

Barrosca

The Dalek Emperor

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Contents

1	Part 1	1
2	Part 2	19
3	Part 3	37
4	Part 4	49

1 Part 1

It's a long story, but one you've never heard before. A story is about a place that dwells in the woods, on the mountain; a place where bad things happen. And you may think you know about the bad things, you may decide you have it all figured out but you don't. Because the truth is worse than monsters and men.

At first I was upset I was when I they told me we were moving to some little town out in the Ozarks. I remember staring at my dinner plate while I listened to my sister throw a temper tantrum unbefitting of a 14 year old honors student. She cried, she pleaded, and then she cursed at my parents. She threw a bowl at my dad and told him it was all his fault. Mom told Whitney to calm down but she stormed off, slamming every door in the house on the way to her room.

I secretly blamed my dad as well. I'd heard the whispers too, my dad had done something wrong, something bad and the sheriff's department had reassigned him to some little out of the way county to save face. My parents didn't want me to know that, but I did.

I was nine so it didn't take me too long to warm to the idea of a change; it was like an adventure. New house! New school! New friends! Whitney, of

course, felt the opposite. Moving to a new school at her age is hard, moving away from her new boyfriend, however, was even harder. While the rest of us packed up our things and said our goodbyes, Whitney sulked and cried and threatened to run away from home. But a month later when we pulled up to our new house in Drisking, Missouri she was sitting right next me texting viciously on her phone.

Thankfully, we moved over the summer and I had months of free time to explore the town. When Dad started his new job at the sheriff's office, Mom drove us around the city commenting on this and that. The city was much, much smaller than St. Louis but also a lot nicer. There were no 'bad' areas and the entire town looked like something you'd see on a post card. Drisking was built in a mountain valley surrounded by healthy forest land with walking trails and crystal clear lakes. I was 9, it was summer and this was in heaven.

We'd only been living in Drisking a week or so when our next door neighbors came to introduce themselves: Mr. and Mrs. Landy and their 10 year old son Kyle. While our parents talked and drank mimosas, I watched the Landy's lanky, red-headed son hung out in the doorway, shyly eyeing the PS3 in the living room.

"Uh, do you play?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Not really."

"Do you wanna? I just got Call of Duty 4."

"Um..." Kyle glanced at his mom, who had just been handed her third mimosa. "Yeah. Sure."

And that afternoon, with the ease and simplicity of our age, Kyle and I became best friends. We spent the cool summer mornings outside exploring the Ozarks and the hot afternoons in my living room playing the PS3. He introduced me to the only other kid in the neighborhood our age: a skinny, quiet girl named Kimber Destaro. She was shy but friendly and always up for anything. Kimber kept up with us so well that she quickly became the third wheel on our tricycle.

With my dad at work all the time, my mom consumed with her new friendships and my sister locked in her room all day, the summer was ours to take and take it we did. Kyle and Kimber showed me where all the best hiking trails were, which lakes were the best (and most accessible by bike), and where the best stores were in town. By the time the first day of school rolled around in September I knew I was home.

On the last Saturday before school started, Kyle and Kimber told me they were going to take me somewhere special, somewhere we hadn't been yet – the Triple Tree.

“What’s a ‘triple tree’?” I asked.

“It’s a totally awesome, totally huge treehouse out in the woods.” Kyle said excitedly.

“Pfft, whatever, Kyle. Come on, you guys, if there was a freakin’ treehouse you would have showed it to me already.”

“Na-uh, we wouldn’t’ve,” Kyle shook his head. “There’s a ceremony for first-timers and everything.”

Kimber nodded eagerly in agreement, her dark orange curls bouncing off of her tiny shoulders. “Yep, it’s true Sam. If you enter the treehouse without the proper ceremony you’ll disappear and then you’ll die.”

My face fell. Now I knew they were making fun of me. “That’s a lie! You guys are lying to me!”

“No we’re not!” Kimber insisted.

“Yeah, we’ll show you! We just have to get a knife for the ceremony and we’ll go.”

“What? Why do you need a knife? Is it a blood ceremony?” I whispered.

“No way!” Kimber promised. “You just say some words and carve your name into the Triple Tree.”

“Yup, it takes like one minute.” Kyle agreed.

“And it’s a really cool treehouse?” I asked.

“Oh yeah.” Kyle promised.

“Okay, I guess I’ll do it then.”

Kyle insisted on using the same knife he used during his own ceremony but we paid a price to get it. Mrs. Landy just happened to be home with her youngest son Parker and despite Kyle’s many objections his mother insisted he take his six year old brother with him.

“Mom, we’re going to the treehouse, it’s only for older kids. Parker can’t go!”

“I don’t care if you’re going to see an Exorcist movie marathon, you’re taking your brother with you. I need a break, Kyle, can’t you understand that? And I’m sure your friends won’t mind.” She flashed Kimber and me a challenging look. “Right?”

“No, not at all,” Kimber said and I nodded in agreement.

Kyle made a loud, dramatic sigh and called his brother. “Parker, put your shoes on, we’re leaving now!”

I’d met the youngest Landy several times before and found that he was as unlike his older brother in looks as in disposition. Where Kyle was a wild, excitable fireball with hair to match, I found Parker to be an anxious, fidgety boy with small eyes and dark brown hair.

We got on our bikes and made our way to a lesser known hiking trail a few miles away. I'd asked before where the trail led when we'd ridden across it several weeks before and Kyle had given me the underwhelming answer of "nowhere interesting".

We pulled up to trail head and leaned our bikes against the wooden sign post which read "West Rim Prescott Ore Trail".

"Why are so many trails around here named Prescott?" I asked. "Is this Prescott Mountain or something?"

Kimber laughed. "No, dummy, it's because of the Prescott's. You know, the family that lives in the mansion up on Fairmont. Mr. Prescott and his son Jimmy own like half the businesses in town."

"More than half," Kyle agreed.

"Which ones? Does he own the Game Stop?" The only store in Drisking I really cared about.

"I don't know about that one," Kyle wound a lock around the 4 bikes and clicked the bar into place, then spun the numbers on the dial. "But like the hardware store, the pharmacy, Gliton's on 2nd and the newspaper."

"Did they start this town?" I asked.

"Nah, mining started the town. I think they--"

"I want to go home." Parker had been so quiet I'd completely forgotten he was there.

"You can't go home," Kyle rolled his eyes. "Mom said I had to bring you. Now come on, it's only like a two mile walk."

"I wanna take my bike." Parker answered.

"Too bad, we're going off trail."

"I don't wanna go. I'll stay with the bikes."

"Don't be such a wussy."

"I'm not!"

"Kyle, be nice!" Kimber hissed. "He's only 5."

"I'm 6!" Parker objected.

"I'm sorry, 6. You're 6." Kimber smiled at him.

"Alright fine, he can hold your hand if he wants. But he's coming." Kyle turned and started up the trail.

Parker face fell into an undignified frown but when the charming Kimber stuck her hand out and wiggled her fingers at him, he took it.

Kyle was right, it wasn't a long walk – only a half mile down the trail and then another half mile hike on a well tread path up the mountain. It was a steep climb though, and by the time we got to the treehouse, I was winded.

"What do you think?" Kyle asked, excitedly.

"It's..." I studied the tree as I caught my breath. "It's pretty awesome," I smiled. And it was. They hadn't lied, the treehouse was the biggest I'd ever seen. It had multiple rooms and there were actual curtains in the windows. A sign above the door said "Ambercot Fort" and a rope ladder hung below the threshold, missing several planks.

"I'm going up first!" Yelled Parker, but Kimber caught his arm.

"You have to do the ceremony first or you'll disappear." She reminded him.

"That'd be fine with me," Kyle grumbled.

I was eager to get into the fort myself.

"Give me the knife." I held out my hand. Kyle smiled and dug the switchblade out of his pocket.

"There's some space in the back to carve your name."

I opened up the knife walked around the tree looking for an empty spot. They were so many names on the tree that I had to crunch down and look near the bottom since I couldn't reach any higher. I spotted both Kyle and Kimber's carvings on the tree and I finally found a spot I liked near the latter. I bit my tongue and carved Sam W. into a blank piece of bark underneath someone named Paul S. Parker went next but had so much trouble with the knife that Kyle had to do it for him.

"Alright, let's go," I ran over to the rope ladder.

"Wait!" Kyle yelled. "You have to say the words first."

"Oh yeah. Okay what are they?"

Kimber sang them out. "Underneath the Triple Tree there is a man who waits for me and should I go or should I stay my fate's the same either way."

"That's... creepy." I said. "What does it mean?"

Kimber shrugged. "No one knows anymore, it's just tradition."

"Okay, can you say it one more time, slower?"

Once Parker and I had recited the poem we were ready to go. I climbed the rope ladder first and took stock of my new surroundings. The treehouse was more or less empty, just a dirty rug here and there and some trash: old soda cans, beer cans and fast food wrappers.

I went room to room – four in total – and found nothing of real interest until the last one. An old mattress lay in the corner and piles of musty, ripped clothing scattered the floor.

"Did a hobo live here?" I asked.

"Nah, this room has been like this for as long as I can remember." Kyle said from the doorway behind me.

"It smells gross." I said.

Kimber walked up to the threshold but refused to go any further. "It's not the smell that freaks me out - it's that." She pointed up to the ceiling and I raised my eyes to read what was written there.

Road to the Gates of Hell Mile Marker 1

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"It's just older kids being dicks," Kyle said. "Come on, I'll show you the best part of the treehouse."

We walked back into the first room and Parker looked up at us and smiled, pointing down to what he'd clumsily carved into the wooden floor.

"Fart," Kyle read. "That's hilarious, Parker." He rolled his eyes but his little brother didn't pick up on the sarcasm and smiled proudly.

Kimber sat down on the floor next to Parker and I sat on his other side. Kyle took the knife from his brother and then walked across the room and wedged the blade between two planks of the wooded wall. He pushed and the board gave, opening up a small, secret compartment in the wall. Kyle took something out and pushed the plank back in until it was flush with the others.

"Check it out." He turned around and proudly held up two cans of Miller Lite beer.

"Whoa!" I said.

"Ewww, warm beer? That's gross. How did you even know it was there?" Kimber asked.

"Phil Saunders told me."

"Are we gonna drink it?" I asked.

"Hell yeah we're gonna drink it!"

Kyle came and sat down in our circle, popped open the first beer and offered it to Kimber. She eyed it like he was trying to hand her a dirty diaper.

"Come on, Kimmy."

"Don't call me that!" She yelled at him and then reluctantly took the open beer. She smelled it and made a face, then pinched her nose and took a small swig. Kimber shuddered. "That was even grosser than I imagined."

"I don't want any! I'll tell mom!" Parker said quickly as the beer passed in front of him to me.

"Good, 'cause you ain't getting any," Kyle promised. "And you won't tell mom shit."

I put on my best poker face and took a long, deep swallow of the warm beer before I had the chance to smell it. It was a poor decision and when I wretched, the foul yellow liquid went all over my shirt.

"Aww man, now I'm gonna smell like beer."

We spent the next hour and a half drinking the two cans of Miller Lite and after awhile the taste grew more tolerable. I couldn't tell if I was becoming a man or actually getting drunk. I hoped it was the former. When the last drop of the last beer was consumed we spent 20 minutes trying to determine if we were drunk. Kyle assured us that he was wasted while Kimber wasn't sure. I didn't think I was, but I failed all of our drunk tests.

Kimber was in the middle of reciting the alphabet backwards when a loud, metallic grinding suddenly pierced the calm mountain air like a gunshot. Kimber stopped talking and we spent a few minutes staring at each other, waiting for the noise to end. Parker curled into Kimber and put his hands over his ears. After what seemed like ten whole minutes the sound ended as suddenly as it had begun.

"What was that?" I asked and Parker mumbled something into Kimber's sweatshirt.

"Do you guys know?" I tried again.

Kimber stared at her feet as she crossed and uncrossed them.

"Well?"

"It's nothing," Kyle answered finally. "We hear it sometimes in town; it's not a big deal. It's just louder up here."

"But what's making that sound?"

"Borrasca." Kimber whispered without taking her eyes off her feet.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Not who, where." Kyle answered. "It's a place."

"Another town?"

"No, it's just a place in the woods."

"Oh."

"Bad things happen there," Kimber said more to herself than me.

"Like what?"

"Bad things." Kimber repeated.

"Yeah, don't ever try to find it, dude." Kyle said behind me. "Or bad things will happen to you, too."

"But like, what bad things?" I turned around. Kyle shrugged and Kimber stood up and walked over to the rope ladder.

"We'd better go. I have to get home to my mom," she said.

We climbed down the ladder one by one and then started the walk back to the trail head in an unfamiliar silence. I was dying of curiosity about Borrasca but couldn't decide if and what to ask about it.

"So, who lives there?"

"Where?" Kyle asked.

"Borrasca."

"The Skinned Men," Parker answered.

"Pfft," Kyle laughed. "Only babies believe that."

"Like men who are skinned? Like their skin is gone?" I asked excitedly.

"Yeah, that's what some kids say. Most of us stop believing in that, though, when we turn double digits." Kyle said.

I looked back at Kimber who was still nine like me but she was staring down the trail, ignoring us. That seemed to be the end of the conversation and by the time we reached our bikes the awkwardness was gone and we were giggling trying to decide if we were too drunk to bike home.

School started two days later and I'd completely forgotten about Borasca. When my dad pulled up to the curb to drop me off that morning he locked the doors before I could get out.

"Not so fast," he laughed. "As your father I get the privilege of giving you a hug and telling you to have a good first day of school."

"But Dad, I gotta go meet Kyle by the flag before first bell!"

"And you will, but give me a hug first. In a few years you'll be driving yourself to school, let me be your dad while I still can."

"Fine." I said, exasperated, and leaned over to give my dad a quick hug.

"Thank you. Now go meet your friend. Your mom will be waiting here to pick you up at 3:40."

"I know, Dad. Why can't I take the bus like Whitney?"

"When you're 12, you can take the bus." He smiled and unlocked the doors. "Until then, I get to drop you off in the mornings. If you think it'd make you look cooler you can ride in the back seat behind the cage."

"Dad... just don't." I threw open the door of his cruiser before he could say anything more and ran as he laughed behind me.

Kyle was already waiting for me at the flag pole and he'd found Kimber, too. "Dude, you almost missed the bell!" He yelled when he saw me.

"I know, sorry."

"Whose class are you in?" Kimber asked. She was wearing a red sweater and leggings with frogs on them. Her curly orange hair was brushed into ringlets and her lips were pink and shiny. She'd never looked prettier and I was surprised to realize I'd never really seen Kimber as a girl.

"Ah, Mr. Diamond's."

"Me too!" She said cheerfully.

"Lucky," Kyle scoffed. "I'm in Mrs. Tverdy's. Only two 4th grade teachers and I get the crappy one."

Kimber grimaced. "Yeah, my mom had her when she was a kid."

"What's wrong with her? What did she say?"

"Just that she's strict and gives out homework on the weekends."

“On the weekends? Fuck!”

“Excuse me, Mr. Landy?” I immediately recognized the tall man that had suddenly appeared behind the white-faced Kyle.

“So-Sorry, sir. I meant ‘dang’.”

Kimber giggled.

“I’m sure you did.” He nodded.

“Hi, Sheriff Clery.” Even though I’d only met him a few times I liked my dad’s boss and he liked me.

“Well hello, Sammy, are you excited for your first day?” Sheriff Clery crossed his arms in front of him and widened his stance imposingly, but gave me a wide smile.

“Yes sir!” I said. And then added lamely, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m giving a presentation to the 5th and 6th grades about safety when walking to and from school.”

“Yeah, he gives it every year.” Kyle muttered.

“Cool,” I smiled.

Sheriff Clery nodded at me and then turned and walked away. I looked around, confused. “Where’s Kimber?”

“She took off. She is annoyingly on time to everything.” And as if to illustrate his point, the bell rang. We both ran up the stairs and inside.

I walked into class and saw that Kimber had saved me a spot next to her at the back. Mr. Diamond, a short, round man of 40 or so nodded at me when I came in.

“Mr. Walker, I presume?”

“Um, yeah, that’s me.” I mumbled as I rushed past him to the desk next to Kimber.

“Welcome to Drisking Elementary. And for the rest of you, welcome back. Go Grizzlies!”

The class echoed a reluctant and subdued “go grizzlies”.

Kimber introduced me to other kids in the class throughout the morning. Most of them were nice, if sort of underwhelmed by me. They said their hellos and asked where I was from and the conversations usually ended with an unimpressed “okay.”

A group of girls who sat near the front, snuck looks at us all morning and snickered. I asked Kimber who they were and she just shrugged. During our second break they came up and talked to me.

“Are you friends with Kimber Destaro?” A tall, dark-haired girl asked me.

“Yeah,” I answered and looked over at Kimber. She was watching me with worried eyes.

“Are you related to her?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so because you don’t have orange hair.” I didn’t know what to say to that.

“You don’t have to be friends with her, you know,” said the second girl with the oddly round face.

“I wanna be friends with her.”

A third girl behind the other two snorted. She had pretty auburn hair and a rude, upturned nose.

“Well, if you do you’re going to be in the ugly kid group,” the first girl warned. “And once you’re in that group you can’t leave it ever.”

“Better than the bitch group.” I said. Rude Nose and Round Face gasped but Dark Hair smiled.

“We’ll see,” she said and the three returned to their corner of the room. I sat back down next to Kimber feeling like a badass. It was the first time I’d ever used a swear word in front of anybody other than Kyle.

“What did they say to you?” Kimber asked, nervously.

“They said you’re too pretty to be near them and that you make them look gross so we have to stay away from them.”

“Liar,” Kimber answered, but I could tell she was smiling.

We met Kyle in the cafeteria at lunch and he had nothing but bad things to say about his morning. Mrs. Tverdy was old and mean and she made everyone come up and say something about themselves even though the class only had 14 kids and they all knew each other. When the bell rang for recess I went to throw my lunch away with Kyle and I bumped into a kid I hadn’t seen before.

“Hey, are you Sam Walker?” The kid asked.

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Your sister is dating my brother.”

“Oh man!” Kyle laughed. “Your sister is dating a Whitiger!”

“Shut up, Kyle.” The kid grumbled.

“She’s gonna be Whitney Whitiger!”

As funny as it was I couldn’t help but be a little surprised. Not that I’d been paying attention but I’d only seen Whitney out of her room once over the summer.

“Um, where did she meet him?” I asked the Whitiger kid.

“I dunno. Probably at his job.”

“His job where?”

“He works at Drisking Water.”

It didn't make any sense to me but I shrugged it off. I did remember my mom giving Whitney some menial tasks like getting the car washed and setting up some utilities to get her out of the house. Maybe she met him once and they started dating over text. Teenagers were weird.

The rest of the school week followed much like the first. We were well into the first month when I heard someone mention the Skinned Men again. We were out on the playground and Kyle and I were trying to start a fire with two large wood chips. I'd just given myself a splinter when the distant sound of metal grinding on metal flooded over the playground, silencing every one of us.

"Borrasca," I said in awe.

"Yep," said Phil Saunders. "The Skinned Men kill again."

"Hey, Kyle said only babies believed in Skinned Men!" I threw an accusatory look at Kyle.

"They do! Phil is just stupid."

"Am not! Ask Danielle, she's seen them." Phil scanned the playground and then yelled at a blonde girl talking to Rude Nose. "Hey Danielle come here!"

The blonde girl rolled her eyes but came skipping over anyway. "What do you want? I told you Kayla doesn't like you, Phillip."

"No, tell them about the Skinned Men." Phil gestured to the air around us which was filled with the metallic scraping coming down from the mountain.

"You tell them."

"No, you saw them so you tell them."

"I didn't see them, Paige saw them."

"Oh." Phil said and an uncomfortable silence descended.

"You guys are weird," Danielle said before flipping her hair in our faces and leaving.

"Who's Paige?" I asked when she'd gone.

"Her sister," Phil said.

"Paige disappeared when we were like 5." Kyle said.

"After she saw the Skinned Men," Phil added.

The sounds from the mountain abruptly ended and the subdued atmosphere of the playground disappeared with it. When the bell rang Kyle lined up in his class line and since Phil was in my class I made sure I was behind him. The teachers began to count us off.

"Hey, what else do you know about Borrasca?" I whispered to him.

"My brother said that's where people go when they disappear. To Borrasca."

"What happens to them there?"

“Bad things,” he said, and then shushed me when I asked him what that meant.

The year dragged on and it wasn’t until Christmas break that I heard the machine at Borrasca again. It was December and there was a thick blanket of snow on the ground which only served to amplify the noise from the mountain. I sat in my room listening to it for a few minutes trying to decide what was happening in the place that bad things happen. I saw my dad’s cruiser pull up out the window and went down stairs to greet him. As I passed my sister’s door I heard her giggling in that annoying, teenage girl way and I cringed. I hoped Kimber never got like that.

“Dad!” I skidded on the landing just as he opened the door. My dad stomped the snow off his boots and threw open his arms.

“Sammy! How many years has it been?” He joked.

It was true I hadn’t seen much of my dad lately since he was working so much. Doing what, I didn’t know since this was the quietest, lamest town ever. Mom thought the Sheriff was grooming dad for his job since Clery was so old and Dad never really agreed or disagreed with her. He’d only been at the department seven months, after all, and he doubted people in the county would vote for him.

“Hey Dad, do you hear that? That like machine-sounding noise?”

“Yep! I hear it in town every now and then.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I asked the Sheriff about it and he told me the noise comes from private property up in the Ozarks.”

“Is the property called Borrasca?” I asked quickly.

“I have no idea. Borrasca? Where’d you hear that?”

I shrugged. “Kids at my school.”

“Well, it’s nothing to worry about, Sammy, probably just some logging equipment.”

“But is the place called Borrasca? Like have you heard that name before?”

“No, I have not heard that before.” Dad pulled his boots off and shrugged off his coat, looking toward the kitchen. I could tell I was losing him.

“Have you ever heard of the Skinned Men?” I asked quickly.

“Skinned Men? Good god, Sam. Is your sister telling you these stories?”

“No.” But he wasn’t listening to me anymore.

“Whitney!” He yelled up the stairs.

“No, Dad, Whitney doesn’t even talk to me.” I repeated.

I heard a door creak open upstairs and Whitney peered over the railing, phone in hand and an annoyed look on her face

“Are you trying to scare your brother?” Dad demanded.

“Dad, no.” I said again.

Whitney shot me a betrayed look. “Ugh, seriously? As if I’d waste my time.”

“You aren’t telling him stories about ‘Skinned Men’?”

“No, Dad, I told you I heard it at school,” I said.

Whitney gestured to me as if to say ‘see?’

“Alright, well you kids need to start getting along. You’re family for Christ’s sake.” Whitney rolled her eyes and when Dad walked into the kitchen she stuck her tongue out at me.

“Real mature, Whitney!” I yelled up at her but she was already gone. “I’ll tell Dad about your boyfriend!”

Christmas came and went with surprising smoothness at our house. Whitney and I got everything we’d had on our lists, which was a first for us. The town may be smaller but Dad’s paychecks were clearly better.

I wore my new Ram’s parka on the first day back to school after Christmas break. Kyle fawned over it and Kimber showed off the blue pearl necklace her mom had gotten her for Christmas. Kyle and I feigned interest but did it poorly. Kimber knew, but just seemed happy we cared enough to fake it.

As we said goodbye to Kyle for the morning Kimber was suddenly slammed from the side. Kyle caught her before she fell and I spun around angrily to see Dark-Haired Girl – whose name I’d learned was Phoebe Dranger – laughing and walking away from us with Round-Face girl.

“You’re bad people who make poor life choices!” Kyle yelled at them. “When I’m your boss someday I’ll make you clean bathrooms!”

“Yeah, and if Kyle’s your boss, you know you messed up!” I added. Kyle and I high-fived and turned to Kimber but she wasn’t sharing in our victory – she was trying to hide the tears on her face.

“Don’t sweat those girls, Kimber, nobody likes them. People are just nice to them because they’re related to the Prescotts.” Kyle tried to give her an awkward pat on the back but Kimber turned away from him and ran in the opposite direction.

“I hate those girls. Like I really hate them.” I said.

“I know, they’re bitches.” Kyle answered, mouthing the last word as he looked over his shoulder for any lurking adults.

“Well, I’d better get to class and make sure they don’t try and talk to her again.”

“There’s an assembly this morning. No class until after lunch.”

“Seriously? That’s awesome! Do we have to sit by class?”

“Not usually but we better get there quick so we can get seats at the back.” Kyle said as we started walking.

"What's the assembly for?" I asked.

"It's either D.A.R.E. or the History Society presentation."

"What's D.A.R.E.?"

"You know, D.A.R.E.? As in 'don't you dare do drugs or you're grounded until you're dead'?"

"Oh. I hope it's the history thing then."

We found Kimber already in the auditorium. She had collected herself and saved us both seats at the back of the room. She waved us over just as the puffy, stern Mrs. Tverdy walked onto the stage.

"Hello 4th Grade students. This morning we have a special presentation for you from the Historic Preservation Society of Drisking. If you have questions during the course of the lecture, please raise your hand."

"Like that'll happen," Kyle laughed.

"Now, I'd like to introduce to you Mr. Wyatt Dowding, Ms. Kathryn Scanlon and of course, Mr. James Prescott."

"What! Jimmy Prescott and not his dad? That's so weird!" Kimber whispered.

"Dude, Thomas Prescott has done this presentation every year for like 20 years," Kyle said. "It's definitely weird."

"It's not weird," whispered Mike Sutton from behind us. He leaned forward. "Tom Prescott went crazy like a year ago. He didn't do the presentation last year when my sister was here either."

"I don't like Jimmy Prescott," Kimber shook her head. "He gives me the heeby-jeebies. His dad is so much nicer, he's like a grandpa."

The presentation was slow and boring. Mr. Dowding and Ms. Scanlon talked about the first settlers here: the Cherokee and the trail of tears. They talked about Alexander Drisking's discovery of a motherlode of ore in the mountains and settling here with his family to mine and refine the iron. Then James Prescott took the stage from there to tell the story of his family's early journey to the town and their role in the revitalization of Drisking itself in the late 50's.

The last part was the most interesting of it all and I found Jimmy Prescott to be infallibly charismatic and entertaining. I was so busy laughing at his jokes and hanging on his every word that by the end of his presentation I realized I'd actually learned quite a bit. So much so that I was interested enough to ask a question, which Kyle warned was committing social suicide.

Mr. Prescott scanned the room and answered a few other questions before he finally got to me at the back.

"Yes, you in the back."

“Um, Mr. Prescott, why did the mines close? Like, what happened?” I asked.

“Very good question, young man. What did you say your name was?”

“Ah...Sam. Walker.”

“Ah, I believe I met your father the other day at the Sheriff’s office. Welcome to Drisking! As for your questions, most of the mines were closed in 1951 after a long period of unprofitability: the mountain had simply ran out of iron ore. The mills and refineries were abandoned and the town suffered for years. The miners and their families moved away, stores went out of business, schools closed and Drisking became a ghost town.

That would have been the end of it if it weren’t for stubborn families like mine who refused to leave. We refused to give up the town and after many, many years of hard work Drisking became the picturesque little haven in the Ozarks that it is today. I hope that answers your question.”

I sat back down and Kyle shook his head at me. “Bro...”

The assembly suffered through another fifteen minutes of awkward Q and A until Mrs. Tverdy finally cut us loose. We were released into the cafeteria to wait for the lunch lines to open. Kyle, Kimber and I sat in our usual corner.

“That was soooo boring,” Kyle whined. “When are they going to figure out that no one cares about Drisking’s history? Seriously, I fell asleep like three times.”

Kimber nudged me. “Sam seemed to care,” she teased.

“I just wanted to know about the mines. Mines are creepy, that’s all.”

“Yeah, but all our mines were blown up. You can’t go in them anymore.” Kyle said.

“Blown up?” I asked.

Kimber nodded. “Some kids died after going into the mines so the city set off some ‘controlled blasts to implode the caverns’, at least that’s what my mom said. They messed up, though, and I heard they blew up the water table or poisoned it or something.”

“What, how do you know that?” Kyle asked.

Kimber shrugged. “I heard my dad talking about it.”

“Did they use C4 or something?”

“I guess.”

“So like, we all drink the water so we all have C4 in our bodies and we could explode at any minute!” Kyle said excitedly.

“Do you think that’s what happened to all the missing people?” I asked him. “Just sitting there one day and BOOM!”

“Yeah, dude,” Kyle grabbed my shoulders. “And that’s where the Skinned Men come from.”

I made the international symbol of ‘mind blown’ and we laughed hysterically.

“You guys are dumb,” Kimber rolled her eyes but then she laughed when Kyle fell on the floor pretending he was exploding. I remember thinking in that moment that I was happy here in Drisking, Missouri with these two people. Happier than I’d ever been anywhere else.

It was the last truly happy moment I ever had. Less than an hour later Mr. Diamond’s phone rang and he exchanged a few quiet words with the person on the other end, his eyes flicking to and from my desk. It was hard to be surprised, then, when he hung up and asked me to come up to the front.

When I got there he told me my mom was waiting for me in the office and I was going home for the day. I traded a confused and worried look with Kimber and then packed up my backpack and went to the office. When I got there, my mom was crying.

We drove home in strained silence. I was too afraid to ask what was wrong. Mom parked the car a block from our house, which was blocked in by several police cars. When an explanation didn’t come I broke the silence myself.

“Is it dad?” I asked quietly, holding back tears.

“No, honey, Dad is fine,” she whispered.

“Then what happened?”

“Whitney never made it to school this morning,” her voice broke over my sister’s name.

“Oh, no Mom, I think she ditched!” I said quickly. “I saw her leave this morning and it was really early, like 6, and she was with her friends. Um, Pete Witiger and that kid Taylor!”

“We know about all that, Sam. But they made it to school and Whitney wasn’t with them. They said she wanted to stop by the Circle K near Drisking High so they left her there. And no one has seen her since.”

“Well...” My brain struggled to come up with an explanation. “Maybe she’s ditching.”

“No, honey.” My mom put the car back in drive and drove up to our house, parking behind a police cruiser. “The police, as well as your father, think that Whitney is with Jay.”

“But she has a new boyfriend here!”

“We found all her books on the floor of her room this morning and half her clothes gone along with some cash of your dad’s.”

“But-”

“Right now we think that she hitched a ride to St. Louis and that she’s with Jay. The Sheriff’s office is trying to contact the boy’s parents now.”

Whitney? Run away? Anyone who knew my sister knew she was prone to dramatics and empty threats. Plus, she was dating Chris Witiger’s older brother Pete. I was sure of it.

We walked up the steps and into a house filled with stale coffee and quiet murmurs. I tried to remember if Whitney herself had ever actually confirmed she was dating Pete but I drew a blank. When we walked into the kitchen, I saw my father sitting at the table, staring at phone records, head in hand. He looked up when I came into the room and gave me a weak smile.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Dad, I have to tell you something.”

I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder and turned to look up at a solemn Sheriff Clery.

“Everything and anything you might know, son. No matter how trivial you think it is.”

I nodded and sat down at the table with my dad as my mom handed the big man a cup of coffee.

“Here you go, Sheriff,” she said, weakly.

“Please, Mrs. Walker, call me Killian.”

My mother nodded and retreated back into a darkened corner to talk quietly with Sheriff Clery’s wife, Grace.

“What do you know, Sam?” My dad asked as he rested his chin on his hands in a mock symbol of prayer, as though I may deliver him from his suffering.

“Well, just, I heard Whitney had a boyfriend, that guy Pete Witiger that she’s been hanging out with, and I saw them and Taylor Dranger leave this morning before me.”

“What time did they leave?” Asked the Sheriff.

“I don’t know. . . like before 6.”

He nodded. “That matches the statements of Taylor Dranger and the Witiger boy.” My father’s head sunk lower into his hands and I knew I’d let him down. “But,” I rushed, “I don’t think she went back to St. Louis because she was dating Pete and I don’t think she wanted to be with her boyfriend back home anymore.”

“I understand that, son, but a teenage girl’s mind is a complicated thing. My officers are trying to get ahold of the boyfriend’s family back in St. Louis.” Clery nodded to my father. “Now why don’t you head up to your room and let us work, Samuel.”

I looked up at him in surprise. "What? No I wanna stay down here. I can help."

"No, son, there's nothing more you can do here. You've been a good brother, now let us handle this."

"But I can help!"

"You already have."

"Dad!" I looked over at my dad with begging eyes.

"Go to your room, Sam." He said quietly after a moment. I balked.

"Dad..."

"Now."

I was so angry I did the only thing that I could of to make my rage known - I stomped upstairs, slammed the door and then sat on my bed in disbelief. The tears came then and I laid there feeling helpless, worthless and scared for my sister.

I thought about all the places Whitney could be. Was she scared? Was she alone? Was she...dead? When the sun began to set, I finally got out of bed and went to check my email. I was expecting lots of messages from Kimber and Kyle but there was only one.

did she go to the treehouse?

I sat staring at the computer screen for almost a minute, Kimber's words from last fall echoed in my brain.

"If you enter the treehouse without the proper ceremony you'll disappear and then you'll die."

I didn't buy that Whitney had gone to Circle K that morning and I especially didn't believe that she'd hitchhiked out of town. Nothing they were saying downstairs made any sense if you knew my sister - but maybe this did. Maybe she and her boyfriend went to the treehouse to make out or something and maybe he'd left her there. Maybe she'd gotten lost or maybe the Skinned Men had found her. That was the worst thought of all.

I didn't need to sneak out because the police were too busy with my parents to care about me anyway. I snuck my bike out of the garage and rode the three miles to the West Rim Prescott Ore Trail. When I got there I saw two bikes already locked to the signpost and my two best friends sitting in the snow next to them.

"I knew you'd come," Kyle said when I pulled my bike up and Kimber ran up to hug me.

"I'm so sorry, Sam."

There was really nothing for me to say and they didn't push. Kimber took my arm and we started up the trail. The silence between us was stretched, but comfortable. We trudged through the snow and all the while I searched

for the telltale footprints of others but the snow was coming too fast. The hike up the mountain was harder and wetter than when we'd come in the fall and when Ambercot Fort finally came into view over the ridge it was a welcome sight. The sun was getting low and we hadn't brought flashlights.

I fell as I ran up to the tree, calling my sister's name to the quiet wild. Kyle was right behind me and leapt impressively onto the rope ladder, climbing quickly up the planks. I kept calling Whitney's name, waiting for Kyle to yell that he'd found her or that there was at least some sign of her.

And then I heard Kimber quietly say my name from where she stood at the Triple Tree. I ran over and tried to follow her eyes to confirm what I already knew was there. And then I found it, freshly carved near the top.

Whitney W.

My breath froze in my chest and my vision blurred with unwelcome tears. And as the sun took its last desperate breath before plunging into the deep of the horizon, a deafening metallic whirl sang out from the wilderness and spilled down the mountainside.

2 Part 2

Underneath the Triple Tree there is a man who waits for me and should I go or should I stay my fate's the same either way.

"Good morning."

The words faded back into the ether and I awoke with a start. Jimmy Prescott was lounging against the wall near the door, an amused yet disapproving look on his face.

"Shit, sorry Mr. Prescott. I didn't hear you come in."

"You know, I worked here when I was a kid, too. I installed the bell on the door for this very reason. Didn't seem to wake you up, though," he laughed. I mumbled another apology and idly straightened a stack of business cards in front of me.

"Late night?"

"Ah... kinda." Very.

"I hope you weren't out at the bonfires with all the other underage drinkers."

"No, sir." Yep.

"Good. Anyway, I'm just here for my lunch. I'll take a parmesan chicken with avocado on rye."

"Yes, sir." Happy that the conversation was over, I walked over to the sandwich counter and unwound the twisty tie from the rye bread.

Jimmy Prescott stepped back from the counter and idly studied that pictures on the wall, though he'd seen them a thousand times before. More of the photos were of the Prescott family, taken over the last century. I'd always thought it odd décor but then, the shop was named after them after all.

"Is Meera here?" Prescott asked as I wrapped up his sandwich.

"She's in the back."

"Ah, I thought she'd still be in St. Louis. Well, when you're finished would you mind getting her for me?"

Shit.

"Yes, sir."

I handed him his sandwich and went to the back to find Meera. She was in the office, furiously punching the keys on her accounting calculator.

"Uh, Meera? Jimmy Prescott is out front. He wants to talk to you."

She turned and gave me a dubious look. "Did he say what about?" I shook my head.

"Okay," she sighed. "You can go home for the day, Sam."

"But... are you sure?" I still had three hours on the clock.

"He's the only customer we've had since we opened. Don't worry, I'll pay you for a whole day, kiddo."

"Thanks, Meera. Um, good luck I guess."

I gave her a sympathetic shrug and she patted my arm. I didn't know how she did it. Meera was perhaps the most burdened and stressed out woman in all of Drisking but she never failed to be unbelievably kind. There was a hopelessness about her, a sadness that she hid very well.

I left the store out the backdoor so I wouldn't have to see Jimmy Prescott again. His weird, yellowed amber eyes always set me on edge. Not to mention he was a total tool.

I hopped in my car and texted Kyle that I was off work. He answered immediately and told me to come meet him. I happily whipped my apron off over my head and threw the car into reverse. Crystal Lake was my favorite place in all of Drisking.

I had to park almost a mile away since the lake was so packed. I eventually found Kyle and Kimber sitting on a rock that jutted out over the beach.

Kimber was sunbathing in a blue, floral bikini and Kyle was wearing his 'no one can tell where my eyes are looking' sunglasses.

"What'd I miss?" I asked, sitting down next to Kimber.

"Not much," she answered, stretching and sitting up. "Just more beer." She dug into the cooler behind her and tried to hand me a Blue Moon.

"Ugh, no." I waved it away. "Got any Excedrin?"

"Oh no," Kimber gave me her 'I'm sorry' pout.

"Okay, then I'll just take those sunglasses." I held my hand out to Kyle who looked back at it in horror.

"What? No, fuck off!"

"Oh, come on, Kyle, give him your sunglasses. Sam didn't get to sleep off his hangover like we did!"

I smiled at Kyle and he tightened his lips. We both knew exactly what I was doing. Kimber stroked Kyle's arm in encouragement. "Please?" she asked.

"Fine," he said and shoved his BluBlockers at me. I put them on and sat back, turning my head to watch the girls on the beach below. Phoebe Dranger – Dark-Haired girl - was there lying on a towel next to Round Face and giggling. It still seemed unnatural to me to see the two off them without Rude-Nose. The three had been inseparable, working as fluidly together as the gears in a watch until Kristy had fallen in love with some college kid and run away.

"So why'd you get out of work early anyway?" Kyle asked.

"Prescott came in."

"Ew," Kimber squirmed. "He totally freaks me out. He's been staring at me since like 5th grade."

"Next time he stares at you let me know and I'll knock him the fuck out." Kyle had always been protective over Kimber but ever since they'd started dating it'd gotten 10 times more unbearable.

Kimber winked at him. "So what did he want, Sam?"

"He wanted to talk to Meera. Probably about the sandwich shop."

"You mean about how no one goes there and the business should have closed years ago but it won't because the Prescott's are stubborn and vain?" Kyle said.

"Yeah, probably, I mean she looked pretty worried. I can count on one hand how many sandwiches I've sold in the past month. "

"Ouch." Kimber grimaced.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure she's going to get chewed out. I really don't like that guy." I thought about the squirmy, yellow-eyed freak yelling at sweet, little Meera and it made my blood boil.

"You should have met his dad," Kyle snorted. "He was a piece of work."

"His dad?"

"Yeah, Tom Prescott," Kimber said. "The family put him in a home a few towns over." "Why is he in a home?"

"I heard he got dementia and he was embarrassing the family in public." Kyle said.

"I heard that, too," Kimber brushed her long curls off of her shoulders. "I always liked Tom Prescott. It was a pretty shitty thing to do."

"Hey kids!" We turned in unison so see Phil Saunders come stomping out of the bushes behind us with Mike Sutton following behind. "So this is where the cool people hang out. High above the kingdom on Pride Rock."

"Sup Mike," Kyle said ignoring Phil, whom he'd disliked ever since Phil had briefly dated Kimber. Phil was either unaware of or uninterested in Kyle's feelings. Of course, that may also have been because Phil was stoned out of his mind most of the time, and now was no exception.

They sat down next to us and Mike offered me his pipe.

"Wanna hit this?"

I did want to hit it, and pretty badly too. I reached up to grab it but Phil swatted my hand away.

"Careful, guy, you don't want to get the Sheriff's son high. For fucks sake, Mike." Mike nodded knowingly and shoved the pipe back into his pocket.

I scowled. "Really?"

"Sorry, Sammy. Hell the only reason I'm even smoking around you is because today is my cousin's deathiversary and I don't give a shit about anything else."

"Your cousin Hannah?" Kimber asked with a sympathetic look.

"Yep. 5 years she's been gone."

"Too many people disappear in these woods, man," Mike said as he exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"Yeah, man," Phil nodded. "You know sometimes, when I'm high, I can see them all. And I feel like I know the answer to the mystery, man. Like I'm so close to solving it. It's just something I can see. Like they're all puzzle pieces and in my mind I see the puzzle put together but I can't tell what the picture is of, you know?"

"You're fuckin' high, Saunders." Kyle said.

"We all are, man. We all are. Everyone in this town is drinking the fuckin' kool aid."

Kimber raised an eyebrow at him but said nothing.

"Everyone except the dead ones. I can see what they looked like before they went into the ground. Or is it the grounder?"

"Shit, I dunno, man." Mike said to the space in front of him.

"Yeah. I see all those people. Hannah. Paige. Jason Metley. Hell, I ever see your sister, Walker."

Kyle, who I knew had been monitoring the conversation for mention of this very thing, sprang to his feet and opened his mouth to yell at Phil.

“Nah, Whitney Walker ran away to St. Louis. Remember?” Mike said.

I saw Kyle and Kimber exchange a quick look as I tried to remain impassive from behind the BluBlockers.

“That true, man?” Phil asked. And there it was.

I knew Kyle and Kimber had always wondered what I thought about Whitney and if I’d ever accepted the official statement that she and Jay had run away together. They were kind enough not bring it up but I knew they wanted to know what I believed, what I thought had really happened.

I loved them both and I wanted to talk to them about it but I just couldn’t. Everyone thought that I had spent the last seven years quietly grieving and that I’d put the incident behind me. At least, that’s what I’d tried to show them.

The truth was that I’d never given up on Whitney. I’d waited years for Jay to show up on social media and when I finally found him last year, I’d been devastated. I’d always hoped the official report was right and that Whitney was somewhere far away from here, alive and happy with Jay Bower. But his Myspace page showed a thriving teenager, still living at home with his parents, his ex-girlfriend Whitney the furthest thing from his mind.

When I’d brought the evidence to my dad he read the pages I’d printed off and then shut the door to his office with me on the other side. I heard him crying in there for hours as I waited for him to reopen the case and bring the smackdown on the Butler County sheriff’s department. But justice had never come and we never mentioned Jay Bower again.

For whatever reason, I never told Kyle and Kimber about any of that. Maybe it was because I was worried they’d blow it off like my dad had or maybe, and far more likely, I didn’t want them to know how obsessed I’d become with the Borrasca and the Skinned Men. I knew, as assuredly as the sun would rise tomorrow, that Whitney’s death had happened at there; just like all the others who’d gone to the Triple Tree.

I was suddenly very aware of 4 pairs of eyes staring at me.

“Yeah, it’s true. She ran off with this guy Jay from our hometown.” I answered. That was enough for Kyle.

“Alright, guys, seriously, he’s the sheriff’s kid. What do you think’s gonna happen if he gets caught with weed?”

“The little man is right, Phil, let’s bounce. I don’t need any more trouble with the cops around here.” Mike said.

“Later, Walker. Kimber. Little man.” Phil stood up, brushed off his pants, and jumped from the boulder onto the sandy beach below. He sprayed

sand all over a couple of freshmen girls who squealed and called him an unthoughtful ass. Phil tipped his invisible hat to them and said “Ladies” before walking off.

Mike followed him down and as I watched them make their way down the beach I became aware of the conversation going on behind me.

“I didn’t say I wanted to go, I said I had to go.” Kimber said.

“It’s only 2 o’clock! And it’s Sunday.”

“I know but my parents have been fighting a lot lately and I don’t want to leave my mom alone too long.”

“I thought she was doing better?”

“A little, but she’s still depressed, Kyle.”

“Do you wanna stay over at my place tonight?” Kimber’s voice dropped into a whisper. “I just don’t... I don’t think I’m ready for that yet.”

“What- no, wait, that’s not what I meant! I’d sleep on the pullout in the basement and you would have my room.” Very awkward silence. “My parents love you, you know,” he added.

Kimber laughed. “I know. I just want to be there for my mom right now. But thank you, sweetie.” And then the absolutely disgusting sound of my best friends kissing. I would never get used to it.

“Ugh, on that note, I’m outta here, too.” I stood up and gave them both a shaming look.

“Oh, come on Sam, don’t be jealous, we’ll find you a girlfriend someday,” Kyle joked.

“I really don’t need your help with that,” I muttered, glancing down the beach to where Emmaline Addler was sunbathing. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” “Last week of school!” Kimber yelled at my retreating back. Thank god.

Tomorrow was the last Monday of the school year and while I should have been thankful my sophomore year was ending, I wasn’t. The summer meant no distractions, more time to think and even more hours of boredom at Prescott Artisan Sandwiches.

But I wasn’t looking forward to tomorrow for another reason: besides it being Monday it was also Sophomore Ditch Day. My dad had caught on to that several weeks ago and warned me to “set a good example” and go to school that day. Sometimes I really hated being the son of a cop.

Kimber and Kyle were sympathetic and had offered to share in my misery. I had, of course, said yes, much to Kyle’s sadness.

As I’d expected my dad was waiting for me when I got home. We shared a brief, strained conversation about our respective days and then he finally got to it.

“Remember, Sammy, we’re cracking down on truancy this year. I want to see you at school tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I got it Dad.”

“And I hope I won’t have to write a ticket to Kyle either.”

I sighed. “It’s just a tradition, even the teachers sort of encourage it. On Friday they said-“

“I don’t care what they said, Sam; besides the fact that I’m the sheriff, I’m also your father and I want my son in school.”

I laughed and shook my head. What a joke. “I can’t control what Kyle does.” “Fair enough but you can control what you do.”

I said nothing and Dad sighed.

“It’s almost over, Sam. Just get through these last five days and you can be done with school for a few months.”

“Fine.” I walked out of the kitchen rudely ending the conversation. I climbed the stairs and passed by Whitney’s door on the way to my room. The light was on and silence was behind it. I knew my mother was in there. She was always in there, doing god knows what.

I walked to my own room, shut the door behind me and locked it. The next day at school ended up being more embarrassing than anything else. There were a few other people that hadn’t skipped, maybe a total of ten of us, and the looks they shot at me made it clear that my dad was the reason they were there.

Kimber, great friend that she was, happily went to her classes like it was a normal day. Kyle attended all of my classes with me. The teachers, who had been looking forward to an easy day, couldn’t have cared less.

Just before lunch an officer came around to all the class rooms and asked for copies of the attendance sheets. Dad really wasn’t kidding about cracking down this year. I was going to get shit from people all summer.

At lunch Kyle and I went out to my car to smoke. Usually we were hidden by dozens of large pick-up trucks but today we were out in the open and vulnerable. I moved the car back to a shady corner of the parking lot and Kyle pulled out his bowl.

“Did you text Kimber?” I asked him while he hit it.

“Yep,” he said through tight lips as he let the smoke sit in his lungs and then blew it out all over my dashboard. “She went home around 4th period. She said her mom called her and she was going home to take care of her. I don’t know, man.”

“Doesn’t her mom hate you?” I asked, taking my turn with the bowl.

“Yeah. I mean that’s a fairly new development, ever since Kimber and I started dating. But I’m pretty sure she’s always hated me and just hid it

better before. Now that she's all depressed and whatever she doesn't give a shit."

It was hard to picture anyone hating Kyle. "Why can't Kimber's dad take care of her?"

"I don't know."

I hit the pipe again.

"Hey man, let's not even go back today." Kyle said.

"You think?" I asked.

"Yeah, I mean you put in 4 periods, you've been a good son. And Officer Dick Ass already came around and collected the attendance sheets."

"Dick Ass? Really? You're better than that, man."

"Officer. . . Ass. . . Dick?"

"You're fuckin' baked, Kyle."

"Seriously, man, let's go."

I thought about it a second. Kyle was right, I'd done my duty as a son and if I left now I'd have enough time to go to Gamestop before work.

"Fuck it." I turned on the ignition.

Kyle sat up in his chair and rolled down the window to clear out the smoke. "Hey man, can you drop me by Kimber's?"

"Sure but how're you gonna get home?"

"Can you come get me after work?"

"What if her mom throws you out again?"

Kyle rolled his eyes. "That was one time."

"Why can't I just drop you at home and you can take your own car?"

"It needs new tires."

New tires, of course. What Kyle really meant was that his insurance had lapsed and he didn't have any money for gas, anyway. He'd bought the car last summer after working double shifts at the convenience store for half a year. It was an okay car, newer, but I knew he'd only wanted it to impress Kimber, something he'd vehemently denied. Had it worked? Not in my opinion.

They'd started dating in the fall and Kyle quit his job to spend more time with her. Kimber didn't seem like the kind of girl to be impressed by a Pontiac Bonneville but Kyle was convinced that was how he'd won her over. I was sure all the car had really done was give him the confidence to ask her out. And now that its part in their romance ended, the car sat in the garage of the Landy home collecting dust instead of memories.

Gamestop didn't have what I wanted and neither did Drisking Games and Media. Since I had nothing else to do I decided to show up to work early and hope that Meera would let me leave early too.

I parked in front and walked in the door, unsurprised to see no one at the front counter. There were only three of us that worked at the shop and sadly I never got to see the other girl, Emmaline, who worked on the days I didn't. This was disappointing to me since she was half the reason I'd applied there in the first place.

I went into the back to tell Meera I was there and found her slumped over her desk on a pile of receipts and paperwork. This wasn't an unusual way to find Meera but something seemed different today. I immediately felt a disturbance in the force but before I could run away she turned toward me and I saw I was right to flee; Meera was crying.

"Are you, um...um, are you--"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said quickly, wiping her eyes. "Is it four already?"

"No, it's 2:15. I just thought maybe if I came in early--"

"Oh right, it's your ditch day." Meera wiped her eyes only to have them fill with tears again. "I don't understand, Sam, this store had been operating in the red ever since I was hired to manage it. What am I doing wrong?"

"I don't...know," I offered lamely, the instinct to escape never stronger.

"No one comes in here -- ever -- and Mr. Prescott refuses to let me put signs up to advertise! He says they're unsightly, but how does he expect me to pull in business! I need this job, Sam, god, I just..."

I must have looked like a frightened deer because when Meera glanced over at me she seemed to subtly collect herself. "Go ahead and go out to the front. I'll do your timecard."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I really liked Meera and I hated seeing her like this.

The front didn't end up being much better. I could hear Meera crying over the store's dated music track. Her sobs went from painfully audible to muffled whimpers. After half an hour I decided I had to do something. Since I was entirely unequipped to deal with an adult woman's emotions I decided to call Meera's husband Owen. He was thankfully at home and answered on the second ring. "I'll be right there."

I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard a car pull up outside and saw the tall, girthy Owen get out of it. He walked in during a quiet lull in his wife's breakdown.

"I'm sorry to call you at home, Mr. Daley, I just didn't know what else to do..."

"That's okay, Sam, you did the right thing." He looked tired and I could tell this situation wasn't new to him.

"Is she ok? I mean like, will she be ok?"

“Oh...yeah.” He nodded. “We’re just going through some things.”

“Oh. Meera said the store is going bankrupt, too.” I winced as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

“Yeah,” Owen ran a hand through his hair. “That’s part of it, although I don’t think Jim is going to let that happen. Meera is more upset about...” he sighed. “Has Meera told you about her, ah, appointments?” “Ah...no.”

“Well, we’ve been trying to get pregnant for years. Long, painful years. It’s just so goddamn important for her to have a baby. And you know she blames me for our problems?”

He walked around the room, staring at the pictures, not really talking to me anymore.

“I understand why it’s important to her, I just don’t understand the obsession with it, you know? Because she’s the last one in her family? Because she’s the last McCaskey on the planet? I mean, does she even realize that our baby wouldn’t be a McCaskey? He’d be a Daley! I tell you Sam, never marry a woman with a crazy father and four dead uncles. They develop these obsessions with lineage and-“

“Four dead uncles?”

“What? Oh, yeah. The famous ones. You know the four brothers who died in the Drisking mines? Well that only left her dad. And her parents were only able to conceive her. Which leaves her as the last McCaskey and hope for the family line. So of course you see how this is all my fault.”

I looked at him blankly and he sighed.

“I’m sorry, kid. These aren’t your problems and they’re way over your paygrade anyway. I’m just very stressed out these days. Our fertility issues and Meera’s absolute abhorrence to our only other option, it’s-“

“But how did they die?” I was desperate to talk about anything else and the story of Meera’s uncles interested me.

“The McCaskey boys? I don’t really know. They died on the mountain somewhere.”

“Oh. Well, um, have you heard of the Skinned Men?”

“Skinned men?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What about Borrasca?”

Owen Daley squeezed his eyes shut and pushed in on his temples with his fingers. “What? What does a borrasca have to do with anything?”

“Owen?” Meera voice squeaked from the doorway.

“Oh, baby, are you okay? Sam called the house-“

“I want to do it.”

"You do?" Owen asked dubiously.

"I called him."

His eyes flicked over to me and I immediately looked away. Another conversation I didn't want to be a part of.

"Sam, why don't you take off for the day? Meera and I will handle things here."

"Okay," I mumbled and bolted for the door. Once I was in my car and backing away I called Kyle.

"Dude, fucking weird shit is going down in this town."

"What happened?"

"I can't explain it over the phone. Where are you at?"

"I'm at Kimber's. Are you off work?"

"Yeah, I'm coming to get you."

By 'at Kimber's' Kyle meant sitting on the curb in front of the house, kicked off the property again. When I pulled up Kimber came out and met us at the curb.

"I'm so sorry, Kyle," she said. "She's really upset today, she wouldn't even let me leave the house to sit with you."

"It's okay," he said. "Don't worry about me I just want to make sure you and your mom are okay."

"We're okay. And my dad will be home soon."

"Text us when he gets home and we'll come get you." I said.

"I wish I could, I'm babysitting tonight until 7:30. Maybe after that?"

"Sure."

Kyle and Kimber hugged goodbye and then Kimber rushed back to her house as something crashed inside.

"So what's going on?" Kyle asked, taking a drink of a warm Dr. Pepper sitting in my cup holder. "You're still wearing your apron, you know."

"Meera had a breakdown," I said, peeling it off.

"Really? What happened?"

I told Kyle the full story giving particular attention to the four uncles.

"Yeah the McCaskeys. I've heard of them. Didn't know Meera was one, though, I thought they were all dead."

"Yeah, she's the last one. So like...do you think the McCaskey deaths have anything to do with the other disappearances?" It had been awhile since I'd mentioned anything about Borrasca and Kyle choked a little on the Dr. Pepper.

"I don't... I don't know, man. I mean maybe if the disappearances started around the same time?"

"How can we find that out?"

"Maybe the cops? There have to be police reports."

"Okay, but what if I couldn't ask my dad?"

Kyle shook his head. "I don't know then."

"What about like records? The historical society people, maybe?"

"Oh yeah," he said, nodding. "We can try them. They're over on 2nd. They share an office with Drisking Arts and Antiques."

I made a u-turn and started back toward town.

"Hey, ah... why are we doing this?"

I'd known the question was coming. I'd hoped to have more answers myself before I had to give him one.

"Just... Whitney," was all I could say. Kyle didn't ask anything more. The Historic Preservation Society of Drisking was at the back of the building and we had to walk through the Antiquities shop as the owner, Mr. Dranger, eyed us warily. At the end of a short hallway we found a small room with two desks pushed together. One was empty and the other was stacked high with books and folders of loose paper. We could hear someone typing behind the stacks.

I cleared my throat. "Hello?" A small woman popped up from behind the desk. I recognized her as the same woman who had given the us a lecture in 5th grade. "Hello. How can I help you boys?" She asked, walking out to greet us.

"Um, yeah, I have a few questions about Drisking's... history, I guess?"

"Oh great! Is this for an end of year report? Have a seat, boys." She gestured to the empty chair sitting behind the other desk. I nodded at Kyle and he sat down, looking uneasy.

"Yeah, it's for an essay we have to write. Hey, I think you gave a lecture to us like seven years ago. At school."

"Oh yes! I give that lecture every year with Mr. Prescott," she smiled.

"Yeah it was you and one other guy, too. A bald guy." Kyle said, shifting uncomfortably in the wooden chair.

"Yes, that was my fiancé Wyatt Dowding. He passed several years ago."

"Oh." Kyle said.

"So, ah, Miss- Miss-"

"Scanlon. But you can call me Kathryn." She said.

"Kathryn," I tried. I hated calling adults by their first names. "Um, we want to know about the McCaskey kids."

"Ooh," Kathryn said shaking her head. "A dark part of history there but still history nonetheless."

"Yeah, so when did that happen?"

"And how did they die?" Kyle added.

“Well they didn’t die. I mean, they certainly perished in the mines but their bodies were never recovered so we don’t know the answer to that. I would think dehydration, starvation and exhaustion killed them within days of getting lost down there. And to your second question that was... 1953, I believe.”

“And the mines closed that year?”

“Well actually the mines officially closed the year after. There was a legal spat between the city and the Prescott family who wanted to leave the mines open until the bodies were found. The city won and the mines were condemned.”

“Wait, why did the Prescott’s care?”

“Don’t you want to write this down?” Kathryn asked.

Kyle tapped his head twice with his finger. Kathryn shrugged and continued.

“Well, the Prescott and the McCaskey family were closely related. Tom Prescott was paying teams of unemployed miners to go down in the mines and search for the bodies. The city had had enough of it, the mountain was unstable and they didn’t want any more deaths. The mines had been abandoned years before and were structurally unsafe. After the city banned the Recovery teams from the mines, members of the Prescott family started going down there themselves. Finally the city had had enough and they had the mines collapsed.”

“With bombs?” Kyle asked.

“Well, with explosives. And that’s what led to the ‘incident’. By this time the mines had been unprofitable for a few years and the city was quite broke. They hired a less than reputable company to collapse the mines and, well, when they set off the explosives, they accidentally broke into Drisking’s water table. The city went into debt trying to purify the water of silt and iron ore. It wasn’t until two years later that things started getting better, thanks to the Prescott’s who truly did revitalize Drisking.”

Kyle’s phone chirped and he pulled it out of his pocket. “It’s Kimber. She wants us to come over.”

“Okay. Thanks Ms. Scanlon. I mean, Kathryn”

“Sure! If you have any other questions feel free to come by. We’re almost always open during the day. Oh! Or you can email me.” She dug into her jacket pocket and pulled out a loose business card. It was creased and had a dusty smudge on it.

“Thanks.”

“So what do you think?” Kyle asked when we got in the car.

"I don't know. It's weird isn't it? I mean why would the Prescott's give a shit if the town suffers after they refused to help him find their family and were actively working against them?"

"Maybe they forgave and forgot." Kyle shrugged.

"Does Jimmy Prescott seem like a guy to forgive and forget to you?"

"Ugh. . . no. And his dad is even worse."

"Exactly. Maybe we should--"

"Turn here! Sorry, Kimber's still babysitting and she's over on Amhurst."

When we pulled up Kimber was out in the front yard with two young boys who were playing in the driveway. She was holding a sleeping baby and waving to us. We parked in the driveway and she introduced us to the two older kids. They gave us shy hellos and then ran off to continue their game.

Once they'd left we explained everything that had happened to Kimber while she listened and rocked the baby in her arms.

"Sam is right, that doesn't make sense. But why are we even concerned about something that happened decades ago?"

"Whitney." Kyle said so I didn't have to. A flash of surprise crossed Kimber's face and she walked over to put the baby down in his playpen. Then she walked back and pulled me into one of her famous Super-Comforting-Not-At-All-Awkward hugs. When she released me she began to pace around the driveway. "Okay, so we think Whitney somehow got involved in all of this and, you're right, if we want to figure this out we need to start at the beginning. Phil is right: every mystery in this town is one piece of a larger puzzle, it's all related. . ." She stopped and looked over at us. "We need to go to the source if we want answers."

"Yeah that's not a bad idea," Kyle agreed. "I know he likes to hang out in the Hide-away and get drunk with ex-Sheriff Clery."

"Ah, no Kyle. Not Jimmy – his dad."

"Tom? He's so crazy they put him in a home!"

"He's the horse's mouth, though, isn't he? Jimmy isn't likely to know half as much as his dad."

"But--"

As Kyle and Kimber argued I watched the kids chase each other around the tree in their front yard. There seemed to be something carved in the bark, words, not unlike the Triple Tree at Ambercot Fort. I was too far away to read what it said.

"He got you, he got you!" I heard the youngest one call to his brother.

"The Skinned Man got you, now you have to die."

"Na-uh, Peter, I was touching the tree."

"No you weren't! You're a liar! One of them got you and now you have to meet the Shiny Gentleman!"

"No I don't!"

"Kimber, Josh is cheating!"

I shuddered and turned away from them. "Where's the nut house?" I interrupted them. "Is it close?"

"It's not a nut house, it's more like a hospice," Kimber chided. "The rumor I've heard is that he's at Golden Elm and that's in Cape Girardeau."

"That's about 40 minutes away," Kyle said and pull out his phone. "I'll check the visiting hours for Tuesdays. Sam, do you work tomorrow?"

"I work every day but I'll get out of it." I promised.

"Ok cool. Let's plan to leave after school."

The following day dragged on like any last Tuesday of the school year. Most people talked about what they did with their ditch day or complained about a cop showing up at their house to issue them a ticket while sliding less than pleased looks at me.

When the final bell rang at 3:30 I grabbed my bag and booked it out to my car. Kyle and Kimber were already waiting for me.

The drive took longer than we expected when I got lost in Cape Girardeau. The town was bigger than Drisking and the streets weren't laid out with any sort of planning or logic. By the time we arrived at Golden Elm we only had 20 minutes left for visiting hours.

"We're here to see Mr. Thomas Prescott," Kimber told the nurse at the front desk. We let her do the talking since she had a disarming, old-fashioned charm about her that put people in a friendly mood.

"Old Tom? Wow, he hasn't had a visitor since Christmas when his son came up. Sign the check-in sheet and take a visitor sticker. You're family then? Do you know where his room is?" The nurse arched a thin, suspicious eyebrow.

"I'm sorry, we don't." Kimber apologized. "My mother has been asking me to check in on my great uncle while she's away doing Doctors without Borders. I should have gotten more information from her but you know, she only has so many minutes to call home."

"Oh, of course dear! Let me get someone to escort you."

An orderly led us to Tom Prescott's room which we found empty. He pointed down the hall and said "He likes to read in the sunroom."

We walked down the hall and found an old, thin man with sitting alone and whispering to himself. He was sitting at a table in front of a backgammon board moving chess pieces around it.

"Tom Prescott?" Kimber said, smiling.

He didn't look up and I wondered if he'd heard her at all. Kimber took a deep breath to try again but the old man suddenly slammed his fist on the table.

"I'm him, goddammit, I'm Mr. Thomas Prescott. Don't call me Tom; people's kids used to have more respect."

"I'm sorry, sir." Kimber said gently as she sat down in the chair opposite him.

"You kids have no respect. Do you even know who I am? It's my son that's done it. That boy's momma shoulda whipped him but she was soft and now he's runnin' around my town spreading his vulgarity and disrespect."

"Our apologies, Mr. Prescott, we never meant to be disrespectful. We greatly admire you. You're the man who built our town into what it is today! Everyone remembers that. Drisking was suffering and the town was dying and then you fixed it. We know that."

"I did what I had to do," the old man grumbled. "It was my town. It still is. Who are you, little girl, to come in here and suggest otherwise?"

"Ah, no, no that's not what I said." Kimber changed tactics. "And as for who we are, we're Meera McCaskey's kids. Do you remember the McCaskeys?"

"Huh. So you're Aida's granddaughter. That explains why you're not there." We exchanged puzzled looks. "We're right here, Mr. Prescott." Kimber said.

"You know what I meant, young lady! They all know. They know I rescued the town, that's my town. Of course they were going to let me do anything I wanted as long as the money kept coming in. That's why it's my town."

"Is the money still coming in?" Kimber tested.

"Well, you're here aren't you? They didn't like it but they took the money. They didn't know. Not everything, they didn't, but they suspected some. And they must have been okay with it because they kept electing Clery and they kept taking the money."

Prescott picked up a pawn and ran his fingers over it as he talked. "It's just a powder, you know, so unassuming. A fine, soft powder. The powder doesn't know what it is, it doesn't know it's bad. It's the people who say it's bad. But it needed to be done. You know that, Aida, you know we had to do it." Kimber hooked him in. "I know. I know we had to do it but it's your son. I don't think he's doing it right."

"Well of course he isn't!" The elderly Prescott slammed his fist on the table again and two rooks tumbled to the floor. "They were mine! He took them from me. He thought he could do it better but he took mine and he

ruined my legacy. Decades of work and now it's all run by the powder. It's the dust of the crumbled empire!"

"What about the Skinned Men?" I asked, caught up in the moment.

"What are you talking about, boy?" He growled.

"And the treehouse! The Triple Tree, what is it? What is it for?"

"Triple Tree? I didn't authorize that. We paid triple the price but it was only for a short while, when things were slow. We certainly never charged triple, that's bad business."

"Where is Bor-"

"Has my idiot boy been telling you that? Did he offer you triple for them? He's ruining my town, isn't he? Goddamn it, Jimmy, you get him in here! Aida, get my boy on the phone, you tell Jimmy I wanna talk him! You tell him they're still mine! Aida! Aida, get Jimmy on the phone!"

Kimber jumped up and Kyle pushed her behind him as the old man rose to his feet, tall and imposing. We were backing toward the door when the orderly came in with a disapproving look on his face and shooed us out. Long after we'd made it to the lobby we could still hear Tom Prescott yelling for his son.

The ride home was quiet and I spent it trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. The Skinned Men, the Triple Tree, the Shiny Gentleman, the powder. These things seemed to have been pulled blindly from the ether, random and meaningless. The veil over my eyes was thick and heavy but I was closer to Borrasca than I'd ever been before. I could feel it all around me but I couldn't see it. I could almost touch it but I couldn't yet comprehend it.

I suddenly realized that Kyle was pulling over off the road and I snapped out of my contemplation. He put the car in park and turned around to look at me in the backseat.

"Is this really about Whitney, Sam?"

"Yes."

Kimber watched us with worried eyes.

"Why do you think that? The cops, I mean even your father confirmed that Whitney ran away."

"I don't believe them." I said through clenched teeth.

"Look, Sam, we're getting pretty deep in here and I am with you every step but I have to know that there's a reason we're doing this. And pulling Kimber in too. . . I have to know this is important to you for the right reasons and not just an. . . obsession."

I looked out the window and realized he'd pulled over near the West Rim Prescott Ore Trailhead. He was right to worry and even more so to be

protective of Kimber. Kyle was thinking it and so was I: the powder...if Borrasca really did involve moving mass amounts of drugs did I want to involve my friends any further? This wasn't their fight. I loved these people, could I really risk their safety for my own curiosities and vendettas? But as hard as I wished I could let them go I knew I needed them.

"I have to know what really happened to Whitney." I whispered.

Kyle turned back around without a word and Kimber placed her hand on mine. I jerked my hand away and crossed my arms and then immediately apologized. Kimber just smiled in a forgiving sort of way.

Kyle sighed. "Sam..."

He was interrupted by the piercing ring of Kimber's phone. She scrambled for her cell to silence it but when she saw the name on the screen she quickly answered.

"Dad?"

.....

"What? Wait, what- what do you mean?"

.....

"Dad?"

.....

"No, wait, slow down. Hello?" She took the phone away from her ear. "Something happened to my mom and she's at the hospital!" Tears filled Kimber's soft, green eyes.

Kyle threw the car in gear and screeched of the parking lot. We made the 10 mile trip to the hospital in as many minutes, which was criminally fast on surface streets. Kyle stopped the car at the emergency entrance and Kimber and I ran inside.

A deputy was there waiting. He refused to answer Kimber's desperate questions as he led us to her father. When the deputy swung open the doors I saw my dad standing next to Kimber's and I braced myself for the worst.

Kimber's dad took her in one direction and my dad took me in the other. Before he said a word I saw Kimber crumble to the floor on the other side of the room. I looked at my dad helplessly and he gave me a sympathetic nod and pulled me into a hug.

We sat down in a corner and I stared at my hands as he quietly explained that Mrs. Destaro had gone grocery shopping at around 1 o'clock, come home, put the groceries away, made two lasagnas and a meatloaf and put them in the freezer. Then she got in her car, drove to the hospital, parked in the shade, took the stairs up seven floors to the roof and jumped off of it. She lived long enough to apologize to the EMT who found her.

I watched Kimber fall apart as her mother's body slowly grew cold in the morgue one floor beneath us.

3 Part 3

"Do you think she blames herself?"

"I don't know, man. Probably." I stretched out on the reclined seat of my Chevy and pulled the bill of my hat lower over my eyes.

"But do you think she's okay?"

I didn't answer him. I certainly hadn't been okay when Whitney died and Kimber was even closer to her mom than I was to my sister. She was definitely not okay. "Sam, seriously. I'm fucking freaking out here, it's been two days."

I pushed my hat up off of my face and looked over at Kyle who was admittedly a wreck. His eyes were bloodshot, his face sallow and his red hair was greasy.

"Dude, her mom committed suicide. You how close Kimber was to her mom. She just needs some time but she'll be okay."

"She hasn't answered any of my texts or calls. I've left her like nine voicemails, man, I think I'm going crazy."

"You just have to give her space."

"Yeah, but she's my- my-..." He still couldn't say it around me. "I'm supposed to be looking after her."

I sat up and pulled the chair upright behind me. "Look, Kyle, I know you want to help Kimber and I want to help Kimber too, but she hasn't answered our calls, been to school or come to the door when we've stopped by her house. She doesn't want to see us right now and we have to be okay with that. Right now Kimber knows what's best for Kimber."

"What about the suicide note? You think that has something to do with it?" I sighed. "We don't even know if there was a note. Kimber's dad was upset and messed up when he said that and it's possible I misheard him anyway. I asked my dad and he said there was no letter."

"Right, because your dad is such a beacon of truth." One look at Kyle told me he'd immediately regretted his words. I shrugged.

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

The truth was that I knew what I heard. Mr. Destaro had said something to the cops about a letter, but I couldn't tell Kyle that, not right now. He was already worried that his relationship with Kimber was part of the reason her mom had been so depressed.

I'd asked my dad about the letter when he'd come home after that long night and he'd sighed, run both of his hands through his hair in a tired away and said, "Sam, I don't know what to tell you. Anne Destaro didn't leave a suicide note and this is the first I've heard of it."

With our best friend in mourning and our investigation on hold Kyle and I had been existing in a sort of suspended state. We went to school intermittently, skipping classes here and there, missing end-of-year tests and smoking more weed than either of us could afford. Without Kimber there to set us straight and keep us in line we were lethargic, brooding, and irresponsible. I'd never realized how much I relied on her.

Kyle and I skipped the last two periods of the day and debated on whether we should even go to school tomorrow, which was the last day of our sophomore year. We finally decided to show up for second period, which I was glad we did because Kimber showed up in Biology.

I didn't even see her at first. I had my head down on my desk, resting on folded arms when I felt a meek hand pat my shoulder. I turned around to see her standing there, looking unsure and uncomfortable. I gave her half a smile and pulled her into a hug. But it wasn't a Super-Comforting-Not-At-All-Awkward Kimber hug. It was a longer, weaker hug and I felt so protective in it that I was sad when it was over.

"How are you doing, K?" I asked her when she finally released me.

Kimber wiped a tear off of her cheek. "I'm okay." And she gave me a wobbly smile and I knew it wasn't true.

I wrapped her into another quick hug as Phoebe Dranger gave us a snotty look. "Have you seen Kyle yet?"

"No. I have next period with him."

"He's been worried about you."

"I know," she said, sliding her eyes to the floor. "Things have been... really hard for me at home."

"It's okay," I said, "we're here for whatever you need."

"Yeah, that's... that's what I was hoping."

"Whatever you need."

Since it was the last day of school our teacher, Mr. Founder, was just happy to return our graded tests and let us bullshit the rest of the period. Kimber talked about the arrangements for the funeral that weekend and chided Kyle and I for skipping finals to get stoned. When the bell rang I could see that Kimber was both excited and nervous to see Kyle. As we packed up our bags I assured her that Kyle wasn't mad, he was just worried about her. She threw her bag over her shoulder, set her jaw and nodded. She was trying so hard to keep it together.

As soon as Kyle saw her from down the hall he slammed his locker shut and walked towards us with such intensity that I began to wonder if maybe he was mad. He pushed past a dozen people without so much as glancing at them and left a curious, if annoyed, crowd in his wake. When he finally reached us Kyle threw his backpack against the wall and swooped Kimber up in the sort of way you'd see in old, black and white movies. Everyone who'd watched all this unfold, including me, groaned in unison.

Since most of the teachers weren't even bothering to take attendance that day I went to Calculus with Kimber and Kyle where they had the same conversation Kimber and I had had last period. Towards the end of the hour the conversation faulted and became uneasy. Kyle and I exchanged a look over the top of Kimber's head and I nodded at him.

"Kimber," he said quietly, "did you mom leave a letter?"

"What?" Kimber asked in surprise.

"I heard your dad talking about a letter on the day that- on the day... On Tuesday." I said.

"Oh."

As we waited for her to continue the bell rang for lunch. Everyone filed out of the room but the three of us stayed still sitting on our desks.

"Kimber." I finally said.

She sighed sadly and looked over at Kyle. "Yes."

"What did it say?" He asked nervously.

"I don't know, I haven't seen it. I asked my dad for it when we got home and he said I'd misheard him and there was no letter. He said not to mention it to anyone else or I'd just upset people."

"Well, then we both misheard him," I said. "Which seems unlikely."

"I've known my dad all my life. And I know when he's lying."

People started to filter in for the next period, sliding sympathetic glances at Kimber. Since it was our lunch period we gathered up our things and walked out to my car, as we always did. I sat in the backseat, letting Kyle and Kimber take the front.

Kimber took a deep breath and continued. "I know my dad is lying and I know he has the letter."

"Are you sure?" Kyle asked. I could tell he was still terrified that some of the blame rested on him.

"Yeah. And I know it contains the name 'Prescott'. I think I even know where it is."

"Prescott?" Yet somehow I wasn't that surprised. He was the axis around which everything that was bad orbited.

"How do you know it says Prescott?" Kyle asked.

"I heard my dad reading it once. I think he reads it a lot, actually. He was sort of sobbing and whispering the words and throwing things in his office. My dad... he hasn't been well."

"Do you think she was having an affair with Jimmy Prescott?"

I shook my head. "I'm guessing you need to think bigger than that, Kyle."

"I agree," Kimber said to her hands in her lap. "With everything we know about the Prescott's I'm fairly sure this isn't about an affair. It's all connected somehow, don't you think? My dad was the love of my mom's life but she only left a letter for me. I think that somehow I'm the one she wronged, not him. You know? I think she did something to me. Or... maybe she did it because of me." Kimber's voice broke over the last sentence and Kyle pulled her over, kissed the top of her head and whispered words to her that I couldn't hear.

"So we need to get the letter," I said after giving them a minute.

"Yes. I really need to read it." Kimber's voice was still wobbly.

"How do we get it?" I asked.

"If it's in the office we just need to wait until her dad isn't home." Kyle said as he looked out the window.

"You don't think I thought of that?" Kimber sighed. "He never leaves his office, not since we got home from the hospital. He sleeps in there."

"So we need to get him out."

"No, we need to get me in. Tomorrow is my mom's funeral and half of Drisking will be there, including my dad of course. I need to leave without him noticing and run home so I can go through the office."

"Okay, that's easy," I said.

"Without my dad noticing. And I need to be back by the end of the service."

We both nodded but stayed silent because it looked like Kimber was weighing saying more.

"My dad... he's been very cold and I think... I think he blames me." Kimber finally said.

"That's bullshit." Kyle spat.

"Can you guys help me?"

"Absolutely."

"Of course."

We spent the rest of the lunch hour creating a plan far more strategic than the mission probably needed. Kyle and I would engage Mr. Destaro in conversation and then Kyle would get a "text" from Kimber telling him she was having a breakdown in the bathroom. Kyle would leave to go "comfort"

her and they would take my car to the Destaro house. I would stay behind and keep an eye on Kimber's dad while they were gone.

I went to work that afternoon for the first time since Monday. Meera seemed to be in a much better mood and let me go home early since it was a Friday. I didn't sleep well, though, and I got up at 4am to go through my clothes looking for something dressy and black to wear to the funeral.

My dad came in before he left for work and found his disheveled, panicked teenage son looking helplessly through piles of black clothing. He smiled pityingly and led me to his own closet. Since my dad and I had not only the same face but the same build as well finding something suitable to wear was easy. I thanked him and he asked me to apologize to Kimber for having to work through the service and that he sends his love.

Anne Destaro's funeral was at an Episcopalian church on the other side of town. I picked Kyle up at 9 and saw he was also wearing a suit of his Dad's though he didn't fit it nearly as well and he was constantly pulling at the sleeves and readjusting the waistline. Unfortunately for Kyle he was much smaller than his dad.

We parked as far away from the church as possible, where we hoped no one would notice a car leaving.

When we went inside the church we saw that Kimber wouldn't have to do much acting to convince people she was having a breakdown. We found her at the back of the room, tucked into a chair and a puddle of curly orange hair and tears.

Kyle sat down next to her and pulled her into a hug. "Jesus, Kimber, what's wrong?"

I kicked his foot and shot him a look that said 'really?'. Kyle bit his lip. "I mean, ah... Fuck."

"There's no one here," Kimber whispered against his chest "My mom grew up here, she had hundreds of friends in this town and no one came!"

We looked around and I had to admit, the turnout was sparse. A few groups of three or four people standing together, Kimber's dad who sat in a chair opposite the room of his daughter with his head in his hands and some family I recognized from BBQs at Kimber's house. Ex-Sheriff Clery with his wife Grace were there, standing with a few of my dad's deputies and talking quietly in the corner. I could see why Kimber was upset.

As we waited for the service to start I realized I'd never been to a funeral before. I wished that we'd had one for my sister but I knew we never could since Whitney was still legally alive. It made me sad to think that she would never be laid to rest.

Only a few other funeral-goers trickled in and the Pastor began getting

people seated for the service. I noticed the casket at the pulpit for the first time and was glad it was closed. Still, I had to wonder at the simple, unadorned, almost ugly coffin that had been chosen for Kimber's mom. I knew the Destaros had money, quite a lot of it, actually. It was an interesting, almost insulting choice. Poor Kimber.

Kyle and I stood Kimber up and started over to the pews but she stopped abruptly. "I'm ready," she said and brushed the hair away from her wet face.

"Ready for...?"

"To leave. I can't be in here anymore, it's a disgrace to my mother." Kimber raised her head a notch and set her jaw. I knew this look and it meant there would be no reasoning with her.

Kyle and I looked at each other - this wasn't the plan. It'd be a lot more obvious if Kimber was missing from the service, especially with the low turnout.

"You guys go over and say what we rehearsed to my dad. Kyle, I will text you in 30 seconds. Go."

Kyle nodded and started over and I knew we weren't arguing. Mr. Destaro was finally standing, looking over at the front pew reserved for him and his daughter with hesitation.

"Mr. Destaro?" I said as we approached. "I'm very sorry to hear about your wife. She was..." Shit, I'd forgotten my lines.

"-a great woman who raised a wonderful daughter." Kyle finished.

"Yeah?" He spat. "Do great women commit suicide leaving their wonderful daughters alone in the world?"

"Ah..." Shit.

"Do great women jump off buildings and make spectacles of themselves? And leave their families to deal with the publicity and the grief?"

Kyle's phone chirped. Thank god.

"Oh, that's Kimber," Kyle said a little too fast, before he'd had time to actually look at his phone. "Oh man, she isn't well. Says she's crying and feeling sick. I'm gonna go help her."

"No!" Mr. Destaro yelled so suddenly that Kyle dropped his phone on the ground where it made a loud clatter on the stone floors. "Not you. You don't help my daughter, you don't even talk to her. He can go." And he pointed at me.

"Ah...okay." I stuttered. The plan had changed too much. I needed to somehow get the car keys from Kyle without being seen. Kyle gave me a shaky, subtle nod and then he and Mr. Destaro went to sit down. It was obvious Kimber's dad was keeping an eye on Kyle. Getting the car keys from him was going to be nearly impossible.

I backed into the shadows at the back of the room while the pastor started the service. I texted Kyle four times asking for help but he wouldn't dare touch his phone. He just stared straight ahead, flicking worried glances at Mrs Destaro every few seconds. After several minutes I went to find Kimber to see what she wanted to do but she wasn't in our meeting spot by the back door. The plan was falling apart.

I pulled out my phone and sent her a text.

Me: Where are you?

Me: Kyle is next to your dad and I can't get the keys from him.

I waited in the hallway, tapping my phone against my hand nervously. After a minute or two my phone vibrated.

Kimber: I'm sorry, I left without you guys. I had to get out of there. I'm so sorry, I'll be back before the end of the service, I promise.

Shit.

Me: Be safe.

It was now imperative that I not be seen. I went to the men's bathroom, locked myself in a stall and played Snake for the longest twenty minutes of my life. I knew the service wouldn't go on much longer so I texted Kimber again.

Me: You on your way back, yet? Did you find it?

I sat waiting, watching the minutes tick by. I texted her again.

Me: I think the service is ending soon. Where are you?

After another seven minutes of no response I tried calling but it went to voicemail. I tried again with the same result. I was getting nervous. I was about to try a third time when two people walked into the bathroom and my phone vibrated with a text. It was Kyle – the service was over.

Kyle: Kimber has the keys. Why aren't you guys back yet? Did you find anything?

I left the bathroom without washing my hands and received dirty looks from the two strangers at the urinals as the door closed behind me. I found Kyle staring out the window looking for my car.

"Kyle."

He jumped. "Where's Kimber? What did you guys find?"

"I don't know, she left without me."

"What the fuck, why? Where is she?"

"I don't know, Kyle, she left without me." I reiterated. "She's not answering my calls or my texts."

"Fuck, mine either."

"We have to keep an eye on her dad until she gets back."

“We’re not the only ones,” Kyle said gesturing across the room. “What the fuck is going on?”

Three men were talking to Kimber’s dad in a corner across the room. Chief among them was Killian Clery, who was flanked by his two former deputies. Drisking’s retired sheriff had his hand on Mr. Destaro’s arm and was speaking to him in an angry, hushed tone. Kimber’s dad was shaking his head and desperately objecting to something. The two deputies walked out the front door of the church and Mr. Destaro sagged against Killian Clery who sat him in a nearby chair. Something was happening.

“Call Kimber. Now.” Kyle said. I tried again and this time the call rang twice and was sent to voicemail. I ended the call and threw up my hands, looking desperately at Kyle.

“Again.” He said and took out his own phone. I got the same result but felt a jolt of relieve when someone answered Kyle’s call. But it wasn’t Kimber.

“Phil, what part of town are you in? I need a ride. It’s an emergency.” I waited.

“Yeah, man, I’m at North Ridge Church. As fast as you can. I’m with Sam. I’ll owe you.”

Kyle hung up and then immediately tried Kimber’s phone. “She’s sending me to voicemail, too.”

We both stood at the window anxiously waiting to see Phil’s silver Mazda pull up. Kyle chewed his lip and I tapped my phone. Come on, Saunders. We threw occasional looks back at Kimber’s dad until Clery stood him up and ushered the now inconsolable man out of the church.

Suddenly Kyle’s phone chirped and we both looked down to see Kimber’s name flash up on the screen. Kyle’s knees nearly buckled in relief and he sagged against the wall.

Kimber: I found it.

Kyle opened the text and furiously typed a reply.

Kyle: they’re coming for you, K

We both stared at the phone waiting for a response. And just as the sun blinded us as it reflected off of Phil’s approaching silver sedan, we got one.

Kimber: They’re here.

It was the last message we got from Kimber. When Phil dropped us at the Destaro house we found the front door unlocked and no home. My car was sitting in the driveway, unlocked with the keys in the ignition.

Kyle and I drove back to the church but the funeral was over and the few people that had attended it were already gone. We drove back to Kimber’s house again but it was just as we’d left it and no one was home. Kyle had

lost it by this time and was an absolute wreck. He'd called her so many times, I was sure he'd killed her battery. His calls went straight to voicemail and his texts were unanswered.

After an half an hour of begging from Kyle, I finally called my dad. He answered immediately.

"Sammy? What's wrong?"

"It's Kimber. She's gone, Dad. We've looked everywhere but her and her dad are missing. She left the funeral early and- and- Killian Clery was talking to her dad and then Sampson and Grigg left and I think they went to her house and they got her, Dad. I think they're still working for Clery on the side or something and I think they're doing something bad. She-"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down! Come by the station and let's talk. I'll take a statement from you boys and I'll send a couple officers over to investigate the house right now. Just calm down, Sam, we'll handle this."

I hung up and threw my car violently into reverse, jerking the wheel to the left as I hit the end of the driveway.

"Sam. Sam, how we you know? How do we know we can trust the cops?"

"I'm not trusting the cops, I'm trusting my dad." I said, my words sounding hopeless, even to me.

I turned into the Sheriff's office and Kyle was out of the car as soon as I slowed down enough to park. By the time I got inside, my dad had Kyle by the shoulders and was nodding solemnly at everything Kyle was telling him. When my dad saw me, he motioned for an officer to take us to his office. After a few minutes he came in and sat down across the desk from us.

"Alright boys, I'm going to have Officer Raminez come in in a few minutes and take a statement from you both. I want you to know that at this point in time it looks like the Destaro's left town voluntarily."

"No, no way, Mr. Walker, Kimber would never-"

My dad held up his hand for silence. "Let me rephrase: Jacob Destaro left town voluntarily. Kimber is a minor and has no legal rights here. If her dad said they're leaving, then they're leaving."

"But she's not answering her phone and we went to that house, Dad, nothing was packed."

"Maybe they're just getting away for a while, maybe going to a relative's. I can't theorize as to why she wouldn't answer her phone, other than maybe she wants to be left alone for a while."

Kyle was exasperated. "But-"

"Look, I know it's hard for you to understand but losing a family member takes a toll on a person, Sam you know that. We don't know how people

are going to grieve and we don't have a right to. I think it's very likely that Kimber will be back by the fall for school."

"The fall?! Sheriff Walker, that's two months away, you need to investigate NOW."

"Kyle, I know you're upset and no one said we're not going to investigate thoroughly."

"Like you investigated Whitney's disappearance thoroughly?" I spat and I didn't regret the words.

"Sam!" he snapped with more force than I'd ever heard him use. "I am tired of listening to you insulate that I didn't do everything I could to find Whitney. I love your sister more than you can imagine, she's my daughter, Sammy. And I will never give her up."

"And what about the deputies that left the funeral to go after her?" Kyle interrupted. My dad raised an eyebrow at me.

"Sampson and Grigg." I ground out through clenched teeth. He sighed. "Boys, Sampson and Grigg left the funeral because I sent them out on a call."

I stood up violently, knocking over my chair in the process. "Oh come on, Dad!"

"Alright, that's enough!" The sheriff slammed his hands on the desk and stood up.

"I told you I would tell you what I know and I have. I understand your friend is important to you and goddamn it, the Destaros are friends of mine, too. I promise you that I will use the full extent of my resources to track them down and put your minds at ease but until then all I can offer you is the assurance that there is no sign of foul play at this time. You boys need to get off the warpath and let us handle this. Now Ramirez is waiting in the hall to take your statements and then both of you are going home. Understood?"

I said nothing and glared at my dad, seething with rage. Kyle stood up and walked out of the room with no emotion whatsoever. He walked past Ramirez and I followed him out to the car. We got in and I waited for Kyle to say something. I heard a loud snuffle and looked over at him to see his face slick with tears. It was the first time I'd ever seen Kyle but not the last.

"He's lying." He whispered.

I just shook my head. I didn't know what to believe.

Kyle turned his face away from me. "I know he's lying. Something bad has happened and he's lying about it."

"What? What happened?"

I heard more sniffing as Kyle tried to collect himself.

"Dude, fucking talk to me. What do you think happened?"

“Kimber’s gone like all the others. So she’s at the place where bad things happen.”

I punched the steering wheel. How the fuck had this happened? Not Kimber, please not Kimber. Was all of this because of me? Had her mother killed herself because of something I’d done? Something we’d found out? Was Kimber taken because of me? If I thought for one minute that that was true I knew I would crack into tiny pieces.

“No. Not Kimber. No.”

“Yes, Sam, fucking think about it!” Kyle yelled at me. “It’s the treehouse! It’s all the same! Borrasca, the Skinned Men, the Triple Tree, your sister, the mountain; it’s all the fucking same! It’s the Prescott Empire and now Kimber has been fucking consumed by it!”

“Where do we go?” I could feel the warm tears of my own desperation and hopelessness sliding down my cheeks. “What- what do we do? What do we fucking do!”

Kyle threw his hands up in frustration. “We have to go to Ambercot, right? It all starts and ends at the Triple Tree, Sam. Surely you’ve figured that out.”

“We’ve been to the treehouse a million times, Kyle, there’s nothing there!”

“I don’t know where the fuck else to go, Sam!”

RAP RAP RAP

I jumped as someone tapped on the window of the car and wiped the tears off my face. I rolled down the window as Officer Grigg leaned down and looked in the car. “You boys move along home, alright?”

“Yep.” I said, and turned the key in the ignition. Officer Grigg waved at us as we pulled out of the parking lot but we didn’t wave back.

“The treehouse.” Kyle said.

We drove in silence, both of us trying desperately to get ahold of ourselves. If we were going to be of any help to Kimber we needed to be calm enough to think logically. I parked in the space next to the trailhead and saw several bikes tied to the post. As we made our way up the West Rim Prescott Ore Trail we passed Parker and a couple of his friends coming down it.

I nodded to him but Kyle said nothing, just stared up the trail reaching for the only place he knew to go. It was almost dark by the time we got to Ambercot and there was little light left to search for whatever Kyle hoped to find. It took half an hour in the darkness before I finally convinced Kyle that there was nothing there to help Kimber.

And though we didn’t speak of it, I knew that he and I were both painfully aware of all the sounds of the night. We were scared, terrified down to our

very bones, that we would hear the piercing scraping, grinding and metal screams of the monster at Borrasca that we'd become so accustomed to over the years. We both dreaded it, prayed it would not come and we did not speak of it.

I dropped Kyle at home and promised we would find Kimber tomorrow. I swore we would. He gave me nothing more than a shallow nod and disappeared inside his house. My dad was waiting for me in the kitchen when I got home a few minutes later. I didn't look at him and walked over to the fridge, realizing I hadn't eaten all day.

"Sammy. Sit down, I want to apologize for today."

I took out some chicken and cheese and went to the pantry for bread.

"I know you're scared. And I know that a lot has been going on that you can't exactly relate to." He sighed. "Anne... Anne had been depressed for a good long while, Sam, over twenty years. That'll weigh on a person."

I ignored him and continued making my sandwich. I was dying inside, wondering if I could even trust the man I'd called dad my entire life.

"She was suffering, Sam, and sometimes people who suffer that deeply don't know of any other way out. She knew her depression was hurting her husband... and her daughter. And maybe she mistakenly thought she was doing them a favor."

"Mom's depressed." I said without taking my eyes from my task.

He sighed. "Your mother is coping okay and this was very different, Sam. Kimber's mom has been depressed since she was in her 20's. Early in her marriage Anne suffered multiple miscarriages. Infertility can be very hard on some couples and not even Kimber's birth could totally ease her pain."

"Dad, with all due respect, I'm tired and I'm going to bed. Kyle and I are getting up early to look for Kimber." I threw the knife in the sink with a loud clang and turned to look at my dad for the first time. "Please tell me you're still trying to find Kimber."

The sheriff stood up from the kitchen table, looking as tired and disheveled as I felt. "I promise, Sammy." And I finally believed him.

The next morning when I pulled up to Kyle's house, Parker came out to meet me.

"Hey, Parker." I said when I rolled down the window and cool morning air wafted in.

"Kyle's not here. He left around 5. Stole my dad's truck. He's pissed so you'd better go."

"Thanks, man." I said, and then rolled up the window and took off down the street. I drove around all morning looking for Kyle and calling his cell but he didn't pick up until around noon.

"Sorry, man. I couldn't sleep." Kyle sounded a bit more stable than yesterday.

"That's cool, where you at?"

"I don't know, exactly. A rare spot where I'm getting service."

"You in the woods?"

"Yeah. She's out here, Sam, somewhere in these mountains. I can feel it. I know it."

"Alright, well let me meet you."

"Ok. Just come down to the West Rim Trail and I'll meet you there."

I was only five minutes away so I arrived before Kyle had time to get down the mountain. Mr. Landy's red Dodge Ram was parked haphazardly in a no parking zone and I figured it would probably be towed by the time we got back. I doubted Kyle cared at this point, though.

I crossed my arms and leaned against my car as I waited for him, staring up the dirty, red trail in impatience. When Kyle finally showed half an hour later, he was covered in sweat and dirt and dejection.

"So?" I said, pushing up off the car.

"No, nothing, man."

"Alright, well let's keep searching."

We hiked miles and miles of the mountain that day but we didn't find any sign of human life. And for the next few days if the sun was out, so were we. Kyle was growing more and more desperate: crossing onto private property to look for logging equipment and mapping out the county's many mines to search the abandoned buildings. But the mountain was big and the needle buried deep in the haystack. And as the days slipped away so did Kyle's sanity.

Every time I saw my dad he would give me a sober look and promise me that they were still looking. It seemed to me that even he was growing concerned. The Destaro house remained as empty and dark as the space between the stars above it.

On was the 11th night of our Kimber-less existence I was awoken out of a troubled sleep by the piercing, whirling, screeching sound of death at Borrasca. I cried myself to back to sleep to the tortured sounds of Kyle own agony next door. We had failed her. Kimber was dead.

4 Part 4

When I pulled up to his house the next morning, I could tell Kyle had cracked. He his skin had taken on a yellowed color and his voice was flat

and void of emotion.

"It's not over yet, Kyle," I said as he dropped into the seat next to me.

"Yes, it is, Sam." He all but whispered.

"No, I don't believe that. Kimber's dad is missing too, you know. Maybe it was him instead that was... that was..." I couldn't bring myself to say it.

"We're living in hell. Drisking, it's Hell in our own reality."

I couldn't disagree. The town I'd grown to love seemed so foreign to me now. Whitney hadn't been an outlier like I'd thought. Missing people were the norm here. "And that would make Jimmy Prescott the king. He's Satan, himself."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth Kyle punched the car door, awaking from his dead state with rageful vigor. "I'll fucking kill Jimmy Prescott! Where is that motherfucker! You know he's involved in all this, Sam, you know-"

"Maybe partially." I said, staring out the window. "His dad created the town that bred this shit but I'm pretty sure the Prescott's are just running drugs. You know, the powder."

"Yeah... and so what, he's recruiting people to be- to be drug mules or something?"

"Maybe," I agreed for Kyle's sake, though I didn't really believe it. The sound, the great beast machine of Borrasca gave off the distinct stench of death. And though I knew that physically that was impossible, it didn't change my mind about it. The air smelled different after the metallic wailing ended.

We drove over to 4th Street Gourmet Coffee and Bakery and went in to buy our usual provisions of Rockstars and Monsters. As I paid for the four-packs of cans I saw Meera waiting on coffee at the end of the bar. I could tell immediately that she was in a good mood, something that I hadn't seen much of since I'd started working for her. It was probably a good time to tell her I was calling out of work for my 5th day in a row.

"Hi Meera," I muttered when I approached. "Ah... I can't come in again today. I've got some- some really important-"

"Sam! Oh my gosh, how are you?"

"Um... o- okay." I stuttered.

"Good!" She said, brightly. "Don't worry about coming in, I'll hold down the fort and I'm sure I can call Emmaline in if I need help. But really, Sam, what have you been up to lately that's so important?"

My mind blanked. Just as I started to stutter out some bullshit about helping my dad, Kyle appeared behind me.

"We're trying to find Borrasca." He said with all the gravitas of a eulogy.

“Ah, yes. Owen told me you’d asked him about that. You know that’s just a story, Sam; that legend has been around since I was a kid.”

“Yeah, well, we’re looking for our missing friend, Kimber. We think maybe she’s . . . there,” I trailed off lamely.

“Oh really? I thought I heard the Destaros were staying with relatives in Maine over the summer. Oh well. Anyway, good luck, boys.”

“Thanks.” Kyle’s voice was sour and I knew his patience was thin.

When we got back into the car we each popped open a can of Rockstar and started chugging. I knew better than to ask Kyle if he wanted to smoke since I was sure he hadn’t lit a bowl since before Kimber disappeared. He finished the energy drink in under a minute and crumpled the can in his hand.

“I don’t like your boss,” he said.

“Meera? Why not?”

“I don’t know. She’s . . . just . . . off.”

“Well I mean she has been going through some things.” I wasn’t going to elaborate any further.

“Why were you asking her husband about Borrasca anyway?”

“I don’t know. I was just making small talk and I thought he might know. He seemed to know about a lot of other things.”

“And did he know?”

“Nah.” I took a long gulp of the sour drink and then choked on it when I remembered something Owen had said. “Well, actually, yeah. He said ‘a’ Borrasca instead of just Borrasca. You know, like it’s a thing instead of a place.”

Kyle lowered his Rockstar. “And is it?”

“Is it what?”

“Is it a thing?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard of it. I’ve googled everything weird about this town but nothing ever came up.”

“Did you spell it right?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Do you know how to spell it?”

“No.”

I pulled out my phone.

“No, fuck google.” Kyle said. “We need to talk to Kathryn Scanlon. That’s what Kimber would say.”

He was right. Kathryn Scanlon may be the most knowledgeable person in town and was probably the right person to ask. I pulled out of 4th Street Coffee and prayed she was at her office already. When we parked in front of Drisking Arts and Antiques I was disappointed to see that the store was

dark. Kyle pointed to a small, cheap 'OPEN' sign hanging in the corner of the door and I crossed my fingers that it was for Kathryn's office.

I was relieved to find the door unlocked and we hurried past all the antiquities and blown glass to the back of the store where we found an open door and Kathryn sitting at her desk.

"Boys!" She stood up when she saw us. "You're up quite early for summer break. How did the essay do?"

"Eh... great," I said. "Actually we're here for more help."

"Personal interest," Kyle added.

Kathryn raised her eyebrows. "Color me impressed."

I needed to get right down to it. If by some small chance Kimber was still alive then every second counted. "We're here because we want to know if Borrasca is a thing or a place."

Kathryn raised her eyebrow. "I remember that legend as a kid. I'd actually have to tell you I didn't know if it wasn't for Wyatt. He knew so little about so much," she laughed. "A sort of jack of all trades... anyway, he told me an interesting fact once about Borrasca – it's both!"

"What do you mean?" I leaned over her desk.

"Well the term 'borrasca' is just old, outdated lexicon. The word was used by miners to describe an underperforming mine."

"A mine..." I whispered.

Kyle shook his head. "We've been looking at mines."

"So all the mines in Butler County are Borrascas?" I asked.

"Well, generally it's only the first mine in the system to run dry that is called a Borrasca."

"Do you know which mine ran dry first? In our mining system?" Kyle asked from where he stood near the door, repeatedly clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Ah, not off the top of my head, no," she laughed. "I can look though, I think I have those records here somewhere." Kathryn walked behind her desk and opened a drawer of loose files. "This is an odd thing to be interested in for boys your age but I guess I should be glad you two are so eager to learn, especially over the summer."

"Yes, ma'am, very eager," said Kyle.

"Is the Borrasca, the first mine that ran out of ore, um, was that by chance the same one those kids disappeared in?"

"The McCaskeys? Oh, no I don't think so. That particular mine was the southwest mine and was very close to town. I think it was one of the last to close, actually. Ah! Here we go. This packet should have that information."

Kathryn spent far too long moving books around on the desk to make room for the stack of papers she had. Kyle and I paced around the room, nervously, trying to appear casually interested, while the energy drinks started coursing through our systems.

"Here, we go! The first mine to close was the north central mine, which was... yeah, actually one of the first to open."

"But where is it?" Kyle walked over to the desk and braced his arms on it. "Where is that mine?"

"Um..." Kathryn pulled over a different stack of papers and started to fumble through it. After the longest minute of my life she made an 'a-ha!' sound and pulled out a large, yellowed piece of paper that had been folded into a standard A4 size. She unfolded it on the desk and leaned over to read the markings. I could see from where I was standing near the doorway that it was a map and I knew we weren't living this office without it.

"Let's see. That mine was up further on the mountain, a little harder to get to. See?" And she pointed at a small dot on the map that was at least four miles from where we'd been looking.

"Can we take this?" Kyle asked. "We'll bring it back."

"Of course! I'm sure I have copies. Listen, if you boys are going exploring-"

"I'm bringing my dad." I lied.

"Oh! Excellent then, you guys have fun!" She yelled at us as we rushed out of the building. We didn't stop to answer her, 'fun' was far from our minds.

"It's- it's- it's so far from where we've been looking," Kyle stuttered. "We need to go there now. And we need to get a gun."

"A gun? Where are we going to get a gun, Kyle?"

"From you dad."

"He's not going to give us a gun, man."

"Fine, then let's scout the place first and then we'll come back with a gun." That didn't seem like a good idea to me either but what choice did we have? After studying the map for several minutes we realized the easiest way to access the mine was still through the West Rim Prescott Ore Trail.

We parked at the trailhead and made the familiar hike down the marked trail and then up the beaten path, realizing that we'd have to travel past Ambercot Fort on the way. And I knew in my heart that we were going the right way. We were walking the same path that so many people before us had on their way to Borrasca. But what had they found there?

We passed the treehouse, which was as silent as the morning. We walked on in the woods, further north than we had ever been before and soon we

were flying blind, hiking in the general direction of the dot on the map and hoping we were still on course. Within an hour I began regretting that we'd come without provisions, emotional and unprepared.

By noon we had been hiking for four hours and it seemed to me that we were lost. I tempered the welling panic with thoughts of Kimber and Whitney and the answers to the mystery that had absorbed my life for so many years.

Kyle, for his part, said nothing and kept his eyes straight and his mission his priority. And then, just as the sun teetered on the apex of the day, we saw an emptiness through the trees and the hard lines of manmade buildings. Kyle quickened his step and I rushed to keep up.

When we finally broke through the tree line I choked on my own deep breath and fell back against a tree as I looked over the quiet encampment. A large, wooden sign post that was almost as long as the entire clearing was still standing near the entrance of the mine. It had to be a century old and though most of the letters had rotted off over the years, from those remaining I could guess that it had once said: DRISKING UNDERGROUND MINE.

What was left, however was: SKIN ND MIN

"Skinned men."

"That way," Kyle pointed to the north end of the camp.

We stepped out from the shadows and into the vulnerability of the clearing. There were several large buildings still standing and the boarded up entrance to the ore mine was set back in the mountain.

"We're not getting in there," I whispered.

"Let's try that building," he said, and pointed toward the one nearby, which was the largest and at least two stories tall. We counted to three and then ran across the camp to the large wooden doors of the old building. They were cracked open and when we squeezed inside I was had no doubts that death was indeed present in Borrasca.

We were standing in what I guessed was a refinery and in the middle of the room was a large silver, conically shaped machine. A conveyer belt fed into it and the room had a sour smell. Even the dirt beneath our feet seemed to have taken on a crimson tint.

"This is the machine. This is where they take them," I said. "This is the place where people die."

"Kimber isn't here. Come on."

I was only too happy to squeeze back out the door of the building and tiptoe around the side. We rounded a corner and almost ran into a recently waxed, shiny, green truck parked there.

"This is Jimmy Prescott's truck," I breathed.

"I know whose truck it is." Kyle growled.

We were now on extraordinarily high alert. Kyle dropped to the ground and began to commando crawl around the building. I followed him waiting to hear a shout or a gunshot but none came.

As we crawled around to the back of the building, Kyle turned around to me and put his finger over his lips, then pointed at a one story brown building that was only a dozen feet away from us. He got into a crouched position and moved as fast as he could across the gap between the two buildings. I did the same.

As soon as I reached the wall next to him Kyle whirled around and put another finger to his lips and then pointed up to a window directly above us.

There were noises coming from inside and even to me, a 16 year old virgin, the sounds of sex were unmistakable. We could hear an animalistic grunting and the tired, objecting groans of an old mattress. Unable to help myself I whispered "What the fuck?" to Kyle but he was already gone, all caution abandoned, running around the side of the building.

I followed him in through the first door we came upon and was hit in the face by an invisible wall of filth and suffering. The smell knocked me back, but Kyle kept running. I followed him in, past crates of ramen noodles, MRE's, bottled water and boxes I had no time to read. I crossed another threshold and I was suddenly surrounded by people. So many people. I skidded to a halt and realized I was standing in a sort of dorm. Rows and rows of beds on either side of me with people strapped to them, some of them wearing dirty rags and some wearing nothing at all.

Many seemed to be bloated and I waited for one to call out to me but they all remained silent, some watching me through tired, dead eyes and others turning away. Looking around I realized they were all women and the bloating I saw seemed to be... pregnancies. Some were confined to their beds and others were not.

I looked around the room for Kyle and saw him standing a little further in the long room looking back at me with the same confused, wild expression I was sure was on my face. I saw the realization cross his and called out to him but he was already running again.

I lost him before I'd taken five steps to follow. I figured it was probably best to just keep running, spread out and look for Kimber. I didn't see her in this room and I was sure she would have called out to us if she was.

I looked around for another door and saw one cracked open on the left behind a row of beds. I stared straight at it as I made my way there, desperate to avoid the wretched, void eyes of the women around me. First we help Kimber, then we help the others. I will come back and help you all,

I promise. As soon as I find Kimber.

Without a thought I pushed the door wide open as soon as I'd reached it and found the source of the noises we'd heard outside.

It was Jimmy, something I'd been expecting to see, but the scene before me was not. He was hunched over the bed of an almost unrecognizable, unresponsive Kristy, treating her like an animal. She watched me through the slits of her dead eyes but she didn't call to me for help. I thought I saw a tear run down her cheek before she turned her face away from me to face the wall on the other side. "What the fuck?" I didn't even realize the words were audible. I had never seen this depth of human suffering.

Jimmy's head snapped around to look at me and briefly registered surprise before he smiled at me in a way that turned my insides to ice. He didn't stop what he was doing and I wanted nothing more than to run over and push him off of Kristy but to my utter shame I couldn't force myself to come any further into the room.

"Sam! Sam!" Kyle's voice echoed through the building and immediately cured me of my paralysis. I found myself running back into the miner's dorm and away from Jimmy Prescott and Kristy.

"Kyle!"

"Back here, hurry, please, I fucking- I found Kimber!"

I followed his voice through the maze of beds and rooms as a cacophony of voices began to follow me.

"Help us. Please."

There were maybe only a handful of girls yelling at me but it sounded thunderously loud as it filtered through my guilt. The weight of their misery dropped down upon me and it almost pushed me into the ground.

"I will! I'll get help, I'll help you!" I promised them as I followed Kyle's voice, still screaming desperately from an adjacent room. I sprinted across another threshold and saw him, hunched down near a corner bed helplessly yanking on a leather strap attached to it.

I slammed into the bed and fell to my knees, trying to work out what he was doing and how I could help him. I tried not to look at the bed because I knew I couldn't see her like that, I couldn't bear it. If Kimber looked at me through the same accusing, empty eyes as Kristy and the others had I might lay down on the ground beneath her and curl up into a ball.

"Go around the other side! Unbuckle the other two straps!" Kyle had the high pitched voice and wild, desperate eyes of madness. I ran around the other side and did as he'd said with shaking, awkward hands.

"Oh, boys!" Jimmy's voice rang out from somewhere in the building. I had just freed Kimber's ankle and was working on her wrist. She whimpered

when she heard him and buried her face in my shoulder. “Do you think you’re hiding? I know where to find you. I know right where I put that girl.”

“I’ll fucking kill you, Prescott, you sick cunt! I’ll fucking stomp all your bones and bleed you out you little motherfucker!” Kyle had lost all reason and strategy. He was filled with rage instead of fear and it scared me even more. I pulled Kimber’s wrist from the final strap and yelled, “Go now!”

We pulled Kimber up off the bed and quickly realized that her legs could barely support her. She was heavily sedated and breathing weakly. We braced her on either side and moved as quickly as we could through the nearest doorway – away from Jimmy.

We were in another dorm, though this one was filled with mostly empty beds. I could see sunlight shining through the door at the end of the long room and we raced toward it as Kimber made little cries of pain. I didn’t think my heart could break any more but I was wrong because in the next moment - it did.

I almost dropped Kimber when I saw her staring at me. Her eyes were hollow and uninvested and when I turned toward her, she looked away immediately as if she couldn’t stand the sight of me.

“Whitney.” I said weakly.

“Sam, let’s fucking go!” Kyle screamed.

“I can’t.” I turned toward him as tears ran down my hot cheeks and Kyle saw her too.

“I can’t. . . I can’t stay,” Kyle said, still moving toward the door. “I have to get Kimber away from here. Please. . .” But he knew I wasn’t going anywhere now.

“Good luck, bro.” I said and then we were both running in different directions.

Whitney’s hair was long but it was thin, as was her face. Everything on her looked brittle except for her stomach which bubbled out from her like an overblown balloon. She refused to look at me and flinched at my touch as I tried desperately to unbuckle her from the bed. I hadn’t even finished the first belt when I heard Jimmy walk up behind me. I didn’t bother to look at him or stop trying to free my sister. I didn’t know what else to do.

“I admire your grit, kid.” Jimmy said, and then sat down on a bed behind me and continued to watch me, giving no objection to what I was doing. “You probably think your friends got away but there’s no sense in false hope, is there?”

“There’s no sense in any of this.” My voice sounded frail and it cracked over the last word.

"You're wrong about that," Jimmy sighed. "But just so you know, I've got Clery out there looking for them already. People making a lot of noise coming down off this mountain, trust me on that."

"Sheriff Clery?" I was desperate to keep him talking, anything to keep him from trying to stop me.

"Oh, yeah. You know he was supposed to retire from the business but unlike the previous sheriff he kept a few horses in the race."

"Horses?" Nothing made sense.

"Yep." Jimmy slapped the bed next to him. "We call these buildings the stables," he laughed.

I dropped the last buckle on the floor and looked down at Whitney. I expected her to spring up and run toward the door while I went after Prescott but all she did was rub her wrists and itch her collarbone. Then she put her arms back where they'd been, turned her head away from me and shut her eyes. I slumped down onto the bed next to her and picked up her cold hand. If she wasn't leaving here neither was I. It was over. I sent a silent prayer up to a God I didn't know and wished my friends safety.

"Do you want to know what this is, Sam?"

I shrugged. It didn't seem to matter now.

"It's all about the babies."

I stared down at Whitney and her swollen belly but gave no indication I was listening.

"You wouldn't believe how much money is in the industry. I mean, my dad was a smart man. And he knew we didn't have anything of value to sell and back then the Prescott's were dirt poor, out of work miners just like everyone else in town. He first got the idea when he sold my older brother off to pay for the legal fees to fight the city. I mean, some people will pay five figures for a newborn, you know, even back then. And the organizations that buy them, well, they buy in bulk. But we still make a killing off them. And our overhead is very low."

Jimmy stood up and pulled a gun out of his waistband, then threw it on a bed across the aisle.

"You know, try to understand, Sammy, it's not just about the money. We use the stables for community services, too. Lots of people in town come to us, you know, ever since the 50's."

I couldn't take it anymore. I didn't want to be here, listening to this, I didn't want to see Whitney so broken and I didn't want to wait for inevitable death. It was torture in its purest form.

"What are you waiting for, why don't you just kill me? This isn't a James Bond movie, I don't care about any of this shit."

Jimmy laughed loudly as if it was funniest thing he'd ever heard. "Kill you?! Christ, kid, if I could than I already would have, but I'm not allowed to kill you. I've been trying to decide if I want to fuck your sister right in front of you though. She's not one of mine but it might be worth it just to see your face."

"Just- just kill me and let her go. Fuck, I'll kill myself if you let her go." I stood up from the bed and Jimmy took two steps toward me and punched me so hard in the face that I fell back down on it. I moaned as I fought the tears and stars behind my eyes.

"I can't let her go, you little fuck. She's got one of our community services babies in her. Grace says she's got another week to go, two tops." Jimmy looked down at Whitney and frowned. "She's been puttin' out shit babies, though, and as soon as this one's out of her she's got a date with the Shiny Gentleman."

"What the fuck does that mean?" I yelled at him and a loud ring suddenly filled the room. Jimmy held up a finger and pulled a phone out of his pocket.

"I gotta take a business call. Two minutes and we can get back to our conversation." Jimmy walked over to a corner of the room and I desperately started to pull on Whitney.

"We gotta go. We gotta go, Whit, we can't stay here." She kept her eyes shut and her body lax. "Whitney, they're going to kill you!"

My head whipped toward the door as I heard a truck skid in the dirt just outside of it. Jimmy ended his phone call and Killian Clery walked in, pushing a limping, bloody Kyle in front of him. "Lose something, Prescott?"

"Where's the girl?"

"Couldn't find her."

"Goddamn it, Clery, you fucked us. Go back out there and find that girl!" Jimmy snatched his gun off the bed and shoved it into the back of his waistband.

"Now listen here, you little shit," Clery growled. "I ain't your fucking employee and I don't have all fucking day to play and hide and seek in the woods. I'll telling you she wasn't with him so I guess if you wanna know where she is you should get it outta him!" Clery threw Kyle down on the floor and spit near his feet.

"I gotta do your fucking job now?" Jimmy walked over and without any hesitation kicked Kyle so hard in the ribs I heard some of them snap inside his chest. I tried to stand up but I was still dizzy and fighting off the darkness. "Where's your girlfriend, Landy?" Prescott raised his boot and then stomped down hard on Kyle ankle. He screamed in pain. "I can do this all day, kid."

Clery sat down on a bed across the aisle and lit a cigarette, watching

impassively. Jimmy pulled Kyle to his feet and then punched him hard in face. A few of Kyle's teeth scattered across the floor. "Tell me, you little cunt!" Jimmy punched him again in the face and Kyle went limp.

"You're killing him!" I screamed and jumped off the bed, running blindly toward Jimmy in a red rage. Clery stood up and caught me with no effort at all, holding my arms down at my sides. He laughed, cigarette still tucked into the corner of his mouth as I struggled helplessly against his chest.

Jimmy had straddled Kyle by now and was rapidly punching him in the face and chest. Kyle was barely conscience and I prayed he'd pass out from the pain. After a full minute of this Jimmy stood up and rubbed his bloodied fists. "Last chance, Landy."

"Fuck you." Kyle said through a wheezing, rattled breath of air. Jimmy spit on him and raised his foot up as high as he could and brought it down on Kyle face with so much force that I heard his skull break. I sagged in Killian Clery's arms and he dropped me into a puddle at his feet.

Jimmy bummed a cigarette off Clery and they stood next to Whitney's bed, watching me cry. "Jesus, what a mess."

After a few minutes Clery flicked his cigarette out and pulled out his phone. "Alright, Sam, take your friend."

I couldn't have heard him right.

"Fuck that, that little Landy shit ain't leaving here."

"You wanna clean this mess up, Prescott?"

I stood up and my knees didn't buckle beneath me. "I'm not leaving without my sister." I told them. Jimmy laughed.

"Yes, you are," Clery said. "If you want to save your friend's life. He ain't dead yet, Sam, but he will be soon." He tossed his keys at me. "The road off this mountain is back by the refinery."

I let the keys bounce off of me and fall to the floor. Clearly swore at me. I knew he was right. I was a coward and I would leave my sister and all the others here just so I could get away and save Kyle's life.

I picked up the keys and then, without looking at the two men, I picked Kyle up by his shoulders and his head rolled back as if it was no longer attached to his spine. His face was a collage of pulp and blood and I struggled to stay calm and breathe as I dragged him out of the building. Cleary and Prescott watched me, taking drags off their cigarettes and saying nothing. I knew they were probably lying to me; Kyle would be dead by the time I got down the mountain if he wasn't already.

I opened the door to Clery's old Ford and placed Kyle in the front seat, wincing as his head rolled around like a ball on a string. It took me almost an hour to get down the mountain, even though I took the overgrown road

at ridiculous speeds and did everything I could to destroy the shocks on the truck. I sped into the hospital's emergency zone and found a medical team waiting inside the door. It was clear that they'd gotten a call to expect me because they already had a crash cart with them and an IV ready to push into Kyle's wrist.

I left Clery's truck where it was and spent the next two hours in the waiting room, calling my dad over and over again and crying over an Architectural Digest magazine. No one came to take a statement from me or ask me any questions. Kyle's mom arrived just before my dad did and started screaming as soon as she saw me. My dad walked in behind her and had a deputy restrain her. He drove me home in silence but I couldn't take it for long.

"Is anyone going to file a police report? Does anyone even fucking care what happened?"

"Sam." He didn't turn to look at me. "I am doing my best to do damage control on the situation but if Kyle dies or his parents sue, there's nothing I can do to keep you out of court."

"You think I did this?" I screamed at him.

"We're not going to tell your mother. Alright? She has enough to worry about."

"Dad, it's- I- Kimber- it was fucking Prescott! And Sheriff Clery!"

"Yes, you arrived at the hospital in Killian's truck. We already talked to them both."

I was so frustrated and full of rage that my next words came out a jumbled, stuttering mess that ended in a helpless scream. We pulled into our driveway and my dad turned off the car and finally turned to look at me as I struggled to catch my breath.

"Samuel, we will never speak of this again. Do you understand?"

"Are you fucking kidding me, Dad? Kyle might fucking die. I saw Kimber-"

"Enough! If you want this to go away you will keep your mouth shut about it, make no statements to anyone and I'll hire the best lawyer I can afford to clean up your mess. I don't know why you beat your best friend almost to death and frankly I don't want to. You-"

"Fuck you!" I screamed at him and threw open the door to the cruiser. I ran then, away from him and the house and my broken life. He didn't come after me. Not that day or any other.

Since everyone in town thought I was a violent thug no one would let me stay with them when I called around. I eventually went to a motel far

outside of town and drained the last of my savings from work paying for the room.

I went back to pick up my car from the trailhead, but it was gone and I hoped it was Kimber who had it and not a tow yard. I read the paper every morning for some mention of Kyle's condition. I saw the Owen's birth announcement about 10 days later. They had just had a son that they named William. The whirling, twirling, Shiny Gentlemen lit up the valley with its stench and song of death that night. It was the last time I ever heard it.

I stayed in Drisking long after the money had run out and I was sleeping on the concrete behind the motel. I stayed until Kyle was released from the hospital; a mute, empty-eyed, soulless vegetable. I went to see him once, while only Parker was home, and threatened him until he let me inside the house.

When I had assured myself that the Kyle I knew was dead and only his empty husk remained, I left his house and hitchhiked out of town. And after I spent four drunken, drug-fueled years in Chicago, I came home one day to find a letter waiting for me. It didn't have a return address but it was postmarked California.

I knew it was from her before I'd even picked it up. She'd written so many of my assignments for me that I knew Kimber's handwriting better than my own.

Inside it was a letter. The letter. I read it only once, many years ago, until I sat down to transcribe it today.

My Kimber,

I know you aren't going to understand why we did the things we did. It was all born out of love, at least it started that way. You're everything to me and you'll always be my daughter. Do you understand? And I'm leaving this world because of what I've done to you, not because of what you are. I don't want you to be upset about what you are. Because WHO you are is beautiful.

My dearest, this town has done horrible things. And all of us who live here are guilty. Read this letter and leave this place.

I need to tell you all of this. I need to start at the beginning:

Somewhere along the way, decades ago, the major population of Drisking became unable to bear children. Most people blame the town for letting the iron ore leak into our water table during the collapsing of our mines.

This is the same water table that still provides the town's water today. They were never quite able to fix it and ore is toxic and exposure causes infertility. The town did, and still does, suffer greatly from its effects.

And the Prescott's, they solved the problem that no one could solve. It

was an ugly, crass solution but most people were happy to look away when they were able to raise families again. You see they took girls, mostly women from other places, and they impregnated them and gave us their babies.

And the town came under the care of Thomas Prescott when he started to “sell” some of the babies on the side for a profit to rich couples. And the Sheriff, he helped him do this. But then an ugly rumor started that they were selling to human traffickers. And the Prescott’s had to offer triple the price for girls. And in town, we began to murmur. But we once again turned the other cheek when the city was suddenly flooded with money because of how well the traffickers paid. People had well-paying jobs again and were proud to call Drisking home. So we said nothing and those that did were taken to the mountain.

Because that is where they do it. There is a place on the mountain where the women are taken, Kimber: drifters, runaways and, if their parents choose it, sometimes the girls in town are even sold back. They arrange to sell the girls and they meet them at a tree halfway between our town and their baby mill. Sometimes kids play there now. I think you played there.

The Prescott’s and the Sheriff are the ones who impregnate the girls and the children are named after them. P children for the Prescotts and K children for the sheriff. And then when the women become too sick or too old to deliver profitable babies they are sent through a giant machine that was used to refine ore and their bodies are crushed and the blood and skin stripped away and what remains of them are their stolen children and the dust of their bones. And all that’s left of their bodies is the powder that they spread over the mountain to hide our crimes.

I’m telling you this, Kimber, because you are one of those children. Most of your friends are one of those children.

Please get out of Drisking before your father finds this letter. Run away and never come back and never speak of it to anyone. Their industry has deep roots now and the traffickers have lofty connections. Don’t tell anyone. Don’t keep this letter. Don’t look back.

I love you. I’m sorry I have to leave you. We all have to answer for our sins and I’m ready to burn in hell for mine.

Love always and forever,
Mom