

---

CHAPTER

---

one

At twelve years old, David King was too young to die. At least *he* thought so.

But try telling that to the people shooting at him.

He had no idea where he was. When he had stepped through the portal, smoke immediately blinded him. An explosion had thrown rocks and who-knew-what into his face. It shook the floor and knocked him off his feet. Now he was on his hands and knees on a hardwood floor. Glass and splinters dug into

his palms. Somewhere, all kinds of guns were firing. Bullets zinged overhead, thumping into walls—bits of flying plaster stung his cheeks.

Okay, so he wasn't sure the bullets were meant for him. The guns seemed both near and far. But in the end, if he were hit, did it matter whether the shooters meant to get him or he'd had the dumb luck to stumble into the middle of a firefight? He'd be just as dead.

The smoke cleared a bit. Sunlight poured in from a school-bus-sized hole in the ceiling. Not just the ceiling—David could see attic rafters and the jagged and burning edges of the roof. Way above was a blue sky, soft white clouds.

He was in a bedroom. A dresser lay on the floor. In front of him was a bed. He gripped the mattress and pushed himself up.

A wall exploded into a shower of plaster, rocks, and dust. He flew back. Air burst from his lungs, and he crumpled again to the floor. He gulped for breath, but nothing came. The stench of fire—burning wood and rock, something dank and putrid—swirled into his nostrils on the thick, gray smoke. The taste of cement coated his tongue. Finally, oxygen reached his lungs, and he pulled it in with loud gasps, like a swimmer saved from drowning. He coughed out the smoke and dust. He stood, finding his balance, clearing his head, wavering until he reached out to steady himself.

A hole in the floor appeared to be trying to eat the bed. It was listing like a sinking ship, the far corner up in the air,

## watcher in the woods

the corner nearest David canted down into the hole. Flames had found the blankets and were spreading fast.

Outside, machine-gun fire erupted.

David jumped.

He stumbled toward an outside wall. It had crumbled, forming a rough, V-shaped hole from where the ceiling used to be nearly to the floor. Stumps of bent rebar jutted out of the plaster every few feet.

More gunfire, another explosion. The floor shook.

Beyond the walls of the bedroom, the rumble of an engine and a rhythmic, metallic *click-click-click-click-click* tightened his stomach. He recognized the sound from a dozen war movies: a tank. It was rolling closer, getting louder.

He reached the wall and dropped to his knees. He peered out onto the dirt and cobblestone streets of a small village. Every house and building was at least partially destroyed, ravaged by bombs and bullets. The streets were littered with chunks of wall, roof tiles, even furniture that had spilled out through the ruptured buildings.

David's eyes fell on an object in the street. His panting breath froze in his throat. He slapped his palm over his mouth, either to stifle a scream or to keep himself from throwing up. It was a body, mutilated almost beyond recognition. It lay on its back, screaming up to heaven. Male or female, adult or child, David didn't know, and it didn't matter. That it was human and *damaged* was enough to crush his heart. His eyes shot away from the sight, only to spot

another body. This one was not as broken, but was no less horrible. It was a young woman. She was lying on her stomach, head turned with an expression of surprised disbelief and pointing her lifeless eyes directly at David.

He spun around and sat on the floor. He pushed his knuckles into each eye socket, squeegeeing out the wetness. He swallowed, willing his nausea to pass.

His older brother, Xander, said that he *had* puked when he first saw a dead body. That had been only two days ago—in the Colosseum. David didn't know where the portal he had stepped through had taken him. Certainly *not* to a gladiator fight in Rome.

He squinted toward the other side of the room, toward the shadowy corner where he had stepped into . . . wherever this was . . . *whenever* it was. Nothing there now. No portal. No passage home. Just a wall.

He heard rifle shots and a scream.

*Click-click-click-click-click* . . . the tank was still approaching.

What had he done? He thought he could be a hero, and now he was about to get shot or blown up or . . . something that amounted to the same thing: dead.

Dad had been right. They weren't ready. They should have made a plan.

*Click-click-click-click-click.*

David rose into a crouch and turned toward the crumbled wall.

## watcher in the woods

*I'm here now, he thought. I gotta know what I'm dealing with, right? Okay then. I can do this.*

He popped up from his hiding place to look out onto the street. Down the road to his right, the tank was coming into town over a bridge. Bullets sparked against its steel skin. Soldiers huddled behind it, keeping close as it moved forward. In turn, they would scurry out to the side, fire a rifle or machine gun, and step back quickly. Their targets were to David's left, which meant he was smack between them.

*Figures.*

At that moment, he'd have given anything to redo the past hour. He closed his eyes. Had it really only been an hour? An hour to go from his front porch to here?

But in the house where he lived, stranger things had happened . . .