

THE GRIMM
TALES FROM
RAINBOW FALLS
4th Draft

Daniel Rosales

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DEDICATION

To Scarlett Martin, Emma Lou Cunningham, and Brian Quinn, who were to play the Carter Family in the web series. To Mark T. Lee, Jamie Mew Duggar and Ronald Clemmons, who were to play the Vic Family. To Vic Case, Taylor Brandt and Juliana Briscoe who were to play the Jameson Family. To Michael P. Gardener and Veronica Dollar who were to play the Smith-Patel family. To Tim Newkirk, Katharine Franco, Jori Gill, and Hollee McMurray who were to be the Constantino clan. To Alejandro Sandoval, Ashley Zamora, Tanner Fontana, Dustin Baumgardner, Grace Patterson, Yvonne Felder, Cannon Wise, Montanya Pierre, Kolt Atchley, Caden Large, Mark Edward Howell, Sheran Keyton, Michael Green, and all the other members of the Rainbow Falls community. I thank you for all you've done.

This book is dedicated to everyone who has ever heard of Rainbow Falls. For many years we tried to get this thing off the ground. Now we've resolved to simply get the story out there. So thank you if you've been waiting to hear these stories. Thank you for your patience and understanding. I hope it was worth the wait.

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01:

The Fun House

It was the early 00's in Rainbow Falls, Texas, a quaint small town like any other, and like most others, a little different. It had that old-time feeling, with two-story red brick buildings lining the main street, one blinking street light that does the job of the stop sign below. And a grassy plaza, the town square, complete with benches and whitewashed gazebo. It was a sleepy little town that did its best to stay asleep and failed miserably.

And just like every other small town, it had the worlds only inland fishery, right on the edge of Willow Lake. It was the number one producer of off-brand fish sticks in the U.S.A. The Jameson family owned the plant, and it was the first fully automated fishery in existence. And when that changes, the Jameson's will add the term "Inland" to make it unique again. Until then, there will only be one soul canvassing the plant, and that's Buford, the maintenance man who kept the automated systems running.

And just like every other small town, there was a scientific research laboratory, also on the banks of Willow Lake. It housed a one-of-a-kind clean energy reactor that powered the entire village. Other things were developed there, things for big business, industries, governments, both local and abroad. To this end, the townsfolk of Rainbow Falls was littered with scientific geniuses.

'And what do you call that thing?' asked Junior Jameson III. He was the strapping young billionaire owner who'd just taken over his father's company. He was speaking to a group of hand-picked researchers. One of them was holding a vial.

'It's a variant strain of --' started the researcher before he was interrupted.

'Is it dangerous?'

'Very much so, Sir. You see --'

'Never mind! The less I know, the better. Bury it in one of our containment labs in China, or wherever.' Jameson said, losing interest and moving on.

And just like every other small town, there was a traveling carnival permanently camped at the edge of town. This carnival was complete with dangerously worn rides, eerily disinterested carnies, sideshows, mirror mazes, and freak shows. A scene that was far too familiar in rural America.

It's in this setting we find a couple slowly wandering the carnival at night, casually taking in the sights, sounds, and smells. The lights illuminated the grounds in dream-like orange tones. The girl carried an enormous overstuffed bear, barely keeping it above the gravel stones at her feet. The man nibbled at cotton candy, minding not to get any on the badge pinned to his chest.

'I drove by this place when I first came to town.' Said Dr. Lindsey Deer, a researcher at the Lab. 'It seemed a bit anachronistic.'

'This carnival hasn't changed since I was a kid.' Said Sheriff Rolly Vic. 'My dad would bring me here, and we'd always see the 'Freak Show.' He'd tell me, 'Son, if you're not a good person, you'll wind up looking like one of those freaks.'

'That's an odd thing to tell a child. Then again, my parents told me the boogie man would get me if I was naughty. Oh, and that he lived under my bed.' She said.

'He does.'

'Don't tell me you believe in the boogie man.' She said.

'He tried to take over the town once. He almost did it too. I chased him into the Mirror Emporium on Main and fifth and lost him. You know, that place right on the square?'

'Okay, not to change the subject, but I thought freak shows went out with vaudeville.' She said. 'Isn't it just asking for a discrimination lawsuit?'

'The Carnival boasts America's largest collection of certified authentic freaks. Each a one of a kind. I can get us in. I have some pull around here.' Rolly jests.

'And go see JoJo the monkey boy, or the Alligator man? No thanks. They're all fakes.' She said.

#

Inside the Freak show building, Mayor Vic and his wife see a few local teens get spooked by a large furry arm, slamming against the Plexiglas.

The Vics know these teens; Tori babysits most of the younger kids in town, Lisa is the resident Emo girl, and her boyfriend Rick is a wannabe filmmaker. The teens bicker a bit, make rude and tasteless jokes, then move on.

'Ah, to be young and an ass.' Quips the Mayor.

'Age has nothing to do with it, dear.' Replied his wife, Morgan.

#

'I'll pass. But I am curious how all those people got here. All the poor people in the freak show.' Said Lindsey.

'Everyone has a destiny,' Rolly said. 'Maybe it's theirs. Making a living can be tough enough, even when you look socially acceptable. If people are going to point, stare and talk, why not make them pay for the privilege. Try to make the best of a bad situation.'

And there it was. Behind the ten-gallon hat, larger than life physique, and square jaw, was the heart of a thinking man. A sensitive man who deeply cares for the welfare of others. Someone who doesn't just care about their status in life.

Lindsey could see Rolly was a well-rounded, good man.

'Thanks for bringing me out, Sheriff. I had fun.' She said.

'Call me Rolly, Doc.'

'Lindsey.' She said.

The two begin to feel comfortable with each other. Then the Mayor and his wife come upon them, killing the mood.

'Mayor, Mrs. Vic,' Lindsey said.

'Please, dear, call me Morgan. Son, it's late. The Mayor has an early meeting.' Said Morgan. She then walked the Mayor to the Parking lot, expecting the other two to follow.

'Once the cruiser is out of the shop, we go out without my parents.' Said Rolly.

'It's a date.'

#

Not every couple in Rainbow Falls is a happy one. Not everyone reaches their full potential. Such is the case for Calvin, a thirty-something shoe salesman whose home life has not been all he'd dreamed of.

For this reason, most nights, he'd stand outside his front door, trying to figure out reasons to go in. Eventually, found an excuse and walked into the home he'd made with Myrtle, his wife of five years. On the outside, they lived the black and white television rerun life. She'd be the beloved housewife in heels and pearls, cooking a four-course meal each night. He'd drink his coffee on the way to work in his suit and tie and bring home the bacon. At night, they'd play the kind of games only adults read about in magazines sold in specialty stores.

This was great for both of them when he worked at the dealership. Okay, when he worked at the mirror emporium, but not as much since he started selling shoes. It's hard to buy a roast when there's less bacon coming in. Calvin made his way inside, hoping for the best.

'Is that you, Calvin?' Myrtle asked, not expecting an answer. 'You're late again. Like that's a surprise. This is the fifth time this week. It's like you don't want to come home, mister.' She scolded.

Calvin tried to snuggle her, to show her love. Especially since he'd come so close to not coming home at all. In fact, Calvin had a newfound appreciation for all that he had, but Myrtle turned a cold shoulder, wanting nothing to do with him.

'I didn't,' Calvin said quietly, not realizing it was out loud.

'What?'

'I said I didn't catch the bus! I had to walk home.' Calvin answered quickly, trying to recover.

'Well, don't expect a hot meal; that train left twenty minutes ago. Why I even try, I'll never know. Mother always said to make something you can serve cold.'

'It won't happen again, Dear,' Calvin said in his most convincing voice.

The bickering had begun once more. Myrtle spoke to his disheveled look, raking him over the coals. This was the case most days lately. It's hard on a couple to keep up appearances when only one is trying.

Calvin flung excuse after excuse, but each was swatted down with ease. Each playing their part until Myrtle suddenly notices something in the mirror. Quickly she turned to face Calvin but what she thought she saw wasn't there. She looked in the mirror again, only to see once more bloody scars on Calvin's forehead.

'What in the world happen to your face?' She said. 'I knew you were clumsy, but this takes the cake! What kind of idiot are you, walking around the streets looking like that? Everyone must think I'm a pathetic loser being married to a moron like you! How in the world could this happen?'

'What are you talking about?' he asked.

Myrtle grabbed him by the shoulders and faced him towards the mirror. There he saw the bloody scar that resembled a cracked window. Calvin quickly touched his forehead and looked at his hand. No blood. He looked in the mirror and saw a bloody palm. Over his shoulder, he could see Myrtle saw it too.

'Did you break a window with your face?' she questioned.

'What are you talking --' Calvin started but stopped. Calvin thought back, recapping his day.

#

Calvin stood in the back of Waddles Mirror Emporium, staring at himself in the old dirty mirror hanging on the back wall. He tried every device to muster the will to go home and play nice with his wife in his arsenal. But the face in the mirror shown the truth of his position.

There he stood face to face with the negative voice that had been ruining his life for months, and it ticked him off that THAT guy was not any happier than he was!

There are times that we get caught up in emotion and act on it. Many broken mirrors or holes in the walls were created by such times. This time was going to be no different.

In a self-loathing fit of rage, Calvin reared back and headbutted the mirror on the wall. Now in any other small town, we could all predict what happened next, and that's precisely what happened. Calvin passed through the mirror clear to the other side, the dirty old mirror drinking him up like a reflecting pool would a heavy rock.

Calvin fell face first on a dirty floor in a rundown hallway in a darkened abandoned building. Behind him was a cloudy mirror; however, instead of seeing a reflection of the room he was in, he saw the Emporium as unmistakable as looking through a doorway.

Well, this was new and piqued his interest. Like any other husband looking for an excuse to not go home, Calvin figured this was as good as any. He explored.

Calvin soon realized he was on the other side of the mirror. He had fallen off his feet and into the back end of reality; it was a world void of any life yet filled with the rubble of a civilization long since gone. Calvin soon found more mirrors that looked into the world left behind and then realized that no one from home could see into the mirror world at all. Calvin made two decisions; he would explore this place, and he wouldn't tell Myrtle.

Calvin mapped out where the mirrors came out and which were the points of interest. Like at the dressing room mirror at the lady's dress store, the Pilates class workout mirror, and the bathroom mirrors of some specific women in town.

This was, for Calvin, the ultimate in voyeurism. There were no hidden cams, no peering through windows, no fantasy role play, and completely anonymous. He'd found pleasure again, and it was more exciting to him than any game because it was real. Soon his own self-gratification became more important to him than the constant bickering awaiting him at home.

#

Calvin found the mirror of an exotic woman. She was the palm reader at the carnival, and she was something new. All the other women he'd seen were strangers to him, but he'd seen this one on the streets, at the carnival, and Bev even read his palm once. To Calvin, she was not a stranger, and that made her all the more intoxicating.

She was not fully dressed yet, but still only slightly covered. Calvin had to get a closer look. As she curled her hair in the mirror, it felt to Calvin as if she was looking right at him. As he moved closer, all he could focus on was her skin, the amount showing, and what was yet to be revealed. He didn't notice that the light from the other side was leaching in as he got closer.

#

Bev loved to look her best. Working as a carnival palm reader didn't afford her much opportunity to shine as bright as she wanted, so she indulged in the finer things in her private time. All her undergarments matched and were made of silk and lace.

The cost was more than most women would choose to pay, but she felt she was worth it. She looked good, and she knew it.

Sometimes she'd put the music on and just dance in her most elegant intimates, feeling gorgeous and free. She was about to do just that when she saw the ghostly face in the mirror. She believed in the supernatural. Bev didn't need to see a ghost in the mirror to convince her there were things in this world she didn't understand.

In one movement, she screamed, fell back, and tossed her curling iron, breaking the mirror into thousands of pieces. Her heart pounded in her chest as she heard the voice of the ghost scream and fade away.

Calvin was in pain. His face felt like it was ripped to shreds like a billion paper cuts painted his face from forehead to chin, ear to ear, all hot with sticky blood. He was way too close to the mirror, and when it broke from the real world, it tried to do the same to him.

Calvin made his way back to the Emporium as quickly as he could. He wanted to put all this behind him. This was way too close for comfort and was no longer fun.

#

Myrtle stared at Calvin, getting angrier with every second he didn't respond. He realized that he had no answer for what was going on. Even Calvin didn't know why the mirror broke his face when it broke or why it only looked like that in mirrors and not windows. Calvin tried hard, but he simply couldn't think of anything to say.

'What was the question?' Calvin asked.

'Idiot, your face.'

Finally, after what seemed to be the longest ten seconds of his life, Calvin thought of a lie.

'Yes. Well, there was this cat.'

'A cat?' Myrtle asked.

'It was stuck in a tree,' Calvin continued, 'like outside, and you know how cats get when they're scared, right? Cats get - scared.'

'Did you try to wear it down like a hat?'

'No, I uh, it was scared.' Calvin insisted.

'You said that.'

'Look, I got scratched okay. Can I get a wet nap?'

'That's the most pathetic story I've ever heard. Is that the best you've got?'

Frustrated, Calvin pinned Myrtle to the wall, leaving an indentation where her shoulders hit.

'It doesn't have to be good, Just true!' Calvin snapped.

Calvin regained his composure and let her go.

'I'm not hungry; I'm going to bed,' Calvin said and started off.

Myrtle stopped him mid-stride, putting a vice-like grip on his bicep.

'Playing games is one thing, boy, but lying to me is another. This ain't over Calvin; you can bet on it.' Calvin pulled his arm away, then left the room.

#

The next day Lindsey found herself back at the carnival. She couldn't help feeling that something didn't seem right. Many things didn't feel right in Rainbow Falls, but Lindsey really felt terrible for those who couldn't do it for themselves. She stood a good while looking at the Freak-Show house until a broom-push made his way towards her.

'Excuse me,' she said, stopping him.

'What is it, sweetheart?' he asked.

'Those people in there. Are they real? I mean, are they afflicted with some sort of rare disease or condition?' she asked.

'I don't follow your meaning.' He said, fumbling for a cigar.

'Are they being cared for?'

'I never heard them complain.'

'Where do they come from? Do you buy them?' she asked.

'Hey lady, that'd be illegal.' the carny quipped, 'No these, ahem, people show up all on their own. We just take them in and give them purpose. That's the truth. If you want to see the certificates and legal stuff, go bug the boss at the office, okay? I'm busy here.'

He lit his cigar, smiled with the teeth he had left, and went back to sweeping.

Lindsey yelled out to him as he walked away.

'Are they happy?'

'Is anyone?' he replied, laughing as he walked away.

#

Calvin made his way to the back of the Emporium, not realizing the owner was trying hard to ignore him. She sat at the counter drinking coffee. It was nothing fancy, just good sturdy Colombian coffee with a bit of sweetener. She knew he was there for the mirror, and although she didn't know what he used it for, she knew it was none of her business.

Then she saw Myrtle come in, and she knew that it was all about to hit the fan. Even though Calvin and Myrtle made no attempt to make friends with the other locals, the town knew about them and gossiped feverishly about their relationship.

'You won't find what you're looking for in here, my dear.' Said Mrs. Waddles in a tender voice.

'Is that right? And what would that be?' Myrtle asked. 'Happiness.'

Well, this cut to the quick with Myrtle, and even though she was right, Mrs. Waddles had not yet earned the right to say it.

'Well, thank you. Mind your own damn business.' Myrtle said and stormed off after Calvin.

'Suit yourself. Nobody finds what they want back there. What do you expect from a mirror other than a reflection of yourself?' Mrs. Waddles said to no one in particular.

Myrtle witnessed Calvin walk into the mirror as if it was a curtain separating rooms. For the first time in a long time, anything was possible for Myrtle. Suddenly the sky had opened, and anger gave way to hope. Calvin had discovered some kind of miracle and was going to make them rich once he knew how to make it work. She was sure of it.

Now it all made sense, sort of—the late nights, the disinterest, the strange scar that appears and disappears. Calvin was caught up in something far beyond his comprehension. Yet that still didn't give him the right to lie to her. She got angry again.

Myrtle was ready to teach that boy a lesson. Myrtle walked into the mirror.

#

Calvin found himself in front of the ladies' dressing room mirror. He was sure he'd marked it. His blood was up, his anticipation peaked, Calvin was ready again to dive deep into self-induced depravity as only he could. To his surprise and joy, Bev from the Carnival had made her way into the dressing room. Calvin squealed with glee.

Myrtle bore witness to this for a moment or two, watching Calvin watch the lady change from one bikini to another. Her blood boiled. She'd been replaced, but not exactly. Myrtle had been replaced by the reflection of another woman and Calvin's right hand.

Her last hope of happiness with the man she married drifted off in short heavy breaths.

Even if she could salvage the relationship, there was nothing there to save. When they first met, they were strangers, and she was enamored with the man she saw. All these years later, they were strangers again, and she was repulsed by the man she saw. Myrtle had seen enough.

'Oh, it had to be something like this! Here it is, you discover some magical Alice in Wonderland door to another... whatever this is. All you can think to do is use it to be a peeping tom?' Myrtle barked.

Calvin spun around, composing himself only to see his Myrtle and her pain for the first time in their marriage.

'What? No! I can explain!' Calvin said.

'Was it the cat again? Don't tell me about the cat!'

'This isn't what it looks like. You've got the wrong idea. I saw a man come this way. I scared him off.'

'Now you get creative,' Myrtle growled. 'You disgust me! I can't believe I was ever attracted to a coward and a pervert like you!'

'I've never been in here before.' Calvin lied.

'Have you no shame?' she asked.

Yes, yes, he did. He felt dirty and filthy and disgusting. Something in all the years of marriage he'd never felt before. He felt humiliated, but he wasn't about to admit it.

'Answer me!'

Calvin couldn't face her. He decided it was time to go.

Myrtle didn't see it that way and cracked her whip. Actually, she snapped her fingers, but Calvin instinctively stopped like a trained dog, head hung low.

'I'm telling everyone! Do you hear me? Everyone's going to know what you are, freak!' Myrtle vented.

She wasn't sure how much of what she said was true, but she knew that would hit Calvin hard. With any luck, he'd crawl right back into his place.

Calvin's world was over. He couldn't let her expose anything. He needed to stop her and her cruel ways once and for all, or he'd never be happy again. Calvin knew he had to get rid of her.

Calvin charged Myrtle, wrapping his hands tightly around her neck. But Myrtle was ready for him; she shifted her weight, grabbed his collar bone and pulled him off balance, and cinched his neck in a choke.

They began to fight viciously, making their way through war-ravaged rooms of the building they were in. Neither held back, and both were looking for the kill. As they moved in and out of rooms, steeped in mortal combat, both failed to see the oddly shaped mirror they'd made their way to.

Deep in an embrace of death, Myrtle tripped Calvin, and he pulled her down with him. both lost their balance and fell through the oddly shaped mirror.

#

At the Carnival, Tori, a teenage girl, desperately tried to get through the mirror maze to catch up with her friends. They'd pulled ahead and were entirely out of sight. At the mirror-maze exit were the distorted funhouse mirrors. She stopped for a moment to gaze at the freakish shape of her reflection. Without warning, two twisted freakish bodies came tumbling out of that same mirror and fell at her feet.

There was no way for her to recognize the twisted bodies of Calvin & Myrtle there on the floor, even if she knew them intimately... which she did not.

Calvin tried to speak but instead vomited on the sawdust-covered floor.

Tori, frightened and a little disgusted, screamed and ran off, leaving the two freaks on the floor. They could not move or coordinate their misshapen limbs. But in the crazy distorted mirror, the two could see their reflection, as pristine as they were before they came out of the mirror.

#

Back at the Research lab near Willow Lake, Jameson III looks over his father's office. The dark oak paneling kept the room from looking bright, despite being wholly lit. It did, however, make it awkward that his father's painted mural looked down on him with displeasure. It certainly didn't help that it was a life-sized painting.

Sadie was Jameson Sr. 's longtime secretary and appeared to be no older than twenty-five. Sadie had been in charge of things at the company. This was before the declaration of the death of Jameson Junior Jameson, II. Quite frankly, she ran the day-to-day, in's and out's long before Jameson Sr. went missing.

She was pretty surprised to see Junior in the office that night.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Jameson.' She said, laying a few files on the desk. 'I didn't know you were in your father's office.'

'My office Sadie. My father is gone now. I'm in control now.'

'Of course, Sir. Since things run pretty much on their own, I just assumed you'd be--'

'Be what? A pushover, A figurehead, some sort of paper giant?' he puffed.

'Working from home, Sir.' She said.

'No, I'm a hands-on kind of guy. And there's a couple of things here at the research lab I'd like to get my hands on. You'll be seeing a lot more of me around here.'

'Of course, Sir,' she said, quietly walking out of the office.

Jameson looked out to the parking lot from the office window, a young king surveying his land, making plans to mark his territory.

#

02:

A Fish Story

It's not unusual to see people coming and going from the research lab. People with boxes, cages, and other protective devices are the norm. This was the first time security had seen multiple fishbowls coming and going from the building. Several men and women walking with determination had entered the building with fishbowls. A security guard tried clapping at them, trying to snap them out of a trance, but they continue unfazed. Assuming they had pressing business and being trained not to ask too many questions, the security guard let them pass.

#

Jameson III looked in on the aquarium from the relatively large viewing room. His mind tried desperately not to give away the fact he didn't know what he was looking at on the other side of the glass.

'So? What do you think?' asked Lindsey, walking up.

'Fantastic creature. What is it supposed to be?'

'Project Land-fish. This could be a food alternative in desiccated areas of the planet. They're viable on both land and water, multiply in the thousands, and one fish alone could feed a family of four, for four months.'

Jameson loved to hear Lindsey talk tech, even if he didn't understand a word she said. Often he'd glaze over and focus on the rhythm and timbre of her voice. Lindsey was new to the company, new to Rainbow Falls, and an altogether different kind of woman than he was used to chasing. She was one of the main reasons he was not working from home and became more involved with the business. In his eyes, she was a conquest worth the effort.

'That is the largest fish I've ever seen. Ugly as sin too. How does it taste?' he asked.

'Just awful. Dung coated tractor tire awful.'

'Ah. Well, that was disturbingly specific. Not to put you on the spot but is that a personal reference?' he quipped.

'Sorry?'

'Back on track. Gene spliced?' He asked.

'Shark and lungfish mixed with a sprinkle of amphibian stem cells for good measure.' she gleefully responded.

'Brilliant. I love you.' He said out loud, to his surprise.

What a surprise it was to hear it out loud, and not at all uncomfortable to the ears. Jameson had never said it to anyone else, nor had he ever felt as nervous, and excited, and scared, but also hopeful at one time. It had to be love, it just had to be. The last time his body felt so turned upside down was while throwing up after the Matterhorn ride at Cedar Park. The roller coaster capitol of the world.

'What?' Lindsey asked.

'I love what you do.' he recovered, 'For the company. A tremendous asset.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

He showed interest in her project. He'd complimented her work. The last five minutes could technically be considered quality time. All the boxes were checked, and it was time to make his move. She was primed to be receptive to his invitation. It didn't hurt that he was also young, handsome and rich. Those qualities alone landed him as much attention as he needed, and on command to boot. This was going to be the easiest of his conquests, and the most meaningful in his life.

'Lindsey Deer, have dinner with me?'

'Oh, I can't, Mr. Jameson. I'm meeting Rolly Vic at Handsome's Roadhouse.' She replied.

'Rolly Vic, hero of Rainbow Falls Rolly Vic?' he asked, slightly put off.

'You know him?'

'Not personally, no. I don't want to put a damper on things but, isn't Rolly kind of, you know, stupid?' he asked.

'Excuse me?' she asked, slightly put off.

'A dolt, fool, blockhead, dunce, simpleton, boob--'

'Sir! My personal life is none of --'

'Too blunt? I'll work on that. Good call, Lindsey. You're full of great advice. I feel like a better person when I'm with you. You're good for me.'

The irony of being in front of the aquarium was not lost on him. All he had to do was reel her in, but he jerked too soon, and she'd broken away from the hook. Once a fish breaks away from a hook, there's no way to get it back. Sadly, he wore his heart on his sleeve, and degraded his competition. He needed to rethink his approach, if he wanted to win her, especially if he had competition.

Dr. Howard & Dr. Stern entered the aquarium with fishbowls under each arm. In the bowls were tiny silver-lined fish.

They handed a bowl to Jameson and Lindsey each. Their eyes glazed over, then a sense of determination took them over.

#

Outside the home of Mayor Vic, a fancy car pulled into the drive. The Mayor's wife exited the car and headed to the front door. Like the doctors at the lab, she, too, was holding fishbowls.

Inside, the Mayor was working on a speech. Morgan entered the house, still holding two fishbowls.

'Thank you to everyone who is participating in the Dead Run 5K.' Said the Mayor, 'You will soon see the inherent ...'

'Greetings, human mate.' She said dryly.

'Hey, hon. What's... Is that a suckerfish?'

'Please take the spherical transport with your appendage, hon.' She said, handing him a fishbowl.

#

The townsfolk of Rainbow Falls purposefully walked the streets carrying fishbowls. At the same time, Sheriff Rolly Vic and one of his Deputies sat for lunch in Handsome's Roadhouse and Cafe. Officer Bills was a plucky young lass who grew up in town. The owner of the Roadhouse cafe was indeed a handsome fellow with flowing blonde hair and sporting a romance novel figure, earning himself the nickname 'Handsome.' He brought a plate of assorted grilled meats for Vic and a menu for Bills.

'Here you go. You two enjoy.' Handsome said & walked off.

'Is that all you're having for breakfast?' Bills asked.

'Good point. Handsome, a cup of coffee, please?' asked Rolly.

'You just don't know sarcasm when you see it, do you?'

'Is there some on my plate?'

Bills giggles and hugged on his arm. She'd always had a crush on Rolly since they were little. She loved that Rolly always stood up for the little guy, even though he was significantly more substantial than the other kids. Bills knew he was a special kind of guy.

'Rolly,' she asked, 'you think you'll ever meet the right girl? I mean, who knows, the right woman might be right under your nose.'

'I think you're right, Gidge.'

'Really? Is it someone I know?'

'Yup.'

'Is she hot?' She asked knowingly.

'I think so.'

'I'll bet she's been sweet on you for a real long time. You just didn't notice until now.'

'You think so?' Asked Rolly.

'Rolly, you're the hero of Rainbow Falls. Every time something bad happens or a monster attacks or aliens invade, you stop them. Of course, she's smitten with you. So, when are you going to tell this lucky girl you're madly in love with her?'

'Tonight at dinner.' He said confidently.

But I'm working the night shift, she thought to herself.

'Do you think Lindsey Deer feels the same way I do?' He asked.

'Lindsey. That wacko brainiac scientist who was laughed out of MENSA for saying squirrels killed the dinosaurs, Lindsey?'

'See? You do know her!' Said Rolly with pride. 'I love this; my best friend and girlfriend are girlfriends. Sort of.'

Two young men who usually have no interest in hanging out together, Rick and Gabriel, entered the Roadhouse with fishbowls. Rick, the wannabe filmmaker, went with Lisa, while Gabriel went with Tori.

Gabriel and Rick were former best friends who had a rift develop long ago. Lisa and Tori were besties, so it was rare to see the two boys without the girls.

'Sorry, boys, no pets allowed.' Said Handsome, operating the espresso machine with the kind of confidence only seen in specialty coffee houses.

'We seek the one designated Share-reef.' Said Gabriel, very uninterested in tone or inflection, or any usual speech pattern for that matter.

'I'm a sheriff.' Said Rolly.

Bills huffed, in disdain, still seething over Rolly's interest in Lindsey. Both were unaware that the boys were acting awkwardly; both were unaware that they were carrying fishbowls or that the fish in those bowls were glaring at them intensely.

But that's how the fish wanted it. They wanted the humans to be caught off guard, to play into their fins, unwittingly and yet willingly, falling into their trap.

#

Outside the fishery, the hands-free townfolk were lined up, flanked by others holding fish in fishbowls. People without fish were lead in one door and came out with fish through another, thus increasing the number of people with fishbowls.

This was an orderly transition, with no fighting, no bickering, no one breaking ranks. Everyone followed the one before because they trusted the people, herding them like cattle. No one saw the danger in collecting a fishbowl. Even if they already had fish or had no interest in having fish, they trusted that there was a reason everyone had a fish. Others didn't want to be left out of what was happening. Still, others didn't want to seem like a complainer or trouble maker. This was, after all, a small town where everyone knew everyone else. No one wanted to be the talk of Rainbow Falls. At this rate, everyone in the city would have a fish in hand before nightfall.

Inside the fishery, A line of people walked single file inside and were all handed fishbowls. Inline, held by the two teens with fish, was a confused-looking Rolly Vic. Standing on a platform with a fish, Overseeing the orderly operation, was Buford, the fishery handyman. Buford saw the boys bringing up Rolly and smiled a confident smile, for all was going according to plan.

'There it is, my kin.' Buford bellowed to his minions. 'The one threat to my plan, adequately restrained and in my control. Bring the beast to me.'

So it is spoken, so it is done. The boys walked Rolly up the stairs and onto the platform before Buford. Buford confidently and condescendingly looked on Rolly.

'Buford, what have you gotten yourself into?' Asked Rolly calmly.

'Simple-minded creature. Only a human would be arrogant enough to think it could implement a stratagem such as this.' Buford boomed.

'This kind of megalomaniacal behavior doesn't suit you.'

'Look at me when I'm talking to you, dolt!' Snapped Buford before holding up a fishbowl, with an angry-looking fish, I might add, to eye level with Rolly.

'That's a fish.' Said Rolly.

'Fool! Not just any fish, you primate, the Master Fish! Here to put an end to the omnivorous ways of you hairless bipeds.'

'A fish.' Said Rolly, with gears turning in his head. He finally realized he needed to assess the situation, not as a friend or a town member, but as the law enforcement officer, he was.

'Finally, evolution has struck the blow that will end humanity's reign on this planet! I alone have the power to bridge the mental gap between ichthyoids and homo sapiens. I am the linchpin that gives my brethren control over your feeble minds.'

'A mind-controlling fish with visions of world domination? That's a new one.'

'Yes, a fish! Get over Yourself. Soon your kind will be no more, and my kind will rule the world! Now bow before me Rolly Vic, hero of Rainbow Falls. Bow before the only one who holds humanity's life in his fins. Then grab a bowl because, you know, that's how this thing works.'

Rolly kicked the fishbowl out of Buford's hands. This was not expected by the Master fish, which was reflected as Buford fumbled to regain the bowl. In rhythmic interpretive dance fashion, the bowl, the fish, and Buford went tumbling off the platform. Onto the concrete floor of the fishery they went. The bowl cracked into a billion pieces. The water from the bowl washed the Master Fish down a drain on the floor.

'This isn't over!' Cried out Buford, but the psychic connection was quickly lost without close contact.

It was the same with the other townsfolk and the other fish in their respective bowls. Now everyone was out of control of the Master Fish and his minions. People were free to reflect on their part in this fish invasion. The teens holding Rolly quietly let him go and abandoned their bowls on the platform, looking to make a clean getaway.

'Uhm, yeah, that wasn't my idea Rolly.' Said Buford.

'I know Buford, I know.'

'So. What do we do about all the fish?'

#

That afternoon, in the town square, the townsfolk gathered. Whatever was intended for the day was put on hold. Tables were assembled, side dishes were prepared, and everyone celebrated the return to normal with a good old fashion fish fry.

At one table were the triumphant father and son, Mayor Vic and Sheriff Rolly Vic. Both nursing a plate stacked high with tiny fish fillets.

'I don't always say it, but I love you, son. I'm proud of you. Not because of what you did for the town, but because you are the best part of my cynical life. Don't tell your mother I said that.' Said Mayor Vic.

'Thank you, Sir. Do you think we should alert outside authorities? It could happen somewhere else.'

'This kind of thing only happens here, son. If we tell the world what goes on here, tourism will die, the town will die. No, this needs to stay with us.'

'Okay. If you think it's wise, Sir.'

'Have I ever been wrong?' Asked the Mayor.

Rolly had an answer ready but refused to share it with his father, instead choosing to enjoy this rare family moment.

#

Outside the fishery were pipes. Pipes that lead to Willow Lake, from the fishery. From these pipes, wastewater trickled out to open water. Caught in this water was the Master Fish, now free from the confines of the fishery, he was free to contemplate his next move. Free to consider his rival, Rolly Vic.

#

Before the days of cell phones, social media, and instant communications, there were publicly available conveniences, such as payphones. You would drop a dime (later a series of quarters) and ask the operator to connect you to or directly dial the person you wanted to speak to. The Roadhouse had one of these phones, and Bills was using it on this occasion. She wasn't talking to anyone. The automated recording was giving her instructions on how to make a call. She used it as a pretext for watching Lindsey, sitting alone at a table for two, in the Roadhouse.

Jameson III did the same thing. He was more inspired by old detective novels as he sat quietly in a dark corner, half-hidden by a newspaper.

Lindsey was waiting on Rolly, but he was late. She wasn't sure how long she should wait, if at all. She wasn't sure how to interpret his tardiness. Was he in some unforeseen trouble, as was the case earlier today? Was he blowing her off because she wasn't as important to him as she initially thought? Was he caught up in traffic? There was no traffic in Rainbow Falls. It became clear to her she'd been stood up by the only decent man in town, and there was nothing to do about it but leave.

But as she stood to leave, Rolly walked into the door. When she caught his eye, a sparkle overcame his face. He was happy to see her still there.

'Did you just get here?' Rolly asked.

'Yes.' She said, adjusting her chair. She quietly sat back down.

'Oh good, I thought I was late.'

'No. Right on time.'

A smile came over Handsome's face, for he'd been watching as well. He quickly walked over two plates piled high with tiny fish fillets.

'We're running a special on fish for a while.' He said while placing the plates before them on the table.

Jameson and Bills, having seen enough, exit the Roadhouse, but not before bumping into each other walking out the door.

'So, what a day, huh?' Asked Lindsey.

'It's better now.' Said Rolly, seeing a blush come over her face. 'Listen, Lindsey, I've never been too good with words or women. Fact is, I don't know much about romance.'

'Well, if this is a romance, I'd say you're doing pretty well. Rolly, fancy words or flowers don't impress me.'

'I knew I forgot something!'

'It's okay. I like you, Rolly, just the way you are. You're real and kind and all kinds of sexy.'

'What?'

'Just kiss me.' She said, leaning across the table. Rolly, being a good man, did as he was told.

#

That night back at the R&D laboratory, Jameson contemplated his situation while looking at the aquarium. Hanging on the wall, looking down on him with obvious disapproval, was a portrait of his father, Junior Jameson II. He'd made sure all the paintings were large, hung high, and painted with the same expression of disdain on every portrait.

'So you see my position, father, Lindsey won't even look at me as long as Rolly Vic shows her interest. He can have any woman in town, but nooo he wants my Lindsey. The man's a block of wood on feet. What could she possibly see in him? They can't be together, can they? No. Not if she was responsible for, let's say, a monster eating the town, then she'd be the bad guy.'

Jameson looked to the portrait for approval but didn't see what he wanted.

'You made this town what it is, father. You never stopped until you got exactly what you wanted. I want her. Everything's been handed to me on a silver platter by servants or other hired help. This is something I can do on my own.'

Jameson pulled a remote from his pocket; on the remote was a big red button.

'It's nothing personal, my hideous friends. You just have to go and, you know, eat some townfolk and all. Happy hunting.'

Jameson pushed the button; an alarm went off, followed by a series of red flashing lights. As he walked out of the aquarium, massive pumps evacuated the water from the tank.

Along with the water, the Land-shark-Fish.

#

City planning was always in the hands of lobbyists and politicians in Rainbow Falls, which is why the lab was situated near Redwood Creek, which incidentally fed into Willow Lake. On the creek's side were large pipes that led to the lab. That night, vast amounts of water flooded the creek from those pipes. Had there been a witness that night, they may have seen a substantial dorsal fin atop the wave of water rushing down Redwood Creek, towards Willow Lake.

#

03:

Dead Run

Junior Jameson II was accustomed to the finer things in life, as well as a jet-set lifestyle that would find him in in some of the most exotic places around the globe. So for him to find himself, lying comfortably in silk pajamas, reading a book by gas lamp while stars shined bright over the Indonesian jungle, was not unusual.

Done reading for the evening, the elderly Jameson placed his book on the nightstand and call out 'Light.', but nothing happened. He did it again. Still, nothing happened, which was very unexpected. Suddenly realizing the voice command was for his office lights, he clapped his hands twice. Not only did the room lights come on, Jameson Sr. realized he was not where he was supposed to be.

'That little Bunion! That demon seed did this to me, his own father.' Jameson Sr. said, to no-one in particular.

He could see no phone, no computer, no form of communication looking around the room. As he made his way to the window, he saw he was in the middle of nowhere. The only signs of life were the animals in the Indonesian forest canopy.

'He's somehow gotten me to cut off all communication with the world!' He shouted, rifling through his dresser drawers, which were filled with nothing but silk pajamas. 'Why else would I be in this fly-infested corner of the globe.'

It was at that point, a butler walked in, just as he'd done for the past two years. He was holding a tray, and on the tray was a drink. This had been the pattern every two weeks since they arrived in Indonesia. Jameson would come back to his senses and begin rummaging through his things. This was the cue for the butler to bring him his drink.

'I'm sure I don't know, Sir.' Said the butler.

Jameson Sr. took the drink in his hand.

'Call the airport. Get the jet ready. Notify the driver. We're going back to Rainbow Falls to claim my company back!'

Instinctively, as if expected, he took the drink off of the tray, with authority. This was his drink, and he needed it. Jameson took a hearty gulp, then quickly spit it out due to its lack of alcohol and its abundance of sugary sweetness.

'What the hell is this?' Asked Jameson Sr.

'Your evening Italian soda Sir.' Replied the Butler, coyly.

'It's- I know what it is, you moron. What flavor is it?'

'Butterscotch.' Replied the butler.

Jamesons eyes glazed over, for the command word was given, just as it was two weeks ago. And also two weeks prior to that.

'Call the airport.' Jameson Sr. declared in a stern voice. 'I need to fly to Indonesia and break off all contact with the world.'

'You are in Indonesia, Sr.'

'Well, that saves time,' Jameson said, crawling back into bed, grabbing the book as he got comfortable.

The butler, using the switch to turn off the room lights, quietly said to himself, 'That never gets old.'

His job done, the butler left the room, confident of a job well done.

#

Jameson III took the opportunity to make some changes to the office. Down from the wall, for example, was the portrait of his father, which now sat in a corner. He did, however, take the opportunity to entertain a guest. If you will, a friend of the family, a certain Senator Constantino, who'd been bankrolled by his father in the last two elections.

'So you see, it's a win-win for everyone,' concluded Jameson III. 'No problems, only opportunities. Dynamic synergy. Outside the box thinking. Are you with me on this? Did you know I voted for you last time around?'

'Is this some kind of joke?' asked Constantino. 'What you're asking for is illegal, immoral, and unethical. Not to mention illegal.'

'My father, God rest his soul, put you in office. You owe him. That means you owe me.'

'You are not your father.'

'So you've said, Senator, on more than one occasion.'

'Well, it's true.'

'You said it at my commencement ceremony, during your speech.'

'What's your point, Junior?'

'I'm not asking for much.' Jameson continued

while emphasizing his points with air quotes. 'Just the ability to push forward with a new form of food without the FDA breathing down my neck about 'DNA manipulations' and 'Mutations' and 'Growth hormones' and what not. I'm telling you, it will revolutionize the holiday food industry.'

'Do you have to do that, your fingers?'

'No. It's just fun.'

'I can't help you, Junior. No matter what your father did for me. God rest his soul. Your father knew how to conduct business.'

'Is that my queue? Good. I'm ready to 'conduct' business.'

Without hesitation, Jameson opened a drawer in his desk and retrieved a big envelope. It was thick, dense, and secured with shipping tape, so no one could sneak a peek. With a giddy look and wide welcoming arms, he offered the package to Senator Constantino.

'You think you could bribe me with a few thousand dollars?'

'That's heroin.'

Constantino quickly put the brick in his coat pocket as Jameson III put a briefcase on the desk.

'This is the cash.'

Constantino took the briefcase and opened it up. As he looked into the suitcase, a smile came over his face, as if he'd seen bundles of denominations not privy to the general public.

'Then it's settled. You put the fix in Washington, passing the legislation & I'll make us 1.5 billion in four years or less. Ka-pow!' Summed up the young Jameson.

'I make no promises, Junior, but I'll do what I can.'

'I knew I could count on you, uncle Connie.'

'Never call me that again.'

Just then, Sadie came into the office. She was just as young and beautiful as when Constantino met her some twenty-five years ago.

And still sporting the same style of Cheongsam she'd worn back then. This style of high necked, body-hugging silk dress, with a high slit on one side, covered in a floral print and vibrant color base, was popular in the 1920s and 1930's China. It was also popular in this office. It matched her beauty to a T.

'Mr. Jameson Jr., Sir, you're needed in R&D,' Sadie said.

'Okay then. I'm done here. Tell those clowns I'm on my way down.'

With a nod and a smile, she backed out of the office.

'You'll do it, and quickly Senator.' Jameson redirected to Constantino. 'Or this conversation will go viral. It's an election year, after all. Something like this could cost you your seat, ruin your reputation, and cause trouble with the feds.'

It was only then that Jameson pointed out the tiny cameras placed about the room. It was then that Constantino knew Jameson has enough footage to frame him for corruption.

'You'll go down with me, Junior.' He quipped.

'Not with my lawyers. You're right about one thing, uncle Connie. I'm not my dad; I'm dirtier than he ever was. Show yourself out.'

As Jameson left the office, the senator contemplated his options, though few they were. He'd have to play along for the time being, although it did ruffle his feathers that the boy got over on him so quickly and effortlessly.

'Your day is coming, Junior.' He muttered to himself as he left the office.

#

Jameson went down to meet a very concerned Lindsey Deer, who was standing in front of the empty aquarium. He's set up the occasion perfectly. This time she'd see him not as a suitor, but as a savior; thus she would see how valuable an association with a Jameson man could be. Jameson would swoop in like a super man and rescue the damsel in distress. Sure he put her in distress, but why dwell on the negative?

'They're gone.' She said. 'Someone must have accidentally dumped the aquarium straight into the lake.'

'Yea, that's probably what happened. Accident. Think the police will blame you?' He asked.

'What? Why, what are you--'

'Shh.' He whispered, placing a finger on her lips to quiet her down. 'I have the best lawyers. You won't do any jail time. But what will Sheriff Rolly Vic say? Dating the mad scientist that created the monster that ate Rainbow Falls and all.' He said probingly.

'What are you talking about?' She asked, moving his hand back from her face.

'When the Sharks attack, of course.'

'They won't attack. The sharks are docile, like aquatic cattle.'

'But they're sharks.' Asserted Jameson.

'Their passive demeanor was an effect of the gene splice process. It was encoded in the DNA for a good reason.'

This was an unexpected complication. Was there something he overlooked when she made her presentation of project land-fish? Yes all he heard was blah blah blah shark, but in the most beautiful melodious tone. All he could see was his plan falling apart before his eyes.

'But they're sharks. Air-breathing sharks that can survive on land.' He said.

'Shark-fish. They have the mentality of fish. They hide, scare easy, and move in schools.' She explained.

'Oh. Well then, that's a relief. I thought there'd be some sort of ... it Doesn't matter. Say what's going on outside?' He said, trying to change the subject.

From the window, they could see people running from slow-moving, disheveled people. It was a familiar sight, although only seen on late-night TV or midnight movies.

'Are those zombies?' Asked Lindsey. 'Is it even possible to have zombies out there?'

'No, no way. Why? What have you heard?'

'What?'

'Nothing. I'm good.'

#

It was a bright and sunny afternoon; the birds were singing, the smell of honeysuckle hung in the air, and zombies chased townfolk through the square. It was the same at the park and on the lake trails; zombies were chasing runners.

In the Roadhouse, Rolly sat alone at the table. He sat trustingly with his back to the door. As usual, Handsome wiped the counter with a damp cloth.

'Wanna try some plant-based food sometime?' Asked Handsome.

'I'm good.' Replied Rolly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Handsome saw a group of people running past the window, followed by zombies.

'Did you see that?'

'See what?'

'I thought I saw-- must me by mind playing tricks on me.'

Rolly turns to look at the door and street windows but sees nothing. He then calmly turns back to his meal.

'Okay.' Said Rolly.

As Rolly cuts another bite of steak, a zombie shambled past the doorway. Handsome decides to take a better look and heads to the door.

'Say Rolly?'

'Yea?'

The streets were clear. No corpses were lying about, no blood on the ground, and no signs of zombies. There was nothing to be seen. It was eerily quiet outside.

'Never mind.' Said Handsome.

#

In another part of town, however, the scene was quite different. People were jumping over cars and other obstacles to get away from the zombies. It was evident from the research lab as the crowd made their way across the parking lot. It was at that point, Lindsey decided to call Rolly.

#

Rolly's meal was interrupted by the call from Lindsey.

'Lindsey,' he answered with a grin. 'what a-- come again? No, I believe you. Sure. I'm on it, Hon.'

Rolly grabbed a rifle case off the floor that he'd conveniently taken with him. There are times when Rolly instinctively grabbed what he needed, even before he knew he needed it. This was the case that morning when he grabbed his hunting rifle. Not standard issue, to be sure, and he'd had no plans to use it either.

Rolly had an instinct, and it served him well in the past; a serendipitous gift he's had since childhood. The skill to be ready for almost anything.

'Handsome, we got zombies.'

'Yea, I saw that. I just thought- never mind.'

'Is the door to the roof locked?'

'No.'

'If you need me, I'll be up there picking them off. Call the National Guard.' Said Rolly as he headed towards the roof.

'Sure thing. Wait, what? Where did you get the rifle?'

#

Positioned on the roof, and with some reservation, Rolly opened the case and assembled his rifle. From his position, he could see zombies chasing the townsfolk. A sense of dread overtook him. 'Zombies. Why'd it have to be zombies?' he thought to himself as he loaded the rifle.

'Zombies always give me the creeps. Just flat out icky.'

#

Downstairs in the Roadhouse, Handsome stood at the window. From there, he could see the streets, the parked cars, and the bulletin board on the corner. It is such a pity to have a zombie apocalypse ruin such a beautiful day. He then saw a flier for the 'DEAD RUN' Zombie 5K / preparedness drill.

'Awe crap.' He said as he lit out for the stairs, headed towards the roof.

#

Rolly looked through the scope and took a bead on a zombie.

'Easy Rolly, they're already dead. Deep breath. Relax, squeeze the trigger, move on to the next.'

At that moment, Handsome kicked the roof door open. Startled, Rolly turned, and the rifle went off, hitting near Handsome's head.

'Whoa!' Handsome cried out.

'Sweet mother of victory! You could have been shot dead, got up, and shot dead again!' Rolly snapped.

'Easy cowboy, you missed. We're good. Can you see the bulletin board from here?'

'Sure.'

'Take a look. It's a 5K zombie run, not the army of the dead.'

Rolly pointed the gun towards the bulletin board, and through the scope, read the flier.

'Wow. This could have ended badly. Glad I almost killed you instead of actually killing one of those non-dead undead health enthusiasts.'

'Yes, it's a relief.'

'I mean, I'm not glad I almost killed you. Just if I'd killed you and reshot you for good measure, I'd feel worse. Worse than I do now. Know what I mean?'

'I know what you mean, Rolly. Say, do you want to unload the gun now?'

'Right!'

Rolly took the queue to unload and dismantle his rifle.

#

'This concludes the Dead Run 5K and zombie preparedness drill.' The Mayor said over the PA system to the runners & zombies gathered in the square.

No one was aware that there was almost a loan gunman massacre right there in Rainbow Falls. No one knew their life was in danger of being taken by the one person they counted on to keep them safe. But Handsome was there to keep an eye on Rolly. He'd always been there to help out when the time was needed. It was his duty to make sure Rolly kept the town safe, and on occasion, to keep Rolly safe from himself.

'Should this have been an actual apocalyptic event,' continued the Mayor, 'we would now know what to do and where to go. When it happens, we'll be ready.'

'Don't you mean if?' Asked Bills from the crowd.

'No, no, I don't. Who's up for pie?'
'I like pie!' Called Buford from the back of the crowd.

Buford loved pie.

#

That night, Jameson III sat at his desk contemplating his next move. He hit a few keys on the keyboard of his computer, and the monitor showed security footage of Lindsey working in the lab. Millions went down the drain with the land shark project, and the sacrifice yielded zero results. He was no closer to his infatuation than he was before.

He'd encouraged her to work on a large chicken variation of the project to distract her from the loss of shark research. It never tasted good, so why not try with something almost everything tasted like?

'What would father do? he asked himself, focusing back on the task at hand. 'I could ask him. No. If I didn't have a plan of action, he'd see it as a sign of weakness. I'll figure something out on my own.'

He leaned back in the custom-made leather chair, squinting his eyes, hoping to increase his personal processing power. Nothing. Nothing.

#

04:

The Touch

The Austin, Texas, home of Senator Constantino, was once on the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. It was one of the many huge expenses that didn't fit within his government Salary. There were also the homes in DC, Miami, the yachts in Maine. And the assorted mistresses from here and there. Not to mention young Tia's posh private school. His wife Gia hugged the Senator from behind in a halfhearted attempt to comfort him, but it was no good. Together, they stared at the heroine and money on his mahogany desk.

'I'm such an idiot!' He growled. 'How could I let this happen?'

'Let it go, babe, we can handle Junior.'

'I let him get the best of me.' He pouted.

'He hasn't seen the best of you. Okay? I'll take care of this. Junior thinks he's dealing with you. Well, he's dealing with us.'

At that moment, his teenage daughter Tia bounced into the room, dressed in her school uniform, blissfully unaware of the dower mood in the room. Sitting on the corner of the desk, she curiously picked up the brick of heroin and inspected it.

'What's this?' Tia asked.

'That's heroin.' The Senator said flatly.

Tia was annoyed she wasn't able to read her father or tell if he was joking or not. After a moment, she put it back down on the desk.

Leaning over to her father across the desk, she quipped, 'Fine, don't tell me.' The Senator kissed her gently on her forehead.

'I've got to go, princess. Obey your mother.' He said, standing and adjusting his vest.

'Stepmother.' Tia and Gia replied.

Grabbing his coat and briefcase, he left the room. Both Tia and Gia looked at the brick of heroin on the desk. From down the hall, he called back to them, 'Don't touch my stuff!' Tia and Gia moved away from the desk and to the window, not knowing if there was a camera in the office or not.

'Get a load of the jock on that hottie,' said Tia, speaking about the pool boy, cleaning the pool in swimming trunks and flip flops.

A smooch of sunscreen on the bridge of his nose.

'Aren't you late for school or the mall or something?' Gia said.

'Look on the back-swing. He is totally going commando.'

Gia didn't seem amused.

'Fine, I'm out.' Said Tia and left the room.

After a moment, Gia opened the window and called to the pool boy.

'You! Yes, you! Come in here, please.'

Gia pulls out her phone and begins to text. In walks a hunk of a pool boy. He stood there for a moment, but she continued to text and occasionally lookup.

'You want me to--' He started but was cut off before he could finish his thought.

'No, no. Don't talk.'

She continued to text.

#

Morning finds the Roadhouse regulars drinking coffee and joking around. It's not uncommon to find Officer Bills, Mayor Vic, and Buford holding court in the corner booth. Often they find levity in the previous days' misadventures. One quick quip after another led to a train of laughter by the group.

But the laughter was cut short when Handsome sneezed. Color ran from their faces, and their moods fell Grimm.

'I've never seen that man sick before.' Said Bills.

'He's never been sick.' Said the Mayor.

'I saw him pick his nose once.' Quipped Buford, but they were no longer in the mood for a laugh.

'It's a bad omen.' Stated the Mayor. 'Whatever can make Handsome sick can make us all sick.'

'Hey, Handsome! You sick or what?' Asked Buford from across the room.

'Just allergies.' Handsome replied with a smile.

'He's hiding something.' Bills said to the others at the booth.

But dread was replaced with optimism as Rolly Vic entered the Roadhouse. He saddled up to the bar and began a conversation with Handsome.

'Here we go, boys.' Bills said. 'Looks like he's going to sneeze again. If Rolly is ready for it, then we can be worried. If he's not, then we're okay.'

'Why is that?' Buford asked.

'Because my son is ready for any kind of danger.' Replied the Mayor. 'For all his faults, there's a place in this world he fits, and he's the best.'

The time for answers came. Handsome sneezed into his elbow. Rolly responded with 'Gesundheit.' The booth collectively sighed with relief. Then, out of nowhere, and with no prompt, Rolly handed Handsome a handkerchief. Handsome looks puzzled for a moment, then his nose began to bleed. Handsome used the handkerchief to wipe his nose.

There was their answer. The group collectively got up and started to leave.

'Where you going?' Asked Handsome.

'To lock everything up.' The Mayor replied.

'Why?' Asked Rolly.

'We don't know.' Said Bills as the three left the Roadhouse.

#

The Carter house was a quiet two-story affair in the suburban neighborhoods surrounding the town square. It was a quaint, unassuming home, on a quiet street, filled with similar homes, and white picket fences, from time to time. Mrs. Carters rose bushes seemed to lackluster, in need of some TLC, and a few weeds had popped up in the front yard; still, the house was in good repair, if not kept to in recent weeks.

In the house was a fireplace whose mantle was adorned with condolence cards. Above the cards was a portrait of the carter family; Pete and Carol stood proudly with their young daughter Jenny. That time in their lives, when the picture was painted, was a happier time.

Carol moved across the room, taking it all in. She wasn't sure why the flowers and cards had been brought to her home or when they arrived.

She didn't know who arranged them, but she knew it happened when she wasn't there, though she couldn't put her finger on when that was.

It was then, she realized that someone was doing dishes. A peak around the corner into the kitchen revealed Tori, the babysitter, was cleaning up after supper.

Carol called to her, but she couldn't be heard of the rock music blaring from Tori's earbuds.

'Tori, I'm home. I'll finish that up later. Tori?'

As far as Tori knew, she was alone in the kitchen. But Tori didn't have to clean. Tori never did. Carol always did the dishes when they got back from wherever it was. There was no reason for this night to be any different. Yet for the life of her, Carol didn't remember where she'd been.

Then Carol heard the soft dulcet tones of Jenny humming her favorite song. She always hummed when she played alone in her room. Jenny grew up listening to Carol hum it to her when she was sick, or scared of thunder, or when the monsters were too loud in her closet. Now she hummed it to herself when she was alone, mainly not knowing she was doing it.

Jenny was playing with the tea set she'd had since she could remember. Bear sat to the left, and Dolly to the right, and Mr. Cuddles sat across to complete the tea party. Jenny wasn't surprised to see the door to her room open, but she pretended not to notice because it wasn't supposed to.

'Hi baby, Mommy came to see you,' Carol said. 'What are you doing? Playing tea? Can Mommy play with you, honey?'

'Daddy said you weren't coming back.' Said Jenny, not looking up because Carol was not supposed to be there.

'That's silly,' Carol said. 'I'm right here.'

Carol sat on the floor, across from Jenny, near Mr. Cuddles, and picked up a cup.

Carol held it out, waiting for her tea. Seeing the cup firmly and truthfully in her mother's hand, Jenny smiled and poured pretend tea. If Mommy was there and willing to play with her, Jenny was going to play with Mommy.

'One lump or two?' asked Jenny.

'No sugar. Only cream, please.'

'Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find me.'

Carol sipped her tea. It was pretty delicious and warm in her belly, and the tea's earthy aroma filled the air. She had a drop on her lip, so Jenny handed her a kerchief.

'Sweetie, why is the babysitter in the kitchen?' asked Carol.

'Daddy had to leave for a while.' She replied, placing imaginary cranberry biscotti on tiny plastic plates.

#

In another part of town, near Beggars Park, Pete Carter waited nervously for Bev to arrive. Bev was dark-skinned and exotic, not at all as reserved as most of the townsfolk were. She dressed like a carnival gypsy, with a modern Bohemian twist, and she was as beautiful as her clothes were rare.

'Thanks for meeting me like this.' He said as she approached.

'It's your dime. I don't usually work in an ally. It makes me seem cheap. This is going to cost you.'

'Look, I'm going to ask you to do something you might think is weird. I promise I'll pay whatever you ask.' He said as he pulled out a roll of money.

'Look, I'm going nuts here. I've really got to have this, and I mean now.'

'Why me?' she asked.

'I heard you'd do it for the right price.'

'Does your wife know your here?'

'Believe me, she has no clue I came to see you.'

#

Tori finished up the dishes just in time to see Pete returned with Bev. She'd seen Bev around and noticed her working the carnival for marks.

Tori didn't like the idea of Bev taking advantage of Pete Carter for all he was worth, even if he asked her to take it from him. Bev could clearly see the way Tori felt, but it didn't matter because she didn't care. Bev blew the teen a kiss from across the room.

'Ewe.' Said Tori.

'Tori, where's Jenny?' asked Pete.

'Upstairs playing with her Tea set.'

'I'm taking Bev upstairs. When I send Jenny down, can you please take her to my Mothers and leave her there?' Pete asked, handing Tori a few extra bills. 'Thanks for helping out.'

'So, is this like the going rate?' asked Tori, more about Bev than the money she was given.

Bev touched Tori's cheek and closed her eyes. After a second, she pulled her hand back with a smile.

'Don't touch me.' Tori asserted.

'If I were you, girl, I'd spend that money tonight. You won't need it tomorrow.' Bev said coldly.

'You're special,' Tori said.

Pete made his way to the stairs, but Tori, grabbed Bev by the arm and stopped her.

'These people are like family. Don't hurt them.' Said Tori.

'Why don't you just wait down here for the little girl. The grown-ups have important things to do upstairs.' Bev said, pulling free.

#

Jenny and Carol were still playing when Pete entered the room.

'Jenny..' Pete started but stopped when he

noticed Carol in the room.

'Daddy, Look! Mommy came to play again.'

'I see, sweetie, I see. Listen, baby, Tori's waiting downstairs to take you to spend the night at MeMaws. Run-on downstairs, baby.'

'MeMaw!' she cheered as she got up and darted for the door, but then she stopped and looked back towards her mother.

'Will Mommy be here when I get back?' She asked sheepishly.

'No, sweetie. Mommy has to go now.'

Jenny took a moment to compose herself because she knew it was right for her mother to go away, even if she didn't want it to happen. 'Goodbye, Mommy. I love you.' She said and walked out of the room and down the stairs.

'You heartless son of a bitch!' cried Carol. 'Why do you keep taking her from me?'

'You can't keep coming back. You're confusing the girl. It's hard enough as it is!'

'She's my daughter!'

Bev entered the room. She knew it was the correct room because she could hear Pete arguing. This was when Carol saw Bev for the first time.

'Who is this? Some hooker?' asked Carol.

'She's a psychic.'

'You don't need a psychic to read my mind! I'm happy to give you a piece of it right now!' shouted Carol, directly to Bev, who clearly wasn't concerned.

'She's here to perform an exorcism,' Pete said.

'So I'm possessed now?'

'No, the house is, by you.'

'You are dead beloved.' declared Bev, to a blank wall. 'You just didn't crossover. I can help you.'

Carol screeched in anger, but only Pete jumped. Carol charged Bev but rushed right through her and through the wall behind her.

'Oh, Pete, I just felt a chill. Carol's presence is near.' Bev said.

Carol screamed, 'It's not true!' But only Pete could hear her.

Bev, knowing time was of the essence, pulled out beads and dusted the room with an acrid powder.

'You can not cross unless you know you are dead.' Bev continued, 'Embrace the reality. Then you must touch eternity; all that ever was and will be. The truth of all things will free you of the bonds of this plane.'

'I'm not... am I?' Asked Carol.

'Remember the last thing we did together.' Said Pete. 'We took a drive. There was an accident.'

'I flew through the window.' Said Carol.

Carol then reappeared, this time to both Pete and Bev. Pete began to tear up, seeing his late wife. Knowing she now knew what she was.

'I, I'm dead?'

'Yes.' Said Bev, dusting her with the powder. Carol became translucent, and her aura shined bright.

'Quickly, touch eternity!' Said Bev, 'Do it now.'

Carol closed her eyes and faded away. A moment passed, and a sigh of relief fell over both Bev and Pete. Suddenly Carol let out a piercing scream from the ethereal plane! She continued, agonized and pained. Screams faded to nothing.

'What the hell was that? What happened?' Questioned Pete.

'She's gone, passed over to the other side. She's at peace now.'

'That didn't sound like peace to me. If you hurt her--'

Suddenly, a ghostly apparition of Carol appeared before them. Carol put her ghostly hand in Bev's head. Bev froze in place, stone still as a statue.

'Why did you make me leave my family?!' Cried Carol.

'Tell him! Tell him what you made me see! Look at it with your own eyes! Tell him before it's too late for my baby!'

Bev screamed a blood-curdling scream and died of fright. Carol looked towards Pete, but he ran. Pete ran down the stairs and out the door. He ran to his car, all the while hearing Carol's ghastly cries of 'My baby! My baby, My baby!'

'Never come back. Never come back.' Pete said to himself as he stumbled for the keys in the front seat of his sedan. 'Crap, the game station 3! No, no, I'll buy another. Never come back.'

#

The Jameson Research plant had one of the finest commissaries around. It was mainly because they wanted to keep the researchers nearby if they are needed in the labs. No one wanted to be somewhere across town if there was a crisis. Still, they also wanted decent meals, and Jameson was willing to pay the extra price for their satisfaction.

So there in the commissary, eating dinner, were Dr. Baker, Dr. Howard, and Dr. Stern. There, these experts in their own respective fields discussed topics beyond my own personal understanding.

'I'm telling you the whole power plant is an empirical quantum experiment.' Said Baker. 'We are in the midst of a quantum suicide situation.'

'Then how would we know?' Asked Howard. 'Given Schrodinger's Cat Box paradox, we'd never see the multiverse split.'

'Only if you don't buy into the Copenhagen interpretation.' Quipped Stern.

'I've been going over Uncle Beau's notes. Here's what I know--' Started Baker. He didn't get to elaborate, for a wave washed over reality, and Baker faded into nothingness. His tray, however, stayed at the table.

Dr. Howard didn't notice that Baker was gone, nor did he acknowledge that he was ever there, but he did see the tray. The fries were warm and seasoned to perfection.

'You gonna eat those?' Howard asked.

'That's not mine.' Said Stern.

Free fries, thought Howard, it's going to be a good night.

#

After spending time controlled by a fish in a bowl, Gabriel was ready to get back to a sense of normalcy. So when his girlfriend Tori asked for his help, he was glad to oblige, without hesitation or asking for details. Though as he walked through Beggars Park, dressed as a zombie, placing down Styrofoam headstones, he thought maybe he should've at least asked a few questions.

'Rick says hurry up and find a good spot,' Tori said in a chipper voice, kissing him on the cheek. 'Love you,' she said and ran back to the other teens, setting up the student film shoot.

'Hey, wanna be an actor in my film?' Gabriel said to no-one listening. 'There's no pay, long hours, and you get to paint crappy-looking props. Sure, I got nothing better to do with my weekend but put on cheap makeup and make crappy zombie films. Hey, I know, why don't I borrow my mom's camera, and you can call me a producer too?'

He was so busy, angrily placing fake headstones, he didn't notice the last one push back up ever so slightly. Or the decayed hand pushing it up.

#

05:

Don't Play With Dead Things

One of the early things Rainbow Falls did as a community created a graveyard for those less fortunate. This poppers field was later known as Beggars Graveyard. It was on the outskirts of town but near enough not to be a burden for those in need. After a time, the community graveyard near the hospital began taking in the vagrants and the impoverished, so Beggars Graveyard fell out of the community-conscious and into disrepair.

For this reason, Junior Jameson Sr. found it to be an excellent dumping sight for those chemicals and compounds he wasn't supposed to have at all. On that night, in 1980 something, a truck filled with barrels labeled 'DO NOT DISTRIBUTE,' backed into the disheveled graveyard. Gus and exited the cam and began to unload the barrels.

'It's a graveyard,' Joey said, popping the top off one of the barrels.

'The boss says dump we dump it.' Said Gus, kicking over the open barrel. Glowing green liquid poured onto the ground, which absorbed it like a sponge.

'I don't like it, Gus.'

'You don't have to like it. It's work.'

'What is this stuff anyway?'

'Some kind of anti-aging juice or whatever.'

'Is it safe for the environment?'

'What do you care, hippie?'

It took them several hours to dump out all the barrels across Beggars Graveyard.

From time to time, until about '92, Joey would come back to see if there were ill effects showing signs at the old dumping sight, for they'd made several more trips with more barrels over the years.

In late '98, The population of Rainbow Falls had grown, and the footprint expanded to encompass Beggars Park, formerly Beggars Graveyard. There, sometime in the '00s, a group of student filmmakers was making a zombie movie. The teens were Tori, Gabriel, Rick, and Lisa, who were the best fair-weather friends convenience could make.

Gabriel, dressed as a zombie, took his place in the bushes, ready to spring out when called on. Tori struck a pose, laying on the ground near a fake headstone.

'So why is my character in a fake graveyard?' She asked Rick.

'The lights perfect,' Rick said, ignoring Tori's question. 'Let's try to get this in one take.'

Rick picked up his mother's camcorder, yelled action, and a zombie's hand came up from the ground, grabbing Tori by the ankle. She screamed and tried to pull away because this wasn't what had been called for in the script.

'Rick, what is this Stanislavsky crap?' She yelled out of character. 'Get off, dude!'

'Cut! Who is this guy? Get him off my set!' Rick yelled.

The zombie held on to Tori as he dug himself out of the ground, and as soon as he could, he bit into Tori's calf.

'He's eating me! Cannibal! Cannibal!' She cried.

But he was not the first, only the first to get their attention, as the residents of Beggars Graveyard made their ascent from six feet underground. As they went to help Tori, they became surrounded by more and more zombies. Rick couldn't pass up the opportunity, as this was brilliant found footage. He turned the camera back on.

'For crying out loud, Rick! Knock it off and do something!' Lisa screamed.

Gabriel could see the whole thing from his spot in the woods. The zombies got Tori and were closing in on the others. At some point in a crisis, self-preservation will take over, and you will do the only thing you can do to stay alive. In this case, it was to shuffle away slowly and hope the zombies think you are one of them because you are dressed like one of them. This is what Gabriel did.

'Not in the script. It's not in the script.' He muttered quietly to himself.

#

The next day, it fell to Sheriff Vic and Bills to find the missing kids.

'Five kids set out to make a student film at Beggars Park.' Summed up Rolly as they drove to the park. 'Gone since yesterday.'

'Maybe they went to a rave.' Bills quipped.

'Let's just find the trail and see where it leads.'

'It was a joke, Rolly.'

'I know.'

#

Rolly and Bills inspect the crime scene at Beggars Park, where the kids had been killed by someone or something. Several things had dug themselves out of the ground, and there was an altercation of some kind.

Bills found the camera and started the playback of the video. They saw the zombie attack and the kids getting eaten.

'I'm not usually a fan of found footage, I think it's played out, but these kids are terrific,' Rolly said.

'That's not part of the movie, hon.'

'Oh,' said Rolly, realizing the documentary nature of the scene he just watched. 'Well, that's not good.'

Gabriel watched from the bushes. Seeing his opportunity, he dashed the only two authority figures he'd seen in a day. Rolly and bills see what looks like a zombie running towards them. Bills drew her weapon and took a bead on the young runner. Suddenly Rolly pushed Bill's hand down as she shot. She missed the zombie.

'Don't shoot! Don't shoot, man! I'm alive! En Vivo man!' Gabriel shouted, waving his hands in the air. Bills holstered her gun.

'Gabriel?' She called out.

'They ate them. They ate every one, man. Those freaks ripped them to pieces with their bony dead hands. It's all there in my mom's camcorder, man.' He replied as he got closer.

'The Zombies ate the kids. Why not you, son?' Asked Rolly.

'I fooled Annie Oakley here. You think I can't fool some dead dudes?' Said Gabriel, shuffling like a zombie as an example of his skills.

'Annie Oakley?' Bills asked.

'We're studying the old west in history class,' Gabriel replied.

'Well, your make-up looks second rate,' Rolly said.

'And the costume looks more like a hobo than a zombie.' Said Bills.

'Then why'd you shoot at me?!

'Hold that thought,' said Rolly, pulling his weapon.

A horde of zombies came towards them.

'Where did they come from?' Asked Bills.

'We were kind of moving in a group.' Said Gabriel, maneuvering behind them.

'We?' asked bills.

'Why does everyone underestimate my acting ability?'

Rolly and Bills root a path back to their car, but they were quickly surrounded. Before they could get moving, the zombies rolled the vehicle on its side. They were trapped in the car. There was nothing left to do but call in the attack over the radio.

'This is Rolly! 5k in effect, I repeat 5K in effect!'

And with that, the town sprung into action. Alarms blared all over Rainbow Falls. People ran to safe places, shops closed, and people left the streets. From his office, the Mayor looked out his window. Morgan sat in a chair looking at a magazine.

'What did I say? Huh? When I'm on, I'm on, baby.' The Mayor gloated.

'Yes, dear,' Morgan replied, letting him have his tiny victory.

#

The zombies congregated by the doors and windows of buildings and houses, all over town, including the research lab. From his window, Jameson III looked down at zombies in the parking lot. He turned and looked over to a row of twelve small, unassuming shadow boxes hung on a wall. Next to each was a small hammer.

Two of them had their glass broken already. Inside one of the remaining, unbroken shadowboxes, protected by a thin plane of glass, was an audio CD. On the CD were printed the words IN CASE OF ZOMBIES in bold red print.

'Well shit,' Jameson said as he took the hammer and broke the glass.

'I'm sorry it happened when I was gone, son.' said the voice of Jameson Sr. over the stereo speakers. 'The Boys in R&D said it might happen someday when I ordered the dump at the graveyard. I thought enough time had passed, so I commissioned the park that now stands there. Parks buy a lot of goodwill with the citizens. Remember that. But remember this, if you remember nothing else, always have a way out.'

'There's a folder in the false bottom of the right desk drawer.' He continued. 'Open the envelope that's labeled 'In Case of Zombies.' Follow those instructions to the letter. It's the only way to save the town and my reputation. Good luck, son. Don't make me look bad.'

#

'Don't worry, son,' said the Mayor over the radio. 'Dad's on top of it. Got a call from Jameson III Just sit tight, and it will be all over soon.'

'Easier said than done.' Replied Rolly, upside down in a car, surrounded by the undead.

'Just be safe, son. Be safe. Is Officer Bills with you?'

'I'm here, Sir.' She said into the radio.

'Well?' Asked the Mayor.'

'You were right about the zombies, Sir. You were right.'

'Boo Ya!'

#

That afternoon, airplanes flew low over the town, dropping a mist over the city.

Zombies fell one by one after a misty coating engulfed them. Rolly and the others saw the fog and the result on the zombies, as they fell dead still to the ground.

'Zombie spray?' Gabriel questioned. 'Seriously? Who has - who makes zombie spray?!

'It worked. That's what counts.' Said Bills.

#

Later that evening, A young boy saw a clown get off a cross country bus with luggage in tow. The clown looked around, taking in his surroundings. He saw a quaint little town, where men in black suits were gathering zombies off the ground and loading them onto a truck. Unfazed, he moved on about his business. The young boy followed him.

Mr. Jingles, the clown, went to the Roadhouse. He handed the waitress a business card. After looking it over for a moment, she asked, 'Anything to drink?' Mr. Jingles replied by giving her another card. Completely satisfied, the waitress set off to get his order, later returning with a short stack of pancakes, a cup of juice, and a black coffee. Adam, the young boy who was following, finally got up the courage to walk over and talk to the clown.

Adam stood next to his table for a few moments before Mr. Jingles gave in and made eye contact.

'Are you a clown?' asked Adam.

Mr. Jingles reached in his pocket and pulled out a business card. On the face of it was one word. 'YES. '

'Do something funny.' Said Adam.

Mr. Jingles looked at him for a moment, then smoothly turned the card over. On the other side, it read 'NO.'

'For a clown, you're not very funny.'

Mr. Jingles went back to eating, but Adam didn't leave. Mr. Jingles turned back to the boy,

making eye contact again.

'Can you say something funny?' Asked Adam.

Mr. Jingles stood up and dusted himself off. He reached into a different pocket and retrieved another card, this time placing it in Adam's hand. The card read. 'I don't talk to strangers.'

'That's not funny.'

Mr. Jingles shrugged his shoulders, put a tip on the table, and left the Roadhouse. Adam stared at the table for a moment, then grabbed the money and ran for the door. The waitress caught him before he made his escape.

#

At that time in Indonesia, things were getting hectic for Jameson Sr. and his Butler. He was coming out of his trance more frequently, remembering more when he did and became more and more aggressive each time.

'It's a conspiracy!' Jameson Sr. yelled as he was trying to get past the butler and out his bedroom door. 'You're in on this, Aren't you? I swear on my black heart no one will ever find your body; this is the pacific rim and money talks her mister--'

'BUTTERSCOTCH! BUTTERSCOTCH!
BUTTERSCOTCH!' Yelled the butler.

Eventually, Jameson Sr. Glazed over and went back to bed. The butler, shaken by the ordeal, left the room.

#

That night, Dr. Howard and Dr. Stern updated Jameson III in his office on the zombie clean-up effort.

'All the bodies were collected and disposed of, according to the instructions.' Said Dr. Howard.

'Good. Are they all dead?'

'They were never alive, Sir.' Said Dr. Stern, 'They were animated by a colony of single-celled organisms, lead by a collective mind. Each cell a separate part of a whole, and the zombies were just the vehicle.'

'But it's dead. The organism thingy, that's dead.'

'No, Sir.' Said Dr. Howard. 'It was stunned by the compound, but it quickly adapted, and we have no way to stop it if it got loose. It continues to adapt to each chemical we use against it in testing.'

'Where is it now?' Asked Jameson.

But he wasn't prepared for the answer. Dr. Stern put a glowing mason jar, half-filled with jelly, on Jameson's desk. Jameson jumped up out of his seat.

'Idiot! You could've killed me!'

'Glass, metal, and an air-tight seal are the only thing standing in the way of global annihilation.' Said Dr. Stern.

Jameson composed himself.

'Oh, okay. As long as you're on top of it.'

The two Doctors looked at each other nervously before they started to walk out of the office.

'Dr. Stern, do you have a moment?' Asked Jameson.

'Sir?'

'Look. I feel terrible about what happened to your daughter. I feel responsible.'

'I don't blame you, Sir. What happened today was the outcome of executive decisions made over twenty years ago. If anyone is to blame for my Lisa's death, zombification, and eventual death, it's your father. He's the one I blame.'

'Well, okay then. Been thinking about this much?'

'Oh yes, Sir.'

Jameson patted him on the back as they left the office together.

'Glad we cleared this up.'

#

06:

Slimongous

Some days, you just have to bury your dead. When Rainbow Falls lost three prominent teens in Lisa, Tori, and Rick, more than a few families stopped and remembered them and mourned their loss. Such was the case with Dr. Stern, his middle-school-aged son Carl, and Carl's best friend Tully, who sat in an almost empty funeral home. Behind them in the back row was Samantha and her best friend Becky, classmates of Carl and Tully. At the altar was a large portrait of Lisa, who died in the zombie attack.

The Mayor, Morgan, and Rolly with Lindsey walked up to pay their respects.

'We are deeply sorry for your loss Alan.' Mayor Vic said.

'I can't imagine the pain of losing a child,' Morgan said.

'Well, that's because your child survived, didn't he?'
Snapped Dr. Stern.

'Not on purpose,' Rolly said, trying to comfort him
but failing.

'Dad!' Carl said.

'I'm sorry, thank you for coming.' Said Dr. Stern.

Knowing there was nothing left to be said or done,
the group went. As time passed, the attendees grew
thin until Dr. Stern and the boys and the two girls in
the back were the only ones left.

'I should get you boys fed.' Dr. Stern said to them
and got up to leave.

The boys followed him. Samantha caught Carl's
eye, and he stopped to talk to her as the others left
the building.

'Hi Carl,' Samantha said, standing to meet him eye
to eye.

'Hi.'

'I'm sorry about your sister.'

'Thanks.'

Samantha handed him a white paper rose. It was
delicate and had the aroma of strawberries like the
perfume Samantha always wore. From two chairs
back, if the AC was on, he could smell her perfume in
class. It wasn't strong or overpowering, but Carl
looked forward to the aroma. It was familiar and
comforting to him.

'I made it. For you, I mean.' She said.

'Thanks.' He was glad she showed up.

Not many of his friends came to show respect. Even
fewer stayed the whole wake. He wanted to tell her
how much it meant to him and how much she meant
to him. But he wasn't sure how to.

'Samantha?' He started.

'Yes, Carl?'

'I just wanted to--'

'Come along, Carl!' Dr. Stern snapped from the
doorway. 'Thanks for coming, ladies!'

'Right back at ya!' Snapped Becky, hoping it reflected the rudeness she felt by him interrupting her friend.

'Becky!' Samantha snapped, embarrassed by her friend.

'I gotta go,' Carl said sheepishly.

'Sure,' Samantha said. 'Bye Carl.' she continued, but he was already gone.

'Smooth girl, way smooth.' Said Becky. 'Here, Carl, I made you a flower out of leftover tissue paper from Christmas. I just know you'll love it.'

'Becky!'

'What?'

Samantha sat down, flustered with how it all worked out.

'Sam and Carl sitting in a tree--'

'This is a house of God,' chided Samantha.

'It's a funeral home.' corrected Becky.

'There's a dead person over there. Show some respect!'

'The LAB kept the body. That's just a portrait.'

'Really?'

'Dad said, so yea.'

The two girls sat quietly for a moment before cravings for frozen yogurt got the better of them.

'I think Tully likes you.' Said Samantha as they left.

'First off, ewe. Second, ewe.'

As the sunset over the town square, Carl could see from the pizza house window Samantha and Becky eating fro-yo at a sidewalk table outside the 'Colder Boulder.' As he ate, he hoped for the possibility to find a moment at school to talk to her again.

#

Juanito, the cleaning guy, loved to listen to music as he cleaned. He often had his headphones louder than necessary to drown out the vacuum and buffers he used at the Jameson Labs and office. Not fully aware of his surroundings, it wouldn't be uncommon for him to bump into things or knock something over—stuff like The glowing jar, which was sitting on the edge of Jameson's desk. Juanito unknowingly knocked into the trash bin while vacuuming the office.

Working there for several years, Juanito had seen several strange things. When he took the trash out of the office, then dumped it into a more expansive can in the hall, it didn't register at all that it was glowing.

Jameson III, on the other hand, did notice the glowing jar missing. Rolling back the security footage, it was clear what happened and who was responsible. He called on Sadie to get Dr. Howard and Dr. Stern, and to fire the overnight cleaning crew.

#

The cells were aware they were free of the lab. They were aware of everyone they ate when they occupied the corpses. What they needed was an opportunity to be free from their prison. Perhaps they could entice someone to open the jar.

As a homeless man dug through the trash at the city dump, he found something of interest. He puzzled it out to be some sort of solar-powered liquid lantern and took it with him. Whatever it was, it was his now. After all, finders keepers, losers weepers.

Back at his camp, the homeless man was mesmerized by the glow. The liquid didn't move the way fluid was supposed to, at least not all the time. He had to have a closer look. He took off the lid to get a good smell.

Suddenly, the goo inside jumped onto his face. They were hungry and fed on the old homeless man. The cells made quick work of him and expanded their numbers and mass.

In no time at all, he was absorbed into the growing puddle of goo. The goo gelled into a viscus ball and rolled away to find others on which to feed.

#

Rolly and the Mayor sat in the Roadhouse, eating dinner. But these last events weighed heavy on Rolly's heart.

'Lighten up, Rolly. These things come and go, and it's never the same thing twice in Rainbow Falls. No son, Once a crisis happens, it never happens again.'

'Well, that's a relief. I just feel bad for Dr. Stern. And Tori, the other gal, was the town's go-to sitter. Good kids.'

'There's nothing to be done about it, son, except move on and be ready. It's what we do here, boy. We need to have our wits about us for the next crisis.'

Rolly sneezed. The Mayor looked at him for a moment, then turned to see Handsome cleaning a bloody nose. Bad omens were everywhere.

#

The goo was now the size of a sedan, a mid-range four-door with room for six. It was engulfing and absorbing townsfolk left and right, although not everyone. The growing gel was quickly making its way into town proper. Word finally reached the Vic men that something was awry.

#

When the news finally reached the lab, Jameson was holding a war council with Dr. Howard and Dr. Stern.

'The Good news we have a solution.' Said Dr. Howard. 'There's nothing like it on earth, so it stands to reason it's not from our planet. If it's not from the earth, it has no built-in immunity to earthly virora.

'That's not a real word.' Said Stern.

'Yes, it is. It's the plural for Virus.'

'That's a common fallacy. It's simply Viruses.'

'What about Virii?'

'Who cares?' Interrupted Jameson. 'Get on with it!'

'Sorry.' Replied Stern. 'There was a small vial of the organism left in the lab. We inoculated it with a common flu virus, and the cells began to die off, with no sign of adaption. We've been fighting it with chemicals all these years and never thought of trying a biological agent until now.'

'If we blanket the town with a common flu virus,' added Howard, 'the town will get sick, but the cellular colony will die. The planes are ready.'

'Only those who it consumes before exposure will die?' Asked Jameson.

Lindsey entered the conference room with a sense of urgency.

'Rolly needs our help!' She said. 'Some slime creature is attacking the town.'

'Well, it's a good thing--' Started Howard but was interrupted by a punch in the arm by Jameson.

'We have the best minds in the contiguous United States!' Jameson III Inserted boldly. 'I'll have the boys get on it right now; I'm sure they'll have something in a few hours.'

'Hours?' Questioned Howard.

'Hours.' Said Stern, jumping in. 'Yes, Sir. We'll be in the lab. Let us know when we're ready- to give you an update.'

Jameson turned his attention to Lindsey. 'Don't you worry, Deer,' he said comfortingly, 'we'll help Rolly stop this thing before it's too late.'

He patted her shoulder, then rested his arm around her waist, and followed up with an attempt at a hug before she pulled away.

'Too much? I thought so, my bad.' He said, dusting himself off. 'Are you hungry, Deer?'

'I'm not comfortable with the way you call me dear.'

'That's your name. Lindsey Deer. As in Deer in the headlights. Doe, a deer, a female deer.'

'You have impulse issues. Has HR spoken to you yet?'

'About what?'

This guy is too much, thought Lindsey, as she left the conference room.

#

In the town square, Rolly, Bills, and Handsome faced off with the goo. It was now the size of a minivan, the kind used by soccer moms to shuttle kids back and forth to-- soccer. Not the tiny European-style minivan used by millennial types to get back and forth between coffee houses and poetry jams, the larger third row kind. The goo was more massive than it was before.

A squishy tentacle lunged forth, grabbing Handsome by the leg. Goo splattered as he tried to fight his way free, only to fail. Handsome was pulled into the center of the mass and dissipated. The splatters bits rolled back and joined the massive object.

The whole thing rolled towards Bills as she fired a shotgun into it with no effect. Rolly dived to cover her, and the mass quickly pulled back and moved away.

From around the corner, Handsome ran towards them.

'Run towards it, Rolly! Do it now!' He yelled as he got closer.

Rolly stood up and charged the goo. It avoided Rolly and retreated into an alley, faster than Rolly could on two legs. It got away. Rolly felt a tickle in his nose, then sneezed into his elbow.

People came running out of the museum two doors down, screaming about a monster.

'I think it went in there,' Rolly said as the three made their way to the museum.

Handsome was the first in, followed by Rolly and Bills. The three helped the last patrons out of the building. When it was clear, they started their search. The main hall was open to the many floors in the building. An old submarine hung from the ceiling in the center. Below on the ground level was the museum's pride, a fully intact tyrannosaurus-Rex skeleton.

Compared to the size of the exhibit, the three seemed relatively smallish. It was very captivating, and no one saw the ooze drop from the second floor until it was too late. The ooze fell right on top of Handsome, engulfing the man like fruit in a gelatin mold.

'Handsome!' cried out Bills, but it was too late. His silhouette in the glowing green goop had already faded away.

The mass lunged towards Bills, but Rolly confidently stepped in the way. It stopped, sliding, losing its traction on the floor, and cautiously backed away. 'It's afraid of me,' thought Rolly.

Just then, Handsome burst through the double doors leading to the street.

'We have to work as a team.' He said to the other two. 'We have to contain it. It wants Bills or me, but the fungus fears you. Let's use this to our advantage.'

'That's not like any fungus I've ever seen.' Said Bills.

Handsome looked at the creature for the first time. He'd never seen one in real life, but he knew what that thing was.

It was a 'Glossoid', and his people were allergic to it. It's what's been making them sneeze lately. Many lesser developed worlds had fallen to the oleaginous creatures, yet it seemed to have trouble on Earth, which was a good thing.

'That is slimy and humongous.' Said Handsome quietly.

'Slimongous,' Rolly said.

'Don't name it. You know how you get when you name things.' Bills said.

#

The Jameson R&D computers were filled with vital information and evidence of possible wrongdoing. It's the kind of information a competitor, rival, or enemy would be glad to get their hands on if they could. It was the goal of the person who'd made her way into the server farm of the lab. Down there, in the bowels of the building, she uncovered damning evidence to the true nature of the lab, the green energy power source, and their connection to the fishery and other businesses and locations throughout Rainbow Falls.

The door to the server farm opened, and that's when Dr. Howard noticed the young lady. She quickly jumped up and overpowered him with a paralysis-inducing spray. She gently guided him to the ground and finished her work. He'd be fine in a few hours and wouldn't remember anything from the past twenty-four hours.

Security had been disabled, and a video loop engaged, so Jameson was unaware of the skulduggery taking place. Not that he would have noticed either way, as he was in the middle of a full body massage. He kept a masseuse on call for such stressful occasions.

Lindsey walked into the office, hoping to get updated on how the research was going and when Rolly could expect help from them. To say she was

shocked at the apathy on display was an understatement.

'Are you serious?' She asked.

'If I didn't do this now and then, I'd go insane.'

'Well?'

'Well, what? Top guys are on it, top guys. These things take time, and you know that.'

Jameson hoped she bought his excuse. He wanted to give the organism enough time to get rid of Rolly before letting the R&D team take it down.

#

'Come on, you big booger! Come to Rolly.' Said Rolly as he backed the creature away from the others.

Rolly sneezed, and the slime violently jumped into the air, sliming the T-Rex fossil. Slowly it enveloped the dinosaur skeleton, covering everything but the teeth. The slime T-Rex began to break the restraints as the goop animated the dino corps in the same way it enlivened the dead in the graveyard. It worked the jaw positions as if learning to chew before turning the bare teeth towards Rolly. The sight of the glowing, moving, mucus-like, translucent dinosaur was quite alarming.

'Well, that happened.' Said Rolly.

The three ran in different directions, confusing Slimongous, for a moment. But it picked Handsome to pursue, as it had a history of succeeding against him. It caught him in no time and snatched him in its teeth before sending him down the gullet and between the bony ribs to dissolve.

Rolly and Bills met up in the cafeteria of the museum. They could hear the creature walking about, looking for them. From the kitchen came Handsome, meeting with the others.

'There's a sub in the main hall,' Handsome said. 'I'll bait it, lead it into the sub, you lock us in. The make-up of the sub should contain it.'

'No, you'll get trapped inside there with it,' Rolly said to his friend.

'It got me before, and I was fine.' Reasoned Handsome.

'True,' Rolly said, counting on his fingers the number of times he saw Handsome get swallowed up, only to return later.

'It's the only way,' Handsome said.

Rolly felt another sneeze coming. He lifted his arm to catch it in his elbow. At the last moment, Handsome moved Rolly's arm, exposing Bills. Rolly sneezed full onto Bill's face.

'What the hell?' Bills said.

'He's sick. That's why it won't eat him. Now you've got it too.'

'Both of you, go for the legs,' Handsome said and headed out the door.

'How does he keep getting out?' Bills asked. Rolly just shrugged.

Bills and Rolly found themselves back in the main hall. Slimongous came charging in. The slime layer pulled off the back of the skull as it slammed down the bare-bone crown, just missing Rolly and Bills. Both Rolly and Bills charge for the legs. The slime pulled away from the legs, and Slimongous lost balance then fell over, knocking the slime free of the skeleton.

Handsome popped up from inside the submarine.

'Over here! Hey, slime ball! Over here!' Said Handsome from his perch.

The ooze, seeing a target free of infection, climbed up a column heading towards the submarine. Bills found the control panel for the cables suspending the submarine. The slime leaped from the column to the sub. Bills began lowering the submarine, and Rolly got into place. The slimongous made its way inside as it came to rest on the floor. Rolly climbed on the sub, sneezed inside, and closed the door, sealing the slime

inside the air-tight submarine. Handsome walked up behind Bills.

'I hope he made it out.' Bills said.

'Out of what?' Asked Handsome.

'How do you do that?'

'You wouldn't ask David Copperfield how he walks through the great wall of China, would you?'

'Yes. Yes, I would. You're a magician then?'

'No, I own a bar.'

Handsome smiled and walked off, blowing his nose.

'There is something seriously wrong with that guy.'

Bills said to Rolly as he walked up. 'What's up with him?'

'Allergies.' Said Rolly.

#

The Master Fish found himself still in the confines of Willow Lake, burdened with the knowledge that the universe was larger than the confines of the shores of Willow Lake. The universe was vast, with unlimited possibilities, and named Rainbow Falls. He felt burdened with the knowledge that there was more than eating or being eaten. He was in the midst of an existential crisis. Then the fish saw a large shadow swimming in the distance. That shape was unmistakably human in design. Another attempt to thwart natural selection. 'I'll destroy it for the abomination that it is!' He thought to himself. 'Then again, it could be the mistake I was looking for, yes.'

It may not have been physically possible for The Master Fish to smile, but he felt enough joy to make it happen. He smiled internally and began to swim towards the shadow.

#

07: Handsones

Morgan sat in the chair, devastated. The Mayors hands were on her shoulders, but they were of no comfort in the small Doctor's office. They'd just gotten the bad news they had hope would not come.

She shook her head in disbelief. She couldn't believe it could be true. But the Doctor handed her the clipboard. There it was in black and white; she was going to die.

She began to weep. The Mayor did his best to comfort her, but his pain was equal to hers. Their minds were in sync, as they had the same thoughts. How would he be able to carry on without her? How would they tell Rolly? The Doctor decided to give them some time alone and left the room, closing the door behind him.

#

Jameson III looked down from his office with disdain. He could see the whole parking lot, the drive, and the drop-off at the main building from his view. Jameson always knew who was coming or going when he looked out his window. From that window, he saw Rolly's squad car pull in and drive up to the drop-off. He hated that guy.

Rolly got out and open the door for Lindsey Deer. They hugged playfully, laughing and enjoying each other's company. Then they kissed. Jameson III bid his time, for one day that scene would be him instead of Rolly, and no one would be looking down from the office with hate in their heart. No one was aloud in his office when he wasn't there. Jameson III closed the blinds.

#

At the fishery, A fish fell off the conveyor belt. Buford Saw it and reached down with his bare hand but cautiously stopped short. Buford vividly remembered his time as a slave to the Master Fish, and it all started when that fish fell off the line. Within an instant, adrenaline pumped into his veins, triggering his fight or flight response system. He couldn't help but be afraid of the little fish flopping on the cement floor.

Buford stood upright and with a shuttering breath, walked away. But only for a moment as Buford came back with long tongs and heavy rubber gloves on. After all, if you can't learn from experiences, then you best not have them. He nervously flicked the fish back on the conveyor belt and ran away at full clip.

Buford was proud to have handled the situation with caution, grace and fortitude. Even though he ran away, it wasn't until his job was done. For that, he could be proud of himself. He'd come along way.

#

It was mid day in downtown Rainbow Falls. A flash of light shot out of the alley, behind the Mirror Emporium with an electrical buzz. Moments later, a man walked out of the alleyway and looked around. He was a stranger, and new in town. This stranger looked the part of a tourist, that is if anyone took notice of him, which they didn't. He was in plaid shorts, a button-up short-sleeve shirt, a fishing hat, and calf-high socks and loafers. He also had a fanny pack, conveniently placed in front. He inhaled the fresh country air deeply and smiled. There was no other air like it. This stranger had breathed a lot of different types of air, but this air was unique.

The stranger casually walked about town, amazed at everything he saw. People, human people, unafraid of death. Buildings made of stone and steel, not reinforced in the slightest for any type of radiation. Yet they all believed they would live to see the next day. Officer Bills walks by and said something to another passer-by. He didn't understand the language spoken, but he understood the body language. He marveled at their audacity.

He saw two women in the dress store, a store specifically for one gender, and one style of clothing. Brilliantly ostentatious. They talked and laughed and talked some more, but they didn't do much shopping in the store, which the store intended. He made a note of it on his phone. None of the businesses that filled the square seemed to be optimized for their specialties, and seemed to encourage nonprofitable socialization.

Later, the stranger sat next to an older man feeding the birds. The older man was talking to the birds, but the birds said nothing in return. The birds showed no gratitude for the free meal they'd been. He felt the relationship was one-sided at best. He could understand the pet-owner relationship, as there was a trade of services.

The pet provides companionship while the owner provides food and shelter. If the pet is not satisfied with the accommodations, it's free to leave. If there's a fence or a chain, then there's a possibility the relationship will sour and the pet may resent his position in the arrangement.

These birds however offer no such companionship, and the old man offered no shelter. There were no strings or expectations from either party. This was an open arrangement, and true to form, the birds fed from others after the old man left. It was hard to figure out the trade off, so he simply added the data to his phone.

In the Roadhouse, Handsome struggled to work the cappuccino machine, instructions in hand, as the stranger walked in. Right away, Handsome knew the stranger was not from these parts. His clothing and mannerisms suggested he was from outside of the milky way. The stranger took a seat, and people watched for a moment before Handsome made his way to the table and joined him. After all, it took a moment for Handsome to figure out that the drip tray was supposed to have holes.

'Is there something I can help you with, stranger?' Asked Handsome in the 'Intergalactic Mind Language.'

This startled the stranger, because this planet is not in the Intergalactic commonwealth. The stranger screamed and fell backward over a table. Then he got up and ran out of the Roadhouse. The stranger was a trespasser, and anyone in the commonwealth would know this, because the planet earth is a wild game preserve, and off limits for official visits. No outsiders allowed. Then again, anyone using the Intergalactic Mind Language would be breaking protocol too.

Moments later, he cautiously walked back in, holding his phone like a weapon. It was, among other things, a weapon.

'You can see me.' Said the stranger telepathically. 'You speak the Universal Mind Language. How is that possible?'

'I could say the same about you, friend. I'm not from around here either. Would you like a drink or something to eat?' Asked Handsome.

'What are you doing here?'

'Acclimating myself with that unearthly contraption.' Said Handsome, pointing at the cappuccino machine.

'A Serillian pod steamer?'

'Some Serillian brought it here as a joke on the natives. Turns out they love it.' Handsome said.

'They use that out in the open?'

'Oh they don't use it for hygiene, they brew a beverage with it. That's what's confusing me. It's built slightly different, and the instructions are nonsensical.'

'Well that's disgusting.'

'How about you? What brings you to this side of the no fly zone?' asked Handsome.

'I'm on vacation. I came to see the sights. I didn't expect to see that.'

'Ah, I know what you're looking for.'

'You do?'

Handsome sneezed.

'Ugh, that Glossoid is still making me sneeze.'

'There's a Glossoid on this planet?' Asked the stranger.

The stranger recalled how a Glossoid colony wiped out a string of under developed planets, and infected Lyrid Prime for two Eons. He had reason to worry.

'It's contained.' Said Handsome assuredly. 'Come, let me take you to the highlight of the planet.'

#

Jameson looked down at Handsome and the stranger from his window. He found it odd that he didn't see them pull up, or park, or walk-up. The two were there, and moments ago, they were not.

But Handsome was a friend of Rolly, which was reason enough to hate them and drive them off the property. With a push of a button on his desk phone, he asked Sadie to connect him with security.

Outside, the stranger looked at the readout on his phone. It told him a lot about the green energy source powering Rainbow Falls.

'These readings are incredible.' The Stranger said. 'This explains the intergalactic quarantine of this sector. You know, the entire universe believes this to be impossible and a myth. But there it is and it is glorious. And it's stable, you say?'

'For over thirty years now.' Said Handsome.

'How is it they've never used it?'

'They don't know what it is. The natives think it's a power source.'

'That's like using nuclear fusion to boil water.'

'They do that too. Do you want to go in and see it?'

'I'm not sure I want to be in the same galaxy now that I know the Omni-Void exists.' Said the Stranger. 'How is it you are allowed to be here when this planet is quarantined?'

'I'm working,' Handsome answered.

Security promptly went outside to run off the trespassers, but they found none. They could feel Jameson watching, so they continued their search.

#

Back at the Roadhouse, Handsome and the Stranger sat at a table drinking beer. The waitress has since taken over doing all the work.

'This is entirely unacceptable.' Said the Stranger. 'The Omni-Void could annihilate the fabric of multidimensional space. If they even knew what they had--'

'They don't. It's been working this way nonstop for decades now, and not one person has stopped to wonder why it doesn't need maintenance. They never touch it.'

'What if they do? This entire sector would be wiped off the face of the multi-verse!'

'Relax, Stranger. My team and I have been monitoring and intercepting since it's inception. It's how and why we came to be here. It is our purpose. We have everything under control.'

#

'Listen, Sadie,' said Jameson III into the intercom. 'I've been going over some records, and I can't find the maintenance record for the power core. When was the last time someone looked at it?'

'Never, Sir.' Said Sadie over the intercom.

'Do you think that's a legal violation?'

'I could send Maintenance down to have a look.'

'Do that. Have a report on my desk in twenty minutes.'

'Yes, Sir.'

#

Jeff, the maintenance man, walked up to a door that read POWER CORE: DOOR TO REMAIN LOCKED AT ALL TIMES. Jeff had been senior maintenance engineer for over fifteen years. He's never been down to the main power core. There's never been a need. Still, dinner would be more interesting if he could tell his wife Shelly and daughter Becky that he finally saw the power core. Jeff searched for a key but didn't find one that fit. It was a good thing Handsome was there to hand him a key.

'Looking for this friend?' Handsome asked.

'Yea. Thanks.'

'Door's open, though. Go on in.'

Jeff thought it curious that he didn't need the key he thought he needed but shrugged it off and walked through the door, followed by Handsome.

Inside, Jeff was stunned. He was hypnotized by what he saw. There are familiar things in life, like sounds and colors and smells, but rarely do you experience these sensations with alternate senses. People using mind altering drugs claim to hear or taste colors, or see audible music. But those hallucinations pale in comparison to authentic experience. The human mind is almost incapable of processing these sensations, and once open to the possibilities of a new reality, one finds themselves more malleable.

Handsome knew this would happen. Jeff's human brain was reset, and was then susceptible to suggestion. The total lack of self-control was an oddly calming sensation.

'Everything is fine.' Said Handsome. 'You replaced a few wires and cleared conduit 507.'

'Conduit 507.' Mumbled Jeff.

'Everything is ship-shape.'

'Ship, shape.'

'You didn't see this. You saw and worked on the power core. It should be good for the next ten years.'

'Ten years.'

'Go back up and file your report.'

'Report.'

'One more thing, friend. You didn't see me.'

'Didn't see Handsome at the power core.'

'Good man.'

Jeff left the power core room, leaving Handsome slightly confused. Then he remembered his co-worker's position at the Roadhouse, and that no human could tell them apart. They were all Handsome from the Roadhouse, as far as the townsfolk were concerned.

#

'How can you be so sure?' Asked the Stranger, back at the Roadhouse.

'It's our job to be sure.'

'What are you? Are you even from this dimension?'

'It's best to leave some things be, friend. I've got to get back to work.' Handsome said, pulling out a white bar rag and heading back to the infernal machine.

#

Constantino met with The mystery woman who stole vital information from the Jamesons' in an alley somewhere in Austin, Texas. She handed him the flash drive with the information she got at the research lab.

'What did you find, Colleen?' He asked.

'Enough to bury the whole lot of them.' She said.

'I guess interns are good for something.'

'We're good for a lot more.'

The two began to kiss, passionately right there, in the alley. A red corvette drove by filled with prep school girls. It was Tia Constantino and her prep school friends Chandler, Shay, and Amber. They could vividly see Senator Constantino and his intern kissing in the alley.

'O-M-G. Tia, was that your Dad kissing some tart in an alley?' Amber asked.

'Probably,' Tia responded dryly.

'Tart? What, are you like 90?' Quipped Shay.

'You going to tell your mother?' Asked Chandler.

'Stepmother,' replied Tia quickly, 'and no. How do you think she met him anyway? She should know better by now.'

'Harsh.' Said Amber.

#

Tully laid in his bed, looking up at the poster on his ceiling of a Sports Illustrated swimsuit model. His stepmother would disapprove, but she never looked up, so he was safe.

He thought back to when his father went on his business trip, how the two of them argued. He thought about his Dad promising to make things better when he left a message on Tully's phone.

His stepmother Kate wouldn't be a problem anymore.

'I swear on my college ring,' Tully's Dad promised, 'when I get back, it's just you and me. And you know how I feel about my ring.'

But he never came back. His stepmother said his Dad was working overseas, but he never called or answered his phone. It was like he left Tully in the hands of the devil, and Tully hated him for it. He had to get out.

Tully made his way to the backyard, and there he saw Kate's prized roses. The ones Tully was told to stay away from, quite clearly and frequently. Tully decided to piss on them. In his mind, he'd be pissing on her. It ran down the stem and pooled at the base, and washed away some soil. Tully smiled, thinking of how upset Kate would be when her roses died. He smiled until he saw the shiny glint in the pool of urine. His stream had exposed his fathers' class ring.

#

Todd was a research assistant, which meant he could wear a lab coat on and off the clock. It was a stressful job, but it paid well. It didn't hurt that Willow Lake was nearby. This way, if the day was too stressful, he could always end the day with some calm evening fishing, which he did at the end of most shifts.

The Master Fish had seen Todd for several evenings, fishing at the dock. He wasn't a trophy hunter like most other anglers. He didn't hunt for sport; the fish always went back into the water. He wasn't a consumer either. He didn't keep his prey and eat them like others he'd seen frequenting the lake.

No, Todd fished for other reasons, reasoned the Master Fish, although he didn't know the man's name was Todd.

Todd got another bite and reeled it in. What an exciting evening. Each catch came more frequently, and each was bigger than the other. He took out his ruler and measured the fish before returning it to the water off the dock. The pressures of the day quickly falling away.

The Master Fish took note; the average time out of the water was sixty to ninety seconds. More data was collected after each time Todd carefully removed the hook. Todd minimized the damage and trauma. The past twelve fish survived the encounter. If these lower species could survive the hook, then so could he. And who better to take control of than a lab researcher? It was his turn to take the bait.

Todd got another bite and reeled it in. It was the strangest looking fish he'd ever seen. It wasn't a carp, nor was it a bass. Todd couldn't figure out what it was. But he needed to get the hook out of its mouth. So he took the fish in his hand.

'Oh,' Todd said quietly, succumbing to the powers of the Master Fish.

Todd puffed his chest out.

'Yes, Yes! I'm back!' Todd said boldly. 'Not one of the over-sized gibbons can stop me now! I'll finally get my revenge on these, these- I need some water.'

The two walked off. For now was not the time for proclamations of victory. It was time to find a fishbowl and some water.

#

08:

Squatchfest

Tully hid the comic book in his back pocket, hoping his stepmother wouldn't see it, as he made his way upstairs.

'What's that?' She asked from her room. The lights were out, and he hadn't seen her.

'Nothing.' He said, lying.

She grabbed him by his arm and swung him around. Then she pulled the comic from his pocket.

'Nothing? What is this? What have I told you about spending money on this crap?' She said.

'Carl bought it for me.' He stated.

She slapped him.

'Don't you lie to me, boy!'

'I'm not lying!'

She slapped him harder. Tully looked at her coldly, no expression of pain on his bruising face.

'How's your garden coming?' He asked her knowingly.

She backed off, tore the comic in half, and walked away. Tully went up to his room. A 'hang in there' kitten poster on the inside of his door. A poster of the periodic table hung above his computer. He sat down, opened his RPG monster manual, and went back to coding his android app.

#

The Constantino family was not done with the Jameson family nor Rainbow Falls. Not by a long shot. So when the Senator got the information from his intern Colleen, he had to share it with his wife. Both Gia and Senator smiled as they looked over the files on his home office computer.

'This is gold.' The Senator said. 'With this, I can shut them down, send them to prison, and almost guarantee I get the nomination.'

'Yes, true.' Gia countered. 'Or we can hold on to this and use it as leverage. Look at those figures. This place is a goldmine, in almost every industry.'

'So you don't want to take them down, you want to take them over?'

She just smiled at him.

'That's what I love about you.' He said, pulling her onto his lap, kissing her. It was at that moment that the Senator saw the pool boy inside the house. Knowing that everything had a place, and there was a place for everything, he calmly asked his loving wife, 'What's this?'

'Oh um, so this is Chad. He is my new personal assistant.'

'Chad.' the Senator said, standing up.

He walked across the room to Chad and got uncomfortably close to him.

'Since when do assistants smell like chlorine.' He said without expecting an answer.

'We're going to be late,' Gia said, pulling Chad free. 'I'm meeting Tia and the girls for lunch. Love

you.'

Constantino had paused, wondering the exact nature of the relationship between Gia and her new assistant. But he was soon distracted by Colleen walking in from the hallway.

'I thought she'd never leave,' Colleen said.

Constantino smiled and stopped thinking about Gia.

#

Tia talked the Prep school girls into a road trip to Rainbow Falls. It was about an hour's drive. They drank iced coffee and watch as Gabriel stood on a latter hanging a banner above Main Street.

Gabriel played to the crowd as the sign went up. Then he made eye contact with Tia. She was a stranger, an out-of-towner, and that made her mysterious in his eyes. He was easy on Tia's eyes too. Gabriel was a fine little distraction to the family drama and was a totally different flavor from the city boys.

'What are we doing in the sticks?' Asked Amber.

'Admiring the scenery.' Tia Said.

'Aren't we supposed to be meeting your stepmom in the city?' Asked Shay.

'Eh,' Tia replied.

The girls finally figured what Tia was there for.

'I see what's going on.' Said Amber.

'So she's picked a flavor already?' Asked Chandler.

'What would you even talk about with one of these yokels?' Asked Shay.

'Yokels? Were you not just on my case for saying tart, and you pull yokel out of your magic bag?' Asked Amber.

'Their cappuccinos taste funny.' Said Shay.

'I kinda dig it.' Said Tia, talking about Gabriel and not the coffee.

Gabriel began to pose and clown for the girls as the Mayor barked instructions.

'Maybe a little higher.' The Mayor Said. 'Rolly's late. He should be here helping.'

#

The package Jameson III was waiting for came in, and he couldn't help but play with his new toys, Rainbow Falls townsfolk action figures. Not your standard 6-inch figure with 14 points of articulation. These were 12-inch figures, with 16 points of articulation, hand-painted accents, cloth clothing, and injection molded accessories. His order included himself, Rolly Vic, and Lindsey Deer.

'Doh doh dee doh doh.' Jameson made the Rolly figure say. 'Breathing through my nose is way too hard for my brain to handle.'

'I hate you, Rolly Vic.' Said the Lindsey figure by way of Jameson's high-pitched impersonation. 'I hate you and your stupid placid face!'

The Lindsey figure popped up an arm that was holding a toy gun. 'BLAM!' Said Jameson. The Lindsay figure fired on the Rolly figure, and Jameson made it fall down and quiver.

'Stew in your own juices you!' He said for Lindsey.

Jameson made The Lindsey figure suddenly drop her gun and raise her hands to her head. At that moment, Sadie stepped in the open door, followed by Lindsey, out of Jameson's view.

'Ooh, my head.' Jameson continued with the Lindsey toy. 'What have I done? Oh, no! I've committed cold-blooded murder! I am no longer too good for everyone. I'm- morally ambiguous!'

Sadie clears her throat, but Jameson ignores her, pulling his action figure likeness next to Lindsey's.

'Morally ambiguous, you say?' Jameson said in a smooth tone. 'Why, I happen to be morally ambiguous, too!'

'It is like we're two halves of the same collectible coin.' Jameson made the Lindsey figure say. 'I could kiss you!'

'And I you.' He motioned with the other figure.

The two figures begin to make out in a wildly exaggerated fashion, with Jameson adding kissing sound effects.

'Excuse me?' Lindsey finally said.

She had never seen a more narcissistic display of self gratification that didn't involve a penis. To think that she might have at one time entertained the thought of possibly voluntarily spending her free time in his company. As a companion, she was an employee of his company, which was totally different. No one offers healthcare and benefits along with dinner and a movie.

Jameson quickly got off the floor and stood at his desk, shuffling papers.

'Hi, um, Lindsay.' He said. 'I was just uh projecting our third-quarter earnings.'

'With dolls?' She asked.

'It's a sophisticated, accounting technique.'

'Is that why you called me here?'

'I called you.' Jameson said, slightly confused.

He was still in action figure mode and was having a hard time focusing on the here and now.

'Yes, Sir.' Sadie inserted as she left the office.

'Of course, that's not why I called you here.'

Said Jameson confidently.

It was all coming back to him now. He'd been role playing out the scenario as the ladies walked in. now all he needed to do was implement it.

Jameson opened a mint tin and took one out, offering it to Lindsey, who refused. He then cautiously walked over to her.

'I just wanted to tell you what a good job you've been doing and give you a little pat on the back.' He said. With a stiff slap her on the back, he broke the mint on her back. She didn't notice.

'And here I thought you were going to try and seduce me or use a mind-controlling device on me.' She said.

Ironically at that very moment, tiny mind-controlling nanobots spread across her back from the broken mint particles.

'Oh, Lindsey Deer, how precious.' He said nervously.

It wasn't long before the nanobots infiltrated her system, just as Sadie had explained to him. They took control of the synapses of her cerebral cortex. As if on cue, Lindsey stiffened up and stared blankly into space. Jameson rushed to his desk and started rifling through it. There was no sign of rejection, or on site bleeding. The Lewis device seemed to be working.

'Can you hear me?' He asked.

'Yes. I hear you.' She said.

Jameson pulled a prototype laser gun out of his desk.

'Good.' He said. 'I am giving you a weapon. You know, the kind you have easy access to in R&D if you needed one.'

Jameson opened Lindsey's lab coat. She was wearing an Anime T-Shirt underneath it. Unfazed by her pop culture choice, he put the gun in her back pocket.

'When you audibly hear the trigger word - BUTTERSCOTCH - pull out this gun and blast the guy who is closest to you. Understood?'

Lindsey nodded.

'I'm going to bring you out of the trance on the count of three. Ready one... two...'

Jameson stopped. He found himself with the absolute best opportunity to take advantage of a situation. She wouldn't remember, and it would be as if it never happened. He didn't see the harm, since there were no witnesses.

He slowly reached up and closed her eyes. Then he manually pursed her lips as if for a kiss. After a moment, he opens her mouth just a bit. Then a bit more. Jameson pulled out a breath spray and gave himself a spritz. There was a smile on his face he couldn't contain. Then he put his hands nervously on her waist and moved in for a kiss. A kiss he'd thought about since he first saw her in grainy security footage.

At that moment, the HR Representative bursts into the room; there were sounds of an angry crowd in the background. Jameson jumped back about three feet, straightening his hair.

'Mr. Jameson Jr., Sir.' The Rep started.

'CONFOUND IT WOMAN!' Jameson shouted.

'How many times have I told you not to interrupt me?'

'I don't know... Three?' She replied.

Lindsey snapped out of her trance.

'What's going on?' Lindsey asked.

'The workers are revolting.' the Rep said.

'Yea, well, they don't hold a high opinion of you either,' Jameson said, flopping down in his leather chair.

'They want a half-day off to attend the Squatch-Fest festivities.' Said the Rep.

'What's a Squatch-Fest?' Asked Lindsey.

The Rep stared at Lindsey like she's from another planet. She may well have been. Only residence, and die hard fans know about the annual migration of the Sasquatch.

'Fine!' Said Jameson. 'Set the minions free, with my blessing. Sadie, take a note! Everyone's making it up Saturday. Who's up for coffee? I'm buying.'

'Seriously. What is Squatch-Fest?' Asked Lindsey.

'I'll explain on the way to the Roadhouse.' Said Jameson.

#

The Roadhouse was as close to capacity as it gets this time of the year. Tourists from all over congregated on Rainbow Falls for the annual running of the Sasquatch through town as they migrate north for the season. People were milling around, drinking, and having a good time. At a table off in the corner, Rolly and Bills entertained a group of tourists with some tall tales of Rainbow Falls.

'-and then Bills here goes-' Said Rolly, mid tale.

'I think you just made yourself some ectoplasm, son.' Said Bills As the crowd burst into laughter.

'Excuse us, folks.' Said Mayor Vic, with a hand on Rolly's shoulder. 'I need to borrow the Sheriff for a moment.'

Mayor Vic was all smiles until he was sure the public eye wasn't on him anymore and herded Rolly over to a dark corner.

'This is where you have been?' Asked the Mayor.

'Sir?'

'The running of the Sasquatch is less than an hour away, and we don't have our Sasquatch Queen. What happened to Tori?'

'She was eaten by zombies.'

'The Mayor saw Gabriel sitting with the Prep school girls flirting away.'

'Well, that explains a few things.' Said Mayor Vic. 'And our runner-up?'

'Zombies... You know for dead folk, they sure can eat.'

'Idiot. Listen and listen well. I want you to find that girlfriend of yours. Slap a furry crown on her, and put her in the middle of the street. She's our new Sasquatch Queen. Got it?' Demanded the Mayor.

At that moment, Bills walked up.

'Rolly can't play right now.' The Mayor said dismissively.

'Word's out, Sir. She said with a smile. 'I hear you need a Sasquatch Queen.'

'It's under control.' He said.

'I'll do it.' Bills said.

'Bills, that's mighty kind of you, but when our town looks to our Sasquatch Queen, we have a certain set of... what I'm saying is that there is a caliber of...' The Mayor struggled with his reply.

'I say let her do it.' Rolly jumped in.

Both the Mayor and Bills shot Rolly a look: One filled with venom, the other with hugs and kisses.

'I mean, Lindsey's only been here a little while, and Bills, well Bills is a local. You know? Bills knows the trail, and her cardio routine is on point. Besides, look at that record.' Rolly said, pointing to an old wooded sign hung above the bar.

It read 00 SASQUATCH QUEENS LOST SINCE 1982. Therein lies the Mayor's concern. Bills was no spring chicken. The Sasquatch Queen was always young, athletic, and easily healed from the scrapes and bruises associated with running with the beasts, as they migrated through town. If Bills got hurt, who would protect Rolly when things got tough? He counted on her to insure his safety in tough spots.

'Alright!' snapped the Mayor. He rolled his eyes because he knew he'd been licked.

'Fine. We need you in costume out in the street in ten minutes.'

Bills gave the Mayor a big hug as she let out a very girlish squeal. The Mayor left.

'Oh, thank you, Rolly.' Said Bills. 'Ever since I was a little girl, I've always dreamed of being the Sasquatch Queen. I tell you, I've spent many lazy afternoons, staring out the window thinking about a bunch of hairy man-apes chasing me through the streets- the musk just thick in the air.'

At that moment, Lindsey and Jameson III walked into the Roadhouse. Lindsey scanned the room for Rolly, waving to him the moment she saw him. Jameson Jr. heads to the bar where Handsome was mixing drinks.

'Gimmie the usual,' Jameson said.

'Usual what?' Asked Handsome.

Handsome surreptitiously flipped through a photo book, with logs of historical food and drink orders of the locals.

'When did you get in town?' Asked Jameson.

'Two weeks ago.' Said Handsome.

'Just give me a whiskey sour!'

With a nod, Handsome went to work mixing a drink. Without a photo reference, he just had to wing it, mixing a drink with commonly used ingredients, and couple he'd brought from home. Soon Handsome had a Collins glass in front of Jameson. The liquid in it was cloudy, had a glow to it, and smelled of bubblegum. Jameson shot the drink back in one gulp. He then proceeded to cough for the next fifteen minutes.

'That's... That's not...' Jameson wheezed in a raspy voice.

'Not sour enough?' Asked Handsome.

Jameson grabbed Handsome by the collar and pulled him in close.

'Do that again, and I'll pay extra.' Jameson said.

'They're coming!!' yelled the Mayor of the PA in the town square.

The crowd of people began to surge out of the Roadhouse and into the street. Jameson turned his back to the bar. Rolly and Lindsey sat at a nearby table.

Rolly got up and went to the bar on the other side of Jameson.

'Give me one of those flavored coffees for Lindsey.' Asked Rolly of Handsome.

'What Flavor?' Asked Handsome.

'What Flavor?' Yelled Rolly to Lindsey.

'Butterscotch.' She answered before her eyes glazed over.

Jameson drew a diagram in his head. Everyone else had left the Roadhouse, and the three men closest to Lindsey were himself, Rolly, and Handsome, in that order. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lindsey drawing the gun, staring at him.

'I'm too close.' He said to himself as he ran off. Lindsey got off several shots before Jameson jumped for the lady's room. A single ray from the gun burned Jameson's arm clear off as Handsome and Rolly tackle Lindsey. Jameson screamed in pain from the lady's room floor.

'She must really hate her work,' Handsome said.

'I've seen this before. Hold her still.' Rolly said, clapping his hands two times. Lindsey snapped out of her trance.

'What?' She called out, disoriented.

'Everything's fine. give me the gun.' Rolly said.

The crowd outside cheered as the Sasquatch ran by. They broke out into a cheer of 'Go Bills Go! Run Bills Run!'

Confused about her position and the fact that she had a prototype heat gun in her hand, she gave it over to Rolly.

#

Jameson sat on the floor. The shock was setting in, so the pain was fading.

'Junior, you in here?' Asked Rolly as he walked in.

He didn't look up, just raised his right hand.

'Help is on the way. Listen, I just have a few questions.'

'I didn't do it. I want my lawyer.' Jameson Said.

'Well, it's obvious to me. This has to be all about you. Someone was using some kind of mind control on Lindsey. The question is, who wants you dead?'

'Dead? Me? Well...'

'Do you have any enemies?' Asked Rolly.

'My family name is hated by a lot of people, some hazardous people.' Said Jameson. 'I could use someone with your keen eye-protecting me from, you know, the bad seeds out there.'

'We should get that looked at.'

'It's cauterized, a side effect of the energy beam. I'll have the R&D boys make another arm. But I am in shock, and I'm fading fast. So what do you say? Be my bodyguard?'

#

Bills ran Down the center of Main street, full-tilt with a smile on her face and a furry crown on her head. She was in a prom dress and running shoes, holding high a bouquet of wild berries. Behind her was a veritable army of Sasquatch, loping along, hooting and hollering.

Some Yeti in the back kept jumping up, trying to grab the banner, but couldn't quite reach it because Gabriel and the others had lifted it high enough. This made the Mayor very happy.

Two of the Sasquatch caught up with Bills and hoisted her up, carrying her on their shoulders. More Sasquatch piled up underneath her as the crowd cheered them on.

#

Tully had finally finished his app and needed to test it out. He searched his phone and found a pic of his stepmother Kate. Tully added it to his newly finished app, iVOODOO. With it, he made a voodoo doll of his stepmother.

Tully shook his phone and heard crashing noises downstairs. Kate could be heard crying downstairs. He shook it again and heard Kate screaming in pain. It was working. The iVOODOO app was working. With a grin, Tully began shaking his phone violently until Kate's screams stopped.

#

That night, Jameson Jr. sat with his head in Sadie's lap, like he'd done when he was a child. R&D grew his arm back, but it was very sore. Sadie motherly stroked his hair, trying to comfort him, as she did when he was a child.

'I've known you since you were a naughty thought in your father's knickers.' She said in a calming voice. 'It pains me to see you suffer so.'

'Why can't she see me the way I see her?'
Asked Jameson.

'You're not talking to her, Love.'

'I make time to see her every day. I talk to her plenty.'

'Yes, but you don't talk to her heart. Lindsey is not the kind of girl you can buy with things. You have

to win her.'

'How am I supposed to do that?'

'Speak to her heart. Give her her heart's desire, and don't make a show of it, dear. Let her discover your love on her own.'

'What's her heart's desire? What does she love the most? Flowers? Exotic pets? Cheap travel, what?'

'Her reputation Love, her reputation,' Sadie said, 'that seems to be the one thing she can't get back on her own.'

'Sadie, I could kiss you.' He said, sitting up.

'Dear god, please don't.'

'You deserve a raise. I need to make some calls.'

Jameson motioned for her to get him his phone. It was then she realized he had a plan of action. He was going to win his girl, and he was going to be okay.

#

09: IVoodoo

Young Carl was hunched over his calculus, trying to figure out those nasty derivatives. He looked to his left. Samantha, his lifelong crush, was smiling at him. Carls' young heart skipped a beat or two, then he smiled uncontrollably. He couldn't help it, he had loved her since the third grade. Samantha blushed a bright red and went back to her studies. She hadn't expected him to catch her gazing at him. She felt strongly for him as-well, though no words were ever spoken. Nothing more than sweet glances across crowded rooms and hallways.

Mrs. Navon was deep in concentration, diagramming the problem on the chalkboard.

'As you can see here, we use the equation to...!' She started.

Without warning, Navon's arm jerked away from her, causing her to strike a line through her equation. A force beyond her control had taken her over. Carl looked to the left and saw Tully snickering.

'Sorry about that, class.' Mrs. Navon said. 'I'm not sure what happened.'

Navon went back to her equation, and Tully looked back down at his phone.

'We use this equation to...' She started, but her hand jerked again, this time in a different direction.

Then again, Navon's hand went flying across the chalkboard. She winced with pain, as the muscles in her body did as they pleased. The other students stared, not quite knowing what to make of it. Some found it unnervingly funny, while others were a bit scared. The only sound heard in the classroom was Tully's guttural chuckles.

As the afternoon wore on, she found it impossible to get control of her body and accomplish any sort of teaching. Giving up, Mrs. Navon finally dismissed the class early. Something wasn't right in class that day. Carl had an uneasy feeling in his gut.

As the kids left the classroom, Carl stopped at her desk.

'It's ok, Mrs. Navon. We all have bad days.' Carl said to her.

'Thanks, Carl. What's that they say? Keep fighting the good fight?'

'I've never said that, as a kid, that is,' Carl said.

'Bye Carl!' Samantha said as she quickly walked out of the classroom.

It was the first thing she's said to him, in public, at school, since his sister's wake. It took her a few days to plan it out, but she did it. Samantha would casually greet him in passing, never stopping, thus allowing for mystery to build. She also didn't have to come up with fancy small talk if she didn't stick around. A solid plan to build their relationship.

Carl couldn't help but think he was making progress in their relationship.

She was speaking to him now, in public at that. Carl felt like a smooth operator, and the troubles in class soon faded away, as his mind turned to Samantha.

#

That afternoon, Carl and some of the kids hung out at the playground. He couldn't understand why Tully wasn't with them like he always was. He hadn't seen him for a few days outside of class, so he gave him a call on his cell phone.

Tully rarely fit in with the other kids without Carl as a buffer. His room reflected his recent inner struggle with authority. It was covered by posters of death metal bands like 'Scent of Flesh' and 'Disincarnate.'

On the other hand, Carl's reflected his interest in Studio Ghibli and Pokemon. Tully pulled a drag on a cigarette he'd dug out of his stepmother's purse and blew the smoke out of the window. She didn't need them anymore. He was quickly reminded of the garden outback.

The roses Kate protected and doted over were dead. The fresh mound Tully recently made, covered with daises, looked well nourished. The bits and pieces that were left of stepmother made the ground fertile. Tully smiled, thinking of the irony.

On the back of Tully's hand was a dark black tribal tattoo. It had the texture of a birthmark but was a more recent thing to happen to him. His phone vibrated. It was Carl.

'Sup,' Tully said.

'We missed you at game night,' Carl said. 'Let me tell you, I could have used a healing spell.'

'You guys never understood, magic and religion follow rules, you don't just- Yeah, well. I've got better things to do.'

'Chess club misses you. And the robotics club. And the future programmers.'

'Does this call have a point?' Asked Tully.

'I just thought-'

'There's part of your problem right there. Stop thinking and start doing.'

'Sorry. It's just... did you do something to Mrs. Navon today?'

Tully laughed, because he didn't figure that Carl would ever catch on.

'That was pretty sweet, huh? I swear she was about to cry over those derivatives.'

'So it was-'

'Listen, I've got something to do. Talk at you later.' Tully said, ending the call.

Tully was done being lectured too by anyone; not by adults and especially another kid. Carl, needed to learn his place, and Tully had just the way to put him there. Hell, he didn't even have to go anywhere to do it, either.

Carl stood there for a moment, wildly confused by his old friends change in behavior. Suddenly, all the kids' phones lit up. Everyone got a text. Looking at their phones, they saw an animated gif image, with Carl's face, crudely pasted over one of the characters engaging in a lewd act. The kids looked at their phones and laughed, but none of them wanted to show Carl out of respect or embarrassment for him. After all, why would anyone send out something like that, if it wasn't at least half true. It did come from his best friend, after all. The kids began to look at Carl just little differently.

'Come on, guys,' Carl said to the laughing boys.

'Aw, it was nothing. Just a joke.' Brian said.

An awkward silence filled the air as they stared at each other.

Then a group of girls walked past the boys. Samantha was with them. She wasn't looking at her phone, like the other girls. She'd been staring at Carl. She'd hoped to see him again, so she could say hi again. She even hoped to ask how he was doing. She was oblivious to the scandal unfolding around her.

'Hi, Carl!' She said, waving at him.

Seeing she was talking to the kid from the text, all the girls screamed, 'EEEEWWWWW!' Becky quickly showed Samantha the reason for the uproar. Embarrassed, Samantha hit Becky with her backpack and ran off. The other girls ran after her, giggling and pointing.

#

Carl walked through the halls of school later in the week, clutching his textbooks to his chest. He could not help but notices that the other students were a little more standoffish than usual. They stared as Carl moved through the halls. As Carl got closer and closer to his next class, he began to notice that more and more of the students are wearing all black. Tully had recently started to wear black as well. Tully was now a full-on metal-head with a deep-rooted anti-establishment outlook on life. Before, Tully was awkward due to his intellect, weird social skills, and lack of tact. Somomehow he fit in with the new crew.

The kids looked more frightening and a little more goth. Some of them had the same tattoos on their hands - the same tattoo Tully was sporting lately. Carl was shocked to see Samantha, now gothed up like the others, with the tattoo on her face. She got uncomfortably close to him.

'Hey, Carl.' She said. Then she pressed her lips against his, slipped her tongue in the back of his throat, and stole his gum. It was not what he'd imagined his first kiss to be like. Nor was it what he'd thought kissing was like. Carl was in shock.

The kiss was warm, slippery, and Samantha tasted like an ashtray. It wasn't like any kiss he'd imagined, or seen on TV; then again, his channel choices were limited to kids channels. Also, it was his last piece of gum.

'Tasty,' Samantha said, chewing his gum with her mouth opened.

'Way to bring out the tiger.' Becky said.

They laughed wickedly as Carl pushed away and ran down the hall embarrassed.

#

At the end of the school day, Carl went back to Mrs. Navon's classroom. Carl looked around. It was completely empty. On the chalkboard were the words 'TUTORIALS CANCELED' and a drawing of the symbol on the back of everyone's hand. Carl stared at the emblem, slowly realizing he'd seen it before. Carl needed to get to his role playing game books at home. Carl came out of the school, heading for his bike at a determined pace. He looked at the parking lot and saw Mrs. Navon dancing what looked like a jig. A group of goth kids stood around her, smoking and jeering at her, egging her on. Some of them were fiddling with their phones. Carl scrambled onto his bike and got the hell out of there. The goth students stared and laugh at him as he pedaled away.

'Hey, lover boy!' Becky called out as he biked away. 'I want gum!'

She really did want gum. All the smoking was giving her cotton mouth. As for kissing it out Carls' mouth, she could take it or leave it.

#

On his dining room table that night, Carl had out every monster compendium, every encyclopedia of gaming, and every book on the mystic arts he had for role-playing.

Some of the books were also books of history, mythology, and the occult. The hours of research paid off. There it was, the symbol that was on the kids' hands and Samantha's face. The symbol for Bacalao, the voodoo god of possession. The outstanding feature is that he must be invited into a relationship with his worshipers. He needs to be called upon, or he has no power.

'Why would someone want that kind of spirit to come to Rainbow Falls?' He thought to himself. 'No, it wouldn't happen like this. There has to be another answer. God help me. What could it be?'

Carl bumped the table, knocking a book off. It fell open with a thud. When he looked down, and a passage jumped out to him.

'And He called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases.'

Picking up the book, he saw it was the Bible. He closed it and set it back on the table, and walked off.

#

The next day, Carl was back in class, but now he seemed to be the only one paying attention. Everyone was on their phones, clicking away. No one seemed to hear the drone that was Navon's lecture. He noticed that all the kids were dressed in black and had the tattoo somewhere on their bodies. Everyone was now in the manipulative hands of the voodoo demon. Worst of all, his sweet innocent Samantha was caught up in it. Something had to be done.

Mrs. Navon asked if everyone understood the problem and answer, but nobody cared. She moved on with her lecture. Then Carl raised his hand.

'Yes, Carl?' She asked nervously.

'Can I work an equation on the board, please?' He asked.

Tully looked up from his phone.

'No. Absolutely not. No.' She said, erasing the problem from the board.

'Please?' Carl asked.

'I'm sorry, Carl. No.' She said sternly.

'Let him do it,' Tully said.

Suddenly everyone looked up from their phones. It was quiet for a moment. Then for another. Tully's voice carried an air of authority, that everyone not dare cross.

'I said, let him do it,' Tully repeated.

'Be my guest.' She said, relenting.

Carl stood and approached the board. As he got in close, Navon leaned in for a whisper.

'You're taking your life in your own hands, you know that? I can't protect you up here.' She said, her voice cracking. She tried desperately to keep her composure.

Carl picked up a piece of chalk and begin to draw the symbol of Bacalao. He then turned back to the class.

'I know some of you have seen this symbol around a lot recently. Some of you have even marked it on yourselves. It is a cult symbol from long ago. The voodoo cult of Bacalao!'

'Carl!' Tully snapped.

Carl turned to look at Tully.

'Say, cheese buddy.' Said Tully, snapping a picture of him on his phone.

'Carl, please sit-' Started Mrs. Navon.

'Someone needs to say it. The cult practiced possession of bodies and human sacrifices! Magic and religion need to follow rules.' Carl pleaded.

Tully shook his phone lightly to the right, and Carl jerked to the right.

'All the cult members died because his hunger is insatiable!' Said Carl defiantly. 'Once he awakens, he will continue to feed until everyone is dead.'

Tully shook his phone to the left, and Carl jerked to the left.

'That's why he and his followers were isolated on the forbidden island, where he could find no other followers. He lay dormant there until Tully woke him up! It's the phone, isn't it? You did something with the phone.'

Carl flung backward into the chalkboard, pinned against the wall, as Tully held his phone firmly in front of him.

'How did you do it? How did you get all the kids to invite him in on the phone? It was the app, you created, wasn't it. You hid the soul pledge in the terms of service! No one reads the terms of service, they just blindly agree to them! You tricked everyone into selling their souls!'

Tully was angry, and started to turn his phone. Carl began to turn upside-down, scraping against the chalkboard. Tully used Carl to clean the chalkboard.

'Carl!' cried out Samantha. The mark on her face fading in and out.

Before she unwittingly gave it to Bacalao, her soul belonged to Carl, so Carl had a claim to it, whether he knew it or not.

Tully shot her a look, and she went back to looking at her phone, and her tattoo became more solid.

'Let it go, buddy,' Tully said to Carl, letting him fall to the floor. 'Let's get outta here,' he said to the other kids. 'When are we ever gonna use Calculus in the real world, anyway?'

The rest of the class stood up, and they all exited, calling Carl names as they walk out, including Samantha. Samantha called a name. She used a foul word he'd never heard, but it drew a gasp from Mrs. Navon, so it couldn't have been good.

It broke Carl's heart that she used it on him, even though he knew she wasn't in control. None of the kids were.

'At least you tried, son.' Mrs. Navon said to Carl as she walked out.

#

Carl had his tablet under the covers in his room. He also had a pocket Bible on his lap. He was looking up Bible passages that referenced demons, looking for the one that stood out to him earlier in the week. Carl heard his mom come into the room.

'I know, ma, it's late. Light's out. You don't have to tell me.'

Carl pulled the covers off his head, and instead of seeing his mother in the darkness, he saw the cultist kids. They were all in grass skirts and dark hoodies that covered their faces. One of them pulled back his hood to reveal that it was Tully.

#

Carl struggled against his bonds as he stood, tied to a post, surrounded by kindling. In the distance behind him, a group of cultists, led by Tully, finished their ritual.

'Rise! Rise great, Bacalao! Rise and devour the human sacrifice we've prepared for you.' Tully said.

A puff of smoke arose in front of the cultists and out stepped the over-sized demonic spirit of Bacalao, made of flame, smoke, and disturbingly longhorns!

'Congregabit satellitibus.' The demon said.

Tully tried to present the sacrifice, but the demon howled and growled, causing all to cringe in fear. Everyone stepped away, leaving a tied-up Carl exposed to Bacalao.

'Excuse me, Mr. Bacalao? Sir?' Carl said.

Eerily, Bacalao closed the gap between himself and Carl. He emitted a low growl. The smell of sulfur, burnt bacon, and road kill was overpowering.

'I just wanted to sing you a song,' Carl said and began to call out in Latin. 'Deus magnus et potens, unum verum Deum. Gloria ad eius nomen. Tenebris fugit lux, et FAVEO ad eius potestatem!'

Bacalao screamed in pain. All the cultists dropped to their knees, bowing to their voodoo god. Bacalao enveloped Carl within himself.

'Yes!' Tully cried out.

Then Bacalao backed off of Carl, revealing that he'd been untied.

'Nooo!' Tully screamed. 'He's the sacrifice! I'm the high priest. I made the voodoo doll app that brought all these followers to you! I'm in charge! Eat him!'

In an instant, Bacalao swooped down and swallowed Tully whole. The cultists all screamed in fear. Carl cried out!

'I command you to free them from their bonds, remove their memories of you, and send them safely home.' Stated Carl firmly.

Bacalao utters a low grumble. Suddenly all the phones fizzled and sparked. The tattoos vanished, and the cultists rose up calmly and walked away. But a tendril swiped out and grabbed Samantha and brought her back.

'Three wishes, done. Now you pay bargain.' Bacalao said.

'No! Not her! Me! You have to eat me!' Carl said.

Samantha screamed in fear of losing Carl. A tattoo burned onto Carl's face.

'You soul I have. Nothing you can offer.'

Bacalao lifted her up above his mouth, ready to eat her whole. Samantha cried in fear.

'Just let her go!' Carl demanded. 'I promise it's worth it. Trust me.'

Bacalao set her down. She ran to Carl and hugged him.

'Carl I,' She started.

'I know me too. Go.' Carl said.

Samantha ran off into the night. Bacalao wrapped his smokey tendrils around Carl and lifted him into the air, squeezing tightly.

'Lord, please forgive me for dealing with this false idol,' Carl said in prayer. 'I repent of my sin. You are not a voodoo god, demon! Lies!'

Bacalao screeched in pain.

'It is written, 'Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.' You demon have not the Son! You hold no power over me!'

Bacalao swallowed Carl whole.

'In the name of Jesus, I cast you out!' Carl said from within the demon.

Bacalao arose in a puff of fire and light and raced into the trees. Carl fell to the ground, the Bible falling out of clothes. The trees rustle, and a flock of crows flew away.

'Forgive me, Lord. Forgive me.' Carl said, dropping to his knees to pray.

Carl had bet everything on two ideas: The first was that Bacalao was in fact a demon, not a voodoo god. The second had more to do with what Tully had said 'Magic and Religion must follow rules.' According to every book he read in the Bible, and he didn't read them all, God had power over demons and devils.

It was God they obeyed, even though they lied to humans, if God said jump into a pig and die, the demon would do it. It even worked when non followers or believers cast out demons in his name. Carl reasoned the demon would obey. Even in that JOB story, the devil got permission first.

Carl figured he owed a few prayers of thanks for all the kids lives that were saved, through no power of his own.

#

Samantha was devastated and brokenhearted as she walked home, crying. Unlike the other kids, who were sent on their way, she remembered everything she'd done, the way she acted, and just what had happened that night in the woods. She was devastated at the loss of Carl but also thrilled at his bravery and courage. Also, she finally knew he felt the same way she did. She'd found a true love that would give up everything for her, and he did. Now he was gone.

The only thing she had to remember him by was the kiss they shared and just thinking of how that went down brought her guilt and shame. She was so caught up in her grief that she didn't notice Carl running up behind her as she got to her house.

'Samantha!' Carl called out.

'Carl!' She called back.

They hugged. Samantha still smelled of cigarettes, and Carl smelled like a forest fire and sulfur.

'You're safe.' She cooed in his ear.

'It's over now.' He comforted.

Buford then opened the door to the house.

'Samantha! Get inside, now!' Buford yelled across the lawn.

'Dad!' Samantha yelled back.

'The fish guy's your dad?' Carl asked.

'Not helping Tiger.' She whispered back.

'Tiger?' Carl whispered back.

'You like?'

'Yea.' Carl said leaning in for a second kiss.

'You're Dr. Stern's boy, aren't you?' Questioned Buford. Carl nodded yes, remembering his place.

'What's up with your face?' Asked Buford about the tattoo on Carl.

Carl realized he now had the tattoo. Suddenly the tattoo burned away in wisps of smoke.

'I gotta go,' Carl said, running off.

'Call me!' Yelled Samantha.

Buford shot her a look, then she eked and ran into the house. Wacky kids, thought Buford to himself, following Samantha into the house.

The kids went back to normal at school. Kate and Tully hadn't been seen for a while. Everyone assumed they joined Tully's father overseas or that they were all together somewhere. They were together.

#

Jameson II laid in his bed trying to read a book as the lights grow dim in the Indonesian sunset.

'Lights.' He called, but the lights stayed on.

'Lights!' He yelled, but nothing happened.

Frustrated, Jameson II put his book down and clapped his hands twice. He came to his senses, again. He realized his son has eliminated him to take control of the company. He realized that his son had used the Lewis device on him.

Jameson II got up and went to his desk, and pulled out a gun. The butler would be there any moment. When the butler came in with an Italian soda on a tray, Jameson Sr. turned and shot him. The butler tried to say butterscotch, but he shot him four more times.

'You're fired.' Jameson II said. 'So Junior wants to play with the big boys. Well, I've got a surprise for you, boy. Daddy's coming home.'

#

10: Questions; Lots of Questions

Tori was having nightmares again. She woke up screaming, covered in sweat. Her fever had broken, but she was far from in the clear. A nurse rushed into the cold observation room.

'Shh. it's okay.' Comforted the nurse.

'Where am I?' Asked Tori.

'Safe.' The nurse said.

She prepared a sedative.

'Is this a hospital? Where's my mother?'

'There will be time for questions later.'

'A zombie killed me.' Tori realized. 'I was dead.'

'Having more nightmares?'

'That wasn't a dream. It tore off my arm!' Tori yelled, holding up her arm. It was in bandages but still there, attached to her. Tori cradled it and checks for soreness. How could it have been a dream, she remembered the pain of being eaten alive.

'What woke you, dear?' Asked the nurse.

'Dreaming, or remembering,' Tori said, trying to recollect. 'I was a dinosaur, made of goo or slime or something. I was eating people. We ate so many people. Then we were trapped in a submarine at the Museum. We were sick.'

'They're just dreams, dear. Go back to sleep.' Said the nurse, injecting the sedative into her IV.

'I'm telling you I was dead. Check Rick's camera! He filmed us all dying.' Rick was dead, Lisa was dead, and Gabriel- where was Gabriel, she thought as her mind began to fade.

The nurse left the room. Tori saw the bandage on her leg. Where she was bitten by the zombie. The zombie that had been powered by Slimongous. She tried to rub the ache out of it, but it didn't help.

'We all died,' Tori remembered to herself. Soon she was asleep again.

#

'She's starting to remember.' The nurse said, in the hallway to Dr. Howard and Dr. Stern.

'That's not good.' Dr. Howard said.

'Well, it gets better.' The nurse said. 'She's remembering the Museum incident. She also remembers dying in the zombie attack.'

'Note it in the log.' Said Dr. Howard. 'Keep her sedated. Move her to isolation in the morning.'

'Yes, Sir.' She said and walked away.

'Do you know what this means?' Asked Dr. Stern.

'Traces of the cellular colony have somehow incorporated her DNA. The assimilation seems to be in reverse. The human DNA is dominant, where the cellular organism has taken a subservient symbiotic role. Is it possible the Rejuvinex Mark-3 made gene splicing possible?'

'It means there's still hope for my Lisa.' Said Dr. Stern.

Dr. Howard Glared at Dr. Stern, knowing how singularly determined he could be.

#

Down in the cloning lab, Dr. Howard and Dr. Stern look up at a frozen Lisa in a glass tube. They'd brought her there, and let her heal, courtesy of the Slimongous organism, like they did with Tori. Unlike Tori, the Slimongous was more dominant in Lisa, so they put her in stasis to keep the organism at bay.

They were very hopeful they would succeed in eventually separating the girls from the alien organism. Yet Howard was more cautious, and Stern was more optimistic. If the experiments failed, they would have to destroy Tori, if it meant saving Lisa.

'We can't play God.' Dr. Howard said.

'We do it all the time.'

'She's stable, but she's still subservient to the organism. Bringing her out now would be a mistake. We need to be able to separate the alien entity from the girls.'

'Agreed.' Said Dr. Stern. 'But once I figure out how, I'll have my Lisa.'

The console beeped. A readout came across the screen.

Pod 12a...

Female -- age 42, donor..

Female -- age 15, subject, 25% complete...

'Did you-' Started Dr. Stern.

'No.' Said Dr. Howard.

They look through the files and found the cloning was authorized by Junior Jameson Sr.

They turn the camera on in pod 12a. The Doctors see on the screen what looks like a young Sadie in the cloning pod.

'We could clone them.' Stern said.

'Not without a clean DNA sample. We'd be cloning the entity as well.'

#

Mayor Vic sat next to Jameson Jr. on the park bench.

'What's this all about?' Asked Jameson.

'I was going over some of the paperwork for the new poultry facility.'

'We always pass with flying colors.' Said Jameson.

'6 safety inspections, each with almost exactly identical scores. Not to mention the legislation your uncle Constantino pushed past the senate. I know what's going on, Junior.'

'I think you're wrong here, Mayor.'

'I'm never wrong, Junior.'

'Don't call me Junior.'

'That's your name.'

'Middle name. Jameson Junior Jameson- the third. If you want to shake me down, that's fine, but don't talk down to me!'

'Whatever you want, son.'

'Make your pitch. I have a plane to catch in an hour.'

'I want you to buy Rolly a job outside of Rainbow Falls. Get him as far away from here as possible.' The Mayor said.

'My day just keeps getting better.'

#

Lindsey was working out a formula on the whiteboard for fowl DNA regression, when she got a call from Dr. Husky. A former colleague who threw her under the bus for the squirrel paper fiasco. She never blamed him, he had a family and tenure to protect.

'Lindsey! It's Husky. I'm in the Arctic; listen, I know I'm the last person you want to hear from but we found them. About twenty nested in the belly of a Mammoth.' Dr. Husky over the phone.

The line was filled with static.

'What are you talking about?' Lindsey asked.

'Interfectorem sciurus. We found your squirrels, Lindsey! We found your killer squirrels! They're intact and perfectly preserved, in the belly of the beast. You were right all along girl! Your Killer Squirrel theory is correct!'

'I was right? I was right! Wait, have you examined the stomach contents of the squirrels?'

'They're still in the ice. The recovery process is under way. Ultrasonic 3D Imaging shows the squirrels clear as day. We're not doing anything until you get here. come to the Arctic.'

'What? Are you kidding me? Get out! This could clear my name in the scientific community. Restore my career.'

'I just spoke with our corporate backer, and he wants you in on this. Here's the thing, you have to come now. I can have you on the next flight out of Houston. All you have to do is say the word.'

Lindsey thought for a moment. She'd just resolved to her situation, her reputation, and her relationship with Sheriff Rolly Vic. This, however, was a discovery of a lifetime, one that could bring her redemption, recognition, and the kind of success she'd dreamed of.

'Lindsey? You there?' Asked Dr. Husky, but there was silence on the other end of the line.

#

Buford was working on a machine when Todd came around the corner, holding a fishbowl. Buford saw him and recognizes the Master Fish in the bowl.

Oh man, Buford thought to himself. He turned to walk off the other way but stopped when he saw the humongous Shark-fish behind him.

'That's new,' Buford said.

'Oh yes, my former and future minion,' Todd said for the Master Fish. 'Unlike you pathetic bipeds, I learn from my mistakes. The Master Fish is back, and this time it's very personal.'

'What do you want from me?' Asked Buford.

'I'm glad you asked,' Todd said. 'I've got plans for you and this humanoid settlement, and it all starts with you bringing up my kin like you did before. Then we will--'

'You've got a monologue prepared, don't you.' Interrupted Buford.

'What does that have to do with anything?' Asked Todd.

'Just eat me.' Said Buford, turning and walking towards the Shark-Fish.

#

Lindsey met with Rolly at the Roadhouse. Bills sat at the counter nearby.

'I have some exciting news!' Lindsey bubbled.

'Me too,' Rolly said.

'I'm leaving.'

'Before we eat?'

'Rolly, they found the squirrels. I was right. This whole time, I was right! I need to be there when they dig up the find of the century.'

'That is great news! I'm so happy for you, babe. How long will that take? I only have an hour for lunch.'

'She's leaving you babe, for a dead squirrel.' Said Bills as she walked out of the Roadhouse.

'Oh.' Said Rolly, piecing it together.

'What's your news?' Asked Lindsey.

Rolly timidly placed an open jewelry box on the table in front of her, a diamond ring shimmering in the light.

'Oh, no,' Lindsey said, considering the timing of it all.

'Not how I expected this to go,' Rolly said, leaning back in his chair. A tear welled up in his eye.

'Oh, Rolly.' She said. It didn't sound like yes to Rolly.

He'd misread situations before, when it came to matters of the opposite sex. He'd made a fool of himself before, when it came to matters of the heart. One especially cruel Senior prom, his date Jana left with Allen, and without telling him. He searched for her the whole night. When the band packed up, and he stood there alone in the school gym, it was the most alone he'd ever felt. That is until now.

But he knew Lindsey loved him. He knew he loved her. They were great together, like well fitting gloves, and equally proportionate hands. He had to make sure she knew what the situation was before it was too late.

'I got a job offer in Dallas. It's good money and no monsters, from what I hear. I just thought you and I could be regular folks, you know, together, somewhere other than here.' Rolly sheepishly said.

'Please don't ask me to choose, Rolly.'

The waitress walks up with the menus.

'I love you, Lindsey Deer. Will you marry me?'

'You love birds ready?' Asked the waitress.

'Can we talk about this when we get back?'

Asked Lindsey.

'No? I'll give you a few more minutes.' The Waitress said.

That was the second time she didn't say yes.

#

Mr. Jingles walked into the Waddles Mirror Emporium. He was on a mission, and he needed to prepare for the worst. The Old Lady pretended not to see him. Jingles went to the back and faced the portal mirror. It reminded him of the first time he'd left his home dimension.

He was lost to time and space, making his way from one universe to another, trying to make his way back home.

He turned the mirror on its back, then broke it. Mr. Jingles bent down and picked up a piece of the shattered mirror, about the size of his palm. He then put it in a velvet bag. This would come in handy. He wasn't sure when, but he knew he needed it. That mirror needed to be broken anyway. As Mr. Jingles walked out the front door, the Old Lady said, 'Thank you.'

Mr. Jingles stopped. He turned and slowly walked to the counter. He placed a card on the counter and left the Emporium. The card reads, 'You are welcome.'

'What a polite young man.' She said to herself.

#

Jameson Sr. sat at his desk in the dark. He was waiting to confront his son, who abandoned him to the badlands of Indonesia. That boy was going to get a stern talking to.

Sadie walked in with a pistol in hand.

'I don't know who you are,' she said into the darkness, 'but office hours are from nine am to five pm.'

'Lights.' Jameson Sr. said.

A feeling of satisfaction washed over his face as the lights came on. He'd been waiting to do that for over two years. Sadie seemed thrilled to see him.

'Sir! Thank God, you've come home!' She said, slipping the gun in her thigh holster.

'Where's the boy?'

'Business trip Sir. Oh, it's a pleasure to see you again. Let me get you something.'

She went to the bar to pour a drink.

'That won't be necessary.'

'Perhaps a candy then?' She said. 'There's a

bowl on the table completely filled with-butterscotch.'

She waited with anticipation for the Lewis device to kick in.

Jameson Jr. raised an eyebrow, then tossed a bag on the table with tiny metal beads in it. Her smile turned to a frown. There was the Lewis device in a bag, not in Jameson Sr.'s cerebral cortex. It was now clear to Jameson Sr. that it was not the boy who sabotaged him and took over his company. It was clear to Sadie that he was on to her scheme.

'Well, that breaks my heart.' Jameson Sr. said. 'I was quite proud of how he took me down to take my place. Oh well, Sadie, my love, you've been a naughty girl.'

Sadie simply smiled and drew the gun once again.

'The lads much more malleable than you ever were, Sir. I've accomplished so much since you've been gone. I've also learned more than you ever wanted me to. I am almost sorry Junior missed you. He'll never know just how close he was to seeing you alive.'

Jameson leaned back in his comfortable chair and smiled a knowing smile.

'You don't have it in you, or you would have killed me years ago.' He said with a smile. At first he was worried she'd actually found out his secret, but it was now clear she had no idea there was an implant in her head keeping her from killing him.

'Try me.' She said with unknowing confidence.

'Oh, I will. Lights!'

The lights went out and gunshots rang out. Security alarms went off, and the entire complex was bathed in red auxiliary lights.

#

Dee was a security guard at the Lab when the

fish invaded the town. It was her first experience with body possession. She didn't like it at all.

She was still there when the zombies invaded, and worked the truck detail when the bodies were brought in for processing. She didn't like that either.

Dee decided to transfer to a less stressful position, so they moved her to the Museum, where it's been quiet since Dee got there. It was after the Slimongous incident, so the museum could be counted off the 'disaster pending' list. Dee made her rounds, confident all would be quiet.

Tori watched the security guard until she was gone, from behind an exhibit. Tori was still wearing her hospital gown and bandages. The nurse would be checking on her soon, and find her gone. Tori didn't have much time. She looked up in the main hall and saw what she was looking for; the submarine hanging from the ceiling.

I was sick, she thought out loud.

Tori moved with outstanding efficiency and stealth and quickly made it up to the hatch, where she opened it.

The inside of the sub began to glow a pale green. There wasn't much light. It was dying and needed human DNA to adapt to this planet. The sludge swirled around as Tori smiled from ear to ear. Soon she would be whole once again.

'Hi.' She said in a chipper, cheer leader voice.

#

11: Squirrels

Lindsey Deer sat comfortably in the Piper M350, making notes and getting her gear together. What a thrill it was finally seeing her work pay off. All she could think about was her theories finally taken seriously.

Then she came across a photo of her and Rolly at the fair. Her emotions ran wild. She'd left behind the most wonderful, bravest man she'd ever known. He loved her and had a ring to prove he expected to love her forever. But she was on a plane to Antarctica and left him back in Rainbow Falls, Texas. She willed up for a moment, then hid the picture, composing herself.

This was no time for emotional outbreaks. The discovery of her career was quickly approaching. The cold winds lifted dusty clouds of snow off the icy peaks as the charter plane cut through the clouds.

'We're almost there.' Said the gruff bush pilot. 'You've got the chute on, right?'

'I, I don't see the landing strip,' Lindsey said.

She didn't comprehend why she needed to have her shoot on, so early in the flight, and so far from the encampment.

'Don't worry. The chute opens automatically, most of the time.' Said the pilot.

'Wait, what?' She asked right before the pilot shoved her out the door.

She screamed, coming out of the plane. Then she shrieked again when her parachute deployed.

'What about my stuff!?!' She screeched as the plane pulled off.

She knew the pilot couldn't hear her from the plane, but she just had to ask. Then right on queue, her bags were tossed out of the still moving plane, hooked to smaller chutes.

'That's a big help!' She yelled as she drifted down to the icy basin.

Later Lindsey sat on her luggage in the heart of the polar tundra. She was angry, cold, alone and way too far out of her comfort zone. She missed Rolly. Rolly was warm. Rolly wouldn't have let anyone throw her from a plane. Rolly just wanted to keep her safe, love on her, grow old with her, just be with her. 'Maybe,' she said to herself, 'this was a mistake.'

Off in the distance, Lindsey saw a Jeep crest the hill and travel towards her. She couldn't worry about Rolly anymore, he would have to wait. He'd wait for her, lord knows she'd waited for him plenty of times. He'd be there when she got back, and they'd work things out. She'd go with him to Dallas, and he'd go with her to Geneva, when the Nobel committee called on her.

When the Jeep reached her, Dr. Husky stepped out, grinning like a kid at a mouse themed pizza parlor. Lindsey wasn't happy.

Things were not playing out as she had hoped. 'How impressive, your plane was early. I hope you landed well?' Dr. Husky said.

'I peed myself on the way down.' Lindsey declared. '3 layers of clothing are now frozen together.'

'We get that often. Let's get you warmed up. Shall we go?' Invited Dr. Husky.

As Lindsey stood, several crackling bits of yellow ice fell to the ground from her lap.

#

As they approached the Antarctic research center, Lindsey was amazed at the size of it all. Several inter-connected buildings, raised above the ground on legs, connected by gantries and tubes. It was powered by a combination of solar cells, wind turbines, and backup diesel generators. There were crew cabins, labs, research centers, and everything one could think of. It was reminiscent of the British run Haley VI, if only slightly tinier.

Later, in the research lab, Dr. Husky lead Lindsey to a room with a woolly Mammoth on its side. Its belly was shaved. Everyone was in personal protective equipment and ready to engage in science.

'We are ready to begin the procedure.' Said the lab assistant.

Dr. Husky turned to Lindsey. She took a deep breath.

'Let's begin,' Lindsey said, and the science team went to work, opening up the mammoth.

With caution and precision, the stripped-back layers of skin, fat, and muscle, being sure to label and catalog every sample for testing. They moved on to the organs. Some of the organs were intact, while others were partially consumed. Then they found a cavity.

In the cavity, they found squirrels. Twenty of them frozen along with the mammoth. A further examination found the insertion point of the squirrels, who appeared to have burrowed into the mammoth. They carefully removed them and set them on a tray.

Each specimen was tagged and labeled for shipping, to labs across the globe, specializing in different aspects of forensic pathology. Two were shipped to Jameson Industries so Lindsey could do her own follow up. A few were tagged for preliminary studies there at base camp, but with twenty specimens, there were plenty to go around. After the procedure, Lindsey and Husky washed up in the clean room.

'What a tremendous find.' She beamed. 'This will change the entire debate about dinosaurs and mammals. I'm free.'

'Are you hungry?' Dr. Husky asked.

'Famished. I haven't eaten since New Zealand.' She said.

'Good. Dress nice. It's time you meet our benefactor.'

'He's here? Why?'

'To meet you, of course. He's a big fan.'

#

Lindsey walked into the common room to see a candle-lit table set for two. It was an intimate setting for her business dinner. It's not uncommon for a corporate sponsor to meet with a lead researcher. It's a way to hear about where your money is being spent, directly from the horse's mouth. But Lindsey never filed any applications, or even spear headed this expedition. Every detail was put in place for her, and she brought in to do the final work. She was just as curious to meet this mystery benefactor as the benefactor was to meet her.

She approached the table and sat down in time to see Jameson Jr. walk into the room. He was well dressed, and approached with caution. His heart pounded in his chest, with his final play in motion.

'Hi.' He said.

Millions spent in a matter of weeks. Ridiculous pay scales extorted in order to get these workers in place. Millions more in bribes and permit fees just to be able to set foot in the Antarctic. All was done so that Jameson could see the look on her face when she finally closed in on her one true dream.

'What the hell?' She exclaimed. 'Are you crazy following me here? You have to go, now! This is an essential dinner for me!'

Simple math seemed to be lost on Lindsey. $1+1=2$, $a+b=c$. Like any reality show, this was the big reveal moment of Junior Jameson Jr. III as the mysterious benefactor. The 'I never saw that coming' moment in every must watch TV scenario.

'I came to have dinner with you.' He stated.

'You can't stay, Junior. The benefactor will be here any min--' She started, but the wheels in her head finally put two and two together.

Jameson was the benefactor. In a moment of synchronicity, both of their hearts sank as the situation played out differently as expected.

'You?' She asked.

Jameson Jr. looks at his watch, then back at Lindsey with a smile.

'It's Tuesday in Rainbow Falls. Happy Birthday.' He said.

She walked over to him cautiously.

'What is this?'

'All this is for you, Lindsey. The entire dig and its research, I funded it for you. So I could give you what you valued most. Your name and place in the scientific community.'

Why? Why would this narcissistic, self entitled, rich kid brat do so much for someone he barely even knew? He'd manipulated her before. She was even sure he sabotaged her research, and infected her with nanobots, though she had no proof. The stories of how non-trust worthy the Jameson family was had played out on more than one occasion. Yet she was completely overwhelmed by the fact that her reputation and career were just restored as a birthday gift.

'No, there's an angle here. What's the catch?' She probed.

'No catch. Well, one. Dinner.'

'This is too much.' She said, sitting at the candle-lit table.

'If you haven't noticed, I kind of sort of love you. And I'm erratic, impulsive & rich.'

The two shared an awkward laugh, at the equally sweet and scary thought.

'I don't get you.' She said.

'You don't have to. Have dinner with me, then I'm gone. Take the squirrels and run with them. Make a new name for yourself. All I want is to see you happy.'

Lindsey always felt she was a good judge of character, and somehow Junior seemed different. He was being honest, vulnerable, giving and loving. She'd never seen him in this light before. She was seeing something in him she'd never seen before. What she saw was very attractive by candle light.

'I, I, don't know what to say.'

'Say you're ready to eat.'

With a snap of his fingers, an army of servers head into the room, setting the two up with small salads and a basket of bread. Lindsey smiled and then squealed.

#

The sun was setting over Rainbow Falls. For the first time in a while, there was a quiet calm over the town. The only disturbance lately was the playlist coming from Tia's convertible, as she and Gabriel got more and more friendly. She and her squad came into town more often.

Bills sat with Rolly eating a late dinner. She was trying to take his mind off of things. Lindsey said no to his proposal, and set off on her own adventure. Not so much a no as it was a not yet. But since she was out of town on her birthday, Rolly had a deeper case of the blues. Bill had to work extra hard to keep his mind off of things.

The Mayor sat at the bar while Handsome made him drinks. He'd gotten better of the last few weeks and was running the Roadhouse like the Handsome of old.

'So I said to the little bald gray dude,' Bills continued her story, 'I said, no papers? Well, I guess that makes you an illegal alien.'

Both laughed, forgetting any personal troubles. Suddenly an icy chill overcame Rolly. The hairs on his arm stood on end. A hollow feeling fell over him, and his breathing became shallow, and a pang of sadness washed over him. It was as if his heart was breaking. It was as if someone had pushed him off a cliff and there was no getting back to where he was. He'd lost something precious.

'Rolly babe, what's wrong?' Asked Bills.

'I don't know, but I- I feel like a part of my heart just died. I want to cry, but I don't know why.'

The Mayor turned to see his son in trouble. He didn't see the hulking man that faced danger daily. He saw his baby boy who needed a new diaper, his five-year-old who fell off the bike and skinned his knee, his teenager whose prom date left with another boy. His son needed him, so he walked over to him. As any father would.

'Son? You okay?' Asked the Mayor.

'No, I'm not. I think something happened to Lindsey. She's in some kind of trouble.'

'That's just separation anxiety, son. I'm sure where ever she is, she's having a blast.'

#

Jameson Jr. laid next to a modified Lindsey under some kind of animal fur in his cabin. A huge grin on his face. Lindsey was pale and overcome with buyer's remorse.

'That was the best three and a half minutes of my life.' He said.

'Shut up. I need to think.'

'I love--'

'I said shut it!' She snapped, getting out of bed. 'Never ever speak of this to anyone. Understand? I need to go home.'

'Of course, let's go home. We need to share our love with the town.'

'Absolutely not! This never happened.'

It didn't work. Juniors' plan didn't work. Lindsey didn't love him like he loved her. All the work, all the planning, all the money wasn't enough to win her over. Jameson Jr. was heartbroken.

'I'll arrange a plane tonight.' He said, getting out of bed. 'No catch. Remember?'

#

12:

Shark Attack

All was quiet in the suburbs of Rainbow Falls. No one had grown 50 feet tall, and no lizard ate the town. It was oddly quiet. The Mayor took it as a win and began to look forward and make mental notes. He'd been making big plans. Squatchfest made big money, and the annual 'Inland Luau' did very well, and so the Mayor looked to expand tourism, as the town's sesquicentennial was coming up soon. He poured himself a scotch and knocked it back, considering the options. He poured himself another when there was a knock at the door.

He did have misgivings about sending Rolly away. But Morgan was going to need all his attention, and she didn't want Rolly to see her when she was sick with Chemo. He may have been the Mayor, but what Morgan wanted, she got. If she wanted Rolly shielded from her pain, then that's what was going to happen.

The big old house was always quiet and cold, but it seemed more so without his dear Morgan. He could hear every creak, every cranny, every sound inside and out. It was so quiet, a knock on the door rang through the whole house.

'Mayor?' Said Buford through the door, faking a strange voice. 'I am from the concerned citizens for animal cruelty. Can I talk to you about making a campaign contribution?'

'I always make time for concerned contributors.' The Mayor said, opening the door.

A land shark barreled in, backing the Mayor into the center of the living room. A second land shark then entered, flanked by Buford holding the Master Fish.

'Miss me?' Said Buford for the fish.

The Mayor calculated his options and poured a second scotch, offering it to the fishbowl.

'Would you care for a drink?' Offered the Mayor.

'I'm afraid alcohol leaves me dehydrated.' Said Buford.

One of the land sharks snarled at the Mayor and moved between the drink and Master Fish.

'Which means I go to plan B.' The Mayor said.

Plan B was to keep drinking. He knocked back the scotch he poured for the fish.

'Don't hurt yourself too much. I need you to sound the alarm and gather up all of your people.'

'Supposed I don't. Are your friends going to eat me? Go ahead.' He said, pouring himself another drink.

'My friends will eat your wife. Check and mate.'

'She isn't home. You don't even know where she is. I don't mind dying, so.. out of check.'

'County hospital, room 334. I have a school of fish headed there now.'

The Mayor stared at the fishbowl, shocked at the revelation. He poured himself another drink.

'Call your fish back. She stays safe, or you get nothing from me.' Countered the Mayor.

#

Bills enjoyed the quiet of the evening. She drove around town in her squad car, performing her nightly patrol, talking to Rolly on the radio.

'That's a terrible name for a movie!' Bills said.

'Not true,' Rolly said over the radio. 'All of the best movie titles are names of the main character. Like Forrest Gump, Citizen Kane, or K-9. So if they were going to make a movie about my life, I'd want it to be titled 'Rolly Vic.'

'That's nine kinds of sad, Rolly.'

'Fine. If they were going to make a movie about your life, what would you call it?'

'Everybody Wins. And at the end of the movie, everybody wins.'

Then something caught Bill's eye as she passed the Mayor's house. She slowed her driving to get a better look.

'Now that I think of it, maybe my movie could be called something like 'Thunder Fists' or 'Punchy Mc Punch Punch.' What do you think, Bills?'

'First of all, Rolly, you don't even have thunder fists. Second, is the Mayor having one of his theme parties tonight?'

'Not that I reckon.'

'I have a possible 10-14 at the Mayor's house. If you don't hear from me in ten minutes, send back up.'

'Roger that. And Bills?'

'What is it, Rolly?'

'Be careful.'

Bills got out of the car and maneuvered closer and closer to the Mayor's house, keeping to the shadows.

Back at the dispatch office, Rolly stared at the dispatcher's mic for a moment. He had a bad feeling, so he stood and put on his holster. He wasn't waiting.

#

The Mayor sat at his desk with a giant red button in front of him. Buford and the fish folk watching on.

'When you call the emergency meeting, everyone will flood into the streets, where my lovelies will be waiting for them. And I will finally have my revenge on at accursed Rolly Vic!' Buford said, for the Master Fish.

'Wait. This is all about Rolly?'

'Do not utter the name of the wicked one without permission, Mayor!'

'If you really wanted to hurt Rolly, all you have to do is get his girlfriend.'

'His weakness is the love of a good woman? Of course! I should have known! Summon this woman to me.'

'I'm afraid she's in Antarctica.'

'Antarctica?'

'On a research trip. So what you need to do is round up all of your beasties and go there.'

'Hmmm... Let me think this through.'

'Nobody move!' Yelled Bills as she burst into the Mayor's home office.

She wasn't ready to see what she saw. The fish wasn't expecting company, and was caught off guard.

The Mayor took the opportunity to throw his scotch at the land sharks. They growled in pain as the alcohol burned and dehydrated their skin.

It was the first time they'd felt discomfort intentionally inflicted on them. Their feelings were hurt.

'Run!' The Mayor yelled, but it is too late. In one fell swoop, a shark swallowed Bills whole.

'Mayor, even for a politician, you are spectacularly stupid.' Said Buford as he pushed the red button on the Mayor's desk.

The other shark swallowed the Mayor whole.

#

The lights were out in Jameson's office. The senior Jameson hid in a corner.

'Lights.' He called out. But the lights came on red.

'Intruder alert,' Sadie said over the intercom system. 'The main office breached.'

'Seriously, Sadie. You had everything a decent person could want!' Jameson Sr. yelled in frustration. 'A job. A home. The occasional pork chop. Why would you want to throw something like that away?'

'Because someone like you should die alone without all the answers.'

'Sadie, how about a truce? I promise, just stop doing whatever it is you're doing, and all is forgiven.'

A hum rang out from the ceiling as a small door opened. Tiny clicking robot bugs fell in clusters to the floor from the hole in the ceiling—thousands of them. Sparks flew from their taser pincers.

'I know how you love your security systems, Sir.' She said via the PA system. 'All of your little traps and your cockroach robot warriors. They're hard to reprogram, but it can be done. And now, the number one thing they are set to destroy... is you.'

Jameson Sr. broke for the desk and hopped up as the little pieces of gross robots began to engulf one piece of furniture at a time. Sadie starts to laugh as she watched via the monitor.

Her laugh echoed through the halls of the office as the town's emergency sirens began to wail.

#

The sirens pierced the night air. The town was in chaos. People were running through the streets, being pursued by giant land sharks.

Gabriel and Tia were parked at Willow Lake in her red convertible, looking up at the stars. Gabriel was fiddling with his mother's camera, trying to get the night vision to work.

Tia was amazed at the craziness this town had to offer, and the casual way everyone took it, as if it was just another day. If she was in Austin, or any place else that had 5G, the sirens would send everyone looking for shelter. But nothing seemed to phase Gabriel. It was just another night.

'What's that?' Tia asked, about the sirens.

'Oh, that's just the emergency alarm calling all the townsfolk in.' Gabriel said.

As far as he knew, it was like the 5k run. Just the Mayor trying to prepare the town for the worst. But things never reached 'worst' level, even when he had to hide among a horde of zombies.

'Is that normal?'

'Happens all the time.'

Some splashing caught her attention, so she looked towards the lake. She saw multiple land sharks emerging from the lake.

'Is THAT normal?' She asked, pointing at walking shark invasion, rising from the deep.

'Yeah, um, no. That is not normal.' Gabriel replied, setting the camera down and starting the car.

Perhaps that night was the night things got worse for Rainbow Falls.

#

It was an invasion, and Jingles had seen it before, but not in this reality. Not here in his home universe. The migrating Sasquatch, and the mirror in waddles proved to Jingles that the Omni-Void was thinning the veils of the multiverse.

Thus allowing cross contamination from invasive species who cross from one world to another with impunity.

Jingles saw that the Roadhouse was a mess as he walked in. Tables were upturned, and chairs were askew. Mr. Jingles wandered through the rubble, kicking a glass out of the way with his humongous clown feet.

Jingles also knew about the species known colloquially as Handsome. He was familiar with their kind, and their views on the Omni-Void. They were not to be trusted. Their presence there in Rainbow Falls, however, would have to be dealt with at a later date. First things first.

He scanned the wreckage and then spied what he was looking for, a bottle of booze. A faint clown smile crosses Mr. Jingles' face as he reached out for the bottle on the wall, but then he heard a whimper. Mr. Jingles grabbed the bottle and whirled around, eyes darting from corner to corner.

Then he saw it—a little makeshift fort made out of a table and some chairs. Mr. Jingles walked over to the fort and slid one of the chairs out to peek in. It was the boy Adam from earlier that day. The boy was obviously frightened.

Mr. Jingles smiled and gave a little wave for Adam to come to him. Instead, the boy hunkered down. Mr. Jingles offered his hand, giving a little 'come here' gesture. The boy reached out. They clasped hands, and Mr. Jingles pulled the boy out of the fort.

'I'm hungry,' Adam said.

Mr. Jingles nods, then held up a rubber chicken. Prop comedy was his specialty.

'Still not funny.'

Jingles tossed the chicken aside, and it bounced with a squeak. Not everyone could appreciate a good prop. Jingles started to escort the boy into the kitchen. As soon as they open the kitchen door, they saw a shark standing there swallowing all of the food. It would regurgitate anything that wasn't plant based, but it continued to sample everything.

Mr. Jingles turned to the boy and raised a single finger to his lips in a shushing gesture. Then he turned and flawlessly lobbed the bottle of booze at the shark. The bottle shattered, covering the shark with alcohol and glass. The shark began to cry in pain before it turned to charge them.

Jingles pulled a spray can from his coat. It was a can of Shark Spray. He'd used it on Legis-12 with great success, but wasn't sure how it worked with the local gene-spliced variety. He coated the beast, who backed off and flailed about, before it fell over dead.

'That was the coolest thing I have ever seen.'
Said Adam.

Mr. Jingles smiled.

'I'm still hungry.'

Jingles held up another rubber chicken. Never let a prop comedy opportunity pass you by.

#

On Main Street, a wrecked police car pinned the body of a land shark to the side of one of the buildings. Sharks roamed about, looking for townsfolk, with no luck. Rolly stood in a shadowy corner, looking for a moment for the street clear.

'On the count of three,' Rolly whispered, 'ready? One... two... THREE!'

Rolly darted into the moonlight, with Mrs. Waddles from the Mirror Emporium in tow. They crossed the street, quickly and safely.

'Where are you when I need help with my groceries?' She jabbed.

'I know a shortcut,' Rolly said, ignoring her. 'Just through this alley, and we've got a clear shot to the woods.'

They started down the alley, suddenly, a shark rose up in front of them. The two screamed, and Mrs. Waddles whacked the shark in the nose with her purse. The shark backed up two steps and just stood there, not attacking.

'What's in the purse?' Asked Rolly.

The shark flopped onto its side, on the alley floor. A long blade popped out of its belly and carved a long line down the side of the shark. The slit became a gash, and the gash became a large wound. From the injury came a hand clutching the knife.

Bills wrestled her way out of the shark.

'Bills!' Rolly yelled, helping her out of the shark guts.

'I don't care what you say.' She stated. 'This is personal now!'

Rolly helped Bills to her feet.

'You ok?'

'Of course I am! You think something like that is gonna stop me?'

'It was just... I just... I was worried about you, Bills.'

They'd been lifelong friends, growing up together, and she knew he would give his life for her, but this was the first time he'd verbalized his concern in a way that showed just how important she was to him.

'I love you, too. Rolly.'

'Can we do this someplace safe?' Mrs. Waddles said.

#

In the woods, several survivors of the attack gathered at rendezvous B. Rolly and Handsome confer while Dr. Stern examined Bills. Mrs. Waddles sat on a log next to Adam. She was fatigued, as it was well past her bedtime. Mr. Jingles was kneeling nearby, doodling in the dirt with a stick.

'So you weren't affected by the nine stomachs at all?' Asked Dr. Stern.

'It made me mad as hell.' Bills said.

'But you weren't digested?'

'No.'

'Great news, everyone!' Stern called to the group. 'The sharks don't digest their prey.'

'But their teeth still work, right?' Asked Handsome.

'Oh. Yes. That could be... fatal... but that shouldn't stop us.'

'Stop us from doing what?' Asked Mrs. Waddles.

'Reclaiming the town, of course.' Said Stern. 'We know their secret weakness now. If they attack us, we just jump into their mouths and hope they swallow us whole.'

'Dr. Stern, your happy place and my happy place are a little bit different.' Said Rolly.

'Don't ever discredit hope.' Said Stern.

'I don't. But sometimes I just prefer hope and a handgun.'

'So we just shoot everything and hope for the best? What if you shot that shark with Officer Bills in it? She'd be dead. Rolly, we have to assume any shark that doesn't directly assault us probably has someone in it.'

'Sorry Doc, I'm with the cowboy on this one. I'm not jumping into anything's mouth.' Said Mrs. Waddles.

There was the sound of a throat clearing.

Everyone turned to see that Mr. Jingles had drawn a detailed schematic of the town in the dirt, complete with arrows and strategic strike points. Everyone looked at this schematic and smiled with optimism.

'I think we've got a plan,' Rolly said.

#

13:

Things Get Bad

A cross country bus drove away from the town square, leaving Lindsey & Jameson Jr. staring at the town square in ruins as flames and explosions lit the night sky.

'Hmm. This looks different.' Jameson Jr. Said.
'Where's my driver?'

'Junior. what did you do?' She asked.

'What? I was with you. Remember?'

'I'm trying to forget.' She said, not noticing the land shark approaching. 'Only you can rain this kind of havoc, now tell me what you did!'

The shark swallowed Lindsey whole. The land sharks that he set lose had finally ravaged the city. They had destroyed Rainbow Falls, and one of them just ate the woman he loved. Jameson Jr. cried out in fear. He turned to run away only to run headfirst into the waiting jaws of another land shark.

#

Jameson Sr. had made his way to the power plant with the aid of some advanced weaponry he'd hidden all over the Jameson Industries complex. He blasted several advancing land sharks, killing them. They fell to the ground again.

'Die! Die! Die! Why won't you stay dead!?'

From a catwalk, Sadie fired a futuristic rifle labeled Rejuvinox Mark-3. The same Rejuvinox that revived both Lisa and Tori. She shot several downed shark fish, who quickly rose again.

'You did something to me! I may not be able to kill you myself, old man, but they can.' She called out.

#

Two sharks presented themselves before Buford and the Master Fish. They regurgitated Jameson Jr. And Lindsey, who fell to the ground gagging and coughing.

'That was the second most unpleasant experience I've had this week,' Lindsey said.

'I thought we weren't talking about that?' Jameson said.

'Silence, bald chimps!' Buford yelled for the Master Fish. 'So you finally fell into my hands. The one person who can end all this useless violence and bloodshed. The mate of the so-called Hero of Rainbow Falls, my arch-nemesis, Rolly Vic.'

'You've killed him?' Jameson and Lindsey said; one with fear, the other with excitement.

'Well, if you let a mastermind finish a thought, you wouldn't have to ask now, would you?' Buford scolded.

'Never really crossed my mind,' Jameson said.

'That mindless beast has been a thorn in my side since I raised above the water table. Now that I have his female, Rolly Vic and his band of outcasts will have to surrender and bow down before me, and I will rule the world!' Buford said, then laughed maniacally.

#

Back in the woods, the survivors huddled in the dark, some holding weapons, others clubs and sticks. The debate was over. The plan was set, and everyone had their instructions. It was time to move out and confront the sharks and the Master Fish.

'I don't like it.' Said Dr. Stern.

'If you've got a better plan, Dr. Stern, we'd love to hear it,' Rolly said.

'Some of us would feel better if you just let us complain.' The Dr. said.

'Noted.' Rolly continued. 'We all have our assignments. Everyone partner up and get ready to head out.'

The group began to drift apart. Mrs. Waddles pulled Mr. Jingles aside, speaking to him in a hushed voice.

'You think I can't see past that fake nose? I know you Beau, I'd know you anywhere.'

Mr. Jingles winked one eye, not showing any emotion.

'It's been a long time. Does Jameson Sr. know you lived?' She asked him.

He just smiled and walked away from the old woman and patted the boy on the head, gesturing with his thumb that the kid needs to scam.

'I'm going with you,' Adam said.

Mr. Jingles shook his head no and walked Adam to Mrs. Waddles.

'I need someone to protect me.' She said to Adam. 'You think you can handle that?'

Adam looked to Jingles for approval, but he was already gone. She and the boy headed off, leaving Bills and Rolly Vic by themselves.

'Radio contact only in emergencies,' Rolly said.

'10-4.' Bills said. Rolly was tickled by this.

'Even with the world ending and civilization falling apart, we're still police officers. No matter what.' Rolly said.

'Damn straight.' Bills said. They both laughed, and then they got serious, nodded to each other.

'Take care, Rolly.'

'You too, Bills.'

#

Jameson Sr. ran through the power plant as a hovering robot followed behind, and fired upon him. Jameson rattled off as many command words as he could think of, including butterscotch. Changes had been made since he was gone. Not all for the better. The robot kept firing.

'Stupid machine shut down!' He yelled.

It shut down and landed itself on the ground.

'I have to find a better safe word.' He said to himself.

'The robots won't work, Sadie!' Jameson yelled to the security camera. 'Best call this off. Let bygones be bygones and all that forgiveness stuff.'

'Lights,' Sadie said from the balcony.

The lights flickered on, and Jameson Sr. saw she had the high-tech rifle pointed at him.

'Why can't I kill you?' She asked.

'You were made for better things than killing.' He said to her.

'But I want to kill you. More than anything.' She said, her voice cracking.

'Sometimes what we want is not what we need. Please, let's work this out. I still love you, you know.'

'You love the idea of me, but you never loved me. Not any of me.' She said, putting the rifle barrel under her chin.

Her life was out of her control, and the times she sought to end her torment, he always found away to pull her back in. Not this time. She pulled the trigger and fired the gun directly into her head.

'NO!' Jameson screamed.

A burst of light and sparks came from Sadie, but she lived. A wisp of smoke danced from her temple.

'Whoa.' She said, holding the Rejuvinox Mark-3. Sadie felt a little giddy.

'I feel so... alive.' She said.

Jameson finally put it together. That's why the land sharks kept coming back; that's why Sadie didn't die. She had the one thing that could stop death in its tracks.

'Still not your biggest fan, though.' She said, firing towards Jameson and missing.

'Sadie, you can't hurt me.' He proclaimed.

'Not directly.' She snapped.

Jameson was distracted by a shuffling sound from behind him. As he turned, he saw a battered and bloodied land shark corpse rumbled to life. Jameson Jr. pulled out his gun and pulled the trigger, but the charge was gone. The gun was out of ammo.

Jameson ran off as the shark began to lumber after him.

#

Dr. Stern and Bills creep through the shadows down Main street. The streets were deserted for now.

'I still don't understand why the sharks attacked. They were bred to be docile and vegan. They moved in herds, not individually like we see here in town.' Dr. Stern said.

'Could it be because they're sharks?' Bills asked.

'They're also half cow. If I ran through town yelling 'cow attack, cow attack,' do you think anyone would take me seriously?'

'It depends on the outfit you're wearing when you do it.'

'Please. I'm trying to approach this situation logically.'

'Okay. What are you suggesting?' She asked.

'I think they're being controlled.'

#

Rolly and Mr. Jingles hide behind a dumpster in an alley. Jingles is packing a bag with cans labeled 'shark repellent.'

'You are ready for anything, aren't you?' Rolly asked.

Mr. Jingles quickly flicked a business card to Rolly's feet. It read, 'You bet.'

Suddenly, Samantha ran past the alley, followed by Carl. Jingles jumped into action. He stepped out into the moonlight, holding up a can of shark repellent and dropped the bag behind him.

A shark that was chasing the kids turned a corner and saw Jingles standing there. Carl stopped and looked back to see the shark swallow the clown. Carl picked up a stick and ran back, but as he got there to help, the shark spat the clown out on the sidewalk and began to gag.

'Come on Tiger!' Yelled Samantha from down the street.

Carl saw the bag filled with cans of shark repellent. Carl snatched the bag up and ran off to catch up with Samantha, as he was told. Jingles got up and sprayed the shark with repellent until it fell over dead. Rolly and Jingles watched as the two kids quickly disappeared into the night with the repellent.

'Were you prepared for that?' Asked Rolly.
Jingles just handed him a card that said 'No.'
while looking down at the only can they had between
them.

'Rolly. Listen,' Bill's voice came over the radio.
'we think Master Fish might be behind the shark
attacks.'

'That's not good,' Rolly said back, over the
radio. 'it's worse than we thought. We can't take any
chances, guys; we need to activate Project Bloomin'
Onion before this goes too far. Sterns, I need you to
head to city hall and activate the system, and Bills, I
need you to find the lead carny & pass the message
along.'

'What's Bloomin' Onion?' She asked.

'No time to explain, officer.' He replied.

'It's safer for Dr. Stern to head out of town.

Let me activate-' She started but was cut off.

'NO!' Rolly yelled.

'Really, you should go to the carnival. It's for
the best.' Stern said, standing next to Bills.

'Don't question me. I know what I'm doing;
just follow orders.'

'Yes, Sir.' She said, splitting from Dr. Stern.
Rolly and Jingles continued on.

#

Following the altered plan, Dr. Stern made his
way to the Roadhouse. A shark watched him but
didn't attack. Its eyes glowed yellow as the Master
Fish watched on through its eyes. Stern lit, then
tossed in a Molotov cocktail into the Roadhouse,
starting a fire, and ran off. 'It's just like the Mayor
said.' thought the Master Fish. 'Be ready. He's
heading for the second site.' Thought the Master Fish
to another shark.

#

Dr. Sterns made it to city hall. He rushed down the stairs to the basement. In the basement were several doors with different labels, including supplies and storage. At the end of the hall was a door marked restroom, with a sign that read out of order. Stern pushed the door open and saw that it was, in fact, a control room bathed in red light. In the room, he saw the Mayor, flanked by two townfolk holding fishbowls.

#

Bills made her way down the street leading out of town, where she was confronted by a shark. She drew a pistol and a machete.

'Bring it on!' She yelled as the shark charged at her.

#

Rolly and Mr. Jingles were in the park when they heard a rumbling sound. They cocked their heads.

'You hear that?' Rolly asked. Mr. Jingles nodded.

They turn behind them to see a wall of land sharks bearing down on them. Dozens of rabid land sharks were charging down the street.

'STAMPEDE!' Yelled Rolly as he was enveloped by genetically altered sea life.

Mr. Jingles dove out of the way, but the sharks kept coming and coming. Soon the streets of Rainbow Falls were empty, with no sign of Mr. Jingles or Rolly.

#

There was a harmony to the screams of Chandler, Shay, and Amber as their car was tossed about by stampeding sharks. Their voices, shrill and piercing, did nothing to dissuade the rampaging land sharks.

The sharks quickly moved on to rampage elsewhere, but Shay's car was totaled. The wheels were bent out, and the rear axle was broken. They weren't heading anywhere.

Carl and Samantha walked up, each holding a can of shark repellent.

'Are you okay?' Asked Samantha.

'Nowhere near.' Said Chandler.

'My dad's gonna murder me. This was his favorite car.' Said Shay.

'Is that hairspray?' Asked Amber.

'It's shark repellent.' Said, Carl. 'Have a can.'

'Ewe.' Said Shay.

'Hey, little boy, do you know a dude named Gabriel?' Asked Chandler as the girls exited the ruined car.

'He does,' said Samantha, getting between the girls and Carl, 'We both do. Are you friends with his new girlfriend?'

Just then, Gabriel and Tia came running down the street from the direction that the sharks went. Gabriel had his mother's camcorder in one hand.

'Run!' Gabriel yelled as he pulled Tia along with his other hand.

Just then, from behind them, a wall of running shark fish came rumbling after them. Shay snatched a can from Carl's hand.

'Where did you get this?' Shay asked.

'I stole it off some clown on 5th street.'

'This is legit shark repellent; it has an ingredient list and everything,' Shay said, reading the can.

'Get ready to spray. The sharks are almost here.' Said Carl, stepping in front of all the females, one spray can in each of his hands.

'Shake well before use!' Shay called out.

Everyone shook their cans.

#

Lindsey woke up in a pile of shark vomit as Buford laughed maniacally for the Master Fish. Jameson Jr. lay folded in a lump next to her, coming to his senses.

'Lindsey Deer, you were in close contact with my minion, the shark fish. While, unlike my smaller brethren, it could not bend your mind to my will, it did give me limited access to your memories.' Said Buford.

'What are you on about?' She asked, sliding excess mucus off her body.

'I know what you did with that boy in Antarctica.'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'It was the worst three minutes of your life.'

'Oh dear god.' She said, hiding her face with her hands.

'Now I'm going to need you to tell your true love all about it.' Buford said.

'Oh hell no.'

'Well then, I will just have to have him chewed to bits.'

'No!' She cried out. 'Fine. I'll tell Rolly that I slept with Junior.'

'Please don't tell the guy with a gun.' Jameson said.

The sharks separated them and led them off two different fishery areas as Buford laughed menacingly for the fish.

#

Jameson Sr., covered in blood and shark bile, stood solemnly with two samurai swords in hand. He was out of breath. There were shark fish pieces everywhere.

'Let's see you get back up in pieces.' He said, panting.

Sadie rounds the corner, the Rejuvenex strapped to her shoulder, holding a flame thrower.

'Time to die.' She said.

'Wait!' Yelled Jameson. 'You didn't send these things. I saw you fighting them too.'

'What's your point?'

'If this isn't part of your plot to get rid of me, then the town must be in trouble. The townsfolk haven't crossed you, just me. So why let them suffer when we can fix it? Kill me later, but we need to save the town.' Jameson Sr. said. 'I'm calling a truce. For the sake of the town.'

#

Bills stumbled into the carnival as dawn cut across the starry sky. She looked like a wild-eyed lone survivor of a horror film; her clothes were tattered. There was dried blood on her face. She'd survived the night. A small cluster of carny folk ran to help her.

'Carnies? I'm on a mission. I'm supposed to talk to the head carny!' She said.

'Officer, I'm the head carny.' He responded as he took her into the carny campground.

'They sent me here to tell you to start Operation Bloomin' Onion.' She said to him. 'We're supposed to rally your freak troops and take back the town. As a sworn officer of the law, I have the authorization to deputize all of you and give you permission to use deadly force if necessary. We've got to-'

'Missie.' The Carny interrupted, putting his hand on Bill's shoulder. 'I know you've been through a lot, but Operation Bloomin' Onion doesn't work that way.'

'I don't understand.'

'I think you might be in shock, so I don't want to scare you any more than I need to, but you just gave me the signal to pack up my carnival and head out.'

'What? No... Why did they send me?' She asked.

'My bet? They wanted to get you to a safe place.'

The Carny pointed to a wisp of smoke rising above the horizon, above Rainbow Falls.

'See that line of smoke?' He asked her. 'As we speak, Handsome's Bar is burning down. See how the smoke is blue? That's the sign. The Operation has begun. Operation Bloomin' Onion is the town's fail-safe in case something threatens to get out, and none of the traditional defenses can stop it.'

'What do you mean by fail-safe?' She asked.

'In a few hours, all of Rainbow Falls is going to blow up. There's going to be nothing left here except for one big crater.'

'They can't just blow up Rainbow falls!'

'You act like this is the first time Rainbow Falls has been blown off the map.' The Carny said, smiling. 'Well, I guess you were just a kid the last time. Come on, folks! Let's pack up.' He said, and like a well-oiled machine, they began to break down and pack up the carnival.

#

14:

Things Get Worse

There's an alcove next to Waddles Mirror Emporium, where three buildings meet. An empty lot where a small cottage once stood. It was then used as a community garden and was currently being used as a safe haven for Gabriel, Tia, Carl, Samantha, Chandler, Shay, and Amber. The pathway was blocked off by a line of empty shark repellent cans.

The sharks learned to recognize the spray and it kept them away. Before dawn, the land sharks just disappeared. Samantha was asleep with her head in Tia's lap. Tia stroked her hair, feeling all kinds of motherly. The other girls did their best to primp. Gabriel tried his phone, but it was no use. There just wasn't a signal.

'Tia girl, I see why you come out to the sticks,' Chandler said.

'I know, right?' Amber said. 'This way more exciting than clubbing.'

'I was thinking,' Gabriel started, 'We need to find someone. Like an adult or something.'

'We've been everywhere,' Carl said, taking inventory of what was left in the bag.

'Have you been by the fishery?' Asked Gabriel.

'I don't know where that is,' Carl said.

'Then you haven't been everywhere.'

Tia wakes Samantha, and they get their stuff together and head out on foot to the Fishery.

'Hey, Sam,' asked Gabriel, 'You know where your dad works?'

'Yea?' Replied Samantha.

'Do you know where it is?'

'Yeah.'

'Can you take us there?'

'Yeah.'

'Cool. Lead on young tour guide.'

Samantha smiled, took Carl by the hand, and lead the group onward, towards Willow Lake and the Fishery.

#

Jameson Jr. trudged onward, surrounded by sharks. He was babbling like a crazy rich person, trying to bribe the sharks with shrimp trawlers to no avail. They turn a corner, only to be confronted with a giant fillet machine suitable for humans.

'What kind of expansion plans did we have here?' Asked Junior.

The sharks poked Jameson Jr. with their noses, edging him closer and closer to the maw of the machine. Gears spun shooting sparks into the air, blades flashed flipping to and fro, as the machine readied for the first human test.

Suddenly the shark next to him exploded, splattering shark brains all over Jameson Jr. In quick succession, the sharks all around Jameson Jr. exploded, to his shock.

Jameson Sr. and Sadie flanked Jameson Jr.
'Come on, boy. We've got to get out of here.'
Senior said.
'Dad?' Junior said.
'Listen to your father,' Sadie said.
Junior fainted from exhaustion.
'So Junior is in Antarctica.' Senior said.
'He wasn't not supposed to be back for a
week.' She said.
'This is why mind controlling me with tiny
robots and shipping me off to Indonesia is a bad idea!
Everything goes to hell!'

#

Rolly found himself in moist darkness, his
clothed dampened with shark saliva. As his eyes
adjusted, he saw Buford on a platform, Master Fish in
a bowl in his hand. In his other hand was a chain.
The chain led to Lindsey Deer at his feet. She was in
a Princess Leia bikini costume.

'That's new,' Rolly said as he stood up.
'Actually no,' Buford said, for the fish, 'She's
had this for years. She's into Cosplay, whatever that
is.'
'I had no idea.'
'Oh, there's a lot you don't know, my friend.'
'This has got to be the most messed up dream
I've ever had,' Rolly said.
'Oh, my dear enemy. It is going to get worse.
A lot worse.' Buford said.
'Tell him.'
'I don't want to.' Said Lindsey.
'Fine.' Buford Said, whipping his head. The
sharks began to close in on Rolly.
'I slept with Jameson Jr.!' She yelled.
The sharks stopped.
'What?' Rolly asked.

'It was an accident. I wasn't thinking. It was icky, it will never happen again, and I'm sorry. I mean, really, really sorry.'

'You made love to Junior,' Rolly said, sitting on the floor.

'They say I'm cold-blooded, but this makes me feel all kinds of warm inside.' Said the Buford, laughing maniacally, for the fish.

#

Carl, Samantha, and the high school kids made their way to the Fishery and passed a burned-out husk of a building.

'Hey, check it out,' Said Samantha, 'the old school. Creepy. Makes a girl chilly.'

Carl is oblivious to her hints for affection.

'There's an old school?' Asked Carl.

'Yeah.' Said Gabriel, 'I thought everyone knew about it. The whole town blew up - what - like... twenty-five?'

'Thirty.' Said Samantha.

'Thirty years ago.' Gabriel continued. 'Get a few beers into the old-timers, and you'll hear all about it.'

'Huh... Dad never mentioned it.' Carl said.

'Yeah, it was like the first time the Boogiemer came to Rainbow Falls, Gremlins got into everything, and I mean everything, and the Creature from Willow Lake was kidnapping college girls. It was a wild time.' Gabriel said. 'They reset the whole town and moved it ten miles west.'

'He says these things that couldn't possibly be true,' Tia said to the Clique, 'but if you look into it, the story is buried somewhere.'

'I'll double check Wikipedia if I can ever get a signal.' Said Amber.

Gabriel positioned himself between Samantha and Carl, much to her chagrin.

Gabriel leaned in close and whispered to Carl. 'Hey, little man. How many of those cans do you have left?' Gabriel asked.

Carl looked in his pack. There was only one can left.

'We've got plenty.' Lied, Carl.

'Cool. Considering how I'm going to be in the thick of your frontal assault if things go sideways again, you know when we get there. You mind sharing a can with me?'

'I don't know. I mean... they're my cans.' Carl said, clutching the bag.

'I get ya. I'm cool with it. Just. If it gets bad, you've got my back, right?'

Carl nodded, though he wasn't sure.

'Gabe, does this kind of thing happen often?' Asked Tia.

'Oh, yea.' He said with a smile. 'Not, this bad but yea.'

'Okay!' She said with a smile.

She had so much confidence in their survival chances. Gabe survived the zombie attack, the goo attack, and she survived the Squatchfest. She figured their odds were pretty good.

#

Sadie and Jameson Sr. drug the unconscious Jameson Jr. along the ground behind them.

'He shouldn't faint like that,' Senior said.

'He's under a lot of stress,' Sadie said.

'Jameson men are made of sterner stuff.'

Sadie dropped her half of the boy.

'Jameson men? Jamesons are scoundrels. You know he's been trying to seduce Lindsay Deer.'

Three sharks slowly crept up behind them.

'The lab tech? I thought her name was Darling.'

'She's the lead researcher!'

'Thank heavens. Jameson men should have more ambitions than secretaries and assistants.'

The sharks got closer and closer.

'No. It is wrong to try to seduce your employees. Period. Black and white. No gray areas.'

'There are always gray areas, my love. If anyone, you should know that.'

The shark roars. Jameson Sr. and Sadie turned and saw them as they attacked.

#

Jameson Sr. woke up in a puddle of slime next to an unconscious Sadie and Junior. He turned to see Rolly Vic sitting down next to him, his knees pulled up to his chest.

'Fancy meeting you here, Sheriff Vic. I assume you're ready to swoop in and save the day.' Said Senior.

Rolly turned his back to the elder Jameson. Rolly was emotionally defeated by the news of Linsey's infidelity.

'I was expecting a warmer reception. It wasn't by any chance something the boy did, was it?'

'At the mention of Jameson Jr., Rolly hunkered down, placing his hands over his ears. Jameson Sr. patted him on the back.

'I see. No need to worry, my friend.' Senior said, tapping his temple. 'Two-hundred-fifty billion brain cells are on the job. I'll have this figured out in no time.'

'It will all be over soon,' Rolly said in a timid voice.

Jameson Sr. knew that tone, that phraseology. He'd used it twice before to save the town from Gremlins & randy lake monsters.

'No. Tell me you didn't.'

'Look at these things. We had no choice.' Rolly said, completely defeated.

Now he just wanted it all over.

'You two wouldn't by any chance be referring to Operation Bloomin' Onion, would you?' Yelled Buford from across the room.

'How could you know? I only found out about it an hour ago.' Rolly said.

'Oh, yes. I know all about your little plan. And I've taken the precautions to stop it, thanks to my new ally.'

From behind Master Fish came Mayor Vic, also in a gold Princess Leia bikini and chains. Mayor Vic took the opposite side of Master Fish, flanking him like Lindsay.

'I'm sorry, son. He was going to eat your mother.' Mayor Vic said.

'Mom?'

'This is just the beginning,' Buford said. 'Now that I have conquered the accursed Rolly Vic, nothing is stopping me from flooding the world! I'll poison your habitats, pen you up in breeding farms, and use your fillets for food.'

'Rolly?' Senior said. 'Now's when you, you know, rally the troops, jump into action and save the day.'

Rolly ignored him.

'You'll never win!' Said Senior to Buford.

'There's always hope!'

'You mean the rescue team outside?'

Everyone looked back and forth because they didn't know anything about the rescue team.

'Doesn't matter because I've already taken care of them.'

#

Carl climbs down, via boxes from the exterior window, outside the Fishery.

'My dad, your dad, everyone, they're all trapped in there. We need to do something about it.' Carl said.

'Okay,' Gabriel said. 'We can do this. Give everyone a can.'

Carl took a step back, clutching the essentially empty bag. Then he saw something in the distance.

'Who's that girl?'

Gabriel turned to see a disheveled and dazed Tori. She was still in the hospital gown. The group rushed to Tori, circling her with trepidation. She didn't seem to recognize any of them and looked almost afraid at the attention. She was now equal parts Tori and Slimongous, and both were fighting for control over what to do.

Gabriel tried his best to be nonchalant, but he was nervous to see his previously dead girlfriend. He'd seen what the dead could do when they came back. This could get ugly.

'OMG girl, you okay?' Asked Amber.

'I think she's hurt.' Said Chandler.

'Anyone know her?' Asked Tia.

Tia took off her jacket and put it gently on Tori's shoulders, covering the slit in the back of the hospital gown..

'Yea, we do. Hey Tori. What's up?' Said Gabriel.

Tori flinched as if hearing spoken language for the first time. She walked over to Gabriel, because that's what Tori wanted. She no longer had the words. Slimongous had no need for words. But she needed her words. She needed to convey the importance of her escape from the underground laboratory her father locked her in. She needed to talk to Gabriel.

'I came for you,' was all Tori could say.

'Me?' Gabriel said, flustered.

'I came for you,' Tori said to Gabriel.

Gabriel waved everyone away.

'Give her some air, people,' Gabriel said. They did as they were told.

'Who is she?' Asked Tia.

'His girlfriend.' Said Samantha. 'She died a while back.'

'So she's like a zombie or a ghost or what?' Shay asked.

'Zombies don't talk,' Samantha said authoritatively.

'My money is on a ghost,' Amber said.

'I came for you,' Tori said to Gabriel.

'So... um... Hey, a lot's happened since you died...' Said Gabriel. 'Kind of funny, really, when you think about it. That's Tia over there, her friends Shay, Amber, and Chandler. You know Carl, right?'

'Hey,' Carl said.

'I came for you,' Tori said.

'No,' Samantha interjected. 'You came for Gabriel, not Carl.'

'Back off, half-pint,' Gabriel said.

'Don't talk to her like that,' Carl said defensively.

'You have a girlfriend?' Asked Tia.

'She was dead, so I thought, you know... I'm a guy. Can we do this later?' Gabriel said.

'I came for you,' Tori said to Gabriel.

'We should probably get out of here,' Samantha said, pointing to a land shark heading their way.

'No, we'll be fine. Carl, could you please?'

Carl bravely stepped between the shark and the others, pulling out the last can of repellent. But at that moment, he realized how light it felt. He pressed the top of the can, and it lightly fizzed. Carl threw the can at the shark.

'Carl?' Said Samantha, walking up to him.

'RUN!' Carl yelled, taking Samantha by the hand, and ran away.

The Clique started to back up slowly, but Tori stood still, in a daze.

Gabriel tugged at her, but she seemed rooted to the spot.

'Tori, we have to go.' He said.

'I came for you.' She said.

'Then come with me! Tori...'

The shark neared them. As it got closer, Tori sniffed the air. Then she took a long, slow inhale through her nose as if she was savoring something tasty, but it wasn't as much Tori as it was Slimungous. There were genetic alterations in the beast that would prove useful to it's recovery. It would prove beneficial to consume it.

Tori bolted past Gabriel, running and screaming towards the shark. Before the shark could react, she tackled it, sinking her teeth into its skin. Swallowing obscenely large chunks of shark flesh, Tori's stomach became quickly distended.

The Clique screamed, realizing this is no longer the fun adventure they believed it to be. They were in the lions den, with the lions.

'What's happening??!?!?' Tia yelled.

Tori turned and hissed at them like an animal protecting its kill. Her jaw unhinged, and hanging grotesquely low. Her eyes were green, and shark goop dripped from her face. The girls ran off. Gabriel ran to Tia, whisking her away.

'This wasn't part of the plan!' He said,

'The walking sharks or the dead, shark eating, girlfriend in my Italian leather jacket!?' Asked Tia.

'Not helping!'

The two caught up with the others, who were facing a wall of sharks. Samantha grabbed Carl's arm, whispering his name.

'I've loved you since third grade,' Carl said to her.

'I know Tiger.' She said back.

'Wait, what?' He asked as the sharks swarmed in on them.

#

It was later that evening when Carl was nudged awake by the younger Jameson. The townsfolk were huddled in different groups, with the troublemakers separated from each other.

'Hey, buddy, wake up,' Jameson said.

'I'm not dead?' Asked Carl.

'Not yet. I think that goons' got one or two more speeches left.' Said Jameson.

The Master Fish surveys the group of people before him via Buford's position. There they stood, what was left of the town of Rainbow Falls. Samantha came to and squinted. She recognized that man holding the Master Fish fishbowl.

'D-dad?' She questioned.

There was a brief flash of recognition in Buford's face. He then clamped down on the emotion. Buford slowly raised the fishbowl to his face, so he and Master Fish sat eye-to-eye.

'So... you have a hatching.' Said Buford, for the Master Fish, to ... himself.

Buford began to sweat, as it was now clear that Buford could hide Samantha from the Master Fish's probes. What else was Buford hiding from him?

'What do you say we kill her first?' Buford said, for the fish.

Their immediate world was filled with the sound of grunting as the sharks began to whip themselves into a frenzy, a feeding frenzy. Sure they couldn't digest the people, but that wasn't the point.

Elimination was the point, and by chewing them and regurgitating them over and over, portions of the town population would be eliminated. The various townspeople, Samantha, Gabriel, Carl, and even Jameson Jr., exchange nervous glances with each other, frightened of what is going to happen next. For they knew they were not long for this world.

The Clique was huddled together, covered in slime, screaming, surrounded by sharks.

'I don't want to die!' Chandler screamed.

'I don't even go here, bro!' Cried, Shay.

'My dad's gonna kill me for dying like this!'

Cried Tia.

'This is so bad for my hair!' Amber yelled.

The girls looked at Amber in disbelief. She showed her hair as if to say, 'Look at this mess.' The girls were all 'Oh yea, so true.'

'It is unanimous!' Buford said, pointing at the Clique. 'The outsiders are annoying. Start with those four.'

The Clique screams again.

#

Gia called Tia's number again. It went straight to voicemail, again. Gia was worried, even if she didn't let on to the Senator. She was sure she would get the blame, once the Senator found out the two had it out, when Tia and the girls stood her up for lunch.

It took weeks to get the reservation, and she had a whole spa day planned out to win over the girls once and for all. There was no winning over Tia, if she couldn't get in with her squad.

Gia let her have it that night, and Tia gave back as good as she got. They came as close to blows as two females could get. It's a good thing they were wearing designer clothing or it could have gotten uglier than it did. As it was, their tongues were

sharper than ever. Now she's gone and nowhere to be found.

The Senator was trying not to be worried. He was trying to be an understanding father, an open minded individual. Progressive, not possessive.

Gia decided it was time to text an apology.

'I feel terrible that we fought.

Come home, and I will make it up to you.'

'All you are doing is hurting your father. Don't be a trouble maker like your mother.'

'Come home tonight, I will get your cars detailed, no strings.'

-GIA

#

15: Tears of a Clown

The Senator watched another sunset on Austin, Texas, with his daughter not home. Sure she could handle her own and was no innocent babe in the woods. She was a Constantino, after all. Tia could handle many situations; still, she was his only child and princess and was, above all else, irreplaceable. Gia did her best to comfort the worried Senator but to no avail.

'I'm just saying it's not like her.' He said.

'She's a teenager. Give her some space. It's not like she's never been out all night before.' She said.

'Not without reason; we were in the middle of a divorce, and you moved into the house. It's not like her to ignore my calls.'

It crossed his mind that something might have happened between his wife and daughter.

'No, don't look at me like that.' She said.

'What happened.'

'Nothing,' Gia said, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. 'She stood me up for lunch the other day. We traded some words but nothing serious.'

Constantino sat back in his chair and pulled out his phone, and called his assistant.

'Call up the GPS on Tia's car.' He said to Colleen over the phone. 'I want to know where she's been and where she's at and who she's with. And Colleen, I want to know now.'

'I'm sure she's having a great time wherever she is.' Said Gia comfortingly. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

#

Tori, now about seven feet tall, sat on the roof of the Fishery eating her twelfth land shark. Her hunger, now satiated, let her mind return to her. From the roof, she could see the burnt-out husk of her hometown. The Jameson labs were hardly touched. There was also an eerie blankness where the carnival Ferris wheel used to pierce the horizon. She felt just as alone as she did in the hospital room, even though she had the colony within her. They were getting better with the help of her DNA and her white blood cells. They were becoming immune to this world's pathogens. But the cells were dying as fast as they could reproduce and need Tori to eat and gain mass to fuel the adaptive progress.

At the carnival site, Bills had to watch as they packed the dissembled rides and broke down the tents because they would not let her return to town. She continued to lobby for intervention from the crew.

'Just like that. You're gonna walk away?' She asked the lead carny.

'You ever hear the story of the incredibly brave carny?' He shot back.

'No.'

'That's right.' The carny said, still loading equipment.

'But the town...' She started.

'This town will find a way to survive.' He interrupted.

'Then stay, help them.'

'Not our time, anymore. Someday we will come back, but not until the smoke has cleared.'

'We need your help.'

'No, you don't. Things have a way of happening here, amazing things, silly things that would never happen anywhere else. Rainbow Falls is special that way. Why, I bet you right now some clown with what, a... a... something, anything, a bowling pin is saving the day.'

#

Mr. Jingles looked down at the Master fish and Buford from the rafters. The orders were given to eat the girls. He pulled a bowling pin out from his suit and lined it up directly over Master Fish's bowl. Then he flipped it in the air, sending it spinning downward.

'I've always wanted to see a feeding frenzy,' Buford said for the fish.

The Clique screamed in harmony again.

The bowling pin hit the fishbowl with the accuracy of a juggling marksman, causing the bowl to shatter. Screams could be heard as the Master Fish once again fell to the concrete fishery floor. Buford snapped out of his mind control. All of the sharks stopped in their tracks. Mr. Jingles whipped out a detonator with a huge red button; he pressed it. The Fishery was rocked as explosions started going off all around the complex.

'Everyone, follow me!' Said Jameson Sr. taking point.

He began to lead the townspeople out of the Fishery. As he gathered everyone, Sadie caught a look at Mr. Jingles. Her mind was jolted back to a time long ago.

#

It was 1970 something. Jameson Labs had recently been built, and the power source had yet to be discovered. In his finest lab coat, Dr. Beau Baker scribbled out an elaborate equation on a whiteboard. Beau looked to be a younger, non-clown-faced Mr. Jingles. Sadie, looking to be about twenty-five, sat on a picnic blanket laid out on the laboratory floor. She was setting out a picnic lunch. They were supposed to eat outside, but the rain kept them inside, and Beau found it advantageous, as he could continue his equations.

'That can't be right,' Beau said.

'Talking about your wardrobe again?' She jibed.

Underneath his pristine lab coat was a bright yellow and black Hawaiian shirt.

'This formula. If this formula is right, we might be able to locate the elusive Atom-12 molecule.'

'Like a police call?'

'Not quite. You're familiar with multiverse theory, right?'

'The theory you talk about every day.'

Beau sat on the floor next to Sadie. He pulled over the basket.

'Say there are two sandwiches in this basket.' He said.

'One ham and swiss, one PB&J.' She said, smiling.

'So I have a choice. And every time I make a choice, it creates a new universe. In one, I eat the ham, and in this one ...'

'You get jelly on your coat.' She said.

'Right, right. But think of every decision you make every day. Now multiply that by everyone ever and every living thing in the world. Suddenly you have an idea of how many possible universes there are.' He said, unwrapping one of the sandwiches.

'But that's just the surface because each new reality presents exponential possibilities deriving from the previous.' She said.

'You've been paying attention.' He said with a smile.

Sadie beamed with joy that he noticed. She also beamed because she was in love with this mad scientist.

'So in all of these infinite universes, there is only one very special Atom. It is the very first Atom at the center of the big bang, and from it, all realities are born. It is the Nexus of all realities.'

'So it binds them all together...'

'Without a direct connection, YES! Imagine if you had access to everywhere, every-when, all at once. The answers to all questions right at our fingertips.' He said, waving the PB&J around.

A small drop of jelly landed on his coat.

'I'm so very proud of you, Beau.' She said, leaning in for a kiss, to which he obliged.

Jameson Jr. II glowered from the doorway. He was smitten by Sadie, but her attentions were given to another, less worthy suitor. But he sucked it up and walked into the room.

'But the real question is... how does this make me money?' Asked Jameson as he sauntered into the room.

'Oh, lord, not you.' She said, under her breath.

Jameson slid between the love birds and began drinking Beau's soda pop.

'This man bothering you?' Jameson said to Sadie.

'I was just showing her my formula,' Beau said.

'So that's what they're calling it these days, hm?' Jabbed Jameson.

Beau averted his eyes, embarrassed by the implication of impropriety.

'I just..'

'I'm kidding! I'm kidding. No, I'm not. Joking! Gees, tough room. Okay, back to business. How long until we can find your magic particle?'

'Atom-12? Well, first, we need to calibrate..'

'How long before it starts putting off power?'

'Almost immediately, but that's just one of the side..'

'Just make it happen. You've got a week.' Jameson said, finishing the soda.

'Mr. Jameson II, Sir, there are some very dangerous potential side effects.'

'Like tourism? 'Come see the tenth wonder of the world; the multiverse!' That sort of thing?'

'No like extreme perceived paranormal activity, or actual aliens. We could see cross-dimensional beings or ghosts and little monsters with big pointy teeth. You see, these unexplained phenomena we have accounted for as myth or legend are realities crossing the barrier, from one world or another.' Beau said.

'In theory.' Said Jameson.

'Yes, in theory, but once we stabilize the portal with the Atom-12...'

'As long as these visitors don't mind country-western music, I don't think there will be any problems.'

'But...'

'I'm not paying you for your butts, Beau. Just make it happen. You have a week.' Jameson said, snatching the ham and swiss and walking off.

#

Machines whirled, and things popped, and sparks flew in the future resting place of the Jameson Power source. Electricity danced through the air as one of the machines burst into flames. Beau fanned down the flames. Jameson Jr. took off his goggles and squinted at what appeared in the room.

'What is that?' Jameson asked as he stared at a floating hole in reality.

'Oh, that? Nothing.' Said Beau, 'Quite literally nothing. It's the space between every reality. This is where we will find...'

'Is it like a black hole?'

'Sort of. It's a hole in every possibility and probability. A low-pressure point, if you will, for this domain's only resident, the Atom-12. We've set the right settings, and now we wait until the particle takes the bait.'

'Well, my friend, if you want something to take the bait, you must have one hell of a worm.'

'Particles love math, and nature abhors a vacuum. Just watch. Any moment now...'

'Where does it go?' Interrupted Jameson.

'Everywhere, nowhere; it is really something beyond normal human comprehension.'

'I see,' Jameson said.

'I've got those figures you wanted,' Sadie said as she walked into the lab, carrying a clipboard and a stack of paper.

She arrived just as Jameson pushed Beau into the hole. Beau folded and stretched exponentially as he was pulled into the physical embodiment of entropy. He was there, then he wasn't.

What looked to be reverse, Tesla coils began collecting electric charges from the void.

Sadie stared at Jameson with contempt, contemplating the best way, and best time to kill him.

#

Townfolk ran past Sadie and Jameson, making their way out of the crumbling Fishery. Back from her instant flash of memory, Sadie stared at Jameson Sr. as he guided the people through the corridors. Sadie grabbed his shoulder, spun him around, and punched him square in the face. A spark flashed at her temple, one of her eyes burst a blood vessel, and a wisp of smoke puffed from one ear. She remembered everything.

'What was that all about?' Jameson asked, massaging his chin as she glared at him.

Samantha ran up to Jameson, followed by Carl. She tugged at his arm to get his attention because he seemed to be in charge.

'We need to go back for my dad.' She said to him.

'Buford, your evil mastermind dad?' Jameson asked.

'He can be nice.'

'I don't care if he bought you a parcel of Shetland ponies when you were five. That man is a menace.'

A shell-shocked Buford staggered into the hallway behind them. He was free. This was never going to happen again. It was time to retire from the maintenance business. As he made his way down the hall, he saw his little girl. He needed to give her the good news.

'Honey! I'm free!' Buford said, lunging towards them.

Jameson Sr. sprung into action and whipped out his gun. He fired at Buford, emptying everything

he had into Buford's chest.

It was a very tight grouping in the center mass. The gun club would be very proud. License to carry earned. Jameson had many hours in the target range.

Samantha cried out in pain as she ran to her father, lying bleeding on the ground.

'Stand back!' Jameson demanded. 'He might squid your face or something.'

Samantha ignored him, lifting Buford's head, to look him in the eyes. He was in bad shape. Blood trickled from his mouth and his breath gurgled as fluid filled his lungs.

'When did Senior get back?' Buford asked his crying daughter.

'Hold still. You're gonna be okay.' She said through the tears.

Neither of them believed what she'd said.

'Baby, you're strong. I know I can count on you to be good...'

'Daddy, don't.'

'Just listen, okay...'

'Please, Daddy.'

'I love you, little darlin'. I don't think I ever said that enough.'

Samantha buried her face in her father's shoulder, unable to control her crying.

'I've always been proud of you baby girl.'

Buford continued. 'You be good, okay?'

'Okay.'

'That's my girl...' Buford said with his last breath.

Buford's eyes rolled up in the back of his head as he died in her arms. Sadie looked around and found the Rejuvnext rifle covered in shark slime. She pointed it at Buford and pulled the trigger, and it fizzled. She tried again to no avail. Sadie pulled Jameson Sr away from the crowd and slammed him against the wall.

'Monster.' She said with conviction.

'What. I killed the bad guy.'

'The fish, you dolt! The fish was the bad guy! You shot a man in front of his daughter. That is too wrong, even for you. Do you see why I could never love you? I never loved you.'

'I'm the hero here.'

'You screwed it up, big time. All you ever do is take away the things people love. It ends now. Your sole job from this point on is to make it better.'

Sadie stomped off, leaving Jameson Sr. alone.

'You can be replaced... again,' Jameson said to himself.

He looked around and saw Carl staring at him, tears and anger in his eyes.

'What's your problem, kid?'

Carl kicked Jameson II in the tenders and ran to Samantha's side. Jameson flopped to the ground and began to cry himself due to the pain.

#

In another part of the Fishery, the bikini twins, the Mayor and Lindsay, planted themselves each under an armpit of a near-comatose Rolly and was hauling him along the way. Rolly snapped to, then stood on his own two feet. Not wanting to be touched by them, pulled himself free.

'I'm going to get mom,' Rolly said defiantly.

'I'll get her son. Why don't you come to the house? Spend some time...'

'Do what you've got to do! I can't be here.' Rolly said, directing his words to Lindsey.

'I said I was sorry! For pete's sake Rolly, it's not like we're married.' Lindsey said, and quickly regretted it.

He couldn't even look at her.

'I'll take the job in Dallas. There's nothing for me here. I'm done.'

'Rolly...' She started, but he just walked off.

Jameson Jr. materializes at her side, slipping his hand into hers. 'Yes!' he thought to himself.

With the big lug gone, there was no way he could lose her. Lindsay broke down in tears. Jameson didn't know what to do, and her hand was full of slime, so he let that go. The three just stood there, dumbfounded.

'Why are you in a bikini?' Jameson asked the Mayor.

'What? Oh, this is mine. I'm into a little cosplay myself.' He said as Lindsay's crying grew louder.

#

With everyone gone, Mr. Jingles and Adam, now dressed as a clown, walked up to Master Fish, who was still wriggling and moving.

'What happens now? Mr.' Adam asked.

'Turn your head and close your eyes.' Jingles said.

Adam was confused, as he expecting to read a card.

'I don't have a card- just turn your head, boy!'

The boy did what he was told. Mr. Jingles removed the broken mirror piece from Waddles Mirror Emporium and placed it next to Master Fish. There was a flash of blinding light, and the Master Fish was gone.

This time he wasn't washed back into the lake, he was sent to the mirror world to die. With no arms, or legs, or water to breathe, there was no way for the Master Fish to live. He would die in an alternate universe, just as Jameson Sr. expected Beau to meet his fate. The immediate threat to Rainbow Falls was gone.

#

Gia fell asleep in a chair, waiting for the call from Colleen. Constantino sat at his desk. His phone rang.

'Yes? Are you serious? Send the car over. We'll be ready.'

He walked over and gently woke up Gia with a kiss.

'Did you find her?' She asked softly.

'You'll never guess where she spent the night.'

'It's a little early without coffee, dear.'

'Rainbow fucking Falls.'

'You're kidding.'

'Come on. The car's on its way. We're going to get our girl.'

#

The citizens of Rainbow Falls huddled together outside the Fishery as it began to implode on itself. Everyone looked shell shocked and haunted as if they've been sucker-punched by the entire Dallas Cowboys '72 lineup.

'So this was scary and all,' Amber said, 'but kind of cool. And this stuff actually conditioned my hair.'

'The way you came after Tia was so brave,' Shay said to Gabriel, with longing and adoration.

If there were more boys like Gabriel in town she wanted one. If Tia got bored with him, she could just take him from her. That day, the possibilities seemed endless.

'Where's your girlfriend?' Asked Tia, unaware of her place, now that Tori was back from the dead.

'I don't know,' Gabriel replied sheepishly.

'So she's still your girlfriend?' Tia asked.

'No?' Gabriel asked, looking for a way out of any looming confrontation.

Tia smiled and locked arms with Gabriel.

'Good answer.'

From the roof, Tori looked down on them.

Her mind regaining control as the Slimongous cells return to hibernation and repair mode. Green tears ran down her cheeks as she looked down on her lost love. Tori came back for Gabriel, but another had taken him while she was gone.

She didn't know how long he waited, but it didn't matter. She remembered. She died, and came back for him, because she loved him. No Austin prep school girl was going to get in the way of an undying love like that.

#

As the carnies loaded up the fun-house mirror, The Master Fish fell out, distorted and mutated by the mirror into a mutant man-fish with gills and fins. The carny looked at him and smiled.

The fish man scrambled for a nearby bucket of water, and poured it through his mouth and gills, gasping for air. The lead carny grabbed a hose and opened it wide, and gave it to the fish man, who stuck it in his mouth, finally breathing water again.

Well, Hello, water-man.' He said to the fish man, 'Looks like you just made it.'

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Rosales is a father of two, occasional filmmaker and animator. He's authored several award winning short films, and published multiple children's books. This was not one of them.