

## CHAPTER ONE

# THOMAS

My sign was propped up and ready on the trailer's flat roof, its three letters painted in hairspray to make them flammable and visible to any cars heading west along the old highway at the edge of town. I wasn't worried about cars heading east because there weren't any.

*Save our souls*, I thought as I imagined the SOS burning. Save *my* soul would have been more accurate since I was the only one left in town, but there was no point in creating confusion by swapping the "O" for an "M." The next car that passed might be the last, and I couldn't risk blowing my chances of hitching a ride, even if it meant facing the danger of being outside and up on my roof.

I scanned the night sky again for dark silhouettes and listened for the telltale hum that was often the only warning a person might get before a flash of teeth and the stench of hot breath. The big prairie sky was clear and bursting with stars, though, and aside from a lone coyote howling off in the distance, all was silent.

I still couldn't quite get over how much brighter the Milky Way seemed now that the electrical grid had gone dark, yet despite all that thermonuclear heat and cosmic radiance, I knew the universe was mostly cold and empty, a wasteland of

ancient rocks and floating ice, with galaxies drifting farther and farther apart as they fizzled and died. Maybe my dad had been right; maybe darkness really *was* inevitable.

*Here's just as good as the next place, son. Ain't no point in running . . .*

I lowered my eyes to the highway across the field and settled in for another long night with only my thoughts for company. Questions about where my neighbors were now began to resurface. Had they made it as far as the coast? Were they safe there? A lump formed in my throat as my mind replayed scenes of rusty old truck beds packed with luggage and grim-faced survivors, the air thick with visible fumes and the stink of gas.

I should have gone with them when I still had the chance, but instead I'd stayed, hoping I could change my dad's mind, just as I imagined my mom would have wanted.

If only I'd known.

I sighed and shivered in the cool night air. For the first time in more than five months, I could see my breath. Soon the leaves on our oak tree would yellow and fall, blanketing grass that hadn't been cut since back in the spring. I remembered how my dad used to mow it with his shirt off when I was a kid, a beer in one hand and a cigar in the other, my mom watching from inside the house, shaking her head but smiling ever so slightly.

The memory almost seemed stolen, a snapshot from a life I no longer recognized as my own.

I blew on my hands and rubbed them together, then scanned around a second time, my rusty lawn chair groaning beneath me. It didn't matter that I hadn't seen a blitz in almost a month now; I knew the monsters were out there,

chasing storms and riding thermals on dragon-like wings, methodically blacking out cities and plunging us all back into the dark ages.

My SOS sign was a new plan, and one I hoped would work better than my last, which had been simply to barricade the highway, forcing approaching cars to stop. It hadn't occurred to me that a barricade might look like an ambush and that wary drivers would keep their distance. I'd watched two do exactly that, with both cars slowing before pulling U-turns and squealing off.

*Getting the hell out of Dodge*, as my dad might have said. My dad got the hell out, too, in his own sort of cowardly way. I tried not to think about that right now as I sat and waited.

The problem wasn't only that there were so few people left in the east; it was also the shortage of functioning vehicles. A blitz swooping down from the heavens had the same effect as an electromagnetic pulse bomb going off. Modern cars with all their computers and electronic parts didn't stand a chance. Pre-1980 models were best for not having their circuits fried, but I remembered hearing that a few from the nineties could withstand a blitz pass, too, provided it wasn't a *close* pass, like the one that stopped my Uncle Steve in his big Dodge Ram, on this very same stretch of highway.

My dad saw the whole gruesome episode from beyond our back gate, staring across the field while the dragon-like menace clawed open the truck and plucked out my uncle like a sweet butter pickle from a jar, his scream of terror mixing with the belated wail of our town's old air-raid siren. I was spared the trauma of seeing it myself thanks to a flu that had me cocooned in a mountain of blankets, where I shivered and dreamed of my mom, who had died of cancer almost a year

before. I dreamed of her often and still found it hard to accept she was gone, but at least she'd been spared the horror of having to live through the end of the world.

My fever broke later that same day, but not before my dad's spirit. Things trended downhill quickly in the days that followed. How many times had I tried to warn him?

*One of these nights you'll drink so much that you pass out for good . . .*

A painful throb returned to my chest as I remembered jolting awake to the *thud* of a thick glass bottle hitting the floor and to an ominous knot in my stomach as I sat up in bed. It wasn't the first time I'd thrown off my sheets to go check on my father, yet somehow I had sensed that this night was different, that reality had shifted in some meaningful way.

I remembered pausing behind my closed door, before trading the safety of one room for the stillness I feared in another. It was like stepping into a new kind of gravity or a stream in which time itself didn't move like it should. Even now, the memory played out in slow motion, the whole thing fogged by the woody and sweet smell of whiskey and smoke.

The distant coyote was closer now, its howl a lonesome dirge that only sharpened my awareness of my own isolation.

*Owww, owww, owwwoooo . . .*

I buried my dad in the flower bed in front of our trailer. It was as far as I'd been able or willing to drag him, and dirt was dirt, I figured. Maybe his body would help feed the soil and give strength to whatever flowers popped up in the spring. His death could be a catalyst for rebirth—at least there was purpose in that.

As if to seek refuge from the howling predator, a pure-black cat jumped up from the fence to the trailer's roof,

startling me as it landed. It meowed a greeting, and then meowed again as I reached out for it.

“You’re new,” I said. I wasn’t aware of any dogs that had been left behind, but while searching through neighborhood houses for food and supplies, I found and befriended seven different cats who, like me, had been abandoned. A few of the owners hadn’t even left a door or window open so the cats could escape once they finished whatever water and kibble remained in their bowls. I made daily rounds to feed them now and hoped that with humans being out of the picture, there would soon be plenty of mice to keep the cats going. The pet food I had rustled from cupboards was almost gone.

The black cat rubbed up against my pant leg and started to purr. I smiled and scratched it under its chin, at which point the purr changed and deepened, or at least that’s what it seemed like for a second. Then I realized I was actually hearing two different sounds at once: one a purr and the other a mechanical rumble from off in the distance—the rumble of an engine.

I stood up so fast that the cat went skittering back with a yowl of surprise. It stayed on the roof, though, uncertain if not quite scared.

A pair of headlights came into view as the source of the rumble crested a hill and started into the long winding curve that would bring it to the edge of town.

I scrambled, forgetting for a second where I’d left my lighter. It was in my pocket, of course. I took it out and knelt by the plywood sign, reminding myself not to light it too early. If I did, the flames would spread past the edge of the hairspray, the crucial letters vanishing in a conflagration. It

couldn't look like a random fire. It had to be recognizable as a call for help.

Seconds ticked by in slow motion. I knew how well sound could carry across the prairies on a perfectly calm night like this one, but even so, I was surprised the rumble had reached me from so far off. It seemed like an awfully loud engine for just a car. Unless, of course, it *wasn't* just a car . . .

I squinted into the night as the vehicle rounded the bend, its headlights appearing dimmer now that they were no longer aimed right at me. With the glare reduced, I could finally make out the vehicle's shape, and it was a *big* shape. Or rather, *two* big shapes. I realized that what I was looking at was a semi pulling a trailer.

I hesitated with the lighter. Back before the blitz first began to appear, my dad used to take me for lunch at a greasy spoon attached to the gas station at the edge of town. It was a popular spot for truckers to stop and eat at, and I clearly remembered how small and intimidated I used to feel when the tables surrounding our own would fill up with men who not only looked like they were part bear but who ate as if they were, too. I remembered their big bushy beards and their booming laughter and the way they smelled strongly of cigarettes.

Was that who was inside *this* truck? I swallowed hard at the thought, this despite the fact that my mom had always said to be careful about judging books by their covers.

My heart pounded as the truck got closer. I had imagined my moment of rescue a hundred times over, and it was always the same: a wholesome-looking family in one of those old wood-paneled station wagons. The dad would have thick-rimmed glasses, and the mom would be wearing a sundress. The two young children—a boy and his sister—would be

riding along as if on their way to a county fair rather than some theoretical safe-zone on the coast. Try as I might, I couldn't reconcile that vision with reality; I couldn't picture myself riding shotgun next to a bear.

But what if I waited and my wood-paneled wagon never came? I would slowly run out of food until I was forced to leave town on foot. That or a blitz would find me first. The one that got my uncle and spurred our town's exodus west had been hunting alone, but the larger horde could arrive any day now. Was it worth it to waste a real opportunity for a silly bit of wishful thinking?

No, I decided, it wasn't.

I thumbed the small metal wheel and watched as the lighter sparked but failed to light. I thumbed it again, and the same thing happened. My eyes darted back to the truck as a growing panic tightened my chest.

"C'mon, you piece of shit!" I gave the lighter a shake and kept trying. *Spark, spark, spark.*

I was just about to scream when it finally took, the SOS going up with a *whoosh* that sent the already wary black cat off and running, down to the fence below and into the darkness, howling coyotes be damned.

The rumble from the big rig changed as the driver slowed and began to downshift through the gears.

I whooped with triumph in the firelight.

I didn't wait to see if the truck would stop completely. Instead, I launched myself across the roof and down the ladder, taking the rungs as fast as I dared before hitting the ground and rushing through the gate to the field beyond, a dancing aurora now visible in the sky above me.