

Ghost Towns



by Pete Garcia (Rev310.Net)

Introduction

Jack Murray tightened his grip on the steering wheel as his rental truck wound its way along the narrow, twisting highway. He had taken Highway 23 south out of Pikeville, Kentucky, and the deeper he drove into the Appalachian wilderness, the more the world around him seemed to close in. The ancient mountains on either side loomed like sentinels, their steep slopes shrouded in green Kudzu vines, as if he had somehow crossed continents and ended up in the jungles of Colombia rather than the heart of Appalachia.

The Kudzu vine, was an invasive species brought over from China in the 18th century by railroad companies to control the foliage along the railway, had spread like wildfire. Entire hillsides were swallowed by its creeping tendrils, draped over trees and old telegraph poles like nature's camouflage netting. It gave the landscape an otherworldly, almost exotic quality, as if the mountains themselves were hiding behind a curtain of living green.

But the further Jack drove, the more the landscape began to change. The vibrant, jungle-like hillsides gave way to something darker, more primal. Just as the Kudzu receded, it was replaced by towering trees cloaked in mist, their jagged peaks disappearing into the overcast sky. It was as if the mountains were trading their lush greenery for the cold embrace of shadow.

After four hours on the road, the isolation hit him. He couldn't imagine having to travel this path back before the automobile and the modern highway. The mountains grew taller, the roads narrower, and the feeling of being cut off from the world settled deeper into his gut. This was Black Mountain territory—the kind of place that lived in whispers and legends. Even through the windshield, Jack could feel the weight of the devastation of Hurricane Helene, and his recent realignment from one disaster to another, pressed upon him the urgency of the situation. It would seem that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), had been caught flat footed at the outset, grossly underestimating the reach and impact of Hurricane Helene as it rampaged up eastern side of the Appalachian Mountains.

He swallowed hard, forcing himself to focus on the road ahead. He'd driven through disaster zones before, but this... this felt different. The destruction he was beginning to see was unprecedented. With four other deployments under his belt, it was by far the worst. Even the air was heavy with something more than the aftermath of the hurricane that had torn through the region. There was something ancient here, something that ran deeper than the roots of the trees or the foundations of the houses that clung to the mountainside.

Black Mountain had its secrets. And Jack was driving straight into them.

The remnants of Hurricane Helene had passed through about four days earlier, leaving behind a trail of destruction that had yet to be fully surveyed. Before coming, Jack had only seen the damage from the various pilots and drones who'd flown over early on. But seeing it from the ground, was surreal. The silence, the gray sky, the barren roads—it all seemed to press down on him. It was as though the mountain itself was holding its breath.

He passed through the first small town on his way up, a place so remote it barely registered on the map. The buildings—what was left of them—were mostly old, wooden structures, their roofs sagging, windows shattered. A few had been completely leveled, piles of debris where homes once stood. But it wasn't the damage that bothered Jack. It was the people.

They were everywhere, standing in the doorways of ruined houses, huddled on porches, their eyes fixed on the road as Jack's truck rumbled through. Survivors, no doubt. Tough folks, hardened by a lifetime in the mountains. But they watched him with a cold, wary gaze, as if they already knew what he was there to do—and they didn't like it.

Jack glanced in his rearview mirror and saw a small group of them—two men, a woman, and a boy, all standing by the roadside, staring as he passed. The woman raised her hand, shielding her eyes from the midday sun as she tracked his movements, and for a brief moment, Jack thought he saw something in her expression—something darker than just suspicion. It was fear. But fear of what? Him?

He shook the thought away, focusing on the road ahead. Of course, they were wary of him. Didn't President Reagan once famously say, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" Outsiders were never greeted with open arms in places like this. And after what they'd been through with the storm, the lackadaisical response from administration and FEMA, they probably saw any government vehicle as another reminder of how bad things had gotten. FEMA was supposed to be here to help, but that didn't mean the locals would welcome their presence. Jack knew that from experience.

He passed a gas station, long since boarded up, its sign dangling by a thread, creaking in the breeze. A few more houses stood clustered around the remains of what looked like a general store, its windows blown out. There were people here and there, too—watching, waiting. No one waved. No one called out. Just cold stares, following the progress of his truck as it lumbered down the road.

Jack sighed, glancing at the map on the dashboard. According to his directions, he was still about five miles out from the FEMA base camp, which had been set up on higher ground, just beyond the worst of the flooding. From there, he'd be assigned to survey one of the hardest-hit areas—remote properties deep in the mountains, many of them unreachable by road. If he was lucky, he'd be assigned an all-terrain-vehicle (ATV). If he was unlucky, he'd be hiking for most of the next week, cataloging damage and assessing what could be salvaged, if anything.

His stomach churned slightly at the thought. He'd been in disaster zones before—floods, tornadoes, wildfires. But something about this one felt different. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the tension was thicker here, heavier. As if the storm had torn something loose that wasn't just wood and shingles.

Something deeper.

Another cluster of homes appeared in the distance; these ones nestled closer to the base of the mountain. They looked older than the others—blackened wood cabins with steep, slanted roofs, the kind of places that had been standing for generations. Smoke curled from a few chimneys, despite the warm weather. People lingered outside, silent, their eyes turning toward the truck as it passed. Always watching. Always silent.

Jack adjusted his rearview mirror again, catching sight of one old man standing alone near the edge of a field, his weathered face expressionless. But as Jack's truck rolled past, the man's gaze never left him, and as Jack glanced in the mirror again, he saw the man raise his hand slowly, drawing a small symbol in the air. It was quick, just a flick of his fingers, but it made Jack's skin crawl.

He focused back on the road, a knot of unease settling in his gut. These people didn't just distrust him—they wanted him gone.

Jack gritted his teeth and pushed the truck forward, trying to ignore the growing discomfort. He was here to do a job, and he'd do it, no matter how much hostility he faced. But as the road narrowed and the trees grew denser, swallowing the sky above, Jack couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't just an outsider here—he was an intruder.

And the mountain didn't like intruders.

Chapter One

One week later

Jack Murray's boots sank into the mud, the sound of each step swallowed by the thick fog that had settled over the Black Mountain valley like a curse. The rain had stopped two days earlier, but the ground was still slick and treacherous, reminding him with every misstep just how unforgiving this place could be.

He paused at the edge of the property, a half-collapsed farmhouse looming ahead in the mist. The skeletal remains of a barn hunched beside it, its roof bowed inward, offering little protection from the elements. He raised his flashlight, its beam slicing through the gray. Nothing moved. Just the wind whispering through the skeletal trees. Even though the sun started to set behind the mountains around four in the afternoon, it was still plenty of light out. The flashlight was more for the landowners (if there were any) to see him, rather than for him to see. He didn't want to risk taking a bullet for his well-intentioned site inspection.

Jack rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, glancing over his shoulder. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone—something—was watching him. It was ridiculous, of course. There was no one left here only him and the other FEMA response teams. Most of the locals had fled after this once-in-a-millennium hurricane had torn through. The storm had done so much damage, much of the area looked unrecognizable to those who knew it from before.

"This place looks like ground zero for the apocalypse," he muttered to himself, shivering slightly despite the thick jacket.

He turned his attention back to the farmhouse, the reason he'd been sent out here this late in the afternoon. FEMA's orders were clear: make an assessment, capture the details (grid coordinate, damages, and photos), and move on to the next site. The same routine, over and over. But something about this property hadn't sat right with him from the moment he'd read the briefing.

According to the official documents, this 600-acre farm, which encompassed one whole side of the mountain, had belonged to the Marlowe family for generations, a name that Jack had seen scrawled in a hundred old files over the past few weeks. The Marlowe's were one of the oldest families in the region, tied to the land in ways outsiders like him couldn't fully grasp. They were the kind of people who didn't take kindly to strangers telling them what to do. But then again, neither did any of the other locals, not since FEMA and DHS had moved in after the storm. Every conversation Jack had with the other emergency site

inspectors reinforced the same idea: the people in these parts weren't just tough—they were fiercely protective of their land, and anyone who tried to take it.

Still, Jack had his orders.

He took a breath, adjusted the straps of his backpack, and stepped over the sagging fence that barely marked the property line. As he did, a faint gust of wind seemed to rise from the earth itself, carrying with it the scent of damp leaves and decay. Jack hesitated for just a second, casting one more wary glance around the valley. It wasn't just the isolation that was getting to him—it was something deeper. The feeling that Black Mountain was hiding secrets, secrets the storm had somehow churned up from the depths, things which were never supposed to see the light of day.

He shook his head, dismissing the thought. He wasn't here for secrets. He was here to make sure the land was assessed, cleared, and prepared for the next phase.

The inside of the farmhouse was worse than he expected.

Jack's flashlight flickered over warped floorboards, peeling wallpaper, and shattered glass strewn across the floor. A few pieces of furniture remained—an overturned table, a rocking chair that creaked as the wind rattled the walls—but otherwise, the place was gutted. You could clearly see the water mark on the wall where the flood waters had reached. Whoever had lived here was long gone, but they'd left in a hurry. His boots crunched on broken glass as he moved further inside, taking quick notes on the structure's condition.

The kitchen was the worst of it. Dishes lay scattered across the counter, a sink full of murky water that hadn't drained since the power went out. An old family photo, its frame cracked, hung crookedly on the wall—a man, woman, and two small children. Their somber faces, products from an age when the times were much more unforgiving, were forever frozen in time in a grainy, water-logged, black and white photo. He cast a stare at the rest of the living rooms. The storm didn't just wipe them away, but their memories as well seemingly erased by the wind and the rain that had passed violently through.

Jack snapped a few pictures with his phone and made another mental note. The house wouldn't survive another major storm. It was barely standing as it was.

A faint creak from upstairs caught his attention. Jack froze, the beam of his flashlight hovering just above the staircase. He stood still for a moment, listening. It had to be the wind, or the structure settling—this place was ready to collapse. There was no way anyone else was here.

But then he heard it again—a soft, deliberate creak, like the sound of someone shifting their weight on a loose floorboard.

Jack's heart rate picked up. It wasn't the first time he'd run into squatters in a house like this. Homeless families or drifters often took shelter in these places, especially after a disaster. He had no problem with that—they were just trying to survive. But it was still his job to make sure the site was cleared.

He took a step toward the staircase, his flashlight beam bouncing slightly as he moved. "Hello?" he called, his voice sounding too loud in the quiet house. "Anyone up there? I'm with FEMA. I'm not here to cause trouble. Just doing an safety inspection."

No answer.

Jack felt a knot of unease form in his stomach. He couldn't quite place it, but something about this felt... wrong. It wasn't just the sound, or the emptiness of the house. It was the air itself, heavy and thick, like the storm hadn't fully left.

He climbed the stairs slowly, his hand on the railing. Each step groaned under his weight, and the further he went, the colder it seemed to get. When he reached the top, he swept his flashlight across the narrow hallway. The doors to the bedrooms were ajar, their hinges rusted and worn.

The sound had come from the far room, the master bedroom.

Jack's pulse quickened as he moved forward, his boots barely making a sound now. He reached the door, slowly pushed it open with his flashlight, and stepped inside.

The room was empty.

Completely empty.

Jack exhaled slowly, shaking his head at himself. His nerves were getting the better of him. Of course, the room was empty—this whole place had been abandoned. He was probably just hearing the wind.

But as he turned to leave, something caught his eye.

In the corner of the room, barely visible in the shadows, was a small pile of rocks—no bigger than his fist. They had been carefully stacked, one on top of the other, forming a crude pyramidal tower. Jack stared at it, frowning. That wasn't something you'd expect to find in an old farmhouse. It definitely wasn't something caused by the flooding. This was deliberate. Purposeful. Odd.

Jack walked over to it and cautiously crouched down, carefully taking in the miniature stone monument. The rocks were river stones, smooth, worn by time, and seemed to have been taken from outside. But why? Why go to the trouble of stacking rocks in the master bedroom? He snapped a couple pictures with his phone.

Before he could puzzle it out, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. There it was again—that feeling of being watched.

Jack stood slowly, his eyes scanning the room. The silence was oppressive, heavy. He could hear his own breath, feel the weight of the stillness pressing down on him.

And then, just as he was about to leave, he heard a sound.

Not a creak this time. Not the wind.

A voice.

Low. Faint. A whisper.

“Leave.”

Jack froze, his heart pounding in his chest. He swallowed hard, the flashlight beam trembling in his hand. He couldn't have heard that. It wasn't possible. His mind was playing tricks on him.

But the whisper came again, louder this time.

"Leave."

Jack didn't need to be told twice. He turned, his footsteps quickening as he descended the stairs, the flashlight bouncing wildly as he rushed out of the house. His breath came in shallow gasps as he burst through the front door and into the cold, damp air of the valley.

The fog had thickened, wrapping around the farmhouse like a living thing, swallowing the landscape in its gray embrace. Jack didn't stop until he was back at his Honda ATV he'd parked back down by the road, his hands shaking as he fumbled with the key.

He didn't look back. He didn't need to.

Something was wrong in Black Mountain. Something far worse than a hurricane.

And Jack Murray had walked right into the heart of it.

Chapter Two

Inside the makeshift FEMA camp, everyone was assigned either sleeping trailers, or tents. He was in an open-air tent filled with cots. Jack barely slept that night, to which he did not lay blame on his current sleeping arrangements. Five years in the army had cured him of that. No, the farmhouse's unsettling whisper haunted his thoughts, repeating like a broken record in his mind. *Leave*. Who, or what, had said that? He kept trying to rationalize it. Maybe it was some kind of electrical device that was left there to ward off looters had they tripped some kind of silent alarm. But if that were the case, why did he get the heebie-jeebies? Maybe there was someone hiding in the house—a squatter, or some kid playing tricks. Or maybe it was the wind, somehow creating that sound as it rushed through the empty rooms.

But something inside him refused to believe the logical explanations. The sensation had been too... real. The air too charged; the silence too thick. The entire property had felt wrong, as though it was alive in some hidden, unfathomable way. And the stacked rocks... they gnawed at him. Why had they been there? Who had placed them? The elderly homeowner Eleanor?

Jack lay in his cot in the temporary FEMA quarters, staring at the ceiling. Even though he was only a few miles from the farmhouse, with the roads out and the layout of the mountain, it felt like it was on the other side of the world. The sound of generators hummed in the distance, and the occasional murmur of voices outside his tent gave the camp a faint sense of normalcy. Yet, Jack felt anything but normal.

He reached over to the small desk by his cot and pulled out the file on the Marlowe property. He'd gone over it earlier, but now, in the pale glow of the camp's lantern light, he flipped through it again, looking for anything he might have missed.

The Marlowe family had owned the land for nearly two centuries, dating back to when the first settlers had carved out their homesteads in these mountains. Over all that time, the family had either died off or moved away, finally leaving the farmhouse to one last living relative—Eleanor Marlowe. According to the file, she had been the sole occupant of the property up until the storm. The last anyone had seen of her was a week or two before the hurricane hit. Well, she wasn't in the house as far as he could tell he thought.

The report was thorough, but dry. No mention of strange occurrences. No hint of the eerie atmosphere that clung to the place. Just data. Jack set the folder down, leaning back on the cot.

Whatever had happened in that house earlier, he wasn't going to let it mess with his head. He had a job to do, and the rest of that mountain was scheduled for assessment in the coming weeks. More agents would be sent out there soon enough, and he'd be far away from Black Mountain, on to the next disaster site. He just needed to get through the next few sixty days.

But as he closed his eyes, the image of those stacked rocks floated in his mind's eye.

Jack's nerves were still on edge the next morning when he received an unexpected call from his superior, Agent Donna Halverson. Halverson was as no-nonsense as they came—a veteran in FEMA operations, she was the epitome of an aristocratic bureaucrat. However, she was known for being tough but fair, and Jack had always respected her for that.

"Murray," her voice crackled over the line, "you're up. We need you to meet with some DHS folks at noon. There's been a change in the priorities list, and the Marlowe site is under special review. We're fast-tracking it."

Jack's stomach tightened at the mention of the Marlowe site. "Special review? Why that place?"

"Don't ask questions. You're going to be working directly with a DHS contact—Agent Marston. He'll give you the details."

Jack's mind raced. DHS involvement meant there was more going on than just disaster recovery. Granted, FEMA fell under DHS, but aside from the atomically charged border issues, FEMA and DHS rarely worked together. This was the first time DHS inserted itself into a FEMA operation he was on. Still, from what he gathered, it was rare, which usually meant something political.

"Got it," Jack said, trying to keep his tone neutral. "I'll be there."

After hanging up, Jack stared at his phone for a long moment. Something was off. DHS typically stayed out of day-to-day operations, focusing more on broader national security concerns. Why the sudden interest in the Marlowe property?

He had an uneasy feeling about this.

Chapter Threes

The drive to meet Agent Marston wasn't long, but it gave Jack enough time to think about what was happening. With the overcast skies and the cool weather, the fog stubbornly clung to this Appalachian valley, thickening as he ascended the winding roads moving deeper into the mountain. He'd only been stationed here for about a week by this point, but already the landscape felt claustrophobic—trees crowding the road, mountains blocking the sun, and the constant mist reducing visibility to just 20 yards or so. It was as if the mountain itself was trying to swallow his soul.

He arrived at the meeting spot—a temporary FEMA command post set up on the outskirts of a neighboring town, far enough from the worst of the storm damage. The site was buzzing with activity—vehicles coming and going, tents set up as makeshift offices, and agents running from one location to another.

Jack spotted Marston easily. He was leaning against a black SUV, dressed in the standard dark suit and tie that seemed so out of place here in the muddy wilderness. He had the air of someone who wasn't to be questioned—his stance rigid, his gaze cold, scanning the horizon as if the mountains themselves were hiding something dangerous.

“You Murray?” Marston asked, his voice as sharp as his gaze.

Jack nodded, extending his hand. “Yeah. Nice to meet you, Agent Marston.”

Marston barely glanced at Jack's hand before speaking again. “We've got a situation. The Marlowe property is now a DHS priority. You're going to be coordinating with us to make sure nothing slips through the cracks, got it?”

Jack frowned. “I'm not sure I understand. What's the issue with the Marlowe property? I was just there yesterday—place is abandoned. Has the owner abandoned it, or is she deceased?”

Marston's jaw tightened, and for a moment, Jack thought the man wasn't going to answer. Then, finally, he spoke, his voice low. “We believe that owner Eleanor Marlowe was taken in the flood. She was the only owner on the deed, and the last living relative. But we need more than the house assessed and documented. We're going to need all six hundred acres.”

“Come again? The entire property? Am I going to be getting some help on this? I am just one person.”

“You're it. Our philosophy, and now yours, is that less is better, especially in these types of cases.”

“A land grab? That's pretty cold don't you think?” Jack asked. “I mean, we don't even know where she is yet; she could still be alive.”

Agent Marston looked from side to side cautiously, and then leaned toward Jack and whispered, “listen closely junior detective, that land sits on a vast strategic mineral reserve of incalculable value. Lithium and quartz. DHS has been tracking potential deposits in the area for years, but we couldn't move on it until now.”

Jack felt the air leave his lungs. Lithium. The word rang in his ears. That explained everything—the lackadaisical answer on the initial preparation and response. Now, after the disaster was declared, the damage is so substantial it will likely measure into the trillion-dollar range, to which, the cost will be deemed, untenable, and eminent domain will be declared in certain strategic locations like the Marlowe farm.

Now, after slow walking federal assistance for weeks, the sudden push to assess the site and ‘seal the deal’ as it were, now the DHS gets involved. Makes sense as to why the government was so interested in this backwoods stretch of Appalachian land. Lithium was becoming one of the most valuable mineral commodities on the planet, essential for batteries, electronics, and the growing electric vehicle industry. They’re going to swoop in here and claim the land before the county, state, or anyone else makes a fuss. All he knew was, that if DHS was involved, it meant there was a lot of money and power at stake.

“So this isn’t about disaster recovery,” Jack said, unable to keep the edge out of his voice. “This is about mineral rights.”

Marston’s cold eyes flicked toward him. “Don’t get all idealistic on me, Murray. This is about national security. The U.S. needs that lithium, and we need it fast. You’re going to help us secure the site, make sure everything goes smoothly. After that, your job is done. You’ll be fine. You’ll move on.”

Jack opened his mouth to argue but thought better of it. This was way above his pay grade. He knew he wasn’t able to challenge this DHS machine. Even if he was a ‘whistleblower’, with them framing it as a matter of national security with billions of dollars at stake, he didn’t think his complaining would matter. In fact, if he made too much fuss, he might find himself amongst the missing in this corner of Appalachia. Still, the more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became. He didn’t like being a part of something like a land-grab, eminent or otherwise. Still, he couldn’t shake the image of the farmhouse—or the strange, whispering voice that had told him to leave, out of his mind.

“I’ll email you the files and the login for the reporting site we use for this sort of thing. You’ll get your orders from there.”

As Marston turned to leave, Jack’s mind spun. He was in it now. He was now a part of something much larger than FEMA’s relief efforts. Although he knew having more information is preferable to not having enough, he now suddenly felt exposed, like he’d seen too much. It must feel like that moment when a kidnapped victim inadvertently sees their kidnapper’s face. Moreover, the Marlowe property, with its eerie, unexplainable atmosphere, was now at the center of a high-stakes game between the government and whoever—or whatever—was still out there, watching.

Something deeper was happening on Black Mountain, and Jack Murray was about to find himself tangled in its web.

Chapter Four

Jack returned to the FEMA camp after meeting Marston, but he couldn't shake the growing sense of unease. The information about lithium deposits on the Marlowe property made everything fall into place, but it also raised deeper questions. Why had Agent Marston been so upfront telling him about it? He was a nobody. Normally, if this was such an important issue, Agent Marston wouldn't have explained anything citing the oft repeated phrases "need to know basis" and "you don't need to know," specifically in that order. Which raises another issue, that being their perceived boldness in saying the quiet parts out loud.

No wonder the chilly reception and cold stares from the locals. They could smell a conspiracy cooking, since this wasn't the first time the feds had come for the land. I bet with the news that the hurricane was coming, they must have seen these land grabs coming a mile away.

His thoughts kept drifting back to the farmhouse and the whisper he'd heard. Was it his mind playing tricks, or was something else at work? Jack decided to return to the site, unofficially, after everyone else had left, which really meant, after dark which did not sound all that appealing. If he was going to be involved in this land grab, unintentionally or not, he needed to understand what was really happening.

Around 9PM that night, Jack carefully and quietly walked down to his ATV, and pushed it a good ways down the road before starting it. When he arrived to the Marlowe's farm an hour later, the fog was even thicker than before, shrouding the house in an eerie glow. Jack carefully approached the farmhouse, flashlight in hand. As he stepped inside, the same oppressive feeling settled over him—thick, almost alive.

That's when he noticed something he hadn't seen before: new symbols etched into the floorboards of the entryway, crude but unmistakable. Circles, spirals, and shapes that seemed ancient, primal. It wasn't random. Was someone—or something—trying to send a message? If so, to who and why?

Just as Jack knelt to examine the symbols, he heard movement behind him. Spinning around, he

came face to face with a local man standing just outside the still open front door. He was older, gaunt, with deep-set blue eyes that gleamed in the dim light. "You shouldn't be here," the man rasped. "They'll be watching you now."

"Who is going to be watching me?" Jack asked while panning his flashlight beyond the stranger.

The man just stood there with dead eyes. Confused, Jack began to think that coming here after dark was a terrible decision. "Who's going to be watching me?" he asked again slowly.

The man simply gestured to the symbols without breaking his gaze and said, "the land remembers. The mountain keeps its secrets." But before Jack could press further, the man turned away and headed back into night mist without any sort of light, leaving Jack more unsettled than ever.

He began to follow the man but after a few steps forward, even with a flashlight, the night mist seemed to have swallowed the man up as if he never existed at all.

Well, at least he now knew that there was folk still living on Black Mountain. They hadn't all fled the storm after all. He wondered if Eleanor was with that group who were moving around up here after dark.

Back at the FEMA headquarters, Jack found himself caught between the growing pressure from DHS and his own nagging conscience. The more he dug into the background of Black Mountain, the more he uncovered: stories of disappearances, strange lights in the woods, and entire families who had vanished without a trace. At least this confirmed that his feelings of dread were not without their warrant.

Over the next few days, Jack had done concentric circles away from the house moving further and further up the mountain. He was to photograph and document everything he saw. So far, he'd found a moonshine distillery that didn't appear that out of use. Meanwhile, Marston was ramping up operations and using the Marlowe house as his base of operations. As far as he could tell, he was the only FEMA person here, everyone else that was on Marston's team was DHS, or other three letter agencies he'd rather not know about. They were continually pushing for rapid clearance of the Marlowe property both from the state and the courts. Apparently, the state government got wind of this and immediately placed an injunction to stop it, before they could negotiate a better deal. DHS and who else knew, wanted to get mining companies in as soon as possible, despite the lingering damage from the hurricane.

On his way back to his camp one evening, Jack's unease deepened when he was approached by a young man in his twenties claiming to be Eleanor Marlowe's long-lost nephew, Ben. He claimed he had been living in Ohio but had returned to the region after hearing about the hurricane's devastation and the rumored government plans to take over Black Mountain, with which the Marlowe estate occupied.

Although Jack was skeptical at first, Ben proved to be a wealth of information, even explaining the piles of the mysterious rocks Jack found around the property in subsequent visits. It was just that old Appalachia superstition many of the older generation still believed warded off the *evil spirits*.

Ben also revealed the depth of the Marlowe family's connection to Black Mountain in ways that left Jack speechless. It wasn't just land ownership or generations of farming that tethered the Marlowes to this place—no, their bond ran far deeper. Each generation had "elected" a 'mountain queen' as it were, and Eleanor, his great aunt, was the current mountain queen.

Her primary duty was to serve as the guardian of the mountain, to which she has done now for at least sixty years. Ben told him she was the mountain queen when his parents were children. He wasn't sure how old that really made her, but she had to have been in late eighties or early nineties. Even in her advanced age, Ben assured Jack that she was very active and vibrant, as if immune to the effects of both time and aging.

He went on to explain that the protector of the mountain and its hidden forces, would be empowered to do the job. This explains why her advanced age had neither dimmed her eyes nor weakened her body. Ben swore she was fit, often traversing the steep climbs up to a hidden cave on the east side of the mountain on a daily basis. These 'queens' were to be the steward of ancient traditions passed down through whispered stories and rituals that outsiders would dismiss as superstition. But for the Marlowes, it was their birthright, a covenant with the land itself.

"The Marlowes have always been more than just farmers," Ben said, his voice low and steady, as if he were revealing something sacred. "Long before the first settlers built their cabins here, before there were boundaries and property lines, our family understood what lived beneath the surface. The mountain isn't just dirt and rock. It's alive, Jack."

Jack frowned, struggling to wrap his mind around it. "Alive?"

Ben's eyes darkened as he spoke, the weight of his words heavy in the small room. "Yes. The spirits of this place, the ones that the Cherokee used to speak of, they've always been here. And my ancestors learned how to live in harmony with them. They left offerings, respected the old ways, never taking more than the mountain was willing to give. We're bound to this land, Jack, in ways most people can't understand. It protects us, but only as long as we keep the balance."

Jack leaned back, crossing his arms. This was more than he had bargained for. He'd expected to find resistance to the government's land seizure, maybe some folklore tossed around to scare off the feds, but this... this felt deeper. The gravity in Ben's voice made it hard to dismiss.

"So, protecting the mountain... environmentally? From drilling? How is that going to impact what is happening now?" Jack asked, his voice more curious than skeptical.

Ben's expression hardened. "The government's been poking around up here for years, Jack. At first, it was small stuff—survey teams, a few drones, environmental studies. But when they found out about the lithium under the mountain, everything changed. They've been pushing harder ever since, trying to take control of the land through lawyers and corporations. None of that worked. But a hurricane? That was the perfect opportunity. The thing is, they don't understand what they're messing with. They're not just digging up minerals—they're waking something that should've stayed buried."

A chill ran down Jack's spine. "What do you mean, 'waking something'? Is this supposed to be some kind of Native American curse?"

Ben looked away for a moment, as if deciding how much to say. Finally, he spoke, his voice tight with restrained emotion. "Look there are things here, Jack. Old things. Spirits that were sealed up eons before even the first settlers arrived. All of that, has been kept at bay by the mountain's natural order. My family... we knew how to keep them asleep, how to keep the land at peace. But when the government started blasting and drilling into other mountains in the region, they broke that balance. Now, the spirits are stirring. And they're not happy."

Jack's skepticism wavered. He was a practical man, one who trusted logic and reason. But there was something in Ben's words, in the way he spoke with such certainty, that gnawed at Jack's carefully constructed doubts. He'd been to the Marlowe property. He'd felt it—the oppressive weight of the air, the whispers that seemed to rise from the ground itself. And now, hearing Ben talk about the mountain as if it were a living thing, it was hard not to wonder if there was some truth to the madness.

"So, what happens now?" Jack asked quietly.

Ben looked him dead in the eye, his face grim. "Look, if you can't help us, then you need to stay away from that place. If they keep pushing, keep digging, it's only going to get worse. The mountain is alive, Jack and once that door is open, it may not shut again."

Jack's thoughts swirled. What had started as a routine assignment—another FEMA assessment in another disaster zone—had spiraled into something far darker, far stranger. He began to question everything he had been told about Black Mountain, about the people who lived here, and about the land itself. The government wasn't just seizing property for minerals; they were trespassing on something ancient, something that didn't take kindly to being disturbed.

And as Jack stared out the window, where the fog clung to the trees like a living thing, he had an idea. “Would it be possible to find these ancient sites and document them?”

“Why?” Ben asked.

“If we can prove they are historical archeological sites and trace them back to say, a Native American tribe, wouldn’t that prevent the government from coming here and turning this mountain into a lithium mine?”

“Perhaps.”

“Maybe we can get them list as protected historical sites. We can get all sorts of lawyers and groups together that normally take on cases like this to back us. That way, it’s not just the locals here against the federal government, but the entirety of the Environmental-Historical preservation groups backing us. Then, no one can come in here and dig, regardless of what lie underneath.”

Chapter Five

Into the Realm of the Dead

Two nights later, Ben and Jack pushed north from the Marlowe’s farm up one of the many mountain trails. The path into the deeper sections of the Black Mountain Forest had grown narrower, more overgrown, as if the mountain itself was trying to swallow the old trails. Jack followed Ben in silence, their flashlights casting long beams through the mist that clung to the underbrush. The deeper they ventured, the more oppressive the atmosphere became. It wasn’t just the weight of the air or the creeping fog; it was the feeling of being watched, as if something unseen lurked just beyond the light’s reach.

Ben moved with purpose, his steps sure and silent. Jack, on the other hand, could feel the weight of the place pressing down on him with every step. There was something ancient here, something older than the trees themselves. He had come this far hoping that Ben’s stories about the land were just that—stories. But the further they went; the less certain Jack became.

“These are the burial mounds,” Ben said quietly, breaking the silence as they climbed a small ridge, “they don’t belong to any tribe you’ve ever read about in history books. They’re much older than that.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. He had heard some of the folklore before—rumors about ancient burial sites hidden deep in the Appalachian wilderness, passed down through generations of locals. But Ben’s tone was different, heavier with a truth Jack wasn’t sure he wanted to confront.

“Older than the Cherokee? The Shawnee?” Jack asked, his voice catching in his throat.

Ben nodded. “Much older. My family kept records going back centuries, stories passed down from the earliest settlers who learned about these mounds from the few surviving native groups. But what they knew barely scratched the surface. These mounds... they were here long before any of them. Even before the Vikings.”

Jack stayed quiet, letting Ben's words settle in. It was a ridiculous claim, one that would've sounded like superstition to any outside observer. But there was something in Ben's voice—something haunted, something too sincere to dismiss.

"They were giants, Jack," Ben continued, his voice low. "Nephilim. The ones you hear about in the Bible and other ancient texts—the offspring of fallen beings, cursed to walk the earth. Some say they ruled these lands long before any humans ever set foot here. Others say they were buried alive, trapped in these mounds to keep them from ever rising again."

Jack shot him a skeptical look. "Giants?"

Ben stopped at the top of the ridge and turned to face him. "I know how it sounds, but you've felt it, haven't you? The mountain. . . it's alive, in a way. Not because of the trees or the soil, but because of what's under it. Something's been sleeping here for a long time, and now the government's wanting to tear open its tomb."

Jack didn't have a response. He had felt the weight of the mountain—the strange tremors, the oppressive atmosphere—but giants? Nephilim? It sounded too far-fetched. Still, there was something in the way Ben said it, something that sent a chill down Jack's spine.

"We're here," Ben said quietly, interrupting Jack's thoughts.

They had reached a clearing, a wide, circular space in the forest floor surrounded by towering stones covered in thick moss and lichen. In the center of the clearing, the earth had been disturbed—a deep pit, recently dug, its edges rough and crumbling as if it had been torn apart in haste.

Ben knelt beside the pit, his face pale as he ran his hand over the loose soil. "Someone has already disturbed the mounds."

Jack stepped forward, peering into the dark pit. The ground had been freshly dug, revealing the jagged remnants of what appeared to be large bones—massive, brittle fragments protruding from the earth like the remains of some ancient beast. His heart pounded in his chest as he took it all in.

"These aren't human," Jack whispered, his breath catching in his throat.

"No," Ben said, his voice grim. "They're not."

Jack knelt down beside the pit, his flashlight flickering as he examined the bones more closely. They were enormous—far too large to belong to any human, even one from ancient times. His mind raced, trying to make sense of what he was seeing, but there was no logical explanation. Whatever had been buried here, it wasn't of this world.

"The government says they're just digging for minerals," Ben said, standing slowly. "But they've known about these mounds for a long time. I think one of their teams was told to open one and verify what's here. I wonder if they were going to put it back the way they found it before having to leave unexpectedly. Regardless of their intentions, these tombs that were never meant to be opened. The Nephilim were buried deep, their remains sealed in these mounds to keep the world safe from them. And now they're tearing that seal apart."

Jack stood, his legs trembling. He could feel it now—something beneath the ground, something stirring violently in the depths of the mountain. It was more than just folklore. This place... it was a prison, and the government was breaking it open with every shovel of earth they moved. He pulled out his phone and snapped some pictures of the giant remains.

Before Jack could continue, a sudden gust of wind swept through the clearing, carrying with it the unmistakable sound of a low, resonant hum. The air grew cold, and the ground beneath their feet trembled—faint at first, but growing stronger with each passing second. The towering stones around them seemed to vibrate, their surfaces humming with an ancient energy.

Jack's heart raced as the hum grew louder, more insistent. His flashlight flickered, casting long, erratic shadows across the pit. And then, just beyond the edge of the clearing, he saw it—strange lights hovering in the distance, flickering like faint orbs in the mist.

Ben stood frozen, his face pale as the lights danced through the trees. "It's them," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "They're waking up."

Jack took a step back, his pulse thundering in his ears. This wasn't just a legend. This wasn't just some old story. The Nephilim were real, and something in the mountain had begun to stir.

"We need to go," Ben said, his voice shaking as the ground trembled beneath them. "Now."

Jack didn't argue. They both turned and ran, the hum growing louder behind them, the lights flickering through the trees like distant stars. As they sprinted through the forest, Jack could feel the mountain shifting beneath his feet, as if something enormous was stretching, pushing against the soil that had held it captive for millennia.

By the time they reached the edge of the forest, the trembling had stopped, but the air was still thick with that strange, oppressive energy. Jack stopped to catch his breath, his hands shaking as he looked back toward the clearing. The mountain had stirred, but it wasn't done. And now, Jack realized, there was no turning back.

In those days, and for some time after, giant Nephilites lived on the earth, for whenever the sons of God had intercourse with women, they gave birth to children who became the heroes and famous warriors of ancient times. Genesis 6:4 (NLT)

Chapter Six

Several weeks later

Montreat was the name of the town located to the north of the town of Black Mountain. Montreat was nestled at the base of Greybeard Mountain, which, like Black Mountain, were all part of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which made up physiographic province of the greater Appalachian Mountain range. But Montreat wasn't its original name. The real name of Montreat was Black Mountain but had successfully petitioned the North Carolina Supreme Court to be changed in the early 1960s. Half the town wanted the

change, the other half did not, which led to the successful incorporation of Montreat as its own city in 1967.

While Montreat didn't have a proper town square per se, they had a small parking lot across from the local college that served the same purpose. The college parking lot now occupies the grounds for what had once served as a familiar place where fairs and carnivals once occupied. It was a place where families gathered, where kids played, and where old men told stories of the land's history in the shadow of the Blue Ridge mountains. But now it was a war zone, barricades of overturned trucks and rusted-out farm equipment blocking the roads, with locals standing shoulder to shoulder, their faces hard with resolve in protest at the government's tone-deaf *assistance*. The air buzzed with tension, thick with the anticipation of a fight they all knew was coming.

Jack stood on the edge of the crowd, feeling the weight of the situation like a noose tightening around his neck. He hadn't come here to pick sides. He was supposed to be neutral; a FEMA inspector sent to assess the damage and assist with the recovery. But that was before he'd learned the truth—the DHS had no intention of helping these people. They needed them off that mountain and preferably, out of the entire Black Mountain Region so they could pursue their corporate overlord's mining operations. They'd arrived with their armed convoys, their helicopters slicing through the mist, treating the people here like enemies in their own country.

It had started slowly. At first, the federal agents were just an annoyance—issuing orders, setting up checkpoints, confiscating donated goods, monitoring the locals as they went about rebuilding their shattered lives. This was all done intentionally to kill morale. But the more the locals pushed back, the more the government escalated. Peaceful protests were met with riot gear and rubber bullets. When the locals tried to form a human chain to block the drilling equipment, DHS forces broke through with tear gas, scattering the crowd as if they were insurgents. People were dragged away in cuffs, their shouts drowned out by the hum of helicopters overhead.

Jack had watched it unfold from the periphery, powerless and horrified. These weren't criminals—they were farmers, tradesmen, and families, trying to protect the only home they had ever known. Just because the floods had caused tremendous damage, it didn't give the government the right to come in and claim large swaths of land due to eminent domain. The government wanted their land for the lithium buried beneath it, and they didn't care who they hurt to get it. They painted the locals as radicals, racists, and even terrorists, spinning the narrative to the mainstream media to fit their agenda.

But it wasn't until the sabotaging of equipment that things truly spiraled out of control.

Later that night, a DHS convoy had been making its way up the mountain, transporting drilling equipment to one of the contested locations. The locals, now fully organized, had decided enough was enough. They knew the mountain better than anyone—its roads, its hidden trails, and the way the rain turned the earth into a treacherous quagmire. When the convoy hit the mud patch just past the old mill, it didn't stand a chance.

Jack hadn't been there to see it firsthand, but the aftermath was all over the news. DHS trucks, overturned and stuck deep in the mud, their wheels spinning helplessly. The drilling equipment, scattered and wrecked like the bones of some ancient beast. And painted across the wreckage, in red and black, were the

symbols—circles and spirals, crude and haunting, the same symbols Jack had seen etched into the farmhouse floorboards weeks earlier.

The media exploded. Comparisons to Ruby Ridge and Waco were now being made by the pontificating pundit class tucked safely away behind the D.C. Beltway. The government labeled it an act of domestic terrorism, claiming the locals had coordinated an attack to halt "critical national operations." Overnight, the small town became a hotspot for federal crackdowns. The FBI and CIA swooped in, pushing the DHS aside, treating the locals like they were part of some underground militant group. Jack watched as Black Mountain was transformed from a sleepy mountain community into a militarized zone—drones patrolled the skies, armored vehicles lined the roads, and anyone who so much as spoke against the government's presence risked being labeled a threat.

The resistance had been born out of desperation, and Jack could feel the fire of it in every interaction he had with the locals. They were no longer just fighting for their homes—they were fighting for their lives, their history, their identity. The federal agents, with their uniforms and guns, didn't see it that way. To them, these were just backwoods hillbillies standing in the way of progress.

Jack's own role had shifted, too. No longer just a bystander, he found himself feeding the resistance vital information—FEMA schedules, DHS routes, anything that might give the locals an advantage. He knew three things without the slightest degree of hesitancy: 1) the government's attempt to confiscate the mountain was unconstitutional, 2) he was on the right side of history with his actions, and 3) there was something bigger than all of them at stake here. Still, he'd seen too much to sit back and let the government steamroll these people.

But as the days dragged on, something else began to gnaw at Jack's conscience—something darker, more unsettling than the political struggle unfolding around him.

The strange occurrences he'd noticed when he first arrived—the eerie whispers in the woods, the shifting mists that seemed to take on shapes in the corner of his eye, the way the land itself seemed to groan under the weight of the conflict—were becoming more frequent. It was subtle at first. The locals didn't seem surprised, almost as if they had expected it. But Jack, raised in the rational, modern world, struggled to make sense of it.

One night, after a particularly brutal clash between the locals and the federal forces, Jack found himself standing at the edge of the Marlowe property, staring out over the expanse of Black Mountain. The air was thick with fog, as it often was in these parts, but this time it felt... different. The mist seemed to move with purpose, swirling in unnatural patterns, its tendrils wrapping around the trees and the rocks like fingers searching for something hidden beneath the earth.

He heard the whispers again—faint at first but growing louder as the wind picked up. Voices, not quite human, carried on the breeze. They were filled with a primal rage that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. It wasn't just the locals who were fighting for the land. The mountain itself was stirring.

Ben Marlowe had been right. The government's interference wasn't just upsetting the people—it was waking something far older, far more dangerous than anyone could have imagined.

Jack clenched his fists, his breath fogging in the cold night air. The line between reality and myth had blurred, and he could no longer tell where one ended and the other began. What had started as a routine assignment had now become something else entirely. He was in too deep now. And whatever was coming—whatever the mountain had in store for the interlopers—he was certain that neither the locals nor the federal agents were prepared for it.

The mountain was alive. And it was furious.

Chapter Seven

Jack's heart sank as he overheard snatches of conversation from the contractors. He'd heard how the ACLU had tried to sue the government to stop, but a gag order was issued and things were delayed from being brought forth. The drilling companies were instructed to keep working, and were going in that night, bulldozers and drilling equipment primed to tear apart the first section of land, pushing the locals aside by force if necessary. The Nephilim burial mounds—ancient, sacred, and long forgotten by most—were about to be unearthed. The government saw them as nothing more than inconvenient obstacles standing in the way of progress (i.e., their lithium treasure), but Jack knew better.

Apparently, the government had been at this for a long time and the sight of giant skeleton remains were inconsequential to them. Ben had mentioned that the government knew America used to be called, the 'land of the giants' since the late 1800s when the Smithsonian would go around collecting up giant skeletal remains found all over the country only to never see the light of day again.

Those mounds weren't just part of the mountain. This felt different. It felt far more dangerous.

Jack hurried to his tent, his mind racing. His role as an inside man was over. Marston's suspicions had been growing too quickly, and it was only a matter of time before he was caught. But what haunted him more was the knowledge that whatever the government was about to unleash, it would be catastrophic. The resistance was teetering on the edge, and Jack couldn't let the final push begin without warning them. He had to stop it—somehow.

He grabbed his phone, his hands shaking as he typed out a message to Ben. They're moving in tonight. Full operation. You have to stop them.

No signal.

Jack's heart pounded. He hadn't realized how close they were. This wasn't just some distant plan. The operation was happening now.

He rushed out of the tent and into the open night air, his mind racing. He had to get to Ben, warn the locals in person. But as he moved toward his truck, Marston stepped out from behind the command post, blocking his path.

"Going somewhere, Murray?" Marston's voice was sharp, laced with suspicion.

Jack forced a smile, trying to keep his voice steady. “Just checking the perimeter. I heard the operation’s ramping up. Wanted to make sure everything’s locked down.”

Marston’s cold eyes studied him, his jaw set like stone. “Is that right? You’ve been doing a lot of checking lately. A lot of moving around.”

Jack’s pulse quickened, but he didn’t let it show. He had to play this carefully. “Just trying to stay on top of things. We’re in for a big night.”

Marston didn’t smile. “That’s right. Big night. And I don’t want any loose ends getting in the way.”

Jack felt the weight of Marston’s words, the unspoken threat lingering between them. He was out of time. He nodded curtly and headed for his ATV, trying to keep his pace steady, even as his heart hammered in his chest. Marston would have eyes on him now, but it didn’t matter. Jack had to get out of the camp and warn the resistance.

The drive to the Marlowe property was a blur of sharp curves and winding half-destroyed roads, the thick mist rolling down the mountain like an omen. Jack gripped the wheel, his mind spinning with everything he knew. The locals had been right all along. This wasn’t just about the land. The government had no idea what they were tearing into.

The burial mounds scattered across the mountain were not relics of some ancient indigenous tribe—they were far older, remnants of the Nephilim, the giants from the days before the flood. Jack had heard bits and pieces of the old legends from Ben and the others—stories of colossal beings who once walked the earth, their bones buried deep beneath the mountains, their power dormant but never truly gone. The mounds weren’t just graves; they were prisons, sealing something in.

As Jack neared the Marlowe property, the first signs of destruction came into view. The bulldozers had already started, their steel claws digging into the earth, ripping apart centuries-old soil. Bright spotlights illuminated the night, casting long shadows over the misty valley, and the ground vibrated with the roar of machinery.

Jack skidded to a stop just short of the property line, throwing the gear shifter into park. He could see the resistance gathered at the edge of the clearing, their faces lit by the harsh glare of the floodlights, fear and fury etched into every line. Ben stood at the front, his fists clenched, his eyes locked on the advancing machines.

Jack ran toward them, his breath coming in ragged gasps. “Ben!” he shouted, his voice barely carrying over the noise. “You have to stop them! You are a relative, perhaps the last living one. Can’t you do anything? They’re going to get themselves killed!”

Ben turned, his face pale but resolute. “I know, Jack. We tried to warn them. Now... now they’ll have to deal with the consequences.”

Jack reached him just as the ground beneath their feet trembled. It was faint at first, a low rumble that could have been mistaken for the vibration of the machines, but it grew steadily stronger. The locals fell silent, their eyes wide as they stared at the earth, watching as the ground seemed to shift and move beneath the heavy equipment.

And then the lights flickered.

One by one, the floodlights sputtered out, casting the entire site into darkness. The machines groaned to a stop, their engines choking as the ground beneath them heaved, like some ancient beast stirring from its slumber.

“Jack,” Ben whispered, his voice barely audible. “They’ve disturbed the Nephilim.”

Jack’s blood ran cold. The low, bone-rattling hum echoed through the valley, vibrating deep within his chest. Strange lights flickered in the distance, hovering above the tree line like spectral flames, casting an eerie glow over the scene. The bulldozers stood frozen, half-buried in the churning earth, and the air was filled with a deep, resonant hum that seemed to come from the mountain itself.

The locals knew. They had always known. This was the mountain’s warning—a final, terrible signal that something long buried was rising. Jack’s stomach twisted with dread. This was no legend. No superstition.

It was real.

He took a step back as the ground shifted again, the tremor growing stronger. In the distance, deep within the mountain, something groaned—a low, guttural sound that sent shivers down his spine. The Nephilim were stirring, their prison cracked open by the government’s relentless greed.

And now it was too late to stop them.

Chapter Eight

The last stand came under the shroud of night, with the full weight of Black Mountain looming overhead. The air was thick with anticipation, every breath Jack took filled with the heavy scent of damp earth and the ever-present mist that clung to the trees like a living thing. The locals had gathered, armed with little more than the tools of their trade—axes, hunting rifles, and the determination to defend the only home they’d ever known. Jack stood among them now, no longer an outsider but a part of their resistance.

Across the clearing, the DHS teams were assembling with far more firepower than the locals could hope to match. Black SUVs and armored vehicles lined the dirt road, and soldiers in tactical gear moved into position, their rifles glinting under the floodlights. Behind them, the private contractors had already begun rolling in the heavy equipment—bulldozers, drills, and excavation rigs, all aimed at one goal: tearing the mountain apart to unearth the lithium below.

But Jack knew now that it wasn’t just lithium under the mountain. It wasn’t just minerals or resources the government sought. The burial mounds they’d uncovered were tombs, prisons meant to seal away something far more dangerous. The Nephilim. Giants from a forgotten age, buried deep beneath the surface to keep their ancient power from ever rising again. And now, with every dig, every cut into the mountain, the government was undoing that seal.

Ben stood beside Jack, his face grim, his eyes scanning the approaching DHS forces. "It's too late to stop it now," he muttered. "They've already disturbed the tombs. The mountain knows."

Jack felt the rumble before he heard it. A deep, bone-shaking vibration that traveled through the ground, rattling the loose stones at his feet. The air grew heavy, thick with an energy that hummed like the electric charge before a storm. Somewhere deep beneath the surface, something was waking up.

The DHS commander raised a bullhorn, his voice booming across the clearing. "This is your last warning! Surrender now, and no one gets hurt!"

Ben's eyes flashed with defiance. "They don't understand," he said quietly, shaking his head. "It's not us they need to be afraid of."

As if in response to his words, the ground beneath them began to shake violently. The tremor rolled through the valley like a wave, sending the DHS agents stumbling, their vehicles rocking on their axles. Jack felt the earth shift beneath his boots, as if something massive was stirring below, stretching, pushing against the thin layer of soil that had kept it buried for millennia.

The floodlights flickered, casting long, distorted shadows across the clearing. Then, without warning, the mist thickened, swirling in unnatural patterns. It moved like a living thing, coiling and twisting around the trees, creeping toward the DHS forces like a predator closing in on its prey.

"Hold your positions!" the commander shouted, but his voice wavered with uncertainty.

Suddenly, from the depths of the forest, figures began to emerge, and old woman from the looks of it— behind her, dark, humanoid shapes, towering and silent, their forms barely visible through the fog began to walk past her. Jack's breath caught in his throat. These weren't men. They were something else—something ancient and otherworldly. Shadows born from the mountain itself, their shapes massive and distorted, their movements slow and deliberate.

The Nephilim.

Jack felt a cold chill race down his spine as the figures moved closer, their sheer presence freezing the DHS and FBI agents in place. They weren't attacking—at least, not yet. But the air crackled with an energy that Jack had never felt before, a primal force that pulsed through the clearing like a heartbeat.

Chaos erupted.

The agents opened fire, the sharp crack of gunfire echoing through the valley. Bullets ripped through the fog, but they passed harmlessly through the shadowy figures, as if they were shooting at smoke. The Nephilim kept advancing, their massive forms barely disturbed by the hail of bullets. Their silent, purposeful movements filled the air with an eerie calm.

And then the fog moved.

It surged forward, thick, and impenetrable, swallowing the trucks, the men, everything in its path. The soldiers screamed; their voices muffled by the dense mist as it wrapped around them like a shroud. Vehicles disappeared in seconds, their headlights snuffed out as if a giant hand had reached down and snuffed out

the light. The heavy machinery—bulldozers, drills, and excavators—groaned under the weight of the earth, sinking slowly as the ground beneath them churned like liquid.

Jack stood frozen, watching in awe and terror as the mountain fought back, reclaiming what had been disturbed. It wasn't just nature—it was something far older, far more powerful than anything he had ever imagined. The Nephilim weren't attacking directly. They were simply watching, waiting, as the mountain itself did their bidding.

The soldiers tried to retreat, but there was nowhere to run. The fog consumed them, and within minutes, the entire federal force had been swallowed by the mountain. Only silence remained, the clearing now empty save for the towering stone sentinels that marked the ancient burial ground.

Jack's heart pounded in his chest as the fog began to recede, the swirling mist slowly dissipating, leaving only the stillness of the night. The ground stopped shaking, the tremors fading away like a distant memory. The mountain had spoken.

Ben stood beside him, his eyes locked on the remnants of the battlefield, his face pale but resolute. "I think it's over," he whispered.

But Jack wasn't so sure. The mountain had defended itself, yes—but for how long? Whatever they had disturbed was still down there, awake now. The Nephilim had been awakened, their prison cracked open, and Jack had the sinking feeling that this was only the beginning.

The locals gathered at the edge of the clearing, their faces pale with fear and awe. The ancient secrets that had once been buried deep within the earth had been brought to the surface, and the price for that awakening was yet to be fully paid.

Jack stood with Ben at the edge of the clearing, watching as the fog slowly dissipated, leaving only silence in its wake. The mountain had protected itself this time, but Jack couldn't shake the feeling that something had been let loose—something that wouldn't be so easily contained.

Epilogue

In the Shadow of the Black Mountain

The Appalachian Mountains had stood for millennia, their peaks and valleys shaped not only by the hand of time but by the stories that whispered through the trees and the deep caves hidden beneath their surface. To outsiders, the Appalachians were just another mountain range—old, weathered, and majestic. But to those who had lived there over the centuries, these mountains were alive with myth, lore, and superstition.

The first peoples to inhabit the region—ancient tribes whose names have long since been lost to history—spoke of giants that roamed the hills and valleys. These giants, some said, were the descendants of the Nephilim, the fallen ones of biblical legend. The stories were passed down through the generations, woven into the fabric of the land itself. Long before the European settlers arrived, the indigenous people believed these mountains were not merely a natural formation but a sacred, dangerous place where the earth's most ancient beings had once walked.

As the centuries passed, the legends only grew. By the time the Scots-Irish, Germans, and other European settlers arrived in the 18th century, they brought with them their own superstitions, stories of the old world—tales of faeries, witches, and dark forests where unseen forces ruled. These beliefs found fertile ground in the Appalachians, merging with the existing legends to create a rich tapestry of folklore that defined the region for generations.

The settlers soon learned to fear the mountains in ways the indigenous peoples already knew, that the Black Mountain were the focal point for Appalachia's mysterious allure. It was believed to be a place where the earth's energy ran deep, and those who ventured too close often returned with tales of strange, unsettling experiences. The old-timers warned travelers of the "witch", and especially avoiding travelling the mountain at night, for the air there grew heavy with an inexplicable presence, and shadows there seemed to move with intent.

As strange occurrences continued to spread beyond Black Mountain, an equally insidious agenda began to reveal itself. Behind the retreat of federal forces, there were whispers of a larger strategy at play—an intentional effort by the government to cripple local industries, turning once-thriving communities into ghost towns. The coal mines, logging operations, and small-town factories that had sustained the region for generations were shuttered, their closures attributed to economic downturns or shifting policies.

But those who lived in the shadow of Black Mountain knew better. This wasn't a natural decline—it was a deliberate dismantling. The aim was clear: to drive the population out of the hills and valleys they called home, forcing them to migrate to ever-growing cities where control was tighter and surveillance easier. It was a slow, calculated push to break the spirit of rural America, to erase the independence and resilience of these mountain people.

With each industry that collapsed, more families packed up and left, leaving behind empty streets and boarded-up homes. Ghost towns dotted the landscape, silent testimonies to the government's plan to centralize power and herd the populace into sprawling urban *smart* cities. The mountains, once a refuge, were being systematically emptied. And those who remained in Appalachia couldn't help but wonder: was the battle for Black Mountain just the beginning of something far worse?

The battle for Black Mountain was over now, but for how long, was anyone's guess. After weeks of contentious conflict with the locals, the federal government had retreated for the time being. The agents, despite their advanced technology and overwhelming force, had been defeated not by the locals, but by the mountain itself. Yet, even in victory, the locals sensed something darker was emerging.

With the government forces gone, strange occurrences began to ripple through the surrounding towns, as if Black Mountain had awakened. Reports of eerie lights flickering in the sky and disembodied voices echoing through the forests became more frequent. Animals behaved erratically, vanishing for days, or returning with a wild, disturbed air. The once-crisp mountain air now felt charged, as though the atmosphere itself was building toward something ominous.

The communities around Black Mountain, once devastated by Hurricane Helene, were slowly beginning to rebuild. Yet, even in their recovery, a deep unease lingered, as if something unnatural was stirring beneath the surface. Hunters began finding tracks—footprints far larger than any known animal—while children spoke of shadowy figures: tall, hulking shapes that appeared on the horizon, only to vanish in an instant.

Even the most seasoned locals, long accustomed to the strange happenings of the mountains, couldn't shake the sense that something had profoundly changed.

Rumors spread like wildfire. Some whispered that the Nephilim, the ancient giants of legend, were returning. Others speculated that the government's experiments deep within Black Mountain had unleashed a far more dangerous force. The victory over the federal forces, once a proud moment for the locals, now felt hollow in the shadow of this growing, mysterious threat. Perhaps the true enemy had yet to reveal itself.

As weeks passed, the unsettling phenomena only intensified. Vast sections of the forest surrounding Black Mountain fell eerily silent, as though the land itself was holding its breath. People disappeared without a trace, only to reappear days later, disoriented and with no memory of where they had been. The lights in the sky grew brighter, their strange glow cutting through the night, while the air grew thick with a creeping sense of dread.

Black Mountain, once a symbol of defiance and resistance, had become something much darker—a beacon for forces far beyond human control. The battle might have ended, but whatever ancient powers had been stirred were now spreading their influence. And the stories that once served as folklore were beginning to feel all too real.

The people of Appalachia, who had lived with these legends for centuries, were now confronting the possibility that they weren't just tales meant to scare children or the curious. The land itself was waking up, and whatever lay beneath the surface of Appalachia was beginning to rise.