

Silver Falls

# Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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## Chapter V

After a 35 minute drive, the headlights of Dodger's truck pushed through a thick, inky darkness as it bounded up a steep incline and rounded a sharp corner. The headlights came to an uneasy rest upon a stout log cabin structure with pale yellow light softly seeping out of a row of old windows which sagged as if bearing a great weight. Across the winding road, the mountain wall rose up defiantly against the sky, reflecting pale moonlight upon Pullen's Station. On the other side of the building, the land receded downward into a deep valley, inside which evergreen trees shimmered with green and silver as they rose out of a wispy fog, reaching up as if howling at the moon.

As Dodger and Karn stepped out of the truck and onto the crunching stones on the ground, they were greeted by the sweet scent of pine trees riding an icy northern wind making its way down from the peak of the mountain. A faint hint of recently fallen rain on freshly chopped firewood lingered in the air. The distant sound of the night breeze gently sweeping the tops of the towering trees surrounding Pullen's Station formed an atmosphere that sheltered this building from its surrounding environment. The air was thin and sharp to the touch, offering a dangerous knife's edge for city slickers too cowardly to face it, and a brisk wake-up call for the locals who dared to breathe it in.

“It’s cold so cold here, I think I just lost an inch or two,” Karn muttered as he used a napkin to wipe his hands after finishing his dinner.

“Let’s head on it. Smells like they’ve got the fire going,” Dodger replied as his boots hit the creaking floorboards of an awning that looked to have been built at least 60 years prior. The distant sound of laughter and the clanking of glass could faintly be heard from the other side of the frost covered windows. As Dodger approached the shadowy front door, he noticed three trucks and two sedans parked haphazardly in front of the old building, next to a snow plow and snow mobile which sat waiting for the oncoming snow season. He stepped around a pile of hastily stacked firewood and an ice box with peeling white paint to check out the vehicles, guessing which one of them might belong to Iron Austin. What if Iron wasn’t there? Would it be a waste of time? What would Dodger tell Karn if Karn asked why they went there? Dodger’s heart rate spiked as the icy door knob of the weathered front door sapped all the heat from his hand. With an agonizing groan, the door creaked open and as the icy air forcefully pushed its way into the smoky, warm air of the tightly bundled building, the sound of laughter and slurring chatter eased to a standstill.

Dodger and Karn inched their way up to the bar, led by the scent of recently waxed leather and cinnamon. The walls of the interior were covered with so much climbing and mountaineering gear, there was barely space left to hang up a postage stamp. Hanging from the ceiling were old sleds, trophy antlers, taxidermied animals, all kinds of antique bows and arrows, and animal traps.

A serious looking man in his late 20's, with blue eyes as sharp as an arrow's broad head tip and hair the color of a sunrise turned his head and nodded at Dodger and Karn from the other side of the bar. Held tightly between his two hands was a bright red apple. As he clenched his teeth and gripped tightly, the muscles of his forearms and shoulders bulged so intensely that it seemed the threads of his green plaid shirt were right on the verge of tearing apart. "Be with you in a sec," he said to Dodger.

All eyes fell back to the bartender who gripped the apple tighter and tighter with his two hands. With a sudden, echoing pop, the apple snapped into two perfect halves along a split that looked to have been made with the sharpest of knives. The men sitting side by side slammed their hands down onto the surface of the bar, cheering and cursing out with shock and disbelief.

"Holy shit!"

"No godamn way."

"I don't believe that shit!"

"How in holy hell did you do that!?"

"See!? I told you he could do it!"

"Alright, there. I did it. Pay up," the bartender broke the apple halves into quarters before setting them into glasses and pouring in some European Apple Cider from the bar tap. Each man sitting at the bar shook his head and set down a five dollar bill which the bartender collected nonchalantly.

“Shit. Hell of a grip,” Dodger said as the bartender walked back over to him.

“No big deal. So, what can I get you fellas?” the bartender’s voice was dry, as if playing a tired old recording. He sounded years older than he looked.

“Hurricane Light, please,” Dodger answered, looking over to Karn with agreement. Karn could tell Dodger came here for some reason and didn’t intend on staying too long.

“You want me to open a tab or you want to pony up now?” the bartender got straight to pouring the drinks, not even making eye contact. Dodger could feel the heat from the regulars of the bar staring him down.

“Tab’s fine,” Dodger answered, trying to not look back at the other guys watching him. Over an old muffled jukebox, doo-wop music from the 50’s began to play softly.

“Oh, hey. I love this song! You Don’t Belong Here, Johnny and The Star Rockets, from 1957 I think,” Karn beamed with a smile as he turned around to locate the source of the music. He noticed a worn but well maintained pool table in the middle of the room, a cast iron fireplace in the far corner, and an arcade machine from the 90’s tucked away in another corner. The bartender handed Dodger and Karn their drinks without paying much more attention to them. When he turned around, Dodger noticed a metal slingshot sitting in the bartender’s rear pocket; a sight Dodger hadn’t seen since the 90’s. As the bartender disappeared into the back room, the chatter of the other bar patrons slowly picked up where it had left off.

Instead of clinking their glasses together, Dodger and Karn quietly sipped their drinks as they sat uncomfortably at the bar.

“What’s the deal with this place?” Dodger asked. Karn started to answer, “I don’t know, man. These guys look like they’re staring at your-”

“Nuts. Here you go,” the bartender set down two bowls of mixed peanuts, pretzels, and trail mix in front of Dodger and Karn, giving them a slight nod.

“Thanks. Hey, we didn’t barge in on some kind of private event here, did we?” Dodger asked, finally making eye contact with the bartender.

“No. Why? Are you guy’s from the down the mountain? I’ve never seen you around here before,” the bartender answered while mixing a drink for a man who had just signaled him from farther down the bar.

“I feel like a marching band that just showed up to a funeral,” Dodger hid behind his beer while looking up at an antique clock sitting up above the rear wall.

“Huh? Oh, don’t mind them fellas. They probably think you’re with that out of town weirdo who’s been up here past couple weeks. Let ‘em know you’re local and they’ll be fine,” the bartender said with reassurance.

“Out of town weirdo? Can you tell me about it?” Dodger leaned in over the bar, lowering his voice.

“Yeah, sure. He’s got this long dark stringy hair, looks unwashed. Wears a purple baseball cap. Said his name’s Val,

or Valentine, or something. He's been asking people about his sister who was working with a logging crew like 28 years ago or something. Said she went missing, but honestly, I can't imagine a woman working in a logging crew back then. It just didn't happen," the bartender answered.

A somewhat thin, older man with drowsy eyes beneath wild white eyebrows, big, thick frame, perfectly round glasses, and a bushy mustache that stuck out like a bird beak hopped off his chair and wobbled his way over to the bartender and Dodger talking. He put his arm on the bar to steady himself as a leaned in close to Dodger.

"Hey, the other fellas and I were just talking. You're Dodger Rodgers, aren't you?" the old man spoke with a creaking voice.

"Yeah. Who's asking?" Dodger leaned back to get a good look at the old man and size up the other men in the bar, as if calculating his chances of him and Karn winning a bar fight.

"Shit, I thought I recognized you. You're the guy who never loses a game of pool, darts, or horse shoes. What are ya doin' up here in our little bar?" the little old man's joints creaked with excitement.

"Actually, I'm looking for a guy named Iron Austin. I heard he usually has a drink here. I was hoping to have a chat with him," Dodger said, taking a big swig of his drink.

"Now, Iron likes to keep to himself. He doesn't really like talking to folks," the old man said.

“Dodger’s interested in buying and working Golden Ridge Ranch,” Karn leaned in with his beer. Dodger looked at him with wide eyes, trying to figure out why Karn would say something like that.

“Oh well if that’s the case, Iron might want to hear from you then. He’s been looking for someone with the right head on his shoulders to pick up that old place and properly take care of it. Go on to the far end of the bar. That fella with the overalls and long beard is Iron. Tell him Owill told you to talk to him,” the little old man said, changing his tune. Owill grabbed his mixed drink from the bartender and wobbled his way back to his seat, laughing at a joke that he had just missed from one of the other guys sitting at the bar.

Dodger exchanged a look with Karn as the song “First To Shoot, Last To Die” by The Wranglers started playing over the jukebox. He got to his feet and slowly made his way to the other side of the room. With each footstep, the floorboards creaked ever louder, and his heart punched against his chest ever harder. What should he say to Iron? How should he start the conversation? Karn pulled his sleeve back and checked the time on his watch as Dodger made his way toward Iron.

Dodger found a large figure hunched over in the farthest barstool at the bar, intermittently taking huge bites out of his beer glass with a face that even the coldest winter wind was afraid to brush up against. Beneath an old cowboy hat, two smoldering embers of eyes rested wearily, hiding behind a long, faded grey beard that looked as hard as metal.



“Hey, the name’s Dodger. Are you Iron?” Dodger struggled to step up onto the bar stool, suddenly feeling like a small child trying to climb into a highchair.

“What do you want?” a deep, heavy voice spoke, rumbling the glass in Dodger’s increasingly sweaty hand.

“I was hoping I could ask you something about Golden Ridge Ranch,” Dodger said sheepishly, hiding behind his drink.

“I don’t feel like talkin’,” Iron poured the rest of his half empty glass down his throat in one gulp. After a moment of awkward silence broken only by the other guys in the bar whispering and mentioning Dodger’s name, Iron pushed his glass forward across the bar and called out with a booming voice, “Atticus! Dodger here’s buying a shot of Honey Thunder for everyone.”

“So generous,” Atticus, the bartender, answered back with the driest of tones. The other guys at the bar sputtered comments of surprise and cheered Dodger’s name. As Atticus grabbed handfuls of shot glasses and poured out thick, amber liquid, Dodger looked at the stony muscles of Iron’s forearms, wondering what it would feel like to get punched out by a man nearly the size of a semi truck cab.

“Uhh, Owull told me to talk to you,” Dodger said, his voice barely audible over the joyous uproar of the other guys.

“Alright then. Talk,” Iron grunted.

“I uh- wanted to ask if you know anything about those rumors around Golden Ridge Ranch. You know, weird animals, lights in the night sky, that kind of thing,” Dodger raised his voice, trying to sound tough, but the other guys in the bar

drowned out his voice by slapping their hands down onto the counter while cheering on Atticus.

“Yeah, well, I’d like my wife to take a break from being a grade-A bitch, but you don’t see me holdin’ out my hand for wishes,” Iron lamented, his deep voice cutting through the riotous sound of the bar. Atticus finished filling the nearly dozen shot glasses and lined them up on a wooden board sitting on the back of the bar.

“Uh- a friend of mine said he saw you having a talk with Bull Brandish. I was wondering if he said anything to you about them weird lights in the sky folks in town have been talking about,” Dodger raised his voice, but by that point, Atticus had his hand on a thick rope hanging in the corner of the room, ringing a bell with a sound that surely must have been audible for at least a mile away. With a dramatic flick of his wrist, Atticus slammed a big red button labeled “Storm Warning.” The lights dimmed and a strobe light flashed out, heralding the sound of booming thunder and heavy wind over a loud speaker.

As the darkness took hold of the room, the strobe light flashed. Iron slowly stepped off his barstool and stood up. Dodger watched in slow motion as Iron rose higher and higher until Iron’s face loomed far above, glaring down at Dodger like the head of a storm cloud. Iron’s eyes flashed like lightning above the turbulent tempest of his beard. His muscle bound shoulders stretched on like mountains on the horizon.

Atticus carried the wooden board to the front of the bar, handing out the shot glasses to the men who were out of their seats, hootin’ and hollerin’ at the light show. With drinks

in hand, all the men cried out, “3! 2! 1!” With that, the men downed the premium priced shot of liquor as the sound effect of the thunder and storm roared to a crescendo, all the men except for Dodger and Iron who were locked in a stare down, seeing who would make the next move.

“I’ll answer your questions,” Iron spoke firmly as he reached across the bar and grabbed two shot glasses with one hand. He pushed his fist forward, dropping one of the glasses into Dodger’s hand.

“Hey, Dodger! Come talk to my new friend, Owull! He can do this cool trick with two forks and a toothpick!” Karn hopped excitedly over to Dodger, dragging along Owull with their arms over each other’s shoulders. Dodger couldn’t bring himself to break eye contact with Iron.

“I’ll answer whatever you wanna know, but first you play me one round of pool. You win, I’ll talk,” Iron grunted, squinting hard. He and Dodger nodded as they simultaneously downed their shot of Honey Thunder, breaking eye contact for the first time since the storm had started. The sound effects faded away, leaving the easy calm of the chatting men in the bar and the feeling of smoldering fire in Dodger’s stomach.

“That’s easy. I’ve known Dodger nearly my whole life and I’ve never seen him lose a game of pool,” Karn bragged, nudging Owull with his elbow.

“Alright. It’s a deal,” Dodger said with a stone-like expression, hiding a smile, knowing it would be a piece of cake. This trip was going to be worth it after all.

“8 Ball, International Rules. You break,” Iron paced around the table, set up the balls, then grabbed a pool cue from the wall rack without so much as looking.

Dodger carefully inspected the pool cues hanging on the wall before picking up the straightest looking one. He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a well worn cube of pool chalk with a label that had been rubbed blank after countless nights of use. Iron leaned back against the wall as Dodger stepped up to the table. He took the cue ball in hand and lightly tossed it against the right rail of the table, analyzing the way the ball rebounded. Feeling satisfied, Dodger rubbed his bright silver chalk along the tip of his pool cue with a nonchalant flourish as he had done countless times before in his life.

The men at the bar turned around in their seats to see Dodger winding his arm back, preparing to launch the cue ball to get the game started. With a resounding crack, the balls shot across the green surface of the table. The striped 11 dropped into a corner pocket. Then, the solid 6 dropped into a side pocket.

“Your pick,” Iron muttered.

Dodger kept his poker face as he secretly smiled to himself. He always preferred playing striped. He paced the table, walking all the way around, planning out the entire match. Dodger didn’t want to just win. He wanted to prove to Iron that he was just as tough and masculine as anyone else. Dodger found the most difficult shot he could make. In the corner of the table, the striped 9 hid behind the solid 5. In between the cue ball was an entire battle field of other balls.

“9 in the corner, cue off the rail down the back. 15 into the 5 into the 9,” Dodger grunted in his deepest, roughest growl. He felt the pool cue sink snugly into his hand as he effortlessly slipped a thread through the eye of a needle without even taking a second glance. The cue ball shot forward as if following Dodger’s spoken orders, dropping the striped 9 in the corner. The room was filled with gasps of surprise. Iron’s eyebrows lifted up to reveal a look of surprise and disbelief.

“I told you. That really is Dodger Rodgers.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for a hundred dollars!”

“Damn what a shot.”

Dodger had spent years learning to keep his cool and practice his swagger. He kept his eyes on the table and slowly walked over to his next shot as a familiar song began to play on the jukebox. Bittersweet chords chimed out of an electric organ as a Theremin weeped an electronic, haunting melody. As the melancholy rhythm guitar and muffled drum track eased the song into full swing, Dodger stumbled.

“No More Rivers, Tax on Justice by The Midnight Falcons 1969. Aw man, I love this song,” Karn scratched his beer, turning around to look for his drink that had wandered off somewhere. As the song wrapped its grasp around Dodger’s head, a distant memory formed in Dodger’s mind. He saw himself and Karol sitting at Burden Lake, holding each other’s hands. The moon rose over the water, casting a shimmering light upon them as this same song played on the radio. It was the first time they kissed. It was the first time of many, but it was the most important kiss of his life. He knew

he had found the woman of his dreams. As he lined up his shot, his vision blurred.

“12 in the corner,” Dodger muttered, struggling to focus. Maybe Karol was there at the lake at that moment. Maybe she was thinking of him the same way he was thinking of her. No, she would be too busy for that. She had a busy life with work. She wouldn’t have time to waste sitting around thinking of her husband. She had people to take care of. Karol would have no reason to just sit at the lake and reminisce about moments that Dodger wished he could feel the passion of one more time, even for just a second. He wound his arm back and slammed the cue ball with blind rage. Weeks of unspent fury shot through Dodger’s arm. With a deafening crack, the cue ball smashed into the striped 12, sending it flying off the table with terrifying speed. The ball launched through the air like a bullet straight toward a dumbfounded Owull who watched in horror. His eyes widened in total awe as he struggled to grasp the situation. The ball was going to slam directly into the middle of his face as if a sniper had fired the shot with intent. Owull squeezed his eyes shut just in time to hear someone shout “Holy shit!” He waited for a moment to feel the pain, yet he felt no impact; only a light breeze of some unseen movement.

Owull opened his eyes to see an unfamiliar sleeve of a brown jacket and a watch outstretched before him. A clenched fist held the striped 12 ball just two inches and seven stitches away from his face. Owull turned to his right to see Karn with a determined, eagle-like expression. Karn’s mustache contorted into an uncomfortable grimace as he held the ball in place. The ball moved faster than anyone in the bar could have detected. Owull didn’t even have time to avoid

being hit. How did Karn manage to reach out and grab the ball out of thin air like that?

“That was a close one, buddy,” Karn tried to laugh, but a tone of concern caused his voice to waver.

“Wha- what the hell just happened?” Owill sputtered.

“I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean that,” Dodger walked over to Owill, hanging his head in shame. All eyes were on Karn as Atticus leaned over from across the bar to verify that his eyes had not played tricks on him.

“It’s alright, man. Accidents happen,” Owill said, his eyes wide open.

“Dodger, what the hell was that?” Karn gently placed the ball back into Dodger’s reluctant hand.

“I- I don’t know. I got distracted. I’m sorry,” Dodger looked away, unable to make any kind of eye contact. He shamefully set the ball on the table and sat back at the bar as Iron stepped up to take a shot.

“My turn then,” Iron said plainly, wide eyed, trying to figure out how Karn was able to move and react at such an inhuman speed. Iron called out his shot and sank a ball with little effort. He dropped three more balls before he finally missed a shot. Iron had three balls left on the table while Dodger had five more.

Dodger stepped up to take his shot, his pool cue slipping down his increasingly sweaty palm. He glanced at the table and found the simplest, easy shot.

“15 in the side,” Dodger exhaled, lightly tapping the cue ball and barely easing in the striped 15 into the target pocket. “13 in the corner,” Dodger sighed. He hesitated and stared at the table for almost a minute before he barely tapped the cue ball which crawled its way straight ahead until it just kissed the striped 13. The ball crept forward and stopped at the very edge of the pocket. Dodger held his breath until the ball lightly rocked forward and slipped down into the target pocket with an unsettling slam. Karn felt a deep pain within his chest as he watched Dodger struggle. He had never seen Dodger play so carefully or apprehensively in all the years that they had been drinking together.

“10 in the corner,” Dodger said as sweat ran down his face. He held his breath as he took his shot. With the lightest of touches, the cue ball inched forward, stopping short of hitting the target ball. He openly winced, wondering what he could have done wrong. Karn looked away, unable to face the pain of watching his friend struggle with something that should have been as easy as breathing.

“Scratch. Ball in hand. Too bad,” Iron said, furrowing his brow. After years of hearing rumors of Dodger, Iron could not understand why Dodger was playing so poorly. He had waited those years, hoping he would one day have a chance to test his own skills against the man who could not lose, but there in that moment, Iron could tell something was wrong. Iron caught the glimpse of a glimmer coming from Dodger’s hand, noticing a wedding ring. Iron looked down at his own hand, trying to remember when it was he stopped wearing his own; whenever it was he realized his wife just didn’t care whether or not he wore it. Not even a tan line remained.



Iron called his next shot, then his next, and then his next. Lastly, Iron called the 8 ball into the side pocket, banking off the rail to avoid Dodger's balls collecting dust on the table. Dodger's throat locked up tight as he watched Iron sink his last shot.

There was no sense of victory or celebration as Dodger did the walk of shame to return his pool cue to the wall rack. The stony expression on Iron's face perfectly masked the sense of guilt he felt for having beaten Dodger in that game. With his eyes kept on the ground, Dodger returned to the bar to square up his tab with Atticus. The credits in the jukebox had run out and no man in the room had the guts to say a single word after what they had just seen. The silent atmosphere pressed down heavily on Dodger's shoulders. The man who couldn't lose had just lost.

"Hey, come on man. Don't be so hard on yourself. It's normal for a man's pool cue to not work perfectly as he gets older," Karn tried to make his friend laugh as he set his hand on Dodger's shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Dodger faked a laugh, hanging his head low and turning away from the bar in embarrassment. Iron watched Dodger, feeling a storm of guilt brew up deep within his stomach. With a heavy thud, Iron dropped down onto his bar stool in the far corner of the bar and removed his hat, understanding the look of hurt and rage that Dodger had tried so hard to hide.

"Come on, Dodger. Let's go home. Let me buy you a drink," Karn said calmly with his deep, reassuring voice that Dodger had only ever heard a handful of times before.

The disappointed men in the bar watched in silence as Dodger and Karn slipped out of the building and out into the pale darkness. Iron roughly set his hat back on his head and slowly sipped on another beer as he wondered exactly why Dodger wanted to ask him about Golden Ridge Ranch and Bull.

Owull perched himself on the seat next to Iron. From the shadow of the far corner of the bar, Atticus peered at Owull and Iron as if reading their lips.

“What do you think that was all about?” Owull asked, slowly rotating his wedding ring that had grown loose as he grew older.

“Probably nothing,” Iron answered as he reached into his pocket to pull out a crumpled piece of paper with Bull’s scribbly handwriting.