
STRANGER THINGS

5

by Loren Rosson



Author's Note

This novel is intended to be the fifth season of *Stranger Things* – my version of it, not the official TV version slated for release in 2025. It's not part of my alternate series grounded in seasons 1 and 2: *The College Years*, *The New Generation*, *World's End*, *The Witch of Yamhill County*, *The Black Rose of Newberg*, *Endless Night*, and *The Lost City*. Those stories assume the events portrayed in TV seasons 1 and 2, but don't acknowledge seasons 3 and 4. I wrote most of those stories before season 3 aired, and took the characters in directions that cannot be reconciled with what happens in the third and fourth seasons. That doesn't bother me, since I dislike season 3. Season 4 was a return to form, and I'm looking forward to seeing how the Duffers conclude the saga of Vecna. The following story represents my wild and risky imagination of that season-5 conclusion.

I set the story in the year 1989. The Duffers have said there will be a significant time jump, which means more than the usual one year between seasons. Season 4 was 1986, and so season 5 will have to be at least 1988, and I imagine even later: the spring of 1989, when the kids graduate from high school.

I began writing the novel on July 24, 2023 and finished it on September 15, 2023.

Needless to say, this is fan fiction, not canon, and I don't profit from it in any way.

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Chapter One:

Graduation

Friday, May 26, 1989

On the fifth ring, Mike decided to oblige the caller. If it was Lucas bailing, Mike would tear him a new one, and then another twice as big.

"Mike, will you get that?"

His mother, upstairs. Who couldn't be troubled.

"No!" he hollered back, just to be contrary, while vacating his sacred couch. He dialed back the volume on the stereo; Robert Smith was complaining about time running out and feeling washed up, and Mike understood that. He'd been closing down for the last three years of his life. Feeling sorry for himself every day. But the Cure, bless them, made self-pity seem virtuous.

Another ring. Mike looked at the phone hanging on the pillar by the basement staircase and wondered why he'd thought putting one down here was a good idea. It was an intrusion. His parents would never have done so without his pestering. The prices he paid for his relentless stupidity.

"Mike!"

"Shut up!" he yelled, yanking the receiver on the seventh ring, and bellowing a rude "hello" into the mouthpiece.

"Jesus, Mike." It was Nancy. "Do you have any manners at all anymore?"

Mike felt pettily triumphant. If his mother had known Nancy was calling, she would have answered the phone upstairs on the first ring. But his annoyance swallowed that victory. It had been weeks since he last spoke to his sister, which meant she would want to catch up, and he had no time for her right now. He was in his zone and listening to *Disintegration*, an album to be savored without interruption. "What do you want, Nancy?" he said. "I'm busy."

"I'm doing well, thanks," said Nancy. "How about you?"

"Shit doesn't change."

"Yes it does," said Nancy.

"For you maybe," said Mike. The song "Closedown" had finished and yielded to "Lovesong", the only track on the album Mike didn't care for. It was too pedestrian for the Cure, and out of place among the psychedelically transcendent songs that made *Disintegration* a masterpiece. Mike reached over and grabbed the remote lying on the card table, and brought the volume way down.

"Thank you," said Nancy. "You have manners after all."

I did it for me, not you. "What do you want?" he repeated.

"For you to realize that shit does change. Happy graduation, by the way."

"Just another day," said Mike, starting to pace back and forth.

"Well, congratulations," she repeated. "College will do a lot for you."

College had done wonders for Nancy and almost made her forget the horrors of her life. Her two exes hadn't been so lucky. Jonathan was a distant memory for all of them, including Will. After the terrible events of three years ago, Nancy had returned to Steve, and Jonathan vowed to never see or speak to her again. Over the protests of Joyce Byers and brother Will, he had returned to Lenora Hills in California, ditched all dreams of college, taken up residence with his pizza-delivering friend Argyle, and become a full-time meth head. As for Steve, Nancy had broken up with him six months later, soon after she touched down at George Mason University. That was in the fall of '86. Steve had told her she would do this; she had sworn she was his forever, a promise which had lasted two weeks. Now she was Paul's forever: Paul Manning, a biochemistry major with plans for an MD when he graduated next year. Nancy, an English major and history minor, was on track to become the world's best journalist when she received her diploma by Paul's side. They had been together for three strong years and would surely be married in another one or two. Mike was nauseated for them both. He had no room for those who succeeded in life, especially his family and friends.

"College is overrated," said Mike. He was actually looking forward to it. Chicago. The city university. His number one choice. Dustin, Lucas, and Will were attending liberal arts colleges (Vassar, Lewis & Clark, and Grinnell, respectively), but fuck that smalltime shit. Mike couldn't wait for Chicago, but he was damned if he was going to show any enthusiasm, especially to Nancy. Even after three years, he wasn't over being miserable, and the need to impose that misery on others bled through him.

Especially on those who hadn't been robbed as he had. "Look at Steve," he said, opening old wounds. "He's still doing fine for himself here."

"Don't be a douche," said Nancy. "Steve works for his father and hates it. You'll love college. And you'll find someone, you know --"

"Nancy, shut up." That subject was off limits. She who was not to be named.

"I don't get you. Rejection is a part of life. You can't --"

"Are you serious?" The gall of his sister was unbelievable. "With Jonathan out there killing himself right now, you actually say that? You rejected him for Steve once, then Steve for Jonathan, then Jonathan for Steve a second time, and then Steve for Paul." Who the *fuck* was Nancy to lecture on rejection? She'd never experienced it. She was the Queen Rejecter who couldn't fathom the devastating impact on her rejectees. Mike believed that Jonathan Byers would be dead in a year, two at most. Thanks to his goddamn sister.

"You may not understand this," said Nancy, "but I miss Jonathan. And Steve."

"You miss getting fucked by Steve, consoled by Jonathan, and fighting with them both because you hate them impartially."

"Mike, what the almighty fuck is wrong with you? You can't talk to people like that."

"Just speaking truth, dude." *And if you talk shit to me, I'll fling it back at you.*

"No, you're not," said Nancy. "And you're out of line."

"What about Paul? Are you tired of him yet? When will you reject him as a 'part of life'?"

There was a long pause. Nancy would either ask for their mother now, or hang up. She said: "I thought maybe you could be pleasant today, seeing as you're graduating and now an adult --"

"Not an adult 'til the end of July."

-- but if you're determined to be a self-absorbed shit, then put Mom on the phone."

"She's busy," Mike lied.

"What do you mean? Busy how?"

Mike belched into the receiver. "Steve was talking about you the other day." Another lie, but Mike was just warming up.

"Are you going to put Mom on?"

"Should I tell Steve you still burn for him?"

"Fuck off, Mike!"

He didn't need the dial tone to tell him he'd been liberated from a pesky phone call. But as he hung up, Mike suddenly realized how much he missed the old days, the dangerous days, when he and his friends, and his sister -- and that someone he wouldn't name anymore -- had worked as an unbeatable team. He hated the asshole he'd become but couldn't help it.

Pissed at the world, he cursed Nancy and deluged the air with more profanity. Then he returned to his couch and cranked up the stereo volume. The CD had made it to track five, "Last Dance". It was about reconnecting with an ex, acknowledging the necessity of breaking up and moving on, and that any attempt to recapture past feelings was doomed to failure. Mike smoldered. He didn't need to hear that shit after Nancy's phone call. He grabbed the remote again and skipped over the song to "Lullaby". He needed something soothing, and a goddamn nap, and the Cure's cradle song about a spiderman devouring people was the right medicine. Vecna had been a spiderman, after all. Mike felt eaten by the Upside Down's legacy.

The lullaby worked its creepy magic, and Mike drifted off. *Rejection is a part of life.* Fuck Nancy. She knew nothing.

Lucas arrived two hours later, a little after 1:00 PM. Mike was up in the living room when the car pulled into the driveway. He looked out the window and was awash with the usual envy. Since his 18th birthday last December, Lucas owned a red Mazda 323 GT-X, courtesy of Dad. It had four-wheel drive for winters, air conditioning for summers, and a state-of-the-art stereo system and CD player. Mike still didn't have his own car. His father was wealthy like Mr. Sinclair -- everyone who lived on Maple Street was upper middle class -- but Ted Wheeler wasn't inclined to spoil a son who treated his parents like excrement.

He watched Lucas walk up to the front door. *We're graduating tonight and I hardly care.* His friend rang the doorbell, and Mike stood watching him through the living room window before letting him in. He remembered when they were in elementary school and middle school, and all the things that had happened since the fateful November of seventh grade. His eyes watered and he banished the tears. Mike was good at that kind of suppression. Lucas rang the doorbell a second time and also knocked. Mike went to let him in.

"Mike, will you get that?"

His mother, from the kitchen. Who couldn't be troubled.

"Shut up!" he yelled for the second time that day, after the exact same question, and threw open the door.

"Whoa, dude!" said Lucas, holding up his hands. "Whose head are you biting off today?"

"Did you listen to it?" asked Mike.

"Uh, are you going to let me in?"

Mike stood aside and made a sweeping gesture. Lucas came in and they went downstairs to Mike's basement. The cave that had been their private world for the past twelve years. Eight years with Dustin, who had come to Hawkins in the fourth grade. And nine years with Will, who hadn't been to Mike's home for the past three (Mike pushed thoughts of Will away). But he and Lucas had been forever. *Forever will be over once Lucas is in Oregon.*

"I just heard Mandy isn't coming tonight," said Lucas, plopping down on the couch.

"Why not?" asked Mike, not caring in the slightest.

"She just found out she's pregnant."

Mike laughed. "Don?"

"Of course," said Lucas. "She's too distraught to show up tonight."

"No shit. That baby was conceived on the gym floor." Donald McNeil had pinned Amanda Barrett in the gymnasium as his friends watched gleefully from an adjacent hallway. Mandy had believed herself alone with Don when they broke into the gym on a weekend to have their way with each other. Screams of passion had ricocheted and echoed thunderously in the wide hall, as Don's friends -- with the blessings of Don himself -- secretly looked on, barely containing their laughter. After Don had spent himself, his friends walked into the hall clapping and cheering. Mandy had been outraged, and with outrage came enlightenment: the boyfriend she had worshiped was the Lord of All Assholes. The gymnasium had humiliated her; now that she was pregnant, receiving a diploma in that room would have been too much.

"Don's a piece of shit," said Lucas. "He's the one who should stay home tonight."

"Never mind that." Mike took a case from his CD rack -- *Disintegration* -- and held it up. "Did you listen to it?"

Lucas sighed. "Yes."

"Well?"

"It's good."

Mike's eyes narrowed. "You'll have to do better than that. You'd *better* do better than that."

"It's good, Mike," repeated Lucas. "It's just... I mean, it's not quite as good as you think."

"What? Are you on crack?"

"No, I'm --"

"Are you a tone-deaf idiot?"

"Mike, relax --"

"Did you actually listen to it, or are you full of shit?"

"I've been listening to it in my car everywhere I go! And in my room." Mike was so rapturous over *Disintegration* that he had bought the CD for Lucas. Usually they borrowed and shared, but Mike was insistent that Lucas own a copy and agree one hundred percent that it was the best album of the '80s.

"And do you actually listen to it?" hectored Mike. "All of it? Or do you just put the first two songs on replay?" Everyone loved "Plainsong" and "Pictures of You".

"Why are you getting so mad?"

"Because you're pissing me off!"

"Really."

Mike picked up the CD case and waved it in Lucas's face. "I buy this thing for you, the best thing that's happened to music in over a decade, and you treat it like it's something by the Police." He was making an ass of himself but couldn't help it. He was still smarting over Nancy's phone call, and angry at the prospect of losing Lucas when he flew out west.

"You need to calm down, Mike. It's just an album."

"It's not *just* an album!"

Lucas tried to bring Mike down. "All right, all right. Let's discuss. So you think it's better than *Pornography*?"

Up until now, Mike believed that the Cure's *Pornography* was the best album of the '80s. "Yes, even better. It's the album I've been waiting for since *The Top*." *The Top* was the Cure's successor to *Pornography*, a disappointing effort of forgettable songs, and rightly panned by most critics. The band had reattained greatness with *The Head on the Door* in '85 and *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* in '87, but not the heights of *Pornography*. Not that Lucas was much impressed with *Pornography* either.

"See," said Lucas, "I kind of liked *The Top* better than *Pornography*."

"That makes no sense at all. *The Top* is like *Rattle and Hum*. It sucks." Mike was on the offensive now.

"Will you shut up?" said Lucas, provoked. "*Rattle and Hum* does not suck."

"It sucks, Lucas." Mike believed *Rattle and Hum* was the most disappointing follow-up to a great album; even more disappointing than *The Top*. "It's *Joshua Tree* B-sides and live songs and pretentious blues. Bono thinks he's a messiah. He's a wash-up."

"You're crazy. You make no sense. 'Heartland' is a great song. It should have been on *The Joshua Tree* album. 'All I Want is You' is a beautiful ballad. And the gospel version of --"

"Don't even start," said Mike. "The gospel version of that song royally sucks." Mike had grown tired of hearing "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" only a month after *The Joshua Tree*'s release. He positively loathed the gospel version on *Rattle and Hum*. "Bono needs to lose his savior complex."

"He doesn't have a savior complex," said Lucas. "He's authentic. He reaches people with music. Robert Smith isn't comparable."

Mike laughed. "You're talking out of your ass. Smith reaches loads of people, and without having to lean on a stupid religious image."

"It's not religion, Mike. The U2 guys are spiritual, not religious, and there's a difference."

"So you say. Wait and see how *Disintegration* 'reaches' people. Jesus, I can't believe you hate this album."

"Mike! Shut. The Fuck. Up. *Disintegration* is a fine album. I'm just saying --"

"A *fine* album? *Fine*? Maybe *Dark Side of the Moon* is a *fine* fucking album too."

"*Disintegration* isn't *Dark Side of the Moon*."

"You're right. It's better."

"Christ. Whatever." Lucas stood up and turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" demanded Mike.

"Chill out. I'm leaving already. It's customary when there's nothing more to say. See you tonight, dude." Lucas started going up the stairs.

"Get back here!" shouted Mike.

Lucas stopped for a moment, as if wanting to say something, then slowly resumed his ascent. Then he stopped again and turned around. He chose his words carefully. "Mike, you're not the only one who was robbed. So was I. Worse than you were -- no, shut up and listen! Max is still vegetating in the hospital. She's dead as far as the best doctors can tell. How do you think *I've* felt for three years?"

Mike's blood began to boil. "Max didn't dump you, asshole. She didn't *erase* you from her existence. She was the one erased."

"And so, what? That makes the pain of my loss less than yours? Listen to yourself."

"Then why *aren't* you in pain?" asked Mike.

"I am in pain, you moron. I hurt every day."

"Doesn't look that way, honestly. You seem to enjoy yourself."

"I live my life. I don't advertise my anguish. Grief is sacred. It's private. You don't dump your shit on others. I think a part of you enjoys making everyone around you miserable."

Mike snarled. "'Grief is sacred'? Did you get that from a U2 song?"

Lucas shook his head. "Be careful. You don't have a monopoly on suffering."

"Never said I did," spat Mike. "Now get out of my house."

"Oh, I'm going. I hope you'll be over your tantrum by tonight. You're getting a diploma, for Christ's sake." Lucas turned and went up the rest of the stairs.

Mike swore and ran after him. At the top, Lucas was already down the hall at the front door. Mike ran halfway down as Lucas opened it.

"Asshole!" yelled Mike. "Listen to that CD and give it a fair shot!"

Lucas was gone before Mike finished.

Mike's fury soared. "ASSHOLE! ASSHOLE-FUCKING-ASSHOLE-FUCKING--"

Pots banged in the kitchen and Karen Wheeler came storming out into the hallway. She stopped in front of her son, irate. "Michael, what's wrong with you? What are you and Lucas fighting about?"

"Shut up and mind your business."

"What did you say?"

"I said what I said, you heard what I said, and stop getting up in my shit!" He kept staring at the front door, incensed that Lucas had walked out on him. Conveniently ignoring the fact that he had told Lucas to leave. Then his mother grabbed him by the front of his shirt and threw him against the wall. Mike had five inches and twenty pounds on his mother, but outrage had lent her strength. She slapped his face.

"OW!" he yelled. "BITCH!"

She smacked him again, on the same side, his cheek now on fire.

He grabbed her offending hand and held it fast. "Stop hitting me, you bitch, you flaming, fucking --"

She hit him a third time with the other hand, and Mike went nuclear. Bombarding her with vulgarities, he shoved his mother back and pressed her against the opposite wall, saying things no decent son would conceive. He threatened violence -- to "pound the living shit out of her" if she ever

butted into his conversations again. If Nancy could have seen this, she would have shot Mike with one of her guns.

Finally his mother pushed him off. "Listen to me, Mike! Do you hear me? Calm down and listen! I'm sick and tired of you. Your father and I -- and all your friends, which I can't believe you still have any -- have extended you every grace, and you don't deserve it. You're graduating today. You'll be eighteen in two months. Grow up. Do you plan on going through life like this? Treating everyone around you like shit?"

I'm skipping graduation. He'd just decided. *They can mail me my fucking diploma.* Having made up his mind, his rage subsided. "There's shit all around me, so how do you expect me to act? Don't butt into my conversations."

"Lucas was out the door already. You were raising hell in this house and I'm sure Lucas wasn't to blame."

"Don't butt in," repeated Mike. He pushed past his mother and headed back down to the basement.

"Don't forget to change and be ready by 3:30," she called after him. "The dinner starts early."

In the basement again, he back-flopped onto the couch where Lucas had been sitting. Graduation dinner at Angelo's. Then ceremonies at the school. *But I'm not going.* Dustin would give him a tongue-lashing, Lucas would kill him, and Will would be hurt. But then Dustin was always chewing out Mike; Lucas was always in his face; and Will was always hurt by Mike who couldn't look at him properly or talk to him like a real friend. Lucas and his mother were both right. He had fallen low. It only reinforced what he had decided. Graduation would be vastly more pleasant without him.

Grabbing the remote, he clicked to track seven on *Disintegration*: "Prayers for Rain." It was about feelings of helplessness and despair that came from being trapped in a stagnant mindset; being desperate for something to change; for a new beginning. *How fitting.* He cranked up the volume, and Robert Smith sang about being shattered, stifled, and suffocated. *Preach it, brother.* He wouldn't be missed tonight at all.

But of course he ended up going.

The gymnasium was a knot of excitement. It had been well dressed for the occasion, with chairs lining the floor and banners adorning the stage. The class of '89 had assembled, and the graduates milled about before the ceremonies. Their stomachs were full of steak, their hearts brimming with

indestructible feelings. Everyone remembered their caps and gowns, and even the last in the class -- a dufus named Shawn Crandall -- looked scholarly. Though personally, Mike hated the green and orange school colors. Green and gold would have been fine; black and orange sublime. Green and orange was an eyesore. But he was determined to keep his attitude in check. He owed his classmates that much for tonight. He would try anyway.

He skimmed through the brochure in his hand, ignoring most of it, not really caring about the order of events. He saw the top trio listing, the graduates who would be sitting up on stage with faculty:

Dustin Henderson - Valedictorian
Stacey Booker - Salutatorian
Brett Logan - Master of Ceremonies

Everyone had known that Dustin would be valedictorian since freshman year. Mike surveyed the hall and saw Dustin way on the other side talking to Lucas and Stacey Booker. They were laughing and Mike wanted no part of it. Lucas caught his eye and nodded, and Mike nodded back neutrally. Lucas held his gaze. Mike stayed put. Lucas shrugged and resumed gabbing with Dustin and Stacey. *Fuck you, Lucas.*

"Hey, Mike."

He was jolted by a familiar voice behind him and turned. An attractive redhead stood in front of him, her cap hanging carelessly and almost falling off. "Oh. Hey Beck."

The girl punched his arm. "Yeah, we made it!" Rebecca Sloane was a suave chick to whom Mike had surrendered his virginity last year. She was 39th in her class (right in the middle) and on her way to Rhode Island to major in graphics design.

"That we did," said Mike. Any other sixteen-year old boy (now seventeen) who got laid by a girl like Rebecca would have considered himself the luckiest guy on earth. For Mike the sex had been rewarding enough -- it had been his first time, after all -- but the affair itself had been lifeless. He and Beck didn't connect on any real level, and Mike resented losing his innocence to anyone other than the girl he couldn't get over. There was no one on the planet who could follow that act. He and Beck had lasted two months, not even, and then broken up by mutual consent; no hard feelings. Mike hadn't been with a girl since.

"Say, listen, I have a question for you," she said.

"Shoot."

"After the ceremony can I come over?"

"What do you mean? To my place?"

"Yeah." She moved closer and rubbed her hand up his arm and back down again. "Spend the night? For old times?"

The request surprised Mike. Beck had been seeing Scott Bellavance for most of the senior year, until March, when the Bellavance family moved to Florida. Mike had never expected her to take an interest in him again, and he certainly carried no flame for her. He was about to politely refuse and then reconsidered. Why not? He could use a good fuck tonight. Something to exorcise the day's rage out of his system.

"Want to know a secret?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Secrets can be poison."

"You fuck better than Scott."

He laughed. "You're just saying that."

She raised an eyebrow and he knew she wasn't lying. Well then. "Yeah, sure. My place. For old times." *Those raw, joyless times.*

"Great." She looked across the hall, smiled at someone and waved. "I gotta go. My bestie is calling." She looked over his shoulder. "And *your* bestie looks like he's pining for you."

"What?" He turned, expecting to see a wrathful Lucas. It was a lonely Will. *My bestie.* Mike hadn't treated Will like a best friend since Will made a pass at him. He had half-hoped to talk to him this evening; the other half didn't want to take that step. A coin flipped in his mind, and then he was standing before his old friend. They looked at each other, wondering who would speak first. Mike thought it had to be him, and said hi.

Will looked mildly impressed. "Hi Mike."

As usual, Mike couldn't look at him for more than a few seconds at a time. "Yeah, I guess we're here. Finally here, you know?" He forced some laughter.

Will nodded.

"And you're number six," said Mike. "You beat me and Lucas." *Especially me.* Dustin was at the top of the class, Will at #6, Lucas at #9, and Mike at #21. Twenty-one wasn't bad in a class of eighty-two students, but Mike should have been much higher, in the top ten, hugging shoulders with Will and Lucas. He'd hardly applied himself in the past three years.

"Well, it's not about beating you guys," said Will.

"Yeah, of course. People take grades way too seriously." That probably sounded like sour grapes, and it was.

"So it's Chicago for you?" asked Will.

"Yeah," said Mike, nodding. "Yeah." He looked down at his shoes, uncomfortable.

Will drew in a breath. "Well, I'm going to find my seat. See you on the stage."

As Will walked off, Mike decided. "Will!"

Will stopped and turned around. "Yeah?"

Mike walked up to him, reaching under his gown into his front pocket. "I was looking at this today -- Oh, here, I got it." His hand held an orange 30-sided die they used to use when playing Dungeons & Dragons. "You gave this to me, remember?"

Will looked at the die and then curiously at Mike, nodding. "Yeah, I remember."

"Yeah," said Mike. "I loved you for this die. I mean, it was hard to find 30-siders back then, at least in stores around here."

"You were a great DM," said Will noncommittally. "I wanted you to have it."

"Yeah," said Mike. He scratched his head under his graduation cap, feeling awkward. "I miss playing, you know?"

Will looked wary. This was the first attempt at a real conversation from Mike in three years. "So do I, Mike. I miss a lot of things."

"I know. Me too." Mike couldn't undo the pain he'd caused Will, and he was terrible at making amends. This was a stab at the latter, and wholly inadequate. He pushed on anyway: "I miss the days when everything was simple." *Before you got lost.* "You know, D&D." *Before her.* "The AV Club." *Before this town went to hell.* "Skipping stones at the quarry." *Before you told me you love me and tried putting your tongue in my mouth.* "I wake up some mornings and want to rewind, you know? Try things over again."

Will nodded. "Yeah. But we don't get rewinds. We can only stumble and get up. Use it as a learning curve. Become better people. Or at least try."

"Yeah," said Mike. *Message received: I'm the shittiest friend on the planet.* "Anyway, I was going through my stuff today and saw this die and it brought back memories. Good memories. I was having a bad day, a really shitty day, with Lucas and Mom -- oh and Nancy called too -- and, you know, it was bad, mostly my fault. But these memories helped. And... well, I just wanted to tell you that." *Christ, that was so damn lame.*

But Mike could tell that Will was moved. "Thanks, Mike. That means a lot. Maybe I can visit you in Chicago sometime, on a weekend." It was

about 300 miles from Grinnell to Chicago; a four-hour bus ride. "I hope you visit me in Iowa."

"Yeah," Mike nodded. "Absolutely. Totally dude."

Will smiled and they went to find their seats. In the front rows reserved for the 82 senior graduates, Will was up front ("B" for Byers) and Mike a few rows behind ("W" for Wheeler). Mike planted himself, hoping that seating arrangements at college weren't dictated so inflexibly by the alphabet. Though truthfully, he hadn't minded sitting in the back rows of his classes. Kept him under the radar.

Others were taking their seats now. Seniors and faculty up front; parents and guests way back. Mike saw Steve Harrington walk down the aisle, and on impulse flagged him down.

Steve saw him and came over. "Hey, Wheeler. Congratulations. You made it to the end."

"I guess I did. Nancy called today."

Steve frowned. "She's not here?"

"Of course she's not here. She's in Fairfax. She's too good for us."

"But her brother is graduating."

"Just another day, dude. No big deal."

Steve looked unsure of what to say. "Well, how's she doing?"

"She's a bitch, is how she's doing," said Mike.

"That's... not cool, man. What happened?"

"What happened? She dumped your ass is what happened. You've forgotten?"

Steve looked at him carefully. "Yeah... that was three years ago. Why is this an issue now?"

Don't talk to me about three years ago. Time doesn't undo treachery.

"She was wrong to do that to you, Steve, and I told her so. I wanted you to know that."

Steve was even more on guard now, and Mike swore inwardly, knowing what Steve was thinking. That Mike was projecting.

"Well," said Steve, "I'm not sure I want to hear her reply to that."

"Her reply was shit," said Mike.

"Okay, well, you're clearly having Nancy issues. I get that. Been there many times. But you may want to lighten up. This is your night."

Are you hearing me, asshole? "You have every right to still be pissed at her. Don't think I'm going to make excuses for her because she's my sister."

"Hey, Mike, come on. Don't do this. Girls, they, you know, make a career out of dumping guys. It's what they do. Shit, I'm sorry. It's just... I mean, are you okay?"

He wasn't okay. He was an ass twice over. "Yeah, fine." He forced a smile. "I can't wait for your bro to regale us."

Steve laughed. "You'll love the speech. I was there when he wrote most of it."

Dustin Henderson's speech was remembered for years to come, for its content and what followed. Stacey Booker's opening salutatory oration was forgotten as soon as it was over; the seniors walked the stage and were handed their diplomas. Then came Dustin. He stood at the podium and made the night his.

"Good evening, everyone: Principal Fleming, faculty, family, friends and foes. That's a lot of 'f's', but I promise I won't call any of you 'fuckwads', not even my foes, though God knows I have plenty of those."

Laughter rippled through the gymnasium, and even Mike smiled. Dustin was good at this.

"My biggest foe has been Mr. Fleming. I know he still hates me for what I did last year. A lot of you were in the cafeteria when Lucas Sinclair and I led the Moon Strike."

More laughter and titters.

"To this day, I'm unrepentant, and I know Lucas feels the same. Our administration deserved it, and I'm proud that we moved some teachers -- some, mind you -- to take a stand against the mayor."

Cheers and applause filled the hall. Mike clapped too, though he had missed the spectacle of that day. On the stage behind Dustin, Principal Fleming looked like he was swallowing bile. Others in the hall frowned on the applause. Mike looked back at Mrs. Sherman, the English teacher who thought the mayor walked on water. She wasn't amused.

The Hawkins High Moon Strike of '88 had made the papers in other towns and even out of state. Instigated by Dustin and Lucas, over forty students had given a reticulated "fuck you" to the school administration: On Martin Luther King Day they stood on the cafeteria tables during lunch, turned their backsides to the faculty table, bent over, and dropped their drawers. They held their bare asses like that for fifteen minutes, to the cheers of other students and even a few teachers. This was in retaliation; the school had supported the mayor's petition to the state legislature to discontinue observing Martin Luther King Day. As if it were being



observed to begin with. It had been established as a state holiday in '87, but only as a temporary measure for two years. At the end of '88 the bill would expire, and legislators would have to reintroduce a bill if they wanted a permanent holiday. Meanwhile, all of Indiana's neighbors were MLK progressives. To the west, Illinois had adopted the holiday in '73, the first state to ever do so. On the southern border, Kentucky followed suit in '74. To the east, Ohio passed their bill in '75. And in the north, Michigan did so in '77. Those states had legalized MLK Day over a decade ago -- long before the federal holiday took effect in '86 -- and many of the schools in those states had been closing for just as long. All schools in Indiana remained open on MLK Day under the temporary bill of '87-'88, and even most state offices were open. There were regions in the deep south that took the holiday more seriously than Indiana. It had been too

much for Dustin and Lucas, and Fleming's vocal disdain for Martin Luther King pushed them over the edge. Baring their asses in the cafeteria had felt good, and the Moon Strike had an unanticipated impact: the holiday had been renewed with an effective bill. As of this year, 1989, Martin Luther King Day was a permanent state holiday in Indiana. In the opinion of some pundits, the crude demonstration led by Messrs. Henderson and Sinclair had played a major role in the bill's success.

Mike hadn't been a part of the Moon Strike. His way of protest was typically selfish: he had skipped school that day and given himself a holiday.

"But seriously. I'm honored and thankful to be standing here and giving this speech. Mostly thankful. Thankful for making it to the end of school, yes, but thankful, really, for being alive. There should be a lot more people here with us today. But you know... this is Hawkins."

Inwardly Mike groaned. *Don't get carried away.* It was public knowledge that Hawkins was a dangerous town with unexplained occurrences. Three years ago, a mass exodus had followed the Four-Day Apocalypse. No one liked being reminded of those events, and those who spoke of them got their tongues spanked. The Four-Day Apocalypse had cursed Hawkins irrevocably. Property value tanked, and the town population plummeted to a third of what it had been (reduced from 12,800 to 4,600). The death toll in Hawkins was no secret, but the shadow world was still kept secret by order of the government. Anyone who broke that confidentiality agreement could expect to be imprisoned or killed. The government didn't mess around. Dr. Sam Owens had died at the hands of Uncle Sam, and a certain girl (Mike wouldn't allow her name into his thoughts) was still wanted dead or alive, preferably the former.

"Not all schools -- dare I say, not a single high school in America -- has endured the way we have. We've been through a lot. People have died, no, been killed, and despite this, we keep having each other's backs. I consider myself lucky to have met you all -- even those of you who don't like me -- and you mean more to me than you can possibly imagine."

There was some murmuring in the back rows, where the parents and guests sat. Mike wished they'd shut up.

"Often on graduation day, the valedictorian looks outside for heroes but I see plenty of heroes right here before me. Trust me on this and take it to the grave: we don't have to look beyond our town borders for inspiration, for potential, or for being true to ourselves and persevering against whatever the world throws at us. Let me name some people from

our class -- and I promise I'll have the modesty to leave myself off the roll call:

"There's William Byers, who disappeared for a week when he was twelve, almost died when he was thirteen, and has shown more wisdom these past six years than the sages of old."

Lots of applause for that... and commotion from the back that wouldn't settle. Mike looked over his shoulder, annoyed. Why couldn't people put off their claptrap until the end?

"There's Maxine Mayfield, who has been in a coma since the end of our freshman year. She should be here with us today, and I count her as a graduate. She's a special hero, and a reminder every day of the cost this town has exacted on us."

Applause again, but whatever was happening in the back was getting out of control. Mike swore, looking back again, and saw parents who were looking and pointing at the corner door of the gymnasium.

"There's Lucas Sinclair, who as you all know --"

Dustin never finished his roll call. A scream tore the air and everyone leaped out of their chairs. Then gasps filled the hall; and hell came to Hawkins High.

Mike saw two things at once that shivered his bowels. First, people were rising in the air. Slowly, as if levitated by a powerful wizard. Three, four -- no, *six* senior graduates: Pierce Reynolds, Eva Hammond, John Bass, Rebecca Sloane, Drew Lippenheimer, and Loren Dillon. Rising straight up, protesting, flailing their arms, kicking their legs, helplessly against whatever force was dominating them. When they got halfway to the ceiling, they hung suspended, outraged and terrified at what was happening.

The second thing was moving down the aisle, and parents were giving it the widest berth. It was a six-foot-five tall humanoid, and obviously the source of this levitating act. It pointed its grotesque arm at the students above, growling deeply as it breathed -- a ferocious utterance that made the creature sound innately constipated.

From the stage Dustin bellowed through the podium mic: **"No! Don't you dare do this again!"**

Beck! Mike tried crying her name but his throat felt like cement. He began to hyperventilate.

And then bones began to snap.

Agony rained from above as the six students died horribly: Pierce Reynolds's arms were dislocated, his body spun in the air, and his back broke in half; Eva Hammond's shins blew apart, and her brains came out

her eyes; John Bass's feet broke off, and his neck pivoted 360 degrees; Rebecca Sloane's head was bent over and down between her legs, which then twisted and strangled her; Drew Lippenheimer's teeth flew out, and her body accelerated to the ceiling, crushing her skull; Loren Dillon's face expanded like a blowfish, and then his whole head exploded. Below the levitating corpses, the humanoid moaned as if relieved by a laxative. It had massacred six kids in the blink of an eye. It made another gesture and the corpses fell, smashing wetly on the gym floor.

People ran for their lives, and Mike found his voice, screaming Rebecca's name, unable to accept what happened to the only girl he'd slept with. *You were supposed to come over tonight.* He was shaking in helpless rage.

Dustin yelled again, through a mic cranked up to full volume:

"VECNA, STOP IT, YOU ASSHOLE!"

It was shattering to hear the name:

Vecna.

Slash Henry.

Slash One.

Mike Wheeler had never seen the creature Vecna, also known as Henry Creel, also known as Lab Child Number One. He'd been on a west-coast road chase while Hawkins was terrorized by a serial killer. Everyone believed that killer to be a Satanic dungeon master, but his friends had known the truth and faced off the real culprit. Afterwards, his sister and his ex had told vivid tales. About a gross humanoid, with black skin and vines that slithered over his body; milky eye sockets that promised blindness on his victims. There was no doubt that Vecna was this demon in the gymnasium wreaking slaughter. He was back, finally, making good on his promise -- made to Mike's ex-girlfriend -- that his death was *only the beginning.*

The beginning of the end.

The end, apparently, now unleashed.

"Michael!"

He turned and saw his parents. They couldn't get to him -- they would have to wade through too many people and get close to Vecna -- and were yelling at him to run outside. The hall was a flood of chaos. Mike yelled at *them* to run outside (they were near an exit, for Christ's sake), and then heard his name called again. It was from the direction of the stage. He turned and saw that Dustin was no longer up there. He looked for him on the floor, but people were dashing everywhere, crying and screaming.

Then the evening got worse. Over howls of parental outrage, Vecna growled, raised his arms, and six more bodies climbed the air. Mothers and fathers threw themselves at Vecna. Every one of them went flying backwards before they could touch him. *No*, thought Mike, going delirious. *No more. Stop this.*

Someone grabbed his arm. It was Lucas. "We have to get out of this building!" Mike nodded, still shaking with trauma. He wasn't going to watch any more classmates die, and there was nothing he or his friends could do to stop Vecna. Toward the nearest exit he saw people running out of the gym, especially senior graduates, including Dustin and Will. He and Lucas followed as the snapping of bones began. Mike hardly realized he was crying as he ran. They had known Vecna might return someday, but three years of peace bred complacency. The creature had been pounded to a pulp; the four gates had been sealed. And *she* had promised him, *promised*, that she would be here in Hawkins, ready and waiting, should Vecna try again. Promises, shit. She was on the other side of the globe.

They made it outside and paused to look back. Screams escalated inside the gym, and the boys knew there were now twelve dead classmates. And there were still people inside -- seniors, faculty, and parents -- all of them clamoring to escape. The boys turned and followed the mad rush to the parking lot; halfway there, they were assaulted by their parents.

"*Oh, dear God!*" cried Dustin's mother, clinging to her son. "*Dear God, Dusty!*" She kept exclaiming the Lord's name and Dusty's, as Dustin repeated that he was okay.

Karen Wheeler told Michael to hurry on ahead and get in the car; she and his father were taking him home at once. (Husband Ted was staring at everything around him in a daze. "Shit," was all he could mutter, violating his eternal ordinance against foul language. "Shit, shit, shit.")

Lucas's parents were all but dragging him to the parking lot.

Will was spared the parental suffocation. Joyce Byers was in a mental institution in Illinois, and Hopper was working late tonight. Will had gotten a ride to the school with Loren Dillon, whose brains now covered the gymnasium floor. He didn't plan on asking Loren's parents for a ride home, all things considered.

Suddenly there was a loud rumble, and heads turned back to the gymnasium. To everyone's shock the roof exploded, and two figures rose into the evening air. One of them was Vecna. The other was his victim, and it wasn't a graduating senior.

"*No!*" shouted Dustin, throwing his mother off him and starting to run back. His mother hysterically objected to that course of action.

"Who is that up there?" asked one of the teachers.

"Oh my God," said Will.

Mike strained to see who it was -- and then swore. It was Steve Harrington. And it was no mystery why Vecna was singling him out for special execution along with the graduates. Steve had been one of three people to behead the lion in his den. He, Nancy, and Robin Buckley had entered that awful house in the Upside Down, bombed Vecna with homemade fire grenades, and then shot him out a window. Vecna's three-year death was thanks to them, and tonight he was paying back the one he could.

Suspending all his grievances, Mike thanked the gods that Nancy was in Fairfax; blessed her for blowing off his graduation. Otherwise she'd be up there with Steve.

Vecna roared and made a hand gesture. Dustin fell to his knees, crying and begging the creature to stop. No mercy from that quarter: Steve groaned as every bone in his body -- all two hundred and six -- snapped, sundered, and twisted out of shape. Vecna drank his demise like a rapture, his growls sounding orgasmic. Dustin wailed Steve's name and shook his fists at the sky. Then, as Steve's bloody remains came tumbling off the roof, Vecna descended back down into the gym.

We have to go, thought Mike. Nearly everyone was outside now -- parents, faculty, and the graduates still alive -- and Vecna wouldn't remain in a hall devoid of prey. He yelled at Lucas to get Dustin.

Lucas was already doing that. He reached Dustin and hauled him to his feet. Karen Wheeler was holding back Dustin's mother. Will was at Mike's side, in tears.

Mike felt ineffectual. "Will --"

"What the hell?" said someone.

Mike and Will looked around. People were pointing, looking toward the center of town.

"Oh no," said Will.

Mike's heart pounded. What he saw on the horizon was something he'd hoped to never see again.

"It's back," said Will.

Right where it left three years ago. Which raised a host of questions that Mike couldn't begin to sort out.

Lucas and Dustin rejoined them, out of breath, and then saw what everyone was looking at.

The apocalypse.

"Motherfucker," cried Dustin.

From the town center six blocks away, shadow motes were billowing outwards. Clouds had taken over the sky, supplanting moonlight with flashes of orange and pink lightning. The shadow was expanding and would soon swamp the entire town. Just like before. Mike remembered it well.

The Four-Day Apocalypse of 1986 had lasted from March 29 to April 1, terrorizing the people of Hawkins out of their living minds. That stretch of hell caused more residents to jump ship than Vecna's murders from the previous week. Immediately after he killed Max Mayfield, Vecna was killed in turn (by Nancy, Steve, and Robin), but the damage had been done. Max's death caused the final gate to open, and all four gates joined, creating massive rifts -- the incarnation of a 7.4 earthquake -- and converging on the town center. It killed over twenty people. Two days later, the Upside Down started bleeding into Hawkins. Shadow vines invaded and crawled everywhere; up buildings and into homes. Plants and trees blackened and withered. Electrical storms flared and thundered. Dust motes swirled everywhere, becoming the atmosphere.

That's what was happening six blocks away. Everyone stared, recalling those four terrible days. Of martial law. Twenty-four hour darkness. Shadow creatures invading homes, and eating those who couldn't fend for themselves. Especially children.

"This can't be happening again," said Lucas.

"It's like the four gates were never closed," said Dustin.

"But they were," said Will.

Damn right they were. Mike had seen them close with his own eyes, standing by the girl who could seal the gates of hell if she had to.

Which again raised serious questions. How had Vecna reopened the gates? Or had he opened new ones? The way to open a gate was by making a psychic connection across worlds, and Vecna had done that in 1986 by invading the minds of teenagers and killing them with hallucinations. There had been no reports of any killings recently. Yet the four gates were back -- or, if not the four gates, some other gate at the same place where the four had converged -- allowing Vecna passage into this world. He could now enter Hawkins physically, without resorting to mental attacks across dimensions. He didn't need the right kind of victim who was emotionally vulnerable. He could attack anyone, and multiple victims at once (six at least), to devastating effect.

Vecna before the apocalypse had been bad enough. Vecna plus the apocalypse was shaping up to be exponentially worse.

Hawkins had no chance against a threat like that.

Nor, probably, did the world.

"Guys," said Lucas. "What do we do? What *can* we do?"

"Nothing," said Dustin. "We need El."

The name burned Mike's ears.

Dustin looked at him. "We need her, Mike," he repeated.

Lucas nodded. "We have to get her back here."

Mike coughed up phlegm and disgust. "Yeah, well, good luck with that. She's in Hong Kong, remember?" With a boyfriend who was perfect as Mike was not. She was probably married to him by now. With promises broken beyond repair: *I'll never leave you and this town, Mike. If it ever comes back, we'll be ready.* They were not ready for this. Mike was sure they would all be dead within days.

As if to confirm his thoughts, more escapees arrived from the gym. The news wasn't good. Vecna had killed four more graduates as they fled the hall. He was now in the main school building, going through classrooms and annihilating everything -- desks, windows, chalkboards, visual aids, whatever was there. At least there were no people inside.

Everyone started yelling again, not knowing what to do. They needed their sheriff, Jim Hopper, and needed him now.

Mike snorted. *Hopper's going to die like the rest of us. Go to hell, El.*

Not far off, the motes of the shadow world swirled and kept coming.

Chapter Two:

Apocalypse Now

In a cabin that already knew violence, two men prepared for the most violent calamity come to earth. One man was a seasoned veteran; the other barely a man, recently turned eighteen. The younger was the elder's most trusted confidant, and it was fitting that they lived together. They had each died, received funerals, and come back from the grave. They were well loved by the townspeople but held at arm's length, as if a curse hung over them. Some even blamed them for the current catastrophe. The younger man supposed you couldn't blame them for thinking that. It had all started with him, after all.

Currently he was outside, about fifty feet away from the cabin, holding open a pair of bulkhead doors. He stared down a flight of stairs that led to a bunker, constructed two years ago by the older man. You could see the front end of the shelves down there, stocked floor to ceiling with canned goods, and there were other supplies toward the back: bottled water, sleeping bags, blankets, toilet paper, flashlights, batteries, soap, guns, ammunition, grenades, and a radio. The older man had known this day was coming.

But we're not moving down there, thought Will Byers, the younger man. *Not yet anyway.* He wasn't ready for a step of that magnitude, and besides, the shadow creatures were being mysteriously lenient. If you stayed inside your home, they left you alone. Some saw that as an act of grace. Will shuddered. There was nothing mysterious or graceful about it. Vecna was just playing with them.

About a mile away, the center region of the town was another matter. It was under full management of the Upside Down. The sun didn't shine, it was pitch black, impossibly cold for the month of May, vines crawled

everywhere like boa constrictors, and demo-dogs and bats had invaded the homes. Those who hadn't fled on time were corpses filling the place. Will thanked God that his friends lived outside this death zone. Though Dustin just barely.

"Will!"

He turned and saw Hopper calling from the front porch. Breakfast was ready. Will didn't need to be told twice. He was always hungry in the morning. He closed the bulkhead doors and hurried back, where the sheriff stood glaring at him.

"Don't say it," said Will, stepping up to the porch and heading inside. Hopper blocked his entry, and Will rolled his eyes.

"I will say it," said Hopper. "What's rule number one?"

"Always keep the curtain drawn," said Will flippantly. That had been rule number one for Eleven when she was thirteen, and living here secretly with Hopper.

"You think this is funny?"

"I'm sorry, you're right. I'll remember to take it next time."

"Even if you're just ten feet away," said Hopper.

"Yes."

"Even if only for a few seconds."

"Agreed."

Hopper stood aside and they both went in to eat. The sheriff's number-one rule in the apocalypse was simple and common sense: *Always carry a gun when you go outside*. A demo-dog could leap out of nowhere and be digesting you in minutes.

Will sat down at the small table, and savored the aroma wafting up from their plates. The bacon smelled divine but he frowned at the eggs. There were two on his plate. He looked at Hopper.

"Eat up, kid," said the sheriff, pouring coffee for them both and ignoring Will's look. He set the carafe close by his side, picked up his fork and dug in to his single fried egg.

Will began to eat slowly. "We're supposed to be rationing," he said. He was hungry enough to eat three eggs, but with the town on shadow lockdown, food was already a commodity. Of course, he and Hopper had their private bunker to fall back on -- he had just looked down into it, to bolster his sense of security -- but that was all canned goods and non-perishables. Eggs wouldn't last.

"Don't worry about it," said Hopper. "I'll take care of us. You need your energy." He held up his mug. "All I need is my caffeine."

How he does it. Will knew that underneath Hopper was terrified like everyone, but only because he knew Hopper. Three years in this cabin had made him a foster father. He loved the man. He was overprotective, yes, but not in the suffocating way of his mother, and he entrusted Will with delicate tasks; even dangerous ones. He was a born boss but respected those he bossed on their merits. It was no surprise that he'd been offered his job back so soon after his return from the dead. Thanks to his leadership during the Four-Day Apocalypse, his bank accounts had been resurrected, his social security number re-validated, and for the second time in four years, Hawkins rejoiced that a funeral for one of its citizens had been a mistake.

They ate for a while, and then Will spoke as if on cue. "So how are we going to stop Vecna? It seems impossible without El."

"El is dead, as you know, and there's no use thinking of her," said Hopper, following the script. The sheriff had known his cabin was bugged ever since Eleven murdered Colonel Jack Sullivan three years ago. Her payback for Sam Owens, and a very stupid move on her part. "We have to rely on the government. I know you hate it, and so do I, but the military is our only hope."

Will was used to these charades and took some measure of satisfaction in fooling those who eavesdropped. Not that they were really fooled. The military -- you could bet your last dollar -- knew that Jane Hopper was alive. And now the army was camped on the town's perimeter, unable to get in. *No one in, no one out.* Will wasn't sure that was for better or worse. But even if soldiers couldn't get in (yet), their bosses were still listening in. Telephones were dead, but radios worked, which meant the bugs were still transmitting. If the military goons learned the truth about El, they'd go out of their way to find her.

Color me crazy, but I think our government is worse than Vecna. Which was mostly El's own fault.

The official story since April 2, 1986, was that Jane Hopper, AKA "Eleven", had died in the Four-Day Apocalypse, sacrificing herself to save the day. But Sullivan's murder less than two weeks later had undone that fiction in the eyes of the government. Sullivan had been twisted apart and mutilated in the safety of his own quarters in Washington D.C. Only an extremely talented assassin could get away with a kill like that. Security videos had shown the colonel being ripped apart with no one else present. As if an invisible presence were assaulting him. Or perhaps someone miles away using psychic powers. As in a certain girl who had a major grievance against this colonel. The government wasn't stupid; not a trace of an

intruder could be found. It was obvious that Jane Hopper was alive and out for blood.

A day later, the military had returned to Hawkins, and it was martial law all over again. The apocalypse had been averted, but Sullivan's replacement, Colonel Evan Merritt, seemed to believe that Jane Hopper was ten times worse than any threat from the Upside Down. He ordered a search of every home, apartment, and business -- and wasn't polite about it. Citizens were scared, wondering if the apocalypse was coming back. Merritt's men tore the homes apart, and the colonel himself skulked around Hopper's cabin for two full days. Will had been petrified. He was the only one sharing the cabin with Hopper by that point. His mother had departed for Illinois, and Eleven -- on Hopper's fierce orders -- had fled Hawkins immediately after what she did to Sullivan. The sheriff was in a towering fury when she boasted to him and Will of her assassination. Even after a year of school education, the poor girl was naive. One did not punish the United States Government and expect Uncle Sam to suck it up and move on.

Thanks to Eleven's red-hot vengeance, everyone's home had been bugged: the Wheelers, Sinclairs, Hendersons, Harringtons, and Hopper's cabin. None of them saw Merritt's men plant the bugs, but Hopper was no fool. As soon the military left, he searched their homes -- in places most people wouldn't dream to look -- and sure enough, found the bugs. He told everyone to leave them untouched and play dumb. From that day forward, no one spoke openly of El unless it was to reinforce the fiction of her death.

Then came the devastating break up letter. Mike had received it a week later, from an envelope postmarked Lenora Hills in California. In this bombshell Eleven explained to Mike why she had to leave Hawkins. She was the government's most wanted terrorist. That was one reason. The second was that she was in love. Seriously in love, with someone she'd met in Lenora and who fully appreciated her as a person, and was able to express love and actually say the word. She wouldn't say who, for fear that Mike would try finding him. Mike was more intent on harming himself. Officially on suicide watch, he had to be moved from his home into a motel. It wouldn't do for the agents of Uncle Sam to overhear the boyfriend of their most wanted terrorist suddenly upset over being dumped for someone on the west coast. That would prove the terrorist was alive, and bring down manhunts, witch hunts, and inquisitions. Seven months later, another letter came during the week of Thanksgiving. El's boyfriend had gotten a job in Taiwan and they were moving there. Engagement was

also on the dock. Mike had cried for days, and he had to be managed again. Concealing the truth about Jane Hopper was no small task when the lie was so big.

But there were other lies -- deeper, complicated, and delicate -- that had produced tunnels of confusion and highways of misdirection. Lies that weighed on Will like molten lead. He wished he were more like Hopper. He wasn't made for bearing what couldn't be borne.

As Hopper finished the last of his toast he suddenly looked weary. He wiped his mouth and hands, tossed the napkin on his plate, and looked at Will. "I've got some bad news."

Will made a face at him. Bad news? Since Friday night, the term was meaningless. "I guess it must be really bad," he said.

The sheriff nodded. "Max is dead."

A brutal punch. *No*. He stared at Hopper, waiting for elaboration.

"You know the hospital is in the shadow zone," said Hopper. Will nodded. The hospital was close to the border of the town's outer "safe" region, but it was in the death zone nonetheless. "The fire team and some of my people did their best to help the staff evacuate the patients, but you know, it's like everywhere else in that zone. It's the Upside Down. And most of the firemen can't fire a gun to save themselves."

Will had a vivid imagination and was already seeing the helpless patients. Strangled by shadow vines; gorged by demo-dogs. "Jesus," he croaked.

"Some of the firemen were killed and so was one of mine. Officer McNeil. They had to run for their lives. The hospital was crawling with those vines and dogs. And bats were waiting outside. It was a goddamn slaughter."

"No patients were saved?" asked Will.

Hopper shook his head. "And only a few of the staff made it out. We're presuming all the patients are dead. Though apparently the building is still getting electricity."

That surprised Will. Vecna had killed the power to just about every building in the shadow zone.

"Backup generator," said Hopper. "So the life support systems are probably still working. But, you know... the vines and dogs would have left no patients to support."

"Probably not," said Will. "Does Lucas know?"

Hopper nodded. "I sent Powell to his home yesterday. I waited for today to tell you, because yesterday was such a shitstorm."

"Yeah." An understatement. "When during the day did you hear of it?"

"Morning. I was radioed by Callahan at the town border." Where an even bigger slaughter had taken place, and Hopper faced the cold truth of what they were up against. He had watched Vecna confront the army of his old nemesis, Colonel Evan Merritt, and honestly didn't know who to root for.

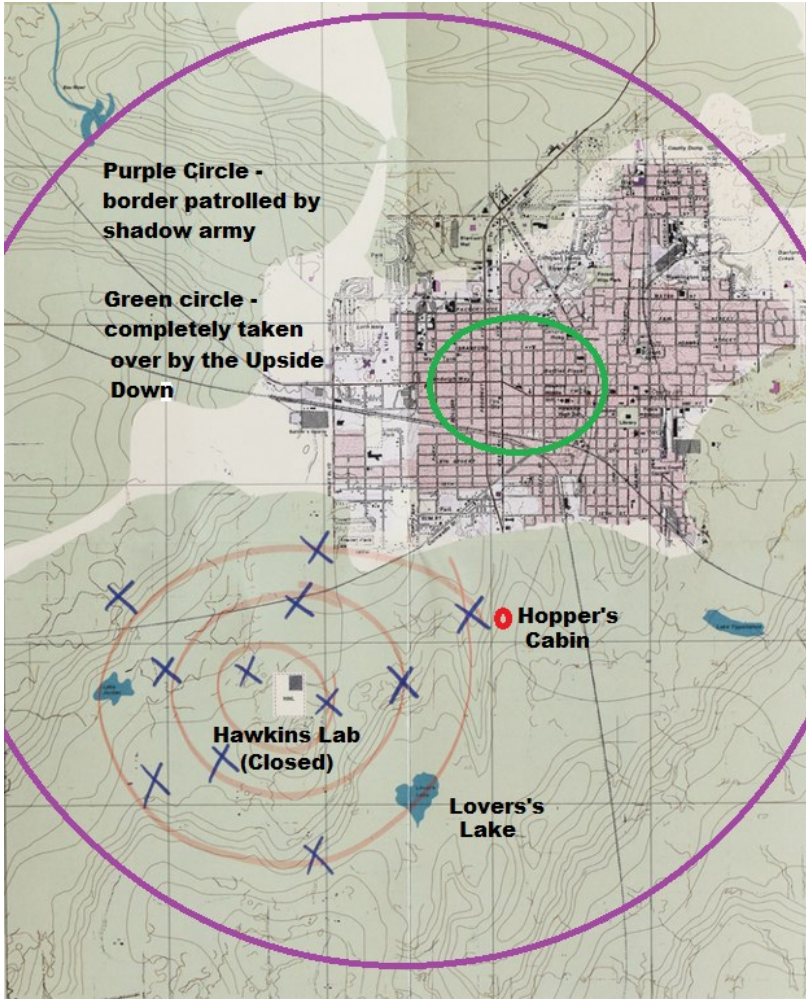
The colonel had arrived the morning after the graduation massacre, and to establish martial law in Hawkins. Just as his old friend Colonel Sullivan had done during the Four-Day Apocalypse of '86. No doubt Merritt also intended to begin another search for Jane Hopper (as Sullivan did), believing (as Sullivan did) that she was somehow responsible for unexplained tragedies in Hawkins. But unlike Sullivan, Merritt had Vecna to contend with. He couldn't get past the town border. Vecna was ready with his own army: thousands of demo-dogs and demo-bats, dominated by the hive mind, swarmed the perimeter. And there, four miles from the town center, the U.S. government went to war with the forces of darkness. Merritt's soldiers had unleashed all they had. Dogs and bats went down under brutal firepower and bombs. But there were always more of the creatures.

Then Vecna himself arrived. Utterly fearless, he walked onto the battlefield ahead of his dogs, chortling and hurling insults at the colonel. By now Hopper had arrived in his sheriff's car, and he remained at a safe distance, his jaw on the ground as he observed what followed.

The soldiers fired and bombed Vecna, but he easily stopped it all. Bullets dropped harmlessly in front of him, and grenades were sent back. Soldiers were blown apart by their own efforts. Tanks exploded as their missile turrets jammed. Oddly, Vecna didn't perform any gratuitous levitating acts. He killed in self-defense, as if his only concern about the soldiers was keeping them out of town. A bit later, helicopters arrived, but they couldn't bomb the town center (where the gate was) until they cleared the town of citizens. Which Vecna was preventing. *No one in, no one out.* For whatever insidious drama the creature had planned. Hopper doubted that bombs would do any good against the gate anyway. They would just pass through and explode inside the Upside Down. The gate needed closing, not bombing.

Hawkins, in other words, had become a prison on borrowed time. Demo-dogs prowled the perimeter, attacking whoever tried crossing from whichever direction. Demo-bats shrieked from above as an auxiliary air force. *No one in, no one out.* The central town area -- the fire station, the schools, the hospital, shopping places, residences -- was blanketed by eternal night, swirling motes, thunder, and weird lightning. And swarming

with those goddamn vines. In between the death zone and outside perimeter, the town was free of the shadow (so far) but still under Vecna's control, and there were dogs and bats that attacked anyone outside the safety of a home or car.



Like Hopper, Will didn't know who to root for in this stand-off. Merritt was a sadist who wanted to kill El. Vecna was a sadist who wanted to kill El. Merritt had bugs in all their homes -- at Mike's, Lucas's, Dustin's, and this cabin -- and Will was still marked by Vecna, in a way that he didn't entirely understand. The creature could be listening through Will's ears at

any given time, for all he knew. William Byers could hardly speak his mind wherever he went, let alone in this cabin. He and Hopper knew things no one else did, and some days that was too much to own. And now this news about Max.

"Well," said Will, suddenly not hungry anymore. "We don't know for sure that Max is dead."

Hopper just looked at him as he ate. It didn't need saying.

Of course she is, thought Will. *She's been dead for three years. It's just as well.*

Hopper changed the subject. "So when are you going?"

"I don't know." Will picked up his glass of grapefruit juice, drained it in a few giant swallows, and set it down hard. "Like, now, I guess." Hopper would be leaving shortly too; he had plenty to do at the station and all over town. Will had something else to do, for both of them.

"Okay," said Hopper. "What's your itinerary?"

Will considered. "First Dustin, then Lucas, then the Roys, and any food shops I find open along the way." Market Basket was out of the equation. Hawkins' largest grocery store was in the shadow zone.

"Not Mike?"

Will shook his head. "He spoke to me on graduation night, but he still has issues. He's still not comfortable being around me."

"Something like this could make you guys tight again."

Something like this could have the opposite effect, and probably will, as you very well know. However things played out over the next few days -- assuming they lived that long -- Mike would hate him in the end. But he wasn't about to argue. "Whatever. I need the envelope."

Hopper rose and started to clear the table. "It's on my bed; go get it. And don't forget your gun."

In Hopper's room he found the sealed manila envelope on the bed. There was nothing written on the envelope itself. He stuffed it under his shirt, looking forward to the trade off. Given the present catastrophe, the exchange of information today would be critical.

He came back out and got the shotgun hanging on the mantelpiece: the Mossberg 144 LS. It had been his father Lonnie Byers', and Will hadn't aimed it with the intent to kill since that night in his shed when he was snatched into hell. Five and a half years ago. When Hopper and his mother had moved heaven and earth to rescue him.

"Be careful in town, Hopper," he said as he went out the door. He paused and looked over by the sink. The sheriff hadn't heard him. He was scrubbing their dishes and singing his favorite song, "You Don't Mess

Around With Jim". Will didn't envy the man his day ahead. There were fires to put out and bodies to bury. At least Will would get to see his friends.

As he drove Hopper's pickup down Elm Street, his anxiety increased. This was his first trip into town since the graduation massacre, and he expected the worst. Any of his friends could be dead by now.

To his right the central town region smoldered under blackness, five or six blocks away. Streaks of purple and orange flashed through the darkness, and thunder rumbled every half minute. Will watched everywhere. His was the only car on the street and there were no pedestrians, which wasn't surprising. Even the "safe zone" wasn't safe. People who had brains stayed inside and locked up; if they had to get about town, they drove and carried a weapon.

At Cherry Avenue he took a right, heading towards Dustin's house. He passed the point on the road where El had flipped the van. Five years ago and then some. The spot had taken on a sacred quality in his imagination. He wished he could have seen that vehicle fly, but he'd been imprisoned in the Upside Down, wondering if he'd ever see Hawkins again. Now Hawkins was the prison.

He took a right down 7th Street, drove a bit further, and became immediately alarmed. Dustin's house was up ahead, and it looked like it bordered perilously on the shadow region. Hopper had warned him that Dustin was close to the danger zone, but this was so close... *Jesus Christ...* The house was practically kissing the blackness.

He slowed down, his heart in his throat, and braked in front of the Henderson driveway. He looked around. No sign of activity. Grabbing his shotgun, he opened the car door and stepped gingerly onto the road. He swallowed, glancing about, fully expecting a demo-dog to leap on him from any direction.

Then a door banged open, and Will yelled, turning and aiming his gun. When he saw who it was, he relaxed and lowered the Mossberg.

"Byers!" said Dustin, walking down to greet him. "Great to see you, man. And that you're alive."

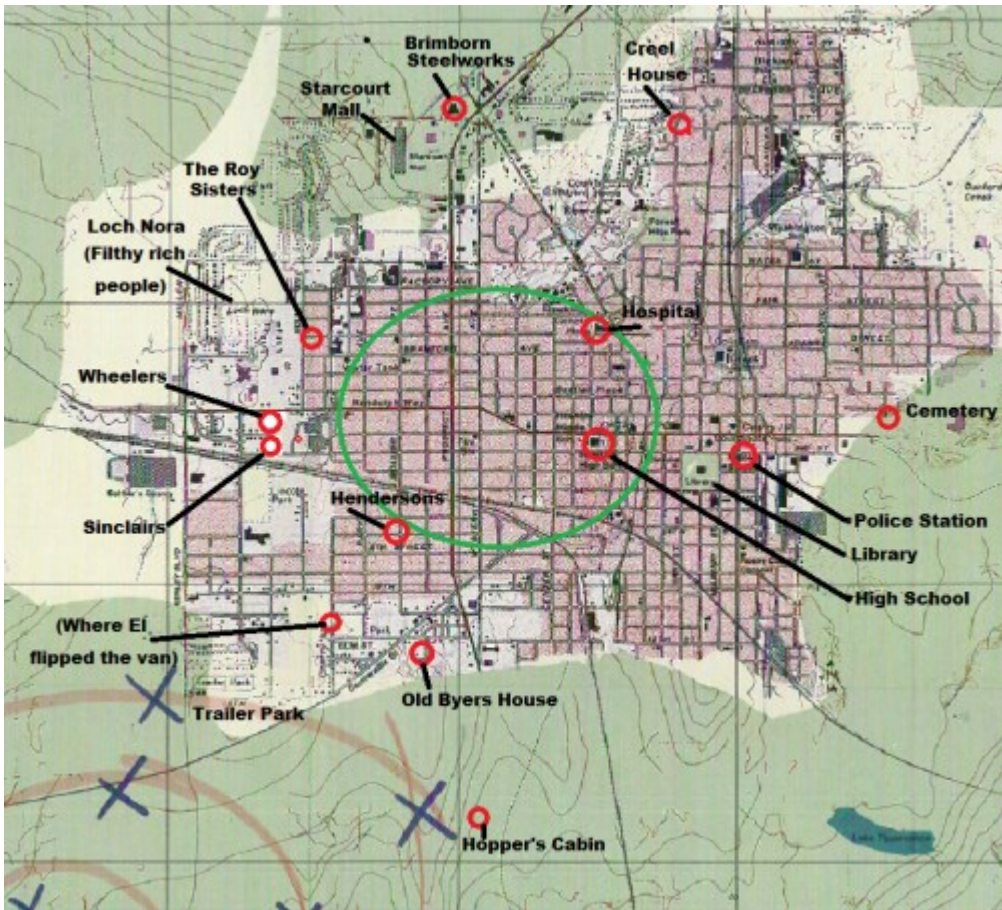
Will was catching his breath from the fright of everything. "Dustin, what the fuck? Please don't tell me you and your mom are living in this house."

Dustin pushed Will's rifle out of the way to give Will a hug. They held each other a long time, and Will told him about Max. Dustin had already heard about the failed hospital rescue.

"Has Lucas heard?" asked Will.

"Will," said Dustin, releasing him. "We need to get our asses inside, off the street. Lucas is devastated. Let's go."

Will followed him because he was Dustin. The smartest valedictorian in the state. He would have followed no one else into that house. Black clouds broiled and pink lightning danced way too close for comfort.



Inside, everything looked as it always had. Will kept the Mossberg in his hands regardless. "Hopper told me you were close to the shadow zone, but Jesus, you're right on the edge."

"Yeah," said Dustin. "Hopper tends to minimize threats to my existence. He's never really liked me."

Will walked ahead into Mrs. Henderson's bedroom. It was on the northeast side of the house, and he looked out the window into the wall of blackness not fifteen feet -- *fifteen fucking feet* -- away. His bowels turned to water. "Dustin, there are vines!" They were slithering obscenely up to about five or six feet from the house.

Dustin followed him in. "Yeah, it's crazy, isn't it?"

Will faced him. "You're crazy. Where's your mom?"

"She's at Lucas's. There's no way she can be in this house."

"No shit, Sherlock. Why aren't you at Lucas's?" *You're going to wake up at night to those vines strangling you.*

"It's weird, Will. For whatever reason, Vecna isn't expanding the danger zone. Maybe he's weakened and needs to recharge -- you know, like Eleven had to. He killed a shitload of our classmates and plenty of army soldiers. Or so I've heard."

"You heard right," said Will. "Hopper was there and he hung back, watching the whole thing. They were military professionals, with machine guns and grenades, and Vecna turned every weapon right back on them. He's invincible."

"Well, let's not get carried away. He's a nasty son of a bitch, but he can't stay invincible while wreaking havoc. I'll bet that performance against the army drained him."

"Maybe," said Will. "I wouldn't put it to the test."

"It's bullshit, Will. We're all trapped in this town, and no place is safe. Yesterday Mr. Nolan was killed by a demo-dog four blocks down from here, well away from the shadow zone. Poor bastard went into his garage for something and the thing pounced on him when he came out."

"That's horrible. Do you know if the dogs have gotten into any homes?" Demo-dogs could easily scale walls and crash through windows, but that wasn't happening so far.

"Strangely, no," said Dustin. "It's like Vecna is keeping them leashed under certain conditions. Outside the death zone, the dogs and bats only kill people who go outside their homes or cars, and even then not always."

"As far as we know," said Will.

Dustin shrugged. "It makes sense. Vecna doesn't want to kill us all at once. He wants us to be scared -- really scared. He wants to bathe in our despair."

"Christ," said Will. "I still don't like you being here."

Dustin laughed. "Then you won't like what I'm about to tell you."

"Probably not."

"I actually would be at Lucas's, but I have to prepare this house -- and please don't have a cow when I tell you this -- I have to prepare it for a party tomorrow."

Will stared at him. "What?"

Dustin smiled, nodding. "My birthday party."

"Your... birthday party."

"Yeah. Not my idea, mind you. It was --"

"Dustin, seriously," interrupted Will. "The world is crashing down on us, sixteen of our classmates die, not to mention Steve and Max, and you want to celebrate your eighteenth birthday?"

"First of all, I repeat, this was not my idea. Stacey Booker and a dozen of her friends begged me for this, and I said yes. It's *because* the world is ending that this is a good idea. We could die at any moment. I've never appreciated the saying, 'Life is too short,' until now. Second, I resent your comment about Steve and Max. It's out of line. I loved them both. I loved Steve more than anyone will know; he was a brother to me."

"So why do it at your house? Why not Stacey's? She lives on the east side of Hawkins. At least ten blocks from the shadow zone, maybe more."

"Because it's the whole point," said Dustin. "To celebrate life when you're just a few feet away from death. There's power in that idea."

There's power in what we saw at graduation, you idiot. Dustin was courting disaster. "You won't want me here, with my foul attitude."

"Nonsense," said Dustin. "At least think about it. If Hopper can spare you -- I mean, I know you're at his beck and call -- then please come. Lucas will be here, even feeling like he is right now, and I think Mike is coming too."

Will groaned.

"You know, honestly," said Dustin. "It's a perfect opportunity for you guys to be whole again."

"Hopper said the same thing."

"We could *die*, Will. We probably will, unless the military comes through. Or unless --" he leaned over and whispered in his ear -- "*unless we can reach El and get her back from Taiwan. But Vecna killed the phone lines, and it wouldn't matter anyway, because we don't know her number*"

or where she lives." He backed off and spoke normally again. "We're fucked, plain and simple. I just want to die happy, and on good terms with my friends. Is that so bad?" He was crying now.

"No," said Will, feeling awful, especially since he had more room for optimism than his friends did. "I see what you're saying, Dustin." *I guess.*

"So you'll come?"

"I'll make the effort." *A birthday party as the world goes to hell? Yeah. Sure. Why not.*

As he drove away from Dustin's he decided to skip Lucas's place and head straight toward the source of his optimism. Lucas needed space to grieve, and Will would see him tomorrow at Dustin's foolish party. If they were still alive.

He was back on Cherry and then going through side streets until he was on Holly. When he crossed the train tracks, his heart nearly stopped: something huge flew out of nowhere and thudded on the windshield, shrieking. He braked as the demo-dog jumped onto the top of the pickup, dashing back and forth over the roof -- the sound utterly terrified Will -- until leaping away. It had all happened blindingly fast. The thing was probably back in the death zone by now.

Sweating like six hogs, he kept driving, and wondered about his mother. Joyce Byers had seen her boyfriend Bob Newby ripped apart by a demo-dog, while her son was being ripped apart inside by the Mind Flayer. That was when he was thirteen. She had almost snapped that year. Instead she snapped a year and a half later (three years ago), after the Four-Day Apocalypse.

That apocalypse had ended but certain fires kept raining. First there was the Jonathan crisis. Nancy had broken up with him (for Steve of course), and Jonathan took it worse than Mike would soon take his break-up letter from Eleven. He went back to Lenora with plans to attend community college -- plans that were doomed the moment Argyle took him in. Argyle had graduated from pot to meth, and Jonathan became a fast disciple. By the end of the summer, college wasn't on the radar. Jonathan burned his acceptance letter and started delivering pizzas too. What Argyle did, Jonathan did, and that was that.

None of this had helped their mother, who was on her own bobsled to hell. After the briefest fling with Hopper -- an affair that made oil and water seem like soul mates -- she was crushed by the nervous breakdown that had been hovering since Bob's death and Will's exorcism. Jonathan

had just put himself beyond her reach and any source of positive influence. Will was still marked by Vecna, who was down, granted, but certainly not out. Will had downplayed his weird sensations in her presence, but she wasn't fooled. When Hopper tried appeasing her, she took her cue from Nancy and El, dumping the sheriff and retreating to Sesser Illinois where Murray Bauman took her in. It was an act of unprecedented charity on Murray's part; he never, by God, shared his humble abode with anyone beyond a day or two. But he and Joyce had been to a Russian hell and back. That had bonded them, and Murray cared deeply for her. Not that it did any good. With one son lost to drugs and the other unable to shake the shadow, Joyce finally went mad, on a miserable Christmas in '86. Murray had no choice but to have her committed.

His mother was off the board, and that was just as well. But Hopper had sent a radio message to Lenora Hills and Will wondered if the message had reached Jonathan -- and what Jonathan would do if he got it. *He'll think he's dreaming and go back to his meth.* Snorting it. Smoking it. Shooting it. Jonathan did all three.

He banished thoughts of his family as he saw the street ahead. It was Randolph Way, which would have taken him down to Maple (where Mike and Lucas lived) if he turned left on it. But he'd made his decision. He kept going straight on Holly. Soon an apartment building loomed ahead on the right. He pulled into the parking lot and killed the ignition. According to the clock on the dashboard, it was 9:07 AM. The Roy sisters weren't early risers, but they should be up and dressed by now.

Feeling his front shirt for assurance that Hopper's envelope was still there, he grabbed the shotgun and exited the pickup, looking around. He saw no threats. From one apartment he heard the wailing of an infant; from another, a fierce argument between a man and a woman. The air reeked of hurt. Will went inside the building and up the creaking stairs to the second-level rooms. A hall smelling like potpourri went left and another went right. He was glad the Roys lived on the latter wing. The potpourri was obnoxiously cloying. He walked down to the Roy apartment and knocked.

It opened almost right away on an attractive young woman. "There you are."

"Hi Jace," said Will.

"Have you had to fire that thing yet?" she asked, eyeing his shotgun.

"No, but I might have to if you don't let me in," he said, half-serious. "I don't trust the hallways in this joint."

Jacinta Roy smiled and stepped aside. "No dogs and bats inside this building. So far."

He entered the apartment's living room. There was the couch, two chairs, coffee table, desk, and TV that he was familiar with. The place seemed quieter than usual. "You guys have breakfast already?" he asked.

"A small one," she said. "Have a seat, I'll get Rae." She walked down a hall and knocked on a door, telling her sister that Will had arrived. A muffled voice answered, and Jace returned to Will, offering him coffee.

Will shook his head. He had settled in his usual place, a comfy couch chair, and set his gun on the floor. "I'm fine. How have you been holding up?"

"Glad to be alive," said Jace, sitting on the couch across from him. "But I'm luckier than most." When she talked, she ran her fingers through her rich auburn hair. A compulsive habit she'd nurtured since she was a kid. She was twenty-one now.

"Yeah," said Will. "I'm not counting on staying alive."

"Don't say that."

"I'm just --"

They heard the bedroom door open, and the other Roy came down to join them. Rachel was younger and shorter than her sister, not quite eighteen, with dark hair and nerdy-looking glasses. Will rose to meet her and they hugged. "How are you?" she asked, not letting him go.

"Well, you know," he said. "It's awful. Just awful."

She hugged him harder and so did he. He wished they could speak freely, but for all Will knew this apartment had been bugged too. He'd been paying visits here for a long time. Any friends or associates of his might have been flagged as people of interest.

They finally stood apart. She was holding back tears and wiped her eyes under her glasses.

"Well," he said, unsure of what to say. He looked at Jace. "Uh, maybe I'll have that coffee?"

"I'll get it," said Rae. "A cup for all of us. You guys sit." She went into the kitchen and started boiling water.

"So how's Hopper doing?" asked Jace.

"His job is insane right now," said Will. "The station would be flooded with hysterical people if they dared to leave home."

"Yeah, it didn't take long to learn that lesson," said Jace.

"You remember Jordan and Sarah from next door?" said Rae from the kitchen.

"I think so," said Will. "With the kids, right?"

"You notice how quiet it is today?" asked Jace.

He nodded. Usually when he came here, he heard a lot of noise from next door.

Rae came into the living room with two steaming cups. "They died trying to leave," she said, giving one to her sister. "It was right before the army got here."

Will took the other cup. "Hopper told me about that." People had tried fleeing the town the night after graduation and early next morning. Vecna had disabused them of that hope. At the town perimeter, drivers had desperately floored their pedals to get past the hordes of demo-dogs. The dogs had leaped and crashed through the windshields, devouring the screaming families. Drivers further behind had wised up, turning back to town when they saw what happened. The people of Hawkins had been put on notice. *No one out*. By 10:00 AM the soldiers arrived, and it was their turn to be spanked. *No one in*. Vecna wasn't messing around. The playground was his.

"I miss them," said Jace, sipping from her cup. "Those kids were sweet."

"I'm sorry to hear," said Will.

Rae came back with her own coffee and sat next to Jace. "How are your friends doing, Will?"

"I just saw Dustin. His house is about to get swallowed by the Upside Down." He told them about his visit and tomorrow night's absurd birthday party.

Jace laughed. "Trust Dustin to find beauty in the worst mountain of shit. He'll probably invite Vecna and ask to be friends."

"I don't think that's funny," said Rae. "I don't think you should go, Will. Tell Dustin not to do it."

Will shook his head. "It's happening. And he was very emotional about it. I want to respect him. I guess we all have different ways of coping with death... you know, when we could die at any moment. He wants his last days to be happy. I mean, hopefully they won't be his last." He looked at Rae and spoke carefully. "Do you think there's a shot?"

Rae looked at him for a long moment. "Do you have anything?" she asked.

Will set down his cup and reached under his shirt, pulling out Hopper's envelope. He tossed it to her. Rae set it beside her, and then reached for a photo album on the coffee table. She opened it to the back and removed a manila envelope, like the one she had just taken from Will. He took it from her across the table and began putting it inside his shirt.

"No," said Rae. "Read it now."

Will paused. "Now?"

Rae nodded. Next to her, Jace looked unhappy.

His fingers trembling, Will opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. Usually he read these when he was back at the cabin with Hopper. They went outdoors if they needed to discuss the letter's contents. Given what was happening now, Will knew there would be plenty to discuss. He began reading.

Minutes passed. Jace fidgeted. Rae remained passive as stone.

When he was finished, he looked up, appalled. "Are you fucking serious?"

"It's my best understanding of the situation," said Rae.

Will looked hard at her. "So what you're saying, in other words, is that you have fucked every one of us in the ass."

"Will," said Jace. "That's not fair, is it?"

"Is it not?" asked Will.

Rae was visibly hurt. "I'm sorry. I thought I knew what I was doing. It felt right at the time and it worked. Or it seemed to."

"Don't apologize, Rae," said Jace. "Who could have done better? And Will isn't really the asshole he's acting like right now. Are you, Will?"

"No," he said, ashamed. "I'm sorry. But this means..." *It means exactly what you just said, Rachel's feelings be damned. That Hawkins is irrevocably fucked in the ass.* But he controlled himself. *Think positive... there's always a way through things... even when there isn't a way... no way at all... Jesus fucking Christ...* "I mean, what do we do now?"

Rae couldn't look at him. "I don't know yet," she said quietly.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Jace silenced him with a slash of her hand. "Let's talk about something else, yeah?"

They all agreed that was wise and settled into small talk. About grocery shopping. It was a problem, especially with Market Basket under the shadow. Smaller stores were already running out of product, especially toilet paper. Fortunately for the Roy sisters, they bought toilet paper in bulk. Last week Jace had purchased forty-eight rolls. For the second time that day, Will was grateful for Hopper's bunker.

They talked a bit more and then Will got up to leave. Jace hugged him good-bye, and he was about to hug Rae but she stopped him: "Can I talk to you in my room before you go?"

He stared at her and then nodded. This was unexpected.

She turned and walked down the hall, and he followed into her bedroom. *What's she doing?* He'd never been inside this room before. She

stood in front of her bed and looked at him intently, clearly intending something serious.

"What's this about, Rae?" he asked.

"I need to ask you a favor," she said.

"Okay," he said, expecting the worst. "What do you need?" *And be careful of what you say in here.*

"I want you to have sex with me."

Of all the unpleasant requests he had braced himself for, this was not one of them. *"Excuse me?"*

"Yes. Just once. Will you?" It was as if she were asking him to pick up a grocery item for her.

Stunned, Will couldn't respond. This was out of left field, and wrong on every level.

"Just once," she repeated. "I need... help with this kind of thing. Someone to teach me."

Will couldn't believe his ears. "To *teach* you?"

"Yes. Josh has slept with two girls. I'm still a virgin. I don't want to be clumsy for him."

"Oh... I see. So it's better to be unfaithful than clumsy?"

"Josh already thinks I'm unfaithful."

"Well, you'd be proving him right. What do you think he'd say to that?" *What would he do to me?*

"We'd never tell him."

"He would know. He knows you. And he'd prefer a clumsy virgin over a casual slut." He winced as soon as he said that.

Rae's eyes narrowed. "I'm not a slut."

"Of course not. But that's how Josh would see it."

"Only if we told him."

"Rae... You know I'm gay."

"That's why you'd be good for this. It wouldn't mean much to you. We could be... *dispassionate* about it, as Jace would say."

Will sat down in a chair beside the bed, burying his face in his hands. "Oh God, I can't believe you," he said.

"I'm sorry I keep upsetting you. I'm only asking."

Will looked up at her. "So the apocalypse is here, and this is your priority?" *On top of fucking things up beyond repair?*

"It's *because* of the apocalisp, or whatever it's called, that this is important."

Well, yes, that did make sense. But still. She was so clueless about the nature of relationships. "Okay, listen. I'm going to pretend you didn't ask

me to fuck you, and we'll chalk this up to a bad idea with good intentions. Okay?"

"I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with. But I don't think I'm asking much."

"Rachel! You don't ask a friend to have sex with you as a learning exercise. And you don't ask a gay man to fuck you for any reason."

"Jace told me she had sex with one of her girlfriends to get better at doing it with her boyfriend. She offered to have sex with me, but I can't do that -- I mean, I just can't do it with a girl. And I don't see how doing it with a girl would help me fuck a boy any better."

"Well, bully for Jace, but for me that sort of thing isn't acceptable." He didn't like hearing the f-word roll casually off Rachel's tongue. He was a hypocrite for thinking that -- he had dropped plenty of f-bombs during this visit -- but that word made her sound like a different person. "It's way beyond my comfort level. I'm sorry, Rae."

"Don't be sorry. I'm sorry for asking. I just want to be good for him. After everything."

"I get that." He breathed easier now, believing she would drop it. "But you're thinking about this all wrong anyhow. Guys love it when they bang a nervous virgin. It turns them on." *Not that I would know. But it's evidently the way of this goddamn hetero world.*

"Okay. I'll walk you out now."

"I'm really sorry, Rae. I didn't mean to take you down. I'm just really scared."

"I know. So am I."

"We'll think of something," said Will, not believing it.

"I know," she repeated, and they hugged again before he left.

And as he drove back to give Hopper the terrible missive, Will Byers knew that *thinking of something* at this point was just damage control. Trying to find the most painless way to die.



Chapter Three:

Black Celebration

The house on 36 Bollier squatted under blackness. Like other homes on the street, it kissed the shadow, and motes fluttered over it like Christmas snow. Unlike the other homes, it hadn't yet been deserted. Light came from the windows, cars filled the driveway, and laughter could be heard inside. Music too, so loud at times that it shook the street like the coming of Ragnarok. It was a party, of all things, a birthday party, a celebration of life in defiance of the encroaching shadow. Foolish, perhaps, but some religions said that foolishness was wisdom for the end times.

Dustin Henderson was the wisest fool in Hawkins. He wooed death as a means to self-empowerment and had the charisma to draw others into that policy. He wasn't reckless by any means; you could trust Dustin with your life, and his friends always did. But he had grasped the value of life in relation to how fleeting it was -- priceless while it lasted, but you couldn't cling to it. Human nature said otherwise.

His guests had started arriving at 7:30 PM. The party would start at sundown, 8:05, and go until about 10:30. Stacey Booker's "dozen friends" had swelled into almost two dozen. Including Dustin, Mike, Lucas, and Will, the party-goers totaled twenty-seven. Fifteen guys and twelve girls. Their world had flipped after getting handed their diplomas, and tonight they were reclaiming themselves, come what may.

Mike needed reclaiming more than anyone, and so he was here. Otherwise he would have skipped. Most people found him disagreeable, and he had no wish to be a killjoy tonight.

Never mind killing joy. We should be worried about getting killed. This house is a death trap.

Four of the party-goers had brought guns, including Will. Dustin put them in a closet by the front door. Mike had considered bringing one of Nancy's firearms. She had given him a crash course during the Four-Day Apocalypse, and he had killed a demo-dog during that strip of hell, but he wasn't a very good shooter; and frankly he didn't like guns or trust himself with one.

"Surprised to see you here."

Mike turned, bumping elbows in the crowded living room. It was Lucas. "Sorry to disappoint."

"Not disappointed," said Lucas.

"Liar," said Mike.

"Don't be an asshole tonight, Mike. I mean it, I'm tired of dealing with your bullshit. And stick around after the party's over."

"Why?"

"The four of us need to talk. About El. And don't get pissed."

The "four of us" was obviously himself, Lucas, Dustin, and Will. "No, actually I agree with you."

Lucas's eyes narrowed. "You do?"

Mike nodded. "It's worth a shot if we can get hold of her. I haven't quite accepted defeat like Dustin has. I mean, why does he even care about El, if the whole point of this party is to embrace the inevitable and be happy about it?"

"He thinks you can do both," said Lucas.

"What about you?"

"I guess we'll see. It's almost time."

Mike looked at his watch. It was 7:56. "Yeah. Nine minutes to Sonico."

"It's going to be a ride," said Lucas. He looked over peoples' heads.

"Oh, he's got the mic. Brace your ears."

Mike followed his gaze and saw Dustin about to address everyone from the front of the living room. *Here we go.*

"Listen up, you wild and crazies!"

The guests hushed as their host's voice boomed over them.

"I want to thank Stacey for suggesting this party in honor of my eighteenth. But it's not about me tonight, and I don't want it to be. I already told you to not bring me any presents, and so far -- so far, mind you -- it looks like you've respected my wishes."

Laughter flowed through the room.

"I want you all to be at ease with each other tonight. We're going to dance and have fun. We may only have a few days to live, if that. But before I start the music, I'll explain how this all works."

Dustin had planned for everything. The living room area served as the main area for dancing, snacking, and conversation. In his bedroom, he had set up his VCR to play a Miami Vice episode -- the series finale, for those who had missed it eight days ago when it aired. He had arranged for booze as well, but the booze would be managed so no one got sick.

"Let me be clear: This won't be a college frat party. No one is going to leave puking; no one's waking up tomorrow hung over. Everyone is allowed three beers. Space them over the next two hours however you want. Marcy is the beer warden. When you want one, she'll take you to the kitchen and give you one out of the fridge. She has a checklist to keep track of you all. And thank *you*, John, for getting the beer."

John Sharron's father had relinquished two cases of Beck's from his cellar, and then gone out to purchase two cases of Amstel at a very steep cost. The shop owner was selling at double prices during the shadow lockdown. Nothing was too good for Mr. Sharron's son, whose dreams of college football had been dashed.

"It's German and Dutch brew tonight. No American shit."

Mike had nothing against the Germans but he would be sticking to Amstel. He didn't need to be reminded of Beck. Flashbacks of her getting strangled by her own legs were enough.

The front-and-center feature of the party was of course Dustin's stereo system, which he had disassembled and remade into something rather incredible. He presented it proudly: it looked like technology ahead of its time. The mic was wireless, and colored lights flashed on the stereo dashboard.

"This is my greatest invention since Cerebro."

Cerebro was the ham radio he had built in the summer of '85. It communicated over long distances, and he had used it on a critical occasion to contact someone in Utah.

"The tech behind this system makes Cerebro look like a toy. I call it Sonico."

"What's that?" asked someone, pointing to a huge box that looked like a speaker.

"That, my friends, is a subwoofer. It amplifies bass like you've never heard before in your home systems. You're not just going to hear music tonight, you're gonna fucking feel it."

A girl named Sophie Juniper wagered that her stereo system was just as loud.

"You're wrong, and it's not just the volume. I can make recordings of my CD tracks and edit the sound. I can take out the vocals completely, amp up the bass, make the drums sound more brassy or more bassy, whatever. And for the first song we're doing tonight, I've removed the singer's vocals, because yours truly is going to do the honors. Don't all applaud at once."

"We'll applaud when we hear you," said Stacey. "Assuming you can sing worth a shit."

Dustin could sing all right. Mike had heard him cover hits like Foreigner's "That Was Yesterday", Boston's "Peace of Mind", Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing", Journey's "Stone in Love", and Van Halen's "Dance the Night Away". Dustin was as good as the artists he aped.

"I believe I can do more than that. And it's almost time."

It was 8:04.

Sundown in five, four, three, two, one...

As the town dipped into darkness, Dustin leaned over Sonico and turned one of the dials down to zero. Probably the output for lead vocals. Then he pressed the play button on the CD player.

"Are you all ready?"

"Yeah, we're ready!" yelled Mike. "Do it already!"

"Well, you better be ready, because we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life."

A familiar tune began droning from the speakers as Dustin spoke.

"It's an electric word, 'life', it means forever and that's a mighty long time, but I'm here to tell you... There's something else... The afterworld."

Cheers erupted as everyone caught on. They knew the song.

"A world of never ending happiness... You can always see the sun... Day... Or night..."

Then the drums thundered in, and with the drums hollers of approval over the reverberation of the subwoofer. Dustin continued speak-singing as if he were Prince himself:

"So when you call up that shrink in Beverly Hills -- you know the one, Dr. Everything'll Be Alright -- instead of asking him how much of your time is left, ask him how much of your mind, baby... 'Cause in this life, things are much harder than in the afterworld.. In this life... You're on your own... And if that asshole Vecna tries to bring you down... Go crazy... PUNCH A HIGHER FLOOR!"

With that the party took wing, and for the next two hours, the house on 36 Bollier Avenue boomed and rocked like the Hoosier Dome.

Mike smiled, feeling the music rumble through him. *Well played.* Dustin's lyrical substitution of "that asshole Vecna" for "de-Elevator" had the right amount of syllables (five) and the right theme: in Prince's song, "de-Elevator" was a metaphor for Satan, not an actual elevator. *Take that, Vecna, you piece of shit.*

Everyone did as the song urged. They went crazy. And Dustin, having speak-sung the song's prelude, sang the rest of it with modifications. When he got to the chorus, everyone knew to respond:



[Dustin] Are we gonna let that asshole Vecna bring us down?

[Everyone] Oh no, let's go!!!

[Dustin] Let's go crazy,

Let's bounce back,

Let's look for the fucking worthless gate that was opened

And shit into its crack!

[Everyone] Let's go!!!



Stacey Booker threw her middle fingers up in the air and slurred Vecna with an obscenity. Barry Keagan opined that Vecna's brains and bowels were one and the same. Eric Pagent exposed his groin and invited Vecna to taste him, and to keep sucking until the end of time. Through it all they whirled and danced and cheered Dustin's performance. His living room on this night offered more than any concert at the Vogue.

Mike looked over at the hall that led to the dining room. There were a few people standing there -- three or four, it looked like -- who hadn't joined but seemed content to watch. Will being one of them. Of course. Not to hold back the gates of hell would Will Byers surrender and let loose like this.

Lucas, on the other hand, was matching Mike's gyrations with movements just as wild. They caught each other's eyes and laughed, and for the first time in years it felt like things used to be between them.

Go crazy. Man, did it feel good.

Later in the evening, as Sonico finished blasting Peter Gabriel's "Red Rain", Mike and Lucas were arguing in Dustin's bedroom. Over *Miami Vice*. The season-5 finale -- indeed, the series finale, "Freefall" -- was playing on VCR, and six of the guests were piled on Dustin's bed watching it. The world was ending and so they had to see how the best TV show ended. Dustin had recorded the finale eight days ago when it aired; a two-hour special. The TV volume was turned way up to compete with Sonico. For all the good it did.

Mike and Lucas had already seen "Freefall" and argued over it. Now they were repeating their argument -- and pissing off the kids trying to watch.

"Self-plagiarism," said Mike, standing next to the bed. "And running on empty."

"Shut up," said Lucas, next to him.

"You guys shut up!" said Julie Blake, whose eyes were glued. Crockett and Tubbs had just climbed over the wall of the dictator's palace. She and everyone else on the bed were loving it.

In Mike's harsh opinion, "Freefall" copy-catted the season-one hit "Smuggler's Blues" to a fault. Both involved Crockett and Tubbs being sent to a Latin American country by a shady third party, in order to bring down a drug dealer. In "Smuggler's Blues" the third party had been a corrupt DEA agent; in "Freefall" it was a sleazebag colonel of the Special Drug Enforcement Task Force. In "Smuggler's Blues", the vice heroes had been sent to Columbia; in "Freefall" to the Caribbean. Same story recycled.

Lucas objected that from those points the stories diverged significantly. In "Smuggler's Blues" Crockett and Tubbs were trying to flush out someone in American law enforcement; this snake was extorting drug dealers by kidnapping their families. In "Freefall" their mission was to extradite a Latin American dictator; this tyrant, General Manuel Borbon, could name many names in the drug cartel, and perhaps end the drug war.

"Fucking stupid, Lucas. Ending the war on drugs is a pipe dream."

"But that's the point!" said Lucas. "'Freefall' is all about burnout and futility. Crockett, I mean, he's been burned out all season. Remember the Nazi episode?" That was "Victims of Circumstance", from three weeks ago that was depressing by even *Vice* standards. All the ugliness in that story had confirmed to Sonny Crockett that the world was an undiluted hellhole where the innocent got burned without exception. The earlier *Vice* seasons had been cynical while allowing the protagonists a measure of hope. By season five the vice cops had given up on humanity -- and on

themselves. They weren't law enforcers; they were useless referees in a criminal network that reached into law enforcement itself. "Freefall" encapsulated that nihilism, and Mike, said Lucas, should love it for that reason alone.

Mike wasn't impressed by this defense. Yes, he liked the bleak tone of *Miami Vice* and how things kept getting bleaker each season, but the plots had become so outlandish that they were impossible to take seriously. Either that or they were rehashes from the early seasons. "Freefall" was the latter. And a cop-out to boot: "One of them should have died."

"Tubbs, I suppose?" said Lucas.

"No, Crockett," said Mike. "The show has been about his gradual downfall. He should have been killed off."

"Shut up, you guys," repeated Julie. The others on the bed were throwing them nasty looks too.

"Let's go," said Mike, heading toward the door, but Lucas held up a finger, his eyes on the screen. The convoy of soldiers had arrived at Borbon's palace, and the shoot-out was about to start. Lucas wanted to see Felicia get killed again. Tubbs's moment of rage. Mike rolled his eyes and left the room.

As he returned to the dance-fest in the living room, he suddenly saw the end of everything. Of *Miami Vice*. Of the '80s. Of Hawkins, and probably the world. *Maybe everything should end*. Mike had been in freefall for so long that he wasn't inclined to give the world a fair shake. He still wasn't sure his ex-girlfriend should be given one. In fact, he wondered if he and his friends had had it backwards all along: maybe this world was a copy of the shadow world, not vice-versa. Perhaps humanity was the upside-down species.

Sonny Crockett, if asked, would have likely agreed.

Damn you, El. Where are you?

Two minutes later Mike was in the kitchen by himself, getting his second Amstel. He didn't bother going through Marcy; Dustin's close friends could ignore the booze chaperone. As he closed the fridge door he saw a notepad on the adjacent counter. He picked it up as he began sipping his beer. It was the setlist for the night, which Dustin had written down sloppily and then evidently committed to his photographic memory. Mike scrutinized the setlist and frowned. There was nothing from the Cure. But on whole it was a good selection:

8:05 - "Let's Go Crazy", Prince. *Be happy and crazy and you can beat the devil.*

-- "Dance the Night Away," Van Halen. *As it says.*

-- "Prime Mover," Rush. *Anything can happen.*

8:25 - "Here Comes the Flood", Peter Gabriel. *As it says.*

-- "Two Tribes", Frankie Goes to Hollywood. *Apocalyptic battle between two powers.*

-- "Distant Early Warning", Rush. *Imminent destruction.*

8:45 - "Red Rain", Peter Gabriel. *Not fearing the apocalyptic future.*

-- "Atmosphere," Joy Division. *How to carry on when depressed.*

-- "Lucretia, My Reflection", The Sisters of Mercy. *The fall of an empire; massive devastation.*

9:05 - "1999", Prince. *Dancing and partying in the face of Doomsday.*

-- "Shadows of the Night," Pat Benatar. *As it says.*

-- "Separate Ways (Worlds Apart)", Journey. *When a lover dumps you and goes with someone else.*

9:25 - "Black Celebration", Depeche Mode. *Celebrating the dark parts of life.*

-- "One Time One Place," Skinny Puppy. *The extinction of humanity.*

-- "Kingdom Come", The Mission U.K. *Longing for resolution to the pains of life.*

9:45 - "It's the End of the World as We Know It", R.E.M. *Don't despair in the face of the end.*

-- "Live to Tell", Madonna. *The complexity of deceit and mistrust.*

-- "Disappointed", Public Image Limited. *Friendship and learning how to forgive.*

10:05 - "Purple Rain", Prince. *Apocalyptic ballad.*

[Start "Freefall" in the bedroom around 8:15 for whoever wants to watch. Episode will run until about 10:15]

Seven special apocalyptic songs had been scheduled to play twenty minutes apart, with Sonico cranked to enormous volume. In between was other music, songs played at lower volume, which allowed the party-goers to converse without yelling. The commentary for each song was apparently Dustin's reason for selecting it. Mike smoldered at the Journey song. Dustin had chosen that one with him in mind, no doubt. He also sensed a personal attack in the choice of "Disappointed". *Fuck you, Dustin.*

He looked at the kitchen clock: 9:02 PM. Sonico was almost finished with "Lucretia, My Reflection". Right on schedule. That meant Prince was up again.

Dustin was suddenly at his side. "Where have you two shitheads been? And where's Lucas now?"

"Get off me, dude. Lucas is watching 'Freefall'. He may be in there a while."

"Well, get your ass in the living room. Next song is a rager."

"Yeah," said Mike, holding up the notepad. "I saw."

Dustin swiped it from his hand. "Cheater. Don't look at this." He opened a drawer full of wooden spoons and spatulas and tossed the notepad inside. "It's supposed to be a surprise. Now let's go." He practically shoved Mike out of the kitchen.

In the living room, Dustin pushed through everyone to get up front. He took the mic.

"All right, you wild and crazies, we're halfway there. And no, I'm not about to play Bon Jovi's 'Living on a Prayer'; you know I have better taste than that. This song is the theme -- the big theme -- of my party. Another one by Prince. Can you guess?"

They could guess and they did. It was a no-brainer.

"Right on. Prince was a prophet but he was too optimistic. He gave the world a ten-year extension. So when that line kicks in, I want you all to sing... what are we going to sing together?"

They were already shouting the chorus, modified with the correct date.

"Yeah, now make me proud! For the next four minutes I want to see each and every one of you maniacs dance your life away. Byers, it's time to get on the floor. Skelly, you too. And anyone else who's been giving their legs a vacation."

The song had already begun halfway through this little spiel. People clapped and cheered, and launched into whatever twists and spins that made them happy. Some faced off with partners; others changed partners more than once. Will gave it a try, dancing awkwardly (two beers by now had lent the required courage), but his clumsiness went unnoticed. Everyone was an equal on this floor.

Mike set his Amstel down on the coffee table and joined the dancers. He was really into this now, bumping into someone as he hopped back and forth. Without thinking, he picked the girl up and gave her a huge kiss. She shrieked and kissed him back. It was someone he had never spoken to at school. After four years of classes together. He left her and went back to himself, singing the lyrics:

♪ ♪ *The sky was all purple,
There were people running everywhere.
Trying to run from the destruction,
You know I didn't even care.* ♪ ♪

Then came the chorus of "two thousand zero zero, party over, oops, out of time", and on the punchline everyone followed Dustin's orders, singing at top of their lungs:

"TONIGHT WE'RE GOING TO PARTY LIKE IT'S 1989!"

Mike punched the air, hooted and swirled, caught up in the ecstasy. Prince may have gotten his timetable wrong, but his attitudinal optimism found the right home on 36 Bollier. The party-goers took up his call: to welcome the worst with rapture, and revel in the pleasures of the world before leaving it. At least for tonight, Mike could go with that. It was easy to be stupid when you were high on camaraderie, booze, and Sonico.

♪ ♪ *War is all around us,
My mind says prepare to fight,
So if I gotta die
I'm gonna listen to my body tonight.* ♪ ♪

Mike's body told his inhibitions to go to hell, and for the second chorus he was in full-throttle rapture:

"TONIGHT WE'RE GOING TO PARTY LIKE IT'S 1989!"

So it went on. By the time that refrain was on its fourth run, everyone was shouting loud enough to break the windows. Then Mike *looked* over at the window curtains -- and his heart slammed in his chest. Someone else saw what he saw and screamed; the sound was swallowed by screams of delirium. Then more people saw, and everyone traded bliss for terror.

The window curtain was crawling with demo-bats.

At least thirty of forty of them.

"Oh God," said someone. It sounded like Will.

The bats didn't appear to be readying for an attack, but that was small consolation. *They were inside the house.* Vecna was either changing the

rules, expanding the death zone... or pissed off at what was going on at this party.

Jesus, thought Mike. *We insulted the hell out of him.* During the first song, "Let's Go Crazy". *We were crazy to do this. Dustin, you stupid motherfucker.*

"Dustin!" said someone. "What do we do?"

Dustin had silenced the CD player but had the mic in hand.

"Just stay calm everyone."

"Calm, my ass," said a girl named Heather. "Someone get the guns." *Guns won't do shit. Kill a few bats, maybe, and shoot up the house.*

"No, Heather. Don't provoke them. We can't kill these bats with guns. Be lucky if we could hit any. They're too many and too fast."

"Jesus, they're staring at us!" said Jeremy Allen. He was referring to the bats perched on top of the curtain header. They peered down at everyone with blood red eyes, as if contemplating an attack. Other bats moved up and down and sideways over the curtain... and then more bats emerged from behind it.

People went hysterical and grabbed each other, and as one they slowly backed away from the living room window, heading toward the front door. Some of the bats took wing, flying across the room, down the halls, and back. Two alighted on a bookshelf; one on Dustin's CD rack; another on the couch. The party-goers became panic-stricken.

"Just take it easy, people! Don't anyone leave the house. They're not attacking us. Outside, especially at night, you're at risk."

"Fuck that shit," said Jeremy. "It's time to bounce." He was closest to the front door and opened it. He yelled in shock and retreated backwards. Everyone gasped. Standing in the doorway -- no, coming through the doorway -- was a demo-dog. It came into the living room slowly. No one dared to try stop it. It was between everyone and the closet with the guns.

"Oh God, we're all gonna die!" cried Theresa Barbary, echoing Prince's song they had just received like holy communion. She was far less sure of her faith now.

"Please trust me, everyone. I'm scared right now too. I have no idea what this means. But don't try to leave. Let's see what happens."

What happened wasn't bad, but it sure wasn't encouraging. The bats chattered from every direction above. The demo-dog parked itself in a corner, growling softly. It eyed everyone in the room.

"Don't worry, Dustin," said Mike loudly. "We're staying put." Nominally he was offering Dustin assurance, but he was really reinforcing

him; backing him up so that no one did anything rash. "My suggestion is that we not insult Lord Vecna anymore. Be careful of what we say."

"Yes, Mike. Thank you. No more snide remarks --"

Someone was running down the hall from the bedroom. It was Lucas. He was about to say something and then saw the bats everywhere. "Jesus Christ!"

"Are they in the bedroom too?" asked Mike.

"No," said Lucas. "But there are vines crawling over the window. Probably all over the house too. We weren't about to open the window to find out."

"We've got a dog too," said Mike, pointing to the corner of the room.

Lucas didn't like that at all.

"Let's see if we have vines," said Will. He walked over to the living room window and, to horrified gasps, pulled back the curtain that was still crawling with bats. The sudden movement annoyed the critters, and they exploded into flight around Will, chirping furiously. Will cried out in disgust, swatting them away.

I wouldn't have done that, thought Mike. Will had grown a pair over the past three years. It hit Mike suddenly. *He's braver than I am now.* Of course, you had to be brave, to come out gay in the '80s, but there was more to it than that. Will lived under Jim Hopper's roof. The sheriff's influence was evident.

"There they are," said Lucas.

"*Oh God,*" cried Theresa again.

Mike squinted. It was nighttime and hard to see, but yes, there were clearly slithering movements on the other side of the window pane. And this was the front of the house, not the back that was already kissing the shadow. The Henderson home was under siege. A cautious siege, perhaps, but it demanded serious caution in turn.

As if to make that point, the demo-dog growled again from its corner. At least it was lying down.

Visibly shaken, Will let the curtain fall back in place. "I guess we should get back to it, guys. Just go with the flow. I mean, it's why we're here. Dustin, what's the next song?"

Heads turned to their host who smiled. The next song was a fitting one, as it turned out: Pat Benatar's "Shadows of the Night".

The second hour of the party was subdued, given the unwanted guests. But the creatures paid scant attention to the human beings they'd been sent

to monitor. The bats dashed about, giving attitude only when someone got in their way, and the demo-dog napped for the most part. The dancers had a bad moment when it left its corner to walk among them -- it was during Skinny Puppy's menacing song, "One Time One Place" -- but no attacks ever came, and at times the coexistence was weirdly friendly. At one point Mike saw John Sharron stroking the head of the bat that kept landing on the couch. Its eyes looked mean as it yipped and clicked; but it allowed John his strokes.

Then came the tenth hour and the special finale Dustin had arranged. He went to the front and grabbed the mic.

"I hope you weren't *disappointed* by that song... You get it?"

No one had a clue what the joke was about.

"No? Oh, come on, really, you guys?... DISS-A-POINT-ED... As in, what I am with you. That's the name of the song you just heard. It's from Public Image Limited's new album, and it's climbing the dance charts."

Most in the room had never heard of Public Image Limited. But they had loved the song and agreed it was a dance smash.

"Well, I know you've heard this next song. Our last one tonight. We started with him, used him in the middle, and it's only right to finish with him. His apocalyptic ballad. 'Purple Rain.'"

Warm applause. A song loved by many.

"Right on, Dustin!" yelled Stacey.

"Oh, you bet. This is more than just a love song. It's about blood in the sky, the end of the world, and being with that person you love when all the shit comes raining down. So find a partner, you guys. Hold each other. And remember this night, no matter what happens to us next. We may die soon, but I love you all. Thanks for coming to my party."

The dance to "Purple Rain" began like any slow dance. Everyone found a partner, except for Will. Mike was grabbed by Julie Blake, who had emerged from the bedroom a half hour ago, tired of watching "Freefall". As he held her, he saw Dustin walk up to Will and say something. Will nodded and took his hands. They joined the dance, holding each other as Prince sang out his heart and soul:

♪ ♪ I only want to see you laughing in the purple rain. ♪ ♪

Mike teared up and clasped Julie closer to him. It should have been him, offering Will the dance. He owed him as much, after years of

avoidance. But there was poetry in Dustin's move. He was returning a favor. From the Snowball of '84. The Christmas dance in the eighth grade. When Dustin was rejected by every girl he'd asked, until Nancy Wheeler did him a kindness. *My own sister. Why is everyone around me so good and I'm such a shit?*

Julie Blake seemed to read his thoughts. She reached up and caressed his face as they swayed to the ballad. She'd never liked him and he'd never given her reason to. He saw how pretty she was through her plainness. He leaned in and kissed her without thinking. Gently at first, to test the waters, and then working his tongue hard as she returned his efforts. They fed off each other like that, and Mike was dimly aware that other pairs were doing the same. Life was short and love in short supply. Passion sufficed on this special night.

The dancers' mutual aggression mounted as Prince took it up five notches:

♪ ♪ *I know, I know, I know, times are changing!!!* ♪ ♪

Julie reached up Mike's shirt and raked his back; worked his pants furiously down. She was saying things that sounded filtered through water, mumbled through rain... *Get inside me...* rubbing him, making him hard... to which he objected for lack of a condom... to which she denied him the right to refuse ... *I need you inside me... now... while we're alive...*

And then before he knew it, Mike was inside her, powerless to stop what was happening. All around him the dance had morphed into an orgy. He saw Lucas on the floor with Sarah Danville, their movements as unrestrained as their fire for each other. It was unexpected and surreal, as if the party-goers were part of a hive mind taking orders from Vecna himself. There was even a threesome going on near the kitchen. Mike wondered if the four still watching *Miami Vice* in the other room were exempt from these compulsions. In this room only Dustin and Will seemed exempt. They held each other and continued to slow-dance around the revelers on the floor, content as they were. Mike didn't want an exemption. He needed this.

As he worked Julie over, he thought of *her*, for it was always her, Eleven, and then, by force of will, he saw her face superimposed on Julie's. *She* was the one beneath him right now: crying for him, affirming him, fired by his every thrust, demanding that he do this forever. *El. You left us. You left us, and here we are.*

The other species took an interest in the orgy. Mike heard chirping that sounded alarmingly close, and he looked up from Julie's face to see a bat sitting on the floor next to her head. It glared at both of them with its blazing eyes. Mike looked over and saw another bat, on the back of John Sharron as he made fervent love to Rhonda Mills. It must have been the one that John had stroked on the couch. It made calculated clicking noises, as if it were actually trying to sing in sync to John's thrusts.

At that moment, Mike wouldn't have cared if a bat leaped onto his or Julie's forehead. "Purple Rain" had put him on a plane where deities walked. It was better than the Cure's "Plainsong" -- or at least better under these extraordinary circumstances, filtered through the wonders of Sonico.

"Mike," cried Julie.

"Julie," he wept.

El.

Names were all that mattered now, conveying all will and intent. Julie didn't want this to end. There was some grace for that, since this was an extended version of "Purple Rain". Dustin had put the song on a loop made through splicing -- an alien technique to most home stereo owners in '89. The guitar solo and emotional ending were repeated twice, and Mike cried for himself, cried for Eleven, as he remained locked inside Julie, doing his utmost to make it last for her:

♪ ♪ *Woo, hoo, hoo, hoo... woo, hoo, hoo, hoo... woo, hoo-hoo...* ♪ ♪

It was the finale everyone needed. Dustin's eighteenth birthday party climaxed by bridging heaven and hell, and everyone on the floor climaxed, some of them multiple times, as they promised to find their partners in the afterworld.

"We can speak freely now, guys," said Dustin. In his hands he held the bugs that were planted in the Henderson home three years ago. He had removed and destroyed the devices this morning.

"Uh, I don't know about that," said Will. "We have to watch our tongues no matter what."

"I mean, Dustin, isn't that a bit reckless?" asked Lucas.

"Why?" said Dustin. "At this point it doesn't matter. The military can't get into town. With the world coming down, who cares if the government knows we're on to them?"

Will looked unhappy. "There's more than the military to worry about."

"I'm beyond worrying," said Mike. "We do need to talk."

"Yeah," said Lucas. "About El."

The party was over and the party-goers had left. The human ones anyway. The bats had overstayed their welcome and the demo-dog had moved from its corner to the center of the living room. The four boys sat at a wary distance from it, about fifteen feet away. Will's shotgun rested on the floor by his feet. The spiked bat that had once been Steve Harrington's leaned against the chair Dustin was sitting in. There was still no immediate threat, but Dustin was through with this house. It had served his purpose. After this meeting, he would leave with Lucas and stay with his mom at the Sinclairs. Vines plastered the house exterior, the guests had made it to their cars safely; Mike hoped they'd made it home okay. Julie Blake had asked him to visit her tomorrow, but Mike was noncommittal. His real girlfriend -- the one he had no right to think of that way, but he did -- demanded his attention now. Wherever she was, and to whomever the blackest hell she was married.

"Agreed," said Dustin. "Eleven could be anywhere in Taiwan, but I want to find her."

"I also agree," said Mike. "Vecna is playing with us. Let's make him pay for that while we live. Will, does Hopper have any idea at all how she can be reached?" Everywhere in Hawkins, the phones were dead; but radios worked.

Will shifted uncomfortably. "No."

"What about the gate?" asked Lucas. "Has anyone seen it? Is there a way to destroy it without psychic powers? Like with bombs?"

Few people had seen the gate at the town center, unless they died for the privilege. On graduation night, the boys had been driven straight home by their parents, without any sight-seeing trips. The shadow had quickly radiated outwards and by midnight covered the death zone area. Then the expansion stopped, for whatever mysterious reason. As the death zone was evacuated that night, people had seen the gate -- a huge gaping crevice in the road, in the shape of a cross, bisecting Randolph and Western.

"It's huge," said Will. "About fifty feet long and wide. Hopper saw it that night."

"Jump into that cross, and you're in the Upside Down," said Dustin. "But I don't think bombs would do a tinker's damn. It's an extraterrestrial portal. If anything, a bomb would just blow it open wider."

"But how was it created?" asked Mike. "Didn't you guys say that Vecna needs to kill people in order to make gates?" Mike had been in California

with Will and Jonathan when Vecna went on his killing spree. "There haven't been any killings or deaths reported recently, as far as I know."

"Normally Vecna invades someone's mind to open a gate," said Dustin. "I don't think killing the victim is necessary, but it does help."

Dustin was the one who had figured it out back then. It was a psychic connection across dimensions that opened gates from one world to the other. Vecna had needed four, and had preyed on teenagers experiencing trauma and shame, invading their minds and killing them with nightmarish hallucinations. Stress and panic seemed to be the key, as if psychological duress fortified the strength of the psychic connection and made the opening between worlds much easier.

Killing Chrissy Cunningham had produced the trailer gate at Eddie Munson's place. Killing Fred Benson yielded the road gate not far from the trailer park. Patrick McKinney's demise made the water gate at Lover's Lake. And the death of Max Mayfield resulted in the gate at the old Creel House.

"But why did he need four gates?" asked Mike.

Will cleared his throat. "Listen you guys, I have some information about the new gate and how it relates to the previous four. You know I work with Hopper, and help him get intel on anything related to this stuff."

"Yeah," said Dustin. "Secret deputy. You're badass, Will."

"There's a source in town that I use," said Will. "And yesterday I found out some things from this source. It's not pretty."

They all stared.

"Do tell," said Dustin.

Will told them. As he explained, they couldn't believe their ears.

What they had never asked themselves about the gates is *why four*? What was so special about four gates? All you need is one gate to let an apocalypse through. But no, Vecna had wanted a stronger gate -- four gates fused into one -- that made it indestructible and unclosable. Eleven had become his instrument in that purpose. When the four gates converged into one, she had closed them, ending the Four-Day Apocalypse. But *she had treated them as a single gate*. That was her grievous error. The gates had converged on the town center and joined together, but they hadn't actually fused into one. It was like the difference between a mixture and a compound, and in treating the four gates as a compound she *made* it into one, falling right into the trap Vecna had set for her. When she "closed" the gates, she fused them into one, unintentionally creating a super-gate. It was sort of "closed" -- it was invisible and impossible to pass through -- but it could be activated on Vecna's command. El believed she had closed

the gates, because that's how it appeared. Vecna had waited three years for his strength to return and then "opened" the super-gate that was already there. Thanks to Eleven.

Mike exploded. "How did your source find all this out?"

"And how do you and Hopper know that it's true?" asked Lucas, aghast.

"I really can't say," said Will. "But trust me, it's true."

"*You can't say?*" Mike was ready to break bones.

"So what you're saying," said Dustin, "is that when El closed the four gates back in '86, it was a sham. She really just made them into a stronger gate that... you say it can't be closed *at all*? The gate that's now at the center of town?"

That was it, in a nutshell. What El should have done is close each gate individually. Instead, on the power of her belief that she could treat the four gates as one -- a reasonable assumption, since they had physically joined together -- she had *made* them one and spelled the world's doom. Not even Vecna could have done that. He knew in advance that the gates couldn't be treated as a singular portal, and so his mental will would have been insufficient in creating the super-gate that he craved. Eleven, in her naivete, became his tool. She had worked a miracle but a catastrophic one. Thanks to her, they were now dealing with a gate *that could not be closed*. Not even by her. She had made it unclosable.

"Jesus!" said Lucas.

"Jesus, my ass!" said Mike, standing up from the couch and looking down at Will. "How can anyone know all this?"

"More to the point," said Dustin. "How can you or Hopper know someone who would know something like this?"

"I can't talk about that," said Will, clearly uncomfortable. "Please just accept it as fact. The point is that even if we could find El and contact her, she can't do anything about it."

"Actually, Will, I don't accept that --"

Mike cut Dustin off: "I don't believe it at all. An unclosable gate? If something can be opened, it can be shut again."

"What I mean," said Dustin, "is that this secrecy is unacceptable. I know you and Hopper have your little thing going, Will, and you're his secret deputy and all, but Vecna is back and we're going to die. And that's fine -- I've made my peace with that. That was the whole reason for this party tonight. But accepting the inevitable doesn't mean giving up, because it's never a hundred percent. There's always a small chance. The four of us are a team. There can't be any secrets between us at this point."

"Totally agree," said Lucas. "You need to come clean, Will. Do you know how El can be reached?"

Will looked like he was about to say something, but shook his head miserably.

Then it hit Mike. "You *do* know. And you've been in contact with her." *You and Hopper both.* "You lying piece of shit --"

"Whoa," said Dustin.

"Take it easy," said Lucas.

"Oh don't worry, guys," said Mike. "I'm just going to rip his head off." He grabbed Will from the couch and yanked him to his feet, yelling at him: "*Where is she? And don't even think --*"

"Mike, look out!"

Mike barely heard Dustin and Lucas as he was slammed from every direction by flying projectiles. Pain raked down his left arm, and something sharp bit into the back of his head. Shrieks filled his ears, and he realized the projectiles were demo-bats. Dozens of them, flying into Mike like aerial bombardments and clutching him with razor claws. He yelled and flailed his arms about, trying to ward them off, and was scratched and bit again; and again. The pain from the bites was excruciating. He heard the demo-dog roar. Terror seized him, and he threw himself on the floor, screaming and rolling to get the foul things off him.

Then suddenly they were off. He looked up. Dustin was holding the spiked bat that was once Steve's; it couldn't have been much use without clubbing Mike too. Lucas's weapon had probably been more effective: a pillow taken from the end of the couch, used to bat the bats away.

Mike got up, cursing his pain. The bite on his left arm was bleeding. *I'm going to get rabies.* He swore again.

"Just calm down, Mike," said Lucas.

Fuck you, Lucas.

"Mike, are you okay?" asked Will.

I'm not okay. And you won't be either.

"Well, this is bad," said Dustin.

Mike looked around. The bats were furious and hovering in the air not far from Mike, baring their teeth. Seven or eight of them formed a guard around Will on the couch. The demo-dog came closer, watching everyone, but Mike in particular.

Mike glared at Will. "What the fuck is this? Are they your friends?"

"No!" said Will. "Of course not!"

"Well, they sure seem mighty protective of you!"

"Stop yelling," said Dustin.

Four more bats joined the hover-guard next to Will and shrieked at Mike. Another landed on Will's shoulders, and Will swore, shooing it away.

Mike ignored the bats; ignored Dustin's warning. He wanted answers. "I swear to God, Will, you'd better tell us --"

"*Oh shit!*" yelled Dustin.

Mike turned and screamed. The demo-dog had lunged and was two feet from him, its petaled face wide open, raw with rage. *Christ, those teeth... those fucking teeth...*

Lucas yanked Mike back as the creature lashed out, missing Mike's head by inches. Mike was suddenly furious. He threw Lucas off and grabbed the baseball bat out of Dustin's hands, confronting the dog.

"Mike, no!" said Dustin. "That thing will tear you apart in seconds!"

"Fuck that," said Mike, knowing he was being stupid and not caring. He swung the bat at the demo-dog's head. The creature evaded the swing with ease, leaped sideways, and screeched at Mike again.

"*You want some, bitch?*" taunted Mike. He swung the bat again, missing by a mile. "*Come here you slimy fuck!*"

He was pulled back again by Lucas. Mike swore, struggling, and then Dustin was in front of him, taking the baseball bat from his hands. Mike cursed them both.

"Sit down," said Dustin, panting. "Stop being an asshole, and stop provoking that thing!"

"That *thing* can eat my shit," said Mike. He turned on Will again. "I want answers, Will -- and tell those fucking bats to fuck off!" They were rearing again and looked ready to fly at Mike.

"You're going to get us killed!" said Dustin. "Shut up and let me handle this."

"Sit down," agreed Lucas. "Now."

Mike hadn't taken his eyes off Will. The bats hadn't taken their eyes off Mike. The demo-dog was primed at Mike and ready to lunge. Will looked ready to kill himself.

To hell with you all. But Mike relented and sat down.

Dustin looked at Will. "Why are these things trying to protect you?"

Will shook his head, confused. "I honestly have no idea."

"Okay, listen. We won't force you to say anything you don't want. But I'm asking you. Please. If you know anything about El. Remember when this all started five years ago, and *we* worked with her to rescue *you* from the Upside Down?"

"Will," said Lucas gently. "Please tell us about El."

Mike looked ready to chew nails.

Will said nothing for a long minute, clearly debating. Then he relented. "All right. I know where she is. It's over --"

He never finished. The bats turned on him like the Furies. The very ones that had warded him against Mike now fell on him, smothering him with deadly intent. Almost instantly, there was a sickening wet sound of flesh tearing. Will was being raked and bitten apart; blood spattered from his torso, arms, neck, and face. He begged his friends for help.

Then they all realized what was happening. The shadow creatures hadn't been protecting Will from Mike's wrath. They had simply been trying to stop Mike from making Will talk. Now that Will was volunteering, he was the one who had to be stopped.

Which meant that Will certainly did have critical information about Eleven.

And Vecna didn't want him sharing it with his friends.

No information was shared, that night or any time after. Will went down under the swarm; every bat in the room descended on him. He screamed for his friends but they could do little more than watch. Mike, in an earnest one-eighty, led the defense, throwing himself on the flood of wings and fur that blanketed Will, crying his friend's name, the friend he had abused so terribly for too long. He pulled a few bats away and was bitten savagely for his efforts. Dustin kicked with his feet; Lucas swatted with the pillow. There was Will's shotgun by the couch, but it was useless against so many small attackers, and the bullets would have ended up inside Will. Desperate pleas, in the end, were thrown against the horde that answered to an implacable being -- a vicious entity who had once been exorcised from Will, but not completely. The host had been on borrowed time ever since.

No, no, no, God, don't take him from us...let them kill me, they should have killed me...

Mike kept grabbing bats, trying to save his friend.

And William Byers died, eaten alive before three people who meant everything to him.

Chapter Four:

The Eternal Nightmare of Max Mayfield

He came for her again.

The usual routine, every day or hour, when it suited him. There was no clock on his activity, just the drifting grandfather clock that bonged recurrently like water torture. He was a blot on her vision, still far away, but walking slowly, purposely, to announce himself.

She prayed for death at this moment, also routine, but technically the prayer made no sense. Death was the whole problem. It had put her in this nightmare to begin with.

She thought she had hit the floor of despair when she died and came to this hell: a wasteland wrapped in fog that bled red into the air. A place that was no place, but every bit as real. Thunder and lightning raged above, spiders scuttled the ground below, and in between, strapped to the black spires, his victims. Dead but forced to live on as streams of consciousness in a warped mindscape.

She was special though; different from those victims. She wasn't dead and hadn't been so for years. For how many she couldn't say; she had lost track of time and couldn't think coherently beyond the immediacy of her torment. But she had died nonetheless, and that passage had put her soul here. Or her consciousness. Whatever. It felt like a physical body and certainly registered as much pain; especially when he came for her.

He drew nearer. Taking his time, to prolong the agony of anticipation. She struggled, whimpering, but the five thousandth time was no different from the others. The vines held. They slithered as they kept her immobile on the spire, crawling over and savoring her nudity. Jail was home in this nightmare; the spire an eternal bed of pain.

It wasn't the only bed that imprisoned her. Somewhere else, she lay blind, broken, and brain dead. Thanks to her friend, her best friend, who had restored her to life when she was killed by the fiend who now approached. Her friend was like that, working miracles that backfired; who kept suffering on life support instead of letting it pass. Jump-starting her heart, of all things, with psychic power wielded like a defibrillator. Death hadn't lasted more than two minutes, but it was enough to send her consciousness to this twisted afterlife. To be strapped in, afflicted, terrorized, and raped for eternity, while her physical body was confined on a hospital bed.

Her friend, her best friend, had preserved her like this. In the name of saving her.

The road to hell, paved with staggering intentions.

She shivered on the spire, knowing his touch would come any moment. Then his monstrous invasion. Like the other victims around her, she was here to be broken, and broken again, on the lowest shelf of darkness. But she was his favored, his specially chosen. She had thwarted him once and tricked him twice; the price for that had to be paid in perpetuity.

He was a madman consumed by hate, and in this realm hateful memories took on a fragmented life. Shards of his old house floated at the center, and spiders were everywhere -- bursting from diseased sacs, scampering over pools of sludge. Mixed with his memories were those of his victims, given hideous incarnation when he allowed them form. Hers were the worst.

Closer now; very close. Her body trembled at his approach. She turned her head as much as the vines allowed, and saw him not twenty feet away. As always, she tried not to cry out, to deny him the satisfaction of terror, but all attempts at restraint in this place were as nothing before what he was.

"Max."

Names had power and he reveled in hers, to amplify her degradation. She hated her name because he was the only one who used it anymore. He and the shades that he raised. All the name did was reinforce how puny and trashy she was; a piece of meat to be chewed and plowed.

Another step, and he was there before her. The vines released her to his purpose. When his touch came, she fought reflexively, and he laughed, peeling her open like fruit. She closed her eyes, holding back a wail of despair that would have only fired his pleasure.

Then he took her.

His grotesque stump inside her, as he moaned like rot. The bottom of hell was so far down; the truest depths of evil beyond apprehension until something like this. What had she done in life to deserve it? To be smashed on this anvil of hate, again and again?

In the physical world you could send your mind away; go to another place, to minimize the shock and trauma. Here she couldn't, because this place *was* the mind -- *his* mind that controlled what she saw and felt. She could try to shut him out, as she did, but he was there a hundred percent. Long ago, in her own mind, she had hidden from him in a memory of the Snow Ball dance. In his mind there were no sanctuaries. No corridors to be chased down; no rooms to be found in. The red land was pure exposure.

Inside her, as he tore her flesh. His talons were swords and they shredded her, bled her like the surrounding mist. It went on a long time, and she cried, begging God for help, anyone to save her, to get her off the spire and out of hell.

Eventually it ended, as suddenly as it had begun. She vomited over both of them, and he chortled. When her eyes focused, she saw that he was looking her over. He often did this when he was finished. Lingered, loomed, and lectured.

"You were born for this, Max. To be ruined... so beautifully ruined."

Rubbing her cheek with the back of his talon, almost tenderly. She tried staring past him into the thunder and lightning above, but his face filled her world.

"Do you appreciate all I do for you?"

A voice that rumbled with spite. It was vain to try tuning it out. She thought of music. There was a song that once saved her. A song about making a deal with God; if only she could remember how it went -- even just the name of it.

"I should tell you a secret."

Leaning over, his mouth so close to her ear. Her need to scream was overwhelming.

"Your friends have given up on you."

Then abruptly, he turned and walked away. Until the next time, of course. But what did he mean? There were no such things as friends, or at least not anymore. He hadn't mentioned her friends in a long time, and she rarely thought of them. It hurt to think of precious things out of reach. *Given up on you*. Did he mean that her friends had been trying to rescue her? Until now?

Given up.

She cried then, more deeply than she had in a long time. She wanted to see her friends but couldn't remember their names, let alone what they looked like. Except her best friend, the one who had put her here. And her ex-boyfriend, sort of. He had been black; that much she could recall. And sweet and kind. She had pushed him away. This place was her reward.

Given up on you.

What was happening?

Fading out. Waking. Then out again. The spire held her up, no matter how far down she went. It was picturesque, almost, like being crucified with vines instead of nails. They choked her, the vines, not enough to suffocate, just enough to make breathing hard.

The thunder was angrier than usual. The wasteland bled deeper, a dark crimson, as if the mind of her tormentor was under some kind of stress. Was he killing people again in the physical world? Had he done something to her friends?

And then the familiar shade was there in front of her.

"Max."

Her brother. Or his doppelganger. Or a mirage. She no longer tried to distinguish illusion from reality. This place was her reality, regardless of ontological truths.

"Are you still glad?" he demanded. "That you stood there that day, and let me die?"

The same questions, plunging her into the guilt that defined her.

"It's okay, you can admit it, Max. You never do, but I'm patient."

Leave me alone, Billy. Please.

He came a step closer. "You hated me and wanted me to die. Didn't you?"

No. I mean, yes. I hated you. I didn't want you to die. I tell you every time.

Closer still. "Did you hate your friends?"

What? No. What do you mean, my friends?

He was in her face now. "You pushed away your friends, your nigger boyfriend most of all. You loved yourself and only yourself. Except that's not quite true, is it? You actually hated yourself. Because you deserve hate. You deserve hate, nothing but hate, nothing but hate, nothing but hate, nothing but --"

Stop! Stop saying that!

"-- nothing but hate, nothing but hate, nothing but hate --"

Her brother used words like her captor used his physique, to efface her and kill any lingering spark of self-worth. There was none; she was an ash heap of self-loathing. Responding to him only made it worse, and she knew it, but she was drawn into the game every time. She finally gave up and let the abuse run over her and do its job. She did deserve hate. Why else was she here? But the bit about her friends was jarring.

Did you hate your friends?

Why all of a sudden, the talk about her friends?

Sometime later, maybe hours, maybe days, there was a new voice. Shrill and passionate, rousing her from slumber.

Max!

A voice she hadn't heard in years.

Oh, Max, honey, how can you be here? What has he done to you??

A girl, it looked like. Crying over the sight of her.

Max, it's me. El. Can you hear me? Can you see me? I'm right here, honey.

El? As soon as she heard the name, a window opened. Onto memories long forgotten. *El*. Her best friend, oh God, her *best friend*. But no, it couldn't be. This was trickery, one of his cruel games.

Max, can you look at me?

Her eyes focused and she saw it was indeed a trick. The girl standing before her had black hair and glasses. El had brown hair and 20/20 vision. *Go away. I'm not listening to you. You're not El.*

The girl cried, very upset. It was a good act. But her captor had seriously bungled El's appearance. Probably because he had never seen El with hair. As an eight-year old, Eleven had been bald when she knew One at the Hawkins Lab, and her head had been shaved again during their last confrontation inside his mind. This place. Where El had failed her. *She failed me. Here. My best friend*. But not this girl, whoever she was.

No, Max, no. The girl was shaking her head, still in tears. *I look different, but it's me. It's really me. Remember when I braided your hair, and you taught me about boys? We had sleepovers, and made fun of Mike and Lucas.* The girl reached forward and touched her face. It was a soothing touch; impossibly nice. *I've been hiding from bad people. I had to make myself look different. Even Mike has seen me but doesn't know it.* Gentle fingers combed through her hair. Exactly as El used to do.

Yes. It was her, and once you saw past the hair and glasses, it was obvious. Eleven. Jane. Her best friend.

Who had left her here.

What has he done to you? repeated El. Her hand probed the bruises and injuries on Max's naked body, and she became furious.

There was sudden movement from the vines. They increased the chokehold on their captive, smelling danger. One of the tendrils slithered towards the intrusive hand. El withdrew it, and the tendril reared like a cobra. The vines were on full alert. Which meant that he would be on his way, very shortly. They were his eyes and ears.

Max inhaled air, fighting against the constriction. This was her chance, her miracle, to escape hell. But three years of rape had to be answered for. Pain and rage forced out the indictment:

You... you left me here!

I know, honey. I'm so sorry. He was too strong for me in this place. But I don't understand. You shouldn't be here anymore. This is where dead people come when Vecna kills their bodies. But I brought you back. From the dead, three years ago. And you're still alive in the hospital. I saw you yesterday. I don't understand --

Lightning hit the sky, and from somewhere close the clock bonged louder than usual. The vines around her tightened. The land was shaking at the fury of Vecna's approach.

You left me, Max sobbed. *He's coming for me, and you left me. Don't leave me again.*

Max, honey, listen to me. This will be very hard for you to hear. It's impossible for you to leave this place. It's not a physical place. It's his mind, and your -- your con-shus-ness -- is trapped here. Your body is safe, sort of. It's on a hospital bed. But your con-shus-ness is trapped here and I can't take you out.

You can! You can do anything! You brought me back to life!

I jump-started your heart with my powers. Your physical heart. I can't use my powers to move a soul or a con-shus-ness.

Max grew frantic. *I was here before and I escaped.* By the power of her favorite song. *I can leave again. I just need help.* Her friends had played the song during her assault in the cemetery, and it had freed her consciousness to return to her physical body.

El was shaking her head. *That's when he got inside your mind and brought you over here to his mind. You were a "guest" then as he tried to kill you. But later he did kill you, which put you inside his mind forever. Which I still don't understand, because I brought you back. You're not dead anymore.*

Max didn't understand any of this and didn't want to. She had to get out of this place, end of story. *El, I can't stay here, no more, he hurts me, he gets inside me, and I always hurt, and he keeps coming back, and I never get off this spire, El, please, please, please...*

Max, I'm sorry. I can't take you from here. You're trapped like the others -- forever. I have to kill him to free you all. If I kill him, his mind is destroyed and this place goes away. But I can't fight him here. He's stronger than me in this place. It's his own mind. I tried beating him before, remember? That's when he killed you, and almost me. I'm going to kill him outside in the world. Then you'll be able to wake up.



It was unacceptable. With her savior -- her *best friend* -- standing before her, after so much untold abuse, she would not remain here another

moment. If El left her now, it would be three more years, thirty more years, three hundred... Max cried, knowing the rape and torture would go on for eternity. Forever, and again, and forever...

Max, honey! I promise! I won't rest until I save you!

Max screamed and thrashed against the vines. *Get me down off this! Get me off and take me out of here!*

I can't! I have to kill him to do that! More thunder. More rage. Then a terrible voice boomed from the sky. It was him, Vecna, saying something ferocious and incomprehensible. El looked across the wasteland and then back. *He's coming, and I have to go. He knows I'm here and I can't let him see what I look like. I swear -- I swear to you -- I'll get you out of here! I won't let him keep doing this to you! I'll save you! Max, honey, I'll save you!*

Max was panic stricken. She repeated her pleas for immediate rescue, but El was already fading. The ease of her departure mocked every soul left behind. They seldom made noise, but Max thought she heard faint sobbing, as if the spires themselves protested the injustice. Max led the choir, demanding that El come back.

Then she was alone again. As if nothing had happened.

And he was on his way.

No, she sobbed. I can't. No more. She looked to the sky and screamed, begging for death.

When he arrived, it was the usual routine, but with rage unbound. His nemesis had broken in, and there were prices to be paid. Rescue fantasies to be crushed. And a girl, this fire-haired filly, to be opened and filled with all he had to give. He broke her like never before.

Chapter Five:

Revelation

"We want to see Hopper. Now." Mike wasn't messing around.

"You and everyone else," said Flo.

"We're going into his office," said Mike. This was beyond ridiculous.

"He's not there, Mike." The police secretary looked weary and ready to resign. "Believe me, I'd haul his ass out here if he were. Just to get both of you off my back."

"She's right," said Lucas. "He's not here. Let's go."

"Where is he, then?" demanded Mike.

"I don't know," said Flo. "Like I told you before." Yesterday Flo had explained that Hopper no longer kept the station informed about his whereabouts. In a town gone to hell, he was off dealing with any one of a million complaints -- house break-ins, thefts, assaults. People thought they could get away with crime now, and the sheriff's office didn't have the manpower or jail space to arrest everyone.

"No clue when he'll be back, I suppose," said Mike.

"Honey, I'd be surprised if he came back today at all. He slept here last night, left early this morning, and that's all we've seen of him."

"Thanks for nothing," said Mike. He abandoned the secretary's desk and let the next sob in line waste his time. It was lucky for Hopper that he wasn't here. At that moment Mike could have shot him with his own gun.

This was Mike's fifth trip to the station since the party the other night. Three times yesterday, with Lucas and Dustin; this morning with Lucas, and with Lucas again now, at 2:00 PM. Each time Mike had left a message with Flo telling Hopper what time they'd return to the station and

hopefully catch him. All three of them had made trips to Hopper's cabin, last night after the station visits, and then early this morning at the crack of dawn. No one had answered at the cabin, and the sheriff's car wasn't there. (Though Flo had just resolved that mystery.) Since the night of the party, Jim Hopper had been virtually a ghost. He came into the station for brief moments, and then out to deal with... whatever it was he dealt with.

"So what now?" asked Lucas. Officer Callahan was far down the line, near the station entrance, consoling a grieving mother who had lost her eight-year old son to a demo-dog. She had watched her little boy get torn to pieces and eaten in the backyard. Her pain became everyone else's as she cried about it.

"Fucked if I know," said Mike. "Christ, this town is the shit."

"Maybe we come back late tonight," said Lucas. "If this is where Hopper is sleeping now."

Mike shook his head. "He probably knows we'll find out he slept here, and he'll go to some motel."

"Don't be paranoid," said Lucas. "He's not trying to avoid us that badly."

"Don't be dense. He's absolutely avoiding us that badly." Right after Will was eaten alive, Dustin had radioed Hopper at the police station with Cerebro, and relayed the whole tragedy. Including the fact that Will had died precisely because he was about to reveal Eleven's location. But Powell had been the respondent on the scene, not Hopper, which had infuriated them all. The sheriff, Powell explained, had another emergency to deal with.

"He has a lot on his plate," muttered Lucas, but without conviction. Like Mike, he knew that Hopper certainly would have made time for Will's best friends in the wake of such a tragedy.

They had speculated about the whole business after their visit to the cabin this morning. Lucas had initially suggested that Hopper was avoiding them to protect himself. If Vecna killed Will because Will was about to reveal critical information about Eleven, then he would kill Hopper just the same. Hounding Hopper for answers put his life at risk.

"Not necessarily," Dustin had said. "We just need to be sure there are no shadow creatures nearby when Hopper talks to us. The dogs, bats, and vines -- they're all Vecna's eyes and ears. My house on party night was a surveillance zone."

"Yeah, well I hope you're satisfied," Mike said. "Was your party worth Will's life?"

"Actually, my house was superfluous. Will would have died if we had gone anywhere else to talk about El."

"How do you figure that?" asked Lucas.

"Because Will was marked by Vecna. Even after being exorcised. Vecna could still see and hear through Will. He didn't need the bats or the dog at my house for that. They just made it easier."

"That's true," admitted Mike. "Will felt Vecna on his back as soon as we came back from Lenora."

"And Vecna was even dead at that point," said Lucas.

"He wasn't deep inside Will, like before," said Dustin. "It wasn't a possession. But he was still inside him, in some way."

"On him," corrected Mike. He remembered their first day back from California, in March '86, when Will had sensed that he still wasn't free: *Now that I'm here in Hawkins, I can feel him*, he'd said to Mike. Then, over the summer, he began to describe that sensation as Vecna being "on him", as opposed to "in him". Probably because everyone worried that Will was being possessed again, and Will wanted to put those fears to bed.

"Right," agreed Dustin. "On him. But for spying purposes, it amounts to the same thing. Vecna could see and hear through Will. Once we started talking about Eleven -- I mean, assume we had gone to Lucas's house after the party to have our meeting -- Vecna would have summoned a bunch of bats or dogs on standby, ready to crash through Lucas's house the moment Will began to reveal El's location. Or maybe he would have showed up to kill Will himself, like he did at graduation. The point is, the creatures in my house were superfluous when it came to anything Will said or did. Vecna was on Will wherever he went. But Hopper isn't marked. He doesn't have to worry about being spied on every minute of the day. He only has to worry about that in the presence of the hive-mind creatures. The bats, the dogs, the vines."

"Then in that case," said Lucas, "we're probably looking at this all wrong."

"What do you mean?" asked Dustin.

"If he's not worried about being constantly spied on, then I don't think Hopper would fear talking to us. Maybe he doesn't *want* us to know where El is."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "Then he's an asshole like I've always said."

"Or maybe he's trying to protect us," said Lucas.

"Asshole," Mike repeated.

"Lucas may have a point," said Dustin. "I mean, this is all kind of a farce anyway, isn't it? We have a gate that can't even be closed, according

to Will's mysterious source. Vecna has enough power to annihilate the shit out of this town. Why haven't we had more slaughterfests like graduation night? Maybe Hopper is just trying to avoid batting the bee-nest and yes, protect us, and prevent as many deaths as possible. And maybe buy time."

"Time for what?" asked Mike. "The military?"

"Maybe," said Dustin, "but Hopper doesn't trust the military. Maybe he's trying to coordinate something with Eleven under the radar, and doesn't want us involved. So buying time, yes, but not for the government. For El."

"But what good is she, if she can't close the gate?" asked Lucas.

"Which I still don't buy," said Mike.

"Well," said Dustin, "if she can't close the gate, she can at least try to kill Vecna. I mean, he's the biggest threat of all. He controls the hive mind. Every single shadow creature is under his command at any given time. And we've seen what he can do -- he slaughters people the way you and I breathe air, including military personnel. Is she killed him, that would lessen the threat significantly. The military would be able to at least get into town. The shadow creatures would still be dangerous, but they would be mindless beasts. They wouldn't be under the unified direction of a supremely evil intelligence. Maybe El is planning a strike against Vecna, and Hopper is helping in some way."

"If she's going after Vecna, she may intend to go through the gate," said Mike. "Kill him in the Upside Down, where he lives."

"Unless she confronts him in our world," said Lucas. "Since he started the apocalypse, he seems to spend enough time on both sides of the gate."

"Whatever," said Mike. "In either case, we have the right to be involved. We're always involved against threats from the Upside Down. Hopper can't keep El to himself. He did that to us before -- to *me* before -- and he's not doing it again."

"It's a bit different this time, don't you think?" said Lucas. "Vecna's so powerful that he can slaughter massive amounts of people at a time. What he did at graduation night? To all the soldiers at the town border?"

"Exactly," said Dustin. "The only reason he's spared so many people so far -- including us, by the way -- is because he wants to milk us for all the agony we're worth. He enjoys making people despair before killing them. I have a feeling this apocalypse is going to roll out slowly in stages."

"You're guessing," said Mike.

"But it makes sense," said Dustin. "I mean, if this gate is truly unclosable, then he can afford to be blithe. And that's precisely what gives

El a shot at beating him -- if she can come through in time. Maybe that's Hopper's game."

"So what are we supposed to do?" asked Lucas. "Sit on our laurels and wait to see what happens?"

"Maybe that's not such a bad idea," said Dustin.

"I see what you're saying," said Lucas, "but I can't do nothing. The fact is we don't know what's in Hopper's mind. He hasn't told us jack shit. About *anything*. Maybe he's just up to his ass in alligators and not having any luck with El at all."

"Somehow I seriously doubt that," said Dustin.

"I'm with Lucas," said Mike. "And let's not forget that Will was our friend. And don't fucking say it, either one of you. I know I treated him like shit. That was my fault. But he's dead now, because we all asked him for something that Vecna wouldn't allow. We're involved whether Hopper likes it or not. He's not taking that from us."

"Fine," said Dustin. "But I need to spend some quality time with my mom today. You guys will have to go to the station without me from now on."

That was fine with them. Mike and Lucas were determined to find Hopper and make him account for himself -- and for whatever El was up to. But now, after the fifth time, Mike knew these trips were pointless.

"Let's go," said Lucas. "We're sardines in here."

"Agreed," said Mike. More people had come in. He looked at Officer Callahan, who was doing his best to manage the unruly line. There was a furious man complaining about shop owners who sold their wares at extortionate prices. Mike despised Callahan but didn't envy him.

Suddenly, someone yelled Mike's name and grabbed him from behind. Mike turned to face a stranger. A street person, by the looks of it, and the smell too. He wouldn't let go.

Mike pushed back. "Lay off, dude, what's your problem?"

"You're my problem, you jerk. I've been waiting to get my hands on you."

Then Mike recognized him, and swore in disbelief. It was Jonathan Byers.

"Holy shit," said Lucas.

"Shit" was a mild way of putting it. Jonathan looked like he'd been living in a shithole and eating whatever shit fell at his feet. Drugs had clearly taken their toll. His eyes were jittery, glassy, and bloodshot. A mophead of hair crowned his emaciated body, and he hadn't shaved in days. He barely gave Lucas a glance. His full angry attention was on Mike.

"Jonathan," said Mike uneasily. "Jesus, man, how did you get here?"

"Rental car," snarled Jonathan. "Airports have those."

"No, how did you get *here*, into Hawkins?" asked Mike. "Vecna's army isn't letting anyone through."

"Tell that to Vecna. His dogs let me pass for some reason. The army tried following me, but it was only me they allowed through."

"Vecna wants you here," said Lucas.

"You don't say," said Jonathan, not taking his eyes off Mike.

Why is he pissed at me? I always defended him against Nancy. "So... what, you got Hopper's radio message?" It had been sent last Saturday. Today was Wednesday.

"Eventually. I flew in last night." To Indianapolis, presumably. "Got to Hawkins this morning and went to the cabin first thing." He paused accusingly. "There was no one there, so I came here for Hopper. And now I'm told that Will" -- tears spilled from his eyes -- "that my brother was killed two nights ago. Because of your stupid party!"

Mike cursed himself. In his shock over seeing Jonathan, he'd forgotten the obvious.

"Jonathan, it was horrible," said Lucas. "We're all devastated."

"Yeah, I'll bet!"

"Jonathan," said Mike, "why are you --"

"Throwing a fucking party?" spat Jonathan. "Were you guys insane?"

"Hey," said Mike, "that was Dustin's idea. Blame him. We were at his house, not mine."

"No, I blame you." He looked ready to hit Mike. "You don't think I know you treated Will like shit for the past three years?"

Mike's eyes narrowed. "You'd best back off." Who was Jonathan to talk? He'd been ignoring his brother completely for the past three years. For the cause of meth.

Jonathan got up in Mike's face. His breath smelled like old tires.

"Because he was gay, you made him a pariah!"

Mike shoved Jonathan back. "Watch your mouth! You haven't even seen Will in three years. Your own brother, asshole. You had plenty of time for shooting crystal, I'll give you that. Or smoking it. Or snorting it. Will said you do all three. You look like fucking shit."

The punch was already flying and caught Mike below the eye. If Jonathan hadn't been so drug-wasted, it would have put Mike on the floor. Still, it was a solid punch and hurt like sin. Mike's temper exploded and he reacted without thinking. An eye for an eye, and he didn't pull his punch at

all. There was a sharp crack and Jonathan went sprawling. A tooth flew somewhere. The people in the station gasped at what was happening.

"Hey!" shouted Callahan. He broke off from the visitor he was talking to and came running at Mike. "*That's enough!*"

Mike couldn't stop. He threw his fist again and Callahan came right into it. Everyone was aghast as the officer dropped and went out cold. Mike stared at his hand, unable to believe it was hardly sore. Those two punches should have hurt him more. *Christ, get a hold of yourself.* He didn't listen to himself. His fury hadn't abated. Jonathan's accusations had hit way too close to home.

He sensed movement at his side and knew it was Lucas, going for a tackle. He leaped sideways, barely evading him. He spun to confront him.

"Mike --"

"Stay the fuck-toast away from me, Lucas, or I will split your head open!"

Lucas stared at him, wide-eyed. Everyone in the room was shocked. Flo was crying. Jonathan was moaning on the floor. Callahan may as well have been dead. No other officer was around.

"You just calm down," said Lucas. "Or you're going to be locked up."

Mike advanced on him. "I said: *Get. The Fuck. Away.*"

Lucas shook his head. "You're going to regret this."

Mike ignored him and knelt over Jonathan. The elder Byers moaned through a bleeding mouth that had one less tooth in it. Mike pulled up his head. "You're trash, Jonathan, you hear me? You were the shittiest brother. And you didn't give a gnat's ass about what Will went through here, being gay. Hey, are you hearing me?" He smacked Jonathan's face. Lucas was telling him to stop again. Lucas could fuck himself. "Jonathan?" He slapped him again, harder, and Jonathan groaned. "Keep your meth-head out of my face." He let him go and stood up.

Lucas looked ready to kill him.

"Relax," said Mike. "I'm leaving. And don't worry, I'll find another ride home." As he left, the other visitors parted for him, giving wide berth. He could hear Flo asking a visitor to help her examine Callahan.

Outside, he walked through the parking lot and headed toward a road in a random direction. He didn't know where he'd go, only that he had to get away.

"Mike!"

It was Lucas, of course, chasing after him. Mike kept walking.

"Hey!" said Lucas, catching up. "Get off the street! Do you have a death wish?"

"I don't care." *Let the demo-dogs come and do their worst.*

Lucas got in front of him and Mike stopped. "You'd better start caring. Especially when you end up in jail."

Mike waited for him to move.

"Get in my car, Mike."

"Lucas, I don't want to hear --"

"I don't give seven shits what you want to hear. Get in the fucking car."

"I don't want to go home either," said Mike.

"We're not going home."

Mike looked at him. "Well, what then?"

"There's a restaurant with a good bar about five blocks down. If it's open for business with all this shit going on. I'm taking you for a drink."

They were the only ones in the restaurant. *The Old Goat* was a modest establishment, known for its pork barbecue -- many locals would have killed for the sauce recipe -- and above all the bar, which had the best liquor selection in town. The owner was a known hedonist, and it was rumored that there were bedrooms available upstairs that occasionally turned *The Old Goat* into a bordello.

"Why is this guy even open?" asked Mike, standing in the doorway. To his right, a chalkboard announced a colorful welcome in four shades of chalk.

"Wants to make money," said Lucas. Like others who clung to the delusion that everything would soon blow over, the owner of *The Old Goat* was probably making a killing by raising prices. "We're going to pay through the nose here."

"Well, I hope you have cash," said Mike. "I have a ten-dollar bill and that's it." He'd been buying too many CDs lately.

"Yeah, I got cash," said Lucas, pulling out his wallet and thumbing through the bill pocket. "Thirty-two bucks, it looks like."

The kitchen door opened and the owner came out. He was pointing a shotgun at them. "What are you guys here for?"

"Whoa!" said Lucas holding up his hands. Mike did the same. "Just a seat at your bar. If you're open."

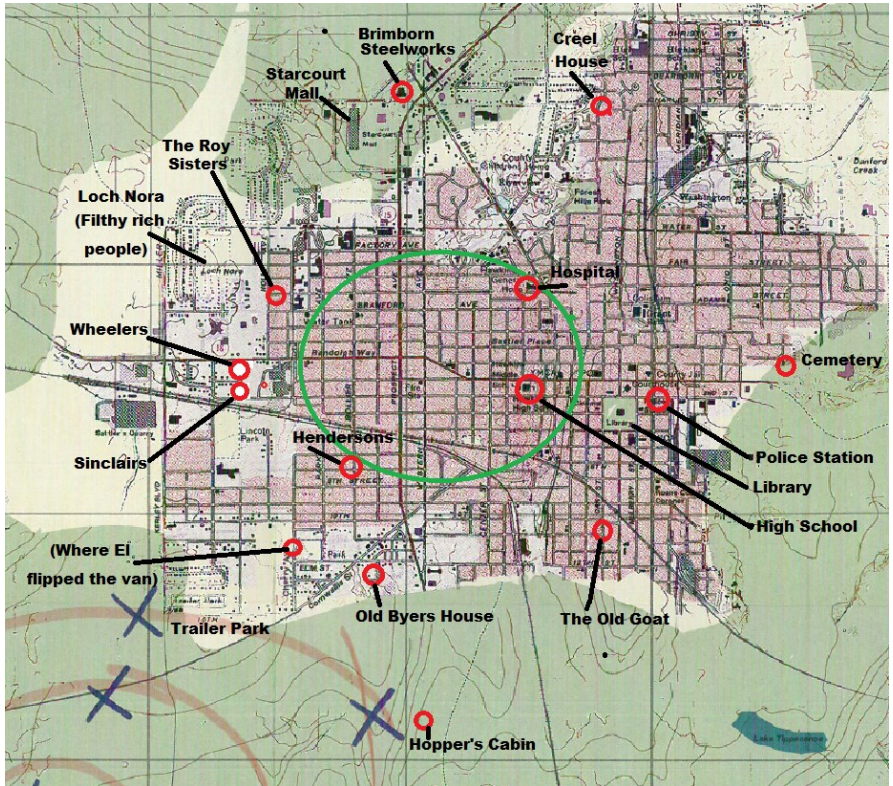
The man lowered his weapon. "Sorry. Lot of thieves these days. You want a lunch or dinner menu?" It was 2:40 PM.

"Just drinks," said Lucas, as he and Mike sat down.

He looked at them. "You guys aren't twenty-one."

"Do you honestly care?" asked Mike.

The owner laughed. "Not at all. But my drinks aren't cheap."
 "I think we're good for it," said Lucas. "Do you have a Sam Adams?"
 "Going for broke?" he asked. "That'll cost you eight bucks a glass."
 "Jesus," said Mike in disgust.
 "Sorry," he said.
 "It's fine," said Lucas. "What do you want, Mike?"
 "A Glenlivet single malt," he said flippantly.



"That'll be twelve dollars a pour."
 "I was joking," said Mike. "Just give me an Amstel."
 "I'll tell you what," said the owner. "I'm going to give you your drinks for the normal pre-apocalyptic price. You both look like you've had it rough."
 "You don't have to do that," said Lucas.
 "Yeah he does," said Mike.

"I want to do it. There has to be some trace of goodness left in this town going to hell. I'm Hoss, by the way."

"Thanks Hoss," said Lucas. "We appreciate it."

"Hoss?" said Mike. "Like the character from *Bonanza*?"

"The very same," said Hoss. "My father loved that show."

"You look nothing like Hoss Cartwright," said Lucas.

"For which I'm grateful," he said, laughing. "But my son Josiah looks a bit like Little Joe, and he's around here. You might see him. I keep him on patrol duty, outside and inside the building, and he has a gun. But don't worry, he won't bother you."

"Thanks for the heads up. I'm Lucas and he's Mike, by the way."

"Pleasure. I'll get your drinks."

Minutes later, their drinks came. It was \$3.50 for the Sam Adams and \$6.75 for the Glenlivet. They thanked Hoss, and he went back into the kitchen, telling them to holler if they needed refills.

"I'm going to savor this and make it last," said Mike, holding up the glass and staring at the amber fluid before taking the first sip. When he did, it tasted just as he remembered. He had tried Glenlivet single malt scotch whiskey once, last December, when he stole a 50-ml bottle of it from his father's Christmas stocking. After drinking it he became sympathetic to the alcoholic's plight. It was pure smoothness.

Lucas took a large swallow of his Sam Adams, and smacked his lips. "Honey porter. Man, that's good."

"Cheers, dude." Mike raised his glass.

Lucas clicked it and took another gulp. "Listen Mike, I want you to get a handle on yourself, because I'm so sick of your nonsense. This Jonathan thing, you're going to make it right."

"Oh, you still want to bust my balls?" said Mike.

"And a cop. You assault a fucking cop!"

"Callahan isn't a cop, he's a clown." *And a cretin. And a cunt-face.*

"Jesus, what is it with you?" said Lucas. "You lose a girlfriend three years ago, and what, you're off the rails for the rest of your life?"

"I guess I'm a sensitive guy. And she wasn't just any girlfriend. She was Eleven, for Christ's sake. And it's not just her. Will died. Remember? He was eaten alive as I tried saving him. So cut me a little slack."

"Max wasn't just 'any girlfriend' either. But she dies and goes into a coma for three years, and then she dies for good last weekend when the hospital gets eaten by the shadow. And Will is my friend too. But somehow I manage to keep my shit together."

"Oh yeah, I wish I could be like you, you self-righteous sack of shit."

"Keep it up," said Lucas. "You keep it up. If we somehow survive this, you won't see me around anymore."

Mike swiveled on his chair to face Lucas squarely. "Yeah, you know, it's funny, I seem to recall you saying that before. That you'd never come over to my house anymore. Yet somehow you keep showing up -- to work me and get me 'back on track'."

Lucas snorted. "A lot of good that's done."

Mike grinned. "You still fucking love me."

"Look, deal with your shit, you asshole. And get down on your motherfucking knees and apologize to Jonathan. The guy's a mess, and the fact is that you both treated Will like crap. And you pray that Hopper won't have you arrested for Callahan. And as for Will? Let me tell you this: he was a hundred times better than either one of us."

That sobered Mike. "Yeah, I'll drink to that."

They both drank in silence for a while.

"I didn't know how to deal with it," said Mike, finally.

"Sorry?"

"When Will said he was in love with me." *When he kissed me.* "I freaked out."

"Well, we have breakthrough," said Lucas. "You're at least talking about it after three years. What did you do when he made a pass at you?"

Do? "I didn't *do* anything, Lucas. I didn't know what to do. He didn't just tell me he was gay, like he told you guys. He said he loved me, and, you know... tried to... I didn't know how to react. What to say." *How to be his friend.* "It paralyzed me."

"Okay," said Lucas.

"Everyone hates gays, and I was worried people would think I was gay, which is stupid to worry about, I know, but it's... it was all new to me."

"Mike, you're allowed to be human and fuck up. Hell, you're allowed to keep fucking up. We're all good at that. What you're not allowed to do is stop trying to be better. It's in our genes to improve as a species. Try being a better human being. That's all anyone can ask."

Mike drained the rest of his scotch and shouted for Hoss. "I wish I could have done something for him." *Like Dustin. He danced with Will.* The simplest gestures.

"We all could have been better," said Lucas, finishing his porter. "You were the asshole, but Dustin and I weren't saints. We should have reached out to him more. No wonder Hopper became his best friend."

Mike was suddenly glad that Will had bonded with Hopper. Mike personally couldn't stand the sheriff, but that was because of the father-

boyfriend history with El. Objectively, he had to admit that Jim Hopper was solid and reliable. That was, until now.

Hoss came out of the kitchen. "You guys want a second round?"

"You know it," said Mike. "Glenlivet is the gift of the gods."

"Yeah, one more," agreed Lucas. "That's a good porter."

Hoss obliged them. "Glenlivet is good," he said to Mike. "And strong. So that'll be it for you, my friend."

"Yeah, of course," said Mike. "Hell, I'm not even eighteen, let alone twenty-one."

Lucas paid the same amount as before, then added a five-dollar tip.

"We'll settle up now so you don't have to come out again."

Hoss took the money. "Thanks guys. Drive safely when you leave. And be safe, with all the shit going on out there." He went back to the kitchen.

"You were saying?" said Mike.

"What was I saying?" asked Lucas, belching. "Oh... that we could all have supported Will better than we did."

"I was such a dick," said Mike. "He asked me to go hiking with him, right after he made a pass at me." It had been the end of the first month of their sophomore year. September '86. Will had waited five months after El's breakup letter to Mike. "It was awkward, you know, I had just freaked out, and he was embarrassed, and just trying to make sure our friendship was still okay." Mike had actually intended that very day to ask Will to go hiking with him. Danford Creek and the woods in northeast Hawkins. "So instead I tell him that I'm seeing Lori that weekend."

"Yeah," said Lucas. "Your first lay."

Mike scoffed. "I never slept with Lori."

Lucas looked at him. "You didn't?"

"Of course not." Lori Crain had shown a mild interest in Mike and they chatted sometimes in class. "I pretended to have a fling with her to avoid Will." *And because I needed to feel masculine.* "I was shitty for that."

"So Beck was your first," said Lucas.

"And only."

"Until the other night," said Lucas.

"Oh, Julie? Yeah. That was messed up. I mean, you and Sarah Danville?"

"I think I might have fucked a guy if he asked me," said Lucas. "It was a weird night."

"We should have all paired up with the same sex," said Mike. "If we survive this and the girls get pregnant..."

"Shit, I'm not ready to be a Pop," said Lucas.

"We can call the babies who were conceived at Dustin's eighteenth the Children of the Apocalypse."

Lucas laughed. "Sounds like a B-grade horror film."

Mike twirled his glass, loving the look of the amber. "So why do you think Vecna let him through?"

"What?"

"Jonathan," said Mike.

"I have no idea," said Lucas. "I mean apart from the fact that his brother had a rather unique relationship with Vecna. Possessed then marked."

"Yeah, it's part of his whole game," said Mike. "He wants the 'whole family' here to torment. I'm glad Mrs. Byers is where she is. Jonathan shouldn't have come here. You can bet your ass Vecna won't let him leave."

"Of course not," said Lucas. "And you can bet your dick and your ass that Jonathan wouldn't have come here if he had known in advance that his brother was dead. Another reason you should have more sympathy."

"Yeah, Lucas, I get it."

They soon finished their drinks and got up from their chairs. "I need to take a raunchy shit," said Lucas.

"How raunchy, dude?"

"The most diseased and smelliest shit that's ever passed through me." He looked across the room and saw a restroom sign. "I won't be long."

"Take your time," said Mike. "I'll be outside."

Lucas glared at him.

"Jesus. I'll be waiting in the car."

"You'd better be," said Lucas. He walked off to relieve himself.

Mike went outside but didn't go to the car right away. He was riding a pleasant buzz and not terribly concerned about his safety. It would have been a beautiful day if not for the broiling thunder and blackness hovering over the center of town. It was 75 degrees, not too humid, and just the right amount of breeze. He took in the sky and his surroundings and counted himself lucky he was still alive.

A car door opened to his left. Mike turned and saw three men get out of a large black sedan. One stayed behind the wheel. He saw their uniforms and sobered quickly. They were military.

"Michael Wheeler?" asked the eldest man, probably a colonel or a general. He was mean-looking and strangely familiar.

"Who wants to know?" asked Mike.

"You need to come with us," said the high-ranking official. The other two watched Mike intently.

Well, that didn't take long. "Is this for Jonathan Byers? And Officer Callahan?"

"You need to come now," repeated the officer.

This was starting to look suspicious, and then Mike suddenly remembered. *They shouldn't be here.* His heart began pounding. "Who are you guys? How did you get into town?" Had the army finally beaten Vecna's horde?

The official took a step closer. "I'm Colonel Evan Merritt. I'll answer your questions at the police station. We just arrived, and we're here to restore law and order."

As soon as the colonel said his name, Mike remembered. *Merritt.* The man who had been hunting Eleven for three years. Shortly after the Four-Day Apocalypse, he had torn apart Hawkins searching for her. His men had planted the bugs. In Mike's home, Lucas's, Dustin's, and Hopper's cabin. He was known for being a sadist, and he had frightened Mike's little sister Holly.

"What do you need me for?" asked Mike. He glanced toward the restaurant. Lucas was still inside doing his business.

Merritt's face reddened. "I'm not accustomed to answering questions. Come with us, Mr. Wheeler."

Mike backed away. "I don't think I will." Whatever Merritt wanted, he exuded nothing but the worst intentions.

The colonel barked an order, and the other two men were on Mike in seconds, easily overpowering and restraining him.

"Let me go!" He was about to yell for Lucas, but didn't want him captured too. He looked over at the restaurant again as he was dragged into the car. He thought he saw a figure with a rifle looking out the window. Terrified now by whatever was going on, he shouted and struggled vainly against his captors. He felt his neck being pricked, and he was shoved into the back seat of the sedan. The back doors slammed shut and he was squeezed between the two soldiers, while Merritt slid into shotgun.

For the hundredth time, Mike wondered where the hell Hopper was. "We're going... to... the police station... you said?" He slurred the words and felt his eyes getting heavy.

Merritt turned and looked at him from the front seat, smiling like a predator. "Well, not exactly. I lied about that. We're going to see someone you've been wanting to see for a long time. As have I. It's the end of the road for both of us, Mr. Wheeler. And not a good one for you."

The words sounded like Merritt was drooling; speaking through water. Mike was sinking fast into whatever sedation had been prepared for him. He tried fighting it, but he was out in seconds.

He woke groggy and feeble, on a cushioned armchair, in a room bathed in florescent lighting. His arms and forehead itched madly from where he'd been bitten the other night. He tried to scratch himself and realized he couldn't. His hands were cuffed behind his back. He felt the rise of panic. He'd never been in handcuffs before and didn't like it at all. He surveyed his surroundings as best he could. To his right someone sat in another chair: one of the two men who had apprehended him. To his left, on the wall, yellow curtains draped over a long horizontal window. He couldn't see what was behind him in this room and didn't bother trying.

"Awake now?" asked the soldier.

Mike cleared his throat. "What is this place?"

The soldier stood up, ignoring his question. He walked across the room and left through a door. Mike heard him walk down a hallway and knock on another door. "He's up," said the soldier.

Mike tested the strength of his handcuffs with the expected result: they were unshakable. He was scared by this turn of events. And he itched like mad.

Footsteps returned down the hall, but it wasn't the soldier. Colonel Merritt entered the room alone. He closed the door and stood appraising his captive. To Mike, he looked more fiendish than Vecna.

"Where have you brought me?" asked Mike.

"To an old building," said Merritt. He moved the empty chair so that it faced Mike and sat down in it. "We have it all to ourselves."

What does that mean? "Am I under arrest?"

The colonel smiled. It was a smile that promised ovens of hell. "Not exactly."

"Then what's this about?" demanded Mike, his voice quavering. "Why am I in handcuffs? Is this for Jonathan Byers and Officer Callahan?" He already knew this colonel didn't give a rat's ass about his assault at the police station, if he even knew about it at all.

"I'm asking the questions," said Merritt. "And my questions --"

"Eat shit! I want to know what this is about. Where exactly in town are we?"

"-- my questions," continued the colonel, as if Mike hadn't interrupted, "concern the girl known as Jane Hopper. Known to you also as Eleven."

Mike's heart skipped a beat. "You're still on that crusade? She's not the cause of this apocalypse, and she died in the last one. You came here and searched all our homes."

"I should have come back and searched again," said Merritt. "And kept looking until I found her. She's been living here for three years. Though I believe that comes as a surprise to you as well."

"Your head is up your ass. El hasn't been here all that time."

"Oh. Meaning you think she's been somewhere else. Meaning that you never did believe that she was dead. Where *did* you think she was all this time?"

Mike cursed to himself. "No, she is dead. I just meant... It's stupid that you think she's been in Hawkins with us. You turned the town upside down looking for her."

"I didn't say she was in Hawkins with *you*. It's become evident that she's been hiding under your nose, and none of you had the wits to catch on. Except for the late William Byers and the esteemed James Hopper -- who is proving to be elusive, but I assure you, we'll find him too -- yes, except for those two, who have always been in the know. They're the ones who set up her special living arrangement. Ms. Hopper apparently got out of town right before we arrived to look for her -- that concerns a matter for which she will pay dearly -- and she hid out in Indianapolis for about a month, then returned, in around the middle of May '86. Since that time, for almost exactly three years, she's been living here as a documented citizen." The colonel smiled. "Not far from you, in fact."

This was a heap of horseshit. El could not possibly have been living in town for that long, let alone so close to his own residence. Will and Hopper would have never kept that from him. *She* would have never done that to him. Provoked by the outrageous idea, Mike didn't waste any more time on lies. "Whoever's been feeding you information doesn't know shit from shine. El has been in Hong Kong, not Hawkins. After the last apocalypse she went back to Lenora Hills, in California, not Indianapolis. By the end of the year she was in Taiwan. She left with a boyfriend and she's probably married to him now. As far as I know, she's still there." *Unless she's on her way to Hawkins now, or already here*, he didn't add. Will had been about to reveal something but failed. Mike and his friends were still completely in the dark about whatever Will and Hopper had been doing to get Eleven back.

At that, Merritt laughed. It was a cold laugh that made a dragon sound cute by comparison. "Well, at least we're past the fiction of her demise. I

never believed she was dead, of course, but it's quite plain that you have believed she was far away from you, and even out of the country."

"I know where she's been. We've been hiding that from you all along." Mike was spilling everything now, as if explaining it all would ensure the truth of it. "When you put the bugs in our house? We knew that. Hopper found them right away. And we were careful to always pretend that El was dead when we talked about her. We never mentioned Lenora or Taiwan around your bugs, but we knew she was living in those places all along."

"Yes, yes," said the colonel. "Your conversations were very circumspect. Hopper was fooling me, but also fooling you at the same time. The difference is that I know when I'm being deceived. You obviously don't. Nor do your friends and families. You were all duped about Eleven's whereabouts, even as you were pretending that she was dead. Young William and Sheriff Jim were playing a doubly duplicitous game."

"Bullshit!" yelled Mike. There was no way this was true. It implied levels of deception that were off the scales. "I don't know what you're trying to get out of me, but I just told you the truth. El isn't here."

"Oh, but she is. In fact she's sitting right now in the next room."

Mike went rigid. "What?"

"You heard me."

"She's here," said Mike. "In this building."

"Yes. Would you like to see?"

Mike was tumbling inside, trying to make sense of what couldn't be. Knowing that El had dumped him and then flown overseas with nuptial intentions had devastated him. Merritt was saying that she had done something worse. With the blessings of Hopper and Will. Hopper, maybe, he could see -- the son of a bitch had done this to him before -- but not Will. And not El, who had promised, *promised*, to never stay hidden from him again, the way Hopper had confined her to his cabin back in '84. No. It was absurd.

Yet the absurdity was eating at him. It was so preposterous it might be true. It would account for Will's excruciating discomfort when forced to talk about El at the party.

He nodded at Merritt, swallowing hard. "Show me."

The colonel rose from his chair and told Mike to do likewise. The handcuffs kept his arms locked behind him, but he was able to stand well enough. Whatever drug he'd been given had worn off. Merritt walked over to the side of the room with the yellow curtains, and with a huge sweep drew them back.

Mike gasped. The windows showed a room with a long table and a girl sitting at it. He got up close to the glass for a better look.

"It's one-way," said the colonel. "She can't see us."

Mike looked closely at the girl, and almost choked when he saw what was around her neck. It was a shock collar, exactly like the ones Dr. Brenner had used on his lab kids to keep their powers in check. El had been wearing a collar at the Silo Lab when Mike arrived in Argyle's pizza van to rescue her. The collar served two purposes: for electric shock torture, and to dampen the use of psychic powers. Brenner had collared El for defying him after she regained her powers, and for allying with Dr. Owens against him. The piece of shit had been gunned down shortly after that, and begged El for a forgiveness that she couldn't offer. The collar around this girl's neck would have kept her from using any psychic powers, if she had any.

But she wasn't El. Mike immediately recognized her, and felt like a fool for taking the colonel's nonsense seriously. She was one of those two sisters who lived off Holly Avenue. The Roy sisters. They were recluses and a bit weird. Mike had seen them a couple of times. This was the younger one, Rachel. He'd seen her when he was out buying shoes. She'd bought a pair of sneakers.

He turned to Merritt. "That's not El, you idiot. That's Rachel Roy. She's a recluse, not a spy. Whose dick did you suck to get your job?"

The colonel watched him carefully. "It's funny how disguises fool people, even after they're told what to look for."

"Are you on crack? That's not her."

"Are you sure?" asked the colonel. "Ignore the black hair and glasses."

Mike looked again. Rachel was looking down at the table and at a side angle that made it hard to get a clean look at her face, but... no, there was no way she was Eleven. She couldn't be. On the other hand, Mike had never seen her up close. He squinted and focused harder, suddenly doubtful. Then she looked up slightly -- and Mike caught the full front of her face. It smacked him like a cannon ball. Unbelieving, he stared. *No... you.... no... not possible... how could you....*

"No more doubts?" asked Merritt.

Mike was shaking with emotion. "Let me in there," he said. "I have to talk to her."

"Oh, I'm afraid that's out of the question," said the colonel.

Mike faced him. "No! I have to see her!" He cursed his handcuffs and shouted at the window. *"El! El, it's me! It's Mike!"*

Merritt grabbed Mike by the throat and choked him. Mike struggled, unable to breathe. After a long minute the colonel asked: "Are you going to keep quiet?"

Mike nodded, his face purple.

"Good. She can't hear you anyway." He released Mike and threw him into the chair. Then he went over to the window and took a remote switch out of his pocket. He clicked on it and the window went black. Eleven and the room she was in disappeared. He closed the curtains again.

Mike inhaled air. "Please," he begged, coughing. "She and I can't do anything to hurt you or escape. She's collared and I'm cuffed. I just want to talk to her." He began crying. *El! You talked to Will and Hopper all this time, but not me? When I was seven blocks away from you?*

The colonel stood over him. "Stop your blubbing and listen to me. I brought you here for one reason only. As insurance. Jane Hopper has a lot to answer for. It's true that the neck collar should keep her subdued, but she has proven herself to be extraordinarily resourceful. If she gives me any trouble at all, or displays even a hint of her witch-powers, my men will kill you at once. She knows this. One of my men will be here in this room with you at all times when I leave and return to her."

"Why?" demanded Mike, in tears. "She's not the bad guy. She's never been bad." *Except to me.* "She keeps saving Hawkins from the shadow world."

"*Never been bad?*" Merritt was venomous. "Are you aware of how she murdered my friend and colleague?" He waited for Mike to answer. "Well, are you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Mike. "El's not a murderer."

"Oh, but she is, and she confessed her crime to me earlier today, when I brought her here. Not that there was ever any doubt."

"If she killed someone, I'm sure he deserved it. Especially if he was a friend of yours."

Merritt smiled mirthlessly. "You indict yourself like she does."

"Well, who did she kill?"

"Colonel Jack Sullivan," said Merritt. "A great and noble man."

Sullivan. That piece of shit. He was the one who had hunted for Eleven during her memory therapy at the Silo Lab in Nevada. He had believed she was responsible for the teenage serial killings, and for all the previous shadow ills in Hawkins. "Sullivan was trying to kill her."

"Can you blame him? She's a murderer. And Sullivan was following orders. Of the United States Government. Against which Ms. Hopper was,

and still is, in rebellion. But it's worse than that. She didn't even kill Sullivan in self-defense. She murdered him in cold blood, sadistically, after the apocalypse was over and Vecna had been dealt with."

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"What I mean," said Merritt, "is that she murdered Sullivan from a long distance, just as she did to the teenagers in Hawkins. It was a couple weeks after the Four-Day Apocalypse. We found him dead in his private room in Washington D.C. You know how he was killed?"

Mike shook his head.

"His eyes were torn out, his arms and legs were twisted and broken, and he had a terrified expression on his face. Sound familiar?"

That was how Vecna had killed his victims. Including Max, though El had brought her body back to life.

"There was no sign of forced entry into his room," continued the colonel. "Security footage showed no intruder at all in the army compound."

"That was Vecna, not El," said Mike.

"You're not listening. This was after the Four-Day Apocalypse. Vecna had been killed -- or at least temporarily -- and the four gates were closed. It could not have been any creature from the shadow world that killed Sullivan."

"I don't know what to say. But that's not El. She wouldn't have done that."

"Once again, you underestimate her. Or overestimate her, depending on your point of view. As I just told you, she confessed her crime to me already. She killed Sullivan viciously. She entered his mind, terrorized him with nightmares, and then tore him apart. And she did all this from Hawkins, while he was in Washington D.C."

"No, no... that doesn't make sense." *Jesus, El, what were you doing?*

Merritt seemed to hear his silent question. "As she explained it to me, she was avenging Dr. Samuel Owens. Sullivan had killed Dr. Owens, and Ms. Hopper didn't like that."

"Well, there you have it!" yelled Mike. "Dr. Owens didn't deserve to die! He was a decent man. Unlike that shit Dr. Brenner."

"Owens was a traitor. He and Brenner both deserved to die, for aiding and abetting Jane Hopper."

"So this is all because she killed your friend?" asked Mike.

"Of course not," said Merritt. "There's the larger issue at stake. She's responsible for this apocalypse, just like the last one."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"She confessed on this point as well."

"Excuse me?"

"She did."

"Oh, let me see if I understand. She confessed to inviting Vecna to slaughter the senior graduating class and then to slaughter the entire world? You're not that much of an asshole."

"The gate that opened last Friday night was created by her," said the colonel. "And it cannot be closed. She's been Vecna's ally all along."

"What? No." That was a horrible distortion of the truth. According to Will, El had created the mega-gate by mistake and through the best intentions. She had closed the four gates at the same time -- instead of handling them one by one -- which fused them into a single super-powerful gate. "El would never have intended something like that."

"Whether she's a willing or unwitting ally of Vecna, it amounts to the same thing. She's a national security threat. She has proven to be a threat time and time again. And she's a vicious killer, a traitor to the government, who murders government officials to settle personal scores. Need I say more? Jane Hopper has plenty to answer for. Which she will, by my hand."

"Don't kill her." Mike became frantic. "Please don't hurt her or kill her."

Merritt smiled. "I'll do what's necessary and probably kill you both. I'm a patriot to my country. Now listen good. Behave yourself in here. I'm sending Adam back in to watch you. If your girlfriend gives me any lip, I'll signal him and you'll die for it. If you give Adam any lip, you'll die for it." He turned and walked towards the door.

"Please!" shouted Mike. "At least let me talk to her!" *I haven't spoken to her in years. And she's been here all along.* The hurt from that went deep. "That's all I'm asking. Just let us say good-bye to each other." He was crying again. "Please."

Merritt looked at him coldly, as he stood in the doorway. "Look at it this way. If she wouldn't speak to you for three years, seven blocks down, why are you so desperate to give her anything? Say good-bye to yourself. You're more worthy than she ever was. Not that it will likely save you." He left and slammed the door. Hard boot heels walked away on the floor of the hallway.

And it was then that Mike Wheeler finally gave up -- on life, himself, and the girl for whom he'd carried an unquenchable flame. She was in the next room and still as distant as the stars. She could hardly have cared. He lied on the floor and curled into a ball. *I never stopped loving you, El.* Tears spilled, and he cried the anguish of the lost.

He was hardly aware when Adam returned, ready to kill him at a moment's notice.

Chapter Six:

The Colonel's Captive

When he came back at last, she was almost glad to see him. Waiting was harder than confrontation. Both required courage, but the solitude that came from waiting eroded courage. Though she had spent much of her life in solitude and become accustomed to it, the past three years had blessed her with a sister. Now Jace was dead, and her stepbrother too, and she was a captive of the monster who had dreamed of this day, this special day, when he could torture her with impunity. The waiting ate away her capacity to confront him.

Then she thought of Max and rebuked herself. After yesterday's horror, she had no business complaining. Max was on an endless cycle of waiting, confrontation, and torture. She could relate a billion percent to El. Suffering the pattern every day, maybe many times a day, for three whole years. Will and Hopper had always said that Merritt was as dangerous as Vecna, but El was doubtful. There were bruises on her right arm, and a swelling on the left side of her head, from blows he'd delivered earlier, but those were kisses compared to Max's wounds. The colonel was a monster but surely not the devil.

She was about to find out.

He entered the room of her confinement. It was empty save the long table, and a cot against the wall opposite the door. There were windows to her right, but they were black and opaque. He sat across the table from her, placing down the same folder he had brought before. "Behave yourself this time," he said.

She said nothing. His mood seemed brighter, as if things were going his way. That would be bad news for her.

"There's been a development," he said. "Your wet dream. Mike Wheeler. He's here."

She could see that her reaction gratified him. Her heart began racing. "Where?" She tried asking in a normal tone, but the question came out hoarsely.

"In this building," he said. "Somewhere." He leaned forward. "Let me be clear. If you don't answer my questions and fully cooperate, or even worse, if you try using any of your powers despite that neck collar, Mike will be killed immediately. I won't even have to leave this room to give the order. Do you understand?"

She stared, hating him. "I understand," she said.

"Good. He knows --"

"I understand that you're a monster."

"Name calling is pointless and will be taken as a sign of obstruction. Watch yourself. Mike knows that you're here. It was -- how shall I put it? - a shock for him. Seeing who Rachel Roy actually is. Why he cares for you at this point is beyond me. Regardless. Do you want to me to bring him in here, so you can be sure I'm not bluffing you?"

She wanted more than anything to see Mike -- to hold him, to assure him of her love and fidelity -- but she couldn't face him. His heart would be a wasteland right now, and she couldn't face the accusations. Not when she was like this, collared and stripped of what made her so worthy in his eyes. "No," she said. "I believe you."

That surprised him. "Very well. Let's resume then." He opened his folder, removed a notepad, and took a pen from his jacket. "About Jacinta Roy. I trust you're over your hissy fit. How did Hopper get you two together?"

Earlier today he had gloated over killing Jace, and she had screamed at him, refusing to answer any more of his questions. Merritt had grabbed her arm, digging his fingers in cruelly, and with his other hand punched her savagely in the head. That had left her on the floor, and ended the interview. She still wasn't over Jace. She wasn't over Will. Her pseudo-sister and stepbrother had meant everything to her. But any place for grief was far away from here. She had to steel herself, lest Mike be added to Merritt's kill list.

"It was an easy arrangement," she said. "Jace and Rachel lived in Kokomo, with their mother. Hopper knew Jace because her uncle used to live in Hawkins and worked at the police station, until he moved to Arizona. It was around that time, three years ago, Rachel left Kokomo to live with her father in Minnesota. Jace was eighteen and Rachel was

fourteen. I was fourteen, and Hopper got the idea to have me take Rachel Roy's identity, and come and live in Hawkins with Jace. Dying my hair black and wearing glasses made me look like Rachel."

"So the real Rachel Roy is in Minnesota right now?" asked Merritt. He was scribbling all this down on the notepad. "Where in Minnesota?"

"She's in Canada. Somewhere, I don't know, under a different name. She emigrated with her father. Hopper helped them with the move and change of identity -- that was about a year and a half ago."

"What's her name now?"

"I don't know," she said.

He stared at her, waiting.

"I'm telling the truth. I don't know. Jace never told me and I didn't want to know."

"So as Rachel Roy, you were home schooled by your sister, who had become your legal guardian."

"Yes."

He finished writing and flipped to a blank page in his notepad. "I doubt she taught you well."

"She was a good sister. And a good friend." *Your men killed her.* "She didn't deserve to die."

Merritt and his men had come knocking at the Roy apartment at 10:30 this morning. Jace had opened the door and been gunned down on the spot; then the soldiers had thrown in a sleeping gas grenade, so that "Rachel Roy" could not unleash any fury on them, if she really turned out to be Jane Hopper as their colonel suspected. He'd been tipped off the night before, but hadn't yet told her by whom. The grenade gas had done its job, putting her under almost instantly. When she woke up, it was in this room -- wherever this was.

"Jack Sullivan didn't deserve to die. The soldiers you killed in that helicopter explosion didn't deserve to die. Don't play this game with me. You're the most wanted terrorist in the country. You signed Jacinta Roy's death certificate the moment you and Hopper made her your accomplice."

She choked back a reply. She would start yelling if she said anything more about Jace.

"Speaking of Hopper," he said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"You told me earlier that he regularly contacts you."

"But he doesn't tell me where he goes," she said. Since the other night -- the night of Dustin's foolish party -- Hopper had told her that he would stay on the move and never tell her where he was, so that she couldn't tell

anyone in turn. "He's staying away from his home, and mostly avoiding the police station. He never tells me where he is."

"What is he doing?"

You'd never believe me.

He frowned, tapping his pen on the table. "I'm waiting."

"He's not doing anything."

The colonel ground his teeth. "Don't be stupid. I warned you."

"I'm not stupid, and I'm telling you the truth. Hopper doesn't want to provoke Vecna and risk more people dying, so he's laying low and just trying to get information."

Merritt wasn't happy with that answer, but let him stew. She was telling the simple truth, as she said. But her insistence that she wasn't stupid belied other truths. The whole present fiasco -- the unbeatable apocalypse, her estrangement with Mike, and her captivity in this room -- derived precisely from her stupidity, specifically from three Supremely Stupid Acts on her part. The past seven hours had given her ample time to reflect on them.

Her Supremely Stupid Act #1 was to close the four gates by treating them as one. True, she had ended the Four-Day Apocalypse (of March 29 - April 1, 1986), but by doing this she had made the four gates into a single mega-gate that could not be closed. She realized her colossal blunder last Saturday. It was the morning after graduation, and she had gone into the death zone to close the gate. This was why she had remained secretly in Hawkins all this time; to stop Vecna when he returned as promised. But the gate didn't acknowledge her attempt to close it. It was impervious, or immune, and not threatened by her powers. She had seen with her psychic prescience the drastic error she had committed; that she should have closed each of the four gates individually. The only saving grace was that Vecna wasn't tipped off by the use of her powers, since the gate didn't register her as a threat. This kept her off Vecna's radar, and he remained unaware that she was in Hawkins (until she committed Supremely Stupid Act #3).

There was a bonus grace: Vecna was unable to probe or enter her mind at will, thanks to the Nina Project. It had restored her powers with added abilities. Dr. Owens had told her that Nina would not only reignite her powers but make them stronger, and she had learned the truth of that in two ways. First, she had the unconscious ability to blank her mind from any psychic intrusion. So her presence in Hawkins would not leave her open to Vecna preying on her mind, which he could normally do even from the Upside Down; it was how he had killed his teenage victims with nightmares. She could not be spied on like that, and so her presence in

Hawkins had remained hidden from Vecna (until Stupid Act #3). But second, her "blinking" ability also blanked her physical scent from non-intelligent creatures. She had discovered that by accident, when taking a walk two and a half years ago in the Forest Hills Park; a nasty doberman pinscher had gotten loose and was terrorizing every stroller who got near it. Except for her. The dog had given her a brief look and then ignored her as if she weren't there.

That second power was a godsend in the current apocalypse. She could wander anywhere in Hawkins and not have to worry about fending off assaults from the demo-dogs, bats, and vines. They hardly registered her presence. Which had made it very easy for her to slip into the death zone that Saturday night, when she tried to close the gate. For all the good it did.

Her Supremely Stupid Act #2 was to kill Colonel Jack Sullivan and rub it in the government's face. That act -- also three years ago, less than two weeks after the four-day horror (and her Stupid Act #1) -- had ensured that she would be feared and hunted by the military until she was exterminated; that her friends and family would never again enjoy privacy. Yet she remained unrepentant. Dr. Owens had done everything for her. She had come to love him during her training in Nevada (much to the resentment of Papa, who had believed himself to be deserving of that love). She had pulled a Vecna, quite deliberately, copy-cutting his style, and invading Sullivan's mind when he believed himself safe back at his headquarters in Washington. Nightmares filled him and wreaked a violation more hideous than what Vecna had done to his teenage victims. It had felt monstrous to do that, but by God, it had felt *right*. Sam Owens had to be spoken for.

Only later had she realized the stupidity of her vengeance -- her father made that loudly clear -- but she had no regrets, not even now, sitting here collared before Merritt. She'd gladly kill Sullivan again and leave his remains on the White House lawn. But facing the truth last Saturday of Supremely Stupid Act #1 had pulverized her; demoralized her terribly. She had done exactly what Vecna hoped she would do, and merged his four gates into something invincible. It hadn't helped when Will, the following day, accused her of "fucking everyone in the ass" for good. In the letter she had given to Will, she explained to him and Hopper how she had immediately tried to close the gate the morning after graduation night; that she had failed and her best guess as to why. Though it hadn't really been a guess. Her psychic senses had told the story: the mega-gate was of her own making.

Her demoralization had lasted two days. She sat in her apartment with Jace, convinced she was not only a monster who killed like Vecna -- and

enjoyed it as much as he did -- but an instrument of the Upside Down. She wouldn't try fighting Vecna anymore, for all she did was help him by doing so. She sent Will away with her letter, but not before asking him a favor that only made him angrier. *Sex. I only asked him for sex.* So that she'd be good for Mike. Will had been mortally offended, as if Vecna himself had tried raping him. She couldn't do anything right.

Jace had finally snapped her out of self-recrimination, and on Tuesday, yesterday, she decided to act, committing Supremely Stupid Act #3. She had entered Vecna's mind to look for Max. It was the reason she was now a prisoner.

It began with her psychic visit to Max in the hospital. The building was still under power from a generator, though the shadow creatures had killed the patients. Except for one. From her bedroom in the Roy apartment, El had reached out and probed for Max's mind, to see if it still existed. To her shock she found that Max was indeed still alive. Brain dead still -- her mind was as blank as it had been since El resurrected her -- but, incredibly, spared the depredations of the shadow creatures. Then El used the Void to "spy" on Max's external surroundings, and saw to her greater shock that she was being tended to by two orderlies. Judging from their conversation, Vecna was keeping their families hostage and forcing them to monitor Max in the death zone; replace her IV tubes and keep her body alive. Vecna had apparently visited Max in the hospital every day since graduation night, treating her patient room as some kind of a holy shrine.

At that point, El had become extremely alarmed about the nature of Max's brain death, and wondered if Vecna had trapped her inside his mind. She stepped inside it to find out. She could do this, just as she had entered her mother's mind in '84, Billy's mind in '85, and Max's and Vecna's minds in '86. And since Vecna was now in this world, she didn't have to worry about blowing open another gate. It was psychic connections *across* dimensions that created gates (it was how she opened the first gate in '83), and Vecna was now in this dimension since graduation night. It was a stupid act in any case. She found Max, but at quite a cost. Once she put herself in Vecna's mind, he was instantly aware that she was close by -- most likely in Hawkins -- even though her friends pretended otherwise. From that point, he probably deduced that Will's reclusive friend "Rachel Roy" was Eleven. Will had been marked by Vecna, which meant that Vecna could see and hear through Will with minimal effort. He didn't need to enter Will's mind; he was always "on" Will in a special way. Given the tense and restrained conversation between Will and "Rachel" the other day -- especially when Will accused her of "fucking everyone in the ass" --

Vecna might well have concluded that "Rachel" meant she had fallen into Vecna's trap, by making the four gates single and invincible.

That would have made him desperate. His nemesis was in Hawkins, and she was likely this "Rachel Roy" with whom Will often schemed. Eleven was a dangerous enemy. She had defeated Vecna when she was only eight years old, and almost defeated him again, three years ago, when she was fourteen. He would not have wanted to risk a battle with her -- or at least, not a physical battle -- and so he made a bargain with Colonel Merritt, who would do Vecna's dirty work and kill her. Merritt, after all, hated Jane Hopper as much as Vecna did. The colonel made his deal with the devil, as if he were the American president throwing his support behind a third-world tyrant. Vecna would have told him to make the Roy residence his first stop and see if Rachel was indeed Jane Hopper. They had probably made their deal either late yesterday or early this morning -- after she had fled Vecna's mind yesterday afternoon -- and then the army had moved into Hawkins this morning.

That was her best reconstruction of what had happened since she committed Stupid Mistake #3. Surely it was no coincidence that the army was suddenly allowed into town the next morning, and that Merritt's men came knocking at the Roy residence first thing. By bearding Vecna in the den of his mind, El had forced his hand in a way she hadn't expected.

I had to do it. I had to see if Max was in there.

She did not regret her second and third Supremely Stupid Mistakes. Dr. Owens deserved to be avenged, and Max was her best friend. But what good were these acts if she was going to die, in this room, because of them? For there was no doubt: Merritt was going to kill her, pure and simple, as soon as the interrogation was over. Sullivan's men had tried gunning her down in Nevada three years ago, on governmental orders, and those orders had only magnified since her vengeance on Sullivan. Merritt had been Sullivan's friend, to boot. What hope did she possibly have of leaving this room alive?

As if reading her thoughts, the colonel set down his pen and folded his arms on his chest. "I have a proposition for you."

"A proposition?"

"Yes. The reason I was able to move my men into town is because Vecna and I reached a certain understanding."

Just as she'd figured. "Let me guess," she said. "In return for being allowed into Hawkins, you have to kill me and not harm any shadow monsters. Once I'm dead, Vecna promises to not to harm any more people."

Merritt looked nonplussed. "Close," he admitted.

"It's stupid," she said. "You can't believe him."

"The deal we made was more fine-tuned than that. As I told you this morning, I know the gate can't be closed -- and that's thanks to you."

"As I told you," she said. "That was my mistake."

"Whatever," he said. "But it was Vecna who told me that, and he added a qualifier. According to him, the gate that you made *can* be closed, but only from the other side. The shadow side. The deal that he and I made was that in return for killing you, Vecna will return with his army to the shadow world and then he will close the gate from his side. He says that he never opened the gate that you created, and never had any intention of opening it. He only came through with his army when *you* opened it."

"That's a lie," she said, getting angry. "I created the gate by mistake. I thought I had closed the four gates but they became the one gate and went into some kind of hibernation. It was Vecna who opened the gate, or made it appear, or brought it out of hibernation. Not me."

"Whatever," he repeated, indifferent. "The point is that both you and Vecna are threats to the American people. Threats to humanity. He has agreed to abandon his conquest of this world if I kill you."

"You don't really believe him," she said.

"Are you claiming the gate cannot be closed from the shadow side?"

"I have no idea," she said. "I'm saying that Vecna will never close it, even if it is possible. You really believe he's going to give up his conquest of the world just because you kill me?"

"Of course not. He's a liar and a homicidal maniac like you. My job is to neutralize you both in any way I can."

"You said you have a proposition."

"I want you to kill Vecna."

I was going to do that anyway. Since yesterday, when she was renewed with purpose. And after she went into his mind, there was no question she had to kill him. To save Max. To save Hawkins. And the world.

"Once he's dead," the colonel continued, "there won't be a hive mind that controls the shadow creatures. The dogs, the bats, the vines... they'll become wild mindless animals. Still dangerous, but at least they won't be unified under the control of a devil. The army will be able to come in here and do its job, and exterminate the creatures, and bomb the living hell out of the gate."

"And me?" she asked.

"You'll be deported from the United States. For killing Vecna you get to live, but you won't be allowed in this country ever again."

"You promise me this?"

"I absolutely promise," he said.

He was absolutely lying. He undoubtedly intended to kill her and Mike as soon as Vecna was dead.

But for the moment she played along. "So you'll let me out of here now, so I can find Vecna and kill him."

"Don't be silly," he said. "You're not going anywhere. You will kill Vecna in the same way you killed Jack Sullivan. Inside his mind. You'll do it from this room. I'll take the collar off you when you're ready, and if you try weaponizing your powers against me, then Mike Wheeler dies."

She pretended to consider the offer. "No," she finally said.

He reacted as if slapped. "No? What you mean? What other choice do you have?"

"I don't know that I have any choices," she said. "But I'm not doing what you ask. I don't trust you."

She didn't tell him the real reason she was refusing: she simply didn't stand a chance against Vecna in a mind battle. She would eagerly take him on in a physical battle -- she had done so when she was eight years old at the Hawkins Lab, and nearly destroyed him -- but inside his mind he was damn near invincible. She had learned that the hard way three years ago, when she fought him while lying in a tub of water at a Nevada pizzeria. She had failed to save Max, and failed to destroy Vecna. It had been Steve, Nancy, and Robin who had killed him (though not permanently) in a *physical* battle. The *physical* world is where Vecna always proved himself to be most vulnerable. Inside the mind, he was the near equivalent of a god. He would be even stronger by now.

But she didn't explain this to Merritt. She owed him nothing, and she wanted him to think she was refusing his offer because she didn't trust him. Which was also true.

The colonel looked ready to break her neck. "I'd reconsider if I were you."

"You're not me. And that's my answer."

He contemplated her. "Just what kind of a vicious cunt are you?"

She paused before answering, and then held his gaze as she leaned forward to reply. "The kind who killed your friend. Who made him see things before he died. Who made him scream and hate himself. Who would do the same thing to you if I could."

His hands were shaking with rage. "You're going to regret saying that."

She sat back. "I'm doing as you asked. I'm answering your questions honestly."

"Impudent bitch," he snarled, standing up. "You'll see who makes *you* scream and hate yourself." He walked around the table to her, clearly intent on violence.

I won't scream. Whatever he does, I won't scream or beg him to stop --

He pulled her out of her chair and seized her by the same arm as before, grinding his fingers in the bruises he'd left. She hissed in agony; the pain was sickening. With his other hand he yanked the back of her hair and put his mouth to her ear, as if ready to kiss her. "I'm glad you're defying me," he panted feverishly. "I've been waiting for this a long time." He threw her forward on the table, releasing her arm to tear down her pants. Realizing what was coming, she instinctively let loose her powers to throw him off -- but the collar denied her efforts. In seconds, two of his brutal fingers were up inside her. She almost did scream then.

"How does that feel?" he rasped, working his fingers deep inside. "Tell me." She gasped; hot tears flew from her eyes. *"Tell me how that feels, you cunt!"* Plunging in and out; hurting her like she had never been hurt in her life. Not even Papa, in all his unconscionable sins, had violated her on this outrageous level.

I won't scream, I won't scream, I won't --

He threw her forward again, and tore her pants down further. *I'm sorry, Max!* Tears fell on the table in front of her. She had provoked him like this, because some part of her believed that she deserved what Max had endured for so long. Three terrible years. Then suddenly he was in and up her backside, and her whole world was pain... and she must have screamed, *must* have... but somehow she kept her vow and the cries of rage inside.

"Make no mistake," he grunted, working himself back and forth. "I'm just warming up with you." He was squeezing her breasts as he raped her, furious that she wasn't crying out. She dug in with defiance. *I won't scream.* In and bloody out. *I won't.* Agony unendurable. *Won't.* Punched through a black hole... Then falling upside down, in a zone worse than the Upside Down, falling, pounded, smashed, squeezed, bleeding... *Help me, someone... Mike, help me...*

She must have passed out from the shock, because the next thing she knew, she was lifting her head from the table, barely sitting in her chair. Her body howled; it had been electrocuted by rape. Her collar felt like a necklace of bricks. She looked up and saw him, the dragon, across the table from her again, tucking in his shirt. She hadn't been out for too long, depending on how long he had raped her. Her body would have guessed ten hours, but it had probably been more like ten minutes.

"I hope you've reconsidered."

She tried sitting up straight. Her body felt smashed. She wanted Jim Hopper more than anyone right then.

"If you don't agree to my terms, then Mike is next. One of my men is a flaming faggot. I try not to hold it against him -- because it does have its uses at times like this. Did you enjoy being sodomized? Imagine Mike --"

She threw up all of a sudden, over the table.

"Well then. I guess you didn't like me inside you. I'm going to give you some time alone to collect yourself. Clean up your puke. When I come back --"

"No."

He was taken aback. "What did you say?"

She clutched the edge of the table, steadying herself. She wanted to die, but she was Jane Hopper, and by God, she would live up to the name. Her father had suffered untold brutality in a Russian prison, and yet he had transcended himself. She had to do the same thing now, even though she wanted to die. "I said *no*. I didn't like you inside me. You're a sick monster. I'm not cleaning up my puke. You clean it up."

"You obviously want to die. And your boyfriend too."

"Shut up. Just shut up." She closed her eyes, resigning herself, then looked him straight in the eye. "I accept your proposal."

He stared at her and then laughed. "Do you now? Maybe you're not so stupid. Very good. But you need time to recover. I just raped the shit out of you. I don't want to throw you at Vecna right after that. Take some time to rest. Sleep on the cot over there. I'll have another supper brought in, if you want it."

*Time to rest? Another supper? Was he so out of touch that he thought rape could be recovered from like an asthma spell? She needed a hospital right now; a trauma center. Her body was damaged. But she'd been down this road. Not as badly, but pretty close. Papa had abused her. One -- or Henry, before he became Vecna -- had torn her up horribly before she ripped open a gate and hurled him through. She preferred to dive in right now and get this over with. She was likely to second-guess herself if given enough time; the trauma would chisel away at her. *Waiting was harder than confrontation.* She needed confrontation *now*.*

"Take the collar off me," she said. "I'm ready."

"I applaud your initiative, but no. I want you to actually succeed in killing Vecna. I want you rested before you do this. " He looked at his watch. "Almost eight. I'll be back at midnight. You have four hours to play with yourself." He collected his notepad and papers and walked to the

room's only door, that led wherever. She had seen only the inside of this room since waking up from being gassed at the Roy apartment. He looked back at her before leaving. "Think of me inside your behind while I'm gone." The door slammed behind him.

Four hours to play with yourself. Think of me inside your behind. She'd spend plenty of that time thinking of his castration.

She lay on the cot and did her best to ignore the fire down below. It wasn't easy; he had damaged her rectum, and she feared to touch where it hurt. One of his men brought a tray of food, but she ignored that too, knowing she would throw it up. Her resolve didn't falter from the waiting. She would mind-fight Vecna to the death, just as she had vowed. A hopeless cause, but all her avenues were hopeless at this point. It was the path of a slim chance, at least, to save Max from hell. If she failed -- *when* she failed -- it was no matter. She would go to hell and keep Max company. To rot and suffer more rape, on those awful black spires.

It was simple really. She owed Max this much. And if, by some next-to-zero chance, she could use her powers to surprise her captors and escape with Mike, then she owed it to him as well. Her father would have gone down fighting like that. He had been tortured in a Russian prison, and forced to maim his own feet to escape; then he was caught and imprisoned again, but still went on; he became a gladiator, fighting a demogorgon, of all things, in the prison yard. His fellow inmates had their limbs ripped off and their skulls smashed. He would have died alongside them, if not for the miracle rescue of Joyce and Murray.

No miracles were coming here. The apocalypse didn't allow for them. More people had died in the past six days than during the four weeks of '83, '84, '85, and '86 combined. What was it Mike had once said? When the world ends, you go down giving it your best shot; not because it will do any good, but because it *is* good and *is* the right thing to do. He was talking about Ragnarok, or something like that; the apocalypse that the Vikings believed in. She wiped her eyes, suddenly wishing she had never become Rachel Roy, that she had fled the country with Mike and started over somewhere far away. Just the two of them, in a warm place where the Upside Down couldn't touch them.

She tried thinking of a strategy to deal with Vecna, but came up dry. A mind battle boiled down to willpower, and Vecna's will reigned supreme in the space of his own mind. Her violent thoughts kept turning on Merritt, but that was as much a problem. She could easily snuff him out once she

was uncollared, but she saw no way to spare Mike the consequences. The colonel surely intended to kill her and Mike anyway. Would anything she did matter? Her Supremely Stupid Mistakes had brought her to this crossroads.

There wasn't a clock in the room, but it must have been close to three hours into her four-hour wait that she heard someone shouting down the hall. The door to the hall was closed, but the shout was loud enough to hear. Then the muffled sound of a struggle, followed by another shout. She stood up from the cot, her heartbeat accelerating. She prayed that Mike hadn't done anything stupid.

Then footsteps were pounding down the hall, and an angry voice barking orders. The door crashed open, and two people came in, one dragging the other by the neck. She gasped. One of them was the colonel. The other was Mike.

It was Mike who had the colonel in his grip, not the other way around.

Before she could register her shock, Mike threw Merritt against the wall as if the colonel weighed no more than an infant. Merritt collapsed on the floor, moaning. Mike had clearly already beaten the daylights out of him. Blood trickled from Merritt's mouth and his right eye was swollen. He was incapacitated and harmless, and would be for quite a while.

"His gun, Mike." Her first words spoken to him in over three years. "Get his gun --"

"It's gone," said Mike. "And the knife in his boot, and his walkie. I got everything." He came closer to her but stopped at the center of the room. There was a handcuff clinging to each of his wrists, but the chain between them had broken, leaving his hands free. Hands that had somehow become as strong as the Hulk's.

Come hug me. He looked as he always did, beautiful in his way, tall with long shaggy hair, and droopy eyes that told his mood. But the whites of those eyes were pink and he looked frazzled. "Are you all right?"

"I'm doing really shitty, to tell you the truth," he said. "What about you?"

A million times as bad. But she nodded. "Fine. How did you... ?" She looked from his broken handcuffs to her rapist lying on the floor.

"I killed all his men," said Mike. "Now I'm going to kill him."

"No!" she yelled. *Don't you dare. He's mine.*

"I have to," said Mike. "He's dangerous. You have no idea what a sick fuck this asshole is."

I have some idea. "I'm going to kill him. I need this collar off me, Mike."

He looked troubled. "Let me kill him. I know you've done your fair share of killing. Let me get my hands dirty for a change."

"How did you get so strong?" she asked.

"By being an asshole," he said. "And then trying to save someone. Which I couldn't do." His eyes were tearing up. "Let me do this, El."

"If you killed the other men in this house" -- how many were there? -- "then you did your share. This man belongs to me. I'm not asking, Mike."

"Did he hurt you?"

"Thanks to you, he's not a threat anymore," she said, sidestepping. "But he's been on a crusade against me for the last three years. This is between me and him, and I'm going to finish it."

He looked down at Merritt and then nodded. "Fine. The key to your collar must be in one of his pockets." He leaned over the colonel to search him.

"Mike," she said insistently.

He stopped and looked at her. "Yeah?"

After all I've put you through. Is that why you aren't rushing to hug me like before? Back in '84, he had thought she was dead for a whole year. Their reunion at the Byers' home was the most precious moment of her life. They'd flown into each other's arms; he had thought he was dreaming. Now she opened her arms to replay that moment.

He backed away. "No, El. Don't touch me. I'm dangerous."

She shook her head, confused. "Mike, honey, I know you'd never hurt me. Those men you killed deserved it. You're not a monster. You're... you're a superhero." *But I don't understand how.*

He looked sorrowfully at her, his eyes as sad as a basset hound's. "No, I'm not a hero, El. Not even close. I'm dying."

Dying? She mouthed the word, not comprehending. "I won't let you die. I promise." She had let others go to the grave for their allegiance to her. Will. Jace. No more, and not Mike, of all people. *Why won't you let me hold you?*

"I'm dying," repeated Mike. "It's unstoppable."

She kept shaking her head, crying now. *Stop it. You're not dying, and I want you to hold me, and I want us to be right with each other again, and I know I don't deserve any of this, but I love you.*

"I have rabies." He coughed and wiped his eyes. "Shadow rabies. From the demo-bats two nights ago, at Dustin's party. According to one of the shit-faces I just killed, I'll be super-strong for two days, and then... well, then my bones will start to dissolve." He barked a laugh. "Jesus, I really don't want to die like that."

She was on him then, embracing him, overriding his protests, danger be damned. She needed to be held after what Merritt had done to her, and to give whatever consolation she could. For a moment he resisted her, standing rigid and unyielding. Then he surrendered. His arms closed around her, and he leaned down and kissed her forehead, as if the taste of her would heal and make him whole.

Chapter Seven:

The Deep Down Trauma Hounds of Mike Wheeler

Holding his girlfriend, Mike saw with crystal clarity how small and weak he was. Taller than most of his peers, and now stronger than three sumo wrestlers, but small and weak regardless. El had done things he didn't understand and he had raged against the world for it -- lashed out at everyone who meant well and tried their damndest when dealt shitty hands, and who continued to stand by him when he deserved their backsides. Only now, at death's door and holding her, could he face what the mirror had showed for too long.

Whatever time he had left, he would rise above himself. For her.

They stood there like that clasping each other, starved for what three years had robbed. Finally she stood back. "I'm going to look through his pockets. I need the remote for my collar."

Mike nodded. She looked exhausted and emotionally scarred. No wonder; she'd been trapped inside this house longer than he had. "Don't worry, he's harmless now. You won't need me to defend you."

He had been astonished at the strength that suddenly filled his body about a half hour ago. The itches from his bat bites had hit a crescendo that had him begging Adam to scratch his arms and neck for him. Agonizing, he had broken free of his handcuffs as if they were plastic. Before Adam could react, Mike lunged, and gave Adam a pounding that crushed the poor sob's lungs. As the soldier wheezed on the floor, he had scorned Mike, explaining the cost of his freedom.

"Shadow rabies," he'd said, hacking up blood. "Enjoy feeling invincible. In forty-eight hours, your bones will be liquid."

"How do you know that?" Mike had demanded.

"We saw it at the town border." Where the demo-bats, like the dogs, had attacked anyone who tried to get through. Soldiers had been bitten,

especially last Saturday morning, when the army had first arrived. Many weren't affected, but those who were had turned into supermen two days after the bite, on Monday morning, and then melted like wax two days after that, which was this morning. "Wasn't a pretty sight, I'll tell you. You've got hell to look forward to, asshole."

Mike believed Adam. There was no reason the soldier would have lied at that point. He killed him quickly, reaching down and snapping the soldier's neck in fury. It was the first time Mike had murdered a person, and he felt no remorse. Rabies had changed him.

"Here's the remote," said El. She was holding a device found in Merritt's front pocket. She pushed a button and her collar opened, freeing her neck. She tore off the collar and threw it to the floor.

"Let me see," said Mike, taking the device from her. He remembered Dr. Brenner using one of these to free her when his life was bleeding out on the desert sand. She had brought down a helicopter in a spectacular conflagration. "So one of these dials controls how much power you can use? On a scale of zero to ten?"

She nodded. "The right dial for dampening. The left one gives shock treatment. For dampening, ten means I can't use any power at all. Merritt used that highest setting for me, like Papa did." Brenner had punished her for choosing Dr. Owens over him. But then Sullivan had arrived with the military, and Brenner had dialed the dampener back to zero so she could defend herself. He had kept the collar on her though, since he would have to reassert control over El once they escaped. But it didn't matter; Sullivan's men killed him.

"I remember," said Mike. "What an asshole."

"Mike," she said. "Listen to me. I'm going to kill Merritt now, and I don't want you to interfere."

"What? No, of course not. He deserves to die." The colonel was still on the floor and barely conscious. Mike had pounded him senseless after killing the other four soldiers. He encountered three after he dispatched Adam, as he went through the house room by room, looking for El's interrogation cell. He kept Merritt alive until he saw El with his own eyes, and then planned to finish him off.

"It's going to be ugly," she warned him.

"El, I've seen you kill before. Remember Papa's goons when we first met? You burst their brains out when they chased us at the school."

"That's too good a punishment for this man. I'm going to do something different."

Mike suddenly remembered what Merritt told him she had done to Jack Sullivan. "Oh. God. You mean like Vecna? With nightmares?"

"Do you have a problem with that?" she asked.

"Well... I guess not. But why do you want to be like Vecna? It seems sadistic."

"Some people deserve evil treatment. But I'm not Vecna."

Of course you're not. "I know," he said. "Do whatever you need to do."

She got on the cot and lay on her back. "I'm going to close my eyes. You know how this works. Be my bodyguard." Whenever El spied on someone, or went into their mind, she had to concentrate, leaving her body vulnerable.

"Don't worry," said Mike. "I killed all the soldiers. There were four." One of them had almost drawn his gun, but Mike seized his hand and broke it just in time, before crushing his skull.

"There might be more on the way, that we don't know about," she said. "Close the door and lock it."

He did as she instructed, and she closed her eyes. He watched Merritt closely.

For almost a minute nothing happened. Then the colonel's body hiccuped and went rigid. His eyes snapped open but only the whites showed. Mike remembered Lucas's description of Max in the cemetery. This was the same torture treatment. The colonel remained stationary and white-eyed for another minute... then two... then three...

She's giving him a very bad nightmare.

... four... five...

Come on already. Just kill the fucker.

... six...

Mike looked over at El on the cot. He called her name softly, asking if she was okay. She didn't reply.

... seven... eight...

Merritt's body was now drenched in sweat. His eyelids blinked rapidly over the whites. He was going through El-Hell.

... nine...

Suddenly the colonel's body rose from the floor in an upright position. Mike drew back and watched as Merritt levitated until his head touched the ceiling. He knew what was coming next. Lucas had told him what happened to Max at the Creel House, and how he had wailed in grief afterwards, holding Max's broken body in his arms. No one in this room would mourn Evan Merritt. The colonel's arms broke at the elbow joints. His legs snapped upwards at impossible angles. His eyes burst, spraying

blood on the ceiling and the floor. His mouth stretched open twice as wide as a mouth was made to, and his jawbone shattered. His ruined body shook, suspended on high, for a long time. Then his mutilated mess fell to the floor.

Mike stared in fascination. From the outsider's perspective, it looked like Merritt had suffered no differently than if El had simply used her telekinetic powers to rip him apart like this. But the body-breaking was window dressing. El had invaded his mind and given him a hideous dream that would have seemed very real to him. Mike wasn't sure he wanted to know what that nightmare was.

El sat up on the cot. Her nose was bleeding and her eyes looked glazed. She clambered to her feet, swaying to get her balance. Mike rushed to support her. "Here," he said. "Lean on me." She clung to his shoulder, grateful. *I hope it's safe.* He had already hugged her, so if his rabies was that contagious, the damage was already done. He prayed that shadow rabies was like rabies from their world, requiring exchange of bodily fluids to transmit the disease. He had been careful to kiss her on the forehead and not her lips when she embraced him.

"I'll need an hour at least, maybe two, to recharge," she said, breathing heavily.

"You went all out against that son of a bitch," said Mike. "I'm not sure I want to know, but what kind of a nightmare did you give him?"

"A kind that he completely deserved," said El.

"Good. Let's get out of here. Do you have any idea where we are?"

She shook her head. "I was gassed at home and then woke up here."

"That's like what happened to me. Come on, I know the way out. I saw the rest of the house when I came looking for you." He still felt impossibly strong, like he could bring down the walls of the house if he had to.

They left the room and he led her down a hallway past two doors, and into an empty wide room. From that room were three other hallways to choose from. "I was down there," he said, pointing down the hall closest to the one they came from. "The front door's this way." They took the hallway straight ahead to the exit and left the building.

As soon as they were outside, Mike gauged the surroundings. It was night -- his watch said 11:42 pm -- and hard to see, but there were street lamps illuminating what looked like a normal suburban area. Twelve or thirteen blocks away, the death zone teemed with snowy atmosphere and orange-pink lightning; the ground rumbled with thunder. Mike looked up and down the road, looking for a street sign; there was none. Two of the

houses had lights on inside, but most people had either gone to bed or abandoned their homes, if they were still alive.

Halfway across the front lawn, Mike turned back for a view of the house they had left. It looked like most homes on this street and nothing special. Probably an abandoned home that Merritt had repurposed for his twisted needs.

"Where are we, Mike?" asked El, still holding on to him.

"Not sure," he said, looking down the road again. "If I had to guess, it's the southeast corner of town. Like, if we went up that road for about seven or eight blocks, we'd be close to the police station and library."

Colored lightning flashed again in the distance, and thunder growled, still on the interval of every thirty seconds. It made the nights seem beautiful in a sinister way, with the death zone just out of reach; as if the Upside Down were an enchanted realm out of Grimm's fairy tales.

Suddenly Mike heard a car approaching. It was from their left as they faced the street.

"Behind the bushes," he said, pulling El towards mounds of greenery at the side of the house. If it was more soldiers, he didn't want to risk a confrontation. El was out of commission for the next hour or two; and he, for all his Herculean strength, could be shot by a gun if he took on too many people at once.

As soon as the car came into view, Mike's alarm turned to unbelieving relief. It was the familiar red Mazda. Lucas must have been combing the streets all night looking for him. The car doors flew open and three people came out: Lucas, the owner of the restaurant where Mike had been abducted -- Hoss was his name -- and a younger man who must have been Hoss's son. All three had guns in their hands and looked ready to use them; Lucas with his pistol and the other two with shotguns.

"Mike!" yelled Lucas. "Are you okay?"

Mike waved at them. "Yeah! I've got El with me!"

"*What?!*" said Lucas. He lowered his gun in disbelief and told the other two men to do the same.

El ran across the lawn to Lucas, heedless of her exhaustion. From the middle of the front lawn, Mike watched them embrace and smiled, allowing himself a good moment. He might die in two days, but he had reunited with the person he loved most, and now his best friend. It was time to put to bed the shittiest night of his life. Let the next two days be as they would.

Suddenly a cry pierced the air. It sounded like a child in pain. It came from four or five homes down the road, to Mike's right. He peered across

the lawns but couldn't make out anything. Probably a demo-dog victim. He had to get off this lawn and into Lucas's car.

He turned and started running to the car -- and stopped short.

There was no one at the car. The car doors were still open, but no one was inside or outside the vehicle. No one was anywhere around.

"El!" he called. "Lucas!"

His friends and the other two men had vanished.

Mike began to panic. He ran into in the middle of the road and surveyed the area. The nearby front lawns; down the road in both directions. It was too damn dark. He saw nothing that gave any indication of what had just happened. One moment four people had been standing next to the car; the next moment they had literally disappeared.

A child's anguish punched the night again.

Goddamn it.

He yelled El and Lucas's names again, and began running towards the scream, not knowing what else to do. Down the road, and past homes that were mostly dark. Up ahead, he saw something. When he reached it, he knew this terrible night wasn't over.

It was a fire: burning on someone's front lawn, and unlike any fire he'd ever seen or felt. It burned pure white and radiated cold. From the street Mike felt the coldness emanate like an arctic blast. At the base of the fire, chopped wood supplied the fuel as it would have for a normal fire, but Mike had no idea how an arctic flame could burn. Was it fire from the shadow world? Shadow fire?

He approached the blaze and saw that someone was tied to a stake at the fire's center. Alive and squirming. Mike swore in outrage. It was a child -- a boy about nine or ten years old -- obviously the one who had been crying out. The strange fire consumed him, turning his skin blue and making it crack.

"Hang on!" said Mike. "I'll get you out!" He began to scatter the wood, kicking the boughs out of his way as he reached toward the stake, then leaped backwards as the fire licked his arms. It was so cold it burned like the sun.

The wood didn't matter anyway at this point; the boy was on fire and nothing would quench it. Mike swore again, knowing he was useless. As if responding to the vulgarity, the boy let out a cry as final as the apocalypse. Mike watched, appalled, as the kid's skin began to shatter like ice from a car windshield. He fell apart in pieces, while the interior mess of his tiny body oozed down the stake and congealed at the wood pile.

Christ bloody Jesus, what the hell is going on?

Something from hell surely, given what Mike saw next: a man, on the other side of the fire. Mike squinted over the flames. It was Hoss. The owner of *The Old Goat* was smiling -- a shy smile that hinted at insanity. "Come, Michael," he said, his voice edged with hysteria. "Bathe in the purity of coldfire."

"Hoss!" said Mike. "What in God's name? You kill children?"

Hoss walked around the fire and reached Mike's side of the blaze. Mike gasped, unable to believe his eyes. The restaurant owner was now naked to the waist, and his chest and stomach were behung with rattlesnakes. They grew out of him, as a part of him, and their jaws snapped and dripped venom.

"No closer," said Mike, his voice shaking. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

"Of course," said Hoss. "I don't want to hurt you either. I just want to burn you until you scream like the children."

Mike willed himself to retreat but his feet remained planted. Hoss exerted a horrific fascination. Mike found himself staring involuntarily at the snakes as if they were blessings.

"Come, Michael," whispered Hoss. The snakes hissed from inside his torso. "Come scream with the children."

Mike was transfixed; and the snakes lashed out. Eight of them. Three struck, biting his neck. Fire instantly tore through his bloodstream, and he fell to the ground. The effect of the venom was instantaneous. Supine on his back, Mike started to gibber as his body shook. Pain was everywhere. His respiration multiplied it; the pulse of his heart accentuated it. The swelling became an alternation of crises -- a dervish one moment, vertigo the next, then an avalanche, sweeping him over the edge of sanity.

For how long he spasmed on the ground howling like that, he couldn't say. It could have been five minutes; it could have been three hours. The poison was so eviscerating that it left him no sensory coherence. But paradoxically, it was so savage that it created a space of clarity in his head. Clinging shipwrecked there, Mike finally came back from the brink. When he could, he opened his eyes.

There were two people staring down at him.

El and Lucas.

"He's waking up," said Lucas.

"Oh, *Mike*," said El.

Mike tried to sit up, but the ground held him. He was thirsty enough to drink five gallons of water.

"What did I tell you about lingering outside?" asked Lucas. "You should have gotten in my car right away."

Was he talking about back at the restaurant? *Merritt would have captured me anyway. He would have yanked me out of your car.* Or did Lucas mean the house he and El had escaped, and that Mike should have walked faster to his car instead of lingering on the front lawn?

"Mike is stubborn," said El. "He does things his way."

"He's burning children, you guys," Mike croaked. He forced himself -- nearly killed himself -- to sit up, and looked around. Hoss was gone. The stake and the wood pile were there, but there was no fire and the mess of the boy's corpse had vanished. Mike was surprised that Hoss hadn't put him on the stake to burn.

"We took care of Hoss," said Lucas. "Don't worry."

"Lucas shot him," said El. "He's good with his pistol."

"Who lives at this house?" asked Mike.

"No one," said Lucas. "The family abandoned it last week-end and died trying to leave town."

Mike coughed again, shaking his head. "Where were you both? You vanished on me."

"We were inside the car," said El.

"What? No, you weren't. I looked at the car and there was no one inside it."

Lucas and El looked at each other, as if deliberating on whether to tell him something.

"What?" said Mike. "What is it?"

"We were lying down in the back seat," said Lucas.

"What do you mean?"

"We were making love," said El.

Mike felt smashed over the head. "You were *what?*"

"Making love," said El again.

"Mike, don't get mad," said Lucas.

"You... *motherfucker!*" Mike struggled to stand, and then fell back down.

"Don't get up," said Lucas. "You've been snake bit."

"You need help, Mike," said El. "Lie down and stay calm."

No, he raged. *How could you... both of you...* The betrayal was so treacherous it assaulted him more than the snake venom. The shakes were reclaiming him.

"He's going mad again," he heard Lucas say.

"Oh, *Mike*," repeated El.

Mad and then some. *Making love... making love...* The voices of his betrayers faded, becoming as wisps on the air. Delirium clouded his sight, and then it was spasms and howls again, for who knows how long. Weird shapes gamboled across his fever; there was a chaos of something terrible going on. With a strenuous act of will, he forced his eyes open again.

El and Lucas were gone. No sign of Hoss either. But the wood pile was burning again, and there was another child. A tiny girl this time. Flames as cold as vacuum clutched her in a white blaze.

Then Mike saw the others. *Jesus God.*

Warped figures, capering around the fire. Men with piranha jaws for their bellies, leering at him cross-eyed. Women with cactus-quill breasts, cackling for his life. Children with three eyes, or four eyes, vomiting spiders. What hell had these people died and gone to?

And where were El and Lucas? *Making love.* No. He had misunderstood them. It was the fever talking. But why had they left him here?

The prancing ghouls leaned over to shriek at him as they danced by. One of the children puked a spider onto him; the critter cheeped and then leaped away.

And the girl on the stake found her voice, wailing like a soul from Dante's Inferno. Pleading with Mike, begging him, to save her from everything he had done to her. *What do you mean? What did I do? Why are you blaming me?*

It was too much, everything, and he gave himself to the madness again.

Later he woke. Alone and abused in every body cell. The mutated beings were gone. Everyone was gone.

He pushed himself up from the lawn. The stake and wood pile were there, but the girl's mess had been cleaned up. It didn't matter; he wasn't staying here a second longer. He had to get back to Lucas's car.

As he headed back, he noticed the street lamps had gone dim; they hardly shone any light. He walked hurriedly down the road, uneasy about what that implied. When he reached the house where he and El had been held captive, Lucas's car was still empty; the doors were still open. He called for El and Lucas, not expecting an answer.

He still had no idea what to do, so he walked down the street in the other direction, from which Lucas had arrived in the Mazda. He could barely see where he was going. All the homes were dark, and the occasional street light may as well have been a candle.

Finally he saw a house with lights on inside. In one of the rooms he could see two people: a woman in bed and a man standing next to it. There were no window curtains, so the couple had no privacy. Mike looked at the couple and sputtered. He left the road and ran across the lawn, up to the window to get a better look. He peered through the glass, and the worst was confirmed.

El and Lucas.

She was lying nude on the bed, holding her arm out and smiling at Lucas. He was naked too, and laughing as he spoke to her. *You unbelievable god-rotting fucking bastard.* So he hadn't dreamed what they said to him.

His head pounding, he raced to the front door of the house. It was unlocked and he did his best to open it quietly. He was breathing like a racehorse as he entered a foyer. It led to a living room on his left and the perfidious bedroom down on the right. He could hear El and Lucas laughing down there. To his immediate left was a hallway chair. A gun lay on the chair: Lucas's pistol, the Bren Ten his father had given him during the Four-Day Apocalypse. The Bren Ten was Sonny Crockett's gun on *Miami Vice*. He had shot his partner Tubbs with it at the end of season four. There was a certain poetry to that, given the present situation. Mike swiped the gun and sized it up. He had fired a semi-automatic pistol once - - a CZ-75 that Steve Harrington loaned him during the four-day horror of '86 -- and the Bren Ten was a lot like the CZ-75. He pulled back the slider, filling the chamber with a round. Then he turned and stomped down the hall to the bedroom.

When he crashed open the door, Lucas was in bed positioning himself on top of El. She screamed when she saw Mike, and Lucas bounded off the bed to confront him. Mike pointed the Bren Ten at Lucas, and Lucas froze, his eyes widening.

"Mike, no!" shouted El.

Mike was having a hard time breathing. With both hands on the Bren Ten, he kept the gun aimed squarely at Lucas's face.

"Mike, put it down," said Lucas. "I told you before, I'm sick of your bullshit."

"Shut up!" yelled Mike. "You were my best friend!"

"El and I are in love," said Lucas. "I'm sorry, I should have told you a long time ago."

In love. A long time ago. The knife kept plunging deeper. "You unbelievable shit. So that's why you left me out there to die? With those mutated people?"



"We didn't leave you there, Mike," said El. "You wouldn't come with us."

"We tried to carry you," said Lucas. "But you were convulsing, and you got even more violent when we tried touching you."

"What are you talking about?" cried Mike. "El could have overpowered me easily."

"I was still recharging, Mike," she said.

"You were screaming at us," said Lucas. "Telling us to go away. That you never wanted to see us again."

"No shit," said Mike. "It's not every day your best friend and girlfriend tell you they were fucking in the back seat of a car."

Lucas shook his head. "Don't be so dramatic."

"*Dramatic?*" screamed Mike.

"Mike, go away," said El. "Please. Lucas and I want to make love."

Her nudity inflamed him, and he turned on her. "Did he always know you were Rachel Roy?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "It would just make you mad."

"You owe me answers, bitch!"

"Hey!" yelled Lucas. "Don't talk to her like that. You need to leave. El and I are going to fuck. When you cool off, you can come back, and we'll try to discuss this rationally."

Mike tightened his grip on the gun. "You backbiting fuck, I'm not going anywhere."

"Mike --"

"You're trash, Lucas. Jesus fucking Christ. With your girlfriend in the hospital, you stole mine?"

"That's a childish way of looking at it," said Lucas.

"Don't tell me I'm childish!"

"Go outside," repeated Lucas. "When El and I are done, I'll come get you."

El tried mediating. "Lucas, let him sit in the living room. Let him stay inside where it's safe."

Lucas considered, and then nodded. "You heard El. Go down to the living room."

"Fuck you!" he shouted. "Both of you!"

"Mike, stop yelling," said El. "Leave us alone."

"It never ends with you," said Lucas. "Your threats. Your attacks. Dumping on everyone around you. It's going to stop, and it's going to stop now."

"It's going to stop, all right," said Mike. His intentions solidified.

El lashed out. "Mike, listen to Lucas and put down the gun. He and I are going to fuck. If you really need to know why I chose him over you, it's because he knows how to love and care for someone. You don't. Now get out of this room."

Lucas was nodding. "You're a shitty boyfriend, Mike, and that's the truth. No girl is ever going to put up with --"

Mike shot him. Lucas's brains blew out the back of his head and splattered the wall. His corpse fell to the floor and Mike put three more bullets into it, just to be sure. *That* was how Crockett should have shot Tubbs, he thought grimly.

El had leapt off the bed and was in his face screaming. "*You bastard! He was your best friend! Your best friend!*" Her tiny fists rained blows on

him. *"Why couldn't you be happy for us? What's wrong with you? What is wrong with you?"*

Thanks to rabies, Mike barely felt the blows. Her words did the damage. Words from the deep past; his own words. *What's wrong with you?* At the quarry, two days after he found her in the woods. They'd been kids, twelve years old. She had led them to believe Will was dead, and led them to his corpse (as they'd believed at the time) being dragged from the water. *What is wrong with you?* he had yelled in her face. Why had it ever mattered? Will was dead now anyway. Lucas deserved it too.

"Your best friend!" She went on hitting him. *"You should have been happy for us!"* The sight of her naked body was driving him mad. *"You're a selfish, selfish, brat!"* He wanted to take her on the bed right then. *"I hate you, Mike Wheeler! I hate --"*

He lost his mind then, and swung at her every bit of his rabid strength.

The punch of three strong men combined slammed into Eleven's face, crushing it like paper mâché. Her brains flew in every direction, including over Mike. He was instantly mortified and tried taking it back. He fell to the floor and knelt by Eleven's corpse, crying apologies, begging her to rise from the dead and kill him as he deserved.

The reply that came was unexpected:

"Oh, I will."

Mike blinked, and it was no longer El lying on the floor. It was he, the grotesque humanoid who had slaughtered his peers on graduation night. The beast of the apocalypse.

Vecna.

Slash Henry.

Slash One.

The unholy trinity sat up and moaned. *"Michael. You are so strong and yet so weak. To kill those whom you love most."*

Mike screamed and put the gun straight between Vecna's eyes.

"Mm. Do it, Michael. Shoot me again."

Mike obliged. Once, twice, and three times. The bullets went through Vecna harmlessly, and the creature casually pulled the weapon from Mike's hand.

Vecna chortled and rose from the floor, lifting Mike as he stood up, pressing him against the nearest wall. Mike was tall but Vecna much taller; his rabid muscles seemed as nothing against the creature's lordly might.

"It is time, Michael," the deep voice grated. *"Time for me to end your suffering."*

It had been a manufactured nightmare all along. From the moment Mike had heard the little boy's cry and seen his friends vanish by the car, Vecna had been inside his mind, manipulating him. Right now Mike was still standing on that front lawn, his eyes white and blank. El and Lucas were probably trying to snap him out of it.

"You saved Eleven. A worthless effort. She was meant to die in that house. You killed her in this house instead. It all ends up the same."

Meant to die. So this nightmare was an act of revenge. For Mike's interference. He had rescued Eleven and enabled her to kill Colonel Merritt. Had Vecna and Merritt been in cahoots?

Vecna raised his claw, positioning it over Mike's head. The creature's eyes fluttered as if he were on the brink of orgasm. A searing agony tore through Mike's skull. He probably had a minute or two before his body in the physical world would break and snap apart. Eleven couldn't run interference -- she couldn't come inside Mike's mind to defend him against Vecna -- because she was drained from doing the exact same thing to Merritt. Mike couldn't imagine his girlfriend subjecting someone to nightmares this evil.

"It's time," repeated Vecna. *"Time for you to join me."*

Mike felt like his head was in a vise. *No. Please. I can't die like this... I can't die... I still have two days... Please let me have my rotten two days...*

Then something happened. Something sublime.

A stray piece of goodness, a strand of beauty, swam into the ugliness of Mike's mind. It intruded on the nightmare, and Vecna sensed it, snarling. It was a musical note. A bell, strangely, as if heralding something liturgical. Another bell, and the notes multiplied. It sounded familiar... so, so familiar...

And then suddenly the heavens opened. A cascade of music poured down, and Mike started laughing through his tears. The song was familiar, all right. It was the opener to the masterpiece album released only this month. "Plainsong", by the Cure, about a pair of lovers who, caught in some tragedy, watched as the world came to an end. How fitting was that? A five-minute track that put three-hour operas to shame. No chorus to it, mostly instrumental grandeur, carried on slow waves of radiant synths. And as the waves crashed, Mike saw, over Vecna's shoulder, a hole open in the wall on the opposite side of the bedroom: a tunnel with a view to himself, his physical self, suspended high in the air on the front lawn; people shouting up to him -- El, Lucas, Hoss, and another man. Hard to see, and projected at a long distance, but a connection nonetheless. A

lifeline back to reality. The music came from Lucas's car. He had turned on the CD player and cranked up Mike's favorite song full blast.

Vecna leaned over so that his face was inches away from Mike's. *"They can't help you, Michael. There's a reason you killed them. The same reason you belong with me. Feed your hate. Join me."* The hideous claw flexed over him again, pulling at the last string of his life.

Against that pull, the music flooded Mike with memories. Memories of his first friend, his very first. The friend most precious to him, but whom he'd kept at arm's length when support was needed. At the swing set a long time ago, in kindergarten, he had asked him to be his friend, scared of asking him, but the boy had said yes, *yes*. Playing games with him, riding bikes, walking the train tracks. Years later, in a hospital bed, smiling for all his suffering, bitten by the shadow, but back from the dead. First friend, now gone.

Trailing this montage were echoes of his best friend, his black friend, who had stood tall since the first grade; tall in a town of hidden prejudice. They had connected at once, arguing with each other more than agreeing; yelling at each other as much as laughing. Together they had clobbered the world. Best friend, now gone.

Then, of course, her: the first time he saw her, in the pouring rain; tucking her into bed under his basement fort; dressing her up in his sister's wig; assuring her of all she was worth, after she saved him from a foolish jump; kissing her for the first time; watching, in tears, as she said goodbye, vanishing, disintegrating before his eyes; embracing her like treasure a year later, stunned that she was alive. Girlfriend, now gone.

The three most important people to him, and he'd killed them all, real or imagined.

Around those memories came the song vocals, and Mike's heart utterly broke. He realized he wanted only to hold his friends, tell them he loved them, and that no apocalypse could sunder the bonds they had relied on for so long. To smile for them. "Plainsong" was about that -- the end of the world, the cold, the rain, the pain, but being able to smile for the briefest second despite it all. It went [like this](#):



*"I think it's dark and it looks like rain," you said
"And the wind is blowing like it's the end of the world," you said
"And it's so cold, it's like the cold if you were dead"
... Then you smiled for a second.*

*"I think I'm old and I'm feeling pain," you said
"And it's all running out like it's the end of the world," you said
"And it's so cold, it's like the cold if you were dead"
... Then you smiled for a second.*

*Sometimes you make me feel
Like I'm living at the edge of the world
Like I'm living at the edge of the world
... "It's just the way I smile," you said.*



Emancipated from despair, Mike was suddenly walking past Vecna, pushing him aside with ease, striding to the tunnel ahead. Max had run to escape Vecna. Mike needed no urgency. The ceiling shook like thunder and caved in on him; he shrugged it off like confetti. Vecna roared behind him; Mike heard the music instead. Where Kate Bush enabled, The Cure lifted to another plane. Mike ascended there, and stepped out.

Next he was falling. He flailed his arms and landed hard on the lawn, as El and Lucas rushed to assist him. *I'm back*, he cried to himself. *Alive*. For only two more days, but two days at this point felt like a gift. There was so much to put right in the space of two days.

"Oh, *Mike*," said El.

She said it as she had done in the nightmare, but there was no mistaking her authenticity this time. She hugged him to her bosom and cried, and he cried too, as the events of the whole night overwhelmed him.

"We got you, Mike," said Lucas, his hand on his shoulder. "We got you out."

"Saved by the fucking Cure," sobbed Mike. "You'd better worship them from now on. Play that CD every day."

"I might just do that," said Lucas.

El wiped the tears from his eyes. "I'm sorry I couldn't get in there and fight for you. I tried, but I'm still on empty."

Mike nodded. "I know."

Another voice spoke above him. "I thought you were a goner, kid." It was Hoss. Without rattlesnakes, thankfully. "You're one hell of a fighter."

"You've got a solid friend," said the younger man. "I'm Josiah. Lucas never gave up on you. We searched this neighborhood for seven hours until we saw you come out of the house."

Solid and sure. Mike hardly deserved a friend like that. He replayed himself shooting Lucas in the face. *I'm an awful person.*

"Come on," said Lucas, helping Mike stand. "I'll drive you guys home." He meant Hoss and Josiah. "I can't thank you two enough for helping me tonight."

"Don't mention it," said Hoss. "I liked you guys as soon as you sat down at my bar. And I'm going to feed all three of you as soon as we get back."

"Jesus," said Mike, looking towards the car. About twenty feet away lay the corpses of two demo-dogs.

"We were attacked while you were attacked," said Josiah, patting his shotgun. "I love shooting those fuckers."

Mike laughed. "I'm glad you were here. Seriously. Lucas isn't that good with a pistol."

"I'm better than you are," said Lucas, opening the door to the driver's seat. "And at least I carry one."

They all piled into the Mazda. El rode shotgun, and Mike squeezed in back with Hoss and Josiah. They sped away, leaving Mike and El's demons behind. It was a little after midnight. Mike said a prayer of gratitude. Two terrible individuals had tried to kill him that night. Disease saved him from the first; a song saved him from the other. Salvation from the unlikeliest places. *God, I want to lie down and sleep forever.* He knew El wanted that too. But it wasn't in the cards. For them, this long dreadful night wasn't over by far.

About three hours later, the three of them were speeding to the police station. It was half past three, dark, and the death zone had expanded its radius by two blocks. The thunder was furious; the lightning a non-stop web of fuchsia. El was recharged, and their lives depended on it. There was slaughter everywhere, and no one was safe, not even inside a home or car. Most of the homes had smashed windows. Movement could be glimpsed inside: demo-dogs leaping about, devouring families; bat swarms bringing people down. Other homes were more graphic, displaying Vecna's personal signature on the sloping rooftops: twisted and mutilated corpses, positioned so that they could be readily seen by drivers and passersby. It was the worst horror film come to life.

Put simply, Vecna had changed the game. Having failed in his vengeance against Mike, he was taking out his fury on the whole goddamn town. Graduation-night style.

And he had chosen 3:00 am to lift the dam. Mike imagined waking up at that hour to being torn apart before you knew what hit you. He prayed that his parents and Holly were okay.

El was in his arms in the back seat, as Lucas navigated the road carnage up front. He swerved all of a sudden. "Look at this motherfucking shit!" he swore. Mike looked out his side window as they drove by a half-eaten corpse in the street. The boy couldn't have been older than twelve.

This is it, thought Mike. *The end of everything*. Unless El could find Vecna and kill him. But that still left an unclosable gate. "Any military?" he asked.

"The army is toast," said Lucas, swerving again, and turning down a side street to avoid a demogorgon that was rampaging up ahead. It was the size of a T-Rex.

The military was indeed taking the worst of it. Having allowed the army into town with full privileges, Vecna had revoked those benefits. Merritt had failed to keep his end of the bargain. Jane Hopper lived. The price for that was wrath eternal. Thus far Lucas had driven by two battle tanks smashed to pieces. In each case the soldiers had been ripped apart and left displayed on top of the wreckage.

El wasn't watching any of it; she kept her eyes on the seat in front of her. Mike felt her lassitude as he held her, and prayed that she was ready for Vecna. She seemed demoralized by the night's events, as if her interrogation ordeal was finally catching up to her. At least they had rested a few hours before the shit hit the fan.

Back at *The Old Goat*, Hoss and Josiah had fed them well, free of charge, and allowed El to take a shower upstairs. Over a fulsome dinner of pork roast, stuffing, and green beans (Hoss's cooking was better than even Karen Wheeler's), they had swapped stories and accounted for themselves. Mike and Lucas ate like hogs, while El ate only what she needed. She did most of the talking, catching the boys up on everything, and why her father was avoiding them. Dustin had been largely correct in his assumptions. Since Will's death, Hopper had been staying out of the way to avoid provoking Vecna into more slaughter. Relying on his daughter to do whatever needed to be done. Mike had to hand it to him. Hopper wasn't one to sit on the sidelines. Had he been proactive, he could have made things worse. From Dustin's lips the explanation had sounded far-fetched, but Mike saw the wisdom in it now.

El also explained why she had gone into hiding. As the most wanted terrorist in America she had to be invisible, but she also had to stay in Hawkins in case Vecna returned. As the sister of Jacinta Roy, she was well disguised and kept under the radar. Only Hopper and Will knew of the deception. Involving anyone else would have been too risky, especially with the bugs planted in their homes. Mike had things to say about that, but didn't press it.

Unfortunately, Hopper's shrewd planning had been for naught. The gate was unclosable. El planned to kill Vecna, but the portal to the Upside Down would remain open, continuing to unleash its terrors. The apocalypse would be diminished without Vecna but still in force, basically like the Four-Day Apocalypse all over again -- random savagery without a hive mind controlling the monsters -- but lasting forever instead of four days, and spreading out to swallow the world.

When they finished eating, Lucas went into the kitchen to help Josiah with the dishes, while Hoss went upstairs to shower. Mike and El stayed at the table talking, and with Lucas out of the room she dropped a bombshell. Max, she said, was still alive.

"What?" he said. "No, that can't be."

She explained everything to him. Using the Void and seeing Max still on life support at the hospital, attended to by orderlies. Entering Vecna's mind to see if Max's soul was trapped there, which it was. What that soul had been subjected to for the last three years. Barely escaping the wasteland before Vecna sniffed her out. Mike was in tears by the end.

"Jesus Christ, El. You have to get her out."

"I know that. I'm going to kill him first thing tomorrow. But I have to find him. And I don't think that's going to be easy."

"I'll help you," Mike said at once. "Lucas will too, obviously. We'll get Dustin too --"

"No," she said.

"No?"

"Listen to me, Mike. I don't want you telling Lucas about Max. Any of it."

"Are you insane?" Of course Lucas needed to know.

"I don't know for sure that I can save her," said El. "If he gets his hopes up, and I can't save her, then he'll be devastated all over again."

"Jesus, El. Shouldn't we be done with secrets at this point?"

"You're one to talk."

"Excuse me?"

"You haven't told Lucas about your rabies."

Mike was trying not to think about the short clock on his life. "Please don't mention that to him. Don't tell him how strong I am."

She raised her eyebrows; a clear *See what I mean?*

Mike exasperated. "I don't want to think about dying. And he'll just... you know..."

"He'll be devastated that his best friend is dying," she said.

"Okay, fine," he conceded. "Nothing from me about Max."

"Mike," she said, reaching over the table and taking his hand. "I don't want you to die. I love you."

"You love me? Do you know what your letters did to me? I mean, do you know what those fucking letters *did* to me?" It had been suicide watch each time.

"And do you know," she countered, "what would have happened if I hadn't pushed you away? I'm the most wanted terrorist in the country. All your homes were bugged. If we had tried carrying out a secret affair, the government would have been on to us. I would have been caught. And killed. There's no way we could have kept our affair secret. That's something you have to be secret about every minute. We would have slipped. Especially you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." *And for trusting Will instead of me.* But he didn't say that. Will had proven one hundred percent worthy of that trust. Instead he went after Will's brother. "I suppose you used Jonathan to send the letters? They were both postmarked from Lenora."

"Yes," she said. "I wrote the break-up letter in Indianapolis. Hopper put me there in an apartment, until he could arrange for me to move back to Hawkins secretly as Jace's sister. When I wrote the second letter, about Hong Kong, it was months later, and I'd been in Hawkins as Rachel for a while. Hopper and I used Jonathan in both cases. So he knew about it too."

"Fucking Jonathan," said Mike. For an irrational moment he felt good about breaking the bastard's mouth.

"It killed me, Mike. I hated myself for it. And I mean what I say. I still love you, and I don't want you to die."

"Yeah, well, I don't have much choice. Unless the soldier I killed was bullshitting me." His eyes were filling up. "I don't want to die either. But I already accepted that, or at least I thought I did. At Dustin's party."

She had come over to his side of the table then, sat on his legs, and they held each other as they talked about Dustin's party. How Mike and his friends had made peace with dying, but without giving up. And why Vecna killed Will. But something gnawed at Mike about that.

"It was a bit crazy, wasn't it?" he asked. "For Vecna to kill Will? I mean, why didn't he just let Will tell us who and where you were. He was as desperate as we were to find that out. If Will had said what he was about to say -- that you lived in Hawkins, posing as Rachel Roy -- then Vecna could have used the creatures in the house to kill all of us, and not just Will. Then he wouldn't have had to worry about us scheming with you against him, and he would have known where you were."

Talk about Will made El cry again. "I wondered the same thing when Hopper told me about the party," she said. "But I think killing all of you too soon would have defeated his purpose. He has this grand egotistical plan to make all of you -- and me -- suffer a long time for what we did to him before. He already made Will suffer enough with that awful possession, so he could afford to kill him."

Mike kissed her cheek. "Well, he must really have it out for us, to act that irrationally."

"He does have it out for us," said El. "But really, I think he just panicked. The thought of us together, working together, terrified him and he decided to shut Will down for good. He found me another way, the next day. By using Merritt. Thanks to my stupidity."

"You weren't stupid," he said. "You had to find out about Max."

"I know," she said. "And again, not a word of that to Lucas."

Lucas and Josiah had emerged from the kitchen soon after, and Hoss had come downstairs. He insisted that they all sleep overnight upstairs. The kids were exhausted, needed sleep, and shouldn't be driving anywhere until fully rested. They had readily accepted his offer; Mike and El took a room with a king-sized bed, and Lucas took a twin-sized. They got less than two hours of sleep before being awakened by hell come to earth. Out the bedroom windows they saw vines blanketing homes, demo-dogs crashing through windows, and bat swarms doing the same. They were lucky to be in *The Old Goat*. Business establishments were being spared -- for now at least. But despite the safety of the restaurant-inn, they couldn't stay a moment longer. They had to be sure their families were okay. And to find Jim Goddamn Hopper. Last night he had slept at the police station. It was time for another visit. If they could make it there alive.

Now in the car, Mike was praying. He had never prayed before the apocalypse. *Please God, let Mom and Dad be okay. Let Holly be okay. Please, please, just until El can kill Vecna, that devil piece of shit...*

Something slammed into the side of the car, jolting Mike out of his appeals.

"What the fuck was that?" Lucas yelled from the front.

Mike's bowels almost burst when he saw it out the rear window. El looked too. Chasing the car was a demogorgon -- the huge one they had just taken a detour to avoid. It was barreling after them and having no problems matching the Mazda's 35 miles per hour.

"Step on it, Lucas!" shouted Mike. "We've got the grandfather of all demogorgons on our ass!"

Lucas shifted into fourth gear and went up to 45, though that was dangerous on roads like this in the dark. The demogorgon fell behind for a moment, and then accelerated to keep up with the Mazda.

Those things run like cheetahs. He looked at El. "Can you take care of it?"



"Yes," she said. "If I destroy Lucas's window too." Her psychokinetic abilities worked through solid objects only at their expense.

"Go ahead," he said. "Lucas can sue us later. I'm sure he --"

"Fucking shit!" screamed Lucas. He slammed on the breaks, and Mike and El were thrown backwards against the front seats. The demogorgon misgauged and overshot, leaping straight over the car, which braked just in time to avoid plowing into a man and a young girl who had dashed from a building. The beast landed beside them and roared in rage.

Lucas unbuckled himself, drew his Bren Ten, and jumped out of the car. Mike and El hurried out the back doors. The young girl was screaming as the man shielded her protectively against a petaled face with razor teeth. Lucas fired the pistol. The bullet smacked into the beast's back, and it shrieked, whirling to face Lucas. Mike didn't even think of El. He ran at the demogorgon and jumped, reaching out to bear hug it. Lucas yelped at his friend's audacity. Mike landed on the beast's back and clung there like a child desperate for a piggy-back ride. El screamed, telling him to get away from the thing. Mike ignored her. *We'll see how strong I am now.*

The demogorgon was furious at the newcomer on its back -- and doubly furious that it was unable to shake the pest. Mike clung to it without breaking a sweat. But the beast was instinctively shrewd. It almost immediately gave up trying to throw Mike off, and instead crouched down low. Then it leaped backwards with all its might. Mike was slammed against the wall of the building the man and girl had come from.

If he hadn't been rabid-strong, his back would have shattered. But though he wasn't harmed, he lost his hold from the sheer force of the impact. He fell to the ground against the wall, and the demogorgon was instantly over him, shrieking. Mike saw El raising her arms, and Lucas aiming for another shot. *No. He's mine.*

"Stop, El!" he yelled, standing up. "Don't shoot it, Lucas!"

Lucas looked amazed that Mike was alive, let alone able to stand. El hesitated, unsure of what Mike wanted. Mike was about to show them. He was going to crush this kingly shadow creature; render it limb from limb. He faced the beast head on.

Lucas was still pointing the gun. At his side, El put her hand on his arm, making him lower the weapon. Lucas asked if she was crazy, and what the hell she was she waiting for. None of them realized, or cared, that the man and girl were long gone. Probably being chased by another monster, down another road.

Mike was ready for this monster, ready to lunge, but then stopped when he saw that the beast had ceased its attack. It was mewling and sniffing

Mike curiously -- sniffing him all over, from head to groin. The hostility had vanished. It was as if the beast realized it had made a mistake in attacking Mike; that Mike was a friend.

"What the serious fuck?" said Lucas.

"It thinks you're one of them, Mike," said El.

"Why would it think that?" asked Lucas.

The demogorgon nuzzled Mike's chin, and Mike, unsure of what to do, began stroking the beast's head. It growled happily and prodded Mike some more.

"Someone explain this to me," said Lucas.

"Hey there," said Mike, ignoring Lucas and petting the creature. He was getting slimed with a vengeance. "Jesus, you guys, I wish Dustin were here. Remember Dart?" Dustin's pet demo-dog had nothing on this grand-daddy.

"Mike, you have to kill it," said El.

"Oh, do I?" said Mike.

"Yes," said El. "It likes you. It won't like anyone else, unless they're rabid. It's still a killer."

The demogorgon snapped playfully at Mike, and pushed against him, clearly wanting to roughhouse. Mike gave the creature a final stroke and then abruptly turned away. *Fuck this shit. I'm not killing it.* His hyper-aggressive impulses were gone now. "You do it, El. I'll see you guys in the car." He didn't want to watch.

The beast whined and tried following him, but El wasted no time putting it down. Mike heard her fury, as the thing was blasted into a thousand filaments.

He got inside the Mazda and watched through the windshield as El and Lucas carried on a heated exchange. She was telling Lucas everything, surely; that Mike had rabies, was as strong as a demogorgon, and had two crummy days to live. When they finished talking, Lucas looked at him through the car window. *Here we go.* Mike wasn't up for this right now.

Sighing, he stepped out of the car as Lucas came over to him. They embraced without saying a word. It was too late in the game for platitudes and sorrows. After a minute, Lucas stepped back, crying, saying they would figure something out. Mike gently reminded him of what they had accepted at Dustin's party.

"Fuck that party," said Lucas, wiping his eyes.

"No, I'm glad we had that party more than ever," said Mike.

"Will any of us be alive when this is over?"

Mike shrugged. "Will it ever *be* over? The gate can't be closed."

"Actually, I'm not sure that's entirely true," said El.

They both looked at her. "You're the one who discovered it," said Mike. "It's what you told Will."

She looked uneasy. "But Vecna told Merritt there *might* be a way to close it. A hard way."

"You didn't say any of this before," said Mike. She had told them of her interrogation by Merritt over dinner at *The Old Goat*, but evidently left out a few details. Important ones.

"Because it may not be true," she said.

"Yeah," said Lucas. "I'd be skeptical of anything Merritt said."

"But I can't see any reason he would have lied. He had a proposition for me --"

Suddenly a car screeched to a halt one block down from where they were standing. They all looked. El's eyes widened. The car turned sharply and came down the road at them.

"Holy shit," said Lucas. "At long last."

Mike recognized the sheriff's vehicle. "Damn well about time."

The car braked in front of them, and Jim Hopper flew out without killing the ignition. He went straight for his daughter. El jumped and he scooped her up. "Jesus, kid, I've been looking all over for you."

El was crying hard. "They killed Jace, Dad."

"I know," he said. "I went to the apartment, to see you around noon. The bastards left her corpse lying there. I thought you were dead too. Where did they take you?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "In the south part of town somewhere."

"Moser Street," said Lucas. "I didn't catch the number of the house."

"Did Merritt hurt you?" asked Hopper.

"I'm... I'm fine. He captured Mike too. But Mike saved me."

Hopper looked at Mike, incredulous. "He did?"

"Don't be so surprised, asshole," said Mike. "Try believing in your friends." But Mike was blowing air. The only reason he had been able to save El is because he'd been bitten by bats.

Hopper put down El. The sheriff came up to Mike and looked hard at him. "I do believe in you, Mike. And I'm sorry."

Mike couldn't help himself. "Yeah. Sure. First you keep El away from me for a year. This time it was three years. Yeah, you're the sorriest motherfucker I've ever seen."

"Mike," he said.

"What?" snapped Mike.

"I have bad news."

It's Callahan. How badly did I hurt him? He remembered knocking the officer out cold, and his fists not hurting like they should have from a punch like that. His rabies strength had been in infancy at that point. Ditto for Jonathan.

"Is he okay?" asked Mike. "Callahan? What about Jonathan?"

"What?" Hopper seemed confused by the question. "Oh. Well, Callahan's been better. And Jonathan is sleeping in jail. It's the only place he feels safe from all this."

"Well... I'm sorry for hitting them. I was a bit of an asshole."

"Yes, you were," said Lucas, "but these grievances can hold. We've got bigger fish to fry than Mike's assholeries."

Hopper clearly didn't care about any of that. He took off his hat. "Mike, there's no good way to say this. When hell broke loose at three o'clock, the first thing I did was drive over to Maple Street. To get your family and Lucas's. Everyone's being killed in their homes now."

"What about my family?" asked Lucas. "And Dustin and his mom?"

"They're fine," said Hopper, still looking at Mike. "I moved them to Brody's shop and he's letting them stay there."

"And my parents? And Holly?" asked Mike. "Are they with them?"

Hopper's eyes were moist as he shook his head, and Mike's stomach flipped. He knew before the words came: "No, Mike. I'm so sorry. They died."

Chapter Eight:

Mindscape

Died.

That word seemed to hang in the air, as if to announce that everyone was now in its path. El could hardly think. They were standing on a street, but every street in this town was a battlefield. The screams continued from all around, competing with the thunder, as homes were ravaged and their occupants slain. Mike's parents, Holly -- and in two days Mike himself -- were tally marks; a few victims of the voracious swamp. In order to stop the tide, she had to do the impossible.

I have to find him. But he'll never let me. He planned well for this.

Her father was holding Mike as he cried, saying nothing; words couldn't help. She needed words, though. Any advice on how to counter Vecna effectively.

"How did it happen?" sobbed Mike.

"Dogs and bats," said Hopper. "Like most everyone."

"How many homes are under assault?" asked Lucas.

Hopper let go of Mike and faced them all. "I don't know. But on the roads I've been down since this started, at least half of them."

"Jesus," said Lucas, also in tears. "It's too much. Too much death."

El thought death might be a blessing. Life was too hurtful. She put her hand on Lucas's shoulder.

"And you may have noticed the army is being slaughtered too," said Hopper. "When Merritt came this afternoon, he gave orders, for some reason, that the shadow creatures shouldn't be harmed. But none of his officers have been able to reach him for the past few hours."

"I killed him," said El.

"I thought you said Mike did that," said Hopper. He eyed Mike, still not believing it.

"Mike saved me from him, but I killed him."

"I have rabies," said Mike, wiping his eyes. "From the bats at Dustin's party. Since eleven o'clock I've been really strong. I mean, like the Hulk. I broke out of my handcuffs and killed four soldiers. And the shadow creatures like me now. They think I'm their best friend. It's all really useful, except that I'm going to die at eleven o'clock this Friday. That's how fucking rabies works in the Upside Down. You become a super-being for two days, and then die two days later. But it doesn't matter. We'll all be dead before Friday."

Hopper was poleaxed to hear all of that. "Jesus, Mike... I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

"Oh, I know what to say," said Mike. "It's been Take-a-Giant-Shit-on-Mike-Wheeler Day."

"But what was Merritt trying to do with you both?" asked Hopper.

"It's a long story," said El. "Basically he was using Mike as a hostage to make me cooperate. He wanted me to kill Vecna, and said he would drop the federal charges against me if I did that. He had made a deal with Vecna to get the army inside the town. He was supposed to leave the shadow monsters alone, kill me, and then Vecna would give up his conquest and take all his monsters back to the Upside Down."

"Merritt couldn't have been that stupid," said Hopper.

"No, but he thought I was stupid," she said. "He said that if I killed Vecna, he'd let me leave the country."

"His promises were as empty as Vecna's," said Mike. "He would have killed me and El after she did what he wanted."

"Yeah, well, Merritt's whole unit is worthless now," said Hopper. "As I said, Vecna's been hitting the army hard -- even more than the homes. Since this afternoon there were two choppers patrolling the air above Hawkins. At 3:00 am, they were the first to go. Vecna made them crash into the death zone."

"That's fucked up," said Lucas. "But listen, I really need to get to my family."

"Of course," said El. "Go now, Lucas."

"But what are you guys going to do?" he asked.

"I have to kill Vecna," she said. "Every single shadow creature is under his control at all times. He makes the apocalypse invincible. He makes the Upside Down invincible."

"Are you going to mind-fight him again?" asked Mike. "Like you did from the pizza place in Nevada?"

"No," she said. "I was stupid to do that. I can't beat him inside his mind. I have to find him here in town and kill him."

"But where is he?" asked Lucas.

"We saw mangled bodies on some rooftops when we drove up Mulberry," said Mike. "So he was obviously rampaging around the southeast area to start with."

"We'll go back and start looking," said El.

"I'm sure he's in a different neighborhood by now," said Hopper. "But maybe close by."

"Mike and I will start there," said El. "And search the whole town if we have to."

"We'll need a car for that," said Mike.

"Here," said Lucas, taking the car keys from his pocket and tossing them to Mike.

"Are you sure?" said Mike, catching them.

"Of course," said Lucas. "You guys can't look for Vecna on foot. Hopper will get me back home."

"You bet I will," said the sheriff. "I don't want you driving alone. These streets aren't safe anymore. After I drop Lucas off, I'm coming back to help you two."

"No," said El.

"What you mean, 'no'?" Hopper said angrily.

"I mean what I say. There's nothing you can do to help us. You'd just be in the way." She said that deliberately, knowing it would infuriate him as the simple truth.

He got indignant. "Oh, I would be *in the way*. Seriously."

"She's right, Hopper," said Lucas. "In case it's not obvious to you, Mike and El are the only ones who can survive all these shadow creatures. El for obvious reasons, and Mike because of his rabies. Hell, they think Mike is a friend. I need to be home with my family right now. And Dustin and I need you there to help protect us. That's where you'll be helpful, and not in Mike and El's way."

Hopper hated that, but he relented, knowing he couldn't refuse Lucas. Not after what just happened to Mike's family. He came over to El and hugged her fiercely. "God damn it, you be careful," he said.

"You be careful," she said, fighting back tears, wondering if she'd ever see him again. At this point, her "being careful" was a meaningless platitude. She would do what needed to be done. All of this was her fault.

Five and a half years ago, she had created the first gate that started the whole cycle of threats from the Upside Down. Three years ago, she had created this gate, the mega-gate, that could only be closed from the shadow side, if at all. Ten years ago, she had failed to kill Henry/One when she was eight years old, and he had become Vecna as a result. And now the boy she loved standing next to her was completely ruined. Whatever happened to her was a sidebar, if she could undo just a smidge of the damage she had caused to the people of Hawkins.

Hopper looked at Mike again, and El could tell that he felt wholly inadequate. He struggled for the right words, and then said them. "I do trust you, Mike. And I should have trusted you more. Take care of her."

"Just go," said Mike. "Come on, El." He got into the driver's seat of the Mazda.

El gave Lucas a tearful smile as she followed Mike to the car and got in the other side. She watched as her father and Lucas got into the sheriff's car and drove off fast to the west side of town.

Mike put the keys in the ignition and looked at her. "Are we ready?"

She looked at him. "Are you sure you're up for this?" He'd been sledgehammered with the news of his family, on top of his own crisis.

"El, this is what I need," he said. "I'm going after that bastard."

She nodded. "Then let's find him."

They drove around the line of homes that displayed Vecna's obscene handiwork, but there was no sign of him. Just dogs and bats dashing and flying everywhere. They parked the car on the road and got out, looking around. A bat dive-bombed Mike, slamming into his head; then it fluttered apologetically, realizing Mike was of the shadow. A dozen other bats arrived, and circled Mike, chirping happily.

"Go away, you fuckers," said Mike, shooing them. "Go away!"

They circled him once more and then took off, yipping gleefully.

"*Vecna!*" yelled Mike down the road. "*Where are you, you piece of shit?*"

From the death zone came an explosion of thunder with an angry fork of lightning. The lightning was redder than usual and the thunder so detonative it felt like an earthquake.

"What an asshole," muttered Mike, as the thunder faded. "What's he playing at?"

"Drama," said El, unimpressed.

"Melodrama," agreed Mike. He shouted again: *"Hey, Vecna! Was that gas you were passing? Get your cowardly ass out here, so Eleven can kick the shit out of it!"*

No more theatrics. The lightning and thunder rolled back to the usual levels.

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Mike. "He's not here."

He could be here, thought El. He could be hiding in a home on this street, right under our noses. Or he could be in a completely different part of town by now. Or he could have gone back to the death zone, and through the gate, to hide in the Upside Down.

Somewhere a baby cried and a woman begged in agony. There was snarling -- a pack of demo-dogs, most likely -- and then the baby and woman were heard from no more.

"Vecna, you asshole!" bellowed Mike. "Are you scared of us? Maybe I'll kick the shit out of you myself and give El a break!"

This was useless. "Forget it, Mike. He doesn't want to be found."

"Doesn't he want to kill you?" he asked.

"Yes, but he knows I can beat him in a physical fight. I beat him that way when I was eight years old. That's why he had Merritt try to kill me, so he wouldn't have to get his hands dirty. Now that Merritt failed, he wants me to go into his mind to fight him, like I did in Nevada."

"You may have no choice but to do that, El."

She shook her head. "I may as well cut my throat and save him the trouble."

"Christ, El, people are dying."

"I know that!" she said. "But I can't do it, Mike. He's stronger than me inside his mind. I can't beat him there, and he knows it, and he wants me to do exactly what you say I should do, because I have no choice."

Mike swore and looked around, scratching his head. "Can't you spy on him, to see where he is now? In the Void?"

"I could do that," she admitted, "but he would sense me spying and just go somewhere else." Besides that, the Void was usually sparse in its display of external surroundings. Sometimes it didn't show much of anything. Just a watery blackness, with the subject being spied on. She could hear and see what the subject was saying and doing, but often had to deduce the subject's location, if it was even possible. If the Void was being generous and showed homes on a street where Vecna was engaging in slaughter, she would almost certainly not recognize the homes, of which there were thousands in this town. Certainly nothing as detailed as a street sign had ever been shown in the Void.

"Well, come on, then," said Mike, getting back in the car.

She got back in with him. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Anywhere!" he said. "We'll drive around until we find the fucker."

"Mike, stop." She pulled his hand away from the ignition.

"What?"

She sighed. "We could drive around town for days and not find him."

"You're the one who suggested we search for him like this!"

"I know!" she said, frustrated. "I was hoping we'd get lucky at this place, but mostly I was just trying to get my father off our backs. He would have wasted time going into every home in town to look for Vecna. I don't know... I guess I was hoping I'd come up with a better idea once we got here."

Mike put his head back on the seat. "Well, I'm dry on ideas. I mean, aside from a mind-fight. Maybe you're underestimating yourself."

"I'm not," she said. "Even when I started fighting him in Max's mind, he recovered from my surprise attack and kicked my ass. But once he took me out of Max's mind into his own, I didn't stand a chance at all. And Max died for it."

"Wait a minute," said Mike. "You fought him in Max's mind?"

"You remember," she said. "I went into her mind from the pizza place in Nevada. To stop Vecna, who was already inside her mind. Then Vecna shifted both of us into his mind."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "I'd forgotten that."

"He's unbeatable in mind-fights, Mike."

"I don't know. You were off to a good start in Max's mind."

"It was the element of surprise," she said. "He got over that and made me powerless."

"And then he transferred you. From Max's mind to his own."

"Where he's most powerful."

Mike turned in his seat to look at her. "So why don't you do the same thing?"

"What?"

"Do to him what he did to you guys."

"I don't get it."

"Go into Vecna's mind and bring him over to your mind."

She stared at him. "Mike, that's not possible."

"Why not?"

"Because... I've never tried anything like that." To actually transfer someone's consciousness into her own mind? She had never put her own consciousness into her mind as a discrete entity, let alone abducting

someone else's. How did one create a mindscape, like the red wasteland Vecna had fashioned for himself as a representation of his mind? The whole idea was completely beyond her.

"Well, call it a guess," said Mike, "but I'm thinking that *maybe* it's a good *time* for you to try something like that. Everyone's being slaughtered."

"Mike, you're crazy." Did he think she was a goddess? "I'm not Vecna."

"But you are!" he said. "You killed Jack Sullivan when he was in Washington DC, as if you were Lord Vecna on High. Not six hours ago you did the same thing to Merritt. You killed those bastards with nightmares -- for all I know, nightmares far worse than the ones Vecna comes up with. El, honey, you've practically been in training to be Vecna."

"No, Mike, stop." His whole line of thought was reckless. She'd fall on her face trying a feat like that.

"Hey," he said, reaching over the stick shift and hugging her to him. "You can do this. You can, El. Jesus, are you kidding? You've done impossible things before."

"You haven't been in there, Mike," she said, pushing him back enough to look into his face. "You don't know what his mindscape is like."

"I know you," he said. "And I know that sounds stupid, like a lame platitude, but I believe in you. And besides, what alternative do we have? Like you said, driving down every street is useless. He doesn't want to be found."

And so he wins. She resigned herself. *If this is how it ends, at least I tried.* She nodded. "Okay. I'll try."

He wasted no time. "So where do we do this?"

"Here," she said. "I'll lie down in the backseat. I'll start right now."

"But you need a tub of water, don't you? With a lot of salt." He looked through the windshield, down the street of empty homes. "We can use a bathroom in one of these, I guess. The corpses on the rooftops shouldn't mind."

"Mike," she said.

"Sorry, that was sick. But we can do it. And I'll drive to *The Old Goat* and ask Hoss if he has enough salt at his restaurant."

"Mike," she said. "I don't need a tub."

"Really? Are you sure?"

She nodded. She had entered her mother's mind in '84, and Billy's in '85, just fine without a tub. But when she went into Max's mind in '86, she had been far away in Nevada, and wanted the added security of sensory deprivation. It turned out that even then it had probably been unnecessary.

Weeks later, she had gone into Jack Sullivan's mind to kill him, when he was far away in Washington D.C. Again without relying on a water tank.

He was doubtful. "You were just saying you're not sure you can do this. Now you're saying you'll be strong enough without a tub?"

"The tub isn't the issue. I told you I went into Vecna's mind yesterday. I mean, the other day." She had found Max inside his mind on Tuesday. It was now Thursday morning, close to 4:30 am. Sunrise would come soon, at about quarter after five. "I got in fine without floating my body in water. I'm beyond the point of needing that now."

"You're the boss," he said.

"Just stand outside the car and keep watch," she said.

"Of course," he said. "Nothing's going to attack you. Those critters will do anything I say."

"I'm not worried about that. I'm invisible to them anyway."

"What do you mean, invisible?"

"I didn't tell you. Remember when Dr. Owens said that the Nina Project would make me stronger when I got my powers back? Now I have this mind-blanking ability. It makes it impossible for anyone with psychic abilities to spy on me or get inside my head; including Vecna. But it also makes me invisible to animals. It's like my scent is masked, or something, and I'm not there. I mean, unless I touch the thing, maybe."

"Wow," he said.

"Wish me luck," she said, opening the front door to get out.

He stopped her and gave her a hug, kissing her on the cheek and forehead. She knew he wanted a real kiss -- and she did too, more than anything -- but he was mindful of his rabies. "I know you can do this," he said fiercely.

I guess you know more than I do.

She got out and got in the back seat. Mike got out and stood by the car. She rolled down the back windows so he could hear her if she cried out. She stretched out in the back seat, and the Mazda accommodated the length of her body, a small five foot three. She forced herself to breathe slowly. This was stupid. *No, breathe slowly.* She'd be dead as soon as she began this farce. *Slowly, slowly...*

As before, she was inside his mind right away. The red wasteland hadn't changed. The grandfather clock drifted and bonged, heralding its doom. Pieces of the Creel House lay scattered here and there. The spires held their victims; the souls of all the people Vecna had killed. She had arrived at the same preliminary spot as before, about fifty feet away from

Max's spire. She wanted to talk to her before Vecna arrived. She began walking towards the spire -- and then froze at the sudden voice behind her:

"I knew you'd come."

She turned around, and he was there, right there, for of course he'd been waiting for her this time. Doubts flooded her all over again, and she cursed Mike for his naive ideas.

"Have you come to join me, finally, Eleven?"

"I've come to kill you," she said, but her voice trembled, and he knew she was terrified.

He chortled at that. *"You know, Max has been fun to play with. I taste her every day. But she needs company. This is your home too."*

Home. She had never known the right place to call home. Mike's basement was the first place she'd felt safe, after escaping the Hawkins lab. Hopper's cabin had been home for a while, until she ran away to her Aunt Becky's. Then she found Kali, her lab sister, and thought the streets might be her home; she had tasted vigilante life with thugs and couldn't deny its appeal. Then it was Lenora. She had loved the beaches of California, but otherwise been miserable there, without Mike and bullied constantly by her classmates. Her torments had compounded when taken to the Silo Lab in Nevada. Papa had assured her that she was finally home, again, with him, but he was so wrong; she only needed him to get her powers back. Most recently, home was an apartment with a lovely pseudo-sister -- so close to the home she had felt safe in at the start of it all, Mike's home, but that she now had to avoid at all costs. Home was a word of comfort to most people. For her it was a signpost of anxiety.

But if she didn't know where home was, she knew where it was not, and it was not in this red hateful dominion of torture.

"I've been saving a place for you. A special place, close to Max."

Looking at the creature who was probably about to kill her, El actually felt sorry for him. Papa had abused Henry, his lab child number One, and she had turned him into Vecna by blasting him into the shadow world; but there had been something terrible in Henry from the start that made the molding possible. A rot so deep and twisted that he needed to kill people and then reign over them, offering rape and ruin as a holy privilege.

It was a rot that cried for obliteration.

She felt entirely unequipped to do it. She felt it at once, as if the atmosphere of the red land was laughing at her. The task that Mike had set for her was too much.

Then her boyfriend's voice came, barely audible:

Fight, El.

He was outside the car, talking through the window.

You can do this.

She couldn't.

Do it for Max. For Hopper. For Lucas and Dustin. For me. And for you.

Those names triggered her, but one in particular. Max. Outrage for her abused friend began turning her. It was always the case: anger supplying the kick she needed. Kali had been a good instructor.

Vecna felt the stirring of her wrath and rumbled:

"Mm. Your anger does you well. That too has a home here. Ask Max."

He was smug, knowing he'd already won.

She kept her thoughts on Max. Fury and need gathered inside her, and piled up like a mighty sea. She would not lie down and die; she would go down blazing. Mike had given her the will; Max had given her the rage. There were answers to the limits she set upon herself. And if she couldn't learn what they were, then by God she would create them out of the wild possibilities of her mind, just like Vecna had.

She was going to fight, and fight hard.

Now.

The tsunami broke. She raised her arms and screamed, unleashing her rage.

The suddenness of her attack caught him off guard and her forces slammed into him, hurling him backwards. For a moment he seemed fearful, but quickly regrouped. He fired back with a wave that sent her sprawling. She bounded to her feet, but he was at her again, throwing her through the air. She smashed into a black spire, and fell to the ground in agony. She lay there catching her breath.

"Did you like that, Eleven?"

He was striding towards her nonchalantly, arrogantly allowing her the time to stand up again. For a moment she remained where she was, and then pushed herself up. She drew power into her hands, shaping the forces with her will, letting them run through her like a riptide. But Vecna had had plenty of time to reassert the offensive, and before she could release, he fired again.

His blast staggered the atmosphere of the red land. It tore from his whole body, as if his very bones craved annihilation. The forces whipped around her like a gale, threatening to tear through her and scatter her parts to the winds. It was all she could do to stand before him, and hold herself erect under his might. The blast she had been ready to fire fizzled out; she

tried summoning another, but it was useless; she was being hammered down relentlessly.

Oh, Mike. I never had a chance.

Assured his victory, Vecna's wrath became ecstasy, gleefully savage beyond all restraint. In an instant, his passion exploded, and the concussion brought her to her knees. She screamed, unable to muster a defense, knowing she had seconds to live. She looked over at the spire where Max was hanging. She had to let her know. That she had at least tried.

Max --!!!

--- !!!

... Then she was falling in blackness.

Falling. Spinning. Dying. Before she could even say good-bye, to let Max know she loved her and had come to hell to fight the devil for her. No matter. She would be joining Max shortly. On her own spire of woe, as he'd promised, to be given the treatment Merritt had given her, but a thousand times worse.

Falling. Mike would be cradling her corpse, in the back seat of the car, crying, crushed; another loved one gone. He had said once that you could expect no less from the apocalypse. Inevitable defeat while giving it your best shot. Silly, as far as she was concerned; it was just pretending to have a chance.

Falling. Pure blackness all around, and strangely familiar. This didn't feel like death. It felt like the red wasteland, as if she were in someone's mind. But that wasn't right. No one's mind was completely blank... unless...

Oh, God.

... unless you were brain dead, or trapped in Vecna's mind, as your body clocked on like a vegetable.

Max.

This is exactly what Max's mind had looked like when El stepped inside it three years ago: a pitch-black void of nothingness. She had arrived in Hawkins two days after her mind-fight with Vecna, and visited Max at the hospital. Sat on the bed and held her hand, hating herself for failing. Nancy, Steve, and Robin had prevailed against Vecna, but she -- the superhero who had reclaimed her powers -- had failed, and Max had paid the price. She had probed Max's mind for a damage report, finding nothing; gone fully into her mind, and found what she was seeing now.

El wasn't dying; she was inside the mind of her brain-dead friend. Somehow she had escaped Vecna's mind and fled into Max's. She had done it accidentally, or instinctively, as she looked over at Max and

shouted her name. A desperate act of self-preservation, knowing she couldn't beat Vecna.

So she was back to square one. She could either return to Vecna's mind and have another go at him, or bail and wake up in the car.

Neither option was viable. She couldn't go back to Mike like this, with her tail between her legs. He was counting on her. Humanity's survival depended on her. And she was furious at being smacked down so casually, as if she were nothing more than a pest. *But that's what you are*, she told herself. No more than a housefly, or a wasp at best, in the mental spaces where Vecna reigned supreme.

Drifting. The emptiness of Max's mind offered surprising peace and clarity. There were no intrusions to contend with. She wanted to rest here forever. She couldn't communicate with Max but she was inside her nonetheless, communing with her, surely, on some primal level. To drift, spin, and fall, forever...

Then he was there -- *right there* -- his face the size of planet Jupiter, filling the blackness. The shock nearly killed her, almost ruined her sanity. To see his face that infinite, as if he'd become the universe, was too much for any mind to bear. She would have screamed, but she could hardly breathe.

"We've been here before, haven't we?"

His voice boomed throughout the emptiness of Max's mind, so loud it rocked her entire body. No, she had not been with him here before. Or yes, she had. But that was when Max's mind was full and healthy, before he killed her. He had invaded Max's mind, and she had stepped in to defend Max. From the pizzeria in Nevada. He had brutally pounded them both and then taken them over to his mind. To his mind...

"You can't run from me, Eleven. It's just as well you die here. You'll be joining Max soon. Shall we continue?"

He had chased her here; followed her down the rabbit hole of a narrow escape. It wasn't over. By God, no. He loomed over her like a god. She looked away from him, probing the contours of Max's mind. Testing their boundaries. How was this done? Probing, reaching, feeling her away forward... no, backward... backward, yes...

"I'll have you now."

Then she did scream, as his face zoomed in even more. His claw reached out from somewhere and snatched her arm. She didn't try evading him. With her free hand she seized the claw that was holding her, and held on fast. He growled, surprised. How was this done?

How on earth was this done?

Like so.

Clinging to Vecna like salvation, she let go of everything else. Fell backwards, out of the blackness.

The fear was crushing. She was losing herself, surrendering to intuition, not really knowing what she was doing. Deeper down the rabbit hole. Still she held on. Held on...

Then came a wash of brightness, and she stopped and let go. Looked around and gasped. She was in a place she'd never been before, and yet every space of it was familiar. She should hope so, if this was indeed her own mind.

The familiars would have to wait. The first thing to contend with was being thrown off balance. There was no ground or floor to stand on -- in any direction she looked. Her mindscape was an endless vault of air, completely encircled by a sterling blue sky. Brilliant sapphire in all directions: up, down, and sideways. The sky was everywhere. Then she realized that no ground was necessary. The air sufficed as a place to hover, drift, fly, or swim -- if you had the will for it. She was air-swimming now, using breast strokes to move about.

As she did, she saw her life story, drifting everywhere in fragments. She wished Mike could be here. So he could see that he was right, and share these familiar wonders.

Memories, to be precise. Memories floating like clouds, above, below, and beside. Up there: a wave crashing on a beach; her place of sanctuary in California. Down to the right: the small dining table in Hopper's cabin, at which she and her father had eaten, argued, and laughed. And there: a painting of Will Byers; not a painting that had ever existed, but evidently how her mind chose to remember him -- dignified, wise, and scholarly. Across further: the basement fort Mike had given her as a bed, when she was on the run from Papa. And so much more: the loft she slept in when taken in by Kali; the Nina tank that had reawakened her powers; the apartment living room she had shared with Jace; the school gymnasium, decorated for the Snow Ball.

She took all this in as fast as she could allow herself before seeing the anomaly -- the demon she had dragged in. He was up and over, not far away. He had recovered from his own initial shock, and was now gliding towards her, his eyes blazing with fury.



She waited for him to get close, and then dashed underneath him, swimming and flying towards the bottom sky of the vault. She stopped at a place far down, and hovered there, looking up at him.

He roared and looked down:

"You think you're safe in here, Eleven?"

His voice was raw with rage, devoid of the smug confidence he had displayed in his mind and in Max's.

She had no rage to counter with. She had somehow lost her capacity for it in this place. Kali's lessons were null and void here.

Come, Henry, she said gently. *Catch me if you can*. She dashed off again, flying in another direction, past the memory of the clothes store where Max had taken her shopping for the first time. She had bought that godawful romper dress.

He roared again and fired a blast of power. She dodged it while flying, somersaulting in the air, and landed upright to face him. Hovering, she fired back her own blast. It smacked him head on, throwing him back a long way.

Enraged, he lashed out again before he could recover and focus. His torrent of force assailed her, but she easily parried it.

Is that all you have? she asked.

He tried another blast; her counterblast smothered it. His telekinetic power was diminished when he was in her mindscape. Accepting this, he abandoned that tactic and launched himself at her with all his strength.

He was far away, but came so fast that she barely leaped upwards in time. His claw missed her leg by an inch, and he leaped up high to try grabbing her again. Feinting left, she flipped backwards just in time. He overshot in the wrong direction and grunted angrily.

She knew what he was trying to do. Maddened by being outfoxed and reduced in power, he intended to tear her apart; to smash her and squeeze her into pulp. She knew what she had to do. This was her mind, and now that she was here, her intuitions answered her questions as soon as she asked them.

Henry.

He faced her, baring his teeth. Drifting closer. She allowed him. Closer. His eyes gleamed triumphantly. She tilted her head and spoke again:

Let me show you what I can do.

Quickly, he leaped forward to snatch and crush her.

Not quickly enough. As he moved, she touched a moment of eternity.

The moment was hardly longer than the space between one heartbeat and the next, but it was enough to create the impossible thing that she needed. Below her and Vecna, a crack split open in a space of air. It was almost like a gate, splitting wider and wider until it showed a red-hot pit that went down forever. Flames filled the column of the pit, and lava ran wildly up and down and around the walls; steam sputtered from the opening, intruding into her mindscape like a contaminant.

Vecna had his spires, where his victims hung forever, to be used and abused. She had this: a flaming inferno that fell forever -- the worst hell imaginable to any being of the Upside Down. Shadow creatures thrived in cold, were made uncomfortable in warmth, sickened by heat, and tortured beyond endurance by fire.

Mike was right. She was good at this. In her own mindscape, she could match Vecna's machinations, and then raise him twenty-thousand more.

As he grappled for her, she landed a blast that hurled him down into the pit.

His roars shook the vault as he fell. For a moment the sapphire sky turned purple, as he strove to claim the mindscape. The sky went redder, then bluer; then redder again. She looked down at him, tilting her head this way, then that, massaging the redness out of her domain. Another tilt, and he was shoved further down the pit. The flames enveloped him like a sleeping bag, and, as he became a raging bonfire, the vault returned to its blue purity. He howled in the pit; pounded the walls of lava; begged -- yes, *begged* -- her for clemency.

Good-bye, Henry.

She gave a final nod, and Vecna, Lord of the Shadow World, fell down the ladder of hell. He kept falling, faster every second, never hitting bottom. His screams took on mass, reverberating off the walls of the pit, pulverizing his own body with bruises and breakage. The flames scorched him black, and then blacker still. He fell and fell, and somewhere in the world his body died, but in this place there was no death, just the ladder that kept falling.

For as long as she lived, it would keep falling.

Chapter Nine:

Disintegration

Dawn broke but no one noticed. All of Hawkins was the death zone. Motes swirled in darkness lit by angry flares of red, as if the lightning protested the passing of its lord. Its objections were reasonable. For the first time in a long time, the shadow wasn't under management.

The planet could rejoice: Vecna was dead and his grand plan foiled; humanity would survive and carry on. The town had less room for gratitude. It could no longer rely on a grace period that guaranteed a slow demise. With the hive mind gone, the shadow creatures became truly wild, un beholden to capricious whims. Dogs and bats attacked anyone, wherever. Larger hordes began pouring through the gate. Vines slithered down every lane, up any edifice, around every tree. The shadow pushed outward, unchecked, and by 6:00 am on Thursday, June 1, residents were doing their damndest to get the hell out of Dodge.

Which proved to be easy enough -- if you could make it to the town border. The guards there were freed from their *geas*. Unrestrained by command, those dogs and bats had abandoned their post, and tore off in random directions to hunt. Some went back into town; others went out far beyond Hawkins. Military replenishment was on the way and would arrive by early afternoon. With Vecna gone, the army would at last be able to strike back. Shadow creatures would be gun fodder. But there would be always be more -- more dogs, more bats, more vines -- pouring through the gate at the town center. A portal no bomb could scratch. Humanity would survive, thanks to Vecna's passing, but it still had a killer problem.

In the back seat of a car, two kids slept, pulverized from their ordeals of the past twelve hours. Technically they were still kids. The girl's

eighteenth birthday was in three weeks, and the boy's was in two months. The boy had made his peace with death earlier this week, and then unmade it hours ago, when given a death sentence that allowed him to save his girlfriend. He had his arms around her now. Earlier they had rested at *The Old Goat*, but not nearly enough; their bodies cried for slumber; especially hers.

He stirred eventually. Something was snarling. A demo-dog, it sounded like, through the fog of his awakening. He looked up and saw the dog at the backseat window. Its head was inside the car and looked ready to leap inside and tear him and El apart. Then it hesitated, and leaned in more to sniff Mike over. Right away it backed off, making a weird sound that sounded apologetic; it tore off down the road in search of real prey.

Nice doggy. They were all nice while he was on borrowed time.

Then he saw how black it was outside, and the flakes that looked like snow. He forced himself to sit up, careful to lay El back down without waking her. He stuck his head outside and swore. Vecna was dead all right. It looked like the Four-Day Apocalypse all over again. Dogs and bats were dashing and flying everywhere -- more than before, and with less coordination. The homes were crawling with vines. The flakes swirled, the thunder was right underneath, the lightning straight above. A scream from over there; a fainter cry further off. He looked at his watch: 6:20 am.

They'd been sleeping for about an hour, and people were still dying. Lord Vecna had fallen, but the winds of chaos had swept in to fill the void. Mike still had no idea how El had beaten him.

She'd been inside the mind-fight for about forty-five minutes. In the end, the death zone had released a thunder-and-lightning show that signaled something catastrophic. El had come out of her trance as if a truck had plowed into her -- her nose bleeding, hardly able to sit up, and looking pale as chalk. Mike had got into the backseat and picked her up, asking if she was okay. And what the hell had happened.

"He's dead, Mike," she had said, starting to cry, her breath coming in hitches. "Max is free. You were right. You... were right..."

"Hey!" he said, cradling her. "It's all right, I'm here. Just take your time." *God, what the fuck happened in there?*

"I... I need to rest," she said, slurring her words. "Let me... sleep..."

"Of course," he said, cursing inwardly. At that moment he wanted more than anything to know how she'd killed him, and more details about Max. But she simply could not stay awake after whatever the hell she'd been

through. His own body was craving shut-eye, for that matter, and he lay down with her in his arms.

Now he saw that they were back to square one. The square that Nancy, Steve, and Robin had put them on when they shot down Vecna three years ago. Four days of savage terror, until El closed the four gates -- or as she believed she had. She had melded them into a gate that couldn't be closed, or maybe sort of could, depending on who you believed.

Fifty steps forward, plenty still back.

He stopped leaning out the window and gently prodded El. She moaned softly, and as he cradled her again, he was overcome by how much he loved her. Her face wore its beauty like a bruise. He caressed it, and brushed away the dried blood from her nose. Her skin was still too pale.

He tried gently shaking her awake. "Hey, sleepy."

She mumbled something and snuggled closer to him. He sat her up and she finally opened her eyes.

"Hey," he said. "We need to figure out what's next."

She made a face at him, but sat up, leaning against a backseat door to face him. She coughed and took a minute to fully wake up.

"You really did it," he said. "You killed that piece of shit."

She shook her head. "I can't believe what I did."

"See, I told you, you could do it."

"Not really. It only worked because of an accident. I couldn't do what you said -- I couldn't get into my mind from his. He had me beaten from the start. He almost killed me, Mike. I escaped by accident."

"Escaped?"

"Into *Max's* mind, not mine. And I wasn't even trying to. I probably would have failed if I'd tried. I was just trying to apologize to her before he killed me. I guess my stress and desperation... it did for me what I wanted and threw me out of his mind. But into hers."

"Jesus. What a trip." He wanted to ask more about Max but let her go on.

"I thought I was dead at first, because I was in this black emptiness. Then I remembered that's what Max's mind looked like when I went in three years ago. We always thought it was because she was brain dead, but even a braindead patient would have at least something in their mind. She was totally blank."

"Yeah," he said, "because her consciousness got absorbed. Into Vecna's mind. When he killed her."

She nodded. "That's what I found out two days ago. That her soul was trapped, and she was being tortured and raped all that time."

"You told me that back at the restaurant," he said.

"But because her mind was blank, it was easy for me to go out of it into my mind. There was no interference. I sort of fell back into my own mind. It was weird. I think if I had tried too hard, I wouldn't have done it."

"Wow," he said, awed. "How did you get Vecna there?"

"I got lucky again," she said. "He guessed where I went and chased me into Max's mind. He almost killed me in there too. He was the size of the universe." She shuddered, trying to explain how she had almost died of extreme fright.

Mike remembered something a local pastor once said about a Bible passage in Exodus. The verse in question said that no human being could look at God's face and live. Mike had been with his friends at a blood drive, and the pastor explained his interpretation of the passage to Dustin, who had found the idea fascinating. "It would be too much for the human mind to bear," the pastor had said. "To stare in the face of eternity, even for a second, would overload the senses and destroy the mind."

"Vecna wasn't a god," she said, when Mike explained that. "But in the mind, I guess he sort of was."

"Well, anyway. You brought Vecna into your mind from Max's."

She nodded. "I wish you could have been there. It was wonderful." She explained how the sky stretched everywhere in her mind vault, with no surfaces to walk on. And her memories.

"I'm glad a part of my basement was there. You had a painting of Will, but not of me?"

"Mike."

"I'm *razzing* you, El, *razzing* you." He playfully grabbed her arms and pulled her over to his side of the car, sitting her up against him. He kissed the side of her head and began massaging her shoulders. She smiled and leaned into him more. He ached for her desperately; they'd lost so many years. And he was almost out of time.

"Mike, listen," she said after a minute. "We need to get Max. Out of the hospital."

"Yeah we do," he said. "But I want to know how you killed that son of a bitch."

She shifted uncomfortably. "I killed him, and I don't want to talk about it."

"Seriously? You're going to keep the juicy climax from me?"

"I can't talk about it, Mike," she said. "Okay?"

"Would you have talked to Will about it?" He bit his tongue too late. "Sorry. And fine, whatever. Let's go get her."

"Not me," she said, sitting up. "You. You're strong enough to get her by yourself. Carry her out of the hospital into the car -- no monsters will attack you -- then bring her to... wherever Hopper is with Lucas."

"Brody's," said Mike. Dan Brody's music shop was on the west side, not far from Mike and Lucas's homes. "Assuming they're still there. But what about you?"

"Drop me off at the town center. On your way to the hospital."

"What?"

She looked at him. "Mike, you know what I need to do. I have to finish what I started."

He felt a stir of unease. "What do you mean?"

"Vecna's dead, but the gate is still open. The gate that I made."

"Yeah, and that gate can't be closed," he said. *And don't say it.*

"From the shadow side, I think it can."

He snorted. "Because Vecna said so?"

"He would have had no reason to lie. And you're the one who's been saying that it doesn't make sense that the gate can't be closed."

He hated having his words thrown back at him. "El," he said plaintively, "assuming it's possible, it would mean sealing you in the Upside Down."

"But I could come back," she said. "Once I close the super-gate from the Upside Down, I can create another gate, a normal one, and then cross back over into this world. Then I can close that gate from this side."

She didn't sound convinced by any of what she said. Neither was he.

"What other choice is there?" she asked.

"I don't like it," he said.

"Then what do you suggest?" she asked. "The town is still under attack. And a lot more places will be soon. Eventually the whole country."

"El, just come to the hospital with me. Jesus, you should want to see Max too."

"If I see her..." her voice broke. "If I see her, I may not be able to go through with what I need to do. I'll want to stay with her..."

He hugged her close and kissed her. "Enough. You're coming with me to the hospital. We'll figure out what to do from there. Understand?"

She hesitated, wiping her eyes, and then nodded.

"Good," he said, opening his door. They both got out and got in the front seats. *We have to hurry*, he realized. The monsters were getting wilder; more random and less discriminate in their targets. Mike hoped they weren't attacking Max's room. They'd been ordered by Vecna not to harm Max. Two orderlies had been tending to her, also on his orders. But

Vecna died an hour ago. His ordinances were obsolete. The proof of the pudding was in the screaming: cries for help came from all directions now.

El rolled up her window to shut out the sounds of human agony. "If she died when I killed Vecna, I'm killing myself," she said.

Mike left his window open. He needed to see and hear everything. "You're not sure she's alive?" he asked, turning the ignition.

"I'm not sure of anything," she said. "I just know her consciousness is free, and that's what matters. It's either back in her body, or, if her body is dead, then it's gone to... wherever a consciousness goes when the body dies." She looked at him. "Where do we go when we die, Mike?"

Fucked if I know. Anywhere but a mind like Vecna's. "No idea," he said, shifting into first and driving off. He noticed a pack of demo-dogs racing in parallel with him, across the front lawns. As if they were cheering Mike on.

"Look at them, El!" said Mike. He shook his fist at them out the window. "*Yeah! Andele, andele! Race, you fuckers!*" He shifted and sped faster down the road, as the dogs matched his efforts on the side.

She ignored the fun Mike was having. "I hope Hopper and the others are okay," she said.

"Yeah," he said, slowing down a bit, also concerned. "Lucas is going to flip out when he sees her."

Lucas wouldn't be flipping out for a long while. Mike and El left the hospital empty-handed. Max was gone -- though El did find her.

She had waited in the car when Mike ran in to get Max. He had a bad moment when he entered her room. A demo-dog was in her bed and there were bats flying everywhere. But there was no sign of blood. There almost certainly would have been a bloodbath had Max and the two orderlies been killed. When he rushed back out to tell El, she had used the Void to search for Max. She almost failed; the mind-fight with Vecna had exhausted her beyond anything she'd ever done with her powers. But for a few seconds she was able to enter the black watery psychic space. And beheld the miracle: Max was out of her coma, and being driven somewhere in a car. Snippets of conversation sounded like the car had made it out of town. Heading somewhere safe, like so many others. El didn't recognize the other four people in the car; two of them had Max between them in the back seat. Max was blind and maimed as before, but she was mumbling something, by God, *alive* and trying to put words together... and then the vision had evaporated. She related all of this to Mike.

Mike wanted a report on everyone else -- Lucas and Dustin, their families, and Hopper -- but El was drained again. *They could all be dead.* That would be the cruelest for Max. To come back to awareness after three years, just as all her friends died.

And he was under no delusion by this point: He, at least, and very likely El, were going to die. He felt it in his bowels. He was going to die tomorrow night anyway, but he'd made up his mind. He had no intention of waiting for the torture of rabies. He would go down with the girl he loved -- or, if he could save her, then die doing so. Saving her was preferable, but the other option seemed to be folding over them like the wet wallpaper of fate. It had become clear as they sat in Lucas's car in the hospital parking lot, discussing their next move.

"You're going to die soon, Mike," she said. "So am I."

"Why you?" he demanded. "How do you know that?"

"I feel it. When I tried to close the gate last Saturday, I saw what it was. I felt what it was. Vecna set his trap with so many layers. The first trap was when I closed those four gates at the same time. I created the super-gate. I'm sure a second trap will go off when I try closing it from the shadow side."

"So you were never serious about what you said. All that business about closing this fucker of all gates, then creating another one to escape the Upside Down, and then closing that one from this side once you came back through."

"I think closing it from the shadow side is possible, but that it will kill me."

"How would closing a gate kill you?"

"From whatever trap Vecna put there."

"You're being paranoid."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Dying is what I deserve."

"Shut up."

"I created the first gate. If not for me, Will would have never gone missing, and everything else since then -- all the deaths in this town -- would have never happened. I started all of this."

"Henry fucking Creel started all of this!"

"And I didn't kill Henry when I had the chance. I turned him into Vecna. My fault again."

"El, that's such horseshit. You can't --"

"I don't want to argue, Mike." She touched his face. "Please. If you want to die with me, I accept that. Your time is up anyway. I'm asking you to accept what's going to happen to me."

"If it's going to happen to you," he had said, conceding as much as he could allow.

"It will," she said. "Vecna planned this carefully, like he said when we were in Nevada. He gets his revenge against me either way. Either the shadow apocalypse continues, or I die."

If you die, El, then I die with you. I'll do what it takes to make it count. And maybe, just maybe, you won't have to die after all.

Resigned to that purpose, he started the car again and pulled out of the hospital lot. "So that's where we're going, then? To the gate?"

She nodded. "Where else?"

To Mike it looked like the Crack of Doom.

"I'll park here," he said, stopping the Mazda about thirty feet from their destination. He looked out his side window. One block away was the fire station. All around was darkness, savagery, and snowy motes, fed by an endless supply. He and El got out and began walking to that supply.

Crack of Doom indeed. But who's Frodo and Sam?

At ground zero, the town center may as well have been Mordor. As for who the two hobbits were, it was obvious. El was the fateful Ringbearer, and he would face down any Shelob that came her way. *For all the good.* It was no consolation that Frodo failed in his quest and the Ring was destroyed only by accident. Mike and El weren't on track to a utopian afterlife like Valinor. The final chapter of this tale wasn't *The Grey Havens*; it was *Disintegration*.

Mike smiled grimly. The Cure spoke eternal truths but gave small comfort.

Then they got to it. And when he saw it, he surrendered. To all his intuition that screamed El was right. This appalling cross-pit could only be her death knell.

"Jesus," he breathed.

"It's a lot bigger than the others," she said.

"I wouldn't know," he muttered.

He had never seen most of the other gates. Hopper and Mrs. Byers went through the first one to rescue Will; Hopper saw it again, a year later, when El closed it; he'd shielded her from the demo-dogs defending the portal. Hopper also saw the second gate, and jumped through it, right before Mrs. Byers closed it; it landed him in Russia. Mike's friends -- Lucas, Max, Dustin, Nancy, Steve, and Robin -- saw two of the four gates created by Vecna: Water Gate and Trailer Gate. Most of his friends went

through those gates at some point into the Upside Down. He was out west when that shit went down. When he returned to Hawkins, he did see Vecna's four gates -- which by that point had converged closely together at the town center -- but it was from a distance, and the earthquake rifts had obscured details. So he had never actually seen upfront what a portal to the Upside Down looked like, let alone this mega-version.

It looked staggeringly alive. Menacing, gleaming, and hissing. Almost as if it were sentient, like Vecna himself.

Closing this thing...

It was enormous, shaped like a cross, that bisected Randolph Way and Western Avenue. Each of the two cross lengths were at least fifty feet long, and twelve to fifteen feet wide. It was organic, the stuff of body horror films like *Videodrome* and *The Fly*. Tendrils snaked around the edges. It radiated a phosphorescent glow; blends of purple, orange, and red. Scurrying noises came from below -- the other side -- and there was traffic in and out, though more the latter. For every dog or bat that went down, it seemed that three more emerged from below. Most of them dashed off or flew away, but some came over to Mike, excited. They ignored El entirely, if they even saw her.

Mike shooed them off.

"Thank God," she said, rubbing her forehead.

"Sorry?" he asked.

"The screams," she said. "At least there's no screaming here."

That was true. This central area had been the death zone for six and a half days now, and everyone who had lived here or nearby had either fled or been long dead. "Yeah," he agreed. "That was making me more suicidal than I already am. So how do we do this? Can we get close to it?" He wanted to see into it.

She nodded and they got closer and looked down. The vines slithered in all directions around the rim, but without really going anywhere, reminding Mike of an optical illusion from one of his childhood books; circles that seemed to move in both directions at once. Looking through the gate showed a bottom that was dark and cloudy, punctuated by forks of colored lightning. It was the sky of the Upside Down.

"How does this work?" he asked. "If we jump in, will we keep falling back and forth?" As soon as they entered the Upside Down, the gravity would reverse, and they'd fall back in the direction they came from.

She turned to him. "Mike."

"Yeah?"

"We're not ready for this yet."

He nodded. She still looked weak. "Yeah. I mean, we can just hang out in the car until you recharge and feel up to it."

"It's not just that," she said. "Not just me. *We're* not ready."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you?"

She looked awfully sad. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said.

"This is our last day. We've only had, what, eight hours together? After three years? I want more time with you before we start this. I do need more recharging. But I need you."

He felt tears coming. "Yeah... I get that. Yeah, I want that too."

She took his hand. "Let's get back in."

At first he protested, full of doubts and second guesses. She might survive this ordeal. She couldn't be sure -- her gut wasn't that prescient -- that closing the gate would kill her. His sperm and saliva would certainly kill her. His objections held no sway; she denied him the right to refuse. He would make love to her, and that was final. She wasn't dying a virgin, nor risking dying a virgin. The person who meant everything to her was going to the grave because of her. That was worth dying for.

They stripped in the backseat; everything off. Mike had started the car and cranked the heat. It was June 1, but under the shadow, no more than fifty-five degrees. He went for tender at first, tonguing her with kisses -- the real kisses he'd been starving for since he rescued her from Merritt. She took that well and gave back even better. Then he went for broke. He went deep inside her and dialed up the roughness, shedding any pretensions to gentlemanly etiquette. They were dying, for Christ's sake; he was going to make this count and his girlfriend see stars.

She clung to his torso and rocked her hips, wincing a couple times, and he wondered if he was hurting her, but as soon as he hesitated she said *no, no, harder, harder...*

He obliged, reaming her much harder. He *was* harder -- harder than he'd ever been with Beck, or with Julie two nights ago. Inside her: the lost soul he'd found in the woods and fallen so hard for, before even knowing the things she could do. It had rained so hard that night, as if the gods had announced her coming. So hard to imagine how his life would have turned out otherwise without her. He'd *have* a life ahead of him, surely, but here and now, he couldn't find regret.

Harder, harder...

His seed was screaming for release, but he used the trick he had honed with Beck, dialing back just enough to make it last, for her, and he could tell she was in ecstasy as she cried his name. He began crying then, wishing that he could do this for all eternity. To fuck El to the gates of hell, until demons intervened. She too was crying, climaxing to his thrusts, taking everything she could while it lasted. He kept going and going. He owed her the pleasure, if she would pay the steepest price for it.

Finally he couldn't hold back, and shot what felt like a pint of himself inside her. She responded with an orgasm so volcanic that he almost expected her head to blow. It drew the attention of others: he and El looked up and saw bats clinging to the car windows, chirping inquisitively. They laughed at that.

"I hope that didn't hurt," he said, a bit lamely.

"It hurt just right," she said.

They lay there holding each other.

"El," he said, after a while.

"Yes?"

"You asked me where we go when we die. I've no idea, but I promise I'll find you. Wherever we go next."

She kissed him. "That's nice. But I think I'll find you first."

He believed her. If there was anyone who had proven she could find someone in an afterlife and navigate the impossible perils, it was she.

They lay in the backseat a long time afterwards. Sleeping, talking, making love, drifting again, strangely at peace in Mordor. When visitors intruded at the window, they caught Mike's scent and moved on. It was beautiful really. It looked like snow outside on Halloween night. From the lightning; flashes of orange, red, pink, purple. From the thunder; tremulous groans. They could have stayed like that in Lucas's car forever.

After a while, she broke the silence. "Mike."

"Yeah?"

"You know I was faithful to you, right?"

"Oh, you were? I kind of thought you were blowing some dweeb you hooked up with in California."

"But you know that isn't true now. I haven't had sex with anyone. Until now."

He'd actually been very unsure about that. No doubt projecting his own infidelities onto her -- his affair with Rebecca Sloane during junior year,

and his orgy-fuck with Julie Blake two nights ago. "So you're telling me Rachel Roy had no affairs at all?"

"No, she didn't," she said.

"The thought never entered your mind," he said.

"No. I mean, well... not really... There was only... no, I don't think --"

"Jesus, El, you can't lie for shit. Who did you fuck?"

"No one! I'm not lying. I only asked someone if he would help me practice, and he said no."

"Help you *practice*?"

"Yes," she rushed on. "So that I could be good for you, when we got back together. I know it was a stupid thing to ask --"

"Who?" he asked, feeling punched. "Who did you ask for this favor?"

"Will."

His eyes widened in shock -- then he laughed so hard he almost choked.

"Why is that funny?" she asked.

It was too farcical to take seriously. "You asked Will. Who was your stepbrother. Who was gay. Who was my close friend. To have sex with you, so that you would be experienced when you were finally ready to fuck me."

"I know it sounds --"

"What did he say? What did Will *say* to that?"

"He got mad."

Mike laughed uproariously. *The poor guy*. A request like that from El must have turned William Byers upside down -- more than his abduction by the demogorgon or possession by the Mind Flayer.

"I'm glad you can laugh at it," she said.

He leaned over and kissed her, for about the fiftieth time that day.

"You're a constant surprise, you know that?"

Making love again. The backseat smelled of their sex. If Lucas ever saw his car again, he'd have an unpleasant cleaning job.

Speaking of which. "Do you want to check on the others?" he asked her.

"Make sure they're okay?" He was asking for himself as much as for her.

He needed to know that Lucas and Dustin were alive.

He could see that she wanted this too, but she said no.

"Really? You don't want to check on Hopper?"

"I need to save my energy."

That was a feeble excuse. She was almost fully recharged again. Using the Void to spy hardly drained her, unless it was a long surveillance. He pulled a strand of hair away from her eyes and kissed her. "I think you're fine on power now, El."

"I can't look at them now," she said.

Mike understood. It was the same reason she didn't want to go to the hospital at first. She feared the sight of friends and family would undo her resolve. To bear what must be borne. To walk into the final trap that lay ahead.

"I understand," he said.

She broke down then, crying, and he held her until he was doing the same. He cried for his family, and hoped that Nancy would do well for herself. He mourned Will and so much left unsaid because of his own inadequacies. Mostly he wept for the girl in his arms, his soul mate; they'd spent more time apart than together in the past five and a half years -- less than a year together. *The afterworld better make up for that*, he thought. *It owes us.*

When they awoke for their final time, his watch said almost noon. One would never have guessed it. Atmospherically, the town was indistinguishable from the Upside Down. They left the car, walked up to the gate, and began their descent.

"Hug the rim as you go through," he said, batting away vines. If they jumped through the gate, the gravity reversal might keep them stuck in the crossing point.

They hung on to the edge of the ground and lowered themselves as if into a swimming pool. Mike felt the gravity reversal as soon as his legs submerged, and gave himself a push. He went totally "under" (through) and then turned his body around to face the shadow version of the town center.

He laughed when he saw his surroundings.

"What's so funny?" asked El. She was standing next to him, having followed him through.

"It's really no different," he said.

It looked a lot like the town center they had just come from, since both were under the shadow. No wreckage though, from the slaughter of six days ago. In the Upside Down, it was always the day of November 6, 1983. The day Will went missing. When El had created the first gate. The reason for the time freeze was mysterious. Dustin had theorized that when

El created the gate, elements from the shadow world had mixed with their own world, and somehow that fusion had frozen the Upside Down in an endless time loop.

El had speculated differently. She didn't think the Upside Down was frozen in time at all. She believed that her gate in '83 had *created* the Upside Down -- not the shadow world itself which would have existed for millions of years, but the "replica" part of the shadow world, or the Upside-Down part of it. Prior to the gate she opened in '83, the shadow world was the vast primordial landscape she had blasted Henry Creel into, when she was eight years old in '79. Wastelands and mountains, and furious lightning, but no replicas of another dimension. Mike had developed her train of thought, suggesting that when El opened the gate in '83, Henry (now Vecna) finally had access to the world he came from -- the world he wanted revenge on -- and initiated his grand plan of melding their world to the shadow. So he modeled the shadow world, or at least part of it, on the town of Hawkins. Replicas mirrored how the town looked at the moment the gate opened. The Upside Down, on this understanding, was Vecna's creation in 1983 that announced his vision: a world free of humans, where no one could threaten him or his dreams of conquest; and a world free of time, in which any moment was as good as eternity.

Mike thought El's theory made more sense than Dustin's, even though Dustin was usually right. If the Upside Down were actually frozen in time, it would mean that any passage through a gate was time travel, which didn't make sense. The Upside Down had to be a small part of the shadow world, created by Vecna, which simply resembled how Hawkins looked at the time of its creation. Now that Vecna was dead, all that remained was to seal away this perverse creation forever.

"Mike?"

He dismissed his theorizing and looked at her. She had asked him a question. "Sorry, what?"

"Are you ready?" she asked. She had moved closer to the gate's center, where the cross-beams intersected, and was looking down, into their home world now. Breathing deeply, readying herself.

"Yeah, of course," he said, nervous times a thousand. "I'll be sure nothing attacks you." Her scent-blanking ability made the shadow creatures oblivious to her, but he wondered if that would hold true once she attacked the gate. El was convinced that Vecna had set a "second trap" for her, but had no idea what. Mike didn't know what to expect either, so he expected anything. He stayed back from the center a bit, to survey all lines of possible attack.

Her back was to him as she raised her arms. She paused, indecisive.

"Go for it," he said.

She did. Letting out a scream like a challenge, she unleashed her power.

Her telekinetic forces assailed the gate, trying to unmake the opening. To Mike, at first, it looked like nothing much was happening. Then the tendrils around the gate began to hiss and ripple faster. She was having an impact; and the vines weren't happy. He silently applauded her. *You've got this.*

Suddenly there was movement far to Mike's left, and he looked over. A massive seven-foot tall humanoid had just risen up from the earth, by the end of one of the cross beams. It appeared to be made of glass, crushed gemstones, and organic shadow flesh. Vines snaked up and down its neck, a lot like Vecna's. The creature's eyes were huge gemstones, one a pink sapphire, the other violet amethyst. Its fists were made of jagged crushed gems of many colors, clearly made to pound and shred. Mike was reminded of the *glasspane horror* monster from Dungeons & Dragons. If Dustin had seen this thing, he would have surely christened it the Glasspane Horror of the Upside Down.

"We've got company, El!" he shouted.

Its direction was unmistakable. It was aimed at the spot where El stood about thirty feet away. Mike felt the radiations of raw and hostile power broiling inside this creature as it moved towards her. Before he could act, she turned around, suspending her attempt on the gate. Without transition she threw a blast at it. The Glasspane Horror was halted by her forces -- and then began howling as she used them to break its head off. Mike felt totally useless.

Then, just as suddenly, she released the creature from her hold. "Mike! We can't kill it! It's the second trap!"

The Glasspane Horror made ready to come at her again.

"What?" yelled Mike. "I don't understand!"

"That thing is what makes it possible to close the gate from this side!" she shouted. "I don't know how, it just does. If it dies, then the gate can't be closed! We can't kill it, and I can't fight it off while I'm trying to close the gate!"

He understood at once. He would have to keep this goddamn monster off her without killing it. He lunged at it immediately, putting himself between it and her. She was maybe twenty feet away. *"Hey! Look at me, you piece of shit!"*

The creature swept Mike to the side with one of its huge arms. It had eyes only for El. Mike leaped back in front of it and swung a punch at the monster's head. He would have wounded his hand if not for his rabid enhancements. His fist connected with the Glasspane Horror's chin. It was organic material laced with hard glass. The creature roared, livid, and Mike leaped backwards to avoid a counter-strike. He barely avoided getting shredded by a gem-crusted fist.

But now El had the breathing space she needed. Out of his peripheral vision Mike saw her resuming pressure on the gate.

Furious, the Glasspane Horror shifted in Mike's direction and lunged. At the last moment, Mike spun out of its way. Unable to stop, the creature dashed by him, barely halting in time to avoid falling into the gate, and into the real Hawkins. Mike cursed himself. America didn't need a creature like that in its streets. Without thinking, he sprang for the creature's back. With his rabid strength he grappled it and held on -- hammering blows against a slithering neck studded with glass. The creature snarled and spun sharply, trying to throw Mike off its back. Mike didn't budge.

He heard El scream and glimpsed over at her for as long as he dared. Her back was to him, and she had both arms out, giving the pit her all. He swore, searching his memory. How long had it taken her to close the first gate? With Hopper defending her as Mike was fighting for her now? He thought she had told him five minutes. The mega-gate might take longer. He didn't think he could carry on a dance with the Glasspane Horror for more than ten minutes. He wanted to break the monster's head off, and knew he had the strength to do it. But if he killed the thing, the gate wouldn't close. Somehow this creature's cursed existence was the "key" to closing the gate from the shadow side.

With all his might, Mike tried wrestling the beast to the ground. He head-butted it -- not knowing what else to do -- which wasn't the best idea. His skull was hard, thanks to rabies, but the Glasspane Horror's was harder. Mike lost his grip and fell to the ground.

He needed a respite but that was a fantasy. *Get to your feet, you fuckwad, she's counting on you.* Dimly he heard El scream again, pouring her energy at the gate. Then he saw the Glasspane Horror aiming for her again. It had turned its back on Mike, making the larger threat its priority.

Ignoring his throbbing forehead, Mike got up. Yelling at the monster, he leaped into the air and launched a flying kick at the back of its head. The yell was a bad idea; the Glasspane Horror turned at the last moment, trying to sweep Mike into its embrace. Mike barely dodged in time, and his kick missed by a mile. Wheeling behind the creature, he sprang onto its

back again. He clasped his legs to its torso, locked his arms around its neck, and squeezed, straining every muscle to throttle the creature and bring it down. The Glasspane Horror flailed its arms, unable to reach him. Mike kept straining. It was no use. He was strong but the seven-foot creature had too much weight on him. Wrestling it to the ground was impossible.

Swearing in fury, he punched the Glasspane Horror in the side of its head -- careful to pull the punch so as not to knock the head off and kill the creature. He had to sacrifice his hold to land the punch, and the creature took advantage, spinning wildly and throwing Mike off. He landed and rebounded right away, circling to put himself between it and El. Then he launched another kick. His foot connected with the monster's groin, and Mike hoped (but seriously doubted) that the creature was as vulnerable there as Mike was.



It was vulnerable enough. The Glasspane Horror staggered -- but one of its arms caught Mike's offending leg and yanked it savagely. Mike went down on his back. He thought he heard a thunderous crack, around and underneath him. That cost him his concentration. Too swiftly for any defense, the creature raised its foot over Mike's leg and stamped down. Mike screamed in agony as his leg snapped. He looked at it in horror. Splinters protruded from the wreckage of his thigh and knee. Blood spattered the ground, looking black in the darkness of the shadow world. *Oh fucking Jesus, it looks as bad as it feels, and feels worse than it fucking looks.* The benefits of rabies had their limits.

The creature looked down at him, its foot raised for the *coup de grace* to Mike's head. Mike heard another booming crack, and the atmosphere went darker. The Glasspane Horror's eyes flared. The different colors, pink and violet, somehow made the thing's facial expression look insane. Then it was blasted from behind; lifted high in the air, and as it rose Mike saw El with her arms raised, facing the monster. She let out a scream to call avalanches -- and the Glasspane Horror exploded. Mike cried out, using his arms to shield himself from the scattering debris.

The pain of his leg was so bad it was sickening, but Mike forced himself to look around after the explosion. He gasped in ragged relief. The cross-shaped gate was gone. El had done it. *Of course she did,* he thought wearily. *She can do anything. All I can do is keep getting ass-whipped.*

"Mike!" she cried. She was kneeling over him. "Oh, God, that must hurt."

He wanted to scream. *Yeah, it fucking hurts.* He'd never been in this much pain. *Take my leg off, my foot off, my fucking head off...*

"You were wonderful," she said. "You did it." She held and kissed him. "You did it."

"Bullshit," he gasped through his teeth. "*You* did it. *You* closed the fucking thing. Fuck Vecna and fuck the Upside Down." F-bombs seemed to be the greatest balm for the pain.

"*We* did it," she said. "It took both of us after all."

Mike thought he heard a humming noise somewhere in the air above. "Yeah, well, just kill me already. I'm a wreck and I don't want to die from rabies tomorrow night."

"Mike." She sounded scared. "It's time, I think. For both of us."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Look," she said, turning her head skyward.

He followed her gaze, and saw the source of the humming noise. Two bright stones were hovering fifty feet in the air. One pink, the other purple. "Those aren't...?"

"The monster's eyes," she said. "I can't destroy them with my powers. They're Vecna's last trap."

"I don't get it," said Mike, not really caring at this point, just wanting to be put out of his misery. "What are they going to do?"

"I don't know. But I think they're about to explode."

"Well, then shit. El, you have to create a normal gate now, go through it, and then close it from our world."

"Mike, I just closed a gate. The mother of all gates. I can't open another one without recharging."

He felt desperate. "Then run. Run away from those beady-eyed fuckers. Leave me here. Hide out somewhere in this god-forsaken place until you're recharged."

She shook her head. "I'm not leaving you." She sat him up against her.

"You have to," he said, crying. "You have a chance --"

"No," she said. "I can't outrun what's going to happen. I have your rabies anyway. We don't have much time. Don't tell me what to do. I'm staying here."

The gemstones were rising higher and humming louder. Mike looked up and saw the pink and purple glow of the gemstones and cursed Vecna a final time. For the devastation he'd caused to so many people. *Nancy*, he said to himself. *I failed our family. But you'll be fine.*

"Mike," said El, still holding him. "I'm sorry. For our time apart. It wasn't fair to you. Or me."

"Yeah," he said. "So am I." His sight was blurred from crying.

"I'm scared of dying. But I'm ready." Her body tremors suggested otherwise.

"I've been ready since Dustin's party," he said. "But not really." He clutched her tighter. "I don't want to go."

She turned his head so that they were looking each other in the eyes. Eyes that could hardly see through wetness. "It's okay. We're here and it's okay."

"Yeah," he said. "We're here. It's okay." It helped as soon as he said it. Surrender.

There was crackling and hissing from above. They looked up and saw the two gemstones dissolving in air, releasing plumes of vapor. It bathed the darkness in fuchsia and made the swirling particles look beautiful, like fluorescent snow. The plumes multiplied and drifted out in all directions,

heading for at least a mile. And from the vapor came rain. A rain that fell slowly -- as if on a moon with a fraction of the earth's gravity -- but fast enough, inexorably and unavoidable. Mike cried out at the color. It was purple.

Purple rain.

Dustin had been a prophet.

And Mike began to laugh, as the first drops of the rain landed. On their bodies nothing happened, but where rain hit the ground, fumes shot up, a purplish gas that was instantly soporific. The rain kept coming, and the gas was all around. They would fall asleep and never wake up again.

At least it won't be painful.

He looked at El. She was fighting the drowsiness, trying to stay awake, alive, as long she could. To hold her boyfriend until she couldn't. "It's okay, El," He held her face. "We're here, it's okay." She nodded, tears mixing with the purple wetness on her cheeks. "We're here," he repeated. He smiled for her, wanting that to be the last thing she saw, and she smiled back. Prince's words came to him:

♪ ♪ *I only want to see you laughing in the purple rain.* ♪ ♪

And so he did laugh again, fully at peace, and she joined him. They laughed as their minds closed down, and the rain worked its purpose, and Mike promised, *promised* to find her in the afterworld. Wherever and whatever that was.

Epilogue:

Black Friday

It was the same story as before, but this time it was true. Jane Hopper, AKA Eleven, died saving the day. The government denied it like before, and wasted mountains of manpower chasing leads down rabbit holes. Still they searched. It was accepted dogma that Jane Hopper could not die, or that if she could, she would surely come back as an avenging avatar. Her friends knew the truth: she'd accepted the mantle no one else could. To bear what must be borne.

The difference this time is that she wasn't alone. She died in the arms of Mike Wheeler, who, also deceased, breathed his last assuring that he would find her, wherever death took them. No one knew this except them, and it was just as well, given how people imbibed those tales only to drown in a sea of schmaltz.

Also unknown was Vecna's strange fate. Jane Hopper had killed him; on that everyone agreed. What no one knew -- not even Mike Wheeler -- was how she had trapped his soul, or his consciousness, inside her mind and threw him down a ladder of unrelenting torture that got worse with each rung and never landed. It was the worst hell anyone in the universe had been subjected to, but Jane's death had ended that hell. It didn't matter. He was eternally dead. He had fallen down the ladder for seven hours, but to him it had felt like seven millennia. No one could say he hadn't been paid back in full for his treatment of Max Mayfield and countless other victims.

The town of Hawkins got back on its feet as it always did, with a segment of citizens who persisted in living there. The population had taken its first major hit after the Four-Day Apocalypse of '86, when it plummeted

from 12,800 down to 4,600. After the Six-Day Apocalypse of '89, there were less than 1,200 returnees when the town was cleaned up by September. Hawkins endured -- as Dustin Henderson said in his valedictorian speech -- like no other place in America.

The friends of Jane Hopper endured too. It kept her father going and his head in a good place.

Black Friday, November 24, 1989

"Hopper! Get in here!"

"What?" yelled Hopper. He was at the sink scrubbing dishes when Lucas called for him. Then he heard her scream.

"In here now!"

Goddamn it. He threw down his sponge and hurriedly grabbed a hand towel, barely wiping his hands. He rushed into the bedroom to help Lucas. He was holding her on the bed, trying to restrain her as she thrashed and whimpered. Her white eyes looked wild, as if an invisible terror were perched above her that only she could see. She usually had one of these fits every three to five days, but it had been a whole week since her last one.

He got on the bed with Lucas and took her from him, clasping her to him in his strong embrace but being gentle as possible. She screamed when Lucas let go of her -- and kept screaming, as if Hopper were a vile monster. Lucas reached over to the nightstand and opened the top drawer; he felt around inside and got out the syringe. He removed the cap and primed the needle. Hopper already had her arm ready.

"Okay?" asked Lucas, holding up the needle.

Hopper nodded. "Go ahead."

Lucas gave her the shot. She bucked wildly, but Hopper was strong enough to hold her, and slowly the fight went out of her. In less than a minute she was asleep.

Lucas set the syringe on the nightstand and took her back from Hopper. He tucked her under the covers, and then straightened the sheets at the foot of the bed.

Hopper stood up. "What triggered her?"

"No idea," said Lucas. He leaned over and kissed the side of her head. "I'm close by, hon," he said softly. "Not going anywhere."

Not going anywhere. Hopper admired the hell out of this kid. Lucas Sinclair had given up everything for Max Mayfield -- college, freedom,

and anything remotely resembling a life that an eighteen-year old deserved to enjoy. Murray Bauman hasn't been quite so altruistic with Joyce Byers. He had taken her in to start with, but eventually had her committed. Hopper knew that Lucas would never give up home-caring for Max. And if he did, then Hopper would take over the home care himself. He refused himself any other option.

Max and Lucas had become his salvation.

"She was doing so well lately," said Lucas, looking back at her from the bedroom door.

"She had Thanksgiving to look forward to," said Hopper, putting his hand on his shoulder. "Now it's over."

"Nancy better come today," said Lucas.

Don't count on it. "Come on, let's sit down."

They went into the living room and left the bedroom door halfway open. El's old bedroom. Then Will's. They each would have wanted Max to have it. Hopper needed her to have it, just as he needed Lucas here too. He'd lost both El and Will, each of whom he'd loved like Sara. There was only so much loss a man could take and pretend that life was worth living.

Yesterday's celebration had been the best day for all of them since... well, since a long time. Since the Six Day Apocalypse six months ago. And for Max, since the Four Day Apocalypse three years and six months ago. Dustin had brought Jonathan, who had flown in from California the day before. The elder Byers had astonished them all with his clean appearance and articulate conversation. Rehab worked wonders for the right people.

Dustin was coming again today. He was in town until Sunday morning, when he had to fly back to New York, and he was getting in as much time as he could with Lucas and Max. Nancy was also in town, to visit an old friend. If she could handle a visit to her closer friends, then Dustin would bring her.

"What time did he say?" asked Lucas.

"Straight after lunch," said Hopper. Dustin was having lunch with Stacey Booker then coming here. It was about 1:00 pm now.

They sat and played cards while waiting. No Limit Texas Hold 'Em. Gambling for pennies. Lucas got most of Hopper's money by the time they heard the car coming. It was a few minutes before 2:00.

"Finally," said Lucas, mucking his hand and standing up.

The sound of the car grew closer. Hopper rose from the couch and went to the front window. Dustin's lime-green Chrysler sedan came into view.

Hopper's eyes widened when he saw who was riding shotgun. "She's here," he said.

"Jesus," said Lucas, joining him at the window. Neither of them had seen Nancy since last Christmas. Long before the tragic events in May. They both went outside.

The Chrysler was an eyesore as always. Dustin stopped the ignition and got out smiling. "Told you I'd be back."

They ignored him. The passenger door opened, and Nancy Wheeler stepped out. Hopper's heart broke at the sight of her. She looked effaced -- in the way that only a sole survivor looked when her entire family had been obliterated -- though not weakened. As always with Nancy, the more she was shat on, the more her resilience increased. She was one of the strongest people Hopper knew. But he could tell she wasn't having an easy time of this. She came to him and opened her arms.

"Hey, you," he said, hugging her fiercely.

"Hi," she said, letting him hold her.

He stepped back and looked her over. "We missed you yesterday."

"Yeah, well." She shrugged.

"I'm glad you're here."

Then Lucas was at his side, and when Nancy saw him, she broke down. Hopper gave them space as they embraced. Lucas was crying harder than she was. Mike had been his best friend, and Nancy was the only Wheeler still alive.

Dustin was pitching a fit about something. Hopper looked over and saw him reaching inside the back seat. Dustin cursed again, then emerged. When he saw Hopper standing there, he told the sheriff to give him a hand.

"With what?" asked Hopper.

"Will you just get over here?"

Hopper turned to Lucas and Nancy. "You two go inside. I'll grab whatever he needs."

They both nodded, wiping their faces, and went up the porch stairs and into the cabin. Neither had said a word to each other yet. Hopper couldn't imagine where they'd start.

Dustin was still swearing.

"What the hell is your problem?" asked Hopper, coming around for a look inside the back seat.

"I can't get this fucking thing out."

"What is it?"

Dustin moved aside and bowed with flourish. "This, Sir Sheriff, is Sonico."

Hopper looked inside. The backseat was filled with boxes. "I don't get it."

Dustin pushed him aside. "Well, I *can't* get it! This box" -- he yanked at one of the larger ones that had fallen to the floor and was stuck -- "isn't cooperating, and you need to be careful, because it's delicate equipment."

"What are you bringing into my home?" asked Hopper.

"Sonico," said Dustin. "It's my stereo system. I built the thing. I want Max and Lucas to have it. I mean, you can use it too, seeing as it's your place. But Jesus, please, don't abuse it with any of your shitty '50s music."

"A stereo system?" Hopper swore inwardly. "We don't need that. I have a record player and tape deck. This will take up way too much space." *And the volume will be way too loud.*

"Your record player is shitty, Hopper. No one listens to *records* anymore, and tape cassettes are a joke. Put the '80s behind you, they're coming to an end. Lucas needs to play his CDs -- and I bought more CDs for you guys in New York."

"No," he said. "The cabin's too small --"

"Hopper, I am giving Sonico to Max and Lucas, and you're going to find the space in your cabin -- and in your goddamn heart -- for it, do you understand?"

He gave up, and started carrying the boxes in. Truly, he didn't have the heart to refuse these kids anything anymore.

Two hours later, Sonico was assembled and so were they. In the living room, over beer and pretzels, with Kate Bush's "Love and Anger" pulsating and booming through the walls of his cabin. Hopper couldn't believe that subwoofers were legal. Surely not in condos and apartments. No mind; he was won over. The record player had been supplanted by a higher authority. He was tapping his feet to the fey lyrics:



*Take away the love and the anger
And a little piece of hope holding us together
Looking for a moment that'll never happen
Living in the gap between past and future.
Take away the stone and the timber
And a little piece of rope won't hold it together*

*We're building a house of the future together
What would we do without you?*



Yeah, I can get used to this. But it was the company, more than that. He wished he could keep all four of them -- Lucas, Max, Nancy, and yes, even Dustin -- in this cabin and stretch out the moment forever. He had no problems admitting that in the past six years, kids had shown him a thing or two. He needed them. More (he was quite sure) than they needed him.

Max was still sedated, but Lucas had brought her out anyway. This was Kate Bush, after all. Max's favorite, and whose music had saved her from Vecna's first stab into her mind. According to Dustin, Kate hadn't put out an album since that one about running up a hill, and the new one had been in stores for a month now. Not that anyone in Hawkins knew. The music stores hadn't reopened (one had been utterly destroyed by Vecna's minions) and Starcourt Mall no longer existed, having been demolished over the summer. Without a town population to speak of, other businesses had suffered the same fate. But from Vassar College in New York, Dustin was still way ahead of the curve, on music or any subject. He had come home armed to the teeth with developments from the outside world. Not least these music CDs. Like he was Santa on Thanksgiving.

They let the song finish and then Dustin turned off the CD player. "Well?" He looked around at them, Hopper especially.

"You really built this thing?" asked Hopper, taking a long swig from his bottle of Michelob.

"Don't look surprised," said Dustin. He had a Sam Adams, like Lucas and Nancy. Lucas did the grocery shopping, and always got Sam Adams (for himself) and Michelob (for Hopper). For the Thanksgiving week-end he'd overloaded with Sam Adams.

"Those two songs were great," said Lucas, looking at Max. He held her in the couch that had its back to their bedroom. She was smiling faintly, or so it looked. The walls of sedation couldn't keep out Kate Bush. Not from this girl. Hopper thought she was beautiful, maimed eyes and crippled body parts notwithstanding.

"It looks like she heard them," said Nancy.

"Oh yeah," said Lucas, stroking her head. "She heard them."

"Anyway," said Dustin, rummaging through the box of CDs he'd brought. He pulled out another one. "This one you'll love, Lucas. Skinny

Puppy's new album. *Rabies*. It has this song called 'Worlock', it's their fucking best --"

"Dustin!" said Lucas. "Seriously?"

"You like Skinny Puppy, what's wrong?"

"Max can't listen to Skinny Puppy. It would give her a panic attack on the spot. And I don't need to be reminded of rabies. In any context."

"Oh," said Dustin. "Yeah. Stupid me." He tossed the CD back in and pulled out another. There were a bunch of rabbits on the cover. "Presto!" he said.

"What's special about that one?" asked Nancy.

"No, I mean *Presto*, literally," said Dustin. "It's the name of the album. Rush's new one. Came out three days ago."

"Really?" said Nancy, plucking it out of his fingers. She looked it over.

"Holy shit," said Lucas. "As good as *Hold Your Fire*?"

"Well..."

"*Power Windows*?"

"It's different from those and the two before. Really different. They're done with synths."

"I liked the way they used synths," said Nancy. "Paul loves Rush."

"Synths are eighties, Nance, and the eighties are so over. It's time for new ideas and new sounds."

"So what, they're like back to their seventies roots?" she asked.

"Eh, not really. As I said, it's a new sound for them. Probably setting the tone for a nineties act."

"Answer my question," said Lucas. "Is it good? Are they still in top form?"

"I'll need more replays before I can answer that," said Dustin.

"Speaking of Paul," said Hopper. "You need to bring him here sometime. So we can all meet him."

Nancy smiled. "I will. At some point. But that wasn't going to happen this time."

"Max was doing well, yesterday," said Lucas. "She would have loved you being here. She was talking quite a bit. Laughing too."

Nancy looked pained. "I'm sorry I missed her when she was cogent. But you had another guest for Thanksgiving. He would not have appreciated my presence at all."

"That's not true," said Hopper. "Jonathan's cleaned up his act. We had a really good time with him."

"He's not using?" asked Nancy.

"Four months sober," said Lucas. "He said that he's happy for you, Nancy. I believed him."

"Me too," said Dustin.

"Well, then I believe it too," said Nancy. "But I can't see him. I just can't. Coming back to this town was hard enough." Her family and other ex-boyfriend, Steve Harrington, had been subtracted from Hawkins, forever.

"Of course," said Lucas. "You don't have to justify yourself to us. I have my own demons. I can't see my father anymore. Whenever I visit Mom, it's when I know Dad's at work."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because he's an asshole," said Lucas. He shifted Max into a more comfortable position in his arms. "Someday I'm going to do to him what Mike did to Jonathan."

"It's because you gave up college?" asked Nancy. "And that you live here with Hopper, instead of with your parents and sister?"

"Mr. Sinclair," said Dustin, "believes that his son is pissing away his life, babysitting a lost-cause, and spurning his own flesh and blood."

"Like I said," said Lucas. "Asshole." He took one of Max's hands and kissed it.

"Cut him some slack," said Hopper.

"Excuse me?" said Lucas.

"Any decent father would want his child to better himself. Especially if his child graduated in the top ten of his class."

"Jesus, Hopper --"

He held up a hand. "I'm not denying his -- what do you kids call it? 'assholeries' -- just saying his heart's in the right place and he genuinely cares for you. Your Dad isn't like Will's." Lonnie Byers was the purest asshole. And still living somewhere.

"Not to change the subject," said Dustin. "But back to my grab bag." He pulled out a VHS and held it for them all to see. The cover displayed a huge bat.

Lucas was exasperated. "First rabies, now a bat?"

"It's *Batman*," said Nancy. "Paul and I saw it in the theater over the summer." She had moved in with Paul and his family when college classes were over. Hawkins was a disaster area and wouldn't be cleaned up until September. Nancy had no family to return to anyway. She was through with Hawkins.

"I didn't even know there was a Batman movie out," said Lucas.

"No shit, Sherlock," said Dustin. "You're on the moon in this town."

"There's talk about the Apple Tooth Theater coming back," said Hopper. "Jory might have it up and running by the new year. But I wouldn't count on it."

"I don't know if I can watch superhero films anymore," said Lucas. "They seem so cheesy. Real superheroes don't have any easy time of it. And they die."

"Oh, this Batman film might surprise you," said Dustin.

"Yeah," said Nancy. "It's pretty dark. Jack Nicholson's the Joker."

Lucas couldn't believe it. "They got Jack Nicholson to play the Joker? Holy shit."

"And Batman himself is pretty grim," said Dustin. "Don't think Superman, where the good guys and bad guys are easily defined. I agree with you, those films are silly."

"Gotham City was well done," said Nancy. "The place is a nightmare. I mean, it reminded me of Hawkins."

"Absolutely," said Dustin. "The city oozed with menace. It was great. Tim Burton is a good director."

"I guess we'll have to watch it, Hopper," said Lucas.

"If you say so," said Hopper. "Sounds a bit creepy for a superhero film."

None of them had any idea that in another fifteen years, a man named Christopher Nolan would show the world how dark Batman could really be, and make this Batman film look campy by comparison. But by eighties standards, Dustin was right. Tim Burton's *Batman* was groundbreaking.

"Like I said," said Dustin. "The eighties are already over."

"Five more weeks," said Lucas. "Don't rush it."

"Everyone's rushing it," said Dustin. "My theater professor at Vassar was talking about the eighties before we left for break. He said the eighties really started in 1983. The first three years were basically the 'seventies part two'. Films were still gritty and real from '80 to '82. The silliness started in '83. But people are so tired of that cheap relief. Filmmakers are getting serious again."

Silliness? The eighties? Hopper felt his age. On the one hand, he didn't want the eighties to be over; he didn't want to turn fifty (which he would in '92). On the other, he needed to put this decade behind him and all the trauma it had dumped. Eighties films may have been light and cheesy, but real life in this town had been anything but. And 1983? He agreed with Dustin's professor that the year was a good marker for the new decade, but for the opposite reason suggested. It was the year the shadow broke into

Hawkins. If 1983-89 had been breezy and silly, Hawkins didn't get the memo.

Nancy stood up. "More drinks?"

"Let me," said Hopper, starting to rise.

"Hopper, sit," she said. "Another Michelob?"

"That'd be nice," he said, plopping down again.

"How you drink that dishwater, Hopper," said Dustin. He shook his head at Nancy. "I'm good."

"I'm not good," said Lucas. "You can definitely bring me another Samuel."

"You and me both," she said, going to the kitchen.

Hopper thought more about the 1983-1989 period. He wasn't into superstition, and certainly not numerology, but as he reflected, he saw sixes everywhere:

Six years ago, William Byers had gone missing. A little girl had opened a gate to a terrible world. The people in this room, and others now deceased, had done what they could to offset the damage that rolled out for the next six years.

Six months ago, William Byers died, murdered finally by the fiend who had been attached to him for so long. The little girl, not so little anymore, died too, as she brought the fiend down. Mike Wheeler died defending her, finding a peace he'd believed to be out of reach.

The day that El had opened the first gate was November 6, 1983. They day that Vecna opened the super-gate was May 26, 1989. Sixes everywhere.

Not superstitious. But then again, not beyond seeing the devil at work in the hell they'd been through.

Nancy came back with three bottles and set them on the coffee table. She gave Hopper and Lucas theirs. They all saw that she was crying.

"Nance, you okay?" asked Lucas.

She didn't look okay. She sat down and put her head in her hands, and sobbed quietly.

The rest of them looked at each other, unsure of what to say.

After a minute she reached for the kleenex on the table. Hopper got up and passed the box to her. She wiped her face. "Sorry," she said. "You have a picture of Mike and El on your refrigerator. It caught me off guard."

That one would do it. The photo had been taken right before the Four-Day Apocalypse, after the return of El, Mike, Will, and Jonathan from California. Jonathan had taken the picture. It showed Mike and El in front

of the cabin. Shaggy Long Hair and Baldy. Holding each other, made for each other, oblivious to the turn of events that was about to separate them for years. *Goddamn, it's so unfair.*

"It's my favorite picture of them," said Lucas.

Nancy exhaled deeply. "God, he loved that girl more than anything."

So did I, thought Hopper. *And Mike hated me for it.*

"I miss him every day, Nance," said Lucas. "Mike was... difficult after El went into hiding, but I never stopped loving the guy."

"Yeah," she said, crying again. "All he did was yell at me whenever we talked."

"He yelled at me whenever we talked," said Lucas.

"And his whole estrangement with Will," said Dustin. "It broke my heart."

Hopper needed to get out of here, or he'd be joining the tear fest. He stood up. "Look, I'm going out for a walk. You guys keep catching up, okay?"

They nodded as he left.

The outside air was cold, but it was a soothing lotion. Hopper loved November. It was dark and moody, but so was he, and by this late in the fall, you didn't have to worry about Indian summers or the resurgence of humidity. Nor was there usually much snow, and this year not any. It was the purest month, he believed, with the best holiday of the year, and it always went by too fast. It was the one month he felt aware of spiritual forces inhabiting nature when he took his walks in the woods. The other months left him feeling like an atheist.

He walked past the bunker and stopped to look at it. The bulkhead doors remained padlocked. Hopefully forever. He remembered the days he'd spent building it with Will's help. The kid had helped him with everything. When they had finished construction, Will had said that he was going to sleep down there for one night to "test it out", relying on the canned goods for dinner and then breakfast the next morning. He'd reported to Hopper the next day, Sir, that the bunker was well prepared, Sir, and ready for emergency use, Sir. Hopper had laughed and said that was very well, Sir. He'd never retreated down those stairs yet -- but it was there in case.

In case the shadow had more to say against Hawkins.

It probably didn't. He had to believe that, because if the Upside Down were still a threat, then his daughter and Mike's sacrifice had been for nothing, and nothing was acceptable anymore.

He walked far out into the woods until he couldn't hold back. He fell to his knees and cried, letting out all the anguish triggered by the last two days spent with old friends. He tried to be strong for everyone -- for Max and Lucas, and for the town people as their sheriff -- but he wasn't sure he was strong anymore. He missed El and Will terribly; he missed Joyce; he missed Mike. He'd not realized how much he loved poor Mike until the kid was gone.

The grief poured out of him, and he gave it the time it needed. When it ran its course, he got up and headed back. And when he drew near the cabin, he smiled, hearing laughter inside from Dustin, Lucas, and Nancy. It sounded solid and clean, like it could hold back the darkness if it had to. Laughter imperishable.

It sounded like life.



Praise for *Stranger Things: The College Years and Beyond*

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