

*It was an age of monsters. An age of prowling beasts that preyed on any living creature that crossed their path; shattering bones, rending flesh, sometimes swallowing their victims whole. Yet they were not the sort that dwelled under your bed or stirred in the musty depths of your closet. They had no fear of discovery; no innate compulsion to lurk in the shadows.*

*They were fashioned not of fur, fang nor claw but were no less deadly for it. They were born of a mother's rage at mankind for meddling in her affairs; for desecrating her beauty and timelessness. They were vengeful demons full of fury and raw power, hellbent on destruction.*

## PROLOGUE

Becca Hanson had seen them. She knew what they could do. And she was running from one of them now. She paused in the middle of the dark rain-drenched street to get her bearings, her slipped feet awash in ankle deep water. Sirens wailed incessantly. A sudden blast of wind slammed into her, violently snapping the loose folds of her robe and knocking her back a step. With both hands she tightened her grip on the two precious valuables that meant more to her than her own life.

Six year old Charlotte was on her left, clinging to her stuffed panda bear, eyes clenched tightly shut as if she were trying to will the storm away. On her right, eight year old Graham stood shivering, looking up to his mother for some measure of reassurance that she couldn't offer.

The dull glow from the street lamps penetrated through the rain just enough to tell her that the neighborhood was deserted. The majority of the residents had already sought shelter. She would have been amongst them had she not had to embark on a frantic search for Charlotte and Graham upon finding their bedroom deserted. She had finally found them. They'd been cowering in a linen closet on the lowest level of their house, their arms tightly wound around each other. Being several meters below ground level, she had debated crawling into the closet with them and shielding them as best she could with her own body. But she knew it wouldn't have been enough.

The sky lit up blindingly, white hot tracers arcing between black seething clouds. In the glare of the lightning, she noticed a small rectangular shadow gliding across the lawn next to a two-story brick apartment building. She looked higher and spotted a weather drone hovering near the rooftop. She had seen them before but only as tiny, indistinct dots in the sky, dutifully chasing the storms. This one had obviously strayed too close. Its ducted fans were spinning frantically as it struggled against the wind and rain just to stay aloft. As she watched, a sudden gust caught the floating platform, flipping it and sending it crashing into the side of the brick building. Its plastic shell shattered and fell, landing in a heap of debris in the shrubbery.

Another streak of lightning arced down, striking a satellite dish on a nearby house. Sparks skittered across the roof. She glanced down at the flooded street they were standing in. A tremor shot through her as she thought of what would happen if one of those lethal bolts were to strike near enough to electrify the water surging around their feet.

“Let’s go, kids!” she said, prodding them onward. She dashed for the sidewalk, dragging her children beside her, their tiny legs a blur of motion as they struggled to keep pace with their mother.

Caulfield Park was still two block away but she could already see the flashing green beacon that sat atop the community storm shelter in the middle of the park. It was right next to the playground she took her children to twice a week.

Their bedroom slippers slapped at the wet pavement as they ran. The first block passed quickly. But as her children grew tired, they trailed further and further in her wake. It was like dragging two fifty pound anvils behind her. She slowed as they approached the next street, hoping it would allow them time to catch their breath.

Rain streamed down her forehead and cheeks and cascaded off the tip of her nose. She swung her head back and forth to clear her vision and throw off as much of the water as she could. Then she chanced a look behind her. Her mouth dropped open. Amidst the churning black clouds, illuminated by the near constant flicker of lightning, a rotating vertical column of wind-driven destruction hung down from the sky. It swept back and forth, writhing like a serpent anxious for its next meal. In just the scant few seconds she watched, it grew noticeably larger as it bore down on them.

“Oh my God!” she screamed.

Desperation seized her. She lengthened her stride, praying that her kids could keep up. As she approached the next intersection there was so much standing water that it was hard to tell exactly where the curb dropped to street level. She misjudged the step, her foot dropping to the blacktop before she was ready and throwing her off balance. She went down in a flurry of splashes in the middle of the street, pulling her kids down with her. To her right, Graham hit the water in an indelicate belly flop, arms flailing wildly until he managed to pull himself to his hands and knees. On her left, the momentum of Charlotte’s fall plunged her beneath the surface. She came up gasping for air, still clutching the soaked panda to her chest.

Becca climbed to her feet and quickly pulled the children out of the torrent. Another flash of lightning and a glance skyward told her they were rapidly losing their race.

“Move! Now!” she shouted and bolted out of the street and onto the next block, hauling the children along beside her. She lost a waterlogged slipper. The sudden imbalance sent her into a canted lope. Without missing a stride, she hopped on her bare foot and, with a snapkick of her other leg, sent the remaining slipper hurtling off into the darkness. As long as they kept moving there was still a chance, she thought to herself. Just keep moving.

Up ahead, she could make out the shapes of other people. Frenetic moving shapes. All converging on the strobing green light that was beckoning them toward safety. She could hear

their frantic shouts as they called out to one another. She could hear something else as well. A low growling rumble that was rising in volume, so deep and resonant she could feel the vibrations in her chest.

Out of the upper periphery of her vision she glimpsed a streamer of fiery blue current lash out like a cobra at the transformer mounted on the pole directly above them. A boom like a cannon set her ears ringing. Charlotte screamed. Suddenly the air around them was alive with burning sparks. Fiery orange pellets of molten metal sizzled as they landed on the wet sidewalk. The street lamps winked out. One of the glowing metal shards settled on her wrist, searing the flesh. She stifled her own scream. The pain told her to release her grip and shake the burning fragment away but it was her motherly instinct, telling her to hang on to her child for dear life, that overrode the first impulse. She tightened her grip, let the ember burn deeper, and pressed on.

Without the glow of the street lamps to illuminate their course, all she could do was aim directly for the strobing green light, relying on the occasional burst of lightning to correct their course and avoid any obstacles in their path.

“Mommy! I’m tired!” Charlotte cried out. Becca didn’t slow; didn’t dare to. Beneath her bare feet, the harsh slap and scrape of cement suddenly turned to the soft tender prickle of grass. She knew they must be entering the park.

“We’re almost there, honey,” she yelled. “Just a little bit further!”

The voices of other people were growing louder, more feverish and more urgent. They were all around her now. She saw them with every white blaze of the sky; featureless wraiths in the gloom. They moved with a purpose, although in the strobe-like flashes of lightning they almost appeared to be standing still. They were everywhere. Some ran swiftly. Some hobbled slowly. Some were solitary forms. Some huddled in small groups. Yet all of them were blatantly obsessed with the single-minded goal of reaching the sanctuary offered by that luring green light.

They were close now. She could even make out the arched silhouette of the shelter, perhaps fifty meters away. Suddenly Becca’s right foot slammed into something solid. She tumbled, losing her grip on two tiny hands, her arms thrashing in a futile attempt to regain her balance. She landed hard, air exploding from her lungs.

Dazed, she saw a green light coming toward her. Was it the shelter growing still closer? How was that possible when she was lying prostrate on the ground? A strange whirring sound grew louder. Then a sudden fusillade of lightning ripped across the sky, illuminating the object she had tripped over. It was a robotic lawn mower about the size of a child’s wagon. Its green status light glowed bright and steady. The plastic cowling that normally covered its blades was missing, no doubt detached from the impact with her foot. That same impact must have also shifted its course. She quickly realized it was heading directly for her face, its rack of knifelike blades

spinning furiously.

There was no time to move. No time for anything. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed the end would be mercifully quick. "Obstruction detected," a tinny voice droned. "Shutting down." She opened her eyes to see the faint outline of the mower as it ground to a halt, the glistening blades only a centimeter away from her cheek. Atop its dome, the green light turned red.

Becca seized the opportunity and leaped to her feet. But as soon as she applied weight to her right leg, it buckled. A knot of searing agony tightened in her knee, forcing her back down into a kneel on her uninjured leg. Placing her hand atop her right thigh she pressed down, testing it. She could feel bones shifting and scraping behind her kneecap. She wasn't going anywhere.

Looking up, she could see Charlotte and Graham hovering over her. Their faces glowed an eerie poison green with each flash of the shelter's strobe light.

"We'll help you, mommy," Charlotte said.

Becca shook her head. "No! Just get to the shelter!"

"We're not leaving without you!" Graham insisted, his tiny hands balled into hard fists.

There was no time to argue. "Okay, come on!" she shouted and lifted up her arms. Her children swept in to either side of her, their mouths set, eyes narrowed as dogged determination pushed aside their fear. She rested her hands on their small shoulders, placing as much weight on them as she dared. Expecting their diminutive bodies to sag under the burden, she was astonished at how sturdy they actually felt.

Pulling herself up on her good leg, she found her balance and began hopping toward the shelter, her children pacing her on each side. The wind was a heaving monster now, threatening to knock them off their feet at any moment, hurling stinging slabs of rain at them. The roar was deafening.

Another jagged blade of lightning tore a hole in the night sky. An ear shattering boom rattled their eardrums. Flames erupted ahead of them. Through the orange haze, she watched as the massive oak tree that towered over the playground split down the centerline of its trunk. Chunks of bark and splinters of wood filled the air. Several people went down in the maelstrom, crying out in pain as the shrapnel tore into them.

The two halves of the tree parted ways. One section crushed the swing set and snapped a teeter totter in two. The other half came crashing down on the storm shelter's roof. The reinforced steel arches that formed the skeleton of the shelter did their job, resisting the crushing weight. The oak tree rebounded off the roof of the shelter, impacted again and rolled, twisting about its crooked axis. It had nearly come to rest at the very edge of the roofline when the base of the trunk tore away from the jagged stump. Screams rang out as the smoking

wooden wreck slipped free of the roof and plunged to the ground, directly in front of the shelter's only door.

"It's blocked!" a man bellowed. Screams of panic erupted from the crowd. People rushed in, tugging at branches, heaving at the unyielding trunk, trying desperately to clear a path to the doorway.

"It's no use," another man yelled in exasperation, followed by more cries of anguish. Then Becca heard an even more blood curdling noise behind her. It was the sound of rampant destruction. Lumber snapping, metal shearing and glass shattering. She saw others turn, their eyes glazed in horror. Then she spun around herself and watched as a cluster of houses were churned into a cloud of whirling debris.

The funnel was huge, easily a half kilometer across at its base, ravenously chewing up and spitting out row after row of buildings. It rocked back and forth, sweeping the ground with its unbridled devastation. It would be on them in seconds. This was the end. Becca went down on one knee and pulled her children close to her, gently covering their eyes with her hands. She could feel them trembling beneath her touch.

"Don't look," she said as calmly as she could. "I love you, Charlotte. I love you, Graham." They didn't answer her. They didn't need to. She lowered her head and listened to the keening howl of the unholy tempest that was about to consume them.

Something shrieked past just over their heads. She felt a momentary wave of intense heat. Looking up, she could make out a flaming ember in the night sky. It took her a moment to realize it was the exhaust of a rocket, spewing out a contrail of gray smoke behind it. It took another moment to realize it was heading directly for the tornado.

Before she could mentally process what this might mean, two more missiles shredded the air above them. They followed on the heels of their predecessor, belching hot gases that turned the rain in their wake to billowing clouds of steam.

Becca held her breath, waiting. She didn't have to wait long. The first missile hurtled toward its target, angling upward for the final few hundred meters. It pierced the swirling wall of wind, penetrating to the very heart of the twister. An explosion bloomed from within, tearing a gaping hole in the flank of the tornado, disrupting the cyclonic forces that fueled it. The funnel shuddered, its tip breaking away from the ground and lashing the air.

As Becca watched in awe, the vortex contracted, becoming denser, almost as if it were rallying its strength, tightening its defenses. But before it could recover, the other two missiles streaked in and detonated, flaring brightly, adding their potent destructive forces to the mix.

Flames gushed outward, tugging the swirling winds with them, diffusing them. Nature's sinister magic spell was broken. The funnel shrank, collapsing in on itself, becoming a ropelike thread.

Its base swung free, no longer grazing the ground, thrashing like a wounded eel. Then it came apart in a burst of spiraling eddies that faded into the night sky. The beast was dead.

Before anyone could react, the shockwaves from the three detonations advanced on them. Becca saw them as they neared, rippling the grass in an expanding circle, flinging rain out of their path. They came in quick succession, each one feeling like a solid blow as it swept past. Then it was over.

A cheer went up behind Becca but she barely heard it as she pulled her two children close to her and broke down in choking sobs of relief. The tornado sirens were still blaring but she thought she could hear a new higher-pitched wail join the din.

She glanced up to see a stormcruiser racing down the street. Its yellow and red warning lights blazed, sending up a shimmering haze as they reflected off the vehicle's glistening armored hull. A fresh triad of red-tipped missiles was already rotating into place atop its roof mounted launcher. She smiled as it passed by and said a silent prayer for the nameless, faceless crew that had just saved their lives.

## CHAPTER ONE

"Kill confirmed. Funnel terminated," Marta heard Kinney announce over the comm system in her helmet. Flipping up her gray-tinted enhanced reality visor to give her eyes a momentary rest, the glowing instrumentation and data displays that had surrounded her instantly evaporated, leaving only stark, smooth consoles of clear glass wrapping around her seat at the right front side of the stormcruiser.

She turned in her seat to glance back at Kinney. His square jaw was set, steel-blue eyes narrowed behind his own enhanced reality visor as he took in the virtual targeting data that she knew would be hovering in front of him. His gloved hands tapped and swiped at controls that were invisible to her unaided eyes. He had about him the calm, focused air of a career soldier.

She heard the familiar mechanized hum of servo motors overhead as three fresh SCH-4 missiles slid into the firing tubes. Then three distinct clunks as they were each latched into place. "Next salvo in position and armed," Kinney added.

"Roger that, Kinney," Marta called back over the intercom and continued to watch him. Then she flipped her visor back down. The transparent console that curved around him came alive with shimmering holographic projections. She felt an electric shiver rush up her spine as his burly hands slid across its surface, deftly manipulating a shifting maze of glowing icons with the steadiness and precision of a surgeon. She caught the subtle shift in his focus as he made eye contact with her. His features softened for a brief moment. He nodded. She returned the stark acknowledgement just as his attention veered back to his workstation.

As she swung back around in her chair, she let her gaze sweep over the man sitting next to her in the driver's seat. She paused long enough to drink in his smooth boyish face and the slight smirk that seemed permanently affixed there. She knew that Chaz was in his element as well. He lived for the thrill of the hunt, the exhilarating rush of speed and the bracing sense of danger that came with taking on one of nature's most destructive and unpredictable forces. At times like these, she found his youthful vigor intoxicating; arousing even, despite the fact she was nearly old enough to be his mother.

"Coming up on the town of Waurika," Chaz called out in his thick Carolina drawl. His right hand left the steering wheel just long enough to confirm that his crisp tan Stetson was still securely perched on a dark portion of the console beside him where he'd customized the control scheme to leave a void for his hat. Then the squealing whine of the turbine spooled down an octave as they slowed. "Or what's left of it," Chaz added in a low tone.