

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter IV

Nickelas shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he sifted through a manila envelope full of old papers and photos. The scent of stale coffee wafted from the old envelope like a cloud of dust. Dodger crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat, wondering if he really should have invited Nickelas over to his house. After breakfast, Dodger purposefully forgot to pay the tip so that when he and Karn got back into the truck, Dodger had a reason to rush back into the diner to talk to Nickelas. Dodger's palms started to sweat as he watched Nickelas' twitchy shuffling of the seemingly random garbage that had been dumped onto the kitchen table. After muttering to himself for a moment, flinging photos left and right, Nickelas jumped up and thrust an old 4x6 photo toward Dodger. Instinctively, Dodger leaned back and raised his arms up as if to defend himself from an attack.

"There! This is it! This is what you asked me about!" Nickelas sputtered, nearly out of breath. The sweat from his fingertips left marks on the old photograph depicting a night sky with some kind of light streaking across the entirety of the image. A barn and trees framed the edges of the photo.

"What am I looking at?" Dodger yawned dryly.

"This was taken about fourteen years ago at Golden Ridge Ranch by Dan Austin. You see them bright lines there going across the frame? Those are the exact same kinds of lights folks have been talking about seeing around town the

past couple weeks,” Nickelas leaned in close and spoke softly. He pointed to the lights in question, as if Dodger couldn’t see the obvious detail for himself.

“Dan Austin? Is it true what they said about him?” Dodger scratched his wrist nervously. He pointed to the photo, distracting Nickelas while tucking his bag of Ritmo coffee behind a vase of flowers on the table. He didn’t want Nickelas staying too long or asking for a cup of premium coffee which Dodger didn’t have that much of.

“Killed himself? Sure as rain in May, he done shot himself with a Cougar .45. Spilled his brains all over the barn. I seen his suicide letter with my own two eyes,” Nickelas shook his head, his brow furrowed from the shame of seeing something he knew he shouldn’t have.

“So what’s this photo got to do with anything?” Dodger asked, leaning in closer.

“Well, I have some pages from one of his diaries. He was sure there was some funny business going on. He lost his life trying to figure out exactly what it was, but when it comes to aliens and UFOs, nobody stands a chance,” Nickelas rifled through his envelope again before handing a mud stained, crumpled paper to Dodger. The paper had the handwriting of a man who had not experienced a full night’s sleep in years and whose sanity left on a ship that had set sail long ago.

“I had the dream again last night. The dream where I stood in my kitchen as a terrible light pierced every window in the house. Then those figures appear. Their bodies block out the light behind them as they approach my windows. Only one at first, then two, and then three. I try to close my eyes, but I

can't. I see them walk to the front door. The door opens. The light blinds me. All I can see are their silhouettes and shadows as they come closer. I want to scream. Oh God, I need to scream, but there ain't no words inside me. What are they doing in my house? What do they want from me? I awake and find myself standing outside my house, naked, but I don't feel the cold. I'm numb. I feel nothing. I stare up at the sky and see three lights drifting up higher and higher until all three suddenly shoot off across the sky without a sound. Is it still part of the dream? Am I imagining it? And the creatures. Oh, God. The creatures. Like a bear has been stretched far beyond the limits of its skin. Their bones have grown far too long for their own bodies. Their jet black fur or skin refuses to catch even the faintest of lights. I see them sitting at the very edge of the tree line on the property. Dear God. They're too big. When they stand, their heads reach the tops of the trees. And the trees. They're in on it too. If I look away, the trees change position. I know it! Some days, I look out there and some of the trees are just gone. They've moved somewhere else entirely. I see them watching me, waiting until I fall asleep so they can approach. I can't turn away. I can't stop watching them. If I look away for even a second, I might lose sight of them. What good would guns do? I can't let Iron find out about what I saw. If he gets involved, it'll destroy his life the way it has destroyed mine. I can't help but believe those creatures had something to do with my brother, Hank's, disappearance nearly 20 years ago. If that's the case, it would be ironic if those creatures made it here to the house and finally got me too."

Following that page was a second page, not entirely blank, but with a single line that read,

“Overnight, a fully grown tree has suddenly appeared in my yard, about 40 yards from the front door.”

Dodger stood up and wiped the sweat that had formed on his forehead. He removed his baseball cap and slicked back his hair in one motion, trying to look cool, but the look on his face was that of shock and bewilderment. Nickelas scattered more photos and papers across the table as if piecing together a jigsaw puzzle.

“He’s clearly lost his mind, right? Moving trees? Monsters? The poor guy was sleep deprived,” Dodger reasoned unsteadily. “Anyway, what about Dan’s nephew, Iron Austin? My buddy, Bear, says Dan took Iron in and treated him like his own son after Hank died. What does Iron know about all this? What has Iron said about these journal pages?”

“I don’t know,” Nickelas’ eyes seemed to tear up as he looked away uncomfortably, “I... I stole these diary pages after I saw them. I couldn’t let Iron find out about all these things Dan was saying. It might have driven him insane too.”

“What the hell, Nickelas!? Are you serious? Don’t you think Iron has a right to see this?” Dodger gritted his teeth and gripped his fists tight.

“I know how it looks, alright! But- Dan was a friend of my dad’s. My dad used to tell me stories about all the fun he and Dan used to have on road trips and hunting trips. He used to talk about how fun Dan used to be. But after Dan’s brother, Hank, went missing, Dan became obsessed. He’d take tracking dogs up into the mountains. He’d go nights without sleep, certain he’d find what happened to this brother. Whatever it

was he found, he couldn't handle it. The truth was too much. Ending his own life was the only way he could make sense of the world. How could you risk letting that happen to someone else?" Nickelas reasoned, his eyes pleading with Dodger to understand.

"That shouldn't be for you to decide," Dodger scolded him, staring him directly in the eyes.

Nickelas turned away, reaching into his handmade backpack. He took a deep breath away from the tension that had formed between them. He pulled three books from his bag and set them on the table with a slam.

"Look. Ordinary people can't handle the idea of visitors from another planet. They aren't ready. Their brains just break. Here, read these books about alien abductions and UFO sightings throughout history," Nickelas said, pushing the books toward Dodger.

"Aliens? I don't believe in any of that. There's a logical explanation for all this," Dodger shook his head, looking away.

"Oh yeah? Well, you Iron's father, Hank? You heard about that logging crew that disappeared back in the 80's, right?" Nickelas questioned. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a tinfoil brick. He unwrapped it with little care, spreading crumbs of some strange mish-mash of nuts and granola across the surface of the kitchen table.

"What the hell is that?" Dodger winced at the off-kilter fruity smell of the snack.

"Huh? You know; the group that went up and nearly all of 'em went missing. No one knows who the survivors are,

since apparently they still live in town and their identities are protected,” Nickelas answered.

“No, I know that. Everyone knows that. What is that weird squirrel’s lunch you’re eating?” Dodger covered his nose to avoid the smell.

“What, this? Oh, this is a health bar I invented myself. I grow all my own ingredients. This is made of a special mixture which will optimize brain performance and keep your prostate healthy and supple. Not only that, but it’ll guarantee kidney and liver health, and if you’re trying to have kids, it’ll maximize your production of seme-” Nickelas prattled on, but Dodger interjected before he could finish.

“Whoa- hey! Look at the time! I might go get dinner now,” Dodger put his hand up to stop Nickelas.

“Really? You don’t want to try a bit? It’s all natural and you get used to the taste after a week or two,” Nickelas had already broken off a piece and was trying to hand it to Dodger.

“I’ve never been interested in nuts,” Dodger declined, trying not to blush.

“Well, your loss. Anyway, I’ve been trying to figure out who the survivors of that logging group are for years. I’m close, but I’m just not there yet. Rumor has it Iron Austin knows who the survivors are and on top of that, I’ve seen him over the past week around town talking to Bull Brandish. Maybe Bull Brandish is one of the survivors of that logging crew that went missing!” Nickelas shoved the rest of his squirrel’s lunch into his face hole, packing his cheeks full like a squirrel.

“No kidding? Bull Brandish never talks to anyone,” Dodger scratched his moustache, thinking hard to recall the last time he even saw Bull Brandish in town.

“What do you think that is all about?” Nickelas asked while haphazardly folding the tinfoil back into a sheet which he tucked neatly into his pocket. Dodger laughed to himself, guessing that perhaps Nickelas was going to reuse that tinfoil later to make himself a little hat.

“Iron Austin likely knows something about the weird stuff that happened up at Golden Ridge Ranch. He must have looked into his father’s logging crew and their disappearance in the 80’s. It might even be related to what happened on the Brandish property in the 70’s. Why else would he be talking to Bull Brandish?” Dodger said to himself, letting his guard down.

“Wait, what do you mean? What happened in the 70’s?” Nickelas stared at Dodger incredulously. How could anything strange happen in town and Nickelas not know about it?

“It’s not likely you would have ever heard of it. I was just a little kid at the time but I think I was there the night it happened. You’ve got no idea how many years I spent buying rounds of Silver Courage for Sheriff Fred, trying to get him liquored up enough to tell me about what happened back then. He’s done his best to keep things under wraps. He doesn’t want anyone in town scared. All I know is a bunch of kids got dragged into the woods by some animals, and somehow, most of the kids made it back to town alright. Three kids and Butch’s old man, Johan, went missing and never came back. Fred says it was a pack of rabid wolves, but whenever I

ask him about it, he has this far away look in his eyes,” Dodger spoke softly, his back turned to Nickelas. He sifted through a toolbox in the living room. Carefully, he pushed a pin into a concealed hole in an open drawer to reveal a hidden compartment. There, he pulled out his own manila envelope, not tattered and coffee stained like Nickelas’, but seemingly brand new. Dodger slowly removed a photo from the envelope and set it on the table next to Nickelas’ evidence.

The photo seemed to be that of a painting hanging on a clean, white wall. The painting depicted a night sky with a distant tree line and blinding, fiery light highlighting a peculiar silhouette in the foreground. Streaking across the night sky appeared to be a flaming shooting star, leaving a bright trail moving from left to right.

“No way. How did I not know about this!? Where did you find this painting?” Nickelas gasped as if suddenly stumbling upon buried treasure.

“My buddy Rauno and I were doing electrical work at the Silver Lining motel a few weeks back. I saw this in the office and it stuck with me. Something about that tree line looked so familiar. Took me a while to really put my finger on it but it reminds me of the tree line around the Brandish property. I’ve heard a lot of weird stories about that place over the years, and even more weird stories about Bull. No one in town has ever heard of Bull having any friends, so him suddenly chumming it up with Iron is pretty odd. I’d like to talk to Iron and ask him what he knows,” Dodger lowered his baseball cap to cover his eyes, looking at the windows as if to make sure no one could see him. He carefully returned his

photo to his secret compartment as Nickelas tried to peek in, wondering what other secrets Dodger might be hiding.

“If you want to catch Iron, he usually hangs out at Pullen’s Station up on the mountain. I see him there most nights. He usually has a couple of drinks and plays pool there but he always leaves before 10 pm,” Nickelas said, watching Dodger lock his toolbox shut.

“Pullen’s Station, huh? Bit of a drive just to talk about funny lights in the sky, isn’t it?” Dodger mumbled, trying to convince himself it wasn’t worth making the trip. Sure, he could talk about these conspiracies with Nickelas there at home, but asking a total stranger about it in public was another issue entirely.

“You have no idea how vital that puzzle piece is. Here, take a look at this photo,” Nickelas’ eyes went wild as he pushed another photo out of the pile toward Dodger and shook with excitement. “Look. Look here. This was taken some time in the late 70’s at the Brandish property. You see, it’s hard to see, but there’s this streak of lights in the sky. It’s just like the photo from Golden Ridge Ranch and your painting.”

Dodger could not stop himself from standing up when he realized the similarities between the painting and the photo. He felt his chest vibrate with a strange, unsettling hum as his fight or flight reflex had suddenly activated. The creatures described by Dan’s diary. The streaks of light in the night sky. People suddenly going missing. And finally... the thing that had been down in his basement. They all had to be connected somehow.

“I need to get to the motel to see that painting for myself and find who painted it. Thanks for the lead, Dodger! I was just about to stop by Chunky Chicken for a burger. Let me buy you dinner,” Nickelas patted Dodger on the back enthusiastically.

“Well, sure, I guess. I haven’t been to Chunky Chicken in a while so that’d be nice,” Dodger replied, not too enthusiastic about eating a fast food dinner. Still, he hadn’t decided on what to have for dinner and this arrangement happened to take the stress of making a decision out of his hands. Besides, he was a temporary bachelor. He should be allowed to eat junk food for dinner.

The sun was resting gently upon the delicate tops of the spruce trees to the west as the two men, each driving his own vehicle, parked in front of a weather-worn yet well maintained white building. Its windows were polished to a shine. Its roof trim had recently been painted a vibrant light blue and on its roof proudly sat a sign that read, “Chunky Chicken.” The smell of fried chicken and gravy formed an intoxicating atmosphere all around the building.

Dodger had only just stepped out of his truck when he noticed a stern looking man in his early 30’s, with shoulders nearly the size of a mountain and eyes as sharp as an eagle’s stepped out of the Sheriff’s Office. Dressed in a leather jacket and dark colored cargo pants, Sheriff Moss was dressed so casually that he was almost unrecognizable to Dodger.

“Whoa, howdy there, Sheriff. Fancy meeting you here,” Dodger laughed.

“Good to see you, Dodger. Have you got a minute for a chat?” Sheriff Moss nodded with a reserved, respectful smile, shaking Dodger’s hand firmly. Nickelas stepped around the corner of the car and gave a goofy, toothy grin as he greeted Moss. Dodger asked Nickelas to go inside of the restaurant and just order anything for him as he needed to talk to Moss. Nickelas agreed but kept looking back towards them through the windows of the restaurant, disappointed that he may be missing out on some juicy information.

“Have you heard much from Bear Greentree, lately?” Moss asked, checking his pockets for something.

“Not this past week. He went hunting about ten days ago. I called a few times but his wife, Patriona, says he hasn’t come home yet,” Dodger answered uncomfortably, looking away toward the road that lead to Bear’s house.

“Is it normal for him to be away this long on hunting trips?” Moss questioned, this time focusing his voice directly toward Dodger.

“To be honest, he normally asks me to go hunting with him, but this time, he didn’t even mention it. It’s a long time for him to be out on a hunt,” Dodger answered, looking toward the bar down the street.

“You have any clue why he didn’t invite you this time?” Moss asked, leaning on the hood of Dodger’s car to make a metal sound. This brought Dodger’s attention and eye contact back toward Moss. Dodger shifted uncomfortably in his spot.

“I don’t know, really. I guess sometimes people just move on in life without you,” Dodger looked down, kicking at the gravel beneath his boots.

“Come on, Dodger. I’m not some random cop in a suit with a badge. It’s me. You can talk to me,” Moss softened his voice and put his hand on Dodger’s shoulder. Dodger looked up to look at Moss and for a brief moment, he caught a glimpse of the eyes of an excited young man with hopes of one day protecting the town he called home.

“About two weeks back I was having a chat with Arnalt Weiss in the bar. You know what happened with Arnalt and his wife, Sarah, around six or seven years ago, right? Well, Patriona and Sarah used to be best friends. There’s the whole fallout between Arnalt and the Greentrees. Bear’s been my best bud for years so he was pissed off to see me talking to Arnalt. I mean, I spent years avoiding the guy but we were just having a harmless chat. Since then, Bear hasn’t answered any of my calls,” Dodger exhaled, finally letting his guard down.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hope you guys can work it out and get back to talking. It’s no good to hold a grudge with someone who should be a close friend,” Moss patted Dodger on the shoulder.

“Hey, in speaking of not hearing from someone this week, have you heard anything about Falcon Allerdycy? He hasn’t shown up to work at the Frying Saucer at all this week. He hasn’t called in sick or anything,” Dodger asked, trying to sound as if he was not overly interested.

“Falcon, oh, huh. Well, no. I haven’t heard anything about it. Yeah, no. No one has reported it or anything like

that,” Moss answered, looking away to check the pouches on his belt for something.

“Really? Oh, well maybe someone should check in on him at his place, you know, just to make sure he’s okay,” Dodger added, reaching into the crinkly paper bag which held his greasy dinner.

“I’m sure he’s fine. Probably just caught a cold,” Moss laughed overly enthusiastically.

“I guess you’re right,” Dodger reached into his bag and pulled out a pack of fries.

Moss checked his jacket pocket before his eyes sprang to life. He beamed with a smile as he brought a small, cylindrical package wrapped neatly in tin foil, clean and symmetrical as if produced in a factory. He handed the package to Dodger and said, “Oh, hey, when you drive to work tomorrow, would you mind dropping these cookies off to Fred? I’ve been swamped with work here and I haven’t been able to drop by in a while.”

“Yeah, sure thing, no problem,” Dodger smiled back, but deep inside, he wanted to ask if he could have some of the cookies. He politely kept his mouth shut but he didn’t want to have to wait for the upcoming Winter Cookiefest competition to eat more of Moss’ baking. Dodger silently planned out excuses he could use to visit Moss at his office with hopes of grabbing some cookies there later in the week. “Oh, hey, you haven’t seen Bull Brandish around town lately, have you? Have you talked to him recently?”

“Hmmm. No. Can’t say that I’ve seen him around lately. Why do you ask?” Moss answered plainly, looking Dodger straight in the eyes.

“No reason. Just curious,” Dodger shrugged, acting as if he didn’t really care. With that, Nickelas just about sprinted out of the building, holding hot bags of juicy chicken burgers and fries. He ran up to Dodger and skidded to a stop with hopes of catching an important conversation.

“It was good to see you, Dodger. And you too, Mr. Dollarbuck. I’ve got business to take care of. Have a good night and look after yourself,” Moss nodded with the rare air of an utmost gentleman before turning around and walking to his car.

“Awww,” Nickelas moaned, certain he had missed out on something. “Hey, here’s your food, Dodger. I’m taking my food on the run so I can go check out that painting at the motel!”

“Cool, thanks for that,” Dodger said, tipping his hat. Nickelas nearly dropped his food as he jumped back into his car and drove westward into the gently fading light of the early evening.

Dodger sat on the lowered tailgate of his truck as he ate his chicken burger and fries. Sipping his diet soda, he smiled to himself, remembering his first date with Karol there at the Chunky Chicken. They were still in their early 20’s and they were happy to sit there on the back of Dodger’s truck at the time, dipping their fries into their smoothies while watching the stars. It felt like a lifetime ago. Years of sacrifice and hard work had gradually forced them to trade in romantic

stargazing and campfire-side dinners with paying bills, working late, and apologizing to their daughter for her having to spend the whole day with a babysitter while her parents often couldn't come home until late in the evening.

Dodger was lost in thought by the time he had finished his meal and crumpled up the paper bag. A familiar voice echoed out from across the street with a jovial laugh, bringing Dodger back into the real world. It was Karn's voice coming from in front of the bar across the street. Dodger quickly hopped back into his truck and drove 30 seconds over to the Dusty Cactus, a genuine old wild-west saloon which surely had seen more than one hundred of years of joy and heartache. He found his regular parking spot and quickly pushed aside the creaking swinging doors before entering a safe haven.

The scent of stale beer, firewood, and peanuts filled the air with a smoky haze. Upon entering the bar, dollar bills with all kinds of greetings and messages could be seen pinned to the ceiling. Along the rear of the room were dozens of different baseball caps from all over the world, colors faded from hundreds upon hundreds of wild late night parties. A fireplace in the middle of the dining area gave off a modest amount of light to compete with the brilliant neon signs of various beer and liquor brands, each of which shining a light which seemed to be able to warm the soul of any visitor. In the corner of the room, an old 70's style jukebox softly sang out an old song to sooth some lonely old patron, sitting at the bar having a drink while thinking about 'the one that got away'. The soft, dim, amber light of the bar perfectly matched the subtle sigh of sunset's fading light.

Dodger's footsteps creaked as he walked toward the far end of the bar; footsteps that had been well worn in over decades of patronage. He ran his hand along the edge of the pool table on which he had won countless games against strangers and enjoyed even more laughs with friends. This place was just as much home as anywhere else. Dodger approached a short statured familiar figure who was already happily lost in a chat with the bartender. Dodger moseyed on up to the bar and planted himself on the creaking bar stool next to his old friend.

The steely eyed bartender, with blazing red lipstick, hands tough enough to just about rip a phone book in half, and a smile warm enough to melt ice, gave Dodger a wink and a smile. She moved her delicate yet muscular frame underneath Dodger's favorite neon sign behind the bar and said, "Evenin' sugar. You having the regular?"

"Oh! My old friend! Dodger! I didn't even see you there. Clementine, I've got Dodger's drinks for tonight. Get him started on his usual Pale Moonlight," Karn chuckled, patting Dodger on the back. Dodger tipped his hat to Clementine, the bartender, before turning to Karn and thanking him.

"You betcha, sugar. Two Pale Moonlights to start," Clementine said, sweetly smiling at Karn.

"I got a lot of work done today. Thanks again for the help earlier," Karn said, lowering his voice to match the soft country song playing over the jukebox.

"My pleasure. Anytime," Dodger replied. Dodger looked around the bar to see who else was there. Over in the

opposite corner of the room were two figures, a small man with a big heart, and a large man with an even larger smile. Sitting at the other end of the bar was a healthily sized middle aged woman with a bright pink sun hat and fuzzy green sweater. Hunched over in the middle of the room, stoking the fireplace, was a tall, thin man with long, scraggly hair and a bushy mustache that seemed to have totally different plans for the evening. In the brighter corner of the room was a bright eyed lady in her late 20's with a determined grin and rocket ship earrings, excitedly cheering herself on as she played an old pinball machine based on the 70's sci-fi movie, Space Warrior 99.

“Hey, you think if we ask real nice, Clementine will let us have a bonfire out back later?” Karn asked, reaching for two cup coasters from across the bar.

“That sounds nice. I’ve had a weird day and I could really use a drink tonight,” Dodger sighed, leaning forward onto the bar as if he had done so countless times before. The smooth, cool surface of the wood brought a sense of comfort to him.

“My friend, order whatever you want. Don’t you worry about nothin’,” Karn assured him, not prying into whatever it was Dodger was talking about. Clementine returned and set down two sparkling, luminescent glasses of golden liquid. Then, as if rehearsed hundreds of times, Dodger and Karn picked up the glasses and clanked them together with perfect synchronization. The impact of the glasses nearly gave off sparks as if starting a fire. With a bitter, cool, and smooth swig of the drink, the weight on Dodger’s shoulders started to slowly but surely melt away.

“It looks like it’ll probably be a quiet night,” Dodger said, eying the room. And with that, the swinging doors of the entrance slowly creaked forward. A great, towering shadow totally filled the opening of the front door as a heavy set of boots clomped into the room. The old floorboards seemed to drop an inch or two as a man with the silhouette of a fully grown bull stomped his way over to the bar. As the figure came under the glow of a pale blue neon light, Dodger saw a frayed, worn baseball cap failing to hide two piercing eyes which surveyed their surroundings with the clarity of the mid day sun. On this man’s face sat a mustache and beard that looked strong enough to pick up a razor and shave itself free of its owner if it felt like doing so. The muscles of his arms could have torn the sleeves clean off of his shirt with a single flex. His rough, scarred hands and stony face told the story of a man who had spent his life busting up and hauling wood and had likely never touched a computer before. Dodger wondered how a man like that could have even fit through the front door of the bar.

“Well, slap my tallywhacker! I don’t believe it. It’s Bull Brandish,” Karn softly gasped, wide-eyed. It had been years since Dodger saw Bull Brandish in person, and even then, it had been from a distance. He wouldn’t have recognized the difference between a fully grown redwood tree and Bull if Karn hadn’t pointed it out. Clementine walked toward Bull while discretely looking out the corner of her eye. Under the cover of an old country song softly sighing out of the jukebox, Bull whispered something to her, his words barely able to escape from beneath his muscular, mountainous moustache. Bull barely shifted his chest forward, but due to his size, leaned all the way to the other side of the bar counter top.

Dodger watched carefully as Clementine leaned in close and whispered something back to Bull. For about one minute, they exchanged seemingly secret messages. Bull handed Clementine a handful of small folded papers, each of which surely contained some vital secret. Like a shadow sneaking past a street lamp just past midnight, Bull left the bar without a sound.

“What in blue blazes do you think that was all about?” Dodger turned to Karn, wide eyed. He watched Clementine tuck the papers into her tight jean shorts as she walked into the back door.

“I got no idea. It’s probably nothing though, right?” Karn shrugged as he brought his beer to his face and pulled his left jacket sleeve back to check the time on his watch. Dodger squinted hard as his brain kicked into overdrive. Dodger had been a regular at that bar for decades and this was the first time he had ever seen Bull come inside and talk to anyone. What could those little pieces of paper have been about? Why was Bull suddenly talking to people in town? First Iron, then Clementine.

“Hey, Karn, you ever been up to have a drink at Pullen’s Station?” Dodger leaned in close to Karn as if to have a hidden conversation of his own.

“No, can’t say that I have,” Karn shrugged again, turning around to see the tall, thin man shout after dropping a small block of firewood on his foot. Dodger scratched the scar on his left hand as a phantom pain flared up, snagging his attention.

An old The Midnight Falcons started playing over the jukebox. As the familiar intro melody played delicately over twelve string guitar, and the heartbroken voice of Bran Steelhide called out over the speaker, a memory in Dodger's mind ignited like a spark in a dry forest.

"Interstellar Highway, from Room In The Desert, 1970," Karn nodded along to the song with a smile on his face. Why did this song sound so familiar? Sure they've heard it in the bar before, but seeing Bull and Karn in the same room and hearing the song fanned the flames of a long buried memory locked away in the basement of Dodger's mind.

This was the same song that played over the radio in the Flying Saucer diner that night many years ago when Dodger got the scar on his hand. It was the same night Karn was there with him, comforting Dodger in spite of all the blood that had been spilled. As the fog in Dodger's mind cleared ever so slightly, another familiar face appeared. Fred and Karn were not the only ones there with him. Bull Brandish was there too, not saying a word, but just standing and watching like a guardian statue. Why was Bull there with Dodger all those years ago? Did Bull see what happened when Dodger's hand was hurt?

Clementine stepped out of the dimly lit back room and set down a greasy wicker basket fully loaded with food in front of Karn with a heavy plomp.

"Here ya go, sugar. Cowboy sausage and chili fries for my most handsome customer," Clementine winked at Karn.

“Ooh, I bet you say that to all us boys,” Karn laughed, nodding to Clementine. He slid the food basket in front of Dodger and pointed, offering him some fries.

“Hey, Clementine. That was Bull Brandish, right? What did he want when he came in just now?” Dodger questioned, raising his hat up off his head. As if acting of its own volition, Dodger’s hand reached down, grabbed one of Karn’s fries, and shoved it into Dodger’s mouth. Dodger was still full from his burger and fries and flinched when he realized he was eating even more food on top of his finished dinner.

“Huh? Oh, Bull? Umm... the fella who just came in? He just stopped by to say hello. Wanted to see if a friend of his was here in the bar, but he wasn’t,” Clementine looked down as she used a towel to dry a glass. Without making eye contact, she quickly shifted to the other end of the bar to yell at the tall, thin man for starting the fireplace without asking her first.

Dodger’s blood began to run hot. He had known Clementine since she was a little girl. Why did she lie to Dodger just then? Bull Brandish doesn’t have any friends. Why did Karn refuse to acknowledge what happened in the Frying Saucer so many years ago when Dodger got the scar on his hand? On top of all that, why was Sheriff Moss so dismissive of Falcon Allerdyce not showing up to work? When Dodger worked a shift fixing electrical wiring at The Silver Lining motel two weeks before, he noticed Sheriff Moss staying at a room at the motel, which he thought was very unusual at the time. In fact, when Dodger tried to greet Moss at the motel, Moss had ignored him totally. When Dodger asked around at the bar if anyone knew what Moss was up to, all he could gather

was that Big D said that Little D said that Moss was investigating the lights in the night sky that locals had been reporting. Moss took every report of suspicious activity around town very seriously. Why would he act like Falcon's disappearance was no big deal?

Dodger couldn't just sit there. He had to find answers. Clementine certainly wasn't going to tell him anything. After years of drinking with Karn, Dodger learned that there was likely no amount of liquor that would get Karn to let slip any kind of secret. Hell, Dodger didn't even know if Karn had a wife or kids up until that day and Dodger had to find that out for himself. He stared up at the clock above the bar to see it was about thirty minutes past 7 o'clock. Nickelas said Iron usually hangs out at Pullen's Station until 10 pm. It would take about 40 minutes to drive up the winding mountain roads. If Dodger left just then, he should get there at just past 8.

Karn tilted his head back with his eyes closed and tickled his beer glass, playing along to the crunchy electric guitar solo playing over the jukebox. As Dodger's heart raced ever faster, he thought about the only other thing he had learned that day. Bull had been seen recently talking with Iron. If no one else was going to give Dodger answers, he would have to follow the only lead he had. He ran through the scenario in his mind, imagining driving up, confronting Iron in the bar up there, and asking him what he has to do with Bull. What does he know about those lights in the sky? What does he know about the cases of animal attacks and people going missing? And most importantly, does Iron know anything about the thing that had been in Dodger's basement? Dodger mentally prepared himself for whatever answers he might find, and as he stood up, his knees buckled. He caught himself

just in time by setting his hand on the bar, revealing the scar on his knuckles. He didn't want to find out the truth, only to have to carry the weight of it all on his own. He didn't want to have to drive down the lonely dark roads of that small mountain town with nothing but radio static to keep him company. He didn't want to have his car suddenly die again in the middle of a soulless stretch of road, with a strange light hovering above him casting his shadow. Maybe if he had Samba with him, he wouldn't have been afraid. But Samba was gone. He didn't want to be alone.

He set his hand on Karn's shoulder, trying to give him a friendly tap to get his attention. Yet some trembling, terrified part of his soul reached out and gripped Karn's shoulder tightly as if hanging on for dear life.

"Hey, Karn. Go with me for a drive up to Pullen's Station, would ya?" Dodger's voice was dry and rough.

"Huh? What!?" Karn nearly gagged as he had just slipped a sausage into his mouth. Dodger's request had caught him by surprise. "B- b- but, my Cowboy Sausage. And my chili fries!" He said just before catching the look of fear in Dodger's eyes. "What do you even need little old me for?"

"Please?" Dodger said softly, releasing the grip on Karn's shoulder. They had known each other for nearly their entire lives. They had partied together, spilled drinks together, laughed together, and even fought aggressive drunk out of towners together. But even after all that time, they had never shed tears together. Dodger locked eyes with Karn and as the music of the jukebox faded to a distance silence, Karn understood the look of loneliness in Dodger's soul. Karn knew

all too well the fear of being alone and of needing someone else who could understand some terrible truth that he himself just lacked the strength to grip with his own two hands.

“You betcha, partner,” Karn said with a kind smile of assurance. Together, simultaneously, as they had done countless times before, they poured their drinks down the hatch entirely before setting their glasses down with a thunderous clank. Just as they nodded in agreement, a bright, metallic bell rang out from the pinball machine in the corner of the room. “Bonus Round!” an excited female voice cheered.

Karn grabbed his food basket and hopped off of his stool. As Dodger and Karn made their way toward the exit, Clementine waved her fist in the air.

“Karn! Don’t you dare lose another one of my food baskets! You best bring that back,” Clementine hollered.

“Relax,” Karn answered with a cool smile, “We’ll be right back.”