



Free excerpt # 3 – Copyright 2013

# 3

*"There is love of course. And then there's life, its enemy."*

—Jean Anouilh

**Six months later. . .**

The August sunrise lit the sheer gray vertical cliff face into a canvass of gold, causing my heart to race. "Andie, I really don't feel good about this."

"You'll feel better once we get started."

"I don't want to get started. When you said you knew how to cure my night terrors, I thought we were going for a hike."

"We are going for a hike – straight up to the summit."

"Without ropes and harnesses? This is crazy."

"It's not crazy, it's called 'free soloing,' and you can do it."

"No, I can't."

"Yes you can. You have the physical strength, what you're lacking is the psychological control needed to stay on the wall. It's all about learning to control your fears through Buddha breathing – in through your nostrils, filling the belly, then slowly exhaling through your mouth. Commit to the climb. Focus your fingertips on the rock; be light like a spider monkey. And whatever you do, Ike, keep looking up."

Andria and I had been living together just over five months when I began suffering severe anxiety attacks. She had kidded me about feeling the pressures of being domesticated, and in a way she was right. Worrying about my own survival had been far different than protecting the woman I loved from the murderous gangs that roamed the countryside.

Fear entered my dreams in the form of night terrors. Ghoulish men would break into our home, the faceless demons raping and torturing Andria as they pinned me down and forced me to watch. Each night terror ended with her death, followed by my bloodcurdling scream.

Things grew so bad that we had to sleep in separate bedrooms again.

When my anxiety grew into a severe depression, Andria decided we needed a change of scenery. Claiming she knew the perfect mountain hideaway that would be free of the sociopaths, we packed supplies and rode all night on my battery-powered motorcycle, arriving just before dawn at the foot of Buzzard Rock, a 1,145 foot high mountain located in Loudoun County, Virginia.

As she pointed out our route, I felt the blood drain from my face. "Relax, Ike, I've climbed this face a dozen times. I'll go first, do what I do and you'll be fine. And remember—"

"I know, I know. . .keep looking up."

We began our ascent. I carefully measured the first fifty handholds, my body trembling in fear as I learned to balance myself on a rock wall. After a while my fingers, hands, and feet became flesh-like pinions, adhering me to the cliff face. I learned to cleave to inch-wide grooves between the slabs of slate; the toes of my running shoes sought the tiniest of perches to bear my weight as I flattened my body to the unforgiving mountain.

Ten feet turned into fifty; fifty became a hundred, each arm length accompanied by controlled breathing and the occasional, "I'm okay" in reply to Andie's query. We paused, poised on a three foot ledge three hundred and seventy-two feet above our starting point that offered us a treetop view and a place where we could rest and eat.

I bit into a ripe pear, my body tired, my muscles taut. "Andie, this was an amazing workout, but I'm shot and we still have to climb back down. Seriously, I never thought I'd make it ten feet, let alone this high."

She was lathered in sweat, her high cheekbones darkly tanned, accentuating her heritage. "We're going all the way, Ike. Trust me, the hardest part is over. From here on up it's a cinch."

I trusted her.

*Foolish, foolish man.*

The next few hours of climbing were slightly easier as the cliff face was shredded in three inch cracks that helped get us to another perch just below nine hundred feet.

I pointed to a rusted pinion embedded in the rock. "Pussies."

Andie smiled, tearing into an apple. "You're the man, Eisenbraun. When we get up to the summit, I'm going to fuck your brains out."

I glanced up. The good news was the appearance of dry-rotted roots sticking out of the cliff face. The bad news was a five foot curl of rock that protected the summit like a protruding lower lip. "How do we get around that ledge?"

"I'll show you when we get up there. Ready? I'm getting really horny."

We started out again, my fingers by now raw and blistered, the sweat on my

palms becoming a new threat as the midday sun beat down upon us. The roots were a mixed

blessing, offering us handholds we could grip – along with palms full of splinters.

And then we arrived at our final perch, the two of us staring at a ceiling of rock that jutted five feet out over our heads.

Andria pointed to a series of roots along the outer lip. “This will sound scary, but what we have to do is lean out and grab onto that root, then invert and blindly work our feet and legs up and over the ledge.”

“You’re insane. I’m so tired I can barely hold on.”

“Which is why we have to reach the summit, so we can rest and climb down tomorrow.”

“And just how are we going to get down?”

She flashed me her shit-eating grin. “We’ll take the trail.”

Anger shook me as I cursed my companion to exhaustion. I felt utterly helpless, my existence forced into a do or die situation that was as frustrating to fathom as it was insane – as insane as what had happened to my family and the rest of the world, as insane as the psychopaths that roamed the countryside and haunted my dreams – only this time I had a choice. This time I could save my life or at least die with some dignity.

“Embrace the fear, Ike. Use it to focus your strength.”

“Okay, Andie, but I’m going first.”

“That’s not a good idea. I’ve done this before—”

“Bullshit. You’ve never climbed this mountain; if you had you wouldn’t have taken us up this route. I knew it back on the last perch when I saw your face. You realized you

had screwed up, but as usual you tried to wing it. . .control the moment. You're right about one

thing though, if we don't get over that summit now, we'll never make it down, not in the dark.

So we'll give it a try, only I'm going first. Not because you're a woman or some other bullshit sense of male chivalry, but because I love you and I just. . .I just couldn't bear to watch you fall."

Tears flooded her eyes, marking the first time she had shown her emotions to me.

Reaching carefully into her backpack, she removed a twenty foot length of nylon rope. "Tie off," she said, securing one end around her own waist, handing me the other. "When you reach the summit you can pull me up. If something happens, then we'll die together." She leaned over and kissed me. "You're the only man I've ever loved, Eisenbraun. Don't fuck this up."

I looped the rope tightly around my waist while drawing deep breaths into my gut, summoning every reserve of strength I had left. For the first time since we began the climb I felt truly alive, knowing in my heart that no matter what else happened to me in the days or weeks or years ahead, that right here, right now there was no possible way I was going to allow myself to fail.

# 4

*“Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him.”*

–Martin Luther King, Jr.

A die-off provokes a different kind of fear than a war or a natural disaster. In war there is a common enemy; in a tsunami, earthquake, or hurricane there is bond of humanity to stoke the desire to aid those in need.

In a die-off, death is a game of musical chairs which begins as an innocuous boil. An occasional power outage evolves into rolling blackouts, followed by assurances from government officials that oil reserves will last another thirty years, even as prices spike and the lines at your local gas station stretch for miles. The grocery store becomes a battle front as every non-perishable left on the shelf is fought over in hand to hand combat and customers with loaded carts, refusing to risk their precious bounty, charge out the doors without paying. These scenarios degenerate into civil disorder and mandatory curfews, the protests and street violence that follows unleashing the military.

Stop the music and remove the chair known as personal freedom.

Phase two is rationing. Oil, natural gas, coal, firewood. . .food. Communication gets squeezed into weekly assurances that times are tough but things will be improving soon. These

pep-talks from politicians, also known as lies, are designed to buy time – time being the variable that allows the weak to perish, either with a whimper (starvation) or a bang (riot police with orders to shoot to kill).

For the lower class, the music has stopped.

A long winter without heat strikes next. Add in diminishing water and food supplies, not to mention a cessation of hospital services – and there goes the middle class – first in the colder rural regions, followed closely by the urban areas. As we remove this chair, the government shuts down, society collapses and now it is officially every family for itself.

Die-offs come in many flavors. You could starve, freeze to death, die of heat exhaustion, thirst, physical ailments, or perhaps you'll be shot attempting to get food to feed yourself or a starving child. In the last few years I had seen it all, and the images never went away. . .the nightmares and the anger stuck with me forever.

In the warmer states, suburbanites had lasted a season longer than their city dwelling counterparts, but a die-off, like musical chairs is a zero-sum game. Eventually, every family, save the farmer with his own well-armed private army of migrant workers and the inaccessible survivalist community was forced to abandon their powerless homes and their gas-less vehicles to search for food and potable water, joining a nomadic exodus that defined the post-apocalyptic landscape. Hunters still hunted and fisherman fished, but the competition for food turned neighbor against neighbor, no catch safe among the hordes of the wandering desperate. Parents pushed their starving children in shopping carts and wheelbarrows, leaving the elderly behind to die with the family pet they could no longer feed. Unyielding hunger could transform a populace into a mob of borderline psychopaths, and western nations did not go quietly into the night like



I had survived these trials and tribulations through preparedness, sheer luck, and a fear that spurred ingenuity. I accepted isolation over insanity, waiting out the first year within my fortress of solitude. What kept me going was a numbers game – without oil, the world's population would drop from seven billion to just under six hundred million – if I could safeguard my chair then maybe I'd live to see a different, wiser world.

Instead, I found myself quarantined against a society gone mad in every sense of the word. As fate would have it, after sixteen months of rationing, I was forced to venture out of my prison. . .and that's when I met my new companion.

My initial impression of Andria Saxon besides love at first sight was that she was a natural warrior – a fearless hunter as at home in the forest as I was in the lab. As I grew to know her, I realized I was wrong.

Andria refused to give me many details about her family life, other than that she had been on her own since she was fifteen. Over time, I was able to put together the missing pieces of a difficult existence – her “toughness” forged in strip bars, street corners, and flop houses. Having lived in her deceased mother's car for almost a year, Andria was as unaffected by the die-off as the Eskimos, Mayans, and other indigenous people who had little use for technology. What forced her from the streets of Lynchburg, Virginia and up into the Blue Ridge Mountains was her fear of being sodomized and enslaved as livestock.

Andria trusted no one, especially men. I would learn later that her intentions at the time we met were to gain access to my “safe house” and kill me. What stayed my execution was her need to understand how everything in my home worked. It was only after our first week together

that she decided I was worth more to her alive; after a month she knew I was not a threat.

For Andie, our time in bed together was lust – mindless fun. She would never allow herself to become vulnerable to her long-harnessed emotions.

Our adventures on the cliff face led to profound psychological changes in both of us. For me, a man who lived to survive but was afraid of life, I realized a new-found freedom that released me from the phobias that had dominated my existence since high school. As for Andria, she later confessed that the mountain was never meant to be survived. Believing her destiny was already set – that she would eventually be enslaved and tortured by the gangs of sociopaths, she had brought me to Buzzard Rock to end both our lives; albeit in as thrilling a manner as she knew how. It had been my selfless act at the summit that had melted her cold veneer, just as it had been my leap of faith that had ended my night terrors.

We returned the next night to my family's Virginia home reborn as newlyweds, each kiss as if it were the first, always knowing it could be the last. For the next twenty months we lived together in a gilded love nest surrounded by chaos – always careful not to conceive a child as we waited for the world to change.

And then, one fateful day, the wolves showed up at our door.

## **May 29, 2025**

“How many of them are out there, Ike?”

It was hard to see, the lenses of most of the closed circuit surveillance cameras still clouded with the morning dew, their sheer numbers having short-circuited the electrical grid. “I count nine, plus the two wounded stiffes who tried to save their electrocuted dogs.”

Andria handed me a loaded handgun – the very one she had taken from me the day we met. “How long before they realize the grid is down?”

“Not long.”

“Let’s get outside; we’ll pick them off one by one as they climb over the garden wall.”

I followed her through the kitchen, past the bricked-up windows and out the reinforced steel back door to the garden. The eight foot high walls surrounding the yard were topped with coils of barbed wire, but I doubted the supports would hold beyond the first assault.

Ten minutes passed, and then we heard boots trudging heavily on the metal car hoods as they approached.

I listened, my heart racing. “They’ve split up!”

“Stay here, I’ll take the front door.”

“Andie, no--”

Wa-boom!

The blast took out a twenty foot section of wall, pieces of brick and mortar rending the smoke-infested air. My head throbbed in the deafening aftermath, my ears ringing as bullets sprayed the orchard, shredding our spring harvest into pulp.

Andria grabbed my wrist and dragged me into the house mere seconds before the front door blew open, the concussion wave collapsing the dining room cupboards that displayed my mother’s good china. Blindly, she fired into the smoldering doorway, her shotgun burying lead in the chest of an auburn-bearded hayseed, shattering his necklace of human teeth.

Pulling Andria out of the hallway, I yanked open the cellar door and led her down

the creaking wooden steps, praying that the predators hadn't discovered the basement emergency exit. Andie checked the security monitor while I unhooked the motorcycle from its charger – the batteries barely energized from last night's run.

"Looks clear." She unbolted the door and climbed on behind me, wrapping her arms around my chest as I powered up the engine, its silent rumble overpowered by the blast of machine gun fire that splintered the cellar door above our heads.

We motored into daylight and up a two-foot wide, shrub-enshrouded stretch of tarmac. The tires flattened the hood-covered lawn, the sound alerting the cannibals searching the front of the house. We were halfway down the cul-de-sac by the time their assault weapons opened fire.

The motorcycle died before we reached the end of the street.

"Andie, run!"

Abandoning the bike, we sprinted down the road, perhaps a hundred yards ahead of the enraged wolf pack. The grid had killed their dogs – a lucky break, but there was no cover, just a deserted suburban development, separated from the nearest woods by the Interstate, which ran below the deserted community.

We slid down a weed-covered embankment to access the highway, my heart skipping a beat as I heard Andria scream out in pain.

"My ankle. . . I felt something snap."

I helped her up, only to see her cry out in frustration, her foot unable to bear any weight.

"Ike, give me your gun."

My heart pounded. . . it was suicide time.

I searched my waistband. "Shit. I must have lost it sliding down the hill."

"God dammit, Ike--"

"It's okay, I can carry you."

"And outrun these assholes? Ike, listen to me, you need to kill me, you need to snap my neck! Come around me from behind, you can do it. Ike, please--"

"Andie. . . I can't--"

Tears flowed down both our cheeks, her eyes filled with desperate fear. "You said you loved me, Ike! You swore on that love you'd kill me if it ever came down to this."

"Shh!" Hearing voices, I dragged her down into the weeds.

Gunfire erupted, bullets ricocheting off the highway's steel girder.

"Andie, the bullets. On the count of three, we stand up into the line of fire."

She kissed me hard and fast. "You are my heart."

I was about to tell her how much I loved her when the gunfire abruptly ceased. Lying in the grass, I could hear their boots thrashing through the weeds. "I'll stand and draw their fire again, then drag you off the ground."

"Okay."

"One. . .two. . ."

If I said, "three" I never heard it. What I heard instead was the bone-rattling reverberation of helicopter blades beating the air, followed by gunfire – the kind of gunfire that can split a car in two.

I crawled on top of Andria until the rain of hot lead ceased and the chopper landed

“You folks all right?”

I looked up at the soldier, his face obscured by his helmet's dark visor. “Who are you?”

“Naval reserves. Domestic forces are sweeping the area for survivors. We see a human carnivore, we kill them and ask questions later.”

There were sixteen people aboard the Sikorsky transport – bewildered adults, malnourished children, a paraplegic bound to a wheelbarrow and an infant suckling her mother's breast. We learned that the Internet was back up, powered by solar grids and windmills. Pockets of communities had organized, calling upon war veterans and returning soldiers to mobilize military firepower to reestablish law and order, their vehicles fueled by secret reserves stored at military bases.

We were flown to the University of Virginia. Major universities were now functioning like state capitols, offering survivors food and a dorm room in exchange for work. A website – Survivors.org – had been created to locate family and friends.

I was relieved, but not surprised to learn that my Uncle David was alive.

Andria's broken ankle was fitted with a walking boot. We lived in a tent and worked in the fields.

A month later, in July of 2025, representatives from seventy-two university communities convened in Topeka, Kansas – the geographical center of America – in order to create a new framework of government. What emerged from this six-week convention would have made the founding fathers proud. No more political parties. Term limits for all elected

officials. Most important – the elimination of future financial influences in elections, safeguarded by a Supreme Council which insured that each candidate operated on equal footing.

The first President of New America was a professor of ecology and agricultural science, elected by the founding members of Congress. Her vice president, Dr. Lee Udelsman, was a fusion expert who had worked on the Omega Project before society had collapsed.

Uncle David showed up in Virginia a short time later, our reunion soured when he learned I had no interest in finishing my work on GOLEM. We negotiated a consultant fee – a research grant and lab that would allow me to experiment with a new pet project, along with Andria's acceptance at the soon-to-be established Space Energy Agency in Cape Canaveral, where we would share an apartment while she trained to pilot mining shuttles to transport loads of Helium-3 back to Earth.

Could we rebound as a species? I had no doubt. If anything, humans had demonstrated, both as individuals and as nations, a fortitude born of courage. Still, ours was a resilience strengthened by numbers; when we divided as a people the strong feasted upon the weak, manifesting our worst attributes – man's ego unbridled. The Great Die-Off had served as yet another reminder of the devil lurking in each one of us; its aftermath mind-numbing: more than five billion people wiped out.

For now at least, it appeared the reign of the Homo sapiens subspecies known as "Petroleum Man" had officially ended, and with it Big Oil's stranglehold on clean, renewable energy sources. The question was – *had we learned anything?*

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