

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter VIII

The four figures huddled close together, surrounded by the dusty darkness of Dodger's kitchen. Fort set his camera down on the table, struggling to slow his breathing. The raspy sound of the wind clawing at the windows with its cold, cruel fingers sent shivers down Dodger's spine.

"So you did watch my videos?" Dodger scrutinized with a deep voice, leaning in close to Fort.

"I'm sorry, it's not my fault. I had to know what you were being so secretive about," Fort complained, shrinking far into his shirt.

"I thought I told you to not watch my videos. What if it had been weird sex stuff!?" Dodger flung his arms in the air. Rauno leaned back with wide eyes, giving an impressed and surprised nod to Dodger.

"But you said it wasn't weird sex stuff!" Fort argued, picking up the camera again.

"That's beside the point! It's my personal business. You shouldn't have snooped around," Dodger grunted, unable to keep his anger bottled up.

"I'm sorry! But how was I supposed to know if I recovered any of your videos if I didn't watch one just to check?" Fort reasoned, handing the camera to Dodger.

“Uh...” Dodger stumbled, realizing he didn’t know anything about digital cameras. He took a moment to collect his scrambled thoughts before saying, “Sorry. You’re right.”

“Look, I’m sorry I watched a video. Almost all of it is ruined anyway. You had like five hours worth of recording. I was only able to recover five seconds of it all. It’s a miracle I was able to get any of it, seriously,” Fort pushed buttons on the camera, trying to get Dodger to acknowledge the effort and time he had put in.

“Sorry, Rauno, Tira, would you guys mind leaving the room? I need to see what’s on this video,” Dodger pleaded, unable to hide the embarrassment in his voice. Rauno nodded as his shoulders sagged heavily. He felt some hurt that his friend of many years didn’t trust him with whatever secret was contained on the camera.

“I’m driving you all the way to Bull’s murder farm and you’re not even going to let me watch a five second video? That’s so rude,” Tira complained, glaring directly at Dodger.

“Dodger,” Rauno softly mumbled, setting his hand gently on Dodger’s shoulder. Dodger was taken aback as he turned to see the silhouette of Rauno there in the dark room, with only a subtle stream of moonlight spilling in from the kitchen window. Rauno had never gone out of his way to make any physical contact with anyone beyond a handshake. Dodger assumed maybe it was a European thing to be so distant and pragmatic. There in that moment, through Rauno’s hand resting on Dodger’s shoulder, Dodger could feel a terrible weight that Rauno had been carrying on his own.

“It’s something serious in the video, isn’t it?” Rauno muttered, his words cutting through the shadow of the room.

“I don’t know,” Dodger whispered, barely able to breathe. He took the camera from Fort and held it flat between them so they could all see. The dim, pale glow of the screen on the camera illuminated the faces of the four figures as they leaned in close and held their breath. Dodger’s hand trembled as his thumb hovered over the play button on the camera. Would he really be able to press it? Could he handle seeing whatever was in the video? Maybe if he was alone, he would have taken that memory card and destroyed it, totally forgetting whatever it was that had been in his basement. He would have left this paralyzing secret behind without ever watching the five seconds of video that had been recovered. But there, Dodger wasn’t alone. There were people there who wanted to see the video just as much as he did.

A heavy cloud passed overhead, strangling the thin stream of moonlight that had been leaking into the room. As the darkness thickened, the temperature of the air dropped what felt like ten degrees. Dodger pushed against the weight of the world with his thumb, pressing the play button on the camera as his heart came to a stand-still.

The screen on the camera cast an eerie green light which pulled the four faces in closer and closer like a tractor beam. A dull, faint, high pitched screech emitted from the camera, blipping and chirping seemingly randomly as a torrent of colored squares flashed across the screen. Behind the chaos of green, red, and blue pixels, a dark room could be faintly seen.

Five seconds.

A dull, green glow cast an imprisoning light upon cement walls and a low ceiling. In the back of the room, a heavy looking metal door appeared to be the only way in or out. Lining the back walls were work table tops holding an assortment of toolboxes, tools, and ammunition. Thin, disturbed cobwebs could be seen hanging from the corners of the walls. The cement floor of the room was bare except for a single chair which appeared far too large for anyone to sit in comfortably without looking like a child's toy.

Four seconds.

Barely visible, sitting on that impossibly oversized chair, appeared to be some figure; someone with thin, almost tree branch like legs. Even thinner arms drooped down the side of the chair. Within the otherworldly green glow of the camera, it was impossible to tell the color of the figure's skin.

Three seconds.

The figure hunched over terribly as if looking down at its legs. The screen flickered a chaotic row of squares, sounding an electronic screech as if screaming in pain. Some metal, circular object on the ground reflected the dim light. It was an animal trap clamped on tightly to the figure's leg.

Two seconds.

The figure's emaciated, motionless body looked to have been starved for weeks. It became clear that rope had been used to tie the figure to the chair. Were they dead?

One second.

The figure's head snapped up to stare directly into the camera, revealing a face of grotesque, inhuman proportion. For a fraction of a second, its enormous, bulbous, empty eyes, like two cavernous holes, peered out as if shooting through the camera lens. An almost imperceptibly small slit where its mouth should have been wretchedly twitched just as the screen flashed a blinding white light.

With the sound of a gunshot, the camera dropped out of Dodger's suddenly powerless hands and slammed to the kitchen table.

"Fuck! What the fuck was what!?" Dodger shouted, no longer in control of his own voice.

"Voihan paska! Perkele!" Rauno stumbled back, losing control of his body, knocking over the kitchen chairs in blind horror.

"Oh, God! What the hell!?" Tira clasped her hands, stepping away from the camera as if avoiding hot lava. Fort stood, motionless, staring down at the camera, processing the inhuman thing he had seen. He wished he could destroy that camera and forget what he had seen.

"Wha- what is that, Dodger!?" Rauno stuttered, scrambling to pick himself up from the floor.

"I don't know! I've never seen that before!" Dodger shouted back, desperately searching his mind for answers.

"Where is that? Where did you film that?" Rauno demanded, grabbing Dodger's jacket sleeve.

“That video shows my basement,” Dodger muttered, realizing the meaning of what he said just as the words left his mouth. The screen of the camera automatically shut off, leaving the four figures in absolute darkness with a ringing, deafening silence. They could no longer see each other’s faces as they stood in an unfeeling void.

“Dodger. Is that thing still in your basement?” Tira whispered, reaching out blindly to grip Dodger’s jacket sleeve tightly. An agonizing, boiling air of tension swirled around the four figures huddled together in the dark. Dodger heard his heart threaten to crack one of his ribs as he realized he hadn’t been down to his basement in at least two weeks ago.

“Is it still in the basement? I... don’t know,” Dodger’s hoarse voice broke the silence. No one could move. Could it still be down there? No, it couldn’t still be there. The house was totally still. There was nothing there with them in the house except silence.

Until.

The sound of muffled, heavy rattling reached up from beneath the house. The four figures huddled closer together, gripping tightly, listening for what that sound could have been.

With a terrible moan, a floorboard at the opposite end of the house creaked out in agony, shattering the silence like a bullet through a window. Dodger, Rauno, Tira and Fort screamed out every curse word they knew as they stumbled blindly through the dark, scrambling to get as far away from the sound as they could.

“Sweet Kansas! We’re gonna die!” Fort screamed, his voice cracking. Dodger shushed him, planting his feet square on the ground and standing as firm as he could. The three others grabbed onto him tight as if holding onto their only tether to life itself.

“Quiet,” Dodger grunted, staring hard through the impossible pitch black shadow of his living room. He felt his chest grow increasingly hot until he felt some degree of pain. As the four figures settled down, a silence fell over them like a blinding fog. Yet through the silence, Dodger heard a subtle ringing in his ears. Some strange, curious humming, calling out to him from somewhere in the distance. He tilted his head down, aiming his ear toward his chest, thinking he could hear the sound getting louder. Louder.

Louder still. Until suddenly.

A terrible, rumbling exploded all around them. Like a horrible beating of drums from hell, the sound rocked the entire house. As the four figures screamed out in shock, Dodger gritted his teeth, wondering what he would have to do to protect them. A blinding, brilliant light flashed out, filling the room with a glowing aura and an echoing “pop” for a fraction of a second. All four of them cowered in pain as the light seemingly pushed them down against the floor with the force of a thousand suns. Dodger felt an intense pressure and heat pulse against his chest.

In an instant, the light was gone, the heat disappeared, and the terrible rumbling of the house eased to a knocking at the front door. What was that light? Did the camera flash go off on its own? Who was at the front door?

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Shit. It’s just... someone’s here,” Dodger gulped hard, picking up the three people that held on to him for dear life. He shook free of the grip they had on him before carefully making his way to the front door as if walking along a tight rope.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Dodger felt the cold metal of the door knob on his palm which had grown sore from being clenched so tightly. With an agonizing crunching of metal, Dodger turned the knob and slowly inched the door open. The bitter night air forcefully pushed the door all the way open, pouring in moonlight along with it like a tidal wave. There standing at the front door with a look of surprise was a man in his mid 50’s with graying, honey colored hair, a vintage moustache, and the scars of some terrible accident peeking out from beneath a well worn eye patch. In the man’s remaining eye was the look of a distant dreamer, looking past the day at hand toward a different tomorrow.

“Willie!” Dodger stuttered, shocked to see a familiar face at his front door. He wasn’t sure what to expect when he opened the door but Willie Belgrade certainly wasn’t on his list just then.

“Hey, Dodger. Is everything alright in there? I heard screaming and all your lights are off,” Willie said, scratching his arm nervously.

“Yeah, no, everything is... normal. Just fine. Nothing weird just happened. I mean nothing weird is still happening,”

Dodger stumbled over his words as he fought for his heart rate to slow down. He stepped aside and waved for Willie to enter the house.

“Well, I didn’t see you at the bar and I wanted to hear what you thought of the Ritmo coffee, so I thought I’d stop by,” Willie squinted, peering into the darkness of Dodger’s house as he tried to orient himself.

“Oh, yeah... Ritmo coffee,” Dodger sighed with relief.

“Hello,” three spectral, disembodied voices called out in unison from within the shadow.

“Oh, Shit! Jeepers!” Willie jumped and nearly hit the roof as he turned to his right and realized three people were huddled in the shadows of the kitchen’s corner. “You nearly scared the piss out of me!”

“Sorry, Willie! It’s, uh, some friends and I were, uh,” Dodger looked to the corner of the room, then the camera, then to Willie, who was absolutely dumbstruck.

“What’s going on in here?” Willie sighed with relief.

“It’s not weird sex stuff! We swear!” a voice called out from the darkness.

“Uh, what?” Willie tilted his head in confusion.

“Don’t say that, you goof. Now he’ll think that’s what we were doing,” another voice called out.

“I need another drink,” another voice muttered.

“Oh, yeah, my power went out two weeks ago but I haven’t gotten around to fixing it,” Dodger explained as he felt around for the camera on the table, tucking it behind a vase full of dead flowers.

“So uh... who’s in here?” Willie put his hand up over his eye as he peered into the shadows, still unable to see anyone.

“There’s Rauno, you know, from the bar, Tira, who used to babysit Dahlia when she was little, and Fort, who works down at Rendlesham Hardware,” Dodger pointed, as if it would make a difference.

“Uh, hi,” Willie said nervously. The three figures stepped out of the corner of the kitchen, feeling the fear of the figure in the basement wash away as this man with an innocent, kind look on his face brought fresh air into the house. He smiled as he was finally able to see their faces in the moonlight.

“So did you try it? What did you think of it?” Willie stepped close to Dodger with his hands out as if waiting to be handed something.

“It was the worst coffee I’ve ever had. It was so bad, I poured the rest of the bag down the sink,” Dodger muttered, staring Willie down. His eyes glistened in the pale, distant light.

“Aww no. Aww gee. Aww jeeppers. I can’t believe it,” Willie’s voice trembled as he fought hard to hold back tears which were truly on the way.

“Hahahaha,” Dodger laughed as he playfully patted Willie’s shoulder. “I got ya, Willie! Just joking. I loved it. It was the best coffee I’ve had in ages. Can you get me more?”

“Aw, really!?! You totally got me!” Willie chuckled. His eyes watered as he sniffled and regained his composure. “Shucks, I really believed you for a second. Well, I’ll have to call this company to see if they have more stock to send out.”

“Thanks, partner. This is good stuff. I really liked the... barracuda flavor,” Dodger said unsteadily as he squinted.

“Maracujá?” Willie corrected him politely. “So, uh, what were you guys doing in here, anyway?” Willie gave a happy-go-lucky smile as he looked back and forth between Rauno, Tira, and Fort. Dodger’s survival instinct activated, and without even thinking about it, he reached over and picked up the bag of Ritmo coffee grounds.

“Actually, I loved the Ritmo so much, I brought these guys over here so I they could try it,” Dodger said, setting his hand on the table to steady himself. It wasn’t more than fifteen minutes ago that he had finished his last drink.

“Oh, yeah, I love me some coffee,” Tira agreed.

“Can’t get enough of the stuff,” Fort added.

“Yum yum,” Rauno mumbled with a deadpan look.

“Wow, this is just like the coffee club I always dreamed of starting up. Remember, Dodger? How I told ya all about how I wanted to start my own club?” Willie beamed with pride, hearing that other people were going to enjoy a rare

exotic coffee that he had imported. He plopped down on a kitchen chair and happily tapped his hands on the table.

“But it looks like there’s no power so it looks like we’ll have to come back for coffee another day,” Tira said, redirecting the conversation.

“Uh, yeah, I definitely don’t have a camping coffee maker or anything like that,” Dodger added nervously.

“Oh, that’s no worry. You guys can come by my place. The power at my house went out two weeks ago too, but Flatwoods Electrical sent Dodger over and he fixed it up in a jiffy. Anyway, we should all go back to my place then, I’ve got a whole heap of other great coffees for you to try!” Willie said with bright eyes and a grin. He was certain he had just made new good friends.

“Oh, well, uh, we can’t tonight,” Tira stumbled, trying to think of an excuse.

“Why not?” Willie frowned.

“We’re going to Bull Brandish’s place,” Rauno’s words slurred as he dropped himself down on an overturned kitchen chair.

“Wha... what? Why would you do that?” Willie stammered as his face twisted into a look of fear. He reached up to rub a phantom pain that throbbed deep behind his eye patch. “Why would you go to the Brandish property?”

“Uhhh... photography!” Fort snatched his camera from behind the vase and held it up, thinking quickly.

“All of you? Doing photography? But why there?” Willie gently ran his fingers along the ridges of the scars that had defined his face since he was thirteen years old.

“It’s, uh, there’s a very particular landscape I want to capture below the stars. This time of night and time of year, the constellations are lined up a certain way to get the perfect lighting. It’s photography stuff. Complicated to explain,” Fort spoke like a used car salesman, looking back and forth between the different faces in the room. Tira nodded in approval, impressed at Fort’s quick thinking.

“You guys shouldn’t go there. You shouldn’t get mixed up with Bull,” Willie warned, his voice softening as if trying to avoid being heard from too far away.

“Why not?” Rauno belched.

“Bull is dangerous. You can’t trust a guy like him. And his property... It’s got dangerous animals running wild all over,” Willie turned away and dropped his hand when he realized he was drawing attention to his scar.

“Hey, how about we catch up tomorrow, huh? Like Fort said, we should probably head out now because of the time,” Dodger patted Willie on the back, subtly pushing him out the door.

“Oh... yeah, sure. See you tomorrow, Dodger,” Willie had become lost in a time and place totally separate from everyone else as he gazed far past the horizon. He quickly got back to his car and drove away as Dodger, Rauno, and Fort stood in the driveway, watching him leave.

“Come on then, troops. Let’s get moving before someone else shows up,” Tira lead the three others toward her car, all the while keeping her eyes locked on the basement door, watching for even the slightest movement. Dodger took the front passenger seat as Fort and Rauno lined up on the same side of the car, trying to get into the same seat.

“I gotta pee first,” Rauno mumbled lazily.

“Fine, go pee and we’ll wait,” Dodger answered.

Tira started the engine as Fort got into his seat and shut the door behind him. After a moment of waiting, Fort shouted in shock as he recoiled away from the window.

“Oh, sweet Kansas! I just saw a German sausage!” Fort slapped his hands onto his face to cover his eyes. Standing on the passenger side, Rauno set one hand on the top of the car as the sound of a waterfall hammered against the car door.

“He’s Finnish,” Dodger said with a shrug.

“Agh! No he’s not! He’s still going!” Fort gasped in horror, accidentally catching a second look.

“Great. Guess I have to wash the car tomorrow,” Tira sighed. “You guys have had too much to drink. This is a terrible idea,” Tira closed her eyes and wearily rested her forehead on the steering wheel.

“If you don’t want to drive us then we’ll drive ourselves,” Dodger belched, filling the car with the odor of Pale Moonlight and Silver Courage.

“I know, I know,” Tira moaned.

“Whoa, I wasn’t serious about going to the Brandish property with you guys. You’re all crazy. You heard Willie. He said there’s dangerous animals there! And that weird thing we saw in Dodger’s basement!” Fort exclaimed.

“Look, we don’t know what we saw. Dodger, do you have any idea who that was in your basement?” Tira said, watching Rauno as he walked around the back of the car to get to the other passenger seat.

“No. I don’t remember any of that,” Dodger muttered, horrified that he could not recall any details of why he borrowed Fort’s camera in the first place. Whoever was that slender person with an animal trap on their leg, Dodger had no memory of them. He just knew that he was overwhelmed with fear whenever he approached his basement door.

“Good luck to you guys, but if you don’t mind, please drop me off at the bar so I can get my car and go home,” Fort took out the memory card from the camera and handed it to Dodger. As Rauno opened the passenger door, the distinct smell of burning plastic caught Tira’s attention.

“That’s no problem. Just keep all this stuff between the four of us, okay? We don’t know what we saw, if we even did see something, so there’s no reason to go around scaring people with stories,” Tira spoke with her deep voice of authority.

“Oh sure, that’s fine. I’ll just bottle it all up until I start having reoccurring waking nightmares at the age of 45 and I have to see an expensive psychologist,” Fort tucked his camera away. Just as Rauno flopped down into the passenger seat, Tira tossed a small, plastic bottle onto his lap.

“Wha- huh? What’s this?” Rauno picked up the bottle and squinted hard.

“Hand sanitizer. You can’t just go to the bathroom and not wash your hands,” Tira turned around to give Rauno a look, making sure he did indeed clean his hands as directed.

“But I didn’t go to a bathroom,” Rauno protested.

“Lost in translation,” Dodger mumbled. “Just clean your hands like Tira said.”

“Animals like the smell of girl soap,” Rauno frowned, opening the bottle and hesitating.

“Relax, it’s odorless. I grew up here, you know,” Tira rolled her eyes. Rauno sniffed the bottle before he shrugged and nodded a look of approval to Tira. He poured out the soapy liquid and rubbed his hands together before Tira added, “Be careful if you smoke. That stuff’s really flammable.”

“Dodger, your astronaut is trying to kill me, I think,” Rauno snapped the bottle shut and handed it back to Tira. She shifted the car into gear and as she reversed to line up to leave the driveway, the car inched precariously close to the basement door. Rauno and Tira leaned away from the windows as if it would have a made difference.

Tira’s car came to a stop beneath the drowsy glow of the street light in front of The Dusty Cactus. For a moment, Fort hesitated as he grabbed the car’s door handle. Should he really leave or should he go with them? He glanced over to Tira who was watching him with a scanning eye from the rear view mirror. For a heartbeat, Fort thought he should go with them to make sure they would be alright. No, they were

grown adults. They would be fine without him. Fort grew up hearing countless campfire stories of the terrifying things that happened on the Brandish property. There was nothing he could do to help them anyway.

Hanging his head, Fort gently opened the door as if trying to not make a sound. "Good luck," he muttered as he turned away and rushed to his car. While Tira backed out of the parking lot, Dodger noticed a shadowy figure standing off to the side of the front door of the bar. The figure took a small step forward, as, from behind long, dark, stringy hair and a purple baseball cap, a pair of beady, searing eyes glinted through the shadows. A sinister ember at the end of a cigarette billowed clouds of smoke which masked the stranger's face.

Dodger locked eyes with the stranger as Tira turned the steering wheel and backed out of the lot. Even as the wheels of the car rolled onto the worn pavement of the main road, Dodger and the stranger remained locked in each other's gaze, unable to look away.

"Alright, I hope you guys are ready for this," Tira sighed while a heavy worry weighed down her words. As she drove onto the northern road, she turned on the car's high-beam headlights, barely making a difference in cutting through the curtain of darkness that veiled the Brandish property.