

THUNDER, AZ

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For My Father,
HAROLD LOEB

*Though is it ever too late
to destroy the World?*

—MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI

PROLOGUE

THEY SAID IT was a hurricane that did it. That was part of it, sure. A convenient way to cover up what had really happened. But no, it was not a hurricane. It was far more sinister than that, and its deadly claws reached much farther than Navajo territory.

Conspiracies were never pursued. Though the terrifying mystery never became a blockbuster movie, it would've made for a great one.

The hurricane began two thousand miles from the Eastern Seaboard. *That* was the mystery. “Desert Typhoons” became the new hot topic—a scientific horror that hooked the world.

It only took three days: cold and cloudless February days. And despite all the running, screaming, and praying, the whole town vanished with smooth efficiency, more like a scheduled event than a natural disaster.

Scientists sought answers in all the wrong directions. They should have been looking underground.

They might have even seen it coming.

PART
ONE

1

“SHIT, WE CAN’T do this.” Charlotte took a deep breath and held it, eyes shut against the world. She was trembling, although from fright or from the cold it was hard to tell. She wore a miniskirt and leggings, which was about as warm as it looked on a February night.

“We can’t!” she cried. “Change of plans! Let’s put watermelon kombucha in her locker. All her fucking books will stick together! We can sip it up out of the bottle, then spit it through the little vents there. That would be funny as *fuck!*”

Despite the nature of the moment, there was no humor in Charlotte’s voice. She felt as if she were swimming against some horrible riptide, the practical joke pulling her in.

She and Bobbi were walking along Eighth Avenue in Manhattan, beside a row of stopped New York City buses.

The bus at the front of the line was an old one, Charlotte noticed. To her it resembled a beached, dying whale. The hiss-and-fart sound of the air brake reminded her of a whale spitting mist out its blowhole, willing itself to roll over toward the water before it would dry up into a dead bus-like structure in the sand. An effortless smile spread across her face.

She glanced over to her friend, Bobbi, for whom she had waited and rehearsed her lines (“change of plans,” and, “we’ll sip it out of the bottle, then spit it through the little vents there”). They’d planned to do something to Gwenn, Bobbi’s little sister.

Little did they know their plan would go right out the window.



The two girls walked among an enormous crowd of New Yorkers. To Bobbi, they all looked similarly fickle. No hard-walk-hard-cock New Yorkers here. *New York is just a big contradiction*, she thought. *In the city that never sleeps, everyone walks around like insomniacs. They don't show that in the movies. Well, maybe Taxi Driver.*

They're all so fragile, she mused. She conjured the image of thin shells with gas inside of them, ready at any moment to flake or crack and spill an unholy reek of madness and tragedy. Insomniacs with poisoned inspiration. Bobbi imagined driving a car through the crowd, half of them popping like balloons, and the other half failing to budge. They'd just keep on walking. Yeah, the tourists would pop like balloons. The locals would keep on walking.

Bobbi spat. "That's fucking gross. Watermelon kombucha?"

"Gwenn hates watermelons!" Charlotte was ready with the retort.

"It's just not classy, Char. Also that stuff rots your teeth. Why can't we just go to Starbucks? It's right here."

Charlotte was ready for that, too. "Because Starbucks is owned by Walmart. It's literally Walmart coffee."

Before Bobbi could argue her facts, Charlotte halted right in front of an old-looking bus and yelled, "God damn! These tights are always bunching in my heels!"

As she bent down to adjust her tights, miniskirt opening its coy eye to the public, the bus began to move.

2

THE DRIVER OF the old bus was John Walter.

Born in the Bronx sixty years back, Walter had attended Brooklyn College, and at one point in his life, he'd aspired to be a writer.

While working on his college thesis, Walter had gone to live on the street to study the homeless.

He drank whiskey and discarded half-drunk cokes. He gave himself three weeks, as an experiment. At first it was easy (only spring when he'd started, and still warm outside), but eventually Walter had submerged himself so deep into the Meisner Technique that he forgot what he was doing. So he sought truth at the bottom of a bottle. He wanted to find a truth so brilliant that it burned his mind and branded his writing. He wanted to put a patent on the mythic nature of modern man. He wanted his novels to be famous for it. He said he would either find this great treasure in prison or in the frozen parking lot of some church on 65th Street, drunk.

John Walter, like Bobbi and Charlotte, had spent his high school years denying his lessons, mocking his mentors, and laughing at the word "wisdom." They'd all gone to college like bong-toting babies, Christmas lights and hair extensions flapping in the breeze.

Walter went crazy on whiskey and his desperate quest for the knowledge that most men already know in their hearts. Charlotte and Bobbi went crazy on social media and reality television.

Walter was mostly bald now and looked much older than sixty. He'd spent twenty-six years on the street, homeless, smelling like corpse feet, drinking whatever he could find.

Eventually, to clean up New York City, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani took as many homeless New Yorkers as he could find and turned them into MTA workers. Better buses and subways and cleaner church parking lots. Win, win!



Walter checked the side-view mirror and started the classic heroin lean off the curb into traffic. He had no vantage on Charlotte, who had crouched, adjusting her tights, just inches from the bus's looming face.



Bobbi was dimly aware of the bus moving and automatically took a step back. But Char, from that shoelace-tying position, still concentrating on finding a detour for Bobbi's insane and totally unimportant plan, didn't see it.

The bus lurched forward in first gear, and nudged Charlotte, who swiveled and fell to the ground, like a little Charlie Chaplin in a miniskirt.

Walter the bus driver didn't notice. Nobody noticed, at first.



Charlotte noticed only dimly, and it took her a moment to convert the observation into belief. *Maybe*, she thought, she'd just lost her balance because the bus was so close and large that the proximity gave her vertigo. Yeah, that, and *maybe* she got a head rush from being crouched for so long. In any event, the bus would stop.

The bus did not stop. The front-left tire, four feet in diameter,

caught her right hand and crushed it up to her elbow. She brayed quietly, like a trumpet with a mute. She was too focused on her survival to just let loose and scream. It was a distant yet audible shrill, and the New Yorkers in the vicinity noticed her at once.

Not a moment later, the bus crushed Charlotte's right shoulder, collar, and finally her head. Blood burst from her deflating body and sprayed into the traffic, slashing cars and onto the sidewalk. It misted the entryway of the Starbucks Coffee that Charlotte had been boycotting. The bus looked like a huge, grotesque street-cleaning vehicle.

On the street, steam billowed, and a faint hissing sound whispered to onlookers, unsure whether it had come from the bus's front tire or Charlotte's decimated throat.