



DAVID KETTLEHAKE

A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

BLACK

BOOK TWO OF THE FIREBRAND TRILOGY

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A NOVEL

Book Two of The Firebrand Trilogy

David Kettlehake



BROTHER MOCKINGBIRD

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To my mom,
who always made sure I had a book in my hands.



CHAPTER ONE

My name is Scout, and I'm a killer.

Over the past twelve months, I've killed two hundred and thirty eight times. Not two hundred and thirty seven. Not two hundred and thirty nine. I know the exact number, and when I lie down at night and close my eyes, I can recount the horrible details of every single one. Remembering in such clarity amazes me, because before the Storm I had to be reminded to complete even the most mundane tasks. You know, simple stuff, like packing my lunch for school, or not flushing the toilet when someone was taking a shower. Perhaps the difference is killing is such a primal, basic thing. Maybe because the taking of life, even the life of something as monstrous as a Gray, is fundamentally against my nature and so contrary to the person I thought I was. Whatever the reason, I've become a killer. And it gives me no pride in saying so, but I'm very good at it.

Take right now, for instance. Three Grays are rushing at me through the muddy grocery store park-

ing lot. A toddler has more sense than they do when it comes to fighting, strategy, or even the basics of personal hygiene. Grays only know one thing – hunger. And a hungry Gray is an aggressive, murderous creature that will rip you apart and eat you to survive. And to them, I'm looking like a tasty morsel, a meek, helpless little girl in a black poncho, standing all by herself in the rain.

Before the first one reaches me, I feel a familiar tingle in the back of my head, almost like several bees have taken up shop at the base of my neck, and suddenly the world goes into slo-mo. That's what I call it, anyways. The charging Grays seem to freeze in place, moving no faster than the minute hand on a clock. I've got all the time in the world to reach beneath my poncho and pull out a very large hunting knife. I've named it Chuck. Chuck's leather-wrapped handle is stained and worn smooth from use, and the blade is nicked up and scratched. Battle scars. Chuck and I have seen a lot of action together. He's been with me for all two hundred and thirty-eight kills. But unlike me, he doesn't seem the least bit bothered by it. I take a heavy, deliberate step forward, gradually shifting my weight to my front foot. Any movement in slo-mo is hard, like pushing your way through wet cement, the sloppy kind fresh out of the truck. To me my actions may seem sluggish, but to someone watching from outside my reality, I just darted forward hummingbird fast. It's bizarre, but I've gotten used to it.

And to be honest, without slo-mo, I would've been dead a long time ago.

Now that the gap has closed between me and the first attacker, I can tell this one's been around for a while, at least a month, which is pretty much the max lifespan for these things. Its face is an origami skull of sharp creases and angles, with its ashen skin stretched over its cheekbones as tight as a snare drum. Its eyes are so sunken they're nearly invisible, and even this close they're little more than two dark smears beneath its brow. Its long, filthy hair is fanned out behind it and gently moving in my slo-mo vision. It reminds me of white seaweed swaying in an ocean. The creature's basically naked, with only a few scraps of a shirt around its bony neck and shoulders. I can see it was a male before it changed. Not that it matters now.

Straining with the effort of fighting through the wet cement, I bring Chuck up and toward the lead Gray in a smooth, practiced motion. Did I mention I'm also extremely strong? Freakishly strong? The long blade connects just under the creature's chin and slices clean through its neck. My arm barely registers the connection. Why decapitation? It's one of the few ways to be certain a live Gray doesn't stay that way. This particular one is dead and doesn't even know it yet. I force myself to the side while the torso continues its forward progress, the freshly detached head just starting a slow, backwards tumble. Yeah, it's pretty gross. Black blood begins a glacial, pulsating erup-

tion from its neck, but I'm already stepping past it and targeting the next one. In my head I hear myself say, "*Two hundred and thirty nine.*"

Everything is happening so fast in real-time that the second Gray hasn't had a chance to notice the death of its buddy. I've found for some reason these things usually travel in packs of three or four, even though I can't tell if they care or realize when one of them dies. But really, who knows what these monsters think? Before the Storm we had a Golden Retriever, a big, happy guy with dark brown fur and an eternally sad face. His name was Jerry, but I couldn't pronounce my Js very well, so I ended up calling him Larry. Larry knew three tricks: sit, shake, and leg humping. I'm convinced Larry was smarter than a Gray.

The second one is almost on me now, so I surgically separate its head from its body but with a wicked backhand cut this time. *Two hundred and forty.* Due to momentum, its decapitated body is still on its feet and headed my way, so I give it a slight shove to one side and take a step to my left. I'm already searching for the third one, with Chuck at the ready. Where the hell is it? Then from behind me a powerful hand grabs my throat and squeezes. The grip is scalding hot. Body parts that aren't designed to make noise begin to crackle in my neck. Muted grinding sounds travel up and into my inner ear.

Shit. Shit. Shit. This last Gray is a fast one.

Greys come in all shapes and sizes, which

makes sense because before they changed they were normal everyday people, just like you and me. Teachers, ministers, lawyers, students, baristas. Brothers. You can also break them down into two general categories, regular and fast. All Grays are super strong like me and are hard as hell to kill, but a fast Gray is just as quick as I am and probably shares my ability to see and operate in slo-mo. Fast Grays are pretty rare and just about as deadly as anything left on this flooded Earth. Well, maybe deadlier than anything but me, of course.

The Gray steps to face me and draws me in close until our noses are nearly touching, and I'm staring into its eyes, the whites now the color of frozen meat. God these things are ugly. Its breath is heavy and steamy hot and reeks of food long forgotten in a broken refrigerator. Effortlessly it lifts me off the ground. I raise the knife to start slashing, but its free hand snatches my wrist out of the air and tries to crush it. I should be able to toss this nightmare a dozen feet or more, but its strength is equal to mine, and I've got no leverage. All it has to do is hold Chuck at bay with one hand while it strangles the life out of me with the other. I try to pry its scalding fingers from my throat, but they won't budge. White fireworks dance and flash around my outer vision, and I can feel my consciousness waning. My grip on Chuck is weakening, the bloody blade twitching in my hand.

Before the light fades from my eyes forever, I

manage to place my feet on its scrawny thighs and slowly walk them up its torso. When both feet are firmly planted on its chest, I thrust backwards with everything I've got. As strong as this thing is, there's no way it can't hold me, and I perform a slow-motion backflip, landing ten feet away before ingloriously falling on my ass in a mud puddle, my poncho twisted around me. Chuck bounces away as gently as a butterfly lighting from flower to flower, eventually ending up under a car, out of action. The stupid Gray hasn't realized what just happened as it stares in confusion at its empty hands. Then it lifts those dead eyes and comes at me again. Besides their heavy breathing or the slap of their feet on the ground, these things don't make a sound. But if it could, I'm pretty sure it would be howling in frustration and rage.

I move as quickly as I can and leap onto the roof of a car. I've learned the hard way this past year that defending yourself from a position of strength is key, and shy of running away, gaining the high ground is the strongest position out there. Arms outstretched, the Gray launches itself at me from ten feet away. I've got all the time in the world to set my feet and prepare. When it's almost on me, I grab its wrist and yank like I'm jerking the cord on a stubborn lawn mower. The Gray soars past me in a smooth arc and smashes into the side of an SUV parked a few spots behind us. The SUV's windows shatter on impact, and a million glittering shards of glass blow outward in a donut

shape, like an exploding star. The big vehicle rocks so far sideways I can't believe it doesn't topple over. Sounds in slo-mo are different, with the higher tones all clipped and flattened out, the low ones muffled and thick. The window's implosion sounds just like a huge wave crashing on a beach.

If I get out of this, Chuck and I are going to have words about ditching me, but there's no way I can retrieve him just yet. The Gray is already crawling out through the broken windows. It's covered in broken glass and has suffered a thousand cuts, which don't seem to bother it one bit. I quickly search for another weapon. The only thing nearby is a rusted shopping cart that's toppled over on its side. That will do just fine. I leap down slower than Neil Armstrong jumping from the lowest step of the lunar lander and grab the cart's handle. I swing it at the rushing Gray. The cart smashes into the thing's side, and the creature goes cartwheeling across the parking lot. Dark red blood starts slowly oozing from its head and arm, but it doesn't care. They never do. It comes at me a second time, and again I send it soaring when I smash it with the shopping cart.

The creature's in bad shape. Its arm is shattered and its jaw is hanging loose, flopping limply back and forth on a hinge of flesh and tendon. The side of its face is fresh hamburger, so pulverized I can no longer make out distinct features. But like all Grays, the thing is too dumb to understand it's been terribly,

maybe mortally, wounded. It lunges at me again. I've got the upper hand now, and this thing has royally pissed me off.

I go medieval on it. I connect with the monster so hard that the cart nearly shatters in my hands. Angry vibrations course up and down my arms. The Gray is sent spinning once more, and this time when it tries to get up, it can't. Dragging the remains of the ruined cart behind me, I walk up and start beating it over the head. Again. And again. After ten or fifteen times I stop when I realize it's really and truly dead.

Two hundred and forty-one.

And then, just like that, the tingle in the back of my head stops, and the world snaps back to normal. Had anyone been watching at regular speed, the entire fight would have taken no more than fifteen or twenty seconds and would've been an eye-blurring haze of spraying blood and utter mayhem. To me, in slo-mo, it took a few minutes, although to be honest it felt a lot longer.

I gather up Chuck from beneath the car, quietly scolding him under my breath for ditching me like that. I wipe the dark blood off his blade and slide him into his sheath underneath my poncho. The parking lot is deathly quiet now, the only sound being the steady rain dappling the puddles and slicking my poncho. With a sigh, I drag each dead Gray over near the SUV, so they're lying next to one another. I carefully cross their arms over their chests. After that, I gather

up their heads and place them with the right corpses, trying my best to make them look as natural as I can. I shut their eyes.

I'm not a religious person. Even if I had been before the Storm, there's no way in hell I would be now. Not after what I've seen. Not after what I've done.

Then I sit down in the rain and cry.

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