

## ONE

There was never a sunrise in Ashes, there was the rumor of a sunrise. Deep in the mountains, surrounded by jagged peaks, the big red orb rose out of sight sheltered by the massive rock. In summer, the heavens would just drift from indigo to a hazy grey and finally to the brilliant blue stark against the greenery. The sun herself, fashionably late, would gloriously emerge at ten taking her proper place in the sky heedless of those who'd been waiting for her.

Underneath, unchanged for a hundred thousand sunrises, the mountains speared up, made even more serrated by pine and Douglas fir trees tickling along the ridges. In the mid-August heat, the greens seemed to glow before any light hit them they were so vibrant. The trees beyond a number you could count. Wisps of morning mist drifted past, the little bit of moisture cold and refreshing before the heat of the day snuffed it out. Beneath all this natural beauty, and also never changing, the town of Ashes spread out in beige and brick, mottling the valley floor like a dry crack in the skin. Still kind of beautiful, but clearly an acquired taste. Like every town in Washington State, it had started out as a logging village and grown through fits and starts to what it was now. The streets had the feel of an old west town, but the buildings had been built up in the 50s by vets returning home. The collision of old brick buildings and art deco gave it a model America look. It was like the Norman Rockwell ideal of a gold rush town and Jesse adored it.

Wandering idly down Main Street, Jesse Crawford looked at the town with the intimacy of something he loved and the banality of something that never changed. He was a young man by the town's often geriatric standards, and barely looked his twenty-four years. His hair was longer, ruffled and settling over his ears, although nowadays he took the time to style it right. His blue eyes were bright, his features sharp and in another world he might have been called dashing. Though, to be fair, that world was likely only in his head. He was clean shaven, his clothes perfectly pressed, and as he walked down the street in Ashes, he felt like he owned the place.

Jesse glanced around at the familiar shops and storefronts, taking in the sights and smells of his hometown in the morning. On his left, Mellie's Café was opening up. From the door, hefting a foldable wooden sign, Raul Melecio rambled out, the scent of sizzling bacon wafting with him. Jesse glanced at his watch, knowing long before the hands came into focus that it was eight fifteen. Mr. Melecio was a big man, maybe two-fifty or two seventy-five, who had affected the same bushy moustache for as long as Jesse could remember. At least long enough for some kids in Ashes to call him 'the walrus'. A Cuban immigrant, he had settled in Ashes to start his restaurant after spending a week on a rickety fishing boat in the Gulf of Mexico, arriving in Florida sunburned and hungry. When he was ten, Jesse had bought every word of that story. Now, he cracked a smirk at the thought. When he was twenty, the time had grown to ten days. A few weeks ago, he'd heard the story again only now it was three weeks. The big man finished positioning his sign just right, then seeing Jesse, offered a friendly wave as he strolled back in. Jesse kept his smirk and waved back, walking straight past the sign with the day's specials chalked in place. He didn't need to look. He already knew what was on the menu for a Monday.

Down the street other doors were being opened, blinds being drawn up, OPEN signs flipped by calloused hands. A few cars with out of state license plates were already parked. Ashes was one of the last stops before the Canadian border, explaining the unfamiliar faces walking by. One attractive woman about Jesse's age wandered past. As they passed, her eyes ran up and down his clothes then smiled at him. He grinned back happily.

At the end of the block was his destination, the General Store. A completely generic place, with a completely generic name. As the tiny bell rang above the door, the completely generic greying man who ran the place looked up with a scowl. He'd had it in for Jesse ever since he'd caught him stealing donuts when he was fourteen.

"Morning Darcy." Jesse chirped at him cheerily.

The scowl deepened, the man begrudgingly returning the greeting.

"Morning Sheriff."

Hearing his title, Jesse subconsciously straightened his green jacket. Beneath, pressed with creases razor sharp, his khaki shirt shifted giving a brief glimpse of the silver star on his left breast. Just like he was the hero in a western. His pants were similarly crisp, the crease down the front matching the yellow stripe down the side all the way to his polished boots. The wardrobe didn't help, as the store owner still glared at him as he wandered over.

Jesse glanced back through the door at the warming sky.

"It's gonna be another hot one today."

"Sure." Darcy grunted.

He instantly turned and began pouring Jesse's usual cup of morning coffee behind the counter, wanting this transaction over as fast as possible. The discomfort only gave him more joy, as that was why he came in here in the morning. He didn't even like coffee.

"How's the mayor doing?" The owner grunted feebly as he worked.

*Still a sanctimonious, condescending, pain in the ass.* Jesse thought.

"Oh, same as always." The lawman murmured. Then, theatrically: "How about a donut this morning too? I remember those being pretty good."

Darcy looked over his shoulder, the scowl turning into an abyss. Wordless, the store owner pulled a cruller from the display case, slipped it into a paper bag beside his coffee and presented him with both.

"Five fifty." He grunted.

Jesse paid, and lifted up his things with one final smile.

"Thanks Darcy. You have yourself a good one now." By which he meant: *Screw you, old man.* Then slipped happily out the door.

Back on the street, he headed back over to where he'd parked, the dull white Ford with the Sheriff's star right where he'd left it. In the sixteen months since the election he'd settled into a contented routine. His grandfather had told him once that being Sheriff was like carrying an invisible mountain on your shoulders. No one could see it, but you were damn near crushed by the weight.

He hadn't felt that yet. There was much to do, but little stakes. A sheriff was supposed to uphold the law but when nobody broke it, there wasn't much in jeopardy. The odd robbery out here got

everyone's attention. In this county, where crime was pretty rare, two thirds of his job was being on patrol.

Of course, he was the one who decided where they patrolled and today: he was thinking down by Plymouth Creek. The forecast called for another scorching hot August day. That would bring out all the kids from the high school nearby to cool off in the spring. Hell, that's what he'd been doing not too long ago. He could spend the day keeping watch. Not necessarily on the kids, but on Mollie. Mollie Biehn, the most beautiful girl in school when he'd been that age, now ran a baking business. On days like this she'd be down by the river selling cookies and lemonade in a sundress cut scandalously low, or scandalously high, depending on a gentleman's preference. Apparently showing her goodies made the boys want to come buy goodies. Good marketing.

True, she hadn't wanted anything to do with him when they were eighteen, but the magic of the badge might make her see things differently. Being Sheriff was sexy, being the youngest Sheriff in the history of Rowland County was *very* sexy. For Jesse, on these hot summer days in Ashes anything was possible. Kicking back in his seat in his immaculate uniform, he took a bite of his donut (freshly seasoned with spite), and settled in for another long easy day of nothing.

At his knees, the radio squawked.

He flipped the handset up to his mouth.

"Hello Rosie *darling*." He purred into it. "What's up?"

Rosie had been running the dispatch for the county since before he was born. He actually remembered her static grainy voice wishing him a happy sixth birthday. She was a dour woman in her sixties without much personality, so Jesse had taken to flirting with her constantly in an effort to lighten her up. Lately his efforts had been paying off as she'd taken to laughing on the radio, the sound like a truck tire squealing at low speed. This time though, when her voice came in, it was heavy with concern instead of the giggles.

"Sheriff," She said slowly. "Someone just phoned in a tip."

Jesse sat up a little straighter in his seat.

"A tip on what?" He asked, suddenly interested.

"They wouldn't say." She answered. "He called up sounding spooked, wanted to remain anonymous. Just said something bad happened last night."

In his patrol car, the young sheriff snorted laughter.

"Can you give me anything better than 'something bad'?"

There was a pause.

"Something illegal?" She offered tenuously.

That got an eye roll.

“Ok, fair enough.” Jesse responded, abandoning his earlier plans. “Give me the address, I’ll go check it out.”

“Thanks Sheriff. Do you want...” There was a pause as if the word was taboo in this county. “Do you want backup?”

Jesse smiled. That was adorable.

“No, no.” He thought for a moment. “But have Wayne swing by Plymouth Creek if this takes a while. There’ll be swimming on a day like this. I don’t want some kid jumping into the water and cracking their head open on a rock. What’s the address?”

“No address, but I’ll give you the GPS coordinates.”

Jesse looked at his radio as if the machine was on the fritz.

“Sorry, the *GPS coordinates?*”

“That’s what he gave me.” She confirmed. “Got a pen?”

For an annoying moment he didn’t. Luckily, one was in the glove compartment and he scribbled the numbers down on the bag with his revenge cruller. He repeated them back to Rosie and she signed off still sounding shaken.

An anonymous tip. That certainly made the day more interesting. Jesse to his surprise, felt more than a little excitement at the idea. He girded himself for letdown though. The last anonymous tip that had been called in was when a woman in town had been stealing other people’s lawn ornaments. Her kids eventually turned her in. A photograph of Jesse and his deputies standing in a room full of dozens of gnomes still sat behind his desk. Still, it was something different, even if it turned out to be nothing. Mollie would just have to wait. Jesse put the car in gear and pulled away from his boring day. He didn’t bother with the siren.

It took longer to find the location than he’d thought. The GPS handhelds that the Sheriff’s office used were a decade old and reception in the mountains was always spotty. After getting lost for the third time, Jesse finally switched to his smartphone and was headed on the right path. Up he went, ascending near one of the many plateaus that circled Ashes, past where anyone else would have stopped. Shortly after that, so did the road.

Jesse pulled over in a grove of trees, the gravel road fading out into oblivion a few meters before their branches. He looked at his phone in confusion, the destination was still deeper into the wood. He stepped out from the car, looking into the murky green shadows. There was nothing to look at, nothing to distinguish but the vastness of forest that he’d grown up with. More damn trees. For a moment he thought about turning around, but this was the job he’d been elected for, and he’d come this far.

With an irritated grunt, he shrugged off his jacket. It was already seventy-five degrees and he was going hiking. He tossed it in a ball back in the car then, after a moment, went around to the trunk.

From inside he pulled an old Winchester 870, and a half empty box of ammunition. Jesse didn't carry a pistol with his uniform. Around here what was the point? Carrying a gun in Rowland County was like taking a condom into a science-fiction convention. Yes, you could theoretically use it, but really, look at where you were.

He threaded five shells into the shotgun's tube, hefting the weight onto his shoulder. Now that it was August the bears were usually at their worst around here. This was the time of year they were starting to forage more and more, and Jesse didn't fancy being a meal. He wasn't even sure if the old gun could still shoot straight, but the noise would be enough to scare them off. Then he slammed the trunk and headed off toward the woods. As he walked out into the hot shady grove, the slam was still echoing around the trees like a gunshot.

If today was a glorious sunny day in the grove, then last night's weather must have been profoundly shitty. The forest floor was completely saturated with water, making Jesse's every sodden step difficult. The remnants of a rainstorm that still hadn't dried up from the night before. It dripped down from the canopy above in a pattering against the grass, the underbrush always sounding like it was moving. Jesse started to imagine every sound was a bear paddling along, to the point that when a cold drop landed on the back of his neck he damn near screamed.

He swatted at the back of his collar in irritation, already regretting his decision to come out in the first place. He could just as easily have sent Wayne to check on this. Now he was here and his deputy was watching Mollie Biehn bask down by the water. Maybe it would be too hot out there, even for the dress. Maybe Mollie would slide it off over that red hair and dive into the cold water of the creek wearing nothing but...

He slapped himself on the cheek to plop him back into reality.

*Grow up.* He thought grumpily. *You made your choice, now live with it.*

Deeper he went into the forest. He kept glancing at his phone, wiping beads of moisture from the screen, to see how close he was. Maybe it was all in his head, but the forest seemed quieter than usual. Ominous. He kept expecting to hear songbirds out in these trees, but nothing reached his ears besides the squelch of his footfalls and whisper of wind through swaying branches. Slowly the incline rose, until he came to a mossy rock face. The stones marked the edge, the plateau of the half-mountain right above him, and still he had to go forward. He tucked the heavy shotgun under his arm, simultaneously causing his gun-safety obsessed grandfather to roll in his grave, and checked his phone in confusion.

Suddenly, from above there came a series of rapid shrieks, sounds that would wake the dead. In a panic, Jesse dropped to his knees and fumbled the shotgun up only to see a flock of black birds streak through his vision. Obsidian against the blue sky visible through the trees, they squawked and cried bloody murder as they flew away. The young sheriff stayed still, his heart racing. He was still breathing fast as the stock came down from his shoulder. Crows. Why were there so many crows out here? Where were the little birds? For that matter, why the hell would someone call in a tip way out here?

Standing up again, he found the knees of his uniform were soaked. Brilliant. Looking at the sloping rock face in front of him he checked the GPS again. Straight ahead. It had to be at the top of the ridge. With a quiet growl, he continued up, stepping from rock to rock on the steep incline. Internally, he resolved that if this turned out to be a prank he would find the person responsible and put them on a chain gang.

The trees began to thin out as he got higher. Instead of a wall they clumped in twos and threes. Wide trunks sticking out among the still-wet rocks on the incline. A soft bed of dropped pine needles covered everything, the scent rising in the humid air.

Then he caught the smell.

It was a just a whiff, just for a second as the wind changed, but it instantly turned his stomach. He heaved, wanting to retch, and scrambled to plant his feet on the slippery rocks. He'd smelled that before when his grandfather had taken him hunting. When someone had left their kill behind.

Poachers? It was right season for it. Calling in a tip about a few assholes shooting bears for trophies made perfect sense actually. Maybe one of them had a crisis of conscience, maybe someone wanted to report a competitor. There could be something ahead. Suddenly Jesse wasn't so sure this was a prank after all. After a few more meters he stopped, catching his breath. He hesitated, then pumped the action of the shotgun, chambering a round.

*Keep going. Carefully.*

Still further upward. The scent was mild, but it was still there. With each step up the slope, each grasping of a wet tangled root for balance it became more intense. Jesse felt his stomach turn, but now it was only half from disgust. Ahead, the treeline broke the slope flattening out. His brought the heavy gun up feeling his hands shake a little from the weight. Probably the weight. Suddenly the trees melted away and he was standing in the clearing on top of the ridge. The highest point around, the great panorama of Washington forest stretched out from where Jesse stood to eternity. The blue sky above covered a carpet of trees, the green mass immutable. The plateau though, looked decidedly different.

It was a wide span of nothingness, brown grass and sodden mud. Puddles of brown water dotted the field randomly, the mild stink of rot from the tepid pools breaking through that other smell. It was all brown and mud, save for a patch of black that seethed and convulsed in the distance. As Jesse drew nearer he could see it was crows, dozens of crows picking at something. They jabbed, pecked and beat their wings as they gnawed at it. Clumps of red and ash black sometimes peaking beneath the maw.

For a second he stared, unable to tell what this was. Then his mouth dropped open and his gut spiraled up into torment. Jesse's arms went numb and the shotgun sagged in his grasp. The barrel dipped into a puddle next to him, then he dropped the gun altogether. As it splashed down, the receiver struck a rock. The gun discharged in a violent explosion of water, mud and buckshot. At the detonation, the crows leapt into the air as one, flying into the sky in a horrible shrieking symphony. A fountain of mud kicked up coating him from his polished shoes, to his pretty uniform, to his lips, his mouth still open wide in shock. What they'd left behind was worse than he'd imagined.