

ASHWOOD

ACT FIVE

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Alan Russell

I awoke in the hallway of my middle school, as bullet-ridden and wartorn as the last time I'd walked its halls. Outside the thick glass windows, there was nothing but sheer and utter darkness, enfolding the building like a weighted blanket. I walked forward nervously, my steps echoing across the cracked linoleum. Up ahead, I could see a sliver of light emerging from a doorway almost at the end of the hall. The door was halfway closed, the firm wood the only one not punctured by bullets. I made my way towards it, cautiously resting my hand on the smooth wooden surface.

Inside, the walls were cloaked in the same writhing mire of inky shadow that had infested my home and encircled Heather's soul. Inside, at a pristine wooden desk, sat the man in the tweed suit.

"Why hello there."

His voice was like a hymn sung backward. His hat sat low on his brow, casting his face in perpetual half-darkness, as if even the light refused to touch him fully.

I didn't speak. Words felt dangerous here.

"You're walkin' awful careful for someone who's dreamin'."

I stepped forward, the smoky curtains curling like burning film as the sound of my shoes echoed across the red tile. "What are you?"

"Names don't matter much. Not here, anyways. But you've known me since you were young. Why, I'm sure you remember." He drawled, casually tilting his head to the side.

"You were there at my house."

He nodded gently, like a teacher pleased a student had been paying attention. *"And at the grove. And in the woods. And behind Sheriff Wilkes on every Sunday he ever called himself righteous."*

The man chuckled, the sound reverberating oddly, like a tape played backwards.

"Good ol' Wilkes," he said. *"That old buzzard had God in his mouth and rot in his belly. Told you stories, didn't he? Bible stories. The kind that got your little heart pumping. Men killing men in the name of heaven. Samson and his jawbone. David and his sling. Jael and her tent peg. Oh, the Bible's full of blood."*

"You corrupted him."

"I? No, no, my dear boy. I very much doubt he ever even saw me. His unusual bloodlust drove him into a feeding frenzy he couldn't tear his eyes from if he tried."

His teeth gleamed like blown glass.

"No, Wilkes didn't fall," he said. *"He jumped. And he liked the feeling of the wind."*

I felt my pulse hammering in my throat.

He leaned forward. *"But oh, how your mother cradled you as she fell."*

His expression softened behind the brim of his hat, like a parent comforting a crying child.

"She did love you, Alan," he said. *"More than anything. Even more than she feared me."*

I shook my head.

"She only did what she thought was right, paid what she thought she owed."

"She killed two boys."

"No, she saved one." He whispered, eyes gleaming. *"Or at least, she tried to. I'm afraid our deal still stands."*

My stomach turned and the world seemed to ripple at the edges as he rose from the chair, his tall lanky frame hinged on joints that bent the wrong way. He moved towards me like a projection running one frame too slow.

"Free will, Alan," he said gently, *"is a crown that weighs more than most heads can carry. Your father wore it like armor. Your mother wore it like chains. And you—"* He stopped, inches from my face. *"Well, you just don't know what to do with it."*

The lights faded red above us, the room dimming around me and I woke up gasping with Heather's hand on my chest, her head nuzzled into me, fast asleep. I laid there for a moment and wrapped my arms around her, listening to the birds chirp outside our tent as the world woke up around me.

Mac Peterson

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that I was hungry. Not the normal slow, creeping sensation that settled in the pit of your stomach when you skipped breakfast. No, this was sharp and insistent, curling deep in my gut like something gnawing at my insides.

I groaned and rolled over in my sleeping bag, the fabric shielding me from the cold bite of the morning air. The tent rustled as I shifted and fumbled around in the dim light for one of the packs of rations we had stashed in the back of the Chevy.

Outside, the world was still half-asleep, the sky barely tinged with the gold of early morning as mist clung to the trees like a veil. I unzipped the tent, the fabric cold beneath my fingers, and stepped out, my boots crunching against the frosty earth.

Alan was already up, standing by the edge of the ridge, his back to me, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket as he looked out at the forest below. Heather was still curled up inside their tent, wisps of her hair furling in the breeze. Eddie sat on a fallen log a few feet away, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

I ripped open the ration pack and tore into the stale protein bar like a man starved, which I suppose I was.

Eddie glanced over and raised an eyebrow. “Damn, dude. You eat like an animal.”

I let out a noncommittal grunt, chewing around a mouthful of dry, chalky granola. “Yeah, well, almost dying’ll do that to a guy.”

I swallowed and washed down the last of my rations with a sip from my canteen. “We should pack up.”

Alan nodded once, as if he had already been thinking the same thing. It didn’t take long. Our tents came down in minutes and we rolled up the sleeping bags, tossing them into the back of the pickup. Next to me, Alan double-checked the gear, making sure we had everything we needed.

Heather emerged from the last tent, rubbing her arms against the cold, her messy hair tousled from sleep. She exchanged a glance with Alan, a silent message passing between them before she turned to help pack up the last of the supplies.

I walked over to the Chevy C/K and checked to make sure the camcorder was still where we left it. It sat on the backseat, completely untouched. I picked it up and turned it over in my hands, popping it open to make sure the tape was still inside.

Heather’s voice cut through the crisp morning air. “Ready?”

I nodded and turned toward the mountain, my eyes falling upon the rusted metal protrusion. Once more, I stared into the depths of the tunnel. It yawned wide before us, a gaping maw carved into the side of the mountain. Rust streaked the metal beams that framed the opening, and the air that seeped out was damp and thick with the scent of iron and wet stone. It hadn’t changed much since we were kids—except now it felt *smaller*, less like the maw of some great beast waiting to swallow us whole and more like the gullet of a creature we had no choice but to crawl inside, praying that its teeth wouldn’t tear through our flesh.

Alan took the lead, his steps sure, though I could see the tension in his shoulders. Heather followed, her breath curling in the cold as her eyes flicked between the entrance and the trees behind us, as if expecting someone to emerge from the shadows and drag us back before we ever made it inside. Eddie and I trailed behind them, my camcorder clutched tight in my hands, its red light blinking steadily.

We stepped past the support beams, their wooden frames warped with age, and past the rusted sign that marked the end of safe passage. The deeper we went, the more the sounds of the world behind us faded. The forest, the wind, the sky—they all ceased to exist the moment we crossed into the depths of the mountain. The tunnel curved downwards, leading us further underground, the metal grating beneath our feet groaning with each step.

Up ahead, the tunnel stopped abruptly, a wall of jagged metal sheeting covering the entrance. Alan pulled his crowbar from his backpack and wedged it into the seam between the metal panels, his muscles straining as he

struggled to work the rusted steel apart. The cave trembled around us, small stones skittering down from the ceiling as the air grew thick with dust. Heather muttered a curse under her breath and glanced at the walls of the tunnel behind us, but they held.

With a final wrench, the barrier gave way, the metal shrieking as it slid open just enough for us to slip through. The stale, electric-scented air of the facility beyond greeted us, the cold bite of industrial sterilization stinging our noses. Alan was the first to step inside, ducking through the gap and disappearing into the dimly lit corridor beyond. Heather followed, then Eddie. I took a breath, bracing myself, then hoisted the camcorder and pushed myself through.

The rough, uneven walls of the tunnel gave way to passageways lined with cheap drywall, stretching out before us in a maze of linoleum floors and artificial light. The hum of electricity vibrated through the floors, a deep, thrumming pulse that sent shivers up my spine. I pressed record, angling the lens to capture the sheer impossibility of what lay before us.

The deeper we went, the more the walls seemed to hum, vibrating with some unseen force, as though the mountain itself was alive, breathing around us. We approached the end of the hallway, rounded the corner, and suddenly, we weren't alone.

Past a series of sealed off doors, scientists in crisp white coats wove between rows of massive servers, their faces illuminated by the glow of a thousand screens. The room stretched endlessly, a vast command center where countless lines of code flickered across oversized monitors, blinking cursors sending prompts into the void. Peeking around the corner, I held up the camcorder and zoomed in, focusing on a screen where data scrolled at an impossible speed, symbols and equations morphing and shifting faster than my eyes could follow.

A massive cylindrical chamber dominated the far end of the room, its walls lined with thick copper cables. My eyes widened as I realized everything Jeremiah had told us was true.

The Hadron Collider was an impossibly large machine, a cylindrical behemoth of cold metal and pulsing energy, a leviathan buried beneath the mountain range I called home. It looked like it stretched for miles, a gigantic cylinder comprised of superconducting magnets, clusters of interwoven cables and steel, and a network of chambers that hummed with energy. The great mechanical beast looked out of place amongst the walls of the facility, like a massive Tesla superconductor housed in an oversized DMV.

The air was thick with the scent of ozone and the bitterly metallic taste of copper, like the remnants of a thunderstorm trapped underground. The collider itself was a vast, silver cylinder embedded into the walls, layers of insulated tubes and cryogenic chambers feeding into its core. Supercooled liquid helium hissed softly, keeping the entire structure at a temperature colder than the vacuum of space. The massive dipole magnets, aligned with razor precision, waited like a taut bowstring, prepared to send particles hurtling at nearly the speed of light.

Banks of thick, blocky computers lined the walls, their monitors filled with a sea of cascading numbers, formulas, and waveforms. Each time the collider was switched on, a low, constant vibration moaned from the chamber, a frequency just beneath the range of hearing, as if something was speaking from the other side.

I panned the camcorder across it, the lens shaking slightly in my grip. The machine hummed as the scientists' fingers flew across their keyboards, their voices clipped and urgent as they called out numbers and adjusted dials and switches.

A high-pitched whine filled the room, the air itself seeming to stretch and bend as the glow from the collider intensified and pulsed. A ripple ran through the room, like heat rising from pavement, distorting everything for the briefest moment. My head swam and my vision blurred, a wave of nausea washing over me as I swayed on my feet.

"What the hell was that?" Heather hissed, pressing herself back against the wall.

Alan's eyes were locked on the collider. "A reply from the other side."

I steadied myself and held up the camcorder, trying to capture every flashing number cascading across the monitors. The lights dimmed as a reverberating crack split the air, like a thunderclap layered over itself.

The collider roared to life, a bright, electric current surging through its massive rings. In the center of the testing chamber, suspended between the two towering metallic pylons, space began to twist. The air shimmered and distorted, bending inward as if reality itself were being pinched and pulled apart by unseen fingers.

The rift was barely the size of a doorway, but within its shifting, liquid-like edges, there was no depth nor light. It was a dark abyss filled with an absence of everything, a wound cut into the fabric of the world.

The first one shot out like an arrow, its form stretched and indistinct, like ink smeared across rippling water. It splattered across the ground, sliding forward before rising up into the air, its shape pulling together into something vaguely humanoid, its disproportionately long arms tapering into razor-like claws. Two more followed behind it, silently watching and waiting.

Their movements weren't bound by gravity or logic. They jittered and pulsed, like static caught between frames of film, flickering in and out of focus. The scientists didn't react at all, barely moving a muscle, as if their appearance was as normal and mundane as a turkey sandwich. They just sat there, taking meticulous notes on the unimaginable horrors that floated mere feet from them.

One of them, a man with slicked back hair and horn-rimmed glasses, lifted a radio to his mouth.

"Dimensional rift stable. Entities present."

The creatures lingered at the threshold of the rift, the air around them warping as their forms pulsed, as if struggling to fully manifest.

The scientist spoke into the radio. "We are maintaining a stable connection. Awaiting transmission."

I glanced over at Alan, a million questions on my lips.

Transmission?

The scientist adjusted a dial, and suddenly, from the depths of that unholy void, the sound of an inhuman voice crawled into the room. It was multi-layered and discordant, as if thousands of voices were speaking at once, reverberating off the walls with a deep, guttural resonance.

I swallowed hard and willed my hands to stop shaking, the camcorder trembling in my grasp. Alan was stone-still beside me, his hand resting on the grip of his Tokarev. Heather barely breathed, frozen in horror at the familiar sight, while Eddie gaped like a fish as he struggled to comprehend the ancient horror that lay before him.

Within the chamber, one of the creatures twitched as if it were skipping through space, existing in multiple frames of time at once.

It turned its ghastly head directly toward us, not at the scientists or the giant monitors that stretched upwards like Promethean fire, but at us. In the instant it locked eyes on us, its form flickered rapidly like a sudden burst of static. I was filled with a sensation of utter and complete dread, a void opening in the pit of my stomach as I felt as if I was being hollowed out for an unknown host.

The rift shuddered and distorted wildly as the air pressure in the room plummeted. The scientists rushed to the controls, their voices rising as they frantically punched in commands.

"Rift destabilizing—"

"Shut it down! Shut it—"

There was an agonizing shriek as a hundred voices cried out at once in a furious wail that rattled the steel-clad walls of the chamber. The rift imploded in a torrential twist of purple energy, pulling the creatures back into it as the hum of the collider finally came to a stop.

I glanced down to make sure my camcorder was still recording. Alan's hand came away from his gun as the tension escaped from us like dissipating smoke. Heather gripped his sleeve, her fingers still trembling. Eddie remained in his spot, sunken down the wall, as pale as a sheet of printer paper, virgin to any trace of ink.

The scientists murmured among themselves, their voices clinical and completely unbothered, already reviewing the data, as if they hadn't just ripped a hole into something beyond human comprehension and let it look back into them.

I turned the camcorder off with a loud click. That was more than enough proof. The air in the testing chamber still crackled, charged with the unnatural energy of what we had just witnessed. My pulse throbbed in my ears, drowning out everything but the residual hum of the collider winding down.

Alan's hand came down upon my shoulder, his firm grasp pulling me back from peeking around the corner.

"We need to go," Alan whispered urgently.

I nodded, my clammy grip tightening around the camcorder. I could feel the residual warmth of the device, the plastic slightly slick from the heat of the recording. We had everything, all the footage, all the proof, that we needed to expose the entire operation.

I turned around as we made our way back toward the tunnel, the soles of our shoes barely making a sound against the frigid linoleum floor. As we turned the corner to the next hallway, I felt Eddie freeze beside me.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered, nudging Eddie with my elbow.

His face was pale as he pointed up at the adjoining wall. “Camera.”

We all stopped, turning to look up and making direct eye contact with the roving lens of the security camera that was staring directly at us. We froze for a moment, frantically glancing at each other in absolute panic. Eddie jostled my shoulder as he shoved past me and took off at a full sprint towards the tunnel. I quickly followed after him, my heart hammering in my chest as my sneakers pounded and squeaked against the floor. We had almost made it to the tunnel entrance when an alarm sounded, a sharp, piercing wail that reverberated down the hallway and bounced off the walls.

I cursed as my legs burned with burgeoning exhaustion. Up ahead, Heather sprinted down the hallway, Alan and Eddie following close behind. The corridor stretched endlessly ahead of us, flickering with emergency lights and casting shadows that danced and lunged in the chaos.

I risked a glance over my shoulder, just long enough to see armed men rounding the corner behind us. Despite their body armor, the security guards were quickly catching up to us.

A gunshot rang out, punching through the wall just inches from Alan’s head. I swore under my breath, instinctually covering my head with my hands

“Faster!” Alan barked.

The tunnel was just ahead, the rusted barrier door still cracked open from when we had forced our way in. My lungs felt like they were going to collapse. I could hear the heavy boots behind us, accompanied by the garbled squawk of radios.

Alan reached the barrier first and threw himself at the loose paneling without hesitation, his fingers curling into the jagged rusted edges as he shoved against the weakened structure with all the force he could muster.

It gave way in an explosion of dust and metal, just wide enough for us to squeeze through.

“Go! Go!” Alan yelled, waving us through.

I ducked and scrambled through the gap, Heather following right behind me, and Eddie struggling for a second before he popped out on the other side. Alan went through last and just as he hoisted himself through, the hallway behind us exploded with gunfire.

Bullets ricocheted off the metal tunnel, sending skittering sparks flying. The sound was deafening in the enclosed space. Heather pressed her back against the opposite wall, her chest heaving. Alan and I grabbed a fallen beam and shoved it through the handles of the door, barricading the entrance into the facility.

For a moment, the only sound was our ragged breathing and the distant wail of alarms muffled behind thick rock and metal.

Heather wiped the sweat from her forehead. “Holy shit.”

We didn’t have much time to catch our breath. Alan hurriedly ushered us toward the mouth of the tunnel, where the soft light of the evening shone down upon us in haphazard streaks. I stumbled towards them, eagerly awaiting the warmth of the sun, but as I emerged from the dark tunnel, I saw something that made my heart sink like a stone.

Two sets of flashing red and blue lights lined the ridge and blocked the road ahead, casting their twisted glow against the dark silhouettes of men in uniform.

We made a break for the treeline, Alan pushing through the branches ahead of me. I clutched the camcorder tight in my hands as it jostled with every desperate stride, ducking down as stray branches whipped by my face. His pickup was just ahead of us, barely visible through the thickly packed trees. I could feel my heart slamming against my ribs, my pulse roaring in my ears as a surge of adrenaline rushed through me

Fifty feet.

Forty.

The headlights of the patrol cars came into view, their beams sweeping across the trees.

Thirty feet.

The sound of gunfire cracked through the air again, splintering bark off the tree next to my head, sending splinters flying through the air like buckshot.

Twenty.

Eddie stumbled on a root and I grabbed him by the back of his shirt, barely slowing down as I yanked him forward and up onto his feet.

Ten feet.

Alan reached the driver's side first, wrenching the door open and shoving the keys into the ignition. I threw myself into the backseat as Heather and Eddie dove in right behind me. Alan floored it, the engine roaring to life, tires spitting dirt as they lurched forward and tore through the brush. The glare of red and blue lights shone in the rearview mirror, following closely behind us as the pickup made its way through the woods.

"Shit," Alan growled, the cab of the pickup shaking violently as we went over a rough patch.

The sound of engines revved directly behind us, followed by the glare of emergency lights. I anxiously gripped the passenger seat in front of me. We weren't getting caught, not now when I finally held the proof in my shaking hands. Alan veered left, wrenching the wheel and sending the Chevy careening down the dirt path at breakneck speed, branches whipping against the windshield as mud splattered up from the tires.

I twisted in my seat to see the convoy of patrol cars plowing through the trees behind us, their frames groaning in protest as they scraped across the roots. Alan's eyes darted between the road and the shine of the rearview mirror, where I could still see the police headlights glowing like hellfire in the distance.

"Step on it," I said.

"I'm going as fast as I can," Alan snapped as he swerved around a jagged outcrop of rock, the tires skidding dangerously before regaining traction.

Up ahead, the dirt road twisted and narrowed, swallowed by the looming black silhouettes of trees.

"They're gaining," I warned.

Alan didn't respond. He yanked the wheel hard, sending us veering off the road and straight into the thick of the forest, branches snapping against the windshield as the undercarriage groaned in protest. My stomach lurched as we plowed through the dense brush, headlights bouncing wildly, illuminating nothing but a blur of leaves and shadows.

"Holy shit," Eddie choked out.

Alan cut the wheel again, guiding the Chevy C/K into a deep thicket, its tires sinking slightly into the loamy earth. He flicked off the headlights, the hum of the engine slowly fading as we settled into the darkness of the grove. All was silent.

Alan took a slow, shaky breath. "Nobody move."

The pickup sat like a carcass in the brush, its frame swallowed by the tangled wilderness. My breath was shallow, my heart pounding in my chest, the noise so loud I was sure they could hear it through the trees. From beyond the pines, the deafening roar of engines grew closer, the gleam of their headlights cutting through the clearing like searching eyes as streaks of white and red flashed through the gaps in the branches. My fingers dug into the headrest as I willed myself to be smaller.

One by one, the patrol cars sped past us. The woods settled behind them as the night slowly swallowed the fleeing tail-lights of the hunting party.

Alan sank back into his seat with a sigh of relief. Within the Chevy we sat still in the darkness, surrounded by the pines and hidden from the world.

Alan Russell

The night pressed down on us, the suffocating stillness of the woods making the pounding in my ears feel impossibly loud. I could still hear the roar of the engines, the crack of gunfire, and the scrape of branches clawing at my pickup as we'd torn through the trees like hunted animals. But the reality was sinking in now, the silence wrapping around us like a shroud.

We were still alive, for now at least.

I opened the door and stepped out into the damp early evening air, my legs wobbling as my boots crunched softly against the brittle leaves. My pulse still raged against my ribs as the rush of adrenaline slowly settled in my chest. Heather slid out behind me, wrapping her arms around herself as if the cold had only just begun to touch her. I pulled her close and tried to warm her up as she burrowed her head into my shoulder. Mac climbed out of the truck, still peeking around at every tree, as if he expected armed police officers to jump out at any moment. Eddie leaned against the Chevy and ran a trembling hand across his face.

The only sound was the distant whisper of the wind through the trees and the steady hum of insects. The sky above was endlessly black and streaked with stars. It was as if the whole world had forgotten about us.

I watched as Mac's expression darkened, his eyes narrowing as he stared off into the woods, one hand curling into a fist at his side. I followed his gaze and my stomach dropped as I realized where we were. Up ahead, the edge of the forest thinned out into a manicured lawn, stretching wide and pristine beneath the cold glow of lantern light.

Beyond it stood the Quintin estate.

The massive, sprawling mansion sat nestled against the dark, its towering columns catching the moonlight, the large bay windows as dark and hollow as the eyes of a corpse.

Mac flung open his door and began rummaging around in the backseat. In the dim moonlight filtering through the windows of my pickup, I saw him reach for a gun. His fingers wrapped around the carry handle of one of the Marshal's service rifles as he grabbed a few magazines from the seat pocket. He shut the door with a resounding clang and turned towards me, his hollow eyes meeting mine.

"Take the footage and get out of here." Mac said, nodding his head toward the cab of my truck.

"Where are you going?" I asked, dreading the inevitable answer.

He took a moment to answer, his voice filled with the pain of lies and locked office doors.

"There's nothing for me out there. Alan, I'm not asking you to follow me," Mac said. "But I am asking you not to stop me."

I felt Heather shift beside me. She was silent, but I could feel the tension rolling off her like heat from a dying fire. Eddie stood by the bumper, his eyes flitting back and forth between us.

Mac's face twisted raw with a feral desperation as his gaze flickered toward the house, that massive, cold estate where the devil himself slept soundly in silk sheets, entirely unaware that the boy whose life he had shattered now stood at his doorstep.

He slung the service rifle over his shoulder and grabbed one of the heavier flashlights from the floor of the truck bed. His eyes didn't meet mine as he continued. "You've got the footage. You can take it to the press and you can end it. This is my burden to bear."

His voice was even, but his eyes were a storm held back by skin and bone. I met his gaze and slowly shook my head. There was no world where I was going to let him die alone.

"I'm going with you."

Mac stood stiff for a moment, backlit by the silver sheen of the moon and the eerie stillness of the manicured lawn far beyond us. Finally, he gave me a single sharp nod, like a man accepting the weight of the hangman's noose.

We prepared in silence, laying out what little we had left in the bed of the Chevy C/K; our guns and some ammo, the rations I'd packed, some bottled water, one last jug of holy water, and the cardboard box that contained all

our evidence. I tightened the strap of my shoulder holster, the cool metal of my father's Tokarev pressing against my ribs, and slid the last of the holy water jugs into my backpack, nestling it next to the tapes from the camcorder.

Mac knelt beside the truck, loading magazines with methodical precision. The metallic click of each round sliding into place was the only sound between us for a long time.

Heather sat on the hood of my pickup and rested her lever-action rifle against her knee, her silhouette dark against the canopy of the pines. I slung my Armalite rifle over my shoulder, the smooth wood finish of the gun comforting in my cold hands.

Beside me, Eddie grabbed the Remington 870 out of the truck bed and stuffed shotgun shells into his coat pockets, muttering uneasily under his breath.

Heather climbed down from the truck and nudged me with her shoulder.

"You ready?"

I smiled softly as her gaze met mine. "Yeah, I'm good. Eddie?"

"Sure, man." Eddie said, shrugging away the tension in his shoulders.

I took a deep breath, letting the brisk evening air fill my lungs.

"Let's go."

We slipped quietly through the trees, the shadow of the estate growing closer with every step. As we stepped out onto the edge of the lawn, the forest fell away behind us like a curtain. The grass was wet beneath my boots, the dampness soaking through my laces and bleeding up my ankles.

There were three guards, one stationed at the front gate and two more patrolling the perimeter. Mac crouched beside me, his fingers curling around the grip of his M16.

I shifted my position and knelt down on one knee, raising my rifle and peering down the scope. My first shot cracked through the night, splitting the quiet like a bone snapping under pressure. The gate guard's head snapped back, his blood misting in the glow of the lamplights as a choked sound tore from his throat. He crumpled onto the pavement, the blood pooling beneath him turning black in the dim light.

Before the second guard could react, Mac's rifle barked, a controlled burst punching into his chest and sending him sprawling backward. The third guard was already reaching for his radio, but Heather was faster, her lever-action roaring in the dark, the round of .30-30 tearing through flesh and bone.

We moved quickly across the lawn and through the iron-wrought gate, my boots scuffling against the concrete driveway. The darkened mansion loomed ahead of us like a slumbering beast. Eddie cautiously made his way up the steps, clutching his shotgun close to his chest.

The grand doors swung open before we reached them and two more guards spilled out into the night. Eddie shot first, the report deafening as the buckshot slammed into the closest man's throat, turning his shout of alarm into a wet gurgle. Heather took the second, her bullet punching through his ballistic vest in a single clean shot.

Illuminated by the pulsing red lights of the Quintins's alarm system, we stepped over their bodies and into the foyer. The house was a maze of dark wood and polished stone, of chandeliers that hung low and heavy like glimmering nooses. The gilded frames of the paintings on the walls glowed under the flickering sconces. It was a house designed with luxury in mind, the kind of house you stand in awkwardly, not wanting to touch anything for fear of breaking or staining something. I turned a corner and let loose another burst of gunfire, eradicating a priceless chandelier and another guard with it.

Up ahead, Mac led the way, the layout of the house seemingly burned into his memory. We passed by fully stocked kitchens and large marble statues of grotesque creatures, before finally coming to a stop in a lavishly decorated living room. An ornate chair sat square in the room, almost throne-like in appearance. To the left, a flight of teak-toned stairs led down to a set of double doors secured with a gilded chain. Eddie glanced around nervously as Mac slowly stepped forward and lifted the chain from the door, jingling loudly as he placed it on a coat-hook that hung on the opposing wall.

Mac pushed open the double doors, revealing a small rectangular bedroom, filled with a few plush armchairs, a sandalwood coffee table, and a ludicrously large bed, the mattress and comforter spilling over the opulent frame. Heather cautiously edged her way across the room, leaning in close to me.

"I don't like this." She whispered, clutching her rifle a little tighter.

Mac spun around in the center of the room, a confused expression on his face as he examined the furniture that adorned the bedroom.

"This is wrong. This is all wrong."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, exchanging worried looks with Heather as Mac continued to pace around the room.

"There was a... help me push this." Mac said, grabbing ahold of the mattress and lifting it off of the frame.

Eddie and I rushed over and we managed to push the bed across the room. In the spot where the bed had been, the expensive wood flooring gave way to a sterile square of sheet metal. A trapdoor.

Mac reached for it with shaking hands and pried it open with a hiss. A gust of cold air escaped the chamber as we stared down into its depths. The rungs of a ladder were attached to the concrete wall. More than that, I couldn't see.

Mac reached for the top-most rung and carefully made his way down. I quickly followed behind him, my boots landing on the solid concrete floor with a thunk. I stepped forward and blinked as I took in my surroundings. The hidden room was like a large subterranean hallway, its walls lined with large metal shelves that held rows of glass jars filled with dark viscous liquid and bobbing tubular shapes of unknown origin. Oddly enough, each jar had a bit of newspaper print taped to the front of it.

The hall seemed to stretch on for a hundred feet or more, with a single door at the very end of it, jarringly normal in its appearance, the sharp red paint of the classic wooden door a stark contrast from the rough cement walls and floors of the hallway. As we made our way down the tunnel, it seemed to narrow and the shelves gave way to large photographs, beginning only in black and white but replaced by color photographs as the tunnel progressed.

They were all largely the same, mostly group photographs of expensive-looking men in casual clothes posing in a clearing of the woods. As time wove its course through the row of pictures, the colossal figure of a great owl joined the pines in the background of the pictures, and I suddenly recognized the clearing. It slowly dawned on me that I was looking around at the members' photos of the Phoenician Club.

Ahead of me, Mac seemed to be in a dreamlike fugue state, gazing around the passageway with a glossy-eyed stare. In front of him, the red door loomed, the classic slice of Americana out of place among the clinical cold of the tunnel. Upon closer inspection, the brass knocker was in the shape of a long-horned goat. Mac palmed the door handle, adjusting his grip on his rifle before throwing open the door. All four of us barged in with our guns raised, but I froze as I recognized the room we had walked into.

The room was identical to the one in my dream, the red floors and dark curtains ripped straight from the recesses of my mind. The desk sat empty and devoid of life, the wooden chair spilt sideways upon the floor.

These curtains didn't sway or writhe with the fervent energy of my dream. They sat stagnant and smokeless, nothing more than black velvet. I noticed with a start, that a pair of shoes poked out from the far side of the curtain.

The velvet curtain was thrown back and an ear-splitting roar filled the room as bullets screamed past us and punched into the walls. The muzzle flashes from Quintin's pistol strobed wildly, illuminating his panicked, contorted face in split-second bursts.

The staccato bursts tore into the wall behind us, carving jagged holes in the mahogany, but the bullets passed by us harmlessly.

Mac stepped forward methodically, like a man walking through a storm untouched by the rain.

Quintin's gun clicked empty.

He stood there for a moment, clutching a jar from the shelves in one hand and his pistol in the other, his blue eyes wild with fear and disbelief. The pistol slipped from his shaking hand and clattered onto the polished floor.

The fine wool of his tailored slacks darkened as piss pooled around his expensive leather shoes. He staggered back, his mouth working around half-formed words.

Mac stepped forward, his eyes as cold and hard as I'd ever seen them.

"You killed her."

Quintin's panicked eyes met Mac's as a silent recognition passed between them.

“Morgan?” Quintin asked resignedly.

“Morgan Leigh Wright.” Mac confirmed, enunciating each syllable.

A long moment passed as they stared each other down. Quintin shifted, cradling the jar against his chest as a father would hold a newborn.

His eyes flicked up from the floor, blue and bloodshot. “Her name was Lenore.”

“Lenore Grayson?” Heather asked.

“I tried to hide her,” he whispered. “I really did. But my father—he found out. He always found out. And when he did...” His mouth twisted, as if he was seeing it all again.

“What happened to her?” Heather asked, her voice hoarse.

“What happened to all of them,” Quintin said, his eyes fixed on the floor now. “At first, she was a party favor for my father’s meetings. The night’s entertainment. And when the patrons grew bored of her...”

He trailed off for a moment, his eyes as clouded as the jar in his hands.

“...she went before the Owl.”

Quintin’s fingers tightened around the glass jar. I looked at it more closely, squinting to make out the shape of the tubes within. They floated around within the jar, the view clouded by the murky liquid, until one floated directly against the glass. The jar was filled with human organs.

“Just another sacrifice to hold back the ire of Care,” Quintin said, his thumb stroking the missing poster taped to the glass. “We were only children, barely old enough to love.”

“You were never one to let age stop you.” Mac said, his grip tightening around his gun.

Quintin shook his head frantically, the glass clinking against his blazer buttons. “No, you don’t understand—”

A calm confidence seemed to wash over him as he collected his emotions and straightened up, lifting his head to meet Mac’s gaze.

“You know no one would ever believe you, Mac.” Quintin’s voice slipped from his lips, his drawl as smooth and sickeningly sweet as a warm honeysuckle.

“I don’t need belief to remember the smell of your sheets.”

The gunshot was deafening in the confined space. Quintin’s body jerked violently and collapsed to the floor, his mouth opening in a soundless scream as his hands flew to his waist, where the bullet had punched clean through his pelvis, shattering bone and shredding muscle.

He rolled onto his side, convulsing and writhing against the floor, his fingers twitching uselessly against his ruin, dragging red smears across the hardwood floor. A thick, wet sound bubbled up from his throat, choked and garbled, somewhere between a gasp and a sob.

Mac closed his eyes and sighed, as if he’d just made the first cut into a deer carcass and was preparing himself for the rest. Eddie cursed under his breath and averted his eyes, turning to the other corner of the room.

Mac stepped closer, watching Quintin’s chest heaving, his hands pressing against the mangled mess of his hip as blood poured from between his fingers. He shuddered violently, his head rolling back against the wall as he bared his teeth in a twisted, broken grimace.

Quintin’s head sagged downwards, taking in the sight of his gore, an acceptance of it passing through him before he lifted his head to look at me.

“You like the room?” He croaked.

I stared at him in confusion.

“I know you’ve seen It in your dreams.”

Mac rested the muzzle of his rifle against Quintin’s chest, directly over his heart. Quintin whimpered, his body trembling violently as his breath came in jagged rasps. His head whipped around to speak to me once more.

“It waits for you.”

The force of the bullet jolted Quintin’s body against the wall before he slumped forward, his chin dropping against his chest as his final breath escaped his lips.

For a moment, the only sound was the slow, steady drip of blood pooling onto the hardwood floors. Mac knelt down and lifted Lenore’s jar from the corpse’s grip, tucking it into the crook of his arm.

We made our way back through the hallway, my eyes rebelling against my better judgement and staring at the jars we passed by, at the names and pictures on the missing posters that were taped to them. I recognized most of them from the wall at Carson's. I tried not to look at the prices they'd taped above them.

We reached the end of the tunnel and I boosted Heather up so she could reach the rungs of the ladder. Eddie followed behind her into the upper room and then it was just Mac and I in a room of human remains.

We gazed out at the rows of jars, alphabetized and clinically stored in a perverse cemetery. It felt wrong, leaving the remains of the victims in the hands of their captors. Mac and I glanced at each other, coming to a silent agreement.

As Mac tossed Lenore's jar onto the concrete floor, shattering it and splattering formaldehyde against the shelves, a memory came back to me. I handed Mac the match as the words of Don's mother emerged from my subconscious. Her people had a word for this, *brenna*. A funeral by fire.

I climbed the rungs of the ladder as the fire burned brightly below us, the tongues of flame consuming the rows of remains, finally free.

I didn't bother to close the side door as we ran out of the mansion, the red alarm lights spilling onto the grass of the backyard and glistening across the surface of the pool. I could see the glow of police lights by the front door and I prayed that they wouldn't see us.

We ran up the uneven dirt of the mountain, the trees stretching high above us like black veins against the sky. Behind us, the Quintin estate was a smoldering ruin and beyond that I could hear the howling wail of sirens and the frantic bark of orders through police radios as they swarmed my hidden pickup truck.

We had minutes, maybe less. Heather was just ahead of me, her curls whipping back and forth as she tore through the underbrush with her rifle slung tight across her back. I could hear the stomping of Mac's shoes behind me, and a little further back, Eddie scuffling across the loose rocks and tangled roots. The first crack of gunfire split the night, kicking up the dirt behind my boots.

"They're gaining!" Eddie wheezed.

Mac didn't look back. "Then move faster."

The range of the Ozarks arched high above our heads, jagged and endlessly reaching for the horizon. The path we cut through the pines was steep and littered with loose shale and tangled thickets, but it was the only shot we had.

A beam of light slashed through the trees to our left, followed by the low growl of engines. I glanced over to see three patrol cars trailing us along the winding service road, bouncing over ruts and loose gravel, their lights flashing red and blue through the damp darkness of the night.

"Go!" I barked, grabbing Eddie by the back of his jacket and shoving him forward.

We hit the incline hard, scrambling over loose dirt, our hands grasping at roots and rocks as we looked for anything that would give us leverage. My legs screamed in protest, but we kept going. Heather yelped, dropping low as another bullet clipped a branch above her, showering down splinters of wood.

Mac spun mid-stride and brought his rifle up, frantically aiming down the ridgeline. A burst of gunfire burst through the pines, forcing the police officers below to duck for cover, their tan uniforms disappearing behind the thick trunks of the trees.

"Don't stop!" Mac snapped, turning back to the mountain peak, his boots slipping on the incline. "Get to the ridge!"

The ground shifted beneath my feet as we advanced up the steep slope. The air was thinner up here and laced with the damp, earthen scent of moss and rotting wood. Sweat slicked my spine, but I kept moving, ignoring the way my arms burned and my breath came in ragged gasps.

Heather reached the ridge first, hauling herself up onto the narrow ledge. She spun and reached for Mac as he scrambled up behind her, his boots skidding against the loose rock. Eddie barely managed to climb over, gasping as his fingers clawed at the dirt, his face pale with exertion.

As I reached upward, my grip faltered on a patch of crumbling shale, slamming my knee into the rock. Searing, white-hot pain flared up my leg and I cursed, digging my fingers in and forcing myself up to work past the pain.

Behind me, I could see that the patrol cars had stopped at the base of the incline. The deputies flung their doors open and piled out of their cars, weapons drawn.

I turned back and lunged for Eddie's outstretched hand. His fingers latched tightly around mine and he yanked me up onto the ridge as another shot tore through the dark.

We all hit the ground and rolled into cover behind a cluster of thick boulders.

Below, the deputies were regrouping, their flashlights sweeping over the trail, tracking our footprints up the slope.

"We can't stop," Mac panted, wiping sweat from his brow. "They'll be on us in minutes."

I pushed up onto my elbows and peered out from the boulder. Somewhere far below, an order had been given. The deputies were moving toward us again and we were running out of time.

I unslung my AR-10 from my back and braced the rifle against the boulder, my fingers slick with sweat as I counted my remaining ammunition. I had three magazines, ninety rounds total. That was all the .308 I had left. I wouldn't get another chance to resupply.

I met Mac's eyes across the ridge.

"Head on up," I told him. "I'll cover you."

Mac hesitated for a second, then nodded, bracing himself against the rock and preparing to run.

"Wait." Heather said, her gaze flicking between me and the line of deputies below, her face tight with worry.

"I'll be right behind you," I promised.

She grabbed my shirt and pulled me in for a kiss. Reluctantly, she pulled away and joined Mac and Eddie, crouching by the face of the boulder.

"I'm not kissing you." Mac said wryly.

"Go." I told him, rolling my eyes and waving my hand toward the tree-line.

As they disappeared into the thick tangle of trees, I took a deep breath and forced my pulse to steady. I thought back to all those hours spent in the woods with my father, teaching me to hunt when we didn't have the money or the gas to go into town. I gripped the wood handguard, nestled the stock against my shoulder and peered down the scope.

Below me, I could see the glint of flashlights as the deputies made their way up the steep mountainside. I counted six of them, their tan uniforms distinct against the dark landscape. I took a deep breath and laid my finger on the trigger. My first bullet found its mark, burying itself into the side of a deputy. My father used to tell me that a wounded man took two men off the battlefield. As the deputies turned to look at the fallen man, their flashlights clearly marking their positions, I took out two more of them. The muzzle flash lit up the ridge in violent bursts of orange, illuminating the chaos below. The remaining deputies ducked and scrambled for cover, their flashlight beams dancing amongst the pines.

I laid down suppressive fire in controlled arcs, keeping them pinned as they struggled to make their ascent up the cliff face. A deputy broke from cover in search of a better position and one of my bullets caught him in the thigh, sending him crashing into the dirt with a strangled cry.

With a click, my first magazine ran dry. My fingers worked on instinct, slamming in the next and racking the charging handle. As I fired once more, the hot brass clattered against the rock face, spinning and tumbling down the slope. Down below, the deputies returned fire, their shots desperate and wild. A bullet ricocheted off the boulder, spitting shards of stone into my cheek. Another zipped past my ear, so close I could feel the air curl as it went by.

I fired back, emptying the last of my second magazine as one deputy dropped to the dirt, clutching his arm. Another staggered back, his shoulder taking the brunt of the shot, knocking him off balance and sending him plummeting down the slope.

But they kept coming.

My last magazine slid into place with a mechanical click. Then I was up, my boots digging into the loose dirt as I sprinted after my friends and disappeared into the tree line. The mountain swallowed me whole as the shouting grew distant behind me.

The hunt had begun.

Mac Peterson

My legs were on fire, quivering pitifully with the burn of the climb as we passed through the belly of the Ozarks. Up ahead, the mountain peak leveled out into a narrow shelf of rock and pine overlooking the slope below. We collapsed there, one by one, falling into the dirt and pine needles as we all struggled to catch our breath.

Alan staggered through the trees a moment later, his shirt clinging to his chest with sweat and soot, his eyes flickering back and forth like he still hadn't come down from the fight. Blood dripped from a cut across his cheekbone, the crimson stark against the dirt smeared across his face.

He didn't bother to say anything as he dropped down beside us. Heather leaned forward on her knees, her hands shaking as she pulled Alan into a hug, squeezing him so tightly her knuckles turned white. Eddie laid out on his back with a long, ragged sigh, his limbs dramatically splayed out as if he would never move again.

I stood up unsteadily on my wobbling legs and turned in a slow circle. The trees were thick here, but not so much that we'd be blind to anyone coming up the mountain. The ridge was high, about a good quarter-mile from the slope below and easily defensible with good visibility. If we had to make another stand, it'd be here.

"We should camp here," I said, my voice hoarse.

Alan looked at me, then nodded slowly. "We're not going any further tonight."

I dropped my pack onto the ground and started clearing space, yanking away old branches and stomping down leaves. Heather followed, unfolding a tarp while Eddie unrolled the sleeping bags and the tents. We worked quietly for a while and I lost track of the time as I mindlessly pushed in tent stakes and hauled dry branches and brush from the tree-line to make a crude barrier in front of the outcrop.

I sat down hard on a flat patch of dirt, wiping the sweat from my face with the sleeve of my jacket. Alan had disappeared for a bit, probably to walk the perimeter. I had no idea how long he'd been gone; forty minutes, maybe an hour. One glance behind me told me that the others were still setting up the campsite, Heather propping up her tent and Eddie rummaging through his backpack.

It didn't take long to find Alan.

I heard him before I saw him; the sharp metallic click of wire being pulled taut and a soft grunt of exertion. When I rounded the bend, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Alan stood in a hollow between two large oaks, his silhouette flickering in the sunlight that filtered through the canopy above. His Armalite rifle was slung across his back, the steel barrel catching the light with each small movement. In his hands, he held a coil of wire, threading it carefully through a tangle of brush and down to a trip-trigger he'd wedged into the dirt with a carved wooden stake. Nearby, a collapsible shovel leaned against the tree, half-buried in a pile of loose soil. A few crude but effective traps were already laid, a variety of snares, sharpened stakes, a deadfall pit, and tripwire hooks strung with tension so fine I hadn't seen them until I nearly stepped into one.

"What the hell is all this, man?" I asked, trying to keep my voice low, but the surprise leaked out anyway.

"The Vietcong used to do this," Alan said, his eyes locked on the wire. "My father 'borrowed' the idea for hunting."

I stepped closer, careful not to disturb anything. The soil was soft here, the ground cold against the soles of my boots. Alan knelt down beside the trap and adjusted the angle of the sharpened branch. His face was streaked with dirt and sweat, and there was a gash across his cheekbone that had crusted over, the blood dried in a jagged, broken line down his jaw. He looked like hell.

"You think they'll come tonight?" I asked.

Alan was silent for a moment, then he stood and dusted his hands off on his jeans.

"I don't think they'll stop coming," he said.

He moved past me and headed back up toward the peak, his boots crunching softly on the pine needles. Through the pines, the camp came into view, dwarfed by the steep cliff face. Eddie was still struggling to pin up a tarp

and Heather was attempting to light a small bundle of wood with Alan's matchbook, sending small bursts of flame up into the evening air.

Alan looked at her, then around at the campsite and down at the view from the mountain peak.

"We'll be safe tonight."

The firelight flickered across our faces, painting us in shades of gold and shadow, the crackling of tiny embers spiraling into the night air and filling the quiet space between us.

Alan had pulled out an old, half-ripped deck from his pack and we sat in a lopsided circle around the fire, Heather curled up in her sleeping bag, Alan sprawled out with his arm around her, and Eddie somehow already in possession of the largest pile of ration bars and bottle caps that we'd agreed to use as makeshift chips.

"Raise five," Eddie said.

"Okay," I said, narrowing my eyes at him as he slid two packs of jerky into the pile like it was nothing.

"You're bluffing."

Eddie blinked. "I mean... maybe."

Heather laughed softly. "Mac, you've said he's been bluffing every round for the past six hands. How's that working out for you?"

I tossed my cards down in defeat. "He's gotta be cheating. There's no way this is beginner's luck."

Alan arched an eyebrow. "You realize poker isn't a game of luck, right?"

"Not when I'm playing it, apparently."

Eddie grinned, shrugging modestly as he raked the pile toward himself. "I used to play a lot of poker with my brother," he said. "He taught me how to read people. Said I had a good eye for tells."

"Oh, yeah?" I muttered. "What's my tell?"

Eddie didn't miss a beat. "You get real still. You do that thing where your left eyebrow twitches and you hold your breath like a kid hiding in a closet."

I blinked at him. "You serious?"

"Dead serious."

Alan snorted. "He's got you down to the eyebrow twitch, man. You're screwed."

I rolled my eyes as Heather craned her head around and narrowed her eyes.

"Hey, you're bleeding," Heather said to Alan, pointing at the cut across his cheekbone.

He touched it absently, as if he'd forgotten it was there. "I'll live."

"Try not to bleed all over my cards," I said, flicking one at him.

He caught it without looking. "You're just mad you're losing."

To soften the blow, Eddie offered me one of his winnings—a precious sleeve of Oreos—with a crooked grin. "I only hustle my friends."

I took the Oreos begrudgingly, but I couldn't help the smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

Across from me, Heather sighed and stretched out in her sleeping bag. "God, I forgot what it felt like to sit down without worrying about getting shot at."

I let out a small huff of amusement, extending my hands toward the flames as I rubbed the warmth back into my fingers. "Yeah, it's the little things in life."

Alan stretched out on his back, arms folded behind his head, staring up at the sky through the gaps in the trees. "I wouldn't mind living like this forever. Camp out under the stars. Live like wild men. Hunt for food, maybe build some little huts."

Heather nudged his side with her boot. "You're already half-feral. You'd fit right in."

Alan smirked and turned his head to look at her. "I didn't hear you complaining about that earlier."

Heather smacked his arm and I sighed, rubbing a hand over my face, filled with the deepest form of exasperation.

"I swear to God, if I have to hear one more thing about the two of y'all, I'm gonna walk into the woods and let the mountain lions take me."

She rolled her eyes at me and shifted closer to the fire, resting her head on Alan's shoulder in what only could have been a purposeful slight against me.

The fire died down after a while and the effects of the night began to take its hold. Heather and Alan made their way over to their tent, giggling amongst themselves, while Eddie sprawled out and began thumbing through the pages of a battered paperback by the dying light of the fire. I unzipped my tent and climbed in on my hands and knees, throwing myself face-first into my soft bundle of blankets and letting out a relieved sigh. I turned over, slipped inside my sleeping bag and let sleep take me.

Around midnight, I was awoken by the sound of engines. I carefully unzipped the flap of the tent and peered out into the gloom. Down below the ridge of the mountain peak, I could see the beams of headlights cutting through the dark forest. I reached for my rifle as Alan burst out of his tent, the noise jolting Eddie awake from his spot by the campfire. Alan unslung his rifle and laid prone by the ridge, looking down through the scope. Heather poked her disheveled head out of the tent, grumbling as she crawled out and picked up her lever-action.

I could see the vehicles rapidly approaching, a patrol car and an AMC Eagle, coasting over the grassy slopes and parking directly below us, as close as possible. I watched as the doors were flung open and four figures stepped out. Two of them knelt in front of the headlights with their hands folded behind their backs, one of them much slower than the other.

"What can you see?" Eddie asked, crouching by the ridgeline.

Alan turned away from his scope, his face grim. "Heather, it's your parents."

I didn't need a scope to recognize the man standing above them, lit up by the beams of that patrol car.

Even now, in the silver wash of moonlight and halogen, I'd know my father's silhouette from a mile away. His dark hair was slicked back and as stiff as his crisply ironed shirt. His eyes were filled with a ragged desperation as he pressed his revolver against the head of Heather's father.

I heard Heather let out a panicked squeak beside me. I didn't look at her. I couldn't.

The other man was new. I didn't recognize his face, not that it mattered. It was obvious that they'd need someone to fill Wilkes's boots. The bloodstained badge pinned to his uniform told me they'd found their man.

Heather's parents looked rough. Her mom was shaking, her whole body trembling and not from the cold. Her dad, Mr. Robinson, had blood running down the side of his temple as he defiantly glared up at my father, unflinching even with a gun pressed against the back of his skull.

"You come down that mountain," my father shouted, "or I'll have to kill them. Don't make me do this, son."

"Don't you dare!" Mr. Robinson roared, the sound carrying up the mountain like a crack of thunder. "You hear me, Heather? Don't come down that mountain! You shoot that bastard where he stands!"

The new sheriff walked over and whispered something to Mac's dad. They murmured about it for a minute, occasionally glancing back at their hostages. Mr. Robinson turned his head as much as the pressure against his skull allowed, making eye contact with his daughter as her curly head poked out from the ridge line.

"I'm proud of you, baby girl," he rasped, his voice cracking as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. "I mean it. No matter what happens tonight, I love you. You remember that. Don't give him what he wants. Get out of here and get to safety."

Heather was crying silently beside me, her hand shaking as she gripped the rifle tight against her chest.

Down below, her mother knelt limp in the grass, rocking ever so slightly. Her eyes were vacant and empty and her hands shook like wayward leaves. Behind her, my father shifted his stance, settling back so that his voice would carry up the mountain more clearly.

"Mac, do you have any idea how much money you just cost me?" he said. "You just set an entire quarter's worth of earnings on fire. You killed a personal family friend that was near and dear to all our hearts. You burned bridges with donors that I spent decades cultivating and yet..." Tears filled his eyes as he dragged the barrel slightly against Mr. Robinson's scalp. "And yet I still came here tonight to forgive you."

Somewhere within the bowels of my stomach, a sickening pain began to hammer its way through my ribs.

"I still love you," my father said. "And I forgive you. We will figure something out, but first I need you to come down that mountain."

The pit in my stomach dropped as I stared into the eyes of my father.

I had never been so ashamed.

Mr. Robinson growled low in his throat. "You pathetic son of a bitch," he spat. "If you're gonna shoot me, shoot me and have the decency to look me in the eyes when you do it."

My father didn't flinch, his eyes still firmly locked on mine. "You always were a real asshole, Keller."

My father stood there for a moment, one hand resting on Mr. Robinson's shoulder, the other gripping the revolver and pressing it into his skull with a venomous desperation.

"Last chance, Mac," my father warned, his finger flush around the trigger. "Three."

"No," Heather whispered beside me, struggling to line up a shot with the iron sights of her rifle and her shaking hands.

"Heather, don't look!" Mr. Robinson bellowed.

"Two."

"I can't get a clear shot." Alan said, turning away from his rifle in panic.

Mr. Robinson turned to look at his wife, locking eyes with her as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Honey, I love you."

"One."

Mr. Robinson closed his eyes and sucked in a shaky breath as Mac's father pulled back the hammer of the revolver behind him. Slowly, he slid the barrel from Mr. Robinson's skull and leveled it at the bowed, trembling head of his wife.

The crack split the night as Heather's mother dropped like a sack of cloth and bone, her body folding awkwardly beside the cruiser's tire, a crimson spray decorating the fender like a child's handprint in red paint.

For a moment, all was still as wisps of smoke curled from the revolver and Heather's choked sobs of shock filled the air beside me.

Her father surged upward with a feral scream, slamming his body into my father's and dragging them both to the ground in a heap of fists and fury. The revolver skittered into the grass, forgotten.

Heather raised her rifle and fired off a round, but Alan reached out and stopped her with a sharp jerk of his arm.

"You're going to hit him," Alan snapped, and I could see the war waging behind his eyes.

Then a second blast echoed through the night. The new sheriff stood with the butt of his patrol shotgun against his shoulder. Mr. Robinson's body jerked as the buckshot punched through his back, and he dropped beside his wife in the grass, their limbs tangled in death.

Heather's scream rended the night around her, the sound tearing her throat raw. Alan opened fire first, his rifle barking as he aimed straight for the sheriff. Beside me, Heather fired wildly into the night, her face wet with tears of rage.

The new sheriff tried to duck away from the hailstorm of bullets, shouting as a round caught his thigh. He stumbled into the grass and rolled behind the body of his cruiser, then disappeared into the pines. My father staggered to his feet, a steady stream of blood pouring from his broken nose and split lip as he reached for the revolver.

Heather's bullet cracked across the distance, and I watched my father's chest snap backward as the round hit home. He crumpled forward as his knees folded beneath him, his last breath escaping him like a deflating tire.

The clearing fell silent, save for the wind rustling through the trees and the distant crackle of the cruiser's dying engine. It felt like we sat there for hours, watching the headlights cast their wicked glow upon the bodies and the steaming blood that pooled in the grass, turning it to a thick, earthy sludge.

It was as if the world had been muted, drained of its sound and color as I tore my eyes from the macabre scene. Alan held Heather as she sobbed into his shirt and pulled her back into their tent, desperately trying to clot the grief that burst from the arteries of her soul.

I laid there in my tent and I knew that sleep would not take me, not tonight. I thought of the way the smoke curled from the muzzle of Heather's rifle and I tried to remember what my father used to sound like when he told me bedtime stories.

But all I could hear now was the echo of that gunshot, ringing louder than his voice ever had.

Alan Russell

I found myself standing in the same hallway as before, the same bullet-ridden stretch of hell that haunted my dreams. The fluorescent lights flickered above me, buzzing like dying flies over the bloodstained floor. I walked briskly, dulled now to the horrors of my childhood.

At the end of the hall, past the cracked door and its halo of flickering light, waited the red room, with its curtains of writhing ink and the floor that bled with every step.

The door creaked as I pushed it open, and there he was, as always.

The Man in the Tweed Suit.

He sat behind a polished oak desk, his long legs crossed and his hat tilted low. The air smelled faintly of tea and wet stone. Two porcelain cups sat between us, steam rising from their rims like tiny ghosts. The barn owl perched above the doorframe, its heart-shaped face a pallid mask filled with an incoherent rage, silently watching.

"You've been busy," he said, his voice was as warm as molasses and twice as slow, but the words still scraped like broken glass. *"There hasn't been a ceremony of Care in weeks, but I must say, Ashwood's never been so lively."*

I stepped forward and took the seat across from him.

He gestured to the tea. *"Chamomile. It's good for nerves."*

I didn't touch the cup, but he smiled anyway.

"You're a difficult man to catch in dreams, Alan," He clicked his tongue. *"Always tossing and turning. You're wonderin' why you're here again, I suppose. Why your sleep's no longer yours. Well, I suppose there's a few reasons."*

"For one, that great collider beneath the mountain," He said, stirring his cup of tea. *"Who do you think answered all those questions they sent into the void? Did you think it was the benevolence of Promethean fire? No, that machine was a bell, boy. And every time they rang it, they thinned the veil between your world and mine."*

"Second, you've wrought more death than most men your age," He said, picking up his teacup and taking a sip. *"Morgan. Your father, Arvin. Kevin, Don, Laura, Trevor, Tricia, Jenny, Brandon, Wilkes, Quintin, Heather's parents, Mac's father, and poor, poor Charlotte, by your own hand. Now, some might say that's a pattern."*

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. *"You're thinkin' about running, boy. About taking that girl and what's left of your little flock and vanishing into the trees. But you won't, because you know the third reason as well as I do."*

The room darkened as the shadows thickened behind him like oil spreading across canvas. The air tinged with ash and rot, filling my lungs like a cancer as his form seemed to dwarf the table.

"All debts come due, son. Yours most of all." He said, rising to his feet, his joints cracking backward as he straightened.

He stepped around the desk, stopping just inches from my face.

"Do you hear it, Alan?" he whispered, his breath hot against my cheek, like the hiss of coal.

"The Call of Care?"

I woke to a sound that didn't belong to this world, an ancient droning wail that vibrated through my skull, clawed its way into the marrow of my bones, and sent my pulse skittering like dead leaves in the wind. It wasn't the sound of any machine, nor the call of any animal.

I threw off my sleeping bag as the earth shifted beneath my feet as if the mountain had been brought to life. The pines trembled, their skeletal branches shivering against the black sky. The sound was all around me, vibrating the air itself and pressing against the fabric of reality like a fist against damp paper.

"Heather," I rasped, barely able to hear my own voice over the hum. *"Get up."*

Beside me, Heather shot upright, her orange curls frizzy with sleep, her breath hitching in surprise as she untangled herself from the sleeping bag and yanked on her boots with shaking hands. Outside, the ground shuddered,

pine needles tumbling down from the boughs of the pines like rain. The fire from the night before had gone out, leaving behind nothing but smoldering embers.

I grabbed my Armalite rifle, checking the magazine on instinct as my stomach twisted itself into knots.

Heather turned to me, her wide eyes searching mine. “The peak,” she said. “We can see the whole town from there.”

I nodded and slung my rifle over my shoulder, already on the move.

We scrambled up the incline, my boots slipping against the damp leaves and the loose dirt of the shaking earth as I used the roots of trees to haul myself higher. The sound grew stronger and more insistent, filling the sky like the wail of an apocalyptic siren.

By the time we reached the peak, my heart was hammering like a war drum in my chest. I unslung my rifle and raised the scope to my eye, aiming down at the valley below.

Far below us, the town of Ashwood was coming alive, people pouring out of their homes and streaming into the streets. They moved oddly, in a slack-jawed unison. A few were dressed in their work uniforms, police officers and deputies in their crisp tan uniforms, their weapons forgotten at their sides, blue-collar men with grease-stained hands, gas station attendants with half-zipped jackets and waitresses in name-tagged aprons that swayed as they moved.

The rest were barefoot in their nightclothes, their arms held stiffly at their sides. I recognized some of them. Mayor Kowalski shuffled behind Mr. Sherman, Kevin’s father, who was still in his nightshirt. Far behind them, Lester Freeman stumbled through the horde in the regalia of a janitor at Ashwood High, followed by Don’s mother and his three brothers, padding after her like ducklings. It seemed as if everyone from town had been swept up into the frenzy. Through the scope, I scanned the crowd for Jeremiah, but he and his family were nowhere to be found.

I lowered the rifle, my skin crawling with dread.

“They’re going towards the Grove,” Heather whispered.

My eyes tracked them as they flooded into the woods and dispersed among the pines. A distinct rustling sound came from behind us. I spun around fast and raised my rifle, only to find Mac and Eddie stumbling forward as if they were sleepwalking, their hair tousled and filled with leaves as they moved glassy-eyed, their feet dragging through the brush.

Heather ran forward and grabbed Eddie by the shoulders, shaking him hard. “Eddie! Hey! Wake up!”

Eddie didn’t react at all, maintaining his cloudy stare as Mac moved past us, his lips parted as his gaze locked on something far beyond the trees.

I cursed under my breath and stepped in front of him, grabbing him by the collar. “Mac,” I snapped. “Look at me.”

Mac didn’t even blink. My pulse pounded against my skull as panic filled my chest.

“They can’t hear us,” Heather said.

I clenched my jaw. “Do you still have that vial of holy water?”

Heather’s hands flew to her bag and she pulled out her last bottle of holy water. She popped the cap off with her thumb and splashed the water across Mac and Eddie’s faces, making sure to coat their ears. The effect was immediate. Mac gasped and jerked back as if we’d woken him up with ice water, his hands flying up to wipe at his face.

“Heather, what the hell?!”

Eddie staggered sideways, swearing under his breath.

Heather sighed in relief. “Oh, thank god.”

Mac blinked hard as he woke up, his pupils flaring wildly.

“What—what just happened?”

I let go of his collar and stepped back. “You were walking toward the Grove.”

Eddie’s expression twisted. “What?”

I nodded toward the ridge. Eddie followed my gaze, his face going slack. Far below, the seemingly ant-sized people of Ashwood still marched, their figures growing smaller as they disappeared one by one into the thick trees, headed towards the clearing of the Grove.

Mac wiped a trembling hand across his mouth, his face pale and drawn in the waning light. His voice, when it finally came, was barely a shaky whisper. “Holy shit.”

Eddie stood frozen, his hands limp at his sides as the color bled from his face. His breath came shallow and quick, and he blinked at the field below like he was trying to wake up from a nightmare.

Mac’s eyes darted between Heather and I, struggling to piece the moment together. “Why—why weren’t you two pulled in?”

“I think it was the holy water.”

Mac furrowed his brow, eyes narrowing with confusion.

“The bath I took,” I explained. “Back at the cabin.”

It took him a second. Then his gaze slid to Heather, who was avoiding his gaze. Despite himself, his mouth turned upwards slightly.

“Not the time, man.” I muttered.

“I was going to walk into that,” Eddie said, almost to himself, his voice cracked and hollow as his eyes fixed on the path the townspeople had taken. “I was gonna follow them.”

The forest seemed to pulse with reverberations of the sound, the pull of it calling to me like a long-forgotten lover. I could feel it in my teeth, in the marrow of my bones, clouding the edges of my vision as a tense knot formed in the center of my chest, as if my soul was being pulled into the forest, summoned by some old and ancient evil. The hum had settled into the air itself, a low, droning presence that pressed against my skull and vibrated through my bones.

It wasn’t loud anymore, not the unbearable wail that had first sent the town into its trance, but it was still there, lingering beneath everything as it seeped betwixt the cracks. From our vantage point on the ridge, the sight of the townspeople marching through the trees was like watching a stream of corpses floating slow and steady across a bloodied river.

“Do you think we could make it to your truck?” Eddie asked tentatively.

Mac shifted beside me. “My mother’s down there.”

“We’ve got to follow them,” I murmured.

I thought of my dream from the night before, of every moment that man had walked his way through the boulevards of my life and curved his way through every forking road. I knew that I had no choice but to join them at the base of the mountain, as lambs for slaughter. It was as if each pulsating note of that hum, of the Call of Care was the tolling of some great unseen bell that reverberated through every inch of my being.

He was right, the debt had come due.

And the bell rang for my soul.

We cautiously made our way down the mountainside, past the thick brush and hanging boughs that obstructed our frantic sprint down the peak. I stopped as I saw the glint of sharpened stakes up ahead. Past the hanging branches of a maple tree, the body of the newly appointed sheriff hung limp from one of my traps, the crimson stained spikes protruding through his abdomen and poking out the side of his uniform. We all stared at the body for a moment before the sense of urgency set back in and we set off down the steep slope.

I cut through the brush ahead of me, slicing off hanging moss and branches with the hunting knife I’d strapped to my backpack, carving a trail through the agrestal wilderness.

Through the underbrush and past the great ancient pines, I could just make out the edge of the clearing. It opened out before us, the foliage parting like a wound in the earth. The giant stone owl loomed up ahead, its hollow eyes fixed on the steady stream of the approaching congregation.

Within the clearing, the swelling mass of people moved with eerie precision, their eyes wide open and their pupils so enlarged they nearly eclipsed their irises. Their arms hung loose at their sides like marionettes cut free of their strings.

My stomach churned as a low groan filled the air. The earth beneath our feet gave a subtle lurch, and I realized that the statue was moving. In a single smooth, fluid movement, the owl shifted forward, the stone grinding against itself and sending small rocks tumbling down the ridge as it moved with a static fluidity that defied logic itself.

The base of the statue crumbled away in large chunks, revealing a darkened tunnel beneath the great idol that stretched deep into the bowels of the earth.

Warm, fetid air wafted up from the opening, thick with the stench of damp soil, rotting roots, and something sweet and metallic, like blood left to bake in the sun. I watched in horror as the gathered people began pulling themselves down into the darkness, the wet maw of the tunnel swallowing them whole.

From where I crouched in the brush, I turned towards my friends and locked eyes with Heather as I felt myself being called to descend into the depths. It felt as if there was a fishhook lodged between my ribs that was slowly reeling me into the darkness.

I felt my feet stepping out of the tree-line as I tossed aside the pine boughs and brush, yearning for the warmth of the tunnel, ignoring the cries that called my name. The descent was slow at first, but the ground sloped downward sharply and I stumbled, falling onto the far wall of the tunnel. The air grew humid as the damp walls seemed to close in around me, the polished stone cool beneath my fingertips. But as I went deeper, as the last remnants of the morning sun faded behind me, the texture changed.

It was subtle, a slow yielding give beneath my palm, damp and pliant. The scent of loam and wet rot filled my nostrils, earthy and unpleasant. I kept moving as the tunnel pressed against me, slowly tightening, like a gullet pulling me down. The rhythmic sound of footsteps became the only noise in the damp passageway, the shuffle of feet against the unseen ground, the endless march of the dark parade trudging forward through the gloom. I squinted in the darkness and I was surprised to see Heather at my side, the dim glow from the end of the passage casting just enough light to catch the outline of her profile. Beyond her, I could just barely make out the shapes of Mac and Eddie.

The conditions worsened the further I descended. The walls began to pulse and compress with a steady contraction, as though the tunnel itself was breathing. The gusts of air came in rhythmic bursts, a slow inhalation of stale, humid heat followed by an exhale of frigid rancidity.

I struggled to swallow, my tongue swollen and thick in my mouth. Up ahead, I could see a woman pushing through the passage ahead of me, her sweaty hair hung limp over her shoulders, her skin sallowed and clammy.

The whispering started then, riding in on the next gust of wind. It was a chorus of voices, a susurrations of long-dead tongues, slithering through the passage and curling around me like unseen serpents. I didn't recognize the words, but their meaning crawled beneath my skin. It was beckoning to me as the siren song had once called sailors to their watery graves.

Up ahead, the tunnel narrowed once more. The woman ahead of me had begun pushing through a gap barely large enough for her body, her limbs twisting unnaturally as her bones contorted to fit the impossible passageway. She disappeared into the fleshy tunnel, the last of her body writhing its way through like a worm forcing itself through a crack in the earth.

For the first time, I hesitated, my pulse hammering in my throat. I turned my head and caught a glimpse of the others behind me in the dim glow from the tunnel's end.

The walls around me flexed like a muscle, moving me through the passageway after the glossy-eyed woman. The walls were slick beneath my palms and held a vein-like texture. I had to squeeze through sideways as I pressed my body against the throbbing walls and felt the flesh give way beneath me.

Behind me, I heard Heather get stuck in the pulsing passageway. She let out a panicked squeak as the two undulating surfaces wedged her between them. I reached out for her in the darkness and grabbed her by the arm, feeling the rapid beat of her pulse beneath my fingers.

"Don't panic," I murmured.

Heather nodded, wrinkling her nose at the putrid organic stench of the tunnel. With a sharp push, she forced herself through as it expanded just enough to let her pass.

Beyond the narrowing dark, the dim glow of the passage flickered and pulsed. I could hear it now; the low, rhythmic thrum of the Hadron Collider. It vibrated through the flesh-like walls, rattling my chest and pressing against my skull.

The tunnel opened up and spat me out with a sickening pop. I stumbled forward in the cavernous clearing, my boots sliding against the slick surface beneath me, and I nearly choked on the sheer stench of the chamber before

me. Gone were the pristine walls of the research facility, gone were the neatly arranged consoles and the sterile, fluorescent lighting.

The room I stood in was cavernous and impossibly vast, the paneling of the original structure overtaken by thick, pulsing tissue. Veins snaked across the walls, their dark cords pulsing with a thick golden ichor. The overhead lights flickered, struggling incessantly against the wet, organic film that had overtaken them, casting shifting shadows down upon me.

And at the center of it all was the Gate.

It was a rupture in the very fabric of existence, a gaping wound in reality itself. It strobed gently, jagged at the edges like torn flesh, a great black void that pulled in the light around it. As I stared into it, I felt my vision blur as my mind rebelled against its horrible beauty.

From the void, they emerged in slow, fluid movements; inky, amorphous figures pulling themselves from the wound in reality, their bodies shifting and stretching as they moved without logic or form. One moment, they had arms. The next, their limbs unfurled into gossamer strands, twisting into new appendages. Their bodies rippled like liquid shadows, their edges flickering like a film reel.

The scientists stood in a tight circle around the Gate, their blood soaked coats like crimson robes as they bowed their heads and whispered in low, reverent tones. The sigil beneath them pulsed, its thick, sinewy lines glowing faintly as the symbols twisted and reformed, never settling into a single shape.

The woman ahead of me was shuffling toward the tear in reality, her vacantly dilated eyes betraying no fear or hesitation. I heard another wet pop behind me and turned to see Eddie struggling to slip through the fleshy opening, while Heather and Mac were already standing behind me, gazing up at the maw of the portal.

“What the hell is she doing?” Eddie asked, but it was as if his voice was underwater. He rushed toward the woman as she approached the threshold, his arm outstretched.

“Ma’am! Please—” Eddie lunged to grab her arm, but his fingers passed through empty air.

She had already stepped into the abyss.

She burst upon impact, her body coming apart like a water balloon filled with hot, steaming meat. Her insides liquefied instantly, a wet, sucking pop echoing through the chamber as blood and viscera splattered outward in a steaming arc. Jagged, glistening bone fragments skittered across the stone floor. What little was left of her scattered across the floor and rolled to a stop by my boot, her skull split open like a crushed insect, her mouth locked in a final, soundless scream.

Eddie stumbled back in shock, his face splattered with viscera, but Mac caught him before he could fall to the sinewy floor. Heather turned away, gagging as her stomach searched for something to expel. I wrapped my arms around her as she buried her face into my shoulder, her face wet with tears. I looked around the room, uncomfortably aware of the pulpy remains of the masses of people that had once been there but no longer were. My eyes caught the alluring glow of the dark portal, numbing my senses.

As I stared into the yawning mouth of the abyss, I wished that they hadn’t followed me into the dark. My mother’s sins were mine to bear, not theirs. I held Heather close as the blood pooled at the sigil’s center and seeped into the veins that lined the walls, feeding the golden fluid like a transfusion. The symbols pulsed hungrily and the glow intensified as I heard a rhythmic heartbeat in the cavern.

A deep, wet shudder passed through the chamber as the men of science tilted their heads back, the flesh of their faces drooping like melting wax as their eyes rolled dark with ecstasy beneath their pallid masks. An ancient chant rolled from their lips in a language no man had spoken since the fall of Babel.

The ebony doorway shuddered, the darkness at its center rippling as something vast and formless shifted just beyond its threshold. The blood-drenched sigil on the floor pulsed like a beating heart and my shallow breath caught in my chest, the void twisting and bending as something emerged.

It didn’t step or crawl out, It unfurled its way into existence.

It did not have a form. It shifted constantly, flickering between shapes, each one stranger than the last. It was the creature at the center of every nightmare, of every fear that had gnawed at the hearts of men since the dawn of time. Evil turned and moved towards us, flickering between forms.

A great, horned bipedal beast with eyes like burning coals and the head of a goat. A king draped in yellow finery, his face beautiful and unbearably cruel beneath his pale heart-shaped mask. A monstrous shadow, its edges dissolving into the air, vast and unending. A wrinkled old man, his eyes dark and shining with an irrepressible youth. A beautiful angel with flowing locks of chestnut-brown hair and red-rimmed eyes. A man in a tweed suit, standing as casually as if he had just stepped out of a Sunday service.

My fingers brushed the edge of my backpack as I reached for my final bottle of holy water. It tilted its head slowly, before lazily flicking its pale digits.

Eddie screamed as he was yanked back by an unseen force so strong it sent a gust of hot, rancid air sweeping through the chamber. His body snapped like a doll made of dry sticks, his spine arching too far, his arms twisting around themselves like wet rope.

The scream choked in his throat as his chest split clean down the center, the skin unfurling like the torn wings of a butterfly pinned to a collector's board. The flesh pulled away, inch by agonizing inch, exposing the glistening red pulp beneath. His ribs cracked loud enough to echo against the walls, but he was still alive. His fingers twitched, his mouth forming words that could no longer take shape.

His tongue blackened, curling like paper meeting fire and swelling until it filled the hollow cavern of his splitting jaw. His eyes burst like twin overripe berries with a wet pop as dark fluid poured down his cheeks. His last breath rattled in his throat, a sound more horror than human, and then he was gone.

The flesh, the blood, and the bones were absorbed by the bulbous mass of the floor, leaving behind only the stray remains of his teeth, scattered like dice on the crimson ground.

It looked directly at me and Its lips curled into a smile.

"Alan Russell," It said, "I've come to collect."

As It extended Its hand and placed Its palm upon my forehead, I felt my body begin to float as a calm numbness wrapped itself around me. The edges of my vision blurred and the world faded away from me. In some far-off place, I was vaguely aware of Heather calling my name and shaking my lifeless body.

I found myself in a small clearing amongst the pines. The air tasted of copper and ozone, like blood in a thunderstorm. When I finally looked around, I realized I was standing on the edge of the grove, but not the one I remembered.

The trees here grew backwards and twisted skyward in spirals, their bark slick with a slow-moving film that shimmered like oil. The sky above was bruised black and mottled purple like spoiled meat, as a jagged slit of blood-red light pulsed behind the clouds.

In the dark hollow of the woods, the pale, heart-shaped faces of a thousand owls peered out at me from between the pines, weeping incoherent rage from their eyes.

I took a tentative step backwards as a table flickered into existence in the center of the clearing.

It was a simple wooden thing, scarred by time and use, with mismatched chairs on either side. A rusted lantern sat atop it, flickering with a weak, yellow glow that didn't cast any warmth or light at all. And seated across from me, as though he'd always been there, was the Man in the Tweed Suit.

His hat was tilted low, one long-fingered hand resting atop the old silver lantern as his eyes gleamed from under the brim like amber in a fire.

"*I like this one,*" he said, his voice like a whisper through an old vinyl record. "*This dream. It's one of yours, y'know. I just moved a few things around.*"

I didn't sit in the chair, my feet already sinking slightly into the soft loam. "Where am I?"

"*A question best not asked,*" he replied, lifting his chin. "*Though I'd wager you already know.*"

I didn't answer, my breath curling white in the cold air.

He motioned with a lazy flick of his wrist and the grove suddenly melted away, bleeding down the sides of my vision like paint in rain.

I sat in the cab of my pickup, my hands wrapped around the familiar grip of the steering wheel as I realized it was taking on water. The water was shallow at first but filling fast, and I watched my shoes vanish into its surface like ink into paper.

I could hear the high, distant echoes of children laughing and my own voice among them, bringing back memories of summer days spent swimming in the river, the warmth of my skin under the sun and the feeling of freedom so pure it made your chest ache. That feeling turned on me now and curdled in my gut.

I tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. The water had already swallowed my shins and was climbing my thighs like cold hands. Panic pulsed in my throat as I pressed both of my palms to the window and pushed away at the glass. My reflection stared back, both younger and older, flickering between versions of myself I didn't remember becoming.

I heard his voice once more, rumbling through my eardrums like a passing train.

"Come now," he said. "Aren't you tired of the running?"

My mouth moved, but my tongue had turned to sand. I tried to blink, but the world blinked with me, twisting inside out and folding away like wet paper.

Suddenly, I was eight years old again, standing in my backyard. I stood barefoot in the cool grass, the blades still wet with dew. I could hear my mother humming somewhere nearby, a lullaby I hadn't thought of in years. I turned toward the sound, searching for that sliver of childhood comfort, but instead it was the Man in the Tweed Suit who stood in her place with his hand outstretched.

A false warmth radiated from him like steam off a rotting compost heap.

"Memory is a fragile thing," he murmured. "We like to think it belongs to us, but it doesn't. It belongs to time. And time, my boy, belongs to me."

I stumbled back, and the world faded beneath my feet. Steel rails screamed under my palms as I hit the ground hard, the impact knocking the wind from my lungs. I pushed myself up from the train tracks, my boots shifting underneath the crumbling clay.

I saw my mother sitting on the opposite side of the tracks, younger than I'd ever seen her, her hands clenched tightly before her as she spoke to the Man in the Tweed Suit. He lounged in his wooden chair, drumming his fingers across the table.

"She bartered your soul before it had the weight to walk," he said suddenly, his eyes snapping to meet mine across the tracks. "Such a tender thing to gamble."

Then the years peeled forward like burning paper.

I found myself on the same train tracks, now rusted and tarnished with age. Rain cascaded down in sheets, dousing my head in a providential flood and soaking through my coat. Up ahead, my mother's burgundy robes clung to her like skin.

Through the deluge, I saw Kevin and Don sprawled out on the tracks, staining the clay crimson as my mother stood over their bodies, the barrel of her shotgun steaming in the downpour.

Far off down the tracks, I could see the silhouette of a man in a tweed suit and a matching hat, silently watching. I heard his voice whispering in the wind.

"She prayed for your life, Alan. And so many others have paid to prolong it."

I flinched as I heard the world re-assemble around me again.

I opened my eyes and found myself in my kitchen, my father's gun trembling in my grip as my mother stood across from me, smiling through her tears. The grip still carried the shape of his hand.

The Man in the Tweed Suit leaned over my shoulder as I raised the gun.

"You carry so many deaths with you," he said. "It's a wonder you can walk at all."

"I never asked for this," I whispered.

She dropped to the floor as the bullet hit her, a flower of red blooming at her side. The world froze and rewound as she hit the floor, the bullet re-entering the gun as her back arched unnaturally, pulling her to her feet.

In a single unconscious movement, the gun fired again. I struggled to close my eyes as her body jerked upwards again.

"Tell me, how many times do you think it takes before it stops hurting?"

I fought against my finger with everything I had, forcing it away from the trigger. I let out a cry of anguish as my finger snapped back to the trigger.

Bang.

She rewound to her feet.

With a Herculean effort, I tore myself from where I stood and ran down the hallway to my room as the lights flickered off behind me, the room folding in on itself like paper. I turned the corner and pulled on the door handle, tugging on it to no avail.

Behind me I could hear the hallway disassembling and I found myself standing back in the kitchen again. Sweat poured down my face as my fingers gripped the gun, firmly removed from my control. As the trigger was pulled once more, I could feel something in my chest crack open like an eggshell.

Each time, she died a little differently. Sometimes with a sigh or a sharp gasp, but most of the time, she was silent. Every time, it ended with her body folding like laundry and landing on the floor in a bloody heap, but her eyes seemed to always find mine in that final second. I could feel it tearing at my soul as I began to fray at the edges.

"You want to believe you're the righteous one," he said, standing directly behind me now. *"The shepherd. And maybe you are. You sure as hell ain't the first to put down a rabid animal, and you won't be the last. But you've got to ask yourself—do you think the good Lord looked away for you, too?"*

I tried to scream but my throat had been rubbed raw. All that came out was a pitiful gargling groan.

Bang.

Rewind.

"I could stop this, you know," he said, clicking his tongue. *"I could make it all go away."*

Bang.

Rewind.

"You can stop running now," he murmured. *"You don't have to be afraid anymore."*

Bang.

Rewind.

Finally, when I'd been hollowed out completely and I'd lost count of the amount of times I'd pulled the trigger, the world unspooled again.

Like the snap of a film reel flipping scenes, I found myself back in the clearing. The pines arched like spines overhead and the bruised sky leaked its pulsing red light as the ground swayed beneath my feet.

He stood in front of me, close enough to see the dust on his coat and smell the copper on his breath.

"Sit," he said kindly, the way a doctor speaks to a terminal patient. *"You look tired."*

My legs folded without permission and I sank into the chair, my hands trembling as I gripped the edge of the table.

He leaned forward and rested his crooked elbows across the wood tabletop.

"All this effort, all this running, all this pain and still, you carry your mother's sins."

I looked beneath the brim of his hat and saw myself reflected a thousand times over, each version more ruined than the last. His smile split wider, his skin tightening around the gaping wound of his mouth.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Only what's owed."

I stared at him, at the flicker of dark ichor that flared beneath his skin. He was shifting subtly, his cheeks darkening and his limbs lengthening, then quickly contracting, as though the body he wore was a shirt that didn't quite fit.

"You want my soul," I said.

"I want you to finish what your mother started." He placed his hands on the tabletop and stood up, pushing back his chair. *"You were born into it, son of the carpenter."*

I could hear his heartbeat quicken with excitement as he began to circle around me slowly, his footsteps barely stirring the pine needles. I could hear them whispering beneath his heels, the same sound as the murmurs from the flesh tunnels.

"You don't have to keep burning just to stay warm," he said. *"I can take it all. The grief. The guilt. The rage."*

With each word, the air thickened as his voice poured into me, coating my senses in a cloudy film. I staggered toward him, my legs moving independently as my mind faded away. His hand extended toward me, those long pale fingers curling at the edges and inviting me into the jaws of oblivion.

“Walk with me, my wayward son.”

I stared at his outstretched hand.

Behind him a burst of blue blossomed, spiraling and twisting wildly as Mac stepped through. His hand reached out and grasped firmly around mine, pulling me away from the table.

“I’ve got you, brother.” Mac said, his eyes meeting mine as the blue light spread from his hand and enveloped us both.

I looked around as the azure glow snaked around the trees and absorbed the crimson canopy above us. The surreal dreamscape flickered and I saw myself from above as Heather cradled my body in her arms. Mac stood beside me, the last remnants of our holy water poured upon the fleshy earth in a series of geometric shapes, surrounding him within a circle. The liquid glowed a pale blue, the light snaking up his arms and encasing him in a soft halo. On the floor next to him laid my father’s leather bound bible, open to the page we had looked at together, the page on the exorcism of Lex Talionis, a life for a life.

As the realization hit me, Mac’s hand tightened around mine and the world faded away from me.

It was like standing too close to a lightning strike and finding yourself trapped inside the thunder.

I was Mac at ten, a boy with tangled hair and bruises on his ribs, flinching from the voice of a father that never loved him and the cold absence of a mother who didn’t know how.

I was Mac at sixteen as the three of us laid on the Petersons’ roof with a blanket and a stolen bottle of vodka, staring up at the stars.

I was Mac at eleven as Trevor pushed him into lockers, as he went nights without eating dinner, as he stared at his ceiling with red-rimmed eyes and whispered promises to God.

I was Mac at fourteen as he swam in the river with us, his socks balled up in his sneakers on the shore, as we had campfires and s’mores and told dumb stories that made us laugh so hard we forgot the darkness just outside the glow.

I was Mac at thirteen as Morgan’s laugh whipped through the wind, holding her hand in his as their legs swung over the edge to the dock. I felt the warm glow on his face when she looked at him like he was someone worth loving. He told her he’d never leave her, and as their lips met I finally understood.

My gaze flickered back to reality as Mac’s voice rang out, the final words of the exorcism rolling off his tongue with the confidence of a man who had made his choice before he ever set foot in this hell. The symbols poured across the floor ignited in a furious burst of white light, the holy water sizzling against the earthen flesh. It spread outward in tendrils of flame, racing across the chamber and licking at It, still dressed in the form of the Man in the Tweed Suit.

It staggered back as It was engulfed in fire, Its form unraveling like smoke caught in a hurricane. Its fingers curled into claws, Its many faces flickering between rage and agony as Its mouth opened in a wordless, howling scream. The Gate behind It convulsed and spasmed like a great wounded beast as it buckled inward, the wound in reality desperately trying to close in on itself, tearing away the air and the light that surrounded it.

Mac stood at its center, bathed in the glow of his own sacrifice. His hands were raised, his lips still moving in prayer as he kept his eyes locked on the abyss. His face was calm and utterly at peace, his breath steady even as the light consumed him, as the holy fire licked up his arms and spread across his chest. His clothes blackened and his skin began to crack, light shining through the fissures as if he had never been made of flesh at all.

I could do nothing but watch as my best friend, the boy who had been by my side since we were children, turned to me one last time, his eyes full of hope.

“I’m gonna go see Morgan.”

He smiled, a small, quiet thing as the impossibly bright light consumed him and he was gone, reduced to atoms.

Behind him, the Gate tore away at itself, reality shrinking around it as a deafening roar split the air, the last unholy cry of a dying angel. The chamber walls trembled and the machinery that had once adorned this space shrieked in protest, sparks erupting from them in a blinding cascade. Its form buckled and writhed, Its body splintering apart in jagged ribbons of smoky darkness, Its many faces howling in rage and ruin as it was pulled into the collapsing gate.

There was silence for a moment as the light faded and the fire dimmed. The room stood empty, the absence of the gate now unnervingly unnatural as it was filled only with the sound of ragged breathing.

I staggered forward, barely feeling the weight of Heather's hands gripping my arm, barely hearing the way she was saying my name, her voice hoarse and broken, barely seeing anything past the hollow space where Mac had once stood.

Gone.

Mac was gone.

The first beep was soft, barely audible over the ringing in my ears. Then another and another. A slow, rhythmic beeping, cutting through the smoldering ruin of the chamber like a distantly beating war drum. It barely registered at first, my mind still trapped in the ghost of Mac's final smile, still frozen in that split second before he was gone, before the light had consumed him and reduced his body to less than dust, before I reached out for him only to run my hands through the ashes that remained. The world could have ended right then and there, and I wouldn't have noticed.

But the beeping grew faster and more urgent.

Heather's fingers dug into my wrist, her tone laced with desperation. "Alan—"

The sound of my name ripped me out of the memory. My head snapped up, my vision swimming as the raw scent of ozone and burning metal flooded my nose. The chamber was lit in flickering shades of red from the failing emergency lights. Smoke curled in thick tendrils from the shattered remains of the Hadron Collider, the behemoth machine a twisted corpse of steel and circuitry. Its broken halves spat sparks like dying embers, and warning signals flared in a frantic dance across the cracked monitors. Somewhere deep within its belly, something whined, high-pitched and eerie, like a wounded animal preparing to scream.

Then, beneath my feet, I felt a tremor, almost deceptively small at first, then another, growing stronger this time, rattling the debris around me. A sudden, sharp groan echoed through the cavernous chamber as the walls shuddered, as if the entire structure had inhaled one final breath and the chamber lurched violently to one side.

"Oh, shit—"

Heather grabbed me just as the floor tilted beneath us, sending loose shards of metal and stone skidding across the fleshy ground. The groaning intensified into a deafening, all-encompassing wail as the weight of destruction bore down on us. Cracks raced across the floor in jagged lines, splitting open like the maw of some unseen beast. A heavy support beam gave way in the distance, crashing down in an explosion of sparks and dust. I barely had time to move out of the way before another tremor knocked me forward, nearly sending me sprawling onto the unstable ground.

"Heather—" I turned toward her, but she was already moving, pulling me up by my jacket with the fierce determination that had kept us alive this long. Her face, streaked with sweat and soot, was illuminated in the scarlet glow of the dying chamber, her eyes wide with the same fear I felt clawing its way up my throat.

Then came the sound that shattered what was left of my composure. A deep, resonating crack from beneath us, so loud it reverberated through my bones.

The floor was giving way. A massive fissure split open just a few feet from us, devouring everything in its path. Pieces of machinery tumbled into the yawning crevasse, swallowed by the endless darkness below. The wall nearest to us groaned and buckled, fractures splintering across its surface like lightning strikes. One of the emergency lights flickered and then popped, showering us in sparks.

I grabbed Heather's hand and shoved her forward. "Go!"

The chamber let out one final, ear-splitting wail before it all came crashing down.

My fingers curled tight around Heather's as we shoved past the half-melted remains of the chamber and sprinted for the tunnels.

The fleshy walls heaved and convulsed around us like dying muscle. The rhythmic gusts of air were erratic now, gasping and shuddering as I struggled to keep my footing. The passage screamed as we pushed through narrowing gaps, the walls closing in and pulsing with an inhuman sentience.

Heather gagged at the stench, but I didn't let go of her hand. I pushed her ahead of me as the tunnel pitched upward. The air was thinner now and hotter, filled with the stench of scorched flesh. The beeping from below had turned into a shrieking klaxon, echoing through the collapsing caverns and chasing us up and out.

The passage narrowed even further, forcing us to drop to all fours and squeeze through on our hands and knees. The fleshy walls quivered as if aware of our intrusion, the very architecture of the great beast rebelling against us. I clawed forward, my hands sinking into the clammy, pulsating ground. The air was so humid it felt like breathing through wet fabric.

The tunnel twitched and I was nearly thrown backward. Heather yelped as the walls squeezed inward, the space shrinking around us and forcing us to wedge ourselves forward inch by agonizing inch. My shoulders scraped against the pulsing walls and a viscous, mucus-like fluid seeped down my neck.

I bit down my panic, and followed Heather, climbing up to the light. The tunnel dipped and suddenly we were sliding, our bodies plunging downward into a slick, sloping passage. My hands clawed at the walls, but there was no purchase, only a fleshy, undulating surface that I couldn't hold onto. Heather screamed ahead of me, her voice half-swallowed by the abyss.

Then we hit the bottom, the impact sending a jolt through my spine and I barely managed to roll onto my side before the tunnel groaned again, another tremor rippling through its organic structure. We were in a small chamber now that was barely large enough for the two of us to crouch in. The only exit was a gaping maw of a tunnel, its walls pulsing like the throat of some enormous beast.

Heather turned to me, her face pale and slick with sweat. "We have to move," she gasped, out of breath. "It's—it's closing."

The tunnel ahead of us was narrowing by the second. The fleshy walls pulsed in slow, deliberate contractions, starting to seal off our only escape route.

I lunged forward and we dove into the passage, my elbows and knees scraping against the slick, undulating surface. The tunnel was so tight now that I had to turn my head sideways just to keep moving as my breath came in sharp, desperate gasps. I felt a shift behind us, a deep, awful compression that sent a shudder through my bones.

The passage was collapsing. We scrambled forward frantically as the walls squeezed tighter and pressed against my ribs, pinning my arms to my sides. My lungs burned and spots began to spread across my vision.

Up ahead, I saw a pale sliver of light. I clawed toward it, my lungs screaming as I pulled us through the last stretch of the tunnel. We hit the surface in a burst of cold air, my legs burning and my lungs heaving, desperate for oxygen. Ashwood stood before us, completely still and bafflingly normal, save for the flickering streetlights and the empty houses. I felt another tremor as the earth beneath us cracked like brittle bone.

My gaze snapped to the nearest vehicle, an off-road Land Cruiser with wood paneling and 4 wheel drive. The driver's side door was open and I could see that the key was still in the ignition.

By the hand of God.

"Come on!" I threw myself inside and fumbled with the key, turning it in the ignition, as I regained my breath in short, ragged bursts. Behind us, the hills buckled and the tree line split as the first shockwave tore through the ground, fissures spreading like a patchwork of veins.

Heather barely had time to slam the door before I threw the Land Cruiser into drive, its tires screaming against the asphalt. We shot forward, bouncing hard as we hit the uneven dirt roads, the rearview mirror offering nothing but a widening chasm that swallowed everything behind us.

The town was falling into the crevasse, buildings wrenched from their foundations as the ground convulsed like a living thing, rolling in waves as the asphalt split open and swallowed entire streets. The street lamps flickered and died one by one, their glass bursting like fragile stars. The water tower shuddered, its rusted supports groaning

before snapping in a violent cascade of sparks, toppling it like a felled giant and slamming into Main Street with a deafening crash, sending a tidal wave of water surging down the ruined roads, and mixing with the dust and the ash. Buildings I had known for my entire life split open like cracked skulls, their insides spilling into the abyss below. The pavement heaved and lifted in jagged waves before collapsing into the hungry void. Power lines snapped and writhed like struck serpents, showering the street in front of us in a rain of electric sparks.

To our left, the Ashwood Library, the place where we had spent countless hours hiding from the world, folded in on itself brick by brick, its massive oak doors vanishing into the abyss below.

I gritted my teeth and gripped the wheel as another violent tremor sent the Land Cruiser skidding sideways. The shockwave was coming, a monstrous ripple spreading outward and devouring everything in its path. I slammed my foot on the gas, the engine roaring in protest as we tore through the carnage, dodging falling streetlights and crumbling buildings. Heather clutched the seat as the rearview mirror showed the roofs imploding, the town hall's bell tower shearing in half and the doors to the mayor's office torn away by the earth's relentless hunger.

Heather choked back a sob, her knuckles white as she gripped the dashboard. "Alan—"

"I know." My voice was hoarse and barely audible over the chaos.

A deafening crack split the air as the pharmacy where my mother used to take me for ice cream shattered, its facade giving way and swallowing decades of memories into the pit forming beneath us. I swerved hard, barely missing a collapsing telephone pole, the wires whipping like desperate fingers as it was yanked into the abyss.

Just past it, the bowling alley where we spent so many lazy weekends was nothing but a collapsing shell. The giant neon pin on the roof flickered desperately, throwing jagged red and white light over the street before it groaned, tilted forward, and crashed through the front entrance. I could still see the polished lanes inside, buckling like they were made of paper, the bar top splitting down the middle. The thought of all those moments spent there, the late night arguments over who could eat the most nachos being buried under rubble made my stomach turn.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from our old middle school as the abandoned building groaned, the bullet-ridden halls caving in first, followed by the west wing folding inward like a dying animal, but Heather grabbed my arm and shook me back to reality.

"Alan—look out!"

I wrenched the wheel just in time to avoid a splitting section of road, the tires screeching as we skidded past Wilkes's sheriff station. The roof caved in with a splintering roar, the front steps collapsing into a widening sinkhole and swallowing the old patrol car still parked out front. I shook my head as my childhood was erased piece by piece.

The trees that lined the outer edges of town, the ones we used to climb as kids and carve our names into, were wrenched from the soil like weeds, their roots dangling and their trunks splintering before being consumed by the shifting earth. The playground where I had pushed Kevin and Don on the swings, where Heather had broken her wrist falling off the monkey bars, lurched and bent under the pressure of the earth, the rusting slide snapping in two as the ground beneath it folded inward.

Through the pines, I saw the neon sign of the Roadhouse flicker desperately before sparking out, the building tumbling into the crevasse a moment later, the counter where Mac used to sit at reduced to splinters.

The ground beneath us buckled again and we sped past the burned-out Quintin estate, the cursed heart of the rot that had festered beneath its foundations for generations, standing defiantly atop the last solid ground. But even it couldn't escape judgment.

The earth beneath its grand facade cracked, then crumbled, the mansion tilting forward as if bowing to an unseen opponent. Its skeletal remains, the blackened walls still bearing the scars of fire, gave one final groan before the entire structure collapsed in on itself, consumed by the same chasm it had birthed.

Heather let out a strangled sob as I wrenched the wheel, the Land Cruiser fishtailing as the final shockwave exploded outward. The world behind us disintegrated, swallowed whole by the gaping maw of the earth. I slammed my foot down on the gas as we veered away from the chasm that was ripping toward us. The rear tires skidded, the frame groaning as we barely stayed ahead of the destruction. Heather was gripping the dashboard, her other hand bracing against the door as we dodged falling debris and leaped the cracks in the pavement.

The road was vanishing ahead of us as the yellow lines cracked and fragmented, the asphalt peeling away as we skidded over the widening gaps. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, the roar of the collapsing town behind us nearly deafening. Heather's fingers dug into my arm and I could feel her frantic heartbeat.

"Faster!" she screamed.

I pushed the pedal to the floor as the Land Cruiser jumped the final stretch of road crumbling behind us. The chasm yawned wide and hungry, and for one terrible second, the back tires lost traction.

Heather's scream tore through the air as we soared over the last dying remains of Ashwood, the ruins of our homes collapsing into dust. Time stretched thin, my breath frozen in my lungs and the taste of ash and burning memories thick on my tongue.

The tires hit solid ground with a brutal jolt, the truck bouncing hard and skidding wildly before I wrenched the wheel and steadied us out. My vision swam and my pulse hammered against my skull as I fought to keep the vehicle on the last unbroken piece of road.

Behind us, Ashwood was gone.

The glow of destruction flickered in the rearview mirror, a final funeral pyre for everything we had ever known. Heather's breath hitched, and she reached for my hand, her firm grasp grounding me as I fought to process it all.

The crater loomed behind us like a jagged wound torn into the earth. Up ahead, the mountains loomed their dark silhouettes against the bruised sky. The hum of the truck's tires on the cracked asphalt was the only sound between us, save for our ragged breathing and the occasional snuffle. Heather's fingers were still wrapped around mine, her grip tight and unyielding, as if letting go meant losing everything all over again.

Somewhere between the traction of the tires and Heather's ironclad embrace, an eternity passed. It may have been measured in minutes or in hours, but in that moment it held no consequence.

For a fraction of a second, time had become irrelevant.

Heather broke the silence with a shaky laugh, devoid of humor.

"I keep thinking I'll wake up."

I glanced at her, my own hands shaking against the wheel. "Me too."

She shook her head. "I don't know whether I want this to be real or not."

I didn't answer immediately. The enormity of what we'd lost pressed against my ribs as I eased my foot on the gas. I kept my eyes on the road, the headlights cutting through the mist rolling off the mountain slopes and illuminating nothing but dark trees and twisting curves.

But we were here, still alive somehow, by the grace of God.

I tightened my grip on her hand and brought it to my lips for just a second before resting it back on my thigh.

"It's real."

Heather sighed and leaned her head back against the seat. "God, I can still smell the smoke."

"Me too," I admitted. The acrid stench clung to our skin and our clothes and it felt like it would never leave.

Silence settled again, stretching between us like a fragile thread, thin but unbroken. I knew we should talk about what came next, where we were going, and what we were going to do. But right now, the only thing that mattered was moving forward and putting as much distance between us and Ashwood as possible. Maybe then, the horror of it all wouldn't crush me entirely and the vice of grief would ease off my ribs.

The road dipped suddenly, revealing a breathtaking view of the valley below, the city lights in the far distance twinkling like a visage of a brighter, newer world.

Heather turned to me, her expression softer now, exhaustion etched deep into her features, but accompanied by a warmth behind her eyes. "Do you remember the first time we drove through here?"

I let out a small chuckle as the memory crept in through the edges of my mind.

"Yeah. We were sixteen. I stole my dad's car."

"You didn't even have a license yet."

"We almost drove off a cliff."

Heather grinned, the first real smile I had seen since our lives had turned to hell. “It was still one of the best nights of my life.”

I glanced at her, and for a brief moment, the weight eased off my chest. I remembered that night too; wind whipping through the windows, the scent of pine in the air, the way we had laughed until our stomachs ached, the way we had been young and stupid and reckless, and somehow after everything, we were still here, still together.

I swallowed hard and turned my gaze back to the road. “We should stop and find somewhere to rest.”

Heather nodded, her fingers tracing absent patterns against the back of my hand. “Yeah. But not yet.”

“Not yet,” I agreed, pressing the gas pedal just a little harder and watching the world unfold ahead of us as the wind rushed in through the open window. The past was behind us, buried beneath the rubble of a town that would never be spoken of again. But the future, our future was still unwritten.

And for the first time in a long, long while, I wasn’t afraid of it.

Heather squeezed my hand once, then shifted closer and let her head rest against me. The weight of her warmth spread through my chest like a blooming fire.

She was all I’d ever needed.

As we drove on and left the ghosts of Ashwood behind, the sky above us began to lighten as hints of dawn broke over the horizon.

The first promise of a new day.

I drove on.