



# DARKNESS FALLS

BOOK 1 OF THE NATURE'S FURY SERIES

*When Mother Nature reaches her breaking point,  
humans have no choice but to face her fury.*

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# Chapter 43

Jasmine's screams fill my ears. I can't be sure if my own screams permeate the car too or if they only echo in my mind. Chris' head volleys back and forth between Jeff and Aidan, his eyes searching for answers.

Jeff revs the engine, punching the gas in an attempt to move us forward. While the front end of the car rises, the back drops like a boulder. Aidan shouts to be heard over the panicked din. "Stop! Stop the car. We need to get out. Now."

Seizing the handle, I throw the door open. The hinges squeal as I steal a quick glance behind me. Wes shoves Jasmine out the other door. Fighting gravity, I push through my open door. For a dumbfounded moment, I gawk at the crumbling edge of asphalt glaring at me. Shouting pulls me out of the temporary stupor.

"Quinn! Grab my hand," Jeff yells, reaching over the cracked edge. The previously puddled water rushes toward me, muddying the exposed dirt. Scrambling on the slick earth, I snag Jeff's open palm. His biceps flex as he eases me up and over the fissure. I flop onto my backside and crab-walk away from the opening.

“Stay right there!” Jeff commands as he jumps to his feet and runs around to the other side of the car. *Yeah, no worries there. I’ve got no plans to jump back into the hole that decided to swallow our car.*

The two front tires perch on the asphalt while the back end of the car grumbles as it slowly sinks deeper into the dirt. Still comprehending that the car we were just sitting in is being swallowed by the earth, I scan the parking lot, searching for signs that the ground isn’t done shaking. My eyes barely register the activity swirling around me.

Jeff leads a gasping Jasmine toward me and directs her to sit down. She’s still screeching, “What the hell?” when he turns away, shifting his attention to Aidan and Wes. Chris scrambles around the guys, flanking them like a hummingbird searching for nectar.

Wes staggers, leaning into Aidan. An angry red gash separates several inches of skin just below his right knee. Fueled by a rush of adrenaline, I spring to my feet. “What can I do? How can I help?”

“Let’s go back inside. We need to get that leg patched up,” Jeff commands, rushing to Wes’ other side, taking position as another crutch. Trudging around the building, we return to Ton O’ Fun. *I never thought we’d see this place again, but we can’t seem to escape it.*

The guys lead Wes back to the party room that served as their bedroom last night. As they gently guide Wes onto a makeshift bed, he starts rambling. “Thanks, guys. My leg’s killing me. What happened out there? Was there another earthquake?”

“That wasn’t an earthquake,” Aidan announces. “That was a sinkhole, and it just swallowed our ride and all of our belongings.”

# Chapter 44

Silence saturates the room. My brain replays the moment I tossed my bag in the trunk, just a moment before I threw Riley's bag in there. *I can't lose my sister's bag. It's the only connection I have to her right now.*

"I'm going back out there. I have to get my stuff out of the trunk," I state firmly. Jasmine punctuates a perfectly-timed eye roll with a groan. Before the looming argument erupts, Jeff barks out orders.

"Quinn, there's no time for that right now. Go to the bathroom, grab as many paper towels as you can find. Run some under hot water and bring them all out here. Aidan and Chris, find a First Aid kit. Jasmine, go to the freezer and find something we can use as an ice pack."

Once again, before my eyes, Jeff transforms into the ROTC student I imagine he was before our paths crossed. He'll be a great military officer someday. The clack of fingers snapping pulls me back to the present. "Quinn! Let's go," Jeff snaps.

After we've gathered our assigned supplies and reported back to Jeff, he patches Wes' leg up as best he can. Wes guzzles down some water and ibuprofen from the First Aid kit. When

the bandages prove they'll stay in place, we leave Wes in the party room to rest.

As soon as the door drifts closed, I announce, "Okay, I'm going back to the car. I'll just need the keys."

Aidan and Jeff share a glance. "Let's not have this conversation here. Wes needs to rest. Let's go to the kitchen and talk while we clean up," Jeff suggests. Turning to Chris, he says, "Buddy, why don't you wait here. Just keep an eye out and if Wes makes any noise, you check on him, okay?"

Chris purses his lips and watches us curiously but doesn't argue. His only response is to slide down the jungle-green wall until his butt lands on the black carpet. The four of us continue to the kitchen in silence. Each step I take strengthens my resolve. They will not talk me out of doing what I need to do.

As soon as we reach the kitchen, Aidan ignites the firing squad. "Quinn, sinkholes aren't safe. You can't just hop in and out of them whenever you want."

Striding to the sink, I wash my hands, letting the warm water run down my fingertips just like I'm letting his words slide out of my thoughts. He quickly takes my place at the faucet when I yank a paper towel from the dispenser and scrub my hands dry.

"Yeah, and the last thing we need is someone else hurt," Jasmine mutters, crossing her arms. Before I can respond, Jeff approaches me cautiously.

“I know you want your stuff,” he says sympathetically, resting a hand on my shoulder. “Heck, we all do. Not to mention the food that’s sitting in that trunk. But it’s not worth what could happen. It’s just not worth the risk, Quinn.” His eyes beg me to understand. But he’s the one who will never understand. I need to get my sister’s bag. I have to bring it to her.

I don’t want to waste one more moment listening to them tell me what to do. “Guys, it’s all on me, okay. If I get hurt or something, just leave me. I’ll figure it out.” Extending one hand, palm side up, in front of me, I simply say, “The keys please.”

With an audible huff of disagreement, Jeff beckons over his shoulder. “They’re in the party room with Wes. They were digging into my leg, so I pulled them out of my pocket and dropped them on the floor.”

“Thanks,” I say coolly. Turning on my heel, I stride to the party room. Anchoring one hand on the toothy hippo painted on the door, I crack it open as quietly as possible. Not quietly enough, as a startled Wes questions, “Chris, that you again?”

“Sorry, Wes, it’s just me, Quinn,” I say quickly. “You keep resting. I just came to get the car keys. Jeff said he dropped them on the floor in here somewhere.” Bending down, I start patting the floor and all of the germs it harbors.

“The car keys,” he says groggily. “Chris was in here a few minutes ago, looking around on the floor too. Said he needed to get the keys for you.”

# Chapter 45

Pushing down a surge of panic, I simply say, “Thanks, Wes, you get some rest. I’ll go find the kid,” before I sprint out the door. Dashing around the colorful money-hungry video games and token dispensers, I whisper-yell, “Chris!”

I’m greeted with silence, as expected. Charging out the door, I tear through the parking lot until the car is in sight. A flutter of movement at the Malibu catches my eye. “Chris!” I yell, hovering around the edge of the asphalt’s gaping mouth.

The kid’s straddling rocky ledges lining the dirt wall. Looking up, he flashes me a smile. “Quinn, I’m doing it! I’m getting the bags!” Suppressing my anger, I smile back and say, “Chris, let’s get you out of there. Let me do it.”

As if I didn’t say a word, he crawls into the open trunk. The car releases a metallic groan in response to the added weight. Wide-eyed, the smile slips off of Chris’ face. “Quinn, wh-what was that?” he stutters.

“Buddy, just come out, okay? We’ll worry about the bags later,” I plead. He shakes his head defiantly. “Get ready to catch, Quinn. I’m gonna throw a bag out.”

With that, he heaves each bag, one at a time, and tosses it to me. He pauses momentarily between each load to catch his

breath and swipe messy blond hair off his sweaty forehead. Sweeping my eyes over the car and the hole that swallowed it, a sense of urgency surges through me. Dropping the final bag at my feet, I instruct Chris to crawl out of the trunk slowly.

“I can’t, Quinn,” he gasps between gulps of air. “The food is still in here. I have to get it.” Shaking my head fervently, I cry, “No! It’s not worth it. You’re more important. Just come out!”

Disbelief flashes in his watery eyes. “But, the cookies,” he whimpers.

“Chris, come out now!” I huff through clenched teeth. Worry wraps its sharp claws around every last thought in my head. Slowly nodding in defeat, he concedes.

Shifting his weight to the edge of the trunk, he starts crawling out backwards. When one shaky foot reaches the ledge, he visibly relaxes. Pushing off of the car, he throws his other foot behind him, searching for a grip.

Just as he stands tall, leaning into the alcove of earth, a sharp cry cuts through the air, startling us both. “Chris!” Jasmine’s panicked voice rings in my ears as a scream escapes my own lips. “Nooooooooo,” I shout as Chris loses his foothold. His little hands scramble over the bumper before he disappears into the plunging darkness below.