

DIABLO CANYON

C. FLEMISH

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*Dedicated to my wife and all my friends who
supported me in this endeavor.
To Tessie and all our four-legged kids.*

CHAPTER ONE

Apple Valley, California 1874

A meteorite from a foreign solar system painted the night sky absinthe green as it streaked across the valley, tumbling slowly, sacrificing itself to the fire of the atmosphere. The wind persistently roared from the south, and the only sound was the everlasting battle between frogs and crickets—mortal enemies who, on this warm summer evening, had chosen to fight for vocal supremacy. A barn owl's call cut through the night, a futile attempt to silence the contest, its echo swallowed by the darkness.

“Move you stupid burro, move.” A sharp slap cracked through the night.

“Hee-haw, hee-haw.” Pinto, the four-year-old burro, brayed in loud protest, his voice carrying through the darkness. He turned, kicking his legs sideways at his assailant.

“Shut up, Pinto. If they find us, we’re both dead. Now, go!” José wiped the pearls of sweat from his forehead, his eyes wide with fear. His heart pounded wildly in his chest, a prisoner desperately trying to escape.

Ba-da-boom, ba-da-boom, ba-da-boom...

Adrenaline surged through his veins. His body was fighting to keep him alive. His breathing was heavy, erratic, too fast. He needed to get away—had to get away. Fast.

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If he returns and doesn't see me at the cave, he'll know. He'll know right away. I'm as good as dead. He is not stupid. If he was, they would have caught him years ago.

Twenty-three years. That's how long it had been—twenty-three years of running and hiding. Years filled with exhilarating highs and crushing lows. But no matter what happened, Tiburcio Vásquez always managed to stay ahead of those hunting him.

Tibu, as those closest to him called him, was no ordinary man—he was a genius. A natural at the bandito lifestyle, he sensed things others never could. A strategist. A diplomat. It was this rare combination of skills that had kept him and his men just beyond the law's constricting hands.

Rumor had it that the gallows wouldn't have him. If a noose were ever to be placed around his neck, it would come loose. If his body were placed in the ground, the earth itself would spit him out. Rumors about Tibu were plentiful and made their rounds in those days, but the fact remained—Tiburcio Vasquez, son of José Hermenegildo Vasquez and Maria Guadalupe Cantuna, simple peasants, had become a man both feared and loved. He was a sharp and striking man, a bright young bandito that wouldn't be misplaced on any Hollywood stage. He shared his spoils to the poor and helped the ones in need. To those who benefited from his generosity, Tibu was a hero— an outlaw with a cause, incapable of the evil whispered about him in hushed conversations.

Little did they know that when he unleashed his anger, he could put the devil to shame.

Reluctantly, Pinto began to move. The sting of the fat Mexican's slap still burned on his hindquarters. He would not forget. When the moment was right, he would repay that act of kindness threefold.

A pair of stuffed canvas bags hung flaccid across his back, shifting left to right. His small hooves carefully sought their path through the desert's chaparral. The clinking of his cargo stirred a family of California Valley Quail. The male

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and female darted ahead, calling sharply to their young. Instinctively, the chicks scattered from the clump of sagebrush where they had been nestled. Eight tiny dots trailed into the night, their delicate feet weaving through the darkness, leaving V-shaped prints in the sandy soil. The moon lit their frantic path, guiding them toward safety.

It would not be long before José and Pinto would clear the hills of the Apple Valley and make camp for the night. They would catch a breath, plot their next course, and as soon as the sun rose, they would cross the plains. If luck was on their side, they could reach the Sierra Nevada by nightfall. There would be no stopping—not for food, not for rest—until José was certain he had put enough distance between himself, Tibu, and the band of banditos. José would do anything to put as much distance between them as possible. *Bring on your scorpions, Mojave greens, black widows, Gila monsters, anything. Bring it on!* He could endure them all. But nothing, nothing, terrified him more than the revenge he knew awaited him for his betrayal. He would lay low in the Sierra Nevada for a while, and from there, he would make his way back to Mexico. *Home sweet home.* But he could not think of that yet. First- he had to get out of this canyon.

Alive!

CHAPTER TWO

Clouds of dust shimmered in the moonlight as Tibu and his banditos returned to camp. Tonight's raid had been disappointing—a small bag of gold coins and two satchels of low-grade silver. Not nearly enough. Tomorrow, they would hit the church in Acton. Churches always had gold.

Tibu felt no remorse in stealing from the church. In his mind, he was simply reclaiming what had been stolen from his people centuries ago.

“José! José, where are you, you lazy dog? José, you drunk piece of shit!” Tibu's voice rang out into the night.

José had been left behind to guard the camp, tasked with keeping the fire lit and ensuring fresh water was ready for the horses. Tibu was not only sharp but also meticulous and highly organized. He ran his group like a well-oiled business.

Each man had a role: some handled operations, others managed finances, and veterans like José—who understood the group's daily needs—took care of logistics. They scouted new campsites, bribed farmers for safe havens when lying low was necessary and gathered intelligence on potential targets. Most importantly, they ensured that every man and his horse had enough to eat and drink.

Tibu himself was always scheming, searching for new ways to satisfy the group's insatiable hunger for treasure.

“Manuel, go find that pig. If he's drunk again, he'll be

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sorry!” Tibu shouted, a wide grin spreading across his face. “If you find him sleeping, shoot him in the foot. He has been warned before.”

José had a Bacchus complex—one that would have cost him his head several times over if he weren’t Tibu’s lifelong friend.

Tibu dismounted his horse and tied it to a post outside his tent. As his cracked leather boots met the dry riverbed, a thin cloud of dust rose around him. Striking a match, he lit his lantern and settled onto his makeshift bed—a bundle of old sheets stuffed with grass and brush. It wasn’t much, but it beat sleeping on the cold, unforgiving rocks of the riverbed.

Reaching beneath the bedding, his fingers found a small, dusty oak box. Of all the treasures he had amassed, this one meant the most.

Wine.

The thought of the sweet nectar rolling over his lips made his mouth water. He carefully lifted the bottle, cradling it like a lover in his hands. After tonight’s disappointment, he needed comfort—something warm, something soothing.

His fingers drifted down to his boot, wrapping around the familiar weight of his knife.

His knife. A gift. A curse. What a curse it had been.

He remembered everything about it.

CHAPTER THREE

It had been a cold winter night. Tibu and his sister were outside, rolling the last handful of snow onto their half-built snowman, when their mother's voice cut through the air.

"Tibu! Inside. Now."

There was an unnatural urgency to her tone, a sharp, high-pitched edge that made his stomach twist. He turned to his sister, eyes wide, and without a word, they raced up the hill, abandoning the snowman to the darkening sky.

Inside the shed, the air was thick with the scent of damp wood and sickness. A faint moonbeam streamed through the lone window, casting a ghostly glow over the bed.

His father lay still. Too still.

Tibu hesitated in the doorway, heart pounding. His father had always been a giant of a man—strong, unbreakable. He carried Tibu on his shoulders, worked the fields from dawn to dusk. But now, his skin was pale, his breath shallow, his once-mighty frame reduced to a motionless shell.

"What happened? Who did this? Papa?" His voice wavered, breaking under the weight of fear.

Years later, his mother would tell him the truth. His father had been wounded in the Battle of California, a lead bullet lodged deep in his flesh. Slowly, the poison seeped through his body, shutting his organs down one by one. He was one of the many who had fought against the gringos,

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one of the many who had suffered for it.

That moment, that single point in time, had sealed Tibu's fate—and the fates of many others.

"Tibu."

The rasp of his father's voice was weak, a dying ember in the wind.

"Tibu, my son. Come to me."

With the last reserves of his strength, he lifted a trembling hand. Tibu rushed to his bedside, kneeling, pressing his ear close to his father's lips. A cold object was placed in his palm.

"This, my son, is all I have to give you. My father gave it to me when he died. Promise me, Tibu—promise me you will take care of your mother and your sister."

Tibu clutched the knife, his fingers tightening around its worn handle.

"I promise, Papa."

But it was too late. His father's eyes had already gone vacant, staring blankly at the ceiling. His limp arm slid off the bed, dangling lifelessly.

Tibu shook him, desperate.

"I promise. I promise, Papa. PAPA!"

A final, rattling breath escaped his father's lips—the last sound Tibu would ever hear from him. A sound that would haunt him forever. It would wake him at night, gasping for air, his sheets soaked in sweat.

This knife was all he had left of his father. It was one of the few things Tibu cared about, in many ways, it was the only family he had left. Tibu ran his fingers over the smooth oak handle, lost in memory.

With a flick of his wrist, he slid the blade free and pressed its tip against the wax seal of the bottle. The cork surrendered with a soft pop, releasing a bouquet of deep, rich aromas. The scent teased his nostrils, making his mouth salivate.

He reached for a tin cup, blew the dust from its rim, and tilted the bottle. The red nectar spilled into its belly, swirling

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like liquid fire. He lifted the cup to his lips, the first sip sending warmth through his veins, quieting the restless storm in his mind.

As he folded the knife shut, the candlelight caught its blade. A stain, darkened with time, lingered on the steel. The patina of his first kill.

CHAPTER FOUR

He was only fourteen, but he was smart as a fox and strong as an ox.

That night, the town pulsed with celebration—one of those rare moments when everyone momentarily forgot the daily struggle for survival. It didn't matter what they celebrated. The point was that they *did*. For one fleeting night, the weight of hardship lifted. Beer and whiskey flowed freely from the saloons, and the local girls made extra coin doing what they had learned to do best. Lively piano tunes danced through the air, drifting far beyond the town's borders, shattering the desert silence.

Down the road, a group of out-of-town drunks staggered arm in arm, singing a filthy song about a girl in Texas. Gunshots cracked through the sky. Saloons lost their windows as bodies crashed through them, whiskey and blood staining the dirt roads. The acrid scent of gunpowder mixed with stale beer, hanging thick in the air.

By dawn, the town reeked of sweat, liquor, and regret. Drunkards lay sprawled across the streets, wherever their last conscious steps had left them. Shopkeepers swept their sidewalks, patched up their displays, and in some cases, boarded up shattered windows. It was business as usual—until Tibu saw her.

Esmeralda.

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His sister.

She stood across the street, struggling against the grip of a towering gringo brute. Her face streaked with tears. Her body twisting, resisting.

A fire ignited inside Tibu—an anger unlike anything he had ever known. Without thinking, he charged, weaving through the street's filth with impossible speed. He leapt onto the wooden sidewalk, fist clenched, and without breaking stride, slammed his knuckles into the gringo's stubbled chin.

The brute's grip loosened, confusion flashing in his drunken eyes as his brain registered the attack. Then he let Esmeralda go. Only to throw her to the ground.

Tibu barely had time to react before the gringo's massive fist came swinging from his side. The punch landed square between Tibu's eyes.

Darkness.

Numbness.

Muffled laughter.

When he came to, he was sitting on the sidewalk, hands pressing against rough wood. His face throbbed, warmth trickling down his lips. The coppery taste of blood seeped onto his tongue.

Laughter.

A crowd had gathered, jeering, howling, slapping their knees at the sight of a scrawny teenager knocked flat. Then Tibu saw *him*. The gringo was on top of Esmeralda. His filthy tongue slithered over her skin. A surge of white-hot fury erupted inside Tibu.

With a flick of his wrist, his father's knife flashed open. He lunged. The gringo never even heard him coming. One moment, he was pawing at his prey. The next, a sharp, searing pain tore through his throat. Warm, sticky blood gushed down his chest.

A strangled gasp. A wheezing cough.

But Tibu wasn't done.

He locked his legs around the brute's waist, yanked his

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greasy hair back, and drove the knife into his jugular—again and again. The blade sank deep, severing veins, spilling life onto the ground.

The crowd's laughter died.

"Run, Esmel! RUN!" Tibu's voice cracked, his throat raw.

The gringo thrashed like a dying beast, clawing at the boy clinging to his back. But Tibu rode him like a wild bronco, heels digging in, hands unrelenting. The man staggered, knees buckling, blood pouring in rhythmic spurts onto the sidewalk outside Smith's Grocery. His body convulsed, desperate for one last fight. His adrenaline-fueled heart pounded faster, speeding up the inevitable.

Tibu twisted the knife. A final, fatal stroke.

Then, silence.

No one laughed anymore.

The boy stood over his prey, soaked in blood and dirt, his knife glinting under the morning sun. His bright eyes burned with something *not human*. The crowd parted for him, stepping back in quiet disbelief, making just enough space for him to leave. Tibu didn't run. He walked. Each step left a bloody footprint on the wooden sidewalk. He didn't know where he was going. He only knew that after this, nothing would ever be the same.

Esmeralda was gone. He turned, scanning the empty street, his mind slow to catch up with reality. She had run, just as he told her to. But had she made it home? Tibu staggered to his feet. Bystanders parted without a word, some avoiding his eyes, others staring at him as if he were some specter of death. He didn't care. His legs carried him forward, past the wooden storefronts, past the broken glass and whiskey-stained dirt, until he was running.

Home.

He had to get home.

CHAPTER FIVE

It only took two days for the gringo's friends to find out where Tibu lived. Two days for revenge to come knocking.

Tibu wasn't home. He was out gathering cattle with his uncle. But his mother and sister were. The men wanted blood. And when they couldn't find Tibu, they settled for what he loved most.

They nailed his mother to the door. Esmeralda? They took turns. One by one, they destroyed her innocence, thrust by brutal thrust. Her mother begged, pleaded, screamed.

"Take me. *Please!* Take me instead!"

They didn't listen.

Esmeralda was only a girl. And by the time they were done, she wasn't even that anymore. They shredded her body to pieces and hung the remains from the trees surrounding the house where she had been born. Her flesh left hanging for the crows and vultures to feast on. Then, as the last act of vengeance, they lifted his mother's chin, slit her throat, and left her bleeding in the dirt. Before they rode off, they set fire to Tibu's home. The house collapsed behind them, flames devouring what was left of his past. A thick, black plume of smoke curled into the sky.

The men never found Tibu.

But Tibu? He found them.

CHAPTER SIX

For years, he hunted them. He never forgot. He never gave up. He traveled from state to state. One by one, he tracked them down. One by one, he made them suffer.

When he finally found the last one in a forgotten town in Texas, he took his time. He stalked the bastard for over a week. Learned his patterns, his weaknesses, the way he moved through life without a single ounce of remorse.

This one—Emilio Vargas—was the last of them. The final monster who had defiled his sister, slaughtered his mother. The last piece of filth still breathing.

Tibu followed when Vargas rode out alone on a cattle run, waiting until they were deep in the wild, where no one would hear him scream. Tonight was the night. The night justice would be delivered. The night he would end it.

Tibu's breath was steady as he watched from the ridge. Vargas had no idea he was being watched. The bastard was humming to himself, squatting near the fire, poking at the embers with a stick like a man without a care in the world.

The others had begged. They screamed. And Tibu had made sure their ends were slow.

Vargas would not be spared.

Tibu slid down the slope in absolute silence, moving like a shadow. The crackling of the fire masked his approach. A predator closing in.

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Before the man could react, Tibu's hand shot out, clamping around Vargas's throat. He slammed him to the ground, pinning him like a wild animal, his knee digging into his chest.

Vargas choked, hands clawing at Tibu's wrist, his eyes bulging with the realization that death had finally come for him.

Tibu leaned in close, his voice like gravel. "Do you remember her?"

Vargas gasped, shaking his head violently. He knew exactly who Tibu meant, but denial was the only weapon the coward had left.

Tibu's knife flashed in the firelight. He pressed it against Vargas's cheek, just beneath his eye.

"Then let me remind you."

With a slow, deliberate motion, Tibu dug the blade in and pulled. Flesh peeled away in a slick, red ribbon. Vargas shrieked, his body convulsing beneath Tibu's weight.

Tibu didn't stop.

He carved.

One cut, then another. Slowly. Carefully. Like a craftsman etching his masterpiece.

Vargas bucked and howled, his screams tearing into the night, but there was no one to hear him. No one but Tibu.

He scalped him next.

The blade slid beneath Vargas's hairline, slicing through skin and muscle, prying loose the scalp with a wet, sucking sound. Tibu tore it free and threw it into the fire, where it sizzled and smoked, curling into itself like burnt parchment.

Vargas was sobbing, his body trembling violently in shock. Blood pooled beneath him, sinking into the dirt.

"You took everything from me," Tibu whispered. "Now I take everything from you."

Vargas tried to plead, but his lips were gone now too.

Tibu took his time. He made sure Vargas felt every slice, every pull of the blade. He cut him open slowly, gutting him like a deer, making sure he lasted as long as possible.

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Vargas's agony became a hymn, his screams the final confession of a dying wretch.

When Vargas finally stopped moving, Tibu stood, drenched in the bastard's blood. The night was silent now. No insects. No wind. As if the world itself held its breath.

He grabbed the lifeless husk by the legs and dragged it to the fire. The smell of burning flesh filled the air as he watched the flames consuming Vargas flesh.

Only then did he finally allow himself to breathe.

It was done.

Justice had been served.

But the hunger for vengeance never truly fades.

As Tibu stared into the fire, watching the blackened remains smolder and crack, a thought whispered from the darkness inside—just for a moment—to consider the path he had chosen. A dark, endless road paved with blood and rage. Why did the fire inside him still burn? He had avenged Esmeralda. He had avenged his mother. So why did it feel like it would never be enough?

For the first time since that day, a sickening thought slithered into his mind. Would they have wanted this for him?

The answer didn't matter. His fate was already sealed. There was no turning back. When he found his prey, he did more than kill them. He made legends out of their suffering. The stories of his vengeance spread like wildfire, whispered from campfire to campfire.

The name Tiburcio Vásquez became a ghost story.

A warning.

A monster that could not be found.

A monster that could not be killed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Boss! Boss!” Manuel's voice trembled as he burst through the flaps of Tibu's tent. His breath was ragged, his face pale. “Boss—José is gone! I can't find him anywhere, and he took Pinto with him!”

Tibu's world tilted. The warmth of his liquor vanished, replaced by a searing rage.

“¡Maricón!” he roared. The crystal cup slipped from his grasp, shattering against the ground, amber liquid bleeding into the dirt.

His mind raced—José, gone? Impossible. José had saved his life once. José was his brother. Betrayal was unthinkable.

But the facts were undeniable.

Tibu shoved his boots on, his movements sharp, mechanical. “Get all the men. Send messengers to the border towns. Leave two behind to guard the camp, the rest, with me. To the cave. Now! Vamos!”

With a practiced hand, he holstered his pistol and stormed outside, the night air slapping against his face.

Darkness cloaked the desert as Tibu and his band of outlaws rode out, their shadows stretching long under the moonlight. Their guns were loaded, knives eager to bite into flesh, thirsting for blood.

One hundred and twenty hooves pounded against the hardened earth. Thirty outlaws. Sixty guns. An ocean of lead

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waiting to rain death.

The cold desert wind howled through the night, but nothing would slow them down.

They were hunting a ghost.

And if José had truly betrayed them—

He wouldn't live to see another sunrise.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The desert stretched out before José, endless and merciless beneath the moonlight. His breath came in sharp gasps, his heart pounding so violently it felt lodged in his throat. He knew what awaited him if Tibu caught up—knew it too well. Betrayal was not forgiven. Not in their world.

He had betrayed his oldest friend.

But what choice did he have?

Night after night, he lay awake, staring into the void, twisting and turning, wrestling with the truth—he couldn't live like this anymore. No home, no love, just the ceaseless chase. Always running, always watching his back. Surviving from one stolen meal to the next, raiding ranches like a pack of starving wolves. The more they took, the higher the bounties. The thrill had consumed Tibu, turned him into something else. He wanted infamy—he craved it. Being the most wanted man in the United States had become his obsession.

But José? José was tired of being hunted.

It's only fair that I finally took my share. Just a few pieces. They won't even miss it.

He tried justifying it, forcing himself to believe it, but guilt gnawed at him like a vulture picking at a carcass. Then, suddenly—he felt it.

A low vibration in the earth. A distant rumble. His

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stomach twisted. They had found him.

Panic surged through him. His fingers wove into his greasy hair, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Shit. Shit. Shit!"

His wide eyes darted across the barren landscape. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

"Damn you, Pinto! You slow, useless fleabag!" José yanked at the mule's lead, but it was no use. He needed a plan. A way to buy himself time.

Then, it hit him.

The gold.

A crazed laugh tore from his throat. *Of course!*

With frantic hands, he clawed at his saddlebags, ripping them open, hurling golden trinkets into the night like bread-crumbs in the sand. He had become a twisted version of Hansel, leaving behind a trail—not to find his way home, but to escape. He ran. As fast as his legs could carry him, yanking Pinto along. One bag remained.

José's fingers curled around the last prize—the cross. It was magnificent. A solid golden crucifix, its center carved from aged oak, lined with copper. Two angels at its base, lifting it toward the heavens. Every inch of it bore intricate Native American symbols, inlaid with deep red cabochon gems. It told a story—a story he had yet to understand. But he didn't need to. From the moment he saw it, he had been consumed. Drawn to it with a force beyond reason. He had thought it was his choice to steal it. That he had claimed it. But he had been a fool. The cross had chosen him.

It whispered to him, wrapped around his mind like silk, its voice sweeter than any woman's, more divine than any hymn. It promised salvation. Redemption.

It commanded him—To repent. To be better. To save his soul. And in that moment, under the cold stare of the desert moon, José wasn't sure if he had stolen the cross, or if the cross had stolen him.

José stood in the desert, his boots sinking into the soft sand, the weight of the cross heavy in his hands. The

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moonlight glinted off the gold, casting flickering amber reflections in his tear-filled eyes. A single drop slipped down his cheek, then another, until they fell in steady streams, carving silent paths through the dust on his face.

For a brief moment, he was somewhere else. Somewhere safe. Somewhere where life had not yet twisted him into a man on the run.

Then—thunder.

The pounding of hooves shattered the fragile illusion.

José blinked hard, wrenching himself from the cross's hypnotic pull. He turned. A cloud of dust rose behind him, churning and violent, his executioners closing in. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Farewell, mi amor. God willing, we will meet again."

His lips pressed against the cool gold in a final kiss before he hurled it into the night. It spun through the air, catching the moonlight—small glimmers, tiny sparks of hope. Maybe—just maybe—he would survive this.

The cross struck the ground with a dull, heavy thud. The force of the impact tore the wooden center from its golden embrace, separating them after centuries of unity.

José didn't look back.

"¡Vamos, Pinto! ¡Vámonos! The devil is coming."

The first shot rang out, splitting the night. A second later, bullets tore past him, whining as they ricocheted off scattered rocks. José flattened himself against Pinto's neck, his fingers white-knuckled around the reins, his breath a ragged, desperate thing.

"Madre de Dios, please, help me. I need a miracle. I'll do anything—I'll become a priest! I'll never steal again, I swear it!"

Like so many before him, he bargained. Empty words thrown into the void, hoping that, somehow, he was different. That God would halt time, send an angel, intervene just for him. But God had better things to do that night.

José should have listened—years ago—when his mother warned him.

"That boy is no good, José. One day, he'll take you down with him."

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If only she knew how right she had been.

“Hiya, Pinto! Hiya!”

The mule had other plans. With an indignant bray, Pinto reared, his hooves kicking high into the air. José barely had time to yelp before he was airborne—then crashing, hard, against the unyielding ground. Pain exploded through his skull. His nose cracked against a jagged rock, blood spurting down his face. He groaned, rolling onto his side, disoriented, hands fumbling at his face. *Was it broken? It had to be.*

A shadow swallowed the moonlight. José forced his eyes open. They were here. Horses pressed in from all sides, their riders sneering down at him, blocking out the sky. Hooves stamped the earth, nostrils flared, hot breath misting into the night air. The circle tightened. The walls of his tomb had been built—not of stone, but of muscle and malice.

José swallowed hard. *Got you now, puto.* This was no mere posse. This was something else. Something darker. The horses were not of this world. Their breath came in snorts of sulfur, their eyes pools of black malice. They were the steeds of revelation, the offspring of conquest, war, famine, and death. José had not escaped to the desert. He had galloped straight into hell. His lips trembled as he whispered the old prayers—the ones the monks had beaten into him as a child. The ones he never thought he’d need.

But no prayer would save him now.

CHAPTER NINE

“And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, come and see.

And I looked, and behold a pale horse, and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”

José shuddered.

“I’m going to hell, and I deserve it... I’m going to hell...”

Warmth spread down his legs. His body had betrayed him. José, the man who once killed a bear with his bare hands to save Tibu, the man they had all respected, now sat in a puddle of his own piss. His face was a mess of blood and dirt, his hands raised, trembling, begging. Some men faced death with dignity.

José did not.

Tibu swung down from his horse, his boots slamming into the earth like iron fists. A storm brewed in his chest, rage clawing to break free. He had never known anger like this. He had seen betrayal, lived it, breathed it—hell, in their world, treachery was as common as dust. Every sunrise, someone was scheming, plotting, looking for an angle. Even in sleep, the knives never stopped coming.

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But not from José. Not from the one man he trusted.

José had not just betrayed Tibu. He had betrayed all of them—the men who had fought beside him, bled beside him. They were criminals, outlaws, but there was a code. A bond. These men had shared food with José, killed for him, risked their lives for him.

And he had spat on their faces.

Tibu's lips curled in disgust as José groveled.

"Tibu! Please! I beg you—please, Tibu, please, I be—" The plea ended in a sickening crunch. Tibu's boot connected with José's jaw, cutting his words short, sending blood and shattered teeth spilling into the dirt. The impact snapped José's head back, his vision exploding into white-hot agony. Before he could recover, another kick landed, lifting his head from the mud. He gasped, choking on his own blood, his body writhing in the filth beneath him.

A fist wrenched his hair, ripping him from the dirt. The follicles screamed as they tore from his scalp, one by one.

"Look at me, cobarde. Look at me!"

A slap cracked across José's face; blood vessels burst beneath his skin.

Tibu's voice was thick with fury. "After all these years, this is how you repay me? After all our battles, all our travels—I treated you like a brother. I would have died for you. And you repay me by stealing?"

Tibu wrenched José's head toward the crowd.

"You didn't just betray me, pendejo." He jerked his hair harder, making José yelp. "You betrayed every man here. The men who would've killed for you. You betrayed everyone back home who believes in us." Tibu's voice dropped, low and venomous. "And now, you worm, you have the guts to beg?"

Tibu's body trembled with rage. "If it had only been me you betrayed—maybe, maybe—I would have let you live. But too many stand against you now. And in their name, I will do what must be done."

José sobbed, scrambling onto his knees. Words tumbled

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from his lips, frantic, desperate.

"The cross! It was the cross—it made me do it!" He threw himself at Tibu's feet, clutching at his boots. "Please, Tibu! Please, I don't know what happened to me! I don't know! You have to believe me!" Blood pooled at his chin, thick and red, dribbling onto Tibu's boots. "You know I would never betray you. Please!"

Tibu moved like a snake—swift, uncoiling, deadly. Before José could react, cold steel kissed the underside of his chin. The knife punched through flesh and bone, fusing his jaw to his skull.

José's eyes bulged. His breath hitched. He could still hear, still feel—his body spasmed violently, fingers twitching, trying to grasp onto life.

Tibu held him like a grotesque offering, José's head speared on the blade.

His voice softened—almost gentle. "Hermano... my dearest friend. I wish I could change tonight." He sighed. "Of all the men I have killed, I have never regretted a single one." A pause. Then, softer: "Until now." Blood trickled down the blade, warm against his fingers. "You once saved my life. For that, I give you peace."

Tibu wrenched the knife free and, in one fluid motion, sliced through the soft meat of José's throat.

A wet gurgle. A shudder. A final, broken gasp. The mud beneath him darkened—not with piss, but with blood. José, the man who had once fought bears, now lay still. And the desert swallowed him.

Tibu stood and wiped the knife clean on his sleeve, the fabric darkening as it absorbed the blood. The blade caught the flickering firelight, gleaming for a moment before he sheathed it with a slow, deliberate motion. He looked at his men and stabbed the air with his knife. "Take his body and bring it back to the camp. Four of you stay behind and search for the gold. Do not keep anything for yourselves; I will not show you the same mercy."

Hours later, back at the robber's roost, all the men were

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gathered. Tibu emerged from his tent, dressed in his most formal attire, his grandfather's revolutionary sword strapped to his side. He looked like a true commander, ready to address his men.

The tension was palpable. No one could predict Tibu. He was a man of calculated fury, known to embrace a brother in one breath and strike him down in the next. There was the time he had caught a thief among them—rather than immediate punishment, he had dined with the man, shared laughter and drink, only to slit his throat when the thief least expected it. The men never knew whether they would receive his mercy or his wrath, and that uncertainty made him all the more feared. The anticipation was nerve-wracking.

Tibu climbed onto a nearby boulder, ensuring that every single one of his men could see him, and more importantly, hear what he had to say. The glow from the campfires illuminated him, casting a large, monstrous shadow against the rock wall behind him.

“Mi hermanos! Listen well, I will not repeat these words.”

All eyes were locked on their leader.

“We have witnessed the worst level of betrayal tonight—a man we called our brother, a man we shared our food with, drank our wine with, has betrayed all of us. And not just all of us here, but all who are fighting for the cause. Those at home, who hope we succeed and reclaim our land. This, my compradors, is the highest level of treachery, and as long as there is a drop of blood running through my veins, as long as air flows through my lungs, as long as my heart beats, I will never tolerate treachery.”

The camp was silent. You could hear a pin drop. They all hung on Tibu's every word.

“As you all know, the bendejo who committed this crime was a brother to me. Tonight, you will witness that no one, absolutely no one, stands above our code of honor.”

Slowly, Tibu made his way down from the rock that

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served as his stage and walked toward the center of the camp.

José's dead body hung strapped between four horses; each one saddled by one of José's closest friends. Ropes tied around each limb connected to the saddles. The once-respected man was now nothing more than a fragile sack of flesh and clotted blood, displayed for all to see.

Tibu's words rang through the air as he approached the gruesome display.

"I swear on the grave of my mother, my father, and my beloved sister—I swear in the name of God, that whoever betrays us will suffer the most terrible death. Let this be a lesson to all of you."

Tibu pulled his sword from its sheath and stood beside José's body, signaling the riders to push their horses. The stallions inched forward, the ropes stretching to their limit with a squeal. The moonlight cast a perfect X on the sierra's dirt.

In that moment, flashes of their youth played in his mind, nights spent by the fire, dreams of freedom, the laughter they once shared. But that man was gone, replaced by a traitor. His grip on the sword tightened, his breath ragged. If he faltered now, he would lose more than just a friend—he would lose control. His hands trembled for only a second before he steadied himself, pushing the memories aside like dust in the wind. He could not allow himself to show emotion. The moment his men sensed weakness; they would turn on him like a pack of hungry wolves. He had to do what needed to be done.

His face tightened; his teeth clenched. He took a deep breath, and a tortured scream erupted from deep within his soul.

"Death to traitors! AAAAAAAA!"

Tibu's sword came down in one swift motion, separating his old friend's head from his body. José's head fell to the ground, rolled to the side, and ended up with his dead eyes gazing at the moon.

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The four horsemen spurred their stallions and took off in separate directions. José's limbs trailed behind them; his shredded torso abandoned in the dirt.

Tibu reached down, picked up José's severed head, and, without a word, flung it into the crowd. Gasps rippled through the gathered men, some stumbling back, others frozen in place. A few recoiled in horror, their faces pale in the firelight, while others, hardened by war and bloodshed, merely nodded in grim approval. The severed head landed with a sickening thud, rolling to a stop at a young recruit's feet. He gagged, bile rising in his throat, but quickly swallowed it down, forcing himself to stare into the lifeless eyes of the traitor. Tibu's gaze swept over them, searching for any sign of weakness, any hint of hesitation.

"All of you, take a close look. Take a very close look. Never forget this rat and his betrayal. Cut his body to pieces and leave it for the vultures to feed on. No one shall ever speak his name again, or I swear to God, you will suffer the same fate." He raised his sword. "Our heart, for our country!"

The crowd followed suit, chants and gunshots ringing through the night.

CHAPTER TEN

Los Angeles, California, Current Day

There had always been a rivalry between Alpha and Bravo Company, long before my time. No one could quite explain it. That was just the way things were and always would be. Bravo Company were dicks—it was just another law of the universe.

Alpha Company always got stuck with the dirty work, while Bravo Company took the credit. This imbalance led to more than a few unfortunate confrontations over the years.

One particular incident stood out. During a Bravo Company training camp, a group of Alpha veterans decided it was time to settle the score. A small team infiltrated the guard shed, lobbing in a couple of flashbangs stolen from a previous exercise. The guards didn't put up much of a fight. Only Bravo Company would be dumb enough to assume nothing bad could happen at a training camp. With their hands zip-tied behind their backs and their own socks stuffed in their mouths as gags, they could do nothing but watch as the Alpha veterans slipped into the camp.

Several pairs of combat boots stomped past their line of sight. Then, the sharp crack of a rifle butt. Darkness.

A second team waited for their signal—a simple, cliché owl

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hoot—before moving in. Their target: the officers' quarters. One soldier stayed behind to watch the entrance as the rest crept up the stairs, silent and deliberate. They knew exactly where to go. Their target: Capt. Patrick Campbell.

Campbell was an egotistical, backstabbing son of a bitch—the commanding officer of Bravo Company. Tonight, he'd learn a valuable lesson. A crash course in humility... and aviation. He awoke from his wet dreams to the crushing impact of knuckles against his skull. To his credit, he fought back, but that resistance didn't last long—just like him. A sharp struggle, a final shove, and a short-lived scream sliced through the night air, followed by a hollow ka-thump.

Silence. A body, still and broken on the ground.

Movies always exaggerate falls. In real life, they end before you even register what's happening.

The Alpha men didn't stick around to admire their work. They bolted, racing back to their barracks on the east side of the camp, adrenaline pounding through their veins.

Two hours later, military police stormed in. Apparently, Campbell's dying cries hadn't gone unnoticed—short-lived or not. Batons and boots pounded against doors.

"Everyone outside! Now! Get the fuck out of your beds before we drag you out!"

Half-dressed, bleary-eyed soldiers stumbled out of their bunks. Confusion and irritation crackled in the air like static electricity. About thirty MPs held Alpha Platoon at gunpoint. To them, we were the enemy now—wild animals, unpredictable and dangerous. Not entirely inaccurate.

The MP captain pulled Lieutenant Perez—our commander—aside. Their heated conversation left little room for doubt. Something serious had happened. Perez's expression morphed from confusion to barely restrained fury. Dressed in nothing but socks and army-green boxers, he turned to us, his voice sharp with rage.

"Alpha Company! Atten-HUT!"

Boots and socks slammed against the pavement in unison.

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“Men, I’ve been informed that a crime has been committed. Potentially by some of our own.” His voice was a hammer striking steel. “Some of you decided to take justice into your own hands. By doing so, you disgraced this company. At zero-two-hundred, Captain Campbell of Bravo Company was thrown out a window.” Perez paced the line, his sharp gaze scanned every face, looking for the slightest flinch, any sign of guilt. “Campbell has been rushed to a nearby hospital with life-threatening injuries. It’s unclear if he’ll make it.” Silence fell over Alpha Company. The weight of Perez’s words settled in, heavy as the dawn creeping over the horizon.

Pvt. Freselli, new to the Company, let out a nervous giggle. Without warning, an MP’s fist slammed into his stomach, doubling him over as he collapsed to his knees, retching violently.

“If there are any other smart asses who think this is funny, please step forward,” Perez challenged, his eyes sweeping over his troops.

Silence.

“I didn’t think so.” He exhaled sharply. “We all know there’s a rivalry between us and Bravo Company. I know it. I acknowledge it. I also know Alpha Company doesn’t always get the respect it deserves. But that is no excuse for what happened tonight. No matter how much we despise Bravo Company, they are still part of our battalion. And when we’re in combat, we fight as one. We will have to rely on them, as they rely on us.”

Perez’s voice hardened. “I would hope that the men of Alpha Company—my men—have the pride to know they are better than this. Do you need a fucking pat on the back every time you do something? Do you need someone to hold your hand and tell you you’re special? Is that what you want? Do you really want to be like them? Isn’t it enough just knowing you are the best?”

“Sir, YES, Sir!” the platoon roared in unison.

Perez paced, his eyes burning with disappointment. “So

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if you all know you're the best, then why THE FUCK are we here? Why did some of you think this was okay? It disgusts me to my core to know there are men in Alpha Company who would embarrass us like this. Embarrass their fellow soldiers. Embarrass me. Disgrace the traditions we stand for. And in the end—hurt one of our own." He paused, his voice dropping to a growl. "I want names. I want to know who the piece of shit is that did this. You will stand here all night. You will stay here until your fucking nuts freeze off. I. Don't. Care."

With that, Perez turned and marched away.

The MP Captain stepped forward. "Alright, let's see if there are any real men in the notorious Alpha Company," he sneered. "If you have any balls, step forward now, and the rest can go back to sleep. Don't let your brothers suffer for your actions."

He scanned their faces, searching for a flicker of guilt. A twitch. A glance at the ground. A quivering lip. Nothing. Not a twitch. Not a sound. The troops stood tall, chins high, shoulders squared. Their fists clenched at their sides. Alpha Company wasn't just a unit—it was a force. A disciplined, hardened machine. And while many of them disagreed with what had happened, they would never turn on their own. Not for a dirtbag like Capt. Campbell. Bottom line—he had it coming.

Hours passed in the freezing cold, the MPs hurling their best attempts at intimidation. Alpha Company didn't break. Eventually, they were allowed to return to their quarters. The investigation dragged on for months, but without evidence—or suspects—it was closed. Then came the news. Campbell had barely survived. His pelvis and lower vertebrae shattered, his career was over. He would never walk again. Alpha Company received a little more respect after that, but their reputation was tarnished. The unspoken trust between military brothers had fractured, and it would take time—and blood—to mend.

It wasn't long before Campbell's replacement arrived.

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Another idiot. A rookie straight out of the academy. No experience. No combat. Just in time for the next deployment.

Some of the men exchanged knowing looks as they watched him step onto the base. He had no idea what he was walking into. Alpha Company wasn't just another assignment. It was a proving ground.

As was often the case, we didn't know where we were going or why—we were just told when to report and to be ready. We assembled in one of the base's hangars as the C-130s roared to life. Our battalion had been tasked with securing an abandoned enemy airbase. Once secured, we would hold it until reinforcements arrived, allowing us to expand our field of operations. It was a standard mission, but missions could change in an instant.

Under the cover of darkness, we were dropped a few miles from the objective. A high-altitude insertion ensured we landed undetected. Everything was going according to plan. We checked our gear, confirmed objectives, and split into designated sectors. As soon as we left the landing zone, Alpha and Bravo Company separated.

There was no love lost between us.

We were descending the hillside when gunfire erupted from the east. The sudden break in silence had only one explanation—Bravo Two Zero had drawn enemy fire.

Perez had sensed trouble from the start. He didn't trust the commander's strategy of keeping everyone clustered together. The moment we cleared the LZ, he ignored orders and split Alpha Company off. Minutes later, tracer rounds carved fiery arcs through the night sky, exposing the enemy's position. Without hesitation, we moved to flank them.

It took twenty minutes to maneuver, but we abandoned the open trail in favor of the forest. Covering half a mile an hour wasn't fast, but rushing meant getting killed. Every step was deliberate, every breath measured. The scent of damp earth and distant gunpowder lingered in the air, a warning of what lay ahead.

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“Down!” Corporal Thompson, our scout, dropped to a knee and raised his fist. Instantly, the company followed, rifles trained in their sectors.

Perez moved forward, his pulse steady but his grip tightening on his rifle. “Thompson, report.”

“Tripwire, sir,” Thompson whispered. “Double stacked, front and back.”

It was a classic trap—one wire set inches off the ground, with parallel wires placed even lower to catch anyone attempting to step over. A careless step meant instant death.

Thompson barely breathed as he reached for a small, flexible twig he had prepared earlier. Stripped of bark, its pale surface gleamed faintly under the weak moonlight. He dragged it slowly across the ground, his movements precise. Up, down, left, right. Then—contact. Something was there. Just enough tension to be unnatural.

Thompson's stomach tightened. He raised his fist again and went down on one knee, signaling Perez. Perez crouched beside him. “Okay, Thompson,” he whispered. “You check left, I’ll check right. Go.” Perez turned, keeping his voice low. “Michaels! Up front!”

Michaels, armed with his M249 SAW, moved in.

“Sir?”

“Watch our backs while we clear this. Scan sectors two through four. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Michaels dropped prone, machine gun braced, night vision scanning the terrain eastward. The faint glow of his goggles reflected in his eyes, unwavering.

Perez signaled again. “Sergeant Davis.”

“Sir.”

“Take the men, fall back one hundred feet, and assume an all-round defensive position.”

“Yes, sir.” Davis relayed the order, and the unit moved. Thompson exhaled slowly, steadying his hand as he reached toward the wire. Then, without warning...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Los Angeles, California, Current Day

Woof, woof. “Get it, Tessie—get it!”

The barking and laughter echoed through the house. A red plastic ball rolled into the room, hotly pursued by Tessie, the Boston Terrier, and Lisa, Jack’s nine-year-old daughter.

Such a simple act. Such an innocent, everyday moment. Yet, this plastic ball—this stupid, insignificant piece of plastic—just ruined everything.

Jack’s inspiration, his hard-fought battle between Alpha and Bravo Platoon, the covert mission, Cpl. Thompson, Sgt. Perez, and rookie Sgt. Davis—gone. Flushed away in an instant.

His frustration boiled over. Without thinking, his voice thundered through the room.

“Get the fuck out of here! How many times do I have to tell you this is not a playground? This is my workspace! Take Tessie and get out! Don’t ever come in here again. Ever! You hear me?”

Lisa froze. Her bright eyes widened in shock, tears welling instantly. Her small body trembled as her lips quivered, never before having heard such venom from her father. Clutching Tessie to her chest, she turned and ran, her sobs echoing down the hall.

Jack barely noticed. His mind was already back at his

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desk, locked in his own world, blind to the damage left in his wake.

Two months to go. Fifty-one days. Twelve hundred twenty-four excruciating hours until his deadline expired.

It had all happened so fast. Jack never thought he'd sell a single story, never imagined seeing his work on bookshelves, in Barnes & Noble, or available for purchase on Amazon. At first, the stories flowed easily. He had drawn from his experience in the Special Forces, his missions abroad providing endless inspiration. But success came with a cost.

The publishers wanted him closer—closer to the industry, closer to the media, closer to the money.

"This way, you can do more interviews, more appearances. It'll be great for your career."

Los Angeles. The City of Angels. Sunny California, with its golden beaches, Palisades Park, and the glittering Hollywood lights. It all sounded like a dream. Jack convinced his wife, Allison, that the move would be good for them, that they'd finally have more time together. No more traveling for weeks on end, no more book tours keeping him away. They could be a real family again—trips up the coast, days at Disneyland, afternoons at the LA Zoo. Lisa could even learn to surf.

It sounded so good.

A few weeks after signing his contract, the moving truck pulled up to their little house in Cedar Creek, Texas. They left more behind than they could have ever imagined.

Like everything else that sounds too good to be true, it all fell apart fast.

Jack was home less than ever before. The publishers had him in a constant whirlwind—meetings, parties, book signings, photo ops, interviews, promotions. He was exhausted, detached, barely present.

Allison and Lisa saw him less and less. And when they did, he was too drained to engage.

Like so many before him, Jack got caught up in the trap

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of fame. Nights in the Montmartre Lounge turned into cocktails at The Ivy, followed by music at The Wiltern, then hopping between clubs on Sunset Boulevard. Whiskey A Go Go, The Viper Room, The Key Club, The Roxy, and a final stop at The Rainbow Bar and Grill. Jack became a Sunset Strip regular.

Networking, he called it.

In Hollywood, excess isn't a vice—it's currency. In this world, snorting hundreds of dollars' worth of cocaine and sleeping with whoever presented themselves was just another part of the job.

As the parties intensified, his family faded into the background. Writing became harder. Inspiration dried up. His priorities shifted like a tectonic fault line, shaking everything in his life.

Eight months ago, the publishers demanded a new book.

"It's time. Your fans are waiting. You can't let the market go cold."

Jack agreed. Instantly, he had a title—First Line of Defense.

The publishers loved it. The marketing machine roared to life, press releases went out, social media buzzed, and anticipation built.

Coming up with a title was easy. Writing the book? That was another story.

Now, six months later, with only two months left, the celebrated novelist sat in front of his blank page, struggling. Alcohol, isolation—his old crutches—were failing him. Red Bull and vodka, Red Bull and tequila, straight Jack Daniel's, Jack with tequila, Bailey's with Jägermeister. Nothing worked. No amount of intoxication could summon the words he needed. For the first time, he had no experiences left to draw from. He had to rely on raw talent. He had to earn his paycheck.

The ticking of the clock grew louder in his head.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick. Tock...

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Every second that passed, desperation grew. The hours slipped away like water through clenched fists. He would have sold his soul for just a spark of inspiration.

Then—finally—a breakthrough. A flash of memory. A friend had once told him about a covert mission in Eastern Europe. A secret operation.

This was it. His lifeline. If he could just get a solid beginning, just a few paragraphs, the rest would follow. The story would flow.

“Thank you, God. Thank you!”

Jack leaped up, fists pumping, his body trembling with excitement. He grabbed his pen, his notepad, and started writing. The words poured from his mind like a floodgate bursting open. He was in the zone, consumed by the rush of creation.

For eight glorious hours, he wrote nonstop.

Then—fate intervened.

A small, round, red piece of plastic rolled into his study and his mind went blank. Just. Like. That. It all came crashing down.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kashtiq, California, 1928

For months, Chief Lightfoot endured nights of unspeakable horror, trapped in visions that clawed at his sanity. At first, they came sporadically, mere glimpses of horror. But with each passing night, the visions deepened, stretching longer, embedding themselves in his soul. Those nights, he at least woke up screaming. The worst ones left him frozen, his body paralyzed as shadows fed him nightmares he couldn't escape.

Desperate, Chief Lightfoot called upon Silent Horse, his tribe's medicine man, to conduct a purification ritual. Sleep had abandoned him, and what little energy remained seeped from his body like blood from an open wound. His once dark eyes were now marred by crimson veins, and his skin, pallid from exhaustion, bore the marks of sleepless nights. Tonight, he would endure one final session of agony—he needed answers before it was too late.

Silent Horse, flanked by four trusted tribesmen, journeyed to Pacoima—the Tataviam's sacred burial ground. It was not merely a graveyard. It was a gateway, where spirits of the past lingered, ever watchful, never at rest.

The white settlers who had stolen their land called it Indian Hill. The shape of the hill was an eerie miracle—its

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outline bore the image of a great chief reclining against the earth. The peak formed the chief's face, his headdress eternally lush with greenery, while his barren visage resisted the growth of even a single blade of grass. Upon first sight, settlers mistook it for a great statue, a trick of nature that whispered of something beyond their understanding.

As night fell, Chief Lightfoot rode his mustang toward the sacred hill, murmuring prayers to his forefathers. The setting sunbathed the valley in hues of crimson and gold, an omen of what was to come.

Silent Horse awaited him at the hilltop, clad in his ceremonial dress. His headdress, once the skull of a mighty buffalo he had slain as a young warrior, rested upon his brow. The beast's horns remained intact, a testament to his triumph. Red and yellow beaded strings draped over his shoulders, ending in eagle feathers that caressed his back as he moved. His chest bore sacred symbols painted in ochre—watchful coyote, standing bear, soaring eagle—alongside the imprints of his own crimson-stained hands.

As Chief Lightfoot approached, the rhythmic pounding of drums echoed through the valley. The medicine man and his disciples began their chant, invoking the ancestors. The fires burned higher, their flames reaching toward the heavens, desperate to be heard. Silent Horse assisted his chief in dismounting, offering him a bundle of smoldering white sage. The scent curled through the air, thick and pungent, cleansing the space between the realms of the living and the dead.

Looking up at the burning sky, Silent Horse lifted his arms to the firelit sky, his silhouette twisting and contorting as he danced, shadows warping against the flames. Circling Chief Lightfoot, he moved in rhythmic steps, waving his eagle feathers to summon strength from the spirits. The others followed, their movements forming a protective orbit. Red clay powder filled the air, their ancient prayers ascending into the night. The drumming intensified, the flames writhed in response, and suddenly—

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Silence.

The ritual had begun. Silent Horse pulled aside the grass door of the ceremonial hut and bowed deeply.

“Chief, let me free you from the demons that torment you. Please.” He gestured toward a buffalo skin laid upon the dirt floor. “Shed your earthly garments.”

Lightfoot obeyed. As he stood bare, the helpers anointed his skin with crushed herbs, their scent thick, cloying, as though the earth itself was marking him for sacrifice. His skin tingled under their touch. He lay upon the buffalo hide, his breath steadying as the fire roared.

Silent Horse unrolled his sacred buckskin—a map to guide wandering spirits back to the realm from which they came. Moon phases adorned the corners, each connected by red and blue lines, symbolizing the tides and their endless pull. At its center blazed a great yellow sun, encircled by the painted visages of past Tataviam chiefs.

Taking his knife, Silent Horse drew the blade across his palm, allowing his blood to drip onto the map. He reached into a pouch at his belt, loosening its straps. Coyote vertebrae tumbled onto the buckskin, their bleached remnants soaking in the crimson droplets. His eyes rolled back as the spirits seized him, their message reverberating through his bones.

“Chief,” the guttural voice echoed, deep and omnipotent. “You are haunted by the worst of demons. The great earth snake, Terraqual.”

Lightfoot’s breath hitched. His weary eyes met the medicine man’s.

“Do what must be done,” he rasped. “I believe in your power and in the wisdom of our ancestors.”

Silent Horse knelt, presenting a wooden cup filled with a dark, viscous liquid.

“Drink,” he urged. “It will guide you deeper. It will force Terraqual to surface, and when it does—we will sever its head.”

Lightfoot grasped the cup. The stench alone made his

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stomach lurch. He brought the foul brew to his lips, forcing the sludge down his throat. It constricted his windpipe, slithering into his belly like a living thing. His vision blurred. His muscles spasmed. His body stiffened.

Lightfoot plummeted into darkness. A low hum vibrated through the soil, growing in intensity. The earth itself was calling.

Then—

A shadow.

The cavernous dark pulsed, Terraqual slithering forward, the very ground warping beneath it. Its body was massive, a chain of rippling muscle wrapped in razor-edged scales, shimmering with an unnatural, oily glow. Its tongue, split into four, flicked wildly, tasting him not just in the air but in his mind.

The third eye upon its forehead, the eye that gazed at the heavens, suddenly turned downward, fixing on Lightfoot. Time fractured. The air distorted. For a moment, Lightfoot felt his body unspooling, as if he were being unwoven from existence, his mind stretched across a thousand unseen dimensions.

The beast did not strike immediately—it spoke.

Its voice was a soundless vibration, a whisper from the depths of time itself. *"You do not belong here."* The words didn't enter his ears but his veins, slithering into his blood like a disease.

"Come," Lightfoot rasped. "Face me."

Terraqual reared, the walls of the underground chamber writhing as if alive. Then, with a monstrous hiss, it lunged.

Lightfoot pivoted, seizing the serpent's throat. Its scales tore deep into his flesh, burning him with an unseen fire. Visions flooded his mind—men drowning, rivers choked with the dead, fire consuming villages. The horror was endless.

Then—nothing.

Chief Lightfoot's eyes flew open. He heaved forward, vomiting a vile mixture of water, blood, and mud onto the dirt floor. His body trembled violently.

The battle was over.

But the war had just begun.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Los Angeles, California, Current Day

A cold flood of water crashed over Jack's face, shocking him awake. He sputtered, gasping for air as the empty bucket clattered to the floor, rolling aimlessly across the hardwood. His lungs burned as he lurched forward from the couch, confusion clouding his mind.

"What? What the hell?" he coughed, wiping water from his eyes.

Alison stood over him, arms crossed, her expression carved from ice.

"I hope I got your attention," she said, her voice laced with venom.

Jack blinked up at her, still trying to piece together what had just happened. Before he could respond, a second, more muffled thud registered in his ears. His gaze darted to the floor, where an empty suitcase now lay open.

"I want you to leave."

"Leave? What are you talking about? Leave where?"

Her eyes burned with an intensity that made his stomach twist. Her hands clenched at her sides; her knuckles white with tension.

"I grew up with an abusive father, and I will never allow my daughter to be exposed to the same shit I lived with."

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Jack recoiled as if struck. “Honey, what are you talking about? I’m not abusive. I’ve never done anything abusive. Have I?” His voice softened, his expression pleading, but it only seemed to stoke the fire in her eyes.

Alison had been silent for too long, swallowing her pain, but now it was spilling out like a flood.

“I’ve taken it all, Jack,” she screamed, her voice cracking under the weight of her emotions. Her flushed cheeks were streaked with tears, her chest heaving from the force of her sobs. “The alcohol. The drugs. I never even said anything about the other women.”

“What other women?” Jack protested, but his words barely left his lips before the sting of her palm snapped his head to the side.

“Don’t insult me, Jack. Don’t you ever insult me. Do you think I’m blind?” Her voice trembled with rage, her whole-body quivering. “You asshole. All the time you were out there—partying, basking in the glow of being the big, famous writer, the newest flavor in the business. Do you think I don’t see how those women look at you? Do you think I don’t smell their perfume when you come home the next day? I can smell them on you, Jack.”

Jack opened his mouth, but no words came. There was nothing he could say.

“I never said anything,” she continued, her voice hoarse, “hoping it would just fade away. For the sake of our daughter. For the sake of the fourteen years we’ve been together. But you’ve become the man you swore you never would. You’ve become the thing you hated most.”

Her words struck harder than any slap. Jack felt the weight of them settle in his chest, suffocating him.

“It hasn’t just destroyed us,” Alison whispered, her fury giving way to exhaustion. “It’s destroying you. You hardly write anymore. You don’t know what to do, so you just drink. You’re a loser, Jack. A real loser.”

Allison was sobbing so hard that her entire chest shook, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Her eyes, bloodshot and

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swollen, burned with unshed fury and sorrow.

“I can take it. I’ve been exposed to it my entire life,” she choked out, her voice a raw, trembling force. “But I’ll be damned if I let some asshole like you serve as an example to my daughter. NEVER!” Her voice cracked as she turned and stormed out, the door slamming shut behind her, echoing through the empty space.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jack sat in his car, parked in a dimly lit, near-abandoned lot, the weight of Allison's words pressing down on him like a vice. The realization seeped into him, slow and suffocating: she was right. He had become what he loathed, the one thing he swore he would never be. His father.

Absent. Drunk. Chasing an illusion of charm and charisma while his real life decayed around him.

How had he let it happen? It wasn't overnight, it had crept in like a slow, insidious poison. The free drinks, the effortless attention, the women. It was all so easy. No harm, right? Just sex, no love. Half the time, he was too wasted to remember. He had told himself that lie so often it had started to sound like truth.

His gaze dropped to his wedding band, a dull, worn circle mocking him.

"I'm a dick," he muttered, shaking his head. The self-loathing surged like bile. His fists slammed against the dashboard. "I'm a dick. I'm a fucking dick!" The words ripped from him, each one punctuated by his fists pounding the car, his voice rising to a scream.

"Fuck! Fuck! FFFFUUUCCKKK!"

His breaths came in ragged, uneven bursts. He reached for the glove compartment, his fingers fumbling against the latch. The compartment popped open with a plastic click, and his hand

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wrapped around the cold metal of the Heckler & Koch—a gift from Allison on their eighth wedding anniversary.

A bitter laugh bubbled in his throat. Some fucking gift.

The gun felt heavier than it ever had before. With practiced motion, he gripped the slide, pulled it back, and chambered a single .45 federal hollow point.

One shot. One kill. Hoorah.

A tear slipped down his cheek, trailing warmth against his cold skin before dropping off his chin.

“How the fuck am I gonna do this?” he mumbled, staring into the barrel. The steel eye of the gun glinted back at him, unblinking, patient.

Was this what it had all been for? Years of grinding, sweating, chasing dreams, only to piss it all away on cheap thrills and empty nights? What a goddamn joke.

His chest heaved with sobs he could no longer control.

“I never thought I’d be scared to die.” His voice was barely a whisper. “Never gave a damn before. But now... now I’m just a fucking coward.”

He turned on the radio. The dashboard glowed a soft, eerie green, casting shadows along his face. The CD player clicked, shuffled, and settled. Jack’s finger skipped ahead, track after track, until he reached number eighteen.

The piano began, soft and familiar.

His thumb flicked the gun’s safety off. The volume cranked up, filling the empty car with melody. With a slow, practiced motion, he pulled his wallet from his pocket. He flipped it open, fingers trembling over the pictures inside.

Allison. Lisa. His girls.

He thought of Hedgehog, who had hanged himself over a girl. David, who shot himself in the face because of demons that had haunted him since childhood. Collin, who couldn’t take the pain anymore, his sickness driving him to the shotgun in his closet.

Their faces flickered in his mind like ghosts.

The barrel pressed against his tongue, the cold steel sending a shudder down his spine. Carefully, he angled it

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upward, feeling the metal scrape the roof of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, barely able to form the words. "I'm so sorry."

The tears poured freely now, blinding him. His body trembled as he tried to hum along with the song. His favorite song. The song that had carried him through so much.

"At times we may fall, like we all tend to do," the lyrics rang out. "But I reach out and find that I'm running to you..."

His grip loosened, the gun slowly lowering from his mouth.

His shoulders shook with sobs that wracked his entire body.

"Forever..." he croaked out, voice raw, shattered.

He slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

"Damn Dropkick Murphys," he choked out.

The gun fired.

The flash exploded in the car, lighting up the darkness in a burst of orange fire. The bullet tore through the roof, disappearing into the night.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The phone rang relentlessly. Allison stirred but hesitated to wake up. Lisa had crawled into bed with her, her small frame curled up against her warmth. At the foot of the bed, Tessie snored loudly, undisturbed.

Carefully, Allison shifted, easing herself off the bed without waking them. It had taken her hours to calm Lisa down, to help her understand that her daddy had to go away for a while. She brushed a hand over Lisa's hair, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead before slipping out of bed. Now, she tiptoed into the living room and picked up the phone.

"Jack, what the hell are you doing? Do you know what time it is?"

"Ms. Morrison?" A calm, unfamiliar voice on the other end.

"Yes?" she answered, confusion creeping into her tone. "Who is this?"

"Ma'am, my name is Detective Fiene. I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, but this is regarding your husband."

Allison's stomach twisted. Her grip on the phone tightened, nails digging into her palm. "Jack. What has he done this time?" Her exhaustion evaporated, replaced by a slow-burning fury. Even in his absence, he caused trouble.

A pause. A too long pause.

"Ms. Morrison," Fiene continued carefully, "there was

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an incident at a motel parking lot. Officers responded to reports of gunshots.”

Her body went rigid. Her heart slammed into her ribs, her breath stuttering. “Jack,” she whispered. “Oh my God. Jack—is he okay? Please, tell me he’s okay!” Allison sank into the chair beside the phone, her fingers gripping the receiver.

“Yes, Ms. Morrison, your husband is alive. It appears he attempted to commit suicide. We have him in custody.”

The words punched the air from her lungs. The room blurred. She barely registered the scrape of a picture frame as her elbow knocked it off the table. She slipped from the chair to the floor, gasping as if the very air had been knocked from her lungs.

“Ms. Morrison? Ms. Morrison, are you alright?”

She pressed a trembling hand to her forehead, forcing herself to steady her breathing. A moment passed before she could form words.

“Yes,” she finally croaked. “I think so. Where is your station located?”

Fumbling, she grabbed a scrap of paper and a pen.

“We’re at 3630 Olympic. Are you certain you are okay to drive? I can send a squad car if you need.”

If Jack weren’t a celebrity, they wouldn’t have offered. But better safe than sorry. The detective could already hear Lt. Smith’s screeching voice if something happened to her en route. He could already picture himself being called into the office to explain why he hadn’t taken extra precautions.

“No, no, that’s not necessary,” she said quickly, regaining her composure. Her eyes flicked back to Lisa, still curled in bed, oblivious to the storm waiting for her mother outside. “I’ll be there shortly.”

She hung up the phone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jack wasn't asleep. But he wasn't awake either.

He drifted somewhere between a space not meant for the living.

The ground beneath him was black and cracked, like scorched earth after a great fire. Heat radiated from below, making the air shimmer in waves. The smell hit him first. It wasn't just rot. It was burning meat. Charred flesh. The stench curled into his lungs, making him gag.

Ahead, a river of bodies stretched endlessly. Not floating—writhing. Twisting and wriggling over one another, their mouths open in silent screams. They weren't dead, but they weren't alive either. Their faces were frozen in agony, eyes locked wide, trapped in their final moments.

Jack took a step forward, but the ground shifted beneath him. Not solid—something pulsed, like muscle beneath skin.

A whisper crawled through the heat.

"The land remembers."

Jack's breath hitched. He turned sharply, but there was no one there. Just the endless expanse of cracked stone, the sky above a deep, sickly red. No stars. No sun. Just a burning void stretching into eternity.

Then he saw them—the eyes in the darkness.

Hundreds. Thousands.

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Not human. Not animal. Something ancient. Something waiting.

The figures moved within the shadows, tall and skeletal, their elongated limbs dragging against the burning ground. Their faces stretched too long; their mouths gnarled into something that should never have been called a smile.

One of them reached out. Its fingers were too many. Too thin.

Jack staggered back. His heartbeat thundered in his chest.

The whisper came again, closer this time. "It wants you."

The writhing river of bodies suddenly jerked in unison, their heads snapping toward him. Mouths opened, gasping, sucking in air that didn't exist. Their hands stretched upward, reaching for him, fingers clawing, pulling.

Jack stumbled, his foot sinking into the flesh-like ground. He tried to pull away, but it was like stepping into tar—thick, suffocating.

Something gripped his ankle.

He looked down—a hand, charred and blackened, fingers digging into his skin. The face of the woman from the church stared up at him, her hollow eyes filled with terror. Her lips moved, but no sound came out.

More hands erupted from below. Hundreds of them. Clawing, grasping, pulling him down.

The figures in the shadows were moving closer now. Their elongated faces twisting, shifting.

One of them knelt beside Jack, its mouth inches from his ear. The voice was wrong—too deep, too many tones at once.

"It's not finished."

The sky above cracked open like splitting flesh, revealing something vast and writhing beyond it. Something not meant for human eyes.

Jack screamed—

And jolted awake.

His body jerked upright, drenched in sweat. His hands

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trembled, gripping the sheets so tightly his knuckles turned white. His breath came in ragged gasps, his chest heaving.

For a moment, he wasn't sure if he was really awake. Where was he? A cell? The air felt too thick, too hot.

Then he turned his head.

And saw the handprint scorched into his ankle.

The smell of burning flesh still lingered in the air.

He screamed in agony.

He felt hands on him. Shaking. Reluctantly he opened his eyes. Light slowly started to seep in his eyes, and a muffled sound rang through his ears.

"Mr. Morrison. Wake up. You have a visitor."

Detective Fiene's deep baritone barely registered with Jack. His ears still rang from the gunshot that had torn through his car's roof. He squinted up from the hard wooden bench, the numb haze of tequila fading into a dull, throbbing reality. His head pounded like it had been cracked open, his mouth felt like dry sand, and every sound sent needles through his skull. His limbs felt stiff, weighed down as if gravity had doubled overnight.

"What? I can't really hear you."

"Your wife is here," Fiene said, this time louder, with intentional cruelty.

Jack winced. "For fuck's sake, man, I'm not deaf."

Fiene smirked, unimpressed.

Jack raised a hand to shield his eyes as he struggled to stand. The scrape of the key turning in the metal cylinder made him wince. Fiene's scarred hand pushed the heavy steel door open, its long, drawn-out squeal sending a fresh wave of nausea through Jack. His legs buckled with each step, muscles sluggish as if filled with lead. The cold tile burned against his palms as he steadied himself against the wall.

The fluorescent lights burned his eyes. He squinted at Fiene, studying the cop's worn features. The man looked far older than he should, his eyes hollow from years of dealing with human wreckage. The kind of exhaustion that sleep never fixed.

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“Follow me, sir,” Fiene waved him forward.

Dead man walking.

Jack clung to the wall for balance, each step an effort against the spinning room. More than once, his knees buckled, and he had to claw his way upright. By the time they reached the lobby, his stomach churned violently. He swallowed hard, fighting the bile rising in his throat.

Then, Lisa saw him.

At first, she just stared. Her big, questioning eyes flicked over him, as if she wasn’t sure whether she should run or recoil. And then, in a burst of motion, she sprinted forward.

She slammed into him so hard he nearly lost the fragile grip on his stomach. He held her close, burying his face in her hair, kissing her over and over.

“Daddy! Daddy!” she cried, clinging to him, her little arms locked tight around his middle.

Overcome, Jack dropped to his knees, clutching her as sobs wracked his body.

“Dad?” Lisa tilted her head, eyes wide as she saw the tears streaming down his face.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Jack choked out. “I’m so sorry for yelling at you. I’m so sorry. I’ll never do it again, I promise.” He kissed her again, desperate, his tears soaking into her curls.

A gentle hand moved through his hair. He looked up.

Allison stood behind him, her eyes bloodshot, shoulders tense as if bracing for impact. Jack searched her face for anger, relief—anything—but found only exhaustion.

She exhaled sharply, her lips curling in the faintest, weary smile.

“You asshole,” she whispered.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rehab Location, California, Current Day

Jack had expected rehab to be miserable. What he hadn't expected was how much the walls whispered at night. How lonely he felt.

The facility—an old converted estate nestled deep in the mountains—had looked picturesque when he checked in. Too picturesque. The kind of place where rich people went to “reset their spirits,” or whatever overpriced nonsense they were peddling.

“You’ll love it here,” the intake nurse had said with a serene smile. Jack hated her immediately.

The first night, he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. The mattress was stiff, the sheets starchy, and the air smelled like lavender masking something rotten. The silence was thick, pressing in on him like a physical weight. He shifted uncomfortably, his body aching from withdrawal. His skin itched, his stomach twisted, and a dull headache pulsed at the base of his skull.

Then he heard it.

A faint, rhythmic tapping.

Jack sat up. The sound was coming from the vent near the ceiling, like someone drumming their fingers against metal.

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He rubbed his eyes. Just detox messing with his head.
He lay back down.

Then, a whisper. Not from the vent. From the hallway.
Jack froze.

A slow, shuffling sound passed by his door, followed by a quiet, almost melodic murmur. Like someone humming an old lullaby.

He sat up again, listening. Footsteps. Soft. Barefoot. They stopped outside his door.

Jack's heart pounded. He clenched his fists, trying to ground himself. The tension in his muscles made him aware of the deep exhaustion settling into his bones.

Then, silence. Nothing but the distant hum of the heating system.

After what felt like forever, he exhaled and lay back down.

The moment his head hit the pillow—three soft knocks on his door.

Jack shot upright. “Who’s there?”

No answer.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and crept toward the door, pressing his ear against the wood.

Silence.

Then—a whisper, just on the other side.

“You don’t belong here.”

Jack flung the door open.

The hallway was empty.

The fluorescent light flickered, casting shadows that seemed too long, stretching the wrong way.

Jack let out a breath and closed the door. Rehab was going to be a long damn stay.

The next morning, Jack found himself seated in a circle of folding chairs, surrounded by the broken and the barely holding on. The session leader, a wiry man with slicked-back hair named Dr. Gregson, had the kind of voice that sounded both soothing and unbearable at the same time.

“Jack,” Gregson said, tilting his head, “you’ve been here

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a few days, but you haven't shared much. Why don't you tell us what brought you here?"

Jack shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His fingers played with the frayed hem of his sweatshirt. "I... I don't know."

A woman across from him scoffed. "Bullshit. We all know."

Jack swallowed. He glanced around, feeling the weight of everyone's eyes. He felt small. He felt exposed. He clenched his jaw, memories flashing behind his eyes—a bottle clutched too tightly, a slammed door, his daughter's tear-streaked face.

He let out a slow breath. "I feel like a failure," he admitted. "Not just with drinking. With everything. My marriage. My kid. My life. Every time I try to be better, I screw it up. And now..." He hesitated, his throat tightening. "Now, I think they'd be better off without me."

The room was silent.

Gregson leaned forward. "Do you really believe that?"

Jack let out a hollow chuckle. "I've convinced myself of worse."

No one spoke for a long moment. Then, the woman who had scoffed at him earlier crossed her arms and muttered, "Join the fucking club."

A few people chuckled. Jack looked up, confused.

An older man, someone who had clearly seen too much life and too much loss, spoke up. "You know what that is, Morrison? That's the sickness talking. It makes you think you're the problem when really, it's the thing in your head that's lying to you."

Jack stared at the man, something shifting inside him. Something cracking open.

For the first time in a long time, he wondered if maybe—just maybe—he wasn't beyond saving.

That night, Jack sat outside on the patio, staring up at the stars. The cool air felt real against his skin, grounding him. For the first time since arriving, he didn't feel like he was drowning.

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He took a deep breath, the sharp night air filling his lungs, cutting through the haze of withdrawal.

A moment of stillness.

Then, from the darkness beyond the courtyard, that same whisper.

“You don’t belong here.”

Jack didn’t flinch this time. He didn’t run.

Instead, he whispered back.

“I know. But I’m staying anyway.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jack had volunteered to go to rehab. It was a better option than prison, his publisher had told him. Now, his time was up, and Allison and Lisa had come to bring him home.

As Allison helped him ease into his wheelchair, a short, stocky nurse with cropped blonde hair came rushing up. Trisha. She had been looking after him for the past few days, and she radiated warmth, even in this place.

“Mr. Morrison, before you go, would you mind signing my copy of *Demon on the hill*?”

Jack grinned. She was cute, a little older, short, sturdy, but with a heart of gold.

“Of course,” he said, taking the book from her hands. “You took excellent care of me, Trish. Thank you. You really kept me sane.”

He flipped open the cover and scribbled:

To Trisha, the Irish hoodlum of the 4th floor. Thank you for everything. Jack Morrison.

Trisha beamed. “Oh, thank you so much!” She leaned in and hugged him tightly.

“Shall I wheel you out?” she asked.

Jack shook his head. “No, thanks. I’ve got my team right here.” He squeezed Allison’s hand, looking up at her.

Before he could say anything else, Lisa practically threw herself at him, wrapping her small arms around his waist as

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tightly as she could.

“Daddy!” she said, her voice high with excitement. “You’re really coming home!”

Jack let out a breath, warmth spreading through his chest as he hugged her back. “Yeah, kiddo. I’m really coming home.”

The elevator doors slid open, and Allison pushed the wheelchair inside. Lisa hurried in beside them, holding onto the armrest, her eyes never leaving Jack’s face. She was beaming, but then, after a few seconds of silence, her expression grew more serious.

“Are you really better now?” she asked, tilting her head.

Jack met her eyes, understanding the weight behind her simple question. He hesitated, considering the right words. “I’m trying, Lisa. I don’t have all the answers, but I promise I’m trying really hard.”

She seemed to consider that, then nodded, as if deciding it was enough. “Good,” she said, her grip on his armrest tightening. “Because I missed you a lot.”

Jack swallowed, his throat tightening. He reached out and ruffled her hair. “I missed you too, more than anything.”

The elevator descended, each floor clicking by like the slow turn of a page. Jack exhaled, letting the reality sink in. He was leaving. Rehab had been its own kind of limbo—uncomfortable but safe. Out there, everything was waiting for him. The choices, the temptations, the expectations. It all felt heavier than it had before he came in.

Lisa started bouncing on her heels. “Mom said I could stay up late tonight because you’re coming home. Can we watch a movie? Eat pizza?”

Jack chuckled. “Sounds like a solid plan. What movie are we watching?”

Lisa’s eyes lit up. “*The Princess Bride*! Or *Jurassic Park*! Or maybe *Labyrinth*! Wait—no—*Monsters Inc.*! Ugh, I can’t decide!”

Jack laughed. “That’s quite the lineup. Guess we’ll have to see what mood we’re in later.”

Lisa grinned. “And no pineapple this time, right?”

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Allison rolled her eyes. "We'll see."

The elevator doors opened to the lobby, where a few other patients milled about, and a receptionist gave Jack a knowing nod. Trisha had followed them this far and now stood at a distance, watching.

Lisa pushed the wheelchair forward, her small hands gripping the handles with determined effort. Jack let her, smiling at her enthusiasm.

The glass doors reflected back his own image, thinner, paler, but still standing. Still here.

The cool rush of outside air hit him as they stepped through the doors. The world hadn't changed while he was gone, but maybe he had.

Jack inhaled deeply, letting the clean, crisp air fill his lungs. He had a long road ahead, and it wasn't going to be easy. But for the first time in a long time, he felt like he had a shot at walking it.

One step at a time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It had been weeks since Jack walked out of rehab, but the fight wasn't over. The real battle had only just begun.

He had spent years convincing himself he could handle it alone, that willpower was enough. But the truth was staring him in the face now—he couldn't fight this demon by himself. He needed help.

As much as he hated the idea, he had surrendered to it. Therapy. A psychiatrist. Allison had found him one, someone he could tolerate, someone who didn't make him feel like a patient in his own life.

Now, he sat in the sterile office, hands clasped tight, staring at the floor. He had walked in willingly, yet every muscle in his body screamed to leave. To run. But there was nowhere left to run.

The sessions had stripped him raw, peeling back the denial, forcing him to see himself without excuses. The truth was ugly.

He was lying to himself. And worse—he was destroying the only thing that still mattered.

His family.

Allison had begged him. Pleaded. Threatened to walk away.

“We need to leave this city. We need to get away from the monster that has its hold on you.”

He had fought her on it, clung to the wreckage of his old

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life like a drowning man. The city was familiar. The city was toxic. And he had let it eat away at him, at them, until there was almost nothing left.

Then Lisa changed everything.

It had been a passing moment—just another night at home, another dinner filled with silence. But then she had looked up at him with those wide, knowing eyes and asked, “Daddy, are you mad at me?”

The question had hit like a gunshot to the chest.

“What? No, sweetheart. Why would you think that?”

“Because you never smile anymore.”

That was it. No accusation, no anger. Just a quiet, heart-breaking truth from a little girl who deserved so much more than this version of him.

Jack had felt something crack inside him.

His father’s voice had always been loud—booming, furious, a force that turned love into fear. But his own? His daughter feared the silence. The distance. The absence of who he used to be.

I won’t let Lisa grow up the way I did.

Allison had said those words before. But hearing them from Lisa’s own mouth—her tiny voice filled with uncertainty, with hurt—made something inside him snap.

He had to change.

And that meant leaving.

Los Angeles was a graveyard of his worst impulses, a city where temptation lurked around every corner, whispering in his ear, promising release. He couldn’t stay. Not if he wanted to keep them. Not if he wanted to keep himself.

His voice was barely above a whisper when he finally admitted it aloud.

“I feel like I’m living in Dante’s Inferno, twenty-four-seven. If I don’t leave now, I’ll lose everything I love.”

He exhaled, feeling the weight of it settle over him.

No. That wasn’t true.

If he didn’t leave, Lisa would be the one who lost the most. And he’d never forgive himself for that.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jack's publicist was pissed.

"Jack, we need you in LA, especially with the promotion coming up for the new book."

Jack barely heard him. The city was burning him alive, and if he stayed any longer, there wouldn't be anything left to promote. Michael, his publicist, must have seen it too. After a long pause and a heavy sigh, he finally relented.

"Fine. I'll make some calls."

The publishing house wasn't thrilled, but in the end, they made it work. Michael would connect them with one of the city's most discreet and well-connected realtors.

A week later, Allison's phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Morrison?" A man's voice, smooth and professional.

"Yes?"

"My name is Barry Wilmes. I was contacted by Jack's publicist, Michael. He said you and your family are looking for a fresh start."

"Yes... we are," Allison said hesitantly.

"You will be in good hands. We work exclusively with clients in the business—people who need privacy, discretion, and a home that offers more than just four walls. We find places that heal."

Allison's grip on the phone tightened. "That's exactly

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what we need.”

“Good,” Barry said. “Take your time, talk it over. I’m available whenever you’re ready. I have a few locations in mind—places that will give your husband the space to breathe, to create. Places that might just save you all.”

She exhaled. “Thank you, Mr. Wilmes.”

Two weeks later, the Morrisons met Barry Wilmes at his office.

Barry looked like a man who had seen it all. Late sixties, tall and wiry, with silver-threaded hair and sharp, knowing eyes. He had the air of someone who had spent decades in the industry but had long since stopped being impressed by fame. Allison felt oddly comforted by his presence.

They told him everything they were looking for—a spacious home, preferably Spanish-style. Jack wanted something far from the city, somewhere quiet, close to nature. Most importantly, they needed a place where Lisa could grow up safe, unburdened by the chaos they were leaving behind. Barry listened intently, nodding along. Then, a slow smile spread across his face.

“I know just the place.”

Jack studied him. “You sound pretty sure.”

Barry leaned forward slightly, his voice lowering. “Because I am. It’s private, secluded. Spanish-style, just like you want. But there’s something else about it—something I can’t quite explain.” He paused, letting the moment stretch. “You’ll see when you get there.”

Jack and Allison exchanged a glance.

A handshake, a smile. It was all set.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A week later, Barry Wilmes steered his car down Olympic Boulevard, checking his reflection in the rearview mirror as he approached the Morrisons' driveway. He smoothed his tie and took a deep breath. He had done this a hundred times before, but every new client was different. Every new home was a new beginning.

He knocked firmly on the door, waiting as he heard the deadbolt shift.

Lisa opened it, standing on her tiptoes, hands folded neatly in front of her.

"Hello, Barry," she said politely, giving a small, dramatic bow.

Barry grinned. "Well, hello there, young lady. Are you excited to go house hunting today?"

"Of course, I am!" she chirped before dashing back inside, leaving Barry stranded on the doorstep. A moment later, she returned, tugging Jack by the hand.

"Hey there, Barry. Come on in," Jack said, stepping aside.

"If you're all ready, let's get on the road," Barry said, clapping his hands together. "We've got a lot of ground to cover today."

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Jack nodded and turned toward the hallway. “Honey! Barry’s here.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” Allison called back, her heels clicking against the tile.

Barry stepped back and motioned toward his car. “Shall we?”

Once they were all settled inside, belted in, and ready to go, Barry handed Allison a manila envelope.

“I put together a folder with listings that fit your needs and budget. I think you’ll find a few properties in there that are worth considering. There’s also a map of the area, some points of interest, and the latest local paper. It’s a great community.”

Allison eagerly took the envelope and flipped it open. “Thank you, Barry. This is wonderful.” She beamed at Jack, who returned her smile.

Jack leaned forward from the backseat. “No haunted houses, okay?”

Barry chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry, I’d have to disclose that.” He glanced at Jack in the rearview mirror. “Though you’d be surprised how many clients specifically request those kinds of properties.”

Allison raised an eyebrow. “You’re joking, right?”

Barry smirked. “Not at all. If I could find them, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with the demand.” He shrugged. “To each their own, I always say.”

They left Los Angeles behind, heading north on the 5 Freeway toward Bakersfield. As the miles stretched between them and the city, the usual realtor-buyer small talk filled the car. Allison inquired about schools in the area, and Barry assured her that the local school was among the best in the region—small classrooms, dedicated teachers, a close-knit community. That was one worry checked off her list. She glanced at Lisa in the back seat. Uprooting her daughter again wasn’t ideal, but this move wasn’t about convenience. It was about survival. Jack needed this. They all did.

Jack, meanwhile, asked the usual questions—hunting regulations, crime rates, the kind of people who lived there.

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“You can hunt with the required permits,” Barry answered. “But only in season, of course. As for the people, you won’t find a friendlier bunch. It’s a small community. They tend to stick to their own, but if you need anything, they’re there for you. Crime is practically nonexistent. Everyone watches out for each other. If something is out of place, it’s noticed and taken care of.” He paused, smirking. “I’d live up there myself if I could. But unfortunately, my wife refuses to move anywhere without a Starbucks.”

They all laughed.

Barry pointed out the window. “Lisa, look to your left. That’s Six Flags Magic Mountain.”

Lisa’s eyes widened in delight. She gasped, pressing her hands against the window. “Oh my gosh! Roller coasters! Daddy, look! Look! Can we go? Please, please, please?” She bounced in her seat, nearly vibrating with excitement.

Jack chuckled, watching her light up. “Of course. Just not today. First, we need to find a house.”

Lisa gave a dramatic sigh but quickly recovered. “Okay. But you promised!” She wagged a tiny finger at him before turning back to the window, watching the coasters twist and turn in the sky. Jack smiled and pulled her close, planting a kiss on the top of her head. A lump formed in his throat. She wouldn’t stay this little forever. Soon, she’d be a teenager. Then an adult. She’d drift away, like all children do. He squeezed her tight and breathed in the soft scent of her hair. He had almost thrown this away. Almost lost everything. The thought sent a sharp pang through his chest.

They drove past Magic Mountain, watching as the towering roller coasters twisted and looped against the skyline. From the freeway, the cars looked like tiny specks flinging themselves into oblivion. Even from inside the car, they could hear the distant, exhilarating screams of the riders. The excitement faded behind them as Barry exited the freeway. Slowly, the landscape changed. The meticulously trimmed lawns and suburban homes gave way to rugged hills, dry earth, and sprawling boulders. Tumbleweeds rolled

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across the road.

Allison frowned. “How do people do their grocery shopping up there?”

Barry smiled. “There are a few local stores in the Lakes community—small but reliable. Some people shop in town before heading home. It’s not like living in the city; you have to plan ahead. But in exchange, you get peace and quiet that you’ll never find anywhere near L.A.”

Jack squeezed Allison’s hand. “We’ll manage, baby.” He winked at her playfully. She gave him a small smile, but her mind was racing. Could she really adjust to this? Could they?

They entered San Francisquito Canyon Road, the winding path that snaked its way up into the mountains. The views were breathtaking. Rolling hills stretched for miles, bathed in golden light from the late afternoon sun. The higher they climbed, the more the land opened up, stretching toward the horizon like an unspoiled painting.

Jack leaned his head against the window, letting the scenery sink in. For the first time in a long time, something inside him unclenched. Maybe—just maybe—this could work.

“Alright, folks, this is the last stop,” Barry announced, breaking the quiet.

Jack frowned. “What do you mean, last stop?”

Barry smirked. “I mean, in about five minutes, we’ll hit the Rattlesnake Inn. That’ll be our last connection to civilization. Once we pass it, we’ll have no cell service, no gas stations, and no stores for at least an hour.”

Jack turned to Allison, but she was already looking at him. No turning back now. A few minutes later, the car rolled into the dirt parking lot of the Rattlesnake Inn. The tires crunched over gravel, a small dust cloud kicking up around them. The place looked like it had been standing since the Wild West and hadn’t seen a renovation since. A wooden sign, half-chewed by time and termites, hung over the entrance, swaying slightly in the breeze. Barry stretched as he climbed out. “Alright, I need to hit the restroom. If

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you need to stretch your legs, make a call, grab a drink—now's your chance." He disappeared inside, the screen door creaking loudly before slamming shut behind him.

Jack slid his arms around Allison, pulling her close as they took in the breathtaking landscape. From up here, they could still see the smog-covered skyline of Los Angeles in the distance—a reminder of what they were leaving behind. Below them, the canyon stretched wide, revealing the remnants of the old San Francisquito Dam, long since abandoned, its tragic past buried beneath time and dust.

"It's so peaceful up here," Allison murmured.

Jack inhaled deeply. The crisp, earthy scent of sage and sunbaked rock filled his lungs. "Yeah. It really is." He turned to her, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "You want something to drink?"

"Just some water is fine."

Jack kissed her softly. "We're going to be okay."

Allison nodded. "I hope so."

Her gaze drifted to Lisa, who was holding Jack's hand, laughing as they walked toward the inn. *I really hope so.*

The digital door chime let out a strained Ding-Dong as Barry stepped inside.

Behind the counter, Steve, the forever-grumpy inn-keeper, was stacking cigarette cartons, his posture hunched, his movements slow and methodical.

"Hey, Steve," Barry greeted.

Without looking up, Steve grumbled, "Same old fucked-up world, Barry. You headed up the canyon again?"

"Yes, sir. More happy customers looking for a new home." Barry gave a knowing grin. "Bathroom still in the same place, I hope?"

Steve let out a snort. "Yeah, to the back on your left. What do you think, I remodel every week?" He finally turned his head, his bushy eyebrows furrowing over blood-shot eyes. "I don't know how you do it, man. That place gives me the creeps. I wouldn't be caught dead anywhere near it."

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Barry chuckled. "It's not that bad. You just need to get used to it."

Steve scoffed. "Yeah, if you make a pact with the devil maybe."

Barry winked. "Something like that."

As the bathroom door creaked shut behind him, the main door swung open.

Jack stepped inside with Lisa holding his hand. The door chime wheezed out another weak Ding-Dong, struggling to function.

Steve forced something resembling a smile. "Well, good day. Can I help ya?"

Jack hesitated, taking in the dimly lit, timeworn interior. "Uh, yeah. Got anything to drink? Sodas, water?"

"In the back." Steve jerked a thumb toward two antique refrigerators, their rusted chrome handles worn from years of use. The glass doors were clouded with dust, barely letting light shine through. Jack walked over and yanked open the left fridge, which let out a reluctant whoosh. The shelves inside were a chaotic mess, bottles stacked haphazardly, as if they were trying to keep each other warm.

"What do you want, honey?" he asked Lisa.

"Coke!" she chirped.

Jack scanned the cluttered shelves, frowning. "Mmm... I don't see any Cokes."

The fridge was a lawless wasteland—Pepsi, Dr Pepper, Mountain Dew, Root Beer—everything but Coke. Jack turned back toward Steve. "Hey, you got any Coke in here?"

"Coke?" Steve scoffed. "Nope. Pepsi."

Jack smirked and turned to Lisa. "You okay with a Dr Pepper?"

Lisa sighed dramatically. "Fiiiine." Jack grabbed a Dr Pepper, a Pepsi, and a bottle of water for Allison. As he walked toward the counter, he spotted a Hershey's dark chocolate bar and grabbed it, tossing it in with the drinks. Lisa squeezed his hand and leaned in. "Mommy says chocolate's bad for you," she whispered.

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Jack smirked. "I won't tell you if you don't."

Lisa giggled, pressing a finger to her lips in a dramatic 'shhh' motion.

Steve barely glanced up as he rang them up. "\$10.50."

Jack pulled a crumpled ten-dollar bill and a single from his pocket, sliding them across the sticky glass counter. He took the drinks, tucked the water bottle into his pocket, and reached for Lisa's hand.

"Come on, honey. Let's leave the Grinch behind."

Lisa giggled.

Behind Jack's back, Steve flipped him off. A timeless, international symbol of displeasure.

From the back of the store, a gurgling toilet signaled the end of Barry's torment.

Moments later, he reappeared, fumbling with his zipper as he pushed open the screen door. "Oh, Steve, as always, thanks for the hospitality." Barry shot him a grin. "I'll be back in a bit."

Steve grumbled, "Sure." *My pleasure, asshole.*

The screen door slammed shut behind him with a hollow bang.

Barry climbed back into the driver's seat, clapping his hands. "Alright, campers! Ready for the adventure?"

Jack nodded, a slow smile forming. "Bring it on, Barry. Bring it on."

Allison had moved to the passenger seat for a better view of the canyon. Jack leaned forward, resting an arm around her as he handed her the bottle of water. He kissed her cheek.

"You excited, honey?"

Allison took a sip of water and exhaled. "I can't wait to get away from the smog and have our lives back."

She glanced at Barry. "Let's just see if this place is as good as you say it is."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Vasquez Rocks, California – 1874

The night was alive with the pulse of the wild. The air hummed with the endless chorus of crickets, their hidden symphony stretching in every direction. Though unseen, they were everywhere, filling the silence with their relentless chatter.

A warm breeze swept across the land, stirring the pepper trees, whispering through their branches like restless spirits. Above, the sky unfurled in an infinite sea of stars, the moon casting its dim, ghostly glow over the rugged terrain. The land was painted in silver and shadow, eerie and untamed. Somewhere in the distance, coyotes howled—a sharp, triumphant cry. A celebration of the hunt. A reminder that only the strongest survive.

Only a few moons had passed since Tibu's greatest betrayal. José. His brother in everything but blood. The man who had once saved his life. The man he had trusted above all others. The man he had killed.

The memory clung to him like a festering wound. How could he have been so blind?

The question tormented him, looping over and over in

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his mind, a snake eating its own tail. Tibu took José's betrayal as a personal failure. And if there was one thing Tibu could not tolerate, it was failure.

He hadn't been the same since.

His men saw it. They felt it. The distance he created, the silence that stretched between them. He no longer spoke of the future, no longer carried himself with the effortless command he once had. Instead, rage gnawed at his bones, restless and insatiable.

He made reckless decisions, lashed out with unprovoked aggression.

Some nights, his men would find him alone in the hills, muttering to himself, his pistol smoking, its barrel hot from the bullets he'd spent on shadows. He never explained what he saw out there. And no one dared ask. Then, there were the rides. Tibu would rouse them in the dead of night, ordering them to saddle up without reason. They would ride for hours, through desert and canyon, chasing nothing. Then, they would find someone—anyone—unlucky enough to cross their path. And Tibu would unleash his wrath upon them. This was not how it used to be. Before, they had a purpose. They took from the rich, used what they needed, and gave the rest to the poor. Now? This was madness. His men no longer just whispered behind his back. They watched him, wary, hands twitching near their holsters whenever he passed. Tibu wasn't just their leader anymore—he was their greatest threat.

"Get up, you lazy pigs! Get up!" Tibu's boot slammed into the dying campfire, sending smoldering embers exploding into the air. Glowing sparks danced against the darkness; their brief life snuffed out as they sank into the dust. "On your feet—NOW!"

Gunshots split the night, their echoes bouncing off the canyon walls. "Saddle the horses!"

The camp erupted into chaos.

Men stumbled out of their tents, half-dressed, half-asleep, their hands fumbling with buckles and boots. Horses

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snorted and reared, spooked by the sudden commotion. More gunfire. More shouting.

The night, once peaceful, had become a battlefield before a single sword had been drawn. A few frantic minutes later, the dust settled. Tibu sat tall in the saddle, his horse restless beneath him. He yanked the reins hard, spinning the beast in a tight circle. His men watched, hesitant, unsure. He raised his gleaming sword high, the moonlight catching on the blade's cruel edge. He turned his gaze on them—wild, unhinged.

“Tonight, we leave the past behind!” he bellowed. His horse reared up, front hooves slashing the air. “We will absolve our sins with blood.” He slashed his sword toward the horizon. “VAMOS!”

The night shattered with gunfire. Pistols cracked like thunder, their bright flashes stabbing through the dark. Horses screamed, hooves drumming the earth in a relentless rhythm, their riders nothing more than ghosts with steel in their hands.

Ahead, the desert stretched endless and indifferent—as if it already knew their fate.

None of them knew.

None of them would return.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

San Francisquito Canyon, California, Current Day

A small jolt brought the car back to life.

“Okay, let's continue,” Barry said, flashing a grin with too many teeth—like a salesman who had already closed the deal but still enjoyed watching it unfold.

They had barely driven five minutes when Lisa suddenly pointed ahead, her small hand pressed against the window.

“Dad, what's that? Are those birds?”

Jack leaned forward, squinting through the windshield.

Two hundred feet ahead, a massive, blackened oak tree loomed alone, like a charred skeleton against the canyon sky.

Its twisted branches curled inward, gnarled and claw-like. Its bark had been scorched beyond recognition, its belly split wide in a deep, jagged wound. A dying titan that refused to fall. Jack's stomach tightened. The image buried itself deep in his mind. It reminded him of a photo from the Vietnam War, one that had haunted him for years. A soldier's hand, clawing up from the ground, the flesh seared by napalm, blackened and peeling. The bones, brittle, ready to turn to dust at the faintest breeze.

And then—the vultures.

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They covered the tree, their hunched black bodies perched like sentries on its broken limbs. Fifty, maybe a hundred, their red, wrinkled heads standing out against the nightmarish backdrop. Jack had seen turkey vultures before—but never this many.

The car rolled forward. One by one, the birds turned toward them, their beady black eyes locking onto the vehicle. Jack swallowed.

Hope you guys aren't looking for lunch.

The entire scene felt unnatural—wrong in a way he couldn't quite place.

For a brief moment, he could have sworn one of the birds was staring directly at him. Not just looking—watching. A strange, uneasy feeling curled inside his gut.

Lisa's voice snapped him out of it.

"Dad, what are they?"

Jack cleared his throat. "Turkey vultures."

"Turkey vultures?" Lisa repeated, her voice lifting in curiosity. She pressed her nose against the glass, eyes wide with amazement. "They don't look anything like turkeys," she said.

Jack smirked. "No, they don't. Maybe a little like a turkey I'd cook for you—Chef Boyardee style." Lisa giggled, and the mood in the car lifted for a moment.

Jack turned to Barry. "Have you ever seen that many vultures before?"

Barry didn't take his eyes off the road. "Oh, this? This is nothing."

Barry's voice was casual, but his words painted a gruesome picture.

"A few months ago, a wildfire ripped through this canyon—destroyed everything in its path. A real firestorm. Hot winds blasted through here, turning the hills into a chimney. Flames over a hundred feet high. Embers the size of grapefruits." His grip on the wheel tightened. "The animals never stood a chance. And once the fire died out, there were bodies everywhere. The vultures have been feasting ever since."

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Lisa listened intently. Allison, however, grimaced. “Ugh. That’s disgusting,” she muttered. “They remind me of those old westerns—where the cowboys get lost in the desert, run out of water, and then the vultures just... wait.”

Barry chuckled. “I hear that a lot. But up here, they’re necessary. Can you imagine the smell if they didn’t do their job?”

Allison shuddered. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure,” Barry said.

But the further they drove, the harder it was to ignore the destruction. The charred skeletons of trees stretched across the canyon like grave markers. Ash clung to the hills, the pits of burned brush forming gray craters across the land. Jack exhaled. “Shit.” He immediately glanced at Lisa. “Uh, sorry.”

But she wasn’t even paying attention. She was glued to the window, staring. Jack glanced at Allison—she hadn’t said it, but her expression screamed the same thing.

Shit.

Jack turned to Barry. “Does this happen a lot?”

“What, wildfires? No. This place hadn’t burned in decades, which is why it burned so hard. Too much fuel. But it’s actually a good thing.”

Allison scoffed. “How the hell is any of this good?”

Barry didn’t miss a beat. “Once the rain comes, the ashes act like fertilizer. Give it a few weeks, and this place will be brighter and greener than ever. You’ll see the most beautiful wildflowers—hills covered in purple, orange, and red. It’s one of Mother Nature’s little miracles.”

Allison wasn’t convinced. “That still doesn’t sound safe.”

Barry grinned. “Well, how about something you will enjoy?”

Jack smirked. *This guy really loves his job.*

“What’s so exciting?” Jack asked.

Barry pointed ahead. “Look at the road. See that up there?”

Lisa gasped. “Fog!”

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“No, Lisa,” Barry corrected with a grin. “Not fog. Clouds.”

Lisa’s eyes doubled in size. “REAL clouds?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Barry said proudly.

“Yeah!” Lisa cheered. “Clouds, clouds, clouds!” She practically threw herself against the window, her excitement radiating through the car.

Jack and Allison exchanged glances. This was why they were moving. Lisa’s joy, her excitement, they hadn’t seen this in so long.

Jack felt it like a punch to the chest. Happy. And ashamed. Ashamed that he had neglected them for so long. Ashamed that it had taken nearly losing everything for him to see how much they meant to him. He leaned over and kissed Lisa’s head.

Barry continued, his voice full of enthusiasm. “We’re so high up, we literally live above the clouds. It’s not heaven, but it’s damn close.”

“Pretty cool,” Jack, Allison, and Lisa said at the same time.

They all laughed.

They broke through the clouds, and just like that—the world transformed.

One moment, they were swallowed in mist. The next, golden hills stretched for miles. The lake glowed in the distance, a perfect mirror of the sky. The charred wasteland was behind them now.

Jack’s jaw dropped.

Lisa gasped. “Cows! Daddy, look—cows!” She slammed her hands against the window, eyes wide with pure joy.

Jack leaned toward Allison, whispering in her ear, “Cows.”

She smirked. “Moooo.”

Lisa giggled. “Moooo!”

They laughed.

And for the first time in a long time, Jack felt like a father again.

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Allison turned to Jack. Her eyes sparkled. Jack knew she had already made up her mind. She smiled—a smile he hadn't seen in a long, long time. And for the first time, Jack let himself believe it. Maybe—just maybe—they were finally safe.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

For three agonizing days, the Morrisons lived in limbo. Every time Jack's phone buzzed, his heart jumped, only to sink when it was just a work email or a spam call. Allison tried to keep herself busy—organizing drawers that didn't need organizing, wiping down the countertops until they gleamed—but nothing could quiet the anxious drum of waiting. Even Lisa, picked up on the tension, asking at breakfast each morning, "Did we get the house yet?" in the same hopeful tone she used when asking about Christmas.

That third afternoon, the call finally came.

Allison had been folding laundry on the couch when Jack's phone rang. His eyes met hers, and in that split second, they both knew. He scrambled to put the call on speaker as Allison grabbed Lisa's hand, pulling her close.

"Mr. Morrison?" Their real estate agent's voice was steady, professional—impossible to read. "Congratulations. The sellers accepted your offer."

For a heartbeat, silence stretched between them. Then, Allison let out a sharp breath, clapping a hand over her mouth as tears welled in her eyes. She clutched the phone like it might disappear.

Lisa's eyes went wide. "Did we get it?"

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Jack swallowed; his throat tight. “Yeah. We got it.”

A squeal erupted from Lisa as she threw herself onto her mom’s lap, giggling and kicking her legs. Jack let out a slow exhale, rubbing a hand over his jaw as the relief finally hit. They had done it. After months of troubles and difficult decisions, they found their way out. Their path to something new, something hopefully, better.

“We have to celebrate,” Allison said, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater. She was already grabbing her coat. “Gandhi’s?”

Jack laughed. “That was fast.”

“You don’t say no to butter chicken on a night like this,” she shot back, already ushering Lisa toward the door.

The warm aroma of cardamom and roasted spices greeted them the moment they stepped into Gandhi’s, their favorite Indian restaurant on Melrose Boulevard. It was a family tradition, a place they only visited for the biggest moments—Jack’s new book release, their tenth anniversary, and now, the house.

The owner, Mr. Patel, smiled when he saw them. “Ah, I knew I’d see you again soon! Another special occasion?”

Allison beamed. “We just bought a house.”

“A house!” His eyes twinkled. “Then you must have a mango lassi, on the house.”

They slid into their usual booth by the window, Lisa bouncing with excitement. She grabbed a crayon from the cup on the table and began drawing on the paper placemat—squiggly lines forming what Jack assumed was their new house. “That’s the front door,” she explained, pointing. “And that’s my window. It’s the biggest one, right?”

“Definitely,” Jack said, ruffling her hair.

As their food arrived—samosas, sizzling platters of tandoori chicken, fragrant bowls of tikka masala, and warm naan fresh from the oven—Jack let himself relax for the first time in weeks.

“Okay, best part of the new house?” he asked.

“The backyard, with the view of the lake.” Allison said

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without hesitation. "I can already picture summer nights out there, fairy lights on the patio."

"The kitchen," Jack added. "Finally, enough counter space to cook without knocking everything over."

Lisa grinned. "My secret hiding spot."

Jack raised a brow. "Does it have one of those?"

She nodded. "Not yet. But I'm gonna find one."

Allison laughed. "You're impossible."

Jack took a sip of his beer, watching his wife and daughter, the golden restaurant lights casting a soft glow over them. This was what it was all about—these moments, these quiet pockets of happiness before life inevitably threw something unexpected their way.

He clinked his glass against Allison's. "To new beginnings."

She smiled, her fingers brushing his. "To our home."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The following weeks were pure, unfiltered chaos. Packing. Sorting. Decluttering. Trying not to kill each other over what stayed and what had to go. Jack was a firm believer in throwing out anything they hadn't touched in two years. Allison? Not so much.

"What if we ever need it?" she protested, holding onto a barely functional blender from the early 2000s. "I don't want to buy a new one."

Jack sighed. "Allison, we haven't needed it in years. We're not going to start now."

"I might!"

Most of the time, Jack let her win. But sometimes—when she wasn't looking—things mysteriously disappeared. The only exception? Lisa's treasures. Not a single one of Lisa's toys, books, or trinkets were touched. Those all came with them, no matter how impractical it was.

The worst part wasn't sorting the junk—it was packing everything up.

Wrapping plates in bubble wrap. Folding endless cardboard boxes. Realizing just how much crap they had accumulated over the years.

Allison groaned, dropping into a pile of clothes in the

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middle of their half-packed living room.

"Tell me again," she huffed, "why didn't we hire someone to do this for us?"

Jack smirked. "Because you said it would be fun. Team building, I believe, was the exact phrase you used."

Allison sat up. "No. I did not."

"Oh, yes you did, missy."

Allison narrowed her eyes. "Well, if we ever move again, please don't listen to me."

Jack grinned. "Dearly noted." He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

The move itself was exhausting—but at least Jack made sure they hired professionals to haul their belongings up the canyon. No way was he going to drive a moving truck full of furniture up those steep, winding roads.

Soon, their dream home became a maze of stacked cardboard boxes, filling every hallway, garage, and spare room. It was chaos. But it was home. Lisa, on the other hand, loved it.

She and Tessie, their overexcited Boston Terrier, turned the maze of boxes into a playground, sprinting through the narrow tunnels and bursting out into the backyard with victorious giggles. The house was filled with laughter, and Jack felt it deep in his bones—this was right. This was what they had been missing.

That night they gathered in the backyard. Jack had built a fire pit. Lisa snuggled up in Allison's lap. The fire crackled softly, sending small embers into the night air. Lisa giggled as she turned her marshmallow over the flames, watching it bubble and blacken at the edges. The scent of smoke and toasted sugar curled into the crisp evening breeze. Jack leaned back against a log, stretching his legs out in the dirt, letting the warmth of the fire soak into his skin. It had been a long time since they had done something like this. Something normal.

"Look at that sky," Allison murmured, tilting her head back. The stars stretched endlessly above them, clearer than

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they ever were in the city.

Lisa followed her gaze, grinning. "Can we find Orion's Belt?"

Jack smirked. "That's the only constellation anyone ever finds. Try to find something harder."

Lisa playfully stuck her tongue out at him before squinting up at the sky. "Alright, how about... the Big Dipper?"

Allison chuckled. "Okay, smartass. That's even easier."

Lisa laughed, taking a gooey bite of her marshmallow. "I like the easy ones."

Jack let out a contented sigh, glancing at Allison. She looked... calm. For the first time since the move, she wasn't tense, distracted, or staring into the distance like she was listening to something no one else could hear. Just Allison. His wife. The way she used to be.

"Good idea, kiddo," Jack said, nudging Lisa's knee with his boot. "I think we all needed this."

Allison nodded, smiling softly. "Yeah. It's nice."

For a while, they just sat there, watching the fire, enjoying the kind of quiet that didn't feel oppressive. The kind that felt like peace.

Then, just for a second, the fire dimmed.

Not a gust of wind. Not the wood shifting. It simply shrank, like it had been smothered from within.

Jack barely noticed, just blinking at the flames as they flared back to life. Lisa didn't react at all.

But Allison did.

Jack caught the way her head tilted slightly, her fingers tightening just a fraction around her marshmallow stick.

Then, as if snapping out of a thought, she smiled at him again. "I love you."

Jack hesitated. Something in her eyes seemed just a little too distant.

He shook the feeling away, reaching over to squeeze her hand. "I love you too."

Lisa groaned dramatically. "Oh my God, get a room."

Jack snorted, tossing a pinecone at her. "Eat your

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marshmallow, brat.”

She laughed, dodging it, and just like that, everything felt normal again.

The fire crackled. The stars shone. And if something had shifted in the air, Jack chose not to notice.

As the sun rose from behind the hills, Jack finally allowed himself a moment of stillness. Lisa and Allison were still asleep.

The fresh mountain air wrapped around him, carrying the scent of rosemary and wild sage. His muscles still ached from a long day of moving furniture and unboxing memories, but it was a good ache—the kind that told him he had done something right.

The lake stretched calm and glass-like as the sunlight slowly transformed the darkness underneath the water. The rolling green hills turned to gold, quietly embracing the hustle of the day. Birds flew high across the valley, making their way to destinations unknown.

For the first time in what felt like years, he felt at peace.

Then—the sound came.

At first, he thought it was just the wind—a low whistle through the hills. But as he listened closer, it wasn’t quite right. It was... deeper.

Not wind. Not an animal. Something else.

A distant, low vibration, almost imperceptible—like the earth itself exhaling. Jack tensed, his fingers gripping the wooden railing.

What the hell was that?

The valley remained still. The frogs, the crickets, the rustling leaves—it was all the same. Normal. Maybe he imagined it. He let out a breath, shaking his head.

You’re just tired.

And then—

“Honey,” Allison’s voice drifted through the open doorway, low and teasing. “Maybe you want to come back to bed?”

Jack turned—and his breath caught in his throat.

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Allison stood in the soft morning light spilling in from the window, black silk stockings hugging her legs, held up by a garter belt snug around her waist. A deep red front-laced corset accentuated her curves, her long black hair spilling over her shoulders.

Jack blinked. “Is it my birthday?” Then, panic. “Wait—where’s Lisa?”

Allison folded her hands against her cheek, mimicking sleep. Their daughter was still fast asleep.

Her lips curled into a mischievous smile. “I don’t know,” she teased. “Maybe I got the dates mixed up. But you can still come to bed and unwrap your present.” She turned slowly, the click of her heels against the tile sending a shiver down his spine.

Jack let out a slow breath. *Whatever that sound was—it was probably nothing.*

Right now, he had much better things to focus on. As he followed her into the bedroom, the warmth of the morning lingered behind him, deceptively calm. But far beyond the lake, deep within the canyon—

Something shifted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Berlin, Germany – 12 Years Ago

Jack pushed through the heavy doors of the Golden Tulip Hotel and made his way toward the bar. There were still a few hours to kill before the 5th International Peace Convention wrapped up, and he figured his time was better spent drinking at the hotel bar than listening to a bunch of old men in suits rambling about world peace.

Why the hell did they even send me here?

He had no interest in peace talks. He was a warrior, not a diplomat.

“Hippies,” he muttered under his breath as he pulled out a stool at the oakwood bar.

Behind the counter, the bartender, a broad-shouldered man with a square jaw and a thick German accent, glanced up. “I’m sorry? You wanted whiskey?”

Jack shook his head. “No, no. My bad. I’ll have a Guinness, please.”

The bartender nodded. “Tab to your room?”

Jack snorted. “Yeah, right.” The last thing he needed was a receipt for alcoholic drinks on a government credit card. Might as well start filing for unemployment. “No, I’ll pay cash.”

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As the bartender turned to pour the drink, Jack pulled out the convention floor plan from his pocket. He skimmed through the emergency exits, checked off the required vendor booths, and mapped out the fastest route to collect the obligatory gift bags filled with useless trinkets and business cards. With luck, he'd be out of there in under an hour.

Then— he'd have enough time to actually see the city.

"Guinness, as requested." The bartender— Karl, according to his gold-plated name tag— placed the dark, frothy beer in front of him.

Jack nodded, wrapping his fingers around the cool, condensation-covered glass, and took a slow sip. That's when he saw her.

A flicker of movement in the corner of his eye.

Jack set his glass down hard against the wooden bar, his attention locked. She moved across the room with quiet confidence, gliding toward a small table in the back like she owned the damn place. Long, sculpted legs carried her effortlessly in black heels. Her tailored Calvin Klein business suit hugged her curves in all the right places— sharp, professional, but undeniably sexy. She took a seat, adjusted her glasses, and pulled out a notepad, completely immersing herself in her writing. Jack exhaled slowly. Nothing was more attractive than a woman who was self-assured, intelligent, and a little mysterious. The club girls— the ones in short skirts and low-cut tops— didn't do it for him. They never had. But this woman? She was bold, poised, completely unbothered by the world around her. Jack licked the foam from his lips, squared his shoulders, and made a decision. Now or never. He grabbed his Guinness and walked straight to her table.

"May I sit?"

She didn't look up right away. Instead, she let the question hang in the air for a moment before finally lifting her gaze over the rim of her glasses. She studied him, her dark eyes sharp, calculating.

"I suppose," she said, setting her pen down. "But why

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this table? There are plenty of others.”

Jack smirked. *Oh, she's going to be a tough one.*

“Well...” He paused, searching for the right words. *Think, dumbass, think.* “To be honest? I don’t know. Sitting alone at a bar or sitting with a beautiful woman? Easy choice.”

She arched a perfectly shaped brow. “Flattery won’t win you any points, Mr. ...?”

Shit.

“Morrison. Jack Morrison.” He extended his hand. As soon as her fingers slid into his, a shiver ran down his spine.

“Allison McKay,” she replied, her grip firm but elegant. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Morrison.”

Jack let out a breath. “Likewise. Can I buy you a drink? Coffee, tea... something stronger?”

She tilted her head, considering. “I’ll have a Bailey’s.”

Jack grinned. “Good choice.” He took a sip of Guinness and walked back to the bar, his palms slightly damp.

What the hell, man? I've been to war. I've jumped out of planes. I've stared down the barrel of a gun. I was never nervous then. But now?

His pulse was hammering over a conversation with a woman he hadn’t even known five minutes ago. *You’re hooked, Jack.*

He glanced over his shoulder—just in time to catch her watching him. Jack’s heart jumped like a giddy schoolboy. *She’s looking. Yes!* He turned back quickly, heat rising to his face. God, he hoped she didn’t notice. The sound of ice cubes swirling in a glass pulled him back to reality.

“One Bailey’s.” Karl slid the drink across the bar.

“Vielen Dank, Karl.” Jack thanked him in terrible German and made his way back.

Step by step, his life was changing, he just didn’t know it yet.

“Your Bailey’s, my lady.”

Allison smirked. “Thank you, Mr. Morrison.”

“Jack.” He took a seat across from her. “Mr. Morrison

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makes me feel ancient.”

“All right, Jack.” She raised her glass and took a slow sip.

Jack swallowed hard, watching her lips press against the rim.

Lucky damn glass.

“You’re American, right?” she asked.

“Yeah. So, are you?”

She nodded.

“So, why Berlin?”

She leaned back slightly. “Business. Visiting clients, getting signatures—same old routine.”

“What about you?”

Jack sighed. “I got stuck at a convention. My boss didn’t want to go, so he sent me instead.”

She smirked. “Sounds thrilling.”

“Oh yeah. Riveting.”

She chuckled and took another sip of her drink.

“So, how long are you staying?” Jack asked.

“Two more days. Flying back Sunday.”

“Any plans to see the city?”

She exhaled. “I’d love to, but with meetings... it’s hard to tell. Everything’s at the last minute.”

Jack leaned forward, tapping his fingers on the table.

“I’ve been planning mine carefully—in and out. Want to make the most of this trip.” He paused. “Why don’t I give you my number? If you have time, let’s explore together. Better than going alone.” He winked.

She smiled.

Jack glanced at his watch. “Damn. I got to run.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card, sliding it across the table. “What about dinner tonight?” he asked casually. “Your call. My treat.”

Allison twirled the card between her fingers. “Sounds like it could be fun.”

Jack grinned. “Good. I’ll see you tonight.” As he walked out of the bar, his mind was already racing. He had no idea how much his life had just changed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Elizabeth Lake, California, Current day

“So, what did you have in mind, naughty boy?” Allison asked from the bed, teasing him as she let her leg slide from beneath the covers.

“Mmm, I don’t know. So many things to choose from and they are all so much fun.” Jack unbuttoned his shirt and slowly approached the bed. He slid off his shoes as he placed his knee on the bed. He leaned over to kiss her. Allison opened her arms, embraced him and clutched her hands behind his neck as their lips locked. She could feel the weight of his body resting on her. His fingers gently caressed her breasts. His lips kissed her neck, gently setting her body on fire. He slowly penetrated her, and the warmth of her body spread like wildfire through his body. They got lost in each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Jack woke up with a start.

Something was off.

The room was too still, the kind of stillness that presses against the walls like a held breath. He blinked, disoriented, listening. The wind whispered against the glass, and beyond it, the trees swayed in the moonlight, but inside the house, there was nothing.

Then he noticed it.

The bed beside him was empty.

“Allison?”

Silence.

Jack sat up, his pulse quickening. He rubbed the sleep from his face, squinting into the dark. The sheets where she had been sleeping were cold.

He climbed out of bed, his footsteps barely making a sound against the wooden floor as he made his way to the hallway. The house was quiet, but not the right kind of quiet.

A soft creak sounded from downstairs.

Jack’s stomach tightened.

He moved cautiously, stepping down into the dim living room, where the front door stood wide open.

Cold air spilled inside, rustling the curtains. His breath

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fogged slightly in the night air as he stepped onto the porch.

And then he saw her.

Allison stood in the middle of the yard, barefoot, her nightgown swaying in the wind. She faced the lake, her head tilted ever so slightly, as if listening.

Jack's chest tightened. She wasn't moving.

He swallowed and stepped toward her. "Allison?"

She didn't flinch. Didn't react at all.

Jack exhaled sharply and placed a hand on her shoulder. The instant he touched her, her body went rigid. Then, as if waking up from a trance, her breathing hitched, sharp and sudden.

"Allison," he said again, quieter this time. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

She blinked, slow and unfocused, her pupils wide in the moonlight. Her skin felt too cold.

"I—" She swallowed, shaking her head. "I don't know."

Jack glanced past her toward the lake. The water was too still. Too dark.

He gently turned her away from it. "Come inside."

She let him lead her back into the house, but just as they stepped over the threshold, she whispered something.

So soft, he almost missed it.

"The land remembers"

Jack froze.

His grip on her wrist tightened just slightly. "What?"

Allison's lips parted as if to answer. Then, slowly, she looked toward the lake.

Jack followed her gaze.

The surface was rippling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Another day, more boxes to unpack. Jack was making breakfast, pancakes for Lisa and some eggs and toast for Allison and himself. A gentle knock on the door caught Jack's attention.

"Don't worry, I'll get it." Allison walked towards the door, as she continued drying her hair from the morning shower. The oak wood door unlocked with a firm click.

"Hi, hello. I am Sandy." the visitor pointed to her left, "Your next-door neighbor." Her gray eyes were welcoming, and her lips curved into a warm smile. "I live next door in the yellow house, I wanted to come by and say hello." She held out a basket filled with cookies. "Made them myself this morning."

"Oh, that's so nice of you, come in, come in, please." Allison waved Sandy inside. Allison looked at Sandy as she walked in.

Nice girl, fit. Allison scanned her athletic six foot two neighbor. She was in her mid-thirties, her raven black hair tightly bound in a ponytail. She was wearing a plain white T-shirt with a low cut pair of jeans. A short black knit jacket covered her shoulders. Her body was immaculate. Her breasts firm and her legs endlessly long.

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She must have never had kids Allison thought. *Great, we leave Hollywood to get away from the skanks and now we have a model living right next to us.*

Allison immediately felt guilty. She was surprised by how quickly she could think such nasty things about a person she had only just met. *No wonder us women never get along; we are always in competition mode.*

"Jack. Jack, we have a visitor." She turned to Sandy. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure."

Jack looked up from his sizzling pan of eggs.

Holy Moly, what is this? He was surprised by Sandy's presence and beauty. He wiped his hands on a towel, giving himself a second to regain himself and extended his hand to Sandy.

"Hi there, I'm Jack, how are you?"

"I am well, thank you. Sandy, your next door neighbor."

"What would you like?" Allison asked as she stepped into the kitchen.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, whatever you have open." Sandy took a seat at the kitchen counter as Allison searched the fridge for some refreshments.

"Is lemonade ok?"

"Yes, that would be great, I love lemonade on a hot day like this."

"Want some eggs, the pan is still hot?" Jack asked as he stumbled around the stove and wandered into the living room, swerving around the opened and unopened stacks of boxes. He was a little sweaty and hadn't shaved for a few days. He was wearing a pair of old ripped jeans and a faded Iron Maiden shirt.

"I'm sorry for the unkempt look but, moving, you know. It is not particularly an activity for tie and suit."

Sandy laughed. "No worries. I know how it goes. I've moved many times myself. It gets old after a while. I'm glad I finally moved up here and hopefully I never have to do this again."

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Allison placed a coaster on the granite countertop and handed Sandy her lemonade. "How long have you lived here?"

"O God. It has been so long; it seems like an eternity. It has been a long time, but it has been good. There is no other place I'd rather be." Sandy sipped from her glass. "So, you are the famous writer everyone is talking about."

"Famous? I wouldn't say that. I've sold some books and I've been on a few shows. I'd rather not be in the spotlight. Is that what people are saying around here?" Jack was a little uncomfortable. He did not want to be seen as a famous person. They moved here to be normal.

"Well, it is a small town, there really is not a lot going on here. So, if someone moves here that has been on TV and in the papers, everyone knows about it." Sandy sipped her drink.

"We are trying to escape all the business, slash, celebrity stuff basically." Jack pulled Lisa closer and gave her a kiss on her head.

Allison stepped in "Jack has had some challenges when we lived in Hollywood, it was very stressful for all of us. We are just looking forward to getting back to normal. A simpler life."

Sandy put her glass down. "I totally understand. I could never deal with all that hustle and bustle. I used to work for a big corporation. Filling orders, signing contracts, it never stopped. So, I looked for a career change and here I am."

"Ok. So, spill the beans, "Jack said" Who do we avoid? What are some of the best things in town? What are the worst things about this town?" He smiled at Sandy and knew they would become good friends. She seemed like an old kindred soul.

"Well, everything up here is really simple. As to avoid, that's a hard question, we never have any problems. The local sheriff, his name is Cooper, can be a hard ass but he means well. He is a cop, so."

"Yeah, I'll steer clear of the law if possible." Jack laughed.

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“He is not so bad. We really don’t have any crime here. Everyone knows each other. It keeps everyone in check. I guess that’s a good thing and a bad thing at the same time.”

“Gossip town?” Allison asked.

“No, but let’s just say nothing goes unnoticed. People really want to be on their own and want to be left alone. We are not a bunch of loners or weirdos, it’s more,” she shrugged.” We like peace and quiet. And people will say something if you don’t respect that.”

“Well, that’s not a bad thing, I guess. “Jack opened the fridge and took a beer.” We like peace and quiet, that’s why we moved here.”

Sandy looked around the room “This is such a lovely home, the previous owners lived here for a long time and really put their heart and soul into it.” She stared out at the lake.

“Why did they leave?” Allison asked.

“The husband passed away and the house was just too big for Elizabeth to maintain by herself, so she downsized.”

Allison nodded “That makes sense. Sorry to hear that. It worked out for us though.”

Sandy walked towards the windows and looked out over the valley.

Allison joined her.” It is hard to believe we are only an hour away from Los Angeles.”

“Isn’t it. So close, yet so far. As if you could just get over those hills and see it.” Sandy drank her lemonade.

Jack walked up to them, holding his plate of eggs in his hand and took in the million dollar view. “I love how when the sun sets, it paints the hills golden and how they reflect in the lake, it truly is amazing. What do people do here for fun?”

“Well, it all depends, there are many families up here so there are a lot of family activities, there is of course the soft-ball team, there also is a karate class. Lots of hiking, horse riding, all those sorts of things. A lot of people are involved in the church.”

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Jack sipped his beer. "Well, we stopped going to church many years ago. Not really our thing anymore."

Sandy continued "It's not that it's a thing. Father McBarr really is a nice man and kind of keeps the community together. He's not a real preacher. It is more a feeling of being together, if that makes sense, even if you aren't a big believer." she shrugged her shoulders.

Allison pointed at the lake. "Can you go swimming in the lake? Is there any fish in it?"

"Oh no! You can't swim in the lake." Sandy seemed uncomfortable. "It is filled with leeches and sticky smelly algae, it really is nasty, there are fish in it but they all have some sort of lesions and many times the fish are covered in leeches too. I'd have to be damn near dead before I would eat one of them."

"So, we have this beautiful lake, and we can't go in it." Jack asked in disbelief.

"Well, you can go on it, if you have a small boat or kayak but you need to get Sheriff Cooper's permission. Basically no one ever does it. People just enjoy the beauty of the lake from the shore or hike around it, I wouldn't go in it if I were you. It is just nasty."

"Point taken." Jack raised his drink.

"Well, I better go, I still have some work to do and I just wanted to stop by and say hello. If you ever need anything please don't hesitate, I am just next door." Sandy offered.

Allison walked Sandy out. "Well thank you so much, that's really kind of you."

"No worries, up here we can only count on each other. See you all around." Sandy waved as she walked out.

What a gorgeous smile. Jack thought.

Allison slapped him gently on the stomach. "Hey, earth to Jack. Back to work."

He laughed. "What? I wasn't thinking anything bad. She just seems very nice."

"Yes. Nice. Now back to work."

The house was quiet that evening, the kind of silence

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that felt heavier than it should. Unpacking had drained them all, and the weight of the move settled in as they picked at their dinner. Jack sat at the dining table, watching as Lisa yawned between bites. Across from him, Allison barely touched her food, her fork hovering just above her plate.

"You okay?" Jack asked, noticing how distant she seemed.

She blinked, her head snapping up like she had just realized where she was. "Yeah. Fine." Her voice was distant, detached.

Jack frowned. "You sure? You've barely said a word all evening."

Allison forced a tight smile, shaking her head. "I was just... thinking."

Lisa looked between them, then spoke hesitantly. "Thinking about what?"

Allison's fingers tightened around her fork. "This place. The air feels different here."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Different how?"

She hesitated, as if searching for the right words. Then, almost too softly, she whispered, "It feels like it remembers."

Jack felt a cold ripple crawl up his spine. The way she said it—like she wasn't just making an observation, but like she knew it.

Lisa shifted in her seat. "Mom, your kind of freaking me out."

Allison's face softened, and for a second, she looked normal again. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I don't mean to." She let out a weak chuckle, shaking her head. "It's probably just the exhaustion getting to me. Long day."

Jack nodded slowly, but something about her expression unsettled him. She wasn't just tired.

She was elsewhere.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The house was finally starting to feel like home. The boxes were mostly unpacked, and while some were still stacked in corners, at least everything was in the right room now. After days of exhausting work, the Morrisons decided they deserved a reward.

“How about a BBQ tonight?” Allison suggested, stretching her arms over her head. “Some steaks, a few drinks, just us enjoying the view. Maybe we invite Sandy?”

Jack smirked. “Oh, sure. And I’m totally saying yes just because you suggested Sandy.” He wagged a teasing finger at her.

“I know, goofball.” She tossed him the car keys. “Go get us some meat to burn.”

Jack leaned in, kissed her, and headed out.

By now, Jack had a decent lay of the land. The town was small, almost too small—a single loop around the lake, one main road out into the canyon. You couldn’t get lost here even if you tried.

The butcher shop was right near the golf club, barely a five-minute drive. In LA, this would’ve taken an hour. Jack parked the car, stepped out, and pushed open the weathered green door. A set of copper bells clanged, announcing his arrival. Behind the counter, a massive figure popped up.

“Hey there! How can I help ya?”

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Jack nodded politely. "Looking for some good steaks."

The colossus of a man wiped his hands on his apron. "You're new in town, right?"

"Yeah. Moved in a few days ago. How'd you know?"

The butcher chuckled. "Small town, my friend. New faces stick out like a sore thumb." He leaned on the counter, arms thick as tree trunks. "And seeing as I'm the only butcher within forty miles, I see everyone sooner or later."

"Makes sense." Jack extended a hand. "Jack Morrison."

The butcher's paw engulfed his hand. "John-Paul. Frere."

Jack raised a brow. "Frere? French?"

The man snorted, almost offended. "Hell no. I'm no Frenchy. I'm Canadian."

Jack smirked. "Big difference, huh?"

"Damn right." John-Paul leaned back. "Now, what can I get you? Got Ribeye, New York, T-bones, Filet Mignon—"

Then—

A shrill, piercing caw.

Jack's head snapped toward the window. Something was watching him. Perched on the telephone post outside was a monstrous crow, black as night, feathers sleek like oil.

Its head was bare, stripped of feathers, leaving only rough, weathered skin. And where one eye should have been... was a gaping, hollow socket.

Jack's stomach tightened. "Jesus. What the hell is that?"

John-Paul followed his gaze. "Oh. That's 22."

Jack frowned. "22?"

"Yeah. Some dumbass shot him years ago with a .22 rifle."

Jack turned back to the creature, a cold unease creeping into his bones.

"But he never died." John-Paul crossed his arms. "Lost an eye, sure. But he's been hanging around here ever since."

Jack's chest felt tight. The crow—if it even was a crow—tilted its head toward him. Then, the single remaining eye locked onto his.

A glowing red ember. The moment it happened, Jack

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froze. A pressure built behind his skull—like a hot wire threading through his brain.

Then—

Images slammed into him.

His first girlfriend. Her lips parting for a kiss.

Blood. A man he had never seen before, Native American, mid-forties. Dead. Mud in his hair.

Lisa's tiny hands reaching for him as a newborn. Smoke. Screams. Drowning bodies. A chief, sweat dripping from his brow.

His mouth moving, forming words— Jack couldn't hear them—

Flashes of twisting limbs. Hands reaching out of water, fingers clawing for air.

A young man raising a rifle. The trigger pulling, the shot ringing out.

Fire. So much fire.

A blinding, searing pain ripped through Jack's eye socket. He hit the floor, screaming.

"JACK!" John-Paul's massive hands grabbed his shoulders, shaking him. "Jack, talk to me!"

The pain was unbearable. His hands flew to his face, blood pooling between his fingers.

"My eye!" he choked. "It's gone!"

"What?! Let me see!" John-Paul pulled Jack's shaking hands away from his face. There was nothing. No wound. No missing flesh. His eye was still there.

Jack gasped, his chest still heaving.

John-Paul squinted. "You on drugs, man?"

Jack jerked away. "I don't do drugs. Not anymore." Still dizzy, he staggered toward the back of the shop, where a dusty mirror hung on the wall. His reflection stared back at him. His left iris had changed. It was now half-red, half-blue. It was not a popped blood vessel. Jack stumbled backward, his stomach turning.

Outside— A piercing caw.

Jack spun toward the door.

22 flapped his massive wings, lifting off the telephone pole.

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Jack burst outside; fists clenched. “FUCK YOU!” he roared. “I’ll take more than your goddamn eye!”

The bird’s laughter echoed through the canyon. Mocking.

Jack clenched his jaw. *What the hell just happened? Who were those people I saw? What did it mean? And what the fuck is up with that bird? I have to find out.*

A wet slapping sound came from the counter. John-Paul had dropped a bundle of wrapped steaks, the butcher paper stained red.

“Ribeyes. Best I got at this time.” His voice was gruff but steady.

Jack turned, still feeling his forehead, trying to slow his erratic breathing.

John-Paul eyed him carefully. “Why don’t you go home now, hey?”

Jack hesitated. “How much do I owe you?”

The butcher shook his head. “Nothing. It’s on the house.”

Jack frowned. “You sure?”

John-Paul narrowed his eyes. “Yeah. But next time—don’t scare the shit out of me.” His tone dropped slightly. “Get some rest. It’s... different up here.”

Jack caught the way he said it. Not *you need rest*. *It’s different up here*. His fingers tightened around the warm butcher paper.

“Okay, okay. Thanks, John-Paul.” Jack exhaled sharply, trying to gather himself.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

John-Paul just nodded, but his expression stayed unreadable.

Jack grabbed the steaks, turned toward the door. “Au revoir,” he muttered, waving halfheartedly at the giant butcher. John-Paul didn’t wave back.

As Jack stepped outside, the heat of the sun hit his face—but it felt distant, unreal. His skin was clammy. His hands shook slightly. He pressed a hand to his forehead. His pulse hammered beneath his fingers. I need a drink. Now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sandrock Road, Elizabeth Lake, California, Current Day

Just a few blocks away.

Ka. Ka. KAA.

The sharp, grating caws of .22 shattered the morning stillness. Perched on a weathered wooden fence, its bony, featherless head rocked back and forth, its black beak splitting wide as it mocked the old man inside the small house at the corner of Sandrock Road and Elizabeth Lake.

Ka. Ka. KAA.

The front door slammed open, nearly ripping from its hinges. A thin, wiry man stepped out, a deep frown creasing his aged, sun-scarred face. His body was all sharp angles, a man hollowed out by time and isolation. His sharp Italian accent cut through the air like a blade.

“Figlio di puttana! Shut the hell up, you damned bird!”

From inside, a low, guttural growl rumbled.

Then— a shadow barreled past him. Hubbard. The big, shaggy mutt exploded from the house, muscles tensed like coiled steel. His eyes locked onto the bird, lips pulling back into a snarl.

.22 tried to take flight— Too late.

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Hubbard lunged, jaws snapping around the bird's tattered wing. A hellish screech erupted from .22's throat as the dog dragged it to the ground, shaking viciously.

Bones snapped. Flesh tore. Feathers flew. Blood splattered. JC's manic laughter erupted.

"Get him, boy! Tear that son of a bitch to pieces!"

The front yard turned black and red, a gruesome mess of gore and tattered feathers. By the time Hubbard finally released the corpse, the once-mocking crow was nothing more than a heap of shredded meat. Panting, Hubbard lifted his bloody muzzle, tail wagging. JC grinned. "Good boy, buddy. Let's get you cleaned up." He spat toward the lifeless remains, his chest swelling with triumph.

.22 was dead. For good. Or so he thought.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The next morning JC stepped outside, stretching, the cool morning air brushing against his skin. His boots crunched against the dewy grass as he bent to grab his morning newspaper. The sun was still rising, casting long shadows across the quiet street. As he reached for the paper, a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision made him freeze. Something wasn't right. He turned his head. His blood ran ice cold.

Hubbard.

His best friend, his only companion, lay sprawled in the grass. But the dog wasn't just dead. Hubbard's corpse was grotesquely swollen, his belly distended and split open, as if something had violently crawled its way out. His face was gone. The skin stripped away, leaving behind a gleaming white skull. The flies buzzed thick around the gaping sockets where his eyes had been. Maggots twisted and squirmed within the gory cavities. A soundless scream lodged in JC's throat.

"No... no, my boy..." He staggered forward, knees buckling. His hands reached out, trembling, trying to lift the ruined body. The skin peeled away in wet, sticky strands, separating from the grass below. The rotting flesh ruptured,

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intestines spilling out like steaming coils of rotten rope. A sickening squelch.

Then— A caw. Loud. Piercing. JC's head snapped up. His breath hitched. Perched high on the telephone pole... was .22.

Whole. Alive. Waiting.

Its beady red eye burned, glowing like coal from the depths of hell.

Ka. Ka. KAA.

The crow's neck twitched unnaturally; its gaze locked onto JC like a needle piercing his skull. "No. This is impossible." His mouth fell open, but no words came out. The thing he had watched get ripped apart, the thing Hubbard had destroyed, was alive. It was mocking him. "You? No! This cannot be! YOU ARE DEAD!" JC's scream tore through the quiet morning air. "YOU DID THIS! GO AWAY, SATAN! YOU DIRTY BEAST!"

His rage boiled over, grief and terror twisting inside him like a venomous snake. He dropped Hubbard's body and snatched a handful of rocks from the dirt. His face contorted with fury, spittle flying as he hurled them at the bird.

One.

Miss.

Another.

Miss.

"Damn you! DIE! DIE!"

.22 tilted its head, watching. Amused.

Ka. Ka. KAA.

JC charged forward, blind with rage. The bird didn't move. It just watched.

JC barely heard the truck horn. A screeching roar split the air. Tires burned against asphalt. An air horn blared, shaking the ground beneath his feet.

JC's head snapped to the side— and for a split second, he saw it.

A massive chrome grill. The word MACK gleamed in the morning sun.

C. FLEMISH

His gaze locked onto the hood ornament. A chrome bulldog. A moment of horrible realization.

Then— Impact. The eighteen-wheeler slammed into him at full force.

His body crushed beneath thousands of pounds of steel and rubber. Bones snapped like brittle twigs. The sound of his skull cracking was drowned by the shriek of metal and screeching brakes. Chunks of flesh and shattered bone sprayed across the pavement.

The truck finally skidded to a stop. The driver stumbled out, hands shaking, his face twisted in horror. Smoke billowed from the tires. He followed the blood trail, hoping—praying—that maybe, somehow, the man had survived. But all he found was a broken, mangled mess.

And there— perched on what remained of the skull, pecking at the eye socket— was the crow.

Ka. Ka. KAA.

The driver swore and kicked at the bird, but .22 just laughed.

With a few powerful flaps, the demon bird lifted into the air, spiraling higher and higher, rising over Diablo Canyon. A final glimpse of something wet and round hanging from its beak. An eyeball.

Then, with a last, chilling caw, .22 vanished into the sky.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Indian Hill, Santa Clarita, California – 1928

“Chief? Chief?” Silent Horse patted his leader’s back, his hands desperate as he tried to clear the thick sludge from the old man’s lungs. “Chief, can you hear me? Are you alright?”

Chief Lightfoot raised a trembling hand, signaling that he was still alive. Beneath him, a pool of red and brown slime glistened, thick and putrid. He wiped the sludge from his mouth and met Silent Horse’s gaze, his bloodshot eyes wide with urgency.

“We have to go. Now. Gather everyone and prepare for the move.”

Silent Horse hesitated; his breath uneven. “Chief—where will we go?”

“To the Chumash. We will ask for shelter. If they refuse, our ancestors will guide us.” Lightfoot grabbed Silent Horse’s arm, pulling him close. “Go! There is no time to waste.”

Silent Horse bolted from the small grass hut, leaping onto his waiting horse and galloping toward their settlement. The men who had stayed behind helped Chief

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Lightfoot to his feet, guiding him to his own horse. His limbs were weak. His hands trembled as he reached for the lead rope. One of the men stepped forward, pressing a torch into the chief's palm. Lightfoot exhaled, steadying himself. Then, with a swift motion, he flung the torch through the air. It landed atop the hut, embers biting into the dry thatched roof. Within seconds, flames roared to life, consuming the structure in an inferno of orange and black.

No spirit would escape now. No portal would remain open.

The men walked alongside their chief as they descended from Indian Hill, guiding his hands, his horse. Behind them, smoke churned into the night sky. Lightfoot looked back once, then forward again. His voice was grave.

“We have work to do.”

As they rode toward their settlement, a distant wail carried on the wind. Silent Horse, now far ahead, gritted his teeth and rode faster. It was starting.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Castaic, California – 1928

Heads turned as the horses thundered through the muddy streets of Castaic. The townspeople had always known about the Tataviam Tribe, but few had ever seen them—especially not like this.

Chief Lightfoot and two of his elders rode into town, their traditional garments catching the sunlight, their spines straight and proud. Their presence alone commanded attention.

The delegation pulled their horses to a halt in front of City Hall.

Swift Arrow, the chief's eldest son, dismounted first, helping his father from his horse before stepping back. Lightfoot steadied himself, took a breath, and walked inside.

Mayor Walter P. Epcock lounged in the lobby, a cigar between his fingers and a glass of whiskey at his side. He was a man with no spine, a politician who spoke in circles to keep his power intact. The native tribes had never been a problem for him—so long as they kept to themselves. The heavy oak doors swung open.

“Chief Lightfoot!” Epcock sprang to his feet, forcing a pleasant smile. “What a pleasure. How can I help you

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today?" He extended a hand, though he didn't much care for the old man. Best not to start trouble. He'd seen pictures of settlers' scalps before, and he was rather fond of what little hair he had left.

Lightfoot didn't take the hand. His face remained expressionless. "Let's skip the white man's extra words. I am not here for pleasure or business."

The mayor blinked. "No pleasure, no business? Then what else is there?"

"I have come to warn you."

Epcock stiffened. His fingers gripped the edge of his desk. So this was it. The start of trouble. A war. He knew it.

"A warning?" He forced a chuckle, but it sounded strained. "What kind of warning?"

Lightfoot's voice was low, steady. "I have seen terrible visions. Your dam—the one built to give water to your people—it will fail." He paused, letting the weight of the words settle. "White men. Yellow men. Women. Children. Thousands of them. Dying. Suffering."

Epcock swallowed, shifting in his chair.

The chief stepped closer, gripping his wrist. His fingers were like iron. "You must leave. Tonight."

A jolt of something—pain? Electricity? —shot up Epcock's arm.

Lightfoot released him just as quickly, turned, and strode toward the door. The mayor stumbled to his feet. "Hold on. Wait!" He followed the chief outside, nearly tripping in his haste. "When? How do you know this will happen?"

Lightfoot was already in his saddle. His horse snorted, pawing at the dirt.

"Soon."

Epcock exhaled sharply. "What the hell is soon? Tonight? Tomorrow? Next week?"

Lightfoot didn't answer. He gave his mustang a swift kick, turning sharply as he and his men rode out of town. Epcock stood there, watching them go, dust curling into the air.

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“Wait! Hold on! I need more information!” His voice was swallowed by the wind.

They never looked back.

“Shit.” He tore off his hat and slammed it onto the ground. “Damn it, old fool. Lots of help. Really a lot of help.” He kicked the dirt in frustration.

“Soon.”

The word echoed in his mind, taunting him. Mayor Epcock returned to nursing his whiskey in the saloon, still seething over the meeting.

“That guy is crazy,” he muttered under his breath. “Our dam is the best in the south. Inspected, approved. Nothing wrong with it.” He took a slow sip. “Soon,” he mocked, voice dripping with sarcasm. “They’re just making things up. Trying to scare us. The whole tribe is leaving? Yeah, right.”

He wanted to dismiss it all. But in the back of his mind, a sliver of doubt gnawed at him. The tribes weren’t known for making rash decisions. They were connected to things—things westerners didn’t understand.

What if they were right?

He sighed, rubbing his temples. He’d send someone to check the dam in the morning. Just to be sure. Outside, the night was still. Then—faintly—a tremor. It was so light it barely registered, a whisper of movement beneath the earth. But on the table beside him, his whiskey glass quivered. A single ripple, slow and deliberate, spread across the surface.

Epcock didn’t notice.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Tataviam Settlement, Santa Clarita Valley, California, 1928

It was an easy forty-five-minute ride through the canyon, and when Chief Lightfoot and his men returned to the settlement, they found a hive of activity. The tribe moved with swift precision, every member playing a role in the exodus.

Women and children bundled their belongings in deer skins and satchels, their hands steady despite the urgency. Men gathered the horses and livestock, ensuring nothing essential was left behind. Though the scene bustled with movement, there was no panic. Packing up at a moment's notice was second nature to them. The Tataviam were a nomadic people, shifting between the hills in winter and the valley in spring. Change was part of their way of life, woven into their culture like the patterns on their woven baskets. This move, however, carried a different weight—an unspoken tension beneath the surface.

Silent Horse approached his Chief, stopping a few feet away before bowing his head respectfully.

“The camp is preparing all essential supplies as requested, Chief. We have gathered the livestock and are taking only what is necessary for travel. I have sent a scout ahead to the Chumash

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tribe to inform them of our intentions.”

Chief Lightfoot nodded, his gaze scanning the camp. “You have done well, my son. I will consult with the elders one last time. Ensure we are ready to leave.”

Dismounting, Lightfoot strode towards the elders' tent at the heart of the settlement. As he lifted the flap, a wave of Jimson weed's pungent scent drifted into the cool evening air, curling into his nostrils like a whispered omen. The shadows inside the tent flickered unnaturally, as if something unseen stirred beneath them.

A few hours later, the Tataviam people—hundreds strong—set out on their journey north toward their neighbors near Fort Tejon. Their horses bore proud red and yellow markings, symbols of their heritage and resilience. The men herded their livestock, the rhythmic thud of hooves blending with the hushed murmurs of the departing tribe.

None of them looked back. But if they had, they might have seen shapes shifting in the dust, figures lingering at the edges of the dying settlement, watching them go. They would never return to Kashtiq Valley.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Lakes, California, Current Day

“Lisa. You want to go for a walk, honey?” Jack shouted down the hallway. In the distance, he heard a weak, “Yes.”

“Tessie, come here,” Jack called out.

Tessie came bounding down the hallway, her little body wiggling with excitement.

“Are you ready for your walk, baby? You ready?” Jack said in a high-pitched voice.

Tessie leaped up, yanking the leash from his hands as if to say, you bet I wanna go!

A few minutes later, Lisa stomped through the hallway.

“Let’s go!” she said, reaching for Jack’s hand.

They stepped outside, the sinking sun painting the hills in deep gold, its reflection shimmering in the lake’s rippling surface. As they made their way down the street, Lisa skipped alongside Jack, her tiny hand still in his.

“You like it here, sweetie?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“Yes? That’s it?” He smiled. Their evening walks were special to him.

“Well... it smells nicer here. I like the birds and the frogs

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at night.” She glanced up at Jack.

“I like that too. And the crickets.”

“Yes, the crickets are Aaaawwwsome. And—” She hesitated. “I like that you and Mom don’t fight anymore.” Her voice was small, almost embarrassed.

Jack kissed her head. She is so smart.

“I’m happy about that too, sweetie. Very happy. I love you lots.”

“I love you too, Dad.” She resumed her happy little hops.

Jack swallowed against the lump in his throat. *How many more years will I have this? Before she grows up, before she pulls away?* His mind wandered until Tessie’s sharp barking yanked him back to reality. She stood at the lake’s edge, hackles raised, barking wildly.

Jack frowned. Tessie didn’t just bark—she growled, deep and guttural, her tiny frame trembling. Then Jack heard it—a scream. Lisa and Jack stood frozen, staring out over the lake, squinting into the setting sun.

Lisa grabbed his arm. “Daddy... do you hear that?”

Jack hesitated. “Hear what?”

Lisa’s brow furrowed. “It’s like... buzzing.”

Jack listened. Just the usual sounds. But the lake... the lake looked wrong.

“There,” Jack pointed. “See it?”

A small black dot bobbed on the water, an arm thrashing, splashes breaking the golden reflections. Muffled cries for help rose and fell with the waves.

Jack dropped to one knee, clipped Tessie’s leash, and placed it in Lisa’s hands.

“Lisa, run home. Take Tessie and call 911. Tell them we need help now at the north side of the lake. Ok? Just like we practiced.”

Lisa’s eyes were wide, but she nodded. “Ok.”

Jack turned back to the lake. Lisa took off running. Then he dove into the water. The moment his body broke the surface, the cold hit like a knife. Not normal cold—

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unnatural, numbing. His limbs dragged, his muscles sluggish, like something unseen was pulling at him, slowing him down. Each time he lifted his head for air, he heard the desperate cries. The man was closer now. But something was off. His face—twisted with terror—looked pale, too pale.

“Oh God! Help me! Please!” the man shrieked, splashing wildly.

“Hey! I’m here! I’ve got you!” Jack shouted, trying to calm him.

But the man wasn’t listening. Panic gripped him, and before Jack could react, he lunged forward, clawing at Jack, dragging him under. Jack fought, twisted away, gasping as he resurfaced.

“Hey! You have to calm down, or I can’t help you!” Jack shouted.

The man kept thrashing, gulping water between choked screams. Jack cursed under his breath. This was where his training kicked in. He circled behind the man, wrapped an arm around his chest, and pulled him under. The man thrashed violently, but Jack tightened his grip. Seconds passed. The struggle weakened. Then stopped. Jack kicked to the surface, gasping. The man was limp. With a final burst of strength, Jack hauled him toward shore.

Jack collapsed onto the sand, panting. The man lay beside him, unmoving. Jack pressed two fingers against the man’s neck.

Weak pulse.

“Shit!” Jack muttered.

Instinct took over. He turned the man’s head, water spilling from his nose and mouth. Tilting the man’s forehead back, Jack pinched his nose shut and breathed. The man’s chest barely rose. Jack inhaled and blew another breath into his lungs.

Then—a cough. A deep, guttural cough. The man convulsed, water spewing from his mouth.

But it didn’t stop.

More water. Too much water. It gushed from his mouth

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in thick, black rivulets, bubbling up from somewhere deep inside him.

Jack recoiled. The man's chest shuddered—his ribs bulging as if something inside him was moving. Then his eyes snapped open.

Black. Entirely black.

From his tear ducts, something leaked—thick, dark, and glistening, oozing down his pale cheeks. Then came the sound.

A deep, inhuman buzzing filled the air.

The man's mouth stretched wider, wider—until it split at the corners. Then the flies poured out. A writhing, pulsing, living mass of black wings and twitching legs erupted from his throat, bursting past his lips, flooding the air in a cyclone of horror.

Jack staggered back, shielding his face. They crawled across his skin, skittering through his hair, filling his ears with their maddening drone. The man's body deflated, his skin collapsing inward, shriveling like an old, discarded husk. His eyes sank deep into his skull, leaving behind only two gaping, black voids.

Then he laughed.

Deep. Hollow. Inhuman.

The voice slithered into Jack's mind.

You are mine now, Jack. You. Are. Mine.

Jack's body locked in place, the laughter reverberating inside his skull.

Then, silence. The flies scattered. The only thing left was a pile of drenched clothes. Jack panted, sweat mixing with lake water. *This can't be real.*

Sirens wailed in the distance. Dogs howled in response. Jack knelt, his hands searching through the soggy fabric. No body. No blood. Nothing. A chill crawled up his spine. Then, a whisper in his ear.

"We will see you soon, Jack."

Blue strobe lights flickered across the neighborhood. Jack barely noticed as heavy footsteps approached.

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“Out of the way,” a deep voice said, a firm hand on his shoulder.

Jack turned. The paramedic’s eyes bored into him.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

Jack opened his mouth, but no words came out. He looked down at his palm. A single dead fly rested there. Its tiny legs twitched.

Buzzing filled his ears.

And then—nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

San Francisquito Dam, Santa Clarita, CA - 1928

Lance had taken the job of dam keeper a few months ago. It was a great opportunity. He got a few pennies an hour more, but the best thing about the new job was that it had gotten him out of the mines. Now his wife, Jeannie, could afford to stay home and watch their three children, and with a fourth on its way, it was a change in pace that was long overdue. Lance and his family moved into the dam keeper's cabin just a mile south of the dam, nestled deep in San Francisquito Canyon, where the hills rolled in jagged waves and the wind howled through the rock like a ghost trapped in time.

The scenery was idyllic, and no normal working man could ever afford this kind of view. The cabin looked out over the canyon. Miles of rugged land stretched out beneath them, a kingdom of rock and dust. At night, the sky was a river of stars, the Milky Way curling overhead like a celestial scar.

It was an easy job but one with major responsibilities. The dam supplied one-third of all the water for the City of Los Angeles. Hundreds of thousands of people depended

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on the water behind this wall of concrete, a massive, looming monolith that held back an impossible weight. Every day, at sunrise, Lance would make his way to the dam, inspect the foundation and its large arching concrete belly.

During the day, frequent inspections were conducted. But Lance's main task was to keep the local kids away from the water. The sun was starting to set, and Lance made his way down the canyon, eagerly awaiting a hot homemade meal. The sky had turned a bruised shade of purple, streaked with dying gold. The wind carried the distant sound of frogs, but something about it felt off. The sound was hollow, stretched thin—like an echo from somewhere much deeper.

The next morning, his usual routine was turned upside down. The sun was beginning its ascent when Mayor Caldwell and his men reached the dam. The air was thick with humidity, carrying the stagnant scent of the lake. The dam loomed before them, a beast of stone and mortar. Caldwell swung down from his horse, his boots sinking into the damp earth near the reservoir's edge. He removed his hat, wiping sweat from his brow as he eyed the structure. Something about it had always unnerved him—the way the water pressed against it, as though something beneath was pushing to break free.

"This is worse than I expected," muttered Harris, the town's most experienced engineer. He ran his calloused fingers along a deep fissure running through the dam's lower section. The crack hadn't been there a week ago. "Lance, did you notice this crack before?"

"No Sir, I have been making my inspections as instructed and documenting all my rounds in the log. I did feel a little rumble last night after my last shift."

Caldwell knelt beside him. "How bad is it?"

Harris exhaled through his nose, tapping the stone with the handle of his knife. A hollow sound echoed back at them. He exchanged a glance with Davison, the younger of the two engineers, who frowned deeply. "Bad. If we get another storm, the whole damn thing might not hold."

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Caldwell chewed the inside of his cheek, staring at the lake. The water was too still. Not a single ripple moved along its surface, as if it were holding its breath.

Davison stepped forward, removing a heavy iron rod from his satchel. "We should check the foundation," he said, making his way toward the maintenance platform that extended partway down the dam's side.

As Davison began prodding the cracks, Caldwell walked to the spillway, staring into the narrow channel that guided excess water away. The flow was weaker than it should have been—not sluggish, but hesitant.

Then the ground beneath him shuddered.

A low, hollow thump sounded from inside the dam, like something striking the wall from the other side. The horses tethered near the bank, snorting and pulling at their reins, ears pinned back.

Caldwell stiffened. "You hear that?"

Harris nodded, his face pale. "Something just hit the damn thing."

Davison leaned over the railing, tapping the iron rod against the structure again. Another thud. This time louder. Deeper. The vibration rattled through the ground, up their bones. Then came the whisper of shifting stone. A slow groan. A breath.

Caldwell took an involuntary step back. The lake remained still, but below the surface, a dark shape moved.

Harris sucked in a sharp breath. "Sir, we need to leave."

Davison hesitated, looking at the growing cracks. "If this collapses—"

Something was down there.

Something wanted out.

Caldwell didn't wait. "Mount up!" he barked, already turning toward his horse. "We will report to Mullholland. He built the thing. He needs to make the call."

Caldwell instructed Lance to conduct hourly inspections. No explanation, no reason, just a firm order delivered with a face that looked a little too pale, a little too tight around the mouth.

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The ground gently quaked beneath their feet as they scrambled back to their horses. The last thing Caldwell saw before kicking his horse into motion was a ripple forming in the center of the lake.

One. Then two. Like something was rising. The group of men hurried back to town to report what they had found.

It was quite the buzz that day. Even Mr. Mulholland, the designer of the dam himself, came to conduct an inspection that afternoon. But when he said everything was normal, all the engineers and officials concluded that small leaks were normal, and the dam was in perfect operating condition. Caldwell did not dare to disagree or question the final report.

As the sun dipped behind the hills, Lance couldn't shake the unease settling deep in his chest.

He checked his watch; it was five minutes till midnight, and the hustle and bustle from the day had finally started to fade away. Lance was left to his tasks. His supervisor had gone home after complaining that staying behind for night inspections was beneath him. So Lance was left alone.

The dam loomed above him, its vast concrete face silver in the moonlight. Shadows stretched unnaturally long across the base, twisting in ways that didn't make sense. The dark, muddy water had been trickling for hours now and had started to create large pools around the base of the dam.

Lance picked up the phone in the dam house and reported to his supervisor that the dam was continuously trickling water and that there were puddles forming. Unfortunately, Lance's supervisor was more talented in the art of putting things off and avoiding all forms of responsibility than doing the right thing. He told Lance that everything was fine and that he shouldn't worry.

"Just keep checking every hour until morning" was the only advice given.

But Lance did worry.

The trickles of water didn't just seep; they pulsed. He could hear them—a steady, rhythmic dribble, like the heartbeat of something too large, too deep beneath the earth. The

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color was wrong. Too dark. Too thick.

He had been checking the foot of the dam hourly and had never seen this much water seeping through the concrete before. The muddy color meant something was breaking apart beneath the surface. Something was very wrong.

Lance's wife, Jeannie, had accompanied him. She held his jacket open for him so he could slide in.

"What do you think, dear? Should we go to bed?" She took his hand in hers.

Lance hesitated, glancing back toward the dam. The air had changed. The wind had died completely. The canyon felt... silent. Not the kind of silence you got when the world was sleeping, but the heavy, suffocating kind. Like something was waiting. Listening.

The puddles at the base of the dam shuddered. Just slightly. Just enough that Lance's breath caught in his throat.

"I think for tonight we should head in," he said carefully. "There is nothing I can do. If the flow of water increases by morning, I want you to pack, take the kids, and move out of the canyon."

Jeannie's face paled. "You really think it's that bad?"

Lance exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Remember that crazy prediction from the Indian chief the mayor was talking about?"

Her grip on his hand tightened. "Of course I do. How could I not?"

"Well..." Lance swallowed. "The old man might have been right."

Jeannie gave him a worried look. Holding hands, they started walking back to their cabin, their steps crunching against the dirt path.

Jeannie's hand gripped him.

"Lance." Jeannie's voice was hushed, but urgent.

"What is it?"

She swallowed, pressing a hand to her belly.

"The baby... it's moving too much. Something's wrong."

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Lance frowned. "You sure?"

Her hand trembled. "It feels different. Like..." She exhaled shakily. "Like it's trying to get away from something."

Silence stretched between them. The wind picked up again. They walked back toward the dam. The dam sat in the moonlight, unchanged. Silent. Still. But the puddles were gone. The wind moaned through the canyon, carrying a sound that almost sounded like his name.

Lance.

He turned to Jeannie. "Did you hear that?"

She shook her head. "Hear what?"

The dam stood silent in the moonlight. Watching.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Elizabeth Lake, California - Current Day

Jack had barely dried off from the lake incident when he heard the knocking—a hard, deliberate series of raps against the front door.

He exhaled sharply, rubbing his temples as he made his way to answer it. The last thing he needed was a lecture, but the moment he swung open the door, he knew that was exactly what was coming.

Standing on his porch, hands on his belt, face set in a scowl, was Sheriff Cooper. A man built like an aging prize-fighter, his uniform stretched tight across his broad chest. His expression was a mixture of mild amusement and deep-seated irritation.

“You Jack Morrison?” The sheriff didn’t bother with pleasantries.

Jack met his gaze. “In the flesh.”

Cooper nodded slowly, stepping onto the porch with a deliberate slowness that reeked of authority. “You wanna tell me why I got a 911 call about some kind of drowning, only to find out the man you pulled from the lake doesn’t exist?”

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Jack crossed his arms. "He existed when I jumped in after him."

Cooper let out a low chuckle, but there was no humor in it. "That so? Funny, because my deputies couldn't find a trace of this mystery man. No footprints. No wet clothes. No body. Just you, thrashing around like some lunatic."

Jack stiffened. "I know what I saw."

"Well, what you *saw* wasted county resources." Cooper's voice hardened, his eyes narrowing. "And I don't take kindly to outsiders pulling stunts. Especially celebrities." He spat the last word like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Jack sighed, already tired of this conversation. "Look, Sheriff, I wasn't trying to waste anyone's time. I thought I was saving someone."

Cooper stepped closer, invading Jack's space just enough to make it clear who was in charge. "Well, I'm telling you right now—you stay the hell out of that lake."

Jack frowned. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Cooper said, his tone flat and final. "Lake's off-limits. It has been for a long time. We don't need city folk coming in and stirring up trouble."

Jack felt his blood pressure rise. "Is there a *law* against swimming in the lake?"

Cooper smirked. "There is now."

Jack clenched his jaw. "You can't just make up laws."

"I can when it comes to public safety." Cooper's expression darkened. "And trust me, Morrison, I know *exactly* the kind of men like you. Think the world owes you something just cause you were on TV."

Jack's patience snapped. "I don't give a damn about being on TV, Sheriff. And I sure as hell don't appreciate being threatened on my own porch."

Cooper chuckled again, taking a slow step back. "Ain't a threat, Morrison. Just a warning." He adjusted his belt, turning back toward his squad car. "Stay in your lane. And stay out of the lake. Next time, I won't be so friendly."

Jack watched as the sheriff climbed into his cruiser, the

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engine rumbling to life. As Cooper pulled away, his eyes lingered on Jack through the rearview mirror.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Jack shut the door harder than he meant to, exhaling as he ran a hand through his hair. Allison was already watching him from the couch, a hint of concern in her eyes.

“Who was that?” she asked. “I heard voices.”

Jack sighed, stepping into the living room. “The law,” he muttered. “Looks like I just got my warm welcome from our local sheriff.”

Allison frowned. “Babe, we just got here. What did he want?”

Jack sat down, rubbing his face. “It was about the man in the lake.”

Allison’s eyes narrowed. “The drowning guy?”

“Better said, the man who wasn’t in the lake.”

Sandy, curled up on the couch, peeked over the back of it. “What do you mean?”

Jack hesitated, then shook his head. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry. But when I pulled him to shore—when the ambulance got there—he was gone. No body, no clothes, no footprints. Nothing.”

Allison’s head tilted slightly. “Wait. You’re telling me the guy just—disappeared?”

Jack exhaled. “That’s what it looked like.” He hesitated

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before adding, “And now people think I pulled some kind of prank.”

Allison studied him, searching his face. “But you didn’t.”

Jack’s jaw tightened. “I swear to you, Allison. I didn’t.”

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she turned her gaze toward the window, where the lake shimmered under the fading light.

“This is weird,” she murmured, more to herself than to him.

Jack ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah,” he said. “And I think it’s only going to get weirder.”

“Talking about weird, Sandy gave me a book about our neighborhood—the history of the lake and the canyon. Remember that dam we saw at the entrance of San Francisco?”

Jack glanced up from the box of books he was unpacking. “Yeah, of course. You can still see some of the debris that’s left.”

Allison flipped through the book in her lap. “Well, it says here that it was designed by Mulholland to bring water to Los Angeles. But back then, they didn’t have the technology to do proper soil studies. The dam collapsed.” She paused. “Over six hundred people died. The water rushed all the way from the canyon to the ocean in Ventura, flooding entire cities along the way.”

Jack frowned. “Jesus. I never knew that.”

Allison nodded. “And get this—apparently, the real death toll will never be known because a lot of the workers were farmhands who didn’t have official records. So there could have been even more.”

“Jeez” Jack leaned against the counter.

Normal life. Normal town. And yet, everywhere had its ghosts.

Allison traced a finger down the page. “It also says that weird things happen every year on March 12th at midnight.” She looked up. “We should go down to the dam one night, don’t you think?”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “What kind of weird things?” He reached for the book, but Allison pulled it away with a grin,

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sticking out her tongue.

“Well, according to this, people have seen things—shadows moving where no one’s standing, voices whispering from the canyon.” She flipped a page. “One guy even swore he saw a group of people standing by the dam in the middle of the night. Thought they were campers—until he realized they were too still. Too quiet. And when he blinked... they were gone.”

Jack let out a short laugh. “Come on.”

“I’m serious. The ranchers around here have stories too. There was one ranch down San Francisquito that had a massive bronze horse statue delivered—so big they needed two industrial cranes to lift it into place. Two weeks later, on the morning of March 13th, they found it spun around a full 180 degrees. Water still seeping from it.”

Jack snorted. “Aw, bullshit.” He waved a hand dismissively—but the way Allison looked at him made him pause.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, shrugging. But she was still watching him, like she was waiting for something.

He shook his head. “I just don’t buy it.”

Still, as he grabbed the book, his fingers lingered over the page just a second too long.

Allison smirked. “You’re just mad because I had the book first.”

Jack snatched it from her hands. “Hey!”

“Well, I don’t want you getting nightmares,” he teased.

Allison shot him a deadpan look, then raised a single finger in response.

Game. Set. Match.

Jack chuckled. “Careful, or I’ll put that to good use.”

“Promises, promises,” Allison shot back with a grin.

Jack grabbed his car keys and headed for the stairs. “I was thinking of checking out the local watering hole. I could use something to keep my mind off that damn sheriff. Looks like The Rock Inn is the only bar up here, so I figured I’d meet some

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locals, hear some stories. Get a little inspiration.”

“You want to join me?”

Jack hesitated asking , but Allison was already shaking her head.

“Nope,” she answered for herself. “Lisa’s asleep, and I’m not about to leave her alone. Besides, I’m reading.” She held up the book again. “Go have fun—just don’t get into trouble.”

Jack opened his mouth to argue, but then The Look appeared. Not the playful one. The one that meant *or else*.

Jack grinned, walking over to kiss her. “Okay, okay. No worries. I won’t be late.”

“You better not,” she called after him, voice teasing but firm. “And no more run-ins with the law.”

Jack chuckled as he stepped outside, the cool canyon air greeting him. A quiet night. A normal town. But even normal towns had their shadows.

Jack turned the key in the ignition. As the engine rumbled to life, he glanced toward the canyon, where the lake stretched under the fading twilight. For a second, he could’ve sworn something moved near the water’s edge.

Just a trick of the light, he told himself.

And then he drove away.

CHAPTER FORTY

Jack inhaled the crisp night air, the scent of sage and dry earth filling his lungs. In the distance, a pack of coyotes sent up their wild chorus. The first few weeks here, the sound had unnerved him—the way it cut through the silence like a ghost wailing across the valley. But now? Now, he liked it. The way one pack called to another, the way their voices carried over the lake, untamed and unapologetic. Something primal. Something real.

He slid into the driver's seat and eased out of the driveway. The radio hummed to life, and a familiar riff filled the car—“Whiskey in the Jar.” Not the original Thin Lizzy version, but Metallica's cover. A rare case where the remake didn't butcher the song. *Love that guitar sound.*

Jack cruised down Sandrock Road, passing the golf course. The two-lane road hugged the lake, flanked by steep hills. No room for error here.

He glanced at the water, the moonlight painting its surface in an unmoving, glassy sheen. A little too still. *Where are you?* he thought. *What are you? When will I find out?*

His headlights caught a flicker of movement by the campsite. Two cars were parked near the shore, a small fire crackling beside them. A group of teenagers laughed, their music blending with the wind. Drinking, joking, hoping for a good night. The good life.

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Jack smirked and drove on. A sign on the right caught his eye.

Now entering Elizabeth Lake. Population: 501.

He chuckled. 501? That's oddly specific.

As he neared town, street lights flickered into view. He passed the tiny post office and the fire station next to it, then a large water reservoir and the local school. The road veered away from the lake, weaving through the quiet town.

To his left, Papa's Country Store was buzzing with activity. People filled their gas tanks, while younger kids darted in and out of the shop, arms loaded with beer and snacks.

Jack slowed as The Rock Inn came into view. The old roadhouse stood like a piece of history; its walls built from locally gathered stone. Motorcycles lined the front.

Jack parked a little further down the road, locked his car, and walked toward the entrance. *Here we go. A new beginning.*

The heavy wooden door swung open, and Jack grinned.

This was the real shit. The kind of place where every scar on the bar had a story. Where the walls had heard things no one dared to repeat. The wooden floor looked as if it had been pulled from an old barn, worn but solid beneath his boots. A mosaic of flags covered the ceiling—the Gadsden flag, POW/MIA, military banners. Jack felt at home. A long hand-carved bar stretched along the wall, its polished surface gleaming under dim light. Swivel chairs lined up like sentinels.

Oh yeah, I know where I'm heading.

A wooden board creaked under his step—a small, familiar welcome. From the back, the sound of billiard balls cracking against each other echoed off the walls.

Johnny Cash's gritty storytelling oozed from an old Wurlitzer jukebox.

I love this place.

Jack's eyes flicked to the shelves behind the bar. So many temptations...

"Hello, son. What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

Jack scanned the taps. Eight options, most likely more in bottles.

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“Geez, always tough choosing.”

“Sure is,” the bartender chuckled. “But that’s the fun of it.”

Jack spotted the familiar logo. “I’ll take a Stella.”

“Good choice.”

As the bartender pulled the pint, the swivel chair beside Jack squeaked.

“The food here is damn good,” a voice said. “If I had to recommend something, I’d go with the teriyaki chicken sandwich with pepper jack and avocado.”

Jack turned as the newcomer blinked at the bartender. “Usual, Clay.”

“Coming right up,” the bartender said.

The man turned to Jack and held out a hand. “Alex.”

Jack shook it, feeling a firm but oddly calculated grip.

“Jack. Nice to meet you.”

Alex nodded at his beer. “And a lover of good drinks, I see. Stella—good choice.”

“Yeah, I like it. A little smoother, but still full of flavor.”

Clay slid a sweating glass of dark brown beer onto the counter in front of Alex.

Alex raised it in a toast. “You might not like this. Fizzy yellow beer has never been my thing. Some even say it’s for wussies.” He winked.

Jack smirked and glanced at the logo on Alex’s glass. A demon grinned up at him, raising a pint.

Arrogant Bastard.

Fitting.

Alex looked older—late fifties, maybe mid-sixties—but something about him made it hard to tell. His pale, sharp-featured face was unreadable, his eyes too knowing for small talk. His build? Tall. Lanky. Like a man who had been stretched just a little too thin.

Something about him made Jack feel like he knew things he shouldn’t.

Without another word, Alex pushed himself from the bar. “I’ll be right back.”

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He strolled toward the jukebox, sipping his beer. His thin fingers slid into his pocket, flipping a quarter between his knuckles like a magician's trick. Effortless. Hypnotic.

The quarter vanished into the slot, and a second later, a pulsing bassline filled the bar.

Weapon of Choice—Fatboy Slim.

Jack watched him return, stopping to say hello to a few patrons. *Everyone knows each other here.*

501 people. That would sure make it easier.

Alex settled back onto his stool, setting his beer down with a casual ease.

"So, Mr. Morrison," he said, swirling his drink. "Why move to Diablo Canyon?"

Jack blinked. "Diablo what?"

How the hell does he know my last name?

Alex smirked. "Diablo Canyon. That's what they used to call this place. The lake of the devil. Canyon of the devil. Old wives' tales, but I'm into all that"—he made air quotes—"stuff."

Jack studied him as he took another sip of beer. A white foam mustache lingered for a second before vanishing.

"Well," Jack said, shifting in his seat, "my family and I needed a fresh start. We wanted to get away from the madness. Reconnect."

Alex's eyes locked onto him, unwavering. Jack took another sip of his beer.

Yeah. This was going to be interesting. Whether that was a good thing or not? He'd find out soon enough.

"How did you find us?" Alex asked.

"We found a realtor. You know how it goes—told him exactly what we wanted and he brought us here."

"Was it Wilmes?"

"Yeah, Barry. You know him?"

"Pretty much every one of us here knows Barry. I think he's the only realtor crazy enough to bring people up here."

"Why is that?" Jack asked.

"We're pretty much on our own out here. Most realtors

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don't even bother coming this way—no shops, no Starbucks on every corner... It pretty much guarantees a no sale. The people who live up here do so for a reason. We cherish our privacy, our simple life. You really have to be a particular kind of person to live here.”

“Well, I hear you, and that’s exactly what we were looking for.”

“So, if I may,” his eyes locked onto Jack with an intensity that couldn’t be missed, “was it before or after you crashed your book launch for ‘The End Of Paradise?’”

“Holy shit.” Jack was taken aback. “So you know me?”

“Jack, everyone here knows you. It was all over the local paper.”

“New York Times bestseller Jack Morrison moves to The Lakes... In a small town like this...”

“So much for trying to stay anonymous.” Jack glanced around the room; no one seemed to be paying much attention.

“No need to worry—we all stick together up here. No one’s going to bother you or your family. We all keep to our own business. We all have our pasts.” Alex clapped Jack on the shoulder. “I apologize if my questions seem forward. I’ve read your books and enjoyed them immensely. I heard about your troubles and was simply curious.”

“Well—I’m still working on that.”

Alex then handed Jack a business card.

“We have a great program here, Jack, and if you ever need someone to talk to,” he paused, “I’m always available.”

Jack studied the card, momentarily stunned as he took a second look.

Pastor Alex McBarr

Spiritual Counselor

Church of The Lakes

42719 Lakes Road

The Lakes, CA 900325

“You’re a pastor? I mean, what?”

“Sorry for not having a staff or even a priest’s collar, son.” He raised his glass and they both laughed. Alex

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signaled the barkeep, "Clay, another round over here, will you?"

"I would have never thought..." Jack murmured, still in disbelief.

"Well, as I said, we've got a solid program here, and if you need any guidance, I'd be honored to lend an ear. Why don't you come by next Sunday? Bring the family—no pressure at all. You show up on your own free will, or don't show up at all. I'll keep asking till you do."

Jack took a sip of his beer. "I'll have to discuss it with the missus. It's been decades since we last set foot in a church. We sort of went our own way."

"Nothing wrong with that, Jack—it happens to the best of us. The Lord knows none of us are perfect. Neither He nor I will hold it against you. We all have our own paths to travel."

They raised their glasses to each other's health and resumed their chitchat. At that moment, it felt nice to be a part of something normal again.

When Jack arrived home that night, he paused at the doorway, taking in the familiar sight: Allison on the couch, lost in a book about local history, and little Lisa sleeping peacefully in her lap. In that quiet moment, a rush of nostalgia swept over him, something he had needed so much.

"How was it?" Lisa asked.

"It was amazing, you should've seen this place. Flags on the ceiling, a cool pinball machine and apparently they have pretty good food." Jack hung his jacket over one of the chairs and went to sit with Allison. "What did you guys do?" Lisa wanted me to read her a story and she fell asleep ten pages in. And then I started reading more about our area. It's fascinating."

"Guess what?" Jack leaned forward, excitement dancing in his eyes.

"What?" Allison replied, eyebrows rising in surprise.

"I ended up having a drink with the local priest."

"What. No way." Allison didn't buy it.

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“Way.” Jack gave her McBarr’s business card.

“That’s nuts. How did that happen?”

“I was sitting down, ordered a drink and he came sitting next to me. We started talking and had a drink. He knows about us, he reads my books apparently.”

“That is crazy.” Allison smiled

“He invited us to church Sunday.” Jack gave her a weird look, not knowing how to respond.

“We should go.” She replied.

“‘To church?’ Jack hesitated, the thought stirring up a mix of reluctance and uncertainty. ‘We haven’t been in years, and it just feels... unfamiliar.’ Even as he spoke, a small part of him wondered if reconnecting with the community might fill a hidden void.”

“Well don’t see it so much as going to church but more as meeting the people in our community. It’s such a small town, it might be nice to meet some new people.” She pokes her finger at Jack’s chest. “Normal people. It could be good for you.”

“I don’t know.” Jack wasn’t really sure how to respond.

“Well we have a few days. I think it is a good idea, even if we just go once and show our face.”

“Maybe... I’ll think about it.” Jack murmured as he eased himself onto the couch, hoping he would doze off.

“You do that.” Allison flipped another page of the book she was reading.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The topic of attending church had been discussed a few times throughout the week, and where Jack did not want to go, he did genuinely like McBarr. They had hit it off and a new friend, even if he was a priest, would be very welcome. Eventually, Jack surrendered to Allison's persistent reasoning, and on Sunday morning, they set off for the Church of the Lakes.

As they approached, Jack noticed a charming assortment of pickup trucks and family cars gathered outside the small stone church, which nestled on a gentle hill overlooking the shimmering lake. The scene carried a quiet promise of community and renewal. Jack took Lisa's hand, and together they walked toward the door where Alex McBarr was busy shaking hands and welcoming parishioners. The moment Alex spotted Jack, he hurried over with genuine enthusiasm.

"Jack, how are you? I didn't think you'd come!" Alex exclaimed, extending his hand toward Allison. "And you must be the lovely Allison—Jack has told me so much about you. You're his rock."

Allison shot Jack a playful glance. "Well, that's very nice to hear, Father," she teased.

"Alex, please—nobody calls me Father up here. We're

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not that formal,” Alex replied with a laugh.

Bending down to Lisa, McBarr gently rested his hand on her head. “And you must be the amazing Lisa. Your daddy wouldn’t stop talking about you—he loves you very much.”

“I love him too,” Lisa responded wittily, and her spontaneity drew a round of cheerful laughter from them all.

“Let’s go inside. Come on, come on—everyone will be so happy to meet you. I’m really glad you’re here.” Alex held the thick oak door open as the warm, spicy scent of incense mingled with a gentle breeze drifting across the lake.

As they stepped onto the flagstone floor, friendly faces greeted them—neighbors and longtime parishioners sharing smiles and gentle nods. A kind elderly woman paused to offer a few welcoming words, her voice soft and sincere. Guided by the gentle murmur of conversation, Jack found a pew bathed in the colorful glow of stained glass and helped Lisa settle in while Allison joined him on the other side. There was a relaxed, easy feeling in the air—as if the church was a gathering place for old friends.

Then, with a calm and assuring presence, Alex McBarr made his way to the altar. He paused to adjust a few cherished relics before addressing the assembly. His warm, resonant voice filled the room as he began the service, inviting everyone to partake in a moment of reflection and connection. In that moment, the church became a space where everyone could feel at ease, connected by the simple joy of being together.

Jack sat rigid in the pew, hands clasped loosely together, head slightly bowed. He wasn’t praying. Not really. He was trying to find something inside himself, some piece of clarity buried beneath the weight of his own regrets. How had he let things fall apart? How had he failed so completely as a husband, as a father? How could he do better?

From the pulpit, Alex McBarr stood firm, his presence filling the small church. His voice was steady, commanding yet calm, as he directed the congregation to scripture.

“Let’s review Genesis 4:10-11.”

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He cleared his throat and spoke, his words ringing out through the old wooden beams:

"The Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.'"

Jack's mind drifted as McBarr continued, but something about the verse unsettled him. The words lingered in the air longer than they should have, as if they carried weight beyond the passage of scripture.

McBarr's tone deepened, the calm taking on an eerie edge. "The land remembers. Always has. Even when we forget." His voice reverberated through the quiet, pressing against Jack's ears, pressing against his chest. "The voice of your brother's blood is crying from the ground."

Jack's breath hitched. McBarr's eyes swept over the congregation. When they landed on Jack, they lingered just a second too long.

"Some things cannot be washed away."

The church had fallen into complete silence, the weight of McBarr's words settling over them like a heavy shroud. Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the stained-glass windows, howling through the cracks in the wood.

"The dead tremble under the waters," McBarr continued, his voice almost reverent now. "Sheol is naked before Him, and Abaddon has no covering. That which is buried will rise, and all debts will be paid."

A murmur ran through the congregation. A woman made the sign of the cross. Somewhere in the back, an old man exhaled shakily.

Jack sat frozen, a deep unease twisting inside him. This wasn't just scripture. This was history.

This was a warning.

Something shifted in the air—not physically, but as if an invisible thread had been plucked, sending a vibration through the space around them. The candles flickered, their glow briefly dimming before flaring back to life.

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Jack swallowed hard. He wasn't sure if it was just his imagination or if, in that moment, the ground beneath them truly trembled.

McBarr closed the Bible with slow, deliberate care, his gaze still lingering on Jack.

"The land remembers," he said once more, quieter this time. Almost like a whisper.

Jack exhaled, his pulse hammering in his throat.

And then the service continued, as if nothing had happened at all.

When the mass ended, the congregation gathered outside in little clusters, scattered around the parking lot. Conversations were hushed, subdued, as though McBarr's words still lingered in the air.

"Well, I hope you come again. I try not to be too preachy. Try to make things relevant. And if it's not for you, I won't be offended. I'm thankful that you made the effort," McBarr said as he walked Jack and Allison to their car.

Allison shook his hand. "It was a nice service. Easy, and definitely not too preachy."

Jack started the car. "Maybe I'll see you again at the Rock Inn?"

"Well, it is our only watering hole up here, so the likelihood of that happening is high. You have a blessed Sunday, and I'll see you soon."

Slowly, the Morrisons drove down the little hill, hugging the lake as they set course for home.

"Okay. Am I paranoid, or was that shit weird?" Jack asked, glancing at Allison.

"What do you mean? What was weird?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You didn't pick up on the sermon? The whole 'The land remembers' thing and 'All debts will be paid'? And then he looked at me."

Allison shrugged. "Yeah, maybe you're being a little too paranoid." She reached over, running her fingers through his hair. "You need a haircut, babe."

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Jack scowled. “No, seriously. I don’t know, the whole thing felt... off.” His voice carried a slight edge. “Tell me you felt the shaking. The candles—did you see them flicker?”

Allison took his free hand in hers. “Babe, relax. Everything seemed fine. The candles flicker all the time, these are old buildings. And the shaking? I didn’t feel it. We get small earthquakes all the time.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She smiled. “Let’s get something to eat and go see the dam. It’s a gorgeous day, and we could use the exercise. We’ve been sitting in the house forever—I’m starting to feel trapped.”

Jack exhaled, gripping the wheel a little tighter. Something still gnawed at the back of his mind, but he let it go. For now.

He pulled into the driveway, shutting off the engine as they stepped out. The wind carried the faintest whisper across the trees.

The land remembers.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Allison made some pancakes and packed some snacks for their little trip. After their simple lunch they put on their comfy clothes and piled into the car, winding their way down the canyon. Allison had used every bit of her persuasion skills to convince Jack to visit the remains of the San Francisquito Dam.

“Aren’t these views amazing?” Allison stared out the window, her eyes wide with wonder. “It’s like I can see all the way to the ocean.”

Jack glanced at her, smirking. “Hard to believe this is still Los Angeles County.” He shook his head. “Why isn’t this place swamped with people?”

Allison’s smile faltered. “Shhh. Be careful what you wish for.” She squeezed his hand. “We don’t want everyone coming up here. That would defeat the whole purpose of why we moved.” She inhaled deeply, her shoulders relaxing. “This place is good for the soul. Detoxing from the city.”

Jack couldn’t argue with that. He felt himself smile, mirroring hers.

Then, Tessie let out an audible grunt.

“Oh God!” Lisa gagged. “Tessie, no!” She waved a hand in front of her face, frantically rolling down the window.

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Jack coughed, hitting the button for the rest of the windows. “Jesus, dog! That’s a war crime.”

Allison burst out laughing as the whole car scrambled for fresh air, while Tessie panted contentedly, completely oblivious to the chaos she had caused.

“So much potency in such a little package,” Jack wheezed, petting Tessie’s smooshed face.

“She sure knows how to wake you up.” Allison glanced back at Lisa, who was scratching Tessie’s belly.

“Be careful, honey. You rub that tummy too much, and she might give us another present.”

Lisa hesitated for half a second before shrugging. “I don’t care,” she said and kept scratching. Allison smiled.

The moment passed, the air cleared, and the Morrison family continued gliding down the canyon, taking in the breathtaking views. The windows were cracked open, letting the scent of sage and warm earth seep into the car. Overhead, red-tailed hawks cut through the sky, scanning for prey.

This—this is what they had needed. A better connection to nature. A distance from the artificial friendships and infrastructures of the big city.

“Here it is.” Jack pulled onto a gravel turnout, parking the car just in front of some heavily tagged K-rails.

Allison reached for Tessie’s leash. “Put her on the leash, honey.”

Lisa clipped it to Tessie’s collar, while Jack locked the car and stepped over the barrier.

It only took a few steps before they entered another world.

Jack let out a low whistle. “It’s like we just stepped into one of those post-apocalyptic documentaries. You know, the ones that show what the world would look like after humans are gone.”

Allison chuckled, but her voice held a note of seriousness. “It kind of does, doesn’t it?”

The abandoned road stretched out before them—

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cracked, overgrown, flanked by gnarled trees that stood too close together. Sunlight barely pierced through the dense canopy, casting twisted shadows on the pavement. Little saplings forced their way through the asphalt, breaking apart what had once been a smooth road.

Scattered boulders littered the ground, remnants of the disaster that had reshaped this canyon. The few signs that remained were rusted, bent, riddled with bullet holes. Jack and Allison strolled along the ruined path, kicking at loose gravel, the eerie quiet settling over them. Tessie, meanwhile, dragged Lisa forward, half-choking herself on the leash.

Then—a sharp caw.

Jack stiffened, twisting on his heels, scanning the trees.

“What is it?” Allison squeezed his hand.

He forced a breath. “Nothing.”

Just a crow. Right?

Jack swallowed hard, a shudder crawling up his spine. The memory of .22—the black-feathered nightmare from the butcher shop—clawed at the edges of his mind. The convulsing bodies, the piercing gaze, the overwhelming dread.

Allison tugged at his arm. “Come on, let’s go.”

Jack followed her, but his eyes flicked back to the trees more than once, searching for any sign of black feathers. Then, he noticed something.

The mud near the creek—disturbed. Not just by Tessie’s paws or the deer’s hooves. Something else had been there.

“Daddy! Look—look!” Lisa pointed excitedly. Jack turned.

A majestic buck stood atop one of the gargantuan concrete slabs, watching them.

Jack exhaled, marveling at its sheer strength and presence. Then—Tessie shot forward.

“NO! Tessie!” Lisa screamed, her voice breaking.

The buck darted off. Tessie chased after it, disappearing into the trees. Jack was already running. He tore through the brush, feet sinking into the soft, wet earth, brambles slashing at his arms.

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“TESSIE!”

No answer.

No bark.

No sound.

Just silence.

They searched until the sun went down. Lisa was exhausted, her little body limp from crying. Allison cradled her in the backseat, rocking her gently. Jack drove in silence.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

That night, Jack went back alone.

Fog rolled over the canyon, thick and suffocating, curling between the trees like ghostly fingers. He searched. He called. He listened.

Nothing.

By dawn, defeated, broken, and exhausted, he made the slow drive home.

The moment he pulled into the driveway, his stomach dropped.

Something was hanging from the gate.

Jack's breath caught in his throat. He already knew.

He stepped forward, his hands shaking.

Tessie's collar.

Soaked in blood.

Clumps of black and white fur still stuck to it.

Jack clenched his jaw. No tracks. No trail. No body.

Just this.

This final, cruel message.

He walked inside, knowing today was going to be a very, very bad day.

Jack didn't say anything when he stepped inside. He didn't need to. Lisa was sitting on the couch, still in her

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jacket, eyes red and swollen. She hadn't gone to bed.

Allison was beside her, arms wrapped around her small body. But Lisa wasn't looking at her. She was staring at the door. Waiting. Jack swallowed the lump in his throat.

How the hell was he going to tell her?

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Tejon Pass, California – 1847

The ground trembled beneath the horses' hooves as Tibu and his men rode down the Tejon Pass. The earth itself seemed restless tonight, unsettled.

By the time they made camp in a grove of upturned sandstone boulders, the men were exhausted. The horses drank greedily from a nearby creek, muscles trembling from the long ride. Tibu paced in tight circles near the fire, his lips moving in whispered mutterings. His men stole uneasy glances at each other. He hadn't been himself for weeks.

Their leader—normally ruthless but composed—was now erratic, unpredictable. And if any of them doubted how dangerous he had become, the way he had butchered José without hesitation had erased those doubts. No one would dare question him now.

“Chavez,” Tibu snapped, pointing at one of his men. “Come here.”

Chavez hesitated before stepping forward, keeping his gaze low. “Sí, jefe.”

“I want you to take two men and ride toward the lake. There's a farm to the west—good horses. Fast. We need

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fresh stock.” His eyes gleamed dangerously in the firelight. “Scout it tonight. We ride tomorrow.”

Chavez swallowed hard. “Sí, jefe.”

Minutes later, the three riders disappeared into the night, a fading trail of disturbed dust the only sign they had ever been there. Tibu turned back to the fire, crouching low. He drew in the dirt with a stick, tracing the lake and the Hunts’ ranch with quick, deliberate movements. He placed small colored stones across the map—his men, his attack points, his strategy. When the time came, they would sweep down the hills, take the farm, and disappear before anyone knew what had happened. It was a flawless plan. It had to be.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The first light of dawn set the valley ablaze in gold and amber. The lake below them was a glassy mirror, perfectly still.

The signal fire was lit.

From across the canyon, a thick plume of white smoke curled skyward. The men moved in unison, a well-oiled machine executing their attack. Several of Tibu's men crawled through the dewy grass, pressing low as they reached the Hunts' house. Two peered through the windows. Inside, the family was still asleep. On the southern ridge, another group laid in wait, weapons at the ready—prepared to cut off any reinforcements. Tibu approached the house, gripping the brass doorknob.

A low growl rumbled from inside.

He kicked in the door. A gunshot ripped through the house.

A yelp. A flash of red. The dog collapsed.

The screams came next.

Boots thundered across wooden floors as the men swarmed the house, pulling the Hunts from their beds at gunpoint. The women sobbed and pleaded. The men trembled, forced to their knees. Tibu grabbed James Hunt by the hair, dragging him across the floor. "You know who I am,"

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he growled. "I am Tiburcio Vásquez."

The name sent a visible shudder through the family. Tibu smirked. "Then you know I don't kill unless it's deserved."

"I'm taking your horses. Most of them. You'll keep enough to survive. Try to follow us, and you'll die." Then his gaze fell on the eldest daughter.

Elizabeth. Sixteen. But with the looks of a woman grown.

She tried to shrink away, but his hand caught her wrist.

"We take her with us," he said.

The women screamed. James lunged forward, only to be kicked back to the floor.

The men tied the Hunts family to their beds. Tibu walked out, dragging a sobbing Elizabeth behind him. He tied the girl across his horse. He took the gag from her mouth.

"Remember," his dirty finger pointed at her hazel brown eyes. "I promised your father that I would return you unharmed. Don't make me break my promise. Be calm and ride with us. Once we leave the canyon you can return home and untie them. Are we clear?" His gaze made her swallow, she had never been so scared in her life. Her voice broke, barely able to say yes.

It was done.

The men rounded up the horses. It had taken less than twenty minutes. Tibu swung into the saddle. Victory.

Then—

The lake twitched. Just for a second.

A ripple spread outward—against the wind. Tibu barely noticed, but the horses did. Their ears flattened. Their bodies tensed. One of the horses screamed.

The earth trembled. A shadow rushed beneath the water, massive and shifting. Riders were thrown from their horses as they reared up and fled away. Others used all their skills to stay in their saddle. Their horses bucked, kicked wildly, and spun around.

"What the hell!" Tibu looked around him, the thrown

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up dirt cloaked them in dust. Gunshots and screams erupted from the east side. It was coming from the lake.

Then—

Silence.

The birds had stopped singing. The wind had died.

The lake exploded. Dark plumes of fire shot up into the air.

Tibu threw the girl to the ground. “Stay here.” and he rode out towards the lake. “Vamonos.” he waved for the men that were still in their saddle to follow. As they came closer to the lake, fleeing bandits urged them to turn around.

“El Diablo, El Diablo. Salir de aquí, get out of here, the devil is coming!” Their eyes were cold and filled with panic. Foam streamed from their horse's mouths; desperately looking for a way out. The slight breeze carried the scent of gunpowder that was being spent.

A black shape tore from the depths—water cascading off its body, its wings unfolding like the limbs of something that had no right to exist. Its wings cracked like old leather, the air rattled as it turned in the sky. Its eyes weren't eyes. They were voids. Not black—not reflective—just... empty.

Tibu wasn't just watching a beast.

It was watching him.

Its head tilted, unnatural and deliberate.

Tibu dismounted in one fluid motion, ripping his 1873 Winchester repeater from the saddle. The acrid stench of burning brush and charred flesh stung his nostrils as he pushed his way through the scrub.

All around him the gunfire was relentless—cracks of revolvers, the deeper booms of rifles—but none of it mattered. Something was killing them all.

Tibu crawled closer to the lake, the ground was scorched black, embers hissing in blood-soaked dirt. Flames curled up the brittle trunks of trees, and through the thick smoke, he saw shadows moving frantically—men running, horses screaming, bodies tumbling through the air like discarded dolls. Then—he saw it.

It didn't just kill—it ripped through the men with

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unnatural precision, a predator that knew exactly how to break its prey. Talons as long as machetes clamped around a man's torso. The bandito shrieked, arms flailing, pistol still firing wildly.

Then—he was gone. Lifted into the sky.

Tibu craned his neck, tracking the man's silhouette against the rising sun—his body twisting and writhing as he vanished into the monster's maw.

Crunch.

The sound was thick, wet—bones snapping between jagged teeth. Blood rained down, steaming as it hit the scorched earth. Another man tried to run, his boots kicking up sand, his face twisted in terror. He made it six steps before the creature's spiked tail lashed out. A single clean cut. His torso slid apart from his legs—falling in two separate directions.

Tibu's stomach turned.

The beast screeched—louder than anything Tibu had ever heard, shaking him to his bones. It swooped low, its shadow stretching across the crimson-stained ground. Another rider had reached his horse, spurring the mustang into a full sprint, his pistol aimed over his shoulder.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Every bullet missed. It didn't matter. The rider kept pulling the trigger, even after the chamber was empty—click-click-click—his mind was too broken with terror to stop. The monster descended.

Its tail flicked with pinpoint accuracy. The rider's head spun clean from his shoulders—his body slumping forward, still gripping the reins. The mustang kept galloping. Headless rider, lifeless body, gun still twitching in its grip.

Tibu wanted to move, to run, but he couldn't. This wasn't a battle. It was a slaughter. The beast plummeted again, its massive jaw unhinging. The mustang didn't even get the chance to scream.

One bite. A sickening rip. Half the horse was gone. The front half kept moving, staggering forward, intestines trailing behind.

C. FLEMISH

It collapsed. Kicking. Whimpering. Until it didn't.

A desperate roar ripped from Tibu's throat. He raised his Winchester and fired.

Boom.

The bullet slammed into the monster's rib cage—right between the plates of its black, scaled hide. It did nothing.

Boom. Boom. Nothing.

The creature snapped its head toward him. And it saw him. For the first time, Tibu felt truly hunted. The beast inhaled, its chest expanding.

Then—it breathed fire. A violent, blinding torrent of flames erupted from its maw, consuming everything in its path. Men dropped instantly—screaming, their skin melting off their bones. Some tried crawling to the water. They never made it. Their lungs filled with smoke before they could take another breath. One by one, they collapsed—blackened husks, still twitching. It had only been minutes. The lake was soaked red. Bodies floated along the shore, burnt beyond recognition.

The stench of sulfur, charred hair, and burning flesh filled the air, suffocating Tibu as he gasped for breath. He couldn't win. There was no fighting this. Survival was his only option.

Tibu turned and ran—his boots slipping in blood, his breath ragged.

He needed somewhere to hide. His eyes darted wildly—searching, searching.

Then he saw it. The half-eaten horse. The steaming, gaping wound in its flank.

The only cover he had. Tibu didn't hesitate. He threw himself into the carcass, pushing through the wet, sticky insides—gagging as the warmth clung to his skin. The smell of blood. The heat. The wetness. His hands slipped against something slick—a chunk of muscle, maybe an organ—he didn't care. He buried himself deeper. And waited. Waited. Until the screams stopped. Until the gunfire faded. Until there was nothing.

DIABLO CANYON

By nightfall, Tibu forced himself out of the corpse. He crawled through the blackened battlefield, his boots squelching in blood. He was looking for Elizabeth.

Corpses lay scattered like discarded dolls. The air was wrong. Thick. Heavy. The stench of sulfur clung to his skin. Tibu turned over the first body. The man's eyes were open—empty. Staring. Not at the sky. Not at the ground. At the lake.

The Hunts' ranch was gone—razed to the ground. Then he saw her.

He fell to his knees, staring at her sightless gaze. She had been dead for hours. Yet her eyes remained fixed on the water. Just like all the others.

The lake was watching.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose. He wanted to close her eyes. To turn her away. But he couldn't. His hands wouldn't move. A soft wind stirred the branches above. The lake remained still.

Silent.

Waiting.

Tibu finally stood, his legs unsteady. The fear he had buried deep inside clawed its way up his throat. He needed to leave. He needed to run. Whatever had happened here tonight... was not over.

He ran. Did not look back. Did not stop. He kept going till he collapsed.

Days later, he awoke to cold steel against his cheek.

The deputy grinned. "No more running, Vásquez."

Tibu laughed. Not because he thought it was funny.

Because from somewhere in the distance... something laughed back.

Not one thing. Many. The sound came from all around him. It was his own voice. Twisted. Warped. Layered with others.

The deputy's grin faltered.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The Lakes, California, Current Day

Time had passed slowly since Tessie's disappearance. Jack and Allison were heartbroken about the loss, but their little girl's world had been destroyed.

They had rescued Tessie right after Lisa was born. She was Lisa's best and oldest friend. They were always together.

Lisa had never been confronted with death before. Now—her ten-year-old world had been turned upside down. It had taken a full week before she even stopped crying. Jack would sit with her, join her in grief. Some nights, he would wake up to find her curled between him and Allison, trembling in her sleep. It was a horrible loss.

But for Jack and Allison, watching their precious little girl experience that kind of grief was worse. Slowly, time went by. Things began to settle, as much as they could.

Lisa still crawled into their bed at night, cuddling up with either parent—she did not pick favorites. Jack and Allison tried their best to make things okay again.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Jack hadn't wanted to come, but McBarr had been persistent. "Come meet the community," he had said with a broad smile. "It's always good to know your neighbors. It will help you." McBarr knew about Tessie and how much the family missed her. Jack had told him, but he had not told him everything.

Now, standing inside the small church hall, Jack realized just how many people had gathered. Too many for a town that felt half-dead. The long tables were lined with home-made dishes—cornbread, baked beans, roasted meats, casseroles. The air was thick with the smell of food, but beneath it lingered something else. Something musky.

People greeted him warmly, too warmly. Handshakes that lingered a second too long, smiles that never quite reached the eyes. Conversations that danced around the same phrases—"It's good you're here." "This town has a way of keeping people." "You belong here now."

Jack forced himself to relax, accepting a plate of food from an elderly woman who patted his hand like a mother doting on her son. Everything felt normal. Too normal.

Then McBarr clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Enjoying yourself?"

C. FLEMISH

Jack gave a tight-lipped smile. "Yeah. Seems like a tight-knit group."

McBarr's expression didn't waver. "Community is everything, Jack. We take care of our own."

Jack nodded, but a chill crawled up his spine at the way McBarr said it—like a promise or a warning.

As McBarr drifted away to speak to someone else, Jack took a sip of the sweet tea in his hand, scanning the room. It felt like every conversation around him had dropped in volume. Whispers slithered through the air, but the moment he turned his head, the talking resumed like nothing had happened.

He was about to step outside for some air when a hand brushed against his arm.

Jack turned and found himself face-to-face with an older woman, her eyes clouded yet sharp beneath the surface. She was small, frail-looking, but there was something in the way she gripped his wrist that made his skin prickle.

"You need to leave," she whispered.

Jack frowned. "Excuse me?"

Her fingers tightened. "You don't understand what this place is. What it does."

Jack glanced around. No one seemed to notice them, but the hairs on his neck stood up. "What are you talking about?"

She swallowed hard, eyes darting toward McBarr, then back to him. "They won't let you leave."

Jack's stomach twisted. "Who won't?"

But before she could answer, McBarr called her name from across the room.

The woman let go of Jack's wrist immediately and turned without another word. Jack watched as she walked away, her steps stiff.

McBarr's voice rose in the background, leading a toast. The room erupted in laughter and chatter once again.

Jack exhaled slowly, rubbing the spot where her fingers had pressed into his skin.

He suddenly wasn't hungry anymore.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Jack exhaled as he pulled onto the main road, putting distance between himself and the church. The drive back was short, but instead of heading home, he turned onto the lakeside road leading to Papa's Country Store. Allison had asked him to pick up some flour and coffee, and after that unsettling encounter at the potluck, a mundane errand was exactly what he needed.

As he approached the bend near the lake, he spotted a familiar car heading in the opposite direction. Wilmes, the realtor.

The sleek blue sedan slowed slightly, revealing Wilmes in the driver's seat, a cheerful expression on his face, waving enthusiastically. In the passenger seat sat a man, his face lit with polite curiosity, while in the back, a woman and a young boy peered out at the scenery, their eyes full of the same wonder Jack had once felt.

Jack gave a brief wave back, watching as the car disappeared around the bend. Another family. Another set of newcomers.

Papa's Country Store sat at the edge of the town's main road, a rustic, weathered building with a wraparound porch and a hand-painted sign above the entrance. Wind chimes

C. FLEMISH

jingled softly as Jack stepped inside, the door's bell announcing his arrival.

The store smelled of aged wood, dried herbs, and the faintest trace of tobacco. A few locals milled about, nodding politely as Jack made his way down the aisles.

"Hello, stranger," the cashier called. A short fellow with a round face and a friendly grin—his name tag read 'Dan.' He stood behind the counter, leaning against the register with an easy familiarity. "Hope they didn't scare you too bad at church."

Jack forced a chuckle. "Nah. Just a lot of food and friendly faces."

Dan nodded approvingly. "That's the way of things here. I remember seeing you there—welcome to the area. We always appreciate new folks discovering our beautiful little town."

Jack felt the warmth in Dan's tone, but there was something in his choice of words—discovering—that made his skin prickle.

"Thanks," Jack said, keeping his tone casual. He grabbed the items Allison requested before making his way to the register. As he stepped forward, something caught his eye in the back corner of the store.

A pinboard.

At first, it looked like a regular community board—advertisements, business cards, lost pet flyers.

Then he looked closer.

Rows of missing persons posters.

Dozens of them. Some yellowed with age, others more recent, their ink crisp. Faces of men, women, children. And beside them—missing pet flyers, tacked haphazardly among the rest.

Jack's stomach twisted as he scanned the names. Some had vanished decades ago. Some within the last year.

One flyer had McBarr's church listed as the last known place a man had been seen.

Jack swallowed hard.

DIABLO CANYON

The bell above the door jingled as another customer entered, and Jack forced himself to turn away, taking his bag from Dan with a nod as he placed the money on the counter.

As he stepped back outside, the cool air no longer felt refreshing.

It felt suffocating.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Jack got home and placed the groceries on the kitchen counter.

“Honey, let’s go to the Rock Inn, grab a bite. What do you think?”

Jack walked down the hallway.

“Allison? Alli?”

No answer. He opened the bedroom door. Nothing.

“Honey?”

The faint sound of water running. Jack turned toward the bathroom. He opened the door, and a cloud of steam rolled over him. The shower was still running—hot water pounding against the tile, steam rising in waves. Jack’s stomach tightened.

“Allison?”

The shower door was partly open, the glass fogged over. Jack stepped forward.

He reached out—slowly, hesitantly—and slid the glass door the rest of the way.

He froze.

Allison lay on the shower floor. Her legs were bent at odd angles. Her head—God, her head—

Jack’s breath caught in his throat. Her eyes were open. Not wide. Not shut. Just open. Staring through him. Jack

DIABLO CANYON

didn't move. His mind screamed at him to react—

But something was wrong. Her head—it wasn't right.

"Alli." His voice broke.

He dropped to his knees.

"Alli!"

His hands trembled as he reached out and shut the water off.

Her skin was slick, warm from the heat of the shower, but— She wasn't warm enough.

His fingers pressed against her neck, searching for a pulse.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

"Alli! No, no, no—come back!"

He dragged her from the shower, water pooling on the tiles beneath her body.

He tilted her head back.

Two breaths.

Her chest rose and fell—but nothing else.

Jack shifted into position, hands pressing against her sternum.

He rocked back and forth, counting aloud.

"One and two and three and four and five—"

Crack.

Her ribs gave under his pressure.

He kept going.

"—six and seven and eight—"

Her lips were turning blue.

"—nine and ten."

He blew another breath into her lungs.

Nothing.

Jack's breath hitched. His ears were ringing. His vision swam.

This isn't happening. This can't be happening. Then Lisa's voice.

"Daddy?"

C. FLEMISH

Jack snapped up.

“Daaaad!”

Oh God, no.

“Honey, don’t come in here!” His voice cracked, frantic. “Baby, you need to call an ambulance. Call 911, stay at the door, okay? Can you do that?”

“Yes—” her voice wavered. “Are you okay?”

Jack’s throat burned. He had to be strong for her.

“Yes, baby, it’s okay. Just call them now—stay on the phone, okay?”

“Okay.”

Her footsteps slapped against the tile floors as she ran.

Jack turned back to Allison. He should have known better. His training told him everything he needed to know. But now that disaster had struck so close, he had ignored the obvious. Allison’s neck was broken. Her spine severed from her skull.

There was nothing anyone could do. She was gone. Jack—or anyone else—could never save her. He was too late. Tears rolled down his face, dripping onto her cheeks.

He kept going anyway. He pinched her nose, blew air into her lifeless body.

Outside, dogs were howling.

CRASH.

The bathroom window shattered inward. A black shape streaked through the air—

A crow.

Dead before it even hit the ground. Its lifeless body slammed into the shower

It flopped, jerked and twisted unnaturally, flailing, its shattered wings slapping against Allison’s corpse.

Jack flinched.

His body moved on instinct—his hand shot out and he flung the crow across the room.

It hit the wall with a sickening thud and collapsed, twitching, convulsing.

Feathers scattered across the wet tile.

DIABLO CANYON

Then— The voice. It wasn't in his head. It was in the room. The air vibrated. The tiles beneath him trembled. The presence was here. It was always here. The voice was a growl, a whisper, a promise.

“There is no escape.”

Jack froze. His breath hitched.

“You belong to me.”

His heartbeat pounded in his ears.

“You all—belong to me.”

The room felt smaller. The air felt thicker. Jack couldn't move.

His wife's lifeless body lay beneath him. The crow's broken form twitched in the corner.

The voice wrapped around him like a chain.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Santa Clarita, California, 1928

Two and a half minutes before midnight.

Lance and Jeannie were heading back home after conducting their last inspection for the day.

A deep, distant rumble stopped them dead in their tracks.

Then—the sound of enormous boulders crashing down, echoing through the canyon walls. Lance grabbed Jeannie's hand. They ran.

The ground trembled beneath them. The wave hit.

A 125-foot wall of water slammed into the canyon, swallowing them whole.

The force ripped the air from their lungs, crushed them, flung them like broken dolls through the darkness.

They never resurfaced.

Soon, they would be joined by hundreds more.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

The Lakes, California, Current Day

The ambulance had come. Sheriff Cooper arrived a close second.

Had he come so fast to make sure Jack hadn't called in another false 911 call? Or was he just doing his job? It didn't matter.

Allison was gone.

The paramedics tried to take her lifeless body, but Jack refused to let go.

They pried her from his arms, but he fought. Screaming. Thrashing. Desperate. They had to sedate him. Jack barely registered the hands pulling at him.

The paramedics were saying something—calm words, measured voices—but it was all muffled, like he was underwater. Someone wrenched Allison's body from his grasp. Jack lashed out, fought against them, screaming her name. His throat was raw, his vision blurred.

Then—a sharp prick.

The world tilted.

Sound dulled.

Everything slipped away.

C. FLEMISH

Somewhere in the distance, Lisa was still crying.

No one was holding her.

Sandy stopped by after hearing the sirens. The door was open. People were moving inside. Then, she saw her.

Lisa stood alone in the hallway, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Her face was blotchy, red, wet with tears. She wasn't sobbing anymore. Just trembling. People were passing her, stepping around her, whispering. But no one looked at her. No one spoke to her.

Lisa didn't move. Didn't make a sound. Sandy's chest ached.

"Oh, baby," she whispered.

She scooped Lisa into her arms, lifting her from the ground. The girl didn't resist. She just sobbed into Sandy's shoulder. Sandy rocked her gently, brushing her hair back. The paramedics laid Jack on the couch, the drugs already pulling him into unconsciousness. Sandy sat across from him, Lisa curled in her lap, still asking, over and over, "Where is Mommy going?"

She didn't know what to say. What could she say?

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

The following days were a blur.

Jack remained medicated, drifting in and out of consciousness. When the sedation wore off, the grief swallowed him whole.

Sheriff Cooper came by for testimonies.

Sandy handled most of it. Jack was in no condition to answer questions.

And Lisa— Lisa was invisible to the world. Sandy spent every waking minute with her. Poor girl lost her mom, and her dad was a wreck.

Jack had to make arrangements. How do you plan a funeral when you can barely breathe? They had written a will years ago. At least that part was easy.

Allison had chosen to be cremated, her ashes scattered. No ceremony. Not yet.

There would be a memorial later, when Jack and Lisa were able to attend properly.

Maybe friends. Maybe family.

But Jack had no one left. It was just him and Lisa now.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Most of the day, Jack was asleep. The nights were worse. The nightmares came fast, violent, relentless. Sandy found him drenched in sweat, screaming into the dark until his throat bled.

She gave him water. Another pill.

Lisa was inconsolable. She didn't have the luxury of being drugged into numbness.

Lisa cried in silence now, curling up in whatever corner she could find.

There was no one else to help them. No one else left.

Minutes ticked away. Turned into hours. Hours felt like weeks. Days went on forever.

Slowly Jack reduced his meds. But when the pain became unbearable—he turned to the bottle. He knew. He knew what he was doing. That is what he told himself.

But if anything, he had to stay strong for Lisa.

Sandy was a godsend.

If it hadn't been for her, he would have fallen apart completely.

One morning, he woke up and really saw Lisa for the first time in weeks.

Not just saw her, but really looked at her. She had lost weight.

DIABLO CANYON

Her eyes were hollow, dark circles carved beneath them. She looked so small.

She needed him. And he hadn't been there. Jack swallowed against the lump in his throat. He would not fail her again.

Slowly he was able to function again.

They took walks together. The three of them. Jack, Lisa, and Sandy.

Along the lake, watching the ducks and birds. They found a fallen tree and sat on it, the breeze cool against their faces.

Lisa stared at the water, silent for a long time. Then, her voice. Small. Quiet.

"Do you think she can see us?"

Jack's throat tightened. "I don't know, baby."

Lisa nodded, kicking at a rock. "I think she can."

A duck swam past, leaving ripples on the surface. Lisa watched it for a long time.

"I miss her."

Jack's chest ached. "I miss her too, sweetheart."

Lisa wiped at her nose. Then—for the first time since the funeral—she reached for Jack's hand. Jack squeezed it tight. He wouldn't let go.

Sandy had taught him how to make pancakes, so every morning he could make Lisa pancakes. They would sit on the deck, and he would read her stories before he would put her to bed. More often than not sleeping in her bed. Jack spent every second he could with Lisa. She was all that he had left in this life. He was planning to take a trip to his parents. They needed a change of scenery, they just had to go somewhere else for a while, maybe even for a long while. There were too many bad memories. Tessie. And now Allison.

Maybe it was time for him to leave the writer's life behind. Maybe he should just become a full time dad. Nothing motivated Jack anymore. He only cared about being with his little girl.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

It was a little after 3 a.m. and the moonlight was slowly fading out of Lisa's bedroom.

The shadows in the corners stretched just a little too far. Then, the ceiling shuddered.

A ripple moved across the surface. Across the ceiling, little droplets of blood seeped from the stuccoed sheetrock. They quivered, swelling, trembling—fighting gravity.

Each one gaining weight, struggling to hold on. Then—they fell. One by one, they disconnected from the safety of the ceiling, accelerating on their way down to finally impact at terminal velocity on Lisa's forehead.

The first few impacts barely disturbed her sleep. Then, the ceiling grew more saturated.

The droplets turned to trickles and started to rain down.

Lisa woke up violently, yanked from the safety of her sleep.

She gasped, choking on something thick as the foul coppery aroma penetrated her mouth. She was laying inside a sticky deep red pool of blood. Her hands trembled as she raised them, dripping, slick. Her breath hitched in her throat, coming out in a strangled sob. Then she screamed.

“Daaaaaddddd! Ddddddaaaaayyyy!”

DIABLO CANYON

Lisa had never screamed like this before. Her lungs burned as she forced the air out.

“Daaaaaadddyyy, Help me! Help!”

Jack slammed the door open—

The world stopped.

This wasn't his daughter's room anymore. The walls weren't supposed to bleed. The ceiling wasn't supposed to drip. Lisa wasn't supposed to be covered in blood.

But she was.

Drenched. Trapped in a lake of red goop.

Her small arms reached for him. Begging.

Jack's breath hitched. His mind refused to accept what he was seeing. This was real. This was hell. Lisa's bed trembled beneath her. The frame groaned as if it were alive, the mattress pulling her downward.

Jack's muscles finally responded. He lunged forward and the floor swallowed him.

His feet hit the ground, but the ground wasn't there. The blood wasn't just thick—it was dragging him down. It clung to his skin like syrup, congealing, gripping. His feet sank deeper, the floor pulling at him like quicksand. His knees buckled and he lost his grip.

Jack collapsed. For a moment, everything turned black.

Then—he felt it. The warm, slick texture against his skin. The coppery stench so thick it choked him. Jack gasped, coughing out something thick—spitting blood that wasn't his.

The room spun. He tried to push himself up. His hands slipped. The blood was moving.

Something slithered beneath him. A thick handprint appeared on the floor beside him, pressed into the blood.

Not his.

Jack kicked, fought, struggled. He was sinking.

“Dad, here! Grab this!” Lisa had pulled off her blanket and flung it toward him. Jack's fingers latched onto the fabric, sliding across the blood-soaked floor. His hands grabbed the bed frame, pulling—clawing—until he finally

C. FLEMISH

heaved himself onto the mattress.

He was soaked in red goop.

Carrie would envy him.

He grabbed Lisa's arms, running his hands frantically over her face and body.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt? Are you bleeding?"

Lisa was shaking. "I—I'm okay, I guess," she whispered. "What's going on, Dad? Why is this happening?"

Jack wiped his face, spit out the thick coppery taste. "I don't know, baby, but we need to get out of here. Now."

Jack ripped the sheet from the bed and wrapped it around his feet.

Lisa watched, her little face smeared with red. "What are you doing?"

"I need traction. Its like snowshoes" He tied the fabric tight. "We have to move, Lisa. You have to climb on my back, okay?"

Lisa hesitated. "But Dad—"

"Lisa. Trust me."

She nodded, her fear turning to determination. Jack stepped into the blood again. It clung to his legs, slithering up his skin, gripping, trying to hold him. The ceiling continued to rain. His clothes were soaked through. The thick drops streamed into his eyes, flooded his nose, slid into his mouth. He spat it out, gagging.

"Now, Lisa. Get on my back."

Lisa wrapped her arms around his neck. Jack gritted his teeth and moved.

The hallway. The hallway was close.

With every step, the blood tried to pull him back. Every time he blinked, fresh red goop filled his vision. Finally he saw the doorframe. The threshold of safety.

Jack lunged forward. Pulling himself and Lisa from the sucking blood pit. They were free.

Lisa jumped off his back as Jack collapsed onto his knees.

Lisa breathed hard, her little chest heaving. Jack grabbed

DIABLO CANYON

her face gently, searching, checking to see if she was not hurt.

“You okay, sweetie?”

Lisa nodded weakly. He hugged her so tight she squeaked.

“Let’s go, we need to get outside. To the car.”

They ran, flung the door open and ran straight onto the street.

“Hi there, neighbor. Everything okay?”

Jack’s head snapped up. John, one of their neighbors, stood at the edge of the driveway, looking at him with mild confusion.

“Okay? OK? Does this look like we are fucking okay, John? No, I am not fucking okay.” Jack’s voice shook with fury, but his anger was already beginning to wane. His chest rose and fell in ragged bursts, and beneath his grip, Lisa was trembling—shaking so hard it was as if her bones had turned to ice.

Jack swallowed. His breath was shallow, barely there. “I’m sorry, John. I apologize. But—can’t you see? We are not okay.”

John studied him, his brow furrowed. “I can see you’re out of breath.”

“Yeah? And what else?” Jack demanded, his voice fraying at the edges.

John hesitated. “You’re out of breath from carrying Lisa around. What’s going on, Jack?” His concern was clear now, wary but gentle.

Jack’s stomach twisted violently. He could still feel the slick warmth on his skin, the unmistakable weight of something terrible clinging to him. “The blood, man. The blood. Can’t you see it? We’re covered in blood!” His voice cracked as he yelled.

John took a careful step closer. “Jack, maybe you should go inside and rest. I don’t see any blood. What are you talking about? Do you need help? Do I need to call someone?”

Jack’s breath hitched. His pulse pounded. He dropped

C. FLEMISH

his gaze to his hands, turning them over slowly, searching for the stains that had been there just moments before. His fingers curled, then stretched out. Nothing. No red. No thick, wet smears.

Lisa's shirt—he grabbed a fistful of the fabric and squeezed, hard, expecting to feel something ooze between his fingers. But it was dry. Nothing.

Jack's stomach lurched. His mind screamed at him that this wasn't real, that it couldn't be real. But he knew what he had seen.

Without another word, he scooped Lisa up in his arms and bolted inside, his heart hammering so loudly it drowned out his thoughts. "G' night, John. Sorry—just a game. Sorry, buddy!" he called over his shoulder before the door slammed shut behind them.

He's calling the sheriff right now. Jack knew it as surely as he knew his own name. And he couldn't blame him.

But the blood had been there. He had seen it. There had to be something—a smear on the carpet, a stain on the stairs. He had seen it as he ran down.

"Lisa, look for blood, okay? On the walls, on the steps. Don't go to your room until I say so."

His voice was firm, but inside, he was unraveling. This wasn't possible. It had to be here. It couldn't just be... gone.

He dropped to his knees, fingers clawing at the carpet, splitting the fibers apart as if he could force the truth to reveal itself. His face hovered inches above the floor, his breath coming in sharp, frantic gasps. His mind begged for something—anything—to prove he wasn't losing it.

Nothing.

"No blood, Daddy."

Jack's head snapped up. Lisa stood a few feet away, small and still, but her wide eyes were filled with something deeper than fear. She was looking at him. Afraid.

Jack forced himself to swallow the rising bile in his throat. "It's okay, honey. We'll check your room. Then I'll clean it up. You can sleep with me tonight."

DIABLO CANYON

He took her hand. She squeezed back, hard. Together, they walked toward her bedroom, Jack feeling the weight of every step, as if something unseen was pressing down on them.

“Are you ready?” he whispered.

Lisa nodded. She didn’t let go of his hand as he slowly pushed the door open.

The room was spotless.

Jack blinked. Not just clean—untouched. The bed was made, the floor undisturbed, the walls bare.

His stomach twisted in a slow, sick churn. *This is bullshit. What the hell is happening?*

Jack lifted Lisa into his arms, his grip tightening as she wrapped herself around his neck.

“What is happening, Daddy?” she whispered against his ear, her breath hot and desperate.

Jack swallowed the knot in his throat. “I don’t know, sweetie. I don’t know.” His voice wavered.

And then—laughter.

A deafening, skin-crawling, soul-draining laughter.

It erupted from nowhere, slamming into them like a shockwave. Lisa let out a small cry and buried her face in his chest, her tiny fingers digging into his skin so hard it hurt. Jack’s pulse spiked as he spun around, his eyes darting across the empty room, searching—knowing—that something was there.

“What do you want?! Who the fuck are you?! Leave us alone! Damn you, leave us alone!”

Silence.

As sudden as it had begun, the laughter was gone.

But Jack knew that sound. That thing.

It was the same laughter from the lake. The same laughter that had wormed its way inside his head the night Allison died.

A low, demonic growl crawled through his skull, resonating deep within his bones.

It never left. It was waiting.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

March 19, San José, California 1875

Almost a year had passed since his capture.

He remembered the steamboat ride from Los Angeles to San Francisco, caged like an animal. A spectacle for the masses. Once arrived, he was quickly transported to San José where he would stand trial.

People came from all over the region to see him. They traveled for hours just to see the so-called beast. He felt like a zoo animal but never let anyone see his hurt pride. From his cell window, he sold autographed photographs to fund his legal defense—and the occasional bottle of wine.

The trial was a farce. He had known the verdict before it began. As expected, it concluded in four days and, even though Tibu persisted that he was innocent and had never killed a man, he was found guilty nonetheless and sentenced to hang.

His last hope was that the Governor would grant his appeal.

This morning, that hope, too, had been lost.

He could hear the sound of hammers pounding nails into wood. Outside his cell, the sheriff's men were finishing the scaffolding in the jail's plaza.

DIABLO CANYON

Today, he would die.

At least the nightmares will stop, he thought to himself. Since the night he saw the monster, sleep had been a distant memory. He woke up drenched in sweat, gasping for air. It infuriated the guards when his screams disturbed their naps. Yet waking up to the familiar cell walls brought a strange relief. Proof it had only been a dream.

The squeaking of his cell door interrupted his thoughts. A priest walked in and sat beside him.

"My son, are you ready to face your judgment?"

"Judgment?" Tibu scoffed. "You mean my murder. I am an honorable man, Father. I never killed anyone who didn't deserve it. I did not kill anyone in that robbery, and I will never say otherwise. But if you mean am I ready to leave this life behind, Father? Yes. I am."

The priest laid his hand on Tibu's. "Do you believe, my son?"

Tibu exhaled. "After what I've seen, how could I not? I saw the Devil with my own eyes, felt his fire scorch my skin, watched him devour my men. If the Devil exists, then surely God does too."

"Would you like to pray with me and ask for forgiveness?" the priest asked.

"No, Father." The priest looked surprised at Tibu's response. "I have prayed every night. I have done things that might not seem right, but always for a cause I believed in. A spirit of hatred and revenge took possession of me. I fought for my people, for what I believed to be our right. I know I am forgiven. I know where I am going, and I am at peace with it. I will finally find peace and be with the one I loved."

"Would you like to receive the last rites, my son?"

Tibu nodded. He knew what was coming. He would not leave unprepared.

"Kneel, son," the priest instructed, opening his last rites case. He assembled the holy cross, laid out a small bottle of holy water, and a little vial of blessed oil on Tibu's bed. Sitting across from him, he took Tibu's hands.

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The priest prayed, his voice steady, his words invoking God's mercy. Tibu closed his eyes as the priest anointed his forehead with oil. He let out a sigh of relief.

"Amen. Thank you, Father."

The old man held his hand and stood with a little smile. "God bless you, son. You have been cleansed. It will all be okay." He picked up his case, grabbed the cell door, and left.

Tibu was alone again.

Outside, crowds had gathered. He could hear their chatter. The town square was packed, and people were trying to sneak in. Sheriff J.H. Adams had sent out invitations to the town's nobles; this was the spectacle of a lifetime, and anyone who was anyone wanted a front-row seat to see "the beast" hang.

After finishing his last meal, two deputies came to get him. He obediently turned around and felt the cold steel shackles closing around his wrists. His beard was neatly trimmed, his hair combed back. He would die as he lived—proud, strong, unafraid.

He ascended the steps to the gallows. The boards squeaked under his weight.

The sheriff was waiting for him. They had no quarrel. The man was only doing his job.

"I've never had any problems with you, Tiburcio. Let's keep it that way, okay?"

Tibu met the sheriff's gaze, then swept his eyes over the crowd.

"Pronto."

The noose slipped over his head. The coarse rope scratched his skin. A yank, and the knot tightened against the back of his neck. A deputy bound his arms behind him, then bent to tie his ankles.

Sheriff Adams addressed the crowd, reading from a document listing Tibu's alleged crimes. He declared the trial fair, the sentence just. Then, he turned to Tibu.

"Any last words?"

Tibu said nothing. He exhaled slowly. No fear. Only silence.

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The sheriff pulled a dark bag over his face and secured it beneath the noose.

Tibu closed his eyes. *Our Father, who art in heaven...*

The trapdoor fell with a sharp crack.

The rope lashed tight. His body jerked once. Then, stillness.

The crowd gasped. A slow trickle of urine darkened the dirt beneath him.

Many turned away, their expressions unreadable. The satisfaction they had expected never came. The macabre spectacle had been anything but appetizing. The guards began escorting guests from the plaza.

It was time for Doctor Smith to do his job. He stepped onto the platform, black bag in hand. The deputies had removed Tibu's hood, unbuttoning his shirt to expose his chest.

Smith placed his bag carefully, ensuring it wasn't downstream from the urine trickling into the dirt. He snapped it open, took out his stethoscope, and climbed the ladder the deputies held steady. Pressing the instrument to Tibu's still-warm chest, he listened.

Nothing.

He moved the stethoscope, checking both lungs. Still nothing.

Carefully, he stepped back to the ground, draped his stethoscope around his neck, and signaled to the Sheriff.

"He is gone. You can cut him down."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

The Lakes, California, Current Day

Jack's urgency was undeniable. "Lisa! Grab your clothes and whatever you need. We are leaving right now."

Lisa gave Jack a confused look.

"We can't stay here, honey. We need to leave, okay? We're going to make the nightmares stop. Now go."

Lisa hesitated but walked back into her bedroom. Jack pulled the car out of the driveway, backed it in so it was facing the street, left the engine running, and rushed back inside.

Like a madman, he moved through the house. He grabbed a duffel bag from the closet, ran to his bedroom, and blindly stuffed clothes inside. In the living room, he pulled photo albums from the bookshelves. Everything else could be replaced.

As long as we get out alive, we are fine.

Dragging the duffel bag behind him, he walked up to Lisa's bedroom. "Are you ready, honey?"

Lisa sat on the bed, a small bag of clothes in front of her. She was only ten, but strong for her age. Clutching her worn-out teddy bear, she looked up at Jack. He remembered

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how his brother had given it to her at her baptism. She never went without it.

Jack could see fear in her eyes. She had been through too much. More than any child should ever endure. He sat beside her and took her small hand in his. He could feel tears welling up in his eyes.

"I love you, baby. We are going to be okay." Jack kissed her forehead.

Lisa squeezed her teddy bear tighter. "I love you too, Daddy."

Her words sent shivers down his spine. He loved her more than anything. He missed Alison. The weight of it all threatened to consume him, but there was no time for self-pity. This was a time for survival.

"Come on, baby. Let's go. Let's get out of this place."

They moved through the kitchen and into the garage. Jack hit the switch, and the rasping sound of the garage door lifting echoed in the stillness. He stepped to the gun safe, punching in Lisa's birthdate. A quick twist of the handles and the safe unlocked. Over the years, he had collected an arsenal. Tonight, he was glad for it. He couldn't take everything, just enough to make it down the hill.

Everything could be replaced. Everything but Lisa.

He grabbed his Heckler & Koch USP, his Glock 23, his Remington 12-gauge shotgun, and Lisa's Ruger .22 rifle. They had spent hours shooting cans in the backyard. She was a good shot.

They ran to the car. Jack threw the bags in the back seat, jumped in, and slammed the door.

He handed Lisa her rifle. "Here, baby. You know how to use this, right?" She nodded.

"Okay, no loading or turning the safety off until I say so, okay?"

"Okay." She looked him in the eye, self-assured, unafraid.

Jack chambered a round in his .45 and cocked the shotgun. The .45 went in his belt, the shotgun lay between them. He slammed the gas pedal. The tires shrieked, burning

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rubber as they shot forward. Jack didn't close the garage. Let them take whatever they want. They were never coming back.

He thought of Sandy and wished she would be with them, but when he had mentioned leaving California altogether, she had refused numerous times. It was just him and Lisa now.

As they tore down the street, Jack spotted a familiar figure—Mr. Smith, the neighbor, out for an early morning jog. Even in madness, some clung to routine.

Smith recognized the car. "What the hell is he doing?" Then, realization struck.

Jack was leaving.

Smith's panic set in. He frantically waved his arms, trying to flag Jack down.

"Stop! Jack! Go back! It will kill you! Don't... come back!"

Too late. Jack and Lisa were gone, their taillights vanishing into the darkness.

They left Hughes Canyon and neared San Francisquito Canyon. To their left the desert stretched out and in the distance the Tehachapi foothills could be seen. The road wound between burned orchards and skeletal apple trees. The remnants of better days.

Ahead, the path to freedom came into view.

A dead tree fell across the road.

Jack hit the brakes. Lisa lurched forward, her teddy bear slipping from her grip.

"What the fuck!" Jack slammed his fist against the dashboard. His breath came in short gasps, his fingers tightening around the wheel, slick with sweat.

Lisa glared at him. "What now, Daddy?"

"It's okay, hun. We'll go around it."

Jack reversed, scanning for a path around the obstacle. The moon cast an eerie glow over the landscape.

"Daaad." Lisa pointed out the window.

Jack followed her gaze. His stomach clenched.

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The dead apple trees.

The soil at their roots moved. The burned limbs quivered. The earth trembled as skeletal branches stretched, breaking free from the ground. One tree fell forward. In a cloud of dust, it pushed itself upright, burned limbs cracking like bones.

A gaping mouth appeared in the tangle of roots.

Jack's heart pounded. "Load the gun, Lisa. Load it now."

He slammed the car into drive. The tires spun, flinging dirt as they veered off-road. Jack instinctively reached for his .45, he flicked the safety off, gripping it tighter.

Lisa stared out the window.

Dozens of tree creatures pulled themselves from the soil. Their skeletal forms bounding after the car, undead spiders, yearning to catch their prey.

"They're coming, Daddy! They're coming!" Lisa's voice cracked.

Jack whispered a prayer. His breath hitched. His pulse thundered in his ears.

Behind them, the monsters screamed.

Jack maneuvered his way around the fallen tree. The car's tires clawed at the road, jerking forward as the engine roared. Lisa was glued to her seat, knuckles white against the door handle. Her breath came fast, shallow.

Outside, the darkness writhed.

All around them tree creatures were pulling themselves from the soil, their tentacle limbs flinging their stiff bodies forward like grotesque, nightmarish octopuses. They moved with unsettling speed, snapping limbs propelling them like coiled springs unbound.

Lisa screamed, her body trembling as she pressed herself against the window.

Jack flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror. The creatures surged forward, relentless, their twisted forms illuminated by the pale moonlight.

"We'll be fine, baby! Almost there, just a little more! Keep watching them!"

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A shriek tore through the air, high and inhuman, followed by the sound of glass shattering. Lisa screamed and ducked. The creatures were tearing off their limbs, flinging them at the car. The smashed windshield flopped over the backseat like the ragged tail of a gutted fish.

“Baby, listen to me,” Jack said, forcing his voice to remain calm. “Take the headrest off your seat. Use it to steady your rifle. Take the safety off and shoot the one that’s closest. But don’t fire unless you’re sure you’ll hit. Okay? It’s just like when we practiced, just go slow and squeeze. One shot at a time.”

Lisa’s hands trembled, but then her lips pressed into a firm line. “I’ll get ‘em, Dad.” Her voice was steadier now.

She yanked the headrest free and let it drop. The rifle nestled into her grip like an extension of herself. Stock tight against her shoulder, breathing steady. She flicked the safety off, her eye locking onto the scope.

Through the Leopold lens, the creatures were stark and detailed. Their bark-covered flesh was split and burned, their gnarled mouths gnashing, rows of jagged wooden teeth snapping hungrily. Tiny, glistening eyes—black and soulless—glared back at her.

Jack cranked down the windows. A .22-caliber bullet wasn’t loud, but fired in the confines of a car, it could still do damage to their ears.

Lisa fired.

The muzzle flash exploded, illuminating the car’s interior in a burst of orange light. The high-pitched ping of the spent cartridge ricocheted off the ceiling. She barely flinched, already looking through the scope to see if she’d landed the shot.

The bullet struck home—but the creature barely reacted. Without hesitation, she fired again, this time at the gaping, splintered maw.

Bang!

The creature reeled, its movement faltering. It rolled, crashed to the ground—and then, impossibly, lurched back

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up, spitting the bullet out as if it were nothing more than a bitter seed.

"It's not working, Dad! I hit it, I saw it hit!" Her voice wavered, eyes darting to Jack in desperation.

"It's okay, baby! Try for their legs! We're almost over the top!"

Jack didn't know if it would work, but he had no better idea. All that mattered was cresting the hill, getting over that ridge—escaping this nightmare.

The creatures swarmed closer, their dead limbs flinging projectiles. Branches. Rocks. Whatever they could lift. Inside the car, it sounded like hailstones the size of cannonballs.

Jack pushed Lisa down. "Stay down, babe! We're heading into the clouds!"

"Okay!" she whimpered from beneath the dashboard.

The car surged into the mist. Fog curled into the shattered windows, thick and damp, swallowing the vehicle in an eerie silence. He slowed, gripping the wheel tighter. Losing control now would be a death sentence.

Would they follow?

The answer came in the form of a deafening thud as something landed hard on the roof. The metal caved inward. Jack grabbed the shotgun from the console, racking a shell into the chamber with a smooth, practiced motion.

Boom!

A shriek erupted, high and hollow. The sound drilled into his skull, clawing down his spine.

"Got you now, motherfuckers!" Jack growled, pumping another round.

Lisa sat up, tears in her eyes. "I'm scared, Daddy. I'm scared."

"Me too, baby. But we're almost down. We're gonna be safe soon."

"Promise?"

Jack forced a smile he didn't feel. "Promise."

The clouds thinned, revealing the steep descent into San

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Francisquito Canyon. Freedom was in sight—but so was death.

The creatures weren't giving up.

Two of them galloped down the hillside, gaining ground fast, their sinewy limbs coiling like living whips. Jack's gut tightened.

"Lisa, duck! Hit the floor!"

She curled into a ball, barely breathing. Jack threw his knees against the wheel, grabbed the shotgun, and swung it out the window.

Boom!

The closest creature stumbled, tumbling over itself. But before he could reload, the second one slammed into the side of the car.

The impact sent them skidding. The thing clung to the doorframe, tentacles piercing through the windows, reaching for them. One snapped inches from Jack's face, forcing him to let go of the gas, twisting his head just in time to avoid losing an eye.

The thing was too close. No room for the shotgun. He dropped it and yanked his .45 from the holster.

Boom! Boom!

The hollow points slammed into the creature's hide, blackened wood cracking like charred bone. The smell of scorched sap filled the air. The monster let out an unholy wail, its grip faltering. Jack emptied the magazine into its snarling maw.

The thing fell away, vanishing into the abyss.

The rearview mirror showed no signs of retreat. If anything, they were angrier.

Then—

A giant stone fist erupted from the hillside.

"Shit!" Jack had no time to react.

The granite arm swung like a wrecking ball, smashing the hood into oblivion. The car crumpled, momentum snapping it into a dead halt.

The airbags exploded. Jack and Lisa were flung forward,

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seatbelts biting into their ribs. Jack's vision swam, a ringing filling his ears.

For a moment, everything was black.

Then—Lisa's voice. Small. Muffled.

"Dad? Dad?!"

Jack gasped, blinking. "Lisa! You okay, baby?!"

"I—I think so." Blood streaked her forehead, but she was moving.

Jack tried the door. Jammed. "Try yours!"

"Stuck!"

"Shit. Backseat, now! Grab your rifle."

Lisa crawled through first. Jack pushed after her, metal groaning under his weight. Then—

A deep, grinding noise. The stone fist pulled free.

"Move! GO!" Jack shoved her forward.

Lisa scrambled out, Jack right behind her. Just as they hit the ground, the massive fist came down again, flattening the car into twisted metal.

Jack clutched his shotgun, scanning the darkness. The tree creatures hadn't stopped advancing.

"Dad! Over here!"

Lisa was crouched behind a boulder, rifle ready.

Jack ran, heart pounding.

"What now, Dad?"

"We run. And we don't look back."

Lisa swallowed hard, nodded. "Okay."

Jack kissed her forehead. "I love you, baby."

Lisa smirked. "I know, Dad. I'm not a baby."

She was so brave, he was so proud of her.

"Okay, I will start shooting. You start running. Keep going, I'm right behind you. Go! "

Jack raised his shotgun. "I'm right behind you."

Lisa hesitated for only a second before she leaned in, kissed him, and whispered, "I love you too, Dad."

Jack swallowed hard. "Go. Now."

Lisa took off, her rifle clutched tight, her small form disappearing into the darkness. Jack shouldered the shotgun,

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sighted the nearest creature, and squeezed the trigger.

Boom!

The slug ripped into the thing's twisted body, sending it skidding backward with a bone-chilling scream. But it wasn't alone. The horde surged forward, snapping limbs as they propelled themselves forward with terrifying speed.

Jack sprinted after Lisa, his boots pounding the cracked road. The forest howled behind him, a cacophony of shrieks and snapping wood. Every few steps, he pivoted, fired, and ran again. His world shrank to the rhythm of his breath, the recoil of his shotgun, the desperate need to keep moving.

A projectile—a gnarled branch—whipped through the air and smashed into his shoulder. Pain flared hot and deep, but he kept going. Another rock caught him in the thigh. His leg buckled. He stumbled but forced himself upright, lungs burning.

Then, a blur of motion.

A thick, jagged limb lashed out from the darkness. Before he could react, it struck low, sweeping his legs out from under him.

Jack hit the pavement hard. His ribs ignited in agony. The shotgun slipped from his grasp, skidding across the road. He barely had time to roll before a massive weight bore down on him.

A tree creature pounced, its twisted limbs pinning him like a specimen on display. Sharp, blackened tentacles drove through his shoulder, anchoring him to the road. The pain was instant, white-hot, searing through his flesh. Jack arched his back, a strangled cry escaping his throat.

He clawed for his pistol, yanking it from his belt. His fingers barely wrapped around the grip when the creature loomed closer, its grotesque maw unhinging. Splintered mandibles snapped open and shut, black ichor dripping onto Jack's face. The stench was unbearable—rot, sap, something acrid and alien.

He fired.

The shot went wide.

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His vision swam. His fingers trembled. The monster slithered its remaining limbs across his chest, coiling like vines tightening around prey. Then—

The bite.

Fangs plunged deep into his flesh, spreading an immediate burning sensation through his veins. Jack's breath hitched. The pain was unbearable, a venomous fire spreading from the wound outward. His limbs felt heavy, slow. His mind blurred at the edges, slipping toward darkness.

Then, gunfire. Small, rapid pops. Lisa's .22.

"DADDY!" Her scream was raw, desperate.

Jack blinked through the haze. He heard the impacts—small but steady. Lisa was hitting her target, but the creature barely flinched. The rounds shattered bark, sending splinters flying, but it wasn't enough.

"Lisa! Keep going! Don't stop, baby! Run!" His voice was weaker than he wanted. Slurred.

The monster hesitated. Then, as if something had changed, it uncoiled its grip, mandibles twitching. The burning in Jack's veins worsened, but the pressure on his chest lightened.

The creature stepped over him, drawn away, its focus shifting.

Lisa.

Jack's world spun. He rocked his body, forcing his numbed limbs to respond. He barely managed to roll onto his stomach, his muscles sluggish, every nerve screaming. But he had to see. Had to know if Lisa was getting away.

Blurry figures danced in his vision—more creatures swarming forward, their jagged limbs reaching.

And Lisa.

His daughter, his baby girl, swinging her rifle like a bat, smashing the nearest creature with all the strength she had left.

Jack tried to push himself up. He barely got an inch off the ground before the world tilted sideways.

Everything went black.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Sandy's house, The Lakes, CA, Current Day

"Jack. Jack, can you hear me?"

A cool touch pressed against his burning forehead, the dampness seeping into his skin. He barely registered it, his mind floating in and out of awareness. Distant voices wove in and out of his consciousness—muted, distorted, unintelligible. His head pounded, each pulse sending a fresh wave of agony through his skull. He tried to move, but his limbs felt leaden, too heavy to obey. Somewhere, close but out of reach, Sandy was sitting beside him. An anchor in the haze.

Time slipped. How long had he been here? A few seconds? A few hours?

Then, a moment of clarity. His eyes cracked open, crusted over from whatever fever had overtaken him. Blurry shapes solidified. Sandy's face hovered above him, her gray eyes shadowed with something deep and old.

"Sandy?" His voice was barely more than a whisper, hoarse and raw. "What... what am I doing here? What's going on?"

She squeezed his hand. "Jack, you need to stay calm. You're lucky to be alive."

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Her words carried a weight he couldn't quite grasp, but something in her expression sent a chill through him. A sadness. A grief that had settled into her long before this moment. The room tilted. His vision blurred. Darkness swallowed him whole.

"Lisa!"

The scream ripped from his throat, tearing him out of sleep. His body lurched upright, drenched in sweat, heart hammering against his ribs. The nightmare still clung to him, the images too real—Lisa's face, her outstretched hands, her voice calling for him—before she was wrenched away.

He flung the blanket off and tried to stand. The moment his feet hit the ground, his legs buckled. His body crashed to the floor, his ribs exploding in sharp pain as his shoulder slammed against the hardwood.

The impact sent a fresh wave of nausea through him. The room spun, shifting and tilting, as if gravity itself had been unmoored. A light flicked on.

"Jack!" Sandy was at his side in seconds, her voice thick with sleep and alarm. She knelt beside him, reaching for him, but he twisted away.

"Lisa," he rasped, his breath ragged. "Where the hell is Lisa? They took her—I have to get her back."

Sandy's eyes glassed over, her lips pressing into a thin line. She had seen this kind of desperation before. The raw, frantic kind that swallowed people whole.

"Let's get you off the floor first," she said, slipping an arm under him.

Jack shoved her away, his movements clumsy but filled with fury. "Fuck the bed! You don't understand—I have to go!" His voice cracked, wild and unhinged. "You don't have a fucking clue what's happening here!"

The words hung between them, sharp and cruel.

Sandy flinched. For a moment, her face was unreadable. Then her gaze dropped.

"I do know," she murmured.

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Jack froze. His breathing hitched. He stared at her, the weight of those three words cutting through his rage like a knife.

The ground swayed beneath him. His vision blurred. His body, too weak to keep fighting, gave out again. The last thing he saw was Sandy's face—haunted, guilty—as the darkness dragged him under.

Morning.

Light crept through the curtains, warm and golden. The world was still, almost peaceful. But Jack felt anything but.

His body ached. His head pulsed with a dull, relentless pain, like hammers striking bone. When he tried to move, something heavy pinned him down. Sandy. She had fallen asleep beside him, her body curled slightly against his. She had stayed.

He shifted, groaning through clenched teeth. Pain flared through his ribs like a knife twisting inside him. The sound stirred Sandy. She blinked awake, took one look at him, and reached for a glass of water.

"Drink," she said, her voice still rough with sleep.

Jack's lips parted just enough for the cool water to trickle over his tongue. He swallowed, wincing, but the relief was instant. And then, reality crashed back in.

Lisa.

His grip on the glass tightened. His jaw clenched.

"Where is she?" His voice was stronger now, edged with something dangerous. His bloodshot eyes bore into Sandy, demanding the truth. "You said you know."

Sandy hesitated. Just for a second. But it was enough.

"I do," she said softly.

Jack's pulse roared in his ears. His fingers twitched against the blanket, his entire body coiled tight. "Then tell me."

Sandy swallowed. Her hands trembled slightly as she set the empty glass down.

"You need to get stronger first," she said. "I promise, I'll tell you everything. But you won't help Lisa like this. You can't even stand."

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Jack's breath came sharp and uneven, his exhaustion battling his rage. He wanted to scream at her, shake her, force the answers out of her—but he had nothing left.

Sandy's voice wavered. "I'm sure Lisa is fine."

Liar.

Jack heard it in the way her voice cracked, saw it in the way she wouldn't meet his eyes. His body gave in before his mind did. His eyelids grew heavy, his thoughts slipping, slipping...

Sandy watched him as sleep took him again.

A single tear rolled down her cheek. Because Jack was right.

She knew.

And once he did too... nothing would ever be the same.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

It was close to sunset when Jack woke up screaming.

“Sandy! Sandy!” His voice was urgent and angry.

She walked in, holding a glass of water in one hand and two aspirins in the other.

“Take these.” She sat next to him. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit. My head hurts. But it's clearer.” He swallowed the aspirins and drank the water.

“Good. If you are ok, we can talk about all the things happening here.”

Jack gave her a wondering look. *How does she know any of this?*

“I am listening. Tell me everything. Especially how I get Lisa back.”

“Most of what I am about to tell you will sound crazy and you won't believe me. But everything is true.” She had a troubled look.

“Ok.” Jack said with doubt in his voice.

“All of us here at the lakes, we are trapped. Held captive by demons.”

“Demons?” Jack asked.

Sandy continued. “There is a monster living in the lake. It feeds off our fears, pain and anger. It needs us to be in

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pain. We are its food. Our emotions are what it needs to feed.”

Jack took her hand and stared into her eyes intensely. He wanted to ask questions but couldn’t.

“I don’t know everything, but I know a lot. I have been trapped here for 198 years.”

“What?” Jack let go of her hand and sat up. “That’s not possible.”

“I know that is what you would think but it is.” She pulled a photograph from her side and handed it to Jack. “This was my family.” Her finger pointed to the picture “My husband and my daughter.”

Jack looked at the picture in disbelief. Sandy and her husband were dressed in proper period attire, their pretty daughter happily standing next to her. Sandy was wearing a beautiful mantua, her husband was dressed in formal attire, wearing a wig, and holding his walking stick.

His first instinct was to ask her if it was real, but it all looked real, it made sense. He had experienced things the last few months that could not be explained by the normal laws of physics and reasoning. What he and his family had been through were supernatural, demonic occurrences.

He looked at Sandy, studied her. His hand touched her cheek. “How?”

Sandy pointed at her husband. “My husband David died over 70 years ago.” Tears rolled from her eyes. “They took our daughter, like they had taken so many before her. David tried to save her, but he never came back.”

Jack leaned forward, “What happened?”

“What always happens. They take what they want, they find ways to torment you. If you resist, they kill you. We are trapped here and as long as we play along, as long as we are good cattle, they allow us to live. In return we don’t age. Why kill a good feeder if you can torment them forever.”

“You don’t age? At all? He needed to know more.

“When we moved up here I was 35, now I am 233. As long as we live up here, we don’t age. Not a single day. That

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ring of clouds that surrounds the lakes, that is no natural phenomenon, it is the boundary of our prison. If you try to escape, beasts and demons will come from the ground, from the sky, from the water, from whatever to stop you. They will get you and punish you in ways you could never imagine." She stared at Jack intensely, "We are living in our own form of Hell Jack. Trapped and tortured until we die, and we can only die if the monster or its servants decide they no longer need us."

"Tell me about the monster, tell me about its servants. Who are they? Where are they?"

"They call it a Dwyrolith, it is massive, I have seen it only once. A mix of a stingray and a bat. It is massive. It spits fire and it can't be killed."

"Everything can be killed." Jack said instinctively.

"Not this thing. The only thing I have learned is that it can't get far away from the lake. It is trapped here. That is why it has servants. They make sure enough people are trapped here to feed it."

"How many are there? I need to know." Jack focused on her.

"There are so many Jack, but there are three main ghouls. There is the gatekeeper, the enforcer, and the high priest. I don't know who they are. But some do. Some of the villagers are informants, they are granted special privileges in return for keeping an eye on all the rest of us and ratting us out if we step out of line. They are allowed to trade with the outside world and for the most part are immune to the monster's attacks. You'll need to get one of them to talk if you want to know more."

"Do you know any of them?" Jack eagerly asked.

"Dean Jackson, as long as I've lived up here he's been working for them."

"Jackson? The drunk?"

"He wasn't always a drunk. I guess his conscience started to get the better of him."

"How many are there? Do you know?"

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"I know of seven, but I'm sure there are more. Anyone who does any type of trade has some form of privileges, so they are connected to them one way or the other."

"I'll need those names Sandy; I need to get some answers."

"Jack, you can't win. If you cause problems, they will kill you."

Jack laughs. "Many have tried Sandy, no one lived to tell."

"This is not just anyone. You are talking about a demonic monster, a creature that controls people's minds, that can summon demons to help it at any time. Bringing a gun to the table isn't going to cut it."

"I never said I would bring a gun. I just said I would look around and get some answers." He held Sandy's face in his hands and looked into her mesmerizing gray eyes. "I don't want to live forever, Sandy. I want to live free. I refuse to sit here and let them control my life. I refuse to let them torture me and my little girl. Let them torture you."

Sandy reached for his hands and a tear rolled down her face.

"I have been trapped here for 198 years. Yes, I have been tormented, I've seen so many trying to escape or reaching out for help. None of them ever broke free. I am still here today Jack, and none of them are. You have Lisa, you could have me. Let's make the best of it." She kissed him. He did not kiss her back.

Tears rolled down a gentle stream now. "I don't want to lose you Jack; I'm done losing everyone I care about. Please Jack,"

He leaned in and finally kissed her. The salty taste of her tears on his lips.

"I can't" He took her into his arms. "What about Lisa?"

"They have her. I'm sure. If they want to control you, they need her alive."

"Where?" He asked, his eyes penetrating deep into hers.

"I don't know exactly, all I know is that there are tunnels in the mountains, tunnels under the lake. They take people there."

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“Where do I find these tunnels?”

“I know of one of the bigger ones, but I have never gone in.” She lifted her shirt exposing her stomach. It was covered with dozens of thick scars. “I paid for being nosey.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Jack drove to the other side of the lake, the road narrowing as trees pressed in on either side. The air smelled damp, thick with the scent of moss and decaying leaves. He pulled off just a few feet away from the dirt road's entrance, his tires crunching against gravel. A cold wind rippled across the lake's surface, whispering through the reeds. He parked carefully, ensuring his car remained hidden from any passing vehicles. He parked carefully, ensuring his car remained hidden from any passing vehicles. Sandy had drawn him a crude map, guiding him to the old mining site. The terrain was rugged and steep.

"Look for river rock out of place," Sandy had said. "Look for a stone with the sign of a demon."

On the piece of paper, she had scribbled a silhouette—arms raised, horns protruding from its head. Jack pocketed the map and started his trek up the hillside. After a few hundred feet, he noticed scattered river rocks, seemingly misplaced. He narrowed his eyes and allowed his vision to blur slightly. The stones formed a faint path, all leading in the same direction.

Thirty minutes later, he reached the foot of the hill, just as Sandy had described. He scanned the area for the painted

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rock. The landscape was riddled with old mine shafts—dark, gaping mouths carved into the hillside, long abandoned and unstable. None bore the mark he was searching for. But after passing several entrances, he finally saw it—a round, red river rock with a black silhouette painted on it, its arms raised in a silent scream, horns stabbing upward.

This was it.

From here on, Jack was alone. This was all the information Sandy had been able to give him.

He stepped into the shaft. The sand cracked beneath his boots. Within a few feet, he was plunged into total darkness, so complete it devoured every trace of light. Jack wasn't afraid—darkness was something he knew well. He recalled a technique from his fire department days.

"Keep your right hand on the wall. When you return, switch to your left. That way, you'll always find your way back."

His instructor's voice echoed in his memory. The technique had saved his life more times than he could count.

The walls were cold and slick beneath his fingertips, the moisture seeping into his skin like clammy dead flesh. The texture was uneven—sometimes smooth, sometimes jagged—each shift making his breath hitch. A rancid, mineral scent clung to the damp stone, as if something had rotted in the crevices, long forgotten. Every brush of his fingers sent an unsettling shiver up his spine, a visceral warning his mind couldn't ignore. His breath echoed back at him, amplifying the vast emptiness of the tunnel. His eyes slowly adjusted, but dark was dark—no amount of adjusting would change that. He inched forward, occasionally flicking the dim glow of his watch for a brief glimpse ahead. It was a useless comfort.

Time stretched. It felt like an hour had passed when the tunnel finally began to widen. The air felt different, less damp. The rocks were drier, the footing steadier. And then—a glow.

A soft, shifting light flickered ahead.

Jack pressed forward. The tunnel opened into a vast

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chamber, dimly illuminated by small glass containers hanging from the ceiling. Inside, tiny insects skittered and buzzed, their faint phosphorescence casting eerie shadows along the walls.

Jack exhaled, relieved for even the smallest amount of visibility. He let out a slow breath, his shoulders loosening slightly as the dim light offered a sliver of comfort. Then, he looked down.

A sickening snap echoed beneath his boot. He lifted his foot and saw what he had stepped on—a human bone, cracked in half.

His stomach lurched. His gaze swept the floor. Bones. Everywhere. Vertebrae, ribs, limbs, even scattered teeth. A grotesque puzzle of discarded remains.

What the fuck.

Jack turned in a slow circle, taking in the horror. He had to keep moving. He forced himself forward, stepping carefully over the remains. Then—

A voice.

“Hello? Who’s there?”

A girl’s voice. Small. Fragile.

Jack’s heart slammed against his ribs. He followed the sound, his boots sloshing through shallow, stagnant water. A room to his right. He stepped in and stopped cold.

Wooden cages lined the walls. Some were empty, rotting, their bars broken. Others were occupied.

Children.

Two girls, three boys, all crammed into the cages like animals. Their faces hollow. Their limbs gaunt.

The moment they saw him, they erupted into cries.

“Who are you? Help us! Help us!”

“Ssshhh.” Jack raised his hands, stepping closer. “My name is Jack. I’m new to the village. I’m looking for my daughter, Lisa. She was taken. I found the tunnel and—”

Laughter.

Dark. Hollow.

“Stop it,” a small girl scolded. “Ron, shut up.”

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The voice came from the smallest cage. A little girl, maybe six, maybe seven. She pressed her hands through the bars.

“My name is Crystal.”

Jack crouched in front of her cage. And that’s when he saw her face.

Her eyes were sewn shut, the thick, crude stitches looping unevenly through her swollen eyelids. The thread was dark, almost blending with the dried blood crusted around the punctured skin, as if someone had done the work in haste—or with cruel indifference.

Fucking monsters.

His chest tightened. Who could do something like this to children?

He dropped to his knees and grasped her small, dirty hands. “Crystal, how do I get you out? Is there a key?”

She chuckled. A hollow sound. “No, Jack. There’s no way out for us. We’re stuck.”

“No, no, I’ll get you out. I’ll take you home.”

She shook her head. “Jack... I might look six, but I’m not. None of us are what we seem.”

His stomach twisted. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been here for decades. Some of us longer.”

His blood ran cold. “But why?”

“We’re the monster’s food.” Her voice was devoid of emotion. “They hurt us—rape, cut, burn. The monster feeds on our pain.”

Jack clenched his jaw. He wanted to vomit.

Crystal sighed. “I don’t cry anymore. The only thing that hurts is when they show me pictures of my family. Then I cry for days. When that stops working... they replace me.”

He squeezed her hands. “I won’t let that happen.”

She patted his hand. “Jack, you can’t help us. Where would we go? Back home, to parents who can’t escape this cursed valley? They’d just be killed too. The only way out is if the monster dies.”

Jack’s mind raced. “Then tell me everything. I’ll kill it.”

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Crystal leaned closer, her tiny fingers tightening around his. "I'll tell you everything, Jack. But you have to promise me something first."

"Anything."

She exhaled slowly. Then, in a voice too calm, too old, she whispered:

"You need to kill us all."

The words hung in the air, pressing down on Jack like a weight he couldn't shake. His breath hitched, his heart pounding against his ribs. He felt an icy dread creep up his spine, numbing his thoughts.

Jack yanked his hands back, stumbling onto his ass.

"What?"

The words hit him like a hammer.

Kill kids?

"No. No way. I-I-I c-c-can't." The stutter ripped from his throat like a wound torn open.

Crystal's voice sharpened. "Jack."

He crawled back to her. "Crystal, I can't—"

"Oh, shut up." Her voice was suddenly older, tired. "I've been here for seventy years. Seventy. I've been raped, beaten, burned. You name it, it's been done to me."

Her voice dropped, flat and final. "If you make it out of here alive, we'll keep suffering. Over and over. Until they finally kill us."

Silence.

Jack's throat tightened. He swallowed hard. "Yes." The word barely left his lips. "Yes."

Tears streaked his face.

Crystal smiled, her stitched eyelids pulling slightly. "Good."

Then, she leaned into him and began to whisper.

CHAPTER SIXTY

The Dwyrolith was Lucifer's pet, a monstrous creation of sinew and shadow, with scales blacker than the void and eyes like molten embers. Its massive wings, tattered and leathery, carried the stench of brimstone, and its maw, lined with jagged fangs, could cleave through bone with ease. A creature of pure malevolence, it thrived on terror, reveling in the agony of its victims. But because it caused too much trouble in hell, Lucifer sent it here. He created the lake for it in the late 1300s. A massive earthquake hit the region, split the ground, and formed the lake. The monster has been terrorizing the region ever since, eating cattle and people alike. It wasn't until a priest from the Spanish explorers had a great battle with the monster that things changed.

They almost lost all their men, but eventually, with God's help, they were able to have the beast confined to the lake. They built a church in honor of the battle of the beast in Aqua Dulce. The Sierra Mission held the key to the monster, but during a robbery, it was taken. It was a large golden cross with a small wooden cross laid in. As long as the two crosses were joined together, the monster would remain trapped inside the lake. But somehow, the crucifix of Father Junipero Serra was separated, and the monster was released from its prison. Ever since, it has terrified the region and killed whoever stood in its way. The only way it can be

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stopped is by finding that crucifix, Jack. You need the wooden cross to lock it back up. Recreate the seal that was broken.”

“Do you know where it is?” Jack asked, his eyes wide with hope.

Tears pushed from her stitched eyes. “No; I don’t. No one does. Only the gatekeeper has the lock. It is the golden cross that holds the wooden cross.”

“Who is the gatekeeper, Crystal? Do you know? Tell me!” He squeezed her hands tightly.

She spat out his name as if it were sour in her mouth. “Sheriff Crawford.” Her hands trembled in his.

Jack had to catch his breath. Of course, he thought.

“What else do I need to know?”

“There is a gatekeeper, an enforcer, and an enabler. These three are no normal men. They are demons; their only purpose is to serve the monster and to make sure it stays fed. They are Lucifer’s lieutenants and are sworn to serve and protect the monster.

“The gatekeeper is Beelzebub, the lord of flies, who in his human form is Sheriff Cooper. Then there is Asmodeus, the demon of lust, the beloved Father McBarr, and Mammon, the demon of greed—your realtor friend, Wilmes.”

“Fucking Wilmes. He brought us here,” Jack spat in anger, unable to control himself.

“We all have been tricked, Jack. Not just you.”

“McBarr is the false prophet. He has been in charge all along and is the sickest fuck of the three of them. Wilmes is the enabler. He tricks everyone to come up here and then leaves so he can go on recruiting new cattle.”

“That son of a bitch.”

“He did not find you by chance, Jack. He knew that you were weak, and he knew you would not be missed if he got you up here. So here you are. That is all I know.” She let go of his hands. “It is time to keep your part of the bargain. Kill us.” Her voice was cold and lacked any emotion. Her spirit had died a long time ago.

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The others chimed in. "Kill us! Kill us! Kill us!"

"Stop!" Jack covered his ears. "Stop. I will. I will. Just give me time."

He looked at their dirty little faces. They were so beautiful. Even through the dirt and inflicted torture, he could see the children they once used to be. He thought about their parents and how much they would miss them, the eternal pain they must be enduring. That is why these demons chose children—to inflict pain like no other. The bond between a parent and a child. He thought about Lisa. Where could she be? What might she be forced to endure? The pain and suffering on their faces were palpable. His heart shriveled inside.

He searched around the room and found a rusty knife nearby. One by one, he went to their cages; he opened the doors and carefully helped them from their prison. Some were too weak to stand, and he held them in his lap, asking their names and if they wanted to say anything. A few gave him messages for their parents; the ones who knew their parents were dead just asked him to keep them in his prayers. Some just wanted to hold his hand; others prayed.

They all went the same way.

Jack held the rusty tip of the knife to their solar plexus, his hands shaking as he forced himself to go through with it. The air was thick with the stench of damp rot and old blood. He could feel their tiny ribs beneath his grip, fragile and trembling. In a swift, desperate motion, he thrust the blade upward. A sharp gasp escaped their lips, followed by a faint, almost peaceful sigh. Their fingers clenched around his, a silent moment of connection before their grip slackened, their body going limp. The room felt heavier, the walls pressing in, suffocating with the weight of what he had just done. He felt their hand squeeze his. A loud breath. A smile. A thank you. And then, they went limp.

Crystal was last. Jack could no longer cry. His eyes burned from all the tears he had cried for these innocent souls. Never could he have imagined what he had found

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here. Never could he have imagined what he had just done. But he knew it was the right thing to do. They needed to be set free.

“Are you sure you want to go on with this?”

“I have no other choice, Jack. I’ve waited so long for this moment. I want you to do one more thing for me. Give this to my mom.” She handed him a small wooden dove.

“Of course. Who is your mom?” He asked as his fingers ran through her dirty hair.

“You’ll find out soon, Jack.”

Jack put the little toy in his pocket and took Crystal into his arms. She cradled herself into his lap, and he felt her tears roll over his hand. She whispered a prayer for Jack and her mom.

As she said amen, Jack felt how Crystal pulled the knife towards her chest, and he pushed it swiftly through her heart. He felt her head rest against his chest and kissed her forehead.

“Rest in peace, Crystal.”

He stood up slowly, carrying her lifeless body. He placed her on a nearby table. Then he took Ross, Esther, Jacob, and Dan. He placed all five of them next to each other. He tore a little piece of cloth from his bloodstained shirt and, with a little water from the floor, tried to clean them up as much as he could. He placed their hands so they were all holding each other. He threw wooden boxes around the table and looked for anything flammable. He found a large canister of fuel and some books.

They looked so peaceful now.

I won’t allow them to desecrate you any longer.

The anger inside him was stronger than ever before. These creatures would wish they were back in Hell when Jack found them.

He pulled his lighter from his pocket, tore another strip of cloth from his shirt, wrapped it around a stick, and dipped it in the last little bit of gasoline. He walked towards the tunnel he came from, set his improvised torch on fire,

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and flung it towards the makeshift altar.

The flame hit home, and with a large woosh, the table and the little bodies upon it erupted in fire. The room filled with an orange blaze and started to fill with smoke.

Jack started running. The heat clawed at his back, licking at his skin as thick plumes of smoke coiled through the tunnel. His lungs burned, each breath harder than the last. Sweat dripped into his eyes, blurring his vision as he stumbled forward, the walls trembling with the fire's fury. He knew it was a long way before he would get out, and if he hesitated, he would never see daylight again. He could not die. He could not let the children down. He could not let Lisa down. As the flames spread through the room, the mine shaft started to rumble. With his left hand against the wall, Jack began to run—run like he had never done before.

A colony of bats fleeing the cave rushed out over him, the beating of their wings so hard that dirt from the tunnel supports was falling down on him.

Jack never stopped running and never looked back. His legs burned, his breath came in ragged gasps, but he couldn't afford to stop. His heart pounded, not just from exertion but from the weight of what he had done. The heat of the flames behind him still licked at his skin, the cries of the dead echoing in his ears.

When he got back to his car, he broke down in tears, fell to the ground, holding his head in his hands. He couldn't believe what had just happened. He couldn't believe what he had just done.

I gave them freedom.

He wiped his eyes and got in his car.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

A few minutes later, Jack pulled into his driveway. He got out and walked to Sandy's place. As Sandy saw Jack walk towards her door, she rushed out and hugged him hard.

"Oh my God, Jack, I didn't know if you were going to make it. I was so worried."

Jack hugged her back and let his head rest on her shoulder. He was exhausted.

"I didn't think I was going to make it myself." He could feel her breath against his neck. It was nice to feel something again.

"What happened? Tell me, what did you see? Any sign of Lisa?" One question after the other fired from her lips.

"I have so much to tell you. No. No sign of Lisa." He said, defeated. "Let me quickly shower and change. Come to my place in ten minutes, and we can talk."

"Sounds like a plan." She gave him a little kiss on his cheek. It meant a lot to him.

A few minutes later, Sandy walked into Jack's place. His blood-soaked clothes lay in the kitchen. He had undressed, grabbed a Corona, and gone to shower.

She threw the empty bottle away and grabbed his clothes. She opened the laundry room and was about to put

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his clothes in the washer when something fell on the floor—Crystal's wooden dove.

Jack walked out of the shower with a towel wrapped around him. When he turned into the living room, Sandy was sitting on the couch, her makeup washed out from the tears flowing down her face.

Jack walked towards her, putting on his shirt and sitting next to her.

"Sandy," he put his hand on her shoulder. "What is going on?"

She slightly turned her head and looked him in the eyes, holding out her hand.

Crystal's wooden dove.

"Did you find this in the mine?" she said, sobbing.

"It was given to me, a young girl called Crystal. Do you know it?"

Sandy clenched the dove to her chest, her hands trembling. She held onto it like it was the last piece of Crystal she had left. Her breathing turned ragged, as if the air in the room was vanishing. "My Crystal."

Jack realized what had just happened and what was coming next.

"Yes. Your Crystal. She was such a brave girl. She asked me to give this to her mom." Jack held Sandy's hands in his, looking at her face—he knew that pain and sorrow all too well.

"Is she okay? Why didn't you bring her with you?"

"Sandy," Jack had difficulty speaking. "Crystal didn't make it."

Sandy's tears rained down.

"She gave me the dove, said I would soon enough know who her mom was," he pulled her close against him. "She told me she loved you and never forgot about you."

Sandy broke down. For years, she had not known if her daughter was still alive or not. She had tricked herself by forcing that thought as far back in her head as possible. Now and then, the monster would push Crystal's voice in

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Sandy's head to torment her, making her sad and desperate. Other times, it would project Crystal's screams in her mind, night after night, exhausting her, pushing her to the brink of insanity. But now, there was no denying it. She had been alive. And just like Sandy had never forgotten about her, Crystal had never forgotten her mom.

"Sandy..." Jack looked miserable. "You were right about the tunnels. I found the one you told me to find, the one with the demon rock. I walked and walked, almost an hour, then I came to a large cave. It was filled with all sorts of cages. Several had children in them. That is when I saw Crystal."

"How was she? What did she look like? Why did she not make it?" Her eyes bore into him intensely.

"Sandy..." He sat up, fearing what he needed to confess. "What I am about to tell you is the worst thing I have ever experienced in my life. I wish it had never happened, but it did. This is going to destroy you, and I think that is what the monster wants—to destroy us, to torture us beyond the point any normal person can withstand." Tears welled up in his eyes. "The children, there were five of them. Three boys and two girls. They looked horrible—emaciated, dirty, visible scars from the torture they had been exposed to. They all had their eyes sewn shut."

Sandy let out a cry of despair.

"I know. It was horrible. They were suffering. Crystal told me the history of the monster. She told me the names of its servants. She told me some of the horrible things that had been done to her and that she did not think she would survive much longer. But they had not heard anything about Lisa." Jack swallowed hard, his throat dry as sandpaper. He struggled to form the words, his chest tightening like a vice. He knew what he was about to say would break her.

"Before she told me anything, she made me promise. She said she would tell me everything she knew, but I had to promise to help them after. So, I promised."

"What did she need? What promise?"

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“She didn’t say at first. Which was smart. I don’t think I would have agreed.” He could find no other way to say it, so he just spat it out. “She made me promise I would kill them.”

Sandy jumped up, her body shaking with fury and disbelief. “What? No. No no nooo.” She clutched at her head, pacing the room like an animal. She turned on him, fists clenched. “You’re lying. You had another choice. You should have found another way!” Her voice cracked, raw and broken. Please tell me you didn’t?” Her mind knew the answer, but her heart refused.

“I did not want to. I refused. But she told me the horrible things they did to the children—over and over again. They were the monster’s personal feeding stock. She said the monster would know I had been there and that it would kill their parents. She wanted to be free. She still had her child form, but she was an adult, Sandy. Everything she said made sense. She begged me to set them free—the only way they could ever be free. I’m so sorry, Sandy. I am so sorry.”

He expected her to break down, but she didn’t.

She sat up and wiped the tears from her face.

“How? TELL ME HOW!” She was furious. Anger. Hate. Grief.

“I freed them from their cages, held them in my arms. They told me their names, the names of their parents, and any last message they wanted me to give. I had a knife.” A slight hesitation in his voice. Reliving the moment was horrible. He could feel them against him, smell them. “I stabbed them through the heart. They did not suffer, and all had a smile on their face when they finally passed. They did not die alone.”

“Oh my God.” She sobbed, her face buried in her hands. Jack sat next to her and pulled her close. He kissed the top of her head. They sat together for a bit, sharing each other’s grief.

“How did Crystal go?”

“Sandy...”

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“Tell me. I can handle it. I’ve been tortured for decades. I need to know.”

Jack nodded, understanding the weight of what she was asking. He hesitated for a moment, his hands balling into fists. “I freed her from her cage. She was weak, skinny, in pain. She crawled into my lap and cradled herself against my chest. She asked me to pray for her and her friends. She asked God for forgiveness and to watch over us who were left here in the lakes. When we said amen together, she pulled my hand and drove the knife through her heart. She thanked me and passed with a smile like her friends. I sat there for some time with her in my arms. I don’t know how long I sat there. I cried. I felt disgusted, angry. I made a makeshift altar and placed them next to each other and had them hold hands. I found gasoline and piled up everything flammable I could find, and then I set the place on fire. I was not going to let those monsters desecrate their bodies any more than they already had. Then everything started to shake, and I had to flee. That’s all.”

He looked at Sandy. She looked at him. She took his face and kissed him. “Thank you.”

He kissed her back—hesitating at first, his mind clouded with guilt. But as Sandy pulled him closer, the lines between grief, comfort, and something deeper blurred. For a brief moment, they lost themselves in each other, clinging to the only warmth they had left.

“I am so sorry.”

Sandy wiped away his tears now. “Don’t be. You made one of the hardest decisions anyone could make, and you did it. You set them free and gave them peace. Peace, we might never get.”

They kissed again and curled into each other’s arms. Emotionally exhausted, they fell asleep.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

Jack woke up early. Sandy was still curled up against him. Carefully, he slipped out from under her arm and looked back at her. She was beautiful, and he was thankful for her friendship. But now, he needed to find Lisa. Maybe if they could escape this hellhole, they could see what the future held. First things first.

Jack crossed Sandy's lawn toward his front door. It was open.

What?

He hesitated, then pushed it open further, stepping inside cautiously. The house was silent. His eyes scanned the dim interior as he moved toward the living room.

A trail of small droplets of blood led deeper inside. His heart slammed against his ribs, fear tightening in his chest. His pace quickened.

A scream tore from his throat as the full horror came into view.

“NOOOO! No, no....”

The sporadic blood droplets led to a thick, smeared trail against the far wall. Lisa's clothes lay scattered across the floor. His breath caught. His body went cold.

Lisa's body was nailed against the wall in the shape of an

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upside-down cross. Blood seeped from her wounds, dripping steadily into the pooling crimson below.

Jack nearly slipped as he ran to her. A scream ripped through him, his throat raw and tearing. He yanked her hands free, then her feet, catching her limp body as it collapsed into his arms. Her blood soaked through his clothes, but he barely noticed.

Jack fell to his knees, cradling her. He sobbed, his vision blurring, his body wracked with shudders. Snot mixed with tears, streaking down his face, but he didn't care.

"Not my baby. Not my girl. No..." His voice cracked, breaking under the weight of his grief.

Sandy's footsteps thundered through the house. "Jack? Jack, I heard you scream—"

She turned the corner and froze.

Her breath caught. She could hardly comprehend what she was seeing—Jack, crumpled on the floor, rocking his lifeless daughter. Lisa's small, broken body draped across his lap. Her eyes were sewn shut, bloody lashes marking her pale skin. Sandy's chest clenched. The pain in Jack's voice, the pure agony, was one she knew all too well. It was the pain that never left.

She moved beside him and wrapped her arms around him, whispering soft words of comfort as he sobbed, screaming for vengeance. They stayed there for hours, grieving together, holding each other in the silence of the dead house.

Eventually, Jack lifted his head. His tears had run dry. What remained was a void, a consuming numbness.

Sandy helped him move Lisa to the bathroom, where they carefully washed her body. They worked in silence. Jack changed her into fresh clothes, his hands trembling as he smoothed her hair back. Sandy found her favorite toy and placed it beside her.

"What do we do now?" Sandy finally asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Jack clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached. His hands

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curled into fists. “We kill the bastards.”

“With Lisa, I mean.” Sandy’s voice pulled him from the edge of rage.

He exhaled sharply. “Oh... sorry. Yeah.” His vision swam with fury, consuming him, but he forced himself to focus. “We should bury her, Jack. We can’t leave her here. And now they know we’re in their sights. There’s no way they’ll let the undertaker come up here.”

He stared at Sandy, lost. “I...”

“You don’t have to say anything. I’ll help you.”

Jack gave a small nod. Together, they carried her to the backyard, choosing a spot near a large oak tree. Sandy fetched the shovels, and they began digging.

Neither spoke. They let the work consume them, driving their grief into each thrust of the blade. Dirt piled up beside them. Time blurred. The only sound was the rhythmic scraping of metal against soil.

When the hole was finally deep enough, Jack wrapped Lisa in the best sheet he could find. He knelt beside her, brushing his fingers over her still face, placing a last kiss on her forehead.

“Daddy loves you, baby. More than life itself.” His voice was hoarse. “I swear I’ll get them. I swear.”

He lowered her into the grave, his movements slow and deliberate. A final moment. A final goodbye.

Then he climbed out and grabbed a shovel. His grief had turned to something colder. Harder.

“Let’s do this. I’ve got things to do... and monsters to kill.”

Sandy didn’t reply. She simply took up her shovel and together they started to fill the grave.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Jack handed Sandy a list of supplies—everything from first aid essentials to the chemical components needed for incendiary devices. Without hesitation, she drove to Johnny's to gather them. Johnny was one of the few people they could trust, and his shop had the kind of inventory that didn't raise eyebrows.

Meanwhile, Jack focused on his own preparations. He meticulously cleaned and oiled each weapon, ensuring every piece was in perfect working order. He loaded extra magazines, checked the sights on his rifles, and laid out the empty containers he'd use to mix the volatile ingredients once Sandy returned.

With his arsenal prepped, he unfolded a worn map of the area, tracing potential locations with his fingers. He needed vantage points—places where he could observe his enemies unnoticed, gather intelligence, and, if necessary, plant caches for future use.

Finally, he started his car, the engine growling to life. His hands gripped the wheel, his mind already locked on the mission ahead. Tonight wasn't just about preparation. It was the beginning of a war.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

John's Supply Store, The Lakes, CA

"Well, Johnny, I think I've done enough damage. Ring me up." Sandy forced a smile.

"Okay then, that'll be \$439.69." Johnny printed out the receipt and placed it in the bag.

"Thanks, here you go." She laid \$450 on the counter. "How are the kids doing?"

"They're fine. You know how it goes. Same old thing every day. They want everything but don't want to work for it." He opened the till, tucked away the bills, and handed her the change. "And here's your change. Need help with the car today?" He pushed the paper bags to the edge of the counter.

"No thanks, I can still manage. See you later. Say hello to Jess."

"I will. Have a good day now." Johnny waved goodbye.

The little copper bells jingled as she pushed open the door and stepped outside.

It was a perfect day. The sky stretched wide, brilliant and blue, a gentle breeze rolling in from the east. The air smelled crisp, clean—almost *too* clean. The birds weren't singing.

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Not a single chirp. Just an empty, yawning silence.

A cold dread crept into Sandy's gut, clawing at her ribs.

A loud *caw* shattered the stillness.

She stiffened, her arms tightening around the paper bags as she looked up.

Across the street, .22 perched atop a telephone pole, its beady eyes locked onto hers.

"Caw." The bird jerked its head back, its black beak slicing the air—commanding her to move.

Sandy's breath hitched. Her fingers clenched the bags against her chest.

"Go away, you filthy beast. Leave me alone."

"Caw."

Two more crows landed beside it.

"Caw. Caw."

Then more.

Dozens.

They dropped from the sky, settling on parked cars, filling the trees, their claws scraping against metal. A low, eerie rustling filled the air as their wings flexed and shifted in unison. The air thickened with the sound of wings and scratching talons.

"Fuck."

Sandy's bags hit the pavement as she sprinted for her car, her trembling hands diving into her pockets. Her fingers fumbled desperately—where were her keys? Then, she felt them. The remote. She hit the unlock button again and again. Twenty feet away, the blinkers flashed.

"Caw."

The sky erupted. A swirling black mass of feathers descended upon her, their shrieks merging into a deafening cacophony.

Pain exploded in her neck. A hot, sharp sting. Her left hand flew up, her fingers slick with the warm trickle of blood sliding down her skin. The wound throbbed, pulsing with each frantic beat of her heart.

They were on her. Claws raked at her scalp. Beaks tore

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at her arms, her hands—

Sandy shrieked, thrashing her arms to fight them off, but it was like striking at a hurricane. Talons dug into her flesh, shredding away strips of skin. Feathers blinded her, wings battered her from every side.

She sucked in a breath to scream, but her mouth filled with feathers. She gagged, choking, spitting them out as claws carved into her cheeks.

“Help! Someone, help!”

But she knew. She *knew* no one would come. No one dared interfere. The monster was delivering its message.

Play by my rules, or else.

Her vision blurred, the world shrinking to blood and feathers and pain.

The car. Almost there.

She lunged, yanking the door open, using her left hand to shield her face as she threw herself inside. But something came with her.

A crow. A smaller one, but rabid, relentless.

It flapped wildly, its talons sinking deep into the raw flesh of her right hand. A searing, electric pain shot through her arm as the claws carved through muscle and tendon.

She screamed, slamming her hand against the ceiling, again and again, desperate to dislodge it. Blood splattered across the interior. Feathers rained down in a sickening flurry.

Finally, the thing went still.

Sandy sobbed, shaking, but the bird was still latched onto her hand. Even in death, its claws remained embedded in her flesh.

Her breath came in ragged, broken gasps. The pain was unbearable. Blood dripped onto the dashboard. Her fingers twitched, raw flaps of flesh dangling from where skin had been torn away.

Oh my God. Oh my God. It's coming for me. It's my turn.

Memories flickered—she had seen this before. The others. Their bodies torn apart, left for the crows to pick clean.

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And now it was her turn. Her body would be next.

It knows I told Jack.

Through the neon haze of the storefront, Johnny watched her car peel out of the parking lot, tires screeching.

He knew he would never see her again.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

It was only a short drive to her home, but the seven-mile stretch seemed longer than it ever had before. Crows plunged themselves down onto the car—black, feathered hail balls striking hard, leaving blood smears and dents behind. The cracks in the windshield slowly widened, feathers seeping inside the car.

Finally, her driveway appeared in the distance.

With a flick of her wrist, she unhooked her house key from the car key. A sharp jerk of the wheel sent the car dashing over the lawn, stopping parallel to her front door.

She took a deep breath. With her left hand, she threw the car door open, jumped out, and sprinted to the door. Holding out the door key, she flung herself against the entrance. The key scratched against the lock before sliding in, twisting with a click that had never sounded sweeter. She pushed herself inside—two crows followed her.

Diving down at her head, they pecked relentlessly at her ears and eyes. One tangled its claws in her hair while the other latched onto her earlobe, its beak savagely trying to rip the flesh away.

Sandy slammed herself into the wall, crushing the crow that had been shredding what remained of her ear. Its dead

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body dangled grotesquely from her head, like a twisted Halloween decoration. With her frayed hand, she clawed at the bird still tangled in her hair, her fingers slipping in the blood coating her scalp.

“Caw! Caw! Caw!” it screeched, its rancid breath hot against her face, pecking wildly at her fingers as she grasped its throat.

Her fingers were sliced open, but she didn’t let go. She squeezed harder—snapping its fragile neck with a sickening crunch. Black goop oozed from its beak as she hurled its corpse to the floor and stomped on it, staining the wood beneath her.

The onslaught wasn’t over. The windows rattled as the murder of crows battered against the house, their bodies bouncing off the glass like living projectiles.

She ran to the kitchen, leaving a bloodied trail in her wake. Ripping open the first aid cabinet, she grabbed a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, flung the cap onto the floor, and poured it over her hands and arms. The wounds fizzed, bubbles bursting in agonizing relief. She bit down a scream, then tore open a roll of gauze with her teeth, wrapping her mangled arms.

Outside, the crows were relentless. Their talons scraped against the roof. Their beaks struck the windows. The house trembled under their assault.

She took a deep breath and let the lukewarm water run over her hands. The sink turned bright red as blood and dirt swirled down the drain. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed onto the tile, sobbing.

She knew this was useless. The monster would not stop. She had seen it too many times before. If it didn’t kill her today, the infections would. No one would help her—not even the doctor. A marked one deserved to die. To help her was to sign your own death warrant.

Slowly, she pushed herself up. She needed to call Jack. She needed to tell him how much he meant to her. And then she would go upstairs and end it herself.

C. FLEMISH

As she stumbled toward the phone, a low hum filled the air.

It came from the fireplace.

A bee flew past her face.

Her eyes widened.

The voice slithered through her mind, thick with amusement. *"Did you think you'd make it? Did you think Jack could save you?"* The laughter was inside her skull, pushing against the walls, filling her with visions of others who had tried to run. *"You should've taken the easy way out, Sandy. Now... now, you'll really suffer."*

Thousands of killer bees erupted from the fireplace. The swarm engulfed her, blanketing her in a writhing, black-and-yellow mass of stingers.

Each sting was a live ember pressed into her flesh, thousand miniature daggers slicing into her veins. Her skin bubbled under the relentless assault, every nerve screaming in fire. She flailed, crushing them beneath her hands—but for every bee she killed, ten more buried their stingers into her flesh.

Her lips and eyes swelled shut. She could barely see. She could barely breathe.

She stumbled toward the front door, her swollen fingers fumbling for the handle. She managed to pull it open and threw herself outside.

The crows had been waiting.

They descended, claws ripping into her back, beaks carving away flesh. Blood gushed freely. A crow tore at her scalp, yanking away a chunk of hair, exposing bone.

.22 landed on her bloated face, its talons sinking into the stretched, fevered skin. It tilted its head, inspecting her like a curiosity, then leaned in. A sharp pinch—just a test. Then, with a brutal jerk, its beak plunged deep.

A wet, sucking sound filled the air.

A burning spike of pain shot through her skull as the bird yanked backward, her vision fracturing in a smear of crimson.

She twitched once.

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Then silence.

The bees dispersed. The crows vanished.

Sandy's yard was littered with thousands of dead bees, black feathers, and blood. Her 1960 Thunderbird was dented, streaked with chunks of flesh and hair.

Sandy was no longer tied to her human form.

She felt herself rising—then claws yanked her back.

Dragged from the light into the dark.

A child's voice rang in her head, warping from innocent to tortured. *"Mommy... mommy, help me..."* The screams swallowed her whole.

The last thing she heard was the wet squawk of a crow, its beak still dripping with her blood.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

Santa Clara, CA - 1875

The grave at the Santa Clara Mission Cemetery had already been prepared.

A horse-drawn cart rattled along the stone path, its wooden wheels grinding over the uneven ground. Tibu's body lay within six pine boards, the lid shut tight against the sunlit day. It would have been a fine afternoon—if he weren't trapped inside a coffin.

Sheriff Adams sat straight in his saddle as the cart came to a halt. He had made sure to see this through himself. Too many lawmen had risked—and lost—their lives bringing this man to justice. He'd be damned if he left anything to chance now. The infamous Tiburcio Vásquez would stay buried. For good.

The undertaker tipped his hat, acknowledging the sheriff. Adams returned the nod but kept his eyes on the crowd gathering nearby—journalists, townsfolk, and weeping women still enthralled by the legend of the dead bandito. Some shopkeepers who had once traded with Vásquez in jail had shown up too, eager for one last look. The air buzzed with morbid curiosity.

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“Good morning, Sheriff,” said Father Elijah Johnson, stepping forward in his long robes.

“Father,” Adams greeted him with a firm handshake. “Let’s hope this goes off without any trouble.”

“I doubt there’s any left in him,” the priest replied. “Yesterday’s spectacle was enough to satisfy even the most vengeful souls.”

Adams wasn’t so sure. Bodies had been stolen before, and Vásquez wasn’t just any criminal—he was a legend. That’s why he’d posted guards at the cemetery. After two weeks underground, the body wouldn’t be worth digging up anymore. Until then, caution was necessary.

“Sheriff.” Doc Smith approached, adjusting his hat. “How’s your morning?”

“I’m alive, he’s not, so I’d call that a good day. You?”

“Fine enough. My wife, Maria... not so much. She insisted on watching the execution. I warned her, but she wouldn’t listen. Didn’t sleep a wink last night.”

Adams sighed. “People have a strange fascination with death. They say they want justice, but they just want a show.”

Smith nodded. “I suppose being a doctor has made me numb to it. Dead bodies don’t shake me anymore. You think that makes us bad people?”

Adams studied him for a moment, then clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Not feeling something doesn’t make you bad, Doc. It makes you useful. We do what others can’t. People call us when there’s blood, when there’s danger. We don’t run—we face it. That doesn’t make us bad. That makes us saints.”

Father Johnson stepped to the head of the grave. The murmuring crowd quieted.

“Brothers and sisters, we are gathered here today to lay Ti-burcio Vásquez to rest.” His voice carried across the cemetery. “A man most of us knew only from wanted posters and whispered stories. He was called a thief, a murderer, a bandit. And yet, as all men must, he stands before God now.”

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He opened his Bible, his deep voice rolling through the scripture.

Luke 23:32-43

“...One of the criminals who hung beside Jesus mocked Him, but the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God? We suffer justly, for we receive what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he turned and said, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus replied, ‘Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.’”

Closing the Bible, Johnson lifted his aspergillum, dipped it into holy water, and made the sign of the cross over the casket. “This man received absolution. He received his last rites. He shall be buried as any other man.”

A few townsfolk cast their eyes down, shame washing over them for their quick judgment. The gravediggers moved to lower the coffin.

Then the laughter began.

It started as a whisper—just beneath the dirt, curling up through the roots and into the air. A chuckle, thin as a blade. Then it grew. A rolling, unnatural cackle, twisting in the wind, deepening into something guttural and wrong.

The gravediggers froze. The crowd gasped, stiffening as a tremor ran through the ground.

The coffin lurched.

The gravediggers dropped their ropes and ran. Screams erupted as the trembling grew violent, knocking people from their feet. The earth cracked, a jagged wound splitting near the grave’s edge. A panicked horse reared, its cart smashing through the cast-iron cemetery gates, trampling anyone in its way.

Adams hit the ground, reaching instinctively for his pistol. But before he could draw, a firm hand covered his.

“No weapon made by man can help here, son.”

Father Johnson, still on his knees, reached into his robe and pulled out a bottle of holy water. His face was pale but set with determination. He opened his Bible again, his voice

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ringing out over the chaos.

“In the name of the Father—depart! In the name of the Son—depart! In the name of the Holy Ghost—depart! In the name of the Holy Trinity—depart!”

With each command, he flung water over the casket. The droplets hissed, evaporating the instant they touched the wood. The laughter twisted into a shriek, then silence. The trembling ceased.

Adams slowly pushed himself to his feet, his breath unsteady. Johnson remained kneeling, his head bowed in prayer. Finally, he stood and turned to Adams, exhaustion lining his face.

“We must finish this, Sheriff. Can you stay?”

Adams swallowed hard. “Yeah.”

Johnson moved to the pile of dirt, scooping a handful and letting it fall into the grave. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Amen.”

Adams did the same, his hands still shaking.

The priest placed a hand on his shoulder, his eyes weary. “I could use a drink, Sheriff.”

Adams exhaled, barely holding onto reality after what he had just witnessed. “Yeah. Me too. Maybe more than one.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

Church of the Lakes, Elizabeth Lake, CA - Current Day

The heavy oak door slammed open with a thunderous bang. The stale, candle-scented air slithered outside, wrapping Jack in its suffocating embrace before vanishing into the night. He stepped in, the heat from the church engulfing him like an unwelcome shroud. As he moved down the aisle, flanked by rows of empty pews, childhood memories clawed at the edges of his mind.

Focus. Focus.

He couldn't afford distraction. Not now.

Jack moved like a predator, each step deliberate, calculated. He was hunting. His prey, Father McBarr—the monster who had stolen his daughter, who had preached filth and lied in the name of God. Tonight, Jack was the instrument of divine retribution.

Genesis 9:6

He who sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed.

Jack had no love for scripture, but tonight, he would obey it.

He walked slowly, calculated. Each footstep rolled from heel to toe, silent and precise. He could feel every crack in

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the floor. Every few steps he would hold and listen. Was he here? His pulse was steady, his grip firm as his hand brushed the cold steel of his USP .45 tucked at his back.

"Mr. Morrison."

The voice slithered from the altar, smooth and amused. Jack stopped.

"How can we help you tonight?"

McBarr spread his arms in mock reverence, a snake in priestly robes. Jack's hand found the pistol grip, pulling it free in a single fluid motion. He stepped forward, dropping into a shooter's stance. His thumb flicked off the safety, the sights drawing a straight line to McBarr's forehead.

"Yeah, you can help me," Jack said, voice flat. "Die."

McBarr merely smirked. "A gun, in a house of God? Is that really necessary, my son?"

"Are we in a house of God, McBarr? Are you sure of that?" Jack advanced, his finger brushing the trigger. "Would God allow filth like you to serve in His name?"

The priest's face was impassive. "I don't know what you're insinuating."

"Of course not. You don't have a fucking clue. "Jack's stomach churned with rage. "You should run for office."

McBarr slightly raised his shoulders and gently shook his head.

"Don't play dumb. Sandy told me everything. The lake, your beast, Cooper and Wilms. And I know what you did to my daughter." Jack slowly advanced, keeping his pistol aimed at the priest.

Something shifted in McBarr's expression—a flicker of amusement, of something dark writhing beneath his skin. A murky film coated his eyes, spreading like ink in water.

"Ah, so you know."

Jack's grip tightened.

"And Lisa? My wife?" His voice cracked, but he steadied it. "You killed her too."

McBarr smirked, his head tilting forward with the slow, deliberate movement of a snake tasting the air. He could

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sense Jack's next move before it happened. Should he strike now? Or wait for the perfect moment?

"Seems like you figured it all out Jack. Seems like no secret is safe from you. The Great Jack Morrison. So what are your plans now? Are you going to kill me here? In my church?" McBarr took a step towards Jack. "You're not going to get away with this Jack. No one can escape once they are here. We own you."

"Shut Up!" Jack shouted

"We didn't kill her, Jack. We *guided* her. We whispered in her ear, night after night, until she understood what she had to do. We *showed* her—the blade, the rope, the water—subtly projecting her own death in her mind until she chose her end." His lips curled. "Such a beautiful sight, don't you think? The smell of urine, feces, and rot—" McBarr licked his lips.

Jack fired.

The bullet seared past McBarr's head, close enough to scorch hair.

"Why my little girl? Why her? She was innocent. Don't you have a heart?"

The priest's laughter was deep, bellowing. His body convulsed, flesh rippling. His grin widened unnaturally, splitting his chin apart. The blackness in his eyes consumed him.

The thing inside McBarr *awoke*.

"We are all born as sinners Jack."

McBarr's hands pressed against his chest, fingers digging deep, skin splitting around them. His knuckles vanished beneath torn flesh as blackened blood oozed down his torso. Jack heard the sickening crack of bone. Then—

A wet, popping snap.

McBarr wrenched his ribcage apart, splitting himself open like a carcass on a butcher's block. Blood-soaked meat glistened in the dim light, the flaps of flesh swaying as if still clinging to life.

He lifted his head, his lips peeling back in something between a grin and a grimace.

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"I have no heart, my son. Only immoral flesh."

His chin split wide, his face distorting as the demon inside him tore free. A shriek, inhuman and ear-splitting, filled the air.

Jack didn't hesitate. He raised his weapon and emptied the chamber into the thing that had once been McBarr.

The thing barely flinched. Then it moved.

A blur.

A claw slammed into Jack's chest, sending him flying through the air. The confession stand shattered beneath his weight, splinters biting into his flesh. The demon's laughter echoed off the stone walls.

"Pitiful creature," it hissed. "You think bullets can harm me?"

Jack struggled to his feet, blood filling his mouth. "Figured it was worth a shot."

Jack felt himself lifted off the ground, weightless for a fraction of a second before he was hurled across the church like a ragdoll. His arms and legs flailed, desperate for something—anything—to slow his momentum. It didn't.

He crashed into the wall behind the altar with bone-rattling force, bouncing off it like a rubber ball. Pain exploded through his body. His mouth filled with the sharp, metallic tang of blood. His vision blurred, his ears rang, every nerve screaming in protest.

How long can I keep this up? This is insane. This can't be real. What is this thing? I need to kill it. But how?

A voice slithered through the haze of pain, mocking, savoring every word.

"You like cats, Jack? I do. You know why? They love to play with their prey before they kill it. Torture them a little. Mmm, so good. Play with it until it's dead. Feeling like a mouse yet, Jack?"

Bony claws punctured his neck, curling into his flesh as he was yanked off the ground again. The creature pulled him close, its black, clouded eyes shifting—moving. Within the swirling void, faces appeared, shifting and writhing.

C. FLEMISH

Trapped souls. Its past victims.

The demon's breath hit his face, a putrid stench that turned his stomach. Jack clenched his jaw, his muscles trembling with pain and fury.

"Fuck you."

He spat straight into the demon's face.

"Fuck me? Ha! Such limited imagination. I expected more from you."

The demon loomed over Jack, its rancid slime dripping onto his face, thick and putrid. The stench hit him like a sledgehammer.

Jack's stomach twisted. He gagged, then violently emptied his guts, spraying the creature's face with bile and acid.

He couldn't help it—he was grinning.

The demon flung Jack onto the altar like a discarded toy.

"It's time we end this jack. Time for you to go to hell."

McBarr's face closed in.

"Goodnight, Mr. Morrison. Give my regards to your daughter—she was a hell of a ride."

A white-hot bolt of rage exploded through Jack's body. He lunged forward, snapping his head forward with every ounce of strength he had left. His skull cracked against the demon's forehead. The beast reeled, its grip loosening just enough—

Jack twisted free, his hands scrambling behind him, fingers closing around cold metal.

With a guttural roar, he swung the crucifix like a hammer, driving it straight into the monster's skull. Bone split with a wet crack. A thick, putrid ooze seeped from the jagged cavity where its face had been. Smoke curled from the wound, the scent of burning flesh filling the air.

The creature thrashed wildly, screeching in agony. Its arms flailed; its high-pitched shrieks so powerful they shattered the stained-glass windows with an ear-splitting BOOM.

Jack didn't hesitate.

He grabbed a heavy candelabra from the altar and

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swung, slamming it into the demon's back with brutal force. The impact sent the thing sprawling onto the ground, rolling, screaming, its flesh smoldering, its claws desperately clawing at the crucifix embedded in its skull.

I need to take control. I need to finish this.

He scanned the room for anything he could use as a potential weapon. *Think, Jack. Think.*

Then he saw it.

His eyes darted frantically—then locked onto something. That could work.

He sprinted to the wall, grabbing the telephone wire that ran along its base. With a hard yank, the cable ripped free. He pulled again—another foot. And another. The wire coiled in his hands, growing into a makeshift weapon.

“What’s wrong now, McBarr? Who’s the mouse now?”

Jack lunged, kicking the demon square in the face, his heel slamming against the embedded crucifix, driving it deeper.

A deafening shriek tore from the creature's throat. It flailed blindly, its claws swiping at the air, trying to catch Jack. But Jack was faster. He swung the wire, looping it around one of the monster's claws and pulling it tight.

McBarr thrashed, rage and despair twisting his features. He hissed, spat, bile and acid spraying the floor, burning holes into the wood.

A sudden jolt—then they were rolling.

Before Jack could react, the demon surged back to its full seven-foot height, looming over him. It swung wildly, barely missing Jack's head as he dodged at the last second. With a guttural snarl, the beast lunged backward—straight through the window behind the altar.

Glass exploded around them.

Jack spun on his heels and gave chase.

McBarr, still in his monstrous form, stumbled forward, trying to escape. But the phone wire was still wrapped tightly around its claw. Jack didn't hesitate—he ran, leaped, and grabbed the end of the wire.

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Momentum carried him forward. He rolled, twisting mid-motion, looping the wire around the nearest tree. The demon kept running.

The line snapped tight.

McBarr's body wrenched backward, slammed into the ground with a bone-rattling impact. A furious hiss ripped through the night. Jack was already moving, sprinting toward the creature before it could recover.

McBarr lashed out with his free claw, desperate to tear flesh, to take something from Jack before the fight ended. But Jack was ready. He had already made a second loop.

As McBarr reached for him, Jack flung the noose over its other claw and yanked tight, binding the beast's arms together.

The demon stopped struggling.

"Now what?" It hissed, voice dripping with malice. "Now what, Jack? Going to leave me here? You can't kill me. We don't die. You might have noticed. Silly little human."

Jack didn't answer. He picked up the remainder of the phone wire, slung it over his shoulder, and started dragging the beast behind him, step by slow step, back toward the church.

McBarr spat and cursed, writhing against the restraints. But it didn't just speak—it mimicked.

Jack's spine stiffened as voices poured from the demon's throat. First his father. Then his mother. Then strangers he had never heard before but somehow still knew.

"What are you going to do, Jack? Can't kill us."

Then Jack saw it.

"Can't kill me, Jack. I'm going to eat your soul."

Jack yanked the wire tighter. "We'll see about that."

His eyes locked on a thick branch nearby. He grabbed it, looping the wire around it again and again, tying a solid knot, anchoring the monster in place. Then he turned and walked away.

McBarr hissed after him.

"Where are you going, Jack? Giving up? That's all you've ever been good at—quitting. Every time life gets hard, baby

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Jack runs away.”

The line went limp. McBarr’s head tilted up, following the wire’s path—

Straight to where Jack was standing.

Right next to a gleaming green John Deere wood chipper.

A metallic thunk echoed as the heavy branch dropped into the feed tray.

Jack’s grin stretched wide. “I think you’ll see Hell before me, Father.”

He slammed the start button.

The machine roared to life.

Teeth spun. Metal churned. The heavy branch lurched forward, sucked into the churning blades.

The wire snapped taut.

McBarr’s eyes widened in pure, animal panic. It snarled, spat, thrashed—but the line dragged him forward.

The demon screamed, its voice warping, shifting—turning guttural, alien, ancient. The words twisted into something foul, something that made Jack’s skin crawl. Glass rattled, the earth trembled beneath them.

And then—

“Help me, Daddy.”

Jack froze.

Lisa’s voice. Clear as day.

“Help me, Daddy. If you kill the demon, my soul will be lost forever. Don’t, Daddy.”

Jack dropped to his knees, his hands clamping over his head like a vice.

“No, get out of my head! Lisa is dead. Lisa is gone. You are NOT her!”

His voice cracked, raw and broken. Tears streaked his dirt-stained face, his chest heaving.

“No! I won’t let you control me! You have NO power over me! I do not serve you!”

The night went deathly still. The voices stopped.

McBarr’s body suddenly lurched upward, rising from the ground as if suspended by invisible strings. Limbs spasmed,

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kicking and flailing, but it was too late. The demon's writhing form drifted toward the churning mouth of the wood-chipper, feet kicking, spinning wildly in one last desperate attempt to break free.

Then—

A wet, sickening suck as the machine took hold.

The demon's flesh and bone cracked, crunched, and tore under the churning discs and steel teeth. Jack listened, breathing hard, as the machine shredded McBarr into nothing but meat, slime, and bone dust. Blood sprayed in a fine crimson mist, painting the church lawn red.

Music to Jack's ears.

He wiped a sleeve across his blood-splattered face.

"Rest in pieces, asshole."

With a satisfied sigh, he shut off the machine.

Just as he turned to leave, a cold chill ran up his spine.

Something felt off.

Jack hesitated, his eyes flicking back to the carnage, the blood-soaked grass now eerily still beneath the moonlight.

His stomach twisted.

This is impossible.

The droplets of blood... they were moving.

Tiny rivulets of red twitched and pulsed, creeping toward each other, merging like liquid veins. Splintered bones skittered across the dirt, locking together with a sickening, wet snap. Strips of shredded meat crawled across the ground like grotesque slugs, tendrils of muscle reaching, seeking, fusing.

Jack's breath hitched.

No. No, no, no.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with a trembling hand, his pulse hammering in his ears. His mind screamed at him to run, but he couldn't. Not after all this.

Think, dammit. Think.

The damn thing was pulling itself back together.

His mind raced. *What do I do? How the hell do you kill this thing?*

Frantic, Jack turned in circles, scanning the field for

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anything—anything—that could finish the job.

Then—

His boot caught something solid. His body pitched forward, slamming into the dirt.

Pain jolted up his arms. He groaned, rolling onto his back, cursing under his breath.

Then he saw it.

The gas container.

The red plastic jug lay on its side, just inches away. His heart pounded.

“Thank God. Thank you, yes.”

He lunged for the container, unscrewing the cap in one sharp motion. His eyes darted to a glass jar lying nearby—oil.

Jack remembered his military training.

Molotov cocktails. The right mix of fluids to make sure the fire sticks.

His hands worked fast, popping the jar open, dumping the oil into the gas, shaking the container violently. The thick, lethal mixture swirled inside.

Then he moved.

Jack jumped to his feet and began dousing the ground, soaking the twitching remains, stepping on shattered bones and writhing flesh as he went. Under his boots, fingers were already beginning to form, tiny joints bending, nails scraping against the dirt, eager to reassemble.

His pulse pounded. Not this time.

Jack stepped back, pulling the lighter from his pocket. His fingers curled around it, his thumb pressing down—

Click.

The tiny flame flickered against the darkness.

Jack flicked the lighter onto the ground.

A thunderous whoosh sucked the oxygen from the air, flames racing like living veins of fire across the desecrated field. Heat slammed into Jack’s skin, sucking the moisture from his lips.

Deep red fire danced over the blood-soaked ground.

C. FLEMISH

The pieces of McBarr curled and shriveled, flesh blistering, blackening, peeling back like burnt paper. The air thickened with the stench of scorched meat and boiling marrow, a scent so vile Jack gagged.

Hundreds of screams erupted in Jack's skull.

His eyes darted across the inferno. A disembodied finger twitched, trying to crawl away, the fire devouring it inch by inch. A grotesque eyeball, still half-embedded in a fragment of cheek, the pupil wide with terror, suddenly burst in a boiling pop.

Then—

A soft *thud* against his boot.

Jack froze.

Slowly, he looked down.

McBarr's tongue.

It hadn't been caught in the flames. The damn thing convulsed, contracting and expanding, its slick surface pulsing as if still tasting the air. It left behind a trail of silvery mucus, glistening like slug slime under the moonlight.

Jack recoiled, his gut twisting. His instincts screamed at him to burn it, crush it, anything but touch it—but he moved anyway.

In one swift motion, he snatched the empty glass jar and slammed it down over the writhing organ.

The tongue lashed against the glass, smearing it with thick, putrid mucus that oozed in slow, curdled streaks. It coiled and spun in frantic circles, slapping the insides of the jar with a wet, sickening sound. Every movement was frantic, mindless—a thing in pure agony, desperate to break free.

Jack tightened the lid, twisting it until the metal groaned against the pressure. The jar vibrated in his grip, the last writhing, pulsing piece of McBarr thrashing like a dying snake. His stomach churned at the heat seeping through the glass, at the unnatural way the thing twitched as if it still had something left to say.

But there was no more McBarr. Not anymore.

DIABLO CANYON

The demon was finally trapped.

Jack clutched the jar tight and bolted for his car, boots pounding against the dirt. The wind cut sharp against his face, carrying the lingering stench of rot from the church behind him. He threw open the trunk, the hinges whining in protest, and stretched his duffle bag open. The smell of gun oil and leather greeted him.

Carefully, he slid the jar inside, tucking it between the cold steel of his weapons. He paused, his eyes scanning the contents—a loaded Glock, extra mags, a hunting knife, and a sawed-off shotgun he wasn't sure would do a damn thing against what he was up against. His fingers ghosted over the grip of the Glock before he zipped the bag shut.

Sandy was right. He couldn't just go in guns blazing. Cooper was a smart son of a bitch. He played the long game, always had. Jack needed to corner him, press the right nerve, force him to give up Wilmes.

Jack slammed the trunk shut, the sound cracking through the empty night like a gunshot. He climbed into the driver's seat, his pulse a slow, steady drum in his ears.

As he pulled onto the road, the headlights carved twin beams through the darkness, illuminating the empty stretch ahead. His mind raced, picking apart every move, every angle.

That demon won't go easy.

But neither would he.

He gripped the wheel, knuckles pale as the tires carved a path through the dirt road. The low rumble of the engine filled the quiet night, but his mind was louder. The jar sat wrapped in his duffle bag like a ticking bomb. He could still feel the weight of it, the unsettling pulse of something not quite dead inside.

Cooper wasn't going to roll over. He was too slick, too damn paranoid. Jack needed to corner him. The question was—how?

He ran through possibilities, each one more reckless than the last. He could storm that godforsaken place Cooper holed up in, put a gun to his head, and make him

C. FLEMISH

talk. But Sandy was right—this wasn't a fight he could muscle through.

Jack's gaze flicked to the rearview mirror, expecting to see headlights trailing him, but the road behind was empty. He knew he was being watched. The thought made his skin prickle. The deeper he dug, the more the darkness seemed to close in around him.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

In the distance, a pack of coyotes howled. The moonlight shimmered across the lake, painting the hills in a haunting gray-blue hue. The night felt alive, pulsing with something unseen.

Jack's headlights cut through the darkness as he was making his way to the other side of the lake. He tried to focus. The weight of the task ahead pressed down on him like a physical force.

If they're all connected, I won't be able to get him. He'll know. The monster will kill me before I can even make a move. And the monster—how the hell was he supposed to kill *it*?

A sharp, pulsing pain gripped his skull. His heartbeat accelerated; his breaths grew shallow. A panic attack clawed at the edges of his consciousness.

No. Not now. Stay calm. Think. There's always a way.

"There is, Jack."

The sound of fingers drumming against the car roof sent a jolt through him.

Jack slammed the brake, pulled over, threw the door open and rolled forward, tumbling out of the vehicle, his pistol drawn in an instant. He aimed at a figure barely visible in the moonlight—its edges blurred, translucent.

C. FLEMISH

What the fuck?

“Relax, Jack. I’m on your side.”

Jack’s grip tightened. “Like hell you are. Everyone on my side is dead. Murdered. Keep your hands where I can see them.”

“You won’t shoot me, Jack. And it’s of no use. I’ve been dead for years.”

Jack hesitated, his eyes locking onto the figure. The dim outline of his car shimmered through the man’s body.

Not possible.

“I was sent to help you. I’ll help you kill the monster and bring you back to your family.”

Jack’s breath hitched. “Who sent you?”

The figure took a step forward. “My name is José. I roamed these hills over two hundred years ago. I was part of a group of bandits that terrorized this region. And in some way, I am responsible for everything that’s happened here.”

Jack’s stomach twisted. There was pain in José’s expression, a suffering so real Jack could feel it crawl over his skin.

“What do you mean? How are *you* responsible?”

José’s gaze shifted to the lake.

“In the beginning, when God cast Lucifer and his angels from Heaven, the Devil sought revenge. He sent his demons across the earth to torture and corrupt mankind. He was patient—he believed he would win in time. That men would crumble under their own vices.”

Jack remained silent, the air thick with tension.

“Lucifer created his army. And among them was his favorite pet—the Dwyrolith. A monster born of hellfire. A beast with the body of a giant stingray, leathery bat-like wings, skin as red as the flames of damnation. Along its spine, seven horns—one for each of the seven evil kingdoms Satan would use to bring about the end of days. Three tails, one for each member of the unholy trinity: Satan, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet.”

The words carried weight, each syllable pressing against

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Jack's chest like an unseen hand.

"The Dwyrolith didn't just kill, Jack. It fed on suffering. It drove men mad with hallucinations, twisted their dreams into nightmares so horrifying they took their own lives just to escape. Many cultures have spoken of such an omen—different names, different forms, but always the same presence."

Jack swallowed. The cold seeped into his bones.

"The monster was cunning. Ambitious. It wanted more than just what Lucifer gave it. One day, it reached into its master's mind, tasting his suffering. As Lucifer once tempted God, the Dwyrolith *tempted* Lucifer. It was a mistake."

Jack watched as José's fingers twitched. His voice dropped, almost reverent.

"Lucifer, in his rage, cast the beast from hell itself. That is why Diablo Canyon exists. The earth cracked open, and Lucifer created the lake as a prison. He loved the beast, still—so he gave it three loyal servants to feed it, to worship it. For centuries, they thrived, torturing and killing in its name."

Jack's stomach churned. "And the missions?"

"When the first Catholic missions arrived, things began to change. The natives—the Tataviam—had always feared the lake, but the monster's servants would still raid their villages, dragging innocents to the water's edge. Where they would lock them up and torture them. It wasn't until 1613, when the tribal chief's daughter was taken, that everything shifted."

José's voice darkened; eyes distant.

"The chief went to the San Miguel Mission in Santa Fe, desperate. He had heard of this new God. He begged the friars to help—to prove the power of their God by saving his daughter. He swore that if they succeeded, his people would convert."

Jack could picture it. The desperation. The fear.

"The friars sent word to the church, seeking approval. When the blessing finally came, weeks later, they rode west. It took them three days to reach the lake. The land was

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scorched, reeking of sulfur and death. Members of their party fell ill. Some died. The Tataviam, watching the friars unwavering faith, learned their prayers, their rites, hoping for protection.

By the time they reached the lake, the air had grown heavy, thick with the scent of damp earth and something fouler beneath it. The friars moved with solemn purpose, their robes whispering against the ground as they carved a wide circle into the dirt. They poured blessed salt in an unbroken ring, its pale grains stark against the dark soil. Within the boundary, they lit sacred incense, the curling smoke rising in ghostly tendrils toward the moonlit sky.

One by one, they knelt, heads bowed, voices rising in fervent prayer. Their Latin chants wove together, a relentless rhythm of devotion and defiance. They fasted, their bodies growing weak but their spirits unshaken. Hour after hour, day into night, their prayers never ceased. Each friar took his turn, murmuring holy verses until his voice rasped and his limbs trembled.

Two days passed.

The lake, which had been eerily still, began to stir. At first, only faint ripples disturbed the surface, but soon the water seethed as if something beneath it struggled to rise. A deep, unnatural groan echoed across the shore, the sound of stone grinding against bone, of rage long contained.

Then, the water erupted.

The beast and its servants burst forth, shrieking, unable to endure the relentless power of the Word. The lake churned with unholy fury, black waves lashing at the shore. Shadows twisted in the mist, clawing, writhing—until they came for the ones who had dared to call them forth.

Jack tensed. “And?”

“The Tataviam guides fled. They didn’t make it.” José’s face hardened. “The friars stood their ground. Among them was Miguel Anacosta—he carried a relic that the Pope had given him. A cross, carved from the wood of the Holy Cross itself. It was the most powerful artifact in the New World.”

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A chill ran through Jack.

“As they chanted, the monster was *sealed* within the lake and its servants sent back to Hell. When the sun rose, its light fell upon a tunnel on the far hills.”

Jack knew it. *He had been there.*

“They found the Chief’s daughter inside—broken, beaten, raped, burned but alive.

They took her back to her tribe. When they stopped in the center of the encampment, the Chief emerged from his tent, his face stricken with shock at the sight of his daughter. Her broken form barely stood, bruised and burned, yet alive.

“You asked us to show you how merciful God can be,” Anacosta said. “And we are here to show you that there is only one God, and God is merciful. Bring your people so they may witness His grace.”

The Chief summoned every man, woman, and child to the center of the camp. The friars asked for warm water, and the Tataviam provided a large wooden tub, steam curling from its surface. The friars blessed the water and brought forth the Chief’s daughter.

Gasps rippled through the crowd as they took in her ruined body. Wounds fresh and deep, burns trailing her skin. It was a miracle she had survived.

Friar Anacosta turned to them, speaking in their tongue. “Your leader came to us seeking proof of our God’s power. He promised that if we destroyed the demon and returned his daughter, you all would believe. But hear me now—we did not come to prove our God is greater than yours. We did not come to demand conversion.” He reached for the Chief’s daughter’s hand, guiding her gently toward the tub.

“We came because we love mankind, and we fight against evil. We came because we are all God’s creation, and through His mercy, He sacrificed His only Son so that we may live. The devil placed this monster upon your people, but God has struck it down. Yet faith is not a bargain—it is a choice. You must choose to follow Him of your own free will.”

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The Chief's daughter, her voice barely above a whisper, nodded. "I choose."

A hushed silence spread as Friar Anacosta removed the girl's tattered dress. A collective gasp escaped the crowd at the full extent of her suffering.

"I stand with Esme Quqna, daughter of Esconde Quera, Chief of the Tataviam," the friar said. "She chooses to follow God."

She sank to her knees in the water, and the friar placed his hand on her head. "Do you accept God as your Savior?"

"I do," she whispered.

He dipped his hand into the water, raising a cup and letting it trickle over her. "Lord, free this woman from sin and pain. Let her enter this new life."

The water streamed down her body.

"In the name of the Father." The crowd watched in awe as her scars began to fade.

"The Son." The bruises melted away, the burns vanishing beneath the water's touch.

"And the Holy Ghost." Her skin became whole again, the wounds nothing more than memories.

"Amen," the friars said in unison.

Esme rose; a new dress placed over her shoulders.

The tribe fell to their knees. One by one, they stepped forward, not out of obligation, but of their own will.

The friars remained and settled in the area. Together they built a tribute to the miracle, the Sierra Mission in what is now known as Acton, ."

Jack exhaled. There was *pain* in José's expression, a suffering so real Jack could feel it crawl over his skin.

"So how are *you* responsible?"

José's gaze shifted to the lake.

"The friars left the wooden cross they used to contain the beast in the lake as a relic in the mission and commissioned a new, larger cross to be made—one forged from gold, exquisitely crafted to highlight the glory of God and His bond with His people. The original wooden cross,

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imbued with the prayers and rites used to seal the monster, was inlaid within this golden structure. The two crosses together formed a sacred seal, the physical and spiritual lock that kept the beast imprisoned beneath the waters.

For over a century, the mission's pilgrims revered the cross, unaware of the true power it held. It was worshiped, blessed, safeguarded. But then my band came. We scouted the church, preparing to rob it, and that was when I first laid eyes on the cross. The monster tricked me. It got in my head. Made me think the cross called out to me. It appealed to my lust and greed. It *made* me steal it. I took it from the mission, believing it was mine to take." José's voice wavered, thick with regret. "And in doing so, I set in motion events that would shatter the seal. I set the Dwyrolith free."

Jack's jaw tightened. "You did *what*?"

José exhaled slowly. "I won't make excuses—I was a thief. But when I saw the cross, something changed. It was more than gold, more than craftsmanship. It *called* to me. It whispered into my soul, tempting me, telling me it belonged to me. I couldn't resist."

He shook his head. "That was my sin. I stole the cross and ran. I thought I was leaving the bandito life behind, but when my partners found out, they chased me like the devil himself. As they closed in, I grew desperate. I threw away everything—my gold, my silver—hoping they would stop. But when I tossed the cross, the wooden piece dislodged from the golden frame."

His voice broke. "The seal was broken. And at that moment, the monster was set free."

Jack stood still, the weight of the revelation settling deep in his gut.

José's eyes darkened with sorrow. "I died soon after. I betrayed my best friend. But my true sin was far greater than theft—it was the destruction of the one thing keeping the world safe from *it*."

A silence settled between them. Then, from the lake, something *moved*. A ripple expanded outward, breaking the

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stillness. Water lapped against the shore, unnaturally slow. A whisper curled through the air—too soft to be words, yet thick enough to send a chill through Jack’s spine.

Jack turned to the lake, his breath hitching.

The Dwyrolith *knew* he was here.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

Jack took a swing at the ghost, only to see his hand fly through the air and hit the car. “You bastard.”

“I have paid for my sins, Jack. I still regret the life I led, the things I have done. But that was hundreds of years ago. I have been forgiven, and tonight I am here to tell you how you can return the monster to its cell.”

Jack leaned against the car, exhaustion and frustration weighing on him. “You’re here to tell me? What kept you? It’s been years now. Why me?”

“People have free will. No one who has ever been trapped here chose to fight. They chose eternal life at the cost of enduring the monster’s torture.”

Jack’s jaw clenched. “How about my wife and daughter? What did they choose? They didn’t choose this. They were innocent.”

His fists balled in anger, the muscles in his neck tightening as he ground his teeth together.

“Jack, I know your pain. I can feel it. Unfortunately, they chose to follow you. It has always been you. It always had to be you. A fighter. A broken man with nothing to lose. A man who will not compromise, who will surrender his life to benefit all.”

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Jack's breath hitched. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, buddy. What do you mean, 'surrendering his life'?"

José hovered toward the lake, his translucent form gliding over the ground. He pointed toward the dark waters.

"The cross I stole lies at the center of the lake. As deep as it could possibly be. That is where they hid it. If you want to defeat the monster, you will have to place the original wooden cross back into it. Fuse the two back together. Restore the seal."

Jack felt a cold sweat break over his skin. His gut twisted, an instinctual rejection of what he was hearing. Jack's heart pounded as José continued.

"The waters down there... they don't just hold the cross. They hold things. Things that don't sleep. I have no idea what terrors wait beneath the water. But I know the monster will fight you. Even if you make it to the bottom—" José paused, locking his eyes onto Jack's, "—you will never make it back to the top. Your life here on earth will be over."

Jack's mouth went dry. He stared at the lake, its black surface so still it looked unnatural.

Jack kicked the dirt, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. "You gotta be fucking kidding me, right? You're asking me to commit suicide? Anybody ever tell you your sales pitch sucks?" His voice cracked, torn between fury and despair. He wanted to save his daughter, free his wife's soul, and get out of this hellhole. He didn't want to die.

"No. Not suicide. Sacrifice." José's voice was solemn. "The one that surpasses all sacrifices. Just like God's Son who gave His life for mankind, your life will free all the souls taken by the monster. Your wife committed suicide, Jack, yes, because of the monster. But she made that choice. Her soul is trapped in the seventh ring of hell. Her pain and suffering will continue feeding the beast for eternity. Lisa, Crystal, and the hundreds of others—their souls are held captive, forever feeding Lucifer's pet. When the Dwyrolith is killed, you will be reunited with those you love. They will be freed. And you will truly live in peace. Forever."

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Jack fell to his knees, his vision blurring with tears. He felt like a broken man, more than ever before.

"I'm not afraid of dying," he sobbed. "I would do anything to be with my family again. But what if I'm not worthy? I'll fuck this up. I fuck everything up. I had it all, but I never saw it. I always wanted more. I cared more about what others thought of me than what mattered. I've hurt so many people. And none of them deserved it."

His shoulders shook as his body gave in to sobs, the weight of his failures pressing down on him like the crushing pull of deep water.

José hovered closer, his voice firm yet compassionate. "Jack, everything in life has a purpose. It's not for us to question. It's for us to answer when the call comes. That takes true courage. God is on your side, and no force that has ever existed is stronger than God."

Jack wiped at his face, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Through tear-filled eyes, he looked up at José. He knew there was no escaping this prison of horror. If anything, he would rather die trying than remain trapped and tortured. "What do I do?"

"The priest kept the original wooden cross locked up in his house. Find it. Then. Go to the middle of the lake and dive to the bottom. Be prepared for anything. The monster will know you are coming. When you are close, the golden cross will reveal itself to you. Place the wooden cross into the opening and pray. From there, all your worldly problems will be over. Lisa and Allison will be waiting for you. Sandy will be reunited with her family, and so will all the others trapped in torment."

Jack swallowed hard, bracing himself to ask one last question. But when he looked up, José was gone.

Jack staggered to his feet, blinking at the empty space where José had just stood. His fingers curled into fists, but there was no one left to lash out at.

"Fuck."

He sat down in the car, gripping the steering wheel as he

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tried to make sense of it all. His hands trembled. His breath was ragged. The last few months had been crazy—but this? This was something else entirely.

He closed his eyes for just a moment. The stillness of the night pressed in around him. But out in the darkness, the lake sat waiting. And it knew he was coming.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

Jack went to church as a little boy, heard all the stories about God and the Devil. But as he got older, church fell further down his list of priorities. By the time he turned thirteen, girls and video games took up most of his thoughts. Every now and then, in moments of desperation, he found himself praying—not out of faith, but as a last resort.

Even then, he doubted everything. What was life? Who gave a shit?

And then he met Allison—a ray of light that cut straight through his darkness. So many things should've gone wrong, yet somehow, everything had fallen into place. She became his rock. Slowly, he started to see things differently, but that didn't make him a believer. He was open to things. That was about it.

But now—after everything he had seen, after staring into the abyss of the Devil's work, after hearing its breath, facing its lackeys—how could he still deny God?

“I love you, Allison.”

He turned the ignition.

One way or another, this ended tonight.

Jack swerved along the lake, the road stretching endlessly before him. Not another soul in sight. He focused on the task at hand.

Kill the servants. Kill them all.

C. FLEMISH

Well, we'll see. I'll kill it, or I'll die trying.

Jack turned off onto the dirt road just past the golf course where Cooper's cabin sat nestled in the hills. He slowed down and killed his lights. The moon loomed overhead, casting its pale glow across the lake.

Even amidst all this horror, there was still beauty.

He eased off the road, steering onto a smaller dirt path. Stopping behind a thick patch of bushes, he took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. He left the keys in the ignition—just in case.

This will have to do. Maybe I'll be back. Maybe I won't.

Popping the trunk, he reached into his duffle bag, rummaging through the contents. He took the jar and stuffed it in his pocket, opened a box of ammunition and methodically reloaded the magazines for his .45. Then, he grabbed his father's double-barreled Remington 12-gauge shotgun, stuffing a handful of shells into his pocket.

Never leave home without your boomstick.

He smirked. How many times had he seen that movie?

Next, he strapped his old Marine dagger to his belt before pulling back an old blanket, revealing one of his favorite hunting tools—the Barnett Ghost 410 crossbow.

Silent and deadly.

If he could keep things quiet, that would be ideal.

Slipping the crossbow sling over his shoulder, he grabbed his AR-15 and a small backpack loaded with extra magazines.

I'm loaded like a fucking mule.

Jack carefully shut the trunk and moved toward Cooper's house, each step measured and silent. A dim speck of light flickered in the distance.

I'm coming for you, you son of a bitch.

His gear was strapped tight, keeping him silent as he crouched low, his mind racing through different entry points and angles of attack. He knew full well—he would only get one shot at this.

Three hundred feet.

DIABLO CANYON

Jack dropped to his stomach and crawled, his movements slow and deliberate.

Two hundred feet.

He reached behind him, slid his rifle off his back, and chambered a round. He tucked his backpack under a nearby coastal sage bush, leaving the zippers open for easy access. Magazines were arranged for a quick grab.

One hundred feet.

He went fully prone. The last hundred would have to be covered on his stomach. *Slow and low.*

Jack slithered to the house and pressed against the wall. The muffled sound of a late-night talk show played from inside. Peeking under the window, he ran his fingers along the frame—cheap aluminum, standard for homes built in the '70s.

Peering through the corner of the glass, he spotted Cooper.

Beer cans lay scattered on the coffee table, next to a half-smoked pack of Marlboros and the TV remote. Cooper sat on the couch, feet propped up, eyes glued to the screen.

Jack took out his dagger and carefully wedged the tip against the window.

Unlocked.

Thank God for small favors.

He positioned his crossbow in front of him, planting his foot in the cocking stirrup and pulling the string into the latch. He carefully loaded a broadhead-tipped arrow into the flight groove, then set four more in his quiver.

That should do it.

Jack slid down the wall, his back against the siding, settling into the waiting game. His fingers rested lightly on the trigger.

He focused. Counting from one to a thousand and back. Slowing his breathing. Emptying his mind.

Fifteen minutes later, he heard movement inside.

A remote dropped onto the table.

Footsteps.

C. FLEMISH

Jack carefully peeked in—Cooper was getting up, heading toward the back bathroom. A light flicked on, followed by the sound of piss hitting the toilet.

Showtime.

In one swift motion, Jack slid the window open and vaulted inside, landing silently on the balls of his feet.

Crossbow raised, he flicked off the lights and took cover behind the couch.

A deep sigh came from the bathroom. The toilet flushed.

Then—

“What the fuck?”

Cooper hesitated in the hallway, startled by the darkness. He reached for the switch.

The second the light flicked on, Jack fired.

The broadhead sliced through Cooper’s flesh and bone, pinning him to the wall.

“FUCK!” Cooper howled, straining against the shaft buried deep in his shoulder. His muscles tensed, veins bulging, rage radiating off him. He reached for the arrow—

Thwip.

A second arrow struck, embedding into his other shoulder.

Pinned like an insect.

“NOOOO!” Cooper roared.

Jack loaded another arrow as he stepped out from behind the couch.

“Howdy, Sheriff.” Jack’s voice was calm. Controlled. The crossbow remained leveled at Cooper’s head. “Thought I’d drop by. A welfare check, so to speak.”

“You’re a dead man, Morrison.” Black goop oozed from Cooper’s wounds, thick and putrid. His eyes turned to swirling smoke, an abyss of darkness.

“I’m not afraid of death, asshole. You monsters took everything from me. It’s life I fear these days.”

Cooper smirked. “You can’t kill us.”

Jack reached into his jacket and pulled out McBarr’s severed tongue, still spinning in its glass carousel.

Cooper’s smirk faltered. “What... What—”

DIABLO CANYON

Jack kicked the jar toward him. It rolled across the floor, the tongue slamming against the glass, twitching violently inside its prison.

Cooper's eyes widened. "Put that away, Morrison. Put it away."

Then—Allison's voice.

"What do you want, Jack?"

Jack froze. His breath hitched. His vision blurred.

He could see Cooper's lips moving, but it was Allison's voice.

For a moment, he lost it. His eyes burned. His chest tightened. A stinging headache shot through his skull as memories of Allison flooded his mind.

Then—the memory of holding her lifeless body.

Before the demon could tighten its grip, Jack's rage ignited.

His arms swung up. His bow fired.

The arrow tore through the air, burying itself deep in the demon's skull.

Cooper shrieked.

Jack pulled out a can of lighter fluid.

"If you kill me," Cooper hissed, "your wife and daughter's souls will be damned forever. They'll never find peace."

Jack scoffed, popping the cap off the can. "Oh? And if I let you live, you'll set them free? You're out of bargaining chips, Cooper."

Cooper's face began to shrink and distort—his flesh tightening, his eyes sinking into deep black sockets. His lips peeled back, exposing jagged, rotting teeth.

"Where is Wilms?" Jack dropped the crossbow and drew his dagger.

"Wilms?" The demon wheezed, a sick, wet sound. "Why the fuck would you want Wilms?"

"Because I'm going to kill you all. The entire trinity of evil. Then I'll kill the monster you serve."

Laughter erupted—deep, guttural, shaking the walls.

"You can't kill us, Jack. We just go to hell and come back. Our energy is eternal. We serve the darkness. The

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Devil himself sent us. You think a mortal man can stop us?”

Cooper licked his gums, his tongue rancid and slimy. His distorted form made Jack’s stomach churn.

Jack’s grip tightened on the can.

“We shall see.”

Without thinking, Jack flung lighter fluid over the monster.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

As Jack made the sign of the cross, the demon began to vibrate violently, its body convulsing as it screamed in agony. The words burned through it like fire.

Where did that come from? Jack thought.

Cooper’s twisted face contorted in panic.

“Looks like this mortal man can hurt you.”

With a swift thrust, Jack’s dagger sank into the creature’s flesh, carving a deep, gashing wound.

The flesh parted, but no blood flowed. Just stinking, black pus.

Jack grabbed the can of lighter fluid, pried the wound open with his dagger, and poured it in.

His rage boiled over.

He stabbed Cooper’s grotesque body again and again, filling every wound with butane.

Jack picked up the jar holding McBarr’s tongue.

“Now, demon. Where the fuck is Wilms?”

The creature wheezed.

The contorted face that was once Cooper spoke with a low, rumbling voice.

“You really think you could get us all? Silly little man, you can never get him. Never. He is beyond your reach. Always looking for the fallen, the desperate, the undesired. Just like you, Morrison. Why did you think he showed up at your door? Washed-up, celeb little writer.”

The mocking tone was bad enough.

But what cut deeper was the truth—Jack knew the creature was right.

The realization that his family’s pain and suffering were,

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once again, his fault hit like a blade to the gut.

His eyes burned.

Cooper could see his pain.

He inhaled it like perfume.

“Mmmm, no better pain than that of a suffering soul.”

Cooper licked his rotting gums.

“Shut up, you piece of shit.”

Jack turned on his heels, flipped the lid of the jar, and filled it with butane.

He ripped a piece of cloth from his shirt and stuffed it into the jar.

Inside, McBarr’s tongue thrashed violently, desperately searching for any friction—any escape from its submerged hell.

Jack walked toward the window and pulled his lighter from his pocket.

With a flick of his thumb, the flame burst to life.

He touched it to the wick.

The Molotov ignited.

Jack calmly stepped through the window.

He turned.

And flung the jar toward Cooper.

“Burn in hell, motherfucker!”

The jar shattered.

Fire erupted.

Cooper’s screams ripped through the night.

Jack ran.

Behind him, flames consumed the house.

Cooper’s piercing cries echoed from the inferno.

Jack turned.

Cooper’s body melted, peeling away from the wall.

At his feet, Jack saw the shattered jar, McBarr’s shriveled tongue curling as it burned.

Jack raised his father’s 12-gauge shotgun.

“Hey, Cooper.”

The creature’s melting face twitched, parts of it sloughing off in chunks.

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“I will kill the monster, just like I killed you and McBarr.
Tell your master I’m coming. And tell him—”

Jack cocked the shotgun.

“He can go fuck himself.”

BOOM.

BOOM.

Cooper’s skull liquified.

Jack turned and ran.

Behind him, the flames devoured the cabin, licking through the roof, illuminating his path through the chaparral.

He grabbed his caches, swung them over his back, and pushed forward.

When he reached his car, a wave of despair crashed over him.

Wilms.

Jack gritted his teeth.

I need to get that bastard.

I can’t let him bring more people up here.

It has to end.

The monster can have no more servants.

The task loomed over him—impossible. Overwhelming.

Jack leaned forward, his head sinking into his hands.

There must be a way.

There’s always a way.

I can’t give up. Not now.

I have to make them pay.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

Jack drove back onto the main road. It stretched out empty before him, no headlights, no signs of life. Just him and the night. He focused on the task at hand. He had no time to lose.

He had to get the cross. The key that could destroy the monster.

José said it was in his living room. He also said the monster knew I was coming for it.

That was the way. Take out the monster. Kill it. Take it out for good.

Jack turned onto the dirt road just past the church, heading toward McBarr's place. He slowed down and flicked off his headlights, his pulse steady despite the weight of what lay ahead. As he approached, he could see José was right—two cars and a pickup truck sat parked outside the cabin. A small group of men loitered near the entrance, smoking cigarettes, shotguns and double barrels slung lazily over their shoulders.

Jack came to a full stop. There was no way in without making noise. He was too close for anything but force.

He flipped on his high beams, blinding them in an instant. It might buy him the split second he needed.

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The second his door swung open, he drew his .45 and let off a few shots in their direction. The men scattered like silverfish exposed to the light, some dropping low, others diving behind cover. Jack spun, yanked open the passenger door, and dragged his bag of rifles from the seat. He unzipped it, hands working fast, and pulled out his AR-15. One fluid motion—he chambered a round, flipped the safety, and engaged the night scope.

By the time he was set, the first salvo of shots slammed into his car, ripping through metal and shattering the windshield.

“Fuck.”

Jack ground his teeth, fury burning behind his eyes. They were turning his car into a sieve. Most of them were using shotguns—less accuracy, more spread, and slower reloads. That gave him the edge.

He popped up from behind the car and spotted movement by a tree. Kipp. Son of a bitch. Jack had seen him around—an abusive bastard who beat his wife and kid.

Jack lined up his crosshairs just above the shoulders. Kipp stepped out from behind the tree—bam. The bullet punched through his forehead, splattering brain matter against the wall behind him.

Jack swung his rifle right, eyes locking onto the pickup truck. He fired at the metal, forcing the men crouching behind it to hit the ground. Exactly what he wanted. Their ankles stuck out just beneath the truck’s frame—easy targets. Jack squeezed the trigger, sending rounds into exposed flesh. Screams rang out. They hit the dirt, writhing.

Two more shots. The squirming stopped.

These weren’t soldiers. Just men who had sold their souls to the monster for favors. And Jack was here to collect.

He moved swiftly, shifting to the other side of the trunk, scanning the cabin. Movement behind the living room window. Someone inside. But that would have to wait—he needed a clear entry.

A sudden crack. The rear windshield above him exploded, glass raining down on his shoulders.

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Jack cursed, grabbing his bag. He stuffed extra magazines into his pocket, checked his .45, and loaded spare rounds for his USP. Then, flat on his chest, he crawled forward. As he reached his knees, he unleashed a sweeping spray of bullets, forcing anyone still aiming at him to take cover.

Momentum carried him forward—he landed at the right side of the cabin, giving him a full view of the battlefield.

Instinct took over.

He yanked a flashbang from his jacket, pulled the pin, and flung it toward the front entrance. It tumbled through the air in slow motion, twisting, turning.

Jack was in the zone now. No distractions. No stray thoughts. Just muscle memory, drilled into him over years of training.

The flashbang hit the ground—boom.

Two men near the cars reeled, blinded and disoriented. That was all Jack needed.

A fresh mag clicked into place. He raised his rifle, firing toward the window. The glass exploded into a million shards. Whoever had been looking out would be kissing the carpet now.

He spotted movement—one of the men was reaching for the trunk of a car.

Without hesitation, Jack fired two rounds. The bullets tore through the trunk, punching clean through the man's chest. His body hit the dirt, lifeless.

"Stay down! Stay the fuck down, or I will kill you!" Jack barked, his voice sharp as steel.

A rustling from behind the 2008 Camry. Jack moved in, rifle raised.

The man stepped out.

Jack froze.

It was Phil.

"Phil?" Jack's breath hitched.

Phil's hands shook. "Sorry, Jack. We're all just trying to survive."

"Survive?" Jack's anger flared. He kicked Phil in the face,

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knocking him to the ground. “Stay the fuck down, Phil. Maybe you’ll live.”

Jack spun back toward the cabin, pressing his back to the wall beside the door. With his rifle, he emptied a full mag into the hallway without even looking. Then, in one swift motion, he reloaded, slung the rifle over his shoulder, and grabbed his .45.

“Whoever’s inside—come out with your hands up!” His voice was calm, lethal. “I don’t want to kill anyone.”

Silence.

Jack peeked inside, quick and sharp, then ducked back. No movement. But he knew someone was in there.

Someone with balls of steel.

His grip tightened on his USP. His breathing was slow, measured. The hallway stretched before him, dark and quiet. The gunfight had wrecked his night vision, but his instincts made up for it.

Every corner was a potential ambush.

His shoulder pressed to the wall as he moved forward.

A door to his left. Jack reached out, twisting the knob. He shoved it open, fired two shots, and rolled inside.

Clear.

He checked under the bed. Behind the curtains. Nothing.

He locked the door behind him. The hallway was too exposed—he had to keep moving.

The last flashbang came from his jacket. He bit the pin, yanked it free, and hurled it into the living room.

Eyes shut. Ears covered.

Boom.

A scream.

Jack moved.

As he burst into the living room, something whistled past his face. A meat cleaver buried itself into the wooden frame above his head, missing him by inches.

John-Paul Frere.

The bastard was huge. He grunted, muscles straining as he tried to yank the cleaver free.

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Jack didn't hesitate.

Two hollow-point .45 rounds slammed into Frere's chest. His massive frame shuddered and collapsed to the floor.

Jack kept moving, scanning the room. He checked the second bedroom. Clear. The cabin was his.

He flipped on the lights.

There it was.

The cross hung above the TV—upside down.

Of course.

Jack ripped it from the wall. It was smaller than he expected, strangely light. This? This is what caused all this suffering?

The wood tingled in his hands.

No time to dwell. He pocketed the cross and turned toward the door.

A shot cracked through the night, hitting the frame. Dust and splinters flew into Jack's eyes. Blinded, he fell back to his knees.

Through the blur, he saw Phil—gun raised, finger on the trigger.

"Don't do it, Phil!" Jack shouted. "Throw the gun away!"

"I have no choice!" Phil's voice cracked. "It will kill my family if I don't!"

"Your family's already dead, Phil. Don't be a fucking idiot!"

Jack slid back, aiming for the rear wheel of the car. His trigger finger tensed—pop.

The tire exploded.

Phil flinched. A heartbeat later, Jack's next shot punched clean through his eye socket.

Silence.

Jack exhaled, muscles tight. He switched back to his AR, scanning the area through the night scope.

Clear.

He made his way to his car.

The bullet-riddled frame made his stomach turn. Not a single window survived.

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“Just one more trip, baby,” he muttered. “Just me and you now.”

The radio still worked.

“*Paint It Black*” by The Rolling Stones blared through the speakers.

Jack hit the gas.

The wrecked frame sparked as he sped toward the lake—one headlight dragging, metal grinding against asphalt.

Like a bat out of hell, he raced toward the docks.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

One headlight was hanging out of its fitting, dragging over the road, sparks flying as Jack sped through the night. Like a bat out of hell, he barreled toward the docks at the lake. He pulled in and drove to the far end, hoping someone had left a boat tied up.

He was in luck.

A few boats bobbed gently on the dark water. The moonlight had vanished, thick clouds smothering the sky. Soon, the sun would rise.

Should I wait, or just go now?

Jack picked a boat, reached into his rifle bag, and pulled out a knife. As he started to cut the rope, a stinging headache exploded behind his eyes, dropping him to his knees. It felt like a molten dagger was slowly being driven into the base of his skull. Blood streamed from his nose. His eyes contracted painfully, and his body convulsed.

"Jack, stop this. Stop." Allison's voice thrummed in his head. "What are you doing?"

He curled into a ball, the pain so excruciating he nearly blacked out. He focused on his breathing, forcing himself to concentrate.

"You are dead. You are not alive." He repeated the

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mantra through gritted teeth. "I will set you free. This is not real."

His hand slid into his pocket, fingers wrapping around the cross. A violent jolt of electricity shot through him. The headache vanished. So did Allison's voice.

Jack staggered to his feet, blinking at the lake, now blacker than black, an abyss that swallowed even the faintest ripple. He wiped the blood from his lip and started moving. The wind picked up. He knew he would have to give it everything. The monster wouldn't go easy. He threw his rifle bag into the boat and severed the final string of cord.

The cord snapped, falling into the water. Jack made the sign of the cross and shoved off. The boat drifted, rocking in the restless current, pulling him deeper into the lake's endless dark.

He zipped his pocket closed, making sure the cross wouldn't fall out. He reached inside for a small SureFire flashlight.

Jack closed his eyes. Memories flooded in. The day he met Allison. Their rushed wedding in Vegas. The moment Lisa entered their world. A warmth spread through his chest. Peace.

This is it.

He knew. And it was okay.

Without them, there was no life anyway. But if he did this, they would be free. Their souls would be reunited.

Destiny.

He slowed the boat down. This was it. This was the spot. He could feel it. This was where he needed to jump in.

Jack grabbed his rifle bag and forced deep, fast breaths into his lungs, flooding them with oxygen.

I have to make it. If I don't, my sacrifice will mean nothing.

Jack exhaled, forcing every last breath from his lungs. Then, with a final, desperate gulp of air, he filled his chest until his ribs burned. He heaved the bag overboard and clung to it, letting its weight drag him down.

The boat rocked above, empty, swallowed by the darkness.

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Jack plunged into the void, the cold closing around him like a fist. He kicked hard, driving himself deeper. Time was slipping—every second, every heartbeat—racing against the moment his lungs would betray him. He clenched the flashlight between his teeth. The deeper he sank, the warmer the water got, pressing against his chest, squeezing his ribs like a giant's grip. His heartbeat thudded in his ears, slow, heavy, like war drums beneath the silence of the abyss. His flashlight barely cut through the murk, its beam revealing only shifting shadows that darted just beyond his reach. His lungs burned. A flash of movement. Something large.

Jack tensed.

Stay on course. Sink. Don't let it distract you.

A bump against his shoulder. A sickly, slick touch. His hand clenched the knife in his pocket. Tall, sticky strings of algae slithered from the depths, reaching like fingers. Tiny air bubbles rose towards him. Something was below him. They algae tangled around his arms and legs, dragging against his skin like living veins. The strings getting thicker, slowing down his descent.

Jack slashed wildly, cutting a path forward. His light swung, illuminating a corpse wrapped in the tangled mass. The body twisted slightly in the shifting current, its mouth frozen in a silent scream. The skin stretched thin over sharp bones, pale and waxy, its hollow eyes locked wide in eternal agony. Jack's stomach lurched. *Did it move?*

The algae tightened, layer upon layer constricting his limbs. He was trapped. Frozen just feet above the bottom. He dropped his bag, freeing his other hand. Jack fought, but the more he struggled, the tighter they clung. The water filled with shredded green as he hacked at them. He saw the bag fade away. Then a muddy cloud rose. The bag had hit bottom. He was almost there.

I will fucking reach that bottom.

Jack could feel his efforts paying off. With a final, desperate burst of energy, he kicked hard, wrenching himself free from the unseen shackles that had kept him trapped.

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His body screamed for oxygen, every muscle trembling from exhaustion.

Do I have enough air left? Will I find the cross?

His vision blurred. His skull throbbed, his thoughts growing sluggish as the last of his oxygen slipped away. Struggling had nearly drained him, leaving him weak, but he forced himself to sink again, letting gravity pull him deeper into the abyss.

Then something latched onto his wrist.

A sharp, sickening *clench*.

Jack jerked, instinctively trying to rip free, but the thing—some kind of squid-like abomination—had already coiled its tentacles around his hand, tightening like a vice. The pressure built, unbearable, crushing his bones inch by inch.

Then came the teeth.

A wet, sickening crunch sent white-hot agony screaming up his arm. The bones in his wrist shifted, grinding against one another as the thing squeezed tighter, tighter—until something *snapped*.

Jack screamed. He couldn't help it.

Water surged into his mouth, icy and relentless, searing down his throat like fire. His lungs convulsed, his body rebelling against the rising pressure in his chest. Black spots burst across his vision, pulsing, spreading. His brain begged for air. Just one breath. *Just one.*

The flashlight spiraled away, its beam flickering in rapid, disorienting bursts.

And in those flashes, he saw them.

They were waiting.

Gliding just beyond the reach of the dying light, dozens—no, hundreds—of shifting shapes slithered through the abyss. At first, they were only silhouettes, twisting masses against the ink-black void. Then, in a brief flicker of light, something blinked.

Eyes.

Not just one set—*hundreds*. Some were small, clustered

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together like a spider's. Others were large, lidless, reflecting the glow of the sinking flashlight in eerie, colorless glimmers. They watched him with an unsettling patience, circling slowly, just outside the reach of his ruined hand's trailing blood.

Then the light flickered again.

They had moved.

Closer.

Their elongated bodies undulated in the water, long, spindly limbs extending from gelatinous forms. Some had too many arms, too many fingers, too many mouths. Others had no discernible shape at all, just writhing masses of pale, porous flesh that expanded and deflated, inhaling the water as though tasting him.

Then he saw the teeth.

Rows of them. Jagged. Glistening. Too large for their bodies, curving inward like barbed hooks. A mouth within a mouth within a mouth, opening wider, *unhinging*.

The flashlight flickered again.

They had stopped moving.

They weren't coming for him yet.

The thing on his wrist released him with a sudden *snap*, its tentacles vanishing into the abyss. Jack didn't need to wonder why.

His knife was gone. He hadn't even noticed it slipping from his grasp, drifting toward whatever waited below.

His fingers wouldn't move.

His hand—his *fucking hand*—was useless, the tendons slashed, the bones shattered. Through the gaping wound in his palm, strands of shredded algae drifted free, mingling with what had once been his flesh.

Darkness pressed in, thick and suffocating.

The flashlight was gone. The knife was gone. His hand was gone.

He was sinking, broken, bleeding—straight into the waiting jaws of whatever lived below.

Darkness crowded in. His lungs screamed for air, but his

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strength was gone. The last bubbles slipped from his lips, spiraling upward, vanishing into the abyss. He was ready to let go. To surrender to his fate.

Then—his hand moved.

Without thinking, his fingers slipped into his pocket, reaching for the cross. A sudden jolt of electricity tore through his body, sharp and searing, every nerve igniting in agony. Jack's muscles convulsed as the shock ripped through him, and in an instant, the algae clinging to his skin burned away, vaporized into nothing.

He was free.

But it was too late. His limbs were dead weight. His vision pulsed, the edges darkening. His body was shutting down.

Just as the void threatened to take him, a sliver of light sliced through the blackness.

Jack's fading eyes locked onto it—a ray of sunlight, cutting through the depths like a blade. It pierced the shadows, revealing what lay below.

The creatures recoiled.

They hissed, their writhing bodies flinching from the light. Their grotesque forms scattered, twisting and slithering away like insects scurrying from an open flame.

And then—he saw it.

The lake's bottom, stretching out before him. The sand shifted under the disturbance of his descent, and there, half-buried beneath the silt, a golden cross gleamed in the sunlight.

Jack hit the ground, his body collapsing in slow motion. His chest barely rose. His blinking eyes fought to stay open.

It was now or never.

With the last flicker of strength he had left, he reached forward, his trembling fingers brushing the edge of the wooden cross. It felt warm, almost alive, as if it had been waiting for him.

He swept his hand through the sand, revealing a deep slot carved into the larger cross beneath it. The space where the wooden cross had once belonged.

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Jack moved—barely.

The moment his fingers aligned the two relics, the wooden cross was ripped from his grasp, sucked into place like two magnets colliding.

The lake exploded.

A piercing shriek shattered the silence, the water vibrating with the force of it. Jack's vision went white as a surge of blinding blue light erupted from the cross, detonating outward in a shockwave.

Then—the Dwyrolith surfaced.

A nightmarish form shot from the depths, its body twisting violently as it breached the water. Sunlight struck its wet, glistening skin—and instantly, it began to burn.

The monster screeched, writhing in agony as its flesh melted away, strips of charred, blackened tissue peeling from its skeletal frame. Its tails lashed wildly, trying to escape, but there was no salvation. The light was devouring it.

It shrank.

Its monstrous form collapsed inward, reduced to a pitiful, shriveled husk as its stolen power was torn away.

The water raged, a final act of fury. The lake churned violently, waves crashing outward as a massive downward vortex opened beneath the Dwyrolith. The whirlpool yawned wide, its current dragging the creature downward, deeper, back into the cracks of the earth. Its final shriek echoed through the abyss.

Then—silence.

A column of pure light erupted from the bottom of the lake, piercing straight into the sky. Within it, thousands of luminous shapes began to rise—souls.

The trapped spirits, held hostage by the Dwyrolith for centuries, ascended in a dazzling burst, freed at last.

Jack, barely conscious, watched as the light faded. His vision blurred.

The lake settled. The ripples vanished.

And at the bottom of Devil's Lake, two crosses lay fused together—forever sealing the monster's prison.

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Across Hughes Canyon, black feathers rained from the sky.

Dead crows littered the streets, unmoving. Their hollow eyes stared at nothing, their twisted bodies a final, eerie monument.

A reckoning. A cleansing.

And somewhere, in a place beyond pain, beyond fear...

Jack Morrison was finally free.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

At the Rock Inn, Clay Johnson stepped outside. His heavy boots crunched against something brittle. He looked down—one of the crow carcasses lay beneath him, its black feathers scattering in the wind, lifted like ash from a dying fire.

He took another step and exhaled slowly. Something was different.

The air felt lighter. The light itself had changed. The eternal gray that had loomed over the valley was gone.

He lifted his face toward the sky, blinking against the brightness. The valley, once choked in mist, was now flooded with golden light. For the first time in years, he could see the true colors of the land, the deep greens of the pines, the rolling gold of the hills. The lake shimmered, no longer a pit of darkness, but a mirror reflecting the sky.

A tear slipped down his weathered cheek.

He knew. They were free.

From across the lake, a dove emerged from the trees, its white wings catching the sunlight like a beacon. Behind it, two bald eagles followed, their young struggling to keep up before catching the wind beneath its wings.

The eagles circled once, their sharp cries echoing

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through the canyon. A farewell. A release. Then, with a final, piercing shriek, they rose higher, vanishing into the endless blue.

Clay exhaled, the weight on his chest lifting, though he hadn't realized it was there. Another tear traced its way down his cheek.

"They're free," he whispered, his voice barely audible, yet carried by the wind.

In the distance, a final, distant shriek echoed across the lake. Then, silence.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

The entrance to San Francisquito Canyon, Santa Clarita, California

Hollow thuds bounced off the canyon wall as wooden stakes slowly made their way deeper into the dirt. Strike after strike, blow after blow, the hammer steadily pounded the wood dull.

Barry took a step back, catching his breath. Sweat dripped from his crooked nose, staining his cheap shirt. His hands throbbed, a raw blister already forming. He surveyed his work—a neat trail of stakes leading into the canyon. Just a few staples, a few *for sale* signs, and Barry would be back in business. A mischievous grin stretched across his weathered face.

He knelt at the first stake, staple gun in hand, and pressed a sign against the wood. A metallic *click* nailed it in place. A dry crack popped from his knees as he rose and shuffled to the next.

He never saw it coming.

A deafening screech shattered the air. Instinct screamed in his head. *Run. Move. NOW.*

But he was too slow.

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The black Ford Explorer barreled around the corner, tires shrieking against the cracked asphalt. It swerved wildly, front wheels lifting for a breathless second before the entire vehicle left the ground.

Time warped. Barry watched in slow motion as the metal beast flipped—glass shattering, steel crumpling like paper. The airborne wreck hurtled straight for him.

His legs refused to move. His arms came up in reflex, a useless shield against the ton of death roaring toward him.

Impact.

The SUV crushed his arms first, jagged steel slicing through flesh and muscle. Barry was yanked off his feet, pinned to the wreck as it rolled, his body flailing like a ragdoll in a hurricane. Bones shattered. Flesh peeled away in strips. The metal death trap dragged him, pulping his torso with every sickening crunch.

Then, silence.

The wreck settled against the hillside. The doors swung open like broken arms, surrendering. Oil and blood bled together, pooling on the fractured pavement.

A harsh, excited “KA!” cracked through the air.

Perched on a telephone post, an old, one-eyed crow bobbed its head violently, wings flapping as it let out a frenzied caw.

From beneath the twisted engine block, a hand twitched. There was hardly anything left of Barry Wilmes.

His mangled remains barely clung to the label of *human*. Meat, shattered bone, and shredded sinew—a bag of flesh emptied onto the road. His body twitched, limbs jerking as something unnatural pulled the pieces back together.

A rasping breath wheezed from his collapsed chest. His fingers scraped weakly at the pavement.

Above him, .22 swooped down, landing beside the mess of a man. The crow pecked at Barry’s exposed wrist, tearing away shreds of skin.

Barry’s remaining eye rolled wildly.

A *pop*—his artery ruptured. Black, tar-thick blood oozed out,

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sluggish and wrong. The sickly pulse of the demon's lifeblood stained the pavement, coiling like searching tendrils.

.22 hopped inside the wreck, hopping over the driver's corpse. Blood painted every inch of the vehicle's interior—but not just human blood. The demon's ichor mixed freely with gasoline.

The crow pecked at the radio. A green LED flickered to life. A voice crackled from the speakers.

"You can run on for a long time.

Run on for a long time.

Run on for a long time.

Sooner or later, God will cut you down."

.22 let out an ear-piercing caw, wings flaring.

Sparks danced from the exposed battery, snapping against the gasoline. A hiss filled the air as the first flicker of fire took hold.

"Go tell that long-tongued liar.

Go and tell that midnight rider..."

.22 hopped onto the twisted steering wheel. It cocked its head, as if smiling.

The tiny flame swelled, racing along the crimson river of fuel.

BOOM.

A dark explosion bloomed into the sky, the shape of a twisted, clawing hand reaching toward the heavens.

Black feathers and charred, broken metal rained down upon the wreckage.

Barry was still alive.

His ruined body writhed, his nerves screaming as the flames licked at his flesh. The black ichor bubbled and sizzled, fusing with gasoline and molten metal.

His remaining eye blinked once, its surface reflecting the growing firestorm. His lips parted in a final rasp—half a scream, half a curse—before the second explosion ripped him apart.

"Well, you may throw your rock and hide your hand.

Working in the dark against your fellow man.

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But as sure as God made black and white.

What's done in the dark will be brought to the light."

A second explosion shattered the night. The green glow of the LED flickered once... then died.

Johnny Cash stopped singing.

THE END

AFTERWORD

If you've made it to this afterword, I hope that means Diablo Canyon pulled you in. That's all a writer can hope for—not fame, not fortune, just the chance to share a story that means something to someone. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I never planned to write an afterword, but this story demanded it. Some stories come from the imagination. Others, like this one, feel like they come from somewhere deeper—somewhere beyond us.

In early 2006, my wife and I moved to Elizabeth Lake, an hour north of Los Angeles. Our first exploratory ride through San Francisquito Canyon left us flabbergasted by the beauty of the region. The ride up the canyon was thrilling, and when we crested the hill, Leona Valley and Elizabeth Lake sprawled before us. The sun was at just the right height, painting the landscape a deep gold. It was a truly breathtaking moment. I hope I captured that same excitement in this story.

This brings me to why I'm writing this afterword. Many of the things you just read really happened. Some events I described exactly as they occurred; others, I took liberties with to fit the story. So, please forgive me.

I never aspired to be a writer. I have no formal education in writing—no PhD in English hangs on my wall. In fact, it

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took an act of God to get me to read at all. School was not a stimulating place for me, and the literature peddled to us felt uninspiring and of little value. As a result, I resented reading for the longest time.

It wasn't until my first military deployment in the early '90s, in Croatia, that I got the bug. We were tasked with protecting the UN HQ, and as some U.S. troops were leaving, they left behind items in the common areas for others to enjoy. At the time, there was no internet. We barely had cell phones to call home. Needless to say, I was bored out of my mind during my off days. So, I finally decided to give in and try this book thing.

One book caught my eye—Patricia Cornwell's *Cruel and Unusual*. For the next two days, the reading seed took hold and grew. I couldn't put the book down and became completely immersed in the story. When I finally got the chance to call home, I asked my parents to send me as many books as they could.

Two weeks later, two big boxes filled with books arrived, and I read them all by the time I returned home. From that moment on, I read daily and never went anywhere without a book. I've read all the masters, most horror classics, and own over a thousand books, immersing myself in the genre as much as possible. But that was where it stayed—until 2007.

You wouldn't know this, but my friends, family, and wife do—I don't dream. It's very strange, and I feel a little sad about it. I wish I could travel to the bizarre worlds others do, but unfortunately, I do not dream.

That changed in 2007, several months after we purchased our little home in Elizabeth Lake. I had a dream. When I woke up, I told my wife, excited. She asked what it was about.

"I don't really know," I said. "There was a young boy. Maybe 8 or 9. That was it."

She asked if he had spoken. "No. He just stood there."

For the next four weeks, the boy visited me every night;

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he never spoke. He was just *there*, and then he was gone. Several weeks later, he pointed before disappearing. This continued for a few weeks.

I didn't know what to make of it. I even started researching the meaning of these dreams but found little to go on. Then, one night, something changed. The boy pointed again—but this time, a burned tree appeared. Its charred branches twisted inward like clenched fists, frozen in silent agony. I woke up unsettled, not knowing what it meant.

The dreams continued for months. The boy, the pointing, the tree—repeated, unchanged. Then, one night, the boy spoke. In a clear voice I can still hear today, he said, "*He wants you to write it.*" Then he vanished, and the dreams stopped. I haven't dreamed since 2007.

What was I to do with this? What did it mean? Write? Write what? I was beyond confused.

The next day, as we drove up San Francisquito Canyon, I saw it. The tree from my dreams. It stood there, just as I had seen it—burned, twisted, waiting. I could barely speak. My wife saw it too. We pulled over, staring in disbelief. I don't know what I expected that night, but the boy never returned. And I have not dreamt since.

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So, what do you do? What was I supposed to make of this?

I started asking neighbors, friends, and long-time residents about the history of our area. Everyone had a different story, and it became clear what I had to do. I had to tell the story of the place that stole my heart. A place where I felt at home and at peace. That story became *Diablo Canyon*.

I researched Tiburcio Vásquez, a brilliant and fearless man, and tried to incorporate as many elements of his history as possible. The Tataviam Tribe still calls this land home. Their traditions run deep, but many are sacred, and I

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wanted to honor that. I wove what I could into the story, but there is so much more to learn beyond these pages. I encourage you to learn more about this incredible culture and its people.

If you drive through San Francisquito Canyon, you'll pass a water station. Shortly after, on your left, you'll see a rock formation. With a little imagination, I hope you, too, can see Indian Hill come alive. A little further on your right, you can spot the site of the St. Francis Dam collapse—one of California's greatest disasters. This is where Jack and his family lost Tessie.

Tessie was real. She was my Boston Terrier. We rescued her from someone who thought she was a Chihuahua. Tessie wasn't just a pet—she was my writing companion. Every time I sat down to write, she curled up on her blanket beside me, her mismatched eyes watching as the words took shape. She was there for every page, every draft. Losing her in 2022 left a hole in my heart, but in these pages, a part of her still lives



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The *Rock Inn*—we frequented it often. The food is great, but my favorite part was in the back, behind the pool tables: a Bally's *Addams Family* pinball machine. Still my favorite. Later, a jukebox was installed, and it inspired Father McBarr. I imagined Christopher Walken dancing in Fatboy Slim's *Weapon of Choice*. That movement, that *vibe*—that became my villain. More cowbell, please.

And finally, the legend of Elizabeth Lake—the Devil's Lake. The stories are endless. I encourage you to seek them out.

Incorporating all these elements, it took me eight years to complete *Diablo Canyon*. Stories like *Diablo Canyon* aren't just fiction—they're echoes of the past, whispers of forgotten legends, waiting for someone to listen. If this book has sparked even a sliver of curiosity in you, then I've done my job.

The journey doesn't end here. Two new stories are already taking shape, and I can't wait to share them with you. Until then, stay curious. Stay haunted. And most of all—stay spooky.

Chris Flemish