

Chapter 1

The Dream came often and without warning. Drenched in sweat, he would jerk awake, eyes wide, his heart pounding from the stupefying fear, the horrific images still fresh in his mind. And they were always the same, though one image in particular stood out.

He saw *it* in the distance, sticking up out of the flat and nearly desolate expanse before him, like the countless other pieces of debris, naked and exposed to the world. Most of the debris was no longer identifiable, having been ground up like corn cobs turned into animal feed, the malicious, and devastating landslide through their small mountain valley so thorough and deadly in its effect. But this one, *this* particular piece of debris, young Bud Bustovf could identify, to his utter horror. No one else with him during the first light of that summer morning spotted *it*. They were still standing in shock at the vast and absolute destruction of their little town of Gamore by the landslide.

It, the starkly white arm—and luckily nothing else—was exposed down to the armpit of whatever poor soul it belonged to, half bent over at the elbow. The fingers of the hand were spread out, not in an expression of fear and struggle, but somehow relaxed. Bud supposed it meant *that* particular someone was already gone, no fight left in him. But what does an innocent, carefree boy of six know of such things, life and death, and especially this kind of event, where sudden death comes before sunrise, before you even have a chance to wipe the sleep from your eyes.

‘So unfair,’ he always told himself in The Dream. ‘Why me, why us, why them?’

But all Bud understood, and could grasp as he stood there, was the realization that his town and all his friends were gone; all except those within a few feet of him. It was just them, the only survivors, his dad the town Sheriff, the towns’ one mechanic and his only son Nev, also six years old. Counting Bud, only four.

Not all of The Dream was horrid though. The beginning of it could still wrench out a smile. The start of The Dream, a nightmare in every sense of the term, always began during the drive back from an early breakfast in nearby Creekville, the ‘*big city*’ to their small town of Gamore. It was their daily routine, the two dads and both boys, at least during the summer months when school didn’t force a different habit on all of them.

That particular day, in The Dream, the car radio was tuned to a local station, playing a recent hit, ‘*Here Today and Gone Tomorrow*’, by some artist Bud had long since forgotten. Only the song’s name remained burned in his memory, but *only* in the dream-world kind though; his waking memory wouldn’t allow its presence. Maybe it was because the name itself, was somehow prophetic of the event to come.

“Ooohhh, I think my ears are busted,” moaned little Bud as the song played on, holding his hands close to his ears but not covering them completely in case one of their dads in the front seat relented, and changed the radio channel. He didn’t want to miss a single beat of the tunes on ‘*Billboards Top 100*’, their favorite station, in case his impromptu and melodramatic performance succeeded. His friend Nev blurted out a few equally exaggerated *fake* sobs in support of Bud’s *station-changing* mission—and his friend’s very serious *broken ear drums* medical condition.

“That song is *nowheresville*,” they whined together, their initial efforts often unsuccessful. They yelled out whatever other insults their young minds could conjure up about the song, finally descending into uncontrollable giggles as it played to its bitter end. And when that didn’t work either, they took turns sticking their fingers down their throats, forcing out a gagging response, hoping the sheer grossness of the sounds would do the trick.

Eventually, one of their dads would surrender, turning the radio dial. Both boys would throw themselves up against the back of the seat in anticipation, waiting to hear what magical sounds might now escape from the small dashboard speaker. That particular day in the patrol car, in *The Dream*, it played Elvis Presley’s brand new hit ‘*Heartbreak Hotel*’. The boys were in heaven—but it quickly turned into a living hell.

They heard something else that easy summer morning, while the boys rocked and rolled in the back seat of Gamore’s one and only patrol car, something besides Elvis Presley’s sultry voice and tantalizing musical beat. They also felt it. A deep, growling rumble vibrated through the vehicle, the four of them sitting up straight at nearly the same time, exchanging glances, hoping the other had an explanation for whatever it was.

But this wasn’t caused by a blast from the nearby mining company. They all knew that instinctively, having lived, and become comfortable with, the sound and feel of those occasional events—certainly for Bud and his boyhood friend—their entire lives. *This* unearthly rumble they all felt in their souls, without actually knowing what it was, sensing that it had to be something totally different from anything they knew, or could imagine—world changing.

“Dad!” Both boys screamed in unison, clutching at the back of the car’s front seat, half climbing over it, fighting the urge to seek refuge in the arms of family.

“Sit back!” yelled each dad.

“I see something up beyond,” said Sheriff Patrick Bustovf, not taking his eyes off the road ahead. “Something that shouldn’t be there.”

He slammed on the brakes, forcing the patrol car’s tires to scream, the vehicle skidding off the pavement in a part-forward and part-sideways slide, coming to rest in the roadside bed of kudzu. They all piled out and ran, breathlessly, up to the sharp bend in the road, which normally would look out over the picturesque valley, the turn signaling the beginning of a long circuitous route down the mountain into their town, their home.

Nothing about what they saw was picturesque, anymore. The valley, where their town had rested so innocently, somewhere below, was filled up nearly to the bend in the road where they now stood in utter shock, aghast, and disbelieving. That’s when Bud saw *it*, sticking up out in the middle of the landslide’s shockingly grotesque scenery.

In a way, Bud got used to the nightmare, in the same way anyone adapts to a constant event, whether unpleasant or even enjoyable, the senses deadening to it over time. As the years slowly ticked by, so rudely tossed out from the innocence of childhood, he endured the gauntlet of middle-age, then emerged, suddenly, into the twilight of his career and retirement, just as abruptly, the unwelcomed event thrust upon him.

The Dream was now a part of him, sequestered to the night time hours except for the occasional daytime event, where the sight of something would resurrect that dreadful vision of *it* in an unexpected jolt to his consciousness. Oddly, the unwelcomed reminder was often expressed in some food item, the particular shape of a crayfish claw, or strip of overcooked bacon, that visual shock souring his appetite.

Bud would remind himself, as a way of easing his conscious, that as far as he knew, at least in The Dream, neither his Dad nor any of the other survivors with him that serene, innocent summer morning, saw *it*, the arm. It made Bud happy, for them. But, he really wished that it was *only* a dream, and the landslide was not a horrendous event that *actually* happened to him and his little town of Gamore.