

SHADOWS OF WESTVILLE



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A NOVEL

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Shadows Of Westville
by Ryder Jones

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For Jess, and a love through the light, dark, and the in-between.

*Shadows walk the world and leave a stain that eats away the
colors of the sun and darkens the hours that pass beneath it.*

ARTHUR J. KRAMER

SHADOWS OF WESTVILLE

THE DIG

1

AUGUST 16TH, 1997

Canyon Diablo, 38 minutes outside Leupp, AZ

If Daniel Nez could've picked a day that didn't crack one hundred degrees, hot enough to fry an egg on the stone—he would have.

But the desert didn't offer choices.

Only consequences.

At least the GPR cart was picking up something—faint as it was. Nez narrowed his eyes at the flickering black-and-white display. Ghostly echoes of static showing a buried mass.

"Right there," he said, tapping the screen with a finger gone slick with sweat. "Could be a couple good-sized rocks."

Or one big one, he thought, letting the hope rattle in his chest. A meteorite of that size hadn't turned up in the Navajo Nation in years.

Lisa Monroe straightened from her crouch behind the radar unit, brushing damp strands of hair from her forehead. "Not much light left."

He followed her gaze west. The sun sagged into the arid expanse, bleeding orange fire into the sky. Canyon Diablo cut across the distance, its scar of stone yawning like an old wound split open again. The big meteor crater further east was long picked clean, but the areas surrounding were fair game and mostly untouched, and the grant was up for renewal in two months.

No finds, no funding. No team.

"We start now," Nez said. "See how far we get before dark."

Monroe nodded, though her glance lingered on the horizon as if measuring something else. She called back to the shade structure, where the rest of the crew hunched beneath the sagging canopy like they were waiting out a storm.

"Careful, Nez." Ray Yazzie's voice carried low and heavy. Same Navajo blood as Nez, but older, harder, as though the land itself had etched its warnings into him. "There are places," Ray said, slow as stone rolling, "that don't want to be touched."

"And is this one of them?"

"Hard to know for certain."

From beneath the canopy, the crew began to rise. Jacob Torres hefted a shovel, shoulders dark with sweat. Dr. Eric Sloane dragged a rattling metal crate from the ATV—chisels and hammers clanging like iron teeth. Monroe returned to the radar cart. The detectors began to whine, thin and metallic, a keening that scraped the silence like cicadas screaming underground.

The first shovel bit into red earth. Dust rose. The air grew heavy—charged, expectant.

Nez wiped his brow. "What's that you always say... The earth has secrets to tell?"

Ray stood at the edge of the pit, arms crossed, eyes hard as obsidian.

"And some secrets should stay that way."

2

Nez powered on the dig lights.

Twin high-beams mounted to the cart glared out like hollow eyes, turning the desert white. Every dust mote hung suspended, stark and restless in the harsh geometry of light.

"I've got a strong read," Monroe called, hunched over the Ground Penetrating Radar. "But it's strange," she added, eyes narrowing at the display.

"Strange how?"

"Dense. Could be metal. But there's no magnetism."

Nez's stomach tightened. No magnetism meant no iron core. No iron core meant no space rock—just expensive junk buried deep.

"Could be aircraft debris," Monroe offered. "Something dumped years ago. Or ranch equipment."

Nez forced a smile. "Sure. Or maybe Jesse James left his saddlebag of silver."

Monroe smirked but didn't look up.

"Let's keep digging," Nez said. "We came this far. I'm not leaving with nothing but bad jokes and sunburn."

"Whatever you say, boss," Torres muttered, swigging from his canteen.

When the earth turned stubborn, they switched to hammers and chisels. Nez crouched beside Torres and Sloane, their strikes ringing in

rhythm—sparks of sound vanishing into the desert void. Monroe stayed by the radar, fine-tuning. Ray watched from the rocks, arms folded, gray hair dancing in the wind.

An hour passed. True dark had swallowed the horizon. The dig lights held back the void in a hard circle of brightness. Beyond their perimeter, the desert vanished—absolute night, formless and waiting.

Then—clang.

A strike sharper than the rest. A note that didn't belong.

"I've got something," Sloane said.

Nez's heart climbed into his throat. He dropped beside Sloane as the others crowded in. Together they worked the surrounding soil, brushing carefully until a black stone emerged—glossy as obsidian, lightless in a way that seemed to drink the surrounding glow.

"Bring the XRF," Nez said.

Lisa was already moving, yellow analyzer in hand. "Way ahead of you."

She knelt and aimed point-blank. Nez caught it—just a flicker—as though a faint red vein pulsed beneath the surface. Probably the angle, the harsh glare. Still, his breath hitched.

The scanner shrieked its high whine. Five seconds stretched like rope about to snap.

"What's the iron and nickel percentage?" Nez asked, trying to sound casual.

Monroe frowned. Then cursed. "Might need recalibration."

"What's it say?" Sloane craned to see.

"It read... fifty-two percent iron. Eighteen silicon. That doesn't make sense. Could be fusion with sediment—like slag—but..."

"But?"

She didn't answer. Just ran it again.

The beeping returned. When it stopped, her face went pale.

Sloane eased back. Nez leaned over her shoulder.

"Alright, now I'm freaked out," Monroe whispered, handing him the analyzer like it burned.

"It's a glitch," Nez said quickly. "Density's throwing it off. Bad calibration. Let's get it out and see what we're dealing with."

Torres was already backing away. "Sorry, boss. Don't feel like getting cancer tonight."

Nez scoffed. "Come on. You know me—Mr. Abundance-of-Caution. There's no stray plutonium out here. Government swept this land years ago."

"Still," Sloane muttered, adjusting his glasses, "doesn't inspire confidence."

"I'll bring a second reader tomorrow and—"

"No," Nez cut him off. "We dig it up tonight. Last thing I need is scavengers spotting our flags."

Ray finally rose from his perch, tamping out his pipe—slow, deliberate, ritualistic.

"I'd advise caution," Ray said.

Nez held his gaze too long. He knew the stories—the ones whispered about places you didn't dig, doors you didn't open. But Daniel Nez wasn't a child anymore. He was a scientist.

He dropped to his knees and carved around the stone.

Lisa joined first, then Sloane. Torres groaned but followed, shovel biting reluctantly into dirt.

"You've never steered me wrong before," Torres muttered.

"Not about to start now."

They dug it out. Nez braced, inhaled, and lifted the jagged, oblong stone, the weight settling in his palms.

It stirred a memory: his premature newborn nephew, fragile and impossibly warm.

Only this warmth wasn't desert heat. It radiated from within.

He set it on the metal cart.

A red flicker rippled across its surface—like a vein catching fire.

"That ain't from the sky," Ray said quietly, voice cracked. "That's from underneath."

"No kidding," Sloane snorted. "We dug it up."

Torres didn't laugh. He looked from Ray to the stone, uneasy.

"Not the ground," Ray added. "The world below. Spirit world."

Monroe stepped up with the thermal imager. "You feel that?" she asked Nez.

"It was... warm."

"No recent impact," Sloane said. "No heat sink. No crater."

"Maybe the ground's retaining—" Torres started, then cut himself off.

"If our gear isn't glitched," Monroe said, peering into the scope, "this thing is burning hot. But only itself. The rest of the site reads ice cold."

She walked to the edge of the light circle, sweeping the imager. "Just confirming this isn't fried too—"

Lisa screamed.

The thermal unit hit dirt with a hollow crack. She scrambled back, face drained of color.

"What is it?" Nez rushed forward.

"Just saw something... out there," Monroe gasped, eyes locked on the dark.

"Coyote?" Torres offered, sounding doubtful.

Nez's jaw clenched. His eyes slid to the rock—that faint pulse in its surface, the night pressing harder against the light's edge.

"Okay. We'll pack up. Bring the sample in. Everyone needs rest."

Ray stepped closer. "No. We need to put it back."

Nez gave a short, incredulous laugh. "Not happening. Everyone, move."

He bent for the dropped imager. Ray followed, voice low and flat.

"I was hired to guide you. But I know when the land is warning us."

Nez didn't look up. "I respect that. I can't afford superstition."

Ray didn't argue.

He just stared at the rock.

3

Sloane had taken the ATV to haul equipment back to the trucks along the interstate while the rest stayed behind breaking down the site under the dig lights' pale glare, shadows bending and stretching across sand—long lurching figures too thin for flesh.

Torres had wandered off to relieve himself, muttering about the heat, nothing unusual except ten minutes had passed and when Sloane returned there was still no sign.

"Jake?" Nez called into the dark, voice pitched half-joking to cut the crawling unease. "You doing alright out there?"

Silence. Too thick. Too sudden.

Monroe stepped closer, arms crossed tight. "What's taking him so long?" A tremor in her voice she hadn't shown before.

"I'll check," Nez said, grabbing a flashlight. "He's probably screwing with us."

But he didn't believe it—Torres wasn't the type, he was steady, efficient, and if he wasn't back something had gone wrong.

Nez barely cleared the perimeter when instinct halted him and he turned back. "Lisa—the thermal."

She passed it over wordlessly and he raised the scope, swept the horizon in low steady arcs. At first nothing, just emptiness, warm pockets of earth cooling, heat-trails of desert life underground. Then a

spike—jagged, sudden—flared red across the display, gone before he could steady his hand.

His pulse quickened. The same glitch Lisa swore she'd seen. He tried framing it as misread data, dust in the lens, tech hiccup, but that buried voice whispered clearly: *Something is wrong. You were warned.*

Ray's words returned. *Some places don't want to be touched.* He'd brushed them off, had to, too much at stake. Without something tangible—something to anchor his next paper, secure the grant—he was finished, back on the line frying chicken for tourists in Flagstaff while peers erased his name. He'd clawed too far from the reservation, fought too hard to become another ghost of ambition.

"Come on, Jake!" Louder now. "This isn't funny."

From beyond the ridgeline sound drifted through darkness—not laughter but something ragged, broken, disbelief wearing laughter's mask.

Nez whipped the thermal toward the dig where the ATV's running lights glowed faint, his only landmark in the void. The engine revved. The vehicle lurched forward, wheels tearing dirt, someone yelling—angry, panicked. Sloane?

Nez froze watching the ATV carve a brutal turn and vanish into the slope, then his legs kicked and he ran.

The clearing unfolded in harsh light. Monroe sprawled in the dust staring blankly at the stars. He slid to his knees, seized her shoulders, shaking harder than intended. "Lisa? What happened?"

Nothing.

He fumbled the flashlight on, beam cutting across her face, and the scream tore loose before he knew it was his.

Her eyes were gone—hollow sockets blackened and burned, skin leeches gray and shrunken, peeling like paper left to flame, her body emaciated and collapsed as if something had wrung the life from her in a single pull. Her expression frozen in terror no living thing could fake.

Nez trembled, paralyzed, heart jackhammering, then his body snapped free—legs half-numb—as he bolted toward camp's edge.

The ATV's taillights flickered like distant beacons, moving. He raised the thermal with shaking hands and Sloane bloomed on screen—yellows and pinks on the vehicle's seat. Then a flash. Red. A figure cut

into view for a single frame—tall, angular, wrong—it blotted out Sloane's heat like it had been stitched over reality.

A scream ripped across the dark, distant then smothered, and the ATV swerved hard and rolled to a stop.

Nez scanned again. Both signatures gone. His throat went dry and he lowered the scope.

Behind him—sound. A shuffle. Something heavy dragging across gravel.

Torres stepped into the light, his shape off somehow, gait too loose, shovel scraping behind him with each step.

"Jake?" Nez's voice broke. "Lisa... she's dead. I don't—Are you alright?"

Torres didn't stop, his eyes—once weary but alive—sunken now and lit from within by dull red glow, his voice coming out his yet not his. "You never were a good listener, Dan."

Bile surged. "My God... did you do this?"

Torres tilted his head, smile twisting across features that no longer belonged to him. "No, Dan. You did. You finally learned how to shed your skin."

Nez stumbled back. "What are you talking about?"

Torres lifted the shovel slow and deliberate. "You've always been selfish. Now you can be yourself."

The blade rose overhead.

"Get back!" Nez shouted. "Jake, get back!"

But Torres stopped, his gaze dropping between them. The stone pulsed in the dirt, crimson veins threading its black surface—blood moving beneath translucent skin. Torres's body convulsed and a hiss escaped—steam under pressure—eyes flaring red then hollowing into ashen pits. Nez froze watching as skin peeled away in sickly gray strips until Torres collapsed, a frail hollow husk.

Nez ran, terror propelling him toward the ATV. He stumbled, lost the flashlight, didn't stop, vaulted onto the vehicle and gunned it for the road.

When he reached the highway headlights caught Ray's truck ahead—door open, cab lit faintly by the dome light. Nez yanked the passenger door wide and clawed for the radio beneath the seat. "This is Daniel

Nez! Our dig crew—something happened. They're dead. Two dead. We need help. Please!"

Static crackled, then a voice slid through, low and familiar.

Ray.

Nez turned slowly.

Ray stood feet away, his eyes sparked red. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said, stepping forward. He reached across his face and grabbed hold—fingers hooking beneath skin—and *peeled*. The face came away like a mask, stretching in a surreal blur of iridescence and shadow, colors that shouldn't exist bleeding through the darkness. Beneath was something terrible and mesmerizing—shifting, fragmenting, a face that was all faces and no face at once.

Nez stood frozen, terrorized and mesmerized, unable to look away as Ray's arm extended too long and the hand plunged into his chest. He felt it—sensation tearing through him, skin sloughing from within, his self peeling away like bark stripped from a tree. He clawed at himself desperate and screaming but the peeling continued, layers separating, everything he was coming undone—

He gasped.

Nez stood by the running truck, chest heaving, sweat pouring in the cooling night. Ray was gone. The thing was gone. His hands flew to his arms, his neck—moments ago he'd felt himself tearing apart from the inside but he was whole, alive, still here.

Then he saw it.

The stone lay at his feet pulsing and insistent, this dark heart they'd exhumed from the earth. He bent and picked it up, heat rushing into his palms, and with it something else—an impression, a command, not from him, not from the stone but from below. He knew what to do, where to go.

Nez placed the pulsing rock gingerly into the aluminum briefcase in the back of Ray's truck. He slid into the driver's seat, shadows inside folding over him, and drove north into crystalline dark.

A pulsing *thump, thump, thump* like a compass leading *it* home.

FAIR PLAY

1

TWO WEEKS LATER

The air was too thick for pretense.

Casey watched a bead of sweat crawl down his forearm, hanging out the Monte Carlo's open window in the late summer Michigan air. The Offspring crackled thinly from the old speakers. He turned down the dirt utility drive into the 4-H fairgrounds, squinting against the glare until the RV cluster materialized.

In the rearview, Liv Fischer mouthed along to the lyrics, then gagged theatrically, wrinkling her nose. "Ugh. What is that smell?"

"Fried regret with a side of manure," Casey said, turning down the radio volume, which seemed to displease Liv. She brushed away wild red curls with a sour look on her face, glancing around the sunbaked maroon leather. "Or maybe it's just this rust bucket."

"Easy. She's a classic."

From the passenger seat, Aly punched his arm, flashing her drive-me-crazy grin. "Gee, thanks, Benson."

She turned her emerald eyes back to the visor mirror, where she applied the lightest touch of makeup. Somehow Aly could pull a double at Fischer's and still look radiant. Not that diner grease ever washed off easily. But she still smelled better than he did after sweating all day in a broken patrol car.

"So are you guys like..." Liv leaned forward between the seats, looking back and forth between them. "...a thing or whatever now?"

Casey pumped the brakes harder than necessary, bouncing her back. "As much of a thing as you and Henry," Aly shot back.

Liv shot him a flat stare in the mirror and rolled her eyes. "Well he asked me to homecoming... but we just hang out."

"Right," Casey said wryly, throwing airquotes. "*Hang out.*"

"Alright, well—on that note," Liv said, shoving the heavy door open.

"Thanks-for-the-ride-see-ya-bye," she rattled out in one breath, already beelining toward the barns—leaving her older sister and Casey to their *thing-or-whatever*.

"They grow up so fast," Casey said half-heartedly.

"So you say," Aly retorted. "Try living with her ten years too long."

She hopped out. Casey followed. His pager—the Bureau-issued one—caught on the seat and tumbled into the dust. For a moment he considered leaving it there. Reeves hadn't paged in weeks, and the last time had blessedly been a false alarm.

He bent, scooped up the little black device. Its screen glowed faintly, that sickly green. Straightening, his gaze snagged on PRINCE Milling's looming silhouette.

No "aftershocks" yet, despite Lochlear and Heiser's predictions. And somehow, that was worst. The silence. Something biding its time, waiting.

"You coming, Benson?" Aly called from beneath the faded red-and-white banner strung across the livestock gate:

62nd HOLT COUNTY 4-H FAIR

Casey slipped the pager into his back pocket, letting dread settle behind his ribs—its usual place—and followed.

2

The fairgrounds burned bright.

Yellow and white bulbs blinked over carnival rides that creaked and jerked like skeletons in the wind. Kids shrieked with joy, chasing rust-laced thrills and nausea-inducing spins—an endless parade of sticky fingers and shrill noise.

Millie turned up her Discman, spinning *OK Computer* from Radiohead that Liv had bought her for her birthday earlier in the summer. The world blurred into sound as Thom Yorke's voice drifted lazily amid the chime of bells and a bright guitar line, seeming to give sound to the glow of the ferris-wheel lights as they spun and the carts teetered precariously.

For a moment, it almost felt like the song belonged to this place—sweet, tired, and just a little sad.

And beneath it all, Millie Thompson felt the tug of too many yesterdays, sharp and sour in the back of her throat.

Most of all, the song drowned out the lingering whispers.

For now.

She used to walk this same midway with her dad, her hand in his calloused grip as he nodded to nearly everyone who passed. They'd stop, chat, folks asking about the mill. Then they'd turn to her, smiling like they meant it—tell her she was getting tall, just like her mom. But her

dad was gone now. Gone in a way that left her wondering if she even knew him.

The same faces still walked the midway. But their smiles had changed: tight-lipped, cautious. Like one wrong word might split her open. She didn't blame them. She just didn't want to be seen like that.

Truth was, she didn't want to be here at all.

A sudden burst of laughter cut through the song. Someone jostled her shoulder, and the Discman skipped, the melody warping before it righted itself.

She pulled the headphones down around her neck just in time to hear Eli arguing with Kyle, insisting the Jurassic Park novels were superior to the movies—especially *The Lost World*, which they had all seen twice at the new theater in town.

Eli polished off his second corn dog in three bites, lobbed the stick into a barrel without breaking stride.

"Alright," Eli said, licking salt from his fingers. "We hitting The Zipper first?"

Austin raised his dark eyebrows. "Jeez man, eat much?"

He'd shot up over the summer—taller, lankier, his body not quite keeping pace with the growth spurt. Dark hair hung past his shoulders, loose tonight instead of tied back, and his swarthy skin glistened with sweat beneath a faded striped polo.

Kyle recoiled like someone had pulled a knife. "No way I'm climbing into a metal cage with you after two corn dogs."

"And a large fry," Eli added, pushing his thick-framed glasses up his nose.

"My point exactly. Or did you forget what happened on the teacups?"

Kyle recoiled like someone had pulled a knife. "No way I'm climbing into a metal cage with you after two corn dogs."

Eli ate like a black hole and never showed it—still narrow-shouldered and gangly in his oversized oversized Philmont Scout Ranch t-shirt and khaki cargo shorts, thick-framed glasses catching the carnival lights. Kyle had started to bulk up, though she doubted it was intentional. His Starter jacket hung open over a faded Lions tee, and his jeans were still too loose, cinched with a worn belt.

"Upchucking at Disney was a low point," Eli admitted. "In my defense, that ride spins a lot faster than it looks."

Millie laughed. A real laugh—sharp, unguarded, alive. Not one of the rehearsed little noises she'd been tossing around like party favors for months. It slipped out before she could stop it.

Her mom said it was normal to pretend. To smile through it. That she did it too. That they were all still adjusting—still missing Dad, still clawing through the wreckage of Grandpa's trial and the headlines and the whispers.

But it wasn't the same for her. Not really. No one else had been taken.

"I'll ride with you," Millie said, holding onto that laugh like a rope. Maybe tonight could be the start of something better. That's what she told herself, anyway.

"Deal." Eli's grin widened, pure and uncomplicated under the glow of a food truck marquee.

Millie hesitated, tugging at the hem of her flannel shirt—one of her dad's old ones, too big in the shoulders but soft from years of wear. "Wait... where's Liv?"

Austin cleared his throat. "I'll wait. You guys go."

"I'm gonna hit the rigged games," Kyle said. "Ladies love a guy who can win an off-brand Winnie the Pooh, right?"

"Sure," Austin muttered. "Knock yourself out."

Millie glanced down the main fairway, past the worn EXPO building and the floodlights pooling beneath the ferris wheel. A group filtered in through the gates, half-cast in shadow.

And there she was. Liv—oversized Smashing Pumpkins tee with the sleeves hacked off, ripped wide-leg jeans, Doc Martens catching the midway lights, flannel tied at her waist despite the humidity—walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Henry Morgan.

Millie froze. Her stomach clenched before her thoughts could catch up. Liv had mentioned Henry before. Mostly to complain. Said he kept calling, that she'd "rather swallow a rock."

Apparently, her appetite had changed.

Just like everything else had.

Millie lifted a hand, calling out through the flicker of confusion—and something else she couldn't yet name.

Liv spotted them and veered over, red curls catching the carnival lights.

Austin's sudden stillness said more than any expression.

"Sorry I'm late," Liv said. She glanced back, half-corrected herself. "We're late."

Henry's curly brown bounced as he came up alongside Liv, big hands hovering awkwardly at his sides like he didn't know what to do with them. He wore a Carhartt jacket over a plain white tee and mud-stained Wranglers—farm kid through and through. For a star football player, he didn't radiate confidence. But he was nice enough, Millie realized—and maybe that was why Liv had been drawn to him. Every time Millie had been around, Henry had been careful, kind, almost overcautious about saying the wrong thing. Unlike others, who barely bothered to hide their pity or unease.

The girl in the river. The daughter of a drunk martyr. The granddaughter of a disgraced town hero.

"Hey guys. What's up?" Henry said.

"Uh... what's he doing here?" Kyle asked, no attempt at subtlety.

"Taking in the glory that is the Westville Fair," Liv shot back with a shrug. "Same as you."

Henry gave a half-shrug of his own and grinned. "Already over it. Been here all day showing our cows."

Everyone in Holt County knew the Morgans. Big dairy. Big trucks. Big presence. The only name bigger was Thompson—and that name, her name, carried shadows now.

Austin crossed his arms. "Well, don't feel like you've gotta tag along," he said, voice edged with a bitterness Millie had never heard from him.

Her chest tightened. Something had shifted over the summer—something she hadn't noticed until now.

Austin turned back to the group. "We ready?"

Eli hesitated, then stepped forward with a smile too sincere for the moment. "I'm Eli Lancaster, by the way," he said, extending a hand.

Henry blinked, then shook it. The contrast was almost comical—Eli

thin and wiry, barely taller than Millie; Henry a head above Austin and three times as broad.

"Come on," Kyle hissed, tugging Eli by the sleeve like a frustrated parent wrangling a toddler.

Millie shifted on her feet. "I, uh... I told Eli I'd go on the Zipper with him."

"We'll come too," Liv said, eyes tracking Austin as he stalked toward the midway. Her gaze narrowed. "Just give me a sec."

Millie trailed Eli while Kyle headed after Austin.

She tried to focus on anything to stay grounded. Her ears rang with the clang of the sledgehammer game—the bell shrieking as someone struck the base. Lights flared red, then reset. A cheer rose behind her. She exhaled.

Just like you and Liv talked about, she reminded herself. Stay present. Focus forward.

The Zipper loomed above, its caged compartments spinning and tumbling like dice tossed by an unseen hand. Kids shrieked, voices pitched between terror and delight.

She wasn't sure this counted as fun. But it was better than the dreams. Better than the cold sigh of the A/C, the endless hush in her room at night that pulsed like something alive. Better than waking with damp sheets and her own ragged breath crackling in her ears like static.

She shook it off and jogged a few steps to catch Eli, who turned with a grin and waved her on.

Millie forced herself to grin back.

This was what normal kids did. Rides, lights, friends.

She just hoped the cracks wouldn't show. Not tonight.

3

Olivia was fuming.

It'd become something of a familiar state since last year, after everything. One that came on when she thought about what had been done to Millie and kept happening to her friend because of it and the way everyone looked at both of them like they were made of glass.

See through.

But lately, she'd convinced herself she was better at tempering it.

More mature. Centered. Even some kind of enlightened, whatever that meant.

Then Austin had to get all broody and judgmental the moment Henry showed up, and now she was marching through the fairgrounds like her sneakers had something to prove.

She caught up with Austin and Kyle near the balloon dart game. She didn't bother checking if Henry was following. He probably was. Sometimes it felt like he was always around—hovering, orbiting, gravitating toward her like a cross between a moth drawn to flame and a puppy.

He called every night. Sometimes she answered. Sometimes they talked for ten minutes. Sometimes two hours.

There was something sweet about it. There was also something suffocating. Most days, she couldn't decide which won.

Austin stood off to the side while Kyle lobbed darts at balloons like he was actively trying to miss.

"Oh come on!" Kyle shouted as another dart bounced harmlessly off a rubbery red target.

"Sorry, kid," said the carnie, a wiry man with a yellowed tank top and teeth that were losing a slow war.

"Next time is now," Kyle said, slapping two crumpled bills onto the counter like he was dropping stacks in Vegas.

Olivia turned on Austin. "What the hell was that?"

He gave her a look—stone-faced, jaw tight, his swarthy skin catching just enough light to make her hate how annoyingly handsome he looked when pissed off.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. You practically growled when Henry showed up."

"My problem's not with him."

"Then what is it?"

"It's you, Liv," he snapped. "All you care about lately is your shiny new football star boyfriend."

She blinked. "Seriously?"

"At the end of the year, he asked you to prom, and you told him to shove it. And that you didn't date people with an IQ under 69."

"I did," she said, and remembered Austin laughing beside her when she'd said it.

"So what changed?"

She opened her mouth. Closed it. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I needed your permission to date someone."

"Whatever. I don't want to talk about this."

"Then quit acting like a jerk."

Kyle groaned. "Will you two please shut up? I'm trying to concentrate." He tossed another dart—it sailed wide, landing nowhere near the balloons. "But, yeah. Austin's not wrong. Henry is kind of a—"

"Want me to give it a shot?" Henry said, appearing behind them like some conjured varsity genie.

Kyle startled, then sighed. "Be my guest. The whole game's rigged anyway."

POP.

A fat white balloon exploded on the first try. A buzzer screamed.

"Well shit," Kyle muttered.

The carnie leaned forward, cigarette stub dangling from his lips as he pointed. "Pick your prize, son."

Henry nodded at the largest red bear on the wall. The carnie wrestled it down with zero grace and all the care of a man who hated his life.

Henry turned, bear in arms, and looked at Olivia.

"No thanks," she said.

He shrugged and handed it to Kyle. "Stephanie Douglas seems like the type."

Kyle scoffed. "Mayor's daughter? Way outta my league," he mumbled, holding the red bear around the neck in a chokehold. "But hey, worth a shot."

He wandered off, clutching his trophy. Austin trailed in the opposite direction, shoulders stiff, heading toward the livestock barns.

Heat flared in Liv's chest. "Where are you—"

But Austin was already gone, swallowed by the crowd.

Henry stepped up beside her, wearing that smug half-grin. "Brave enough for that thing?" He nodded toward a ride that looked like a rusted chainsaw had been blessed with sentience and a salvaged motor. Metal cages spun wildly on either end, rattling like they'd been bolted together by drunken welders. People lined up anyway. Always did.

"Sure," Liv said. "Why not."

She looked away from the direction Austin had gone, past the blur of blinking lights and fried food haze. Eli and Millie were already in line for the Zipper, Eli gesturing excitedly like he was explaining the plot of a book Millie probably wouldn't read but wouldn't say no to hearing about anyway.

Millie was smiling. Not the fake kind, either. A real one.

Liv swallowed hard. She'd have to figure this out—whatever this was with Austin. She didn't want it to keep going like this, the distance, the tension. They'd been too close, too long, not to deal with it eventually.

They'd seen things together last year. Things that didn't go away just because nobody talked about them.

But talking about it was the problem. How was she supposed to help Millie forget if every conversation turned into a reminder? How

could they move on if they were always stuck in the wreckage of what happened?

Henry was a distraction. Maybe more. Maybe not. She didn't care. Not right now.

What she cared about—really cared about—was Millie. Keeping her stable. Giving her a reason to laugh, to feel like a normal teenager again. Liv had done what she could: sleepovers, dumb movies, pretending everything was fine until some of it almost felt real. She tried to steer conversations into safe territory, soften them where she could. But she knew she couldn't do that forever.

Just like she couldn't avoid the conversation with Austin much longer.

They all needed each other. She knew that. Their friendships couldn't afford to fray. Not after what they'd lived through.

Not when it might come back.

Liv felt like she was walking a tightrope over a black void. A void that pulsed. That waited.

The Red.

Liv remembered what they saw—what they fought. The thing stitched from bone and skin, its eyes hollow, screaming through the trees while Millie bled beneath it.

That kind of nightmare doesn't vanish. You just learn to carry it quieter.

And so, she played the part. Balanced herself between normal and not. Between teenage chaos and something much darker waiting beneath.

They reached the Zipper just as Eli and Millie were about to board. Eli was beaming, already launching into some ramble about whether velociraptors had feathers. Millie nodded along, still smiling.

Liv watched her and tried not to ruin it.

This was what she fought for. This brief moment. This shimmer of almost-normal.

As the ride groaned and lurched into motion, lifting them toward the sky in clattering circles, Liv gripped the safety bar and braced herself.

The world spun into chaos. The fairgrounds blurred.

And somewhere in the darkness, the Red watched.

RYDER JONES

Olivia just held on.

4

Liv was right about one thing, Casey thought.

The 4-H fair was even more of a sensory ambush than he remembered. It had been years since he'd actually been in the thick of it.

Every dozen steps, the golden haze of peanut oil gave way to the ripe bite of pig pens and filthy chicken coops. The transition was so seamless, so accepted, most folks didn't even blink. Probably because half of them were parked out here in the makeshift RV village, soaking in the smell first thing each day with their morning coffee.

He spotted Aly laughing with Jessie Wilkons. Jessie's smile vanished when she caught his awkward wave, replaced with a scowl sharp enough to cut. Apparently she hadn't forgotten how he'd ditched her on prom night. Westville didn't forgive, not really. The town carried grudges like heirlooms.

"People change fast," Aly said when Jessie walked off.

"Yeah?"

"Jess just told me Billy ran out on her last year."

"Figures." Casey groped for sympathy and found only silence. What came out was, "Want a corn dog?"

Aly arched a brow, lips curving in that half-grin that made him want to kiss her right there under the buzzing carnival lights.

"Benson," she said, "I tell you a friend got left by her husband and you think food?"

"Forgot to eat today."

He'd meant to swing by the newly reopened and rebuilt Fischer's Cafe for lunch. Special Agent Stephen Lochlear had applied pressure in the right places to get the insurance companies moving per Casey's request—a fact which the agent didn't let Casey forget on their monthly check-in calls.

He was trying—really trying—not to think about work (or whatever he called his watchdog obligations to the DCB) when he was with Aly. After everything last fall, now that things felt... better with her, he wasn't about to screw it up. Even if he wasn't always sure he deserved it.

Her green eyes caught the carnival light just right, reflecting back like distant stars. Something good. Something real. He followed her back toward the concessions stand, surprised suddenly at how badly he wanted this moment to linger.

They sat on a wooden bench across from the big red-and-white tent where the 4-H Variety Show was about to kick off. Mayor Douglas tapped the mic inside.

Casey tore into the corn dog, snapped the stick between his teeth before he realized it. Aly watched.

"What?" he mumbled.

"You eat faster when something's bothering you."

He swallowed. "Lochlear called. Same runaround. Nothing new."

"Do you think it's really over?"

He thought of Heiser's memos, the "geomagnetic readings" that were supposed to be stabilizing, the words he wasn't allowed to share. Not even with her. He hated the secrets, but he hated losing her more.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe we're out of the woods."

Her smile didn't reach her eyes. And he didn't blame her. Sometimes it was easier to believe nothing had happened at all.

A whine ripped through the loudspeakers, splitting the night.

Casey flinched. The air rippled near the sound tent, heat haze folding in on itself like paper with the faintest flare of iridescence.

Then it was gone.

His head throbbed—pressure behind the eyes, not quite pain. Static in the spine, waiting to arc. He hadn't felt it in months, like something leering, unseen.

Not since last year.

"Good evening, Westville," Douglas boomed. His voice echoed hollow, stretched too thin across the tent. "In twenty minutes we'll kick off the 40th annual Variety Show!"

"Shall we?" Aly asked, Coke in hand.

Casey dumped the basket of fries, turned—nearly colliding with a tall, squared-jawed man in blue coveralls pushing a wheeled trash bin. The man didn't speak, just gave a passing hard glare before continuing on.

Fair maintenance, Casey guessed. Cheery bunch.

He turned, caught sight of Kyle Anderson along with Austin Williams hovering near the edge of the tent, Kyle discarding a big red stuffed bear at the base of an overflowing garbage can as Austin smirked, giving him a consolatory pat. He noted the group of girls toward the front in the gray-brown metal folding chairs arranged in a messy circle, snickering and glancing back at the boys.

He was glad at least to see those boys doing alright, after everything they'd seen last year. Ethan Crawley had even taken Austin hostage. It wasn't the kind of thing you just forgot—though apparently the effects of exposure to "the Seethe," as Heiser referred to it, seemed to vary and include blurred memories and time loss. He wondered if that was part of it—or whether the kids were just more resilient than most, more resilient than him.

And then he saw Erin Thompson standing alone by a tent pole.

His chest tightened. Joe. Millie. The ache was always there.

She's alright, he told himself. The thought sounded thin, like something spoken in a dream.

But even here, with the lights and laughter, he felt it: the shimmer, the static, the waiting silence.

Where was Millie, anyway?

5

Millie stumbled out of the ride, breath catching in her throat as the fairground tilted just slightly beneath her feet. The neon world felt off-kilter. Her skin buzzed, clammy with leftover adrenaline.

Beside her, Eli hunched like a marionette with cut strings.

"I told you," Kyle said, smug as ever. "But Mr. Know-It-All never listens."

"Maybe just one corn dog too many," Eli wheezed, palms braced against his knees.

"How about a change of pace?" Liv offered, pointing toward the Hall of Mirrors.

Millie's gaze followed. A cluster of upperclassmen boys jostled their shrieking girlfriends inside, swallowed by flickering bulbs and ultraviolet haze. The entrance pulsed under garish violet-and-yellow lettering. Where Jungle Madness used to sit every other year she could remember—cheap leaves, musty tarps, bad speakers—now replaced by something colder. Cleaner. Worse.

A sign overhead bore three theater masks: one laughing, one crying, one blank as a corpse.

Something clenched tight in her chest.

"I'll stay with Eli," she said.

"I'm good," he insisted, straightening with forced enthusiasm. "Let's go."

She followed, one foot dragging behind the other.

The metal ramp groaned beneath them, warped and trembling as if protesting their weight. Sickly UV light poured down from overhead, coating their clothes and faces in radioactive outlines.

The first mirror greeted them like a portal. Arrows pointed left and right.

"Whoa," Eli said, lifting one foot. The white trim of his sneakers pulsed like bioluminescent fungus. "We look like extras in a zombie rave."

"Choose your own adventure," Kyle said, already veering left without looking back.

Liv and Henry disappeared ahead.

"Right?" Eli asked.

Before she could answer, a swarm of older kids pushed through, shoulder-checking her into the mirrored wall. Her shoulder struck glass—cold and sharp—and by the time she looked up, Eli was gone.

Her pulse skidded.

"Eli?" she called.

No answer. Only echo.

She turned right.

The hallway narrowed like a throat. Another blast of ultraviolet flared, and her reflection multiplied—dozens of her staring back. Every angle exaggerated. Every face slightly wrong.

"Mil?" A whisper from somewhere ahead. Or behind. She couldn't tell.

The laughter of the upperclassmen echoed from somewhere deeper inside—distant and distorted. Overhead, the groan of old mechanics moved like breath through bone.

She turned in a circle. The reflections offered no answers—only warped silhouettes and too many exits. Something buzzed behind her eyes. She bumped into another mirror. Then another. Her own face lunged out of every corner, smiling too wide, frowning too long.

Some mouths half-open like they were about to speak.

Then they did. Voices.

Not from inside the maze. The voices of people all around, resounding inside her head.

I'm fine... I'm fine...

You're not. You're a burden.

Just keep pretending.

She's better off without you.

They don't know what you saw.

You wanted it. All of it.

She clamped her hands over her ears—but the voices kept whispering beneath her skin. A flicker of red slashed the edge of her vision.

She froze. Not again.

She turned slowly. Too slowly. Her limbs felt submerged. Mirrors to every side. Her face in all of them—pale and trembling.

In one reflection, her back was turned. Still. Head bowed. Not moving.

Her blood thudded in her ears.

Then the figure moved. Not her. Not really.

It turned.

The face was hers. But wrong.

Time stuttered.

Everything *slowed*—the distant laughter stretching into low, warped groans, the mechanics overhead grinding to a crawl. Her own heartbeat dragged, each thump separated by impossible silence.

The reflection's skin began to shift. Pale at first, then paler still—bleaching to ash-gray like something left too long in darkness. The features hollowed, gaunt, wrong. Not hers anymore.

The eyes stayed closed.

"You're not real," Millie whispered, shutting her own eyes tight.

She opened them slowly.

The reflection's eyes stayed shut. Waiting.

Then the lids snapped open.

Not her eyes. Not human eyes.

Red orbs—brilliant, luminous, depthless—stared back at her. No iris. No pupil. Just perfect circles of burning crimson light.

And beneath that light, veins of red spread like cracks through glass, spidering outward across the gray skin in geometric patterns. Perfect angles. Mathematical precision.

The mirrors around her began to shimmer. The reflections frac-

tured into tessellating shapes—hexagons layered over hexagons, refracting light in impossible directions. The walls breathed with them, pulsing in synchronized rhythm.

Then the whisper came.

Not from outside. From *inside*. A boy's voice. Young. Desperate. Achingly sad.

"Millie..."

Her breath hitched.

"Come find me... please..."

Time lurched forward—*snapped* back into motion like a rubber band released. The laughter returned. The mechanics groaned. Her heartbeat raced to catch up with itself.

You are the wound. You are the silence.

The words flooded her skull like a broken dam.

You are... RED.

The mirrors trembled. Cracks splintered outward, following the hexagonal patterns etched across their surface.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "It's not real. It's not real—"

Glass cracked behind her. Vibrated. Sang.

Something reached for her shoulder.

She screamed, spinning.

"Mil! It's me!" Olivia's voice broke the pressure in her skull like a pin to a balloon.

Millie blinked.

The red orbs were gone. The gray skin vanished. The hexagons dissolved. The mirrors were whole again—reflecting only carnival lights and cheap paint.

Her reflection was just her—sweaty, wide-eyed, shaken.

Olivia touched her arm gently. "Was it another—"

"I'm fine," Millie said, too fast. "Just got turned around."

"You sure? You can tell me."

"I said I'm fine." She pulled away. "You brought Henry. You don't need to worry about me."

Olivia's brow furrowed. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just go hang out with your boyfriend, Liv."

Olivia exhaled, somewhere between tired and stung. "First Austin, now you?"

"I don't care, okay?" Millie snapped.

"If you're seeing things again, more than before, then we should—"

"I should go," Millie said. "Mom's meeting me at the main tent."

Millie headed toward the echo of applause and a booming voice over a PA system. She kept her gaze low, trying to block out Liv's call behind her.

Somewhere—beneath the laughter, beneath the crowd, beneath her very skin—the whispers were still there.

The boy's voice echoing faintly: *Come find me...*

And she felt the eyes—those perfect red orbs—still watching.