

CHAPTER ONE

OAKDALE, WA., 2013

A YEAR AFTER the world ended, Kylie sat on the floor at her boyfriend's house, picking through stacks of DVDs. The living room was small and over-crowded with deep bookcases, bulky leather chairs and a matching sofa big as a Buick. The carpet held dust like a dry sponge. It hadn't been vacuumed since Judgment Day. Once a week a power strip drew electricity for the TV setup plus one pole lamp. A thick extension cord snaked out of the living room and through the kitchen window to a noisy generator on the back porch. Most of the time Kylie was used to the lack of animating electricity. But when movie night ended and Billy switched the gennie off, the house always felt dead to her again. She wouldn't give up the movies, though. Not for anything.

Kylie was eighteen and hungry for things she couldn't have. "This one?" she said, holding up a movie.

Billy slumped in a corner of the sofa with a warm can of Mountain Dew in his lap. He looked up. His

shaggy beard and patchy hair made him look older than he really was – though he was already pretty old for Kylie. At thirty-five Billy was played out, overweight, and impotent. Well, all the men in Oakdale were impotent, not just Billy; the poison rain saw to that. It also accounted for the patchy hair. At least Billy hadn't scabbed up yet. His eyes were mostly clear, his finger and toe nails hadn't fallen off, his breath was mostly okay. It was all coming, though; everybody got it bad, eventually. Everybody except Kylie.

Usually Billy drank beer or wine, especially on movie night. The Mountain Dew didn't make him as happy. Not that he was *ever* exactly 'happy'. But when he was drunk, at least, he tended to be less gloomy. Billy wasn't drunk now. His shirt was untucked and missing a couple of buttons. Billy's navel squinted in a wiry tangle of black hair. He nodded at Kylie's movie choice. "Again? Sure, yeah."

The cover of the DVD case depicted a man and a woman: John Cusack and Ione Skye – Lloyd and Diane in the movie; two people no doubt annihilated by *The Judgment* (as Father Jim called it) but miraculously existent in Kylie's hand, their endlessly repeating lives waiting to be unlocked by laser light. Kylie pried the case open. She tilted the silver disk under the lamp, watching colors bend over its surface. Then she fed it into the machine and sat next to Billy on the sofa. He slung his arm around her, pointed the clicker and pushed PLAY. The empty blue screen filled with images of a lost world and the things Kylie couldn't have.

Two hours later she said, "They were meant for each other."

"Movie people," Billy said.

She snuggled against his body. He was big and warm. Well, he was bound to be big, with all the crap he ate. Kylie rested her head on his chest, which rose and subsided heavily with each breath. Her nose twitched at the sour smell of his sweat. But she didn't mind that. He took care of her, protected her. She thought: *I love him*. Like telling herself something and hoping she believed it. *I love Billy*. But maybe not like Diane loved Lloyd.

Billy came from outside the town. This was almost unheard of. Wanderers did occasionally straggle into Oakdale but they tended to straggle right back out again. Unless they were skin-and-bone people, SABs, in which case townies *drove* them back out. Billy had grown up in Oakdale, but had been gone almost as long as Kylie had been alive, and so his arrival in the aftermath of disaster was simply a return home.

"Do you want to watch a sex one now?" she asked. Kylie didn't really get the sex movies, the pornos. But sometimes watching a little of one got Billy in the mood, even if his poisoned body could no longer perform the way men in those movies did. Kylie was more turned on by *love* scenes. In a love scene you saw people who cared about each other kissing and caressing. Maybe once in a while there was a bare breast or exposed behind, but it was the love that mattered. Kylie was the youngest survivor in town and the only one not sick. That's probably why she still cared about love scenes.

"I don't think so," Billy said.

"Are you sure?"

He patted her shoulder. "I don't really like them anymore," he said. "They're depressing."

"Oh. What about one of your gangster movies or Westerns?"

“They’re depressing, too.”

“It’s okay, Billy. Don’t be sad again.”

“I’m not sad.”

“Do you want a beer?”

“I don’t think so.”

They were quiet a while.

“Let’s go to bed,” Kylie said.

Billy grunted. He turned off the TV and the DVD player then got up to kill the generator. He carried his extra weight awkwardly. Billy ate a *lot* of crap food. He hoarded it in the spare bedroom, cases of Doritos, potato chips, candy bars and soda pop. “Might as well eat what I want,” he liked to say. “All bets are off.”

Kylie lit a candle that smelled like strawberries. A minute later the generator cut out. In the absence of its muted racket the profound silence of the world returned. It was God listening to the souls of the survivors. That’s what Father Jim said, and the hundred or so dying, rag-tail remnant souls of Oakdale believed in Father Jim. Kylie used to believe in him, too. In fact, she used to be hooked up with him – *definitely* not like Diane and Lloyd; but all that was before.

To Kylie the silence was like a bottomless well into which everything she knew had been discarded – every comfort and familiar joy and expectation, every hope. Even Kylie’s father was in the well, she supposed, though he had been gone anyway for many years. Her mother, who said her rosary every day, maintained her own silence on the subject of Kylie’s father. He was dead by now, anyway. The Judgment had killed almost everybody outright. Those few who survived were dying by slow inches.

Except for Kylie.

In the bedroom she stripped down to a t-shirt and panties. The t-shirt was gray with black letters that spelled: PROPERTY OF U DUB, one of Billy's old shirts. Kylie liked candlelight, enjoyed the way it fell on the pages of the books she found in Billy's house. She looked through a collection of poems by Yeats, hoping Billy would come in soon. Mostly she didn't understand the poems (Robert Frost was easier and Charles Bukowski the *best*) but she liked how the words sounded together in her mind and the way the lines of black type assembled in orderly ladders on the thick white paper. She read silently, moving her lips. Her father used to read to her when she was very little. Kylie remembered that much about him.

Lying on her back, reading, Kylie had a strange feeling she wasn't alone. She looked up. The blinds were open and the window was a black mirror capturing a girl, a book, and a candle. Then Billy appeared in the doorway and she let the feeling go. He didn't come in but only stood there, the candle making shadows on his face, hiding his eyes.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Nothing. Maybe I'll stay up for a while."

She put her book on the bedside table. "Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"I really don't want to be alone."

He didn't say anything.

She patted the bed beside her. "Come on."

He scratched his cheek, stalling.

"Don't you want to be with me?"

For a moment it seemed he really *didn't*, and Kylie's heart sank.

"Course I do," he said, not very convincingly. He lay beside her, the mattress springs groaning. Like he's

doing her this big favor. Kylie stifled her irritation, tried to relax back into the right mood. After a while she said, “Touch me,” and he began to caress her breasts. His hand knew what it was doing, even if the rest of him was checked out. Kylie closed her eyes and let her mind hover around certain images from the movies, and then she slid her hand between her thighs. After a long while, her breathing changed. She made a sound in her throat. Some of it was acting, like people in the movies, but not all of it. She slipped her hand inside her panties. Things became mixed up in her mind, Billy and Lloyd and John Cusack and the good feeling of her body, and the way her dreadful loneliness retreated. Time began to unwind in sensation, and then the acting part was over, and the heat built and spread through her thighs and belly until it became bigger and bigger and was through all her body and she was almost *outside* of herself with the intensity of it. She arched her hips and cried out: “I love you, I love you, I love you,” like that had to be part of it, then fell back, panting, while the glow subsided.

She wanted to cuddle now. Touching herself could banish loneliness for a few moments, but sometimes when Billy held her it was as though loneliness could be extinguished forever. Not this time, though. She slung her arm and leg over him, and he held her but was distant, staring at the ceiling.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” she said.

“Nothing. I’m thinking.”

“What about?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

He patted her raggedy hair. Kind of patronizing. Kylie made a face. Her mother cut Kylie’s hair short, using

the big kitchen shears, and it was uneven and choppy. Kylie *hated* her hair.

“I wish you would get undressed one of these times,” Kylie said.

“What would be the point?” Suddenly he crushed her hard against his body. He was trembling, and she could hardly breathe, he held her so tight. Then he let go and stood up, wiped his eyes and put his glasses back on. He turned away and said, “I’m going to stay up for a while.”

She started to get up.

“Kylie, I want to sit by myself and think.”

She chewed her lip, said, “I love you,” throwing it out there like a ball he was supposed to swat back to her. She didn’t even believe herself. She was scared was all. Why couldn’t it be simple and real?

“Love you too,” he said.

“I doubt it.”

He looked back at her. “I really do, Kylie.”

“How about a beer?” she said. There was plenty of beer in town, since Father Jim told everyone God didn’t want them to drink ‘spirits’. Billy never quit, though. Billy didn’t give a shit what Father Jim said. And Billy was so much better with the beer.

“Naw,” he said, “I’m sick of warm beer.”

There was plenty of beer but the fire-extinguishers had run out ages ago. Billy had used the fire-extinguishers to cool off six-packs. He didn’t want to waste generator fuel running a refrigerator. Because Father Jim had told everybody God wanted them to live simply, without electricity (“God’s a real killjoy in this town,” Billy liked to say), Billy was the only one using a generator; but sooner or later the gas would be gone, and that would be the end of movie night.

“Anyway,” he said.

He pulled the door shut behind him. She felt like everything was ruined from the inside out. Kylie stared at the door like she was staring at some pain inside her secret heart, which she was.

ALONE IN BED, she listened to the deep-well silence and fought off tears. Crying didn't do any good. The town dentist, Dr. Lee, had cried himself crazy after The Judgment left him standing but killed his wife and kids. Eventually his crazy tears got *him* killed, too, which Kylie guessed was all right with Dr. Lee.

She thought about getting up and closing the blinds. Instead she rolled onto her side, yawning, drawing her knees up, exhausted. Random pictures drifted through her mind, like clouds in a foreign sky, and she passed into sleep.

Some time later the sound of the generator entered her awareness and putt-putted her awake. She opened her eyes, not fully conscious. The candle, bed and girl floated in the black glass, and something else. Kylie blinked slowly, not really taking anything in, her mind mostly asleep. But she had to pee, and she got up and padded out of the room.

Billy was watching the TV. She could hear it while she was in the bathroom, squatting over a bucket. Her pee rang against the galvanized tin. She struggled to remember something on the edge of her mind. Had she dreamed of the normal days again? Somehow remembering those days didn't hurt but dreaming about them left her feeling disoriented – almost as if her dreams were real and her reality a bad dream.

She finished peeing, covered the bucket with a towel, pulled on a pair of tight black Levi's, and went down the hall. Billy lay on the sofa, facing away from the set, the light shifting on the broad back of his wrinkly shirt. Seven or eight bottles of the beer he was so sick of stood empty, guarding a tower of DVDs. Billy's favorite Western was playing. *Tombstone*. The volume was low, but she heard Val Kilmer say, "I'm your huckleberry," followed by a gunshot. Kylie touched Billy's shoulder.

"Are you awake?" she said

"Yeah." He rolled over and faced her, his eyes bleary. He reached for a bottle, like a reflex.

"Are you still sad?" Kylie asked.

"More like drunk. But don't worry – I'm turning over a new leaf as of right now. Anyway, I am as soon as the beer wears off."

She sat on the edge of the sofa. "What new leaf?"

"Kylie, if that crazy priest knew what we were up to he'd probably chop my head off. You know how he's always blathering about 'purity' and all that shit. Besides, I think he'd like to chop my head off just on general principles, since I'm the only one around here besides you not falling into lock-step."

Father Jim delivered weekly sermons standing in the bed of a burned out F-350 in the middle of Main Street. He really worked on those sermons – and the sermons really worked on *him*. Like everybody else in town, except Billy, Kylie showed up to listen. There was pressure to do so, an un-stated threat if you didn't. Nevertheless, she would have quit going except that Billy told her that was a bad idea, told her it would draw attention to her. Father Jim's early sermons had been almost incoherent, filled with emotion and

desperation. But over the last few months the priest seemed to be *building* something. To Kylie it sounded like he was building the world from the inside of his head. The Judgment had come sheeting out of the sky like a vast white lightning, killing billions in an instant, transforming most of the world into blasted destruction and leaving the survivors to fade into a slower, more cruel death. In his sermons Father Jim was practically writing a new book for the Bible. The Word According To Jim made sense out of what didn't make sense.

"I wonder," Billy said, "how that idiot felt about purity *before* God took the steel out of his dick. "

"He felt guilty, I think."

Billy grunted. Father Jim had been a pilot in the Marines, and he still retained a private license. The way he started with Kylie was by giving her flying lessons in his Cessna. Eventually that's what they called it when they were going to meet for the other things: flying lessons.

"That was just him grooming you," Billy told her. "Like he did practically your whole life. The bastard."

She had told Billy about Father Jim. The priest had always been around, but the grown up part, the really bad part, began when she was sixteen and ended, abruptly, a year later when the world did the same.

What she hadn't told Billy was how *crazy* Jim had sometimes acted. Once, they had sex on the day bed in her mother's basement. Her mother, a nurse, had been at work. Father Jim pulled out of Kylie before he finished, disappeared into the bathroom, and stayed there a long time. Kylie got up to see what was wrong. (Of course at this point, deep down, she knew *everything* was wrong). The door was open a little, so she said his

name and pushed it open wider. Jim stood there naked, his half-erect cock bloody from multiple nicks. He held a Gillette blade between his thumb and forefinger, the tab of blue steel shining in the fluorescent light. He had taken it out of the pink safety razor her mother used to shave her legs. She always shaved in the downstairs bathroom because the light was better. The empty razor now sat on the edge of the sink behind Jim. He stared at Kylie with guilt-stricken eyes and said, “What we do isn’t *right*. I have to mortify my appetites.” Shocked, Kylie couldn’t look away. That was probably a mistake. Jim seemed to get something out of her looking at him. In moments the superficial little cuts ceased to effectively mortify his ‘appetites’. He pushed her back to the bed and took her, grunting with pain and animal excitement. No, it hadn’t been anything like Lloyd and Diane.

“Mom says The Judgment unbalanced him,” Kylie said to Billy.

“Yeah. Unbalanced like Charlie Manson. Don’t forget the dentist.”

Instead of Dr. Lee she pictured a sign that used to hang in the dentist’s waiting room: *A smile is your first bello!* Near the end, the man used to stand on the roof of the Ace Hardware store yelling at God. Father Jim hadn’t appreciated that blasphemy. He hadn’t actually chopped Dr. Lee’s head off, but he *had* whacked it pretty hard with a baseball bat.

“I doubt that idiot appreciates you living with me.”

“Who cares what he appreciates,” Kylie said.

Billy picked up a DVD case. *The Dong of Man*. There were two naked ‘cave women’ on the cover, also a guy with a thick black mustache wearing a bear pelt, or

maybe it was just his own chest. Billy had found the pornos on top of a bookshelf. The two bedroom ranch house had belonged to Billy's father, a retired history professor and Oakdale's only resident atheist. Growing up in Oakdale, Billy liked to say, was like growing up a leper in Mayberry. Billy had one of his gloomy quiet days when he found *The Dong of Man* and the other pornos. He didn't talk about it, but Kylie guessed the videos made him think of his history prof dad in a way he didn't like to think of him.

"It used to be everybody got off once in a while," Billy said, waving the DVD. "Now it's only you."

"Have another beer," Kylie said, hoping that yet *more* alcohol would cheer him up.

"No. Listen, we have to talk seriously."

"What about?" Something was nagging at the back of her mind and had been since she woke to the sound of the generator. Something she had seen. It seemed to her she must have seen it in a dream, this scary thing that she couldn't quite recall, couldn't quite bring into focus.

"Leaving Oakdale," Billy said.

She stared at him. "But it's too dangerous outside of town."

"It's getting too dangerous *inside* of town. I've been planning this since everybody started paying too much attention to that lunatic priest. You said yourself he's even started mentioning me in his sermons-on-the-Ford."

"But where would you go?"

"Back to the Big Boat." The Big Boat was what Billy called the *USS Carl Vinson*, an aircraft carrier stranded in sudden shallows after The Judgment. A small number of survivors lived on the carrier, most of them Navy personnel, though there were also some stragglers like

Billy. Billy had been living in Seattle but was visiting a friend in Bremerton, a port town south of Oakdale, when the world ended. “Kylie, I thought you might—”

“But why would you go there? You said everybody was dying and some of them were crazy. Just like here.”

“Take it easy—”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“Come with me. There’s more to the world even now than this stupid hick town. Don’t you want to see the Dome? It’s pretty close to the Big Boat. At night you can see the glow.”

Billy had talked about the giant Dome before, how it stood over the place where Seattle had been, but it was so fantastic and Billy was usually so drunk, that she hardly believed him.

“Come on, Billy. That can’t be real.”

“It’s real.” Billy looked at her seriously. “It covers the whole city, and you can see through it a little bit. Like you can see the buildings and water, but everything is all wavy and dim, like looking through thick green glass.” He held his empty beer bottle, bottom-up, to Kylie’s eye. “Kind of like this. Kylie, there’s a reason I want you to come with me.”

“Because you love me so much?”

“Yeah, sure. But—”

She pushed the bottle aside. “I couldn’t leave my mom, Billy. She’d be all alone.”

“She’s as frightened as everybody else.” Billy swung his feet to the floor, fumbled for the clicker and turned *Tombstone* off. “But Kylie, I *have* to go – and soon. We both do, before Jim gets your neighbors whipped into a real mob. And everybody being afraid of the world outside Oakdale can work in our favor.”

“They aren’t a *mob*,” Kylie said, deeply distracted now, looking around the room to make sure the blinds were all closed; the thing she had seen without registering was coming closer. She could almost remember.

“They aren’t yet,” Billy said. “But it’s only a matter of time before— What’s wrong?”

Kylie stood up. The thing had finally come forward. In the bedroom’s black glass mirror window: a bed, a candle, herself... and behind the reflections a face swam into view, and Kylie caught her breath.

“I think Father Jim is outside.”