CHAPTER 1

1800 MILES, MORE OR LESS

I awoke with a start, my heart racing and my pillow damp with sweat. Heidi was whining and pacing about the room as if she needed to go outside, or perhaps my screaming had scared her. I eased my aching body out of bed, shaking my head to chase away the cobwebs of sleep and the remnants of yet another nightmare. I squinted as I looked out the window. Menacing storm clouds raced along the horizon, looking for trouble. I've lost track of dates, but I'm pretty sure it's the beginning of November.
Time to get on the road.

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3000 km, or roughly 1800 miles, that's the distance between my uncle's farm and Las Vegas, with nothing but barren grassland and rocky desert most of the way. It would have been a long trip before The End came, so I can only imagine what it will look like now.

My truck is packed and ready to go, with Heidi sitting patiently in the passenger seat. Various supplies have been tied down in the box of the truck, including my Coleman stove, a couple of suitcases full of clothing, and various tools and equipment I will need for survival. A rack I constructed from spare lumber was fastened to the roof of the truck, upon which I had strapped a set of summer tires, complete with rims. The back seat is also packed full of supplies, including as much ammunition as I can carry for several rifles and a shotgun, all standing at attention behind the passenger seat. I have three handguns within arm's reach, and a fourth handgun, a snub-nosed .38 revolver—Anna's gun—sits in the glovebox.

I opened the console next to me and pulled out a small box, looking at the diamond engagement ring resting inside. I had planned to propose to Jess when she returned from a trip to Las Vegas, but she was still there when the Internet collapsed and the world as we knew it ended.

I placed the box in the console and sighed deeply before reviewing a mental checklist of everything else I'd packed. Canned goods and non-perishables, enough to last a few weeks. I collected several large plastic containers of rainwater from the cistern, suitable for cooking but not so much for drinking. A variety of ammunition—a finite commodity these days—packed in metal containers I'd purchased at an army surplus store several years ago. Two sets of body armor, just in case, with a metal plate fitted inside a front pocket for added protection. Extra fuel, five plastic jerry cans worth, each holding five gallons of gasoline I took from Ted's storage tank. The truck's tank is full, and my reserve supply is good for one refill. Altogether, I have enough

fuel to take me at least 600 miles, or about a third of the way to Las Vegas, where I hope to find Jessica. And that hope, as slim as it may be, is the only reason I haven't already ended my life.

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I left the farm with a heavy heart, teary-eyed as I drove past a fresh burial mound, the final resting place that held my kids, my brother, my uncle...murdered by a band of treacherous thieves, all of whom are dead now, thanks to me.

I am all who's left, and now I am heading for the gravel road that marks the beginning of my journey to find Jess. Conflicting thoughts writhe around in my mind as I watched the farmyard recede in the rear-view mirror.

"I don't know if I can do this," I choked, "but what choice do I have?"

I looked at Heidi, curled up in the passenger seat. She stared back at me, her nose buried under her tail.

She didn't respond, obviously, but I might as well talk to her as if she were a person. I guess that's the sort of thing a person does when they're lonely and half mad with grief.

This is a suicide mission. How are you going to make it through 1800 miles of wasteland? God knows what kind of trouble you'll run into. How can she still be alive? It's been, what—more than two months now?

A voice in my head, unrelenting in its tone, suddenly appeared from somewhere deep in the back of my mind.

Why not just stay put? Tend to your family's grave and try to build a new life at the farm. At least you're safe here.

"Shut the hell up!" I screamed, staring into the rear-view mirror.

Heidi pinned her ears back, startled by my outburst.

"Sorry, girl," I said quietly, trying to soothe a creeping sense of fear and self-doubt. "I'm sorry I scared you. I'm just figuring out what's best to do now."

I know that voice, I thought to myself. *But how is it possible?*

I turned onto a gravel road and headed south, deep in thought as the rising sun slowly turned the horizon a light grey, snowflakes melting as they fell on the wet gravel.

"We left just in time, Heidi. This road might be buried under a foot of snow in a few days."

I'm abandoning yet another home. Even if I find Jess, how can we possibly carve out a new life in this ruined land?

I looked down at my .357, secured in a holster on my right hip. A dozen ammunition canisters sat behind my seat, each green metal box filled to the brim, my gateway to safe passage. I thought about the time Jack told me I wouldn't live long enough to use it all back when things started falling apart. That Mother Nature, or a bullet with my name on it, would eventually catch up with me, ending my time on this planet.

Maybe he was right, maybe he was wrong—either way, fate will decide. Whether we run or prepare to face it head-on, Death will eventually catch up to all of us. But for now, this journey is fueled solely by my enduring hope that Jessica and I will find each other. If I meet my fate along the way, I accept that risk.

Ten miles of gravel road led me to the intersection with a highway that marked the beginning of this desperate search for the love of what's left of my life. I parked on the side of the road for a moment, the wiper blades sweeping back and forth in a soothing rhythm as the truck's heater warmed the cab. I stepped out of the truck to collect my thoughts as the enormity of the task ahead threatened to overwhelm my resolve.

I looked back at the gravel road that had led me here. I stared up at the wintery overcast sky, visions of the Grim Reaper haunting me.

I can hear him calling out to me from above, his presence tugging at the dark recesses of my tortured mind. Anguish roiled within me as memories of the past few days tore apart my mind, flooding me with a sense of grief so intense it threatened my sanity.

"JESSICA!" I sobbed, "WHERE ARE YOU!?"

I wiped tears from my eyes as the urge to turn around and head back to the farm threatened to overwhelm me. But that familiar voice spoke to me again as I began to open the truck door.

I'm sorry...perhaps there's still a chance Jess is alive...if you love her, then go...

I paused halfway back in the truck.

Don't lose hope...there's nothing here for you but Death. Go while you still can.

I got in the truck and dried my eyes as I watched soft, wet flakes of snow land on the windshield before being swept into oblivion by the wiper blades. My hand shook as I reached for the gear shift.

I will keep going. My love for Jess leaves me with no choice.

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Daybreak arrived slowly as storm clouds in the east blotted out the early morning sunrise. I sat in my truck, focused on an old road atlas of North America I had brought with me from the farm. Google Maps no longer exists, so this had been a blessed find.

"We have a long way to go," I said, considering our options. "Best to stay away from the mountains. It's probably snowing in the high passes, and snowplows are obviously out of service."

Heidi ignored me, snoozing in the warmth of the truck's interior. I continued to pore over the road atlas, flipping through several pages as I reviewed my intended route, which would take us through several states on the way to Las Vegas.

"We'd better avoid big cities as well, given how dangerous they must be by now. Looks like that won't be much of a problem, though, given where we're headed."

Damned empty country, most of the way there. Good lord, Jess...why did you have to be all the way down there when everything went to hell?

I dragged my finger along the map, down the highway past Regina to the US border, then east when we hit Montana to skirt the eastern slopes of the Rockies, into North Dakota, then further south to Spearfish. Then west to Wyoming, following the I-80 down to Provo to avoid Salt Lake City.

If anybody were prepared for what we're facing, it'd be those Utah Mormons, and they could cause me a lot of grief if there were enough of them around to mess with me.

"See, Heidi, we can cut through a gap in the mountains to get to Utah, then we'll go south through the desert until we get to Vegas. How hard can it be, right?" I said, trying to build my confidence.

Probably a lot harder than you think.

Heidi groaned as she sat in her seat as if she were skeptical of our chances.

"1800 miles," I said, with a low whistle. "That's a minimum of six tanks of gas in total, and we have two on board right now...damn...this is going to take four days at least, maybe five, even if all goes well, and if we find enough gasoline along the way. We'll be traveling through areas that were barely habitable in normal times. There's no help for us out there. No police, probably no military, and definitely no government services."

Probably no government at all, for that matter.

I glanced out the window, looking down at the pavement while absently rubbing Heidi's head. Delicate wisps of snow were starting to gather alongside the edges of the highway, which would become impassible soon enough and won't open up again until after the spring thaw.

Is this an act of madness—a reckless idea born of heartbreak and desperation? Or do we have a legitimate shot at reaching Vegas?

Either way, this is a one-way trip, at least until the snow melts next spring.

I grabbed the gear shift and placed the transmission in drive.

"We'd better get going. It's a race to the border, and we don't have much time. Old Man Winter is about to kick in the front door."

A black shape caught my attention as we got rolling—a large crow sitting on top of an aspen tree.

That's odd. He should have flown south weeks ago…

We soon turned to travel down a poorly maintained secondary road, the asphalt full of cracks and potholes. The land around us was dead, without signs of life save for the crow.

Tears welled up again as memories of my family intruded into my thoughts, and a sense of despair gnawed away at me when I reminded myself that I was leaving them behind. A lump formed in my throat, and tension gripped my forehead like a vice as my shoulders stiffened and my jaw clenched tight.

I stopped the truck, staring at the road ahead.

What might have happened to Jess by now, having been stranded in Vegas, where everything had likely collapsed? How could she possibly be alive? What if she fled the city? How the hell would I be able to find her?

I am alone…all alone.

I burst into tears, sobs wracking my body.

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I was drying my tears when a feeling of warmth enveloped me as if a warm shawl had been placed on my shoulders. I was suddenly filled with a sense of inner peace.

I'm going to be alright.

I slowly drew my .357 and pressed the muzzle against my temple, finger on the trigger.

I get to be with my kids again.

NO! Don't lose hope! You need to stay alive to find Jessica!

It was that voice again, reaching out to me from somewhere deep within my subconscious.

It doesn't seem possible, but...

I shook my head and tried to focus on memories of Jess, if only to loosen the grip of fear and anguish.

More words of encouragement, reaching out to me.

Stay positive...don't assume the worst. Jess is resourceful.

I lowered my arm and stared at my handgun for a moment, then holstered it and wiped my runny nose on my sleeve.

"Fine," I said with a heavy sigh. "Setting myself free from this world would mean leaving Jess behind, and I'm not ready to do that just yet."

I placed the truck in gear and stepped on the gas.

"If two people are meant to be together, nothing can keep them apart. Not even you," I said, looking up at the purple-grey sky, searching for the face of Death. "Not even you."