

## CHAPTER ONE

### FIVE WORDS

*Five words.*

Five simple words. And my life is over.

It wasn't much of a life by most standards. I'm just a normal guy without anything great about me. I don't even have a big group of friends. Not many people will notice when I'm gone.

I guess I should be glad it wasn't something like "You are dying of cancer." But I stare out the car window without any feeling of relief. The miles stretch ahead with no sign of a town. I can't shake the feeling that my death is going to be slower and more painful than a horrible disease.

*Five words.*

I repress a sigh, knowing Aunt Kate will hear me over the engine noise as she drives. We haven't listened to music for miles, preferring to sit in silence while the endless road rolls underneath us.

The dimmed reflection in the window shows an average seventeen-year-old guy with messy dark hair and tired brown eyes behind dark-framed glasses. I took my contacts out a long time ago.

As the road drops down the hill and curves its way steeply to the river at the bottom, a few lights from Lewiston, Idaho appear. They are scattered on our side of the river and stretch up the hill on

the other side. The road veers away from the town, and streetlights line the road to illuminate a small gas station.

I glance at it, too road weary to be more than only vaguely interested. One old Toyota sits at the pumps with the hose still connected but no one in sight. The pickup looks like it's been through a war with rusty holes throughout the body and a dent on the side of the bed. There isn't a speck of dust on it, though. Whoever owns the truck is proud of it.

We weren't supposed to come this way, but the only road from Missoula was closed due to a terrible accident. I try to think of something else. Death is not what I want to think about tonight or any other time.

I glance ahead and catch my breath.

*It can't be. Not that high!*

The creatures I've seen before never stayed high in the air for long periods, apparently preferring the depths of the earth. But I can't ignore what I see. My heart races. I stare at the grotesque form on the crossbar of the light.

My hands start to shake, so I press them into my seat. Aunt Kate doesn't see it. She *can't* see it.

Panic rushes over me like a speeding car. I want to run. I want to squeeze my eyes shut and yell until he's gone.

*Until they're all gone.*

I always avoid their vile stares. If I pretend not to notice them, maybe they will leave me alone. The rule has worked well so far. I broke

this rule twice, unable to avoid their eyes. Then really bad things happened. So I do everything I can to avoid looking at them.

The shape shifts when we draw closer. The long wings behind it are similar to an eagle, but these are large enough to support a big man even though this is no man, no matter how much it may look like it.

I can't help but stare at him. His eyes shift down to me. He sees me, and he knows I see him.

The light dimly illuminates long arms with finger-like talons clutching the metal bar. I stare at the deformed nose, the mutilated skin, and the dark eyes staring down at me. A long, jagged scar crosses his nose.

That moment when they know that I see them is what terrifies me. They know they are invisible to almost everyone. Anyone who can see them is a friend or an enemy.

*I don't want to be either.*

Evil radiates out of him, threatening to tear me apart. He wants to destroy me, but then he glances at Aunt Kate and cackles. I hear him over the engine. I can imagine what he's thinking, and bile rises in my throat.

*Drive!*

I fight the urge to push on Aunt Kate's foot. He smirks at my discomfort and slowly points his long, talon-like finger at me.

*Why won't you drive faster? Get past him before he destroys us. Get out of here!*

We pass under him, and I hold my breath while I wait for the thud of the demon landing on the roof. It doesn't happen. I glance in the side mirror and see that he has twisted to watch us flee into the darkness.

I sigh.

*Maybe there's just one. Maybe I'll be safe.*

Aunt Kate mistakes my sigh and glances over at me with her nose wrinkled. She pinches it and makes a face.

"It's the paper mill," Aunt Kate says, much more nasally than needed. She points across the river at a large building. "That's why it smells like rotten eggs."

She's trying to be funny. It might have worked any other time. She can normally make me laugh. But not tonight. I nod, trying to avoid talking because I don't want the foul air in my mouth.

That's the last thing said. The town and the lights drop away in the background. Winding through a canyon and up a mountain pass, we emerge onto a rolling prairie dotted with farms and small towns. The road twists through the curves of the hills before it straightens on the flat land.

*What would I see out there if it was the middle of the day instead of late at night?*

Judging by the lack of lights, there aren't any houses for miles. I shift in my seat. Being surrounded by nothing is strange. I don't like it.

*Five words.*

“School starts soon.” Aunt Kate breaks the silence. “Are you ready?”

I groan. She doesn’t mean ready in the sense of clothes. She’s talking about handling the reminders of what happened last year.

*Why does she have to bring that up now?*

I glance at Aunt Kate. Her grip on the steering wheel and the tight lines of her face tell me she’s tired. And worried.

The soft light from the dashboard reveals her long dark hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and her dark eyes that normally twinkle with mischief and energy are dull while she scans the road ahead.

I suddenly feel bad for her. She hadn’t planned to raise me. But there was no one else when Mom died. Mom didn’t have any other siblings, and I wasn’t going to stay with Dad even if he could have taken me.

No. Don’t think of that tonight. Not with so much emptiness around. I fight the darkness inside of me. The green clock melts into a soft white, and the red glare of the dashboard reminds me of blood...

Blood mingles with my pleas for her not to leave me. White intermingles with red on my hands as I crawl to her. His laugh mixes with the strange ringing in my ears...

“You’ll meet some of the kids in your class at church,” Aunt Kate’s voice jolts me to the present. “I know it’s hard to start a new school in your senior year, but it won’t be as bad as you think.”

“Church?” I try to stop the disdain, but I can’t.

“It’s a new start, Nic.” Aunt Kate grips the wheel tighter as the road curves down a hill.

*Is it the hill, Aunt Kate, or the reoccurring argument causing your knuckles to turn white?*

“Oh, don’t analyze me!” Aunt Kate shook her finger at me. “You’ll have plenty of time to do that to others when you work for the FBI!”

She always knows when I’m reading her body language. It’s not like it’s something I can stop. People always give clues about what they’re thinking and feeling, and I see them. It’s not my fault it’s so obvious.

Aunt keeps talking. “When we talked about this in Chicago, you agreed we need one, remember? The school won’t be like...” She says no more.

I finish her sentence in my head.

*It won’t be like before.*

I stare into the night. We skirt a small town named Craigmont with fifty or so streetlights and leave them behind. It’s so empty and quiet. I shiver. In Chicago, I could use the lights and noise to hide the darkness in myself. Normally.

Until that day in school.

I wince and shift to distract my thoughts by looking for deer that like to graze by the road. Ryan told us to watch for them. But it's like trying to use a paper cut on your finger to distract you from a leg that's torn off.

*Five words.*

It had been just us for eight years. Then she met Ryan, a cop in our neighborhood. I couldn't blame her for falling in love with him. After they got married, life was okay. I could pretend I had parents.

Ryan filled a room with swords, battle axes, and bookcases packed with fantasy and psychology books. Since I love both, he shared with me. Sometimes I could almost forget what happened to turn my life into a horror movie.

The blackness from the countryside creeps into my heart as the memories are too hard to fight. Like a mighty wave of the ocean, the dark in me sweeps everything away and fills me with fresh horror...

The door slams. The flash of metal blinds me. Strange noises fill my ears. The shadow twists on the white wall to become a monster with wings. Red blends with white...

I jerk back to the present and try to slow down my racing heartbeat.

*Five words.*

Ryan wanted to go home. He thought the change would be good for us. For me, honestly. A job opened up as a game ranger, something he'd always wanted to do. Then that day at school happened. Later I grabbed a knife to fight the shadows.

*I was asleep, right? It wasn't the darkness?*

So they made a decision, and that's when they told me the news that ripped through me like claws from an angry beast.

*Five words.*

“We are moving to Idaho.”

One, two, three, four, five.