

FOREWORD

Although it appears underestimated, water is the leit motiv of our lives. All living species of this planet are intrinsically connected by water. A striking fact is that more than 60 % by weight of the humans, animals, and plants is water and, some species like the jellyfishes, can be up to 98 % water. Therefore, the quality of the water existing in all places of the Earth must be the best possible, not only because we need to drink it, but because water is us.

Water Thieves originated in a leisure walk along the beach in the Argentinian summer of 2016, in which the author and a couple of SAFER¹ researchers were discussing a way to approach children about high-school age to the concept of water quality and conservation, but also being entertaining. Even though in our present society books seem less appealing, if the story can capture children's imagination, a book is the perfect choice to go into a thrilling adventure moving back and forth in time.

The story develops in a medium city of Argentina, Bahía Blanca, but it could be placed anywhere in the world. The scarcity of water is common to all. Just think that only 3 % of the total water on the planet is potable. Basically, the only large-scale dis-

1 SAFER is the acronym of the IAI project "Sensing America's Freshwater Ecosystem Risk (SAFER) from Climate Change," funded by the InterAmerican Institute for Global Change Research (IAI) and the National Science Foundation (USA).

tilling mechanism to make more drinkable water is evaporation. With higher global temperatures, the capacity of the atmosphere to retain this distilled water becomes larger, which, in the end, implies less water on the Earth surface.

This simplification provides an example of the interconnection among all the processes that occur on the planet, from which the accommodating factor (like a joker) is water. *Water Thieves* is also a plea to increase our consciences regarding the preservation of water for us and the generations that will follow.

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We hope you enjoy *Water Thieves* and we encourage you to share it with your families and friends. It is important that you know that the product of the book sales will be entirely destined to provide funds for:

- 1.- more measurement kits for high schools so they can make monthly visits to their local lake or stream and take samples and direct measurements of the water properties and quality;
- 2.- fellowships and research funds for students working with in the SAFER project;
- 3.- and buying more books to distribute to schools and public libraries, as well to provide more educational outreach to the communities.

Therefore, by purchasing the book you are strongly contributing to increasing our knowledge about water and its management, as well as to helping kids like yourself to become better scientists.

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My parents, with whom the idea of writing a book was born, helping me with idea genesis and the editing process; my friend Alyson Hampsch, who also helped me bounce ideas and in the editing process. My friends, Katie Miller, Morgan Paine, Shannon Smullen and Bailey Anne Bradley, who read the chapters out loud so I could listen to the flow of the story and helped me get unstuck when the plot and my brain disagreed on possible outcomes during our weekly writing sessions. Professor Nancy Welch and my fellow classmates from the Advanced Writing: Fiction class at the English Department of the University of Vermont, who gave me feedback and helped me bring the future to life. All my friends and family, who directly or indirectly, lifted me up and encouraged me to keep going. The SAFER Team, who gave me the fantastic opportunity to work with them.

Writing is said to be a lonely endeavor, but with the support of family and friends, writing can be a team effort.

We're not islands, but a community.

CHAPTER I

VALENTINA

The thirst and my sister were my only masters. There was nothing I wouldn't do for the first one, nor anything I wouldn't give up for the second one. I was so thirsty that licking a cactus was starting to look appealing, but I managed to save what little dignity I had left and focused on what I needed to do.

Survival.

For my sister and myself. Nothing else was as important.

"You should have stayed back," I told Emma, taking advantage that Frank and Pete were walking ahead of us, out of earshot. "It's not safe."

"And I told you, I don't care," Emma replied, dad's stubbornness copied in every bone of her little body. "I need to do something. I don't want to be a burden to you or anybody."

"You're not a burden. How many times do you need me to say that? You're my sister, and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"What if something happens to you? Where would I be then?"

I flinched, her point too close to my own fears.

"Nothing is going to happen to any of us tonight. It'll be a piece of cake."

The lie didn't come easily to me, but I had to pretend for her sake, and maybe a little for me as well.

"If it's going to be so easy, then why did you complain to Pete about using me this time?"

“You heard?” I asked, scratching my head. “You know you’re not supposed to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations. What would mom have told you?”

“She’s not here to say anything.”

I flinched again, this time with guilt. Mom wasn’t there because of me. I had been responsible for our parents’ deaths, and it was something I had to live with every day. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake with my sister. I was going to protect her from the world – and even from herself if I needed to.

“Well, in her absence, you have to do what I say. No more eavesdropping.”

“Yeah, yeah, mom.”

I shook my head but let the conversation drop, hurrying our pace to catch up with the boys. I wasn’t going to convince her to stay back and, to be honest, even if she had agreed, I wasn’t sure there was any place nearby where I would have felt safe leaving her to wait. We were too far away from our usual hunting grounds for my comfort, but our job tonight didn’t leave us many options.

Our target was a huge house with its roof completely furnished with solar panels, conveniently located in the center of Barrio Norte, a neighborhood we should never have set foot in. There were grandiose brick and white plastered manors in this part of the city, with polished windows and perfect front lawns, with black-clad private guards and ‘Beware of the dog’ signs. It took a lot of resources to keep a Doberman or even a Chihuahua nowadays. Who had enough water to waste on a dog?

The house we were going to steal from wasn’t so far away. We only needed to walk a couple more blocks to go before we could hide, but I didn’t think I would be able to relax until we were long gone from this neighborhood and back to our usual sanctuary, the Storni elementary and middle school.

My throat was parched as if sand were stuck to it, rasping and hurting with each breath. I hadn’t been able to have a single drop of water since that morning, and I felt almost dizzy with my need to taste it. We had to get water soon, and we needed sleep too. For the past week, all our days and nights had been

about casing the house we were going to go into. We had hardly taken naps and, without sleep or water, I didn't know how long I could go on this way.

I was jumpy, my nerves wrecked. It was only a matter of time before the guerrillas found us and threw us into a dark, disgusting cell and then called social services on us. We were too out of place here walking in the middle of the clean streets. We should have stayed in the shadows during the day, only arriving at night, but Pete had insisted that we should be in place before night came.

"Oooh, I can already taste the water. It's going to be so good," Frank was saying when we caught up with the boys.

Frank thought of himself as the team leader. He thought that descending from a line of successful –according to him– men automatically qualified him for the position. His grandfather had been the minister of natural resources in the days before the water was gone, but to me, the man clearly hadn't done a good job in keeping our water safe, or we wouldn't have been getting ready to steal some. Frank's father, had landed a position in Zwisk Industries, the company that provided water for all. The same company my parents had worked for. Frank's dad had been high up on the board before his disappearance, while my mom and dad had done some type of research and development in the security area of the company. These facts weren't why he was our leader, though. Let's just say that brute force was his weapon of choice.

Most days, I wanted to punch Frank in the face. He had it coming, and I was going to be the one to take revenge for all of us bullied but not yet. My smaller body wasn't strong enough to fight him. Someday, it would be; meanwhile, I was going to be patient and bide my time.

"Yeah..." Pete sighed in pleasure in reply to Frank's comment. "We'll be able to fill a swimming pool with all the water we're going to take. How many liters are you going to drink in one go?"

"No idea. As many as I can. I want my belly to hurt from all the drinking."

What a waste of water, I thought. If we got enough water, I was taking Emma to Buenos Aires, the biggest city in our area, where word of mouth said, not even one beggar went thirsty with the newly elected mayor. I wasn't sure it wasn't just a myth, but we had to try. What I wanted for Emma and me was to go to a place where we could go beyond being brute animals in search for the next drop of water and start behaving like people. If it weren't Buenos Aires, then we would get as much water as we could, and we would start heading North. There had to be some clean water after crossing into Guatemala.

Pete laughed at Frank's comment but thankfully remained silent. I kept pace with them, eyeing my surroundings with distrust.

Both boys had shown up at Storni school three years ago, where Emma and I had still been able to attend as students. They had made the school their home after hours. We had always seen them lurking around before mom and dad had come to pick us up when the school day was over, but we hadn't talked to them until I had decided to use the school the same way after our parents' death.

Pete was the only one of us who had completed middle school, which made him think that made him smart. I didn't agree, but he had Frank's backing, so I didn't dare question him. He wasn't as mean as Frank, but most of the time I tried to get out of both of their ways, making sure Emma was never left alone with either of them.

There were advantages to being a member of their team. It gave Emma and me a modicum of safety in the cold nights, and all four of us together collected more water than Emma, and I could have gotten on our own.

We finally reached the house, walking right past it towards the dumpsters, our spectacular hiding place. As we climbed into the trash and recycling cans, I couldn't help but find it terribly ironic that Emma and I were now in the same business as our parents' killers. Life had even taken away my right to hate them as well.

I took a deep breath and rolled my shoulders, hiding in a black trash can. The space inside the can was tight, not quite

larger than my body. I was still amazed I had been able to fold myself into the can. I was sure I was going to have a hard time getting out of it when the time came. I also couldn't decide if the smell of rotten tomatoes was worse than the smell of my own unwashed body. I already couldn't wait to get out of there.

Frank, Pete, and Emma were hiding in the much larger orange recycling can next to me. I hoped it smelled better than mine. I heard Emma's giggles and wished I could find anything amusing in our situation. I admired the way Emma had managed to maintain her childhood's naïvety, even though we had been living in the streets for a little less than a year. When we lay on the cold floor each night at the deserted school, trying to sleep, I only saw what we had lost. Emma saw the possibilities. As her older sister, I worked hard to keep her that way. Emma was too small, too skinny, too innocent for her age. She had barely finished elementary school, and I longed to get her somewhere better, where our clothes weren't torn, and we wouldn't have to worry about water.

To distract myself, I went over the plan and tried to pretend there weren't so many holes in it.

My sister would be the distraction, while I disrupted the alarm system. Then we would somehow find our way inside the oversized shed that probably held the water stock for the house at the back of the property, and we would carry with us as much as we could back to Storni.

Having always been fascinated by wires and technology, my knowledge made me the closest thing we had to an expert in hacking computers and disarming systems. I had my trusted RTL-SDR in my backpack—a radio monitor that would help me bypass the alarm. Dad had given it to me the last birthday we spent together; I bet he never thought I would use it to steal.

Finding the water wasn't all that worried me. I had serious concerns about how we were going to get back to Storni with all the water. It would take us days. We had sneaked on the public buses to get to this part of town along with all the maids and blue collar workers, but there was no way we would be able to get back on the buses with the water. People would either turn

us in to the guerrillas or kill us for our precious cargo. I had heard of such things happening.

The guerrillas were nothing more than gangs that had taken power into their own hands twenty years ago when all drinking water reserves in South America, from Argentina to Colombia, had been polluted almost overnight. The overnight lack of water had thrown the country into chaos. The poison persisted even today, so many years later. No one knew who to blame, and scientists were still puzzled by what had happened. Some had said this had been some kind of war act, but nobody had come forward to admit their guilt. Those who had money fled this part of the continent. Those who didn't, like my parents, had had to stay.

There had been a guerrilla war, and death and disappearances had been the norm until two years of war later, one of the gangs won, and for the following eighteen years they had had complete dominance over our city. They were the ones that guarded the water distribution and punished water thieves. In our time in the streets, our group had always done its best to remain under the radar. Always taking advantage of what opportunity presented itself to us, but this time we weren't just going in through a window left open on the way to work, nor hitting a house with barely a key and lock on their doors. No. This time we had made our way to one of the small pockets of money left in the city, and we were planning to get so much more than we did any other time.

If we found water. After all, we weren't even sure the water was in there in the shed, but hey, we were desperate, and our thirsty brains didn't allow for brilliant ideas. Most of the houses in the area used a shed on the property to store so many liters of water. The odds that this house did the same were in our favor.

*

Hours later, I watched the house through the square opening on the trash can, taking in the large garden, shining a vibrant

green even as the sun set. I took note of the locations of the cameras and the small building close to the gate where the only night guard kept an eye on the property. During the day the grounds were overrun by heavily armed men, but at night they felt confident with only two guards. If it were my house, I would have done the opposite, but who was I to judge? Better for us that it was this way. Daylight would have given us away. As I checked that there were no guards in my field of vision, I wondered how many people went thirsty each day to keep so many roses and daisies alive.

“Come on,” Frank said, too impatient to wait any longer. I heard him get out of hiding and, by the ruckus of aluminum cans and cardboard boxes, the others had followed him. “Let’s go.”

“I don’t think it’s dark enough to—,” I started to say, but my words came out cracked, unintelligible. I could see them already way ahead of me. With a sigh that closely resembled a groan, I disentangled my limbs, climbed out of my temporary prison and followed. I felt my side, and I was glad for the weight of the hunting knife I had stolen from Mrs. García’s kitchen a few days ago.

We moved, as fast as our adrenalin-filled bodies would let us. We each went to our positions. Pete and Frank with me; Emma, on her own. I hated seeing Emma walk with slow, measured steps towards the main gates, her body language slightly disoriented by the lack of water. I was afraid that her movements weren’t part of an act at all, but I couldn’t do anything about it now.

In the setting shadows, we moved parallel to her, towards the surviving bushes that bordered the electric fence and the smallest, hidden opening we had dared cut during the daylight hours. It was the only time of day the fence wasn’t electrified. At night, the electricity on the fence would be on, but for a reason beyond my comprehension, during daylight, the electricity would be off.

We had found out about this shortcoming in their security by accident a week ago when, while escaping the guerrilla, we had taken the first of the buses that would get us to Barrio Norte. We had only seen unbreachable houses until this one. Emma

had marveled at the roses in the garden beyond a fence that had a large, square yellow sign saying that it was electrified in bold black letters. She had been so entranced by the view that she had touched the fence. We had been surprised when there had been no electric discharge. That same night we had returned with the intention of climbing the fence. Being impatient, I had grabbed hold of it.

Big mistake.

I had managed not to cry out, despite the pain and the burning that had gone through my body. The lack of electricity during daylight had sparked an idea in Pete and from then on we had busied all our waking moments trying to come up with a plan to go in and steal the owner of the manor dry. And tonight, finally, we were going inside the house and getting our water.

Sometimes I was glad our parents weren't alive to see us now. Their jobs had given us water, but with them gone, we were left out of the loop. Social services were too busy, and we had fallen through the cracks in the system. We couldn't even work for our own water. The law, too afraid of child labor, prevented us the dignity of earning our water by ourselves.

Emma was already in position, and I wasn't anywhere near where I should be. Frank and Pete were breathing down my back. The lack of water was making me feeble minded when I needed my wits the most. I had to focus, or Emma could be hurt.

Reaching the cover provided by the sage shrubs leaning against the fence, we squirmed inside, careful not to disturb the outer leaves. Space was tight; the dead branches inside caught on my skin and clothes. I could hear Frank and Pete's louder, clumsier movements and I rolled my eyes at their ineptitude.

"I swear that if you're not quiet, I'm going to electrocute you with the fence," I said, determined to do it if necessary. I didn't care about the boys. All I cared about was Emma, and if they put her in danger by being stupid, they deserved anything that came their way.

"Ha!" Frank laughed – well, as much as a laugh as a person could manage while whispering. "You'd never reach the fence. I'll crush you and make mince meat out of you."

“You wish. I’d—” I curled my hand into a fist, ready to take him on.

“Stop it,” Pete said, getting in between us. “Just shut up, Valen, and get to work. We don’t have all night.”

“Then stop making so much noise. You’re going to get us caught.”

We went on with less noise. I was grateful that despite their bravado they had listened to me. Both Pete and Frank knew they needed me for the next step. I reached the fence, careful not to touch it yet. We were hidden from view by the thick foliage of the plant, but it made for an uncomfortable position in which to work.

I gave Frank the broken yellow plastic gloves we had found in a dumpster behind Storni, and with a glance towards the perimeter of the house, I motioned him to put them on. He had to hold the cut wire fence open for Pete and me to go through. He didn’t move.

“Frank!” I warned, loud enough I was afraid we would be heard. “Put them on.”

Frank shook his head and crawled backward. “I’m not getting electrocuted for the group. You do it.”

What a leader he turned out to be! How easy it was to be merciless when all was in your favor. I grimaced, my hand touching the hidden knife I carried. He was only a bully. I shouldn’t have expected anything better from him. He would throw us to the wolves the moment he could.

“Frank, I need to go through so I can go disconnect the alarm. I can’t be holding the fence for you.”

“Pete, you do it.”

“Pete has to start working on the door,” I said, crossing my arms, but shaking inside as I could see our plan unraveling and knowing Emma was still inside.

“I’ll do that,” Frank said, his dark eyes showing too much white, his face shiny with sweat, reflecting the light that filtered through the leaves.

“Frank, you don’t know how,” Pete said.

“We don’t have time,” I added. “Emma won’t be able to distract the guard for too long. We’re too close to them. He’ll notice us.”

Frank was still shaking his head. Pete, arms akimbo, shook his own head in incredulity.

They weren’t moving. We were there, standing still, doing nothing, while Emma was with the guard. I didn’t want her out of my sight for more than I had to.

“Come on, I’ll hold it.” Frustrated, I went for the gloves. “Frank, you better keep an eye out for the guards.”

I put them on and grabbed the wire, eyes closed, half afraid that the plastic gloves wouldn’t be enough. I was careful to keep the holes that exposed my skin away from the wire.

Sighing with relief when there was no electric shock, I opened my eyes, saw that the guard wasn’t in sight and taking the wire with me, I motioned for them to go through the opening. The cut fence was heavier than I remembered and my arms were already weak. As they crawled through, I could feel sweat pouring down my back from the effort; water I couldn’t afford to lose.

Because I had the gloves, neither of them moved a finger to help me go through. They ran, instead, towards the end of the house, just before a vast stretch of grass that separated the house from the shed, leaving me to deal with the wire and going through the opening on my own. I was glad my body was flexible enough to give a contortionist a run for their water. Twisting my grip, I checked again for the guard, then angled my body so I could crawl backward into the property. I didn’t dare look around me. There was nothing I could do if a guard suddenly appeared from around the corner and saw me.

It was a relief to be able to let go of the wire. My heart was beating faster than when that guerrilla officer had run after us for stealing a kilo of oranges last week. I turned around and, looking towards the gate, I saw the guard walking towards the front of the house with Emma. Afraid they would see me in the middle of the way, I panicked and stepped back and into the wire.

I cringed, expecting the pain, but there was nothing.

No electric shock. No current was running through the metal mesh.

I felt both relieved and puzzled. The wire had always been live at night. It was the expected pattern: daylight meant more guards, no electricity; during the nights, it was the other way around. Every single night we had come back and checked, finding only one guard on duty at the gate. It was the reason why we cut the wire during daylight and planned to break in at night in the first place. There was also another guard patrolling the lawn, but this time of night he was on his break, giving us a twenty-minute window to get in and out.

Pete and Frank were staring at me, eyes wide, tense, but relieved I hadn't cried out. I stared back at them, my heartbeat racing.

The creaking of wood signaled that Emma and the guard had disappeared inside the luxurious front doors of the house. I wanted to go in after her. I couldn't risk anything happening to her. Where she went, I went.

But not right now. I had water to steal. I glanced to my sides, saw no one and ventured towards Frank and Pete.

"Come on," I whispered. "We need to move. Frank, make yourself useful and sneak towards the house. Keep an eye out for the guard and Emma."

We didn't wait for his response. Pete and I ran towards the oversized shed, leaving a cross Frank behind. I didn't know if I felt that Emma was safer with the guard or Frank, and that worried me.

The shed was a newer construction than the old manor, but not by much. Broken tiles on the roof belied its age, while fresh beige paint tried to give the large building a veneer of pride. I could see the shapes of the bricks underneath and hoped they provided enough insulation for the water to be fresh inside. I dreamt of ice-cold water, but any temperature would work for me. I just needed relief from my parched throat.

The steel doors to the shed had an electronic keypad to open them. I had assumed from the beginning that it was connected to the general alarm system –what house wouldn't?– as I didn't

want to risk us being caught because we hadn't considered all scenarios.

Kneeling on the fresh grass, I took the RTL-SDR from the pocket of my worn backpack. I turned it on. The green-yellowish lights of the tiny, rectangular black box blinked. It was scanning, locking into the system.

I waited. Slightly above me, I could hear Pete's heavy breathing. The sweet, peaceful smell of grass clashed with my racing heart. Beyond, behind the shed, I could hear a stream running. It brought unwelcome memories of happier times. It mocked our thirst, so close yet at the same time, like a mirage in a desert, so unattainable. To drink it was to court death and I didn't want to die. Emma needed me.

The lights on the RTL-SDR stopped blinking. I turned it over, where the screen was. It showed no signal. I frowned. It couldn't be. The alarm had to be activated. They always did that at night. I looked behind me, toward the fence, thoughts racing.

Two out of two security features were disabled. I looked up at Pete, eyes wide. I didn't like this at all.

"What's wrong?" Pete whispered to me, leaning over. I could see fat, drops of sweat cascading down his temple. I licked my lips, fascinated by the sight of water, no matter its origin. I was horribly thirsty. "What's wrong, Valen?"

I blinked, his words breaking the spell his sweat had on me.

"Out. We need to get out," I said.

"What? Why?"

"The alarm's off. The electric fence's off. They're on to us. We need to get Emma and run."

"No, no," he said, shaking his head. I didn't think denying the facts would make them less real, but apparently, Pete did. "We're not leaving without some water."

"What? Do you want to get caught?"

"The security is off. So what? It's easier for us to break in. You're making too much out of nothing."

"There must be a reason for the fence and the alarm to be off," I said, putting the RTL-SDR back in my bag. "We can't risk it. I won't risk Emma. Not even for water."

“Oh please, you’d sell her to the first bidder in a couple of hours if we don’t get any,” he said, turning to the door and twisting the handle. The door opened on the first try. “Besides,” he added with a smirk, “they might just have forgotten to turn the system on.”

I grunted. I shook with the need to punch him in the face, bloody his nose, but I didn’t. We needed to get out of there as fast as we could, but instead of following my instincts, I followed him.

We walked inside the shed, and my mouth dropped open. It was as if we had opened a door into another world.