

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter I

A delicate, orange ray of sunlight slid soundlessly into the room. It was almost as if the sun itself, with the back of its hand, gently pushed aside the faded, floral pattern curtain of the bedroom window. A thin beam of light drifted across the room the way a dandelion rides the wind, looking for just the right place to land to grow into something new, something beautiful. The spot of light drifted across a hand crafted cabinet nearly overloaded with trophies and medals, brushing past a 1st place trophy for a knife throwing tournament. Etched proudly on the base of the trophy read, “Dodger Rodgers”. And the trophy tucked tightly next to it, an award for 1st place pistol shooting, also read, “Dodger Rodgers”. Next to that, a trophy for 8 ball pool and a trophy for darts, among countless other trophies, hid tucked away behind a photo of a man and woman in their 30’s holding the hands of a smiling young girl with the world reflecting from the glisten of her eyes. The photo stood proudly, mounted in a wooden frame adorned with plastic butterflies and ribbons, clearly hand made by a child. While the trophies seemed aged and covered in dust, the photo frame shined immaculately.

The delicate ray of light came to a rest upon the face of a man, no longer in his 30’s. As he felt the warmth of the light, his arms jolted up to protect his face. He tucked his knees in tight to cover his torso. He waited for a four legged, happy faced, floppy eared assault, but was met with only the silent darkness of the bedroom. Dodger opened his eyes to see the

gentle beam of mourning light land on an empty dog bed that rested on the floor next to Dodger's side of the bed. Strands of tired, grey fur of a golden retriever still covered the bed. It was Samba's bed, but Samba was nowhere to be found. Dodger stared at spot where he used watch to Samba fall asleep, trying to convince himself the past 3 weeks had been a dream. He half heartedly wished this was the morning he would wake up to Samba jumping on him to wake him up. He wished he would turn over to see Karol yawning and holding up her pillow to prevent Samba from jumping on her too. But instead...

Silence.

Dodger scratched his cheek to find his five o'clock shadow had turned into a 12 o'clock shadow. He hadn't shaved in days. What was the point? Dodger expected when he became a temporary bachelor, he would enjoy drinking beer all day, walking around the house without any pants on, and drinking milk straight out of the container from the fridge without pouring it into a glass first. Instead, he found himself going to bed wearing the same moose print 2 piece pyjama set Karol gave to him for his 50th birthday. Samba had chewed a hole near the ankle of one of the pant legs and Karol had told him to throw it out countless times but he always said it was still perfectly fine. Slowly, as if hoping to wake up from a dream, Dodger turned over to Karol's side of the bed. It was empty. The ray of light had softly shifted over to the doorway as if telling Dodger to get out of bed and get into gear. There was no point in staying in bed. Karol wasn't there. Samba wouldn't come greet him. There was only the gentle beam of light leading Dodger forward.

He walked past a pink painted door, adorned with dried flowers. He half felt like humoring himself by knocking on it and saying, "Dahlia, it's time to wake up. You'll be late for school". He chuckled to himself as he raised his hand to the door, unsure of whether or not he would follow through with it. It was a force of habit built by years of faithful repetition. And yet, Dodger wanted to knock. He wished more than anything he would hear Dahlia shout back, "Okay! I'm awake!" He wished he would hear her come charging down the stairs to scarf her breakfast down in a single gulp. He wished she would forget to hug her mom and dad goodbye as she sprinted out the front door to catch her ride to school.

By the time Dodger snapped out of his daydream, he found himself standing in front of the stove, about to drop an unbroken egg into a pan. He stopped and wondered if it was worth the trouble. He loved seeing the smile on Karol's face when she sat down at the table to enjoy a pancake with a shredded bacon omelette on top and a moose sausage on the side. "Mmm, my second favorite sausage," Karol used to say before giving Dodger a luscious grin. Dodger would wink back at her before setting their cups of coffee and his own plate on the table.

Dodger sighed deeply and set the eggs back into the fridge. He grabbed a glass from the cupboard and checked to make sure it was absolutely clean before pouring himself some milk. With his eyes locked on the empty dining room table, he took a deep swig of the milk, only to be knocked out by the putrid stench of what seemed like a skunk's asshole. Dodger whipped around and belched out whatever was left in his mouth into the kitchen sink but the damage had been done. He had swallowed some of it, and clumps of the rotting

milk had latched onto his moustache. It was too late. He was tainted.

He threw open the fridge door, frantically searching for anything to wash the taste out. He was shocked to find the fridge nearly empty. Only old take-away containers from the local Frying Saucer diner and mysterious jars of years old jam accompanied two bottles of Hurricane Light. It was too early in the day for beer. He couldn't just drink beer all day anyway. He tore open an old take away container to find a crumpled, miserable omelette. It stared back at him as if poised and ready for a fight. He couldn't possibly eat the rest of the omelette. He picked it up two days ago when Falcon Allerdycce was supposed to be working the morning shift at the Frying Saucer. Falcon failed to show up at work and didn't even call in so Nickelas Dollarbuck had to fill in the shift. Dodger had only gone to the diner that morning because he knew Falcon was working that day, and for as long as he had lived, no one in Silver Falls ever had the heart to tell Nickelas how terrible he was at cooking eggs.

No. It had to be done. It had come down to the wire. There was no other choice.

Dodger reached down with his tough, weathered, bare hands, ham-fistedly grabbed a chunk of that dirty omelette and jammed it down his throat. He winced as the grainy, chalky eggs scraped the lining of his insides. On any other day, it would have been torture, but just in that moment, the omelette somehow scrubbed his mouth of the rotten milk. He had been cleansed by the bland, void-like taste of Nickelas' cooking.

There was nothing left for Dodger but to salvage his morning with a coffee. He checked the ceramic, wolf shaped jar to find it totally empty of coffee grounds. It was only a matter of time. Without anyone else to cook for, Dodger felt no reason to ever check anything in the kitchen. More and more, with Karol gone, he found himself buying meals at either the diner, Butch's meat shop, or The Spaghetti Western. Could he seriously get his morning started without any coffee? Was there really no other option? No, there was one way out. All throughout the last week, Willie Belgrade had been going on and on about this latest new foreign coffee he had just found. It was late at the bar the night before when Willie brought a small bag of that coffee for Dodger to take home. Dodger squeezed his brain, trying to recall the details, but at that point in the night, they had enjoyed a few drinks, and Wirriam Shipwright had bought a round of shots of Honey Thunder for everyone. No one ever buys that expensive stuff but one round quickly turned into two and Dodger didn't recall much of anything else that happened.

No, it was all starting to come back to him. He could hear Willie's voice echoing in his head.

"Brazilian coffee with hints of orange and an aroma of guava and maracujá."

Whatever the heck maracujá was, Dodger didn't think a fruity aroma was all that important to coffee. He was happy to have Jen Ericcson brand instant coffee if it wasn't for Karol demanding something better. Dodger found the small bag of coffee on the kitchen table. "Ritmo" it read on the packaging in curly, fancy lettering. For years and years, Dodger had nodded along to Willie raving about the latest new exotic

coffee he found, and for years he just assumed Willie had been simply entranced by the intoxicating allure of foreign mystery. Yet when Dodger brewed himself a cup of Ritmo coffee, he found his sense of smell latching on to this steaming hot drink. The color wasn't like that of his regular coffee. The drum-like rhythm it made as it poured into his favorite mug sounded like the gyrating hips of a gorgeous costumed dancer at Brazilian Carnival.

Maybe it was the lingering effect of the drinks from the night before, or maybe it was the combination of curdled milk and an omelette legally indistinguishable from sandpaper, but as Dodger took his first sip of that coffee, he swore he could hear the drum beat of some far off tropical festival.

“Oh shit. That’s good,” he muttered.

He sat and breathed deeply, trying to pick up that scent of guava and maracujá, whatever that was. We was certain he needed to have a good reply for when Willie asked what Dodger thought about the coffee. Dodger eyed the bag and guessed there may probably be enough for fifteen or so more servings. Surely, if he needed more, he could ask Willie to order more Ritmo for him.

As he slowly savored his coffee, he looked around the living room. The sparkle of Samba’s dog collar resting atop the fireplace caught his eye. Behind the collar was a photo of Samba and Dodger out on a hike. The photo had been taken many years ago. Dodger’s mind wandered back to a night many years ago, just after Dodger had finished training Samba as a search and rescue dog. Fred Hardluck, then sheriff at the time, had asked Dodger to help him with something. He

needed Samba to find a missing person. Dodger squeezed his brain to recall the details, but for some reason, he just couldn't put his finger on exactly what happened that night. They had been celebrating the birth of Stormy Skiesgard's son and the Silver Courage seemed to pour out of the bar like rain water that night.

Dodger didn't remember much of anything that night. All he knew was that Samba was a very good dog who had kept them all safe somehow. He gave Dodger more years of companionship than anyone could have asked of a golden retriever, and Dodger knew it. If he knew Samba wasn't going to last until the end of the year, he wouldn't have sold all of the new puppies he had just finish training. He was starting to regret giving the last one, Artax, to Tafford Weatherstone. If only he knew Samba wouldn't last much longer.

No. That was a lie.

He knew Samba was old.

He just didn't want to accept it.

While training the last batch of puppies, Dodger felt a connection to Artax. Maybe Dodger would have kept him, but Tafford seemed so panicked and frantic to get a dog. All the talk about weird animals out in the desert and weird noises on his roof at night made Tafford sound like a crazy conspiracy theorist. Maybe he was going to end up becoming another Nickelas Dollarbuck. It didn't matter anyway. Samba was gone. Dodger knew he could never replace a dog like that one.

Too much had already happened those last few weeks. The night Samba died, something strange happened that

Dodger still couldn't explain. Maybe he was afraid to fully understand or admit what happened. Maybe he simply wasn't capable of understand. What he did know was that two weeks ago, the new electric keypad lock he put on his basement door malfunctioned and somehow ruined the electrical wiring in his house. Karol wasn't home so what was the point of fixing it? Dodger knew where everything was in the house so he didn't need any lights at night to make his way from the front door to his bed.

It would be another two weeks before Karol came home from her shift at the campgrounds. Dodger figured he may as well fix the electricals in the house since Flatwoods Electrical hadn't called him in for a shift in more than a week.

After finishing his coffee and putting on his least dirty clothes, he stepped outside to face the morning head on. The crisp autumn air filled his lungs as he looked up into the warm, purple haze of the seemingly endless sky. He paused for a moment, believing that things would definitely be alright. Things would soon go back normal. Today was going to be a good day.

The gravel of his front yard crunched under each of his short steps. The air was colder than he expected. Just as he reached for his keys, he caught a glimpse of one of his throwing axes on the ground, just below the driver's door of his car.

"Huh. Well tickle me silly," he said, scratching his mustache. He wasn't one for leaving his throwing gear lying around. Then again, he was out late the night before with the

other guys at the bar. He picked up the throwing axe and turned around to face a target hanging from an old oak tree.

“Six yards,” he whispered to himself as the steam from his breath slowly drifted away.

He drew his arm back and took a deep breath. Just as he had done hundreds of thousands of times before, he stepped forward and swung his arm. He let that axe loose like an eagle taking flight. The axe soared through the air with a whistle and then

Nothing.

There was no familiar clash of metal on wood. There was no satisfying “thunk” as the axe embedded itself into the target. No. Instead the axe missed the target by what may as well have been the broad side of a barn.

“Slap me silly,” Dodger grumbled, taking off his camouflage baseball cap, as if to punctuate his incredulousness. He paced over to the target and set his hand upon it, feeling the groove that he had carved out hitting the exact same spot hundreds of times over the last few months. He retrieved his axe and drove down to the local hardware store in near silence. Only the sound of radio static distracted Dodger from the agitation he felt from missing a throw that he had never missed before in his entire life.

Chapter II

With a familiar squeaky creak, the glass doors at the entrance of Rendlesham Hardware slipped open. As Dodger made his way inside, he heard a familiar voice greet him. Dodger stepped out of the cool morning air toward the cash register to see a bright eyed young man with fiery hair and a welcoming grin on his face.

“Good mornin’ there, Fort.” Dodger nodded toward the hardware store employee.

“Mornin’, Dodger! Did you bring my camera back?” Fort answered, setting down a clipboard and leaning toward Dodger.

“Sorry, I’ve had a busy week with work. Why don’t you come by my place later to pick it up? There’s something I wanted to ask your help with,” Dodger scratched his mustache and looked away uncomfortably.

“Yeah, sure. What did you have in mind?” Fort stretched, being far too energetic for that early in the morning.

“I was taking video with the camera but the files went missing. The camera says it’s all been corrupted so everything I recorded is gone,” Dodger answered sheepishly, his sentence trailing off, becoming quieter and quieter.

“Aw, yeesh. That’s a real bummer. Sorry to hear that. It wasn’t anything important, was it? What were you videoing anyway?” Fort questioned, obviously distressed. He couldn’t stand the idea of the camera equipment he let Dodger borrow becoming broken.

“I’d rather not talk about it here,” Dodger shifted uncomfortably, unable to make eye contact with Fort.

“Ohhh, right! I gotcha. I know what you mean.” Fort nodded enthusiastically before patting Dodger on the shoulder.

“Huh? You know what I mean? You know what I was videoing?” Dodger’s head snapped up to meet Fort’s gaze. Could Fort possibly have figured out Dodger’s secret?

“Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me,” Fort reassured the then panic stricken Dodger. In an instant, his heart began to race as his hands became cold and numb.

“Uh... what do you think I’ve been videoing?” Dodger stammered, trying to keep his voice down. His eyes darted left and right to make sure no one who could recognize him would be within earshot. His lungs tightened up as Fort uncomfortably locked eyes with him. How did Fort figure out what Dodger was keeping in his basement? Did his new electric lock and metal security door fail? When did Fort see what was down there?

“Weird sex stuff, right? Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone. It’s normal for guys to experiment as they get old,” Fort reassured Dodger as if he were some kind of doctor. In

that moment, Dodger's eyes widened as the air evacuated entirely from his lungs. His body temperature just about dropped to freezing point as his jaw dropped.

"What in blue blazes? No! Dagnabbit, Fort! That's not what I've been videoing. Jeez! Why would you even think that?" Dodger sputtered, absolutely aghast. He could barely get the words out of his mouth.

"Huh? But then why's it such a secret?" Fort trailed off, absolutely befuddled by what Dodger could have been hiding. His eyes drifted up to the ceiling of the hardware store as his face scrunched up in frustration. What could Dodger have been so desperate to video but couldn't talk about in public?

"Just come by my place when you're off work and we'll talk about it then," Dodger coughed out, struggling to regain his composure. Fort nodded and agreed enthusiastically as Dodger marched off aimlessly into the isles of the store. With fists balled up tightly, Dodger tried to clear the echo of Fort's words from his mind. What did Fort mean by "old" anyway?

After a few deep breaths, Dodger was able to calm down and focus on the task at hand. He needed some fuses, wires, sockets, and a few other replacement parts. By the time he came to his senses, he realized his auto pilot system had navigated him to the right locations and picked up all the right parts that he needed. After working more than 19 years with Flatwoods Electrical, finding this sort of stuff had become not just second nature, but first nature. 19 years was a long time to work with a company, but surely not long enough to make a guy old, right?

At some point, the glimmer of something metal caught Dodger's attention. Sitting at the end cap of isle six was a stack of Falcon Fang brand multi-tools. These weren't just any multi-tools. They were the new "Marsh Stalker" model that Dodger had been reading about for the past year in gun magazines from Shellaby Winterrose's shop. Dodger picked up the reinforced plastic packaging to admire what surely had to be the absolute pinnacle of human engineering. A semi-spring assisted folding five inch titanium blade which locked into place; a hardened steel leather sewing awl, gut hook, shark toothed saw, insta-spark single contact waterproof fire starter, 777 lumen LED flashlight; a thermometer, digital fish scale, can and bottle opener, all accentuated by a handsome, hand crafted elk horn and Hickory handle, with a matching hand crafted wolf leather sheath made by the studio run by Stirling Nightcroft. It was like holding a dream come true. Dodger could barely believe they were able to get any of these in stock. Just as he moved his hand out of the way to read more of the packaging, the price tag shot out towards him like a bullet.

Three hundred and ninety nine dollars, plus tax.

"Oh. Shit." Dodger's shoulders drooped down with a heavy sigh as the multi-tool in his hand multiplied in weight. Work had been too slow the past month. Flatwoods Electrical hadn't called him in for a shift in more than a week. Sending Dahlia off to college had taken a substantial bite out of his and Karol's savings. There was no way Dodger could buy something like that and justify the price tag to Karol. But then again... Karol wasn't home. She probably wouldn't even find out he had purchased it.

She was probably off having so much fun at her new job, she wouldn't care anyway. Karol loved him so much. She would want him to buy this for himself, wouldn't she? Of course she would. She would love nothing more than for Dodger to be happy.

But... if that was true, why did she leave him all alone?

Why did she abandon him so she could live a life of fun and adventure, dragging tourists and city slickers all around the mountains? How was it fair for her to leave him with nothing but a silent house and an empty bed?

No. It wasn't fair for Dodger to think like that. Karol had worked so hard so they could save up money to send Dahlia to college. She put up with brutal hours and an ungrateful manager and still came home with a smile on her face, just for Dodger and Dahlia. She never complained about her last job, but Dodger knew. He could feel her soul being chipped away at, piece by piece. Karol deserved to be happy. Karol deserved to do something she would enjoy. She deserved to be free. Her new job made her happy and she certainly didn't need Dodger there for that.

Dodger took a slow, shallow breath before setting the three hundred and ninety nine dollar toy back on the shelf. Months ago, he had planned on asking Shellaby to order one of these Marsh Stalkers so he could give it to Bear for his birthday. For as long as he could remember, Dodger and Bear had been trying to one-up each other when it came to birthday gifts. After Bear gifted Dodger a set of six Tungsten Carbide throwing knives, each one custom etched with each of the first animals they ever hunted together, Dodger swore he

would get something great for Bear. There was no way Dodger could have bought one of these multi-tools for himself.

He dragged his feet a few steps before regaining his composure and grabbing a moon pie off the shelf. It wasn't right for a man to mope like a child. He gritted his teeth and marched his way over to the check-out counter, clearing his mind of the multi-tool. He stood in line, waiting for a short, older man with a silver pony tail, faded bandana tied around his head, and welding goggles. The little old man flung his arms in the air as he relayed some kind of story to the cashier. The creases of the old man's face, hidden beneath a scraggly, animated moustache and beard, told the story of a vibrant character who loved to laugh.

"And that's when I said, oh, it looks like she *was* a fish after all!" the old man sputtered in pretend disbelief. Nearly falling over the cash register, Fort burst into laughter. He couldn't catch his breath for at least a minute as the old man puffed his chest out and smiled with pride at his funny anecdote. Secretly, Dodger wished he had gotten there sooner to catch the lead up to the punch line.

"Anyway, that's why I haven't been able to get any new glassworks made this week. I've been using candles in my house all week and I just can't get my furnace started," the old man lamented, scratching his beard.

"That's a real bummer. I hope you get it fixed soon," Fort replied, packing away a handful of screws and other assorted items into a brown paper bag.

"I've got no idea what happened but ever since two weeks ago, my truck hasn't been able to start and the

electricity in my house just hasn't been working right," the old man added.

"Hey, Karn, it's me, Dodger- from the bar," Dodger set his hand on the little old man's shoulder expecting to feel skin and bones. To his shock, he felt a surprising amount of muscle and bulk.

"Hey! Nice to see you here, man!" Karn spun around with a grin. For the number of years they had been drinking together at the Dusty Cactus, they had never really interacted with each other before except for chatting a few times during Moose Steak Festivals in the past. Dodger looked down at the electrical components in his hand, thinking about having to go home alone to fix up the house so he could sit at home. Alone.

"Did you say you needed some help with an electrical problem at your house?" Dodger asked, trying to not sound too eager to help.

"Well, I was gonna call Flatwoods Electrical to send someone out to fix it but I was just thinking about how some people in the world don't even have electricity, and they're just living off the land, like all groovy with the spirit of the planet, you know? And I thought, man, who am I to complain about not being able to turn on a light bulb, you know?" Karn explained, picking up and shaking his paper bag. With a tinkering clink, something fell out of his bag and landed on the hard, metal counter.

"Oh, look out, Mr. Delance. It looks like you've got a screw loose," Fort blurted out as he reached for another bag.

“Why don’t you let me take a look at your electrical and I’ll fix it up for you,” Dodger pushed forward, setting his items on the counter as if trying to rush the transaction.

“No, I couldn’t possibly ask you to do that. I’ll just get an electrician from Flatwoods,” Karn answered, starting to blush.

“I work for Flatwoods. I’ve got the day off but I’m happy to come by and help,” Dodger threw his words out like darts at a dart board.

“Well, maybe if it really isn’t a bother to you. My truck hasn’t been working and I walked here so I wouldn’t mind getting a lift home,” Karn seemed lost in thought, processing his situation. There was some sense of apprehension in his voice. Even after all these years, he and Dodger had never really had a serious conversation. It had come as a shock to Dodger that Karn didn’t even know what Dodger did for a living. For a brief moment, Dodger felt a bit hurt, considering he knew that Karn was considered one of the world’s best glass blowers.

“Yeah, you need help so I’m there. It’s no problem at all,” Dodger laughed, trying to make it seem like it wasn’t a big deal. Yet to Dodger, it felt as if he had just been pardoned of a prison sentence.

After saying bye to Fort, Dodger led Karn out to his truck. Karn complimented Dodger on what a nice truck he had, bringing to Dodger’s attention neither of them even knew what kind of vehicle each other drove. They hopped into the truck and as Dodger turned on the heater, Karn asked if they could stop by the Frying Saucer for breakfast.

“What day is it?” Dodger asked.

“Don’t you mean to ask if Falcon is working today?”
Karn answered.

“Heheh, yeah, you’re right. That’s what I meant,”
Dodger chuckled, feeling a bit more at ease. Maybe they
weren’t as alienated from each other as he thought.

“Yeah, Falcon’s working today. I’d like a big breakfast
today so I can catch up with work if you can get my furnace
started,” Karn said, lost in thought.

Dodger fiddled with the truck’s center console, unsure
of what to say without drinks in their hands.

“So, uh- how about that Sluggers game last Thursday?”
Dodger asked, fishing for a conversation.

“I’m not really into sports,” Karn answered plainly.

Only the radio static distracted them from the
awkward silence on the five minute drive to the Frying Saucer
diner.

It felt like far too long before Dodger’s truck kicked up
the dust of a well worn parking lot. He was nearly blinded by
the silver reflection of a shiny building, clearly built sometime
during the 50’s or 60’s. Despite its age, it was well maintained
and shined like it has just been polished. Resting above the
chrome trim and checkerboard façade proudly hung a cutout
billboard with a burger resting on a plate, the silhouette of
which clearly resembled a flying saucer. On foggy nights, the
backlit spotlight of the restaurant could fool visitors into

thinking that Silver Falls was home to some kind of spacecraft from another world.

Without saying a word, Dodger and Karn stepped into the restaurant, ready to greet Falcon. They instantly felt the warmth of the old diner, breathing in the aroma of bacon grease and coffee. Just barely audible over the loudspeaker played an old Roy O. Nelson country song. Pinned to the walls were pages of old Captain Bang! comic books and Midnight Falcons records. Stood proudly in the corner next to the barely functioning jukebox was a lifesize cutout of Wayne John, the old cowboy movie actor. A faint hint of dust and firewood lingered in the air. As they walked toward the counter, Dodger ran his hand along the red suede seats, thinking about his teenager years drinking milkshakes and chasing cute girls in that very diner.

“Mornin’ fellas! Can I get ya some omelets?” a terrible, booming voice called out to them. Dodger could hear Karn gulp hard as they slowly turned to each other to exchange looks. A shadow of abject horror had wrapped its hands tightly around both their throats and clenched down hard with the force of an entire world.

“Hi Nickelas. Nice to see you,” Karn croaked out, barely able to speak. His throat had instantly become as dry as a desert. He was at a loss for words as he searched Dodger’s eyes for any chance of rescue.

“I’ll have a chicken fried steak with hash browns and bacon, extra gravy on the steak,” Dodger swiftly called out as if raising a shield to protect his body.

“How will you have your eggs?” Nickelas asked, stepping up to the counter with a welcoming smile.

“No!” Dodger shouted far too aggressively. His glance shot back over to Karn, who’s face also had the unmistakable look of a cornered animal.

“No thanks. I’m- uh- watching my cholesterol, so I’ll pass on the eggs,” Dodger tried hard to soften his tone.

“Rock on, rock on. And what about you, Karn?” Nickelas aimed his notepad and pen at the shrinking old man.

“Same,” Karn whispered out inaudibly. He managed to gasp for just enough air before he followed up with, “I’ll have the same as Dodger.”

Nickelas pointed his pen at Karn, winked, and made the sound of a cocking gun. With a whistling tune, Nickelas wandered back toward the kitchen while Karn took a seat at the front counter. Dodger instead stepped away and moved toward a booth in the far corner of the diner.

“You wanna sit here where it’s a bit quieter?” Dodger asked, pointing to the booth. Karn nodded and followed along. He looked around to see the diner was empty save for a tired looking man sitting at the far end of the front counter. He wore long, shaggy brown hair beneath a dark purple baseball cap. He seemed quietly content to hover over a cup of coffee as he intently wrote into a notebook with tattered, crumpled pages.

They took a moment to settle down in their booth before Karn said, “I’m sorry. Falcon was supposed to be working today. I don’t know why he’s not here.”

“It’s no big deal. I think we’ll survive this, but seriously, where in blue blazes is Falcon?” Dodger pulled a napkin from the dispenser and quietly wiped down his side of the table. Karn watched him intently, wondering why Dodger was going through the trouble of cleaning what looked like a perfectly fine table.

“You don’t think anything bad has happened to him do you?” Karn leaned in close over the table, trying to keep his voice down.

“I- don’t have a clue,” Dodger shifted uncomfortably, wringing his hands. As he searched his mind for any topic he could change the subject to, his right thumb brushed over a scar on the knuckles of his left hand. Dodger wasn’t sure if he himself might have an idea of why Falcon wasn’t showing up to work. He shifted his heavy gaze to watch the road past the parking lot on the other side of the window. Without some sort of alcoholic drink to lubricate his ever drying throat, Dodger wasn’t sure what to say to Karn. Should he ask if Karn has kids? Should he ask if Karn is married? Should he ask if Karn has a dog? No, that would be awkward. What kind of weirdo just asks if someone has a dog unprompted? It was just awkward. They had only ever had the most casual of conversations while drinking at the bar. He had never sat there in that diner with Karn before... right?

Right?

A faded, foggy memory began to echo in Dodger’s mind. Softly at first, like a subtle dropping of water in the distance, the memory came to him. He looked down to the scar on his hand and the image of blood dripping onto the

diner table became clear. No. This wasn't the first time they had sat there together in the diner. Dodger looked over to the counter and saw the phantom image of a much younger Karn yelling out for help, asking for bandages. Dodger saw himself gripping his hand tightly, unable to process what had just happened to him.

He saw Sheriff Fred Hardluck bringing him a bowl of water to wash the wound out. He saw the image of Shelly Anne Piper, who was working the counter that late night, rushing over to him with face of absolute horror as she wrapped his hand in bandages. He recalled the terrified look on Dan Austin's face as he sat at the opposite corner of the diner, peering up from between his baseball cap and coffee, too afraid to walk over to Dodger to ask what had happened. At the table next to him, a woman and her daughter watched in shock as Dodger's blood pooled on the table. He could hear Karn's voice reassuring him, "You're gonna be alright. It's not as bad as it looks. Just stay calm." He looked up to see an expression on Fred's face that he had never seen on anyone before. "What the hell was that thing out there!?"

Then there was Samba, the faithful golden retriever, sitting by his side, calmly watching him to make sure he would be okay. He sat by the table, out of the way of people running back and forth to bandage up Dodger's hand. What a good, faithful dog.

"Hey, anybody home in there?" a soft, creaky voice snapped Dodger back to the present day. Karn's soft, aged eyes were such a stark contrast from how he looked in Dodger's memory.

“Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking about my dog, Samba. He died just a bit more than two weeks ago,” Dodger half lied. He cleared his throat and regained his composure.

“Sorry to hear that. Samba was such a good, faithful dog,” Karn sighed softly, reaching over to pat Dodger gently on the shoulder.

Wait a second... Karn knew Samba? Karn knew about Dodger’s dog? Then he had to know what happened that night many years ago when Dodger got the scar on his hand.

“Hey, Karn, have we been to this diner together before? Something just seems familiar,” Dodger prodded, tilting his head back and peaking subtly through the bottom of his glasses.

“Hmm, no, can’t say that we have,” Karn stated firmly, looking up to the ceiling as if searching for something. Dodger sat for a moment, aiming his next question.

“Hey, just an unrelated thing. I know this was a long time ago, but you know that night when Stormy’s son was born and we had that party in the bar? Do you remember anything about that night?” Dodger tried to make direct eye contact, now aiming for the center of his target.

“Hmm, let me see. I don’t recall much. I only remember that funny fella from Finland betting he could beat you in a game of pool. He had the darndest look on his face when you ran the table on him five times in a row!” Karn chuckled. His eyes shifted uncomfortably to look out the window as he forced a smile onto his face.

“Hey, so yeah, your electrical problems at your house, you said it started two weeks ago?” Dodger swerved, hoping to catch Karn off balance.

“Yeah, it was the darndest thing. I heard this loud boom, or a pop sound, and I dunno, I guess maybe I blew a fuse or something. I was in the middle of watchin’ that old movie, you know, the one where the woman is running away from that swamp monster that looks like it’s in love with her, but at the end of the movie, the twist is that the swamp monster is actually in love with her husband! Well, I was only half way through that when the power in my house stopped working.” Karn prattled on as Dodger pretended to be interested in whatever movie Karn was describing.

“Hey, maybe it’s got to do with those weird lights some folks in town were seeing in the sky around that time,” Dodger pushed Karn, visibly applying some pressure.

“Oh, I don’t really know nothin’ about that, really. I certainly didn’t see any lights. I heard it’s some kind of aurora borealis type thingy. You know what it’s like when the mountain is getting ready to snow,” Karn chuckled, stretching his shoulders and looking over to the kitchen.

“Did it look anything like that bright flash in the sky that night of Stormy’s party?” Dodger questioned casually as if he didn’t care at all.

“Yes, actually. Now that you mention it, them lights looked an awful lot the same,” Karn’s voice seemed to sneak out from beneath his bushy moustache without his control. His brow furrowed as he tried to process exactly what Dodger

had just said. Dodger folded his arms as he leaned back, acting as if the conversation wasn't important at all.

Bull's eye.

An uncomfortable silence settled over the table as Karn realized he had just been caught in a lie. He flicked through the pages of the breakfast menu, looking for a way out like he were some sort of trapped animal.

With a thunderous slam, Nickelas appeared and set two big plates down onto the table. The silverware clattered hard, jolting both Karn and Dodger to attention.

"Alright, boys. Two chicken fried steaks, extra gravy, country style fries and breakfast sausages! How's that?" Nickelas chimed out proudly. He stuck his chest out, waiting for his thanks. Dodger and Karn exchanged confused, crooked looks before coming to a silent agreement. They understood each other.

"Yeah, that's perfect."

"Oh, yeah, great, thanks, Nickelas."

"That's definitely what we ordered."

"Look's fantastic."

"Can't wait to tuck into that."

"Mmm, yummy, baby!"

Nickelas beamed for a second before leaning in close. His look changed to that of dire seriousness.

“Hey, I couldn’t help but overhear you fellas talking about them weird lights in the sky,” Nickelas whispered. Dodger and Karn exchanged another silent, concerned look.

“Uh, yeah, it’s no big deal. We aren’t really that interested in all that,” Dodger tried to say, but Nickelas quickly interjected.

“You want to know what those lights really are, huh? It’s aliens. That’s right. Beings from another world. They’re watching us, you know. And you know why they’re here? Overfishing. We’ve been overfishing the lakes and putting the ecosystem out of balance. They’re trying to stop us from ruining the ecosystem,” Nickelas’ voice became louder and increased with conviction with each sentence. From the corner of Dodger’s eye, he could see Karn gritting his teeth hard, trying to stop himself from bursting into laughter.

“I’ll tell you how they do it, do. They stick a device up your yahoo and it emits false memories into your prostate, which propagates into the rest of your body. That’s right. They jam a probe right up your poop chute. Right up in there!” Nickelas’ arms flailed as he motioned with his index finger, twisting and hooking sharply upward into the air.

Karn’s eyes welled up with tears. His face reddened as he desperately looked to Dodger to rescue him. It was clear Karn could no longer breathe as the breakfast menu slowly inched up more and more to cover his face.

“But those aliens won’t get me. At least one of us in town has to keep his wits, and that fella will be me! You know how I’m able to do it? I’ll share my secret with you. And this is top secret so don’t go telling too many people or the aliens

will figure out my counter measures,” Nickelas leaned in close, tensely locking eyes with Dodger. Dodger sat expressionless, maintaining the same stony poker face he wore when playing pool, horseshoes, or darts. Nickelas put his arm on Dodger’s shoulder and pointed toward him. His voice lowered to a barely audible whisper.

“I wear a butt plug every night when I go to sleep to stop the aliens from anally probing me,” Nickelas stated firmly, as certain of that fact as he would have said the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

It was then that Karn’s eyebrows shot upward to the sky. Dodger could hear the grinding of Karn’s teeth as a muffled cough of air escaped him. Dodger tilted his head so that Nickelas wouldn’t see the reflection of Karn’s face in Dodger’s glasses.

“That’s a great tip. Karol isn’t home tonight so I just might give that a try,” Dodger said dryly, not breaking his statuesque, piercing gaze, refusing to lose eye contact with Nickelas.

“Anyway, can we get some coffee, please?” Dodger asked, pointing to the counter to distract Nickelas.

“Oh, yeah, sure, of course! Anyway, you guys enjoy your breakfast,” Nickelas whipped around and marched into the kitchen.

As soon as Nickelas was out of sight, Karn let loose the breath he had been holding for the duration of the entire conversation. Tears streamed from his eyes as he clamped his hands over his mouth to muffle his laughter. Dodger could not

help but chuckle and smile back as he slapped Karn on the shoulder. They shared a muffled laugh before Dodger pointed out his index finger, twisted his hand sharply and jammed it upward into the air. Karn had to remove his glasses as he dried his eyes. After a moment, he managed to stifle his laughter to finally bring his attention to his breakfast.

Karn raised his eyebrows and gave Dodger a look before directing his gaze to the two plates of food. This may have been the first time they hung out together outside of the bar, but at least it was turning out to be a pretty good time. After Nickelas brought out their coffee with two complimentary donuts, Karn waited for Nickelas to leave before holding up the donut like a flying saucer, sharply jamming his finger up through the hole and shouting, “Yeouch!”

At this, Dodger lost his cool and let loose a laugh that dispelled any awkward tension between them. Over the loud speaker, a familiar voice gently sang out a delicate melody, riding the harmony of a 60’s keyboard and electric guitar.

“Hey, it’s one of Bran Steelhide’s songs,” Dodger said, sawing into his chicken fried steak.

“Leaving Irene, from Never Ending Road, 1973,” Karn added, chomping down onto a fork full of gravy covered fries.

Dodger grinned quietly to himself, eased by finally having something they could talk about and connect over. The two men slowly sipped their coffee while softly singing along to the old song on the radio, knowing full well that Bran Steelhide would absolutely hate it to see locals in town singing along to one of his songs.