

Don't Let The Past Haunt
Your Futures

INVERTIVERSE

DERRICK DAVIS

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SAMPLE

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Published by

DERRICK DAVIS
M E D I A

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FIRST EDITION

Updated printing, 2026

Cover design & illustration by Emma Wittwehr.

Illustrative logos by Roy Govier (Cover, Title Pages, Page 42, 96, 98, 103, 105, 113, 186, 293, & Bio Page).

Illustrations by John Bell (Page 104), Bálint Benke (5, 10, 63, 87, 102, 147, 188, 210, 265, 304, & 337), Charlie Chiodo (84), Michael Vincent Eppinette (134, 178, & 285), Felipe Humboldt (36, 41, 55, 70, 158, 168, & 231), Ilyazsa (205), Stephen Marchesi (17 & 315), Victor Murillo (86), Lucas Nunes (238), K. Patola (79, 97, 128, 156, 197, 199, 215, 226, 240, 281, 287, 307, & 327), Adam Petke (322), & Daniel Wachter (191, 225, & 258).

Library of Congress Control Number: TX0009531434

ISBN (Hardcover: Deluxe Color Edition): 979-8-9905195-1-0

ISBN (Hardcover): 979-8-9905195-0-3

ISBN (Paperback): 979-8-9905195-2-7

ISBN (eBook): 979-8-9905195-3-4

ISBN (Audiobook): 979-8-9905195-4-1

Published by Derrick Davis Media.

derrickdavismedia.com

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PROLOGUE

Quiet enveloped the desert landscape, with only the clicking of cicadas performing to the night sky. Their music played against the twinkling stars as grains of sand danced in the wind. The soft breeze scorched the wildlife despite the sun's disappearance.

A girl sat on a porch that edged the dark desert. The wind seared her exposed toes, barely shielded by her small white flip-flops. She didn't even flinch from the heat as she focused on the bright stars that were suspended high above. A gust of wind caused her long strands of red hair to twirl wildly. In the blink of an eye, something blocked out a small portion of the stars. It was difficult to discern what it had been as her hair obscured the view.

A large bird? A distant airplane?

"Susie," a voice said, approaching from behind her, "it's late. Time for bed."

Susie sighed, then turned around.

Her mother stood at the front doorway of their house. She was on the phone, with the cord wrapped around her arm.

"It's too hot," Susie whined. "The sheets will get all stuck to me."

"I know. I'm sorry. The AC should be fixed in a few days, okay? You have to try."

Their air conditioner had hardly worked during the stifling summer. Any distraction from the heat was tantalizing for Susie. She quietly begged, "Can't I stay out just a little longer? The stars are so pretty right now." She turned back to face them. The stars sparkled like gems against her wide eyes.

Her mother's lips curled into a smile. "Okay, but only ten more minutes. Not fifteen, not eleven; *ten*."

Susie beamed.

Her mother turned around and went back inside the house, almost tripping on some sealed cardboard boxes before closing the door.

They had only lived in the desert for a few weeks, and Susie was still

excited by the new environment. She was used to being trapped within the confines of a small apartment, staring out through thick glass windows, watching people bustling up and down congested city streets. But her new home was in the middle of a vast desert, with *much* more intriguing distractions: prickly cacti, spiky Joshua trees, and racing roadrunners that populated the landscape.

At night, Susie often heard howls from coyotes. She *desperately* wanted to see one, expecting them to look like big, wild dogs. There were finally things more exciting than her crayon scribbles of unicorns and whales.

Unfortunately, it was the middle of summer. Her new school would remain closed for another month. That meant she always had to join her mother at work. Susie's father had been absent for as long as she could remember, and her mother couldn't afford a sitter. It was awkward sitting quietly in a small police station as her mother took phone calls at a desk. Coloring books and paint-by-numbers were torture for Susie when *thrilling* creatures like rattlesnakes waited for her outside.

The police station had at least prompted some new career aspirations. The idea of wearing bulky police uniforms, speaking into handheld radios, and shooting guns was *exciting* to her. Then there were the badges—the shiny, golden badges that all the officers wore. She had wanted one so badly that the amused officers eventually made a cheap reproduction for her. They even engraved her name on it: *S. JENKINS*. Susie almost never took it off, wearing it on the porch at that very moment.

She looked up at the stars, their faint light illuminating her future aspirations. Susie imagined what her new school would be like and the new friends she could make. Her mother could also make new friends or a new *boyfriend*, perhaps. But boyfriends seemed like a complicated thing, the way her mother always—

A loud whimper abruptly invaded Susie's ears.

She sharply looked down from the stars and gazed into the desert beyond. There was an immediate silence; even the cicadas ended their performance. The front porchlight's beam illuminated just a few yards ahead before fading into the black veil of night. Only the thin outline of a Joshua tree was visible, standing at the light's edge. Susie thought the strange tree

resembled a tall person but with many bent and twisted arms that reached out. It had a prominent presence among the desert's other indigenous plant life.

The wind picked up again, tossing more grains of sand in a swirl of air that flew into the darkness. Susie leaned forward, her ears attuned. For a moment, there was only more silence. She tried not to blink, not to miss a thing.

The whimper finally emanated again.

The sound was closer this time, but its source remained hidden. It didn't sound like it had come from a person. *Perhaps a dog?*

Susie turned around and faced the closed door of the house, imagining her mother just beyond it. She wished there had been a flashlight somewhere nearby, but they were all likely still packed in shipping boxes.

The whimper erupted into the air, louder this time. Susie's head snapped back around to face the desert. Something was now standing at the edge of the light.

It wasn't a dog; it was a *coyote*. Her mouth split into a grin. She had finally seen her first coyote. It was a brown and gray-haired thing, scraggier and more wolf-like than a dog. However, as it continued to emerge, the coyote was visibly shaking and *bleeding* on the ground. Susie's grin faded. The poor thing—it was limping toward her, practically dragging itself. She wasn't sure if they normally walked up to people at all, but it had clearly been hurt by something.

Or, by someone.

As the coyote continued to approach, Susie gasped. The light revealed that one of its hind legs was *missing*. The shaking animal wheezed, staring at her, while blood oozed profusely from the open stump where its leg had once been. Susie's mouth opened to speak, but she couldn't muster a single word.

What had happened to its leg?

She grasped her badge. A police officer wouldn't have been scared, so she tried not to be. Her fingers trembled against the metal.

SNAP!

Her heart raced.

The new sound came from the Joshua tree ahead, somewhere near

the top of its branches. It was too dark to see what had caused it; she imagined it had just been another gust of wind.

The coyote yelped and began to hobble back into the desert.

Why would it leave? Didn't it need her help?

Susie immediately leaped from the porch and chased after it until she reached the edge of the light. "No, come back!" she yelled.

But it was too late. Without a flashlight, she couldn't see where it had gone. Her heart continued to pound as sweat crept down her forehead.

SNAP!

She froze beneath the Joshua tree.

One of its branches had cracked. Pieces of the tree's thick spikes and tattered bark littered her head. As she brushed it all off, a strong, putrid smell invaded her nose. The scent was like a disgusting combination of wet vomit and burnt rubber. Her nose wrinkled. She had never smelled anything quite like it before.

A sharp *crunch* came from beyond the branches. Something then fell from the tree and rolled out into the light: the coyote's severed leg, ravaged and half-eaten. Chunks of flesh hung off the bones while blood stained the sand.

Susie screamed.

*

Ms. Jenkins abruptly ended her phone call, flung open the door, and raced outside.

Susie liked to play rambunctiously, especially after revealing new aspirations of becoming a police officer. She often ran around the house and pretended to shoot like one.

But she didn't usually *scream*.

"Susie!" Ms. Jenkins yelled.

A quiet stream of wind was all that greeted her. The porchlight revealed nothing but an empty yard. "Susie!" she shouted again. "*Where the hell are you?*"

A deafening *SHRIEK* erupted into the silent landscape.

She jumped back, almost falling over.

What the hell was that?

As she gained composure, a cracking sound from the Joshua tree drew her gaze. Something dark and indiscernible rested within its branches, blocking the distant stars. A foul stench assaulted her nose while the tree continued to crack. As debris fell to the ground, two large, crimson eyes glowed between the branches before disappearing.



Ms. Jenkins froze. After a moment, a gust of air blasted against her face, followed by a flapping sound that blared in her ears.

There was a loud thud as something fell from the tree and rolled toward her into the light. Trembling, Ms. Jenkins took a few steps toward the object. It was something small and white, with specks of red that brightly contrasted against it.

No, it couldn't be.

Crouching down, she reached out her hand and picked it up. She shuddered, breathing rapidly.

It was one of Susie's white flip-flops, covered in specks of blood.

"No!" Ms. Jenkins moaned. Her eyes squeezed shut, tears already streaming down her face. *She refused to believe what she was holding.* "NO!" she screamed, her voice curdling. "SUSIE!"

Ms. Jenkins dropped the flip-flop and ran toward the Joshua tree, but it was too late.

The shrieking entity rose above the branches, flapping a pair of gigantic wings, as it flew into the nightscape with her daughter. The porchlight briefly revealed Susie's motionless body within its grasp. There was no struggle; only a wide, empty stare. A red trail of blood dripped from her pale lips, glistening in the faint light.

She was as lifeless as stone.

"Oh God, no!" her mother hollered. "NO!"

Susie swiftly disappeared into the darkness. She was gone.

Ms. Jenkins stared out into the night, looking beyond the desert flora as her tears continued to fall. Suddenly, she wiped them away and scowled. *She never gave in to the monsters of Los Angeles, and she wasn't going to give in to the monsters of the desert now.*

Ms. Jenkins raced back inside the house, stumbled into her bedroom, and opened the closet. On the top shelf was a small box that she grabbed and hastily opened. A Colt revolver with ammunition was inside. Her hands shook as she quickly loaded the gun.

Dashing out of her room, she passed by her messy kitchen and grabbed a large knife off a wooden block. She spun around to snatch her keys from the nearby counter and ran out the front door.

Ms. Jenkins sprang into her car and instantly accelerated down the dirt road, rumbling over the rugged terrain. She was driving in the middle of the desert, miles away from anyone that could help her.

Far ahead, she could barely make out the creature's black shape as it flew against the stars. It was still too dark to know what the elusive thing really was, but luckily she was still able to track it.

She lowered the driver's side window and aimed her gun. Rocks littered the dirt road, forcing her car to bump and swerve, making it difficult to focus on the moving target.

She couldn't let that thing get away. Justice had to be served for her daughter.

As Ms. Jenkins drove closer to the flying menace, something glinted against the car's headlights. At first, she thought it was part of the creature's body, but then realized it was Susie's golden badge.

Ms. Jenkins aimed the gun higher, away from where the shining badge was. She wanted to avoid hitting her daughter's body, holding the gun as evenly as she could.

She fired.

The monster shrieked, but she wasn't sure if it had been hit or merely startled. It shifted its flight further away from the road.

"Damn it!" she shouted.

Without caring what would happen to her car, she steered it off the road and into the desert landscape. The car jolted and shook as it ran over rocks, plants, and whatever else was in the way. Her gaze remained focused on her daughter's captor, who dipped between a grove of Joshua trees ahead.

"No," Ms. Jenkins gasped. "Where did it go?" Her headlights were only bright enough to see what was directly in front of her while she dodged as many trees and cacti as she could.

A loud pop erupted from a rear tire, sending the car on a lopsided trajectory as she continued the chase. The kitchen knife slid around the passenger seat, almost falling to the floor.

Her gun was now aimed at nothing but the darkness. She was ready to make her next move. "Where is it?" she said.

WHAM!

Her car was rammed from the passenger side, making it slam against a Joshua tree. The gun flew from her hand, and she was no longer certain where it was. Ms. Jenkins whimpered in her seat as the car's wheels spun in the dirt. The Joshua tree's trunk bent and cracked from the pressure.

CRACK!

Her driver's side door was torn off the car and flung into the desert. The crunch of metal pierced her ears as she was furiously ripped out of her seat and slammed onto the ground. The dirt from the impact dispersed into the air against the headlight's illumination until it was darkened by the creature.

She flailed her arms, grasping at anything to help defend herself. Her fingers grazed over a smooth, hard surface within the coarse sand—the kitchen knife's handle.

As she grabbed the knife, the monster descended upon her, knocking

the air out of her lungs. Its eyes glowed, blinding her own, while an intense, piercing pain shot into her neck. The creature was *biting* her, but she didn't feel teeth—it felt like two large mandibles were digging into her skin.

She slammed the knife into the creature's thick, hairy body while its massive, leathery wings continued to flap in the air. The monster shrieked in pain, then lifted her a few feet off the ground with her neck still in its grasp. Her throat gargled as it was nearly ripped out of her body.

While she couldn't see its face, she shoved the knife into where she believed it was. The monster screeched. Blood sprayed from its face onto hers as it plummeted to the ground, dropping Ms. Jenkins.

She tumbled away, then slammed against the front of her car. Her vision blurred. The creature continued to screech while it flew above Ms. Jenkins, with drops of its blood landing on her head.

She could hardly move. The pain in her neck began to fade. Her body became increasingly numb as her heart rate slowed.

Was she having a heart attack? Was she losing blood? Was she dying?

Tears streamed down her face, but she couldn't feel them. Her gaze locked upward, barely able to see the creature with her daughter's body. She had lost all sympathy for herself, concluding that she had failed Susie.

Without warning, the monster with Susie's body jolted backwards into the darkness, as if something invisible had snatched them. A gust of wind rushed past Ms. Jenkins with a force so powerful that even she could feel it against her numb body. But as soon as the wind came, it was gone.

Silence. Nothing made a sound around her.

Ms. Jenkins's frozen eyes forced her to stare at the open sky. She was unsure how much longer she had to live. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. The monster was gone. Her daughter was dead and taken from her.

Abducted into the night.

Into the stars.

CHAPTER ONE

Many Years Later

The glittering sky illuminated a bountiful pine forest, thick with an endless span of green. An ancient musk permeated the trees, covering the mountaintop that shadowed the barren desert region far below.

A large boulder rested firmly at the summit, with a man seated at its edge. He looked out into the night, his eyes reflecting the stars. An increasingly strong and cool wind crept around the desolate location as his gaze remained on the deep expanse. He was only in his mid-twenties, but with a sullen expression that aged him faster than time.

The brown-haired man shifted slightly on the gray boulder, his pants scraping against it. The sound blended with the wind's ebb and flow against nearby trees. He stared at the sky as the golden sun began to peak through a low corner of stars. For a minute, he didn't blink at all, as if expecting to channel the universe itself.

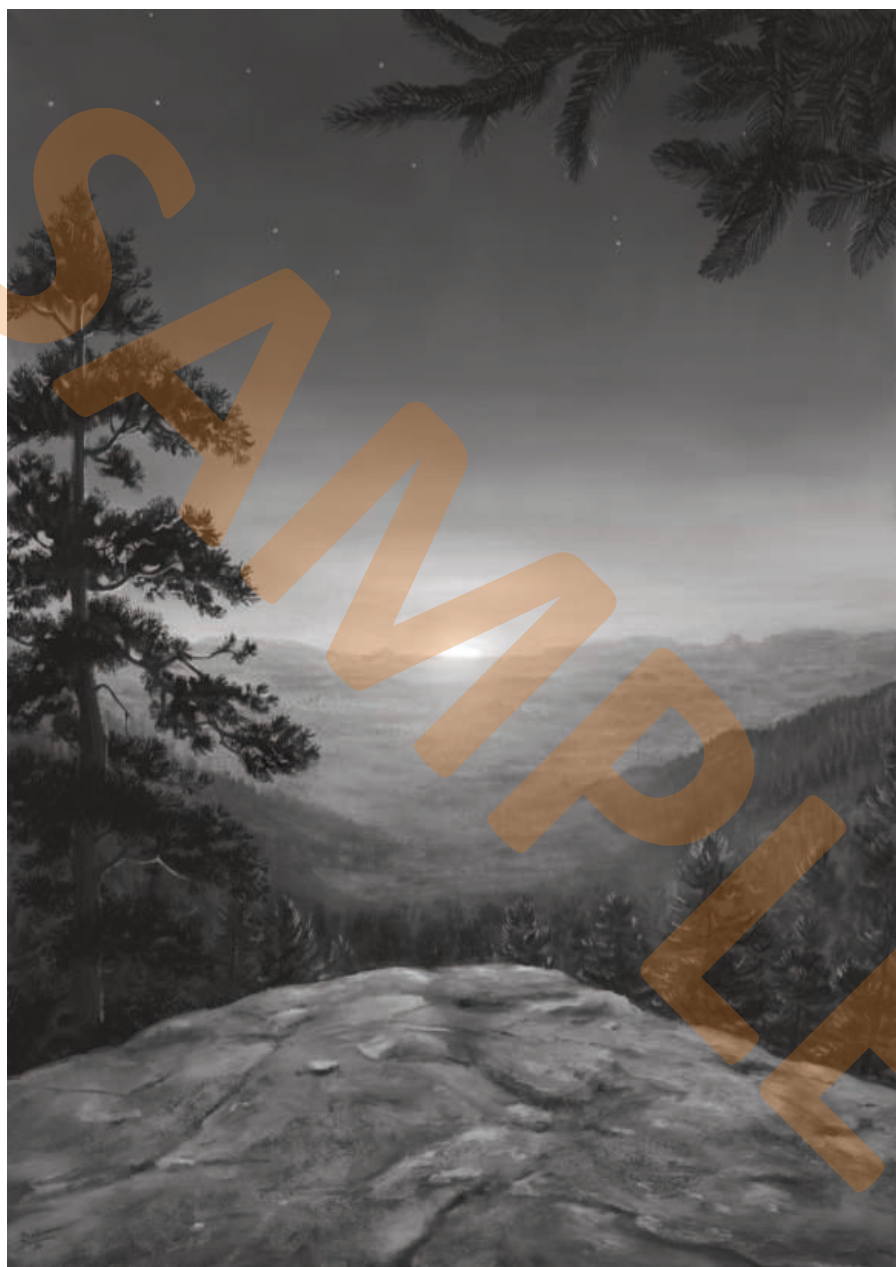
The wind stilled—a moment of quiet. The silence became overbearing, like a roar of emptiness, making the hair stand on the back of his neck.

Beneath the horizon, he could see a myriad of trees in the receding depths of the mountain. They appeared impossible to reach; the mountain had sectioned them off with a sheer drop.

He had always wondered what secrets could lie among those trees. *What could be waiting in a place unexplored by most humans?* Despite the belief that humanity had traversed every inch of the planet, he found it difficult to accept. *Perhaps mountains kept secrets only few would ever know?* He had always desired to be a part of that special inclusion.

The man slowly took an object out of his pocket: a round black handle. Its center featured a white symbol that resembled a sideways number eight. His fingers brushed over it until a blade flicked out at the top. He stared, mesmerized by its sharp edge, as the knife's stainless steel glinted in the faint light.

He looked out at the sky again and took a deep breath. The wind picked



up, swirling around his body and echoing within his mind. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. Finally, he lifted the knife and made his strike. The blade pierced his intended target.

It had been forced into an old, broken tree trunk that was to the right of the boulder. Near the top of the trunk's base were two names, each carved with their own distinctive handwriting styles:

Brent Derringer

David Andrews

Below the two names, a date had been carved from seven years prior.

The man carved into the decayed texture of the trunk until his eyes lingered on the first name: *Brent Derringer*. With a deep breath, he reached out his other hand and allowed his fingers to graze over the chipped lettering. They rested there for a moment before sliding down to his own name: *David Andrews*.

These past engravings were from one of their many trips to the mountain's illustrious spot. When they first discovered it many years ago, underneath the forest canopies, they felt as if they had stepped upon the edge of *wonder*. It quickly became their favorite spot on the mountain. There weren't any footprints since they had last been there. *It was still a secret, special place.*

David's carving into the trunk continued; the scraping of sharp metal against rough wood penetrated the air. The sounds gradually became louder and more intense. His eyes slowly closed, unable to block the oncoming tears.

There was something he wished to have said long ago and a question that could no longer be asked. They were thoughts that lingered in his daily activities, dreams, nightmares, and quiet moments like these. It was always in these moments that he knew the answers to his questions would never come. Responses only ever came from the nothingness of wind and air. It didn't make him want to cry; it made him want to scream.

David gripped the knife firmly as its blade sliced into his palm. Blood seeped out, spreading down from the blade to the trunk. The deep, red

liquid stained the brown bark near their names. He interrupted his crying with a gasp—*he had tainted the memorial, thanks to his inattention*. But as blood continued to smear the trunk, he realized perhaps it was necessary. It was a well-deserved *sacrifice*.

He sniffled for a moment until he finally regained composure. The cut on his hand was small but messy, and he brushed off the pain.

David continued to carve into the trunk; he had to finish what he started. While the sun continued to rise, the wind remained his only companion. His blood-soaked hand started to dry, but it was still tinged with pain.

Once he was finally done, he retracted the blade. His fingers gently caressed the white symbol that brightly contrasted against the black handle. David was never sure if it was a logo of the knife's brand or if it had any important meaning. His research only revealed that it resembled the symbol for infinity. In the end, it didn't matter. The knife's significance was that it had once belonged to Brent, forgotten at David's house long ago. It was now a token of the past.

He returned the knife to his pocket, but as he did, he retrieved another keepsake: an old photograph of David and Brent together.

The moment had been captured in David's old bedroom, which had walls littered with various theatrical film posters. Their arms were around each other as they smiled at the camera. Brent's lips stretched across his face, ending with attractive dimples; his smile gleaming against smooth, golden-brown skin, matched by his gray eyes. He had a single freckle near the outer edge of his left eyebrow—a feature that Brent had always hated but David considered unique.

David looked at his own smile in the photograph. It had been nearly a decade since that moment happened. Since then, he couldn't recall any other photograph that featured the same smile. All the good memories now felt like they came from some other life.

He turned the photograph over. David trembled as he read what was inscribed on the back:

Never forget all our amazing memories!

- Brent

The wind abruptly swooshed past him, snatching the photograph out of his hand and shooting it into the air. He swiftly grabbed for it, but the wind changed direction at the same moment, sending it careening down the mountain. He felt stung by the sudden loss.

Perhaps it was now fitting that it had become part of the mountain's wilderness?

Another sacrifice.

His attention returned to his completed carving. He sighed. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to be good enough. It took all his willpower to finally slide off the boulder and return to the life he had put on hold.

David started to walk away as the wind howled through the nearby trees. Pine needles twirled all around him, falling until they melded into the ground.

For a moment he stopped. He turned back to look at their special spot one more time. The sun was about to overtake the stars with a gorgeous glow. The view resembled a masterpiece painting, making it hard to muster his departure. Finally, he proceeded to walk away, trying not to look back.

The wind continued to blow around the broken tree trunk, encrusting David's blood further into the bark. The new inscription under Brent's name consisted of only two simple words in quotes:

"Forever Remembered"

SAMPLE

CHAPTER TWO

Daybreak streamed through the rectangular windows of a massive lodge crafted out of fine wood. Inside, talkative visitors occupied a sleek bar, restaurant, and gift shop. It resembled a charming hotel but without any rooms for guests; they would have to bring their own tents to nearby campgrounds if they wanted an overnight stay. Near the lodge's amenities was a large loading station with a rounded tramcar that had just arrived.

As the tramcar's door opened, a small crowd of noisy tourists spilled out. They were all eager to shop, dine, and hike thousands of feet above sea level. The crowd walked past a line of other guests that had formed beside the station, ready to descend. Many of them were campers or morning hikers who had finished their explorations. David was among them, checking the time on his mobile phone. *Everything was still on schedule.*

The tramcar hung on its thick cable, suspended in movement, as David and the visitors funneled their way in. It was a cramped space—no matter how few were inside—and was not for the claustrophobic. Everyone's murmurs escalated in volume as David hastily found an open spot near one of the many large windows. Once all the visitors were inside, a hydraulic blast pierced the air, and the tramcar's door closed. They began to rapidly descend, creaking along the cable.

Smooth instrumental music started to play from the overhead speakers inside. A deep, recorded narration began to play over it: "Welcome back to The Mount Beranu Aerial Tramway, everybody! We hope you had an unforgettable experience on top of perhaps the most gorgeous mountain in California! As we begin our descent to Juniper Valley, be sure to hang tight as the tramcar slowly revolves three hundred and sixty degrees for an unlimited viewing experience via our state-of-the-art engineering."

The tramcar started to slowly rotate in place as it slid down the cable. David quickly gripped onto a rail in front of him to maintain his balance. He was facing the right side of the mountain as they whizzed past several pine trees that jutted out of its rocky slope. As the tramcar revolved, David's viewpoint shifted toward a vast desert landscape that was far below them.

The desert surrounded a mass of buildings and roads that made up a small town: Juniper Valley. The sun beamed over the town, promising another sweltering summer day.

David's hand stung as he continued to grip the railing, and for a moment, he had forgotten why. He lifted his hand and saw the cut from the knife.

"We are now leaving the precious, pine-filled world of Mount Beranu behind," the narrator said. "Remember that your support ensures the preservation of its environment. While the land once belonged to the Beranu Native Americans, their unfortunate extinction means we are fully responsible for its future. Make your donations today at any of our gift shops."

David's gaze slid to the large revolving windows as the mountain's peak returned to his view. Looking up, he could see the big lodge surrounded by tall trees. He was glad the lodge had been the only manmade structure established there and hoped that no conglomerates would ever overtake it. Mount Beranu was the perfect place to escape and seek solitude. It was what had driven David and Brent to go there on so many camping trips together, isolated away from everyone.

His hand gripped the railing tighter. He didn't flinch from the pain this time.

The tramcar revolved to the other side of the mountain, then eventually faced the desert valley again. They were much closer to it now, gaining speed.

"You may notice outside that the life zones have already started to change from the alpine fringe to the Sonora desert," the narrator said. "The pine trees, such as pinyon and white fir, are beginning to recede as they make way for an array of cacti and ocotillo."

Down below was an endless sea of dirt, rocks, and scant-ragged plants that gained detail upon approach. Apart from a lone highway, Juniper Valley was isolated in the middle of nowhere.

"There is much to see in Juniper Valley, so be sure to explore the numerous hiking trails of its protected wilderness," the narrator continued. "Much of its desert flora is unique and even endangered, like the one-of-a-kind Joshua trees! They certainly have an appearance only Mother Nature



could love!”

A smile crept onto David’s face. Some of the town’s plant life was indeed intriguing. The Joshua trees were, of course, world-famous in other nearby regions. Other plants, like the junipers of the town’s namesake, had their own unique primordial appearance. There were also the prickly cholla cacti, spiky yucca plants, and green creosote bushes.

A long time ago, Brent cupped his hands around the leaves of a creosote bush and blew his breath on it. He then asked David to smell the leaves, revealing the strong scent of musky petrichor. It was a neat trick that he had never forgotten.

Unexpectedly, tears stung David’s eyes. His smile faded. A wave of memories crashed into his mind. Some were sad and painful; others were happy and painful. David knew that sometimes good memories were the ones that could hurt the most.

Perhaps it was best to ignore the rest of the tram’s narration.

Eventually, the tramcar reached the end of its ride. Upon landing, David and the other passengers exited through the only way forward: the gift shop. Keychains, postcards, shot glasses, and T-shirts instantly engulfed them. All the merchandise was heavily influenced by desert and forest-related quirks.

“We chose *this* over Disneyland?” a nearby man said to his wife, who shushed him immediately.

David stifled a laugh.

It had been years since he had last seen the shop, and he wondered if there was anything new. He checked his phone. There was still time to look around before he had to be elsewhere.

A large wooden table with several levels of Beranu artifacts was located near a checkout counter. There were reproductions of wooden flutes with engravings, stone mallets with twine wrapped around them, and carved figures made from rocks and wood that resembled various animals and people.

The table’s highest level featured a thick book on a stand titled *Talon & Other Beranu Folklore*. David hadn’t seen it before, so he grabbed it to get a closer look. The cover showcased a detailed black and white illustration of the fabled ‘Talon.’ It was a feathered creature that resembled a

Cockatrice or a Griffon, with an eagle-like head on a body that was blended with the aesthetics of birds, lions, and serpents.

David heard a loud laugh, drawing his attention away from the book. He spotted a man several yards away wearing a red shirt with khaki pants. The man was laughing with a woman beside him. Something about him made David's eyes narrow: he had a beautiful smile, golden skin, and a distinctive chuckle.

David's heart squeezed; his eyes widened. The man was so *familiar*. It couldn't have been who he thought it was. But it was the same handsome face, the same gray eyes, the same...

No, it wasn't him. That would be impossible.

The man turned toward him, noticing he was being stared at. David blushed as he clutched the book. Sweat began to form between his fingers and the cover.

The man smiled, then made his way over to the Beranu table. When he arrived, he said, "Need any help? I haven't seen anyone look at that book for ages." He chuckled.

David noticed that the man was sporting a badge that revealed his name: Isaac. He was a gift shop worker, *not* the person David believed he was.

Jesus, of course it wasn't him. How ridiculous, how insane.

His nose was all wrong, and he didn't have that single freckle by his eyebrow that would have been the ultimate confirmation. Still, he was unnerved by the faint resemblance that had tricked his mind. It was certainly not the first time such a mistake had happened.

David exhaled, then forced a smile. "Really? Well, that's a shame. The Beranu's folklore is so interesting. Especially Talon's story." He pointed to the illustrious cover.

Isaac shrugged, then said, "Oh, I honestly don't know *any* of their stories."

David's eyes widened.

"I'd like to!" Isaac hastily added, reddening a little. "Maybe if I knew at least *one* story, perhaps I could sell stuff from this table better? Just haven't had the time!"

David smiled as he pushed the book toward him. "Well, Talon's story

details how the Beranu Passage was formed. *Surely* you know what *that* is.” He chuckled.

“Of course, that’s the path that goes through those tunnels,” Isaac said while gesturing toward the mountain. “It became popular during the Gold Rush, didn’t it? All those mineshafts.”

David nodded, still smiling. He couldn’t help but educate Isaac further. “But that passage was there *long* before then. The Beranu people had their own story about why it was created. You see, the Beranu were wary of ever leaving the mountaintop once they had arrived. While many died there in the harsh winters, many more feared they would perish when trying to descend. Well, one winter, a man was resting in a cave as snow fell outside. But he wasn’t alone; he had a visitor. *This* thing.” David pointed again to the creature on the book’s cover.

“Yikes,” Isaac said as his eyebrows furrowed. “Looks creepy.”

“It entered the cave and walked toward him with its *talons* clicking against the icy ground,” David continued. “Hence the name. The man brandished his weapon to attack, but he became distracted by the monster’s *piercing* black eyes that stared into his. The monster then burrowed its beak into the man’s stomach and shredded his body with its talons. Afterwards, it flew away, disappearing in the snow.”

“*Jesus*,” Isaac said, frowning. “You sound like you enjoy that gory stuff. I don’t really care for it.”

David stepped back, blushing. “Sorry, it’s just part of the story. Well, before the man died, his people found him first. He warned them about the ‘monster from the snow’ and told them that they could no longer stay when winter arrived, or more would be sacrificed. From that point on, every winter, the Beranu traveled to the desert below them. When spring arrived and the desert was hot, they would return to the mountaintop. Over time, the Beranu Passage was formed to make their journeys easier. That’s their folklore’s explanation, anyway.”

Isaac forced a smile and said, “That’s *interesting*. But I don’t think people care about *those* stories as much as Juniper Valley’s urban legends. We certainly sell more products related to *them*. There are even multiple programs that have been made, like the one playing on the TV now.” He pointed to a television screen mounted behind the checkout counter.

David turned to face it. The screen faded from black to a dozen photographs of children. One of them zoomed to the center—a picture of a little red-haired girl wearing what appeared to be a golden police officer badge.

It had an engraving that read: *S. JENKINS*.

SAMPLE

CHAPTER THREE

David watched as the television program's unseen host talked over the images. "Young Susie Jenkins was never seen again, swallowed up by the night," the host said. "All that remained was her bloodied, white flip-flop. Clearly abducted, but by who? Or by *what*? Even decades later, we only have one witness: Susie's mother, Laura. Thankfully, she managed to survive the alleged horrific attack. According to Ms. Jenkins, her daughter's abductor had common traits with the most famous culprit of Juniper Valley's legends: *the spiderbat*, which we have just dramatized."

Susie's smile haunted David beyond the confines of her picture, until it zoomed out to join the other children. "For over ten years, children, as well as several adults, disappeared around the town," the host continued. "There were many reports of people *screaming*, sometimes in the middle of the night, then silenced. They all disappeared the same way as Susie Jenkins: without any hope of ever being found again."

A new photograph appeared on the screen, featuring a large gray building obscured by a tall, barbed fence. "This prompted the creation of Site 31-D: a highly restricted government area built on the outskirts of Juniper Valley," the host said. "Why they chose to create an entire base of operations due to mass abductions is still a mystery today. It appeared they knew something more than they were willing to tell the citizens of the town."

Another photograph faded on the screen, showing a gray-haired woman in her fifties with a stern frown on her face. "Janice Nordstrom was the lead agent in charge of the site," the host continued. "She ensured a relatively quiet presence, with only large trucks and vans occasionally passing through high perimeter fencing. The town's mounting mysteries and the studies behind them remained locked away."

More photographs faded in—a prominent mansion modeled after old Victorian architecture, as well as several images depicting bulldozers amongst debris. David's gaze locked on the screen when the old mansion appeared. A deep fissure cracked through his heart.

“Several years later, the disappearances and reports of strange animals finally stopped,” the host said. “We still don’t know *why*. Site 31-D was quickly shut down and demolished. To this day, no physical remnants of the site or any of the rumored creatures, like the spiderbat, have ever been found. Nordstrom kept silent, spending the rest of her life comfortably in Juniper Valley. She remained at her luxurious home and received a hefty government *hush payment* until she died at the age of fifty-two. Without any word from her and without any surviving evidence, the stories became—”

“Mom, we missed it! They were showing the spider *thing* I told you about!” a shrill voice interrupted.

David spun around. He had expected to see Isaac, but instead a frowning young boy was in his place. The boy held a plush animal that depicted the spiderbat; it was as adorable as a half-spider, half-bat creature could look in such a form. David frowned. He had never seen that plush before, but he wasn’t surprised. Juniper Valley’s legends had always been commercialized.

He spotted several shelves nearby that were filled with other plush versions of the town’s legendary creatures. The least monstrous one was the strange myrmedeer, which resembled a deer standing on two legs with spikes and horns along its head. However, the spiderbat remained the point of interest for the boy, holding it tight. David understood; it was Juniper Valley’s very own Bigfoot, Loch Ness Monster, or Chupacabra.

The boy’s mother, wearing a vibrant floral outfit, slowly approached them. Her eyes drooped as she sighed. “*What* did I miss, Jason?” she asked as they all focused on the screen.

The program’s host continued, “When we return, what harm ever came from opening a box? Hear the story from the surviving witness who claims a wooden box made her husband disappear when we continue this special episode of *Mysteries and Mayhem: Juniper Valley*.”

“The TV show! The monster was on it before!” Jason grumbled to his mother. “Maybe if you saw what it’s *really* supposed to look like, you would understand why I *need* to get this!” He gave the plush spiderbat a squeeze; a loud but tinny roar erupted from its cotton innards.

A grin carved onto David’s face. As if possessed, he couldn’t help

himself from chiming in. Besides, Isaac was nowhere in sight to do the job himself.

David turned toward the boy and his mother and said, “You know the roar that plush just made? That’s a common misconception. According to old reports I’ve dug up, the spiderbat didn’t *roar*. It actually *shrieked* like a boar. Now imagine *that* sound, filling your ears as it descends upon you, and—”

“Are you a local or something?” Jason’s mother interrupted as her eyes narrowed into slits.

“I guess I am, *again*,” David said, his eyes briefly averting her gaze.

“Wait, you know the stories? Could you tell her more about the spiderbat?” Jason asked, his voice becoming shrill.

“Sure, I *could*,” David said, twitching as they focused on him. “I mean, I know a lot about it.”

David had heard many of Juniper Valley’s frightening stories told at summer campfires in his youth, and he relished this sudden opportunity to relive the wonder of those days.

“Let’s hear it!” Jason beamed.

His mother let out a sigh, clearly not wanting to hear from a stranger in a gift shop. But David’s nostalgia was beginning to overtake him, nearly pushing away his despair. He crouched a little lower to the ground so the boy would have his full attention without getting a crick in his neck.

David began, “Well, *many years ago*...like four decades ago, or whatever...*weird* things were going on in this desert. Strange creatures allegedly came here then quickly vanished. The unknown visitors were ultimately linked to the disappearances of many children, including Susie Jenkins. So—”

“Come on, get to the good stuff!” Jason interrupted.

“Oh, sorry,” David said. “I just wanted to point out that children were visibly smaller, weaker targets for whatever was out there. It’s like when alligators or lions attack children. They are simply going after *easier prey*. Anyway, of all the *crazy* things that supposedly passed through this town over that ten-year time span, the one thing that was said to be the most vicious, disturbing, and frightening was...the *spiderbat*.”

Jason’s eyes were as wide as his smile, while his mother shook her

head.

“The few people that survived spiderbat attacks recalled some *disturbing* details,” David continued. “Putting all their stories together, it was said to be truly unnerving to witness, like the feeling one gets when they have awoken from a nightmare but can’t move. That tingling, burning sensation of terror that’s inescapable. The creature was a disgusting mesh of two phobias combined into one single, terrifying entity. It had shimmering, blood-red eyes that would stare straight through your soul as it rushed upon you with its jet-black, enormous, bulbous body...then snap at you with its sharp, hairy mandibles that oozed with long drips of saliva. Even worse, it could swoop down from the air, snatch you away with its eight powerful legs, then devour you in the sky. A giant, human-sized spider...with large, bat-like wings! And as it ate people alive, it would also—”

“Yeah, okay, that’s enough,” Jason’s mother interrupted.

David’s energy was abruptly deflated. He slowly stood up straight, his face turning a light shade of red.

“Oh, come on!” Jason whined. “You didn’t let him get to the part where it bit Susie’s mom! *The venom!* The venom that almost killed her! But the hospital said it was just cobra venom!”

“*Rattlesnake* venom,” David couldn’t help but correct him. “They thought it was just a high dose of rattlesnake venom.”

“See, Mom?” Jason exclaimed, his eyes bursting. “Doesn’t it sound so cool? I can get this now, right?” The boy squeezed the plush spiderbat again, and it roared its tinny lungs out.

David smiled. He was reminded of himself at that age when the same dark mystery had overwhelmed him.

“We’ll see,” Jason’s mother said, frowning. “It’s just a bunch of nonsense.”

“Many people think so,” David said. “And a long time ago, I wanted to find out for myself. Me and...*a friend*...we tried to discover the answers to some of our town’s mysteries.”

“How?” Jason asked.

“Remember Nordstrom?” David said as he pointed toward the television screen. “The government agent from the program? We...*snuck into*

her house. It's been abandoned and boarded up for a long time. We tried to find old documents, or whatever else had been left behind, to see if the urban legends were true. But we never got..." He stopped talking and became still.

He wasn't sure why he had brought up that ill-fated experience. It was foolish. If he had uttered another word, he would have likely exploded into a mess of emotions that the boy and his mother would not have understood.

"Wait," Jason's mother said. "You're—"

"Dear God, it can't be *you*," a new voice interrupted from behind them.

They all turned as they saw a woman approaching them. She had arrived as a new slew of tourists had exited from another tramcar's arrival. David's eyebrows perked up. She had a perfect, beautiful, doll-like face that was only soiled by the frown her lips had formed. She was just as he had remembered her: beautiful and elite.

"Carol Harper," David said. "Wow. Talk about a high school reunion." He smirked.

"You won't ever show up to the *actual* reunion if you know what's good for you," Carol responded with a scowl.

David realized he should have anticipated the possibility of running into old friends when he returned to his hometown. And *old foes*.

Jason broke in, "Carol! What are you doing here?"

"Just wanted that fresh mountain air, Jason. *Alone*," she said.

David frowned, then turned back to Jason and his mother. He shook his head, then laughed. "Oh my God. Carol's your cousin, isn't she, Jason? You were just a baby the last time I saw you."

Jason ignored him as he told Carol, "Is this your friend? He's like the *coolest* person! He was just talking about the spiderbat and how he broke into some dead lady's house!"

Jason's mother, who was Carol's aunt, said, "If I had remembered that you were...*David*...well...let's go, Jason. You can forget about this toy. Don't want you to be inspired by this *awful* person. Nice seeing you, Carol."

The two of them began to walk away as Jason cried, "What? Why am

I being punished? What the hell did *I* do?”

His mother immediately scolded him for swearing, then argued as they continued walking.

Carol shook her head as she said to David, “After all this time, you just can’t stop, can you?”

His expression hardened. Carol pushed strands of blonde hair away from her vibrant green eyes as David noticed a diamond ring that glinted on her finger.

“Now, how could I *not* notice that sparkling rock you’re showing off?” he jested. “You got married!” He pointed at her finger.

Carol squirmed, as she snarled, “Why would you care? What are you doing back here?”

“Oh, wait,” David said, ignoring her question. “*Wait*. You’re *married* to *him*, aren’t you? You married Grayson!” He smirked.

Carol’s lips twitched. “Don’t give me that look!” she snapped. “We’re just *engaged*. Now, *why* are you back here?”

David’s smirk subsided. “I just needed to move back here from Los Angeles. I’m living with my parents again.”

Carol beamed brighter than anyone in the surrounding crowd. “You weren’t able to write your way into the movies?”

He shifted in place, his eyes swiftly avoiding her judgmental gaze. He tried not to think about the dark clouds that were forming the storm in his mind. “Well, you could say I had writer’s block.”

Carol chortled. “Well, I thought maybe your college had finally discovered the police investigation on you.”

David didn’t respond to her comment. He had been shocked into silence.

“Just do me a favor, David,” Carol continued, stepping closer to him. “If you *ever* see me again, you better—” She stopped talking as her attention shifted behind him.

David turned to look in the same direction and saw her fiancé, Grayson Moore, standing by the building’s entrance. He was certainly easy to spot in a crowd. Grayson had been on the football team in high school, and he still had the same stocky, muscular build. Gorgeous eyes, gorgeous smile; ‘Gorgeous Grayson,’ everybody had called him.

“Damn it, Mom,” Carol uttered. Her face flushed as she sped past David, heading toward the entrance.

“Yeah, I guess I better go, too!” David called out. “Interview at WiseMart, lunch, my horrible life, you know, things to do!”

Carol turned to him with her mouth momentarily agape as if he had said something shocking, then continued to furiously walk toward the building’s entrance. She shot past Grayson, leaving him visibly distressed as he ran outside after her.

David shook his head, wondering about the details behind what had just happened. He checked his phone again.

It was time to go now.

SAMPLE

CHAPTER FOUR

“So, let’s hear it,” Grayson said. “I’m listening.” He raced away from Mount Beranu in his black sports car as Carol sighed in the passenger seat.

“Really? You’re listening? To what?” she said. “You already know what this is about! I needed some space. Mom was *not* supposed to tell you where I was.”

“It was just a little bachelor party with the guys!” he said. “I won’t be seeing them again until the wedding! No reason to be yodeling up a mountain like a Goddamn European! You don’t even like nature.”

“So, it’s completely okay to be fooling around with some girl that they brought over?” Carol continued. “Some girl that you knew, *and I knew!* I mean, what the hell? We’re not in high school anymore.”

Grayson swerved hard against the bending road. He gripped the steering wheel tight, as the wedding band on his finger practically embedded into it. The rising speedometer needle momentarily diverted Carol’s attention.

“Yeah,” he said. “You didn’t care back then. Why does this matter so much now?”

Carol’s blood rushed to her chest. “You’re saying that sleeping with someone else while you are engaged is *okay?*” she uttered. “Christ, what’s going to be okay *after* we’re married? What do you—”

“Just answer me one question,” Grayson calmly interrupted. “Do you want me or not?”

She swore and momentarily closed her eyes. “Yeah, I do,” she said. “It’s just, I—”

“Stop,” Grayson interrupted again. “Only answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ You always respond with these long, rambling sentences. For *years* now! It’s *really* unattractive. Just answer the damn question: do you want to be with me or not?”

Carol clutched her seat. “Yes,” she uttered.

“See?” he said, rolling his eyes, “not hard, was it? Life is easy like that; things either are or they aren’t.”

Carol shouted, “Then what exactly are we? Are you going to do this all the time without me even knowing? You’re just going to be a *whore* our entire marriage?”

“Whoa, hey, no one talks to me like *that!*” he yelled. “You *know* better! There won’t be anyone in Austin you’ll need to hide your bruises from!”

Carol grimaced.

“So what if I do sleep around? I know plenty of guys who do that during their marriage. You have to be more open about what marriage *really* is. We’re not stuck in the medieval times anymore.”

Carol stared ahead, looking past the front windshield. She gripped her seat so tightly that she could almost rip out the stuffing. “Can you just slow down?” she said. “Dear God.” She nearly jumped out of the car.

“This is *still* too fast?” he said, smirking. “You’re *really* going to hate it when we leave. I am *not* going to be driving at the speed limit the whole time. At some point, you need to get over all your endless *anxieties*. You got into a car crash a few years ago, *so what?* You survived, you’re fine! *Everybody* drives, accidents happen. You should be the one driving *me* around.”

Her fists squeezed despite the speedometer needle finally going down.

Grayson sniggered—his typical, deep, annoying snigger. He was his usual self: cocky, powerful, and ready to do whatever he wanted. Nothing had ever changed about him at all. In fact, he had only become more robust in his qualities over the years.

Carol looked away from Grayson’s gaze and focused outside the window; they were quickly approaching her street.

Numerous multi-level houses adorned Mayberry Avenue with their vibrant green lawns—a sharp contrast against the brown earth of Juniper Valley. Carol’s house was at the end of the street, and while it didn’t feature any exotic sports cars parked outside like the rest, her lawn appeared to be the healthiest. Tall, wet blades of grass shimmered against the sun, soaking up the sprinkler water required to survive in the desert’s scorching hot summers. However, she didn’t cultivate it herself, usually hiring some handsome townspeople instead.

At the edge of the sidewalk, between her house and the neighbor's, she spotted someone who stole her breath away. It was a gray-haired man wearing a ragged white tank top and dirtied khaki pants. He had a crooked grin as he gestured to her with an open hand. A collection of colorful candy rested on his palm. His hand shook a little, making the candy sparkle in the light.

Her mouth thinned to a line. This wasn't just any man; it was someone from her nightmares. She had seen him on many occasions, but it had been quite some time. He always appeared in her moments of panic, so she wasn't surprised to see him now. But every time, no matter how brief the sight of him was, she felt nothing but internal terror.

And he was *right there*—exactly where he had *really* been, many years ago.

She looked away, returning to Grayson's smirking face.

He was pulling up to Carol's driveway, clearly in his own world of internal thoughts. As he parked the car, she looked back out the window. The man was no longer there.

It was always the same: brief but terrifying.

"Ms. Harper!" Grayson shouted as he stepped out of the car. "Wow! You're beaming so bright I think you sent the sun into hiding!"

Carol's mother stood at the front door frame of their house. She practically glowed, as if she had just stepped off a photoshoot, wearing a white outfit that made her look glamorous and unobtainable. It was the perfect combination that often attracted many of the visiting businessmen who passed through town. Her firm and toned body was enhanced by the thin outfit, the final hook reeling in anyone who glanced her way. Carol always knew that her impressive looks and style came directly from her mother.

Grayson wrapped his arms around Ms. Harper, squeezing her tight before letting go. Carol slowly got out of the car, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, please!" Ms. Harper said, smiling. "You're just trying to get on my good side!"

"All of your sides feel good to me!" he sharply added.

Carol's mother exploded with laughter as Grayson grinned like the Cheshire Cat. No matter how despicable, he was naturally 'Gorgeous Grayson.' But even Carol knew beauty didn't always have substance.

“What’s with the laugh?” Grayson said, his smile plastered on his face. “Anyone in their right mind would want you. I’ve told you that before.”

“Not at *my* age,” Ms. Harper stated.

“Why not?” Grayson asked. “What does age matter when you look as good as *you* do?”

She turned red.

Carol glared at them, disgusted by how they were acting together. Unfortunately, it was a *common* occurrence. Despite being forty-seven, Carol’s mother looked about half her age. Grayson couldn’t help but often *appreciate* her youthful appearance.

“*Stop!*” Ms. Harper laughed. “What on Earth would *your mother* say to that?”

“Mother doesn’t need to know *everything*,” Grayson said, as his eyebrows arched.

The blood drained from Carol’s face.

A small white dog abruptly ran over the lawn toward them. They all leaped back, startled at first. Carol had never seen it before. Dirt and plant particles matted its hair, but despite that, it looked cute and harmless. The dog was a terrier of some kind, with no collar or nametag. Carol was thankful for the new distraction.

“Now who are *you*?” Grayson said, smiling. He knelt down to the dog without any hesitation as it quietly panted.

“That’s definitely *not* ours,” Ms. Harper said, stepping back.

Grayson ruffled the dog’s fur, making loose strands and debris fly in the air. “Well, you certainly are a little cutie!” he said, blushing from grinning so hard. “Where’s your owner, huh? You must be thirsty, you little stray!”

It should have been a charming moment, but Carol frowned. She couldn’t remember if he really liked dogs or if he was just continuing his usual act.

Grayson looked up at her and said, “Hey, be a pal and get some water for this sweet puppy until we find its owner!”

She huffed. It took all her willpower not to kick Grayson while he was on the ground, but she didn’t want to accidentally hit the dog. “I’m right on top of it, *pal*,” she said, grimacing.

Carol flung herself through the front door, slammed it behind her, then proceeded inside the house. Precious china and antiques adorned the walls, complementing the lavish furniture. The house was filled to the brim with *stuff*. Most of the items were tokens of appreciation from her mother's admirers. It had become overcrowded.

When Carol walked into the kitchen, something made her stop in her tracks. She looked down toward the trash can. Sitting at the top, crumpled in a loose ball, was a frail and corroded paper that had colors and shapes that struck a chord in her memory. She picked up the ball and slowly uncrumpled it, revealing an illustration.

Carol froze. She stood still for a long moment as the paper wavered in her grasp. It was a hand-painted illustration of a black cat with big, yellow eyes. It almost looked like something from an old Halloween postcard, but she knew otherwise. With her other hand, she caressed the inky strokes that made up the black fur. Memories began to unravel in her mind as tears formed in her eyes, wavering at the edge. Her nostalgia overwhelmed her, until a long-burning question finally escaped from her lips: "Where did the girl who painted this go?"

"The dog already ran off," her mother abruptly said from behind her. "You can forget the water."

Carol's back straightened as she turned to her with the illustration in hand.

Her mother continued, "Oh, yeah. I found that today while packing up stuff from your closet. I didn't think you'd need it anymore. That was Toby, wasn't it?"

"I painted this," she said, wiping her eyes. "After he died."

Her mother forced a smile. "Sweetheart, what's passed has passed. You're moving on with your life, beyond all of these bad memories!"

After living in Juniper Valley her entire life, Carol was finally moving away. It was a transition that made her stomach queasy. There was some excitement. *Who wouldn't be excited to finally step out of their comfort zone and into a whole new life?* But it wasn't with the man of her dreams. Not anymore, and not for some time. It was a departure built out of necessity, not happiness.

"Am I?" Carol said, frowning. "Is this what—" She stopped talking when



she noticed there was something else in the trashcan that had been buried beneath her crumpled illustration. It was an old picture frame, and she could discern her own face beyond its cracked glass. Carol picked it up, wiping off other trash debris that had collected on top of it.

The frame held a picture of Carol and her father. Judging by her outdated clothing, it had to have been taken when she was in high school. Her father stood tall beside her, his brown hair peppered with gray strands. She wondered if his hair had turned grayer since then.

“Really, Mom?” Carol said, turning to face her.

“Well, you certainly don’t need *that* memory anymore either,” her mother said. “He won’t even be delivering alimony after this year. What use is he now?” She snatched the picture frame out of Carol’s hand and swiftly slammed it back into the trashcan.

Carol shook her head. She didn’t understand why her mother refused to alleviate the financial concerns by getting a job. She was already friendly with a bunch of executive types, but she was more interested in instant gratification.

“Listen, I know how *desperate* you’ve been, trying to find other ways to get out of this town,” her mother continued. “But it’s too late. You know how wealthy Grayson’s family is. We need—you need to—”

Carol’s mobile phone rang and vibrated in her pocket, halting the familiar speech. She pulled it out and saw the screen flash with the name ‘Wendy.’ It was Carol’s aunt, who she had just seen at the tramway’s gift shop. They didn’t talk to each other often, so she was curious to answer the call.

“I better take this,” Carol said, frowning.

“Okay,” her mother replied, “I better take *this*, too.” She calmly took the crumpled illustration of Toby from Carol’s hand, squeezed it back into a ball, and returned it to the trash can.

All of Carol’s carefully chosen colors, deliberate strokes, and time-consumed details were now nothing but trash, like her father. Her mother had finally discarded the last connection to a time that was hardly a memory anymore.

They stared at each other with blank expressions as the phone rang in Carol’s hand. After a moment, she went to her bedroom and closed the

door.

There was nothing left in her room but white walls, a few strewn items, her bed, and stacks of haphazardly taped cardboard boxes. Her entire world was packed up and ready to go. She thought it looked like her life was ending, even though it was supposed to be a new beginning.

Carol sat at the foot of her bed as she finally answered the call. “Wendy?” she said over the phone.

“Carol!” Wendy shouted, making Carol wince. “Jason’s gone!”

“What?” Carol said.

“Jason’s gone!” Wendy continued to shout. “We had an argument about that *David guy* and whatever he was talking about! I didn’t want to get Jason that toy, he got mad, and he said he was going to Nordstrom’s house to ‘*find the answers to the mysteries*’ himself! Then he got away from me and...I don’t know how, but he isn’t here now! I can’t find him anywhere! I don’t know if he got on a bus or what. But he’s gone!”

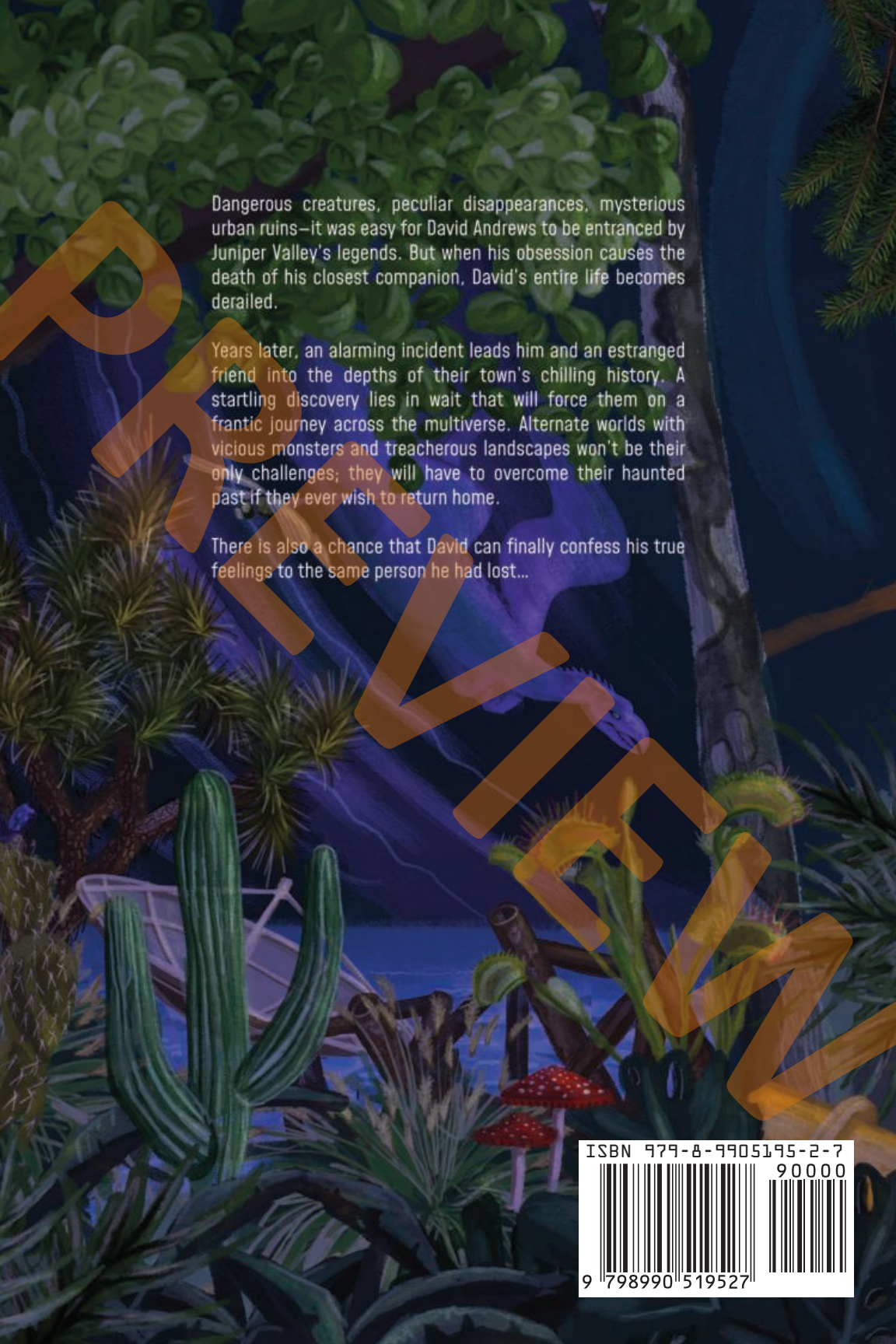
“Jesus,” Carol said. “Have you called the police?”

“Obviously!” Wendy said, her tone continuing to spike. “They’re patrolling for him now! They also notified the security car near that old mansion to be on the lookout. But they can’t go in without a warrant, they said! Can you believe that? Some bullshit about violating the rights of the landowners, property owners, and squatters! The only other way they’ll check is if they see him go inside.”

“I guess they’re too afraid of getting sued,” Carol said. “But security *would* probably see him, right?”

“Jason’s a kid,” Wendy said. “He’s a small ball of trouble, honestly. I’m sure he could break in without anyone seeing him. Remember that time he snuck into the museum? He’ll find a way. And that’s a dangerous old house. We all know what happened there! I don’t know what to do...I just wanted you to know. Be on the lookout in case you see him somewhere else. I need to get going. Tell your mother, okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” Carol said. “I’m sure he’ll turn up. I just can’t believe it. Years have gone by, then David comes back to town, stirs shit up again, and—” She stopped talking and thought for a moment until her eyes lit up. “Wendy, I know who can help find him.”



Dangerous creatures, peculiar disappearances, mysterious urban ruins—it was easy for David Andrews to be entranced by Juniper Valley's legends. But when his obsession causes the death of his closest companion, David's entire life becomes derailed.

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ISBN 979-8-9905195-2-7



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