

“A GENUINE HORROR SUPERSTAR.” —*ESQUIRE*

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FEAR

THE

REAPER

*New York Times* Bestselling Author  
of *The Only Good Indians*

STEPHEN GRAHAM  
JONES

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# DON'T FEAR THE REAPER

**THE INDIAN LAKE TRILOGY: BOOK TWO**

STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

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*for Wes Craven: we miss you*

*The killer is with few exceptions recognizably human and  
distinctly male.*

—CAROL J. CLOVER



# MOTEL HELL

It's not really cool to play Lake Witch anymore, but that doesn't mean Toby doesn't remember *how* to play.

It started the year after the killings, when he was a sophomore, and it wasn't a lifer who came up with it, he's pretty sure, but one of the transplants—in the halls of Henderson High, those are the two main divisions, the question you always start with: “So... you *from* here, or you'd just get here?” Did you grow up here, or did you move here just to graduate from Henderson High and cash in on that sweet sweet free college?

If it turns out you're from Proofrock, then either you were almost killed in the water watching *Jaws*, or you knew somebody who was. Your dad, say, in Toby's case. And if you're the one asking that question? Then you're a transplant, obviously.

The reason Toby's pretty sure it was a transplant who came up with the game is that, if you'd lived through that night, then the whole Lake Witch thing isn't just a fun costume.

But it is, too, which is what the transplants, who had no parents dead in those waters, figured out.

The game's simple. Little Galatea Pangborne—the freshman who writes like she's in college—even won an award for her paper on the Lake Witch game,

which the new history teacher submitted to some national competition. Good for her. Except part of the celebration was her reading it at assembly. Not just some of it, but *all* of it.

Her thesis was that this Lake Witch game that had sprung up “more or less on its own” was inevitable, really: teenagers are going to engage in courting rituals, that’s hardwired in, is “biology expressing itself through social interaction”—this is how she talks. What makes Proofrock unique, though, is that those same teenagers are also dealing with the grief and trauma of the Independence Day Massacre. So, Galatea said into the mic in her flat academic voice, it’s completely natural that these teens’ courting rituals and their trauma recovery process became “intertwined.” Probably because if life’s the *Wheel of Fortune*, then she can afford all the letters she wants.

What she said did make sense, though, Toby has to admit.

The game *is* all about getting some, if you’re willing to put in the legwork. And, as Galatea said to assembly, the elegance is the game’s simplicity: if you’re into someone, then you do a two-handed knock on their front door or the side window of their car or wherever you’ve decided this starts. You have to really machine-gun knock, so you can be sure they get the message, and will definitely be the one to open that door. Also, knocking like that means you’re standing there longer than you really want, so you might be about to get caught *already*.

But, no, you’re already running.

And?

Under your black robe, you’re either naked or down to next to nothing, as the big important part of the game is you leave your clothes piled in front of the door. Galatea called this the “lure and the promise.” Toby just calls it “pretty damn interesting.”

Which is to say, just moments ago he got up from the ratty, sweated-up queen bed at the Trail’s End Motel at the top end of Main Street, his index finger across his lips to Gwen, and pulled the dull red door in to find a pair of neatly folded yoga pants and, beside them, one of those pricey-thin t-shirts that probably go for ninety bucks down the mountain.

He looked out into the parking lot but it was all just swirling snow and the dull shapes of his Camry and Gwen’s mom’s truck. Idaho in December, surprise. One in the afternoon and it’s already a blizzard.



“Who is it?” Gwen creaked from the bed, holding the sheets up to her throat just like women on television shows do. Toby’s always wondered about that.

Another part of the game is that, if you don’t give immediate chase, then this particular Lake Witch never knocks on your door again. “Message received,” as Galatea put it, because “menacing the object of your affection while disguising your identity is... kind of creepy?”

It was the first laugh she got at assembly that day.

“Message received...” Toby mutters to this Lake Witch, kneeling in his boxer briefs to touch these yoga pants, this expensive shirt, as if his fingertips can feel the body heat from whoever was just wearing them. Who was just standing right here where he is, slithering out of her clothes under cover of a robe—and in minus whatever the temperature is.

The question, of course, is does he leave Gwen in the room to chase another girl through the snow?

It’s not really a question, though. This is the game, isn’t it? It’s not about convenience. It’s about opportunity.

“Gonna get a coke,” he mumbles back into the room, and steps out, just managing to reach back in for his letterman jacket. It’s against the rules—you have to give chase exactly as you are, no tying your laces, no brushing your teeth, no pulling your good pants on—but he’s already freezing.

Gwen calls something to him but the door’s already shutting, catching, latched.

Now he’s alone under the second-floor balcony or walkway or whatever it’s called. Galatea would know. “Parapet?” Toby chuckles, zero idea what that word’s doing swimming around in his head. English class, maybe? Some movie?

Doesn’t matter.

What does are the footsteps in the snow, already rounding off in the icy wind.

“This better be worth it!” he calls out into the parking lot.

It feels like he’s the only person in the world, here. Like he’s standing on *top* of the world.

Everybody smart, which is everybody but him and this Lake Witch, they’re inside where it’s warm. Anybody outside, they probably have their winter gear

on, and, for this kind of storm, goggles, and maybe a defibrillator.

Toby thrusts his hands up into his armpits, hunches his head as deep into the no-collar of his jacket as he can, and steps out into the cold.

When he doesn't come back with a coke fresh from the machine, Gwen'll know something's up, sure. But Toby's already got his lie ready: he thought he had change in the jacket. Just... Gwen's not exactly stupid. Granted, she just moved here this year, for the scholarship, and the Lake Witch game had pretty much run its course by then, meaning she didn't recognize its signature knock, but still.

If he's got a line of shiny-wet hickeys coming down from his neck? If his mouth is smeared with some other girl's lipstick?

Gwen's big city, but she's not *that* big city.

If you're a shark, though, you keep moving, don't you? Keep moving or die. That's been Toby's mental bumpersticker ever since the massacre—a strict policy of constant movement means that bad night in the water gets farther away with every day, with every swish of the tail. Or—this is the motel—with every *piece* of tail. Galatea should write something about *that*, really. The principal's basketball-star son landing on “shark” as his spirit animal? “Really? Is this, pray-tell, maybe the same shark that was on-screen when your principal-dad was dying in the water?”

Probably, Toby knows.

You do what you have to do.

And you keep moving, from Penny last week to Gwen this week. And now... now whoever this Lake Witch is going to be.

Wynona F, emphasis on that last initial?

Oh yeah. Yeah yeah yeah.

He's *glad* this game is back. Who cares if it's already old. It's also forever new. And no, Henderson High, having a Terra Nova princess read it to assembly didn't quite kill it, thanks. It did pull it into the spotlight, but it didn't wither.

Neither is Toby—though he does reach down, check to be sure.

Good to go.

The cold doesn't matter to a lifer, does it? To someone born to this elevation, to these winters?

He does have to turn his back to the wind, though, to keep it out of his jacket, and whoever the Lake Witch is tonight wasn't expecting that, evidently—a ragged black form slips out of his peripheral vision, into the white.

Too fast to tell for sure if it's Wynona.

"Here I come!" Toby calls out all the same, and like that the chase is on.

Galatea's explanation to assembly was that all the running after each other is foreplay, is hunter-prey seduction: the blood's flowing, the breathing's already deep, and, if this Lake Witch knocked at the right time, then the one who finally catches them is probably in some state of undress. Just like they are under that slinky robe.

"Convenient, yes?" Galatea said to assembly—her second laugh.

As always, there were bowls of no-questions-asked condoms at the two doors out of the auditorium that day.

As always, someone had already dropped an open safety pin into each bowl.  
Hilarious.

And, speaking of: Toby pats his pockets, comes out with... Visine, of course. A blue pen, okay. His wallet, damnit. Unless he stashes it out here, Gwen'll know he had money for the machine.

In the other pocket, though—yes. Three rubbers.

He counts in his head, and... yeah. That's how many he should have left.

He puts everything back into his pockets, just catches a hooded face watching him from the vending machine hall.

He's there in a flash, his feet ten degrees past numb, but this Lake Witch, who *did* keep her boots on, it looks like from her tracks, has run all the way through to the other side of the motel.

Instead of falling for that like a noob, Toby backs up, jogs to the front, because that's the only way you can come back, if, say, you think your pursuer is coming up the vending machine hall.

"This better be worth it, it better be worth it!" Toby calls out into the storm, but he's grinning wide, too.

Until Gwen opens the door of their room.

"My money blew away!" Toby says back to her, bending like trying to catch a dollar scraping across the snow.

"I'll give you another!" Gwen calls back, hugging herself against the cold.

And... no.

But yes: she's seeing the yoga pants and shirt she's nearly standing on.

"What?" Toby thinks she says. It's what her body language is saying anyway. What her eyes are beaming across.

*You don't understand*, he wants to explain to her. *I have to see who this is. She won't come knocking again.*

All of which translates down to *I'll never be this eighteen again*, he knows.

He takes a step toward her, which is when he becomes aware of... of some *massive* shape in the parking lot. Like a great black wall fell out of the sky, planted itself across the lines.

"What the hell?" he says to himself, and looks over his right shoulder for the chance of this Lake Witch slashing up beside him, touching his side before slipping away again.

And there's Gwen, holding those clothes up now, inspecting them.

Recognizing them? Girls can do that, can't they?

And—and... and now this whatever-this-is in the parking lot?

It's too much.

Toby doesn't want to get too far from the motel, but this is a mystery he can solve in four or five steps, he's pretty sure.

He shuffles out, his teeth starting to chatter, and it's... a *trash truck*?

A big gust swirls hard little crystals of snow up into his face, his eyes, his lungs, and he spins away from it all, shakes his head no, that he's just going to go back to the room, back to Gwen. That if Wynona's into him, great, fine, wonderful. But another time, girl, please. Can't she see he's otherwise occupied?

Doesn't she know how freaking *cold* it is?

He balls himself as small as he can to take less punishment from the wind, which is when... something hot happens. Hot and fast.

At first it doesn't even make sense to his primitive shark brain.

Part of the game, the "advanced version" as Galatea had called it, making it all super boring and academic, was the Lake Witch dashing past, "counting coup" on her or his intended's shoulder—"part of the dance," Galatea called it, getting zero laughs, this time.

"Coup" is a Native American thing, she then slowed down to tell them all, being kind of judgy about it, like she was insulted that this even needed to be said out loud.

In the parking lot two months after that day at assembly, Toby looks up to the blinking neon sign, the giant dying Indian on his giant tired horse, and then, to be sure he felt what he thought he felt, he looks down to his hands, opening at his waist.

They're not just red with the light leaking down from the Indian, they're red with his blood, and they're holding his, his—

He shakes his head, falls back.

He's holding his intestines, his insides, his liver and pancreas and gall bladder and whatever else there is, and his hands are so numb they don't even know what it is they've caught.

He pushes them away as if getting them out of his vision will mean they're not really happening, but that just pulls more out, and they're glisteny and lumpy and slick and getting away fast, and he feels a warm hollowness inside that he's never felt before—it's the wind, blowing *into* him for the first time, because his gut is now an empty cavity.

He falls to his knees, trying to gather himself to himself, and when he looks up again, the giant neon Indian is looking right down at him.

It flickers once, comes back stronger, redder, and then it dies all the way out. Toby Manx goes with it.

# DARK MILL SOUTH

In the summer of 2015 a rough beast slouched out of the shadows and into the waking nightmares of an unsuspecting world. His name was Dark Mill South, but that wasn't the only name he went by.

Cowpoking through Wyoming, working the feedline as they used to call it, he'd been the Eastfork Strangler. Not because he ever hung his hat in the Eastfork bunkhouse or rode their fences, but because he'd somehow come into possession of one of their 246 branding irons, and had taken the time with each victim to get that brand glowing red, to leave his mark.

For that season he'd been propping his dead up behind snow fences, always facing north. It wasn't necessarily a Native American thing—Dark Mill South was Ojibwe, out of Minnesota—it was, he would say later, just polite, after all he'd put them through.

His manners extended to six men and women that winter of 2013.

Come spring melt, the Eastfork Strangler lobbed his branding iron into the Chugwater and drifted up into Montana, where the newspapers dubbed him the Ninety-Eye Slasher. It was supposed to have been the "I-90 Slasher," since Dark Mill South's reign of terror had extended up and down I-90, from Billings to Butte, but the intern typing it into the crawl on the newsfeed had flipped it around to "90-I." By that evening, "Ninety-Eye" had gone viral, and so was another boogeyman born.

The "slasher" part was close to right, anyway: Dark Mill South was using a machete by then. With it he carved through eleven people. He was no longer being polite with them. According to the one interview he'd ever supposedly given, Montana had been a bad time for him. He didn't remember it all that clearly.

Next it was the Dakotas, where he was known as the Bowman Butcher, responsible for eight dead at Pioneer Trails campground over a single weekend, and then two weeks later in South Dakota he became the Rapid City Reaper, who didn't use a bladed weapon at all, but hung his five victims by the neck, one per month.

It was those five victims who got the authorities piecing his history together—what could be his history. The campground this "Butcher" had sliced through in Bowman, North Dakota, was 160 miles directly north of Rapid City, and murders happening two and a half hours from each other, with major arteries connecting them, and on successive months... this couldn't be the same killer, could it?

At which point someone probably unfolded the map, to see what roadways fed into Bowman. To the east it was smaller and smaller farming communities, and no major highways or interstates until I-29, which was nearly Minnesota. And there had been no unaccounted-for bodies turning up over there. Nothing to suggest a killer prowling the rest stops and truckstops.

U.S. Route 12 west out of Bowman, though, connects with I-94 just over the Montana state line, and, although called "94," it's really what I-90 should be, if it hadn't taken a sharp turn south. And there were definitely bodies piling up alongside I-90. Or, there had been. Two months had gone by since the last one turned up in pieces. Either the Ninety-Eye Slasher had been locked up for some minor offense or he had hung up the white pantyhose he'd been using as a mask and moved on to other pastures, other victim pools.

A campground in North Dakota, perhaps? And then Rapid City?

While Dark Mill South hadn't used a machete on those eight campers, the felling axe he did use to deadly effect that weekend had, according to forensic analysis, been swung from the left, not the right. Just like the Ninety-Eye Slasher's machete. And those brands the Eastfork Strangler had burned into his victims were all deep, mortally deep in most cases, but autopsy showed that they were just a smidge deeper on their right side.

Since only ten percent of people are left-handed and less than 0.0008 percent are serial killers, then, statistically speaking (ten percent of "0.00008"), it was less likely that the Eastfork Strangler and the Ninety-Eye Slasher and the Bowman Butcher all just "happened" to be left-handed than it was that they were actually the same killer, adopting different methods and rituals with each change of location, so as to not attract an interstate task force.

That task force was forming all the same.

However, this Rapid City Reaper wasn't using a bladed weapon or a branding iron that could give away his handedness. And instead of a sustained killing frenzy involving stalking and masks and campgrounds, he seemed more deliberate with his victims, as if he was feeling out a way to extract more meaning from the act.

How he staged his series of hangings through the suburbs of Rapid City from December 2014 through April of 2015 was to allow his victims metal stools to stand on, so as to take their body's weight off the rope around their neck. But these stools, which the Rapid City Reaper was bringing with him, were all metal with rubber feet, so he could open up an outlet on the wall—always the north wall—and splice into that current, leave this stool circulating with blue fire.

The result was that the stool these people could stand on to take the pressure off their neck was sizzling hot, would arc up and down through their hanging bodies. Without shoes or socks, just touching that stool would cook the soles of their feet, a show the Rapid City Reaper would observe while eating cold leftovers from the victim's refrigerator, the crumbs of which he was leaving either carelessly or due to overconfidence.

Since there were no wounds on these hanging victims other than their cooked feet and crushed windpipes, where the authorities had to look for the telltale signature they needed was the splices in the wires used to pass the current. As it turned out, these copper unions had all been twisted counterclockwise instead of what would be natural to a right-hander—and so were the murders all connected, and the various media-bequeathed epithets collapsed into a single name.

This is when Dark Mill South became sensationalized as the "Nomad," a term dialed back from the throwaway "nomadic" the authorities used to explain his interstate peregrinations, but also stemming from the "Indian" silhouette the surviving camper

from North Dakota insisted wasn't her imagination—traditionally, before incursion by wave after wave of settlers, Plains Indians had been nomadic.

At this point, all indications were that this Nomad was responsible for the violent deaths of some thirty people.

Which is perhaps when Dark Mill South himself started counting.

The couple he killed in their car just outside Denver, Colorado, in June 2015 had "31" and "32" burned into their torsos with the cigarette lighter from the dashboard. They'd evidently been alive for this hours-long process, and it hadn't quite killed them—a car lighter is no red-hot branding iron. What did kill them were the headrests of their seats, which had twin metal posts with adjustment notches in them. Dark Mill South lined those two metal posts up with this couple's eyes and then pushed them in to the last notch. When found, the murdered couple had their seatbelts on, the car had been positioned to face north, and the radio was tuned to an oldies station high up on the AM band. One responding officer claimed that, while he'd once had a taste for what he called "Poodle Skirt Music," he now preferred silence on patrol. The quieter the better.

The next three victims were in Elk Bend, Idaho—a 767 mile drive by the most direct route, which crosses Caribou-Targhee National Forest here in Fremont County. In Elk Bend, Dark Mill South took on the guise of Dugout Dick, the local legend, and stalked and eviscerated volunteer firemen with a railroad pickaxe. Finally, pushed to her limit and beyond, one of those firemen's wives—Sally Chalumbert, Shoshone, technically a widow by this point—stalked this "Dugout Dick" back, and, in a final confrontation, bludgeoned him with a shovel. After Dark Mill South was down, though, Sally Chalumbert's fury was still far from spent. Screaming, she continued beating him with her now-broken shovel, dislodging most of his front teeth, fracturing the bones of his face, and then using the blade of the shovel to neatly remove his right hand. The only reason she stopped there was that her husband's brother tackled her away, trying to, as he said in his statement, "save her soul."

He was too late.

The dark place Sally Chalumbert had to go to was a place she couldn't come back from. Thus her continuing institutionalization.

Dark Mill South came back, though.

The good ones always do.

When he tried to swim the Salmon River and get away into his next killing spree, one of the remaining volunteer firemen rammed the county firetruck into a utility pole, dropping its transformer into the water. Before that power line shorted out, it killed every trout, muskrat, duck, and beaver in that portion of the Salmon, and apparently scalded a young moose as well.

Dark Mill South floated in to shore face down, his wrist and face seeping blood, and when he woke weeks later, he was strapped to a reinforced hospital bed, the charges against him accumulating fast, every federal agency wanting a piece of him, every state he'd passed through angling for extradition. The Nomad was a nomad no more.

In that one muttered and variously reconstructed interview he supposedly gave, recorded by a nurse who had been given questions she'd had to crib onto her inner forearm, Dark Mill South claimed that he wasn't done yet. Thirty-five dead wasn't thirty-eight, and that's the number he was going for.



The media followed this number back to his home state of Minnesota, where thirty-eight Dakota men had been hanged in 1862—the largest mass execution in American history. Dark Mill South's claim, then, the media surmised, was that he was merely taking lives to balance the scales of justice. Whether this had been his mission all along or if it were just something he picked up along the way was anybody's guess. Either way, the effect was to permanently associate this 1862 atrocity with Dark Mill South's seven-year, multi-state "rampage," as it was now being called.

And so the Eastfork Strangler, the Ninety-Eye Slasher, the Bowman Butcher, the Rapid City Reaper, Dugout Dick, and the Nomad had their day in court, as Dark Mill South. Specifically, as he'd been arrested in Elk Bend, Idaho, Dark Mill South's "day" was down in Boise. Since those three killings were the most recent, had the most evidence directly associated with him, even including cellphone footage of surprisingly good quality, it was felt that conviction was guaranteed in this case.

Dark Mill South was a media sensation by then, and nearly a celebrity—not just another serial killer after a half century of them, but the West's favorite new boogeyman, a, according to one account in Montana, "latterday Jeremiah Johnson." At an imposing six and a half feet tall, with shoulder length hair he never tied back but wore like a shroud, with a hook attached to the stump of his right wrist and a sly grimace permanently etched into the knotted scar tissue of his face, the public couldn't look away. Fan fiction surfaced of him escaping his holding cell, making his way to the local lovers' lane, and, with his hook hand, "giving precedent after the fact to all the urban legends, and making some new ones in the process."

Because the so-called trials of the thirty-eight Dakota in 1862 had been as short as five minutes in some cases, Dark Mill's day in court went for years, as every *i* needed careful dotting, every *t* the most patient crossing, and he had to get a new set of teeth installed besides. The Elk Bend Massacre, as it came to be known, had been July 3rd and 4th, 2015—a fateful day in the history of American violence, to be sure—but Dark Mill South's much-negotiated plea deal wasn't entered until mid-October 2019.

His claim was that he could show the officers of the court more of his north-facing dead if they were interested in that kind of thing, and had enough bodybags.

They were interested.

And of course nobody doubted that Dark Mill South could lead them to leathery body after leathery body in Wyoming, in Montana, and down through the Dakotas, across to Colorado. There could even be some in southern Idaho, on the way to Elk Bend, right? After all, there had been a sensational death along that path that had garnered national attention in the summer of 2015, and it very well could have been a murder, not just an animal attack. Better yet, if it could be established that Dark Mill South had passed that holy bodycount of "38" well before getting to Elk Bend, that would serve to mitigate the continuing outrage over all those Dakota men Abraham Lincoln had hanged in 1862, as they wouldn't be people anymore, but simply an excuse a wily killer had used to rally public sympathy.

Social media dubbed this circuit The Reunion Tour—the killer reuniting with his victims.

The convoy of armored vehicles left Boise on Thursday, December 12th, 2019. Dark Mill South's shackles supposedly had shackles, he had been doped to the gills besides, and the blacked-out SUV he was strapped into was one of four identical vehicles, each

of the others mocked up to appear as if they too were carrying him. The fear was that the victims' families might attempt an ambush, or—worse—that Dark Mill South's ever-expanding fanbase might stage an escape.

There was air support, state troopers both led the way and rode drag, and local constabulary closed the roads ahead of this convoy when possible. And in what was surely a strategic slip, the speaker at the press conference laying all this out went "off-script" to whisper into his bouquet of microphones that there would at all times be an armed guard assigned to sit directly behind Dark Mill South, for "any eventualities," which was of course wink-wink code for the last resort being a bullet to the back of the Nomad's head, halting his murderous peregrinations once and for all.

If, indeed, a bullet would even be sufficient.

All of America poured a stiff drink and settled into their most comfortable chair to ride this out with the grim men and women assigned this task, but then the hour got late, the channel got changed for a quick look at the game, and... attention waned.

Which was just how the convoy of armored SUVs wanted it.

Better to travel in anonymity, well out of the camera's eye. And, though they hadn't counted on the weather helping them stay off the national radar, the weather was a boon in that regard all the same. When visibility is nil and the temperature's in a nosedive, journalists can't deliver progress reports to the world. The convoy ceased to be a blinking blue dot on a map over an anchorperson's head. Instead, there were special reports interrupting the usual programming to warn viewers about this winter storm, this once-in-a-century whiteout.

The first of the interstates along the convoy's route to shut down was I-80 across Wyoming, which was no surprise to anyone familiar with that stretch of highway. The convoy shrugged, went to their Plan B: the old stomping grounds of the Ninety-Eye Killer—Montana.

Retracing their route, they picked their way through Pocatello, then Blackfoot, intending to follow the I-15 north to Idaho Falls and then all the way up to Butte, ideally in a single push.

The blizzard rocking their SUVs didn't agree: I-15 shut down as well, and wouldn't open even for badges.

Now this convoy had no recourse but to either register at a hotel they hadn't vetted or attempt a northern passage up Highway 20, which would spit them out just west of Yellowstone, right at the Montana state line.

When the call went out for a snowplow to clear the way for them out of Idaho Falls, three class 7 trucks showed up, each of them the size of a garbage or cement truck. The drivers let it be known that if that judge down in Boise needed someone to pull the switch on Dark Mill South's electric chair or gas chamber or lethal injection, they could probably find an open slot in their schedule for that as well.

Or if, say, he were to accidentally fall out the side door of an SUV, then... well, it was slick, and snowplows are heavy, and that big blade's gonna do what it's gonna do, right?

There was much manly handshaking, many shoulders patted, and so began the slow grind up the mountain, the swirling gusts of snow revealing only greater blackness beyond and, every few miles, old billboards touting Proofrock, Idaho, as "The Silver Strike Heard 'Round the World!" and Proofrock's Indian Lake as "The Best

Kept Secret of the West.” By 2019, of course, these billboards had been defaced—a shark fin spray-painted onto the glittering surface of Indian Lake, along with the obligatory “Help! Shark!” dialogue balloon, the miner making that world-famous silver strike given overlarge eyes and a leering grin, since there was now the cartoon of a screaming woman painted in between his pickaxe and that seam of foil.

It’s probably safe to assume that Dark Mill South, seeing this graffiti through the storm, chuckled to himself with satisfaction. Just as the Marlboro Man would feel right at home walking into a forest of cigarettes, so would the Nomad recognize the country his convoy was broaching into. He was even, at this point, facing north.

As were his drivers, his guards, his handlers.

The individual flakes of snow crashed into the windshields and the wipers surely batted them away, smeared them in, fed them to the heat of the defrosters on full blast, but still the safety glass had to be icing over, making it tricky to stay locked on the taillights of the phalanx of snowplows leading the way, flinging great but silent curls of snow over the guardrail, out into open space.

Had air support been able to stay aloft in this storm, they would have had to hover so close over this crawling black line that their rotor wash would have only made visibility worse. But the two helicopters had retreated to the private airports hours behind, were handing the convoy off to Montana pilots, already waiting at their pads.

So, by 11 a.m., possibly 11:30 a.m., the convoy was out of the media eye, it had no air support, and it was being swallowed by the snow, by the blizzard, by the mountain. There was a team of snowplows carving a route, there was thermos after thermos of coffee for those drivers, but there was also Dark Mill South, perhaps already testing the limits of his shackles’ shackles—handcuffing a prisoner who only has a single hand is a tricky proposition, and some metabolisms burn through sedatives so fast you can almost see them steaming away.

It was like the West was calling him back. Like the land needed a cleansing agent to rove across the landscape, blood swelling up from each of his boot prints, his shadow so long and so deep that last cries whispered up from it.

Or so someone might say who believed in slashers and final girls, fate and justice.

But we’ll be getting to her later.

And everyone else as well.

First, though, this convoy lost in the whiteout, this Reunion Tour slouching toward a Bethlehem already swimming in blood.

Fifteen miles up Highway 20 is where accounts of that night begin to differ, Mr. Armitage, but where they converge again is a pier jutting out onto Indian Lake here in Proofrock, 8,000 feet up the mountain. In the offhand words of Deputy Sheriff Banner Tompkins—the sound bite that came to characterize this latest series of killings—“If we were looking anywhere for more bad shit to go down, we were looking out onto the lake, I guess. Not behind us.”

“Behind us” would be U.S. Highway 20.

Dark Mill South’s Reunion Tour began on December 12th, 2019, a Thursday.

Thirty-six hours and twenty bodies later, on Friday the 13th, it would be over.

As Martin Luther says on that poster by your chalkboard, “Blood alone moves the wheels of history.”

Our wheels are moving just fine, thank you.

Just, don't look in the rearview mirror if you can help it.