

CHAPTER 1

The blackout dropped across the Minnesota north country like a tablecloth being fluffed out and draped over a table. If you had been in a plane and happened to look down, you might have marveled at how smoothly the blackout moved. The largest cities went first, the tall buildings snuffing out like candles in one large huff. The power continued to fade under the spreading darkness, slithering down the center of smaller channels, extinguishing things as it proceeded.

A softball stadium in the town of Blue Earth went dark in the middle of a fly ball.

In Austin, Minnesota, the lights at the local skate park went out a second after a skateboarder jumped on

his new deck and headed down the biggest incline in the Sioux Rec Center cement canyon. He had to ride blind.

A thirteen-year-old babysitter on Sidle Street in Little Falls had two arms in the tub washing down a three-year-old when the lights went off in the house. For a second, she did nothing at all. The house went quiet, too quiet, and suddenly the only sound audible was the enormous grandfather clock ticking in the study. It sounded like a heartbeat, it always had, but then it grew louder and louder. She didn't dare move, didn't do a thing except wait for the lights to come back on.

But the lights didn't come back on.

It was the biggest blackout to ever hit Minnesota. It took a snapshot of almost everyone in the state, a giant flash exploding for a second, then freezing everyone in place. The difference was that no one smiled for this picture. They simply gazed up with worried looks, red eyes sizzling for a second before the state plunged into a darkness it hadn't known in more than a century.

At Camp Summertime in northern Minnesota, the blackout didn't have much of an impact. No one bothered

to check if the blackout extended beyond the camp. Blackouts happened frequently at Camp Summertime, a result of trees flicking down to snap a line or squirrels eating their way into a transformer. When the power died, as it had on four occasions over the course of the summer, an enormous generator kicked on in the tool shop beside the boathouse and provided backup energy. Blackouts were a fact of life at Camp Summertime. No one imagined it could last more than a couple of hours.

Besides, it was closing day for the camp, the morning after the final bonfire, August 27. Parents had already picked up hundreds of kids, each family unit celebrating a mini-reunion followed by the long slog with sleeping bags and trunks back to the parents' SUVs. Once they departed, the families didn't bother calling back to inform the camp of the generalized blackout. For one thing, they didn't have a sense of how broad and far-reaching the blackout extended. Not at first. No one did. It wasn't until near sunset the next day that the electric company, Minnesota Power and Light, issued a bulletin about the blackout. The bulletin outlined the blackout's unprecedented dimensions, attributing the malfunction

to the demand for air-conditioning in the record late-summer heat, but the alerts went out over radio waves, and only people in cars, or ones with battery-powered transistors, received those messages initially. Parents driving away with their kids heard the news, but once they left it didn't occur to them to call back to Camp Summertime. The place passed quickly out of their thoughts as they pointed toward home. Summer was officially over. They had Labor Day picnics and school to think about.

In the confusion caused by the blackout, no one gave a thought to the white commuter van – called the Milk Truck by the campers for the putrid odor of spoiled milk that clung to the interior – that carried the kids who were making plane or train connections a half-day drive's away in International Falls. The kids left in the Milk Truck at ten fifteen in the morning. It was the last van of the season, the last group to leave. Every year, in a joyful ceremony, the owners of the camp, Dave and Margaret Wilmont, toasted the final departure with a bottle of champagne once the Milk Truck disappeared. They raised their glasses to each other, smiled at the

knowledge that another successful summer had been completed, then handed the keys to Devon O'Neal, the winter caretaker.

Devon O'Neal was a wannabe novelist who liked the quiet of a winter beside the lake. He spent the dark months in the nurse's apartment, huddled next to the woodstove. Occasionally, he would go ice fishing to break up the monotony, or try to complete a five-part fantasy novel called *Roman Winter* that he had been writing for three years. Devon accepted the keys with a few last-minute instructions, then watched as the Wilmonts climbed into their Otter aircraft and roared up the lake to leave.

When Devon saw the plane disappear at last, he smiled, happy to regain his island of personal isolation. He had a million things to do to shut down the camp and tuck it away for winter, but for the moment he simply wandered around, assessing the damage and the work to be done. Besides, it was devilishly hot, well above ninety degrees, and that simply did not happen in northern Minnesota. He thought about going for a swim or taking a nap. He did not give a thought to the Milk

Truck, the most decrepit van in the fleet and the one with the longest journey across the most isolated road, the only van traveling north toward International Falls. Devon swung the security gate closed on One Hundred Mile Road – the road that took the Milk Truck northward through a couple million acres of Minnesota spruce forest – then he padlocked the gate and turned back to the camp, wondering what he would cook for dinner on this, his first night alone.