

Dzoavits

Dear Reader and or Listener,

This is a horror story, and it gets pretty gross and profane here and there, but it's supposed to, you know?

Still, as a member of Round Valley Indian Tribes, I wanted to add something a little different to the terror genre we all know and love, and I wanted to play with what legends and myths can be or could be or are, maybe. Who knows?

Go Mustangs!

"I only get frightened when--and it happens very rarely--I think I have an idea.
That is, what people find doesn't frighten me, but the understanding of it sometimes has this quality...
The only way I can tell whether my thoughts really have some weight to them
is the sense of terror when I think of something new."

-J. Robert Oppenheimer, See It Now, January 4, 1955

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, settings, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Preface: In the Beginning...

First Book of Enoch*, Chapter 10: 4-5

"[C]ast him into the darkness: And make an opening in the desert, which is in Dûdâêl*, and cast him therein. And place upon him rough and jagged rocks, and cover him with darkness, and let him abide there forever, and cover his face that he may not see light. And on the day of the great judgement, he shall be cast into the fire."

*Enoch was a significant biblical patriarch, father of Methuselah and Noah's great-grandfather, who is known for "walking with God" and ascending to Heaven without dying, appearing in Genesis, Hebrews, and the Book of Enoch, also as a son of Cain. The Book of Enoch is a non-canonical biblical text that has been heavily disputed since its creation due to questions over authorship, theological inconsistencies (like fallen angels marrying humans), and speculative content (excessive angelology/apocalyptic visions) that contradicted established scripture.

*Dûdâêl: God's cradle, crucible, or kettle.

DAY 1: That's My Home

ONE

Mom

Joseph was in a hospital.

His mother was lying on a bed with a tube down her throat. He was standing ten feet from her, and she was so close. She was right there. Right with him, but she also wasn't. The only sound in the room was the steady whine of a heart monitor. It wasn't beeping. It wasn't chirping. It was droning in one singular tone the way monitors only did when someone's heart had stopped beating. The room was an all-white, blank slate, and she was surrounded by medical curtains. The whining, constant sound began to irritate Joss, and he wanted to go and unplug the stupid thing. To rip the cord out of the wall and then throw the damn machine on the ground and stomp on it. He knew she was gone; he didn't need a reminder. Then her body began thrashing around violently. Her chest, arms, and head suddenly convulsed in furious spasms. It was as if she were having a seizure, and she shot bolt upright before settling into a slump. She was sitting up but hunched over, and her hands rose to her mouth. She grabbed at the intubation with hideously white, thin fingers and ripped it out. The long medical tube brought a gush of sanguine fluid with it. A crimson flood of blood flowed from her lips, and into her lap. She retched violently and droplets of gore poured onto the sheets and rained to the floor, pooling underneath her gurney.

"Mom?" Joss asked, his voice was weak.

She was gurgling and coughing, and she let out a long, heavy sigh and sat motionless for a moment. Not moving and not breathing. She never inhaled as he expected her to. He assumed she would need air, but she was as silent and still as the dead.

His mother turned her head towards him and opened her eyes. Her once beautiful baby blues had been replaced with two inhuman glowing golden orbs, and she grinned as sharp-toothed as a shark.

"Mom?" Joss asked again.

His pulse was racing, and he could hear the blood pounding in his ears. She twitched, and somehow, he thought she could hear it, too.

In an instant, she moved from her seated position on the bed to standing next to him. There were no sounds or indications of movement--no pitter-pattering footsteps or wafting curtains. She was sitting across the room one second and then standing inches from him the next. He knew there was no way anyone could move that fast, but she did. Before he could blink, a sickeningly metallic smell overtook him. It was a pungent, nauseating wave of scent that surely would've made him vomit if her abrupt appearance hadn't startled the disgust right out of him. She raised a blood-soaked hand and began caressing the nape of his neck, tickling the hairs there. It was something she'd done since he was a baby, and it always made him feel safe. But he didn't feel safe now.

His mother bent down low to his ear.

"Can you hear it, baby?" she whispered.

He couldn't hear anything over the drumming of his heart.

"I can hear it. It's so loud. So clear."

"What?" Joseph asked.

His fear was evident in his wavering voice.

"It's almost here," she said.

Her hand tightened around the back of his throat, causing searing pain to jolt through him, and he turned to see her mouth open unnaturally wide. Her lips tore open like her jaws were escaping her face, and black rivulets ran from rows of unbelievably sharp fangs jutting out and piercing through the flesh of her cheeks and chin. She was transformed into nothing more than teeth and hunger.

She bit down hard on his dumbfounded face and the fangs digging into him shot sizzling agony through his body.

(...)

Joss hit his head on the side of the truck cabin as he jerked awake. Not that he noticed. He was too busy making sure everything was still there. Nose. Lips. Ears. They were all accounted for. The dream was always the same, but that didn't make it any less horrifying. His skin was glistening, and his brow was wet.

"Ya okay, son?" his dad asked him.

He kept his focus on the road but couldn't help but see his son's abrupt fit in his peripheral vision. The day was bright and cloudless, but the shadows from the redwood forest made this stretch of the trip darker, and he'd watched the boy struggle to stay awake. Then he roused in an instant and started grabbing at himself and inspecting his face in the mirror.

"Yeah," Joseph said. "Just fell asleep for a second."

"I meant ya noggin." his dad told him, "Ya hit it. And ya were, uh, I don't know, checking yourself. Are ya okay.?"

"Oh, yeah," Joss said, and they both laughed.

"Well, good news," his dad said. "We're almost there. We've got one more road to get down, and we'll be home."

TWO

The Last Log in Covelo

Moving back to Covelo was like moving back in time. It wasn't just that the reservation was old, even though it was. It was more that time stopped there. It protracted. It slowed, and it crept, but it never moved forward, not really.

Covelo in 2021 was as close to 1991 as the world had been since the Soviet Union dissolved. It was a relic in the modern age. The kind of land-locked oasis high in the mountains of California that shunned the new in lieu of the old and the hard and, generally speaking, the worse.

Round Valley Indian Reservation was a 35-square mile sovereign nation that barely survived on its own, and the tiny town of Covelo was its center, its heart. The reservation itself was poor and downtrodden. The land had turned to thorns and waste, and the people had forgotten the pride of their mothers and the strength of their fathers. They'd forgotten who they were, and, as such, had forgotten all that came before them. Or that's what Joseph thought as he and his dad drove into the small downtown area of the city, if you could call it a city.

Joss was a member of the tribe. Which tribe he and his father belonged to, he still wasn't sure. There were seven on Round Valley, and he'd never gotten a straight answer as to which of those he was a part of. Not that any of that was on his mind as they made their way through town. In fact, all he could manage at that moment was to silently thank God for his life. The drive into the valley had been one of the most frightening experiences he'd ever had, while he was awake, anyway.

(...)

The road leading into the reservation, named Covelo Road, was an isolated, 30-mile-long stretch of asphalt that was terrifying to behold; and that terror was only made worse by trying to navigate the winding, dangerous, and *only* way into or out of Round Valley. And just as the name suggested, it was a valley; and it was surrounded by mountains. That made it the ideal location for the US government and the State of California to resettle several tribes into this area in the mid 1860's. It was so insulated and secluded, and it was separated from the rest of the world by natural walls thousands of feet high. The Coast Ranges that encircled the Nome Cult Farm, as it was once known, still segregated the people of the reservation from most of civilization, leaving it connected by a lone stretch of SR 162 (or Covelo Road), which was generally considered one of the worst and most hazardous routes in the world. After a half-dozen blind curves and more near misses than he'd have liked, Joseph came to that very same conclusion. Half the time his dad's truck was teetering over what seemed like a razor's edge between life--in this case the road--and death, which was a 100-foot drop into the Eel River or off the side of a cliff. The other half the time, Joss was praying to the blessed mother and all the angels a car coming from the opposite direction didn't cross the center line and drill his dad's old truck head on, killing everyone in both vehicles in a hail of broken glass, bent metal, and shattered bones. He held onto his mother's Saint Christopher pendant so tightly in his hand that there was an imprint on his palm, and he almost snapped the necklace it was hanging from. She'd always joked they were reformed Catholics, but she also taught him all the prayers and devotions.

The thought of death was hard for Joss. It's hard for most people, but it's especially difficult for kids. Children can't really understand life ending the way it does, and having only turned twelve a few weeks before moving, Joss had his whole life ahead of him, so the idea of death should've been a far-fetched, improbable fantasy, but it wasn't. For him, it was a stark reality.

(...)

Joseph's mother passed away about six months before. They told him it was complications from Covid, and he was still trying to come to terms with living without her, while everything constantly reminded him of her. He saw her every time he looked in the mirror; in the blue of his eyes, and he saw her in the wildflowers she used to pick, in the terrible songs she used to sing, and in every aspect of his every day.

The relentless, horrifying fear of death while riding down Covelo Road didn't help. Unfortunately, thinking you might die, doesn't keep you from thinking of those you've lost. The adrenaline numbs the fear and pain a bit, but as soon as that wears off, everything comes flooding back, and as they descended the final curves and hills of the mountains and settled on the valley floor where 162 gives way to Commercial Street, Joss couldn't help but remember everything he wished he could forget.

(...)

His mom started to sleep more during the day. It was slow at first, but when it started to progress, it got bad fast. Her coughing got worse. Her fever spiked. And she couldn't seem to catch her breath anymore.

(...)

His dad drove to the hospital, and Joss sat in the back. He couldn't believe this was happening. It wasn't real. It couldn't be. Why *his* mom? What did she do? So many people got this stupid flu-thing, and they were fine. Hell, some joked about getting stronger, but here was his mother, wasting away in the front seat as his father weaved in and out of traffic.

(...)

The waiting area was cold. She was only in the back of the emergency room for an hour or so before the doctor returned.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We did everything we could."

He wasn't talking to Joss, but the boy was sitting nearby; around a glass corner and in the Small Tikes Room, and he could hear the entire conversation between the resident and his father.

Fuck! he thought instantly. He couldn't help himself.

"The virus affects everyone differently," the doctor continued. "And, for her, she was anemic, and that..."

"Lily wasn't anemic," Joss's dad interrupted, nearly breaking into hysterics. "She just got a physical."

"Unfortunately," the doctor said, not unkindly, "Lily's bloodwork today showed severe anemia."

He handed Joss's father a piece of paper.

"And with severe anemia, the possibility of complications with this virus are highly probable and..." He took a moment to try and think about what to say and how to phrase it. "And we did everything we could."

(...)

There was a song that began playing, and only seemed to play, on the one radio station in Round Valley: KYBU, 96.9 FM.

It was a country song, soft and with an edge of sadness. Joss's mom loved that sound and most of her music centered around that drunken-folksy twang, so he was surprised he hadn't heard it before.

Got the last log in Covelo, the singer crooned as they passed into the center of town.

That's where I wanna go.

Gonna get there fast, then we'll take it slow,

With the last log in Covelo.

It took a few listens for Joss to figure out the song was about a guy trying to get to his girlfriend with what he said was the last log, literally the last piece of wood, in Covelo. It was ridiculous. The mountains caught fire every year in Northern California because they were covered in trees and logs and, well, wood. But it was a catchy tune, and it broke his heart to think about all the things he'd never get to share with his mother, so he sat silently and listened, letting everything else go.

*Pull up the pick-up,
Try to not mess up,
Got to get the wood on the fire.
Cause she's layin' there waitin',
And the heats dissipatin',
So, I got to hurry or lose this desire.
But I got, the last log in Covelo,
That's where I wanna go,
Gonna get there fast, then we'll take it slow,
With the last log in Covelo.*

"That's Herc Pina," Joss's dad said. "He was a cousin. He, uh, passed a few years back. But that's him on the track. It was his only hit, if you can call it a hit. They play it a lot around here. Ya pops was in a touring band with him."

"My pops?" Joseph asked.

"Ya grandfather," his dad said.

They didn't talk again until they got to the ranch.

(...)

Joseph's father pulled the truck into the driveway. He hopped out of the driver's side of the vehicle and walked to the gate to unhook the lock. He removed the chain and threw the 12-foot steel entrance open. Finding pleasure in his work, he turned back to smile at his son. Joseph smiled, too, even though he didn't really want to. The house was outside of town and was positioned a couple miles from the downtown area, but the road they were going to live on wasn't paved, and the trailer they'd been towing bounced like a toddler on a trampoline as they tried to get down it.

The ranch was built sometime after Woodstock but before the Grunge scene of the late 80's, and it looked like it hadn't been touched much since. The paint was chipping, and the roof was sunken in. The red trim on the faded brown cedar planks gave the impression that the house was home to a serial killer or cult, and while the barn was still standing, it leaned heavily to the right and had holes where shingles should be. It sat on five fenced-in and gated acres, and it was, at one time, a working horse ranch. It was a family place, and Joss was one of the last of his family.

Everyone on his mom's side was gone before he was born, and, besides his dad, he had no family he knew of. Except his Pops. He'd have to remember to ask about him later. He was confused.

Why had no one mentioned him before? he wondered.

"Ready?" his dad asked, climbing back behind the wheel.

"Sure," he said, and he faked another grin. He wasn't close to his father.

Jeremy and his mom divorced when he was a baby, and while he was born here, on the reservation, he wasn't raised here.

He and his dad spent some time together, and Jerry, his mom's nickname for the man, was always good about paying child support. Still, he was an absentee father. That all changed when his mom got sick. Her illness lasted three weeks, total, and in that time, Jeremy quit his job, abandoned his apartment, and moved to the small town in Georgia that Joseph and his mom had called home for most of his life. He came over every day to care for his son and to play nurse to the woman who'd broken his heart all those years ago. He'd stepped up. He took care of her while he could and tended to her bills and debts when she was gone, which took longer than anyone thought it would. The bank eventually took her car and their house, but his dad found the ranch for them to stay in, and he packed everything up, got Joss set up with his mother's best friend in town for a few days, and he'd driven across the country so he and Joss could settle here for a while. Then he paid for Joss to fly to California to meet him. He was a good guy, and he was more dependable than others gave him credit for, but even when he was around, he wasn't present. He just wasn't there, and being there is everything to a child.

The truck rolled to a stop in front of the detached garage, and Jeremy put the old clunker in park. "Let's get to it, bud," he said, and he climbed out of the truck's cabin, beckoning Joss to follow him.

The boy opened the passenger side door, dropped from the raised chassis, and looked around. All the scenery was some shade and saturation of brown (the leaves, the grass, the mountains). The ground crunched under his feet. It was cool, and the air felt different here.

Wind blew around his ankles, and Joss really wished he'd worn pants, but it was hot in the truck. The whole trip had been hot--all the way up from Sacramento. Not having visited California since he left as a baby, Joss had no idea how big the state was or how much the weather changed from place to place. He'd flown in, taken a tram to baggage claim, got picked up by his dad, and then spent the better part of four hours pretending to play a game on his phone while riding north and into the mountains. The truck they were in seemed to radiate heat from the engine compartment no matter what setting the air conditioning was on. Changing out of his shorts and t-shirt and into some jeans hadn't crossed his mind, but it had to be twenty degrees cooler here than at the airport.

The pair also didn't talk on the ride. They weren't yet able to bridge the gap that existed between them. They didn't know what to say to each other, and they didn't say much when they did.

"Ouch!" Joss said, a sharp pain jabbed his ankle as he walked towards the front porch of the house.

He froze and looked down.

Attached to the top of his sneaker and pressing into his flesh, was a bean-shaped and bean-sized object that looked like a miniature sea anemone. He bent over and plucked it off his shoe only for the barbs to plunge into his fingers. He shot up and flailed his hand around, shaking the spiked seed out of his skin. Instinctively, he shoved his thumb in his mouth and sucked on it. The fresh taste of iron blood trickled down his throat, and his memory flashed to his nightmare without him wanting it to. He shook the images of his violent death away as best he could.

"Spur weed get ya?" his dad asked.

"Wha--" Joss said, his mouth now full of fingers along with his thumb.

"Spur weed," he said again. "It's a plant that's found around here. It's actually called Burweed, and it's from the *soliva sessilis* species of flowering plant in the family Asteraceae. But the locals..."

Jeremy stopped talking when he saw his son wasn't listening. Joss was staring out at something and not paying attention to anything else. He turned to see what was so enthralling. Right then, a large black vehicle appeared from behind the trees and began to slowly pass by the front of the ranch. The considerable potholes in the dirt road made it bound as it moved carefully by.

Their truck had creaked and clunked as his father negotiated the dodgy dirt path they were now going to live on, Oak Street, they called it, but this car made no sound at all. Even as it pitched and swayed, it moved smoothly. Beyond its uncannily soundless and agile movements, the vehicle itself was peculiarly plain. It was solid black with black tinted windows and absolutely no adornments. No chrome. No trim. And the lights were covered with shades. Any one of these things wouldn't be something to look twice at, but the accumulation of them was glaring, which made it interesting. He stood by his son and watched as the strange, somehow cold car slid by their gate and moved past their new home. They would've stood there, stone silent, even if the car had been screeching and champagne-colored because of what kind of car *it* was.

"Huh," Jeremy said. "I didn't know they had a funeral home in town."

Fuck, Joss thought, but he stayed quiet and kept his eyes trained on the back of the ebony monstrosity that made his insides freeze the moment he saw it.

He felt the cold in his spine, and it shot spikes through his body and into his brain. It was a warning. Some instinctual reaction to a threat. Joseph didn't know that, though. He knew he hated it here already. That he knew. Nothing says, "Welcome to the neighborhood," like a shadowy, creepy corpse car skulking around the place, but that's what it was--a corpse car. It was a hearse.

Fuck, Joss thought again.

(...)

The inside of the ranch was nicer than it looked from the outside. It had hardwood floors throughout the house, and a sizeable wood-burning stove was situated along a wall that separated the living area from the kitchen behind it.

It was sparsely furnished with an older leather couch and chairs, and there were beds and dressers in each room. No one had stayed in the ranch in a long while, that was plain to see, but it had been loved once, and the people here had been comfortable. There was an empty landline jack next to a thermostat that was hanging by some wires. It was obviously broken. Many homes didn't have central air or heat in the valley. They used fire to warm their houses and cracked windows for air conditioning. The kitchen was open, and there was a den that connected further into the residence, through a dining area. Big bay windows dominated most of the space, so it was bright and welcoming inside.

"Ya room's right this way," Jeremy said, walking through a small dining area and into the den where there was a portico with a bathroom situated between two bedrooms.

"Ya can have either one of these."

Joss picked the one to his right; it shared a wall with the living room, and he figured if the heat traveled, then maybe it could find him in there. His dad went and got a handful of blankets from one of the closets.

"It gets pretty chilly at night, so you'll need these."

"Thanks," Joss said.

"We'll need to get a few things done before it gets dark, are ya up for it?" Jeremy asked.

"Sure," the boy said.

(...)

They unloaded the trailer and moved their things into their respective rooms. It was still early in the afternoon, so they had time, but the ranch needed work, both to live in and keep up, so Jerry went inside to get everything up and running, while Joss had a few chores to do.

Much to his surprise, Joseph enjoyed chopping wood. It was a great way to release pent-up energy, and he had plenty of that. His dad found a 10-pound maul and a stack of wood rounds in the old garage. Someone had left a lot of tools and odds and ends lying around. Jerry showed him how to swing the heavy-duty ax upwards, and then how to come down hard on the logs to split them in two.

If the maul got stuck, he gave him a small sledgehammer to pound the rounded side of the splitting tool and drive it deeper into the timbers to crack them open. Joss was innately good at this exercise, and he found the process fascinating, because it was something he could do without thinking. He was tired of thinking. But this was easy: aim, lift, swing, and split. That's all there was to it.

In about an hour, he had a nice, neat stack of firewood. He was sweating, his hands were bleeding a bit, and he was breathing hard, but he hadn't found himself fixating on the helplessness or unfairness of life at all. He focused on the task at hand. Hard work made the mind forget, but, as always, everything came back eventually.

"Time for dinner!" Jeremy yelled from the back door, yanking Joss from his work. "Bring some of that in with ya, please."

Joss did as he was told and grabbed eight or so pieces of Pacific madrone, and then he made his way inside.

The wood burning stove was sitting atop a short tile platform, and it had a large smokestack that went up and through the ceiling and out of the roof. He stacked the firewood beside the stove. His father had a red-hot blaze burning, and it was warm inside. Not that Joss was cold anymore.

"Go wash up," Jerry said. "I made lasagna for dinner." Again, the boy listened to his father. His hands were blistered, but they didn't hurt much, and he went and showered, cleaned up his palms, and then changed into some clean clothes.

"Ya did great," Jeremy said. "Any better and I'd have to pay ya."

He slid a plate of food across the counter to where his son sat on a barstool.

"Thanks," Joss said.

"There's school tomorrow," his dad continued. "And I managed to get ya registered. Maybe that's too much, too soon, but--"

"No, it's okay," Joss said, interrupting but not rudely. "I like school."

Jeremy chuckled and sat next to Joseph. They didn't say anything else until after dinner.

(...)

"Want to watch a movie?" Jerry asked. "We got some DVD's. This place doesn't have the internet yet, but we can get satellite soon, maybe. I'll have to call about it."

"Not really," Joss said. "I'm tired. I think I just wanna go to bed."

"Sure," his dad said, taking the plates to the sink to wash them. "Goodnight, son."

"Goodnight," he said back.

(...)

Joss wanted to rest, but that wasn't in the cards for him.

He startled awake and instinctively grabbed at himself. It was that nightmare again. He'd been crying in his sleep, and the blankets were moist with perspiration. He exhaled and heaved a hard sigh and then brought in as much air to his lungs as he could. It was cold in the room, but his skin burned. He wouldn't be able to sleep anymore. It was nearly 5 a.m., so it was time to get up, anyway.

Fuck, he thought, and not for the last time.

DAY 2: I Got Nothin' to Show

THREE

Welcome to the Rez

School started early--around 6:30 a.m.--and it ended right after lunch, and while there were divisions between age groups and grade levels, the elementary and middle schools were housed in the same building, which was going to take Joss some getting used to. The classes and school days on Round Valley were shorter and less common than usual. Covid restrictions had been lifted, and everyday activities resumed after the spring semester of distancing. The reservation didn't have an online learning program, mainly because there was no access to the internet for most people's homes, and it wasn't that they didn't want it. They did. But it wasn't available. So instead of distance learning, people just distanced.

Classes in the fall still had the students separated by six feet, but that was when teachers or staff were present. Hallways and lunch lines were as crowded as ever. Learning took a back seat somewhere, and the students lost more and more engagement as time waned on.

Joseph was different. He had what his Pops would soon term as a kind of preternatural or spiritual intelligence. In truth, he absorbed information quickly, and he was able to use what he learned in practical applications with relative ease--something that endeared him to his teachers but didn't always go over well with the other kids.

Even on his first day, trouble found Joseph. It always seemed to find him.

(...)

Joss was a quiet boy. He was never prone to fits of anger or outbursts of emotion. He was, as many would say, mild-mannered and respectful. He was older than his years. A child but already a good man. And while he was never one to talk much, when he spoke, his words carried weight. He carried weight, too.

He was lean but large for his age, barely four inches shy of six feet at twelve, and his shoulders were wide. Usually, that would mean other children left him alone, or, at the very least, tried not to get on his bad side. But that wasn't Joss's experience.

(...)

The kid swearing was named Timothy, or Timmy, as he was more commonly known. Timmy's cousins, Bert and Ernest, were on the ground. Bert was pouting and rubbing his sore chin. Ernest was holding his throat while exaggeratedly choking and rolling around on his back. All of them were hurt in some way, but Timmy got the worst of it. He was currently wrapped up in Joss's arms and trying to scream. It was obvious he was in pain, but that was his fault.

Timothy wasn't big, but his attitude was enormous, and his cousins were huge for middle schoolers, so he thought he could get away with anything.

That's what he thought.

(...)

Joss was talking to the Boggs brothers in the hallway.

They were discussing a trading card game and a cartoon they all enjoyed. Joseph liked Nathan and Joe, and they were peripherally related in some way. They were cousins. Of course, everyone on the reservation was a cousin or an auntie or an uncle, even if they weren't related by blood or marriage. That was how the people talked. It was how they connected to each other. Nate and Joe were sweet kids, and they'd struck up a conversation over something they all enjoyed. That's when Joss saw Timmy. Well, that's when he saw Timmy's fist hurling straight towards him.

The world went black and exploded with colors and shapes, and then Joss was sitting on his butt, looking up at a trio of longhaired, Native boys staring back at him. Two were stocky and built the same way rugby players were, but the other one was a tiny guy.

"Welcome to the Rez, honky!" Timmy spat, and then he turned to gloat over his victory.

He was feeling good about himself, and he wanted to parade around. The considerable group of other kids that had gathered gave him and his cousin's a wide berth.

"That's right! Back up!" he yelled.

It took Joss a second to assess the situation. He found himself on his backside, sitting on the floor and looking up, and he could taste blood in his mouth--the same mealy zest from the day before when he'd sucked on his pricked thumb. That's when he realized what had happened. The small one with the big mouth cold-cocked him, never giving him the option to run or fight back. He realized immediately what he needed to do.

(...)

There were a few stories about that day. Some were sprawling tales about how Joseph pushed off the ground and palm thrust Ernest's throat while expertly connecting a punch with Bert's jaw, à la Bruce Lee. Others were less skillfully crafted, but they ended the same way. Joseph could take care of himself.

The truth was far less dramatic. It was a schoolhouse scrap with all the proficiency of a barroom brawl. Joss pushed up from the tile and hit Ernest in the throat, mainly by accident. He threw out his hand to stop himself from falling over because he stood up too fast, and it happened to land in Ernest's Adam's apple. He managed to swipe and catch Bert by surprise with a quick and mostly unintentional, openhanded slap, which knocked him down. That effectively took care of the bigger guys, and Joss was able to remain upright, so it was a win-win for him.

Tim was caught still strutting around like the cock of the walk, and he didn't have time to see anything. He'd been too preoccupied with gloating to hear the scuffle behind him, so he got blindsided. He was trying to be intimidating, when someone grabbed his ponytail, kicked his knees out from under him, and wrapped their arms around his neck.

(...)

Joseph slipped his right elbow under Tim's chin and placed his left hand on the back of his head. Joss then grabbed his left arm with his right hand, and he began squeezing by pushing his elbows together. It was a hold he'd learned in Taekwondo, which was something his mother insisted he be put in when he was five. He'd gotten his junior black belt the same week she got sick.

He wasn't choking Timmy, but he was applying equal pressure to the sides of his neck, cutting off the blood flow to his brain, and the smaller boy's face glowed bright red, and he was starting to feel dizzy.

"Get off me--!" Tim yelled, as Joss increased the pressure.

"Say you're sorry," Joseph said.

"I'll get you---Ah!" Timmy continued. He tried to scream more, but it was difficult to understand him.

"Say it," Joss said, his tone was level and calm.

"You...Ah!" Timmy yelled. "I'm sorry!" He was so dizzy "sorry" came out as a hoarse "sowwy," and his consciousness faltered.

Joseph knew he could knock Timmy out. It would take a few more heartbeats or another pound of pressure to render him completely unconscious, and Tim would probably piss himself. If Joss did that, he knew he'd either never be bothered again, or he'd have enemies for life. Probably both, somehow. He was going over his options and trying to figure out what would be best when there was movement to his left.

"That'll about do it, now," a low, kind, elderly voice hummed. "These mountains hold grudges. The people do, too."

Standing a few feet away was a kindly looking man of about 60 or 70. He had grey and black hair pulled back in a long braid and his beard, while a bit disheveled, was well-formed and it accentuated his face when he spoke. He hadn't been there before, or Joseph hadn't seen him.

Using a wooden cane, the old man stood stoically. Joss didn't know how he'd moved through the throng of students gathered around them as quietly or quickly as he had.

"Now, I said that's about enough," the man said, pointing at Joss, and he could feel the words resonate through him.

The old timer with his weathered clothes, headband, and large wooden cross dangling around his neck might've looked like some pop-star's stylist or a wannabe pirate, but he had power behind his words that demanded respect. Joss let go of Timothy, and he fell forward and onto his hands. Tim gripped at his collar and breathed in heavily. He stayed down briefly, collecting himself, and then he jumped up and ran off.

"I'll get you! Son of a bitch!" he yelled behind him, wiping away his tears. He was soon joined by his cousins, and they all skulked off nursing their aching egos.

"Put a mighty whoopin' on them youngins, didn't ya?" the old man asked.

"They had it coming," Joss said.

"That they did," the old man said, appraising him.

They stood there for a few minutes, surveying the hallway and watching the other students rush off after the excitement. They didn't need to talk, and they didn't until it became clear it was time for them to go. The old-timer looked over at Joss and broke the silence.

"What do you say we go get us some lunch, grandson?" he asked.

FOUR

D & Z Funeral Home

Round Valley had never had a funeral home. It had a few churches and a lot of sacred grounds, and the Natives were accustomed to performing at celebrations of life, but it never had a funeral home, until now.

D & Z Funeral Inc. bought and renovated the old flower mill in downtown Covelo a year before. The building was dilapidated and deserted decades prior, but the new owner, Mr. Diamond, replaced the roof, painted the exterior, and fixed the place up to the point most of the residents didn't recognize it anymore. The windows had been replaced, and large shades had been hung. It was beautiful, but somehow less inviting, even though it was supposed to be shiny and new. And shiny it was. But there was a falseness to its facade--a fakeness that made it seem less pristine, even after all the work that had been done to it.

Timmy had to walk past the old mill on his way home from school. He'd never liked it. It had always given him the "willies" as he put it. Today was no exception. He trudged down the street, cursing Joss under his breath.

"Bastard," he said. "I'll get him back."

He was still sore. His neck ached, and he had a headache from having been squeezed so hard. He wasn't paying attention to where he was; he was too upset to notice his surroundings. But then he felt it: the cold. It crept through his skin and sunk down into his bones, and he stopped. It was only then that he noticed he was standing right in front of D & Z. He stared up at the black and grey building, and he felt a chill shoot through him.

"Hello, young one," a steely voice said. "Would you like to come in?"

Timmy shot his gaze down, and it fell on a man standing on the steps of the funeral parlor. Not that you'd call him a man, if you knew better. He looked more like a leech in an ivory suit. His bald head and ample gut bursting from his jacket made it seem as if his clothes were blowing a skin bubble. His fat cheeks didn't round properly, and his nose was bulbous and dotted with black pores.

"Ah," Timmy said. "No. Thanks." He was nervous. He didn't know why, but he was.

"We have all manner of sweets and candies inside," the man said. "And some soda pop, if you'd like." He smiled, revealing a large mouth of small square teeth. They were unnaturally white and spaced apart like a saw blade.

"That's okay," Timmy said. "I gotta go."

"Alright Timothy," the man said. "Maybe some other time."

His voice was a slithering hiss--a whisper that carried in an unusual way.

"H-How did you know my name?" Timmy asked, and he could feel his pulse rising.

"Oh, I know many things," he said. "I'm Mr. Diamond."

He smirked again, and Tim was struck by a fresh wave of fear.

"Maybe just one for the road, then?" Mr. Diamond said, and he descended the steps and walked towards the small fence between them.

His huge body was oddly elegant. He had to be 300 pounds, but he moved as lithely as a ballerina. He floated to the gate and extended a meaty hand towards Timmy. There, on his palm, lying, pretty as you please, was a piece of candy. Tim took one look at it and decided he wasn't hungry.

"No, thanks" he said, hastily, and he turned and ran towards home.

(...)

Mr. Diamond, wearing his dark sunglasses, watched the boy flee, and as he rounded the corner, the fat, unnatural thing licked its lips.

FIVE

Pops

Joss and his grandfather left the school for lunch.

"Are we allowed to leave like that?" Joss asked.

"Ain't nobody gonna stop us," his grandfather said. "Things are a little different round these parts." Joss already knew that was true; he didn't need to be told. The classroom computer still used dial-up. He'd never seen nor heard a computer make so much noise. It sounded like it was about to lift off, not connect to a website.

"Am I going to get in trouble?" Joseph asked. "For the fight, I mean?"

"No more trouble than anyone else," the old man told him.

This was the first time he'd met his grandfather. He hadn't come to the house to greet them when he and his dad arrived, and he had never spoken with him on the phone, and yet Joseph was comfortable with him. This man could be anyone, but Joss knew he was who he said he was. He also double-checked his identity with his dad. He was too smart not to. A short text and a response later and his suspicions were confirmed. He was his grandfather. His "pops," as Jeremy called him.

They walked to Pops's old car, and Joss jumped in the passenger's side. It was a rusted beater, and the interior was cracked and frayed, but it was clean and neat in an antique kind of way. His grandfather put his cane in the back seat and slowly eased behind the wheel, huffing and grunting as he situated himself.

"Damn hips," he said. "If I didn't have bad luck, I'd have no luck at all, grandson."

"What do you mean?" Joss asked, and then Pops went into a long story about car accidents and a horse bucking him off and about ten other things that would keep an ordinary man down. He didn't quite know how much of it was true or how much hyperbole was added to elevate the narrative, but he liked the way his granddad spun a story, so he sat and listened.

Pops turned over the key, and the engine started immediately. The song about the logs in Covelo filled the cabin with its haunting melody, but his grandfather immediately cut the radio off. He didn't say anything. He stopped talking, and his face was grave. Joss wanted to ask what was wrong, but he figured it might be better to let it go, and so he did.

They went to one of the few places that served food in town: the small tent casino. There were no restaurants in Covelo. There were no traffic lights. There were some stop signs, but those were more suggestions for the frenzied vehicles that sped through and around the town. There was also a coffee shop, a bar, and a take out pizza counter inside the Indian Store, which was one of two gas stations on the reservation.

Nobody ever called the second one a "gas station." It was always and only ever known as the "Indian Store." The tribes owned it, so it made sense, and nobody on Round Valley Indian Reservation had time to waste splitting hairs over terms like "Indian" or "Native American." That wasn't their problem. Other people could argue over that. This was often conflated with the belief that tribespeople preferred the old-fashioned and historically inaccurate term "Indian." They didn't. If asked, most would prefer to be known the same way their ancestors were: as Nomlacki, Wailacki, Pit River, Pomo, Concow, Littlelake, or Yuki. Not that anyone ever asked.

The casino was right next to the Indian Store, and it had a small grill inside and some tables, and if they had a cook working for the day--they didn't always, even before the shutdown--then you could order a steak sandwich or a burger or anything you'd normally get from a greasy spoon.

Luckily, it was open and there was a cook on, so Joss got a chicken sandwich and a side salad; a mature order for such a young one, and something his grandfather noticed and appreciated. His pops got a patty melt and some fries, and they sat at one of the small tables, listening to the rows of slot machines jingle and chime. Every now and then someone would curse in frustration or yell out in jubilation--winners and losers all.

They sat and ate, staying mostly quiet. There was one question Joss had:

"Pops?" he asked.

"Yeah?" the old man said.

"What's a honky?" Joss asked.

"Oh," Pops said. "That's a bad word. It's a slur like Injun or the N-word."

"Really?" he asked. "I've never heard that."

"It's older," Pops said. "But stuff tends to linger in these parts."

Joss had a thought then. "So, am I, like, half--"

"Ain't nobody pure anything anymore, grandson," he answered, having had this conversation enough in the past to know what he was asking. "We're all a little bit something else. That boy was just trying to get under your skin."

"That's dumb," Joss said, after a brief reflection. "Really dumb."

"It sure is," his grandfather answered.

And then they sat. They didn't have to fill every second with chatter. It was enough to be together. Somehow it was enough just to be with one another.

SIX

Hitcher

Hitchhiking wasn't, and isn't, as popular as it once was, but it's still a common occurrence in Northern California and has been since the 60's. It wasn't odd to see the aberrant vagrant or rambler shooting out a thumb and trying to bum a ride. It was a frequent and regular part of life in the mountains.

William was such a rambler. He wasn't homeless or poor. He was simply a wanderer. He'd never been married, had no kids, and he collected his retirement check from the Navy every month that he usually picked up from Western Union, which was everywhere (5,000 worldwide locations in every country but Iran and North Korea). He'd joined the military while still in high school (got his parents to sign a waiver when he was seventeen), and he'd served honorably for twenty years before getting out at the tender age of thirty-seven-- and that afforded him the ability to go where he pleased and to do what he wanted to do.

In his case, that meant bouncing around the planet to anywhere and everywhere. Then, somewhere between Malta and the Amalfi Coast he got a call. He was on a small boat, catching a ride in one of the less-legal ways of getting from country to country. It wasn't comfortable, but it was cheap, and it was semi-illegal, so it was also exciting. That excitement was cut short when he answered his satellite phone. Bill's brother, Michael, was dead, and he had to go back home to Round Valley. He flew back to the States and hitched as far as he could, but he had to walk into town the last three or so miles. The driver of the truck he was in the back of had a house in the hills, and Billy jumped out of the bed where the mountains ended, the valley began, and Covelo Road became Commercial Street.

Three miles wasn't a lot for him, even with his bag on his back. He could walk that stretch easy enough. He'd walked all over this place as a child, after all.

(...)

He'd made it into town and was leaving Keith's A&P--the only grocery store within a hundred miles--when he saw some kid running around a corner like a bat out of hell. He dashed into one of the small homes, and Bill thought he was ding-dong ditching or something.

Spooked, Billy thought.

It was a bad day for Bill to come back to town. Of all the times he could have meandered back into Covelo, it had to be on the day two children went missing.

SEVEN

Gone

"Come on, Bert," Ernest said. "We're late."

"I'm almost done," Bert said. They were supposed to be at Timmy's house an hour ago, and he was going to be angry. They hated it when he got angry. Tim was smaller than them, but he was their leader. He was the youngest of the grandkids, after all. He was the baby and the favorite. But they'd gone without him to the gas station after school to get a slushie and some snacks. Timmy wouldn't be happy about that.

Making matters worse, Bert suddenly had to piddle on the way to Tim's house, so they were going to be later than they already were. He would probably blow a gasket if they didn't show up soon. He'd told them to meet him right after school so they could make a plan to deal with the new kid.

"That bastard is gonna get it," he'd said.

The brothers were walking in front of the old mill when they spotted a surreptitiously situated tree on its side to duck behind, and good old Bert decided he couldn't hold his water.

"Hurry up!" Ernest said. "You've been peeing forever."

"Oh, there's no rush," a voice said, and Ernest spun to see Mr. Diamond standing over him.

The round-lensed sunglasses he was wearing against his pallid skin made him look more like an obese skeleton in a suit than a person.

"Holy shit!" Ernest said. "W-Where did you come from?"

"Here and there," Mr. Diamond said. "Is that your brother over there?" He extended a large, sausage finger towards the brush.

"Yeah," Ernest stammered, too stupefied not to answer.

The shock of seeing the monstrous looking pale man cut off any chance of him remembering stranger danger.

"Well, isn't that nice," Mr. Diamond said. "Birds of a feather, piss together." He snickered to himself.

"I-I didn't have to go," Ernest said.

Bert came out from his hiding place zipping up his jeans. "Uh, sorry, mister," he said. "But I really had to, um..."

"That's quite alright," Mr. Diamond said. "But next time just knock on the front door, and you can use the facilities inside. There's no need to water my trees."

"In-Inside?" Ernest asked, gazing up at the building and feeling a bitter frost slink into him.

"Of course," Mr. Diamond said. "Mi casa. Tu casa."

"We don't speak, um" the boys started.

"Would you like some candy?" Mr. Diamond asked, interrupting them, and he held up a huge bag filled to the brim with sugary treats.

"What's the catch?" Bert asked, disregarding how bizarre the situation was.

"No catch," Mr. Diamond said. "I merely want to be neighborly. And I believe your brother, Ernest, needs to use the restroom now. You went, and now he can relieve himself, but he should really go inside."

"H-How did you know?" Ernest asked, the words coming out on their own.

"I know many things, kiddos," he said, smiling and showing off his chainsaw-toothed grin. The siblings looked at each other, puzzled.

"We're late," Ernest said, latching on to the excuse. He wanted to leave. This guy gave him the creeps.

"Do you gotta go?" Bert asked his brother.

"Well, yeah, but..."

"But what?" Bert said. "You go pee, and then we'll get some candy for Cuz. That'll keep him from freaking out too much. You know how he gets."

Ernest mulled that over, and then he looked at the bag of candy. "Real quick," he said.

Mr. Diamond beamed. "Follow me," he said. "Real quick."

(...)

Bert and Ernest didn't make it to Tim's house that day, and they never made it home that night.

"Those assholes!" Timmy said to himself.

He was in his room after having been stood up by his cousins.

"I'm gonna beat the crap out of them when I see them."

And he would have. He had every intention of roughing them up, because he knew they wouldn't fight back. They would fight for him, but not with him. Timmy was a spoiled child, but he was also the star in the family. They were Tweedledee and Tweedledum, so they would let their cousin do whatever he wanted to do, but they wouldn't dare harm him back.

"They're going to get it," Tim said. "As soon as I see them."

But he would never see them again. No one would ever see them again.

(...)

Billy made it to his Aunt Jodie's house around mid-afternoon. She was outside watering her plants, so she watched him walk up.

"Will!" she said, excitedly, and she rushed over to hug him. He was crying and so was she. "I'm so sorry."

"How did," he began, setting his rucksack down.

"Let's get inside," she said. "Get you settled. Then we can talk."

(...)

They sat at Jodie's dining room table. She'd made some coffee after Billy put his stuff away, and he was eating a piece of cake.

"Got that from the cake walk at church a few days ago," she said. "It's good."

"It is," he said. "What did they say about Michael?"

"He was uphill," she started. "He'd been working for the Forestry Service, and they were clearing out some of the dead trees from the fires last year." She paused to take a sip from her mug. "They found him last week. Said he'd been, um." She hesitated. "He got attacked by something. A bear or a mountain lion, maybe."

"There haven't been mountain lions around here for years," Bill said.

"Well, they weren't sure," she said. "But he was torn up really bad. They had him cremated.

That's what he wanted." Billy nodded. "And we're going to spread his ashes on your mom's grave tomorrow."

William and Michael's mother passed three years back. Billy had taken leave to see her. She was always a big woman, and her diabetes got the best of her eventually. Her first stroke was small.

Her second wasn't, and she never recovered. She passed peacefully on the day they brought her home from the hospital. She was found under a tree, wrapped in blankets. No one knew how she'd managed to get out there, but that's where they found her.

"Okay," he said, rubbing his temples. His head hurt. "Can I see his room?"

"Of course," Jodie said. Michael had been living with her for a few months. His divorce wasn't finalized yet, and he needed somewhere to land until all that blew over. "You can stay here, if you'd like."

"Yeah," he said. "Thank you."

(...)

The knocks on the door came around nine that night. Joss's dad was stoking the fire in the wood-burning stove, when the sound of three hard *bangs* startled him.

"Who the hell?" he asked himself, putting the fire poker down.

He went to the entrance and opened it. Standing on the front porch was the sheriff, a deputy, and two state troopers.

Round Valley had a police department, but they didn't have real policing power. They were police in name only. If someone dialed nine, one, one in Covelo, it actually connected to the Sheriff's Office, which was an-hour-and-a-half away, making it all too easy for nefarious characters to start trouble and get away with it. But having the sheriff in-person and standing on the porch right then meant something serious had happened.

"Hi there," Jeremy said. "Can I help y'all?"

"Mr. Frazier?" the sheriff asked.

"Yeah, that's me."

"Can we talk to your son?" the sheriff asked.

"What's this all about?" Jeremy asked.

"We have a few missing kids from town," he answered. "And we understand that your boy had a run-in with them earlier today."

"Missing?" Jeremy said. "Oh, my god."

He was sincerely affected by the news. People went missing on the reservation at an alarming rate. It was a very real problem. Most of the time it was domestic disputes and family fights, but there were other elements of danger that lurked in the valley.

Joss hadn't told his dad about the scrap he'd been in. Neither had Pops. They figured what he didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Pops had dropped his grandson off around one in the afternoon, and he'd stayed for a short visit, but they'd neglected to tell Jerry anything about what had happened at the school.

"Why don't y'all come in?" Jerry said.

He called for Joss as the officers sat down in the living room.

Joseph walked in and saw the sober, serious faces of the adults.

"What's up?" he asked.

The sheriff stood. "I understand you got into a fight with the Willis boys at school today," he said.

"They started it," Joss said. "The little one sucker punched me."

"We're not here about him," the sheriff said. "It's the twins, Bertram and Ernest. They've gone missing."

"I haven't seen them since earlier," Joss said. "I went to lunch with Pops, and then I came right back here."

"He did," Jerry said, confirming the alibi.

"You sure you haven't seen them boys? the sheriff asked Joseph, soberly. "Because if we find out..."

"No, sheriff, I swear. I haven't." he said. "I was actually a little afraid they might try something tomorrow, but after they ran off, I didn't see them again."

Joseph didn't show any signs of deception. He didn't seem overly nervous, and he wasn't setting off any red flags for the officers.

"Okay," the sheriff said. "We had to come by and ask. If you see or hear from them--"

"We'll call straightaway," Jeremy said. "Is there a search party out looking for them?"

"We have them on video at the gas station after school," one of the other officers said. "But then nothing after that."

He looked directly at Joss.

"I went to the casino to have lunch with Pops, and then we came straight home," he said, and the cops nodded to each other and readied themselves to leave.

"There's a search party out looking for the boys," the sheriff said. "But we have to run down all possibilities when something like this happens. They're just kids, after all."

"Of course," Jeremy said. "I can't believe--"

"Believe it," one of the state troopers said, not letting the man finish his sentence.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Joseph asked. "I'm not their favorite person, I'm sure, but I would never want anything bad to happen to them."

That wasn't exactly true, but it was true enough. He didn't want them to go missing.

"We may need some eyes tomorrow if we can't get ahold of them tonight," the sheriff said. "We'll put something online and get the word out through the community center, if it comes to that. You folks have a nice evening." He tipped his cowboy hat to them, and then he and the other officers left. Jeremy walked them out. When he came back, he put his hand on Joseph's shoulder.

"Son," he started, "I know all of this is new, and I believe you when you say he sucker punched you."

"He did," Joss said.

"I believe you, bud," he said. "I grew up here. I know what it's like. But, please, if anything happens, tell me. Okay?"

"Okay," Joss said in subdued resignation. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," his dad said, and he gave him a hug. It was the first time he'd felt close to his father, and while he didn't know it yet, it was also one of the last.

EIGHT

Missing

The sheriff showed up at Aunt Jodie's doorstep around ten-thirty that night. He pounded on the door, and she answered, still in her robe.

"Damn it, Carl, what the hell are you beatin' on my door for?" she snapped.

Jodie had had enough cops come by looking for one or another of her sons or her nephews to have no filter when interacting with the police.

This didn't bother the sheriff, but his deputy and the state troopers were alarmed.

"Hello to you, too," he said. "Is Billy here?"

Sheriff Carl knew about William. They had gone to rival high schools and had played on rival football teams.

"Yeah, he got in earlier this afternoon," she said.

"About what time," the deputy asked.

"About, hell if I know," she said. "After lunch but before dinner. What do you need Billy for? He doesn't know nothing about nobody around here."

"We're just running down a few leads," the sheriff said.

"What leads?" Jodie shot back. "You know Billy's been gone for a long time, and he just came back, because of Michael..." She paused there.

"It's okay, Auntie," Bill said from behind her. "What's going on Sheriff?"

He nodded, as he moved to stand by his aunt.

"You were at the gas station earlier today," the sheriff said, it wasn't a question.

"I was," Billy answered. "I went to Keith's, got something to eat, and then I went over to grab a pack of smokes across the street. Keith's was out of menthols."

"Did you see two kids there?" the deputy asked.

"There were a bunch of kids hanging around," Bill said. "Any kids in particular you're looking for?"

"The Willis boys, twins, they went missing this afternoon," Carl said. "And we got you on video in the store at the same time they were there. That was the last time anyone saw the boys."

"Can't say I know the Willis twins," he said. "I got my smokes and then walked on this way."

"Anybody see you leave?" the deputy asked, a hint of accusation in his tone.

"You got me on video," Billy said.

"That we do," the sheriff said. "Did you see anything...funny happening?"

"Funny ha-ha, or?" Bill asked.

"Look, smartass..." one of the troopers started, but Carl put a hand up to quiet him down.

"Anything out of the ordinary," the sheriff clarified.

"I saw a kid hauling ass around a corner by the A&P," Billy answered, "but that was before."

"Anything at the store?" Carl asked.

"Nothing," Bill said. "Got my smokes and said 'Hi' to Rainbow. I hadn't seen her in a while."

"We've already talked to Rainbow," the deputy said. "You didn't see anything?"

"No," Billy said.

What he didn't know at the time was how much the cops wanted to take him down to the police station and interview him under more controlled conditions, but there was nothing linking him to the disappearances.

"We all know you're a fag, Bill," the deputy suddenly spat.

The state troopers shared a mutual wince but remained silent.

There'd been rumors about William since he was a kid, and they didn't get any better when he'd left at seventeen to join the Navy. But there was no point in arguing with these guys. They wouldn't listen and they wouldn't understand if they did. Bill wasn't gay or straight. He was asexual. He wasn't attracted to men or women or anything else. He never had been. It wasn't something he could control, but it also wasn't something most people understood, so it was commonly mischaracterized. That didn't stop his aunt from puffing out her chest and berating the armed officer at her door.

"He is not!" she yelled. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but...!"

"It's okay, Auntie," Billy said.

He knew the subject of homosexuality was taboo on the reservation. The tribes were still very conservative about many things, and being gay was one of them. As it was in many ways, the broader ideals that had swept through most of the world had not reached these lands, and those that had were slow to take root and slower to mature.

For his part, Bill could care less what anyone thought about him or anything else. His aunt was a different story.

"No, it ain't!" she exploded again. "You better get off my porch, you little shit!"

She was pointing at the deputy now.

"Ma'am, you need to calm down," he said, putting his hand on the butt of his gun.

"If you think you can make me, you better try, little man," she said, and her eyes bore into him.

She was a full foot shorter than the deputy, and she was wearing a puffy pink bathrobe with her hair up in pins, but he seemed smaller and feebler than her somehow.

"Frank," the sheriff said. "Why don't you go back to the car and wait until we get done here."

Frank looked at his boss and deflated. He knew as soon as he'd spoken, he'd screwed up. He'd probably get a reprimand or worse. He might even get put on unpaid leave for his comment, which was the least he could expect in the majority of districts where an officer used a slur against a citizen, but that was there, and this was here. The deputy left without another word, his tail firmly between his legs.

"I'm sorry about that," Carl said.

"You damn-well better be," Jodie said, incensed.

"Even if I were gay," Billy said, cutting in, "that wouldn't mean I know anything about two missing kids. Or any kids at all. Do you think all gay people are pedophiles or something?"

The men struggled with their words, trying and failing to say anything.

"Jesus, you guys," Bill said, rubbing his eyes.

"We weren't accusing you or anything," Carl sputtered. "And Frank was outta line. We're not, uh, like that. We, um, don't think like that, I mean."

"Sure," Bill said. "Regardless, it doesn't change anything. I don't have any information, and I didn't see anything. Like I told you, I got my smokes, and then I came over this way. The only person I spoke to was Rainbow, and she's the only person I remember. That's it. I'm sorry I can't help out any more than that."

"Okay," Sheriff Carl said.

He also believed Bill "played for the wrong team," as he put it, and, in his mind, that meant he was automatically a person of interest. Carl wouldn't describe himself as racist or sexist or a bigot in any way, but that's not exactly how others would describe him. Bill's appearance and its connection to the disappearance of the twins was suspicious to him, but there was nothing directly tying Billy to the missing minors, except a feeling in Carl's oversized gut that he was somehow up to no good. The truth was something he wouldn't be able to comprehend if he tried. William being nonsexual wouldn't make any more sense to him than cosmology or rocket science or basic science, for that matter. If he'd known Bill was still a virgin at thirty-eight years old, it would've blown his mind, especially since it was by choice. Bill was a strikingly good-looking man. He was tall, had a full head of beautiful black hair, and he was in better shape than any of his deputies. Him not taking advantage of all the gifts bestowed upon him would be too much for Carl.

"You folks have a nice night," the sheriff said, and he tipped his hat.

Jodie slammed the door in his face.

"I can't believe that son of a bitch," she said.

"It's okay, Auntie," Billy said, again.

"They don't know anything about you," she said.

The truth was she didn't know much more than they did, and she, herself, had questioned why William never brought any girls around. Or why he never went on dates. He was so handsome. But she simply couldn't believe anyone from her family wasn't straight as an arrow any more than she could understand what an ace was. That's one of the reasons Billy left. He knew what the people believed here and how they were, and he didn't agree. He couldn't. But he also wasn't going to try to change anyone. That wasn't his place, so he went out searching for somewhere that was.

"I'm going back to bed," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

DAY 3: We Tried to Fight It

NINE

Shave and a Haircut

Native families from the region don't usually have funerals--some do, most don't. They have celebrations of life. They sing songs and gather, and they try to remember their ancestors while commemorating those they've recently lost. They were spiritual, and they were deeply personal but also communal.

Billy needed a shower and a haircut before going to spread his brothers' ashes, and there was one store in town that had hairdressers working out of it. He'd showered the night before, he had to wash the road off of him, but his hair was long and unruly, and if he was going to see his aunts and uncles and everyone else, then he needed to clean up. He shaved the scraggly beard he'd grown off, and Jodie had gotten up early to give him a ride.

Today was going to be hard for Bill, and not just because he would be letting go of his brother, but because he would have to see his family for the first time in a long time. When he left, it had created a rift between him and some of those closest to him. There were hurt feelings and those that felt abandoned or betrayed, and it had been a long while since he'd tried to foster those relationships. He simply didn't know how to overcome that divide. Michael was the only person who'd ever understood him. He was the only one who'd ever really gotten him (he was that one person, his person). He never passed judgement or preached to him. He'd only ever loved and supported his brother, so Billy wanted to look his best for him, and he wanted to try and keep the peace with everyone else.

Walking into the Half-Circle Trading Post, which was a mash-up between a second-hand store and a flea market, he saw a small set of steps leading up to a few spinning chairs and some mirrors.

Must be it, he thought.

He'd come back for a few months after retiring from the Navy, but he hadn't been in here since he was a teenager, and it had changed a lot over the years.

A woman came out from the back, and she greeted him with a sweet smile.

"Hey," she said. "Need a haircut?"

She was a thirty-year-old, slight woman with brunette hair and light brown eyes.

"I do," he said, and he walked up to greet her. "I'm Billy."

"Laurie," she said. "Have a seat."

Bill sat and told her he wanted the sides of his head and his ends trimmed but to keep it long. He was trying to grow his hair out. His mother was Native, but his father wasn't, and he favored his dad. That meant with short hair he looked different than his family. Too different. He didn't need any more attention, and the long hair helped him blend in.

"Are you new around here," Laurie asked, organizing her cutting tools and cleaning her clippers.

"I was born here and went to school here, but I left a long time ago," he said.

"I went to school here," she said. "I don't remember you."

"Class of O1," he said.

"Oh," she said. "I was O9." She was surprised. She thought he may be twenty-eight or twenty-nine at the oldest. "You must live really clean."

"I just live," he said.

He and Laurie talked while she worked, and he learned about her nephew, a five-year-old who'd started kindergarten this year, and about her family who'd moved to Round Valley a while back. She was flirting with him, and he knew that, but he wasn't interested in her for anything more than the haircut.

His inexplicable inability for attraction was annoying. He wanted to "like" someone the way other people did. He wanted to get excited, or, at the very least, to understand sex, but he couldn't. He had wet dreams, but he never remembered them. His equipment worked, but nothing had ever stirred when he kissed a girl (the few times he had), and he had no interest in men. Nothing against them, but he'd taken his time in therapy and undergone enough self-reflection to recognize that, at least.

Something else he hated about his *condition*, as he thought of it, was when he tried to explain how he felt, or didn't feel, about men and women, there were those who always assumed he was into kids somehow. He wasn't. He might not know a lot about himself, but he knew that wasn't part of who he was in any way. Still, he found situations difficult at times. This was one of those times. The fear of being honest with Laurie kept him quiet for the most part. She was nice, and he didn't want to give off the wrong impression. He wanted to flirt with her, and he was, as best he could. He wanted to know what it felt like to have a crush on a girl. Just once. And it wasn't because it seemed so amazing or sounded so great. Sharing spit and sucking on another person's tongue wasn't the most appealing image, but he wanted that experience. At this point in his life, he would take what he could get.

"Can I get a wash?" he asked. "I've got to leave from here to, uh, visit some folks, and I don't want to be covered in hair."

"Sure," she said. They moved over to a small sink, and he reclined to put his head into the scoop made for his neck. She turned on the water and let it run to get it warm, and she wet his hair. It was long, about shoulder-length, and soft. She took some shampoo and lathered it into his scalp, making careful swirls with her fingertips.

Billy could smell her perfume, and he appreciated how meticulous she was, and, for a second, he could almost feel a stirring from within him, but as soon as it started, it was gone again.

"All done," she said, and Bill stood to dry off with a towel.

He sat once more, and she combed the tousled mess out for him, showed him the back and sides, and then he got up to leave. Laurie was blushing slightly when he stood and paid.

"Maybe I'll see you around," she said.

"Yeah," he said, and he simpered solemnly and left.

Jodie was waiting for him in a parking space on the side of the building, and he climbed in her car.

"You look so good!" she said. "Very clean. Now, let's go get changed. That Laurie's a cutie, huh?"

"She is," he said, and he meant it.

(...)

Joseph didn't want to go to the funeral. They could call it whatever they wanted to, but it was still a funeral to him.

Celebration of life, my ass, he thought.

He'd never even met the guy who'd died. His name was Michael. He was one of his dad's old friends. All Joss could think about was the urn his mom's ashes were put in, and he didn't think he could take seeing another person reduced to nothing and then put in a pot. But then he'd had *that* nightmare. It was the only dream he had these days, and he didn't want to be alone.

"We'll just go to the reception," his dad said, and Joss nodded.

(...)

There were twenty or so family members and about fifteen more close friends that attended Michael's celebration of life. The cemetery was tucked away at the foot of a mountain and was hidden except to those who knew where to look. Everyone gathered around as some traditional singers serenaded them with songs of mourning and praise.

Michael's widow was there, and she was genuinely broken by her loss. She and Billy hugged, and he could feel her body shaking.

"They'd been trying to work it out," Jodie told him. "He gave up drinking, and they were going to couple's counseling. She pulled the divorce papers the day before he, uh, didn't come home."

William moved to the urn in a daze. He took a handful of ashes, not believing what he was holding used to be the man he loved the most, and he spread them over the ground where their mother was laid to rest. He was crying uncontrollably, tears streaming from his eyes with an ease that not even he could understand. He continued to spread the ashes and stayed, kneeling there to pray for Michael and talk to his brother. He told him how much he loved him. How much he missed him. And how the world, his world, would never be the same without him.

It wasn't until far later, when thinking back on it, that he remembered the one detail everyone else couldn't seem to stop talking about. Michael was a tall, husky guy. He was bigger than Billy and towered over most of his peers or anyone not currently playing professional basketball. But there were barely any ashes in the urn--only enough for two loose handfuls. There wasn't enough left of him for any more than that.

(...)

The reception was held at the Covelo, Round Valley United Methodist Church. The church, itself, had been standing since 1869. It was once the commissary for the reservation but had been a house of worship for over a century.

The preacher, Pastor Patrick, was a bear of a man, standing six-foot tall and emanating the presence of both a leader in worship and an elder in the tribe. He came to William, hugged him tightly, and said a soft, short prayer for him and his grief. There was food (there was always food) and tables were arranged so everyone could sit and eat. Billy wasn't hungry. He smoked a cigarette in the dirt parking lot out front, and he came inside and leaned against the nave's doorframe, keeping to himself. He'd changed out of the suit Jodie rented for him after the ceremony but was less comfortable now somehow.

"Ya, okay?" someone asked, pulling him from the trance he'd been in.

It was Jeremy. He was a childhood friend of Michael's. They were close in school, but they'd grown further and further apart as life took over.

"I will be," Billy said.

"I'm so sorry; it's a hell of a thing," Jerry said. "Hard to believe."

Bill agreed, but believe it or not, dead was dead.

"Yeah," he said.

"Oh, this is my boy, Joseph."

"Hey," Joss said.

School had been canceled because of the missing twins, and he'd come with his dad even though he didn't want to.

"Hi, Joseph," Billy said, and they shook hands.

They stood for an awkward moment, no one knowing what else to say. They could overhear other conversations, most of them were dominated by Bert and Ernest.

"You hear about the missing kids?" Joss asked.

"Bud, that's not," his dad started.

"No, it's okay," Billy said. He was happy for the change of subject. "I did. The sheriff came by last night."

"You too, huh?" Joseph asked.

"He come by to see you guys?" Billy asked back.

"He came by to talk to Joss because he, uh, got into a scuffle with the boys yesterday," Jerry said.

"Same Rez," Billy said.

"Pretty much," Jeremy agreed. "What'd the sheriff go see you for? Didn't you just get back?"

"Same Rez," Bill said, again.

He shrugged when he spoke and they both chuckled lightly.

"You joining the search party?" Jerry asked. "It's all over the community board."

"I might," Billy answered. "I know they can use all the help they can get."

"You're not lying about that," Jerry said. "Maybe we'll see you later."

"Maybe."

Bill nodded, and he walked with them to the front doors of the church foyer. The trio stopped there, all of them staring out at the car slowly skating by the front of the building. As the pitch-black hearse slithered past, the hairs on their arms rose.

"Fuck," Billy said, which was exactly what Joss was thinking.

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "The valley's got a funeral home now."

(...)

Joss and his dad left and went back to the ranch after the reception. They didn't sit and eat at the church, so they made a few sandwiches, and Joseph went to chop some wood. He needed to clear his head. He needed to clear the air. After an hour, his father came outside.

"I'm heading out, if you wanna come with," he said. "We're going to look for the boys."

Joss was sweating and dirty, but he put the ax down and followed Jeremy to the truck.

"Let's go," he said.

TEN

Search and Rescue

Timmy was downtown. Not that there was much of a downtown. On the main strip (also known as Greeley Street; there was no town square), there was the Half-Circle Trading Post on the corner, the post office, and a dozen shops in various states of repair or disrepair. A few were still open, but there were also the ruins of burned-down buildings scattered throughout. If you can imagine Hometown, USA, this was it after it got assaulted. The throughfares that connected to and around the strip held a small charter school, some houses, and the new D & Z Funeral Home.

If you followed Greely, it ended at the high school, where most of Round Valley congregated for football games in the fall. Every loss was the referees' fault, the Mustangs could've always played harder (whether they won or not), and someone, usually a spectator or coach, had to be walked out before a fight started. It was crazy in the best way, and it brought the community together like nothing else could.

Tim was angry and upset. Angry at himself. Upset about his cousins. He was, and had always been, a selfish child. He had a low self-esteem. And he lashed out because he was jealous. Jealous of Bert and Ernest because of their physical prowess. Jealous that he was an only child, and that he was alone--his dad got locked up before he was born, and he wouldn't be back for a long while.

Being a tween wasn't helping, either. The hormones made it more difficult for him. He was having feelings and thoughts he didn't understand.

"Hey," a voice said, snapping him back to reality.

It was the new kid.

"Hey," Timmy said. He wanted to sound obstinate and strong, but his voice was meek.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Joss said.

This surprised Timmy. He was used to kids apologizing when it wasn't their fault (he lived the life of a bully, after all), but that was usually only after Bert and Ernest had pummeled someone, so this caught him off-guard.

"I know I didn't start anything," Joss said. "And you called me something racist, but I probably took it a little too far."

"I called you something racist?" Tim asked, honestly surprised.

"Yeah," Joss said, "you did."

Timmy pursed his lips.

"I didn't know that," he said, and the way he said it made them giggle.

"I am really sorry about your cousins, though," Joss said.

His mood shifted from jovial to empathetic naturally as he spoke and created an air of calm sympathy and sincerity.

"Yeah," Timmy said, weakly. He was quiet and contemplative. When he spoke again, his voice had regained its strength. "And it was my bad. Yesterday, I mean. I'm sorry. There was other stuff, and I was copying my uncle, and...uh."

"No worries," Joss said, and he patted Tim's arm.

They officially introduced themselves and talked as if nothing had happened in the way only children can.

(...)

The sheriff had set up at the baseball fields, which was not downtown. He knew that's where most people were going, and he decided he didn't want to be around most people.

"I'll be setting off in this area," he said. "That's where they've got a grow going."

"Yep," his men confirmed.

They were going over search areas on a map they'd spread out on the hood of one of the patrol vehicles. The regions the sheriff was referring to were ones they believed they could use to double for opportunities to spy on, if not take down, some of the gangs and cartels they believed had set up in the mountains to legally and illegally grow marijuana and produce or traffic other unsavory things.

"I'll head up this way," he said. "Had another girl go missing around there."

Missing girls were unbearably commonplace on Native lands. The seclusion and the ease at which dark influences could hide and expand made disappearances and unsolved crimes abnormally widespread. It affected every tribal nation. Not one but all.

"Let's get out there, then," he said, and the small crowd of deputies assembled in the dirt parking area of the ballfields dispersed.

"Sheriff?" someone asked.

"Yeah." he said, folding the map and not paying attention.

"There's a bunch of people gathered downtown," Frank said.

"You best get down there and tell 'em something then, Frank," the sheriff said, and he tipped the brim of his cowboy hat and walked away.

(...)

The groups of families and volunteers stood on Greely Street and waited for the sheriff. He never came. They got a deputy, instead.

It was good Aunt Jodie wasn't there. She had a short memory, but she would've remembered Frank, and Bill wouldn't want that.

Billy was alone and leaning against the brick wall of the post office. He was smoking a cigarette out front. The street had been blocked off to traffic so people could organize. They used to try and have these meetings in the parking lot of Kieth's A&P, as it was the largest paved plot around, but they'd stopped doing that due to some issues that arose. The fact that they'd met enough to even make such a decision says about all that needs to be said about the frequency of missing folks in these foothills.

Pockets of people stood and moved up and down Greely, one of the center streets, and they were talking animatedly and getting frustrated by the wait. Then Frank showed up. That didn't help much.

"Okay," he said. "Can I get, uh," and then he pulled the microphone he was using away from his mouth, "is a karaoke machine the best we can do?" he asked someone, not realizing everyone could still hear him.

"Oh, sorry," he said when he saw the crowd of blank stares and crossed arms.

"Right, so, we're going to get everybody to start here, and we've got," he turned away again, "these."

He held up a stack of paper.

"These are grid sheets, and they're color coated to one area. So, we'll give everybody here," he glanced around, "y'all seem to be pretty broken up already. Seems like there's, um," and he started pointing and counting the crowd. "Fifteen groups, so we'll give each of y'all some of these sheets and we'll be searching those areas. Knocking on doors, if there's houses, and handing out, um, okay, these." He held up fliers with the twins' pictures on them. "Any questions?"

There weren't, but there wasn't a whole lot of faith in Frank, either. His inexperience was showing, and the overall presence he gave off didn't instill confidence. People called him an asshole; people that had never met the man.

The volunteers gathered and formed a line. Bill waited.

After a while, he saw some familiar faces.

"Billy," Jerry said, "long time, no see."

Jeremy was always one for a good dad joke. He'd always been that way.

"Hey, Jerry. Joseph."

He nodded to both of them and put out his menthol.

"Ya wanna join us?" Jeremy asked, pointing to the line.

"Might as well," Bill said, and they moved towards the others and continued to small talk.

Jeremy, Billy, and Joss met back up with Timmy and his family, and everyone said hello or introduced themselves. Most everyone knew each other but it had been a while for some.

"Jeremy?" Frank said, walking over.

"Deputy," he said.

"You know about that land over by the Wright Farm, don't you?" Frank asked, using what limited information he could piece together to seem personable.

"It belongs to one of the aunts now," Jerry said. "Pops is the expert. I haven't been up there in years."

"Yeah, your aunts and pop," Frank said.

Everyone was aware of what Jeremy's father thought about authority figures. Needless to say, he wasn't a fan, and while Frank was still in the doghouse with his boss and was expecting some form of retribution for a few of his actions, he was given a substantial, wild part of the outer rim to search. He was also given a few patrolmen to help him, but none of them were raised in the vale, and most of what they knew was conjecture and rumors. If they were going to get out of there before midnight, they needed a guide, and that guide needed to be amiable and able to keep up.

"Could you maybe help us out?" Frank asked. "It would get us going a lot faster, you know?"

Jeremy looked at Bill and Joss.

"My son can't go up there," he said. "There's five hundred acres on the side of those mountains, and it's rough and dangerous, and it's going to start getting dark after a while."

Sunsets and sunrises didn't work the same way on Round Valley. Because the reservation was surrounded by mountain ranges, there was a shadow that covered much of it during dawn and dusk, coupled with the fact that the floor of the valley was thirteen hundred feet above sea level, it got dark faster and was darker for longer. Not by much, but the light of the mornings and evenings was shortened.

"Hey there," Frank said. He ignored Bill, and Bill ignored him right back.

Joss nodded.

"Can we take your dad for a few hours?" he asked.

Joss looked at his dad.

"He's a grown man, he can make his own decisions," he said, which flummoxed Frank.

The dumbfounded expression on his face made Jeremy and Bill laugh.

"I'll go with Timmy and his family, if it's, okay," Joss said, talking mainly to Tim.

"Yeah, that's cool," he answered. "And Bill can come with us, too."

He motioned at Billy with his head.

"He's a cousin."

"But you're okay with that, right, bud?" Jerry asked, cautiously.

"It's cool," Joss said.

Timmy's group consisted of his mother, Yolanda, one of his aunts, and a few older cousins. Yolanda was a vibrant woman who had a smile that could brighten the darkest day. She was known for her Native necklaces and wearing jean shorts no matter what the weather was, and Tim lived with her and one of her sisters in a small house not too far from where they were currently standing. The teenagers were Bert and Ernest's siblings. Their mom, Samantha, had been too grief stricken to get out of bed.

Timmy snatched a couple sheets of paper. The top one highlighted a grid close to where he lived, but he never got to look at the other one, because it was quickly taken from him by his cousins. They glanced at it and recognized the area. It was across town.

"We'll find 'em," they said. "They better be okay. Mom is really messed up over all this."

And, with that, they were off.

There weren't many young ones helping with the search. A lot of the families on the reservation were too afraid to get out there with their children. Bert and Ernest were big, and they'd disappeared. They'd vanished into thin air. The fear of that caused them to shut their doors, lock their windows, and draw their curtains. That also meant there were plenty of people home to answer when Timmy and Joss knocked.

No one had seen the twins since that last day. Every person they spoke with expressed concern and invited them in. They started declining the invitations because they took too long. There were other groups in this area, but they wanted to try and cover as much ground as possible. They were walking off the tiny front porch of one of the homes in town when Tim saw the doors at D & Z across the street swing open, and a few volunteers were seen shaking the unnerving proprietor's hand as they left. A chill went through Timothy, and he felt sick.

Mr. Diamond saw Tim, and he gave him a wave. The wave went unreturned.

"Oh, well," Mr. Diamond said to himself. "I'll see you later, then."

He closed the giant 15-foot door behind him. It was soundless as it slid shut.

(...)

Joss went to Timmy's house when it started to get dark. He'd actually enjoyed the day with Timothy. At first, he wasn't sure how this was going to go, but it was pleasant. His mother was very kind, and his aunt was equally as gentle and considerate. It was obvious they doted on him.

As for Timothy, he either had a short memory, or he wore his heart on his sleeve and had no impulse control. He was earnest, but when he felt something, he had to get it out, and it was always raw and unrestrained.

"Shit!" he said, throwing a toy into a full hamper in the corner of his room.

The twin's mother called, searching for hope or some semblance of good news, and the sisters stayed in the living room and talked and wept. Bill left after their search, but walked them home first, and Tim was excited to show his room off to the new kid. Or he had been until Aunt Sam called.

"Sorry," he said. "But if these guys are trying to be funny; it's not funny."

"I'm worried about them, too," Joss said. He was appraising an action figure of Godzilla from the 90's version of the film and thumbing through the DVD collection next to the old-school tube televisions sitting on some milk crates.

"I didn't say that," Tim said.

Joss turned to him, and for the first time Tim fully saw his eyes. He'd heard about them. It was the reason Timmy had attacked him. He was different. Joseph's hair was longer, and it covered his face most of the time. There were other reasons the pair hadn't locked gazes yet, but those don't matter. When they did, Joss's eyes gave him pause. They were deep, blue voids that made him feel as if he were being considered by some great authority or power. Joss was a copy of his father in many ways. He had the high cheek bones and the strong chin, but his irises and his stare were all his mother's, and they gave off the impression that he wasn't made for games or for lies, and he wouldn't put up with them, either. He showed no emotion. He didn't have to.

"Okay," Timmy said. "I'm really worried about them. Those guys are buttheads and as smart as a bag of rocks most of the time, but they love their mom, and they would never do this to her. So, something happened. Something bad. I can feel it."

Joss nodded.

"It had to be that Mr. Diamond guy," Timmy muttered, almost to himself. "He makes me feel this..."

"Coldness," Joss said, completing his thought.

Is this guy reading my mind with those eyes? Timothy wondered.

"I felt it, too," Joss said. "Earlier near the building, and whenever I see that car."

"We should go check that place out." Tim said.

Joss agreed, but Timmy's mom walked in the room right then.

"Joseph," she said, "I called your dad, but he must still be out on the hill and it's getting dark sweetheart. Do you want to stay here for the night? Or should I call your Pops?"

"I don't have his number," Joss said.

There was a knock at the door. It was unexpected and nearly prophetic timing, because it was Pops.

"Hey grandson," the old timer said. "Your dad ain't come back yet. They gotta go by my cabin to get those trucks out, and it looks like they might be going at it for a while tonight. So, I figured, since I got the po-lice," he said this word with two hard syllables, "all over my back yard looking for those boys, I'd come here and get ya and make sure ya get home safe."

"How'd you know where he was?" Timmy asked.

"A good man always knows where to find his family," Pops said. "And I was talking to his aunt, Jodie, on the phone when Bill got in from y'all's searching. Me and her go way back. But he told me where y'all was."

He winked and smiled good-naturedly. They all did.

(...)

"Are we going back to your cabin?" Joss asked, as they got to the car.

"Nah, we'll go over to the ranch, and I'll wait till your dad gets back," he said. "I don't have electricity at the cabin, and the well water can get irony sometimes, so, you might not like it."

He assessed the area, seeming to be aware of something in the shadows, but Joss didn't see anything.

"Plus," he continued, "we need to stay away from the hills tonight."

He closed his car door and turned the engine on.

(...)

At the exact same moment Joss was warming his hands on the dashboard vents, five miles away and on the side of one of the mountains, someone was running.

It was a man, and the flashlight he was carrying shook violently in his hand as he pumped his arms with everything he had. He was trying to will his body to move faster but he was failing.

"No!" he screamed. "No!"

He peeked over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of glowing golden flecks flittering through the darkness.

Goddamnit! he thought *This shit can't be real! It can't be real!*

A noise caught his attention, and he turned his head to try and see what it was. He'd barely glanced away when he ran full steam into something. It wasn't a tree, but it sure felt like one.

Jeremy hit his head when he fell, and the night was spinning around him. He was confused, and he couldn't make sense of anything that was happening. He managed to stumble to his feet, and he tilted his head back. Looking down on him were two perfectly round, golden orbs. The person he'd run into didn't even flinch when he bounced off of him, and he had to be six-foot-five. But it wasn't a person, was it? It looked like a man, but it wasn't. It couldn't be. Jerry had seen what it had done. He knew what was left of the three men he was with. He knew what it ate.

"Hello, Jeremy," it said.

Jerry could feel the thing in his head. It felt like invisible tendrils had extended from this creature and were digging around in his mind. As if he was having his brain unlocked by it.

"You are scared, aren't you?" it asked, but it wasn't really a question. "To tell you the truth, I prefer children. They taste better. All that fear." It used a long, black pinky nail to pick at its teeth. "But I went too far with the last two, so, for now, you'll have to do."

Jerry wasn't able to move. Terror had wiped his mind of all thought, and he wasn't able to regain his consciousness before the beast ripped into him. The sheriff found one of his arms three weeks later.

No one ever saw Frank or the other patrol officers again.

ELEVEN

Daddy Dearest

It was nearly five in the morning, and Joss had been sleeping soundly when a series of loud *bangs* woke him from his sleep. He wasn't having the best dream, so he didn't mind much.

He got out of bed. The floor was cool, and he walked out of his bedroom, around the corner, through the small living area, and to the front door. It was so much warmer in the room with the wood burning stove in it.

"Hello?" Joss asked.

"It's me, bud," his dad said. "Invite me in, would ya?"

Weird way to say that, Joss thought.

"Open the door, but don't invite him in," a voice from behind Joseph said.

It made his heart drop.

"Pops!" he snapped. "Why are you hiding in the dark?"

The old man was propped in a chair in the corner. His hands were resting on the top of his cane.

"Been waiting," he said.

He felt chastised but he didn't say anything, and he didn't show any signs of it. He took a beat to steady himself before he began.

"He's been begging to be invited in for a while now."

He made hand quotes when he said, "invited in."

"But I was waiting for you. Ya might not believe this, but I seen this coming. I been havin' visions. Dreams of evil and teeth. Dreams of golden eyes."

This was the single weirdest moment in Joseph's life. He both had no idea what the hell Pops was talking about, and he knew exactly what he was saying at the same time. But that was impossible.

"Ya've had them too, haven't ya?" he asked, and Joss nodded. "Who is it in the dreams? Who comes for ya?"

"It's my mom," Joss said, and he sounded his age for once.

It was the first time he'd ever sounded that young, at least to Pops.

"It's always him," Pops said, and he was instantly upset. "It's always your daddy. My boy. That's why I always stayed away. I kept him at arm's length. I pushed him away because I thought it would save him. Save us both, maybe. But I knew it tonight. I felt it. The coldness. I shoulda done something. I shoulda stopped him. I shoulda tried. But I didn't. I kept calling myself a fool, instead. A damned old fool."

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his wet cheeks.

"But then he showed up here, and he was saying exactly what he said in my nightmares," Pops said, his voice quivering. "Exactly the same things. Open the door, but don't invite him in. Whatever he asks for don't give it to him."

Pops wanted to tell him more. He wanted to tell him how he'd seen Joseph in his visions, too. He'd only met him yesterday, but he'd known Joss for decades.

"It's his house," the boy said, trying to move them back into reality. "He can come in."

"We'll see if he can or not, won't we?" Pops asked.

Joseph didn't have a comeback to that, so he turned the knob and opened the door. The porch light was on, so he could see his dad well enough, but it was immediately clear there was something wrong with him.

"Buddy!" he said, too cheerfully to be believed.

He was jittery, and he was avoiding eye contact.

"Are you high?" Joss asked, because he was acting, well, as Joss was thinking, like a meth head who needed a fix.

He'd ever seen that, but if anyone had, they would have agreed with him.

"Invite me in, bud," Jerry said in a peculiar way. It wasn't menacing, but it was.

"You live here," Joss said, and he turned to give a look to Pops.

The old man acknowledged him and nodded as if to say, "look closer." Joss did. He studied his dad. There was definitely something wrong.

Is he shorter? Joseph wondered, and then he moved his gaze down, and he saw what his grandfather had to be pointing out.

Jerry was twitching but standing relatively still. One of his hands wasn't moving at all, though. It was reaching out and facing downwards, but it was flattened, palm forward and fingers extended, against the empty borderline of the entry. It was as if he was pressing his hand against a pane of glass, and not just because of its position, but because his hand was physically pressing against something. Something that wasn't there. Joss could see the impression against the flesh of his palm; he was literally unable to enter.

What the fuck? Joss thought.

"Everything okay, bud," Jerry said.

They both heard a loud sigh from the corner.

"Oh, Dad!" Jerry exclaimed. "Is that you!"

A large pendant flew by Joss's face, causing him to flinch. The necklace was a cross Pops had been wearing since the 60's. It rocketed over Joseph's shoulder at blazing speed, and it slammed into the side of Jerry's head. There was a bright flash and a loud pop as Jeremy was blown backwards with the force of a grenade.

"What the fuck!" Joss yelled, unable to stop himself this time.

His grandfather moved past him quickly, too quickly. It seemed impossible, but Pops was out and on the front porch retrieving his cross in an instant. He gaped around, wary of any potential threats that might still be out there. When he settled, he leaned against his cane.

"We need to talk, grandson," he said. "And I am truly, truly sorry about that."

(...)

In the bushes outside of a house that was two blocks away from the D & Z Funeral Home, a bald, fat man-looking thing sat perched outside of a window. It was watching a boy inside sleep.

I don't get the fuss over the small ones, Diamond thought. They seem dirty to me. Gross.

It spun and marched off, one quick stop and then it would be back to its own devices.

(...)

Tim was in bed and watching the figure as it passed under the light. It was Mr. Diamond.

I'm on to you, you son of a bitch, he thought.

He stopped to talk to someone. It was a big guy, and not big like he was fat. The other guy was muscular and extremely tall. The burly one glanced over. Timmy knew it was too dark in his room and too light outside for anyone to see through the window right then. There was a streetlight right at the curb, too. Not to mention he was under his covers and watching events unfold through a pair of binoculars. He'd pretended to sleep, then thrown his blankets over him when he heard the crunchy steps of Diamond moving away. He couldn't make out the face of the big man, but he couldn't concentrate on that because when the light at the curb went dark, something it did to "conserve energy," Tim's heart nearly stopped. As soon as the night took over, two glowing golden eyes came to life, and they saw him.

(...)

On the other side of Covelo, Bill wasn't sleeping. He was on his phone and searching for the quickest ways out of town. Something tapped at the small window in the room. The sound was unmistakably one made by a fingernail, and it had the signature "tap-tap" cadence. Bill sat up and turned to investigate. At first there was nothing. It was quiet outside, and he could hear the chirping and twirping of bugs.

Rainbow's head came out of nowhere, and Bill shot back, falling over and onto his rear end.

"Ah!" he yelled, as Rainbow laughed maniacally.

He got up and went to the window. She was acting strange. Her hair was up in pigtails, she was wearing her work clothes from the gas station, and she was fidgety and agitated.

"Invite me in Billy," she said. "We can have some fun, you know?"

Bill didn't know what to say, so he cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Go home, Rainbow," he said.

Instead of going home, she began rubbing her hands over her chest. She was an attractive woman in her early thirties. She was tall and slender with long legs, but William had never seen her *that* way.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She continued to rub her chest and began making moaning noises.

"Come on, Billy," she said, gripping her breasts hard and licking at him. "Don't you want to have some fun?"

He didn't. Not like that. Not with her. Not now. Not ever. But he also didn't know how to tell her that.

"I'm good," was the best he could come up with.

"You're not a queer, are you?" she asked, venomously. "Or some kind of sicko? I like a good sicko."

She cackled as an odd sensation began to build and distract Bill. It felt similar to having his hair washed earlier in the day, but it was coming from inside his head. It was difficult to focus and his vision doubled.

"You need to go home, Rainbow," he said. "Sleep it off. And don't come here again."

Rainbow's body became rigid, and her teeth caught the light in a strange way that gave Bill chills.

Does she have something in her mouth, he wondered.

"You don't want to fuck me, Bill?" she asked, and she ripped her shirt open with her nails.

It wasn't sexy. Even if Bill had been attracted to women, it wouldn't have been sexy. It was desperate and violent. She was feral and threatening.

"No, you don't," she said, absently, and she froze. "You don't want to fuck anyone, do you? You're fucking useless!"

Hurtful, he thought, and it was almost as if the sarcasm reached her.

She backed away from the window. As she did, the shadows obscured her, and her eyes began to radiate a golden hue.

"What are you on?" Bill asked, too low for her to hear.

She shifted her body and head towards something to her right, almost as if she'd caught the smell of something, and then she squinted back at Bill, stuck her tongue out at him, and then darted off with ungodly speed.

(...)

There wasn't a landfill on the reservation. They had an area where people could go and throw their garbage into bulky dumpsters that got taken out of the valley and buried elsewhere. Residents had to pay to throw their trash in (usually by the bag), and while there were trucks that could pick up waste from individual residences, getting those services set up and affording them wasn't easy for most families. Having to haul loads of garbage off several times a week wasn't easy, either, but it was cheaper. Where these dumpsters were located was also complicated, and there were a few reasons for this. First, there was Native land surrounding it. There are Native lands on reservations--those owned by the tribes--and private lands that are owned by individuals and businesses. Native-owned lands had laws specific to them, and members of the tribes were allowed to stay there without question. This meant that tribesmen and women always had somewhere to stay, even if it was under the stars. It also meant that those with nowhere else to go and no future prospects could squat there for free, which many an addict and fugitive did.

The other reason it was complicated is that it was out at the end of a dead-end street miles from town, only making it more attractive to those on the run. Whether on the run from others or from themselves, it didn't matter.

The sprawling encampment, filled with discarded trailers and tents, was rowdier and more volatile than usual. The rats from the dumpsters had been more vicious than normal and several residents had started shooting at anything they saw moving. Birdshot blasts rang out through the night before he showed up.

Who he was, no one could say. Where he came from was equally unknown. He was a big fellow, and he moved as if he were floating over the land.

Those living in the camp were tending to their fires. They had to be careful. It was too dry this year, and any sparks or embers that got away, whether they were floating on the wind or not, could light everything up. Then this big drink of water walked into the middle of the camp.

"Hello everyone," he said.

"Hey!" someone said, but she was the only one who spoke.

Everyone else stood and watched the stranger warily.

"Oh, not you," the big man said, and he raised his hands to the air.

As his arms moved skywards, dozens of pairs of glowing eyes came to life in the blackness, surrounding the encampment.

"Them," he said.

The campers fought, or they tried to fight, but they lost. Badly. The flames everyone was worried about minutes before were extinguished by the waves of blood and carnage the beasts spilled. What they didn't eat, the rats finished.

(...)

"What's going on?" Joss asked. "What's wrong with my dad?"

They'd closed the door, and the old man had gone back to the chair. He was breathing hard.

"You know that ain't your dad," Pops said, and he was right. Joss did know that.

"I can't tell ya exactly what's goin' on," Pops said. "But I can tell ya my story. And then we can take it from there. The first thing ya should know is that I'm not a hippie or whatever anyone else has said about me."

No one had said anything, but this interaction helped the boy understand how the old man believed others saw him. Or maybe how he hoped they saw him.

"I'm a mathematician," Pops said.

"I don't know where this is going, but aren't there more important things we can get straight first?" Joss asked.

"No," Pops said with a finality that shut his grandson down.

"I was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton," he continued. "That's Princeton University, and it's in New Jersey, not Massachusetts. Those Massholes from Harvard and MIT always try and make themselves feel important by comparing brain pans between their schools and the Institute, but they got nothing on the Tigers."

Pops waited for there to be some semblance of recognition for the famed scientific establishment or maybe some admiration for being a member of such a distinguished group, but he got none. His grandson's face didn't register recognition, much less appreciation when he belittled the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he was sure nearly everyone had at least heard of MIT. Buzz Aldren went there and so did Richard Feynman. He nearly namedropped J. Robert Oppenheimer, who headed the Institute for Advanced Study for nineteen years, but if the boy didn't know who that was, it might break the old man's heart.

"I began there when I was about your age," he said, disappointed but undeterred, "because I'd solved an equation they thought was unsolvable. And that might sound odd to ya, but in the sphere of influence math and science creates, it's commonplace. The Millenium Prize problems are an example. I mean, if ya solve the Hodge conjecture, they give you a million bucks, but the point is, I am and I have always been a man of science. Do you understand that?"

Joss nodded.

"Good," Pops said. "Then maybe this won't sound as insane as it does when I tell it to myself."

Joseph said nothing. He waited.

"When looking into the theories and the maths of the universe, the more you think ya know, the less ya really understand, and it gets easy to lose focus and sometimes it can get easy to lose ya grip on reality, because there are concepts and the realities around those concepts that become too insane to believe. If I were to tell ya gravity is space pushing down on ya and not the Earth pulling ya down to it, because gravity is spacetime's distortion around the planet that would probably sound fake to ya. Right?"

"We're having the same dreams," Joss said. "And you blew up Dad with a piece of wood. Does it matter what sounds fake right now?"

"Right," Pops said. "On to the important stuff. I'm not a superstitious man. I believe what I believe, and if that makes me religious, then I'm a religious man."

He held up his pendant as he said this.

"But I'm not superstitious. I never have been. I ain't got time for ghost stories. Or that's what I've been telling myself now for going on nearly sixty aught years."

"How old are you?" Joss asked.

"I'll turn eighty soon, if I live to see tomorrow," he said. "And in all that time, I still remember the day it saw me like it was yesterday."

His lips quivered, and his hands began to tremble.

"I wasn't quite twenty, and I was doing something simple. It was nothing. Just another equation in Princeton. Another day toiling alone in a small room hoping to prove I belonged there. I was fully engrossed in my work, when my pencil broke. I picked it up to look at the shattered wood and graphite, and I had a random thought then. I still can't remember what it was exactly. Something about the equation I was working out and the particles that hold matter together, when every molecule in my body was suddenly crushed by a great weight. It felt like an enormous, hand grabbed me and squeezed."

He clasped his fist tightly to accentuate his story.

"And, yes, I know that sounds crazy. It sounds crazy to me, and it happened to me. A hand didn't appear or anything. It was invisible to the naked eye, but I felt it. My entire being was overtaken by something unimaginably powerful, and while I was trying to find a way to free myself, it opened its eyes, and it looked at me. Again, I couldn't really *see* the eyes, but I felt them on me, and I wet myself; I was so scared. Horrified. I'm not afraid to admit that."

"Was it the golden ones? Like in the dreams?" Joss asked.

"No," he said. "They were different. They held more hate and malice. They were hungrier and had depths I knew I would never understand. And this was merely an impression of them."

This was the most Joss had ever spoken to his grandfather, and it was kind of amusing how he dropped the folksy act once he got going, but Joss understood that. Sometimes it's better to hide. "Not long after, I left the Institute and Jersey altogether," Pops said, dismally. "I stopped my work. I quit looking, because I knew that to search meant to find and to make yourself vulnerable to being found, and I didn't want to be found again. I'd also started having the dreams. Dreams of creatures with golden glowing glares and bloodred appetites. They would tear me apart every night, and it felt so real. For the longest time, I wrote it off as stress or having an overactive imagination, but then the face behind those orbs. One day I realized. I realized that the face was your father's."

He broke down.

"I dreamed of him before he was born." he said. "I dreamed of him before I'd ever met his mother. And last night, when he was going by my house, I should've stopped him, because I knew. I felt it, and I don't believe in 'feeling' stuff, but I did, and I do. Jeremy is gone."

He cried openly, and it took him a bit before he could stop. Joseph consoled him the best he could, but he wasn't completely ready to believe his dad was dead.

"Who was that at the door?" Joss asked after some time had passed.

"I don't know," Pops said, and he was being genuine. There was no irony or sarcasm in his words.

"Why'd you throw your cross at him, then? And what was that?" Joss asked rapidly.

"It was the heaviest thing I had," he answered. "And I wanted whoever or whatever that was to shut up. I couldn't stand the sight of it knowing it wasn't my boy. Did you see the eyes? Even in the light there's a glimmer."

Joss had seen it. He'd never had anything in the universe take an interest in him, but he'd felt something similar to what Pops described after his mom died. That's when his dreams started. "Why did he explode when the cross hit him?" Joss asked.

"I don't know that, either," Pops said, and he held up the pendent.

It was no worse for the wear.

"It's got to be like them needing to be invited in. You saw the hand? It was pressed against the air like something was there, just like in my visions."

"What else did you see in these visions?" Joss asked. "What else do you know?"

Pops took a deep breath and let out a strong, resigned sigh.

"I've been having the same dreams for almost sixty years now," he said, "And I'm not certain I know anything anymore. It's not like they're literal. I think you know that, so I don't know why I'm saying it, but the only part of any of my visions that was ever exactly the same, and I mean exactly, was Jeremy begging at the door."

He needed to iron out his thoughts, and then he began.

"I've only ever seen them in the night. It's never daytime in the nightmares, so I assume they can't be in sunlight. I know they're not who they appear to be or who they say they are. And I know if we don't do something, they'll slaughter every last one of us."

DAY 4: We Didn't Start the Fire

11

Ambitions

Sheriff Carl pulled up to his ranch at daybreak. He had a bunch of paperwork to get done, but that would have to wait. He'd never been so tired and confused at the same time.

He walked through the door and was greeted by his wife. They went through their usual morning pleasantries. She was used to her husband spending long hours out and about in Mendocino County.

"It was the darnedest thing," Carl said. "I'd never seen anything like it, Agnes."

"There was nothing?" she asked.

"Oh, no," Carl said. "There was all kinds of stuff, but there wasn't anybody there. We got in because one of the uniforms climbed under the gate, and we walked around the complex like we owned the place. There were guns and they were growing marijuana illegally, and there was a whole heaping amount of evidence. I think these were one of the cartel affiliated grows, and nothing we saw we could use in court because of how we gained access to the property. But there were no people. Not one person. The lights were on. The TV was going. Music was playing, and there were drinks with ice in them, but there wasn't anyone there. We found a baby carrier with no baby and what looked like a changing station that was abandoned in the middle of changing a diaper. It was like they all disappeared."

"Was it far enough back in them mountains for them to have made a run for it?" Agnes asked.

"Why would they?" he asked back. "Hell, the only reason we broke in was because nobody answered, and when we looked over the gate and saw all these cars and quads but no people, we took a chance."

"They still coulda run," she said.

"Without someone seeing something?" he spat. "We had helicopters and heat cameras. There was no one within miles."

"What are y'all gonna do with the evidence?" she asked, knowing if she didn't ask him at least a few questions about his day he'd never shut up about it.

"We taped up the gate and cordoned off the area," he said. "We had to. There was some really dangerous shit in there."

She swiped at him for cursing.

"Oh, sorry." he said, unconvincingly. "But we can't officially do anything like I said, so we'll tip off the bureau and the other agencies. I mean, I'd love to take 'em down myself, and I could try to use the missing kids as a good enough excuse, but it's an election year, and I don't want the hassle. So, we'll probably hand it off, and they'll go in there and take care of it."

"And what about those missing kids?" she asked, giving him a look.

"We gotta wait to get the dogs in there," he said. "And we got people still out searching, I think Frank and a few unies are still down there, and we're coordinating and all. You know how it is. But they'll probably show up in a few hours anyway. Its kids being kids, is all. We'll get back out there tomorrow if we need to, but I been up all night, and I'm tired."

"You okay with giving up like that?" she asked.

"You know, Agnes," he said. "I just got home from work, and I think I've had enough of this crap for one day."

She smirked at him.

Mission accomplished, she thought.

(...)

Bill convinced himself he was dreaming. It was ten after seven, and it was a cold morning, but he put on some sweats and went out for a jog. There were so many sites he could've seen, and so many trails he could have trekked down. But he didn't. He went straight past the casino, into town, by the main strip, and right to the gas station where Rainbow worked.

He took a second to catch his breath, and then he went to push the door to go in, but it didn't budge. It was locked.

"They're closed," someone said from across the street at Keith's A&P. "Nobody showed up for work today."

Bill waved.

Shit, he thought.

TWELVE

What Did You Say?

Joss woke up in his bed around eight. He'd managed to get another hour of sleep after he and Pops got done talking.

"Ya up, grandson?" Pops asked, knocking on his door. "Wanna get some breakfast?"

(...)

Over at Timmy's, the boy woke up and went straight out to check the perimeter of his house. He didn't see anything that pointed to where the man and Mr. Diamond had gone to, but he had an idea.

He didn't have Joss's phone number. Their day together was nice and all, but it wasn't braid your hair and share your number nice. Right then, he wished it had been nice like that, because he needed to tell someone about what happened, and his mom wasn't going to be able to help. Something like this would only stress her out. And this was Tim's job. He was the man of the house. Fortunately, he remembered seeing Pops getting coffee in town almost every morning on his way to school. He hadn't known who the old man was until he met him last night, but he had a distinctive look, and Timmy recognized him. If he hurried, maybe they would be there, and he could catch them. He told his mom he was meeting a friend downtown, grabbed a jacket, and sprinted out the door.

She didn't have time to protest before he was gone.

(...)

Joss and Pops were in the coffee shop in town. It was new, but there had always been someone selling coffee out of this location. Whether it was a bar or a honky tonk, it always served a hot cup of joe to any weary traveler, but it was officially a coffee shop now. Pops was amazed by how calm Joss had been throughout their conversations. He was focused and forward thinking, and he hadn't so much as cried. He only wanted to know more about the creatures. They were sitting at a table eating muffins when the boy Joss had gotten into a fight with a few days ago came barreling in. It'd surprised Pops to find his grandson at that same boy's house the night before, but that's how it always had been and how it would probably always be; children fought, became friends, and then fought some more, as friends. Lather, rinse, and repeat. A part of him couldn't keep itself from wondering when this stopped being true for people, because adults certainly didn't work that way.

"Joseph!" Timmy huffed, panting. "Diamond. And. Gold."

"Catch your breath, son." Pops said. "You want some water?"

Timmy shook his head.

Bill was at the register behind the entrance door. He was getting a biscuit and was about to say "hello" to Pops when Timmy came bounding in. Billy and Tim's mom were related in some way, and while they were distant branches on a long and gnarled family tree, they'd grown up together, and it was nice for Billy to catch up with some of the more extended family during the search yesterday. That also meant the kid bursting through the door was Nate's son. He hadn't known what to make of that. Not before and not now.

Bill spun.

"Did you say gold eyes?" he asked.

"You saw him too?" Tim asked.

"I saw them," someone said from the small hallway leading to the restrooms.

They all turned to look. It was Laurie.

"So did I," said a completely new and foreign voice from one of the tables.

The speaker was English or Welsh. Pops could never distinguish between the two. He was gifted in math, not phonetics. The man who'd spoken was in his mid-20's, and he had blond hair that would best be described as floppy. His nose was on the larger side, and his teeth were too big for his mouth. If you could create the most stereotypically English person alive, this guy wouldn't be far off.

"Bill?" Joss asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Do you want to join us?"

The boy turned to everyone in the cafe.

"Would you all like to join us?"

(...)

Cathy, who owned the Rocky Ridge Bean Company, turned up the volume on her EarPods and went to the back to check on the bagels.

Whole worlds going to Hell in a handbasket, she thought, as she receded into the kitchen.

(...)

The group sat around two small tables shoved together. It was awkward.

"Ellis," the Brit said, introducing himself. "I'm a nurse and a volunteer for the search. We heard about what happened from a community post on Facebook. One of our friends has a cousin who lives here, I believe. Anyway, we came in, and we were out with the search parties until a wee bit after dark, and then we went to the casino to get tea when we were done."

He saw everyone giving him odd stares.

"Tea?" he asked. "Right. Dinner. We went and got dinner."

Everyone understood that, so he continued:

"There were three of us, and two of us were obviously hot for each other, and they went outside to vape while I settled my bill. But when I went outside to join them, my friends were gone. I thought they might be taking the piss at first, but there wasn't a sign of them anywhere, and their mobiles went straight to answerphone. Happily, my friend's car was still in the car park, so I got a room in case they were too busy screwing, ah..."

He paused when he remembered there were two children present.

"Apologies."

"It's cool," Joss said. "We're twelve, not five, and we've had the internet since we were born, so there's nothing you're going to say we haven't already Googled."

"Right," Ellis said, flabbergasted by the young man. "So, I got a room, and I was going to report them missing if I couldn't find them this morning. There were plenty of bobbies around yesterday, and I can't leave without them."

"That's very noble," Laurie said, and she blushed slightly.

Bill noticed, and he wondered if she was hot. It was cold in here.

"Sometime before sunup," Ellis said. "I heard a raucous noise outside my inn window, and when I looked outside, there was a woman standing under a broken lamppost. Her hair was up in bunches, and her shirt was slashed, so her chest was out, and her eyes were glowing this horrid gold. It made my insides crawl."

"Did you go out to see what was going on?" Joss asked.

"I did, but I had to get dressed and find my mobile first," Ellis explained, "and by then the sun was out and she was gone."

"How about you?" Ellis asked Laurie. "Did you see some spooky eyeballs?"

It was obvious to everyone that Ellis was trying to use this as an opportunity to get closer to Laurie. He might have seen what he said he did. It seemed plausible enough to Joss.

Bill knew he wasn't lying because he'd seen Rainbow, too, but he could feel the desperation wafting off of Ellis. Not that he cared.

Pops had known Rain a while (he was a frequent customer at the gas station), and his chest ached for the poor girl. She didn't deserve what happened to her. None of them did.

"I was in the shop late yesterday," she said. "I run a little shop close to downtown. And with the volunteers and cops there's been a lot of foot traffic, and I've been busier than usual, so I had to stay late to get things done."

She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. Something that didn't go unnoticed by Ellis.

"I was trying to get my budgeting software to work," Laurie continued. "And I heard someone scream outside, so me and Ralphy--Ralphy's my dog, and he comes with me to work if I'm there after dark--but we went out to see what was going on, and Ralphy was angry. He was growling and his teeth were showing. And, I don't know, something brushed past me and when I turned to see what it was, there was nothing there, but someone was standing down the street. They were wearing a hoody with the hood up, and their eyes were glowing that same unusual kind of gold Ellis talked about. I tried to tell myself it was some contact lenses or a pair of glasses or something, but Ralphy was really angry and really scared. He was out in front of me and he was bearing his teeth and spitting as he barked. When I realized he was trying to back me up and move me into the shop, I ran inside, and Ralphy followed me. I wound up sleeping at my computer. Nobody was there when I got up. Do you guys think something strange or dangerous is going on? Like some kind of gang thing? Or drugs?"

Bill told everyone about Rainbow and how out of sorts she'd acted. He mentioned drugs, too.

Joss wondered how much he should tell them all, and then Timmy saved him from having to.

"I don't know what you guys saw, but that freaky Mr. Diamond dude was watching me sleep, and then he went to talk to one of those...goldies. And I can't speak for everybody, but y'all are dumb as fuck if you don't think there's something a lot worse than drugs and gangs here."

Ellis seemed offput by the cursing. No one else paid any attention to that.

"It's okay," Laurie said in her best auntie voice. "There's nothing out there."

"Yes, there is," Pops said, and that made all the adults look at him. "Bill, would you come with me and my grandson back to the ranch? I got something I want to bend your ear on a bit."

"I gotta go get changed," Billy said. "And then I got some stuff Jodie wanted me to get done before I head out."

"Please, William," Pops asked.

Bill was surrounded by pleading expressions, and while he wanted to cut and run, he found himself conceding instead.

"I can be over in a few hours, I guess," he said.

(...)

Laurie was going to go back to her house and get some laundry done. She didn't make it home the night before, and her shoulders were sore from the position she'd been in at her computer, so a bath sounded nice, too. But then Ellis asked her to show him around and help him search for his friends. She had to take Ralphie home first, but she didn't have any plans for the rest of the day. The shop was well looked after, and she thought, *Why not?*

He was nice, and it was exciting to have someone from Europe around town. She loved the accent. There was a part of her that was nervous Bill might have the wrong idea. It wasn't that she liked Bill. It wasn't that she didn't. She wasn't ready for a relationship anyway. Not after the last disaster. If only she hadn't fallen for that boy, she wouldn't have stayed. Her mom and dad had some land out here, but she didn't have to stay, and she didn't need another reason to.

But Ellis was nice.

(...)

It took Bill a few hours to get to the ranch, as he'd told them it would, and Joss had taken that time to talk more with Timmy and tell him about what happened with his dad. Timothy had outright refused to go home and threatened to walk to the house if they didn't let him come along. It was a hollow threat, as he didn't know where Joseph lived, but they didn't have time to work all that out.

"Your dad?" Tim asked.

He was sitting on a stump near the detached garage while Joss chopped wood.

"Yeah," Joss said. "But it's not him anymore. He's a goldy."

"You know, I almost never got to meet my dad," Timmy started. "His name was Timothy, too. That's where I got it from. But everybody called him Nate."

His voice was even, and he seemed detached as he spoke. His gloomy expression and flat tone kept Joss from asking how or why his dad was called Nate.

Has to be his middle name, he thought, but said nothing.

"It's not something I tell everybody. A lot of people already know, but when he was still young, like seventeen, I think. He was out in Willits doing some tree work. Mom didn't even know she was pregnant yet, but they were together and life was okay. So, after work, him and his crew were having a few beers."

"Wait," Joss said. "He was seventeen and they let him drink?"

He was going to ask about his parents being teenagers but thought better of it.

"Yeah," Tim answered. "It's different here. But my dad, you see. He was a fun dude, and they were just trying to blow off some steam after work, so they got a few cases of beer and went back to their hotel and hung out. But Dad went out to the car at some point, and when he was out there, he got jumped by some crazy asshole. I don't remember his name, and I don't really know who he was, but the guy was nuts. He'd already been in a fight the day before, and he got put in the hospital because of that. And as soon as he woke up, he left the ER, and the first thing he did was jump my dad."

"So, some random guy attacked your dad for no reason?" Joseph asked, trying to make sure any hint of correlation wasn't obvious.

"I'm sure there's more to it," Tim said.

He never came close to seeing the similarities between this story and how he'd sucker punched Joss.

"There always is," Timmy said, "but the dude from the hospital was still hurt. I mean, he just left a hospital! What was his problem? So, Dad basically just pushes this jerk over and that was it. Round one. Knockout. But he hit his head when he went down, and he, uh, well, he wound up dying."

Joss put the ax down and sat next to Tim.

"And Dad went to jail. He's been there ever since."

"He didn't try to fight it in court?" Joss asked.

"Lawyers cost money," Timmy said. "And he was drunk and there was this and there was that. He didn't want to burden the family. He took a deal, and he'll be in there for a long time, but I get to see him a few times a year. And he'll be out one day. And, I don't know. I guess, what I'm trying to say is...I'm sorry about your dad, man."

"Yeah," Joseph said, and he felt the tears fall before he realized he was crying.

Timmy put an arm around him and let him weep. He wasn't certain his father was gone until that moment, and he wasn't sure what made him so certain right then. He'd been told it, and he understood it. But it hadn't hit home. When it did, he sobbed. He wasn't embarrassed, and he wasn't self-conscious. He let go, and he gave in to the overwhelming emotions.

Jodie's car pulled into the gate and up to the ranch fifteen minutes later, and Joss was glad he'd gotten back to chopping wood. He might not be embarrassed in front of Timothy, but the adults were another story.

Once Bill was there, they moved into the dining room, and he listened to Pops and the boys, but he was less than convinced by what they were saying. There were some wild allegations, but no one seemed to have a central point.

"Okay," Bill said. "So, do you want to call the sheriff and tell him something happened to Jeremy?"

He patted himself down.

"Ah, I must've left my cell at Jodie's. She's the only one who calls me, anyway. But if he went off with the cops, and if he came back different than when he left, then we can ask the sheriff what happened out there."

"That's a good idea" Pop said. "We thought the same thing."

He pulled out his old cellphone and dialed nine, one, one. Nothing happened. He dialed eight, six, seven, five, three, O, nine, which were the numbers to an old lyric in a pop song, but, again, nothing happened.

"It's the same with mine," Joss said, holding up his much newer smartphone. "And we have different carriers."

"Phones are down," Pops said. "Somebody must've messed with the cell towers uphill. They went down over night. It ain't but thirty minutes ride out to the closest tower. Landlines aren't working, either. Now, you know how they do things around here. It's always the lowest bidder doing the worst work. Those phone lines have been going down and flipping in and out since they ran them forty years ago, and now they're gone. They're all gone. They don't care about us, William. They never have. We're alone up here."

"Wait. Emergency numbers work whether you have service or not," Billy said, incredulously.

"They ain't picking up, or somethings stopping the calls," Pops said, dialing again.

There was nothing. No ringing. No dial tone. Only silence.

"And the sheriff ain't coming back today," Pops told him.

"Why's that?" Billy asked.

"Everybody who's been here," he caught Bill's attention, "knows that Carl has ambitions, the whole lot of them do, and those ambitions go way beyond the county sheriff's office. They also know those ambitions got nothing to do with finding them boys."

"He's got a job to do," Bill said, playing devil's advocate. "Are you saying he won't do it?"

"Not today," Pops said. "They saw him sneaking around those grows over yonder."

"Can't say I know what those are," Bill said.

"Best you don't," Pops said. "So, let's keep this short and neat. There's a lot of money in these hills. Some's legal. Some ain't. This area's remote, so outside groups move in to do business here."

"Yeah, I heard," Bill said. "Like what Laurie was saying at the coffee shop."

"Yeah, well, Carl was seen sneaking around a few of 'those' properties last night, and, from what Jumpy at the Indian Store said, they broke in."

"Jumpy's still around?" Bill asked. "I thought he'd be moved on or dead a long time ago."

"Nah, he's still kicking rocks up and down these roads," Pops answered. "He moved outta that camp by the dump a few months ago. Staying with his uncle somewhere."

"Can we focus," Joss said.

"Yeah," Timmy said, wanting to take part in the conversation.

"Focus on what?" Bill asked. "What exactly do you think is going on?"

"We think something is killing people and replacing them with these goldy things we keep seeing," Joseph said, flatly.

THIRTEEN

Proof

Bill was walking back to the car.

"You can drop me off at Jodie's, right?" he asked. "I've got to get my stuff before I get going."

He'd walked out on Joss, Pops, and Timmy. He didn't even let Pops finish explaining why he thought the sheriff and the county police wouldn't be around come nightfall.

"We know how it sounds," Pops said, joining him with the boys at his side.

"Do you?" Billy asked. "Because I'm wondering if the drug problem around here isn't worse than I thought. And they are just kids, man. That's a screwed-up thing to have them thinking."

"He doesn't have me thinking anything," Joss said. "I saw what I saw."

"Yeah!" Tim yelled behind him.

"Your dad is probably fine, kid," Bill said. "He probably got drunk or high like he always used to, and he got embarrassed and he ran off. That would be just like Jeremy."

"Sounds more like Michael to me" Pops said, and that made Billy's face twist in anger and heartbreak. "Those two were a lot alike."

Bill was physically hit by the mention of his brother, and his stomach ached fiercely as he wiped at himself with his shirt sleeve.

Pops had an idea then. He had no proof, and Bill had no reason to believe anything he was about to say. He didn't believe what he was about to say, but they needed help. They needed Billy.

"Your brother was torn apart," Pops said, and there was emotion in his voice. "But it wasn't no bear did it or anything else. It was one of those things, Bill. Those fuckers killed your brother, and they killed my son! And they took or hurt them kids! So, if you want revenge, like we all do, this is your only chance to get it!"

The depths of emotion Billy had flowing through every inch of his being right then were unfathomable. More than all others, what he felt was rage. And that rage brought with it clarity. What Pops said was absurd, but his brother *had* been torn to shreds. They only found pieces of him. That's not what bears do. From what they said, it wasn't done by people, either. So, it had to be something else. And what was wrong with Rainbow? What was going on around here?

"Can you prove that?" Bill asked.

"We can," Pops said. "But we need to get to the church."

(...)

As they packed into Pops's beater and rode off, Joseph wondered what proof Pops had of anything. This seemed like a blind bluff, and it was starting to get dark. He wasn't sure where the day had gone. They hadn't spent that much time at the ranch talking, had they? But it didn't matter, because one way or another the sky was painted blood red as the sun descended behind the blackened peaks.

What's at the church? Joss thought.

Timmy and Bill were also both curious but more furious than anything else as they sat in the back seat.

Tim was convinced Mr. Diamond and his goldy friends either kidnapped or killed his cousins, and he was going to get those assholes.

Bill had never felt vengeance in his heart before. He hated it. And if what Pops said was true, even half true, he would end every last one of them to get rid of it.

(...)

Pops didn't know what he was thinking. It was the first thought that popped into his head. He had no idea where it came from.

Get to the church! it said, and he listened.

He'd stopped blocking it out now. He could deny it when he was alone all he wanted to, but he had others to consider now. It was time to listen.

(...)

They pulled up and Joss ran around to help Pops get out of the car. Timmy got out and ran up the stairs, and Bill lingered around waiting for everyone to get inside first.

The shadow of the valley had fallen, and they were bathed in the last muted and dim rays of daylight. The old man made it out and got up the few steps. He pulled a ring of keys out of one pocket.

"You have keys to the church?" Bill asked.

"Tell ya the truth," Pops said, unlocking the deadbolt and the door. "Our family has always been in charge of the church, ever since it changed over from the old canteen. It was where they used to feed everybody at one point. Our family has been on every board this building has had since it was erected. "

He walked in and Timmy followed him. Joss was almost inside, so Bill started to make his way in.

Don't need the history lesson, Bill thought.

"Hey," a voice whispered in his ear.

It wasn't there before, but then it was all around him all at once. He turned quickly, and there was Jeremy.

"Sup Billy," he said, and he grinned evilly.

His dark eyes had been replaced with the same golden globes he'd seen when Rainbow visited, and his mouth was stretched and elongated with rows of teeth crowding the space. He hit Billy with a left hook, and Bill went straight down.

(...)

Joss felt his body moving. He felt his hand grip the pendant banging against his chest. It was his mother's Saint Christopher pendant, and he held it tightly in his balled fist as he ripped it off and pulled his arm back. This wasn't his idea. He didn't want to do this, but he was. He lunged forward and as Bill's body was thrown aside, he punched his father as hard as he could.

(...)

It was having fun. It would kill this big one, and then it would coax the son out and it wouldn't share him. No, it would drain him dry and eat him down all by itself.

It didn't see anything until it was too late.

(...)

Joss's fist made contact with his father's nose, but that didn't do a whole lot. The pendant, however, used the force of the movement during his swing and the chain, which was still held tightly in Joss's grip, as a fixed point of a pendulum and the necklace as a line to fly forward and around his fist and land flatly on Joseph's knuckle. That wasn't what the boy intended to have happen, but he was lucky it did.

As soon as he hit his father and the Saint Christopher medallion was smashed into Jerry's skin, a bright light enveloped his hand and his dad's head, and it exploded, throwing Jerry's body away like a rag doll.

Joseph was stunned for a beat, the blast did nothing to him besides scare him, and then he came to his senses and ran over to check on Bill, who'd suffered an awful one-punch knockout. When he got hit, it was contact and then straight to the ground.

"Bill!" Joss said, trying to get him up. "Pops! Tim!"

The old man and boy were about to rush out and help when two people cut them off, running in front of them and straight through the vestibule. They continued out the front entrance of the church but went right by Pops as if they didn't see him, and he almost lost his balance.

"Everybody okay?" Laurie asked. She was buttoning her shirt.

"Yeah," Ellis said, trailing her, "need some help?"

The Brit sounded meek and more than a little timid, but he was also wrestling with the front of his pants, so that might have something to do with it.

Laurie saw Bill and raced over to him. She put her ear to his lips.

"He's breathing," she said.

Timmy ran out and stood by Joss, who was watching Laurie try and revive Bill.

Ellis went over and began taking vitals after he'd fixed the zipper on his trousers. Laurie crouched and stayed close while everyone else gave Ellis room to work.

"He's unconscious, that much is obvious," he said. "He has a small contusion on the back of his head. He must've hit it."

He pulled out a pen flashlight and clicked it on with his thumb.

"Will you help me, dear?" he asked Laurie. "Would you hold the tops of his eyelids open? But gently, very gently."

He used one hand to pull the bottoms of Bill's eyelids down, opening his eyes.

"Pupils aren't blown," he said. "That's good."

He moved the flashlight across Bill's field of vision.

"No anisocoria, and the pupils are responding normally. He may still be concussed. We should get him to hospital."

(...)

This was the best thing to happen to Ellis all day, and that was saying something considering what the group had interrupted between him and Laurie. And in a church, no less. That would definitely make his top ten. He loved America. It truly was the land of opportunity, and he'd just been given another opportunity right then. The bulky, heavy waste of muscle might not have been good for much, but he'd given him the perfect excuse to get out of here. Finally, he could leave.

He wasn't a liar. Not usually. Not always. He only lied when he needed to. He was a nurse. That was true. And he was British. That was also true. But he didn't come to the reservation to help find two kids. He came to buy drugs, and the friends he was with went off somewhere and never came back. They were supposed to come back. This was supposed to be an easy, safe way to score. The couple he came with took their baby over to the ranch with them, for God's sake. The pudgy two year old was far too big for his car seat, but that was the least of his worries when they didn't return from what was supposed to be an hour trip. Two, tops. They'd left their car and ridden with a group of people, but Ellis had chosen to hang back because he didn't feel well. He was not a brave man.

Not that he could tell anyone any of this. Mentioning a missing couple would cause a ruckus right now after the boys, and mentioning a missing infant would cause pandemonium. He might get searched. That couldn't happen. He needed to hold on to what he had left. He couldn't let them take it.

But that was okay now. He could get away. If something terrible had happened to the others, then too bad. He was okay, right? He'd be okay.

(...)

"Let's get him up," Ellis said.

"Good idea," Jerry said.

He'd appeared without warning. He didn't rush in shouting or make himself known in any way. There was nothing but air and opportunity in front of Ellis, and then instantly Jerry was there and slashing at the Brit's face. Long fingernails cut through the air and sliced deep grooves into and across his cheeks, nose, and forehead. Ellis recoiled and began screaming.

Jerry sucked on his fingers and bellowed.

"Yes, Songbird," Jeremy said. "Sing for me."

Songbird was Jerry's pet name for Joss's mother. It was what he called Lily when they were still in love.

Jeremy didn't acknowledge Joseph. He was the only one who'd have known what Songbird meant, but he wasn't saying it *to* Joss. He was just saying it. That didn't mean it didn't affect the boy. It did, and when it did, it hit him hard, and he burned with rage.

He hurried back to the car. It was only a few yards away, and the front door was still open. What he needed was in the passenger's side floorboard. Nobody asked why he was taking it as he put it in the vehicle with them, but this was why.

"Move!" Pops yelled to everyone as Ellis was screeching. "Get inside!"

"Ellis!" Lauri said, reaching out to him.

He didn't hear her, and he didn't see her. He scrambled up and ran off without any regard to her at all. It seemed what he lacked in courage, he made up for with speed, because he was fast. Not fast enough, though. He'd only made it to the steps before slamming into Jerry again. He appeared in front of Ellis and caught him by the throat, lifting him off his feet with one arm.

Timmy was small, and not small for his age, he was small in general. It was one of the reasons Bert and Ernest never fought back when he would throw a temper tantrum. He was weak. That didn't mean he was a coward. He jolted forward, jumped, and dropkicked Jerry in the back. Jeremy barely moved, but Timmy tumbled to the ground with a loud *thud*.

"Kid, I would love to drain your little ass dry, but I'm busy here," Jerry said, and he was going to turn around to address Tim directly, when Joss came down with the ax and cut his arm off at the elbow.

Ellis's body dropped, and he gripped at his throat, prying the fingers of Jeremy's hand away from his neck.

Jerry roared obscenities and spat as he howled. Then he stopped and became still. He dashed to Laurie in an instant and dragged her away by her hair. They vanished for a blink, but Joss caught sight of them breaking the tree line behind the church.

"Ellis! Get up!" Joss said. "We gotta go after them!"

Ellis whimpered and ran into the church. Pops was tending to Timmy, and Bill was still knocked out. Joseph didn't hesitate; he ran after them.

(...)

It was losing too much of its blood to keep this up. It needed to replenish what it had lost when that kid cut off its arm. No big deal. It grabbed a snack on its way out. It would finish the rest of them off later.

It doubled its grip on the woman's hair and slung her body against a tree. They were far enough away, it thought. It was slower than normal but still fast enough.

Now more than ever, it wanted to kill that boy and eat him. That was always the plan. It wanted the other one, too. The others it might have to share, but first it would take this one.

(...)

Laurie was in shock. She couldn't believe what was happening and the pain was causing her consciousness to wane. Her feet hurt badly from being drug behind the man, and her heels caught on a few large roots causing bursts of brilliant anguish. But she could still see the outline of the church through the thickets. They were still close. She could still be saved.

He was in a rush, and he threw her. It felt like he'd ripped all of her hair out as she was thrown forwards while facing backwards, and she smashed into a tree. Blood flowed down her face, but she could see him. His eyes were alive with hunger, and they glowed so brightly. It was as if twin suns had opened and they were about to swallow her. Then he opened his mouth, and rows of spiny teeth shot out.

It's not real! she thought and she curled herself into a ball.

She gave into the fear. It overtook her, and she froze. She couldn't move. She heard him breathing and growling, but her mind wouldn't allow her to accept what was happening, and her body wouldn't budge.

Not real! she thought. *It can't be!*

She couldn't even yell as the world exploded in sharp, excruciating pain. It bit down on the back of her neck, and hundreds of barbs pierced her skin and dug deep into her flesh. There were seconds of pure agony, hate, anger, panic, and disbelief, but then it lessened. The throbbing decreased, the terror faded, and she felt lightheaded and tired.

If only she hadn't fallen for that boy.

(...)

Joss swung the ax. He didn't slow down. He didn't aim. He didn't know if this was going to connect or not. But he had one shot, and he took it.

He was sprinting as fast as he could, and he finally saw them up ahead, but the ax was heavy. It wasn't the maul. That would've been too unwieldy. This was a four-pound, wood-handled, razor-sharp splitting ax.

Pops had given it to him that morning and told him how Jerry had gone over to M&M Feed to buy it for him, and while the reservation was lacking in many areas, the small hardware store had one of the best selections of saws, axes, and blades in all of Mendocino County.

"He's a dad gum natural," Jeremy had said. "And he enjoys it. That's what matters."

Joseph had to fight to keep himself composed when he'd heard that, but it was exactly what he needed, exactly when he needed it. And as soon as he thought he was close enough, he swung it with everything he had.

(...)

It could feel its energy returning. This one tasted good. She was so scared.

Wait! it thought. *Was that a noise?*

It lifted its head to listen. Then it heard nothing at all, ever again.

(...)

Joseph swung the ax with his right hand. He couldn't use both hands because that would throw off his balance too much. At first, he was afraid he'd aimed too high, but then the blade caught at the hairline on the back of its neck, and the steel carved through the beast's head, cutting it in two before sticking into the tree in front of it.

After a few heartbeats, what he'd done sunk in. The reality sunk in, and he let himself cry. He let himself mourn his father and rejoice in his retribution. He loved his father, as all children do, deep down. He would miss him, and he knew this would hurt so much more later, but he let himself have this moment.

Joss wiped the wetness away and saw Laurie's head was rolled to the side. He'd missed her by inches.

When he pulled the ax out, he also noticed he cut through the creature's spine and then halved the head at the jaw. So, the blade came out its mouth before lodging into the oak. The lower jaw fell off altogether when he freed his weapon. It was gross but it didn't last long. The mandible and every part of Jerry dissolved into orange goo in minutes. It steamed and it stunk, but it wasn't flesh and bone anymore, if it ever was. It helped relieve his guilt, and it solidified his purpose. Joseph checked on Laurie, but he was too late. She was starkly pale. There was no blood on or around her neck wounds, and he logged that information away for later. He considered cutting her head off, too. She'd been bitten. It was evident this was all some supernatural nonsense, and he didn't want to be the guy who had walked away and let an enemy sneak up on them later. That's what he'd do if they were vampires, but these weren't vampires. He was sure of that. And there was something in that line of thinking. Some fault or weakness in assuming the goldies were what they appeared to be. He remembered Pops's warning. He couldn't take anything at face value. That was a mistake.

"Joss!" he heard Pops yelling.

He was in the woods and was at least three football fields away, but he was still within earshot. He redoubled his grip on the ax and headed back to the others.

FOURTEEN

Gettin' Rich

"Help me get him up, Joss," Pops was saying. "We gotta get inside."

Joseph looked out at the vista in the distance as he broke the tree line. It was full dark now.

There was a sudden explosion, and everyone ducked. It was far off, but it was big, and it was loud, and it made the ground shake fiercely. Joss bent down and put Bill's arm over his shoulder, and he hoisted him up. Bill had to be 220 pounds of lean muscle, so he was hard to move, but they got him up the stairs and inside. Pops went and got something to rest his head on, and they closed and locked the door.

(...)

"You, okay?" Timmy said.

It wasn't who Bill was expecting to see. Not that there was anyone specific he was expecting, but if there had been, it wouldn't have been Timothy.

"My head hurts," Billy said. "Again."

He sat up. He was on a pew in the small nave of the Methodist Church. He remembered someone once told him the pine pillars holding the roof up were over a hundred years old.

"Yeah," Pops said. "He walloped you a good one!"

"What's going on?" Bill asked. "Was that your proof?"

"No," Joss said. "But yes."

"You're not helping my headache here kid," Bill said.

"We wanted you to see one of them, but not like that," Joss said, making stuff up as he went along.

He wasn't going to mention the fact that they didn't have any sort of plan before Jerry attacked, and that definitely wasn't part of any plan. He also wasn't going to say anything about how they didn't have anything connecting the goldies to his brother's death.

"Cool," Bill said. "I saw one, and it kicked the crap out of me."

"They're faster and stronger than us," Pops said. "I was moving in slow motion compared. I can barely move enough to save my own ass right now, but they're lightning quick."

"Was Jerry shorter?" Bill asked.

"He was," Joss said. "I noticed that, too."

"Okay. So, what exactly is going on?" Bill asked.

"We told you, dude," Timmy said. "Something's taking and changing people, and Mr. Diamond has something to do with it."

"I don't know about this Diamond fella," Pops said. "But something's come to the valley, and it's bringing Hell with it."

"Very poetic," Bill said.

"Is anyone going to get the guy in the kitchen?" Timmy asked.

Everyone had forgotten about Ellis.

"I'll get him," Pops said, and he slowly rose. "You come on, too," he said to Tim.

"Why do I gotta go?" Timmy asked.

"You wanna sit out here while he tells Bill what he did to his own daddy?" Pops whispered. "Or do you wanna give him some privacy so he can do this without an audience?"

He hobbled off towards the back of the building and the kitchen behind the nave. Timothy followed.

The church, itself, was a simple structure. It had stairs at the front that moved up and into the foyer where an office was housed to one side and then led through a set of double doors that opened into the small congregation space with twenty-foot-high ceilings, a dozen or so pews, and a tiny stage with a podium at the front.

Another door led to the back part of the building that had a full kitchen on one side and two bathrooms on the other. It wasn't the biggest or brightest church in the area, but it was the oldest and had the most history--it held the most stories.

Bill couldn't concentrate. His ears were ringing, and he was puzzled and sore.

"This is what we know," Joss said. "They need to be invited to come inside, they're really fast and strong, they have these big fang-teeth things, you saw those, and they turn into gross smelling goo when you cut their heads off."

"Cut their heads off?" Bill asked.

"The one," Joss began, and he had to dig deep and stop himself from feeling like a child.

This was life or death now.

"The one that looked like my dad."

"Jesus, kid, you cut your dad's head off?"

Billy felt his stomach turn violently.

"It wasn't my dad," Joss said, matter-of-factly.

"It could've been drugs kid," Bill said.

"Drugs don't make your body melt when you die, look," Joss said, and he lifted his ax.

It had a dried crusty substance covering it.

"Drugs didn't give him the power to knock you out or to lift Ellis off the ground with one arm. And Laurie. What he. No. It. What it did to her. The way it killed her."

Inside Joss could feel his stomach cramping. A lot had happened in the past twenty four hours. It would be a lot for anyone, any adult, but he was still a kid. Maybe he was mature for his age but having to come to terms with your father's death, then killing a monster that looked like your dad because it was eating a woman was way more than his brain and body were able to handle. And yet, in the deepest depths of his mind, he was at peace. There was a calm and requiem, and he knew he would push through. He had to.

Joss's hand tightened on the butt of his ax without him realizing it.

"In what way?" Billy asked. "Kill Laurie? What?"

"He bit her, and I think he drained her body of all her blood," Joss said. "The bitemarks didn't have anything around them."

"Are you telling me your dad killed Laurie, and then you beheaded him?" Bill asked, fear of more than death rising within him.

"I would show you," Joss said. "But we can't go out there right now."

Bill sat and tried to come to terms with this new reality.

"So what?" he asked after a while. "Are they vampires? Is that what you're saying? Because that's what it sounds like."

Bill was a respectable and respectful person, but he wasn't very imaginative. That wasn't where his strengths lie, so the furthest his mind would allow him to go was vampires.

"No," Joss said. "I don't."

The foyer doors flew open causing a commotion that ended their conversation.

"Fuck you!" someone screamed and gunshots rang out through the church.

(...)

Rich was in her late 20's, and, for her, she was getting too old to go out, but her best friend from college wanted her to go with her to a party in her hometown, and she couldn't tell her no. She and Rainbow had been friends for years, and she was excited.

She'd heard some bad news coming from Covelo, but she'd confirmed the party was still on.

"C U soon," Rain texted.

"C U," she texted back.

(...)

She managed to get to the party at sundown, and she had to pat herself on the back for that. She pulled up in her old Jeep and parked. There were a bunch of cars and quads in the way, but she managed.

The party was being held on a farm, and she could smell what kind of farm as she pulled in.

"Woah, that stinks," she said.

It wasn't that she disliked the smell of cannabis, but the sheer density of the scent made her tear up. She closed her windows and checked her makeup in the mirror. She wasn't dressed up, but she was wearing an outfit she held onto when she wanted to get some extra attention. She got a flosser and cleaned her teeth, grabbed a piece of gum, hopped out, and walked to the front entrance. The door was slightly ajar, and the house was older, but had a large privacy fence surrounding the property. The gate was open when Rich drove up, and while she thought she saw the remnants of police tape, she went in and followed the line of parked cars, showing her the way to the house. She pushed the home's front door, and it swung open. Loud music was blaring from the backyard, and she could hear people laughing and yelling.

Sounds fun, she thought, and she wanted to join in, but she had to use the bathroom first. The ride in was longer than she remembered, and that road in was a nightmare.

(...)

The restroom was clean, but she couldn't believe there was a baby carrier next to the toilet.

Somebody has a baby here? she asked herself.

She was washing her hands when the music stopped, and she was drying her hands when she heard the first shouts and cries for help.

The next fifteen minutes of Rich's too short existence were full of enough horror for a lifetime.

(...)

She hurried out of the bathroom, but no one was inside the house. She ran to where she could see out to the back yard through a sliding glass door. What she saw made her sick and she immediately threw up.

Spread around tables and chairs were twenty or so people, and each person was being gutted and eaten by someone else. If it weren't for the violence, the party would've been a good one. Probably too good. There was enough coke and booze in this one backyard to fuel Burning Man for the next few seasons. There were entrails and offal splattered on the patio floor and on the ground around them. Those being fed on were immobile. They were awake and aware but motionless and not fighting back as she'd thought when she heard the screams. Those feeding had huge mouths, and she saw their teeth, hundreds of them, thousands of them, ripping into the bodies of others. Some were chewing, but most were stuck in and holding on while drinking.

The fuck! she thought.

Rich peeked back up, and there she was. There was Rainbow. She was eating a man, and not in the way they would joke about later. A figure moved in from the obscurity of the forest then. He was tall and big, and his outline was a silhouette. He was wearing a furred robe and had a long, wispy mane flowing around him. There wasn't enough light on him to see details, but she could see his radiating eyes in the darkness. They were beautiful and hateful, and they were infinitely hungry.

"Enough," he said, and the cannibals stopped feeding.

The man lifted a hand. He had incredibly long and sharp fingernails, and he moved his fingers together. He basically made a hand puppet with its mouth closed. This forced his claws to come together to make a singular deadly point. He jabbed his hand, nails and all into the center of his chest. Rich couldn't exactly see this, but that's what appeared to happen. He pulled his hand away and then dropped something onto one of the corpses lying at his feet.

Rich didn't care what was happening anymore. The second she saw the gore and teeth outside, she was done. She had been trying to quietly back away, but she was having problems keeping her cool. Her legs were shaking uncontrollably, and her pulse was drumming too hard and too fast.

"You missed one," she heard the man say.

"Fuck this," she said, glancing over to see a bag that had a handgun sitting at the top of its opened flap. She grabbed the bag, threw it over her chest like a vest, and she ran as fast as she could.

(...)

The way her Jeep was parked, there was no way she was getting it out as fast as she needed to, so as she descended the steps, she had to make a choice: find something she could steal or try to get away on foot. A sound came from behind her, and she gazed up at the roof where it was lined with people standing on the peak and watching.

"Shit!" she said, but there was a four-wheeler sitting ten feet away and on the side of the driveway.

She'd had to drive around it when she came in, and it had a key in it. She'd missed a lot of obvious red flags. It was too late for that now. She jumped on. There was a clatter as some of the roof people dropped to the ground.

Rich backed the all-terrain vehicle up as quickly as she could, put it in gear, and punched the throttle. She felt the tires spinning, but she wasn't moving. Something was holding onto the back of the ATV's frame and keeping her stuck in the same place with the tires digging into the gravel driveway.

She reached into the bag; glad she'd remembered what her granddaddy told her: "A gun is only useful if you can get to it." When she threw the bag over her. She pulled out a weapon. It wasn't the one she saw when she grabbed this sack, but it was a gun, nonetheless, and she spun, pointing the barrel in front of her. She shot as many times as she could in rapid succession. The man's mouth was stretched open, so she shot through it. It was a Saturday Night Special, so there weren't many rounds, but she emptied it with incredible speed. The man let go of the frame and faded to the ground as she jolted forward.

There was an otherworldly shriek that filled the air. It was so loud and so shrill it physically hurt to hear it. Rich was glad to be on the move. She could play dress up and put on the girly act when she needed to, but she was a rancher's daughter and as much as she yearned for a big city life and had big city dreams, she was eternally thankful she knew how to work this machine and how to shoot right now.

She discarded the empty 38 at the end of the street and reached back into the bag. She might need another firearm soon.

These tweakers are next level crazy, she thought.

It was dark and she couldn't see well, but she pulled out what she thought was a big novelty eraser. It had this repulsive rubber cement chemical smell. She tossed it over her shoulder, and it fell to the road with a *thunk*, and she reached back in her bag grabbing onto cool hardened steel. It was a 40 caliber this time, and it had fourteen bullets in the clip with one in the chamber. She put it in her waistband like she was in a movie and took off.

The abandoned ATV she'd taken was a Yamaha Grizzly 700. It had a single-cylinder, liquid-cooled engine, and a top speed of 63 miles per hour. The rucksack she'd grabbed had weapons, ammunition, and more. But it wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough.

(...)

She didn't make it three hundred feet before one of them caught up to her. It appeared at her side, and she had to duck to miss its claws. She pulled the pistol and began blindly shooting at where she thought it might be. She was sure she wouldn't hit anything, but maybe she would scare it off.

She pulled the trigger swiftly, but as the hammer slammed home for the second or third time, a huge explosion went off from somewhere in the road behind her. It was large enough to knock those following her off their feet. A wave of sound and air hit Rich, and it took all she had to concentrate on the road and stay straight. She didn't slow down, and she didn't let off until the Grizzly ran out of gas.

(...)

Four miles isn't far. That's technically the distance Rich had to travel to get into downtown Covelo. She figured she could find someone and call the cops. She'd left her phone in the bathroom. Somehow, she'd managed to grab guns but had forgotten her phone. If only her dad could see her. He'd be so proud. She wasn't sure what the explosion was all about, but it nearly knocked her over, and it hurt all the way through to her insides. That *boom* went into her. But she was moving now, and she would get away.

And she did. She made it three and a quarter miles and broke down a stone's throw from the Methodist Church. Her outfit was one she liked for two reasons: first, it made her butt look great, and second, they were comfortable enough to really move around in. They also slid on quick and slid off quicker, but that wasn't as important. Rich could feel the bike beginning to drag.

Damnit! She thought.

She got off and started to sprint towards the church when the herks and jerks became one final lurch, and the ATV halted altogether.

"What's wrong, Rachel?" Rainbow's voice said from somewhere in the blackness.

No one called her Rachel. It wasn't a cute story, either. She was in a group of girls when she was small and still competing in beauty pageants. The parents called them The Rachels. It was her, Rachel R., and Rachel G.

Rachel R. went by Rachel. Rachel G. went by Rach, so our Rachel was left with Rich, or Richey. And if you can't follow that logic, don't be upset, neither could anyone else. But she didn't hate the name anymore.

"What the fuck, Rainbow?" she said, pointing the gun as she slowed down so she could try and find her friend.

She'd had to grab another weapon, because she ditched the 40 to grab the handlebars after the blast wave.

"Did I ever tell you about that tall, handsome guy who came into the store late one night after closing?" Rainbow asked.

"Nope," Rich said. "I don't remember that."

The voice was coming from every direction, and she couldn't zero-in on where her target was.

"Well, he comes in one night," Rainbow starts. "And we neck a little. Well, he bites me, and I'm dangling there thinking about how my life is going to be over, and I'm scared, and I'm sad, but then, in the middle of all of it, I got so turned on. Isn't that crazy? What do you think that says about me? Dying was a kink."

"I think it says you aren't my friend," Rich said. "I don't know what the fuck you are, but you're not my Rain and you're talking shit because you're an asshole."

"Fuck your Rain!"

She screeched as she swiped and caught Rich on the thigh opening a large gash. Richy didn't show any pain. She wouldn't give her that satisfaction, and she couldn't shoot because she got the gash when Rainbow went for the gun, and she'd dropped it. The cut was long, but not deep. It looked worse than it was, so Rich took off again, knowing Rainbow had to be behind her. She put everything she had into the all-out run she was in. When she made it on to church property, she raised her arms in triumph.

"Holy ground, bitch!" she said. "Safe!"

She trotted to the stairs, watching her feet and being careful with her sliced leg as she bounded up them.

"Hey," Rainbow said, as Rich made it to the second to last stair.

She'd appeared out of thin air.

"Not safe," she said, and she grabbed Rich by the throat with both hands and lifted her off the ground. "But you're a little too feisty right now, Bitchy. It'd be nice if you'd calm down a bit and realize that I'm about to squeeze the fucking life out of you."

Her grip was strong, and it hurt fiercely. Her skin was icicles, and her fingers were steel, but Rich didn't focus on any of that.

Is she trying to scare me? Rich thought, pulling out the belt knife she'd carried since she was fourteen.

She started stabbing ferociously at her friend. She came down with all of her force over and over again. She pierced her arms, chest, and shoulders. Rainbow merely laughed and increased the pressure.

Richy got lucky right before she passed out and stabbed deep into the center of Rainbow's neck, which made her instantly drop Rachel and address the wound. Not letting her chance get away, Rich grabbed Rain and threw her down the stairs, turned, and rammed into the door of the church. She was coughing and gasping, and she only had a foot or two to run, but she made it work.

The door was locked, but it was also old, so it gave way and she fell into the foyer. She reached into the bag one last time and gripped one of the remaining guns. It was another 40.

What the hell kind of party was that? she wondered.

Then she aimed, yelled, and shot.

FIFTEEN

Ring of Fire

Bill came around the corner. The door had been busted in, and a woman was lying on the floor and shooting at something outside. As he carefully and quickly snuck behind the woman, he saw what she was shooting. It was Rainbow, but it also couldn't be. If it had been the bullets might have done something, but they had no effect on her as holes were blown opened in her cheeks and forehead.

The gun clicked and the slide froze. The woman was out. She almost threw the empty hand cannon at Rainbow but didn't. The fiend laughed evilly and then shot away and was gone in a flash.

(...)

Rich flattening herself against the wood planks.

"Hey," someone said, and she sat up and aimed the spent pistol to her left.

A teenager was standing there with his hands up, palms out.

"I'm a friend." he said.

"Let's just take that," someone else said, and the Glock was expertly and immediately taken from her grasp. "Sorry," the man said. "I know it's rude to snatch, but you were pointing a gun at a kid."

Rich didn't know whether to attack or not. She was still in fight mode, and her skin was on fire she was so angry.

"It's okay," the boy said. "You're safe. No one will hurt you here, I promise."

These words were coming from a child, but they comforted her. Her body was shaking, and she didn't know what to do, so she did the one thing she could: she broke down and she cried.

(...)

Richy was sitting on one of the pews. She'd been introduced to Joseph and Bill, but there was an older man and another kid that were in the church, too. They'd come out of the back during the commotion. A third man, a blonde, whose face was heavily bandaged, came out to look at her leg briefly. He was a medical professional of some kind, but he didn't say much. He cleaned and wrapped her wound, and then he disappeared to the back of the church again.

"Rich, this is Timmy and Pops," Joss said.

Timothy was instantly struck dumb by whoever this angel was in front of him. She had to be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life.

"Pleasure," Pops said, shaking her hand.

"Yeah," Tim said, dreamily.

Bill was at the front, closing the door. It hadn't been knocked off its hinges, but the frame was timeworn, and the wood gave way when Rich tackled it. He set the door back as best he could and managed to get it to stay shut, and he bent down to grab the ruck sack on the floor.

Brings back some memories, he thought.

The bag was heavy, and he wanted to look through it, but he heard talking and he needed to get back to the others.

He returned to the nave, where everyone was gathered, except Ellis, who was still hiding in the kitchen, and he placed the bag on the pew next to Rich.

"I'm guessing you're scared and confused," Bill said.

"I'm confused," she agreed. "And I'm pissed off."

She wanted to say more, but there were kids around.

"I feel you," Timmy said, and she cocked an eyebrow at the small boy.

"They're not vampires," Joss said, continuing his conversation with Bill, but now with everyone around to hear him, it changed the dynamic.

They looked at him.

(...)

They sat and talked for hours. They told their stories, caught everyone up, and debated over what the monsters eating everyone were.

"You said they drink blood," Timmy said. "That's a classic vampire. And they make others. Because, um, that guy out front, wasn't who he used to be."

He didn't know whether to mention Joss's dad.

"And Rainbow," Bill said.

"Yeah," Rich said, and they all glanced at her. "That wasn't my friend. She said, 'F your Rain' like she was somebody else. It wasn't her."

"I told you; they aren't who or what they look like. They aren't flesh and blood. And they aren't vampires," Joseph said.

He didn't say this, but the main reason he was so against the idea of them being vampires was because that's exactly what they acted like, and if he knew one thing, it was that these creatures were something else. That had to be what his dream was telling him. There was no way his mom could be one of those things.

"They turn into this gunk when they die," he said, instead, and he held up his ax blade that was still covered in the dried orange goop. "Vampires don't melt when they die."

"They could," Timmy said. "And you even said they can't come inside unless they're invited, and they got blown away when they touched your Pops's cross and your mom's St. Christopher's medal. That all sounds like vampires to me."

"They can get in your head, too," Bill said. "You can almost feel it."

"Yeah," Rich seconded.

There was brief stillness, and everyone was silent.

"And that Mr. Diamond is his familiar," Tim said.

It was his turn to have everyone's eyes on him.

Pops said nothing in all of this, he sat stoically with his hands on his cane. Ellis had rejoined everyone at some point, and after thirty minutes of calming him down, he was able to sit. He'd found some bandages, and he'd covered the gashes in his face with ointment and gauze.

"Chicks dig scars," Timmy said to him, when he came out.

He liked this kid. Now he was sitting between him and Pops. He didn't want to talk, and he couldn't quite believe the conversation they were having, so it was best to stay quiet, get through the night, and then get out of here as fast as possible at daybreak. There was nothing that could or would convince him that he'd been attacked by "vampires," but he wasn't about to go outside in the dark, either. He held his chin and worried about his damaged face.

"The funeral home guy," Tim said. "He's got to have something to do with this. He acts freaking creepy, and he was watching me sleep before talking to that big dude that Rich said was the Dracula. You've all felt it, too, right? That cold. It sinks down right to your guts."

Not everyone had, but Joss and Bill were on the same page. Pops felt something else, entirely. Rich was still too pissed to feel anything else. And Ellis was tired, fearful, and sore, so all he could feel was sorry for himself.

"If he is, then we should go there in the morning," Bill said. "What do you think?"

He was asking Pops.

"Sounds like we're out of any better options, so why not?" he answered.

"You all can do whatever," Rich said. "I'm getting the," she paused because of the kids again, "heck out of here."

"I'm with you," Ellis said.

He hadn't talked in a while, and Richy forgot he was English. The sound of his voice and his accent were nice, and under different circumstances and without the bandages, he might've been cute. Ungainly, but cute. The other guy was another story altogether. He was hot, plain and simple, and in good shape, but he hadn't given her a second glance. She had a few thoughts about that but kept them to herself.

The old man was in his head for most of the conversation. She wasn't sure what was happening there, but she felt this strong and unusual urge to help these guys, especially considering the boys. At the same time, she was thinking: *I don't know them! Screw that! I want to live!*

She also didn't believe in monsters or anything else. Or that's what she told herself. But she couldn't keep from replaying the events of the night in her head. She'd been so sure getting to holy ground would work, but it didn't.

What's wrong with you! she thought. *Cut it out! There's a rational explanation for this. There has to be.*

"Do you want to do that?" Bill asked.

She hadn't been paying attention.

"Do what?" she asked.

"Pops has his car outside, and we'll go into town in the morning and get you guys home," he said.

She could've kissed him.

"Yeah," she said, holding back the emotion welling within her, "that would be great."

(...)

They took some time to inspect the church. There was some food in the refrigerator and a couple of bottles of soda. It was nice to eat something. It wasn't a banquet, and it wasn't a party, but it was nice.

"We need weapons," Timmy said.

"You need to calm down," Bill said. "You don't need anything. You're staying here."

"No way!" he yelled.

"Actually, now that I think about it, what about your momma?" Pops asked.

"She knows I'm here," he said. "I told her I might spend the night with Joseph."

"But she's got to be worried sick," Bill said.

"I called her," Timmy said, holding up his phone. "It went straight to voicemail, but I left her a message."

"You have a phone!" Rich yelled.

"I have a mobile," Ellis chimed in, holding up his cell. "Fat lot of good it is"

"Yeah," Pops said. "The lines are down."

He pulled out his old, flip-model from the last decade and checked it. There was still no service.

Bill owned a satellite phone, but he'd left it at his aunt's house. He didn't think he'd need it when he left to go to visit Pops and Joss earlier.

Joss put his hand in his pocket but there was nothing there. He must've lost his cell when he was chasing after Laurie.

Oh well, he thought. Didn't use it much anyway.

"I called her using WiFi," Tim answered, as if this was obvious.

During the Covid lockdown, the reservation's tribal council used federal grant money to purchase a tower that was supposed to circulate a wireless signal to everyone on the reservation. The Methodist church invested in a Startlink system. The tower cost five million dollars. The Startlink receiver cost \$500, and there was a monthly fee. One worked. The other didn't. Pops remembered there being a line item on a recent church ledger for a Startlink, but he had no idea what it was then, and he didn't know now. The elders of his family (mainly Pops and his sisters) sat on the board for the church, but they didn't know everything about it.

Ellis muttered something about the compatibility of phones from the UK, but no one was listening, and he sat and went back to eating some leftover cake.

"Can we call the cops?" Rich asked.

They dialed the emergency line, but they got a recording.

"No, the calls aren't going through," Richy said. "I got a message about the lines being busy. I can wait on hold, but this phone has less than 20% charge, and we don't have a charger."

"Does anybody know the local number? We could try that?" Bill asked.

He was met with blank stares.

Why is Timmy's phone working here, but not at the ranch? Joss pondered. It doesn't sound like his mom's phone had service either, but his did.

"Pops, does your phone have WiFi calling?" he asked.

"I don't know," he said, unsure of what his grandson was asking.

"I bet a lot of people around here don't know what WiFi is or that it can be used to make calls," Joss continued.

There was something there. He could almost reach it. Touch it. He was on the cusp of some greater understanding, but the instant it was within reach it faded away.

"Social media!" Rich exclaimed. "Here give me that"

She took Tim's cell and rapidly began to press the screen, opening apps, logging into accounts, and typing messages. She put a video up on Instagram and Facebook. She was sincere and earnest and she tried to get people to understand the danger and to come and help them.

She would later learn many of her posts went viral, but not because people wanted to help. It wouldn't be the internet if people didn't think it was a joke or that she was drunk, and it definitely wouldn't be the internet if almost every viewer and commenter wasn't making fun of her, but they were.

"I thought of something like that earlier," Tim said. "I posted on the Sheriff's Office Facebook page about a vampire attack. They blocked my account. I think we're on our own."

"This has to work," Rich said. "I can't sleep here tonight."

"I mean, you can go, if you want," Bill joked. "'But I'm waiting until morning. And if I could get the phone from that kid, I'd be calling his momma or Nate's brothers."

"You know his dad?" Joss asked.

Billy nodded.

"Were you guys friends?" Joss asked, trying to find Tim.

He thought Timmy might want to hear this, but when he saw him talking to Richy by the stage, he figured he'd tell him later. He probably already knew all about this, anyway, and Tim was trying his best to flirt, which was hilarious. It was also a good distraction, and they all deserved a distraction.

"He was too young to really be my friend," Bill answered. "I mean, he was nine or ten when I left, but we're blood with Yolanda. Not close, mind you, but family, so I know all about it. Michael knew him better. He was friends with everybody, kinda like your dad was."

The mention of his father didn't bother Joss at first. That was probably a stress response, but as they started to settle, reality was slinking back in, and the mention of his dad's name caused Joss's heart to ache painfully. It was the same for Pops. He saw it in him, too.

"But weapons," Bill said, changing the subject immediately.

William was always a very empathetic person, he could feel how others felt. Most feelings, anyway.

"We'll need something better than that ax," Bill said, grabbing the bag Rich brought with her and setting it on the pew in front of him. He threw the flap open.

"Woah," he said, abruptly, and he backed away from the ruck sack.

"Better than an ax?" Rich asked, walking over to them.

"You were running around with this?" Bill asked, referring to the bag.

"Yeah," Richy said. "Why?"

"You saw the clay stuff in there, right? he asked.

"What is it?" Timmy asked, his voice full of childish wonder as he joined them.

"It's a bomb," Bill said, and everyone backed away.

"It doesn't look like a bomb," Timmy said, standing on his tip toes and peeking into the sack.

"I thought it was a gag eraser because of the smell," Rich said.

"The stamp on it," Bill explained. "That's Semtex. Three ounces of that crap can blow up a car, and you've got," he peered back in, "about three pounds or so. That would definitely flatten this entire church and kill all of us."

Everyone took another step back.

"How do you know what that is?" Rich asked.

"Navy," he said, as if that answered the question. "Nobody touch this. Seriously. Where did you get it?"

"I told you; I grabbed the bag when I ran out of the party," Rich said, "I didn't know what was in it. I saw the gun, and I saw a bunch of people being eaten by other people, so I took it."

"Will it kill vampires?" Timmy asked.

"The gun?" Richy asked.

"No," Timmy laughed. "The bomb."

"That'll kill you and everything else in a quarter acre," Bill answered. "And it's been shaken around enough for one day, so don't touch it. Any static or heat hits that and we won't need to worry about vampires or anything else ever again, and I'm not dying here. Not yet."

There was a gleam in his gaze, a bright, insane glare that caused everyone except Joseph to wither. The boy didn't shrink; he grew, instead. He was scared. They all were. But he wasn't about to let that slow him down. He stood and burned with rage, giving over to the endless spite and letting it force the fear so far down inside that Joseph, himself, couldn't feel it.

DAY 5: The End of the World

SIXTEEN

Stir

They woke up late. It was difficult to sleep, but they'd managed.

The first time someone tapped on the glass and started begging to be invited in, it put fear into the room. What made it worse was who it was. It was Pastor Patrick, and he was pleading with them.

"Please invite me in," he said. "It's my church. You should let me lead you in prayer. Aren't you scared? Don't you need to pray?"

"That's messed up," Timmy said.

Everyone agreed.

"The vicar was the one who let Laurie and me in the church," Ellis said. "He opened the back door for us and said we could look around. But he left, and we didn't see him again."

Nobody had any comment on that.

After the hundredth time one of them begged to be invited in, and around three in the morning, it was getting boring, and they were tired.

Ellis, who'd remained sullen all evening, fell asleep first. The boys were next and then Pops.

"Anybody respond to your posts?" Bill asked.

He knew nothing about social media, not posts or otherwise. He'd never even used an app, but he'd heard enough about them to ask a question or two.

"Nothing productive," Rich said. "And I stayed on hold for over an hour trying to get someone to answer or leave a message with the cops, but there must be too many people calling right now to get through. And he battery is going dead, and we don't have a charger."

She forced a silly smile.

"Cool," he said, flatly.

He didn't know what it was, or how, or why. And he didn't care. Because during this short exchange, Bill felt a spark. He felt something stir somewhere and in some way it never had before, and it scared him, and it excited him, so he smiled back.

SEVENTEEN

Mr. D.

"Pops!" Joss said, shaking his grandfather awake.

"Wha! What!" Pops said.

"It's already after nine!" Joseph said. "We've got to get going! We're wasting daylight!"

Everyone was up in a few minutes, and they used the bathroom and mulled around. Ellis checked his wounds and then looked at Rich's leg.

Joss didn't notice, but he didn't have that nightmare as he slept.

"Holy crap!" Bill exclaimed.

"What now?" Pops asked.

"Timmy's phone has sixty missed calls," Billy said. "Most of them are his mom, but this one is Jodie. I recognize the number. Hang on, I'll call her."

He pressed the button on the screen, and it connected after two rings.

"Hey auntie," Billy said.

"Will, is that you?" Jodie yelled.

There was a lot of noise on her end of the phone.

"Yeah, auntie," he said. "Phones are working, huh? You, okay?"

"Have you got out yet, Will?" Jodie said, not hearing his questions.

"Got out?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"We just got to Willits," she said, mentioning the closest town to Round Valley. "We've been waiting all morning in that damn line of cars, and I was calling you, but if you're still in town, you need to leave now."

"What's going on?" Billy asked, fearing they were wrong about the creatures and people were being hunted during the day.

"The fire!" Jodie yelled. "The mountains are on fire!"

(...)

Everyone rushed outside and looked at the vistas in the distance. Thick plumes of black smoke rose from bright lines of flames that were blowing and spreading with the wind. The blast from Rich igniting the Semtex set off a blaze that used the seasonal winds to blow southeast and up the side of the ridges. It caught the farm on fire, and the ranch house went up, and it was a miracle that it hadn't exploded, too. The blaze was heading away from Covelo Road and the town, but it was still on the move, catching the peaks alight as it scorched the dried ground and turned the thickets and thorns to cinders.

"That explains the busy emergency lines," Richy said, hanging her head.

The fires themselves were miles away, and they may never reach the valley. The winds may blow them up and away, but it was more probable that they would blow them around, and the reservation would be surrounded by the inferno, and not for the first time. The smoke had already arrived, and it was harder to breathe.

"Is everyone evacuating?" Joss asked.

"Jodie said they called for a full evacuation," Bill answered.

"That means 'bout half the Rez will be leaving," Pops said. "And everything in town will be closed. Those stayin' will be moving out to somewhere safe, but that'll leave nearly a thousand people out there scrambling around and hunkering down."

A cargo plane flew over the ridges in the distance and dropped a load of fire retardant on the blaze.

"And another couple hundred fire fighters out on those hills," Bill said. "But they've got to be twenty miles from here."

"They're far enough away for now," Joss said. "They'll be out of the way."

The adults gauged Joss's response. It was calculated, and it was logical. But it was also cold as ice

.

"Let's get downtown, so y'all can get outta here," Pops said to Rich and Ellis.

Tim's phone went dead before they could call his mom, and Billy hadn't thought to mention him being with them when he spoke to Jodie. She must've been worried, and he felt bad about that.

"Are you guys really staying?" Richy asked.

"We can't let them get away," Joseph said. "They'll use this to disappear, and we can't let that happen."

"Seriously?" Ellis asked. "You're all bloody barmy."

He ran to the car and jumped in.

The rest joined him.

(...)

There wasn't much room in Pops's beater. It felt like riding in a clown car. The flames to the east were worrisome, but they weren't the real problem. The winds might be blowing the heat further out, and you might assume that it would take the smoke with it, but it didn't. Instead, the smoke churned and settled into a thickening fog that covered the land along the outer rim and speckled the valley with pockets of shade.

It was difficult for Pops to see as he was driving, but there was no one else on the road. The old-timer had been right; every business and bureaucracy had shuttered their windows and turned off their "Open" signs. The buildings were closed. The streets were barren.

They pulled up in front of D&Z Funeral Home, and everyone hopped out.

"You're staying here?" Rich asked again. "With those tweakers and *that* fire?"

"I am," Bill said. "I have to do this, and I don't believe I'm saying this, but I think I'm supposed to."

"Supposed to what?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "I guess I'll find out. But you better get going if you want to get out of here before dark. There'll be a long line of cars waiting down 162 for the evacuation, and you'll probably have to wait a long while before you actually get out."

"Okay," she said.

Bill wanted to say more, but didn't. They tried to get Tim to go with Rich and Ellis, but that didn't work, and neither Rich nor Ellis wanted to kidnap him and drag him away, even if it was for his own good.

Pops got a small bag from the trunk, and Bill grabbed the rucksack Rich had brought. He'd taken the remaining explosives out and tucked them away. Joss grabbed his ax, and Ellis moved to the front. Rich was driving. They all waved goodbye to each other. She put the beater in gear but watched the foursome in the rearview mirror as they pulled away. Timmy, Joseph, Pops, and Bill stood outside D & Z Funeral Home, and she felt an ache in her gut, but then the car rounded a corner, and they were gone.

(...)

A considerable cloud of smoke floated over the sun and cast a dark shade over the town. The light was filtered through the fumes and shone down, tinting the valley pink.

"We doing this?" Bill asked, as Pops's vehicle disappeared.

"You bet your sweet ass we are!" Timothy said.

They all gave him a sideways glance.

"It's something my uncle always says," Tim explained.

"I don't know your uncle," Joss said, "but maybe don't repeat what he says all the time."

They moved to the porch, and Pops turned the knob, pushing the door in. It swung open in a fluid motion. The door was huge and unnervingly quiet. It was dark inside.

"You two stay here," Bill said, and he pulled a revolver from the satchel.

He gave it to Pops and he grabbed the last of the pistols. There were more bullets in the bag, but other than that it was empty, so he dropped it on the side of the small porch.

"We're not staying here," Timmy said.

"Yes, you are," Bill said, and he turned to face Timmy and Joss.

He had a number of arguments he was about to go through. He was going to put these children in their place. Playtime was over. But then he saw Rainbow and two random guys standing in the middle of the street. They hadn't been there seconds ago. The men were young, and both wore the same hooded sweatshirts Laurie mentioned seeing, and Rain had a new work shirt on.

She waved at him.

"Shit!" he said.

She was at the porch in a blink, and she swiped at Bill. He ducked but could feel the wind coming off her claws as they passed by him. He pointed the gun at her and emptied it. She laughed, and her pals were suddenly there next to her. One snatched at Timmy, and Pops shot it twice. One of the bullets went through its forehead and blew out the back of its neck, and the creature went limp and fell to the ground, but not before scratching at Pops and forcing him to drop his weapon.

Rainbow and the other one were physically affected by this. They grabbed at themselves and stumbled. It gave Joseph enough time to aim and then come down hard on the back of the other random guy's neck.

The ax blade severed its head with ease, sending a splash of orange fluid shooting out from the wound.

Rainbow screeched at them. Her shrill cries were full of disgust and anger. Bill had already reloaded, and he aimed and shot her in the chest and head twice, causing her to fumble backwards as she temporarily lost balance. When she did, a beam of sunlight broke through the haze and caught her hand. It sizzled as half her arm bubbled, steamed, and melted into tawny goo. She wailed again, this time in surprise and pain, before she dashed off and disappeared. Joss moved to chase her down, but there was no sign as to where she went.

"Let's get inside," Bill said.

He looked at the bodies, and, despite what he'd seen, he imagined himself in a prison cell for the rest of his life. They'd murdered two people here today. But then the corpses started to dissolve, and they turned into that guck the kid kept talking about, and he felt slightly better and then immediately worse about the situation.

It's real, he marveled.

It's real, he dreaded.

It's real, he feared, that fear sinking into his bones.

"Mr. Diamond's turn," Timmy said, and he ran inside before anyone could stop him.

Tim didn't make it far, about three yards or so, before they caught up to him.

"Don't run off like that," Bill said.

"Yeah," Joss said. "There might be more of them in here."

"There's no one in here but me," a voice echoed from one of the back rooms, and they all began to slowly ease towards it.

The space was sparsely lit by lanterns, and they had to walk past a grand stairway to get to a corridor that ended in a sizeable room. There's no telling what it used to be, but it had been converted to a viewing chamber for mourners. But there were no mourners today, and there wasn't a coffin or flowers. It was only Mr. Diamond.

It was sitting at a small table, and it was drinking coffee from a fine China tea set. The overall image was strange, and it felt wrong. If for nothing else than because the huge thing was sitting on the spindliest chair in existence. It being able to hold Diamond's considerable weight was ridiculous. It was more than that, though. Almost backwards or inside out. They should've been scared. Terrified. They were basically walking up to a dangerous monster of unknown origin, but it felt more like waiting in line for Santa Claus. It was wrong. Maybe a trap, maybe not, but wrong.

"Wait," Joss said, and he held out his hand.

"Nope," Timmy blurted and he ran forward.

When he was a few feet from the table, he pulled a gun from his pocket and pulled the trigger until it was empty. It was a 32 and it only had four bullets in the drum, but each one found its target. Mr. Diamond peered down at its white suit and yellow tie as a viscous, green fluid began to pour from the wounds. It looked and smelled horrid. If pus could be more disgusting, this would be it.

"Ouch," Mr. Diamond said. "That hurt."

It smiled a saw-toothed grin.

Bill rushed forward and grabbed the firearm from Timothy.

"Where the hell did you get a gun!" he said, incensed. "You could have killed yourself."

"Pops dropped it and I picked it up when y'all were distracted," Timmy cried. "Finder's keepers! Give it back!"

"I'm sorry, Bill," Pops said. "I thought I lost it after I shot that one in the head."

"If you want to kill me, that won't do it," Mr. Diamond said, putting an end to the commotion.

Joss held the end of his ax and dropped the head to the floor. It landed with a thud.

"Right," Diamond said.

Everyone began to advance on the fat, bleeding wretch in the suit, but only made it a step.

"Wait," Joss said, again.

And this time everyone stopped.

"Let me."

Nobody could explain what it was about his words, but they listened, and they waited. They watched the boy walk up to the table and sit across from Mr. Diamond. He inspected the sunglasses and the face, he evaluated the suit, and he considered the wounds. He gazed for a long time into the darkness of Mr. Diamond's grin.

"Bill, can I have a cigarette?" Joss asked.

"Why?" Bill asked.

"Please," Joss pleaded, and he held out his hand.

Bill pulled his pack from his pocket. In all the excitement, he hadn't thought to smoke. Maybe it was time to quit. He knocked a cigarette out, had a moment of clarity, and handed the entire pack over.

"Keep it," he said.

"Your lighter," Joss said, but Billy hesitated. "Please."

Bill retrieved it from his pocket and handed it over.

"Mr. Diamond?" Joss asked, and he held up the pack and lighter. "For you."

"For me?" it asked, and its face contorted. "Such memories."

It appeared as if it were trying to cry but couldn't.

"What's Joss doing?" Timmy whispered to Pops.

"You can't beat the devil," Pops answered. "You have to deal with him."

Timmy wanted to yell out and curse again, but he fought to keep himself quiet. Pops understood what Joss was doing. How Joseph knew what to do was a mystery, but, whether he realized it or not, he was performing an ancient Native ritual. A right of speaking and of meeting. One where gifts were given. The most traditional gift between tribes was tobacco. Tobacco and information, and whether or not anyone else grasped what was happening in that situation, Joss had paid for information, and Mr. Diamond was quick to catch on.

After a minute, it sighed heavily and composed itself. Mr. Diamond took a cigarette from the pack and the lighter, it flipped the butt into its mouth, and it lit it and pulled in a deep, heavy drag of smoke in a way that was almost lyrical. It blew out a pall, and its breath smelled worse than the smoke.

"We're sorry for the intrusion," Joss said.

"Screw that!" Timmy screamed. "That asshole's got my cousins!"

"No," Mr. Diamond said. "Your cousins are dead. Eaten. The master was going to drain them, and then use their bodies, but the one," he mulled over something, "What was his name? Ah, Ernest--"

"Don't say his name!" Timmy erupted. "I'll fucking kill you!"

"Tim," Pops said, gently grabbing the boy and resting a hand on his shoulders. He bent down to talk to him at his level. "We need to listen now, okay? I know it's hard, but we need to do this."

Everyone in the room took his words as a truth. They were absolute in this moment, so they listened. As outlandish as this all was, they listened.

"What were you saying?" Joss asked, unfazed by the outbursts.

"Ah, yes," Mr. Diamond said, smirking. "Timothy's cousin had, um, how do I describe it? He had a sense of us. An instinct. Almost like what we have. A feeling. You have it, too. So does Timothy and the ace, but the old one."

He pursed his lips, making a tutting sound.

"He's been touched by something much more powerful. A crimson crown, perhaps."

"Can I believe anything you say?" Joss asked.

"Depends on what your deal is, kiddo," Mr. Diamond said.

"Just need the truth," Joseph said.

"You can't believe anything those goldy bastards say!" Timmy yelled, unable to hold back.

Pops lightly restrained him again, and the boy threw his arms around him, hugging him tightly. He was so hurt and angry.

Mr. Diamond was all business.

"I believe you have me confused," it said, turning its head towards Tim.

It reached up with a hand and gripped the side of its sunglasses, and it removed them slowly. Underneath the lenses weren't glowing orbs. There was nothing at all, in fact. Instead of eyes, Mr. Diamond had desiccated, dark holes in his face. The blackness in them seemed endless. It wasn't that light didn't shine inside his sockets, but more like it refused to, and the skin around the voids was old, stretched, and wrinkled.

"I am not one of the Zotiel," Mr. Diamond said, extinguishing the first cigarette. "I am not Dzoavits."

It motioned at the pack of smokes, and Joseph gestured back, telling it silently to have another if it wanted to. It flicked out another cigarette and lit it in a flash.

"Dzoavits," Pops said. "The Shoshone people had a legend of an ogre with that name. It kidnapped and ate children."

"One in the same," Mr. Diamond said. "Zotiel Dzoavits is that creature of legend."

"Don't names have power?" Joss asked.

"Indeed, they do," it answered.

"Then why tell us that?" he asked.

"The Zotiel are proud of their name," it said. "As is Dzoavits. He would never shy or hide from it. If anything, he wants nothing less than to announce himself and demand subservience."

"Is that what you are?" Joss asked. "Its servant?" Is it here? Is this a trap?"

"I am Mr. Diamond, and Dzoavits doesn't have servants that I can remember. Subservience does not equate to servants. Dzoavits has slaves. Slaves he would never share a roof with, so I'm not sure what kind of trap this could be. I'm here alone."

"What happened to Bert and Ernest?" Joseph asked, getting this out of the way so it wouldn't slow them down later.

He knew Timmy wouldn't calm down until he heard this.

"Bertrum was relieving himself outside, and I invited Ernest and him in, because Ernest had to go as well, and I didn't want him to have to pee in the bushes," Mr. Diamond said. "They came in, and I was getting a soft drink for Bert. I was in the small kitchen at the front, and he was sitting out in the main foyer. That's when I heard a whimper. And I came around the corner and there he was. Both of the young ones were gone, and the master hadn't spilled so much as a drop of blood. He ate them whole. And I knew then why I felt so drawn here."

He returned the sunglasses to his face, much to everyone's relief.

"And I bet you suckered them in here with candy!" Timothy shouted, having to be held back again. "You fat, ugly, cliché piece of shit! You led them to their deaths!" "I did not," it said. "I was trying to be neighborly."

They all gaped at it in disbelief.

"What!" it balked. "It's true. I've never had neighbors. I've always been a solitary daemon, and I've enjoyed that. But a year ago I had this idea. This fantastic idea. I'd been living in an abandoned condominium complex in Utqiagvik, and it was so very sterile and very, very clean, when I had this irrefutable urge to move south to the mountains, these mountains. Where I could finally have community and, well, neighbors. I should've known it wasn't me. I should've known I was being pushed here. He was waking up, and I had to rejoin him. It's part of his nature. When he wakes, he calls whether he wants to or not."

Diamond's a slave, Joss thought.

He almost pitied the creature as it spoke. It seemed sincerely dejected and weak.

Bill stepped forward as Pops preempted another outburst by Timmy. They were all sure one was coming, but Tim didn't move.

"Did that Zovix kill my brother?" Billy asked, much to Pops's frustration.

How was he supposed to calm the kid down when the adults were spouting questions off willy nilly? As for Bill, he struggled with having asked anything at all. He didn't mean to, even if it was all he wanted to know. All he wanted out of Diamond, or anyone, was to know what happened to Michael, but he hadn't spoken consciously.

Diamond regarded him.

"The master was in the mountains for weeks before revealing himself to me, and there were many a weary wanderer who found their fates when he was in his feral state," it said, waiting for a heartbeat before finishing its thought.

"Yes, William, Dzoavits killed your brother."

Bill felt hate pulse through every inch of him, and he silently vowed to end the Zovix, or whatever it was called.

"Are there more slaves?" Joss asked. "And I can't believe I'm asking this, but did you say you're a demon?"

"Demons!" Timmy screeched. "See! It's evil! Kill it!"

"It's daemons, not demons," Diamond clarified. "Demons have religion. As for more slaves, I was the only one to fall through the gate.

"You said Dzoavits woke up and called you here," Joss said.

"They can't make you do things, you see. That's a rule." it told them. "But they can whisper and make you think something is your idea, and that idea can become so intoxicating that it turns into actions. I was drawn here, and I didn't know why until Dzoavits showed up, and he," there was a pause as it reflected. "Well, you know the rest."

"Did you say something about rules? Joss asked, pressing forward.

"Indeed," it said. It had so far been impressed by this boy. He was keen. Where we're from, rules are what bind us. We use them to subjugate, dominate, and consume others. In our realm, that's normal. It's very different there."

"In what ways is it different?" the boy asked.

"I don't remember much. I lost many early memories when I awoke here, but there was no sun." Diamond reflected. "I believe it was described by one of you, a human, one who was able to peak through the void, as a blazing inferno of absolute power, authority, and rule. A realm where the faithless, the detestable, the murderers, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars live. An abyss where the Sulphur lakes burn brightly in the endless night."

"Hell," Bill said. "You're describing Hell."

"I am not," Mr. Diamond said. "And that's a terrible fallacy. Why is it every time I talk about home, you Americans always jump to Hell? It's rude, and that's not what it's called."

Nobody said anything, but an immense amount of expectation hung in the air.

Mr. Diamond stayed silent, leaving their need for an answer unquenched.

I'm calling it Hell, Billy thought. I don't care what that freak says.

"Where are you from? Joseph asked. "As in, where in relation to us right now, spatially speaking."

"I can't answer what I don't know," it said.

"So, you could be a space alien," Timmy said.

"Everyone is a space alien, Timothy," Diamond replied. "You and your friends are on this planet that is, believe it or not, in space, so you are space aliens to anything not on Earth, which is, and this is a fact, everything else. But I would not and cannot eat you. I can only consume the power given by the master."

Joss took note of every time he said, "the master."

"Why can't the golden eyed ones come in without being invited?" Joss asked.

Diamon didn't speak.

Joss lifted the ax.

"That won't change the rule," it said.

"What rule?" Joss questioned, but Mr. Diamond stayed silent. "How are you, and only you, Mr. Diamond, bound by rules?" the boy rephrased.

"Ah, an excellent question," Diamond started. "Here, you are governed by laws. Laws of physics. Laws of science. Laws of man. In our realm, we are reigned over by rules. And they are absolute. Every lesser daemon must ask for entry to an equal or more powerful daemon's home or place of rest. In this realm, that rule still applies, but it's less, um, discretionary."

"That sounds made up and stupid," Timmy said.

"I'm sure it does to you," Mr. Diamond said, nonplussed. "But there are many laws of yours that make no sense to an outsider, such as myself."

It alternated sipping coffee and puffing on its cancer stick.

"Simple things, like sleep," it continued. "Why you creatures spend a third of your lives lying on your backs snoozing is beyond me. Why do you need to rest? Not everything on this planet needs sleep, but you do. Why? And before you answer, please, don't tell me it's natural or that nature has any part of it, because our rules are a part of my nature, and if I can't simply say 'because that's the way it works,' then neither can you."

Pops was about to take Diamond to school when it dawned on him that the best and most accurate explanation for why humans sleep was because it was essential for survival. That was it. There'd been some research about the brain removing toxins, and that was promising, but it was by no means a definite answer. In fact, instead of an answer, the research usually led to a question: Can't the body do that while it's awake? Spoiler alert: it can.

"No one?" Mr. Diamond asked. "Hmmm. Maybe something easier then? How about electricity. I'm sure you've all seen squirrels scampering along power lines every now and then. In other countries, Guam, for instance, its snakes, but it's the same idea. The animals scurry, unharmed, along the high-powered cables. Yet, if one touches the ground while on that cable, or if one touches a cable on the ground, or if one touches a dangling cable while it's on the ground, then the animal is instantly fried into a charbroiled corpse. I'm sure if I asked you, most of you could come up with a good enough answer as to why. It completes the circuit, you could say. Electricity needs to be grounded to be dangerous, you might argue. And there are many other plenty well and fine explanations you could give me but do any of you really know what that means? Because saying you can touch something as long as you don't touch the ground, but if you do touch the ground then you die, sounds pretty made up to me."

It paused for effect, trained on the old man, and pointed.

"I'm sure he could probably give me a lecture as to why, but in the end, your laws of science are based on observations. They are a way for you beings to understand this world, but the truth of this realm, as with any, is that things are the way they are because they are. What goes up must come down. That's just the way it is."

Rules, Joseph thought.

"You can't touch this can you?" he asked Diamond, holding up his mother's Saint Christopher medallion.

"That's a rule, right?"

Everyone besides Pops was utterly confused by Joss's line of questions. Who cared about Diamond? Or a necklace? How did asking about any of that help them?

"Another interesting inquiry," it hissed. "No, I cannot. I am prohibited from touching items of praise that do not praise the Enemy."

"The Enemy?" Bill asked.

"Our king," Diamond said. "His title is Enemy. I cannot recall his name, it escapes me, but he's the enemy of all others. He has what they covet. He destroys all those who oppose him, and he is the keeper of every rule."

"And if you break a rule?" Joss pressed.

"I am punished."

"Like a grenade blast when a cross hits you," Joseph said, again to himself.

The boy stood and pondered something furiously. He worked as hard and fast as he could to find the right words.

"So," he said. "Are the Enemy's rules magic or technology?"

"It seems to me that magic is merely technology pushed beyond understanding," Diamond said.

"And technology is magic that follows your laws. Our rules are similar to the former but not completely unlike the latter."

"And you awoke in this miserable world?" Joss asked.

"Miserable?" Diamond questioned. "Oh, no. It's wonderful here. It's quiet and peaceful and clean."

It picked a piece of lint off of its sleeve and dropped it to the ground in revulsion.

"Of course, we didn't cross into this realm here. It was far from here, and in a desert. So much sand. Gross. There's a national park there now."

"Is it better for you in this realm because you're a slave?" Joss pressed.

"Perhaps," it said. "But my master is equally as pleased to have found himself here. He can feed so easily, and as long as he--"

It stopped in the middle of its sentence, and not because it was done talking. Something was shutting it up by force.

Joss paused and mentally sifted through what he'd learned so far.

If the others had known Joseph's entire interview method was copied from an old episode of Star Trek, they wouldn't have been so willing to stand back and watch and wait, but he wasn't going to tell them that, and he seemed to be doing well.

Diamond smothered another menthol and replaced it with a fresh cigarette.

"Why can't you eat people?" the boy asked.

"Ah, wonderful," Diamond beamed. "As I said, I absorb energy from my master. And he gets his energy from you and from the delightful concoction made in your blood when you feel him. He can use it and change it, and he allows me to continue living with it."

"When we 'feel' him?" Joss pressed.

"For some," it said. "It's merely fear. But for those like you, and like poor Ernest; those with a little something extra, well, for those, he's not able to contain himself. You've all been touched by something. The old one the most. He's seen more than he should. There was another man, hundreds of years ago, who bore a similar mark. I mentioned him earlier. What was his name? Hmmm. Oh, Augusta! But this was long ago. Anyway, he looked too hard and for too long and accidentally opened a window into our realm. What he saw drove him mad."

He drained the remainder of his coffee before finishing.

"He wrote about it, I believe, but one must always be careful not to peak too closely into the void, because one never knows what's peaking back. Right, Pops."

The old man huffed at it.

"And he drew you here? Your master?" Joss asked, letting the consternation of its words wash over him.

"Yes," Diamond said, dismally.

"Billy," Pops said. "Could you?" He motioned at Timmy. "Grandson, I got a question for this, ah, guy."

"Delighted," Diamond said, as the old timer walked forward a few steps.

"Dzoavits swallowed the sun in the myth" Pops began. "But this ain't no myth."

Mr. Diamond nodded slightly.

"That doesn't sound good," Billy whispered.

Timmy shook his head.

" Twilight," it answered, and it winced.

It started sweating and appeared to be in a lot of discomfort.

"What about twilight?" Joss asked.

"This will hurt," it said. "The master has gathered enough mass."

It doubled over and held its gut.

"To regain his form..."

It wanted to say more but couldn't.

"What's his true form?" Pops asked, now unable to stop himself from getting out the burning questions inside him.

"He's an enormous daemon," it said, momentarily fine again. "Roughly the size of your Statue of Liberty, with massive claws and fangs. He has rough quills along his back and wears the skull of his father as a crown. He murdered his father on the same day he destroyed my village and tortured my family to death. The same day I was conscribed as his eternal servant."

It puffed heavily on the cigarette as it spoke.

"A charge which I take with great pride and give all my devotion to, of course."

"Of course," Joss said. "And with that devotion, we wouldn't want to keep your master from overcoming his weakness to sunlight."

"I never said anything about weakness," it replied.

"No, you didn't," Joss said, but it didn't have to.

It was confirming what they were only assuming before. From the conversation so far, Joseph had gleaned Dzoavits's weaknesses to be its current form, the sun, and its lack of mass.

It said 'mass,' he thought.

"Dzoavits must've been pretty upset when his body got taken away the same way yours was," Joss said, working on a theory.

"Yes--" Diamond paused.

It was suffering again, and it was being silenced. Its words were in there somewhere, but they wouldn't come out its mouth. Diamond spit up more of its green festering blood and dabbed at its mouth with a handkerchief to catch the wave of fluid attempting to spill from its lips.

"But he's found a way to make himself whole again, right?" Joss blurted, quickly.

"Quite," it murmured, cleaning its chin and gripping at its chest in agony.

That's what they are, Joss thought.

It might seem cruel that he wasn't worried about Mr. Diamond or its pain, but it wasn't a person. It was helping them, sort of, but Joseph was sure that any information it was giving them was part of its own strategy. Part of its own plans. He remembered Richy's and Tim's story about the big guy who'd been lurking outside windows and crashing parties.

Diamond said, "using bodies." And when it was doing the ritual or whatever it was doing at the party, Rich said the big goldy stabbed itself and dropped something onto the bodies. They're pieces of it, pieces of Dzoavits. They must have either taken over the bodies, "Snatcher" style, or...

"No," he said, aloud.

Dad was shorter, he thought. Mass. Enough mass.

He had to piece this together quickly, but a full picture was forming in his mind. He almost had it.

He had the room's full attention.

"Are there any rules about the sun?" Joseph asked.

"No," it said. "There's no sun, so there wouldn't be any rules about one."

"Why doesn't the light affect you?" Joss asked.

It lit another cigarette.

"It does, but as a lower daemon, I'm weak," it said. "If I were more powerful, it may cause me harm, but as it is, I can stand the direct light for short spells, and indirect light for far longer."

There was a crash outside.

"Time's running short," it said. "The winds are changing. There's a nice, big cloud descending on the valley, and I'm not the only one who can dance around in the shadows."

"Two more questions," Joss said. "I know it uses its heart."

He didn't know this, but he was taking a page from Pops. It was blind bluff time. Rich said the goldy stabbed itself in its chest, so the heart made sense.

"Do those pieces of heart eat the bodies?"

"The Zotiel are proud of what they are," it said. "And at their most basic, they are beating flesh and teeth."

"At their most basic?" Joss asked, pointing at his chest.

Mr. Diamond said nothing. It sat and lit one last cigarette, and it pulled in a large drag and exhaled out of one of the holes in his neck. The hole was right in the front and center of its throat. It was healing, but the smoke came out from the bullet wound in a strong, single column.

"Second," Joss said. "You can't tell us where your master is, can you?"

Diamond shook his head.

"Okay," the boy said to the group. "Let's go."

"What do you mean let's go!" Timmy blurted. "Aren't we going to kill that thing? It's a demon! It tricked my cousins and got them killed!"

"Tim," Bill said. "Let's talk about this somewhere else."

Right as they turned to exit the room, over Tim's many protests, Mr. Diamond said one last thing. Its face warped as it tried to weep one more time.

"Go Mustangs," it said, and a single drop fell from empty sockets.

The droplet was lost completely when Mr. Diamond's head exploded. It burst with a loud *splosh* and covered the table and tea set in its blood and brains.

EIGHTEEN

If I Didn't Have Bad Friends

Rich pulled away from the funeral home but didn't take her eyes off the guys until they'd rounded the corner.

The car was old and frayed here and there. It was well maintained, though, and it drove smoothly. They made it out of town without any problems, and then they started up the mountain on Covelo Road. Ellis was still pouting, and he was quiet. Not that she cared much. She turned on the radio, and the song "In Covelo" filled the car's cabin.

*There was never another, it jaunted.
Had you as my lover,
And I thought it would all be okay,
But you had your reasons, and, damn, it was freezin',
So, maybe I'll work some more today.
Cause I've got the last log in Covelo.*

"Is that the only bloody track they have here?" Ellis asked.

"I like it," she said, and she turned up the volume.

They made it a few miles down the 30-mile stretch of road before hitting traffic. and then they sat. And they sat. And they sat.

(...)

Zoavtis hated that little bastard. How were they doing this? No one had ever been able to resist this much, not since the Shoshone, the only ones to imprison it. But it was out now. It was free, and it was close. So close.

Still, it hated the son. It would eat him slowly, but first.

The line of cars wasn't moving. It wasn't surprised by how simple it was to trap the humans. All it took was a few plastic traffic cones, and twenty cars were rendered immobile. The smoke was helping, too. One more good gust of wind, and they could move. They could feed.

The wind blew right then.

(...)

Rich was having what she could only describe as a "moment". That was the only way she could rationalize it. Well, to be honest, she couldn't rationalize it. The best she could do was to trust her gut, and right then her gut was telling her that she wasn't supposed to be there. She wasn't supposed to be in that car. And she wasn't supposed to be on this road. It was the same certainty Bill had before she left. It was that same sense. It had to be.

The breeze blew a cloud of smoke that covered the sun and bathed the forest in a pink light.

"We gotta go back," Rich said.

"What's that?" Ellis asked, having not heard her.

"We can't stay here," she said.

"It won't be that much longer," Ellis said. "Look, up ahead, I think they're moving."

The pair leaned forward and squinted to try and see what was going on with one of the vehicles ahead. It was the furthest from them, about fifteen cars in front, and it was the last Ford they could see before a big turn. It was moving, sort of. It wasn't going forward. It was kind of swaying. Rocking, maybe?

"Oh, no," Ellis said. "Bollocks!"

"What?" Rich asked, not able to see anything.

"Can you turn around?" he asked.

That's when they heard the first screams. The overstuffed automobiles were ambushed on the sides. Doors were flung open and people were ripped out. Children and women were squealing when the first gun shots rang out. A bullet found its home in the windshield of Pops's old beater.

"Jesus Christ!" Ellis bellowed, and Rich threw the shift lever in reverse.

There weren't any turnoffs on Covelo Road, but there were shoulders that had been built to help slower traffic get out of the way of other vehicles flying around the curves. Rich backed the car up, never letting off the pedal, and she spun the wheel as hard as she could, they slid into the tiny shoulder there, which helped the bigger sedan to make the full 180-degree turn they needed to make so they could get away. There was a part of Rich that wanted to go back and blow a few of those assholes away, she still had a 40 caliber with her, but there was a larger part of her that realized there was nothing she could do. And if she tried, she'd be killed, and that wouldn't help anyone.

Get back to Bill, her brain demanded.

"We gotta find those guys," she said.

"Those nutters!" Ellis barked.

"They have weapons," she said. "And that's the only way out of these mountains."

She pointed behind them with her thumb. The massacre unfolding in their rearview was mainly obscured by the smoke, but blood was being spilled on the asphalt and in the interiors of car cabins. Flesh was being eaten and ripped from bones, and people were being torn apart. They weren't feeding by drinking alone anymore. They were actively eating people, chewing, tearing, and swallowing.

Rich and Ellis weren't able to see the details, but she could make out one figure. It was a woman in a gas station outfit, and she had her hair up in pigtails. It was Rain. The wails of pain and last gurgling yells of anger were all they could hear as they sped away.

The beater broke the line of shadow safely and reentered the light as they headed back towards the funeral home. The fires grew, and the columns of smoke were rising thicker and more dangerous.

"Fuck," Rich said.

"Agreed," Ellis said.

NINETEEN

I'd Have no Friends at All...

The foursome barely made it out to the street when Pops's car came screeching to a halt in front of them.

"Short trip," Bill said, to Rich.

"A lot happened," she replied.

"Us too," Bill said.

"Let's get somewhere safe," Pops said.

"Yeah, we'll catch you up then," Joss said, and they all scrambled into the back seat.

(...)

They broke into the offices of the Tribal Counsel. It was close and no one was there, and there was a room large enough for them to gather and try and figure out what to do next: the Buffalo Room, so called because of the massive taxidermy buffalo head hanging on the wall in there.

"Are we safe in here?" Rich asked. "If the smoke blocks the sun, then the vampires might be able to get in. This isn't a church."

"Not vampires," Timmy said. "We had to watch a fat guy's head explode to learn that."

"Sit," Joss said to a confused Rich and Ellis. "And rest. We'll be safe. For now, anyway."

They sat and went through some pleasantries, and they found some snacks and drinks in the staff breakroom. Each of them shoved as much food in their mouths as they could and sucked down as much fluid as they could get in. When they were done, Ellis and Rich described the scene on Covelo Road.

"We're stuck here then," Bill said.

"That's not the worst of it," Joss started, and he recapped the encounter with Mr. Diamond.

"So, what does that tell us?" Rich asked.

"Mr. Diamond couldn't talk about its master directly," Joss explained. "The one time it did, his head blew up. Well, not counting the butt kissing and the stuff this Dzoavits didn't mind him talking about. But if I asked questions about Mr. Diamond, he could give details about the daemons in general, and that's helping me form some theories about out how to beat it."

"Really?" Timmy asked. "Is that what happened? I was confused, like, the guy's head just popped."

"He was being punished for any detail he wasn't supposed to give us," Joss said. "And he was killed because he told us where his master is."

"Wait, he told us that?" Timmy asked.

"He's at the high school," Billy said. "Go Mustangs."

"Oh, I get it," Tim said.

He didn't get it.

"If they break their rules, then they get hurt," Joss said. "And Mr. Diamond tried to be smart and not tell us anything too sensitive, but he broke the wrong rule. Oh, that's another thing!"

Joss was excited about being able to explain this, because the more he did, the more he understood what was going on.

"They can't touch anything religious," he said, "because of these rules they have to follow. If they do, even if it's not their idea, they get blown away."

"This's all absurd," Ellis said. "Was this all thought up by some silly sod in his gran's cellar?"

They'd started ignoring his comments. They weren't helpful.

"Why are the rules important?" Rich asked.

"None of this is important," Pops said, cutting through the room. "It just ain't! Where they're from don't matter! What they are don't matter! Daemon, demon, alien, hell, they could be sock puppets for all I care. What we know is that they're here, they're real, and we have to kill them before they kill us."

"Right," Joss said. "They're all one creature, I think. From what Rich said she saw out at the ranch before she blew up the mountain and started the fire--"

"Hey," she said. "It's not like I meant to do that."

"No one said you did," Joss said, and she didn't know whether to be angry or impressed.

The kid was smart. Or a smart ass, she wasn't quite sure yet.

"They're weak to sunlight, for now," Joss continued. "More on that in a second. But the pieces of the heart, the weak point of the changed ones, so to speak, is in here."

He pointed to his throat.

"Not where the heart is, dude," Tim said.

"It's not their heart," Joss explained. "Well, it is and it isn't. It's part of that big guy's heart, Dzoavits's heart. Rich saw him do it. He stabs himself and takes pieces of his own heart, and those pieces either eat the bodies or whatever they do and somehow make those goldies. There's something they need first, and I'm still trying to work out what that is. But they are all parts of one monster. The people with gold eyes aren't people, they just look like them. Dzoavits, as Pops said, was a Shoshone legend. It was an ogre that ate kids, it was a boogeyman, but it's also *this* thing, which means back then they found a way to stop it, and we can, too. We have to, because I think that if we don't, it'll be the end of the world as we know it. The basics of the monster itself are that it comes from another realm. That might be another planet or another dimension. Doesn't matter. It didn't come here on purpose, but it's here now, and it eats people, especially people who can 'feel' it, and I guess there's more children than adults with that ability, because Mr. Diamond said his master couldn't help himself when he got a taste of Ernest."

There was a pause.

"Sorry, Timmy."

The other boy nodded.

"That probably means all of us are pretty appetizing to it," Joss said. "But if you destroy the piece of the heart, which is located somewhere in here."

He pointed to the exact spot on his throat where Diamond blew smoke out of.

"Kill shot," Billy said. "A bullet there goes through the neck and cuts the spine in half. It's an instant death. You can hit the same spot on the back if you aim for the hairline. That's right at the base of the skull."

"How do you know that?" Richy asked.

She'd been shooting for a long time, but that wasn't the information her friends at the ranges were sharing with her.

"Navy," Bill said, and she made sure to remember to ask more about that later.

If there was a later.

"Is the heart in that Zovince's neck, too?" Tim asked.

"I don't know," Joss said. "But if we kill the pieces, we should hurt him."

"Hurt him?" Ellis said. "What are you all barking about! This is mental! You're all mental!"

"Ellis!" Timmy shouted, and the boy walked over to him.

He pulled out a chair and hopped up on it, standing on the cushion. He'd barely settled and gotten his balance, when he slapped the man across the face.

"Stop it," he said.

The Englishman did. He paused altogether, as if from a scene in a cinema.

"Just think about them as aliens," the boy said. "You believe in aliens, right?"

"I'm a nurse," the man stammered. "I believe in facts and medicine."

"Then you believe in aliens," Pops said. "An infinite universe with only one planet that has life on it is nearly mathematically impossible."

"Aliens," Timmy said, and he seemed to be rubbing Ellis's cheeks. "You can fight aliens with us, or you can stay here and hide. You don't have to come with us, and you don't have to believe anything we say. But we need to get some stuff straight before we leave."

He patted him on the shoulder.

"Let us talk, bro," he said.

"I want to know why this kid is the only one that seems to know what's going on," Rich said. "Weren't all of you together?"

"We were," Joss said. The others were stung by Rachel's words, except Pops.

He wasn't listening.

"But I was talking to him. To it. And there was, something. It wasn't a normal conversation. I felt, I guess. It was more like the words were given to me, and I could understand what he was trying to tell us regardless of what he was actually saying. Most of it, anyway. No matter what I tell you, though, there are going to be holes here and there. But as far as I can understand them the rules are simple, not logical, and that means the contrapositive doesn't affect the rules themselves."

"Cuz," Tim said. "You're making my brain ache."

"It doesn't matter," Joss said. "They have to ask to get into any home or place of rest."

Joss motioned to the crowd.

"I would say we are resting," he said. "That's all it takes, and right now everyone, even this Dzoavits has to ask to enter. They are also very weak to direct sunlight. We saw that pigtailed chick's arm melt."

"She must've hauled ass right after that," Rich said. "Rain was on 162. I saw her."

"They're fast in short spurts," Joss said. "Really fast. But they aren't very smart. They're gangly in the way they move. I don't think that the main one, Dzoavits, will be that way. And we don't have much time."

"Why?" Rich asked.

"Oh, yes, please enlighten us oh sacred child," Ellis mocked.

"Because it swallows the sun at dusk," Joss said. "Right Pops?"

"Yes, sir, grandson," the old timer said.

"How the hell is it going to do that?" Rich asked.

"It was probably translated poorly," Joseph said, working it out as he spoke. "Or it was a metaphor."

"Dzoavits found a way to overcome the sunlight," Pops said. "And for some reason, it happens today. That Diamond fella said twilight, so we don't have long. Let's go cut this fucker's head off."

"It's a start," Bill said.

"Hell yeah!" Timmy yelled, and he held a gun up like a trophy.

"Where did you get that!" Bill said, snatching the 32 away from him again. "And you aren't doing a damn thing. You need to stay here with the Brit."

"You can't make me!" Tim spat at him.

And they argued that way while the others watched and chuckled.

Ellis wasn't smiling. He wasn't going to die here no matter what they said. They could talk nonsense all they wanted, but it was more likely that someone had spiked his drink, or this was all some form of shared hallucination. That was more believable, than this foolishness. And the little one trying to make it better by calling it aliens wasn't helping.

Mathematical improbability or not, it's bollocks, he thought.

They were right about one thing, though: he was staying right there. The kid could hang around if he wanted to, but he wasn't leaving.

No one noticed the jacket Ellis had put on. He wasn't wearing it before the church. It was something he must've found in one of the closets. It did get cold. It was a waterproof coat with puffy sleeves. No one seemed to notice the smell, either. The plastic, rubbery odor wafting from its inner pockets.

I'm not dying here, Ellis thought, for the millionth time.

It would've been more accurate if he'd said, "I'm not going to be killed here," because he had contingencies. Not that he wanted to use those contingencies, but they gave him a false and unearned sense of safety.

They talked for a while longer and came up with the basis of a plan. It was the best they could come up with. It was going to get dark in a few hours, and they didn't have any more time to sit here and discuss what they could do. It was time to do something and see if it worked.

"We'll see you on the other side," Bill said to Ellis.

"Happy hunting," he said, and he put his feet up on the conference table.

The group had armed themselves with various relics from around the room.

"Always wanted to do this," Pops said, and he smashed a glass display case.

"You can open them," Billy said.

Pops broke another case, enjoying himself too much to listen.

Rich had her 40 with five full clips. Bill had a 9-millimeter with three clips. Pops got a hundred-year-old hatchet, a sinew-backed bow with a full quill (about twenty arrows), and the revolver, when he could keep it away from Timothy. Timmy was given a spear. He wouldn't shut up until they gave him something, and they wouldn't let Billy knock him out.

Joseph had his ax and his mother's pendant. He wasn't sure both would work against this Dzoavits, but he only needed one.

"What time you got kid?" William asked.

He'd hardened. He was full of that rage again.

"Almost two," Timmy said.

DAY 5: 2 PM

TWENTY

The Best Laid Plans

The fires had grown quickly. They spread up the mountains, but not down them. The winds pushed them away from the town itself. Away from the high school.

The smoke was cleared for the most part. Strong gales had pushed them further south, and the sun was out again, so the party felt safe going outside.

"Do you want to drop us off at the high school?" Rich asked Ellis.

"I can't believe you're going through with this," he said.

"You can take the car after," Pops said. "The shadows are mostly gone, and you can probably get out if you want to. I don't know about the traffic or whether the road is passable, but it might be a few days before anyone comes this way."

The Englishman considered this. Sleeping in that room, in that building, for days wasn't appealing. And if he was offering his car, that was a bonus. He'd given a noble reason for coming here and an even nobler one for staying, but the truth was he'd come to Round Valley to buy drugs when he lost his friends, and he was stuck here. Until now.

"Alright," Ellis agreed. "But after I take you there, I'm gone."

They all nodded at him, and he couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever seen a more ridiculous group of people.

(...)

"You can drop us here," Bill said. "We'll walk the rest of the way."

They were a block from the school, next to a row of houses that were once owned by the teachers of the school itself. The educators used to live next to the school. It was quaint and showed the strength of the community. That was long ago.

"We don't know where they are in there," Pops said. "Everybody stay close and keep your head on a swivel."

They exited the car. It was silent, but the air hummed with anxiety and anticipation. A dark shadow fell over them, and they were bathed in pink.

"Fuck," Ellis said, and he put the car in reverse, trying to catch up to the sunlight.

A pair of golden eyed tweakers appeared behind the car twenty feet before he broke the line of sunlight and made it to safety. One of them was Laurie. He hit the brakes.

"Come on, Ellis," she said. "We can finish what we started."

She grinned and giant, spiny teeth jutted and clambered from her mouth.

He put the car in drive and floored it. Someone jumped on the roof, and holes were dug in it right before he ran over something and blew through a stop sign, crashing the car into a ditch in front of him where the road ended.

(...)

Pops had barely stretched after getting out and standing, when he heard the car speed off and come to a screeching halt. Then someone pushed him and he went into a bush.

(...)

Bill was checking his gun when Ellis laid on the brakes, and he heard a rustling and saw a flash of movement from his left. He pushed Pops out of the way right as a goldy swooped in and slashed at him. He was able to grab it while it was thrown off balance, and he shove it away from them. Someone started shooting, but not at the one he'd pushed. That one got ran over, and its head got crushed by Pops's car as it flew by and crashed.

(...)

Rich barely had time to react. She was about to put her weapon away when the Englishman floored it. Her body shifted instinctively, and she was at the ready. There was a flash to her right and she shot. It was a direct hit to the neck, and the other incoming silhouettes stalled. She saw Bill shove one into the road, and while it was immobilized, it got squished by the old beater as it zoomed by.

(...)

Joss was between Billy and Rachel, and he held onto Timothy as the action unfolded around them.

Laurie and the other one were running after Ellis. The goldy she was with leaped onto the car and dug claws into the roof but grabbed at its head when Rich hit her mark. All of the goldies stopped.

Joseph ran after the car when it wrecked. It was only a dozen feet away. The goldy on the roof had been thrown a few yards from the Oldsmobile. Its arm had been ripped off. It was struggling to get to its feet when Joss cut its head off. The boy briefly checked on Ellis. He seemed fine. And he ran to rejoin the group.

Laurie disappeared, and the other dark figures receded as the smoke and clouds cleared briefly. Timmy helped Pops up, and the five of them checked their equipment and made sure they were safe.

Ellis came trotting up.

"One thing we should've asked before coming out here," Rich said. "And it's kind of freaking important. How many of these bitches are there?"

"How many people were at the party last night?" Billy asked.

"A lot," she said.

"Should we get inside?" Timmy asked.

"That's what they want," Joseph said. "They're trying to scare us."

"Well, it's bloody well working!" Ellis shrieked.

"Shut up," Bill said. "Let's get to the gym. It's as good a place as any to get in the school, and it's open and spacious inside. Less chance of a surprise attack."

"This was supposed to be our surprise attack," Pops said.

They stayed in a tight group, moving back-to-back and ensuring they stayed in the sunlight. Ellis kept making the same mistake as Jeremy and Laurie, he was giving in to the fear.

It's not real, he thought, as so many had before.

In a natural disaster, his attitude would be called normalcy bias. That's the fancy term for when people see danger, and know danger's coming, but they refuse to believe it. It's the reason disaster movies exist, and why the citizens of Pompeii stood around and watched as their volcano erupted and killed them instead of running away. They didn't want to believe it was happening, so, to them, it wasn't. That didn't stop the volcano, and it wouldn't help Ellis, either.

They made it to the gymnasium that was only a few hundred feet away and got in through one of the back doors. It was empty and they checked all the nooks and crannies to make sure they were alone.

"Shit," Billy said. "There could be hundreds of them, and we aren't doing much against them. How many rounds do we still have?"

"I only spent one," Rich said.

Her shot had been mostly luck, and she knew that, and she was okay with that. Hers was a swift reaction to the incoming danger, and the 40-caliber bullet blew through where the spine should have been, and it sheered the goldy's head right off. She'd been to the range enough to have the Glock feel like it was second nature in her hands, and she was, as has been said, a rancher's daughter. Her daddy would've been mighty proud to see his little girl kicking ass. Or that's what she was trying to convince herself of. In truth, he would've been as scared as everyone else was.

"We've got a lot, but it ain't enough," Billy said.

"We just need to kill the main one," Joss said. "We have to find Dzoavits and end this now."

"Are we okay in here?" Ellis asked.

"Not for long," Timmy said. "Two hours to sundown."

DAY 5: 3 PM

TWENTY-ONE

Of Mice and Men

"Is time moving funny?" Tim asked. "Because it doesn't take an hour to get here from the lodge."

"It's probably shock," Billy said. "It makes everything in your head fuzzy."

"It's been that way for a few days," Pops said. "It feels like time is slipping."

"It has to have something to do with them getting into our heads," Joseph said. "They're playing with what we see and hear. There's something about it, and I've got some ideas, but every time I've almost got it figured out, it fades away."

"Who is that kid?" Rich asked Bill.

"That's my Grandson," Pops said. "And he's got the touch, as much as I hate saying that. I never believed in that mumbo jumbo, but I can't go denying it now. It's a different kind of understanding. A preternatural way of knowing."

"We're wasting time," Tim said. "Should we go check the lunchroom?"

"First, he's big, right? Zoodles?" Bill asked.

"It's Zoazits, but, yeah, he could be a pro wrestler," Timmy answered.

"And we're thinking most of these goldies are fast but uncoordinated, but Zoazits won't be," he said.

"Dzoavits," Joss corrected. "Vits. With a v. But yes. He'll be whole."

"I don't know what that means," Billy said. "But if he's bigger, stronger, and faster, and he can fight, then I'm not sure we can win this, kid. We just don't have what we need to get this done. There are too many of them, and if this Dzoavits is better than the other ones, then we don't stand a chance. We've been getting lucky up to this point and look at us."

They were all scraped, bruised, and beaten. Their clothes were filthy and tattered. Bill's face was still swollen. Pops was dressing his elbow and knee. He'd banged himself up when he went into the bush. Rich rubbed her leg. The gash was scabbed over, and Ellis had done a great job of wrapping it for her. The Englishman had changed the bandages on his face twice, and he lamented over the loss of any good looks he might have had. And Joss's hands were bloody and blistered. He and Timothy scratched and shabby, but they'd fared better than the others, so far.

"Hell, if it hadn't been for you," Bill motioned to Joss, "We'd be trying to run stakes through their chests, which would've gotten us killed already."

"It's not just me," Joss said. "There's something else."

They paused.

"I can't speak for everyone," he continued. "It may be me and only me, but it's almost as if someone or something has been helping me out. Guiding me. Guiding each one of us to this. I can't say why I'm so sure about some of this shit. I'm just a kid."

He gazed at them intently. His azure irises burning in the bright gym lights.

"But we can stop it. We have to. We're supposed to!"

Everyone but Ellis believed this.

"So, where the hell is he?" Timmy asked.

"Are you going down that rabbit hole, again?" Ellis muttered.

He wasn't a part of their little group, and he didn't want to be. Unfortunately, the best way to stay alive was to stick with them.

"If we believe Diamond, and we kinda have to at this point, then these goldies, as y'all keep calling them, aren't from here," Pops said. "And our laws and their rules aren't supposed to be mixing. It stands to reason that if they were changed when they entered this realm, then something didn't want them here. They don't belong. And whatever forces keep these matters in check, as unknown as they are, might be giving us a leg up."

"Gods on your side now?" Ellis asked, sarcastically. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Sometimes the simplest solution is the only one you've got," Pops said. "And right now we need to solve this problem in a way that ends with us breathing. I don't know all the variables, none of us do, but we've had help, and we need help. The Shoshone believed that. They called on their spirits and beliefs and somehow kept Dzoavits trapped for centuries. There's a lot I'm missing, but this ain't my area of expertise. Regardless, it's here now, and. I can't say God's helping, but I sure as shit wouldn't turn him down right now."

"We have two hours before the sunlight's gone," Rich said.

"Less," Pops said. "The shadow of the mountains comes on about an hour before the sun goes down and that's about now. We already know they can hide in the shade."

"But they're weaker," Joss said.

"And slower," Bill agreed. "You can tell, but not by much."

They didn't have a plan. Not a real one. What they'd come up with when they were in the Buffalo Room was to find Dzoavits and cut its head off or drag it out before sundown. They decided to use one of the old vampire tropes, and hook it, pull it into the day light, and watch it melt. Their quote, unquote plan was based in stealth.

If they could get in before the smoke got too heavy, and if they could quietly find where it was hiding, then they could ambush Dzoavits. It took less than a second to ruin their best laid plans. They'd been seen and attacked almost instantly, and they weren't sure what that meant for them now. They were also angry for not considering how many goldies there were. How could they not discuss that?

"Whatever we do, we've got to get out of here," Joseph said. "This isn't a home, a place of rest, or sacred in any way. None of the school is, so they don't have to ask to be invited in."

"We're resting, aren't we?" Timmy asked.

They were standing around the indoor basketball courts. The bleachers were the kind that folded in, and they were closed, and the hoops were raised, so they were basically loitering in a huge, open space. There were some chairs locked in the closet, but none around.

"Do you want to bet your life on that definition of the word resting?" Joss asked.

They gathered their stuff and went over their weapons again. Pops nocked an arrow, and they made their way from the courts and the collapsed bleachers to the front of the building where concessions and tickets were sold.

Ellis snuck behind them, making sure if there was danger, he could get away.

They walked out and into the waning daylight. The canopy of the valley had begun to descend, and soon it would be covered completely.

"Should we check the football field?" Timmy asked.

The field was to their left and down a set of stairs as they walked out of the gym. There was a library in front of them and walking around it led to a quad that was flanked by parallel lines of offices and classrooms. This created a long, open area between the schoolhouse structures. There were trees planted around the campus and grassy knolls surrounded the walkways that went up to a black metal gate.

"Why would they be on the bloody field?" Ellis squeaked, as he almost ran into the boy. " Watch where you're going!"

They made it to the opening of the quad. The way the sun shone down, there were plenty of dark recesses and corners to hide in.

"Stay sharp everyone," Bill said, keeping his pistol trained in front of him.

They were walking in an awkward cluster, while Ellis was trying to find the best way to disappear.

One second, they were about to descend into the shaded area of the quad and begin their search. It was all they could do. It was fight or die. And the sun felt good on their skin. The next second everything was darker and tinted in pink.

Joss immediately grabbed Timmy's wrist and pulled up his watch, checking the time. It read 3:42.

Shit! he thought.

He nearly yelled but didn't.

"They'll be close," he whispered to everyone. "We need to get to the library."

The door was only a few yards away.

"What's going on?" Rich asked. "What just happened?"

"Let's get inside right now," Pops said.

"But they don't have to be invited in there, do they?" Timmy asked. "Isn't that what Joss said?"

"It's a gamble," Pops said. "But we're painted into a corner, so we need to move, now."

"Screw it," Bill said.

(...)

Dzoavits was confused. It knew it'd touched them. The amount of power it needed to impose the rule on these feeble insects was staggering, but it lost the connection. They shouldn't know about it, much less be able to break it. There were immense amounts of authority dripping off of them.

Like before, it thought.

And it remembered the savages who'd gotten lucky so long ago. Maybe it wasn't luck. It was weak. It had been weak since it awoke here all those centuries ago. But it was worse now, it had spread itself so thin, and it was difficult to remain in control. This was the way, though. The only way. The last of its true weaknesses would be gone today, and it would make its rightful claim as the Enemy of this realm. While hampered by its limitations, it could still feel that authority, that power that came from them. It radiated as brightly as their sun and carried a solemnity it would and could never divine.

Makes no difference, it thought. *Soon it won't matter*.

It sent what it could, but it couldn't spare many. It was better to take care of this itself, anyway.

One last push, it thought.

(...)

The eyes appeared suddenly. There were four sets of them. Two in front and two behind them. Laurie was leading the rear with a random cowboy this time (he wore the uniform--hat, belt buckle, jeans, and boots), and Ellis scampered over to the group. Rainbow was up front with a new female friend. She was dressed for a party, and Rich vaguely recognized her.

Joss grabbed Timmy's wrist again and checked the time.

"Are you trying to hold my hand?" Tim asked.

"Look," Joss said.

The watch read 3:50.

"They're not really disappearing," Joss said. "Get inside!"

They pushed but before getting anywhere, the party girl was at Rich and grabbing at her throat while bearing her teeth. Their eyes were blazing now, full of dark appetites. Rich shot her in the face twice, and Timmy lunged forward with the spear they'd given him. No one expected him to do anything. All they wanted was for him, and everyone, to survive. But Timmy wasn't one to back down. The blade stabbed her in the chest and slid through her body easily.

They're softer, Joss noticed.

The party girl swiped at Tim, slicing him with the claws her fingers had become. He flew into Ellis, and they were both thrown backwards. Tim had a nasty gash on his side, but it was superficial. He hit his head, though, and that had knocked him unconscious.

Bill aimed behind them and shot at Laurie. The cowboy appeared right next to him, and he didn't have time to stop him. He was too close. He could feel its breath on his skin and its fangs were millimeters away. An arrow hit the cowboy in the base of its skull, and he went down. Laurie, who'd been hit but not hurt, reeled in pain. They all did.

Joss sprinted, leapt over a bush, and came down on the party girl's head with the ax and split it down to her shoulders. Again, the goldies were wounded by the loss of their dead. Bill got to the door and swung it open.

Doesn't anybody lock anything around here? he wondered, as the entrance creaked.

He grabbed Rich and moved her towards the open door. She gripped onto Joss and took him with her. Behind them, Ellis threw Tim's unconscious body off of him and scrambled to his feet. He rushed the library's entrance, tackling Joseph and Rachel into the building, and throwing Bill back and off balance. Pops moved over to Tim, and he wanted to grab him and get somewhere safe, but he couldn't, because in a blink it appeared. The master had arrived.

DAY 5: 4 PM

TWENTY-TWO

This is the Time

The golden glowing eyes were larger than the others', and so was the beast. It was shrouded in some kind of cloak and had long, flowing hair that went down its back.

"Well, hello," it said.

Its voice was deep and distorted, and it didn't carry on the air. It was coming from inside their heads.

Pops grabbed Timmy and picked up his body.

"Bill," he yelled, and he threw the boy to him.

Billy was too far away. There was easily fifteen feet between them, and Timmy was still a person. A smaller person, sure, but a person nonetheless, and he weighed about a hundred pounds. None of that deterred Pops who lifted and flung Timmy like a sack. Bill was able to get in front of the entranceway in time and the boy's body floated farther and with more force than it should have.

Bill caught Tim and they fell into the library.

"Boy's sleeping," Pops said, breathing hard and covered in sweat. "That should be rest enough."

Dzoavits regarded him. His features were obscured by the darkness pooling around him and the brightness of his golden eyes.

"You know of the Rule of Entry?" it asked. "Interesting. Where did you come by this knowledge."

Pops said nothing. He dropped the bow and slung the quiver off his back. His body was shaking, but he was drenched in perspiration. He dropped the hatchet in his belt loop and went for the 32, but it was gone.

"Missing something?" it asked.

"Got all I need," Pops answered, and he patted a small sack he'd retrieved from the trunk of his car before going into D & Z Funeral Home.

"Is that so?" it asked.

Pops said nothing. He walked over to a small patch of grass as Dzoavits was joined by Rain and Laurie.

"Want to have fun with us, old man?" Rainbow asked.

"I can't hear him," Laurie said, and she was shushed by her master.

"Going somewhere?" it asked.

Again, Pops was silent, but he stopped at an old tree, and he undid the small carrying bag he'd fastened to his belt.

"Ignoring others is very rude," Dzoavits said.

"I ain't ignoring ya," Pops said, his breathing still labored. "I'm just gonna get myself settled here."

He groaned and sat down at the base of the oak. He opened the small bag, and he pulled out a blanket. It wasn't wool or heavy cloth. It was cotton, old, and thin. It was the same blanket Pops had been brought home in after he was born, and it was always special to him. He was sitting and because it was so tiny, it only covered some of his upper body when he slung it over his shoulders. The creatures regarded him with curiosity.

"There's no fear," one said.

"He's of no use to us," the other said. "He's..."

"Silence, both of you," Dzoavits demanded.

"There's an old fable in these parts," Pops began. "A story of sorts. It's a legend, I guess, but everything's a legend until it isn't anymore. Anyway, they say the people of our tribes once walked within this world and in the next simultaneously. They believed everything had a soul, and that we could talk to those souls. We could tap into them. It made us unique and feared. It also gave us the ability to see the signs, and to hear the owls."

Dzoavits seemed interested in what the old man had to say.

"The owls call us, you see," Pops said. "When it's our time to go home. They call us. And when they do, we get our blankets, we sit under our tree, and we sing our songs until they take us."

He wiped at his nose.

"I've always chalked all that up to a whole lot of nonsense. There's too much in the real world to marvel at to get bogged down by bullshit. Did you know the people here, in Round Valley, have anomalies in their DNA? It's been shown that they aren't descended from the same line of people as everybody else. As in, they aren't descendants of Adam and Eve like the rest of the world, and that's real. Why spend time on hocus pocus? It's been a lifetime of denying what I could see right in front of me. What I could hear, taste, smell, and feel. But I heard my owl three days ago."

There was a quiver in his voice, and if no one knew any better, they'd think he'd been in a rainstorm or that he'd fallen into a pool because he was sticky with sweat.

"There's no gettin' away from that now. And these are my blankets. My mother planted this tree when I was a youngin'. I remember that day, it was a good one, so I'm guessin' this is my tree, and this...this is my song."

Pops never got to sing. He opened his mouth, and he found his voice, but as he sat under the tree, his head lulled to the side, his last breath escaped, and he slipped away.

(...)

Not too far from the school, perched in a Pacific Pine, a Grey Owl took flight, and swooped down to catch a squirrel. It had a long trip ahead of it, the night was coming quickly, and it was ready to move on, but it needed to eat first.

It caught the Beechey with amazing speed, and it used its considerable wingspan to snatch it from the forest floor and take off immediately after. It clutched the body of the rodent with such force it broke its ribs and back, killing it quickly.

Its destination was far away, so it ate and rested. Soon it would be off, but considering where it was going, it needed some dinner first.

(...)

Joseph was under Rich and Ellis, and they were partially under Bill and Timothy. Rich and Bill both watched the Brit toss Timmy and run for his life, abandoning him there.

Damn coward! Rich thought, and she elbowed him before pushing up.

He rolled off and cursed. Joss was almost up when Bill came flying in and knocked him back over. Tim was in his arms. They were down for a second, but Joss roused when he heard the sound of his grandfather talking.

Everybody's in here, aren't they? he wondered.

He hadn't seen the master appear. He was bottom of the dog pile when it did.

He got up. Bill brushed himself off and stood.

"Ellis, get the first aid kit and check the kid," Bill said.

Ellis cowered and sobbed. Rich was standing, and she walked over to him, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, and dragged him to Timmy's unconscious body. She was livid. She couldn't believe this guy.

"Do your job, asshole," she said. "If anything happens to him, you'll need to run from me next time."

She threw him down, and he sniveled.

Bill went and grabbed the kit from the wall. It was marked with a big red cross on the box, and he threw it at Ellis as he stood next to Joseph and looked out of the windows.

The library was a simple space. It was open and had the traditional rows of books throughout it. It was more sparse than some and it wasn't a well-used area. The students rarely came in here unless they had to, but the entire front of the library was a wall of windows, so they could see out well enough. The sides of the building were brick, with one side facing the gym, and there was a back door that led to a hall and one that went outside and to the football field.

Joseph watched and listened as best he could as Pops spoke with the monster. He didn't seem afraid, and he didn't seem bothered. Billy watched along with Joss.

"Why aren't they doing anything?" Rich asked, joining them.

"I think they're as confused as we are," Billy said.

"It," Joss said, correcting them. "It's all one thing, remember? So, that's not two women and some horrifying linebacker. That's all the same thing."

"They're not trying to get in," Rich said. "Should we worry about that. Do we need to say a prayer or something?"

"I don't know if the prayer would do anything," Joss said. "But Timothy's definitely resting. I don't think he was totally wrong about the gym, either. If the rules really are that simple, then all we need is to be in an enclosed area and be at rest. That must really piss Dzoavits off."

"Why?" Rich asked.

"Because it means that here, in our 'realm' as they call it, we're equals," Joseph answered. "It would be the same as you waking up somewhere that has McDonald's food as people and realizing you've been transformed into a Big Mac. And not only are you a hamburger now, but you have to adhere to the laws of gravity and science that you left behind. It's a lose-lose for it, which is good for us."

He was almost onto something again. There were conclusions forming in his mind, and he wanted to share, but Pops was still outside with that thing. He sat under a tree, said something no one could hear, and then Dzoavits cut his head off.

TWENTY-THREE

Momma Said

"You mother fucker!" Joseph exploded, and Bill and Rich held the boy back.

The monster retrieved the head as Laurie and Rich laughed evilly. Joss was fighting with Billy and Rachel, and he nearly won. He was strong.

"Kid!" Bill yelled. "He was already gone! You saw it!"

"He's right," Rich added. "He's trying to get you to go out there, that's all."

Ellis ignored everything but Tim's wounds. They bled a lot but weren't life threatening or debilitating.

They tussled for a bit, but they finally got Joss to calm down and listen to reason. When the beast put Pops's head down on a picnic table outside, so he was looking in on them with a dead man's gaze, they almost lost him again.

"Please!" Rich begged for the hundredth time.

Timmy coughed, and they used that as a way to distract Joss.

"Come on," Bill said. "Let's check on Timothy. Don't take the bait. Come on."

Joss was calming, but he closed the blinds in front of Pops's face before going with the others to check on Tim.

Ellis had moved to a corner. He was staring at some of the blood on pieces of cloth he was holding. The slashes were made across the boy's midsection, and they were shallow. They appeared to be made more to cause pain, than death. He would have a few nice big scars there, though.

Chicks dig scars, he thought, remembering what Timmy had said, and he berated himself for being so weak.

He always had been. He reflected on his self-loathing and stared into the rust-colored stain, and something reached out and touched him.

(...)

Ellis Avery Smith was a superficial person. He became a nurse because he was successful at university, and it opened up a world of service and drugs and partying. It was also a great way to meet women, especially American women, who were always amiable when they heard the dulcet tones of his English accent. They were suckers for an accent.

He would never remember what he was thinking when it happened. He was in this nightmare situation, and he only wanted to live, and it happened. There was no great weight or a violent crushing hand. He wasn't overcome or injured. Instead, there was light. Only light. So much so that it filled his every molecule, and he was all at once in tune with everything around him, with the universe itself. He was crying. Tears were falling from his face as fast as raindrops.

He understood. For the first time, he understood something. Anything. Everything.

He'd always been a selfish person, but he had purpose now. He knew what he was supposed to do.

(...)

"He's gone," Rich said.

Rainbow and Laurie were crawling on the windows and begging to be let in.

"The big guy, I mean," Richy said. "He left."

"What time is it?" Joseph asked.

Bill glanced at Tim's watch. He was the only one of them who wore one.

"Four twenty," he said.

"Is that a joke?" Rich asked.

"Nope," Billy answered. "That's what it says."

Joss had an idea flicker, and he held onto it.

"They don't mess with time," Joseph said. "They mess with us."

"What do you mean, kid?" Billy asked.

"When they suddenly disappear the way they do, I thought they might be messing with time in some way. We'd talked before about how the days feel like they're moving faster. But when they show up out of nowhere, the same way they did in the quad, the time changed. It was later."

Everyone was silent.

"They get in our heads," he said. "But they can't break the laws here. The laws of physics, for example. If they really moved that fast, fast enough to disappear, there would be a sign. A sound. A gust of air. But there's nothing. So, while they can move faster than us, they aren't moving that fast when they flash in and out. I think it may be able to get in our heads and kind of, I don't know, freeze us."

"If that's the case, then why doesn't it keep us frozen?" Rich asked.

"It can't for some reason," he said. "We're not conscious when it happens. I don't remember anything, do you?"

"No," Richy said.

"When my dad showed up as a goldy, and Pops blew him up with his cross, I thought I saw Pops move lightning fast, but I don't think he did. I think it was in my head, and it was trying to find some way to get me to do what it wanted me to do. To invite it in. And when I was in that state, everything was slowed, and if it can slow the world down enough, then it stops. At least to us."

"That's a lot less scary," Rich said.

And another idea hit Joseph, jolting through his body.

"Fear!" he yelled.

That startled Bill and Rich.

"Diamond said, 'For some it's merely fear,'" Joss recited.

"Do you have a photographic memory?" Billy asked him.

"Doesn't matter," Joseph said. "The amount matters."

"The amount?" Rich asked.

"Some," Joss said.

They were thoroughly baffled.

"For SOME it's merely, fear" the boy expounded. "That means that the bare minimum is fear. The rest are those who are afraid and have that 'little something extra' he mentioned. He left it open-ended, but we have enough information to say everyone it's killed and eaten has been afraid, and Diamond said it was the 'wonderful concoction' in our blood that his master can use, so the fear must change our blood in some way it needs."

"Like how myoglobin changes meat," Ellis said.

There was something different about him, but they couldn't place it.

"Myoglobin's a protein that's released by animals when they're stressed," Ellis said. "If there's too much stress, it makes the meat taste gamey. It's the irony, livery taste of death. And if we can taste it, then maybe it needs a similar reaction. It needs fear to feed. That might be why they didn't feed on..."

He didn't know Pops's real name.

"Right," they said, and they were glad he'd contributed.

He was still a coward and a drain on them, but he'd helped this once.

"Why would that Mr. Diamond tell you that?" Richy asked. "That seems like pretty important information."

"Because it doesn't matter," Joss answered. "We can't control our fear, not completely."

"How is Laurie back?" Ellis asked.

There was definitely something different about him. He wasn't only helping but engaging. No snark. No sarcasm.

"Oh," Joss said, embarrassed. "After I, uh, after I found her, um, body, well, I didn't know what to do, so I left her, and Dzoavits must've found her."

Joss was upset, but Bill and Richy consoled him.

"Why is it here? Like, California?" Rich asked after the kid calmed down. "Of all the places it could go, why here?"

"It's isolated," Ellis said, surprising everyone once more. "If there's any truth in what you've all been theorizing, and this monster has to regenerate or whatever, then it would need somewhere to do that. Somewhere off the map."

"I think so, too, especially with the WiFi," Joss said. "Timmy's phone still worked at the church, and the only way to stop emergency calls is to know they're happening and actively block them, but nothing was stopping the WiFi signals. It had to be because the Goldies didn't know about them. Dzoavits doesn't understand this world. Yeah, it's not from here, okay, we know that, but it also doesn't understand the world we live in now. Compared to the last time it was awake and running around, a lot has changed. And it needed somewhere it recognized, I guess."

His thoughts were coming in waves now.

"But it's also put itself close to bigger cities, and it's got all it needs to get started here. Once it gets going there'll be no stopping it."

"So, what's the play?" Billy asked after a short break.

"We go after it," Joseph said. "But we need to get rid of those two first."

"Any ideas?" Rich asked, and the boy grinned.

(...)

Bill opened the door.

"Time to test these theories," Rich said.

The words had barely left her mouth when Laurie was at the entrance. She pressed her body against the invisible barrier and moaned.

"You're not allowed in," Bill said, and then he and Rich grabbed her.

Laurie's hands were flattened against nothing, and they each gripped a wrist and jerked her forward. As they did, her hands and forearms passed through the entrance, dragging her shoulders and head along with it. The entire movement was an instant jerk and then done, and so was Laurie. Every inch that passed the entrance without permission evaporated into nothing, and the lower half of her body fell to the ground with a *thunk*.

Rainbow fell to her knees and tried to yell out but couldn't. Joseph was there in seconds, and he sliced through her throat in a single swipe.

Ellis watched them leave. He checked on Timothy once more.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I'll make it right."

TWENTY-FOUR

Knock You Out

It was at the football field. They could tell as soon as they stepped outside. They could smell it, and the steam rising from where it was wafted a fog over the already darkening campus.

"This way," Bill said.

Rich and Joseph were right with him.

Ellis stayed back, trailing them.

The scene on the football field was a new point of weirdness for everyone. The field itself was segregated into two sides: one bathing in the last direct sunlight of the day and the other in the shade of the mountains and gymnasium. The building cut a straight-line right down the middle. The master and his friends were on the shaded side, no surprises there, and Dzoavits, itself, was on top of what appeared to be a growing pile of bodies. They were crawling over each other, running over one another like ants while growing upwards. The bodies themselves started to steam as they piled, higher and higher. The golden glowing orbs that were once eyes dimmed and disappeared, and the bodies dripped and transformed into the revoltingly horrendous goo that smelled of death and hot garbage. The goop swirled, and small golden flecks could be seen collecting near the ever-rising monster that was getting bigger by the second.

"What the fuck is that?" Rich said.

They snuck over to the field and stood on the sidelines. The beast was twenty feet away, but it was either ignoring them, or it was too busy to care.

The sludge began to coalesce into a shape. It was amorphous and difficult to see at first because it was a bunch of tawny viscous fluid swirling around itself. The bodies of the goldies continued to melt into the base of the monster as it grew.

An elongated, beak-like head formed over rounded shoulders that had enormous spines jutting out from them. It was still difficult to make out in the dimness, but then it opened its eyes, and two orbs each the size of a kiddie pool shined out and put the events on full display.

The goldies were melting into each other and becoming Dzoavits. They had always been a part of the beast, and now they were returning to their master, but it was using so much power, so much energy.

"It's as big as a sperm whale," Billy said.

"Mr. Diamond said the statue of liberty," Joseph said, in as much awe and horror as everyone else. "It needed mass to rebuild itself."

"And that mass was people," Bill said.

"It was," Joss answered.

"But what the hell's it doing out here, right now?" Richy asked.

Powerful arms formed at the ogre's side and huge hands with equally huge claws formed.

(...)

"Yes," it said. "Yes."

The figure inside the orange slushy was fading as something close to skin began to take shape. It regarded its new fingers and weapons with reverence and glee.

"Must, test," it said, but it didn't say it out loud.

It was a thought, but Joss heard it.

"It's weak," Joseph said. "It's testing something."

Dzoavits reached out an arm towards the fading sunlight.

Direct light, Joss heard in his head. It has to be direct light, and then I can use my rules to change it. I'm sure I'm right. I have to be. Once I've beaten the light, once I've swallowed the sun with my new strength, I will take this world.

Its large claws breached the line of shade, and they reacted to the sun. Dzoavits waled in Joss's mind.

"It's being hurt," he said.

"Good," Billy said. "But why is it doing that? The sunlight kills it."

(...)

Joss listened. He focused and he tried to hear it better.

If it can get in my head, that means I must already be in its head, he thought. I'm living in there rent free. And it's weak now. I can use that. If only I can...

Joseph used his mind's eye to stare into the void. He concentrated on what he wanted to know. He dedicated every ounce of himself to that and only that, and he heard it.

"He has to get into the sunlight before his body takes its final form," he said. "Dzoavits power isn't its strength, speed, or size. It's that it can change itself. When it's using this power, it absorbs surrounding energies and alters them. That's how it's going to become sunproof. Pops told us how the ogre in the stories was covered in boulders and trees and moss, but that must be because of what it was around when it tried this before. This is when it's at its weakest, right before it's at its strongest."

The gargantuan hand bubbled in the light, and it smoldered as the goo ignited and burned away, revealing a bloodred, scaled hide and ebony blades for nails beneath the boiling slurry.

Dzoavits pulled its hand back to it, and it marveled at the hardened hide on its fingers. The sun's rays had burned away its weakness. It had overcome. The beast roared in triumph.

It didn't have feet yet, that was good for the people left. Two steps and it would be completely covered in light, and its whole body would be as deadly as its hand. It wouldn't be long now, though. It nearly had full legs. And its shape--it's real shape--was finally revealed.

"It's a giant fucking mole," Billy said. "I mean, it's a demon, sure, but look at the snout and the claws. It doesn't have a star-nose, but it looks like a huge mole straight from the sixth ring of Hell."

Rich thought it was colossal and ugly and frightening, but she didn't see a mole. To her it was more like a ferocious Pangolin with terrifying golden eyes and teeth as big as spears.

"What do we do?" she asked.

Joseph wasn't paying attention to them. He was concentrating again. He wasn't trying to hear it this time, and he wasn't thinking about it. He was watching Ellis, who was walking out from behind them and onto the field, moving towards Dzoavits.

He had tears flowing down his cheeks, his mouth was full of spit, and his nose was running. He looked so scared, and he was. If he'd had anything in his bladder or anywhere else, he would've voided it at that instant, but he didn't. He looked at Joseph as he passed. He admired the boy, didn't he? He wanted to be half as heroic or good as he was. He grabbed something from inside his jacket pocket then.

"What's he up to?" Joseph asked, but they didn't seem to hear him.

(...)

No one noticed Ellis. He'd stayed out of sight, and he watched along with the rest. When the monster pulled its hand back and it was whole and unhurt by the sun, he knew it was time.

He walked out from where he was hiding, and he moved past the others. He paced slowly but purposefully straight towards Dzoavits. This was exactly where he was supposed to be, and exactly what he was supposed to do. This was his job, and it was the only thing that matter.

But still, he stopped for a second and turned to the boy. He was between the three group members and the daemon, but he wanted to say this before it was too late.

"I'm not a brave man," he said, and his face twisted in an overwhelming fit of sadness and emotion before he turned and ran at the ogre.

(...)

It was right! It would work! Soon it would be a destroyer with no rival in a realm where it had no limitations.

Its feet finished forming as the last goldy was absorbed into the giant body. It marveled at being its full size again. Something jumped on it as it moved. It looked down and almost wanted to laugh. One of the insects was trying to stop him.

How quaint, it thought, and then its leg was blown off, and it fell, tumbling away from the light.

(...)

Whatever this Zoodles was, it stank. The closer Ellis got, the worse it was. He was closing in on the foot, but he wasn't quite sure what to do yet, so he did the one thing he could think of. He jumped on it and wrapped his arms and legs around it.

No one paid attention to Ellis. It had been that way his whole life. That was one of the reasons he'd come to the states. People paid attention to the accent, and that was enough. But when it was him and only him (and he was silent), it was easy for him to disappear. He was quiet and good about keeping to himself when he wanted to.

When he found the jacket he was wearing, Bill didn't even notice it was the same light coat he'd wrapped the Semtex in before he tried to secret that away in a cabinet. Not a great hiding place. Nobody seemed to notice the overpoweringly unnatural, plastic scent that wafted from the inside of the coat, and it was a miracle in and of itself that Ellis hadn't exploded on a hundred occasions since he'd put it on. The car accident alone should have been it for him. But he was riding on the foot of a daemon right now, and that made it exactly what he needed. He held up a handful of grey clay material, and he retrieved a butane lighter from his pocket. It reminded him of why he'd come here, why he'd truly come here, to begin with. It was his lucky lighter. The one he used when he could score enough crystal to make the next few weeks worthwhile. He hadn't smoked in a bit, and it didn't seem like he'd ever get to again. He lifted the lighter, sparked it, and held the Semtex directly in its flame.

I hope this won't hurt, he thought, and then he was blown apart.

The remaining plastic explosives in the jacket went up as soon as Ellis did.

It didn't hurt. It was over too fast to hurt.

TWENTY-FIVE

Overtime

The blast was huge. It blew off Dzoavits's leg and ripped through its body, felling it and leaving it as a slowly dissolving mess on the field. The hardened hand fell to the ground as the rest of the body went out with a *splooosh!* And rained down around them.

Joss, Bill, and Rich were all thrown back. If they had been closer, the shockwave would've seriously injured or killed them, but they got knocked down and had gross smelling ooze splattered all over them.

Rich's head was spinning, and Bill was knocked momentarily unconscious, but Joss was up as soon as he could find his feet and grab his ax, and he was running.

(...)

What happened? it wondered. *How can this be? What was that?*

Who kept interfering with its plans! It would find them. It would find and kill them! It would kill them all! But first, it needed to get away. It only had one chance to get this right, and it was going so well at first. Everything worked to plan. The fire was a misstep, but everything else was fine. It had the town. It had the bodies it needed. It had eaten hundreds of people, but then these insects...

Its heart wasn't fully whole. It lost pieces in the fight, but that was a risk it had to take. And now it needed to flee. It needed to get away. It didn't have its form, so it couldn't use its Rule of Changing. That meant the sunlight was still deadly to it. But the tree line wasn't far, and if it hurried, then it could disappear.

The heart of a Zotiel, the heart of Dzoavits, was the origin of its power, and it collected every piece of itself it could from the mass that was bleeding all over the football field and disappearing in the sun. As soon as it retrieved the last piece, it could run. And it was almost there before the ax blade landed in its chest.

(...)

It's not dead, Joss thought.

That was all he could think. He ran around the slush, trying to make his way to where he thought the master's body might have landed. There were small golden, glowing flecks shooting through the ooze, into and through the melting corpse, and he decided to follow those. He sprang up on the hardened hand and made his way up to the chest. He could see the body of the master under the surface of the skin, so he moved over to it. It was difficult to walk, because the harder parts of the upper body were evaporating. It took a few minutes for the goldies to disappear, and this one would take longer, but it was still getting gooey.

The master wasn't in the center of its chest, it was higher, closer to where Diamond blew smoke out of its neck. Joss planted his feet, aimed, and came down hard with the ax.

(...)

Dzoavits erupted in anger and with power. It shot twenty feet into the air and threw Joss off the giant body and to the ground.

It landed next to the boy, who would have been in the sunlight ten minutes ago, but who was safely behind the wall of shade now.

This was it. It was over.

(...)

Bill roused awake. Rich was on her knees.

"What. The. Hell." she said.

"Fucking Brits," he laughed, and he glanced around. "Where's Joss."

(...)

Joseph was on a football field. His head hurt and he was light-headed. He could see the eyes, though. The golden glowing orbs of hunger and hate. Its mouth opened abnormally wide, and long, spiny teeth pierced through its cheeks and chin.

Joseph didn't have his ax. He was slow and weak, and he couldn't fight back. He could feel the fear in him, but he refused to give into it. He still had his wits. At least he had that. He also still had his mom's necklace.

He took the Saint Christopher pendant and threw it as best he could at Dzoavits. He was aiming for the mouth. He wanted it to go down its throat and then blow its head off. He hit its eye, instead, and it blew back as if a grenade exploded in its face.

Joss got up, and he saw his ax on the ground in the goop. He ran to retrieve it, but as he lifted the handle, glowing eyes suddenly appeared behind him.

(...)

Timmy walked onto the field. Something loud had woken him in the library and he'd wandered out, and while he'd seem some strange stuff today, this took the cake. He didn't see Pops's head or body, thankfully, but he did see the kaiju on the football field. Someone had killed it already, but then there was a loud *boom*, and a body flew into the air and landed on the other side of the arm. The shadow on the field grew longer and while the smoke had been blown further south earlier, it was returning now. He saw Joseph stand, and he was happy to see something he understood. He was making his way over to Joss when Joseph stopped. It was as if someone had hit a pause button on him as he was bending down to get something. The wrestler-sized master came walking forward then. His hand was out, and he was concentrating his attention on the boy. Timmy wasn't about to waste a second. He ran over, making sure not to be seen or heard, not that they would've noticed him. Joss was frozen and Dzoavits was too focused.

The beast got closer to his friend, and he got a little closer to the beast.

(...)

It had been a bad day, but it was starting to look up. Dzoavits had the boy, and it wouldn't release him. it didn't need the fear. This one had the touch of this realm's spirits. That would be enough. More than enough.

"I'm going to enjoy this," it said, and then it felt holes rip open through it as bullets flew through its body.

(...)

Timmy emptied the 32 he'd stolen from Pops into the master.

(...)

Joseph had no time. The moment he came out of his trance, he felt it behind him, and he spun around and swiped at its neck.

(...)

Dzoavits never got to see who'd shot it. When its focus dwindled, it accidentally let Joss slip, and now it watched as the last images of him and this realm flashed in its dead golden globes.

(...)

Rich and Billy came running around the now actively dissolving ogre. They'd heard gunshots and went to try and help. What they saw was Joseph walk over to a headless body and shove his hand down and into its cavity and then rip out a grapefruit-sized black organ leaking golden liquid.

He walked to where the shade became the last light of day, and he shoved the heart into it. Flames shot out but didn't burn the boy as the heart was rendered to ash under the watchful light of our planet.

The moment it was gone, the rest of its body faded. The stink lingered.

"Who is this kid?" Rich asked.

"That's Joseph!" Timmy yelled. "We've been with you guys for two days. Did you hit your head or something?"

They all shared a laugh then and celebrated their victory. Rich hugged William, and he felt that stir again. They all shared a group hug, and they were smiling and happy. They'd won.

Joss saw a small glimmer of light on the ground, and he went to get his mom's necklace. He was glad he didn't lose it.

"Where's Pops and the British dude?" Timmy asked.

"Oh, Pops!" Billy said. "I'm gonna go--"

And he trotted off to the gym, looking for something to wrap the body in.

Joseph filled Timmy in on what happened, and the boys shared a hug when he got to Pops. Joss sobbed.

Bill was back in a few minutes.

"I found some tarps," he said. "Does this place have cameras?"

"Not working ones," Timmy said. "Why?"

"Well, if there are cameras, then they'll have caught everything, and we can leave things as they are with the video to show we didn't do any of this. But if they find a body on a table that's going to throw up some red flags. I doubt there's a lot left of Ellis, and there's no telling what they'll make out of that giant monster hand, but our fingerprints and DNA are everywhere, and the rest of this asshole is dissolving, so we're looking like the fall guy, here."

"We need to give him a real burial," Joseph said. "Cameras or not."

"How the hell are we getting out of here?" Rich asked.

"We're going to steal a car," Billy said. "But we should hurry. It's almost dark."

The adults giggled. The kids didn't get what was so funny.

DAY 6: Turn the Light Back On

TWENTY-SIX

New Beginnings

They didn't steal a car at first. They got Pops's car out of the ditch, and that got them back to his cabin. The fires had reached the foothills above his property but weren't on it yet. Bill and Joseph found some flashlights and buried Pops in his back yard under an old oak. With both of them, it didn't take long to get the work finished. They covered him and said their goodbyes. The old man's cross necklace joined the Saint Christopher pendant around Joss's neck. The boy cried and everyone joined him.

They made it back to the part of Covelo Road where a long line of cars sat empty. Bill parked the old beater in the same shoulder Rich had used to turn around in. When they were all out, he put it in neutral, and they pushed it off the side of the cliff before walking up the road. No chills this time. No flickering glimpses of gold. They used the same flashlights they'd found in Pops's shed and picked the cleanest vehicle they could find and drove it the rest of the way out.

Ellis's favorite song about logs in Covelo played on the radio.

"How is the radio station still broadcasting?" Richy asked.

"It's on autopilot," Tim said. "They do that every time something happens"

"I don't get this song," Joseph said. "How could you have the last log around here?"

Rich smiled to herself and nudged Billy.

"It's a metaphor, kid," Bill said, and he considered explaining it but didn't. "You'll get it one day."

Timothy patted Joseph and leaned in to whisper something in his ear.

"Oh," Joss said.

"He gets it," Tim said, not certain if his friend actually understood or not.

(...)

Timmy hugged his mother when they made it to Willits. It was nearly nine at night when they reached the small motel she was staying in. She was thrown into fits when she saw the state of them. They'd stopped, bought new clothes, and tried to clean up, but they were still dirty and disheveled. Bill and Rachel came up with a good enough excuse about how Billy's car broke down, and then having some trouble getting a new ride, having a few accidents here and there, but ultimately being okay. There were hundreds of questions, but they didn't stick around long enough to answer all of them.

"Keep in touch, will ya?" Joss said.

"Get another phone, and I will," Timothy said.

They smiled and bumped fists.

"See you around," Joseph said.

"You, too," Timmy said back.

Tim went into the room and showered, put some cream on his scratches and got dressed in some fresh clothes, and then he laid in one of the queen beds. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

(...)

The fat man-looking thing had never walked so far in its life. To think! It was forced to trudge from the funeral home and walk nearly out of the valley altogether before it found the line of cars.

Finally, Mr. Diamond thought. *I'm not made for this.*

Its neck was sore, and it had a headache. Well, if the part of its body that appeared to be its head were, in fact, a head, then it would have had a headache. As it was, it had been punished by having one of its brains explode, ruining its suit and the fresh shave-job it'd finished that morning. That hurt, and it took a lot of power to put itself back together again, minus one brain, but it managed, and those darling children did exactly what it wanted. It was free now, at least for a while. And it hadn't lied. It hadn't told whole truths, but that was fine. It followed the rules, mostly. Sure, it was a stretch to believe it could "only consume the power given by its master," as it had said, or that half of the other nonsensical claims that it made were factual, but who cared? They would never know how much it had lost through its many punishments for talking to them (three hearts, four pancreases, a liver, lungs, stomachs, and a brain), but it was worth it. Just like it was the last time, and it was good at taking punishment. That was its rule. It was also good at hiding pain and suffering when it needed to. It needed to use misdirection to keep those children from getting too close, and that boy was keen. It would have to keep an eye out for him.

An eye out, it thought, amused by the notion.

The shimmer the daemons created would take care of the rest of the humans. It always did. The shimmer had hidden daemon-kind for eons, and it would continue to hide them. Along with paralyzing fear, it was their greatest blessing. Humans were naturally mistrusting pests, and that was helpful, too. They didn't want to believe, so it was easy to convince them of anything, or to dissuade them of anything, if necessary.

Humans were indifferent and heartless. They would blame each other. They always did, and nothing kept the Enemy hidden better than apathy and disbelief.

Keep fighting amongst yourselves, it thought.

Diamond was ready to put some of its own plans into motion. Power was so simple to attain in this world. It could be bought here, and money was easy. It made people easy targets, easy prey.

I wonder what the Bay Area is like, it wondered, and it grinned as widely as it could, showing ugly nubs that would grow into a saw-toothed smirk.

(...)

Rich took Joseph and Bill to her apartment. Billy wanted to get a hotel, but she insisted.

Her place was small, but it was cozy and she liked it. They all stank and looked homeless. Richy was pissed her favorite pants and shirt got ruined, but it could be a lot worse. She was scraped up, sliced, and bruised, but she was alive. Billy had his debit card in his front pocket, and they'd bought more clothes to change into after they got properly cleaned. They'd left everything they owned behind when they drove out, not that there was a whole lot to leave. And after burying Pops, they just wanted to go. They got showered and changed. Every one of them wept in the shower, but they wouldn't admit that to each other. Bill paid for some pizza and wings. They ate too much, and then they passed out. William on the couch, Joseph in a chair, and Rachel in her bed.

(...)

"What's the damage?" Rich asked.

"Looks like the town's going to be okay," Billy said.

They'd gone into town and picked up a few new phones earlier in the day and had been glued to the news since.

"Did anyone stay?" she asked.

"I'm sure a few did," Billy said, reading an article about the fire. "There's always a few who don't evacuate."

The blaze continued to rage long after they'd escaped, and the state was calling in more firefighters to try and stop it. The land in the mountains was fertile, but also volatile. It was common to hear the tribesmen and women complaining about how their water was taken and moved to richer communities further south. The fact that the fires got worse every year in the valley, while the golf courses and carwashes a few counties lower on the map run pricing specials year round and expand their greenways might not be the best example of why they were so incensed, but it's not the worst.

"Do we need to worry about, you know, the cops and stuff?" she asked.

"I don't think so," he said. "They'll see that claw on the football field. That will cause a ruckus, but they'll probably blame it on vandalism, and any missing people they'll blame on the fires."

"What about me?" Joseph asked.

"We can get you set up with the state," Billy said. "They can find you a guardian, a family member or friend. You still got your grandad's sisters, the aunts. That's who owned the ranch you were staying in."

Joss stared at him with those eyes.

Bill sighed.

"Or you can come with me," he said. "And we'll figure something out."

(...)

Bill was right. A few days after they contained the fires, the news came out, and the county's finest chalked every missing person up to the fire. Sheriff Carl didn't investigate one disappearance any further, not even Frank's. As far as he was concerned, the fire had done his job for him. There was a certainty about that, an absolute. It was unnaturally strong, and it wouldn't let him think anything else. Sure, there were some jokesters who wanted to scare everybody with some stunts, but this was simple and clean. Case closed. Even Bert and Ernest were lumped into the mix. Timmy wanted to tell his aunt that he'd gotten those bastards. He'd gotten revenge. But he never did. It was better to leave some doors closed.

Rich got a new Jeep. It took her a few days, but she was finally mobile again. It was easier than she thought. She'd basically blown her old one up by accident, but the authorities blamed the start of the fires on an illegal marijuana farm. That party Rich went to was at that farm, and the entire area burned to the ground. Thankfully, she had great insurance. Another point of pride for her father.

As for her, she'd decided to hit the road for a bit.

They all had.

(...)

"Still out there?" Bill asked. "You mean more of them?"

"This was an accident," Joseph said. "They 'woke' up here, and if Dzoavits was real, then--"

"There's more of them out there," Rich said.

Their minds and bodies were awash with grief as the shock of the past few days faded, and they were trying to heal and overcome. None of them had nightmares. And only one of them dreamed. Billy finally remembered his first nocturnal ejaculation, and he stained his new briefs. He wasn't surprised that it was about Rachel, but he was alarmed by how vivid it had been. For her part, Rich snored loudly and dreamed of nothing.

When they woke, Joss was anxious. He'd had another dream.

"I think Mr. Diamond lied," he said.

"No shit," Rich said, imitating Timmy.

"Yeah, well, if there is someone or something out there that's been helping us," Joss said, "then it stands to reason that there's something against us, too."

"The Enemy," Billy said, absently--the words flowing out on their own.

"Yeah," Joss agreed. "Look, if you guys can feel what I feel, even if only a little, then please tell me. If not, then maybe I should go talk to someone and get some help, because I'm going crazy."

Richy walked over to the boy.

"Not crazy," she said, and she placed a hand on his.

"Fuck," Bill said, and he went over and put his hand on Rich's.

(...)

The two of them had talked--Rachel and William--and he'd been honest with her. It was awkward, and it wasn't the conversation Rich thought they were going to have. She wasn't imagining much talking at all, in fact, but then he'd told her he was a virgin, and sex was instantly out of the question. She had a lot running through her head.

That's too much, she thought.

The only person he's ever had a crush on? she wondered. *That's a lot of pressure.*

And no experience. None.

That last bit wasn't so bad. There was some safety in inexperience, and a devilish part of her had ideas of teaching him what she liked, which could be nice. And while she never said it, she believed Bill's "condition," as he'd called it, probably saved his life. Rainbow was tall, she had a pretty face, and she had the nicest body this side of Hollywood. There was no way he would've turned her down at his window otherwise. She also never told him how silly she thought all his embarrassment had been.

So what? she thought. *Why does he talk about this like he's so ashamed?*

She wasn't one to dwell on others' personal matters or their opinions of themselves, and she wasn't going to try and give advice, but he was acting as if this were the 90's, or some movie from the 90's. His views and attitudes were a little outdated. But he was raised up in the mountains, in a more conservative environment, and he was a decade older than her. That didn't bother her, though. Her father was sixteen years older than her mom, and Billy had a baby face and big arms--two things she melted over. Plus, if he wasn't attracted to Rain, and if they were to ever get serious, then at least she wouldn't have to worry about him cheating on her.

That's still a lot of pressure, she thought.

Billy hadn't said much after he told her about his crush, if it was a crush at all. Yes, he felt something, but it was new, so he couldn't be sure this was really attraction, or if they'd just been through a harrowing situation and the stress of that created a bond that presented itself as affection. Again, he'd spent a lot of time in therapy. What he expected was rejection, and he was okay with that. As okay as he could be. It hurt in a way he wasn't used to, and the fear he had running through his veins was different, too. It wasn't the same as fearing for his life, but it was no less affecting

He was caught in a moment of quiet contemplation. He was proud of himself for getting it out there and being open and truthful, but it still sucked. He didn't see Rich lean in. He didn't see her get as close as she had. And before he could react, she kissed his cheek.

"Okay, cowboy," she said. "We'll take this real slow."

If it's a stress reaction, it's a strong one, he thought, trying to secretly adjust his position as another new feeling started to rise.

Overall, he was okay with taking it slow, but he certainly wasn't expecting it. They sat and talked and laughed as the awkwardness faded.

(...)

Now they were in her living room and making plans to set off together and go hunting more of those creatures. It was probably stupid to go looking for trouble, but when was doing nothing ever the smart thing to do?

Billy had his retirement. Rich was a rancher's daughter and had her own trust fund. And Joseph was something else, altogether. They weren't sure what, but they were going to find out.

"Here," Joseph said, handing Billy Pops's cross. "It doesn't need to be a cross, it can be any religious symbol, really, but we know this works."

"Thank you," Bill said, seriously, and he patted the boy's shoulder.

Rich went and got a necklace her sister had given her. It was a leather healing pouch from one of the tribes up north, and it was the most spiritual item she owned. The tribespeople took fresh leather and bound sacred flowers and medicines into a small, enclosed purse and then sealed it with natural waxes and lacquers. They hung the pouches from beaded necklaces and prayed over every bead in them. She put it on. She also grabbed the cross she was gifted at her Christening. Better to be safe than sorry.

"We can test out what works if we run into any more of them," Bill said, and a thought occurred to him then. "But where are we going, exactly?"

"Diamond mentioned the desert," Joss said. "And I looked up the Shoshone Dzoavits legends, and I found where they were set. We could start there."

"Where is it?" Rich asked.

"It's in Death Valley at a place called the Devil's Hole," the boy answered.

"Fuck," Billy said, and not for the last time.

26

Sudden Death

The night before their little talk, and back on the football field of Round Valley High School, Dzoavits was finally able to take a shape.

It couldn't believe this shit.

It's not possible! it thought. *Not possible!*

What bad luck. Again! And this time they burned its heart! Its heart! It needed that!

It didn't need all of it. Not to live. It only needed a piece to survive, but they didn't know that, and what they didn't know wouldn't hurt it.

The last golden fleck of heart rushing to return to its master was thrown into the air by a giant explosion. It was robbed of its chance to be whole again. At the time, it was the worst possible outcome for it.

But then, of all the places it could have fallen, it managed to land in what used to be Ellis's chest cavity. There wasn't much left. The arms, legs, and head were gone, but there was enough to eat.

The Zotiel clan's members could assume many forms, but at their core, they were pieces of daemon flesh (a dark, otherworldly material) and teeth. So, it ate. It was full dark soon, and it was able to create a shape. It used the appearance of the people it ate usually, but this was its new principal body, and it would start off small. That was okay. Over time it could haunt these mountains and regain its power. It took an infuriating amount of time to regenerate its heart's mass, but it was patient.

(...)

An owl swooped down and gripped Dzoavits in its talons so quickly it didn't know what was happening. The owl squeezed and ripped through the daemon's newly made skin before it landed on a nearby branch, pinning Dzoavits to it, and tearing its head off.

EPILOGUE: You've Got Us Feeling Alright

"Hello," Timmy said.

"Hey, Tim," a voice said.

Timothy jumped up.

"Joss! Is that you!"

"Yeah," he said. "Can you hear me okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine," Tim answered. "But what's up?"

He listened intently for a minute, and he felt his blood pressure rise with each word. Joseph didn't talk for long, but he didn't have to. Timothy's pulse hastened and he was breathing heavily.

"Fuck," Tim replied, and he dropped the cell.