

# SLAUGHTERVILLE

## THE SLASHER

CHRISTOPHER BROWN

# Slaughterville: The Slasher

Christopher Brown



Copyright © 2025 Laughing Rogue, LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the prior written permission of the copyright owner, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 979-889704468-9

Printed in the USA

Laughing Rogue, LLC  
Pine Grove, PA

<http://www.laughingrogue.com>



To my parents, I have learned so much on  
what it means to be a parent from the both of  
you.

To my friends at the Madness, I wouldn't be  
able to reach as many readers without you.

To my children, you are the reason I spend  
so many nights up late doing things like this.  
I want you to have this so that we are always  
together.









# Prologue

Bright yellow moonlight reflects off of the dew-covered grass. Fallen leaves color the landscape in oranges and browns. Autumn mist clings low to the ground as a pair of headlights cut through the early morning darkness. The crunching of stones breaks the silence as a large white truck bounces and rocks along the gravel road. Its headlights shine into the woods as it pulls off to the side. The passengers inside are jolted as they come to a sudden stop.

“Man, I can’t wait. Been lookin’ forward to this all year. Surprised it didn’t snow yet.” The driver shuts the engine off, and it clinks loudly

in the cold autumn air. The surroundings seem so much darker when the headlights go out. Wispy clouds move ominously in front of the full moon staggering the light and shadows.

The driver's side door opens, and a heavy man dressed in mismatched camouflage with an orange vest and hat steps out onto the gravel. He shifts his belt and takes a deep breath of early dawn air. When he exhales, the stream of white breath creates a cloud in front of him. He puts one heavy arm on the roof of the truck and looks, smiling, at the other side of the truck as the door opens.

"Yeah, Booper, there's nothing like a good fall morning right before a hunt. Glad we got here before first light." Their surroundings take on an eerie glow and feel oppressive with only the broken light of the moon.

The passenger slides quickly out of his seat and hops a few times to work the stiffness out of his bones. He's similarly dressed as the driver, but he's shorter and much thinner. Stringy, black hair is pulled back under his hat. "Hell yeah, Ben. Gives us plenty of time to get to the stands and get set up before the deer start moving."

The smell of damp leaves fills the air, and the sounds of crickets sing on the breeze. Ben opens the cover on the back of the truck and lays down the tailgate. Reaching inside, he pulls out a flashlight and shines it into the woods, testing the brightness. He leans the light against the tailgate to give them some light to work with. He kicks off his Crocs and slides on a pair of old boots that look like they've seen many trips into the forest. "What would you do if we saw a huge buck right here?"

Laughing, Booper clips a fanny pack around his waist before pulling out his shotgun from the backseat of the truck. "I ain't shot a deer in three years, so I'd probably freak out." Three shells click into place as he loads them into the breach. "Hey, hand me my call. I left it back there."

Ben rummages around before finding the long tube. Drawing back, Ben tosses it to Booper. The call flies through the air just over Booper's head. He reaches up to try and catch it, but he just misses. It clatters to the ground and into the dirt. Booper picks up the call and starts to wipe it off on his pants. A shifting rock rolls across the ground and comes to rest

in front of Booper. Looking up, he narrows his eyes, confused at the absurdity of what he's seeing. "Hey, you alright?"

"What? I'm fine." Ben puts his rifle on the canvas cover of the truck before closing the tailgate. The boom of the metal latch catching is loud in the early morning silence. The echo rings out as the only sound they can hear. Ben steps to the side of his truck.

"Not you. Her." Booper points past the front of the truck. A sudden fog rolls in, but the light from Ben's flashlight cuts through it.

A girl stands there, silently, in the chilly morning fog. Her dark hair and white skin shine under the light. She doesn't move, doesn't speak. Her pure black eyes stare at them.

"You need help?" Ben tilts his head and studies the girl. He picks up his rifle and walks around to stand next to Booper, keeping the light on the girl. "You hurt? Lost?" Ben moves the flashlight up and down trying to find any injuries. "What the hell are you doin' out here? Don't look like you're huntin'."

"Looks like she's going out cleaning." Booper chuckles and points to the girl's odd clothes.



She's wearing a black dress that reaches her knees. Over that is what used to be a white apron now deeply discolored to have a musty green tint. It reminds them of a maid's uniform, but it doesn't make sense. Something about this woman makes the hair on the guys' necks stand up.

"Not now." Ben shakes his head without taking his eyes off of the strange girl. "How about you come with us? We can take you to get some help."

"Dude. She don't look right." Booper backs up a few steps. His voice shakes. "I think we should get out of here."

"Not leaving some girl out here all alone in the cold and dark." Ben looks her over with his flashlight. He holds a hand out to show he's not a threat as he steps closer. "We're not here to hurt you. Do you have somewhere we can take you?"

She cocks her head, unblinking. She doesn't react to the words or the people in front of her. She just stands there, staring at them.

"Can you at least tell me your name?" The fog thickens just as Ben's flashlight flickers off and on. The strobing light reflects off of

something metal at the end of a short wooden handle. "Whadda you got there?"

Her black eyes seem to absorb the light as she blinks. She takes a step backwards and the fog swallows her. The last thing the boys see is her dark hair swirling in the breeze.

"Zum mordsackerment! Come on." Ben shakes the light and pounds on the heavy metal case until it turns back on. The beam reflects off of the fog and nothing else. The place where the girl was standing is empty now. "Dammit. Where'd she go? I don't want her getting lost out here and dying." Ben steps forward, pushing the flashlight forward as though it will add more power to the beam and cranes his neck trying to see into the dark fog. "Hey! Where are you? We're just trying to help!"

"I don't like this, man." Booper leans his shotgun against the truck and studies the ever-encroaching fog. "We should get the hell out of here. I got a bad feeling from this weird chick. She just didn't look right, and where'd she go all of a sudden? It's like she just freaking disappeared. Reminds me of that story from when we were kids about the killer chick."

“How the hell should I know where she is? And we don’t have time for kid’s stories.” Ben scans the fog with the flashlight, the light tracing an X-shaped pattern in the early dawn darkness. “Can’t see a damn thing. Girl! Where are you?” He turns, shining the flashlight on Booper just in time to see the axe fall. Time slows to a crawl for Ben.

\*\*\*\*\*

Booper gives a small chuckle of confusion for just a second. Everything happens so quickly that he barely has any time to wonder why Ben looks so scared. “What’s got you...” The question is cut off when the unnaturally cold steel bites deep into his neck, Booper screams and chokes. He grabs at his throat trying desperately to keep his precious life inside. *‘Why can’t I breathe? What’s going on? Why’s Ben looking at me like that?’* It’s no use though, his blood flies through his clutching fingers to create a monochrome rainbow. Where it lands, it colors the white truck red.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Gckk...” Booper gasps and reaches out for help. His severed neck splits, the skin

tearing easily against the blade still embedded solidly. His lifeblood erupts in spurts and drains into the dirt. The girl's face is expressionless as Booper dies at her feet. Ben's brows arch in anger as he screams and takes a step back to put some distance between him and the girl. She looks up at Ben, and a black tongue reaches out over sharpened teeth to lick some blood off of her lips.

"What the hell?!?" Ben raises his rifle, bringing the stock firmly and familiarly to his shoulder. Instinct lets him quickly find his target, and he fires. The .308 bullet slams into her chest with a loud crack. Black blood erupts from a hole in her back as the bullet exits. As her blood falls to the ground, the black mixes with Booper's red. She looks down at the entrance hole in her chest like it's a small annoyance before falling backwards. When her hand slams into the hard dirt, the axe that murdered Booper leaves a trail of disturbed earth as it bounces.

"Screw you, bitch." Standing over her, Ben, filling the act with hate, spits onto her face before raising the rifle and firing another round into her head. "That's for Booper!" Fragments

of skull and brain fountain out into the air and paint a cone of black on the road.

Deep, heavy breaths come from his lungs as he backs up to lean onto his truck. The two bodies lie in the dirt, but Ben only gives a damn about one of them. "Bitch can rot for all I care."

The canvas tarp makes a muffled echo as the gun is tossed on it. Ben kneels down and looks into Booper's eyes. He starts to close them when Booper gives a small shudder. "Holy God!! Gonna get you to the hospital buddy. They'll know what to do for ya. You just stay with me." He starts pulling Booper to the passenger side of the truck with a series of grunts and groans. Even though he looks smaller, Booper is still heavy. Ben feels the blood flowing over his hand and knows that Booper doesn't have much time.

Struggling, Ben grunts as he tries to lift Booper's bloody and limp body into the front of the truck. Veins stick out on his forehead as he heaves and shoves. His breaths come heavy and desperate as they try to take precious oxygen to straining muscles. "Not gonna leave you here man." A rustling from behind him makes Ben



quickly turn. The girl is suddenly standing in front of him as if she were always there, the hole through her head is gone, but the black blood is still wet on her face. There's a smell of deep water coming from her. Ben stares at those sharp teeth as she opens her mouth like she's trying to say something. Her black eyes never blink.

“What the hell are you?” Ben never gets an answer. The air whistles as she cuts through his head, shearing off the top of the skull. He blinks a few times before he collapses.



# Chapter 1

## A Few Hours Earlier

Caroline is staring at the fire as the pages burn. Her long, dark hair is dirty and wet with sweat and blood. A myriad of pains are fighting for attention, but she stays there, kneeling before the fire. She will see these pages burn! Her sister, Beth, is standing next to her carefully cradling her two broken arms. They'd just been through a week of terror and torture and, now that it's over, they have time to feel the pain and get the rest they need. Her knees creak and crack as she stands. A twinging pain in her back wants her to lie down somewhere

comfortable. She can't, though, she has to take Beth and John to the hospital.

John's groaning draws her attention to the car. He's usually taller, but he looks so small hunched over the hood of the car. Torn, broken, and bloody; John waits patiently for them to finish their duty. She takes a moment to process her life to this point. *'All of this started so long ago when Maddie was killed. A werewolf murdered my youngest sister when we were kids. Beth and I were there, we brought her into those woods to play. We were so innocent then. So naive. So stupid. We saw everything, but no one believed us. Who would, right? I swore then that no one else would lose someone they love to these monsters if I could help it. After Beth left, I stayed behind and tried so hard. I got a group that we called The Citizens together, and we thought we knew so much, but we didn't know a damn thing. Yeah, we stopped a few incidents here and there, but did we finally get justice for Maddie? No. Not yet anyway.'*

She and The Citizens wanted to find out the dark secrets of Slaughterville. *'Well, guess we did that. In just the last week or so, I helped*

*steal some freaky book, got kidnapped, lost my husband, Billy, and I got tortured. Then Beth came back when I went missing. She and John found me and got me out of that cave, but she got kidnapped. Me and John went through a whole pantheon of hells to get Beth back. They wanted that book we stole, but we got them back in the end.'*

*'That book...it's been the bane of my existence! See, we were told about it because... well, that's not important. What happened is; we got it from these Cultists, and it was weird. Had strange writing and made me want to throw up just looking at the letters and symbols. The Cultists wanted it back, bad. They sent werewolves out after us, and one of them killed Billy. Werewolves!! Turns out, they were people I trusted. One of them, I used to call Uncle Dave! Another one is the Chief of Police! But we got them. Dave and Debbie are dead. They won't be hunting us anymore, but the Chief and Dave's wife Janice are still out there. Sure, they took the book back, but Beth was smart enough to take some of the pages. Now, we're burning them and, hopefully, it stops whatever evil thing they had planned with it.'*

She brushes some of the dirt off of her torn pants as she walks over to the car. *‘He really doesn’t look very good. He’s so pale and he looks like he can barely hold himself up. His short, blonde hair is plastered to his head. From blood or sweat, I can’t say. He’s not a big guy, but he’s strong enough to have taken on two werewolves. Granted, sure, he didn’t fare so well. Of course, none of us are in really great shape. Guess it makes sense after a fight with werewolves. At least he’s alive to feel the pain. Small blessings and all that. Gotta get him inside before we have to lift him into the car.’*

She gets to the car and pulls the knob for the headlights that point more towards the lake. Enough light reflects off of the metal siding of the boat house to illuminate the path to the car. “There you go, Beth. Can’t have you falling...”

The series of events happens so quickly, she doesn’t have time to react. Stunned, she can only watch as the blade of the axe falls. It slices through the top of Beth’s head, cutting the skull neatly in half as it travels downward. Blood soars as the blade bisects her. The cracking and crunching of splitting bone are so loud in the



otherwise silent evening. The gleaming metal stops when it hits the base of Beth's neck. Blood pours like a river, bone splinters and flies, and brains fall to the ground with a splat. Beth's body falls to its knees before collapsing to lie in the dirt. The axe firmly embedded.

"No!" *'Not her, too. Not now.'* Bile reaches the back of her throat, burning and stinging. Stealing her voice. She's not sure she could use it anyway. She doesn't know what words she could scream to convey the pain.

John screams and tries to run despite his injuries. The torturous fight with the werewolves has drained so much from him that he can barely breathe much less run. "Beth!"

The insanity of the situation threatens to shatter her mind. Caroline collapses to her knees, hearing her mother's cries from so long ago. As the sound pierces her ears, the pain tears at her throat. It's then she realizes the screams are not coming from that life-changing day so long ago. They're not a memory of her mother's anguish. They're coming from her.

Struggling to pull the axe free from Beth's spine where it's lodged is a young woman. Her skin is pale white and sickly looking. Long,

black hair clings to her skull that tilts when she looks down at her axe. Eyes made of the deepest black never blink as they stare at the carnage she created.

Caroline digs her fingers into the gravel and dirt of the parking lot as she claws herself forward. She doesn't know why she's not moving. "No!" She claws trenches into the dirt as she struggles to reach Beth's body. John's shaking arms tighten around her, holding her in place. She tries to scream, but her throat tightens, and she can only think of Maddie, Billy, and now Beth!

Rain starts to fall, mixing with blood and dirt. She's hoisted off the ground, her arms still reaching out for Beth's body. John sounds like he's trying to hold back a scream of pain as he tries to wrangle her thrashing body. "Caroline! There's nothing we can do. I wish we could, but I don't know what I got left in me. We gotta get out of here!"

Blindly, she throws an elbow into his jaw, loosening his grip. John holds on, but she can feel him shaking, struggling to stand. "I'm not leaving her." *'We finally kill those damn werewolves and Beth's taken out by some girl?!'*

With a wet crack, the axe comes free of Beth's spine and the Slasher stalks forward, expressionless. Her alabaster skin glows white and amber from the dancing light of the fire. Blood drips from the chipped blade. Her bare feet ignore the sharp rocks as they cut and dig into her. Dark, dead eyes are locked onto Caroline and John.

"Caroline. Please." John groans as he tries to speak. A line of blood trickles from the corner of his mouth. "I can't. She's gone, Caroline. She'd want you to live. I can't save her, but I can save you for her. We have to go. They won't get away with this, I promise."

Pain and exhaustion from days of captivity and fighting monsters fill her. *'I know he's right, but I can't leave Beth.'* A strong pull on her arm threatens to take her to the ground. John lands in the dirt, holding his ribs. Images of John's fight with the werewolves and the monster in the forest flash through her mind. She hears the sick, meaty thuds as if she were seeing him get pummeled and thrown around all over again. *'I don't think I can take her alone and he needs medical attention.'* "RAAGHH! Fine. Let's go."

The Slasher stalks closer and closer, moving casually like she has all the time in the world, while still managing to gain ground quickly. Caroline slides into the driver's seat and John collapses into the passenger seat. The engine grinds as it refuses to turn over. She cranks the key harder as panic starts to set in. Red taillights illuminate the parking lot, tinting the Slasher a demonic scarlet.

"Come on you stupid piece of garbage!" She turns to look out the passenger window as she desperately twists the key again to the point where it nearly snaps off in the ignition. John coughs in time with the engine as it sputters and spits, trying to start, but it dies again. Slamming a hand on the steering wheel, she keeps one eye on the Slasher who stalks closer. Blood and gore drip from the axe as it swings casually by the Slasher's side.

With a roar, the engine turns over just as the Slasher nears the car. Caroline slams the car into reverse and flies backwards out of the spot, swinging the front of the car to face the camp's exit. The headlights flick over the lake like spotlights as the beams swing over the surface

“GNNNHH” John slams against the door as the car whips around violently. He coughs blood onto the dashboard.

She slams the car into drive and pushes the gas pedal all the way to the floor. The tires spit dirt and rocks up behind them as they try to find traction, showering the Slasher, as the car fishtails out of the parking lot. The reflection in the review mirror shows just how close to death they were as the Slasher swings her axe and it narrowly misses the car.

Accelerating, she loses control of the car for a moment as the back-end slides and slams into a wooden post. She keeps a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel as the car threatens to spin out of control. The car thrusts forward under the wooden arch of the campground. The tires squeal when they grab onto the asphalt and rocket them into the night away from the campground and the Slasher.

The review mirror shows the Slasher, highlighted by the glow of the parking lot lights, standing under the camp’s arch as she and John peel off into the night. *‘I’ll be back for you. You can count on that.’* John’s groaning cuts through her anger and she eases the pressure off



of the gas pedal, slowing the car down a little. "Hold on, John. We'll get you some help."

"No hospital." His voice is so weak. He sounds like he's fading fast. "They'll call the Chief, and we don't need any more werewolves tonight."

"Right...right. Can't believe I didn't think of that." She fights with the steering wheel as she races along the dark back roads, ever watchful for something to jump out from woods and into the front of their car. The yellow lines of the road help guide her. "Reese might know what we should do here. He seems to know just about everything."

Pain-filled moans and coughs laced with blood are all that lets her know John is still among the living. When John mercifully passes out, his head clunks solidly against the passenger window. A small trickle of blood traces a line as it travels down the window. He doesn't make a sound.

"Stay with us, John!" The tires squeal as she practically slides around a deceptively tight turn. "We can't do this without you. Beth would want you to fight! She'd want you to live!"

A harrowing ride through the back country opens up into the familiar residential neighborhood. The tires bounce up onto the sidewalk and the car scrapes, sending sparks flying, as she desperately maneuvers the car into Reese's driveway. She slams on the brakes, bringing the car to a screeching stop. John is rocked violently back and forth as his unconscious body is tossed around from her reckless driving. A fresh coughing fit wracks him, but he doesn't seem to wake up.

The car's horn blares and echoes through the dark night. The bright light comes on over Reese's door like a beacon in the night. She forces her tired and aching body to get out of the car and move quickly. She rushes over to open John's door, and he nearly slumps to the ground. *'Oh, God. There's so much blood.'* She stares for a moment in shock at it all but then reaches under his arm to help him stand. She can feel the shaking that is subtly running through his body.

"Ughh." John's groans come out in barely a whisper. He tries to speak, but his eyes glaze over and his head lolls to one side. His breathing is shallow and stunted.

The clicking of several locks makes Caroline look up. Reese is already rushing towards them, worry and fear covering his face. He stammers something she can't understand.

"Took you long enough." Caroline chastises Reese more harshly than she might have otherwise.

"You're welcome." Reese gives her an admonishing, but worried look. "What the hell happened to you two out there? The last thing I knew, you two were trading a book for Beth. I take it that the exchange didn't go as planned. I was worried half to death. I can't believe you won. You did win, right? Where's the book? Wait, where's Beth?"

The words become stuck in her throat, and she very nearly chokes on them. Wet eyes turn up to Reese, and he stops talking. "Oh dear...Oh...We can continue this later. Let's get him inside."

John is much heavier than she imagined he would be. Her hands slip off of him as she pulls. She stumbles and nearly falls backwards, but Reese catches her before she hits the driveway. Together, they carefully pull the unconscious John out of the car and stand

him somewhat upright between them. Before John's legs completely give out, she is able to slide under John's left shoulder while Reese props him up on his right. Together, they walk him up the front stairs of the house.

The door stands open and the warmth of the home washes over her. She turns to the side, letting Reese take the lead. They carefully maneuver him into the living room and to the couch.

Groaning, John gingerly settles onto the couch. He coughs, wincing from the pain. His eyes pop open filled with fear, hurt, and anger. His voice is raspy and weak. "She's gone! This...thing...came out of nowhere and killed her right in front of us!" He coughs blood into his hand. "Nothing we could do. Too fast. One second it wasn't there and then next it was."

Reaching out, Reese touches John's forehead and recoils. "He's burning up. John, can you hear me? Was it another werewolf?"

Sweat pours as John shivers from the fever. "No...something else..."

She looks down at John, her own injuries catching up to her as the adrenaline and shock are wearing off. Barely making it to the

chair, she sinks into the soft cushion. The night plays over and over in high speed as she tries to come to grips with the death of another sister. Tears fall freely. *'I just wanted to stop whatever killed Maddie. Now, I've gotten Billy killed, John hurt, Beth's gone, and those bastards have everything they wanted. I failed everyone!'*

A warm, steady hand pushes something into her palm. She looks down with hazy, blurry eyes and sees a pair of pills. Reese places a bottle of water on the table beside her before moving to John. She takes the pills. They taste bitter, but the water quickly washes that away.

Reese picks up John's head and puts some pills in his mouth before helping him drink. John spits out some of the water and it's tinted red. After a few tries, John manages to swallow the pills. Reese lowers his head to the pillow and covers him with a blanket. "Relax now, John. You've been through an ordeal, and you need rest. We can talk in the morning."

*'Why's the whole room stretching? What's happening?'* Dizziness and fatigue fill her as she's lead somewhere else. Her feet shuffle and drag, but they follow on their own. "Where..."

“I am sorry about this, Caroline, but... it needed to be done.” Reese continues to lead her somewhere.

The soft clouds she’s resting on envelop her. “Whadja do?” The room starts to spin. ‘*It’s strange whacha see when...*’ “Ya hair’s messy.” She watches Reese reach up to his normally well-kept short, dark hair. His dark eyes look even deeper thanks to his olive skin. She stares into the concerned face as her eyes lose focus and dim. She sinks into oblivion.

“Rest. We’ll talk in the morning.” Reese’s proper British accent sounds muffled as she slides into blissful sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

The clock ticks slowly, Reese glances nervously at it as he works taking note of the late hour. He knows the best he can do is make sure John and Caroline are comfortable and resting from their ordeal. He spent the last hour moving back and forth between the both of them, the fatigue and late hour setting in, but he knows his duty. He must keep them safe. For a while, he was confident that he could handle things, but as the bloody cloths start to pile up, he starts to feel doubt. John

seems to be stabilizing, his breathing returning to normal, but the fever is getting worse.

He dumps out another bowl of bloody water. A rattling and moaning from the living room makes him rush back in. John is lying there, shaking and thrashing as a seizure takes over. He gently grabs hold of John and tries to make sure that he doesn't fall from the couch remembering that you should never restrain a seizing person. Once the tremors subside, Reese wipes sweat from his forehead and stands. *'I need help.'*

A short while later, the soft knock on the door makes him sigh with relief. The locks click as he begins to open the many different locks. *'They're good for keeping out the undesirables, but when we need to get help quickly, these locks can be a burden. I know they make fun of me for having all of these locks, but I need them. I didn't have them before, and now the people I loved are gone.'* The rapping on the door takes him out of his thoughts. "Yes. Hold please. I'm here."

He swings the door open just enough to see who's standing there. Once he sees who it is, he opens the door fully and waves to the

woman on the step. She comes inside, carrying a large bag of supplies. "Veronica. Thank you for coming so quickly." She's shorter than Reese, but heavier. Dark, curly hair barely reaches her shoulder. She keeps nervously looking around her as if something is going to snatch her from the steps.

"Not a problem. I owe you guys a lot after last year." Veronica looks like she's far away for a moment before shaking her head.

Flashes of an adventure that seems so long ago flit through his mind. After the news story of a woman going missing, we were given a note from someone named Tyler. All it said was that this same woman was in trouble, and we should find her. She was an EMT, and the ambulance she was driving was found abandoned on the side of the road near the edge of town. The Citizens, R.D. and George mainly, tracked her to the lumber mill and managed to free her from those Cultists. This was our first real proof that they were operating in the shadows.

Veronica has been a good friend and ally ever since. She doesn't want to be an official part of the Citizens and prefers to keep to



herself. However, she's patched up more than a few of our cuts and bruises after one mishap or another. *'I remember the one time...'*

A waving hand brushes away the memory. *'Not now, old boy.'* He rubs his hands together. "What do you need me to do?" He watches her get to work, methodically pulling out gauze and other materials as she cleans and dresses the many wounds.

"I need fresh towels and a bowl of warm water. I may need you to hold him down if the time comes for it. What happened here?" She puts a hand up to stop Reese from speaking. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

Sweat pours from John as she sutures his wounds. "Reese, he's going to need..." A seizure wracks John, and she drops the forceps. "Get over here and help! Just make sure he doesn't roll off this couch!"

"Come on, John. You can make it through this." His heart races as he watches John convulse. As John settles, Reese stands and exhales a breath he doesn't remember holding. "Thank God." *'I couldn't explain a dead police officer on my sofa. Especially not one from a different city who happened to be engaged to*

*Caroline's sister, Beth, who came to town to find Caroline who was missing, but now Beth may be dead, too. It's like one of those daytime dramas which I normally like, but not when I am living the damned thing.'*

"This man really should be taken to a hospital." Veronica stares up at Reese.

"Well, actually..." Reese holds up a hand as he nervously stammers.

She waves away his response. "Yeah, I get it. You did something that was less than legal and can't take him because they'd call the authorities. You know your secret is safe, but I need you to promise me that if he gets worse and the fever doesn't break, you'll take him to get proper care."

"Of course." Reese stands there, feeling useless and unsure. "Do you think he'll recover?"

"That's up to him." She finishes the sutures and stands. "He went through a lot, and it looks like it's been piling up." Reese follows her to the kitchen and removes his dishes from the sink so she can clean up. While she washes her hands, the red streaks swirl around the drain. He stares at the blood as it drains away.

“There’s one more patient.” He feels guilty for putting so much on her. “Please, follow me.”

The door to the bedroom opens. It creaks a little, which makes him wince, but Caroline snores softly and unaware. Quietly and carefully, they move to the side of the bed. Veronica aims a thermometer at Caroline’s head careful not to make contact and wake her. “She doesn’t have a fever at least.”

“I’m going to wait outside while you finish up. If you need anything, just ask.” Reese steps outside and walks into the living room.

After finishing her examination, Veronica steps from the hall and into the living room. Reese watches her as she walks, looking for some tell or sign of concern. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. She seems relatively fine aside from a few scrapes and bruises. You should also make sure that she eats something. She looks like she hasn’t eaten well in days. Otherwise, I couldn’t find anything that a good long rest won’t cure.” Veronica closes the door quietly, and, together, they walk back to the living room. John rests fitfully, but he’s not

shaking anymore. She picks up her bag and pulls out a couple bottles of pills. "I don't have anything for the seizures, but here's some pain meds. I'll try to keep squirreling some away for you guys, but this is all I have for now."

"Thank you so much. I don't know what we'd have done if you hadn't been here." He looks at her sheepishly.

"Just tell them to try being a bit more careful." She gives him a full, warm hug. "Tell Caroline I said hello and, if she wants to see me, it doesn't just have to only be when she needs medical attention." He watches her from the front porch as she gets to her car and pulls away.

The rest of the night passes slowly but, thankfully, uneventfully. He stands vigilant. Well, sits in his favorite chair vigilant. A cup of hot tea in his hand as he watches over his charge. *'A few days ago, this strange man marched right up to my door and looked like he was about to sock me right in the nose. Now, here he is recuperating on my couch, and I am keeping watch over him. What strange days these are.'* John coughs wetly a few times but settles back into a deep fitful sleep.

*'I thought the strangest thing was planning a robbery, but then Billy and Caroline went missing. Then Beth and John came looking for Caroline. We got proof werewolves were real! All within a few days...'* He doesn't feel his eyes close as he slips into sleep.

Reese startles awake to a tap on his shoulder. Caroline looks down at him, smiling. "Hey."

Sputtering, he shifts in the chair. The cup of tea sits stone cold on the table beside him. "Oh. Sorry. Must have dozed." The clock on the wall reads 6 A.M.

"It's fine." She limps over and looks down at John. "How is he?"

"He had a severe fever and seizures. It was touch and go, but I was assured he should pull through." Reese picks up his cup and stands, staring sadly at the tepid liquid inside. "Veronica came. She took care of him."

"Thank God for her. And for you. Sorry about being snappy last night." Caroline rubs her eyes, stretches the fatigue out of her muscles, and groans as she walks with Reese into the kitchen.

“Here. Sit.” He pulls out a chair for her. “It’s alright. I don’t blame you. Now, I knew you needed rest, so I didn’t want to pry too much last night, but I need you to tell me exactly what happened.”

As she explains the entirety of the last evening, he sets out a cup of coffee for her. ‘*I will never understand the American fascination with hot bean water, but to each their own I guess.*’ He understands the importance of her talking this out so that she can start to heal mentally like she’s doing physically. Caroline starts with their arrival at the campground. She tells all about Dave’s brutality and Debbie’s death. She smiles as she recounts John shooting Dave with the silver revolver.

“And then that Tall guy just took the book. We were just so damn powerless. Those monsters were just too strong. You can see what Dave did to John. If it wasn’t for you giving us the gun, we would have all...” It’s at this point that she chokes up. She trails off, her mouth opening to say something, but the words refuse to come out.

He sits, marveling at the horrific events. He takes it in and catalogs each piece of

information. "I understand. Take your time." Reaching out, he pats her hand and gives it a squeeze.

"It was her, Reese." Her eyes go cold as she drifts away from the present and is pulled back to the tragedy of the night before. "The Slasher. She killed Beth."

"Are you sure?" His eyes are wide, his heart races, and he hates himself for it. He's heard of her, of course. He's known witnesses and there's always been rumors, but he thought she was dormant until the other night's attack.

"Before the Tall Thin Man took the book, Beth tore out some of the pages and hid them. I didn't know until she told me. I grabbed them out of the hiding spot and then took them to the fire pit to destroy them. We were burning the pages of that damn, cursed book and suddenly there she was. One second there was nothing there, and then it's like she stepped out of the shadow. Didn't make sense. She was wearing a full-blown maid outfit! I was already over by the car, John looked like he was about to pass out, and Beth was watching the fire. It was like she poured out of the shadow. She had this axe up over Beth's head and..."

“You don’t have to do this. I can infer.”  
He stands, pushing in his chair. “Let me get something from the records room. We should know what we’re dealing with.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Caroline listens to Reese’s retreating footsteps as he goes to the room at the back of his house that they call the records room. It’s the room where he keeps the documents they’ve gathered up during their many hours of research. She stares into the shimmering surface of her coffee, swirling the cup. The physical pain of the night before is there, but it’s nothing compared to the emotional. *‘All of this is my fault. They’re both dead because of me. I took little Maddie into the woods, and I’m the reason Beth came back to this damn town. I’m the reason they’re dead.’* John’s groaning brings her back to the present. She grabs a tea towel from the drawer and wipes her eyes.

On the counter is a block of wood with several knives in the slots. *‘I just keep getting the people I love killed. I don’t want to hurt anyone else. I just want to be with them again.’* She stares at the blades until Reese closes the door to the records room. She hurriedly wets



the tea towel and washes her face. As Reese sets the files on the table, she sits back down.

“Caroline.” Reese kneels in front of her and takes her hands in his. “It’s okay if you need to take some time. We can do this after...”

“No. No...” She coughs and brushes her hair from her face. Sitting up straighter in the chair, she pulls the stack of papers closer. “I know that you mean well, but I need to do something. We need to get Beth and then kill this thing if it’s even possible. Thankfully, we know where she is. All the rumors tell us she’s only been seen at that campground.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher stares down at the hunter’s bodies. Their light is gone. She stares at her chipped axe blade. She turns away from the bodies and starts walking towards the town. Her dark eyes don’t see it, but something inside of her knows that they’re out there. The lights are all around her. Before, she couldn’t do anything about the offending brightness. Now, she’s free. She shuffles through the fallen leaves and blood as she walks towards the lights. The first rays of sunlight break through the top of the trees and shine on her as she leaves.



## Chapter 2

Sunlight streams through the windows, and the beam lands on John. He sits up against his body's better judgment. "Nnghh." His head feels full of rabbits running and kicking. It's hard to focus on anything but the pain. *'Where am I? It's all so...NO! Beth! I failed her. I let her get killed. How could I...Oh, God.'*

He puts his head in his hands and tries to force it to clear. He doesn't feel great, but it doesn't hurt as much as he expected after being tossed around like a rag doll for the last few days. His eyes practically scream as errant rays of sunlight break through his defenses.

On the coffee table is a bottle of pills. He picks it up and reads it. *'Acetaminophen with Codeine. No wonder I don't feel as bad. If only it took away other pain.'* He can't stop the images from flooding in. He watches helplessly as Beth is murdered in front of him. *'I was trained for this. I am supposed to protect people. How'd she get the drop on us? How was she strong enough to..?'*

"Ah, good. You're awake. Here, drink this." Reese hands him a cup of tea.

"I'd prefer coffee but thank you." He blows on the steaming liquid before taking a small sip. It hits his stomach and spreads warmth through his tired muscles.

"Well, after last night, I am surprised you're even breathing. Now, don't move around much. You're all stitched up, and I don't want you to tear them open." Reese settles into his familiar chair.

"I don't remember much after leaving the camp, but I appreciate whatever was done." John sets the cup down and lies back, resting his head against the back of the couch.

Reese stretches and moves around in the chair. "You showed up here almost dead,

with a high fever, and seizures. I had to call in a favor from an old friend to take care of you.”

John sits up suddenly, regretting the decision immediately as a fresh wave of pain and nausea kick him in the gut. “You brought someone here?”

Reese puts up a placating hand. “No need to worry. She’s someone you can trust.”

The television turns on, and John watches despite wanting nothing more than to close his eyes and lie back down. Caroline is holding the remote and flipping through the channels. She settles on the local morning news. Sitting next to John, she leans her head down. “Hey. Glad you made it through the night.”

“Caroline...I am so...” He chokes back the tears, but he can’t finish the sentence.

“I know. We’ll feel this later. Now, you need to rest up and recover.” Caroline pats him on the leg before cursing loudly and often in such a way that Marines would ask her to watch her language.

Each of them turns to look at what caused Caroline to spew a colorful stream of

expletives. On the television is a Special News Bulletin. The anchor at the desk is shuffling papers and the lower part of the screen reads: *Mayor To Speak At The Campground Shortly.*

*'They found Beth. There's gonna be an investigation, that's just natural. Did we leave anything they could tie to us? My blood is everywhere. Dammit! I'm gonna get them all caught! Calm down, John. Remember to get the facts before you react. Hear what they have to say first.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

*'Look at them all. My people. My charges. They don't know and I have to keep it that way.'* The Mayor is a shorter thin man, standing just over five and a half feet. His wispy white hair rings the side of his head, the bald top shining under the morning sun. Wire-rimmed glasses sit atop a bulbous nose under which rests a bushy mustache. He looks out over the crowd gathered at the campground and smiles. He takes hold of the podium, relishing the feel of the wood and the attention that it commands.

On his right is Chief Wallace, a tall man who looks like he just stepped out of

an Old West town. His wide-brimmed hat is pulled low, but the man stands still and tall clearly commanding authority. The Mayor is a stark contrast to this stoic guardian.

“Well, Chief.” The Mayor maintains his smile while talking to Chief Wallace. “You know you could relax a little. We’ve got this under control.”

“We can’t afford to relax right now, Mike.” Chief Wallace scans the trees and lake around the crowd of people. “I’m glad Evalyn’s not here already. I thought she might show up. We’re not ready for her yet. Are you sure that this is a good idea?”

Mayor Michael Wheeler bristles a little at being called *Mike*. He’s never liked it, but if anyone has earned the right to call him that, it’s Chief Wallace. “Bertram,” He ignores the slight growl from the Chief. “I always appreciate your dedication. We will get through this. In the meantime, I guess we should get started. The people need to know they’re safe and we have a lot of work to do to make sure they are.”

Mayor Wheeler raises his hands to get everyone’s attention. The crowd quiets and looks up at him. He knows how to deal

with a crowd and gives a pause for them to anticipate and wonder. He takes a few deep breaths to force the pause. "I want to thank you all for coming and meeting me here on this wonderful, fall day."

The crowd claps and cheers. He lets it ring for a few moments before raising a hand to stop them. "Thank you. Really. It's good to see all of you here, especially after such a tragedy. Our community coming together fills me with such pride and hope."

He spreads his arms wide to take in the whole group of assembled people. "Our beautiful town of Slaughterville has seen its share of unfortunate events in the last couple of days. Sadly, we lost some of our own this last week. Those animals killed Billy Moore."

"Dave, sweet Diner Dave, and everyone's favorite waitress Debbie, you all knew them from the diner." He looks over the assembled masses and revels in their rapt attention. "I know you do because we've all been in the diner. They were tragically taken from us while trying to stop those horrifying beasts. Our hearts go out to Dave's wife Janice as she takes this time to grieve alone with her

family. She's asked that donations in Dave's memory go to the Community Center for the town that he so loved. Others were hurt, but they are on the way to recovery. Today, I wanted to assure each and every one of you that all of those animals have been rounded up and taken care of. We are watching out for you. Always." The crowd explodes in a loud cheer that he drinks in like so much manna from Heaven.

Chief Wallace looks almost shocked when Mayor Wheeler puts an arm around him and presses him forward to stand in front of the crowd. "The wolves that were plaguing these woods have been removed thanks to the works of our wonderful and dedicated Chief Wallace! Give him a round of applause and show him your love everybody."

Mayor Wheeler pauses and lets the cacophony roll over him and Chief Wallace. He can feel the low growl reverberating in Chief Wallace's large chest. "I am confident we've seen the last of the attacks caused by those animals and to prove it, what better way than this."

The sound of diesel engines roars as two long yellow buses pull into the campground's



parking lot. Mayor Wheeler holds out a hand like he's presenting the buses to the people. They come to a stop with a hiss and click. "Let's welcome the first of many campers to the newly opened Camp Slaughterville! As you know, this camp has been a staple in our community for years, and we look forward to many adventures to come!"

\*\*\*\*\*

In the peaceful tranquility of the residential neighborhood of Slaughterville, at a home sitting on the edge of the neighborhood, a man crouches down next to a small row of flowers. He looks around his ample yard and loves that he bought a home so far removed from the main street of town. Forest trees, dirt roads, and animals of all kinds are gifts he cherishes. He reaches with a gloved hand into a small bag filled with fertilizer. As he spreads the fertilizer, he hums along to the upbeat song coming through the headphones he's wearing.

Unaware and immersed in his work, he starts pulling out weeds and throwing them to the side. Behind him is a set of large bushes. He knows he needs to trim them, but that's a project for tomorrow.

\*\*\*\*\*

From between the bushes comes a demure nightmare. A ripple in the shadow widens and then fades away. The Slasher emerges from the dark part of the forest like a wraith, her bare feet leaving tracks in the dirt. The bright morning sun glints off of her pristine skin. All of the injuries from earlier are gone. So are the memories of her last kills. Once their light is gone, they are no longer important to her.

She watches the man work as she walks; she doesn't pay attention to anything around her except for this man. His light angers her. She doesn't show it, but this light draws her to extinguish it. She can hear voices coming from inside the house, but the noises do not really register to her. Her mind is focused on her task; eliminate the light and return home.

\*\*\*\*\*

The man sits straight, an audible grunt and groan escaping involuntarily. His hands rubbing his perpetually sore back as best as he can. "I need to stop getting older."

His eyes catch the television through the window, and he sees the mayor on the screen.

He shakes his head and goes back to work. He doesn't hear Mayor Wheeler welcoming the new camp counselors as they depart the bus.

\*\*\*\*\*

She's almost there. She's looking at him as he works and wants to bury her axe into him and bathe in the red fountain. She needs to turn off his light. She raises her axe in anticipation and marches closer, her stilted movements look unnatural as she walks.

She doesn't relish the kill. She doesn't take pleasure anymore. She doesn't really feel anything except at the moment the light dies. Then she feels something. Not happiness, but something like it. She doesn't remember who she is or why she is this way. The existential thoughts don't consume her. She just is. This is why it's so strange when she suddenly stops. She can't move and, while it doesn't scare or concern her, it is unusual.

Something is calling to her. Not in a voice, but in a feeling. It's an irresistible draw pulling her back to her place of rest. She sees the man's light and wants to extinguish it, but she can't stop herself from leaving. She tries to fight against it, but it's useless.

A pulsing darkness that only she can see is shimmering nearby. She turns with determined movements and steps into the shadows. The cold darkness swirls and envelops her, pulling at her essence. She shuts her black eyes as the darkness takes her from this place and the offending light.

\*\*\*\*\*

A strange tickling on the back of his neck makes the man stop pulling weeds and turn to look behind him. He doesn't see anything that looks dangerous, but there was something that made him look. "Huh, guess it was nothing."

\*\*\*\*\*

Caroline's jaw drops open, and she is at a loss for words for the first time in a long time. The mayor's words wash over her like a sewage waterfall. When the speech ends, she gestures, flabbergasted, at the television. She reaches out with the remote and turns off the television.

"Well. That was certainly...something." Reese stands up and paces around the room.

"Something? It was a damn insult." She frantically waves her arm that isn't holding

her coffee as she rants. "He acts like nothing's wrong. Like he's not standing next to a damn werewolf."

"What the hell is going on in this freak town? What about Beth? She was killed right there just last night! And weren't all those people just killed at the camp the other day? He didn't mention a damn thing about that! Like it never happened!" John sways as he quickly stands up from the couch. He looks like his injuries are about to send him back to the land of dreams. A shaking hand reaches down and grabs the cup of tea. He looks at it for a second before taking a deep breath and throwing it against the wall. The ceramic shatters and the brown liquid stains the white wall.

Caroline and Reese recoil from the sudden outburst. Reese pulls a hand up to shield himself from the flying shards of hot ceramic. "My God!"

"I should've gone back for her! Now we have no idea where she is and it's all my fault!" John stumbles as he storms around the living room.

"Look! No one wants to get her back more than I do. You think it's your fault? I'm

the reason she had to come back to this death trap of a town!" She moves over to John and grabs him by the shoulders, forcing him to look her in the eye.

"I just feel so damn helpless." John's voice cracks as he speaks. He takes a deep breath, but he's still shaking. From anger, injury, or a combination of both is unclear. "I've been a cop for years, trained to protect, and I failed in the one thing I was born to do."

"We all have enough guilt to go around, but it was them." She glares hatred at the turned off television. "The Chief or someone with him must have moved her." She leads him back over towards the couch.

"Whoever knows where she is now, we will get it out of them. That's a damn promise." John's cold voice turns to a low growl before his fist lashes out, denting the drywall. "I hate this town!"

"John. I know what you're feeling." Reese stands defiantly, holding the shards of a broken mug in his hand. "You're not the only one who lost people to this place. It's why we started doing this, but if you keep breaking my things, you can find another place to stay."

“Reese...Hey, I am sorry man.” John collapses heavily onto the couch, looking up at Reese who softens a little. “I just lost my damn head for a second. I promise. It won’t happen again.”

“Apology accepted.” Reese exhales and relaxes visibly as he turns to throw the pieces of broken ceramic into the garbage. “Now is the time that we need to keep clearer heads. There were quite a few things about the Mayor’s speech that I have questions about.”

“What do you mean?” She looks up at him like he’s a teacher about to give an important lesson.

“Well, you both saw the Chief standing right next to him on that makeshift stage.” Reese gestures at the now blank television and walks to the middle of the living room. “Why would the Chief be there? It’s just a bunch of kids coming to the camp, and it has nothing to do with a police matter. Why does he say that Dave and Debbie were hunting the beasts? Where did Janice go? Why would he even bring it up? How would he know that anything was rounded up or taken care of? What does he know about the pack? Is that Tall Thin Man

working with him? Add this to Beth's missing body and a lot of things just don't add up. I am not saying that the Mayor is a part of all of this, but..."

"Yeah, like them ignoring those people that were killed the other day." John's confusion and distress is apparent.

"Well, there seems to be something with this town that we haven't quite figured out yet." Reese wrings his hands together. "See... this town changes. The people? The everyday Joe's and Jane's? They don't notice it. They forget the tragedies. Well, forget is the wrong word. It seems like they forget, but the town makes them...re-frame it. They have a different recollection of the events. Somehow, we don't. We remember the truth of the matter."

"And you think the Mayor is involved?"  
*'How did we ever think that we could take on something this big? The Mayor, the Chief, and Hell, the whole damn town is against us.'* She blows out a deeply held breath and sits back. "He's a politician, sure, but he always seemed like a decent enough guy."

"You can never be sure, but anything is a possibility until we know it isn't." Reese looks



over at the wall where the tea drips to the floor and his hands fidget.

“If he’s done something with her or he knows anything about these things killing the people of this town, we need to get some indisputable proof.” John’s voice is calmer, more calculating.

“What we need to be focused on now is the Slasher.” Caroline is angry but determined. “She needs to be stopped before anything else. I need...” She clenches her fists and shakes, unable to form any more words. John puts a hand on her shoulder and the unexpected contact is startling. She jumps, pulling herself just out of reach.

“I know.” John’s calming tone cascades over her. “I want that too, but we gotta be smart about it. We can’t go out there half prepared like I did when I first got here. Besides, no one will believe anything without evidence.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Reese walks towards the kitchen and returns with a roll of paper towels, tearing off a few. “We need to get everyone to come over here as soon as possible. The rest of The Citizens can help us get to the bottom of all of this.”

“I’ll call James, Nissa, and R.D. Reese, you call George and Robert.” She walks over to the phone, picks it up, and starts to dial. She listens to the phone ring waiting for someone to answer.

“Wha you need me do?” John slurs the words as he looks from Reese to her. His eyes lose focus, and he sways back and forth and mumbles a few more unintelligible phrases.

“Oh no...” She puts the phone back onto the receiver. Pinstripes of blood spread out on John’s shirt. She hurries over to John, lifting his shirt and revealing several trickles of blood coming from the deeper cuts. “Must have popped these open when you threw the cup. Lie back. Relax.”

“I’m sorry.” John lies down, and Reese offers him a large wad of paper towels. He presses the towels to his wounds, the blood seeps through, but luckily it isn’t as bad as it was last night.

Now, it’s her turn to have a calming tone. “It’s going to be fine. We’ll make sure the bandages are taken care of.” She takes the bloody towels and applies new ones. They seem to be working. “You have to rest, though.”

“What? I can’t just lay here being a useless pile of waste.” John tries to sit up again, but she puts a hand on him, forcing him to lie back.

“John. We haven’t known each other for long but trust me. I’m the exact same way and I am just as stubborn. I would want to be out there, too. That being said...You look like shredded cabbage.” She points to his cuts and bruises.

“This is why we need you to lie down. We will need you later, but you have to be at your best.” Reese hands John some water and another pair of pills.

“Thank you. And I get it. I appreciate everything you’re doing, I just hate feeling like I am not doing anything.” John shuts his eyes but forces them open. She can see that he’s going to lose that fight.

“You will have your time. Let us take care of things.” Reese places a thermometer next to John’s forehead to check for a temperature and, thankfully, it comes back just slightly elevated. Caroline stands and dials the phone.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher flows from the shadows, and she steps from behind the tree. She's at the edge of the campground, the wooden cabins blocking her view of the lights in front of her. She feels the pull, the compulsion to turn the lights out. The cheering and joy mean nothing to her. She doesn't feel those things and she doesn't have the ability to hate those that do. She has a purpose, and she must fulfill it.

She looks down at the axe in her hand and stares at the chipped blade for a moment. Her hand tightens as she steps forward. When she can't get closer, she actually feels confused. She places a hand in front of her and there's a blue ripple of energy. Where she touches, the blue glow shimmers and moves. Dead lips pull back from sharpened teeth in a snarl.

She rakes her axe across the invisible barrier, and it leaves an electric blue trail, but the barrier holds strong. Confusion gives way to an unfamiliar rage as she's being kept from her duty. Drawing back, she slashes over and over, the blue trails dissipating as soon as the axe leaves the barrier. She doesn't tire. She doesn't get discouraged. She knows only her axe and those she needs to kill.

\*\*\*\*\*

The room is cavernous and made of rough-cut stone. Around the edges are shelves for books and other...oddities. Cages large enough to hold a couple of people each are on the far right side of the room but close enough that *whatever* needs to be put into the cages can be thrown in quickly. There's a chill in the air that comes from everywhere.

In the center of the room is a large stone altar, big enough to hold a man. The surface of the altar is flat with deep canals cut into the stone that lead to a drain hole. Dark red stains trail down the canals and color the top of the altar differently from the surrounding stone. Manacles made of thick iron chains are connected by solid rings to the sides of the altar. Strange and arcane symbols are carved into the stone. On the floor underneath the altar is a pentagram traced entirely from copper. Behind the altar is a podium also made of the same stone as the altar. It's wide enough to hold several implements. Currently, it's covered in red felt. Resting on the surface is a set of candles, a large pile of ash, and a bowl of something unclean like dirty water.

“Dammit.” A Tall Thin Man stands behind the podium, staring at the bowl of liquid in front of him. It shimmers and flashes blue, showing the reflection of the Slasher as she tries to break through it. He can see that she’s on the outside trying to get in. “We were so close. She must have been closer to town than we thought.” The Tall Thin Man blows out several candles on the podium, waving away the gathering smoke.

“Sir?” A questioning squeak comes from beside the tall wooden door. Through the barely cracked opening, a robed cultist sheepishly walks into the chamber, the robe swishing along the stone floor. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s not ideal, but what I’ve put into place should still suffice.” He places a knife in its sheath. “I had hoped that she’d be inside the barrier when we erected it, but something must have gone wrong. It went up too soon. My timing might have been off, the components might have been of lesser quality, or her proximity to the town could have had an effect. It’s difficult to be sure. We’ve never had a breach like this.”

“Can’t you just take it down and then recast the barrier?” The robed cultist picks up a long handled matchstick and starts to light the candles along the wall.

“Would that we could, but we’re short on the key reagent. This barrier won’t keep her out of the camp for long, but it just might give us the time to get something more permanent in place.” The Tall Thin Man leans in to blow out the candles on the podium while the robed cultist lights the candles in large iron sconces along the edge of the room. “Maybe we won’t have to deal with more dead counselors.”

“How did she get out, sir?” The robed cultist lights the remaining candles before walking over to stand next to the Tall Thin Man. She looks up at him reverentially before looking at the shelves he’s browsing.

“It’s those damn Citizens!” The Tall Thin Man picks up a wolf skull from the shelf of artifacts and runs a hand over the bleached fangs. Beside it are many different objects that look like they should never have been placed together. Next to a pearl-handled straight razor is a jar of dirt, a bee preserved in formaldehyde, and a set of car keys from an older vehicle.

“I admit. When they tore out the pages, we weren’t prepared for that. They destroyed the only thing that would keep her tied to the campground.”

“Thankfully, the crisis is contained for now. The ritual was designed to keep her contained in the campground. We wanted to use her compulsion to hunt and kill the ones at the camp to keep her occupied. At least that same desire will force her to keep trying to break in. If she’s focused on trying to get in there, she won’t be out killing indiscriminately. The Master’s plan to bring in new blood to the camp is working well.” A vial of sickly green liquid swirls with shifting colors. The Tall Thin Man carefully examines it before placing it back on the shelf. “Our only goal now is to get her back to sleep.”

The robed cultist looks terrified, and he can’t blame her for that. When the door creaks open and a figure walks in, both the robed cultist and the Tall Thin Man bow respectfully and call to the newcomer. “Master”

“I see that the barrier did not go quite as planned.” He opens his mouth to speak, but the Master holds up a hand to stop the litany



of apologies that he was about to put forth. The Master is shorter than the Tall Thin Man, but he moves with a confidence of someone clearly in control. His authority will not be questioned. "I understand that mistakes happen. Just do not make the same ones again. Now, this had better hold until we can get what we need to put her back to sleep, otherwise all we've done and all I've sacrificed will be for nothing. Do not fail me on this."



## Chapter 3

Caroline feels bad for Reese. *'He has come a long way since we first started the Citizens.'* He's standing in the corner of his own home looking nervous and like he's about to tell everyone to grab a coaster.

She looks out the window at the setting sun bringing them closer to evening. In the Fall, the darkness comes so much faster. She stares across the street at the place that used to be her home. *'Not sure I can call it that anymore. Everything I loved about it is gone. Might just sell it at this point. Of course, I don't want to be responsible for a new family coming to this*

*town. Might keep it to save them the pain.'* She looks down at her clothes and then up at the clock. *'Just enough time to rinse last night away in a hot shower and get a change of clothes. I'll be back before they know I'm gone.'*

The sun is sinking lower by the time she gets back, her long wet hair slaps against her back as she runs up the walkway to Reese's house. Her head feels clearer after her shower. She isn't quite sure where the day went, but she's thankful that she and John got some more rest. *'I know we needed it, but I really need to do something. I have to get out there and hunt these things down. It's good to see all of the Citizens together in one place though. Now, it's time to make a serious plan.'*

The Citizens are scattered around the house, talking and reminiscing. She didn't really think she'd be around to see it after all that happened in the last week or so. She takes it all in, looking over each of them like she's seeing them for the first time...or she's afraid that it will be the last.

John sits up on the couch, looking like he's taking it all in. His new shirt is blood free, and he has a cup of coffee in his hand. He

doesn't look fully recovered, but he is at least sitting up and interacting as much as he's able.

*'I never thought I would be here today. Laying on that cold stone floor, I was sure they were going to feed me to the werewolves. Instead, here comes my sister with this guy. He coulda left me there to get killed by that weird monster especially after Beth got taken, but he didn't. I don't think he has that in him. He made sure I made it back safe. Now, here he is, determined to be just as much a part of the Citizens as any one of us. I hope he stays. Yeah, I know. Part of it is because that's all of Beth that I have left, but the other part is that he's really good at what he does, and he seems like a good guy. Maybe he's not officially a Citizen, but he is to me.'*

She hears R.D.'s laugh, full and loud, and it always makes her smile. She's not sure what he's laughing about, but she's glad that he is. *'He deserves it after what he went through.'* A bright shine on his cocoa colored bald head reflects the overhead lights as he throws his head back. *'And there she is, his favorite bat. Never leaves it alone for long.'* He puts a hand on James' shoulder to help steady himself.

James is there in his usual shorts, high top shoes, and zip up hoodie. *'He always reminded me of a hippie Santa Claus.'* His belly shakes as he laughs with R.D. He has short curly blonde hair and a chinstrap beard. "I tell you man, I don't know where you come up with these. You're gonna end up killing me one day!"

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, Nissa comes back in from the kitchen. "What's so funny guys?" Her short, blonde hair trails down to her shoulders in a bob. Her red framed glasses are huge, giving her owl eyes. The deep blue of her eyes always reminds her of the ocean. Her smile is hiding some deep hurt, but she prefers to project positivity. *'She's the only one who can talk Reese into letting go of that stodgy exterior and have any kinda fun.'*

The front door opens and in walks a tall, skinny man. "Sorry I'm late." He's wearing a funny shirt talking about the periodic table. Short brown hair is spiked in a faux hawk. Circular wire-rimmed glasses rest on the bridge of his nose. *'George is second only to Reese in knowledge of the strangeness in this town. There are some things he hasn't talked about.'*

*It took him so long to get comfortable with everyone here that I don't want to push him. He'll tell us when he's ready.'*

"George. Good to see you." Reese motions for him to go into the living room and join the others. "Get yourself something to drink. Caroline, can you please come with me?" He turns without waiting for her to answer and walks down the hall. She watches as George takes a look at them, or was it just Reese, before he joins the others in the living room. She and Reese turn into the records room, and he stops and closes the door. He takes a deep, steadying breath before he turns to her, straightening his shirt.

"I need to talk to you for a moment before we go back out there." Reese looks nervous but determined to talk to her. He walks over to the cabinet and pulls out the box that holds the special gun. Opening the lid, he unloads the gun, placing the four remaining bullets in their spot on the lid before replacing the gun on the red velvet, closing the lid, and putting it away. "When you and John came here hurt, I took the gun and placed it back here in its box. I forgot to mention it, but I

don't want you to think I was hiding it. Also, I wanted to thank you for not telling anyone about this. I can't have...anyone asking any questions about it."

"Reese, you asked us not to say anything about the gun, and we'd never betray that." She can see that something about this is really weighing on him. "I'm looking forward to the day when we don't ever need to bring that thing out again."

"Thank you. Seriously." Reese raises a hand and slaps it back on the dresser. "I...I know you're going to eventually ask me. I can't tell you the details of how I got the damned gun. Just know that the things that I did were absolutely necessary."

"Reese...stop." She puts a hand on his shoulder and can feel the shaking muscles. "If you're not ready, I won't push. If it wasn't for that, John and me wouldn't be here. It's good we have it with Wallace and Janice out there."

"Well, John will just have to be careful with these shots." Reese's eyes get haunted. He hangs his head and breathes deeply for a few moments. "I'm not sure I can make any more of them."

She wants to ask more about it, but she doesn't. She can tell how much pain he's in just talking about it. "I understand. Look, if we can't get more, we will make do with the few remaining bullets we have. We wouldn't want you to do anything that you aren't ready to do."

"Thank you again." Reese clears his throat a few times. "Yes, well. Let's get back. I'm sure they're waiting for us."

Reese reaches down and unlocks the wheels of the whiteboard. She opens the door and steps aside as he pushes the whiteboard into the hall. She pulls the door shut as the wheels click clack over the stone tiles of the foyer.

Reese and R.D. lift the whiteboard from the foyer down into the sunken living room. The wheels squeak as they set it into place once again locking the wheels. On the board are pictures of Dave, Chief Wallace, and Beth with lines drawn between them. *'I can't believe she's on the board. She never should've been here.'* Her throat tightens and her eyes water. *'Hold it back. Use it to go after them'* The Citizens are gathered around the whiteboard now, waiting eagerly to start the session. She can see that each of them is slipping from the jovial into



the more studious and alert states that they take whenever there's a new investigation.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Thank you all for coming." Reese rubs his hands together, nervously standing in front of the whole group. This isn't where he likes to be, but he knows that it must be done. He looks around the room, taking mental attendance. "Has anyone seen Robert? He said he'd be here when I talked to him earlier. He was supposed to bring some supplies."

"Not sure." James stands there with his large hands pressed firmly in his pockets. "Now that I think of it, we were supposed to meet for lunch, too. I didn't hear from him, which is weird. It's not like him to be flaky."

"Well, I'll give him another call." Reese picks up his phone and dials. *'Where could he be? It's not like him to be late for anything, especially when we have something this important happening. I pray he's just being held up and not...being held up.'*

A murmur of voices fills the home. Laughter erupts, but he doesn't know who is speaking. His main concern is Robert. *'He's not answering. Where is he?'* He doesn't want to do

it, but he hangs up the phone. Not knowing is just about the worst thing he can think of. *'The last time that I didn't know something, someone got hurt. I won't let that happen ever again.'*

Caroline nearly startles him out of his shoes when she grabs his arm. "Sorry, Reese. Didn't mean to scare you. When's Robert coming?"

"I, uh, couldn't reach him." He knows he should be better at it, but he can't hide the concern he's feeling.

"Well, I'm sure he's fine. We can always go check on him if you want. We can send someone over right now." Caroline looks around the room.

"No. Let's finish the meeting, then we can go over. I'm sure he's fine and we'll all look like worried hens when we find him home listening to records or something." Reese turns to address the rest of the room and claps his hands together. The Citizens turn to look at him, their conversation stopping. "I want to start by introducing our new friend, John." He gestures to John who is resting on the couch. "He came in last week to help look for

Caroline. I know that many of you don't know him, but I trust him. I know you will come to trust him as well."

\*\*\*\*\*

John shifts uncomfortably, the cracks in his ribs scraping, sending white lights of pain into his eyes, as someone sits down next to him on the couch. Caroline's voice cuts through the pain. "Hey. How you feeling? You're the star now."

"All these people. It's a lot right now. I'm used to dealing with people, but the circumstances are usually much different." He breathes in deeply and puts his head down. "I mean...I still haven't had time to..."

"Hey guys." A petite woman kneels down in front of him and Caroline. She looks nervous, but that might be her natural state. "I'm not so good at this, but I am so sorry. I'm Nissa by the way. Hope we can be good friends."

He takes her offered hand, realizing how small it is compared to his own. A few emphatic shakes and she lets go. "Thank you. Glad to meet you."

A large hand lands on Nissa's shoulder. "Yeah, I wish we would've been there to help. I'm R.D." His head hangs low.

*'He looks like someone who can handle himself. Good to know someone here knows how to fight.'* "Guys...thank you. Really." John looks in their eyes. He may have just met these people, but he can see the pain and guilt written plainly on their faces. "It's hard to talk about, but I know that none of this is your fault. Thank you for this. We just have to get the bastards responsible."

The couch creaks when he gets up. He just nods to the others before walking over to the whiteboard. The heavier guy with the crazy blonde hair is there holding a stack of papers and he starts leafing through them. John takes the offered stack, and it's a set of missing person's reports. *'Something I'm unfortunately familiar with.'* He scans each one intently looking for something his training as a police officer has taught him to look for.

"Oh, hey! I'm James by the way not that any of these guys would introduce me." James reaches out and wraps John in a big bear hug.

“Ufff!” He grunts in pain as he feels the stitches pulling and the bones shifting. He’s on the verge of vomiting from the pain.

“I am so sorry!” James quickly lets him go and steps back. He reaches out like he wants to do something to help, but he’s too nervous to do anything. He keeps reaching and then dropping his hands.

“I’ll...be...fine.” Breathing deeply, he closes his eyes for a moment before standing up straight. “Let’s just keep going.”

“Right. Yeah. Well, when we heard about Jenny getting attacked in the forest, we had one of the nurses we know keeping an eye on her. You were there when she got attacked right, John?” James hands him some other papers. “We haven’t heard anything since she broke out of the hospital and ran off.”

“Hold on just a minute. I know I’ve been a bit loopy from being a werewolf’s toy, but why’d you keep an eye on Jenny?” His mind is working overtime trying to piece things together through the influence of the medication. He goes to sit but suddenly stands upright regretting the movement as a fresh wave of pain makes his head spin a little. “Wait!

What do you mean she broke out? Where'd she go? How does someone who was almost dead when we saw her just up and leave?" He gingerly lowers himself and leans back onto the pillows fighting off the dizziness threatening to make him vomit.

"Woah...lotsa questions." James strokes his beard and takes a moment to consider his answer. "Well, we wanted to keep an eye on her ever since she got attacked. Reese's research indicated that she might become one of them. Turns out he was right. That brings us to your second question. She turned into a wolf right there in the hospital! Broke out of the thick glass, jumped out, and ran right off into the forest. Haven't seen or heard from her since. Not that we're pen pals or anything."

"So, the movies were right?" He looks through the missing person's papers. *'If the movies were right about that, then what else? Clearly the silver works, too.'*

"Pretty much." Nissa stands on the other side of the room. "But I heard they can transform whenever, but the moon makes it worse. Like major worse which I guess you found out about the hard way."

He stares ahead trying to fit all of this into his addled and befuddled brain. "Plus, I guess we didn't see it all over the news because the hospital management or the Chief wanted to keep her breakout quiet. Wouldn't want the little people to panic."

"We, uh,..." James looks around at the rest of the group. Reese nods at him and James relaxes. "We have allies all over the place. The Citizens aren't just us, but a lot of them don't want to get too involved, and I can't say that I blame them. Even though we have people in different industries, we never saw the Chief being a part of this."

"I know I was shocked when I heard about it." R.D. shakes his head and looks around. "He always seemed like an honest, if a bit blunt, kinda guy. At least he always was nice to me anyway. Hell, he was there when someone broke into my garage one time."

"I know what you mean. I believed he was there to help us right up until he turned." He takes a deep breath and immediately regrets it. "He even offered to help us find Caroline. I trusted him because he was a cop like me. I thought he believed in the law."

“And Dave, too.” Nissa holds a hot cup of coffee between her hands, blowing the steam off of the top. “He was a sweetheart every time I went in the diner.”

“And how can we trust anyone if even the law or someone we thought was a good friend was a monster?” James draws lines connecting the Chief and Dave, writing notes under the line.

“I mean, the same could be said about our new friend here.” The new guy gestures a hand towards John. “No offense, of course, but we just barely met you. George by the way. Not that you asked. And how do we know he’s not working with them?”

“Because he saved me from being killed by werewolves.” Caroline stands up between him and George. “Twice. And don’t forget that freaky thing in the woods.”

“I get that, but what if it was an act.” George looks at John suspiciously. “Might be a ruse to get in with us.”

“Hey. I was living my life just fine until we got the call that you couldn’t keep track of your friends.” He sits up straighter. “I lost the one damn person that meant *anything* to me



because of you! If you'd have done your job, then Beth would still be alive! And what about your friend, Robert, or Billy for that matter?

"How dare you!" George looks furious. He takes a step forward, and his hand goes to his side in a fist.

"Calm down the both of you!" Reese yells louder than any have heard him before. "I understand that tensions are high, but I will not have this in here. You two need to calm yourselves now. George, John has more than proven himself to me and that should be enough for you. John, we have done everything we could to stop these things, and I will not have you blaming us for any deaths. Now, if you can both behave, we can get back to the real work!"

Reese walks over and tapes a newspaper article on the whiteboard. Turning, Reese addresses the group like an instructor in front of his classroom. He picks up a pointer stick and angrily taps it into his hand.

"A lot of what we're going to discuss will seem strange. Especially for you, John. For that, I am sorry. However, let's start where most of us first found out about the Slasher,

in school. As kids, most of us had heard of the Slasher. She was a favorite boogeyman. The one that would get you if you were bad or went outside at night. If you remember, there was a poem about the Slasher.”

“Ooh! Ooh! I got this!” Nissa jumps up and down before practically skipping to stand next to Reese at the whiteboard. “Wish I had a proper flashlight or a good campfire for this.” Dramatically, she crouches low, excited to begin her story.

*‘You can practically hear the smiley-face emoji when she’s this excited.’* John smirks at his own thoughts.

“Here we go.” Nissa looks around hunting for everyone’s attention before she starts.

*“In Slaughterville’s dark, reflective lake,  
Her skin as white as winter’s wake,  
A maid with pearls and hair so black,  
Beware, beware The Slasher’s track.  
She glides through shadows, silent, sleek,  
With every smile, a soul to seek,  
Of her blade that’s swift and keen,*

*The Slasher's hunt is never seen.*

*So, tread with care 'neath moonlit skies,*

*For in her hands, your fate she ties."*

Reese waits for a moment as Nissa takes a deep bow, giving the words time to hang heavily in the air. "She's been rumored to have been killing for over a century. There are several conflicting reports, but all of them seem to agree that her hunting grounds are centralized around the campground. All of the reports say that she has only ever been spotted in that area which is further corroborated by John and Caroline's encounter."

"OK. I have a few questions. Why hasn't anyone just shut that place down? Why do people keep going back there? If you've known about it for so long, why hasn't anyone stopped her?" He can feel the anger rising. He knows what he wants to say, but he keeps it inside because he needs these people right now. *'If they knew that this monster existed and didn't stop it, they're partly responsible for Beth's murder.'*

"The truth of it all is that we don't know much about her at all. Do you have any idea how many deaths and disappearances there are

in this town? It's hard to get information from people when she doesn't leave many survivors." Reese paces around the living room.

"Well..." Nissa actually raises her hand like she's back in high school. "We do know someone. I can call her if you want."

"No." Caroline's sudden coldness is shocking. "When she abandoned us, she said she didn't wanna talk about what happened. I promised to respect her decision even if I disagreed with it. It's the least I can do."

"We've tried to find whatever we could about her for years after almost losing a friend to her." Reese calls for everyone's attention.

"Reese, I get it. I really am trying to keep my temper in check, but everything here is stacked against us." He fidgets nervously with a pen.

"I understand, John. I do." Reese breathes deeply. "We have all lost people. We have all suffered. Please know, I don't say that to be dismissive, but I want you to know that we understand. We want this nightmare to end, but we have to have the right information to do it."

He just nods and mumbles. He wants to say more, but his head is a raging tumult of confused ideas. He knows the pain and confusion from the last few days aren't helping his typically analytical mind. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs. "Okay. Look. I admit that things are very heated right now. We all have a lot going on, so I think we should focus on the job at hand and find out what we can about this thing."

"Very well." Reese takes a deep breath. "We don't know much about her, but we do know there have been many different owners of the campground. Some of the owners refused to talk about the incidents, and some of the others...well, they were there the nights that she appeared."

"Kinda hard for them to tell us anything." James is uncharacteristically serious.

"Add in the strangeness of the recent murders." His fatigue and pain making it difficult to think properly. "Caroline and I were just at the camp and people were murdered! Now they just reopen it again like nothing happened! Beth died, and they put a damn podium up right there!"

Caroline's sudden intake of breath makes him stop and look at her. A single tear escapes her tough exterior and falls freely. She doesn't do anything to stop it. "I know that. I was there too."

"Caroline. I...I'm so sorry." He tries to reach over to her, but the pain in his shoulder won't let him raise the arm all the way.

"It's fine." Caroline brushes away the offered hand and coughs. "Let's just stay on topic here. Now, there are a few things about this town that aren't like other towns." Caroline gestures to encompass the whole town of Slaughterville. "There is limited outside connection and communication. People are always coming in and they seem to want to stay. They don't seem to care about all the strangeness. Even after Maddie was killed, my mom and dad wanted to stay. They never admitted what killed her. They always said it was an animal that did it. Our ability to see the truth is what brought us together, we've been trying to find out how to make everyone see. People get killed or go missing and the next day it's like it never happened. As for how or why they were able to open the camp a few days

after what just happened, I have no idea. It's something we have to add to the list of weird."

"Okay. I don't really get it, but I've seen a ton of strange things in the last few days. I'm willing to take a lot on faith." John shakes his head taking in the deluge of information.

"We have a general consensus on what she looks like." Reese turns and gestures towards the group. "She's average height, very pale skin, long black hair, and dressed like a maid."

"The history lesson is good for the new guy." James chimes in and shakes his head. "What about something we can actually prove? This is all just hearsay and stuff. We need to focus on the facts."

"How do you know these murders were that Slasher?" John stares at the papers in front of him.

R.D. walks up to the whiteboard and picks up a dry erase marker. He proceeds to poorly draw a girl with an axe. "Okay. Here's what we know for sure. We call her The Slasher. Don't know her real name. We know that she always shows up between dusk and dawn, she doesn't seem to like the daylight. Also, her victims are all killed by something sharp to

the head. We know she's been seen around the campground since..." R.D. shuffles through some papers.

John listens carefully, trying to take a complete set of mental notes. Using his training, he tries to organize the timeline of events, the evidence, and the suspect information as best as he can. The strange nature of the incidents is filed away, but he treats this as if it were any other criminal investigation. The pieces are laid out, but he can't see the main picture of the puzzle just yet. He holds a hand to his temple to try and relieve the pressure. *'Don't want to miss anything with my probable concussion.'* There's a notepad on the table. He picks it up and starts writing everything that he can remember.

"The camp was started in the 1920s and the first accounts are from there." George holds up a newspaper article showing a brand-new Camp Slaughterville sign arcing over a large group of people.

"Thanks, man. You know me and dates." R.D. twirls the marker in between his fingers before turning to write 1920 under the drawing. "It seems like she always comes out



when there's a bunch of people at the camp. We can't say that all of these reports are the Slasher, but it probably is."

As John listens intently, he crudely sketches what he can remember of the Slasher on the notebook he picked up. *'Now we can see why I was never a sketch artist. Seems like there's a lot of missing pieces. It's a start though.'* Below the picture, he writes in concise sentences that he can read through quickly once he's able to think more clearly.

R.D. writes a few more dates on the whiteboard. "These are the ones that we know about."

"We don't have any clear pictures of her, but someone managed to catch this." George tapes a blurred image onto the whiteboard. In it you can see a streaked image that looks like someone in a black dress and pale skin moving behind a cabin. "This was taken by one of the counselors who was brutally murdered."

"It's her." Caroline's breathing is heavy, her eyes are locked on the blurred picture. "We gotta stop her."

"We can find her at the camp, but how do we stop her?" James puts a piece of gum in

his mouth and starts chewing. "There has to be a way we can find out more about who she is, where she's from, and where she's been."

"Here's a story from this morning. A pair of hunters were decapitated and left on the side of the road. It says they were killed with a sharp blade." Nissa points at the story of the hunters from the morning. "This looks like her work, but those hunters were killed far from the cabins. You guys think this is related or a whole new thing we have to deal with?"

"Lord!" R.D. throws his hands up. "It better not be a new thing. I don't think I can handle more than one thing right now."

"It goes against what we know about her." Reese looks over the article. "It does seem like her method, but if she's outside the camp..."

"But if she's been only seen around the camp, then how can you be sure that it's her?" He can feel the pain killers taking a stronger hold, but he writes everything he can think of down so he can reference it later.

"According to one of our people inside, they were killed with a sharp instrument and the blows were quick, clean, and powerful." Reese hands the article to Nissa.

“Well, let’s hold on to it anyway.” Nissa takes the paper and adds it to the pile of stories. She gives the stack of papers a tap on the table to help straighten the pile.

“Right. We clearly need to gather more data on her past...escapades.” Reese points to James with a marker. “We should find out who she is and if there are any incidents of note from the campground before the 1920s. Best place for that’s the library. Their records go back to the founding of the town. It closes in a few hours, so we must hurry. We’ll stop by Robert’s home on the way to check on him.”

“Haven’t you heard of the Internet?” John’s confusion is plain. “I mean, they gotta have it on there somewhere.”

“I keep forgetting...” Reese sets the marker down on the whiteboard’s tray. “You’re not from here. We don’t have access to what you know as the Internet. It doesn’t exist in Slaughterville.”

“You’re not missing anything.” John shuts his eyes and lies back feeling his head swimming. His vision starts to blur, and his eyes get heavier. “Mostly people just yelling at each other and nudity. It could help with

research...man...these pain meds are strong. Why can't you go to the next town over and use their Internet?"

"Yes. Well, that won't work." Reese moves to stand in front of John. "There wouldn't be anything about Slaughterville anywhere online. To the rest of the world, we don't exist. I've been trying to figure out why for a long time, but it's like the town doesn't want to be found."

"Until it needs new victims for the meat grinder." R.D. looks like he's ready to hurt something. "Then plenty of people can find this place."

"That is true. Anyway, let's get ready to leave. We have a lot of work to do today." Reese grabs his coat. "We'll go to the library. John, you need to rest up."

"Wait. What?" John tries to sit up, but he sways and falls back down.

"You stay here and rest." Caroline gets off of the couch and pulls a blanket over John. "R.D.? Can you please stay with him? Make sure he doesn't try to sneak after us." She smiles down at John.

“Sure. No problem.” R.D. smiles and bounces a few times on the balls of his feet. “We can do the important work and plan what to do once you find this monster.”



## Chapter 4

The Citizens take a small detour on their way to the library. Robert's house isn't far away. Nissa pulls into the driveway and pauses, the vehicle running. George pulls up beside her, rolling down his passenger window. The home is a two-story Victorian in powder blue. White shutters and flower boxes adorn the windows. The lawn is well-kept and there are lights that, were they lit, would lead them up the driveway. A sconce lamp next to the doorway is on making them wonder if he's home.

"His car's gone." Nissa leans out of her driver's side window craning her neck.

"I'll run up to the front door and check anyway." George slips out of the car and runs up the drive. He knocks on the door and rings the bell. He grabs the doorknob and tries to turn it, but it's locked. He pounds a few times on the rigid steel door.

"Anything?" Reese calls after him.

"Nothing." George looks through the window. "I don't see anyone inside the place either."

"Well, maybe he's still out getting those supplies he was talking about." Reese rolls up his window. "I guess we'll just have to give him some time to return home and call again later. We must get to the library quickly. We need that information."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slaughterville Library looks like a well-kept home on the outside. The two-story building sits in the middle of the town next to the movie theater. The dark red brick is well-maintained. White columns stretch up to a large overhang on the front of the building. White wooden doors have a small sign showing the hours.

When they get out of the car, Caroline looks over at the diner. "Looks like there's new owners already."

"How did they get new owners so fast?" Nissa sidles up to her and stares at the diner.

The OPEN sign is turned on and hungry customers sit in the booths. "Weird to see it open and people going inside." Caroline takes a step closer to it. She turns when Nissa firmly takes her arm. She can almost see a ghostly image of Dave behind the counter, smiling with too sharp teeth at them. She shudders and looks away quickly.

"Yeah, it's weird for sure. I would love to find out who's running it now, but we need to get going." Nissa pulls her towards the entrance to the library.

The Citizens walk inside. The place is colder than they expected, and the lights are dim. At the counter is a demure Asian woman. Long black hair is held back in a ponytail that bobs and sways while she works. Her nameplate reads Cindy and she's intently checking in books. Pushing up her large glasses, she blinks a few times when she finally recognizes that they're in front of her. "Can I help you?"



Mimicking Cindy's pushing of her glasses, Nissa steps in front. "Hello! How are you? We were looking for information on the Slaughterville Cabins going just as far back as possible."

"Oh...um, hi." Cindy stammers a bit as she answers. "Well, if you're looking for older news articles, you can check the microfiche room over there. If you want information on the campground, we might have something in the records room near the back of the library. I don't usually get too many requests for that room, but you're free to look around."

"Thank you so much!" Nissa gives a smile and a tap on the desk.

"I guess B...I mean George and I will go check out the records room." Caroline blushes red, her eyes hiding the pain she feels. She waves for George to join her. "The rest of you can check out the old newspapers."

\*\*\*\*\*

As the rest of the group peels off, Caroline and George walk towards the back of the library. There's a heavy wooden door with a nameplate that reads: *Records Room*. Through that door is a small room lined with

filing cabinets along the walls. There are rolls of papers either on shelves or leaning against the wall, and a thick layer of dust over most of the place. In the center of the room is a large table. The light in the room comes from an old incandescent bulb. It isn't the brightest, but its yellow light is enough to see by.

"Geeze. It looks like we stepped into Reese's place. He must have taken some organizational notes from here." Caroline brushes her hand through the dust on top of one of the cabinets.

"How are we supposed to find anything in this mess?" George walks forward and proceeds to wipe away as much dust from the table as he can with his bare hand. He looks at his hand, disgusted, and tries to find somewhere to wash up. In the end, he holds his breath and wipes his hands on his pants.

"Just have to start digging and hope for the best." Caroline points to one side of the room. "Let's hope there is at least some order to it all. You check there, and I'll start here."

Each of them has their own mission. They start rifling through the different drawers. The sound of wood or metal sliding breaks

the silence. She looks around the room which didn't seem this big when she came in. "This might take us a while."

\*\*\*\*\*

The soft glow of the view-screen lights the room. Nissa, James, and Reese enter the microfiche room. Along the wall is a continuous desk, separated by large dividers. In between the dividers are machines used to read the small images captured so long ago. They're covered in dust. The overhead lights are practically non-existent.

"Here you are." Cindy, the librarian, unlocks the cabinets where the microfiches are kept. "If you need anything else, let me know. I'll be at my desk."

"Thanks for the help." Nissa gives a friendly wave as Cindy leaves the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Right. Okay." Reese claps his hands together. "I think the best place to start is by finding something we are already familiar with and working backwards from there. We know, from our other research, that there have been recent incidents at the campground. If we can discern a pattern or a *modus operandi*, we

can know what to look for in other articles.” Reese hands each of them stacks of film to look through and they get to work. A short while passes in silence.

“Can you believe this?” James sits back, the chair creaking under his weight. “There are so many damn murders. Like one every week! Murders, disappearances, or weird sightings all over this town. This is gonna take hours.”

“And for some reason that I will never be able to fathom, tourists really seem to love this place.” Reese never takes his eyes off of his screen as images flit by. “It seems to give the creatures here a steady supply of victims. We need to narrow our focus on only those events related to the campground. We can deal with the rest at another time.”

“Gosh, I sure do feel bad for R.D.” James gives a playful shove to Nissa who takes the opportunity to spin in her chair. “He has to stay at Reese’s watching television, drinking, and having a boring time while we get to look through all these old newspapers.”

“Could be worse.” Nissa shoves him back, but he doesn’t really move. “We could be back at the ski lodge.”

Nissa and James both give a shudder at that before turning back to their respective machines.

\*\*\*\*\*

“RRAH!” John sits up with a grunt.

R.D. shoots up from the chair, dropping the book he was holding. “You alright?”

“I just can’t do it.” John throws his hands up in frustration. “I can’t sleep knowing they’re out there doing something while I am stuck here, no offense.”

“I get it, man.” R.D. bends down and grabs his book. “You gotta rest though. What you need is a distraction. How about this? They said you were a cop. What made you wanna do that?”

“Well, it wasn’t the family tradition story that a lot of cops have.” He grabs a bottle of water that was left for him. “More the opposite. I grew up with a family that was into things that were less than legal. I was doing some bad things for as long as I can remember. But I didn’t know anything else. I thought it was what people did. When I got older, my cousin went out and it went horribly wrong.

He ended up killing this lady, and that's when reality hit me. I couldn't do this anymore. I had to get out."

"Gotta make Thanksgiving kinda rough." R.D. doesn't look like he's judging or blaming.

"Yeah, we don't talk so much." He rotates his right shoulder to take the stiffness out of it. "Most of them are in jail or dead. Anyway, it wasn't all bad. Because they forced me to pay attention to details, I'm a pretty good investigator. Take you for instance."

"Me?" R.D. has a mock shocked look on his face.

"Yeah." He points to R.D. "I can see that you carry yourself well. You know how to fight. I haven't seen you in action, but just the way you watch the room when you think other people aren't paying attention. You're looking for dangers and watching the exits. What branch were you in?"

"Damn. You really are pretty good." R.D. rubs his beard. "Marines. That's all I'm gonna say about that. There are some things I can't and won't tell anyone. Not yet. I'm just not ready to open those wounds."

“Fair enough. Didn’t mean to pry.” He crushes the empty water bottle.

“Not a big deal. Just some things are best left buried.” R.D. slaps his legs and stands up. “How about something stronger than water?”

\*\*\*\*\*

After a few hours pass in the Records Room, Caroline and George have stacks of books, magazines, and other files covering the large table. She sits at the opposite end of the table from George, the stacks making it hard to see each other. The clock ticks loudly in the silent room.

“Been at this for hours.” George pushes the papers away and sits back in the chair. “Feels like days.”

“Tell me about it.” She rubs her eyes and tries to refocus them on her pile of documents. “I can feel a massive migraine coming on.”

Standing up, George pulls another stack of papers off the shelf and flops back into the hard wooden chair. He flips through the pages, and she watches his lips move as he reads. He suddenly sits up straight and pushes

his chair back. Standing up, he hurries over to her carrying the papers. "Hey! I think I found something!"

"Whadda you got?" She sets down the book she was looking at and eagerly awaits the revelation.

"Take a look." He spins the newspaper around on the table and puts it right in front of her. "It's an old piece from the historical society. It says that the same land where the campground is located used to hold the Mayor's home. Whoever was the Mayor back then used to live right on that property near the lake. Not sure exactly where the house was, but it has to be close! This is huge! We should tell the others. It could help narrow their search." He stands there, excited about what he found.

"That is an excellent find." She sets the papers aside. "You go tell them. I'm gonna keep researching for a while. If you don't mind, I'll keep hold of the article so I can use it as a reference point."

\*\*\*\*\*

George closes the door to the Records Room with a loud click that echoes in the silent library. He turns to the left and walks back



towards the front desk. *'I need to ask Cindy where the others are. I don't think I was ever in that room before.'* The dim lights of the library are making it hard to find his way back. George stops at an intersection and looks around unsure of which way to go. The shelves of books reach almost to the ceiling, making him feel like he's in a cave of knowledge that's narrowing and stretching on forever. "This place isn't that big. Where are the others? Heck, if I see a door, I can just open it and yell inside to see if they're in there."

"Over here..." A voice whispers from far off in the darkness, beckoning him to come closer.

"Hello? Cindy, is that you?" He's not sure he actually heard it, but he takes a careful step towards where he believes the sound came from. "Wish I brought a flashlight. Maybe Caroline has something."

He turns to look back to the Records Room, but it's gone. He can't see the light that was coming out of the tall rectangular window. It's like the stacks filled in to block his way or keep him trapped inside. *'Stop it. That's insane. I know this town is weird but come on.'*

He reaches into his pocket, hoping to find a book of matches or a lighter that he forgot about. The search comes up empty, so he resigns himself to wandering in the darkness. *'Never should have given up smoking.'*

He runs a hand along the shelves as he walks, the dust gathering in piles. The stacks of books seem closer than before. He's looking around for light from the windows that he knows line the sides of the building, but he can't see anything. Even the overhead lights are getting dimmer making it nearly impossible to see anything in front of him. "Okay. The lobby was right around here somewhere. Maybe I should have come here more often."

The intersection of shelves leads off into seemingly nowhere on all sides. He can't see any light coming from the aisles. *'Best to just pick one and start going. I'll hit the wall eventually and then follow that straight to the exit.'*

A book falls from one of the shelves behind him and slams into the floor with a loud bang, the cover landing open. "Oh God! What..." He jumps; his hand covers the heart that's threatening to escape from his chest.

He breathes in the dust and almost sneezes. Bending over, he looks at the book and then around the stacks.

He kneels down and picks up the book, making sure to keep the page marked. "*Julius Caesar?* What?" He quickly turns the book to the page he kept and drops it back to the floor where it lands with a thud. Circled was the phrase: "*Et tu, Brute!*"

A voice whispers from the darkness. "Traitor."

Standing quickly, he tries to see who or what made the book fall, but he can't see anyone or anything. "Who's there? Just come out."

Footsteps click along the hardwood floor. They seem to be coming from all around him. "Cindy? Is that you?" A whoosh of cloth rustles from the aisles around him. His breath comes faster, and he quickly turns to look in each direction, but his way is suddenly blocked! It's like the shelves moved to block his path, leaving only one way out.

Another rat-a-tat of feet on hardwood, louder than before and faster like someone sprinting, comes from his left, from the only

path left to him. He runs towards the footsteps, looking at each section as he passes by the end of the stacks. *'What do they want? Why won't they leave me alone?'*

He doesn't see the pile of books stacked in the aisle blocking his path until he trips over them. His head hits the floor sending sparks of light to dance in front of his eyes. A voice calls to him from the shadows as he stands. Shaking, he backs away from the scattered books and a shelf, stumbling as he does. He slips down to the wood floor and breathes through the fear filling his mind. He can see nothing except deep black all around him. *'Maybe that means that they can't see me either.'*

A warm rivulet of blood streaks down his face. He can't see it, but he can feel it dripping off of his chin. All around him is darkness, something moving, and the whisper of cloth. He forces himself to his feet and runs. The path that he hoped would lead to the wall has many twists and turns. With each stumbling turn, he hopes to find the entrance to the library ringed in precious light. Instead, he catches sight of a shadow carrying a small light moving quickly down the aisle in front of

him. *‘What was that? I gotta get out of here. Hopefully, it’s just nerves. Of course, with what we know, it might not be.’*

“We’re watching...” The voice is a whisper, but it feels so loud in the confined aisles that it could be coming from behind the shelf next to him. This voice is different from the other one, telling him that there’s more than one thing chasing him in the dark.

From behind him, heavy footsteps rush closer. His stomach lurches as he runs, but it’s so dark. All around is the sound of shuffling feet, low laughter, and falling books. He’s sweating despite the coolness of the library. He can feel himself starting to cry as he desperately searches for any sign of light or life. *‘Oh, God. Please. Not like this. Help me. I’m so lost.’*

Turning around several times, he tries to find anything in this damned library that will point him to the way out, to safety. A deep breath does nothing to calm his nerves and only adds more of the dust to his labored lungs. A bright light appears in front of him like a beacon, and he feels a foolish rush of hope. Someone is shining a light for him and waving him forward! He stumbles as he runs,

his eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. Excitement. Hope. They can make someone careless. A book that he would swear wasn't there a moment ago appears at his feet and trips him up. After a few stuttering steps, his flailing arms help him to keep his balance and move forward. As he can finally see clearly, he spots a familiar person. Her glasses reflect the light she holds, and her hair pulled back in the ponytail. "I'm coming! Stay there!"

"Oh, thank God. I finally found someone." A sigh of relief pushes out all of the tension and fear he felt. "You would not believe what my mind has been doing to me. I couldn't find..."

A strong hand reaches from behind and covers his mouth keeping him from screaming. "MMMPHH!" Something sharp pierces his neck. There's a warm sensation, pleasant at first, but then turns into cold fire in his veins. Before he passes out, he hears someone talking.

"Stephanie, grab his keys and take his car back to his place. The rest of you get him to the Master. He will want to speak with this one."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Microfiche Room's door swings open as Caroline steps inside. Everyone turns to see her. "Hey guys. Find anything?" "God, *how many nights did we spend doing things just like this at Reese's or our home? Now Billy will never...I can't do this now. Push it aside! Feel it later once this is all done!*" She forces a smile and shuts the door behind her.

"Good. You're back. Quite a lot actually." Reese stands up and offers her his seat. "We found a few interesting pieces we didn't have in the records room already. You wouldn't believe how far back this all goes. We printed them out to add to the Archive. Take a look."

She picks up the pile of papers and starts to thumb through them. The first one is the newest of them. It's about a family that used to run the Slaughterville Campground who was forced to close it a few years ago after an entire group of counselors drowned in the lake. They couldn't financially recover after several lawsuits and were forced to close the camp and their furniture store.

"There were quite a few other articles that referenced mysterious deaths and missing

persons.” Reese leans back against the desk. “We didn’t bother printing those because they had nothing to do with the campground.”

She lays that paper on the desk and reads the next. A story from over a decade ago tells of the local boy and girl scout organizations coming together to repair and open the camp. They were given a special commission by the town that they were able to use the camp as long as they repaired the damaged buildings and maintained the grounds. During a summer excursion while studying the local flora, an entire boy scout troop was staying in the camp overnight. They went hiking in the mountains around the camp to find some nocturnal animals. According to eyewitness reports, the scout leaders went into the woods, leaving the children on the trail. They never returned. The scout leaders were never found, but after the kids found their way back to the camp, they said they saw a white woman with black eyes and hair.

“We thought we would find a pattern.” Nissa’s blonde hair falls over her eyes before being pushed back behind her ears. “If you look at all the articles, that doesn’t match. It



looks like all the killings were done whenever someone tried to open the camp.”

The next article is from 1980. It’s about a church group who purchased, refurbished, and opened the camp for a religious retreat. There was only one survivor known only as Pamela V. She passed away in the Slaughterville Asylum.

“I’ll go out on a limb here.” Reese looks over her shoulder at the articles laid out on the desk. “It seems as if she really doesn’t want to be disturbed on her grounds. The only time she manifests is when someone tries to occupy her property. These articles go back to the early 1900s.”

A blurry black and white picture is placed into her hand. Nissa points to a figure with dark hair and pale skin walking into the lake. “When people leave the campground, the killings stop. This picture is the only one that we could find. It looks just like the freakin’ Slasher!”

“Why are they always so out of focus?” She pulls the image close to her eye.

“Actually, I have a theory about that.” James pushes his chair back and turns from the

screen. "I think their supernatural energy gives them a natural blurriness on film. I can't be sure, but it would be an interesting experiment if you want to gather a few homicidal monsters together and take their pictures."

"Well, I don't fancy doing any of that." Reese shakes his head.

"You guys did absolutely fantastic!" Caroline looks at the array of information laid out before her. "Cindy said the County Records' office might have more information. Between this and what George found; we are really getting close to stopping her."

"What'd George find?" James straightens his shirt and walks over to stand with the rest of the group.

Her confusion is apparent. She looks at each one of them. When Nissa doesn't say anything, and Reese continues to print copies of the articles, she goes from confused to very concerned. "He was supposed to tell you that we found out who originally owned the campground and the surrounding forest."

"I'm not sure what to say." Nissa looks at James. "He never showed up. We thought he was still with you."

“We need to go find him right now.” She quickly grabs the papers. The others are following closely as she leaves the room.

“You don’t think...” Nissa checks down every aisle of books as she tries to find some clue to finding George.

“I’m sure he’s fine.” Reese’s smile is probably meant to be reassuring, but it just doesn’t feel genuine.

“We’re gonna find him.” James comes to a stop as they get into the main lobby of the library. Cindy is sitting behind her desk, barely seeming to notice them as she continues to stamp her books, checking them in. The rubber stamp rises and then falls with a bang.

“George! Hey man! Where are you?” James’ call echoes in the cavernous library.

“Please, sir.” Cindy stops and looks sternly in the way that all librarians must be trained. “You must keep the noise down. This is a library after all.”

“Sorry. Of course.” Reese smiles sympathetically at her and Cindy visibly calms. He walks up to the desk and places his hands flat on the solid wood. “Our friend seems to

have left without us. You may remember him. He's a thin man with brown hair. Perhaps he passed by."

Cindy turns in thought, bringing a hand to her chin. "I don't believe so. I've been here the whole time. I didn't see anyone else leave and no one else entered."

"He's gotta be around here somewhere then." James paces around the lobby and looks as deep into the stacks as he can. "Let's split up and look for him."

They pair off and begin searching through the aisles. The sound of George's name echoes from different voices as they try to find their friend. She and Reese come to a closed door. He quickly kneels down and grabs a folded leather wallet.

"What's this then?" Reese unfolds the wallet and inside is George's driver's license.

"What the hell?" Concerned, she looks around the library expecting to see the worst. "He wouldn't just leave this here."

Reese's eyes go wide with worry as he takes a deep breath. "Madam librarian! Come here, please."

A pair of high heels clack across the polished wood floor. Cindy stops and points at the door. "Oh, that leads down to the basement. It's locked though. No one could go down there."

The others jog into view and she's thankful that they're not missing too. "Hey guys."

"Well, then madam." Reese stiffens. "Might I suggest that you open it. We have a friend in need, and he might be down there."

"I'm sorry." Cindy shrugs and gestures to the door. "Yes. I'll be right back."

Cindy returns a short while later with a ring of jangling keys. She fumbles for a moment before finding the right one and inserting it into the lock. The lock turns, clicks loudly in the silence, and the door opens. The fluorescent lights flicker and flash until they finally steady themselves. A dank musty odor wafts up from the basement.

Nissa goes to walk first down the stairs, but Reese pushes past and leads the way. The rest of them follow behind her. The basement is wide open, the cement walls are bare. When they walk, their footsteps ring off the walls.

“Where is he?” Nissa raises her hands and lets them fall to her sides to slap against her legs.

“There’s absolutely nothing in here. He’s just...” Reese tries to look behind the lone box in the room.

“Where’s he at then?” Caroline can feel her stomach tighten with fear. *‘Oh no. I should’ve gone with him. If I got another person hurt...’*

“That is the big question, isn’t it?” Reese’s analytical tone hides the concern he clearly feels.

“Alright, then.” James claps his hands and starts towards the stairs. “No point hanging around here then wasting time. We need to get the others, and then we can go looking for George!”

“Sound idea.” Reese jogs after him. “We can’t waste any time. Make sure you grab the files. We don’t want to have come here for nothing.”

\*\*\*\*\*

John sits up on the couch, his hand instinctively tries to rub the pain out of his ribs.

He squeezes his eyes shut through the worst of it. When he can finally open them, he's greeted by an odd sight. In the chair across from him is R.D. He's sitting there, silently watching all of this unfolding. His barbed-wire baseball bat slung over his shoulder. "Hey."

"That looked like it hurt." R.D. moves the bat to rest across his lap.

"I gotta ask..." He points towards the bat.

"Jasmine?" R.D. raises the bat in front of his eyes, inspecting the sharp wire. "She's been with me for a while. She saved me from... well, something bad."

"I'm sorry, man." He feels terrible about bringing up something obviously painful. "If I knew..."

"Nah! I'm just messin' with ya!" R.D. gives a full laugh. "It was for a costume I made once. I figured it could be useful against these monsters."

"Son of a..." He shakes his head and laughs despite the pain.

As they're laughing, the door flies open. R.D. stands up, the laughter gone and the bat

at the ready. John reaches for his gun, but it's not on his hip. The pain sends bright flashes in front of his eyes.

Caroline, Nissa, Reese, and James hurry inside and close the door. They each start calling for George.

"Hey. He's not here." R.D. settles back into the chair. "What's goin' on?"

"Dudes, George is gone." James nervously walks back and forth before setting the box of files on the coffee table. "He came with us to that library, but then he disappeared. The library chick, who was kinda hot by the way, said he never left, but he wasn't even in the creepy basement."

"Wait. Wait..." He's having trouble following the speed at which James is speaking. "Are you saying George is missing?"

"Precisely." Reese flexes his hands.

He's seen that look before when he had to tell a family that their relative was missing. It's the need to act, but knowing there's nothing you can do. The hopelessness, the vulnerability, the shame. All of it wrapped up in a cocoon of confusion and grief.



“Do you think it might be possible that he left while the librarian was...I don’t know... in the bathroom or something?” His training searches for anything that could be logical and bring them hope. “Maybe she was putting books away and he left while she wasn’t at the desk. I know there are very strange things in this town, but did any of you notice any signs of a struggle?”

“Well, no.” Caroline admits. “We did find his wallet.”

“And where was it?” He listens carefully to her tone and mannerisms, the training kicking in instinctively.

“It was right near that door to the basement.” Caroline says.

“Was there any blood? Things thrown around? Broken glass?” John can feel his hands so empty without the notepad and pen he would be using to take down information.

“No...” James admits.

“Well, okay.” He carefully sits back, allowing his training to take over. He runs through some of the standard procedures in his head for investigating a missing person’s case.

“Until we know anything for sure, we have to assume that he’s alive. The only thing we know for sure is that he dropped his wallet. How about we check out his place? Maybe it just fell out and he’s at home looking all over for it. You can be a hero.”

“Fine...” Nissa exhales in acceptance.

“Now, what do we do about this other information?” James holds up the paper that he got from Caroline. “We know that the property used to belong to the Mayor at the time. We just don’t know who that was.”

“If you want to know more about that, it should be in the County Recorder’s office. They usually have all of the old deeds and maps.” He breathes through the sudden spike of pain.

“Easier said than done.” James sits on the arm of the couch. “We might be able to get in the town hall and even all the way to the office, but we might also run into the Chief or the Mayor. That’s the last thing we need right now.”

“Yeah, I don’t think good ol’ Chief Wuffles will be so nice and let you go again.” R.D. stares intently at the whiteboard. His eyes

flit over the entire board like he's trying to force clarity from the chaos.

"I know I've fought enough damn werewolves to last me a few lifetimes." He laughs involuntarily and regrets it immediately. "Oh, God...ouch."

"I still have a hard time with the actual saying of it." Nissa speeds up her pacing, which didn't actually seem possible without her going into a full sprint and running along the walls. "I mean. Werewolves are a real thing! A proven real thing!"

"You and me both." John flashes back to all of the werewolf encounters. *'I am never even getting a dog.'*

"I remember reading some news regarding the town hall." Reese walks up to the board and makes a simplistic drawing of the town hall. He circles the front and back entrances. "Didn't they do some construction on the place last year?"

"Yeah, sure." R.D. walks up next to Reese. "But the place is older than your taste in music. We should be able to get into one of the old windows on the side of the building here." R.D. draws a square on the side of the building

closet to the street. “They aren’t as strong as the doors, and they’re up really high. I’ll give Devon a call and see if they got the electronic alarms or cameras installed.”

“Okay. Excellent.” He can feel his routine analytical mind turn on. “I’ll go with James and R.D. to the town hall.” He tries to stand, but a sharp pain makes him cry out and nearly faint. His stomach threatens to climb into his throat. He feels several arms catch him and lower him onto the couch.

“No offense, but you’re in no shape to do anything just yet. You need to rest.” Caroline forces the blanket on top of him. “We’ve done things like this before, so trust us. We got this. James and R.D. can handle the town hall. The rest of us will go to George’s place and see if he’s at home. Besides, you have to go back home when this is all done and keep the good people of your city safe.”

“Thanks.” John coughs for a few moments. “While you guys were gone, I called and told my captain I was going to use all of my vacation time to grieve. I have a few weeks saved up, so you’re not getting rid of me that quick.” He takes her hand and looks up at her.

“Listen, please be careful. I don’t really know anyone else here and you’re my last connection to Beth.”



## Chapter 5

Blue flashes of light color the trees around her with each fierce strike. The Slasher slams her axe again and again into the barrier at the campground. Glancing blows have taken large chunks out of nearby trees to the point where they're ready to fall over. Still, she cuts.

The barrier heals again, but this time there is a gash left behind. A larger and larger hole is left each time she attacks. She feels that the thing keeping her from her duty is failing and it makes her hit harder. There's a whistle and then an electric sizzle as she rips the hole wider.

She raises her axe above her head. The blade never going dull, it sings as it falls, slicing the air in two. When she stands, she looks through the hole in the barrier. There are motes of light drawing her forward. She can hear them moving, laughing, and playing.

\*\*\*\*\*

The bead of sweat falls slowly, tracing a glistening line down the side of his face. The Tall Thin Man isn't used to this feeling of fear and a lack of control. He grabs hold of the stone podium and stares at the tableau in front of him. The herbs in the bowl smolder and crackle. The wisps of smoke rise to the ceiling where they disappear into the cold stone. Next to the bowl of swirling smoke, vials of strange liquids reflect the fading fires.

The Tall Thin Man takes a vial of dark orange liquid and pours a small amount into the bowl. It swirls and bubbles as it contacts the embers. The flames rise but quickly dim to show a blue ring around the orange liquid.

"Dammit." The Tall Thin Man stares at the bowl. "I'm not sure how much longer the barrier will hold. I can feel her trying to get through."

“But sir, why does it matter?” A shorter person in a robe hurries quickly over to the Tall Thin Man. “You let her kill as much as she wanted before. What’s a few more today?”

*‘They seem to get stupider with each generation. I try to teach them, but they don’t seem to want to learn.’* He looks pityingly at the cultist. The smoke swirls higher giving him an ethereal look. “You don’t understand just yet, but don’t worry, you will. It isn’t about her killing a few counselors once in a while. That’s a necessary part of the order. The problem is that she’s free.”

“And why is that so bad?” The cultist actually raises his hand as he asks the question. “If she’s out there killing, then we won’t have to worry about getting people to the camp and then changing the newspapers to hide it.”

“Listen closely. She can’t ever be allowed to leave the campground. It’s her space. Powers and traditions more ancient than either of us have decreed that she is to be at the lake. If she was inside when the barrier went up, the hope was she would finish off this crop of counselors and then go back to sleep in the lake.” He reaches out and places a hand on the cultist’s



shoulder. "If she runs free, she will not just kill a few counselors, she'll kill everyone. Imagine if she makes it to the next town over. She would annihilate the entire town in no time."

"Oh..." The cultist's eyes go wide as the realization hits. Panic and desperation fill his face as he looks around the room frantically.

"And if she's discovered outside of town, then her carnage will lead others back here." He walks back to the podium and stares into the smoke. "We've worked too hard to keep this town a secret. I can't let anything jeopardize that. It would ruin everything. As long as we keep someone at the cabins, she's compelled to kill them and cleanse her hunting grounds. That's why we had to send the counselors to the campground. The distraction might give us enough time."

"Sir, tell me what you need me to do." The robed cultist stares up expectantly.

\*\*\*\*\*

The moonlight shines brightly for a moment before the clouds cover the moon. A newer Volkswagen Beetle pulls up in front of a single-story ranch home. Nissa looks around as she pulls up right behind the car in the

driveway. *'Must be nice living out here with no neighbors close by.'* The car's headlights shine on the back end of a contemporary sedan, something that you wouldn't look twice at if it passed you on a street.

Around the home is a large privacy fence, the sturdy gate stands closed. The tall wood of the fence surrounds the entirety of the backyard. The headlights go out as the car shuts off.

There are no lights on in the house, lending a sinister air to the whole scene. Strips of moonlight cut a path up the walkway to the front door. Nissa opens the door to her car, and she stands staring at the dark home. Caroline and Reese get out of the back of the car and walk around to the front.

"Well," Caroline motions to the house. "Here we are. Let's see if George is home."

"His car's here." She runs a hand along the curved panels and walks to the front door. "He's gotta be home. Maybe he's just sleeping or something."

"There's only one way to find out." Reese walks up to the front door and knocks. The echo is loud in the silence of the night. The

nearest neighbor can't be seen or heard. There are no nighttime screeches or skitters from animals hunting and foraging.

"No one's answering." She shifts from one foot to another. She leans over to look through the small windows next to the door. "Hard to see anything with all the lights off."

"Here, step aside. I have a key." Reese reaches into his pocket and pulls out a set of keys, inserting the correct one into the door.

"Where'd you get a key?" Caroline looks at him, clearly studying him for a reaction.

"Oh. Um...he gave me a key when he needed me to water his plants. There we are." Reese pushes the door open. "Let's go."

Immediately inside is a small hallway. To the left is a living room, and on the right is a dining area. The furnishings are not extravagant, but functional. Ahead there's a closed door and a hall that goes to the right and the left.

A small table sits in the hall. The only things on the table are a telephone and a small note. Caroline reaches out and flicks the light switch on and off a few times. "The lights aren't working."

“Look at this.” Reese stands next to the table holding up the note.

In large, blocky letters it reads; ‘REESE, GET OUT NOW! HE’S COMING!’

“Who wrote this? Doesn’t look like George’s writing.” She takes the paper from Reese. The note is written in handwriting she doesn’t recognize. She offers the note to Caroline.

“Who would know we’re here to read it? We didn’t know we were gonna be here until a little while ago. And who is coming?” Caroline takes the note, turning it over and finding nothing to indicate who wrote it.

“I have no idea. It might not...” What Reese was going to say is cut off as he hurries to the living room window, looking outside at the sudden bright lights. “What’s this now?”

Outside the home, in the driveway, there is a well-maintained old truck. It’s parked right behind Nissa’s car close enough to make sure that it cannot back out of the driveway. The lights on the top of the truck are flashing red and blue, highlighting the living room interior. She can see the signature hat of Chief Wallace as he puts the truck into park and shuts it off.

\*\*\*\*\*

A bright red truck pulls up behind the town hall. R.D. takes a deep breath and shuts off the engine. He grips the steering wheel tightly as he takes in a deep, calming breath. "You ready for this?" He looks over at James who is nervously tapping his legs.

"Hey. Where's Jasmine?" James tries to find the bat in the truck.

"Had to leave her at home." He can feel the doubt creeping in. *'Shouldn't have done that.'* "I don't think we'll need her. Besides, need all the hands free for carrying whatever we find."

"Coulda left her in the truck." James looks up at the building.

"I'm not leaving her out in the cold!" R.D. looks incredulous. "Besides, in this town who knows what might try and steal her."

"At least the truck is conspicuous." James gives a small laugh as he opens his passenger door.

"Better than the van." He closes his door and stares up at the dark building. "So, what exactly are we looking for?"

“Well, we know the old mayor owned the land where the campground is. Not sure why he’d give up such prime property.” James walks around to the front of the truck. “We’re trying to find who that person was. It might be able to tell us more about The Slasher.”

The streetlights illuminate the sidewalk with bright spots of false security. He and James do their best to stay in the shadows in case there’s anyone watching them. They slide along the brick wall, pressing closely to it, and skirt around the spotlight.

“Hey. Look up there.” James points up to a window that’s not very well lit by the streetlights, but it’s high up. “It’s a way inside.”

“It’s dark, too.” He walks over to a dumpster, does his best to ignore the smell, and starts to push. “We’re gonna need this to get up to it. Give me a hand.”

“You got it!” James claps for a second before seeing the look on R.D.’s face. “Sorry.” James jogs over and starts to help push.

“If I get an infection from this, I’m gonna slap you.” He pushes against the large container, and it rolls, the wheels squealing as it rolls along the sidewalk.

They climb onto the dumpster, careful to stand on the edges so that they don't fall through and land on the pile of slurry and trash inside. James reaches up and pushes on the window, trying to open it. "It's locked."

"Let me in there." He slides along the back of the dumpster and pulls out a handkerchief. He starts wiping the window down frantically. "Can't have you leaving fingerprints." Reaching into his pocket, He pulls out a pair of gloves for each of them.

"Makes sense." James slips the leather gloves on. "Wish I had thought of this."

"It's not a problem. I've...anyway." He holds a large pocket knife as he looks up at the window. He can nearly see inside as he works the blade between the window panes. He tilts the blade and slides it to the right, opening the lock. The window slides up easily.

"Remind me to never ask you how you learned to do these things." James watches R.D. fold the knife and put it back in his pocket.

"No worries. If I told you, I'd have to kill you." R.D. smiles. "Well, there you go. Get on in there."

“Oh, thank you.” James fake bows to R.D. as he reaches up and grabs the window sill. He pulls and struggles to get inside. An assist from R.D. rockets him through the window. He falls a few feet before landing on the hardwood floor with a thud. “Ow...I’m okay. Didn’t need that spleen.”

A grunt and groan sees R.D. pull himself easily through the window. He stands at the edge of a wooden railing staring down into the main entryway for the town hall.

“Place is empty. Wasn’t sure if there would be guards, but it’s good to see there ain’t.” He shines a flashlight all around the floor below. “We gotta find the Recorder’s office.”

Their footsteps on the wooden floor echo as they walk. Their flashlights shine on the paintings showing the town throughout the years that line the wall. They come to a wide set of stairs and pause.

“Which way?” James looks between the upper and lower floor looking for the Records Room.

“Look at this.” He shines his beam on a brass plaque on the wall of a hallway in front of them. Small arrows embossed on the



plaque point their way towards the Mayor's Office, Comptroller, and the County Recorder. "There's the Recorder's office. Let's get moving. Might wanna remember where the mayor's office is just in case we gotta come back."

Following the sign, they get to the Recorder's room easily. James reaches out to the knob and hesitates. James looks over at R.D. silently asking if he should open it.

"Whatcha waiting for?" He gestures at the closed door. "Is it's locked? Or are you afraid that something spooky is on the other side there, Scoob? Need a snack?"

James laughs, takes a deep breath, and turns the knob. It clicks and the door opens onto a large room. Maps and other paperwork are stored all throughout. On the wall are rolls of maps with their dates listed. They walk further inside and shine their lights around.

"Alright, we know what year the town was founded." James slides the light along the maps. "Any info about the mayor will be from back then."

"Well, let's get at it." He moves off to a filing cabinet and starts rifling through the documents.

A short while later, and he's standing in front of a wooden cabinet looking through a stack of old papers. "Check this out!" He rushes over to one of the tables and lays out the documents. "This looks like it's what we need. There's the deed for the land."

"Looks like the same address as the campground." James shifts the paper to get a better look at it. "It shows a map number which should be..." He moves to a stack of yellowed rolls of paper and pulls one out. "...here."

"That's gotta be it!" R.D. claps his hands together and pumps a fist. "Okay. Let's take these, get the hell out of here, and go back to Reese's. Don't wanna push our luck too much by overstaying our welcome."

"Right behind you." James gestures at the Recorder's office door.

They return everything they're not taking with them to their proper cabinets. Walking silently, they're careful not to knock over anything. They get to the window that they used to enter the building.

"Yeah, I'm not doing that." James scoffs. "I'm not risking this body falling into a dumpster. I don't know what these people

throw away, and I am not eager to dive headfirst into it. Besides, Devon said there's no alarm on the doors. Let's just go out that way."

"You're right." R.D. shrugs in agreement. "We didn't have the key to get in, but we can just push the dang door open and walk out nice and easy. No dumpster diving."

"Sounds like a solid plan to me." James turns away from the window.

"Guess we gotta." He and James walk down the large staircase. They walk as silently as they can despite knowing they're alone. At the back of the Town Hall is a metal door. The bright red exit sign above it points the way. James opens the door and steps out, a red light hidden by the open door flashes red as they exit.



## Chapter 6

The Slasher doesn't feel fatigue. She doesn't feel much of anything anymore. When her axe slams once again into the barrier, the blue sparks shine brightly and then fade. Her axe rises and falls through nothing. She pauses as she realizes that the barrier that kept her from her instinctual mission has been removed. The rain falls heavily as she steps forward into the campground proper. She leaves tracks in the wet earth as she stalks forward.

The line of cabins is dark, but that doesn't mean anything to her. She stares at them and watches the different lights dancing

through the windows of the far-off building. They look slightly different from the other lights she removed earlier. They usually do have some differences, but she doesn't care. She just knows that they need to be extinguished.

A bang from inside the cabin next to her catches her attention. She can't see anything inside, but she needs to be sure there are no lights inside. She reaches a pale hand out and pushes the door open. She's been in these cabins before, but she doesn't recall it. The only thing she knows is what's in front of her.

Rain hammers into the ground, pasting her dark hair to her head. She raises her glistening axe, and it shines brightly when the lightning flashes, the notch in her axe where the piece is missing scatters the light, interrupting the perfectly sharp symmetry of the blade.

The cabin is dark as she silently steps inside. The lightning flashes, illuminating the interior of the cabin and the sleeping campers briefly. She never reacts as the deep thunder echoes. A ball rolls to her and bounces off her foot. She looks over the beds filled with small campers who sleep, blissfully unaware of death standing in their doorway.

\*\*\*\*\*

The colors of the living room alternate between phases of darkness, red, and blue as the Chief's light's spin. Caroline, Nissa, and Reese are crouched below the window in the living room.

"We're never gonna make it out of this." Nissa's been trying her best not to freak out. She doesn't want to be a hindrance, but this is a whole new thing. She's not ready for this. *'Where is he?'*

"Shhh." Caroline scolds her.

Curiosity was always her drug of choice. She slowly, carefully pulls her legs under herself and gets onto her knees. She inches up slowly to peer out of the window while trying to remain as hidden as she can. Just as she's about to be blinded by them, the red and blue lights from Chief Wallace's truck go out. The Chief steps out of his truck and stands tall.

"What're we gonna do now?" She ducks back down and puts her back to the wall praying silently that she wasn't seen.

"Stay quiet for one." Reese moves away from the window. "He can hear us after all."

Even with the windows closed, they can hear his booming voice coming from outside. "Yes, I can hear you."

She looks over the windowsill and watches him put his hand on his gun belt like he's marching down the main street of an old west town. She nearly breaks as she sees something that shouldn't be natural. Chief Wallace actually tilts his head back and sniffs the air. He takes big whiffs of it before looking back to the home, a grin forming on his face.

"I can smell you, too." Chief Wallace doesn't move. He stands there exuding authority. "Now, why don't you make this easier on everyone here and just come on out. We can just talk this out. It doesn't need to get...nasty."

Fear can be easily read on all of their faces. *'Wonder if he can smell how afraid we are. Like he's just gonna toy with us. Maybe it makes us taste better.'* Caroline emphatically points towards the kitchen area. Reese starts crawling in that direction. Nissa and Caroline follow quickly behind him.

"I can hear you moving in there." Chief Wallace's voice is tinted with agitation. "You won't get away."

*'We can't escape something like that! He can track us everywhere we go! What if he follows us home?'* She crawls closely behind Caroline, making sure to not run into her, but willing her to move faster. Fear makes her careless. The side table shakes as she bumps into it, the phone falling to the floor with a loud ding of the bell inside of it. She holds her breath as the last ding bounces around the empty home.

Reese silently admonishes her with a quick look before hurriedly crawling into the kitchen. He stands up and waves for them to do the same. "We're going to have to run for it."

She and Caroline look at him with the same expressions of fear and *'You have got to be kidding!'*

"I'm sorry, but it's the only way." Reese takes hold of the doorknob of the kitchen door leading into the backyard.

"Don't make me do this here in front of these fine folks." Chief Wallace's voice sounds deeper, more gravelly. "You never know who else might end up getting hurt. Right, Caroline?"



Caroline looks like she wants to turn and charge him. Like she's ready to go and fight the Chief herself. Nissa looks at her, she knows the fear she's showing because it softens Caroline's expression. "Remind me to pay him back for that one."

Reese holds a closed hand up and counts silently. One finger. Two fingers. Three! He throws open the kitchen door and the cool night air blows in with the smell of wet leaves. As the kitchen door opens, there's a loud crack and crash as the front door is kicked in covering the sound of them escaping into the backyard. She pushes on Reese's back to get him to move faster!

"Fine." The Chief's exhale could be heard in his tone. "Have it your way. Just remember I tried to be civil."

Her stomach clenches and adrenaline rises as she grabs hold of Reese willing him to pull her to the safety of the car. She watches behind her while Reese pulls her forward. *'He's gonna jump out and get us. We're gonna be eaten!'* She's underneath the kitchen window when the echoing howl from inside the house ignites the part of her brain that ancient

humans used to run away from dangerous predators. She's one wrong sound or sight away from panicking. "Oh, God. Oh no. We're gonna die here!"

"Get your ass moving!" Caroline shoves her forward towards the gate leading to the front of the yard and, even more importantly, the safety of her car.

The front gate slams open as they burst through, pushing her legs to run faster than she's ever run before. She and Reese reach the car with Caroline close behind. The driver's and passenger's doors fly open, and they hurry inside.

"We're blocked in!" Caroline closes the car door as soon as she slides into the backseat. "How the hell are we getting out of here?"

"Just floor it!" Reese, panic evident on his usually calm features. "I'll pay for George's car! Drive through the yard!"

She involuntarily screams as the wolf that used to be Chief Wallace crashes through the privacy fence. The wooden gate flies off to land violently in the shrubbery next to the driveway. Heavy, plodding footsteps pound the driveway. When he looks at them, the werewolf

growls low and deep. Dark fur bristles as large muscles flex underneath. Long, sharp claws extend from the end of powerful paws.

Nissa tries to drive the car forward, but it impacts the one in front. She tries to back up, but the Chief's truck is right up against her bumper. She can feel her chest tighten in panic as she stares at the beast. Her mind nearly shuts down when it walks forward.

"He's coming!" She screams as she slams the car first into reverse and then drive trying everything she can to get the car to take them away from the imminent death.

"We gotta get out of here!" Reese slaps her arm.

"I can't!" She breathes fast, the sudden intake of oxygen making her head swim. The Chief's yellow eyes glow in the moonlight and stare into her soul. "We're wedged in...we're gonna die here."

Chief Wallace stands in front of them, the light shining on his now human form, the transformation so smooth and quick that none of them even noticed the change. His muscular, naked form storms forward. "Get out of the damn car, now."

The car engine revs, but she's confused, scanning the dashboard's instruments. *'I'm not pushing on the pedal. Wait...that's not mine.'* She's not sure what's more shocking, the Chief's sudden stop or the bright lights shining into her rear-view mirror.

"What the..." Chief Wallace walks past their car.

The Chief's truck flies out of the driveway, the tires screeching as they slide on the asphalt leaving black streaks. The lights and siren break through their fear. Inside the truck is a man with curly blonde hair and a beard of the same color. A mischievous grin is plastered on his face.

"See ya later, Chief!" The mysterious stranger gives a playful wave to the Chief as he slams a foot on the gas. The siren whoops as the truck tears off into the night.

"Let's move!" Caroline slaps the back of Nissa's seat.

"Right, right..." She puts the car in reverse and hits the gas. Turning the steering wheel, she points the car towards the yard before shifting into drive. The gas pedal seems glued to the floor as she spits up dirt and grass

while tearing through the yard. They head off in the opposite direction of the Chief's truck.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Dammit." Chief Wallace looks back and forth between the fleeing people and his own truck as the taillights fade into the distance.

He sighs deeply. "I can always come back to find them later. I can't lose what's in the back of that truck."

The change comes quickly now, but it wasn't always the case. It took time, effort, and practice to gain the power to transform so effortlessly. He feels his feet dig into the ground as he launches himself after the fleeing vehicle. He can smell the exhaust. The homes fly past him so fast, they seem like a blur as he uses his arms and legs to propel himself faster than any other animal could hope to run.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher stands in the doorway, staring at the small campers lying there. She's pulled out of her study as one of them moves, stands up beside the bed, and then screams. One after another, they move, scream, and then gather together. The sound is loud, but

she doesn't really notice the volume. The axe in her hand slowly lowers to her side as she stares blankly at them.

"What the hell's going on here?" The man's voice has no impact on her, but she can sense his light. "Who the hell are you?"

She feels the hand grab hold of her shoulder and spin her around suddenly. Looking up into his face, she watches the light surrounding the person. She recognizes its meaning, and her hand moves in a blur. The axe rises and falls in time with a flash of lightning. The man's face splits in half as the other lights continue to scream. Warm blood is diluted by the autumn rain as the man falls backwards through the open doorway to land in the mud and rain outside of the cabin. His light extinguished.

She steps outside to pick up her axe and turns to see bright lights through windows in the larger cabin nearby. A shucking sound is swallowed by thunder as she pulls the axe free and turns to the lights.

The rain washes the blood from her face as she walks. After climbing the few stairs, she stares at the closed door. She reaches out,

some semblance of muscle memory reminding her how to use a doorknob when the door is suddenly opened inward.

There's a softer, more feminine light standing in the door, looking confused. "You're not Keith. Who are you? Where's Keith?"

She grabs the girl by the throat and slams her head into the wall. The crack is deafening, and she can hear something moving and rushing around. The girl is gurgling just like she used to do. She takes the girl, places her head against the wall, and slams her axe into the skull so hard that it splits the log behind. The reverberating blade rattles the girl's eyes, teeth, and brains so much that they fall to splat onto the floor.

The cabin is filled with screams as several lights scatter. One is a shorter light, another is a softer light, and the other one looks unnaturally bright and strong. She moves down the long hall, unconcerned with speed, and steps into the large common room.

"Brittney!" The shorter light throws something at her that shatters against the wall spilling brown liquid as the glass cuts into her skin. She doesn't flinch as her black blood drips.

“What the hell is that?” The softer light is backing away and shaking.

“Get this bitch!” The stronger light rushes close. “You’re not gettin’ away with this!”

Her hand thrusts forward, the skin and bone of his chest splits easily. Grabbing the first thing she can, she feels the pulsing heart in her hand as her arm continues to extend, exiting his back with a loud crack and snap of spine and ribs. She holds the heart for a moment before opening her hand and letting it fall. She draws her axe high and brings it down on his head with enough force to send the corpse to its knees and tear her arm up through the collarbone sending blood and bone over the common room.

“Let’s get the hell out of here!” The shorter light runs out the door in the front of the cabin and slides away into the night. It disappears from her sight, but she can still feel it out there even if she can’t tell exactly where it is. It cannot hide from her for long.

“Oh, Jesus!” The softer light runs into another room behind her. In one quick motion, she turns and lets her axe fly. It tumbles end over end before punching into the back of the



soft light's skull. There's a scream and a thud as the light falls. The light is dimming, but it still shines dimly, offending her senses. She steps forward, placing a foot on the back of the blade and steps down hard. Her foot pushes her axe through the bone and brain to slam into the floor. She turns towards the pull of the last light, pulls her axe free, and walks leaving a red footprint with each step.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Gotta go! Gotta hide!" Timothy runs along the dark path next to the lake. The wet gravel making the run treacherous. The boathouse looms large in the distance, but it feels miles away. "Oh, God. Don't let me die here. I just gotta make it to the boat."

The boathouse door slides open stiffly as he desperately shoves it aside. The building is mostly empty. *'Nowhere to hide. Dammit! Now what?'* A lapping rhythmic slap makes him turn to the side. A flash of lightning lights up a large opening that leads to the lake. A speedboat bobs up and down on the dark water in the internal dock. "Good. Excellent. I'll get the Chief and the rest of the cops and come back for the rug rats. They'll be fine. Right?"

Yeah. I'll be quick!" He pushes the boat out closer to the lake proper and climbs inside.

The hope in his eyes fades as he looks down to see that the keys are missing. "Where the hell are they?" He throws the life jackets, letting them fly into the water. He grabs other gear, tossing them into the abyss of the lake. *'Where are the damn keys!'* Standing up in the shaking and rocking boat, he frantically looks around the boathouse. In a flash of lightning, they are revealed! A shining set of keys hang next to the door where he came inside.

The wind picks up, making the waves rise higher and faster and playing hell with his balance. Thunder booms and the boathouse shakes, his nerves vibrating in time with it. *'She doesn't know I'm here...she doesn't know I'm here.'* His heart beats in time with the pounding rain as he tried to listen for her. Distracted, he stumbles and crawls out of the rocking boat, the wet dock makes him slip.

His foot hits the water and he scrambles. *'Oh, God! What if she's in the water?! Gotta get out!'* He pushes with frantic strength, but his hands slide on the wet wood, and he falls further into the dark depths. Soaked and terrified, he

reaches out for the dock. Fear causes him to be careless and he pushes hard. *'I'm almost out.'*

A sudden swell from violent wind slams the boat against his leg. With a loud and sickening snap, his shin splits in two. His leg bends and flops unnaturally as he closes his eyes to the pain and pulls himself onto the dock. He holds in the scream that he wants so desperately to let ring out. *'Can't let that thing know I'm here. I gotta move!'*

He forces himself to stand, the broken leg dangling and moving perversely. He hops with one leg, keeping an eye fixed firmly on the keys hanging so far away. It seemed so much closer moments ago. Each hobble leaves a streak on the dirty floor as his broken leg drags. He reaches out, tears of pain falling freely, as he focuses on the keys.

A long, painful trek finally brings him within reach. He laughs in spite of the need to keep silent. "I'm outta here!"

He turns and breathes deeply. He knows the pain he's going to feel as his leg bones grind against each other. He may not hear it, but with each hop he can feel them sliding under his skin threatening to burst free. The darkness of

the boathouse is encompassing. He focuses on the water as it reflects the flashes of lightning. He gets to the edge of the boat when he allows himself a moment of elation. He edges closer to the boat, looking over the instruments and making sure that he has enough gas to make it to safety.

A loud crack breaks the night's stillness and he's suddenly staring into the black eyes of The Slasher. He can feel her cold hands on the side of his head as she watches him. Looking down, he can see that his feet are facing the wrong way. The last things he experiences are the sound of the keys as they fall into the water and the bright blade of her axe rising.

\*\*\*\*\*

Inside the children's cabin, they stay huddled near the walls far away from the door.

"Is she gone?" A young girl pulls her blanket closer as she stares up at the window.

"I think so..." A boy cranes his neck to look outside.

"I am never going camping again."  
A third child slides under the bed, pulling a blanket down to hide behind.



## Chapter 7

Reese slams his door hard once the rest of them are inside. Wide-eyed, he frantically clicks every lock into place before turning, sliding down the door, and panting. Reaching over with shaking hands, he rechecks a few of the locks that are within reach.

Nissa and Caroline are already in the kitchen. They return with some of his finest and strongest bottles of wine. Neither bothers with a glass as they dive into the liquid courage.

“What in the world is going on here?”  
R.D., who was on his feet as soon as the door

bursts open, looks out the window for the impending danger.

Reese takes a few deep breaths. "We... whew...we...." He inhales and exhales a few more times to stop the room from spinning. *'Really must work on the cardio, old boy.'*

"We went to George's place." Nissa says between gulps and panting. "He wasn't there by the way. So, he's still missing. And who shows up but freaking Wallace! Well, we hide, but he goes full wolfen and starts smashing the place! Crashing through doors, throwing gates, and just tearing things up." She tips the bottle back again.

"We almost didn't make it back here." Caroline sets the bottle down on the coffee table.

He watches as the slow drip of condensation slides down the bottle to land on his well-polished wooden table.

"John, he was so much worse than Dave if you can believe it." Caroline pushes her perspiration laden hair back from her face. "The guy is huge and ferocious. He tore through that house like it was paper. I'm pretty sure he wanted something from us. Otherwise,

he would have killed us without losing a second of sleep over it.”

He picks himself up from the floor and brushes off the dust and dirt more to gather his thoughts and poise than to remove any offending debris. “And if not for the timely help of the Stranger, we would not have made it out at all.” Reese picks up Caroline’s bottle and places a coaster beneath it.

“You shoulda seen it.” Nissa starts to giggle. “This guy stole the Chief’s truck and took off with it! It saved us, sure, but the look on Chief Wolfie’s face was worth almost being eaten.”

“And it gave us the opportunity to get out of there. Although with Nissa’s particular style of driving, I wasn’t sure how long we would remain alive.” Once Nissa’s bottle is safely perched on a coaster, he sits in his favorite chair, taking comfort in the familiar fabric. He leans forward, placing his elbows on his knees and his hands on the side of his head. “And the worst thing is, we never found George. Robert either. They’re just gone.”

“You don’t think the Chief got them, do you?” Nissa looks to be swaying as she speaks.

“No idea.” James rubs his beard nervously. “I wouldn’t count anything out, but I’m still gonna hope they’re both safe.”

Reese picks up the box of printed files that they had gotten from the library. Thumbing through them, he pulls out one in particular. “Here. I saw this and wanted to wait until we were all together to show you. This is from around the same time that the town was founded.”

While it’s an older article, it’s been copied onto modern paper. Reese holds it up as he recounts the story. “It’s a story about the mayor from back then. He’s the one that owned the property that the camp was later built upon. It turns out his son and a neighbor boy were killed there. One of his servants went missing weeks prior to their deaths but is presumed to have died.”

“Servant? You mean like a maid?” R.D. chimes in.

“Precisely. They were more common back then.” Reese runs a finger along the article’s text. *‘Where was it now? Ah! There it is!’* “Does anyone want to guess the name of the mayoral family?”



“It’s Wheeler, isn’t it?” Caroline stands there, her jaw agape.

“Right in one.” Reese is in his element now. When he gets into this mode of thinking, he tends to get lost in it forgetting about other worries. Not that he minds. “After the son’s murder, the family left the property and went into hiding and left the property to the town of Slaughterville.”

“I can’t be seeing this right.” James practically has his nose pressed against the article. “Is that really...?”

“It can’t be.” Nissa shakes her head.

John holds a hand out and Reese hands him the article. On it there’s a picture. The caption reads ‘*Mayor, Edith, and Alan Wheeler outside their home*’. “This looks exactly like the mayor. Must be his great-great grandfather or something.” John hands the paper back to Reese.

“Well, that family must have been in office since the beginning of the town.” R.D. stares at the picture. “I never heard of anyone in his family being murdered though. That’s new.”

“What I learned from that first article started me searching even deeper.” He rifles through the stack of papers until he finds the one he needed. He holds up an article that reads ‘*Local Girl Goes Missing*’. “I believe that this is who we are looking for.”

Caroline takes the offered article. “It looks just like her. I will never forget that face for as long as I live. It’s a little less...dead than I’m used to seeing.”

“Says she worked for the Wheelers.” Nissa stretches to look at the article. “I wonder what it was like back then...”

“And her body was never recovered.” He finishes the story, glancing at each of his pupils. “She went missing shortly before the murders started. We don’t want to jump to conclusions, of course, but this does seem a promising lead.”

“What was her name?” Nissa stands there, clearly disturbed and distraught by what she’s hearing.

“Who? The girl?” He quickly scans the article again, running a finger along each line to keep track. “It doesn’t say. Just calls her ‘*the servant girl*’.”

“Oh...” Nissa looks even worse. “That is so sad.”

“That is the way things were then.” He adds. “It doesn’t make it right or proper. It just was.”

“Unggh.” John stands up gingerly. “We need to find out where the original home was located. There might be something in the old house that can tell us more about what happened.”

James and R.D. carefully unroll the map that they brought back from the County Recorder’s office. It’s a topographical map of the forest and camp area. It has markings for the homestead they’re looking for. The land is huge, hundreds of acres.

“Could take us days to find anything if we just wander.” R.D. taps the map. “Best if we get a good starting point.”

“We know that the Slasher stays near the lake and the surrounding forest, so let’s start there.” Reese pulls out a sheet of paper with the current campground shown. It’s a map that is similar to the one they got from the County Recorder’s office, but it’s relatively current.

“Okay.” John points to a large body of water. “This has to be the lake. It runs all along here.”

“And we know that the old Wheeler place was along the lake near the camp, so we gotta find the camp.” James hovers, staring down at the green and brown colorations on the map.

“We know where the current camp is located.” Reese lines up the sheet of paper with the current camp to the one on the table. “We just need to match this up with the correct section of the lake and we know where to start.”

Minutes of searching finally bear fruit. They find the correct curves and land formations that closely resemble the campground map. Caroline looks from the sheet of paper to the larger map. “It’s not perfect, but it’s close.”

“And if we follow the lake around, there’s a big clearing here.” James points at one particular spot on the map. “It’s set a good way back from the camp, but it might be the right place. I don’t like the idea of trouncing around in the woods at night with her out there running around, so I vote we wait until morning to go looking around.”

“Yeah, we don’t really know the area.” R.D. nods along. “Makes sense to wait until we can see.”

“Also...” He feels almost sick for having to say it out loud. *‘Well, it’s not like it’s the first time we’ve done something like this. Okay. Not exactly like this.’* “With the recent disappearances of George and Robert, I think that we should all stay here for the night. Then we can all leave together to go and hopefully find that home.”

“Does seem like that’s the smartest option we have right now.” R.D. holds his bat in his hand, the barbed wire looking sharp and deadly, and bounces it a few times. “Alright, let’s all get some much-needed rest. I know it’ll be hard after what just happened, but we gotta. We won’t do George and Robert any good if we fall asleep while searching for them. We’ll each take turns keeping watch.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The brakes of the bus hiss and squeak as it pulls up in front of the Slaughterville town sign. The doors fold open and the interior lights of the bus come on. A single passenger steps off into the chilly night air.

A woman, nearly six-feet tall with light brown skin, looks hesitant to exit the bus. She puts one foot down only to pick it back up again. *'You can do this, Shawna.'*

"Don't have all night, ma'am." The driver looks tired which makes her feel worse.

"Sorry." She pushes back her black hair and steps down. The doors to the bus close and it makes a U-turn before driving away from the town. "Slaughterville. Dammit all to hell. I swore I'd never see you again."

She looks up at the iron archway with eyes even harder before taking her first step. She feels the weight pushing down on her as she crosses the border. Her hand reaches to rub her lower back.

"I said you'd never get another drop of my blood after last time, but here we are, back together again." She shifts her pack onto her back and walks.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mist rolls along the ground as the rain slows to a stop. The Slasher walks through the puddles as she hunts for more lights. The one from the boat house already forgotten. She feels

the call of the lake, beckoning her to return to sleep, but she can sense that she has more to do.

She stalks by the rows of cabins, past the pavilion, and into the forest. Her axe, sharp and patient, hangs by her side. The hand holding it swings as she walks.

The need for sleep is getting stronger the further she gets from the lake. With nothing to hunt, she turns and walks back towards the dark waters. The edge of the water crests over her feet. Her feet disappear under the water as she walks. She slides lower into the depths. The water reaches her chest, and she stops, the ripples slowing.

This is something new to her. Her head quickly turns towards town to something she can feel even though she can't see it. For the first time in a long time, she feels something. Eagerness and longing creep into her mind. She recognizes it. She needs it.

She turns away from the depths and walks out of the water. The stones under her bare feet cut and poke, but the cuts seal themselves almost immediately, and she doesn't have the ability to feel the pain. She can feel the shadows all around her and she stalks towards

the closest one. Inside the darkened boathouse, she heads to the deepest black. It seems to ripple and show part of the town through it. She steps inside and is gone from the camp.





## Chapter 8

Birds land on the window sill as the orange glow from the sunrise sneaks in through the window. The dust dances through the sunlight dirtying the purity of it. The coffee in John's hands is the closest he's felt to Heaven in so long. He sips it carefully while looking around the room. Reese is in his chair, flipping through the channels on the television. *'Huh. Never pictured him for a couch potato style. Figured he'd be more into reading old stories about ancient architecture or government procedures.'* The show that he was watching is rudely interrupted by a Special Report flashing onto the screen.

“What is all this nonsense now?” Reese turns up the volume.

*‘Good thing everyone else is still asleep in the other rooms. I have a feeling this is about to get heated.’* John watches as the Mayor’s face comes on screen. The bar across the bottom of the screen reads *‘Mayor Wheeler Gives Comments on Camp Closure.’*

\*\*\*\*\*

The sun shines on the town hall and the Mayor thinks that it looks absolutely majestic. He can remember when it was built. It was the talk of the whole town back then, too. The podium stands at the top of the stairs right outside the entrance to the town hall. Chief Wallace stands next to the podium waiting for him. *‘Here we go again.’*

“Good morning, your honor.” Chief Wallace tips his hat and returns to looking out over the crowd.

“Hope you had a good morning as well.” He smiles and waves to the crowd of reporters and townsfolk waiting for him to start. He taps the microphone and hears the sound coming from the speakers. “Good morning. I know that it’s early, so thank you for coming. I want

to take this time to assure everyone that there's nothing to be concerned about."

His face becomes stern and in control. His authority is projected outward to flow over the mass of people. "We have decided to close the camp early. Those of you with children at the camp have no reason to be concerned, and you should expect their arrival back home shortly. We sent our expert health inspector to the camp, and his report showed several severe health code violations. While it fills me personally with great sadness to know that those kids won't get to experience the fun of camping, it had to be done. Thank you."

The crowd claps and the photographer snaps several pictures for the local paper. He smiles for the cameras, but he feels nothing but terrible disappointment. He gestures for quiet, and they all settle down.

"Now for the next part, I will need the help of our illustrious Chief Wallace." He steps to the side and gestures for the Chief to take his place.

Chief Wallace hitches up his belt and looks annoyed. He slowly walks over to the

podium and adjusts the mic, the feedback making everyone cringe. From an envelope, he pulls out a set of pictures and places them on the podium.

“Thank you, Mayor. Ladies and gentlemen of this fine town.” Chief Wallace holds up one of the pictures. “Last night there was a break in at this very town hall.” The image is the back of two men as they’re walking around the town hall.

“Thankfully, there were no injuries.” Chief Wallace holds up another picture clearly showing James walking into the County Recorder’s room. “They stole some vital records and damaged property.”

The next picture is of R.D. leaving the back of the building carrying the map. “If any of you fine and honest citizens have any knowledge of these two thieves, we would appreciate your help in bringing justice to our small town. We thank you and appreciate your cooperation. Good day.”

“Thank you, Chief.” He claps towards the Chief. “And thank all of you for coming. Now, the work of a public servant is never done, and we have a lot of work to do. We will

update you once we know more about these horrid criminals, but we can't do it without you. Thank you!" He waves as he and the Chief walk into the town hall, the heavy doors cutting off the sounds of the people leaving.

He and the Chief go into his office and close the door. Sitting in his chair with a groan, he leans forward onto the desk. "Chief, we really need to get on top of this. If you have to, you can bring in Jenny and contain this mess. I need you to stall and give me time to get everything ready."

"I'll do what I can. Not sure Jenny'll be ready." Chief Wallace picks a few pieces of lint off of his hat. "I know that things haven't been going well, but I won't let you down."

\*\*\*\*\*

When Reese and John finish relaying what they saw on the news, it was enough to do the impossible, drive the rest of the group to silence. His house is quiet, which isn't something that Reese is used to when everyone is there. He coughs to break the tension.

"Guys." James pleads, the fear and concern worn plainly on his face. "We are so sorry."

“We really screwed this one up. We dropped the ball hard.” R.D. hangs his head. “I should’ve known better.”

“Wasn’t your fault.” Caroline puts her cup on the table with a clink. “Didn’t you say Devon told you the alarms weren’t installed?”

“Well, yeah.” R.D. raises a hand to emphasize his point. “But I shoulda seen the cameras.”

“Did you manage to find my ice cube tray in the toilet?” Nissa sits on the floor, her legs crossed.

“What?” He’s relieved to see the confused looks on everyone else’s face. *‘At least I am not the only one confused. Wonder what she’s on about.’*

“No. I didn’t find that.” R.D. tilts his head. “Why the hell are you askin’ me something like this?”

“Of course you didn’t!” Nissa continues in her bubbly way. “You didn’t expect it to be there. Same as the cameras. The fact that you didn’t look for them isn’t because of some fault in you. You didn’t look because they weren’t supposed to be there! See?”

The room is stunned into total silence. He watches them all look from one person to the other. *'I hope someone was able to follow that.'*

"Guess I can't argue with whatever all that was." R.D. slaps his legs in defeat before standing up and pacing. "Doesn't change the fact that we can't show our faces in public anymore. Gotta stay low which means that we can't go with you without it being dangerous for us." R.D. moves to stand with James. "I wouldn't want any of you to get lumped in with hardened criminals like us."

"Hey! Don't worry about that, bud." James claps R.D. on the back. "I'll just tell the cops you kidnapped me."

The house needed the laughter. *'Things have been spiraling lately. We need to do whatever it takes to keep this spirit.'* He forces himself to remember this moment clearly. He files it away with the images of his family. *'Family. That word takes on a strange meaning in these trying times. These people here are family, and we need to find those that are missing. I do hope George and Robert are safe. Wherever they are.'*

“Hey.” Caroline breathes quickly to talk through the laughter. “Pretty sure the Chief doesn’t know about Reese or this place yet since we aren’t all dead or in jail.”

“For which I am eternally grateful.” He gestures openly to James and R.D. “Of course, each of you can stay here as long as is necessary. R.D. and James, we will make sure that you can get what you need from your homes as soon as we can. However, we must now return to the vital business at hand.”

They all return to the living room. The map is laid open on the coffee table. Each of them settles around the map.

“Here’s where we need to go.” He points to a spot on the map. “This is the most likely site for the old Wheeler estate. Things seem to be centered around there. My deduction, and John, you can feel free to contradict me, is that it started those many years ago with the first killings of the Wheeler boy and their servant. If there is anything left there, it might have some clues about the Slasher.”

“The logic seems sound.” John studies the map before sitting back. “I still don’t like the forests around here.”



“Why don’t we just go ask the Mayor?” Nissa shrugs as she asks.

“If he is a part of this, we would let them know who we are.” Caroline explains. “So, we gotta try things a little weird.”

“Yeah, a long walk in the woods seems like our only real plan right now.” James nods as he reads the map.

“Hold on a second. If you look here, there’s a small side road.” John grunts and groans as he sits closer to the map, pointing to a small offshoot or path. “It looks like it’s secluded, and it leads pretty close to where we need to be. With people looking for you, it’d be best to stay as off-grid as possible.”

“Agreed.” He finishes memorizing where the road is. “We’re going to need to do a lot of hiking once we get there. John and Caroline can ride with R.D. Then Reese and I can jump in Nissa’s car, and we can meet up there.”

A short while later, Reese bounces and groans as the car does its best impression of a ping pong ball. *‘Oh, I hope this ends soon. Would hate to show my breakfast to the upholstery.’* James, also in the back of Nissa’s

Beetle, shows a similar shade of green. The ride has been rough ever since she pulled off onto the small road. *'Clearly, this car wasn't built for this type of terrain.'*

R.D.'s truck follows her along the dirt road that is more of a rough cut pathway than anything resembling a proper roadway. *'They don't seem to be having this trouble.'* A screech of grinding metal sets his teeth on edge as the bottom of her car once again meets an upturned rock.

"Niss?" James begs in between jostling. "Might wanna stop before you tear out the oil pan. Don't wanna leave the beetle here in the woods." James's head crashes into the headrest in front of him. "Dang it!"

"Nissa! Stop! Please!" Reese's head impacts the roof of the car again. "Ow!"

Nissa pulls to the side of the path and puts on the brakes. "Think we're back far enough from the main road?"

The car's door creaks as she pushes it open. She stands and waves to the others in the truck while he and James practically fall out of the back of her car. The truck's horn blares an acknowledgment.

*'The woman should have her license revoked.'* "That's as far as I am willing to travel with you on this road. I think I will need to see a neurologist once we return." Reese rubs the sore spots on his head.

R.D. pulls right behind Nissa's car and shuts off the engine to his truck. Caroline climbs out and reaches up to help John. He gingerly gets out of the truck but manages to stand on his own.

Caroline jogs over to the shaken group. "You guys okay?"

"Been better." He looks deeper into the forest while rubbing the knots on his head. "Let's get going before it gets too dark. Don't forget to grab your flashlights just in case."

"Yeah, it's about noon, but I've been in these woods before, and time is weird here. I know I don't wanna get caught out in the dark." John checks his pistol before putting it into the holster on his side. "Who has the map then?"

"It's right here." Reese holds up the part of the map that they brought with them. "It should be a few hundred meters along this path."

“Meters?” James huffs dramatically. “Why, good sir, we use yards here!”

“Actually,” R.D. mock whispers. “They use meters a lot in the military.”

“Well, then...fine. Keep your inferior measuring system then.” James sticks his nose in the air as he walks down the path.

Casual and light conversation help pass the time as they walk. The overgrown pathway extends farther into the forest. Hills, forged paths, and a lot of time later they emerge onto a clearing. “We should be there. What’s all this, then?” He gestures to the open area.

“What?” Nissa jogs up to him pulling on her pink Slaughterville Crows sweatshirt.

“This.” He points in front of himself. “According to the map, this should be it.”

There are very few trees standing in the large clearing. It looks like something could have been here. Once he really sees the place, he can see the old fence lining the property.

“Look. That looks like an old fence. If we go over here,” He walks further and points towards Lake Slaughterville. “Those might be the remnants of a dock down by the lake.”

“Guess there’s one way to find out.” Nissa takes off running towards the lake. She stops in front of the water, with her hands on her hips, before turning around and running back. “Yep, definitely looks like a dock.”

“I don’t know how you can see anything.” Caroline turns to look over the whole clearing. “Never was good at those seeing eye pictures. I’ll trust all of you on this one.”

He turns and immediately notices that John is missing. “John?” As he calls, he hopes to get an answer and is terrified that he won’t.

“Yeah? Over here!” John is a few dozen yards away, squatting next to a small stone wall. “I think I found something.”

“On my way!” R.D. calls as he walks over. “What is it?”

“Looks like a foundation.” John points, following the stone wall.

“Yes.” Reese puts a hand to his chin, studying the scenery. “It does look like a foundation. Look at the uniformity of the stone. It could belong to the old homestead.”

“Yeesh.” James winces at the lot. “The old place musta rotted away. Sucks to think

that things we love will be tossed and forgotten until the last person who remembers us passes away and we're just as lost to time."

"Man..." R.D. looks like he heard the most profound statement.

"What?" James looks from R.D. to the rest of the group. "Did I say something weird again?"

"No. Of course not." Nissa takes James by the arm and walks him to the stone wall. "Come on. Let's go check over here."

"Okay. Look around for anything useful." He takes in the decayed and ruined surroundings. *'I don't think we'll find anything. Looks like the place rotted away long ago.'*

A few minutes pass before he hears R.D.'s voice in the clearing. "Over here! I found something."

"Whatcha got?" Nissa rushes over. "Oooh."

"What is it?" Reese hurries over, eager to analyze these new findings. The others follow closely behind him. They're looking at a strange rectangular metal door lying on an angle and sitting on its own large stone base.

"Looks like the entrance to an old cellar." R.D. kicks the door with a loud clang. "Wonder what's down there."

"You..uh...you've never watched horror movies did you?" James quickly steps away from the cellar door.

"Jimmy, there's nothing to be scared of. It's daytime. She don't come out in the day." R.D. grabs one of the metal rings on the door and starts to pull.

"Ugh..." John grabs the other door and pulls, clearly in pain. James reaches down and grabs the same ring on the door and helps pull. "Besides, we need to get whatever info we can. We'll never find out anything if we stay up here."

"Okay, ready? One more pull!" R.D. heaves. John and James pull. The doors creak and moan before they separate and reveal the entrance.

"Oh, my. I wonder what could be down there." He stares at the dark abyss. There are crumbling stone stairs leading down into a dark basement. *'Answers? Monsters? Rats?'* "Ugh..."

“Well, since you girls won’t go...” Nissa pushes past them and quickly walks down the stairs, her flashlight turning on in the darkness. Her light dances as she walks and scans the way in front of her.

“Wait!” James reaches out to try and stop her, but she’s already near the middle of the stairs.

“I don’t see any monsters down here” Nissa gets to the bottom of the stairs, shining her light all around. James is next, followed by R.D. and Reese. Caroline is helping John down the stairs.

“Niss, you gotta be more careful.” James shakes his head at her. “You never know what’s down here. And I don’t just mean anything weird, tetanus isn’t a fun time.”

“You worry too much.” She pats the side of his face and turns away shining her light on the walls. “Let’s look around.”

The basement is huge, and it looks like it used to be extravagant. The main feature is a set of wine racks that stretch away from them.

“Let’s have a look around and report whatever you find.” He shines his flashlight



along the rows of wine racks. "I'm not sure that there's much here though."

"Sure. Nothing but hundred-year-old wine anyway." R.D. walks to the wine racks. "Should take that with us at least."

"Grab me some, too!" Nissa bounces over to R.D. "I wish I brought my duffel bag with me. Here, use my sweatshirt and fill it up!"

"Well, no point letting it go to waste." Reese smiles, thinking of filling his decorative wine rack at home. '*George is going to love this.*'

\*\*\*\*\*

John and Caroline, side by side, work their way back to the rear of the basement. '*I'm glad she's here, but I don't like being a burden. If she has to run, I don't want to slow them down. All I can do is limp along. Maybe I can trip and be a distraction. At least then I'll be useful.*'

Past the tall stacks of wine bottles nestled in their wooden beds, at the back of the basement, there's a stone wall that stretches nearly to the ceiling. His light shines along it until it reaches the gap in the top, showing

something beyond the wall. *'Well, now I gotta know what's over there.'*

Carefully, and not because of the injuries, he creeps over to the wall. He shines the light on it looking for any hints of what secrets it might be hiding. The wall looks like plain stone. *'Since it's not going to the top, I can deduce that it's not for support. That means it's gotta be hiding something. Could be there just to hide the cleaning equipment.'* Limping over, he shines his light all along the wall searching for a door.

*'What's that?'* His light shines on something just beyond the darkness. His natural instinct to be curious and investigate takes over. He limps over and finds an opening in the stone. It looks large enough to walk through. There's no door to stop the beam of his flashlight as it scans what's beyond. *'It looks like a crude room of some kind.'* The room is much longer than it is wide, giving it a cramped, stable-like feel. The floor is dirt, but at least it's dry. He shines his light further into the small room and it shows an unexpected display.

"Guys." He calls to the others. "Come over here and check this out."

There's a rectangular strip of cloth on the floor on top of a pile of moldy straw. There's no bed frame, just the straw on the floor. Against the far wall is a sturdy wooden desk, the condition of the desk can only be attributed to being protected from the elements. A metal candlestick holds the stub of a candle resting in it.

"Oh my God." Nissa puts a hand to her mouth in shock and empathic surprise. She's minus her sweatshirt and rubbing her arms, standing in the cold in a t-shirt. "Someone actually lived down here!"

"Who would do that?" Caroline touches the cold stone. "Why would they live in a place like this?"

"It must have been a servant. It was common in those times to have their quarters in a basement." Reese makes the observation conversationally. "Let's have a look."

The small room doesn't have many places for things to hide. He stands back and lets them get to work. *'I know that too much movement isn't good for my injuries. I can help in other ways. I am pretty good at a crime scene.'*

“Alright, let’s look around. Where’s R.D.?” Reese leans back to look into the other part of the basement.

“I’m fine!” R.D. yells back in between tink of glass. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Reese, Nissa, Caroline, and James search around the small room. They’re opening drawers and looking around the room. Reese pockets a few small objects always muttering something about interesting history to himself.

“Has anyone checked under the mattress?” John tries to look over at them as they move around.

“Not yet.” Nissa kicks at the straw. A pair of mice runs out and everyone screams!

“Whatsa matter?” R.D. rushes in.

“They were attacked by the most vicious mice they’ve ever seen, but not to worry. They weren’t of unusual size or anything. Just normal mice. It’s all good now. Look there.” John points to a rectangular leather object hidden under the straw. “What’s that?”

Reese kneels down and picks up the object. The dirty leather journal is worn with age. When Reese opens it, the spine makes

a crackling sound as the yellowed pages are flipped. It looks brittle, but it holds together for now. "It's a diary."

"Whose is it?" Nissa stands on the pile of straw and stretches to look over the top of the book.

"There's a name, faint, on inside of the cover. This ink is quite faded." Reese studies it closely as Nissa shines her light on the name. "Warren Evans."

"It doesn't sound familiar." Caroline ponders the mystery of the name.

"I don't imagine it would." Reese's eyes gleam as he studies the diary. "I wonder what we can learn from Mr. Evans. From the straw mattress, worn candle, and now this diary; it's possible that Mr. Evans lived here."

"This is awesome!" Nissa jumps on the straw mattress. "I mean it's terrible if he lived down here, but the diary could tell us a lot!"

"I'm with you, Nissa." John nods and smiles at her. "This was a really big find and it could have a ton of clues. I just don't want us to get our hopes too high. Not everything you find is key evidence in a case."

“Yes, yes. Fine work all. Well done indeed.” Reese is clearly distracted by the find. “Just imagine what knowledge these pages hold. The history of it. We must keep it safe and read it, but carefully. We must preserve it.”

“Hey. It’s getting kinda late guys.” Caroline looks at her watch. “Let’s just take the journal and get out of here. I don’t wanna be out here in the dark again.”

“Of course. Sorry.” Reese closes the journal and holds it close as he leaves the room.

They get to the stairs and R.D. is standing there, shirtless. “What?” R.D. picks up a few tied pieces of clothing that clink as he does. “Don’t leave empty handed.”

A short walk back down the trail and they’re loading the bottles and themselves into their vehicles. With greater care, Nissa drives back to the main road. Thankfully, the ride home was uneventful, but that didn’t stop them all from watching out for police cars or people watching them. Once inside, the doors firmly locked, they gather around the kitchen table. Reese opens the book and settles in comfortably, making sure that his audience is giving him their full attention.

“It starts years before the town was officially recognized as founded.” Reese turns the crinkling pages. “While the town wasn’t recognized by the state until 1887, it was a thriving small town ever since the area was settled.”

“When was it settled?” John is taking detailed notes.

“No one really knows.” Reese continues. “We’ve only pieced together that it’s been around since at least the late 1700s.” Clearing his throat, he starts to read...



## Chapter 9

4th December, 1817

*I was always big, even as a child. Now that I'm just about a full-grown man, I'm bigger than most of the other boys. Since as long as I can remember, I've tended the fields, hunted, and did whatever work was needed for whoever needed it done.*

*People like to think I'm stupid because I'm so big, but I had enough schoolin' to do good. I wanted to start writin' this journal because Momma got a new job in a new town. It's called Slaughterville of all things. I want to*



*keep record of all we do and what we see. This way I'll never forget.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Slaughterville, 10th December, 1817

*Carriage rides are not my favorite way to get around. I'd rather walk or ride a horse, but Momma's new boss sent a carriage for us. She said it'd be rude if we didn't take it. We also didn't need to find a place to stay, because we would be staying in the house of Momma's new employer.*

*The snow was deep today. The wheels slipped and slid in the white powder as Momma and me rode up the lane. As the carriage turned, I saw the house through the carriage window. It's giant and there are windows all over. There were three whole floors. Looked like it had so much room it could fit the whole rest of the town inside.*

*The yard was of such a size that I could see where a nice garden would be tilled in the spring. There was a nice wooden fence that went from*

*the barn to enclose a large pad for the horses. Whoever was here before us did good work. There are a few horses in the pad eatin' the hay in the troughs. That's good. I always got along well with horses. The barn is a considerable size, and it seems clean. Down the lane, away from the house, is the lake proper. I hope to go swimming there in the summer. Too cold to swim now.*

*My legs were a bit stiff from the long ride. I'm not used to sittin' so long. I got out of the carriage first and reached up to help Momma get down safe. She rubbed her hands to get rid of the cold, and I put my arm around her. I remember when she used to be holdin' me.*

*I looked down at my Momma, and I could see she was scared. I was, too. Just a bit anyway. She loves me, I know that. I know she wanted more for the two of us, but this isn't a bad life at all. We get to see a lot of the country, the work is honest, and today we arrived at our new home...*

“Warren!” Momma gives me a firm tap on the back pushing me forward. “Get moving, son. We need to make a good impression with the Missus and the Mayor.”

*We stood at the front door to that big house. Momma spent so much time fussin’ with my shirt and tryin’ to make me look presentable, somethin’ she’s been fightin’ with since I was a kid, that she didn’t hear the door open.*

*First thing that struck me about the woman was her eyes. Colder than the snow in my boots. She didn’t seem cruel or hateful, I’ve seen those eyes, but she didn’t seem very welcomin’ neither. She’s a bit taller than Momma, but where Momma was softer, she was hard edged. She had a long, upturned nose, perfect for looking down on folks. It was the Missus. Her name is Edith, but I didn’t know that then, and those that told me said to not ever call her that. With her arms crossed, she tapped her foot impatiently. Light colored hair was pulled up in a bun on top of her head...*

“Can I help you?” The woman stares right through us as if we’re a distraction that she does not have the time or want to deal with. I could see that, to her, we didn’t seem worth her effort.

“Ma’am. We’re the Evans’.” Momma holds her bonnet in her hand as she talks. “We were hired by the Mayor. I’m to help with the cleanin’, and the boy here is to take care of the stables and yardwork.”

“Yes.” The woman says the word, but she draws it out to about twenty syllables. “I recall my husband mentioning that you were coming today. Where is that man?”

“I’m right here, my dear.” The kind voice comes from a balding gentleman who looks like he’s in his mid-forties. He’s shorter than the woman, but clearly in charge. Unlike her icicle eyes, his are soft and welcoming like a warm fire on a winter’s night. Something about the man makes me like him right away. I can’t really explain it. The Missus turns and leaves, probably to give directions to other hands. I can hear her talking from the other room.

“Please, come in out of the cold and have a seat.” The Mayor leads us inside the

large home and shows us where we can hang our jackets. "Sorry if I am being forward, but I am in quite the rush. We're expecting some company tonight, and we would like to have the place tidied up a bit before they arrive."

"So, you met my dear Edith." He smiles as we walk down a long hall lined with portraits and flowers. "What do you think of her?"

"Well..." Momma starts, but stops suddenly, letting the word hang.

"Yes, she can be a bit of a handful, but she really does have a good heart under all that gruff. You'll see." He stops and looks up at a portrait of Edith and his eyes go from wistful to longing. "She's just under a lot of pressure today."

The dining room was bigger than some houses I stayed in. The large table was made of a solid wood and stained a really nice cherry color. I ain't used to nothin' this fancy, but I could get used to it. The Mayor gets up and walks over to a potbelly stove and pulls off a kettle. He whistles while he does this, like he's happy to do it. There are three cups set out in front of him, and he pours coffee into each of them.

“Here you are then.” The Mayor beams as he hands each of us a cup. “Would you like cream or, perhaps, sugar?”

“Yes, sir.” Momma smiles as she nods and holds her cup out to him. The Mayor pours the cream and sugar for both of us and sits back in his chair.

“Tell me about yourselves.” The Mayor folds his hands in front of himself and puts them on the table. “I am eager to know about the ones who responded to my advertisement.”

“Well, sir...” Momma starts.

“Oh, no need for all that sir nonsense.” The Mayor laughs and waves a hand at us. “If we’re going to be family here, then I insist you call me Michael or Mr. Wheeler if you’re feeling formal. To be honest, I don’t like that last one over much. Always makes me uncomfortable like they’re talking to my Pa.” He laughs again. I can see that we’re gonna like it here.

“Michael then.” Momma took a sip of her coffee before setting it down. “As you know, we used to live in the next town over. I was married for several good years until the mine accident took my Charlie.”

“Oh...I am so sorry.” Mr. Wheeler looks genuinely sorry for it. “We do have a mine here, but I promise to never ask your boy to go down there. I would never want to do that to you.”

“That’s much appreciated. Never liked them dark spaces.” I said gratefully.

Mr. Wheeler laughs again, and Momma continues her story. “After that, I took whatever odd jobs I could to keep a roof over our heads. I’ve done cookin’, cleanin’, mendin’, and pretty much anything else around the home.”

“Well, that is great!” Mr. Wheeler turns to me then. “And what about you?”

“I’ve been a farm hand for about as long as I can remember.” I run a hand over the poor excuse for a beard that I had been trying to grow proper. “Ever since I could wrestle a steer or a horse into a barn, people been needin’ help. I took whatever job I could get to help Momma.”

“That is all excellent. I know that I will get to know each of you more as we spend time together.” He pauses talking long enough to take a big sip of coffee. He coughs a little, sputtering. “Oh, my. That’s hot.”

We all chuckle a bit at this. I can already feel like this place will be good for me and Momma. The work will be hard, but honest, and I couldn't ask for a nicer guy.

"I would love to sit and chat the day away, but we are really very busy." The Mayor picks up his coffee and walks to us. He puts out an arm, gesturing us to stand up and follow him. We grab our coffee and walk along. He keeps up the conversation as we walk. I get the feelin' he really does think of people as family. "It is so fortuitous that you came today, we have so much to do! I know you just arrived and are eager to settle in. We'll get you both set up and let you get started right away. Once you're all unpacked, we can get right to work. I promise it won't always be this hectic around here."

"Thank you again, Mr. Wheeler." Momma holds the cup between her hands to warm them up after the cold of the carriage ride. "I really do appreciate you giving us these jobs."

"Not at all. It is I who appreciate you and your boy here!" The Mayor laughs fully and warmly. He comes over to me and puts an arm around my back. He isn't tall enough to



reach my shoulder proper. "And you, young Warren, I will take you out and show you the grounds after you put your things away. How'd you like that?"

"I do believe I would like that just fine." I drink a healthy bit of the coffee. It's better than any of the swill I made whenever me and Momma could afford it.

*I still can't believe the Mayor got up himself and made Momma and me a coffee. I'm not used to something so fancy as this home, but that doesn't mean I didn't like it. I hope to give Momma a house like this someday.*

*After that, we got right to work and everything seemed fine. The place they gave us to sleep is good enough. It's warm, dry, and fairly comfortable. We'd slept in worse. The other people in the house were mostly nice. Most of them live in town and walk in every day. I can see myself working here for a long while until I can afford a place of my own. Maybe even after I find a home for Momma and me. The Mayor*

*has been as generous man as his wife is indifferent. She isn't cruel, you gotta understand, but I can tell she sees us as property and not people.*

\*\*\*\*\*

12th December, 1817

*Before, I said I knew cruel, hateful eyes. I saw them today. I was workin' in the barn when I heard crashing outside. I went to look and it's the Wheeler's boy, Alan, and his friend Josh Albertson. If there were more spiteful people, I can't think of them. Pretty sure the Devil himself bore them...*

“Do another one!” Josh is behind Alan goading him on. His weaselly laugh feels greasy and slimy to my ears.

Alan grabs another clay pot and sets it up on a stump. He picks up a large stick, draws all the way back, and smashes it into pieces. Josh cackles away. The dirt and flowers inside go flying into the snow. They both laugh.

“Hey. My Momma worked hard on those.” I know I shouldn’ta said anything, but Momma does work hard, and it gets my goat up when someone ruins it.

It didn’t matter what I said though, Alan just laughs at me like I don’t matter. He leans on the stick and looks up at me like I’m beneath him. He kicks the shards of the pot towards me. “My parents bought these, so, that makes them all mine. I will do whatever I please with them. Now, go back to shoveling the manure from the horse pens and leave us alone.”

He gives a small laugh and turns away from me. He picks up another pot and tosses it in the air a few times, pretending to be about to drop it. He holds it up to me so I can see exactly what he’s gonna do with it. He keeps his eyes on me as he sets the clay pot down on the stump. Twirling the stick, he draws back into a full swing. Before it gets the chance to go forward, something in me snaps, and I grab the stick.

He can’t move it, not many could have. It’s an advantage of living a life working and not being taken care of by others. I tear the

stick from his hand and drop it on the ground. I walk by without looking at him and pick up the flower pot. I carry it with me as I go back to the barn.

“Hey, horse boy!” Josh mocks me safely from behind Alan. His beady eyes are wickedly gleeful. “You might wanna give that back or else.” He pats Alan on the back, pushing him towards me.

Alan shrugs off Josh and narrows his eyes. He picks up the stick and tries to swing it at me. I catch it easily, take it from him, and throw it off into the yard. Josh looks terrified and slinks even further behind Alan.

“Well, maybe I misjudged you, horse boy.” Alan holds out his hand. “I’m Alan, by the way. Sorry about all this. Sometimes I get a bit rowdy. Surely, you’ve had fun in your days. It’s not all horses and work, right?”

I give him a dismissive grunt. I keep walking to the barn. I set the pot on a barrel near the open barn doors. Alan hurries over to me, and I’m not sure if it’s to apologize or antagonize.

“Hey. Uh. Do you wanna come with us? We’re just about to head into town to get

something to eat.” Alan smiles, but it never reaches his eyes. “My treat. As an apology for being an insufferable ass and hopefully the beginning of a long friendship. Come on! It’ll mean one less set of chores for your mom. Besides, they have the best pie you’ll ever eat!” Alan glares over his shoulder at Josh who brushes his hands on his pants.

“Yeah. I mean...” Josh stammers a bit. “Look, I’m sorry. I was just messin’. I didn’t mean none of it. Friends?”

Josh sticks his hand out to me. Alan and Josh both stand there, the hand hanging in the air, waitin’ for me to do something. I sigh, shake my head, and take the offered hand. Maybe they just need a firm hand like I did after my Pappa passed.

*I kinda hoped maybe if they spent time with me doing some honest work, they wouldn’t be so mean. I figured if I spent time with them, then I could keep them out of trouble. Besides, making friends with Alan might make it easier for Momma to be here. Especially with the Missus. She*

*still hasn't taken to us like the Mayor has.*

\*\*\*\*\*

7th January, 1818

*I don't spend much time with Alan on purpose, but I try to be friendly. I figured I could keep him from getting in too much trouble.*

*I remember being mean like them when I was a boy. It was an old farm hand that took me aside and taught me what it means to be a good man and help other people. He was about as close to a Pa that I had back then. I hope to honor him and pass that on to these two. I don't know how he kept his patience with me because I am strugglin' with them. I was so worried about their souls that I wasn't ready for what happened next.*

*The Davidson family lives about halfway between town and the Wheeler homestead. The Davidson's dog hated Alan. I hear dogs can tell*

*a lot about people. We need to listen to dogs more. The dog would always bark and snap at Alan, but the tether was too short to reach the road. Today, on our way into town, the dog was barking and jumping more than usual. The next bit happened so fast that I still am not sure exactly what happened....*

“Damn dog!” Alan throws kicks at the animal as it tries to reach him. A dark smile cracks as he spots something across the road. He jogs over and grabs a large rock with especially sharp edges. Drawing his arm back, he throws it. I tried to jump in to catch it, but I wasn’t fast enough. The rock flies right by my hand and it hits that poor dog. The dog whimpers loudly as the rock leaves a large and bloody gash along its head.

“What are you doin’?” I step in between Alan and the dog. Alan already has another large rock in his hand, and I know what he wants to do with it.

“Get out the way.” Alan looks coldly at the dog. The dog is up on all fours, the hair on its back is standing straight up, and it is angry.

Can't say as I blame it. I remember how angry I got when people would treat me like that.

The dog's teeth are fully bared as it snarls and growls at Alan. It pulls so hard on the tether that it's nearly choking itself. I can tell Alan is in one of his moods and Josh was there to egg him on. They both are tormentin' and mockin' the poor thing as it bleeds and barks at them. They stand there laughin' and kickin' dirt at it. Josh lunges front and then jumps back when the dog snaps at them.

"Look, fellas, come on." I hope I can appeal to their better nature if they have one. I really do. I want them to be good people because I want Momma to have an easier life. Can't do that if I'm always dealing with trouble from these two.

When the rope holding the dog back snaps with a loud crack, that dog charges. It's determined to make Alan pay for all of the torment and meanness he did to it. He doesn't have time to throw that big rock he was holding. The dog crouches low and leaps far enough to cross the road. It's still snarlin' as it soars through the air. It lands on Alan and tries to sink its teeth into him.



Josh backs away, like cowards always do. He tries to run so fast that he falls into a bush where he does his best to hide. I see him pull the branches close around him so the dog might not see him.

Alan struggles with trying to keep the dog's fangs from tearin' out his throat. He musta found some hidden strength because he brings the stone he held up and slams it over and over into the dog's skull. The dog doesn't give up. It lashes out with its teeth and claws and manages to tear a line of red along Alan's face.

"Get the hell offa me!" Alan screams in anger.

Each time the rock falls, a sickening crunch and crack can be heard. I wonder why the Davidson's aren't coming out. I'm sure that at any second, Mr. Davidson will bring out his trusty shotgun, and all of us will be meeting Jesus much sooner than we planned. That is, until the animal falls still.

"Stupid mutt!" Alan breathes heavily as he shoves the dog off him and stands up over the carnage. "And where the hell were you two when this thing was tryin' to kill me?"

"I was gonna help, but I tripped." Josh pulls himself out of the shrub and brushes off sticks and leaves. "I got stuck."

"More like hiding to save yourself, no doubt. Damn all cowards to hell." Alan doesn't take his eyes off the animal as its legs kick their final spasms of life. "What about you, Evans?"

"I couldn't..." I look around to see if anyone saw us. "We gotta tell the Davidson's what happened."

"What?" Alan looks up, his eyes narrow in disbelief and anger. "I am not getting in trouble for this. The damn dog was crazy. It attacked me!"

"Yeah, but..." I'm at an actual loss for words. I had heard the sayin', but I never knew what it meant really. Not until now anyways.

"But what?" Alan gets in real close. He looks right up at me, the dog's blood still all over him. "If we don't bury that dog, we're all gonna get in trouble. Me? I might get more chores. Maybe I gotta apologize to the Davidson's. You? My Momma will surely kick you guys out for letting this happen to me. I mean, look at my clothes! They're covered in blood. I was just defending myself."

“What if they find it in the woods?” Josh staggers over, shaking off the sticks and brush that are hanging onto his legs. At least he has the decency to look embarrassed for hiding like he did.

“We do have coyotes around here.” Alan shrugs as he scans the forest. “Can get dangerous for a lone animal. Whadda you say, Evans? We do this, or you and your mom are out.”

I don’t say anything. I just grab the dog by the tail and start dragging. Josh runs off to get a shovel. Once he gets back, we bury it deep enough that it won’t be found easy. We all agree right then to never talk about it again.

*I know why I let this boy get away with treating me like this. I wanted to keep things nice and peaceful for Momma. I really did. I also really hoped I could show him the right way to act. Then again, maybe someone like him is just born wrong and no amount of help will change things. I just don’t know how much longer I can turn a blind eye and not do anything.*

*I didn't wanna hide the dog, but he said he'd tell his momma to throw us out if I didn't. I know Alan's momma listens and believes him no matter what. She doesn't see the monster that lives behind her son's eyes. But I can't let my Momma lose her job either. I can't let her stay out in the cold again. I'm ashamed I went along with it, but what choice did I have?*

\*\*\*\*\*

12th July, 1819

*I know it's been a real long time, but I didn't want to write down some of the stuff I know. It isn't nice. He isn't nice. He likes to pretend he is. Has his momma fooled, but not me. He doesn't have his Pa tricked though. Alan was picking on this young kid. His Pa caught him and tore into him something good. He didn't give Alan the whoopin' he needs, but he did punish him.*

*Alan had to spend the day workin' in the barn with me. I could*

*tell by the way he acted how much he hated doing real work in the summer, but he wasn't stupid enough to talk back to his Pa. Not even his Momma woulda stood for that.*

*The hot summer sun always makes the work a bit harder. Don't get me wrong, I like summer just fine. I just wish it weren't always so dang hot. At least I wasn't alone in the heat, and that made it kinda better.*

*On good news, a girl moved in a little while back. She's my age. Her name's Evalyn and she's pretty and nice. I finally got up the nerve and talked to her today. I was never so nervous in all my life.*

*As I was puttin' the horses back in their stall, Alan came in carrying hay and feed for the horses lookin' like he was just about to spit nails and fire. I went back outside to grab another horse. I couldn't wait to get away from his fussin' and carryin' on. Then there she was, walking along the path carrying an empty basket...*

“Hello, Warren.” Evalyn waves at me and my heart just about stops. I can’t help but smile back.

“Good afternoon, Miss Evalyn.” I wave back and almost get kicked by the horse I’m takin’ to stall. She must have seen it because she looked worried. I keep waving like a big goof.

I feel the slight bump as Alan shoves past me to get feed for the horses. I can see how mad he is, but he deserves this. He glares at me and then out at Evalyn. He was lookin’ at her with mix of anger and desire. I learned a lot in my years of workin’ as a farm hand. For instance, there are a lot of ways that one can get hurt or even killed on a farm. When Alan looks at Miss Evalyn that way, I am ashamed to say that a part of me thinks of a few of them. I push those thoughts aside and keep waving.

“Get out of the way.” Alan sneers at me and then turns back to looking at Evalyn. “You thinking of courting that one? Heh.”

“I don’t...I” I don’t know why I’m so tongue tied. I finally get my hand to stop waving. “I don’t think it’s any of your business. How about gettin’ back to work, or do I gotta call your pa out here?”

“Bet I’ll have her first.” He grins sickly as he walks past.

*And I wanted to hit him right then and there. I thought back to that dog. Suddenly, I was Alan, and he was the dog. I don’t like thinkin’ like that. I wanted him to eat those words and apologize to Miss Evalyn. One of these days he’s gonna meet someone who will stand up to him.*

\*\*\*\*\*

2nd September, 1819

*I know this ain’t a shock, but I watch her a lot you know. Miss Evalyn goes in and out of the house doing chores. Even on the rainiest day, she is always a ray of sunshine. She makes the worst times better. Alan would try to talk to her, but she always walked away. I’m glad for that. I’m happy she could see him for what he really is. She never liked him or Josh. She always smiles at me though.*

*Speakin' of Alan, he was in town and tried throwin' his weight around. It didn't work so well since he ain't got much weight to throw. He ended up with a busted lip and a bruised eye. His Momma wanted to get the sheriff after the man that gave him the black eye, but his Pa told her no. It was one of the few times I seen him do that. He said the boy had to learn and made him work in the barn again. I keep hoping Alan will learn his lesson, but I don't have much hope anymore.*

\*\*\*\*\*

3rd September, 1819

*I shoulda known better than to trust him, but he's the Mayor's son. I shouldn't have agreed. I shoulda listened to the voice in my head that said he wasn't right. I shoulda went back to the stables and minded my own business. I didn't, and it all went wrong from there.*

*I know he was supposed to be learnin' a lesson. I know that people*



*need punished for their wrongs. I just wish his Pa never found out about this one. Then he wouldn't have been in the barn when Miss Evalyn came by.*

“Good morning, Warren.” Miss Evalyn waves at me again as she goes on about her morning chores. She’s over by the hen house collectin’ eggs. “How has your day been?”

“Just fine, Miss Evalyn.” I know I always blush when she talks to me. I can feel it rise all hot and red. I just can’t help it. She just smiles. I think she knows it gets a rise out of me, and she does it on purpose. “And your day?”

“It’s always a wonderful day with weather like this.” Miss Evalyn shields her eyes as she looks up at the few clouds in the sky.

“Hmph.” The Missus saunters over and looks haughtily down at Miss Evalyn. “Evalyn, dear, I need you to go and bring in some flowers from the garden down by the lake. We’re having a party tonight, and I want the best flowers brought in. This night is special, and I want everything to be perfect.” She takes Miss Evalyn’s basket of eggs and gives her an empty one for the flowers.

“Yes, ma’am.” Miss Evalyn curtsies and makes sure to keep her eyes turned away from the Missus. “Right away.”

It wasn’t long after Miss Evalyn left for the lake and the Missus went back inside the home that Josh comes skippin’ up the lane. He musta been fishin’ since he throws down a pair of gutted fish into the dirt. “Hey, Alan! How ‘bout you and me go and talk to your favorite toy? She’s waitin’ for you down by the lake.”

“You need to go home, Josh.” I step in between the two. “Alan’s got a lot of work to do today.”

“Pretty sure I can do what I want.” Alan sidesteps me and moves next to Josh. “Not like you’re my Pa.”

“No, but he’s the one what said you need to clean the barn.” I pick up a shovel and hold it out to him. Josh just laughs as he jumps up to sit on the fence like he’s waiting for the entertainment to start.

Alan scoffs as he takes the shovel. Maybe I can’t teach him anything, but he’s gotta listen to his Pa. While he’s standing there, I catch him staring down at the lake. I see the evil again. It still lives behind his eyes. I want

to make sure he never gets to look at her like that again. "Ya know what? Let's follow her. You guys coming?" Alan drops the shovel to the ground and walks to the horse pen's gate. He unlatches it and turns his head back to us. He waves for Josh to follow him.

"I don't think we should." Even though she's near the lake, I can still see Miss Evalyn walkin' down the lane. Her basket swings as she walks. I bet she's whistling some tune like she usually does. "Sides, I got so much work to do. I can't go runnin' around with you guys today."

"Come on ya big dummy!" Josh hops down off of the fence. He puts on a smile that no one would believe is real. "It'll be fun. We're just gonna scare her."

"Yeah, Evans." Alan walks over and puts an arm around me. He gives me that fake smile he uses on those he's trying to get one over on. He tries to push me out the gate, but I don't move. "We're not gonna hurt anyone. I tell you what, I'll even put a good word in and help you get that date you've been wanting. I think she fancies you."

Even though the voices in my head tell me not to, I let him lead me out of the gate.

Before I know it, we're walking down the lane to the lake. My feet shuffle in the dirt as I watch the water get closer. There she is, just as lovely as ever. The still summer sun makes her hair shine. The flowers she's picking might as well be all gray and boring compared to her. I let myself get distracted. I see a bunch of flowers that I know she would like. I kneel down and start picking, but somethin' makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Alan and Josh had moved up behind Miss Evalyn while I was fool enough to be daydreaming about her. I can't help it though; she just brings that outta me. Those two, though, have a look in their eyes that suggest something cruel.

Alan puts his foot up on a nearby stump. Josh isn't as adept at hiding his cruelty. He gives a small, wicked laugh.

"Oh!" Miss Evalyn stands suddenly and turns around to face Alan and Josh. She gasps and almost drops the basket. Alan walks uncomfortably close to her while Josh backs off. I don't watch or care where he's going. My attention is all on Alan and his intentions. She backs away, doing what she can to keep him

away from her. "Alan, you startled me. What are the three of you doing here? Don't you have work to do?"

"Well." Alan cocks his head to the side and looks at her in an ungentlemanly way. "I just wanted to give you something. You do want a gift, right?" He sidles up close to her and tries putting an arm around her.

"Perhaps another time." Miss Evalyn steps backwards, closer to the water. "I'm terribly busy right now. I do not have the time for social calls and gifts."

Miss Evalyn tries to walk around him, but Alan grabs her arm. She gives out a small whimper. I try to stand up and run over there, but there's something cold and sharp at my throat. Josh was behind me and had his fishin' knife under my chin.

"What the hell are you doin', Josh?" I hate that I let him get the drop on me. *'Gonna make him pay for this one.'*

Miss Evalyn sees what Josh is doin', but there's nothin' she can do about it. She has her own problem to deal with. Alan steps in to block her from getting away. It was then that I knew for sure that they had bad intentions.

“Don’t leave so soon.” Alan tries a voice that he must think is soothing, but it is filled with malice. “I really wanna give you this. Besides, you should be honored that someone of my station would deign to speak with someone like you.”

“What are you talking about?” Miss Evalyn jerks her arm free from Alan’s grasp. “Let me go. You’re hurting me.”

*When she pulled away from Alan, he kept calling her trash and saying that she should be honored that someone of his station wanted to talk to her. I tried to pull away from Josh, but he pushed that knife tighter against my neck until it drew some blood. Alan actually went in to try and kiss her. I was thinkin’ a cut throat might be worth it to get at him. Turns out, I didn’t need to because Miss Evalyn slapped Alan harder than I thought she could. His head snapped to the side, and he fell down to one knee. I thought that was the worst of it. I ain’t never been more wrong. She shoulda run...*

“Alan Wheeler!” Miss Evalyn points a finger straight at him and spits the words. “You just wait until your father hears about what kind of a...thing his son has become. And Josh Albertson you’re no better. Now, let him go!”

“Poor, Miss Evalyn.” Josh mocks, but I feel the knife at my throat shaking.

“Don’t you dare *Miss Evalyn* me!” She turns that full gaze of anger at Josh, and he pulls the knife tighter. “I’m going straight to Mr. Wheeler and pray I don’t tell the sheriff.”

Alan is still on the ground. He rubs his cheek and stares up at her. His face is bruised, but his pride is wounded more deeply. I’m ashamed that I can’t do anything to stop them. Miss Evalyn stomps past Alan and Josh on her way back up to the house.

“Hey!” Alan screams after her. “You think you can hit me? You think you can just get away with that?”

*What happened next just about killed me. I don’t think I could or would ever feel pain and hurt like I did right then.*

Alan stood up so fast that he might as well have already been standing. He grabs an axe that was in a stump and throws it. I watch it tumble through the air. I pray it's going to miss. God wasn't listening. It slams into her back hard enough to knock her to the ground.

"No!" I bellow the word, but I barely hear it. All I hear is her pain-filled screaming. She turns and looks at me. Her eyes beg me to tell her why I let someone hurt her. My soul is so broken, I can't speak an answer.

"Heh." Josh's cruel laugh draws me back to reality. He pushes the knife's point under my chin.

"Trash like you should never lay hands on someone like me." Alan stalks over and reaches down. He pulls the axe free, and she cries out in pain again. I had hoped that was the end of it.

*I tried to run to her, but Josh's knife was sharp. I wasn't sure I could move without killing myself. Even if I died to save Miss Evalyn, it would still hurt Momma. I still tried. I lurched front and up, standing as fast as I could*



*with Josh still on my back. He pulled the blade across my throat, but it had no strength behind it. He was usin' all that to hang on.*

*Josh had the arm without the knife wrapped around my neck. He started thrashin' and kickin' my legs and I fell. He held on as I kicked, but it was too late. Alan took that axe and brought it up and then back down again. The cold steel split her perfect skin, and she bled. She cried. Again and again he struck. Her head was ravaged. Her cries got faint until they stopped. Then she was gone...*

Alan stands there, panting from exhaustion. Covered in blood, he looks more annoyed than remorseful. He looks no different than he did when he killed that dog. I shoulda buried him instead.

Josh pulls himself free and stands up, pushing off of me as he does. I can barely make it to my rapidly shakin' knees. I'm not sure I can stand up. I just see what's left of her face. I can feel her remainin' eye judging me.

“Help me get her into the water.” Alan tries to tug her weight. Even with Josh’s help, they’re not strong enough. “Warren you oaf, grab her!”

“I don’t wanna.” I whisper it because I can’t speak.

“Do it, now.” Alan drops the leg he was pulling like it was trash and stalks over to me. “If you don’t, then I am gonna tell everyone that you did it. Yeah. She wouldn’t court someone of your type, and it drove you mad. She rejected your advances, and you killed her. Then me and Josh got here right as you were finishin’ her off. Right, Josh?”

“That’s how I saw it.” Josh wipes his knife on his pants before foldin’ it and returnin’ it to his pocket.

“So, I’ll tell them the truth.” I stand up shakily, dumbstruck and filled with pain.

“Really?” Alan laughs at me. “Who do you think the people of this town are gonna believe? The honorable mayor’s son or some farmhand moron?”

I hate to admit it, even to myself, but he’s probably right. We aren’t from this town.

Why would anybody believe me? If Alan does tell them I did it, then Momma would be out in the cold again. I can't do that to her. In my head, I know I can't do anything for Miss Evalyn anymore, but I can at least save Momma. In my heart, I wanna kill the both of them.

Alan and Josh stand there, arms folded and waiting. I don't want to do this. The only consolation is if I take Miss Evalyn to her final rest. I can be gentle like she deserves. I can treat her right like I shoulda when she was still alive. I don't wanna look at her face. I take off my shirt and cover her face with it. I pick her up. She's really light in my arms. I walk to the end of the dock and kneel down. I gently lower her into the water and watch as she sinks. I try telling her how sorry I am. How much it hurts that I wasn't good enough to save her. She can't hear me. The water takes her too far away to hear me. My shirt floats away showing her accusing eye watching me as she falls to her rest.

A loud splash sends water splashing up into my face. I watch as the axe sinks alongside her. Alan stands next to me and spits into the water. I want to send him down there. I want to put him into the dark, cold water. But I

don't want him resting next to her. He doesn't deserve the honor.

"Get up, ya big baby." Alan kicks me hard, but I don't really feel it. "Just remember, if you ever tell anyone about this, I will find a way to make sure that you go in right beside her. You understand?"

"Yeah." I sit there crying for a long time. I hear them leave, mocking her and me. I just don't care. I don't deserve to keep going. I am a coward.

\*\*\*\*\*

28th May, 1820

*I never said anything. I stayed quiet for Momma. Miss Evalyn was already gone, but I could at least keep Momma safe.*

*Alan told everyone he saw Miss Evalyn pack and leave, but one of the people at the paper didn't believe him and came asking around. They saw all her stuff still in her room. Even took her picture from her dresser for the papers. I heard from one of the others*

*that his Momma had the person fired for asking too many questions. No one ever asked again, and they never found her in the lake. I went back to look, but she wasn't there. I still go back to the lake and look for her every night.*

*Tonight, when I came back up the road, I heard a voice from the barn. I went and looked through the window near the front of the barn. There was a light coming from inside. Alan was in there saddling one of the horses. I don't know why. I never got to ask him.*

*I know some people would call me crazy because I thought I was losing my mind too. I am tellin' you there was no one there, but then suddenly there was a shimmer in the dark. It came together quick when it stepped out of the shadows. It was Miss Evalyn! But she wasn't like I ever remembered her. But it couldn't be her! She was gone. I put her in the water my own self. But there she was. She had on the same clothes, but her face was a pale white like moonlight reflecting on the lake.*

*I wanted to run to her. To tell her how sorry I was, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I watched her walk up behind him. I saw and heard every terrible thing that happened. I knew he deserved it, too. We all do for what we done.*

“Come on, ya stupid nag!” Alan tugs roughly on the straps holding the saddle. “I got things to do, and I won’t be held up by such a useless animal as you!”

The horse bays and snorts as he roughly finishes up with the saddle. He turns around and picks up a lantern. As he raises it, he looks confused. He lifts the light slowly and it reveals first a pair of pale legs, then a black dress and white apron. Finally, it shines on the blackest eyes I’ve ever seen.

Alan Wheeler, bane of Slaughterville, screams in absolute horror. He steps backwards. He must think he’s seein’ a ghost. She swings her axe at him, but misses. He runs, trippin’ and stumblin’. The horse rears up, its legs kick out at her. She bats the animal aside, keeping the rearing animal from hitting her.

Alan desperately pushes through the small door at the back of the barn that leads to the horse pad. He risks a terrified look back. She's walking right to him as if he's the only thing on her mind. He slams the door closed, but she keeps walking slowly, like a glacier of death. She's not in any hurry. She has the rest of his life to catch him.

The barn's door splinters when she breaks through it, sending wood and debris flying. She steps through and doesn't slow down in her pursuit. I duck, hiding behind a pile of hay stacked by the barn. When Alan runs around the corner, he looks terrified. He runs for all he's worth, but something slid from under his feet, and he falls face first into the dirt. When he pushes himself up, he locks eyes with me in my hiding place. He looks like he wants to call my name or hurry over to me, but he doesn't get the chance.

That momentary distraction is enough for her to get close to him. She swings her axe. He rolls away in time to have it slam into the ground. As he stands, his attention fully on her, she rips her axe free. Even though he is taller than her, she seems to loom over him.

Alan looks around nervously for help. Something catches his eye, and he takes off at a full run, but not towards the house. I look where he's headed, and the horse is pawin' nervously on the road leading to town. It musta recovered and run out of the barn. Alan practically leaps over the fence to get to the horse.

She brings her axe down on the fence just as Alan hits the ground on the other side. Her blow splits the fence in half and the timbers crash to the ground. Alan tries to scramble up onto the horse, but it rears. It must have sensed her coming, or it just hated Alan for all his cruelty. He falls backwards, landing hard on the ground.

When he looks up after the retreating horse, I can hear him yelling at the poor animal. I watch as she walks up to him. What happens next is so fast that I don't think he had much time to consider it. She raises the same axe that he used to kill her and slams it into Alan's neck, severing his head from his body. I never call out to warn him. I did whisper her name.

*Miss Evalyn stood silently  
over Alan's body for only a moment,*



*then, without a sound, she turned and walked back down the lane towards the lake. This time I didn't follow her. With a ripple like waves on water, she disappeared into the darkness.*

*I was never so scared in all my life. I didn't know what to do, so I just ran. I got back into my room in the basement and I hid. When his Momma found him the next day, she screamed for a long time. His dad was more silent, but he changed then. He wasn't mean, but he wasn't nice anymore. It was like he died with Alan. Did I stay silent about what happened to their son out of fear or was it because I knew that we deserved what was gonna happen? I felt bad for them, but I knew we were gettin' our due.*

\*\*\*\*\*

18th June, 1820

*They found Josh next. He was lying next to the same lake where Miss Evalyn rests. I didn't see it happen, for which I thank God, but I heard people*

*talking about it. He was torn to pieces. They said there was a big gap between his eyes. She musta got him with her axe, too.*

*Guess there's only one left. Me. I'm next and I deserve it. I know Momma will be sad, but I brought this on myself by being a coward.*

\*\*\*\*\*

20th June, 1820

*I thought it was my time. I was sure of it. There I was at the edge of the property, thinking about leaving. The next second, there's Miss Evalyn standing there. She had the axe in her hand, and I could already feel it cutting me.*

*She walked up to me without saying a single word. I could feel the cold coming off of her. If she only talked to me, I coulda told her how sorry I was. How I never wanted that to happen to her, but she was so silent.*

*Her eyes were black as night and there was nothing of the light they*

*used to hold. When she brought the axe up high, I closed my eyes. I couldn't watch it fall. I couldn't look into that face that was at once so like the girl I loved and at the same time a nightmare.*

*I must have stood there for a long time with my eyes shut. I already done said I was a coward, so there's no need for repeating it. I cracked open one eye to look, but she was gone. I don't know why she spared me, but I don't deserve it.*

\*\*\*\*\*

21st October, 1820

*I haven't seen her since that day. The Wheelers left the homestead a while ago. I don't know where they went. I didn't ask. The others around town were talkin', and they said the Wheeler's moved into the deep part of the forest. All of the other staff left weeks ago. The house is abandoned now, except for me and Momma. No one wants it. Says it's got ghosts, so I stay here. The living haunting a house of*

*the dead. Momma is here, somewhere.  
I guess I finally gave her the big house  
she always wanted after all.*

\*\*\*\*\*

31st October, 1820

*Yesterday, the church sent some  
people to see if I was alive. They needn't  
have bothered. I've enough food. I  
shouldn't be near people. Momma  
has moved on. Said she couldn't stand  
watching me fade away. I think she's in  
the city. I can't be sure.*

*I told them church people  
to go home. They shouldn't be here.  
They wouldn't listen and kept saying  
they wanted to save my soul. I don't  
deserve it. They sat in the yard, a small  
fire burning, when night fell. I warned  
them to leave, but they refused. After  
they died, no one bothered me again.*

\*\*\*\*\*

15th May, 1831

*I've become a sort of ghost story  
in this town. People have been coming*

*here for years despite my warnings. It took me a few days to write this because I ain't sure what happened exactly.*

*They were clearly drunk, which is why most people come up here. They called her and taunted her. One of them guys was even bigger than I am. Miss Evalyn came for them all the same, just like every other time. She killed them all except for the large one.*

*I watched this all from the home. I've long learned she wants me to live. She wants me to suffer. That has to be why she hasn't taken me yet, but she won't talk to me. God has decided that this is my Hell. It's my duty to watch them all die.*

*Only he doesn't. It's the first time in years that I've felt anything other than despair. I sat up on the edge of the porch. Like she did so many times, she threw her axe at him. Well, much to my surprise, he caught it!*

*I thought I knew how this would end. Others got their hand on her axe, but it always flew back to her*

*on its own. She tried. I saw him get jerked and stumble towards her, but he can fight it off.*

*He ran, fast. I followed him in the woods. He was more payin' attention to where Miss Evalyn was and not me followin' him. She does her shimmer thing and comes out behind him. When he sees her, he pushes himself even faster.*

*What happened next was surprising. It gave me something close to hope that I haven't felt in so long. As soon as he left the property, she collapsed in mid run. From my hiding spot, I stared at her lying there, unmoving once again in the dirt.*

*I was about to take her back to her rest when the man came back. He brought the axe down, aiming right for her head. I tackled him to the ground. I won't let anyone else hurt her. I stood over the confused man who started yellin' at me, but he doesn't understand.*

*I could feel the air vibrating before I saw what happened. The axe*

*dropped from his hand when I hit him, but now it's shaking and rising. It flies to her hand, and she stands up as if she were always on her feet. The man takes off running for all he's worth, leaving me to stand in front of Miss Evalyn once again. As with every time I've seen her, she just stares at me for a few moments before she turns and walks into the shadow.*

*I look from where she laid to the property line. It got me thinking about what's keeping her goin'. Might be I can stop her for good.*

\*\*\*\*\*

4th July, 1831

*No one's come since that night in May. Part of me is glad for it, but a darker part of me wishes they would so she'd come back. I tried swimmin' in the lake to find her. I know where I put her in the water, but I couldn't find her. I can't say for sure if findin' the axe will stop her, but I gotta try.*

\*\*\*\*\*

11th June, 1844

*It's been so long. I've tried to find her for all these years. No one's come here in a long time. Some nights I could swear I hear her walkin' the grounds, but she's never there when I look.*

*I don't eat or drink anymore. I feel so weak. Think I'm sick. I don't have much time. I don't want to lie alone. Think I'll go join her in the lake...*

The moon is full and high when I walk to the edge of the lake. The dock is still there, but it's seen better days. Can't take this guilt anymore. I wander the grounds at night, waiting for death to come and take me. I'm glad Momma passed years ago so she don't have to see me like this.

I hope someone finds a way to stop her, but I couldn't find the axe. I tie the rope around my neck with a heavy stone on the end of it. The first step into the lake is cold, but I don't feel it. I keep walking. I know it's a mortal sin, but I can't live without her anymore. This is where I belong.





## Chapter 10

Streetlights give small bits of false security. The idyllic houses on either side of the street shield the people inside from the dangers outside. A man and woman stagger up the sidewalk holding onto each other, smelling of alcohol. Whether it's love or to keep from falling over is anyone's guess. Being shorter, she leans her head on his shoulder as they walk.

“And thass...an thass why I said I never goin’ back there.” He slurs his words as he stumble steps his way up the sidewalk. “Which house is yours again?”

“I think this one.” She squints as she looks at the houses. “Maybe that one?”

They both turn bleary eyes ahead. Just beyond the streetlight, emerging from the shadows, is the Slasher. She stands there, unmoving, as the couple walk towards her. They stop in the beam of the streetlight.

“Well, hey kid.” The man looks down at her. “What’re you doing so late at out? Wait...”

“Ooh. You have nice hair.” The woman reaches out and brushes long strands of dark hair away from the Slasher’s face. “Wha happen to your face?”

“Not cool.” The man sways, grabbing the light pole for balance. “She mighta b...”

The arcing blade shears through the top of the woman’s skull and continues. The blade tears through the man’s windpipe and ends only when it strikes the light pole. While the woman drops to the sidewalk immediately, the man chokes, gasping for air as the blood fills his lungs. His alcohol-induced stupor does little to stop the horrific realization that he’s about to die. He tries to curse at her, scream for help, or just ask why, but all he gets are bubbles of blood. The Slasher swiftly ends his torment.

\*\*\*\*\*

There's no remorse for what she's done just as there is no elation. She just knows that she's called to end the light. This distraction does not slow her down. There is still the strange pull like something familiar is calling her.

This doesn't make sense to her. She doesn't feel things like others do. She has only the drive to kill and then rest. For the first time in decades, an emotion registers for her, longing.

"You get back here, Muffins!" An elderly woman is half running and half waddling after an orange tabby cat. She scoffs and tuts as she bumps into the garbage cans at the end of her driveway.

The Slasher stands watching as the old woman walks towards her. There's a meow from down at her feet. She looks down into the large eyes of the orange cat and she cocks her head. The cat meows loudly. She reaches down and picks it up by the scruff of its neck, holding it outstretched like it's a diseased thing.

"Oh, thank you." The old woman claps her hands together. "You saved him."

A few moments later and the Slasher is moving down the street. She can feel the strange pull, but she can't tell exactly where it is. Only that it's close. The old woman is neatly folded in half and stuffed in her garbage can. Her head split in two with the cat eagerly lapping up the freely running blood as its twin tails twitch.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Oh my..." Reese closes the diary. He pats the cover as he pushes it towards the center of the kitchen table. "There we have it then."

"So, she wasn't always a scary monster?" Nissa's eyes water and she brings a paper towel up to wipe them.

"You're right, but we can't let her keep killing people." James puts an arm around Nissa.

"I know. I know." Nissa continues to cry as James leads her to the living room.

"Evalyn, huh?" R.D. shrugs. "Wouldn't have called that for her name."

"I'm never calling her that." Caroline looks conflicted. She's clearly still hurt and angry, but there's something else going on. "She

killed my sister. The fact that she was killed herself doesn't matter right now. I understand that it was something in this town that turned her and made her this murderer, but it doesn't mean that I will feel bad when we put her down."

"Then the question becomes how does this help us to stop her?" Reese steeples his hands in front of his face.

"We know her name. We know why she started killing, but we don't know why she keeps doing it." John stares at the diary. "We also know that she seems to be tied to the lake. Like it makes her docile or keeps her trapped."

"So, we need to take a homicidal monster and get her to go swimming?" Caroline stands up from the table.

"It's a simplistic way to state it, but yes." Reese nods at her. "If the lake is really where she is at rest, it is important to make sure that she gets, and stays, there."

"Could always cut her legs off." John looks especially serious as he says this. "Hard to move without them."

"If we can keep her still long enough to do that, I'm in." Caroline agrees.

“It’s the best plan we have so far.” John leans back in the chair, crossing his arms.

“Yes, okay.” Reese ponders the recommended action. His vitally analytical mind begins running through a few different scenarios and their possible outcomes, both good and bad. “We have to remember that she’s really strong, so what would we hold her down with while she’s dismembered?”

“Whatever it is, it will have to be sturdy.” John’s brow furrows as he runs a hand through his hair. “Leather would need buckles or secured straps. Chains are the same thing. Unless...does anyone here have a flatbed trailer or a furniture dolly with the straps?”

“No...” Caroline glances at the rest of them as she answers. “I don’t think so.”

“If we can’t hold her, then we need to find another way. Cement would take too long to dry, so we can’t just dump her in a pit and pour it in.” John holds a hand out to Reese. “Can I please borrow a pen?”

“Absolutely.” Reese retrieves a pen and a sheet of paper. “We don’t want to be too close before she is secured. She’s much too dangerous for that. That leaves traps.”

“Okay. This gonna sound crazy. I know it.” Caroline hurriedly moves around the kitchen, her hands going in all different directions as she talks like they’re trying to capture an idea that is just out of reach. “What if it’s not the lake. What if it’s her axe that’s giving her the power?”

“Well, we know that she was killed with it.” Reese contemplates the suggestion. “There are reports of objects containing and retaining spiritual energies. The diary did make mention of her collapsing once the axe was taken away from her by that gentleman. It wasn’t until it was returned that she was revived. The idea definitely has merit.”

“What if we combine them?” John’s excited motions are punctuated with grunts and gasps of pain. “We take her axe, and then toss her pale and pasty ass in the lake? And if she happens to get a little dismembered while we have the axe, I can’t say as I’ll lose too much sleep over it.”

“Hey, uh...” R.D. raises his hand when he speaks. “Is no one gonna mention that the Mayor from then has the same name as the Mayor now?”

“I had noticed.” Reese latches on to the new thread eagerly. “I would normally assume the current Mayor is a descendant of his. With this town, though, you can never really be sure. What would it mean if he’s the same person?”

“We can always walk into his office and ask him.” Caroline offers the suggestion and seems ready to do just that.

“If he really is that old, then he might know enough about her to help us stop her.” R.D. rubs his hands together.

“It’s also possible that he might be working with her. Not in the sense that he’s sharpening her axe, but that he has not done anything to stop her. I think we need to sit down and solidify the plan.” Reese pours himself another cup of tea before returning to the table. “We need to be careful.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A woman with long blonde hair stands just on the edge of the streetlight. She pulls a long, woolen coat closed and shivers. “Dum de dum dum da. What a wonderful night for a walk.” She pulls out a makeup mirror and starts to apply some powder.



In the mirror, she watches as the girl in a black dress walks with a strange gait. The streetlight highlights the white skin and white fringes of her dress. Black eyes shine in the streetlight as she raises her axe. The bloody blade gleams brightly.

“Gotcha.” She snaps the makeup mirror closed.

Before the blade can fall, a rush of fur and teeth slams into the Slasher. A dull thunk reverberates as the Slasher’s skull cracks when it hits the concrete sidewalk. The large werewolf roars a challenge in her face, but she doesn’t react. The werewolf on top of her slashes, tears, and rends. Her flesh and clothes are torn to ribbons.

“Keep hold of her, Chief!” The woman opens the side of a nearby van. “I’ll get the cage ready. This’ll be over quick.”

“Just be ready, Jen.” Chief Wallace growls the words. She’s still surprised at how clearly she can understand his speech like this.

The Slasher cocks her head and lashes out with a blow from her left hand. Chief Wallace flies through the air and slams into a streetlight pole. It bends around him.

“Oh...” Her eyes go wide. “Maybe not.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Damn...” The Chief’s voice is a mix of gravel and barely controlled anger. Through a muzzle meant more for rending and tearing, the words are hard to make out. “Hey, Jen. How ‘bout you lend a hand?”

“You got it, Chief.” Jen takes a few moments to transform. He can remember being that young. He remembers the fire, the pain, and how hard it was to control. *‘Looks like she’s making the change faster than the others. Doesn’t seem as hard on her as it usually is for new ones.’*

The Slasher stands up straight and formidable. The gashes all over her body have already begun to heal. The dark blood on the ground smokes as it dries and flakes away into the night.

Jenny, her wolf fully taken over, runs at the Slasher. The Slasher, slowed from the Chief’s assault, swings her axe at Jenny. Jenny ducks under the swing which was close enough to feel the cold metal. Her claws slide and slice along the Slasher’s stomach spilling rotted intestines onto the sidewalk with a wet splat.

*'Oh, damn. That smell is horrid.'* Chief Wallace wrinkles his nose and shakes his head.

The Slasher looks down at her own internals splattering onto the ground. She takes her axe, grabs her intestines, and cuts them off. When they land, they start to flake and fade. The wound in her stomach starts to seal itself.

Jenny crouches low, watching the Slasher's movements. When the axe slices through the air, Jenny jumps backwards. Her back hits a fence, stopping her retreat.

*'Gotta watch your surroundings, girl.'* In spite of the rage of the beast that's trying to force itself out, his mind is diligently analyzing the scene, looking for the best time to strike without losing something vital.

Jenny's luck must have run dry. When The Slasher brings her axe swinging back, it catches Jenny brutally from her chest to her stomach. Jenny yelps in pain and drops to one knee. She growls defiance as she looks up at the Slasher.

The Slasher raises her axe, but the blow never falls. With a speed born from desperation and decades of training, he charges forward. He uses the momentum from his rush

to land a devastating punch into the Slasher's face. The cracking of bone is loud in the quiet night. Despite her supernatural nature, she still doesn't weigh much more than she did all those years ago. The blow sends her flying through the air to land in the darkness of a nearby yard where she rolls to a stop.

He uses his enhanced senses of smell and sight to explore the darkness. He lifts his nose high as he takes in the smells of the night. The air is surprisingly crisp. *'She's gone... where'd she go?'*

Pain, intense and burning, explodes from his back. He feels himself scream, but it doesn't sound like him. He spins around in time to hear the growl and see Jenny leap for the Slasher. *'You get her, girl!'*

The Slasher is impossibly fast. Like she knew the attack was coming. Her hand wraps around Jenny's throat, choking her with a strength that he didn't know she was capable of using. Jenny tries to make a sound, but all that comes out is a sick, strangled whimper.

The Slasher turns and starts walking, still holding Jenny out at arm's length. Jenny tries to escape, her claws raking and her feet

kicking. Dropping the axe, she grabs Jenny's feet and lifts her overhead. In front of her is a wrought iron fence, and she slams Jenny down onto the hard, cold metal. Jenny screams, half transforming back into a human making the sound disturbing and shrill. The sounds she makes are like those of something near death.

*'Just hold on.'* He shakes his head and prepares himself. *'I'll get you down as soon as I can.'*

The axe is in her hand again as the Slasher is about to attack. *'She might be able to actually kill us. Gotta stop her.'* With a roar, he leaps forward and brings down his claws across her wrist. The already torn and shredded flesh parts, the bone cracks and splits. The hand and the axe fall to the ground. She looks absently at the bloody stump. Her head turns to look at him. Her good arm flashes forward, her thumb pushing through his eye. He can feel the digit as it presses against the eye socket.

"HOOWWLL!" The Chief jumps back in pain, the sound of wet popping fills his enhanced hearing as her thumb leaves his skull with his eye still attached to it. He smells his own blood as it pours free.

He roars as he lashes out with a ferocious kick. The Slasher soars backwards to land in the shadows. He looks down where it should be, ready to use her own axe against her, but it and the hand are gone!

*'What the hell?'* He closes his empty eye socket against the night air. *'Where you hiding little girl? Wish Jenny would keep it down.'*

He watches every shadow as he walks to the fence. The screaming Jenny reaches out for him. "You get the bitch?"

Chief Wallace growls a response. His remaining eye darts back and forth, studying Jenny's predicament and watching for danger. He mutters a silent apology and moves like lightning. *'Best get it done quick before Jenny knows what I'm about to do.'* He puts one hand under her back and the other on her legs. Reaching down into a spot where the beast lives and runs free, he draws on its strength. He lifts with all he has. Jenny's guts pour out, the smell nearly knocks them both down, but she's free.

A metal clang makes him jump and nearly drop Jenny. Looking at the source of the sound, one of the metal poles of the iron fence had fallen. He looks into Jenny's pained eyes

and then at the hole where her stomach used to be. *'She's hurt real bad. Gotta get her outta here.'*

Jenny growls and it's all the warning he needs. Instinct makes him act. He spins around and the swinging axe cuts deeply into Jenny's shoulder, nearly severing the arm from her body. A loud thunk tells him that the axe hit bone.

He drops Jenny and she cries out in pain as she falls. He grabs the fallen iron post. While the Slasher struggles to pull her axe free, he bends the iron post around her, pinning her arms to the side.

The metal creaks and groans as she struggles to free herself, but he holds it tight. Jenny continues to scream and howl on the ground. Her injuries, while healing, are not looking good. *'If I can get her somewhere safe, she can heal up proper...'*

He lets go of the metal and grabs Jenny, practically dragging her down the street by her one good arm. The sound of iron creaking and then hitting concrete echoes. He looks back in time to see the Slasher advancing with her axe at her side.

A large white van, the side door still standing open, waits for them. The interior light is a beacon of safety. Inside the van the large metal cage waits ready for its murderous occupant. Jenny leans on him for support. *'Gonna need both hands for this.'* He carefully, but urgently, pushes Jenny off and she leans against the van.

He's trying to anticipate what she's going to do, but that's like trying to plan where lightning will strike on a sunny day. The Slasher swings her axe purposefully and he takes a cut along the muzzle. *'Gotta be faster than that, old man.'*

The Slasher follows up with an overhead blow that he deflects with his right arm. Her speed and murderous intent are even greater than his own. She swings again and again, driving him to the concrete.

He can feel death getting closer. He had gotten so used to being the Alpha, so used to the protections that the Mayor provides, that he forgot how dangerous the other creatures in this town could be. The Slasher swings again but is stopped when Jenny's fangs sink into her throat.



Jenny shakes her head, trying her best to bite through the Slasher's spine. She suddenly backs away, the black blood falling from her mouth making her gag and vomit. The Slasher's throat is a torn mess of meat and bone, but still she sits up. Already the wound is closing, and she stands, axe in hand.

*'I don't know how much longer I can hold it together.'* He can already feel the change coming. He's getting too weak to hold onto the beast anymore. He's about to become human again. *'And then she'll kill us both for sure.'*

He stands just in time to see the Slasher hack and chop at Jenny. Large gashes appear in her legs, back, and side. Jenny tries to push herself up with weak and shaking arms, but it's a struggle. He can see her human features start to push back through.

Jenny looks up at the axe as it falls like she's accepted her fate. He hasn't. He meant to catch the Slasher's arm, but injuries and a new lack of depth perception made him miss. Instead, he caught the blade of the axe. A normal person would have lost their hand, but he's stronger than that. It embeds into his palm, and he screams.

“RAAGH!” It’s not the howl of the beast. He can feel the power receding as he changes back to a human. While he still has the strength, he grabs the axe with his other hand and pulls it free. He throws it off into a distant yard and grabs the Slasher around the throat. While staring into the black pits of the Slasher’s eyes, he yells to Jenny. “Get your ass out of here, now!” His arms shake with strain at trying to hold the Slasher back. *‘I ain’t getting out of this one.’*

“Can’t do it, Chief.” Jenny lashes out with half formed claws, raking them along the Slasher’s face. Black eyes explode and the Slasher staggers backwards.

With the last of his bestial strength, he swiftly snaps a kick forward. Her ribs break under his kick with a satisfying snap as the Slasher is sent flying backwards. *‘As long as she’s not near us!’*

He’s back in his human form, clearly hurt badly. He pulls Jenny to the van’s door, and she climbs inside. On the verge of passing out, he jumps into the driver’s seat of the van and turns the key. In the review mirror, he can see Jenny settling herself against the cage.

“Let’s get out of here. We’ll have to come back for her later.” He slams the gas pedal to the floor causing the van to lurch forward. The Slasher is suddenly next to the van, her axe drags along the side. He watches the sparks fly as the blade tears through the metal. He and Jenny speed off leaving the Slasher to stand alone in the darkness.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher stares after the retreating van. Her eyes were the first thing that returned. The rest of her injuries are healing quickly. Once the van is far enough away, the pull of the ones inside is replaced by something else.

It’s the same compulsion that brought her out of her home. It’s stronger now, and she can feel it moving. It feels familiar...



## Chapter 11

After she got off of the bus, she stopped at her parent's place. She leaves with her dad's old truck and his favorite shotgun. *'Glad I kept the place after they moved out. Hope Nevada isn't as bad as here.'* She gathers her courage and makes her plan. She's going to find the Slasher. She's being drawn to the Slasher, and she needs to find out why.

The old truck speeds around the turns on the dark road. The headlights barely give her enough time to see and react. Shawna catches a glimpse of the sign by the road that reads *Camp Slaughterville: 3 Miles.*

“Getting closer now.” She pushes the pedal harder. “Just a little longer and this will be all over.”

She maneuvers the truck around the next turn. The headlights shine on a figure in the road. She slams on the brakes, instinct taking over, and the truck slides.

“Holy shit!” She yells as she turns to see what she almost hit. Her eyes lock onto the pale skin, mottled clothes, and black eyes. The blade shines in the moonlight as the axe is raised into the air. “It’s her!” *‘How’d she get here? How’d she get out of the camp?’*

The Slasher slams her axe into the hood of the truck, sparks flying in the darkness. Steam erupts from the radiator with a hiss, but she never lets go. Her skin bubbles and peels as the heated liquid erupts. Sloughs of skin and flesh fall exposing the skull underneath. A survival instinct has Shawna slam down the accelerator, and the truck pushes forward gaining speed.

“No! Not like this!” Her eyes go wide with panic. She’s filled with terror and nearly hyperventilates. She forces long and deliberate breaths into her lungs. *‘I thought I was ready. I thought I could do this.’*

The truck veers wildly as Shawna whips the wheel back and forth. The tires screech and squeal as she tries to regain control. The Slasher holds on and starts pulling herself forward. They pass a sign saying: *Camp Slaughterville: 2 Miles.*

“Come on!” She screams as she slams a hand on the steering wheel. She’s thrown against the door as she steers around another sharp turn. “Almost there! Just get me to that damn camp!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Chief Wallace pulls the van in front of a mausoleum in the cemetery. His eye is nearly healed. *‘Hurts almost as much when it heals as when it was torn out.’* Jenny moans in pain in the back of the van. A robed cultist walks up to the van and stands there, waiting.

“What do you want?” He glares at the cultist. He doesn’t know which one of the many faceless servants this is. Fatigue and pain making it hard to talk. “I’ve had a really rough night.”

“The Master is not happy with you.” The robed cultist has a smug air about him. “He says to get back out there and get her. He

feels her close to the camp and says that this time you best not fail.”

He breathes deeply as he calms the rage inside himself. There’s a maddening itch as the flesh of his injuries knits together. He doesn’t feel anywhere near ready to fight that girl again, but he has to obey. He owes him that much.

“Fine.” He reluctantly agrees. “Get Jenny out of here and back to her place. She’s not ready for what’s coming. When she comes to, tell her I said to wait and heal or else.”

He takes a deep breath and does everything he can to delay leaving. The ride to the cemetery was a good start to healing, but even the trip to the camp won’t be long enough to let him fully recover.

\*\*\*\*\*

Shawna’s wide eyes are fixated on the Slasher who is climbing ever closer to the cab of the truck. The Slasher digs her axe blade into the metal as she pulls herself forward. Warning lights on the dash tell her that the old truck is not long for this world.

Each time the Slasher slams her axe into the hood, smoke and other fluids erupt from

the engine. The truck shudders and shakes. Shawna wills the truck to gain as much speed as it can.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me!” Shawna screams into the night as the engine dies. The speedometer reads sixty as the truck passes a sign that says: *Camp Slaughterville: 1 Mile.*

As the axe falls again, the engine sputters for a final time. The engine’s silence fills her with dread. With every second that passes, the truck slows.

“Almost there, you evil bitch!” Shawna yells defiance at the Slasher. “Once we get to that lake, you’re going back to hell where you belong!”

The Slasher’s axe splits the windshield, and she pulls herself to her knees. The truck slows even more. The sign on the side of the road reads: *Camp Slaughterville: 1000 feet.* The speedometer reads forty miles-per-hour.

“No...no...not yet!” Shawna wills the truck to keep going. “We’re so close!”

With a loud crash, the Slasher shatters the windshield causing glass to fly. Shawna feels



the shards scratch and cut her skin as they fall. She wants to jump out of the truck, but she needs to get her to the camp.

“Dammit, no!” Shawna narrows her eyes. “You will not get me now!”

She slams on the brakes and lurches forward, slamming her head on the steering wheel. A small cut is opened on her forehead. She looks up in time to see the Slasher fly from the hood of the truck, to roll along the asphalt. The axe sends up sparks each time that it hits the road.

The entrance to the camp is just up the road. Her heart races as she sees the destination she’s been trying to reach. A simple pump-action shotgun is hanging on the back window of the truck. She pulls it from its holder and chambers a round of deadly buckshot.

“We’re almost done.” Shawna runs towards the camp. The truck’s lights illuminate the Slasher as her broken body struggles to reach for her as she runs past. She can hear the cracking and snapping as bones grind themselves into place. She thinks about firing a round into her head, but she needs to conserve the ammunition. She only has a few shells.

She's breathing heavily as she passes under the Camp Slaughterville sign. She turns back to look, and the Slasher is sitting up. The Slasher draws back a broken arm and throws her axe. The Slasher's forearm snaps in half as she throws, sending the axe skittering off into the forest.

The truck's headlights go out.

'Run girl!' Shawna pushes herself to near exhaustion running towards the lake. Her legs burn as she runs. She stops only when she gets near the boathouse. Pulling the shotgun close, she turns to face the main road, watching and waiting for the Slasher.

A skittering of rocks makes Shawna turn around. The Slasher walks quickly towards her. '*How'd she get behind me?*' Before the Slasher can raise the axe, Shawna fires the shotgun into her chest. A tight pattern of round metal punches through the Slasher's chest. The Slasher staggers backwards and gives a sound that's close to a low growl and a gurgle of liquid filled lungs.

"No!" Shawna moves forward, keeping the shotgun focused on the Slasher and racking another round. "Not today!"

The Slasher recovers quickly and comes forward, unfazed. Shawna fires again and again, pushing the Slasher backwards towards the lake. Shawna moves to one side, trying to keep the Slasher between herself and the lake. The gun fires again pushing her closer to the waiting water.

*‘Three more left!’* Shawna walks forward; the barrel of the shotgun practically pressed against the Slasher. She fires again, sending the Slasher even closer to the lake and ripping the flesh from her chest and chipping bone from her face. The force of the shot severs the arm holding the axe. Another two shots rip chunks out of the Slasher and shoves her backwards. *‘A few more shots and she’ll be in the lake for good!’*

“I got you! You’re done!” Shawna raises the shotgun. It clicks empty. “Oh, God. No...”

She’s filled with more fear than she’s ever felt. She’s face to face with a monster. Desperation takes hold. She knows that the Slasher has to be put down and the only way to do that is to get her in the water. She almost loses herself to the fear cascading over her, but she won’t let it win. She dashes behind the

injured Slasher and hurries into the water..  
*'This is it then...all or nothing.'*

"Come and get me! You know you want to!" She bellows defiantly, letting all the years of pain and torment escape in that one scream. She stands there in the water, watching as the Slasher turns, her injuries knitting themselves together faster.

"Can't kill me from way over there!" She taunts with a bravado she doesn't feel. She has no desire to sink beneath the waves and live her last moments with this thing, but it's the only option she has right now.

She shields her eyes as a pair of bright lights speed towards the Slasher. They wreath her in a halo of white just before they crash into her, sending her flying towards Shawna to land in the water beside her.

She scrambles away from the broken, bleeding form of the Slasher, taking a lot of satisfaction at seeing her put to rest. She wants to hold that mottled and mangled head under the water, but she doesn't think the Slasher breathes anymore. *'Would be worth it.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

The van skids to a stop and Chief Wallace jumps out. Still suffering from many of the injuries, he pushes past them to complete his mission. At the edge of the water, the Slasher and some woman are struggling to stand up.

Bones are sticking out of the Slasher's skin all over her body. Her head is turned around completely so that she's looking back out over the lake. Splashing and thrashing is interspersed with cries from the other woman. The Slasher's blood spurts in arcs and she is lying nearly still. Small spasms of movement are the only signs of life.

He reaches down and grabs the Slasher by the leg and starts to drag her from the water. '*What the hell?*' He turns when he feels slight resistance and hears the splashing water. The other girl is trying to pull on the Slasher. '*Oh, that's just adorable.*'

"No! She's going back in the water!" The woman screams at him, but she's not strong enough to do anything to stop him. "I need to put her back in the water. I need to put her to sleep for good!"

He gives a hard yank, pulling the Slasher from the water and causing the woman

to lose her grip. She falls backwards and goes under the water. He drags the Slasher towards the van.

“Sorry, girl.” His voice is weak but determined. “Ain’t up to me. Someone else needs this thing more than you do.”

“No!” The woman struggles to get out of the water. “Bring her back!” Violent splashes tell him that he’s got plenty of time.

He drags the Slasher to the van door. He can hear her bones knitting together. A loud crack and he watches as she turns her head around to face front. He looks down at her and he can see her broken bones reconnect through the open wounds before they start to seal themselves.

With a grunt of effort, he tosses the Slasher into the cage so that she slams against the back of it. A whistling sound sets him instantly on edge and he reaches out. Supernatural instincts save his life. He catches the axe as it flies through the air towards the Slasher. He can feel it pulling out of his grip, like it needs to return to the Slasher. When he slams the cage door shut, runes on the bars glow brightly. The axe stops pulling and she sags to the floor,

leaning uncomfortably against the bars which are covered with blue glowing symbols.

“Not this time, girly.” He slides the van door closed and wrinkles his nose at the smell of the Slasher’s blood. His lupine eyes watch as the woman crawls out of the water. He can hear her exhaustion in each heavy breath, but he gets the sense that she’ll be fine. He flips the axe through the air, catching the handle. He points it at her before tossing it onto the passenger seat.

“Please.” She weakly calls to him.

“Now, young lady.” He climbs into the driver’s seat and closes his door. “I am sure that you’ve been through a lot tonight. Normally, I would have to deal with someone like you. Can’t have too many witnesses and all that. You’re in luck, though, because I have places to be. Take this stroke of amazingly good luck and use it to get the hell out of my town. I’d sure hate to have to come talk to you again.”

He watches her hang her head as he turns the van towards the camp’s exit. He listens to the scraping of metal as the cage slides in the back. The glow of the symbols bathes the van in a deep blue. In the review mirror, he watches

one of the symbols fade, and he hits the gas.  
*'Gotta get her back to them quick.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

George slowly wakes up, groggy, his eyes refusing to open. His wrists are sore, and his back is killing him. The rough texture of his bed scrapes his back as he tries to shift into a more comfortable position. *'Need to change these sheets.'*

He reaches for his pillow. When he can't move his arms, a wave of panic forces his heavy eyelids open. More alert, he shakes his head free of the cobwebs and groans. He's in the middle of a large room. The room's cold stone is lit by many candles around the edge. *'I can't see much, but I'm not sure I want to. This place looks the same as the last time I was here. Was hoping I'd never see it again.'*

He turns to see actual metal cages. He vaguely remembers the pain of being thrown inside of one after he was abducted. He remembers another time from a long time ago. *'No. Don't go back there. It's over. It's not you anymore. Wait. Who's that?'* Even with his glasses at an odd angle, he can see there's someone in one of the cages!



“Robert! Hey! We were looking for you, brother.” He tries to get up, but the restraints are too strong. “What the hell’s going on here?”

“You’ve been unconscious for a while.” Robert shifts in the cage to sit with his back against the bars. That grogginess in your head is their fault. They’ve been drugging us. They got me when I was coming out of the General Store. I guess they know about us.”

The cultists leave to go on about their tasks, uncaring that these two are speaking. ‘That can’t be good. If they don’t care, they must be ready to complete their plan. Whatever that is.’ His neck getting stiff, he leans back onto the stone altar. The ceiling above is the same stone as the rest of this place.

“I guess they are.” George coughs and spits off the side of the altar and onto the floor. “I was in the library when they got me.”

“I’ve been here for days.” Robert looks defiant despite the pain and hunger. “They’re keeping us alive for some reason. We just gotta stay strong and don’t give them anything!”

A Tall Thin Man steps into view above George and smiles. There’s nothing calming in that smile. He leans down, adjusts George’s

glasses, and looks into his eyes, searching for something. He straightens up, nodding.

“I am glad to see that you’re awake.” The Tall Thin Man walks slowly around to the podium, but the angle is too much for George to see exactly what’s happening. There’s a scraping of metal on stone and footsteps. “Let’s begin, shall we? You should know how this goes by now.”

“Yeah. I remember. Let me guess...” George coughs and spits again, this time in the direction of the Tall Thin Man. “You want to know what we know. I’ve seen this all done before.”

“More than just in the movies. Have you told him?” The Tall Thin Man laughs loudly, gestures to Robert, and walks to stand next to George.

“Just shut up. Now.” George, normally a meek and kind man, is suddenly venomous. “What’s done is done. It’s long since over.”

“What’s he talking about?” Robert’s voice is a mix of confusion and desperation.

“Oh, how wonderful.” The Tall Thin Man actually claps his hands together. “You

haven't told them. This will be fun." Without taking his eyes off of George, he continues gleefully. "George used to be one of us."

"What?" Robert's hurt is palpable.

"Oh, yes." The Tall Thin Man answers. "It's all completely true. George here would be standing right where I am, his dark robes hiding his face while he did just the most horrible things to people. Then he lost sight of the bigger picture. He couldn't do what was necessary and he left us."

"George! What's he sayin'?" Robert stares at him, searching for answers he may not want. "You used to be a part of all this? What else are you hiding?"

"Just know that...he...trusts me. That should be enough for now. I'll explain it all later." George tries to wiggle free, pulling on the leather straps. *'Strong as I remember them being.'*

"Damn right you will. If *you-know-who* trusts you, I'll let this go for now. When we get out of here, we'll *all* have a good long talk." Robert slams his cage as he yells. "But we won't be telling you cultists anything!"

“No need for all that. We know everything already.” He holds up a long, curved knife. The edge looks razor sharp, and he runs a finger along the edge. “Do you remember this blade, George?”

“Get the hell away from him!” Robert grips his bars and tries to shake the cage. “Why don’t you talk to me?”

“He’s just trying to scare us.” George puts forth a false bravado that his eyes don’t back up. “You’ve always been a bit of a bully, haven’t you, Samuel?”

“So, you do remember us.” The Tall Thin Man chuckles at this revelation. “Then you must know this is not going the way you think.” The Tall Thin Man seems to be enjoying this. “I don’t want to ask you anything. We already know all about your little Citizens group. We know you have information on what you believe is happening, but you have no idea how much grander this great working really is.”

“Then why the hell are we here?” Robert hits the bars with the palm of his hand.

“Well, we couldn’t start yet.” The Tall Thin Man leans down, holding the sharp blade in front of George’s face. George tries to turn

away from it. "We needed one more for the ritual. A fun extra bit is we also get to send a message to your little conspiracy club and deal with a traitorous problem all at once."

"Wha...what ritual?" He knows he's sweating. He can feel the rising tingle of fear through his body as adrenaline pumps that precious fight or flight hormone through his system. Thanks to the thick straps, he can't do either. He has to lie there helplessly and listen to Samuel's cruelty.

"No!" Robert pounds on the bars harder, his voice becomes a wail.

"Yes." The Tall Thin Man draws the knife above his head and slams it into George's chest. George feels the cold metal slice into him, piercing his heart and lung. The blood bubbles up into his throat, choking him and making him gasp for air. Robert's screams fill his ears. The lights dim.

\*\*\*\*\*

George's blood pours through the tracks, runes lighting up a brilliant blue as the blood fills them. When it travels down hidden pipes to travel through the stone lines on the floor, more runes light up. The Tall Thin

Man stands, breathing heavily. The blade still embedded in George's chest.

"Now..." The Tall Thin Man turns to look at the anguish filled Robert. "There's just one more left. Is there anything you'd like us to tell your friends before it's your turn on the table?"

\*\*\*\*\*

A large set of double doors to the ritual room slams open. A tired, angry, and severely injured Chief Wallace bursts through the doors. With one hand, he's dragging a metal cage. In his other hand is the axe. The Slasher is bouncing around the cage, but she's not moving of her own accord. Her form is still and silent as the grave.

"It's about time." The Tall Thin Man stares unconcerned at the cage and its occupant. "What took so long?"

"She really didn't wanna come with me." He pants and coughs, he can taste the copper of blood in his mouth. *'Getting better, but I need to rest now.'* "And I had to get dressed. Didn't wanna walk in here with my junk hanging out."

“Yes, your right, of course.” The Tall Thin Man stares at the Slasher. “Your uniform is much preferable to your...birthday suit. Oh, my. She is a unique specimen, isn’t she? Absolutely fascinating up close.”

“Yeah, she’s great.” He shakes his head. “Where do you want her?”

The runes on the bars shimmer and flash as another goes out. He holds up her axe in front of her, testing to see if the pull is there. When he doesn’t feel anything, he hands it to the Tall Thin Man. He adjusts his hat and stands up, his newly healing bones cracking as he does.

“Place her over by our other guest.” The Tall Thin Man gestures absently as he studies the axe, looking enraptured. He places it reverentially on the podium. “Don’t let them get too close. If she wakes up, we don’t want her to get hold of him and waste perfectly fine materials. Make sure to keep her in the light, too. Can’t have her moving around on us.”

He drags the cage, careful to stay out of her grasp in case she’s been playing possum this whole time, and places it under a particularly bright torch along the wall. He doesn’t know

why she's lying there still, but whatever is keeping her contained is fading fast. He watches as another rune flares bright blue and goes out.

"Gotta say, I don't wanna be here when the last of those runes goes out." He steps back, keeping an eye on her cage. "They're fadin' awful fast."

"You've done well, Mr. Wallace. I need to go let the Master know she's here." The Tall Thin Man leaves the room quickly.

"Guess he didn't want to be around you anymore." He kicks the bars, and the Slasher rolls lazily. In the other cage, he sees a stocky man with short cropped blonde hair and a large full beard peppered with gray among the black. "Robert! Well, hey there buddy. How've you been? You enjoying your stay?"

"Kiss my ass, Scrappy Doo." Robert glares at him and extends a middle finger to let him know exactly what he's thinking.

He kneels down to get face to face with Robert. "You're saying that I'm a dog? Sure, I might be, but it sure looks like you're the one in the kennel, and your boy Georgie..." He turns, licking fangs that are just barely protruding. "I wonder if they'll let me have a taste."



If he'd been at top form, what happens next would have gone very differently. Robert reaches through the cage bars and grabs his shirt. He feels his nose break and his skin split as his head slams into the bars. He pulls away, falling backwards onto the stone floor.

"You mother..." Anger lends him strength. He picks up Robert's cage and slams it against the wall, hard. He feels himself growl as he does it again. And again.

\*\*\*\*\*

As Robert's cage falls to the stone with a clang, resting against the Slasher's cage, the door to the ritual room opens. The Tall Thin Man hurries inside and stands directly in front of Chief Wallace, glaring at him angrily. Robert laughs loudly from the floor of the cage.

"Was this necessary?" The Tall Thin man gestures to his cage while he sits on the floor laughing. "You know how delicate and important the artifacts in this room are to our endeavors. They are unique and irreplaceable! And look at the state of you, your precious uniform is torn."

"But..." Chief Wallace looks down at the tear in his shirt.

“Just be silent!” The Tall Thin Man chides Chief Wallace with a dismissive wave. “It is never good to argue in front of your sacrifices. Come.”

“Yes, sir.” Chief Wallace follows the Tall Thin Man out of the ritual room, leaving Robert alone with the Slasher who is starting to stir in her cage.

“Run off, little puppy.” Robert mocks the Chief as he leaves. He cockily leans against the bars of his cage. A hand on his shoulder makes him jump, throwing himself to the other side of the cage. He catches his breath and watches her for movement. Crawling over, he watches her and her blank eyes stare back at him. Even though she’s weakened, he can clearly see that she’s eager to tear him apart. This is the closest he’s ever been to actual pure evil, and he’s seriously reconsidering his life choices. *‘Maybe I didn’t need supplies that bad after all.’*

He isn’t familiar with the complex rituals needed to keep the Slasher in that cage. He doesn’t understand the sacrifices that need to be made to keep her contained, but he notices that with each passing minute, more

runes disappear. The more that disappear, the more alert she becomes. Black lips pull back from sharpened teeth as she glares at him.

“Gotta say.” He moves as far away from her as he can. “I didn’t expect to see you today.”

He pulls a badge out from under his shirt. He bounces it once or twice in his hand before moving over to the lock on the cage. He bends the pin on the back of the badge.

“Now to get the hell out of this place.” Robert spends a few minutes trying to move the tumblers in the lock, thankful for R.D.’s teachings. When it finally clicks, he sighs in relief. “Later, lady. Hope I never see you again.”

He pushes the door open a little, ready to stretch the stiffness out of his legs and run when he hears a group of voices come from the other side of the closed door to the ritual room. *‘Son of a...can’t I just get a damn break? Gotta hide. It’s my only shot at getting out of here alive. I need to tell them about George.’*

A sweet voice that sounds like someone’s grandmother or sweet aunt echoes slightly. “The Master said we need to keep an eye on the last sacrifice.” *‘Great, Aunt Bea wants me dead.’*

Despite the stiffness, Robert runs to the candles on the side of the room and proceeds to blow them out, sending part of the room into darkness. The runes of the Slasher's cage glow, flicker, and fade into nothingness as she gains more strength and starts thrashing around. There are very few runes left on those bars.

*'Dammit. Gotta hurry.'* Robert blows out set after set of candles until there's one left. The Slasher strikes the bars, her level of violence and determination, increasing. The runes that remain are much dimmer as they quickly start to fade. *'Don't want to be here when she gets free.'*

The door to the ritual room opens and four cultists stand in the doorway. They gasp as they see Robert blowing out candles. They don't get a chance to take a single step before...

"Good night." He blows out the last candle as the final rune dims.

He can't see. His eyes haven't adjusted to the darkness. There's a whistling sound, followed by a meaty thwack. Then the screaming started. He feels around for the wall to lead him to the door, wishing his ears couldn't hear the sounds of carnage. Men and women wail, cry, and die

as they are torn to pieces. Wet sounds of heavy objects falling bounce off of the stone walls.

“Illuminate!” A voice screams this simple incantation. The candles flare to life and the scene is a carnal house. Bodies lie around the room dismembered and crushed.

There she is, in all her horrific glory, standing among her victims. There are more people coming. He can hear them, but they won't be useful for anything except a distraction for him to escape. He watches as her axe flies from the skull of one of the cultists to her hand. The last remaining cultist in the room is backing towards the altar. He uses this time to slink around the side of the ritual room and the door to freedom.

“Oh...” Whatever else the cultist was going to say is cut off with a sound that can only be described as *schlorch*. Morbid curiosity makes him turn to see what could possibly make that sound. He sees the Slasher's axe embedded in the cultist's stomach. With unnatural strength, she lifts the axe. It slices up through bone and guts, sending both to splatter around the room. It continues the grisly path upwards through his chin and the top of his head. The

cultist falls, but he still can't take his eyes away from the gruesome display.

As a pair of cultists come through the door, they lock eyes with him. He uses that moment of confusion to shove them and run as much as he is able. The corridor is lit by torches, and he can see stairs going up. He feels a breeze wafting down the corridor. *'That could be a way out!'*

"Hah! Freedom. Here I come." He limps and jogs closer to the cool night air. Suddenly, another group of cultists hurry down those stairs. *'Give me a break, God! Please! Just this one time!'*

"Hey!" The closest cultist points at him. "What're you doing out of your cage? Come on. Let's get him back inside. The Master wouldn't like it if we let him get away."

He really did have something clever to say. He was ready to fight his way out using everything he had, but the sharp and sudden cold fire in his back makes him fall forward. He hears the advancing cultists as they're taunting him. He doesn't really comprehend much through the pain, but he knows they're coming. Then suddenly, a pair of white legs comes up

beside him. He feels the axe being pulled from his back as the Slasher pauses next to him.

He feels his head jerk as her axe falls, hitting him with a glancing blow. The last thing he hears is more people dying horribly and screaming uselessly for help. The pain mixes and adds to the myriad of other pains and sends him into a blissful unconsciousness against the stone floor.

The slamming of heavy wooden doors wakes him while also sending the corridor into silence. Surprise fills him because he wasn't expecting to wake up. It only lasts a moment when he faintly hears those people being torn to pieces from inside that other room. *'Now's your chance, old man. Move!'*

He pulls himself forward, drawing on all his will and strength. He crawls over piles of bodies and pieces of cultists. Their blood makes his clothes slick, making it easier to crawl to freedom. *'How many did she kill?'*

*'How long do I have until she's done in there?'* Robert pushes himself, half crawling towards the exit. "Gotta...keep...going."

Each stretch of his arm causes him nauseating pain. His head swims. When he

emerges from the underground, the cool night air helps him to think. He looks around at the cemetery. 'So, *they were in the mausoleum. Need to let...the others...know.*' With pure will, he forces himself to stand and walk.





## Chapter 12

The figure walks up the street and turns to a familiar house. Inside there are voices, but she can't make out what they're saying. She's determined, more so than ever before, but she still doesn't know if she can do this. It's been so long. She's exhausted, but her job isn't over yet. *'Gotta see it to the end.'*

That first step up to the front door is the largest and hardest she's had to make so far. Her hand trembles as she reaches up to knock. Her brain tells her hand to move, to pound out a request for entry, but her heart tells her to wait. *'Maybe they won't want me here.'*

Coughing a bit to clear her throat, she shakes the nervousness out of her limbs and raises her hand again. She gives the door a knock that is soft at first, but, by the third rap, it holds more weight and confidence.

When he opens the door, his eyes are wide with surprise. He takes a sudden and deep breath. "Oh...oh my. Shawna? What are you doing here?"

"Hey, Reese." Shawna waves sheepishly. "Good to see you, too. Uh...you gonna invite me in? Kinda cold out and it's been a long day. I'm not a vampire. I promise."

"Of course. Of course." Reese steps to the side and gestures for her to enter. "Please, come in. We were just working on something that you might be interested in."

"Yeah. I kinda figured as much was going on." Shawna absently rubs that particular spot on her lower back that's been a painful reminder of the last time she was in Slaughterville. "It's why I'm here, actually."

Shawna waves to everyone as she walks inside. Almost immediately, Nissa sprints over and wraps her in a large hug. "Hey bestie! Haven't seen you in just about forever!"

"I missed you too, Niss." She huffs at the crushing hug but pats her on the back as she lets it happen. "Can I use my lungs now?"

"Sorry!" Nissa smiles and lets go.

"Shawna!" R.D. calls to her from the couch that she's sure is the same one as when she was here last time. "Never thought we'd see you around this town again."

"Truth be told, I wasn't planning on coming back." She sighs in relief. "Sometimes things don't work out the way you want them to. Was worried you wouldn't want me here. Good to see you all though."

"So, what brings you to our spooky neck of the woods?" James leans against the opening to the kitchen.

Reese leads her towards the kitchen and offers her something to drink. At the table, there's someone she doesn't recognize. *'This town's always collecting victims and castoffs. Like it needs people to be wallowing in pain and loss or it can't survive.'*

"Ah, a fresh new face around here." Shawna waves and the new guy extends his hand in greeting. "Hi. I'm Shawna."

“John.” He looks like he was hit by the same bus that brought her to town.

“Good to meet you.” She can see the myriad of bruises and she recognizes when someone’s been through an ordeal. It’s in the eyes. They’re just like the ones she sees in the mirror. Her voice goes a bit more somber. “We can use all the friends we can get here.”

“Hey...” The voice from behind her is one she recognizes instantly. She wasn’t sure how she’d feel when she heard it. *‘Calm down. You knew this had to happen. No way of avoiding it.’* She turns, not sure what she’ll do when she finally sees her again.

In Caroline’s eyes is something that’s not quite anger, but there’s something dark and foreboding underneath. Like a solitary storm cloud blotting the bright blue sky. There are no handshakes, no laughs, and the rest of the house goes silent as these two meet again.

“Oh. Hey.” She wanted to be civil, but after what happened, she can only feel disdain. “Guess we really need all the help we can get.”

“Heh.” Caroline’s laugh held neither mirth nor friendliness. “Guess I kinda deserved that one. What are you doing here? When you

left us, you made it clear you never wanted to come back after you survived The Slasher's attack."

"It's sure not to see your shining face." She turns away, her hand going to the spot on her lower back. It feels cold now, but throbs like it's an infection waiting to burst free. "It's because of this damn thing. After...it... happened, I was recovering from surgery. The doctor came in and said there's a piece of her axe lodged in my spine. They couldn't remove it. Said it might paralyze me. So, now I feel her every day. Then a couple days ago, it felt different. Like a magnet. I can feel it, even now, pulling me to her. The worst part is, I see flashes of what she sees...I am so sorry about Beth."

Caroline just nods.

"Look, can we go in the living room." She turns to Reese more to break the tension than anything else. "Some sick and twisted part of me misses your lecture filled meetings, and it just feels right to do this in there."

"Yes, of course." Reese, followed by the others, leads the way into the living room.

While she's telling everyone what happened after she got off the bus, she takes

in all of them. *‘There’s R.D., sitting on the table again and tapping that damn bat against the floor. Nissa and James...you’d think they’re brother and sister with how they act, but I think there’s something more. Reese is...well... Reese. Thank God he ain’t never gonna change. Caroline...’*

“The Chief tossed the Slasher into some cage thing like he was a damn dog catcher. Then he actually pointed her axe at me. He left me there, and I crawled my ass out of the water.” She shivers at the memory of the coldness. Not just because of the time of year, but because of what almost happened. “I started walking towards town. Lucky for me, Mr. Figueras was on his way home from the antique store and saw me walking. Otherwise, I might have been frozen on the side of the road. He dropped me off here and, well, here we are.”

Reese exhales as he stands and walks around the room. The others are in various states of interest, shock, or anger. R.D. is gripping Jasmine so tightly that he might leave marks on her handle.

“It seems our idea has some merit to it after all.” Reese gives a knowing look to John.

"I was thinking the same thing." John turns to Shawna, addressing her directly. "We first thought it was the water that took her down. Now, we think her power is tied to that damn axe. We found out that she was killed with it. Add to it your recounting with Chief Wallace, and it only solidifies our theory. Maybe, if we get the axe away from her for long enough, it can stop her."

"Be better if we just destroy the damn thing." R.D. adds.

"Hey. Uh." James looks hesitant, but he hurries through the suggestion. "My uncle has a scrapyard. We can melt it down there. He lets me come and go as I want."

"If Chiefy has her, how do we know he's not just gonna take care of her for us?" Nissa asks, tilting her head curiously.

"Can't trust them to do anything. We need to handle this ourselves." Caroline says flatly. "From what we've read and know, destroying the axe seems like our best option."

"Shawna, what can you tell me about when you first encountered her? Any small detail could be important." John holds his pen and paper.

“It all happened so quick.” Her face goes dark and distant as she recalls the day that it all changed for her. “I wasn’t at the camp long. I was only hired as a counselor the day they opened the camp. I was so proud of that stupid Camp Slaughterville Counselor shirt. It was later that night when everything went all wrong...”

\*\*\*\*\*

### Four Years Earlier

Her eyes are wide with terror, her heart tries to escape her chest, and her breathing is rapid and dizzying. She holds the phone in a death grip as she silently begs the call to go through. The small bedroom she’s hiding in is closing in on her each time the phone isn’t answered. Shawna carefully looks out through the curtains into the dark night, the moonlight colors the landscape a bright yellow but still seems inadequate to see anything. Turning, she looks at the body on the floor. ‘*Was that Gina? Lisa?*’ She couldn’t tell since most of the face was caved in.

The phone picks up and she nearly screams in excitement. The voice on the other end is groggy. “ello?”



“Caroline!” She whispers the word, but panic made the emphasis very clear. “You need to get me the hell out of here! She’s out there, somewhere, in the dark. She’s killing everyone! Please, hurry!”

“What?” While there’s still a hint of tiredness in Caroline’s voice, it quickly snaps into clarity. “Who’s killing everyone?”

“It’s the damn Slasher! She’s real!” Her panic is settling in firmly the longer she has to stay in one place. “Get your ass over here fast!”

“Okay. I’m...” Caroline’s voice is cut off as the line goes dead. The silence is maddening.

Just outside the window, someone is stumbling. *‘That’s Frank! We can both get...’*

The plan is shattered quickly. Frank picks himself up and turns. He’s wielding some long piece of metal like a fireplace poker or a tire iron. He swings it at the Slasher, and she takes it across the face, splitting that perfectly porcelain skin spilling black blood onto her uniform.

She builds up her nerve to run and help him just as the Slasher catches his next swing. She pulls him in close, like they’re about to

dance. One hand snaps out to grab his throat as she uses the other to embed her axe into his face. His eyes bulge as he screams; his body refusing to realize that it's already dead. Letting go of her axe and his throat, she digs her deep into his eye sockets cracking through the bone. With a swift spreading of her arms, she tears his head in two, covering her and the nearby foliage in gore. He collapses onto the ground along with her hope of escape.

Another scream comes from behind the Slasher. It's Bethany. The Slasher turns and walks, unconcerned with speed, towards the petrified Bethany. With a sense of self-preservation that belies Bethany's usual airhead nature, she turns and runs into the darkness. The Slasher follows, her axe dripping a bloody trail.

"I gotta get out of here." She drops the phone and looks all around the room. "Where am I gonna go? Gotta get somewhere Caroline can see me. She's coming. I know it."

From off in the distance, Bethany screams one final time. That's enough to get her moving. *'Not sure how many of us there are left, but I don't wanna be like the others.'*

The front door to her cabin opens loudly, dashing her hope for a silent escape. The parking area is lit up and she can see the sign over the entrance. The precious minutes, which she is afraid will be her last, feel like hours. She feels like something is watching her from the shadows, ready to rend her to pieces, as she tries to be as sneaky as possible.

*'Where are you, Caroline? Get my ass out of here!'* She puts her back to the cabin, taking comfort in the solid wood, and tries to stay out of the light.

The main road gets closer with each frightened step she takes. The wind blows the wooden camp sign. She kicks a rock that rolls into the parking area, and she freezes. She watches for the Slasher to appear in front of her, axe in hand, and ready to kill. *'Gotta stay hidden. If she can't find me, I can make it out of here alive.'*

She slides forward away from the cabin. The road is less than a dozen yards away. She can feel her adrenaline rise, along with her hope, and she moves quickly to the next tree. She bounces on the balls of her feet, ready to run for all she's worth as soon as Caroline

gets there to save her. A pair of headlights are coming up the road. She's almost euphoric as she steps out from her hiding place.

She's not sure which hurts the most. The axe blade embedded in her back, or the headlights continuing on past the camp. She screams as the blade bites deep. She can feel it hitting and cutting the bone and nerves of her lower back.

She falls and continues to cry out in pain, cursing Caroline with each agonizing jolt. Burning, stinging jolts of searing fire are sent up her spine each time she tries to move. She can hear the Slasher's bare feet crunching on rocks behind her. She reaches out and grabs handfuls of earth, pulling herself forward inch by agonizing inch. When the axe is pulled free, her body jerks up only to fall with a thud onto the ground. She knows that the axe is about to fall again, so she draws her feet under herself and shoves off. Her torso is nearly useless from the pain and damage, but she's propelled forward, flying under the Camp Slaughterville sign, and rolling onto the asphalt.

The Slasher is standing there, watching her, from just beyond the sign. She prays that

someone will come and save her before that thing can come for her. The imperfect blade of the Slasher's axe crashes into some invisible barrier sending blue sparks flying. She breathes shallowly and quickly, the panic and pain sending her into shock. Her vision dims to black as the Slasher turns back from her and walks back into the campground towards the lake.

\*\*\*\*\*

"When she couldn't reach me, she just turned around and left." Shawna's haunted expression remains even as she finishes her story. She stares directly at Caroline when she speaks again. "I saw her then. Really saw her. She didn't hate. I don't think she felt anything. Then I passed out. I woke up in the hospital days later with this reminder, no thanks to you."

"I called the cops!" Caroline protests, throwing her hands up in frustration. "What was I supposed to do? We didn't know about all...this...back then! I mean...we knew some things, but it wasn't all this! We knew about the werewolves, the ghosts, and those cult people. I thought the Slasher was just a kid's story!"

“Yeah. Couldn’t be bothered to come yourself.” Shawna’s anger is rising even higher. She was always hot-headed, but something about Caroline always set her teeth on edge. “I almost left this place behind, but then the other day out of nowhere this thing starts to hurt. I can feel it pulling me back here. I can see what she sees! Every time she tears some poor soul to pieces; I can see it. I can feel her. All because you couldn’t be bothered.”

“One moment please.” Reese steps in between the two bickering people. “Shawna, you stated that when you managed to escape to the main road, that she stopped pursuit.”

“Yeah, why?” Shawna’s voice was still filled with venom when she spoke.

“In the diary, we read something similar.” Reese turns to a page in the diary. “See. Here. This gentleman was being chased, but when he reached a determined point, it seems like the energy that is powering her was ended.”

“Yeah, but now she’s out running all over.” John interjects.

“Perhaps whatever kept her contained has been removed.” Reese looks to Shawna. “It

would explain why you are feeling the pull. The barrier that used to keep her confined to the camp is gone.”

“We need to...” Caroline’s response is cut off as a loud noise erupts from the front door.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Tall Thin Man stands in the ritual room, his face a steady mask of anger. He wanders through the room, kicking the bodies of cultists, until he gets to the empty cage that used to hold the Slasher.

“I can’t believe you would let me down like this.” He runs a hand along the rune covered bars. A robed woman shuffles to stand beside him.

“But sir...” The woman nervously rubs her hands together before smoothing out her robes.

“Just be silent.” He chides. “Just be quiet and let me think. We need to finish this binding, but there’s so much impure blood mixing together that this way is ruined. We need time to clean this up and bring in some new...volunteers.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The pull is the strongest that it's ever been. The Slasher stands on the front step and stares blankly at the wooden obstacle in front of her. She draws her axe back and demolishes the door. The voices inside scream as she pushes herself inside.

\*\*\*\*\*

John's instincts kick in and, in spite of the pain he feels, he stands quickly. His pistol appears in his hand as if by magic. A deep breath, a forceful focusing of his vision, and he fires a round. It travels through the air with a crack and strikes the Slasher in the chest. Black blood flies out behind her, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"Holy crap!" Nissa yells as she backs away. Her eyes tell him she's about to panic.

"How'd she find us?" R.D. grabs his bat and pulls Caroline and Reese behind him.

"Don't care how, more worried that she's standing right there!" Nissa slips behind John and hurries towards the kitchen and the large pair of glass doors leading out to Reese's back yard.



“We gotta go!” Shawna pushes James and Reese towards Nissa.

“We have nothing here that can stop her.” Reese unlocks the glass door. “Get outside now. And if you have the chance, remember to grab the axe!”

He fires a few more rounds, the impacts barely staggering her. *‘If I can slow her down, the others can get to safety.’* When his gun clicks empty, he feels a strong hand on his shoulder.

“We ain’t all gonna make it.” R.D. pushes him to the side. John’s seen that look before. It’s the look of someone resigned to his fate but determined to take the enemy down with him. “I’ll buy us some time.”

R.D. twirls his bat in a slow circle like he’s stepping into the batter’s box. The swing is fast and whistling as it swishes through the air. The impact on the Slasher’s skull is a loud crack. The Slasher’s flesh tears from her skull showing the bone underneath.

“Go, now!” R.D. never turns as he yells.

The Slasher is faster than he thought she could be. She backhands R.D. hard enough

to send him flying backwards, into the kitchen, over the table, and shattering the light above it. The kitchen descends into darkness as the glass bulb breaks. R.D. falls with a sickening thud onto the edge of the table and rolls off onto the floor. He's not moving.

"No!" Nissa runs to his side, her fingers desperately searching his neck for a pulse. She exhales deeply when she finds it.

"I said get outside!" Reese's normally calm and unflappable demeanor is broken as he yells orders.

The light from the small poles at the corners of the pool gives them a beacon to reach. Reese and Nissa each grab an arm and are dragging R.D.'s considerable weight outside. Caroline pulls open the glass door fully before reaching to help Nissa pull.

John hadn't taken his eyes off the Slasher. She was there one minute, but she's gone now. He slides a new magazine into his pistol and chambers a round with a click.

"Move your asses!" He swings his gun back and forth, looking for the Slasher and eager to get some payback. "Get him outside. I don't see her anywhere."

“John! I think she uses the shadows to move!” Shawna yells as she backs up.

The Slasher suddenly appears out of a ripple of blackness right in front of him. Her hand moves so fast that he doesn't have the time to stop it or move out of the way. He flies through the glass door's opening and rolls along the patio and into the grass. Something soft and moaning stops his momentum. He shakes his head, looking down into Nissa's stunned face.

“Hey. You wanna get off me?” Nissa pats him on the back.

“Sorry about that.” He looks at her and then at the empty pool behind her. He looks back towards the house, and the lights give him just enough to see the Slasher standing inside the home. As he gets up, an inkling of a plan starts to form.

The others are in different states of panic or injury. Next to the door are Reese and Caroline tending to an injured R.D. James is with Shawna by the pool. Rushing over to James, he hurriedly relays his plan.

“I'll piss her off and let her get close. You and the others ram into the back of her sending her flying into the pool.” A manic

gleam in John's eyes must have been enough to get them moving.

He watches as James and Shawna run along the edges of the property to hide. They don't have long to wait as the Slasher pushes through the doorway and into the backyard.

The Slasher stalks forward, passing by the three people on the ground. '*She's coming right for me.*' John raises his pistol and fires, the holes in her chest don't slow her down. The gun barks again, but she gets closer. '*This is gonna work. It has to.*'

He fires again and still she advances. Until she doesn't. '*What the hell's she doing?*' The Slasher turns to her right and throws her axe towards James and Shawna.

'How'd she know they were there?' "Hey! Over here!" He fires into her back, but she keeps going, marching towards something only she knows.

"Run!" James bolts out of his hiding place. Shawna moves in the opposite direction towards the pool. The Slasher turns towards Shawna and raises her axe. Everywhere Shawna moves, the Slasher steps to stop her.

“Looks like I got a fan.” Shawna skirts along the edge of the pool. “She must feel the same pull I do. What the hell do I do?”

Caroline dives into the back of the Slasher’s legs, taking her to the ground and sending her axe into the grass. She rolls away quickly, but John is right there. He picks up the axe and, using all of his pent-up rage, severs the Slasher’s arm at the bicep. The pale white appendage flops into the grass, shuddering once before falling still. Each swing opens up gashes, spurting black blood onto him.

The Slasher sweeps her remaining arm in a lightning-fast blow, throwing him off of her. She rises as he awkwardly tumbles backwards from the blow. Painfully he stands on shaking feet. *‘This isn’t doing my injuries any good.’* From behind the Slasher, James and Reese charge forward and barrel into her, sending her crashing into the pool with a satisfying crack and thud.

“How do you like it?” James spits the words as the Slasher lies in the empty pool.

“Looks like it hurt.” Shawna is staring down at the Slasher who has a leg bent at an unnatural angle.

“At least we have this.” He holds the axe up. “If this is what’s giving her power, then we best keep it as far away as possible.”

A cracking, snapping sound comes from the bottom of the pool. Looking over the edge, he can see her leg bending oddly into shape. Her arm that was severed is leaking a sickening dark green liquid. When it hardens, it slowly begins to reform into a new arm one inch at a time.

“That ain’t gonna slow her for long. Maybe the axe wasn’t it?” James swipes at his beard before looking to the others for advice or help.

“Or perhaps it’s still too close.” Reese stares, awestruck at the tableau playing out in his pool. “I’ll never get that stain out of there.”

“What the hell?” John lurches forward nearly knocked off his feet by the sudden pull as the axe surges forward. Its force is so great that it slips free from his unprepared grip and flies into the pool. “No!” *‘I had it! I was so close!’*

“What’d I miss?” R.D. staggers over to the edge of the pool, swaying as he looks inside. “Oh...well, damn. She’s gonna be a real problem, isn’t she?”

“She...uh...” Shawna looks like she’d rather be saying anything else. “I think she wants me. I feel myself being called to her, and she’s probably feeling the same. We need to get her axe and destroy it. Can’t work on that if she’s trying to kill me every five seconds. The lake seems to put her to sleep. That means...”

R.D., limping as he walks, nods along. “I don’t like the idea of getting close to her, but you’re right. We gotta get you back to the camp. She’ll follow, we’ll drop her in the drink, and then destroy the axe. It’s the only way to keep this town safe.”

“So, we just gotta take the weapon of death from an undead murderer and then destroy it before she tears us into teeny tiny pieces.” Nissa shrugs her shoulders. “Seems easy enough to me. What could go wrong?”

“In the diary, she was all but dead when the axe left the homestead grounds, but that barrier’s gone now. The lake is our best option. Let’s go before she recovers.” John leads everyone out the front of the house, stepping over the broken door, leaving the Slasher at the bottom of the pool. The Citizens pile into their cars and speed off towards the camp.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher lies still on the cold tile. Her arm is healing quickly. Her leg is molding into shape. She stares up at the tall walls of the pool. More offensive is the light. It's keeping her from following them.

She pulls her hand back and throws her axe. It clangs against the tile wall before bouncing back to the pool floor. With a force of will, the axe dutifully returns to her hand. She keeps throwing the axe as her arm finishes healing. She can feel the pull towards her home.

\*\*\*\*\*

"We're gonna need to get her weighed down if we wanna keep her stuck at the bottom of the lake." James and the others practically burst from the cars as soon as they stop on the road outside of the camp. *'If we gotta leave in a hurry, best to have the cars outside her camp instead of in it.'* Each of them hurries around the camp. He's amazed at the efficiency that fear can bring. "Find whatever looks heaviest!"

Caroline is untying the canoes from the rack and tossing the ropes to the others. He takes one of the ropes and searches around for something heavy.



“Grab the anchors from inside the boathouse!” James rushes over to the boathouse, R.D., Nissa, Reese, and John are close behind.

The boathouse door flies open, but he stops suddenly. He looks down at the body with the head turned backwards and the leg bent at a disgusting angle. The bone is still wet and poking out through the skin. He can feel his bile rising and his head start to spin. He spots the anchors, right next to the body.

“Hey...uh...You guys go grab the anchors!” James backs out the door, his stomach threatening to heave everything onto the ground. “I’ll go and help Caroline get more ropes from off of these canoes.”

The fall night air helps to settle his stomach as much as the distance from the grotesque display. There’s a mad scrambling as the Citizens rush to prepare for the Slasher’s deadly arrival. While they haven’t always seen eye to eye, they work together like a family. *‘We fight, we laugh, and we get it done. They’re more my family than my actual brother. Can’t wait to send her to the bottom of the lake where she belongs.’* With a buzz, the light above him starts to flicker and pop, fading to black.

“Guys! I made some nooses we can put around her.” He holds up the rope. *‘Why’s John looking so pissed?’*

“Move!” John’s running at him, his legs pumping hard.

“What’s going...?” He turns just as the Slasher brings her axe down. *‘I can’t believe this is it.’* In an instant, a hand shoves him aside. John wraps his arms around the Slasher’s waist like he’s subduing a fleeing suspect. The skittering, sliding sound is loud as her axe comes to a stop right next to him. The chipped blade looks sharp enough to shave with. He reaches for the axe, but it slides away moving towards the Slasher. *‘Focus on getting her in the lake! Then we can take the axe whenever we want.’*

“She’s here!” Reese’s yell snaps him back into reality. “Quickly, while she’s down! Get your ropes around her neck. Don’t let her get free!”

John is lying on the Slasher’s back, who is thrashing and trying to throw him off. He’s doing his best to restrain her one remaining arm. The other is actually growing before his eyes. James and the Citizens are quickly and

carefully moving all around, throwing ropes around her neck, legs, and the offered arm. The ropes cinch tightly, cutting into the soft flesh.

“We got her now!” James finishes cinching his rope around the Slasher’s neck and pulls it taught. “Don’t let up!” All around him the others are securing their lines.

“Hurry!” Nissa, tiny as she is, struggles to pull the Slasher’s thrashing body. Nissa is sent hard to the ground as the Slasher kicks and bucks. The rope she was holding falls loose to flail around. James grabs hold of it, pulling so hard that the ropes scrape the skin from his palms.

“Get her to the lake!” Reese and the others are doing everything they can to keep her subdued, but her unnatural strength is winning.

Undead limbs thrash and writhe making the people stumble as they struggle to keep her contained. Sharpened teeth snap at those unlucky enough to get too close. An errant foot catches Reese in the stomach, and he gives an *oof* of surprise and pain. Even though the Slasher is missing most of one arm, she’s still able to pull and jerk the ones holding

the ropes. The anchors on the end of those ropes swing like wrecking balls. Many times, they would have to pick themselves up or duck to avoid getting hit with them. *'I don't know how the hell we're gonna live through this.'*

He looks at their progress and they're only halfway to the dock. *'Pull harder man! Don't let her get up!'* He heaves on the ropes, trying to pull her faster. With a sharp snap, some of the ropes tear free of the anchors. The Slasher is quickly becoming less a prisoner and more an engine of destruction.

"Just a little more, guys." James is sweating and bleeding from the ordeal. His muscles strain and ache. *'I'm not so sure we're all gonna make it.'* "Almost there."

The Slasher reaches up with her remaining hand and grabs the ropes at her neck. The wood of the dock under his feet and the sound of clunking anchors makes him pull harder. They didn't account for the narrowness of the dock. Not all of them can fit at once. The Slasher violently pulls on the ropes, making the Citizens crash into each other. Several of them are thrown off of the side of the dock and onto the shore.

He lands hard on the wet grass, his head swims from some sudden injury. *'Musta hit a rock. Least it wasn't an axe.'* Shaking the cotton from his brain, he looks up at the chaos. Several of his friends are struggling to stand. The Slasher pushes herself to her knees, the ropes and the anchors hanging off her.

R.D. bellows like a giant as he rushes the Slasher. He grabs her by the back of her dress and, with a rage powered yell, picks her up. He spins in a circle, the anchors flying out with the force of the move and throws the Slasher as far as he can.

The Slasher soars through the air, her limbs stretched taught from the force of the flying anchors. Her inhuman strength is useless when there's nothing to grab or strike. She can do nothing but fly. A series of large splashes fountain into the air as she, and the anchors, slam into the water.

Already, the standing Citizens are running to the end of the dock. "Do you guys hear that whistling?" The noise quickly gets louder but then stops. It ends with a *thunk*.

Shawna nearly jumps into the water when the Slasher's axe embeds itself into the

dock next to her, the blade cutting into the wood. Behind her, R.D. is leaning on a post, panting. Reese, Nissa, and John get to the dock just as he does.

“Maybe it was the water.” James watches the ripples as they spread into wider circles. He watches her sink below the waves until he can’t see her any longer.

“This damnable thing has caused so much death and misery.” Shawna picks up the axe, turning it over. “All the pain this thing caused. All the lives it destroyed. Doesn’t look so sharp now.”

“Hmm...” Reese focuses on some spot in the distance as he stares at the lake. “Well, let’s get this to the scrapyard.”

“Ready when you are.” Caroline pants, her hands on her knees.

“Yeah, let’s get this done so I can get out of here.” Shawna stares for a long moment at the chipped blade while rubbing the scar on her back. “Let’s melt this piece of trash so I don’t have to see her anymore.”

“It’s too bad we can’t keep it.” Nissa stares at the axe. “I was gonna hang it in Reese’s

house. Like our own little Batcave. We could keep something from each one of these things we take out. Then we could get a giant penny!”

“Or a T-Rex.” James adds, his laugh broken up with a coughing fit.

“Let’s get out of here.” John is already walking to the truck. “I think I need to rest.”

“Oh!” Caroline claps him on the back. “Finally gonna listen to us, are you?”

Each of the Citizens are standing next to the cars at the edge of the camp. Some are giving high-fives, others are hugging, but there’s a general air of relief.

*‘We finally got one of them good!’* James looks around at his makeshift family. He wraps Reese in a bear hug and takes some measure of delight in the uncomfortable expression on Reese’s face.

“Hard to believe it’s almost done.” Shawna reaches to her lower back. “It’s weird that I can’t feel her pull anymore. Not that I miss it or anything.”

“Yeah, we did good here.” John gently slaps the hood of Nissa’s car. “Especially R.D. with the big win.”

“Thanks, man.” R.D. looks embarrassed and uncomfortable at the praise. “I don’t know what happened. Something just came over me.”

“Maybe she’ll finally stay asleep for good.” Caroline looks back towards the dock.

“She damn well better. Hold this.” Shawna opens the car door. Before she gets inside, she tosses the axe to John. He carefully catches it, avoiding the blade.

“Gee, thanks.” John stares at the axe, disgusted and angry. Before getting into R.D.’s truck, he leans down to the window of Nissa’s car. “You hold it. Not sure I want this reminder.”

“Huh?” Jame’s reacts out of instinct and catches the axe, quickly dropping it onto the floor of the car. “Oh, shit. Wait! I don’t want this! What if it...”

“Stop whining.” Nissa teases. “Just hold on tight and don’t let it hit me in the back while I’m driving. No offense, Shawna.”

R.D.’s truck is already pulling past them as Nissa starts the car. James looks at the blade lying between his feet and suddenly feels really vulnerable and worried about his future children. “Yeah, let’s go get this over with.”



They pull onto the road and drive towards the scrapyard, hope filling them all for the first time in a long time.

\*\*\*\*\*

She doesn't need to breathe, but still she forcefully exhales sending a trail of bubbles to the surface. She knows there are still lights up there that must be extinguished. For the first time since she's been reborn as the Slasher, she feels something. Her power is getting weaker. She can feel it fading, dimming. The water and weakness make her want to slip off to sleep, but she will not be claimed by the darkness again. She wants to extinguish those lights.

Undead rage makes her struggle and stretch the wet ropes. They would be strong enough to hold a boat in place in a moderate storm, but they're not strong enough to stop her. She snaps them and untangles herself.

The bottom of the lake is a mired mess of weeds, rocks, and rotting logs. She ignores the stabbing, cutting edges as she walks forward. The pull of her axe is weakening as it gets farther away. The surface of the lake parts almost silently as she moves like a shark gliding beneath its surface.

She's not sure how long she was down there. Time doesn't mean anything to her. She only knows that her axe is gone, but she can sense where it is. She walks to the shadow; the familiar ripple is there. She allows the darkness to split, and she steps inside.

\*\*\*\*\*

Their cars pull into the scrapyard. James tells Nissa to park right next to the door to the furnace room. The building is easily a few stories tall but made of thick sheet metal. Its gray exterior dully reflects their headlights. Small windows are sparsely spaced near the top of the building. R.D. pulls up right behind her before shutting off his truck. James gathers everyone at the door, unlocks it, and swings it wide. "Wait here."

James disappears inside. '*Now, where were those lights?*' He snaps his fingers as he remembers the large bank of switches. "Let there be light." He proceeds to turn on every light he can find. He quickly returns outside to the group. "Not taking any chances here, guys. Won't leave her any shadows just in case."

"I'm good with it." R.D. looks around and whistles. The parking area is large enough

for a few cars or a couple of big trucks. Still, it seems tiny compared to the walls of metal on either side of him. Cars, appliances, steel beams, and things that are no longer recognizable tower over him. “Man. If I were scouting locations for a horror movie, this would be in the top three for sure.”

“Been coming here since I was a kid.” He laughs as he bows low, motioning for them to enter the building. “It was my first job. Used to hate this place. Reminded me of those horror movies my brother made me watch. I half expect someone to be scraping their metal clawed glove on the steaming pipes. It’s not so bad once you get used to it, and there’s not really a murdering dream demon. Right?”

“Um...” Reese murmurs.

He looks around at the others, Reese especially, for comfort or confirmation. “Right?”

Their silence tells him more than he wants to know. *‘I’ll deal with that new nightmare later.’* “Anyway. Inside is the smelter.”

John is the first to walk through the door. James comes in behind him, and the others follow inside. James leads all of them to

a large furnace, the steel is cold, for now. *'Feels good to be doing something instead of waiting to be attacked.'*

"Careful everyone." James pats the furnace which rings out with a gong. "This sucker can get hot enough to instantly take your skin off!"

"Let's get this over with." Shawna rubs her arms against the night's chill.

James tells R.D. and Reese to flip some switches and turn some knobs. Meanwhile, he places a heavy metal tray into the furnace and gestures for the axe. "You ready guys?"

John turns the axe over. He holds it out to Caroline. "You want to do it?"

Caroline visibly chokes up as she gingerly touches the handle of the axe that killed Beth and so many others. John looks into her eyes, and they share a moment of grief and pain. "Together."

"Fair enough." John holds the axe in his hand and they both toss it inside the furnace where it lands on the tray with a clang.

The heavy steel door closes, and James turns a knob releasing fuel into the furnace.

The flames flicker before flaring high. They cover the axe in a cleansing fire.

“Burn, you piece of trash!” Shawna growls at the axe as the fire covers the blade, gliding over the wood handle.

Confusion comes over them all as they stand there for several minutes. The blade looks untouched, the wood is pristine. The axe seems to absorb the heat.

“Why isn’t it working?” Shawna yells at the steel behemoth. She reaches out, but James grabs her hand.

“Careful. That’s about two-thousand degrees.” He looks at the axe and then at the rest of them. “Guys. I have no idea what’s going on. This shoulda worked. It should be at least starting to melt by now.”

“Strange. The wood of the handle is not even scorched.” Reese paces around, waving a hand absently in the air. “Clearly simple fire isn’t enough. If the blade cannot be destroyed, then we may need other means.”

“Like wha...” Caroline’s question is interrupted by her own shriek.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher steps out of the shadow, and she can already feel the axe is close. The open door leads her to a room filled with light. Familiar light. And the one who calls to her is there. The noise falls on her uncaring ears as she holds out her hand. She calls to her axe. She tries to pull it from that which is holding it.

The axe clangs and slams against the metal and glass door. She walks forward through the screaming and running people, reaches out, and punches her hand through the glass. She grabs the scalding and burning handle of her axe and pulls it free.



## Chapter 13

Caroline was the first to scream, but she wasn't the last. Her soul is telling her to run, but her legs are frozen in place. As the demonic woman smashes through the thick glass on the furnace, the flames pour out over her, standing there like a burning, crackling monstrosity. The Slasher brings the axe to eye level as her skin peels and flakes away to be replaced by new skin.

"We gotta go!" The voice is coming from behind her. She can feel the hands on her shoulders pulling her away, but she can't turn yet. *'She killed Beth and there's nothing I can do. I'm going to die here.'*

The voices around her get clearer the closer the Slasher is to her. She can feel the heat radiating from her. *'She's so slow. Why can't we stop her if she's so slow?'* The reality of the moment comes into focus.

The Slasher swings her axe. If she weren't suddenly pulled backwards, it would have severed her head for sure. The Slasher brings the blade back towards her in another lightning quick arc, coming in low, the super-heated metal leaves a long gash in her thigh that sizzles and smokes. Her bellow of pain echoes off of the cold steel.

"Girl! Move your ass!" R.D. practically carries her as he pulls.

When her senses clear, she's hobbling towards R.D.'s truck, leaving a trail of blood a blind person could follow. R.D. holds the truck door open for her, motioning for her to speed up. Nissa is already trying to start her car while Reese and Shawna scramble into the back. James is in the front seat of Nissa's car, shouting at her to run.

John shuts the door to the furnace room, but she knows it won't do any good. *'Might buy us a second or two.'* She looks



around at the mounds of metal waiting to be turned into slag. She wishes they had more time to prepare, to set up something to keep her trapped. *‘Why didn’t that damn axe burn? What else can we do?’*

The Slasher’s body bursts through the furnace room’s door, sending shards of metal and wood flying. The flames wreath her like an infernal halo. The sound of bubbling skin and the smell of smoking meat is overpowering. She wants to wretch, run, and hide. *‘What made me think I could do anything to stop her? I can’t do this! But I have to. They need me.’*

R.D. and John are pulling her for all they’re worth. Her feet drag in the dirt for a second before her brain catches up and she runs. The Slasher is right on their tail but doesn’t seem to be in a hurry. Nissa’s engine kicks over, giving her a brief moment of hope.

R.D. is already in the driver’s seat. The engine roars to life as the headlights shine on the Slasher. They also shine on the terrified, panicked faces of those in the other car. The truck doesn’t move.

“What the hell are you doing?” John yells at R.D. “Get us out of here!”

“Why? No point.” R.D. looks hard, his face is a determined mask. “She’s gonna keep coming. We need to stop her here or we’ll never stop running.”

“He’s right...” Her voice feels small, but saying those words gives her strength. “We’ve gotta put her down.” She and R.D. share a look before he slams the truck into drive and floors the gas pedal.

The truck’s tires spin as it tears through the dirt. R.D. whips the wheel to the right, driving around Nissa’s car. They narrowly avoid crashing into the furnace building. The headlights shine on the Slasher just for a moment before the truck strikes. He keeps the pedal to the floor as he drives her forward into a pile of steel.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher can feel her ribs crack and the rotted remains of her internal organs turn to jelly. She’s lifted off of her feet as she’s struck. She’s driven backwards until a sharp piece of metal pokes through her chest, and she stops suddenly. Her feet kick in the air uselessly as she struggles to get free. Were she capable of feeling pain, she would have felt the steel scrap

pierce and rend her flesh as she thrashes around splattering black blood all over the front of the truck. The hot steam pouring from the truck douses the flames while it sears her flesh. The only thing she feels is the need to hunt. The need to extinguish the lights.

She swings her axe hard at the noisy beast pinning her down. It stops making sounds, but she still can't move. The lights that need to go out are just out of reach. She can feel the pull that's tormented her since she awoke. She pushes, but the thing won't move. Her feet dangle in the air offering no purchase. If she could only reach the one calling to her.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Why the hell are we still here?" Shawna practically leaps out of the car and begins yelling at R.D. "We should be a hundred miles down the road already."

"Won't do no good." R.D. stares at the thrashing creature pinned to the steel. "She'll keep coming after us until we're all dead. We can run to anywhere we want, but she'll just pop out of the shadows when we're not ready for her. We need to make sure she can't get out of here."

“What we need is to destroy that damn axe, but we can’t.” Caroline winces as she walks over to the others.

“I may have an idea. I tried to avoid it, but we have no choice now.” Reese never takes his eyes off of the Slasher. “I really don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“I don’t like being torn to pieces, so whatever you have has to be better than that.” James is sweating, looking around nervously.

*‘Looks like he wants to bolt. Hell, I can’t blame him. I’d run too if I could, but she’s always there. I feel her. Until she’s dead for good, I can’t live a normal life.’* Shawna reaches for the familiar pain in her back. “I’m up for just about anything at this point. I can feel her trying to get free.”

“I need a moment of peace to work it all out. Not everyone will like it but sometimes needs must and all that.” Reese looks like some part of him wants to walk over and study the Slasher, but he resists, turning towards the car.

“She seems to be secure for now, let’s take Nissa’s car and get out of here.” James seems about ready to jump into the car. “We’ll decide on the plan as we drive far away.”

"I don't like the idea of leaving my truck, but we gotta." R.D. winces as the Slasher tears another line down the hood of his truck. "Not like it's goin' anywhere anyway."

"Don't think your insurance will cover this one, buddy." Nissa looks at R.D. sympathetically and pats him on the back.

Each of them ducks as the whirling and whistling sound they've come to know as the axe fills the air. A shower of sparks and a tinkle of glass registers to her just before the lights over the Slasher go out.

"Oh, f..." The sudden flare of fiery pain in her back sends Shawna stumbling. She can feel the piece of the axe pulling her towards the Slasher. "We gotta go!"

From their small circle of light, they each stand back-to-back. The shadows seem deeper and more menacing. She knows what's just beyond them, hunting them. The others are in various stages of speaking and rapid breathing. She's well aware that her own panicked sounds are mixing with the others.

"I'll be right back." R.D. takes off running into the darkness.

“Where the hell is he going?” She yells after him.

“No idea.” John turns in a slow, tight circle, always watching for an attack. He holds his gun in his hand, the barrel pointed towards the ground. “Stay alert and get close together! Don’t let her sneak up on us.”

“We can’t stay here. We’re not safe.” Caroline sounds colder and more detached.

“Not sure anywhere would be safe. Wait a minute! I got a really crazy idea.” James chimes in. “We have a magnet crane. What if we just pile a few tons of metal on top of her? There’s lights too, so she won’t zap out of there.”

“Why don’t we just pick up the axe with the magnet and then run away?” Nissa offers hopefully. “Then we don’t have to get close to her.”

“Even without the axe, she’s still an undead killing machine.” James says as he turns in nervous circles watching all around. “Best to pin her in place until we figure this out.”

“That much weight should keep her incapacitated until we can work out how to destroy the axe.” Reese agrees.

“How do we get her to just stand there and wait?” She asks this, but she already knows what they’re gonna say. “Yeah, never mind. I already know. She wants me because we’re connected. Now, you want me to lure her to stand there while you drop stuff on her like in a cartoon.”

“Don’t worry.” Caroline tentatively reaches out and puts a hand on Shawna’s shoulder. “I know I screwed up, but I need you to know that I got your back.”

“Yeah. Thanks. We can deal with our stuff later. Good to know you’re here though.” Shawna turns to keep watch on the yard.

“And the rest of us lucky souls can serve as a distraction.” R.D. says as he comes back into the light holding Jasmine in his hand. He gives it a practice swing before resting it on his shoulder.

“Then let’s go. The main yard is this way. We get her there, keep her busy, and I’ll drop the load on her.” James looks around at the others.

“Lead on.” Caroline gestures for him to move.

\*\*\*\*\*

When the light went out, she could feel the pull of the darkness. She could feel the shimmer in the air as she was torn free from the sharp metal. She left much of herself on the ground, but that didn't mean anything to her. She could already feel her body repairing itself. It's taking longer than it did before.

Reaching down, she grabs a large piece of metal embedded in her sternum and pulls. Her heart, black and beating, is perched on the edge. She tosses it aside as a new heart begins to form. Her knees buckle from the strain of healing. She doesn't recall having taken so much damage in so long. She will have her prize. Then she will be made whole again.

\*\*\*\*\*

The lights in the center of the scrapyard are bright enough to seem like daylight. Each citizen is watching a section of the yard making sure that the Slasher doesn't sneak up on them. Shawna grabs a piece of metal to use as a weapon. The others follow her lead. James climbs into the cab of the crane and flashes them a thumbs up sign. *'Here we go. Now we just need our guest of honor.'*



As if summoned, the Slasher steps into the clearing. Even over the sound of the crane coming to life, their sounds of fear could be heard even louder. They brandish their weapons as the Slasher comes for them.

“Spread out wide.” John shouts orders to them. “Keep her distracted until James is ready.”

The Slasher doesn’t waver. She walks directly towards Shawna, ignoring the others as they circle around her. John is the first to act as he swings a metal piece of pipe low into the back of the Slasher’s knees. She buckles, but lashes out at him, sending him tumbling backwards.

As if a switch were turned on, the rest of them attack. Various metal weapons swing and stab at the Slasher who remains on her feet. *‘We might just do this!’*

“Shawna!” James yells down to her. “Just keep here there for a moment. I’m just about ready!”

“Good thing you told her the plan.” She starts circling towards the spot in the middle of the scrapyard.

“Not sure she’s listening.” Caroline bangs her hammer on the wood post.

The distracting thoughts are interrupted when Reese yells. “She won’t stay still. We have to incapacitate her so that James has time to drop the steel!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Reese’s legs pump hard as he rushes forward, screaming incoherently. His arm draws back, and he swings. There’s a second for him to realize that this wasn’t such a clever idea after all. His blow glances off of her, but he’s in her reach now. The Slasher grabs Reese by the throat and lifts him into the air. His feet dangle, kicking uselessly. He stares into her abyssal eyes, waiting for the axe to fall.

The crack of wood on flesh sends the Slasher staggering forward. She drops Reese unceremoniously to the ground with a sharp exhale of pain. Acting on instinct, he scrambles backwards as the Slasher stumbles forward, her head down. R.D. stands behind her, his bat slick with her black blood.

“Keep on her!” R.D. runs past him swinging Jasmine. “Don’t let her get a hand on you!”

The Slasher moves like a pale panther. Her axe swings in a wide arc. Supernatural metal meets determined maple wood and barbed wire. The cracking, splintering wood is loud as Jasmine is sliced cleanly in half.

“Jasmine!” R.D. is knocked off balance as his prized possession is destroyed.

“Run!” Shawna screams until she’s out of breath. When she finds her voice, it’s filled with regret and pure terror. She speaks softly, but it holds years of painful memories. “I was wrong. We can’t win...”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Hey...hey. I get it” John grabs her and looks sympathetically into Shawna’s eyes. *‘Seen this before. She’s about to bolt. Gotta keep her calm.’* He places a gentle hand on her shoulder, turning her away from the horror going on in front of them. “I lost someone to this bitch, but we can’t let her run free. It’s our duty to protect these people from that monster. We have to find a way to put her down for good or she’s gonna keep coming after you. I don’t know about you, but I can’t keep this up forever.”

“Yeah...you’re right.” Shawna shakes her head and her eyes harden. She takes a

calming breath. "I know. But what can we do against that?"

A high-pitched cry turns his head. Nissa flies through the air. Her head thumps hard when it hits the ground and she slides, unmoving. Caroline is already running at full speed to Nissa's side. Sliding into a kneeling position, she puts her hand to Nissa's throat checking to see if she's alive. She flashes him a thumbs up before pulling Nissa into her lap, holding her steady.

The Slasher swings her axe at R.D. The blow doesn't hit solidly, but it's enough to peel part of the flesh from his skull revealing the bone underneath. Blood covers his face and chest. R.D. yells as he slams the end of Jasmine into the Slasher's collarbone, sending a fountain of black ichor into the air. Her arm holding the axe goes limp. She swings her fist into R.D.'s chest. Something in him cracks as he's rocketed backwards. He rolls a few times before coming to a stop looking entirely too still. Reese hurries over to help R.D., placing a cloth over the gaping wound.

"Caroline! Get Nissa's car!" Reese's voice rises to a level of panic that John's never

heard from him before. He never wants to hear it again. "He doesn't have much time!"

"But..." Caroline looks between Reese, Nissa, and Shawna.

"Now!" Reese's anger and desperation turn his voice into a growl.

Caroline leaves, and John wants to follow after her, but he needs to stay with Shawna. The scraping of wood against bone draws his attention back to the circle. The Slasher pulls the end of the bat free and throws it off into the scrap. Her other arm starts moving as she readies her axe. Turning, she stalks towards Shawna.

"She really doesn't like you." He gives her a playful punch on the arm that drags her out of her panic.

"Feeling's mutual." Shawna licks her lips as she looks around the lot. She shuffles around the spot they agreed on earlier. John stands by her as they prepare to move out of the Slasher's way.

\*\*\*\*\*

The large round magnet swings from a large cable overhead. Its steel load creaks.

Pieces of metal fall from the pile as it quickly moves into position. Heavy thumps and clangs distract Shawna as she tries to dodge the grasping hands of the Slasher. As she dodges to the right to avoid an axe swing, a beam falls in front of her making her jump back towards the Slasher. Before her feet hit the ground, there's a cold, strong hand grabbing the back of her neck and lifting her off the ground.

\*\*\*\*\*

This light is different from all of the others. It's the one she's felt calling to her even though she doesn't understand why. There's a small spot of darker light pulsing like an infected bruise among the rest, pulling her.

"Shawna!" The voice from behind her means nothing. The only thing that matters is reaching the dark light.

The Slasher thrusts her hand forward. Her fingers split the soft flesh easily. The wet blood helps her hand thrust inside to grab the dark light. Cold fingers grasp the sickly dark light. It's cold and familiar. Taking a firm grip, she tears it free. There's a loud cry of pain that she easily ignores. She's been hearing, and ignoring, them for a long time. The dark light

shakes in her hand, shimmers, and flies to land in the missing spot on her axe. The blade is whole once again. She feels a deep blue energy filling her. All of her annoying injuries come together, making her stronger than ever before. She bares her sharpened teeth as she looks at the lights all around her.

\*\*\*\*\*

The pain is intense. Shawna's never felt anything so horrible. She wants to pass out, but she can't. The hand around her neck squeezes hard and her bones crack. She's suddenly sailing through the air; the wind feels nice on her wounded back.

The steel beam punches through her chest as her face slams into a metal mesh. She coughs once or twice, covering the metal in blood. She can't even whisper her final words as the sounds and sights of the world fade.

\*\*\*\*\*

John wants to give in to his anger. He wants to shred, tear, and mutilate this monster. He knows he doesn't stand a chance, but he is so tired of losing people. The bright overhead lights nearly blind him.

Caroline skids into the yard, Nissa's car throwing up rocks and dirt as the car speeds through a narrow turn. Before the Slasher can reach him, Caroline turns the car and rams into the back of the Slasher's legs. The metal bites deep as it severs the Slasher's tendons, making her legs collapse and sending her stumbling forward. Caroline steers the car towards R.D. as James yells to them.

"Move! I'm dropping it!" James turns off the magnet and a ton of metal slams down onto the Slasher.

A clanging, crashing cacophony signals their victory. John hopes they're all far enough away from the falling metal. He takes a sick pleasure in the thought of the Slasher's bones breaking and flesh tearing under all that steel. James is cheering from inside the cab of the crane, but he doesn't have the strength to be happy right now.

The pile of metal shifts and starts to rise with a groan. Beams that weigh as much as a few men tumble from the top of the pile as the Slasher struggles to get free. They clang and crash as they fall. He jumps back to keep from getting crushed underneath them.



“Get out of there guys!” James yells. “I’m dropping another!”

The magnet swings dangerously fast, but it’s not as deadly as the monster breaking free. It slams down onto a pile, rising as it swings back towards the Slasher. The mass of twisted steel drops onto the pile, the clanging metal adds to the Slasher’s prison.

“Caroline. Get Nissa!” John runs over to where Caroline and Reese are fighting to get R.D. towards the car. “We got him.”

Caroline nods and turns. She nearly jumps out of her skin when the metal falls. She sits Nissa up, reaches under her arms, and drags her towards the car.

John helps Reese pull R.D. to the car. *‘He doesn’t look so good.’* He pushes those thoughts away as he heaves and shoves. The progress is slow. Each moment that passes, John knows, is a moment that can lead to *too late*.

James runs up to him and grabs one of R.D.’s arms. Together, the three of them are able to get his battered body into the car. James takes Nissa’s limp form from Caroline. He puts an ear to her mouth and gives a small, but worried, smile.

Caroline slides in next to R.D. and continues the pressure on the wound. James, holding Nissa, also gets into the back. Reese closes their door, gets in the passenger side, and slams the door.

John drives as quickly as he can without tearing out the bottom of the overweight car as it bounces on the uneven road. Once on the main road, he speeds off towards the hospital with Reese's directions. At the hospital, doctors and nurses help get R.D. and Nissa inside.

"We need someone to stay with them." Reese watches the gurneys being taken inside. "I'll do it."

"No, it's gotta be me." James offers. "You're the brains. They might need your quick thinking out there. I'm just the freakin' goof. Besides, Nissa might need me." He quickly looks back at the hospital.

"And R.D." Reese adds.

"He's tough enough to walk off an airplane crash." James gives a forced laugh.

"Wait. Aren't you wanted right now?" John steps forward, guiding James away from the hospital entrance.

“Not sure that’s gonna matter if all of us are dead soon.” James gives John a comforting pat on the arm. “I got this. It’ll be fine. Besides, our inside friend will let me know if the cops are on the way.”

“I don’t like it, but it is the best option for now.” Caroline rubs the cold and pain from her arms.

“Just be quick.” James turns and jogs off inside the hospital. He disappears behind the closing doors.

“So, now what?” Caroline says as she climbs into the backseat of Nissa’s car.

“We still have to destroy the axe, but we don’t know how.” Reese states plainly as he settles into the passenger side. After a few false starts, Reese manages to find what he wants to say. “But...we do know some people that might have the answers we need.”

“Who’s that now?” John turns the ignition, the small engine coughs to life. “Wait a minute. Not...dammit. We need to stop back at the house first. I’d feel better going properly armed.” The car’s headlights cut a bright path as he pulls away from the hospital.

“Wait.” Caroline pulls herself forward to lean into the front of the car. “You wanna go there?! Mother f...”

\*\*\*\*\*

He gets up from his chair. He wipes away the sleep as he yawns widely. Whoever is at his front door is going to have to answer for disturbing his rest. The door opens, and he smiles.

“Well, you must have really screwed up if you came here.” Chief Wallace stands in his doorway looking down at the three people in front of him. “John. Caroline. How’ve you been? Reese. Finally coming out of the house I see.”

He loves the looks on their faces. He picks up his hat from the rack by the door. When it settles in place, he feels like himself. He stands in the doorway, barring them entry.

“We. Uh...” Reese stutters and stammers. “We need your help.”

He laughs long and deep. “How the hell did we think you might be a danger to us?”

“Chief Wallace, sir. Look.” John at least has the guts to look him in the eye. “If it wasn’t

important, we wouldn't be here. It's vital that we talk to your boss."

"Why would I believe any of you?" He folds his arms, making himself look bigger.

"Because I'm here asking." Caroline looks harshly at him.

He studies them for a minute. He doesn't smell anything strange. *'They might have something the Master can use.'* "Come on in..."



## Chapter 14

A short explanation later and John still can't believe he's here. He's sitting in the sparse living room of Chief Wallace. *'And I'm still calling him Chief.'*

"So, you left her buried under all that metal?" Chief Wallace is taking this all in like it's a witness report. John recognizes the familiar look in his eyes as he files away the information for sorting later.

"Not much choice." Caroline snipes at him. "If there weren't monsters like you out there, we wouldn't have had to leave one there."

“And you want the Master to destroy her axe?” Chief Wallace leans forward, his forearms resting on his knees.

“It brings me no pleasure to be here asking for this, but...” Reese sits up straight. “We need to. Your boss might be the only person who can help stop her. And, I’m sorry. I must know. How did you know who I was?”

“Oh, we knew about you guys for a long time. Figured if you’re out running around chasing down the unruly things, that’s less that we have to do.” Chief Wallace stands suddenly. “Alright. I’m going to call the Master. If he allows it, I’ll take you to see him. Don’t be snooping around. I’ll know.”

His training as an officer taught him to listen. It’s something anyone can do, but this world is so filled with noise and petty annoyances that many people learn the opposite. They work hard to not pay attention. It’s easier to listen in this room with the pure silence from Reese and Caroline. Reese seems like he’s trying to remain professional and studious, the picture of the gentleman. Caroline is the opposite. He recognizes the barely contained anger behind the silence.

Chief Wallace dials a number and waits. His voice is strangely reverential. The strength and authority are still there, but it's tempered with respect. John could only hear one half of the conversation, but it sounds like Chief Wallace is making their case. A few short minutes later he comes back into the room.

"Follow me." Chief Wallace picks up his coat, adjusts his hat, puts his pistol in the holster on his hip, and waits for them to leave his home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Caroline follows the Chief's truck until it pulls up in front of the town hall. It's well after hours, so there's no one who will recognize them. They silently walk inside, and she watches everywhere for an ambush. Chief Wallace leads them towards the back of the building to a small office. A light pours from the open door.

"Are we really doing this?" She whispers to Reese as they walk. "What if they just decide to kill us?"

"If we wanted to kill you, you'd be dead already." Chief Wallace turns as he answers, allowing a flash of yellow to come to his eyes.



“Well, that doesn’t exactly make me feel any better.” Reese bristles.

“It doesn’t need to.” Chief Wallace gestures inside the room. “Remember to be respectful.”

Inside the office the Mayor sits behind his desk. *‘Even though we pretty much knew it was him, actually knowing is still strange.’* The Mayor stands up, a friendly smile greeting them.

“Please, have a seat.” The Mayor motions for them to take one of the chairs near his desk. None of them take him up on the offer.

“Mr. Mayor.” John steps forward. “We don’t know how much time we have, so let’s get to the point.”

“Well.” The Mayor chuckles and looks to Chief Wallace. “Direct and respectful. I like this one. Yes, you’re right. What is it that you need? I’m sure coming here could not have been easy for you.”

“We think that you might be able to help with a large problem.” Reese sounds unsure as he speaks. “We...”

“One second.” The Mayor holds a hand up to stop Reese from continuing. “Mrs. Moore. I apologize for not recognizing you earlier. We have much to discuss, but I need you to know that I am sorry for the way things worked out.”

“Worked out?!” Caroline practically explodes with anger. “Your people killed my husband and tortured me for days! You think that’s something we can just *work out*? If we had any other way to stop this Slasher...” She stops, seething in anger. John tries to reach for her, but she brushes his hand away before storming out of the office, slamming the door.

She stands outside of the office, regret fills her. *‘Never should have come here. There has to be another way.’* A single tear falls, and she hates it as it hits the ground.

\*\*\*\*\*

“I can’t say that was unexpected.” The Mayor puts his head down for a moment before relaxing into his chair. “Believe it or not, I am truly sorry for everything that’s happened. I would like the opportunity to explain someday soon. However, I know that time is of the essence. What is it that you need?”

They tell him their stories of their encounters with Evalyn. *'Impressive that they've gotten this far.'* He writes down their story and, when they finish, he takes a moment to collect his thoughts.

"I gotta say, that you survived tells me you got someone watching over you." Chief Wallace leans against the wall.

"And you say that you've determined that her axe is the source of her unnatural life and strength?" He stands up and walks around the desk, pulling a book from his shelf. He looks over at Chief Wallace who looks unconcerned.

"You sure you wanna do this?" Chief Wallace raises an eyebrow as he speaks.

"Not sure that we have much choice. Why don't you bring in Mrs. Moore? I would hate to have to explain myself twice." He returns to sitting behind his desk, the book resting on the solid wood.

"Wait a moment." John holds his hand up to stop Chief Wallace from leaving. "There's something we need to clear up. I didn't want to do this in front of Caroline. In her current state, she's probably not in the best mindset to hear this. Where is Beth?"

“Oh my.” Mayor Wheeler looks unperturbed by the question. “I am not at all surprised by this question. I expected it to come earlier, actually. It is something that we need to discuss before we can all move on together.”

“Sir.” Chief Wallace moves to stand next to the Mayor. “I think we need to tell them .”

“Of course.” Mayor Wheeler inhales deeply. “Well, you know Evalyn had attacked counselors a few days ago. Chief Wallace told me that you were there with him. We had assumed that she would be dormant afterwards. She’s not usually that...active. After your confrontation with David, I had sent the people out to clean up. We have people that we use for that task. They took David and Deborah’s bodies to a hidden graveyard. Beth’s body is safe and that’s all I can say for now. I will gladly return her to you once this is all over.”

“Thank you, sir.” John is overwhelmed with what he’s heard. He runs a hand through his hair and sits back in the chair.

“Now, Chief Wallace, could you please gather Mrs. Moore. We have much to discuss.” Mayor Wheeler gestures to his office door.

“Yes, sir.” Chief Wallace leaves, returning a few minutes later with Caroline in tow. *‘She really does not wish to be here.’* Caroline does not fully enter the room, instead remaining near the doorway.

“What I am about to tell you is something that very few know. I ask you to hold any questions until after.” He clears his throat and rubs his hands together nervously. “This town is not like other towns. Yes, you’re right. We have monsters. We’ve had them for as long as I can remember. I do my best to keep them in check. It’s a longer story than we have time for now, but suffice it to say that we, the Chief included, keep them contained to the best of our ability.”

“Don’t seem to be doing a good job or my husband and sisters wouldn’t be dead.” Caroline growls.

“I understand your pain.” He sighs as he continues holding his hands up to ward off her tirade.

“You understand?!” Caroline explodes, pushing herself off of the wall she was leaning against. “My family is dead! How can you understand anything?!”

“Because, Caroline.” He speaks calmly, trying to be comforting and diffuse the situation. “I lost family to them, too. So, when I tell you that your pain is mine, know that it’s the truth.”

“I wasn’t sure until just now, but you are that same Mayor Wheeler.” John looks calculating, and he runs a hand through his hair as he speaks. “It was your son that killed Evalyn.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Chief Wallace looks impressed. *‘Something that doesn’t happen often.’*

“Yes.” His head hangs a little as he remembers. “It was my Alan that killed her. I’m somewhat glad that you know. It saves us time. Not long after we left that house, I was charged with a unique task. The essence of this town is that we need to keep the things here so that they do not run rampant throughout the rest of the world.”

“So, it’s like a prison for monsters?” John looks back and forth from Chief Wallace to the Mayor. “And you’re the warden?”

“That is as close to an analogy as we need for tonight.” He nods to John. “What

we need to do now, is make sure that Evalyn cannot harm another person.”

“Unless you need her to do so.” Reese interjects. “Then it’s perfectly fine for her to kill to her heart’s content.”

“Not exactly” His stress from the last few weeks has been building, threatening to boil over. “We do our best to keep her asleep in the lake, but sometimes people do fall victim to her when they enter her domain. And, yes, we have had the unfortunate need to make a sacrifice from time to time, but I never take pleasure in it. We had her contained for a long time, but now she’s out and free to hunt wherever she wants.”

“Keep her contained?!” Caroline thrusts an accusing finger at him. “Not doing such a good job at it are you?”

“Little lady.” Chief Wallace stands to his full height towering over Caroline, a low rumbling growl enters his tone. “We’ve done our best here. You think this is a cakewalk? You run around blindly sticking your nose into things that you have no idea about and then want to blame us when your interference goes wrong.”

“Piss off, dog.” Caroline turns on Chief Wallace. “If we didn’t need your help, I’d be shoving a silver bullet up your ass like we did with Dave!”

“Now, calm down.” He stands up, trying to keep the peace.

“You tried to act tough once before in the diner.” Chief Wallace’s anger is up, and he ignores the Mayor’s command. “It didn’t work last time, what makes you think this time will be different? You know? I should actually thank you two. Dave was becoming a real pain in the ass. He was starting to think he was going to be Alpha and needed to be put down.”

“So, you are the Alpha.” Reese looks to be calculating and cataloging everything.

“But you wanna know what really gets me?” Chief Wallace ignores Reese’s question. “See, all of this? It’s your fault!”

“That’s bull...” Caroline steps forward. She looks like she wants to tear into the Chief.

“Quiet.” Chief Wallace interrupts her, anger giving the simple word a threatening growl. “Let me finish! It is though. All these deaths lately, the hunters, the counselors, the old lady,



and even Beth...all...your...fault.” Each of the last three words were punctuated with a whip-crack slap against his hand.

“Chief.” The Mayor warns.

“You know.” Chief Wallace ignores the warning, and stares accusingly at Caroline. “If you morons would have left well enough alone, things would have been fine. Sure, some poor jackass would bite it occasionally, but it was necessary. Beth’s death is entirely on you. You had to take the book. You had to burn the pages. That book was the only thing keeping that...thing...at the bottom of the lake and trapped at the camp. But y’all thought you knew everything, that you were so damn smart. Your small minded thinking made you feel righteous, so you stuck your nose into our business. And so, Beth and Bill are dead.”

Caroline angrily steps forward, but Chief Wallace points a finger at her, and she reacts like it’s a loaded gun. Her fists are at her side, but they tremble with barely bridled rage. She initially resists when Reese gently tried to pull her backwards to stand next to him, out of harm’s way. Glaring at Chief Wallace, she relents and lets herself be moved.

“Yes, I did horrible things in my years of service, and I will do them again if that’s what is necessary. You’ve all lost a lot. I didn’t want that to happen.” Chief Wallace returns to his spot on the wall. “When this is all over, you should visit your friends in the hospital. Look at what your actions have caused. Then, I would recommend you leave town and forget you ever heard of Slaughterville. Otherwise... well, Beth can use the company.”

“Now, that is quite enough!” The Mayor shouts, uncharacteristic anger bursting free. “We need to calm ourselves. If you cannot work together, then everyone is in danger.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry.” Chief Wallace looks apologetic, but still angry.

“Mr. Mayor.” Reese walks forward and takes a seat in front of the desk. “If you have anything that can stop this Slasher, this Evalyn, then I will help. I cannot speak for John and Caroline, but I will do what I can.”

“I’m in, too. If what you’ve told me is true, then I can respect what you’re trying to do even if I don’t like the methods you use.” John nods to Chief Wallace. “I just want to stop this thing and go home.”

“Fine...” Caroline folds her arms and walks to the chair near the door before sitting with a huff of resignation.

“Here’s what we know.” The Mayor steeples his hands on the desk. “She was killed many years ago, but she came back and is hunting anyone that comes to that camp. You said that she was weakened when she was separated from her axe.”

“Holy...” Chief Wallace interrupts. “Sorry, sir. I just realized that when I took her to Samuel, that she was calmer when I kept her axe from her, and she was stuck in the cage.”

“And this is the first you’re telling me about this?” He studies Chief Wallace, annoyance and disappointment creeping in before it disappears behind his eyes.

“Sir...” Chief Wallace stammers. “I haven’t been myself, and it must have slipped my mind.”

“Try not to let it happen again.” He shakes his head before turning back to Reese. “I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. I need to seek out information. I know that it might not be your area of expertise, but I would not turn down your help. In the meantime, we

need the axe. I believe you left it, and her, at the scrapyard. Chief, I need you, John, and Caroline to retrieve the axe for me.”

“I’m not going anywhere with him.” Caroline snaps.

“Well, then Mrs. Moore.” He lets the frustration taint his speech. He sounds more like a stern father dealing with an especially unruly child than an evil mastermind. “You can apologize to all those other families that will be devastated by her rampage. Or perhaps you can put the grievances aside for now and do what’s necessary.”

Caroline folds her arms, her brows furrow deeply. A few deep breaths pass before she resignedly answers. “Fine.”

“Excellent.” He stands up and guides the three of them out of his office with Reese left to sit and wait. “We have much work to do, but I promise that I’ll let you know the moment we find out how to destroy the axe.”

“Watch yourself, Reese.” Caroline glares back into the office, making sure to catch the Mayor’s attention.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” Reese smiles back.

“Chief, try to keep them alive, please.” The Mayor places a hand on the Chief’s shoulder.

“Yes, sir.” Chief Wallace towers over the others as they walk out of the office. He pulls his hat on tightly and reaches to close the door behind him.

“Oh! One more thing.” He smiles, knowing the effect this will have. “I do hope you enjoy my wine.” He closes his office door, grabs his coat, and walks to the back wall. Pulling on a certain book that opens a passageway leading down into a dark staircase.

“You coming, Mr. Bhat?” He pulls his coat tightly around himself before stepping down into the darkness.



## Chapter 15

Stan's phone rings, and he vows to kill whoever is calling him this late at night. He sits up in bed with a groan before picking up the receiver. *'Used to be a lot easier when I was younger.'* "Hello?"

"Mr. Costas?" The voice is feminine, but she speaks in a hurried and serious tone. "We just got a message from your security system. It appears as though there was a break-in at your business."

"Whadda you mean?" He shakes the cobwebs away as he looks around for his pants.

“A few minutes ago someone triggered the front gate alarm.” The voice sounds like it’s reading the information. “We will alert the police, but we wanted to check and make sure that it wasn’t you before doing so.”

“No. It wasn’t me.” Stan holds the receiver to his ear as he pulls on his socks. “You call the police, I’ll be right down there. Thank you.”

“We will do that right now, sir.” The voice ends and the line goes dead.

Stan finishes getting dressed and picks up the old, uncared for pistol from his bedside table. He grabs his coat before rushing to his truck. The drive there takes longer than he remembers, but he’s sure that it’s just because of the anticipation he feels. *‘Hope they didn’t take anything too valuable. Probably some damn kids looking to party in the scary scrapyard.’*

The radio blasts his favorite hard rock station as he drives. Yawning, he wishes he had time to make a proper cup of coffee. The sign for his scrapyard is lit, but just barely.

“One more thing to fix.” He shakes his head as he pulls into the lot. *‘Maybe I’ll just retire and leave this all to Jimmy.’*

He can't believe what he's seeing. His crane is still running and there's a large pile of scrap sitting in the middle of his yard! He curses to himself, really wanting that coffee, before putting his truck into park and climbing out. *'They better not have messed up my damn crane!'*

"Hey, Stan!" A loud, friendly voice yells to him from a patrol car, the lights flashing red and blue.

"Hello there, Officer Johnson" Stan shakes hands with him. "Glad it's you here."

"Yeah, your security company called and said there was a break-in." Officer Johnson surveys the yard. "Anything taken?"

"Not that I saw. Was just about to take a look around." Stan stares up at his running crane, then down to the pile of metal. "Looks like they took the crane for a joyride and messed up the yard a bit."

Together, the two of them walk around the large pile only to be stopped by a horrific scene. A woman's body is impaled on a metal beam, her face a mangled mess. Both of them let out an audible gasp of shock.



“Dear God.” Officer Johnson whispers the words as he walks forward. “What the hell happened here?”

“I don’t know, man. I just got here right when you did.” Stan can feel his throat drying up. “I never seen nothing like this in all my years.”

“I’m going to go and call this in. Don’t touch her. We need to preserve the scene.” Officer Johnson moves around to the side of the metal pile to his cruiser. “We need to get the ambulance in here. Any way that you can get rid of this mess without disturbing anything else?”

“I...I, uh. Yeah. Yeah. I can do that. You make sure to stand back, I’m gonna get this cleaned up.” Stan welcomes the familiar feel of the ladder beneath his fingers as he climbs up into the crane’s cab. He moves the controls out of instinct, forcing himself to not look at the body pinned to the pile.

Officer Johnson must have turned on the cruiser’s spotlight because there’s a sudden flare of bright light on the pile of metal in the yard. *‘Glad I ain’t here alone. I just don’t know why someone would do this.’*

“This won’t take long!” Stan yells down to Officer Johnson, just in case he can hear him. The magnet lowers, picking up a large bundle of steel. He swings it over to the pile and drops it. He brings the crane carefully back and lowers it to grab another pile.

“One more.” Stan shouts over the sound of the large engine. “Hey...who’s that?”

From the entrance to the scrapyard, three people are running towards Officer Johnson. They’re yelling something Stan can’t hear. *‘Is that the Chief? Must be important.’* He lowers the crane to pick up the last load.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Dammit all to Hell!” Chief Wallace runs forward, calling on the wolf’s speed. “Johnson! Stop that man, now!”

“What?” Johnson doesn’t need to yell for his hearing to pick up what he’s saying.

“Turn off the crane!” He yells up the ladder, but he knows that it’s too late.

The pile of metal shifts and rises skyward. The last few scraps that were covering her body are thrown off as she moves. Shattered bones and gouged flesh knit together quickly

as she stands. Her gleaming weapon lies on the ground at her feet. As her fingers crack into place, her hand flexes open. Chief Wallace, John, and Caroline run right at her, but they're too late. The axe flies to her hand before they can get to her.

Awkwardly, she throws the blade at him, but he dives to the ground. It slices the air as it flips end over end, landing in the skull of Officer Johnson. He gives a small whimper and a gasp before falling.

The axe shudders before it pulls itself free, flying back to the Slasher. It's only his special enhanced reflexes that allow him to follow the thing's path. He reaches out and grabs it, the strength of the thing pulls him towards the Slasher. Digging his heels into the dirt, he cuts twin trenches as the axe is drawn to her. She walks towards him while holding out her hand.

Stan is already on hard ground, standing next to John and Caroline. *'Good. Get him out of here.'* The momentary distraction costs him his balance. A piece of scrap gets underfoot, and he falls face first into the dirt. The axe slips free, flies true, and she catches it without any

effort. He grabs her by the front of her shirt and throws her across the yard. The trip must have made him lose his bearings because he throws her right to John and Caroline.

“Run! Get out of here!” John is shoving the other man towards the exit while Caroline is circling to the other side.

*‘Smart. Put some distance. Make her choose which one to go after.’* The older man looks back only once before he disappears behind a stack of metal. “Now, there’s just us little lady.”

The Slasher stalks Caroline in a move so fast that if he wasn’t a werewolf, he doesn’t think he would have seen it happen. She lifts Caroline into the air and raises her axe. He’s already on the move as John’s gun barks a few times, the shots hitting squarely in the Slasher’s back.

His transformed and clawed hand slices cleanly through the Slasher’s wrist, severing the hand and forcing her to drop Caroline. The swinging axe catches him in the stomach as he jumps backwards. An enraged punch sends the Slasher through the air to roll in the dirt until she scrapes against the crane’s treads.

“Thanks.” An injured and confused Caroline looks up at him.

“Grr.” He growls his response and nods. He reaches down to offer her a hand up, but she hesitates. *‘Don’t have time for this.’*

The Slasher is already up and moving towards them. Her black eyes fixated on him despite John’s bullets hitting her. When John’s gun clicks empty, he runs over to the crane and climbs the ladder.

“Caroline! Get her in the middle!” Climbing quickly, John yells. “Chief, take her axe and run! Don’t worry about us!”

His lupine head nods. *‘Hope your plan works, kid. You seem capable.’*

He dodges and feints a few times, getting just close enough to make her take a swing at him and then jumping back out of the way. He takes a few glancing shots while he hears the crane whine. The shadow of the magnet passes overhead. He can hear John yelling to him to hurry.

Caroline moves out of the way, rubbing her throat as she looks defiantly at the Slasher. *‘I can smell her fear though. Good on her for*

*still fighting.*' Once she's out of the way, he attacks. He lunges forward, now nearly fully transformed.

*'Wish I could go full wolf, but I don't have it in me. Too much damage was done.'* He lashes out with a swipe at her throat, and he tears a hole wide enough to see the spine behind it.

*'She's a lot faster than she was before.'* He feels several cuts all over his body as she swings her blade. He manages to stay just far enough away to avoid the worst damage. *'Won't last forever.'*

His prophetic words were quickly fulfilled. The axe quickly embeds itself into his chest, nearly cleaving his heart, but missing it by just a small bit. He tumbles backwards, the blade opening up a wider gash as he does. He grabs the wood handle as it tries to pull itself free. Slowly, it extracts itself, but he holds it. The pain is excruciating as the head of the axe enters and leaves his body, making the gash wide and ragged.

Caroline yells something at him, but he isn't able to understand her through the pain. *'What the hell is she saying?'*

\*\*\*\*\*

Caroline presses against the steel taking some small bit of comfort from the sturdiness of it all. She watches the metal crane swing back away from the center of the yard. She hears him yell to the Chief and waits. *'I feel so useless here. And I have to rely on that damn thing.'*

When Chief Wallace takes the axe to the chest and struggles to keep it, she lets herself hope for a moment. Until he starts to fade. The axe is pulling away from him. She would take pleasure in the pain-filled growling, but she needs him right now. *'What the hell can I do? I don't even have a...son of a bitch.'*

"John!" Cupping her hands around her mouth, she yells loud enough that she hopes she's heard.

"Kinda busy! You good?" John answers without even looking down at her.

"Just great! Thinking of booking it as my next vacation spot!" She shakes her head at him. "Toss me *the gun!*"

"I can't!" As he moves the controls, the crane jerks and sways erratically.

“The hell you mean *can't*?!” She catches a glimpse of Chief Wallace losing his fight against the Slasher. The Slasher moves closer to him as he howls in pain. *‘Good. If she wasn’t a bigger threat, I just might give her a hand.’*

“Look around! Dropped it when I was climbing up here.” He stops the crane and calls to the Chief. “Go now! Get the axe out of here!”

A low growl is the response. She’s turning all around, looking for the special gun that Reese gave them. She spots it by the treads and picks it up. *‘Never been a gun person. Gotta make it count. Could stop it all here.’*

Steadying herself, she takes careful aim and fires. The shot goes wide, pinging off of the steel near the edge of the yard. *‘Not many shots left. Gotta be more careful. My aim is trash. What can I...wait. Screw it!’*

She takes off at a full run, the gun in her right hand. Some primal part of her bellows as she leaps through the air, wrapping her arm around the Slasher’s neck. The barrel of the pistol presses deep into the Slasher’s head. When she pulls the trigger, she’s splattered with dark blood and other bits of gore. The Slasher falls to the ground, still.



“Hell yeah!” She screams in triumph. “Hey, Chief. Maybe we don’t need to...” Her feet are pulled out from under her and she’s staring into the still forming skull cavity of the Slasher. The Slasher’s cold hand reaches across her body, grabs her shirt, and draws her closer. She tries pushing back, but the Slasher is too strong. Her hand slips, the finger sliding into the empty cavity of the reforming face. She pulls her hand back with a scream. “We are so screwed. Wallace! Get your ass back here and help me!”

She watches in horror as the eye socket becomes solid bone once again and black blood oozes, leaks and drips as blood vessels reform. She blindly scampers backwards trying to get away. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Chief Wallace limping off into the night, the axe firmly in his hand. She holds the gun, but she forgets how to use it.

The Slasher stands in front of her, swaying from her many injuries despite their rapid healing. With a clang of metal and a yellow blur, the Slasher is ripped from Caroline’s view with a meaty *thwack*. The heavy magnet swings just over the top of Caroline’s prone

form, sending the Slasher flying in a tumbling arc. She turns in time to see the Slasher land on a sea of steel, impaling her. The magnet swings wildly from the crane's heavy cable.

John is already mostly down the ladder. He's telling her to run, but her legs won't listen. He carefully takes the gun from her, and then runs, pulling her along. Somewhere in their flight, her legs come back to her, and she hurries to the car. Once they're both inside, they peel out onto the road, back to the Town Hall.

\*\*\*\*\*

*'I can't believe what I'm seeing.'* Reese stands amid a small library. Not the one available to the public, but this one rests underground. It's not dank or cold like someone might expect. There's a warmth and light filling the room. There are no candles. They wouldn't be advised in a place like this. It's filled with books older than any he's ever held. Brittle pages crinkle as they are turned. "Where are we?"

"Just below the library. I had this built to keep the more sensitive books safe and secure." The Mayor pulls several books from the shelves as he walks around the room. "Now...where did I put it? It was just here; I could swear it."

“What can I do?” Reese’s head swims at the size of this trove of knowledge.

“We need to find the correct method to destroy the axe. Find the stack of books titled Bindings. They should have what we need.” The Mayor hums absently as he searches. “I’ve been collecting and cataloging the necessary rituals that have worked. If I collected those that failed, we would need a much bigger room.” He chuckles slightly at his own joke.

“I admire the organization of the whole thing even if I am no fan of the use.” Reese walks the stacks and carefully scans the books for the appropriate titles.

A resigned sigh echoes as the Mayor sets a stack of books on the lone table in the room. He places a hand on the table’s edge. “I suppose it was inevitable we would come to this conversation. I had hoped that our task would prevent it until we were finished, but alas...”

“I just need to know.” Reese’s confusion and emotional pain leaks out from behind his dam of stoicism. “I’m not asking for every detail. I would love to know how this town works, but I appreciate the urgency of our current dilemma. But I have to know.”

“That’s a story that’s too long for this evening, but I will sit with you and discuss it someday.” The Mayor absently picks up a book. “Suffice it to say that, while I have agency over the town, I do not have that same agency over the creatures and other things that live here. These books are my record of the trials and tribulations that I have gone through in my attempt to execute my duties.”

“Who charged you with this duty?” Reese places a set of books on the table, taking a seat.

“That’s not important.” The Mayor sits, handing Reese another tome. “That isn’t the question you want to ask though. What you really want to know is why I let people get hurt in my town when I have the power to stop it. Why are people dying?”

“Yes. Please, help me to understand why.” Reese’s intellectual excitement comes out in the outburst.

“Do you know of the Mount St. Helens eruption in 1980? It was possibly the most violent eruption in the United States to that point.” The Mayor pushes the books aside, grabs a blank sheet of paper, and a pen. He

draws a square on the sheet. "Please, forgive my drawing ability, or lack of one anyway. This is Slaughterville. I know. It's an *on the nose* name for the town. I didn't have a say in the naming. Imagine that we are a cap on top of that volcano. There's an energy that builds up within and all around this town. If we do not let it out, then it will erupt, sending that violence out into the world at large. We allow for small releases of that energy so that it doesn't build up and explode."

"But why not just destroy the monsters? Why feed them?" Reese is taking in all of this with a sense of fascination and wonder. His scholarly mind is praying he'll remember it all.

"Let's just say that I can't." The Mayor suddenly goes very serious. His gaze goes to somewhere that is not in the library. "I am obligated to continue my charge. Why will have to wait. Now, we must get back to work. I am sure they will return soon."

The Mayor quickly stands and walks over to a cabinet. When he opens the door, Reese can see several wooden boxes and strange tools. The Mayor grabs a box and a knife, bringing them to the table.

“Here. Take this.” The Mayor hands the knife and box to him. He flips to a page in a new book that is filled with symbols and instructions written in delicate script. “I’ve used this to contain the creatures before. I was going to use it to hold Evalyn, but I haven’t had the chance to use it on her. We should be able to use this to contain the axe. Carve the symbols into the box lid and we will get started on the ritual. Then we can find a way to destroy the thing.”

A short while later and Reese can hardly believe the trajectory of his day. He started this determined to hate this man, but here he sits, working alongside him. ‘*Strange bedfellows and all that.*’ He finishes the carvings and presents the box to the Mayor like a student looking for approval from his instructor.

“You’ve done well.” The Mayor nods as he turns the box and inspects the work. “We will perform the ritual in a moment. I believe I’ve found a way to destroy the axe, but we need something...morbid.”

“What do you mean by morbid?” Reese can feel the nervous tension rising. ‘*I won’t kill anyone.*’

“We need the skull of the one who killed her.” The Mayor’s face hardens, but his eyes turn wet.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chief Wallace’s many injuries are slowly sealing themselves. *‘If I had a day to rest, I could recover proper. No such luck. Duty calls.’* He pulls in front of the Town Hall, picks up the axe, and limps inside. Through the door in the Mayor’s office, he walks down stone stairs. His aching bones and open wounds appreciate the cold of the underground passageway. He can feel the pull on the axe lessen, but it’s still there. *‘Not sure how long I can keep it from her. Hope they have their plan ready to go.’*

The walk takes him to the familiar door to the private library. Without knocking, he opens the door. At the table, Reese and the Master sit pouring over books he’s never read.

“Chief!” The Master stands, rushing over to him. “Come. Sit.”

His legs feel heavier than they should. He flops into the uncomfortable chair like a sack of flour, but he doesn’t care. His heavy eyelids threaten to close and send him into a much-needed sleep.

“Place the axe in here.” The Master places a long wooden box in front of him.

The axe clunks when he drops it inside. *‘Don’t think that’ll hurt it.’* When the lid of the box closes, so do his eyes. His mind shuts down so that his body can heal.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Slasher twists, writhes, and struggles against the large beams and rods piercing her pale flesh. She needs to get free and get her axe. She calls for it, but it never comes. Placing her hand on a large bar, she shoves. Her skin splits, bones crack, and blood flows. Once free of the bar holding her up, her body slips and hangs limply.

While she’s not heavy, her weight and already weakened flesh tears as she slides off of the other pieces of metal. As she tumbles down the mound of metal, her body is shredded and broken. She’s already pushing herself up as soon as she hits the ground. Before she’s able to stand, she pulls herself along the ground using shattered arms and mangled hands.

Each inch of advancement would kill a normal person, but her supernatural physiology keeps her moving. The more that she heals, the



faster her progress. The shadow calls her, and she wants to reach it so it can find her axe.

The shadows ripple and move like water as she crawls inside. It closes behind her, and she appears in the woods. The axe feels closer, but she's not there yet. She somehow knows she can only make small jumps until she's back to full power.

On her hands and knees now, she crawls to the next shadow. The familiar ripple, the wailing and gnashing of teeth, and the demented laughter of the insane surround her as she crawls inside. She doesn't care. She follows the path until she's ejected into the world again. She rolls along the ground and stops. Reaching with one grasping hand for the next shadow, her world suddenly goes black. She lies quietly in the woods, unmoving.



## Chapter 16

The doors to the Town Hall are locked. John hasn't regretted not having a cellular phone since he's come to this town until now. "Can't get in. It's locked."

"What now?" Caroline rubs her eyes, frustration in her voice.

"Not really sure." His experiences on the city streets send his mind to dark places. *'Can't say it out loud. Don't want her to worry, but I hope Reese is fine. He knows what he's doing, but I didn't like leaving him here alone.'* "Let's find a phone and try calling the office."

A streetlight spotlights an actual telephone booth on the sidewalk, the door stands open. He and Caroline hurry over to it and pick up the phone book hanging from a thin chain. They find the phone number for the Town Hall. He rummages around for a bit before pulling out a quarter, depositing it in the slot, and dialing the number for the Town Hall. After navigating the annoying menu, they're connected to the Mayor's office.

The phone rings. He watches the front of the Town Hall, hoping to see a light come on in the entryway. Another ring and no answer. The adrenaline in his system rises as the third ring ends. The voice of the automated answering system tells him to leave a message. *'Can't really do that. What would I say? Oh, hey, we're here to talk about the undead killer. Sure hope this call was recorded for quality assurance purposes.'*

"No answer." He hangs up the phone, his mind already racing with possibilities. "They might be working and just can't answer."

"Or Reese could be in pieces." Caroline stares at the Town Hall, concern and anger fighting for control.

"I don't think they'd do anything to him. It would be too obvious." John closes the door to the phone booth.

"You think that people who kill on a regular basis would give a damn about one more body?" Caroline stares hard at him like he's a confused child. "We tried it your way. Now, I'm getting inside that building."

He follows her as she storms off. After opening the door to Nissa's car, Caroline leans in grabbing a flashlight from the glove compartment. She closes the door and walks up to the front of the Town Hall.

"Just wait a minute." John cautions.

"Wait for what? For another one of us to die?" Caroline turns on him.

"We have other options." He stands at the bottom of the stone stairs. "We can go right next door and ask an officer to call Chief Wallace."

"God! How can you be like this?" Caroline snaps. "You keep calling him Chief like he's important. Get over it. He's evil!"

"I just think that there's things we don't know." John's voice is calm, but firm. "You guys

have said it yourselves that you don't know everything going on."

"What I know is that my friend is in there, probably hurt, and I need to get inside to help him." She backs up a step closer to the door, spreading her arms wide. "Besides, we can't go to the police. Some of us are wanted. And they kinda arrested us the last time we were there. I'm done with this. It's time to more than talk."

"Look, I know what you're thinking." John steps in front of her. "If you break that window, there will be alarms, and we will be back in that cell. Then what? Reese will still be with them, and we won't be able to do a damn thing when that monster comes for us."

Caroline stares at him, angrily. "Raaagh!" She turns and throws the flashlight into the park. The light tumbles end over end until it crashes into the statue, breaking into several pieces. Bits of plastic and glass fall to the ground as the light goes out. "If anything happens to him, it's all on you, and I'll make you wish you never found me in that cave."

She gets into Nissa's car and slams the door. The sound reverberates through the

center of town. He reaches down and grabs the door handle. A loud click tells him that she locked the doors.

“Come on.” He jiggles the handle. “Let me in.”

“No.” Caroline turns, crosses her arms, and stares out the front windshield.

He stands there, on the steps, noticing the night is much colder than he thought it would be. He rubs his arms and sits on the cold stone steps. The car starts and he can see just enough to watch her turn on the heat inside the car. Fifteen minutes later, he hears the door locks click again, and she pushes open the passenger door.

\*\*\*\*\*

Reese’s mind is still swimming hours later. He’s sure the sun must be coming up by now. Their preparations finished, he and the Mayor walk down the tunnel, up the stairs and into the office. As expected, the morning sun is starting to rise, the rays just coming through the window.

“We’re about to have a very busy day.” The Mayor puts a hand on his shoulder. “Once

we explain the plan to your friends, who I was sure would be back by now, you can go home and get some rest. I'll let Mr. Wallace rest, too. Once we're ready, I will send him out for you." The Mayor opens the front door to the Town Hall.

*"This night did not go the way I expected. He's much different from what I thought he would be."* "Ah, there they are." Reese hurries down the stairs to the running car. Even through the closed window, he hears John let out a loud snore that eclipses the sounds of the exhaust. Reese knocks on the window, startling them both awake.

"Huh? What?" John's hand goes to his waist, reaching for the pistol that sits on his hip. He looks around the inside of the car before focusing on Reese. He rolls down the window. "Oh, hey."

"Good morning." Reese steps back as John exits, placing the gun in its holster.

Caroline practically leaps out of the car, the door left standing open. She runs through the exhaust smoke to embrace Reese in such a bear hug that his breath leaves him. Caroline releases her python like embrace.

“Sorry. Just so damn glad you’re not torn into tiny little pieces and fed to a monster, ya know?” Caroline leans on the roof of the car, tapping it impatiently. “Let’s get going. I could use a shower and a hot coffee. It’s a bit chilly out here.”

“Well, we can go in a moment.” Reese rubs cold hands together. “Let’s go back inside and talk about the plan.”

“Wait, what?” Caroline stops tapping and looks confused. “I’m not going back in there. I don’t want to be around...them.” She points to the Mayor.

“Mrs. Moore, I can understand your reluctance.” The Mayor holds up a placating hand. “There have been tensions between us, but I assure you that you’re perfectly safe here.”

“Well, Mr. Wheeler, forgive me if I don’t necessarily believe you. You and your people are responsible for killing my husband and sisters.” Caroline goes to the driver’s side of the car, shuts off the engine, and closes the door, slamming it harder than she might normally. She angrily points at John and Reese. “Maybe *they* can forgive and forget, but I can’t. I won’t.”



“We’ve discussed this already, and we don’t have time to do it all over again.” The Mayor’s frustration is starting to show. “We need to make stopping Evalyn our top priority right now. Everything else will have to wait until after we’re all safe. If you cannot do that, I understand, but I can’t allow it to hinder the operation.”

“You know what?!” Caroline marches around the car towards the Mayor, but is blocked by John. “What’re you doing?”

“I get what you’re feeling, I do.” John looks down into her eyes. “I need you to...no, Beth needs you to remain calm here so we can take this monster off the table. Our best shot at making sure no one else gets hurt is to work with them.”

“Fine.” Such a simple word holds so much anger. Caroline stares daggers at the Mayor who, to his credit, doesn’t flinch. She pushes past John and walks up the Town Hall’s stairs. “You coming?”

“We should be quick. I don’t want to be here when the place starts filling up.” John turns to the Mayor and smiles. “I may not be on good terms with the police.”

“Well, there may be something I can do about that.” The Mayor smiles at him. “I have a little bit of sway in this town if you weren’t aware. Come inside. We’ll tell you our plan.”

\*\*\*\*\*

In the Mayor’s office, John fights hard to stay awake. *‘Not that this isn’t important, I’m just so tired.’*

“We have the axe in our possession. Mr. Bhat and I have determined a method to destroy it, but it needs a macabre ingredient. My son’s skull. Once we get...that, John, Mrs. Moore, Chief Wallace, and I will meet at the campground.” The Mayor looks drained and despondent. “There’s a path that will take us to my old home. I haven’t been there in so long.”

*‘Who’s Mr. Bhat?’* John looks around to see who else is in the room with them.

Caroline jerks a thumb at Reese. “What about him?”

“He and I discussed this.” The Mayor shuffles some papers around absently. “He has a job that will be quite difficult for him. He must wait. If something goes catastrophically wrong and she’s able to, God forbid, kill me, he will be

the only one who knows how to perform this ritual. He will need to take over if I fail.”

“Right.” Reese coughs nervously. “So, you will perform the ritual where Evalyn was killed. It should have the power we need to stop her and destroy the axe. There’s a problem though.”

“Naturally.” John shakes his head, trying to keep from nodding off. He gives a half-smile and sits up straighter. “If there wasn’t a problem, it wouldn’t be Slaughterville.”

“You and the others will need to keep Evalyn distracted while I work.” The Mayor perches on the edge of his desk. “The moment that we remove the axe from the box, she’ll be alerted and on her way to us. We have to work quickly to destroy the axe. If we don’t, then there’s a chance she will escape the town and continue killing forever.”

“No pressure.” John laughs nervously.

“Right. Chief Wallace will be there to pick you up around noon.” The Mayor returns to his comfortable looking chair. “In the meantime, rest as much as you can. We have a busy day ahead of us. And don’t worry about the charges against your friends. Yes, I know it

was them who broke into this hallowed hall. Have them return the documents and all will be forgotten. It's the least I could do for your help with Evalyn."

"Of course." Reese nods in affirmation.

"Let's get going." The Mayor reluctantly stands up from the chair and leads them outside.

Caroline was uncharacteristically silent throughout the whole exchange. She doesn't speak until they pile into the car. "I'm glad you're well. I was worried." There's still anger in the statement, but it's tempered.

"I appreciate that." Reese clicks his seatbelt. "I know who these people are, and I shouldn't have been so excited, but it really was fascinating from a research point of view."

"That's just great." Caroline huffs. "Between Johnny here worshiping Wallace and you wanting to join their cult, seems like I might be the last sane one in this car."

"I don't worship him." He cuts her off. "I just know that not everything is what it looks like. I haven't forgotten anything, but I also can admit that I don't know everything."

“John’s right.” Reese speaks calmly. “We have to be open to all possibilities.”

“I don’t have to be open to a damned thing.” Caroline pushes the accelerator and the car speeds off away from the Town Hall.

“Why did we start The Citizens, Caroline?” Reese’s voice is calm, but there’s a hint of annoyance behind it.

“We started it to stop the same people that *you* want to work with.” She whips the car around a curve, possibly faster than she intended, but definitely faster than the car is meant to handle. The tires slide but thankfully remain on the asphalt and not in the ditch.

“Slow down!” John chides. “I’ve scraped too many people off of the pavement because of driving like this.”

“Yes, I don’t fancy dying because your having a tantrum.” Reese straightens himself, brushing imaginary dirt or dust off of his pristine clothes. “As for us working with the Mayor, I am not sure if you noticed, but we’re getting our asses resoundingly handed to us out there. We have several of our friends in the hospital and two others are missing! We need to do something extreme for this extreme

circumstance. If that means that we must work with evil to stop an even worse evil, then needs must and all that.”

“Where are our missing friends, Reese?” Caroline spits the words at him. “Did you even bother to ask your new best friend about them?”

“How dare you?!” Reese’s voice is filled with accusatory venom. “I am just as concerned for their well-being as I am for yours. We cannot concentrate on finding them while Evalyn is hunting us. I don’t know about you, but my ability to think clearly is severely limited when I’m worried about an undead monster. We need to stop her. Then we can find the others. For you to insinuate that I do not care is insulting.”

“Reese...” Caroline’s voice softens a bit but still has a sharp edge. “I didn’t mean to say that you don’t care about them. It’s just...”

“And it’s for Beth.” John whispers it, but the effect is immediate. “I don’t like anything in this town. I’ve been practically killed every day I’ve been here. I lost the last thing I loved. I just want it over, and I’ll do whatever it takes. You can be as mad as you want, I don’t care.”

“Billy would want you to take all the help you can get to stop the monsters.” Reese leans forward. “He wouldn’t want you giving in to your anger.”

“Huh.” Caroline pulls into Reese’s driveway. “I’m impressed. One night with the Mayor and you’re already good at manipulation.” She gets out of the car and walks to her own home.

John and Reese get out and start to follow her. They stop when, in the middle of the street, she turns to stare at them. She holds out a hand to stop them.

“Just no. I wanna be alone.” Caroline shakes her head as she turns, walking across the street and into her home.

“Come on, John.” Reese pulls on John’s arm. “A lot has happened recently. Let’s give her some time alone to think. We have to rest up for later today anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” John starts up Reese’s driveway, but stops. “Ah. I forgot about that...”

“Well, shit.” Reese stares at his ruined door.

\*\*\*\*\*

As his truck navigates the tree-lined street, Chief Wallace studies the quiet neighborhood. He knows that the place isn't nearly as quiet as it seems. He watches houses that he's pretty sure have monstrous things inside or underneath them that would horrify the normal person. *'I'll get to them soon.'*

He adjusts his gun belt, checks that his pistol is in its familiar place, and opens the door to his truck. The bright afternoon sun takes some of the chill out of the air. He tilts his head back allowing the scents of the fall to wash over him. The smell of an early snow is in the air. *'Have to take a day and go to the ski lodge. Always did like the snow.'*

Closing the door of his truck, he looks around, wondering who might be watching him. He can feel something's eyes on him. Sniffing the air, he can tell that the scent isn't from something that's a real threat. He has more important things to worry about. He reaches up and adjusts his hat, setting it into a more secure position. He starts up the driveway towards Reese's house but pauses. *'Something doesn't look right.'*



The door to the house is leaning awkwardly. He's afraid to knock on it, so he uses the doorbell. He's surprised when, instead of opening, the door is lifted and set to the side. Reese looks like he slept roughly, but his composure is admirable.

"Rough night?" Chief Wallace gestures to the door leaning against the wall. "Good thing we live in such a safe town. Never can tell what's out there looking to get in."

"Chief." Reese coughs, clearing his throat and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "It's that time already, huh? Please, do come in."

"Thank you." He takes off his hat, holding it in one hand. He enters the home and effortlessly lifts the door back into place. It's cold inside, but that's to be expected with a giant hole in the front of the place. He takes in the home, his eyes going to the whiteboard and then back to Reese. "Gotta say, I'm not sure I ever expected to be standing in your home like this. Always figured if I was ever here, it would be to arrest you...or eat you." He flashes a grin showing no sign of fangs.

"I'm glad that's not the case." Reese turns his back to the predator and walks into

the kitchen. "John is still sleeping. He's in the guest room at the end of the hall."

"Good. We'll get him as soon as we're ready to go." He looks down the hall at the closed door, but follows Reese into the kitchen. "Guy's been through the ringer."

"What?" Reese shakes his head to remove the cobwebs. He pulls out a chair and offers it to Chief Wallace. "How did you know? Coffee?"

"Yes, please. Black. You know we've been keeping an eye on you." He sits, placing his hat on the table. "I'm sure that someone like you wondered why I was at George's place the other night."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that." Reese places the hot coffee in front of Chief Wallace. "I was waiting until after we had dealt with Evalyn to discuss it. Now that you bring it up, why were you there? I mean, you tried to kill us."

"Ha!" He laughs genuinely for what feels like the first time in a long time. "No, sir. If I had wanted to kill you, we wouldn't be sitting here talking. I was told you had something there that we needed. I was asked to retrieve it."

I needed to scare you away. I didn't need a pile of bodies. Too much paperwork."

"Oh..." Reese looks taken by surprise. "I guess I can understand that logic, but why didn't you just simply ask us? It surely would have been easier than chasing us and having your truck stolen."

"And you would've just given me what I needed out of the goodness of your heart?" He cocks his head questioning Reese's logic. "And I get it, I do. I wouldn't be so trusting of me if I were in your shoes, but all these years your group has been running around, we've never come after you. You know it wasn't me that killed Billy. That was all Dave and you guys got your revenge on him. No hard feelings there. The incident with John and Caroline in the diner was a regrettable necessity. We needed that book to keep that thing in the lake, but we lost that fight. As for Beth, well...we had that discussion already."

"And we have two friends who are missing." Reese stares coldly at him. "Robert and George haven't been seen in days."

"Can't say I know exactly what you mean." Chief Wallace sits up straighter in the

chair. "Are you insinuating that I had something to do with their disappearance?"

"I am just wondering if you, with your vast network of contacts, and with you keeping an eye on us, that you might have heard anything about them." Reese wraps both hands around his mug and sips purposefully.

"I don't currently know where they are." Chief Wallace's face goes stone still. "I also don't appreciate the accusation."

"Ahem." The coughing comes from behind him. "Chief. Everything alright?"

"Hello, John. It's fine." He says without turning. "You ready to go?"

"Whenever you are." John pulls his gun and checks the magazine. "Let's get this over with. Has anyone heard from Caroline?"

"No, sadly." Reese sits with a steaming cup of tea. "She wasn't answering my calls. I assume she's still upset. We should give her some time to collect her thoughts."

"Well, let's go then. We'll have to come back for her later once we get the skull. Reese, thank you for the coffee." Chief Wallace puts on his hat, nods to Reese, and lifts the front

door. After he steps outside, he waits for John to follow before he replaces the door as securely as he can.



## Chapter 17

“You ready for this?” Chief Wallace studies John for any nervousness or hesitation. He’s glad that he doesn’t find any.

“Absolutely.” John breathes deeply. “I mean, how hard can it possibly be? We’re in a haunted town just digging up a hundred-year-old grave to steal a skull for a mystical ritual. Nothing to worry about at all.”

“Exactly.” He opens his truck’s door and gets out. The shovels are in the back of the truck, and he tosses one to John. “The grave is supposed to be right around here somewhere.

Shouldn't be too hard to find. Mayor Wheeler said that they buried the kid in this section."

"It said in the diary that she cut off his head, so at least we don't have to do that." John uses the shovel like a walking stick. His face is blank, but Chief Wallace can read the small muscle movements showing the nerves he must be feeling. *'I'd be more concerned if he wasn't on edge and paying attention.'*

"Thank God for small favors." Chief Wallace turns and walks into the sea of headstones, each one is relatively newer. "This ain't it. Gotta find the old ones. Let's split up but stay in sight. I know what's in places like this."

"I'll check out over here if you wanna go up the hill by the woods." John points to a patch of trees off to his left.

"Sure thing." He jogs up the hill, ignoring the newer headstones until he comes to a patch where the stone looks duller, more weathered. The worn stone of the grave markers, covered in moss and dirt, makes it hard to read the dates.

He keeps one eye on John as he moves through the rows. The dates on the headstones

count inexorably backwards from more recent times to the distant past. The century changes and he knows he's getting closer. None of the names seem familiar, but he recognizes some of the family names that still live in town. His pace slows as he studies each one carefully.

Near the top of the hill, nestled under a twisted tree, is a grave marker that looks purposefully set apart as if someone wanted it to be in a place of reverence. Unlike the others, this one looks well cared for. He can easily read the name and date etched in stone. *'Well, I'll be damned. Again.'*

"John!" He calls out. "Over here!"

"What is it? You find it?" John rushes over. "Good work." Studying the headstone, he claps Chief Wallace on the back.

"Well, let's get to work." Chief Wallace looks at the sun, knowing that they're pressed for time if they want to finish the ritual before the camp is covered in the shadow of evening. He plants his shovel in the ground and scoops out a mound of dirt, tossing it to the side.

One of the benefits of being a werewolf is the stamina and strength. He knows that a man of his age would be worn out after



digging a few feet of cold hard earth. When the ground they used to be standing on is level with their waist, he stops and stands up, but it's not because of a pained back or sore muscles. There's something else. The same something else he felt earlier watching him in front of Reese's place.

"Hey." He taps John on the shoulder, stopping his digging. "Something's out there. It was around earlier, but now there's more of it."

"What do you mean *more of it*?" John looks around at the wooded surroundings. "I don't see anything."

"Well, trust me. They're there. I don't quite know what it is. Yet." He pulls his shovel, brandishing and testing the sturdiness of it. "Let's hurry up but stay alert just in case they get a terminal case of bravery."

The rhythm of manual labor kicks in and he zones out into a Zen state of repetition. He's throwing dirt over his shoulder at a steady pace. It's a few moments before he notices that John has stopped shoveling and is standing there, staring at him.

"What?" He leans on the shovel. "You're staring at me like you need ask me something."

“I kinda do.” John smells nervous. “I have to know, why you call him Master sometimes? Why not Mayor or Your Honor if you gotta be formal? You called him Mayor earlier.”

“Now that is a story.” He goes back to shoveling. “I’m a good bit older than I look, so I do believe in respect in a way that people of today don’t. I used to be a cop in Texas a long time ago. I came here one summer on a trip with my family. This town did what it does best, and I was left alone. I got my revenge, but I didn’t do it alone. The Mayor helped me get the strength I needed to do it. That’s all I’ll say on it for now. Funny thing, he keeps telling me to not call him Master, but I’ll do it sometimes out of respect. Sometimes I call him Mike just to get on his nerves.” Chief Wallace gives an uncharacteristic laugh at this. “As for when you heard it, well, you didn’t know his name, and I didn’t want to give that information until I knew the Mayor thought you were able to be trusted with it.”

“Fair enough.” John visibly relaxes and returns to shoveling. “One day maybe we can talk about it all. Look, you know what I think

of this town. You know it's filled with evil monsters. But...I can see that not everything is black and white. It reminds me of a lot of cases I worked. There is rarely a clear good guy or bad guy. Sometimes it's just people that got caught up in strange events."

"That's about as good an explanation as I could think of." He keeps digging. "You know, you remind me of me back then. Under different circumstances, maybe we would've been friends."

John grunts an affirmation and throws another shovel of dirt over his head and out of the pit. Pieces of dirt and rock roll back into the grave. An hour or so of digging later and John is huffing every time he throws a new shovel full of dirt out of the hole. They're fairly deep now and the sun seems to keep following them down the hole. It's getting darker out now. *'Gonna be too hard to see soon. At least for the normal folk.'* Chief Wallace slams the shovel in hard only to be met with resistance. A dull thud makes them both stop and look at each other.

"Guess this is it." John tosses his shovel to the grass above.

“Let’s clear it off, get the skull, and get out of here.” Chief Wallace brushes away the dirt with his bare hands.

When the casket’s wooden covering is clear enough, he digs his fingers into the cracks between the old wooden planks and pulls. They part easily, sending him backwards to land hard in the dirt. His back against the hole they dug, he gives a small laugh.

“Hope I can count on you to not tell anyone about that.” He stands up, embarrassed, and brushes himself off.

“About what?” John smiles. “I didn’t see anything. I was too focused on this hole here.”

“Speaking of.” Chief Wallace pulls out a cloth bag and a small flashlight from his pocket. He hands the light to John. “Hold this. I’ll get the skull.”

Rummaging around inside the coffin isn’t what Chief Wallace would call a good time. He knows the job needs doing, and he owes the Mayor that much. Skittering creatures scramble over his hand as he searches inside the crumbling coffin. He touches a rounded object. The pitted bone is rough, but he can tell that it’s the skull. He pulls it out, the bottom jaw hangs

open in a perpetual silent cry of pain. Holding the skull up to his face, he stares into the empty eyes for a moment. 'Alas poor Alan...' Shaking his head, he carefully puts the skull into the cloth sack.

He hears the soft footsteps on the grass before they say a word, so he's not surprised by their approach. "What can I do for you?"

"Huh?" Startled, John turns from the casket and looks up at a group of robed people. "Who the hell are these guys, Chief?"

"The Master sent us to help you." One of the robed men steps forward. He pulls back his hood and holds out his hand, a curiously strained smile on his face. "Give us the son's skull so we may present it to him."

"Well, I don't know about that fellas." He leaps out of the hole to land on the ground above the grave. He reaches down to lift John out to stand next to him. *"These guys were always weird."* "The Master told us to bring this to him directly at the warehouse. Can you get it there fast?"

"Yes. We will take it directly to him." The cultist waves his hand, eagerly waiting for the Chief to hand over the bag.

“Funny thing.” Chief Wallace takes off his hat and brushes dirt off of it. “You look really sure of yourself. If I was anyone else, you might have gotten away with it, but you can’t hide your scent. A few of you are really afraid, and that made me curious.”

“What do you mean?” The cultist reaches for the bag. “Do not defy the Master! Do as you’re told and give us the bag.”

“Heh.” He looks at John and gets a nod of understanding. He figured the kid had been in these types of confrontations with a lying suspect and would know what was about to happen. “I don’t think so. The Master would know where we’re really going. So, who are you actually working for?”

“Enough!” The cultist commands. “Give it to us and you will not be punished.”

As he laughs, he looks at John. “You ready for this?”

“Not much choice from what I can see.” John shrugs, but his hands are hovering near his pistol.

“Last chance.” He speaks directly to the rest of the cultists. He unbuckles his gun belt,

carefully setting it and his hat on top of the tombstone. "Leave and live." He puts a growl into the last words as his eyes turn yellow.

The cultists attack as one, but they're not trained in combat. They don't have the skills or strength that he does. The change comes fast, unlike when he was first turned. His rest may not have given him his full strength, but it's enough for these people. One second he's human, and the next his clothes are shredded and on the ground. He flows through their number like a furred tide of rage.

He hears John firing a few rounds and cultists cry out in pain. *'Good for him. Thought he'd put a bullet in me and say it was an accident. Glad I was wrong.'*

His claws tear through the cultists as they fall to the ground. One of them, who must have been a scholar, runs off into the woods. He can see the stumbling flight, the man tripping and falling. Crouching low, he gets ready to rush off.

"Wait." John calls to him. "Let him go. We don't have to kill him."

He growls low at the retreating cultists but pauses. The change back is always strange.

It's like putting a giant wool sweater over all of his senses. They're still greater than they were before he was changed, but they're not as sharp as when he's turned.

"Well, dammit." He looks down at his naked body. "I've gone through so many uniforms in the last couple of weeks. Come on, son. I have another uniform in the truck, and I don't really like standing here naked in front of you. Grab my hat and gun and let's get going."

He picks up the cloth bag holding the skull and pulls the strings on it tight. It swings back and forth as he walks to the car. John comes up beside him, watching ahead.

"Thanks for letting him go." John doesn't look at him when he says it. "Wish I had your nose when I was on the beat. Would've made the investigations much easier. Probably could have made detective by now if I could smell and see everything like that."

"It does help, but it's not all sunshine and roses." He thinks back to his time in the beginning filled with rage and blood. "It took me a long time to get real control over this curse. Turned it into something useful. It wasn't easy."



"I didn't mean to say it was." John apologizes.

"Not a problem." He opens his truck, dropping the skull carefully onto the seat. Reaching behind the seat, he pulls out a bag holding another uniform, including shoes. *'Gotta remember to replace these. Don't want to be left naked in this cold. This week has killed my uniform budget.'* "Besides, you don't want this nose when you have to go into the sewer as much as I do."

They both share a laugh. He walks to the tailgate and sits on it while getting dressed. Once finished, he slides into the driver's seat and starts the truck. He adjusts the rear-view mirror, looking at the headstones hiding the bodies lying on the ground.

"Ready?" He asks John. "Oh, when we get there, let me tell Mayor Wheeler about those guys."

"Not a problem, Chief." John turns up the heat in the truck. "I never liked debriefs anyway. Don't forget, we need to run back to pick up Caroline. Would hate to have her thinking we forgot about her. She's already pretty pissed."

“Tell you what, I’ll radio in and have someone I trust go get her and bring her to the camp.” Chief Wallace picks up his radio and keys the mic. “Washington! Put down the coffee and pick up!”

“Yes, sir! Sorry sir!” Officer Washington’s hurried and clearly nervous voice pours out of the tinny speakers in his truck. “What is it you need?”

“I need you to pick up someone for me and bring her to the campground. Don’t tell anyone! This is between us!” He growls the words low and menacing, ensuring that the officer got the point.

“Absolutely, sir. Who is it?” Officer Washington asks, eager to please.

“Here’s the address and don’t screw this up.” He gives him the information and then places the mic back into the holster on the dashboard. “Alright, let’s get this bag to the camp and finally put her to rest.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The sunset makes the lake look like it’s on fire. It shines brightly in this fall evening. Mayor Michael Wheeler never likes coming

here anymore, but he absolutely hates it today. It's not destroying the monster that's the problem, it's his part in the creation of it.

"Oh, Evalyn." He sighs. "If only I hadn't hired you back then. Would you have lived a perfectly ordinary life? Would you have married, had children, and grown old and happy? Would I never have had to take up this position? Well, nothing to be done for it now."

The crunching of gravel snaps him out of his morose memories. He waits patiently by a picnic table near the pavilion, the box of tools and components sits on top of it. Chief Wallace and John step out of the truck. *'Hmm. Mrs. Moore is not with them.'*

"Sir." Chief Wallace stands in front of him holding a heavy looking cloth bag. "Sorry we took so long. There's something we will have to discuss later."

"Of course. And that's the...um..." The Mayor can't bring himself to look at, much less inside, the bag. He's done some horrible things. He's seen creatures that delighted in drinking your memories until you were left a shell, whimpering and insane. He has watched idly as horrors flayed the skin from its victims. Yet,

he still can't look in the bag. He can't see his son that way. *'Come on, Michael. Get yourself together and do what is necessary.'*

"Yes." John steps forward.

"Could you carry it for me, John?" He forces his eyes closed as he turns from the bag.

"Of course." John agrees as Chief Wallace places the bag gingerly in the box. John picks up the box, grunting a little at the weight, and follows closely behind.

"Chief, I need you to bring the lights and generator." Without looking to see if Chief Wallace will execute the order, he turns and starts the long walk to his old home. He knows this trail well. It used to be the main road into town. He can follow it almost blindfolded, and he might as well be. The only image in his mind is the last memory he has of his son.

The road leads him home. He knows that it's long since decayed, but he can almost see a ghostly image of his old home. He can hear the voices of his wife and son on the wind. Pulling his gaze away, he walks past the tree he used to love to sit under and is soon standing near the edge of the water.

“Set everything down right here.” He points to a spot on the ground that might not seem like much to anyone else, but he can see Evalyn’s blood staining the ground. He wasn’t there when she was killed, but a death like that leaves a mark that he’s trained himself to spot. It’s like a sickly bright stain on reality that time will never get rid of.

The wooden box holding the axe is placed in the grass. Around it, he sets the rest of the implements in their precise arrangement. Into a large stone bowl, he places plants and powders. Pulling out a stone rod, he puts pestle to mortar.

The sun sinks lower as he works, casting shadows in the trees, but Chief Wallace has already set up the lights and the generator. The area is bright enough to knock out all of the shadows in a large area. Part of him has been intentionally taking his time because he’s dreading this next part. His throat tightens and dries when he tries to talk.

“Chief.” He coughs. “Um. Can you please...” He can’t bring himself to say it. He can’t bring himself to tell this man to crush his son’s skull.

“Yes, sir.” Chief Wallace pulls the skull gingerly out of the bag. He makes sure to hold it carefully. “You can look away. I won’t hold it against you.”

He nods, a tear shaking free to fall into the wet grass. He doesn’t see it happen, but he can hear the bone crunch and crack, and he wishes that it were him. When the pieces tink into the stone bowl, his heart falls alongside it. The stone grinding the bone into powder makes him sick in the stomach. He holds in a sob and breathes deeply, forcing the tears to stop.

“Is it done?” He says as the sounds stop.

“It is.” Chief Wallace stands and steps back.

“Well, that’s all there is to it then.” He breathes deep cleansing breaths. “Thank you. Both. I couldn’t have done this alone. Now, let’s get this over with. It’s going to take a few minutes once the axe is free. I will need you to keep her far away from me. If my concentration is broken, all of this will have been for nothing.”

“Understood. I am gonna need one minute.” Chief Wallace takes off his uniform, standing there in the evening’s cold. His breath

comes out as steam, but he doesn't seem to notice the chill. He sets the uniform aside on a nearby stump that looks like it's been splintered in places. His body ripples as the muscles transform and bones stretch. In a few moments, a werewolf stands in the same spot that used to hold Chief Wallace.

He pulls the wooden box in front of him. *'It feels so heavy.'* Grasping the lid, he gingerly lifts it. The hinges squeak as the lid falls open. Inside the box, the axe vibrates as it tries to fly, but it can't escape the runes. A gasp of surprise escapes him as he sits up straight, turning towards the camp.

"She's here!" His gaze is drawn towards where they came from. "She's at the camp. Go. Now."

\*\*\*\*\*

John can only watch as the Chief lopes off along the trail at full speed. *'Gotta admit, it would be nice to be able to move like that.'* Guilt floods him for thinking this as images of Beth, Caroline, and Dave flicker across his mind.

The trail is well marked with little plaques that he doesn't have time to read. *'Must*

*be for the campers.*' At the end of the trail, the camp opens up. The Chief is just running past the cafeteria and into the pavilion area. The lights in the parking area are bright.

A roar echoes loudly as Chief Wallace leaps at the Slasher. The sounds of violence fill the parking area with rending and tearing sounds. John runs into the light just as Chief Wallace takes a clawed hand across his muzzle. He howls in pain and falls to one knee.

John takes advantage of the clear line of fire. His pistol spits hollow points at the Slasher. Her skin is pock marked with black circles as the bullets hit her. She barely moves as the bullets exit her body, but it's enough of a distraction for the Chief to gather himself.

"We gotta keep her here until the Mayor is done!" John shouts to the recovering Chief. "Don't let her near the shadows!"

A growl of acknowledgment is all John gets in return. When his gun clicks empty, Chief Wallace lunges forward, his teeth sinking into the Slasher's alabaster skin. He tosses her to the ground as he starts to wretch. Black blood falling from his mouth. A hacking fit overtakes him and keeps the wolf on his knees.



The Slasher brings a small fist down on the back of his head. The Chief's skull gives an audible crack as he goes down. One leg twitches in the dirt.

*'It's no good. She's just too strong. We need something drastic.'* John scans the area desperately for inspiration. He laughs out loud as he finds it. *'Gotta give the Chief time to recover.'*

Taking the time to aim carefully, John fires a round into her face. Her head turns instantly towards him, and she forgets all about the wolf at her feet. Slow, methodical footsteps bring her closer to him. He moves in a circle, keeping her in the light and trying to get her between himself and the cafeteria. He makes sure to keep the large silver cylinder with the red triangle sticker in his peripheral view.

"Come on! You can do it. Come kill me!" He fires again hoping to keep her attention focused on him.

From the corner of his eye, he can see the furred form of Chief Wallace stir and slowly rise to one knee. Hope fills him, and he feels terrible for it. *'How can I be rooting for things like that? Am I betraying her? She'd want me*

*to do whatever it takes to stop this Slasher and save people, right?’*

Chief Wallace shakes his head, a human shaped hand pressed against it. He’s visibly smaller and looks much less like a wolf now. He takes a faltering step but stops and groans, falling again to one knee. Deep breaths expand his barrel chest.

John fires again, keeping the Slasher’s attention on him, but the distraction and concern for the Chief costs him. He let her get too close. Her hand closes around this throat and she lifts him, her head tilts as she looks into his eyes and squeezes. *‘I should already be dead. She should’ve been able to snap my neck by now. Is she enjoying this?’*

Gasping, he looks over her shoulder at his plan. The large propane tank that supplies the cafeteria is a straight line behind her. *‘If only I could have gotten her to it.’* His vision dims as she pulls him closer to her sharp teeth.

He prays he’ll be dead before those teeth tear him apart. Her rotten breath makes his eyes water. As his world dims and fades, a furred blur crosses quickly in front of his eyes. A spurt of black and the sound of tearing flesh pull at

his fading senses. The fingers lose their grip, and he feels them weakening. There's a sudden lurching in his stomach as he falls, landing hard on the ground. Gasping breaths fill his lungs despite still feeling her cold fingers around his throat. He looks up through blurred eyes as Chief Wallace stands in front of the Slasher, the broken bones where her hand used to be stick out of her forearm. The severed hand falls from around his throat to the ground where it quickly dissolves into something resembling brackish water. Moonlight dances over the Chief's wet fur as he takes deep panting breaths.

The Slasher swings her remaining fist impossibly fast, but the Chief jumps back in time. Going low, he swipes a claw at her legs, severing tendon and muscle. She buckles but doesn't fall.

"Get her to the propane!" John wanted to yell it out, but it came out as a hoarse and raspy whisper.

Chief Wallace must have heard it anyway because he immediately starts doing a dance of feints and dodges to get her closer to the tank. *'Benefits of werewolf hearing I guess.'* Once in position, Chief Wallace makes a false

lunge, low and fast. John watches the Slasher take the bait.

In a second, she's lifted off of her feet and thrown lightning fast at the tank. The impact is loud and sickening. Bones break and metal crunches as she's embedded in the tank. The escaping gas hisses loudly. John takes the time to aim as carefully as he can. *'Got one shot at this. Literally.'*

All of his hope, his desire, his hatred for this creature spits out the end of his gun with the muzzle flash. The bullet travels so slowly to him, but when it finally hits the tank, the spark it makes is bright, but it's nothing compared to the next moment.

The *whoomp* of an explosion lights up the evening sky. Both John and the Chief are tossed backwards. Like a comet, the Slasher is thrown overhead leaving a trail of fire in her wake. She lands near the lake, fire consuming her. The parking area's lights go out. John's already bruised brain shuts down from the assault and he passes out in the dirt.

\*\*\*\*\*

The smell is the worst part of it all. Chief Wallace can feel his body repairing itself,

even if it's slower than usual, but the scent of her undead flesh burning is making him sick. Slowly and gingerly, he gets to his feet. He tries to transform, but it won't come fully on. Lupine features mix with human as he breathes deeply, reaching for the power.

"You take that rest, John." He gives a nod of respect to the man on the ground. "You earned this one."

A crackling, sizzling sound fills his sensitive ears. *'This can't be happening. Sure hope he's about done. We can't take much more of this.'* The Slasher's burning form stands, the embers of fire dance along her blackened skin.

He half limps and half jogs over to the boathouse. A solid looking oar hangs on the wall. Lifting it off of the hanger, he twirls it in a circle. Through fanged teeth, he snarls. "Well, darlin', let's get this over with."

The solid wood paddle cuts through the air and lands solidly against her skull sending ash, fire, and skin flaking off into the wind. Calling on all of the speed available to him, he swings over and over again, driving the Slasher to her knees and breaking off pieces of fiery bone. He doesn't stop swinging until

she's lying flat and motionless, the flames still flickering and fueled by her oily black blood. The oar is long broken, so he drops it to clatter on the ground.

"John!" He calls out loudly, but it sounds like a growl. He pulls back on the power a bit, letting more of his human side out. "You alright, son?"

A groan greets him on the night air. *'At least he's still breathing. Now, let's make sure she stays put.'* Years of wrangling these monsters should have prepared him for this moment, but his brain must have been too rattled from so many injuries over the last couple of days. It might have been a suspicious sound or maybe a predator's instinct, but something makes him turn towards where the Slasher was lying. Instead of having to look to the ground, he's surprised when she's standing there. Her burning eyes bore into him.

The broken oar stabs through his furred stomach as he's driven back. He brings out the wolf as the grinding, twisting wood tears at his insides. His back slams into the boathouse as the oar is driven forward to embed itself into the wall behind him. Instinct and rage kick in

and, using the wall as leverage, a clawed foot kicks out hard. The Slasher's glowing body flies through the air from the force of the kick and she lands, rolling into the water. The fire goes out with a hiss and pop. Smoke fills the air as they're suddenly bathed in darkness.

"Well, shit." Chief Wallace pulls hard at the oar pinning him to the wall. It pops free, and he drops to the ground. A ripple of darkness that only someone like him could see flickers for a moment. In an instant the trace of her is gone. He can't smell her or see her. The only thing he sees is John getting to his feet. "She's gone! She used the shadows! Get to the Mayor!"

Chief Wallace is already running, but not nearly as fast as he should be able to. He doesn't wait for John. *'He'll either catch up, or he won't.'* The trees fly by faster with each second.

*'Gonna need a week off after this one.'* Even if he didn't always have a good sense of direction, his sense of smell could lead him directly to the Mayor. He trips as he breaks through the trees. She's already there at the edge of the light.

His mind and body are so tired and broken, but duty forces him forward. As she crosses into the light, he half limps and half leaps at her. Both of them crash to the ground, and she thrashes, swipes, and bites at his flesh. With a scream of rage, his face transforms into that of the wolf and he snaps powerful jaws onto her neck. Her spine severs and bone splinters cutting the inside of his mouth. He pushes through it until his teeth clack together. Her arms and legs twitch before falling still.

As he stands, her head turns to watch him. The bones in her neck are reforming and the skin is already closing. *'Hurry up, sir.'*

The Slasher rises as if she were always standing there. Her head tilts involuntarily to the side from her broken neck. It cracks and creaks as she swipes at him, but he jumps backwards getting uncomfortably close to the Mayor and the ritual.

John pants as he comes into the clearing. He runs, staggering as he does. When he's close, he fires at her again and again until his gun runs dry. He slams it back into the holster and the two of them circle around the Slasher. Each looks for an opening.



Chief Wallace lunges for her hamstring, looking to slow her down. Fatigue and injuries must have caught up to him because he misses, the momentum carrying him just past her.

The Mayor's voice is becoming more intense as the chanting continues. Lights flicker on the edge of the clearing as he speaks in a language Chief Wallace doesn't understand. John crouches, clearly bracing for her attack, but she turns and moves fast towards the Mayor. Her claws fall, reaching for the Mayor's vulnerable flesh.

Just as the claws strike, Chief Wallace leaps. He swings a powerful arm out knocking the Slasher off balance. Just then, a loud and rising cry erupts from the Mayor. A bright flash of light, heat, and wind encircle the area as the ritual is completed. As though she were switched off, the Slasher collapses to the ground unmoving, her black eyes go dull.

The Mayor pushes himself up, his knees creak with the effort. He takes off his jacket, looking at the long cuts along the back of it. He turns to try to see his own back, but there are no marks on him. "Well, that was a lot closer than I would have liked."

Chief Wallace cautiously walks over to her, nudging her with his foot. When she doesn't move, he allows himself a small laugh. "Guess we won."

"Yes, Chief." The Mayor is standing by him, the axe in his hand. "Here. Please dispose of this. It's just an ordinary axe now." After handing Chief Wallace the axe, he returns to the ritual site and starts gathering everything and returning it to the box.

Chief Wallace draws an arm back to throw the axe into the lake.

"Wait!" John practically screams.

"What?" Chief Wallace looks at him.

"I...uh...kinda promised someone they could have it." John looks sheepish as he asks. "She really wants it."

Chief Wallace cocks his head, looking at John like he's taken one to many hits from the Slasher. Shrugging, he tosses the axe to him. "Whatever. You can have it."

\*\*\*\*\*

John looks at the thing that took Beth from him. He stares at the dull blade and turns it over. "We did it..."

John stares at the Slasher's body. *'We got her for you, honey. She won't hurt anyone else ever again.'* His head swims with what all this means, with what he's been through since he came to Slaughterville. A few deep and purposeful breaths help steady him. As the Chief drags the Slasher's body towards the lake, John is ready to have an uncomfortable conversation with the Mayor. He clears his throat as he looks down at the Mayor.

"Yes, John?" The Mayor looks over his shoulder at him. "What is it?"

A twang sounds through the night. John's instincts to serve and protect kick in, and he dives forward just in time. The arrow meant for Mayor Wheeler pierces his chest instead. He can feel his lungs filling with blood. The Mayor is already standing over him.

"John! Son!" The Mayor is screaming concern at him. "Chief! Go, now!" Chief Wallace drops the Slasher's body into the grass and runs, transforming as he does.

"Ack..." John burbles and coughs.

"Why?" The Mayor holds him, concern all over his face. His hands keep pressure on the bleeding wound. Bubbling blood seeps

through his fingers. "Why would you do this for someone like me?"

"Part of the job." His voice is getting weaker, more distant. Blood trickles from the corner of his mouth as he coughs. "At least I'll be with Beth."

As the Chief returns carrying the still form of a cultist, John coughs again. The Mayor's eyes close and he starts mumbling something strange. *'It's so cold. I didn't think... What's he saying?'* John's world goes dark.



## Chapter 18

Reese busies himself with trying to repair his front door. He's screwing in the pieces that were broken to try and make his home somewhat secure. *'And keep the cold where it belongs, outside.'* After he finishes his final repair, he checks over his rushed work, closing the door. The door sticks when he closes it, but he can force it open if he needs to do so.

He steps back and admires the work. *'I think I'll call someone to fix it properly.'* When the phone rings, he places the screwdriver onto the coffee table and picks up the phone.

“Hello?” He expects the worst.

“Reese, it’s me.” The voice on the other end of the line is familiar. Reese understands the need for secrecy. “Get down here, now. They just brought Robert in.”

“Wait!” Reese feels the strange sense of confusion. “What happened?”

“We’ll talk when you get here.” The link clicks dead, and Reese hangs up the phone.

He quickly grabs his coat and keys. He gingerly opens the door and closes it as best as he can. His car is in the drive, but he doesn’t go to it. Running across the street, he knocks on Caroline’s door.

“What?” Caroline answers gruffly as she throws open the door.

“It’s Robert.” He fumbles with his keys. “He’s in the hospital. I’m going to see him if you’d like to go along.”

“Yeah. Of course.” Caroline softens visibly as she grabs her familiar leather coat. “We can take Nissa’s car.”

The drive is awkward, made worse by their silence. She parks in one of the spots close to the hospital and gets out, never saying a

word. He steps out behind her, closing the car's door. The lights of the hospital lead them into the main lobby. They quickly find their contact who looks around to make sure he's not being watched. "He's in room 314. Don't take long. Not sure who's going to be looking for him."

Reese nods thanks to him, doing his best to make it seem like they're not speaking. Caroline is already walking to the elevator and hitting the call button. Once inside, they hit the button for the door and wait for their floor. The bell dings and they step off into a brightly lit hall.

"314 is this way." He points to the plaque of numbers on the wall.

A nurse is coming out of the room as they get there. She looks them up and down, studying them. "Who are you?"

"We're his friends. How is he?" He softens his voice and posture as much as he can.

"That's for the doctors to say." Her face betrays her desire to be cryptic. "Don't be long. He needs his rest."

"Of course." Caroline is already working her way inside.

Robert looks rough. His body is bruised, beaten, and battered. Cuts cover his face and hands. Even attached to tubes filled with wonderful drugs, Robert groans painfully.

“Dear God, Robert! How...” His mind races, eager for answers. He feels terrible for having to ask this man questions. “What happened?”

“Hey, bud.” Caroline sits down on the side of the bed. She takes his hand in hers and holds it tenderly.

“Uhh...” Robert’s weak voice shakes as he raises his head and tries to speak. His eyes are glazed over, not clearly seeing whom he’s speaking with. His mouth opens and closes a few times. When he can speak, the words are slurred and stunted. “George...mausoleum...” His head falls back onto his pillow.

Robert starts to convulse, the machines beep warnings. Nurses rush into the room, calling for doctors. Reese and Caroline are forced out of the room and the door closes behind them. Through the window, he watches the doctors and nurses try to stabilize Robert. One of the nurses notices them watching and pulls a large blue curtain for privacy.



“Oh my...” He puts a hand to his chin.

“What do you think happened to him?” Caroline whispers.

“I’m not sure.” He places an arm around Caroline and pulls her closer. “They’ll take good care of him.”

“I know. I know.” Caroline breathes deeply. “Should we check on the others?”

“Let’s.” He hates to leave Robert in such a state, but he knows there’s nothing he can do until the doctors are finished. “They’re just down the hall.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The hospital room is brightly lit and smells of antiseptic and cleaning materials. She remembers this smell and never wanted to experience it again. It’s a lot warmer than Caroline thought it would be. She always hated coming here ever since her mom was sick. Now, it seems a little more welcoming.

The door to room 305 is closed but not locked. When they walk inside, there are animated voices talking and carrying on. Caroline smiles at the sight of them all together. *‘This is what family looks like.’*

“And that’s why I don’t like Jello.” Nissa concludes whatever story she was telling. “Oh! Hey guys! Welcome to our party. Pull up a seat.”

“It certainly feels like a party in here.” Reese gives Nissa smile and nod. “I am glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Me too!” James waves from Nissa’s bedside. “Thanks for asking!”

“Ha. Ha.” Reese laughs. “Yes, of course. Who could ever forget our stalwart hero of the first charge?”

“Guys.” R.D. is sitting on the edge of his bed, bandages around his head and groaning. “Next time, we get helmets.”

The group laughs, some regretting the decision to do so as they wince in differing levels and areas of pain. As they catch their breaths, she takes in the scene. *‘They may be hurt. They may be beaten down, but they’re still here. It’s more than I can say for some.’*

“Hey, Reese.” R.D. says through the pain. “You’re the big brain here. What’s the plan? How’re we gonna stop her with most of us in the hospital?”

“Ah, yes. About that.” Reese looks awkward. No longer the scholarly professional, he looks almost apologetic. “Remember, I said that I had an idea that not everyone would be terribly fond of. We knew we were in over our heads, and we had to seek out some unorthodox help.”

“God, get to the point and stop dancing around it.” Caroline, frustration coming faster these days, burst out. “We asked the Chief and Mayor of all people for help. We were supposed to go and destroy the axe using a spell or something, but they never came for me.”

“Wait, what? They did come for you.” Reese interrupts. “In fact, John was picked up hours ago. We couldn’t reach you, so they were going to come back for you once they had the... ingredient.”

“Well, no one ever did.” She gestures angrily.

“When they didn’t return, I assumed there was a vital reason. I don’t believe that John would just abandon you.” Reese’s concern is evident on his face.

“Of course, it’s not like your new besties to lie though, is it?” Caroline allows her

anger to bubble up to near boiling. She pulls in a breath for a long rant.

“This is not helpful.” Nissa’s calm voice cuts through them both. Her mouth is pulled into a tight line as she absently adjusts the blankets on her bed. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but right now we need to focus on the plan.”

The stark contrast to Nissa’s normally bubbly personality shocked Caroline out of the rebuttal she was about to give. Instead, she crosses her arms and moves to a chair by the door. She gestures for Reese to continue explaining the plan.

“Fine.” Reese tugs on his shirt to straighten it. “I was to remain at home in case everything has gone wrong. They are supposed to be at the campground now destroying the axe. I had hoped we would hear something by now, but they may not be finished. I just don’t know and that’s concerning.”

“I’m just not sure how good I feel that we’re working with them guys now.” R.D. rubs his beard in thought. “We gotta be careful around these guys. I mean, aren’t they still looking to arrest me and James?”

“Not anymore.” Caroline answers snidely and looks pointedly at Reese. “Out of the goodness of their hearts, they said they will forget everything. You two are free men again. Now all you have to worry about is being kidnapped or killed by monsters.”

“So, it’s back to normal then?” James jokes.

“This decision was not an easy one to make, but it was necessary.” Reese’s voice is firmer and more authoritative than she remembers. “Any fallout will be my responsibility.”

“I get it, man. I do.” R.D. shakes his head. “Just so long as we know what we’re getting into.”

“I am well aware. However, since we haven’t heard from them, it might be best if we make our way to the camp and check on things. By the way...” Reese closes the door to the room. “Robert is here. He’s just down the hall in room 314.”

“Oh no!” Nissa folds her hands in front of her chest. “Is he okay?”

“He’s stable for now.” She lies. *‘They don’t need that stress of worrying about him.’*

“He’s not ready for visitors just yet, but I’m sure he’d love to see you.”

“We’ll make sure to keep an eye on him while we’re here.” R.D. sits up on his bed, but he looks nauseous. “I’m gonna need some help when we get out of here. I need someone to drive me into town to get a new bat. Wish I could go myself, but my truck is currently in the scrapyard all torn up.”

“We’ll worry about that when you’re better.” Reese claps his hands. “It looks like you’re in good hands and spirits. We wanted to make sure that you’re all well. However, we must check in on the others, so we will be going. Just think, I get to catalog and record all of this! How exciting!” The other Citizens look at each other with differing degrees of worry about the things Reese considers to be fun.

“James, you coming with us?” Caroline asks.

“No. I think I’ll stay here.” James sneaks a quick look at Nissa. “Unless you really need me, that is.”

“No. We should be fine. We’ll have John and the Big Bad Wolf.” Caroline smiles at the idea of them together. “Reese, you ready?”

Caroline and Reese say their goodbyes and give a final wave. On the long, quiet walk to the elevator, she notices that the door and curtain are still pulled closed in Robert's room. She and Reese exchange a look of concern, She wants to go inside, but they continue on. The elevator ride down to the lobby is taken in contemplative silence.

The night air is cold and crisp. She pulls her collar up to ward off the chill. Just then, the lights and siren of an ambulance pull up to the emergency room entrance. The doors to the ambulance open and a familiar cry of pain comes from the back.

"Wait..." Caroline takes off running with Reese close behind. A chaotic scene of running doctors and nurses surround a gurney. She can't see through the flood of people, but above them all towers Chief Wallace!

"Get him inside!" Chief Wallace barks orders. "He's shot!"

The gurney's pushed inside the hospital and Caroline's face goes white. She loses her breath as she watches John get wheeled in the hospital. Reese catches her before she falls, but her knees won't support her fully.

“Chief!” Reese yells over the siren’s wail. “What happened?”

Chief Wallace marches over to them, clearly angry. He grabs Reese by the shoulder and leads him and Caroline off to a secluded part of the hospital. He looks around to make sure they’re alone. He takes off his hat, holding it in his hand in front of him.

“What’d you do to him?” Caroline’s anger is rising. She couldn’t stop what happened next even if she wanted to. Her hand lashes out and she slaps Chief Wallace across the face. “Did you shoot him?”

“You get that one for free since you’ve had a bad time lately. But don’t do it again. Use your damned brain. If I shot him, why would I bring him here? We finished destroying the axe...” Chief Wallace starts.

“Holy crap!” Caroline interrupts loudly.

“Yeah, it’s done. No thanks to you and your pouting. The Mayor said we don’t have to worry about her killing anymore. She won’t be coming back from this.” Chief Wallace holds up a hand to stop her questions. “We were cleaning up when someone shot an arrow at



the Mayor. That man in there dove in front of it and saved the Mayor.”

“What? Why would he do that?” Reese’s confusion is apparent.

“Because that’s who he is.” Chief Wallace inhales deeply. “No matter what else is going on, someone needed help, and he gave it. Every damn one of us could learn a lot from someone like him.”

“Is he gonna be okay?” Caroline wants to run inside, but she knows that she won’t get anywhere near him right now.

“I don’t know. Just wanted you to know the kind of man he is.” Chief Wallace replaces his hat and returns to the ambulance. He climbs inside and they leave.

“Should we go inside?” She asks Reese.

“I wouldn’t even try to stop you.” Reese smiles at her.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mayor Wheeler opens the door to his office. He wants nothing more than to go back home and rest, but he has a duty to perform. Settling into his favorite chair, he grabs the stack of mail on his desk.

One of the envelopes is dirty and written in a scrawling hand. He picks up his letter opener and slides the blade along the edge. The paper is crisp and well folded. It's a personalized invitation to him. *'I can't believe it's that time already.'*

Written in blocky, misspelled handwriting are the words *'Family Reunion Time!'* It's an invitation to a family dinner that's coming soon. Sighing, he folds the invitation up and sets it back down on his desk.

"I wonder if the next town over needs a mayor." He chuckles at his own joke. "I'll need to have a little talk with Daddy Ray." Mayor Wheeler looks purposefully at the hidden doorway in the back of his office.

He walks over to the hidden door and engages a lock. *'I need to be careful with someone out there trying to kill me. I think I know who, but I just can't believe it.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

The sunlight is just coming over the corn. The rest of the family is still asleep. Those that are here anyway. Daddy Ray always looks forward to these reunions. It's a time for good food, faith, and family. *'All that a man needs.'*

Staring at the coming dawn, he sips his coffee from a well-used cup. He can't help but smile as he slings his shotgun over his shoulder. He holds a copy of the invitation in one hand.

"Good morning, son." The older woman sets a plate down for him on the porch railing. She looks up at Daddy Ray. "I wanted to try a new recipe for the picnic. Try it. Let me know if you like it."

Picking up a morsel, he takes a bite. Smiling, he licks sauce off of fingers that are not his own. "Pretty good, Ma. Might be some of your best yet." He places the piece back onto the plate.

"Well, thank you dear. I will have to make a lot of sauce this year." Ma pats him on the back and stares out over the fields. "I so look forward to this every year."

"Me too, Ma. It's finally time to get the family back together." He folds the invitation and places it in an envelope. As he seals it, he smiles. "Can't wait to have everyone for dinner."

\*\*\*\*\*

The mist of the cold night air hangs low over Lake Slaughterville. The moonlight

flickers and dances over the water. A wave laps lazily against the shore as the head breaks free of the water. Slowly, the figure walks to the shore. Inch by purposeful inch it walks.

He stands there, looking down at her. He doesn't see the black eyes or the torn flesh. He sees her as she was then. His Miss Evalyn. Warren picks her up, carefully, and turns, walking back into the peaceful calm of the dark water.

Thank you!

I want to start by thanking each and every one of you that has picked up a copy of this book. It means a great deal to me that you will put your faith in these stories. I cannot wait to take you on this journey where not everything is as it seems and big surprises are just around the corner.

If you enjoyed this book and want to keep up with new Laughing Rogue projects, join us by using the QR Codes below. We would love to hear from you!

Chris

Laughing Rogue YT Channel:



Laughing Rogue Facebook Page:



Twitter/X: @LaughingRoguePA



If you enjoyed Slaughterville: The Slasher, you can find me and my friends talking all things comics, games, pop culture, and more over on Madness Entertainment Network!





WINNER: 2022  
SERIES WITH MOST  
POTENTIAL  
**-INDIE COMIX DISPATCH**

"THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE JUST  
MET ITS MATCH WITH IT'S VERY  
OWN OUTLAW, JOSE WALES. THIS  
IS THE FUTURE THAT AWAITS US  
IN THE PATH OF THE PALE RIDER!"

**- FERGEL PATRICK AMAYO, OWNER,  
GOTHAM NIGHT COMICS**

"ONE PART WESTERN,  
ONE PART ZOMBIE  
APOCALYPSE... ALL  
PARTS BAD-ASS."

**- ANTONIO "PREME"  
VILLARRUEL, CULTURE  
JUNKIES**

"JOHN WAYNE MEETS  
THE WALKING DEAD!"

**CODY JOHNSON, COMIC  
CHAT AUTHORITY**

# PATH OF THE PALE RIDER

**WWW.PATHOFTHEPALERIDER.COM**







# SLAUGHTERVILLE



**WILL EVERYONE BE ABLE TO PUT AWAY THEIR DIFFERENCES AND STOP THE SLASHER, OR WILL THEY FEEL THE BITE OF HER AXE?**

The Citizens have made it their goal to eliminate the horrors in Slaughterville. They've been thwarted by the officials in town for long enough. Meanwhile, Mayor Michael Wheeler and Police Chief Wallace have been desperately trying to keep the town's secrets along with its dangerous denizens from getting beyond its borders.

Beth and her fiancé, John Martinez, have gone through this hellscape to find and rescue her sister, Caroline. But in a rough twist of fate, Beth's final actions unleash Slaughterville's most dangerous denizen yet—the Slasher. This undead killer seeks vengeance on not just Slaughterville, but the world.

With nothing to stop her, The Slasher could continue killing forever, even outside of Slaughterville. The Mayor and Chief can't let this bring attention to their town. Will John, Caroline, and the rest of the Citizens make an uneasy alliance with the supernatural officials to stop the greater threat? What happens when the bad guys are your only hope? Things get bloody.

