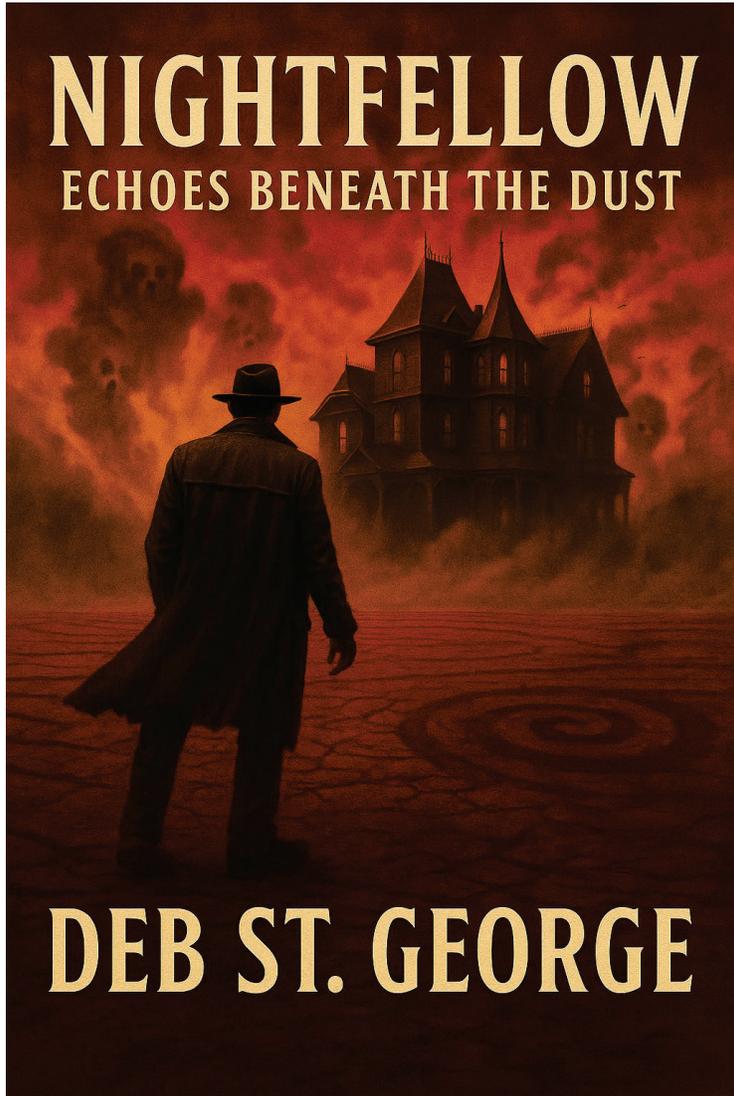


NIGHTFELLOW

ECHOES BENEATH THE DUST



DEB ST. GEORGE

NIGHTFELLOW: Echoes Beneath the Dust



By Deb St. George

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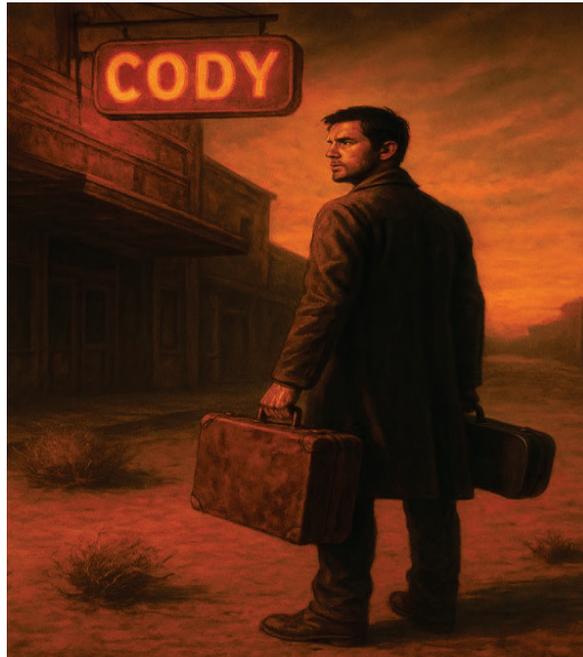
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Prologue: The Departure

Deming, New Mexico. June 8, 1918.



Luke Nightfellow stood outside the weather-worn Cody Theatre, a suitcase in one hand, a trumpet case in the other, as the day prepared to dissolve into desert twilight.

The sun bled crimson across the distant horizon, casting long shadows over the quiet town. The breeze carried whispers—fragments of old laughter and half-forgotten songs from performances past. But tonight, the curtain had fallen for good.

The manager offered a handshake. "We're gonna miss you, Nightfellow. Vaudeville won't be the same without your horn."

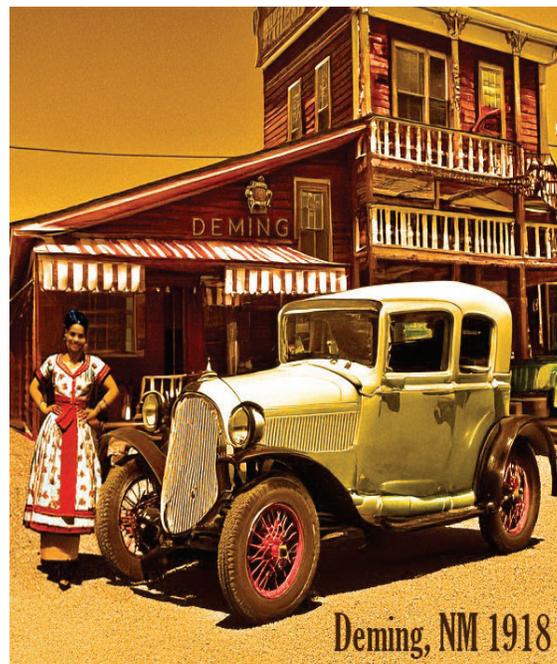
Luke returned the handshake, his grip firm, smile brief. "War waits for no curtain call. I'll still be waking them up—just with taps instead of jazz."

A beat of silence passed.

"MP Detective training," he added. "Not just music this time. I'll be chasing shadows."

“And when it’s over?” the manager asked. Luke looked to the east, where night was rising like smoke. “Maybe I’ll buy that Model T and chase quieter ghosts.”

As he turned to leave, the wind shifted, carrying with it a chill that didn’t belong in June. Luke felt eyes on him—but saw no one.



Chapter One: Ghosts in the Dust

The town of Deming slept beneath the heat of a brutal sun, the streets cracked and shimmering, buildings weathered like bones. Luke walked with a detective's saunter and an artist's gaze, his shadow long and sharp on the sidewalk.



Cowboys smoked and played poker in the shade of the saloon awning. The train station stood like a relic—empty, rusted, haunted by silence. Somewhere, faintly, a harmonica wept.

Luke passed the shoeshine stand.

“Martin,” he said, tipping his hat.
The boy grinned wide. “Shoes before war?”
Luke sat, nodding. “Might as well leave with some shine.”

Martin started his work, his hands skilled.

“Got the paper?” Luke asked.

The boy handed it over, but spoke first.
“If you think you're beaten, you are...” he recited, every word precise. “...It's all in a state of mind.”



Luke looked up, impressed. "That's a battlefield truth."

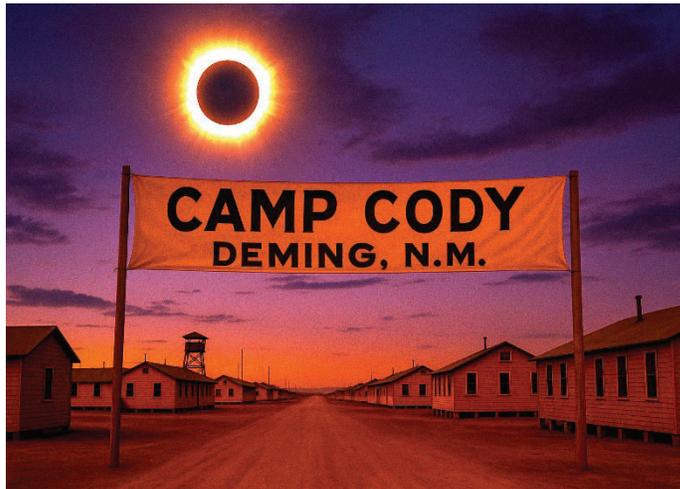
"I say it every day," Martin said. "Helps against fear."

Luke dropped a silver coin in the boy's hand and hailed a passing Model T jitney.

“To Camp Cody,” he said.

The driver grunted. “Twenty-five cents.”

They drove in silence. The sun dimmed—strangely, too early. Shadows sharpened. The air changed.



A solar eclipse crept across the sky.

It turned day into an eerie dusk.
Then came the scream.

A man stumbled into the road. The car jolted to a stop. Luke jumped out.

"I can't walk," the man rasped. "Lopez farm. Take me home."



They found the house twenty minutes later, tucked beyond broken fences and pumpkin fields gone feral. The air felt wrong—electric, oppressive.

Joe Lopez answered the door, ancient and silent, with eyes like burnt coals. "Bring him in. You can use the wagon out back."

Michael was placed gently on a bed. Joe served soup with too few words.



Then the cupboards all flew open. Loud. Violent.

A silence deeper than fear followed.
Joe stood, shut each door calmly.
“Tremors,” he said.

But Luke felt it—something had entered the room.

A coldness slithered into his spine.

Michael said nothing. But his eyes—his eyes screamed.

Luke and Tom left, the wind howling louder than before.

“That house,” Tom whispered. “It watches.”
Luke didn’t answer. He was busy wondering why it watched him.

Chapter Two: Fire and Flesh

July 11, 1918

The explosion came first—a thunderclap of hell tearing open the fabric of morning.



Luke Nightfellow had just finished his inspection rounds at Camp Cody when the sky turned orange and black, the air thick with the scent of burning oil and scorched dreams. Flames rose from Roy Baker's garage like the fingers of a vengeful god.

He ran toward the inferno without hesitation, his boots hammering the dirt, lungs filling with heat and smoke. As he neared, the outline of the old Cody Theatre came into view—and with it, the haunting realization that it too was catching fire. The stage where he once played his trumpet, where laughter used to echo, was now a collapsing furnace.

Memory and present merged: the sound of jazz, the applause... all swallowed by flame.

Screams cut through the smoke. Luke spotted Roy Baker half-buried beneath a collapsed beam.

He surged forward, yanking the man free, the flesh of Roy's face already blistered, his eyes wide with shock.

"Hold on," Luke muttered. "I've got you."

A voice behind him—calm, cool, resolute.
“Let me help.”



She stepped from the smoke like a figure
conjured—blonde hair bound under her
nurse's cap, pale skin streaked with ash.
She knelt beside Roy with a practiced ease.



"I'm Nurse Ruby Rose," she said, voice soothing as spring rain. "Keep him steady."

Luke was momentarily stunned—not just by her presence, but by the eerie stillness in her blue eyes, a clarity that felt untouched by war or fire.

Roy groaned. "It was the negro boy... he tossed a cigarette... hit the oil-soaked rags... didn't know."

Ruby's expression didn't shift. She focused on the wound, hands moving like she'd done this a thousand times.

Luke studied her profile as she worked. The symmetry of her face. The calm beneath pressure. She belonged in another world, far from dust and blood.

"What made you become a nurse?" he asked.

"Uncle had a stroke when I was fourteen," she said without looking up. "I cared for him until he passed. The need never left me."

A sharp *crack*—another explosion. Luke and Ruby dropped, shielding Roy. The sky shimmered with embers.

When they looked up again, half the garage was gone.



Ruby signaled a Red Cross car. "He'll live," she said. "But the theatre...?"

Luke looked back. Only smoke remained. The place that had shaped him was now ash.

A ghost with no bones.



While some went to help put out the fire, most went to drink their problems away at the local bar.

Chapter Three: Bargains with Fire

Smoke was still curling into the clouds when Kevin Mahoney slipped through the back of the ruined garage, his face slick with sweat and desperation. He wasn't there to help. He was there for what the fire hadn't yet claimed.



Liquor. Ten crates of it.
Moonshine brewed in backrooms and
bought with silence. Meant for soldiers who
weren't supposed to have it. Meant for
profit. Meant to be moved today.
Now eight crates were ash.

Only two remained.

As Kevin loaded them into the back of his truck, he spotted someone watching from the edge of the alley—a man standing half-shadowed behind a scorched post.

“Steele,” Kevin called out.

Tom didn’t answer, but didn’t leave.

Kevin motioned. “Get over here. Help me move these.”

Tom stepped closer, unease in his eyes.
“Why would I?”

“Because I saw you drop that cigarette,” Kevin said, voice low, venomous. “The one that started this mess. Could’ve just gone out. But it didn’t.”

Tom paled. “It was an accident.”

Kevin's eyes narrowed. "Sure it was. But no one else knows that. And if they find out? You're done. Gone. Just another colored boy with a crime to his name."

Tom's fists clenched, then slowly relaxed. "Fine," he muttered.



They loaded the crates in silence. Distant sirens still wailed. The fire's rage had

dimmed, but not ended.

That night, they drove out to Camp Cody under cover of dust and dusk.

Three soldiers waited by the mess tent.



"You're short," one of them growled.
"Where's the rest?"

"Fire took it," Kevin replied.

The man stepped forward and slammed a fist into Kevin's jaw.
Another punch. Then another.

Tom froze, heart racing. The soldier turned toward him, face full of fury.
Tom ran.

Jumped in the truck. Sped off.

In the rearview mirror, Kevin lay broken and bleeding on the desert floor.

Tom didn't stop. Couldn't. In this world, guilt was heavy—but survival was heavier.

And something about that fire, that moment, had awoken something he couldn't name.

Something watching. Always watching.

Chapter Four: Dust and Discipline

The winds that night howled like a pack of restless spirits. They clawed through Camp Cody, dragging dust in their wake, rattling tent flaps like the tapping of unseen fingers.



In the barracks, the smell of scorched metal and smoke still clung to uniforms and skin. But the soldiers weren't thinking about fire. They were thinking about the missing rum.

Patrick slammed Kevin Mahoney against the wall of the tent. "You let it burn?" he growled. "All of it?"

Kevin wiped blood from his mouth, already raw from the beatings. "Only got out with two crates," he croaked. "I didn't start the fire."

"You didn't stop it either."

Lex shoved Patrick aside and pulled Kevin upright by the collar. "It's bad enough I share a canvas coffin with you and Davy, but now you've gone and scorched our sanity with nothing but excuses."



Davy punched Kevin in the gut—hard. “Not the rum. Anything but the rum.”

Kevin crumpled to the floor, a wheezing mess. The storm outside screamed its approval.

They dragged him to his cot and left without another word. The dust kept blowing, crawling through every seam in the fabric of the camp. It was the kind of storm

that felt alive. Hungry.

Kevin awoke to the sound of coughing—deep, rattling, full of wet gravel. It came from Simon, the man who bunked beside him. He sat hunched on the edge of his cot, face pale, sweat like dew on his brow.

“What happened to you?” Simon asked.

“Fell down a mountain,” Kevin lied.

“You look like the mountain fought back.”

Before Kevin could respond, two soldiers arrived to carry him to the medical tent.

Inside the field hospital, the light was dim, the air heavy with the smell of alcohol and quiet panic. A nurse approached with confident steps and kind eyes.



"Name's Stacy," she said. "You look like you tangled with a barbed-wire fence and lost."

Kevin tried to smile. "You have the prettiest green eyes I've ever seen."

She chuckled, injecting him with something that burned before it soothed. "Flattery won't get you rum, Mahoney."

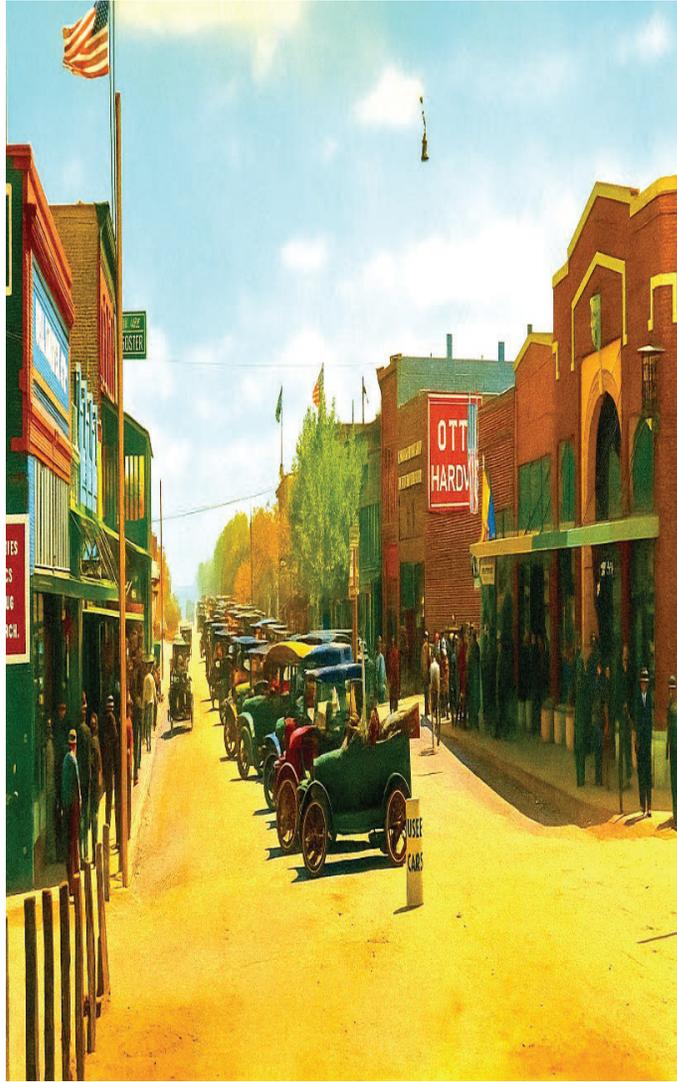
Kevin's head lolled to the side. "Wasn't for the rum."

"Well, that's a first," she said. "Now get some rest."

As she moved to the next cot, the world began to tilt. Pain ebbed. Thoughts floated. The storm outside had died down. But somewhere in the space between his fading thoughts and the shadows at the edge of the tent, Kevin heard a whisper.



It didn't come from a soldier.
And it didn't speak in English.
It hissed.
It remembered him.
And it was waiting.



Chapter Five: Ghost Pits and Gas Masks



Kevin Mahoney sat up slowly in the medical tent, pain pulsing through his ribs like the ticking of a bomb left under the floorboards. The fever had broken, but not the memory—the hiss that slithered through his dreams, the thing that had spoken without breath. Something had noticed him.

He tried to dismiss it as concussion-induced delirium. That was easier than believing in spirits that whispered in gasps. Easier than wondering if something had followed him from the fire.

Nurse Stacy returned with a fresh glass of water and a folded newspaper tucked under her arm.

"You're coherent again," she said. "Try not to flirt this time. I brought the Deming Weekly. Might calm your nerves." Kevin unfolded the paper, half-expecting more bad news.



"National Pit Day declared," he read aloud. "Civilians asked to collect and donate fruit pits and nut shells. Used to manufacture activated charcoal for gas masks. Drop off at Red Cross, Pine Street."

Stacy nodded as she checked another soldier's IV. "We use the carbon from pits to filter poison gas. You'd be amazed how many masks it takes. And now they're making them for horses and dogs, too."

Kevin looked up, groggy but focused. "Fruit pits save lives?"

"In theory. Gas doesn't care what rank you are."

He let that sit. War reduced everything—soldiers, nurses, fruit pits—to either useful or expendable. He wasn't sure which he was.

Just then, Luke Nightfellow stepped into the tent, his uniform dusty, his trumpet case slung over one shoulder like a rifle.

"Morning, Nurse," he said with a nod, then spotted Kevin. "You look like you fought a bar brawl and lost. Twice."

Kevin grunted. "Tell me something I don't know."



Luke held up the newspaper. "Lopez Farm's got more peach trees than Camp Cody has boots. Think they'll donate?"

Kevin tensed. "You going back there?"

Luke raised an eyebrow. "Something I should know?"

Kevin hesitated. Then shook his head. "No. Just... be careful."

Luke stared at him a beat too long, then nodded and turned to leave.

The bugle sounded from the parade grounds outside, shrill and ancient, a song that meant formation. Obedience. Readiness.

"I guess that's my cue," Luke said. "Some of us still have to play soldier."

As he disappeared through the flap, Kevin leaned back against his pillow, eyes drifting shut.

Somewhere deep within the canvas walls, the hiss returned. Closer now. Hungrier.

Chapter Six: Storm over Lopez Farm

Rain came to the desert like a secret confessed. No warning, just sudden downpour—icy, relentless, as if the sky had been holding its breath and finally exhaled grief.



Luke Nightfellow peered out from beneath the brim of his soaked fedora as the Model T sputtered to a halt. Beside him, Tom

Steele killed the engine and gave him a wary look.

"You sure you want to go back there?"

"I need their fruit pits," Luke said. "For the masks."

But both men knew that wasn't the whole truth. Luke hadn't stopped thinking about the cupboard slamming open, the unnatural cold, the whisper of something that didn't belong in any farmhouse.

They grabbed their coats and ran the last stretch on foot. Rain sliced sideways. Thunder rolled like distant artillery. The wind carried voices that weren't there.

When they reached the gate, they heard the scream.

"Joe!" Luke shouted, bolting forward.



In a flash of lightning, they saw it: a shadowy figure standing over a man's collapsed body.

Joe Lopez.

A second flash—brighter, angrier—erupted from the heavens. Lightning struck.

The figure vanished.
A scorched pumpkin smoldered beside Joe's limp form.

Tom dropped to his knees. "He's alive. Barely."

Michael burst from the farmhouse, face pale, eyes wide. "Dad!"

Together they lifted Joe, whose breath came shallow and pained, and carried him to the bed inside. His skin was blistered, clothes singed.

"I was hit," Joe rasped. "It... burned... through me."

Michael worked fast, treating the wounds. Luke noticed the lights flicker. A chill laced through the room again.



Then the bed began to shake.

All three froze.

"I'm not doing that," Joe whispered.

Tom backed away. "We need to get him to the hospital."

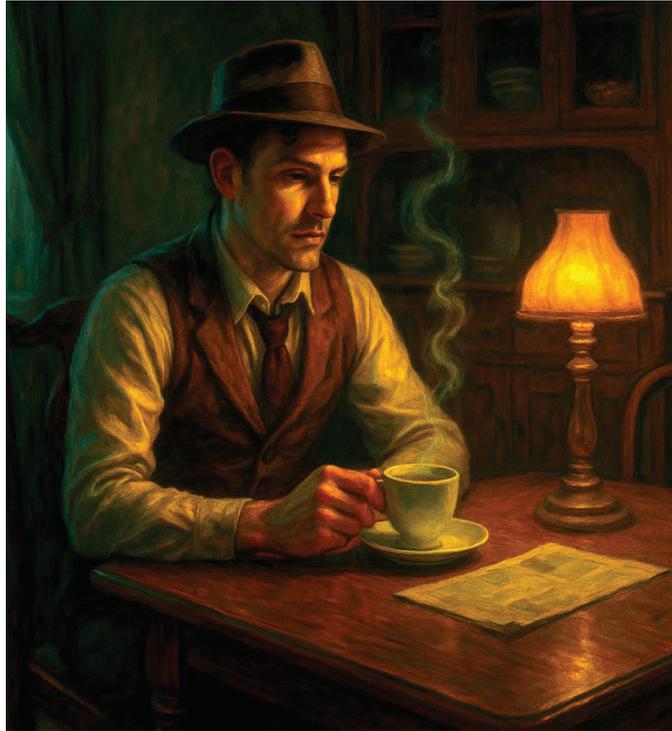
Luke nodded. "Let's move."

They loaded Joe into the wagon, guided it to the Model T, and carefully transferred him into the back seat. Tom turned to Luke. "I'll take him. Come back in an hour."

Luke stood in the doorway of the empty farmhouse as Tom drove off into the rain.



The wind outside screamed.
The house exhaled something colder.



Luke made coffee. He lit a lamp.

And the shadows on the far wall moved...
even though nothing else did.

Chapter Seven: Masks and Monsters

Camp Cody crackled with anxious energy. Rows of soldiers stood in formation beneath a sky still streaked with storm. Their breath hung in the cool morning air like ghosts refusing to leave the battlefield.



Sergeant Trammel paced before them, his voice rough as gravel. "The Germans are

releasing chlorine gas. Invisible. Creeping. It hugs the ground and steals the breath from your lungs.”

He held up a gas mask like a relic.
“This contraption is your salvation. Fail to use it properly—just once—and you die choking on your own blood.”

The soldiers stared at the masks, black-eyed and alien, as if they might come to life and bite.

Trammel continued, “You will breathe through your mouth only. Your nose will be pinched shut by this clamp. Inside is a chamber of peach-pit charcoal. Activated carbon. Every fruit pit you throw away could’ve saved your life.”

He gave a pointed glance at Luke, who stood among the MPs.
“You will hold your breath for six seconds while sealing the mask. Four breaths of chlorine and you’re done. First: pain.

Second: confusion. Third: unconscious.
Fourth?"
He let the silence answer.



"Tear gas drills begin now. If you mess up,
you won't die—but you'll wish you had."

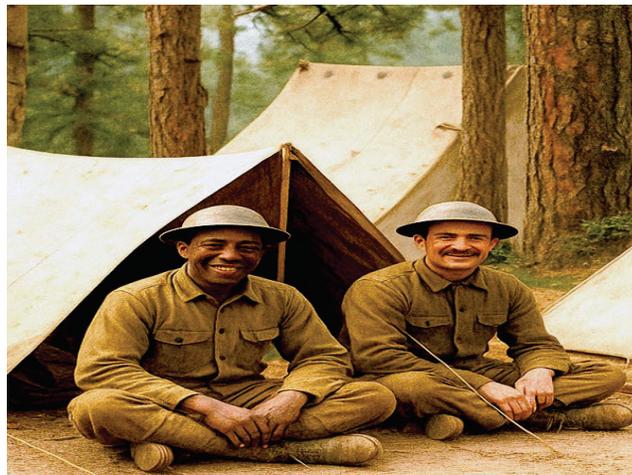
Luke moved with the unit, mask in hand,
heart steady but mind spinning. He couldn't
stop thinking about the Lopez house. The
bed that moved. The shadow that vanished
in lightning. The way the cold wasn't just
physical—but spiritual.

They ran drills. Crawled. Marched. Stumbled blind through clouds of stinging gas.

Then, the Sergeant barked, "Baseball. In masks."

The field became a surreal pageant of war-prepared absurdity. Soldiers threw, swung, and missed while their vision tunneled through fogged lenses. They looked like insects imitating men.

Luke didn't laugh. He watched. Measured. Observed who cracked and who endured.



At one point, a soldier tripped and went down hard. His mask slid askew. Luke sprinted across the field and slammed it back into place just as the gas crept near.

“Don’t breathe!” Luke shouted. “Six seconds!”

Later, back in his tent, Luke peeled the mask from his face and stared at it. It smelled faintly of charcoal and sweat.

He thought again of Michael Lopez. Of Joe. Of the shadow in the storm.

There was poison in the air—and not all of it came from Germany.

Some of it, Luke was beginning to suspect, came from this soil. From something buried long ago... and recently disturbed.

Chapter Eight: The Clock Ticks Back

The storm had passed, but the wind remained. It moaned through the flaps of Camp Cody like a restless soul.



Luke Nightfellow wrapped himself tighter in his raincoat and hailed a passing jitney as the sun dipped behind violet clouds.

The driver was a young man with calloused hands and sleepless eyes.

"Bolton's Café," Luke said, climbing into the back. "Silver Avenue."

The car rumbled to life.

The town rolled by in dim silhouette—empty streets, shuttered storefronts, a general unease hanging in the air like static.

Above them, the radio blared a reminder: "Don't forget to set the family clock back one hour for daylight savings. A war measure—every tick counts."

Luke scoffed. "As if turning back time ever helped anyone."

The café was nearly deserted. Soldiers lingered in corners, nursing weak coffee and stronger regrets.

Outside, a gramophone played a lonely jazz tune, its trumpet strains eerily reminiscent of Luke's own past.



He sipped bitter coffee, scanning the paper.

Reports of soldiers preparing to ship off.
Rumors of submarines near the East Coast.
News of an actress from New York who
traded her stage for an assembly line job at
a munitions plant.

The world was reshaping itself.
And in that quiet corner of New Mexico,
Luke felt it—the churn of something deeper.
Darker. More personal.

He left the café and wandered toward the
edge of camp where the sand blew like
whispers. In the barracks, the men played
poker, smoked contraband cigarettes, told
stories that always ended in bravado or
silence.

But there were no laughs tonight. Not
really.



Luke stopped to speak with Mrs. Elizabeth Copper near the mess tent. She was a widow turned prospector, working claims two miles east of Mirage Station.

"Manganese ore," she said proudly. "Fifty-eight percent pure. We're shipping it now—war needs metal."

Luke admired her grit. "You ever find anything else out there?"

Her eyes flicked to the horizon. "Sometimes I find things I didn't lose."

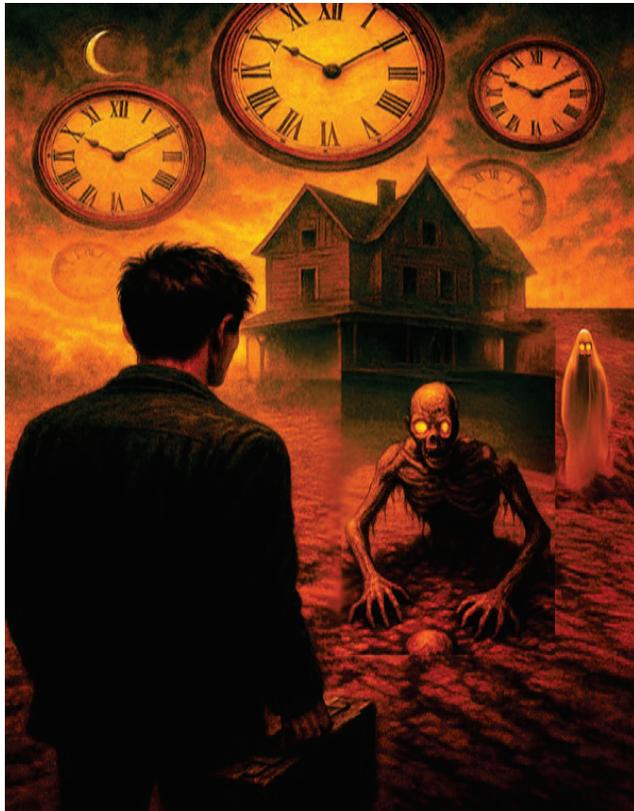
He raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

She hesitated. "Old things. Buried. Sometimes not just bones. Sometimes... shapes."

Shapes.

Luke thanked her and moved on, but the word hung in his mind like a shadow nailed to a wall.

That night, he dreamt of clocks turning backward, of a house with no windows, of cupboards that opened themselves... and of something crawling out of the soil with eyes like burned glass.



Chapter Nine: Shadows of the Sick

September 26, 1918

The flu arrived like a silent bomb.



No sirens. No smoke. Just men slumping into cots with faces the color of ash and lips blued like frostbite. In the infirmary, the moans never stopped. Neither did the dying.

Nurse Ruby Rose moved through the rows with calm precision, her blond hair pinned tightly back, her breath hidden behind a cotton mask.

Her hands worked tirelessly—cool compresses, flannel pneumonia jackets, the endless rhythm of temperature-taking and pulse-counting.



Luke stood at the entrance, the smell of alcohol and despair heavy in his nostrils. He watched as two nurses—Stacy and another volunteer—carried out a body draped in white. One of the five who wouldn't make it.

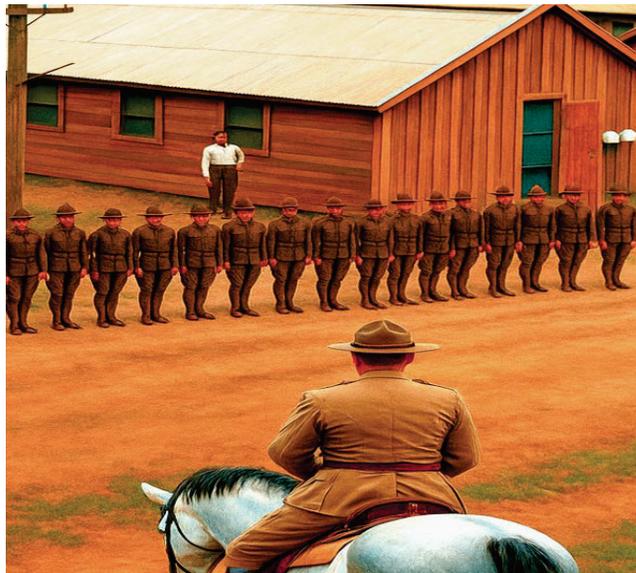
Seventy-five nurses sick. Five dead already.
The camp was holding its breath, but the flu
just kept breathing deeper.

Luke approached Ruby quietly. "Any
better?"



She didn't look up from the soldier she was
tending. "We have nothing but aspirin and
quinine. Some whiskey when we're
desperate. The worst ones go blue. That's
when we know."

Luke's gaze followed hers to a nearby cot. A boy no older than seventeen lay there. Blue fingers. Blue lips. He stared at the ceiling as if trying to see something just out of reach.



"I saw this kind of death once," Ruby whispered. "But it wasn't from the flu. It was something darker."

Luke stiffened. "What do you mean?"

She finally looked at him. "Back east. A town outside Boston. Same pattern. Same progression. And one night, every animal in the town ran for the woods. Dogs. Cats. Birds. All of them."

Luke swallowed. "Did you ever find out why?"

"No," she said. "But the hospital burned down three days later. With everyone in it."

A chill crawled down Luke's spine. Outside, the wind carried with it the low groan of sick men coughing in unison.

"Captain's issued new orders," Ruby said, standing. "Quarantine for the entire camp. Nose and throat sprays every day. Sneeze guards by the bunks. If we're lucky, we'll slow it down."

"And if we're not?"

She didn't answer.



They stood in silence as the bugle played taps in the distance. A soldier had died.

But Luke wasn't sure it was just the flu that was killing them. Something else had gotten in.

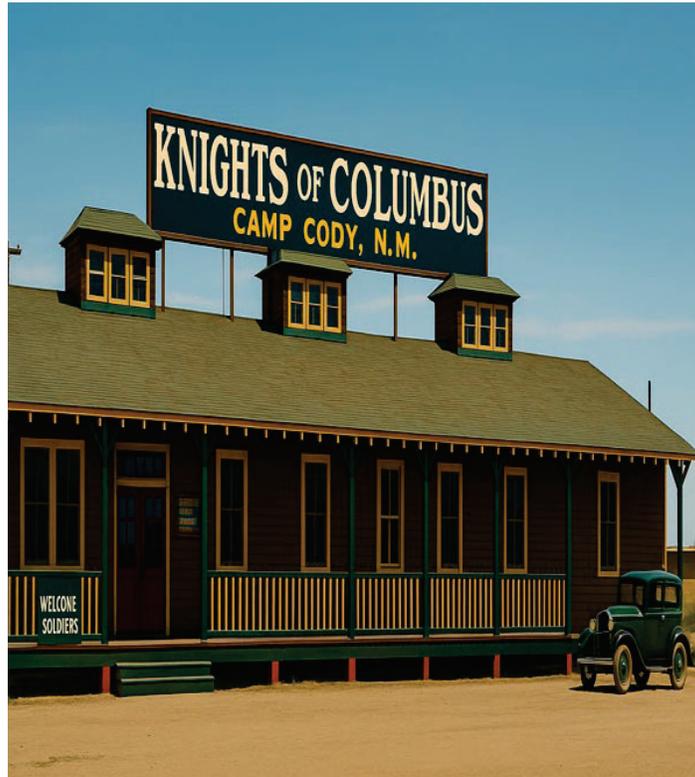


Was this sickness coming from a recently unfrozen dinosaur bone, from a radioactive meteorite, from a shift in the dirt when an earthquake created a tremor, moving the dirt this way and that, or was this a supernatural occurrence, a manifestation from angry spirits cursing the people who were destroying the earth?

Chapter Ten: Theaters Gone Dark

October 14, 1918

The orders were clear: shut it all down.
Theaters. Movie houses. Night schools.
Lodge meetings. Even baseball games.
Public gatherings had become invitations to
death.



Luke walked the empty streets of Deming like a man trapped in a waking dream. Cafés were boarded up. The laughter of children no longer echoed through alleyways. Signs on church doors read: "Closed Until Further Notice."

Bolton's Café, once the heart of the town's rhythm, was dark. The phonograph inside stood silent. A single mug sat abandoned on the counter, as if its owner had vanished mid-sip.

Fear had replaced fire. And it was far more contagious.

Inside Camp Cody, work didn't stop. It shifted.



The munitions plants, short-staffed and suffocating under the weight of death, begged for workers. And women—actresses, dancers, artists—stepped in. They wore overalls and goggles, trading limelight for firelight.

One young woman, Lucille Drake, had once danced the fox trot at the Grand Marquee. Now she inspected shell casings for cracks.

"We do eight hours," she told Luke, "three in the afternoon to eleven at night. It's not glamorous. But every shell I check might save someone's life."

Luke nodded, tipping his hat. "This war makes soldiers of us all."

She smiled faintly. "I'd rather be a dancer."

Out in the fields, another army had assembled.

The Woman's Land Army—known as the "Farmerettes"—had taken to the rows with grit in their teeth and pitchforks in hand.

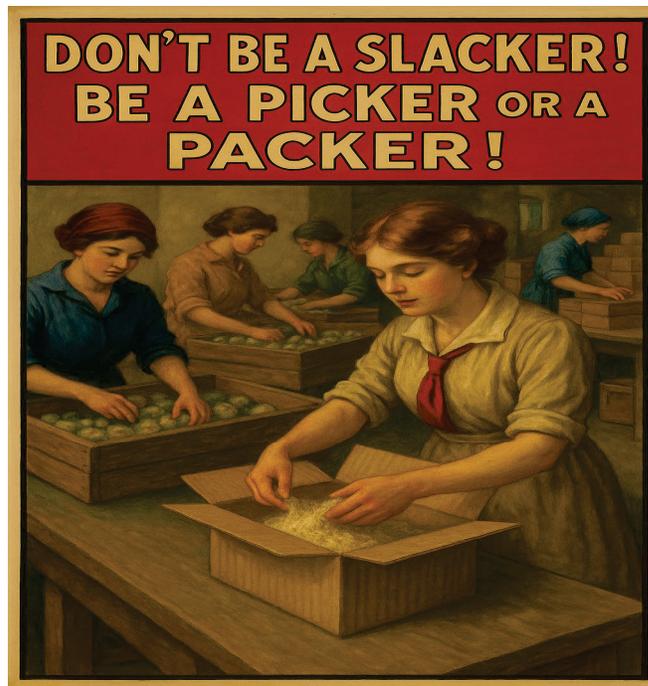


College girls from Berkeley. Mothers from Santa Barbara. Volunteers with dirt under their fingernails and purpose in their hearts.

They rose at 5:30 AM to the sound of a bugle.

They took inspection. Drills. Kitchen duty.
Rationed food.

They signed pledges, swore oaths, and even
elected "majors" among themselves.



One of them shouted, "Don't be a slacker!
Be a picker or a packer!"

And the others responded in chorus: "W-L-A, rah rah rah!"

Luke watched them from the edge of a row of peach trees, fruit pits collected in burlap sacks nearby. The same pits that would save lungs on the battlefield.

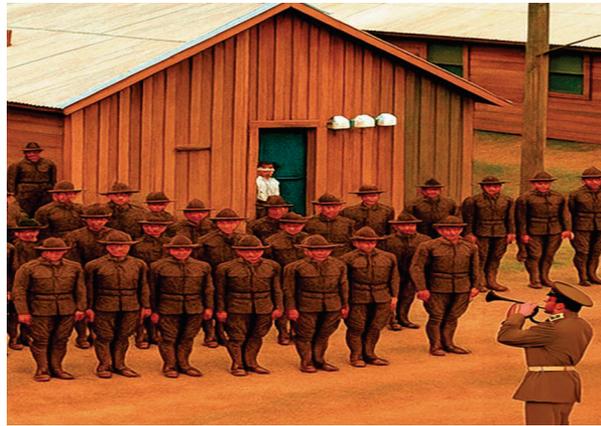
He looked past the farmland toward the horizon, where dark clouds gathered again.

There was a storm coming.
But not just of weather.
Something else. Something that didn't fear
gas or bullets or quarantine.
Something that had waited for the lights to
go out.

Chapter Eleven: Disinfection Orders

October 22, 1918

The town smelled of carbolic acid and desperation.



Disinfection squads moved down the main streets like ghosts with buckets, scrubbing windows and wiping down door handles with trembling urgency.

Every railcar, every tram, every wheel spoke was to be wiped clean daily. Fear no longer whispered—it screamed in silence.

Luke stood at the train station, watching workers with red eyes and soaked cloths clean the cars under orders from Washington. They moved with the precision of grief, having seen too many deaths to question the ritual. It wasn't about killing germs anymore—it was about surviving belief.



A tall man in a black coat approached.
Civilian. Thin. Nervous.

"You Nightfellow?" he asked.

Luke nodded. "Depends who's asking."

"Name's Henley. From the quartermaster's office. They said you've seen... strange things."

Luke narrowed his gaze. "You'll have to be more specific."

Henley looked around as if the shadows might hear him. "We've got reports from two other camps. Camp Grant. Camp Sherman. Similar patterns. Deaths that don't fit the virus. Things moving in infirmaries when no one's there. Entire bunks turned to ice in the middle of August."

Luke's stomach knotted.
Henley continued, "We don't think it's German. Or viral. We think it's old."

Luke wanted to laugh—but didn't. "And what do you expect me to do?"

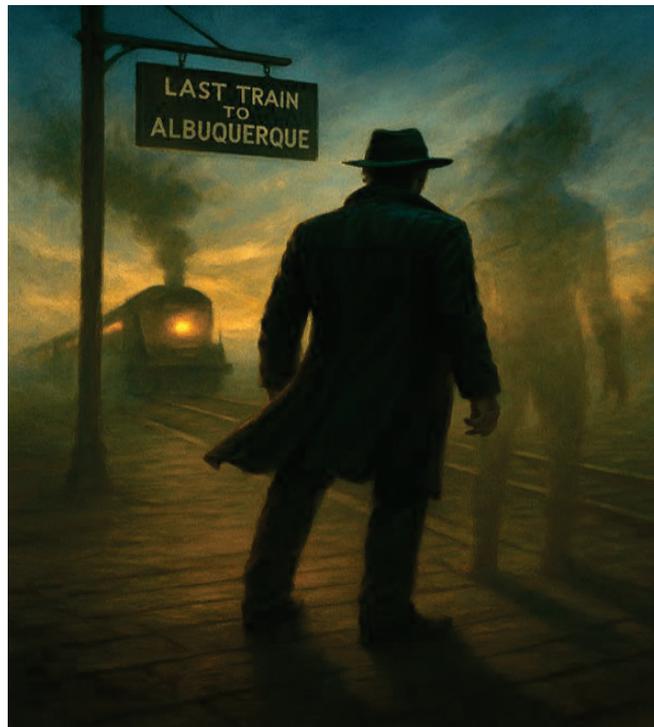


Henley handed him a sealed envelope. "Inside's a transfer order. But unofficially—we want you to stay here. Investigate. Quietly."

Luke took the envelope. It felt heavier than it should've.

As Henley turned to go, he added, "Whatever this is, it's spreading faster than the flu. But not everyone can see it. You can."

Luke didn't respond. He stood alone as the wind picked up and the last train to Albuquerque groaned and vanished into the fog.



Behind him, the air shimmered for a moment. Just long enough to cast two shadows where there should have been one.

Chapter Twelve: The End of the War

November 11, 1918

The bugle blew at dawn. But this time, it wasn't for drills. Or taps. Or gas drills in the sand.

This time, it was for peace.



Luke stood at attention in full uniform, shoulders squared against the rising sun. The air was crisp. Honest. Like the Earth had exhaled.

The war was over.

Men cried. Some shouted. Some didn't believe it. Others collapsed in silence as if the tension had been the only thing holding them upright.

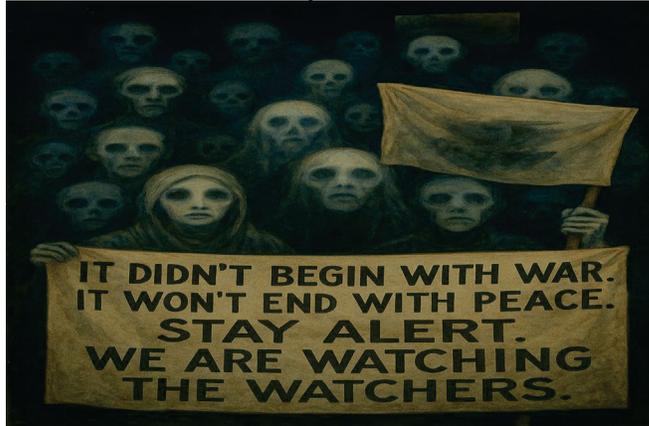


Armistice. A word heavy with ghosts.

Camp Cody would soon disband. The sand would reclaim its tents. The ghosts would remain.

Luke packed his few belongings. The bugle went into its case. His pistol. His notes. A few letters from home. And the envelope Henley had handed him, unopened until this moment.

He sat on the bunk and tore the seal.
A blank sheet of paper.
Except when he tilted it to the light.
Invisible ink. His eyes narrowed. It read:



"It didn't begin with war. It won't end with peace. Stay alert. We are watching the watchers."

Luke folded the paper and slid it into the pocket closest to his heart.

Later that night, after a quiet meal and polite goodbyes, he sat with Nurse Ruby Rose outside the infirmary. They drank bitter coffee and watched stars fight to pierce the overcast sky.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

Luke looked out across the dark desert. Somewhere out there, the Lopez farmhouse still stood.

"Start my own agency," he said.
"Nightfellow Investigations."

She raised an eyebrow. "Haunted houses and misplaced shadows?"

He smiled. "Something like that."

A wind stirred the canvas tents one last time.

Luke stood and tipped his hat to her.

"I'll see you again," she said.

"I hope so," Luke replied, and meant it. He climbed into his new Model T—the one he'd won in a card game with men who might've been spies or saints—and drove into the black road beyond the barracks.

Behind him, the camp exhaled its final breath.



Before him, mystery waited. So did something else.

The real war, Luke suspected, had just begun.

