

Monday, Day One

1

A candle, sputtering on a darkened shelf, cast twisted shadows onto the wall.

The boy sat against the opposite wall, only five feet away. On the floor in front of him, he saw a black shape, darker than a shadow. It terrified him. He hunched inside the storage unit, curled into himself, hugging a rifle against his chest, the barrel's hard steel caressing his cheek. The black shape, like a chasm, pulled him. He clamped shut his eyes. *No*. He forced himself to open them, to look, though he felt paralyzed. *Try to understand*. Sudden waves of rage buffeted him, then fear, then rage again, storm-tossed waves, billowing, battering. As each surge ebbed, a new crush of panic, fury, confusion rolled over him. He felt tossed. Hanging on, he pressed the rifle harder against his chest, his cheek harder against the cold steel barrel, as if it were a stanchion on a capsizing ship.

If I move, I'll kill them.

He closed his eyes to escape the flickering, jerking shadows. Had he seen blood splattered on the wall behind the shadows? Were the screams in his ears real?

Have I killed them already? He pressed his cheek harder against the barrel, hoping pain would block the terror and the fury. But no. He sank beneath this storm. He struggled, panted, panted again, then held his breath. Went under.

Perhaps he fell asleep.

Perhaps he died.

He opened his eyes. The room was black. The candle had guttered. For a few moments, its death comforted him. The storm of hate and horror seemed to have subsided, leaving an emptiness laced with confusion. How long had he been away? And where? His chest ached from the hard steel.

Painfully, he untangled himself, tried to stand. Stiff, dizzy. He braced a hand against the wall. After a moment, he searched, his hands blind, for the electric lantern. Knocked over the dead candle. Found the lamp, flicked it on. Dazed by the sudden light, he squinted, but saw no blood on the wall, no black hole in the floor. His head, filled with screams before, was silent.

Maybe I haven't done it yet. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he counted the rifles stacked in the corner beside the ammunition boxes. *No, all here. Not yet, thank God.* Eight weapons, plus the one lying at his feet. His chest throbbed.

From embracing the rifle? From terror?

Groggy, he aligned his lone weapon with the others lining the wall and arranged the boxes, neatly re-stacking the ammunition as his grandfather had taught him. He rubbed his chest as he doused the lantern and opened the

shed door. Morning sunlight stunned him; he retreated into the darker space, letting his eyes come to terms with the bright air streaming in. A last burst of anger lurked behind his heart.

When his eyes were ready for the sun, he stepped through the door. Turning back to lock the door, he thought, *I'll be late for school*. That last anger boiled. He slammed his fist against the wooden wall.

When will this shit end?

2

From across the street, Loretta Tweedy, eighty-nine years and a month, watched the boy lock the shed door, then strike it with his fist. She stage whispered toward the kitchen, as if the boy could hear, "Ardyss! Come quick! He's coming out!"

Ardyss Conley, Loretta's friend and roommate, herself only seventy-four, came into the living room, wiping her hands on a flowered apron. "Breakfast is almost ready." She stooped and peered over Loretta's shoulder through the window. "Awfully early in the morning to be doing whatever he does in there."

"I tell you," Loretta snapped, "I've seen him at all hours." She pulled the curtain wider. "There, see?" The boy was climbing into his green pickup truck. "Isn't that the Hansen boy?"

Ardyss chuckled. "Aren't you the nosiest old lady on the block?"

"Humph. I'm the *only* old lady on the block. What's he doing in there?"

Ardyss shrugged. "Why don't you go out there and ask him?"

Loretta dropped the curtain. "It's not right, a young man like that spending hours in a storage unit. Believe me, he's up to no good."

Ardyss turned back to the kitchen. "I'll have breakfast on in five minutes. If you're so worried, call the sheriff's office."

"They'll think I'm an old busy-body, for heaven's sake."

"You *are* an old busy-body. Call that Deputy Pelton. She's a nice girl. Get it out of your system."

Loretta grumped, "My system." But when Ardyss went into the kitchen, she reached for the telephone.

3

"April's the cruelest month, but I'm damned if this one ain't a killer," groused Sheriff Ben Stewart.

His deputy, Andi Pelton, grinned. "Shakespeare, right?"

Ben grunted. "Might be." He liked to hide his erudition. "First we get us the flood, then this heat." Standing beside him outside the open storage unit, Andi heard a raw catch of anger in his voice, a stifled rage against the violations in his valley. Two weeks ago, eleven unforecast inches of rain had drowned half the town. Now, this, whatever this was.

Ben glared into the open storage unit. Inside, Deputy Pete Peterson

scribbled on a clipboard, inventorying a stack of weapons and ammunition boxes. Beside him, Deputy Brad Ordrew was opening cardboard boxes. "Crap on toast," Ben muttered. "Makes a guy think there ain't nobody safe here anymore."

Ordrew, his eyes narrow, called from inside, "We got us a mass shooter in full prep mode, folks."

Andi peered over Ben's shoulder. Visible in the dim unit, beside the rifles, stood a carefully stacked pile of ammunition boxes. She grimaced. "Maybe. Could be another explanation. But thank God for Loretta's tip. Never saw this coming."

Pete nodded. "Old Loretta's got the eagle eye, all right." He chuckled. "Even if she does piss off the neighbors."

The sheriff pulled off his cap and roughly rubbed his graying, curly hair. "Overtime budget's already shot to hell, and this'll put a big dent in what's left—and it ain't even wildfire season yet." He put his cap back on, patted it tight.

Andi stepped around him, her hand resting briefly on Ben's arm, as if comforting him. She leaned into the storage unit. "Pete, can you tell if anyone else beside the Hansen boy is involved?" After Loretta's call, when they'd phoned the building's owner to meet them and unlock the storage room, he'd told them it had been rented by Jared Hanson, a local teen, seven weeks ago.

Pete straightened up and shook his head. "No sign of that yet. Just Jared, best I can tell." He stepped out into the sunlight and removed his cap; sweat beaded his forehead. "Damn hot in there. Strangest weather."

Andi looked up at the iron-blue sky and nodded. Ordrew followed Pete out; he too mopped sweat off his face. "Must be a hundred-ten degrees in there," he said.

Pete nodded. "At least." He fanned himself with his cap, then gestured with it toward the unit. "This looks wrong as hell."

"Meanin'?" Ben asked.

"The Hansens belong to our church. I've known Jared since he was seven. Always been a great kid."

"So, what do you make of it?"

"Beats me. Nine rifles, two hundred rounds of ammunition. A pressure cooker. Jesus." He shook his head. "This doesn't square with anything I know about him."

Ordrew said, "Isn't it obvious? Pressure cookers? He's prepping for a mass shooting or a bombing."

Pete frowned. "Just one pressure cooker. If I didn't know Jared, I'd think it's possible, but he's just not right for that."

Andi asked, "How old is he?"

"Seventeen, maybe eighteen. He's a senior." Pete turned to Ben. "I know I'm up to catch this case, but..."

Ben stopped him. "I'm puttin' Andi in the lead on this one, Pete; you're too close. Brad, you'll work second with her."

Ordrew's eyes darkened, but he shrugged.

Ben ignored the look, said to Pete, "That good for you?"

"Thanks, boss. I like Jared too much."

Andi looked in at the pile of weapons in the shadows. "You said nine rifles? They're not semi-automatics."

"Nope, not one. They're all single-shots, take 30-06 Springfield cartridges. He's got a couple hundred extra rounds in the boxes."

"Well, he's not going to shoot anybody very fast using single-shots. Why nine?"

"Good question."

Andi stepped inside the unit, felt the immediate heat, already thirty degrees hotter than morning air outside. "And why a pressure cooker?"

Pete followed her inside, shaking his head. "There's no shrapnel or explosives, so maybe it's just a pressure cooker."

Ben, from the doorway, said, "What's the kid plannin'?"

Ordrew frowned. "Think of those assholes in Boston. Seems pretty clear to me."

Pete said, "Maybe, but like I said, he's got nothing to turn them into bombs."

"Collecting things a bit at a time. Avoiding notice," Ordrew said.

"Could be. But look at these." Pete squeezed around Andi and reached into a cardboard carton on the shelf. "Weird as hell," he muttered. "Check these out," he said, handing a couple of small books, covers tattered, to Andi.

"Books on Buddhism, for God's sake."

Ordrew stepped inside, looking annoyed. "Yeah? Check these out." He pulled some books from a second box, the one he'd opened earlier. "Jesus," he muttered, looking at the spines. "Library books." He read. "*Columbine*." Then, pulling out a second book. "How's this? *Hunting Humans: The Rise of Modern Multiple Murder*." He pulled out a third. "*Give a Boy a Gun*."

Andi checked the title of the book in her hand: *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. "Buddhism and mass murder? What's that mean?" She riffled the book's dry pages, her forehead wrinkling. Maybe there was a note, a photo, something to give her a clue about the boy's thinking. Nothing inside. She handed the book back to Pete and said, "Check the pages of the other books," and to Ordrew, she said, "You too." The contrast among the books disturbed her. She opened a third cardboard box. "What's this stuff?"

Inside was a Mason jar filled with black seeds, a can of Zippo lighter fluid, another jar marked "ethanol," some slices of what smelled like ginger, and on a small plate, a tarry residue.

Pete looked into the box. "Weird. No idea what this crap is."

Andi took the jar and examined the seeds; she opened the jar and sniffed. "This gets stranger. I don't recognize the smell." She turned to Ben standing just outside the door. "I want to send all this stuff to DCI up in Helena."

The sheriff nodded. "Do it."

Ordrew said, "DCI?"

Andi said, "Division of Criminal Investigation. They help us with cases

we don't have resources for.”

Ordrew nodded. “Roger. Back in LA, they're the DLE. Division of Law Enforcement.”

Andi, tired of hearing Ordrew's references to the LAPD, thought, *Homesick*. She turned to Ben. “We probably should call and warn Monica. Once this gets out, she'll have a tidal wave of upset students banging down her door.” Monica Sergeant was the high school principal, a year from retirement.

“Her and one part-time school counselor.” He snapped his cell phone off his belt. “I'll call the school, give her a heads-up.” As he scrolled to the principal's number, he said to Andi, “Give your boyfriend a call and tell him we'll pay him to help the counselor.”

“Ed won't like that,” she said. “His practice has been crazy busy.”

“Ain't nobody's gonna like none of this,” Ben growled. “Call him. That counselor's only here two half-days a week. Ain't no way she handles a flood of scared kids on her own.”

Andi nodded, reaching for her own phone. “I'm thinking I'd better go find young Mr. Hansen and invite him in for a little talk. He's probably at school now.”

Ben, already dialing, stopped for a moment. “Good point. I'll tell Monica to pull the boy out of class and keep him in her office till you get there.” He looked at Ordrew. “Brad, you finish up here, seal off the damn unit, and login the evidence back at the station. We're callin' this suspicion.”

Ordrew frowned. “Suspicion of what?”

Ben frowned back. “Suspicion. We'll figure out the what later.” He resumed dialing.

Andi touched Ben's arm. “Once I pick Jared up, this'll be all over the valley. Do you think...?”

Ben hit the *End* button, nodded. “Jesus in a sidecar, you're right.” He rubbed his face. “Look, I'll hightail it back and work out a statement, run it by Irv.” As he looked at his phone and hit *Speed-dial*, he caught Ordrew's puzzled look and said to him, “Irv's the DA.”

After a moment, he spoke into the phone. “Callie, do me a favor. Find Irv Jackson and set up a meetin'.” He listened. “On the phone's better, and we gotta do it no more'n fifteen, twenty minutes from now. Don't take no for an answer.” He waited. “Whatever. Tell him we got us real trouble.” He ended the call and started dialing again. While he waited for the principal to pick up, he said to Andi, “Irv and I'll write a statement and Callie can read it when the calls start comin' in.”

He walked toward his SUV, the black-and-tan colors of Adams County, consulting his watch, phone against his ear, then turned back and lifted his voice. “People,” he said, “we got us maybe thirty minutes before word gets out and Bud Groh starts prowlin' around. Let's get movin'.”

Ordrew said to Andi, “Who's Bud Groh?”

“Radio station manager, reporter, radio engineer, you name it.” They watched as Ben continued toward his vehicle, and they heard him say,

“Monica? Ben Stewart here. Sorry to say it, but you got some major crap about to hit your fan.”