



# Chapter 1

**Tuesday 5 May  
100 days**

The end of the world is one of those things that you never really expect to wind up being *your* problem.

Not that I used to spend much time thinking about that kind of stuff. But if I had, I would've thought it was pretty safe to assume that saving the planet would be someone else's job.

So when we flew out to Phoenix a couple of weeks ago, it never really entered my head that I might be triggering a countdown to the destruction of the human race, or that I'd be the one who had to try to stop it.

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We were supposed to be taking off from Sydney Airport at 2 p.m. But when the car from Mum's new company came to pick us up, our driver said there'd been a change of plans. He took us an hour out of the city to a private airstrip in the middle of a field. There was a helicopter waiting for us, this big ex-military thing. They'd ripped everything out of the back cabin and crammed in some aeroplane-style passenger seats. The windows had all been painted over, blocking our view of outside.

I thought the whole thing was more than a little weird, but Mum didn't have a problem with it, and I wasn't about to argue. She'd been accusing me for weeks of having a bad attitude about moving to Phoenix, and in her head, this would just prove her right. As if *my* attitude had caused all this in the first place.

It wasn't like I couldn't handle moving. Mum and Dad had always made sure I had plenty of practice. They both had high-powered jobs that meant we never stayed in one place for more than a year or two.

But this time I was leaving more behind than just a rental house and a school.

Two months back, the divorce papers had finally gone through. Dad had moved out a while before then, but now it was all official. Now they had the documentation to *prove* that the last seventeen years were just a sorry mistake.

Not exactly the greatest self-esteem boost for the son they'd had two years in.

They both tried to make it easy on me. They said all the stuff you're supposed to say to your kid when you split up.

*Just because your father is moving out doesn't mean you won't get to see him.*

*Don't ever think that any of this is your fault.*

*We both still love you very much.*

*PS – I'm moving to some backwoods town a billion miles from nowhere and I'm taking you with me.*

That last one wasn't quite so comforting.

Right after the divorce was finalized, Mum was approached by an organization called the Shackleton Co-operative who offered her this amazing job. I'm not sure why exactly, but for Mum it was like winning the lottery. There was just one little catch: she had to move out to Phoenix, this brand-new corporate town built

by the Shackleton Co-operative for all its employees. Which meant that I had to move, too.

Of course, Dad tried to keep her from taking me, but Mum had the better lawyers. Eventually, they worked out some deal where I'd live with her most of the time and fly back to see Dad for holidays and the odd weekend. My opinion never really came into it.

Anyway, that's how I wound up sitting in the back of a helicopter, flying out to a town so new and so tiny that no one had even been able to show it to me on a map.

I reclined my seat back as far as it would go and sat there listening to the thumping of the chopper blades above my head, eyes closed against the too-bright fluorescent lights that burned down from the ceiling. Mum sat in the seat next to mine, flicking through a copy of *Business Week*. She kept glancing down at me out of the corner of her eye, like she was trying to find something to say to reassure me, or at least stop me being so cut at her.

"I've heard wonderful things about your new school, Luke," she tried eventually.

"Yeah, you were saying."

"And you won't be the only new student, either.

The whole town is still getting established, so there'll be plenty of others who haven't been around for long."

"Yeah."

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but then she bit her tongue and went back to her magazine.

And that was pretty much it for conversation.

The sky was just starting to grow darker as we got out of the helicopter at Phoenix Airport. Not that you could really call it an airport. It was basically just a clearing in the bush with a little landing strip and a house-sized grey building off to the side. There were a couple of other choppers and a sixteen-seater plane, and that was it.

Two men came up to us as we walked away from the chopper. One was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He was kind of overweight and had this massive Colonel Mustard moustache. The other guy was like a wall of solid muscle. He wore a black uniform with the same Shackleton Co-operative crest I'd seen on all the paperwork they'd been sending Mum – a red bird with its wings curved up into a circle.

“Welcome to Phoenix!” said Colonel Mustard, shaking our hands. “I’m Aaron Ketterley, Residential Liaison. I’ll be showing you to your new place.”

“Emily Hunter.” Mum flashed her professional networking smile. “This is my son, Luke.”

“Pleasure to meet you both,” Mr Ketterley beamed. He waved a hand at the stony-faced guy next to him. “Officer Bruce Calvin, Chief of Security.”

The chief nodded at us but didn’t say anything.

“This way,” said Mr Ketterley, leading us across the tarmac to the terminal building.

Inside, it was like any other small-town airport – vending machines, a sea of blue seats, tired-looking staff behind marble counters – except that everything here was obviously brand new. There didn’t seem to be any other passengers around, no one waiting for a flight. Just the airport staff and a security guy dressed in the same uniform as Officer Calvin.

As soon as we walked through the door, I pulled out my phone to call Dad.

No reception. Great.

“Hey, is there a phone somewhere?” I asked,

avoiding Mum's eye. "I want to call my dad."

Mr Ketterley frowned. "Sorry, buddy, all our phone lines are down at the moment. Internet, too. Our tech guys are working on it, though. We'll be back online before—"

"We should get you to your new place before it gets dark," Officer Calvin cut in, glancing sideways at him.

"Right," said Mr Ketterley, clapping his hands together. He pulled two helmets down from a rack on the wall and tossed one to each of us.

"What's this for?" asked Mum, fumbling to catch her helmet.

"For the ride into town," said Mr Ketterley. "Come on now, your bikes are around the back."

Mum stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"Ms Hunter, car use is highly restricted in Phoenix. We're only a small town and we find that bikes are the most convenient way of getting around."

Now I was staring at him, too. I'm all for saving the environment, but come on, what kind of town doesn't let you drive a car?

"I haven't ridden a bike in years," Mum protested.

"Don't worry," Mr Ketterley smiled. "It'll all come

back to you. It's just like riding a ... well, you know. In any case, it's only a short ride."

"Define short."

"Oh, forty-five minutes or so."

Mum pursed her lips. It's what she always does when she's torn between demanding her own way and wanting to make a good impression.

"That sounds fine," she said, finally.

We found our bikes and rode away from the airport, down a wide dirt path that curved off into the bushland.

"Beautiful, huh?" said Ketterley, sweeping his arm out in front of him. "This bush stretches all the way around the town."

"What happens if it catches fire?" I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Mum grinning. She reckons I worry too much. I thought it was a pretty fair question, though. If you're going to live out in the middle of nowhere, you want to know you're safe, right?

"No need to worry about that," said Mr Ketterley. "Phoenix's security centre is equipped with the best fire-fighting gear on the planet. All of our safety and

security systems are absolutely cutting edge.”

*And yet you can't even keep your phones up and running?* I thought.

We kept riding, and eventually some buildings came into view up ahead. A few minutes later, we reached the edge of the town, and I realized just how seriously Phoenix took their No Cars policy. There wasn't a single proper road in sight. Where the roads should have been, there was a sprawling network of bike tracks.

Mr Ketterley took us down a wide track that led between two rows of houses. They were all identical – big, two-storey, green-roofed buildings with low picket fences and perfectly mown lawns.

It was starting to get properly dark now, and the streetlights were flickering on over our heads. We rode past a woman working in her garden. Mr Ketterley waved at her as we went by. She smiled and waved back.

It was the perfect town. Almost too perfect. Like something out of *The Brady Bunch*.

“Ah,” said Mr Ketterley, coming to a stop. “Here we are, 43 Acacia Way. Welcome to your new home!”

He pulled out a set of keys and handed them to Mum. “Someone will swing by in an hour or so to drop off your luggage.”

“Great,” said Mum, sounding breathless. “Thanks.”

“Anything else I can help you with before I keep moving?”

“No,” Mum said impatiently, then checked herself. “No, thank you.”

“Right,” said Mr Ketterley brightly. “Well then, I’ll leave you to it. Again, welcome to Phoenix! It’s wonderful to have you as part of the family.”

He shook our hands again and rode back towards the town centre. We parked our bikes on the front porch and got ready to head inside.

“Luke,” said Mum, stopping at the front door and putting her hand on my arm. “Listen. I know this isn’t an ideal situation. Moving so suddenly like this, and so far away from your father. But it’s not the end of the world. I think it’ll be good for both of us. A clean break.”

I thought of arguing. I thought of telling her that she was the only one who needed a clean break, and that I had been perfectly happy with my old life (minus

all the arguing and screaming and divorcing, anyway). But I knew there'd be no point. I just nodded and let her pull me into a hug.

*Not the end of the world.*

Over the next few days, I was going to find out just how wrong she was.



## Chapter 2

**Wednesday 6 May**  
**99 days**

A blast of music rang out across the room and suddenly I was awake. I fumbled around for my phone and switched off the alarm. It took me a minute to remember where I was.

*Hub? What happened to my—?*

*Oh. New house. Right.*

I rolled out of bed and staggered into the hall, feeling vaguely uneasy. It's always weird waking up in a new house, and it didn't help that everything here was so abnormally *tidy*. I squinted around stupidly, reminding myself where the bathroom was.

“Morning, Luke,” called Mum from below me. She

was halfway down the stairs, already up and dressed.

“Mmph,” I said, my brain still kicking into gear.

“I’m on my way out the door. There’s a bit of food in the kitchen, someone dropped off a welcome hamper about ten minutes ago. There’s a town map on the bench – don’t worry, it’s very straightforward – and I’ve left you some money in case you want something else for lunch. I’ll try to do a proper shop tonight, but it might end up being takeaway for dinner. Are you OK to get yourself to school?”

I nodded, yawning, my brain only registering about half of what she’d said.

“OK, good. Have a great day, sweetheart, I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yeah, see you.”

I stumbled into the bathroom, splashed some water on my face, and felt slightly more awake. Heading back to my room, I flipped my phone open again and squinted at the time.

8.07 a.m.

School started at nine, but I was supposed to get there early so that the head teacher could show me around. The usual first-day-of-school thing.

When I opened my wardrobe, I found it already filled with school clothes – grey trousers, white shirts, red ties. All in my size, too, which was weird. I didn't think Mum even knew what size I was any more. There was a rucksack as well, filled with books and pens and stuff.

I got dressed and went downstairs to find some breakfast.

Our new house was incredible. I'd always lived in nice houses, I guess, but this place was like something out of a home and garden magazine. High ceilings and paintings on the walls and giant indoor plants and light streaming in through enormous windows. Everything perfectly neat and tidy and expensive-looking.

The Shackleton Co-operative had insisted that we leave our old furniture behind and let them buy us all new stuff. Most people probably would've counted their blessings or whatever, but for some reason it put me kind of on edge. This place was meant to be my new home, and I felt like I wasn't supposed to touch anything. But I shook the feeling off and grabbed some fruit from the basket on the counter.

Ten minutes later, I was riding through the busy town centre. I was still getting used to the whole bike-riding thing and I almost ran down about five people as I made my way through the morning traffic.

Everywhere I looked, there were men in black security uniforms, like the one Officer Calvin had been wearing the night before. Each of them had a gun holstered to his side. Maybe that's normal for security guards, but there was still something off-putting about them.

Halfway down the street, opposite the massive fountain in the town square, was a building covered in dark tinted windows, those ones that make the whole thing look like a giant black mirror. The words SHACKLETON CO-OPERATIVE were emblazoned across the top of the building in big silver letters, next to a giant-sized version of the phoenix logo on the guards' uniforms.

Back in Sydney, I wouldn't have looked twice at a building like that. But here in this tiny town where everything else was so clean and bright and friendly-looking, there was just something *wrong* about it. Like the people who put it there were trying to make a statement. *Don't forget who's in charge here.*

I kept glancing back over my shoulder at the building as I continued up to the school.

Phoenix High was at the end of the street, right across the road from Phoenix Mall. Creative naming was clearly not a high priority around here. There were kids in school uniforms milling around, getting breakfast from a burger place that looked like Phoenix's version of McDonald's.

It was hard to believe that a student had ever set foot in this school before today. There was no rubbish. No graffiti. Not one blade of grass out of place. And the buildings looked like they'd never been touched, like the cement was still drying between the bricks.

I chained my bike up at one of the hundreds of bike racks scattered all over the place and looked around for the front office.

The office lady smiled at me as I walked in the door. "Ah, you must be Luke Hunter," she said warmly. "Wait just a moment and I'll tell Mrs Stapleton you're here."

"Oh," I said, surprised to be recognized so quickly. "OK, thanks."

The office lady got up and walked out of the room. She came back almost straightaway, followed by a serious-looking woman carrying a black bag.

“Luke,” said the woman, extending a hand for me to shake. “Welcome. I’m Mrs Stapleton, the deputy head here at Phoenix High.”

She smiled the smile shared by deputy heads all around the world, the one that says, *I’m being friendly now, but put a foot out of line and I’ll destroy you.*

“Hi,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Our head teacher, Ms Pryor, sends her apologies for not being here to greet you, but she’s been held back at a meeting.” Mrs Stapleton held out the black bag. “Here, this is yours.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Your new laptop. Every student receives one when they arrive.”

I took the bag and was suddenly reminded unpleasantly of my mum.

Right after my parents told me they were separating, which was about a month after I’d figured it out for myself, Mum went on this gift-giving spree. Almost every day, she’d come home with some new DVD or

video game or whatever. It was like she thought that if she gave me enough stuff, I'd be too distracted to notice or care that my family was disintegrating around me.

And between the new bike, the new house, the massive TV in my room, and now this new laptop, it was almost enough to make me wonder if the people who ran this town were trying to pull the same distraction tactics.

Mrs Stapleton walked outside and gestured for me to follow her. "As you may have heard, our external internet connection is down at the moment, but your computer will still be able to send and receive emails within Phoenix through our town intranet."

She stopped in the middle of the quad and looked around. A guy dashed past and she called out to him, "Peter, may I see you for a moment?"

He rolled his eyes and walked over to us. "It wasn't me, miss, it was Tank! He was trying to hit me with a bin, and—"

"Peter, what class have you got for first period today?" asked Mrs Stapleton, interrupting him.

"Um, English with Mr Larson."

"Excellent," said Mrs Stapleton. "Peter, this is

Luke Hunter. He arrived yesterday. Will you show him around?”

“Sure, no worries, miss,” Peter grinned.

“I’m trusting you to be sensible here, Peter,” Mrs Stapleton frowned.

“Of course, miss!”

Mrs Stapleton shot Peter a suspicious glance, but didn’t say anything more. She turned and went back into the office.

“Luke, right?” said Peter, moving off towards a building at the other end of the quad. “Let’s go find your locker.” He was a tall, weedy guy with messy brown hair, and he walked across the school like he owned the place. He seemed like a weird choice for the show-the-new-kid-around job.

“Don’t you need to know my locker number?” I asked, following him.

“Nah,” said Peter. “They’re all in order of arrival. You’ll be after Jordan.”

“Huh?”

“Whenever someone new comes, they just give them the next locker in line,” Peter explained as he led me down a crowded corridor. “And *everyone* here is

pretty new. I've only been in town for six months and I was one of the first to get here. That's why Staples gets me to show you guys around, even though she hates me, because I'm practically the only one who knows where everything is."

We stopped right at the end of the corridor.

"Huh," said Peter. "Look."

"What?" I asked.

"You've got the last locker."

"Does that mean something?" I asked, opening the locker door. I pulled a pen and a notebook out of my backpack and stashed the rest of my stuff inside.

"Dunno," said Peter. "I guess it means you're the last one coming."



## Chapter 3

**Wednesday 6 May**  
**99 days**

“What do you mean, the last one coming?” I said, my hand tensing up against the locker door as someone pushed past me. “You just said there are new people arriving all the time.”

“Yeah,” said Peter, “but I think this town is kind of invite-only. I mean, Shackleton built it for all the people who work at his company, right? And who else would want to live out here?”

“So, what, you’re telling me this school knew in advance how many of us were going to be here and ordered that *exact* number of lockers?”

Peter shrugged. “So?”

Before I could reply, the bell rang and everyone started moving towards their classrooms.

“This way,” said Peter, heading around a corner and up some more stairs. “Larson’s an all right teacher. Hardly ever makes us do any actual work.”

“Hey!” called a small voice from behind us as we made our way along another corridor. “Hey, uh, you – wait!”

A kid who looked like he was probably in Year 7 came running up to Peter. He was wearing a rucksack that was almost as big as he was and he had a panicked look in his eyes.

“Excuse me,” he said in rush, “I have a history class in room nine and I can’t remember—”

“Back down the stairs,” said Peter wearily. “Hang a right, then go down to the end of the hall.”

“Thank you!” squeaked the kid, running off again.

“Honestly,” said Peter, shaking his head, “I should be getting paid for this.”

By the time we got to the English room, a bunch of other students were already waiting.

“Hey, Weir!” shouted a girl up the back as soon as we walked in. “Who’s that?”

This girl was pretty and she knew it. She had wavy blonde hair and *Days of our Lives* make-up, and was sitting on a desk in front of two boys.

“This is Luke,” Peter called back. “Got here yesterday, I think.” He was acting casual enough, but the way his eyes flashed between the three of them as we walked over made me wonder if there was something going on. He turned to me and pointed to each of them in turn. “Cathryn, Tank, Michael.”

It wasn't hard to see where Tank got his nickname. He was tall and wide, and clearly not the sharpest tool in the shed. He looked like he could easily roll right over the top of me. Michael, meanwhile, was hunched over a piece of paper, working on an elaborate drawing of two men in flowing white robes. He wore dark sunglasses and black nail polish and he was clutching his pencil like that drawing was the most important thing in the world to him.

Michael seemed like the sort of guy who probably would've got beaten up a lot at my last school. But I doubted anyone was going to mess with him while Tank was around.

For a minute, Peter looked like he was going to

sit down next to them, but then he turned away and started moving across to the other side of the room.

“Friends of yours?” I asked, as we shuffled our way between two rows of desks.

“Used to be, yeah,” he said under his breath.

There was a definite edge to Peter’s voice now, but I figured I should wait until I’d known him longer than ten minutes before I started hammering him with personal questions.

We found two empty chairs and sat down. In the row behind us, a girl who looked like she might be Fijian or something was reading over a page of maths questions. She had black hair all done up in little braids and a look of frustration on her face. She was pretty, but not in a self-conscious way like Cathryn.

“Hey, Jordan,” said Peter, turning around to talk to her.

“Something I can do for you, Weir?”

“Just wanted to say that you’re no longer Phoenix High’s newest inmate,” said Peter, waving a hand in my direction.

“Wonderful,” said Jordan, not looking up from her paper.

Peter gave me a weary look. “She’s kind of in love with me,” he whispered. “It’s a bit embarrassing, actually.”

I raised an eyebrow at him.

“No, seriously! She may try to hide her feelings behind that harsh exterior, but deep down I know she’s — *ow!*”

I turned around. Jordan had just nailed Peter in the back of the head with an eraser.

“See?” he said, bending down to pick it up. “Text-book love-hate relationship.”

Jordan just rolled her eyes.

“This is going to bruise,” said Peter, sitting up and rubbing his head. “Seriously, there’s a lump here. I should report you to Staples, Jordan. Violence against a fellow student, that’s not something we take lightly around here.”

Jordan held up a hand like she was about to slap him. “Keep whingeing, Weir, and I’ll give you something to really cry about.”

She was kidding, I think.

Peter grinned at her and opened his mouth to say something else, but at that moment Mr Larson

walked into the room. He was wearing a shirt and tie and carrying a big plastic crate. He looked young for a teacher, but not someone you could just walk all over.

“Morning, everyone,” he said, putting the crate down on his desk.

“Hey, sir!” said Peter, sticking a hand into the air. “We’ve got another newbie.”

“Oh yes, they told me about you,” said Mr Larson. “Luke Hunter, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, bracing for the tell-us-a-bit-about-yourself speech.

But Mr Larson just went straight on with the lesson. “You have impeccable timing, Luke,” he said, reaching into his crate, “because today we are starting a brand-new book study.”

Everyone else groaned as Mr Larson started handing out fresh copies of some novel – *The Shape of Things to Come*.

“I’d like you all to read this in the next two weeks,” said Mr Larson.

“What?” shouted Tank from the back. “Come on, sir! Be reasonable!”

“However,” Mr Larson smiled, “I realize that this

is about as likely as Peter ever getting that haircut he so desperately needs.” He pushed a button on his desk and a projector screen came down from the ceiling. “So today we’re going to begin by watching the movie adaptation.”

The class cheered.

“Let me warn you,” Mr Larson continued, walking over to turn off the lights, “that this is only a starting point. You *will* need to read the book at some stage, and rest assured I will know if you haven’t done so.”

The movie turned out to be pretty dodgy. It was this ancient black and white thing from the 1930s with lame special effects, but even a bad movie is better than doing a worksheet or whatever.

A couple of boys wandered in about halfway through the lesson, muttering something about a mixed-up timetable. Mr Larson just handed each of them a copy of the book and pointed to some empty chairs at the back of the room.

That was a good sign. Obviously this guy had a bit of perspective.

But as the day went on, I realized that people showing up late or wandering into the wrong room

were fairly regular features of life at Phoenix High. Like Mum had predicted, I was a long way from being the only new kid in this place. Even some of the teachers didn't seem totally on top of things.

Apart from that, though, Phoenix High wasn't that different from the last three high schools I'd been at. The only other major difference was that, like the rest of the town, this place was obviously running on a gazillion-dollar budget, so everything in it was top-of-the-line.

I ended up sticking with Peter for most of the day. After whatever had happened between him and his old friends, I got the feeling he was grateful to have someone new to hang out with. When the final bell went, the two of us grabbed our identical bikes and walked them back out into the main street.

"What's up with all the security guards?" I asked as we passed another guy in a black uniform.

"They work for Mr Shackleton," said Peter. "We have them here instead of cops."

"Instead of cops? Is that even legal?"

"Must be."

"But doesn't the government make sure there's

police everywhere?" I asked. "Isn't that a rule?"

"I dunno," said Peter. "But it's not as if we need both. Phoenix has, like, zero crime."

A bit further up the road, Peter stopped at the big fountain in the town square. "This is my stop," he said, thrusting a thumb over his shoulder at the tall, black building I'd noticed on my way in. "My dad's finishing work early today and I'm supposed to meet him here."

I stared up at the building. "What is that place anyway?"

"Shackleton building," said Peter. "Just offices and meeting rooms and stuff. Like our town hall, I guess."

"Pretty big town hall," I muttered. I knew I was probably starting to sound paranoid, but I couldn't shake the feeling there was more to the building than that. "Is that all that goes on in there? Just meetings?"

"Uh-huh," Peter said blankly. "Well, just that and the alien autopsies."

I rolled my eyes and his face broke into a grin.

"Mate, just because a building's big and black and shiny doesn't mean there's something suss going on inside."

“All right, all right,” I said, slightly frustrated but trying not to show it. “Sorry.”

“It’s all good,” said Peter. “But just try to relax, will you? I know Phoenix can seem a bit weird at first, but it’s an OK town once you get used to it.”

“Yeah. Well, see you tomorrow, OK?”

“Yeah, see you.”

I flipped my mobile open for about the hundredth time that day. Still no reception.

How long would it take Dad to start worrying that he hadn’t heard from us?

I hopped on my bike and rode the rest of the way home, my frustration building. As soon as I got inside, I went into the kitchen and tried the landline. No dial tone. The lines were still down.

Unbelievable. How much longer did they think this place could keep functioning without phones?

*Get a grip*, I told myself. *They’re working on it.*

Maybe Peter was right. Maybe I was just stressing out over nothing. This place wasn’t all bad. As far as first days at a new school went, this one had been pretty good.

By the time I got to the top of the stairs, I was

almost ready to take his advice and forget about the few little things that had been bugging me about Phoenix.

But then I opened my bedroom door.

Have you ever had one of those moments where all of a sudden you just *know* that something really, really bad is coming? One of those moments where, somehow, even though there's no real sign of anything being wrong, you just feel it in your gut that there's major trouble on the way?

As I walked into my bedroom and glanced at my bed, I was punched in the face by one of those moments.

Someone had been in here.

Someone had come into my room and made my bed.

Sitting on top of the pillow was a small, unmarked yellow envelope.

And before I opened it up, before I even touched that envelope, I *knew* there was nothing but trouble inside.