





ANDREW REEVES

# SKELETONS

PART ONE: LAREDO



Published by  
SKELETONS, LLC.

FIRST EDITION, OCTOBER 2019

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Skull photograph ©Adobe Stock  
Burning house photograph ©Pond5  
Cover texture designed by Kjpargeter/Freepik  
Author photograph ©Andrew Reeves

Softcover ISBN 978-1-7333658-0-2  
eBook ISBN 978-1-7333658-1-9  
Audiobook ISBN 978-1-7333658-2-6

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Dedicated to Mary Byerly



ANDREW REEVES

# SKELETONS

PART ONE: LAREDO





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Jamessssss, the skeleton whispered in his ear with its gravelly voice.

No... no... no... he mumbled and tossed his head back and forth as the recurring nightmare of a burning house flashed through his mind. He was back in the dilapidated living room again. The circle of fire opened its mouth and he fell into a maze of tunnels winding through the Earth.

Wake up, it whispered.

Mac... TJ... somebody help us, he mumbled as the tunnels spat him out at the mouth of a cave. He crossed a river of lava and found dwellings carved into the foothills of black mountains. Thousands more of the fleshless creatures living in the makeshift city emerged and howled his name under a sky painted crimson red. He turned to run but there was no sun to light the way out of what the Bible on his nightstand described as Hell.

Follow me, it whispered and woke him with its stinking breath.

He pulled the covers over his head in terror as it walked across his bedroom and disappeared into the hallway. He cracked his eyes open, sat against the headboard and turned on his lamp. As he itched his short brown hair he discovered strange footprints on

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the carpet leading out his door. He took a long drink of last night's tap water, set the glass down and checked his alarm clock.

Three-thirty three, James mumbled.

The nightmare woke him up at the same time every morning but this was the first time one of the skeletons had invaded his room.

Come, come, it beckoned from the dark outside his door.

He pulled the duvet up to his chin and gazed past the open door. The clickety-clack of bony feet descended the old pine stairs followed by the rattling of a lock. He slipped out of bed and past his sister's room, careful not to wake her because she would kill him for being a scaredy-cat. He avoided the creaky floorboards, tiptoed on the silent ones and used the railing to steady his descent.

Dont be afraid.

He waited a few steps from the landing to let his eyes adjust to the sleeping house. A cool breeze ran across his body because the front door was wide open. His father kept an old shotgun in the corner because there had been dozens of burglaries in the area that fall.

He picked up the Remington, made sure the safety was on and stepped onto the porch where the Illinois night told him November was closing in. No clouds obstructed the twinkling stars so the Big Dipper was easy to find opposite the yellow moon. Telephone poles and power lines connecting farms to the east and west cast silhouettes twice their height over the quarter-mile lane leading to his family's farm.

Where are you? he asked the night. Show yourself.

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He crept to the edge of the wooden porch and surveyed the property surrounded by wilting corn seven to eight feet tall. The mailbox near the end of the driveway was still cockeyed and his mother's and father's vehicles were still parked in tandem. From behind the garage door his dog was barking and whining, pawing to be let out.

Hold on Blue, we got a visitor.

This way, it whispered.

His eyes darted back and forth but he couldn't locate the intruder. Adrenaline poured through his body. He wanted to run inside and call the police station in town to beg for help. When he stepped backwards and turned the front door shut on its own.

Oh fuck, he said and twisted the handle but it wouldn't budge. He flicked the safety off and spun around to fleece the yard. Where are you motherfucker?

Over here, it whispered and stepped into the moonlight, giving away its location by the corncrib.

When he gazed into its vacant eye sockets, small flames grew and twin silhouettes of a burning house stared back at him. The fires illuminated its fractured and hairless skull, jagged teeth and crooked mandible. Some of its ribs were missing while its left clavicle and both femurs stuck out at unnatural angles.

My God... what... who are you?

A new friend, it whispered and motioned for him to follow.

Mom, Dad, get out here, he yelled. Before he could aim the creature reached across the lawn with invisible hands and squeezed his soul.

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Fuck, he said and clutched his stomach in pain, dropped the gun and fell against the door. The frame kept him upright as he tried not to vomit.

Be quiet, it whispered and lowered its sinewy arms.

Whattya want from me?

To obey, it whispered and the prophetic fires died.

What the hell are you doin outside James? his bald father Dan asked as he opened the front door and stepped onto the porch in his pajamas.

You scared the shit outta me Dad, James said between breaths. I thought someone was in the house so I grabbed your 12-gauge and followed them outside.

Someone was inside? Dan asked and rubbed his eyes.

Yeah but it wasnt a burglar.

What was it then?

I dont know Dad.

Whattya mean you dont know?

Everything okay out there? his mother asked from the doorway, clutching her nightgown. Your dad said he heard a scream but I was sound asleep.

James was sleepwalkin again, Dan said.

You all right? Jodie asked.

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I'm fine Mom, James said and picked the gun off the porch.

Well, I'm callin the school counselor tomorrow, Jodie said and yawned. Somethin's keepin you up and we're gonna get to the bottom of it.

Whatever you say.

Put that gun back where you found it and get your ass to bed before your Mother throws us both out, Dan said.

Shouldnt we call the cops?

What are they gonna do, arrest your imagination? Get some sleep, we'll talk about it in the mornin.

All right, all right but I'm gonna let Blue out first.

He opened the garage, followed the mutt back inside and locked the door. Once he replaced the gun he raced upstairs and walked over to his bedroom window. His breath fogged up the pane and something pulled his attention south. He leaned forward, put his hands on the cold glass and squinted.

A quarter mile away the skeleton stood at the end of the lane, beckoning him.





Your dad and I are worried sick about you, Jodie said from across the kitchen table.

Quit it Mom, I'm fine, James said and wiped the sleep from his puffy eyes.

Just tell us what's goin on James, Dan said. No more beatin around the bush.

I've been havin the same nightmare for a year now, he said without touching his food. But last night was different, someone was in my bedroom.

Are you smokin crack? his curly-haired sister asked while buttering a slice of toast.

Mel, I'm gonna hide your car keys if you arent nicer to your brother, Jodie said. Cant you see he's not well? Besides, how do you know about crack?

I saw it on TV, Mel said and got up from the table.

Do they teach kids how to wash dishes on TV? Dan asked without lowering his newspaper.

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No, that's what James is for, Mel said and laughed.

Quit it you two, Jodie said and slapped Dan on the arm. Go on James, tell us what happened.

When I went outside, I thought I saw someone standin beside the corn crib.

You were sleepwalkin again, Jodie said and stirred her coffee.

I wasnt sleepwalkin, it was real.

Crackheads sleepwalk to their dealers Mom, Mel said.

That's enough Mel, Dan said, chewing on a piece of bacon.

Well, I called the school and made an appointment for you to see the counselor on Thursday, Jodie said.

No way, that woman's nuts. She put Adrien on Prozac and now he's worse than ever.

James, just do what your mother says, Dan said and took a swig of coffee. We cant handle any more sleepless nights round here.

All right, I will, he said and scraped his uneaten breakfast into the trash.

And dont forget to feed the hogs when you get home, Dan said.

I will after football practice, he said. He washed his dishes and stuck them in the drying rack.

Hurry up crackhead or we're gonna be late, Mel said and pulled on her jacket.



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I'm comin, I'm comin, he said.

He grabbed his lettermen's jacket and backpack, walked outside and hopped in the rusty Camaro. She tuned the radio to a local rock station while he gazed out the window as the countryside passed by at sixty-five miles an hour. Dehydrated fields ripe for harvest surrounded the road. Combines filled rusty grain wagons, the grain wagons overloaded semis and the semis raced up and down the two-lane blacktop to empty their cargo at the mills. Crows perched on the utility poles and power lines running north and south took to the gray sky filled with stratus clouds when the two-door passed.

All right crackhead, what's really goin on? she asked and turned down the radio.

You'll never believe me.

I know we aren't that close but I am your sister, so talk to me.

Mel, I didn't see a person last night.

What was it then?

It was a... a skeleton.

A skeleton? What are you talkin about?

You know? Bones, ribs and a skull? A skeleton. I don't know how else to describe it.

Multi-generational farms, rickety old houses and trailers with handmade decks slapped onto their facades passed. She turned east on Highway 34 without a signal and a green sign with reflective lettering stuck out of the south ditch.

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Mom's right, you do need to talk to the counselor.

I'm tellin the truth but no one believes me.

Well, whattya want us to say? You've been actin strange all year. Not eatin. Hidin out in your bedroom. And now you say a skeleton was outside the house?

Leave me alone Mel.

I'm sorry, I just dont know what to say.

You dont have to say anything, just believe me.

I'll try.

They drove past a propane business, three fast-food restaurants, a gas station, an implement dealership their father used to work at, the hardware store, Dicky's Restaurant, another gas station, a dentist's office and a video store. The traffic signal suspended above the Highway 34 and 61 intersection blinked red while they waited their turn. A pickup truck driving farmer they attended church with waved so they gave an obligatory wave back. They headed north and crossed the railroad tracks. The corn company sat on the left side of the road and the IGA was on the right.

Mom and Dad probably think I'm nuts, huh?

Yeah, pretty much.

Oh, fuck off, he said.

She belly laughed while taking a right on Fourth Street. They

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passed by middle-class homes with empty driveways and lawns covered with orange, brown and yellow leaves. Carved pumpkins caving in from the previous week's warm front sat on porches in need of paint. A replaceable letter sign came into view after Sycamore Street.

LAREDO HIGH SCHOOL  
1991 IHSA CLASS 1A  
FOOTBALL CHAMPS

Halloween decorations filled the windows and a few hundred students swarmed the three-story brick building. She parked in the east lot with the trucks, hand-me-down cars and a few Japanese motorcycles. The burnouts wore insulated flannels, Metallica T-shirts and stonewashed jeans. A group of nerds had on windbreakers, corduroy pants and carried stacks of books under their arms. Jocks tossing a football around wore jerseys underneath their letterman's jackets. The farm kids had on trucker hats embroidered with John Deere, International Harvester and Case logos. He spotted his friends, who were a combination of every clique, talking to junior varsity cheerleaders by the main entrance. The corn-fed beauties had too much Aqua Net in their bangs and wore baggy sweaters, denim jackets and flowery dresses.

Thanks for the ride Mel.

Of course but you'll have to catch a ride home, I'll be at Kara's.

Sounds good.

See you crackhead.

See you.

On the way to history class he didnt make eye contact with his

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football coach, teachers or even the girl with big breasts he fell in love with on the school bus a few years back. Stomach pains forced him to ignore his algebra teacher so he spent the last ten minutes of PE in the bathroom with diarrhea. After art class he joined a few of his friends in the cafeteria where his music and Spanish teachers monitored the freshman and sophomores.

Tina's jeans were custom made for her ass, Teddy said and leered at the cute brunette while her preppy friends gave him the stink eye.

You aint joking, TJ said and bit into his bologna sandwich.

I'd love to lose my virginity to her, Pablo said.

Sorry Pablo but I heard she hates Mexicans, Dwayne said, sat and took off his Craftsman hat to reveal his corkscrew hair. He opened his lunch pail and took out a Coke, chips and leftover pizza from the Italian restaurant on Front Street.

Yeah, well I heard she hates blacks too Dwayne, so you're both shit out of luck, Quentin said and everyone laughed except James.

What the fuck's wrong with you? Mac asked, pulled his flannel off and tied it around his waist.

Mind your own business you redneck, James whispered without making eye contact. Besides, those girls wont date us 'cause we drink too much.

Jesus, you've been acting like an asshole for months now James, what's the deal? Teddy asked and his curly blond hair fell onto his freckled face.

Come on James, spill the beans, Quentin said and wiped the chocolate pudding off his football jersey with a brown napkin.

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I'm havin a hard time sleepin, so cut me some fuckin slack you guys, James said.

Well, take a Valium or you're gonna scare Tina's ass away, Teddy said and the other boys fell into hysterics.

James threw his uneaten sack lunch in the trash when the bell rang, retrieved his books from his locker and walked to English class. Ten minutes into Mrs. Jones' lecture a terrible odor wafted in through an open window. He turned and the creature peeked out from behind a maple tree in the center of the playground.

Time for church, the skeleton said and summoned him with its index finger.

Are you okay James? Mrs. Jones asked while his classmates sneered at him with bunched up faces. James? I'm talking to you James.

I'm sorry, what did you say? he asked and the others laughed. Sweat ran down his face and his hands turned white from clutching his desk.

You look terrible, she said and the final bell rang. You should go home before you get the other kids sick.

He didnt respond, collected his books and raced out of the class before anyone else. He took his coat and backpack from locker 218, walked down Elm Street and was alone on Third after a few minutes. A four-door Buick filled with upperclassmen honked and one raised his middle finger as cigarette smoke, classic rock and laughter trailed behind.

This way, it called from down the street.

Where are you? he asked and his eyes darted around the neighborhood. He quickened his pace for a block and came to the

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cathedral where he and his family took communion.

SAINT MICHAELS CATHOLIC CHURCH  
FATHER OMALLY  
DAILY MASSES 9AM & 5PM  
SATURDAYS 5PM  
SUNDAYS 10AM & 5PM

Hurry, hurry James, it called and squeezed his soul. Lunch tried to escape his belly but he didnt want to puke on the steps. Crows sat shoulder to shoulder on the power cables attached to the rectory and cawed as the right door opened on its own. He stopped and made sure no one was pulling a prank on him but the neighborhood was empty, save a few kids walking home from school.

When he stepped inside the door slammed behind him. He pulled on the handle and beat his fists on the mahogany but it wouldnt budge. He dipped his hand into the stoup and touched his forehead, chest and each shoulder.

Fuck, I'm not even goin to mass, he whispered.

A little further, it called with a desperate tone.

Father O'Mally? he asked but received no answer when he walked down the middle of the nave. Bibles and bulletins laid on the wooden pews with their cushioned kneelers extended. A spectrum of light created by the stained-glass windows spilled into the cathedral. A hand-painted statue of Jesus, Mary and Joseph completed the baptistery. Centered among the sanctuary was a wooden statue of the crucified savior staring down at him.

Come, come, it called.

Father? he asked the priest's office. That you in there?  
The door opened, creaking and slow. He walked inside but the

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stale room was empty. There were paintings on the walls, shelves of dusty books and a rosary hanging from the desk lamp surrounded by picture frames. From the southwest corner someone took a labored breath so he spun around to meet his tormentor.

Are you one of the monsters from my nightmare?

Look in there, it said and pointed so he followed its index finger to the desk. Without turning his back he sat and the bottom right drawer opened on its own.

How did you do that?

Take the book, it said and a leather-bound volume, nameless and aged, lay in the drawer. Against all common sense and reasoning, he grabbed the artifact and dropped it on the desk.

What is this? What's it for?

Hello? someone called from the foyer and shut the door. Hello? Is anyone here?

He tried to call for help but the creature squeezed his stomach without reaching for him. He doubled over in pain but couldn't draw a breath.

Shh, it whispered and brought its filthy carpals to its mouth.

Stop, stop, stop, he whispered and clutched his midsection.

Not a word.

What if I tell him you're in here?

Then he dies.

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Okay, I'll take it, just dont hurt him, he whispered, shoved the book into his backpack and inched around the desk. Please, I'm beggin you.

Now go, it whispered and signaled for him to leave. He shuffled out of the office and met the priest in the aisle.

James? What were you doing in my office? O'Mally asked.

I was lookin for you Father, he said and tightened his backpack.

You know you're not supposed to be in Saint Michael's alone, O'Mally said and the telephone in his office rang.

I know but the church was already open.

It was?

Yeah, I thought you were gettin ready for the five o'clock mass.

Stay here while I get that, okay?

Okay.

When the priest was gone he darted outside, ran down Third and cut through the alley perpendicular to Cherry Street. He walked onto the back porch of the third house, rang the doorbell a few times and turned to take in the late afternoon. The lone oak tree on the property cast broken shadows onto the wilting lawn as the sun dropped in the west.





Father O'Mally sauntered into his office but stopped before his desk. His picture frames, mail and lamp were strewn on the carpeted floor. A strange odor lingered in the air. He squeezed his nose with one hand and balled the other in anger. The ringing telephone was giving him a headache so he grabbed the receiver and untangled the chord.

Hello, he said, kneeled to pick up the broken light and tried adjusting its mangled shade.

Hello John, the caller said in a gritty tone.

This is Father O'Mally, who am I speaking with?

An old friend.

Well, old friend, do you have a name? he asked and grabbed a picture frame off the floor. Beneath the splintered glass the photograph of him and the bishop was charred.

Remember me?

State your name please or I'm hanging up.

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Think harder John, the caller said, hung up the phone and returned to the nave.

James? he called and turned, expecting to find him. James? Where are you James?

He stepped back into his office, sat and there were scratch marks on the bottom drawer. He rubbed his face and ran his fingers through his salt and pepper hair.

Christ in heaven, this cant be happening, he whispered, pulled his keys out of his right pocket and located the bronze one. The broken lock wouldnt accept it so he grabbed the handle and opened the drawer without resistance. He pondered the leather scraps left behind and itched the back of his neck.

What have you done James? he asked and his face turned red. Wait, wait a damn minute. He yanked the gold-framed print of Jesus off the wall to reveal a metal safe built into the plaster.

Fuck, he shouted when the right combination didnt come to mind. He spun the black dial clockwise and counterclockwise until the heavy little door opened. Inside were two wads of bills wrapped in rubber bands, a snub-nosed revolver, a jewelry box, three leather-bound volumes and a cluster of manila envelopes. He grabbed the unmarked one, shut the safe and walked to the east window. The clasp was difficult to open with his shaking hands but he still produced the burnt and soiled page. He held the artifact up to the light and studied the cursive written on the front and back.

Thank God no one found you, he whispered, folded it twice and stuck it in his pocket.

# 4

Dwayne got a ride home from school on Tuesday with his older friend Rodney, made a sandwich and stuck a tape marked EXERCISES in the VCR. He undid his belt buckle with a cowboy roping a steer engraved into it, kicked the recliner out and hit play on the remote control. When he took the first bite a curvaceous brunette with a hairy crotch and leggings was pleasuring herself. A drum machine, synthesizer and guitar provided the dodgy soundtrack. The doorbell rang three times in a row so he stopped the movie and walked through the house while zipping up his Wrangler jeans.

What the fuck happened to you? he asked from behind the screen door with his pearl snap work shirt unbuttoned and stomach exposed. You look like shit.

I know, I know, mind if I hang out here for a while? James asked. I'll tell you everything inside.

Sure, just take off your shoes and leave your backpack by the door or my Mom will throw a fit.

I havent felt good all day so I skipped practice.

Same, I'm going to the lumberyard to work in a bit. Coach is

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gonna kill me but who gives a fuck?

Not me, I never get to play.

You gotta see this porno Dave let me borrow. The girls are smoking hot.

Help yourself.

They sat in the television room and Dwayne pressed play on the remote. A dark-skinned man with a greasy mullet and an above average cock kissed the brunette and fondled her breasts.

Turn it down or your Mom will fuckin kill us if she comes home.

No one's coming home you pussy, my parents are at the lumberyard until six or six-thirty.

Whatever, can you keep a secret? James asked and got comfortable.

Of course I can, we've been friends since we were babies, he said but didnt take his eyes off the television. When the brunette took the man in her mouth distortion ran across the screen, flipped and returned to normal several times.

Remember the nightmare I was tellin you about when we were out campin last week? James asked as the tape strained inside the VCR.

Yeah, why? Dwayne asked and glimpses of people in red velvet robes cut between the black and white tracking.

Well, somethin happened last night and today after school but you gotta promise not to tell anyone, okay?

Wait a second, wait a second, did you see that? Dwayne asked, got up and fiddled with the VCR.

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Yeah, what was that?

I dont know but it's creeping me out, he said as the screen rippled one last time and settled on dozens of cloaked people standing in a dark chamber with filthy stone walls.

Omnipotens Lucifer aperi nobis offerre sacrificium humilem hunc dimittis, portas inferni et magister noster uxor, the worshippers chanted in a low register.

What are they sayin? James asked.

The hell if I know, I cant understand them, he said and the camera turned to the five standing around a pentagram painted on the floor in white. It encircled a naked woman tied to four of the apexes by her wrists and ankles. Her long red hair covered the fifth.

What are they doin to her? James asked and stood.

The fuck if I know, I just wanna watch the porno, he said, tried the remote but couldnt fast forward the tape. The woman struggled to break her binds but they held tight. There were medieval symbols written on her skin with the blood spilling from the side of her pregnant belly. Her teeth clamped down on a handkerchief tied around her head, muting her cries.

This aint a movie dumb ass, James said and grabbed Dwayne's arm. It looks real, like someone filmed a crime or a murder or somethin.

One wore a goat's head, others held torches, staffs and objects their Christian upbringing didnt teach the boys. An old woman with a wretched face and stringy gray hair played modal scales on an organ in the corner.

This cant be real, Dave was probably drunk and hit record on

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accident, Dwayne said as the worshippers stopped chanting and turned their heads toward the boys. The sacrificial woman peered into the camera, kicked and fought to break free. Her eyes widened and bulged in their sockets while she squealed through the gag.

Stop the video Dwayne, it's scarin the shit out of me.

I'm trying, the fucking thing wont turn off.

Hello boys, one of the robed men said with a strange accent, stepped forward and lowered his hood.

Is he talkin to us? James asked with both hands on his head.

Yes, I was talking to you.

Who are you? Dwayne asked.

I am the leader of this congregation but you can call me Master.

Coarse white hair sprouted from the sides of his bald head littered with scars. A matching beard half-covered a silver pendant decorated with sparkling jewels hanging from his neck.

Can you see us? James asked.

Yes, we can but please excuse our means. This archaic ritual was the only way we could reach you. We mean you no harm.

Whattya want from us? Dwayne asked.

James has a tome that belongs to me and it needs to be returned. Otherwise there will be terrible consequences.

A tome? he asked and glared at James. What's he talking about?

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Quiet down and I will explain everything. There is a creature in your town who wants the same book. Remember the creature who woke you up last night James? Who came to your school today? Who lured you to Saint Michael's this afternoon?

How'd you know about that? James asked.

That creature was once a beautiful woman. In fact, she was a member of our Church but was cast into Hell after her lover burned our house down. All that remains of her now are bones imprisoning her tortured soul.

Why me? What did I do? James asked.

She needs you and your friends to perform a ritual from the stolen book to resurrect more of her kind from Hell. As you will see in the coming days, the longer she remains on Earth, the more human she will become. But none of that is important now. What is most important is avoiding her at all costs and returning the book to my son when he arrives in Laredo.

I cant take this anymore, Dwayne said and tried the dials but the worshippers remained on the screen. He unplugged the electrical cords from the south wall, stood and peered out the window.

What's wrong Dwayne? James asked. Past the drawn curtains was the brunette from the videotape.

Hey boys, wanna come outside? she asked and pulled the top of her leotard down to expose her bulging left breast.

Look, it's the woman from the porno, Dwayne said with excitement. She's taking her clothes off.

That's not a woman, it's the creature from Saint Michael's, James said and pointed.

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Oh my God, I thought I saw that woman but she's... she's a skeleton now, Dwayne said.

Run, run or she will destroy you, the Master yelled from the crackling television.

The boys cut through the house but stopped in the kitchen where the creature stood in the foyer holding the stolen book.

Don't forget this, the skeleton said and offered it to James.





Father O'Mally drove to Front Street where the Scissor Shack stood beside by the fire station and across from the railroad tracks. He searched for Jodie's minivan among the vehicles parked to the east of the one-story building but couldn't find it. Once he contemplated what to do next he cut through the busy little town and took Interstate 39 south. He cranked the heater on and tuned the radio to the local news. Traffic was light so he passed the other drivers going twenty miles an hour over the speed limit.

Lord, help me find that book before somebody gets hurt, he whispered and rubbed his eyes. He ignored the neighboring towns and patches of timber parallel to the highway, crossed over the Mackinaw River and merged onto Interstate 55. When he reached the south side of Pennington he cut east and took a right at the Chevrolet sign on auto row. He parked, stood beside his vehicle and waved to Dan. The potbellied salesman was talking to a young couple holding a baby wrapped in a pink blanket.

Good afternoon Father, what brings you to the big city? Dan asked, stuck his hand out and squeezed with a farmer's strength. Can I get you a cup of coffee? A donut? Jack Daniel's on the rocks?

Sorry to bother you at work but it's important, he said and zipped

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up his coat but left the white clerical collar visible. We need to talk about James.

Uh-oh, what happened? He steal a bottle of wine? Eat too many communion wafers?

Nothing like that but James was in my office this afternoon. He took something out of my desk that I need back.

A family of five parked in front of the dealership, fell out of their beat-up station wagon and checked the sticker prices on the minivans along the north end of the lot.

You came all the way to Pennington to accuse my son of breakin into Saint Michael's? he asked and rocked back and forth on his heels.

Dan, I didnt come here to make accusations. I came here to tell you no one should have that volume in their possession, let alone a teenaged boy.

The sun hid behind a bank of clouds and the wind picked up so the priest stuffed his hands into his coat pockets.

Father, as you can see, I got customers waitin, so if you'll excuse me, Dan said as his face turned red and the veins on his neck bulged.

I understand you're trying to work but James is in serious trouble. That book is dangerous in the wrong hands. Get it from him when he gets home or there'll be terrible consequences.

Hey Dan, the service manager yelled from the garage. You got a call on line three, can you take it?

Yeah, I'll be right there. Listen Father, I know my boy is a little weird sometimes. Hell, everyone in town knows he sleepwalks. But I cant see him stealin anything from you. So how about the

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three of us sit down after mass on Sunday and sort this whole thing out?

No goddammit, O'Mally said, grabbed his arm and pulled him close with unexpected strength. Why aren't you listening to me?

I am listenin, Dan said, pulled away and adjusted his jacket. But now's not the time for an argument over an old book you probably misplaced. Now, like I said before, I'll talk to him tonight, okay?

The book he stole is for black magic, he said and dropped his head. Spells. You know, satanic rituals? If James so much as reads it, he could hurt himself and everyone close to him.

You've lost your goddamn mind, Dan said and raised his hands in defense. Now get your ass outta here before I call the Diocese.

Help me... help me protect these people Lord, I can't do this on my own, O'Mally whispered as the salesman raced over to the minivans. But God didn't respond so he trekked north and Pennington faded away. Gray clouds spat on his windshield and Paul Harvey promoted insurance on the AM dial.

Damn, smells like the engine's burning oil, he whispered and glanced at the dashboard but no warning lights shined back at him. Cornfields engulfed the interstate as he sped by the town of Janson and took the last exit before Laredo.

## CAPLAND POPULATION

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He slowed down for the cop parked alongside the town's only strip club and continued onto what locals nicknamed the Capland Blacktop. Something caught his eye in the rearview

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mirror and a wicked stench made him gag. He turned around and a blackened creature sat in the back seat.

John, the skeleton said, put its left hand on his shoulder and gripped with the strength of a vise.

Jesus Christ, he shouted and came within inches of hitting a Buick headed in the opposite direction. He swerved, course corrected and stopped halfway in the ditch. He threw the Chevrolet in park and ran south. After twenty yards he spun around, squinted and the back right door was ajar. He scanned the bare fields. Nothing. When he returned to the car he ran his hand over the backseat.

Still warm, he whispered and glanced to the east and west while standing knee deep in weeds. Dehydrated cornstalks floated in the breeze and the sky turned purple, red and yellow from the dying sun. Hundreds of crows suspended on the power lines above gawked at him and stared with licorice colored eyes. They cackled and wobbled closer to the priest on the cables as if readying for an attack.

You need a ride Father? a middle-aged woman yelled from her four-door Taurus.

Thanks for stopping, he said and needed a second to recall meeting her at a football game years ago. I think my car overheated Mrs. Stockholm.

Sorry to hear that Father. Dont worry, I'll have you back to Saint Michael's in no time.

Much appreciated, he said, shut the back door, grabbed his briefcase off the front seat and locked the car. When they drove away he checked the mirror on his side. There was no sign of the skeleton but the crows followed without formation.

PART ONE: LAREDO

Ron's been driving Fords his whole life. He never buys Chevys, says their transmissions dont hold up.

He sounds like a wise man, he said and the creature stood in the first row of corn a quarter-mile ahead. When they passed it waved, stepped into the ditch and paused.

You okay Father? she asked and went slower than necessary for a Tuesday afternoon jaunt through the country.

I'm fine Mrs. Stockholm but that Chevy of mine's a goner.



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What the hell's going on in here? Amber asked and stomped her feet, waking the boys from the creature's hex.

Mom? Dwayne asked and came to his senses. What are you doing home?

What am I doing home? she asked and pushed the buttons on the VCR but couldn't find the one marked EJECT. What are you two doing watching an adult film in my home? Turn it off right this instance Dwayne or I'm gonna spank your black ass.

The screen displayed a leotard wearing blonde laying on a weight bench with a muscle-bound hunk on top of her. He thrust up and down and her animated moans filled the television room.

Oh shit, Dwayne said, pulled the wooden lever on the recliner and kicked in with his legs. James brought it over, I swear.

Is that true James? she asked, holding the video cassette.

Not exactly, he said as the toxic after effects of the skeleton coursed through his veins.

Well, get it outta here would you? she asked and handed it to

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him. His palm brushed up against the book when he stuck it in his backpack. The stinking volume permeated his senses and reminded him of the creature's hold on him.

Wait, why aren't you two at football practice?

I came home to grab a snack before work, Dwayne said.

Why did I buy you all of that equipment if you're not gonna play?

Dad wants me to play but I'd rather be making money at the lumber yard than getting yelled at by Coach.

All right, enough of this crap already. Help me put the groceries away before I lose my ever-loving mind.

Amber, I hate to be a nuisance but can I get a ride home before you guys eat dinner? James asked.

Sure but if I catch you two watching that crap again, you'll be walking home next time.

She drove him across town in silence, through the country and north on the lane that ran to his house. She made a left onto the gravel driveway where three vehicles sat.

Thanks for the ride, he said and opened the car door.

No problem, just don't bring those tapes over anymore or I'm gonna have to tell your mom, deal?

Deal, he said and she pulled out of the driveway. He walked inside where Dan sat across from Mel at the dinner table. Jodie pulled a pan of meatloaf out of the oven and set it on a trivet shaped like a barn.



PART ONE: LAREDO

Hey James, we were just gettin ready to eat, she said and used a spatula to serve the dish. Take a seat, would you?

He grabbed a chair, helped himself to the Kool-Aid and a harsh uneasiness filled the room.

Father O'Mally showed up at the dealership today, Dan said and swallowed a gulp of beer. He told me you stole a book out of his office. Why would you do that?

James, your father asked you a question, Jodie said between bites.

The church door was open so I just let myself in. Father had a book I wanted to borrow for my drawin class, that's all. I'll give it back to him on Sunday, sorry he bothered you at work today Dad.

Goddammit, dont lie to me, Dan said and slammed his Pabst Blue Ribbon on the table. You've been actin weird for months now and your clothes look like they're just hangin on you, so just answer my question.

Dont yell at him Dan, cant you see he's not well? Jodie asked and set her utensils down.

Jodie, your old shrink accused our son of stealin today. So, I'm gonna ask you one more time James, why did you take that book?

All right, I'll tell you, he said and tried not to make eye contact with him. Whatever was in the house last night was outside my English class today. I followed it to Saint Michael's after school and it was inside Father O'Mally's office.

His family stopped eating and stared at him without saying a word. Within moments, their concern had turned into outright fear for his sanity.

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What in God's name are you talkin about? Are you on drugs?  
Dan asked.

No, I swear to God I'm tellin the truth. It said if I didnt take the book it would kill Father O'Mally.

James, I want you to quit this nonsense and talk to the school counselor first thing tomorrow, do you understand? Jodie asked.

Yeah, I understand but do you understand that somethin's been hauntin me for a year now?

Oh, for Christ's sake James, I dont know what's wrong with you but this needs to stop, Dan said. I want you to start eatin, gettin some sleep and quit with the ghost stories, got it?

Oh, I got it, he said and dropped his head in his hands.

Where's the book at now? Dan asked.

I left it at Dwayne's house, he said while pushing the uneaten meatloaf around his plate.

Can I be excused? Mel asked and scooted her chair out. I got chemistry to do.

Of course, Dan said.

James, you need to call Dwayne tonight and have him bring that book to school tomorrow, Jodie said. Now go to your room, your father and I need to discuss your behavior.

He ran upstairs with his backpack and locked his bedroom door. His sister's stereo was loud enough to drown out the arguing in the kitchen so he pulled the book out and lay it on his bed. Hair, skin and glue bound the volume and the cover was soft and aged.

## PART ONE: LAREDO

Pages had been torn out and entire sections were missing. Dark red fingerprints, dirt and candle wax stained the text.

Without warning, the pages fluttered so he dropped the book on the floor out of fear. He peered over the side of his mattress and waited. After a few seconds the volume settled on a spread with a rectangular drawing. He picked it up and squinted at the cursive instructions surrounding the diagram.

Omni... potens Lucifer aperi quaeso oculo... oculos tuos ut videas et inferos, he whispered.

Over here, someone called from across the room in a muffled tone.

He stood and the mirror changed from reflecting the opposite wall to flooding his bedroom with crimson light. He stepped in front of the beacon, raised the book to shield his eyes and repeated the spell.

Come closer.

He lowered the book when the glow dimmed and stared into his recurring nightmare. His perspective was no longer from a safe distance but from within an ancient metropolis carved into the base of a volcanic mountain. Hundreds of skeletons exited the caverns, pointed at him and blocked his view of the radiant horizon. Most were regular-sized, dozens were small and childlike while others had Paleolithic frames. The cursed inhabitants tilted their skulls and discussed the voyeur before one holding hands with an adolescent stepped forward.

Are you James? the adult skeleton asked with a gravelly voice.

How did you know my name? he asked quiet enough not to alarm his sister.

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He told us.

Who? he asked, raised his hand and placed it on the gateway. The child reciprocated the gesture but the glass was hot so he pulled away and shook off the pain.

You should go, the young skeleton said and lowered its arm.

Why?

He's coming.

Who?

The Medicine Man.

Who's the Medicine Man?

Without answering the adults turned their heads, waited and picked up their terrified children. They ran back into the cavernous mountain and the city fell silent. A low rumble, followed by a cloud of dust rose from the distant plateau.

Wait, where are you goin? he asked and stepped closer to the portal. Stop, come back, I wont hurt you.

He stared past the dwellings and into the desert plains. Massive skulls, bones and vertebrates lay half-buried in the smoking ground. Crows filled the sky, dove closer and revealed themselves to be featherless. Their angular wings carried them a quarter of a mile above warriors on skeletal horses galloping toward the vacant city. The riders wore headdresses, earrings and necklaces stolen from the graves, tunnels and caverns leading to Hell.

Oh my Lord, he whispered and opened the book. He read the next set of instructions to himself and regarded the mirror again.

PART ONE: LAREDO

The army numbering in the thousands approached the city at full stride and howled their best war cries. They raised their staffs, swords and shields before they funneled into the courtyard.

Lucifer omni... potens, he said much faster than before. Quaesio oculos tuos vid... videam terras.

The most decorated skeleton motioned to halt, dismounted his horse and approached the glass. He carried a tomahawk fashioned from bones and twirled it with each step.

Master's book? the Medicine Man asked in discordant English.

I think so, he said with trembling words.

Then free us, the Medicine Man said as his tribe crowded around.

Lucifer omni... omnipotens quaeso oculos tuos vid... videam terras, he said again without interruption.

No, stop, free us, free us now, the Medicine Man said, raised his weapon and struck the glass to no effect.

Lucifer omnipotens quaeso oculos tuos videam terras, James said faster and louder than before.

The enraged skeleton struck the barrier until the unholy landscape faded and the mirror returned to normal. His reflection stared back at him and someone pounded on his bedroom door.

James? You okay in there? Mel asked from the hallway.

I'm fine, whattya want?

Nothin, just keep it down. I'm tryin to read you crackhead.

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Sorry, he said and sat at his desk. He flipped through the book, studied the diagrams and read the passages written in English.

Holy shit, this book is the key to those things, he whispered.

# 7

Father O'Mally flew over Laredo with the grace of a barn swallow, past the outskirts of town and into the country where the rural folks lived, farmed and died so their children might do the same. He dipped below the clouds but stayed high enough to miss the utility poles and cables lined with squawking crows. When he landed on County Road 1300 he walked across the weedy lawn and stopped outside the front door. Low and muffled chanting came from inside the abandoned farmhouse.

He crept into the kitchen where moonlight shone through the window over the sink. The cupboards were bare except for a few broken coffee mugs, plates and glasses scattered at random. Dust, rat droppings and newspapers covered the peeling linoleum floor. He bumped into a chair in the dining area and the glow of burning candles in the living room caught his eye.

Dicimus pientissimam contentionem Lucifer et aperire portas inferni et de duabus animabus dimittere, the five boys chanted.

They held hands around a medieval symbol slopped onto the floor along with the entrails torn from the possum lying dead at the Mexican boy's feet. A pregnant redhead lay on top of the symbol with her wrists and ankles tied to railroad spikes. He made eye contact with the young woman and she screamed for

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help through her gag but her attempt to break free was pointless. When he entered the room the teenagers stopped the ritual, turned their heads and glared with evil in their eyes.

John, the redhead cried out and he woke from the nightmare to find himself covered in sweat. There was no trace of the boys, farmhouse or dark country night in his empty bedroom. The digital alarm clock on his nightstand was blurry without his glasses. 3:33 a.m.

He slipped his veiny feet into the leather slippers a parishioner gave him last Christmas and threw on his robe. The mirror above the bathroom sink reflected bags under his eyes, graying black hair and wrinkled skin. He pulled a frayed toothbrush out of the medicine cabinet and dabbed it with paste.

John, someone called from downstairs and the word bounced around the clergy house.

Hello? he asked and froze. He spit into the sink and stood in the doorway as toothpaste dripped from his lips.

Come, John, come.

Hello? Who's there? he asked and waited but received no reply.

He put on twice worn clerical clothing and walked downstairs. When he turned on the foyer light everything was the same as he left it before bedtime. There was a sparse coat rack, three sets of keys hanging from the hook below a print of Mary and a dish full of change on the table.

Out here.

He peered through the paned glass but no one was on the porch. When he stepped outside, Saint Michael's stood tall and quiet



PART ONE: LAREDO

but the trespasser had left the right door open.

Time for mass, someone called from inside the cathedral.

He shuffled down the sidewalk, up the church steps and through the nave. After he paused at the altar he got on his knees and prayed to the life-size statue of Christ hanging above the tabernacle.

Lord, I beg of you to protect my congregation, the priest whispered with his eyes closed. Something is not right. Something is wrong in Laredo.

Up here.

When he raised his head he discovered a skeleton nailed to the wooden cross by its hands and feet with ten-inch spikes. A crown of thorns adorned its fractured skull and bloody and soiled fabric covered its groin. The creature struggled to break free, writhing and hissing.

Hello again, the skeleton said and regarded him without eyes.

Oh, oh my Lord, he said and fell backwards.

Remember me? it asked without a tongue, lips or mouth.

No, who are you?

Think harder.

Why are you doing this? he asked and shielded himself with his right arm.

Revenge, it said and squirmed to separate from the metal hammered into its appendages. He ran to the foyer but the open door banged shut and locked on its own.

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Let me out, he yelled but couldn't turn the handle. Help, somebody help me.

He spun around and covered his mouth in awe. The creature tore its left hand free from the crucifixion nail, reached across its breastbone and worked to loosen its right. It pulled its overlapping feet from the last nail and fell on the altar steps.

Come back, it yelled and crawled toward the vestibule on its hands and knees.

The priest slammed against the door until it broke open with a crack and he stumbled outside. As he rushed to the clergy house he dropped his keys to the loaner in the driveway.

He sped across town, parked the Chevrolet and lingered outside the Scissor Shack.



TJ ignored Mrs. Stillwater's lessons on Wednesdays because no one except the migrant workers who passed through during the summer used Spanish in Laredo. The husky redhead peered out the grimy window, past the school lawn and at the law office where his father worked fifty to sixty hours a week. Restless crows filled the two maple trees dwarfing the brick building and cawed loud enough to distract the class. Dozens more dipped down from the sky, landed and greeted them with screeching beaks and thrashing wings.

Eyes up here, I know you've all seen Corvids before, Stillwater said and rapped her knuckles on the dirty chalkboard. The final bell rang and the twenty-seven students grabbed their belongings and filed out of the classroom.

Nice work today people, she said. We'll be going over adverbs tomorrow so read chapter eleven for extra credit.

He weaved through the maze of students in the hallway, turned left and skipped down two flights of stairs. His friends stood around his locker talking with serious faces.

Discúlpeme gringos, TJ said and grabbed his jacket.

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Hola, tienes tequila? Pablo asked.

No señor, solo cerveza.

The passing students filed into the locker rooms at the other end of the hall to change into their volleyball, cheerleading or football practice uniforms. The remaining walked outside to ride the bus or catch a ride home.

You guys wanna skip practice? James asked. Head out to the Carny House and smoke some cigarettes?

You fucking crazy? Pablo asked. Just because Teddy's dad is a lawyer doesnt mean we can skip practice. My dad will kick my ass if Coach pulls me from the game against Kensington on Saturday.

Yeah, we'd probably get kicked off the football team for that shit, Mac said and adjusted his hat. Besides, why today?

Dwayne and I have somethin to show you but we cant show you here, James said.

Just tell us what's going on for fuck's sake, Quentin said with his number thirty-four Bears jersey peeking through his unzipped jacket. I'm not getting suspended for a bottle of Jack Daniel's or a porno tape you found in your dad's sock drawer.

Something happened to us yesterday and we need your help figuring out what it was, Dwayne said and buttoned up his Carhartt.

Sure, why not? Teddy asked. I got leftover Halloween cookies from Home Economics.

Fuck it, we can always tell Coach we caught the flu when he jumps down our throats tomorrow, Quentin said. Everyone's entitled to a sick day, right?

PART ONE: LAREDO

Sounds like a terrible plan, let's do it, TJ said and shut his locker. The boys walked across the student parking lot, through a patch of woods and headed north on the railroad tracks.

I think Mrs. Jones' tits have gotten bigger this semester, dontcha think? James asked and the Marlboro glowed orange when he French inhaled.

Tits dont grow that fast, Mac said. It takes years for them to get bigger. Besides, I cant believe you like those saggy things.

I wouldnt need to talk about them if your Mom let me suck on hers, James said and the others chuckled.

Hold on, hold on, did anybody see that? TJ asked. Somebody's following us.

Quentin, Dwayne and Teddy kept walking while James and Pablo stopped and focused on where TJ was pointing. There was no one but the maples on both side of the tracks waved to the teenagers. A sliver of town remained to the south.

You must be seein shit 'cause all I see are Mrs. Jones' bajongas rubbing up against the chalkboard and erasing present pronouns or possessive participles or whatever the fuck she was teachin today, James said.

Pablo laughed but TJ remained silent. He didnt take his eyes off the cluster of poplars, making James and Pablo uneasy.

It looked like that skeleton Mr. Moore uses for science class, he said. You know, the one he wheels out of the supply closet to teach us about bones? Except it was black, like it had been burnt or something.

Have you lost your goddamn mind TJ? Pablo asked and followed

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James. Come on, let's go Gordo.

No, I saw something walking through the woods, he said without taking his eyes off the trees. Seriously, I'm not joking around.

Hurry the hell up you guys, we're running out of daylight, Dwayne yelled with an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth.

I'm coming, I'm coming, he said and caught up with them.



How are you and Dan doing? Amber asked, sat in the middle styling chair at the Scissor Shack and glanced at herself in the mirror on the opposite wall.

Oh, pretty good, Jodie said, pulled a smock around her old friend and fastened it at the back. Why do you ask?

Well, a rumor's been flying around town that you two are having problems. Just thought I'd make sure you're all right.

Havin problems? Who told you that? she asked, wetted Amber's black hair with a water bottle and combed it.

Glen and I were having brunch at Dicky's on Sunday after church. One of the waitresses mentioned you and Father O'Mally were there on Thursday nights.

And I thought us hairdressers were responsible for spreadin all of Laredo's gossip, she said and Amber laughed. Between you and me, Dan's drinkin is gettin to me and Father seems to be the only person in town who understands. I'd go to a shrink but they're too damn expensive.

I know you two have been through a lot so I'm all ears if you

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need to talk. Seriously, I'm here for you.

Thanks Amber. After we had Mel, his drinkin got pretty bad, so I confided in Father O'Mally and he helped. Well, when I got pregnant with James things were fine for years. Then, all of a sudden, he's drunk three, four nights a week and we've got two kids to raise.

If it's a money issue, Glen and I are happy to help. Business is good at the lumberyard.

That means a lot but ever since he got that job down in Pennington sellin cars we've been doin fine. It's just that he and his co-workers like to go drinkin after work.

Sorry to hear that but at least you're making good money. There's nothing worse than fighting and being broke. Glen and I went through that once and almost killed each other.

Agreed, it's taken me fifteen years to build my clientele and I'm not about to throw it all away 'cause he wont quit drinkin.

Dont worry, it'll all come out in the wash, Amber said and wiped away some cut hair on her face.

Hey Jodie, Father O'Mally is here to see you, Jennifer said and motioned to the panic-stricken priest standing in the doorway.

You need a haircut Father? she asked without stopping her work.

Sorry to interrupt you at work Jodie but I need to speak with you, O'Mally said and closed the door. It's important.

Oh no, is everything okay?

No, it's about James, he said and gazed at her too long.



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Let me finish cuttin Amber's hair and I'll be right with you Father.

He nodded, grabbed a National Geographic and sat in the waiting room. An overweight woman wearing an orange muumuu whispered something into her husband's ear. Two white-haired women smiled at the priest. A farmer combed through the Laredo Chronicle and three children fought over a pile of Lincoln Logs on the tile floor.

How's the new girl? Amber asked.

Oh, Jennifer? She's great but doesnt seem to know how to sweep or fold towels. Catherine tried droppin hints but she didnt seem to get the message.

Yeah, it's tough to own a small business, I feel for Catherine, Amber said. Anyway, between the hormones and nudie magazines I find in Dwayne's room, there's only so much a woman can take. Every time I turn around, he's smoking cigarettes or fighting with his brother or mouthing off. Glen and I scream and yell at him but nothing changes.

How on Earth do you handle two hormonal boys? she asked and trimmed the top of Amber's hair. James is as weird as they come but thank God he doesnt get into any trouble. I dont think he's even hit puberty yet.

Well, I gotta tell you something but please dont get mad at him.

I promise not to kill him. Why, what did he do?

Before I gave your son a ride home yesterday, I caught him and Dwayne watching a dirty movie.

Together?

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Yup, together.

That's just disgustin.

I know, do you think he got the tape from Dan?

He better not have, I'll kill him if he did. What is it about men watchin other couples havin sex?

Who knows but I cant watch those movies Jodie, they make me sick.

Me neither. That aint sex, that's actin.

Glen was flipping through the channels the other night and landed on Cinemax. This guy was just humping this poor girl like nobody's business.

It's here, get back, it's here, O'Mally yelled from the foyer. The skeleton from Saint Michael's got behind Jodie, placed its right hand around the hairdresser's and squeezed. Her scissors cut through Amber's ear and blood shot onto her face and the mirror.

Oh my God, you cut my ear off, Amber yelled, cupped the side of her head and tore the smock away.

Careful, the skeleton whispered in Jodie's ear.

Let me go, she said and fought to get free but it pulled her in tighter. Everyone in the salon stared at the woman they trusted for years writhing against something invisible to them. Jennifer rushed over to Amber with a clean towel and pressed it against the open wound.

Get off her, O'Mally yelled, trying to pull the creature off Jodie. It squeezed his innards without letting go of her and he fell to the floor in agony.

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Are you okay Father? Jennifer asked as Jodie stood in a state of shock.

How could you do this? Amber asked crying. My ear, my ear.

I'm so sorry Amber, she said with the bloody scissors still in her right hand. It wasnt me, somethin's got ahold of my hand, I cant move, somebody help me.

The creature released Jodie, walked backwards and stood in the corner. She dropped the sheers and put her hands up in defense.

Just stay back, Amber said and Father O'Mally pulled Jodie in closer as the skeleton snuck out the back door without being detected.

It wasnt my fault, she cried out. I swear, it wasnt my fault Amber.



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The seven boys walked east on County Road 1300 whistling and singing the theme to Cheers over and over again. Gusts of wind made Dwayne put on a stocking hat knitted with their school's colors and the others zipped up their coats.

Is it just me, or are those things following us? TJ asked and turned to the crow-filled sky.

Yeah, they like the taste of fat redheads, Teddy said and one fell on the blacktop and twitched before succumbing.

Jesus Christ, it's rainin' crow, James said.

Damn thing almost hit me, Teddy said and kicked it into the ditch where pussy willows swayed.

They made it to the weedy driveway where a mailbox sat atop a knotty post. It resembled a colander after bullets and buckshot of different sizes had torn through it over the years. In the front lawn three overgrown pines flanked a maple splintered by lightning. One-half was still alive and the other was blackened. The garage doors swung on rusty hinges and made a hostile racket. Decades-old tractors, implements and barns resembling oversized tombstones littered the property.

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Why's this place called the Carny House? TJ asked, lit a cigarette and handed Quentin his lighter.

Because it's like a carnival on Friday nights, Teddy said. The upperclassmen like to come out here and drink and fuck their girlfriends and shoot empty beer bottles.

Somebody wanna remind me what we're doing again? Mac asked and stuck his hands in his denim jacket.

No idea, how about you James? Dwayne? Quentin asked.

Quit bustin my balls, James said and shivered. We'll show you when we get inside.

You guys better not be pulling a prank on us, Pablo said and crossed his arms. I didnt skip practice for that shit.

Jesus, enough with the football guilt, Mac said and shook his head.

They ignored the crumbling sidewalk and cut across the lawn overgrown with white clover, foxtails and crabgrass. Cracked white paint clung to the siding, trim and overhangs. The bare sections revealed water damaged wood. The chimney needed mortar and the roof was missing too many shingles. Hundreds of trespassers rendered the front door unable to close so it remained ajar.

My brother and his friends saw Old Man Carny appear in an upstairs window one night, Teddy said. Supposedly, he waved at them and smiled.

Bullshit, this place aint haunted, Mac said, blew his nose into a red handkerchief and stuck it in the back pocket of his jeans.

Agreed, there's no such thing as ghosts, Quentin said.

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Let's go assholes, TJ said, opened the door and the others followed except James and Dwayne.

How the fuck are we gonna tell them about yesterday? Dwayne asked and flicked his cigarette.

They're our best friends, we gotta tell them the truth. If they dont believe us, then who will?

Definitely not Coach.

Yeah, we might as well turn our uniforms in tomorrow.

Did you bring the book?

Yeah, it's in my backpack.

We should make a fire and burn it. Then maybe that fucking creature will leave us alone.

Agreed. Listen, I'm sorry I got you involved yesterday but I needed to know I wasnt goin insane.

I saw it with my own two eyes, so no, you're not, Dwayne said and someone screamed inside the house.

That sounded like TJ, he said and they cut through the kitchen to find Mac lying unconscious on the living room floor with a deep cut above his left brow. Blood trickled out and his forehead was swelling.

What the fuck happened? Dwayne said but no one responded. Somebody answer me.

Look, Quentin said and pointed with a trembling finger.

In the southwest corner a skeleton stood behind TJ, trapping him

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with its left arm. It held a piece of broken glass to his throat with its right hand.

What is that thing? Pablo asked and they stared.

Help me you guys, TJ whispered to his friends. Please, help me.

Where's the book? the skeleton asked and dragged the glass across TJ's thick neck, making a shallow cut. He wiggled to break free but it pulled him in closer.

Run you guys, Dwayne said but the creature caught him in its seductive gaze. Look you guys, it's that pornstar again. She's fucking naked, look.

It's not her Dwayne, it's not her, James yelled at him but he stood transfixed by the brunette the others registered as the skeleton.

What do you want? Quentin asked.

The book.

Book? What book? What the fuck is it talking about? Pablo asked.

I cant... breathe... just give it what it wants, TJ whispered as the skeleton lifted him a foot off the ground and rested the makeshift blade against his Adam's apple.

Stop, stop, stop, James said and raised his hands. He pulled his backpack off, unzipped it and produced the stolen property. The remains of the day peeked through the windows on the west wall, emphasizing the aged cover. Here, it's yours. Please, I'm beggin you not to hurt him.

What's going on James? Dwayne? Teddy asked.



## PART ONE: LAREDO

Here, James said and opened the battered volume. I know this is what you want. Please, take it, it's yours.

The book wiggled out of his hands, dropped to the floor and opened on its own. A thick lock of red hair lay in the gutter of two pages written in exaggerated cursive.

Read or die, the skeleton said and pointed at James with the glass. James picked it up and held it close to his face.

Dicimus... pient... pientissimam contentionem, he said as the other boys stood by dumbfounded. Lucifer et aperire... portas inferni... et de duabus anima... aminabus dimittere.

What the fuck does that mean? Teddy asked.

It's a spell, James said. It wants us to perform a ritual.

How the fuck do you know that? And why do you have that book? Quentin asked.

We're not doing it, Pablo said. I wont do it, that's insane.

The creature turned its head to the disrespectful juvenile and he doubled over in pain. He vomited up his lunch and wiped his mouth after several dry heaves.

Please stop, Pablo cried out and put his hand up to signal defeat.

We'll do what you want, just dont hurt my friends, Quentin said.

There's a diagram, James said. It looks like we need rope, stakes and some paint. Go find it you guys, I'll figure out what to do next.

Dwayne, Quentin and Teddy searched the house but couldnt locate the supplies. They ran outside and collected plaited rope, a

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rusty hammer with a wooden shaft and railroad spikes from the hay barn. Pablo grabbed white house paint and a stiff brush from the machine shed and they returned winded.

Paint a pentagram over here, James said and indicated its width. Dwayne and Quentin pushed the waterlogged furniture and trash against the walls while Teddy slopped the yellowing pigment onto the floor.

Tie him down, the skeleton said and pointed to Mac. Use the spell.

Pablo got paint on his sneakers dragging him onto the imperfect circle as Dwayne pounded the spikes to the five points of the pentagram. Quentin and Teddy tied Mac's wrists and ankles to the corroded metal with the fraying rope. When the tasks were complete James laid the book on the floor, stood and joined hands with his friends at different apexes of the symbol.

Dicimus pientissimam... contentionem, he said from memory. Lucifer et aperire portas inferni... et de duabus animabus dimittere.

The others echoed the foreign words until the house shook and the ceiling splintered above their heads.



Did you see that? the farmer asked and adjusted his DeKalb hat. Looked like somethin had ahold of Jodie.

I'm not sure what you're talking about, O'Mally said with his head down as he shuffled the terrified customers out of the Scissor Shack.

You mean to tell me you didnt see the way she was a movin? the farmer asked. A small crowd of alarmed neighbors gathered on the sidewalk.

Yeah, what on God's green Earth was that? the overweight woman asked.

Amber will be fine, he said. Now go on home everyone, we'll take care of the rest. Go on home now, thank you.

Father, we're headed to Saint Matthew's in Pennington, Jennifer said and ran past him with a plastic bag full of ice containing the severed ear. She got in Catherine's minivan where Amber sat in the front seat holding a blood-stained towel against the side of her head. The tires squealed as they raced past the locals and west onto Front Street.

## SKELETONS

The priest walked back into the salon where Jodie stood by her chair staring at Amber's blood drying on the mirror and floor. She threw her tainted smock in the bin and wiped her face with a green hand towel.

I'd better drive you home, he said and wrapped his arm around her but she pulled away.

I'm stayin, Jodie said without taking her eyes off the floor. I'm... gonna disinfect the place and call my customers and apologize. Then I'm... I'm gonna drive to the hospital and see if they reattached Amber's... ear.

Please, you're in no condition Jodie, he said and helped her lock up. There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just gonna say it. James is indirectly responsible for what happened today.

She stopped crying long enough to wipe her nose as they turned onto Sycamore Street where Macy's Gas Station was busier than normal. They headed west on the highway and past the lumber yard Dwayne's parents owned.

I dont have a clue what you're talkin about Father but at this point I'm willing to listen to anything. Especially if it involves James. I know that wasnt a freak accident back there. I've been cuttin hair for years and nothin like that's ever happened to me or any other hairdressers I know.

I'm listening, go on.

I felt it Father. I felt somethin's arm wrapped around my stomach. Smelled it too. It smelled like smoke. Its hands were stronger than steel. Wiry. It had me and it forced me to cut her ear off.

PART ONE: LAREDO

I know, I saw the whole thing.

Whattya mean you saw it?

I saw what had ahold of you Jodie.

Well, what was it then?

He rolled through the town's main junction without stopping, cut in front of a semi and passed by the businesses sitting along the two-lane stretch going west. He adjusted the rear-view mirror, pushed the blinker down and took County Road 2800.

Goddammit, answer me, she said and smacked his arm.

Do you know where James is?

Football practice or home, she said and read the dash clock.

We need to find out exactly where he is because what happened back there was no accident. He's in danger if he and his buddies have been experimenting with that book.

They stopped at County Road 1000, waited for a John Deere pulling a new cultivator to turn and continued south.

Just tell me what the hell's goin on John, she cried out and slammed her fist on the dash. I cut my friend's ear off and you're worried about some goddamn book he stole? Jesus H. Christ, just tell me the truth for once.

A cold sweat drenched his body while he searched for the right combination of words. He gripped the steering wheel so hard the veins in his hands rose above his skin.

Jodie, I need you to listen. What I'm about to tell you could ruin

## SKELETONS

my relationship with the congregation at Saint Michael's and drive me out of the Church.

He kept checking the side mirror instead of concentrating on his driving and made a right at County Road 900.

I'm listenin but you need to slow down, she said and clutched the door handle. There's exhausted farmers drivin up and down these roads so you need to watch where you're goin.

Back in the late sixties, my girlfriend and I moved to San Francisco. Her name was Katie. We were in bad shape. Hooked on smack and living out of our van. Well, it got stolen and a house full of hippies on California Street took us in. It was a strange place but they fed and clothed us. They even gave us heroin so we didnt have to quit cold turkey.

Why are you tellin me this? Please stop, I cant talk about this after what happened back at the salon.

They were into black magic. Spells. The occult. So many people were back then. I should've grabbed Katie and hit the road but I was a selfish drug addict. During one of their séances, the house we lived in burned to the ground. It killed everyone inside, including my Katie. I escaped with the clothes on my back and the book James stole out of my office yesterday.

John, I'm beggin you, please stop.

That isnt just a regular book James stole. It's the reason that... monster imposed its will on you today.

You son of a bitch. You no-good, rotten son of a bitch.

Jodie, it's time we told your husband about James.

PART ONE: LAREDO

Dont you fucking dare say anything to Dan. You and I agreed not to tell him about James sixteen years ago when I got pregnant. I swear to God I'll call the Peoria Diocese and tell them everything before you tear my family apart John, do you understand me?

I cant keep living this lie any longer, he said, grabbed her hand and squeezed. I'm still in love with you Jodie. James is our son and I cant stand by while Katie threatens his life... threatens all of our lives.

Get your fuckin hand off me, she said and pulled away. You took advantage of me when I was at my weakest. We were young and dumb and made a huge mistake. Not another word John, not another goddamn word about James.

A drop of red hit her thumb, another fell into her open palm and another. Her eyes traced the substance to the sun visor. She opened it and a pair of bloody scissors fell in her lap.

Oh God, she whispered and the priest turned onto her lane. Stop the car, stop the car. Stop, stop, stop.

She moved from side-to-side trying to get the tainted shears off without grabbing them. They bounced around on her dress and left crimson prints on the fabric.

What are you doing? he asked and caught the scissors out of the corner of his eye.

Get them off John, she cried and stood up in her seat. Get them off, get them off.

Jesus Christ, why did you bring them? he asked and just made the turn onto the gravel driveway.

## SKELETONS

I didnt, they were in the visor, she said, fell out of the loaner and ran inside the empty house.

He hit the brakes and parked. The scissors lay on the passenger's seat with Amber's blood coagulating on the blades.



## 12

Dicimus pientissimam contentionem Lucifer et aperire portas inferni et suscipe hanc commutationem pro anima mea in nuda ossa, the boys chanted. A beautiful dark orange glow pierced through the cracks between the floorboards under Mac. He flipped his head from side to side and squirmed to wake from unconsciousness while his friends stood over him. Their eyes rolled back into their heads and faces contorted as they repeated the invocation.

What the fuck are you guys doin? Mac asked, kicking and pulling on his binds. Untie me, I'm fuckin bleedin for God's sake.

From the Earth's core a volcanic blast traveled through the mantle and crust and fizzled out beneath the Carny House's foundation. The light inside the pentagram turned into a searing heat and licked Mac's backside. The other boys stopped chanting, unlocked hands and stepped away from the circle in a daze.

What happened? Dwayne asked as his eyes adjusted to the lightless house.

It must have put a spell on us, Pablo said and stared at the vile creature holding TJ hostage.

## SKELETONS

When it dragged him to the darkest corner of the room his tennis shoes left two uneven trails on the dirty floor. It hoisted him up and his pale white belly stuck out from the bottom of his stretched Def Leppard t-shirt.

Stay back, the skeleton said and brandished the glass.

What did you do to us? Teddy asked it and stepped back.

Used you.

Help me cut him loose, Quentin said and pulled his knife out of his pocket.

Faster you motherfuckers, Mac said and fought the ties, causing his wrists to turn red. An episodic tremor hit Stratford County, bounced him into the air and slapped him back down with a thud. It shook the house and knocked the other boys off their feet.

Fuck, I cant get close enough, it's too hot, Dwayne said as violent scratching and tearing came from beneath the circle. Nail heads rose above the floorboards they had held in place for one hundred years.

Quentin, you cocksucker, just cut the straps, Mac said. Something's underneath me, I can hear it. Hurry, my back is burnin.

Hold on, we'll get you free, Teddy said while extending and retracting his arms over the heat. The rope tied around Mac's right wrist broke so he reached across his body to untie his left when a floorboard gave way. A set of claws impervious to the flames wrapped around his fibula, broke it and his leg folded in half.

Oh my God, James cried, walked backwards and stopped.

They're coming up through the Earth, Teddy said and fell against

PART ONE: LAREDO

the north wall.

More hands connected to bony arms reached to find the rest of Mac's body and grabbed his crotch, thighs, knees and feet. Another board came free and another until the ring of fire was full of skeletons. A red light mixed with sparks overwhelmed the opening and cast abstract shadows on the ceiling and walls. Smoke flooded the ceiling, reached the second floor and escaped through the broken windows.

Fuck, I cant breathe, Mac said as his hair and work clothes ignited. The damned bit into his boiling skin with their jagged teeth. Two large hands missing carpals wrapped around his neck and venous blood gurgled from his mouth.

They're fucking killing him, Quentin yelled and reached for him.

A skeleton with no mandible tore Mac's left eye from its socket and ripped his cheek, exposing two rows of clenched molars stained crimson. The terror on his face showed a virgin on the cusp of eternal suffering. Ripping muscle and ligaments caused the boys to raise their arms and shield themselves from the spraying blood.

Goodbye Mac, the skeleton said and cackled.

His eyes bulged as the railroad spikes gave and they pulled him into the sacrificial opening. A plume of smoke ensconced with sparks collided with the ceiling and rolled to the walls.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck, Teddy whispered, turned and vomited while Pablo snuck out the side door.

Let's get the hell outta here, Dwayne said and ran.

James, Quentin and Teddy followed him through the farmhouse

## SKELETONS

and sprinted on County Road 1200 under the waxing moon. Back inside TJ screamed for help in his captor's arms while the hellbound skeletons dragged Mac into the tunnel.

## 13

Dan spent a few hours at a bar down the street from the dealership with another salesman, their service manager and a mechanic whose rugged hands were grease-stained. After three draft beers, handfuls of free peanuts and two shots of tequila he stumbled to his truck and took the back roads home with the tape deck blaring Rod Stewart. He sang along with the windows down and smoked a cigarette he bummed off the bartender. Images of his time in the Army during the Vietnam War flooded his mind. He sobered up when his high beams lit up the rear of Father O'Mally's loaner outside their house.

God, please tell me James is okay, he prayed and turned to his gloomy home with only the kitchen lights on. He walked up the steps and stared through the quadrant of windows in the front door. Jodie sat across from the priest at the dinner table, clutching a dish towel.

You again? he asked, shut the door and threw his coat on the rack.

Dan, we need to talk, O'Mally said and signaled for him to sit.

Have you heard from James? Jodie asked and wiped her nose.

No, I thought he was gettin a ride home with Mel, he said and

## SKELETONS

gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Oh, for Christ's sake, then where the hell's he at? I rang the school and he didnt take the bus home. His football coach said he and his buddies skipped practice today.

Where's Mel? he asked and used the back of an empty chair to keep himself upright.

She's at Kara's house. I called and told her to come straight home.

He'll show up. Wait, why do you have blood on your clothes?

I cut Amber's ear off at work today.

You what?

I said I sliced Amber's fuckin ear off. Father came by the salon to talk about James and saw the whole damn thing. I was hysterical, so he brought me home.

Oh shit, she all right? he asked and rubbed his head.

I tried callin her house twenty times but no one answered. This might ruin my business Dan, I'm scared to death.

She'll be all right honey, he said and embraced her. She'll heal. Dont worry about your clients, they'll come around.

I hope you're right, she said and used the towel to dry her eyes. Father thinks the book James stole from Saint Michael's has somethin to do with it.

He does huh? he asked, put his arms around Jodie and glared at the priest with bloodshot eyes.

PART ONE: LAREDO

They're at the Carny House, O'Mally whispered, folded his hands and hung his head in shame. I had a nightmare about that godforsaken place. They've got to be there, I'm positive.

The Carny House? Why the Carny House? he asked.

James and his friends used to take the railroad tracks there after school, she said. They got run off the property once by a neighbor who thought they were shootin their guns toward his farm. I thought they didnt go out there anymore but God only knows with those boys.

We have to get to the Carny House, O'Mally said. If he's not there we'll keep looking, I dont care if it takes all night.

Wait a second, wait a second, do you smell that? he asked and checked the stove. Somethin's burnin, it smells like smoke in here.

Smoke? she asked and surveyed the kitchen. I dont smell anything. Oh wait, now I do.

So do I, it smells like burning paper, O'Mally said and stood.

It's coming from the living room, she said and they followed.

Look, Dan said and stood in front of the aerial photograph taken of his father's farm. He pulled the frame off the wall and put his index finger on the home in the upper left-hand corner. The color print smoldered beneath the cracked glass and smoke seeped through the frame.

I saw that place in my dream, O'Mally said.

Saw what? The Carny House? he asked.

We have to tell him, I cant take this any longer, O'Mally said.

## SKELETONS

He's upset Dan, just ignore him, she said and squeezed the priest's arm. Arent you Father?

Of course I'm upset, O'Mally said. I've thought long and hard about this and it's time we told Dan.

Tell me what? What the hell's goin on here Jodie? he asked.

Nothin, it's nothin, she said and scowled at the priest. Father, we need to concentrate on findin James right now.

James isnt your son Dan, O'Mally said with tears collecting in his eyes. Please, please forgive me. I was a different man back then. I only wanted to help Jodie but it got complicated.

Shut up Father, just shut the hell up, she cried out and slapped him across the face.

Is that true Jodie? Is he tellin the truth? he asked.

It's true, I'm so sorry Dan, O'Mally said.

You motherfucker, he said and threw him on the carpeted floor. He punched him in the face but the priest didnt fight back.

Stop it, you're gonna kill him, she yelled and pulled on her husband's arms.

You're goddamn right I'm gonna kill him.

Stop, Dan, stop.

Fuck, he yelled and stood over the priest whose face was bloody and swelling. He got to his side, wiped his mouth and stood trembling, on the verge of crying.



PART ONE: LAREDO

I'm truly sorry but I'm still going to the Carny House, O'Mally said and squeezed his nose to stop the bleeding. You can try to stop me but someone has to save James.

He ran outside and drove away while Jodie stood with her hands covering her mouth. She stared at her husband and wailed.

I could've come home from the Army back in the seventies and moved to the ocean... been a fisherman... maybe a sea boat captain but I worked my ass off so you and the kids could live in a nice little home out in the country. And what do I get in return? I'm told one of my children isnt even my own.

I'm sorry Dan, she said and sobbed.

You two have ruined my life, my reputation, everything.

Your drinkin was tearin our marriage apart. Father O'Mally was there for me, you werent.

I know my drinkin was inexcusable but at least I wasnt out fuckin a priest.

I dont... I dont know what to do.

How are you goin to explain this to James?

I cant, it'll break his heart.

Fine but you'd better call the police and have them meet us at the Carny House 'cause I'm gonna kill you and Father O'Mally after we save James.



# 14

Pablo sprinted a half-mile on County Road 1200, doubled over with his hands on his knees and sucked in the October air between fits of coughing. His contacts must have fallen out because the Carny House was blurry when he turned around to check if any of the freed skeletons were following him. The growing fire illuminated the surrounding lawn and cornfield with vivid orange and yellow. Flames spilled through the windows and licked the siding and eaves. Images of Mac being dragged into the pit by the skeletons haunted his mind and the effects of the ritual made him nauseous.

He continued a hundred more yards and turned south on Pine Street but needed to stop and vomit. Once, twice and by the third heave his belly was empty. Pieces of cafeteria food mixed with saliva hung from his mouth so he wiped it away with his burnt hands. Hundreds of porch, street and business lights to the south kept his hopes of rescue alive. He tripped on a pothole, fell and skinned his hands and knees on the blacktop road. The clickety-clack of unfamiliar footsteps approaching from the north got him upright.

They're coming, he moaned and sprinted toward a station wagon and a truck sitting in the first driveway he found. It was a well-kept farm but a new housing development to the south

## SKELETONS

crowded the machine sheds, silos and livestock barns on the one-acre property.

Help, somebody help me, he yelled from the road.

The kitchen light, one above the west-facing door and two more upstairs turned on seconds apart as he staggered down the sidewalk. When he reached the front steps an emaciated creature back-lit by the living room lights stood in the doorway. It wreaked of smoke and lacked a mandible.

Pablo, the skeleton called and squeezed his guts with its malevolent power.

No, not again, he begged. He almost crumbled to the ground but dashed back onto the road.

Where you going? it called but lost its grip on his soul.

The outskirts of town laid a half-mile ahead as a rumbling vehicle approached from behind. He turned, raised his left arm to protect his eyes from the headlights and stepped into the ditch.

Please stop, he yelled, waved his arms and jumped up and down.

The brakes locked up and the truck came to a halt after squealing for twenty yards. The diesel from the seventies had more rust than paint on the sidewalls and a bed full of soggy hay bales. Pablo jogged past the headlights and the driver's side window lowered.

Sweet Jesus, what happened to you kid? the farmer asked with a smoker's voice. Wrinkled skin clung to an unshaven face cloaked by a frayed John Deere hat. He had callused hands, wore raggedy overalls and his flannel was rolled to the elbows.

No time to explain, he said. Please sir, just take me home.

PART ONE: LAREDO

Well, all right kid, jump on in, the farmer said.

He ran around to the passenger side, climbed into the cab and slammed the creaky door. The farmer drove slow, stopped at Sixth Street and checked both ways.

You okay kid?

Sir, can you please go faster? he asked when they reached Fourth Street. My friends are in danger and I need to call the police... an ambulance... everyone.

A car passed in the opposite direction and a horrible stench reached Pablo's nostrils.

My old friend Marty used to live in that place, the farmer said and pointed to a ranch-style house across the street with a skeletal hand.

Oh no, he whispered and grabbed the door handle but it wouldnt turn.

You never should've played with that book Pablo. Now you're goin to Hell, just like the rest of your rotten friends.

They sat in silence and stared at one another. The farmer took a distorted breath and cleared his throat.

How do you know my name? he asked. He began slamming his shoulder against the door.

Katie told me, the farmer said but his face had turned into a battered skull.

Who's Katie?

## SKELETONS

She's the Messiah, the farmer said and laughed while smacking his hand on the steering wheel.

Let me out, he said, fell onto the pavement and ran south as the sound of cackling filled the neighborhood. He glanced over his shoulder but the pickup was gone. He turned left on Second Street and his home was three blocks away.

# 15

Father O'Mally drove ninety miles an hour on County Road 700, blew three stop signs cutting north and came within a few feet of being jackknifed by a semi when he crossed Highway 34. A few miles later he turned right onto County Road 1100, swerved back and forth and clicked his brights until a slow grain truck got out of his path. He passed over Highway 51 and a southbound train barreled down on the railroad tracks perpendicular to the two-lane blacktop.

Dan, you stupid bastard, you'll never make it, O'Mally said. The grade crossing signals flashed red onto his face and his rear-view mirror reflected shimmering headlights.

Go, go, go, we gotta beat that train, Jodie said from the inside of her husband's pickup.

Father's goin for it but we have to stop, Dan said and took his foot off the gas.

For God's sake go, she said, dug her fingernails into his flannel and broke the skin.

Goddammit stop, he said and jerked his arm away. This is no time to fight Jodie, we cant save James if we're dead.

## SKELETONS

Lord, grant me speed, O'Mally said from his loaner, barreled over the tracks and reached the other side before the falling gates closed. He checked the mirror and a blur of graffitied railroad cars reflected while the train's steam-powered horn warned the approaching pickup.

I'm not gonna die tryin to save James, Dan said inside his truck and stopped just short of the tracks.

You fuckin coward, Jodie yelled and struck his arms with her fists.

Just hold on goddammit, he said as the crossing bell chimed.

Lord, thank you for not killing them, O'Mally murmured inside his loaner. The burning farmhouse was a mile away. He hit the brakes when a small group of teenagers ran through his headlights, waving their arms.

Stop, stop, stop, James yelled as the blood, sweat and smoke covered boys surrounded the vehicle.

James, it's me, Father O'Mally, he said and lowered the window.

Thank God, James said and rested his hands on the driver's side door. I'm so sorry Father, somethin was in the Carny House. It killed Mac and is holdin TJ hostage. We gotta go back, we can still save him.

Unlock the fucking doors, Dwayne said and worked the passenger side handle but it wouldnt budge.

Let us in, Quentin said from behind James.

Open up, Teddy said and smacked the back window several times.

Stay here James, your parents are coming, look, O'Mally said



## PART ONE: LAREDO

and signaled with his thumb. He sped away and left them in a cloud of smoke.

Come back, dont leave us, Teddy yelled and chased him before his legs turned to jelly.

The priest stopped a quarter-mile from the farm with the wheels halfway in the south ditch. He crept over the road, through standing water and into the field. The unharvested rows were good for cover so he approached the house undetected as the firelight reflected in his eyes.

Lord, protect me from the evil inside this house, he prayed. Please give me the strength to save TJ, I beg of you Lord, Amen.

He motioned the sign of the cross, ran over the lawn and protected himself from the heat with his left arm. Crackling wood filled his ears and a twelve-foot section of gutter crashed to the ground by the front door. He pulled his jacket over his mouth and someone let out a bloodcurdling scream inside the house.

Hold on TJ, I'm coming, he yelled and ducked below the smoke in the kitchen. He made his way to the living room where six skeletons lunged after him from the pit. They called his name with deafening tones. One grabbed his right ankle and he fell backwards. He scooted against the north wall on his ass and surveyed the room as his lungs filled with smoke.

Help me, TJ cried out as the creature waved the glass weapon at the priest.

Dont you hurt that boy, he yelled and put his hands up to plead. He's got nothing to do with this.

Yes he does, the skeleton said and sliced the teen's throat. It pushed his flailing body into the burning tunnel and the skeletons

## SKELETONS

tore him from limb-to-limb in a fight for his soul.

TJ, he yelled, dashed across the room and tackled the skeleton. They crashed into a burning wall and fell to the floor. The creature tore his face with its talons and tried to bite him. He grabbed its arms to prolong the inevitable but crumbled below its ungodly strength.

Die, it said, pulled one of the railroad spikes out of the floor and plunged it into his chest.

No, he screamed in agony, grabbed the metal stake with both hands as blood spilled from his lips. The creature got upright, walked around the pit and stood over him while the fire singed his hair and ate through his black clothes.

It's not their fault, it's mine, everything is, he said. Take me but please dont hurt James. I'm begging you, please dont hurt my son.

James is next, it said and walked out of the farmhouse.

Forgive me Lord, forgive me for all my earthly sins, he whispered and a long-forgotten impulse interrupted his last confession. With a leap of faith, he crawled on his side and grabbed the book. He held it to the light and found the page dog-eared back in the late sixties.

Lucifer, ut vocarent... laudere... portas inferorum animas ferte, he said between gasps.

He repeated the words until the remaining skeletons fell back into the Earth and the collapsing foundation sealed the tunnel. His life collected in dark red puddles on the floor but he never let go of the book.

## 16

That's them, stop the goddamn truck, Jodie said as blurry figures stumbled along County Road 1100.

Okay, okay, Dan said, let off the gas and lowered his window. Their eyes reflected the truck's high beams so he flicked them off and four teenage faces in various states of shock came into focus. He put both feet on the brake pedal and the Chevrolet fishtailed, leaving two trails of rubber on the wet blacktop. James opened the passenger door and Jodie scooted to the center of the bench seat.

Thank God you're alive, what happened? she asked and embraced him.

There's no time to talk, just follow Father O'Mally, James said.

Wait, where the hell's Pablo? Teddy asked from the driver's door.

He must have run home, Quentin said.

Fuck him, take me home, Dwayne said in hysterics. Now, I wanna go home.

You fucking chicken shit Dwayne, Teddy said and shoved him.

## SKELETONS

Quit arguing and jump in, Dan said and gestured to the back. They stepped on the tires to climb over the sidewalls and collapsed in the bed. When they turned into the driveway the arson had inched toward the cornrows surrounding the Carny House.

James, stay with your mother, the rest of you come with me, he said and hopped out of the pickup. He led the three boys across the lawn, stopped outside the porch and surveyed the growing fire. Where were you last? Goddammit, answer me.

We were in the living room, Dwayne said as the chimney buckled. The falling bricks shot sparks into the air, forcing a wave of heat and smoke onto them.

Pull your shirts up over your mouths like this, he said and showed them with his flannel shirt. We're gonna run in, grab the first person we see and get the fuck out, understand?

Ten four, Teddy said and the others nodded. They ducked under the smoke in the kitchen and ran through the house to where the priest lay sprawled out on the floor. His clothes were in tatters and his exposed skin was boiling and black.

Father, where's Mac and TJ? Dan asked and checked his pulse.

Hell, O'Mally said and pointed to the middle of the room without opening his eyes. The ceiling dropped another foot and two-by-fours, plaster and wood crashed into the pit, missing the rescue party by inches.

I'll take his arms, somebody grab his ankles, Dan yelled.

I got him, Dwayne said, trying to keep his head out of the smoke.

Lift on three, he said. One, two, three, lift.

PART ONE: LAREDO

They carried the priest out of the farmhouse and laid him in front of the pickup. Smoke rose from his body and into the headlights. The stench of his burnt flesh made everyone sick to their stomachs.

Is he alive? Jodie asked, knelt and lowered her ear to his mouth. Shit, he's not breathin.

If we pull that stake out, he'll bleed to death, he said and got to his knees. I'm gonna do CPR.

Mouth-to-mouth? she asked. You dont know mouth-to-mouth, you'll fuckin kill him.

Just stand the fuck back Jodie, he yelled and pushed her out of the way. He exhaled into the priest's blistered mouth and pumped his chest. On the fifth try he came to life and gasped for air as six terrified faces stared down at him. He grabbed the railroad spike with both hands and cried out in agony.

No, leave it alone, Dwayne shouted and grabbed his left hand.

Stop or you'll kill yourself Father, James said and held his right.

The fire department's here, Teddy yelled as two trucks turned onto the gravel driveway.

The book? O'Mally whispered between coughs.

What did you say Father? Jodie asked and lowered her head. I cant hear you.

Where's the book? O'Mally asked.

He wants to know where the book is, she said. Did someone find the book?

## SKELETONS

It's right here Father, see? Quentin said and pulled the volume from his jacket.

# V

Chief Coston sat in his recliner eating spaghetti and meatballs as his wife lay on the couch flipping through the television stations. The exhausted forty-somethings practiced the same Wednesday night routine since Laredo hired him straight out of the academy back in the early eighties. He washed down the last bite of garlic bread with a swig of domestic beer and cleared his throat.

Long day Chief? Carol asked and stood.

Well, you'd think after ten years of writing tickets, throwing drunks in jail and breaking up bar fights, I'd be used to babysitting adults but they still wear me out.

I'm just glad you're home, she said, gave him a kiss on the cheek and grabbed the blanket off the back of his chair.

Dispatch to Chief Coston, come in Coston, a woman called over the walkie-talkie sitting on the coffee table. We got a burning farmhouse north of town, two missing boys and a priest with third-degree burns, over.

Dammit, I just sat down, he groaned, wiped his mustache off with the napkin stuck in the top of his white undershirt and snatched the two-way radio. Coston here, on my way, over.

## SKELETONS

That sounds really, really bad, she said. When she muted the television and stared at him in disbelief he shook his head.

Sorry hon, I gotta go, he said and set his plate on the end table.

Well, have fun saving the world, Chief, I'll put your pasta in the fridge, she said and stood.

Love you, he said while running to the bedroom.

Nothing says I love you like watching TV alone on a Wednesday night, she muttered.

He threw on his uniform, ran outside and jumped in the police cruiser parked in front of their modest two-story home.

You working Murph? he asked into the CB. He released the trigger, pulled his seatbelt on and cut across town without making a stop.

Copy that Chief, over, Murphy replied over the clear channel.

You know where the Carny House is?

Yessir, over.

Well, stop what you're doing and meet me there 'cause we got a fire on the menu tonight, he said and turned on Adams Street.

Ten four, over.

Several minutes passed, Murphy's headlights reflected in his rear-view mirror and the convoy turned onto County Road 1200. They parked along the northern ditch as the volunteer fire department made fast work of the remaining farmhouse. The EMTs wrapped the four boys in blankets and stood with Dan



PART ONE: LAREDO

and Jodie in a cluster on the driveway.

Well, I'll be goddamned, Coston said, put his hands on his hips and surveyed the wreckage. I guess you boys are gonna have to come to the station.

Go easy on them Chief, they're in bad shape, Dan said.

You're not gonna throw them in jail are you? Jodie asked.

I dont know Jodie but this could get real ugly, real quick if we dont find Mac and TJ tonight.

Murphy loaded Quentin and Teddy into the back seat of his cruiser while James and Dwayne rode with the chief. Dan and Jodie followed in their pickup and parked in the guest lot. The lawmen shuffled the boys into the hallway outside the conference room and made them sit in metal folding chairs.

Why dont you folks take a seat in the waiting room while my secretary and I call the other parents? Coston said.

Will do, Dan said, sat across from Jodie and folded his arms.

Helluva night, huh Chief? Barb asked from behind her desk.

Sure as shit, can you do me a favor and get ahold of Quentin, Dwayne and Teddy's parents? Coston asked. Tell them to get down here ASAP.

What about that Mexican kid? she asked while jotting down notes. I think his name's Paco or Pancho?

Pablo. The other boys told me he ran all the way home like a good little piggy. If he's not there, call every hospital in the county.

## SKELETONS

You got it Chief. I hate to ask but are you gonna call the missing boys' parents?

Unfortunately. Can you put some coffee on? It's gonna be a long, long night.

Will do Chief, good luck.

Thanks Barb, he said, walked into his office and contemplated how to address Mac and TJ's families. He picked up the receiver and set it back down until his nerve came around. Within ten minutes of the last call a crowd of enraged parents gathered in the lobby.

Quiet down folks, he said as he stepped into the foyer. I know you all have a million questions and I'll answer every one of them. But, like I said on the phone, we need you to stay calm until I get some answers from your boys.

Where's my son? Mac's father asked.

We're not just gonna wait out here like a bunch of damn fools Chief, our son might be freezing to death out there, Mac's mother said.

Kenny, Jan, I know how upset you must be but we got a lot of work ahead of us so I need you to be patient, okay?

All right folks, let the Chief do his job and we'll have more information for you shortly, Sullivan said and motioned for them to sit.

Dwayne, Dwayne, Dwayne, Coston said as he walked into the conference room and sat next to Murphy who was taking notes on a yellow legal pad. Last time you were sitting in that chair I busted you and Rodney for buying beer at the gas station next

PART ONE: LAREDO

door with a fake ID. Looks like you're in a little bit more trouble this time, huh?

Tonight wasn't my fault sir, Dwayne said. The fluorescent lights stressed his disheveled hair and red eyes.

Well, then who's responsible?

James used a book he stole out of Saint Michael's to trick us into doing some sort of ritual at the Carny House. It was like he was possessed or something.

That's a much different story than what you and him told me on the car ride here. So cut the shit, where are Mac and TJ?

I'm telling you the truth, sir. When we performed that ritual, monsters came out of that hole in the living room and killed Mac. One held TJ hostage. The monsters looked like... skeletons. Father O'Mally had nothing to do with it. In fact, he was headed to the Carny House to save TJ after we escaped.

Come on Dwayne, we don't have time for this shit. Spill the fucking beans already.

I swear on my mother's grave, that's what happened.

You know how this looks, right Dwayne? We're talking about two of your best friends missing. Missing, Dwayne, missing.

The door opened and Officer Sullivan walked in with an evidence bag. The rookie wore outdated eyeglasses, had an unkept moustache and a pear-shaped body.

Whattya got Sully? Coston asked without turning his head.

You ain't gonna believe this Chief but there's no trace of those

## SKELETONS

missing boys, Sullivan said. No bodies, no backpacks, no evidence.

You gotta be fucking kidding me.

Nope, we combed every inch of the property after you left, dug through the debris and walked up and down the cornrows. I told the farmer who owns the property surrounding that mess to keep an eye out if he's combining tomorrow.

Go on.

I found this book in Quentin's possession. Had a helluva time getting it away from him.

This debacle is getting worse every minute. Sully, put an APB out on Mac and TJ. They gotta be somewhere, right Dwayne?

Yeah, they're halfway to Hell by now, he said and coughed.

Goddammit, I've had it with your shit young man. Go sit with your buddies out in the hall and send James in.

Yessir, Dwayne said as Sullivan set the plastic bag on the table and exited with the suspect.

You know Murph, those parents might burn this place to the ground if I throw their boys in jail tonight, Coston said. He stood and poured himself another cup of coffee.

Think they're on drugs Chief? Murphy asked and flipped to a new page.

Nope, they aint smart enough to figure out where to buy them, let alone how to use them.

True but burning down that farmhouse seems like an accident, so

PART ONE: LAREDO

why would they hurt their best friends? We've never had trouble with any of them. Well, except for Dwayne. Maybe that upperclassman he drinks with was involved but the others seem harmless.

The police chief added cream and sugar to his coffee and took a sip to test the temperature. He caught his receding hairline and pot belly in the mirror hanging on the north wall and turned away in disgust.

I think those boys were probably playing with one of their dad's handguns and it accidentally went off. Hell, it might've killed the both of them with one shot. They probably agreed on that Devil worshipping nonsense for an alibi and set fire to that farmhouse to get rid of the evidence before we showed up. Who knows, Mac and TJ might be sinking to the bottom of the Panther Creek by now.

He took another sip, walked across the room and put his finger on the framed map of Stratford County hanging on the east wall.

I dont know if I agree, Chief. I think Father O'Mally was in on it.

You might be right, Murph, either way, the bank should've plowed that goddamn farm under when they foreclosed on it. The high school kids are always out there fucking around after school. It gets even worse on the weekends.

I know Chief, we get calls from the neighbors once or twice a month about loud music, guns, fireworks, you name it.

Shit, it was only a matter of time before someone got hurt but two missing juveniles? Far as I'm concerned those boys got nothing to cover up unless they got something to cover up.

How about I go to the hospital and interrogate that priest? Murphy asked and checked his wristwatch.

## SKELETONS

I think that's a great idea but I'm gonna send Sully to Pontiac so we can finish interrogating these boys, he said and tossed the Styrofoam cup in the trash. Even shit for brains can handle that Irish bastard.

Sounds like a plan, Murphy agreed, chuckled and scribbled down a few notes.

Hey Chief, here's James, Sullivan said. He stuck his thumbs in his utility belt and waited by the door. The emaciated farm boy sat opposite the lawmen and eyed the evidence.

Thank you Sully, now head over to Saint Luke's and see what Father O'Mally has to say, Coston said. If he's not awake then hang around until he is, okay?

Okay, Sullivan said and closed the door behind him.

I need to quit smoking those goddamn cigarettes, my heart's killing me, Coston said. He took the book out of the plastic bag and a rotten odor filled the air. The artifact commanded their attention with its dark energy when he set it on the table.

This the book you boys were playing with? Murphy asked.

Yessir, James said with tears in his eyes.

Well, what in God's name happened? he asked, opened it and skimmed through its musty pages. Dwayne had a pretty wild story but I'd like to hear your version before we throw you boys in jail.

There's no way to describe what I saw, Chief Coston.

Well, do your best kid.

PART ONE: LAREDO

It's hard to remember exactly what happened over the last few days 'cause it all feels like a bad dream to me. Like the nightmares I've been havin for the last year came true.

Go on, we're listening.

The same monsters, I mean, the same skeletons from my nightmares were at the Carny House tonight.

Skeletons?

I know it sounds crazy, James said, stopped and glanced around.

What's wrong?

Do you feel that sir?

Feel what? Coston asked but the table began to shake. The tremors grew in intensity as the coffee pot boiled over and the map fell to the floor.

Dont move James, he said, set the book down and stood. The lights flickered and quit, leaving the interrogation in darkness. Somebody check the goddamn fuse box.

Where's it at Chief? Murphy asked.

In the evidence room, he said as Sullivan opened the door and the emergency light in the hallway cloaked the room in red.

You okay Chief? Sullivan asked.

We're fine, now get your ass over to the hospital like I asked, he said. When he turned around, James was holding the book, admiring its cover. He stroked the leather and his eyes grew wider when he opened it.

## SKELETONS

James, who said you could touch that? he asked but the boy ignored him as the lights turned on and the coffee pot purred. Murphy stuck his head back in the room.

Wasnt a fuse but the power's back on Chief.



Father O'Mally lay asleep inside room 237 at Saint Luke's Hospital on Thursday afternoon. The heart monitor beeped and respirator pumped oxygen into his smoke-damaged lungs while he slept. There were no get-well cards taped to the wall or flowers sitting on the nightstand. Sullivan was talking to a nurse down the hall when the priest's sole visitor crept into his room. The naked redhead approached his bed and set a five-gallon canister of gasoline on the linoleum.

Time to wake up John, she whispered in his ear and stroked his bandaged head.

Katie? he asked, focused and stared into her green eyes. Her long red hair fell past her breasts and onto her pregnant belly.

Yes, it's me, she said and the fabric-covered chair under the open window slid across the room, struck the door and hooked under its handle.

Am I dreaming?

Shh, she whispered while lifting her right index finger to her mouth. He searched the bed for the call button as the medical equipment reacted and the corresponding graphics bounced up

## SKELETONS

and down on the monitors.

*Can you hear me John?*

Yes, yes I can, he whispered and grimaced because her lips werent moving.

*You dont have to talk, just think... and look into my eyes.*

*Like... like this?*

*Yes, now we can talk without that cop in the hallway hearing us. If you scream, I'll torture your entire congregation, do you understand?*

*I... I understand.*

*You stood by and did nothing when those sick lunatics we lived with back in San Francisco sacrificed me.*

*I was strung out and helpless back then Katie. Their leader possessed me. I dont remember anything from that night, except running away from the house fire.*

*I was cast into to Hell, John, Hell. My skin melted off wading through tunnels filled with lava. They hunted me down until I couldnt run across the endless deserts of bones. They ripped our baby out of my stomach and threw her into a lake of fire.*

*No, no, no, this must be a nightmare.*

*I became one of them... I became a skeleton. I committed unthinkable atrocities trying to find the Devil. I promised Him your soul for the chance to reach the surface again. I wandered around this country for twenty years looking for you. I've waited so long for this moment John. You dont understand what's down there, how horrible it really is. But dont worry, I let Him know you're coming*

PART ONE: LAREDO

*Whattya mean?*

*Let's just say the saints aren't waiting for you in Heaven.*

Father O'Mally? Sullivan asked from outside the obstructed door, tried the handle while waiting for an answer and knocked harder. You awake Father? Hello?

I swear I didn't lock it, a nurse said. Do you smell gas Officer?

Yeah, hurry up with those keys, it might be one of the missing boys' parents in there, Sullivan said.

*Ignore them and say your prayers John. One for you and one for our baby.*

Make her stop Lord, make her stop, O'Mally exclaimed, clasped his burnt hands together and shut his eyes. I've repented Lord, I've changed, please forgive me, I'm begging you Lord.

This is the Laredo Police Department, open up, Sullivan yelled and slammed his shoulder against the steel door but the chair held. If anyone's inside, unlock the door.

*I'll torment that bastard son of yours for the rest of his life.*

No, please, this isn't James' fault, O'Mally cried out and grabbed her arm in desperation.

*Of course it's not his fault John, it's all yours.*

She lifted the galvanized canister, unscrewed the top and doused the medical equipment, walls and drapes with gasoline. The window closed on its own and fumes swallowed all the oxygen in the room.

I... cant... breath, he said and clutched his throat as she poured

## SKELETONS

the fuel on him. Once she shook out the last drops onto his blankets she dropped the can on the floor.

Help, he cried out in pain, closed his eyes and shuddered as the gas ravaged his skin. Katie's in here, the woman who killed those boys is in here, help me.

When he opened his burning eyes she was no longer a young woman but a collection of raggedy bones. She raised her right contorted hand and pressed her thumb and middle carpals together.

Goodbye John, she whispered. I'll always love you. Always. But I'll never forgive you.

She snapped her talons and the explosion engulfed the room, broke through the paned window and blew the door off its hinges. Sullivan, three nurses, the janitor and a doctor landed on their backs as Father O'Mally succumbed to the inferno.

Well, what should I do with them Mayor Mahoney? Coston asked over the phone in his office as the boys waited in the hallway.

I think you gotta turn them over to their parents Chief, Mahoney answered. If we detain them too long, you're liable to have a riot on your hands, or worse yet, one helluva lawsuit. Besides, those boys might turn up any minute so there's no use in ruining a perfectly good election year over a goddamn priest and a torched farm.

Chief, you better get out here, Barb yelled from the foyer and shouting followed.

Shit, I gotta run Mayor, he said and stood. But I want a guarantee that I wont be working at Wal-Mart come November if I turn these boys loose.

Just do as you're told Chief, Mahoney said and hung up.

Good-for-nothing cocksucker, he mumbled, slamming the phone down. He stepped into the hallway to find no one. He ran to the foyer where a fight had broken out between the missing and remaining boys' parents. Mac's father had Dan by the shirt while TJ's father was lying unconscious on the floor with a bloody nose. The other parents held their sons back in horror as Dwayne and

## SKELETONS

Teddy's fathers tried pulling Kenny and Dan apart.

Break that shit up, Coston yelled and got between the flailing men. Murph, Sully, help me separate these idiots before someone else gets hurt.

Gotcha Chief, Murphy said. He grabbed Dan by one arm, Sullivan grabbed the other and they slammed him against the wall.

What the fuck did you boys do to my son? Kenny asked the scared teenagers as his wife got in his face.

That's enough Kenny, Jan yelled and grabbed his jacket. Stop, Kenny, stop.

Kenny, you know good and well James would never hurt Mac, Dan said out of breath. They've been friends since kindergarten for Christ's sake.

Oh, would you idiots shut the hell up? Coston asked and adjusted his uniform. Dan's right, these boys didnt hurt your sons.

Yeah, then what about Father O'Mally? TJ's mother asked, got her husband off the floor and used Murphy's handkerchief to wipe his nose.

He wasnt even there when they turned up missing Veronica. All five of these boys and Dan and Jodie confirmed that when we questioned them. Someone else was at the Carny House when Mac and TJ disappeared but it wasnt O'Mally.

Yeah, then who kidnapped our sons? Tom asked in a daze.

We dont know but they're still out there and fighting wont solve a goddamn thing, so listen up folks. None of your boys are being charged with arson because of the farm's condition before the

## PART ONE: LAREDO

fire. But we're treating them as suspects in the disappearance of Mac and TJ. Now I want y'all to drive straight home and get your boys to school tomorrow morning.

You want them back in school? Jodie asked while embracing James. Have you lost your mind? Just look at them Chief, they've been through Hell.

You heard me, he said with his hands on his hips. It's the best way to keep an eye on them 'cause the entire county's gonna be out looking for Mac and TJ and we don't have the manpower to babysit them here. But do not, I repeat, do not leave town until we have more information, understand?

Understood, Dan said and twirled his truck keys. All right folks, let's get out of here before the good Chief changes his mind.

Agreed, Jodie said and put her arm around James.

Everyone except Mac's parents followed her outside, where a crowd of panicked Laredoans and area news teams waited on the front steps. Every bottom of the barrel news anchor with career aspirations outside of Central Illinois stuck microphones in their faces and asked ridiculous questions. A dozen officers from surrounding communities parted the crowd and escorted them to the guest parking lot.

You stupid cop, how could you let them go? Kenny asked the police chief back in the foyer.

Just do as you're told Kenny or I'll throw you in the slammer, he said and pointed toward the entrance.

We're gonna sue your ass if you're wrong about this Chief Coston, mark my words, Kenny said.

## SKELETONS

Stop it before he throws you in jail, Jan said crying and pulled on his arm.

Last time I'm gonna ask nice Kenny, Coston said and the distraught farmer stormed out of the police station. Barb, can you get me the Sheriff's number? Murph, Sully, get back to work.

It's tacked to your bulletin board, same place it's been the last ten years, she quipped.

Of course it is, he said, walked back to his office, sat and considered the tone and arrangement of the hardest call he had ever made as police chief. He picked up the receiver and set it back down again several times, squinted at the aging paper and dialed.

Chief, we got a call from dispatch, Murphy yelled from across the station. Saint Luke's had a fire and it started in O'Mally's room.

Drop what you're doing and let's roll, he said and stood. He grabbed his bomber jacket from the rack in the foyer and Murphy caught up with him in the employee lot.

Where do you want me Chief?

Get to Pontiac and do crowd control. We dont need those reporters interfering with our investigation.

What about O'Mally?

Leave him to me.

The lawmen turned their lights and sirens on and headed east on Highway 34. Five minutes northbound at a hundred miles an hour on Interstate 55 and the smoking hospital lay a few miles away.



PART ONE: LAREDO

PONTIAC  
12000  
AN ILLINOIS  
MAIN STREET  
COMMUNITY

They took the Highway 116 exit, headed west and pulled into the parking lot as a turntable fire truck retracted its ladder. The local police directed a group of doctors, nurses and patients to the parking deck to protect them from the coming storm. They gawked at the smoldering hole in the facade but were instructed to move along. The police chief jogged into the emergency room and stopped before an exhausted firefighter.

Sir, do you know if the patient in two thirty-seven survived? he asked. One of my officers was guarding his room.

No idea but watch your step Chief, that floor's a damn mess, the fireman said.

He found the empty stairwell, unfolded his handkerchief and put it over his nose and mouth to filter out the lingering smoke. On the second floor more firemen were busy rolling hoses and mopping up the water. He walked around the puddles. The captain, who he had worked with at a grain mill fire years ago, stood waiting for him.

Good to see you Bob, he said trying to catch his breath.

It's been a while Chief, the captain said and wiped his dirty brow with the back of his glove.

What happened in there?

Looks like somebody snuck a few gallons of unleaded into his room and torched the place.

## SKELETONS

Jesus Christ, was the perp killed?

Nope, not a trace of anyone coming or going. I hate to be the one to tell you this but your priest's a goner.

Goddammit. How about that shit for brains officer of mine?

He's finishing up, two thirty-seven's right down the hall. Good luck in there Chief.

Thanks Bob, he said, walked away and peered in the room.

Mornin Chief, Sullivan said with fresh bandages on his face and hands. He retrieved his miniature notepad from the front right pocket of his jacket and clicked his pen.

Where were you Sully?

I was out talking to a nurse Chief.

Sully, please tell me you got a chance to interrogate Father O'Mally before the fire.

No, he was unconscious the whole time I was here Chief.

Terrific. Well, go on then.

Like I was saying, I figured someone might've snuck in to kill him, maybe one of the boys' parents? Anyway, I knocked on the door but it was locked or barricaded or both, I couldnt tell. I tried knocking it down but that didnt work so I grabbed a fire axe. I was getting ready to hack away when the explosion threw us across the hall. The flames almost burned my face off but the nurses said I'll be fine.

All right Sully, he said and took off his hat. I'm just glad you're

PART ONE: LAREDO

all right, now get your ass downstairs and help Murph, got it?

Got it but you might wanna brace yourself, 'cause it's a horror show in there Chief.

He surveyed the waterlogged floor covered in ceiling tiles, shredded wires and melted chairs. He cleared the debris, stood by the bed and examined the priest's charred remains. His hands still clawed the air, torso was twisted and skin hung off his bones. The remaining firefighters passed by the open hospital door when cawing traveled through the paneless window.

I know you wouldnt hurt those boys Father but what exactly went on at the Carny House? he asked and the corpse reanimated, seized his arm and leaned into him.

Save my boy, O'Mally whispered inches from his face. Save James.

Fuck, he yelled, tripped and landed on the floor but the ceiling tiles cushioned his fall. The fire captain ran into the room and the priest returned to his rigor mortis.

You okay Chief? he asked and got him upright.

No, no I'm not Bob, he said and rubbed his dirty hands on his soaking wet slacks. And I think somebody owes me an explanation.



Quentin, you need to tell us what happened, Valerie said from the front passenger seat of the Oldsmobile.

Mom, they interrogated us all night, he said from the backseat and coughed. I just want to take a shower and go to bed. I'm delirious and need something to eat.

Of course Quentin but you're gonna have to talk to me, she said.

Just leave him alone Val, he's been through enough already, Larry said and squeezed his wife's arm.

They drove past the outskirts of town on Highway 34 west, cut north on a wet county road and after a few miles turned right on a gravel lane. Their two-story home sat at the heart of a few dozen pine, oak and pecan trees. A pole barn sitting on the southeast corner of the property sheltered their neighbor's farm implements. The windmill to the north had quit pumping water a decade prior but made a helluva racket as its rusty blades spun with the wind. Their high beams hit the garage big enough to hold two cars and a slew of domestic items fit for a yard sale. A sheep dog stood in the open parking space and barked while wagging its tail.

## SKELETONS

Move, Bessie, move, Larry yelled and pulled alongside their minivan. She's just excited we're all home again, Val said as Quentin hopped out, ran into the house and ignored his siblings waiting in the kitchen.

Are you okay? his sister asked and reached out for him. We've been worried sick.

Where are you going Quentin? his brother asked.

Just leave me alone, he said and jogged up the stairs. He locked the bathroom door, stripped and got in the shower. After ten minutes trying to wash the smoke, dirt and blood away he turned the faux silver handles clockwise. He dried off, threw on a T-shirt and sweatpants and lay in bed. Closing his eyes didnt keep the skeletons from the Carny House from disturbing his mind.

Quentin, can I come in? Val asked from outside his door, walked in and sat next to him. We need to talk.

I cant Mom, not yet anyway.

We know the fire wasnt your fault Quentin but we need to know what happened. Come on, talk to me.

Once a few minutes of quiet had passed he stopped trembling, opened the door and sat. She put her hand on his back and rubbed in a circular motion.

James brought this old book from Saint Michael's to the Carny House. When... when we went inside something was already holding TJ hostage.

Something? Whattya mean something?

It made us do terrible things. I'm so scared Mom... I'm so scared

it's still out there.

Downstairs the telephone rang, his father answered it and walked up to his room. He exchanged glances with his wife and waited until their son was ready.

Quentin, it's James, Larry said and handed him the cordless phone.

Hello? he asked but the caller didnt reply. James? Is that you James? Hello?

I have Mac, the caller said between tortured breaths.

Who is this?

TJ too, the caller said, reached through the line and strangled his vulnerable soul.

My stomach, he said, swung his legs off the side of the bed and doubled over in pain. It's got my stomach.

What's wrong Quentin? Valerie asked as his father steadied him with two hands.

Kleen's timber... Sunday.

Kleen's? Who the fuck is this?

Bring the book.

The police have it.

Trade, the caller said and hung up.







Well boys, get back out on patrol and radio me if you see or hear anything, Coston said from the foyer of the police station. Just promise me you wont let this investigation get the best of you 'cause it's throwing the whole cotton-picking town off. We need to keep it together, got it?

You got it Chief, Murphy said and Sullivan followed him to the parking lot.

Hey Chief, Barb said from behind her computer.

Yeah, what is it? he asked and rubbed his head.

A woman called around noon and reported a creature resembling a skeleton was standing in her backyard.

Was she drunk?

No but my sister-in-law called shortly after and told me quite a few families have left town. They're afraid the kidnapper or murderer or whoever we're dealing with might come back for another round.

Barb, just tell anyone else who calls we got check points at every

## SKELETONS

highway and road going in and out of Laredo. There're dozens of officers patrolling the streets, a curfew and volunteers combing half the county. So no one should be seeing any monsters, okay?

Whatever you say Chief, mind if I head home?

Not at all, just get me the number of the FBI in Springfield before you leave.

Will do.

He walked to his office, opened the top-drawer of his desk and pulled out a stack of empty reports. After he cracked his knuckles he washed his heart medication down with a pull from the aluminum flask his brother-in-law gave him for his birthday. He wrote the name, date, address and Father O'Mally's personal information down but the words didnt come for the cause of death.

Here you go Chief, need anything else? she asked and handed him a yellow sticky note.

Nope, thanks Barb. Get some sleep 'cause it's gonna be a circus around here tomorrow.

Will do, nighty night.

Nighty night, he said and stared at the hunting calendar hanging on the opposite wall. What if those boys were telling the truth Mr. October?

The white-tailed deer didnt reply so he stood and walked to the evidence room. The book sat on the top shelf inside a plastic evidence bag with the case, date and object in Sullivan's childish handwriting on the label. He returned to his office, sat and pulled the volume out.

## PART ONE: LAREDO

So what's your part in this cluster fuck? he whispered and leafed through its smoky pages. Burnt edges, leather and fragments of charcoal rubbed onto his fingertips. He squinted to read the foreign languages as someone opened and closed the front door to the station without introducing themselves.

Hello? he asked and lowered the book, waiting for a response. The pitter patter of the visitor's unnatural footsteps on the linoleum floor startled him. He stepped out of his office and grabbed the newspaper off Sullivan's desk.

Anybody here? he asked but no one answered him. I've had a long fucking day, so if anybody's here, speak up.

He walked into the restroom, couldn't squat fast enough and combed through the sports section. His daughter's basketball team got two columns for racking up six consecutive wins. The obituary section listed people he once knew and cared for over the years. Yard sales, classifieds and advertisements filled the back page.

Coston, someone called with a gritty voice.

He lowered the paper, scrunched his face and sat still. He waited for the voice of one of his officers or a local wanting to file a police report or a transient wandering in to speak.

Hello? Anybody there? Hello? he asked from behind the stall. State your business, please. Goddammit, I can't even take a shit in peace around here anymore.

Come see.

He folded the paper, wiped and pulled up his pants. He brandished his pistol and peeked out of the bathroom but the office was empty.

## SKELETONS

Please vacate the premises, we're closed for the night, he said, walked through the station and waited for more footsteps.

Come see... Chief.

You're trespassing on city property, show yourself, he yelled and raised his forty-five. No one responded but a fluttering noise came from his office. He stepped inside and the pages in the book were turning without help. With the back of his hand he found nothing was coming out of the hot and cold air return above his cluttered desk. He turned around to make sure the intruder didn't flank him and the book stopped. He holstered his revolver, walked around his desk and read the pages written in uneven cursive.

Luciferum vocavi... ad ictus crine ruber... oculis mul... mulierum, he said and shut his eyes as pain from the back of his skull worked its way toward his frontal lobe. When he opened his eyes again he became dizzy and the room spun. He dropped the book, lost his balance and hit his head on his desk before sinking to the floor.

When several minutes of unconsciousness had passed he shoved at his eyes with the palms of his hands. Bursts of light cut through the blackness and a dark cavern came into focus. Robed men and women stood over him with silver artifacts hanging around their necks. Some wore strange masks and headdresses and carried improvised torches. Haunting melodies came from an organ he couldn't locate.

Who are you? Where the fuck am I? he asked the worshippers. He tried to move but discovered heavy rope bound his wrists and ankles. His body now had pouty breasts, a mound of red pubic hair and archaic symbols painted on his flawless white skin with fresh blood.

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Help me, he cried out but his voice was high-pitched, belonging to a young woman. Somebody help me, something's wrong with my eyes. Untie me, I'm a police officer goddammit.

He flipped his head back and forth, studied the worshippers' faces and found one resembling a young Father O'Mally.

Father? Father is that you? he asked.

Just ignore him, he's under our control now, the worshipper with a scarred face and white beard said, knelt and inserted a curvy blade into the chief's abdomen.

No, he screamed, fought his binds and lost consciousness again. He woke to find himself still on the office floor, expecting a bloody cut on his side but his skin was unharmed. He checked the swelling lump on his head, stood and the volume lay closed on his desk.





The County Coroner transported Father O'Mally's charred remains from Saint Luke's Hospital to the Laredo Funeral Home on Friday morning. He carted the body bag through the back entryway and transferred it onto the stainless-steel table in the embalming room. Scott waited in quiet as the town's hardships caught up to him. Tears were in his eyes when the hallway door opened and the town's only funeral director walked over and extended his hand.

Hey Scott, thanks for bringing him in, Jim said, shook and signed the release form.

Sorry for your loss but you'd better brace yourself 'cause this one's a doozy, Scott said.

Thanks, Father O'Mally and my family go back quite a few years, he said. You know, with Saint Michael's and all.

I can only imagine, Scott said. He unzipped the black bag and the stench of burnt skin, feces and smoke enveloped their senses.

Well, I'll be, Jim said and turned and vomited into the metal sink mounted on the south wall. He washed his hands, wiped his mouth with a paper towel and regained his composure.

## SKELETONS

You all right?

Sorry about that Scott.

Nothing to worry about Jim, it happens to the best of us. Whattya make of those boys missing?

I just hope our friend here isnt responsible.

Well, good luck, you're gonna need it.

Thanks Scott, see you next time, he said, shook hands and returned to studying the priest lacking eyes, a nose and ears. Fractured bones poked through blackened skin dangling from his collapsed limbs.

I'm so sorry Father, he whispered, put latex gloves on and poked and prodded. If it were up to me, I'd stick you in the cremator and put your ashes in the most expensive urn the Diocese can afford.

He rested his hands on the slab and sobbed. Once he pulled his eyeglasses off he wiped away the tears with his sleeve.

Fuck it, I need a cigarette, he whispered, threw the gloves in the trash, grabbed his coffee and walked outside. He stood under the foyer, lit a Marlboro and the nicotine calmed his nerves. Across the street and above a well-kept craftsman home a flock of crows circled. They landed in the oak trees, sat on the telephone lines and cawed at him. He exhaled, took another sip and a door slammed inside.

What the fuck was that?

He stepped on his cigarette, forced the Styrofoam cup into the overflowing trash can and dashed through the building. Curls of smoke escaped the embalming room so he opened the big steel



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door and flames danced behind the glass mounted in the door of the cremator. He shut it off and grabbed the fireproof gloves hanging beside the control panel. He turned the handle, took a deep breath and opened it. The corpse lay inside with smoke rolling off its bones so he stepped back and scanned the room.

How the fuck did you get in there Father? he asked and the skeleton reached out, grabbed his left arm and squeezed. He tried to turn and run but its hand was stronger than a vice.

Take this, O'Mally said in his left ear and forced a raggedy object into his hand.

Hello? Anybody home? someone called from the parlor and the skeleton fell limp, hanging half-in and half-out of the burner. A twice-folded piece of paper sat in his palm. It was frayed at the edges and reeked of smoke.

Anybody home? someone called louder. He tried to make himself presentable but the creature had ripped his white button-down shirt. Blood peeked through the torn sleeve, sweat dripped into the claw marks and pain followed.

Jim? We're from the Peoria Diocese and here to see Father O'Mally, hello? someone called so he hung the gloves back on the hook and found a lab coat. He threw it on, walked down the hallway and two priests were standing in the parlor.

Hello, he said, stuck out his hand and approached the holy men. Welcome, I'm Jim, the funeral director here.

It's a pleasure to meet you Jim, the oldest priest said in a tranquil voice. This is my associate Father McLean and I'm Bishop Ayers. We talked on the phone earlier?

Yes, yes, of course, thank you for coming by, he said and struggled

## SKELETONS

to hide the dark red seeping through the lab coat by folding his arms. Father O'Mally meant so much to our church, we are so, so sorry for his passing.

Is everything okay Jim? McLean asked. Looks like you got attacked by a dog.

Let's just say it's been a long morning gentlemen. Well, would you two like to pick out Father O'Mally's casket?

No, we'd like to see his body first, Ayers said.

With all due respect Bishop, Father isnt quite ready for visitors yet. I'm gonna need a few days to work on him.

Not to worry, we've seen it all before Jim. So, if you dont mind, please guide us to our departed friend.

He led them to the embalming room and held the door open. When the metal table came into view he braced for the worst. To his surprise Father O'Mally lay in the same condition the coroner had left him. The priests stood over him and began a ceremony foreign to the funeral director. They spoke in Latin, waved their hands and tossed holy water on the corpse so he stepped into the hall without interrupting. The twice-folded paper opened without resistance and he read a few of the words to himself.

Lucifer atra hanc dicimus pientiss... pientissimam content... contentionem aperire foraminis, he whispered. The instructions flooded his mind and blocked any doubt of what happened earlier. When the priests fell silent he folded the paper twice, stuck it in his back pocket and walked back inside.

We're finished Jim, thank you for your time, Ayers said and extended his hand. May the Lord bless and keep Father O'Mally in heaven.



Chief Coston sat on the toilet combing through the Pennington Telegraph because the stressful case was giving him diarrhea. The front page read **LAREDO BOYS MISSING** in bold letters, followed by high contrast photographs of Mac and TJ and two columns of text. The article detailed their physical descriptions and the locations of the high school, the train tracks and the Carny House. The writer speculated about Father O'Mally's involvement, his death at Saint Luke's Hospital and the other boys being treated as suspects.

He flushed, washed his hands, stuck the paper under his arm and met his officers and secretary in the foyer. Outside the station, three television crews and a few dozen locals stood on the front steps waiting for his statement.

Looks like everyone in the Midwest has heard the news, Barb said with a sigh.

Yeah, I just finished reading the Telegraph, he said. I cant imagine what the Tribune says. Well, whattya got for me boys?

We got the whole town putting up these flyers at every city hall, gas station and restaurant within a hundred-mile radius Chief, Murphy said and passed him one.

## SKELETONS

Looks good, Sully?

I got volunteers working with the fire department to help search the fields, ditches and creeks around the Carny House. They're working in four-hour shifts Chief.

Nice work you two. I'm gonna meet the Sheriff at Dicky's, so hold down the fort until I get back would you Barb?

You bet, good luck out there Chief.

Thanks, let me do the talking outside boys then get back on patrol, all right?

All right Chief, Murphy said, unlocked the glass door and held it open for him.

Everybody quiet down, he said and the reporters shoved microphones in his face. Quiet down, please. Thank you. I'll make this short and sweet, we're missing two local boys and I'm asking everyone to stay out of the way until we resolve the case. We interrogated the five other boys after the fire and released them under order to not leave town. They're also under a strict curfew. We'll keep you updated on any progress. That's all for now, thank you for being patient.

Chief Coston, why did you release the suspects? the female reporter from WMBD asked. Couldn't they pose a threat to their classmates if they're the perpetrators?

We don't view them as any kind of threat ma'am. We trust their families, teachers and friends will keep a close eye on them. Now if you'll excuse me, thank you. Excuse me, excuse me.

He cut through the crowd toward the employee lot, headed west and pulled into the gas station across from Dicky's Restaurant.

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When he swiped his credit card a black and white Xerox taped inside the convenience store caught his eye and the missing boys stared back.

Any progress Chief? Jan asked from the passenger side of a rusty Ford her husband pulled alongside his cruiser. Hundreds more of the flyers, a few rolls of clear tape and a staple gun sat on the dash.

Nothing yet but we're working around the clock, he said, grabbed his receipt and walked over to their truck. How you two holding up?

We're burnin the candle at both ends, Jan said and faked a smile.

I cant believe you let those boys go, Kenny said, adjusted his DeKalb seed hat and gave him a nasty glare. They gotta know something.

Kenny, I thought we agreed to stay positive and not point fingers? Jan snapped.

It's all right Jan, he said and squeezed her hand. I cant imagine what you're both going through. If Mac's friends know where he is, we'll find out soon enough. Until then, keep putting those flyers up, say your prayers and I'll see you tomorrow at the town meeting.

Sorry Chief but we got a terrible feeling about this whole damn mess, Jan said and sobbed.

Take it easy Jan, we need to stay strong for Mac, Kenny said and put his arm around her.

I'm trying, I'm trying, Jan said and wiped her nose with a handkerchief. I just want our son back.

Listen, I'm having breakfast with Sheriff Dwyer at Dicky's right now. We're gonna go over every angle so get some rest and we'll

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have the whole county behind us tomorrow, all right?

All right, Jan said.

Thanks for listening Chief, Kenny said. Sorry about my behavior at the station the other day.

Water under the bridge my friend. Stay strong you two, we got a long road ahead of us.

See you soon Chief, Jan said and they drove off.

He got in his cruiser, cut across the highway and parked in front of the crowded restaurant. As he checked in with the waitress he removed his hat and Sheriff Dwyer waved at him from a window booth. A few dozen old farmers stopped gossiping and lowered their coffee cups as the lawmen shook hands.

Regular or decaf Chief? a young waitress with braces, too much makeup and big hair asked.

Regular please, he said and she poured him a fresh cup, topped off the sheriff's and left two laminated menus on the table.

Thanks for driving over Sheriff, he said and sat.

Happy to help, Dwyer said and scratched his head. Looks like you got one helluva mess on your hands Chief.

Mess aint the word for it, he said, doused his coffee with cream and sugar and took a sip. This is more like a shit storm Sheriff.

Well, without that Priest you're gonna have a difficult time gettin one of those boys to confess. I hate to say it but they either fucked up or they're telling the truth. And you know I'm not a fan of that hocus-pocus bullshit you were talkin about on the

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phone, so it looks like they fucked up.

Agreed but why would five sophomores who've never been in any real trouble before kill two of their best friends on a school night?

Beats the hell out of me but as you know, in law enforcement the most obvious answer is usually the right one. Who knows, you might be lookin at some bad little dudes flying under the radar. Besides, kids are gettin weirder and weirder nowadays. With all the video games, rap music and cable TV, it's a wonder they havent burned the whole goddamn country down yet.

You might be right but on paper they're clean. Loving parents, good grades, they're all on the football team. Hell, even the lumber yard's kid hasnt been a problem lately.

Well, I'll bring my deputies to your town meetin tomorrow. Somebody has to know somethin and once enough badges show up, they'll cave, I guarantee it.

That'd make my life a helluva lot easier Sheriff, he said and a car honked at the checkpoint down the street. I'm wearing out my officers and we got every Tom, Dick and Harry in Central Illinois helping. Problem is, Stratford County doesnt have the budget to keep this up after the holidays.

We'll make it work, Dwyer said and opened his menu. We always do Chief.

Gonna have to arent we Sheriff?

You bet. Did you get a chance to call the FBI?

Yeah, I spoke with a fella named Munn. Says his boys are focusing on a serial killer who's making his way across the Midwest but will send them up ASAP.

## SKELETONS

The Campground Killer?

Yeah, that's the one.

Dont worry, Munn's a good man. I met him at a conference in Springfield a few years back.

Good to hear but I'm hoping we wrap this whole mess up soon and dont need him.

Well, I'm gonna warn you ahead of time, you listenin old buddy?

I'm all ears.

Now we've known each other since the academy, correct?

Get to the point Sheriff.

The point is, we've taken different career paths. One aint better than the other, they're just different, right?

Right.

Now I've dealt with some nasty shit passin through this little county of ours over the years that you didnt have to see. Murders, drugs, politics, you name it.

And I'm a grateful man you shielded my innocent little town.

I'm tryin to make a point goddammit.

Well make it then, I aint got all day Sheriff.

Chief, even if you find those boys, it'll affect this town for years to come. And God help you if a family member or teacher or friend killed them 'cause small-town folks just cant take homicide. We



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just aint made that way.

No, no we arent Sheriff.



Fall was losing to winter as Halloween approached Laredo High School. The final bell rang and two-hundred and eighty-five students affected by the disappearance of Mac and TJ exited the three-story building. Dwayne, Quentin, James, Teddy and Pablo walked across the parking lot and ignored the buses full of junior high kids pointing and gossiping about them. Southbound geese flew underneath rain clouds rolling in from the horizon and the wind rippled the maples running parallel to the railroad tracks.

I cant believe coach suspended us, Pablo said as they took refuge in a clearing below the trees.

Why wouldnt he suspend us? Teddy asked. We killed two members of his practice squad.

Oh well, I was gonna quit anyway, Dwayne said and lit a cigarette. But I'll be goddamned if I turn my jerseys in, those things are expensive as hell.

Fuck this, Pablo said and tossed his backpack on the weedy ground. I'm not going any farther until we talk about what happened at the Carny House.

I second that, James? Teddy asked.

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Yeah, it was your bright idea to meet out there, Quentin said and inhaled. Come on, now's your chance to explain how you got us into this fucking mess.

You'll never believe me, no one does, James said.

Try us asshole, we got all night, Teddy said.

Yeah, spill the beans, Pablo said and nudged him.

Knock it off, James said and nudged him back. Listen, that book I stole from Father O'Mally is a book of spells. It opens and closes tunnels, like the one they came through at the Carny House.

How the fuck did you know that? Pablo asked.

The man in my TV told us, Dwayne said.

The man in your TV? Who, Bill Cosby? Teddy asked.

When I was at Dwayne's on Tuesday, a man contacted us through his TV, James said. He called himself Master and he warned us about that creature who killed Mac and TJ at the Carny House. He said it was using us for revenge against Father O'Mally.

The Master? Why the fuck didnt you two tell us about him before? Quentin asked.

Because that creature possessed me... it possessed all of us, James said and hung his head.

Possessed us? Teddy asked. Everyone at school is right, you're fucking nuts James.

He's not insane, it took control of us all at the Carny House, Dwayne said. I mean, why would we hurt Mac and TJ? Think

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about it. I cant remember a thing after that creature took TJ hostage. It was like we blacked out or something.

That thing called my house on Thursday night, Quentin said and the others glared at him.

It called your house? Dwayne asked.

What did it say? Pablo asked.

It was hard to understand it over the phone but I think it wants the book in exchange for Mac and TJ, Quentin said. He sat on a fallen tree, fired up a cigarette and took a short drag. The days were getting shorter and the sunset painted the boys in red, pink and orange.

That's it? How do we know that's what it wants? Dwayne asked and exhaled. He paced back and forth as the remaining students vacated the parking lot across the street.

Listen fucker, Quentin yelled and got in his face. I dont know what the fuck you want from me but I'm scared shitless. This isnt some run-of-the-mill trouble we've gotten ourselves into this time. Mac and TJ are missing and that fucking monster called my house yesterday. It called my house Dwayne, my house.

Stop it you two, Teddy said and forced his arm between them while James and Pablo played innocent bystanders.

Back the fuck up before I beat your ass, Dwayne said, grabbed him by the shirt with one hand and cocked back with the other.

Knock that fucking shit off, Teddy said and got caught in the tussle.

Break it up, break it up, James yelled and pushed them apart, fearing for his life as the smallest member of the group. The boys

## SKELETONS

retreated to their imaginary corners, Dwayne pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and Quentin tried catching his breath.

One of you two got me good, Teddy said, rubbing a red blotch on his neck. That's the last time I try breaking you two assholes up.

Serves you right for getting in my way, next time I'm gonna break your neck Quentin, Dwayne said.

Fuck off Dwayne, Quentin said and knocked the dust off his jeans.

Listen, we all know this situation is fucked but I have an idea, James said. We all know there's a town meetin tomorrow night at the junior high gym.

Yeah, coach told me we'll look guilty as hell if we're not there, Pablo said, unfazed by the violence his friends waded into from time to time.

Yup, everyone's gonna be there and Chief Coston is bringin the Sheriff, James said. It'd be the perfect time to break into the police station and steal that book back.

Oh, great idea, why not steal a car too? How about a few guns while we're at it? Teddy asked.

Yeah, I'm thinking that's a terrible idea, Pablo said. Besides, if we break our curfew Chief Coston is gonna lock us up, remember?

I feel you Pablo but what choice do we have? James asked. I say we do what that skeleton says and get our friends back. If anyone's got a better idea, I'm all ears.

Skeleton? Is that what we're calling it? A fucking skeleton? Dwayne asked.

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Hey, if it looks like a duck and talks like a duck then it's a fucking duck, am I right or am I right? Teddy asked.

That... that skeleton shouldnt be messed with you guys, Quentin whispered as he field stripped his cigarette.

Fuck that shit, we'll be in jail by Sunday mornin if we dont fight back, James said. I know, I shouldnt have taken that goddamn book and I'm sorry but what's done is done.

James is right you guys but we dont know if it really has them or if it's lying to us, Teddy said. I'll tell you one thing, if you fuckers left me for dead I'd haunt you for the rest of your miserable lives.

Everyone laughed except for Quentin, who opened and closed his Zippo lighter at a feverish pace. The clicking aluminum parts gave cadence to a flock of mangey crows perched in the surrounding trees. They stared at the gang and let out an occasional caw as the horizon halved the sun and the temperature dropped.

Jesus fucking Christ, where are all those things coming from? James asked with his hands up in disbelief.

Who gives a fuck? It's getting dark and I'm starving, we gonna do this Saturday or what? Dwayne asked.

There's one thing I didnt tell you guys, Quentin said and turned his back to them. I was too afraid to say this earlier but if we're all being honest, now's the time.

What? Pablo asked. Come on, you can tell us Quentin.

For fucks sake, we aint got all night Quentin, Teddy said. Our friends are probably burning in Hell while we're out here playing grab ass, so out with it.

## SKELETONS

That skeleton said... Kleen's timber... Sunday, Quentin whispered. Then it said... trade and it hung up.

Trade? What does that even mean? Dwayne asked.

I dont know but that word's been driving me crazy all day, Quentin said, grabbed a loose railroad tie and threw it at a beer can laying on the ground.

I think it means we have to do the 'ole switcheroo, Teddy said and picked up a handful of rocks off the ground.

Switcheroo? Dwayne asked.

Teddy's right, it wants two people for our missing pals, Quentin said.

Wait, are you guys talking about kidnapping? Pablo asked and stood. Impossible, out of the question, I'm not doing that for our friends or anyone else, no fucking way.

Let me get this straight, Teddy said. We have to steal the book back, kidnap two people and exchange them for Mac and TJ at our favorite camping spot?

Sounds about right but whose car are we gonna steal? James asked.

Fuck it, I say we steal one from the trailer court and hope they got Brett Favre and Sterling Sharpe tied up in the trunk, Teddy said.





The bald man walked through Midway International Airport on Friday evening after a direct flight from San Francisco. He wore a beat-up Army jacket with someone else's last name stitched above the right pocket, a flannel shirt, blue jeans and leather work boots. A canvas overnight bag hung from his left shoulder and he carried a black briefcase in his right hand. He rode the escalator to ground level, exited the parking garage in the modest rental car reserved for him and took Interstate 55. The classical radio station turned to static so he adjusted the dial and lowered the window to let the cigarette smoke escape.

Urban sprawl replaced his Golden Gate Bridge, rolling hills crowded with Victorians and multicultural restaurants. Factories, train tracks, billboards and fading brownstones surrounded the four-lane highway cutting through the South Side. The suburbs turned into the outskirts, the outskirts turned into small towns and the small towns turned into an agricultural cornucopia. An hour and a half passed and he double-checked the typed instructions lying on his lap. There was a new sign with reflective lettering to the west.

EXIT 187

34

NOAH/LAREDO

1/2 MILE

## SKELETONS

The turnabout pointed the car east so he stopped at a gas station on Highway 34 and took a piss in the graffitied bathroom. He washed his hands and wandered into the convenience store to study a laminated map.

Sir, are you part Indian? the skinny woman behind the register asked with an annoying voice.

I might be, why? the bald man said.

Cause you kinda look like one of them actors in that western Dances with Wolves.

Really, which one?

The one that had it out for Kevin Costner, she said, pushed a few buttons on the register and gave him his change.

Fucking squaw, he whispered and a black and white Xerox taped to the right glass door caught his eye before he exited. He put ten dollars' worth of unleaded gasoline into the rental while an old couple standing on the other side of the pump stared at him. He whispered something under his breath, returned the fuel dispenser and continued west. A sky full of stars lit the two-lane road as rural tranquility replaced the uneasiness of Chicago. Vehicles in the oncoming lane passed by without turning off their high beams as old farms sprinkled along the highway hung on for dear life.

Two miles outside of Henley a train passed. He tossed the cigarette butt out the window and turned the heater to the highest setting. He passed three manufacturing plants and slowed down when a check point came into view. There were four officers wearing rain gear stopping traffic in-between two police cars parked on opposite sides of the road.

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What brings you to Laredo sir? one young white officer asked and shone his flashlight into the backseat and into the out-of-towner's eyes.

I'm on my way to Peoria. Gonna pick up my nephew from Bradley tonight then head back to Chicago tomorrow. Why, what's going on around here Officer?

We've got a couple local boys missing sir.

Sorry to hear that, anything I can do?

Nope but thanks for cooperating sir, you drive safe now.

He cruised through town, stopped at the only traffic light where a Super 8 sign towered above the roadside businesses. He parked the car on the south end of the hotel and stepped into the lobby where the clock on the wall read nine forty-two.

Where you comin from stranger? the Filipino woman asked.

I'm not in the mood for small talk ma'am, the bald man said and realized his voice frightened her.

No need to be shy, everyone's friendly around here.

Ma'am, I just need a room please.

Well, alrighty then. If you need anything just let me know, my name's Rosie.

Thank you Rosie.

He wrote the name and address matching his fake driver's license in the registry, paid in cash and yanked the room key out of her hand. He grabbed his belongings out of the rental car, opened

## SKELETONS

room 103 and waited before entering.

The finest accommodations in all of Laredo, he said and was disgusted by the queen-sized bed. He set his luggage on the carpeted floor, drew the curtains and stripped. The mirror above the sink reflected a bare chest littered with amateur tattoos and scars from a lifetime of abuse, rituals and incarceration. The linoleum in the bathroom was cold under his bare feet when he sat to shit and the vent didnt work. He pulled the plastic shower curtain to one side and twisted the shower handle to the red part of the dial. Once he left the bathroom he chain-locked the door and confirmed the time. When he separated the curtains with his index and middle finger a vertical column of light shone on his face. He squinted and surveyed the empty lot.

Nothing to worry about Master.

He took a long shower, toweled off and set his briefcase on the chest of drawers. When the combination lock read 218 he opened it and placed the Glock 9mm and its custom-made silencer on the nightstand. He pulled out a leather volume, two candles, a book of matches and a small vial of dark red liquid. Once he let the towel fall from his waist he jerked the framed print of a covered bridge off the wall and drew a pentagram with the blood. He placed the candles on top of the television, lit them and sat on the bed with the book open in his hands.

*Magnus et potens luciferum quaeritur te ad hanc machinam communicationis quia cum magister*, he said in a hushed tone.

As he repeated the directions the lights flickered, room vibrated and a low rumble grew. The television turned on by itself, horizontal distortion flipped on the screen and static came through the Chinese speaker. The picture settled on a dark chamber full of robed men and women of different ages and ethnicities gathered around an altar.

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One worshipper turned, smiled and lowered his cloak to reveal a decrepit old man with contracture scars riddling his face, neck and hands.

Good evening Master, I'm in Laredo just like you asked, he said to the television.



Still waking from a nightmare of his missing friends, Teddy rubbed his eyes, rolled over and checked his alarm clock. 6:03 a.m. He coughed up more of the Carny House, threw on his work clothes and took a long piss in the bathroom down the hallway. After he brushed his teeth he walked to the kitchen and sat at the oblong table where his father was reading the Pennington Telegraph and sipping black coffee. His mother was cooking breakfast behind a green electric stove.

Son, I've been waitin around since five o'clock in the morning and your brother's been plowing most of the night, Orville said and scratched his curly blond hair with the receding hairline. We gotta be at the town meeting later so finish your breakfast and let's get going.

You want me to work today? Are you crazy? Teddy asked.

Do as you're told Teddy, Mary Sue said and put two eggs, three slices of bacon and two pieces of burnt toast on his plate.

Son, you wanna know something? Orville asked. We cant stop harvest just because you and your buddies burned that damn farm to the ground.

## SKELETONS

I know Dad but I can barely breathe, he said and coughed.

Teddy, I don't want to hear another peep out of you, Mary Sue said, waving the spatula in the air. Not after all the trouble you boys got into Wednesday night. If we didn't threaten Chief Coston with a lawsuit, you'd be sitting in jail right now with the rest of your crazy friends.

All right, enough already, I'm gonna fire up the truck so meet me outside, Orville said, took one last swallow, put the FFA mug in the sink and kissed his wife goodbye.

Your dad was up all night pacing around the house and spent all morning drinking coffee, she said and sat. And you know how he gets when he's had too much caffeine.

It ain't the coffee that's making him crazy Mom.

Just get some work done today and try not make him mad, okay smart ass?

Okay, okay, he said and finished his eggs.

And one more thing, she said from the sink. You're riding with us to the gym tonight.

Lucky me, he said, drank the last of his orange juice and ran outside.

Hurry it up, Orville yelled from the Silverado as George Jones poured out of the window.

I'm coming, he said, jumped in and they were out of the driveway before he fastened his seatbelt. His father turned up the volume as they crossed the railroad tracks and stopped at Highway 34. Once a few semis, a police cruiser and a half-dozen cars passed they headed south on the Capland Blacktop. They



PART ONE: LAREDO

traveled several miles on County Road 900 and the old cassette tape hissed and crackled when Waylon Jennings came through the speakers.

That fire throw your asthma off son? Orville asked as the modified exhaust interrupted the tranquil countryside and the sun climbed the sky in their wake. Grain trucks sat in the adjacent fields waiting for overflowing combines to fill them with corn and soybeans.

I've got an appointment with the doctor on Monday after school. My throat feels like it's getting worse by the hour.

Well, you gonna tell me what really happened Thursday night? Orville asked with one hand on the wheel and the other on the radio volume. He turned the music down and yielded at Highway 61 where a semi was making a left. He hit the gas and after a few minutes the family farm sat before them on its one acre plot.

I already told you and Mom everything I can remember.

Son, your mother and I might have to get a defense attorney if Mac and TJ arent found and their parents decide to press charges, Orville said, pulled into the gravel driveway, put the pickup in park and turned to his son. Out with it Teddy. Now.

Something that looked like a skeleton killed two of my friends.

You mean to tell me a monster killed your friends and set fire to that old farmhouse? Orville asked, yanked the hat off his head and threw it on the dash. Son, you must think I'm a goddamn fool.

Dad, I dont think you're a fool but you're treating me like one, he said, slipped out of the truck and walked up the driveway. Morning Grandpa.

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Morning Teddy, Turner said, smiled and shifted his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. We didnt think you'd be out here today after what happened the other night.

I didnt either Grandpa but you know how my Dad is.

Oh do I ever, Turner said and chuckled.

You all right Teddy? Arline asked, hobbled down the driveway and embraced her grandson. I've been worried sick about you.

I'm fine Grandma, he said and rolled his eyes. Just a little hoarse is all, thanks.

Son, why dont you take the four-wheeler out to the south forty and give Ryland a break? Orville asked.

Yessir, see you in a bit Grandma and Grandpa, he said and cut across the combined section of the field. Corn stovers hit the axle, keeping an irregular beat. To the southeast, his brother parked the John Deere and climbed down from the cab.

Where the fuck you been? Ryland asked and shoved him.

Knee deep in shit for two days so get off my back, he said and regained his balance.

Well, you better get your head out of your ass before Mom and Dad have to mortgage the farm to keep you outta jail, Ryland said, got on the four-wheeler and sped away.

Fuck you too, he yelled at his brother, closed the tractor door and turned on the radio. Only reason I'm doing this shit is so Dad doesnt kill me before I join the Navy, you fat cocksucker.

An hour of double-checking the plow's wake passed when all of

PART ONE: LAREDO

the sudden the tractor bucked and died. The engine wouldnt turn over after he tried the ignition so he grabbed the CB and radioed the farm. No one responded. He jumped out, walked around to the hitch and discovered the jackknifed plow.

Oh my God, what in the fuck is that?

Underneath the implement was a raggedy arm sticking halfway out of the ground with a melted Casio wrapped around its wrist. When it reached out he stumbled backwards with his eyes bulging out in disbelief.

This... this cant be happening.

Two legs wedged between the plow and ground kicked at random, trying to find their footing. Eyeless skulls covered in dirt stared at him and a headless torso dragged itself across the maze of bones. He followed the trail of human wreckage for another twenty yards south as a crisp breeze kept him from passing out. His stomach did a somersault when he turned to the north and there was no sign of his family coming to the rescue.

I must have a concussion... or maybe I'm dreaming.

Teddy, someone called in a wicked tone.

I know that voice, he said, turned and a creature with one arm pulled itself from the Earth. Corn stalks and leaves clung to its rib cage as it inched closer.

Am I still dreaming? he muttered, tripped and fell.

No, this is real, the skeleton said and grabbed his ankle.

What do you want? he asked, kicked it in the head and stood.

## SKELETONS

The book, it said and got upright. Bring us the book.

The John Deere started on its own and his father's voice came from the CB in the cab. He glanced at the trailing skeleton one more time and ran back to the tractor.

Hello? Hello? he yelled into the microphone, sat and adjusted the squelch. Dad?

You all right son? Son? Are you there son? Orville called.

Raindrops hit the windshield at random as storm clouds rolled in from the east. The wind picked up and chaff tumbled across the unplowed section of the field.

Teddy? Orville called. Talk to me son.

He turned around in the bucket seat to peer out the back window but no skeletons remained.

I was just taking a leak Dad, over, he said, hung up the mic and got back to work.

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The Laredo Cemetery lay among the fields east of town. It was three-quarters full and contained tombstones etched with dates before the Civil War. Wilting flowers and miniature American flags adorned the graves of farmers, their wives and children who tilled Illinois dirt for generations. Some names were still used in Stratford County while others had faded away when the last of their kin were lowered into the Earth. In the heart of the graveyard, the funeral director set up chairs around Father O'Mally's plot as his part-time employee laid down artificial turf.

Dont forget to put the tent up, it's supposed to rain again tomorrow, Jim said.

Sure thing boss, Brian said.

Thanks, I'm gonna take a break, he said, got in his Cadillac, started it up and sensed eyes were on him. When he turned around there was a black umbrella, the priest's paperwork and three crumpled-up fast food bags lying on the backseat. He put both hands on the wheel, leaned forward and peered through the foggy windshield. Brian was having a hard time erecting the tent because a strong wind had picked up and a light drizzle fell on their work.

## SKELETONS

He stuck his right hand past his trench coat and into the ticket pocket of his suit. The paper's jagged edges and indentations told his brain it was where he left it after breakfast. He retrieved the torn and abused artifact and spread it out on his lap. Forgotten cursive stretched from side-to-side and crimson fingerprints smudged a hand-drawn circle filled with ink.

Ap... aperire... hoc rubeum... dicimus pient... pientissimam... cont... contentionem Lucifer... foraminis, he whispered and held it closer. Lucifer? What is this shit?

He pulled a pen, a notepad and a textbook he had checked out from the library from his briefcase. He found the right translations and wrote them down one-by-one but a knock on the driver's side window startled him.

Hey boss, sorry to interrupt, Brian said.

No worries, whatcha need? he asked while lowering his window.

Nothing, just letting you know I'm done. Need anything else?

Nah, we're good to go, see you tomorrow, he said, rolled up the window and read from the notepad. We... we summon Lucifer... to open this... this red hole. Red hole? Shit, these are instructions.

Jim, someone called from outside his vehicle.

Who the hell's that? he whispered and surveyed the cemetery.

Jim, someone called again but louder. He stared through the windshield and Father O'Mally was staggering toward his car. The priest avoided the tombstones in his path and reached out with blistered and bleeding hands.

Father? he gasped and tried driving away but the car died. Red

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and orange icons lit up the instrument panel but the heater kept spewing lukewarm air from the vents.

Open it, O'Mally called from twenty, fifteen and ten feet away.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he yelled and turned the key but the engine wouldn't turn over. The scorched priest slammed his fists on the hood and clawed the black paint with his jagged fingernails. He climbed onto the vehicle and stopped before the windshield. The skin on his face hung from a battered skull and his nose, ears and hair were missing.

Open red holes, O'Mally said and splintered the glass after striking it with his fists again and again. Open... to save Laredo.

Start you piece of fucking shit, he screamed and the car responded. He threw it in drive, hit the accelerator and the priest slid off the Cadillac as he cut through the cemetery.

When he reached County Road 1250 he glanced in the mirror and a naked skeleton stood in his wake.





Teddy was still plowing the back forty when the sun turned blood orange somewhere over Peoria. He raised the implement after the last row, stopped along the property line and shut down the tractor. When he walked across the lawn Ryland turned off the blacktop road parallel to the farm and parked behind Orville's truck. The brothers washed their hands and joined their father and grandparents in the dining room. They said grace and ate Salisbury steak, corn on the cob and mashed potatoes and washed it down with sweet tea. The telephone interrupted coffee and his grandmother's homemade chocolate cake.

Would one of my grandsons please get that? Arline asked and sighed. I'm sick and tired of salesmen calling during supper.

You bet, Teddy said and grabbed the receiver off the green rotary dial mounted on the kitchen wall. Hello?

Hey asshole, I called your house and your mom said you were at the farm, James said.

Affirmative, we're just finishing up a late lunch, what's up?

Figured I'd call and save your ass.

## SKELETONS

Much obliged.

I talked to Dwayne and we're gonna rendezvous at the railroad tracks by the park, you in?

Yeah, what time you leaving?

Soon as you get over here.

Negative, my Dad's combining until the town meeting starts so I need a ride.

I gotcha covered, Mel's drivin so we'll be there in a few minutes.

Great, he said, hung up the phone and sat. Hey Dad, James and Mel are going to town early to put up flyers, mind if I go with them?

Not at all, just get your butts to the gym on time, understand?

Understood.

Twenty bucks you nincompoops are in jail by Monday morning, Ryland said and laughed. Any takers?

Ryland, how could you say that? Arline asked. Leave poor Teddy alone, he's been through enough this week.

Listen to your Mom and Dad and everything will be fine Teddy, Turner said as a beat-up Camaro turned into the driveway and honked twice. He kissed Arline on the cheek, promised his grandparents he would visit more and ran out of the house.

How's she running Mel? Orville yelled from the kitchen window.

It'll be runnin better once I drop these two knuckleheads off in town Orville, Mel said as James opened his door, let Teddy in the

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backseat and they started east.

Thanks for picking me up, another minute of my father and I would've thrown myself under the plow, he said.

Dont worry, James told me everything, Mel said and turned down the radio.

He did?

Yeah, otherwise she wouldnt give us a ride, James said.

Your plan better work or you're gonna spend the rest of your lives in Pontiac Prison, Mel said.

I got nothing to worry about 'cause my Dad will murder me before the trial, he said and they laughed but James was still. He gazed out the window at a combine eating rows of corn as the sun painted the nimbostratus clouds to the east with swaths of purple and black. She took a left onto Highway 61 and grain trucks waiting to unload formed a line at the mill.

You all right crackhead? Mel asked. I can take you back home if you're not feelin well.

I'm fine, just worried is all, James said and picked at the scab on his left forearm.

She slowed down and turned right onto Clay Street. The poor side of town was littered with trailer homes, a veterinarian clinic and a food pantry. Five blocks of homes stuck in the sixties and seventies passed. She stopped by the railroad tracks where Dwayne, Quentin and Pablo stood underneath a cluster of trees smoking cigarettes.

Thanks for the ride Mel, James said and let Teddy out.

## SKELETONS

No problem, you okay?

Yeah, he said, rested his arms on the roof and waited.

Just promise me you wont get killed tonight, okay?

I promise, he said, trying not to cry.

Love you crackhead, she said and took off.

Can I get a cigarette? he asked the other boys.

How come you never bring your own? Quentin asked. I want some dough if I gotta buy them all the fucking time.

Just give me a goddamn smoke you tight-ass, he said and Quentin raised his Zippo and left hand to protect the flame from the breeze. James and Pablo had their varsity jackets on with faux gold pins attached to the embroidered L. Teddy and Quentin wore thick flannels and Dwayne had on his weathered Carhartt. Everyone wore beat up jeans and different brands of work boots soiled from the muddy ground.

I cant believe we're gonna do this, Dwayne said, leaned against a White Oak and took a drag.

I know, this is crazy, this is fucking crazy, Quentin said.

Teddy and Pablo had their hands in their pockets while the smokers paced around and flicked their cigarettes too much. A car full of older kids drove past blaring Megadeth so they walked farther down the tracks to remain undetected.

There's no turning back now, Quentin said.

How do you plan on getting into the station? Dwayne asked.

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I can jimmy the back door open with a credit card my Mom got in the mail yesterday, James said and pulled it out of his wallet. I'll get in and out without anyone noticing.

You didn't catch the limit on that thing did you? Teddy asked. Because we're gonna max it out buying liquor, cigarettes and hookers with big fake tits if this plan of ours actually works.

They laughed, finished their cigarettes and set off due east on Clay Street. Four blocks later they took the broken sidewalk parallel to Orange Street. Automatic timers turned porch lights on and the police station lay a block away.





The William F. Savage Memorial Gymnasium sat across from the cafeteria and next to the locker rooms inside the Junior High School. On Saturday morning the custodians extended the bleachers and lined the floor with enough metal folding chairs to accommodate a thousand people. The eager Laredoans reserved the seats hours in advance so latecomers stood in the doorways and leaned against the walls. They critiqued the police chief's investigation, discussed their theories on Father O'Mally's involvement and gossiped about the suspects before the meeting started. Area reporters interviewed the lawmen, volunteers and families affected by the tragedy for the six o'clock news.

Any developments Chief Coston? Any suspects? the anchorman from WEEK asked and shoved a branded microphone too close to his mouth.

None unfortunately, he said and cut toward the stage. Please forgive me, we're about to start. Excuse, excuse me.

Chief Coston, Chief Coston, Mary Sue said and grabbed his arm through a cluster of town folk. I feel like a damn fool for telling you this but Teddy's missing.

You gotta be kidding me? he whispered.

## SKELETONS

No, no I'm not. Orville just ran home to see if he's there.

Why in the hell did you let him out of your sight?

He lied about meeting us here. We're scared out of our minds Chief, please help us.

Murph, Sully, he said and gestured for them to join the conversation. Any idea where our troublemakers are?

Nope but it looks like the other parents are freaking out too, Murphy said.

Go outside and get on the horn. Tell everyone on patrol our boys are AWOL. Just keep it down and get back inside before the Mayor starts or we're gonna have a goddamn riot on our hands, got it?

Got it, Murphy said and Sullivan followed.

You about ready Chief? Dwyer asked. Looks like the natives are getting restless.

Ready when you are, he said and sat in one of the chairs lined up behind the podium. Two enlarged photographs of the missing boys glued to foam core sat on easels at opposite ends of the stage. The television crews filmed from the back of the auditorium.

Good evening Laredo, let's start out with the Lord's prayer, Mahoney said and his words bounced off the rafters where basketball, football and volleyball banners hung.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, the crowd repeated. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead



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us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, Amen.

Amen, Mahoney said and cleared his throat. I want to give thanks to the police officers, firefighters and emergency technicians working around the clock to find our missing boys. And special thanks to the volunteers who are organizing the search parties and putting up flyers. Who threw this town meeting together. Most importantly, thank you to Mac and TJ's families for being so patient during this difficult time. I want you all to know that no stone will go unturned. Now, I'd like to bring up Chief Coston.

Thank you for leading us in prayer Mayor Mahoney, Coston said and adjusted the microphone. As of tonight, we have no evidence to suggest Mac and TJ aren't alive. We know they're out there and we'll bring them home as soon as possible, so dont waste any time worrying. Sheriff Dwyer is here with us tonight and he's gonna say a few words about the investigation.

The sheriff stood, pulled notes out of his back pocket and rested his hands on the podium as the crowd applauded. The police chief sat and into leaned into Murphy.

Any word? Coston whispered.

Nothing but every lawman in Illinois is out looking for them, Murphy whispered back.

Thank you Chief, the good people of Laredo and the amazing volunteers from all over Central Illinois who are workin together during this time of uncertainty, Dwyer said. For those of you that dont know me, I'm the Stratford County Sheriff. I work out of the Rosita County Courthouse and would be happy never to see you nice folks there.

Coston scanned the crowd of exhausted farmers still in their

## SKELETONS

overalls, teachers who schooled Mac and TJ since kindergarten and countless friends and relatives. Teenagers from Rosita, Arbor and Finnegan who played sports, hung out and attended Youth Group with the missing boys were also present.

Now, I've got some good news and I've got some bad news, Dwyer said. The good news is that we've been through worse around here and came out just fine. The bad news is that it might take a week, a month or even a year to find Mac and TJ. But if everyone pitches in, our chances of findin them increases tenfold.

Coston studied an Indian man wearing a Cardinals baseball cap in the southwest corner of the gym. He avoided making eye contact with him but after a few seconds they were staring at one another.

We've got our work cut out for us so keep puttin flyers up and spread the word any way you can, Dwyer said. If we're lucky, someone will recognize Mac and TJ's faces, find a clue or make an anonymous phone call that'll bring 'em home.

You see that guy in the baseball cap? Looks like an Indian? Coston whispered to Murphy.

Yeah, he's sticking out like a sore thumb.

Soon as the Sheriff's done we escort him outside.

Gotcha.

I'll be one hundred percent honest with you, the more time that passes the less chance we have of findin our boys, Dwyer said. So let's comb every inch of this county and bring them back unharmed. That's all we have for you tonight folks, thank you so much for comin out and showin your support for Mac and TJ. Be safe out there Laredo and may God bless us on this journey.

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The audience stood, clapped and collected their belongings but the police chief ignored anyone who approached him. He stepped off the stage as the man rushed toward the exit but lost him in the crowded cafeteria.

Please excuse me, he said to Mac's family, turned to his officers and motioned for them to follow. Excuse me, pardon me, excuse me. He reached the bottlenecked front doors, pushed through the crowd and stopped in the employee lot to scan the school grounds. His officers caught up to him under a streetlight at Fifth and Sycamore.

Where do you want us Chief? Murphy asked.

Get in your cruiser and head south on Elm, he said and pointed. Sully, go west on Fifth and south on Walnut. Dont let him get away.

He ran down the sidewalk as the strange man ducked behind a garage on Fourth. Murphy paralleled the police chief in his cruiser, slowed to a crawl and lowered his window.

Murph, radio Sully, he said and clicked on his Maglite. Tell him to comb the area. If either of you see that bastard call it in.

I'm on it Chief, Murphy said and sped away.

Now, where did you run off to asshole? he whispered between breaths and continued west. His officers cut through the neighborhood with their headlights on and sirens off.

Good evenin Chief, nice night for a walk aint it? an old woman asked from a well-lit porch.

It sure is Mrs. Walker, he said and stopped. You didnt see a man with a red ball cap pass by here did you?

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I couldnt tell you what color it was but he ran past here right before you showed up. Strange lookin fella if you dont mind me sayin Chief.

I dont mind at all. Thank you Mrs. Walker, I'll see you in church.

My pleasure Chief.

He ran toward Walnut and stopped in the intersection to catch his breath but his instincts pushed him south. After a half block of jogging someone stepped out from behind an oak tree and struck him with the butt of a knife. He fell to the pavement and lost consciousness for several seconds. Blood streamed down his face. He tried focusing but the assailant had the blade to his throat before he could draw his pistol.

Where's the book? the bald man asked.

What book? he asked, squinted and the missing ball cap revealed a shaved head reflecting the early moonlight. He pulled the police chief closer and rested the stainless-steel blade against his carotid artery.

Last time I ask before I cut your throat, where's the fucking book?

Please dont hurt me, I have a wife and two kids.

When a police cruiser sped down the block the bald man struck him one last time and ran into the night. The approaching officer turned his siren on and stopped short of the curb.

Shit, you all right Chief? Murphy asked, kneeled and helped him off the concrete. Your head's bleeding pretty good.

Yeah, I'm fine, Coston said.

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He turned his back on him, scanned the neighborhood and pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket. Once he dabbed the bloody cut he yanked his hat off the ground, put it on and brushed himself off.

Shit, he stole my fucking walkie-talkie.



Now what? Pablo asked from the shadow of an unlit garage.

Dwayne, Quentin, go in and distract the secretary, James whispered.

Her name's Barb, Dwayne mumbled.

Yeah, I heard you two go way back, Teddy joked and the others chuckled.

What the fuck should we say to her? Quentin asked.

Tell her you killed Mac and TJ so the rest of us don't get thrown in jail, Teddy whispered.

Shut the fuck up Teddy, James whispered, trying not to laugh. Tell her you want to apologize to Chief Coston for skipping the town meeting. When I see you go in the front door, I'll slip in the back. I just need a few minutes, now go.

This is insane, Quentin whispered and Dwayne lagged behind.

What should Teddy and I do? Pablo asked. His round eyeglasses reflected southbound headlights so they crouched behind the bushes and waited for the city truck to pass.

## SKELETONS

I'll be back in two shakes of a dog's dick, James whispered and stood. Wish me luck.

Good luck dumbass, Teddy whispered but Pablo didnt respond. James stayed low, worked the shadows and reached the back door. He got the metal door open after a few tries with the credit card and crept inside.

Must have been unlocked, Teddy whispered and Pablo giggled as Dwayne and Quentin jogged back to the garage.

What happened? Pablo asked.

Keep it down you idiot, Quentin whispered.

Barb wasnt at her desk, Dwayne said and lit a cigarette.

Put it out or we're gonna get caught, Pablo whispered.

Fuck off Pablo, my nerves are fried, Dwayne whispered and took a long drag.

She was probably taking a dump, Teddy whispered.

There he is, Pablo whispered and pointed as James shut the back door and ran across the parking lot.

Let's get outta here, he said without stopping. He passed the garage and the others ran behind him for a quarter mile. They slowed down a block from the Capland Blacktop and hid behind the town's only power station. Dwayne's cigarette still hung from his mouth and Quentin was searching for his lighter.

Jesus Christ, what happened? Teddy asked. You ran out of there like a fucking madman.



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I found the book... in the evidence room and peeked... my head out of the door, he said and sucked in the damp air with both hands on his knees while the others stood around him. I heard a toilet flush... then I hauled ass.

Told you she was taking a dump, Teddy said.

Well, here it is, he said and placed the book on the gravel.

This had better work, if not we're all going to jail, Quentin said.

Look what else I got, he said and unzipped his coat. He pulled a snub-nosed revolver out of his coat pocket and placed it on top of the volume. It had a wooden handle and caught the moon with its shiny black finish.

Holy fucking shit, Pablo said.

There was a box of thirty-eight shells so I grabbed them too, he said and set them beside the gun.

Now we're really in deep shit, Pablo said.

Let me carry it, Dwayne said and reached for the revolver.

Fuck off, it was my idea, James said, pulled his coat up and stuck it between his belt and lower back. Besides, I'm the one who has to point it at someone when the time comes.

Fine but I get to shoot it when we get to Kleen's, Dwayne said.

Quit fucking around you guys, someone's coming, Quentin said and hid behind the station.

Wait here, James said, walked to the center of the two-lane road and waved his arms. The truck stopped and the passenger side

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window lowered as the driver turned down his radio.

You okay? Need a ride? the woman asked.

Yeah, we do, he said and brandished the revolver. Dwayne, Teddy, Quentin and Pablo walked out of the shadows, climbed over the sidewalls and lay in the bed.

Easy kid, we'll do whatever you want, the man said.

Scoot over, he said to the woman, jumped in the cab and stuck the handgun in her doughy side. Keep headin south, obey the speed limit and take a left after the cemetery. Nice and slow please.

Why are you doing this? the man asked.

You wont believe me if I tell you.

Try me.

Listen, we just need a ride to the timber south of town then we'll let you go, I promise, he said as a sedan with its brights on passed in the opposite lane.

Wait a second, do you have anything to do with those missing boys? the man asked while staring through the foggy windshield.

Yeah, they were our friends.

Did you kill them? the woman asked and they turned onto County Road 700.

Fuck no we didnt kill them but we're gonna find out who did.

Hurt my wife and I'll run this truck into a fucking telephone pole, the man said.

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I already said I wont hurt you so just keep drivin. You know where Kleen's property is?

No, we aint from around here. We just ate dinner in Laredo and were heading back to Kensington to pay the babysitter and put the kids to bed. We dont want any trouble, just tell us where to drop you off and we'll be on our way.

Please, we got two beautiful children waitin on us at home, the woman said holding back her tears.

When you pass the golf course it's only a few more miles.

Ten four, the man said and kept the truck around the speed limit. The diesel added background noise to the fearful jaunt through the country.

See that gravel lane?

Yeah, I see it, the man said and tapped the brakes.

Take a right and go slow. Now cut your lights and go slower. Slower I said.

The road was a mile long and curved east before the timber. The headlights lit up a rusty livestock gate connected to an electric fence. Trees, brush and weeds covered the eastern run.

Pull along the left side of the property line and cut the engine, he said and the man drove at a snail's pace. After twenty yards he stopped the truck under a thicket of pines.

We'll leave you boys right here and be on our way, the man said. We wont tell anyone about tonight. Please, I beg of you, just let us go.

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The boys climbed out of the back and surrounded the F-150. James swung his door open and stepped out while keeping the revolver leveled on the couple.

I'm sorry if we scared you, he said to them and clutched his abdomen. But... it was... it was the only way.

What's wrong kid? the man asked.

Who gives a damn, let's get the hell out of here, the woman said and slammed her door.

He dropped the pistol, dropped to the ground and vomited. His eyes rolled up into his head and he began to convulse.

What's wrong James? Dwayne asked and knelt beside him while the other boys gathered around.

Go, you idiot, go, the woman yelled at her husband inside the cab but the truck died.

I cant, it wont start, the man yelled, turned the keys and pumped the gas. Without warning, a skeleton with no jaw opened his door, yanked him out of the cab and he fell to the ground with a thud. The creature planted its serrated foot on his face and he cried out in pain trying to escape its unnatural weight.

Get out, the skeleton said to his wife. Or he dies.

What are you? the woman asked and raised her hands in defense.

Death, the skeleton said and grabbed her arm.

They're here, run, Quentin yelled and headed toward the timber. A paleolithic skeleton hiding in the brush snatched his ankle and dragged him back to the truck kicking and screaming. The other

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boys fell to their knees sickened by their radioactive presence.

Open the gate, the skeleton with no jaw said.

Pablo found a softball-sized rock on the ground, jogged over to the fence and struck the rusty lock until it broke. James stood and pointed the shaking revolver at his friends.

Oh no, what are you doing James? Teddy asked. James?

Follow me, the skeleton said and led them over the cattle guard and onto the dirt road cutting through the pasture.





The bald man jogged to his rental car parked behind the bowling alley and lay his pistol on the passenger's seat. He grabbed his belongings at the Super 8 and sped onto Interstate 39 still trying to catch his breath. A dive bar on the west end of Pennington was the perfect location to spend the evening smoking cigarettes and drinking vodka. He ignored the regulars discussing their lower middle class problems and focused on the television above the jukebox. A white prostitute in a skin-tight purple dress strolled from customer to customer selling her services but everyone turned her down.

You got a cigarette handsome? she asked, interrupting the Stanford game.

Sure, the bald man said.

What's your name?

How about you call me Baldy?

Okay, you here for work or pleasure Baldy?

Work but I could use a little pleasure, how much?

## SKELETONS

How much for what?

How much for me to fuck your brains out?

Goddamn, somebody needs to teach you some mothafuckin manners Baldy.

I asked how much?

Well, whattya wanna do?

Tie you up, put a gag in your mouth. You know, the rough stuff.

I dont know if I'm up for that tonight Baldy.

I'll give you five-hundred dollars, plus all the coke, cigarettes and Smirnoff you want. Come on, it'll be fun, I promise.

I dont know Baldy, sounds too good to be true. You havent even asked for my name.

Tonight your name is Angelica, understand? he asked but received no answer for several moments. She raised her left eyebrow and patted his hand.

Sure, whatever you say. Where you parked at?

They checked into a cheap hotel on South Main Street where he retrieved a bucket of ice from the machine down the hall from their first-floor room. He poured the vodka into the plastic cups by the coffeemaker and offered her one. They sat on the king-sized bed and snorted lines of cocaine off his shaving kit mirror while the late news droned in the background.

Where you from Baldy?



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San Francisco, you?

Peoria. It's a bigger town about forty-five minutes west of here. I aint got no family so I'm hookin until I get my GED.

I want to fuck you from behind Angelica.

Damn, not much for small talk are you Baldy? You promised me a good time, so let's slow it down.

You'll have plenty of time to party tonight Angelica but I need to cum first.

All right, have it your way. Wait, I wanna see the money. Lotta mothafuckas dine n' dash 'round here if you know what I mean.

Sure, here it is Angelica, he said, yanked his billfold out of his back right pocket and placed five crisp one hundred-dollar bills on the nightstand.

Great but you gotta wear a rubber Baldy.

Of course, now strip, get on the bed and turn around.

I just love a man who takes control, she said with a smile.

He tied her to the headboard, stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth and put on a thick condom. She stuck her thick ass in the air and shook it.

Fuck me good Baldy, fuck me real good, she mumbled through the gag.

He penetrated her, smacked her ass and climaxed after several minutes of violent thrusting. He threw the used condom in the trash, picked up the mirror and held it under her nose.

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Untie me, my wrists hurt, she mumbled without doing a line.

No.

Come on Baldy, I'll get bruises.

He grabbed his pants off the floor, brandished his pocketknife and cut her throat. Blood sprayed in two streams onto the bedspread, wall and carpeted floor and slowed to a trickle until death won her over.

Pleasure doing business with you Angelica, he said and laughed. He wiped the blade on her naked ass, folded it and set it on the nightstand. Dipping his right hand into a puddle of her blood coagulating on the bedspread, he drew a pentagram on the wall above the television set. He pulled a leather-bound volume out of his overnight bag, set it on the mattress and flipped to the section bookmarked with a black feather.

Lucifer, magnos et potentes, hoc velit, ut contact fabrica meus ab alio in loco et tempore, he said. With three repetitions the bedside lamp flickered and the television powered on. The meteorologist distorted and the screen settled on an underground chamber filled with cloaked worshippers.

Good evening Master, I've sacrificed to reach you.

Ahh, yes my child, the Master said and smiled, revealing his crooked, jagged and decayed teeth. It looks like you've been enjoying your time in Illinois.

I couldnt help myself, please forgive me.

There's nothing to forgive my child. I have some interesting news for you if time permits.

PART ONE: LAREDO

I've got all night Master. Please, go on.

Katie has been using crows to track our new friends.

Crows?

Yes, crows, the devil's messengers. Look to the south tomorrow afternoon and they'll reveal her location.





Chief Coston led Father O'Mally's funeral procession away from Saint Michael's Church on Sunday morning. Dark gray clouds cried on his windshield so he turned on his wipers and kept the speedometer below the speed limit. A hundred Laredoans, clergymen and members of the Peoria Diocese followed in his rearview mirror. Mortgaged homes, American flags left out in the rain and mail boxes with last names in vinyl letters passed. The wrought-iron gate at the entrance of the Laredo Cemetery was already open. Generations of new, vandalized and crumbling tombstones welcomed the trail of vehicles.

Far as I can take you Father, he whispered and stood by his cruiser in the rain gear he seldom used. A white bandage and ten stitches kept the knife wound on his neck from opening but a patch of black and blue had formed around his left eye. The funeral director welcomed the guests under a collapsible tent while the remaining stood around the plot with black umbrellas. Bishop Ayers administered the last rites, introduced Father McLean as the priest's successor and said a prayer for their departed friend.

Chief, you there? Murphy radioed. Over.

Shit, he said under his breath, yanked the new walkie-talkie off

## SKELETONS

his duty belt and turned down the volume.

Chief Coston, you there? Over.

Whatcha got Murph?

I'm embarrassed to say this Chief but all five boys are still missing. Every one of their parents has called the station multiple times. Some of them havent been home since yesterday afternoon. You want me to put an APB out on them? Over.

Fuck, he whispered and opened the drivers' side door.

Plus, a farmer who lives south of town named Kleen found an abandoned truck on his property this morning. He gave dispatch the license plate numbers and we ran them. Sounds like it belongs to a couple from Kensington. They were supposed to be home by ten last night. Their babysitter got worried and called the grandparents who called 911, over.

Well fuck me running, he said inside the cruiser and punched the steering wheel until his knuckles turned red. He put the engine in drive and navigated around the parked cars as the funeral party turned their heads in his direction.

Chief, I called the Kensington PD and told them we got their truck, over.

He hung a left onto County Road 1150 and sped into town. He turned onto Adams Street and flipped his lights on but kept the siren off.

Listen Murph, he said into the CB microphone and paused. Get on the horn and tell shit for brains to meet us out at Kleen's. Have him keep an eye out for that bald cocksucker from yesterday but dont, I repeat, do not put an APB out on those

PART ONE: LAREDO

boys yet. Over and out.

He traveled one-hundred miles an hour on the Capland Blacktop and the Laredo Golf Course blurred past him on the county road. The car fishtailed on the gravel lane connected to Kleen's and the cattle gate lay ahead. He surveyed the property before stopping and grabbed his binoculars. When he walked south along the fence he found the F-150 buried in a makeshift pile of stolen branches and prairie grass.

A plus for covering your tracks boys, he muttered and confirmed the license plate number. But twenty bucks says one of you nincompoops left a piece of evidence behind.

He pulled the limbs away and tried the locked driver's side door. When he strolled around the ass end and lowered the tailgate a brown leather billfold lay against the right wall of the bed.

Gotcha now you little shits, he whispered, made his way along the side of the truck, grabbed it and sat on the tailgate. There was a FOID card stuck inside the wallet, along with loose change, a picture of a naked woman, a military style can opener and an Illinois driving permit. The signature written in shaky cursive at the bottom was hard to read even after squinting his eyes.

Somebody owes me twenty, he whispered as Murphy pulled alongside Coston's vehicle, shut off the engine and ran over.

That the truck Chief?

Zip up your fly would you Murph?

Oops, sorry Chief.

Yeah, that's the truck. Radio the Rosita Courthouse and tell dispatch we need Sheriff Dwyer over here would you?

## SKELETONS

The officer needed a second to process his orders and had a slew of questions but realized it wasn't the time. He took a few steps backwards, turned and ran back to his cruiser.

Coston stepped over the thick metal bars anchoring the cattle guard and opened the gate. It struck the southbound fence with a clang. After ten yards mud collected on his new work boots so he stopped and studied the permit.

I never should've released you boys, he whispered, stuck the evidence in his jacket and raised his binoculars. You'd be better off sitting behind bars.

A dirt road lay across the pasture and cut south past a rusty and leaking water trough. Beef cattle drank from it while dozens more grazed on fresh hay scattered on the shit-covered ground. Some stood under the surrounding trees, raised their heads and mooed at the unexpected visitor.

They could be long gone by now, he whispered and glassed the foreboding timber.

Dispatch says ten to fifteen minutes, whatcha thinking Chief? Murphy asked and rested against a knotty fence post. Sullivan honked his horn twice before parking behind the other cruisers.

I think we need to start looking for shit for brain's replacement.





The bald man left Pennington on Sunday afternoon, took the Capland and Lake Evermore exit and cut north on Illinois 261. County Road 620 led him east to a muddy road where a dilapidated corn crib stood in an enclave of overgrown grass. He parked behind the wooden barn and cracked the window. The Laredo Police Department didnt change the channels on their CBs so he turned up the volume on the stolen walkie-talkie and monitored their intermittent conversations. Outside the rental the wind stirred the brittle corn surrounding the plot and images of the prostitute's ass filled his mind. He double-checked no one was around, unzipped his jeans and stroked his cock but voices coming through the walkie-talkie interrupted his climax.

He collected himself, grabbed the Motorola and held it to his ear. As the dispatcher gave the police chief directions he traced the thin white lines on the gas station map with his fingertips and found the specified road. He started the car, took the two-lane road through Capland and eastbound on County Road 700. Before the gravel lane stretching to the south he stopped and peered through the dirt-streaked windshield. Hundreds of crows floated above the timber.

You were right Master, you always are, he whispered.

## SKELETONS

A half-mile drive on the loose gravel and three cruisers sat in tandem but no lawmen were present. He left the engine running, found a rock by the cattle guard and approached the southernmost car. The breaking glass scared dozens of geese in the closest field and they returned to the sky. He stole the Remington 870 Express from the center console and turned. A rickety farm stood to the east.

Too far away Master, the owners might be home and I dont have time to kill anyone.

He drove into the brush and past the Ford F-150. Prairie grass and thistle scraped the bottom of the loaner until he could go no farther without getting stuck. He slung the shotgun over his shoulder, locked the car and kept the winding fence row to his right. A canopy of trees provided shelter from the drizzling rain but his steps startled five white-tailed deer bedded in the weeds and they galloped away.

He held the electric fence down with the shotgun, climbed over and waited for voices. Distant gunfire reached his ears so he jogged toward the shootout. Thorn bushes tore his pants and scrapped his shins as he walked under a cluster of oak trees. Unfamiliar noises, mindless screams and the bark of semi-automatic weapons lay a hundred yards west.

Sweat ran in his eyes and his muscles begged for oxygen. He wanted to vomit up the booze from Saturday night but silence fell over the woods. Twigs and leaves cracked below his feet but he didnt stop pushing forward. When the camp was ten yards away he hid behind the largest oak along the deer trail and stood quiet. He glimpsed around the tree but no one was at eye level. He took calculated steps on the loose soil and froze.

She's already here Master, he whispered, lowered the gun and surveyed the death camp as sirens bellowed in the distance.

## PART ONE: LAREDO

Three officers and a male and a female civilian lay roped at their wrists and ankles. The kidnappers had arranged the prisoners to form a circle and five unlit torches fashioned from tree limbs and torn fabric separated their bodies. They had wrapped more of the cloth around their heads, preventing them from crying out for help. Inside the circle five teenage boys bound and gagged the same way formed an imperfect star.

It would take at least a dozen skeletons to prepare this sacrifice Master. A dozen or more.

The human pentagram squirmed to break free but stakes improvised from driftwood and pounded into the Earth held them in place. He made eye contact with the police chief he knocked out in Laredo and chuckled. Pain and indescribable terror stared back at him.

Hello Katie, the bald man said and walked into the clearing without pity for the hostages.

Welcome, the skeleton replied with a vile tone, sauntered out of the woods and stood twenty yards opposite him. Two more followed and waited by her side. One by one until dozens more surrounded the camp as the waning sun caught the raggedy edges of their charred bones.

I see you're building an army.

Yes.

Impressive, very impressive but my Master wants his book returned to him. Give it to me and I'll be on my way.

Take it, she said, raised the volume and her vacant orbits filled with fire. Twin silhouettes of a burning Golden Gate Bridge danced in the flames and the bald man fell under her control.



Jim stood outside the Laredo Funeral Home puffing on his seventh cigarette of the day. He washed it down with gas station coffee and prepared himself for whatever catastrophe Laredo might face next by pacing back and forth. The street light on the corner came on and illuminated the surrounding trees as cawing interrupted the tranquil evening. The number of crows flocking to the neighborhood had increased throughout the week and their droppings were taking a toll on every car on Grant Street.

Good evenin, someone said and startled him.

Dammit, you scared the shit outta of me Ron, he said, took one last drag and stepped on the cigarette butt.

Sorry neighbor, just thought I'd come over and see how you're holding up.

I'm a bag of nerves. Where'd you get the Remington?

My father-in-law let me borrow it, you packin'?

Of course, he said and opened his jacket to reveal a .45 Winchester Magnum stuck in a nylon holster wrapped around

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his chest. How's Linda?

She saw something walking down the street last night when she took Baxter out for a piss. But then again, she's drunk as a skunk seven nights a week so God only knows.

Well, I hope for all of our sakes it was just the booze. I noticed you got a shitload of crows in your maples.

Yeah, they've been making a helluva mess. Fuckers shit all over my hearse before Father O'Mally's funeral this morning.

Well, it's getting dark so I'd better get home. Stay safe Jim.

You too Ron.

He walked through the funeral parlor, into the embalming room and stood over the long metal table. When he pulled the decaying paper and translation out of his rain jacket he laid them down and spread them out with his callused hands. The black illustration of an ellipse was rough under his fingertips and the inscription baffled him.

*Aperire hoc rubeum dicimus pientissimam contentionem Lucifer foraminis*, he said, stumbling over the peculiar words.

Without warning a piece of chalk fell off the shelf behind him, rolled across the concrete floor and hit the baseboard. He obeyed a need to pick it up and drew an imperfect circle on the brick wall. He repeated the stanza until the words rolled off his tongue and the symbol began spinning counterclockwise making a terrible racket. It broke through the mortar and severed the bricks within its perimeter. The room shook, plaster fell from the ceiling and the overhead lights flickered and quit. When the circle stopped rotating a sweltering red hole took its place and lit up his

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face with a spectrum of colors.

Jim, someone beckoned from the smoky chasm.

Hello? Is somebody in there?

Closer.

Who's in there? he asked and reached inside.

Come closer Jim.

Tell me who's in there or I'm calling the cops.

An old friend.

A friend? Who? he asked and his words reverberated for several seconds. He reached in all directions, hoping to grab ahold of something tangible. Waves of unbearable heat caused him to recoil.

You in there Jim? Scott called from outside the embalming room. The hole closed with the speed of a guillotine and severed his arm with a perfect cut.

Help me, he cried out and his brachial artery spewed blood on the wall as he fell backwards.

Jesus Christ, what happened? Scott asked, ran over and kept him from hitting his head on the floor.

It cut off my arm, he cried out and writhed in Scott's arms. Oh my God, it cut my fucking arm off.

The coroner wrapped his jacket around Jim's shoulder while his blood splattered face turned white.







Sheriff Dwyer sat behind his desk at the Rosita Court House on Sunday evening and combed through the manila envelope Chief Coston had given him at Dicky's Restaurant. He took a drink from a white coffee mug with LINCOLN FORD silkscreened on it and scribbled notes on a white legal pad. The radio sitting on the shelf behind him played public radio at a low volume. His entire staff was out looking for the missing boys except a part-time janitor. The old brown man whistled as he emptied trash cans into a plastic receptacle on wheels.

Dispatch to Sheriff, the woman said through his walkie-talkie. Sheriff, you there? Over.

I'm here, over.

We got more teenagers, a couple from Lexington and two deputies missing southeast of Laredo, over.

Goddammit, I knew you'd fuck that up Coston, he said without depressing the trigger, ran outside and jumped in his cruiser parked on Court Street.

Radio my deputies and have them meet me there.

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You got it Sheriff, over.

He went eight and a half miles east on Highway 34, cut through the countryside and took County Road 700 toward the rising moon. When he passed the Laredo Golf Course he caught two sets of headlights in his rear-view mirror.

You boys got here fast, he said into his CB.

We were locking down a fatal car accident a few miles west of Rosita but the EMTs and firefighters are gonna finish up Sheriff, over, Gruene said.

And?

One of the drivers said they saw something on the road. They swerved to miss it and a semi hit them head on, over.

Somethin? Whattya mean, a deer?

No, they described it as a... a skeleton, over.

Gruene, if you wanna keep your job, you'd better quit takin drunk drivers seriously. Dwyer over and out.

The convoy turned south on the gravel lane and their high beams blinded a large man standing in front of a pickup from the late seventies. He wore a Carhartt jacket, work jeans, cowboy boots and leaned against the Chevrolet with his arms folded.

You Kleen? he asked and clicked his flashlight on.

Yessir, Kleen said towering over the sheriff when they shook hands.

Nice to meet you, these are my best deputies, Gruene and Christian.

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Thanks for comin out, Kleen said and blew his nose into a red handkerchief. Them vehicles are this way Sheriff.

Vehicles? I only see a truck.

There's a rental parked about twenty yards south of that Ford, Kleen said and gestured with his thumb.

Gotcha, any idea where the shots came from?

Yeah, sounded like they was by the Mackinaw. It floods down there a few times a year and driftwood just washes on up. Stuff's great for campfires. Jump in and I'll drive y'all down there.

We'll follow you if it's all the same.

I wouldnt bother Sheriff, you'll just get stuck in those boats you're drivin.

Gruene, Christian, you heard the man, jump in.

He rode with Kleen in the cab reeking of cow manure and cluttered with dirty work gloves, flannel shirts and trucker hats. A gun rack mounted behind the farmer held two rifles with high-powered scopes and a shotgun with wood engravings on the pump and stock. When they cut across the rough pasture the deputies bounced around in the bed filled with beat-up tools, a roll of barbed wire and three bags of chicken feed.

Sheriff to Dispatch, he said into his CB. Any word on Coston? Over. Slow it down a bit would you Kleen? You're gonna kill my deputies.

Yessir, Kleen said and eased off the gas.

Nothing as of yet Sheriff, the dispatcher said over the clean frequency. Over.

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Keep me posted but if you dont hear from me in the next ten to twenty minutes, send the cavalry to the timber south of the Kleen farm, over.

The dirt road turned into forest a hundred yards after the water trough and dozens of large eyes reflected back. The cattle lay in the grass half-asleep but stood and dispersed when the truck came to a stop.

Far as I can take you, Kleen said and pointed out the bug-stained windshield. Head southwest into the woods but be careful climbing over that electric fence 'cause it's on.

Thanks, would you mind waitin? he asked and stepped down. I dont want you getting shot but we might need you to haul us out of here after I arrest those little bastards.

They're all yours Sheriff, I'm too old and slow to be playin Cowboys and Indians.

Thanks again Kleen, let's go boys, he said, smacked the roof and the deputies jumped over the sidewalls. Turn your walkie-talkies down so they dont hear us comin. Spread out and follow my hand signals.

Will do Sheriff, Christian said and adjusted his hat.

The lawmen walked into the timber, over the electric fence and through the dark with their handguns drawn. They crept along in a crouched position with Christian on the left of the sheriff and Gruene to the right, twenty yards apart. Through the trees, a budding fire guided the rest of the way so they turned their Maglites off.

Helluva campsite they got out here, he whispered, snapped his fingers and the deputies turned their heads. When he motioned

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to slow down Christian gave him a thumbs up.

Dicimus pientissimam contentionem de inferno Lucifer et aperire portas et dimittere decem animarum, someone recited loud enough for the words to echo past the lawmen.

Christian made visual contact after twenty more yards and relayed the find. The flickering lights brushed onto the forest grew brighter. Muffled screams danced with the foreign words, echoing in every direction.

God almighty, he whispered, motioned for his deputies to stop and surveyed the death camp. Fire rose from a ten-foot wide circle filled with ravenous skeletons pulling the burning bodies into the earth. Chief Coston lay on the perimeter of the tunnel and fought to break the ties at his wrists and ankles.

What the fuck are those things Sheriff? Christian asked and aimed his shaking revolver at the skeletons.

I dont know, he whispered and lowered his weapon. Oh God, oh God, I dont know.

Three of the creatures dragged the curly-haired boy into the pit as flames shot into the canopy and ignited the bronze leaves. The female hostage succumbed to the fire while the brown-haired teenager broke free and raced into the woods. The black kid fought five of the monstrosities and lost. On the outskirts of the ritual an Indian wearing an Army jacket stood with his back to the lawmen. He read from a book he held with both hands but they didn't recognize the words.

Hold it right there, Dwyer yelled and drew his sights on him. Dont move or I'll shoot.

The bald man raised a hand to surrender, set the book on the

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ground and lunged for the shotgun by his feet. When he brandished it Gruene fired a round into his left leg, dropping him to his knees.

Fuck, the bald man cried out. He returned fire and a load of buckshot ripped through the sheriff's right shoulder.

Sheriff, Gruene cried out as the resurrected creatures scattered into the woods. The wounded men fell to the ground in agony as the tunnel closed and a coil of spark-filled smoke rose into the sky.



Make one wrong move and I'll put one in that bald head of yours, got it? Gruene barked at the wounded Indian squirming on the muddy ground and kicked the shotgun out of reach.

I'm not going anywhere Deputy, the bald man said between moans of pain as he clutched his bloody leg. But we're all gonna die if you dont extinguish that fire.

Christian, how's the Sheriff? Gruene yelled across the camp.

I cant tell, he yelled back and crouched beside him. You alive Sheriff? Sheriff?

My shoulder's tore up pretty good but I'll survive, Dwyer said and coughed. One of you radio for help and the other check on Coston. Get a move on it.

Christian to dispatch, he said into his walkie-talkie as the dying torches lit up his face. Deputy Christian to Dispatch, come in, over.

I can hear you Christian, over, the dispatcher said through the distorting plastic speaker.

We got burnt bodies, two gunshot wounds and a forest fire to

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contain. Send everything you got on the double.

Ten four Christian, Dispatch out.

Stay here Sheriff, he said and ran over to the police chief who lay unconscious several feet from the inactive pit. He's alive Sheriff but his pulse is slow.

All right, Dwyer said and surveyed the wreckage from his side. Tend to those boys but be careful, whoever did this might still be around.

The tunnel had turned to molten rock and a growing ring of fire inched across the camp. The flames chewed through the ground cover and picked up speed, producing trails of black smoke.

Help me, James said from a patch of crabgrass ten feet away and the deputy grabbed his dirty hand. Somebody help me.

Stay still kid, the cavalry's on the way, Christian said as the boy writhed on the ground.

Further south, Pablo crawled through the weeds on his belly. The skeletons had torn through his shirt and bloody claw marks were visible on his backside.

Stop, kid, stop, Christian yelled, caught up to him and rolled him onto his side. Jesus fucking Christ, what happened out here kid?

There... were skeletons coming.. out of the... the ground, Pablo stuttered and he stared into his eyes without blinking. They pulled that... that couple into the... the fire. Help me... oh God it hurts, help me.

Blood, dirt and lacerations covered his face and the fire had singed his straight black hair. He winced in pain each time he coughed and moaned in agony.



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Hold on buddy, we got an ambulance coming for you, Christian said and stomped out the flames closest to him. Strange voices bounced around the forest and died out. He clicked his flashlight on and scanned his surroundings but the dense timber limited his vision to ten or twenty yards.

What the fuck were those things Christian? Gruene asked, putting the bald man in handcuffs. He tied a blue handkerchief around the his leg to stop the bleeding wound.

Who knows but I bet you it's got something to do with that cocksucker, he said and pointed his flashlight at the the bald man. Keep the Sheriff alive Gruene, I'm gonna find who's out there.

He held the flashlight under his revolver, spun in a circle and tried locating the perpetrators. Nothing. When he collected his wits he followed a deer path into the timber.

Help me, please, someone called with a terrified voice.

This is Deputy Christian from the Stratford County Sheriff's Department, he yelled and scanned the night. Whoever's out there show yourself. I said show yourself.

Help, they're hurting me.

Strange footsteps circled the deputy so he turned in a circle but the hostage was nowhere to be found. The shadows played tricks on his eyes and a stretch of thorn bushes made it impossible to stay on the trail without getting cut.

What's going on out there Christian? Gruene yelled.

I dont know but I'm scared shitless, he yelled back and his flashlight sputtered and quit.

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It's choking me, I... cant... breathe, someone called.

When he hit the flashlight against his knee it responded. He flected the racing current, opposite bank and the trees lined atop it. An owl hooted from an overhead branch and the smoke caught up to him. He walked close enough to the Mackinaw to fall in as water hit the protruding rocks and flowed southeast.

Come out with your hands above your head, he yelled with his pistol aimed at the blackness. Show yourselves, now.

Another pass with the flashlight and a soaking wet teenager stood on the opposite side. The skeleton with no jaw stood behind him with both its hands wrapped around his skinny neck.

Just do... what it wants or... they'll kill us, Quentin said between labored gasps.

Stop right there, Christian yelled and leveled his revolver but lost them when his flashlight cut out again.

Help... please help me, Quentin said in desperation as the skeleton tightened its grip.

He rapped the flashlight on his leg and it turned back on. Without hesitation he slid down the slippery bank and into the icy river. When he tried high-stepping across, sediment pulled his feet to the bottom and slowed his progress.

Backup's almost here Christian, I can hear their sirens, Gruene yelled a hundred yards back.

The current grew stronger with each lunge forward but he managed to keep the flashlight and revolver above his head. Halfway across, signs of hypothermia had set in and millions of thermoreceptors screamed over his palpitating heart.

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Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck, he said between shuddering breaths.

The water tried sucking him under one last time but he reached a rocky footing, broke from its grasp and crawled up the bank covered in exposed tree roots. His teeth chattered and his flashlight sputtered off and on and off again. The moon shone the way but the skeleton and its hostage were gone.

I'm across... the river... Gruene, he yelled and he rubbed his arms without abandon, trying to generate body heat. Send backup when... they arrive.

They're almost here Christian, Gruene yelled.

The rolling smoke had reached the densest part of the woods. He stammered along without tripping over the rotting logs and river trash covering the trail leading to a small clearing.

Show yourself, come out with your hands up, he yelled and his flashlight caught a skeleton in its beam. It was impossible for his mind to register as once being human because of its missing and contorted bones.

Heaven help me, he whispered and his flashlight picked up more of them. He stepped back but the foreboding river kept him from running down the bank and retreating to the camp. When he turned the skeleton with no jaw twisted Quentin's neck and broke it with a muffled snap. The boy fell into the brush and twitched until expiring.

No, he screamed and shot six times without slowing it down. Another skeleton approached and the dying flashlight caught one peeking out from behind a tree. One stood by a thorn bush and waved. Two the size of a parent and child held hands and laughed as the deputy reloaded.

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The flashlight turned off and on as they clawed at his face, arms and uniform. He tore away, tripped on a rock and fell into the dark and fast river. The dirty water filled his mouth, throat and lungs so he let go of the revolver in a panic. When he reached the surface he was sucked under again without a complete breath and the current whisked him downstream.

An undertow forced him into a fallen tree and his utility belt got caught in its branches. He fought with the last of his strength but couldn't get untangled from the fractured maple. When he gazed past the water's surface the moon peeked out from behind a cloud as he drowned six days before Halloween.

Sheriff Dwyer woke Monday morning with burnt skin, bloodshot eyes and the nerves in his shoulder howling. He turned his head but found no patient laying in the bed parallel to his own. When he pressed the help button a one-eyed crow landed in the tree outside his window with a writhing earthworm hanging from its beak. The vile bird tilted its head backwards, swallowed the annelid in three tries and cawed before flying away. Nursing shoes on waxed hospital floors approached his room, the door opened and a large black woman in green scrubs entered.

Oh good, you're awake, let's get you more comfortable, the nurse said in a caring voice. When she bent down to adjust his bedding her name tag read Nancy. She fiddled with the IV drip stuck in his left arm leading to an infusion pump.

No, he said and coughed. No more pain killers.

You inhaled quite a bit of smoke last night Sheriff so it's gonna take a few days to get your lungs back, she said and checked his vitals. Until then just enjoy the ride.

What hospital is this Nancy?

St. Matthew's in Pennington. They brought y'all in after midnight.

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Most action we've seen around here in a while Sheriff.

Y'all? Who else survived?

Come on Sheriff, I shouldn't be the one giving you those details. If you wait a minute, I'll grab Deputy Gruene so you two can talk it over. I think he's down the hall checking on those Laredo boys.

Would you please just tell me what happened? he asked with a stern voice. She glared at him, left the room and returned with the deputy.

How you feeling Sheriff? Gruene asked with bags under his eyes.

There's no time for small talk. Just give me the rundown.

First off, your wife wanted me to tell you she stayed by your side all night. She's gonna grab a few things at home then take your kids to her parents' place but she'll be back soon.

Thanks for lettin me know, what happened to Christian?

We found him floating a mile down the river, Gruene said as Nancy eavesdropped while raising the top half of his bed. The coroner will have a report to us late tonight or tomorrow morning.

What about the rest?

Everyone except Chief Coston and two of the Laredo boys are missing. They're on another floor and we got officers guarding their room. I'm sorry Sheriff, I'm truly sorry. It was... it was chaos out there. We did the best we could to save the rest.

Any sign of the other boys? That couple?

No but there's footprints all around the crime scene and across

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the Mackinaw. We got forensics out there right now trying to identify them.

Identify them?

Yeah, they're... they're not human Sheriff.

Not human?

With all due respect Sheriff, and I know you got shot last night, but you know what I'm talking about.

No, no, I dont Deputy, what about that bald fucker who shot me?

The bullet went straight through his leg so the EMTs just stitched it up and I threw him in the Laredo jail. The local doctor checked him out this morning and redid his bandages. He'll be fine.

Help me up goddammit, he said and attempted to stand but the morphine flowing into his arm made him light-headed.

Stay right where you are Sheriff, Nancy said, rushed over and motioned for him to get back into bed. You need to rest before you go back to work.

We got half of Central Illinois' finest patrolling Laredo, Gruene said. Plus, every rent-a-cop Stratford County can afford is pitching in. So get some sleep and we'll take care of business Sheriff.

Shit, that drip is strong, he said and chuckled. Nancy, could you please get me a wheelchair? I need to speak with Chief Coston.

Despite his shoulder wound he still found the strength to get upright. His veiny feet hit the linoleum but bounced back up because the floor was cold. His visitors stood by in silence, glancing at one another in trepidation.

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Nancy, get me a fuckin wheelchair, he yelled and she stormed out of the room. After an uncomfortable silence she returned with a dark-skinned man with jet black hair and a hard-to-read last name stitched on his lab coat. The young doctor flipped through the paperwork on his clipboard, wrote a few notes down and stuck the pen in his pocket.

You're not a wheelchair.

No, I'm not, I'm Doctor Sodhi. How are we feeling today?

Peachy but I'm still the Sheriff of Stratford County so if you dont mind gettin me a wheelchair I'd be much obliged. Thanks in advance for understanding Doc.

Sheriff Dwyer, you experienced smoke inhalation, gunshot wounds and second-degree burns. After digging around a bit, I extracted three pellets embedded in your shoulder. There probably wont be any long-term damage but the surgery will take weeks if not months to heal.

Listen Doc, you got no idea what's goin on outside this hospital. So get me a wheelchair or I'll crawl down the hallway on my fucking hands and knees.

Nancy, please get our ambitious friend a wheelchair, Sodhi said and she exited the room.

Thanks Doc.

Here you go Sheriff, Nancy said and helped him down. All right, let's see what this puppy can do.

She pushed him to the elevator while Gruene followed. After thirty-seconds of Muzak the metal doors opened. The room marked two thirty-seven was open. The police chief's wife and



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kids surrounded his bed but were silent.

Hey Sheriff, Carol said and stooped down to hug him. Looks like you got off scott free last night compared to my husband.

I'm so sorry Carol, he said and smiled at the siblings whose faces were red and swollen from crying. We did everything we could, how you kids holding up?

There's rumors floating around town, are they true? Were there really skeletons out there? Brian asked.

I heard those people from Kensington were part of a cult, Tina said and dragged her snotty nose across her sleeve.

I know this isnt a good time you guys but the Chief and I need to be left alone, he said and raised his left hand to stop the questions.

You what? Carol asked and folded her arms.

Coston woke and turned his head. His eyes were druggy but he could still make out his guests. Blood-soaked bandages covered most of his body and a tube ran into his nose and another into his arm.

That's not a good idea, Nancy said and the sheriff wheeled himself over to the opposite side of the bed.

Leave, we've got business to discuss, he said and his heartbeat delivered acute pain on the downbeat.

Now's not the time Sheriff, Nancy said.

Leave us alone goddammit, he yelled.

Come on kids, let's get something to eat in the cafeteria, Carol

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said. They grabbed their coats and stormed out without saying goodbye. Nancy lost a staring contest with the lawman, threw her hands in the air and left.

I'll be out in the hallway if you need me Sheriff, Gruene said and shut the door.

You alive Chief? he asked and patted his old friend's shoulder with his good hand.

Barely, Coston whispered with a hoarse voice.

Your kids sure are gettin big. I remember when they were knee high to a June bug.

Let's hope they dont get big enough to become cops, Coston whispered and coughed.

Good one, he said and waited for the right words. I just need to know one thing and then I'll let you get back to sleep. Were those skeletons real?

Yeah, Coston whispered and nodded. Yeah, they were real Sheriff.



Help... help me TJ, Mac, Teddy... help, Pablo whispered and tossed his head back and forth. Swabs, gauze and medical tape covered his body.

Wake up Pablo, you're dreamin, James said from the opposite bed. An IV was sticking out of his arm and a plastic heart monitor was wrapped around his left index finger.

Quentin... Dwayne, Pablo gasped as the machines hooked up to him made calculated noises and his eyelids twitched. No... I'm burning, I'm burning.

Pablo, wake the fuck up, James yelled across the room. The hospital door opened and four distraught parents barged in.

We heard you yellin, Jodie said and rushed to his bed as Dan followed behind.

Pablo was having a nightmare, where's Mel? he asked.

She's at Kara's, Dan said. She was here earlier but you two were still asleep.

What happened? Where's Pedro and Catalina? Pablo asked.

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They're at Grandma and Grandpa's, Sophia said and tears flooded her eyes.

What about our friends? he asked and tried sitting up but the pain kept him down.

Dont worry about them, rest up so we can get you home, Esteban said and turned his attention to the window.

Are they dead? he asked. Mom? Dad?

All we know is they're missing, Dan said.

This is all my fault, James said, his eyes quivered and they waited on his words. I wasn't strong enough to resist it. That skeleton possessed me. I couldn't take it anymore. I had to know what it wanted.

It's not your fault, Jodie said and ran her fingers through his singed hair. None of this is.

You're lying, it's my fault. They're all dead because of me.

Everything all right in here? an officer said from the doorway.

Yes, fine, everything's fine, Jodie said and he scanned the room before closing the door.

Leave us alone, Pablo said with a voice unfamiliar to his parents.

Pablo, terrible things are happening in Laredo, Sophia said in a state of shock. All the businesses are closed. They've canceled school and no one's allowed into town.

Stop it Sophia, you're gonna scare him to death, Esteban said and grabbed her arm. Please, just stop.

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Go, Pablo yelled and coughed without covering his mouth. I need to talk to James, now go.

I cant believe what you're saying, Sophia said and wept. What is wrong with you Pablo?

Why dont we grab a coffee downstairs? Dan asked. Let's leave the boys alone, they've been through so much.

Dan's right, Esteban said, put his arm around his wife and shut the door behind them. Silence flooded the room except nurses talking with doctors in the hallway and a janitor pushing a mop. The machines volleyed off one another and the overhead lights flickered.

Dwayne told me about his TV on Wednesday before we walked out to the Carny House, Pablo said without turning to James.

Whattya mean?

He told me people were inside his TV. He told me they warned you about the skeletons.

They did but we didnt listen. I mean, we couldnt listen because that skeleton controlled us. It possessed us Pablo. I swear the one at the Carny House has been controlling me for a year now.

When you woke me up, I was having a nightmare, Pablo said and pointed. I was dreaming about robed people talking to us through a TV. That TV.

Did one have a scarred face?

Yeah, he kept repeating something I didnt understand.

Was it in Latin?

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The hell if I know, why?

Can you remember the words?

I'll try.

Think Pablo, think.

I think he said magnus... magnus et potens lucif... Luciferum...  
quaer... quaeritur te ad hanc... machinam com... communicationis  
quia cum magister.

Keep repeatin it, James said and recited the spell.

With three repetitions the television turned on, the picture flipped between two soap operas and a disturbing hum filled the room. The boys stopped chanting when a cloaked priest turned and stared at them from a shadowy chamber.

I thought we had an understanding James? the Master asked with a demanding voice.

Holy fucking shit, Pablo said and leaned forward. It worked, it fucking worked.

I sent my son to retrieve the book but there was interference, was there not?

Are you the man from my dream? Pablo asked.

Yes I am Pablo but I'll give you terrible nightmares for the rest of your life if you dont do as I say.

We've tried, what else can we do? James asked.

When you boys submitted to Katie, she used you to open another

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tunnel to Hell. I need you to pay close attention because I can only help you this one last time before we lose our connection forever. Do you understand me?

Yes but I cant break free of her control. None of us can. If we dont obey, she tortures us and kills our friends. I cant stand it anymore, I'm goin insane.

You must obey me if you want to survive, the Master said and waved his hand in the air causing James to double over in agony. He gagged, turned and vomited on the floor.

What are you doing to him?

I'm teaching him a lesson Pablo.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, James said and wiped his mouth. I'll do whatever you want, just tell us how to get rid of her.

When my son finds you, give him the book and he will send your tormentors back to Hell. Only then will you be free James. Free from a game you do not know how to win, you stupid, stupid boy.

I cant breathe, he said, clutched his throat and gasped. Help, I'm... I'm chokin.

James, Pablo shouted, reached for him and fell out of his bed.

Pablo? Sophia yelled and the door swung open.

Dan and Jodie helped James off the floor, Esteban hit the nurse call button and the television distorted until the congregation vanished.







Help me get these slacks on would you? Dwyer asked from the side of his bed and grimaced in pain each time he pulled on them. Where are the kids?

With your parents, Suzanne said, stood and folded her arms. Listen, I promised to bring you a fresh set of work clothes but I'm not gonna help you kill yourself, Mike. You need to keep your ass in bed and let Mayor Mahoney handle this 'cause we got two kids to raise.

You knew what you were signin up for when we got married Suzie, so quit with the theatrics, Laredo needs me, he said and pulled the matching shirt over his bandaged shoulder. He clasped his utility belt together and coughed into his left hand.

Oh, for Christ's sake, spare me the tough guy crap. Their goddamn funeral director just lost his arm. We both know you're in way over your head, why wont you listen to reason?

Because I'm the goddamn Sheriff, who else is gonna put up a fight?

No one, she said, balled her hands into fists and shook them at her sides. So good luck saving Laredo, I'm going home Mike. Not without a police escort you're not. It's not safe out there.

## SKELETONS

Fine, tell them to meet me outside 'cause I'm tired of making small talk with rent-a-cops who are more scared than I am.

Suzie wait, Dwyer said, grabbed his bomber jacket and hobbled into the hallway. The elevator doors closed before he could catch up to her. Deputy Gruene stood at the nursing station speaking with a doctor and two exhausted nurses.

You got a real way with the ladies Sheriff, Nancy said with a smirk on her face.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you got some pills for me?

Oh, I got some pills for you all right, she said and laughed. She fed his right arm through a sling, wrapped it around his shoulder and fastened it.

Goddamn, could you be any rougher?

Yeah, I can, she said and passed him an orange prescription bottle. Take one every three to four hours with food. And dont forget to drink plenty of water or you'll turn into a pumpkin.

Thanks Nancy, see you next time.

I just hope there is a next time Sheriff, she said with a concerned expression on her face.

Me too, Dwyer said and Gruene accompanied him to the foyer where several news teams stood waiting.

Sheriff Dwyer, what happened along the Mackinaw River? the anchorwoman from WMBD asked. Are you the only survivor? Care to speculate on the strange phenomena happening around Laredo?

He ignored her questions and fell into the passenger seat of his

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deputy's cruiser but left the seatbelt off. He popped the pill container open and swallowed one without water. With Gruene at the wheel, they exited the parking garage, turned north on Veterans Parkway and cut through downtown Pennington on Interstate 55.

Deputy Gruene? Dwyer asked and stared at him. Would you please hit the fuckin accelerator and turn your cherries on? We got missin people, cold bodies and an unidentified psychopath sittin in Laredo so drive like your life depends on it.

Sorry Sheriff. I'm scared to death.

It's all right but I cant have you behaving like a rookie right now so buck up.

Will do, what next Sheriff? Gruene asked.

We gotta put a tourniquet on this shit storm before Stratford County goes up in flames.

Yessir.

Just get us to Laredo and we'll tear that bald bastard's fingernails out if he doesnt talk. Goddamn, listen to me, one pain pill and I'm Dirty Harry.

Better go easy on them Sheriff, Gruene said and he merged onto Interstate 39 and went a hundred and twenty miles an hour.

EXIT 14

34

PEORIA

LAREDO

They cut east and officers they were familiar and unfamiliar with

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waved them through the Highway 34 and 61 checkpoint. The town was desolate except for patrol cars and locals who stepped onto their porches to stare at the passing cruiser. The citizens carried hunting rifles, shotguns, revolvers and gun show AR-15s hanging from their shoulders.

Jesus, this town's startin to look like a goddamn war zone.

You dont know the half of it Sheriff. A lot happened while you were unconscious last night.

I dont wanna know Gruene, I dont even wanna know, Dwyer said as the deputy took a right and pulled alongside his cruiser at the police station. Thanks for gettin my baby back safe, looks like I'm gonna need it the way you drive.

Anytime, Gruene said and smiled.

A half-dozen cruisers were parked out front. Volunteers stood guard on the front steps holding tactical shotguns with synthetic stocks and slings laced with red shells.

How you feelin Sheriff? one officer asked.

Terrible, thanks for helpin out around here Rick. Be safe and say your prayers boys, we're in uncharted waters right now.

Good to see you again Sheriff, Barb said from behind her desk. We sure as hell can use you right now.

I wish it was under better circumstances Barb, he said as blood seeped through his shoulder dressing. I'd love to chit-chat but I got a date with the John Doe you got locked up in the back.

Never a problem Sheriff, she said and her upper lip trembled. Help yourself to some... some coffee and doughnuts in the break

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room... they're only a day old.

Hey, now's not the time to fall apart Barb. We got a town to save so pull yourself together.

Sorry Sheriff, it's just that everyone is terrified, including me. There's so many rumors floating around. I heard people are seeing things and I'm stuck at this desk.

More the reason to stay strong Barb. Dont worry, you're safe here.

Thanks Sheriff.

He walked through the station compensating for his injury and stood outside the holding room door. Once he peeked through the vertical window he turned to his deputy and sought the right words.

Let me do all the talkin Gruene. Hang back and make sure none of those other officers can see or hear us interrogatin him. We might need to get physical to get some answers, okay?

Sheriff? You sure that's a good idea? Gruene asked.

No, it's a terrible idea but you heard me Gruene, he said and motioned for him to unlock the metal door. Come on now, open it up.

Inside the sterile room the bald man sat on a cot behind bars with his arms folded and his leg in a compression wrap. The overhead light reflected off his shaved head and stressed his black eyebrows. The deputy shut and locked the door behind them and clipped his keys to his utility belt.

Well, Deputy Gruene told me you arent cooperatin Mr. Doe. Fake ID, fake registration in that rental car you ditched south of town, unregistered firearm, stolen police property, blah, blah,

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blah. So let's start from the top. What's your real name?

It really doesnt matter Sheriff Dwyer, you're wasting time we cant afford to lose, the bald man said.

All right, we'll call you Baldy then, he said and the prisoner stood, limped over to the metal bars and smiled.

Did you find the book? the bald man asked but received no reply. Moments passed and the sheriff turned to Gruene and he nodded.

Guess so, he said and the prisoner hung his head and shifted his weight onto his healthy leg.

Excellent, was there a page missing?

We didnt exactly go over it with a fine-tooth comb sir, Gruene said and chuckled.

Please retrieve it Deputy Gruene, the bald man said. Now.

Hold on Baldy, I run the show around here now so be polite and we'll work with you. If you're rude, you'll spend the rest of your life in Pontiac State Prison gettin fucked by men who will turn you into a cum dumpster, got it?

He limped back to his cot, sat and itched around his leg wrap. When he rested his head against the painted concrete wall he closed his eyes to pray.

Go on and get it would you Gruene? Dwyer whispered.

The bald man opened his eyes after the deputy left and studied the ceiling. A pregnant fly buzzed around the fluorescent light and one of the elongated tubes flickered and quit.

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Do you play chess, Sheriff?

Used to, why do you ask?

Because those skeletons just put you in check.

Skeletons? What are you talkin about Baldy?

Dont play stupid with me Sheriff, you know what I'm talking about. You know, the skeletons in the woods last night?

Gruene returned with a plastic evidence bag containing the book. He unzipped it and handed the leather volume to the sheriff.

The only thing I saw was you doing the unthinkable to people I've sworn to protect. Now get to talkin or you're going to Pontiac for life. Those boys up there will eat you alive, especially with that bum leg I gave you.

Sheriff, I dont see any missing pages, Gruene said and thumbed through the book. Oh wait, it looks like one is gone after all. Is this the missing section you were referring to sir?

Bring it closer, now, the bald man said and stood.

I already told you to take it easy Baldy, Dwyer said and patted his holstered revolver as a warning. Look but dont touch, okay?

Gruene approached the cell while keeping a safe distance and turned the volume around for the him to inspect.

Fuck, it's gone, the bald man said and slammed his fists against the bars. The most important excerpt from that book is fucking gone.

Sheriff, Barb yelled from the hallway and banged on the door. Sorry to interrupt but we got a call from Officer Proenneke.

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Yeah, what's he want Barb? he asked with his eyes locked on the calm prisoner.

Jim died and Proenneke needs you at the funeral home ASAP.

Jim who?

The funeral director who got his arm got cut off.

Shit, tell Proenneke we'll meet him there Barb.

Sheriff, you need to find that missing page and bring it to me, the bald man said. It's the only way to stop those fucking skeletons.

You didnt give us a goddamn thing to go on Baldy so sit down and shut up 'til we get back. You so much as fart and Barb will come in here and put a round in your other leg.

Hell has arrived in Stratford County, the bald man said and the sheriff turned around in the doorway to meet the prisoner's troubled gaze. So believe me when I say things will only get worse. More skeletons will come. Slowly, life as you know it will fade away and death will take its place.

The sheriff walked out, pulled the orange bottle from his pocket and swallowed another pill. Gruene locked the door, double-checked it wouldnt budge and followed him to the lobby.

Barb, any word from the FBI? he asked and leaned on her desk.

Yeah, two of Munn's agents radioed and said they'll meet you out at Kleen's this afternoon.

The same two that are working on the Campground Killer?

Yup, those two.



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Well, I'll be damned, thanks for the update. Gruene, tell one of those boys out front to get in here and keep an eye on Baldy. Then you're gonna drive me to the funeral home after I take a piss, got it?

You got it Sheriff.



## 40

The lawmen pulled into the Laredo Funeral Home where Officer Proenneke's cruiser sat with its driver's side door still open. They cut through a crowd of terrified neighbors standing around the west door but didn't stop to answer any of their questions. Inside, the two-story building needed a fresh coat of paint and new carpet, wall fixtures and drapes. They walked through the parlor where three affordable caskets were open and ready for purchase.

Thanks for coming so quick Sheriff, Proenneke said and they shook hands. Heads up, there's a lot of blood in there gentlemen.

Understood, lead the way Officer, Dwyer said and they shuffled down the hall and into the embalming room where the crime scene photographer was working. Jesus fuckin Christ, what went down in here?

I really don't know Sheriff, Ray said and worked as fast as his doughy frame could move. There's no fingerprints on any of Jim's equipment. No weapon left behind by the perpetrator. Nothing. Sorry gentlemen, I'm at a loss.

The funeral director's blood had streaked down the walls and dried in pools along the baseboard. An evidence marker sat

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beside a stick of chalk on the floor and another beside a folded-up piece of paper on the metal embalming table.

What is that? Gruene asked and pointed at a basketball-sized hole in the brick wall.

Your guess is as good as mine, Ray said and left the camera dangling around his neck

That what the chalk was for? Dwyer asked and examined the broken mortar and bricks scattered on the floor.

Might be. Well, I'm done here Sheriff. I'll send the prints over to you when they're ready.

Thanks Ray, tell the wife and kids I said hello, he said while staring at the hole.

I will, good luck gentlemen.

Here you go Sheriff, Proenneke said and handed him a pair of Latex gloves.

Thanks, get me an evidence bag would you? he asked, pulled the overhead light down and squinted to scan the fingerprints, diagram and handwriting. This must be the missin page Baldy was talkin about.

You sure? Gruene asked as Proenneke wrote in his notepad.

Sure as shit, he said, slipped the artifact into the plastic bag and zipped it shut. Good work Officer.

Thank you Sheriff, Proenneke said.

Now get outside and make sure that crowd isnt startin a riot.

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Then hit the streets but give us a shout on the CB if you see anything. And I mean anything.

Will do Sheriff, Proenneke said, clicked his pen and exited the room.

Let's get back to the station Gruene, he said and they walked outside as the sun peeked through a bank of purple and black storm clouds. The crowd had doubled in size and the fear in people's eyes was contagious. Two television station vans sat on Grant Street and the crews stood around Gruene's cruiser.

Sheriff, can you tell us anything? the anchorman from WEEK asked. We've interviewed countless locals and think we have footage of one of the skeletons. Can you please give us something to go on?

Yeah, get the hell outta Dodge while you still can, he said and flinched getting into the cruiser.

What was that all about Sheriff? Gruene asked as they cut south.

Well, either someone ran the funeral director's arm through a table saw or we're headin toward the rapture. He held the evidence bag to the light and adjusted his sunglasses. You tell me Deputy.

You know I'm not religious Sheriff. What about that piece of paper? Can you read it?

Looks like it's in Latin, he said and unzipped the bag.

Latin? How do you know?

My parents sent me to a Catholic high school, he said and did his best to translate it. Lucifer atra hac... Lucifer? As in the Devil?

I believe so Sheriff, Gruene said and made a rolling stop turning

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onto Highway 34.

Lucifer atra hanc dicimus pient... pientissimam content...  
contentionem. Oh, to hell with it. I'll get Proenneke to translate  
this nonsense.

I have no idea what any of that means Sheriff but it's definitely  
not from the Bible.

# 4

Special Agent Munn sat across from Assistant Special Agents Dole and Stewart at the FBI Office on Linton Street in Springfield with a manila folder open on his desk. He flipped through the Laredo Police Department's files, let out a deep exhale and studied his agents as they waited for instructions. Dole had a nasty hangover and Stewart wore the same shirt and suit as on Monday but with a different tie.

Well, gentlemen, here's your chance to escape this dreary office for a couple of days, Munn said. I'm gonna warn you ahead of time, they got some strange shit happening in a little farm town north of here called Laredo.

Question? Stewart asked and raised his hand. I thought Laredo was in Texas?

It is but this one's an hour and a half away, smack dab in the center of the state, he said, stood and checked the enlarged map of Illinois hanging on the east wall of his office. He pushed a red tack into town's location and studied Stratford County.

Never heard of it, Dole said and Stewart chuckled.

Well, now you have smartass. Listen, there's a police chief with

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third-degree burns in the hospital, five missing teenage boys and a dead priest at the funeral home. Apparently, the missing boys' friends stole a truck from a couple passing through Laredo on Saturday night and now they're gone too. There's also two officers missing and a deputy from Rosita drowned in the Mackinaw. And, to top it all off, a sociopath they cant pull fingerprints on is locked up after a shootout with the Sheriff.

Why did all of that happen in a place like Laredo? Dole asked.

I have no fucking idea Agent.

What about the dead priest?

He died in a hospital fire on Thursday before they could interrogate him. Apparently it was arson.

Jesus Christ, Stewart said and grabbed the folder off Munn's desk.

Right now, all they have to go on is that bald fucker sitting behind bars in Laredo.

Stewart flipped through the files and a mug shot of a dark-complected man with an angular face and a shaved head stared back. An oversized paperclip held the Saint Michael's, Carny House and Saint Luke's newspaper clippings to the police reports and crime scene photographs.

Jesus Christ, Stewart whispered and closed the folder in disgust. That's the weirdest shit I've ever seen.

Dole yanked the file out of his hand and combed through it. Munn reclined, clasped his hands behind his head and was disgusted by the stained drop ceiling above him.

No, not Jesus, that looks like the Devil's work to me Stewart. Be



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advised gentlemen, the whole county's up in arms and every TV station and newspaper from here to Duluth are all over it. A big fella by the name of Dwyer is the Sheriff and he's filling in for Laredo's injured police chief. Believe me, anyone with a badge and a gun in Central Illinois is at Dwyer's disposal. They love him up there.

What about the Campground Killer? Dole asked.

I'm putting Martinez and Rivera on it, he said without hesitation.

Martinez and Rivera? Stewart asked. They can barely tie their shoes, let alone work a crime scene.

No shit but C.K. hasn't struck in a while and my boss wants this shit up in Laredo taken care of before we have two mass murderers running around the Midwest.

Whatever you say boss, Stewart said and stood.

Oh, and one more thing you two, he said while tidying up his desk. There's a place on Highway 34 in Laredo called Helm's. It's a few blocks east of Highway 61. They got a great buffet if you get hungry. Try the prime rib, it'll knock your socks off.

Thank for the tip, Stewart said and gave him a thumbs up.

Prime rib? Dole muttered as they walked to their desks.

Hey, the boss likes to eat, Stewart retorted, threw on his dark blue FBI jacket and turned off his computer. Grab your shit and let's go, we can radio dispatch on the way.

Thank God for Laredo 'cause I'm losing my fucking mind around here, Dole said while checking his messages.

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You coming or should I go alone? Stewart asked, twirling his keys.

Hold your damn horses, Dole said.

He grabbed his matching jacket and trailed him outside. They cut across the capital in the unmarked Chevrolet with government plates and traveled north on Interstate 55 for an hour.

Well, whattya think? Stewart asked and merged onto Interstate 39 where an old woman in a Buick held up the left lane.

I think some small-town boys made a deal with the Devil and the deal went bad, Dole said, cracked his window and lit a Marlboro.

Shit, you really believe in Heaven and Hell? I always took you for an atheist.

I was joking, Dole said and exhaled. Besides, I'm agnostic.

Figures.

Did you see the picture of that stolen book? Dole asked as Stewart signaled onto Highway 261 and the Capland turnoff lay ahead.

Yeah, why?

Well, twenty bucks says that's what the fuss is all about. Bunch of holy rollers fighting over superstitions.

Along the two-lane road there were one-hundred-year-old houses missing shingles and siding but a few were straight out of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Poverty drowned others. A mangy Labrador with a bent ear turned its head and wagged its tail when they passed.

Take a right on County Road 700, Dole said as he flicked the

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half-smoked cigarette out the window.

Dont you love these little towns? Stewart asked when they passed by the Laredo Golf Course doing eighty-five. No one gives a fuck around here. It's life boiled down to the basics. Zero bullshit.

Yup, I'm gonna buy some property down in Texas after I'm done playing cops and robbers. Maybe out in the Hill Country. You know, southwest of Austin? Settle down with a pretty southern gal, have some kids and float down the Kern River with a Lone Star in my hand on Sunday afternoons.

You're so full of shit, who in the hell would marry you?

Nobody you know, here's our turn.

Stewart took a right onto the gravel lane and veered south for a mile. Sheriff Dwyer and Deputy Gruene waited by a dirty patrol car flanked by six officers. Yellow police tape stretched from each post of the open cattle gate, around the abandoned F-150 and the rental car fifty yards behind them.

Looks like we're right on time, Stewart said, parked and they shook hands with the lawmen.

Thanks for comin gentlemen, jump on in, Dwyer said. We can get pretty close in Gruene's cruiser.

Sheriff, if it's okay we'll just follow you down, Stewart said and surveyed the timber.

Suit yourself, just dont get stuck, Dwyer said and the agents followed them across the ratty pasture and to the timber's edge. He stepped out of the car and stuck his right hand in his pocket to make his injury seem less obvious. They walked through the electric fence cut open for the firefighters and EMTs and

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stumbled through the woods. The ground was mushy and the stench of extinguished foliage permeated their nostrils.

I just finished up Sheriff, it's all yours, Ray said as he walked toward them while loading film into his 35mm Nikon.

Thanks, how'd it go? Dwyer asked and the lawmen stopped below a half-burnt maple tree.

Well, I've been doing this job as long as you've been Sheriff, Ray said and scratched his balding head. And that's the most fucked up thing I've ever seen.

How about forensics? Hear anything?

To be honest with you Sheriff, we're in over our heads on this one.

That's why these two are payin us a visit from Springfield, Dwyer said. Right gentlemen?

Well, let's give it a look, Stewart said and they walked farther west as the effects of the forest fire worsened.

Here we are, Gruene said and ducked under the yellow tape extended from tree to tree. When they went fifteen more yards the death camp's energy contaminated the lawmen and their stomachs turned

I think I'm gonna be sick, Stewart said with an unpleasant face.

I remember this feeling, Dole said. First time I felt it was at a warehouse on the South Side of Chicago. Junkies left dirty needles all over the floor and hookers fucked their clients on old mattresses you wouldnt let a pig sleep on.

Now's not the time, Stewart said as the two walked around while

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Dwyer and Gruene hung back. Improvised stakes and rope laid on the scorched ground. Tent markers pointed out where the .45 and 12-gauge casings landed. A recessed circle of earth three feet deep and fifteen feet in diameter smoldered and reeked of spoiled earth.

There were animal carcasses and pagan symbols painted on the walls with blood in that warehouse, Dole whispered. A missing woman from Rockford was sacrificed and left for dead there.

Enough already, this aint a therapy session Dole, Stewart said and glared at him.

*Agent Dole.*

Shit, he said and the lingering radiation seeped into his bowels.

What's wrong Dole? Dwyer asked.

Nothing, probably just something I ate.

*Come closer Agent Dole.*

Inside the pit a red piece of flannel sticking out from the rocks caught his eye. He stepped down into the earth, grabbed the torn fabric and held it up to the light. The unstable ground was hard to walk on with his black dress shoes. Heat passed through the cheap rubber soles and touched his feet.

You sure that's wise partner? Stewart asked. You might step on some evidence.

*That woman from Rockford is down here Agent Dole.*

Fuck, did anyone else hear that? he asked.

## SKELETONS

Hear what? Stewart asked and glared at his partner. The overturned earth vibrated, slow at first and gained momentum. It made the surrounding trees shake and their charred leaves and limbs fell to the ground.

What's happening Sheriff? Dole asked and turned to him.

Feels like an earthquake, Dwyer said and almost fell over.

In Illinois? Gruene asked and caught his hat before it hit the ground.

*You're going to Hell just like those junkies in Chicago.*

There, I heard it again, he said but couldn't regain his balance. The top of his head dropped a few inches, a foot and he tumbled onto his back as the pit tried to swallow him.

Dole, Stewart yelled and ran to the crumbling edge. Grab my hand, grab my hand.

Lower, I can't reach it, Dole said as Gruene got ahold of the agent's ankles and the sheriff hobbled over to help. He grabbed the deputy's utility belt with his left hand and groaned trying to keep him from going over.

Don't let me fall in, Stewart said and stuck his toes into the ground for anchors.

Climb up the side Agent Dole, Gruene said and the bottom dropped farther into the Earth with each rotation.

Climb for God's sake, climb, Dwyer yelled.

I'm trying, Dole said but the black soil was wet and loose when he stuck his shoes into it. He kicked his right leg over the top, Gruene snatched his suit pants and pulled him over the breach.

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We got you Dole, Stewart yelled, the three collapsed and the pit came to a slow stop.

The sheriff ignored them and peered over the rim. A cloud of smoke, followed by a horrible stench, reached him. He covered his nose with a handkerchief as his deputy got upright and brushed the dirt off his uniform. The agents adjusted their clothing and stood side-by-side, careful not to fall into the pit as it settled.

Dole, I think your partner's right, Dwyer said and fixed his hat. This is an active crime scene.





That your boy upstairs? the mustached officer asked outside the hospital and took a drag off his cigarette.

Yeah, he and the other boy have been friends ever since we moved here from Austin, Esteban said and scanned the bleak sky. They were altar boys together. Played football. Camped and fished. You name it, they did it.

I dont understand what's going on around here but we got your back, the officer said and squeezed the ironworker's broad shoulder.

Thanks, that means a lot, he said and let out a sigh. We never would've settled down in Laredo if we knew any of this shit was gonna happen.

How on earth would anybody know this shit was even possible?

Definitely not me.

Of course not. This shit isnt an accident or a catastrophe, this shit is Biblical.

You might be right Officer, he said and spotted the news teams approaching. Look out, here comes trouble.

## SKELETONS

Sir, can you tell us the condition of Pablo? James? the anchorman from WBBM asked as he barreled up the sidewalk.

Listen asshole, thanks to parasites like you, everyone in Illinois knows about my poor son and his friends, Esteban said. I dont want my family on TV so get outta here.

What did I tell you about harassing these families? the officer barked and stuck his finger in his face. I catch you doing that shit again and I'll throw you in jail, got it?

We have every right to be here, the anchorwoman from WMBD said and stood her ground while her cameraman filmed.

Your rights ended when Hell came to Stratford County, the officer said and knocked the microphone out of her hand. I said get the fuck outta here. Go on, get.

Jesus fucking Christ, the anchorwoman cried out and the news teams covered away.

Esteban walked through the hospital, into the cafeteria and stuck three wrinkled bills into the vending machine for six cans of soda. He stepped onto the elevator, pressed the button marked two and closed his eyes.

God, please help Pablo survive this ordeal, he beseeched. I pray for James, Dwayne, Quentin, Teddy, Mac and T.J. Laredo, Father O'Mally in heaven, the officers guarding our families and those parasites outside. Amen.

He blessed himself, the shiny metal doors opened and Dan stood down the hallway talking to members of the faculty.

Your boy is gonna be fine, the doctor said, turned and shook Esteban's hand. Both of your boys. Their lungs will heal and

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their burns aren't that serious. Strangest thing I've ever seen, it's like they're healing faster than humanly possible.

That's great news Doc, any word on those security guards? Dan asked. We haven't seen them in a while and our wives are scared out of their damn minds.

They're outside having a cigarette, Esteban said.

Well, I'll leave you gentlemen alone, the doctor said, checked his watch and scurried away.

Hey Esteban, I brought a little backup in case the security guards don't do their jobs, Dan said, opened his coat and a stainless steel .357 stuck out of a holster fed through the right side of his leather belt.

You know how I feel about guns Dan, he said and walked away disappointed. When they returned to room 205 the wall-mounted television was playing the Illinois game at a low volume.

What's the plan Dad? James asked and coughed.

We get you two well enough to make a run for Des Moines. I called your Aunt and Uncle and they said we could stay there until things get back to normal. Your cousins will be happy to see you.

That's a terrible idea, Esteban said.

He's right, what about Mel? Jodie asked.

Yeah, what about Pedro and Catalina? Pablo asked.

We'll pick them up on the way out of town. Hey, if you people don't like it then stay here.

## SKELETONS

There's police everywhere, we're safe now Dan, Esteban said.

Bullshit, they havent protected anyone from those things, what makes you think they'll start now?

Please dont argue you two, Jodie said and something caught her eye across the room. She set her soda on the radiator, put her hands on the glass and peered out the window. The sky was green, black and gray. Lightning struck above the university to the east as a large object blurred past the double-paned window.

What was that? Sophia asked and stood.

Fuck, Jodie said and stepped back.

Yeah, what the hell was that Jodie? Dan asked and rushed to her side. Esteban and Sophia walked across the room but were afraid to get close to the window. Another figure dropped before their eyes but this time it registered as a woman in a bloody hospital gown.

Oh God, Jodie whispered and another body streaked by swimming and kicking in an attempt to prevent the inevitable.

Everything okay in here? a nurse asked and crowded behind the terrified parents.

No, it's not, Sophia said and crept toward the window. She leaned against the radiator and peered down at the sidewalk but couldnt speak. Her eyes widened and she pointed in terror.

Watch out, Esteban said and pushed her aside. Below, four disjointed patients lay on the pavement and a doctor in medical scrubs cried out on her way down.

Someone's throwing them off the roof, Sophia whispered.

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What's going on? Pablo asked.

Tell us what you see, James said from the other side of the room.

Mom? Dad? What are you staring at? Pablo asked.

Grab the boys, this whole place is comin down, Dan said, pulled the IV out of James' arm and picked him up. The pulse monitor on his finger disengaged and made the corresponding machine flat-line. Outside the room the fire alarm rang and the fluorescent lights blinked. A violent commotion grew in the hallway and the building shook in punctuated intervals. Pablo howled in agony when his father cradled him with no regard to his burns.

Follow me, Dan yelled and headed toward the exit sign at the end of the hall. Doctors ran in and out of the other rooms to save the defenseless patients and the lights oscillated and quit. Nurses wheeled out defibrillators and the attached paddles fell from their holders and dragged on the floor.

Go, go, go, Esteban yelled and jogged past Dan with Pablo in his arms. The emergency strobes turned on when they navigated down the stairwell.

Put me down, I can walk, Pablo said and wiggled out of his father's arms.

Careful, Sophia said and guided him to the railing. The steps fell dark before they reached the doorway.

What's going on? Why did the lights go off? Sophia asked.

They must have cut the generator, Dan said and opened the metal door.

## SKELETONS

The rescue party found pandemonium on the other side. Flashlights scanned the hallway in an epileptic frenzy and the fire alarm masked blood-curdling screams echoing throughout the ICU. There were red handprints on the walls, overturned gurneys and patients dying on the floor.

Go down this hall, take a right and go through the emergency room doors, Esteban said.

The terrified hospital staff abandoned their responsibilities and followed the families. Two police officers covered in blood crawled on their bellies, leaving streaks of crimson on the linoleum.

Run goddammit, those things are right behind us, Dan yelled as they exited. Sirens reached them but the fire engines were still miles away. James had both arms wrapped around his parents as they dragged him down the sidewalk. His untied hospital gown and unraveling bandages exposed his raw and naked backside. Cries came from above, a janitor hit the pavement with a thump and blood shot across the sidewalk. Thousands of bloodthirsty crows swooped down and pecked at the mutilated corpses.

They're everywhere, Sophia cried out and swatted at them.

Keep moving, keep moving, Esteban said.

My van's on the first floor, Jodie said and pressed her key fob when they ran into the parking garage. Esteban opened the side door, they climbed in and Dan got behind the wheel. He backed out, hit the gas and drove past the emergency drop-off entrance.

Please stop, a fleeing doctor screamed and smacked the passenger side windows to get their attention. Please, you have room for more people. Stop you motherfuckers, stop.

Keep going, we still need to pick up our kids, Sophia yelled and

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Esteban hit the power locks.

James turned, stared out the back and a patient burst through the sixth-floor window. His flailing body took a few seconds to land on the unforgiving pavement. His head, chest and legs broke open and his innards spilled onto the sidewalk.

That was Chief Coston, he whispered and the others turned to see the hospital go up in flames.





Wake up Baldy, we got two FBI Agents in the conference room, Dwyer said and walked into the holding cell. They're gonna escort you to the Sangamon County Jail if we dont get some answers so now's your chance to work out a deal.

Did you find the missing page Sheriff? the bald man asked and stared through the iron bars he clutched with his burnt and swollen hands.

Wouldnt you like to know, he said and stuck his thumbs into his utility belt.

I see you moved your holster to the other hip, can you shoot with your left hand?

I can shoot with my feet if I need to Baldy.

Sir, please step back, Gruene said, pulled a mess of keys out of his pocket and opened the cell. He cuffed the prisoner at his wrists and ankles and used a chain connector between the two. He double-checked they were tight enough and waved for him to vacate the cramped quarters.

Any funny business and I put a bullet in that shiny head of yours,

## SKELETONS

understand? Dwyer asked.

Understood, the bald man said.

Take a right, Gruene said and put his hand on his shoulder. Move it.

The prisoner's shackles chimed as he shuffled across the linoleum floor and exited the room. From the corner of his eye the bald man surveyed the layout of the station in case the opportunity to escape presented itself. Barb's insides twisted when their eyes met so she returned to her computer.

John Doe, meet FBI Agents Dole and Stewart, Dwyer said when they reached the conference room. Be straight with them and we might feed you dinner tonight.

Good afternoon, the bald man said, sat and folded his hands.

Two evidence bags lay on the table. One for the book and the other for its stolen page. The overhead lighting sterilized the room, the coffee maker purred and the dripping faucet kept a lazy time signature.

Deputy Gruene will be right outside this door and I'll be in the Chief's office, Dwyer said. Good luck and yell if you need anything gentlemen.

Thank you Sheriff, Stewart said, pressed the red plastic button on his hand-held tape recorder and took out a pen. He jotted down the date, time and the prisoner's height, approximate weight, eye color and race in his notepad.

Mr. Doe, please tell us who you are, where you came from and why you're here, Dole said and took a deep breath. If you don't cooperate, you'll be charged with the killing of five boys, a Priest, that couple from Kensington, Deputy Christian and two Police

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Officers. All in the first degree.

You're wasting time none of us have Agent Dole, the bald man said and shook his head in disgust. So, like I told the Sheriff, I'll bring your missing teenagers back and destroy those skeletons but you must follow my instructions.

Skeletons? Dole asked and glanced at Stewart.

Yes, skeletons. So do exactly what I say, when I say it or we will die. All of us. Me, you and everybody in Stratford County, do you understand?

Mr. Doe, you're in no position to give orders so tell us your name, Dole said.

No, the bald man cried across the table and the agents recoiled. There's no time to explain. You will lead us out of here right now and we will go to a secret location.

Take it easy Mr. Doe, Stewart said, smiled and flipped to a fresh page in his notepad.

Once there, I will use the spells written in that book and on that piece of paper to send the skeletons terrorizing Laredo back to Hell. All I ask in return is unconditional freedom when it's all over. Work with me and life around here will return to normal, minus those lost because of Father O'Mally's stupidity. Do not and the skeletons will bring forth the apocalypse. Believe me gentlemen, they're here and they will not leave. Thousands more will come and spread to other cities, states and countries. Eventually, no light will shine on this world after the damned replace the living.

All right, time to get real Mr. Doe or we're locking you up, Dole said and checked his watch.

## SKELETONS

Omnipotens Lucifer, the bald man whispered with his eyes closed. Augue velit admittere ad Dole Laredo futurum. Postquam in Apocalypsi. Post infernum invehitur in terra.

What's he saying Dole? Stewart asked but his partner didnt respond.

*Can you hear me Agent Dole?*

Dole? You all right Dole? Stewart asked but he was lifeless. When he shook him drool spilled out of his mouth and he slumped forward. His head landed on the desk with a thud.

*Do you see it?*

Fuck, Stewart yelled, shook him and glared at the prisoner. What'd you do to him?

*Do you see what will happen if we dont stop those skeletons?*

*Where are we? Is that you Mr. Doe? Am I asleep?*

Wake up Dole, Stewart yelled and shook his partner. His eyes twitched as Dwyer and Gruene ran into the conference room with their revolvers drawn.

*Look around, do you see the end times?*

*I see burning buildings... everyone's on fire... the sky is red. There's so much smoke... I cant breathe, they're all around me, there's skeletons everywhere.*

Enough of this shit, Dwyer said, holstered his weapon and grabbed the prisoner by the arm. You're goin back to your cell Baldy.

*It's time to wake up Dole or you'll never come back.*

*Get me out of here, I cant breathe, help me, please, I'm choking*

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He's coming around, Stewart yelled, grabbed his face and shook him. Come on, wake up.

His eyes fluttered and blood trickled out of the shallow cut on his forehead. He pushed Stewart away and checked the wound with his index and middle fingers. Red streamed down his palm and dropped onto the table.

*Welcome back my beautiful little pawn. Explain to the others what you saw or I'll send you back for good.*

Get the fuck up, Gruene said and grabbed the bald man's other arm but he wouldn't budge.

Stop it goddammit, Dole yelled and the lawmen froze. He's right, he's right about everything. Put your fucking guns away and listen, just listen to me.

You hit your head Dole, Stewart said and adjusted his FBI jacket. They're putting John Doe behind bars and you and I are going to the hospital.

We're not going anywhere, Dole said. I saw that abandoned farm outside of town. I saw the funeral home. Those skeletons out in the timber. I saw everything when I was unconscious.

We need to get your head checked because you probably have a concussion, Stewart said and collected his belongings. Come on, let's go partner.

Wait, wait a goddamn second, Dwyer said and let go of the prisoner. How did you know about the funeral home Agent Dole?

I showed him, the bald man said and scratched his leg. Go on, tell them Agent Dole. Tell them I'm the only one who can save you people, go on.

## SKELETONS

I saw an embalming room, Dole said. I saw a man reaching into a glowing red hole and it cut his arm off.

Sheriff, would you mind telling me what my partner is talking about? Stewart asked and crossed his arms in defiance.

Before Jim died on Monday he told his wife what happened at the funeral home, Dwyer said. She called the station this mornin and told me everything but I havent shared her story. Not with anyone. Not a soul.

What are you trying to say Sheriff?

Dole's story matches Jim's.

Have you lost your mind? Stewart asked and got in his face.

No, I havent lost my mind. Something catastrophic is goin on and everyone in Stratford County knows it Agent Stewart. Come on, you saw that pit in the woods try to swallow your partner yesterday. Please stay, I'm begging you.

Sheriff, we've got company, Barb yelled from her desk and the lights turned on and off several times.

Gruene, put Baldy in his cell, Dwyer said. Until we figure out what's next, he's not goin anywhere.

They ran to the lobby where Pablo and James stood in bloody hospital gowns, their parents were out of breath and exhausted holding them upright. Past the foyer and down the front steps Jodie's minivan sat in the parking lot with the doors still open and the engine still running.

We didnt know where else to go Sheriff, Dan said panting. The whole town's comin apart and we cant find our daughter.

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We drove to her best friend's house but it was on fire, Jodie said and the station lost power.

Gruene, check the fuse box, Dwyer yelled and the agents switched on their Maglites. Dan, put that goddamn hand cannon away.

Yessir, Dan said and stuck the .357 in his holster.

Somebody tell me what's going on, Dole said. Now.

Those fucking monsters attacked Saint Matthew's, Esteban said. We went over to Pablo's grandparents' house but his brother and sister were gone. Someone broke in and tore the place apart.

We need to find Pablo and Catalina, Sophia said. Please help us find my children. Please, I'm begging you.

How did you get past the checkpoints in town? Stewart asked. Where were the officers? They should've radioed us.

The ones at the Highway 34 checkpoint were dead, Dan said. All of them.

Oh dear Lord, Barb whispered, ran outside and covered her mouth in horror. Sheriff get out here, hurry.

They walked down the front steps as gun fire rang throughout the neighborhood. Cries for help followed and hordes of crows turned the sky black.

Those things must have cut the phone lines because we should've been gettin emergency calls, Dwyer said and drew his pistol.

Wait, look, Dan said and dozens of the birds landed on the sidewalk, inching closer in the prone position.

## SKELETONS

They dont have feathers, Jodie said in awe. They flapped their razor sharp wings, screeched and glared without eyes in their little skulls.

Then how are they flying? Dan asked but no one answered.

All right people, let's get back inside and regroup, Dole said and they barricaded the door with two desks and a filing cabinet.

Well people, we're on our own now, Dwyer said. So let's gather enough weapons and ammo and get the fuck out of Laredo before those things find us here.

What about our other kids? Sophia asked.

Pray for them, Dwyer said and she doubled over in hysterics.

Are we bringing Baldy with us? Gruene asked.

Yeah, see what else he needs to stop those things but watch him like a hawk, Dwyer said.

You got it, Gruene said and pulled out his keys before running down the hallway.

Only use this to protect your family, Stewart said and handed Dan a riot shotgun from the armory. You hear me?

Loud and clear, Dan said and shucked a round into the chamber.

You got something these boys can wear? Dole asked.

Look in here, Barb said, reached under her desk and tossed a box marked lost and found on the floor.



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The sheriff led the convoy toward a multi-car wreck obstructing both lanes of Highway 34 with his siren off. Bloody and broken drivers pulled themselves from the wreckage and waved for the lawmen to stop but received no rescue. Above the victims merciless crows saturated the utility poles parallel to the road. They tore the transformers apart and the adjoining wires snapped and fell, almost hitting the passing cars. Jodie and James peered out the side windows in the back seat in awe of the carnage. Streams of black smoke rose above Laredo and into the stratus clouds dropping rain onto the windshield.

There's a skeleton over there, Dan said and pointed.

Where? Jodie asked. I dont see it.

By the lumberyard, James said and tapped the window. There, there, there.

Oh my God, Jodie said and covered her mouth in disbelief.

The sheriff checked his rear-view mirror to find Stewart and Dole two car lengths behind with a partition separating them from the bald man. Gruene followed in his cruiser with Esteban in the front seat and Sophia and Barb sandwiching Pablo in the back.

## SKELETONS

Jesus Christ, the whole town's comin apart, Dwyer said as they sped past the VFW. A man thrown from his silver Cadillac lay across the hood of a GMC truck as crows tore through his clothing with their talons and pecked at his flesh. They turned their blood-stained skulls and screeched at the passing entourage in a wretched chorus.

Sheriff, isnt that Officer Proenneke? Gruene asked over the CB.

Looks like him, over.

The rent-a-cop had crashed one of the town's older cruisers into a telephone pole, shot through the windshield and came to his final resting place on the Mayor's lawn. The school bus he struck along the way had landed on its side and the varsity football team from Peoria Heights spilled onto the road. Some lay dead and dying while the others ran toward the neighboring homes whose owners witnessed the collision.

You fuckin cowards, a long-haired man yelled at the lawmen from his front porch and waved a stainless-steel revolver in the air. Dont leave us here, come back, come back.

Do not stop for anyone, Dwyer said into his CB. I repeat, do not stop for anyone.

Copy that, Stewart replied.

Get us out of here, Jodie said and clutched the door handle. Just get us out of here Sheriff.

Close your eyes James, Dan said and turned around to make sure he obeyed. You dont wanna see what's ahead.

Three deputies and four officers were hung with bailing twine from the guy wires suspending the traffic light over the Highway

PART ONE: LAREDO

34 and 61 crossing. Their tongues hung out of their gaping mouths and eyes bulged. Trails of blood dripped onto the convoy when they drove underneath the swaying corpses.

Help us, an old farmer yelled and chased after the passing cars with a few dozen other hysterical patrons from Dicky's. Across the highway waves of fire followed by white smoke rose above the gas station and cloaked the dying sun. Bags of chips, cigarette boxes and newspapers littered the property. Burning vehicles and charred passengers sat motionless as the toxic flames ate through their clothing.

That's my daughter's best friend, Dwyer said and pointed to a blonde girl covered in blood. He grabbed the CB and switched it to the exterior megaphone.

The crows are gonna get her Sheriff, we have to help her, Dan said from the passenger's seat.

Get off the fuckin road Jan, he said into the mic and his words ricocheted off the surrounding businesses. Get back inside, get back inside.

She swung at the vultures, tripped on the curb and dropped to the pavement. The most aggressive of the crows tore her eyes and hair out with their hooked beaks. Dozens more ripped the skin from her face and neck.

Take a stand you bastards, a farmer yelled out the window of an eastbound pickup. Teenagers armed with their fathers' and grandfathers' weapons stood in the bed. They threw empty beer bottles at the cars and yelled their best obscenities. Three more trucks followed and the passengers fired at a one-armed skeleton lurking outside the hardware store.

What's your plan Sheriff? Dole asked over the CB. Over.

## SKELETONS

Just keep west Agent Dole, we need Baldy alive or it's game over for Laredo.

A school bus swerved off Interstate 39, broke through the guardrail and rolled down the off-ramp. It crashed into a semi hauling ammonia and a mushroom cloud of gas filled the sky. Half of the students jumped out of the back and ran in all directions. The rest tried to escape through the broken windows before the inferno swallowed their flailing bodies.

I'm gonna be sick, Jodie said as the stench of burning hair and flesh drifted into the cruiser.

We cant stop so do it out the window, Dwyer said and gripped the wheel. Oh shit, oh shit.

Cars, trucks and semis blocked the highway a half-mile west as the survivors gathered on the shoulder of the road in shock. A trucker with his clothes ablaze dashed into the southern cornfield and set the first three rows on fire trying to extinguish himself.

Drive around the wreckage Sheriff, Dole said through the distorted channel.

Negative, that ditch is full of water, we'll just get stuck.

Then where you going?

Hold on people, we're headin north, he said and hung up the mic.

He locked up the brakes and cranked on the wheel hard enough to still make the turn onto County Road 2425. Stewart and Dole followed but Gruene came within inches of rear-ending them. Jodie grabbed her son's hand as they braced themselves for impact.

I used to bail hay there, Dan said choking up and stared into the

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distance. Flames engulfed a two-story farmhouse, machine shed and barn erected not long after the Civil War. The family stood on the lawn, waved their hands in the air and screamed. The smoldering silos on the southwest corner of the plot buckled and collapsed as thousands of bushels of grain spilled out.

Fuck, Dan said, hit the steering wheel and stopped a quarter-mile from a rusty bridge running over the Panther Creek. The iron frame glowed red from the burning planks it suspended fifteen-feet above the roaring water.

We're goin across so brace yourselves, over.

Oh no we're not, Dan said and leaned forward to assess the crossing.

Are you fucking crazy? Gruene called over the CB.

Do not cross that bridge Sheriff, Dole said over the channel.

See you further on up the road Agent, over.

We'll never make it, Jodie yelled from the backseat but the sheriff stomped on the accelerator.

Shut up and put your seat belts on, Dan said and fastened his with one hand still on the Mossberg.

The cruiser plunged into the flames and reached the other side without a scratch. The sheriff slammed on the brakes and checked his mirror.

Nice work, we're going for it, Dole said over the CB. Two of the planks buckled and dropped into the creek as the car shot through the fiery gateway. A ten-foot piece of scorched iron clung to the front bumper as they came to a screeching halt behind the sheriff.

## SKELETONS

Wish us luck, over, Gruene said and barreled halfway across before the bridge collapsed. The car struck the northern bank, sat motionless for a split second and slid backwards into the freezing water. Five skeletons emerged from the wheat field to the south, entered the creek and climbed on top of the vehicle. The drowning passengers tried to escape through the windows but they wouldnt roll down.

Pablo, James screamed while the car sunk to the bottom. Stop, Sheriff, stop.

I'm so sorry James but we have to keep movin, he said, floored it and the agents followed.

Where are we gonna go Sheriff? Jodie asked as her son bellowed out the window.

See that old church to the northwest? he said into the mic.

I see it, over.

Meet us there Agent Dole. Over and out.

Sheriff Dwyer flicked on the Ford's high-beams and paused to survey the abandoned church. A wrought-iron fence missing ornaments and rails enclosed the graveyard filled with crumbling tombstones blackened by lichen. A cluster of two-by-fours sealed the front doors shut and a rusty NO TRESPASSING sign hung from one of the bent nails. Liquor bottles, beer cans and trash left behind by years of trespassers littered the steps and amateur graffiti covered the facade. The stained-glass windows on the east side allowed the headlights to pass into the nave and illuminate the chapel.

What in the hell are we doin here Sheriff? Dan asked.

Putting our faith in Baldy, Dwyer said and turned off the engine. Come on, let's go people.

They stepped out of the car and Jodie made the sign of the cross when the steel crucifix sitting on the church's peak came into view. There were enough wooden shingles missing on the southeast part of the steeple to allow the elements to speed up the roof's dilapidation. Weeds sprouted from the siding and bird nests made from mud, leaves and twigs clung to the eaves.

Let's go Baldy, Stewart said, exited the cruiser and drew his pistol.

## SKELETONS

Dole clicked on his Maglite and pulled the prisoner out of the back seat. He adjusted his shackles and scratched his bandaged leg before scanning the property.

It's a beautiful place Sheriff, absolutely beautiful, the bald man said and grinned.

Whatever you say Baldy, Dwyer said. No funny business, understand?

Oh, I understand Sheriff. I understand who the pawns are and who the Master is.

To the west the sun fought through a bank of rain clouds and kissed the horizon with a spectrum of reds. An explosion in the neighboring town of Corolla made the rescue party jump as fire climbed into the night.

They're closing in on us people, Stewart said and pushed the prisoner toward the church. Move it, move it.

Dan, why dont you carry Baldy's box of goodies, Dwyer said and opened the trunk. I cant handle much weight with this arm but I can hit somethin with that Mossberg.

Ten-four Sheriff, Dan said and passed him the shotgun.

I'm going in, Dole said, brandished his Glock, kicked the door open and tiptoed into the vestibule. Once he cleared the corners he surveyed the dusty chapel and motioned for the others to come inside.

Let's go, Stewart said and stuck his pistol in the prisoner's back.

When the sheriff reached the facade he turned around and his heart sank. No manmade lights shone in Laredo, Henley or Rosita. Uncontrollable fires had replaced them. Storm clouds



PART ONE: LAREDO

were rolling in from the west and thunder shook the facade and rattled the windows.

God help us all, Dwyer said and slammed the door after Dan, Jodie and James entered. He scanned the chapel with the flashlight in his left hand and the Mossberg slung over his shoulder. Vandals had destroyed most of the pews, water-logged Bibles covered the floor and the altar was devoid of any worthwhile artifacts. Cobwebs stretched to and from every nook and cranny. A crumbling statue of Joseph and Mary holding a baby Jesus stared without blinking at the uninvited guests.

Now what? Stewart asked.

Barricade the windows and doors with those pews then paint around them, the bald man said and pointed at the cardboard box. Hurry, time is running out.

Dan, take my flashlight, Dwyer said and handed it to him.

The pawns scurried around as Stewart guarded the prisoner. He cracked his knuckles and smiled at the sheriff.

Something funny Baldy? Dwyer asked.

Yeah, watching Christians do the Devil's work made this whole trip worthwhile.

What else? Dole asked.

Paint a pentagram on the floor, the bald man said. There. Big enough so the five of you can form a circle.

No, we wont do that, Jodie said. Dont do it James.

The skeletons will be here any minute so do what I say woman

## SKELETONS

and do it now, the bald man said and glared at her.

Mom, we dont have time to argue, James yelled across the church as he finished painting around the last window and started on the doors. The road paint dripped down the walls and collected on the floor in small pools of white.

I wont let him do it, that symbol is sacrilege, Jodie yelled and stomped her feet.

James pushed her out of his path, dipped the brush in the can and painted a series of angles on the rotten floor. His borrowed tennis shoes tracked footprints inside and out of the symbol while he worked at a feverish pace.

Stop, just stop, Jodie yelled and grabbed his right arm.

Your son welcomed this evil to Laredo, all I'm trying to do is send it back to Hell, the bald man said. Besides, not everyone goes to Heaven.

James finished the star within the ten-foot circle, tossed the brush in the corner and embraced his mother.

We're gonna be all right Mom, just do what he says so we can survive this nightmare, okay? he said and a knock on the door silenced the trespassers. The lawmen turned and pointed their weapons but caught no one in their sights.

James? someone asked and knocked again. It's Pablo, let me in, it's freezing out here. Jodie? Dan? Somebody let me in. Mom and Dad drowned and I'm in bad shape.

What the fuck's going on? Stewart asked the bald man. Answer me goddammit.

PART ONE: LAREDO

Answer him motherfucker, Dole said and pressed his Glock to the prisoner's forehead.

It sounds like Katie's here, the bald man said and smiled.

Is that really you Pablo? James asked and peered through the paneless window in the door.

It's me but I'm burnt from head to toe, Pablo said and got face-to-face with him. Please, just let me in.

James, that is not your friend, the bald man yelled across the church. That is Katie, the same monster who's been playing with your mind for the last year. Who tricked you into stealing the book from Father O'Mally. Who tricked you into sacrificing your friends.

It's Pablo, James said and pointed. Come and look everybody, it's really him.

That cant be him, Jodie yelled, walked over to the door and peered over her son. Pablo stood trembling with his straight hair singed off, clothes mangled and fourth-degree burns on his skin.

Let me in Jodie, Pablo said. I brought Mac, TJ, Dwayne, Quentin and Teddy along.

I got a new porno we can watch, Dwayne said, pushed Pablo out of the way and stuck his black face through the opening. The gang's all here, look.

Yeah, let us in James, Mac said with a huge smile on his face and put his arm around Dwayne. Quentin's got a carton of cigarettes and TJ stole a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the IGA.

Dad's been riding my ass all week so I enlisted today, Teddy said and his freckled face emerged in the window. Let's get drunk

## SKELETONS

tonight 'cause I'm heading off to boot camp tomorrow.

Somebody help me get these pews out of the way, James said. Sheriff Dwyer, Agent Dole, please, somebody help me.

No, Jodie cried out and stopped him from pulling the barricade apart. For God's sake Dan, help me.

When Dan peered through the window the six victims stared back at him. The married couple from Kensington walked up the driveway holding hands. Officers Murphy and Sullivan and Deputies Gruene and Christian emerged from the shadows and crowded the steps. All were scorched and threadbare.

Get the fuck away from the doors, Dan whispered and jumped back in fear. He reformed the barricade, grabbed James and dragged him from the vestibule.

We cant just leave my friends out there, the skeletons will get them, James said and ran back to the entryway.

Stop him Dan, stop him, Jodie said.

No, James cried and gazed out the window. Twelve skeletons stared back. What happened? I just saw them, I just saw my friends. Mom, Dad, I swear to God it was them, you gotta believe me.

Jamessssss, Katie said and scratched the door with her claws.

When he stared into her barren skull two small fires grew in the vacancies and possessed him. Silhouettes materialized of his best friends, Saint Michael's, Kleen's timber and Laredo engulfed in flames materialized. As he tumbled into the final stages of psychosis a hand passed through the window and squeezed his throat.

PART ONE: LAREDO

Let us in, Katie said and the door rocked back and forth on its rusty hinges.

That barrier isnt gonna hold, get back, get back, Dole said and pulled him away. Dan helped him refortify the compromised benches and they retreated.

Perfect, now let's start before it's too late, the bald man said.



Agent Dole holstered his pistol, unlocked the bald man's shackles and they fell to the floor. Without turning his back on the prisoner he reached into the cardboard box, opened the evidence bags and handed the artifacts over with caution. He stepped back, patted his firearm and waited for the sociopath to save them from the monsters outside the chapel.

Thank you, the bald man said and replaced the missing page. The violence outside stopped and footsteps, breaking twigs and gravelly whispers followed.

What are they doing? Jodie asked.

Surrounding us, Dwyer said and shined his flashlight on the other doors and windows. Move it Baldy, move it.

Join hands around the pentagram, the bald man said to start the end game. Do it, now.

Dole set his flashlight on the floor, stepped on the outer ring of paint and joined hands with James, Dan and Jodie. The sheriff took his right arm out of the blood-stained sling, handed Stewart the shotgun and completed the circle. The agent clicked the safety off and shoved the one inch barrel into the prisoner's back.

## SKELETONS

Hurt these people and I'll kill you, Stewart said.

There's no need for that kind of talk, the bald man said. Now close your eyes and repeat after me everyone. *Luciferius autem omnipotens si vocare te ad portas inferni, et ex Patre dimittere O'Mally in plano vivorum.*

When the pawns caught on black clouds gathered above the steeple and blocked out the stars. Lightning struck the oak tree north of the chapel and splinters of electricity touched the cross atop the peak. Crows landed in the graveyard, sat on the tombstones and screeched but the growing wind had no effect on their featherless bodies.

Back inside Jodie squeezed her son's hand as dust fell from the rafters and the floorboards vibrated under their feet. When they reiterated the passage a radiant yellow pierced the cracks and threw abstract shadows on their faces, walls and vaulted ceiling.

Where's that light coming from? Dole asked and stepped away from the pentagram.

No, dont break the circle until the ritual is complete, the bald man shouted. Start over.

After they repeated the invocation Hell unleashed enough lava to burrow through the four layers of the Earth. The blast dissipated before reaching the church's foundation but the aftershocks upset the building and rippled the ground for miles in every direction. The soles of their shoes began to melt and the unbearable heat climbed their legs. Embers rose through the weathered floor and smoke carrying an unholy stench followed.

I cant take it anymore, James said, turned and coughed blood into his hand.



PART ONE: LAREDO

You're killing him, Jodie yelled. Make him stop Sheriff.

The ritual worked, the bald man said and closed the book. You can step away now.

Outside, the skeletons pounded on the doors and shattered the stained-glass windows. They stuck their arms through the crevices in the walls and yanked on the wooden siding.

I cant breathe, Dwyer said, backed up and clutched his shoulder.

Cover your mouths, Dole said and pulled up his FBI jacket.

Can you hear that? Stewart asked. Something's under the church.

Yeah, it sounds like an animal clawing to get in, Dan said.

A set of hands tore through floorboards held in place for a hundred years by square-headed nails. The thrashing skeleton cleared the last obstructions, reached the plane of the living and turned in a circle to face his resurrectors.

Jodie, O'Mally said from the fiery pit and tilted his blackened skull.

Father? Is that you? she asked and raised her arms for protection. She recoiled from the ravaged priest who had once comforted her. Who promised to keep their affair a secret. Who confirmed their bastard son.

Where is Katie? O'Mally asked.

She's trying to get in Father, the bald man said and pointed to the vestibule.

Everybody run, Jodie yelled, dragged James over to the foyer and pulled a pew off the barricade. A bony arm reached through the

## SKELETONS

window in the door and grabbed him by the throat.

Let go of him goddammit, Dan yelled. He pushed Jodie aside and yanked the appendage off the boy. They crouched below the smoke, retreated to the southeast corner of the church and waited in fear.

What is that thing? Dole asked and aimed his handgun at the lingering skeleton.

Do not shoot Agent Dole, the bald man said with a hand up in warning. Father O'Mally was summoned to save us.

Get away from us, Dole yelled and fired three times, splintering its rib cage and sternum.

Stop, O'Mally screamed and squeezed the agent's soul. He crumbled to the floor and rolled onto his side. The sheriff kicked his pistol into the corner and dragged him to safety with one arm.

Above the church, gale-force winds generated by the vortex pulled smoke into the troposphere. Sparks shot across the property but a drizzling rain prevented the prairie grass, bushes and trees from catching fire. For miles around, survivors walked onto their porches and awed at the spectacle in the starless sky.

Where are you Katie? O'Mally asked, turned and searched the room for his old lover.

She's right behind me Father, the bald man said and the barrel left his back. When the prisoner turned around a pregnant redhead with shimmering green eyes snapped Stewart's neck. He dropped the shotgun and collapsed into a pile of uselessness by her porcelain white feet.

Katie, O'Mally screamed and they locked eyes.

PART ONE: LAREDO

The bald man seized the shotgun and aimed but the expecting young woman had turned back into a skeleton. She yanked the weapon out of his hands and struck him in the stomach with the synthetic butt. When he collapsed onto the floor she climbed on top of him and scratched his face with a reckless abandon.

Die, die, die, Katie said, wrapped her hands around his neck and squeezed until he blacked out.

Let him go, O'Mally said, crawled out of the pit and seized her left leg.

No, John, no, Katie said and kicked him in the face, knocking his jagged teeth out. When he recovered he slammed her against the west wall, shattering the closest window. Colliding bones echoed throughout the church as the pawns played spectators to the supernatural violence.

Sheriff, I drowned Christian, the skeleton with no jaw yelled from the barricade.

You cocksucking son of a bitch, Dwyer said and fired at the creature with the shotgun but it kept coming.

As the skeletons struck the chapel doors the pews inched farther into the vestibule. Another reached through a hole in the floor and grabbed the priest's ankle. He kicked its hand off and dragged Katie to the pit by the neck.

No, she cried out and dug her sharp feet into the floor.

One resurrected at the Carny House broke through a window near the darkest corner of the nave and grabbed Jodie's hair. Dan used both hands trying to break its incredible grip. Fire crawled across the rafters and embers reached the angled ceiling.

## SKELETONS

You're going to Hell, the skeleton peeking through the roof cried out and pointed at James. He ran over to the bald man, grabbed the volume and held it up to the firelight.

Repeat after me, James yelled and tried to read the dog-eared page. *Aperire hoc rubeum dicimus pientissimam contentionem Lucifer foraminis.*

Kill them, Katie yelled to the other skeletons as Father O'Mally pinned her down. Kill them all.

The pawns screamed out the chorus without rejoining hands. With three reiterations the fire inside the circle turned orange, crimson red and purple. The creatures reacted to their last chance to remain on Earth with primal screams.

Louder, James yelled. Keep chantin, keep chantin.

When they reached a feverish pitch red holes replaced the windows and doors and enveloped the skeletons. Their protruding bones dropped and gyrated before succumbing. Those on the front steps broke down the doors but tumbled into the largest hole before reaching the vestibule.

Stand back everybody, James yelled as the last two skeletons rolled to the edge of the pit.

For our baby, Katie said and pushed down on the priest's skull. He clawed the floorboards with his talons but still dropped in past his ribs.

Help me, O'Mally cried out and reached for Jodie.

Take care of James, Dan said to his wife from the corner. Goodbye you two, give my love to Mel.

PART ONE: LAREDO

Where are you goin? Jodie asked when he stood.

Stop, Dad, stop, James said and yanked on his father's jacket.

He tore away, ran across the church and tackled Katie. They landed on top of the priest and the pit swallowed them whole. The fire changed from purple to yellow to crimson red and magmatic rock closed the tunnel.

Oh my God, he's gone, he's fuckin gone, James said, dropped the book and fainted.

No, no, no, Jodie said and embraced him.

This place is gonna come down any second, Dwyer said as flames blocked the exits.

Run through the fire, it's the only way out, Dole said and pointed.

Help me carry him, Dwyer said to Jodie, flung the boy's right arm over his shoulder and they barreled through the entrance. They hobbled down the steps, crossed the sidewalk and stopped in the driveway. A cold drizzle soothed their exposed skin.

Where's Dole? Dwyer asked and turned to the church. Get out of there Agent Dole.

Dont you even think about goin back in there Sheriff, Jodie said and seized his arm. The missing agent burst through the flames, ran down the steps and turned to face the prisoner.

I see you Baldy, Dole yelled and pointed his Glock. Vacate the building or I'll shoot goddammit, this is your last warning.

The bald man replied with a blast of double-aught buckshot to Dole's face, hurling pieces of skull, blood and brains into the air.

## SKELETONS

He rolled down the steps and succumbed on the ground.

Agent Dole, Dwyer yelled and brandished his revolver. When he cocked back the hammer the bald man rushed through the entryway with smoke rolling off his jumpsuit. He stumbled toward the cornfield while clutching the book in one hand and the Remington in the other.

Baldy, you cocksucker, Dwyer said and emptied his revolver.

Get down, get down, Jodie shouted and dragged James to the other side of the cruiser. The steeple broke through the roof, crashed into the nave and wall by wall the church collapsed onto itself. A nebula of smoke and fire soared into the vortex, lost momentum and dissipated.

Come out you fuckin coward, Dwyer yelled and scanned the cornrows while trying to steady his speedloader.

Checkmate, the bald man said from the dark and fired. Nine pea-sized pellets hit the sheriff's midsection and he slumped to the ground in a heap of blood, uniform and pain.

The bald man shucked a new round into the shotgun and laughed at the pawns he knocked off the chessboard for his Master.

# 4

Jodie and James dragged the sheriff over to his cruiser, propped him against the back left wheel and knelt to check his wounds. He drifted in and out of consciousness and mumbled unrecognizable words as the waning church fire danced on his face. When he opened his eyes he gazed past the last two survivors at the countless piles of crow bones scattered around the property.

Suzie? Where's Suzie? Dwyer whispered between shallow breaths.

Dont you die on us Sheriff, Jodie yelled, grabbed his shirt and shook him. Help me get him in the car James, we're takin him to Rosita.

She stuck her hand in his pocket, pulled out a cluster of bronze and silver keys and found two stamped with the Ford emblem. James climbed into the back seat and pulled while she pushed with the strength they had left.

Keep pressure on his wound, she said, got behind the wheel and started the engine.

Try the CB, he said.

Hello? Hello? she said into the microphone. If anybody's listenin,

## SKELETONS

we have the Sheriff and we're headin to the hospital in Rosita. I repeat, we have Sheriff Dwyer and we're goin to Rosita. Hello? Anybody out there?

She threw the vehicle into reverse, steered around Gruene's cruiser and reached County Road 1300 with the tires throwing mud and rocks in the opposite direction. When they reached the south ditch she slammed on the brakes, hit the accelerator and clicked on the high beams. No porch lights, combines working through the night or neighboring towns guided their trip into the blackest of nights.

With any luck, the hospital's still got power, she said and turned left onto County Road 2425 without stopping.

Jesus, be careful Mom, he said from the rear seat.

Agent Dole? What about Stewart? Dwyer whispered with his eyes shut. He grimaced in pain when he coughed and his breaths were shallow.

Use both hands to stop the bleedin James, she said. We'll be there in five minutes so dont give up Sheriff.

She took a right onto Highway 34 and the ass end of the car swung into the opposite lane. There was no traffic in either direction and the rear-view mirror reflected nothing. A few more miles and there were two cars on fire in the south ditch and three telephone poles severed at their bases by an overturned semi. Soaking wet crows pecking at the deceased turned their heads and their beady eyes caught the approaching headlights.

Hello? Is anybody out there? she asked, waited and hung up the microphone. Shit, I think we're all alone James.

It's all my fault, he said and trembled. The Carny House, my



PART ONE: LAREDO

friends, that couple from Kensington. Everyone in Laredo. Dad.

No it's not James, she yelled at him. We'll get through this but I need you to stay strong for your sister and me. Wherever she is.

Roll my window down Mom, he said and she found the control button on her door. Look, the grain mill's on fire.

Three one-hundred-foot silos on the edge of Arbor shot flames into the stormy sky. Fire engines of different shapes and sizes worked to extinguish the blaze from extended ladders. Dozens of homeless locals stood by in the downpour.

Holy shit, they must be all over Stratford County, she said and turned the windshield wipers onto the highest setting.

He stuck his head out the window and the shrill of emergency sirens filled the cab. The cold rain pelted his dirty face and washed away the smoke, blood and anguish. He was on the verge of crying when a voice called from the farthest recesses of his mind.

*None of this is your fault James.*

Who is that talkin Mom?

No one's talkin, why? James? Answer me James.

*I never should've brought that book to Laredo. I'm so, so sorry.*

Father O'Mally? Is that you?

You're scaring the hell outta me, Jodie said and turned around but he didnt reply. His eyes were closed and head rested on the window sill.

*Yes, it's me James.*

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*Are you readin my mind?*

*Just listen James. Go west and find the bald man.*

*West? Why?*

*Because the book opens tunnels to places other than Hell.*

*Where? Heaven?*

*I have to go now James, good night.*

*Wait, Father, come back. Please, come back.*

What's wrong James? she asked, stopped along the shoulder of the road and turned to him. Are you okay?

I dont know Mom, just keep drivin, he said but wouldnt face her.

Check his pulse James, is he still alive? she asked and floored it.

We're losin him, he yelled and pushed down on the lawman's abdomen with both hands. Streams of blood still seeped out.

Look, we're gettin close, she said and street lights introduced the outskirts of town.

Fuck, she screamed as something struck and cracked the windshield and landed on the wiper cowl. It got upright and shrilled at them before the storm swept it off the cruiser.

What the hell was that?

One of those goddamn crows.

PART ONE: LAREDO

ROSITA

4900

HOME OF  
ROSITA COLLEGE

1987 CLASS A  
GIRLS BASKETBALL  
CHAMPIONS

Thank God, they have electricity, she said. Hold on Sheriff, we made it.

The rain came down in sheets when they passed by the bowling alley, a gas station and a nursery. Officers in rain parkas carrying M-16s stood by a roadblock stretching across the highway.

Slow down Mom, he's motioning for you to stop, he said from the backseat.

What in the hell? she asked, rolled down her window and two deputies approached the cruiser.

Where are you coming from ma'am? the officer on the driver's side asked.

Look, it's Sheriff Dwyer, she said and thumbed toward the back. He got shot so let us through.

Let her through, she's got the Sheriff, let her through, the officer said in a panic.

Hurry up or he's goin to bleed to death, she said and honked the horn in desperation as they opened the barricade.

Go, go, go, the officer said and pointed. Follow them ma'am, the

## SKELETONS

hospital's right down the road.

Two cruisers turned their sirens and emergency lights on and escorted them west. They passed a company of firemen battling a gas station explosion at the corner of Henry and Center Street. Blazing houses punctuated each block as locals jumped into their vehicles with armfuls of possessions. They raced toward Peoria with no hope of ever returning.

I dont think he's breathing Mom, James said and double-checked. I cant tell.

Just hold on Sheriff, we're almost there, she said and honked at a wrecked Jeep blocking the entrance.

Cars overwhelmed the parking lot with their hazards flashing and doors open. Seven ambulances from neighboring towns flooded the emergency room driveway but their crews were missing. Crying families in sopping wet clothes waited on unforgiving news from exhausted doctors. Jodie stopped, jumped out and two male nurses rolled a filthy stretcher up to the cruiser.

We'll take him from here, one nurse said as they pulled the sheriff out of the backseat, wrapped an oxygen mask around his head and carted him away.

Y'all need to get checked out by a doctor, the deputy from the roadblock said and gestured toward the automatic glass doors. It'll be awhile 'cause we got hundreds of people in worse shape than you.

We need to get inside, Jodie said and held him tight.

No, we did what that bald man wanted, James said and pushed her away. Now where the hell is my Dad?

PART ONE: LAREDO

James, listen to me. I need to get you to a doctor before you pass out again.

What about Pablo? he asked, put his burnt hands on his shaking knees and doubled over. Dwayne? Teddy? Quentin? Mac and TJ?

You saved us James, she said and put her arm around him. You saved us back at that church by closin that tunnel. Katie's not gonna to haunt you anymore. Your nightmare's over.

No, it's not, he said and cried. If it's over then my Dad, my friends, everyone would be here now. Everyone would be alive.

They're gone James, they're all gone, she said, put both hands on his shoulders and stared into his red eyes. I'm so sorry. You've no idea how sorry I am.

She embraced her weeping son as the rain washed the sheriff's blood off their bodies. The puddles at their feet reflected the moon hiding behind a storm front headed toward Chicago.



The bald man gimped across a cultivated plot, took County Road 2475 and waded through the Panther Creek holding the Mossberg and book above his head. His waterlogged jump suit made climbing the opposite bank difficult but he reached the adjoining cow pasture. He set his possessions on the soggy grass and took his time re-wrapping his leg bandage. The surrounding farms were still without power so he used the northern star to keep east. He crossed another blacktop road, knelt in the ditch running along County Road 2600 and waited for a vehicle to hijack. His teeth chattered and body shook so he rubbed his arms and breathed into his hands for warmth.

I cant wait for you to see the book Master, he whispered. It's magnificent, just like you promised.

A diesel pickup four telephone poles away flipped its brights off and downshifted. He stuck the volume in his jumpsuit and walked to the middle of the road. After firing a warning shot into the night he chambered another round and leveled the weapon at the cab. The driver locked up the brakes and the ass end zigzagged, coming within a foot of running him over.

He walked to the driver's side and peeked into the bed with no regard for the frightened passengers. There was an overstuffed

## SKELETONS

suitcase, cardboard boxes full of canned goods, six jugs of water, matching sleeping bags, rope and two plastic gas canisters.

Put it in park and open the door, he yelled at the old man. Nice and easy.

Please dont hurt us, the old woman said and raised her trembling hands. We're tryin to get to our son's house in Arbor. Our farm's burnin down, everything's burnin down, the whole damn county.

Sir, you can have anything you want, the old man said with trouble keeping his arms raised.

Dont say another word, the bald man said and stuck the weapon in his face. How do I get to Chicago from here?

Tell him honey, the old woman said. Just tell him, we can walk to Merle's if we have to.

I know, I know, the old man said. Well, head north until you hit County Road 1450, turn east after a few miles then take 61 north. Drive a few more minutes and head east on 1600 until you reach Pontiac. If you cant get on 55 north, you're gonna have to take Old Route 66 all the way to Cook County.

Get out of the truck, the bald man shouted. Get out, now.

Please dont leave us here, the old woman said. We dont have anywhere to go. Please sir, those... those monsters are everywhere.

Just do what he says dear, the old man said, stepped out of the cab and she cowered behind him. Take what you want mister but please, please dont hurt us.

Stand in the ditch and count to one thousand, the bald man said. If you turn around before you're finished I'll shoot your wife in



PART ONE: LAREDO

the fucking face.

He laid the shotgun on the bench seat of the pickup, climbed in and stuck to the directions. The Ford maxed-out at ninety-five miles an hour and the engine shook on Highway 61. He pulled the book out of his jumpsuit and placed it next to the gun. Ice, food and aluminum cans filled the cooler sitting to his right. He ate one of the bologna sandwiches, washed it down with a grape soda and let out a belch before wiping his mouth with the handkerchief he found on the dash.

I need a cigarette Master.

He took a wrong turn and got lost, retraced his steps and traveled a hundred on County Road 1600. The fires vanished and lights twinkled to the north as police cars with their lights and sirens on sped south. When he reached Pontiac he pulled into a 76 Gas Station and grabbed the pocketknife sitting in the clean ashtray. He pulled the suitcase out of the bed and found the bathroom unlocked on the east side of the business.

Once he tore the leg wrap off he cleaned the wound with soap and water and dried it with paper towels. He set the suitcase on the sink basin and pried it open with the knife. The blade was sharp enough to cut twelve-inch strips of fabric from one of the old man's T-shirts so he redressed his infected leg. He put on dry clothes, stuffed the jumpsuit in the overflowing trash can and walked into the downpour. There was an enclosed pay phone on the corner so he made a collect call to San Francisco.

Hello? a woman with a sweet voice answered after five rings.

Good evening Angelica.

Where are you?

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In Pontiac, how are you?

Lonely, when are you coming home?

I'm headed to Chicago right now.

Did you find the book?

Of course, tell the others there's nothing to worry about.

Great, I'll have our guy on the south side meet you in the departures lot at Midway.

Thank you my love, he said, hung up and eyeballed the convenience store.

No need to get more blood on our hands just for cigarettes Master.

He pointed the truck north with the tank half-full and the heater on the highest setting. There were a few semis, tailgating cars and a state cop parked on the divider outside of Plainfield. The wipers strained to keep the windshield clear, Wagner played over the AM preset and the suburbs approached and turned into the city.

EXIT 286  
ILLINOIS 50  
CICERO AVE  
2 MILES

He chucked the Remington out the window before he reached the airport, parked and waited for his contact. The lot wasn't full but a flight attendant rolling a small suitcase stared at him as she walked toward the door marked departures. He smiled and pursed his lips and she turned away revolted. When he scanned the busy parking deck a man with a cigarette in his waving hand rushed toward the truck. He wore a tan trench coat over a black

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suit and his teeth sparkled when he smiled.

Good evening sir, the gentleman said.

Do you have my ticket?

Yes sir, we purchased a coach seat on United for you. Angelica thought blending in with regular folks might work best. Here's a wallet with a few hundred dollars, a fake ID and a credit card inside. Best I could find on such short notice. Your flight's in an hour, good luck sir.

Give me your cigarettes, the bald man said while reading the plane ticket. Your lighter too.

Of course, the gentlemen said and handed them over. By the way, did you hear the news?

What news?

C.K. had a pretty good score in Iowa last night.

You dont say?

Once again, best of luck sir, the gentlemen said and scurried away.

He lit a Marlboro and shoved the billfold in his back right pocket. After he locked the Ford he tossed the old man's keys into the first trash can he came to and limped through the terminal. The other travelers turned their heads to stare at the injured curiosity but he ignored them.

The plane was three-quarters full so he took an aisle seat near the middle. There were men wearing cheap suits in first class, dozens of excited travelers and Berkeley students scattered throughout the cabin. He placed the book on the seat next to him, folded the

## SKELETONS

old man's Carhartt on top of it and stretched out. The plane took off on time and he fell asleep after five minutes in the air.

Sir, would you like a meal? a female attendant with big hair asked. We have meat or fish tonight. Sir?

No, no thank you, he said and cringed in pain.

As the stewardesses collected the dinner trays they played a romantic comedy on the screen toward the front. Halfway through, distortion overlapped the actors until worshippers stood waiting. He put the free headphones on and surveyed the cabin but the other passengers were oblivious to the new transmission.

Good evening Master, he whispered.

Did you retrieve the book my child? the Master asked through the headphones.

Yes, yes I did Master, he whispered, reached underneath the jacket and raised the artifact.

Well done, I will see you soon my child.

Turbulence shook the passengers and the movie returned to normal after a short burst of black and white banding. He took off the headphones, wadded them up and handed them to the boy across the aisle.

Sorry for the inconvenience folks, the captain said over the intercom. We caught the tail end of a storm headed for Grand Rapids but there'll be clear skies for the next few hours. So sit back and enjoy the film, we'll get you to SFO soon.

The bald man fell asleep somewhere over Nebraska and dreamed of bringing his Master back from another time and place.





Thank you for taking the time to read SKELETONS. Please leave us an honest review on Amazon when you have a moment. In the meantime, join our mailing list at [www.skeletonshorror.com](http://www.skeletonshorror.com), follow us on Instagram at [@skeletons\\_horror](https://www.instagram.com/skeletons_horror) and watch our videos on YouTube on the Skeletons Horror channel.





Andrew Reeves grew up in the rural town of El Paso, Illinois, where his family owned a farm for over one hundred years. After graduating high school in 1995, he majored in Visual Communications at Northern Illinois University and then worked as a graphic designer in Chicago. In 2003, he moved to the Echo Park area of Los Angeles, became disillusioned with advertising and released his first record as a musician, *1048 West Kensington Road*. He relocated to Austin, Texas in 2007 to play live music and released *Somewhere in The Middle of Nowhere* and *Where the Greed Won't Grow*. In 2009, he returned to California and produced the guitar, bass and drums album *New York City*.

While taking a break from music in 2010, he created the “Black” series of paintings in his Glassell Park studio. The concept for SKELETONS was born during meditation and fleshed out with charcoal drawings that appeared in an international art show. *Part One: Laredo* is the first novel in The Rapture Trilogy, to be followed by *Part Two: The Bald Man* and *Part Three: Revelations*. He plans on later living in the Abiquiu area of New Mexico to write *The Indian Wars*, a post-Civil War western that will reveal the origins of the Master and the Bald Man.

