

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for taking the time to download this sample of my book, *The Pass*. I deeply hope that it turns out to be a story you thoroughly enjoy, that you end up getting the whole book and telling all your friends about it for years and years to come.

That would be great.

But most of all, I hope that the next forty or so pages gives you a little break from the mundane, a short ride into a world of infinite possibilities. It's a dark world to be sure, but with a bright soul. My soul. And in the next six chapters I'll be sharing it with you. I hope we can do a lot more of that in the future, I really do. And as always, I'll be working hard to make that possible.

Visit my website as often as you'd like, or even send me note if you're in the mood. Writing stories and creating art is in my heart, and certainly the best (and probably the only) use of this strange, overactive brain that I've been given; so your support, however small, is an incredibly valuable part of my survival. You have my deepest gratitude for that! But for now, let's see what happens when you turn the page.

I'll be waiting for you on the other side.

Sincerely,

Walt Bayless

Salt Lake City, Utah 2010

www.waltbayless.com

Walt Bayless

THE
PASS



The Pass

by Walt Bayless

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'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out contagion to this world.

-William Shakespeare

Prologue

The desert wind was clean and cool this time of year, and it kicked up little coyote clouds of reddish dust in front of a tangerine sun. This was the high desert, not much cactus around, and the high Utah mountains rose about in majestic granite fingers, great snow-capped wrinkles in the Earth's living crust. Pine trees and sage brush abounded, and there were deer coming and going if you could sit long and quietly enough to spot them. That's what Jenny Cartwright was doing, right out in front of her little Western-style suite. Chewing on a piece of long grass and thinking as little as her busy mind would allow.

She mused reverently out at the sunset, out at the mountains and the trees. Her big white teeth peeking past her fine lips for the first time in a long, long while. Her green eyes twinkled in the warm, flat light of the high desert. The serenity of this place was a far and fabulous cry from the racing pulse of the Big Apple. At least for her. Sadly, the last six months in Manhattan had left Jenny feeling run down and worn out. It was all just too much anymore.

She had one sister that only came alive in the New York groove. Hell, didn't everyone? Jenny always *thought* she was a city girl, did everything she could to convince herself with all this travel. But in the end she just didn't fit. It was during the backside of her last book tour that she'd discovered a little pamphlet somebody had left behind. It was sitting there on the lavish

coffee table in her suite at the Ritz. It had been a long day, and Jenny had just collapsed back onto a sofa near the big window in her hotel room when she felt a sudden blast of moldy air shoot up and assault her nostrils. She cringed. All that humidity out there made everything smell like dirty laundry to her. Her agent, Mira, said that she'd get used to it after a while. But Jenny never really did. Everything east of the Mississippi had that smell, she thought. But that's where all the business was. And so like they say downtown: "Whaddaya gonna doo?"

But this was the Manhattan Ritz! Jenny chided herself. *Relax!* Said it like a strict military order. But it didn't take. This life just wasn't for her. Too stressful. Too complicated. Even here in hotel paradise. People shouted and bitched at each other in the hallways with little provocation, throwing dirty looks around like it was just for practice. The phone never stopped ringing and the world wouldn't stop rushing. And the fucking traffic groaned on like a constantly upset stomach, burping up clouds of confusion and chaos some eighteen stories below her hotel window. Horns blaring and the works. Enough! Her nerves were shot.

It was right then that Jenny realized that she needed to redefine what she called happiness. What she called success. And that was the very moment she noticed the little pamphlet lying there. It was a glossy brochure featuring the Wasatch mountains and a heavenly, dry landscape, a world that was alive with tall, desert pines and great fir trees that stood up proudly before a setting sun.

Sunny Peaks Pine Resort. Come and stay a while.

And so she did. And it was even better than the little brochure said it was going to be: Low, cozy Western-style cottages, all lined up along a dirt Main Street. Stables with honest to goodness horses you could actually ride. Dusty old barrels and covered wagons. And those neat old water pumps that handsome cowboys used to douse their heads on a hot, sunny day, just like

in the movies. They even had a saloon with a piano player, a young man dressed in a striped shirt, suspenders and a bowtie. There was a town marshal too, a man that came around wearing a big silver badge and a ten gallon hat, asking if everything was all right. And sometimes tumbleweeds blew across the resort's main street, rolling in the whistling, high desert silence, making you think you might see a showdown at high noon.

But here, what you mostly saw was a bunch of smiling faces coming and going from their cozy Western cottages. Maybe heading over to the spa or the Country Grille, the resort's gourmet restaurant that never closed. And to top the whole thing off, there was a little country church down at the end of Main St., complete with a non-denominational preacher man and country gospel tunes to hear on Sundays if that was your thing. Quite the illusion.

It was pricey for sure but Jenny had the money, and she damn sure needed the time away. Sunny Peaks Pine Resort was just what the doctor ordered. Sun, dry air, massages, Mexican food. You name it. And, most importantly, she needed time like this, just staring out at the tangerine sunset and letting the cool mountain wind blow away all those blaring horns and stressed-out memories that still echoed in her head. Carrying them off into the high, rocky distance.

And so this should have been an easy place to find peace.

But there was something else here too, something that wouldn't quite let her rest. Something that had been scraping at the back of Jenny's mind since she'd arrived. It was only a whisper, only a fleeting omen on the dry wind. For now. But aside from the crisp pine fragrance and distant snowy rapture, apart from the dry, desert wonder and the soft, reddish sand, she sensed a growing foulness that she could only describe as evil. But whatever it was, it felt far more terrible than any meager human concept of utter wrongness.

Jesus Christ, Jenny! Enough already. Stop being so paranoid!

But those chiding words held no sway over her spirit voice. By now, there was no way Jenny could make herself deny her intuition anymore. Every time she got this feeling, something bad happened. Maybe she wasn't exactly psychic, and sometimes she was wrong as hell. But not that often. She'd had proof enough to trust herself. Bad relationships. Disastrous ideas. Every damn time she had known better, followed her head instead of her heart.

Everything went to shit.

But there were also those times that Jenny *did* listen to that dark voice, often against everyone else's advice, and a few times it had saved her life. Jenny had seen her way clear of two car wrecks and a private plane crash, simply by tuning in and paying attention to what her higher self was trying to tell her. Sure there were physical clues. A bald spot on a tire or the funny way the propeller jerked on ignition, but it was that pervasive gloomy whisper that seized Jenny by the throat and ultimately convinced her to beware. When her dark intuition cried out it was usually right. Somehow. Some way. But out here in relative paradise, she was having a hell of a time figuring out what exactly could go wrong. And that's where her writer's imagination kicked in. Suddenly, everything in sight was a potential disaster.

Not a nice way to spend nine and a half grand, she thought.

Jenny rubbed her temples and then checked her watch, the one she kept promising herself to stop wearing while she was here. And at the very moment she realized it was time for her massage, Rosa appeared, smiling as always, standing before the sunset like a calming messenger. Rosa had one arm full of white towels, and a hand basket stuffed with exotic oils and scented lotions in the other. She was a short, stocky woman with powerful hands and deep, rich eyes. All she had to do was show up and it made Jenny start to relax. It was like the woman was made for

massage therapy, or maybe just healing in general. Jenny told herself that all she needed was another session with Rosa to get her head straight again, to forget that macabre whisper on the sunset wind.

“Buenos noches, Miss Cartwright,” said Rosa in her smooth, Spanish accent.

“Oh thank God,” said Jenny. “Am I glad to see you.” She got up, dusted off the butt of her jeans like a real cowgirl and then gave Rosa a big hug. Rosa hugged her back the best she could with all that stuff in her arms. “Here,” said Jenny. “Lemme help you with some of that.”

Rosa pulled back and gave Jenny a playful, stern look. “I got it. I got,” she said shooing Jenny away. “Now get on the table and start your breathing, okay. I can manage this little basket. Let’s go.” Jenny grinned and turned to go inside. But she stopped just for a second to look back at the crimson sunset spilling down into a fiery sea of blood behind the mountains. She felt that wicked chill come on again, straight through her this time. Getting closer.

“Andale!” chided Rosa, ushering Jenny inside.

A short while later, Rosa’s strong hands kneaded deeply into Jenny’s back. The scent of lavender filled the room.

“You seem tense, Miss Cartwright,” said Rosa. “You worry too much.”

“Tell me about it,” she moaned. “Call me Jenny, k?”

“Yes, Miss Cartwright.”

And as Rosa continued to work her magic Jenny let her heavy lids and high anxiety settle down at last. Slowly, she began to drift off to the ethereal massage music coming from Rosa’s CD player. She drifted away, smiling at the sweet sounds of the happy people outside her little cottage, listening as they chatted and laughed and made plans for an early dinner. Jenny told herself that she’d catch up with them later. Everyone would be waiting around to hear about the

exciting life of the famous romance writer. Doctors, lawyers, trust fund babies, whoever, they all thought that Jenny's life was somehow more exciting than their own. Of course she couldn't let them down. Jenny had stretched the truth about some of her adventures on more than a few occasions. But how could she resist? All those people staring at her with their mouths hanging open... *God, if they only knew.*

And then, on the placid mirror of Jenny's mind, the men in her life began to appear.

Jason was the guy she'd been dating back home, a safe and boring man who was as likely to disappoint her as he was to fulfill her. But she pushed that thought from her mind and tried to rationalize with herself. Jason was safe, stable and fairly reliable, just like her sister said. But maybe that's all he was. They had all the chemistry of a pair of old shoes. She tried like hell to picture herself in bed with Jason again, or even kissing those cold, puckered lips that preached endlessly about salvation and savings accounts. Suddenly, Jenny felt her shoulders tighten and her stomach begin to turn. She imagined him sliding under the covers with that smirk on and...

No. It just wasn't happening.

Jason floated away into cloud of weary frustration.

And then suddenly there was Nate, that big, strong ball of fire from out of her past. Jenny had been thinking about him for months now, ever since he'd found her on her website and started writing little notes. He wasn't much with words, that was for sure, but the simple things he wrote moved her deeply somehow, took her back to the old days when she didn't even have to sleep. Sex with Nate Palmer was enough to live on for seemingly weeks at a time. *Great for the waistline*, thought Jenny. And he was good to her. Didn't give a shit about money or stuff, just wanted to *be* together. God, that sounded so simple, so nice.

But that was twenty years ago, and Jason *was* about to get a stable teaching position not thirty miles from where she lived. Jenny's shoulders tightened up and she clenched her teeth.

"You thinking about those boys?" said Rosa, kneading gently.

"I'm an open book, aren't I?"

"When you think about the one," said Rosa, "you frown and your face gets all sad. And when you think about the other..."

"...I light up like a bonfire?"

"Yes. I think you should take the bad boy." Rosa giggled.

Jenny smiled and looked up from the headrest. "Oh is that so?"

Rosa winked. "I marry a bad boy too. It took me two times but now we are together at last."

"He make you happy?"

"He just comes in the room and..." Rosa made a gasping sound and clutched her bosomy chest. "...I'm seventeen again."

"Sounds nice," Jenny smiled. "You know what, Rosa? I think you're absolutely —"

Suddenly, a horrible scream tore through the room.

The women froze.

"What the hell was that?" gasped Jenny.

It came from somewhere outside. It was so guttural and desperate that immediately Jenny thought about a bear attack. The guy at orientation said something about there being black bears around there and —

Someone else screamed, this time in mortal agony. And then another. And all at once it sounded like a bloody warzone outside, everyone screaming for their lives. Rosa's eyes went

wide and she reached for the CD player to shut it off, knocking it to floor where it shorted out on the carpet. Now the screams and cries for help were louder than ever. Jenny was paralyzed for a moment. The horrible sounds outside were unmistakable. Her mind reeled at awful truth.

People were dying out there!

Rosa bolted over to the window to see what was happening while Jenny got dressed. Rosa peered out and then made an awful squeaking sound. She shouted something in Spanish, something about the Devil. The poor woman just stood there, staring out through the curtains and trembling like she was being electrocuted.

“Rosa!” cried Jenny, looking around for someplace to run. “What’s happening?”

Rosa turned slowly around. Her face was twisted and blanched with terror. “Demons!” she rasped. That one word combined with the look on Rosa’s face made Jenny turn to icy stone. What the hell could she be talking about? And then those screams outside were suddenly joined by screams of a different kind, inhumanly piercing cries that seared the senses. Rosa staggered toward Jenny in a clumsy, petrified way, as if total shock had already set in.

Jenny grabbed her instinctively and jerked her toward the back door. Then she stopped. For a moment, Jenny was morbidly tempted to hurry over and have a look out the front window, see whatever it was that Rosa had seen. And right then, a mangled human body crashed through the glass and hung itself half-way over the broken sill, the lacey white curtains running thickly to an ugly red. Rosa shrieked and stumbled backward. The balding man lay there slumped over the dripping, crimson sill. The way a dead dog might lie twisted at the edge of a freeway. It struck Jenny how awkward and stricken that poor man looked, folded unnaturally over the sill like that. His bulging eyes and wide mouth were gaping and useless now, just lifeless flesh where a man used to be. And then slowly the dead man began spilling into the room. Cold wind, those horrible

screams, and the inhuman cries outside came pouring in along with the mutilated man. Torn and bloody drapes flapping in the icy breeze.

Suddenly, the lights flickered and died out. And darkness consumed them.

Rosa and Jenny fumbled for each other, held on, and then began groping through the room with trembling hands. Chilly night air and icy fear washing over them. A man outside wailed madly against some attack, his voice rising to a grisly high-pitched scream that suddenly ended in the sky. Jenny looked out dreadfully through the shattered window, past the spilling, moonlit dead man and the bloody drapes, out into the wailing blackness beyond. For a brief instant, Jenny saw people being pulled up into the air and then dropped, screaming, splashing and cracking onto the dirt road outside.

“Dear God,” she whispered, Rosa clinging desperately to her arm. Jenny threw open the back door and ran like hell, dragging poor Rosa along with her. It was incredibly dark outside as those heavy clouds rolled in, smothering the hazy moon. And as they ran, it was hard for the women to see much of anything. But they could hear everything. All around them people were crying out, glass shattering, things cracking apart. And those shrill, inhuman cries piercing through the black. Jenny knew that people were dying, a lot of people. But she could do nothing to help them. Maybe no one could.

Raw instinct took over and Jenny picked up the pace, running so fast she forgot whose legs were even carrying her now. Rosa whimpered and dragged along. One of the buildings to their right, the restaurant maybe, suddenly exploded in a thundering, white flash. The women collapsed and clutched their heads, ducking away from the searing, orange fireball as it reached out for them and then boiled up into the black sky like a dying sun. The women staggered to their feet again and squinted up into the rising fire. And in that fiery light, up above, pale human

figures flew and flitted about like ragged, white wasps against the darkness, howling and swooping down at their helpless human prey. Rosa saw them too, and suddenly began to crumble to her knees again, screaming about the Devil and the end of the world.

“Get up, Rosa! Come on, girl!” Jenny couldn’t believe the power in her voice and the sudden resolve in her body. Effortlessly, she hauled Rosa to her feet and scrambled forward, stepping over the crackling debris, ducking through the lapping flames. Every step of their path was littered with horror, half-eaten corpses and heaps of burning wood. And they had to keep ducking away from those shrieking shadows as they flitted by. Jenny’s mind reeled, closing off somehow to the nightmare as it grew. But her body fought always to survive, surging into a desperate, primal flight.

They kept running.

For a brief moment, a young doctor appeared, stumbling and scrambling frantically along beside them, unaware of anything else around him. He was in a terrible trance, eyes wide and deer-like as he fled, wailing and begging for God to help him. But then one of those things swooped in quickly from above, shrieking its wicked cry. And with a sick, dull crunch, the young doctor suddenly bent backward with a broken spine. Icy white hands and black fingernails digging into his flesh like talons. In the next instant, the broken man spiraled upward into the sky, screaming until his cries for help finally vanished into the night, and blood came raining down.

The women kept running, fleeing under a veil of crimson mist. Jenny’s legs were almost wooden from her frantic effort now, weary from the rush endless waves of fear, and searing jolts of adrenaline that burned inside her veins. But she kept on, dragging poor Rosa beside her, the two of them racing for the tiny chapel up ahead.

1

Blaine Piedmont shut the motor off and sat there on his Harley in the parking lot of Lil's Diner. He lit a cigar and remained straddled over his shiny new bike for a while, taking big puffs, nodding coolly at the people passing by, smiling a little behind his top-of-the-line reflective sunglasses. Blaine was a fat bastard between his belt and his chin, a bulbous gut from years behind a desk and plenty of beer after three. But from the waist down he looked like an overpriced marionette; skinny, unfit legs that slid as easily into these custom leathers he wore on the weekends as they did into his custom silk pants during the week. Behind Blaine's back, his tailor was heard to say that making a suit for Blaine was like making two. But aside from his makeshift physique, Blaine had a handsome face and a clever way speaking when he put his mind to it, years of sales and other velvet forms of bullshit he'd mastered during his twenty-five year legal career. All dressed up he looked the part; leather or silk – it didn't matter. He'd stopped shaving on Friday to have this fine layer of rough whiskers by Sunday afternoon. Right now.

Another bike pulled up next to his, Jap bike, big cruiser made by Honda or something. Blaine couldn't help but look down and feel just a tad higher on the food chain. But he wasn't about to mention something like that to the big man sitting there. Karl Randleman shut off his engine and pulled back a pair of black goggles onto his gray, crew cut head. Karl was a tall block

of gritty steel with blue eyes that felt like two fists coming at you when he was angry. Big, strong hands from years of manual labor and a gravelly deep voice from emptying cigarettes by the carton into his leathery lungs. His leather jacket proudly sported a USMC patch on the left shoulder. He'd done something with the military way back when, but he never talked about it. Karl lit a cigarette and nodded at Blaine, offering a big lead fist to bump. Blaine put up his soft little mitt and made manly contact as best he could with that manicured stub of office dough.

“New bike?” said Blaine.

“Nah,” puffed Karl. “One from the shop. Testing it out.”

“Working on a Sunday. That sucks. At least you're off now.”

“Gotta pay the bills,” droned Karl. “How 'bout you?”

Blaine sported a sly grin all of a sudden, his sun-glassed eyes tracking some middle-aged woman in tight pants as she strutted slowly by the middle-aged men. She had her dated boob job in plain view, her skin dark and freckled from the tanning booth, hair so platinum blonde it looked like she polished it with a rag. “Me,” he said. “I'm always working.” Blaine smiled, thankful to the good Lord above for the pristine timing. He always had good timing.

Like that deal with his uncle Frank.

Frank was four weeks into a six week final stretch of colon cancer. The nurse on duty had been a little too generous with the morphine so Frank was feeling particularly generous that day. And that was just when Blaine had shown up to take the old man's last will and testament. He and Frank had been close, but not that close, not close enough for Frank to leave him nearly half a million bucks. Frank's kids went ape shit over the deal and tried to prove all kinds of things, litigated desperately over the next two weeks. But there had been a notary present and a couple of witnesses too; all of them stated clearly that the old man was sharp as a tack when he signed

the papers, grinning stupidly like he always did. Soon afterward, old Frank slipped into a coma and never came out of it.

Good timing, thought Blaine. It was a gift.

“I’m hungry,” said Karl, cheeseburgers in his eyes.

“Yeah,” said Blaine. “Me too.” He scanned down the row of windows on the diner until he caught sight of the blonde to the far right. Blaine smiled. “Let’s grab a booth in the back.”

* * *

She was on that goddamn cell phone again when he peeked into the bedroom, talking with someone, speaking hurriedly in hushed tones. He didn’t ask because he really didn’t want to know; so he turned away and started for the front door. He could have left just then, but he waited just a second, holding the front door open, letting the warm summer sun spill in.

“Nicholas Gray, get your ass back here,” Lacey cried suddenly from behind. She painted on the best smile she could these days, slipped that cell phone back into her pocket and came walking out of the bedroom like nothing was going on. Nick stood there in his leathers and waited for her to catch him at the door. She came up and gave him a light kiss, like maybe he was her brother or something. “Ride safe,” she said.

“Always do,” said Nick. All these years and he still felt the same way about her. He kissed her back and grabbed her ass like they were still in high school. Used to be that when he did that, Lacey grinned and snarled and snuggled in close. But anymore, Lacey just stiffened up like maybe she didn’t know who’s hand it was back there. He felt that ugly sting in his chest and his confidence buckled.

It’s because I’m still a goddamn janitor, isn’t it, Lace? he thought.

Nick stared down at his wife, looked right into her eyes, and tried to find the girl he married somewhere in there. Lacey gave him a thin-lipped smile and another peck instead of a real kiss. Right then Jasmine and Luca came running around the corner, almost like it was planned, saying how the baby was crying for her bottle. Nick let go of Lacey's butt and gave her a hug instead.

She broke away suddenly from his arms, fixing herself. "Gotta run," she said. "You know how Lila gets about her lunch." Lacey walked off and waved a little good-bye on her way back into the baby's room, her hand reaching for that goddamn cell phone already. "You guys have fun, okay," she cried. And then Lacey disappeared around the corner again.

Nick took a long look around that apartment of theirs, at the window screen, at the shit TV, and that beat up old couch that Spider was sleeping on. That lazy Labrador was the only one who looked like he actually belonged in this junk pile. Time vanished for a moment. Maybe it was that dark expression on daddy's face, but Jasmine and Luca suddenly came up to hug him, telling him that they loved him and to have good time. Then they giggled and ran off to play again. Nick stood there staring at his whole life for a while longer, thinking about everything. Then he finally closed the door and went downstairs into the parking lot.

* * *

"What?" said Karl. "You mean, Daisy like in the Dukes of Hazard?"

"Uh-huh," nodded the platinum blonde, but she was grinning at Blaine. "And this here's my friend Pita." Daisy chonked her gum and motioned at the other girl in their booth. Pita was a skinny ash tray of a woman, fortyish, with black hair and big sexy lips under a pair of tired, sunken eyes. She wore a loose black tee shirt and a big gothic cross dangled darkly from around her delicate neck.

Karl smiled at her.

“So,” began Blaine, blowing on a spoonful of Lil’s eye-watering chili. “What are you two fine ladies doing in a place like this?”

The girls laughed. That crappy line always got a laugh. And even if it was just a bullshit awkward laugh, at least everyone there was playing the game.

“So you guys out for a ride?” said Daisy, chonking her gum some more.

“Oh yeah,” said Karl. He checked out of the corner of his eye to see if the skinny one, Pita, liked that deep gravelly voice of his.

Sure enough, Pita was grinning shyly from behind that dark wall of greasy bangs.

“Cruising Richardson Pass,” said Karl. “You know they still got snow up there this time of year. That’s how high up it is.”

“Is that true?” said Daisy, not actually doubting Karl’s words. If she’d been a guy and said that, though, Karl would have taken offense and asked if he was calling him a liar. Maybe even picked a fight if his neck was bothering him.

“That’s the truth and nothing but,” said Blaine. “You girls wanna come along?” He grinned and waited for an answer. Straight to it. That was the best part about being this age – no fucking around whatsoever. The ladies blushed and looked at each other with excited hesitation.

Daisy blew a bubble and said, “Well, how do we know you ain’t the Sundown Killers?”

“Sundown killers?” balked Blaine. He’d been called a lot of things but never that.

Karl coughed and said, “Well, how do we know *you* ain’t?”

“Girl can’t be too careful,” winked Daisy as she calculated Blaine’s leather outfit in dollars.

“They only kill at night,” peeped Pita. Everyone looked over at her, surprised she even had a voice.

“What?” said Karl. “Oh.” He checked his watch. “Well it ain’t even three yet. We got five or six hours of good ridin’ before we bust out the chainsaws and handcuffs.”

Pita giggled shyly.

“Come on,” nudged Blaine. “We won’t bite.”

“I might,” said Karl, demonstrating on his cheeseburger. He winked at Pita and she blushed some more, starting to nod already.

“Okay,” said Daisy at last. “Do we need helmets?”

The men laughed and said it together: “Only if we crash.”

“Hey,” said Karl, craning his thick neck at the window. “Look who finally showed up.”

Out in the parking lot Nick shut off his old Harley and took off the goofy half helmet that Lacey always made him wear. He felt his jacket pocket for his smokes but suddenly realized that he didn’t have time to light up just then. The boys were already inside.

“Hey there, handsome,” said Blaine, getting up to give Nick a tough hug — two crisp pats on the back and not one more.

“Hey, Blaine,” said Nick, “Karl.”

“What’s up, Nick?” Karl swallowed up Nick’s hand with his own.

“Hey,” said Blaine. “This here’s Daisy and that’s Pita. They’re riding with us today.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Nick.

Daisy smiled. “Aren’t you a little young to be hanging out with these dirty old men?”

Nick chuckled. “Yes ma’am,” he said. “I guess so. Twenty-nine.”

“God,” said Pita, “to be twenty-nine again. You’re just a baby.”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “But I’m already just as dirty as these old farts.”

“Get over here,” growled Karl playfully, swiping at the younger man with his heavy paws.

“You wanna eat something?” said Blaine.

“Nah,” said Nick. “I already ate at home.”

“Alright then,” said Karl, getting to his feet and stretching out his big chest for Pita.
“Enough talking. Let’s ride.”

2

The sign said it was \$3.00 per vehicle during the weekdays but Sundays were free.

A few missing persons flyers were taped up here and there, fluttering in the wind.

Three bikes roared past the open toll booth straight up Richardson Pass. It was a steep, two lane road that snaked up into the Wasatch mountains in big, sweeping turns. The cruisers leaned sharply, dramatically into those turns, the men smiling as the women on the back squealed with both excitement and fear, a well-known combination among bikers of all kinds to turn a woman on. Soft, feminine arms squeezed desperately around thick leather waists for safety. Nick was in the lead, the only solo rider, with Blaine and Daisy next, and Karl and Pita in the rear. Karl cracked open the throttle and pushed up next to Blaine on a straightaway so the two could nod at each other and the girls could giggle. Karl felt Pita tighten her hands around his waist, cop a feel of his pectorals now and then. Daisy had her chin on Blaine's shoulder and he was shouting back to her something about day trading and Daisy looked impressed.

Yeah, thought Karl. *Things were going well.*

Up ahead, Nick glanced back at the happy old-timers and grinned a little to himself. It was good to see that the thrill never got old, even if you did. Too bad Blaine and Karl were too fucked up to keep a good relationship. *Oh well,* he thought. *One day at a time.* But then Nick started drifting off into his own life, thinking about his girls, that shit TV, and that window

screen hanging down over his ragged couch. Then he started thinking about how Lacey didn't like him grabbing her ass any more, about how she was at home feeding the kids tater tots and fish sticks because he was still just a fucking janitor. Almost thirty years old and Nick didn't have shit going in his life. *Nothing*. That's the thought he was thinking when that stupid dog leapt out into the road and stood there staring at him like his whole purpose in life was to make Nick crash his bike.

It all happened in an instant.

Nick always told new riders about not locking up the back brake, *especially* in a turn. But that's exactly what he did, and suddenly his bike dropped out from under him like the earth had opened up and sucked it clean away. And before he knew it, Nick was sliding across the pavement with his motorcycle spraying sparks, that damned dog just prancing off into the woods, dragging his idiot leash with him. Suddenly, the high-pitched singing of pavement against steel dropped off to a low, rumbling growl. That was when Nick and his motorcycle went screaming and scraping off the road, spinning over the dirt shoulder and then finally over a ledge. Behind a pillar of dust, the two tumbled out of view, disappearing down into the forest below.

Pita was the first one to scream.

"Jesus Christ! Oh, fucking Christ!" cried Karl as he skidded up to the place where Nick flew off. He tried the kick stand for a second but then just let the big Jap cruiser crash over sideways into the rocky dirt. But nobody cared about that right now.

"Oh fuck!" cried Blaine. He said it over and over again, trying to keep cool, but his heart was already pounding out of his ears. Daisy jumped off and ran over to where the others were standing by the ledge and searching down. Blaine was shaking, messing nervously with the kickstand, trying desperately to balance his Harley in the soft gravel.

“Nick!” shouted Karl, as he started down the twelve foot embankment, shuffling sideways into the trees and shrubs below. The girls struggled down after him in their high heels and earth shoes. “Nick!”

“You see him?” shouted Blaine, finally coming up from behind.

“Not yet. Oh, Jesus. Nick!” Karl crouched down into the thick forest.

“It was that goddamn dog,” said Blaine, fussing awkwardly down the embankment.

“Nick!” shouted Karl, searching through the brush. “Fuck all, Blaine! Get your ass down here and help me. Oh, Christ, Nick. I found him!”

Karl hurried over and dropped down to one knee, leaning helplessly over the young man lying there flat on his back in the high grass and prickly shrubs. Nick looked up at Karl and searched his face with bleary eyes. He tried to move but he could only cough and groan and wince. He tried to say something.

“Shh! Quiet, goddammit,” said Karl, as softly as his throat would let him. Big hands came down gently on the young man’s chest to keep him still. “Easy, bro,” he said. “You’ll be alright.”

And then all of a sudden the girls were there, mumbling and crying and pointing at the dusty man lying there in the bushes. “Quiet!” Blaine hissed, coming up beside them. “Don’t do that. Don’t point at ‘im like he’s gonna die or something.” But the girls were in too much shock to understand and so they kept on crying and pointing and hugging each other.

“Oh, Christ.” Blaine left the girls and hurried over to where Nick was lying and leaned in close. His eyes scanned the young man for injuries. “Where’s it hurt, buddy?” he said.

Nick gasped there on his back in all those ferns and weeds and moaned in agony, writhing this way and that.

“Talk to me, man,” pressed Blaine. “Where ya hurting?”

And then, slowly, finally, Nick lifted one trembling finger, a finger that every eye in the forest followed with morbid reverence and total silence. Everyone watched and waited to see where the mortal injury was.

“Here,” Nick said weakly, pointing at his crotch. “Can you kiss it better?”

It took them a minute but then Karl suddenly burst out, “Oh, you motherfucker!” Nick started laughing and Karl was blushing, a rare thing in the dark chronicles of Karl Randleman. “You motherfucker! *Very* goddamn funny.”

“Oh, Christ.” Blaine fell back against a tree and laughed, moaning at the same time with huge relief. The poor girls were crying and smiling now, bouncing and hugging nervously from purely too much emotion.

Nick knocked on his helmet and grinned up at everyone from the grass. Good thing Lacy made him wear that thing. “Help me up, you jackass,” he said to Karl. And then Karl held out his big mitt and gently lifted Nick to his feet. The younger man winced and the girls winced with him. “No. No. I’m okay,” said Nick. “My ass hurts, though, from where I landed. You guys see that fuckin’ dog?”

“I should *kick* your ass,” said Karl. “Fuckin’ dog.”

“German Shepherd,” said Pita. “It was a German Shepherd.”

“How you know that?” said Karl.

“I just know,” she said coming over. “I used to have one.”

“I wonder whose it was,” said Nick, dusting himself off. “He had a leash.”

“Maybe his owner’s still around here,” said Pita.

“Christ,” said Blaine, still leaning against the tree. “I thought I was gonna have a heart attack.” He shook away the fright and came up to Nick for another manly hug. A few extra pats this time. Near death experiences deserved a little something extra. Suddenly, Blaine caught sight of the wreck. “Aw fuck, dude. Look at your bike.”

Everyone turned around and there it was, a deceased, crumpled heap that could have easily been the rider. Nick winced at the sight, but he couldn’t help but feel like he’d gotten off easy this time. Blaine walked over and kicked the dead bike with an expensive boot, and frowned. Karl squatted down beside it and ran his thinking fingers over the steel frame. He shook his leathery head sadly for a while before he finally began to nod again.

“We can fix it,” said Karl. “Gonna cost; but I can fix her up.”

“Yeah,” said Nick “How much?”

“Few grand,” said Karl. The girls gasped at the sizable figure. Money didn’t come easily in Morrow. “Maybe more. I don’t know.”

“A few *grand!*”

And right then Daisy looked over at Blaine, the guy who’d been talking big bucks all the way up the mountain. And then suddenly, everyone was looking at him. Blaine began to perspire in the hot sun. He wiped his forehead and cleared his throat and said, “Um, yeah. No problem. I, uh, I got ya covered, bro. Two, three grand. No big deal.”

“Maybe more,” said Karl.

Blaine winced.

“Aw,” said Daisy, taking his arm. “Ain’t you just a peach.”

3

The five of them stood there in the forest staring down at the twisted motorcycle. They decided the best thing to do was to just hide the bike for now, cover it up until Karl could come back with the wrecker and winch it out of the canyon. Everyone gathered up some branches and leaves and chunks of brush, and then they piled them up over the twisted old Harley until it was sufficiently camouflaged.

“That should do it,” said Karl at last.

“I can still see a little piece of it right there,” said Pita. She pointed and Blaine kicked up a wad of grass as the final measure. Pita backed up the ridge with Daisy and said, “I just want to see if you can see it from the — ” Pita opened her mouth all of a sudden and pointed again, only this time up over everyone’s heads.

“What is it?” said Karl.

They all spun around and squinted, staring back into the forest.

“Help!” cried the frumpy, older man as he burst out from the trees, running as fast as he could. He was dressed like a hunter, but he carried only a duffel bag instead of a gun. He looked to be in his sixties, out of shape for sure, and totally out of his mind. He ran awkwardly, right at the others with wide eyes and a beet red face. “Help!” he cried again, gasping now. “Help me. Oh God. They’re all dead.” He stumbled up and collapsed to his knees, sagging into Nick’s arms.

Nick lifted the man back to his feet. “Easy, dude,” he said. “What the hell’s going on?”

“Oh my God,” said Pita. “Is he hurt?”

The gasping, gunless hunter clutched his chest and winced. “Did you see anyone else come out?” His eyes searched the silent leather men and the wide-eyed women, waiting. But then his face went slack with utter hopelessness. “Anyone at all?”

“Saw a dog,” said Daisy meekly.

“German Shepherd,” said Pita.

Karl and Blaine and Nick began darting their eyes around the forest.

“Rusty,” the man said, panting sadly to himself. “He got away. That’s a good boy.”

“What happened, mister?” demanded Karl. His cold eyes still scanning the trees. “Who’s dead?”

The man could hardly breathe. “They’re *all* dead,” he panted.

“Now hold on a second, mister,” said Blaine. He wanted to ask the man some questions but he was half delirious, babbling on about names and places and death, things that didn’t make any sense right now. The girls got upset as Karl grabbed the man and tried to shake him to his senses, but it was no use; he just kept blubbering about strange, unintelligible things. And then he just went limp and started sobbing. Blaine leaned over to examine the man’s duffel bag.

“No!” cried the man. “Don’t open that!” But Nick and Karl held him back while Blaine unzipped the camouflage bag, looking for money or whatever. It’d be just his timing to find something like that.

“You shouldn’t go through somebody else’s things,” said Pita. “It’s not right.”

“Like hell it’s not,” said Karl, restraining the old man by his camouflage jacket. “If people been killed, this guy could be in on it.”

“No,” said the man. “No. It’s was’t us. It was *them*. I swear to you.”

Daisy went white. “It’s the killers ain’t it?”

The man nodded, slobbering and crying still.

“Dude’s lost it,” said Nick. “He’s fucking lost it.”

“If it was the Sundown Killers,” said Karl, “then how the fuck *he* get away?”

Daisy shook her head. “Nobody gets away. I read the papers.”

“What the fuck?” said Blaine, peering into the man’s bag. “The hell’s this?”

“Lemme see,” said Daisy, pushing her breasts past Blaine’s hands to take a peek. Her face went slack with sudden disappointment. “A mallet? Maybe he’s a realtor.”

“Wooden stakes, some bottled water...” Blaine was a little let down.

“Guns?” said Nick. “Cash? Dope?”

“Nothing like that, no.”

Karl jerked the old man close. “The hell’s going on, mister?” he growled. But he didn’t get any kind of an answer. The poor man just blubbered and begged until he collapsed.

“For heaven’s sake, you guys,” cried Pita. “Let’s hear him out.”

“Maybe he didn’t do nothin’,” said Daisy.

“An’ maybe he did,” said Karl, hauling the man up by his jacket. “Start talkin’.”

The man kept weeping, shaking his head and trying to collapse again.

“Oh fuck this,” said Nick. Let’s just get our asses up to the road. Everyone started walking that way.

“Fine,” said Karl. “I’ll drag him if I have to.”

“No. Please,” begged the man. “Let me catch my breath.”

Karl turned away from the others as they headed off, growling at the old man. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m dragging you up there in two fuckin’ minutes. We’re gonna get to the bottom of this one way or another.” The man sobbed and nodded in hopeless compliance. “Blaine! Nick!” shouted Karl at the four heading up the hill. “Maybe we should have a look.” He jerked a big thumb back into the forest where the man had come from.

“No thanks,” said Blaine. “I’m gonna see if I can get reception, call the cops.”

“No reception up here, jackass,” snapped Karl. “You know that.”

“Gonna try anyhow,” said Blaine. Meanwhile, Pita had given up on her no search policy and started rummaging freely through the old man’s duffel bag along with Daisy and Nick. Everybody mumbling and shaking their heads.

Karl looked at his watch and frowned. “Fuck it,” he said. “I’m gonna have a look.”

“No, Karl!” shouted Nick. “Wait for the cops!”

But Karl was already walking off into the forest. “You stay put,” he said to the weeping man. “Don’t make me chase your ass down.” And then he kept on going.

“Stay out of the shadows!” cried the man to Karl’s back. “And whatever you do, don’t go in the cave!”

“Shut the fuck up,” said Karl over his shoulder.

Blaine shook his head from the side of the hill. “Crazy old son of a bitch,” he said, still trying to make a call. He cursed his phone then looked up at the sun. “We have maybe an hour or so of daylight left. We gotta find somebody.”

“You think he’s crazy?” asked Daisy.

“I don’t know,” said Blaine. “Maybe.”

Nick was keeping an eye on the weeping man sitting there down the hill. But then he turned to Blaine and said, “Why don’t you and Daisy ride down for help. I’ll wait here with Karl and...”

“Pita,” she said.

“Right. Pita. Sorry. So what do y’all think?”

“Maybe you’re right,” said Blaine, pretending to consider it. “Maybe we should.”

“Enough bullshit!” Karl’s gravelly voice suddenly roared up out from the forest below. “You tell me what the hell is going on, you old fucker! Or I’ll break your goddamn neck!”

“What the hell?” said Nick, spinning back around.

Daisy gasped. “He’s gonna kill ‘im!”

All four of them went scrambling back down the ravine. Karl was practically lifting the man off the ground by his jacket now, shaking him like a can of paint.

“Karl!” shouted Nick. “Whoa! Buddy! What the hell?”

Karl had his fist back and his eyes were burning into the old man that was begging him to stop. Karl froze at Nick’s voice and then looked up at him. “I seen ‘em, Nick. Four of ‘em. Hundred yards back that way, by a cave. Fuckin’ heads tore clean off.” The girls squealed and the men felt a tingly sickness touch their stomachs. This was real murder. Karl looked down at the man and growled, “Jesus Christ, we got us a serial killer here.” He grabbed the man’s throat and started to squeeze his life away. Every hand in the forest reached over and wrestled with Karl’s one arm. And he only ever let go because Pita asked him nicely. “Fine,” sneered Karl, shoving the old man to the ground.

“What the hell happened?” said Nick.

“It wasn’t me!” pled the man. “I swear to God!”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here, goddammit!” said Blaine. “Let the cops deal with this.”

“In a minute!”

“He didn’t do it,” said Pita.

“How the hell you know that?” said Karl.

“I just do, okay. He didn’t do it.”

Karl frowned, but he listened. Pita could make him do that much.

“Just look at him,” said Daisy. “No blood or nothin’ on his clothes.”

Silence came over the six of them. They all thought for a moment.

“She’s right,” said Nick. “I say he didn’t do it.”

“And I say,” said Blaine, “we get the fuck out of here.”

4

The old Ford pickup grumbled east, music blaring, smoke billowing out of the open windows. Brett Bagley's red eyes squinted over the steering wheel as his truck growled and wandered up the steep, two lane road, huge pine trees walling them in on either side. He and his girlfriend were laughing carelessly into the loud music and all that heavy smoke that engulfed them, swerving even more than they usually did.

Brett blamed Julie for that.

She kept reaching over and trying to take the joint out of his mouth the whole time they were barreling up the pass. She wanted a hit off that thing, but Brett said she'd have to admit that her mother was a slimy sea cow first. Julie said she'd never say a thing like that, not about her mother, not unless he paid her or something. But a few miles up Richardson Pass, she broke down and finally said that terrible thing, and took the whole last half of the joint to herself. A couple hits later, Julie Price couldn't stop laughing hysterically about it. "I hate you," she said. "Oh my God! What the fuck is a sea cow anyway?"

"Manatee," said Brett, squinty-eyed, through a cloud of smoke. "Cow of the fuckin' ocean, babe." They laughed and swerved and laughed at that too. He had his cap on backwards and was grinning like a fool, squinting out of two bloodshot slits at the winding road. All of a

sudden he looked up at the sky and said, “Fuck, babe, let’s just camp out tonight and hit the falls in the manana, k. Cool with you?”

Julie shrugged and puffed and said, “Sure. Whatever.” She loved to say ‘whatever’ whenever she could. It was the lazy new thing to do among kids and adults alike. It was a way of acting like you didn’t give a shit about anything in the whole world, a way of practicing some impolite form of detachment. The new Holy Grail of cool. *Whatever*.

But then Julie thought about how maybe she did care, and about how she’d really rather just keep driving until they got up to the falls and splash around in the dark. That would be cool too. “On second thought,” she began, coughing up a ball of smoke. “Maybe the falls first.” But then she considered cooking out right away — smores and munchies. “Okay. Maybe camping and then the falls. Or how about camping out at the fucking falls?” Julie laughed and grabbed Brett’s crotch. “Or fucking and camping at the fucking falls.”

Brett leaned forward and squinted harder still, cackling and getting a hard-on. The cannabis had kicked in completely now, clouding up his jerky seventeen year old brain even further. He was having trouble listening and hearing at the same time, not to mention driving that goddamn truck. And now all of a sudden Julie wanted him to think too. “Babe,” he said, looking over at his girl. “I don’t know what the fuck you just said. But I’m totally—”

“Look out!!!”

Dry rubber screamed on the asphalt, and the whole truck went sideways as the old Ford locked up its balding gray tires. The tinny sound of an angry motorcycle horn blared out as some old fat guy and a bleached blonde barely swerved out of their way. The blonde lady was screaming as they screeched past each other. Finally, the truck skidded to a stop and sat there in its own rubbery steam. “Jesus Christ!” said Brett, clutching the steering wheel like it was his own

failing heart. The setting sun flickered through the swaying pines at him and made silhouettes out of the whole world for a moment, a black and white film with a soft haze around the lighter parts. And just then, it crossed Brett's fragile mind that maybe that's what the world would look like if you were a ghost.

"Holy fuck!" said Julie. "We totally almost killed those people." She looked out the window and saw that the Harley was making a U-turn down the hill and coming back up. "Holy shit, babe. They're coming back. Fucking bikers are gonna kill us."

"Bullshit," said Brett, playing it cool. But he backed up quickly, straightened the truck out and started to drive off just the same, heavy on the gas. He glanced in the rear view mirror and saw that the bike was gaining on them fast. And then all of a sudden that fat guy and the blonde came racing up beside the truck and started shouting for the kids to pull over.

"Fuck you!" yelled Brett. And so did Julie.

"Pull over, goddammit!" yelled Blaine.

"We just need your help!" cried Daisy. "Somebody's been hurt! We need help!"

It took four miles and a lot of screaming to get those kids to pull over, and even longer to try to explain what the hell was going on. But finally, they got the picture and eventually followed Blaine and Daisy back up the pass to where the others were waiting.

Dusk was rolling in fast. Long, tall shadows began to stretch out over the forest as the pale sun died slowly down before them. Nick and Karl and Pita were having some kind of frantic discussion as the old red Ford and the Harley rolled back up to meet them, the old hunter sitting there in the middle of them all.

"He's freaking me out," said Pita. "I think we should just leave."

"Don't worry," said Nick. "We will."

“The hell *are* you talking about, mister?” growled Karl at the blubbering man. “Four people are dead, and you expect me to believe this crazy bullshit?”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” said Pita. “This is horrible. We should just leave.”

“Please,” begged the man. “I know it sounds crazy.” He kept darting his head around like a acid freak on a bad trip. “We don’t have much time. We need to go! We need to go right now!”

“No more crazy talk,” said Karl. “Just shut your fuckin’ pie hole and sit there.”

“I don’t know what’s going on,” said Blaine coming up. “But I have to agree. Time to ditch this place. Trust me, you don’t want to get mixed up in a murder scene. Leave this shit to the cops.” Blaine jerked a thumb back at the two teens in the truck. “Couple of kids we ran into on our way down the pass. Said they’d pack Nick and... What the hell *is* your name, anyway, mister?”

Nick and Karl and Pita looked a little stunned. They hadn’t even thought to ask the man his name in the middle of all this rambling.

“Oliver,” said the man, still nervous as hell. “Look, we really need to get out of here, quickly as possible. We gotta leave!” He started blubbering again, trying to pull away from Nick and Karl so he could dive into the truck. He wanted out of there bad. “You don’t know what’s coming. Please,” he begged. “We have to go!”

“Jesus Christ,” said Karl, shaking his concrete head. “All that bitchy whining, lucky you ain’t riding with me. That’s all I have to say.” Pita touched his big arm and told him not to get too upset. Karl grunted and went over to check the light damage on the Jap cruiser. Couple of scratches was all, that and a busted blinker. Not much, but it would have to come out of *his* lousy paycheck.

“Alright, Ollie,” said Nick. “You ‘n me in the back.” And then to the teens, Brett and Julie, he said, “Hey, thanks, guys.” He asked them their names and they told him as he shoved Oliver back into the bed of the old Ford. The two men sat down between the cheap tent and dirty coolers the kids had tossed in earlier, settling in as best they could with old Oliver about to crawl out of his skin. And just before they started the engine, Nick reached over and knocked on the driver side window.

Brett rolled it down and said through a white cloud, “Yeah? What’s up?”

“Hey,” said Nick. “Mind if a take a toke, bro? It’s been one helluva day.”

5

He went over the evidence in his mind for the thousandth time. *Christ! What evidence?* he thought. *Black sand and black, curdled blood?* The murders didn't make any sense. The Medical Examiner had been dragging his ass on the lab reports and dodging deadlines since the murders began. Obviously, they were hiding something over there. Something big.

No, he thought. They hadn't left him much choice.

Sheriff Bill Underwood checked his watch and then leaned back into his deep leather chair, scratching his chin. He frowned pensively under a thick, salt and pepper mustache. It was getting late, and still no phone call. Still nothing from the men. Bill got a sinking feeling in his gut. *Should have been there with them*, he thought. They had the old crew together, minus him of course, but said they could handle it just fine. They always could in the past. But maybe this was like nothing they'd had to face before. Maybe it really was unnatural like Oliver said. On top of all that, the boys weren't as young as they used to be. Not one of them under fifty. He thought about those men and their families and...

Jesus, he should have been there.

Patty Wells, his secretary, knocked lightly on the open door and peeked into his office. She was a thin, pleasant woman with a light gray bun that sat on top of her cheerful head like a home-baked dinner roll. "Sheriff?" she said. "You busy?"

“No,” said Bill, shaking away his worry. “No. No. Come on in, Patty. What’s up?”

“Your wife called about the travel package.”

“And?”

“She said it’s gonna be a thousand instead of seven fifty for those tickets. That ad you saw was in *last* month’s magazine. Sale’s over.” Patty winced. “That sucks, right? You still want her to pick them up? I would,” she said. “Cabo’s beautiful. I think you guys will love it. Do you like fishing?” Silence. “You okay, Sheriff?”

“Fine,” said Bill, snapping out of it again. “Yeah, sure. Tell her to go on ahead. Shit, it’s only money right?”

Patty smiled. “Only money. I’ll go give her a call right now.”

“Thank you, Patty.”

Patty was about to leave when she poked her head back in and said, “You sure you’re okay, Bill. You seem... distracted. Sundown case getting under your skin?”

“Something like that. Yeah. I’ll be okay. Thanks though.”

Patty nodded and left. He could hear her chatting with Melinda on the other line, talking about vacations and the weather and good times ahead. It made Bill sick to his stomach knowing that his men might never come home, might not even be around to share those good times with him. A dark cloud of gloomy certainty began to form inside his mind. Christ, he should have been there. Shoulda’ listened to his gut. Bill’s hand reached out for the phone as if it had already lost all hope. *Not yet*, he thought. *Give ‘em a little more time.*

But what if that crazy shit Oliver was talking about wasn’t so crazy after all?

Bill shuddered.

God help ‘em if it was true. God help them all.

6

Oliver kept blubbering as the sun was dying in the west. The old guy wanted to leave the forest more than anything in the world. “Quit yer bitchin’!” growled Karl. “We’re outta here already.” The big man straddled his cruiser and began fishing around his jacket pockets for the keys. Oh there they were, right there in the ignition. Pita jumped on the back and Blaine and Daisy were ready to go too, everyone ready to start their motors and get this whack job Oliver back to town where they could arrest him or whatever the hell they were going to do. *Jesus*, thought Karl, remembering those decapitated bodies back there. It had been a while since he’d seen death like that, not that it bothered him as much as it did other people. But still, the way those bodies were torn apart, he just had no idea how that could happen to a man.

The tangerine sun dipped down, touching the tips of the mountains now. Long shadows grew out of the trees and began crossing the road, touching and climbing over everything. Blaine and Karl were about to start their bikes when Oliver suddenly jumped up in the bed of that old Ford and started screaming at the top of his lungs. “There they are!” he cried. “Oh God I told you! Hurry! Run!”

Karl wheeled around and Nick got up fast, standing up in the bed of the truck too. Oliver kept screaming and shouting and pointing at something in the forest, pointing all around. Blaine and Daisy and Pita and the kids were scared half to death by that maniac’s outburst, frozen for a

second. But one by one they snapped out of it, squinting and craning their necks in the direction everyone was looking, trying to focus on the darkness between the trees.

That's when they saw them.

"Oh fuck me," said Karl, his eyes gaping wide.

"You see them, don't you?" squealed Oliver. "Oh God what are we waiting for? Run!"

"Jesus Christ," said Blaine. "You see 'em too, Nick?"

"I see 'em," Nick rasped. "I definitely see 'em."

"Oh my God," said Pita. "Who are they?"

They caught only fleeting glimpses of them at first, those bleached white faces and pale human bodies that darted quickly from shadow to shadow, avoiding the slightest ray of errant sun. The forest was a tangle of fractured darkness, a maze of unlit earthen patches that were, for now, the only safe paths for these wretched things that watched them. Hopping, flitting, and even floating like pale moths through the growing shadows, coming closer and closer to the people there as darkness fell. And then all at once their black mouths gaped open, bearing rows of razor teeth, crying out with inhuman tones and supernatural tongues that chilled the dusky air. Black, glassy eyes glared and pierced the people's flesh with the purest intent to kill.

Julie screamed and clutched the frozen boy trembling at the wheel of his truck.

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" cried Blaine. Oliver went hysterical and Nick slapped him down into the bed of the truck and shouted "Go! Go! Go!" to the kids up front. Both bikes roared to life and the girls were back there squeaking frantically, like little birds in a nest watching a snake crawl up to get them.

The wraith people were closing in now with the growing dark, darting from shadow patch to stretching shadow, skittering through the trees, bleeding down along the roadside toward the

scrambling human mob. Tires screeched and motors roared, spraying dusty gravel into the air as everyone flipped around to make a run for it. But they'd have to ride right past those things in order to break free toward town. The people on bikes suddenly felt incredibly bare and vulnerable, like skinless mice against a wall.

“Oh God!” shrieked Daisy. “What are they?”

“I don't know,” said Blaine, jerking back on the throttle. “And I don't wanna know. Hang on!”

The three vehicles lurched forward and every face was puckered up in a wincing prayer, begging the good Lord that those things weren't going to come out and jump right on their backs. Because that's what it looked like they'd do. The bikes picked up speed quickly and the truck roared behind. And then all of a sudden a loud crack sounded out of the forest and a huge pine tree crashed down across the roadway right in front of them. Both bikes nearly went down in a desperate screech of smoking rubber. Nick and Oliver reached out for the edges of the truck like two cats tied to a Frisbee as Brett and Julie spun the old Ford around for the second time that day, banging the front bumper right up against the huge, felled tree.

“Holy fuck!” said Karl. “I don't believe it.”

“They cut us off,” rasped Nick.

“Oh God,” wailed Oliver. “Here they come!”

The great shadow of the high mountains crept forward as the sun died down, and the pallid wraiths hopped trees and skittered over rocks like a mass of human spiders, crawling and floating toward the three stranded vehicles below. One of the awful, corpse-like monsters found the shadow of the felled tree. It was a woman, or once it was. And she crawled up quickly onto the hood of the old Ford and shrieked into the windshield at two young teens. Her supernatural

scream split the ears of everyone around, and her gaping, black mouth, stretched open all the way back to her muddy hair, glistening with a hundred bloody fangs. Eyes so black they stole the light around them as they stared right at the young boy with wicked murder.

Brett stared back and froze.

“Brett!” screamed Julie, screamed it as loud as she’d ever screamed before. “Back up, Brett!” She yelled and squalled hard enough that she could feel her vocal cords tearing like wet paper in her desperate throat. Julie shook her catatonic boyfriend madly by the shoulders, but Brett wouldn’t move. All the while the dead lady thing and those shadows were crawling up the onto the hood.

“U-turn, goddammit!” shouted Blaine at the truck. He and Karl had already whipped their bikes around and were screaming for that paralyzed Ford to move its ass.

That horrible creature on the hood stared at Julie now and she fainted onto the dash.

“Nick!” shouted Karl. “You crazy fuck!”

All of a sudden a crowbar smashed across the bloody, woman-thing’s face and she tumbled backward, screaming off the hood of the truck and onto the pavement. But all Nick could do was stand there in shock as that awful creature just jumped back up as quickly as it had fallen. She shrieked and hissed at him, her arms fanned wide with bitter rage.

“Fuck me,” he rasped. Nick dropped the crowbar and dove into the driver’s seat, shoving the catatonic teenager to the side. Now there were more of those things coming, climbing up though the shadows toward the truck. There must have been a dozen. More! Black, shiny eyes like dark pools of infected blood, all glaring with wild rage, those hellish cries bellowing up from hungry, wicked throats.

“Nick!” Shouted Karl, veins bulging out of his thick neck like fiery blue worms. “You get your ass back here!!! Or so help me God!!”

Nick turned the key and the old Ford complained, but just wouldn't start. “Oh Jesus,” he cried, trying again. Four of those things were up on the hood now, scratching wildly through the metal and the glass. “Start goddammit!”

Then, all of a sudden, a mob of those ragged creatures came up over the tree in a grizzly rush. Pale faces, bloody mouths and clawing fingers filled the splitting windshield. From where Nick sat, it looked like somebody had dumped a whole cemetery over the hood of the truck. There must have been twenty of those things. But he wasn't about to hang around and count.

“Come on!”

Nick pumped the gas and twisted the key and the truck suddenly roared to life.

Screeching tires. Gears grinding. Two passed out stoner kids to his right and Nick was making that old Ford do things it hadn't done in years. A few of those creatures tried clinging to the hood as he backed away, tumbling off into the fading sunlight. They suddenly shrieked and writhed and burst into bright blue flames like they were made out of flash paper. Their ashes and embers exploded into the rushing wind and then disappeared almost instantly. The rest of those things scurried back into the shadow of the fallen tree and crouched there, hissing fiercely, guarding the only way out of the pass.

Nick flipped the truck around, heading east now, the only way he could go. He dumped the clutch and floored the gas, coming up as fast as he could behind the charging motorcycles ahead.

Well, there you have it...

Thank you very much again for picking up this preview of The Pass. I hope you have thoroughly enjoyed what you've read so far. And if so, please tell any and everyone you can about my coming book. You have my deepest gratitude in advance, as well my promise to continue creating to the very best of my ability. I look forward to wandering more of these dark and exciting realms together in the future.

Until then, sleep well.

Sincerely,

Walt Bayless

www.waltbayless.com

<http://www.facebook.com/waltbayless>



Serious agents and publishers are very welcome.