



TWO

That sounded different,” Shelby said. Her legs trembled, and her right arm had begun to shake.

“Probably a train.” Max led the group and Patrick brought up the rear. Bianca was breathing heavily when they stopped.

The parking area was deserted. There was no sign of park rangers, emergency vehicles, or other hikers.

Patrick stored their packs in the bed of Max’s old Ford pickup. When he’d bought the truck, it had been used but in pristine condition. He’d liked it because it didn’t have any gizmos—no back up cameras or computers that would require replacing. Now it was twenty years old and showing the wear of travelling down a few too many country roads.

Max pulled out his keys and unlocked the doors, muttering, “Let’s hope it starts.”

“It would. I mean, it will,” said Shelby.

She started to climb into the backseat of the extended cab pickup, but Max nodded toward the front. She hesitated, and then she stepped up on the running board and grasped the grab bar, pulling herself into the passenger seat.

Patrick and Bianca hopped into the back.

They were all buckled by the time Max started the truck. He put it in drive and sped down the caliche, white rock road.

Patrick tapped on the back of the seat. “Someone want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Yeah, what is happening? Planes falling out of the sky? A possible train

derailment? Are we being attacked?” Bianca attempted to drink from a water bottle, but her hands were shaking too badly. She recapped it and asked, “Can you get anything on the radio?”

Max turned it on and cycled through his preset stations. They heard nothing but static.

“Does this have anything to do with the aurora?” she asked Shelby.

“I think...that is, I’m sure, the northern lights are caused by a solar flare. Probably the flare disrupted the electrical systems on the planes and the train, and even the radio and phones.”

Silence filled the truck, and then everyone started talking at once.

Max accelerated as he turned right onto the blacktop. The back tires of the truck slipped and spun before gripping the road. He held up a hand and said, “Shelby, tell us what you know.”

“We’re not supposed to see the aurora. It’s never been this far south. The fact that we can see it means that this is a solar event of unprecedented proportions.”

“Unprecedented?” Max continued staring at the road, gunning the truck, his hands wrapped tightly around the wheel.

“No one knows how ...” She stopped, closed her eyes, and prayed fervently that she was wrong. “We can’t be sure what an event of this magnitude will do.”

“The truck started.” Max continued driving with his left hand and pulled out his phone with his right. He split his attention between the screen and the road. “Why does my truck work but not the phones? I thought electromagnetic pulses fried anything with a circuit board.”

“You’re thinking of an EMP. A solar flare is different. It’s...” She thought again of the notes in her study. Maybe she had the details mixed up. Perhaps this was a nightmare, and she’d wake in a moment. “Some of the effects are similar, but it’s not the same. In many ways, it’s worse.”

“How long will it last?” Max asked.

“Who knows? Twenty-four hours? Thirty-six?”

“Tell me why the truck works.”

“Because it’s older, would be my guess. The newer ones—anything with an advanced circuit board, keyless ignition, any vehicles with GPS integrated into the system—might not.”

“So why does my phone work?” Bianca sat forward, shoving the phone

toward Shelby. “See the pictures? I took them a few minutes ago. Why does it work? Maybe you’re wrong. Maybe—”

“I’m not wrong. Solar flares cause power surges. If you’d had your phone plugged in to charge it, then a flare would have fried the circuits. No one actually knows what would happen to automobiles during a major solar flare because it hasn’t happened in the last hundred years.”

“And the planes?” Patrick asked. “We have had solar flares before.”

“Minor ones.”

“But we’ve had them. Air traffic was diverted from the north and south poles, but the flares didn’t actually harm any of the navigational systems.”

“Because they didn’t fly straight through one. With this event—if it’s as big as I think it is—there would have been no flying around it.”

“The train explosion...” Max glanced her way and then back at the road. “Train switches are all electrical. This flare...it would have fried those as well?”

“Maybe. I guess so.”

“How do you know all this, Shelby?” Patrick was now practically in the front seat, hanging over the space between her and Max.

“I did some research, for a book—”

“You write romance stories.”

“Yes, but they’re historical. For last year’s release, I researched the Carington event, the last major CME—”

“CME?” Bianca pushed into Patrick’s space, so that both of their heads were comically hanging over the seat back. “I thought you said it was a solar flare.”

“A CME is a coronal mass ejection.”

“Sounds bad.” Patrick sank back against his seat. “God help us if what you’re saying is true.”

“So it’s not a solar flare?” Bianca asked.

“Not all solar flares produce CMEs, and not all CMEs accompany solar flares.” She hesitated, and then she added, “That’s about all I remember. I need to get home and make sure Carter is all right.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Max asked. He’d been relatively quiet, focusing on the road, but now he turned his attention to her.

“I don’t know. I...I need to be sure.”

Shelby glanced back at her friends.

Patrick stared out the window, his large shoulders tense and his expression unreadable. Whatever they were in for, Patrick would be a port in a storm. Actually, everyone in the truck would be.

Bianca was still trying to make a call.

“It won’t work,” Shelby said. “Every call is routed through a satellite, and the satellites are almost certainly fried.”

Max tugged the bill of his ball cap lower, possibly trying to block out the aurora. As for the catastrophe they faced, he drove as if he could outrun it.