the current they were supposed to. There was no carpet, but there was a nice coffee table on one side of the room, with a TV and a 1980s VCR with a stack of videos beside it. There was a house plant beside the sofa. An armchair was opposite the sofa. Kieran's mum went into the small kitchen, returning with a first aid box. She opened it, withdrew a pair of bandages and some antiseptic cream, and Joshua stood up, and she tended to the wound, cleaning it and wrapping one of the bandages on it. "Keep it on for a few days" She said. As Joshua said "Thanks", and Kieran's mum returned to the kitchen, Kieran emerged from his bedroom.

Kieran, had The same build as James, and was taller than him. He had white skin, and wore glasses, too. He was dressed in a shirt and Jogging bottoms., and was 15 years old.

"Hey you lot!" Kieran said happily, running into the room. He stopped and said "Who is that with you?"

"I am Ral for short. Proper name is Ralpsa" Ral replied.

"We met him in the ASDA store" Ben explained as he stood up. "Not that there is any of it left now, though"

"I saw!" Kieran said. "You are all very lucky, that was a..."

"Narrow escape" James cut in. "We were inside at the time it crumbled."

"Wow, do say." Kieran said in shock.

Kieran sat in the armchair, and in 10 minutes, the story of meeting Ral, and the collapse of the ASDA store was told.

“Shocking” Kieran replied. We should begin locking our doors in the day! We do at night, already for this reason.

Kieran's mum stepped back into the living room. “Do you want anything to eat?” She addressed the boys. “I have Apple pie; I found some fresh apples and the other ingredients.”

“Sure! Yes please” All but Ral replied in unison. Ral nodded. “How did you cook it without enough power?” Ral asked. “We do have power, not much but enough to operate the oven if everything else is turned off.” She replied.

“Do you have hot water?” Ral asked her

“We modified our hot water tank to take in rain water from the roof, heating it uses a lot more power. Only the hot tap works. Pressure is decent enough.”

“Please could I have a quick wash or shower? I have not washed properly in weeks”

“Sure, the water is only lukewarm though, the bathroom is there” she said, pointing to a door in the passage.

“Thanks” Ral replied.

“My pleasure” She replied.

Ral went into the bathroom, and washed. Kieran's mum returned to the kitchen, coming back 10 minutes later with the apple pie. Ral returned 15 minutes later, having washed using the mixer

shower, and dried himself off. He ate a piece of the apple pie, the others had already finished theirs.

“So how come you don't all live together?” Ral asked, his mouth full of apple pie.

“We prefer the hotel, and in any case there is not enough room on this floor.” Ben replied.

“Also only one water tank could be modified in this place and plumbing isn't exactly our strong point.” James added.

“You said came to ASDA from the hotel” Ral replied. Is there plenty of room?

“Three floors worth.” Ben replied, laughing.

“Can I stay with you lot?” He asked, not quite meeting their eyes.

“Sure, of course you can. I knew you would end up staying with us when we first met you” Joshua said.

“Thanks so much” Ral replied.

Ben meanwhile was rooting through his bag, which he hadn't put down throughout the whole ASDA ordeal, and withdrew a set of batteries and a wall charger.

“Kieran, can you charge these, please?” Ben asked, Holding up the charger and batteries for Kieran to see.

“Sure, I will plug it in” Kieran replied. He got up from the armchair, and Ben handed him the batteries and charger. Kieran went to the wall behind the TV, unplugged the VCR and plugged the charger in.

“Are you always prepared?” Ral asked Ben.

“Just about” Ben replied, smiling.

“He is the most organised of us three” James said, a smile on his face too.

“We had better get going” Joshua said, standing up. “I think that we should go to the shell petrol station. I might get some diesel while we are there.”

“Can't we stay here while you go there?” Ben asked. James nodded in agreement.

“If you two and Ral wish to stay and bond for a while with Kieran, then there is no problem in staying, if kieran's mum is okay with it” Joshua replied.

“I have not got a problem at all, you are all welcome here” Kieran's mum said from the kitchen.

“I will be back in a while” Joshua began. “I will get some more of the freezer bags for sealing more food in, and some diesel.” Joshua said, getting to his feet.

“See you soon” Kieran and Ral said one after the other Ben and James waved.

Joshua went down the passage and left the apartment.

The others began chatting about their lives, and what happened before and after the disaster had occurred.

Chapter 5: The Blizzard

Joshua descended the stairs, left the apartment, and began to walk back to the hotel. As he got to the front doors, the realization

came that they had not been locked when they had left. Pushing them open, he went inside, then climbed the stairs to the third floor, and entered James' room. He took the set of walkie-talkies, and found the charging base in the bedside cabinet, then returned to the ground floor and took one of the plastic bags that were hanging on a hook by the front doors, loaded the walkie talkies and charging base into it, and deposited the bag by the doors.

Joshua then went out of the back door and entered the little outhouse behind the building, where the backup generators were. He took the empty diesel container from the top of the generator, and found a note stuck to it. "89343". Unable to think what it could have been, he pocketed it.

Joshua then proceeded to hit the generator FUEL LEVEL button, and the fuel gauge showed E. A bit annoyed, he took the empty diesel container back inside and put it in the plastic bag, then headed for the shell petrol station, which was a left-turn from the hotel and about a 10 minute walk straight on.

Meanwhile, at Kieran's house, The others were still chatting, apart from Ben, who was taking a shallow bath. He sat in the bath, and had many thoughts. He had been thinking, why does everything happen, it must have a reason. Why did he have the parents he did, why did the solar disaster happen and destroy half the countries electronic grid, why did he have the brothers he had, and what happens after death. Ben had always been fascinated with life after death, and what lies beyond the world we can see. All three of the brothers shared the interest, but did not discuss it much.

And what forces were at work, Ben thought, that brought Ral to them, and Kieran to them many years ago. Ben emptied the bath after half an hour, and dried himself.

James and Ral were discussing about scientific causes for the solar disaster, which had fried the northern power grid, and Kieran was explaining why certain devices survived, less advanced ones that were not as delicate. It had not escaped Kieran's notice, that they had everything they needed to get by. Just enough at times, but always had enough to get by.

Joshua meanwhile, noticed the temperature outside had become freezing. He had filled the diesel can with diesel from the diesel tank of a lorry that had been parked near the petrol station. The pumps were empty, or did not operate without power, he did not know which. He siphoned the fuel from the lorries' tank using a rubber pipe that he had found inside the station shop, placing one end in the tank and the other end in his mouth, sucking on it and then putting that end into the can. When the can began to overflow, Joshua removed the pipe and replaced the cap. He searched the shop for a spare can, but found nothing but two empty lemonade bottles. He filled one of them, and the lorries tank ran dry. He tried several cars, but most yielded nothing but petrol, he finally came across one, round the corner from the station which contained diesel, and he filled the second bottle. There was still plenty left in the car's tank.

Joshua loaded the bottles and can into the plastic bag, and returned to the hotel, looking at the thermometer on his way past it. It read 7 degrees C. A rapid fall, as only 3 or so hours had passed since they had first set out, it was roughly 1 in the afternoon or so he thought. The sky was starting to get dark. Thinking a thunderstorm was on it's way, Joshua went back to the out house and filled the generator's tank as far as it would go, emptying the can and one of the bottles. The other bottle's contents were transferred into the diesel can and left by the

generator. Joshua looked up at the sky and saw in the distance, what he thought was rain falling. Then a sudden gust of wind knocked him off his feet. And looking again, realized it was snow.

Meanwhile, at Kieran's house, Ral pointed out the howling wind. James opened the window and the window was pulled from him as it swung all the way open. After a 2 minute struggle he shut the window, unnerved by the sudden strong winds.

Kieran's mother entered the room. "We have not had wind that strong for several years, I am sure." She said, a note of concern in her voice.

"Do you think Joshua is okay?" Ben asked the room at large, a note of panic in his voice.

"He will be fine" James said soothingly.

Kieran's mother offered them tea, which they accepted, a hot cup of tea was one of the luxuries here, although without milk. "1 sugar please" Ben called after her. "None for me" Ral said "Same here" Said James. 5 minutes later, they were sipping tea and just listening to the howling wind.

"Hey, Ben I forgot" Kieran began. "I have something for James. I found it in that posh house, they had left their basement doors unlocked." Kieran left the room, and returned with a small cassette/radio walk man, with a set of headphones. "It has working batteries" Kieran said, handing it to Ben, who loaded it in his bag. "I managed to power it up, the record function seems frazzled but it plays tapes okay, I found a kettle as well if you want it"

"Sure" Ben replied, and Kieran returned to his room and came back with the kettle. Ben loaded that into the bag as well. Kieran went to the kitchen and returned with some tea bags and instant

coffee, and handed it to Ben who placed that in the bag, too. “Borrow our spare generator if you want” Kieran began. “for luxury.”

“That doesn't work” Kieran's mother said, as she entered the living room from the kitchen, but before she could say anything more, Ben stood up.

“I have the odd feeling...” Ben began. But before he could finish, the door to the apartment opened, and Joshua came over the threshold, shivering, his neat hair blown all over the place.

“The weather is awful! I noticed it as I refilled the generator” he said loudly, panting. Ral stood up and put a hand to Joshua's face. “you are freezing!” Ral said in horror.

“I have never seen wind that bad. We need to get back to the hotel” Joshua said, still panting.

“Wouldn't you be safer in here?” Kieran's mum said, frowning. “No I don't think...”, if the others want to...” Joshua began but faltered for a moment.

“We want to come to the hotel” Kieran and Ral said together, James nodded.

“Kieran, I would like you to stay here” Said his mother, concerned.

“cant I just...” He protested

“If you want you ca...” she began but she didn't finish her sentence, as at that exact moment, the lights went out.

“Wires come off again” Kieran moaned. He left the apartment and climbed the stairs, up to the top floor, and into the storeroom where the solar electronics were housed. The wind was rushing through this poorly built room, and the wires to the battery had been completely disconnected, and because it was so dark, the

solar panels were not producing enough current. Barely able to see, Kieran reconnected the wires, and the lights came on at once. He then put a plastic box over the battery and weighed it down with a small bag of plaster which had sat in the corner of the room for years. The room shuddered as Kieran left it, and he shut the door behind him and went back to his apartment. “Fixed, same as usual” Kieran said as he walked in, bumping into Joshua who was fumbling in the plastic bag he was carrying. “That room isn't exactly wind proof”, Kieran finished.

“Here” Said Joshua, removing one of the walkie talkie radios from the bag and handing it to Kieran. “They are only slightly charged, but here is one of the charging bases.” Joshua began.

“The other one I think we stored in our storeroom but I don't know. The other two were recently charged when we last ran the generator.” He passed the base over as well.

“Thanks” Said Kieran, plugging in the base in place of the TV and placing the radio on it.

“Put it on standby” James said, and he swept across the room and switched it on, the display came on. He left it for 30 seconds, and the display lights went out. “It will charge while left like this. The “call” button will call out to us. It's the same as any other radio.” James continued “and..” He had begun to say more but Ben interrupted him. “Enough of your waffle! I think he knows how to use a walkie talkie” Ben said laughing, as he zipped up his bag.

“Yeah I guess so.” James muttered, grinning.

Kieran strode over to the socket behind the TV and unplugged the battery charger which Ben had given him, and handed it to him.

“I would keep this with you, in case you need a battery swap. It wont be charged by much but it should be enough”

Ben opened his bag and placed the charger and batteries inside.

“Right, we must get going, if this gets worse it will be harder to get back, remember call us if you need us”, Joshua said, turning on his own walkie talkie and pocketing it. He handed another to Ben who put it in his bag. “you have a key, too, if you need to come at night” Joshua added. “James do you still have our key?” James felt inside his pocket and withdrew the key.

“Got it” He replied.

“Perfect” Joshua replied. Ral, Ben, Joshua and James all headed to the passage.

“Thanks for everything” Ben said to Kieran and his mother.

“Any time” Kieran replied.

The four of them left the apartment, waving goodbye to Kieran, and then went down the stairs.

When they got to the main door and opened it, the flimsy door was blown off its hinges, and landed some 6 feet away.

“Right” Joshua began “We need to just run to the hotel”.

“On three” James began. “one... two... three...”.

It was pandemonium. As they left the apartment block, the wind was so strong that they could not move as fast as they wanted to. The iron gates were swinging at an alarming speed, and they had to go through them swiftly, to prevent the gates smashing into them. Past the collapsed ASDA store they went, small pieces of rubble were flying everywhere. They broke into a run and, fighting against the winds which were threatening to blow them off their feet, finally reached the hotel lawn. As they approached the doors, fighting the winds, a big object flew down from the

roof and missed Ben by inches. As it blew away into the distance, James recognised it to be the hotel's TV antenna.

“IN!!” Ben bellowed to the others, attempting open the doors. The doors opened inwards, but they were tightly shut due to air pressure. All four of them threw their full weight against the door, which crashed open. Once inside, they forced the doors shut using all the strength they could muster.

“PUSH!!” Joshua yelled. The doors were held shut by Ral, Ben and Joshua, as James locked them. They still rattled violently, even though they were locked. The entrance hall was very dark, due to no sun.

“Oh my god!” Ben said, panting as he sat down.

“Your not kidding” James said, his voice shaking.

“We should have brought my torch” Ben said miserably.

“Look” Joshua said, pointing to the thermometer on the wall. It read 4 degrees C.

Joshua paused as he heard a ringing sound, then withdrew the walkie talkie from his pocket. “Hello?” Joshua said into it.

“What was it like outside?” Kieran said. His voice sounded frightened.

“It is strong enough to blow you off your feet!” Joshua yelled down the radio.

“Your not kidding, it blew out the living room window!” Kieran said

“Wow” Joshua said, staring at the locked front doors, which were still rattling.

“I placed some wood where the window was, and nailed it in place. I have never seen weather like this, and so suddenly as

well!” Kieran continued.

Joshua noticed the battery indicator on the walkie talkie was blinking. “Hold on!” Joshua began “The batteries are low, give me a few minutes we need power!”

“Okay” Kieran replied.

“Well” Joshua began, turning to the others. “We need to start that generator out there. we need to keep warm first of all, we do not know how long this storm will last and it won't be easy getting outside”.

“Leave it to me” Said James, who had climbed over the reception desk, and took down a key from the key cupboard on the wall.

“Guys...” Ral began, in a worried voice “you do know that diesel freezes when it is too cold right? And the temperature has fallen faster today than I can ever remember”.

“Right”, said James, who had climbed back over the desk, and not paying Ral the slightest attention. He had heard, but didn't want to believe. “I have the generator key here, so I will go out there, hold tight to something when I open the back door.

“Careful” Joshua began. “Maybe I should go”

“I will go” James persisted. He headed towards the back door.

“One... Two... Three...”.

“wait...” Ben began but the instant the door was opened, Ben's words were drowned out, as the wind howled through the hall. James went outside, and struggled towards the out building. Using every ounce of strength he possessed, pulled the door open, and entered. The door slammed shut behind him and he could not see what he was doing.

James stepped forward, feeling the generator for the keyhole. Finding it, he inserted the key and turned it. The generator revved, spluttered and died. He turned the key again, the generator revved, spluttered, and died again. “COME ON!!!” James bellowed at it, turning the key a third time. The generator did not start.

“Please god...” thought James, turning the key a fourth time, and the generator revved and roared into life. The light inside the outbuilding came on. James turned around, and opened the door to the outside.

In an instant, he was sucked from the room and hurled six feet into the air, managing to land on his feet by the back door. He attempted to open it, but it would not budge. There was a big ripping sound as the open door to the outbuilding was ripped clean off its hinges. It was hurled through the air, and smashed into a second floor window of the adjacent dentist surgery, which shattered. Shards of glass flew through the air, missing James by inches. The back door flew open as Joshua came out, grabbing James' arm as he clung for dear life to the door handle, his eyes tightly shut. Ben and Joshua pulled James in, and slammed the back door when he was inside. The force of the slam combined with the wind caused the wood to crack. Ben slid the chain and the bolt on the back door.

“Absolutely mad!” James yelled, spluttering. He opened his eyes, to see that the entrance hall light was on. As were the lights upstairs.

“Good work” Joshua said, smiling.

“Excellent” Ral agreed.

“Brilliant” Ben shouted, punching the air.

“It should last about 48 Hours tops then if left running.” James began. “This one will last longer if we only use what is essential”.

“So Ral” Joshua began, turning to Ral who was by the stairs. “I will give you the grand tour”.

Joshua led Ral up to the third floor to show him the rooms. Ben rooted through his bag, and pulled out the third radio, and spoke into it. “Kieran are you there?”.

There was no response.

“Kieran are you there?” Ben said, even louder.

“I... am... Kieran replied, struggling to get the words out. “The building is shaking, The roof has been completely blown off”. There was a pause, where nothing was heard over the radio but howling wind, then Kieran yelled suddenly: “the building is on the verge of collapse, and it is too dangerous for me and mum to get over there, we are in the bathroom because the living room is in total ruins”.

“Uh oh” Ben replied in a panicked voice.

“Is Joshua there?” Kieran asked.

“He is showing Ral round”.

“I need to speak to him desperately”. Kieran was bellowing down the radio now.

“I will take the radio to him now” Ben replied.

Ben ran up the stairs to find Joshua and found him setting up Ral's room in room 21 on the third floor. “Joshua!” Ben yelled, panting as he came to a halt in front of him. “Kieran's place is falling down!”.

With a strangled yell of “what!”, Joshua held out his hand and Ben passed him the radio.

“We are coming over” They heard Kieran say. “Unlock the front

doors, I lost my key!” There was a loud bang, then Kieran shouted down the radio: “We are going outside now, the building is coll...” a loud grinding noise was heard over the radio, then a series of deafening bangs, and then... silence.

“Oh no” Ral moaned, sitting on the bed and burying his face in his hands.

“Let's unlock the door” Ben said, his voice was shaking and his eyes were swimming with tears. Ben and Joshua went down stairs, Ral sat on the bed silently, lost in thought.

Joshua asked James to unlock the door and James complied.

5 minutes passed.

Then 10 minutes.

Then 15 minutes.

James sat on the ground, and like Ral, buried his face in his hands.

Joshua and Ben were both standing in silence, tears trickling down their faces.

They were startled by Ral rushing down the stairs.

“He is near” Ral began, as he got to the foot of the stairs. “I saw him and his mother from the window”.

The others looked at the doors, and Kieran was visible through the glass, his face contorted, as he clutched his mum, who didn't seem to be good at fighting the wind.

James got to his feet quickly, and pulled the doors open. At once, the wind howled through the whole building. Joshua pulled Kieran in, as Ben and James forced the doors shut, locking them again.

“Kieran are you okay!?” All 4 of them asked him together.

“I think so, Kieran said. “My mum was hit over the head with a falling beam, though, and I had to drag her here”.

How Kieran had physically managed to drag his mum while she was not conscious, they did not know. Joshua knelt down beside her as she lay on the floor, to feel for a pulse. There was no pulse.

Joshua learned some first aid when he was in school, and was able to give CPR.

“one... two... three... four...” Joshua grunted as he attempted to revive her.

“one... two... three... four...”

Joshua attempted this for over 10 minutes, and felt for a pulse, there was still no pulse.

Chapter 6: Bonds Of Love

Joshua looked up at Kieran, his eyes glazed with a mix of sweat

and tears.

“Kieran... I am so sorry” Joshua choked, unable to say anything.

Kieran said nothing. He sat down on the floor, unable to look at any of them. Ben left the room and went into the toilet. Ral sat motionless, beginning to sob. James did the same. Joshua stood motionless, eyes full of tears, but did not break down.

There was silence for maybe 30 seconds, then Kieran broke down and began to cry. The blizzard was stronger than ever, still rattling the front and back doors.

Joshua and James and Ral sat around him, and they all held each in a tight hug, Ben returned from the toilet and joined in the hug.

“Kieran, please remember this” Joshua said “And Ral, you too”
“We are like a family, and no matter what, we will always have them bonds of friendship, trust and love”

There was silence and Ben held his hand out. “We will love, trust and support each other always?”

Ral placed his hand on Ben's and said “Always”

James, Joshua, and Kieran did the same, repeating Ral's word.

They held this for several minutes, for how long they did not know. Then, as they sat in this position, a beautiful and unearthly sound filled their ears. They did not move, nor did they attempt to communicate with each other. None of them knew they had all heard it. This lasted for around 10 minutes, maybe more, their eyes full of; not tears of sorrow, but tears of joy. Then just as the sound as appeared, the sound began to fade, until only the sound of the howling wind could be heard.

For several minutes, none of them spoke. Until Ben said “Shall

we go to bed early?”

The others nodded, then went upstairs into their respective rooms, and crashed on their beds. Ben, however was intrigued by the sound he had heard. He kept replaying it over in his mind. He followed the others upstairs 10 minutes later, and fell asleep on his bed like the others. Ben then began to dream.

He was sitting in a garden by a river, watching it flow. He watched as the fish swam with the flow, and watching as leaves that had fallen onto the surface of the water floated along with the flow of the current. He was tapped on the shoulder and he turned around to see a man in white robes, smiling.

Ben woke up, having only remember three things the man had said: “Love, Compassion and mutual respect”.

He looked out of the window, and the storm was still raging, but not as bad as the night before. Ben opened the bedside cabinet and withdrew a torch. He switched it on and off a few times without noticing until he came to his senses, got out of the bed, and pocketed the torch. Heading to Joshua's room, unused to the lights on at night, he opened the door and glanced at his clock. It was 6AM. Ral had slept in room 21, Kieran had crashed in room 20.

Ben crept down the stairs, past the body, which Joshua had covered in his coat while everyone else had been sleeping, and to the front doors. The wind was not as bad as the evening before, But the windows were covered in frost, and a thin coat of snow was visible outside. Ben went to his bag, which was by the front doors, withdrew his water bottle and drained it in one. He took out his set of batteries and the charger, and plugged it into the socket next to the front doors. James had left the key in the doors, and Ben removed the key absent mindedly. He headed down the passage leading to the downstairs toilet and basement, and took a

left turn to the door labelled “living room”. This door had always been locked, and none of them had felt the need to force entry into there.

Ben inserted the key for the front doors into the lock, and turned. He had had the impression before that some of the doors shared keys. A click issued from the door, and it swung open. Entering the room, he searched the wall for a light switch. Finding one, he flicked it, and the lights came on at once. The room was full of comfy looking armchairs, a fireplace, and there was even chocolate éclairs in a bowl on the coffee table the centre of the room. Ben sat on one of the armchairs, thinking to himself.

Ral had also woke up. He was not tired, but his face was sticky. He went into the bathroom and attempted to wash, but no water came from the cold tap. He turned the hot tap, and to his delight found that it ran for long enough to fill the sink. He washed his face, and dried it using the towel which was folded over the side of the bath, and went downstairs, finding Ben in the now unlocked living room as he explored the ground floor of the hotel. Sitting down in one of the armchairs by the fireplace, Ral looked at Ben who was lost in thought.

Ben looked up. “Hey” Ral said quietly

“Morning” Ben replied. “you slept well?”

“As good as I could, did you?”

“Yes, a very deep sleep” Ben said quietly.

“We need to bury the body with the others” Ral whispered across the room.

“I have a question for you” Ben asked Ral quietly

“What is it? You can ask me anything”

“Where does the person go, when the body is dead like that?”

“What do your mean?”

“Well” Ben said slowly, choosing his words very carefully, The body... it doesn't seem like Kieran's mother at all”

“I know what you mean” Ral replied, his voice barely audible now.

“It is as if, whatever is in there, the spirit, the soul, the “life” that was in the body, just goes somewhere else, because the body in the hall there, it is dead. It has no feelings. It is almost like a snake shedding a skin.”

“Is that how you think it works?” Ral replied

“I don't know wh...” Ben began to say but he stopped speaking abruptly. James had heard Ben talking upon heading downstairs himself to get something to eat from the basement. The other two had not even heard him come down.

“How did you two get in here?” James asked, astonished, seeing no forced entry marks on the door.

“Front door key” Ben replied.

“Oh, good going, and morning you two”

“Morning” Replied Ral and Ben quietly.

“Been chatting about much?” James asked.

“Not much” Ben replied.

James left the room, and came back 10 minutes later with 5 freezer bags full of carrot, and 5 full of rice.

“Ben do you still have the kettle Kieran gave you?” He asked, placing the food bags on a coffee table.

“Yes, it is in my bag by the doors” Ben replied. James left the room and came back with the kettle.”

“I had trouble using the taps” Ral explained

“The water tank was blown away, I checked early this morning with Joshua” James began. “however I have over 10 big bottles full of water stashed in the kitchen, been saving it up for weeks.”

“Just as organised as Ben you are” Ral said, a smile appearing on his face.

James grinned, and went to the kitchen and came back with 2 bottles of water under one arm. He brought Ben's bag along too. James plugged the kettle into the nearest socket in the living room and filled it with water, and then proceeded to poke holes in the rice bags with a badge pin, leaving the tops sealed. When he had finished, he lowered the bags into the kettle, shut the lid, and put the kettle on. James then left the room to get some clean plates and cutlery from the kitchen.

Joshua had already woken up. He had tried, and failed to wash, due to the missing water tank. He went to room 20, and walked inside. Kieran was sat on the bed, reading a book he had borrowed from Joshua: “Cause and Effect for dummies”.

“How are you feeling?” Joshua asked kindly, as he sat on Kieran's “Best I can do I suppose” Kieran said, not meeting Joshua's eye.

“Do you need anything?” Joshua asked.

“A cup of tea would be nice, if the kettle I gave Ben works.”

“Sure thing”.

Joshua headed downstairs, but found Ben's bag wasn't there. Perplexed he searched the entrance hall, and the passage leading to the downstairs toilet. Seeing the living room door was ajar, he entered.

“Morning everyone” Joshua said to the room at large. He stopped for a moment, and then started up again

“How did you lot get in here? We never found a key for this door”

Ben explained about the front door key.

At that moment, James returned with the plates and cutlery, set them out on the coffee table, removed the bags of rice from the kettle and emptied them, one bag's worth on each plate, then did the same with the carrots. He passed the plates around, offering two to Joshua, one for Kieran.

“I thought something half decent would help, hot food is a rare luxury now a days.” James said.

Joshua took the plates, and also took 2 forks from the coffee table. “I will take this to Kieran, can you fill the kettle up with fresh water please? Kieran would like a cup of tea” Joshua left the room with the plate. James emptied the water from the kettle back into the bottles which he had poured it in, saying he would use it as non drinking water. Ben objected, saying it could be filtered, James had suggested it be used as wash water, so put the bottles to one side, opening up another 2, filling the kettle to the brim again and putting it on. “I assume everyone wants a cup of tea?”

“Yes please” Ben and Ral said together.

“Joshua will want one too” Ben added.

James left the room and returned with 5 mugs, and placed them on the coffee table. Ben opened his bag and withdrew the teabags, counting out 13, putting one into each mug, and then stuffing the others back into his bag.

5 minutes later, there was 5 steaming cups of black tea on the table. Ral and Ben both began to sip theirs, and began chatting again. James went upstairs with the mugs, but on his way up he realized the body had gone from the hall. James headed to room 21, where Joshua and Kieran were talking. The empty plates were on the bedside table.

“Here you go” James said kindly, handing Kieran and Joshua a mug.

“Thanks” Kieran replied

“We will be down soon” Joshua replied. “and before you ask, I moved it out the back. We will bury it later.”

James looked at Kieran, but Kieran just stared at the floor.

“I have the same curiosity as you” Ral was saying to Ben in the living room downstairs.”My belief in that matter is the same as yours, always follow your heart, because it is always right.”

James walked in, having come back downstairs.

“How is Kieran?” Ben asked him

“He is just fine, very quiet, but that's understandable of course”

Ben placed his now empty mug on the table. Ral followed suit.

James looked out of the living room window, and saw that the storm had died down. Letting Ben and Ral know he was going to shut off the generator to save the fuel, he went back upstairs and let Joshua and Kieran know as well, then headed outside. He noticed the body was not there.

The out house was a mess. The spare can of fuel was not there, but he had not expected it to be. The light bulb which had been hanging from the ceiling had been torn from it's socket. Walking up to the generator control panel, and gazing at the fuel gauge, which read 73%, James turned the generator's key and the generator slowed down, and then stopped.

Ben and Ral had finished their conversation now, and had helped themselves to the old éclairs, which tasted great to them. The lights then went out. Ral opened the living room curtains a bit wider. Ben rooted through his bag and withdrew some tea light candles and a box of matches. “Save them” Ral began. “It is

bright enough in here”.

Ben stuffed them back into the bag, then got up, left the room to get his batteries which had been on charge, then returned.

Joshua and Kieran headed downstairs, meeting James who had just come back inside and locked the back door again.

“We are going to bury her now” Joshua began.

“There is no need” James replied.

“Why?” Joshua said quickly.

“The body has gone”

“gone?”

“yes, without a trace. If someone had picked up the body...” But James never finished his sentence, for there was a knock at the back door. James unbolted it, but left the chain on.

The moment the door opened as far as it would go, 3 people threw their weight against it, trying to force it open.

“Let us in” Barked a harsh voice.

Chapter 7: The Narrow Escape

Ben and Ral heard the commotion in the living room. Ben reacted

in an instant. Darting to the basement, he stuffed 8 bags of carrot into his bag, which was on his shoulder, then returned to the living room putting 2 of the big water bottles into his bag, then darted back into the main hall.

As he ran through the main hall, he saw hands coming round the side of the door.

“Let us in, or we will smash the door down” The voice barked again.

Ben darted upstairs, seized the second walkie talkie from Joshua's bedside table, packed it, and then ran into room 22 and packed 5 sets of clothes. Meanwhile, one of 3 people outside the back door said loudly and sharply “we are not asking again. You have Ralpsa in there, we saw you with him.”

Ben ran into his own room and opened his bedside cabinet, and withdrew a pair of gloves, and a rolled up tent. Ben's bag was now full to bursting point as he zipped it up. He went back into Joshua's room and noticed a scrap of paper on the floor. It read: “89343”. Curious, Ben pocketed it, and then took Joshua's rucksack from his bedside cabinet, just as a loud THUD echoed from downstairs.

The gang members, who were trying to force their way in, were doing so with brutality never seen before. One of them had raised an axe, and took a swing at the door. Ral, James, And Kieran had all thrown their full weight against the door, forcing it shut and bolting it again, while Joshua had gone into the living room looking for Ben.

“Ben we need to get out but...” Joshua began, just as Ben returned to the living room, checking if Joshua was there.

“I began packing everything the moment I heard the first knock.” Ben replied calmly. “Don't panic, OK?” Ben began, then going up to the living room door and wrenching out the key, “we need to go out the front doors.” Joshua entered the hall, where an already weakened back door had axe slits over it, and beckoned the others towards him. “Unlock the front door quietly, and run, Ben says he has everything. Ben had already ran up to the front doors and unlocked them. The others ran up behind him, they all put their shoes on, pushed open the doors, then began to run in a pack, hoping beyond hope the 3 people breaking open the back door would not notice.

“This way” Ral said in the lowest voice possible.

They ran up the street, past the shell petrol station, Ral in the lead. They kept going straight on, and came up to the army barracks. “This way” Ral whispered.

Ral was stood in front of the main gates, which were ajar. He pointed towards a hill in the distance. They started walking fast, Ral still in the lead. After a 5 minute or so walk, they arrived at a small building which was on top of a small hill, a cable stretching from it's back. The entrance was locked. Ral ran at the door, and kicked it, breaking the lock. Upon entering the building, Ral looked around. “The cable car should be in here” But no sooner had he said it, the cables suddenly sprang back into the distance, as if they had been intentionally severed, and to their horror they realized they had run right into a trap.

A makeshift metal gate swung down in the doorway. They couldn't exit through the cable car opening, as a makeshift fence had swung over it. Ral realized he had stepped on some wire that had been stretched across the room, thus triggering the trap. There

was no way out.

“What should we do?” Kieran said in a frightened voice, starting to panic.

Ben, whose eyes had been scanning the whole room, found a handle on the floor, in front of a filing cabinet, and realized what it was at once.

“Oh no” Ral groaned. “We have a problem”

“Joshua help me move this” Ben whispered, as footsteps came closer and closer.

“what is it?”

“Just move it! I know what I am doing, quick!”

Joshua, Kieran and James all pushed away the filing cabinet. Ben squatted on the ground, and pulled on the handle, and a grate lifted, showing a ladder.

“down down down, and shut the hatch after you!” Ben whispered loudly, quickly descending the ladder himself. The others followed, and then Joshua who was the last to go saw the 3 gang members, and more of them, approach the makeshift gate like door. Joshua then dropped through the hole, pulling the inner handle shut. He withdrew a fork from his pocket, which he had put there by mistake after eating his breakfast, and lodged it through the inner handle, through a hole in the concrete. The only problem now, was none of them could see what they were doing.

Ben rummaged through his zip pockets, and found the torch he had taken from his bedroom. He managed to switch it on, flooding the tunnel with light. Meanwhile, they could hear banging on the grate above them. Joshua was sure the fork would not hold long. Ben reached the bottom of the ladder, and shone his torch in front of him, showing a long passage.

The others got off the ladder one by one. Ben, his bag still swinging over his shoulder, the nearly empty rucksack on his back, said: “This way” and then he followed the passage. There was a clatter, as something flew down the shaft they had just climbed... the fork.

They ran through the tunnel at top speed, they did not know when it would end. They were sure the looter gang did not know about the grate before setting the trap, nor did any of them think they would have a torch. However they heard voices in the distance behind them. The tunnel seemed to go on for miles. They had lost all track of time. Ben was sure they had run several miles. They kept passing many other tunnels branching off in many directions, but theirs was the largest, which, several minutes later, came to an abrupt halt at a ladder. Hearing voices growing louder, they quickly climbed the ladder, pushed up another grate at the top, and climbed out, one by one. Joshua slammed the grate back into position, and they ran for several more minutes before stopping. Panting, they all looked around.

Chapter 8: The Sitting Bull

What they saw, caught them by surprise. They had not entered the city as it had seemed, they had come out in the street, in the

village of Langlock, which was on the outskirts of Ruddingham.

The city had been to the east, they had obviously gone west, under the town. It was a very small village, comprising of a church, a pub and a village shop, and 2 long rows of houses. They had run far from the grate they had come out of, they had all stopped on the snow covered front lawns of the Sitting Bull, The village pub.

“what the...” Kieran breathed, shaking, after 2 minutes of silence. “I thought we had had it” Joshua said, looking at each of them in turn, checking they were all there.

“Ben really is prepared” Ral said, amazement in his voice. Ben however, had frozen, listening for more sounds. There was a distant clang of metal, a yell of fury, another metal clang, and all was silent.

“That was close” James said, panting. “Too close”.

They turned towards the pub, and they could see a light, which was flickering in one of the windows.

“Someone is in there” Ral said, looking at the flickering light.

“Shall we knock?” Kieran asked quietly, still shaking.

“I think we should, it is freezing, and the wind is picking up again”. Joshua replied.

They walked up the lawn, coming to the heavy wooden double doors.

Ben switched off the torch and pocketed it.

Joshua stepped forward, gritted his teeth, and knocked. Footsteps were heard, and then a slow, croaky voice issued from inside:

“who is there?”

“My name is Joshua, and I have 2 of my friends, and my brothers here” Joshua replied.

There was a click as a key turned in the lock, and one of the doors creaked open.

An old man stood there, a kerosene lamp in one hand. “You had better come in”.

The man stepped back, and let them all walk into the passage past him, he then closed the doors and locked them again.

“In here” The man said, pointing towards a door on the right near a staircase. They went through the door, and into the pub's bar room. The man came in after them, sitting down on a sofa which was against the wall, placing the lamp on the ground. He had sat next to a woman who was clutching a steaming mug in her hands. “Sit down if you like” The man said kindly, indicating the sofa opposite the one he and the woman were sitting in. They all sat, and Ben pulled off his bag and laid it on the floor at his feet. No one in the room said anything for a few minutes.

“Who are you?” Ben began in a small voice.

“Me?” Said the old man, in a slow voice. “My name is David, and This is my wife, Sylvia.”

David's wife looked up, and said “nice to meet you all”.

None of them said anything for a few seconds, then Ben said “Nice to meet you too, we have just been chased out of Ruddingham”

“Don't you have your parents with you?” David asked.

Kieran, who had been gazing out of the window behind David and Sylvia, looked down at the floor

“Mine are both dead” Kieran said, without looking up.

“Ours fled when we had decided to stay” Ben said.

“They didn't treat us that well” Piped up James.

“You have been living there, since the solar storm, all alone?”
Sylvia asked, looking horrified.

“Yes, we got by nicely.” Ben replied.

“Kieran's place” continued Ben, looking over at Kieran, was destroyed during yesterday's storm. His...” Ben stopped speaking, his mouth shaking slightly.

“His mother... was killed when they tried to escape” James finished Ben's sentence for him.

“Oh.. I.. I really am sorry” Sylvia said, placing her mug on the ground beside the sofa, and came over to the sofa and put her arm around Kieran.

“Do you live here?” Joshua asked.

“Yes, it was our pub in fact” David replied.

Kieran asked if he could use the toilet at this point.

“Of course you can” David had replied. “Show him where it is love”.

Sylvia led Kieran out of the room, up the stairs, took a right turn up a second shorter flight of stairs, and to the first door which came up in the upstairs passage.

“The water does run” She said kindly. “We still have water pressure.”

Kieran went inside, and closed the door behind him, and slid the bolt.

“Come down when your ready” Sylvia said, in a motherly voice.

“Thanks” Kieran replied, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Sylvia went downstairs and sat back down.

Sylvia and David discussed Kieran's mother with the others. The brothers and Ral also introduced themselves.

“The poor boy” Sylvia said.

“I know” Joshua replied, looking right into Sylvia's eyes. They were deep and brilliant blue, like his own.

She looked young for her age, being 75, she looked in her 50s.

“Does anyone want tea?” She asked everyone.

“How are you able to make it?” Ben asked curiously.

“We have water pressure, and a wood burning stove in the private living room” She said in her naturally kind voice. “We have powdered milk also” she said, but no sugar I'm afraid.

Everyone in the room, including David accepted her offer of tea. Sylvia left the bar room, entered the kitchen, and began making the tea.

“We have 4 bedrooms upstairs” David addressed the others. You can share 3 of them between you if you like”

“That would be great” Joshua said, a smile appearing on his face.

“Thanks”

The other 3 thanked him too.

“I will go and make the beds” David said, he rose and and left the room.

“It was all my fault” Ral said in a small voice, staring at the floor .

“I should not have stayed with you, I put you all in grave danger”

“Ral” James began. “No matter what, we will all stick together.”
“We are strong while we are all with one another. But divided, we are weak.” James paused, and then continued. “This is what caused mayhem when the power went out.”

There was a 2 second pause, then Joshua said:

“had all the people who were affected by the solar storm been united with one another, the loss of technology or damage to material possessions will not have mattered.”

“And remember” Ben said, in a very soft voice “We will all stand by you, as you have stood by us. No matter what. I assume you have already guessed, bonds of true friendship and love cannot be broken by anything or anyone.”

“I guess so” Ral said quietly. “Thanks, for everything”

“Thank you Ral, for being with us” James said quietly.

“If there any force that is more powerful than any other, it is love” Ben started to say as David had returned to the room, Kieran at his heels. Ben paused for a moment as Kieran sat back down on the sofa, and David went up to the bar and picked up another kerosene lamp which was on it.

“Nothing can override pure, unconditional love”. Ben continued. “The only time I have ever seen that type of love at all, aside from a few friendships between a few people, was a mother's love for her child”.

“You all sound like really kind, loving people” David said in the same kind voice as his wife, while trying to light the second lamp.

“Thanks” They all replied, at near enough the same time.

“I feel that all humans should have that love towards each other” Kieran began suddenly.

“If they did, there would be no wars, no violence, no hatred. People would be able to live in harmony with one another”.

“We all fully agree” Joshua said. I had always said, “If a war was declared, and no one turned up, there would not be a war”.

“I fully agree with everything you lot have said” David said slowly, as his wife returned to the room with a tray, 7 mugs of steaming hot tea on it. She had made Kieran, herself and David one too. She held out the tray and each of them took a mug each and thanked her. David, who had managed to light the second lamp at last, set it down on the floor, pulled up a coffee table in front of the sofa the boys were all sitting at, then sat down on the other sofa himself. Sylvia sat down beside him.

They did not chat much as the boys, Sylvia and David drank their tea.

Several minutes later, Ben placed his empty mug on the table, and opened his bag, emptying out the contents onto the table: the spare clothes, the bags of carrot, the water bottles, the batteries and their charger, the rolled up tent, 2 of the 3 walkie talkies with a charging base, and the teabags. The cassette walk man that had been packed in there the day before had been lost, as had the gloves, the tea lights, the matches, and the third walkie talkie, lost when Kieran had struggled towards the hotel.

Rooting through his pockets, Ben then withdrew the torch, however the piece of paper containing the numbers had gone missing.

“This was everything I packed” Ben explained to the room at large. “I wasn't sure where we would end up”

“That was good thinking” Ral said to him.

David and his wife both agreed.

After they had finished their tea, Sylvia offered them some food, but they all declined, wanting nothing more than some sleep. Sylvia carried the contents of Ben's bag upstairs, went to the furthest bedroom in the upstairs hall. She deposited them on the bedside table, and returned downstairs. Joshua looked down at his bandaged hand, which he had not paid much attention to, due to all the drama that had happened. Slowly, he took off the bandage. "What happened to your hand?" David asked, in a slightly worried voice.

"Got a cut" Joshua said, and he explained about the ASDA store collapsing. Joshua got up and threw the bandage in the bin by the door.

"There has been quite a bit of drama, it seems." David said, concern in his voice.

"Yeah" Joshua replied. "My hand is fine now though".

"If it has any problems, tell me or Sylvia"

"I will do" Joshua replied.

"I will show you the 3 your bedrooms" David said kindly, as Sylvia entered. David picked up the second kerosene lamp and went into the hall. The boys went into the hall after him and took off their shoes, putting them by the front doors. They went upstairs, following David.

"Ben's stuff is in the furthest one" Sylvia called after them

"Thanks" Ben replied back.

When David reached the upstairs hall, he indicated the furthest bedroom, and the two doors along opposite walls near it. "These are the three spare bedrooms, and the bathroom is here" He said, pointing to the door they were standing in front of. "Me and Sylvia sleep in here" Pointing to the door to their right, which was

opposite the furthest bedroom.

“Thanks for everything” Joshua said.

“Yes, thanks so much” Ben added.

“Thank you very much” Ral and James said together, both smiling. “Thank you” Kieran said.

“Not a problem. You know where we are if you need us.” David said as he began to descend the stairs.

The boys decided amongst themselves who would sleep where.

Ben and Ral went into the furthest bedroom, James and Joshua went into the room on the right, and Kieran went in the room on his left, it was agreed he would get to sleep alone.

They all found a hot water bottle on each bed, which had already been prepared for them by Sylvia earlier. The hot water bottles were still quite warm, and as the pub was very cold, they all got comfortable into the beds with the hot water bottles, Ben and Ral sharing their bed, James and Joshua's room had separate beds. All of them fell asleep within a few minutes, the wind still howling at the windows. Their sleep was deep, and dreamless.

Chapter 9: Security

They all got up early the next morning, and upon entering the living room they were served some porridge by Sylvia. David lit

the fireplace in the Private lounge, burning some of the coal they had.

“All 5 of you, need a nice hot bath.” David addressed the boys, when he had lit the fire.

“How?” Ben asked curiously. “There is no power”

“There might not be power” David said, in his kind voice.

“however, we have a back boiler, so the fireplace can heat the hot water”

“How did you have 5 years worth of coal?” James asked, curiously.

“We don't use the fireplace often, mainly to heat the water.”

Sylvia began, who had just collected in the empty porridge bowls.

“But if you head west, through the village and into the next village, about 5 miles away, there is a coal storage place.” She smiled her kind smile. James and the others smiled back.

“It used to sell coal, and they left plenty there.” David added.

“And you were able to carry it 5 miles?” Ben asked, awed.

“No, we have a working car” David replied.

“Is it an old one?” Kieran asked him, getting up from the sofa.

“Yes, a 1980s ford”

“Where do you get fuel?” Ben asked, as he could not think where David and Sylvia would be able to find it.

“There was a broken down petrol tanker a mile down the road, if you head to the east.” David paused for a second; a fly was buzzing near the window. “It had and still has plenty. We fill up my petrol cans whenever we need any”.

“Why don't you drive down south?” Joshua asked him, ignoring the buzzing.

“We prefer to stay here, and in any case we are no better off down there. Fighting and martial law is at its peak, their society is

disintegrating”

“How do you know?” Ral asked him, getting to his feet and going to the window.

“The car radio” David explained. “It still works, as it is an all manual radio, but only picks up AM.”

“Martial law in England? Joshua asked, astonished.

“Right in one.” Sylvia said.

“I think, that balance will need to be restored soon” Ben said to the room at large

“what kind of balance?” Kieran asked slowly, a look of curiosity dawning on his face.

“The balance of nature, humans going back to nature, and being in harmony with it”

“That is just what is happening, although they do not see it yet” Sylvia replied.

“They will go back to nature, and within the next few years. The problems around the globe now” David began then noticed Kieran had an awed look on his face “Yes, around the globe” He said, going to the window next to Ral, and then opened it to let the buzzing fly out.

“Their structures are collapsing, and then new ones, ones conforming to the laws of nature will be put up” David continued, shutting the window.

“How come they have not destroyed the world already with one of the many bombs that exist” Kieran asked.

“Nature won't allow them to violate it's laws in that manner.”

Sylvia said, smiling her kind smile. “They have had the technology over 50 years, and the reason they have not managed to destroy the world with it already, is because it was simply not allowed to happen”.

“There has been wars” She continued. “Which in the end, even though they were awful, were allowed to occur, to teach people to stay compassionate towards one another”.

“I have always thought” Ral began, turning from the window to look at the others “that nature was not dumb. We are here, to grow and learn. There was some garbage I read before the solar storm hit, that over 90% of the human genetic code is junk”. He paused to let it sink in, then continued. “Nature would not have been that dumb, to create meaningless code. It might be inactive, used for other abilities we do not know we have, or serve some other purpose than building the body”

“My thoughts exactly!” Ben cut across him. “The scientists of the west could not explain it, so they thought: might as well call it junk, save us explaining what is nearly impossible to explain from a scientific only view”

They all carried on the discussion for a few minutes, then Sylvia went upstairs to run a bath for Ben, who was going to go in first. Ral went upstairs, and returned downstairs with the pair of walkie-talkies and charging base from his and Ben's room, placing one of them in the private living room on the coffee table. The private living room was about half the size of the hotel living room. Inside was a sofa, an armchair, the fireplace which had a roaring fire, and the coffee table.

The walkie talkies were barely charged, and there was no power for the charging base. David entered the room as Ral turned to leave the room.

“David, do you happen to have a petrol generator?” Ral asked him in a business like voice

“Yes I do, we don't use it very often though” David replied.

“Could you start it up? I have 2 walkie talkie radios here, and they

might be useful, if I could plug in the charger.

“Sure, bring the charger and the radios, ill show you where it is”. Ral picked up the walkie talkie back up from the coffee table, placing it in his pocket. Then, with the charging base under one arm, which had the cord trailing on the floor behind him, followed David.

David took him past the stairs, and through a door at the end of the hall, which led to the kitchen.

“Doesn't seem much like a pub” Ral pointed out. “It seems more like a house with a bar room”

“Many of the residents who left used to say that” David replied, a smile on his face.

David continued through the kitchen, which was quite wide. They passed a gas stove, which had an old fashioned copper kettle placed on it, then walking past an old-fashioned sink.

They went into the back gardens, which had been recently mowed; the snow had also nearly melted, and the sun was shining. There were 2 large vegetable patches running along the sides. They both went to the shed at the end of the large garden. It had a mechanical keypad, which David proceeded to enter the code “ 89343”. Ral gasped.

“Are you okay?” David asked him, opening the shed door.

“Yes” Ral began “I have seen that code before”

“Where?” David asked, surprised.

“Joshua had found it written on a piece of paper in their outhouse, he mentioned it to me earlier, his memory is good, but he lost the paper.”

“Really?” David replied, curiosity in his voice.

“Yeah, talk about Synchronicity”.

David went inside the shed, and Ral followed. Inside the small shed was: A petrol lawn mower, 3 petrol cans, 5 sacks of candles, a gas cylinder, and the generator.

David picked it up, and heaved it out into the garden.

“Plug the base in here” David pointed to a standard plug socket which was on the side. Ral plugged it in, David pulled the cord, and the generator started. Ral placed the first walkie talkie on the base, and it began to charge. David and Ral returned inside to the kitchen, and David went into the cupboard under the sink, taking out a pan. “I will cook us some lunch” David said to Ral. “Let the others know I am steaming some fresh vegetables”. Ral went into the bar room, where Joshua and Sylvia were sat, chatting. The others had all had their baths and were chatting upstairs.

“David is cooking us some lunch” Ral said as he entered.

“What is it?” Joshua asked.

“Fresh steamed veg” Ral replied.

“Perfect” Joshua replied. Sylvia was just showing me the cellar behind the bar, they keep most of their fresh vegetables stored in there.

“Good thinking” Ral said, Sylvia smiled her kind smile.

“Ral, your bath is ready by the way” Joshua told him.

“Thanks” Ral replied, going upstairs and into the bathroom.

The next couple of weeks were uneventful, but enjoyable for everyone. Sylvia found some old board games in the cupboard under the stairs. All 5 of the boys spent their time playing ludo, chess, and checkers against each other, and with David, who was a good chess player. Ben, who liked exploring, went up into the attic with David, where they found an old monopoly which still

had all the pieces and cards, a guitar, and several dusty volumes of books, which were very old. Joshua and Kieran both read many of them, including the lord of the rings, the hobbit, and the many books on Spirituality there was. Ben and Ral went out to explore the village, taking one of the walkie talkies with him each time he went. The sun was shining all day long, so the mood was pleasant. There were no clocks in the house, and they all found the lengths of their days to feel variable, and they also felt abnormally free. The luxury of a hot bath, and David's home grown food, were deeply appreciated by the boys.

“Ral, why do you always have to be lucky with the dice!” Ben pointed out loudly one evening, 2 weeks after their first night, during a game of monopoly. Everyone was sat on cushions on the floor in the bar room, and Ral was in the lead with the most money.

“I am a natural” Ral replied, a grin on his face.

Ral had over £2000 in cash, taking £1750 off of Ben who had just landed on Mayfair, which had a hotel on it.

Ben could not afford the full bill, so had retired from the game.

“Ral, it is your turn” Joshua said, handing him the dice.

Ral rolled. One dice had two and the other had five, making seven.

Ral went from Piccadilly, to the chance square. Grinning, Ral picked a card from the top pile. “Advance to Trafalgar Square, if you pass go, collect £200”. Ral collected his £200, and placed his piece (the boot) on Trafalgar Square before he realized where he had landed. David's hand was outstretched, a smile on his face. Ral had sold the whole set to David for £600, desperate for more money, despite having plenty. “Ha, that will teach you to not be greedy!” Ben chortled.

“Just you wait” Ral laughed, paying David £1000 as there were 3 houses on the property.

The game continued for another hour, until everyone decided it was time to leave it until the next day. Joshua was in the lead, Ral having landed on “The Angel Islington” two times in a row, having to pay Joshua £450 each time, as it had a hotel on it. James had also retired from the game, losing the last of his money to Sylvia.

Sylvia left the room first to prepare the hot water bottles, which she did every night.

The boys all used the bathroom, and went to bed. Ral and Ben were the first to go to sleep.

James and Joshua were chatting about the days events, but they went to sleep too, around half an hour later. Kieran however, lay awake. He kept looking out of the bedroom window, which was by the bed, into the clear starry sky. He felt so drawn to the stars, and had spent the past 2 nights just gazing at the stars for several hours before going to sleep. Kieran eventually drifted off into a sleep, but tonight, he began to have a very vivid dream, a dream which he was in control of. In this dream he was gazing out of the window at the stars, as he had been when falling asleep. Wanting a drink he got up out of bed, and turned around. With a sudden feeling of slight curiosity, he saw himself sleeping in the bed on his back.

Chapter 10: The Council Of Elders

The moment Kieran saw himself sleeping on the bed, he shot upwards like a rocket, zooming through a tunnel; a very long tunnel, with bright swirling colours, and a blue-white light was

visible at the end of it. It was getting closer... and closer.. and closer... and then as Kieran hit it, he found himself standing in the most beautiful garden he had ever seen. The colours were more vivid than anything he had ever seen. Looking down at his hands, he found they were shiny, and semi-transparent. The sky was a deep and brilliant blue, and a beautiful unearthly sound, not unlike the one they had heard back in the hotel filled not his ears, but his entire being. Looking around, and seeing a large castle in the distance, Kieran wanted to go there, but did not want to run for some strange reason. Instead, he began floating towards it; his body had no weight. In no time at all, he was there. A tall, robed man, who had very long hair, and who looked old, was standing not far from where Kieran had landed. The man beckoned him forward.

“You are ready to visit the council” The robed man said. But his lips did not move. Instead, Kieran found that he felt, rather than heard the words. The man glowed with a golden light, and the love Kieran felt from him filled every fibre of his being. He began to follow the man, who led him inside the great shining golden gates of the castle keep, and through the wooden front doors. They were standing in a magnificent entrance hall, which had a staircase in the middle, with golden banisters. Kieran followed the man up the stairs, then another flight of stairs, then another. Kieran noticed there was no lighting, but everything radiated its own light. Kieran was led to a door somewhere in one of the castle's towers, and the man's voice radiated through him again: “I am here for you, always. Go inside, I will wait for you.”

Kieran went inside, and shut the door behind him. There was a large round table, in a large circular room, which was quite dark. There were 12 people seated around it, all dressed similar to the man he had met outside. They looked much older, though, and the

love that radiated from them was more intense than any he had ever felt before. Seeing one empty chair, he walked slowly to the table, and pulled out the chair, then sat down.

At once, Kieran's whole life began to unravel before his eyes, like a fast-forward movie.

Events of his childhood was passing his eyes. But the strange thing was, he was also feeling the effects of every action, deed, and even his thoughts, in a cause and effect scenario. He would feel them from the perspective of other people, even animals. He saw one event in particular, where he had pushed another boy over in primary school. Kieran felt the pain the boy felt, from the boy's point of view, physical and emotional. Kieran cried out, but no sound left him, he felt it coming from his heart: "Nooo!", and the movie halted.

One of the people at the table, stood up and said, with great love and compassion in his voice, "This is only a lesson. It is all right to make mistakes, for it is all part of being human and why you assume your bodies of flesh".

Kieran wanted the movie to continue, and as he thought the thought, the movie started up again.

It picked up where it left off, and then it slowed down, coming up to a point where Kieran had met a tramp in the street, a year before the disaster. He had given the tramp, who was 14, all £5 of his pocket money. Kieran then became aware that everyone around the table was applauding. Another one of the people at the table stood up, a woman who had pure golden skin, and a halo of golden light around her head.

"It is small acts of kindness such as this, that mean the most to creation and the universe."

Kieran then felt the appreciation the tramp had felt, and the woman said:

“This boy had chosen to live his teenage years on the street before he had even been born, to help him grow and become compassionate.”

The movie started up again, and Kieran witnessed a scene from 6 months before the solar storm, his mum winning of £2000 on the national lottery. There, there felt no meaning to it. It did not feel like an amazing thing as it had at the time. This surprised Kieran, and he became aware of the table again, and another person, a white robed very tall man, who was surrounded by an aura of golden light, said: “Material gain means absolutely nothing in the long run. You enter the classroom with nothing but yourself, and you come out with just yourself, and what you have learned”.

Kieran noticed the word “classroom” and in that instant, he realized planet earth was a school room for the spirit, nothing more.

The movie then started up again, and Kieran witnessed all scenes, up until when he had gone to bed that night. He witnessed the scene in the hotel, where him and the other 4, had all held hands, feeling the same unconditional love he had felt at the time. Shifting his awareness back to the table, another robed man stood up, this time in blue robes, an aura of blue-white around him.

“What you experienced there, is unconditional love, the love that is everyone's birthright, the force that holds everything together”
The man said, the aura of love radiating from him.

“That is one of the Divine reasons your mother returned home when she did, because she had completed what she had signed on for, and because it was one of your lessons to work through, and

to teach you unconditional love while in a body of flesh”. The being continued.

Kieran noticed the word “home” and the realization came to him, home meant the place where everyone came from before they came to earth, the spirit world.

The movie had faded out now, and Kieran was looking at the people sitting down as well as standing up, and asked them “Why was I sent here?”

Another one of the beings stood up, a native American type man.

“Humans have forgotten their connection with God, and the universe” The man said, the same aura of compassion and love coming from him.

“They have become so buried in materialism, and they have weakened their planet.”

The man said “Let me show you”

And in an instant Kieran found himself hovering in space, facing planet earth, which was surrounded by a beautiful aura of light. He felt waves of what he thought was energy, which was a constant pulse. Shocked, Kieran realized that the earth was breathing. Not breathing air, but breathing energy. The Native American man was nearby, watching him. “Let me show you some more” The man said gently, and Kieran found himself zooming towards the ground, and over a forest. Kieran slowly willed himself down to the ground, his guide landing next to him.

He had found himself in a clearing inside the forest, and looking up at the trees nearby, felt laughter, love, Joy resonate through his weightless body and being. Kieran stood, awed. The trees were

communicating with one another. The being took Kieran's hand, and Kieran was shown a scene of a tree in another forest having an axe thudded through it. Kieran felt the tree's scream of pain pierce him like scalding knives. The being took Kieran's hand again, and he found himself floating back into the room with the round table, and he slowly floated down by his chair. Sitting back in it, Kieran looked around at all the occupants of the table, who had sat down.

The person at the opposite end of the table said, with love and compassion:

“Kieran, the council have decided, that it is in you and your friend's best interests, and the interests of many other people, that you will need to travel down to the south of your country. You are all to explain, to anyone who will listen, the importance of love and compassion for one another. David and Sylvia know about this. They have already met up with us, and we have explained. They will return to their pub, while you all are down south.”

“But... I didn't think I had to go back” Kieran said, not wanting to leave where there was so much love and acceptance. The door to the room opened, and a woman walked through, closing the door behind her. Kieran's jaw dropped as he turned to look at her.

His mother was standing in the doorway. He had known somehow, at the moment he had hit the light at the end of the tunnel, that he would see her.

She came up to him, and he stood up from his chair.

“Hello sweetie” She said, the unconditional love radiating from her. She looked many years younger than she had been when she had died.

“I will be here to meet you when you have finished your mission

on earth”. She continued to say.

“But, tell the others I am safe, and that I am happy where I am”.

“I will do, I promise.” Kieran replied, still awed. And he pulled his mother into a tight hug. This lasted an unknown amount of time, in fact time seemed not to exist. Only the present, seemed to exist, the past and the future were all in the moment.

The Blue-robed man stood up again, and spoke.

“Humans need to turn back to nature, and soon they will have no choice, as the balance of nature is being restored on earth, and within the next few of decades as you know time, the balance of nature, and unconditional love will be restored on planet earth.”

“Remember... teach all those who are willing to learn.”

After the Blue-robed man had said this, Kieran felt a voice go through his entire being, although it did not come from anyone who was inside the room, it felt like it had come from everywhere, and nowhere at the same time: “Always have faith, the universe will provide for you, now you must return, and remember everything you have been told, for it is important”.

The man Kieran had first met had entered the room, and him and Kieran's mum both took Kieran's hands, and in an instant, they were in the tunnel, zooming back down it. In no time at all they had arrived back in the bedroom. The unearthly sound had gone, but the feelings of total bliss had not. The sun was just rising, but Kieran had been gone for what seemed like much longer than a night. “Love you, sweetheart” Kieran's mother said gently, intense love still radiating from her.

“I am always here for you” The robed man began to say. “I was assigned to help you while you were on earth, assisting from the other side, I love you, always.” Kieran then found himself being pulled back into the body which was sleeping on the bed, and next thing he knew, his eyes had opened.

Kieran sat up, then just sat in silence, cross legged for maybe 20 minutes, absolutely awed, and totally at peace. He knew, as he sat there, that it was no dream. The experience had been real, and upon thinking that, his mind totally blank otherwise, his whole body began vibrating as if an electrical current was surging through it. A few minutes or so passed, and his body stopped vibrating, and Kieran slowly came back to his 5 senses once more.

Chapter 11: The Journey South

Kieran was the first to go downstairs, so he went to the kitchen, lit the stove and made himself a cup of tea.

When he had made the tea, Kieran went into the bar room, walked past the unfinished monopoly game, and sat down on the sofa. As

he sat and drank, Ral came downstairs and entered the room.

“Morning” Ral said, yawning.

“Morning” Kieran replied, not quite meeting his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Ral asked him.

“Something happened to me in the night”

“What happened?”

“Well...” Kieran hesitated, then began to tell the story of everything that had happened.

Ral didn't ask many questions while Kieran was telling the story, but just sat there, a look of awe on his face.

“do you believe it happened?” Kieran asked Ral, frowning slightly.

“Of course I do” Ral began. “I need to add, that I heard that beautiful unearthly sound you described the day we were all in the hotel holding hands.”

“You've got to be kidding” Kieran replied, open mouthed.

“I think we all heard it, but none of us said we had” Ral said, fiddling absent-mindedly with his glasses.

At that moment, Joshua and James entered the room both clutching cups of tea too, Ben hurrying along in their wake.

“There you are” Ben said to Ral.

“Yeah I got up early but didn't want to wake you up” Ral replied.

“Fair enough” Ben replied.

Ben, Joshua and James all sat down on the sofa by the window, sitting in silence for maybe a minute.

“Kieran are you and Ral okay?” Joshua asked, as Kieran kept looking around the room, and Ral was still fiddling absent-mindedly with his glasses.

“Yeah we are” Kieran paused, then continued “I need to tell you

all something, when David and Sylvia get up”

“They will be up soon” Joshua replied

“While we wait, we should play some more games” James suggested.

“Might as well” Joshua replied.

“Let's play Ludo” Ben suggested.

“Who wants to play chess?” James asked.

“I will” Joshua said.

Joshua picked up the chess board which was beside the sofa, placed it on the middle of the sofa, and took all the pieces out of their bags and set it up.

“I'm white” James said

“If you insist” Joshua replied.

Ral got up from the other sofa and picked up the folded ludo board from beside Joshua and James' sofa, unfolded it on the ground beside the bar and placed 3 lots of pieces on it. Ral and Kieran sat down with Ben, and started playing. Ben went first, having rolled the highest number on the dice.

They were playing for about 10 minutes in near silence, until James moaned, breaking the silence.

Joshua's bishop had taken his queen. James responded by taking the bishop with his knight.

“Why do you always get my queen with that bishop” James asked Joshua

“I dunno” Joshua replied, grinning.

The game of Ludo was going the same as usual, Ben in the lead having got 3 out of 4 of his pieces into their home space.

It was Kieran's turn, who had only got one of the pieces to the home space. He then rolled the dice a bit too hard and they rolled

across the floor and under the sofa opposite where James and Joshua were sat.

“doh” Kieran moaned, getting up with Ral and Ben, and they moved the sofa forward to retrieve the dice, just as the door opened. Sylvia and David entered the room, holding a tray with 5 mugs of tea and 5 bowls of porridge.

“Lost the dice again?” David said, with a smile.

“Yeah” Kieran replied.

“We heard you talking so we thought we would do your breakfast” Sylvia said kindly, handing a bowl to each of them as Ral, Ben and Kieran sat down on the sofa. Ben who had picked the dice up, rolled them across the floor, and they landed spot on by the board.

They ate breakfast, chatting with one another and Sylvia and David, who were stood up. Joshua and James were still playing their chess game, until James managed a checkmate which took Joshua off his guard, achieved with a pair of bishops and a rook, which had cornered Joshua's king which was on a corner square.

When they had finished their breakfast, and Joshua and James had packed up the chess board, Sylvia and David sat down. When everything was silent, Kieran said unable to hold it in any longer:

“I have something I need to tell you all”

“What is it?” Sylvia asked, although comprehension dawned on her face as she spoke.

David smiled, as Kieran began telling his story. It took longer than the first time he had told Ral, because he was quite shy to say it to the room at large.

“And the council had told me that you and David already know” Kieran said to Sylvia.

“Yes, we did know you would go to the meeting, but we did not know when. I went to the council a week ago, during my afternoon meditation.

“And I heard the music, that evening in the hotel.” Ben said excitedly “You know when we were all...” Ben started but James cut in: “I think we all heard it”

“We did” Ral began. “as I did too”.

“So did I” Joshua said, who had a look of total awe on his face.

They sat in silence... but then Ben said “So we need to go down south?”.

For a few minutes, no one spoke.

“You do not have to” Sylvia said. “You are all more than welcome to stay here, but it will be in everyone’s best interest that you go soon.”

The boys discussed it for a few minutes, until James asked how they were going to get there.

“I had filled up the car the day before you all came here” David began. “I will also put my 2 full cans of petrol in the boot.”

The boys then discussed when they would set off, with Sylvia and David.

“I think it should be tomorrow” Ben said. “I have the feeling the longer we wait, the harder the task will be.”

“Tomorrow?” James asked in horror.

“I agree” Ral and Kieran said. Joshua thought about it for a moment, and then agreed.

“I think that will be the best idea” Sylvia said to them. “However you will always be welcome back here, should you ever wish to return”.

“How can we get in touch though?” James asked her.

“I will show you” she replied, and getting up she went behind the bar, and beckoned them to follow. When they got there, Sylvia ducked down, and opened a cupboard, taking out a very old fashioned telephone and placing it on the bar, the wire plugged into a socket inside the cupboard.

“Telephones don't work” Ral said, frowning.

“The good thing is, the telephone exchange in this village was upgraded before the solar storm hit, and used a satellite, instead of cables.” Sylvia began. “Any damaged satellites must have been replaced, because there is a dial tone.”

“But how would it get power?” Ben asked.

“The exchange David told me had solar power for backup power, and it stores enough power for use through the night as well” Sylvia replied.

“And the electronics were not fried?” James asked.

“Doesn't look like it, but as no one paid their bills, the ability to make outgoing calls from any of the houses does not work any more.”

“Do incoming work?” Joshua asked.

“Yes, my son called a week before you had arrived, we keep the phone in the cupboard so no one trips over the wire in the dark.”

“Does your son visit you?” Ral asked her.

“About once a month, we were offered a ride down south when the storm happened, but we prefer it here. He does bring us many boxes of teabags and other things when he comes.”

“I was wondering why you had not ran out of teabags” Kieran said, comprehension dawning on his face.

Sylvia ducked again and withdrew a notebook and pen from the cupboard. She wrote her and David's phone number on 5 pages, tore them out, and handed one to each of them. “To ensure none of you loose it.”

“Thanks” The boys said in unison.

“You are always welcome” Sylvia replied, smiling.

For the rest of the morning, the boys packed. They packed their clothes, and filled several bottles with water for the journey. They packed the stuff in Ben's bag. They did not take much else, as David was going to take them to his son's place in Grimsby. They had lunch, which consisted of a small portion of oatmeal and fresh vegetables. They spent their afternoon playing board games, and all of them had a bath. They all went to bed early, as they were going to set off early the next day.

Ral, who had laid awake for several hours, felt like he had barely laid down to sleep when he and Ben was being shaken awake by Sylvia, 2 cups of tea on the bedside table.

“Morning boys” She said gently

“Morning” Croaked Ben and Ral.

Ral reached over to the bedside table and took his and Ben's glasses from it. Ral handed Ben's glasses to him, then put on his own. Sylvia left the room to wake the others.

Ral and Ben both sat up, Ral then passed Ben's tea to him.

“Thanks” Ben said.

They both drank their tea, feeling a little apprehensive about the day ahead.

“Do you have any idea how we will do what we need to do once we get there?” Ral asked.

“Well...” Ben began slowly “we could attempt to get on a radio station”.

“Or the news?” Ral suggested.

“I don't think the mainstream news would hear us out, but it is worth a go”.

They both finished their tea, got dressed in their now clean second set of clothes, had a wash in the bathroom, then went downstairs. The others were already there.

“Morning” Ben and Ral said to the room at large.

“Morning” Everyone replied back. Breakfast was already prepared, which was porridge. After eating breakfast, David said that they were ready to set off. Ben went upstairs, got his bag and came back down.

“Thanks so much for everything” Ral said to David and Sylvia. The others thanked them as well, and then they all got up and had a tight hug.

“It was a pleasure” David told them.

“It was lovely having you all in here.” Sylvia said kindly. “and you are all always welcome here, should you all ever wish to return here”

“Are you coming in the car with us?” James asked Sylvia.

“Yes I will be” She replied kindly.

They all went into the hall, put their shoes on, then went outside to the front lawn. It was quite warm outside, which they were all thankful for, as the one thing Ben had forgot to bring from the hotel in the hurry to get out were their coats.

“Where is the car?” Ben asked

“This way” David said, walking them down the front lawn, and to the house opposite the pub. He opened the garage and there was an old looking 7 seater car inside.

“I chose to park it here, protect it from any bad weather” David explained.

“Good thinking” Ben replied, smiling.

“I loaded the 2 spare petrol cans last night” David told them.

“Lucky you have a 7 seater” James said, looking around the garage, there was nothing else there.

“Yes you are right there” David replied smiling. “I also have £40 in cash, in case we need it, I had it inside a tin in the kitchen”

“Might come in handy” Agreed Joshua.

They went up to the car, and David withdrew a key from his pocket and unlocked the car doors and the boot. Ben and Ral sat in the two seats in the boot of the car. James, Kieran and Joshua sat in the back. Sylvia sat in the passenger seat. David got into the driver's seat, inserted the key into the ignition, and turned it. The engine turned over for a few seconds, then roared into life. David pulled out of the garage, and began heading east, towards Ruddingham.

“Do you have ABBA?” James asked, noticing the cassette player in the car.

“Yes, I do.” David replied. “love can you pass it?” He asked Sylvia.

Sylvia opened the glove compartment, and took out few cassettes. There was ABBA, Jim reeves, Dire straits, and The Shadows.

Seeing the shadows tape from the 2 back seats in the boot, Ben asked if David could put it on. They put it to the vote, ABBA or The shadows. The shadows won, so David inserted the shadows cassette into the cassette player.

A few seconds later, their song “Apache” began playing.

Ben and Kieran hummed to it; they had always listened to Kieran's mother's copy of the song whenever they had went round.

“Not many people your age like music back from when we were younger.” Sylvia said, turning to look at them all, a smile on her face.

A few minutes later, they could see the familiar town of

Ruddingham. They went round a roundabout, and through a tunnel, coming out on the street where the hotel was, and in the distance opposite the hotel, the collapsed ASDA store.

“That is where we stayed” Joshua said, pointing to the hotel, but it was unrecognisable. The glass in the front doors had been smashed, and as they passed, they saw the main hall had been burnt to a cinder. Quickly looking up at the upper windows, they saw soot coating all of them. The dentist surgery had suffered the same fate.

“They trashed it” Kieran said, disgusted.

“I know” Said James, who was looking at the side of the seat and noticed an unlabelled cassette wedged there. Pulling it out, he noticed the tape was labelled “Mix”.

“The gang must have gone back to their other place in the city” Ben concluded.

“What is on this?” James asked, handing the tape to Sylvia.

“I don't know, do you want to see?”

“Yes please”

She ejected The Shadows cassette and inserted the “Mix” one.

No music or sound appeared for the first moment. As they came to the shell petrol station, instead of turning left, which was the windy road towards the army barracks, he turned right, and continued straight on, passing the nursery and post office.

Suddenly the song “Heart of glass” Began playing out of the speakers. All of the boys and Sylvia began singing to it.

Several minutes passed, they had gone through the Crown estate,

where Ben James and Joshua had lived with their parents. They had also passed the old fish and chip shop, which was in total ruin. After passing many more rows of houses, they had come to a rural road.

“We are now heading south” David said, pointing to a compass which was on the dashboard. “I will drive down the A1, it will be easier and quicker”.

The song playing was now Fleetwood Mac “Little lies”.

The boys Didn't chat much. They just relaxed and enjoyed the music, watching the scenery pass. 30 minutes, maybe more had passed. The car clock did not work, as David had disconnected it to prevent it draining the battery. Ben reached into his bag which was beside him, and took out one of the water bottles and offered it to everyone. James accepted, and Ben handed him the bottle.

Ben took the second water bottle and took a drink from it himself, then put it back in the bag. A minute later a car suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and David slammed on the brakes. After a few seconds they realized that all the cars that broken down when the storm had hit had stopped on the road. David continued on slowly, working his way round the cars. The music had stopped now, so Sylvia turned the tape over.

Ben said suddenly “I think many people still are” But he never finished, the song “Living In A Box” Came on. “That was not what I was going to say, but it is somewhere along them lines.” Ben continued, laughing.

The amount of broken down cars had reduced now, and David

was able to drive a bit quicker. After 10 more minutes, there were no more broken down cars visible. David continued at a regular speed of 60mph. Sylvia opened the glove compartment and found 2 more cassettes inside, under a map. They were both labelled “Mix 1” and “Mix 2” Respectively.

The song playing as she picked up the other mix tapes was “The One I Love” by REM. Suddenly the music ground to a halt, Sylvia ejected the cassette to find it had been chewed up. She pulled the tape from the player and wound it all back in. She then inserted another one of the mix tapes.

“Years ago, we used to copy mixes for the car” Sylvia explained. I think one of them is my son's.

The song “Mr Vain” by Culture beat began playing.

Ben, who loved this song began singing it out loud.

The sun had risen now, so they suspected it was nearly midday.

“That tape must have been my son's 90s mix. Do you want to keep it on?” Sylvia asked them all.

everyone replied “yes” in a quick voice. The song “Rhythm Is A Dancer” by “Snap!” was playing.

This time, James began singing.

“Not had a chance to listen to 90s music for a long long time” Joshua said, grinning.

Another hour or so passed, and they had seen a couple of cars that were driving, mostly heading north. They assumed this was to check on family, or just to check the north out while it was deserted.

“Wouldn't want to run out of petrol up north would you?” Ben said, cringing at the very idea,

“No, I don't think you would” James replied. Sylvia flipped the

cassette over which had come to the end of side A. Side B started with “Push The Feeling On” by the night crawlers. The boys had only just started singing to it, when that ground to a halt. Sylvia pulled it out and found the tape had snapped.

“Oh no” James groaned.

Sylvia inserted the third mix tape, placing the snapped one back in the glove compartment. The third tape started with a trance kind of music.

“Who composed this?” Joshua asked.

“Steve Roach” Sylvia replied. The song is “Towards The Dream”.

“Who is he?” Ben asked.

“He had a spiritual experience when he nearly died” Sylvia began.

“He had a trip not unlike Kieran's.”

“Have you driven south since the storm happened?” James asked.

“Not since the storm no” Sylvia replied.

Suddenly, Kieran and Ben both yelled “There's that sound we heard!”

For the song on the tape had just changed to another one.

That one is “Structures from silence” By Steve Roach. David told them.

“It sounds identical to the sound we heard in the hotel, and my experience” Kieran said.

“I had a dream” Ben told everyone. A dream where I was told about love and compassion, watching a river flow.

“When did you have this?” Joshua asked, turning to him.

On our last night in the hotel. I forgot all about it.

“I think you were being shown the river of life and how you can go with the flow or fight it” Sylvia said, smiling.

Ben smiled. “Sounds about right”.

They all enjoyed the relaxing music. The boys had all sat back and relaxed as it played. Several hours later, or so it seemed, the sky was growing darker. They had begun to approach a town or a village which had its lights on, they could see it in the distance. A few minutes later, they had begun passing through the town, most of the houses, and shops had their lights on.

The boys had looks of awe on their faces, as they had not been used to lights on in the street for years.

“The petrol light is on love” Sylvia said, pointing to an orange light just under the speedometer. David, who had only just noticed the light when Sylvia mentioned it, began to slow down, stopping by a corner shop.

“Does anyone want anything from the shop while I fill up the car?” David asked them.

“A cappuccino would be great please” Ben replied.

“Yeah a cappuccino please” Joshua said also.

“A hot chocolate” James replied, a smile appearing on his face.

“A cup of earl grey tea if they do any, if not a Latte please” Ral replied also.

“Can I have a Latte too please?” Kieran asked.

“Of course you can” David replied, turning off the engine.

He then got out, opened the boot, and removed the 2 cans of petrol which were behind Ral and Kieran's seats. David then went to the side of the car, removed petrol tank cover, then emptied both cans of petrol into it. He then replaced the cover, put the 2 cans back behind the seats.

David then went inside the shop, returning 5 minutes later with the 2 cappuccinos and the hot chocolate, then making another trip back inside the shop to get Ral's and Kieran's drinks. There had been no earl grey tea, so Ral and Kieran both had a cappuccino.

They all sat and drank the hot drinks, they had not had any of these luxury drinks in over 5 years. David had gone back into the shop to use the payphone, to call his son. They all unbuckled their seatbelts, got out of the car and threw the empty cups away when they had finished drinking. They then got back inside the car, just as David returned to the car. David then shut the boot, and James swapped places with Kieran, who had been in the middle. The boys thanked Sylvia and David for the drinks, then David started the car again. The petrol light had gone out now, so David continued going down the road, and the journey continued. Sylvia put the spiritual music on again at the boys' request. They all sat back and relaxed once more.

“We are nearing the town of Grimsby, where our son lives” David told everyone hours later. Ben and Ral had fallen asleep in the back. Kieran however, was gazing out of the window. James who was in the middle had also fell asleep, and Joshua had been chatting to Sylvia. Kieran poked James awake, who yawned. “We are nearly there” Kieran began. “It is a beautiful starry night”.

James turned and tapped Ben on the nose. Ben woke with a jump, and yawned. Ben then woke Ral up.

“Are we nearly there?” Ben asked.

“About 10 minutes to go” David replied, smiling. Me and Sylvia will spend the night at our son's house.”

“A shame there is a lot of light pollution” Ral said, as he looked out of the small windows in the boot at the starry sky.

They entered Grimsby, passing street lights, a photo lab, and a petrol station. David began to slow down, stopping at a semi-detached house opposite a doctors surgery. There was a car parked in the driveway, so David parked the car on the side of the road. David then stopped the engine once more. “Time to get out” He said, in his kind voice.

End Of Book Sample

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