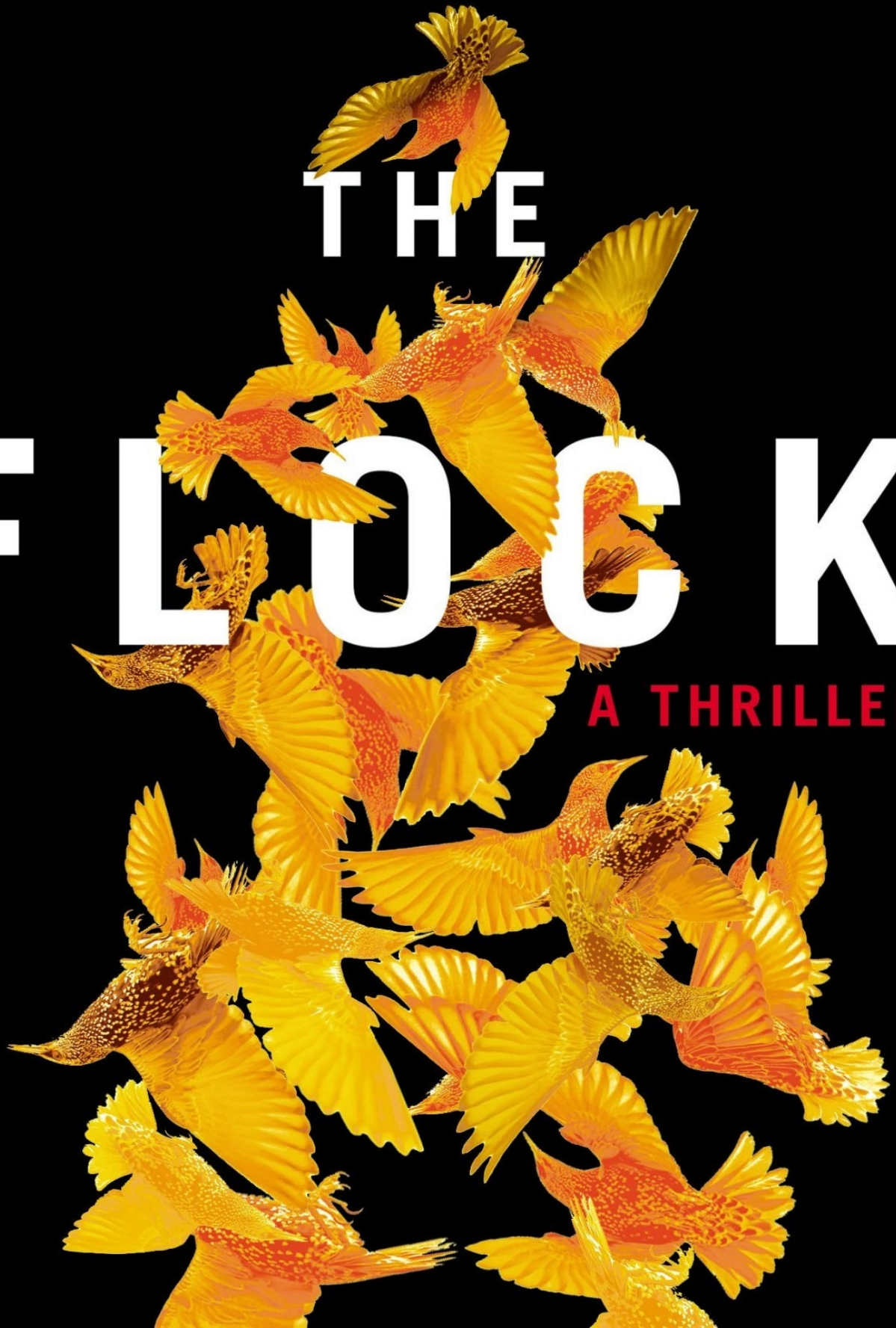


J. TODD SCOTT

THE  
FLOCK  
A THRILLER



## PRAISE FOR J. TODD SCOTT

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“It’s all here: doomsday cults, innocents and grifters, unexplainable phenomena. Heartache and regret. A chance at redemption. What sets *The Flock* above your average thriller is the absolute ring of authenticity from this twenty-plus-year career DEA agent. You got the real deal right here.”

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—*Kirkus Reviews*

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—*Newsweek*

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**THE**  
**FLOCK**

# OTHER TITLES BY J. TODD SCOTT

*Lost River*

*This Side of Night*

*High White Sun*

*The Far Empty*

**THE  
FLOCK**

**A THRILLER**

**J. TODD SCOTT**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

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*For Delcia, a miracle every day.*

*Mirabile dictu.*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The night has a thousand eyes,  
And the day but one;  
Yet the light of the bright world dies  
With the dying sun.

Francis William Bourdillon,  
“The Night Has a Thousand Eyes”

***Bloody Birds Drop from Sky***

Like a scene from a horror movie, bird enthusiasts in Australia recently discovered a thousand birds “falling from the sky like stones,” bleeding heavily from their open eyes and gaping beaks . . .

*New York Times*, July 13, 2019

***Drones Buzz Colorado***

In a mystery that only deepens with time, since late October, a ghostly night flight of winged drones has circled over numerous counties across Colorado and Nebraska, igniting a firestorm of increasingly wild rumors, and firing the popular imaginations of armchair detectives and conspiracy theorists all over the world . . .

*Denver Post*, January 9, 2020

***Macao Will Close Its Casinos for Four Weeks Over the Hadney-Pharoah’s Outbreak***

Macao, the gambling capital of the world, is planning to close its casinos as the deadly HP outbreak continues to surge . . .

*CNN Business*, February 3, 2023

***End-of-Times Cloud Spotted Over Bering Sea***

A glowing, multi-hued cloud was recently observed off the coast of Nunivak Island . . .

Alaska Public Media, March 16, 2024

***Western Wildfires Are the Four Horsemen***

Four massive fires burning across the American West—the Camson/Devil fire in Oregon; the Elkhorn fire near Redding, California; the Greater Wolf fire in the heart of

the Sierra Nevada Mountains; and the High West fire in Colorado—are yet another example of the earth’s climate change–induced fury . . .

*Los Angeles Times*, August 2025



# THIS IS HOW THE WORLD ENDS

No one sees the old Sunseeker RV as it rolls to a stop thirty yards from the small house.

Engine idling, headlights off, it lurks in the dark as if regarding the house itself.

Watching, waiting.

In the snow-dusted pines along the road, a hundred roosting crows murmur and rustle, disturbed by the RV's sudden arrival.

But if they know what's about to happen next, they keep it to themselves.



Inside the Sunseeker, a blue-eyed woman raises a hand over a kneeling man.

She whispers to him, “How you have fallen from heaven, Morning Star, son of the dawn. You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations. You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to the heavens, I will raise my throne above the stars of God, I will sit enthroned on the Mount of Assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon, and I will ascend above the tops of the clouds. I will make myself like the Most High.’”

She touches his shaved head. “But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.” She crosses his heart with her gloved fingers. “Those who see you stare at you. They ponder your fate. Is this the man who shook the earth and made kingdoms tremble? Is this the man who made the world a wilderness? Who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?”

Then the woman leans close and slips the semiautomatic handgun into the man's grasp.

They got the gun, and all the others like it, three days ago from a novitiate in Oklahoma. Three days before that, the guns were sitting in a police department evidence locker in Guymon, long forgotten, likely never missed.

“You are one of the Seven Archangels, Camael,” she murmurs. “One of the Exalted. When we are done here, you will rise on great wings, for Ascension is finally at hand.”

“And I welcome it,” Camael whispers back, head bowed.

The woman knows this in her heart. She nods in the dark and checks her watch before turning to another young man sitting behind the wheel of the RV. She says to him, “Kill the engine and get the backpacks.” When he hesitates, she raises her voice, insistent. “*Now*, novitiate.”

This novitiate, Nico, has not yet completed his vows or the Third Circle, has not yet been granted a new name. He’s been useful and loyal so far, but she’s looked into his eyes, caught glimpses of indecision, uncertainty.

His heart still holds so much doubt.

But Nico finally nods his own assent and abandons the driver’s seat, disappearing to the rear of the Sunseeker.

She hears him breathe, *feels* his unease, a thick swampy fear fueled by the things they will do here and the things yet to come.

*Fear breeds faith.*

And faith makes all things possible.



Moments later, the woman and two men stand in the snowy dark just beyond the house’s hidden security lights.

Once they’ve moved within twenty feet of the perimeter, those lights will snap brightly on, and eave-mounted cameras will start recording.

Fortunately, they’ve come prepared. In their GoRucks they carry more guns gifted from their allies in Oklahoma, as well as Kobalt bolt cutters, Diamond Tech pistol-grip glass

cutters, US military-grade AGM night vision goggles, file-shredding software and scrubbing programs backed up on custom titanium flash drives, and multiple sets of Peerless restraints.

Camael still wields the long-bladed knife she bestowed on him days ago.

The novitiate Nico has zip ties as well as Sabre tactical pepper gel.

And she has a Gamo air rifle slung over her shoulder that she'll use to shoot out the forward-facing security lights, allowing them to approach under the cloak of night via the unattached garage—where the security system sits—before covering the final distance to the house itself.

Still, they'll have only a few minutes to breach the door, even though it feels like she's been waiting a lifetime for this moment.

*I was brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.*

She unslings the air rifle and kneels in the fresh snow as seven crows circle above, silently eyeing them all.

*I am the one who will shake the earth and make kingdoms tremble. I am the one who will make the world a wilderness.*

*I am the one who will overthrow its cities.*

She says to the two men next to her, "I need both alive, but the child matters most."

*I am the one who will not let my captives go home.*

She says, "If there must be a great struggle, sacrifice the rest."

Sacrifice. Penance. Faith.

*Blood.*

It was always destined to be this way. Ascension demands penance and faith and fealty and blood and suffering and sacrifice. Few are worthy or have the will to see it through,

even as those left behind face their own final moments of grief, despair, fire, ruin.

She smiles at that, at the birds overhead, as she settles the air rifle against her cheek. The cold metal feels good on her skin, where, even untouched, it still burns all the time now. It's like her blood is constantly aflame, penance for her own faithlessness and failure. She's been on fire . . . *burning in hell* . . . for years and years yet welcomes that pain each new day with prayer.

*It's been so long, the blue-eyed woman thinks . . . prays.*

*But all is as it is and ever will be.*

It's a New Day Dawning.

*And it is time . . .*

# LIMON, COLORADO

*October 2025*

When I get home tonight to find our front door kicked wide open and wild wind and fresh snow still blowing through it, I know the world is coming to an end.

My Rennie is gone, and Noah is dead.

I know in that bruised place in my heart; I know the way only a wife and mother can, although honestly, I've never been much of either.

I don't need to follow that blood-black trail from our porch past the gravel drive, beyond the trees and falling flakes, to know my husband's dead body is out there in the dark, somewhere.

Yet I can't turn away from that ominous stain, brightly haloed in my headlights, even as Rennie flies farther and farther from me.

She might as well have real wings now.

*My angel . . . my miracle.*

Noah's violent, blood-soaked passage—where he stumbled and fell outside our front door, then crawled hand over fist across the snow after our daughter—is a warning, a message.

*A sign.*

And if there's anything I do know a lot about, it's symbols and signs.

I've spent my whole life seeking and searching for them, waiting and worrying about them, running from them.

I steal a few moments to kneel next to that horrible mark: to touch it, trace it with my fingers, the way I traced Noah's stubbled chin only hours ago. He hated that beard but grew it for me. I was mad when I left earlier, and he was too. Now I'll never be able to apologize or say I'm sorry again—*forever*

*sorry, for so many things*—and Noah will soon be snowed over, forgotten, left behind.

Like me.

Because that's the *real* message written in bloody snow in front of my ruined house—

*It was never about you at all, Sybilla.*

It was, and always has been, about Renata.

And the End of the World.



I circle fast on foot to our backyard, where I buried the gun.

It's dark and dead here, too, shadows holding even more shadows.

The porch lights are off or out, the hidden security lights and the sophisticated alarm system Noah installed for me either cut or disabled, so I use my phone instead and follow its watery glow and try not to cry.

I'll need another phone soon.

But there are no footprints or boot treads here, no signs of struggle or blood. This snow is fresh and cool and untouched and goes on and on, and part of me just wants to go on and on, too, and never look back. And if it wasn't for Rennie, I just might lie down here and let the snow cover me. Or go out past the trees to Noah and wrap my arms around him, one last time.

Let this falling snow fall over both of us until it's over.

All these years I've spent waiting for the world to end—searching for the signs, a crazy, inexorable calendar in my head—only to discover now the day's finally come, as real and unforgiving as Noah's frosted blood on my fingers, that I was never truly ready at all.

I didn't see it coming, not like this.

The End doesn't always start with falling birds or shooting stars or a great flood or a fiery cataclysm. Sometimes it's just blood in the snow and a dead body in the dark and a

missing little girl. Noah, Rennie—*my whole world*—all gone now.

As if they never existed at all.



I run to Rennie's old play set, chasing the phone's pale glow in my hand.

It looms in the dark like a crashed car or plane, shrouded in freshly fallen snow.

The big play set is true Georgia pine, because Noah only wanted the best for our daughter, and he also planted three trees to shade it, one for each of us: Colorado blue spruce, which, over thirty years, can grow more than seventy-five feet high.

Noah used to tell Rennie those trees were *alive*, watching over our makeshift family, protecting us, remembering us even long after we are gone. And although I thought that was silly, hopelessly romantic, it was sweet and beautiful, too, and honestly, not any crazier than the things I was raised to believe at the Ark.

Noah wanted to be a writer, before he met me. So I helped him plant those trees for Rennie, for *us*, and then waited to see what birds might flock to them, seeking shelter in their growing branches. None did.

But buried near Rennie's play set, marked by Bert the Beagle's old tie-out stake and hidden under the spreading limbs of one of Noah's trees, is a six-quart plastic Sterilite latching box I stole from the Dollar General, and in a way, that plastic box holds memories too.

*My life before Noah.*

*The Ark of Lazarus.*

Ten grand I've saved, a dollar at a time. A clean ID I bought off the dark web.

And a Colt semiautomatic handgun.



Now I'm finally crying.

Still crying.

Still digging.

Frantic, as my tears freeze on my face, wrestling that box from the unforgiving ground with the old spade Noah used to plant our summer garden. The spade is heavy and cold in my bare hands, and I can't feel the wooden handle or even my fingers, but that's okay; I don't want to feel anything at all.

The snow tastes sooty, ashes on my tongue, the aftertaste of the massive High West fire that's been burning across Colorado for weeks now, threatening to jump the Continental Divide.

The entire Southwest is on fire again, flames more than three hundred feet high, higher than our blue spruces will ever grow, although that doesn't matter anymore.

Nothing does, except Rennie.

Fires are signs, too, sometimes.

And for the second time in my life, the whole world is burning down around me.

I have two days at most to save my daughter and maybe, just maybe, stop the End of the World.

But please, please, understand . . . if it's a *choice* between Rennie and the world—

*That really isn't a choice at all.*



|

BLACK-WINGED BIRD

## The Ark of Lazarus Ten Years Later: Five Things You Never Knew

From cult members' bizarre sexual restrictions to the handmade black paper suns the group wore during its horrific 2015 mass suicide

By Roddy Aiello and Dr. Deborah Fallon for VICE

Published December 2024

Almost ten years after their suspected mass suicide by immolation made headlines across the world, the Ark of Lazarus remains one of the most notorious, scrutinized and studied cults of the 21st century. For several days in March 2015, we were enthralled by their strange story: a desolate New Mexico compound complete with military-style bunkers and weapon caches, allegations of sexual abuse and child brides, drug use, Hollywood connections, internet recruiting complete with secret chat rooms, glossy promotional videos and testimonials, and a final, fiery end during a much-debated federal law enforcement weapons raid—a raid that prompted a yearlong congressional inquiry into the actions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and generated two civil lawsuits.

The story also spawned multiple documentaries and books, and a well-regarded miniseries, *Fires at Dawn*, that some say launched the career of recent Oscar-winning actor Margot Austin.

Much like Heaven's Gate before it, the Ark of Lazarus was a uniquely American cult of the

internet era, adept at using the web and social media to promote their beliefs to a wider audience. Formed, reformed and rebranded throughout the late nineties—first as an insular think tank, then as the popular multilevel marketing scheme and executive training and spirituality seminar known as AXL, and finally as a quantum transcendental religion—the Ark in all its incarnations was the singular vision and brainchild of Etan Laure, a French author and polymath who became a mysterious mainstay of the Hollywood elite in the aughts.

A friend to the stars, his background, beliefs and apparent wealth were the subject of much speculation (and a 1997 profile on the BBC2 series Louis Theroux's *Weird Weekends*), as was his burgeoning Page Six relationship with actress Marin Ross, best known for the sitcom *Here Comes Your Sun*, which ran on ABC from 1992 to 1994. The couple met during in-patient stays at Privé-Swiss, and it's been speculated that this relationship, and the contacts Laure made there and later through Ms. Ross (including the birth of their alleged daughter, Sybilla Ross-Laure, in 1996), set the stage for the Ark's Icarus-like rise and fiery fall.

By 2003, after a scathing *Hollywood Reporter* exposé shed unwelcome light on Laure's and Ross's activities, AXL—or the Ark of Lazarus, as it was already then known to its most devoted followers—had become increasingly reclusive, authoritarian and apocalyptic.

Decamping to the ominously named *Jornada del Muerto* in the New Mexico desert, but still actively recruiting members online under its

**AXL branding, they soon drew the attention  
of...**

# 1

Chief Elise Blue finds the body thirty yards from the house under a stand of ponderosa pine.

He's faceup, eyes open, mostly covered in snow, as if taking one long last look at the trees and the sky and the stars, leaving her to wonder just what the young man was seeing when he died.

She stands over him, snow gently swirling around them both, thinking about that.

He can't be much older than her own son, who graduated Mines four years ago and moved in with that awful girlfriend of his, Lori, near his dad's place in Denver.

She tries to remember when she and Denny last spoke. *Last Sunday? A week ago? Was it really the week or two before that?*

She checks her watch, a sudden urge to call and wake him, risking the inevitable wrath of Lori, who's never liked her much anyway. Truth be told, neither likes each other much.

But beyond the concerns she voiced over a single glass of wine in Golden—when Denny was already talking about getting married, settling down, and having kids they couldn't afford—Elise now refuses to weigh in on her son's love life.

God knows she's the last person to give advice in that department.

Still, the young man in the snow could be Denny or a thousand others like him, and there's a mother somewhere who is about to get a horrible, unimaginable call or visit. Maybe not tonight or today or even tomorrow, but again, God knows, soon enough.

Far too soon, given how young he is.

Someone's son found dead in the snow.



*Murdered.*

That's what the caller said—

*Noah Brannen was murdered tonight. You should find him out near 311 State Road Seven. From the road, in the dark, the house can be hard to see. There's no sign, no mailbox. But it's a white house, green shutters. And he's out there.*

*Please go to him.*

After the call came into the Limon PD, it took Jerome Harris, the responding officer, thirty-five minutes to get here. Now, everyone in Limon knows Jerry's lazy, a bit of an underachiever and not particularly motivated, not since a high school football career went south, but that still seems like ten or fifteen minutes too long to Elise.

He was likely with his new fling, Nadia, over at the Dollar General, sharing a Cisco Strawberry in the parking lot, and probably already fudging the time to cover up his absence to his wife, Delfina.

By the time Jerry finally did arrive to find the front door wide open at the white house with green shutters and then catching an eyeful of all that blood outside not yet blurred away by the snow, he decided to safely wait for some backup—Worth Askew—before entering.

Give that another ten, fifteen minutes. Hell, maybe twenty. Then, spooked by what they discovered, Worth and Jerry only stayed inside for a minute before calling Elise.

Checking her watch again, she sees it took her at least another twenty minutes to get out here, sweep the house herself, and then half again that long to find the body. All told, it's easily been an hour and a half from the initial call, and however long before that.

All that time just lying here.

Eyes open. Alone.

If it were snowing harder, or hadn't stopped for a time earlier, Jerry might never have seen those last vestiges of blood, and Elise might never have found him at all.

There's someone she can bring in from Denver who can calculate the rate of snowfall, take Noah Brannen's core temperature, give her a decent estimate how long he's been here, but Elise already knows the answer—

*Far too long.*

She twists her watch round and round, an old habit whenever she's upset, or lost in thought.

It's the last gift Denny's dad gave her, an Olivia Barton Lucky Bee. The watch is too delicate, too pretty, too frivolous, for her work, and she hasn't felt anything like lucky in a long time. But time is weird like that, just like snow.

Impossibly heavy on the ground, as light as can be in the sky.

Burying you by the hour . . . or melting away in a moment in the palm of your hand.

*A heartbeat.*

When you get to be Elise's age, all you do is wonder where the time's gone, and how much you have left.

She kneels and feels all those past years all the way down, needing to steady herself with a hand. She's too old to be out here, too old to start something like this. And although she shouldn't do it—knows better than to alter a crime scene—she can't help herself and brushes the frosted hair out of Noah Brannen's eyes.

*Dead both far too soon and for far too long.*

The woman who called this in—recorded voice cracked and raw, but *determined*—has a good head start and a snowy night at her back and all of Colorado to get lost in. Has all the time in the world on her side. But she *made* the call, even though she had to know it would start the clock ticking on her. And the only reason that makes any sense at all to Elise is that her mysterious caller *wanted* Noah Brannen found as soon as possible.

Needed him properly buried and laid to rest. Didn't want him out here all alone in the cold.

*Does a murderer do that?*

Elise isn't sure. She's dealt with exactly two murders in the last fifteen years, both aggravated domestic situations, both heavily under the influence, and both wrapped up in a matter of hours. This could be just another domestic situation, too, but she's on a whole different clock here and already a couple of hours behind.

After all, she saw inside that house—

*All that blood, so much of it.*

Looped and sprayed and spattered throughout the formerly neat and tidy family room, sullyng too the tiny kitchen painted pale blue, like a bird's egg.

*Flecked on the still-green bananas that someone, maybe Noah Brannen himself, had just set out in a flowery ceramic bowl.*

All over the walls of a young girl's empty bedroom.

They were getting ready for her birthday.

After such a horrific, violent scene, an angry intruder probably doesn't make that kind of sad, incriminating call, but maybe . . . *just maybe* . . . a grieving wife does.

A mother.

*So much blood.*

Too much for one person . . . but not enough for three.

Two people missing now, both gone and disappeared into the night, leaving only a photo on those horrible bloody walls

—  
*The wife. The mother.*

*Young. Dark hair but blue eyes.*

*The hair doesn't look natural, but the eyes do. Pretty but oh so haunted. A hint of a tattoo on a shoulder blade, another on a thin wrist, probably two of too many.*

*And her young daughter, sunburned and freckled, all arms and legs.*



*Laughing.*

Elise already had Jerry carefully remove that photo and bag it and tag it because she knows she's going to need it, for however long this takes.

*God, please let that young girl be okay. Please, please let me find her soon. Alive.*

Limon, Colorado, police chief Elise Blue can't close Noah Brannen's eyes for him—they'll stay frozen open until the ME brings him in—so she rises unsteadily and dusts off her hands and heads back toward the house, leaving him like that.

Alone, again.

Staring into the night.

Seeing trees and sky and stars and nothing at all.

## 2

This morning, Noah did everything he could to hide the birds from me.

Thinking about it now, I see it all differently, my mind playing tricks on me, filling in the moments I missed.

I was already distracted with Rennie, throwing a half-assed snack together for her, getting her books and bag off the floor, trying to get us out the door.

I've always homeschooled her, but let her attend a few extra programs—at Noah's urging—like that math tutor last year, piano lessons the summer before, and the art class this fall.

She also walks dogs at the local shelter, since neither Noah nor I are willing to replace Bert the Beagle, and Rennie doesn't ask anymore.

This morning we were running late for her art class as always, running late because of me, like usual.

So, I didn't quite catch his double take with the paper, and there was a time we didn't get the paper at all. Or magazines. Or mail. Two years ago, we even tried to do without TV, until that proved impossible for both of us, despite the anxiety it often left crawling inside me.

With Rennie in tow, grabbing for my keys and my purse—and hiding the cigarettes Noah and I'd gotten good at pretending didn't exist—I never saw him turn the newspaper facedown and cover it with the bowl of steel-cut oats I'd tried to make.

*I didn't see his face.*

Didn't see him wrestle with telling me about it, before scooping our copy of the *Denver Post* into the trash altogether.

He finished up a piece of toast and kissed me quick and light and ran his hand through the hair I've recolored and

grown out again and mumbled something I didn't quite hear and now will never, ever, know.

I rushed through the door and probably left him staring out our window.

Searching the sky.



Birds are sentinel species.

Adaptable. Durable. Easily observable.

They are everywhere.

Look out any window and you'll likely see one. You might not be able to name it, but close your eyes and imagine a sky without beating wings, absent the color of feathers and the sound of morning song.

Empty skies forever, as far as you can see.

Because birds migrate—because they can literally *fly away*—they tell us a lot about the health of the world we share. They're omens of pollution, disease, climate change.

Birds have long been considered harbingers of doom too; if a bird wings its way into your house, death will soon cross the threshold.

There are miners' tales of the Seven Whistlers, seven black birds whose song portends tragedy, representing the seven souls who crucified Christ. Souls of unbaptized babies fly away in the bodies of birds, and in some Native American folklore, great chiefs live on in birds of prey. Search a dozen cultures and you'll come across the psychopomp, a creature that guides the dead to the afterlife, and perhaps no other animal serves as this mystical avatar as often as a bird.

Owls. Ravens. Sparrows. Starlings.

The sudden appearance of white feathers is still said to be a gift from a deceased loved one, an offering of hope and comfort that all is well on the Other Side.

Etan promised us that since birds can fly all the way to heaven, we'd follow them, too, after Ascension.

On many cold mornings at Jornada del Muerto, Becca and I knelt in the Ark's starling coops, with our arms and faces bloody, praying for hours among them, their eyes infinite black, plumage glossy and iridescent like oil on water.

A flock of starlings in flight is called a murmuration, an intricate, impossible aerial dance. They create waves and vacuoles and helixes in the sky, a single beating heart, and it's believed that during that spinning, swirling ballet, each pays close attention to only *seven* others.

Seven Seals. Seven Trumpets. Seven Archangels in the biblical apocrypha that once so fascinated Becca.

Seven is a mystical number, and we see it again and again in the natural world, in history and science.

In the Ark of Lazarus, there are Seven Signs of Ascension, and one of them is birds falling from the sky, lost souls plummeting back to earth.

*Nonbelievers.*

Falling birds are signs, sometimes.

With Deborah Fallon's help, years of therapy, I came to understand the overt symbolism, the easy analogy. *The Ark was Etan's murmuration, and we were all just starlings flying about him. His Flock.*

All those tiny birds, physical symbols of the control he exerted over us.

But I also told Deb I *saw* Etan command our birds with little more than a gesture and a whispered prayer, whipping them into wonderful airborne shapes over the desert. We clapped and laughed at familiar faces and French crosses and wild animals and blossoming flowers, all luminescent from bird wings. He once even conjured a towering, sky-high version of the Ark's winged symbol out of their heart-size bodies—a shimmering coda in the New Mexico sunset—and Becca cried and held my hand and said—

*All is as it is and ever will be.*

She was wrong, of course—we all were—but I tattooed the words on my skin anyway, where they still curve gracefully along my seventh rib, right beneath my heart.

There is a lot more ink now to cover the lasting cuts and scars—

*A small bird in flight, a wide-winged starling, on the back of my left hand.*

*Forty-seven names on my forearm, then Becca's alone, surrounded by thorny roses on my wrist.*

On my eleventh birthday, I formed two hundred starlings into a tight lacuna around the sun, and thought I saw my future there, but I was only a child then.

The same age as Rennie two days from now.

But unlike Rennie's miracles, none of those things truly happened, not the way I remember them.

When the Ark burned and Etan's coops went up in flame, many were already empty, the birds long since gone. They'd abandoned him like some human members of our Flock, or they'd been released by Becca in one of her increasing fits of anger and jealousy.

But the few that remained took to the air that morning, little bodies on fire.

Incandescent.

*Furious.*

Tiny, exploding stars I'd once held in my hands, and they danced and twirled and showered sparks as they rose higher, higher, all the way to heaven.

They never made it.

They drew their final fiery faces and flowers in the dawn sky and then burned up on the wing and fell back to earth as little more than soot and ash.

A handful of smoking feathers that got caught in my hair  
as I ran with Rennie.

### 3

It's barely eight hours from Limon to Truth or Consequences and Elephant Butte if I head straight toward Denver and take I-25 south.

The lesser-traveled SH 285 is an hour longer.

With all the farm roads and rural byways out here, there's a hundred ways to disappear, infinite ways to fly south, but if I'm right, there's only *one* true destination.

Even if I can't catch Rennie, at least I know where to look.

I need to get to Lubbock first, though, and fortunately, that's less than eight hours too.

I also desperately need a new phone, which is why I'm at Zippo's Liquor on the north side of Limon, knowing I'll be picked up by the one parking lot camera and the two in the store.

By tomorrow morning at the latest, someone will think to check them and see me here.

But the Zippo's guy, Dallas, already knows me on sight—

*Not the New Mexico me, the Colorado me.*

Dallas is a former Washington State Ghost Rider, an outlaw biker, although you can never be a former anything like that, not really. Over the last two years, we've become *almost* like old friends, with our own weird rapport, a secret, almost silent language. Call it the shared experience of two people who clearly don't like to look in the mirror, who both have far too many secrets and skeletons. Too many ghosts.

I've never said much of anything about myself, and he's never asked any questions, even after I started overpaying for my weekly bottle of Johnnie Walker Black.

I've never gotten the change back either.

It's been about fifty dollars a month for him to keep an eye out for me, secretly nicked out of my Dollar General paycheck, one of the few reasons I held on to the job, but honestly, Dallas the sort-of-former biker probably would've helped me for free.

Fingers heavy with rings, wrists circled with twisted wire bracelets jangling from a dozen tiny silver crosses and skulls, he's a bearded, massive man, built for violence, but *gentle*, too, in his own rough-hewn way, or so I tell myself.

Always moving slow around me, like he doesn't want to scare or startle me. Doesn't want me to fly away. I think he's gotten used to seeing me once a week, knowing I'm still around, knowing I'm still here. Still safe.

Last year, without a word, he slipped that Colt in with my JWB, and I buried it out in the backyard in that plastic box. Before that, he gifted me a knife that's still hidden in my car, beneath the seat.

Like I said . . . *dangerous*. But gentle. Almost sweet. And covered in tattoos like me.

He has a story all his own, too, inked in script across his throat—

*Talk Shit, Spit Blood.*



## 4

“Okay, walk me through what I’m looking at,” Elise asks Grant Olson, the Lincoln County ME.

Grant shrugs, waving at the cold house around them. “I’m just the local-yokel medical examiner, not a crime scene tech.” He looks at her, doubtful. “And is this even your crime scene?”

“I’ve already called Lincoln County Sheriff’s,” she says, “as well as CBI. They’re both sending a team.”

Truth be told, Grant’s right: this house is at the very edge of her city jurisdiction, if not beyond it. Even though Limon PD got the initial emergency call, Lincoln County SO probably *should’ve* responded. But regardless of jurisdiction, a handful of lines drawn on a map somewhere, she doesn’t have the resources or manpower to process this sort of crime scene anyway, nor the murder investigation it will lead to.

Other than Elise, only Jon Nielson, her sergeant, has any homicide experience among her six-person department, and he’s fly-fishing in Whitefish.

“The FBI?” Grant asks.

Elise studies the bloodied walls, the remaining framed family portraits like the one folded in the evidence bag in her pocket. “No, not yet,” she says. “I’ll let CBI do that.” The FBI represents a whole new set of jurisdictional issues, a whole new crime. “But I’m not sure it’s a kidnapping.”

“Well,” Grant says, as he offers her his coffee, “it is something.”

“Yes,” she agrees, taking the Styrofoam cup that’s long gone cold in Grant’s truck on the drive out here. “Something awful.”



Grant Olson's older than Elise, and although he's nearly a lifelong Limon local, he's hardly a yokel.

He went to medical school at Colorado School of Medicine, completed his residency in Aurora, and came home to work at the Lincoln Community Hospital in Hugo. For years now, he's done double duty as the county's ME while managing the hospital's Emergency Department and Trauma Center, as well as creating and managing the mobile health clinic.

His wife, Courtney, whom he met in Aurora, died three years ago after a ferocious battle with ALS. Elise has known Grant since high school, and although they went out a couple of times when he was a junior and she was a sophomore, he proved too quiet, too serious, too sober, and she was anything but back then.

They've both changed a lot in the intervening years, their lives' respective sharp edges sanded down into a warm friendship neither expected: something quiet, serious, sober.

Grant still struggles in the long shadow of Courtney's passing, suggesting their gentle amity will never be anything more than that. But once a month they get together for dinner, or even breakfast at La Posta, and other than a random call or text from Denny—less frequent now—Grant is the only person who checks up on her with any regularity. He texts a couple of times a week, something interesting he's read or a movie she might enjoy. A sale in Colorado Springs. Even a bit of local gossip he's picked up in passing at the hospital or the mobile clinic.

He never breaks doctor-patient privilege but is not above dropping the occasional hint about someone in Limon she should be concerned about or pay a call on.

They both know she's going to push him about the Brannen family, to find out if he's treated them or knows someone who has, but right now, she doesn't want his medical opinion, only his *eyes*.

Wants to know what he sees in this cold, empty, bloody house.

All Grant's quiet seriousness also makes him careful, meticulous, observant. He's a great doctor, but he would've been a hell of a cop.

CBI or the FBI will take over the investigation, but until then, the Brannen family, or what's left of it, is still her responsibility.

A missing girl—

*Sunburned and freckled, all arms and legs.*

*Laughing.*

A daughter whose daddy died cold and alone out beneath the trees.

## 5

The liquor store's empty and far too bright, all colorful buzzing neon.

I'm reflected in the big store windows, and I look like hell.

*Frazzled, near frozen.*

Upset, maybe even strung out—

*Dangerous too.*

I won't look any better on the grainy security camera footage when someone reviews it tomorrow. But Dallas the Ghost Rider only takes me in with one heavy-lidded glance and comes around the counter before I draw too close.

"Looks bad, lady," he says softly, reading my mind. "He hit you?" His voice is a bass guitar thrum, and the way he leans in close, searching my face and neck for bruises or blood, it all makes sense now—

*The gun. The knife.*

All this time he assumed I was caught up in a shitty marriage, a husband with a bad temper and flying fists, and I want to both laugh and cry, because the thought of Noah ever raising a hand to me is ludicrous, impossible.

But that man died *crawling* across the bloody snow after Rennie; that same, sweet man who planted trees and flowers fought tooth and nail for our daughter.

He was constantly fighting for me and our life together from the moment we met.

You never know what someone is truly capable of . . . *what they're willing to do or sacrifice* . . . until something they love is threatened. And I know that as well as anyone.

Dallas looms over me, reeking of Marlboros and weed and aftershave, heavy whiskers running salty white, and I have no idea how old he is. At least as old as Etan when he died, but

then again, Etan's true age was never known. Etan had two birth certificates, neither real, and over the years, he offered a dozen different false dates and fictional childhoods to reporters and magazine profiles, always shaving a decade off, here and there.

But up close, Dallas the Ghost Rider is positively *ancient*, the lines on his face weathered valleys, an echo of the New Mexico landscape, the mysterious arid desert and endless azure skies around Jornada del Muerto. His deep-blue eyes hide mysteries and secrets—old stories too—like the tattoos on his knuckles and neck.

Our secret language.

He reminds me of Braum, another haunted man with a propensity for violence who once came to the Ark searching for peace, like so many others did.

“No, not that,” I tell him. “It’s my daughter . . . my baby girl.”

Of course, Rennie isn’t a baby anymore, but I’ve never mentioned a daughter, any kids at all to him, although Dallas probably already had his suspicions about the gravitational pull of my bad marriage.

“Where is she?” he asks, stealing a glance at my empty car in the lot, where I left the door open, engine running.

“Gone.” I fight tears, swallow them. “They took her.”

Dallas blinks slow at that, once, twice. “Where? How long?”

What he doesn’t ask me is *who*, or the most obvious, glaring question of all—

*Why the fuck didn’t you call the police?*

Instead, I tell him I need a new cell phone; that I still have the gun he gave me and some money and a car but that I really need to *go*; that I should already be *gone*—until he finally stops me with a heavy hand on my shoulder. A hand somehow still light enough I barely feel it, despite the metal rings.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he says, in a way that suggests he knows it’s not, and that Dallas is the sort of man who knows *exactly* how bad it’s likely to get.

This is when most people—anyone with any sense at all—would throw me out the door and call the police themselves, but he doesn’t. Just holds me with that impossibly light and steady hand and even steadier blue gaze.

Maybe in a former life Dallas the Ghost Rider was a parent, too, a loving father like Noah. Maybe in that life there’s another little girl safe and happy and healthy and all grown up now, all because Dallas is the sort of man who knows *exactly* what it takes to save the ones we love.

Maybe that’s why I was drawn to him in the first place and why I’m here now.

Here in Limon, I’m *Sarah Brannen*, as colorless and innocuous and forgettable as possible. I’m only guessing at his name because of the silly laminated tag he refuses to pin on, which he always leaves faceup on the counter whenever he’s working, probably so he won’t get grief about *not* wearing it. That tag may only be an artifact of some random guy who worked here before, or some inside joke to Zippo’s most valued and loyal customers, like me.

*Dallas* may no more be his real name than *Sarah* is mine.

When you joined the Flock, you shed your old name, all your old ties and commitments, your old life; most of the Flock were former *someones*.

Dallas the Ghost Rider, or whoever he’s decided to be here in Limon, Colorado—whoever he once was or used to be—takes one last look around Zippo’s Liquor, then goes around the counter and grabs a worn, heavy canvas knapsack, one that’s an immediately recognizable shade of military green.

Like the one Braum—former navy lieutenant Taylor Allen Carr—brought with him to Jornada del Muerto. Before I was even fifteen, Lt. Carr taught me how to shoot and hunt and field strip an assault rifle, and he died in the Ark fire along with forty-six others who’d also taken new names—

*Jacob. Chavin. Paz. Alard. Devorah. Freda. Gannet.*

*Rebecca.*

In those hours after the Ark burned, as I was standing in handcuffs and screaming for Rennie, I saw a lot of those green military-style bags, the tactical gear carted out to the observation and command post by the FBI Hostage Rescue Team that had assaulted our compound that morning.

They were there to save me . . . or so they said.

Dallas grabs a prepaid TracFone off a spinner, two plastic bottles of Wild Turkey 101, and a six-pack of Rainier, and, as he hefts that green bag over his shoulder, starts turning out Zippo's lights, one by one.

"I'm going to pull the security tapes," he says. "Let's go get your daughter."

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF NEW MEXICO  
SYBILLA ROSS-LAURE on her own behalf and  
on behalf of her minor child, R. L.**

**Plaintiffs**

**v.**

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA;  
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION;  
JOHN B. HARRINGTON, in his official capacity  
as the Director of the Federal Bureau of  
Investigation; BUREAU OF ALCOHOL,  
TOBACCO, FIREARMS and EXPLOSIVES;  
ROSS A. NEUMEYER, in his official capacity  
as the Director of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms  
and Explosives.**

**Defendants**

**Before the Honorable A. Shae Tashima**

**Transcript of Proceedings**

**Bench Trial Day 4. July 24, 2017**

**On Behalf of the Plaintiffs:**

**Wiehl, Markus & Ferrone, LLP**

**On Behalf of the Defendants:**

**Office of the Attorney General**

**Leslie Simson Curran, Assistant Attorney General**

**WITNESSES PAGE**

**DEBORAH FALLON**

**Direct Examination (Resumed) by Mr. Ferrone**



**MR. FERRONE:** Dr. Fallon, let's go back to the days immediately after March 18, 2015.

**DR. FALLON:** Yes.

**MR. FERRONE:** You'd just been assigned as a clinician and psychiatrist by the state of New Mexico to evaluate Sybilla Ross-Laure.

**DR. FALLON:** It was more complicated than that.

**MR. FERRONE:** Please explain.

**DR. FALLON:** Ms. Ross-Laure . . . Sybilla . . . was still in custody at the time, although she hadn't been formally charged with any federal crime related to the events on March 18. She was being held instead under a New Mexico state child endangerment statute.

**MR. FERRONE:** A request . . . a ploy . . . by the FBI?

**MS. CURRAN:** Objection, speculative. And not in the record.

**MR. FERRONE:** Withdrawn. But the endangered child?

**DR. FALLON:** Her daughter, Renata. And frankly, Sybilla herself.

**MS. CURRAN:** Objection, again. That's pure opinion.

**THE COURT:** Sustained. And you and Dr. Fallon are walking on thin ice again, Mr. Ferrone.

**MR. FERRONE:** Even Ms. Curran can concede Ms. Ross-Laure was a young mother. Exceptionally young. And many parties were interested in her welfare, correct?

**DR. FALLON:** As I said, it was complicated. A lot of speculation, rumors, and intense media attention, including press conferences by family members of the forty-seven who perished.

**MS. CURRAN:** Objection, yet again. The witness is speculating. That's still in dispute.

**MR. FERRONE:** That they died, Ms. Curran? Or just the final tally?

**DR. FALLON:** Professionally, I'd never use the term, but it was a crazy, crazy time.

**MS. CURRAN:** Your Honor, may we approach?

**THE COURT:** Yes.

**NOTED OFF RECORD/12.12.1333**

**RETURN TO RECORD/12.12.4164**

**MR. WIEHL, ON BEHALF OF MR. FERRONE:** Sorry for the delay, Dr. Fallon, but I'll be taking over from here. Let's start again, focusing solely on Sybilla. Please tell us about her.

**DR. FALLON:** Then? Emotionally immature, of course, but also amazingly composed. Steely, I'd say, given the various traumas she'd both endured and observed.

**MR. WIEHL:** Traumas?

**DR. FALLON:** They've been well documented, I think.

**MR. WIEHL:** In the intervening years, you've remained formally retained by her, correct?

**DR. FALLON:** She's still a client of mine, yes.

**MR. WIEHL:** A confidante? A friend?

**DR. FALLON:** I'd like to think so. But our relationship is first and foremost professional.

**MR. WIEHL:** Returning to those first sessions then, I still think we need a first-hand account, a true picture, if you will, rather than the caricature often depicted by the mainstream press and the government.

**DR. FALLON:** Extremely bright and articulate but reserved.

**MR. WIEHL:** Homeschooled, no doubt?

**DR. FALLON:** No doubt.

**MR. WIEHL:** So, her education was unusual?

**DR. FALLON:** By most standards.

**MR. WIEHL:** By any standard. And deeply informed by the beliefs of her father, Etan Laure.

**MS. CURRAN:** Objection. Ms. Ross-Laure's parentage remains an open question, both medically and legally.

**THE COURT:** Sustained. Noted.

**MR. WIEHL:** While we may never know if Etan Laure was Sybilla's biological father, Sybilla and others, including her biological mother, Marin Ross-Laure, often held him out as such.

**DR. FALLON:** Adah.

**MR. WIEHL:** I'm sorry. Adah?

**DR. FALLON:** Yes. Most members of the Ark of Lazarus took a new name by the time they entered the Fifth Circle. Marin changed her name to Adah in 2001. Sybilla's older half sister, born Skyler Ohlin, took the name Rebecca shortly thereafter.

**MR. WIEHL:** The Fifth Circle?

**MS. CURRAN:** Objection again. Mr. Wiehl's attempted ignorance is endearing, but time consuming. The baroque mythology of the Ark of Lazarus is only a Google search away, and we're all familiar with it.

**MR. WIEHL:** But it's still highly relevant, Your Honor. This baroque mythology, as Ms. Curran so in-artfully calls it, informed Sybilla Ross-Laure's adolescence. It was her education, her faith, her social currency. Her whole life. So, Dr. Fallon, what was Sybilla's Fifth Circle name?

**DR. FALLON:** Technically, she didn't need one. Or rather, she wasn't required to take one. She was born into the Ark, an SGA, Second Generation Apostle, named at birth by Etan himself. He was her spiritual father if nothing else.

**MR. WIEHL:** Let me see if I understand this. Marin Ross renamed herself Adah. Skyler Ohlin, Sybilla's half sister, chose to start calling herself Rebecca. And, by 2006, if not well before that, Etan Laure was demanding his followers address him as . . . Eleazar.

**DR. FALLON:** Yes. And his followers called themselves the Flock.

**MR. WIEHL:** But Sybilla was always . . . just Sybilla. She had no choice in the matter at all. Frankly, she never had any choices, a pattern that defined her upbringing. She was both socially and physically isolated out there in the New Mexico desert. Told what to wear, when to eat . . .

**DR. FALLON:** That's accurate.

**MR. WIEHL:** Who she could love?

**DR. FALLON:** There was an arranged marriage, if that's what you're suggesting, although it was more symbolic than literal.

**MR. WIEHL:** Mostly spiritual then, like her familial relationship with Eleazar?

**DR. FALLON:** Yes.

**MR. WIEHL:** But there was a child born out of the union. Literally.

**DR. FALLON:** Renata.

**MS. CURRAN:** Objection. Much like Ms. Ross-Laure's own parentage, there are unresolved questions surrounding the child's birth.

**MR. WIEHL:** No, Your Honor, the Government likes to raise those questions because they're otherwise inconvenient facts for them. But standing issues have already been resolved. Sybilla's sworn affidavits, affidavits already accepted by this court, legally establish that Renata is the biological daughter of Sybilla and Etan Laure.

**THE COURT:** Objection denied, and now you're the one walking on thin ice, Ms. Curran.

**MS. CURRAN:** Withdrawn.

**MR. WIEHL:** Dr. Fallon, you've suggested that Renata's birth prompted a crisis of faith in Sybilla?

**DR. FALLON:** A crisis of conscience, at the very least. She was young, still in her teens, questioning and acting out, as many at that age do. And suddenly she's a mother, with all the emotions that come with that.

**MR. WIEHL:** In fact, Eleazar had numerous symbolic brides, didn't he? Seven to be exact, including Sybilla's half sister, Rebecca, as well as her own mother, Adah.

**DR. FALLON:** Six.

**MR. WIEHL:** Not seven?

**DR. FALLON:** No. Renata would've been the seventh, eventually. Renata's birth was a significant occasion to the Ark, and as my research indicated, the number seven was doctrinally important to Eleazar and his Flock. There were constant references to Seven Angels, Seven Circles, etc. But that number's been important to many esoteric groups and mystery cults throughout the ages. Eleazar was far from the first to subscribe to these ideas or adopt them.

**MR. WIEHL:** But it's no wonder young Sybilla was deeply troubled and confused.

**DR. FALLON:** And honestly, desperate. Not only were there growing tensions among Eleazar's wives, the so-called Centrum, but across the wider Ark of Lazarus community at Jornada del Muerto, as well. These were doctrinal arguments, a schism between competing factions, and the Flock had lost some of their number as a result. Further, their more apocalyptic beliefs were drawing significant unwanted external scrutiny.

**MR. WIEHL:** Federal law enforcement scrutiny, you mean. In fact, a lengthy undercover FBI investigation, culminating in the raid that's brought us here today.

**DR. FALLON:** Yes.

**MR. WIEHL:** And although the Government continues to resist explaining their actions, refusing to release any of their investigative files or even reveal any of the agents involved, including the mysterious Aaron, it's fair to say these beliefs

they claim they were so concerned about were . . . far-fetched?

**DR. FALLON:** Baroque. And increasingly hard for Sybilla to reconcile with the life she wanted for herself, and more importantly, her new daughter. In the days immediately after March 18, Sybilla was violently protective of her daughter. Obviously, she was still grief stricken over the deaths of her mother and sister and the rest of the Flock, so much so she was unwilling, initially, to even accept they had perished. But she never wavered in her devotion to Renata, even in the face of significant pressure to have the baby legally removed from her care. And that is what struck me so powerfully about her when we first met at the Western New Mexico Correctional Facility.

**MR. WIEHL:** And that was?

**DR. FALLON:** There was nothing Sybilla wouldn't do to protect Renata. She'd die for her daughter. She loved that little girl more than life itself.

## 6

“Okay,” Grant says, breathing deep, steadying himself. “No signs of obvious forced entry, but I’m guessing it all started right here.”

Here—

*The living room. A couch shifted sideways. An end table knocked over.*

*Broken glass. Bloody footprints.*

“Mr. Brannen opens the front door to someone, or more likely is surprised here, maybe by an attacker coming in from the garage.” Grant turns and points down a small dark hallway. “Right away he knows there’s a problem, and a fight ensues, all the way over to the kitchen. Physical at first, until he’s shot.”

“First time?” Elise asks.

“Yes. He drops near the stove. You can see plenty of spatter on the nearby wall and counter, enough you’ll get good angle and distance. Maybe the round’s in Mr. Brannen or still in the wall or the ceiling. Should be a spent casing . . . somewhere.”

They can only see a slice of the kitchen from where they’re standing, but Grant is *seeing* it all the same.

“Significant pooling on the floor suggests he was huddled there for a moment, longer than he wanted to be.” Grant nods to himself. “He lays there, gathers himself, pushes himself up.”

“Refuses to stay down.”

“That’ll be *his* handprint smearing that pool,” Grant says, “then grabbing for the counter.”

“Is that when he gets the toaster?”

“Yes, it was plugged in, obviously. He pulls it straight from the wall, dragging the cord behind him.”

Elise can almost see it all too. “And follows back out here and then into the girl’s bedroom?”

“Following the screams,” Grant replies. “More bloody handprints down the hall, knocking down pictures, keeping himself upright.”

“Is that when he’s shot a second time?”

Grant nods, slow.

Elise won’t walk them back to the girl’s bedroom again, just as she’s unwilling to let either of them reenter the kitchen, trying to limit how much they corrupt the crime scene beyond what she and her deputies already have.

“But first he gets in one good swing, maybe two,” Grant says, with a bit of a sad, wry smile.

There was a metal toaster, discarded, dented on the bedroom floor. Bloody, too, with what looked to be human hair tangled in its slots.

Elise tries to imagine Noah Brannen roundhousing that appliance at someone’s head, their face, their eyes. Trying as hard as he could to *kill* that someone.

She doesn’t know much about Noah Brannen—not yet—but she’s willing to wager he wasn’t a violent man. Not a killer, not naturally. Thankfully, few people are, although a lot of people *can* be. Tonight, Noah Brannen was fighting for his life and for his daughter, and Elise figures that’s enough to make nearly anyone a killer.

“The second gunshot puts him down a little longer,” Grant continues.

“How long?”

Grant’s lips are bloodless, considering. “Not sure . . . long enough.”

“And he was stabbed there, too, in the girl’s bedroom?”

“Likely.”

“Finishing him off?”



Grant sighs. “They *cut* his throat, Elise, or tried to, anyway. A large-bladed knife with a significant edge. Just a bad angle, only barely missing the carotid. In too much of a hurry.”

To Elise, the whole scene is hurried, messy, the intruder trying to get in and out again as fast as possible . . . but with the girl in tow. “And yet,” she says, “Noah Brannen *still* somehow stumbles out of the house, gives chase.”

“Bleeding badly, though.” Grant adds, “*Fatal* blood loss. Two gunshot wounds, that throat laceration. He’s dying with each passing second and likely knows it.” Grant pauses. “But I don’t think where you found him is conclusive that his attackers fled through the woods. Instead, he was probably just disoriented . . . chasing taillights as they disappeared up State Road Seven.” Grant pauses again, collecting himself. “Chasing ghosts,” he finally says. “But then again, I’m just guessing.”

And that’s all they’re both doing, just guessing.

Other than the wounds Grant identified with a superficial examination of Noah’s body out in the snow, they’re trying to make sense of what little evidence they have, reading bloody tea leaves. But to Elise, it all sounds true.

It *feels* awful . . . and all too right.

“Attackers?” she asks, taking a sip of cold coffee. “Multiple?”

“Two different weapons, gun and knife, suggest two assailants. But, you know, that’s just from too many episodes of *CSI*.” He flashes another wry smile through three days of beard. Grant is tall but tends to stoop, to keep himself at eye level, or like he’s carrying unseen burdens on his back, a heavy weight he’ll never share. But he has strong hands and a steady, green-eyed gaze, and she knows he doesn’t watch *CSI*, or much television at all. “Plus, it appears he seriously injured at least one of them. So, while he’s still fighting with that one, someone else had to deal with the girl, right? Grabbing her, carrying her, whatever.”

“Or she walked out willingly,” Elise adds. “Or wasn’t even here.”

But Grant’s face suggests otherwise as he takes back his coffee and turns it in his hands. He still wears his platinum wedding ring, but then again, so does Elise. Hers is silver, inscribed with her wedding date and a song quote.

“Mr. Brannen put up one hell of a fight,” he says. “He was a fighter to the very end. Shock alone would’ve done in most right here in the house.” Grant shakes his head, trying to imagine it. “He made it a long way.”

“So, two assailants then?”

“No, honestly, probably more like *three*.” Grant finishes off the coffee. “Noah Brannen was barefoot out there in the snow. You can even see his shoeless prints here in the blood.” He motions with the coffee cup at the stark, naked prints on the floor, each one a bloody step closer to death’s door. “But by my count, there are three *other* shoe or boot patterns in the blood between the girl’s bedroom, the hall, the kitchen, and the living room. They were rushed, on the move, tracking blood carelessly everywhere. One of them was hurt bad, say another was carrying or leading the girl . . . but there was definitely a third.” Grant glances at her. “The driver?”

And that’s why Elise wanted Grant’s eyes: he’s observant as hell. “The mother?”

But at that, Grant only crushes his empty cup and slips it into his coat pocket.

Because as good as he is, he can’t see that. And he hasn’t seen the rest of the small house yet, either, including the garage, where the Brannens’ surprisingly high-tech security system lays gutted. Or the parents’ bedroom Elise swept through, gun drawn, when she first entered the house.

A closet still filled with hidden presents for a birthday party that will never happen now.

And the room itself *untouched*, the bloody chaos everywhere else absent; nothing packed up, removed, or even

searched, because the attackers had already found what they were looking for in the girl's bedroom—

*Renata.*

Spelled out in fairy-light-covered letters on her wall.

Whoever they were—however many there are—came for the girl and the girl alone.

A shadow appears at the door behind Elise and Grant. It's Jerry, who was afraid to enter the house when he first arrived on scene and is afraid still. Still ashamed.

He won't look at the floor or the walls, focusing instead only on Elise. "We found something," he says. "I think you need to see it."

# 7

We dump my car behind the Dollar General and then drive Dallas's Corolla to his apartment off Schuman.

I've passed by these dilapidated units a hundred times. The building itself looks ready to come down, fall right over. At this late hour, there's few lights on and even fewer TVs, but behind the old windowpanes, they glow like blinking, bleary eyes, watching us slowly disappear.

I've disappeared before, vanished from sight.

First after Jornada del Muerto and the court cases, then again when I married Noah.

But if there's anything I've come to accept since the Ark, there are parts of you that run so deep they root you in place no matter how fast or far away you try to fly.

No matter how many times you change your name or hair or eye color.

Things *immutable*, like the burn scars and whip marks and razor blade cuts I can only hide with my tattoos.



In Etan's earliest teachings—the esoteric spiritual and self-actualization classes he was shopping around Hollywood when he first met my mother—he often talked about *morphogenesis* and *biogenic fields* and *ephemeral energy*.

Qi or chi. Life force. Élan vital.

He promised not only a whole new level of consciousness, but actual *metamorphosis*—

*A change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one, by natural or supernatural means.*

Etan understood that most people *want* change—any chance to escape their addictions and anxieties and faults and

failures so they can embrace their better selves, their better angels.

He offered hope.

Etan's brand of metamorphosis—of hope—only required an exhaustive regimen of his special guided Inner Exploration sessions, at around \$500 per half hour. He also believed in quantum mysticism and ley lines and *auras*, brightly colored metaphysical signatures, like our cosmological signs.

He said he could see our auras, and that they could change too.

For many years, I was *gold*, and Etan liked to tell me I glittered for him like a faraway star. My early brilliant shine meant I was protected and guided by angels and one of many reasons why I was so special.

My mother was supposedly *silver*, the shimmer of abundance, of wealth.

Becca was *indigo*, a wise seeker, someone who could see other worlds.

It was right after Rennie's birth that Becca started claiming she could see auras, too, that she could see *my* aura, and how with each passing day, it was *souring*, flickering out, fading to black.

It was another little battle in our long-running war, a fresh scar between us.

When Becca couldn't whip me for my perceived faithlessness, she whipped herself to demonstrate her piety to the Ark, so even before Aaron arrived, before Rennie's birth, we both carried far too many wounds.

She warned Etan and the Flock that my darkening aura was an omen, a troubling *sign*, not only of an existential change within me but an external, impending threat to the Ark.

In the end, she was right.

*Did my aura change when I met Aaron? After Rennie was born?*

*Before I fled the Ark?*

*What color was my aura when I married Noah?*

Truth is, I've never been able to see auras, and I'll never know whether Etan or Becca truly could either. But I do know it's harder than ever to just up and disappear now, to *vanish* like I did before, when so much of our lives is computerized, our cell phones always tracked and cameras omnipresent.

We leave shimmering electronic signatures wherever we go, digital ley lines visible long after we're gone.

No matter what our colors, our auras burn bright, like North Stars others can follow.

That's why I needed the TracFone from Zippo's, and a new laptop.



Dallas parks, finishes off a can of Rainier, and tells me to stay put.

He asks me how much money I have, and I show him the rubber banded stack still wrapped in a Glad freezer bag.

He takes about half of it and hands the rest back to me, tells me to keep the gun close, and then, while I wait in the cold, he moves up the street alone, throwing long shadows beneath a lone streetlamp. He gleams copper in its burnished yellow light.

Becca would've claimed that's the color of an impending spiritual journey, a mind awakening to the latent powers within.

Then he's gone, and the snow flickers overhead, and I hold the Colt tight and watch the handful of lighted windows on his apartment building change colors too.

Elise turns the shattered remains of the iPhone in her hand.

Jerry Harris found it—what was left of it—crushed in the dirty snow next to the mailbox for 311 State Road 7.

He didn't move it.

But Jerry did grab the mail, which Noah Brannen never had a chance to check himself. Mostly junk, circulars for the local Dollar General and Zippo's Liquor. Coupons for KFC and Pizza King. Electric and DirecTV bills, both addressed solely to Noah Brannen.

They'll eventually get all the relevant utility, toll, and property records and identify *everyone* associated with either the phone or the house. But thanks to Jerry—yet again—and despite the useless mail, they now know the wife's name—

*Sarah.*

Jerry was slow in getting out to the house, and a little slow in putting two and two together, but he finally figured out that his girlfriend, Nadia, *works* with Sarah Brannen.

And earlier this evening, only about two hours before the 911 call, Nadia and Sarah finished a shift together at the Dollar General.

This morning, after I left our house and dropped Rennie off with Marcus Ray, I drove north out of Limon toward Last Chance on SH 71 and pulled into the Howard United Methodist Church and sat in our car beneath the Colorado winter sky.

Last Chance is little more than a ghost town, a handful of abandoned buildings, burned-out husks. It used to be neon lit, the last place to grab a bite to eat or fuel up before heading across the eastern plains, but once traffic was diverted to I-70, it pretty much dried up and blew away.

Long before I moved to Colorado, a blown-out tire ignited the Last Chance fire, immolating forty-five thousand acres of fields of wheat and corn and most of the town itself. Despite the current High West fire, it's still one of the largest wildfires in state history. It finished off, scoured away, whatever time hadn't.

But somehow, the church didn't burn.

A miracle, it survived without a scorch mark and still holds services every Sunday. A small Bible study too. Even a quilter's club.

Deborah Fallon would've chastised me for going there, telling me all the reasons it's wrong to be drawn to churches and fire, Bibles and flame.

I've never been to the services and haven't opened a Bible of any kind in a decade.

But I did buy a Howard United Methodist quilt at a local bazaar down in Limon. It was thick and warm and heavy and mostly secular, stitched panels of suns and stars and birds.

Only one panel had any overt religious symbolism at all, a simple quote—

*Let your faith be bigger than your fear.*



But when you're not sure who or what to put your faith in anymore, then fear is all you have left. Fear is *huge*, big as the Colorado sky.

All those years of Deborah's supposed counseling did little to fight that. The meds, which for a while just became *pills*—any pills—didn't work. Nor the endless cycle of cigarettes and cutting and JWB. All the name and hair changes, all the colors of the rainbow—

*All those different auras.*

All the endless nights lying awake in Rennie's room, staring through her windows into the dark night, worrying, wondering, waiting.

When Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 mysteriously disappeared, the Flock spent six days in the Ark's bunker beneath the barn—six dark, terrifying days, breathing each other's last breaths, listening to Etan's and Becca's reassurances and promises—only to surface to find the world much the same as we left it.

I was seventeen and already pregnant with Rennie.

Her birth eight months later changed *everything*, and Deb used to say Rennie's arrival was the beginning of the end for me—

*Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.*

I have that tattooed on my left shoulder, along with a stylized Black Sun, and *Renata* in regal cursive. My whole body is a picture book of angry scars and the colorful tattoos I try to hide them under.

Two years later, when another passenger airliner, a Nippon Airways Airbus A380, vanished in midflight over the Sea of Japan, that same old panic took hold again, and I hid the two of us in the bathroom of our tiny apartment for four days, eating Ritz crackers and drinking juice boxes, singing her songs, sleeping in the tub with her in my arms.

Four days waiting with my baby girl for the world to end . . . or just another new beginning.

I'm not a true believer anymore because of faith, but because of fear.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of other true believers out there now, too, outcasts and conspiracy theorists and preppers and extremists who've revived and remade the Ark of Lazarus on Reddit and 9kun and the dark web, on MeWe and NSide and Tesseract. A whole new Flock taking wing at society's edges, *corrupting* everything we did at the Ark, scouring those old books and documentaries and that miniseries, searching for hidden clues and insights and answers.

Searching for me . . . *for us*.

That awful, infamous picture of Rennie and me, wrapped in flames, when the Ark burned.

Forty-seven souls forever lost . . . only two saved.

Deb once told me that image had been shared or downloaded *sixty million times*, and that was five years ago.

So, there were good reasons for all the high-tech security surrounding our innocuous little house at the end of the road, and plenty more for the buried money and the new ID and Dallas the Ghost Rider's untraceable gun.

I *faked* normal all these years—pretending, playing house—so Rennie could have a pet dog and a wooden play set and a life that *looked* almost normal, and so could I, at least for a while.

A little world I tried so hard to hide . . . and a special little girl I tried to protect for so long.

But I was never destined to escape the Ark of Lazarus, and Rennie was never truly safe with me, and there's nothing normal at all about my beautiful, miraculous daughter.

Like it says in Revelations, in the End, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for *this* world, the old order, will pass away.

Falling planes are signs, sometimes.

And you can't hide from the End of the World in a goddamn bathtub.



Etan took us to the sea once—San Diego—just me and my mother and Becca.

He stood in the blue ocean and held my hand, and although the salt-heavy surf, that inexorable tide, tried to pull me into the deeper black water, he scooped me up tight to his bare chest—cleaved me to him, as if we were one heart, one breath—and I knew nothing was ever going to take me away.

I knew I was safe, and I've tried so many times to hold Rennie that tight, that *close*.

Noah's always been so much gentler with her yet loved her just as furiously, just as fiercely.

I can still remember—

*Hot sun on my face and the way it turned Etan's gray eyes green. His long beard the color of smoke, of starling feathers. All the fish, bright as coins, a shower of pennies and dimes that flipped flashy circles around us. How they went still when he told them to, and it was like we were standing at the bottom of a wishing well, a fortune's worth of other people's dreams at our feet.*

*Sand in my hair. The taste of sea-salty ice cream.*

*The long midnight ride home to New Mexico.*

*Dozing in the van with Becca, our heads resting together.*

*Her long fingers in mine.*

I was ten years old.

But the FBI's investigation never confirmed that San Diego trip. No record of it exists anywhere, and no one's left alive to remember it . . . but me.

Everyone else burned to death inside the Ark of Lazarus, ghosts who haunt me still like miracles and memories I hold on to that may never have happened at all.

All I'm left with is that constant fear, afraid I'm losing my mind.

Afraid the Ark will never be over for me, afraid that I won't let it be, that I don't even know how.

After I ran away with Rennie, I couldn't stop running, until Noah.

I asked him to grow out that beard, and it came in wispy, soft, gentle. Running my fingers through it was like stroking starling feathers again. He was so different from Etan, from Aaron, too, and loved Rennie and me without hesitation. He was patient and kind and rarely confronted me and deserved so much better and we both knew it.

Deserved more than my fears and anxieties and mood swings, more than me inexplicably staying out late after work or sneaking bottles of alcohol in the morning or sitting in an empty church parking lot in Last Chance, forty miles from our home, pretending I was there for any reason other than fear.

Or the nearby Verizon cell tower with a strong signal.



Although the laptop we shared was still plugged in at the house, it was easy enough to use my iPhone as a hotspot for Rennie's iPad, and along with the extra apps I'd downloaded—hidden behind another app—I could scan the internet and send my emails and posts. I'd been doing it for months, at least a couple of times every week, before and after work: secrets I'd started keeping from Noah, like the money and gun buried in our backyard.

This morning, while Rennie was at her art class, I cracked the window and lit another cigarette and poured some JWB into my coffee, which was quickly going cold, and tapped open the secure browser tucked away on Rennie's iPad and first checked the latest Reddit posts and then the most recent ARoG Missives and the endless, ongoing discussions on Tesseract.

A world of online radicalization, of hope and desperation, all seeking and seeing the same signs and patterns and portents as me.

A Russian airliner disappeared somewhere over Murmansk.

*Falling planes are signs, sometimes.*

A rare earthquake in Florida, an even rarer 4.1 magnitude in New Jersey the week before, shaking buildings as far away as Northern Virginia.

Twin hurricanes—Ophelia and Nigel—gathering strength and spinning toward the gulf.

The Four Horsemen fires out West.

*Fires are signs, too, sometimes.*

A few new cases of Hadney-Pharoah's in Fresno.

In Salina, Kansas, the FBI stopped a plot by the Sons of Revere to bomb the National Guard's Nickell Barracks Training Center. Across Colorado and Utah, more weird drone sightings like from a few years back, dozens of them flying in formation, making shapes in the night.

A digital murmuration.

And there it was, the *Denver Post* article Noah tried to hide from me over breakfast, just a short couple of paragraphs, tucked away deep in the Environment section.

Hundreds of bloody birds tumbling from the sky in Sunbeam, Colorado.

*Falling birds are also signs . . . sometimes.*

# 10

Jerry Harris sits in Elise's truck, with Grant behind them.

Roof rack emergency lights still silently spin overhead, painting the Brannen house and the windblown snow around it in stark, staccato colors.

The emergency at the Brannen household is over for the moment, but the glowing lights will help vector in the Colorado Bureau of Investigation and Lincoln County SO.

Nothing looks good or natural in that kind of light.

Nothing ever looks *right*.



Jerry blows on his thick hands, warming them, although Elise feels her truck is already way too warm, almost oven hot.

Everything she wears sticks to her, another delightful side effect of getting old. She's always either too hot or too cold now, and it never has much to do with the actual temperature.

Jerry huffs and puffs because he's nervous. Because he doesn't want his wife to find out about his girl on the side, Nadia Rupert.

"I don't care about any of that," Elise assures him, already imagining how the headlines will play out. A violent killing in a small town like Limon—worse, a possible child *kidnapping*—will mean plenty of headlines. Pretty white woman. Young, smiling girl. The story writes itself, however unfair but true. Although it's also fair to ask, Is any place *really* that small anymore? Everyone intertwined and connected now, everything anyone's business, social media and cell phones and a frenzied twenty-four-hour news media pulling complete strangers into each other's orbit, crashing hard, leaving truth as collateral damage.

Limon is about to be turned upside down, every stone and skeleton unearthed.

“Nadia talks about Sarah all the time,” Jerry says, gritting teeth. “Knows her from that store. Her husband, her kid too. I’m sure Nadia also talked about me.” Jerry slumps heavily in his seat, stares out at the circus colors on the snow, where dawn’s still a few hours away.

“Did *you* ever talk to her?” Elise pushes.

“In passing,” he answers. “Hello here and there, that sort of thing. She was . . . different, you know? Kind of . . . out there.” He waves his hand at the night outside. “Changed her hair color all the time. Always a new tattoo. You know, I would’ve thought she was a lesbian.” Jerry ties the thought off with a *know-what-I-mean* look, glancing back to Grant for affirmation, who simply shakes his head. “Except for what Nadia told me.”

“And that was?”

More slumping, more sighing. “Just stuff about Sarah’s husband. A quiet guy, a nerd. Sometimes he brought Sarah dinner during her shifts. And that girl of theirs, with the weird name. Ramona? Randy? Whatever. She was homeschooled, mostly. Nadia always wanted to get their kids together, playdates and that sort of thing, but Sarah was super protective of her, like there was something wrong with her. One of those kids in a bubble who are sick all the time.”

Now it’s Elise’s turn to look to Grant, who is staring intently at the back of Jerry’s head. “*Was* she sick?” she asks.

Jerry shrugs. “I dunno, and Nadia didn’t either. But Nadia is big into TV and the internet chats, conspiracies and cold case mysteries and stuff like that. She loves those true-crime podcasts.” Elise shrugs and Jerry plows ahead. “Anyway, she got it into her head that Sarah wasn’t telling the truth about her kid, or herself. Little things didn’t add up. She thought Sarah was hiding or on the run, like a bad marriage or one of those runaway kids, all grown up now. Or maybe she ran off with that girl, who wasn’t her real daughter. It was this big mystery to her, you know, something exciting.”

As Jerry’s speaks, Elise catches a blurry glimpse of Worth Askew, his flashlight nearly lost in the swirling blue-and-red

afterglow. She had him following up their initial canvass of the perimeter with a second search about twenty yards out, a big concentric circle, with the house the bull's-eye.

“Nadia wanted me to run checks on her,” Jerry confesses, raising his hands, already absolving himself, flashing a too-tight gold wedding band. Elise has met his wife, Delfina, a few times. A tough, tough woman. And she'll need to be when all this breaks open. “Nothing bad, not like she was going to sell the info to anyone; she just wanted to know. Like I said, it was a big mystery. Nadia actually really liked Sarah and was worried about her.”

“Did you run those checks?” Even Elise's small department has access to NCIC—the FBI's National Crime Information Center—as well as N-DEx, the Law Enforcement National Data Exchange, and a host of other federal, state, and local databases. Running someone for personal reasons, anyone who isn't a target of an ongoing investigation, violates about a dozen official policies and procedures and more than a couple of laws.

Kind of like cheating on your wife.

“No,” Jerry says, far too fast, giving away that is *exactly* what he did . . . or that's what he led Nadia to believe. “Nadia figured it out on her own anyway. Look, I'll be honest: I didn't believe her, wrote the whole thing off as bullshit. But, you know, *now* . . .” He trails off with a final sigh as he tries to turn that gold ring on his finger. It doesn't budge.

“Figured out what?” Grant asks from the back seat, the first thing he's said since they got in the truck. But before Jerry can answer, Worth suddenly appears at the window with his big Maglite.

He's been with the department two years, and he'll eventually make a decent cop if he doesn't learn too many bad habits from Jerry.

Elise rolls her window down, letting in snow-tinged air. “Got something?”



“Yeah, I think so,” he says, his voice made ragged by the night wind. “A hole.”

Not sure she heard him right—or worse, afraid she did—Elise asks again, “A *what?*”

“A hole,” he repeats, and then he motions with his flashlight for Elise to follow him around to the back of the house.

“A hole,” she echoes, shaking her head . . . and dreading already the things she might find at the bottom of it.

When Dallas returns, his green bag is noticeably heavier and he's carrying another set of keys with a tiny Magic 8-Ball key chain.

He also has what looks like a sawed-off shotgun, blunt and ugly and deadly serious, loosely wrapped in a bath towel. Like the Magic 8-Ball lanyard, it's small in his large hands, and it shakes me.

Not the gun itself—I'm clutching one too—but what Dallas and his towel-wrapped shotgun and heavy green bag and mysterious key chain portend, what they all signify—another *sign*.

A point of no return, a decision that can't be undone, a choice I won't be able to unmake, like that night alone at Engle, waiting endlessly, hopelessly, for Aaron. All those promises he once whispered to me in the Ark's bunker beneath the starling coops, when he held my hands and swore to keep me safe . . . before it all went up in flames—

*A handful of smoking feathers that got caught in my hair as I ran with Rennie.*

"We'll leave my car here," he says, handing me the keys for a Ford truck. "We've got a new ride."

"Will someone miss it?" I ask.

He smiles a skeleton grin, showing big, square teeth. One's gold stamped with the ace of spades. "Well, you sorta already paid for it," he says. "But that someone sorta owed me a favor too."

He finishes off the last can of Rainier and trades it for the Wild Turkey, taking a deep drink straight from the cold bottle, as I turn the Magic 8-Ball in my hands, wondering what sort of debts and favors might necessitate someone giving up their truck in the middle of the night.

I shake the Magic 8-Ball, looking for answers—

*Cannot predict now.*

“So, what am I going to owe you?” I ask.

Dallas tries a real smile this time, somehow both sad and serious, flashing more gold tooth through his heavy gray beard. “How ’bout the truth,” he says.

“The truth,” I echo, with a last shake of the 8-Ball—

*Better not tell you now.*

I clutch the truck keys until my fingers hurt and decide I’m going to ignore the 8-Ball’s shitty advice.

“My real name is Sybilla,” I say. “Sybilla Ross-Laure.”

# 12

Elise stands over Worth's hole next to the play set as he lights it up with his Maglite.

*Just a hole, not a grave.*

Even hazed by still-falling snow, its recent shape and depth are clearly visible, marked by a discarded garden spade and a rusty dog tie-out stake. There was a picture of the dog on the fridge in the house, Renata Brannen holding a wide-eyed beagle, but no other evidence of it.

The girl looked younger in the photo than Elise suspects she is now, the family planning for an upcoming birthday.

"Maybe this is what they were really after," Jerry says, over Elise's shoulder. "Some kind of buried treasure or something."

Elise looks back toward the house, trying to imagine what Noah Brannen would've seen in the dark and the blowing flakes if he'd been watching from the windows, before or after the security lights were cut. "Then why even enter the house?" Elise asks. "Why take the girl?"

Jerry doesn't answer as Grant kneels to examine the hole, careful not to disturb it. The empty hole is just one more mystery, like Sarah Brannen herself.

Noah's wife, Renata's mother, is a ghostly presence in her own family. Hints of her everywhere, but little else. Her name's not on any mail, and Elise suspects now she won't be listed on any household accounts either. There are few pictures of her in the house, none by herself, and so far, no childhood photos or memorabilia at all. She tossed out her cell phone but likely changes it every couple of months anyway.

A woman in *hiding* . . . hidden like whatever was in this hole . . . but from who . . . or what?

*Who the hell are you?*

Sarah Brannen hovers just outside of sight. A faceless voice, a shadowy presence, an outline in the snow. One of the only clues they have is that she worked at the Dollar General store alongside Jerry's secret girlfriend, Nadia Rupert.

Elise turns to Jerry. "You were about to tell us something about Sarah Brannen, something Nadia learned or figured out?"

"Yeah," Jerry says. "Like I was saying, Nadia is into weird things, believes some crazy stuff. She doesn't trust the news, thinks everything is fake or a conspiracy. You know, drones tracking us, the government listening in to our calls, that sort of thing."

Grant stands. "Nothing wrong with healthy skepticism."

"Sure," Jerry says, "but she didn't believe *anything* Sarah told her about herself, so she decided to go off and play a little Sherlock Holmes."

He jams his hands into his rumpled uniform pants to keep them warm.

"So, there was this cable series a few years back," he continues. "Don't know if you saw it. It was cheesy, kinda dumb. Nadia said it was called *Fires at Dawn* . . ."

FIRES AT DAWN  
ACT II, SCENE 1  
Blue Note Draft, 2019  
Mark David Driessen

FADE IN ON:

BECCA entering the barn, hot and sweaty.

A HOLSTERED GUN rests on her hip.

SUNLIGHT peeks through the unpainted slat boards,  
and WIND rocks the walls.

We HEAR the CHITTER of tiny birds in their coops,  
the WHISPER of wings.

SYBILLA stands in front of the coops.

The two young women regard each other with barely  
disguised contempt.

BECCA

You weren't at the range this afternoon.

SYBILLA

I wasn't up for it.

BECCA

Seems you haven't been up for much, lately.

SYBILLA

I'm not pregnant again, if that's what you mean.

BECCA

No, you played that card already. (BEAT) Where is  
Renata?

SYBILLA

Asleep. Others are watching her.

SYBILLA reaches into a coop and pulls out a starling.

She holds the small creature in her cupped hand.

Looks at it closely.

We HEAR it WARBLE.

BECCA (smirks)

You've always been soft on the little things, little sister.

SYBILLA

And you've always been too hard.

BECCA smiles, not denying the charge. Almost proud.

BECCA

I saw you talking to Aaron last night. Again.

SYBILLA

He was talking to me, no different than Abel always chasing at your skirts, trying to get your attention.

BECCA

Eleazar says—

SYBILLA

A lot of things.

BECCA strides across the barn and stands over  
SYBILLA.

As we FOLLOW her, crossing beams of SUNLIGHT,  
we see shadowy farm machinery and tools, including  
shovels and pitchforks, lining the walls.

We LINGER a moment on stacked GAS CANS and two  
PROPANE TANKS.

We also make out numerous RIFLES cradled in racks.

BECCA (whispers)

That's close to blasphemy. Are you a blasphemer, little  
sister?

SYBILLA

No more than you.

BECCA

You've been sneaking off with him. Stealing moments.  
Finding little hiding places.

SYBILLA

Those are lies. And Eleazar sees all.

BECCA

Eleazar sees and so do others, so will everyone, when  
their eyes are fully opened. Do not presume you are too  
precious, little sister. Penance is the sharpest scythe, and  
it harvests every stalk.

SYBILLA

Stop spreading lies about me.

BECCA

They have only come home to roost, like your birds.

BECCA reaches over and pulls the starling from  
SYBILLA's hand.

It CHIRPS.

BECCA holds it up high, staring into its dark eyes.

It STRUGGLES and FLUTTERS in her iron grip.

BECCA

So small, so tiny, so helpless. (BEAT) Like our little  
Renata.

SYBILLA

*My Renata. My daughter. That is enough, Becca.  
Enough.*

BECCA

Renata is a daughter of the Ark of Lazarus. You may  
have birthed her, but do not think for a moment you are  
her mother.

Angry silence hangs between the two sisters.



BECCA

You're both children. Fussy, clamoring for attention. But she is important. Not you. Not anymore.

SYBILLA

Nor you. You have no favor, no standing. You mooned over Aaron when he arrived, but he only ignores you. You follow Father around—

BECCA

He is not my father.

SYBILLA

And he pays you no attention. Won't look at you. Won't touch you.

BECCA

You are a poison.

SYBILLA

I am a salve to the anger and hate you preach.

BECCA

You are no healer, no matter what you claim.

SYBILLA

I've made no such claims.

BECCA

Your vows are as empty and meaningless as all that comes out of your mouth.

The sisters stare each other down again, as DUST twirls in a bright bar of SUNLIGHT between them.

SYBILLA

What has happened to us, Becca?

Becca runs a calloused thumb over the bird in her hand.

BECCA

I fear for you.

SYBILLA

I am afraid too. Aaron does talk to me, but only because he is worried for all of *us*. He says it is not safe here.

BECCA

I fear for your *soul*, little sister.

BECCA takes a long, appraising look at SYBILLA's blonde hair, her body beneath her dress.

BECCA (CONT'D)

And that is the thing a man is least concerned with.

SYBILLA pulls back as if slapped, the tender moment she thought she was sharing with her sister now gone.

BECCA

Ascension is coming. We must be vigilant, prepared. We must be *strong*, and if there is one thing you lack more than faith, little sister, it is strength.

SYBILLA

You are wrong.

BECCA

Your weakness threatens us all. Flee, fly away as fast as you can; I will not stop you.

A pregnant pause.

BECCA (CONT'D)

But you will never take the child.

BECCA tosses the starling skyward, where it flutters and flaps, rising to the beams holding the barn's roof aloft.

We TRACK it, FOLLOW it, as it seeks an opening to the sky.

BANG! BANG!

BECCA's gun is LOUD in the small space, causing SYBILLA to JUMP.

We JUMP too.

But the bird flies on, right up to the sun, the HEAVENS.

Only a few stray FEATHERS rain down.

SYBILLA watches them fall.

As does BECCA.

The still SMOKING GUN in her hand.

CUT TO:

# 13

I didn't want to fight with Noah today, so of course, I did.

He was working when Rennie and I got home from Last Chance.

Noah had one of those careers they advertise on midday and late-night TV, things like web development and computer graphic design, criminal justice, home health care. Noah did actual website work, though, picking up commissions on Fiverr and handling local businesses around Lincoln County and Limon. None of it paid much, but he was good at it and enjoyed it.

We've mostly been living off my money since we got married, and most of that has been tucked away in a fund for Rennie when she's older: the remains of a DOJ settlement, the residuals from a nonfiction book and that "loosely based on" made-for-cable miniseries. The actor who portrayed me was so much prettier than I've ever been, then or now, and almost won an award for making me so sweet and vulnerable and brave. She wanted to meet before filming, get together for coffee, but I'd already been off the grid and out of the public eye for a while, and I wasn't ready for someone to Xerox my ticks and mannerisms, to look me in the eye and see how I'd turned out.

It was weird enough to watch my life played out over dramatic hourly increments backed by swelling music, lens flare, and special effects. Like flipping through photos and not recognizing your own face.

There was so much they got wrong, so many things that never looked quite right or the way I remembered it.

And much like that gorgeous young woman who played me, they made the Ark of Lazarus and our lives in the New Mexico badlands so much prettier than the real thing.



I stood at the doorway of the spare bedroom we'd turned into Noah's office.

Far enough away that as I chewed my peppermint gum, he couldn't smell the JWB, but there wasn't a thing I could do about the cigarette smoke on my skin.

"I heard about that thing today about the birds," I said. "Up in Sunbeam, near Craig."

There was a long beat as he watched me chew, fingers hovering over the keyboard as pixelated windows threw neon light on his thin, boyish face. Liminal light that left him gauzy, indistinct. I could've waved my hand through him, made him disappear.

"I figured you would." But he didn't ask me *how*. "They were probably poisoned, Billie." Other than Aaron, he was the only person who'd ever called me *Billie*—he knew how much I hated *Sybilla*—but only when we were alone. "Or it's that big High West fire. Everything north of White River is burning. When the wind's right, we can smell the smoke here." He sat back, watching me, waiting. He could no doubt feel my anger across the room, hints of it, like my cigarette smoke.

He was way too thin, his beard ridiculous, and he hadn't been sleeping much, dark hollows around those dark eyes I adored, loved.

I'd been keeping him awake . . . *again*.

"One of the Four Horsemen fires," I said.

"It's just a name, Billie. Just a *thing*."

"And what does that mean?"

He breathed deep, unsettled. "Just lately, there's always another thing."

"With *me*, you mean."

"No, *us*," he said, standing. "You, me, Rennie." He closed the gap between us and reached for my hand, and his fingers were warm, and his touch made me want to cry.

He just wanted to keep our voices down so Rennie wouldn't hear.

We didn't fight much, but she was sensitive to it, the same way I was sensitive when I was her age. She was probably listening through the walls.

"It's not been good for a while," he whispered.

"I've gotten bad," I whispered back. "Gotten *worse*. That's what you really want to say."

"Honestly, you haven't gotten a whole lot better." Another beat, long enough it left me unsettled, unsure, what he was going to say next. "I think you need to talk to Deb again, tell her what's going on, see what—"

"No, I don't want to do that." I pulled back. "I won't." Talking to Deborah was a *step* back.

"When's the last time you checked in with her?"

I pretended to think, even though I knew exactly when we'd last spoken, and exactly what we said to each other. "Midsummer. June. July." But I didn't admit that was June or July more than a year ago.

Noah pulled us together again. "I can be here for you in all the small ways. I can listen when you want to talk and shut up when you've heard enough." He offered a small, uncertain smile. The most beautiful smile in the world. "But I can't do the real work with you."

"Those small ways matter," I said. "They add up."

"They do," he agreed. "Just not enough. Not nearly enough." He brushed my hair out of my eyes and kissed the furrowed spot between them.

It's easy to say I suffer from PTSD, but that so inadequately describes what I lived through—what I *survived*—that it hardly says anything at all. I was raised in a doomsday cult and married off to its spiritual leader when I was still in my teens, a man who also raised me as his *daughter*: a man who taught faith and redemption yet preached

violence and death, a greatest-hits playlist of the most arcane Judeo-Christian precepts and occult beliefs imaginable.

*And God said unto Noah, the end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.*

*Make thee an ark . . .*

While other kids were in school, playing sports, going to dances, I was sequestered in a dusty, desolate New Mexico compound, handloading rifles, waiting for miracles. Held *hostage*—physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually—by a madman that I madly loved.

*No . . . that I worshipped.*

As did scores of bright and wonderful people. My family, my friends, my salvation.

*The Flock.*

And it wasn't just Etan. It was the Ark itself. I believed in it for so long: everything we were building out in Jornada del Muerto, awaiting the signs, preparing ourselves for Ascension and our resurrection four days later.

*A New Day Dawning and the World to Come.*

I loved that we were special, that we were somehow *chosen*.

But the true signs never came, and it all ended not with the Rapture but a disastrous federal raid that left our home a smoldering ruin and forty-seven people dead.

*My family, my friends, my salvation.*

Some did escape earlier than that, like Abel, who loved Becca but fled both her and the Ark a month before the fires as her zealotry created divisions in our Flock and demanded a fealty even Etan couldn't command, as her sermons turned decidedly bloodier and more apocalyptic.

There were other *survivors*, but all those who stayed, everyone I left behind, perished in those horrible flames, and none have been resurrected yet.

Noah understood all that as well as anyone, knew *me* better than anyone alive. He'd watched over me over a thousand sleepless nights, all my addictions and ever-growing anxieties.

My *anger*.

My guilt. My shame. My penance.

*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart . . .*

I've never been able to hold it all in, yet I can't let it all go, even though it's sharp and unwieldy and has hurt so goddamn much.

*Sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit . . .*

Noah constantly cut himself on my edges but always . . . *always* . . . came back for more. Maybe he stayed mostly for Rennie, and I don't know what she would've done all these years without him. I've struggled to be a good and decent mother, the day-to-day rhythms of taking care of her escaping me like a song I've forgotten the words to, a melody I can only hum.

But I haven't been able to let go of *her* either.

And Noah wasn't wrong. I have gotten so much worse, harder to handle, unpredictable and anxious. My past's crushing, inescapable gravity pulling me back again and again and again, like falling birds, like a black hole in my heart.

Just another of Etan's and Becca's endless apocalyptic signs—

*And the unseeable Black Sun will finally be clear to the naked eye. It will rise and the whole world will gaze on it and marvel.*

In 2019, scientists displayed the first real images of a black hole. Not an artist's concept or a computer simulation but a *picture*, captured by the Event Horizon Telescope. It was



revealed at seven concurrent news conferences, and one of the project leaders was quoted as saying, “*We have seen what we thought was unseeable.*”

A Black Sun surrounded by a halo of fire.

It’s so easy to fall into black holes, to be blinded by the false light of fiery prophets. That’s my whole life . . . *a Black Sun surrounded by a halo of fire* . . . like the one I now have tattooed on my left shoulder blade.

I let Noah hold me this morning, although I was still angry, still seething, still *afraid*, as was he, in his own quiet way. But I needed *his* warmth, the innate light that’s always surrounded him, his beautiful shining aura, no matter how dark my moods got.

I swallowed his light, counting the beat of his heart against mine—

*Onetwothreefourfivesixseven.*

Seven is a mystical number.

“I’ll call Deb tonight,” I lied.

“Good,” he said.

He didn’t believe me, but he didn’t release me, either, or maybe I didn’t release him—

*Onetwothreefourfivesixseven.*

He kissed that spot between my eyes again. Gentle, fleeting, frustrated. A kiss gentle and quick as a butterfly, like the ones he was always giving Rennie.

“You and Rennie are the first thing I think about every morning,” he said.

“And the last thing you think about every night,” I finished for him.

“It’s going to be okay,” he lied, this time for both of us, so I wouldn’t have to. “I promise.”

I felt his whiskers on my lips, that beard he hated but grew for me. “I need to get ready for work,” I said and finally let

him go.

*I was mad when I left earlier.*

*He was too.*

And that was the last time I saw my husband alive.

“I don’t know,” Grant says, shrugs, staring at Elise’s phone. “Could be.”

Elise flips it around to take another look, comparing the stalled image on the tiny screen to the bagged family photo in her hand.

“I think Sarah Brannen is this Sybilla Laure,” Elise says, holding the two women next to each other as best she can. The light in her truck is bad, too much contrast, the screen too bright and the photo too dark, but the resemblance is there.

Weird. Unmistakable. Unavoidable.

Grant calls it an *uncanny valley*: the more you stare at Sarah Brannen and start to see the similarities, convince yourself she *is* Sybilla, the more unnatural the “real” Sarah appears.

Sarah *disappears* altogether, and then all you can see is Sybilla. It’s the eyes, always the eyes. Blue and steady and piercing. They give her away.

“What does it mean?” Grant asks, still seemingly unconvinced.

Elise swipes at her phone, scrolling through the various articles they’ve googled since Jerry revealed Nadia Rupert’s suspicions.

*What does it mean?*

“I don’t know,” Elise admits, shoving the phone across her dashboard as a fleet of CBI and Lincoln County SO cars and trucks descend on 311 State Road 7 in a wash of engine exhaust and crunching snow and stuttering emergency lights. “But it means something.”

Because Elise doesn’t much believe in coincidences.



Elise remembers bits and pieces of the Laure story, probably what most remember. A weird cult camped out in the desert, shades of Waco and Heaven's Gate. Hollywood connections and notoriety. Hidden money. Sex and drugs. Brides and sister-wives. A mysterious undercover agent and a dawn raid that descended into chaos and fire.

The End of the World.

Everyone remembers the flames and that infamous picture and the survivor herself.

*No, two.*

A young woman—just a girl, really—with a baby girl of her own.

Someone should've learned after Waco, but nearly twenty-five years later, the FBI and ATF got burned again in the Southwest badlands. Three buildings ignited within minutes of each other as FBI drones circled above and agents tried to make entry, and what started as an arrest warrant became a desperate—and ultimately doomed—rescue mission.

Allegedly, most of the cultists drank some sort of poison cocktail before igniting themselves, but no one knows how many were still alive and breathing as the flames consumed them.

Three federal agents died: two from the fires, one from gunshot wounds. Several more were badly burned and injured.

None of the cultists escaped, save for that one young woman.

*Just a girl, really, with a baby girl of her own.*

Walking untouched out of the fire, wreathed in smoke, with embers in her hair. It was the perfect shot. The baby clutched to the young woman's chest, both haloed in a hellish, impossible black light, a dark corona.

There was something about that woman's eyes, staring straight ahead—

*Blue and steady and piercing.*

As the whole world burned to the ground around her.

That photo won numerous awards, making the mother and daughter famous for a while, until the young woman changed her name, and both disappeared, leaving behind a mystery and a trail of articles and documentaries and books and that lone miniseries.

The one Nadia Rupert caught late at night on HBO Max after her Dollar General shift.

The one with the big-time actress who doesn't look *exactly* like either Sarah Brannen or Sybilla Laure, but looks enough like both to be a sister.

Three different versions of the same woman passing through an uncanny valley of their own, right here in Limon.

# 15

“So, you really that girl from that crazy cult, the one in that photo?” Dallas asks, staring straight ahead out the windshield of the big F-150 we’ve commandeered.

His associate’s truck, the one I *sorta* paid for, rumbles and rolls. A long hairline fracture in the front windshield is letting in too much cold air, the cab littered with fast-food bags and cigarette packs, empty beer bottles, and a Cold Butte Mining baseball hat.

I’ve been talking for twenty minutes straight, putting Limon behind us, giving Dallas a snapshot of the last ten years of my life. So far, he hasn’t done a double take or looked at me. He hasn’t made any eye contact at all. Just nursed the bottle of Wild Turkey: slow, steady sips, listening quietly.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“I seen that once.” His hands are massive on the wheel, but he guides the truck over the windblown highway with a practiced grace. He mostly stares straight ahead, only glancing at the rearview now and then, taking in the snowy black ribbon unspooling behind us, like he’s done this sort of thing before, and that’s both unnerving and comforting.

The shotgun lays across his lap, still wrapped in the towel.

He says, “I thought you made a bunch of money and moved to Australia.”

I laugh and it sounds way too loud, way too hysterical, even to me. I’m exhausted, coming apart at the seams, and I’m not sure I *shouldn’t* just tell him to turn us around and drop me off in front of the local Limon Police Department. But there’s still the matter of Aaron, once a true believer, too, although he never admitted it, not even under oath.

He stopped calling himself *Aaron* before I changed my name, before the first criminal hearings and the civil litigation that followed. Neither of us has used our real name in a long

time, both trying desperately to rekindle new lives out of the ashes of our old ones, like those ashes earlier on my tongue.

I've been tracking him like I've been tracking the Ark's newest disciples.

I've known for the better part of a year where he's living now, and he needs to know what's happened here tonight, what it signifies and what he once used to believe. All those promises he once made to a young girl.

"No, never been to Australia. Bet it's nice, though."

"S'okay," he says, without a hint of humor or mockery. And I can't imagine when or why Dallas the Ghost Rider might have been to Australia, and it's clear he's not going to tell me. But now I'm compulsively checking the sideview mirror, too, turning in my seat, looking behind us.

He asks, "These people who took your little girl . . . they all part of that?"

"In a way yes, I believe they are."

"All these years later?"

And how do I explain the long shadow something like that casts? The Ark burned down a decade ago, but all its notoriety—all its mysteries and infamy—drifted on and on, like embers caught in the wind, blowing around the world, ready to ignite again.

It only took forty-seven deaths and one fiery photo.

Rennie and me—

*Like embers caught in the wind.*

"They're different now," I admit. "Kind of put their own spin on it, I think." Which is saying something.



We're pattern-seeking creatures. There's even a word for it: *apophenia*.

We constantly make connections between completely unrelated things, tease meaningful patterns from meaningless

noise, and find familiar objects in the world around us. We see the man in the moon, or climbing kudzu looks like a crucified man, or a blackish stain on a hardwood floor stares right back at us.

Birds make smiling faces in the New Mexico sky.

The world is a *mirror*, and our tendency to see ourselves in it was once a matter of survival. As soon as a baby can see, she recognizes the human face. The baby smiles at the sight, and her mother picks her up, holds her tight, loves her, protects her.

See . . . *survival*.

Maybe trust is nothing more than need, and love is nothing but our mind playing tricks on us, but they say those with religious beliefs are more prone to this sort of thing.

Women, too, either because we better recognize emotions, or we're just emotional by nature. Too emotional. We're always seeing the Face of God somewhere. But it's a good thing most mothers are women; otherwise humanity might never have survived this long.

Rennie was born with her eyes open. From the moment Becca put her in my arms, she was already staring up at me, considering me, and I couldn't look at her enough either. We'd shared my body and then we were sharing a breath, a new life.

The first time she smiled at me, my heart broke in two, and I knew then in my broken heart *she* was a miracle, and that had nothing to do with prophecies or patterns or signs.

*I believed.*

No different from knowing aliens exist or finding flying saucers in the night sky or accepting the afterlife or catching restless ghosts haunting old photographs. When you believe in something, there are *always* signs.

You just need to know where to look.





As Dallas drives on and sips his Wild Turkey, I tell him how members of this new movement—these *New Lazarians*—have multiplied wildly just over the last three years, how hidden link trees and social media algorithms have swept up otherwise disparate and different groups—refugees from QAnon and Twin Flames and Ho No Hana and Raëlism and the Church of the Last Testament and even the Order of the Solar Temple, where Etan allegedly got his start—by fomenting and validating their already hardened distrust and fear. Their paranoia or longing or fervor.

Those AI search engines and algorithms did a far better job of finding the patterns and signs and connecting all our little dots than we ever could have ourselves. We looked at our computer screens and saw our own faces staring back at us.

When I finish, Dallas roots around in the center console and shakes a cigarette out of a discarded soft pack and offers me one, lighting both with a heavy metal Zippo, a silver thing with skulls and leering faces. I breathe the smoke in deep, the second time tonight I've tasted soot, ash.

After several miles of silence, he finally turns to me, asks, "How dangerous are they?"

Despite everything I've told him, Dallas didn't see Noah tonight. Didn't see the blood.

The FBI raided the Ark because we'd been identified as a *domestic terror threat*, *domestic extremists*, on par with the World Alliance, even the Aryan Nations. The danger we posed was spelled out in the unsealed Patriot Act affidavits authorizing the months of wiretaps and surveillance of Etan and the Flock, including me.

Aaron's affidavits.

But when I recall hardworking Aslam . . . and Paz, who was so good with the birds . . . funny Freda, who could mimic any of us down to the smallest tic . . . always-smiling Ayla and her blueberry muffins that would make the entire Big House burst like spring . . . even Abel, who taught me to draw, and the beautiful, delicate charcoal paintings he now sells under his real name . . . no, I don't *remember* terrorists.

I didn't think we were violent or menacing, despite all the guns and training. We thought we were going to change the world. But that kind of change is hard, requiring almost unimaginable sacrifice, and if you're willing to make that kind of sacrifice, then I guess you'll always be a danger to those who aren't.

I must've been silent too long, but that dead-silence answer is enough. Dallas gently unwraps the shotgun with one hand and puts it up on the dash, within reach.

"Why are you helping me?" I finally ask.

Because an hour ago, he was working at a place called Zippo's and I was just a woman he saw once a week, if that: one of dozens who walked through his door every day. We'd shared a few silent nods, some unspoken secrets, and little else, and now most everything that was important to either of us is getting smaller and smaller by the mile in the rearview mirror of a truck neither of us owns.

I realize then I'm crying again, and the hot tears fall free and fast and hard, blurring my vision.

"You love this little girl of yours?" he asks. His face, his own eyes, obscured by smoke.

"More than anything." I wipe at tears. "I won't lose her."

He screws the top back onto the Wild Turkey and rolls it behind his seat. "Then I s'pose this is the last chance for either of us to go back now." Dallas raises his cherry-tipped cigarette, acknowledging the road ahead and the road behind us, the last lights of Lincoln County disappearing in the dark and snow. Another few minutes and the lights will be gone altogether.

He only settles into his seat.

"Anyone else back there you need to warn?" he asks. "Anyone else you need to pass a word to?"

I settle into my seat, too, for the long ride. I hesitate, but not as long this time.

"No, no one," I say. "No one at all."

# 16

After twenty minutes, a plan starts to take shape.

Elise has pulled the only registered car for the Brannens and issued BOLOs for their 2014 Dodge Journey, green in color, as well as for Sarah and Renata Brannen. There aren't a lot of public or even traffic cameras around town, but her officers can start checking footage, maybe catch a glimpse of the Journey in a parking lot, either earlier tonight or in these hours after Noah's murder.

I-70 is the big east/west pass-through, and if his killers have already grabbed the interstate, they could be anywhere from Denver to Kansas City, not to mention US 287 and 24, State Highway 71, and dozens of smaller county roads.

The Limon Municipal Airport.

CBI, who's taken the lead now, is looking for a green needle in a blacktop haystack.

But unless you're hiking in a national park or have made a lot of advance preparations, it's hard to just up and vanish nowadays. Doubly so if you're a woman on the run with a young girl. Maybe near impossible if you've just committed a violent, bloody murder and kidnapped an unwilling mother and her daughter.

There's already a split of opinion between the different agencies on whether this *is* a kidnapping, but a heads-up call's been made to the Denver FBI, just in case.

The crime scene here at State Road 7 still needs to be cordoned off and fully analyzed, Noah Brannen's body needs to be moved and an autopsy performed, and a myriad of coordination details need to be ironed out between CBI and the Lincoln County SO, leaving Elise and Limon PD in a support role, mostly working on the periphery, awaiting instructions.

This investigation may have started here in Limon, but it won't end here. Elise's jurisdiction is just too small and Noah

Brannen's killers are too far away now, no matter which direction they've gone.

And so is Renata Brannen.

But Elise isn't willing to give up on the young girl yet . . . or quite let go of the mystery woman who's supposed to be her mother.

Elise has Worth Askew and Freddie Alvarez heading into town to do a quick search for the Journey at the La Quinta and the Holiday Inn and the muni airport parking lot; they'll also pull the video footage from the Shell and the Loaf 'N Jug and Zippo's too. Zippo's is open twenty-four hours, so it's not a bad idea to have them roll by there as well.

After the divorce, Elise sometimes stopped in there after work—just before heading to the empty home Denny's dad had left her—looking for her favorite malbec from Colterris. At least she didn't come home empty handed.

One other place that's well within her jurisdiction is the old Skyline Mobile Home and RV Park, off North Avenue.

And according to Jerry, that's where Nadia Rupert lives.

# TRANSCRIPT OF *DARK STARS*

Podcast #314 / Air Date: May 23, 2021

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A Hell and Half Acre Production

Host: Wyatt Gray (WG)

Guests:

Connor Whaley (CW)

Dr. Deborah Fallon (DF)

[BEGIN]

**WG:** I'm back with Connor Whaley, an LA-based artist who escaped the Ark of Lazarus prior to that infamous March 2015 raid, and, for the first time, Dr. Deborah Fallon, who worked closely with the lone adult survivor of that raid, Sybilla Ross-Laure. Welcome to both of you.

**CW:** Thanks.

**DF:** Thank you.

**WG:** So, starting with you, Connor, I don't think it would be inaccurate to call you a survivor too? Right?

**CW:** Oh, that's right. I voluntarily left the Ark, but that leaving, that act of tearing myself away, was an act of survival itself.

**WG:** Was there a single event that prompted your departure? I read that you left in the middle of the night, with only the clothes on your back.

**CW:** And about five dollars, mostly in quarters [laughter]. Honestly, it was a culmination of things. I'd been with AXL, what became the Ark of Lazarus, for about nine years, and all the joy, all the hope I had from the earliest days was gone. Obviously, I was young and naive. I wanted a community, friends, a sense of meaning. But in the end, it wasn't the community I thought it was, or the one I needed so badly. It just wasn't the same place, not the same people.

**WG:** And Sybilla Laure?

**CW:** Sybilla was born into it. She had no frame of reference outside the Ark. Before I got involved, I'd been to college, was working in Santa Barbara. I had a life pre-AXL, pre-Ark. Her experience was so much different than mine.

**WG:** Dr. Fallon, do you agree with that?

**DF:** Absolutely, although I can't speak directly to Sybilla's personal experiences.

**WG:** Patient confidentiality?

**DF:** Correct.

**WG:** But it's been suggested by Connor, and frankly, others as well, that you have capitalized on your most famous patient.

**CW:** What I said is that Dr. Fallon benefitted from both Sybilla's experiences and mine.

**WG:** Took them as her own?

**CW:** In a way.

**DF:** I try to be respectful of that. But I was thrust into an unwelcome spotlight because of my work with Sybilla. Like Connor, I had no idea what I was getting into. I've

had my own experiences with the Ark of Lazarus, my own unique frame of reference. Different, but just as valid. And just as vital.

**WG:** So, you're a victim too? A survivor?

**DF:** No, of course not. But I have tried to take what I learned, my experiences, and use them as a platform for increasing advocacy and awareness about cults like the Ark of Lazarus.

**CW:** And two books . . . seminars . . .

**WG:** To be fair, Connor, you've both written books. I think the only one here who hasn't penned a novel about the Ark of Lazarus is me [laughter].

**DF:** And Sybilla herself.

**WG:** Connor, in that series *Fires at Dawn*, which has really driven popular perception of the Ark of Lazarus, you're portrayed as something of an agitator. The series intimated that you were romantically linked to Rebecca, Sybilla's half sister.

**CW:** Intimate, physical relationships were strictly forbidden within the Ark, except for those Eleazar . . . Etan . . . carried on himself. But I was close to Becca, for a while. We shared a similar vision for what the Ark of Lazarus could achieve.

**WG:** She was one of Laure's so-called wives, correct?

**CW:** She was part of the Centrum, a select group within the Ark. The full meaning of that I don't think any of us understood. Only Eleazar.

**WG:** Was there frequent tension between you and Etan Laure . . . Eleazar?

**CW:** Honestly, by the time I left, there was plenty of tension. Period.

**WG:** Why?

**CW:** Eleazar had grown increasingly erratic, placing a greater emphasis on guns, on a need for the Flock to defend itself. Dark visions and enemies everywhere, that sort of thing. A lot of that was driven by Sybilla too.

**WG:** You didn't feel the same?

**CW:** Not to that extent, no.

**WG:** And Becca Laure wasn't advocating for this sort of . . . prepping?

**CW:** Again, not to the same extent. Violence was not one of our tenets.

**WG:** What about flagellation, physical punishment?

**CW:** Something that mainly occurred within the Centrum, if it occurred at all. A form of sacrifice and penance that Eleazar demanded.

**WG:** What about the sisters? What was their relationship like?

**CW:** Both were brides, Eleazar's Exalted, although most thought the idea merely symbolic, metaphorical.

**WG:** Lamb of God and all that?

**CW:** Yes.

**WG:** But Laure preached a lot about polygamy and polyamory. To an outsider like me, a nonbeliever, that sure doesn't sound metaphorical.

**CW:** It's easy to see all that now . . . but back then . . .

**WG:** Go on.



**CW:** It all made a perfect, crazy kind of sense [laughter]. Sybilla had just given birth to Eleazar's eventual seventh bride, the most holy.

**WG:** The child, Renata?

**CW:** Yes.

**WG:** And Becca?

**CW:** Although she had assumed her own position of prominence in the Ark, second only to Eleazar, after Sybilla gave birth to Renata, his anointed successor . . . well, I think you can imagine the friction.

**WG:** A child shall lead them?

**CW:** Yes. Isaiah 11:6. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them." Although, just to be clear, such Judeo-Christian concepts formed only a small part of our ethos.

**WG:** Sure . . . but are you suggesting sibling jealousy contributed to the downfall of the Ark of Lazarus?

**CW:** I'm merely pointing out that despite what that silly series suggested, Sybilla was no angel. She had power, privileges, like few others, and wasn't afraid to wield them. Even more so after her daughter was born.

**WG:** And that's because Renata was your savior, imbued with Laure's Holy Spirit?

**CW:** It was given that she was special, sacred, and we were expected to treat her as such. And her mother as well.

**WG:** Are we relitigating history now? Shifting blame?

**CW:** [voice rises] No! The federal agents who illegally raided our compound are to blame for everything that

happened. Even Dr. Fallon and I agree on that.

**WG:** Doctor?

**DF:** Absolutely.

**WG:** Connor, you left the Ark, the Flock, one month prior to that raid, correct?

**CW:** One month and one day. I felt the drama surrounding Eleazar and Becca and Sybilla and her baby was too . . . parochial. Not worthy of what we were trying to do.

**WG:** And that was?

**CW:** [long pause] Save the world.

**WG:** Save yourselves?

**DF:** I would argue that to the Flock, that was one and the same.

**WG:** But, in a way, Laure's predictions or prophecies did come true. You said he was imagining enemies, foreshadowing the end-times, but only weeks after you left, it all did end for the Ark of Lazarus. Not in a worldwide apocalypse, but a federal raid.

**DF:** And let's be clear: it truly was apocalyptic for those trapped inside those burning buildings.

**WG:** The Grijalva Commission concluded they were not trapped. They chose not to walk out.

**DF:** Into what? The guns of federal agents who they believed were there to strip away everything they believed in? That's the worst sort of Hobson's choice.

**WG:** Death or imprisonment.

**DF:** Which is tantamount to no choice at all.

**WG:** But Dr. Fallon, Sybilla prevailed on that very issue in a civil trial, didn't she? She won a lot of money.

**DF:** Only a minor settlement, but yes.

**WG:** And Connor, you've been involved in significant litigation as well.

**CW:** Unfortunately, I can't get into that.

**WG:** But what can you tell us about this shadowy FBI agent, the mysterious "Aaron," who apparently infiltrated the Ark of Lazarus for more than a year before the raid? His identity is still unknown; he's never come out and talked about his time with you. The FBI all but refuses to admit he even exists. But it was primarily his testimony, his evidence, that precipitated the assault.

**CW:** I have nothing to say about that either.

**WG:** Is that part of your settlement?

**CW:** Again, no comment.

**WG:** Aaron's heavily redacted affidavits indicated there were not only weapons, ammunition, explosives, and flammable fuel on the property, but significant stores of phenobarbital and cyanide as well. A poison cocktail, some have called it.

**CW:** I will categorically state no one in the Ark of Lazarus committed suicide. That was not something we believed in.

**WG:** Like violence? Again, Fires at Dawn implied . . .

**CW:** [interrupts] There was a lot in that series that was just as flimsy as Aaron's so-called evidence, and as overblown as some of Eleazar's predictions.

**WG:** Is it hard to say that now? To disavow what you once believed so deeply?

**CW:** Honestly, yes.

**WG:** I find it curious that you still use the terms “we” and “us.” It suggests the Ark of Lazarus is still very much alive for you, even now. Don’t you agree, Doctor?

**DF:** Mr. Whaley’s never been a client of mine.

**CW:** I believed wholeheartedly in what we were doing at the Ark of Lazarus. I was committed to creating a better world, the World to Come, promised not only in the Nicene Creed . . . we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come . . . but also referenced in Zoroastrian and Jewish and Hindu eschatology. It’s a common theme in religions throughout the world, not just the Ark. We weren’t seeking paradise, but we were determined to make this world a better place.

**WG:** Connor, you’ve turned your passion now to art, right? Your sketches and paintings have done well. A bit of minor celebrity.

**CW:** I’ve been fortunate . . . blessed. They have a following.

**WG:** Blessed? Are you still religious?

**CW:** Not in any formal way, no.

**WG:** But there’s been some controversy. Fresh Ark converts out there, a new movement, New Lazarians, buying up your artwork. Searching for what . . . clues?

**CW:** Some of my pieces touch thematically on my time with the Ark of Lazarus. How could they not? But if someone wants to learn about the Ark, they can read one of Deborah’s books. She’s the expert.

**WG:** [laughter] Dr. Fallon, do you own one of Connor's paintings?

**DF:** No.

**WG:** One last question, Connor. How do you view your time with the Ark now? What would you say to that younger Connor Whaley? The idealist. The believer.

**CW:** [long pause] I'd say, "What the hell are you thinking?"

Elise tracks down Grant near the ambulance that'll transport Noah's body to tell him she and Jerry are driving over to the Skyline.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" he asks.

"Do you?"

He frowns, made more serious by the unflattering shadows of the emergency lights. "You didn't happen to mention it to that CBI lieutenant, did you?"

Lieutenant Carl Feehan is spearheading the CBI case. He's about three decades younger than Elise and, from the few words they've exchanged, thinks he's about three times as sharp.

"I told the lieutenant we believe Mrs. Brannen worked at the Limon Dollar General and possibly finished a shift earlier tonight. I offered to get a rundown of everyone employed there, and anyone she may have worked with over the past few months."

"Makes sense," Grant says, although his unsettled expression suggests otherwise, his breath a pale plume in the cold air.

"I'm not interfering," she counters, but he should know her better than that. Things were difficult for her after the divorce, and he knows that, too, but the job's never been an issue. "I won't jeopardize the search, or the case. But we do need to establish a timeline for tonight . . . or an alibi, if there is one."

Grant looks east. Dawn comes after seven a.m. in Colorado in October, but that's still several hours away. "What you really want to know is whether Sarah Brannen is this Laure woman."

"Call me curious."

“Does it matter?” Grant asks. “I mean, right here, *right now*, does it matter?”

Elise looks east as well. It’s black out there, a shifting, uncertain darkness, like the corona around Sybilla Laure in that photo, striding out of the blazing compound with a halo of embers in her hair. Some people said it was a miracle, and, based on some of the weirder stuff Elise and Grant have already seen online, more than a few still think it is.

Elise can’t ignore the thought that someone who could calmly walk out of a horror show like that could just as easily kill her husband and walk away.

But—

*There’s the house . . . that empty hole in the ground . . . all those birthday presents all wrapped up for a party that will never happen now.*

“Yes,” she answers as she waves at Jerry to get his ass in gear. “I think it does.”

# 18

Earlier tonight, after I left Noah and Rennie at home, I made faces for Nadia in the cereal aisle.

While I stocked my shelves at the Dollar General, I aligned the brightly colored boxes in a way that if you stood back and looked at them, you could tease out a nose, maybe an eye.

I did the same thing with shampoo. Fruit juice. Toothpaste.

*We're pattern-seeking creatures.*

The harsh overhead lights did little to help my illusions, didn't give me any shadows to work with, but they were there, if you looked hard enough. Etan often kept the Ark lit in such a way that it added to its mysteries. He favored salt lamps and Yankee candles: a perpetual pale ambience nearly impossible to read by. Everything was soft, muted, a forever twilight, and the endless shadows worked a kind of magic on your perception.

Things moved behind that veiled dark, phantasms gliding in the gentle gloom, and even softer noises shuffled below the hush and quiet.

Breathing. Whispers.

Aaron once showed me the microphones Etan had hidden around the Ark, the Dropcam cameras tucked away in the common areas, the kitchen, the dining hall. Those didn't even account for the FBI's own drop mics.

Only the Mithraeum—the bunker beneath the coops—was truly silent, safe.

That's why Aaron started meeting me out in the barn.



After the toothpaste, I grabbed a cigarette behind the store and watched the smoke curl fantasy shapes in the lead-gray sky.



Snakes. Dragons.

I saw tiny faces in the quartz-flecked parking lot wink at me as the last of the setting sun flickered like a bad bulb, and I shared one of my two remaining Camels with Nadia, as Wally Mint, our boss, awkwardly hit on her.

Wally made his usual bad jokes, said something nice and not overly creepy about her hair. Stood a shade too close but didn't touch her.

Wally had a wife and three kids but enjoyed his daily dance with Nadia, who laughed and flirted back, just enough to scam better shifts and the odd night off.

Nadia had a little boy of her own and a series of on-again, off-again boyfriends, including a Limon PD officer named Jerry, who, like Wally, was married too. She was always good-natured about Wally's overtures, accepting them as a natural hazard of working at a Dollar General store in the ass-end of Colorado.

Wally never hit on me.

Taller than me, heavier, Nadia *seemed* so much lighter on her feet, positively graceful, dancing around all the Wally Mints of the world. Nothing ever got her down, although I suspected that some days, sharing an outdoor cigarette with me *was* the best part of her day.

Maybe life had dealt Nadia Rupert a shitty hand, but she was determined to play it out with a smile on her face. And she did have a beautiful smile, even when she was tired, even when one of those old boyfriends was blowing up her phone.

Even if she showed up late with a barely hidden bruise, dusted over with foundation.

Even then, she laughed, heartfelt. A silly belief that tomorrow, or the day after, had to be better. Bruises fade. Tears dry up. The music starts up again and another dance begins.

Life goes on.

Nadia—who signed each *A* in her name with a star and slapped a fresh smiley face sticker on her name tag every day

—reminded me of Becca. Or rather, reminded me of the Becca I remember before Etan “married” me.

Before Aaron. Before Rennie.

The Becca who *might've been* . . . if she hadn't been consumed by the Ark of Lazarus and died there.

When I was still working with Deb Fallon, the Becca sessions were always the hardest, harder even than those about Etan. Harder than those about Aaron, too, but for different reasons.

*Life does go on.*

But not always for the better. Sometimes it just can't.

Nadia's son, Colton, was younger than Rennie, but at least once or twice a week we talked about getting them together. And although I often agreed—the idle, aimless plans you always make, as fleeting as our shared cigarette smoke—I always found an excuse later not to.

Nadia never pushed, and if it hurt her feelings, she never showed it.

I'm sure the playdates were an excuse for us to hang out, a way to extend our fifteen-minute breaks a little longer, and even now, I don't know what's worse: That I truly was the best part of Nadia's day. Or that it was so damn hard for me to share anything more than a couple of cigarettes with her.



“You see that thing about lights in the skies?” she asked between puffs. She was trying a new eye shadow, something green, and her eyes sparkled. “It's all over the news. Big-ass drones or something, flying overhead.”

She gestured dismissively, expansively, at the sky above us with her cigarette. “I asked Jerry about it, but, you know, he just shrugs. You'd think with his job, it might be something he would know all about.”

Jerry came in and out of our little talks like he came in and out of her life. I never knew exactly where the two of

them stood.

“He’s out there looking for them, though,” she continued. “They got ’em on shifts, driving around from one end of the county to the other, looking up.” She laughed. “If that’s the best plan they got, they should pay *us*. We could drive around all night, get drunk, stare at the sky. How fun would that be?”

She laughed again, all in one uninterrupted take, stream of consciousness, talking as much to herself as to me. She watched the sky through our shared smoke, as if there really was something up there right then, watching us back.

Prior to the assault on the Ark, the FBI orbited two UAVs over our compound. They videotaped the approach, and the fires that swept through after, and made a high-pitched whine as they circled and circled, a sound I heard in my sleep for years.

Nadia had already moved on. “Also saw that thing about those poor birds up in Sunbeam, all falling out of the sky. Weird, huh?” Another long drag on the cigarette. “Sad.”

Nadia devoured romance and fantasy and loved puzzles and riddles and conspiracies, her wild-world “News of the Weird.” Although she’d never once mentioned the Ark, she’d hinted around the edges now and then, like the news about the birds, gauging my reaction.

She had been out to the house once or twice, dropping off a book she thought I might like or a shirt that had gotten too small for her, trying to fill out a mental picture of my life beyond the Dollar General, and she suspected there was a lot more to me than I’d ever let on. I was her own “News of the Weird,” a neat little mystery or puzzle to solve, like her stories about Bigfoot and lights in the skies and falling birds. She wanted mystery and magic in her life, and I guess that’s why I made those faces and symbols in the cereal and toothpaste, little miracles for her to find. Or I just made them for myself.

“Do you think they feel anything?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Not who . . . *what*. The *birds*.” And then she pointed her dying cigarette at the wide-winged starling inked on my left hand, the hand still holding the crushed Camel pack. “Do they know what’s happening to them?”

I rubbed at the tattoo, one of the first I ever got. “No, I don’t think so,” I said. “Most of the time *we* don’t know what the hell is going on, so how could they?”

“Yeah, that’s probably right,” she said with a smile, a laugh. “Nothing super interesting ever happens here anyway.” She bit back a yawn. “This place is so lame,” she concluded, taking a long look at Limon darkening around us before tossing her cigarette out into the parking lot, where it fell in a long, fiery arc. “So, you want to get Rennie and Colton together this weekend? We can do it at my place. I’ve got a butter cake recipe. My mom’s. You’ll love it. Everyone does.” Her eyes brightened. “Say, there’s that new Margot Austin movie, the one where she’s like this sexy super assassin, with the dead husband who isn’t *really* dead, but is maybe now the bad guy, sleeping with her ex-best friend, or something crazy like that.”

Margot Austin was the young actress who portrayed me in *Fires at Dawn*.

“Sounds fun,” I lied, like always. “Let me check with Noah, see what we’re up to.”

“You do that. Bring lover boy too. I don’t mind.” She straightened her name tag. “Beer and cake and a silly movie sound like a decent Sunday to me.”

Then she reached out and grabbed my hand, running a brightly nailed thumb over my starling tattoo. “You know, if you ever want to talk or anything, we can. Just *talk* . . . about whatever.” Her neon-shaded eyes searched mine, all that color reminding me of the sort of birthday parties I never attended or had growing up. Rennie’s birthday was in two days, and although we weren’t having a real party, we were having a cake of our own. Red velvet, her favorite. “Friends, right? And girls like us, we gotta stick together.”

I nodded, and Nadia wrapped me in a short, fierce hug, and then we walked back inside the store as the first fat flakes tumbled aimlessly down—

*Girls like us.*

I'd always avoided the connections and complications in my life by never making friends, girls or otherwise, but if anyone needed a *true* friend, needed their own Dallas the Ghost Rider to keep an eye out for them and defend them—a knight in one of those fantasies to slay a few dragons—it was the Nadia Ruperts of the world.

If I could've seen her aura then, I'm sure it would've been rosé, bubble gum pink, one of the rarer colors, signifying sensitivity and creativity and the flowering of romantic love.

A gentle touch, a smile, a laugh. The closest thing to a friend I'd had in years. But I finished up my shift at the Dollar General and we went our separate ways, like always.

Jerry's patrol car was idling in the lot for her. He'd brought a six-pack of beer they were going to finish off before she headed back to Colton and her trailer at the Skyline, the one I'd always imagined twinkled with Christmas lights all year round.

Jerry the cop waved absently at me, face lit by his cell phone, and I wondered if he was calling his wife.

I didn't call or text Noah because I was supposed to be checking in with Deb Fallon, so I instead took the long way home, killing time. Without Rennie's iPad to check the internet or the day's news again, I searched the starry night sky for drones or black holes or birds instead.

By the time I finally did get home, to find our front door kicked wide open and Colorado wind and fresh snow still blowing wildly through it, I knew the world was coming to an end.

And I didn't bother to call Nadia to warn her.

# 19

Nico knew the woman wouldn't survive the night.

She was staring at Nico from the bathtub as he tried to look anywhere but directly into her bright, scared eyes, silently pleading with him, begging, leaving Nico to think, *I know, I know, I'm sorry, but some things are bigger than either of us.*

Mysteries are revealed only with sufficient sacrifice. Only after abundant offerings of blood and treasure. Suffering and penance.

Nico is still only an adept, a servant, a *novitiate*. There are Seven Circles, and they must be ascended in a specific, prescribed way. An Ark novice cannot take the vows, or even a new name, until the Third Circle is complete. It is a remorseless path, but the rewards are priceless.

And Camael and Angel are unforgiving teachers. Despite Camael's wounds, they tortured the woman for fifteen long, horrible minutes. Camael holding her down. Nico holding back her boy. And Angel asking the questions.

Angel was pointed, direct, but gentle, almost kind too.

Kneeling beside the woman and stroking her quivering hand, voice never rising above a whisper, she asked the same things over and over, although the woman had answered a hundred times already.

Nico believed her.

But Angel often talks of the *truth beneath the truth*, a truth you don't even know you know, like in Job 19:20, where it says, "My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth."

Angel's truths are impossible to know.

She never talks about her past, never wears anything but dark Under Armour or Woolx merino long-sleeved T-shirts and jeans. Like everything else about her, her skin itself is a

mystery; she's forever bundled up against the cold, no matter the real weather or temperature.

Inside that woman's trailer, it was so hot Nico was sweating through his coat, all their combined breath, the exhalation of their efforts, the steam of blood and the frisson of fervor.

But Angel's demeanor stayed as controlled and monotone as her clothes, as always. Only that frost-burned glare of hers, brightest blue, like glacier ice. Salty sweat ran down Nico's spine, ran into his eyes, or it was just tears. He didn't want them to see him cry, didn't want that poor woman to see him cry, as Angel asked her again and again and again. *Where did Sybilla go? What did she tell you?*

*Where is she now?*

Until the woman whispered, confessed, all but screamed everything she knew, *again*.

Finally convinced, Angel had leaned forward and kissed the woman's bloody mouth and promised her that, although she wouldn't be resurrected, that she could never fully Ascend, they would pray for her all the same.

*We are the Seven Archangels.*

*We are the Exalted.*



They stop at the motel seventy miles outside Limon and park in the wintry lot but don't rent a room. The Sunseeker RV they're driving has been their home for two months now. Normally they sleep in shifts as one of them drives, a constant fractal motion back and forth across the country—Nico dealt with fractals in his prior life—but Angel says they all need to rest now.

To pray. To gather their strength.

Even Angel, who's relentless, seems exhausted by what they've done tonight. And Camael is still injured from the fight at the first house, his head heavily bandaged.

Blood all over their clothes.

Blood and kerosene still beneath Nico's nails.

Despite his injuries, Camael is already on one of their fifteen cell phones and eight laptops, working off a VPN and hacked wireless connection from either the motel itself or a guest parked in the lot. He's checking in with other novitiates like Nico, scattered here and there and everywhere, all connected via Tesseract and Reddit and NSide, all awaiting word.

Awaiting their own special orders and more signs from ARoG—

*Ananiel, Rain of God.*

They have plenty of food and water stored in the Sunseeker, but Nico sees the glowing light of a vending machine across the parking lot catch Angel's eye, and she commands him to buy a couple of sodas, a rare treat.

When he returns, she and Camael split one between them, and she allows Nico to give the other to the young girl bound and gagged on the RV floor, the whole reason they've risked such exposure.

The sole purpose for all the blood they've spilled tonight.

The dark-haired girl is strange: preternaturally quiet. Not *clinically* deaf and dumb, at least not according to the medical records Angel has somehow gotten her hands on, but rather lost within herself, as if the horrors she's witnessed have driven her deep into hiding, somewhere behind her equally dark eyes.

Angel says the girl's *special*, that she's Exalted, too, but she's not what Nico expected. She hasn't cried for her father or her mother, hasn't breathed so much as a word, only chewed at her zip ties, leaving her lips bloody and raw, until Angel slipped the gag between them.

*My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth . . .*



Nico now gently loosens the spit-soaked gag and holds the cold can to her lips and tries to look anywhere but directly into her dark, harrowing eyes.

She's silently pleading with him, begging him, too, and Nico wants to say, *I know, I know, I'm sorry, but some things are bigger than either of us.*

*Mysteries are revealed only with sufficient sacrifice. Only after abundant offerings of blood and treasure. Suffering and penance.*

But she knows that already. She already watched her father die tonight.

Angel appears at his shoulder with something sharp in her hand, and Nico is afraid it's Camael's long-bladed knife, but it's only a pair of scissors.

She also has a set of Andis professional hair clippers and Madison Reed hair dye.

For an awful, infinite moment, Angel runs her hand through the girl's long, pretty hair, stroking it.

*Like a mother and her daughter.*

Then she orders Nico to cut it off.

*Cut it all off.*

Right down to the skin.

## 20

Elise is distracted by Jerry, questioning him as he fills her in on everything he knows, every detail he can remember about Nadia Rupert and Sarah Brannen, when she nearly runs the boy down.

He's standing alone in the street in front of the trailer, appearing suddenly out of the snow globe gloom, bathed in her harsh headlights. Covered in blood.

She abandons the truck and runs to him.

Heart pounding, a sound like the ocean in her ears.

She should have her gun out . . . .  
*ineedtowatchthetrailerneedtocoverjerry* . . . but she's not going to run at a young boy in the snow-driven dark with a drawn gun.

Jerry's moving to her right, calling both her name and Nadia's, as he approaches the trailer, still draped in last year's Christmas lights.

Red, green, yellow, blue. They wink and flicker and burn.

Jerry's voice dials in and out like a bad radio station, shaking as bad as his hands, and Elise gets her own hands on the boy whom Jerry just got done telling her is called Colton, sweeping him up off his feet in one motion.

He's small but heavier than she first imagined, and she almost slips on the slick street. But she clutches him tight, won't let him go, retreating toward her truck and ducking her head low in case they take incoming gunfire from the trailer.

Jerry holds up on the porch, his own gun drawn, waving it awkwardly in the direction of the trailer's open door, still calling Nadia Rupert's name.

Once Elise has Colton safe behind her truck's engine block, using it for cover and concealment, she runs her hands over the boy, searching for cuts or other wounds. He cries and struggles but he seems okay, although Elise knows that he's far

from okay, that it's going to be a long, long time before he's ever okay again.

The blood isn't his, but there's a lot of it, and it stains Elise's hands, her face. He smells like smoke, like scorched skin, and whatever happened here happened not long ago. Might still be happening, right now, inside.

He cries in her arms, and she doesn't want to do this, but she whispers to him, "Stay right here, just stay right here," before pulling him into a crouch close to her.

"Where's your mommy?" she asks, and he points a bandage-wrapped finger at the trailer. The Band-Aid has a little monster on it, some silly cartoon character.

Now she draws her duty gun, the same one she's carried for twenty years—that she's pulled and pointed at a living and breathing human being only a handful of times—only to find it weighs far more than Colton did in her arms.

She can barely lift it, hardly can get it out in front of her.

*Damndamndamndamndamn . . .*

But she does her best to hold it steady and whispers to Colton one last time to stay put and then goes in after his mommy.

# 21

Rennie was eight years old when she brought Bert the Beagle back to life.

We were outside the house in Limon, a late-spring day. Still cool, still windy, the sky so bright blue it was hard to look at.

I was sitting out on the front porch, smoking a cigarette, scrolling news stories on my phone, and Rennie was a few feet from me, pulling fake flowers out of our planters, turning them this way and that, singing to herself.

She was holding them up, asking me where I got them, what they were made of. I only ever kept plastic geraniums and chrysanthemums in those pots outside because I was so bad at growing anything.

Bert the Beagle was chasing scent trails around the yard, wandering farther and farther afield, the uncut grass along the gravel drive and the ditch by the road rubbing his fat belly. We'd owned him for about a year, over my many objections, and he was still just a puppy. All squat legs and round paws. He started each night sleeping next to my and Noah's bed, snoring loudly on the hardwood floor, but we'd always find him the following morning in Rennie's room, next to hers. He would lay there until the sun grazed him and woke him before she did.

Despite my scrolling, I was paying close attention to Rennie. I always did. Her shadow played tricks between my feet; if she moved too far, it would tremble, get small, and I'd look up and pull her back. I was overprotective about the slightest, smallest things, and I didn't want her stumbling or falling off the porch.

I wasn't paying attention to Bert at all.

We were so far off the beaten path that trucks and cars rocked past 311 State Road 7 without much thought or care, so loud at times it made our windows rattle. You could smell the

lingering hot exhaust, the sticky burn of rolling tires. Noah and I had worried about living so close to it while Rennie was young and even called Limon PD a couple of times to ask them to run a radar gun out our way just to make a point, but we loved the house, and the thing is, we soon got accustomed to the noise anyway, the occasional fury of an F-150 or a big oil tanker.

It just goes to prove you can get used to almost anything, eventually. Those roaring trucks didn't make me flinch anymore, didn't even startle me, and they didn't startle Rennie either.

I still don't know if she saw the big red and white Conoco truck hit Bert.

But I do know he yelped once, an awful solitary bark suddenly cut short, and I looked up in time to see him flung skyward into our yard, trailing blood.

The diesel truck didn't slow down. If anything, it sped up, making its escape. It was out of sight by the time Bert crumpled to the grass, and Rennie started screaming.

That beautiful, dumb dog was likely dead by the time he hit the ground.

*He had to be.*

He was almost unrecognizable. A bloody, matted, broken mess, even yards away, and the only saving grace was that he didn't suffer, or I don't think he did.

I told Rennie to stay put and vaulted across the yard, only to drop kneeling next to him, crying, cradling him, as he bled all over me. His dead eyes were wide open in his crushed skull, wide enough for me to see myself and that blue sky above us reflected in them. I was still dry heaving in guilt and terror and grief when I suddenly saw Rennie reflected in them, too, just over my shoulder. I told her to *Get back, honey, you don't need to see this*. Yelled at her louder than I ever had to *Get away, get away*.

I told her the fiery lies every parent ignites in those desperate, awful moments: that Bert was just sleeping, that he

was going to be okay, that we were all going to be okay.

But Rennie knew better and was already crying and telling me it was her fault . . . *No, baby, nonono, it's not your fault* . . . and asking why bad things ever had to happen.

And what can you say in those moments? That bad, horrible, awful things happen to good people and sweet, stupid dogs all the time? That no amount of praying or begging or bargaining can ever keep the ones you love safe from all the bad things?

Not always, not forever.

I'd spent her whole life trying to protect her from bad things, willing to make almost any trade, suffer any penance for every sin, if those sins could just keep my daughter safe.

I held Bert tight and reached for her, too, wanting to pull her close to stop her tears, but she just shrugged me off and kept saying *no*.

*No.*

And then she *touch*ed Bert's limp tail—her small hand grazing his fur, for just a moment—and I *felt* it through my arms.

I felt *her*.

An electric surge, a primal, unnatural shock, that brought fresh tears to my eyes. That also brought light, *life*, flickering back into Bert the Beagle's eyes, like a tiny flame in a fresh fire. A flickering ember, a barely lit candle. Any quick breath would've blown it all back out again, so I held my own.

He tried to bark, to whimper, and his tail flicked against me. He licked my hand, leaving a bloody smear. But Bert was still broken, still ruined. And despite Rennie's childish insistence, her powerful refusal, her unwillingness to *accept*, there was no way to truly put him back together again, even though I was sure his unseen aura was shining like a small sun, his tiny soul glowing and growing.

Rennie's birth had been hard on the both of us. Born premature, far too small, she had to be resuscitated three times.

They told me she all but died for seven seconds, and I think I died right along with her. I prayed so hard for her to live, offered everything I had, even my own life, for hers.

I would've made a deal with every god or any devil.

She was a mystery and a miracle and Jesus himself was responsible for seven miracles, including healing and resurrection. But some think Jesus's healing *took* something from him every time; each miracle *weakened* him.

Etan believed, too, that every divine gift was a trade, every miracle required a sacrifice.

Rennie was my divine gift and the guiding light of Ascension. She *was* the Ark of Lazarus. But she didn't know any of that. And she didn't know what she'd done to Bert, only that she loved her dog and wanted him back. Wanted to wake up the next morning with him curled up beside her bed, like always.

I couldn't bear to leave him that way, so I carried him with me into the house, leading Rennie with a blood-stained hand, and I wiped away her tears and made her sit on the couch and turned on the TV and got her a Capri Sun.

Then I took Bert outside, out by the play set Noah had built, and laid him down near his tie-out stake, the same place eight months later I would first hide Dallas's gun and some getaway money.

I already had a gun, though, an old .38 revolver with two bullets I kept locked beneath the bed.

I kissed Bert's head and put a folded terry cloth towel over his eyes and thought I could shoot him through that towel that was as bright and yellow and cheery as a summer sun and kill him all over again, but I couldn't do it.

Becca was right: I didn't have the strength, the will. All I could do was close my eyes and cry.

And by the time I opened them again, he was gone.



I went back inside to find Rennie still in front of the TV, eyes open but unresponsive.

I called Noah in a panic, and we took her to an urgent care center, but they couldn't find anything medically wrong with her, nothing physical anyway.

She was silent the whole drive there and back. Silent that night when we put her to bed. Silent the next morning when we got her up, although I'd sat by her all through the night anyway, watching her sleep, listening to her breathe.

Silent the following day.

Silent ever since.

The last word I heard my daughter say was *no*.

I tried to explain it all to Noah, everything that had happened with Bert, with Rennie, and it was the only time I ever thought he didn't believe me. He didn't *blame* me but couldn't fully accept my explanation either.

Our daughter's silence settled over us like a gathering of winged shadows and we never talked about it again, although I discovered later that he was sneaking her off to that mobile clinic for checkups, still searching for some plausible, medical explanation for the words she suddenly wouldn't say and the things I swore she could do.

That I always knew, always feared, she was *destined* to do.

But even if it were possible, Noah never would've welcomed it. He *accepted*—believed in his heart—that death was a natural part of life; it's what made life so precious, so poignant.

We love, and we grieve, and we *remember*.

And anything else is playing God.



I wake with a start.

I was drifting, sleeping . . . *dreaming* . . . with Dallas's open computer in my lap, checking the news, scanning one of the Tesseract imageboards.

The lock screen on his battered laptop is a photograph of a young woman standing next to a motorcycle, a big Harley with chrome pipes. Her hair is tied back in braids, her earrings tiny dream catchers.

*Magic 8-Balls and dream catchers.*

I was dreaming about Nadia, I think. Or Noah. Or birds. Or Bert the Beagle and Becca surrounded by an indigo aura, Rennie lit by her own fierce, bright light.

Dallas's eyes are fixed on the rearview mirror, where a different bright light blossoms: red, blue.

I don't hear the sirens, not yet.

We're clear of Lincoln County, crossing Elbert now, but not far enough away, not nearly far enough. I don't know how they've already found us.

"Thought we'd have more time," Dallas says with a sigh as he takes the shotgun from the dash and cradles it in his lap, muzzle toward the driver's side window and door—

*Thought we'd have more time.*

Me too.

It's too easy to live like we have all the goddamn time in the world.

## 23

This is the second dead body Elise Blue has found tonight.

But where Noah Brannen was almost peaceful, eyes open, lying faceup in the snow despite the violence done to him, Nadia Rupert's death was ugly and brutal.

Extremely violent.

Partially burned in her bathtub.

Someone *took* her eyes.

Jerry sobs and stumbles out of the trailer that still smells like his secret girlfriend's pink-and-green lavender Scentsy warmer and burnt skin and hair, the Scentsy still casting delicate, starry light on the low ceiling.

The trailer's bookshelves are filled with dog-eared romance and fantasy novels and dozens of pictures of Nadia and Colton and knickknacks and tchotchkes like dream catchers and tacky souvenirs from Elitch Gardens and Fun City, an invading army of tiny glass figurines.

Unicorns. Wizards. Dragons.

The figures glow in the Scentsy light and throw rainbows around the room, and Elise doesn't even know where to begin with all this . . . *death*.

Two parents killed within hours of each other. A missing girl. A motherless boy.

*They burned her. Someone took her eyes.*

These things don't happen in Limon. Things like this shouldn't happen anywhere, but they do, because horrible things happen all the time everywhere now. But this . . . *this* . . . is somehow different. And Elise knows it, feels it like a lodestone in her chest, even if she can't begin to explain it.

This is the *start* of something.

Something way out there in the cold dark beyond where she found Noah Brannen's body: something awful gathering speed, gaining momentum. A warning, too, that whatever this is, it's likely to get worse before it's over.

Maybe a whole lot worse.

Elise Blue holsters her useless gun and wonders what the hell is going on.

*Los Angeles Nights*

September 10, 2013

Popular Culture

**The Third Eye: How One Cult Is Using YouTube for Recruitment**

**You can now be recruited in the comfort of your own home**

**By Casper John Galloway**

**Los Angeles, California**

**Photos via YouTube**

**This article was originally published in LA Nights and Deadline**

**In March 2012, Thomas Luray disappeared.**

**According to his wife, Heather Luray, he'd become fascinated with AXL, a popular transcendental self-improvement movement and multilevel marketing scheme started in Los Angeles and headquartered in New Mexico.**

**Its most recent real presence is on the internet, particularly Facebook, where it maintains numerous pages under the old AXL moniker, as well as its newest incarnation: the Ark of Lazarus.**

**In whispers, they call themselves the Flock.**

**The Flock maintains an Ark of Lazarus website that has a YouTube subscriber count of more than 10,000. According to its landing page, the group's archived videos have been viewed more than a million times.**

**"He was just lost," said Heather. "After his position was downsized, he was spending**

hours on the computer. Political stuff and then day-trading and then internet poker and then . . . this.”

“This” is a slickly shot video featuring an older man named Etan Laure and two young blonde women, Rebecca Ross-Laure and Sybilla Ross-Laure. They stand in the desert, night descending, before a rustic barn draped in decorative tea lights.

All three wear pendants that gleam in the light: small bird wings.

With the sound down, the whole setup might be a music video, music you might hear plinking away in a coffee shop, or even a commercial for an HGTV show.

The illusion is quickly dispelled when you *listen* to the trio.

“It’s okay to wonder,” blonde Rebecca says, her voice barely above a whisper, “whether any of this is right for you. What we share, what we offer, isn’t for everyone.”

“Because we don’t offer comfort or routine or familiarity,” intones the other, younger blonde, Sybilla. “We’re going to take you outside your comfort zone because that’s what Ascension requires. Where the *You* you’ve always known ends is where true change begins.”

They are joined by Laure, whom both women refer to as *Eleazar*. “Each Circle rising toward Ascension takes sacrifice, courage and commitment,” he says with the ring of the Ten Commandments. “Can you bear those sacrifices? Do you have that courage? Will you honor your commitments?”

It's undeniably intriguing, if not more than a little creepy.

But what makes it truly so powerful is how maddeningly vague and cryptic it all is.

"It was like a challenge," Heather said. "They dared him. And once he responded, other members started emailing him, Skyping him. He felt special, important, because he knew all this stuff no one else did. And it was all there on the internet, where he could watch these videos or get in the chat groups. There was always someone to talk to. He couldn't stop. They wouldn't let him."

Inglewood detective Steve Jaffey investigated Thomas's disappearance, a mystery with an easy answer.

"He's out there in New Mexico with those . . . people. He calls himself Chavin now, but he hasn't broken any laws. I can't drag him back. It's hard to believe he won't talk to his wife, his kids, but this thing has a hold on him. It won't let him go."

Inglewood PD doesn't have a full cybercrime unit, but Det. Jaffey believes the internet is fertile ground not only for pedophiles and drug traffickers, but also for harder-to-classify—and equally dangerous—groups like the Ark of Lazarus, who can skirt scrutiny and accountability and are far more likely to recruit now via that medium than in person.

"Look how many people they can reach with these videos. Their secret little chat rooms. They hide behind the anonymity of their screens and say whatever they want."

Det. Jaffey's concerns are not misplaced. According to many experts, charismatic prophets like Eleazar, who operate outside traditional denominations, will soon make up one of the fastest-growing subsets of religion in the United States.

"There are so-called prophets and apostles all over YouTube," said Det. Jaffey, who is old enough to remember Charles Manson and Linette Alice "Squeaky" Fromme. "Sure, it seems silly, all fun and games, until it isn't anymore. It'll take someone getting hurt before we look back and realize how serious it all was."

But it's already not fun and games to Heather Luray.

It's deadly serious.

"I tried to call him the other day," she said. "But he didn't answer. It was one of those women from the video, I think. They've taken his phone, but not before they emptied our bank accounts. I told her I didn't care about the money but to let him know we missed him and wanted him home. She told me he is home."

Heather Luray tried to hide her tears. "She told me he's where he was always meant to be."

## 24

The moment is in my hands, heavy as the cocked Colt I've pulled from the floorboard, now lit by the glow of the approaching police car.

Dallas waits for me to tell him what to do, to give him a *sign*, and I feel this moment, alive, so full of possibility, like—

*The beating heart of a starling.*

Bert the Beagle in my arms. Rennie's hand in mine. Noah's kisses between my eyes.

I'm feathering the trigger with a shaking finger. I can yell at Dallas to floor it, drive like a bat out of hell. Or tell him instead to slow down, pull over, stop.

Beg him to put the shotgun away and then drop my own gun back to the floorboard between my feet.

I hold life and death in my hands, and infinite possibilities spin outward like Etan's ley lines: every choice I have, every future imaginable. All meaningless in two days if I'm right . . . but irreparable, irrevocable . . . if I'm wrong.

Before Noah, when it was just Rennie and me, maybe this wouldn't have been a choice at all. But this choice isn't just Sybilla Ross-Laure's anymore; it's Sarah *Brannen's*, too, and Noah never wanted to believe his wife was a killer, a murderer.

And despite the horror of the last two hours, my desperate need to get to Rennie and that old fear that's finally threatening to swallow me whole, right now—*this moment*—I'm not ready to give up on his faith in me.

His faith in *us*.

Noah's faith was always stronger than my fear.

When I close my eyes, I can almost *feel* him right here next to me, his innate light, his shimmering aura, his heartbeats against mine—



*Onetwothreefourfivesixseven.*

Etan believed that, as Ascension approached, we might see the souls of all those we'd loved and lost, a flock of spiritual psychopomps he called *anima-rising* harbingers of Ascension, guides to the other side and the World to Come.

Lights to lead us home.

And I so badly want to go home.

But when I open my eyes again, Noah's not here, not yet. It's just me, alone . . . and this moment in *my* hands.

I decock the Colt and put it back in the floorboard and push it deeper underneath the seat. I slide the shotgun from Dallas's lap and lose it in the darkness in the seat behind us, covering it with the towel it was wrapped in.

Then I tell him to slow down, pull over.

Stop.

Dallas glides over to the shoulder.

He grips the wheel tight, big knuckles white, as those red and blue lights flash brighter and brighter in the rearview mirror. They fill the truck's rear window, illuminating us.

I lean my head back and wait for it to be over as the car chasing us chews up the highway, eating up the last thirty or forty yards, the scream of its sirens catching up to those racing lights.

It grows loud, a high-pitched wail, and then . . . *then* . . . echoes right past us.

Receding.

Dallas says something under his breath, a surprised curse, as the Colorado State Patrol cruiser barrels past us and into the night.

We both watch it go by, get small, until it only glitters in the distance.

Dallas turns to me and says, "Guess it is a sign."

And I don't know whether to laugh or scream or cry. But I do feel the fever breaking as I sit in the cooling truck, snow twirling in our headlights. I've been wild, desperate, in shock. But racing wildly across the country with Dallas the Ghost Rider, chasing my daughter and those who took her, babbling about the End of the World?

That's the definition of insanity.

Dallas is right: it is a sign. A sign we need to turn around and go back. That I need to let the authorities handle this. That I need to bury and grieve my husband. I'm not that scared teenager back in New Mexico anymore . . . I'm the woman Noah married and tried so goddamn hard to love.

"I'm so sorry," I start. "This isn't right, this isn't what—"

And then something hits the windshield.

Dallas ducks, cursing again, thinking we're being shot at. I jump in my seat, too, startled, reaching for the gun I just put down.

Something hits the windshield again.

Again.

*Again.*

Now the hood.

And then the roof above us.

# 25

We get out into the snowy dark as small objects drop from the sky.

They fall lifelessly, striking the ground, the truck.

*Birds.*

One after another. Dozens of them. Hundreds.

Dallas turns his face skyward, watching them tumble and turn, arms outstretched, as if he can catch them all.

I reach for one crushed against the windshield, its tiny body broke, bruised, and battered. I cup it gently in my hands and kneel by our headlights, where it steams in the glow.

A starling bleeding from its beak and eyes when it fell.

More than that, its eyes are *gone* . . . bloody pinpoint holes where they used to be.

The warmth of my hands won't bring it back to life, nothing will, as more and more fall all around me.

Like the snow itself. Like ashes.

The soft silk of feathers against my fingers . . . *like Noah's beard.*

Bloody, blind birds, silently plummeting from the sky.

II

SHINE A LITTLE LIGHT

**FBI REPORT OF INVESTIGATION**

**DATED: June 15, 2013, RE: OPERATION SANCTUARY**

**Undercover (UC) report by Special Agent (SA)  
E. A. Morales**

**Reviewed by Senior Supervisory Agent (SSA) D. Coats**

- (1) On June 13, 2013, at approximately 10:35 a.m., acting in an undercover (UC) capacity, I initiated primary surveillance on the Ark of Lazarus (AoL) compound at Jornada del Muerto.**
- (2) Under the guise of surveying for a new irrigation system/project near Engle (see notes), I maintained an unobstructed westerly view of the compound, to include the main residence (the "Big House"), the windmill and solar farm, three (3) external Winnebago-style trailers, the smaller house often referred to as the "Lodge," as well as a fenced barn (see also ROI by SA C. Modell).**
- (3) At approximately 11:45 a.m., I was approached on foot by a white male, approximately 6'2, heavily bearded, later identified as ETAN LAURE, dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, and a black button-down shirt. He was accompanied by two (2) white females; a young blonde woman in a green dress, later identified as SKYLER OHLIN, aka REBECCA ROSS-LAURE (hereafter RL), and a blonde sibling, also in a green dress, later identified as SYBILLA ROSS, aka SYBILLA ROSS-LAURE (hereafter SL).**
- (4) LAURE introduced himself as "ETAN" and the two females as "REBECCA" and "SYBILLA." He was interested in my identity and the nature of the irrigation project.**
- (5) I identified myself and we exchanged pleasantries. Both RL and SL stood apart, mainly silent.**
- (6) I observed RL take a picture of me with an iPhone.**
- (7) LAURE asked my age, and I stated that I was 22, that I was a student at New Mexico State University (NMSU), and**

that I had been employed for the summer by ARCOS HYDRO.

- (8) LAURE asked me questions about both ARCOS HYDRO (see backstop UC reports) and NMSU. As he spoke, he moved closer to me, inspecting my survey equipment.
- (9) I found LAURE to be an intimidating presence, but not overtly threatening.
- (10) LAURE stated he was once a “lifestyle design entrepreneur,” until discovering the real meaning of life out here in the desert. He asked me if I knew anything about the Bible, or the Book of Enoch (see SANCTUARY briefing material), and I said that I hadn’t been a “good Catholic” in a long time, much to my mother’s distress.
- (11) He laughed and asked about my mother, and I said she had passed away two years earlier. He wanted to know if I had “processed” that, and I said I didn’t understand the question, but she was an amazing woman, a wonderful mother who’d sacrificed a lot for me.
- (12) He asked me about the nature of sacrifice, and if I thought she was in a “better place” now.
- (13) I told him I’d never thought about it.
- (14) LAURE asked me if I’d ever heard of AXL, or the Ark of Lazarus, and I stated I had not. He pulled out a small, circular pendant from under his shirt, a bird stretched over the letters AXL, and held it up to the sunlight. I noted both RL and SL were wearing similar ones.
- (15) LAURE stated that the Ark was a “fellowship community,” with members from all over the world. He stated they were interested in environmental awareness, sustainable growth, and socio-economic injustice.
- (16) I observed that LAURE carried three (3) iPhones. He appeared to be unarmed.
- (17) As we spoke, another white male approached, approximately 5’6, with a closely shaved head and thick

beard, later identified as CONNOR WHALEY, aka ABEL (hereafter referred to as WHALEY). WHALEY indicated that "Eleazar's" presence was needed back "at the Ark," and LAURE shook my hand. I understood this to mean LAURE was ELEAZAR. LAURE suggested I join an "open door dinner."

- (18) LAURE admitted there might be "something like praying here and there" but they weren't "selling salvation or anything like that." The Ark was just like-minded folks who cared about the world and what we were doing to it. Or more importantly, what we could do *about* it.
- (19) WHALEY stated loudly that RL and SL should "come along too." WHALEY reached for RL's arm, but she did not allow him to touch her.
- (20) I saw what appeared to be a semiautomatic handgun beneath WHALEY'S shirt.
- (21) RL asked me if I was staying up in Truth or Consequences or Elephant Butte or somewhere else. I stated that ARCOS HYDRO was renting a room in T or C but that I would be out at Jornada del Muerto every day for the next two weeks, working on the irrigation system.
- (22) RL stated that I should "definitely share a plate" with them. She stated I might even "learn something new."
- (23) SL, who had remained silent and apart during these exchanges, approached the fence line, indicating there "wasn't any water" there. She pointed instead west to where SA Modell remained hidden in the surveillance van and claimed that "was a much better place to look."
- (24) SL stated that "water was damn slippery, wasn't it?" That most of the time if you tried to catch it, "all you did was end up wet."
- (25) I told SL I hadn't thought of it that way, but that was "pretty funny."
- (26) RL called over to SL to "get her ass in gear," and SL laughed and told me that if I did come to supper, she'd

show me my future.

(27) I told SL I didn't believe in that "sort of stuff," and she told me, "You will."

(28) She stated, "I've seen you before," and I said I couldn't imagine how that was possible.

(29) SL stated she had dreamed about me. That she dreamed of many things, some of which ended up real, and some not.

(30) SL reached out and touched my arm and said, "But you seem real enough to me." She then slipped one of those bird pendants into my hand.

(31) SL then smiled knowingly and walked away.



Eladio runs in the dark.

He's gotten used to doing this every morning before the sun rises. Before it gets too hot.

He's learned the hard way that if he starts his runs any later than this, rising heat off the Texas asphalt will almost choke him, make it hard to breathe. Like a hand around his throat. His heart.

That choking feeling reminds him of a long-ago New Mexico fire, and he doesn't want to remember that, even though the black pall of real smoke has been harder to escape now, with all the fires burning out West. So, he runs early, when it's still cool and effortless and black, before dawn turns on the bright lights.

*Before it gets too hot.*

When stars still crown the sky, and he has the road all to himself.

He averages six-minute miles—twenty seconds or so worse than his Quantico days—but he's not as young as he was back then. Stronger in some ways, but weaker in so many others, like a watch winding down, losing a few seconds each year.

No matter how hard he pushes himself, how fast he goes, he knows he'll run out of time, eventually.

There are some things you just can't outrun.

You can't race the sun forever.



He circles back down toward home, Nike-clad feet hitting the pavement like heartbeats.

A roseate glow glimmers on his left, the first hints of the morning to come, and he checks his watch, digital numbers

burning green. The watch is the only tech he takes with him on these dawn runs. No cell phone, no earbuds. Just the sound of his own labored breathing and his shoes hitting the ground and the banging of his heart in his chest.

He likes the silence.

He's got court early, then a meeting about the Pally corruption case, and then dinner with Viv at six, if he decides to follow through. He and Viv are in a difficult place, tenuous. They've been tenuous for months . . . *winding down too* . . . another relationship that seemed so good at the start now running its natural course, running out of time.

They *all* start off good, and then he does that thing he does—or doesn't *do* anything at all—and lets them slip through his fingers.

He's had more than his fair share of Bureau-ordered therapy, so he's well aware of this self-defeating pattern. But when all is said and done, he likes being alone—

*He likes the silence.*

It's easy enough to pick up the pieces and move on, to keep running alone, even if he's only running in circles, going nowhere at all. His mama used to say, *Eres muy bueno haciendo planes, Lalo, pero no tan bueno tomando decisiones.*

Always so good at making plans but downright shitty at making choices or decisions, and *not* choosing is a choice he's content with.

He breathes deep, readying to push himself the last mile, to make up for lost time, and inhales smoke, cinders. It's those Four Horsemen fires, burning endlessly.

He then turns left like he always does, racing up Oakwood Lane, really leaning into it, and nearly gets run over.



Taking his turn too wide, he never saw the big vehicle, never even heard it.

Lost in thought, lost inside his own head, he never caught the crunch of its approaching tires or the growl of its big-block engine.

Thank God, he *felt* it, though, like a tap on his shoulder, like warm breath on his neck, allowing him to spin out of the way just as it rolls past, trailing dust.

He barely keeps his balance and gets only one fast look at a hazy, receding outline—

*A truck.*

It continues up Oakwood and then, with a single brake tap, makes a slow, almost predatory, turn onto Night Owl, *his* street. He watches it go and now understands why he never saw it to begin with. Its headlights are off.

He takes two shortcuts through some barberry and Texas redbud and approaches his house from the other direction, confirming what his gut's already yelling at him.

The truck's now idling in *his* driveway, waiting for him.

He didn't catch the license plate, has no idea where it's from or how many people might be loaded inside, but he's long worried a day like this might come, ever since the friends he has on the Bureau's cybersecurity and investigation teams started passing him updates four years ago: All the constant internet and dark web chatter and statistically significant search engine inquiries. The innuendo and threats.

He tells himself the constant threat of discovery is another reason he's always been so quick to run out on every relationship the minute it feels too safe or nice or comfortable.

Now he's trapped alone outside his home, where his cell phone, badge, creds, and most importantly, his *gun*, still sit on his nightstand, wearing nothing but a thin T-shirt, running shorts, and Nikes.

He can go to Javier's house two blocks over—Javi works for the Lubbock County Sheriff's Office—and he's probably awake even at this hour. Or he can make the five-mile sprint toward the freeway and the Shipley's Donuts and Valero gas

station. Both will be lighted up, open for business, and he can call for backup from there.

But while he's deciding, two figures exit the mystery truck.

The driver's *big*, even at a distance, even in the predawn gloom. Bigger than you'd want to tangle with in the best of circumstances, and these aren't those. Even if the man wasn't armed, which he appears to be.

The big man moves cautiously toward the house, circling it, casing it, a shotgun at low ready, graceful for a guy so large. Like he's done this before.

At least the passenger is quite a bit smaller, face hidden by a baseball cap, standing uncertainly by the truck's open door. Little more than a shadow, there's still something all too familiar about the way that shadow just stands there, waiting, hand on—

*A weathered barn door, desert wind and sun playing havoc with her blonde hair, as she smiles at him, and feathers fall all around.*

A smoky breeze catches dark hair spilling out from underneath the baseball cap, and although the color's unexpected, he *knows* it's her.

Another day he's long been worried might come is finally here, and it smells again like smoke, like embers.

He walks up slow, hands up. Way, way up.

The big guy sees him first and stops him in the street with the sawed-down shotgun. "Hold up there, amigo," he says casually. "Take 'er easy, nice and slow."

Eladio does, and at the sound of the big guy's booming voice, the woman turns to face him, and there's an audible gasp, like she's been holding her breath for a long, long time.

Ten years.

"It's okay," she says to the guy with the shotgun. "We're okay."

She approaches but doesn't reach for him, doesn't touch him. Thankfully, she doesn't shoot him, either, now that he sees she has a gun, too, pointed at the spot where his heart beats beneath his T-shirt.

"So," she asks, her voice cracking under the weight of all the years, "what do I call you now? Aaron? Or Eladio?"

The gun doesn't move, doesn't waver, but he puts his hands down anyway.

If Billie Laure was going to shoot him, she wouldn't be asking at all.

He shakes his head and says, "How about Special Agent Morales?"

Officers Askew and Alvarez located the Brannens' abandoned Dodge Journey in the Dollar General lot, the last place they thought to look.

It was just sitting there unlocked, keys inside, and Elise wasn't sure what to make of that. Was it some subtle message or a cry for help? Or just an *adios* and *fuck you*.

It didn't matter; Sarah and Renata Brannen weren't with the car. Like Nadia Rupert's eyes, they were gone without a trace.

The only thing they did recover was a knife hidden beneath the driver's seat.



Elise now sits in her living room in a predawn gloom and drinks a glass of Colterris, the first in a good long while.

Going on nearly forty-eight hours straight, every attempt to close her eyes on her own brings up images of Noah's open and dead ones, or the black and horrible burned holes where Nadia's used to be.

Every hour is one more hour Renata Brannen is missing.

Elise has stayed in constant contact with Lt. Feehan at CBI, making herself frankly a pain in the ass, couching her continued interest in the Brannen killing and disappearance in terms of the Nadia Rupert torture and murder, arguing the two cases are—obviously—linked. But when the lieutenant finally decides to fold them together, as she knows he will, she'll just as easily turn around and argue those links are mere conjecture.

She's doing whatever she can to stay on the case, to stay on Sarah Brannen's trail.

Despite the discovery of a knife that could've been used in either crime, there's still no investigative consensus about

the woman, no firm theory on whether she's the perpetrator or victim . . . or somehow both. Elise herself isn't entirely sure Sarah Brannen killed Noah or Nadia, but she's sure enough they're dead *because* of her.

Like she's sure now that Sarah Brannen *is* Sybilla Laure, just as Nadia Rupert was no doubt sure of it.

Tucked away in Nadia's closet, behind camisoles and T-shirts with cartoon characters and band logos, was a collection of books and pamphlets and Blu-rays. Not only the *Fires at Dawn* series, but far more esoteric titles—chat transcripts and printed web pages too—all related to the Ark of Lazarus cult . . . and Sybilla Laure.

Sifting through it all laid bare a cottage industry that's sprung up around them both, peddled by revisionist historians and conspiracy theorists and apologists. A dark blooming garden of new believers calling themselves *New Lazarians*, a New Age movement or group trading on the old Ark of Lazarus infamy.

They'll still need to do a deep dive on Nadia's actual computer and cell phone, if either is ever found, but Elise figures they'll just discover more of the same. Nadia Rupert not only seemed to believe her coworker was Sybilla Laure but was equally fascinated by the Ark of Lazarus itself.

Elise, too, has spent the last hour down an internet rabbit hole, following up every reference and lead about this Sybilla woman and the Ark, about this mysterious NL movement.

It's been unnerving, a peek through the looking glass, that always, *always*, somehow ends with the End of the World. Denny would call it doomscrolling, which is easy enough to do when the world truly feels awful sometimes.

And another reason Elise needs the wine now: to wash away the bad taste, that tang of ominous foreboding. It's not hard to imagine how someone all alone, someone disconnected or lost—someone who's simply *searching*—might find all this appealing. How a secret world that only a few are privy to might make more sense than the real one.

When Denny was around fourteen, he got heavily into one of his console games, an online world shared by millions of players. For a while, it was as real to him as Limon, maybe *more* real, and a lot more interesting. He was struggling in school, didn't have a girlfriend or even a close group of male friends, and although Elise and his dad were still together, the cracks and fissures were already showing.

The game was called *Siege Perilous*.

Denny would disappear for hours on end into its electronic caves and castles. There was always some new quest, a fresh mystery to solve, a secret path to discover. A whole community of seekers just like Denny, sometimes working together but mostly at odds; yet they were always *moving* in tandem, whether they realized it or not.

Deeper and deeper into the game, further and further afield.

It seemed to her that Denny was forever searching for the heart of this mythological world, but of course, that *was* the ultimate mystery, the real secret. There was no *end*.

It was all just so . . . *endless* . . . and that was the whole point.

And no different from all the Ark of Lazarus conspiracies Elise has stumbled onto, all so endless too. That's how it works, how it succeeds and survives, drawing you deeper and deeper, promising mysteries with no true answers and a salvation that never occurs.

Years after the Ark of Lazarus burned down in New Mexico, it lives on, if only in the minds of those who still believe in it.

Denny eventually pushed away from *Siege Perilous*, although not before "losing" a whole year to that game. Even then, Elise worried her son had forever lost a small part of himself there, a part that still needed to believe in magic and mysteries. Later, after Denny's dad up and left them both, she lost a part of herself too.



She wasn't there when her son needed her most and saw a counselor for a while over it, something she probably should have done much earlier, but Denny adamantly refused, and she never found much comfort in the young therapist's push for accountability and introspection, all her hard, heavy questions.

Elise stares deep into the dark-purple malbec in her glass as if there might be answers hidden there now, all these years later.

If there has been any one constant in all of Elise's late-night research, it's Dr. Deborah Fallon, Sybilla Laure's own court-appointed therapist. The doctor's name comes up again and again, some sort of cult expert, or at least an expert on Sybilla Laure.

Nadia owned several different editions of the woman's books.

Elise took one of the tattered paperbacks from her trailer, and it now sits facedown next to her laptop, Dr. Fallon's author photo staring at her. In the undated picture, the woman is not as old as Elise might've imagined. She's young, slim, pretty, almost patrician. She reminds Elise, not unflatteringly, of Denny's Lori. And weirdly enough, Sybilla Laure too.

Dr. Fallon still lives in New Mexico, outside Santa Fe. She doesn't maintain an active practice anymore but still does some consulting, hosts conferences, that sort of thing.

Nadia had a laminated badge from one in her closet.

*Did Sybilla know that Nadia had discovered her? Is it something they shared at the Dollar General? If not, is it the sort of secret Sybilla would kill to keep?*

Still far too many questions, too many mysteries, but figuring out how Sybilla and Nadia are connected, uncovering what each woman knew about the other, is crucial to understanding what happened overnight.

Those mysteries likely hold the secret of Renata Brannen's disappearance.



Elise is about to pour herself another glass of wine, hopefully the last one she'll need before crawling into bed for a fitful hour or so, when Grant shows up at her door with a coffee tray from the Loaf 'N Jug in one hand and two file folders in the other.

When she lets him in, shaking off the cold and fresh snow, he looks around her dim living room, spying the open laptop and the Fallon book and the nearly empty bottle of wine.

He looks like he wants to comment on the bottle but doesn't. "They told me you were knocking off for a bit" is all he says.

"Trying to knock myself out," she answers, raising the Colterris.

He puts the coffees down and places the files on top of her open laptop. He's wearing fresh clothes, smells like evergreen shower soap. "I finished up Noah Brannen's autopsy and knocked off myself for an hour." Elise can't remember the last time Grant pulled an all-nighter in the morgue. In fact, she can't remember the last time a case kept her up and out all night either. "I went by the department first thing to check in with you before I start on Nadia Rupert." He nods at the top folder. "It's all there. The same report I gave to CBI."

"Did you talk to Feehan?"

Grant blinks, slow. Too slow. "Some, not much."

Maybe it's just all the conspiracy nonsense she's been up reading, but Elise wonders if Feehan might be sharing more of the CBI investigation with Grant than with her, or vice versa.

"Time of death?"

Grant says, "Two hours, give or take."

"We weren't far behind them."

"No . . . and *them* is looking more right by the hour." Grant pulls loose the second folder, thicker by an inch. "Officer Askew had this for you. I told him I'd bring it by."

She takes it and flips back and forth through it, searching for a connection to Nadia or the Brannens. "It's an NCIC

printout for some guy named Randall Travis McGee.”

“Yes,” Grant says, “but look close. Closer.”

Elise zeroes in on a gray scale photo, finally recognizing him. “He’s bigger now, older.”

Grant smiles. “Aren’t we all? He works over at Zippo’s, and was working last night, at least until nine thirty or so, when he abandoned the store in a rush and pulled the security camera footage on his way out the door. *All* the footage.”

Elise had Askew and Alvarez swing by Zippo’s, and it looks like it paid dividends.

“That’s within our two-hour window,” she says, “give or take.”

“Give or take,” Grant agrees.

“Does our young lieutenant know about this?”

“No, not yet, but he will.”

Elise fans out Randall Travis McGee’s lengthy criminal history, and it covers her coffee table.

“Jesus,” she says, scanning page after page.

“Yes,” Grant says, “it’s . . . colorful, to say the least. According to Officer Askew, McGee is better known around here as *Dallas* . . .”

*How about Special Agent Morales?*

When he says it like that, I almost shoot him then and there, or ask Dallas to shoot him. Instead, I ask *Special Agent Morales* if there's a wife or girlfriend in his tidy little house on the corner.

A family. A child.

When he tells me no, there's no one, no one at all, I tell him we need to get inside.



In his living room, lights on, Special Agent Morales . . . *Aaron* . . . looks the same to me. Older, sure, as am I, but it's still *him*, thin, mostly angles, hair still vibrant and dark. Eyes just as dark and piercing.

He's confused by my own jet-black hair and stares at it like he can't reconcile it with the girl he once knew, or the woman still pointing a gun at him.

But if he's nervous or curious or furious about my sudden appearance, about Dallas the Ghost Rider or any of this, he doesn't show it. So far, the only thing he's asked about is Rennie—

*Where's Renata, Billie? Where's your daughter?*

Otherwise, he sits calmly on the couch and stares at me as if he can't believe I'm here while Dallas checks the house room by room.

He blinks me away as if I'm some sort of ghost, and maybe I am.

Just another soul haunting him, like all those that haunt me.



Dallas appears from a bedroom with Agent Morales's duty weapon and empties the chamber and drops the mag and slips the gun into the back of his jeans before trekking to the kitchen for what proves to be a couple of cold beers.

After he returns, planting himself on a chair opposite Agent Morales and offering him one (he shakes his head no), Dallas cracks both for himself.

SA Morales didn't drink at the Ark. None of us did, except for the occasional sacramental wine, or when Etan slipped something in the Big House for me. After our overnight trek, it's not lost on me that Dallas might have a drinking problem, but if so, he's one of those functioning alcoholics. Long as he's drinking, he's functioning fine, and it's no problem at all.

He finishes off the first beer without pausing for a breath.

"You found me," Agent Morales finally says.

"Yes," I answer. "It wasn't easy."

"It wasn't supposed to be," he replies, and although the words aren't aimed at me, not necessarily about me, they still sting.

"Did you ever look for me?" I ask.

He stares at the shadowed ceiling, like an answer might be up there, somewhere. "The truth? No, Billie, I didn't. And, really, why? What would've been the point?"

"Curiosity?"

"Or concern?" he asks without a hint of any. "I knew you could take care of yourself. You always have. I wasn't worried about you."

"What about the Ark?"

He shakes his head. "What about it? There is no Ark. Not anymore."

He checks the ceiling again. After him not being able to take his eyes off me, I don't think he can look at me now. "I'm in public corruption," he continues, crossing his arms,

revealing a hint of a tattoo on his left triceps. I can't see it clearly, but he never had a tattoo at Jornada del Muerto. "I know that old Ark stuff still holds some sort of weird fascination for a few outliers, the real dead enders. I've seen some of the reporting. Minor stuff, mostly. Off the grid. They're not much of a threat."

I know then that he's lying. He's seen most, if not all, the reporting. "Not much of a threat?" I make him look at me. "We never were either."

"We?" he asks. "*We?* You disavowed the Ark. I read that in *People*, or Deb Fallon laid it out in one of those books she wrote about you. Or maybe it came up in one of the civil trials . . . or that awful fucking miniseries. You left it all behind, remember?" Now he does look right at me, or right through me. "According to you, *I* was the goddamn threat."

There's heat, friction, between each word he's carefully, painfully, articulating.

"Well, it didn't leave *me* fucking behind," I fire back. "Not me. And not Rennie. I'm the girl who walked out of the flames. I have magic powers."

He laughs. "Sure, once upon a time," he says. "Or so I wanted to believe." His eyes finally find mine, pin me down. "But it was all bullshit, Billie. Smoke and mirrors."

"Now *that* sounds like a line from one of Deb's books."

"But that doesn't make it wrong . . . or any less true. Because *none* of it was real."

"What about us?" I ask. "Were we real?"

The question smolders there, threatening to ignite what little trust remains from our frenzied, final moments together at the Ark.

He leans forward. "There is no *us* either. Not anymore." Then sits back. "There never was."

Dallas hasn't said a thing, but he reads those last, stark words as a signal . . . *a sign* . . . and finishes off the second beer and sets it carefully on the coffee table. Hefting the

shotgun, he stands to walk Agent Morales out, but I stop him with a look: I'm not done yet.

"Those outliers," I say, "those dead enders you don't think are any kind of threat, showed up at *my* house last night. They found *me*, the way I found you. And trust me, I was doing a hell of a lot better job lying low."

"Then you need to—"

"I'm married . . . *was* married. To a good, good man. But they found us and killed him and left his body for me to find. They *murdered* my husband . . . and they took Rennie."

It's not lost on me that Rennie's the only thing Agent Morales has expressed any concern about since I appeared.

*Where's Renata, Billie? Where's your daughter?*

Just her. Even though I'm the one sitting here in front of him, angry and anxious, with a strange shotgun-wielding man and a gun of my own.

"No, that's—"

"What, impossible? Unbelievable? No, it's all *too* real, Special Agent Morales, even if it hasn't shown up in one of your goddamn reports yet."

Agent Morales takes a deep breath, steeling himself. "There's nothing I can do," he says. "You need help, Billie. Serious fucking help, no doubt. But that's not me. Not now."

Now it's my turn to laugh. "Honestly, I *almost* knew better than to expect anything different. But I didn't come here to drag up our past."

"Then why come at all?" he asks. "Because the past is all we are."

"To *warn* you," I say. "Because you might be the only person who'll understand."

I put my gun down on the coffee table next to Dallas's empty beer can and spin the grip so it's facing Agent Morales. He can grab it freely if he wants to.

Then I turn to Dallas and say, "Show him."

# **AUGUST 2016 DAR CHART**

**DR. DEBORAH C. FALLON**

**CASE #4523**

**SYBILLA ROSS-LAURE**

**AGE: 19**

**D: Subjective and objective data about the client.**

**A: Intervention, assessment—working hypothesis, gut hunches.**

**R: Response or revision—what you're going to do about it.**

08/10/16 (D) Met with Sybilla for one-hour session. Sybilla reported she's sleeping less and unable to concentrate, also struggling with Renata's care. Indicated she does not believe the Prozac is working. Says her dreams continue to be intense and specific, centering on family-of-origin. Claims her sister, Rebecca (Becca), visits her dreams. Also insists Becca and others did not perish in Ark conflagration, despite proof otherwise. Sybilla described several manic episodes, burning herself twice by holding a match to her hand; other self-injury/mutilation, including cutting. Given the burn marks she still carries from the Ark fire, as well as her prior self-flagellation and punishment scars, I am not surprised by this tendency. For the first time in a month, I did not ask questions relative to the current whereabouts of Aaron. (A) There is an ongoing thematic focus on sister. Survivor guilt? Regret? Sybilla's depression, self-injury, and manic episodes continue to be troubling. *Does she want to get better?* (R)



Need to probe emotional reactions re: Becca, specifically.  
Updated Prozac dosage. Examined Zyprexa regimen.

08/17/16 (D) Met Sybilla for one-hour session, but it was cut short when she left in anger, prompted by questions about day of Ark fire itself, although intention was to talk only about sibling relationship/rivalry. However, Sybilla was already agitated on arrival, dissatisfied at current living arrangement. She and Renata have been placed in a monitored residential apartment for battered women, and Sybilla believes one or more residents are selling pictures and information about her. (A) Sybilla experienced similar agitation in July of this year to widespread news coverage of the disappearance of a Japanese airliner. Sybilla's anger stems from deprogramming and reassessment of her adolescent worldview. Her Ark beliefs have always been a safe harbor, a ritualization to take comfort in, no matter how destructive they were. Although the tenets that once circumscribed her life do not accurately reflect her world now, efforts to point out inconsistencies threaten her psyche and call into question everything she's ever known, further complicated by a classical love/hate relationship with the most powerful role model in her life, Etan Laure, who was both father figure and proxy husband. Arguably, this love/hate dynamic extends to Becca as well, who often acted as Sybilla's proxy mother, given the emotional absence of Marin/Adah. Becca being one of Etan's "brides"—an *Exalted*—adds a layer of emotional trauma. (R) Was unable to discuss new Prozac dosage or Zyprexa. Made call to NM CYFD for new residential placement and again offered additional accommodations, as necessary. Gave Sybilla HW: asked her to continue journaling (See June 12, 2015, ongoing HW) and make a list of ten words that describe her relationship with her sister. Ten words also that describe herself now.

08/24/16 (D) Met Sybilla for one-hour session, which again was cut short. She arrived calm and responsive. Thanked me for call to CYFD and indicated her new placement is

underway. She also requested the court that she be allowed to continue her remote classes at CNM, another initiative I have supported. She said Renata has been sleeping through the night, and that she's discovered a cocktail of Ambien and tequila that helps her do the same. She wanted to talk about the acts of Dispossession, Disassociation, and Disintegration that presage failure to Ascend. Before end of session, I asked about her two HW assignments, and she produced instead a single hand-drawn sketch of a starling from her journal. She set it aflame with a lighter and tossed it in my trash can. (A)

Sybilla continues to challenge authority. Her admission to drinking tequila was either to gauge my reaction or test the limits of our relationship; she's fully aware that any active alcohol use will get her removed from CYFD housing.

Abandonment and trust issues manifest in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. She still sees patterns and signs everywhere, everything "circles" back to the Ark, which is only natural at this early stage of treatment and recovery. A year later, the memories are still too vivid, raw, and painful.

(R) Have opened a second case file (FOURTH DAY) related to Ark mythology as relayed by Sybilla. There are so many inconsistencies, although it is difficult to determine if those inconsistencies are due to Laure's loosening grip on reality, Sybilla's own faulty prepubescent memories, or willful disassembling. *Why is Sybilla still willing to lie now?* She's been remarkably open and candid, even when her representations of her life at the Ark and her role in its demise are self-serving. Are there more painful or even embarrassing memories? *Is she telling me the truth?* Will segregate in FOURTH DAY.

08/31/16 (D) Sybilla did not report for her session. (R)  
Notified court.

09/07/16 (D) Sybilla did not report for her session. (R)  
Notified court.

09/14/16 (D) Met with Sybilla for one-hour session. She apologized for missing prior appointments and understands that our sessions are mandated by her supervised release

and critical to maintaining custody of her daughter. She was polite, remorseful, and introspective. When asked what triggered her absences, she said she had received a phone call from Aaron. She did not wish to report the call to his superiors at the FBI or local authorities here. She did not want to divulge the call. For most of the session, she stared out the window and cried. (A) Aaron's call troubled Sybilla and is likely to be another fresh setback in her recovery. Her journaling continues to be erratic, some of the expected musings of a preadult and young mother; most of its notations of so-called "signs" and "auguries" she's observed in the media; hand-drawn images and ideograms one might only describe as "apocalyptic"; and finally, numerous beautiful sketches of birds in flight. (R) Gave Sybilla HW: asked her to make a list of five words that describe her feelings toward the FBI Special Agent she knew for more than a year as AARON. . . .

Randall Travis McGee, a.k.a. *Dallas*, has an extensive, colorful criminal history.

In Elise's cop parlance, he's a bad, bad man.

He started early and often, and there's probably an equally thick juvenile file under seal somewhere. B&E. Assault. Aggravated assault. Assault with a deadly weapon. Terroristic threats. Public intoxication.

A decorated vet, he was in Desert Storm, and after the war became a one percenter, a patched member of the Washington State Ghost Riders.

He did five years in Lompoc for his part in a federal RICO drug conspiracy, and then a bomb plot—McGee was the bomb *maker*—sent him back for two more.

He caught another eight-year stint at Washington State Penitentiary, Walla Walla, for a double homicide. He was convicted of abuse of a corpse, tampering with evidence, and a handful of firearms violations. One of his codefendants, Anthony "A-Train" DeNuzzo, ended up on death row. A-Train and two other unidentified trigger men—one likely McGee, but never proved—shot a rival Bandido six times, loaded the body into the trunk of a car, and dumped it on a roadside two counties away.

In between prison tours, McGee was married twice and had one daughter. Her name was Sally Sunshine Monroe, and she died from a heroin overdose in 2011.



Elise meets Grant at La Posta, where she doesn't order anything beyond a Diet Coke, and he sticks to a breakfast burrito.

They grab a table by one of the big windows that look out onto Main Street. Across the way is the K&S Motel and the

Midwest County Inn, both a few miles down from the trailer park where she discovered eyeless Nadia Rupert.

It's still early and faint snow circles the pale streets, held aloft by the wind. It's also early in the season for this kind of snow, even for Colorado, but the weather's been off, unnatural, all year. There are twin hurricanes churning in the gulf, and the western fires—the Four Horsemen—have been burning for what feels like years now.

They say it's global warming, but Elise has been deep inside the pages of Fallon's book all morning; the Ark of Lazarus believed fire and rain were two signs of the apocalypse, as were falling birds and dead souls rising and black suns. The End of the World they called *Ascension*, and in their version, the World sure doesn't go quietly.

As Elise sips her soda, a big black SUV with CBI decals rolls past.

“What did you get out of McGee's apartment?” Grant asks between burrito bites.

“About what you would expect from an aging felon biker.”

“So, not much of a housekeeper?”

“No, not much,” she says. McGee's apartment had been dark, dusty, cluttered. The kind of clutter you can leave behind in a heartbeat, none of it valuable or personal or meaningful. A few strips of yellowed wall tape here and there to indicate old photos or magazine articles. An empty nightstand space where a framed photo might have once sat. Not even a TV.

The only book was a battered copy of the Alcoholics Anonymous *Big Book*. Elise flipped it open to discover the center pages had been cut out, revealing a space just big enough to hide a small-caliber handgun or lock-blade knife. A hidey-hole, like the freshly dug one they found in the earth and snow beneath Renata Brannen's play set.

Where Nadia Rupert's trailer smelled like Scentsy lavender and cream—the stannic tang, too, of blood and burnt hair—Randall Travis McGee's apartment smelled only like old

cigarettes and stale beer. Empty bottles and cans, fallen soldiers from whatever battles he was still fighting.

She doesn't tell Grant she had to fight just to get inside McGee's place, that she's losing her own little war to hold on to the Rupert case. It didn't exactly devolve into a shouting match with Feehan over the McGee warrant, but he made it clear she was close to the edge with him.

McGee, Rupert, and the Brannens are all somehow connected; it's just the *somehow* that's got everyone stumped. CBI's operating theory is that McGee and Sarah Brannen killed her husband and fled together with Renata.

The Brannens' Dodge Journey was left behind in the Dollar General lot, and McGee's Toyota Corolla—formerly registered to his daughter—was found parked near his apartment, although no one reasonably believes they walked out of Limon. However, Nadia Rupert's little beat-up Miata with all the bumper stickers was also still tucked in right next to her trailer, where her neighbors said she always parked it, dusted in last night's snow with a third of a tank of gas and a center console full of loose change, lip gloss, and pictures of Colton.

Even if Nadia was considered a legitimate third suspect in the Brannen home invasion, it's tough to make the timing work. The two women were at the Dollar General together in the hours before the attack, and then Nadia was with Jerry Harris *after* they closed for the night, corroborating her whereabouts.

It's only Sarah's—*Sybilla's*—movements between the Dollar General store and her 911 call that are still a mystery.

*Where did she go? Who was she with?*

McGee was at Zippo's that whole time; the few customers they've tracked down confirm it. So, how could all three of them meet up and kill Noah? And even if they did, why did the other two suddenly turn on Nadia?

*Why take her back to her trailer and take her eyes?*

Was it something she wasn't supposed to *see*? Something she was never supposed to know . . . like Sarah Brannen's real identity?

Then there's the matter of the broken glass they've discovered from the shot-out security lights at the Brannen house, and the security system itself: destroyed and, if Elise was a betting woman, likely wiped.

Whoever broke into the Brannen house and took Nadia's eyes tried to burn that scene in their wake, dousing Nadia with kerosene, and it was only either bad luck or a miracle that her body didn't go up and take the trailer or whole park with it, immolating what little evidence they do have from there.

"You should've rested earlier," Grant says, with an air of clinical diagnosis. He knows all too well that after he left her this morning, she continued researching the Ark of Lazarus, eschewing sleep. He hasn't bothered commenting on his second sighting of the Fallon book, sitting open and underlined at her elbow. "They'll find them soon enough. They stand out."

"I know," she says, crunching ice, the cold in her teeth sharp and bracing and welcome. A massive gray-haired biker and a woman and young girl *should* stand out, like the Brannens themselves should've stood out in a small town like Limon. But Elise has been racking her brain all morning, trying to remember them. Although they lived here only a handful of years, Elise must've passed Sarah Brannen on the street or at the store a dozen or a hundred times. Noah even did computer work for the county, including the Limon town council.

Their daughter wasn't enrolled in school, but papers at the house indicate she was taking local art lessons, which Elise plans to follow up on next.

Were the Brannens just that good at staying out of sight, or, after Denny's dad left, did Elise just stop *looking*?

*When did her hometown and the people in it become such strangers?*

Before coming to La Posta, she gave a brief statement to the media, but Lt. Feehan will handle most of the press from here on out. Once McGee is formally identified as a person of interest and it's put out that he and Sarah and Renata Brannen are possibly traveling together—once it's leaked or discovered that Sarah *might* be the infamous Sybilla Laure—the press will spin into overdrive.

Then they'll go off the rails.

So, Grant's right, the noose around the fugitive pair should tighten quick, maybe too quick, leaving Elise to wonder just how much of this was truly planned from the outset. Some of it seems very thought out, like the whole thing with Nadia's eyes and subsequent fire—that looked carefully scripted, almost *ritualistic*—but the rest of it, culminating in a frantic flight in the middle of the night?

No, not so much. Not at all.

*So, why now?*

What triggered all this sudden blood and violence?

*As Dr. Deborah Fallon might ask, What was the sign?*

More importantly, what does it mean?

“Let's say you really are Sybilla Laure,” she poses to Grant, “and you're on the run with your daughter and this character, Dallas. Where are you going?”

Grant looks out through the big glass windows at Limon, at morning shadows changing size and shape. His eyes are also sleepless hollows, and Elise senses he's equally distracted, worried. “I have no idea.”

Despite the hours she's just spent wandering through these people's homes and lives, neither does she. They remain strangers, too, riddles wrapped in mysteries.

But the smoke and stale beer of Dallas's place still cling to her, the way Nadia's burnt hair and blood and lavender Scentsy did earlier this morning. The way the snow falling on Noah drifted quietly over her late last night.



*Yes, they're strangers . . . but she knows them all the same.*

“There has to be someone who can point us in the right direction,” she says as she peels off a twenty for Grant’s breakfast and her soda. “I’m supposed to meet up with Marcus Ray now. He might be the last person to see Renata Brannen.” She can’t bring herself to—won’t let herself—say *alive*.

“What about Noah’s family?” Grant asks.

She folds the twenty beneath her plate. “Both parents are dead, and no other relatives we can find. All he had was *this* family, here in Limon.” Until last night, his whole world. “At least I didn’t have to make that call,” she says.

As she goes to scoop up the Fallon book, Grant puts his hand over hers. “When’s the last time you called Denny?”

It’s unusual, Grant asking anything about Denny. Although she and her only son aren’t officially estranged, Grant knows they’re not super close, either, and things have only gotten more delicate, awkward, since Denny’s dad sobered up and Denny and Lori moved nearby. Nearer to him than Elise.

“I tried first thing this morning,” she says, “before we hit McGee’s place. No luck.”

“Oh,” Grant says.

“He’s busy, I’m sure,” she adds, although she’d be lying if she said it didn’t bother her that Denny hasn’t called or texted her back yet, even if only to let her know he got her message and that he’s okay.

*Still, the young man in the snow could be Denny or a thousand others like him . . .*

It’s just these killings, this awful, goddamn case. It’s got a miasma like the spilled blood in Nadia’s or the old cigarettes in Dallas’s apartment. Like the smoke from the western fires that seems to cling to everything nowadays.

“When you’re done with Marcus, come by the office,” Grant says, and the way he says *office*, Elise knows he really

means the morgue. “I found something odd as I was wrapping up Nadia Rupert’s autopsy. Odd enough I went back to check on Noah Brannen, wondering if I’d missed it there.” Grant takes the Fallon book from her and flips through it, thumbing through the pages, like he’s stalling. “It’s not in the official ME report. Neither of them.”

“You didn’t share it with Lt. Feehan?” Elise asks, curious. “Why?”

Grant’s *always* been meticulous, professional, thorough, and law abiding.

“I did,” he says, suggesting to Elise the real question wasn’t whether he was planning on sharing what he found with Feehan, but her. And what may have changed his mind. “No one wants it leaked out yet; no one’s sure what it means. But you’re already invested, too invested it seems to me, so maybe it’ll mean something to you.”

Grant hands Fallon’s book back to her and says, “Maybe it’s a sign.”

I watch Agent Morales as he looks at the dead, eyeless starling in an old Amazon box.

He won't touch it. Just closes the lid and hands it back to Dallas.

I could've put five or ten just the same in the box, lined them up in a neat little funeral row, almost like headstones, but one was more than enough.

"I want to change clothes," he says, "and then let's talk, Billie. Just the two of us. Can we do that?"

"Okay," I agree as I take my box back from Dallas, and he heads out to the kitchen to grab himself a few more of the FBI agent's beers.



He's wearing dark jeans and a T-shirt now, the gun I gifted him casually slipped into the jeans near his hip.

He leans against a large gas grill that doesn't look like it's been used in a while, and in the dawn gloom, the whole backyard is untended, wild, a riotous tangle of Texas growth here and there amid dying, knotted grass.

The sky's lightening by the moment, a pale radiance that should soften the dead yard but does nothing to make it look better. There were flowers here, once. He's lived in this house for two years, but it might as well have been abandoned for a decade.

"Want to tell me about Dallas? How involved is he in this thing?"

"Not much. And not much to tell," I admit. "Call him a concerned citizen."

Agent Morales arches an eyebrow.

“I’m not searching for a father figure,” I say, “and I’m not screwing him, if that’s what you think. I told you, I was married.”

Agent Morales hesitates. Then, “I know.”

I pick at the leaves of something dry and sun scorched. “Do you?” I ask.

“I lost you a bit after Santa Fe, that last time we talked.”

“I went to Grand Junction for a year, then on to—”

“Denver,” he finishes for me. “That’s where I found you again. You married Noah James Brannen shortly thereafter but were already going by Sarah Truman by then, I think.”

“No, Sarah Post.”

Agent Morales shrugs, shakes his head. “How much did *he* know?”

“Noah? All of it. Everything. Right from the start.” And although Agent Morales was lying earlier about keeping tabs on me, I’m not lying about Noah now. Noah did know everything, at first. I only started keeping secrets later.

I swallow hard, fighting back tears. I’m not going to cry about Noah in front of Agent Morales.

“I trusted him,” I say. *And I killed him.* And although I can’t, won’t, say it out loud, he’s the only man I’d trusted since the man I knew as *Aaron*.

But Agent Morales’s look says it for us both. “That’s what I’d hoped,” he says. “You finally settling down. I was good with that.”

“You didn’t get a say. You didn’t want one.”

“I was happy for you all the same,” Agent Morales says. “I only ever wanted the best for you and Renata.”

I laugh, bitter and harsh. The words taste like salt, like fucking *ash*. “Well, I wanted you to hurt for a long, long time.”

Two lawsuits. A trial. Innumerable rumors leaked out to the media for years. I more than made my feelings clear. But

he never once countered the story everyone thought they knew, the one we both let grow and metastasize like cancer, blackening our lives. All these years gone by, and he never once breathed a bad word about me.

He looks around at his small empty house and dead yard. “And here I am.”

“You still have your career.”

“Bits and pieces, whatever you left for me.” And that’s as close as he’ll get to lashing out at me, and he doesn’t look comfortable even doing that. “Whatever the Ark didn’t take from me. The only reason I wasn’t fired, imprisoned, was to cover the Bureau. They needed my help burying a whole host of systemic failures, from the top all the way down.”

“So, you’re a coconspirator?”

He agrees with a shrug.

“You made that deal, willingly.”

“I did,” he says. “But don’t think I didn’t make it for us both.”

I want to remind him that was never *our* deal. I want to take him back to those days in the Mithraeum, that quiet sanctuary beneath the coops, where he held my hands and promised me a better life, promised to keep me and Renata safe.

That night in Engle, where I waited for him to make good on all those promises to take me away.

Fly me away.

But he never came, at least not until it was nearly too late.

“I’m an object lesson,” he says. “A case study they teach at Quantico. A graduate-level course on how *not* to compromise an expensive and extremely delicate undercover investigation.”

“Do you really want to compare awful lives? Do you really want to do that?”

He raises his arms, a plea, before letting them fall in frustration, or resignation. “No, Billie, I don’t. Like I don’t want to rehash the past and spar with you over things we can’t change. Like I don’t want to look at your dead bird in a box.” He shakes his head. “But I do want to know about Renata. I *need* to know what’s happened to her and why you’re here.”

“I told you. I *showed* you. The birds . . . you know what this means—”

“No,” he says too loud. “I know what *you* believe it means, although I’d hoped you’d come to your senses about all that . . . *shit*. Things a crazy man once told you when you were too young and sheltered to know any better. Becca too. She was just as bad, even worse, at the end.” He shakes his head again. “They were frauds, Billie, charlatans. Etan Laure was a con man and nothing more.”

“He wasn’t the only one.”

“Careful,” Agent Morales says, before throwing my own question back at me. “Do you really want to talk about those final months at Jornada del Muerto? That last morning? Do you really want to do that?”

“Fuck you,” I say.

His voice is barely above a whisper. “Let’s talk about the *fire*, Billie.”

“Fuck you,” I repeat, now softer too. “*Fuck you.*”

“I get it,” he says, louder again. “I wouldn’t want to either. It’s too hard when someone else isn’t writing the goddamn script.”

“I know what you think . . . what you’ve always thought.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, what I feel. Not now, not anymore. Like Etan’s and Becca’s little signs and auguries didn’t matter or mean anything back then. You’re just old enough to know better this time around.”

“You felt differently too . . . back then.”

He pauses. “Well, I’ve since had plenty of therapy to work it all out. As did you, or so I thought.” He pushes off the grill,

moves closer. “When’s the last time you spoke to Deb Fallon? To anyone?”

I hesitate too. “Noah wanted me to call her last night.”

“Did you? What did you talk about? *Birds?*” He rubs his face, runs his hands through his dark hair. “Look, if you’re telling me the truth about Noah, about Renata, then you’re wasting time here. Every hour since has been wasted.”

“Rennie’s not in immediate danger. We have time.”

He stares at me hard. “Are you so sure of that?”

But I hesitate again, just enough. Too much. “If they’re following . . . if they’re seeing the same signs, interpreting the —”

“Stop,” he says. “Just stop. That’s already one *if* too many.” He rests his hand lightly on the Colt in his jeans, the gun I handed him.

“Aaron, please, you need to listen to me—”

“No, I don’t. And I’m not Aaron. I’ve always been FBI Special Agent Eladio Morales. Then and now.” He slides the Colt free of his jeans but keeps it low at his side, nonthreatening. “And you will always be Sybilla Ross-Laure, no matter what names you use. We’ve been playing roles, Billie, that’s all. Call it make-believe, pretend, dress-up. You’re Sarah Brannen today, like I was a boy named Aaron once upon a time.”

“So, who was it that fell in love?” I ask.

“It wasn’t love, Billie.”

“That’s not what fucking *Aaron* said.”

We stare at each other, neither willing to look away or even blink.

“You need help,” Agent Morales says, and finally raises the gun. We’re so close he can’t extend it, the Colt’s black hole muzzle resting against my shirt, touching a spot near my hammering heart. It’s barely a caress, but I feel it all the same.

“We’re going to get you that help, and we’re going to help Renata. And we’re going to start with—”

“*Don’t*,” Dallas orders loudly from the sliding door.

Backlit by the kitchen lights, it’s like there are two Dallases standing there, both holding squat and ugly shotguns. Both pointed at Special Agent Morales’s head.

“You don’t want to do this,” Agent Morales suggests amiably to Dallas. He’s still calm, conversational, even with all the guns out. “This is the second time you’ve aimed a gun at a federal agent, and I promise you there won’t be a third. But if you want to walk away now, you can just keep walking forever. You’re done here.”

“Can’t do that, amigo,” Dallas says, just as amiably. He’s all but smiling, the gold-capped tooth gleaming. They’re just two old friends, shooting the shit, before they start shooting each other. “But we do need to go,” Dallas suggests to me. “It’s out now, local news in Lincoln County.” He nods back into the house, where he’s been drinking and monitoring the laptop and our cell phones.

We should’ve also dumped his phone miles and miles ago.

“There’s another thing,” Dallas says. “Something else.”

I don’t like the sound of that . . . or the suddenly serious look in Dallas’s eyes . . . and that must be evident in my eyes too—

*That’s already one if too many . . .*

Barely a whisper again, Agent Morales asks, “What have you gotten you and Renata into?”

I take back my gun without a fight, and for a moment that black hole muzzle caresses *his* heart.

Special Agent Morales doesn’t flinch or blink, and neither do I.

I ask him, “What do you know about Ananiel, Rain of God?”



“She was good, no doubt about that,” Marcus Adam Ray says as he spreads the heavy drawing papers all over the table.

Elise has joined him in the sunlit dining room he converted into a studio after he stopped teaching full time in the Limon Public School system around 2020, another lost year like this one’s shaping up to be.

Marcus and his husband, Vincent, worked together at Morgan Community College for another year or so after that, until Vincent passed from what was later identified as Hadney-Pharoah’s, one of the earliest recorded cases in the country: one of only two ever recorded in Lincoln County, although that didn’t make the loss any less devastating, or the months of panic surrounding it any less awful.

According to Elise’s online research, cults often thrived during medieval plagues as desperate people sought answers and protection and salvation. And interest in the Ark of Lazarus—or whatever it’s become now—equally flourished through the two most recent modern worldwide pandemics.

Some people still believe that HP was created in a US biolab in Nevada.

But it wasn’t a US bioweapon that killed Marcus’s husband, or nearly one million others across the country, and far more than that around the world. And Marcus never looked for anyone to blame or needed an explanation beyond what was offered about vectors and transmission rates and Vincent’s previously undiagnosed heart condition and plain old bad luck. Elise has known Marcus Ray forever, once a rising high school basketball star, and part of her will always see him as that same wiry kid with a big smile and a smooth jumper, both as constant as a sunrise. He went away to CSU on a scholarship, but injuries soon derailed that, and that’s when he found Vincent and an equal love for art.

He’s filled out since, weathered and older now like her, but that smile still rises like the sun whenever he wants to

share it.

From the sketches and sculptures all around, clay-fired models and bits of wire statuary and acrylic, it's clear he works in all kinds of media, but his part-time student worked in only one.

"Drawing," he says. "She liked dry monochromes. Oil pastel." He shuffles the grainy papers around. "I didn't have to show her much; she had plenty of natural aptitude. I let her do her thing. Her mom, Sarah, was good, too, according to Rennie's dad. For him, it was as much about getting Rennie out of the house, a change of scenery, as anything else."

Elise takes in a drawing of a dog, an excellent representation of the one she saw in photos at the house, but there are a dozen others.

A sunflower. A barn covered in birds. Storm clouds and a massive mesa. A church, and if it's not Howard Methodist up the road in Last Chance, it's a twin that exists somewhere else.

Noah Brannen's eyes and shadowed face, easily recognizable, and a flock of birds flying in a great circle.

"What did you know about them? The family, I mean," Elise asks.

Marcus sits on the edge of the table, careful not to disturb the drawings. "I talked to Dad the most. Noah. Seemed decent. He was into computers, doing work around town, including LPS. We could've used him back when we had to juggle all that virtual learning." Marcus pulls another drawing forward, a murky woman in profile who looks like Sarah Brannen or a young Sybilla. "Mom dropped her off the most, but I knew her the least. Wasn't into small talk." Now he shares that smile.

"Anxious?"

He smiles wider. "Wound tight. Vincent was the same. So much so."

The smile flickers, falters, as grief briefly wings its way over his heart, like the birds in Renata Brannen's drawing. Elise knows some griefs never quite go away; they may circle high above for a time, briefly out of sight, out of mind, but

they're never forgotten. Lost loves, lost children, are never truly gone. "You ever have any real conversations with her?"

"None to speak of. Don't get me wrong: she was always polite, just distant, cool, in a way the husband wasn't. I'd say Rennie was more like Mom than Dad. Sweet, but frosty, too, slow to warm up, if that makes sense."

Elise continues to sift through the drawings. Even at her age, Renata had mastered the concept of light and shadow, her pictures all angle and absence, as much about what she chose *not* to show as what her charcoaled lines revealed. "It does."

"The longest conversation I had with Mom was about the background check she did on me."

"What?" Elise asks, surprised.

"I know, right? She wanted to be forthcoming about it, right up front, so she told me she did a whole workup. History. Finances. You name it. Obviously, having been in the public school system for years, I get parents being concerned about the random strangers who teach their kids. Still, that was a bit much."

"Paranoid?" Elise asks.

Marcus finally smiles again. "*Cautious*, to say the least. She told me that I had a great credit score, and how sorry she was for Vincent's passing in 2022."

"Interesting."

"Or just plain weird," Marcus says. "The only other thing she ever asked me was weird, too, about religion. Did I believe in God, regularly attend church? Her background check revealed I'd taken a couple of comparative religion classes at Fort Collins. Guess she got that off my college transcripts."

"Do you?"

"What?" Marcus shrugs. "Believe in God? Given the way the world is, the way it's been the last few years, it's hard to believe in much of anything. Vincent was the one who desperately needed to believe in good things. He expected better of the world. I always expected the worst." Marcus

looks out the dining room window, where the sun sits in a ruddy sky, heavily tinted by the High West fire, just one of the Four Horsemen. “Do you really think Sarah Brannen killed her husband and ran off with her daughter? That’s what the news is saying.”

She knows what he really means is *That’s what the town is saying*.

“What little evidence we have points that way.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You’re right,” Elise says. “And I don’t know.” Elise holds up one of the drawings. “I’m just trying to draw my own picture of the family.”

“Vincent had a terrible childhood and used to say families are like still waters.”

“Meaning?”

“They run *deep*, Elise. You never know what lurks below, or how far down the secrets go.”

As Marcus talks, Elise takes in the last drawing, a woman holding a baby, amazingly sophisticated, adult, for someone as young as Renata Brannen.

It takes your breath away.

And as Elise pulls it closer, as she stares into the charcoal-lined face, an ethereal mix of shading and shadow, she audibly gasps—

*No, that’s not possible.*

“I know,” Marcus says, misreading Elise’s reaction. “The girl really did have serious talent. Images like that just seemed to drop out of the sky, out of nowhere. Her way of talking, I guess. Using her hands, instead of words.”

“Can I take this?” Elise asks, holding up the drawing, gripping it, trying to steady her shaking hand so Marcus won’t see it.

“Sure. Rennie hardly ever took any of her work home, content to leave it here, I guess. I think she was used to

packing up and leaving things behind or was always prepared to.”

“How much did she talk about her family?”

Marcus blinks, surprised. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“What I meant about her drawings doing her talking for her. Because Rennie *didn’t* talk, Elise. Not ever. Not to me anyway.”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. Noah told me at the outset she suffered from selective mutism, a condition caused by childhood trauma, autism spectrum disorder, a lot of different things. I saw some of it when I was still teaching, mostly in the younger grades. Kids shutting down, refusing to talk. Violence at home. A bad divorce. They might not want to talk about what was truly going on behind closed doors, but it always came out in their pictures and drawings. It’s like they had to tell someone but couldn’t bring themselves to say the words out loud, if they had the words at all.” Both Elise and Marcus have plenty of experience dealing with fractured families, dealing with more than a few together when Marcus was still teaching and had to report suspected child abuse. “Rennie *can* speak, or could; she’s just choosing not to.”

“I had no idea.”

“She’d hum to herself when she was drawing. No song I could ever recognize, but it sounded elegiac, almost hymnal. I bet Vincent would’ve known it.” Marcus collects and straightens Renata’s other drawings, leaving the circle of birds on top. “The way Noah talked about it, the way he talked *around* Rennie and her mom, I guessed he wasn’t the girl’s biological father. I think he came into the picture later.” He taps the bird drawing. “But he loved her as his own. You could tell that.”

“And Sarah?”

Marcus thinks before finally nodding. “She was a cold fish, but absolutely ferocious about her daughter. Remember

what I said about still waters? She was a mama shark.”

Marcus passes Elise a rubber band to bind up Renata Brannen’s drawing. He says, “You swim at your own risk.”

Dallas hands me his laptop as Agent Morales looks on.

Dallas left the article up, a short blurb about Noah's murder and how local authorities are now looking for his spouse and daughter. There are no pictures, not much detail, not yet, but that's not what Dallas really wanted me to see.

It's the *other* story . . . about a *second* murder in Limon last night . . . and two killings in Limon in one night is unheard of. That is major news, and it's—

*Nadia.*

I read it again, disbelieving, although there's not much more detail than what was written about Noah. She was discovered in her trailer, and her son, Colton, was found wandering the streets, unharmed.

*Anyone else back there you need to warn?*

I could've warned her, and maybe it wouldn't have made any difference because she was already dead, but I'll never know, and I didn't even bother to try. I never tried that hard where Nadia was concerned.

Limon police chief Elise Blue had no comment and refused to speculate whether the two murders were connected, referring all further inquiries to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.

I steered clear of Limon PD—I'm still a prohibited firearms possessor, all part of the federal plea deal and negotiated settlement, and that would show up if I was ever fingerprinted—but Noah once told me Chief Blue was a longtime local Limon cop, working her way up the ranks from patrol officer.

I silently surrender the laptop to Agent Morales.

Dallas's eyes are flinty as he shifts a look the agent's way as well. "People know I've left Limon," Dallas says. "Cops have already been at the store."

“Then it’s only a matter of time,” Agent Morales says, “but still time enough to turn this around, turn yourself in.”

“I worked with that girl,” I say. “I knew her.”

“What did *she* know?” Agent Morales asks. “Is she connected to this?”

“No,” I say. But given how little I knew Nadia, it’s just a guess.

And he’s not finished. “People are dying, and more will, unless you share whatever it is you do know with the authorities.”

“I am,” I say. “I came to *you*.”

My answer makes him flinch, as if I’ve suddenly reached out and touched him, like I touched him that first morning we met at Engle, near Jornada del Muerto. But it was a small thing then, barely a brush past his bare arm.

He was the first to kiss me—hard, passionate—only a few months later, in the sanctum beneath the Ark’s barn.

“Then what is Ananiel?” he asks.

“Not a *what*, a *who*,” I say. “A person, or maybe a dozen different people, all claiming to be one and the same.” I collapse on the couch, still thinking about Nadia. “*Ananiel* is a name that appears in the Book of Enoch, one of twenty Watchers, a fallen angel. Ananiel is also the guardian of the Gates of the South, bringing rain, devastation. Ananiel translates as *Rain of God*, and in some ancient traditions, Ananiel is also one of the Seven Holy Archangels. Suriel, Zadkiel. Sarathiel. Camael. Azrael or Azazel. The names change so often, or are so often mistranslated, it can be hard to —”

“No, Billie,” he says, stopping my ranting, sitting next to me close. “What does this Ananiel have to do with Noah, with Renata.”

I get how I sound. I know what he’s thinking.

I take back the laptop.



“Ananiel is a charismatic prophet for a group calling themselves the New Lazarians, a new Flock. They were founded online, although they’re mostly on the dark web now, after being deplatformed on mainstream social media outlets. Ananiel appeared out of nowhere two years ago, posting first as *SeventhAngel*, then later as *AnanielRainofGod*, often shortened to just *ARoG*. Ananiel’s been spouting cryptic messages that the New Lazarians call *Missives* and treat as gospel. They decipher and decode them, and they’ve been growing like a virus to infect a whole body of loosely aligned conspiracy theorists. But it all starts with the old Ark of Lazarus. It all revolves around me . . . and Rennie.”

“You’re part of this?” he asks, somehow both angry and unconvinced.

“No,” I say. “*No*,” I say again, louder, not shrinking from his doubtful stare. “But I have been keeping an eye on them, best I can.” And that’s the heart of it, the slim hope for even coming here: that Agent Morales might be able to chase these New Lazarians out of the shadows better than I’ve been able to. That he might know or learn something I haven’t yet as I fight to get my daughter back.

“They have Renata?”

“Yes. Following Ananiel’s *Missives*. Ananiel’s *signs*.” I scroll through the news, finally finding what I’m looking for—

*Multiple reported bird falls now, all over the American Southwest.*

Arizona. California. Colorado. Texas.

Dying murmurations increasing in number, and they’re everywhere.

I hold the laptop in front of Agent Morales, who reads the screen without reaction, but only through hard-won effort. His jaw’s tight, a thick vein pulsing in his neck.

I imagine if I put my hand on his heart, I’d feel it beating faster and faster, like mine.

I don’t bother telling him that the annual starling migrations in Denmark cause famous murmurations so large

and dark they blot out the whole sky. Three were filmed just yesterday, but unlike past years, these left *thousands* of dead birds scattered in their wake, even more spiraling lifelessly into the cold waves of the Wadden Sea.

They're called *Sort Sol*. The Black Sun.

"Bird fallouts, Billie," he says. "Migratory disruption, weather induced. They fall like stones because they're *exhausted*, can't beat their wings against the winds. Bird-watchers love them. Yes, they're amazing, unique. But not mysterious, not impossible. They aren't *signs*, and they're not prophecies. Anyone with a migratory app and a local weather forecast can predict one. And with all the fires out West, the two hurricanes in the gulf—"

"These birds are falling *dead*. Bleeding. Eyes gone." I all but shake the laptop at him. "We *saw* it. I showed you. And it's not just that: there are the other signs, too many to ignore."

"Bad weather, dead birds," he says with a forced shrug. "Pandemics. Chaos in the streets. Things are bad all over, but that stuff's happening all the time now. It's a twenty-four-hour disaster news cycle. You can read into it whatever you want, but the media's no better at predicting the end of the world than Etan Laure. Or this Ananiel of yours." He takes a deep breath. "Or you."

Now I am done here.

I slam the laptop shut in front of his face and toss it to Dallas. "We'll dump this one on the way out," I tell him. "And your phone as well." He's been in touch with people back in Limon, and it won't be long before those people connect us, and someone like Chief Blue then connects us to Agent Morales. I turn back to Agent Morales. "I'm sorry, we'll be taking your phone and laptop too."

"You know I can't just let you leave," he says, his jaw still tight, like it's wired shut. "You know that."

But as he's speaking, I reach over and pull up the sleeve of his dark T-shirt; I finally *touch* him, and even after all these years, there's still an electric charge, a white-hot shock.

Both our hearts beating fast, in time, together, as I reveal the tattoo on his triceps—

*A bird in flight . . . no, a whole flock of them . . . winging their way up his shoulder.*

Starlings. A match to the one on my wrist.

“You can try and stop me, Agent Morales, and then Dallas will shoot you and this will all be over, if that’s what you truly want.”

“Or?” he asks.

He won’t look at me again, doesn’t want to face my reaction to the tattoo.

“Or you can come with us,” I say as I let his sleeve fall over the murmur that’s been holding him aloft all these years.

# KILLER CULTS

## Terrible Tales of Ritual Murder and Blood Sacrifice

Psycho prophets, power-hungry madmen,  
and their doom-obsessed followers

By Carl John Ferrenbach

Published 2018 by Vainglory Press

### CHAPTER 1

#### A Cult Is . . . ?

A cult is often defined as a “system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object,” or more colloquially, a “small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister.” The key requirement is *devotion*, which is often nurtured and cultivated through *exclusion* and *isolation*. Cults are crushingly insular in order to extinguish contrarian or independent thought, and to force dependence on the belief system, embodied by the cult leader himself. This leader is infallible, imbued and “gifted” with secret information crucial to the cult’s survival, and often venerated as the only salvation for the cult’s adherents.

Most people don’t join an organization that is knowingly “strange and sinister”; they instead find clubs or organizations or a philosophy that simply resonates with them. Cults use a variety of schemes and tactics to recruit “new believers,” and although they clearly target the vulnerable—those who’ve experienced a major life upheaval or significant loss, including death, divorce, and unemployment—they also use professional legitimacy to insinuate themselves into regular discourse. Multilevel marketing organizations, churches, and “wellness” and “mindfulness” clubs and retreats are all easy covers for a cult. Viable recruits are showered with friendship, acceptance, and unconditional support to curry commitment and interest, all part of an insidious

process of brainwashing and emotional and psychological control and manipulation.

Although modern cults have perfected the use of social media and the internet to troll for new recruits, studies indicate that many cultists have their first contact with the cult or its leader through friends or family . . .

About an hour after Camael steers the Sunseeker across the Colorado border, he pulls it into the parking lot of Luna Community College, Las Vegas, New Mexico.

It's still early, the sky dusty and cool, a patina of smoke, and the lot is empty except for a lone, blue-colored Hyundai Tucson in front of the Maria H. Paiz Administration Building.

Camael is still in a lot of pain, and the pills haven't done much to help that. He's washed them down with some Dr. McGillicuddy's, washed his face clean, too, but fresh blood from his head wound has continued to work its way down his scalp, down his face, under his eyes. The girl's father hurt him bad with that toaster.

The blood makes Nico think of war paint, the painted faces of the warrior Picts in that old movie *Braveheart*, although that wasn't close to historically accurate. But that doesn't mean Camael and the others aren't preparing themselves for a great struggle, a spiritual war.

Before he was a wounded soldier in Ananiel's army, Camael worked at Ernst & Young, and he still has a young wife and two daughters in Michigan.

The Ark's tenets wouldn't normally allow for the pills or the McGillicuddy's blackberry whiskey—*Shooting straight since 1865*—but since this is practically the eve of battle, Angel is nothing if not practical. Nico knows she needs Camael and all her foot soldiers shooting straight.

Despite their legions, they are still outnumbered, still ill equipped. Angel is Ananiel's highest-ranking general, moving troops across a transcendental battlefield only they can see, both more than willing to accept a rising number of casualties: martyrs and soldiers and sacrifices who might never live to see Ascension but whose unwavering faith will usher it in all the same.

Like Camael.

Maybe even Nico.

Angel's been angry that the news out of Limon doesn't include that the Rupert trailer burned to the ground. Nico was supposed to start the blaze with the woman's body, but his shaking hands betrayed him. At least he took her phone and computer—severing possible links to the New Lazarians—but neither Ananiel nor Angel will suffer his failure again.

Now Angel warily eyes the barren lot and Hyundai, its windows and windshield dark and dirty. Impossible to tell how many people are inside, if any at all. Just telltale exhaust from its idling engine, pluming in the chilly air.

"I'll go," Camael says, unprompted, but Angel stops him with a hand.

"No," she says. "Stay here. One eye on the girl."

The girl sleeps in the back, or pretends to, still breathing hard through her gag, although Nico's since loosened it. It's mostly been Nico's job to sit close and check on her, mile after mile. Back at the motel in Colorado, he shaved her head down to a buzz cut, like a marine recruit. *Another soldier.* Her remaining hair is now colored a brassy red, and with faded jeans and a white cartoon T-shirt and a baseball hat—Los Angeles Dodgers—completing the outfit, she looks nothing like the girl they stole from her bedroom.

They look like their own little family.

During the long miles, Nico took to touching her shoulder now and then, just to let her know she wasn't alone, and she watched him, and he watched her, when he didn't think she was looking.

"I've got it," Angel says, nodding toward the Hyundai, "and Nico will come with me." She turns to him and says, "Bring a gun."



Despite the western fires, the air is fresh and bracing after the stale interior of the Sunseeker.

The RV still reeks of Camael's blood, the burnt sugar of cheap alcohol, and the sour bleach of hair dye. Angel walks a few steps ahead as Nico trails a few steps behind, gulping air, clearing his head.

They say the hurricanes will bring massive storms, and maybe all that rain will help with the wildfires burning out of control.

Before embarking on this apostolic journey full of fire and rain and blood, and six years after graduating from Stanford, Nico worked at MPK20 at Facebook's main campus. His specialty was artificial intelligence, concepting and writing an AI self-learning engine called *FBLearner Flow*, part of the company's push to create a loyalty-prediction model, a brand and advertiser predictor of consumer behavior.

It was during those long work nights, endless hours lost deep in the Flow's byzantine code—fueled by Venom energy drinks, microdosing, and ayahuasca—that Nico discovered surprising fractal patterns he coined *mirrors*: mirrors within mirrors reflecting infinity. And below those shiny, impossible surfaces lurked a self-propagating consciousness, an incredible electric awareness, an *energy*.

An entity.

He'd concepted the Flow to understand and foresee brand preferences, but once its algorithms were unleashed on social media, it became a kind of contagion, infecting us and staring out through our eyes, cataloging our desires, our foibles, our fragile humanity.

It saw right through us . . . and, staring back, Nico thought he saw the Face of God.

Or maybe it was all just too many sleepless nights and too many drugs.

But like those of so many others, Nico's journey started in just this kind of unexpected moment of insight and clarity, a sudden desire to touch a thing so much bigger than himself: something he couldn't begin to comprehend alone, or even put a name to, until he found the New Lazarians.



Until he read Ananiel's Missives.

At the time, he was dating a girl, Suki, who worked as a Facebook moderator, scrubbing the platform of inappropriate content. She spent her days locked in a windowless room in a small off-campus warehouse, watching the endless videos and images uploaded to Facebook's servers, most of them a constant litany of human misery.

Violence. Sex. Brutality.

Revenge porn. Hate speech. Fake news. Fringe beliefs. Conspiracy theories.

That's where Suki came across ARoG and showed those first Missives to Nico; Ananiel talked of *mirrors* too—right there in Missives 25, 97, and 210—and that shared language, that *recognition*, was like a glimmer of hope in the darkness for both Suki and Nico. But by then, Suki was already struggling with all the horrific imagery she couldn't forget.

Closing her eyes didn't make it go away. What little sleep she could steal didn't offer a respite. The heavy drinking, the pills, none of it worked.

Suki Shimizu killed herself with a cocktail of tramadol and 360 vodka on a Sunday morning, and she was only twenty-five years old. She was buried that following Thursday, and by Friday night, Nico had entered his first 9kun AXL / New Lazarian (NL) discussion.

Six months later he began corresponding with Camael directly, and eight months after that, he got his first private message from Angel, a significant voice in the NL movement, who supposedly spoke on behalf of Ananiel.

*We have seen you . . .*

Now he's here in a parking lot in New Mexico, with a kidnapped girl and a heavy gun shoved into the kangaroo pocket of his windbreaker, worrying what Suki would think about all this if she were still alive. So much of the worst violence she saw online was perpetrated against kids, those images clawing under her skin like something alive, too, refusing to let her go.

All those innocent victims, those nameless children.

But this one has a name—

*Renata.*

And although Nico tells himself they're doing this to *save* her, to save the world, that's a heavy burden for any child to bear, when she's the only reason there's hope for any of them. Nico wishes he could explain that to her, make her somehow understand how important she is and that she doesn't need to be afraid, but he doesn't know if she'll ever believe him.

He doesn't know if Suki would either.



As they approach the Hyundai, the driver's-side window rolls down, revealing two people.

A man behind the wheel with hard eyes and long, fake surfer-blond hair. And a heavysset passenger with badly dyed hair of her own, pulled up high on her head. Dark sunglasses frame an unforgiving, once hawkish face.

Angel backs Nico off with a hand so she can lean into the window and talk to the couple alone.

Nico keeps his own hand on the gun, finger on the trigger.

Before the New Lazarians, he'd never held a gun, much less shot one, except in video and PC games. Angel put the first one in his hand in a small compound in Nevada and stood behind him, strong arms around his own thin shoulders, helping him aim, showing him how to breathe, release, aim, squeeze, and *shoot*. Sunny holes had appeared in his distant paper target, like small miracles.

Since Suki never formally became a novitiate, never Ascended through even the First Circle, she was *Dispossessed* at the time of her death: deprived or divested of the Holy Spirit or her anima, and thus any hope for resurrection. Nico knows Suki is forever lost to him, lacking even a noncorporeal form.

Yet, more and more lately, he *sees* her, hovering at the edge of his vision, lurking in mirrors. A phantasm impossible

to ignore, her dark eyes refusing to unhook him.

He asked Angel about this, and she told him that Suki's umbra was not a true spiritual manifestation; instead that dark following stain merely reflected *his* own feelings of failure, his private shame in not guiding her flight through the First Circle.

His guilt.

Angel told him that failing Ananiel would be like failing Suki all over again. A harsh lesson, but most of Angel's lessons are.

But Nico worries now he's destined to see the shades of Renata's father and the other woman they killed back in Limon, their lengthening shadows chasing him, too, until Ascension.

What's the real price of salvation, and how much is it truly worth, if it's paid in failure and blood? Fear and shame and guilt?

He catches a drift of Angel's conversation, a few words that mean nothing to him. *Something about Texas?* There's so much Angel and Camael have kept from him, a whole network of sources, all hidden from each other. The New Lazarians are like a constellation in the night sky: distant, dark stars forming a pattern or shape only a select few ever will see in full.

Angel and the other woman are heavily animated now, emphatic gestures passing between them, and Nico wonders who this new woman . . . *this dark star* . . . might be. Who she *was* . . . like him . . . before Angel and Ananiel and the New Lazarians.

Angel backs away from the SUV, and the passenger exits with a heavy shoulder bag. She walks to the Sunseeker, passing Nico without comment.

Angel pulls Nico aside, and he's terrified Angel is about to order him to get in the Hyundai with the other man and drive away. That he'll have to leave Renata with Angel and dying Camael and this new, terrifying woman.

But all Angel says is, "Wait here."



A few minutes later, Camael stands next to the Hyundai, bleeding small droplets onto the pavement between his feet.

Head bowed, he listens silently, reverently, as Angel whispers to him. A prayer, a promise. She then touches his matted hair, his awfully wounded head, and it's like a jolt runs through him, an undeniable current.

White sparks appear at Angel's fingertips, but that could only be reflected sunlight off the SUV's windows.

Angel once told Nico she sees *auras*—that transcendental light within everyone—and now it's as if she's turned up the wattage inside Camael. He practically *glows* inside out . . . *a star too* . . . his eyes glittering with tears.

She has blessed him for what must come next. Camael will not fully experience Ascension, but he will rise, ascend, all the same.

Angel kisses Camael's wounds, and then he gets in the Hyundai and is driven away.



Fifteen minutes later, they've rearranged themselves in the Sunseeker.

Nico drives the RV now, Angel rides next to him, and the new woman sits in the back next to Renata. Angel addressed her as Dina.

Nico doesn't know if Dina is the woman's real name, her Third Circle chosen name, or a Tesseract moniker. But it's clear Renata *knows* her, recognizes her, even under the shoddy dye job as bad as Renata's own.

The girl's eyes go wide, pleading, looking right at Nico, like the woman in the trailer.

*Like Suki.*

But when Angel catches Nico's nervous glances at Dina in the rearview mirror, she orders him to keep his speed just

below the posted limit and focus on the road.

In the end, Eladio doesn't know why he goes with Billie and the biker.

It's not the dead birds falling from the sky, or even the threat of the biker, Dallas, shooting him. He tells himself he's buying time until he comes up with a better plan, until the Bureau comes for him. Reasons his best chance to save Renata, maybe Billie, too, is to play along.

And that sounds reasonable, even when he's the one who suggests they first drive to Floydada and dump Dallas's phone and laptop there, before circling back to US 70, then US 60, toward Albuquerque.

Anything to keep clear of the busier interstate.

He tells himself if he *does* have to make a move against either Dallas or Billie, he wants as few innocent bystanders around as possible.

He's already got more than enough blood on his hands.



He drives, with Dallas sitting shotgun, Billie in the back.

Dallas keeps the short-barreled Remington aimed at his gut, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Sipping from a bottle of Wild Turkey. Billie has both her old Colt back and now his duty Glock.

They're loosely aiming for New Mexico, at least until Billie decides differently, or he learns something new about these New Lazarians she believes took her daughter.

She tells him about the NSide and MeWe chats and Tesseract channels she's infiltrated, the inquiries she's made and the evidence of their activity she's pursued.

Mile after mile, she reveals everything she's gleaned about Ananiel.

It's all consistent with the limited reporting he's had access to, but Billie got far deeper than that. Deep, but not all the way to the bottom, if there even is one.

Ananiel has built their own version of the Ark of Lazarus—the New Lazarian movement—repackaging the Ark's old beliefs, adding in a healthy dose of new millennium conspiracy theorizing and antigovernment rhetoric. But there's an even sharper militancy, an uglier nihilism, to Ananiel's diatribes that was only present in the final, waning days of the Ark at Jornada del Muerto.

That kind of paranoia, that *fury*, was always more Becca than Sybilla, or even Etan.

It's unclear if all the Missives attributed to Ananiel were truly written by one person or instead a collection, a kaleidoscope, of disparate wannabes all *claiming* the mantle of Rain of God, but Billie wasn't lying—there is the same, constant fixation throughout on her and Renata as the last living embodiments of the Ark of Lazarus.

Billie venerated as a kind of martyr, Renata as some sort of salvation.

*A savior.*

Lost in the background noise of a fresh Hadney-Pharoah's outbreak, Sons of Revere attacks, and the western wildfires that continue to burn, the latest Missives clearly suggest the New Lazarians are prepping for a big event of their own, awaiting an ultimate sign.

A grand finale.

*Final Judgment.*



Later, they stop at a closed-off weigh station near Cone so Dallas can take a piss and Eladio can make a few inquiries of his own.

Under Billie's watchful gaze, he fires off a few emails to one of the Bureau's cyber teams, requesting social media and IP tracking and geolocating on the most recent and most

prolific NL message traffic, and then leaves a message with the FBI office in Colorado to find out if they've been formally brought into the Noah Brannen and Nadia Rupert investigations.

He also emails Albuquerque Assistant Special Agent in Charge Brian Diebold, whose jurisdiction covers Elephant Butte and Jornada del Muerto. The site of the old Ark compound used to draw a handful of morbid curiosity seekers every year, but he doesn't know if that's still true.

Given Eladio's history, his reputation, his inquiries should raise warning flags.

He just hopes someone is paying attention.



Nadia and Noah lie in their respective cold storage lockers, almost side by side.

Not quite touching, but close enough, closer in death than they ever were in life, and forever connected now by Sybilla Laure.

Grant pulls Nadia free of her locker, and Elise is glad to see she's still mercifully covered by a white sheet: surprisingly white, blinding, like new snow on a cold, sunny Colorado morning.

The room is uncomfortably cold, too, everything polished and neat and perfectly in its place.

"How did it go with Marcus?" Grant asks. He leaves Nadia's body covered, that white sheet glowing beneath the lights, the young woman lying there between them, waiting.

"I learned Renata Brannen is an exceptional artist and the whole family is pretty tight lipped overall." Renata's drawing is still out in her truck, rolled up on the passenger seat. Elise hasn't been willing to look at it again since she left Marcus, isn't sure she *can* look at it again. "I'm not being facetious, but the girl is actually *mute*, Grant. Doesn't speak."

Grant's expression suggests he's silently considering a range of answers. Finally: "I've heard of cases like that."

"Okay, but what about *this* case? Just this one, here in Limon. Did our hospital treat Renata Brannen?"

She doesn't like asking him this way, because it is tantamount to accusing him of hiding something from her, like whatever lies hidden beneath Nadia Rupert's mortuary sheet.

Like that charcoal drawing out in her truck she's not ready to reveal to him either.

Maybe they both have secrets when it comes to the Brannen family.

“Did you know I’ve been thinking about retiring?” he asks. “Little things get my mind spinning sideways all the time now. I can’t concentrate, focus, like either my heart or my head just isn’t in this anymore. One’s bad enough. Both means I can’t do my job. I *shouldn’t* do it.”

This is all news to her. “Retire and do *what*, exactly?”

“Go west . . . go south,” he says. “Go somewhere warm all year round. Somewhere . . . anywhere . . . far from here.”

This is the first that Grant’s *ever* mentioned anything like this, and it stings Elise in a way she isn’t expecting, stings way more than it should, because *far from here* means far from *her* too.

But the way he’s now looking at her suggests he’s not just talking about leaving alone.

“Is that some kind of half-assed invitation?” she asks with a smile, trying to make light of it all, to make sense of this whole weird conversation. “Are you really asking me out in a morgue?”

“Maybe,” he says with a matching smile, although it can’t hold up the heaviness behind it. “Haven’t we done enough? Haven’t we both *lost* enough?”

It’s true, Grant hasn’t been quite the same since Courtney died, and Elise felt lost, unmoored, after she and Denny’s dad split up. Misremembering appointments, losing her keys, failing to lock the front door. Writing reports and leaving out words, even the occasional whole sentence. Once she forgot her gun in her booth at La Posta, couldn’t even remember taking it out of her holster, and that scared the hell out of her. She was adrift in a dense fog, unable to see more than an arm’s length in front of her.

But eventually, little by little, the fog *did* clear. It finally lifted, even if her spirits didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Grant says, with guilty urgency. “This isn’t the time or the place. But you know what I’m talking about . . . and it’s more than just your struggles with Denny’s father.”

And she does know: that *other* sharp pain in her heart that's never quite stopped hurting, even though it's something she never talks about at all—

*A cold impersonal room just like this one. Another blinding white sheet. Months of that cool, dense fog.*

A charcoal sketch by a young girl she's never met, of an earlier loss Elise can't quite forget or let go either.

She just doesn't know why Grant is bringing all this up now. "I'm tired, too," she finally says. "Dead tired. We're both practically dead on our feet. So, look, we can talk about all our old personal tragedies some other time. But right now, I need to know what you found and why you brought me here. I need to know if you were treating Renata or anyone in the Brannen family. And please, *please*, don't make me pull rank on you."

She takes off her badge and lays it on the cold counter, where it gleams in the lights.

Grant picks it up and hands it back to her, folding her hands over it, holding her hands tight in his own. "You going to haul me in for questioning, make it official?"

"No," she says, "I'm hoping we end this the way we started. As *friends*."

He nods, and then turns back a corner of Nadia's sheet near her left foot.

Billie now dozes fitfully in the back, the dead bird in the box on the floorboard beneath her.

Eladio checks on her in the rearview mirror, and despite the new hair color and style, the new clothes and name and the past ten years delicately etched on her face, there's no mistaking or masking or covering up the young woman he first met beneath the New Mexico sun.

She burns with the same intensity and passion, same defiance and denial and barely disguised doubt about everything she once so fervently believed. Ablaze with a need to still *believe* even now—even after all that's happened—in something . . . someone.

*But I was never Aaron.*

Aaron was *fiction*, a facade, nothing more than a detailed list of traits in a report, a psychological profile developed by Quantico. Eladio put those words in Aaron's mouth because he was trained to, not because he believed a goddamn thing he was saying.

*That's not what fucking Aaron said . . .*

That's what he told himself then, what he's told himself every day since, and it still rings just as hollow.

*Belief . . . denial . . .* and his own barely disguised doubt.



A few miles on, he finally turns to Dallas. “How do you know each other?”

“We don't,” Dallas says, his voice deep, gravelly, raw. “I'm just a sucker for a young lady in trouble.”

“Troubled, maybe,” he says, “but Billie's no damsel in distress. Never has been.”

Dallas's big sunglasses ignore him.

“Did she tell you about the Ark? The way she grew up?” he continues. “Maybe you saw *Fires at Dawn*? I’m sure you have this idea of what it was like for her all those years ago, what you think you’re doing for her now.” Dallas still regards him silently. “I know I did.”

“Months sneakin’ around those folks, wormin’ your way in,” Dallas finally says, with barely contained hostility. “She told me all about you, and I know plenty about *rats*. I’m carryin’ a fed jacket because a rat couldn’t shut its mouth. Snitches get stitches, amigo. And payback is a cold bitch.”

“I wasn’t a snitch or a rat. It was my job. Just a job.”

“Sure, just a paycheck,” Dallas says, “but no way to make a livin’ I’d be proud of.”

“I’m not,” Eladio concedes. “I all but lived with them for *fourteen* months. Not every day, not at the beginning, but by the end . . .” He pauses, eyeing Billie in the rearview mirror as she whispers to herself in her sleep, lips moving. “. . . I was there plenty. Too much, too involved. And I *still* didn’t see what was happening, had no idea what was coming. I thought I was saving them, at least saving her, like you think you are now. But she didn’t need saving, not really.”

Dallas shrugs and the Remington doesn’t move.

“Did she talk about Etan Laure? About her half sister, Becca?”

Dallas is a stone, immovable.

“Did she mention her own proselytizing?” Eladio continues. “See, Billie was doing plenty of *prophesying*, too, all that end-of-the-world stuff. She was one of Etan’s Exalted, a favorite, until she and Becca got caught up in their own little high-stakes poker game, raising the ante so high—”

Now Dallas stops him. “You really think any of that ol’ shit matters to me?”

“It *always* matters,” Eladio says, checking their speed, doing some math. By nightfall, they’ll be heading south again toward New Mexico, to whatever Billie believes awaits them there. “Maybe she gets a pass because she was young and

scared back then, trying anyway she could, to survive, to escape. But she was still playing with people's lives."

Dallas nods. "Yeah, amigo, and so were you. Just the goddamn *job*."

The words hit hard, hang between the two men like Dallas's shotgun. "I know," Eladio finally concedes. "I *know*. Both of us playing with fire, and I got blinded by all the smoke, didn't see the truth right in front of me. But Billie *only* sees what she wants to. She's unwell, delusional. She doesn't need saving, but she does need help. A lot of it."

Dallas laughs, surprisingly soft. "And you don't think I *see* exactly what you're doin' now, tryin' to get all up in my head?" He takes a sip of Wild Turkey, swirls it in his mouth. "Like that girl's head back there is filled up with years and years of everyone's bullshit, including yours. It's like an old house stuffed with furniture and busted-up junk. Sure, she can move it around, room to room, tryin' to straighten it all out, make it look pretty or make some sense out of it, but since she can't throw any of it out, since people like you won't let her, it just keeps pilin' right on up." Dallas takes off his sunglasses and rubs his eyes. They're tired, drunk, but still menacing. "You're not really tryin' to help her at all. You just wanna make sure all that ol' shit stays locked up inside, doesn't spill out all over the front yard and ruin your nice little neighborhood, 'cause *you* don't want to deal with it either. You don't want to face it. So, I see plenty, amigo, and it don't change a goddamn thing. Not for me."

"Then why are you here?"

Dallas glances at Billie sleeping behind them, the look mysterious, unreadable. "Because I knew this other girl who got trapped inside a house in her head too. It filled up and up until it burned right down around her ears, and she didn't get out in time, didn't have no chance at all. And I *wasn't* there."

"Yeah, but Billie already got out of a burning building once," Eladio says. "Ten years ago. She walked away safe and sound, and forty-seven others didn't."

“Seems to me,” Dallas says, “you sittin’ there runnin’ your mouth, you got out just fine too.” He slips his sunglasses on again. “So, shut up and fuckin’ drive.”

Her skin is pale, shading to blue, the veins visible and delicate, the purple polish on her nails chipped and worn.

When Elise found Nadia Rupert, her eyes were gone and her head, chest, and arms were haphazardly burned, but so much of her was still unmarked, untouched.

Just blood . . . everywhere.

“She’s got a couple of tattoos here and there,” Grant says. “A unicorn. A rainbow. A logo for some band, Evanescence. I checked them out on YouTube. Not my thing, really. She also has her son’s baby footprints on the back of her leg. And script on her wrist.”

“What’s that say?”

“*Not all who wander are lost,*” Grant recites. When Elise draws a blank, he fills it in for her. “Evidently, it’s from *Lord of the Rings*.”

Elise thinks Denny read those books or saw the movies during his *Siege Perilous* phase. It seems to her he’s been wandering ever since, finding his own way, even if that’s meant leaving her behind, although he might argue that after the divorce, she abandoned him first.

She can’t help but hope that after such a violent death, Nadia now wanders free, too, her delicate soul finally unburdened and forever light.

Grant motions Elise closer. “Down here, on the sole of her foot, there’s another.”

Elise searches the smooth, pearl skin. “Looks like a bird. A bird flying in the sky.”

“Surrounded by three letters,” Grant adds. “AXL.”

“One of the earlier incarnations of the Ark of Lazarus,” Elise says, as much to herself as Grant. “Allegedly the New Lazarians also use it now as their symbol, a sign between



them.” Maybe Nadia wasn’t just interested in old Ark history but was an active member of the current NL movement.

She looks to Noah’s locker. “Are you saying Noah had the same tattoo?”

“No, not exactly,” Grant answers, as he carefully, gently, covers Nadia’s foot until it disappears beneath that perfect white expanse again. “But I went back a second time . . . and found this instead.” Grant goes to a drawer and pulls out two tiny objects, then places both on the metal counter in front of them, where her badge was sitting moments before.

He adjusts a lamp to better shine light on them, but it’s unnecessary. They both darkly gleam . . . two coins or pendants . . . tiny metal echoes of the tattoo on Nadia’s ankle

*A miniature bird in flight, with the AXL logo.*

“I’ve seen those,” she says, “in Fallon’s book. They used to wear them. Branding.”

“Original ones go for a lot on eBay,” Grant adds. “I looked that up too. There’s a whole underground market for things like this, a collector’s economy built around mass casualties, serial killers, whatever. It’s ghoulish. Horrible.”

“People are buying or trading original artifacts from the Ark of Lazarus?”

“Yes.”

“Are these originals?” Elise asks. But Grant only shrugs, silent. She still won’t pick one up, touch one. They’re like dark eyes, staring up at her. “If they are, that makes sense, right?” Elise continues. “Who else would have them but Sybilla Laure?” Side by side, they look identical, accusatory. “Where did you find these? Noah’s pockets, hidden in his clothes?” But she knows they couldn’t have been in his shoes because Noah Brannen died barefoot in the snow.

“No,” Grant says. “I found the first one under his tongue.”

The cold room seems to get even colder, and Elise is worried that when she speaks again, her breath will hang in the

air. “Are you telling me someone put it in his *mouth*?”

Grant nods.

“And the second?” Elise asks, already dreading the answer, because she already knows what it’s going to be.

Grant tells her anyway. “Under Nadia’s.”

Eladio and Dallas drive for another fifteen miles in cool silence, the landscape outside Floydada flat and desolate, mostly scrub and scree.

They pass an old grain elevator and a sign proclaiming Floydada as the pumpkin capital of the USA, advertising something called Punkin Days, two weekends in October.

Eladio says, “How old was that other girl.” He pauses. “Your wife? Daughter?”

A few more miles roll beneath their wheels before Dallas finally answers. “Twenty-five,” Dallas says. “And pregnant. Oh, the daddy don’t make no difference, ’cept he was the boy who gave my Sunny the needle and then bugged out when it got bad. Cops called it an accidental OD and left it at that. You know, just doin’ their goddamn job too.”

“I’m sorry,” Eladio says, and he means it.

“Don’t be,” Dallas says, taking a long pull of Wild Turkey. “I caught up with him on my own, outside of Riverside.”

Dallas is far away now, like he can see all the way to Riverside from here.

He says, “I’m pretty good with my hands. Back in the war I was an explosives guy, EOD. Did some demo when I got back stateside. Construction. Mining. Handlin’ that stuff never scared me. I never been the nervous sort anyway. Most just don’t have the stomach or nerves for it, though—can’t get them damn shakes out of their hands.”

“No, it’s not for everyone,” Eladio agrees.

Dallas takes another pull. “Yeah, but bein’ too scared of dyin’ ain’t no way to live.”

Dallas is really drifting, remembering, nursing the bottle of Wild Turkey, and only loosely cradling the Remington. If Eladio’s been waiting for his opening, his chance, this is it . . .

*if* he wants to risk it. He's buckled in, but Billie, still curled up tight in the back seat, isn't. Neither is Dallas.

If they end up fighting for the shotgun, losing control and rolling the truck, Eladio will probably crawl out of the wreckage; that's a lot less likely for the other two. But just like back at his house, out there on his dusty porch—when he and Billie were standing close together, and he had a gun pointed at her heart—he's still not ready to risk hurting her.

"You ever bury a man alive?" Dallas suddenly asks.

"No," Eladio says, thinking it's some kind of joke. "Can't say that I have."

"Not as hard as you might guess," Dallas says, unsmiling. And if it's a joke, there's no punch line. "I broke both that boy's legs and dug a hole and tossed him in it, and he was so scared he pissed and shit himself. All this godawful beggin', too, least till his mouth started fillin' up with dirt. But I just kept shovelin', and he got quiet as a church mouse soon enough."

Eladio says the next slow, soft, because he wants to make sure Dallas hears him loud and clear. "You just admitted to torturing and killing a man to a federal agent."

"Yeah," Dallas says, now fully, finally, focused on him again, the Remington closer. "The whole time I was shovelin' dirt over that son of a bitch, my hands didn't shake, not once. See, I *do* got the nerves . . . the stomach. So, whatever happens here, I'm good. I'm fine with it. Just thought I'd let you know what I'm wagerin' over *either* of us walkin' away from this. And that's with both legs workin' just fine."

Eladio doesn't know if the big biker was somehow reading his mind, but it's like a cold, ephemeral hand running down his neck. Like Billie's breath on him when they were standing so close on the porch. "I got it," Eladio says, and he does.

But Dallas is right: with every mile, there's less and less chance any of them will walk away unscathed.

“I truly am sorry about your daughter,” he adds. “About the baby.”

Dallas says, “I told you I don’t hear that ol’ boy beggin’ no more, but when it’s all quiet, when I’m alone, I do hear my Sunny laughing. And she had this *laugh*, amigo, like beer bottles clinking, like a birthday party or a good time at midnight, although truth to tell, she didn’t have much good to laugh about. She had this beautiful *light*, too, like an angel’s halo. But I never gave that little girl much cause or chance to smile or shine ’bout anything, and I reckon that’s the least a daddy should do.” Dallas runs a hand through his beard, pulling on it like he wants it to hurt . . . bad. “Sometimes I hear that little baby, too, that little innocent one that never had no chance. I hear both my daughter and my grandbaby laughin’ and cryin’ in my sleep, and I don’t know which is worse.”

Dallas’s admission, the cries of an unborn child in the night, runs another cold hand down Eladio’s neck, a second awful caress. “The whiskey helps?” he asks.

Dallas smiles, as ephemeral as that dead hand. “It sure don’t hurt.” Then he slips the bottle of Wild Turkey over to Eladio.

Eladio takes the bottle and checks the rearview mirror to find Billie’s eyes now open, staring at him. He doesn’t know how much she’s heard, if anything. “I never had kids,” he says, “so I don’t know. Not really. Not like you, not like Billie. But kids change things . . . change your perspective, your priorities.”

“That they do,” Dallas agrees.

“I was there when Renata was born,” Eladio continues, eyes still locked with Billie’s as he swallows the last of Dallas’s bourbon. “And that little girl changed *everything* . . . for everyone.”

*That little girl changed everything . . . for everyone.*

Special Agent Morales is talking about Rennie, but in so many ways, he's also talking about me. Becca used to bitterly complain about it all the time. First to our mother, then to Etan, and then to me.

When I was born, I changed everything for everyone too.

We hadn't been out at Jornada del Muerto long, the new buildings still smelling of pine resin and stamped aluminum, the starling coops mostly empty, when Becca first came to me in the night.

I had my own room even then, away from the others. Even though I hadn't taken my most sacred vows yet, I'd already assumed a special place in the Ark's hierarchy and at Etan's side.

I was only thirteen years old.



It was always easy for people to focus on my age, how I'm allegedly Etan's biological daughter, although the truth of that remains in doubt, even now, even to me. But given everything that happened, everything written about our years in New Mexico and how they ended for us, people come back to that again and again: Etan's multiple wives. Me. Renata.

And I get it, I do. There's the salacious aspect of it: sex sells books and shows, after all, raises all those inscrutable questions about how and why otherwise-smart women like my mother, like Becca, like Hannah and Devorah—*like me*—fell prey to the whims of a con artist and narcissist. How we succumbed to what you would now call a *high-control group* and allowed ourselves to be so utterly . . . *controlled*.

There are Seven Circles, or *cercles*, in the Ark of Lazarus. But hidden within the centermost of them is the *Centrum*, and only Etan's wives, only his Exalted, could ever attain that.

That standing came with a heavy price—he alone could decide what we could wear, when we could sleep, when we could eat—but also status and no small amount of privilege.

Etan preached that proper penance demanded suffering, that faith and wisdom required discomfort and obedience. But for those of us in the Centrum, Etan might softly temper our penance on occasion, even when it was wielded like a blade against everyone else.

Over time, Becca honed this blade to its sharpest point, ruthlessly attacking the very idea of the comfortable, the easy —

*Sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit . . .*

Everyone at the Ark of Lazarus started out as novitiates, aspiring to become acolytes, and eventually penitents. All of us preparing *daily*—spiritually, mentally, physically—for Ascension. But at Jornada del Muerto, only the Centrum, and those few whom Etan had deemed to have successfully Ascended *all* Seven Circles, were *guaranteed* a place in the Mithraeum, that most sacred space built to carry us safely through to the new world.

That hidden sanctum . . . *the bunker* . . . beneath the barn and starling coops, where our bodies would lay for four days. Where my daughter—Etan’s daughter—was destined to pray and watch over us until we were resurrected, just like Lazarus.

To raise us from the dead.

I was therefore a sacred vessel, the *pavitr paatr* in Hindi, a kind of living Sacristy. And although I was still subject to most of the Centrum’s rules, my status meant even *more* freedoms and favors. My father spoiled me. I was his little bird, he said, his *petit oiseau*.

Did I take advantage of that? No, not at first. The burden of bearing his child, bearing the *future*, was still years away, and I was still little more than a child myself. But over time, I realized just how special I was, and acted so. And most at the

Ark accepted this order of things and understood it, begrudgingly or not.

But as I got older, it only got harder for Becca. Losing her place, her status, must have felt like being *Disassociated*, falling back through the Circles she'd worked so hard to Ascend the hard way, one trial at a time.

Because I *couldn't* fall.

I was a Second-Generation Apostle, after all. I was *special*, I was Etan's daughter, and the mother of our salvation.

I was born already with wings.



When Becca crept in that night, with waning desert moonlight on my floor and the sound of music drifting from Etan's room down the hall, it was the first of a dozen nocturnal visits she'd pay me over our early years in New Mexico.

She slipped into my bed and lay next to me and held me in her long cool arms so tight I squirmed. She wasn't as thin as she would later become, but she was thinner than me—yet, in so many ways, even then, so much stronger.

Her arms above the elbows were mottled and scarred like the skin on her back and shoulders from the leather scourge she used on herself, and later used on me.

Her lips were close at my ear when she told me she knew that I was lying about *my* dreams, my visions. She told me to stop *faking* it, that it was so silly and childish and unnecessary, that I didn't have to work so hard to curry Eleazar's favor and attention.

That I was only making it harder for everyone else.

I tried to tell her that it wasn't my fault she wasn't an SGA or Eleazar's natural blood. That I couldn't help that the starlings flew only for me now or stop the visions of the daughter to come or the fire and rain and birds falling from the sky, the Black Sun rising.



How could I be blamed for things that were ordained . . . that were *prophesied*?

She only pulled me closer, tighter, laughing, asking, *But what will happen when the baby is born? What becomes of Eleazar's little bird then?*

I struggled against those strong, cool, wounded arms.

*Yes, he will still come, she whispered, as he still comes to me. He will tell you pretty things in French, in Arabic. He'll share his sacred secrets and promise he loves you and remind you that God or Elohim commands you to love him back. And you will, little sister, you will . . .*

She was crying.

*There are a thousand little birds like us, little sister, and when he casts you aside, you will hate him and still love him because it is ordained . . . because that is prophesied too.*

She then stroked my hair and kissed my forehead, and quoted what I would learn was one of Etan's favorite French poems—

The night has a thousand eyes,  
And the day but one;  
Yet the light of the bright world dies with the  
dying sun.  
The mind has a thousand eyes,  
And the heart but one;  
Yet the light of a whole life dies when love is  
done.

Not every visit began in tears or ended in threats or French poetry, and as I got older, they became less frequent altogether. But our relationship eroded, like the desert sand around us. And as our mother slipped into her own madness, Etan himself became ill, and Becca slowly—successfully—wrested control of the Ark from him, it only got worse.

That's when she started actively recruiting other young women for the Centrum among the newly arriving acolytes.

That's when she first saw her auras and preached from the Book of Enoch.

That's when she pronounced that she could heal the sick and the lame and that she was one of the Seven Archangels.

That's when she claimed my visions and dreams as her own, repeating and repurposing them to her whims, prophesying about coming strife and a great conflagration only she could see or avert, and demanding others in the Centrum secretly call her—

*Ananiel.*

The tension between us was palpable, an electricity in the air at Jornada del Muerto that made the Ark hot and uncomfortable. Everyone could feel it; everyone was affected by it.

When Aaron arrived, that tension became nearly unbearable.

But it was only after Rennie was born that it became truly dangerous.

Although Elise doesn't want to—really, really doesn't want to—she picks up both pendants.

She knows they've been scrubbed clean but can't help but wonder if some small part of Noah or Nadia still resides in them, a tiny bit of their essence or spirits left behind. She weighs one in each hand. They weigh next to nothing, almost entirely weightless.

If they hold souls, Elise can't feel them. They're small and meaningless in so many ways; if you found them lost in a desk drawer with a bunch of old pens and Bic lighters and pennies and leftover screws, you might not think twice about them. Might miss them altogether.

She's still struggling to understand how methodical, precise Grant missed these.

"I know, I know," he says, reading her expression, answering her unasked question. "I told you, I'm slipping." He gestures halfheartedly at the cold room around them, the lockers that fill again and again with the dead, no matter how hard he works to keep them empty. No matter what either of them do.

"But these *are* too important to miss, Grant," Elise says. "They tie both crime scenes together. They're a direct link to Sybilla Laure . . . maybe the killer or killers." More than that, they suggest to Elise that Sybilla is possibly even a New Lazarian herself, that she never truly left behind the beliefs of her youth.

"Maybe," Grant says as he takes the pendants back, then stows one in the drawer, holding on to the other one. "But clearly this is bigger than Limon or even Lincoln County. Bigger than *us*."

"Big or not, it's still my job."

"It doesn't have to be. Let CBI or the FBI or whoever else handle it. Just let go of this one." It's almost a plea.

“You’re worried,” she says, “worried about *me*. Why?”

He looks down at the pendant in his hand, turning it over in his fingers. “I’m worried you’re not prepared for this.” It’s a strange admission for Grant, who until today has always lauded her strength, her fortitude, her perseverance.

“Not prepared for *what*?”

He shrugs. “Whatever happens next . . . however this thing ends.”

“I appreciate that. Your concern. Your worry. I know it comes from a good place. But honestly, you’re not making any sense,” she says, “unless there’s more to this than I know. Unless *you* know more than you care to admit.”

And that’s been her growing suspicion all along . . . that Grant’s been holding back, although she can’t imagine what or why.

“I’m not sure I’m making sense, either,” he concedes. “But if you’re asking if I knew the Brannens, I did.” He looks away, unable or unwilling to face her. “I wasn’t sure until I reviewed the mobile clinic’s records, but there were two wellness checks on file for the girl, both following an incident involving the family dog, the one we saw in the pictures at the house. That was roughly around the time Renata stopped speaking. The father, Noah, wasn’t forthcoming about the details.”

“Did you know who her mother truly was?”

“No, of course not,” he says, in a way that suggests he likely suspected *something*, leaving Elise even more suspicious of what Grant does and doesn’t tell her: wary, too, of what he might’ve learned from Lt. Feehan and won’t share with her. “But Noah Brannen was worried about his wife, specifically her mental and emotional health. She wasn’t sleeping and evidently had a long history of depression. She’d been treated in the past for a delusional disorder.”

“Treated how?”

“Individual psychotherapy—”

“Dr. Fallon,” Elise says.

“—and medication,” Grant finishes. “Clozapine initially, then quetiapine.”

Elise doesn’t know what those drugs do or what their side effects might be, but she doesn’t recall seeing any pill bottles back at the house. “Was she still taking that stuff?”

“Not according to the clinic records, which were thin, to say the least. And I wouldn’t have been able to formally treat her anyway. She would’ve needed far more specialized and consistent care than I could give her out of the back of a converted school bus. The best I could do was a scrip for some sleeping pills, and a referral over to Colorado Springs.”

“Why the mobile clinic, and not the hospital?”

“Far fewer questions and little formal follow-up, but that’s just a guess. I never saw Sarah Brannen herself, Elise, never spoke with her. Only Noah when he came in with the girl. And I suspect Sarah, Sybilla, never knew he did.”

“Can I see whatever you *do* have on them?”

Grant reaches out and takes Elise’s hand, a sudden, surprising touch, although his hand is ice cold. “Elise, you know me. You know I don’t make emotional decisions, never been one to second-guess. I’ve always been too practical, too reasonable. Courtney used to tell me that all the time.”

“I told you that, too,” Elise says, “once upon a time.”

“That you did,” he says, remembering, smiling sadly. “Courtney was the one who wore her heart on her sleeve. She felt enough for us both. And then she was suddenly gone, ripped from me.” Grant pauses, remembering that, too, struggling. “I started questioning, feeling, everything.” He squeezes her hand. “And I have a bad feeling about *this*.”

“Again, I appreciate that,” Elise says, and she means it. “I truly do. But I don’t get to decide what’s important on a *feeling*.”

He drops her hand. “Then how do you feel about God, Elise? An afterlife? After everything you’ve been through, do

you have any sort of faith?”

She stares at him, uncomfortable—closer to angry—over where he might be heading with this, and why. “Honestly, I haven’t thought about it in years,” she says coolly, “and I don’t have time to convert now.”

He looks again at the pendant in his hand. It seems to kill the harsh light from above, to swallow it. “Not since Denny’s dad left or . . . even before that?”

“Don’t,” she warns.

“Not since Lily Renee?”

And that pulls her up like a harsh, stinging slap. Like the way he just callously dropped her hand. She can’t believe he’s willing to reopen her old wounds to justify his own stubborn reticence, his unconscionable furtiveness when it comes to the Brannens and Sybilla Laure. This is still her goddamn case, and a little girl is still missing.

“We’re done here, Grant. *Done*. I’ll get a warrant for what I need.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I know it’s hard to hear her name after all this time.”

“Don’t,” Elise says again. “*Don’t*.”

“I know how hard it is,” he continues, “for a parent to ever talk about a lost child.”

# 41

The sun sits low and late in a bloody western sky as we cross from Texas into New Mexico.

All three of us wear sunglasses against a fiery haze that shifts and coils like an aurora borealis, crimson and gold. The horizon moves like smoke, and maybe that's all it is.

The epic show in the heavens is because the world is falling apart all around us. Because firestorms—the Four Horsemen—are sweeping down the West Coast, consuming Washington, Oregon, California. Now Nevada and Colorado. Worse than the wildfires five years ago.

Brushfires still burn in Australia, too, all these years later.

The twin hurricanes—Ophelia and Nigel—are roiling in the gulf and expected to make landfall in the next twenty-four hours, where they'll slam into Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi.

It's all fire and rain as far as the eye can see.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, barefoot Ophelia is driven mad and dies by her own hand before becoming an angel in heaven.

Shakespeare wrote of the seven ages of man. There are seven candles on the Jewish menorah. In ancient Egypt, there were seven paths to heaven. Seven was a fundamental number to the Rosicrucians and the supposed foundation of their text *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosenkreutz*. Seven was also central to the cult of Mithra; Mithraics had to go through seven grades of initiation, survive various ordeal pits, not so different from the Ark's Seven Circles.

The seven luminaries—the seven classical planets—are visible to the naked eye.

In Christianity, there are seven layers of purgatory. Muslim pilgrims walk around the Kaaba seven times.

The Book of Revelation has its seven seals, seven trumpets, seven signs, seven bowls.

*Seven is a mystical number.*

In the Ark of Lazarus, there were seven signs, too, the Seven Signs of Ascension.

Unfortunately, they've been refined and modified through the years, some discarded altogether; they became everything and nothing at all. The New Lazarians adopted a few, and Ananiel identified others.

The first true image of a black hole.

The discovery of a second, more virulent strain of acute flaccid myelitis—Hadney-Pharoah's—a silent killer of children across the globe that now affects adults.

Bloody, eyeless birds falling from the sky.

Plague. Famine. War. Death.

*The Seventh Archangel.*

It's hard to see the whole pattern, to recognize all the signs, and it's even easier to misinterpret them or get them wrong.

I know I have. We all did, for so long.

But they're there if you look close enough, so I've been watching and waiting for them, scouring the news and the internet—one eye on Ananiel and the New Lazarians, because they've been searching, too, and one eye always on the skies. Not because I want to believe we're right, but because I so, so desperately hope we're wrong.

But looking now at this awful New Mexico sky, it's almost impossible to believe otherwise.



I try to talk about all these things with Agent Morales, but he's not interested.

He tells me those aren't signs, just *news* . . . and the most recent news out of Limon isn't good either. His FBI contacts in Colorado have told him that when Nadia was murdered, her killers tried to burn her body and took her *eyes*.



I struggle with that, try to make sense of it, and he can see that in my own eyes.

“What sort of *sign* is that supposed to be?” he asks. “Who is that message for, Billie?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” I admit.

“I don’t buy that,” he fires back. “I don’t *believe* it. You’ve been studying these New Lazarians for months, maybe years. Corresponding with them too. You’ve been—”

“No, not like that, though. Nothing like that.”

“Close enough,” he says. “Like they somehow got close to you . . . to get to Renata.” His dark sunglasses pin me down. “You’ve been part of this far longer than you want to admit.” He clutches the wheel like he’s going to speed up but slows down instead as realization dawns on his face. “Oh, Billie, you’ve been *posting* as Ananiel, too, haven’t you? *Pretending.*”

“Look, they perverted, corrupted, everything we did at the Ark . . .”

“That’s no goddamn excuse.”

“Did you know Becca started calling herself *Ananiel*? That night after Engle, when you weren’t there, when you fucking left me, she took the whip to me. I had to beg for mercy from *Ananiel*, not Becca. Not my fucking *sister.*”

But Agent Morales only smiles, bitter and lifeless. “That’s no answer either. Your sister was no more Ananiel then she was ever Rebecca. She was just a confused, hateful young woman who died ten years ago because she refused to save herself when she had the chance and refused to let others save themselves. Refused to accept that whatever else she may have wanted to believe about the Ark or Etan, it was *always* first and foremost a lie, one you *both* perpetuated. It’s easy to throw it all on Laure now that he’s dead and gone, but we know better, don’t we?”

“You’re talking about my life,” I say, but it sounds weak, empty, even to me.

“I’m talking about the three accounts Laure had in the Caymans, and the Raiffeisen account in Switzerland. The deed he owned to a chalet in Chamonix and the three hundred acres of Kentucky farmland he tucked away in your mother’s name. I’ll give him his due: Laure was a hell of a salesman. He just never *once* believed what he was selling. Unfortunately, you and Becca and so many others couldn’t *stop* believing it, until it was too fucking late.”

I get why he’s saying these things, this angry urge to pull back the curtain on something he thinks I don’t want to see or accept—

*Let’s talk about the fire, Billie . . .*

But he wasn’t there when Etan and Becca and I commanded the birds. He never fully believed my dreams and visions. He hasn’t followed the signs in years.

He has no idea the things Rennie can do now.

“This Ananiel has been drawing *you* out,” he continues, “and you just couldn’t help yourself. You took the bait. Laure preached free will, but that was always the first thing he took away. I’d hoped his death, the Ark’s demise, would give that freedom back to you, a second chance to choose or believe anything, maybe for the first time in your life. I thought you wanted that too. Yet here you are, waiting for the world to end all over again. You squandered everything we risked. A self-fulfilling prophecy, and the only one that ever fucking came true.”

“That’s enough, amigo,” Dallas says quietly from the passenger seat. “*Enough.*”

But Agent Morales only slows the truck down more, leaving us practically stalled on the empty highway. He turns on me. “You’re not out here to rescue Renata from these New Lazarians. You’re trying to *join* them before your doomsday clock runs out.” He shakes his head. “I promise you, Billie, the world’s going to be fine tomorrow. Shitty as always but fine. But today? This insanity is over.”

We lapse into silence, both of us spent, and in the quiet aftermath, I catch sight of a lone building on a nearby hill, a faded white church looming above us against the smoky sky. An abandoned, weather-beaten ruin, decades old, but somehow, in the moment, that small church out here in the middle of nowhere is symbolic, perfectly poetic.

*A sign.*

Like the church in Last Chance where I spent all those mornings reaching out to the New Lazarians, pretending I was just one more true believer like them, while pretending to myself I wasn't.

Dallas is the first to pick out the vehicle racing from the shadows of what is left of the church, a small SUV trailing a horse tail of dust, obscuring it, as it flies toward the highway. If Agent Morales doesn't speed us up again, or the mystery SUV doesn't slow down, it will arrow through us.

"On your right, amigo," Dallas warns, but by then, Agent Morales sees it too.

He guns the engine, trying to open some distance, get us out of the way, just before something fast and heavy hits the hood. Followed rapidly by a second *something* winging just as fast off the windshield, punching an air-sucking hole through it.

Not birds . . . not this time . . . only light and heat and dust swirling in the cab.

"They're *shooting*," I yell as I drop the back window to get a better look.

The highway wind is really rushing in now, turning up the volume in the truck, as our pursuer hits a rise at full speed and goes airborne, pulling free of its dusty shroud, revealing a blue Hyundai.

The front passenger window is down, and bright muzzle flashes bloom there, one after another after another. Shooting low . . . shooting at our *tires*.

I have the Colt and I'm about to return fire when I go airborne, too, weightless, our truck slipping free of the

highway, starting to flip sideways, then barrel rolling down the center line.

We're all thrown upward, outward, except Agent Morales, who is wearing his seat belt.

Dallas's head hits the ceiling with a sickening crunch, his bulk otherwise holding him down. But his shotgun inadvertently goes off, a horrible, deafening blast that drowns out the screaming tires and crunching metal. That sounds like a thousand brass trumpets. Like Revelation.

Sparks boil off the pavement as the truck bounces and slides, peeling paint down to the steel beneath.

I spin and spin while sunlight and dust and broken glass glitter around me.

The bird box flies past, thrown wide open, the dead starling within set free, and it looks for all the world like it's flying again, too, right out the open window.

I grab for it, try to pull it back, until all the blood blinds me.

**US Department of Justice Attorney Work Product // May  
Contain Material Protected Under Fed. R. Crim. P. 6(e)**

**Report on the Investigation into Federal Conduct Before,  
During, and After Operation Sanctuary**

**Volume I of II**

**Special Counsel Donald K. Young**

***Submitted Pursuant to 28 CFR § 600.8(c)***

**Washington, DC**

**September 2019**

**APPENDIX A**

**TRANSCRIPT OF TESTIMONY OFFERED UNDER OATH BY  
SPECIAL AGENT ELADIO A. MORALES DURING REPORT TO  
THE DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL ON THE EVENTS AT  
JORNADA DEL MUERTO, NEW MEXICO.**

**(JWG): Congressman James W. Grijalva (R, New Mexico)**

**(EAM): Special Agent Eladio A. Morales, FBI.**

**JWG: Thank you for meeting with us again, Special Agent Morales. I'm sure you're tired of covering the same ground.**

**EAM: I'm fine, sir. It's all part of getting at the truth.**

**JWG: And do you think you know the truth of what happened in March 2015?**

**EAM: I know my part, sir, which is all I can know.**

**JWG: As we've already established, you were not involved in the tactical raid planning on the Ark of Lazarus compound, were you?**

**EAM: No, sir, I was not. I provided input, but operational planning for the raid itself was conducted by Senior Supervisory Agent Dan Coats, members of our Hostage Rescue Team, and elements from the ATF.**

**JWG: Were you satisfied with the plan your senior leadership put together?**

**EAM:** I don't understand the question.

**JWG:** Was the plan sufficient to secure the compound and the safety of the people within?

**EAM:** I had concerns, but they were adequately addressed.

**JWG:** And they were?

**EAM:** The compound consisted of several buildings. The main lodge we referred to as the Big House, the outer trailers, the barn. I was concerned about our ability to safely secure all the locations in a timely manner, given the propensity of the people within to freely move around.

**JWG:** What about their propensity to carry weapons?

**EAM:** They were often armed, yes. Not all of them, though.

**JWG:** They had a well-stocked armory, explosives?

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** During your time together, you had the opportunity to train with them, to shoot with them?

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** How would you rate their marksmanship? FBI level?

**EAM:** There were some very capable marksmen among them.

**JWG:** Did you advocate for diversionary or incendiary devices? An airborne assault?

**EAM:** No, I did not.

**JWG:** Why?

**EAM:** Because I believed they would surrender willingly. I hoped they would.

**JWG:** Three dead federal agents would suggest that hope was misplaced.

**EAM:** As would the other forty-seven who died. I'm cognizant now that I was wrong.

**JWG:** The raid was set originally for March 20th, correct?

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** Who moved up the date?

**EAM:** SSA Dan Coats.

**JWG:** But that was only after a meeting with you?

**EAM:** Yes.

**JWG:** And that meeting set the raid into motion nearly forty-eight hours earlier than planned.

**EAM:** Yes, sir, I believe so.

**JWG:** Why is that?

**EAM:** There was increasing friction in the group, ostensibly two factions.

**JWG:** Two factions? Is it possible to illuminate this?

**EAM:** Not easily.

**JWG:** Well, let's try, Special Agent Morales.

**EAM:** For most of the Ark's history, Etan Laure was its lone voice, a man who at times held himself out as a prophet, the Messiah, and even Jesus reincarnated. He was the Fourth Day, the shepherd, and the Ark of Lazarus was his flock, preparing to usher in a new world after Ascension. At various times he referred to global events, signs, that would indicate we were on the cusp of Ascension, even going so far as to predict specific dates, but the signs changed frequently, arbitrarily, and the dates came and went without incident. Also, Laure created a series of tests and purification rites, Seven Circles, that really were just loyalty tests. Failing them meant you couldn't Ascend. You risked your soul.

**JWG:** And just so we're clear, so there's no ambiguity, you are talking about the End of the World? The biblical Apocalypse?

**EAM:** That was the problem. There was too much ambiguity. And Laure's interpretation of the apocalypse was biblical only in the loosest sense.

**JWG:** Nevertheless, Laure and his followers were preparing for a doomsday scenario out in the desert?

**EAM:** They were readying themselves for Ascension. It wasn't doomsday to them. It was a New Day Dawning, their version of Heaven on Earth. A Better World. The World to Come.

**JWG:** One where Laure's followers would be our leaders, our overlords.

**EAM:** After four days, they expected to be resurrected. Figuratively, if not literally.

**JWG:** Is that why they were stockpiling weapons, explosives?

**EAM:** They anticipated violence in the days leading up to Ascension. They expected resistance.

**JWG:** All the while, Laure was hiding assets, buying luxury items and exotic properties, padding personal offshore bank accounts. He clearly believed the mundane trappings of wealth, power, and privilege were going to be just as valuable in his new world as this old one we're still stuck with.

**EAM:** I don't believe Eleazar . . . Laure . . . believed in anything other than his own aggrandizement or enrichment. However, many of those who followed him believed almost everything he preached or taught or prophesied.

**JWG:** But there was disillusionment among these believers? These different factions?

**EAM:** There was a schism, a doctrinal split, between the most devout. Some believed Becca Laure was destined to be the group's true spiritual leader, both pre- and post-Ascension. Others saw Sybilla as heir apparent, particularly after the birth of her daughter, Renata.

**JWG:** And Laure was sick too? Dying?

**EAM:** I didn't know that then. I don't think anyone did. There's been no evidence put forward in the four years since to verify it. But that was the rumor.



**JWG:** And who spread that rumor?

**EAM:** I believe Becca Laure.

**JWG:** So, this is what I'm struggling with, Agent Morales, even though I've repeatedly been over the record. An implication that a costly federal raid was ill-advisedly and prematurely greenlit based not only on rumors and innuendo and incomplete intelligence, but seemingly to referee a family fight? Is that possible?

**EAM:** I've never agreed with that assessment, nor did the Office of Inspector General. We had valid search and arrest warrants. The legal concerns never changed.

**JWG:** And those were?

**EAM:** The numerous weapons violations you've already mentioned, including unlawful possession of a destructive device, in violation of 26 United States Code, section 5845(f).

**JWG:** But you only had arrest warrants for Etan Laure and Becca Laure, specifically?

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** Is it safe to say that Becca Laure's arrest would've effectively de-escalated the animosity between her and her sister, Sybilla?

**EAM:** I don't think anyone looked at it that way.

**JWG:** I'm not asking anyone, I'm asking you. More pointedly, what faction did you side with?

**EAM:** Excuse me?

**JWG:** You stated that these cult members, and let's again be clear about that, this cult, this violent, domestic terrorist group threatening the sovereignty of the United States, had divided itself into two camps whose enmity was threatening to boil over into the wider community. They were readying themselves for armed conflict, if not against each other, then those who disagreed with them.

**EAM:** I'm not sure that's a full or fair characterization.

**JWG:** I'm sure you don't, Special Agent Morales. And I understand. You lived almost side by side with these people, so I can only imagine your loyalties and sympathies were tested.

**EAM:** My only loyalty was to my work, the Bureau, and the mission I was given.

**JWG:** I don't mean to impugn that. I'm talking only about the split within the Ark of Lazarus. You had an undercover role to maintain, and that likely required taking a side.

**EAM:** I did my best not to take a side.

**JWG:** I'm sure that was difficult.

**EAM:** The whole assignment was difficult, sir.

**JWG:** For the record, I think Operation Sanctuary represents a colossal . . . REDACTED / HARM FOR ONGOING MATTER.

**EAM:** Those were not my decisions. I did the best I could under the circumstances.

**JWG:** I know, Special Agent Morales. But I need to ask you some questions about your relationship with the Laure sisters. Or Laure's wives. Or whatever you want to call them.

**EAM:** They were half sisters. But both were married to Etan Laure.

**JWG:** Sybilla was also his biological daughter?

**EAM:** Allegedly. But as I understood it, these marriages to Laure were mostly symbolic.

**JWG:** The record itself, the birth of one Renata Laure, indicates they were more than symbolic.

**EAM:** I can't comment on that. But both Becca and Sybilla were part of the Centrum, a smaller sect within the group's hierarchy, comprised only of women.

**JWG:** But only certain women, right? Laure's so-called wives?

**EAM:** Yes.

**JWG:** Was self-harm, flagellation, piercing, or even branding a routine practice in the Centrum?

**EAM:** I didn't know much about the inner workings of the Centrum, for obvious reasons.

**JWG:** But corporal punishment was relatively common within the Ark of Lazarus.

**EAM:** Suffering was part of their belief system. Sometimes that included physical penance for transgressions.

**JWG:** Is it fair to say that some of the previous tensions you described can also be attributed to the existence of this Centrum?

**EAM:** There was a feeling that the Centrum had liberties other members of the Ark didn't enjoy. Abel, I'm sorry, Connor Whaley, left Jornada del Muerto prior to March 2015, over this very issue. He'd been arguing for months with Laure over the Ark's direction.

**JWG:** And what faction was Mr. Whaley part of?

**EAM:** He was close with Becca.

**JWG:** Intimate?

**EAM:** That wasn't allowed.

**JWG:** How would you characterize your relationship with her?

**EAM:** There's nothing to characterize.

**JWG:** But not close?

**EAM:** Not particularly, no.

**JWG:** Not intimate?

**EAM:** No, absolutely not.

**JWG:** And Sybilla?

**EAM:** Sybilla and I were closer in age.

**JWG:** She was eighteen, if barely that, and you were twenty-five, Special Agent Morales. Becca Laure was thirty, give or

take. The math might make a liar out of you.

**EAM:** I know the chronology. I just meant we were closer in . . . temperament.

**JWG:** You were a new agent, inexperienced, yet well thought of in your field office.

**EAM:** I would like to think so.

**JWG:** In fact, the reason you were selected for such a difficult assignment was because you were young and didn't, and I'm merely quoting SSA Coats here, "give off that cop vibe."

**EAM:** I've seen that report and his statements.

**JWG:** Would you say you enjoyed at least a camaraderie with Sybilla? That maybe she looked up to you . . . liked you?

**EAM:** I wouldn't say that.

**JWG:** She was a sheltered young woman, inexperienced in so many ways, like you. A new mother impregnated during your time with the Ark of Lazarus, alone and in over her head, as some have since suggested you were. It could be argued the two of you had more in common than just temperament. Did she tell you she had magical powers? That she could see the future?

**EAM:** Yes. But Becca did as well. And Laure.

**JWG:** Did you believe her?

**EAM:** I didn't believe any of them. Ever.

**JWG:** What about her daughter, Laure's progeny? Did she share these magical powers too?

**EAM:** She was considered important by the Ark of Lazarus. Special.

**JWG:** Here's this pretty, young mother, scared and under siege, everyone around her taking up sides in this battle of good and evil, talking up the End of the World, and you're one of her few friends in the whole world. As far as we know, one of the few outsiders she's ever gotten close to, and

surprisingly, also one of the few who also has the ability and wherewithal to help her . . . if she asked.

**EAM:** I'm not sure what you're suggesting.

**JWG:** Only what the facts suggest. Did you ever tell that girl that you were a federal agent?

**EAM:** No, sir, I did not.

**JWG:** Never dropped a hint about the impending raid you were there to put into motion? Nor suggested spiriting her away beforehand?

**EAM:** No, sir, I did not.

**JWG:** So, anyone who believes that the raid was conducted in a time and manner that most benefitted Sybilla Laure would be wrong?

**EAM:** REDACTED / PERSONAL PRIVACY

**JWG:** REDACTED / HARM FOR ONGOING MATTER

**JWG CONT'D:** I know our time is short, but I would like to turn our attention to the morning of the raid.

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** Despite all the evidence in the record, we still have no clear causation for the fires that swept through the Lazarus compound.

**EAM:** No, sir, we don't.

**JWG:** But our operating assumption, and OIG's conclusion, is that the cultists themselves likely set those fires.

**EAM:** Media outlets and so-called experts in some quarters still accuse the Bureau of setting them. There are other theories that their stockpiled ammunition cooked off, spontaneously igniting.

**JWG:** At least three fires in three different locations across the compound suggests they were, in fact, deliberately set, then accelerated, pointing to coordination and premeditation.

**EAM:** I stand by my prior testimony and the DAG's findings.

**JWG:** You were never aware of the vast stores of phenobarbital and cyanide?

**EAM:** I saw small amounts at the compound and detailed that in my reports.

**JWG:** What about the bunker under the bird coops in the barn? This Mithraeum?

**EAM:** I also outlined that in my reports and detailed it extensively in preoperational briefings.

**JWG:** A bunker lockable only from the inside?

**EAM:** That's what I was told.

**JWG:** Large enough to hold at least two dozen or more cult members?

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** REDACTED / HARM FOR ONGOING MATTER

**JWG CONT'D:** Special Agent Morales, do you believe the Ark of Lazarus cultists poisoned themselves and then purposefully and deliberately immolated their compound at Jornada del Muerto?

**EAM:** Yes, sir, unfortunately, I do.

**JWG:** And you understand that level of premeditation suggests those same cultists had prior knowledge of what was supposed to be a surprise raid?

**EAM:** I do.

**JWG:** Do you have an explanation for that?

**EAM:** No, sir, I do not.

**JWG:** Sybilla Laure's lawsuits lay the blame at the Bureau's feet. Her civil suit award legally implicates the FBI, and to a lesser extent, you.

**EAM:** I know that Sybilla was, and likely remains, a traumatized young woman.

**JWG:** Who somehow miraculously walked away when no one else did.

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** You weren't supposed to be part of the raid team itself, were you?

**EAM:** No. I was only there that morning to provide active intelligence, help with any subsequent searches, and identify detainees. Given my undercover role, we were unsure when or how my true affiliation should be revealed, or how it would be received.

**JWG:** It might exacerbate an already delicate situation? A volatile situation?

**EAM:** Yes, sir, I believe that was a concern, shared by many.

**JWG:** But you know there are affidavits from some of your fellow agents stating that you explicitly deviated from the operational plan. That, in fact, you entered the compound on your own during the initial raid.

**EAM:** Yes, sir, I've seen those.

**JWG:** And your response?

**EAM:** That would've been impossible. I never left the command post until I was instructed to.

**JWG:** So, they were merely mistaken?

**EAM:** Honestly, it was all very confusing.

**JWG:** I'm not being flippant or frivolous when I ask this next question, Special Agent Morales, but I am a God-fearing man. I was raised a devout Roman Catholic, as I believe you were.

**EAM:** Yes, sir.

**JWG:** Did you see any magic or miracles during your time at the Ark of Lazarus?

**EAM:** No, sir. Not unless you count Sybilla and her daughter surviving that conflagration, which in hindsight, does seem

like a minor miracle to me.

**JWG:** Did those fires start before or after the tactical raid began, Special Agent Morales?

**EAM:** I don't know. I don't think anyone does.

**JWG:** Did you accelerate the raid's timetable because you had concerns about just such an event? Did you fear that without immediate intervention, there would be a violent, internal clash precipitated by warring factions within the Ark of Lazarus?

**EAM:** No, sir, I never anticipated that. No one could have. I just knew my work was done.

**JWG:** REDACTED / HARM FOR ONGOING MATTER

**JWG CONT'D:** If you could go back in time, Special Agent Morales, if you could do it all over again, is there anything you'd do differently?

**EAM:** I'd do it all differently, sir. Everything.



“I’m not talking about this . . . *her* . . . with you,” Elise says. “Not today, not tomorrow.”

She backs away from Grant, from Nadia’s covered, lifeless body. “But,” she adds, “I’ll be back in an hour with that warrant.”

Grant blinks. “Elise, please, no. I’ll give you whatever you need, whatever you want. I had no right to bring Lily up. None.” He raises his hands, surrendering. “But I saw how you struggled after her passing . . . how you struggled again after Denny’s dad left . . . and—”

“Don’t fucking do that,” she says, biting off each word. “Don’t make me sound so goddamn *weak*, and don’t you dare turn me into a cliché. I wasn’t some hysterical woman who came apart or broke down.”

“But I did . . . *I* broke down, I fell apart,” Grant admits. “After Courtney died, I was so lost, alone, empty. Because that’s what true grief does. It rips a hole through you, hollows you out, leaves nothing behind. It has *teeth*, Elise, and it’ll eat you alive, eat you whole, if you let it.”

“I’m sorry, Grant. I truly am.” Sorry that they’ve known each other so long and maybe still don’t know each other well enough. “We understand grief as well as anyone, both professionally and personally.”

But Grant ignores her, pushing ahead. “And those teeth are sharpest when it’s a child. I imagine there’s nothing like that pain, nothing like it in the world.” He looks over at Nadia’s covered body. “At least Nadia Rupert won’t face that now. She’ll never see her son fall sick or suffer, never know the agony of having him taken by some senseless tragedy or struck down too young.”

“The way she was?” Elise asks, incredulous. “It’s not a fucking *choice*.”

Grant shakes his head. “You don’t think she would’ve traded every year of her life for even one of his? Her flesh and blood, her *child*? Maybe she did, Elise; we don’t truly know what went on in that trailer. We don’t know what she *offered*. But we both saw *exactly* what Noah Brannen was willing to do, what he was willing to sacrifice, for his daughter.” Grant stares at her. “He laid down his life for hers. And isn’t that what you’re willing to do, too, every day you put on that badge?”

“This is . . . ridiculous,” she says, shrugging off his question.

“No, this is perhaps the only question that truly matters. The question each of us must ask ourselves. A question of *faith*.” He pauses. “What if there’s nothing after *this*, Elise? No God or heaven or afterlife? What if these few, fleeting, earthbound years are all we get? All there ever *is*? If so, then they are too precious to contemplate, priceless beyond measure. If so, then it’s a *sin* to waste even one, to let something like grief or pain or suffering swallow them by the decades. To foolishly take these lives, our very *existence*, for granted.” He pauses again, sharing another one of those sad smiles. “For as it says in the Psalms, we are like a breath of air, and our days are like passing shadows.”

And for someone who’s willingly sacrificed so much, given so much of himself to the community for so long, this doesn’t sound like Grant at all. She says, “If there’s no God, then there’s no sin, either, and I’m just fine with that. And do you honestly think I’ve taken *any* moment after Lily’s death for *granted*?”

A shadow plays over Grant’s face, as if the bright lights overhead have suddenly lost intensity: a moth or bird flickering past, but there’s nothing there.

“No, but I do think you’ve needlessly suffered. And that’s faith, Elise, or lack thereof.” He takes a deep breath. “Believe it or not, even a doctor, a man of science, can appreciate that kind of conviction,” he says. “Patients expect me to magically heal their sicknesses and frailties, to unfailingly fix their suffering. And worse still are those parents of severely ill

children, who always demand nothing less than a miracle. I treat them all as best I can, knowing for most that the drugs and procedures and surgeries and science itself will fall short; even the prayers will eventually go unanswered. There will be no miracles, but only the bitter realization that the worst suffering was likely my so-called heroic efforts. That in the end, I was always destined to fail them.”

“Grant—”

Grant ignores her again, talking right through her. “But those of faith seem better able to shoulder that horrible suffering, that ravenous grief. The inevitable doesn’t frighten them, convincing themselves it is all part of some grand plan, God’s design. They see his hand at work, even when it’s bloody. Call it heaven or the other side or whatever, they truly believe there is more than this mortal coil. They know and accept that *this* life, our world, is but . . . a passing shadow.” He nods at something unseen. “When I can do no more, when they know there is nothing more to be done, they surrender peacefully. Even those who have it the hardest . . . those who have to let children go.”

Grant’s admissions, more personal, more intimate, than anything he’s ever shared with her, have drained him, exposed him.

“We often see faith as a weakness,” he says, “a failing. But it can also be a source of ferocious, infinite *strength*. And the people who did this”—he regards Nadia’s body covered in white—“the people who cut this woman’s eyes out and put that pendant under her tongue, they *believe*, Elise. They’re willing to kill for that belief, for their *faith*, and I have no doubt they’ll die for it.”

Grant slides Nadia back into her locker, then shuts the door behind her with a soft click. He turns back to Elise. “They risk everything because nothing in our world matters to them. But what is it you’re risking now, to see this through?”

“Are you really telling me you’re worried about my *soul*?”

“Maybe,” Grant says. “I’m worried about *you*. You can’t repair your relationship with Denny this way. You can’t bring back Denny’s dad to you . . . or Lily Renee.”

“And that’s what you think I’m trying to do?”

“Unresolved grief drives us to all sorts of . . . desperate things.”

“As do anger and hate and despair. As do zealotry and radicalism and extremism.” Now it’s her turn to shake her head. “Grief is no excuse, and neither is faith.”

“True,” Grant says. “Very true.” He looks tired again, defeated. “The Greeks, the Romans, used to put coins called *obol* in the mouths of the dead, small offerings, payment to Charon to safely guide souls across the river Styx into the afterlife. It’s a custom that’s proliferated over millennia. Not just coins, but tiny crosses, carved stones, gold foil stamped with birds.” He holds up the remaining AXL pendant he’s kept palmed this whole time, and Elise doesn’t know if it’s the one he found beneath Nadia’s tongue, or Noah’s. “But the *intent* is always the same, Elise: to ensure that the soul isn’t forever lost, that it gets safely to where it belongs, where it’s supposed to be. I don’t want you to get lost chasing these people . . . these zealots. I don’t want to lose you too soon.” He puts the pendant in her hand. “Because the end *is* inevitable.”

Before Elise can answer, her cell rings, mercifully interrupting the moment, giving her a chance to take a breath and calm down.

The call is from an unknown number, and she stares at her reflection in the metal countertop, now turning the AXL pendant in her own fingers, in some ways no different from the badge she wears, and just as heavy—

*They risk everything . . .*

Grant is right about one thing, though. She’ll be in one of these lockers someday, her own soul unbound, and it might be a good idea to sort out what she believes before then.

“What is it?” Grant asks, gesturing to her phone as she slips it into her coat pocket.

“There’s been an incident,” she says. “An attack, outside Clovis, near Fort Sumner.”

“New Mexico?”

“Yes.” And she suspects even Grant understands what New Mexico means to the Ark of Lazarus. “A truck has been recovered over there. A truck registered *here*. The owner lives in the same apartment complex where Dallas McGee was laying his head.”

Now they know how Sybilla, and McGee, got out of Limon, and where they went after.

“Oh,” Grant says. “What about—”

“Yes.” She stops him, turning to the door. “There are bodies. Several.”

There's blood in my eyes, but I crawl clear of the crumpled truck and fight my way to standing.

I never let go of the Colt, and I hold it up in front of me like a cross, like a talisman, as foam floats in the air from our ripped car seats, reminding me of white feathers.

My ears still roar, the sound of the crash rolling back and forth in my head like ocean waves, and I feel seasick, like I'm going to throw up. I don't know if I've broken anything, but *everything* hurts. My entire body trembles, shakes.

Agent Morales is still pulling himself free from the truck as sparks flicker and fly off its undercarriage, the shooters in the Hyundai trying to pin him down, pick him off.

I search for Dallas, but in the haze, I can't find him.

The Hyundai's pulled up short twenty yards away, tires smoking, both front doors open, and the driver and a blond-haired passenger have taken up cover behind them, shooting through the open windows and around the doorframes. The passenger looks like he's wearing a flak jacket, thick body armor.

I take all this in with one look and then drop to a knee and zero in on the driver, who's somehow *already* wounded, his head wrapped in a thick bandage.

I aim low, trying to slip a round under the door, into his feet or knees. With a heavier-caliber weapon, I'd shoot right through the door. And although it's been a while since I've fired anything, the gun feels natural in my hands—

*Light as a feather.*



Braum was tall, with a thick dusky beard.

On his left forearm, he had a frog skeleton tattoo and an inked trident, almost iridescent on his tanned skin. If he ever

laughed once, really laughed out loud, I never heard it. But he was always nice to me, if a little standoffish, awkward.

I was a kid, and a special one at that, and he didn't know how to deal with me. He was married before, and his wife had left him while he was on deployment, taking his two young sons. He struggled after the military, missing that camaraderie and sense of purpose, that clear-eyed focus on the next mission, where there's always a next mission.

The Ark of Lazarus gave him that. The End of the World became his mission.

At Becca's urging and with Etan's blessing, he took over the Ark's firearms, defensive tactics, and explosives training. Due to his former military contacts, he was also instrumental in expanding our small but growing armory.

Not everyone enjoyed the training, much less was good at it, but Braum told me I was a natural. Next to Becca, I was one of his best students.

The one place he felt comfortable around me was on our makeshift firearms range, where we spent long hours together practicing tactical reload drills and popping steel plates, the echoes of AR-15s ringing up and down the sunburned canyon, muzzle smoke drifting into the clear sky.

Three FBI agents were shot and killed during the raid on the Ark, and although it was never proved in court, or during any of the inquests afterward, I know it was Braum.

His body was recovered with a rifle all but melted into his hands.



Now it's like Braum's at my shoulder all over again, talking into my ear, telling me to *breathe, relax, aim . . .*

I don't empty the mag, but I let the driver know I'm deadly serious, tightening up my shot group. The driver disappears into the Hyundai, pulling the door shut behind him.

Another car suddenly flies by me on the highway, and a perfectly timed stray round punctures its windshield, the man

behind the wheel never realizing he's driving through the middle of a firefight until it's too late. The car slips, slides, barely misses our wrecked truck, and then erratically turns into the oncoming traffic lane, where it rolls to a stop.

Agent Morales trades fire with the pale-blond guy in the body armor, hugging the side of our overturned truck, using it for cover. Leaning out, taking one measured shot after another, then leaning back again, steadying himself. He spies me and holds up a hand, slashing it right two times, wanting me to flank the Hyundai—he knows my training at the Ark—and hoping to get my ass off the exposed highway.

I move fast and low and mentally count how many rounds I have left—

*Onetwothreefour . . .*

A bullet skips off the pavement, humming like a passing starling.

*Fivesix . . .*

The wounded driver is a hazy silhouette in the Hyundai's open window, reloading.

*Seven.*

I put two into the shadows, but instead of getting wide, I charge straight at the Hyundai.

Braum used to say action always beats reaction, that surprise *always* wins, and if I'm surprised by my own sudden change in direction, then the driver is absolutely fucking *shocked*.

Despite the pain, a broken-glass feeling in my left leg, I clear the distance between us and empty the Colt's mag into the open window. Then I'm at the window itself, pulling the door open, dragging the wounded man onto the pavement.

I've shot him at least twice already: once in the chest, the second grazing his throat.

Blood jets high, fan-tailing across the side of the SUV, across my arms. He tries to hold the gaping wound closed with his fingers, trying to stay alive, as hot blood fills his mouth.



The bandage on his head slips off, revealing a deep, ugly gash at his temple, running jaggedly up his hairline. I pull him close, blood covering us both, and stare into the dying light of his eyes and ask him where Rennie is.

I yell it at him again and again, same question over and over, because I know without a doubt this man killed my husband and took my daughter. But he only smiles through red teeth and tells me how much we look alike; he then draws what feels like spreading wings, a bloody *bird* on my forehead, with a shaking finger as the blond passenger on the other side of the Hyundai lines up a clear shot.

I'm only feet away, close enough we can hear each other's labored breathing, and the man in my arms says something . . . *I think he says my name . . .* but I can't let him go, won't let him go, even if it kills us both.

He smiles again and his eyes shine and he says, "You look so much alike."

The blond man has the shot. He has *me*. There's a sudden booming and white light.

*Once.*

I close my eyes.

*Twice.*

Only to open them again and find the twin blasts are Dallas's shotgun going off in quick succession in close quarters.

I don't know where he's been, how he's appeared out of seemingly thin air, but Dallas now looms over the Hyundai, emptying the Remington into the blond man, spent shells popping and spinning over his shoulder. Dallas is a bloody mess, too, his head held at an odd, awful angle, and he blocks out the sun.

The blond man gets off the shot he didn't take on me, catching Dallas square in the gut, just before the blond man *explodes*.

Dallas's first blast pins him against the side of the Hyundai, and the second messily takes his head off: everything above his chin disappears in a grainy crimson mist, and what's left of his straw-blond hair goes flying.

All the while the wounded man in my arms is still talking to himself, crying, reciting Etan's old French poem like a prayer . . . *the night has a thousand eyes* . . . until he sighs one last time and finally dies too—

*You look so much alike.*

And then Agent Morales is at my shoulder.

"It's finished, Billie," he says. "Finished."

All I can do is let the dead man slip from my arms and stare out at the carnage.

Our wrecked truck.

The other car still idling down the road, where there's probably one dead, maybe more.

Two bodies sprawled around me.

Spent shells that still glitter and roll on the pavement and broken glass that winks and gleams like a million fallen stars. A murky haze that hangs over the highway, gritty ash from either the Four Horsemen fires or our own drifting muzzle smoke.

My ringing ears.

It's a miracle that more passing traffic didn't get caught in the crossfire, the highway somehow mercifully, eerily empty, as if God left it this way just for us.

Dallas has retrieved the blond man's weapon—an automatic rifle—and looks like he's going to use it as a crutch, because he's shaky on his feet, gut shot and bleeding bad and likely suffering a concussion from the crash.

He opens and closes his eyes, desperate to focus, to blink away something he doesn't want to or can't stop seeing.

"No indication that Renata was ever here," Agent Morales says. He's also covered in shattered safety glass, streaked in blackening blood, and I don't know how much of it is his or someone else's. He moves with a limp and evident pain, but all the while he's been searching our attackers' Hyundai and now their bodies. "We need to get Dallas to a hospital. Once we find out who these men are, we'll get her."

"No," I say, struggling to stand. "We're going. Now."

He looks from me to the dead man I was just cradling. "After *this*? No. *No.*"

I've been watching these New Lazarians for two years, blindly assuming I knew what they were capable of because—from afar—it all looked so much like the old Ark of Lazarus.

But I never saw . . . never truly imagined . . . Noah's murder or Nadia's missing eyes or this brazen assault here. Never envisaged Rennie's kidnapping.

*You look so much alike.*

I never wanted to see or believe or accept that Rennie—who was always so important to the Ark—might also be in danger from these new believers.

I never understood they were watching *me* all along too.

And I have no idea how they found me again so soon.

“She was *here*,” Dallas suddenly says, ignoring the wound in his gut, all the spreading blood, and I don't know if he's talking about Rennie or how he's possibly still standing there, talking so calmly at all.

From the look on his face, neither does Agent Morales.

“After the crash,” he continues. “I was trapped in that truck, and she was there, right there.” Dallas points to a spot up near the ruined church that caught my attention at the start of this. “I saw her through the windshield, clear as day.” His eyes are bright in a way they weren't even moments ago, and I pray he saw Rennie there. “Clear as you standin' here now. Hair down, blowin' all around, and she came to me and helped me right outa the truck. She *lifted* me free of it.”

“Who?” Agent Morales asks.

“Sunny,” Dallas says. “My little girl.”

A flicker passes over Agent Morales's cut and bloody face, an acknowledgment, an understanding, or something more. But instead, he says, “No, that didn't happen.” He shakes his head as glass falls on the ground. “You're hurt, Dallas, hurt fucking bad. Concussion, blood loss. And if we don't get you help, you're going to bleed out here and die.”

Dallas ignores him, talking only to me. “She touched my face and called me Daddy and said she was sorry for it all. I

said I was sorry, too, baby girl, and then she lifted me up and put my feet on the road and that scatter gun in my hand and told me I had to save the girl.”

“Billie?” Agent Morales asks.

“No,” Dallas answers. “The young one. Renata.”

Tears now stream down Dallas’s face, but he’s also smiling up at the horrible sky, smiling at Agent Morales. “She said it’s beautiful now and she don’t hurt no more and she don’t want me to hurt no more neither. She told me she forgives me, and we’ll be together soon enough. All I gotta do is see my part through. So, hell or high water, that’s what I gotta do, amigo.” He takes the rifle he pulled from the blond man’s dead hands and aims it squarely at Agent Morales’s head. “See it through.”

Agent Morales now pleads with me. “He’s hallucinating, Billie. Tell him we need to get him help. Tell him to drop that fucking gun. *Order him.* He’s—”

And then a bird drops out of the roseate sky, fluttering, landing light and alive on the Hyundai’s hood. A dark-winged starling, feathers flecked like all those broken-glass stars all around us.

Sure, it’s possible this is the same dead one I was carrying from Limon, bloody and eyeless, the one I last saw thrown clear of our truck, escaping its shoebox coffin as we tumbled and wrecked.

But if it is, that would be a miracle.

It watches us with night-black eyes until it starts *singing*, a beautiful series of chirps and whistles and warbles at odds with the chaos and death all around. It’s the song of an open window at daybreak, the sound of summer’s first light—

*A New Day Dawning.*

The starling lifts off the hood, still singing, still rising and rising until it disappears, but we hear it still. We all watch it go. Special Agent Morales the longest. He never takes his eyes off it, not once, not even long after there’s nothing to see anymore.

Until Dallas collapses onto the pavement at our feet.

They are pulled over by the bright, spinning lights of a New Mexico State Trooper just outside the Cibola National Forest, with Angel at the wheel this time, Dina now riding shotgun, and Nico again in the back with the girl.

It's hot in the Sunseeker, almost an oven, but Angel warns Nico to keep quiet and still with a single, fierce blue glance. Dina has one of their Oklahoma handguns in the purse between her legs, and as the heavysset, uniformed trooper lumbers toward the driver's-side window to talk with Angel, Dina casually moves the bag up to her lap, both hands draped over it, the gun inside within easy reach.

Nico lays close with the girl on the bed in the back, loosely hidden beneath the covers and arms wrapped around her despite her restraints, added insurance to keep her from shuffling or moving or kicking. Although he can barely hear what's going on up front, just rising whispers and murmurs, he *knows* the trooper is going to search the RV; there was no reason to stop them otherwise. He's no doubt on the trail of wanted fugitives, looking for a stolen little girl.

Nico tenses for the inevitable shouting, the screaming and shooting. Wonders how Angel's certainties, her multitude of prophecies, failed to account for the sudden appearance of the one trooper on a lonely stretch of highway.

Sweat rolls down his face, and although he's holding the girl too tight, almost smothering her, she doesn't struggle. It's as if she also knows all too well what's at stake for the man outside the RV if she makes a noise or raises an alarm. She only stares at Nico, her dark eyes beneath the covers holding their own delicate light, and Nico wonders what she's thinking.

Her calmness is like a gentle, steady hand holding his own, both reassuring and safe.

Nico tries to follow the wandering conversation up front, knowing Angel can be persuasive, witty, even charming when

she needs to be. Despite the girl's eerie calm, her *grace*, his head feels like it's about to split open, the sort of savage headache he used to get in college, the worst kind of migraine that often started with black auras and strobing lights firing across his vision before leaving him fully blind in one eye and doubled over and nauseous.

So weak he could barely speak for hours afterward, his arms and legs as loose and heavy as sand.

The moments tick by and Nico can't breathe, heart and bile in his throat, but the girl just stares at him in the dark as a gentle, undeserved peace settles over him. He can barely see but closes his eyes anyway and just listens to her *breathe*, a susurrant that's like a hundred soft wings: can almost *feel* her diaphanous heartbeats matching his, delicate as the fluttering of tiny birds or butterflies, as he waits for the inevitable bloodshed.

*An abundant offering of blood . . .*

Her fingers somehow find his—he doesn't know if she's holding his hand or he's holding hers—and their hands are still entwined like that minutes later when they both hear the trooper's cruiser finally rolling safely away from the RV. And although Nico's cleaving headache seems to miraculously dissipate in the wake of the trooper's surprising departure, it's replaced instead by fresh, bright spots of blood that now spot the girl's wan face.

A sudden, small nosebleed that Nico wipes away with his own trembling fingers.



Afterward, Angel shares with Nico the news that Camael is dead.

*Camael.* Cameron John Tyler. Former accountant. Husband. Father. Fifth Circle novitiate.

Edgar Allen Adair, the quiet, blond-haired surfer from the community college parking lot, is also dead. He was a former sheriff's deputy from Diamondhead, Mississippi, who had to



retire early on medical disability. He still sang in the church choir every Sunday, volunteered with the Boy Scouts.

Both were killed during an apparent road rage incident near a place called Taiban, in New Mexico. Also killed was Juan Pablo Navarre, the suspected target of their attack, who was on his way to his daughter's thirtieth birthday party in Vaughn.

Authorities are still investigating.

The two deceased attackers were driving a stolen truck from Colorado, although there was no obvious connection from the men to the area. Nothing overtly connects the showdown on a rural highway near Taiban to a pair of murders in small-town Limon.

Nothing yet connects it to *them*, but Nico fears it's only a matter of time. But if either Dina or Angel are concerned about that, or the fact the RV was stopped, neither woman shows it. There's no mention of other bodies or victims, no discussion with him about what transpired with the state trooper.

Only that the FBI has been brought in to determine if the attack at Taiban was a hate crime.

Elise knows no one is more surprised than Jerry when she calls him into her office and tells him she's leaving him in charge.

"But . . . what about Nielson?" he asks, referring to her sergeant.

"Still up in Whitefish," she says. "Storms whipped up a ton of snow, but he should be back late tomorrow."

"I don't know," Jerry says, looking at his hands, as if they might hold an answer. "I don't know about this at all."

"Honestly, I don't know either. But I won't be gone long, and hopefully it's only a day until Jon gets back. Just keep an eye on things, keep me apprised."

Jerry slumps in his chair. He hasn't shaved and his face is gray and shadowed, patchy stubble crisscrossing his jawline. The rumors of his connection to Nadia Rupert are already making their rounds, and he has an interview with CBI today. Elise isn't sure if he's sleeping at the house or a motel or if—like her—hardly sleeping at all.

He says, "You're not going to this Taiban, are you?"

"No," she says. "There's nothing there." And there isn't. She knows all she needs to know about *that* horror show, at least for now. Although CBI hasn't confirmed it publicly, there's little doubt that DNA and other corroborating evidence will eventually put one or more of the deceased out there inside the Brannen household. But that still leaves too many questions, including where McGee, Renata, and Sybilla are now, and those answers aren't going to be found on the side of the highway in New Mexico.

But Elise thinks she now knows another place to look.

"What do I tell people you're doing?" Jerry asks.

"Following up a lead."

He smiles grimly. “Those aren’t our leads to follow up, Chief,” he says, sounding so much like Grant.

“Everyone else but me is busy here. These two cases are spreading like a disease. We’ve got to get ahead of this, and I’ve got the free time.”

“Do you want to tell me exactly what *this* is?”

“No,” she admits. “I’m not sure I even know, and either way, you have plausible deniability.”

Jerry doesn’t like the sound of that. “You aren’t gonna cause trouble, are you?”

“I don’t think so.”

Jerry shakes his head. “Just, you know, be careful anyway.” And that’s as heartfelt and honest as anything she’s ever heard Jerry Harris say.

He finally sits up, leans forward. “I also want to tell you I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

He raises his eyebrows, lets his silence answer for him.

She nods. “Well, you only have to explain that to your wife.”

“Sure,” he replies. “But let’s shoot straight here: I’m not exactly the best cop you have in this department, and that’s saying a hell of a lot with a department this small.”

She smiles at that. “And you’re not that good of a shot either.”

He smiles, too, a sad flicker. “I know. Everyone knows, right?”

She catches that haunted look in Jerry’s eyes and sees now why he hasn’t been sleeping and likely won’t for a while, can see clearly what’s been eating at him even worse than his wife’s anger or the public shame.

Grant said grief had teeth, and he wasn’t wrong.

She says, “I don’t think there’s anything you could’ve done to stop what happened to Nadia.”

“That’s what I tell myself,” he agrees, without much conviction. “But I still should’ve done . . . *better*.” He examines the badge on his chest as if seeing it for the first time.

“And you will, Jerry.”

“Okay,” he finally says, dragging himself up from the chair. “I got your back here while you’re out playing Sherlock Holmes. But keep your phone on.”

He shares another sad, worried smile.

“If I fuck up or if more horrible shit happens around here,” he says, “get home quick.”

# 47

We park behind the Four Winds Motel in Carrizozo, New Mexico, a place called the Valley of Fires.

We're two hours past Taiban, night rapidly descending. Earlier, we dropped off the highway onto another just outside Vaughn, cutting deep into the badlands.

We drove the Hyundai slow, below the speed limit, but even at sixty miles per hour, the bullet holes in the doorframes and across the hood would still have been visible to the handful of passing cars if anyone had bothered to look.

On the way, we searched the Hyundai, finding zip ties and duct tape, a box of Glad ForceFlex Plus Drawstring trash bags, and two bottles of Shockwave multipurpose disinfectant and cleaner.

Peerless handcuffs. A hammer. Six box cutters. A Spyderco knife.

Two boxes of Wolf 223 steel case ammunition, a Liberty Band emergency solar radio, and a SPOT X Two Way Satellite Personal Tracker.

Multiple carefully packed vials of phenobarbital and ketamine, which is some sort of horse tranquilizer.

A smashed bottle of Dr. McGillicuddy's blackberry whiskey.

Cavalier men's hair clippers. One of Deb Fallon's books.

A MyFAK first aid kit.

A crushed laptop and three cell phones missing their SIM cards.

And two old AXL pendants. It had been years since I'd seen originals like those, and I stared at them, turned them over and over in my hands, for a long time.

Other than the first aid kit, we tossed the rest of it out near Corona, where a UFO supposedly crashed in 1947, an event

later known as the Roswell Incident.

For a while, in the late nineties, Etan's "Personal Development and Self-Actualization" classes hinted at an extraterrestrial power source. He was selling these PD/SA machines—Core Calculators—and, although he never *explicitly* claimed they were based on alien technology recovered from Roswell and stolen from Area 51, he never denied it either. Many of those same ideas were later incorporated into his wildly successful guided Inner Explorations, and they became popular with the same crowd.

Actors. Artists. My mother.

Etan eventually scrubbed any reference to the Core Calculators and the alien connection from AXL's marketing and recruitment material after the Heaven's Gate suicides in San Diego in '97, and I was never aware of any of it until after I fled the Ark nearly twenty years later.



Agent Morales gets us one room at the Four Winds, and we lift, carry, drag Dallas onto the meager bed, where he falls in and out of consciousness.

Despite the first aid kit, he's dying right in front of us: seeing things, talking to someone who isn't there. His daughter, Sunny. Agent Morales tells me Sunny is dead and has been for years.

Dallas won't let go of the rifle he took from Taiban, and every now and then he sits upright and points it at the door, at imaginary enemies or old friends.

He tells us both the Black Sun is rising and says something in Spanish, and Agent Morales won't look at him anymore.

Dallas is like a radio station tuning into faraway channels, like one of Etan's Core Calculators, sending us alien signals from distant stars. A way station for circling souls, the anima rising before Ascension, that Etan predicted.

Agent Morales says we're almost past the point of getting Dallas to a hospital, and here in Carrizozo, in the heart of the Valley of Fires, we're the farthest possible way from one.

Our own throw-down phones and laptop were lost or destroyed in the wreck. The Hyundai is destroyed, too, leaking fluid and two tires going flat. We're down to a couple of guns and the room's one lone Gideon Bible.

And a host of aliens or ghosts or souls looking on.

# **CERTIFICATE OF LIVE BIRTH**

**October 10, 2014**

BIRTH NUMBER: 3010506

Sierra County, New Mexico

1. CHILD'S NAME (First, Middle, Last, Suffix): Renata  
Liliane Ross

2. TIME OF BIRTH (24 hr): 111220

3. SEX: Female

4. DATE OF BIRTH (Mo/Day/Yr): 10/10/14

5. FACILITY NAME: Sierra Vista Hospital

6. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION OF BIRTH: Truth or  
Consequences, NM

7. COUNTY OF BIRTH: Sierra County

8. MOTHER'S CURRENT LEGAL NAME (First,  
Middle, Last, Suffix): Sybilla R. Ross

8a. DATE OF BIRTH (Mo/Day/Yr): 03/01/96

8b. MOTHER'S NAME PRIOR TO FIRST MARRIAGE  
(First, Middle, Last, Suffix): N/A

8c. BIRTHPLACE (State, Territory, or Foreign Country):  
California

9. RESIDENCE OF MOTHER—STATE: New Mexico

9a. COUNTY: Sierra County

9b. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION: Elephant Butte

9c. STREET AND NUMBER: N/A

9d. APT. NO.: N/A

9e. ZIP CODE: N/A

9f. INSIDE CITY LIMITS?  Yes  No

10. FATHER'S CURRENT LEGAL NAME (First,  
Middle, Last, Suffix): Unknown



10a. DATE OF BIRTH (Mo/Day/Yr): Unknown

10b. BIRTHPLACE (State, Territory, or Foreign Country): Unknown

11. NEWBORN BIRTH WEIGHT: 5.5 lbs.

12. OBSTETRIC ESTIMATE OF GESTATION: 37.5  
(completed weeks)

13. APGAR SCORE: Score at 5 minutes: 5

If 5-minute score is less than 6, Score at 10 minutes: 7

14. PLURALITY—Single, Twin, Triplet, etc. (Specify):  
Single

15. IF NOT SINGLE BIRTH—Born First, Second, Third,  
etc. (Specify)

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16. ABNORMAL CONDITIONS OF THE NEWBORN  
(Check all that apply) X Assisted ventilation required  
immediately following delivery X Assisted ventilation  
required for more than six hours X NICU admission   
Newborn given surfactant replacement therapy   
Antibiotics received by the newborn for suspected  
neonatal sepsis X Seizure or serious neurologic  
dysfunction  Significant birth injury (skeletal  
fracture[s], peripheral nerve injury, and/or soft  
tissue/solid organ hemorrhage which requires  
intervention)

17. CONGENITAL ANOMALIES OF THE NEWBORN  
(Check all that apply)  Anencephaly   
Meningomyelocele/Spina bifida  Cyanotic congenital  
heart disease  Congenital diaphragmatic hernia   
Omphalocele  Gastroschisis  Limb reduction defect  
(excluding congenital amputation and dwarfing  
syndromes)  Cleft Lip with or without Cleft Palate   
Cleft Palate alone  Down Syndrome  Karyotype  
confirmed  Karyotype pending  Suspected  
chromosomal disorder  Hypospadias X None of the  
anomalies listed above

18. WAS INFANT TRANSFERRED WITHIN 24  
HOURS OF DELIVERY? Yes.

IF YES, NAME OF FACILITY INFANT  
TRANSFERRED: Ark of Lazarus Compound / Jornada  
del Muerto

19. IS INFANT LIVING AT TIME OF REPORT?  Yes  
 No  Infant transferred, status unknown

Elise doesn't want to waste any time, even though she's bone weary, way past the point of exhaustion, so tired her eyes *hurt*, like turning screws in her head.

It'll take her about five hours to get to where she wants to go, driving straight through. She'll get in late, but, depending on what she learns—if anything—she can grab a motel there for the night and be back in Limon before noon tomorrow.

She contemplates calling Grant but in the end texts him two messages: **On the road, quick visit to see Denny.** She hesitates, then: **Back soon.** It's still hard lying to him, even though he's been far from forthcoming with her, and apparently hasn't been for a while. But after their talk in the morgue, it's easier than the truth.

She'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit their talk hadn't affected her. All of Grant's heartfelt despair, his disillusionment, rubbing off on her. A borderline *anger* she never would've guessed at, and it begs the question how well you can ever truly know someone, or just how easily grief and loss can break or reshape anyone.

And that she knows all too well.



Denny's dad started drinking seriously early into their marriage.

A six-pack of Grain Belt Premium on Saturdays, then Fridays. Then Thursdays. Then pretty much whenever and for whatever occasion. It only got bad, only got to be a real problem, after he lost his job at Gardner Welding and Machine.

The beer and all the idleness, that worthless feeling that comes with too much free time and too many regrets—a young son to raise and a wife whose job and status in the

community had left him behind—changed the man she'd married when she was nineteen.

The man with whom she'd already shared the unimaginable loss of a child.

Lily Renee Blue, their beautiful first, died in 1985, when she was three years old, due to rare complications from the even rarer acute flaccid myelitis: the precursor disease to what later mutated into the much more aggressive and deadly Hadney-Pharoah's.

Elise was barely twenty-one and cried for three months straight after Lily Renee's death, but Denny's dad was her source of strength then. They were little more than teenagers playing grown-up, but he took care of her, held her together, when she could barely hold herself upright.

Too afraid to try again . . . *too hurt* . . . Denny only came along by "accident" years later, long after she'd already joined the Limon PD: a place to find purpose after Lily's loss. Long after giving up on the idea of a family at all.

She still considers her son a miracle, even now, and it's not lost on her that Denny Blue and Sybilla Laure were born the same year.

When Denny's dad took to the bottle, it wasn't the specter of Lily's passing or the job loss or the drinking itself that took the heaviest toll; it was the perpetual specter of *violence*. He got surly when he drank, surlier when he *didn't* drink, and it got harder and harder to raise a boy in a house charged with that much anger and frustration. She couldn't protect the folks she'd grown up with, only to come home and be afraid of the man she'd loved since she was a teenager.

He should've been arrested a dozen times, but the other cops just drove him home, where their front door was always unlocked, so he could sleep it off. Once one even cuffed him to his bed, with a glass of cold water and three aspirin.

Still, this was her *husband*, whom she'd vowed to stay with through better or worse—vows she took as seriously as the ones that kept her gold badge pinned to her chest—and

when Elise had been at her absolute worst after Lily's passing, he'd been there. So, the divorce, when it did come, was made harder by the fact that Elise didn't file it. He did, right after he got sober and found God.

He told her he had to escape his demons in Limon, so he moved to Denver, where he now collects his sobriety coins and talks about faith and God. He's got a new girlfriend, too, with plenty of old family money, and Denny and Lori have dinner with them every two weeks.

Denny seems to have embraced religion again as fervently as his father and sees in him—a man who once passed out in the bleachers during one of his middle school football games—a beautiful story of grace and faith and redemption. Elise's story of stolid dedication and quiet perseverance is only half as compelling, and not nearly as moving.

There are no divine miracles in her version.

Denny likes to tell her that it's time to let her anger go, that she needs to stop being a *martyr*, but she did everything she could to raise him—everything she ever imagined she needed to do to be both a good mother and a wife—and her reward is what, exactly?

A divorce. An empty house. An estranged son.

If Grant is disillusioned about being a doctor, or the unfortunate, untimely death of his wife, then Elise has equal reason to be disappointed in how her life has played out. She's no martyr but won't deny her own anger and grief.

*Her loneliness.*

She can't let those things go, because without them, she doesn't know who she is.



Later, she both texts and calls Denny again but gets no response.

It's worrying, because usually he'll touch base with her—eventually—even if it's just to tell her he's too busy to talk. She even toys with the idea of calling Denny's dad but can't

bring herself to do it, focusing instead on the dark road ahead, the low clouds threatening snow or ash.

Wondering if Sybilla and her daughter came this way.

Wondering, too, about the girl's drawing still rolled up in the back of her truck, the one she never showed Grant, because if she had, he would've immediately recognized it—

*An incredible likeness of a much younger Elise, holding Lily Renee to her heart.*

It's borderline insane, and she's never considered herself insane or even silly. But she can't let this go, either, even if she can't explain what she's looking for, or what she's hoping to find. Grant suggested she needs faith, but she just needs *answers*, needs to understand.

Needs a rational explanation that will make sense of that mysterious drawing or explain how a young woman like Sybilla—a woman who was so carefully planning a birthday party for her daughter for tomorrow—could possibly kill her daughter's daddy in cold blood last night.

Those answers aren't in Taiban, and they aren't in Limon, and Elise isn't even sure they exist at all outside of Sybilla's feverish, delusional mind. But if they do, there's one other person who might have them, someone who might be able to guide Elise to the explanations she wants, the answers she so desperately needs—

*Dr. Deborah Fallon.*

I take a quick, cold shower and wash the blood and broken glass out of my hair and slip back on my dirty jeans.

I stand at the mirror, turning sideways to see the Black Sun tattooed on my shoulder, the darkly feathered wings inked across my back, and think about Bert the Beagle. Maybe he *wasn't* truly dead after that truck hit him, somehow still clinging to life when I pulled his limp and shattered body off the grass and held him to me.

There is no such thing as reincarnation or resurrection.

*It's playing God.*

Even if you can breathe a heartbeat's worth of life back into a body, you can't just put a whole *lifetime* back together again.

But I'll be damned if I won't try.



“That picture,” Agent Morales says, leaning against the motel door, one eye through the dirty blue curtains, “is still pretty incredible.”

“What picture?” I say, although I know the answer: the same picture that Noah never allowed in our house.

“You, standing there with Renata, all those flames around you both.”

“A trick of the light.”

“And is that all this is?” he asks. “A trick of the light?”

As if on cue, headlights waver and flutter on the curtains, another visitor to the Four Winds. The sun's down and the motel's lot is dusty and dark, most of the security lamps burned out or broken. But the sky still *glows*, still the color of a bloody bruise, either from the distant fires or the stormy breath of those incoming hurricanes.

“Everyone looked at that picture and saw strength and defiance. Anger, even,” he says, using two fingers to widen the crack between the curtains before letting them fall into place again. “But I saw *peace*, Billie. You were at peace, maybe for the first time.”

I sit next to Dallas, whose eyes are closed, fluttering wildly like trapped birds beneath his lids. He’s breathing heavy and slow, and although I’ve wiped the blood from his head again and again, there’s nothing to be done with the blood pooling on his stomach, leaching through his bandages, soaking the bed beneath him.

“I didn’t want *this*,” I say, “now or then.”

“Really?”

“You know the Ark of Lazarus was all I had.”

“Until Renata.”

“Until *you*.”

I run a hand over Dallas’s forehead, checking for fever. He’s warm, sweating. When I touch him, he opens his eyes and smiles. “I wasn’t sure I could walk away on my own,” I say, “but I was more than willing to run away . . . with you.”

Agent Morales’s face and arms are a maze of cuts and bruises. One eye is swelling shut, but he glances through the curtains again, at the lot outside.

While I was in the shower, he turned on the small TV, and the past day’s news silently, endlessly, scrolls past us. The world in all its endless chaos illuminates the thin walls, our faces.

I gave him a second chance to abandon me and Dallas, and he didn’t take it.

“I wasn’t your *savior*, Billie. I couldn’t be. Don’t put that on me.”

“No, but you didn’t have a problem saving *yourself*,” I say as Dallas rumbles next to me, coughing up thick dark blood the color of the sky outside. “Where was I going to go?” I ask



him. “What was I going to do, without you? I didn’t know anything beyond the Ark.”

“You did fine.”

I wave at the room around us. “This is *fine*?”

“Do you want to hear me say I’m sorry? Is that it?”

“I want your fucking *help*.”

And now it’s his turn to wave at the room, at Dallas bleeding to death next to me. “And this is *help*?” He pushes off the door. “I nearly died today, and your friend here surely will.”

“I was there too.”

“And you *should* probably be dead too. Right after the crash, when you were still lying there dazed and exposed, both those New Lazarians had clear shots on you, but neither took them. That attack was never about *killing* you, Billie. They wanted to *grab* you, capture you, and now I bet you you wish they had.”

“Yes, if it had gotten me one step closer to Rennie. She’s all that matters anyway, she’s all that ever did. The rest of us —”

“Nonbelievers,” he says.

“*You* believed,” I throw back. “You believed . . . or desperately wanted to. That tattoo on your arm says as much. As loudly as you still standing there.”

Agent Morales nods, but he’s not agreeing with me. “I thought I believed in you, thought I needed to believe in . . . something. But there’s no miracles, no magic, no great mysteries. And no God nor angel saved all those people who died in that place.”

“Then all you did was take advantage of me. *Use* me. And now—”

“No,” he stops me. “I loved you.”

And it’s been years—a lifetime—since I’ve heard him say that, since he’s dared admit it out loud, and now it hangs in the

small room between us. “But it still wasn’t enough, was it?” I ask.

“No,” he concedes. “It wasn’t. I couldn’t risk . . . everything.”

“I did,” I say. “I was willing to risk it all.”

Agent Morales comes over and kneels next to me, then takes both my hands in his, pulling me close. His fingers trace my wrists, the first set of scarred-over cuts that run up both my arms, that aren’t hidden by my tattoos. “Yet you still got out,” he says. “Without me, or despite me, and that’s something we both have to live with.”

His eyes are sad, crestfallen. His ravaged hands warm, strong.

“So, what’s worse?” I ask. “Believing I burned it all down to get away, or fearing I did it because you didn’t leave me a *choice*?”

“That’s not true,” he says softly. “Please don’t act like you set those fires for *us*.”

“I waited for *you*. Hours and hours, what seemed like a lifetime to me then. I put all my faith in you, and when you didn’t show at Engle, I had to crawl back to the Ark with Rennie in my arms. I had to go back to *her* . . . alone. What did you think was going to happen?” I try to pull my hands back, but he won’t let me go. “Who do you think she *blamed* when all those helicopters appeared overhead, and you descended on us?”

I won’t show him the whip marks on my back, the ones I’ve tattooed over with black suns and angel’s wings. I won’t show him what Becca . . . *what Ananiel* . . . did to me.

My punishment . . . my penance.

“That was never your fault,” he says. “Never your choice.”

“No, but sometimes not having a choice is the only chance you get.”

Agent Morales considers this as we both realize I'm not trying to pull away anymore, neither of us letting go. His eyes find mine. "Did you burn the Ark, Billie? Tell me the truth."

I laugh, soft and bitter. "Is that what you want to hear? That your noble silence protected me, somehow absolved your own guilt. What do you think now, Special Agent Morales? After all these years, you tell me the goddamn *truth*."

The moment stretches on between us, infinite, forever. Infinite possibilities . . . but no answers that will ever change anything now.

Finally, he says, "I need to know what your plan here is. I need that . . . if I'm going to go any farther."

"You already know. You knew from the moment I showed up on your doorstep. You knew when you emailed those agents in New Mexico before we left Texas."

"Jornada del Muerto?" He shakes his head. "That's not a plan, Billie. That's a fucking gravesite. Have you been back since? There's nothing out there. Nothing."

"It's still sacred to the New Lazarians, to Ananiel. That's where this started. That's where it'll end."

"The End?" he asks as his grip slips away.

"Ascension," I answer. "Tomorrow. Rennie's birthday."

"No," he says. "No more prophecies, no fucking prophets." His face glows in the TV's ambient light, and it somehow makes him look younger: the way I remember him, the way I for so long dreamed about him, in the months after the raid. "No matter how fucked up the world is, it is not going to end tomorrow. The world just keeps on turning, struggling on, day after day, like always. Just like we did, after New Mexico." He raises a chin toward Dallas. "But your friend here is going to die within the hour if we don't get him help. And if we don't end up dead right alongside him, we're going to jail for the rest of our lives. All we can hope now is that Renata escapes, unscathed. I can still make that happen."

"You don't know her, and I wish you did." I reach for his face, run my fingers across his fresh scars. "There were things

I claimed I could do at Jornada del Muerto, things Becca denounced as false miracles and blasphemies. But Rennie *is* a miracle, and if you don't believe anything else, believe that."

He shakes his head again and reaches up and touches my hand on his face. No man has touched me like this since I met Noah.

"I don't know that I can," he says.

"And I only know I have to get to her."

"That's what they *want*, Billie. What they've likely wanted all along. For whatever reason, you're important, too, and if it doesn't feel right to me, it shouldn't to you." He pulls my hand away. "You told me you called Deborah Fallon the night you left Colorado, just before you went home and found Noah. It's possible that call may have saved your life." I can see he's considering all sorts of possibilities. "Does she know anything about this?"

"I didn't," I admit. "I mean, no, I didn't call her. Not then. Not in a long time. I haven't spoken to her in months."

I don't tell him she hasn't known my address for far longer than that.

He's surprised, puzzled. "Why?"

But before I can answer, Dallas groans and tries to sit up.

He calls out Sunny's name, his knuckles whitening on the rifle, and Agent Morales watches him a long moment before he stands and says, "I need to see if there's a hospital nearby, a drugstore, anything more we can do for him. And if we're still going to Jornada del Muerto, we need a new ride. You can shoot me if you want, but that's what I'm going to do."

"I'm not going to shoot you," I say, making sure Dallas doesn't rise. "Do whatever you need to."

"I will be back," he says, "so bolt this door after I'm gone." Agent Morales's eyes then flick to the TV, where something has grabbed his attention, and I wonder what new disaster it is. More birds or storms. The world on fire.

The sky falling.

“One way or another now,” he says, “this really is almost over.” And he steps aside so I can see for myself: another breaking news report out of Limon.

A picture of me—*Sarah Brannen*—from my Colorado driver’s license. And a video of our house surrounded by police tape and a flash of Rennie’s old play set.

Zippo’s. The Dollar General store. Nadia’s trailer.

And finally, that infamous picture of me—*Sybilla Ross-Laure*—walking out of the Ark of Lazarus with embers in my hair.

Dr. Fallon's house is a secluded, low, rambling affair in Tesuque, just outside Santa Fe.

The adobe cabin with blue-trimmed windows hides behind thick lemon and orange trees and knotted acacia mesquite, sprawling behind an uneven wooden palisade fence. Wind chimes and dream catchers hang in the low branches, and if it were daytime, they'd be spinning shadows on the dark earth beneath them.

It's all casual and unplanned and unmanicured and rustic—unassuming—except for the winking red lights of the high-tech surveillance cameras Elise picks out near the front door and the cardinal corners of the walls.

It's hard for her to reconcile this place with the urbane, polished woman on the back of Nadia's book, no matter how old the picture might be.

Finding it took more than a little digging, an exercise in her police power. Not quite an abuse of it, but not far from it either. Deborah Fallon isn't living off the grid, but she's gone to ground since her last public talk, in 2020.

A dog barks somewhere, and a smoky nighttime wind shakes branches and makes chime music. Otherwise, the darkened street—the whole neighborhood—might as well be asleep.

Motion lights snap on at Elise's approach, and she waves at the nearest camera as she approaches, holding her badge up high.



The woman who answers the door probably *isn't* Deborah Fallon.

There's a passable resemblance—the patrician nose, the serious eyes—but this woman is older than Deborah, heavier set. Hair gunmetal gray, pulled up in a messy pile on top of her

head. She's wearing a flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up, and dark jeans dotted with old paint. Turquoise necklaces circle her throat, and bangles jangle on both wrists.

She has a cell phone in one hand and a small, nickel-plated revolver in the other.

Elise stays calm. "Sorry to bother you this late, ma'am. And I don't want trouble. I'm just looking for Dr. Fallon. Deborah Fallon."

The woman who is probably not Deborah Fallon blinks slow. "Why?"

Elise laughs, hoping to deescalate this situation. "Honestly, I'm not sure you'll believe me. I don't know if I believe it myself. But I was hoping to ask her some questions, maybe get her help, on a case out of Colorado. I'm a police chief up there." Elise shows her badge again, holding it faceup in the palm of her hand. "I don't want to lie to you. This case is being actively worked by both the FBI and the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, so they may already have approached Dr. Fallon, or soon will. I'm here somewhat unofficially."

"Is Deb a suspect?" the woman asks. "Unofficially?"

From the way she asks it, underscored by exasperation and worry, Elise understands the woman would not be surprised if Deborah was. And it strikes Elise that until this very moment, the thought never crossed her mind. "No, I don't believe so. Unless you tell me something otherwise."

The woman thinks it over and then tucks the shiny silver-dollar revolver beneath her flannel shirt. "When it comes to my sister, I'm not sure there's much I wouldn't believe anymore either."

Elise nods. "If it weren't important, or time wasn't of the essence, I wouldn't be here now. This has to do with the Ark of Lazarus—specifically, Deborah's connections with Sybilla Laure, and whatever she might know about Ms. Laure and her activities over the last few years, including last night, in Limon, Colorado."

“Well, Deb wasn’t *here* last night. She hasn’t been home in a month or more.”

Elise turns that over. “Do you know where she might be?”

Deborah’s sister takes Elise’s badge and holds it up close, then hands it back and opens the door wider, inviting Elise into the dark interior.

She says, “I was hoping you were here to tell me.”



The first time Special Agent Eladio Morales saw Sybilla, it wasn't that day he was out surveying the Engle property, no matter what all the official reports said.

It wasn't even the two weeks of visual presurveillance around Jornada del Muerto before that.

It was about a month earlier, in Elephant Butte. May 2013. He was there checking on the availability of extended-stay motel rooms for himself and his cover team and taking pictures of the surrounding area. And until that moment, the Ark of Lazarus was just another thick file folder, a mess of FBI intel reports and internet videos and ATF straw-purchase records: hundreds of hours of transcribed interviews of individuals associated with the cult, as well as former business partners, friends, and lovers of Etan Laure's.

The Ark was merely a puzzle Eladio was still trying to fit together, to wrap his head around and understand.

He was walking out of one of Elephant Butte's two gas stations, heading to his car, when he saw her.

She was across the street, staring right back at him.



He didn't know then how young she was, only that she was raw, beautiful.

But he did know immediately she was Ark of Lazarus by the long skirt she wore. It struck him as a silly affectation, an old-timey costume, although older women in the group had greater freedom in their dress when they were out and about, at least according to his intel and the interviews. Sybilla—later confirmed by going through his accumulated pictures and videos—was standing in the shaded awning of a small pharmacy, her blonde hair down, dark deco sunglasses pushed up on her head, just another one of those weirdly out-of-tune notes, those little modern touches here and there, that pulled

you out of the Ark of Lazarus daguerreotype. Long tresses for the women. Thick, unkempt beards for the men.

But then, expensive sunglasses. Or a TAG Heuer watch peeking out of a cuff. An iPad or laptop casually slung over a shoulder in a soft leather case.

It was hard to reconcile the ancient, convoluted mythology and biblical beliefs with their glossy brochures and websites and the Ark compound's DirecTV satellite subscription, with Laure's two Range Rovers parked in a garage in Truth or Consequences—one a pearl-white Evoque, the other a black supercharged V-8—and his mail-order erectile dysfunction medication and extensive stock portfolio.

Here was a doomsday prophet worried about future market shares, and the whole puzzle just wouldn't come together for Eladio. The picture didn't make sense; none of it did.

Most of the cult members weren't clinical; they didn't have a diagnosed mental illness. Many were well educated and well off or had been. They did seem, however, to be plenty *damaged*. Going through the background files, he discovered more than a few had suffered significant losses and tragedies in the months preceding their arrival at Jornada del Muerto, and there, at least, was something he could grasp. After the passing of his own mama, Paola—who'd raised him alone, holding down numerous hand-to-mouth jobs just to do so—he'd entered a few dark months of what could only be described as depression or a fugue, his own quiet despair.

If he hadn't reached out for the FBI's Employee Assistance Program, seeking consolation, peace, would he have grabbed for a lifeline like the Ark of Lazarus? He didn't think so. He considered himself too grounded, too smart, but then again, there were a lot of smart people over at that compound.

And Etan Laure, for all his bullshit and Ponzi schemes, all the smoke and mirrors and magic tricks, was no dummy.

The issue of Eladio's mama came up when he was being interviewed for this assignment. Only four months removed

from her funeral—and his three free sessions with the EAP counselor protected by privacy laws—her passing was still no secret around the FBI.

Group Supervisor Coats asked him point-blank: *Are you up for this? Look, I know you lost a parent recently, and that can be tough. And this assignment is going to be even tougher, a total bitch. There's no issue if you want to pass.*

But he didn't want to pass, so there was no issue. He told GS Coats he was all good, clearheaded, ready to work. Ready to throw himself into something, ready to lose himself in something.

He didn't bother telling GS Coats that his mama—who cut garden flowers every Saturday and arranged them in a gypsum vase by a picture of her own dead mother—had long been a devout Catholic. How she went to Mass three times a week like clockwork and had died with their local parish priest by her side; how she used to remind her son, *Eres muy bueno haciendo planes, Lalo, pero no tan bueno tomando decisiones.*

A plan was based on facts at hand, but a decision was an affair of the heart. A decision was a choice; it took *faith*.

She also warned him, *La fe, no facilita las cosas, las hace posibles.*

Faith didn't make things easier; it only made them possible.

The last words his mama ever uttered out loud were, *Ya veo, Ya veo . . . I see, I see . . .* as she pushed her old wooden rosary into his hand.

Sitting in front of GS Coats's desk, Eladio decided then he was going to do whatever he had to do to take down Etan Laure.



Eladio watched the beautiful girl watch him and wondered if he would meet her, talk to her soon.

Wondered if she would remember him.

The idea that any federal agent could infiltrate the Ark of Lazarus was a long shot, and that shot was Eladio Aaron Morales. Long-term undercover operations, previously used against the mob and outlaw motorcycle gangs and later white supremacy and alt-right groups, fell in and out of favor, proving too expensive and posing far too many logistical, ethical, and legal issues. But the Ark of Lazarus was proving particularly difficult to penetrate otherwise. The usual methods of surveillance and wiretaps just didn't seem to work with them.

But there was no doubt they were buying up and storing weapons and explosives and too many serious, if not corroborated, allegations of child sexual abuse and extortion for them not to take action. Within two years they'd popped up on every domestic terror watch list—and *no one* dismissed domestic terrorists anymore—and the families of those who'd watched their loved ones disappear down the Ark's rabbit hole had become increasingly vocal.

It was difficult to pinpoint when the group had moved from some sort of pseudo-self-improvement movement to a doomsday cult, but the thought around FBI headquarters was that they were a growing threat that could no longer be ignored, a danger not only to themselves but to others.

But standing there in that dusty street that day, the beautiful blonde girl with the dark sunglasses on her head didn't look dangerous. She didn't look like any kind of threat at all.

She looked like a college student—

*Like an angel.*



A month later he saw her out at Engle, and Billie said, *I've seen you before.*

And he didn't know if she was remembering him from that day in Elephant Butte, that quiet moment they'd shared across the sunny street from each other.

His hair was a little thicker, his three-day shadow a little longer, but if he recognized her, there was no way she didn't recognize him.

He clenched up, waiting for her to call him out in front of the others. But she told him only that she'd been dreaming about him, that she dreamed about so many things, some of which ended up real and some that didn't. She reached out and touched his arm and said, *But you seem real enough to me.*

Before smiling and walking away.

Deborah Fallon's private office is at the back of the house, with a long row of windows that look out on more fruit trees, wild forsythia, birds of paradise.

It smells like leather and smoke, the citrus tang from candles or incense, and it subtly reminds Elise of Nadia's trailer, that combination of ephemeral smells and burdened bookshelves and leaning files and papers. The flotsam and jetsam of diplomas and photos and mementos and memories.

But where Nadia's place had a fairy-tale quality, a princess's high tower, this is dark and cluttered and claustrophobic, dungeon-like, and the room presses in heavy and hot, like it's breathing on you. Standing in this inner sanctum is like looking inside someone's mind, stealing a peek at their darkest thoughts, everything that might've been troubling or preoccupying them.

If that's true for Dr. Fallon, then she's been troubled and preoccupied by only one thing for a long, long time—

*The Ark of Lazarus.*



Judy Jowell, twice divorced but still holding on to one of her former husband's names, takes it all in with Elise. She's embarrassed by it.

"It's a mess," she says. "I tried to go through it, looking for . . . I don't know what. Clues? That's what you're supposed to do, right? That's what they do on all those *CSI* shows."

"It's easier on TV," Elise says. "And they have really good writers."

Judy laughs, but without much heart. "My sister was a writer, a real student. She was . . . a lot of things. I was the one who married too young, had too many kids." Judy picks up a

random book, puts it carefully, gently, down again. “We were very different.”

“Always?”

Judy nods. “Pretty much. We were never super close or anything like that. Not distant, just not *close*, if that makes sense.” And it does to Elise, since it might as well describe her relationship with Denny, even though it seems to be getting further and further apart by the day. “Deb was . . . is . . . a good person. She always meant well, always wanted to help people. She didn’t ask for any of this nonsense to end up at her door.”

“The Ark of Lazarus?”

“Yes,” Judy says, “and it changed her. I told myself that all the fame, the notoriety, was getting to her head. Dressing differently, acting differently. I’d see her on TV and not recognize my own sister. It sounds like a cliché; it was. And I told her so.”

“Did you fight?”

“No, I wouldn’t call it that. We *disagreed*. And it wasn’t just over the TV or book stuff, the missed birthdays, the lost holidays. It was also her relationship with Sybilla. All of them.”

“All of them?”

“*Anyone* who had any connection to that goddamn cult.” Judy shrugs. “I swear, Deb was obsessed with it too. She made a career, and a successful one, by sifting through the ashes of the Ark of Lazarus, but it always seemed ghoulish to me.”

As Judy talks, Elise wanders the room, not wanting to disturb it too much, not wanting to disrupt Judy’s revelations. She finds framed newspaper articles, a magazine cover story promising the true story of the Ark of Lazarus. *Byline: Dr. Deborah Fallon*. “So, it affected her?”

“I mean, how could it not?” Judy asks back. “And it only got worse over time, particularly once public interest waned. As other awful events overtook the news, she just got deeper and deeper into it.” Elise stops in front of a crammed

bookshelf, a small object drawing her attention, as Judy continues: “She got cryptic, secretive. Honestly, I was worried about her.”

Elise is listening, nodding along in the right places, but she can’t take her eyes off her discovery—

*One of those metal AXL pendants, that tiny titanium bird in flight.*

This one is locked away in a clear cube of Lucite, but it’s the same as those pulled from Nadia’s and Noah’s bodies, the same as the one Elise still has in her pocket.

The Lucite cube rests next to a weird curlicue cross and a framed photo of Deb Fallon and Sybilla and Renata Laure. It’s hard to tell when the photo was taken, but probably not long after the two women met; Renata can’t be more than two years old, standing next to her mother, clutching her hand.

According to her bio, Deborah is fifteen years older than Sybilla, but in the picture, she looks younger, almost like she’s trying to channel the woman next to her.

But even Sybilla doesn’t resemble that version of herself anymore; in fact, she’s gone to great pains not to, leaving Elise to wonder what Deborah Fallon looks like now.

Elise takes the picture and returns to Judy. “She’s been close to Sybilla all along?” She hands the photo to Judy, who accepts it, rubbing dust off the black metal frame with the hem of her shirt and holding it up for a better look.

“Oh no,” she says, “nothing like that. Not for *years*.”

“Are you sure?” Elise asks, surprised.

“Absolutely,” Judy says. “My sister was no fan of Sybilla Laure’s.” She pushes the picture back toward Elise. “Not at all.”



They pull the Sunseeker off the Sandia Man Cave trailhead, in the shadows of Las Huertas Canyon.

According to the signs Nico drove them past earlier, there's a cave on the ridge, discovered in 1936, that humans occupied more than nine thousand years ago. Stone arrows and lance points have been found up there, evidence, too, of mammoths and mastodons and camels.

They're about two and a half hours from Jornada del Muerto, but Angel's making them stop here and wait, not wanting to give themselves away too soon. She's still working off that map and timetable only she knows, although the girl's birthday plays a role in it. The RV and the back roads and campgrounds of Colorado and New Mexico have allowed Angel to move them around undetected and at her own pace, to hide in plain sight.

If Angel's upset at Camael's death, she still doesn't show it.

*Mysteries are revealed only with sufficient sacrifice. Only after abundant offerings of blood and treasure.*

She's too intent on one of her laptops now, tracking their progress, sending message after message, checking the news on both mainstream media and the deeper, darker sites. He's not sure how Angel so exquisitely coordinated and timed the attack at Taiban—or how Renata's mother escaped again—but Angel doesn't seem surprised by the failure. Dina is more irritated by it, or irritated by Angel's fixation on Sybilla Laure, precipitating several whispered, angry conversations between the two women, none of which they've shared with him. Nico almost agrees with Dina; there's so much more at stake than Sybilla Laure as New Lazarian cells everywhere are being activated, strung together like pearls on the social media and internet strands Nico himself once created.

They are infinite and their will is strong, their faith unflinching. The sort of faith that moves mountains, like those

stretched out into the desert.

Angel and Dina continue to huddle in hurried whispers, bent together over Angel's computer, but they otherwise ignore Nico.

That leaves him again with Renata, who's fascinated with the fire he starts outside the Sunseeker in a small circle of rock and dirt. The way her eyes follow the flames, he wonders if she's ever seen a live fire, ever slept outdoors, ever been camping. He and Suki went camping once, but it was mostly to smoke weed and drink, and they passed out in their rented tent during a predawn rainstorm and woke up cold and damp and hungover.

Renata is entranced by the fire. But when she's not staring into its embers, she only has eyes for him.



He wanders a few yards from the small campsite, just to escape her gaze, just to breathe again.

The sky is still that eerie palette, a stirring set of unnatural autumn colors animated by the Four Horsemen fires. In the weird glow, he can make out the trailhead, the glint of the long iron railing and stairs that lead up to the Sandia Man Cave, and standing up there, hidden in the shadows but crowned by rising stars, is Suki.

He would otherwise be too far away to make out any person, much less a face, but he knows it's her. He can follow the curve of her slim neck and a hint of a frown and the pale beauty of her liminal skin. She's both here and there at the same time: close enough he can feel her breath on his face, too far away to draw his arms around.

She's as silent as Renata, but in her silence, he hears only disappointment, disapproval.

In the final days and last hours before Ascension, souls will grow restless, anima rising, and although he couldn't save Suki before, can't set her free now, Suki tells him freedom is still in reach for them both.

From high up on the cave wall, Suki's uneasy soul kisses him the way Angel kissed Camael, the former Cameron John Tyler she sent off to die, and with a voice of a thousand rustling bird wings, Suki tells Nico what he must do.



He's startled awake when Angel appears at his side.

He must've been asleep on his feet, dreaming. Hallucinating.

Angel bears one of their heavy GoRucks over her shoulder, arms crossed over her chest as she looks up at the cliff face where Suki was standing before, leaving Nico to wonder if Angel saw her too.

"You're troubled," Angel says, turning away from the cliff, where there's nothing but rock and shadow.

"I'm worried," he answers.

"There is a difference?"

Nico doesn't know if it's a trick question or the start of another harsh lesson. "I am not troubled by the things we've done. I only worry I haven't done enough . . . for you."

"I am but a mere messenger," Angel says. "I mean nothing. Servitude is easy; it is true faith that is hard. What you do now, you do for yourself, because *your* faith demands it."

"It is not my place to question. If all is part of the grand design—"

"It is," she says, cutting him off. "And we only serve its purpose, even if we don't fully appreciate or understand it, even if we cannot comprehend it. All we can ask ourselves is if we are spiritually ready and pure."

"Are we?" he asks.

Angel smiles, as sharp as the knife-edge quartz in the cliffs. "Are *you*? Do we need to do another IE, Nico? Delve deep into the cave in your heart, where you hide your truths and fears?"

Nico looks away, unwilling to challenge Angel's awful gaze.

"It is beautiful here, isn't it?" Angel asks, turning her stare back to the coming night. "Imagine the incredible burden of these mountains and the passage of time immemorial they carry. *Feel* how ancient it is and listen for the souls of all those who lived here long ago. On this final eve of Ascension, they call to us still." Angel puts a hand on his shoulder. "Jornada del Muerto was no different. Until we Ascend, they'll never be truly silent, never know peace, and neither will we."

She reaches down and picks up a handful of silt and sand: small, sharp quartz rocks. "This place has existed for eons," she continues, "and yet, it can so easily be swept aside." She holds the earth tight between her thin, strong fingers. "Most are living these last hours mindlessly, unaware of what's to come. They don't share our beliefs and none of our faith. *Your* faith. They are blind. And while you also might not see all, even with faith, without it, you risk being swept aside as well. You risk your immortal soul." She lets the sand and rock fall from her fingers, and it all tumbles to the ground. "The smallest rocks were mountains once upon a time too. Everything falls to dust, but with faith, our faith, we rise again."

"The sort of faith that moves mountains," Nico says.

"The sort of faith that raises them up high. You stand on the precipice of greatness, and your faith has made that possible. It is a gift."

"And the girl?"

Angel's bright eyes shine. "She is the greatest gift of all." Angel rubs the trailing dirt from her hand. "Our precious little bird has been caged for too long, but we will set her free. And then she will *sing*."

"That woman, Dina, scares her," he says.

"Renata has nothing to fear."

Nico understands that's a nonanswer but doesn't want to admit she scares him too.

Angel continues, “Like you, Dina came late to her faith. Better late than never. And she is as strong as any of us.” She puts a hand on his shoulder again. “As strong as you.”

Her touch is now *electric*, a blessing.

“And with Camael gone, that strength is needed now more than ever. Despite your failings, despite your fears, you are ready to Ascend beyond the Fifth Circle. You have earned that, if not through perfect servitude, then through dogged faith. Through *blood*. And now that the time draws near, that must be enough.”

Nico is stunned, feels all that strength Angel was lauding go out of his knees.

“Further, I raise you up as one of the Seven Archangels now. You will not only bear your new name . . . but this.” Angel pulls the pack from her shoulder and unzips it on the ground between them, revealing four items.

The first is a large semiautomatic handgun. The second is a bottle of Ronsonol lighter fuel. The third is a metal lighter. And the last is the knife Camael used to cut out Nadia’s eyes as Nico looked on. A ceremonial blade with a black serrated edge, somehow gleaming almost crimson now.

Angel presses it into his hand, her own hands close over his, holding them tight. He is surprised at how heavy it is. It weighs as much as any of the rocks around them.

“What name will you now choose?” Angel asks as he turns the blade this way and that, catching and scattering the falling sun.

“I am Zadkiel,” he says without thought, without hesitation. He’s studied the Book of Enoch, too, all the ancient texts, learned of the Seven Archangels from Camael, and knows what an honor this is. Knows what trust . . . what faith . . . has been placed in him.

“The Archangel of Benevolence,” she says, and if she’s surprised, or worse, disappointed, she hides it behind her icy-blue gaze. “The Archangel of Freedom.”

“The Angel of Mercy,” he adds.

She regards him. “Some texts suggest Zadkiel stayed the very hand of Abraham before he sacrificed his own child at God’s command.”

“Yes,” he says. “In the World to Come, we must have mercy, no?”

Angel smiles without humor and checks the handgun, making sure a live round is chambered, before slipping it back into the GoRuck and sliding the pack over his shoulders.

“Of course, Zadkiel,” she says. “There is always a place for mercy.”

## A Prophet in Hermès

Etan Laure started a business and now aims to start a revolution

By Dana Llewellyn

New York magazine / Vulture—Entertainment News

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Etan Laure is not what you expect and everything you imagine.

Tall and graying, immaculately cut into a Hermès suit, on a casual glance he might be a north-of-fifty actor (he counts many as friends) or a high-dollar New York attorney. He has bright slate eyes, almost otherworldly, and he's not afraid to use them. They pin you down with their high-wattage intensity. It would be uncomfortable if he didn't pair them with the most wonderful laugh, a deep baritone that washes over the crowd at Fraunces Tavern.

He's said something funny, something a little off-color he hopes I won't print, and after that laugh, a quick touch on my wrist, I likely won't.

Etan Laure's muse, Marin Ross, sits close, only a table away. Ms. Ross is just as beautiful as you remember from *Here Comes Your Sun*, as is her oldest daughter, Skyler, although if the rumors are true, she calls herself Rebecca now. Rumors have also long intimated that Sky is the biological daughter of Chev Ohlin, bassist and lead singer for Well Aimed Grace, and there's plenty of the famous Nordic musician in Rebecca née Skyler's pale skin and blue fjord eyes. Sitting close to her mother,

who hides her own eyes behind black Pradas, they look like nothing less than Viking hawks, ready to swoop down on unsuspecting prey . . . on *me* . . . but only after they finish their fresh Bellini cocktails and matching goat cheese, pecan and radish salads.

Hardly the epitome of brainwashed cultists, although if all those *other* rumors are true—and rumors forever follow Etan Laure like a flock of birds—that’s the only way to describe Laure’s latest venture, AXL.

Laure prefers instead to call AXL a “revolution,” a ley line to revolutionizing business management and self-actualization and creative stimulation. Laure sees himself as a visionary, a lifestyle design entrepreneur, and liberally uses bon mots like “actualization” and “internal stereoscope” and “creative productivity”; he verbs a lot of nouns, and there is an unavoidable electric buzz, an intoxicating romance, to what he’s selling, whatever that might be. Go to an AXL shared workspace (called a “kiva”), and there’s always activity, a sense that something big is going on, something just out of reach, and maybe it’s only that fear of missing out—FOMO—that Laure has been able to capitalize on again and again; in fact, he’s already used the phrase “ethical capital” three times during our drinks. With Laure’s baroque terminology and AXL’s air of exclusivity—space at a kiva is by invitation only, as are Laure’s personal productivity seminars and Inner Explorations (IEs)—he’s somehow monetized mystery, spinning gold out of lead.

But in this constant swirl of multilevel schemes and billion-dollar valuations and



celebrity endorsements and pseudo-religious trappings and brightly named projects and companies that go up in smoke, when the smoke finally clears, there's always Etan Laure.

Or Eleazar . . . if that rumor is true too.

Maybe that's all he's selling, one of the simplest products of all: the cult of personality. And for someone who—again, only in hearsay—counts Lazarus of the Four Days as a blood relative (yes, that Lazarus), carries a tear from Jesus in a tiny vial, and perhaps fought in the Crusades in an earlier incarnation (a process of rebirth known in AXL speak as “metempsychosis”), that's one hell of a sales pitch.

What color suit and Berluti Scritto shoes pair well with an ancient lachrymatory?

Laure is a whirl of talk and laughter, lighting on one subject after another. He's well versed in politics and religion and technospeak and mixes them like a libertine bartender. When apropos of nothing he asks me what my superpower is—the sort of question that comes across like a bad bar pickup line—all I can do is hem and haw over my dirty martini. But then he slays me with one of those million- or billion-dollar smiles and tells me knowingly that “truth” is my superpower, which is an interesting read from a man I don't know, and a meeting that is governed by multiple ironclad NDAs.

I can't ask about all the lawsuits, for instance; I can't ask about the alleged drug use or the old girlfriends or anything about his current relationship with Marin Ross or their rarely

seen daughter, Sybilla, whom few people will go on record to confirm is his actual daughter.

I can't ask if AXL stands for "Ark of Lazarus," as some suggest.

In fact, I can't ask anything. The idea is I'm here to listen, and the longer he talks, and the longer I listen, the more Laure does sound like a country-tent revivalist preacher and less like a tech entrepreneur or business guru or life coach.

His superpower, he confides in me—a secret he's shared with everyone—is his unwavering belief in A Better World™. And who doesn't want that?

And with a lot of money and moxie and a platoon of lawyers—with supreme faith in his own ethical capital and creative productivity, whatever those things are—Etan Laure plans to *will* this world to come into existence every day.

That vision is a superpower too.

That and a killer smile.

As our lunch date winds down, and with few answers to show for it, I angle to catch a moment with Marin Ross, until several of Laure's handlers make that impossible. They're all the same: closely cropped heads and beards, dark suits with small pendants—the AXL logo fronted by a black-winged bird—and their eyes all burn with an intensity that's hard to put a finger on.

I don't want to call it a fervor, don't want to suggest it's cultlike, but it is intense.

They don't smile very much at all. They're like evangelical stockbrokers during a market

crash.

But as their Range Rovers pull up, I do share a quick glance with Rebecca Ross, who's about twenty. She's thin and alabaster pale and her hair is pulled back severely, and yet she still makes that stern look sharply ethereal, achingly pretty. Unlike the bodyguards, she graces me with a slight knowing smile, a smile that says she, too, has a wonderful secret of her own she's not telling.

Like maybe it really is all just a put-on . . . AXL, the rumors, the visions, A Better World™ . . . or maybe that it's all *too real*, and I'm just too undeserving. Unworthy.

Either way, it's a secret she'll never share.

Surprisingly, I also steal a glimpse of Sybilla Ross-Laure, tucked away in one of the Range Rover's big leather seats. Tittle-tattle has it that she'll eventually assume a special place in AXL since the true blood of Lazarus flows in her veins.

The next board member. An heir apparent. A priestess. A prophet.

But all I see is a kid.

Small, delicate, beatific.

If her half sister Rebecca is Brunhilde, Sybilla is Joan of Arc. Both warriors enlisted to bring Etan Laure's vision to life.

And as Laure kisses my cheeks goodbye—he smells of expensive Kentucky bourbon and Tom Ford—I can't take my eyes off young Sybilla. She looks so much like him, right down to those slate eyes. And although I'm not sure of it, I could almost swear she holds a tiny, living bird in her hand.

A pet. A totem.

A sacrifice?

But then the door closes, and they're all gone in their black fleet, and I'm left outside Fraunces with a glossy pamphlet and one of those pendants in my hand, both of which Laure pressed into my fingers when he was kissing me goodbye.

The pamphlet is for a weeklong AXL workshop, including personalized IEs with Etan Laure himself.

It costs \$3,000, but I get a \$500 discount.

And the pendant is just like the one his bodyguards or acolytes or whatever they are were wearing.

AXL.

And a tiny titanium bird.

Dallas sits up and smiles at me, lucid and awake.

He scans the motel room and has no idea where we are, where he is. Looking for Agent Morales, he asks, “You let him go?”

“Yes.”

Dallas knits his brows at that. “You think he’s comin’ back?”

And although I don’t say anything, Dallas seems satisfied anyway. He’s done worrying about Agent Morales if I am. “I been talkin’ to Sunny. She’s been here with me this whole time.”

“I know,” I say, although I’ve been sitting here with him, holding his hand.

“She forgives me,” he says. “She’s proud of me.”

“I wouldn’t be here without you, never would’ve gotten this far.”

“And still a way to go, I think. But not for me. She says I don’t see the sunrise, that new day dawning.” Dallas breathes deep, staring at a spot near the curtains where Agent Morales was standing before. “It’s like I been sleepin’, and that crash done woke me up.” His eyes well up with tears. “Like I been sleepwalkin’ my whole goddamn life.”

He’s pale and sweating and shaking and in shock; he’s got a savage concussion coupled with fatal blood loss and in his dying moments he’s hallucinating his dead daughter—

*His life passing before his eyes.*

Or she really is standing there by the curtains, waiting for him, ready to guide him home.

“If he rolls back here, he ain’t comin’ alone,” Dallas says.

“Did Sunny tell you that?”

“Naw,” he says with a deep, painful laugh. “I just been on the wrong end of the law enough times to know.”

“Me too,” I say, and we both laugh as I lean forward and kiss his forehead. He’s given everything to me, lost everything for a little girl he’s never met, and the weight of his sacrifice crushes me.

“So, we both know what happens next, what I gotta do,” he continues, “and neither of us need any prophecies for that.” He rises unsteadily from the bed, using the rifle as a crutch. He’s crying, smiling at an empty spot in the air, and I can tell by his eyes, she’s gone.

“Was she really here?” he asks. “Or was it just my cracked skull makin’ it all up?”

I know . . . and I don’t. I don’t believe . . . and I do. I want to believe so much it makes my heart hurt, but isn’t that what faith is?

“It don’t matter much, I guess,” he finally says before I ever answer. “She was real enough to me.”

Isn’t that all love is?

“Get my bag,” he says. “There’s a stop n’ rob a block over.” I don’t know how he could possibly know that. He was unconscious, blacked out, the whole time as we drove through town. “I’ll tell you what to grab there,” he continues, “but get back quick, ’cause your amigo ain’t gonna give us much time.” He grins. “And I’m dyin’ for a drink.”

“No,” I tell him as I hold him upright, try to hold him steady, but he only wipes bloody tears from his eyes and checks the rifle.

“It’s okay, darlin’,” he says. “I’m ready.”

In her sister's kitchen, Judy pours herself two fingers of Yellow Rose whiskey into a coffee mug she finds in the dish strainer.

She offers some to Elise, who declines.

"I'm not much of a drinker anymore," Judy says, "but these last few months, everything going on." She swirls the amber liquid in the bottom of Deb's mug. "I'm not just talking about my sister, although that's been hard enough. I'm talking about the whole damn world out there, going to hell in a handbasket." She takes a long sip. "I can't even turn on the TV anymore. It's enough to drive anyone to drink." She makes a face, the hot liquid burning all the way down. "You have kids?"

"Yes, I do." Elise hesitates. "Just one. A son."

"Older, I take it?"

"Old enough," Elise says. "Too old."

Loneliness hovers over this dark, empty house. For all its clutter and claustrophobic mess, there's still a hollowness here, an *absence* of light and life, something missing.

Judy takes a last gulp and washes out the coffee mug in the sink. Dries and puts it back in its former place in the dish strainer. She shares a sad smile with Elise. "If we're just being honest, mother to mother, there's not a lot of upsides to being a parent." She twists the bangles on her wrist. "Children are the crosses we bear."

"Deborah never had kids of her own, never got married?"

"No. No kids. Her work was her cross. Sybilla and her daughter. There were men here and there, but nothing ever serious. I think they got tired of being psychoanalyzed all the time. I know I did."

"Did Sybilla?"

Judy looks out the dark kitchen window. In profile, the low lighting, her jaw is set, eyes still sad. “Deb has this way of making you feel like she’s always keeping book, filing away things, writing little reports. Constantly forming a *diagnosis*. She can wear out a welcome. But the strife between her and Sybilla was a long time coming and deeper than that. Deb was concerned about Renata’s welfare, her safety.”

Elise thinks back to that house on State Road 7, Renata’s pretty bedroom and the expectant birthday presents in Sybilla’s closet and all the smiling family pictures. “I don’t understand.”

Judy nods. “Deb’s little book on Sybilla Laure was that she’s a straight-up *liar*. Dangerous, delusional. Maybe even psychopathic.”

“Are you sure?”

“My sister and I talked *a lot* about Sybilla Laure. Deb became convinced that Sybilla was either making up the most extreme stuff about the Ark or downplaying her own role in it.”

Elise wrestles with this. “That’s not what Deborah said in all her interviews, or in all those books she actually *did* write.” Elise goes over and grabs a paperback from a shelf, the same one she took from Nadia’s trailer. She hands it to Judy. “She always defended Sybilla. And vigorously.”

“Oh, I know,” Judy says, aimlessly flipping a few pages before tossing the book in the sink. “But what was the better story? Sybilla as tyrant, or Sybilla as victim?” Judy sits down at the kitchen table. “Look, Sybilla was little more than a little girl herself when she walked out of that burning compound, clutching a *baby*. She was raised up in that awful place, with all those strange, desperate people. Her mother an emotionally distant mess, father a con man prophet, sister a full-on zealot. Families are the crosses we bear, too, and Sybilla’s was particularly heavy. She had a lot of complex traumas to work through, a lifetime’s worth, and Deb didn’t shy away from that. She welcomed the professional challenge. But somehow



it got . . . personal. She wanted to *mother* Sybilla, and Renata too. That's what I thought anyway, and that's what I told her."

"She didn't agree?"

"No, she kept digging in, deeper and deeper, before concluding the only one with a messiah complex was Sybilla herself. She was the one driving them all toward the apocalypse."

"What about Etan Laure? Or her sister, Rebecca?"

"By the end, he wasn't much in control. He was sick, suffering from dementia. Becca was a true believer, though, through and through, and *very* jealous of Sybilla. Jealous of Renata. She and Sybilla locked horns on who was going to be the Ark's next leader after Etan was gone."

"Sybilla was Etan's favorite?"

"Yes," Judy says. "Because of Renata, their child. But Sybilla was no angel, no messiah. No more than Etan nor Becca. Just an angry, scared kid herself."

"I don't know that I blame her," Elise confesses as her attention is grabbed by a painting on the wall, a striking rendition of that fiery photo that made Sybilla famous. But in this version, the burning building is built from dozens and dozens of tormented souls, each plank of wood an elongated face. The writhing smoke is a chorus of open mouths, and the embers are tiny birds.

Sybilla's head is crowned in ruddy flames sharp as thorns, and the baby in her arms is a porcelain doll with a cracked face. Above it all, the sky is seared by lightning, and a Black Sun shines no light. It's beautiful and awful and frightening at the same time, much more mature and detailed than even Renata's drawings, and Elise wonders if Sybilla drew it.

As Judy joins Elise at the painting, Elise says, "It seems to me that your sister benefitted plenty from Sybilla's lies. They *both* got something out of it. Sybilla the martyr. Deborah the savior."

"And neither got what they'd bargained for," Judy says, staring at the painted Sybilla and the fake flames threatening

to engulf her, threatening to leap off the canvas and burn the whole world.

“It’s dramatic,” Elise says, nodding at the image.

“It’s horrible,” Judy says. “I hate it.”

“Did Sybilla paint it? Deborah?”

“No,” Judy says with a fierce shake of her head, twisting the bangles on her wrist again, as if that will hold back the tears Elise knows are now threatening. “One of those cult members gifted it to her.” Judy glares at the painting as if willing it gone. “Deb didn’t just build a career out of this nonsense; she built up a weird kind of *following* too. People started showing up here, searching her out. They called themselves New Lazarians. They had questions, wanted answers. Some were more aggressive than others.”

Elise now understands the cameras and security lights.

“It took on a life of its own,” Judy continues. “Deb started going out of her way to collect stuff related to the Ark of Lazarus. Laure’s old YouTube videos and recruiting pamphlets, even some of Becca’s original writings. She kept this huge file, research for a new book or project, all about the Ark of Lazarus. She called it ‘The Fourth Day.’”

“Fourth Day?”

“Lazarus of the Four Days. Jesus resurrected Lazarus on the fourth day. It’s one of the seven signs in the Gospel of John, another one of those things that was important to Sybilla and the rest of them.”

Elise says, “And your sister, too, apparently.”

“Yes, Deb, too,” Judy concedes, sadness hiding behind every word. “And I know *way* too much about this stuff, just trying to understand her, looking for a way into her head, a way to pull her back. But it gets under your skin, in your blood, like poison or venom. A snakebite. Some of Deb’s Fourth Day stuff got loose out there in those sick internet chat rooms, and earlier this year, the FBI showed up and questioned her about it. That’s when I couldn’t ignore it anymore either. I got all up in her face about it, and she cut me out. She burned

her computer, a bunch of notebooks and notes.” She looks around the dark, empty house. “And now here we are.”

“The FBI was *here* asking Deborah about Sybilla?” Elise is troubled by this revelation, and its implications. “Or these New Lazarians?”

“Both, I guess. But Deb wouldn’t tell me. She wouldn’t talk about it all.”

Elise joins Judy Jowell in taking one last look around the cramped house, all the stacked books and papers, the old mementos and photos, and that singular painting on the wall.

She can now make out a faint winged shadow looming behind Sybilla—a shadow holding what looks to be a *knife*—and Elise wonders who it’s supposed to be, what it’s supposed to represent. The longer she takes it in, the more weird details seem to appear right before her eyes. Or maybe it’s just her tired and reeling mind conjuring them. “When’s the last time Sybilla and your sister saw each other? Spoke?”

“I don’t know. A while. A couple of years? But it was Sybilla who cut Deb loose first, didn’t want anything to do with her. And honestly, for Deb, it wasn’t about Sybilla anymore anyway. It was *Renata*. Deb thought Sybilla was dangerous. That she was unstable, unsafe, and only growing more so. Deb was planning on suing for custody.”

Elise can’t hide her shock and doesn’t even try. “That’s . . . ridiculous.”

“Trust me, I know. A therapist *taking* her client’s child would’ve been a public relations mess, a media shitshow that would’ve pushed them both and all that cult crap right back into the spotlight.”

“She didn’t follow through?”

“No. But that didn’t make Deb any less determined to get Renata away from her.”

Still, it just doesn’t make sense to Elise. There’s something she’s missing, not quite seeing clearly, like the hidden images that come and go in that painting. “If Deborah

thought Sybilla was mostly making up all this stuff, then why on earth was *she* still so fascinated by the Ark of Lazarus?"

Judy turns with fresh tears in her eyes, the ones she'd been fighting so hard to hold back. "Because Deb *believed*, Chief Blue. My sister swallowed the goddamn poison too." Judy wipes at tears. "After the FBI showed up, she got all paranoid, convinced herself it was a *sign*. She believed the End of the World truly *was* at hand . . . and that Renata Laure was the key to it all."

Carrizozo only has a three-man police department.

The nearest FBI office in Albuquerque is more than two hours away. The county sheriff, Bob Hernandez, can pull together five deputies in thirty minutes. Add in those three officers from the Carrizozo PD, and Eladio has eight armed men to work with, enough to get Dallas and Billie out of the Four Winds and safely under control. Dallas won't come quietly, but he's injured bad and probably won't put Billie at risk.

Even this haphazard arrest team—most well into their fifties, if not older—should be able to get them into custody in moments. But that's what they thought at Jornada del Muerto, too, and there they had satellite imaging, two full highly trained tactical teams, and months to plan.

Eladio has half an hour and is reduced to sketching out a diagram of the motel on the back of a pad of parking tickets.

Sheriff Hernandez has already sent one of his deputies over to keep an eye on the Four Winds. The deputy is in plain clothes, parked in an old Dodge Ram across the street, and he's popped on the radio to say it's quiet over there, both the Hyundai and motel room in clear view.

Billie or Dallas could've already slipped out, made their escape, but they're still going to need a vehicle, so Eladio's betting they're still there, waiting for him to return.

Hernandez, a weathered man in his sixties with a massive gunmetal-gray mustache, sips coffee, holding his mug tight, probably to hide the shaking in his hands. "Are you telling me these two were involved in that dustup near Taiban?"

"It's more complicated than that," Eladio says.

"Son, it's *never* that complicated," the sheriff says dryly. He looks at Eladio over his mug. "They armed, dangerous?"

Eladio hesitates—

*But standing there in that dusty street that day, the beautiful blonde girl with the dark sunglasses on her head didn't look dangerous. She didn't look like any kind of threat at all.*

“Yes,” he says. “Yes, they are.”

“And now you want me and my men, my *boys*, to run up on them?”

“I do,” Eladio says, “and we can't wait for agents to get here from Albuquerque.” Agents needed instead to go to Jornada del Muerto, to find a missing girl.

Sheriff Hernandez has already asked to see Eladio's badge and credentials twice. “But *you* were with 'em up Taiban way.” Hernandez blows on his coffee. “And then *you* brought them here.” Blows again. “Seems to me *we* don't need to do anything that you couldn't have already done.”

Eladio puts the pad of parking tickets down and lays the borrowed pencil next to it. “I know what I'm asking. I know I'm putting your men at risk. But I'll be right there with them. I'll be the first one through that door.”

“That's not much of a sales pitch.”

“I'm not trying to sell it, Sheriff. I'm just telling you I need your help. And honestly, whether your men are behind me or not, I'm walking through that door anyway.”

Hernandez sets down his coffee mug—*World's Best PawPaw* painted in gold and blue script—on top of the pad. He smooths out his long mustache with a hand flashing a wedding band, the gold as old and tarnished as the man wearing it.

“I'm not going to let a fellow law enforcement officer do something like this alone,” he says, “and you know that too. But son, if your friends in there start shooting my town all to pieces, you better hope you do take the first rounds. Because if you walk out of there and leave any of my men dead on the ground”—Sheriff Hernandez grabs up a long-barreled Winchester loaded with twelve-gauge rifled shotgun slugs—“there *will* be hell to pay.”

When I was younger and still working with Deb, she used to have me keep these silly journals, to write out how I was feeling.

How I was *processing*. All my secret thoughts. My desires.

Every month she gave me a fresh wire-bound notebook covered in flowers with the phrase “Life Is Beautiful” etched on it, and I remember thinking she must have bought these things in bulk. I imagined a thousand Deborah Fallon patients wandering all around New Mexico, the entire Southwest, carrying these dumb notebooks.

She asked me to share them with her so we could discuss the progress I was making, so we could work through the process together, not much different from the Inner Explorations Etan used to charge \$500 for. He trained others to be Guides, and they charged anywhere from \$50 to \$200. Becca was an experienced Guide and commanded \$300 for a half-hour session.

I learned from Aaron that Becca and Etan were *taping* their IEs, just like I later found out Deb Fallon was copying my “Life Is Beautiful” notebooks. Preserving them, saving them for herself.

Some of my pages *were* nonsense, outright lies. Some weren't. Some I tore out and kept for myself. I never showed her *every* page. Maybe I thought I'd share them with Rennie one day, a kind of explanation or rationalization or confession for everything we'd been through. Maybe I found the exercise as useful as Deb had suggested and was even able to exorcise a few demons, but I wanted to keep them close all the same, so I'd never, ever forget.

I've since burned all those prodigal pages but one:

*There is smoke in my eyes*

You have to go, he says, and his arms around me are strong. You have to go now, he says, and his breath is heavy on my face.

He smells of ash. His beard is gritty with it. His lips are raw, bloody, like mine.

I hate you, I suddenly say, and it's such a silly thing. A childish confession, here and now, with fire at our feet.

I know he says.

My heart hurts. It jumps. It leaps like a bird on the wing, like the flames at the door.

I can't leave without her, I say. My baby. . . the baby.

Go, go, he says. I will get her. I will bring her to you.



They are coming for us I say.

Did you do this he asks? Did you?

But before I can answer he pushes me out the open window.

I grab for him. I desperately, foolishly, try to hold on to him.

If you don't hold on to something, you'll fall for anything.

But he is only smoke. Only white, white, burning light.

It is the End of the World.

And when I fall, I discover I don't have wings, and there is nothing to hold on to at all . . .

The old man picks me up three miles outside Carrizozo.

He doesn't speak much English, and I don't speak any Spanish, but he sees a woman walking alone in the middle of the night and decides to stop, and I make it clear enough that I need to get near Truth or Consequences, to Elephant Butte. To Jornada del Muerto.

He smiles, showing bad teeth, and gestures me to get in with a liver-spotted hand.

On the bench seat next to him is an even older dog, a hound the same rust color that speckles the truck's hood and wheel wells. The dog smells like summer sunlight and cracked leather and regards me with rheumy eyes as he chuffs and puts his big paws in my lap, and I hug him and kiss his mailbox-size head, and the old man laughs and affectionately calls him Poco.

The ancient Egyptians thought their pets were vessels of divine powers. Some Native American tribes believe animals have souls, and Hindus and Buddhists and Sikhs all accept some concept of animal souls and reincarnation and rebirth.

Poco nuzzles me and watches me closely, and I wonder if it's Bert the Beagle staring at me.

If so, I hope he forgives me.

It should be pitch dark way out here in the desert, but the night sky is instead suffused with a reddish-purple hue, almost bright enough to see by, an apocalyptic aurora borealis as the West burns. The moon and stars are invisible, drifting smoke having washed them out, because the Four Horsemen fires have remade all the constellations.

The morning the Ark of Lazarus burned, the sky was the same, all the smoke and tears in my eyes—

*But he is only smoke. Only white, white, burning light.*

The End of the World was beautiful then and now.

The old man aims all three of us toward it, and I hold Poco tight.

Elise wakes up with a start in the motel room, reaching for her gun.

She left it on her nightstand, within grabbing distance, next to a half-finished Coke and the bottle of Advil she brought in from the car. She now brings her SIG Sauer to eye level and scans the darkened room, finding . . . *nothing*. Only heavily curtained windows. A tiny table and two chairs.

She flips on the light to assure herself she's alone, although she knows it's silly, because she's been alone for years.

She was sleeping above the motel sheets, still fully clothed. Hot and sore and uncomfortable, but that has as much to do with the dream that threw her awake as anything else.

That dream . . . *no, an honest-to-God nightmare* . . . falls away, even as ugly slivers of it still work their way under her skin—

*It gets under your skin, in your blood . . .*

Reflected images, like broken shards of glass.



*Denny in a place of sighing wind and gritty dust and arid rock, like the high desert she drove through to get here.*

*Like the twisted ruins of Siege Perilous.*

*Denny suspended above a throat-like hole in the ground, a snake pit, holding Lily Renee, his burned body wrapped in a white sheet—as bright and clean as Nadia's—and his eyes gone.*

*Black holes watching, judging her.*

*Bloody tears running down his torched, emaciated face, pouring freely from those deep, unforgiving sockets, as she labored to pull him down from his invisible cross.*

*Her son whispering to her to turn away, telling her, Don't be a martyr, Mom.*

*Just let it go.*

And Lori there, too, and Denny's dad—a frosty can of Grain Belt Premium in each hand—both on their knees, heads bowed, as if praying to her son, covered in *his* blood.

And as if the horror show couldn't get any worse, as Denny whispered her name and called her *Mother, Mom, Mommy*. As he taunted and jeered and made fun of her tears—

*Small starry birds flew from his mouth into the unsettled desert sky.*



She decocks her gun and abandons the bed, shivering from the nightmare that won't stop shaking her.

She must be sick, feverish, haunted by that painting hanging in Deborah Fallon's house.

On the bed is her discarded phone and Deborah's book. She spent the last hour before sleep claimed her reading another chapter and scrolling through the internet for any information about the New Lazarians. Scanning the news, too, searching for anything further that had been released about the cases in Limon, but instead she found only fires and rain, more signs of the apocalypse.

The twin hurricanes—Ophelia and Nigel—are due to slam into the Gulf Coast between Lake Jackson and Galveston, one right after another, sometime in the next twenty-four hours, maybe even before she gets home. The Four Horsemen fires have turned eastward, burning through Fremont-Winema and Umpqua National Forests. Farther north, they've spread past Bend into the Umatilla National Forest.

Everything west of here scorched, charred, smoking. Birds still falling from the sky across the country.

That Russian airliner vanishing earlier over Murmansk, and now a second, an Egyptair flight bound for Paris, disappearing without a distress call. Another Sons of Revere

bomb plot uncovered, this time a Verizon office in Petaluma: something about the 6G network they dislike or distrust.

The New Lazarians share some of these fanatical ideas, but it's hard to know who truly believes what anymore, with so many people refusing to accept or believe *anything* at all, even when they know better or see it with their own eyes.

So much fear, intertwined and self-perpetuating, feeding on itself like a snake eating its tail. So easy to fall into that dark snake hole yourself, to get lost down there, to end up snakebit, just the way Judy Jowell warned.

It happened to Deborah Fallon, and it might've happened to Nadia Rupert, eventually.

Elise fell asleep doomscrolling again; it's no wonder her dreams were so vivid, wild, horrible. No wonder she's starting to see conspiracies and shadows everywhere.

She glances now out her motel window, eager for the first rays of the dawn sun, some sort of light, any light, but the sky is still leaden, smoky, sultry. She scans her phone to find that Grant's texted her several times, each one increasingly desperate—

**How's it going?**

**You get there yet?**

**Please just give me a call.**

**Worried.**

**Don't do this.**

**I can't help you.**

The last one came at three a.m., almost two hours ago.

There was no reason for Grant to be up at that hour texting her. And no texts or calls from Denny at all.

She checks twice, just to make sure.

Judy told her Deborah's been missing for about a month. Before that, she was talking to a man Judy didn't know, but not local—possibly from Texas or Louisiana or Alabama—and

Elise wonders if that could be the former sheriff's deputy from Diamondhead, found dead yesterday on the highway in Taiban.

If Deborah is a New Lazarian now, then Nadia may have been one as well, or at least communicating with them, which makes sense, given her missing phone and computer. Sybilla is likely mixed up with them, too, somehow, an idea not as easy to dismiss as it might've been yesterday.

*But why?*

*Where are they? What connects them all?*

The Ark of Lazarus is the key, and Elise checks Google Maps on her phone. She's three hours from Elephant Butte, another hour to Jornada del Muerto.

Deborah told Judy the New Lazarians have been visiting the site for years, a rite of passage or a pilgrimage, despite the best efforts of the local sheriff's office and park rangers to keep people out. It's a wilderness research area, and although the Ark compound doesn't show up on any map, there's a crisscross of old trailheads and roads that circle it. It's there, hiding in that maze and the shadows of a dead volcano.

Elise is still exhausted and has no idea what she's accomplished. She came here ready to convince herself that Sybilla Laure was innocent, a woman—a victim—on the run from forces she couldn't control, but now she isn't so sure. She just doesn't know what to believe anymore either.

She's not sure she can bring herself to trek out to Jornada del Muerto but not sure she can go back to Limon, and she's still deciding when Jerry calls. "Hey," she answers, glad to hear his voice, any voice. "It's early, Jerry. Everything okay?"

"Here?" he says. "Fine. I'm just glad *you're* okay. I was worried you wouldn't answer . . . and well, hell . . ."

"Wait, slow down." She can hear the panic, the worry, in his words. "What are you talking about?"

"It's been leaked out, all about Sybilla Laure . . . all that cult stuff."

Elise didn't see any of that before she fell asleep, but it doesn't surprise her. She knew the longer it took to find Sybilla, the more likely her identity would be revealed.

Jerry says something about fingerprints, and that makes perfect sense. Sybilla could change her name and hair color and even buy a new background but wouldn't be able to alter her prints. They'd still be on record from her arrest in New Mexico, and Sarah Brannen's prints would be all over that house in Limon.

"You *knew*," Jerry says. "You knew all along." That's not strictly true, but she doesn't deny it and doesn't admit it either. "Did you call the press, leak it?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, Lt. Feehan thinks differently. He was on the warpath last night, looking for you. If he hasn't tracked you down yet, he will soon."

"I'll deal with that," she says, although she doesn't know how she will.

"I bought you some time. I told him you were up in Whitefish, fly-fishing." And Elise can't help but smile at that. "But that's not all. Not the worst of it. And this isn't on the news yet."

"What?"

"An *explosion*. Some local cops and an FBI agent tried to grab the Taiban suspects in a fleabag motel in New Mexico. That's all anyone will say officially to me anyway, but that's what Feehan's really all spun up about. It has something to do with Laure and McGee. Jesus, I was convinced you were there . . . that you were part of it."

"No," she says as cold dread takes hold. "But what about Renata Brannen? How bad is it?"

*An explosion . . .*

She can almost hear Jerry shaking his head on the other side of the line.

"It's bad, Chief. Real, real bad."



III

# FIRE AND RAIN

# Where There Is Smoke

## The True Story of the Ark of Lazarus

By Deborah Fallon, PhD, LCSW, LMHC

With a Foreword by Carl John Ferrenbach

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### Chapter 13

#### End of Days

In the months preceding the FBI raid on the Jornada del Muerto compound, there were two significant “defections” from Eleazar’s flock: Connor Whaley, a.k.a. Abel, and Eleazar’s own daughter, Sybilla.

While Connor’s defection resulted in his very loud and visible departure after an argument in the compound’s main dining hall, Sybilla’s quiet defection was far less noticeable and had been going on for far longer.

Outwardly, she’d maintained her regimen: religiously attending her lessons and prayer groups, handling her innumerable chores (maintaining the compound and expanding it took constant effort from all involved), all the while busying herself learning how to be a mother to her daughter, Renata. But as tensions within the Ark grew, a hothouse environment of stress and competing ideologies, Sybilla found herself looking beyond the mesas and surrounding mountains to a world beyond the reach of her father and half sister.

Much has been speculated about the figurative, if not literal, absence of Sybilla’s mother, Marin, a.k.a. Adah. But she had already become a remote, missing figure in Sybilla’s life in the years leading up to March 2015. In fact, she had long finished her most prominent role to date, as Eleazar’s famous consort and financial backer, giving AXL / Ark of Lazarus just enough of a veneer of respectability to ensnare some of her Hollywood coterie. But as the worst of the articles regarding AXL started to

hit the press as early as 2006, presaging the group's withdrawal en masse to New Mexico (and subsequently dropping all pretense of being "just" an executive-development program), Adah had already fallen out of Eleazar's orbit in favor of her first daughter, Rebecca.

By the time Sybilla was indoctrinated in the Centrum and had become a mother herself, she'd surpassed the status of both Adah and Rebecca in Eleazar's eyes as well.

This will always be the central paradox to understanding how Eleazar was so successful at holding sway over his growing, and increasingly squabbling, Flock for so long: a mixture of calculated callousness and an almost pathological flexibility and adaptability.

Over the years, Etan Laure shed skins as easily as any snake, changing colors as quickly as a chameleon. He was whoever he needed to be in *that* moment in time. French. Austrian. A writer. An entrepreneur. Etan. Eleazar. His first venture, Inner Journey LLC, became Executive Power Success Inc., which soon begat EPX, and then gave way to AXL, before finally morphing into the Ark of Lazarus as we know it today.

Before he finally revealed his and the Ark's true colors.

Freed from any belief system other than his personal gain, Eleazar was able to capture the mood or zeitgeist of the moment and repackage or rebrand it.

But that ideological flexibility came at a cost, because that left the Ark rudderless, absent a true doctrinal foundation. Its substance seemed less firm than the desert sand the compound itself was built upon, leading to the sort of theoretical and philosophical debates that drove Connor Whaley (and others before him) from the fold. Cults usually self-isolate to keep at bay opposing viewpoints, to prevent dissension and questions. But as Eleazar freely repurposed belief systems, seeking meaning and support in increasingly ancient and contradictory texts, and devising ever more obscure prophecies and mysteries to hold control, he only raised *more* questions.

The sum of his pronouncements and edicts seemed less preordained and more mundane.

Rebecca, however—always one of the Ark’s most ardent believers—understood that even if the *messenger* was fallible, the Ark’s message was invaluable, possibly priceless.

It’s hard to pinpoint when this subtle shift in authority began, but Rebecca sought to impose order and codify much of what became the Ark’s final message and mission. As Eleazar’s physical and mental health waned<sup>1</sup> and he receded both physically and spiritually, Rebecca aggressively stepped forward to take up his mantle.

This change was not insignificant and only hastened a growing confrontation with the younger Sybilla.

The best evidence we have that Eleazar and/or Sybilla may have tried to wrest control back is the argument in the dining hall, and the only people alive who know the truth of it are Connor and Sybilla.

Connor’s public statements have been inconsistent,<sup>2</sup> while Sybilla’s have been nonexistent. But if Connor and Rebecca represented at least one spirited “splinter” faction within the Ark, and Eleazar was still venerated by a nonzero number of the others, then Sybilla’s support would have been dispositive, because both sides believed the Ark’s future, if not the world’s, was tied to Sybilla and Eleazar’s daughter, Renata.

Whoever controlled Renata would control that future.

It could be argued that Sybilla’s quiet defection was the real cause of the Ark’s downfall, even more than the FBI raid that doomed it. Until those final, fateful months in 2015, if there was anyone who believed in the Ark of Lazarus *more* than Rebecca, it was only her half sister, who had never known a life outside it. When Sybilla rejected the Ark, it meant turning her back on an existence she’d never questioned. It meant refusing to accept the roles long proscribed and *prophesized* for not only her, but her daughter.

She risked both their immortal souls and those of everyone at the Ark.

*Why* Sybilla lost her faith is beyond the scope of this book, but her growing skepticism in the final months raises three fascinating questions:

*Would the Ark of Lazarus have survived even if the FBI had not raided it in March 2015?*

*What would Eleazar or Rebecca have done to keep Sybilla and, more importantly, Renata, in the fold?*

*And how far would Sybilla have gone to protect her daughter and flee the Ark anyway?*

The first question is easy.

The Ark of Lazarus has survived, at least in our continued examination and fascination with it and in the spiritual guidance, beliefs, and precepts it left behind. At the time of this writing, even a cursory internet search reveals that many are still drawn to the promises of its New Day Dawning, its Better World, the World to Come. And they believe, like Rebecca Laure, that the early—and premature—demise of the Ark of Lazarus was always less the message than the messengers themselves.

The other two questions are impossible to answer.

They're forever lost to the ashes of the Ark of Lazarus.

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[1](#) Again, as noted, corroborated evidence regarding Etan Laure's actual health at this time is minimal, but the circumstantial evidence suggests he was ill.

[2](#) See interview, *New York Times*, August 15, 2015, and 20/20 Special Report, broadcast January 9, 2016, as well as Fox News interview on July 2, 2018.

Eladio *thinks* he remembers knocking three times on the Four Winds door and hearing Dallas say, *Get back, amigo*, from the other side.

*Get back.*

Turning to Sheriff Hernandez—*World's Best PawPaw*—and the men behind him, and screaming, *Get back, get back* too.

And then—

*The door turning upside down and all the windows blowing out and the bed catching fire, blossoming like an awful flower, billowing sheets igniting in a rush of hot gas.*

*Flying backward through a fine mist of broken glass, wood, and blood.*

But not before seeing his mama, Paola, standing in the fire with her rosary in hand, calling his name.



He doesn't recognize the older woman standing at the end of his hospital bed, although she reminds him of Paola too.

Same sad yet sharp eyes, that smart, hawkish stare.

There's something *believable* about her, an inherent trustworthiness in her lined face, her gray hair casually pulled back in a wet ponytail. It must be finally raining because a million raindrops also darken the shoulders of her coat, a coat that does nothing to hide the holstered gun and badge on her belt.

Eladio sits painfully upright in his hospital bed to discover his heavily bandaged right arm is handcuffed to the rail.

Someone, this mysterious woman, just told him that he's lucky to be alive—

*A miracle.*

He doesn't know how long he's been out, how long he's been in the hospital, or even *where* this hospital is.

She says, "I'm Elise Blue, Special Agent Morales, and you're in Presbyterian Hospital, in Albuquerque. I badged my way in because those young guys out there guarding your door took pity on an older woman and a fellow cop, but there's a lot of people eager to talk to you, including a lieutenant from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation and probably every FBI agent in three states. They're all on their way here, so we don't have much time. I'm a police chief from Limon."

She flashes her badge for a better look, although it's unnecessary. Eladio understands.

She asks, "You're Aaron, aren't you?" And when he doesn't answer, she evidently takes his long silence as a *yes* anyway. "I really hope you'll tell me about Sybilla and Renata Laure."

The old man who scooped me up, whose name seems to be Gerardo, gives me his phone.

But due either to the remote area we're driving through or the chaotic weather all around us, the sky ominous with rain, I can't catch the faintest Wi-Fi or cellular signal.

I have no idea what's going on in Limon or anywhere else, no idea how close to the edge the world sits or who is still looking for me or if there's been any news about Rennie. It's possible she's already been found, or that I'm driving Gerardo and Poco into a law enforcement blockade right around the next mesa, or even another New Lazarian ambush.

From the start, I've miscalculated this shadowy group's number and reach and dedication. And worse, it's possible Agent Morales was right: I've misconstrued their true purpose as well.



We cross a long, dirty finger of the Rio Grande and stop for gas outside San Antonio, New Mexico.

When we lived at Jornada del Muerto, I passed through here several times and remember a collection of windblown buildings, including the local Buckhorn Tavern, famous for its green chili cheeseburger.

That's all gone now, and we were supposedly strict vegetarians at the Ark back then, but Etan secretly brought Becca and me here—he'd let us change out of our itchy dresses and wear regular jeans and T-shirts—and we'd all three slip into the Buckhorn and order those cheeseburgers and sit out back at one of their pinewood tables and watch the desert sky change a hundred colors until it finally went dark altogether, and the stars came out.

Eventually, Etan just started bringing me alone, and I *know* it happened, like I know we took that trip to the beach.



*I can still taste the sea salt on my lips, feel the sand and sun on my skin.*

*I can still taste that burger, hear Becca's guilty laugh beneath the stars.*

We were breaking the rules and we loved it, just the three of us.

When Aaron and I were planning to flee the Ark, I told him I wanted to come here one last time and eat a burger under the stars before we disappeared together forever.

Just me, him, and Renata—

*Just the three of us.*



As Gerardo gasses up the truck, another man nearby is on the phone.

He's parked about twenty yards from us, standing outside a dusty, late-model sedan, his face down in his cell, scrolling through it.

Although his hair is different, and he's gained some weight, I recognize him.

I'm sitting in the shadows of the truck's cab, so he can't make me out. Even if he has a recent picture of me, and I assume a picture has been circulated among the New Lazarians ever since Limon, if not before, there's no way he'd expect me here now, riding shotgun with an old Mexican field hand and his dog.

Guess I got lucky . . . or it is a miracle. I scratch Poco's ears, and his breath is hot and heavy and comforting. Looking at me with his dark eyes—Bert the Beagle's eyes—they seem to say, *Don't do it.*

*Please don't do it. Just stay here with me.*

He's a good old dog and I respect his opinion, but I clutch him one last time and kiss his head and get out of the truck.

Zadkiel can't take his eyes off the woman.

She does everything with a studied ferocity. And the bad dye job, the ill-fitting clothes, do little to soften her, even less to shake this idea that he *knows* her.

No one has ever claimed to have seen Ananiel, no one knows if the Rain of God is one person or a legion, but it takes little to imagine this woman could hold *multitudes*.

She catches his eyes slipping from the highway ahead . . . *staring*. "Is there something you wish to say?" Dina asks.

"No, I'm sorry," he answers, but now it's her turn to stare right back at him, making him uncomfortable. Her piercing gaze pins him down, sharp and heavy as the knife he now carries.

Dina commands him, "Tell me what you see."

"I'm sorry?"

Her voice is softer than he imagined but no less powerful. "Tell me what you *see*."

So, he sweeps his gaze up to the mountains, to the sky. To the low-slung clouds heavy with lightning and rain that will soon angle across the highway toward them. For days they've moved under heavens seared by fire, a blanched shroud that's left the Sunseeker covered in ash.

He's found soot in his clothes, in his hair. Tastes it all the time now.

And another great storm is coming, this time a flood, and he wonders if it will wash not only the smoke away but all of them as well—

*The Rain of God.*

Renata sits in the back with Angel. The girl is silent and still, as always, watching the woman with the badly dyed hair and the worrisome sky.

“The sky is—”

“—*beautiful*,” Dina finishes for him. “Ascension is here at long last.”

She says it with such anticipation, such a profound joy, it almost hurts. A joy that Zadkiel doesn't share. He knows he should be rapturous, but this woman's feeling of certainty, of surety, escapes him. It only scares him.

“We have prepared and waited so long,” he dutifully replies.

Dina smiles. “The Fourth Day is at hand, Zadkiel, and there will be much pain and penance but joy too. This is not the time to suffer the indignity of doubt but clothe yourself in righteous armor and arm yourself with faith's sharp knife and join me in the shadows of the Black Sun.”

She then looks back to Renata, to Angel, and says, “It is time to send the picture of the girl.”

Chief Blue tells Eladio everything she can as fast as she can.

The mystery of Sarah and Noah Brannen.

The death of Nadia Rupert.

A charcoal sketch of a woman and baby. A visit to Deborah Fallon's home.

He's still foggy, not quite following all her connections, but picks up enough: the long, winding trail that brought her here, to him.

She wants to know if either Billie or Renata was at the motel with him and Randall "Dallas" McGee, and he tells her Renata wasn't but has no idea if Billie was still inside when it blew.

Has no idea if she's still alive.

Then he tells her everything he does know, as fast as he can too.



When he's done, Chief Blue stares out the window, at dark skies.

"I feel like the last forty-eight hours I've been chasing this . . . shadow . . . a ghost," she finally says. "All these different personas, all these stories, bits and pieces of a truth I'm not sure I *can* believe. Sybilla . . . your Billie, my Sarah Brannen . . . passed through so many lives, but it's like no one caught more than a fleeting glimpse of her."

"Only what she wanted them to see," he says, "or what *they* wanted to see. She haunted me, too, from the first time I saw her. Laure was supposedly the charismatic prophet, but trust me, Billie had a charisma all her own." He smiles. "Still does."

"Did you love her?" Chief Blue asks.

He can't feel his hands beneath the bandages, unsure if it's the thick wrapping or the drugs he's been given. Doesn't even know *what* to feel if Billie is truly dead. "That wasn't allowed," he says. "Never mind the Ark's rules. I was a federal agent working undercover, and she was the target of an ongoing criminal investigation."

Chief Blue nods. "But that's not what I asked."

"I know," he admits, smiling again. "Things happened at the Ark I still can't explain, even now. Billie once told me love is just a kind of faith, so yes, I guess I did love her. And for a while . . . for her . . . I was willing to believe just about anything."

He sees now that Chief Blue has an old paperback copy of one of Deb Fallon's books, *Where There Is Smoke*. He hasn't flipped through it in years. He's never mentioned by name, only hinted at. Another ghost, too, lingering over the pages.

"What about the Ark of Lazarus itself?" she asks. "Were you a believer too?"

He hesitates. Long as he's quiet, he can hear rain on the windows. His mama loved the rain because it rained so rarely around her desert home. She said it was always such a surprise, a gift from God, a reminder of his great power. Rain gives the desert color, makes it come *alive*, like the whole wide world is reborn fresh and new after every fleeting storm.

"Sure," he eventually says. "We all want signs, want the world to make sense and mean something. But then again, we can find meaning in almost anything, if we look hard enough." He knows he's still not answering her questions. "When I was at the Ark, I wanted to believe in its *promise*, the possibility, of something better. A beautiful future out there, somewhere. And who doesn't want that? But there was no possible future at all for me and Billie."

Chief Blue regards him without judgment, maybe something closer to compassion. "What happened?"

He hesitates again. "I made a young woman a promise I couldn't keep. A promise I *didn't* keep. I got scared at the . . .

*size . . .* of it all. The immensity of what I was taking on and what I was throwing away. It all seemed just too big to truly contemplate, and I was so young. Old enough to know better, but young enough not to know a goddamn thing, if that makes sense. I thought I still had my whole life ahead of me.” He listens to that whispering rain, not sure why he feels like he can tell this woman all these things. “I made Billie a pariah, Chief Blue. She sinned against God and worse, the Ark, for me. Her sister wasn’t forgiving, and I don’t know that she ever even forgave herself . . . or me. I know I didn’t.” He pulls at the cuffs, listens to the rain again, barely louder than his own breathing. “Becca almost killed Billie.”

“Sybilla knew about the raid?”

“She knew *everything*. We were supposed to be gone well before all that. After I understood how bad it was going to be for her, I even pushed the raid’s launch window to at least get her out as fast as I could. I wanted it over.”

“But it was already too late,” Chief Blue says.

“Yes,” he says. “By then, Becca knew too. They all knew. The Ark was already burning.”

“Sybilla must’ve warned them,” Chief Blue says. “They were ready, waiting.”

“Becca *whipped* the truth out of Billie.”

Chief Blue nods, turning the book over and over in her hands. “But you saved her.”

“No,” he says bitterly. “I just got her out *alive*. Forty-seven others didn’t. Three federal agents died too. All dead as if I lit those fires myself.”

Every word *hurts* even after all this time, even with all the meds. The fresh wounds from Taiban and Carrizozo adding to that old bone-deep pain from the Ark of Lazarus. Scars that won’t ever truly heal.

“How did they start?”

“For years I blamed Billie . . . but I just don’t know anymore.”

Chief Blue holds up the book. “Deborah Fallon decided Sybilla was a fraud, a fake.”

“Billie’s many things,” he says, “but she’s not a fraud. She *believes* in what she’s doing.”

“What about Rebecca?”

“Becca’s dead. It doesn’t matter what she believed.”

Chief Blue puts Fallon’s book on the small table next to his bedside. “And you?” she asks. “Is this really the End of the World?”

As if on cue, thunder rumbles and rolls outside. Lightning the color of running blood reflects against the window, making the room shine.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe either. Then or now. But it matters a lot to the killers that descended on your town.”

“The New Lazarians,” Chief Blue says. “Tell me, did Sybilla kill her husband?”

“No. They were after just her and Renata in Limon. They attacked us at Taiban to get at Billie after first missing her in Colorado. She thinks they wanted Renata because she’s their savior, all that old Ark mythology. But I think Renata’s in *real* danger, and Billie, too, and it has nothing to do with the End of the World.”

“Either way, we’re almost out of time,” Chief Blue says as loud voices getting even louder echo in the hallway outside. “Where’s Renata, Agent Morales?”

“The only place she could be,” he says, nodding at *Where There Is Smoke*. “These people are beyond dangerous, Chief Blue, but they’re not your problem. I already passed Renata’s location to the nearest FBI office when I was in Carrizozo before we rolled back on the hotel. It’s over.”

“No, it’s not,” Chief Blue says. “Because no one’s found that girl yet. Not a word. And you were brought here to Albuquerque *hours* ago.”

That doesn’t sound right, doesn’t sound possible, and he can’t hide his concern. He can see it mirrored on Chief Blue’s

face as well.

“Do you believe in miracles, Agent Morales?”

This time he doesn't hesitate. “No, I don't. But God knows I *wanted* to, once upon a time.”

Chief Blue smiles. “Like I said, it's a miracle you're even alive.”

“If that's true, then how come I don't feel truly saved? How come I didn't see God or angels or a magical white light or anything at all? No, I don't feel blessed.” He tugs at the handcuffs. “I woke up here with you, like this. And I still have to face a reckoning for what I've done . . . then and now.”

Chief Blue says, “They say God works in mysterious ways. But I do hope you heal, Agent Morales.” And she smiles at him again, genuine, real. “I wish you the best, I truly do, whatever happens next. Whatever you choose to do.” She turns to the door. “And for what it's worth, I think we're all facing a reckoning. Because if it's not the end of everything,” she continues, “it sure feels like it.”



I press all the remaining cash I have into Gerardo's weathered and rough hands, and his eyes go wide.

He starts to protest, but I shake my head no, and I hug him goodbye and walk off before he can stop me. I make a direct line to the car and the man staring at his cell phone, and I get to him just as he's hiding the phone away in his pocket.

I press the Colt into the small of the man's back like I've seen on a hundred crime shows, and he knows immediately what it is without me having to tell him.

His body tenses under the muzzle and my body pressed hard against him. "I don't have any money and the car's a rental," he says. His voice trembles a lot for someone who's waiting for the End of the World.

"I don't need money," I say. "Just *you*."

And when he hears my voice, even whispered like it is, he still knows exactly who I am.

"Oh shit," he says. "It's you."

"I guess I could say the same thing," I say as I turn him around to face me. My gun is now pointed at his chest, but he doesn't even glance at it, only me.

"Hi, *Connor*," I say as I push him into his car.

“Best we can guess is that McGee set his little homemade bomb on the opposite side of the bed, beneath the mattress, which softened the blow.”

FBI ASAC Brian Diebold doesn't smile at his own unintentional joke.

“Maybe he wasn't trying to kill you, Morales, but he was determined to cause a hell of a mess. Old mining blasting caps, some gasoline, and Styrofoam, too, from a couple of packs of picnic plates the Laure woman bought at the twenty-four-hour minimart down the block. We've got her on camera there, twenty minutes before you returned. That motel was a tinderbox, and all that melting Styrofoam created something akin to napalm. *Everything burned.* It took the local fire department two hours to get it under control, and we'll still be sifting the wreckage tomorrow.”

Eladio remembers Dallas's green bag, and the big man's story about his time in the war—

*I'm pretty good with my hands. Back in the war I was an explosives guy, EOD. Did some demo when I got back stateside . . . handlin' that stuff never scared me . . .*

“Who else was hurt? How many?”

“*Hurt?*” ASAC Diebold echoes, as if the word is meaningless. “Everyone was *hurt*, Morales, and two deputies have already died from their injuries. A Carrizozo officer is still in intensive care. He may or may not make it.”

“Sheriff Hernandez?”

“Took a piece of a bed frame straight to the heart, like it was shot out of a cannon.” ASAC Diebold has heavy-lidded eyes, which, like the mattress Dallas used to cushion his bomb, do little to soften the blow of his stare. “He was right behind you, and dead before he hit the ground. Frankly not sure how that metal shiv didn't pin you both.” Diebold is well over six

feet and looms over him. “There are a lot of questions about the last twenty-four hours.”

“I know,” Eladio says.

“Then let’s start with how you ended up with two suspects wanted for murder in Colorado, and possibly two murders in New Mexico as well.”

Diebold flips open a folder, revealing a color photograph of the blue Hyundai sitting outside the Four Winds. From the gritty shrapnel around it, the broken glass, and sooty streaks like a Rorschach test on the hood, the photo was taken shortly after the blast. Diebold all but tosses it at him.

“I know all about you, Morales,” he says. “Your colorful history, everything that happened before here in New Mexico, just up the road. You’ve been through this drill, so be exceedingly careful how you answer these next few questions.” Diebold spins the whole folder onto Eladio’s bed. “If you want to talk to OPR, even a private attorney, I’ll understand. I’ll think it’s chickenshit, but I will understand.”

Eladio sits up straighter. “Yesterday morning, Billie Laure and Dallas McGee broke into my home in Lubbock and took me hostage. Ever since, I’ve been looking for an opportunity to either escape or put them in cuffs, without endangering the public. I didn’t get that chance until Carrizozo.”

Diebold’s heavy lids rise in studied disbelief. “You had a whole day to come up with something, and that’s the best you could do?”

“We were attacked outside Taiban by a group calling themselves the New Lazarians. They’re so-called cultists, religious extremists. They killed Billie’s husband back in Colorado and kidnapped her daughter, all part of some plan or ritual.”

Diebold laughs. “This isn’t the Dark Ages, Morales. And if that’s your story, your *defense*, you’re going to have to do a whole lot better.” He’s standing where Chief Blue was less than twenty minutes ago. “For years, that Laure woman’s been successfully lying low, a new identity and a whole new life to

go with it. Then she up and kills her husband and a coworker and ends up on *your* doorstep. The only way that makes any sense to me is if you've been in contact with her this whole time."

"She didn't kill anyone."

"Well, she nearly killed *you*, left you behind to die, with that bomb stunt."

The way Diebold says it—the implication—jolts Eladio. "Is she here *now*? Injured, alive?"

"So far, she's not in the motel wreckage," Diebold says, "and I'm not sure it's even worth looking more. McGee likely detonated that makeshift IED to *cover* her escape, to make us waste time digging for a body we'll never find." Diebold leans over him. "Why risk everything to find you, only to blow you all to hell later?"

Eladio looks out the window to the leaden, dangerous sky. "Because she's unstable, unwell."

Diebold laughs again. "Right." He draws out the word, holding on to it. "You two together again after all these years, and just like before, you're the only ones who walk away." Diebold leans in close, too close. "A magic trick? Another little disappearing act?" Diebold blocks the light. "Where the fuck is she?"

"If she's not dead, you already *know*," Eladio says, feeling the weight of the cuff on his wrist, feeling the room *shift* beneath him, as he starts to understand what's really going on here, and just how wrong he's been. "Because I begged *you* to get a team out to Jornada del Muerto even before we hit the motel."

Diebold blinks. "And curiously enough, there doesn't seem to be any record of that. None. Nor the email you sent me about the Ark, nor all your other inquiries about the New Lazarians and Ananiel. But then again, you are suffering a serious concussion. Or maybe you're just fucking unstable too."

“No.” Eladio tries to get out of bed, get at Diebold, but the cuff holds him back.

“Careful you don’t get hurt again,” Diebold says. “That you don’t get hurt *worse*.”

“You won’t get away with this,” Eladio says, knowing that Diebold already has.

Diebold knows it too. “No one will believe you, Morales. No one will touch you now. You’re a fucking *leper*. You fucked up and got people killed. Fucking up and getting people killed is your MO.”

ASAC Diebold retreats toward the door and cracks it open to a bustling hallway where two young agents in suits stand post, guarding Eladio’s door. Not to keep the curious away, but to make sure he doesn’t leave.

“If you and Ananiel want her so bad,” Eladio calls after him, “don’t worry, she is coming. Coming for her daughter.”

“Probably,” Diebold agrees. “That’s the hope anyway. The only question is who might be coming with her.” Diebold checks his phone. “And what she might be planning. She’s proving to be . . . resourceful. Her big mistake was trusting *you*, again.” Diebold looks at him with barely disguised disgust. “I’m going to ask you this just once, and make no mistake, your answer dictates whether the old woman who was here before lives or dies. What did you and the Limon police chief talk about?”

“Nothing. She’s lost, going in circles.” He stares Diebold down. “She’s going home.”

Diebold hovers at the door, hesitating. Eladio’s not sure if the man believes him or not, but at last he understands just how he and Billie and Dallas were so easily tracked and boxed in, sees with terrifying clarity just how widespread the New Lazarian threat is, and how high it goes.

Billie wasn’t the only one who badly underestimated them.

“Are *you* Ananiel?” Eladio asks.

“No,” Diebold says with a shadow of a smile. “I am Uriel, one of the Seven Archangels.” His eyes glitter with fervor, with expectation. “And it’s a New Day Dawning.”

# **AUTOPSY REPORT**

**Autopsy: QXR5776X-77F**

**Filed March 22, 2015**

**DECEDENT: Skyler Ohlin, a.k.a. Rebecca  
Laure.**

**Autopsy authorized by: Dr. Ferdinand  
Rojas for City of Las Cruces.**

**Body identified by: [see FEDERAL BUREAU  
OF INVESTIGATION REPORT; see FBI  
addendum, statement by Special Agent  
Eladio Morales]**

**Investigative Agency: Sierra County  
Sheriff's Office / Federal Bureau of  
Investigation**

**Rigor: absent**

**Livor: purple and black (to the extent practicable)**

**Distribution: posterior/anterior (left)**

**Age: 31**

**Race: White**

**Sex: Female**

**Length: 67 inches**

**Weight: 118 pounds**

**Eyes: Blue**

**Hair: Blonde**

**Body Heat: Refrigerated**

**EXTERNAL EXAMINATION**

**The autopsy is begun at 8:30 A.M., March 22, 2015. The body is presented in a black body bag.**

**The victim is wearing:**

- 1. Green dress. Blood-stained, scorched. Significant and numerous tears of different sizes on the front. Right arm shredded/mutilated.**
- 2. White underwear. Torn on left side with searing. Blood stains, soot deposition.**

**Body is that of a normally developed white female measuring 67 inches, weighing 118 pounds, with significant blast wave and burn injuries, including partial amputation of upper extremity at right mid-forearm with full fragmentation, otherwise appearing generally consistent with the stated age of thirty-one years.**

**Body is cold and un-embalmed.**

**Lividity, as noted, is primarily fixed in the distal portions of the limbs.**

**Left eye is open. The iris is blue-gray with yellow-brown spots, and cornea is cloudy. Petechial hemorrhaging is present in the conjunctival surfaces of the eye. The pupil measures 0.2 cm.**

**Hair is dark blonde with red highlights, wavy, layered, and approximately 11 inches in length at the longest point, minus extensive searing/scorching.**

**There are face and scalp lacerations with significant fracturing of the calvarium, facial bones, and skull base.**

**The cranial vault is vacant with brain fragments recovered separately. There are significant penetrating fragment injuries of the posterior thorax and right thigh, including gaping lacerations of the right abdomen and evisceration of small intestine and descending and sigmoid colon.**



**There are superficial burns of the posterior thorax, face, and right thigh.**

**Due to thermal injuries, the presence of premortem scars, tattoos, or other identifying marks is inconclusive.**

#### **X-RAYS:**

**Full body x-rays reveal comminuted facial and skull fractures, multiple anterior and posterior rib fractures, comminuted pelvis fractures, severance of distal extremities, and metallic shards/fragments/flakes in the head, thorax, and thighs.**

#### **HISTORY:**

**Injured by exploding gas canister(s).**

#### **PATHOLOGICAL DIAGNOSES:**

##### **1. Blast injuries to head.**

**(A) Comminuted fractures of calvarium, skull base, and facial bones. (B) Expulsion and fragmentation of brain. (C) Expulsion and fragmentation of right eye. (D) Perforation injuries to lower face. (E) Superficial burns to lower face.**

##### **2. Blast injuries to trunk.**

**(A) Significant perforation injuries with multiple lung, heart, liver, spleen, and intestine lacerations. (B) Multiple fractures and perforations of posterior ribs and sternum. (C) Laceration and perforation of right lower abdominal wall with partial extrusion of small intestine, mesentery, and colon. (D) Superficial burns to posterior thorax. (E) Comminuted fractures of right ilium, ischium, and pubic ramus with perforations of the sacroiliac joints. (F) Evisceration of pubic symphysis. (G) Multiple metallic shards/fragments/flakes recovered from abdomen and pelvis. (H) Six-inch-long metal object/shard recovered from thorax.**

##### **3. Blast injuries to extremities.**

**(A) Partial amputation of right arm with avulsion and searing/scorching of muscle and connective tissue. (B)**

**Multiple penetrating fragment injuries to both anterior and posterior surface of right arm. (C) Comminution of right proximal femur with partial avulsion and searing/scorching of muscle and soft tissue. (D) Multiple metallic shards/fragments/flakes recovered from soft tissues of right thigh.**

#### **4. Toxicology**

**Negative for drugs of abuse and alcohol.**

#### **CAUSE OF DEATH:**

**Blast and penetrating fragment injuries.**

#### **SUMMARY:**

**This thirty-one-year-old female died from blast injuries when a gas can exploded in her proximity. Identification is by scene and circumstance, but significant perimortem thermal injury precludes definitive identification.**

#### **CAUSE OF DEATH:**

**Blast and fragment injuries. Perimortem thermal injury.**

#### **MANNER OF DEATH:**

**Homicide.**

Connor sits behind the wheel, watching the storm roll in over us.

“I’m not surprised you’re here,” he says. “No, that’s not true. I think I am. I truly, truly am.”

“Me too,” I say, keeping the Colt on him. “You were pretty convincing all these years. The interviews, the articles. You denigrated what we did . . . ridiculed what *you* did.”

“Yes.” He laughs quietly. “I spoke with a forked tongue. But my message wasn’t for you anyway.”

“Ahh, that’s Etan’s old trick,” I say. “One of Becca’s favorites too. Fake enlightenment, secret knowledge, mysteries inside of riddles. Make an audience out of exclusion.” I use the gun for emphasis. “Your art was the true tell, though. I should’ve paid more attention to that.”

He glances over. “What do you mean?”

“C’mon, every painting, every piece? You tried to hide it, but in the end, it was always about the Ark. It always is.”

He smiles without teeth, and the gray rain leaves him pallid, unhealthy. “We both tried to hide, only to find out it’s inescapable.”

“I know.”

He smiles again, grim, and it’s impossible to reconcile the man next to me with the one I once knew. That Connor was young, fiery, idealistic. This one, despite the paunch, the middle years he’s carrying around his waist, and the heavy lines on his face, is weirdly hollowed out, empty and spent. The past has drained all color from him. He looks like one of his charcoal paintings, a study in gray.

“Do you, Sybilla? Have you not learned anything after all these years?”

“I’m not here to debate doctrine with you, Connor . . . *Abel*. I’m only here for Rennie. You took my daughter.”

“I am Sarathiel now,” he says proudly. “And she was never yours.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Oh, Connor. She was never *yours*.” I put the Colt in his face. “You killed my husband.”

“I had nothing to do with that.”

“If you’re saying you weren’t there, that’s no excuse. That doesn’t absolve the mortal sin.”

Connor glares at me. “Let him . . . or *her* . . . who is without sin cast the first stone.”

“All this time,” I say, “and you still sound like her.”

Something now passes over Connor’s face, a flicker of pain, hurt, anger. Something else.

“What?” I bark at him. “Does it still sting that Etan cast you out?” I know I’m goading this man, but I *want* him angry, careless. “Or only that Becca stood by and let it happen? She never cared for you the way you cared for her; she never even cared for us, only her hold on us. It was all too easy for her to let you take the blame for both your efforts to undermine Etan. You told everyone you walked away, but you were *Disintegrated*. Expelled. Banished.” Even now, I almost feel sorry for him. “And that saved your life.”

“It didn’t feel that way then,” he says softly, “even after the fire, after everything that happened. I thought I’d lost my immortal soul. But I’ve long since forgiven myself . . . and her. And now I have this chance to atone.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but I also know there’s no reasoning with him. I can see it in his eyes, how they *burn*.

Connor slowly reaches for his pocket, for his phone, and turns it around so I can see—

*A GIF of a young boy with closely shorn red hair in the back of what appears to be a van or truck or RV.*

*Hands bound with zip ties. Dark eyes wide.*

*No, not a boy . . . Rennie.*

It's like getting punched in the heart. It takes my breath away, my own immortal soul. I imagine that image being shared among the New Lazarians, proof of what is to come.

"Connor, you're going to tell me where my daughter is, you're going to take me to her, or I'm going to shoot you here and now."

He ignores my threat. "Do you honestly believe you've come to save only Renata? Do you even think that's your choice anymore?" Connor watches the rain over my shoulder, entranced by it. "Otherwise, you would've shot me already. Otherwise, you wouldn't even be here at all."

"Now," I say.

But Connor only graces me with that bone-chilling smile again. "We're like grains of sand on a beach," he recites. "Like birds in the sky. A whole new Flock. So many have come to the faith since that day the Ark burned. And in a way, you are responsible for that. You tried to snuff it out, but you breathed life *into* it. You were the quickening, Sybilla, the ensoulment. You fanned the very flames you walked away from, untouched, unscathed . . . *reborn*. And now you've returned to us, a last act of redemption, of sacrifice. Of *penance*. You've come to atone for your sins as Ananiel always said you would. You are the final sign, Sybilla. *You*."

I raise the Colt and put the barrel between his eyes, and he closes them, leaning his forehead into the cold barrel.

He intones, "You are the Black Sun, rising over us all."

It doesn't matter what I say, how much I try to convince him that he's wrong or convince myself. My very presence here in this car, in this place, with the rain and lightning whipping around us, is all the proof he needs.

He *believes*.

And it's all the proof I need too. I ask, "Is Ananiel here now? Is Rennie?"

“Yes,” Connor says. “They’re both here. Both waiting for you.”

I hand him the gun. “Then take me to them,” I say, “and let’s fucking finish this.”

Elise drives out of Albuquerque, then Socorro, then San Antonio, and she's just approaching the outskirts of Truth or Consequences when birds start falling from the bloodied sky.

She's been racing the storm she left behind in Albuquerque, but it's been steadily gaining on her, and the empty highway stretches beneath pregnant, smoky cloud cover. Those clouds unhealthy, unnatural, both dark and fiery. Halloween colors.

And as the birds fall all around, if this isn't the End of the World, it's damn close.



She parks in the middle of the highway and watches them tumble down.

Like the birds from Denny's mouth in her dream, like the burning birds circling Sybilla in that painting at Deborah's house. Some flutter to a quiet stop, exhausted and silent, but others simply drop, as if batted from the wet sky by a great unseen hand.

She doesn't know anything about birds, but she realizes these aren't just one breed, instead dozens, maybe hundreds, of different ones. And not just the smaller varieties, the starlings and warblers and the finches she's accustomed to seeing in her own yard in Colorado, but larger ones too. Crows or ravens. Egrets or cranes. Vultures. Owls.

She read somewhere that the smoke from the Four Horsemen fires might be affecting bird migrations, but she never imagined anything like this.

Some are brightly, beautifully colored . . . *hummingbirds* . . . and even in the gloom, their plumage gleams. They glitter on the dark road like shiny coins, like jewels, scattered as far as she can see, falling and falling, and there's no way she can

continue on to Elephant Butte, to Jornada del Muerto, without driving over their helpless bodies.

This heavy downpour of birds is one of the Ark's innumerable signs, and it would be awful, terrifying, even if it didn't herald the apocalypse.

Headlights suddenly flare in her rearview mirror, and she flips on her hazards and pulls over to the side, out of the way. She can't bring herself to roll forward in a rainstorm of drifting feathers.

The widening headlights reveal a small RV, a Sunseeker with green lightning-like decals on its side, and it passes slow, the blurry, ghostly face of a passenger she can't quite make out regarding her closely, with zero regard for the birds.

The RV rolls right over the fragile bodies, the delicate, pretty wings, churning up blood and bones and pinfeathers as it plows about twenty yards ahead of her before coming to a complete stop in the middle of the highway. Brake lights pop on, glowing red eyes staring back at her, and it's like it's waiting up ahead, considering what to do with her, while more birds fall from the sky between them.

Elise has been driving with her gun beneath her seat ever since she left Special Agent Morales in Albuquerque, and she draws it now, holding it low, near the window.

Maybe the other driver has decided to wait out the storm, like her. Maybe they're wondering if she's okay. Or maybe they're here to witness the End of the World.

Elise reaches for her phone, too, but reception's been spotty from the moment she walked out of the hospital and it's worse out here. The storm could be playing havoc with reception, cutting everyone off.

But even if her phone worked, there's so few people in her life to call anymore, none of whom even know where she is or could get to her.

Her gun is cold comfort, no protection against the empty house and bed she'll return to. It won't save her if the earth swallows her up or this storm sweeps her away or if the faded,



ghostlike faces in the idling RV up ahead decide to come back for her, steal her off this deserted highway, the way the New Lazarians took Renata.

*These people are beyond dangerous . . .*

But before Elise's spiraling panic can overtake her, the red brake lights up ahead wink out, and the Sunseeker starts rolling again, picking up speed before finally disappearing in the feathered gloom.

The birds finally stop falling, too, but the sky is still awful.

Still bloody, still terrifying.

And Elise is still alone.

Getting out of Presbyterian Hospital is as simple as opening a book.

After ASAC Diebold—*Uriel*—leaves and Eladio's call button and shouts go ignored, he finally remembers the book left behind by Chief Blue, who told him—

*I wish you the best, I truly do, whatever happens next. Whatever you choose to do . . .*

An interesting thing to say, given he's handcuffed to a bed, with no good choices at all. But he also can't shake something Dallas told him back at the motel—

*La fe, no facilita las cosas, amigo, las hace posibles.*

*Faith doesn't make things easier, amigo, it makes them possible.*

Dallas, wracked with delirium and blood loss, had said it in *Spanish*, just like his mama.



A few moments later, Eladio is flipping through Deb Fallon's book, finding old pictures of the Ark compound the way it used to be, the way he still occasionally remembers it and dreams about it, when a small silver key falls from between its well-worn pages. A cuff key. He balances it on his numb fingers, amazed . . . *a miracle* . . . as the lights in his room flicker from the storm raging outside his window.

Chief Blue told him God works in mysterious ways, but *she* made this possible. She put this choice, this decision, literally in his hands.

He first gets to work on the cuff . . . and then throws the worthless book at the door as hard as he can.

When Elise pulls into Elephant Butte on the northern edge of Truth or Consequences, her phone finally flickers to life as the rain sweeps down.

One bar, weak and indistinct, but it's enough to call Grant, who answers on the first ring, asking, "Elise, where are you?"

There's a neon gas station sign above her, the blue-and-red sign reminding her of emergency lights, the lights swirling outside Sybilla's home and Nadia's trailer what feels like a lifetime ago. "A Chevron, I think," she says before catching herself. "I mean, Truth or Consequences . . . Elephant Butte . . . New Mexico."

"What the—"

"I know, I know. It's ridiculous. Insane." But she can't bring herself to mention the tumbling birds, their small, crushed bodies. "I didn't find what I was looking for, but I think I found . . . *something*. I just wanted someone to know that I'm here. Please call Denny for me. Tell him I'll come home after the storm passes."

*But what if it doesn't? What if the whole world's a storm now?*

She wants to put her head on her steering wheel and sleep for days, but Grant's still talking, his distant voice bobbing up and down in a rising tide of static, a squall of white noise.

"—not safe. So sorry . . . I . . . stay . . . don't know . . . stay . . . didn't—"

She doesn't know why he's still apologizing for warning her about getting too involved in this, since it seems like he was right all along. She feels lost, adrift. "I'm okay now," she lies, "it's just—"

And then she stops, midsentence, because although the rain is still sheeting down her windshield, leaving black sooty traces on the glass like smeared mascara, she can finally *see*.

“Oh my God,” she says, as much to herself as to Grant, because the line’s gone dead again.

Despite the storm, she gets out of the relative safety of her truck to get a better look at what she can’t believe she’s just glimpsed through her windshield and catches a face full of wind-whipped rain for her trouble.

The tempest tastes like smoke, ash.

It gets in her hair, her eyes. It ruins her small bit of makeup.

Purple-red lightning dances over the nearby state park, glowering over the Rio Grande coursing below, and beyond that, out in the desert, the ruins of the Ark of Lazarus.

Elise can’t see that far, but she stands in the acrid rain and sees that she’s not alone.

Not anymore.

The agent, young and wary, finally opens the door and steps in.

He's in his late twenties, with the build of a recent former athlete. At one time his sport might've been basketball or baseball, nowadays probably water polo or rowing.

Lacrosse.

Lacrosse's suit is charcoal, rumpled. He's either been traveling in it for a while, or he threw it on quick this morning. The coat barely hides the weapon holstered on his left side, and he reminds Eladio of himself, once upon a time.

"What the fuck?" Lacrosse asks, eyeing the book on the floor.

Eladio holds up the nurse call button in his bandaged hand. "I've been pressing this thing for a while. No one's coming."

Lacrosse throws a look at the other agent behind him, still beyond the door. "You're right, no one's coming. ASAC Diebold said to keep you on ice. No more visitors."

"Then will one of you head out to the front desk, tell them I need some help."

Lacrosse looks him up and down. "What kind of help?"

Eladio motions to his head with his free hand. "Dizzy, getting worse. A lot worse. I'm nauseous."

But Lacrosse doesn't buy it or doesn't care. "There's a pan for that. Knock yourself out." He smiles, looks around. "Unless you threw that at the door too."

"Almost," Eladio says. "Look, I'm all cuffed up. I can barely manage this. Just please get someone in here." He reaches for the pan anyway and fumbles it, trying to hold on to both the pan and the nurse call button in his swaddled, numb hand. The pan loses out, slipping to the floor.

“Jesus,” Lacrosse says, irritated, but clearing the distance from the door to the bed in two steps.

He bends over for the pan, and an uncuffed Eladio goes for the gun.

Lacrosse, never expecting it, never sees him coming.

Eladio’s hands are torched, hurt like absolute hell, but they *work*.

Lacrosse is left handed and, given the bed’s height and angle and where Eladio fumbled the pan, it makes grabbing for his holstered gun easier.

The sudden movement, the head-down lunge for the Glock, almost does make Eladio throw up. And any other time this wouldn’t even be a contest. At the FBI academy, all agents go through weapon-retention drills and “fight for your life” scenarios, battling one another for a loose gun. Lacrosse is younger, in better shape, and went through his academy training a lot more recently. But Eladio’s perceived weakness, the hospital bed with all its tubes and cannula, his bandaged hands, and the handcuffs, all contribute to lowering Lacrosse’s guard just enough.

Eladio gets ahold of the gun with one hand and wraps the call button cord around Lacrosse’s throat with the other. His falling weight does the rest.

They tumble to the floor, tearing Eladio’s IV drips out in a bloody spray as he slides a finger under the holster’s thumb break and gets it free.

By the time the other agent in the hall turns around to see what the hell all the racket is, Eladio has Lacrosse’s gun jammed under the man’s throat.

“Easy, easy,” Eladio coughs out as the agent in the hall—Lacrosse’s near twin, Polo—raises his hands, deigning to draw his weapon.

“Easy,” Polo echoes from the doorway, both men trying to calm the other down.

“I don’t want to hurt your partner,” Eladio says. “But trust me, I will.”

He doesn’t know if either of these agents are New Lazarians, like Diebold, but he won’t chance it with them.

Polo says, “No one needs to get hurt here at all. Let him go, and you’re a free man.”

Eladio ignores the offer. “We’re going to stand up now,” he says, “and I’m going to walk him out that door, nice and slow. You’ll find him outside after I’m gone.” Eladio feels Lacrosse breathing angrily beneath him, sees the wired tension in the man’s jaw as he pushes the barrel deeper. “We’re not negotiating.”

Polo nods, hands still raised. “I get that. And you’re not worth it. You’re too busted up to get far. A couple of miles down the road, we’ll just scoop you up again. You see what it’s like out there.” Polo points toward the window, where dark clouds have erased the sky and the sun, where rain has been brutally lashing the glass ever since Chief Blue left. “This is stupid and futile, man.” He points at Eladio. “But this also can’t be undone. This decision here and now is fucking *final*.”

“I know,” Eladio says. “I know.”

And Polo knows the playbook here, too, playing the odds, trying to nudge them in his favor, as he keeps Eladio talking and distracted. “ASAC Diebold said you’re the guy who got caught up in that cult thing. That true?”

Eladio ignores him again, whispers to Lacrosse, “Get up and walk with me. Careful. Slow.”

Lacrosse does.

“They talk about you at the academy,” Polo continues, still blocking the door. “The dangers of undercover work, how easy it is to get sucked in, get too close.”

Eladio moves Lacrosse forward, using him as a shield, kicking away the bedsheets and IVs, leaving bloody footprints on the floor. “Cuff him,” Eladio orders Polo, knowing Polo’s got cuffs on him, somewhere.

Eladio wants to keep the ones he has.

Polo still won't give ground.

"Everyone says you were fucking that girl, the one in that picture, on the TV series. She's all over the news now, too, by the way." Polo eyes the gun, calculating. "The way I heard it, you were banging *both* sisters. That's why those freaks never suspected a thing."

Eladio pushes Lacrosse one more step ahead of him. "I said cuff him, or I'll shoot you both."

Polo asks, "You two looking to start a new cult together? Is that what this is all about?"

"No," Eladio says, "it's about the End of the World." Then he puts the gun hard to the back of Lacrosse's head, where Polo can see Lacrosse's face, the gun's barrel, and Eladio's eyes.

Polo stares, breathing through his nose. Hand still raised . . . *mostly*.

Lacrosse, still tense, his body electric, searches his partner's eyes for a signal.

*A sign.*

Eladio pushes the Glock into Lacrosse's neatly trimmed hair. He says, "So, amigo, how do you want to spend your last hours on earth?"



# 71

Angel knows paths no one else does.

Before they get to Elephant Butte, she orders Zadkiel to steer the Sunseeker off the highway onto Lower Narrows Road and into the desert.

He tenses up when he sees two local police cars and a state trooper pulled off to the side of the road as if waiting for them, but the patrol cars don't move.

They sit motionless, only their emergency lights turning.

They need to cross the Rio Grande, and Angel tells Zadkiel there are ways, places where it's neither wide nor deep, even a couple of bridges known only to a few.

The deluge will make the river swell and roil so that it will be nearly impassable.

Those who have not crossed over before then—those late making their way to the Ark—will be trapped on the other side.

Left behind.

Recorded Transcript of Voluntary Interview, January 15, 2025

1435 MDT

Special Agent Karl Malder, Special Agent Agnes Nunez

s/GS Roger Remspecher

s/ASAC B. Diebold

**NUNEZ:** Three, two, one. This consensual recording was conducted with Dr. Deborah Fallon by Special Agents Karl Malder and Agnes Nunez on January 15th, 2025.

**NUNEZ:** Dr. Fallon, what can you tell me about the FOURTH DAY message traffic on the Tesseract imageboard.

**FALLON:** Nothing. I don't know anything about that.

**NUNEZ:** Our understanding is that you are very aware of Tesseract. In fact, you've been extremely active there. It's become something of a gathering place for members of the New Lazarian movement.

**FALLON:** My research into cult activity has taken me far afield.

**NUNEZ:** I know. I can show you IP tracking and online metadata that shows just how far afield you've ventured. Unless someone else had access to your home computer.

**FALLON:** I don't know anything about Tesseract, but I do have a rotating group of research assistants from St. John's College who handle my more esoteric internet inquiries. Young people are so much more tech savvy nowadays. And if you plan on taking my computer, you'll need a warrant.

**NUNEZ:** Obviously. Is it possible your research assistants have been posting on Tesseract or elsewhere as VERITY?

**FALLON:** No, and neither have I.

**MALDER:** And we'll still need a list of those research assistants.

**NUNEZ:** What do you know about the NL movement, and its connection to the Ark of Lazarus?

**FALLON:** I have heard of the New Lazarians, and obviously I'm intimately familiar with the Ark of Lazarus. The former is a grassroots group that has clothed itself in some of the old Ark's trappings. The latter no longer exists.

**MALDER:** Grassroots? Two sitting members of the House of Representatives and one former Senator have referenced the NL movement in fundraising letters. The Southern Poverty Law Center has verified some NL adherents are also members of the Sons of Revere.

**FALLON:** Domestic terrorism and sovereign movements are outside my purview, or area of expertise.

**NUNEZ:** Yet you and your work are frequently referenced in NL and SoR message traffic. Further, syntax and grammar analysis suggest relevant statistical probabilities between your writings, passages from this mysterious FOURTH DAY treatise, and postings not only by VERITY, but by an individual online only identified as both SEVENTHANGEL and ANANIELRAINOFGOD.

**FALLON:** Syntax and grammar analysis?

**MALDER:** Think of it like electronic fingerprints.

**FALLON:** I'm not sure the FBI's track record on latent fingerprint analysis has stood up to serious rigor or scrutiny.

**NUNEZ:** Is that a reference to the Madrid bombing case?

**FALLON:** That's my belief that your investigative process is warped by cognitive bias.

**MALDER:** So, we're just jumping to conclusions?

**NUNEZ:** Dr. Fallon, the New Lazarians appear to be recruiting for a violent, terroristic, event. That's based on their own postings, their own words, including the musings of ARoG. They believe the end of the world is at hand.

**FALLON:** Curiously, it's extremely hard to perpetuate belief, while being perversely easy to sow doubt. The human mind is an amazing wonder, a miracle, but it is subject to great limitations. We're held hostage to biases and biology we're

not even aware of. Our brain takes shortcuts, jumps to conclusions, fills in the blanks, to efficiently process the world around us. Belief and doubt are just two possible fill-in-the-blank answers to perception.

**NUNEZ:** Are you saying seeing isn't believing?

**FALLON:** I'm saying sometimes we see what we want to see. And I think both the Sons of Revere and the New Lazarians appeal to people who've lost faith in their institutions. My research suggests that a cult, almost any so-called radical movement, is less about what someone is willing to accept and believe, and more about what someone's already rejected or lost faith in.

**NUNEZ:** Have you lost faith lately, Dr. Fallon?

**FALLON:** I'm comfortable with my faith and my beliefs.

**NUNEZ:** Have you ever used the moniker Dina, or Jophiel, in any online correspondence? Or know anyone who has?

**FALLON:** No.

**MALDER:** What can you tell us about Ananiel? What is that? Person, place, or thing?

**FALLON:** All three . . . or none of them. Maybe Ananiel is nothing more than an idea, a hope, a belief. Fill in the blank, Special Agent Malder. Fill in the blank . . .

**INTERVIEW TERMINATED**

Elise stands in the rain and counts the incoming RVs.

Dozens of them, old and new, snaking their way through Elephant Butte and past her, out into the desert. Cars, too, and a handful of SUVs. A whole mechanical tribe on the move, driving toward the End of the World.

As one of the SUVs glides past, she catches sight of a woman nursing a baby—

*No, this can't be real.*

She wants to run up and bang on the windows and ask them who they are, what they're doing.

*Why the hell are you here? What are you looking for?*

But she already knows, just like she knows every one of them likely wears a dark metal bird pin, tiny wings extended over their hearts. Seekers inexorably drawn here, like gravity, like Elise herself.

*What are you looking for, Elise?*

And she can't fight the growing dread, a dark and unreasonable certainty, that one of these vehicles holds her son too.

He's always been a seeker, and for a while, she all but abandoned him when his dad left them both. It makes sense now, their current estrangement, his recent return to faith.

Her dream last night. A vision . . . *a prophecy.*

Special Agent Morales said—

*We all want signs, want the world to make sense and mean something. But then again, we can find meaning in almost anything, if we look hard enough . . .*

And, unable to stop herself, Elise walks out into the street, a weak attempt at blocking traffic, searching desperately for Denny's face behind every wheel.

Searching, seeking, hoping, praying.

Some of the caravan honk, irritated, but most just ignore her, creeping around her frantic, arm-waving figure, moving inexorably into the storm. She bangs on passing doors and hoods, peers into windows, calling out Denny's name again and again until she's hoarse, until she can barely breathe.

Until someone appears out of the sheeting rain to pull her back to safety—

*A man's face close to her own, saying her name.*

"Denny," she says into his chest. "I knew you were here. I knew you'd come for me." But as she goes to wipe the smoky rain out of her eyes, to hug and kiss her son, Denny's face disappears.

"No," she cries out. "Oh, no, no, no." Then, "*You?*"

A simple, futile question . . . and one Grant Olson only answers with silence.

He holds her tight, holds her up, and gently guides her back through the rain to her truck.

Still wearing nothing more than a hospital gown, Eladio gets a cuffed Lacrosse out of the hospital and into the storm-racked parking lot without a gun battle or Polo raising a wider alarm.

That in and of itself is maybe the fourth or fifth miracle he's experienced since Billie showed up at his door. Surviving the wreck and firefight at Taiban. Dallas talking in Spanish, echoing his dead mama's words. Surviving again the explosion at the Four Winds, and Paola watching him from the flames.

The cuff key left behind by Chief Blue.

*Billie's dead starling, taking flight again.*

It's only when he tries to force Lacrosse to take him to a car that he runs out of miracles.



As rain sweeps the parking lot, drenching them, Lacrosse walks toward a dark SUV, an older Explorer.

With Eladio's permission, and a nudged gun muzzle, Lacrosse awkwardly, slowly—and very carefully—withdraws a key fob from his suit coat pocket and aims it at the door, pressing it once, twice, three times.

His hands are cuffed in front—a necessary trade-off to getting outside fast—and with the way he's holding the key fob, head bent over it, it looks like he's praying.

The rain tastes like embers, like the sky that morning the Ark burned, when Eladio held Billie in his arms.

Over the rising wind and distant thunder, Lacrosse calls behind him, “I don't know what's wrong,” and then relinquishes the fob for Eladio so he can try it for himself. But Eladio already knows what's wrong.

With Lacrosse dangling the keys from his cuffed hands, Eladio gets a good look at the *My Child Is an Honor Student at St. Pius X High School* bumper sticker, a quintet of dancing

white stick figures on the Explorer's rear window, a little decal *family*.

This isn't Lacrosse's official government vehicle, just a random SUV he picked because it looks like every other bland OGV in the FBI's fleet and sits a safe distance from the hospital entrance. Far away from bystanders and onlookers.

In one motion Lacrosse drops the useless keys and barrels into Eladio, putting the crown of his head square into Eladio's chest, knocking the wind out of him.

Both men tumble across the rain-slicked pavement, and although Eladio fights to hold on to Lacrosse's gun, he doesn't have the desperate strength or the element of surprise he had inside.

The Glock flies away and bounces through deepening puddles, throwing dirty water pinwheels behind it.

But Lacrosse decides to ignore it, not wanting to fight over the slippery gun with the stainless steel cuffs circling his wrists, figuring he can beat Eladio into submission with just his bare hands.

He gets up first, gets up *fast*, gets his hands around Eladio's neck, and, even with his limited range of motion, hauls Eladio clear over his head to throw him onto the hood of a black Hyundai.

As Eladio fights to breathe, to stay conscious, Lacrosse batters him with sharp, double-fisted blows.

Eladio rolls off the hood onto the pavement and tries to crawl away.

Lightning lances the sky, turning the world into a blinding, crazy kaleidoscope, throwing both men into sharp, chromatic relief.

Thunder heaves and sighs over the hospital.

"That took balls in there," Lacrosse says, wiping rain out of his eyes, breathing hard over Eladio, who's still crawling away, inch by inch. "Now I'll hear the rest of my goddamn career how I let a handcuffed cripple get the best of me."



Lacrosse shakes the cuffs on his own wrists. “They’ll talk about me at the academy too.”

He kicks at Eladio, shoving him ahead, one painful inch at a time.

“But they’re also gonna talk about how I disarmed a dangerous lunatic, a rogue agent, and beat him to death.” Lacrosse lifts him up. “Because that’s *exactly* what I’m going to do.”

Somewhere, sirens are wailing.

But when Lacrosse grabs for him a final time, Eladio suddenly rolls over onto his back, revealing Lacrosse’s forgotten Glock, the gun he was crawling toward this whole time.

His hands don’t shake. They’re steady, strong.

“Do you believe in God?” Lacrosse asks.

And then Eladio shoots him in the face.

The Ark of Lazarus, or what remains under it, lies beneath furious skies.

The buildings—the Big House, the Barn, the Lodge—are gone but their *shadows* remain, as if the fires that destroyed them left behind afterimages still visible to the naked eye.

Ghosts of what was once here and all that could have been.

Zadkiel knows of others who have made a pilgrimage to this holy site but has never come here himself, and the landscape is beautiful in a raw, unfinished way, made even more so by the unnatural light as far as he can see. The featureless sky glowing with unburdened ash, the friction of lightning and smoke.

The sun lost behind rain clouds, but there all the same, nearly *black*, glowing—

*A Black Sun rising.*

They are close to the Jornada del Muerto volcanic field, where there hasn't been an eruption in ten thousand years. But the glowing tendrils overhead recall volcanic lightning, ash and rocky fragments generating static electricity in the sky. It reminds him of hiding under the bedsheets as a child, the crackle of liminal static from his own whispered movement beneath the covers.

He wishes he were back there—just a kid again—hiding. It reminds him that only hours ago he was hiding beneath the covers of the Sunseeker's bed with the girl Renata, her breath on his face, calming him.

He wonders if these storms are a prelude to Jornada del Muerto rumbling to life, exploding in an incandescent miasma, burning everything away.

The world glimmers with black light, the sky ultraviolet all the way to the horizon.

A weird custom has taken hold, where those who have made this journey leave half-buried glass bottles in the sand, meant to represent the forty-seven souls lost here, and the souls of those who visited, seeking guidance, leaving a small part of themselves behind.

Park police and local deputies used to remove the memorials but gave up, since they just appeared again and again. And from a distance, at sundown, the field of glass would glow like dozens of small fires across the desert floor.

Now, the fulgurous light of the storms overhead reflects in the glass . . . *lightning in a bottle* . . . and they wink and gleam and glow in succession, like eyes blinking. Like quickening heartbeats. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of them, as far as Zadkiel can see, and beyond the glassy shrine are the rolling lights of a hundred RVs and cars.

Although Angel ignores the fiery show, Dina is just as entranced as he is. She's rolled down her window to soak it all in, to revel in it, and the hair rises from her head, charged by the strengthening storm outside.

The fine hair on Zadkiel's arms ripples, too, sending a cold chill through him.

It should be joy but feels more like dread . . .

Grant puts Elise in the passenger seat of her truck and buckles her in, gently checking her for unseen injuries.

He retrieves several cardboard boxes from his own vehicle and slips them in the back of hers before taking the wheel himself.

He waits for an opening, blinker ticking in time with her heartbeat, and eases them into the slow but steady river of vehicles snaking their way into the desert.

They're both soaked through, and he takes off his glasses to wipe them clear so he can see.

But he keeps driving.



“You’re here,” she eventually says.

She knows that’s impossible. She left him miles and miles away in Limon. She spoke with him only moments ago, but there was no way he could get here that fast, unless he was here all along . . . unless he was part of this, all along.

Grant wipes at his eyes again, smearing more rain, or tears. “I tried to warn you.”

“Oh, Grant, *no*. Not you. Not you.”

“But I also wanted you to know too. Hoped to make you understand.”

“How long?” she demands. “How fucking *long*?”

He grips the wheel. “Since Courtney passed. It surprised me how much I was suffering, how much her death—”

“No.” She doesn’t want to hear about his dead wife. “How long have you been *spying* on Sybilla? You and Nadia together.” Elise’s anger is steadying her, strengthening her. “Or did *you* kill Nadia? Noah?”

Grant looks shocked at the accusation or does a masterful job of feigning it. “I had nothing to do with any of that. I never even knew Nadia Rupert, and we lived only a few miles apart. Most of us don’t know each other, Elise. That’s not how this works. Only faith binds us. *Belief.*”

“But you knew all about Sarah Brannen.”

“*They* knew,” he counters. “Probably because Nadia had already posted her suspicions online. They came to me eventually, inevitably, but only so I could keep an eye on Sybilla.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t guess.” But she knows he’s lying, dissembling.

“*Try.*”

“They were interested in the girl, always the girl.”

“Because Renata is their savior? *Your* savior?”

He shakes his head, stares at her with sad eyes. “She’s never been in any danger. Not from me, not from us.”

“Fuck you,” Elise says coolly, watching Elephant Butte fall away behind them as the desert looms. “You could’ve put an end to this at any time. And why even show me those pendants? Did you plant those?”

“At first I was trying to *save* you,” Grant says, “spare you. But then you left Limon . . .” He trails off. “More than that, I wanted to—”

“Test me?”

“No,” he says. “I wanted to open your eyes.”

“What, to *this*?” she asks, waving at the vehicles all around them. “The End of the World? *Salvation*? And all it cost you was a handful of killings and a kidnapping. I don’t know what’s worse: that your grief brought you here, or believing I would join you.”

“Yet here you are,” he says. “All your pain and loss. We’re *both* here.”

“It’s not the same, not even close. Everyone suffers, Grant. We all grieve the choices we could’ve made, the things we’ve lost and had to let go. That’s *life*, messy and full of mistakes. Regret and sorrow, pain and loss, are just part of the deal, the *price*, for all the joy and beauty and love we do experience. I accept that and understand just how fleeting it all is. Back in the morgue, you weren’t questioning my faith . . . you were questioning yours.”

Grant nods. “If there was a chance to save you, I wanted to take it. I still do.”

“Then pull over and let me out of this goddamn truck.”

“But that I can’t do.” He focuses on the glistening windshield, on the flickering taillights in front of them. “And I need to know where your weapon is, Elise.”

And then she understands. When he was putting her in the truck, patting her down, it had nothing to do with doctorly diligence or even concern, and everything to do with searching for her gun.

Still holstered beneath the front seat, just inches from his wet shoes.

“I’m not armed, Grant.”

“Really?” he asks, unsure. “Why not?”

“I’m way out of my jurisdiction, and I never came out here as a cop anyway.”

“Then why come at all?”

Elise looks out at the rain, at the passing traffic, at the line of vehicles snaking inevitably into the desert. “Like Sybilla, I’m here as a mother.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I truly am.”

“Me too,” she says, “for both of us.”

She folds her hands into her lap and then they both lapse into silence as he drives them into the storm.

When we get to the Ark of Lazarus, I don't recognize it.

It's not just that the buildings are long gone, although that's part of it. I don't recognize the lay of the land itself, the curves or creases or contours of it. For years I lay in my bed and looked out the same small window at the same serrated mountains, the same immutable mesas, but I don't see any of that now.

It's as if the wind and time have sanded and scoured the surrounding desert flat, erased all memories of us. I can't find the paths that Etan and Becca and I once walked, or the wells where I once drew water with Connor's laughing help. I can't make out the path to Engle or the skies where starlings once flew in formation.

None of this is familiar to me. It's an alien landscape, a barrow covered in glass bottles and ringed by still-arriving RVs and trucks and cars, a murmuration of brand-new believers.

I don't know the expectant faces staring at me.

"We're here," Connor says, although I don't know where here is. I don't know this place anymore at all.

But at least it's stopped raining, a brief reprieve, although the sky looks no better. Still bloody, still injured, as the sun struggles lower in the west, a black ball made ashen by the storm clouds.

Connor and I exit his car, and if I expect to be rushed, or attacked and held down, none of that happens. It's like the whole world is holding its breath, me included, as a figure appears.

A woman exiting a small RV, a Sunseeker with green lightning on its side.

Like Jornada del Muerto itself, I don't recognize her, either, not at first. She's gained weight, changed her hair. Mine

is dark, and now hers is too.

*You look so much alike.*

But that's not quite true. One look at her eyes and mine and you can tell we're nothing alike at all.

"Deborah," I say as she approaches. "Or is it *Ananiel* now?"

"Sybilla," she says, ignoring my question, her voice huskier, deeper since last we spoke. "You came."

"You knew I would." I take a half step toward her, prompting Connor to grab at my arm, to point the gun I gave him at my head. I shake him and the gun off. "You're the expert on all things Sybilla Laure, after all."

Deb lets slip a hollow smile. "You were never that hard to figure out."

"But that didn't stop you from wanting to steal my life, to be *me*," I say. "And when that wasn't enough, you created all . . . *this* . . . to claim something that was never yours, that you can never fully understand. You think you've resurrected the Ark of Lazarus? You have no idea what you've unleashed, how hard it will be to control."

"I didn't do this, Sybilla." She opens her arms to embrace the shifting wind, all the eyes staring at us both. "At best I kept the candle lit in the dark, one you once tried so hard to snuff out. I was *brought* into the light, like all those here, and it had nothing to do with you. It was all *her*."

Now I'm at a loss, unsure of what or who Deb's talking about.

"If I had my way," she says, "you would've been sacrificed long before now. The *message* is all that was ever important, and much like Eleazar, you were never a worthy messenger. But that wasn't my decision; it wasn't the design. She said you were fated to be here to see this with your own eyes. Destined, one way or another, to *know*."

"Who?" I demand. "*Who?*"

"Ananiel," Deborah says. "*Ananiel*. Rain of God."



When they arrive at the center of the maze of vehicles, Elise tries to make sense of what she's seeing.

Headlights point toward a slight rise where several people gather near another RV, that Sunseeker she recognizes from the highway. Light gleams off bottles planted in the earth, glass flowers extending in all directions, reminding Elise of the poppies from *The Wizard of Oz*, one of her favorite movies as a kid.

It's like one of Denny's fantastical realms in *Siege Perilous*.

None of this is possible, can't be happening, but she can't deny the very real roar of the heavy wind or its clammy caress on her face. The stray, smoky rain in the air. Colored lightning in the sky, a refracted radiance that makes everything ephemeral, turning shadows inside out.

"I have to go now," Grant tells her, and he gets out and starts to unload the boxes he put in the back seat of her truck cab, the ones she'd all but forgotten about until now, distracted instead by this horrible spectacle.

She gets out, too, and takes one from him, silently reading the labeled bottles in the gloom. Small plastic bottles of Tropicana juice, and empty bottles of something else: Luminol. Solfoton.

She doesn't know what the brand names are, but Deborah Fallon's book listed drugs allegedly stored at the Ark compound too.

Cyanide. Phenobarbital.

"Please, Grant," she says, "you can't do this."

His eyes gleam again with rain or tears or both. "We'll lay down and sleep and the girl will wake us. We will be *resurrected* like Lazarus four days from now, after the worst is over, after the storm has passed. Renata's pure light, her aura,

will guide us to that New Day Dawning and the World to Come, where we'll be remade whole, and where those worthy souls who've been lost too early will finally return to us."

"No," Elise says. "That's insane."

"Maybe," he says. "But I've been so tired, Elise, so exhausted. I'm just ready for it to be over, ready to be with Courtney again, in this world . . . or the next. She's waiting for me." He points to the rise, toward the Sunseeker. "She's there now, calling my name."

And although Elise knows Grant's lost his mind, he says it with such conviction, such truth, she can't help but steal a glance, just to be sure Courtney *isn't* there—a ghost or revenant lit by car lights or lightning—beckoning them both forward.

"They all wait for us," he says, "in the end."

He throws her truck keys overhand as far as he can, even as she dives for the open door of the truck, where her loaded gun still rests beneath the seat.

When I finally see Rennie, I nearly fall to my knees.

Her hands are zip-tied in front of her, a gag in her mouth, and just like that image on Connor's phone, her beautiful blonde hair has been haphazardly cut short, chopped close to her skull. What's left has been colored a burnished red, like flames.

She's in boy's jeans and a T-shirt with a big sweatshirt over that, but for all the attempted disguise she is still my daughter, and I'd recognize her anywhere.

*You look so much alike.*

But I see now *another* woman standing behind her, pushing her forward, and I understand that the dying man in Taiban wasn't talking about Rennie, or even Deb Fallon.

He was talking about *this* woman—

*Ananiel, Rain of God.*

"No," I say. "It can't be."

*You look so much alike.*

"But it is," she says. "It's a *miracle*, little sister."

Ananiel stands there in front of me with one firm hand on Rennie and a gun in the other.

Two nights before the Ark burned, Becca came to my room, as she had so many times before.

Tiny Rennie was asleep in the bassinet a few feet away, and I woke to Becca standing there holding her, staring down at her with equal measures of adoration and disgust.

“Don’t hurt her,” I pleaded as Becca turned to regard me. “*Please.*”

I’d already been punished for my attempted escape with Aaron, and I still had a legion of fresh bruises, bloody scars, to show for it. Cuts I would emulate again and again, years later.

Etan had stopped it just before Becca might’ve killed me.

“That man abandoned you, Sybilla. A false idol you trusted and now he’s gone. He will not come back.”

“I know,” I said as I slowly rose from my bed, wanting to get Rennie out of Becca’s arms.

“Your sin is not that you wanted to leave us,” she continued, “but that you tried to take the child with you. That was not your *right*. Damn your own soul if you want, Sybilla, but not ours.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said, “and neither do you, not truly. I just want my daughter.”

Becca laughed softly and kissed Rennie’s head just as softly. It was gentle, tender, almost motherly, but she was not Rennie’s mother. “You loved a man and lost your faith. You were unfaithful to Eleazar, to the Ark.”

“You mean I was unfaithful to *you*.” I tried to keep the anger out of my voice. “And I’ve been punished, paid the price, twice over. Denounce me and it is all yours; I do not care.”

“If it were only that simple, little sister.”

“It is,” I said. “All you have to do is let us go.”

I reached for Rennie, but Becca held her tighter, drew her closer, and when Rennie woke, squirming against the unfamiliar arms, my anger flared.

“I know the truth now, Becca.” I reached out again for Rennie. “Aaron showed me.”

She laughed at that, laughed in my *face*. “There are no truths but ours.”

“*No*. This is all a lie, a lie I’ve helped perpetrate. I know about the hidden cameras and the bank accounts. The files and secret recordings. I know. *They know*.”

For the first time, Becca’s cool composure faltered. “What did this man tell you? *What?* And dare not make me ask you again.”

“They are coming for Eleazar, for you, for all of us. They’re going to tear this place apart. They’re going to jail us, shame us, mock us.”

Becca went still, so still I thought she was holding her breath, and only my baby moved in her arms. “They don’t understand,” she said.

“Nor do I,” I shot back. “Not anymore.”

She looked at me with disgust . . . and pity. “You treat your faith like a dress you can take on and off, like it’s a mere choice. But it’s a yoke now, and you will forever wear it.” She stroked Rennie’s face. “When?” she asked. “When will these men come?”

“Soon. They’ve been readying for months and months.” I moved close until I was able to get a hand on Rennie, to quiet and comfort her. “But you can still escape. We can, together, right now. Just you, me, Rennie. The three of us.”

“You’ve been helping them,” she said, with a brutal certainty that felt like a door closing. “Aaron tempted you to bear witness against us. You already have.”

“No, never. But there is no stopping them. It is done. We are undone.”

Becca looked down at Rennie, at the tiny, delicate figure in her arms. “And you are such a fool . . . such a silly goddamn fool,” she said. “What will be your sin offering now, for such betrayal?”

“We’ve all been fools,” I said as I finally, slowly, pulled Rennie from her. “But I’m trying to save us all now.” Becca didn’t resist, and I crushed Rennie to me. Felt her heartbeat, her soft breath on my face. So alive, so beautiful, so safe.

Becca walked to my lone window, staring out at the moonlit mountains as I’d done so many times before, and I asked her, “Do you still believe? Did you *ever* truly believe in any of this?”

“Did you?” she asked. But I didn’t answer, and neither would she.

“Do you remember the birds?” she asked. “All the beautiful birds. Eleazar made them fly for us.”

“No, Becca,” I said, “*we* did that.”

Becca smiled and turned away from the window. “I am *Ananiel* now, little sister, and I can’t let them take this from me. I will not lose it. This is *my* Flock. This is all I have.”

“No,” I said again, “until now, this is all we’ve ever been allowed. But we can fly away too.”



Becca . . . *Ananiel* . . . left Rennie and me that night, but she was right: I was a goddamn fool, for having told her the truth about Aaron.

I gave her just enough time to prepare, to plan—

*The cyanide and phenobarbital in the food the next night.*

*The staged oil drums.*

She was always stronger than me, always had a furious faith that burned brighter than mine or Etan’s. It burned brighter than the sun, and she was willing to burn us all rather than lose what we’d built, and I should’ve known.

I should've seen it coming.

I never set the Ark fires, not by my own hand, but I might as well have, and no amount of suffering, no amount of penance, can change that.

No offering will ever absolve that sin.

Zadkiel watches the two women square off, with Renata between them.

A man he recognizes as the artist, Connor, has a gun aimed at Sybilla's head.

Dina is at Sybilla's shoulder, ready to hold her back as well.

And Angel . . . *Ananiel all along* . . . clutches Renata.

A crowd has gathered in the darkness, their faces lit by the light of the vehicles that have brought them here: all those who've followed the signs and read the Missives and Ascended the Seven Circles.

All waiting for what Ananiel will do next.

But beyond them rise a hundred spectral shapes, winged souls hovering just beyond the light, waiting expectantly too—

*Suki.*

She calls out to him, begs him to come to her, at last.



Even now, Elise doesn't want to hurt Grant, but she will, and they both know it.

He takes his glasses off and slips them into his pocket and raises his hands, eyes on the gun now in hers. "I should've known," he says. "Please don't do this, Elise."

"Don't make me," she says, voice rising over the storm.

Stinging rain pelts her, and Grant's form wavers, seems to turn to water in front of her. He looks to the sky, listens to the rolling thunder, and she can't imagine what he's truly seeing, truly hearing, except for the ghosts and voices in his head.

"You're damning us all," he says.

"Probably," she says, and she means that too. "All I wanted to do was save one little girl."

"And for *what*? This horrible world? Petty and unforgiving? Full of hate and fear, pain and needless suffering."

"Yes," she says. "But it's all we got."

He smiles at that. "Are you so sure? There are so many of us now. We're everywhere. We're infinite."

"Like birds in the sky," she says.

"Yes," he agrees with an air of understanding, of finality. "We are the harbingers, Elise, and the End is here." And then he runs wildly at her to kill her with his bare hands.

But she holds herself steady, lets him get close, eating up the short, stony distance between them.

And even though she's never pulled a trigger on another living person, she calmly puts two rounds in his chest, and a third between his eyes—

*Just to be sure.*



Elise doesn't have time to mourn him, to even look at his body.

The storm masked her gunshots, but the *congregation*—there's no better word for it—is growing and swelling near the Sunseeker. She can only guess at what they're waiting for, what they expect, but in the gloaming, the electric light, she knows that Renata Brannen, and likely Sybilla, too, will be together in the center of it.

She slips her still-warm gun inside one of Grant's boxes, easily reachable beneath the Luminal and fruit juice, and tucks the box under her arm, then fishes in her pocket for the AXL pendant she's been carrying since the morgue in Limon.

Then carefully affixes it to her chest, just above her heart.

Ananiel looks as I imagine Becca would've looked, had she lived.

Same hair, same eyes.

*You look so much alike.*

We always shared our father's temperament but our mother's features. Yet for all the things I once believed and still do, I cannot believe it is truly her.

It is easier to believe the world is ending than she somehow survived the Ark's fires.

In those first weeks after the raid, there were rumors, fevered theories, that she and others had survived safely in the Mithraeum, the bunker beneath the barn. Whispers that Etan, or Connor, had somehow spirited her away in the hours before that awful dawn, although I was the one who begged and pleaded with her first to leave with me.

I feared for months that she somehow still lived.

Until a surprise call from Aaron—the last time we spoke before yesterday—where he told me about the autopsy report and forwarded me pictures of the pitiful remains.

She had *exploded* like the starlings escaping those burning coops, too close to the pyre of fuel cans I know she set off.

Ten long years went by after that, long enough for me to finally accept . . . *to believe* . . . that Becca had died behind the burning walls—never long enough to forgive myself for what happened.

This ghost or spirit or avenging angel wears Becca's face now, as I've worn Sarah Brannen's.

Maybe Becca, my sister, did die, but not Ananiel.

Never her.

And she has my daughter.



Ananiel strokes Rennie's shaved head. "Welcome home, Sybilla."

"This is not *my* home," I say. "Nor yours."

Ananiel smiles in the murky half light, leaving her face a ghastly skull. "Ascension is at hand," she says, and she appraises me knowingly, as if my presence here was always ordained—destined—despite her two attempts to kidnap me.

This Ananiel didn't trust her own signs and prophecies enough—or didn't trust me. Didn't have faith that I'd tear down heaven to get my daughter back.

"Renata will usher in a New Day Dawning, the World to Come," she continues. "It is the final fulfillment of the Ark of Lazarus and the covenants we made. *Renata* means *born again*, and all those here, all those who've suffered and sacrificed for so long, will experience rebirth and resurrection four days hence." Ananiel's voice is barely above a whisper. "I died here, too, and was reborn just like you . . . *little sister*."

I laugh at her self-important words, her terrible visage. "You're not my sister. You're *nothing*, a fucking fraud."

But before I can finish mocking her, she pulls up the sleeve of her long black T-shirt to reveal a twisted coil of melted flesh snaking up the length of her arm.

*Burn scars* . . . and more than that . . . what look like scourge marks. A thousand lashes, a lifetime's worth.

An ugly map of pain that's led us both back here; I have plenty of scars of my own.

"Look around you, Sybilla. Open your eyes and *see*."

Instead, I kneel in front of Rennie, eyes only on her, and she looks at me with her own large, dark eyes. It feels like months, a lifetime, too, since I've seen her, touched her, although it's barely been two days. But if she's scared, she doesn't show it, despite the horrors she's seen and the things that've been done to her in my name. She's strong, steady,

composed, and there's no fear in her heart, none, and that breaks mine in two, leaving splinters in my chest.

I'm scared enough for both of us, but she only has her silent, unwavering faith.

*Faith in me.*

But when I press her small body to mine, I feel oil-slicked skin, smell a high, acrid odor, even the rain can't mask.

Rennie's been doused, drenched, in some alcohol or oil . . . something *flammable*.

Ananiel hides all her old wounds and whispers, "She must *burn*, Sybilla, so that her bright, shining aura will light our way. You both must burn. It was always destined. Her blood, her sacrifice." She looks at me. "*Your* penance."

And at last, I do see—

*A young man hovering over both me and Rennie like a dark angel.*

*A sharp blade in one hand—the same one I imagine they used on Nadia, on my beautiful Noah—and a heavy silver lighter in the other.*

But unlike Rennie, this young man looks *terrified*, now that we both understand what is truly going to happen here.

*Open your eyes and* see, she said, because like any miracle, Ananiel's Ascension—resurrection—requires *sacrifice*.

Renata's biblical sacrifice. My sin offering.

Ananiel is going to kill my daughter as I look on, her New Day Dawning ushered in by the blood of a child.

But if that was *ever* the price of the World to Come, of salvation and resurrection, it's too goddamn high.

"We never believed this," I say. "You don't save your soul, the world, with innocent blood on your hands. That's not a world worth saving. Rennie is not your savior."

“She is the blood of Eleazar,” Ananiel says calmly. “The Seventh of the Seventh.”

“No,” I turn and tell the crowd. “Because she was *never* Etan’s daughter.”

I rise from my knees as Connor’s gun, my gun, grazes the back of my head. He and Deb loom behind me, watching this play out in stunned silence. The crowd around us, strangers who’ve tossed their lives aside on Ananiel’s lies and promises—who still don’t yet grasp what both will cost—murmur but don’t move.

“She’s *Aaron’s*,” I say.

And now those murmurs rise like the whisper of a thousand rustling pinions as a sudden, uneasy pulse—a spiraling dread—wings its way inexorably through the crowd.

*Fear . . . no, worse . . . doubt.*

But if Ananiel herself doubts my words, if I thought they might stay her hand—protect Rennie the way Eleazar’s birthright once protected me—I realize how wrong I am.

She wraps me in her arms, embracing me the way she might’ve when we were younger.

“I don’t care,” she whispers to me. “The light of the bright world dies with the dying sun.” She kisses me. “And we were always damned, Sybilla.”

Then she sprays something in my eyes and orders the man with the knife to kill Rennie.

# **FOURTH DAY / A X L**

**A New Day Dawning, the World to Come.**

**Watch the skies.**

**Are you ready?**

**AnanielRainofGod**

**Tesseract r/345**

**Verityxxxns23**

**NL**

**Image capture October 2025**

**FBI File Photo | Case 9768**

**New Lazarian reference. "The Flock"**

Elise is still pushing her way to the edge of what she can only think of as a prayer circle when she hears a woman clad all in black order a man with a knife to kill Renata Brannen.

Watches, too, as that woman rears back and sprays something hot and viscous in Sybilla Laure's eyes.

The woman could be Deborah Fallon, but Elise doesn't think so.

Whoever she is, whoever she *was*, she's only Ananiel now.

And none of what is going on here is about faith or belief or salvation; it's only murder, only revenge, and that's a story as old as the Bible itself.

Even though Elise has chased Sybilla across three states, even though Elise is finally *here*, only feet from her, a part of her still feels like she never left that stand of snowy trees circling Noah Brannen, or Nadia Rupert's bloody trailer, or Deborah Fallon's tomb-like home.

Like she still hasn't woken from that awful nightmare in the motel room.

But as the young man raises his knife toward a bound and gagged Renata and no one else in the crowd moves . . . *no one else wakes up either* . . . Elise pulls her gun from Grant's box of Luminal and juice.

The knife looks the same as the one from that painting at Deborah's house, held aloft in the hand of that looming, winged figure behind the sacrificial Sybilla and Renata.

Elise calls out Renata's name and then she aims and prays.



Everything happens so goddamn fast.

Seven heartbeats—

*One . . .*

I'm near blind, my face on fire, but I scream and fly at Ananiel, going for her eyes, too, going for the gun I know she still has, going for my Rennie.

*Two . . .*

Deb grabs for me, and I'm forced to flail and fight both women simultaneously until I catch Deb with a sharp, flat-palmed strike to the throat, doubling her over.

She spits and coughs, and I rake at her soft eyes until she screams and then I use her momentum to throw her against Ananiel, and they momentarily tumble away into the dark.

*Three . . .*

Screams rise from the gathered crowd.

*Four . . .*

Lightning blurs and blazes and thunder crashes.

*Five . . .*

Connor pulls the trigger on my Colt, but it only clicks on an empty chamber.

He fires futilely again and again and again, right into my seared face, but it's no malfunction, no misfire, no miracle.

I shot the gun dry in Taiban and it's been empty ever since and he never checked it when he took it from me.

I was bluffing all along.

*Six . . .*

Through burning eyes, I catch a fractured glimpse of the police chief from Limon, the one from the news, pulling what might be a gun of her own from a box cradled in her arms.

She aims at a spot just above Rennie's head and calls out Rennie's name, or mine, as I scream *nonono* and run blindly for my daughter.

*Seven . . .*

But before I can get to her, before I can make all this horror just fucking *stop*, Ananiel ascends out of the gloom yet again, rising on what I swear are *black wings*.

We're close enough I should feel their gentle feathered touch, feel her warm, living breath on my face, but there's *nothing*.

Nothing at all.

And then she shoots me in the chest—

*Seven heartbeats.*

And seven is a mystical number.

Just as Zadkiel raises the knife, the girl Renata *sings* to him.

Her voice, silent until now, is surprisingly strong and sweet—

*The voice of an angel.*

She's still gagged yet somehow singing to him, an ethereal, impossible song, a choir a million strong, and like the fragile, momentary beauty of a new dawn, the evanescent grace of the sun in his eyes, he stays his hand.

He is the Angel of Mercy, after all. And the world *needs* mercy.

The girl stands before him without hatred or fear, and even as bullets rip through him, tear him apart, he cannot bring himself to hurt the child.

Suki alone knew he could not spill innocent blood, and she now holds the girl's bound hands, protecting her, waiting for Zadkiel to come to her at last.

She tells him again, as she did before out in the desert, what he must do, what only he can do now, with the last of his waning strength.

And he does.

Before he collapses and dies, before the former Nico Roger Miskelli bleeds out in this life and joins his dead girlfriend in the next, he wheels on Ananiel and plunges the sacrificial blade into her chest.

Elise watches, stunned, as a mortally wounded Ananiel *rises* from the ground . . . *rises from the dead* . . . leaving the young man Elise shot and killed in a heap at her feet, and Sybilla—bloody and unconscious, if not already dead too—sprawled out behind her.

Without any expression at all, Ananiel pulls the long-bladed knife from her crushed sternum and turns to face Elise, still-bloody knife in one hand, smoking gun in the other.

She shouldn't be standing, much less breathing.

But Ananiel's wounding gave Elise the few seconds she needed to get to Renata, and she pulls the girl behind her, even as the crowd flees from the chattering gunfire, as the storm's final fury scours the hill clean.

Ananiel breathes hard, wiping dark blood from her mouth, where it's soon lost in the rain.

"Who are you?" she asks. "Why are you here?"

"I'm Chief Elise Blue, from Limon, Colorado, and you're under arrest for the murders of Noah Brannen and Nadia Rupert, and the kidnapping of Renata Brannen. I'm here to take her home."

At that, Ananiel spits more foul, stygian blood. It uncoils from her mouth like a nest of poisonous snakes, spilling and slithering from her gut, from her *soul*.

Ananiel looks up at the dying rain, at the dead sky, at a sun gone black and infinite.

"All is as it is and ever will be," she says through a mouthful of blood. "But it's so fucking hard to *believe* . . ."

Then she starts shooting wildly, flying with that long knife raised high at Elise, who holds her ground and returns fire until her slide locks back, even as Ananiel aims the knife right at her heart and at the little girl behind her.

But Elise doesn't move, using her body and last breath as a shield.

She won't move.

*She will never move.*

And Ananiel does not miss.

I'm dying, already dead, when Noah at last comes to me.

*I need his warmth, the innate light that always surrounds him, a beautiful shining aura . . .*

*I swallow his light, counting the beat of his heart against mine . . .*

I tell him I'm sorry, so, so sorry, and he tells me it's okay.

*He kisses a spot between my eyes. Gentle, fleeting, frustrated. A kiss gentle and quick as a butterfly, like the ones he always gives Rennie.*

*"You and Rennie are the first thing I think about every morning," he says.*

*"And the last thing you think about every night," I finish for him.*

*"It's going to be okay," he says. "I promise."*

But I tell him don't go, please, please don't go. I can't do this anymore alone.

I can't do it without him. I can't do it alone. And he tells me I'm not alone. He will be there to guide me, always and forever.

But I am too scared, too lost, too weak.

*I grab for him. I desperately, foolishly, try to hold on to him.*

*If you don't hold on to something, you'll fall for anything.*

*But he is only smoke.*

*Only white, white, burning light.*

There are now a hundred shimmering souls circling in the sky above me: anima rising, a great holy gyre, like birds finally set free.

All those who died at the Ark of Lazarus, all those after.

But Noah shines brightest.

And as he rises, higher and higher, brighter and brighter like that New Day Dawning I was once promised, I rise after him.



But it's not Noah, not even the dawn sun.

Only flashing emergency lights, and a circling police helicopter fanning the ground with a harsh searchlight, brutal and bright even in the wind and rain.

Agent Morales is holding me, checking me for vital signs, wondering if I'm still alive, and I honestly don't know.

But Rennie is alive, kneeling over that police chief from Limon, holding her lifeless hands, *singing*.

Rennie's voice is beautiful, clear, even if I'm the only one who hears it. She's singing in Spanish, a language I've never taught her, and I don't know the words. I don't know what she's praying for, what she's *offering* this time, and I so desperately want to tell her it's not her destiny or burden to save any of us.

No gift is worth that price, her sacrifice.

She's worth the whole fucking world to me.

But someone puts a mask over my mouth—oxygen boiling in my lungs—and someone else holds my clawing hands to my side as someone else shines light in my ravaged eyes and a final someone puts paddles against my chest and there's no way for me to stop Rennie when she pulls the knife that was destined for her from the dead woman's heart.

An impossible amount of blood wells up, and my beautiful little girl puts both her small hands over the wound and sings to the sky and the heavens above.

*Hurricane Nigel Falls Apart, but Ophelia Still Strengthens in Gulf*

It could have been a lot worse. But by the time Nigel made landfall, it had been downgraded to a tropical depression, lashing Louisiana and Texas with significant storms and rain. Hurricane Ophelia, however, continues to gain strength over the Gulf of Mexico. While the dire predictions of proximate tropical cyclones didn't come to pass, Ophelia still represents a significant threat . . .

*The Advocate, October 23, 2025*

*Mysterious Explosion Rocks Carrizozo*

State and federal investigators are still probing the explosion at a small motel in Carrizozo, New Mexico, that left three deputies dead, in addition to Sheriff Roberto Hernandez . . .

*Albuquerque Journal, October 24, 2025*

*Arrests Made at Site of Infamous Cult Massacre*

Federal authorities continue to investigate a gathering at Jornada del Muerto, site of the 2015 Ark of Lazarus raid. Individuals from across the country appear to have held an impromptu memorial commemorating that earlier tragedy. In his press conference, FBI Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Brian Diebold, confirmed three deaths, but withheld names, pending notification of next of kin . . .

*Los Angeles Times, October 26, 2025*

*Obituary—Grant Allen Olson*



Limon—Grant A. Olson, 62, of Limon, passed away on October 27, 2025. Memorial Mass for Grant will be at 12 p.m. on Tuesday, October 28, 2025, at St. Rita Catholic Church. Visitation will be from 10–12 on Tuesday at the church before the Mass. Grant was preceded in death by his wife, Courtney Alice Olson. Donations may be sent to Lincoln Community Hospital or Lazarus Hospice.

*Limon Leader, October 27, 2025*

*The Four Horsemen Ride Off into the Sunset*

The fires that have been collectively dubbed the “Four Horsemen” and that have been burning across the American West for months now appear to be under control, this according to ...

*Denver Post, December 2025*

IV

THE END OF THE WORLD

## How an Internet Meme Sparked a Cult Revival

The horrific 2015 mass suicide of the Ark of Lazarus did not end the infamous cult. If anything, it only made it more famous.

By Roddy Aiello for VICE

Published April 2026

Only three years after the mass suicide and fiery death of 47 members of the Ark of Lazarus, the first mysterious internet postings appeared on 8chan, later 8kun, as well as several Reddit communities.

These cryptic posts, called Missives by the faithful and originally proliferated under the name SeventhAngel—before later being taken over by AnanielRainofGod—were radical Christian eschatological diatribes that not only espoused a hardline version of the original Ark of Lazarus's tenets, but also rejected government and science, while also incorporating such diverse movements as QAnon, Twin Flames Universe, the Sons of Revere, antivaxxers, the wellness blogosphere, and orgone.

In five years, Ananiel's apocalyptic worldview, a digital harbinger of the end-times fancifully promoted by ARoG's eye-catching posts and videos—the most famous being the Burning Woman GIF and Spiral Bird meme—successfully namechecked or co-opted nearly every contemporary web conspiracy, creating a combustible mix that lit up social media platforms and the internet.

Following Ananiel down the rabbit hole, deciphering the ARoG Missives (in effect, clues), became an international treasure hunt

as irresistible as Forrest Fenn's, but infinitely more dangerous.

These seekers called themselves New Lazarians, and their temple was the internet, where despite all attempts at moderation and oversight and de-platforming, it remains a mirror universe where it is nearly impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. Legitimate purveyors of truth and peddlers of the fake and fantastic are still given equal airtime, sharing the same mammoth megaphone and often afforded the same respect and credibility.

On the internet, authority is an illusion and "the truth" is defined not only by what you believe but what you can deny, how many likes and retweets and repostings you can accumulate.

In a world where a good number of us still believe our current reality might be a computer simulation, truth is little more than a high game score.

While it's easy now to blame this "crazy-train phenomenon" on AI search engines driven off the rails by user-engagement models, real people were the passengers. The New Lazarian (NL) movement was everywhere, hiding in plain sight: Hollywood elite, corporate board rooms, police departments and the military, even the most hallowed halls of government.

The movement counts at least one prominent member of the House of Representatives, whose Facebook posts have now come under increased scrutiny in the wake of last year's events, when dozens of NL devotees returned

to the ruins of the original Ark compound at Jornada del Muerto for a religious observance.

That event, resulting in a handful of deaths, is still the subject of multiple ongoing inquiries and investigations and lawsuits, and appears to have been the culmination of the dark vision of Ananiel, Rain of God.

Or just a meme and game that got way out of hand, a massive hoax.

Call it a huge swatting prank on the movement's faithful, as it was revealed that at least some of Ananiel's posts were written not only by the now-deceased Dr. Deborah Fallon, a once-noted cult expert and author of several books on the Ark of Lazarus, but also Connor Whaley, one of the Ark's original members, who'd come to acclaim through his own apocalyptic paintings and NFT art . . .

# LIMON, COLORADO

*July 2026*

Elise sits at La Posta and ignores the newspaper and drinks her ice-choked Coke, and as she does for a few minutes every day since Jornada del Muerto, she thinks about life and death.

She's learned the Bhutanese are encouraged to think about death five times a day, to contemplate their passing and to *accept* it; to embrace the fleeting beauty of their mortality.

She's also read quite a bit about reincarnation, *punarjama* in Hindi, the transmigration of a soul from one body to another, and resurrection—*anastasis*—where a soul reawakens in the same body.

Death, in all its forms, is often on her mind.

Like Renata Laure and her own Lily Renee.

Grant Olson. Deborah Fallon. Noah Brannen. Nadia Rupert.

Sybilla Laure and Ananiel, Rain of God.

Elise thinks about the living and dead and how only a heartbeat separates the two, a heartbeat that lasts a lifetime.

They told Elise she clinically died out there in that awful place in the desert, that the scarring on her heart reveals a massive trauma no one should've survived, but that no one can explain how it healed.

Scar tissue isn't heart tissue, though; it doesn't contract the right way, can't help the heart pump the way it's supposed to, and her doctors warn her that when scar tissue like that forms around the heart—as in her case—it inevitably leads to congestive heart failure.

It's just a matter of time.

Elise's heart is a fragile thing, barely held together by its scars and wounds, but today she feels stronger than ever.

She feels totally *alive*.

And although she lives knowing she can die any second, that every heartbeat is both a miracle and a risk, every moment only borrowed time, that's true for all of us.

*That's life.*



Later, Elise checks her phone and texts out a quick message to Judy Jowell.

They've been checking in with each other, talking about kids, about getting older and life in general, and that's been a good thing for them both.

It was Judy who suggested that a small part of Renata Brannen was Lily Renee reborn, and although Elise isn't sure she believes that, she doesn't *not* believe it either. She doesn't truly recall everything she experienced on the *other side*—the two minutes and thirty-five seconds she was dead—but it doesn't scare her anymore.

In the end, there was no bright tunnel of light, and her whole life didn't pass before her eyes. There was no moment of revelation, no river to cross.

No heaven, no hell.

There was just Lily Renee, arms wide, waiting for her, all grown up now.

A beautiful, smiling woman—

*An angel.*



Renata's sketch now hangs in her bedroom, a reminder that there's so much about this beautiful, bright, mysterious world we can never know, and that we're never truly alone on *either* side.

La Posta's door swings open, letting in warm, hazy sunlight, and Denny and Lori walk in, and Elise Blue smiles excitedly at her son and very, very pregnant daughter-in-law.

They're having a little girl, and they're still deciding on a name. In another couple of weeks, Elise will be a grandmother for the first time.

But hopefully not the last.



# BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS, VIRGINIA

*August 2026*

I sit on the porch of our small cabin and watch the sunset and Inigo the German shepherd chase the ball that Rennie's been throwing him for the past hour.

I've been writing in my journal again: not Deb's old "Life Is Beautiful" journals, just a plain-covered steno. There are five of them stacked up and more set aside, ready to fill. I've been sketching too. I'm not anywhere near as good as Rennie, but I haven't forgotten those old lines, the contours and shading.

It's a muscle memory thing, and my hands have held on to a lot of memories.

So many goddamn memories.



God, I love it out here.

The endless green and the incredible quiet.

We don't have a TV or a computer, and I only go down the mountain once a month to get some things, and that's the only time I check the news. I listen to the radio for the thirty-five-minute drive there and back, and then I turn it off the second I see the cabin's peaks.

We're so far off the grid that we'll likely never know when the world ends. If anything, we'll be the *last* to know.

We can't stay out here forever. I locked myself and Rennie away for far too long once before, but she needed this time to heal again, and so did I.

She was in a coma for six weeks after Jornada del Muerto, and although no one could explain *why*, or diagnose the exact nature of the injuries she suffered, I don't need them to.

I know.

And even though my vision has mostly cleared up, my left eye still won't heal, my eyesight irreparably damaged by the tactical pepper gel Ananiel fired directly into my open eyes.

I see well enough, but in any kind of bright light, there's a permanent painful black spot occluding my vision, a black hole in everything. A tiny Black Sun forever burning in my left eye, eclipsing the world.

I wear sunglasses.



I also use my journals to write letters to Eladio. Letter after letter.

I tell him how we're doing, how Rennie is. They're full of inconsequential things, day-to-day things, and I don't revisit the past much, but it's always there, hanging over every page, our past.

Like before, he's been dealing with the fallout from Jornada del Muerto, and I admire him for that. When the FBI tried to bury it all a second time, he went to the media, to anyone with a camera or a microphone or a blog, and forced the government's hand. He's been leading the investigation into how the New Lazarians infiltrated the FBI and how many remain, and before I retreated up here, he warned me that too many are still out there, still hiding in the shadows, still waiting, still dangerous.

They recovered nearly three hundred pounds of M112 demolition block and detonators hidden in the side panels of Ananiel's Sunseeker, enough C-4 plastic explosive to take out a high-rise building or several city blocks. An explosion like that would've immolated everything at Jornada del Muerto.

One way or another, Ananiel was getting her apocalypse, all her predictions finally come true: crisscrossing the country forever dreaming of death and destruction, fire and rain.

Deb Fallon was officially listed among the dead from that day, but I know I didn't kill her, and her body was never

recovered.

The official report is that she was swept away in the rising Rio Grande floodwaters.

Eladio's got a long, uphill road ahead of him, and there's every chance he'll get indicted along the way. He's lost so much already I don't even know what's left to lose, but I know as well as anyone that's when you're most dangerous too—

*Because sometimes not having a choice is the only chance you get.*

While both Rennie and I were still in the hospital, and all the rumors about what happened out there at Jornada del Muerto were spreading like wildfire, he never came right out and asked me if she truly was his daughter. But he did visit her often, just to stand silently by her bed, to look at the curve of her face, to watch her dream, to wonder.

The last time, he brought her an old wooden rosary, something his mother once gave him, and he looped it over her still hands and kissed her forehead the way Noah used to.

So, I write him all these letters, but I never send them because I don't want them somehow getting out or reviewed or sold or traded on the internet, and I don't want anyone to extrapolate from them where we are.

But they're all here for him . . . when we're both ready.



They asked me if I knew who Ananiel was, and I said I didn't.

I had never seen her before, had no idea who she could be, but I told them that woman wasn't my sister.

It was impossible.

Rebecca died in March 2015.

That woman who claimed to be Ananiel, Rain of God, meant nothing to me, despite her words on the mount, despite her outlandish claims.

Despite those burn scars and lash marks running up her arms, mirror images of my own.

*Our stigmata.*

The scars of the Ark of Lazarus.



I call out for Rennie, and she's gone.

That old panic takes hold, and I spring off the porch, reaching for the gun I always carry now, racing to the side of the cabin, where I finally catch sight of her—her and Inigo both—down by the creek bed in the shadow of the trees.

Inigo is barking, running in loops, and Rennie is there safe in her wheelchair with its big off-road tires. She hasn't been able to walk since Jornada del Muerto, although they tell me her legs are fine.

But every gift comes at a price, every miracle requires a sacrifice.

Either of us would've gladly paid any price, carried any cross to have Noah back, but we didn't get the chance, and he wouldn't have wanted us to bear it anyway.

*We love, and we grieve, and we remember.*

*And anything else is playing God.*

Rennie's out there beneath the trees Noah would've loved, singing, arms raised to the birches and firs and blue spruce, as birds spin around her in great circles, drawing amazing and impossible shapes in the sky.

They swoop and dive at her song, a dozen different species, maybe a hundred or a thousand or maybe a hundred thousand.

Maybe all the birds in the world, infinite sparkling jewels, a rainbow all the way to heaven after a terrifying storm—

*Birds are sentinel species.*

*Birds have long been considered harbingers of doom too.*

But today, right now, these are just birds.  
Just beautiful birds, flying high and wild and free.  
And they don't mean anything at all.

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Books are journeys, but you're rarely alone the whole way.

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Last, thank *you*, every fan of my prior books who walked this new, dark path with me for a bit.

Next time I head out with my coat on and flashlight in hand, I hope you'll come along again.

JTS

October 2021

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2018 Marie Feutrier*

J. Todd Scott was born in rural Kentucky and attended college and law school in Virginia, where he set aside an early ambition to write to pursue a career as a federal agent. His assignments have taken him all over the United States and the world, but a gun and a badge never replaced his passion for stories and writing.

His previous books include *The Far Empty*, *High White Sun*, and *This Side of Night* in the Chris Cherry / Big Bend Series, as well as the Appalachian crime novel *Lost River*.

For more information, find Todd at [www.jtoddsconfig.com](http://www.jtoddsconfig.com).