ASHWOOD

ACT FIVE

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Alan Russell

I awoke in the hallway of my middle school, as bullet-ridden and war-torn 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 lilting 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. It wasn't 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 and less like the maw of some great beast waiting to swallow us whole.

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 ended abruptly in a wall of jagged metal sheeting that covered 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 tunnel 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 steady hum of electricity vibrated through the rough-shod walls, a deep, thrumming pulse that sent shivers up my spine. I pressed record and angled the lens to capture the sheer impossibility of what lay before us.

The deeper we went, the more the uneven walls seemed to hum, vibrating with some unseen force, as though the claustrophobic tunnels were breathing around us.

At first, the walls were raw stone and damp to the touch, but they quickly gave way to smooth concrete. Beneath our feet, the muddy sludge became a criss-crossing pattern of metal gates that clinked gently when we stepped on them.

The passageway sloped downwards, curving away from the entrance so sharply that the last glint of sunlight was gone in a dozen steps. After the first bend came another, followed by a fork in the tunnels. Our flashlights swept across the diverging passages, both descending into darkness. After a moment's hesitation, Alan led us down the right-hand tunnel, his light dwindling in the inky darkness as we followed behind him.

The tunnels revealed their labyrinthian nature slowly, easing us into the depths of its chambers like a snake toying with its next meal. I began to lose track of time as seconds felt like minutes and hours passed in the blink of an eye. All I had to remind me of the correct time was the display of the camcorder.

It was less a series of tunnels and more of a circulatory system carved into the face of the mountain. At some point, they began to curve back on themselves in long spiraling corridors. In places, the stone gave way to old industrial plating bolted directly into the rock. Up ahead, Alan stopped cold in his tracks.

After what felt like hours of winding tunnels, we had come upon a door. It was made of cheap stamped metal, with a crudely fashioned handle and a chipped coat of crimson paint. I glanced back behind us into the burgeoning darkness as Alan pried open the door with the crowbar. A screeching groan filled the shallow passageway and I turned around to see the darkness of the doorway looming large as the door sank back on its hinges.

Camcorder in hand, I stepped across the dimly lit threshold and into the main chamber. Thick glass panels cut the length of the room in half, separating us from the massive cylindrical machine that dominated the far end of the room, lined with thick copper cables. My eyes widened as I realized everything Jeremiah had told me was true.

The collider was an impossibly complicated machine that more resembled the intricate innards of a Swiss watch than a portal between worlds. It was a cylindrical behemoth of interwoven cables and superconducting magnets prepared to send particles hurtling at the speed of light. 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 walls and ceiling were lined with hexagonal panels that reflected the dim light of the chamber and I panned the camera upwards as one slid aside to reveal the night sky. With the hissing opening of the exposed panel came a rush of sound that filled the silent room and for the first time in hours, I realized how claustrophobically quiet the tunnels had been.

"Hail to Belial and his many masks! Hail to the black bloom that gathers betwixt worlds! Hail to the forbidden delights of knowledge, and the great One that deigns to answer!"

I glanced over at Heather and Alan, our eyes locking as we recognized the chant of the Phoenicians. Beside me, Eddie stared up at the collider, still utterly bewildered.

"Once again, Midsummer sets us free!"

Thick clumps of smoke swarmed the chamber as a charred form dropped through the hexagonal opening, seemingly floating in air as it made its way down.

Wisps of hazy darkness writhed around it, consuming it into shadows as the multiple cylindrical tiers of the collider began to turn. As the body dissolved into smoke, the chambers began to light up and churn faster, sending the magnets into their endless dance.

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 around us. My head swam and my vision blurred, a wave of nausea washing over me as I swayed on my feet.

I managed to steady myself and kept the camcorder up, trying to capture every swirl of the pulsing magnets. 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 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 shadow 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 disproportionally 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.

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 gun. Heather barely breathed, frozen in horror at the familiar sight, while Eddie leaned back against the far wall 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, locking eyes on us as 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. 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 wound to a stop.

I glanced down to make sure the 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 and as pale as a sheet of printer paper, virgin to any trace of ink.

I turned the camcorder off with a loud click. The air in the testing chamber still crackled, charged with the presence of dark matter. My pulse throbbed in my ears, drowning out everything but the residual hum of the collider's magnets winding down.

Alan's hand came down upon my shoulder, his firm grasp pulling me out of my trance.

"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.

We shuffled back toward the mouth of the tunnel, the soles of our shoes barely making a sound against the frigid linoleum floor. Shaking my head to clear it, I descended into the dark passageway once more.

The tunnel sloped downwards faster than before and I was sure that we'd taken the right-hand passageway, not the left.

Ahead of us, the passage twisted immediately, curving back on itself so tightly that I lost sight of the chamber before a full minute had passed. The hum of the collider vibrated the stone walls of the passage, shaking the tunnel around us.

The walls were damp here, slick with condensation that left my fingertips numb in the cooling air. Even that felt different than before, warmer in strange pockets and pooling colder in others.

Up ahead, the passage narrowed to a crawl, forcing us to inch our way through, then widened as it dipped sharply, only to rise again.

Eddie stopped suddenly.

"Hey," he whispered.

We all froze.

"What?" Heather asked.

"I swear," he said, turning slowly in place, his light sweeping across the rock, "we've been here already."

I recognized the distinctive crack in the wall before he finished speaking, shaped like a crooked Y, right next to a rusted length of cable half-buried in the concrete floor.

My stomach tightened in panic

"No, that's not possible," Alan said, though there was no conviction behind it.

For the next hour, I tried to keep track of the twisting corridors. Left. Right. Down. Another right. A slope. A narrow squeeze where I scraped my shoulder across the rough stone that might as well have been sandpaper. The longer we wandered, the harder it became to hold the sequence in my mind. Thoughts slid away from me mid-formation and I caught myself zoning out as we continued our endless march.

"Mac," Eddie said, prodding my chest.

I flinched.

"You good?"

"Yeah," I muttered. "Just tired."

Ahead of me, Alan had stopped again, shaking his head.

"This isn't right," he murmured.

He turned, retraced a few steps, and took a right-hand turn. The passage sloped upward now, though so gradually it was hard to notice. It might have been me, but it seemed like the air grew cooler and fresher somehow, threaded faintly with the scent of wet soil after a hard rain.

Roots began to appear in the ceiling, a few thin ones at first, followed by thicker gnarled stalks that protruded through cracks in the cement. Water dripped more steadily here, pattering softly onto the floor, my boots squelching faintly with each step.

"Wait," Heather said, a note of hope creeping into her voice, "do you hear that?"

I listened for a moment. At first, there was nothing but our breathing and the distant drip of water. But faintly, I heard the sound of wind filtering down through the stone.

We followed it instinctively, drawn toward the whisper of open air. The passage narrowed once more, then abruptly widened, spilling us into a low, slanted tunnel packed with dirt and roots. The stone gave way to packed earth beneath our hands as we climbed, clawing our way upward, the earthy scent of the forest growing stronger with every inch. Light appeared ahead, dim but unmistakably natural.

Alan pushed through first, breaking through a curtain of roots and low brush. Heather followed, then Eddie, scrambling awkwardly. I came up last, hauling myself out of the earth like I was being born again.

We stood there in stunned silence, thankful to be on the surface once more.

A dense cropping of tall trees surrounded us on all sides, their branches knitted together overhead, blotting out most of the sky. Moss clung thickly to their trunks and across the earth, completely coating the rusted door that had once blocked the exit to the tunnel. Ferns brushed against our legs and the ground was soft with leaf litter and pine needles, damp and springy beneath our feet.

"Where… where are we?" Eddie whispered.

Alan turned around slowly, scanning the tree-line. "I'm… not sure."

I glanced up at the trees as we stood still in the darkness. Through the thick cover of the pines, I saw a twinkling light up ahead. As I recognized its source, my heart sank to my stomach, only to boil into hatred.

I knew exactly where we were.

Alan Russell

The night pressed down on us, the suffocating stillness of the woods making the pounding in my ears feel impossibly loud.

I breathed in the damp early evening air, my legs wobbling as my boots crunched softly against the brittle leaves. Heather leaned her head against me, shivering 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. Beside us, Eddie leaned against the closest tree 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 we had been forgotten by the civilized world.

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 unslung his backpack and began rummaging around inside it. In the dim moonlight filtering through the trees, I saw him reach for the revolver. He zipped his pack shut and turned towards me, his hollow eyes meeting mine.

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

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

In all the years I'd known him, I'd never seen him like this.

"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 his tree, 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.

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 go 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 the single sharp nod of a man accepting the weight of the hangman's noose.

We slipped quietly through the pines, 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.

We moved quickly across the lawn and through the iron-wrought decorative gate, our boots scuffling against the concrete driveway. The darkened mansion loomed ahead of us like a slumbering beast.

I reached up to my holster and slowly pulled out my father's gun as the grand doors swung open. Quintin's bodyguard stepped out into the driveway, gun raised and aimed toward Mac.

The gunfire was deafening in the quiet night, my ears ringing as my bullet slammed into his throat, turning his shout of alarm into a wet gurgle. As he swung his gun in wild arcs, Heather sent a round of buckshot through his ballistic vest.

She stared down at his bleeding form, a spinning array of emotions swimming behind her eyes. I walked over and put a hand on her shoulder reassuringly, then guided her eyes away from the corpse and lowered the barrel of the shotgun.

"He didn't give you a choice."

Heather nodded silently and shook her head, steeling herself and regaining her composure. Mac pushed past us with the revolver in his hand and fire in his eyes.

Illuminated by the pulsing red lights of the Quintins's alarm system, we stepped over the body 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.

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 the shotgun 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. Each jar had a missing poster 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, tightening his grip on the revolver before throwing open the door. All four of us barged in, 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 a gun 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 walk between worlds," Quintin said, his thumb stroking the missing poster taped to the glass. "We were only children, barely old enough to love."

Mac stared down at him blankly, a dark mirth curling behind his eyes. "Heather, give me the shotgun.".

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 buckshot 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, staggering back 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. "It's a perfect replica."

I stared at him in confusion.

"I know you've seen him 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.

"He 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 the property.

We had minutes, maybe less. Heather was just ahead of me, her curls whipping back and forth as she tore through the underbrush. 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. A crack of gunfire split the night, kicking up the dirt behind my boots.

"Holy shit!" Eddie wheezed.

Mac didn't look back. "Move faster, Eddie."

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 a patrol car trailing us along the winding service road, bouncing over ruts and loose gravel, its 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 the shotgun up, frantically aiming down the ridgeline. He fired off a few shots through the pines, forcing the deputy below to duck for cover, his tan uniform disappearing behind a thick tree trunk.

"Don't stop!" Mac snapped, turning back to the mountain peak, his boots slipping on the incline. "Get up 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 car had stopped at the base of the incline. The deputies flung their doors open and piled out of the car, their service pistols 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 stay," Mac whispered, the words pushed out between gulps of air. He dragged a sleeve across his face, leaving a streak of dirt and sweat. "They're already climbing."

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

I met Mac's eyes across the ridge.

"Head on up," I told him. "I'm gonna try something."

He hesitated for a second, then nodded solemnly and started slowly making his way up the slope.

Heather's gaze flicked between me and the darting flashlight beams below, her face tight with worry. For a moment, I thought she was going to argue with me, but she pulled me down and kissed me on the cheek.

"Don't do anything stupid," she said, her green eyes boring into mine, "Or I'll kill you myself."

I nodded, a faint smile playing across my lips. "I'll keep that in mind."

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

"Go." I told him, rolling my eyes and waving my hand toward the ridgeline.

They slipped away one by one, their bodies hunched low as they were swallowed by the thick tangle of trees above us. Leaning up against a boulder, 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.

Below me, I could see the glint of flashlights as the deputies made their way up the steep mountainside. There were two of them, their tan uniforms distinct against the dark landscape. As their lights crept closer, I grabbed the closest tree bough and pulled myself up, climbing high above their heads. I folded myself into a fork of branches and let the shadows of the night conceal me.

They wouldn't expect an ambush. That was my only advantage.

The beam of light crept across the ground beneath me, flicking over tree roots and the spiderweb of our footprints in the muddy earth. A man stepped into the light and crouched down, his eyes narrowing as he prodded at the footprints. He was close enough that I could smell the sweat on his collar and the faint trace of cigarette smoke on his breath. I slowly pulled the gun from my holster as the world narrowed down to that single figure and the slow rhythm of his breathing.

I dropped down from the tree, letting gravity deal the brunt of the damage. I hit him square on his head with the grip of my pistol, then wrapped my arm around his throat, using my weight to pin him to the forest floor. He fought for a moment, his pudgy hands scrabbling weakly against my forearm, but I kept my hold until his limbs went slack. I dropped him to the ground as a second flashlight beam swung toward us. I ducked behind a boulder and crawled toward the next deputy as he scanned the forest.

The beam of light darted towards the rock outcropping and our eyes met as he raised his gun. I lunged out at him as he pulled the trigger, his shot going wide and grazing my cheekbone. I pistol whipped him across the face and grabbed the collar of his shirt, pulling him towards my knee as I drove it into his midsection. He gasped wordlessly in the dirt, the air driven completely from his lungs.

Hearing the smattering of gunfire, new beams of light darted toward us, jittering up and down as they ran, quickly closing the distance. I darted away into the trees, weaving between the trunks as branches slapped away at my face, my boots digging into the loose dirt as I sprinted to the ridge with everything I had. 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 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 of cards 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.

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.*"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. Trevor, Saul, Wilkes, Quintin, and poor Kevin and Don, by your own mother's 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 chthonic siren's song?"

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

beneath my feet, 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 pistol, checking the magazine on instinct as my stomach twisted itself into knots. Mac was standing next to his tent with a camping mug in hand, blearily looking around the clearing. Eddie's tent lay open, the flap unzipped and his belongings still laid out inside.

"Where's Eddie?" I asked urgently.

Mac stared at me for a moment before pointing down toward the ridge. "He went to check the perimeter."

I took off down the mountainside, Heather and Mac following close behind, their footsteps crunching through the autumn leaves. The further down the mountain we went, the louder the keening wail grew, building pressure behind my eyes until I was sure my skull would burst. I tripped and staggered to a stop, clutching my head as the pain came in waves. I felt my eyes roll back in my skull as my vision swam and I found myself kneeling in the dirt.

Heather's warm hands enveloped my head and the pain came to a screeching halt. I blinked up at her in shock and confusion. Gingerly touching my ears, I found a faint trail of blood and stuffed cotton balls from one of our med kits.

I looked up to see Heather smiling at me with her own patch of cotton stuffing. I shakily climbed to my feet, marveling at her quick thinking. She'd always been the smartest among us.

We made our way down the mountainside, past the thick brush and hanging boughs that obstructed our frantic sprint down the peak. I stopped short as I saw the glint of my sharpened stakes up ahead.

Past the hanging branches of a maple tree, a deputy had been run clean through from one of my traps, the crimson-stained spikes protruding through his abdomen and poking out the side of his uniform. His eyes were rolled back white as he shuffled repeatedly into the trap, soullessly shuffling toward some unseen destination. We all stared at the man for a moment before our sense of urgency set back in and we set off down the steep slope.

Up ahead, I could just make out Eddie's form through the trees. His mousy brown hair was still spiky from sleep and his clothes hung loosely from his limbs as he staggered forward in unnatural jerking movements.

"Eddie!" Mac bellowed, charging towards him.

As we caught up to him, I saw that his eyes had rolled back white and I realized that he wouldn't have responded even if he could hear us over the wailing siren. He'd lost his glasses somewhere along the trail, but his vacant eyes saw nothing anymore.

Mac grabbed Eddie by the shoulders, shaking him hard.

"Eddie! Hey! Wake up!"

He didn't react at all, maintaining his cloudy stare as Mac crumpled in defeat, his lips parted as his gaze locked on something far beyond the trees.

Heather tugged on my sleeve and I turned to see a massive crowd shuffling into the forest on the far side of the clearing, an unending procession of children and deputies, of working men and their wives. I watched in horror as the population of Ashwood disappeared amongst the pines.

Eddie staggered after them and after glancing at Mac and Heather, I knew we had no choice but to follow. He led us deep into the glen of the forest, past hanging boughs and thinning needles to the center of evil within the town. With shaking hands, we followed as he led us into the Grove.

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 Owl as lambs for slaughter. It was as if each pulsating note of that siren 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.

As we scrambled through the brush, I sliced away at hanging moss and errant branches with the hunting knife I'd strapped to my pack, 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 ugly wound in the natural world. The giant stone owl loomed up ahead, its hollow eyes fixed on the steady stream of the mindless congregation.

The base of the statue had 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 earthy stench of damp stone and rotting roots. I watched in horror as Eddie pulled himself down into the darkness, the maw of the tunnel swallowing him whole.

Heather turned to me, her wide eyes searching mine 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 stone tunnel was identical to the one we'd explored before, comprised of claustrophobic concrete walls and muddy dirt floors. 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 stone cool beneath my fingertips.

As I went deeper, as the last remnants of the morning sun faded behind me, I found myself in complete and utter darkness. Panic ran through me like a frisson of fire, but I pushed it down and felt around for the nearest wall. My fingers caught on a fringe of loose thread and I followed it, my hands firmly grasping the rope as I moved onwards, hand over hand, into the unyielding darkness.

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As I wove my way through the pitch-black corridors, bracing myself against the stone walls, I felt a fog fall over my mind, twisting my thoughts and emotions as sharply as the winding passageways.

The deeper I descended, the more tangible the fog became, a sinister presence that lingered behind my eyes and pulsed within my skull. I checked to make sure the cotton hadn't come unlodged from my ears, but this was a far different beast than the droning siren that had called the town into the depths.

It began to encroach upon the corners of my mind, a whisperer in the darkness accompanied only by the beat of my footsteps that fell steadily like drums in the deep. It never spoke a word, but I could feel it influencing me, guiding me through the forking tunnels as I clutched the crimson cord like a lifeline. It wanted me, needed me, and I was certain it desired my soul for a purpose greater than my own.

As I came to the next branch in the tunnel, I felt something press close behind me, the condensation of hot breath trickling down my neck. I froze, stiffening in the suffocating darkness as I realized I wasn't alone.

A hand ran its way along the length of my shoulder blade and I relaxed as I recognized Heather's familiar scent. I lifted up her hand and brought it to my lips before slipping it into mine. Together, we took the right-hand corridor and descended further into the depths.

A faint spark of light dawned up ahead, a glimmer in the darkness. In the dimly gathering light, I locked eyes with Heather as we caught a glimpse of our salvation or damnation. Relinquishing the red cord, I placed my hand against the stone wall, my fingers vibrating as a dull hum pulsed through the concrete.

A sinking feeling filled my chest as I realized that it was the rumbling of the collider. The dawning light in the passage seemed to settle on damnation as we neared the mouth of the tunnel. The hum grew louder, chattering my teeth and rattling my chest as the steady pulsing of the collider expanded with proximity.

A few steps behind us, Mac emerged from the left-hand tunnel and plodded towards us, his complexion as pale as a sheet. He'd never been one for tight spaces or dark corners and I felt a pang of sympathy for my old friend.

He had, I remembered with an incongruous flash of amusement, been the only twelve-year-old I knew that couldn't sleep without a nightlight. Bitterness flooded through me as I wondered if that had been Quintin's doing. I patted him on the back as he emerged from the maze and once more rejoined the fold.

As we rounded the final turn, I saw Eddie's distant silhouette stumble toward the entrance and into the burgeoning light. I sprinted towards his retreating form, only to stagger backwards in shock at the blinding glare of light that filled the vast chamber ahead.

Once again, the great machine lay before me, resplendent in the manufactured uniformity of its metallic construction. It was just as I'd last seen it, wound around by thick cables and massive magnets, but a pale light blossomed in the center of its concentric chambers.

I recognized this stage from my research, but I never could have pictured the swimming storm that swirled within the center of the collider, never the globe of pure energy that threatened to burn dark spots in my retina.

It was nearly at full power.

Eddie mindlessly shuffled toward the machine and my heart sank as I realized that the droning siren emanated from the light of the collider, pulling in its prey to power itself to a capacity no one had ever attempted. His arms hung limp at his sides, his jaw slack and his eyes fixed on the twisting mass of magnets as if he were staring into the eyes of the Lord. I staggered towards him, my hands reaching for his jacket as he stepped across the threshold and into the glowing light.

For a moment, his silhouette flared up against the great machine, only for the air where he'd been to shimmer as if heat were rising off a summer road. The light swallowed him from the outside in, dissecting him into threads of white that unfurled and bled into the core of energy within the collider, expanding it a few inches further.

All was silent, save for the damned siren, the keening wail that had come from the collider, twisted and distorted through the tunnels that ran beneath our town, and wailed through the streets, pulling men from barstools, mothers from kitchen sinks, and children from their beds. Led them to the labyrinth, through the twisting tunnels and to the pulsing core of the collider that required the power of their souls. Led them, every man, woman, and child, to their deaths.

As I gazed into the twisting mass of magnets, I knew that Eddie's fate had befallen every inhabitant of Ashwood. The singular swirl in the center shimmered with particulate glints, like distant stars embedded in a newborn cosmos, souls suspended in the roiling gyre like iron filings in a magnetic field.

Mac staggered backward, shaking his head as if it would come free of his shoulders.

"No," he muttered. "No, no, no…"

I thought of Don's little brothers at his funeral, the unquenchable pallor of childhood wrapped within dark suits of death. Of Kevin's father, taking the first steps toward redemption and sobriety. Of Heather's parents, misguidedly protective but undeniably loving. Of Mac's family, who had sold him to a devil for another shot at life. Of my mother, who had done the same.

I thought of sweet old man Carson and his gas station, putting up with our childish antics and looking the other way as we nicked items from his shelves, smiling to himself all the while. I thought of the missing posters he kept up on his wall and refused to take down, even when the police came to his door. Of the pain in his eyes when I handed him Kevin and Don's posters, when he saw that his prayers had been in vain. I hoped they would accept such an angel in heaven.

Other people came to my mind, swirling in time with the pulsing of the collider, of Brandon and Tricia and Laura and everyone we'd sent back to town, thinking they'd be safer there. Of misguided deputies who thought they were doing the right thing. Of my mother in our kitchen, tears streaming down her face as she confessed her sins.

"All of them," I murmured. "It needed all of them."

Heather's fingers dug into my arm as it came to her, as she crumpled to the wall, her eyes filling with tears as she gazed into the twisting mass of light, searching for any trace of her family within its writhing depths. I found myself doing the same, and for a moment, I thought I could make out the face of my mother. I stared into its depths once more, but then the swirling light flashed and expanded and there was no time for grieving.

That, more than anything, was our undying curse. Too much tragedy in too little time.

The collider began to rotate faster, its colossal rings spinning with increasing velocity until the air itself seemed to liquefy. The pale blossom in the center darkened at its core as the light began to bend inward. The magnets twisted and tore concentric circles in the blossoming energy field, wisps of dark matter reaching skyward, smoky claws grasping for the stars as they skittered like cockroaches amongst the pulsating beams of light. The black sphere widened, swallowing the light around it in a vortex of twisting gravity that pulsed faster and faster, until a sudden flash of light encased the room and all was dark.

I opened my eyes slowly to see that the energy had stabilized into a rift that shimmered like summer silk, ringed by a circle of white light that contrasted the swirling ovoid mass of dark matter.

An event horizon.

My father's gun fell from my grasp and tumbled upwards into the pull of the void as I gazed upon eternity.

The gravitational pull began to tug at my bones as the cylinders slowed their revolution and silently came to a stop, bits of metal and machinery floating in the air around the jagged tear in reality.

As I stared into the yawning mouth of the abyss, I wished that they hadn't followed me into the dark. I held Heather close as the ebony doorway shuddered, the darkness at its center rippling as something vast and formless shifted just beyond its threshold.

And now, as we stood at the edge of the opened throat of eternity, with every soul we had ever known dissolved into the engine of its creation, the singularity turned its attention to us, the void twisting and bending as it emerged.

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 its many forms.

A great, horned bipedal beast with eyes like burning coals and the head of a goat. A king adorned with yellow robes and a laurel crown of antlers, his dark eyes 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 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.

Seeming to settle on this form, it looked directly at me as 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 upwards as Heather once had. A calm numbness wrapped itself around me as edges of my vision blurred and the world faded away. In some far-off place, I was vaguely aware of Heather calling my name and reaching for 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.

"*You should never have been born, Alan,*" he said, his voice like a whisper through an old vinyl record. "*Yet you have walked far further than you were ever meant to. You have seen what hides behind the curtains. Most men never do.*"

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

"*Most men live and die in the shallows,*" he continued, lifting his chin. "*They marry, they work, they sweat beneath a sun they never question. Some claw above the rest, crushing skulls underfoot, friend and foe alike.*"

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

"*I called to them. To the men too proud to admit they sought a God.*"

With each word, the air thickened as his voice poured over me.

"*To men who were bored. To men with too much time on their hands. To men who had... everything.*"

His smile split wider, his skin tightening around the gaping wound of his mouth.

"*And yet, they could never refuse.*"

He paused, his smile fading as he drummed his fingers on the rim of the lantern.

"*But... not you.*"

I stared him down, my breath curling white in the cold air. "What do you want?"

He sighed and sat back in his chair. "*I want you to finish what your mother started. She believed she was buying you time, and she did. But I am very patient, Alan.*"

He removed his hand from the lantern and rubbed them together, as if reminiscing. "*Once, in the wilderness, I offered bread to a starving man.*"

He paused for a moment, lost in the memory. "*He refused.*"

Beneath the brim of his hat, I felt his eyes flick back to me. "*But you are not Him.*"

His dark features didn't move an inch, but I was sure he was smiling.

"*For oh, how you hunger,*" He said, spitting out each syllable, "*Not for bread, but for them. For the girl with the red curls and the stubborn heart. For the boy who would carve his own chest open if it meant saving you. You love them. And love is such a human flaw. Such a... pliable instrument.*"

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 was in my house, standing in the living room as Mac, Heather and I worked our way through my father's collection of whiskey. I forlornly stared at us, at our sloppy smiles and instantly felt a million miles away from that last moment before Kevin and Don disappeared. The man in the tweed suit watched me carefully, as if cataloguing every twitch in my brow and every shake of my hands.

"You have no power over me." I said, instinctively reaching into my coat for a pack of smokes.

His mouth curved into a small moue of amusement. "*You may be the son of a carpenter, but you are not the Nazarene in the desert.*"

I stiffened as he walked towards me in stiff, unnatural strides.

"*Look at them, look at your friends.*"

I forced myself to stare at the whiskey bottle, at the amber liquid backlit by the roaring fire.

"*I can guarantee their safety,*" he said. "*I can close the loop. I can take their problems, their worries, their sorrows and scatter them like chaff.*"

My living room melted away, replaced by a warm orange sunset and a cottage with a worn-down porch. Beside the front door, an old man sat in a rocking chair, a patterned blanket laid over his lap as he stared out at the horizon.

"*Mac can live a long and fulfilling life. He can be a businessman, like his father. He'll grow gray and small. He'll teach his grandchildren to fish. He'll even forget her.*"

A small boy ran out of the doorway and climbed atop the old man's knee as he laughed, wrinkled and ruddy-cheeked. I'd never seen Mac so happy.

I shook my head. "Stop."

The shadow of the man in the tweed suit fell over my shoulder.

"*Do you remember playing in the pool as children? Carefree, full of joy, and utterly naive? Do you remember Heather's smile? She can be happy again, truly happy.*"

His hand motioned once more and I saw Heather as she stood barefoot in a patch of sunlight. Her tangled curls were tied back loosely as she knelt in the fresh soil, planting something delicate and green.

"*She'll have a small white house with a garden out front. She'll find someone new, marry them, have a few children, and in time, she will forget the shape of your face.*"

A man I didn't recognize stepped out behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She laughed, high and clear, a sound free of strain or stress. I reached for her as the scene dissolved around me.

I was back at the table as the lantern's light trembled and cast a map of shadows across his face. 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.

"*And that is the best that you can hope for.*"

He leaned forward and for the first time, I could see beneath the brim of his hat, could see the swirling mass of shadowy strands that writhed and pulsed within his suit, thousands of tendrils of dark matter re-arranging themselves by the millisecond.

"*Because you, Alan—you are obscene. Your very existence is an affront to three hundred thousand years of humanity. Born of blood and brimstone, the very spawn of Satan.*"

With each word, he seemed to grow larger, towering over me at an impossible height as he hurled each syllable like a spear.

"*You are a poison, a virus, a bastardization of God's greatest gift, the weakest link that drags the chain beneath the waterline. The one flawed rivet that kills thousands. The hairline crack in a dam that swells and swells until the valley drowns.*"

His face was inches away from mine, so close that I could taste his scent, an earthy smell like licorice, sickly-sweet and unmistakably venomous.

"*Think how much safer she'd be if you'd never moved to town. If you had never loved her. If you had never been born.*"

He leaned down to look at me, a dark delight dancing in his cavernous eyes.

"*Kevin and Don would still be alive.*" He smiled softly. "*They all would.*"

After a moment of silence, he pulled away, stepping backwards and tapping the desk as he sat down.

"*I promise you that they will not suffer.*" His voice softened. "*And one day, when her hair has silvered and her hands have wrinkled, she will enter that cold night and emerge into the laurels of heaven untouched by what you were.*"

The sound of Heather's laughter wrapped around my chest and squeezed my ribs like the grip of a boa constrictor.

"*All I require,*" he said, "*is what was promised.*"

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 tissue paper.

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. Warmth radiated from him like steam off a rotting compost heap.

"*Trade your breath for theirs, your life for her laughter, your soul for their sunrise... such a noble sacrifice. You know it's the right thing to do.*"

I staggered 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.

"You were born into this, Alan," he said, his eyes snapping to meet mine across the tracks. *"The contract was inked in blood before your first cry split the air."*

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 on the wind.

"All I ask... is that you finish it."

I flinched as I heard the world re-assemble around me again like the snap of a film reel flipping scenes.

I was back in the clearing, the pines arcing like spines overhead and the bruised sky leaking its pulsing red light as the ground swayed beneath my feet. The man in the tweed suit stood before me, flickers of dark ichor flaring beneath his skin.

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.

Through the fog of my clouded mind, I remembered a verse from the Bible, not one of Wilkes's bloodstained perversions, but from an old memory of my father. The book of Isaiah. I stared into the swirling mass of darkness beneath the brim.

"I heard the voice of the Lord, saying 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then said I, 'Here am I; send me.'"

My hand shook as I reached out to meet his.

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 concrete floor 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 Philip of Damascus, 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 stone floor. It spread outward in tendrils of flame, racing across the chamber and licking at the figure still dressed in the form of the man in the tweed suit.

It staggered back as it was engulfed in golden fire, its form unraveling like smoke caught in a hurricane, its fingers curling into claws as its many faces flickered between rage and agony, its mouth opened in a wordless, howling scream. Behind it, the dark rift 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 ebony doorway 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 of the collider shrieked in protest, sparks erupting from them in a blinding cascade. The figure buckled and writhed, its body splintering apart in jagged ribbons of smoky darkness as it was pulled into the collapsing portal.

There was silence for a moment as the light faded and slowly dimmed. The room stood empty, the absence of the rift now unnervingly unnatural as it was filled solely by the sound of our 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 came another and another, a slow, rhythmic beeping that cut through the smoldering ruin of the chamber like the distant beating of a 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 voice 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 cooling magnets of the collider, the behemoth machine shuddering away its last signs of life. A high-pitched groan emerged from deep within its chambers, like a fatally wounded animal preparing to scream.

Then, beneath my feet, I felt a tremor, almost deceptively small at first, followed by another, growing stronger this time and rattling the walls around us. The entire structure inhaled one final breath as something collapsed beneath us and the room lurched violently to one side.

"Oh, shit—"

Heather grabbed me just as the floor tilted beneath us, sending loose shards of concrete skidding across the earth. Cracks raced across the floor in jagged lines, splitting open like the maw of some unseen beast. I barely had time to move out of the way before another tremor knocked me forward, sending me sprawling onto the uneven 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.

A deep, resonating crack erupted from beneath us, so loud it reverberated through my bones. A massive fissure split open just a few feet from us, devouring everything in its path as the floor gave way beneath us. Pieces of of the collider 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, the walls sloughing open to reveal a series of tunnels.

My fingers curled tight around Heather's as we shoved past the half-submerged remains of the collider and sprinted for the nearest tunnel, desperate not to drown beneath the earth.

The stone walls heaved and convulsed, shards spraying the air as the tunnels collapsed around us. The rhythmic gusts of air that had whistled through the passages were erratic now, gasping and shuddering as I struggled to keep my footing.

I pushed Heather ahead of me as the tunnel pitched upward, praying that she could escape the clutches of the earth before the concrete collapsed upon us. As we went, the air began to thin, growing hotter the further we climbed. Below us, the beeping of the collider had turned into a shrieking klaxon, echoing through the collapsing caverns and chasing us up and out, filling the tunnels with the inverse of the siren call.

Up ahead, the concrete had collapsed even further, forcing us to drop to all fours and squeeze through the narrowing passage on our hands and knees. The stone shuddered as if aware of our intrusion, the very architecture of the tunnel rebelling against us and threatening to drop its weight upon us at the slightest movement.

Heather yelped as the stone walls squeezed inward, the space shrinking around us and forcing us to wedge ourselves forward inch by agonizing inch. I bit down my panic, and followed behind her, climbing up towards the light.

The ground gave way beneath us 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, the rough concrete shredding away at my fingers. Heather screamed ahead of me, her voice half-swallowed by the abyss as we hit the soft soil below.

The impact sent a jolt through my spine and I barely managed to roll onto my side before the tunnel groaned again, another tremor rippling through its stone structure. We were in a small chamber now that was barely large enough for the two of us to crouch in. Beside me was a sharp outcropping of concrete that would have killed me if I'd landed an inch to my left. I stared at it in horror, my hands going numb as I realized how close I'd come to death.

Up ahead, I could make out a sliver of light from our only exit, a jagged maw of a tunnel that grinned down at us like a carnivorous 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, hairline cracks forming in the stone surface.

I lunged forward and we dove into the passage, my elbows and knees scraping against the unyielding 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.

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. I clawed toward the pale sliver of light, my lungs screaming as I pulled us through the last stretch of the tunnel.

We hit the surface in a burst of cold air, legs burning and lungs heaving, desperate for oxygen. The streets of Ashwood stood before us, completely still and bafflingly normal, save for the flickering streetlights and the empty houses. Five thousand people had once lived here, carving out their own slices of life, raising their families, falling in love, and starting anew. Now, it was a ghost town. A hundred years of humanity, wiped out in an instant.

Another tremor rumbled through the street as the earth beneath us cracked like a brittle bone. My gaze snapped to the nearest vehicle, a wood-paneled off-road Land Cruiser. The driver's side door had been left 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 us 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 father 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 sniffle. 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 hands still 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. All that we had lost wrapped around my ribs like a vice 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 creeped in through the edges of my mind.

"Yeah. We were sixteen. I…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, how the wind had whipped through the windows and filled the air with the scent of pine, how we had laughed until our stomachs ached, how 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.