

## Chapter 1

“In what we would come to call Year Zero, a deadly virus was released in early fall by a madman. The records for that year are suspect, but the number of dead appears consistent with my own observations. Approximately 40% of the population died worldwide. We were not equipped to handle such a broad scale calamity. Nor were we prepared when it returned the following summer.”

*History of a Changed World, Angus T. Moss*

Gale force winds rammed into Nick forcing him back into the train station. Rain slashed at him raking his skin like cold claws. Drenched in a second, half blind against the wind, he staggered into the building. The door slammed behind him, rattling under the assault of dangerous weather.

“Told ya.” Frank shook his head in exaggerated dismay. “Shoulda listened.” He stood far enough from the door to remain dry. The only note of untidiness about him was a stray curl of hair standing up from the wind Nick had let in. His blue National Train Authority uniform was spotless.

“Should have known you to be right,” Nick agreed. He dropped his pack and bedroll to wipe his face. “Looks like I’m stuck here for the night.”

Frank gave him a condescending nod. “The forecast was for category three winds ‘til past midnight. What’s got you in such a hurry to get back?”

Nick shrugged his uneasiness away. This trip had been different for a couple of reasons, but nothing he wanted to share with Frank. “Just want to sleep in my own bed,” he said honestly.

“Can’t blame you for that. Good trip?”

“Making progress.”

“Good to hear.” Frank’s response was professionally cheerful. He didn’t ask intrusive questions and was always satisfied with vague answers. “Got to check on the 8:27. I think it’s coming late.” He bobbed his head in a slight bow, turned on his heel and strode off to the control booth.

Nick grabbed his gear and headed for the shelter cubbies. High Meadow was one of the older style stations, built just as the world was coming to grips with climate change. It was barely far enough underground to remain in operation. Despite the thick walls and storm proofing, Nick could hear the howl of the wind and the pounding of the rain. But no thunder. He breathed a sigh of relief. Probably no tornados tonight. He considered using one of the ether booths to send a message to Angus, but was too tired to retrace his steps. Angus probably wouldn’t see the message until tomorrow anyway, and Nick would be there by then.

An older woman, thin as a rail, in an NTA uniform came up toward him on the stairs to the lower level. The tailored blue jacket and slacks hung on her bones, a size too big. Another symptom of the changed world. The downsizing of the population left a lot of resources behind, but not enough people to run the factories that would make new ones. So the people left had to make do with what was at hand. Nick didn’t recognize her. He knew most of the people that manned High Meadow. She moved with a slight hitch to her walk, climbing the stairs slowly, arthritis maybe.

“Evening,” he said politely.

She cast a measuring glance over him. Her eyes lingered a moment on the bedroll, then took in his two-day old scruff and wet clothes. It took a minute for her to complete her scrutiny. She startled at his green eyes, her gaze going directly to his neck to check for a tattoo.

“Evening.” She climbed past him a bit quicker.

He got that reaction sometimes. People wondering if he was human. Green eyes and dark brown hair wasn’t that odd of a combination. He’d stopped saying that his mother had had green eyes. Maybe if he’d had her red hair, it wouldn’t look out of place. The woman’s fear that he might be a biobot made him wonder if she’d seen any. It made him want to tell her that they could look normal, too. Before Zero Year, all the biobots he’d seen could have passed as human. That’s why they started tattooing them in the first place. But in all his travels over the past ten years, he’d never encountered one. They might have been wiped out by the virus after all.

The shelter level was well-lit. A long corridor of shiny white walls and glossy black enamel doors with black and white tiled floors stretched out before him. Each cubby was self-contained, lights, potable water, toilet, sleeping space. Although originally designed to be used in a disaster, Nick had seen several stations that had permanent residents. Knowing the rooms by the stairs were the ones used most often, he went halfway down the long corridor and chose one with a picture of an acorn on the door. Pictures now, not numbers, marked the cubbies, which probably meant the illiteracy level was rising.

The cell-sized room was immaculate and smelled of antiseptic. The NTA people were very thorough. Proud to have jobs in a world that had no industries left. He tossed his bedroll on the shiny metal shelf that passed for a bed, hoping the waterproofing held. It was a relief to be still for a minute. He’d been travelling for six days and the ultra-fast trains took a toll. He peeled off his wet clothing and dried off with the towel he carried in his pack. The clothes probably wouldn’t dry tonight, but he draped them on the row of coat hooks that lined one wall anyway.

He sat on the shelf with a groan. He’d been gone longer than planned. There’d been some unexpected complications. Things that he wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to Angus about. Nick had been gathering information for Angus’s history book for the past three years. It gave him a purpose. A reason to go out into the world and talk to people. He was a man that needed those things— purpose, reason, order. Without them he was too easily lost in regrets and sorrow for all the people he’d lost. Whenever the ghosts and darkness came calling, he got out his pack and bedroll and went searching for new communities. The world had shattered, and Angus was trying to knit it back together with cobwebs and good intentions. It was a cause he could easily support.

He’d found a couple new communities to add to Angus’s list. New lists of people and commodities. He searched abandoned towns for tools, books on self-sufficiency and any preserved foodstuffs still good after ten years on the shelf. This trip he’d found things that were all too unsettling.

Wind whined down the corridor outside the cubby and fingered the doors. Nick shivered, pulling on dry clothes quickly. He made a dinner of the packaged food stocked in every station. Boring but nutritious, the food only came in two kinds nicknamed Crunch and Stew-goo. He had one of each. Crunch was slightly sweet and would pass for dessert. He was eager to get home to the med center where he’d get a meal of real food, a hot shower and a bed with clean sheets. It made him a little uneasy sometimes that he called a re-purposed high school home. The world had changed that much.

He took out the waterproof sack to make sure his new discoveries were still in good shape. He’d found four boxes of table salt and one of sugar. Those were always welcome. A few good knives, three skeins of red wool and some odd notebooks wrapped in a frayed silk scarf. He’d

glanced through the notebooks once. He wouldn't do so again. His own journal held the information Angus wanted—how many souls in a community, how many born or died each year, where were they from, how well were they surviving. Sometimes when he asked those questions people would get choked up. Stunned that anyone still wanted to know.

The first year that he started collecting he had often been the sole occupant in the train cars. Initially, it was a mystery to him as to why what was left of a struggling government would spend the time and effort to keep the train system running. But as he traveled, he figured it out. Partly, it kept the system in good repair. Partly it was needed to distribute the yearly vaccines. But the biggest reason was emotional. Despite the storms and drought and sickness, trains were arriving on time. It was one tiny foothold of normalcy in a world that didn't know itself any more.

He woke the next morning to the sound of the air scrubbers. He wandered upstairs to check the weather. Sunbeams slanted down through the skylights striping the concourse with light and dark. It was safe to go.

The location of the med center had been chosen with the proximity of the High Meadow station in mind. It was a fairly new school complex with a recessed profile and surrounding storm baffles, finished the year before the world changed. Before the virus downsized the human population. According to the records left behind, it had been used for two years, but the curfews put an end to schools. It was abandoned and went unused for four years. In Year Five, Angus found it and claimed it. Then he began inviting like-minded people to move in.

The walk from the station had become so familiar that Nick didn't notice the abandoned homes any more. Block after block of empty houses slowly falling apart behind yards gone to seed. A few older homes had been torn apart by the weather. Pieces of them were scattered across yards and driveways. The council had talked about reclaiming some of them. The newer ones designed to withstand the superstorms would be useful for new families, but the med center hadn't reached capacity yet. People felt safer in groups. So the idea was scrapped. Nick took a new look at the houses as he walked down the fissured asphalt road. He should put together a team to search all of them for anything useful. Every year their needs changed. What they hadn't wanted before, they might need now.

Nick topped the rise of the small hill above the med center. He could see most of the campus from here. People were out working in the cool of the morning. The sky was a hard deep blue, sure to be brutally hot by the afternoon. The rising sun glinted off the lightning collection grids on the massive bulk of the storm baffles. As he started down the hill, the solar panels rose and turned their faces towards the sun. The Growers Committee bickered as they took the storm sheeting off the growing fields, which had once been the storm-proofed athletic fields. One of the main reasons Angus had chosen this place was the possibility of using those areas to grow food. Superstorms made short work of crops grown in unprotected fields. The football field was carved up into tidy vegetable plots. The soccer and track fields had been combined for a checkerboard of grains—wheat, amaranth, corn and millet. Old man Larson and his grandson herded their small flock of chickens to forage in the new orchard area. Nick felt proud of what they'd accomplished in the five years they'd been here.

He waved to the pair of men on Watch at the edge of the campus. They'd had little trouble since settling here. Nick worried that they'd grown complacent. He wanted to talk to Martin, the head of the Watch, to make sure they had some contingency plans in place. This trip had made him edgy. The med center looked ill prepared for any kind of confrontation.

The minute he entered the glass doors to the big foyer, he could smell breakfast cooking. His stomach growled as he made a beeline for the cafeteria. The enormous space, designed to serve a minimum of five hundred students, had been chopped up into smaller rooms with dividers pilfered from one of the auditoriums. There was a general eating area by the kitchen, a small area for meetings and a lounge that had recently received the upgrade of a firepit. In the climate-controlled buildings, they didn't need fire for warmth, but Angus had been wanting one for some time. There was something soothing about watching a fire, a primal penchant in the human spirit that made people want to gather around.

Nick waved to the few folks lingering over their meals. He was almost too late, breakfast had been served and eaten. He hurried over to check the steam tables. To accommodate their hundred or so residents, they had significantly downsized the original cafeteria line. The extra refrigeration cases, counters and steam tables were carefully packed away in storage to use as replacements. Angus didn't waste anything. Nick was glad to see that there was plenty of food left. He grabbed a tray and started loading it up.



Tilly considered herself Lady of the Manor and accepted all the responsibilities implied in that office. She and her husband, Angus, had taken on the duty of running a med center with eyes wide open. The registration people had frowned over their ages. It was true she and Angus were way past retirement age, but did that even apply anymore? They had the inclination and skills to make it work. From the beginning, she had tried to take on as much of the daily operations as possible so Angus could be free to do what he did best. She got people placed, fed and clothed. He kept the facilities working, the clinic up to date and posted storm warnings. If he was the beating heart of this center, she was the busy hands.

Tilly looked over the food inventory with a sinking feeling. She and the head cook, Susan, were working out how best to use today's odd combination of produce with the dwindling supplies of oil, salt and vinegar. They had green peppers and tomatoes by the bushel full, very little left of the new potatoes and no onions. Last night's storm must have spooked the hens because there were only a few eggs this morning. Susan used up most of the previous day's eggs with the breakfast omelet before they'd heard. They needed to have another planning session with the Growers Committee. She looked around the industrial kitchen, appliances for every conceivable chore and so little raw materials to work with.

A deep voice called her attention out to the eating area. Nick was back. Finally. Another day and she'd have been concerned. Tilly liked Nick, and not just because of the way he treated Angus. He was polite and smart. Two things that she felt spoke to a man's character. He kept his dark hair short and his face clean-shaven. Another statement. Just because the world had turned upside down didn't mean people had to start looking like barbarians. There was still hot water and soap available. Although sometimes you had to forage for the soap. Nick had a competent look to him. You just knew he could turn those long-fingered hands to anything from a chainsaw to a needle and thread. It didn't hurt that he had rugged good looks and the nicest green eyes she'd ever seen. But not nicer than Angus's sparkling blue eyes, which could still put a silly grin on her face.

"I think Nick's back," Tilly said. Susan was on her feet and moving toward the pass-through to check. Tilly saw Susan's face light up when she caught sight of him.

"He'll need to speak with Angus first thing," Tilly said.

“Of course.” Susan smoothed her apron as she watched Nick load up a plate with eggs from the steam table. “Got a treat,” she called to him. Her eyes crinkled in a smile. She tucked a stray curl back into the braid of light brown hair that ran down her back to her waist.

“I can smell it,” he answered with a grin. “Been too long. Nothing like a good cup of joe!”

Susan leaned on the counter, head sticking out of the pass-through. “Any new contacts?”

“A few. But they’ve just gotten started. Won’t have anything for trade for a while.”

“Oh, well. Eat up while it’s still hot.”

Tilly watched the interchange approvingly. Susan and Nick would be an excellent couple. She’d been encouraging it for some time. Nick needed an anchor. Susan needed to produce a few children sooner, rather than later. Every woman needed to. If Tilly wasn’t past her bearing years, she’d be considering it herself. It didn’t matter how many they lost. She let her mind skip over that thought. No one here was unscarred. Every single person living had lost family and friends to the virus. And they lost more every year. So it was down to simple math. They needed to keep adding to the population.

Susan returned to the table where they did their planning. “Do we have any cucumbers? I could do gazpacho again.”

Tilly groaned. “I think we’ve all had enough gazpacho.” Between the uneven supply of crops and unskilled labor, it was difficult to produce good meals consistently. But five years into their residence, they were nearly self-sufficient. They only had to rely on train food occasionally. Like maybe tonight.



Nick loaded a little of everything on to his tray—omelet, salsa, roasted potatoes and a gloppy mix of amaranth and cornmeal. No bread today. He was disappointed. The spring wheat was supposed to be harvested while he was gone. He checked the tables. Angus waved to him from a seat by the window. The storm shutters were fully retracted allowing sunlight to shine off every surface including Angus’s unruly white hair. It gave him a bright halo. As usual, Angus’s table was covered with notebooks and pads, his knobby, veined hands working over paper and keyboards.

Nick nudged a pile aside and put his tray down. Angus brought his attention up from his studies and focused his bright blue eyes on Nick.

“I’m glad you didn’t try to brave the storm,” Angus said. He reached over and patted Nick’s hand. “Good to have you back.”

“It was too much even for me.”

“Even for you,” Angus chuckled. “You are late. I hoped that wasn’t an indication of trouble.”

Nick pulled a thick stack of folders out of his pack to hand over to Angus. “I think you’ll be very pleased.” He dug into his breakfast.

Angus laid the stack on the table and gave it a pat. “Anything out of the ordinary?”

Nick nodded with a mouth full. “Couple of dead ends...” He took a sip of coffee. “And a murder.”

“Murder. Well, that sort of thing was quite common pre-virus. Though it pains me to find that as a species we are too stupid not to stop killing each other when we are facing extinction. Although from what you tell me, the virus has left us plenty of fools. What about this caught your attention?”

“It was an odd situation. Young girl. On her own, I think.”

“A young girl murdered? Are you sure? Was it a rumor?”

"I saw the body. She was shot."

"Oh dear. I'm sorry you saw that, Nicky. How sad. And you're sure it was murder?"

Nick halted a laden fork to speak. "From the look of the scene, she shot back."

"I think that is the lawman in you speaking. " Angus sat back folding his hands over one another on his stomach in his customary thinking position. "You believe there is more to it."

Nick gave him a dip of the head in agreement.

"Where did this happen?"

"Clarkeston."

"You've been there before without trouble. What's it like?"

"Not much different than here." He said with a gesture toward the windows. "Built around a med center. They specialize in wool, so everybody's got sheep. Might want to remember them when we're getting ready to barter some of the grain."

"When did this murder occur?"

"From the looks of it, a few days ago. Shot through the heart."

"Good heavens, what fool did this? Don't they know we can't afford that now? There are cities that have been completely depopulated. We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of crime! We need every human being left on this planet!"

Nick sipped the last drops of his coffee. "I know that," he said in what he hoped was a calming voice. He didn't think Angus needed to know about the other body, yet. Until he had all the facts, Nick didn't want to worry him.

"Kill a young girl." Angus threw up a hand in disgust. "She was of childbearing age?"

"She seemed young, but the body was a few days old." He finished the last bites quickly.

Angus slumped with a sigh. "How can people be so short sighted? What could a young woman have done to deserve being shot?"

Nick pushed his tray to one side. "The virus didn't change the fact that some people are flat out crazy," he said gently. He and Angus were old enough to remember the time before, when cities had police forces fighting violence of all kinds. When gangs killed indiscriminately and there were recreational poisons that people chose to put in their bodies. "I checked around. No one saw the murder. No one missed the girl."

"We would have missed her," Angus snapped back indignantly.

Nick nodded. Angus's settlement was a utopia compared to some of the places he'd seen. They had a Council and a Watch. People took care of one another. It was all because of the tone Angus set, thoughtful, gentle, caring man that he was. Nick had seen settlements that were little more than refugee camps, a few that were run with cold, military precision and others that were run by self-appointed tyrants. It was a new system, and the bugs hadn't been worked out, yet. A touch of anarchy that worried Nick. Why wasn't there anyone supervising the creation of settlements and med centers?

"She wouldn't have been shot here," Nick assured him. "Clarkeston is big. Spread out. They don't have a watch, and their council is shoddy. She lived at the edge of the population zone. It was down the street from an address I tracked down. The front door was off its hinges on an otherwise nice house. I went in to check and saw the body. When I went to report it to Clarkeston's council, they said they already knew. A family tried to move into the house and only went close enough to smell it. They reported the death, but that settlement doesn't have anyone to look into stuff like that."

"Why would a young girl be alone?" Angus was persistent in his questioning.

“Why are any of us alone, Angus?” Nick couldn't keep the sadness out of his voice. All the deaths behind him, all the lost loved ones he carried in his heart weighed heavily on him at times like this.

“We're not, Nicky.” Angus grabbed his arm and squeezed gently. “We have each other. We have all these others,” he said gesturing outward. “Good people that care about us.”

“Yes. Sorry. Seeing some of these other places gets me down.”

“It's hard.” Angus patted him. “Hard to see how stupid and petty we still are when our very existence depends on cooperation.”

Nick pulled a small bundle out of his pack. “I think this is hers. I found it in a bedroom.” He unwrapped a silk scarf to show several small notebooks.

“Where is the poor girl now?”

“I buried her.”

“Thank you, Nicky. Always a gentleman. Poor child.” Angus took the top notebook and flipped through it. “Do we even know her name?”

“I haven't had time to look through them.” He didn't say that just holding those books had brought on such deep depression that he'd wasted the afternoon staring into space and mourning the loss of a sweet young girl who liked to scribble in notebooks. Nor the cold fear he'd felt when he'd looked through the one that was dog-eared and grubby. Nick left Angus paging through the notebooks and took his tray to the kitchen.

“How is it out there?” Martin Asbury leaned against the wall by the dish station. Dark haired and dark eyed, he radiated strength. The head of the Watch asked the same question every time Nick returned. In a time when last names were cast off or reinvented, Martin had taken on the fashion of using a dead city as his last name. Asbury Park, like much of the coast was under water and had been for decades. It was a way to remember what nature had taken away. Nick doubted there were many people still alive that remembered the Jersey shore, white sand beaches and lazy days sunbathing. His mother had told him about it. Lying in the sun sounded like a quick death of hyperthermia and sun poisoning to him.

Nick debated what to tell Martin. At any rate, what he needed to say shouldn't be discussed here. “It's quiet. People are waiting for the sick season to start.”

“It hasn't?”

“Not where I was. Have we had any reports on what to expect this year?”

Martin shook his head. “I hate it when they wait like this. It makes me worry that the information is so dire, they don't want anyone to know.”

“They weren't this late on the Hoofed Flu. That was a bad one for the food supply. Maybe it's good news, and they want to make sure before they say anything.”

Martin gave him a shrug and a snort. “I don't hope for good news anymore.”

Nick sorted his silverware and rinsed off his plate, stacking them in the racks for the dishwasher. “I need a word.”

“My office?” Martin asked as he turned to go.

“Right behind you.” Nick didn't especially like Martin, but he had to admit the man was more than competent. He projected an easy-going, relaxed manner that kept people calm, when underneath he had a sharper edge.