

CHAPTER ONE

THERE WAS NO war, no infection, no outbreak, and no meteor. It simply happened. It was a regular cold day in winter. Everyone was busy going about their normal day, trying to keep their noses and fingers from the burning cold, when suddenly everyone ceased moving. They seemed frozen, nothing could be heard but the sound of the air whooshing down the street. It was strange yet peaceful.

Ethan was in his apartment watching a movie with his headphones on, trying to dull the sound of the busy street that his apartment overlooked. When his movie stopped buffering, he refreshed the application a few times only to realize that he'd lost connection. Agitated from the terrible service, he threw the computer on the couch and got up to scavenge whatever he could find in the refrigerator. He was craving something sweet but couldn't find anything. Disappointed and bored, his next stop was the balcony to get some fresh air. As he opened the door, freezing air swooped down his spine, leaving him with a skin full of goosebumps. It was cold but refreshing, just as he expected. As he looked down on the street, his eyes widened, shocked at the sight of burning cars, smoke rising into the sky, littering what now seemed to be an abandoned street.

He rushed inside, grabbed his phone and jacket, and sprinted down the street. The scene of burning cars and gushing flames seemed unreal, but the pungent smell of burning tires was too real to deny. The horrifying nightmare-like state soon dissipated as the people inside the cars were engulfed in flames. Looking closer, Ethan realized the people weren't burning. He thought to himself, *A prank, but on such a large scale! Someone has a lot of money to spend.* He pulled out his phone and started recording, shouting, "You got me guys, well done!" While looking for the cameras, he strolled down the street confidently to show that he wasn't scared, but the more he walked, the more destruction he could see. Even-

tually, he stopped recording and began examining one of the frozen people nearby.

The man's eyes were wide open but not responsive. A beating heart confirmed that this was not a dummy. His face was expressionless, like a mannequin's. Ethan pushed the man to see if his instincts would kick in to catch him from harm, but to his surprise, the man fell and remained in his original stance with no signs of pain. It was in that moment that Ethan grasped the severity of the situation.

"A chemical attack!" he shouted, running frantically to his apartment while covering his mouth with his jacket. He bashed the door and ran to the bathroom to wash his face, and in his state of panic, he jumped into the shower and poured as much shampoo on himself as possible and began rinsing every inch of his body as hard as he could. It was as if he'd declared war on his skin, scratching it as hard as humanly possible. After a thorough bath, the lines of his nails running down his body were clearly visible. "A sign of a good bath," said Ethan, then put on his last clean jumper and turned the TV on to see a no signal message floating on his screen. He checked his phone, and it had no bars. With his mouth covered, he climbed to the roof to see the extent of the damage and if any emergency sirens, broadcasts, or police sirens could be heard, but he could barely see a few blocks ahead as the city was covered in a dark cloud of smoke. He went back into his apartment then to the hallway, knocked on the door of everyone who lived on his floor, but the only reply he heard was the echo of his knuckles slapping against the wooden doors. Going back inside his place, he sat on the couch. Hundreds of possible scenarios went through his head. The most plausible explanation was a biological attack, but that hypothesis soon crumbled as the barking of dogs began echoing throughout the street.

Perhaps it was designed to target humans, a biological weapon that immobilized the infected, leaving them defenseless to whatever attack that might follow. For a moment, Ethan believed that he touched upon the truth, but that moment of enlightenment was drowned in ignorance as he wondered why he hadn't seen or heard any other survivors nearby. He was not ready yet to give up on his new hypothesis. He needed more evidence.

Leaving his apartment, Ethan began knocking on his neighbor's door again. The symphony of silence that followed his knocking was not the

answer he was searching for. Once more, he banged on the door with an open palm and added a few kicks, which stirred the dust on top of the door.

"I know you're in there, Jimmy, open the door, or I'm gonna break it. I'm already freaked out, so don't make me do this," said Ethan. He took a few steps back, then said, "Screw it," as he ran forward and kicked the door with enough force to break the lock and send the door swinging against the drywall.

Coughing a few times, Ethan began walking in slowly. As he expected, there he was, sitting on his couch with a joystick in his hands and a pair of monstrous headphones on, staring at the screen while surrounded by piles of junk food and energy drinks. "Jimmy?" Ethan's shaken voice said as he slowly approached him. Just like the rest, he was frozen. Ethan checked the windows inside Jimmy's apartment to see if they were open, which could explain how he could have been infected, but found none.

This was not enough proof that this was not an attack. Ethan broke into two randomly selected apartments on each floor in his building only to find more frozen people. He repeated the same inspection in two other nearby buildings but to no avail.

Ethan returned to his apartment, lay down on his couch, swept the sweat droplets on his forehead, and stared into the ceiling confused as he tried to catch his breath.

"It cannot be a biological attack, if it was, I should have been frozen just like my neighbors were. But if it isn't a biological attack, then what is it? And why am I not frozen? And if I am not frozen, does that mean that there are others out there who aren't frozen, too? How many? What if there isn't anyone else and I'm the only one? Ugh, none of this makes sense." Ethan rolled over and began mumbling into his only companion, mister pillow.

It was now nighttime; Ethan knew nothing would come of his thinking. His mind was scattered, his judgment was clouded, and the power just went out. Unable to see anything, he extended his arm nervously, looking for the wall to navigate his way to his phone, which he left on the bathroom sink. As he moved forward, all the horror movies he'd watched did not seem very farfetched, and at any moment now he believed that his hand would touch a face or an organ of some creature and that it would be the end of him. Ethan felt as if something was breathing down his neck

but did his best to remain calm. His breathing intensified and his heart pounded in his chest. He could feel the throbbing veins in his neck and the blood pumping to his vital organs while his hands lost sensation from the adrenaline surging through him.

As he stepped inside the bathroom, he could no longer control his nerves and reached for the phone frantically, turning the flashlight on. At last, safety. No being could attack him now with the flashlight on. *What a dumb thought*, he thought to himself, but the comfort of light was the best he had, and he was content. He didn't want to waste all his phone's battery, so he locked all his doors, closed the curtains, crawled into his bed, and spent the night curled in a ball, trying to fight the cold but mainly just to feel safe.

The next day, he woke up to the sound of rain gently tapping his window, reminding him how cold and harsh winter can be with no heat or electricity. It was 1:00 p.m. Still no bars and with little charge left. Wrapped in his blanket, he mustered all his courage to slowly get out of bed, then looked through his window with one eye closed, grinding his teeth and breathing through his mouth in anticipation of seeing the same scene of yesterday. As his eye caught a glimpse of the street, "Shit!" was his only reaction. Nothing had changed except that the pouring rain had drowned the flames. The people hadn't moved a single inch. He was not certain how large the impact area of the phenomenon was, but Ethan hadn't heard a single ambulance or siren throughout the night. Assuming the worst, Ethan thought that the entire city must be affected. He wondered if he should go and check everyone's pulses again, but he didn't want to risk falling ill with no hospitals or emergency services operating.

His survival instincts kicked in, and he began thinking of ways to keep himself alive. Judging from the scale of destruction the city withstood or potentially the whole country, Ethan knew that he was likely to be stuck in this situation for a few days or weeks. He had food and water to last him a few days, but his apartment was too cold with no electricity. He began listing where he should go and the needed resources to survive for now. After some thinking, he was ready to take some action. First, a trip to the police station to see if anyone was there or if there were any emergency broadcasts through the radio. If not, then he could perhaps borrow a radio just in case. Second, a trip to the mall to borrow a generator, some

survival equipment, and food as well. He got dressed, grabbed a kitchen knife, and began heading downstairs.

It was still raining, so he made his way back upstairs, grabbed his umbrella, and was now ready to embark on this mission. On his way out, he decided that living on the third floor seemed like a terrible idea and a recipe for disaster when moving resources upstairs.

The sky was dark, and the bouncing droplets of water made it all the more tempting to turn around and curl up in his bed. His only motivation to continue was the thought of having to spend one more night in the utter darkness and, worst of all, with no heating. He took a deep breath and carefully took his first step forward with his knife squeezed tightly between his fingers.

On his way, he saw more and more people the same as the rest—frozen with beating hearts. As he looked at them, he was reminded of a feeling he was very familiar with—abandonment. He shook his head to get that thought out of his head and continued to move forward. He then saw a frail old couple, with their walkers under the cold rain, and just could not get over the idea of how alone they must feel. Unable to stop himself, Ethan moved the couple into a store and said, “Don’t worry, sir, ma’am, I will not leave you under the rain like that.”

As he continued walking, he saw more and more frozen people abandoned and in need of help. Knowing he couldn’t help them all, he shouted, “I’m going to leave now, but I promise that I will help you as much as I can. I won’t abandon any of you. Of all the people in the world, I know how that feels, so don’t you worry, okay?” With a clenched fist in his pocket and a feeling of helplessness filling him, he walked away from them but was distracted from his thoughts by the sound of a barking dog.

The animals surprised him. They didn’t seem to have been affected by the phenomena. He met a few shivering dogs trapped by leashes entangled in the hands of their frozen owners. Ethan set the dogs free and hugged them in a desperate effort to warm them. Knowing that he couldn’t afford to waste time, he moved on, promising the dogs to come back for them. Some of the dogs followed him, wiggling their tails along the way to show their appreciation for his kindness but eventually returned back to guard their frozen owners. “If only humans were that loyal and kind, truly man’s best friend,” said Ethan as he moved on.

Finally, he was at the police station. It wasn't too far from where he lived, but the totaled cars made it all the more difficult to navigate through the streets. Unsure of what he'd find, he took a deep breath and walked inside slowly. Ethan was nervous; this was his first time walking into a police station, and although he hadn't done anything bad, his heart raced, beating against his chest like heavy bass music. Though he couldn't see much as it was pitch black, the warmer—and drier—environment was inviting. He walked into the first room to his right and opened the curtains to let some light in before searching the room. There was a police officer standing there frozen just like the rest. Ethan looked at the officer and said, "Freeze!" and laughed. Eyes narrowing as he looked at the frozen man, Ethan found what he was looking for.

"Bingo," he said, approaching the officer. A flashlight, a radio, and a gun, all strapped to the officer's belt. He took all three, then realized that the radio was as good as dead because no one was there to respond, and no emergency broadcasts were being transmitted. He searched the rest of the room and found an emergency kit and some bullets. As he exited the room, he looked into the darkness at the rest of the station and hesitated. Shaking his head, he convinced himself that he wasn't scared—he'd found everything he was looking for, and there was no need for him to waste precious time. He left the police station better prepared and armed with light.

Although he was happy that nothing had gone wrong while he was inside the police station, a numbing fear grew inside that he may actually be the only one not frozen. He was almost certain that it was not a biological attack since no other developments had taken place and no other authorities had intervened to rescue the affected. Even if it was a biological attack, there was no plausible explanation as to why he was not affected, so he ruled that possibility out. There were too many questions that Ethan hadn't found the answer to. The answers to the questions he thought of yesterday could potentially change life as he knew. Finding those answers were his second top priority, right after securing shelter and food. He realized that falling ill or starving while trying to find answers wouldn't improve his likelihood of surviving. He shook his head as he looked at a woman frozen on the street. "I promise the time will come when I figure out what's happening to you, ma'am, and how to fix it. But it's not today." No, today—and for the time being—he pushed all ques-

tions and concerns about what was happening aside and tried to focus entirely on surviving.

His next stop was the mall. It stopped raining by now, and the sky was slightly less intimidating and more inviting. He walked the street with more confidence, waving a gun around even though he'd never used a gun in his life and didn't know how to turn the safety pin off. The structure of the gigantic mall was barely visible from the fog. He walked inside, and his eyes immediately scanned all the stores. The mall was a magnified, glorified horror house. Dark and full of frozen people. What made it worse was the sound of animal paws running around. He opened the doors of the mall to let light in and soon was welcomed by an army of friendly dogs circling him.

After some time, he was able to locate all he needed except for the generators, which he found at a nearby Home Depot. A sense of relief and ease took over him. "It won't be easy; it will take a lot of time, but it will be all right."

Taking all the items he'd gathered, he piled them outside. "Oh shit," Ethan said when it finally struck him: he couldn't move the large generators up to his apartment without sacrificing his back or arm in the process. He would need to get a new place to live sooner rather than later. He took the small items back to his apartment and spent the rest of his day thinking of a proper new house to live in. With nothing but canned food to eat and clothes to keep the cold at bay, Ethan's determination skyrocketed. A showroom was his answer. There was a showroom close to his house; they sold quite expensive cars there, so it was quite secure. The location was perfect, and it was designed for cars to easily enter the facility, hence it would rid him of having to carry all the items manually. It would require endless days of work considering that the streets are all blocked, but Ethan had a solution that could potentially make his life much easier and the moving process quicker. Although the showroom was not the most practical option, it seemed the most secure.



WEEKS HAD PASSED since the incident—which Ethan started thinking of as The Test because he was sure that this phenomenon was meant to test him—and Ethan was the only normal person in the world for all what

he knew. He'd finally moved to the two-floor car showroom successfully without losing any fingers. His new house was on a slightly raised platform with a large glass front overlooking the street. The glass was his first concern as it didn't seem to be safe, but then he realized that it was reinforced and sturdier than a wall. He'd emptied the showroom of the few cars in there. The bottom floor was where he mainly spent all of his time and kept all his food, clothes, supplies plus a large TV, video game consoles, and a pile of movies and games. The TV was mounted on the glass with the couch facing the street. This helped him keep an eye on the outside, plus enjoy the view. Sadly, the showroom did not have a shower, so he brought a bathtub and shower head from the mall, which he connected to the water pipes and installed in the bathroom. It was not the most glorious of bathrooms, but considering that he was the only one who was going to use it, he didn't mind doing his business and bathing in the same place. The second floor had only one space and that was his bedroom. Unfortunately, as the showroom was not designed to be a house, the second floor space did not have any walls but only rails for safety and a small ladder leading to the roof. Ethan only kept a few basic items such as a bed, a telescope, and snacks in the bedroom. What made the second floor special was the glass ceiling that allowed him to stargaze every night.

Moving the large items was his biggest challenge, but luckily he didn't have to worry about destruction. He used one of the large trucks he found at the mall to clear as much path as possible. Then, one by one, he dragged the generators, refrigerator, microwave, heaters, a table, a couch, and last but not least an electric stove outside and loaded them into the truck. The first few tries were a total failure, he broke a refrigerator and a microwave, but after a few more attempts, he successfully loaded and unloaded the items without breaking anything. That task alone took over a week. His biggest worry was having to connect the generator since he didn't know anything about electricity, but, luckily, it was much easier than he thought it would be. All he had to do was plug the cable into the building's electric panel and turn the generator on. His new house was now complete. Occasionally, he would realize that he'd forgotten an item and go to the mall and get it if the weather permitted it.

In front of the showroom was a gas station, which was convenient for refueling the generator, and next to the gas station was a large supermarket, which he used as a shelter for any animals that hadn't run off to

the forest. He gave them food and water on a daily basis. They were also his only living companions. Every week, new strays would join the ever-growing group living in the shelter. After mapping the city to gauge the amount of supplies and resources available, he realized that he could live a lavish lifestyle without ever worrying about resources. Chances were, he would die of an infection rather than a lack of food. His current luxurious lifestyle was something he would never afford in an eternity of working.

After The Test, Ethan checked the city for any other regulars but couldn't find anyone who was not frozen. It was a terrifying scene seeing all these people not moving, frozen, disconnected from the world, but time has a magical way of making the extraordinary seem ordinary. At first, he was nervous to walk by a person and felt that they would at any moment move, which would give him a heart attack, but days and days of interaction dulled that feeling, and he pushed that thought to the back of his head.

The scorching cold of winter was his biggest obstacle in researching the frozen people. That and his hope that soon they'd all wake up. He was afraid of falling ill and not being able to treat himself. In the past, the internet was his genie where he could find the answer to the most complicated questions in seconds. Now, the simplest questions meant a trip to the library and a few hours of researching, provided that he could find the right book. Only now Ethan realized how limited his knowledge was and how reliant he was on technology. He felt like a man who lost his torch in a dark night in a forest and now has to physically check for every object around him. Yet this didn't stop Ethan from trying to understand what was going around.

It was nighttime, and he was playing video games with headphones on as it dulled the sound of the wind and howling dogs, which constantly reminded him of how lonely he was in this new world. Ethan considered opening up his heart and home to a dog but dreaded the idea of loving his dog unconditionally only to have it fall ill and die. His life resembled the movie *I Am Legend* too much, and he did not want to end up living those moments.

Stuck on the same level of his game for hours, Ethan began getting frustrated. He lost again and threw the controller on the couch, shouting, "Bullshit! This is just bullshit." Getting up, he headed to the refrigerator to drink some juice. He took a sip to quench the thirst of the built-up

frustration losing caused, and as he put it back in the refrigerator, his eye caught the expiration date, reminding him that soon this juice would also be a relic of the past.

What was supposed to be a few days of strictly survival operations had turned into weeks of procrastination. He closed the refrigerator, determined that tomorrow he'd begin to research the frozen people. The questions that were once second on his priority list seemed more of an optional matter rather than an urgency. His lingering curiosity to understand what was happening and try to find a solution was pushed down by endless hours of video games and junk food. Yet even that was not strong enough to keep those questions and responsibilities at bay for long. He suddenly remembered the frozen woman who he talked to on his way to the mall and the promise he made her. He was guilty, and there was no escaping it. No excuses could rid him of that guilt but hard work and keeping that promise of his.

Ethan was afraid of taking on such a big responsibility or, worse, realizing that things couldn't be fixed. He realized that once he embarked on this journey, he wouldn't be able to go back to his carefree life. As he ascended the steps, he felt as if he was saying goodbye to the good old days of video games and binge eating snacks, sheltered from the dark unknown world. He threw himself on the bed and gazed at the stars, trying to appreciate his cocooned lifestyle as much as possible before falling asleep while scrolling through his now useless phone as a final attempt to cling on to the old world. Soon his eyes found more comfort in the darkness of his eyelids rather than the boring phone, and Ethan gave up to sleep.