

Chapter 1

– 2065 –

Micah sets out at dawn. The bitter August wind stings his cheeks through his tangled beard, and the cold air burrows into his bones. He tugs his mangy coat collar up to his ears and stuffs his hands down into the pockets. His chapped fingers poke through the holes in the lining. The orb of the sun is lost behind the bone-gray skies, as it has been for thirty years, ever since The Miracle.

He wishes for a moment he had stayed inside, drowsy and warm in his makeshift bed. He could wait for the relative warmth of midday to make his journey, when the wind goes calm and the fog slightly thins. But by then, he might be too late. He quickens his pace to keep warm, windburn already licking at his skin, watering his eyes. He shields them with the brim of his NASA baseball cap — a gift from Father, a lifetime ago, before the world went cold.

Church bells have already begun to toll across Manhattan in celebration of the anniversary of The Miracle. Their songs echo through the city, hollow and discordant, as though the bells themselves suffer from some sickness festering in the iron. Their melodies promise hope to believers, to the true followers of the Prophet. But to Micah, they are an elegy. A reminder of things lost.

The city sounds like a leaky faucet. The streets are slick with seawater, so he keeps to the sidewalks, broken as they are. The Seawall on the south shore of the island keeps the ocean from swallowing it whole, but in the ever-damp Flood District, high tide forces water up from the sewer and brings with it a thin stream of filth trickling across the pavement. When he must cross

the street, he steps only with his toes, which keeps his ankles mostly dry. He hardly notices the smell anymore.

Sloshing past the skeletons of condemned buildings in the early morning, he feels like the last person on Earth. Buildings here still bear their pre-Miracle scars, evidence of the ultraviolet storms of his childhood — pockmarked concrete pillars, plywood boards shuttering broken windows. The surviving is glass cracked and splintered, like spiderwebs spun from lightning, the glassy stigmata of windborne violence.

He walks and walks. Through a rusted wrought iron gate, guarded by a cluster of scrawny pigeons who sift through the dusty ground of a once-verdant park. Under a rickety scaffolding rig, abandoned when the waters first rose. Past laundry lines strung between fire escapes, draped with threadbare garments which never fully dry in the permanent fog. If the rapture came tomorrow, this would be all that remained.

This, and Micah.

Further north, a line of people stretches the length of a city block. They shuffle forward in slow motion, bundled against the cold in their patched, tattered clothing, toward the window of a building that used to be a bank. Government workers in their powder blue uniforms pass out ration baggies, one per person, no exceptions: Two small cans of lab-grown tuna. Six dehydrated vitamin drink packets. Six synthetic protein bars. Six bandaids. One small tube of antibiotic ointment. One roll of toilet paper. One bar of soap.

Towards the end of the line, where forward motion has ceased completely, Micah notices a little girl, quiet and thin with long brown hair, raking her dirty fingers through crumbs of gravel and concrete piled against the side of the building. She finds a strip of white plastic on the

ground and stands to show her mother, eyes beaming with pride, her eager arm outstretched. The mother bends to her, smiles at her with sorrowful eyes, kisses her on the forehead, and takes it from her. The child sits cross-legged. The mother bends the strip of plastic in on itself, twisting it into a knot, her calcified fingers shaking as she works. Holding the hoop in her teeth, she gathers the girl's hair into a ponytail, humming in a low, warm tone. She slips on the makeshift hair tie, and tightens it until it stays.

They stand, and the girl clings to her mother's leg while they wait. The line doesn't move. Neither says a word. Speaking takes energy, and a world without sun is a ravenous one. The girl and her mother watch Micah as he passes. He has nothing to give them today. He clenches his jaw and keeps walking. The Miracle stopped the world from burning, but not without consequences.

Even Miracles, it seems, have their limits.

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On his trek north, Micah's shortcut through the churchyard is blocked by worshippers, already gathering for their Miracle Day ceremonies.

The building itself is a gothic masterpiece, formerly Trinity Church, rechristened as The Church of the Miracle, like so many hundreds across the nation. Its towering spires and gabled rooftops form a bony exoskeleton, made eerier by the powder blue paint covering the exterior. Swarms of people overflow the dusty churchyard, clustering under large white tents where faux grass has been rolled out to cover the fallow earth.

Micah wades through the crowd. The men wear suits, the women dresses, each one faded and threadbare. The multiracial congregation communes as one, old and young, alike in poverty as well as faith. Some pray in oblong circles: hands clasped, eyes closed, heads bowed. Others are hanging blue banners along the outer wall, head height where the stains from the pre-Miracle floods of the mid-30s carved a water line into the sandstone exterior. The banners bear the official symbol of this Neo-Christian sect: a simple blue snowflake.

“Bless us, oh Lord on high,” they cry in a simple melody, arms reaching for the stratosphere. Theirs is a new spin on an ancient religion, but some things never change. God is everywhere, but mainly in the sky.

The throng of people is thick and clamorous, too dense for Micah to easily cut through. He steps into a gap in the crowd to see a man in a dark suit with a bright blue feather in his fedora blocking his path. The man smiles and invites him to pass with a sweep of his arm. Micah nods and steps forward, but his path is blocked by a group of children armed with toy musical instruments. One child slams a drum with his fists in an arrhythmic fury. Another is blowing into the wrong end of a trumpet. A third whips around quickly and almost bludgeons Micah in the groin with his banjo. He nearly falls dodging the impact. The children giggle and scamper off.

When he regains his balance, he feels the crowd tighten, pushing him in the direction of a priest standing on a stump in the middle of the courtyard. He’s wearing a powder blue cassock and holding a silver urn, waving the worshippers closer. Above him, blue balloons filled with water hang from ropes strung between two dead trees, and above the balloons, connected to another rope, a row of folded sheets. It looks like the set of a school play. The priest smiles and turns his palms downward to quiet the crowd.

“Thirty years ago, the Lord answered our prayers.”

Someone behind Micah says “amen” directly into his ear.

“Fires burned the highest mountains. Oceans churned with deadly storms. Our skin blistered in the sun. Like so many arrogant sinners, we endured the ire of a vengeful god. For the wages of sin...”

“Is death!” the crowd replies in unison.

“It seemed our doom had been sealed! But the lord saw fit to send his Miracle, so that we might spread his word and prepare his flock for the end of days.”

“Amen!” the crowd shouts back.

“Only one foresaw this great event. A child. God saw fit to open his eyes. To give him sight. To commune with him, as he once communed with Jeremiah, and Isaiah, and John of the Revelation. A Prophet!”

A little boy steps out from behind one of the trees, no more than eight or nine years old. He wears the halo of The Prophet — yellow rays of holy light fashioned from plastic, glued onto a yellow cap. He holds his hands in front of him and keeps his eyes down, walking in short, quick steps. He looks back towards the tree. A woman motions for him to go on. He shuffles to the front of the stump, and pauses for several seconds. The priest leans toward him and whispers “kneel” loud enough for the audience to hear. A few in the crowd chuckle. The child drops to his knees. The priest steps down and slowly circles him, pouring a clear liquid from his urn onto the ground.

The priest pulls a book of matches from his robes, strikes one on the box, and drops it on the liquid. A circle of fire ignites around the child. The boy raises his hands to his nose, whispering prayers to himself, his body shaking, his eyes to the heavens, wide with fear. Micah clenches his fists.

“Blessed be the Prophet,” the crowd recites in unison.

The circle burns, at first a flickering orange, intensifying to white. The heat warms Micah’s face as the flames dance higher. The child ceases his prayer. He looks out from behind the growing wall of fire, eyes wide and darting. Tears stream down his cheeks. He disappears behind the blaze. The crowd drops to their knees. Micah stands, alone, staring into the inferno, his own tears falling in unison with the boy as the crowd begins to chant.

“Blessed be the Prophet. Blessed be the Prophet. Blessed be the Prophet.”

The child calls out for his mother. No one moves. The crowd drones on, heads bowed in reverence. The boy begins to cry, then scream, his voice a raspy shriek, stretched thin with panic. The priest crosses himself, ambles over to the nearest tree, pulls a knife from his robe, and slices through one of the ropes. The balloons drop, exploding their watery contents, dousing the fire.

“Give thanks for the Miracle.”

“Praise be to God.”

He cuts the second rope and slowly lets out the slack. The white sheets open, and fake blue snow billows out onto the wet ground. The child rises, still clasping his hands, his reedy body quaking, wisps of blue confetti clinging to his soaked shirt. He shakes as he delivers his line.

“P-p-praise ... be ... the Miracle.”

“Amen,” says the priest.

“Amen,” says the crowd in unison. The boy looks to the priest. The priest waves his hands over the crowd to bless them. They rise, greet one another with smiles and hallelujahs, and disperse. Micah stares at the boy kneeling inside the scorched circle. The boy finally stands, bottom lip quivering, teeth chattering, arms crossed and trembling. The boy stares back at Micah. His pupils are black and enormous. The woman behind the tree calls to him. He rips the halo off his head and slams it into the wet earth, then runs off.

He wonders what they would say if they knew just how wrong they are about the day of The Miracle. The singular moment in history that cauterized their faith, gave them the proof they craved so deeply. Proof, once and for all, that god is real, and that the end of the world, the Revelation, is at hand. What they would say if they knew what he knew, about the dreams, the fire, the deception — the true story of the Prophet?

There wasn't one child trapped in the fire, afraid for his life, praying for deliverance and rescued from on high on the day of The Miracle.

There were two.