

The Great Alone



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KRISTIN HANNAH

Kristin Hannah spent the early years of her life in Southern California before her family relocated to Washington in 1968. As a child, Hannah traveled a lot; her father was always in search of adventure, and he took the family along with him in a VW bus. One year, the Hannah family made it all the way up to the Kenai River in Alaska, a region they fell in love with. Later in her life, Hannah graduated from the University of Washington and for several years she worked for an advertising agency. Later, she would graduate from the University of Puget Sound law school and become a practicing lawyer. While in law school, Hannah's mother was diagnosed with cancer, which would eventually kill her. However, during this difficult period of her life, Hannah and her mother began working on a novel together. Although the book was never published, it sparked the beginning of an extensive career. Hannah published her first novel, *A Handful of Heaven*, in 1991 and would publish nine more novels over the next decade. The novel that made Hannah a literary star, *Firefly Lane*, arrived in 2008; it has since sold over a million copies and was turned into a Netflix series. Still, the best was yet to come because in 2015 Hannah published *The Nightingale*, her most critically and commercially successful novel. It sold over 4.5 million copies and is currently being adapted into a film. All of Hannah's most successful works, including *Firefly Lane*, *The Nightingale*, and *The Great Alone* are works of historical fiction. Today, Hannah lives in Washington with her family.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are several historical events that are front and center in *The Great Alone*. Most prominent is the Vietnam War, which the United States entered in 1965, purportedly to stop the spread of Communism. The Vietnam War split the American public more than any other conflict in the 20th century. Many Americans found the war to be unjust, and the rise of global news coverage and recording technologies allowed the American public unprecedented access to the horrors of war. Unlike after previous American conflicts, Vietnam veterans were not always welcomed warmly when returning from war. Although much of Ernt's sense of persecution in *The Great Alone* is imagined, his irritation at how Vietnam veterans were treated is based in reality. Additionally, Ernt's paranoia and aggression are both symptoms of PTSD, a condition common among those who served in Vietnam. Hannah also references other historical events, including the Ted Bundy murders and Patty Hearst's kidnapping. Ted Bundy is one of America's most

notorious serial killers, who killed at least 20 women. Meanwhile, Patty Hearst is the granddaughter of newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. She was kidnapped and held prisoner by the Symbionese Liberation Army, a far-left organization responsible for a number of crimes between 1973 and 1975. Hearst participated in some of these crimes, although there are conflicting narratives as to whether she did so of her own volition. Regardless, Hannah includes figures like Bundy and Hearst in her narrative to speak to the general state of paranoia that was present in America during the mid-to-late 70s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Great Alone wears its literary influences on its sleeve. Early in the novel, Ernt gives Leni a copy of Jack London's [The Call of the Wild](#). *The Call of the Wild* is a 1903 novel that follows the adventures of Buck, an Alaskan sled dog. It is the most famous American novel set in Alaska, as well as a foundational work of literary naturalism. Literary naturalism is a movement that emerged at the end of the 19th century and one of its common themes is the harshness of nature. Other important works of literary naturalism include Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" and Frank Norris's *McTeague*. Also, *The Great Alone* is inspired by works of genre fiction including *The Lord of the Rings* and [The Shining](#). Throughout *The Great Alone*, Leni regularly compares herself and Matthew to Frodo and Sam, the lead characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy classic. Together, Frodo and Sam embark on an epic journey and rely on one another to defeat an evil lord. Leni and Matthew both love *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is the book that first bonds them together. Meanwhile, although Stephen King's [The Shining](#) is not mentioned by name, it is an obvious influence on *The Great Alone*. *The Shining* is a novel about a family that goes to a remote hotel where they live alone in the winter. Throughout the winter, the father of the family goes insane and attempts to murder his wife and child. Although King's novel is a work of horror, similar plot points show up all throughout *The Great Alone*. Additionally, *The Great Alone* is a work of historical fiction, an incredibly popular genre in contemporary American fiction. Current practitioners of historical fiction include Colson Whitehead, Delia Owens, and Anthony Doerr.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Great Alone
- **Where Written:** Bainbridge Island, Washington
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction

- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Kaneq, Alaska
- **Climax:** Leni tells Ernt that she is pregnant with Matthew's child. Enraged, Ernt punches Leni in the face and beats her with a belt. Cora, concerned for her daughter's safety, shoots Ernt twice in the back, killing him.
- **Antagonist:** Ernt Allbright
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Quite Prolific. Kristin Hannah is the author of 24 novels. Between 1999 and 2008, Hannah published a book every year.



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1974, the Allbright family—made up of Ernt, Cora, and Leni—move from Seattle to Kaneq, Alaska. Ernt, the family patriarch, is a Vietnam veteran who is mentally disturbed after returning from the war. He is gifted land in Alaska by Bo Harlan, a former friend whom he watched die after they were captured and tortured together. The Allbrights hope Alaska will be good for Ernt, who is disgruntled by the current state of the country. However, when the Allbrights arrive in Alaska, they discover they are woefully unprepared for survival there. They make friends with the Harlans—Bo's relatives—and Marge Birdsall, their neighbor who also runs the local trading post and helps them get settled. Once they settle in, Leni begins attending school, where she meets Matthew Walker, the only person her age in Kaneq. The two become fast friends and Matthew invites Leni to a community party his father is throwing. That night, the Allbrights attend the party, and Ernt immediately clashes with Tom Walker, Matthew's father. Tom is rich and Ernt finds him to be condescending. Although Ernt doesn't make a scene, Leni and Matthew hear him talking about his dislike of Tom. Despite her father's harsh words, Leni and Matthew remain close friends. However, they are forced apart after Matthew's mother, Geneva, falls through ice and dies. After Geneva's funeral, Matthew goes to live in Fairbanks, Alaska where he can live a normal life and see a therapist. Leni is sad to see her friend go, but the two continue to write letters to one another.

In the meantime, Leni, Cora, and Ernt learn to live in Alaska. Ernt teaches his wife and daughter how to shoot and fish, and other members of the Kaneq community teach the family how to garden and save food for the winter. Though Ernt initially feels better in Kaneq, his rage begins to grow. He spends a lot of time with Earl Harlan, Bo's father. Together, the two drink heavily and complain about the downfall of civilization. Both are convinced that a war will erupt soon, and people will come to take their land. Nearly everyone else thinks their claims are ridiculous but find the men themselves to be concerning. The day of Geneva's funeral, Ernt is in a particularly nasty mood and

when the Allbrights arrive home, he drags Cora inside and hits her twice in the face in front of Leni. Leni always knew that her parents argued, but this is the first time she witnesses physical abuse.

One night, Ernt gets angry and heads off into town to drink. While he is away, wolves come and kill the Allbrights' livestock. In the morning, Leni and Cora hike into town, worried that the scent of blood will attract bears. When they arrive in town, they find their van at the local saloon and see Tom Walker, who is concerned about their safety. Quickly, he realizes what's happened and goes to confront Ernt, despite Cora's protests. As the two men argue, Ernt makes a nasty comment about Geneva's death, so Tom drags him outside and throws him in his van, infuriating Ernt. When he arrives home, Ernt locks Leni out of the cabin and brutally abuses Cora. When Leni is allowed back inside, she grabs some emergency items and tells Cora that they are leaving Ernt. Their escape attempt results in Cora swerving off the road to avoid a **bull moose** and ending up in the hospital. A few days later, Tom and Marge show up at the Allbright cabin and tell Ernt that he will go work on a pipeline in the winter while Marge keeps Cora and Leni safe.

Four years go by and the Allbright home is relatively calm. However, in the winter of 1978, Ernt comes home early from his job on the pipeline because he is fired for drinking. Shortly after, Tom calls everyone to town for a meeting, where he tells them he is renovating the bar and opening a boarding house for tourists. This angers Ernt, who wants things to stay the way they are, and that night he vandalizes the saloon. Around the same time, Matthew returns to Kaneq to live with his father. Matthew and Leni begin seeing each other secretly, knowing Ernt won't approve of their relationship. One day, while Ernt is away, Matthew and Leni have sex for the first time and profess their love to one another.

As tensions continue to rise in Kaneq, Earl suddenly dies. At his funeral, Ernt makes a scene and Thelma, Earl's daughter, tells him that he is not welcome on the Harlan property anymore. As a result, Ernt begins to build a **barricade** around his property so that no one can get in or out without his permission. This frightens Leni and Cora, who decide that they need to escape for good. One day, the Allbrights go to town for supplies. While there, Leni sees Matthew and yells, "Help!" Enraged, Ernt drives home and begins abusing Cora. However, Ernt forgets to lock his gate, allowing Matthew to come in and punch Ernt in the face. While Ernt recovers, Matthew takes Cora to Marge's and Leni to the mountains where Ernt cannot get to her. On their way down from the mountains, Leni falls into a ravine and Matthew attempts to rescue her. Unfortunately, Matthew falls and seriously injures himself. Days later, a helicopter comes to rescue Matthew and Leni. Leni ends up being fine, but Matthew has serious brain damage and ends up in a coma.

When Leni arrives home from the hospital, she discovers her mother failed to press charges against Ernt and he is already

back in their cabin. Angry at Ernt because of what happened to Matthew, Leni refuses to speak to him from that point forward. Every day, Leni checks on Matthew, though no significant progress is made. He still cannot communicate beyond grunts and screams. In addition, Leni learns she is pregnant with Matthew's child. Leni plans to keep this information between herself and Cora, but then blurts it out at her father in a fit of rage. Angered by what he's learned, Ernt begins abusing Leni. In response, Cora shoots Ernt and kills him. Not wanting her mother to go to jail, Leni helps Cora hide Ernt's body. Together, the two of them escape Alaska and head to Seattle, where Cora's parents take them in and help them obtain false identities. Several months later, Leni has her baby and names him MJ, Matthew Junior.

Several more years pass and soon 1986 arrives. In that time, Leni manages to go to college and graduate with a degree in visual arts while raising her son. Soon after Leni's graduation, Cora finds out that she has lung cancer. After months of chemotherapy, she dies and leaves Leni with a signed confession for Ernt's murder. Leni returns to Alaska, hoping to clear her name and reunite with Matthew, but ends up in jail. Luckily, Tom makes a call to the governor and manages to get her charges dropped. Afterward, Leni reunites with Matthew, who has begun to recover. Although Matthew has difficulty remembering the past and expressing himself, he soon recognizes Leni and is overjoyed to learn that he has a son. Leni and Matthew revive their relationship and eventually have two more children: Cora and Kenai. Additionally, Leni gathers the Kaneq community together to perform a funeral service for Cora. She is touched that so many people attend and thinks Cora would be, too. Years later, Leni is interviewed by a newspaper because she has become a famous photographer. In the interview, Leni talks about her love for the wildness of Alaskan life.

that she is pregnant. This revelation results in Ernt ruthlessly beating Leni, which in turn leads Cora to shoot and kill Ernt. Not wanting her mother to go to jail, Leni helps Cora dispose of her father's body. For the next several years, Leni and Cora move to Seattle and live under false identities. Leni gives birth to her first child, MJ, and graduates college with a degree in visual arts. After her mother's death, Leni returns to Alaska and ends up in jail for covering up her father's murder. However, Tom Walker uses his influence to get Leni's charges dropped and soon she is able to return to Kaneq, just as she planned. Once there, Leni reunites with Matthew and introduces him to his son. She also holds a funeral service for Cora. Many years later, Leni becomes a celebrated photographer, as well as the mother to two more children, Kenai and Cora.

Coraline (Cora) Allbright – Coraline Allbright, or Cora, is the mother of Leni Allbright and the wife of Ernt Allbright. Cora drops out of school to live with Ernt and have his child at the age of 16. Although they don't live luxuriously, Cora and Ernt are happy together until Ernt leaves for the Vietnam War. While Ernt is away, Cora lives in hippie communes and often spends her time protesting the war. When Ernt returns, he is a changed man. Before long, he starts abusing Cora. Despite Ernt's behavior, Cora loves him and stands by his side. She is convinced that he is sick and wants to do whatever she can to make him happy. Accordingly, she often gives in to her husband's demands and puts too much trust in him, much to Leni's chagrin. During her time in Alaska, Cora becomes tough and learns to survive on her own. She continues to put up with her husband's violence and does whatever she can to pacify him. However, one day Ernt goes too far and begins to physically abuse Leni. Afraid for her daughter's life, Cora shoots Ernt twice in the back. Afterwards, she expects to go to jail, but Leni convinces her to cover up the crime. Together, Cora and Leni dispose of Ernt's body and then flee to Seattle to live under different identities. While in Seattle, Cora lives a relatively normal life, though she is haunted by how much she believes she's screwed up her daughter's life. After living in Seattle for several years, Cora learns that she has stage four lung cancer, likely a result of her constant smoking. Eventually, Cora's cancer kills her, but before she dies, she gives Leni a signed confession for Ernt's murder and tells her to return to Alaska.

Ernt Allbright – Ernt Allbright is the father of Leni Allbright and the husband of Coraline Allbright. Once a happy young man, Ernt is radically altered by the horrors of the Vietnam War. While in Vietnam, Ernt is captured, tortured, and forced to watch his friend, Bo Harlan, die. In an attempt to find happiness, Ernt moves his family to Kaneq, Alaska where he was bequeathed land by Bo. Although Ernt's time in Alaska begins peacefully enough, soon winter starts to approach, and he becomes moody and abusive. He also becomes close friends with Earl Harlan who is convinced that an apocalyptic event is



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Leni Allbright – Leni Allbright is the child of Coraline and Ernt Allbright. She begins the novel as an awkward teenager who doesn't fit in anywhere. Her parents move around constantly, and she never gets a chance to make friends. That all changes when she moves to Kaneq, Alaska and meets Matthew Walker, the love of her life. Over the course of her teenage years, Leni falls in love with Matthew and eventually becomes pregnant with his child. However, during that same period, Leni is forced to watch her father physically and verbally abuse her mother. Leni knows that her father dislikes the Walker family and therefore does not want to tell him that she is pregnant. For that matter, Leni is always as reserved as possible around her father, and typically does what she can to keep him calm. Nonetheless, in a moment of anger, Leni reveals to her father

on the horizon. Ernt's relationship to Earl increases his paranoia and he begins to develop new ways to protect himself and his property. After alienating himself from the rest of the community, Ernt's paranoia culminates in the construction of a large **barricade** around his property. No one is allowed in or out of it without Ernt's permission and he wears the key around his neck. Though Ernt believes he is protecting his family, he also continues to abuse them. He regularly beats Cora, especially in the wintertime, and he is physically aggressive with Leni. Additionally, Ernt is excessively jealous of Tom Walker's wealth and his relationship with Cora. He orders Leni and Cora to stay away from the entire Walker family, including Matthew, the soon-to-be father of Leni's child. When Ernt learns that Leni is pregnant with Matthew's child, he brutally beats Leni. Wanting to protect her daughter, Cora shoots Ernt in twice in the back, killing him.

Matthew Walker – Matthew Walker is the son of Tom and Geneva Walker, as well as the brother of Ayeska Walker. At the age of 13, Matthew meets Leni Allbright, the only other person his age in Kaneq. Matthew and Leni form a fast friendship when they discover that they share a love of the same books, particularly *The Lord of the Rings*. Matthew is mature for his age and does not mind that Ernt hates his father. He tells Leni that they will remain friends no matter what. One night, while returning home, Geneva falls through ice and Matthew is unable to help her. As a result, Geneva dies and Matthew moves to Fairbanks, Alaska where he can lead a more normal life and see a therapist to help him with his grief. While in Fairbanks, Matthew lives with his sister and constantly writes letters to Leni. Several years later, Matthew returns to Kaneq and resumes living with his father. He also begins a secret relationship with Leni, knowing Ernt disapproves of him. Later, Matthew steps in and rescues Leni and Cora from Ernt during a particularly fierce bout of abuse. He punches Ernt in the face, sabotages his vehicle, and takes Leni to the mountains where Ernt cannot get to her. However, on the way down from the mountains, Leni falls into a ravine, and while trying to rescue her, Matthew badly hurts himself. For many years, Matthew is unable to speak, and he lives out the rest of his life partially paralyzed. For a long time, Matthew does not know who Leni is, although he knows that someone he once loved is missing. To help fill the void and express himself, Matthew takes up painting. Eventually, Leni returns and tells Matthew why she had to leave. Leni introduces Matthew to his son and together the three of them start the family they always wanted. Matthew continues to live out his life in Alaska and eventually has two other children with Leni: Kenai and Cora.

Tom Walker – Tom Walker is the father of Matthew and Ayeska Walker, as well as the ex-husband of Geneva Walker. Tom's parents, Eckhart and Lily Walker, were among the first settlers of Kaneq. As a result, Tom has a lot of power and money; he is regarded as the leader of the town. However,

some members of the community do not like Tom because of his status, particularly Ernt and Earl, who find him condescending. Throughout the novel, Tom attempts to modernize Kaneq, a move that is welcomed by some, but despised by the likes of Ernt and Earl. Additionally, Tom is not afraid to stand up to Ernt. When Tom learns of Ernt's abusive behavior, he—along with Marge—takes action to help Leni and Cora. Among other things, he gets Ernt sent away for several winters to work on a pipeline and rescues Cora when she drives off the road. Although Tom is generally a happy man, he becomes a melancholy figure after the death of his ex-wife and Matthew's accident. Nonetheless, when he learns Leni is in jail, he quickly gets her charges dropped and takes care of MJ in the meantime. By the end of the novel, Tom regains some of his former happiness; he marries a native woman, Atki, and gets to see Matthew and Leni live happily with children.

Marge Birdsall – Marge Birdsall, affectionately known as Large Marge by her friends, is the owner of the general store in Kaneq. She also lives a half mile from the Allbrights, making her their closest neighbor. Marge first came to Alaska after the death of her sister, a victim of domestic violence. Though Marge is steadfast in her love of Alaska, she is also keenly aware of its dangers. She warns the Allbrights about the perils of Alaskan winters and is the first to recognize that Alaska may not be a good place for Ernt. When something goes wrong in Kaneq, Marge is almost always first on the scene. She helps search for Geneva, rescue Cora, and she provides supplies whenever necessary, even when she knows she won't be paid back. Additionally, Marge works with other members of the community to make sure that Leni can go to college.

Earl Harlan – Earl Harlan, also known as Mad Earl, is the father of Bo Harlan, Clyde Harlan, and Thelma Schill. Earl writes to Ernt to let him know that Bo bequeathed him some land and a cabin in Alaska. When the Allbrights arrive in Kaneq, Earl treats them like family. However, Leni and Cora dislike how Ernt acts when he is around Earl. Earl is convinced that war is coming to Kaneq, and his paranoid thinking rubs off on Ernt. Earl is also Ernt's drinking buddy, and although Earl handles his booze just fine, it makes Ernt aggressive. Even though Earl feeds Ernt's paranoia for a long time, he eventually stops after Thelma tells him they've gone too far. Not long afterwards, Earl dies suddenly of a heart attack.

Mrs. Gollither – Mrs. Gollither is Cora's wealthy mother. She is largely estranged from Cora's family because she does not like or trust Ernt. At the beginning of the novel, she gives Cora money and warns her not to go to Alaska with Ernt. Toward the end of the story, Cora and Leni return to the Gollither home after fleeing Alaska. Mrs. Gollither is happy to welcome Cora and Leni into her home and takes care of them the best she can.

Cecil Gollither – Cecil Gollither is Cora's father. Like her mother, he is well-off and does not approve of Ernt. Because he is a lawyer, Cecil has connections, which allow him to create false

identities for Cora and Leni. Like Mrs. Gollither, he is happy to help his daughter in any way he can.

Thelma Schill – Thelma Schill is the daughter of Earl Harlan and the sister of Bo and Clyde Harlan. She greets the Allbrights warmly and offers to help Cora in whatever way she can. When Ernt and Earl come up with disturbing and dangerous plans, Thelma is the only person to speak up against them. After Earl dies, Thelma tells Ernt that he is no longer welcome on their property.

Geneva Walker – Geneva is the ex-wife of Tom Walker, as well as the mother of Matthew Walker. She is romantically involved with Calhoun Malvey. Geneva helps the Allbrights get settled on their new homestead and fills in as a teacher at the Kaneq school. She is fond of Leni and encourages the relationship forming between Leni and Matthew. One night, while heading home, Geneva falls through ice and dies.

Alyeska Walker – Alyeska is the daughter of Tom and Geneva Walker, as well as the sister of Matthew Walker. She is away at college for much of the novel, though she comes home for her mother's funeral and after Matthew's accident. Matthew has a tight bond with Alyeska, and she serves as his primary support system after their mother's death.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bo Harlan – Bo Harlan is the son of Earl Harlan. He is also the crew chief of Ernt's helicopter in the Vietnam War. Bo and Ernt are captured and tortured together. Their captors make Ernt watch as they kill Bo. Bo leaves his land in Alaska to Ernt.

Tica Rhodes – Tica Rhodes is Leni's teacher in Kaneq. Tica is a kind, intelligent woman who cares deeply about her students. She regularly takes them on field trips, especially when tensions in the community are high. In addition, she is one of the people who offers to provide Leni with college funds.

Marge's Sister – Marge's sister is never given a proper name, but Marge tells the Allbrights that she died as a result of domestic abuse. Her death sparked Marge's move to Alaska and makes Marge especially wary of Ernt.

Lily Walker – Lily Walker is the mother of Tom Walker. She and her husband Eckhart were among the first people to settle in Kenai, Alaska. Matthew gives Leni an article Lily wrote about her life in Alaska.

Eckhart Walker – Eckhart Walker is the father of Tom Walker. He and his wife Lily were among the first people to settle in Kenai, Alaska.

Natalie Watkins – Natalie Watkins lives in Kaneq. Along with Marge and Geneva, she helps the Allbrights get acquainted with Alaskan life.

Ted Schill – Ted Schill is the husband of Thelma Schill and the father of Marybet Schill.

Marybet Schill – Marybet Schill is the daughter of Thelma and Ted Schill. She is affectionately known as Moppet.

Clyde Harlan – Clyde Harlan is the son of Earl Harlan and the brother of Bo Harlan and Thelma Schill. He is married to Donna Harlan and has four children: Darryl, Dave, Agnes, and Marthe.

Donna Harlan – Donna Harlan is the wife of Clyde Harlan. Together they have four children: Darryl, Dave, Agnes, and Marthe.

Darryl Harlan – Darryl Harlan is the son of Clyde and Donna. He and Dave are twins.

Dave Harlan – Dave Harlan is the son of Clyde and Donna. He and Darryl are twins.

Agnes Harlan – Agnes is the daughter of Clyde and Donna Harlan.

Marthe Harlan – Marthe is the daughter of Clyde and Donna Harlan.

Axle – Axle is a standoffish 16-year-old. When Leni first arrives in Kaneq, he is the only person Leni sees who is around her age. He is related to the Harlans.

Curt Ward – Curt Ward is a by-the-book policeman. He coaxes a confession out of Leni and arrests her.

Dieter Manse – Dieter Manse is a former Pan Am pilot. During a school trip, he flies Leni's class to a nearby inlet.

Demby Cowe – Demby Cowe is Leni's state-appointed lawyer. He tells her to plead not guilty.

Atki – Atki is a native Alaskan and Tom Walker's second wife.

Kenai – Kenai is a child of Leni and Matthew.

Cora – Cora is a child of Leni and Matthew.

Calhoun Malvey – Calhoun Malvey dates Geneva Walker.

Crazy Pete – A man Leni sees who talks to a goose. Matthew tells her that the bird's name is Matilda, and it is married to Crazy Pete.

Matilda – Matilda is Crazy Pete's goose. Matthew tells Leni that Matilda and Crazy Pete are married.

Jim – Jim is a bartender at the local saloon in Kaneq.

John – John is the judge at Leni's trial.

Adrian – Adrian is the prosecutor at Leni's trial.

Darrow – Darrow is Alyeska's husband.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is ever-present in the brutal world of *The Great Alone*. Ernt, a disgruntled Vietnam veteran and former prisoner of war, regularly takes his anger out on his wife Cora. Although Cora constantly makes excuses for her husband's behavior, she eventually reaches her breaking point when he turns his violent wrath on their daughter, Leni. As Ernt beats Leni with a belt, Cora shoots him twice in the back and then disposes of his body out in the wilderness. Cora's actions throughout the novel are a response to the ongoing, intensifying violence she's endured at the hands of her husband. She often refuses to stand up for herself, assuming that to do so will trigger further abuse; when she finally does act for Leni's sake, she resorts to deadly violence.

Similarly, Ernt's actions over the course of the novel are responses to the horrors of the Vietnam War. Time and time again, he believes that people are out to get him, even in remote Alaska. Generally, his abusive behavior toward his family is a result of fear and shame, two emotions that have heightened in Ernt since returning from the war. Although *The Great Alone* certainly empathizes with Cora as a victim more than Ernt as an abuser, it also suggests that their toxic behavior comes from a similar place of pent-up suffering. Thus they both react to traumatic situations the only way they know how: Cora through passivity (and eventually killing) and Ernt through violence.



PARANOIA AND THE VIETNAM WAR

The Great Alone takes place in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, an event that starkly divided America, and Leni's parents stand on different sides of that divide. Ernt went off to war despite Cora's protests; he regards himself as a patriot and wants to protect the nation he loves. While Ernt is away, Cora lives with Leni in a number of hippie communes and protests the war. Upon returning from Vietnam, Ernt is a changed man. As he struggles to cope with his trauma, he starts to abuse Cora and perceives danger everywhere.

Admittedly, danger is not hard to find in the aftermath of the Vietnam War; Hannah uses a number of real historical events to provide the backdrop to her novel, including the Ted Bundy murders, the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, and the Cold War. However, even with such dangers in the world, Ernt's paranoia is excessive. He lives in remote Alaska—where the natural environment is more likely to claim one's life than another human—and yet is still worried about people coming to hurt him and take his land. Ernt's paranoia reaches a peak when he decides to **barricade** himself and his family from the outside world. Ironically, Ernt's paranoia results in the exact circumstances he was trying to avoid—his death—brought

about by the one person he did not expect to hurt him—his wife. In the end, paranoia is a condition that destroys Ernt by blinding him to the real threat to his family: himself.



ISOLATION

From the title alone, it is clear that *The Great Alone* explores the concept of isolation. Isolation is relevant in a literal sense throughout the novel (many of its characters live in the middle of nowhere), and in a metaphorical sense, as several characters feel alone and cut off from society. Leni's sense of isolation grows throughout the novel as Ernt progressively alienates the Allbrights from the greater Kaneq community. First and foremost, Leni feels alone because the only person close to her age is Matthew Walker, a boy her father forbids her from seeing. Leni's sense of isolation only grows as her father's violence and paranoia get worse. Intentionally, Ernt attempts to cut Leni and Cora off from the rest of the world by creating a **barricade** around their property. At this point, Leni is left with only her mother to talk to, as she fears her father too much to have a real conversation with him.

Alternatively, Matthew feels isolated from the world after suffering a crippling fall that results in severe brain damage. Unable to speak coherently, Matthew expresses his feelings by painting. Even so, he is unable to shake the sense of loneliness he feels. He waits for years for Leni to return to him, even though he cannot remember her name. Eventually, Leni and Matthew do reunite, and Leni introduces him to his son, MJ. MJ and Leni alleviate Matthew's sense of loneliness and help him to feel alive again. Ultimately, loneliness in *The Great Alone* is not about the number of people one surrounds themselves with, but rather who those people are and how they treat one another.



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Throughout Leni's years in Kaneq, Alaska, the lines between family and community become blurred, as she begins to fear the former and yearn for the latter. Upon first arriving in Kaneq, Leni, Cora, and Ernt are all happy to be part of a community, albeit a small one. Leni manages to make a friend in school—Matthew—while Ernt and Cora bond with the Harlan family. Before long, however, Leni and Cora begin to worry about Ernt's relationship with Earl Harlan. Though they are glad Ernt has a friend, Earl seems to feed Ernt's paranoia; the two of them often discuss apocalyptic scenarios and how to prepare for them. In addition, Earl and Ernt's rude and erratic behavior starts to isolate them both from their community and their own families. In a climactic moment in the novel, Earl dies of a heart attack, and Ernt is left with only Leni and Cora, both of whom fear him. It is this moment when Ernt begins to **barricade** the Allbright property, making sure no one gets in and no one gets out—including Matthew, whose father Tom Ernt especially hates. Meanwhile,

Leni and Cora, who are quite fond of their neighbors, despair that they will never be able to leave their property again. Eventually, both Ernt and Cora die—Ernt is shot, Cora gets cancer—and Leni is left to pick up the pieces of her family. Always resilient, Leni makes her own family out of the Kaneq community; Marge acts as her surrogate mother, Tom her surrogate father, and Matthew her actual husband. By the end of the novel, Leni does not care whether she is biologically related to the Kaneq community; she feels that her community has become her family and enjoys a closer, healthier relationship to many of them than she ever had with Ernt.



DEATH AND GRIEF

Death is a near constant in the harsh world of *The Great Alone*. One statistic, mentioned several times over the course of the novel, says that five out of every 1000 people go missing in Alaska. In Kaneq, more than anywhere Leni has ever lived, death is a key part of life; animals are regularly killed for food, Geneva Walker freezes in the icy water, and Cora is forced to shoot Ernt when he threatens Leni's life. Throughout the novel, Leni regularly confronts her own mortality, as well as that of her family members and friends. In fact, Leni almost dies several times; once when she and Cora get into a car accident, once while crossing ice, once when Ernt fires a gun in their direction, and again when she and Matthew fall into a mountain crevice. Many of these experiences bring with them extreme grief, particularly Matthew's life-altering injuries and Cora's death. However, despite all that she goes through, Leni still returns to Alaska; she wants to raise her son in Kaneq and marry Matthew. Although it regularly focuses on death and grief, *The Great Alone* is not nihilistic. It allows most of its characters a relatively happy ending, ultimately celebrating the perseverance of the human spirit and the transcendent quality of love despite suffering and death.



COMING OF AGE

The Great Alone tracks the maturation of a young girl in extraordinary circumstances. From the age of 13, Leni is asked to participate in an extreme lifestyle. Much of Alaskan life is spent preparing for the future and those who do not prepare end up dead. Among other things, Leni learns to hunt, fish, and garden. These activities are not merely hobbies, but rather necessary means of staying alive. In addition to learning to live in Alaska, Leni has a stressful and dangerous domestic situation. At almost all times, Leni is forced to bend to her father's demands; failure to comply leads to the physical abuse of her mother. Leni regularly worries that her actions will bring about her death or Cora's. While surviving Alaska and her father, Leni also goes through the normal phases of teenage life; she experiences puberty, meets a boy, and falls in love. Unfortunately, that boy is Matthew Walker, the

son of Ernt's sworn enemy. Therefore, once again, extra stress is put on Leni, who must hide her love from the world. Nonetheless, Leni overcomes every hurdle that is put in her way; she saves her mother's life, escapes her father, and eventually reunites with the love of her life. Though Leni begins the novel as a young girl who is reliant on her parents, by the end she is a self-supporting adult. However, Leni's maturation does not embody the spirit of rugged individualism that is often associated with Alaskan life and that she associates with her father. Instead, she learns to be a strong, intelligent individual who can still accept help from others when necessary. She allows herself to become a part of the Kaneq community and casts off the isolationist mentality of her father. Despite the extreme circumstances she suffers through, a mature Leni finds happiness in Kaneq in a way Ernt never could.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ERNT'S BARRICADE

Ernt's barricade symbolizes the extreme disconnect he feels with society. Ernt initially moves his family to Alaska to escape what he sees as the moral decline of the United States. He sees Kaneq, Alaska as a safe haven from the violence and corruption present in the rest of America. However, before long, Ernt alienates himself from members of the Kaneq community as well. In particular, he hates Tom Walker because of his wealth and his attempts to modernize Kaneq. Ernt sees Kaneq as the last bastion of a dying way of life and he thinks Tom is trying to take that away from him. Because of his hatred for Tom, Ernt divides the entire Kaneq community. However, once Mad Earl dies, Ernt is left alone; the Harlans will no longer tolerate him, and he's already alienated everyone else. It is at this point when Ernt begins building his barricade. The barricade blocks anyone from entering his property without his permission. He wears the key to the gate around his neck and does not let Cora and Leni use it. In effect, Ernt becomes the totalitarian dictator of his 40 acres of land; he rules over the property with Cora and Leni as his subjects. However, Ernt's perceived strength is also his weakness. Ernt believes his barricade will keep him safe, but he is killed by Cora while he is abusing Leni. Ultimately, his barricade is useless; it is a symbol of a desperate man attempting to safeguard what little semblance of normal life he thinks he has left, not realizing that it is already gone.



CRACKING ICE

Ice cracking and giving way symbolizes the danger

of Alaska as well as Ernt's ever-increasing rage. From early in the novel, ice is established as one of the most dangerous features of Alaska. Geneva Walker dies from walking on ice when she shouldn't, and Leni almost falls into ice while hunting. Typically, ice cracks gradually before eventually giving way in a sudden burst. Similarly, Ernt's temper builds gradually until eventually he snaps, causing harm to those around him. Subconsciously, Leni draws parallels between her father's temper and cracking ice. She dreams about falling through ice and being dragged down by something that has her by the feet. Symbolically, that something is Ernt, whose simmering rage is just as dangerous as cracking ice, if not more so.



THE BULL MOOSE

In *The Great Alone*, the bull moose represents the impasse that Ernt creates for his family, which can only end in violence. The bull moose appears in the novel while Cora and Leni are fleeing Ernt's wrath. After Leni witnesses Ernt beat her mother, she grabs Cora and tells her that they are leaving before Ernt kills her. Cora resists, but ultimately listens to her daughter and begins driving away from the Allbright property. Their escape takes place at night in bad weather and results in Cora flipping their van off the road after she sees a bull moose. A bull moose—or a male moose—is a giant animal, which could easily kill Cora and Leni if they run into it head-on. Instead, Cora swerves, resulting in injury to herself and her daughter. Because the moose is specified as male and because it prevents Cora and Leni from escaping, it is closely associated with Ernt. Similar to her fights with Ernt, Cora decides to avoid the moose, a decision that results in injuries to herself, but keeps Leni safe. The moose's symbolism suggests that ultimately, there is no safe way of avoiding Ernt.

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Coraline (Cora) Allbright, Ernt Allbright

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening lines of the novel. *The Great Alone* is a book about the relationship between humanity and the natural world, akin to the novels of Jack London. In fact, early in the novel, Ernt will give Leni a copy of *The Call of the Wild*, London's most famous book about survival in Alaska. Throughout the novel, weather proves to be an issue for the Allbrights. Ernt's mental condition consistently worsens when the weather is bad due to his experience in war. Notably, Alaska has long and dangerous winters, so Ernt's decision to move there for his health is an ill-conceived plan. In addition, even without Ernt's issues, Alaska is a difficult place to survive in the winter. If one is not properly prepared, it is easy to die. Multiple times in the novel, a statistic is cited that says five out of every 1000 people go missing in Alaska. Indeed, multiple people end up missing or severely injured due to the weather by the end of *The Great Alone*.

●● Mama was engaged in a continual quest to “find” herself. In the past few years, she'd tried EST and the human potential movement, spiritual training, Unitarianism. Even Buddhism. She'd cycled through them all, cherry-picked pieces and bits. Mostly, Leni thought, Mama had come away with T-shirts and sayings. Things like, *What is, is, and what isn't, isn't*. None of it seemed to amount to much.

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Coraline (Cora) Allbright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

While Ernt is away at war, Cora is lost. This quotation tracks Leni's understanding of her mother's spiritual journey, which ultimately seems to be a failure. While Ernt is away, Cora and Leni live in hippie communes where Cora becomes acquainted with a variety of New Age practices. All of these practices claim to lead the way to enlightenment, though Cora does not find them useful. Throughout the novel, the issue with Cora's character is that she has a difficult time



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the St. Martin's Griffin edition of *The Great Alone* published in 2019.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● That spring, rain fell in great sweeping gusts that rattled the rooftops. Water found its way into the smallest cracks and undermined the sturdiest foundations. Chunks of land that had been steady for generations fell like slag heaps on the roads below, taking houses and cars and swimming pools down with them. Trees fell over, crashed into power lines; electricity was lost. Rivers flooded their banks, washed across yards, ruined homes. People who loved each other snapped and fights erupted as the water rose and the rain continued.

creating her own path in life. She always needs others to lead her, and never pushes back or asserts herself. Even toward the end of her life, Cora is never able to stand on her own two feet. She is always supported by Leni and her parents, the Gollihers. However, on her deathbed, Cora leaves Leni with a signed confession for Ernt's murder to ensure that her daughter can move beyond Cora's mistakes and become her own woman. Ultimately, Cora never finds enlightenment in the novel, but she does what she can to rectify the past and provide a better future for Leni.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ “Your dad cleared out our savings account. And they won't give me a credit card unless your father or my father cosigns.” She lit up a cigarette. “Sweet Jesus, it's 1974. I have a job. I make money. And a woman can't get a credit card without a man's signature. It's a man's world, baby girl.” She started the car and sped down the street, turning onto the freeway.

Related Characters: Coraline (Cora) Allbright (speaker), Leni Allbright, Ernt Allbright

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

Cora Allbright says this to Leni after walking out of a bank. Cora does not trust Ernt with the family's finances and was hoping to get some money out of their account before he could spend it all. She is angry both because of the sex discrimination she faces and because she knows that she will now have to get money from her parents, which she finds humiliating. Gender continues to be an important factor throughout *The Great Alone*. Even in Kaneq, Alaska, gender norms still apply, especially for the more conservative characters such as Ernt and Earl. In particular, issues crop up surrounding what the authorities are willing to do about domestic violence. Cora doesn't think her claims will hold up in court because women do not have the same rights as men do. That said, women in Kaneq are treated differently than in other places. They are expected to hold their own and participate in traditionally masculine activities such as hunting and fishing. In fact, many women in the Kaneq community, such as Marge, live entirely on their own. So, to at least a limited degree, life in Kaneq complicates Cora's assertion here that it's “a man's world.”

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ “Two kinds of folks come up to Alaska, Cora. People running to something and people running away from something. The second kind—you want to keep your eye out for them. And it isn't just the people you need to watch out for, either. Alaska herself can be Sleeping Beauty one minute and a bitch with a sawed-off shotgun the next. There's a saying: Up here you can make one mistake. The second one will kill you.”

Related Characters: Marge Birdsall (speaker), Coraline (Cora) Allbright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Marge says this to Cora when they first meet at Marge's shop. Marge is an unusually perceptive person, and she is immediately concerned that the Allbrights want to move to Kaneq. She doesn't trust Ernt, nor does she think he can keep his family safe. Ernt is clearly one of “the second kind” of people who Marge refers to; he is running away from his wartime trauma and therefore needs to be watched.

Additionally, Marge provides some foreshadowing for the rest of the novel. Although death is uncommon in *The Great Alone*, characters who repeatedly make mistakes—even if those mistakes are courageous—ended up suffering because of them. Matthew is perhaps the key example in that regard. Even though Leni tells him to go find help, he decides to try to rescue Leni himself and ends up severely hurt. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Ernt abuses Cora and Leni one too many times and ends up dead.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ “Down there,” Mad Earl went on, “Outside, people are standing in line for gas while OPEC laughs all the way to the bank. And you think the good ole USSR forgot about us after Cuba? Think again. We got Negroes calling themselves Black Panthers and raisin' their fists at us, and illegal immigrants stealing our jobs. So what do people do? They protest. They sit down. They throw bombs at empty post office buildings. They carry signs and march down streets. Well. Not me. I got a plan.”

Related Characters: Earl Harlan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Earl gives this speech the first time he meets the Allbrights. Essentially, this is a list of U.S. events and movements that Earl finds objectionable. Some of them are reasonable; for instance, the reference he makes to Cuba refers to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the time in the Cold War where America and the Soviet Union came closest to firing nuclear weapons. However, he is also concerned about the Black Panthers and illegal immigrants, none of whom have any effect on his life in Kaneq. As such, Earl's attitudes, which Ernt agrees with, come off as racist and off-putting to Cora. This is the first of many times where Earl will complain about such things, though mostly he proves himself to be all talk and no action. However, his rhetoric is dangerous because it gets Ernt fired up and, unlike Earl, Ernt is willing to take action. Throughout the first half of the novel, Leni and Cora will regularly express their dismay that Ernt is spending so much time with Earl. They worry that Earl is making Ernt's condition worse by regularly spewing inflammatory rhetoric—a reasonable fear, as it turns out.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ “Our friends showed up at noon to help us prepare for winter,” Dad said. “No. They’re better than friends, Red. They’re comrades.”

Comrades?

Leni frowned. Were they communists now? She was pretty sure her dad hated the commies as much as he hated the Man and hippies.

“This is what the world should be, Red. People helping each other instead of killing their mothers for a little bread.”

Leni couldn't help noticing that almost everyone had a gun holstered at his or her waist.

Related Characters: Ernt Allbright (speaker), Leni Allbright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 74-75

Explanation and Analysis

Ernt says this to Leni while driving her home from school. Leni understandably finds her father's words confusing. Up until this point, Ernt's political views have leaned heavily to the right. Yet, as Leni notices, “comrades” is a communist term that, especially in the 1970s, would have been associated with the Soviet Union. Ultimately, this moment proves to be a one-off event. For the rest of the novel, Ernt

does not express any sympathies with left-leaning organizations or politics. However, it is an important moment because it showcases the paradoxes of life in Kaneq. Though nearly everyone lives by a code of rugged individualism, they also regularly help one another. In fact, community proves to be a key tool for survival as the novel progresses. Unfortunately, Ernt's positive feelings toward the Kaneq community do not last long. Eventually, he isolates himself, a decision that leads to his death. Meanwhile, Leni only survives and stays out of prison because of the Kaneq community.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ “This is Alaska. We live and let live. I don't care if your dad hates my dad. You're the one who matters, Leni.”

Related Characters: Matthew Walker (speaker), Leni Allbright

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Matthew says this to Leni after Leni apologizes for her father's behavior. The night before, Matthew and Leni overheard Ernt and Earl speaking negatively about Tom Walker, Matthew's father. Leni is embarrassed by what's happened and assumes Matthew will no longer want to be her friend. She spends the next day avoiding Matthew until he confronts her. Matthew's statement indicates two things. First, it is a display of Matthew's maturity. Many people his age could reasonably react exactly as Leni expected, but Matthew does not. Second, Matthew's statement spells out the law of the land for members of the Kaneq community. Many people in Kaneq do not like one another, but they find a way to get along. Matthew inherited this perspective by growing up in Kaneq under the guidance of his father. Like Matthew, Tom Walker regularly shows grace to members of the Kaneq community, even those who do not like him, such as the Harlans. Matthew's similarly gracious attitude puts Leni at ease and provides her with a safe outlet in Kaneq.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ He picked out the small, plump heart and held it up to Leni. Blood leaked between his fingers. “You’re the hunter. Eat the heart.”

“Ernt, please,” Mama said, “we’re not savages.”

“That’s exactly what we are,” he said in a voice as cold as the wind at their back. “Eat it.”

Related Characters: Coraline (Cora) Allbright, Ernt Allbright (speaker), Leni Allbright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation occurs between Ernt, Cora, and Leni while on a hunting trip. Leni successfully shoots a rabbit and then Ernt walks over, guts it, and skins it. While pulling out its entrails, Ernt tells Leni to eat its heart. Cora finds the suggestion off-putting, as does Leni. However, Leni ultimately listens to her father and eats the heart.

First, it should be noted that eating the heart of a freshly killed animal is a tradition in some cultures, including Native American tribes. However, this doesn’t seem to be what Ernt has in mind. Instead, Ernt wants Leni to prove that she is tough enough to survive in the wild. It is at this point in the novel where it is clear that Ernt has come a long way from his original statements about Alaska. Early in the novel, he envisions Alaska as a place to live comfortably and make a fresh start. Now, however, he describes himself, Leni, and Cora as “savages.” Clearly, his behavior is getting worse, and more erratic. He is returning to the soldier he once was, rather than turning over a new leaf.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ Leni didn’t want to think about a loss like that, the bone-breaking magnitude of it, but at a time like this there was no looking away, and when she did look it in the face, without blinking or turning away, she knew this: if she were Matthew, she would need a friend right now. Who knew how the friend could help, whether offering silent companionship or a clatter of words was better? That, the how, she would have to figure out on her own. But the what—friendship—that she knew for sure.

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Matthew Walker

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during Geneva Walker’s funeral. Geneva dies after falling through ice in the middle of the winter and Matthew is there to witness his mother’s death. Now, at Geneva’s funeral, Leni does not know how to comfort her friend. She’s never experienced a loss like Matthew’s and does not know how to help him. Death and grief are primary themes in *The Great Alone*, and before the end of the novel Leni will learn that there is no right way to respond to traumatic events. Leni loves literature and language and relies on them during troubling times. Nonetheless, she regularly fails to find the words to express what she is feeling, especially in moments of extreme duress or grief. In this moment, Leni ultimately decides to stand next to Matthew silently, hoping that her presence will provide him comfort. This is a crucial development for Leni as she matures; previously, she avoided Matthew when she didn’t know what to say. Now, she goes right to him, hoping she can help.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Leni saw his love for her, shining through his regret. It eroded her anger, made her question everything again. He didn’t want to hurt Mama, didn’t mean to. He was sick ...

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Coraline (Cora) Allbright, Ernt Allbright

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

This quote tracks Leni’s thought process after Ernt apologizes to her for hitting Cora. The night before, Ernt abuses Cora because he thinks she acted inappropriately while consoling Tom Walker. He hits Cora in the face in front of Leni, which is something Leni has never seen before. However, after the hit, Leni realizes that it probably isn’t the first time Ernt has hit her mother. Nonetheless, Leni still doesn’t know how to feel about her father. On one hand, he seems genuinely apologetic. He is a sick man, and he became that way because of the horrors he suffered in the Vietnam War. On the other hand, though he may be apologetic, he’s done such things before and is likely to do them again. Leni wants to believe that her father will fix his behavior, but she finds it unlikely. Still, she must convince herself that he will get better. After all, she is a child, and has

nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to. Leni's thoughts illustrate the struggle that victims of domestic violence often face in trying to make sense of what's happened to them.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ “I love you,” Mama said, and she was crying now, too, and suddenly Leni understood the reality of her world, the truth that Alaska, in all its beautiful harshness, had revealed. They were trapped, by environment and finances, but mostly by the sick, twisted love that bound her parents together.

Related Characters: Coraline (Cora) Allbright (speaker), Leni Allbright, Ernt Allbright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after Ernt apologizes to Cora in the hospital. Cora winds up there because, after a particularly vicious bout of abuse, Leni decides that it is time to get Cora away from her father before he kills her. Leni grabs their emergency bag and makes Cora get into the car. While driving, Cora goes off the road and breaks her arm. Later, in the hospital, Tom offers to help Cora; he knows Ernt is abusive and wants to get her out of her current situation. However, Cora refuses because she still loves Ernt. Cora knows Ernt will abuse her again, probably many times, but she decides to go back with him anyway. She refuses to see that Ernt will not get better and continues to put herself and Leni in harm's way. Though she often cites excuses such as the environment and money, Leni knows that the real reason Cora stays is because she loves Ernt. Unfortunately, if Cora stays, that means Leni must stay too and live with the consequences of her mother's decision.

☝ Leni sighed. How was Mama's unshakable belief in Dad any different than his fear of Armageddon? Did adults just look at the world and see what they wanted to see, think what they wanted to think? Did evidence and experience mean nothing?

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Coraline (Cora) Allbright, Ernt Allbright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Leni thinks this shortly after Cora arrives home from the hospital with her broken arm. It is an important moment for Leni's maturation in the novel because she fully realizes that adults are flawed, including the ones she loves. More specifically, Leni compares her mother's belief in her father to Ernt's belief in Armageddon. It is an interesting comparison because it puts Cora and Ernt on the same level. Though Leni will later become much more sympathetic to her mother, this thought suggests that Cora and Ernt deserve each other to some degree. Although the situation is more complex than Leni may realize, her feelings here are understandable. While it is one thing for Cora to put herself in harm's way, it is another to do the same to Leni. Although Leni doesn't say it explicitly, she worries that Cora loves Ernt more than she loves her. Even worse, it is a toxic love that is likely to end with someone getting killed.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ Every window was broken, the door had been hacked to bits, left as sharp shards of wood hanging from brass hinges, and white spray-painted graffiti covered the burnt walls. THIS IS A WARNING. STAY AWAY. ARROGANT PRICK. NO PROGRESS.

Related Characters: Ernt Allbright, Tom Walker

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the saloon in Kaneq after Ernt has vandalized it. Annoyed that Tom wants to modernize parts of Kaneq, Ernt resorts to this vandalism after a heated town meeting. In the middle of the night, he sneaks out of the cabin and destroys the saloon. Everyone in town expects Cora knows who is responsible and the act makes Ernt an unpopular figure, even among the Harlans. Although Ernt's actions are extreme, his frustrations are understandable. He, along with other members of the Kaneq community, came to Alaska to get away from the trappings of modern society. Now, he thinks Tom is trying to bring modernity to Kaneq. Ironically, the message he spray-paints on the walls of the saloon may apply just as well to Ernt as a person. He came to Kaneq to improve himself, but no progress has been made. Instead, the opposite has happened. Now, his actions have divided the Kaneq community, and he is only getting

worse.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ *If you knew me, you wouldn't be surprised at all that I start my college essay off with a quote from Tolkien. Books are the mile markers of my life. Some people have family photos or home movies to record their past. I've got books. Characters. For as long as I can remember, books have been my safe place. I read about places I can barely imagine and lose myself in journeys to foreign lands to save girls who didn't know they were really princesses.*

Related Characters: Leni Allbright (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is an excerpt from Leni's personal statement for college. Although Leni is unsure whether she wants to go to college, mostly because she worries for her mother's safety, she ultimately decides to apply and constructs a personal statement about her life. In the essay, she references J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, Leni and Matthew's favorite book. She talks about the importance of books in her life and how they mark important events in her growing up. Indeed, references to other books are a key element of *The Great Alone*. Throughout the novel, Leni makes references to J.R.R. Tolkien, Frank Herbert, Stephen King, and Jack London. Each of these references has its own place in Leni's life, and often, she reads books that reflect her mood. For instance, when Ernt's behavior becomes worse in the winter, she reads Stephen King. King famously wrote a novel called *The Shining*, which is about a family who is stuck alone in a hotel during the winter. The father in that novel eventually goes insane and tries to kill his wife and child. Leni sees clear parallels between books like *The Shining* and her own life. As such, books become one way she organizes and copes with her daily existence.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ "If he loved you guys, he wouldn't hurt you."

He made it sound so simple, as if it were a mathematical equation. But the connection between pain and love wasn't linear. It was a web.

Related Characters: Matthew Walker (speaker), Leni

Allbright, Ernt Allbright

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 336

Explanation and Analysis

Matthew says this to Leni after learning how Ernt treats his wife and daughter. Matthew, who grew up in a normal home with kind and loving parents, finds Leni's situation deeply disturbing. He knows how parents are supposed to treat their children and is appalled by Ernt's behavior. However, things are not so simple for Leni. She knows that Ernt's actions aren't normal, but she also still loves him. He is her father, and she knows his experience in the Vietnam War radically changed him. Abusive though her father may be, Leni does not feel as though she can simply stop loving him. In this case, though Matthew may be correct, he fails to understand the complications of Leni's day to day reality. Even if Leni and Cora could stop loving Ernt, it would be difficult for them to escape him. Matthew grew up relatively privileged; his family has money and his parents loved him. He has a hard time understanding what it is like to be Leni, who did not grow up with the same luxuries.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ Fear, Leni learned, was not the small, dark closet she'd always imagined: walls pressed in close, a ceiling you bumped your head on, a floor cold to the touch.

No.

Fear was a mansion, one room after another, connected by endless hallways.

Related Characters: Leni Allbright

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

These are Leni's thoughts as she thinks about the prison her father has constructed for her. After Mad Earl's funeral, Ernt burns his last bridge with the Kaneq community. Only Cora and Leni still stand by his side and only because they are forced to. Angry at the world, Ernt constructs a barricade around his property so no one can get in and no one can get out without his permission. Ernt becomes a totalitarian figure; he claims his barricade is for protection,

but really it is all about control. Leni is scared by Ernt's behavior and knows that she and Cora must escape. However, this quote demonstrates the way fear can be paralyzing. There is no logical beginning and end point to Leni's fear; it simply keeps on going and going. This description makes sense because Leni doesn't know how to escape Ernt. She's tried several times at this point but keeps ending up in the same situation. At this point, she simply feels trapped, as if she's in a "mansion" that keeps rambling on indefinitely.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☛☛ Mostly he was afraid for Leni, because no matter how this all worked out, no matter if she did everything perfectly and got away and saved her mom, Leni's heart would always have a broken place. It didn't matter how you lost a parent or how great or shitty that parent was, a kid grieved forever. Matthew grieved for the mother he'd had. He figured Leni would grieve for the dad she wanted.

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Ernt Allbright, Matthew Walker

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 359

Explanation and Analysis

This quote gets inside Matthew's head after he rescues Leni from Ernt and takes her up a mountain. After hearing Leni's cry for help, Matthew punches Ernt, drives Cora to Marge's place, and takes Leni to a mountain where Ernt can't get to her. Together, they camp overnight and discuss what to do next. Leni wants to return to her mother to make sure everything is okay. Matthew similarly hopes Cora is alright but knows this incident will impact Leni forever. Matthew is no stranger to grief and trauma; he watched his mother die and has had to live with that moment ever since. Although he doesn't have a parent like Ernt, he's come to understand why Leni and Cora still love him, despite everything. There is something about immense trauma that the human mind cannot comprehend, and that lack of comprehension deeply affects almost everyone in the novel. All of the main characters are suffering from trauma in one way or another; they all have "a broken place" that can't be neatly or rationally explained away.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☛☛ Leni felt something then, a seismic shift in her thinking; like spring breakup, a changing of the landscape, a breaking away that was violent, immediate. She wasn't afraid of this man anymore. Or if she was, the fear was submerged too deeply to register. All she felt was hatred.

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Coraline (Cora) Allbright, Matthew Walker

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 385

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation describes Leni's feelings the first time she sees Ernt after Matthew's accident. It is a significant turning point for Leni's character, and it is the moment that leads to the climax of the novel; that is, Ernt's death. Leni blames Ernt for Matthew's injury. It is because of Ernt that Leni and Matthew were up on the mountain in the first place. When Ernt sees Leni, he apologizes for Matthew's injury, but does so half-heartedly at best. This is what causes Leni to hate her father. Though later in her life she decides that she may still love Ernt as well, she despises him for the remainder of his life. Though she once feared Ernt, she now sees him as pathetic and completely devoid of empathy. Ernt knows that she loved Matthew, yet he treats his death like it is nothing. From this moment forward, Leni refuses to talk to her father and vows to escape their home, whether Cora comes with her or not.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☛☛ In the silence, Leni wondered if one person could ever really save another, or if it was the kind of thing you had to do for yourself.

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Coraline (Cora) Allbright, Matthew Walker

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 400

Explanation and Analysis

Leni thinks this as she is being comforted by Marge in the general store. After Matthew is moved to a new facility, Leni goes to visit him, despite her father's protests. She is alarmed by what she finds; Matthew's handsome face has been ruined by injuries and the only way he has of

expressing himself is to moan. Later, when Leni sees Marge, she tells her that Matthew got his injuries trying to save her. However, she becomes unsure of whether it is possible to save anyone. Throughout the novel, Leni has tried and failed to save people several times; she tries to find Matthew and Geneva, only for Geneva to end up dead, and she repeatedly tries to get her mother away from Ernt to no avail. However, at the end of the novel, Cora and Tom do find ways to save Leni; Cora writes a signed confession and Tom wields his power to get Leni's charges thrown out. As such, though this moment is one of despair, Leni's question ultimately has a hopeful answer, even if it takes a while to appear.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝☝ Matthew's eyes opened. One stared straight ahead. The other rolled wildly in the socket. That one staring green eye was the only part of him she recognized. He struggled, made a terrible moaning sound of pain.

He opened his mouth, screamed, "Bwaaaa..." He thrashed, bucked up like he was trying to break free. The halo made a clanging sound when it hit the bedrail. Blood started to form at the bolts in his temple. An alarm went off. "Hermmmm..."

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Matthew Walker

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 425

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of Leni's last interaction with Matthew before leaving Alaska. After hiding Ernt's body, Leni and Cora leave Alaska, knowing they will go to jail if they don't. However, before she leaves, Leni risks seeing Matthew one last time. Although the experience is painful for Leni, she is glad that she can see him, even if he doesn't know what she is saying. Matthew's sounds are unintelligible to Leni, though they do carry some meaning. At several key moments, the novel goes inside of Matthew's mind after he is paralyzed. Internally, Matthew has forgotten Leni's name, but knows that she is important to him. He also senses her presence when she is around. He refers to Leni as "HER" and therefore, even though his moans sound nonsensical, "Hermmmm" is an acknowledgement that he recognizes Leni. Unfortunately, Leni does not know this, and she spends many years feeling guilty about abandoning Matthew.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝☝ *Wild. That's how I describe it all. My love. My life. Alaska. Truthfully, it's all the same to me. Alaska doesn't attract many; most are too tame to handle life up here. But when she gets her hooks in you, she digs deep and holds on, and you become hers. Wild. A lover of cruel beauty and splendid isolation. And God help you, you can't live anywhere else.*

Related Characters: Lily Walker (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 432

Explanation and Analysis

This is an excerpt from an article written by Lily Walker, Matthew's grandmother. The article is a birthday gift from Matthew that he prepared for Leni before his accident. He attaches a note to the article that says, "THIS COULD BE US." Unfortunately, this is no longer the case, at least for the time being. Leni must leave Alaska, and Matthew is confined to a hospital bed. Nonetheless, Leni relates to the article written by Lily. Lily and her husband Eckhart were the first two non-Native people to live in Kaneq, Alaska and helped settle the region. At the end of the novel, Leni will write a similar article about her life in Alaska where she will also talk about her love for its "wildness." Despite Ernt's fears, Kaneq never becomes the modernized city he dreads; it retains its wildness, as do the people who live there. Like Lily, Leni is proud to call herself an Alaskan, and by the end of the novel, Leni and Matthew end up more like Lily and Eckhart than Leni could have ever imagined.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ *I guess my mama was right about love. As screwed up as she is, she understands the durability and lunacy of it. You can't make yourself fall in love, I suppose, and you can't make yourself fall out of it.*

Related Characters: Leni Allbright (speaker), Coraline (Cora) Allbright, Matthew Walker

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 450

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is from one of the letters Leni writes to Matthew but never sends. Now in Seattle, Leni must live under a false identity. She occasionally calls Matthew's care facility to

check on him, but never provides her real name. Because she cannot talk to Matthew and she feels lonely, Leni regularly writes Matthew letters that she keeps for herself. These letters are a way for her to express her feelings and stay connected with someone she feels she has lost. In this letter, Leni realizes that she is not so different from her mother. Though Matthew proves to be a much better partner than Ernt was to Cora, Leni realizes that love is not always rational or within one's control. Leni gives up on trying to understand love, and instead accepts it. She knows she will always love Matthew, even if she never sees him again. She may even still love her father, as unfortunate and twisted though that may seem.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ “It’s been years,” her mother said. “Look at her. She’s happy. Why must we keep having this conversation?”

Cora wanted to agree. It was what she said to herself on a daily basis. Look, she’s happy. Sometimes, she was able to almost wholly believe it. And then there were days like today. She didn’t know what caused the change. Weather, maybe. Old habits. The kind of corrosive fear that once it moved in, pitted your bones and stayed forever.

Related Characters: Mrs. Gollither (speaker), Leni Allbright, Coraline (Cora) Allbright

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 461

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation that takes place between Cora and Mrs. Gollither several years after the Allbrights return to Seattle. While Cora does not regret killing Ernt, she worries that she’s destroyed her daughter’s life by doing so. Although Mrs. Gollither tells her that Leni is happy, that isn’t completely true. While Leni has moved on from the past, she still misses Alaska and feels guilty for abandoning Matthew. In other words, Cora’s fears are correct, and she feels obligated to fix her mistake. Like Leni, Cora worries that she’ll live the rest of her life in fear and regret otherwise. Soon after, Cora is diagnosed with cancer, and she sees a chance to set Leni free with a signed confession. Throughout chemotherapy, Cora is never afraid of death, but she is scared that she will leave Leni alone to solve problems that Cora created. That’s what eventually moves Cora to provide the confession so that Leni can live freely in the Alaska she loves.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝☝ It’s a bad idea, Leni. A terrible idea. If you’ve learned anything from your mother and what happened, it should be this: life—and the law—is hard on women. Sometimes doing the right thing is no help at all.

Related Characters: Cecil Gollither (speaker), Leni Allbright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 496

Explanation and Analysis

Cecil Gollither, Leni’s grandfather, tells her this after she says she wants to return to Alaska. On her deathbed, Cora gives Leni a signed confession for Ernt’s murder and tells her to return to Alaska. She also leaves her two one-way tickets. Wanting to carry out her mother’s wishes and reunite with Matthew, she tells the Gollithers that she is going to Alaska and taking her son MJ with her. Cecil worries about her plan, which is a red flag. Cecil is a lawyer and whenever knowledgeable people provide warnings in this novel, those warnings generally prove to be well-founded. Indeed, Leni does end up in jail for “doing the right thing,” although Tom Walker manages to get her charges tossed out. Nonetheless, Cecil’s prediction emphasizes the point that women who’ve suffered abuse often find little recourse in the law; like Cora felt herself to be, many abused women feel trapped and unable to find adequate help.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☝☝ “You know what I love most about you, Leni Allbright?”
“What?”

“Everything.”

Related Characters: Leni Allbright, Matthew Walker (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 532

Explanation and Analysis

This is an exchange near the end of the novel where Matthew lets Leni know that he still knows who she is and that he still loves her. Earlier in the novel, when Matthew and Leni are on the mountain together, the exact same exchange occurs, except the roles are reversed. In other words, Leni tells Matthew that she loves everything about him. However, at the end of the novel, there is an open

question regarding how much Matthew can remember about Leni. Leni tries to explain to him why she had to leave him, and he cuts her off to begin this exchange. It is an important moment in the novel because Matthew reveals not only that he still loves Leni, but that he remembers their interactions together, including some significant details.

After years of suffering and longing, Leni and Matthew are finally reunited with one another so they can live happily. Although the novel is not a “happily ever after” story in a conventional sense, it does provide its main characters with some happiness after many years of sorrow and guilt.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

It is the spring of 1974 and rain is flooding the city of Seattle, creating a lot of tension between its inhabitants. 13-year-old Leni Allbright is especially stressed because she is starting a new school and her parents are arguing again. Her father is angry, and her mother is trying to pacify him, saying, "You need help, baby. It's not your fault. The nightmares—" When Leni leaves to go to school, her parents momentarily calm themselves, though she hears them arguing again as soon as she walks out the door.

When Leni was younger, her parents were happy. However, her father, Ernt, had to leave to fight in the Vietnam War and he came back a changed man. While her father was away, Leni and her mother lived in a number of different communes and protested the war. Ever since returning from the war, Ernt cannot keep a job and he experiences rapid mood swings. He, along with Leni, is also dismayed at the general state of the world, which is undergoing events such as the Watergate scandal, the Munich Olympics massacre, and Patty Hearst's kidnapping.

Leni feels isolated from the world. Ernt makes the family move on a yearly basis and she is not able to make friends. When she returns home from school, her father apologizes for losing his temper earlier. Leni believes his apology is sincere and knows his actions are a result of what he experienced in Vietnam. Leni recalls the many nights she has heard her mother, Cora, have to comfort her father after he woke up sobbing in his sleep.

In mid-April, Ernt enters the house with a big smile on his face. He has received a letter from Earl Harlan that says Earl's son, Bo, has left Ernt a cabin and 40 acres of land in Alaska. Bo was a friend of Ernt's from Vietnam. The two men were captured and tortured together and eventually their captors made Ernt watch as they killed Bo. Ernt is excited about the prospect of moving to Alaska, but Leni and Cora are hesitant. Ultimately, though, Leni knows her mother will give in, and the family will do whatever her father wants. Like her mother, Leni plans to go along with her father's wishes in hopes that he will find happiness.

Weather is important in "The Great Alone" because of its impact on characters' moods, particularly Leni's father. Immediately, the novel establishes that bad weather leads to tension. Though Leni's parents try to shield her from their argument, their attempt is futile. Leni can hear them through the walls and when she walks out the door, and she's clearly heard them argue before.



The Vietnam War was a divisive time in American history and Leni's parents fall on different sides of the divide. Leni's mother is staunchly anti-war, while Ernt is a veteran. Historically, the war, along with the other events mentioned, led many Americans to distrust the government and become concerned about increases in violence.



Clearly, Ernt is dealing with an undiagnosed mental illness as a result of his time in the war. In 1974, when this novel is set, there still wasn't a lot of knowledge about how to treat traumatized soldiers returning from war. However, Leni and Cora understand what caused Ernt's issues, and do their best to cope with them.



Because Leni already feels isolated, a move to Alaska does not seem like it will help things. However, Ernt is the one in charge, and Cora is willing to sacrifice some of Leni's happiness, as well as her own, so that Ernt might regain some of his. As the story progresses, Cora's inability to stand up to Ernt for the sake of herself and her daughter becomes increasingly important.



CHAPTER 2

The following day, Leni wakes up and talks to her mother about Alaska. Leni hopes that they can put off the trip until the end of the school year, but Cora tells her that she doesn't think that is possible. She then asks Leni to put on a blue dress that her father bought her. Leni does so but is annoyed; she is embarrassed that she has not gone through puberty, and the dress showcases that fact. Cora also dresses herself up to look professional, so much so that Leni almost doesn't recognize her. Cora says she is taking Leni to run errands with her, though she does not go into specifics.

The first stop of Leni and Cora's errand run is a trip to the bank. Cora makes Leni wait in the car. Before too long, Cora returns angrily. Cora is upset because she attempted to withdraw money, only to find that Ernt has used up all their savings. Additionally, she learns that she is not allowed to open a credit card without Ernt's or her father's signature. Cora tells Leni "It's a man world, baby girl" and then speeds her way to the freeway.

Cora and Leni drive to a ritzy neighborhood of Seattle where Leni has not been for a long time. Eventually, they arrive at a lavish house. Cora tells Leni to wait in the car alone but Leni refuses because women have been going missing all over Washington. Cora decides to let Leni come with her. The house belongs to Cora's parents, although only her mother, Mrs. Gollither, is home. Mrs. Gollither is surprised but happy to see Cora and Leni. She gives Leni a copy of *Pippi Longstocking* that she bought for her years ago.

The conversation between Mrs. Gollither and Cora quickly becomes confrontational, as Cora gives her mother the Alaska news. Mrs. Gollither is vehemently against the plan; she does not trust Ernt and thinks the move is dangerous for Cora and Leni. The reason she has not seen Cora and Leni for such a long time is because Ernt is not allowed in her house. Eventually, the argument ends with Mrs. Gollither asking, "How much do you need this time?" Afterward, Cora and Leni drive home in silence, and Cora is clearly upset. When they arrive home, Cora tells Leni that she cannot tell her father that Mrs. Gollither gave them money. Leni is not comfortable with hiding this information, but she agrees. When they go inside, Ernt is there, and he has already marked their route to Alaska. He tells Cora and Leni that they depart in four days.

Leni has even less say over the family's future than Cora. As a 13-year-old, she must listen to her parents, even if it means putting on a dress that doesn't fit. Leni's coming of age will become a key theme as the novel progresses, so it is significant that she starts as a prepubescent child. The dress that doesn't fit is one of many times when Leni's parents will ask her to look, think, or act mature for her age. However, because Cora is reticent about the nature of their errands, it is implied that there are things Leni has yet to learn about her parents and the world of adulthood.



Once again, Cora is shown to have little power in her relationship with Ernt. Not only is she unable to open a new account, she also didn't know the old one was empty, suggesting that she has no control over the family's finances. However, although Cora isn't in control, she also isn't blind to her situation; she likely suspected something like this to happen, which is why she makes Leni wait in the car.



The women going missing around Washington is a reference to the Ted Bundy murders, another event that led to American paranoia in the 1970s. Ted Bundy is one of America's most infamous serial killers and serial killing, in general, was on the rise during this time period. Also, the book Mrs. Gollither gives Leni is indicative of their estrangement; Pippi Longstocking is a book for young children, meaning Leni likely hasn't seen her grandmother for over five years.



Red flags continue to pop up regarding Ernt and his condition, which foreshadow trouble in the future. Although the Allbrights love each other, Ernt and Cora don't trust one another; Ernt doesn't allow Cora control and Cora keeps information from Ernt. However, there is a strong bond between Cora and Leni, one that will continue to be tested as the novel goes on. Additionally, this is the first of several instances in the novel where Ernt will make sudden decisions, often without fully thinking them through. Alaska is a unique and dangerous place; it is not somewhere to casually pick up and move to on a whim, but that's pretty much what Ernt is doing—and dragging his family into.



CHAPTER 3

Four days later, the Allbrights are on their way to their new home. They have a great time driving up the Alcan highway and Leni thinks this is the happiest she has ever seen her parents. Leni herself is enchanted by the beauty of Alaska and spends her time taking pictures of the landscape. Eventually the Allbrights arrive in Homer, where they take a ferry to Kaneq, their new home. Ernt reminds his family that the only way to leave Kaneq is by plane or boat. Upon arriving in Kaneq, Leni and Cora are extremely underwhelmed, as the majesty they witnessed in the rest of Alaska is nowhere to be found. Kaneq's main street is only a block long and Leni quickly notices that there is no school in sight. She worries there will be no one her age in Kaneq.

The Allbrights enter the general store on Main Street where they meet Large Marge, the store's owner. The store itself is unorganized, though Marge assures the Allbrights that it contains everything they need. When the Allbrights tell Marge that they are moving to Kaneq, she offers them a number of warnings about the dangers of the region. Leni and Cora are frightened by what Marge says, but Ernt finds it exciting. To reassure Cora, Marge tells her that they are neighbors, and she will come running whenever Cora needs her.

The Allbrights leave the general store equipped with a map given to them by Marge. They begin to drive in the direction of their home and as they do so the terrain becomes more and more remote. Eventually they come to a stop, just a few hundred feet short of a cliff. Their new property is close by, but the driveway has not been cared for, so they are forced to hike in. Leni and Cora find this quite distressing, though Ernt remains excited. The hike takes quite some time and darkness begins to close in.

Finally, the Allbrights reach their destination and Leni and Cora are horrified by what they see. Their new home—a cabin—is incredibly small and has not been cared for whatsoever; its deck is rotting, the indoors reeks of animal feces, and the dust is so thick that breathing is difficult. Leni looks around for a bathroom, to no avail. When she asks Cora about it, Cora gasps as she realizes that their new bathroom is an outhouse. Despite their uncertainty, Leni and Cora reassure one another about their new living situation. They both hold on to the belief that this change will help Ernt be happy.

Several times in The Great Alone, Cora and Leni will find temporary happiness, only to have it swiftly undercut; this is the first of those instances. Also, the fact that Kaneq is difficult to leave is disconcerting for Cora and Leni, who are not yet sure about their new home. For Leni, who yearns to fit in and have friends, Kaneq initially seems like a step in the wrong direction.



Marge's warnings to the Allbrights highlight how unprepared they are for life in Alaska. It is telling that Marge knows that Leni and Cora are scared, while Ernt is too excited to notice or care. Ernt prioritizing his feelings over those of his wife and daughter will continue to be an issue as the novel progresses. In addition, Marge's promise to come running to the Allbrights is another instance of foreshadowing.



Danger is present everywhere in Kaneq, as is evidenced by the cliff near the Allbrights' new home. Here, Cora and Leni get their first taste of what it is like to fend for themselves; no one has cleared the road to their house, and no one will unless they do it. Once again, though Leni and Cora are distressed, Ernt continues to live in his own world, largely ignoring the feelings of his family members.



Already stressed out from their trip, Cora and Leni find the cabin is almost a step too far. Even basic necessities for life, such as clean air and sewage, are not present here. However, it speaks to Cora and Leni's love for Ernt that they are willing to tolerate such conditions, at least temporarily. The question, though, at this point in the narrative, is whether that love goes both ways.



CHAPTER 4

The Allbrights spend their first few days in Kaneq cleaning up the homestead. At the end of the second day, Ernt prepares a fire on their private beach and the family has a nice night sitting around the campfire. At this point, Leni starts to believe that the family can be happy in Kaneq. The next day, the Allbrights are awoken by a pounding at their door, which turns out to be Marge and two other women named Natalie Watkins and Geneva Walker. The three women have come to help the Allbrights prepare their homestead, and though Ernt is briefly offended, he quickly comes to realize that he needs their help.

Marge, Natalie, and Geneva help the Allbrights make a cache—a small, elevated platform to keep food away from bears—as well as a greenhouse. Marge once again reiterates both Kaneq’s wonder and danger to Cora and Leni. Directing her stare at Ernt, Marge also warns them that isolation can make some people crazy. She tells Cora and Leni that they need to learn to fend for themselves, which includes learning how to use a gun. In addition, Marge informs the Allbrights that they have much to do before they are prepared to survive their first Alaskan winter. After spending the day with Marge, Natalie, and Geneva, Leni begins to understand the true meaning of the word “remote.”

The next day, the Allbrights eat breakfast together and then Ernt parks their VW bus in front of the cabin. After several days of work, the driveway is finally clear and the Allbrights are able to unload all of their belongings. Afterwards, Ernt takes the family on a drive to meet Earl Harlan. Eventually, they arrive at the entrance of Earl’s property, which is decorated with a sign that reads, “TURN AROUND. YES, WE MEAN YOU. PROPERTY PROTECTED BY DOGS AND GUNS. HIPPIES GO HOME.” Nearby is a man with a gun who asks the Allbrights to state their business. Ernt explains who they are, and the man lets them pass. Ernt does not seem bothered by what he sees, but Cora is alarmed.

Gender plays a key role in The Great Alone. Though there are limitations for women in Kaneq, they are largely expected to hold their own. Marge best embodies this quality—she is always prepared and ready to help—but it is true of the other women in the community as well. Additionally, Ernt’s hurt pride will become increasingly important, especially when other men are involved. In this case, though Ernt is stubborn, he is not stupid; he knows he’s come to Alaska unprepared and is willing to swallow his pride for the good of himself and his family.



There is more heavy foreshadowing in this section. A perceptive woman, Marge already appears concerned about Ernt and his mental condition. This warning, in addition to Mrs. Gollither’s, suggests that there is a side of Ernt that has yet to be revealed. Though Marge’s suggestion about learning to shoot does relate to hunting animals, she seems concerned about the danger posed by Ernt as well. However, Cora and Leni do not catch her meaning.



While Ernt was fighting in Vietnam, Cora essentially lived life as a hippie, so the sign at the front of Earl’s property carries some extra weight for her. Once again, Ernt does not care about his wife’s feelings and continues to do what he wants instead. Throughout the novel, Ernt will repeatedly fail to distinguish between what he thinks is dangerous and what is actually dangerous. Although this does not prove to be an instance of true danger, it is an example of Ernt’s casual disregard for his family’s safety.



When the Allbrights arrive at Earl's house, they are greeted by an old man pointing a gun at them. Once again, Cora expresses her concern, but Ernt ignores her and leaves to talk to the old man. The man turns out to be Earl—or Mad Earl, as the locals call him—and upon learning Ernt's identity, he welcomes the Allbrights inside. Upon entering Earl's home, Cora and Leni are alarmed by the stockpile of weapons and military equipment—including a gas mask—that they find. When asked about his collection, Earl tells the Allbrights, "The world's gone mad. A man has to protect himself." In particular, he is upset by gas prices, the Cold War, the Black Panthers, and illegal immigrants. He seems to believe a war is coming and although Cora finds his claims ridiculous, Ernt quickly agrees with him.

After their conversation with Earl, the Allbrights are introduced to the rest of the Harlan family, including Thelma Schill, who greets them kindly. When talking to Thelma, Leni discovers there is actually a school in town, a fact that makes her very happy. Thelma also begins teaching Cora about what she will need to do to prepare for winter. Thelma offers to help her start a garden and can salmon. Like Marge, she warns Cora about the dangers of the Alaskan winter. Cora is increasingly worried about the warnings she receives, though Thelma promises that she and her family will help the Allbrights however they can.

CHAPTER 5

Leni is getting ready for her first day of school, a process she finds rather stressful. She has always had trouble fitting in and she doubts that a school in Kaneq, Alaska will be any different. Her embarrassment is magnified because she feels obligated to wear the unstylish clothes given to her by her father and to use a Winnie the Pooh lunch box gifted to her by Thelma. Ernt drives Leni to school, although she asks him to drop her off where they cannot be seen together.

Leni walks into her new classroom expecting the worst, but quickly makes friends with a boy named Matthew. The two of them bond over their mutual love of reading, particularly *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dune*. Leni's heart skips a beat when Matthew calls her pretty and invites her to a community barbecue at his house. Leni worries her father will not let her come because he always hated community events in the past. However, on their drive home, Leni notices that Ernt is more open to being a part of a community since moving to Alaska.

The nicknames the locals give to one another are often quite literal and "Mad Earl" is no exception. Though he is kind to the Allbrights, it is cause for concern that Ernt agrees with someone named Mad Earl so quickly. In addition, it is telling that Mad Earl fears issues that have little to do with his day-to-day life. Though the Cold War is a reasonable worry, the Black Panthers and illegal immigrants likely have no presence in Kaneq, Alaska. As such, Earl comes off as quite paranoid and potentially dangerous.



In sharp contrast to Earl's concerns about the Black Panthers and illegal immigrants, Thelma gives the Allbrights useful information that is key to their survival. Here, the women in the community prove to be of much more use than the men when it comes to preparation. Thelma's warning about being prepared for winter echoes Marge's and serves as yet another instance of foreshadowing.



A key component of The Great Alone is Leni's attempt to live the normal life of a teenager under such strange and dangerous conditions. In this passage, she once again proves willing to sacrifice her own happiness for that of others, though she does draw a line by making Ernt drop her off before they reach school.



Books play a key role in Leni's life and until this moment, she's never bonded with anyone over a book before. Leni's reading habits change throughout the book depending on her mood and age. The sci-fi and fantasy epics that define this stage of her life are characterized by hope and the overcoming of evil. However, Leni's life does not follow a similar path. Meanwhile, though she is happy that her father is more open to being a part of a community, his previous experiences and his affinity with Earl suggest that this might not be the case for long.



When Leni arrives home, she sees Cora preparing salmon. When Cora asks her about school, Leni tells her about Matthew and the barbecue. Cora is excited that Leni made a friend and tells her that she and Ernt received the same invitation. To Leni's delight, her parents plan to attend. Later in the day, Leni stresses herself out while getting ready. She is unsure of what to wear and she is worried about how Ernt will behave at the barbecue. Previously, Ernt attacked a man at a state fair because he flirted with Cora. Leni knows her mother is beautiful and worries about similar incidents in the future.

The Allbright family drives to the barbecue together. Eventually they arrive at a beautiful two-story log house. The Allbrights park and join the party at the beach where they find a number of friendly faces, including Marge and Leni's teacher, Ms. Rhodes. Before long, Tom Walker comes and introduces himself to the Allbrights. Tom is Matthew's father as well as the owner of the impressive property. Although Tom means well, he immediately makes a bad impression with Ernt by saying he heard the Allbrights arrived in Alaska unprepared. He tells Ernt he is happy to help with whatever the Allbrights need, but Ernt is already angry. Tom is also single, and Leni worries about the interest he takes in Cora.

After meeting Tom, Leni hears Matthew calling her name. The two teenagers run off into the woods and share their first beer together. Leni is glad to finally be around someone her own age, although she does not feel she can be completely honest with Matthew about her family's circumstances. After talking about their families for a while, Leni and Matthew head back to the beach where they overhear Ernt and Earl talking negatively about Matthew's father. Ernt and Earl think Tom is condescending and both seem disgusted by the fact that he was born into money. Although Matthew does not appear to be bothered by what he hears, Leni is mortified, and she worries that Alaska will not have the positive effect on her father she had hoped for.

Here, a darker side of Ernt—the side Mrs. Gollither and Marge fear—starts to show itself. Other than his actions as a soldier, this is the first specific instance in the novel of Ernt acting violently toward others. Meanwhile, Leni continues to go through experiences common to a teenager, such as figuring out what to wear.



Leni's fears show themselves to be legitimate, as Ernt immediately takes issue with Tom. In fact, things may be even worse than she imagined, as the man Ernt has a problem with is her new friend's father. Because Ernt fancies himself a self-reliant man, his pride is wounded when Tom suggests that he might need help. It also quickly becomes clear that Ernt is repelled by Tom's wealth and—as with Cora's parents—he refuses to take anything from him. Given that Leni's worries have so far been accurate, her fear that Tom will take an interest in Cora should carry extra weight.



Here, Leni gets to experience something close to a typical teenage experience: running off in the woods to drink with a friend. Though she likes Matthew, Leni struggles to place trust in anyone except for her mother and therefore does not tell him what her father is really like. Ironically, he soon finds out anyway, although he doesn't care. In the meantime, Leni's utopic vision of Alaskan life begins to crumble, as she realizes that her father has already begun to regress.



CHAPTER 6

When the Allbrights arrive home from the Walker party, Cora and Ernt are “all over each other, making out like teenagers, banging into walls, pressing their bodies together.” Wanting to get as far away from her parents as possible, Leni scrambles up to the loft where she begins reading the poetry of Robert Service. As Leni reads, she wonders whether Matthew will still want to be friends. The next morning, Leni wakes up and helps her father with some manual labor. Ernt tries to badmouth Tom Walker, so Leni lies to him and says that Tom told her that he thinks Ernt is a war hero who has been treated unfairly. Leni also tells her father that she thinks he should quit drinking. Afterwards, there’s a moment of silence, but eventually Ernt agrees with her.

One hour later, Leni is in school. Because Ms. Rhodes could not make it in today, Geneva Walker, Matthew’s mother, is teaching class. Geneva takes the children on a field trip to Eaglet cove. To get there, the children must pair up and ride in canoes. Geneva pairs Leni with Matthew, much to Leni’s dismay. She had spent much of the day ignoring Matthew because she is ashamed of what her father said the night before. Matthew is confused by Leni’s behavior and decides to confront her about it directly. Leni explains herself and apologizes, but Matthew says there is nothing to be sorry about. He hears similar things all the time, particularly from Earl, and he does not hold Leni accountable for her father’s actions. Leni is overjoyed by Matthew’s attitude and the two swear to remain friends no matter what.

At the end of the day, Leni returns home and tells her parents about her school day. Later, the family goes out into the woods together so Ernt can teach Leni and Cora how to shoot. Before he can complete his instructions, Leni accidentally fires her rifle, and the kick of the gun makes her smash the scope into her eye. This incident is incredibly painful, and Leni begins crying. Although Cora moves to comfort her child, Ernt takes a tough love approach and tells her to stand back up and stop crying. When Cora protests, Ernt gives a speech about how Leni needs to be able to defend herself if she wants to survive the winter. When her father is finished talking, Leni stops crying, stands back up, and tries again. Although the gun makes her nervous, she fires off a second shot and hits her target.

The size of the Allbright cabin means that Leni hears and sees more of her parents’ relationship than she would ever want to.

Throughout the novel, whenever Cora and Ernt engage in sexual activity, Leni is treated as an afterthought, and they do not seem embarrassed or self-conscious about her presence, though Leni herself is clearly uncomfortable. However, Leni is able to distract herself by reading, this time with the poems of Robert Service. Among many other works, Service wrote a poem titled “The Shooting of Dan McGrew,” which refers to rural Alaska as “The Great Alone.” The phrase works well as the title of the novel because it simultaneously captures the magnificence and isolation of Kaneq. Ironically, in this moment Leni feels isolated from people her age, yet way too close to her parents. Additionally, Leni is becoming bolder when lying to Ernt. Previously, she felt uncomfortable withholding information from him, but now she tells an overt lie without thinking.



Leni’s behavior toward Matthew speaks to her relative immaturity. Rather than talk to Matthew about what happened, she chooses to ignore him, which only makes things worse. Luckily, Matthew’s behavior is the inverse of Leni’s—making him quite mature for his age—and he makes sure the two of them stay friends. Matthew’s attitude toward Leni speaks to a broader conception of individualism that is present in the Kaneq community. In Kaneq, most people judge others by their actions, not the actions of their friends and family.



Though Ernt’s parenting has been questionable up to this point in the novel, the tough love approach he takes here proves to be effective. Though there is a question about where such behavior will lead, there is no doubt that a certain degree of toughness and perseverance is required of both men and women who hope to survive in Kaneq. Leni’s determination to shoot successfully, despite her initial mishap, also shows that she’s growing up and getting tougher.



CHAPTER 7

The day after her first target practice, Leni arrives at school, wearing her newly acquired black eye as a badge of honor. Early in the day, Matthew suggests that he and Leni skip school. Both kids make up excuses, allowing them to leave school early. Instead of attending class, Matthew takes Leni to the shore on an ATV. Once they arrive, Matthew shows Leni a bald eagle's nest. Ever since Matthew was a child, he and his mother came to look at the eagles and their nest. Lately, though, Matthew has not been to the nest as often. He tells Leni this is because his home situation has grown more complicated ever since his parents separated.

After hearing about Matthew's life, Leni is able to open up more about herself. She tells Matthew that her father has not been the same since the war and that he often has nightmares. When she mentions that he might be better in Alaska, Matthew responds, "I don't know. Winter is one big night up here. People go batshit in the dark, run screaming, open fire on their pets and friends." This just makes Leni worry even more. She is also upset that soon she won't be able to see Matthew very often because school is ending and both of them will be spending all their time preparing for winter.

The last day of school arrives, and Matthew and Leni make promises about keeping in touch, although Leni does not think these are promises she can possibly keep. Cora picks Leni up from school that day, notices she is upset, and decides to let her relax when she gets home. The two of them sit around a fire and discuss Ernt. Ernt is currently on a fishing trip with Earl, which is concerning to both Cora and Leni. Neither of them like Earl, and they notice that Ernt's rhetoric becomes more extreme after spending time with him.

Not wanting to dwell on their present problems, Cora tells Leni about what Ernt was like before the Vietnam War. Cora and Ernt got together when Cora was only 16. That same year, Cora became pregnant with Leni, quit school, and ran off to live with Ernt in a trailer park. Cora's parents were mortified by her decision, but she is proud of herself for making that choice and for a number of years, she and Ernt were happy. Before long, however, the war came and although Cora did not want Ernt to leave, he did so anyway. When Ernt came back, he was a changed man and his issues have plagued the Allbrights ever since. Cora ends by saying that she thinks Ernt is feeling better in Alaska, but Leni is not so sure.

Matthew and Leni's messy home lives are part of what binds them together. However, just as Matthew does not know the full extent of Leni's home situation, Leni does not know the full context of his. Though Matthew is more forthcoming than Leni, much of his home life remains unexamined and the novel rarely strays from Leni's perspective.



Potential issues with Ernt continue to add up. All signs point to trouble when the winter arrives, no matter how positive Leni and Cora try to be. Not only could winter prove difficult for the Allbrights in general, but Leni will also have to return to her life of solitude without someone her age to talk to.



Unlike Ernt, Cora pays close attention to her daughter and knows when she is burned out or upset. Meanwhile, the threat Ernt poses continues to grow to the point where even Cora is concerned. Although Cora will continue to defend Ernt and hope he gets better, this is a turning point for her character.



The key conflict for Cora's character in the novel is that she constantly wants to reconcile the man Ernt is now with the man he used to be. However, that man is gone, and everyone realizes it except for Cora. Additionally, pre-war Ernt shares a negative characteristic with the current Ernt; that is, he put his own desires before those of his family and went off to war. Of course, this could also be construed as a selfless act, but nonetheless, Cora had no say in his decision.



The next few months of Leni's life are spent enjoying the beauty of the Alaskan summer, while working hard to prepare for winter. Over the course of the summer, Leni finally hits puberty. She is embarrassed by her changing body, particularly her acne, but her fears are somewhat assuaged by her interactions with Matthew. Although they do not see each other often, Leni and Matthew cherish the moments they spend together. Whenever he gets the chance, Matthew shows Leni something beautiful or fascinating from the natural world such as bear prints or duck eggs. Eventually, the school year starts up, so Leni and Matthew are able to spend more time with one another.

One night, after a hard day's work, Leni and Cora are inside waiting for Ernt to come join them for dinner. Cora is annoyed because Ernt is outdoors drinking with Earl. Fed up with waiting, she calls Ernt inside for dinner. Ernt comes inside and drunkenly sits at the table. He tells Leni and Cora that they need to prepare themselves for "WTSHTF"—"when the shit hits the fan"—because otherwise they will be "the first casualties." Annoyed by her husband, Cora tells him that she is fed up with his apocalyptic rhetoric. Ernt reacts aggressively, slamming his fist down on the table. Angered by what he sees as Cora's lack of support, he gets up and leaves. Cora and Leni are both concerned that Ernt is getting worse as winter draws near.

After school the next day, Ernt brings Cora and Leni to Earl's property. When they arrive, Ernt and Earl give speeches about how the world has gone to hell. They believe an apocalyptic event is on the horizon and plan on teaching everyone how to fend for themselves. Cora and Leni are alarmed, but they keep quiet so as not to anger Ernt. However, Thelma speaks up and tells the men not to worry everyone with their extreme rhetoric. The men dismiss her and keep talking. In his speech, Ernt disparages Tom Walker, who he thinks would be useless in the type of scenario he is predicting. Ernt ends his speech by telling everyone to line up so he can assess their individual skill with a gun.

CHAPTER 8

Winter arrives in Alaska and before long, there is very little daylight. This puts stress on the Allbright family and Leni starts learning what it means to survive an Alaskan winter. One evening, after filling up the water barrel, Leni goes inside and sees her parents fighting. Cora has food from Marge and Ernt is angry because he knows they cannot pay for it. After a heated argument, Ernt angrily leaves the cabin. Leni and Cora both agree that the weather is making him worse.

Leni continues to deal with the embarrassing issues of normal teenage life, even while performing rigorous tasks to prepare herself for her first Alaskan winter. Though Leni likes Matthew and treasures their time together, there has yet to be a romantic component to their relationship. They treat one another as friends, rather than boyfriend and girlfriend.



"WTSHTF" is an acronym common among soldiers in wartime and Ernt's regular usage of it suggests that he feels as though he never left the war. As such, his treatment of Leni and Cora is heartless and although he has yet to harm anyone, his violent behavior is alarming. Though Ernt is worried about outside threats, Leni and Cora are beginning to worry about the threat within their own home.



Ernt gives several speeches on the Harlan property over the course of the novel, each of which is alarming. Again, his rhetoric sounds like that of a commanding officer—and a paranoid one at that—rather than a concerned neighbor. Though the women don't like how Ernt and Earl speak, they ultimately fall in line, thinking there will be more trouble if they don't. Also, this is the beginning of what will become a public feud between Ernt and Tom Walker. Ernt feels comfortable disparaging Tom because he seems to think that he is surrounded by likeminded people. However, this proves to be inaccurate.



Ernt's behavior begins to move in a predictable cycle once winter arrives. First his pride is wounded and then he lashes out. Just like in the opening of the novel, the weather seems to severely impact Ernt's mood and Alaskan winters are perhaps the most brutal weather in the country. As such, it would follow that Ernt, too, will become worse than he ever has been before.



Before long, snow has covered everything, and Leni's everyday life quickly becomes focused purely on survival. Although she does go to school some days, the weather often makes the trek impossible. The bad weather puts the entire Allbright family on edge, though Leni and Cora do their best to placate Ernt. Ernt is regularly experiencing nightmares again and one night he strikes Cora because he wakes up and does not know where he is.

One day, Ernt wakes Leni and Cora up early to go hunting. While on the trip, Ernt points out a hare and tells Leni to shoot it. Leni makes a clean shot and the Allbrights move to collect their prey. Ernt skins the rabbit, pulls out its entrails, and then orders Leni to eat its heart. Cora asks Ernt not to make Leni do such a thing, saying, "we're not savages." Ernt replies, "That's exactly what we are," and once again orders Leni to eat the heart. Leni hesitates, but ultimately complies with her father's demand. Not long after this bizarre event, December arrives and Ernt's condition continues to worsen. One night, he wakes Leni up and orders her to put together a rifle. He times Leni and makes her try again when she does not complete the task within his time limit.

Later that December, the Allbright family is huddled inside on a particularly nasty day. Suddenly, Ernt's radio picks up Marge's voice. Someone is lost out in the bad weather, and they need volunteers to help find them. The Allbrights gear up and head into town, where they learn that Geneva and Matthew Walker are missing. An officer gives them flashlights and they begin looking for the missing Walkers. The search is incredibly stressful for Leni, who is worried about her friend. Eventually, Matthew is found near some ice, but his mother is nowhere to be seen. Matthew is frozen and shaking, but he manages to tell his rescuers that his mother is dead. She fell through the ice and could not make her way back out.

CHAPTER 9

In the days following Geneva's death, everyone in Kaneq is in mourning. Leni spends her time trying and failing to write Matthew a letter. When they arrive in town for the funeral, Leni sees the most vehicles she has ever seen in Kaneq at the same time. During the funeral service, Leni spends her time trying to catch Matthew's eyes, but he never looks at her. After a touching speech honoring Geneva, the service ends.

Normal life is put on hold in Alaska in favor of survival. Surviving such conditions would be difficult even in a normal household, but Leni and Cora must deal with the additional threat of Ernt. However, although Ernt becomes increasingly easy to criticize and dislike, he still remains a sympathetic character. His nightmares are suggestive of the extreme trauma he experienced during his time in war and the violence he commits in this section is well beyond his control.



Ernt's behavior in this section of the book is increasingly erratic and primal. Once again, Cora and Leni have no say over what happens; Ernt dictates their lives on his terms and according to his rules. If the initial goal of moving to Alaska was to find a happier and simpler life, then Ernt's comments about living like a savage demonstrate that he's strayed far from the original goal. Though Cora and Leni continue to put up with Ernt, there is no indication that his behavior will improve and significant indications that it will worsen.



This is a climactic moment in the novel and one that will temporarily hinder Leni and Matthew's already strained relationship. Like other characters in the novel, Matthew has experienced immense trauma, which will impact his character going forward. On a less dark note, this section of the story also demonstrates the willingness of the community to come together and help one another out. Even Ernt, who fancies the Walkers his enemies, is quick to help out.



Although Leni wants to help her grieving friend, she continues to be unable to deal with complicated, adult subjects such as death. Also, again in this passage there is an indication of the importance of community in Kaneq. Everyone comes out for Geneva and the Walker family, and the loss they all feel is genuine.



Everyone leaves the church and heads over to the local bar. The Walkers enter last, and everyone moves to console them as they arrive. The only exceptions are Earl and Ernt, both of whom continue to make snide comments about the Walker family. It doesn't help that both are drinking heavily and that Ernt is jealous when he sees Cora console Tom Walker. Cora and Thelma tell the men to have some respect on the day of a funeral, to no effect.

When Leni sees Matthew alone, she walks over to him. She wants to console him but does not know what to say. Instead, she briefly greets him and then stands next to him silently. Eventually, Matthew speaks up and says, "He blames me," referring to his father. Leni tells Matthew that there's no way that's true, but it doesn't seem to help. Instead, Matthew begins crying hysterically. A few moments later, Alyeska comes over to console Matthew. Alyeska is Matthew's older sister who is home from college for the funeral. Alyeska introduces herself to Leni and tells her that she is glad Matthew has someone like Leni in his life. Despite not knowing Alyeska, Leni immediately feels bonded to her.

The drive home is quiet for the Allbrights until Ernt begins an argument with Cora about how she touched Tom Walker. Tensions continue to rise on the drive home and when they arrive at the cabin, Ernt drags Cora inside and hits her twice in the face. Cora falls to the ground, her face bleeding. Leni is paralyzed; she has never seen anything like this before and does not know what to do. Ernt stomps out of the cabin.

Regaining her composure, Leni moves to help her mother. In an instant, she realizes that incidents like this had happened before; she'd regularly seen bruises on her mother, but only now is she able to connect the dots. Cora says she is fine and that this is what it means to love someone who is sick. Not long after, Ernt returns and immediately apologizes to Cora. Although Cora forgives Ernt, Leni is terrified by the incident. She realizes that the true danger of living in Kaneq is not what is outside of her cabin, but what is inside of it.

The exception to the kindness and compassion exhibited at Geneva's funeral comes from Earl and Ernt, and it marks a turning point for their characters. Although neither was previously likeable, here they become outwardly antagonistic, and their behavior begins to divide the town and the Harlan family. Once again, though the women present try to keep them in line, the men pay them no attention and continue to behave rudely.



Unlike her father, Leni wants to be a positive force for the Walkers, although she still hasn't figured out how to help Matthew. However, Alyeska shows up and proves herself to be a positive female role model for Leni. Meanwhile, Matthew is racked with guilt, and while there may not be truth to what he says about his father, he feels alone and distant, even with Leni and Alyeska nearby.



Ernt continues to morph into the novel's villain by becoming exactly what was foreshadowed by the likes of Mrs. Golliver and Marge. His violence is shocking, sudden, and brutal, and he shows no restraint, even with Leni present. Like Matthew, Leni has just witnessed an event that will haunt her forever and it alters how she sees both of her parents.



The cycle of violence present in the Allbright family is typical of households in which domestic abuse is present: anger slowly builds, violence occurs, and then apologies are handed out. However, though Cora may not recognize the severity of her situation, Leni certainly does. She lives in one of the most dangerous places in the world, and yet she fears what is inside her own home more than what is outside of it.



CHAPTER 10

The morning after Ernt's assault of Cora takes place, Leni wakes up to find her parents acting as though nothing is wrong. Angry, Leni comes to the conclusion that "Mama loved him too much to leave him." While driving Leni to school, Ernt apologizes for the previous night's actions and then promises her he will quit drinking so it will never happen again. Leni feels as though she must believe him; her mind cannot yet grasp any other possibilities. After her talk with Ernt, Leni walks into her classroom and sits down quietly next to Matthew. She wants to comfort her grieving friend but does not know how.

January arrives and the weather worsens; light is only available for six hours a day and Leni's parents are fighting again. Between the snow and darkness, a sunny day arrives, so Ms. Rhodes decides to take her class on a field trip. She is keenly aware of how Geneva's death affected the community, and she wants to do something that will lift everyone's spirits. As it turns out, the field trip is a plane ride to an inlet. The plane is small, and Leni is frightened at first. However, when she opens her eyes, she is treated to some of the best scenery she's seen since arriving in Alaska.

When the plane lands, Ms. Rhodes gathers the young children and tells Leni and Matthew that they are free to explore on their own. Leni walks up to Matthew, who has his back turned, and tries to grab him. Matthew pushes her to the ground, trying to hide the fact that he is crying. In this moment, Leni sees flashes of her father and is scared. Matthew immediately apologizes. He tells her he is upset because he is leaving Kaneq for Fairbanks where he can play hockey, learn to become a pilot, and see a therapist. Leni is happy for her friend but knows she will miss him immensely.

January rages on and Ernt continues to get moodier. One night, convinced that Leni and Cora are talking behind his back, he throws his dinner to the floor and leaves, presumably to go drinking. Leni starts writing a letter to Matthew while he is gone—a new habit ever since Matthew moved—but before long she is interrupted by a scream. Cora tells her there is something outside in the dark. They eventually discern that wolves are attacking their livestock. Leni fires the rifle at them, hoping to drive them away. Once daylight arrives, Leni and Cora go outside to assess the damage. They find all their livestock dead. Knowing that the smell of fresh blood will attract animals, Cora and Leni begin a trek into town.

A crucial aspect of Leni's maturation in the novel is her realization that her parents are flawed people who she does not know as well as she thought she did. Although she hasn't completely processed the events of the previous night, it is a turning point in her life. Like Matthew, she is dealing with problems that far exceed what typical teenagers are asked to grapple with.



Tempers are already flaring up again in the Allbright home, suggesting that it is unlikely that Ernt will keep to his promise. However, apart from her home life, Leni does have support in the form of Ms. Rhodes. Like many people in the Kaneq community, Ms. Rhodes is sensitive to the needs of those around her, which is why she chooses to take the children on a field trip. There is a notable contrast created between Ernt—who's become increasingly selfish—and Ms. Rhodes, who acts selflessly and compassionately.



This interaction between Leni and Matthew introduces an interesting question for the story: will Matthew become like Ernt? Similar to Ernt, he's experienced significant trauma and he apologizes after acting violently. Although Matthew's actions don't come anywhere close to Ernt's, there is a worry that his violent behavior could escalate. Meanwhile, Leni gets a chance to experience a small dose of what her mother deals with; this is, someone she loves acting violently toward her.



Although he doesn't physically hurt Leni or Cora, Ernt's behavior once again leaves them in danger. The Allbrights are already low on food, and Ernt's absence makes that issue even worse. The sudden killing of all their livestock shows how devastating and unpredictable an Alaskan winter can be, and Leni's quick thinking with the rifle shows that she's grown a lot in her ability to fend for herself and her mother.



CHAPTER 11

When Leni and Cora arrive in town, they see their van at the Kicking Moose—the local bar. Before they can make their way to Ernt, Tom Walker and Marge come out of Marge's store and ask why Leni and Cora are outside in such bad weather. Cora tells them what happened to the animals, and they quickly figure out that Ernt was not home to help. Tom begins moving angrily toward The Kicking Moose, even though Cora begs him to stop. Tom ignores Cora, goes inside, and confronts Ernt. Tom begins yelling at Ernt about keeping his family safe, to which Ernt responds, "You got no right to say anything about keeping a woman safe, do you, Tom?" Enraged, Tom drags Ernt out into the street like a child and throws him into the van.

Cora and Leni know Tom's actions have only made things worse. No one talks on the drive home, but Cora and Leni know that Ernt will explode when they arrive at the cabin. Sure enough, before long Ernt is once again abusing Cora. He locks Leni out in the cold and mercilessly beats his wife. When Leni is able to reenter the cabin, she sees blood everywhere and finds Cora with what looks like a broken nose. Leni begins packing up their things and tells Cora to get in the van. She also brings along one of the Allbrights' emergency bags. She tells Cora that they are leaving Ernt and not coming back. Cora protests, but ultimately acquiesces.

Cora begins the drive toward town. Just past the Walker property, Cora swerves to dodge a **moose** that is in the road. This causes the bus to swerve off the road and roll into some trees. Leni loses consciousness. When she comes to, she sees her mother with a broken arm. Cora tells Leni that she must climb out of the van and go to Tom Walker for help. Cora herself cannot move because of the broken arm. Leni is scared, but eventually does as her mother asks. She climbs out of the van and moves through the cold to find Tom. When Leni arrives at the Walker property, Tom immediately springs into action. He calls Marge on the radio and together the two of them manage to rescue Cora. Tom then takes Cora to the nearest hospital on his boat.

Though Tom means well, Cora knows that his scolding of Ernt can only end in violence. Even worse, Tom emasculates Ernt and treats him like a child. He is able to drag Ernt around with little trouble, even though Ernt has previously characterized Tom as weak and over-reliant on others. Furthermore, Ernt continues to turn himself into an unsympathetic character by bringing up Geneva's death in a particularly cruel way.



Ernt's pride is hurt once again and he takes out his anger on Cora, and leaves Leni outside in the cold where predatory animals are likely to show up because of the slaughtered livestock. When Leni is let back inside, she begins to act like more of an adult than the actual adults in her life. She knows her mother can be a pushover and she uses that to her advantage. Unlike Cora, Leni has no problem with leaving Ernt, who she now sees as potentially life-threatening.



Although she is scared, Leni continues to be the most reliable and capable member of the Allbright family. Similarly, Tom and Marge prove themselves to be the most reliable and capable members of the Kaneq community. Ernt regularly talks about the importance of individualism, but this is the second time where his actions could have killed his family if there wasn't a community of people willing to step in and help. Ironically, community is more important in rural Alaska than anywhere in the continental United States; throughout The Great Alone, community will prove to be a necessary tool for survival.



Now at the hospital, Tom comforts Leni while Cora is seen by doctors. They briefly talk about Matthew to take their mind off things. Finally, a doctor informs them that Cora is okay, and that Leni saved her life. When they see Cora, Tom offers to help with Ernt, but Cora refuses his help. She still loves Ernt despite everything and thinks Tom will only make things worse. In the middle of this conversation, Ernt arrives and once again apologizes to Leni and Cora.

While Cora is seen by doctors, Tom acts like the father figure that Leni doesn't have. Unfortunately, the father figure she does have is not going anywhere; even with a broken arm, Cora refuses to get the police involved or move away. Though Cora remains a sympathetic character, there is an open question as to whether she is acting selfishly. If Cora is okay with putting herself in harm's way, that is one thing, but her decisions affect Leni as well. However, she also knows that the law is not kind to battered women, and therefore she may not want to risk getting the authorities involved. Meanwhile, Ernt continues to act predictably by showing up and apologizing after everyone else has done the hard work of saving his family.



After returning home, Leni suggests to Cora that they leave Alaska. Cora dismisses the idea; they are poor, and she thinks Ernt has changed for good this time. Leni loves her mother but fails to understand how she could be so deeply in denial. After this conversation, Marge and Tom arrive and tell Ernt and Cora to sit down at the table. Ernt protests, but then complies. Marge tells the story of what brought her to Alaska: her ex-brother-in-law beat her sister to death. She left the continental U.S. to try and escape that trauma, but then Ernt arrived. Marge tells Ernt that he is going to spend his winters working on the pipeline; this will allow Ernt to provide for his family and keep him away from them when the weather is bad. In the meantime, Marge plans to stay with Cora and Leni.

By now, Leni's life is more like an adult's than a child's. Her mother may be in denial about Ernt's behavior, but she refuses to be, and she fears for her mother's life. Luckily, Marge steps in and solves some of Leni's problems for her. Marge's plan is practical because it addresses the Allbrights' needs without destroying the family. Because their livestock are gone, the Allbrights need food and, whether he likes it or not, Ernt hasn't properly prepared himself for the Alaskan winter.



CHAPTER 12

It is now the winter of 1978. Leni, now 17 years old, is hunting out in the woods. She's become a skilled hunter and is currently tracking a sheep. While doing so, Leni is forced to cross some **ice**, which she fears will break. She does manage to get to the other side, but not without having to take a leaping jump to avoid ending up in the water. The jump results in a cut on her forehead and a mouthful of blood from biting her tongue. Leni quickly shakes this off, spots the sheep, and makes a clean kill. She then drags the animal back to her snowmobile and drives back to the cabin.

There are several instances in The Great Alone where many years will pass by in between chapters. This is an important feature of the novel's structure, which allows its themes to develop in interesting ways. Now, Leni is much older and has grown used to her environment. Just a few chapters ago she was a child who cried after hitting herself in the eye with a gun. Now, she is a skilled tracker who barely notices the injuries she suffers while hunting.



Over the past three years, Leni has grown up; she is practically an adult now and knows how to fend for herself in Alaska. During the same period of time, Ernt has gone along with Tom and Marge's plan. He spends his winters working on the pipeline and provides for his family. However, Ernt is still moody and abusive when he is home, although Cora is convinced that he is getting better. Even though winter is normally the most dangerous time of year in Alaska, Leni finds it calming because she does not have to deal with her father.

Leni's age and body have begun to catch up to her maturity level. After the events that happened four years ago, she was forced to grow up fast. Unfortunately, neither of her parents has changed; Ernt is still abusive, and Cora still has misplaced faith in him.



When Leni arrives home from her hunting trip, she finds Marge, Tom, and Cora playing cards. Leni begins butchering her sheep—an activity that is now part of everyday life—and enjoys listening to the adults laugh and joke with one another. Although Leni loves their company, she does worry about the potential of a blossoming relationship between Tom and her mother.

While everyone is laughing and having a good time, Ernt abruptly arrives. Everyone is confused because he is home much too early from his job on the pipeline. He reveals that he's been fired from the job for drinking, although he denies any wrongdoing. Ernt's arrival breeds tension among the household, particularly between Ernt and Tom. Cora immediately moves to comfort her husband and before long the two of them move to the bedroom. Leni and Marge quickly give up on trying to understand their relationship and Leni turns on the radio in an attempt to drown out the noises coming from her parents' bedroom.

As the weather begins to improve in Kaneq, tourists begin to arrive. Over the past three years, Kaneq has grown more popular as a tourist destination, a fact that angers several of the locals, including Ernt. Due to these recent changes, Tom calls a town meeting, which the Allbrights attend. From the start of the meeting, Ernt is antagonistic, often interrupting Tom. He and some members of the Harlan clan are not happy because Tom wants to renovate the saloon and fix the old boarding house. After stating his intentions, Tom buys everyone drinks, which pacifies the few remaining protesters except for Ernt. Tom tells Ernt that change is inevitable so he should let the issue go. Leni, who overhears this exchange, knows that isn't going to happen.

CHAPTER 13

Ernt spends the next day fuming and talking to the Harlan family about how Tom is going to ruin Kaneq. He believes any attempts to modernize Kaneq will eventually make it just like the continental United States, which is exactly what he moved there to escape. Although Thelma, Leni, and Cora think he is overreacting, the Harlan men all rally around Ernt. Thelma warns Cora, "Your husband's going to rip this town apart if we aren't careful."

One question that runs through this section of the novel is whether Tom and Cora are having an affair. Though Cora loves Ernt, he is away for much of the year, and she has grown closer to Tom. Once again, Leni must grapple with an issue that is beyond her years; Leni likes Tom, but she knows what would happen if Ernt suspected he was romantically involved with Cora.



It's never confirmed, but Ernt is almost certainly lying about not drinking on the job. He never admits his mistakes and regularly lies to his family, so there is no reason to believe he is telling the truth here. Meanwhile, the situation Leni feared immediately comes to fruition; Ernt does not like that Tom is in his house, essentially playing surrogate husband and father to his wife and daughter. Although nothing comes of it instantly, this section of the novel is characterized by growing tensions between Ernt and Tom.



Although Ernt and the Harlans are not always the most sympathetic characters, their attitudes toward modernization are reasonable and would have been common in this time period. Many members of the Kaneq community moved there to get away from the trappings of modern society, so it is not unreasonable for them to be upset by the influx of tourists. However, Ernt's reactions are obviously excessive and uncivilized. Though Tom may shrug him off, Leni knows that tensions will only continue to rise between Ernt and Tom, and she's worried about what that could lead to.



Leni is immediately proved right about Ernt's inability to let anything go. Though the Harlan men commiserate with Ernt, they regularly prove to be all talk and no action. After all, they've dealt with Tom for decades. However, Thelma knows that Ernt is in a different category; he means what he says, and could destroy the town if he's not reigned in.



After spending the day at the Harlans', Leni drives her parents home, as they are both too drunk to do it themselves. She lays in bed, worried about what her father might do. She also thinks about her favorite letters from Matthew. The two of them still communicate as often as possible, and Leni treasures their relationship. Eventually, Leni turns to a book for comfort. While reading, Leni notices her father get up and leave with a gear bag and an ax.

The next morning Ernt is in a good mood, to everyone's relief. Later in the day, the Allbrights drive into town for the Salmon Days, a community festival. When they arrive, Leni notices that the saloon has been vandalized and spraypainted with graffiti reading, "THIS IS A WARNING. STAY AWAY. ARROGANT PRICK. NO PROGRESS." As soon as Tom catches sight of Ernt, he immediately confronts him. Tom knows that Ernt is responsible, as does Leni. Only Cora is willing to defend him. Tom tells Ernt that if he does anything further, Tom will come for him. Leni is concerned, though Tom tells her not to worry. At this point, Leni knows better than to think that her father will let anything go.

The following day, Leni is working at Marge's store, something she has done for the past year. She expresses her concerns to Marge, though, like Tom, Marge tells her that everything will be fine. Leni still isn't convinced. Later in the week, the Allbrights go to the Harlan house for a barbecue. Ernt and the Harlan men spend their time complaining about Tom. Before long, Tom pulls up in his car and tells the men that he is recruiting workers for the upcoming renovations. He offers good pay and several of the Harlan men take the job, much to Ernt's dismay. Tom clearly views this as a win over Ernt, but as Leni drives home, she worries about how the situation could escalate.

CHAPTER 14

Matthew, now living with his sister in Fairbanks, Alaska, spends his time playing hockey and learning to be a pilot. He is an outcast in his new school, and his only support systems are his sister, Alyeska, and Leni. One day after hockey practice, Matthew comes home and tells Alyeska that he wants to finish his senior year in Kaneq. He feels bad that his sister has been forced to sacrifice her dreams to comfort him, and he misses Leni. Alyeska warns him that Kaneq may remind him too much of his mother's death, but Matthew responds by saying that he already thinks about it all the time anyway. Ultimately, they conclude that Matthew should return to Kaneq after hockey season.

Leni once again proves that she's the most mature member of the Allbright family as she drives her drunk parents home. When she arrives at the cabin, Leni has only words to comfort her; she feels alone without Matthew and has only her letters and books to keep her company. Meanwhile, Ernt's sudden departure is alarming, but Leni is powerless to do anything about it.



The warning Ernt spray-paints on the saloon may as well be self-referential. Though "no progress" refers to Ernt's displeasure over modernization, it also says a lot about who Ernt is as a person, and the direction in which his character is going. As Leni knows, even if Cora is blind to it, Ernt hasn't made any progress since arriving in Kaneq. Instead, he's gotten worse.



Leni continues to be the only person in Kaneq who knows what her father is capable of. Although Tom wins a victory over Ernt by recruiting the Harlan men to his project, he does nothing to contain Ernt's rage; in fact, he only causes it to increase. Not only could this have negative ramifications for the town, but it could also lead to more abuse directed towards Cora and Leni.



Matthew's experience in Fairbanks is similar to Leni's experience at other schools, allowing them to relate to one another even more than they already do. However, Matthew's life is largely normal; he goes to school, plays hockey, and lives with his sister. Nonetheless, the trauma of losing his mother still haunts him, regardless of whether he lives in Kaneq.



Just two weeks later, Matthew flies a float plane to the Walker estate. His father is there to greet him. Tensions have been high between Tom and Matthew because Matthew thinks his father blames him for his mother's death. However, they have a touching reunion and Tom assures his son that Geneva's death was no one's fault.

In the meantime, Ernt's anger toward Tom continues to build. Leni worries that her father will do something bad soon. While contemplating the situation, Leni spots Matthew driving a skiff up to their spot on the shore. The first thing that Leni notices is how different Matthew looks; she finds him incredibly handsome and worries that she is not properly groomed for their reunion and that she doesn't know what to say. However, Matthew quickly breaks the tension by handing her a gift, which turns out to be a new camera. Leni is overjoyed; she knows that her friendship with Matthew will cause trouble, but in the moment she doesn't care.

Leni spends the following school day distracted, thinking about Matthew's return. After school, the two of them walk together and Leni finds out that Matthew knows what Ernt did to the saloon. Leni is ashamed of her father's actions but doesn't say anything. Mathew and Leni walk into Marge's store and Marge warns them about being seen together. This worries Leni even more and she apologizes to Matthew for the way things are. Matthew tells her there is no need for an apology.

Leni and Matthew walk home together, eventually arriving at the Walker estate. Leni immediately notices that Tom is building something new and asks Matthew what it is. Matthew reveals that Tom is constructing Walker Cove Adventure Lodge, which will be for tourists. Leni worries about how her father will react when he finds out. She is also concerned that Matthew is not taking Ernt seriously enough. She warns Matthew that Ernt might try to hurt him if he finds out that they are friends.

Matthew still carries guilt about his mother's death, and when he learns that his father does not blame him, it is a huge weight off of his shoulders. Although Matthew still grieves for his mother, this passage is a major step toward acceptance and moving on.



In sharp contrast to the touching reunion between Matthew and Tom is Ernt's anger; he cannot get over anything that upsets him and his behavior continues to worsen. Though Leni would love to act like a normal teenager—and potentially begin a romantic relationship with Matthew—she knows that will lead to more trouble with Ernt. Ernt's thinking is tribal in nature; Matthew has the last name Walker and therefore he is unlikely to approve of Matthew and Leni's relationship.



*Unlike Ernt, Matthew does not blame Leni for her father's actions. He knows about the dynamic between Ernt and Tom but chooses to be friends with Leni anyway. However, even Marge knows that their friendship will cause problems. Whenever multiple characters express the same concern in *The Great Alone*, it always proves to be well-founded.*



*Although Ernt overreacted during Tom's town meeting, his concerns do prove to be legitimate. Tom does not stop at renovating the saloon and is now actively courting the attention of tourists. Though Tom is within his rights to do so, this is an instance where Ernt's fears aren't entirely driven by paranoia—tourists could flow into the area and change the community for the worse. Additionally, Leni is right to worry about Matthew's dismissal of her father's feelings. Time and time again, people in *Kaneq* underestimate what Ernt is capable of, usually to the detriment of Cora and Leni.*



CHAPTER 15

Leni dreams that she is drowning and that the only person who can save her is Matthew. However, she is not able to make it back above water because something below is pulling her down, into the cold darkness. When she wakes, she makes her way downstairs to breakfast. Cora notices that her daughter is taking more care of her appearance than normal and cautions her to stay away from Matthew. She tells Leni that falling in love with Matthew is sure to cause problems. Leni tries to downplay her relationship with Matthew, but she knows Cora is right.

After breakfast, Ernt drives Leni to school. However, on the way, he stops at the Walker estate because he notices Tom's new construction project. He gets out of the car and starts screaming at Tom, who stands there with a smile on his face. The rest of the drive to school is mostly silent; Leni knows she shouldn't say anything and her father mutters profanity under his breath. When she arrives at school, Matthew encourages her to skip work so they can hang out. Although Leni is hesitant, she eventually agrees.

Later, Leni stops at Marge's store to tell her she cannot work. Marge once again warns her about being seen with Matthew. Afterwards, Leni and Matthew go to a hill where they cannot be seen and look at clouds. Matthew apologizes for pushing Leni the day before he left. Leni accepts his apology and tells him that she knows how people can react violently after a tragedy because of her father's post-war experience. Soon, the conversation turns to Matthew's stay in Fairbanks and before long he reveals that he wants to live his adult life in Kaneq. Leni wants nothing of the sort. However, she enjoys the rest of their afternoon together as they hold hands and look up at the sky.

Leni knows that trouble is brewing; she cannot stop thinking about Matthew and Ernt continues to grow wilder. One day, at the Harlan estate, Ernt and Earl show up and gather everyone around. This is an immediate red flag for Leni, who recognizes her father's "Big Idea smile." The idea, in this case, is that Ernt and Earl want to surround the Harlan property with trip mines to kill intruders. Ernt is convinced that an apocalyptic scenario is coming, in which people like Tom Walker will try to take his land. However, despite Earl's support, this idea is one step too far for Thelma. She tells Ernt and Earl that they are crazy and will more likely kill one of the children than an intruder. Earl ultimately gives in to Thelma's protest, which Leni can tell angers her father.

Leni's dreams reflect her perception of reality; she feels close to death in her present context, and Matthew is the only one who can save her. It is Ernt that is pulling her down, keeping her from happiness and safety. Also, in a reversal from normal, Cora must caution Leni about her behavior with a boy. Leni knows her mother is right, but it doesn't seem as though she plans to listen. In this way, she is more like her mother than she realizes—not to mention just a typical teenager.



Ernt's reaction to Tom's new project isn't a surprise and he behaves predictably. Meanwhile, Leni almost immediately gives in to Matthew, despite her mother's warnings. Like Cora, Leni just cannot help herself when it comes to the boy she loves.



Matthew's apology to Leni is an important development for his character. Although the novel briefly plays with the idea that Matthew could end up like Ernt, this moment dispels that notion. Unlike Ernt, Matthew knows how to express true remorse for his mistakes. He is genuinely sorry for hurting Leni—this is his second apology—and he is ashamed for how he acted. In contrast, Ernt's apologies are almost immediate and reactive; he does not reflect on what he's done to his family and shows no signs of growth.



Here, Ernt's behavior becomes unhinged. His paranoia leads him to dangerous places and even Mad Earl ultimately sides against him. As such, Ernt manages to alienate everyone in the community. The only people he has left are Leni and Cora, both of whom stay by his side out of fear and obligation. Furthermore, Ernt's hatred of Tom Walker is becoming increasingly pathetic. By this point in the novel, Tom's proved himself to be resourceful, intelligent, and kind. In sharp contrast, Ernt's shown himself to be abusive, selfish, and petty.



CHAPTER 16

May arrives and Ernt and Leni are on their way to school. Ernt tells Leni that he knows she's been scared ever since the day of his latest speech at the Harlan property. He says he knows that their security is not good enough and he plans on fixing that. After this one-sided conversation, Leni gets out of the truck and starts heading into school. Before she can get far, Matthew waves her over into a nearby thicket and suggests that they skip school. Leni knows she shouldn't but agrees anyway. Together, they take the ferry to Homer.

While on the ferry, Matthew tells Leni that he will be going to the University of Anchorage in the fall and thinks Leni should apply too. Leni thinks this is impossible because her family doesn't have the money and her father will never agree to it. Matthew informs her that there are scholarships and urges her to reconsider. Leni then reveals her other reason—perhaps the primary reason—that she cannot go to college: her mother. Leni worries about how her father will treat Cora if she leaves, although she doesn't fully explain this to Matthew.

The time Leni spends in Homer with Matthew proves to be the best day of her life. They explore the city together and dream about the future, although Matthew is much more hopeful than Leni. After they return home, Leni thinks about whether college is truly a possibility. While working at the general store, Marge notices that Leni is distracted and tells her to go home. She also gives her yet another warning about spending time with Matthew.

At home, Leni continues thinking about Matthew. Cora asks what is wrong, but before the conversation can progress any further, Matthew pulls into the driveway. Leni tries to tell him to go away, but she is too late; Ernt is already on his way. He berates Matthew and tells him that he'll shoot him if he shows up on the Allbright property again. Afterwards, Matthew leaves and Leni runs inside, crying. Cora comforts her and tells her once again that she should stay away from Matthew for the good of everyone.

The next day, Matthew is not in school, and Ms. Rhodes asks Leni if she would mind teaching the class. Leni does so, but spends her day thinking about the delicate situation she is in. On her way home, she spots Matthew standing on a bridge. Matthew tells her that he's been waiting for her and then takes her somewhere they cannot be seen. They each reveal that they cannot stop thinking about one another and then share a first kiss. Afterward, they both acknowledge that they're putting themselves in a dangerous situation, but they feel it's worth it.

Ernt continues to be completely oblivious to the problems of those around him, especially Leni. Leni's concern is about Ernt himself, not the lack of security at their cabin. Also, even though everyone else in town has already figured it out, Ernt remains unaware of the relationship blossoming between Leni and Matthew.



Often when Leni is with Matthew, she is forced to confront her future head-on in a way that she is uncomfortable with. With Ernt and Cora, nothing is ever spoken about that does not have to do with living in Kaneq. Leni never even thinks about college until Matthew brings it up.



Matthew still isn't fully aware of Leni's home situation and so he doesn't feel limited by talking about the future. Still, he gets Leni to think about the next few years of her life in a way that she hadn't previously. However, another warning about spending time with Matthew does not bode well. When warnings are not heeded in this novel, something bad is sure to happen.



Matthew still does not take Ernt seriously as a threat. However, this moment presses home the point that Ernt is dangerous and makes both Leni and Matthew realize that they are playing with fire. It's also somewhat ironic that Cora keeps warning Leni about the effects of her choices when she insists on staying with Ernt even though it hurts her daughter.



Even though they know their relationship is dangerous, Matthew and Leni take things a step further. This is a significant coming of age moment for both characters, both of whom have never shared a kiss with anyone before. However, they are going against the many warnings of Marge, Ernt, and Cora, and repercussions are sure to follow. In this way, Leni is like her mother; she chooses love over her parents' wishes and arguably against her own physical safety.



After their secret meeting, Leni heads home, still thinking about her love for Matthew and the possibility of going to college. Later that day, Leni notices that her parents are going fishing. Thinking they won't be back for some time, she rides her bike to the Walker estate and tells Matthew that she missed him. Matthew says that they need more time together and suggests meeting outside of her property at midnight the next day. Leni thinks his plan is too dangerous, but before they can complete their conversation, Ernt shows up and begins yelling. It turns out that he saw Leni leave and followed her. He thinks that Cora saw her as well and is angry that she would allow Leni to see Matthew. When they arrive home, Ernt locks Leni out of the house and brutally beats Cora.

Love makes Leni careless and ultimately Cora must pay the price for Leni's mistake. It is the type of brutality that Ernt expresses in moments like these that makes Leni hesitant to go to college. Such a rash decision could very literally kill her mother. Ironically, Ernt beats his wife for Leni's actions, even though Cora cautioned her to do the opposite. As such, it seems impossible to make Ernt happy and his behavior is only getting worse.



CHAPTER 17

The morning after Ernt beats Cora, Leni comes downstairs to see her mother's bruised face. Cora again tells Leni to stay away from Matthew before something even worse happens. That night, Leni debates whether she should meet Matthew outside. At midnight, she hears Matthew's birdcall and decides to go meet him. Together, they go to the beach where Matthew has laid out a blanket. They spend time looking at the stars and holding hands, enjoying one another's company despite the shadow of Ernt's rage hanging over them. Matthew again tells Leni that it is not too late to go to college with him, an offer she takes seriously this time. After, the two briefly kiss, but are interrupted by the sound of Ernt calling Leni's name. Luckily, Leni is able to run back and make up an excuse for why she wasn't home.

Leni feels guilty about what's happened to her mother, but her love for Matthew overrides all else. She once again decides to ignore the logical side of her brain and throws caution to the wind to meet with Matthew. Only luck saves the two of them from danger, as well as Ernt's obliviousness.



Over the next few days, Leni composes a personal statement for college. She writes about her love of reading, her father's doomsday prepping, and her life in Alaska. During this time, Leni and Matthew arrange secret meetings with one another. Things are going well until one day, while on a school field trip, Ms. Rhodes tells everyone that they need to return home because Earl has died. Leni is not saddened by the news of Earl's death, but she does empathize with the Harlans.

Applying for college marks another important step in Leni's maturation process. She's decided to live her own life, independent of Cora and Ernt, on her own terms. However, Earl's death does not bode well for the future. Although Ernt's relationship with the Harlans is not as strong as it once was, he still considers Earl a friend, and his death is sure to put Ernt in a bad mood, perhaps destabilizing him further.



All of Kaneq attends Earl's funeral. After the service, Tom offers to throw a party in Earl's honor at his place. Before the Harlans can respond, Ernt begins berating Tom, saying, "The last thing he'd want us to do is celebrate by drinking with the man who wants to turn Kaneq into Los Angeles." Ernt's outburst makes Thelma lose her temper and she rips into him for his attempts to divide the community. She tells Ernt that she won't put up with him now that Earl is dead, and that she would be happy to celebrate with Tom. She invites Cora and Leni to come with her, but Ernt does not allow them to go.

By the end of Earl's funeral, Ernt has completely isolated himself from the other Kaneq residents. This is not good news for Cora and Leni, who largely rely on the comfort of others to maintain any sense of safety and sanity. In the meantime, Tom shows himself a courteous member of the community by offering to throw a party to celebrate the life of a man who hated him.



When they arrive home, Leni and Cora wait for Ernt to explode. Leni suggests locking him out of the house or running away, but Cora quickly dismisses both options. Ernt stays outside, but neither Leni nor Cora dares to risk checking on him. Eventually he comes inside and drags Cora outdoors, Leni following closely behind. At the edge of the property, Ernt shows Cora that he's begun making a **barricade** that will eventually cut off the Allbrights from everyone else. Leni feels more trapped than ever before and worries that she will end up as her father's prisoner.

Ernt's barricade is a symbol much more than it is a practical object. It represents his hatred for the Kaneq community as well as his need to control everything around him, including his family. It is the ultimate example that Ernt cares more about himself and his ego than Leni and Cora. Later in the novel, this moment can be looked back on as a major turning point for the existing Allbright family dynamic.



CHAPTER 18

The night of Earl's funeral, Marge and Tom discuss what they should do about Ernt. Matthew overhears their conversation and worries that Ernt might hurt Leni. He grabs his bike and rides to the Allbright property, where he sees the beginning of **Ernt's barricade**. Ignoring the barricade, he carefully approaches the Allbright cabin. Leni comes out and tells Matthew what her father has planned. Wanting to avoid Ernt, Matthew quickly returns home and tells his father and Marge what he's learned. Tom worries that Ernt will cut Leni and Cora off from the rest of the world.

For the first time, Matthew understands that Ernt is dangerous. Ernt is no longer making empty threats, he's begun to act on what he says. Tom and Marge know that this means trouble, if not for themselves, then for Cora and Leni. Everyone wants to help the Allbright women, but it is difficult to do anything if Cora refuses to press charges against her husband.



The following morning, Leni talks with her mother about Ernt's plan. Cora thinks he'll soon abandon it, to which Leni responds, "That's what you're going to rely on?" Soon afterwards, Marge comes walking through the door. She tricks Ernt into leaving and then offers her help to Leni and Cora. Cora rejects Marge's offer, so Marge gets up to leave, reminding Cora that she will come running anytime Cora needs her.

Even after all that she's seen, Cora still refuses to give up on Ernt. Though she remains sympathetic, her faith in her husband comes off as delusional, especially to Leni. Also, Marge's ability to easily trick Ernt is a reminder that dangerous though he may be, he is not particularly smart.



Marge then offers to take Leni to school. Ernt protests, saying Leni isn't allowed to finish school, but Marge threatens to call the police and he ultimately complies. On the ride to school, Marge expresses her sympathy for Leni's situation and gives her an envelope. Inside is an acceptance letter for the University of Anchorage. Marge tells Leni that she is going to college no matter what; Tom will pay her tuition, Thelma will give her spending money, and Marge and Ms. Rhodes will purchase her books.

Like Thelma, Marge is willing to stand up to Ernt in a manner that other members of the community will not and cannot. Because Marge is a woman, she gets away with behavior that Tom would not. Perhaps this is because Ernt knows he cannot resort to physical violence with Marge, or maybe it is because she is willing to get the authorities involved. Regardless, Marge repeatedly proves effective against Ernt in a way no one else does. Marge also regularly organizes those around her to help out members of the community. She knows it is important that Leni goes to college, to get her away from her father if nothing else.



A few days later, Leni and Matthew graduate from high school. After giving Ms. Rhodes a big hug, Leni walks outside and sees her parents with a sign that reads “HAPPY GRAD DAY.” On the way home, Ernt and Cora ask Leni why she’s sad, and she tells them that she wants to go to a party at the saloon that Tom Walker is throwing in honor of the graduating seniors. However, as Leni expected, Ernt does not allow her to go. Leni begs him, but he only can tell her, “Sorry, Red. I can’t do it. Not even for you.”

Although Ernt is still willing to celebrate his daughter’s achievement, he only does so on his own terms. Even on his daughter’s graduation day, his ego gets in the way. As such, Leni once again misses out on an experience that is typical for someone her age. Instead, she is forced to return to the prison her father has built for her.



CHAPTER 19

The evening of Leni’s graduation, she has a conversation with her mother about her future. She tells Cora that she’s been accepted into college and Cora is overjoyed. Cora tells Leni that she will make sure Leni can go to college, no matter what. However, she also warns Leni not to see Matthew until she leaves for college. Otherwise, they risk angering Ernt, which could hurt Leni’s chance of going to school.

Cora is genuinely excited that her daughter has a chance for a better life. She knows that this is an opportunity to get Leni away from her father and out of harm’s way. However, once again, the warnings begin, and by now, a clear pattern is established for what happens to people who don’t heed them.



The following months are painful for Leni. While Ernt continues to build his **barricade**, Leni spends her time longing for Matthew. She worries about whether she will actually make it to college and tortures herself by questioning whether Matthew still loves her. One day, just a few weeks before Leni leaves for college, Ernt tells Leni that he and Cora are going to Sterling for a day. He gives Leni a list of instructions for while they’re gone and tells her to be careful. As Cora is leaving, she warns Leni not to see Matthew, a warning which Leni ignores.

When Leni thinks about Matthew, her thoughts become illogical. It is obvious that Matthew still loves her, and she knows that she will see him soon, yet she feels that she must see him anyway. Once again, a warning is given and ignored, which can lead to no good.



Leni clocks the amount of time it would take for her parents to depart on the ferry and then rides her bike to Matthew’s house. She finds Matthew and tells him that they can spend the whole day together. Matthew is overjoyed and before long he takes his boat to the edge of Leni’s property. The two of them have a picnic together and begin kissing. Before they can go any further, rain begins to fall, and they run inside together. Leni throws off her wet clothes, and then she and Matthew have sex for the first time. Afterwards, they express their love for one another, and Leni tells Matthew that she feels safe with him. However, in the back of her mind, Leni is still thinking about what will happen to Cora if she leaves for college.

Even while being careless, Leni manages to be methodical by watching the time after her parents’ departure. The time she spends with Matthew marks yet another important moment for her coming-of-age journey, as the two of them have sex for the first time. However, even while she is with Matthew, Leni cannot help but think about the consequences of her actions and feel threatened by her father..



CHAPTER 20

Leni and Matthew wake up to the sound of a truck pulling into the driveway. Leni curses herself for falling asleep and quickly moves to get dressed. Before Matthew can leave, Ernt is in the door. Leni makes excuses for the disordered state of the cabin and, with Cora's help, coaxes Ernt outdoors. While the Allbrights are outside, Matthew manages to escape in his boat. Ernt hears the boat but thinks it is a tourist who has come close to shore. When Cora is alone with Leni, she chastises her for being so careless. Leni says she will be more careful next time, to which Cora responds, "There won't be a next time, Leni." Cora warns her daughter not to see Matthew again until college.

One week later, Ernt takes Cora and Leni outside to show them his completed **barricade**. In order to get through the barricade, a key is required, which Ernt wears around his neck. Ernt is proud of what he's accomplished, though Leni and Cora are terrified. Leni spends the next few days living in fear. Then, when she is alone with Cora, she once again urges her mother to leave Ernt. Although Cora rejects the idea at first, Leni eventually gets her to agree that they will escape when the right opportunity arises.

Near the end of August, the Allbrights are running low on food. Leni suggests that Ernt go into town and get them some supplies, hoping this will provide her and Cora an opportunity to escape. Ernt decides she is right but insists that Cora and Leni come with him. When they are alone, Leni tells Cora that this is their chance, though Cora is not so sure. When the Allbrights arrive in town, Ernt gets out of his truck to yell at Tom Walker, who is digging a trench for a generator. While Ernt argues with Tom, Matthew comes around the corner and yells Leni's name. Leni screams to him, "Help us," which results in Ernt dragging Leni and her mother back to the truck.

Ernt angrily mutters under his breath the entire way home. Back at the cabin, he grabs Leni and throws her against the wall. Cora tries to calm Ernt down, but he begins beating her. In the chaos, Matthew charges into the cabin and punches Ernt in the face. While Ernt is recovering from Matthew's blow, Matthew, Leni, and Cora quickly devise a plan; Cora will go to Marge's and Matthew will take Leni somewhere Ernt can't get at her. This settled, all three of them scramble to Matthew's truck. On the way, Matthew sabotages Ernt's truck so he cannot follow them. As the three make their way out of the driveway, Ernt fires at them with a shotgun but misses.

Leni and Matthew's day together ends tumultuously, as Cora's several warnings foreshadowed. Luckily, Matthew gets away, but Cora is understandably angry with her daughter. Although Cora is primarily angry with Leni because she doesn't want her to ruin her chances of going to college, she also is concerned for her own safety. Leni's actions could easily have led to a brutal beating for Cora, even though Cora actively warned her not to see Matthew. Cora also knows the regrettable decisions she's made regarding men and does not want her daughter to go down the same path.



Although Ernt acts pridefully, he seems to know that Cora and Leni are afraid of him. He doesn't provide them with keys and knows that they are not happy. Even Cora knows that Ernt has gone too far and is much easier to convince than normal that Ernt is life-threateningly dangerous.



Ernt knows better than to leave Leni and Cora alone; he seems to know that they might try something that he will not approve of. His suspicions are confirmed when Leni yells to Matthew, and violence will almost certainly follow. However, Leni is able to deliver her message to the outside world, which will end up helping her. Also, though Ernt's rage takes center stage, this is another moment where Tom is continuing to modernize Kaneq by installing electricity.



Ernt reacts predictably to Leni's outburst, though this time he is quickly put in his place by Matthew. Knowing Matthew's retaliation could put Ernt over the edge, even Cora quickly moves to get out of the cabin. Although their escape is successful, Cora and Leni get a sense of what Ernt is capable of; he doesn't hit them, but he does fire a gun in their direction. Even if the shot was aimed at Matthew, Ernt's reaction is telling; he is willing to kill if it means protecting himself and his ego.



Matthew drops Cora off at Marge's place and then takes Leni into the mountains. Together they hike for miles up a trail, spotting no one along the way. Eventually, they arrive in a field, where Matthew gives Leni some food and begins pitching a tent. He tells Leni that he will take care of her and that she will be fine; however, Leni is not so sure. She fears what will happen to her mother and anyone else who stands in her father's way.

No matter what others tell her, Leni does not think anyone can keep her safe unless her father is in jail. Despite everything, all of Kaneq still seems to underestimate Ernt and the violence he is willing to resort to.



CHAPTER 21

Fearing a repeat of what happened to his mother, Matthew wants to keep Leni safe, no matter what. After their camp is set up, Leni and Matthew make love and fall asleep in each other's arms. After breakfast in the morning, they begin their descent, since Leni wants to return to her mother and Matthew vows to stick by her side. While hiking back to their vehicle, Leni falls into a ravine. When she comes to, she sees Matthew attempting to climb down to help her. She urges Matthew to go and get help instead, but he doesn't listen.

Unlike Ernt, Matthew is willing to protect others no matter what. He rescues Leni and Cora from Ernt and now seeks to rescue Leni again. He loves Leni and is motivated by doing the right thing. However, his passion is also arguably his weakness because his actions risk putting himself and Leni in even more danger. His actions are also understandable, since he was unable to save his mother's life when he was younger and fears the same helplessness now.



On his way to Leni, Matthew grabs a small tree, which causes him to fall. Matthew's mistake causes rocks to rain down on Leni, one of which hits her in the head, causing her to pass out. When Leni comes to again, she sees Matthew unconscious and hanging by the straps of his backpack in a crevice. Leni worries that he might be dead. Fighting through the pain of a potentially broken arm and rib, Leni uses a knife to free Matthew. Upon falling to the ground, Matthew coughs and Leni is relieved to know he is alive.

Matthew's fall is yet another example of a character in the novel ignoring a warning, only to end up in a worse situation. Though he survives the fall, Matthew puts himself and Leni in a life-threatening situation. Both are injured and no one else knows where they are.



Unable to move Matthew, Leni begins screaming at the top of her lungs for help. The rain starts up again and Leni fears that they will die there, trapped. Not knowing what else to do, Leni cradles Matthew and recites Robert Service's "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." Meanwhile, Matthew's perspective is completely jumbled; he hears Leni's voice but cannot recognize it. He feels as though he is dying.

Not knowing what else to do, Leni once again falls back on literature, in this case "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." This poem describes Alaska as "the great alone," and this description resonates with Leni in this moment of desperation. Also, although the novel largely sticks to third-person narration, this section provides first-person narration for Matthew, which allows access to his perspective even though he can no longer speak.



CHAPTER 22

Leni and Matthew are trapped on the mountains for two days before a helicopter comes to rescue them. Leni is rescued first, despite her protests, though Matthew is right behind her. Their rescuers tell Leni that she will be fine but fail to say the same about Matthew. Later, when Leni wakes up in the hospital, Cora is standing over her, comforting her. As soon as Leni fully comes to, she hauls herself out of bed and makes her way to Matthew. When she finds him, she doesn't even recognize him; his head has been shaved and he is covered in bandages. The doctors say he might not live through the night. While watching over Matthew, Leni asks her mother about Ernt. When Cora tells her that Ernt is in jail, Leni responds, "Good."

The following morning, Leni wakes up to learn that Matthew is alive, but he is in a medically induced coma. The doctors decide to try to wake him, hoping he will be able to breathe on his own; if he can't, he will die. Tom, Ayeska, Cora, and Leni all gather around, praying that Matthew will be okay. The doctors wake Matthew out of his coma and after a few moments of intense silence, Matthew sharply inhales. The Walkers and the Allbrights are relieved, but the doctor tells them they shouldn't be too hopeful; Matthew will almost certainly be paralyzed for the remainder of his life and has suffered severe brain damage.

A few days later, Leni is discharged from the hospital. She apologizes to the Walkers on her way out, though they do not think it's necessary. Afterwards, Cora and Leni head home, assuming that Ernt is still in jail. However, when they arrive at their cabin, they find Ernt; Cora refused to press charges and so he is already out of jail. Ernt provides his typical half-hearted apology, and although Cora accepts it right away, Leni refuses to have anything to do with her father from that point forward. In an instant, she decides that she will leave her father, whether Cora joins or not.

Leni's next few days are spent writing letters to Matthew and ignoring her father. In her letters, she tells Matthew how much she loves him and how sorry she is for what happened to him. In the meantime, Ernt's rage is building; he is furious that Leni will not acknowledge him. Cora warns Leni that she is going to cause even more trouble, but Leni doesn't care. She writes in a letter to Matthew, "I have no hope left for him. The only hope I can hold on to is for you. For us."

Leni feels that Ernt is responsible for Matthew's accident, which could potentially lead to his death. The fact that the boy who she loves is unrecognizable to her is difficult for Leni to grasp. She's been through many traumatizing experiences since arriving in Kaneq, but none shake her quite like seeing Matthew this way. Though Cora may still have love and compassion for Ernt, Leni's is gone; she is glad her father is in jail and hopes that he stays there.



The Walker and Allbright families are both familiar with trauma and loss, but that doesn't make Matthew's condition any easier to deal with. If Matthew were to die, the Walker family would be cut in half and Leni's only friend in the world would be gone.



Ernt's return shocks Leni. She cannot believe that her mother would refuse to press charges and risk putting both of them in danger yet again. As such, Leni no longer feels obliged to live by her mother's bad decisions. This is a major turning point for Leni's character, since she previously elevated her mother's needs above her own.



With no one left to talk to, Leni is forced to write letters for someone who cannot read. This speaks to how much she loves Matthew and to the extent of her loneliness. However, although it is nice to see someone stand up to Ernt, Cora is correct to say that Leni is creating more problems for them. Ernt can only contain his rage for so long before snapping again, and each time is always worse than the last.



CHAPTER 23

September arrives and Leni decides against going to college. She listens to the radio every day for updates on Matthew's condition, until one day Tom tells her that Matthew is being moved to a rehabilitation center in Homer. Leni tells Cora she is going to see him. When Ernt protests, Leni looks at her mother and says, "Mama. Tell him if he wants to stop me, he'll have to shoot me." Knowing she's serious, Ernt does not stand in her way. However, he does insist that Cora stay with him.

A few days later, Leni makes her way to the rehabilitation center where she finds Tom. Tom tells her that it sometimes appears that Matthew is doing better, although it is hard for Leni to tell; the bandages have been removed from Matthew's head to reveal a face covered in scars, and there is what looks like a small cage around his head. When Leni tries to talk to Matthew, his eyes roll back in his head, and he makes incoherent noises. After failing to talk to Matthew, Leni and Tom step out of the room, where Tom gives Leni a birthday present Matthew prepared for her before his fall. Leni tucks the present into her coat. Tom also urges Leni to go to college, although she refuses; she believes doing so would amount to abandoning Matthew.

When she returns to Kaneq, Leni stops in Marge's store and breaks down crying. She explains to Marge that she just saw Matthew and Marge comforts her. While in the store, Leni feels as though she might throw up and tells Marge that she's experienced a lot of nausea lately. Marge looks at her knowingly and then hands her a pregnancy test, throwing Leni's life into even more disarray.

Leni returns home and takes the pregnancy test. It comes back positive. Feeling scared and alone, Leni talks to her mother; she tells Cora about her visit with Matthew and her pregnancy. Shocked at the news, Cora tells Leni that she needs to find a way to leave Kaneq. However, before the conversation can go any further, Ernt arrives. He asks Leni, "How is the kid? Still a vegetable?" This angers Leni so much that she immediately blurts out that she is pregnant with Matthew's child. In response, Ernt punches her hard in the face and then begins beating her with a belt. Before he can do too much damage, Cora shoots him twice in the back.

Leni's lack of respect for her father, as well as her need to see Matthew, lead to her making bold, but dangerous, decisions. Though even Ernt is not willing to go so far as to shoot his daughter, Leni puts her physical safety in jeopardy by speaking to him in such a manner. However, Ernt does make sure that he maintains some leverage over Leni by insisting that Cora stay put.



Matthew, once a handsome young man, now barely appears human. Whatever fairy tale ending was once in play for Matthew and Leni no longer exists, and Leni feels hopeless. However, just as Matthew would not leave her, Leni refuses to leave him, even if it means she must continue living with her father.



Despite how much Leni has matured, there are still ways in which she is very much a child. She does not even entertain the thought of pregnancy before Marge suggests it. However, if Leni is pregnant, there will be ramifications. Like her mother, Leni will be a teenage parent with nowhere to turn. Her father will not approve of her carrying Matthew's child and will presumably react violently.



Once again, Cora knows Leni is in a dangerous situation and wants to help her leave. Leni does not want to abandon Matthew but knows what could happen to her if she stays near her father. However, the situation escalates rapidly, and Leni makes the decision to tell Ernt the truth out of anger. For the first time, Ernt is abusive to Leni, and seeing her daughter being hurt, Cora finally draws a line in the sand. Ultimately, Cora won't leave Ernt, but she can kill him.



CHAPTER 24

Leni knows instantly that her father is dead. She watches as her mother cradles Ernt's body in her arms. Cora tells Leni to call the police, knowing that she will likely be convicted of murder. Leni, refusing to let her mother go to jail, suggests that they hide the body instead. Cora is hesitant, but ultimately agrees. Together, the two of them drag Ernt's body to the snowmobile and drive it to the center of the lake. Cora drills a hole in the ice and pushes Ernt's corpse into it, using animal traps to weigh it down.

When Cora and Leni return home, Cora tells her daughter to go to Marge and explain what's happened. Leni does as her mother asks and heads to Marge's house. Marge is both relieved and alarmed by what's happened. They return to the Allbright cabin, and Marge tells Leni to pack a bag, which she does. Marge then explains to Leni that she and Cora will have to leave Alaska; otherwise, they are sure to be caught. Leni is surprised and saddened by this, but she does as she is told. Before leaving, Marge and Cora manipulate the crime scene to make it look as though Ernt killed Cora and Leni.

Shortly after they devise their plan, Leni and Cora are on the ferry to Homer. Before Leni leaves Alaska, she insists on seeing Matthew one last time, although Cora thinks it is too dangerous. Ignoring her mother, Leni heads to the hospital, keeps her head down, and makes her way to Matthew's room. When she sees Matthew, she tells him that she is pregnant and that she must go away. Matthew can only respond by making guttural noises. Not wanting to be seen by the nurses, Leni slips away before anyone can recognize her, feeling guilty that she is abandoning Matthew. Meanwhile, although Matthew cannot speak and his thoughts remain jumbled, he senses Leni's presence, which he internalizes as "HER."

CHAPTER 25

When Leni returns to Cora, she remembers that she never opened her birthday present from Matthew. When she does, she finds an article written by Lily Walker, Matthew's grandmother. The article is about Lily's experience in Alaska and her appreciation of how "wild" it is. Pinned to the article is a note from Matthew, which says, "THIS COULD BE US." After she reads the article, Leni asks her mother where they are going. Cora tells her they are returning to Seattle, the only place she can think to go.

Once again, both Cora and Leni find themselves making questionable decisions in an attempt to help one another. Like in Leni's dream, Ernt ends up at the bottom of a lake, though this time he can't reach up and grab her. Nonetheless, he is still causing Leni and Cora problems, even in death.



Marge holds true to the promise she's made since the beginning of the novel and comes through when Cora needs her most. She helps Cora and Leni escape, knowing it's unlikely that she'll ever see them again. Meanwhile, Leni agrees to help her mother cover up the crime before understanding what she signed up for. Leni hides Ernt's body not knowing it will take her away from Matthew and the region she's grown to love, despite her father's best attempts to ruin her life here.



Again, Leni proves that she is willing to act riskily if it means she can be with Matthew. Leni does not want Matthew to feel as though she is betraying him so, for her, one last trip to the hospital is necessary. Although Leni doesn't think Matthew understands her, this is another time where the novel slips into the first person and provides Matthew's perspective. Indeed, Matthew does not know what Leni is saying, but he knows she is important to him. This is notable, as it reveals that Matthew does still have a significant amount of cognitive functioning.



Although Matthew's gift is kind, it carries with it a cruel irony. Given the events of the past few months, Leni and Matthew can no longer be like Matthew's grandparents. Leni must leave the state and Matthew is in no condition to live in the "wild."



Soon, Cora and Leni's plane takes off. Before long, they are back in Seattle, standing on the doorstep of the Gollither house. Cora's parents are surprised to see her and Leni. Together, Cora and Leni explain their circumstances, and the Gollithers invite them inside, concerned, but eager to help. Shortly afterward, Leni's grandmother takes her to a room where she can get some sleep. Instead of sleeping, Leni climbs out onto the roof and looks at the night sky. A few minutes later, Cora comes out and joins her. Cora apologizes for how much she's screwed up Leni's life, though Leni tells her it is Ernt's fault, not Cora's.

Leni and Cora spend the next few weeks indoors, not wanting to be seen and waiting for their injuries to heal. Eventually, they feel comfortable going outside and so they make their way to the University of Washington library. At the library, Leni and Cora look through newspapers until they find an article about their disappearance. The article says that the authorities expect foul play but have not found any bodies. Leni and Cora are relieved, but Leni struggles to believe that she'll ever find happiness again.

CHAPTER 26

The same day as their trip to the library, Cora and Leni receive a gift from Mr. Gollither: new identities. Because Cora's father is a lawyer, he managed to pull some strings to get them the required documents. He tells Cora and Leni that they will rent a house nearby and live under these new identities. Cora is shocked by what her father has done for her, but before the conversation can go any further, the police arrive. Leni and Cora hide upstairs while detectives question the Gollithers. The Gollithers feign ignorance and act shocked when they are told that Leni and Cora are missing. The police don't suspect anything, so they merely offer their sympathies and leave after all their questions are answered.

Over the next several months, Leni regularly calls Matthew's rehab facility to check on him, even though she knows that it's risky. She also writes him letters, although she does not dare to send them. In the letters, she talks about her new life. She enjoys living near her grandparents and is excited that she will soon be attending the University of Washington. However, she misses the beauty of Alaska and still feels guilty for leaving Matthew. Soon, Leni's baby arrives. She opts for a natural childbirth, a decision she quickly regrets, and after a lot of pain, she gives birth to a healthy baby boy. She names the child Matthew Denali Walker, Junior—MJ, for short.

Cora and Leni end up back where they were at the beginning of the novel. However, this time, they are significantly more desperate. Eager to see their daughter and granddaughter, even under such circumstances, the Gollithers care for them and Leni and Cora finally gain the shelter they've sought for a long time. Nonetheless, both are shaken by the events of the past 48 hours and Cora is finally beginning to come to terms with what she's put her daughter through.



Leni and Cora's plan works, but it brings little relief. Both of them will have to find a way to live without drawing attention to themselves and risking life in jail. All the while, Leni is still pregnant and needs to figure out a way to take care of her child.



Even though they've not seen Cora in many years, the Gollithers risk going to jail themselves in order to keep her and Leni safe. Although the Gollithers are absent for much of the book, this is a major development for them. They've already lost their daughter multiple times, and do not want to risk it again. In addition, the police seem clueless, and it appears that Leni and Cora really are going to be able to start new lives.



Leni continues to jeopardize her wellbeing for the sake of Matthew. She feels guilty, much like Matthew did after his mother's death. However, she is taking significant steps toward improving her life, including a college education. As a way to demonstrate her love for Matthew, she names her child after him.



CHAPTER 27

Many years pass and it is now 1986. Cora is racked with guilt because of her past decisions. She thinks that she's ruined Leni's life. Cora's mother tells her to let the past go; that Leni is happy now. However, Cora still cannot forgive herself. She says that Leni needs to go home to Alaska. Mrs. Gollither tells her that that is a terrible idea that is likely to get Cora and Leni thrown in jail. Meanwhile, Leni is camping with MJ in Hoh Rain Forest, the closest she can get to life in Alaska. MJ is a happy child, and Leni loves him more than anything.

Eventually Leni graduates college with a visual arts degree. She tries her best to be happy on her graduation day, but she is still having difficulty letting go of the past. To celebrate, the Gollithers throw Leni a party and Mrs. Gollither tells Leni that she could likely get her a job at a magazine. That night, Leni tells MJ Alaskan myths, which he loves. After MJ is asleep, Leni reminisces with Cora, and they talk about how they miss the northern lights. They both agree that they are happy to have MJ, who has proven to be their saving grace.

Although Cora and Leni have made better lives for themselves, neither can wholly escape the past. Leni is still trying to recapture the majesty of Alaska, while Cora tries to reconcile her past decisions and finds that she can't. The decisions Cora made are irreversible and, although Leni may forgive her, the damage is still permanent. Nonetheless, there is a way to a better future, as represented by MJ.



Even as a college graduate, Leni struggles to be happy. She cannot think about a future that does not involve Alaska, and even though Mrs. Gollither's offer is kind, it doesn't seem as though it will help Leni. Ironically, the Allbrights find themselves feeling nearly as isolated in Seattle as they did in rural Alaska.



CHAPTER 28

Not long after Leni's graduation, Cora comes down with pneumonia. She goes to the hospital for treatment, takes a series of tests, and discovers that she has stage four lung cancer, likely a result of her persistent cigarette smoking. Cora is terrified of dying, not for her own sake, but for Leni's. Cora plans to start chemotherapy, but she doesn't think that she will live through it.

The following summer, Leni and the Gollithers are forced to watch as cancer eats away at Cora. On her deathbed, Cora reminisces with Leni about their time in Alaska and tells her that her father loved her. She also gives Leni a note, which turns out to be a signed confession for Ernt's murder. She tells her daughter, "It's time, Leni. You've lived my life, baby girl. Time to live your own." Two days later, Cora dies. Just before her death, Leni tells her, "You can go." Cora uses her last words to tell Leni that she loves her.

Cora worries that even after her death, Leni will still have to live with the consequences of her mother's actions. She doesn't want Leni to have to raise MJ on her own, without a loving community to help her.



Although her cancer ultimately kills her, Cora finds a way to die peacefully. By handing Leni the signed confession, she gives Leni her old life back. Leni will get to live in the place that she loves, this time free of Ernt. She will also be able to introduce Matthew to his son. Although Cora dies still regretting the past, she at least has a renewed hope for Leni's future.



CHAPTER 29

After Cora dies, Leni's grandmother gives her a box of trinkets from Cora's past. Leni looks at them and tries to piece together where they fit into her mother's life. Included among Cora's things is a letter from Cora, which urges Leni to return to Alaska. It also includes two one-way tickets. Although her grandparents try to talk her out of it, Leni insists on going to Alaska with MJ. She wants to respect her mother's dying wish and introduce MJ to Matthew.

Leni takes a plane to Homer and then makes her way to the police station. Inside, she finds Chief Ward and hands him her mother's letter. Chief Ward expresses his sympathy for Leni and then asks her if she had anything to do with her father's murder. Trusting Chief Ward, Leni admits that she was an accomplice to her mother's crime. Chief Ward asks her to write a signed confession and tells her that after she does so, she won't have to worry anymore. Leni does as he says and writes her confession. She hands the confession to Chief Ward, who then proceeds to lock her up. He tells her that he has no choice. Shocked, Leni asks him to call Tom Walker.

Although Cora thinks her confession will exonerate Leni, the Gollihers aren't so sure. This is alarming, particularly because Mr. Gollieher is a lawyer. Nonetheless, Leni wants to return to Alaska for the sake of herself, Cora, and MJ. She's never found happiness in Seattle, despite the Golliehers' best efforts, and so, to her, Alaska is worth the risk.



Even as a college graduate and a mother, Leni remains rather gullible. As Mr. Gollieher feared, she is immediately locked up and is at risk of losing MJ. Not only that, but she's also signed a confession herself, which is incredibly damaging to her legal case. However, as Leni has learned throughout the novel, it helps to have friends in high places and Tom Walker is on the way.



CHAPTER 30

Leni convinces Chief Ward to let MJ stay with her in a cell for the time being. While they wait for Tom to arrive, Leni tells MJ about him, and MJ is excited to learn that he has a second grandpa. Immediately afterward, Tom arrives, looking much older. He tells Leni that he shocked she is alive. He asks her why she didn't come to him for help. Leni tells Tom that she didn't want to get him in trouble with the law.

After briefly catching up, Leni introduces Tom to MJ. Tom gets emotional when he sees his grandson, who looks just like Matthew. Following their reunion, Leni tells Tom that she confessed to hiding Ernt's body and asks him to look after MJ. Tom immediately agrees and then angrily curses at Chief Ward for locking Leni up. Afterwards, he leaves with MJ.

Given how much Leni tells MJ about his father and Alaska, it is strange that she waits until now to tell him about Tom. Perhaps she didn't want to get MJ too excited about people he would never meet. Nonetheless, this is the first of several reunions in the novel's final chapters. Clearly, the events of the last several years have weighed heavily on Tom, although he remains resilient.



MJ's similarities to Matthew are especially striking to Tom because Matthew was mutilated by his accident. MJ, as a representative of new life, reminds Tom of what he's lost, even as learns what he's gained.



Following Tom and MJ's departure, Leni sits and waits. After some time, a man named Demby Cowe arrives. Demby tells Cora that he is her defense attorney and that she needs to plead not guilty; they will sort out the rest of the details later. Soon after, Leni is sitting in court. As her trial is about to begin, Marge bursts into the court room and starts yelling at the prosecutor and judge for participating in the proceeding. She tells the judge that she has a whole town of people who will come to testify on Leni's behalf, including Tom Walker. Before things escalate any further, the judge gets a call from the governor, who clears Leni of any charges.

Immediately after, Leni leaves the courtroom a free woman. Marge tells her that Tom called the governor and managed to get her charges dismissed. Marge then takes Leni by boat to Kaneq and the two of them catch up. When Leni and Marge arrive in town, Leni notices that Kaneq has continued to develop since she was last there. Eventually, Marge and Leni make their way to the Walker estate, where they reunite with Tom and MJ. Tom introduces Leni to his new wife, Atki, a Native woman.

While Atki plays with MJ, Tom and Leni discuss Matthew. Leni wants to see Matthew by herself, so Tom takes her to Geneva's old cabin in the woods where Matthew is now living. When Leni enters the cabin, she notices it is covered in paintings, one of which says "HER" on it. Leni moves toward Matthew and tries to talk to him. She thinks she sees some of the old Matthew in his eyes, but she quickly gets overwhelmed when he doesn't seem to recognize her. Not yet prepared for this moment, Leni turns to leave.

CHAPTER 31

Before Leni can leave Geneva's cabin, Matthew says, "Wait." Internally, Matthew is confused; he cannot articulate his thoughts the way he wants to. However, he recognizes Leni as the person he's been waiting for. Happy that Matthew recognizes her, Leni begins explaining her life over the past several years. She apologizes for leaving Matthew and explains why she couldn't come back. She tells Matthew that he has a son and she's brought him here so they could meet. Matthew is skeptical; he does not think his son could ever love him, but Leni assures him that's not true.

Leni's legal proceedings are highly irregular. However, Leni is ultimately let off because of the Kaneq community. Though Tom is primarily responsible for getting the charges thrown out, there is no doubt that Marge is telling the truth about the number of people willing to testify on Leni's behalf. Even though Leni suffered many traumatic experiences in Alaska, she also built up a network of people who would do anything for her.



Although Kaneq is far from a big city, it has continued to move in the direction embraced by Tom but hated by Ernt. As such, the deaths of Ernt and Earl represent the end of an old way of life. Meanwhile, Marge and Tom have moved on and attempted to find happiness in Kaneq.



Leni doesn't know how she'll react when she sees Matthew, which is why she enters the cabin by herself. Although Matthew doesn't immediately recognize her, she is clearly still in his thoughts, as the painting that says "HER" demonstrates. In addition, it is evident that Matthew has significantly improved since the last time Leni saw him. He is able to paint and has some control over language. These details don't fully register with Leni until later, but Matthew's condition is actually much better than what seemed possible earlier in the novel.



Once again, the perspective changes to first-person to allow for an understanding of what Matthew is thinking. However, this switch is less necessary now, because Matthew can also speak, albeit in a limited capacity. It is hard to get a clear idea of Matthew's capabilities—his condition is rather unpredictable—but Leni's presence seems to improve things.



Leni takes Matthew to the beach and introduces him to MJ. MJ immediately takes a liking to his father and the two play together on the beach. He teaches MJ how to skip rocks, just as he had previously taught Leni. While they play, Tom explains to Leni that Matthew was convinced she'd come back; it didn't take him long to figure out who "HER" was. He asks Leni if she plans on staying. Leni responds, "I have no idea what this new life of mine will look like, but I'm staying."

After spending some time at the Walker place, Leni decides it's time to visit her old house. She tells Matthew that she wants to go alone, although he secretly tags along anyway. When she arrives at the Allbright cabin, Leni finds it in a similar state to when she first moved to Alaska, with dead insects and animal droppings everywhere. Matthew asks her what she wants to do with the place. Leni isn't sure, though she does consider burning it down and starting over.

Not long afterwards, on a beautiful summer day, Leni invites her old friends to join her on the beach near her old home. Everyone shows up, including the Walkers, Marge, Ms. Rhodes, and the Harlans. Leni gathers them all to celebrate Cora's life. She tells everyone how much Cora cared for them and how much it would mean to her to see them all gathered around in her honor. After her short speech, Leni takes out a jar of her mother's ashes and spreads them into the water. As she does so, she says, "I will always love you."

Many years later, in 2009, Leni writes a piece for a newspaper about her life in Alaska. At this point, Leni is now a celebrated photographer with three children: MJ, Kenai, and Cora. She writes about her love for Alaska, despite her trials and tribulations. Toward the end of the piece, she writes, "*Alaska is home, always and forever, the song you hear when the world is still and quiet. You either belong here, wild and untamed yourself, or you don't. I belong.*"

MJ is completely nonjudgmental and loves his father unconditionally. Finally, the Walkers and the Allbrights are given a moment of genuine happiness; everyone is back together, and no one is trying to keep them apart. Although Leni remains unsure about the future, she knows that she's found the place where she belongs.



Given her negative experiences in the old cabin, one might expect Leni to avoid it at all costs. However, Leni has matured over the years and wants to tackle her past head on. Once that's done, burning the cabin down is an appealing idea. Though Leni cannot erase the past, she can start again, this time on her terms.



In the closing sections of the novel, family and community once again take center stage. Because Leni is not close with any of her family members—excluding the Gollihers and MJ—the community of Kaneq becomes her family. She is touched that everyone shows up to celebrate her mother, and finally it seems that she will be able to live in peace. Ernt is gone, her mother is laid to rest, and she is reunited with the people she loves most in the world.



After spreading Cora's ashes, it appears that Leni is able to live life the way she always wanted. Alaska, though it's become more modern, hasn't lost its wildness, as Ernt feared, and Leni still loves the place she lives. Over the course of the novel, Leni transitions from a lonely child in Seattle to an adult in Alaska surrounded by a loving community. She's found her place in the world and managed to find happiness in an unlikely place despite her troubled past.





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