

C h a p t e r 1

*Civilization exists by
geological consent, subject to
change without notice.*

—Will Durant

I was home alone on that Friday evening. Those who survived know exactly which Friday I mean. Everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing, in the same way my parents remembered 9/11, but more so. Together we lost the old world, slipping from that cocoon of mechanized comfort into the hellish land we inhabit now. The pre-Friday world of school, cell phones, and refrigerators dissolved into this post-Friday world of ash, darkness, and hunger.

But that Friday was pretty normal at first. I argued with Mom again after school. That was normal, too;

we fought constantly. The topics were legion: my poor study habits, my video games, my underwear on the bathroom floor—whatever. I remember a lot of those arguments. That Friday they only fueled my rage. Now they're little jewels of memory I hoard, hard and sharp under my skin. Now I'd sell my right arm to a cannibal to argue with Mom again.

Our last argument was over Warren, Illinois. My uncle and his family lived there, on a tiny farm near Apple River Canyon State Park. Mom had decided we'd visit their farm that weekend. When she announced this malodorous plan, over dinner on Wednesday, my bratty little sister, Rebecca, almost bounced out of her chair in delight. Dad responded with his usual benign lack of interest, mumbling something like, "Sounds nice, honey." I said I would not be going, sparking an argument that continued right up until they left without me on that Friday afternoon.

The last thing Mom said to me was, "Alex, why do you have to fight me on absolutely everything?" She looked worn and tired standing beside the minivan door, but then she smiled a little and held out her arms like she wanted a hug. If I'd known I might never get to argue with her again, maybe I would have replied. Maybe I would have hugged her instead of turning away.

Cedar Falls, Iowa, wasn't much, but it might as well have been New York City compared to Warren. Besides, I had my computer, my bike, and my friends in Cedar Falls. My uncle's farm just had goats. Stinky goats. The males smell as bad as anything short of a skunk, and I'll take skunk at a distance over goat up close any day.

So I was happy to wave goodbye to Mom, Dad, and the brat, but a bit surprised I'd won the argument. I'd been home alone before—I was almost sixteen, after all. But a whole weekend, that was new. It was a little disappointing to be left without some kind of warning, an admonition against wild parties and booze. Mom knew my social life too well, I guess. A couple of geeks and a board game I might manage; a great party with hot girls and beer would have been sadly beyond me.

After I watched my family drive off, I went upstairs. The afternoon sun blazed through my bedroom window, so I yanked the curtains shut. Aside from the bed and dresser, my bedroom held a huge maple bookcase and desk that my dad had built a few years ago. I didn't have a television, which was another subject Mom and I fought about, but at least I had a good computer. The bookcase was filled with computer games, history books, and sci-fi novels in about equal proportions. Odd reading choices maybe, but I just thought of it as past and future history.

I'd decorated my floor with dirty clothes and my walls with posters, but only one thing in the room really mattered to me. In a wood-and-glass case above my desk, I displayed all my taekwondo belts: a rainbow of ten of them starting with white, yellow, and orange and ending in brown, red, and black. I'd been taking classes off and on since I was five. I didn't work at it until sixth grade, which I remember as the year of the bully. I'm not sure if it was my growth spurt, which stopped at a depressingly average size, or finally getting serious about martial arts, but

nobody hassles me anymore. I suppose by now those belts are burnt or buried in ash—most likely both.

Anyway, I turned on my computer and stared at the cover of my trigonometry textbook while I waited for the computer to boot up. I used to think that teachers who gave homework on weekends should be forced to grade papers for an eternity in hell. Now that I have a sense of what hell might be like, I don't think grading papers forever would be that bad. As soon as Windows started, I pushed the trig book aside and loaded up *World of Warcraft*. I figured there'd be enough time to do my homework Sunday night.

None of my friends were online, so I flew my character to the Storm Peaks to work on daily quests and farm some gold. WoW used to hold my interest the way little else could. The daily quests were just challenging enough to keep my mind occupied, despite the fact that I'd done them dozens of times. Even gold farming, by far the most boring activity, brought the satisfaction of earning coin, making my character more powerful, achieving something. Every now and then I had to remind myself that it was all only ones and zeros in a computer in Los Angeles, or I might have gotten truly addicted. I wonder if anyone will ever play *World of Warcraft* again.

Three hours later and over 1,000 gold richer, I got the first hint that this would not be a normal Friday evening. There was a rumble, almost too low to hear, and the house shook a little. An earthquake, maybe, although we never have earthquakes in Iowa.

The power went out. I stood to open the curtains. I thought there might be enough light to read by, at least for a while.

Then it happened.

I heard a cracking noise, like the sound the hackberry tree in our backyard had made when Dad cut it down last year, but louder: a forest of hackberries, breaking together. The floor tilted, and I fell across the suddenly angled room, arms and legs flailing. I screamed but couldn't hear myself over the noise: a boom and then a whistling sound—incoming artillery from a war movie, but played in reverse. My back hit the wall on the far side of the room, and the desk slid across the floor toward me. I wrapped myself into a ball, hands over the back of my neck, praying my desk wouldn't crush me. It rolled, painfully clipped my right shoulder, and came to rest above me, forming a small triangular space between the floor and wall. I heard another crash, and everything shook violently for a second.

I'd seen those stupid movies where the hero gets tossed around like a rag doll and then springs up, unhurt and ready to fight off the bad guys. If I were the star in one of those, I suppose I would have jumped up, thrown the desk aside, and leapt to battle whatever malevolent god had struck my house. I hate to disappoint, but I just lay there, curled in a ball, shaking in pure terror. It was too dark under the desk to see anything beyond my quivering knees. Nor could I hear, as the noise of those few violent seconds had left my ears ringing loudly enough to drown

out a marching band if one had been passing by. Plaster dust choked the air, and I fought back a sneeze.

I lay in that triangular cave for a minute, maybe longer. My body mostly quit shaking, and the ringing in my ears began to fade. I poked my right shoulder gingerly; it felt swollen, and touching it hurt. I could move the arm a little, so I figured it wasn't broken. I might have lain there longer checking my injuries, but I smelled something burning.

That whiff of smoke was enough to transform my sit-here-trembling terror into get-the-hell-out-of-here terror. There was enough room under the desk to unball myself, but I couldn't stretch out. Ahead I felt a few hollow spaces amidst a pile of loose books. I'd landed wedged against my bookcase. I shoved it experimentally with my good arm—it wasn't going anywhere.

The burning smell intensified. I slapped my left hand against the desk above me and pushed upward. I'd moved that heavy desk around by myself before, no problem. But now, when I really needed to move it, nothing . . . it wouldn't shift even a fraction of an inch.

That left trying to escape in the direction my feet pointed. But I couldn't straighten my legs—they bumped against something just past the edge of the desk. I planted my feet on the obstacle and pushed. It shifted a little. Encouraged, I stretched my good arm through the shelves, placing my hand against the back of the bookcase. And snatched it away in shock—the wall behind the bookcase was warm. Not hot enough to burn, but warm enough to give me an ugly mental picture of my fate if I couldn't escape—and soon.

I hadn't felt particularly claustrophobic at first. The violence of being thrown across the room left no time to feel anything but scared. Now, with the air heating up, terror rose from my gut. Trapped. Burned alive. Imagining my future got me hyperventilating. I inhaled a lungful of dust and choked, coughing.

Calm down, Alex, I told myself. I took two quick breaths in through my nose and puffed them out through my mouth—recovery breathing, like I'd use after a hard round of sparring in taekwondo. You can do this.

I slammed my hand back against the wall, locked my elbow, and shoved with my feet—hard. The obstacle shifted slightly. I bellowed and bore down on it, trying to snap my knees straight. There's a reason martial artists yell when we break boards—it makes us stronger. Something gave then; I felt it shift and heard the loud thunk of wood striking wood. Debris fell on my ankles— maybe chunks of plaster and insulation from the ceiling. A little kicking freed my legs, stirring up more dry, itchy dust.

I forced my way backward into the new hole. There were twelve, maybe sixteen inches of space before I hit something solid again. The air was getting hotter. Sweat trickled sideways off my face. I couldn't dislodge the blockage, so I bent at the waist, contorting my body around the desk into an L shape.

I kept shoving my body backward into the gap between a fallen ceiling joist and my desk, pushing myself upward along the tilted floor. A lurid orange light flickered downward into the new space. When I'd wormed my way fully

alongside the joist, I jammed my head and shoulders up through the broken ceiling into what used to be the unfinished attic above my room.

A wall of heat slammed into me, like opening the oven with my face too close. Long tendrils of flame licked into the attic above my sister's collapsed bedroom, cat tongues washing the rafters and underside of the roof decking with fire. Smoke billowed up and pooled under the peak of the roof. The front part of the attic had collapsed, joists leaning downward at crazy angles. What little I could see of the back of the attic looked okay. An almost perfectly round hole had been punched in the roof above my sister's bedroom. I glimpsed a coin of deep blue sky through the flames eating at the edges of the hole.

I dragged myself up the steeply angled joists, trying to reach the back of the attic. My palms were slippery with sweat, and my right shoulder screamed in pain. But I got it done, crawling upward with the heat at my back urging me on.

The rear of the attic looked normal—aside from the thick smoke and dust. I crawled across the joists, pushing through the loose insulation to reach the boxes of holiday decorations my mother had stored next to the pull-down staircase.

I struggled to open the staircase—it was meant to be pulled open with a cord from the hallway below. I crawled onto it to see if my weight would force it down. The springs resisted at first, but then the hatch picked up speed and popped open with a bang. It was all I could do to hold

on and avoid tumbling into the hallway below. It bruised my knees pretty good, too. I flipped the folded segments of the stair open so I could step down to the second floor.

Keeping my head low to avoid the worst of the smoke, I scuttled down the hallway to the staircase. This part of the house seemed undamaged. When I reached the first floor, I heard banging and shouting from the backyard. I ran to the back door and glanced through the window. Our neighbor from across the street, Darren, was outside. I twisted the lock and threw the door open.

“Thank God,” Darren said. “Are you okay, Alex?”

I took a few steps into the yard and stood with my hands on my knees, gulping the fresh air. It tasted sweet after the smoke-drenched dust I’d been breathing.

“You look like three-day-old dog crap. You okay?” Darren repeated.

I looked down at myself. Three-day-old dog crap was way too kind. Sweat had drenched my T-shirt and jeans, mixing with plaster dust, insulation, and smoke to form a vile gray-white sludge that coated my body. Somewhere along the way, I’d cut my palm without even feeling it. A smear of blood stained the knee of my jeans where my hand had just rested.

I glanced around; all the neighbors’ houses seemed fine. Even the back of my house looked okay. Something sounded wrong, though. The ringing in my ears had mostly faded, but it still took a moment to figure it out: It was completely silent. There were no bird or insect noises. Not even crickets.

Just then Joe, Darren's husband, ran up behind him, carrying a three-foot wrecking bar. "Glad to see you're out. I was going to break the door down."

"Thanks. You guys call the fire department?"

"No—"

I gave him my best "what the hell?" look and extended both my palms.

"We tried—our house phone is dead, not even a dial tone. Cell says 'no service,' but that can't be; it's usually five bars here."

I thought about that for two, maybe three seconds and took off running.

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Darren and Joe yelled something behind me. I ignored them and made tracks as best I could. My bruised knees weren't helping, neither was my right shoulder. I probably looked kind of funny trying to sprint with my left arm pumping and my right cradled against my side.

Still, I made good time toward the fire station. Partway there, I realized I was being stupid. I'd taken off impulsively, needing to *do* something—anything—instead of jawing with Darren while my house burned down. I should have asked Darren and Joe to drive me or stopped to grab my bike from the

garage. But by the time I'd thought through it, I was almost at the fire station.

I noticed a couple of weird things along the way. The traffic light I passed was out. That made the run faster—cars were stopping at the intersection and inching ahead, so I could dart through easily. I didn't see house lights on anywhere; it was early evening and fairly bright outside, but usually there were at least a few lights shining from somewhere. And in the distance to my left, four thin columns of smoke rose against the deep blue sky.

A generator growled at the side of the fire station as I ran up. The overhead door was open. I ran through and dodged around the truck. Three guys in fire pants and light blue T-shirts with "Cedar Falls Fire Department" on the back huddled around a radio. A woman dressed the same way sat in the cab of the ladder truck.

"Piece of crap equipment purchasing sticks us with," I heard one of them say as I approached.

"Hey kid, we're—" The guy broke off mid-sentence when he got a good look at me. Then he sniffed. "Burnt chicken on a stick, you've been in a fire. Y'ought to be at the hospital."

I was gasping, out of breath from the run. "I'm okay. . . . Neighbors been trying to call . . ."

"Yeah, piece of junk ain't working." The guy holding the radio mike slammed it down.

"My house is on fire."

"Where?"

"Six blocks away." I gave him my address.

A guy only slightly smaller than the fire truck beside him said, “We’re not supposed to go out without telling dispatch—how we gonna get backup?”

“Screw that, Tiny. Kid’s house is on fire. Load it up!”

They all grabbed helmets and fire coats off hooks on the wall. In seconds, I was sandwiched between Tiny and another guy in the back of the cab. I could just see the firefighter at the wheel over the mound of equipment separating the two rows of seats. She flicked a switch overhead, starting the sirens blaring, then threw the truck into gear. It roared down the short driveway and narrowly missed a car that failed to stop.

I glanced at Tiny once during the drive back to my house. His eyes were scrunched shut, and he was muttering some kind of prayer under his breath. The firefighter at the wheel laughed maniacally as she hurled the huge truck back and forth across the lanes, into oncoming traffic and even halfway onto a sidewalk once. She swiveled in her seat to look at me, taking her eyes off the road completely. “Anyone else at home, kid?”

“No,” I answered, hoping to keep the conversation short.

“Any pets?”

“No.”

The ride couldn’t have lasted more than a minute, but it felt longer. Between the crazy driving and Tiny’s muttered prayer, I wished I’d run back home instead. The truck slammed to a stop in front of my house, and before I could get my stomach settled and even think about moving, the cab was empty. Both doors hung open. I groaned

and slid toward the driver's side. Everything hurt: both knees, my right shoulder, the muscles in my calves and thighs: my eyes stung, my throat felt raw and, to top it all off, my head had started to ache.

Two huge steps led down from the cab. I stumbled on the first one and almost fell out of the truck backward. I caught myself on the grab bar mounted to the side of the truck. When I reached the ground, I kept one hand on the bar, holding myself upright.

The house was wrecked. It looked like a giant fist had descended from the heavens, punching a round hole in the roof above my sister's room and collapsing the front of the house. Flames shot into the sky above the hole and licked up the roof. Ugly brown smoke billowed out everywhere.

Thank God my sister wasn't home. If she'd been in her room, she'd be dead now. An hour ago I'd been looking forward to an entire weekend without her. Now I wanted nothing more than to see her again—soon, I hoped. Mom would burn rubber all the way back from my uncle's place in Illinois as soon as she heard about the fire. It was only a two-hour drive. I gripped the bar on the fire truck more tightly and tried to swallow, but my mouth was parched.

The firefighter wrestled a hose toward the front of the house. Tiny hunched over the hydrant across the street, using a huge wrench to connect another hose to it. Darren and Joe were standing in our next-door neighbor's yard, so I stumbled over to them. From there I could see the side of my house. One of the firefighters opened the dining room window from the inside and smoke surged out.

“You okay?” Darren asked.

“Not really.” I collapsed into the cool grass and watched my house burn.

“We should take you to the hospital.”

“No, I’m okay. Can I borrow your cell? Mine’s in there. Melted, I guess.” I wanted, needed, to call Mom. To know she was on her way back and would soon be here taking care of things. Taking care of me.

“Still no service on mine, sorry.”

“Maybe it’s only our carrier,” Joe said. “I’ll see if anyone else has service.” He walked across the street toward a knot of people who’d gathered there, rubbernecking.

I lay back in the grass and closed my eyes. Even from the neighbor’s yard, I felt the heat of the fire washing over my body in waves. I smelled smoke, too, but that might have been from my clothing.

A few minutes later, I heard Joe’s voice again. “Nobody’s got cell service. Verizon, Sprint, T-Mobile, AT&T—all down. Nobody’s got power or landlines, either.”

I opened my eyes. “I thought landlines weren’t supposed to go down. I mean, when our power’s out, the old house phone still works. Just not the cordless phones.”

“That’s the way it’s supposed to be. But nobody’s telephones work.”

“Huh.”

“You know what happened to your house? Looks like something fell on the roof.”

“I dunno. Power went out, and then wham, the whole house fell on me.”

“Meteor, you think? Or a piece of an airplane, maybe?”

“Would that make the power and phones go down?”

“No . . . shouldn’t.”

“And there are other fires. At least four, judging by the smoke.”

Joe peered at the sky. “Yeah. Looks like they’re a ways off. In Waterloo, maybe.”

I tried to sit up. The motion triggered a coughing spasm—dry, hacking coughs, every one of them setting off a sharp pain in my head. By the time my coughing fit passed, the headache was threatening to blow off the top of my head.

“You want some water?” Joe asked.

“Yeah,” I wheezed.

“We should take you to the hospital,” Darren said again, as Joe trotted back across the street toward their house.

I closed my eyes again, which helped the headache some. The water Joe brought me helped more. I chugged the first bottle and sipped the second. Joe left again—said he was going to find batteries for their radio. Darren stood beside me, and we watched the firefighters work.

They’d strung two hoses through a window at the side of the house. All four of the firefighters were inside now, doing who-knew-what. The hoses twitched and jumped as water blasted through them. Pretty soon the flames shooting out the roof died down. I heard sizzling noises, and the smoke pouring out the windows turned from an angry brown to white as the fire surrendered.

Two firefighters climbed out a window. One jogged to the truck and got two long, T-shaped metal pry-bars. The other guy walked over to me.

“Are you okay? Having any trouble breathing?” he asked.

“I’m okay.”

“Good. Look, normally we’d call a paramedic and the Red Cross truck to get you some help, but we can’t even raise dispatch. You got anyone you can stay with?”

“He can stay with us,” Darren said. “Till we can get hold of his family, anyway.”

“That okay with you, kid?”

“Yeah, fine.” I’d have preferred to see Mom’s minivan roaring up the street, but Joe and Darren were okay. They’d lived across the street from us forever.

“The fire’s pretty much dead. We’re going to aerate some walls and do a little salvage work. Make sure you stay out of the house—it’s not stable.”

“Okay. What started it?”

“I don’t know. Dispatch will send an investigator out when we reach them.”

“Thanks.” I wished he knew more about what was happening, but it didn’t seem polite to say so.

“Come on,” Darren said. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

I struggled to my feet and plodded across the street alongside Darren. The sun had gone down; there was a hint of orange in the west, but otherwise the sky was a gloomy gray. No lights had come on. About halfway across Darren’s yard, I stopped and stared at the white steam still

spewing from my partly collapsed home. I put my hands on my knees and looked at the grass. A numb exhaustion had seeped into every pore of my body, turning my muscles liquid, attacking my bones with random aches. I felt like I'd been sparring with a guy twice my size for an hour.

Darren rested his hand on my shoulder. "It'll be all right, Alex. The phones will probably be back up tomorrow, and we'll get your folks and the insurance company on the line. A year from now, the house will be as good as new, and you'll be cracking jokes about this."

I nodded wearily and straightened up, Darren's hand still a comfortable weight on my shoulder.

Then the explosions started.