

Chapter 1. A New Hell

“Well at least that’s over,” Mrs. Cardino sighed and said to Mr. Taylor, one of the parents sitting near her on the bus.

“The kids had a great time though,” Mr. Taylor answered, glancing down at his eleven-year-old son, Stephen, “and so did the parents.”

“I still remember my sixth-grade camping trip,” Mrs. Cardino said to him, grinning as she thought about that trip so many years ago. “This was a lot of work, but it’s something these kids will remember for the rest of their lives.”

“We didn’t go on a camping trip when I finished elementary school,” Mr. Taylor said. “We went on a lame field trip. I remember my cousin’s school got to go camping, and I was so jealous.”

“This is the first time we’ve done it,” Mrs. Cardino told him. “We’ve always done the lame field trip. This years group of kids was so great, and they did such a phenomenal job fundraising, we were able to plan something a little bit more extravagant. Truthfully, it also helped that Mrs. Johnson took over fundraising and planned everything, I wouldn’t have had time.”

“They did seem like a really well-behaved group of kids,” Mr. Taylor replied. “I had a great time with my group.”

“They are. This is probably the best-behaved class I’ve had in twenty years. Even the parents this year go above and beyond. Look at how many parents we had volunteer to chaperone this trip. Six dads and eight moms out of fifty kids is amazing. Especially when almost every parent that went, had to take the week off of work or arrange care for their other children,” Mrs. Cardino said.

“There were a lot of parents up at the cabins,” Mr. Taylor said, laughing softly. “We had a good time once the kids went to sleep.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Cardino answered, grinning. “It makes Mr. Connelly and my job much easier when there’s so much parent support. I could hear all of you a few nights outside; it sounded like fun.”

“You should have come out and joined us,” Mr. Taylor said.

“I didn’t want to ruin your fun in case there were things going on that shouldn’t have been.” She laughed and added, “my mom chaperoned my sixth-grade trip, and the moms got caught with wine one night.”

“Well,” Mr. Taylor said, laughing softly again, “maybe it’s better you didn’t come out then.”

“That’s what I thought,” Mrs. Cardino said, trying not to laugh as the bus braked quickly, making everyone grab the seat in front of them. “Whoa,” Mrs. Cardino said as the bus suddenly slowed down to an almost stop. “I wonder what’s going on? We’re only about a mile from the school, and we’re getting back so late, traffic should be light by now.”

Sharon Cardino got up from her seat and walked up the aisle, “everyone stay in your seats,” she announced to groups of students and parents. “We should be at the school soon.”

“Hey Dave,” she said to the driver as she sat down in the empty seat behind him. “What’s going on?”

“I’m trying to get someone at the office on the radio, but I’m getting no answer,” Dave told her. “All of a sudden the traffic is crazy. It’s like everyone is trying to get home.”

“Can we take one of the side roads and cut to the school that way?” Mrs. Cardino asked. “I know there should be a lot of

parents waiting there to pick their kids up by now. My daughters are picking me up; they texted me half an hour ago that they were at the school already.”

“I’ll try. Even the dirt roads have cars coming out of them,” Dave said. “Look at their faces; it’s almost like they’re in a panic.”

“Get us off this main road,” she told him. “I have a bad feeling about this. I’ll keep the kids calm.”

Dave swung the bus down the first available dirt road that headed in the direction of the school, the bus behind, with Mr. Connelly’s class, followed. There were a lot of these back roads in the small rural community Sharon Connelly had moved her family to just five years earlier. Although traffic was still heavier than normal, they were able to make it back to the school within ten minutes. As they pulled up into the parking lot, parents began running towards the bus.

“We have to get out of here now,” one mom yelled, grabbing her son and his gear and running towards her car. Other parents were doing the same from both busses, and Sharon Cardino had no idea what was going on or how to calm them down.

“Mom,” Mrs. Cardino’s daughter Jessica yelled, running up to her. “Did you hear what’s happening?”

“No,” Mrs. Cardino answered, “we haven’t heard anything. Why is everyone acting so crazy?”

“The North Koreans have launched a nuclear bomb at us. We retaliated and launched a bunch at them. Now the Russians have sided with North Korea, and they’ve launched at us too. No one’s sure what the Chinese are doing? We have to get home and take cover.”

“There’s no time for that,” Mrs. Cardino said. Mr. Connelly walked up as Jessica was explaining and heard the whole thing. “We’re going to have to take cover in the school.”

“My family was supposed to pick me up, and they aren’t here yet,” Dan Connolly said, glancing down at his phone, a worried look on his face. “I can’t get Katie on her cell. It keeps saying all circuits are busy.”

“Did you see the traffic out there? Most of the roads around here are just two lanes, give her time, she’ll make it,” Mrs. Cardino said, hoping she was telling him the truth. “Right now, let’s see about getting these kids whose parents aren’t here organized, and into a safe place.”

“Sharon, Dan,” they heard their names yelled as the custodian that was working the afternoon shift came running from the school towards them, “we need to get these kids inside, immediately.”

“We know, Jim,” Sharon Cardino said to him. “We just heard what’s going on. This school has a basement doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jim answered. “It’s only been used for storage the last twenty years, but there are classrooms, bathrooms and a kitchen down there.”

“Great,” Mrs. Cardino said. Then she turned towards the parents that were still near the busses and the few students whose parents hadn’t shown up yet to pick them up. “Everyone listen up,” she called loudly. “I need you all to stay calm, but we’ve just heard some disturbing news. It seems that we’re now at war. The North Koreans and Russians are attacking us, and we need to get to shelter right away. If your parent is not here yet, come with me to the school. If you’re a parent and you want to stay and shelter here, that’s fine too, but we need to head into the school right now.”

Mrs. Cardino turned back towards her daughter, “where’s your sister?” she asked.

“By the car,” Jessica answered.

“Get her, now. We need to get into the school. I need both of you to help me keep these kids calm,” Mrs. Cardino said. Then she saw a familiar car pulling into the lot, as one of the busses and many others were leaving. “Dan, I think your wife and kids just pulled in. Grab them, and help me get these kids inside.”

“Mrs. Cardino,” called Mr. Taylor. “I need to run to my house real fast, but I’d like my son and I to take shelter here at the school. Can you keep him here until I get back?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Cardino answered. There was no time to ask what was so important that he needed to get home. “Let’s go,” she yelled at the students and parents standing around. “If you’re staying, follow me, if you’re going, I suggest you hurry.”

“We need to get organized,” Jim said, walking beside her. “We could be down in that basement for a long time. If we even survive.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Mrs. Cardino answered. “I have some ideas, but let’s get everyone inside first, and then figure out what to do next from there.”

Jim quickly lead the group back into the school and down the steps into the basement. They quickly scanned the rooms and found that none of them had any windows, which was good. They had the students drop their bedrolls and packs on the floor in two adjoining rooms.

Sharon Cardino was an avid reader, and for once in her life, the knowledge she’d gained was possibly going to come in very handy. One of her favorite genres was post-apocalyptic fiction, so as they found places to sit, she thought about all the things she had learned about survival from the stories she’d read.

“Ok everyone, listen up,” Mrs. Cardino once again yelled. “We don’t have much time to prepare. Jim, did they say how long we had?”

“Probably less than an hour now,” Jim answered.

“Alright then,” Mrs. Cardino said taking control. “I may not have all the answers but for once all that post-apocalyptic fiction I’ve read may help out. Jessica, I want you to go by the door. If anyone shows up that looks like a student or family, let them in. Mr. Connelly, can you take a team up into the kitchen and grab any food you find there?”

“We just had a delivery for next week’s breakfast and lunch,” Jim said. “There’s quite a bit up there.”

“Grab it all,” Mrs. Cardino said. Dan Connelly grabbed his wife and two kids, plus quite a few more of the students, and took off for the stairs. “Jim, are there refrigerators and freezers down here?”

“I’m not sure if they work anymore,” Jim answered. “But I can try to get them going.”

“If the power goes out it won’t matter anyway,” Sharon Cardino said.

“We may be all right there,” Jim answered, and Sharon didn’t have time to ask what he meant.

“Mrs. Johnson,” Mrs. Cardino called to one of the moms, “can you take about five kids up to the computer lab and just start printing everything you can find on surviving a nuclear attack? Or do it yourself books? Don’t read it, just open the website and hit print. You have thirty minutes. There should be three or four working printers in there.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Johnson called back and grabbed some of the kids and also headed for the stairs.

“Mr. Ellis,” Mrs. Cardino said to another of the parents, “look around for whatever clean containers you can find and start filling them with water. I don’t know how long the sinks are going to work and we’ll need water to survive.”

“I’m on it,” Mr. Ellis called out, as he too took a group of students with him.

“And last, Mr. and Mrs. Stone, could you get Jim’s master key and go classroom by classroom. Take any food that you find or bottled water. The spring parties were going to be tomorrow, so I can guarantee that a lot of party foods have already been delivered,” Mrs. Cardino said. “Look for mini fridges in the rooms and empty the one in the teacher’s lounge. They’re probably all packed full for tomorrow.”

“On our way,” Mr. Stone said, grabbing the last of the kids and parents and heading out.

“What about me, Mom?” asked Bethany, her youngest daughter.

“Help me down here,” she answered. “We need to clear out these rooms a bit so everyone can lay out their sleeping bags.”

“What about us that don’t have sleeping bags?” Bethany asked her mother.

“Shit,” she said. “Maybe we can find some blankets in the office clinic or some coats in the lost and found. Can you go look, please?”

“Sure,” Bethany told her mother and took off running towards the stairs.

“I’m back,” said Mr. Taylor as he walked down the stairs towards her, carrying two extra large duffel bags.

“That was fast,” Mrs. Cardino said.

“I only live about a half-mile away,” Mr. Taylor told her.

“What’s in there?” she asked, pointing to the bags.

“Security,” he answered and unzipped one, showing at least five guns of various lengths.

“Keep those away from the children,” she said to him. Not really upset that he had brought them, knowing that if they survived the initial strike, they might need them in the near future.

“What else needs to be done?” Mr. Taylor asked.

“Well since you’re now in charge of security, could you go relieve my daughter at the door?” she asked. “Maybe you could check the school over quickly to make sure we’re as safe as can be for now?”

“That I can do,” he said, loading one of the rifles to take with him, while quickly putting the rest out of sight.

“I’m going to start rushing people along and get them back down here. Time is about up,” she said.

The two of them headed back up the stairs, thinking about what else needed to be done while they had time. Sharon Cardino waved her daughter over towards her, and the two of them began making their rounds of the school, telling everyone to finish up and get back into the basement.

Dan Connelly and his group had just about finished moving all the food from the newer kitchen on the first floor, down to the old basement kitchen with the help of three large carts they’d found. It helped that the elevator was working, and kids were still running boxes down the steps as well, as Dan threw what was left on the carts to take one last load. Jim had managed to somehow get the old outdated refrigerators and freezer working, and food was now stacked everywhere and being stored away under the direction of Dan’s wife, Katie.

“Jessica,” she called to her daughter, “go get the group in the library and tell them to grab what they’ve printed and head downstairs, now.”

“Ok, mom,” Jessica called back, trying to stay as calm as her mother.

“I’m just going to make one last check to be sure we have everyone together, and I’ll meet you downstairs,” Mrs. Cardino told her oldest daughter.

Just as she finished talking, they felt the ground shudder and heard a boom sound in the distance. Both froze for a second; then they felt the ground move once more as another bomb went off. Mrs. Cardino yelled, “go now, and make sure you grab your sister!”

Sharon Cardino glanced over towards the tall glass windows that were in the front of the school. Way off in the distance she could barely make out the dust cloud that was forming there. She was hopeful that the bombs had dropped far enough away that maybe they’d be ok. It wasn’t until she heard the screams as parents and students came running from all directions, and heading for the basement, that she unfroze and was able to move.

“Everyone downstairs, quickly,” she called to all of them. “Be careful on the stairs though. The last thing we need is for someone to fall and get seriously hurt.”

Once everyone was downstairs, they were all silent as they took seats along the walls. “What do we do now?” Jim quietly asked Mrs. Cardino.

“Hopefully we survive,” she answered him.

“You don’t seem to be so sure about that,” he said to her.

“I’m not,” she said. “A lot depends on how close to us the bombs fell, and if there’ll be any more.”

“Is there anything else you need me to do?” asked Mr. Johnson, walking up to where the two were sitting.

“We’re going to need a count of everyone that’s down here,” she told him. “I’m not even sure how many kids and parents came inside.”

“My wife and I will get on that,” he told her. “You did good getting us down here and rounding up supplies.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she said, doubting herself. “I don’t even know how much food or water we have.”

“We can work on counting that tomorrow,” Mr. Johnson told her. “What do you think is happening out there right now?”

“I don’t know. We don’t know how many bombs were dropped, or who exactly fired at us. The only thing I’m sure of is that the world just turned into a new kind of hell,” Sharon answered.