

1

WELCOME TO ZOMBIELAND

Out of habit, Jake Rutledge kept glancing beside him for Blake.

The fraternal twins had been inseparable for most of their lives and had relied on each other growing up in Oakley, West Virginia. They'd had to. When they were boys, their father had succumbed to his years working in the coal mines and had died when they were nine. Their mother had held on until their eighteenth birthday; the doctor said she'd died of a brain aneurysm, but Jake was of the opinion that it was despair and tiredness that had done her in. Mom had held on just long enough for her sons to graduate from high school.

He and Blake had talked of leaving West Virginia, but it wasn't the Rutledge way to cut and run. They were the fourth generation to call the Mountain State home, and their Appalachian ties were deep. Blake, in particular, seemed bound by the Rutledge roots. Their family, now small as it was, was everything.

"I got your back, brother," one would say to the other.

"I got your back, brother," was always the reply.

Jake steered his car onto the exit from State Route 19. The sign that Jake had grown up with that said *WELCOME TO OAKLEY* had been defaced so that it now read *WELCOME TO ZOMBIELAND*.

2 / LAW AND ADDICTION

Growing up, he and the other kids had often referred to Oakley as “Smokeley.” That was usually good for a wink and a snicker. After all, there was a lot of dope smoking in town. And it was kind of an inside joke, because even the adults sometimes called it Smokeley—a nickname that didn’t refer to weed but to the time when coal stoves and fireplaces had blackened the winter sky. But now the name Smokeley seemed almost quaint, especially in light of its new nickname.

Still, Jake wasn’t surprised. Even before he’d left town for college, then law school, the long death throes of the coal industry had been pushing Oakley toward the edge of poverty. But the town had held on. Jake had grown up with a downtown that had its Ma-and-Pa businesses and restaurants. They’d even had a small movie theater. Over the course of a decade, though, more and more businesses had failed. Oakley’s infrastructure had crumbled along with the closings. The local library had cut its hours and days, and then shuttered altogether due to budget cuts. It had been the same with the park service. Even the Elks Club was gone.

Now, more than half of Oakley’s downtown storefronts were empty. Only the drugstore seemed to prosper. Of course, there were fewer than five thousand residents in Oakley, so it was no wonder it felt small, but that wasn’t the only thing. The town felt dispirited, and dark. Bruce Springsteen’s song “My Hometown” seemed to describe the place perfectly—everywhere there were signs of troubled times.

Jake drove past the Rutledge home, not ready to stop there just yet—he had another destination in mind. Fresh in his thoughts was the memory of the day he’d graduated from Marshall and was accepted into law school.

“Imagine that,” Blake said. “You’re going to be a lawyer.”

“That’s a long way off,” said Jake.

3 / Mike Papantonio

“How are you going to pay for it?” asked Blake. “Half this house is yours. We can sell it to help with your schooling.”

“Not on your life,” Jake said. “WVU is offering me a partial scholarship. Still, there’s nothing keeping you here. If you want, we could share an apartment in Morgantown.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Blake said.

It was a great idea that never materialized. Blake stayed in Oakley. He worked in what he said was “construction,” but mostly it was part-time demolition. There weren’t any new buildings going up in town.

The good thing about law school and his part-time jobs was that the three years passed quickly for Jake. The last time he’d gone home to visit Blake had been just a month before graduation. Jake was concerned about his brother; it was at least the third time that year Blake had gotten sick.

“Don’t worry,” said Blake. “It’s just stomach flu. Wild horses couldn’t keep me from your graduation. I’ll be the one in the audience screaming the loudest. I got your back, brother.”

“I got your back, brother,” Jake said.

The twins weren’t carbon copies of each other. Blake was darker and stockier, an inch taller than Jake, and the older brother by twenty minutes. That was something he frequently pointed out to his “little brother.”

Both were good students, but it was Jake who put a real effort into academics. Blake was more happy-go-lucky. He’d settle for a *B*, when only an *A* was good enough for Jake. And so, it came as no surprise to anyone when Jake ended up the valedictorian of their class at the five-hundred-student Midway High School.

After their mother’s death, and with money tight, it was “big brother” who insisted that Jake continue his education at Marshall University upstate, though it would be the first time in their lives the two brothers would be apart. To Jake, moving to the tristate area,

4 / LAW AND ADDICTION

with its three hundred and fifty thousand residents, meant he was truly going off to the big city.

Blake had promised to visit him, but something always seemed to come up.

Jake navigated the car around a corner, and his destination was in front of him. He drove through the wrought-iron gate and parked. At fifty acres, the Oakley Cemetery wasn't overly large, but it might very well have been the most scenic spot in town, especially with its profusion of black oaks, live oaks, basswood, beeches, and its many varieties of maple trees. The cemetery grounds had been selected as a historic area by West Virginia's State Historic Preservation Office.

The dead, however, were not immune from the slings and arrows of the living. The upkeep of the cemetery was no longer a community priority, and vandalism seemed to be ever more of a problem—addicts, everyone assumed, looking to rob the dead of whatever jewelry and keepsakes they'd been buried with. It didn't help that the cemetery was also a popular spot for the young to party.

As Jake headed in the direction he'd walked in only a few weeks before, he whispered to the universe, "I got your back, brother."



Walking down the row toward Blake's grave, his thoughts on the past, Jake saw a figure working in front of a headstone. He paused, not wanting to intrude, and as he did so, she got to her feet and began to move away.

"Anna?" he said, shocked by the familiar face.

She turned. "Jake?" she said, her voice unsure.

Anna Fowler looked much the same as she had in high school. Her blue eyes sparkled, and her long chestnut-brown hair swayed

5 / Mike Papantonio

against her shoulders. The two of them walked toward each other and then embraced in a big hug. As they disengaged, Anna's gardening basket hooked on Jake's shirt.

"Don't move," she said. "I don't want to tear your shirt."

With careful fingers—did Jake imagine it or were her fingers trembling?—she disentangled the shirt from her basket. "Sorry about that," she said.

"You could always hook 'em without even trying," said Jake. He hoped his smile said he was kidding—sort of.

"Listen to you," said Anna. "It's so good to see you. How is it that we both live in the same town and we never run into one another?"

She seemed to be struggling to speak and smile at the same time; he could see the sweat trickling down from her forehead, though the day wasn't very hot.

"I've been gone," he said. "For a while, actually. And now that I'm back, all I plan to do is work."

"Then nothing has changed," Anna said. "I knew I never had a chance to be valedictorian with you in the mix."

"That's not how I remember it," Jake said, grinning. "I recall you were always matching me grade for grade."

"Blake thought we were both crazy to study like we did." A cloud passed over her face; then she said, "My kryptonite was Algebra II. You deserved to be valedictorian."

"I didn't have your social demands," Jake said with a wink. "I was more the nerd while you were doing cheerleading and student council. You even played volleyball, if I remember correctly. Not to mention how you were always working at Fowler's."

She laughed. "Don't remind me about my misspent youth. See where it got me? Still right here. On the other hand, I hear you're a lawyer."

Jake nodded. "Hard to believe, right?"

6 / LAW AND ADDICTION

Anna shook her head. "It's not hard to believe at all. I'm really proud of you, Jake. And even though Blake and I didn't keep in touch much after high school, I know he would be, too."

Jake tried to deflect her praise. He didn't want to feel like a fraud. "It's not as glamorous as it sounds," he said. "I'd probably be making more flipping burgers."

"I don't believe that."

"Sadly," he said, "it's true. But that's partly because of my own stubbornness. I'm about to start working on this long-shot case. I hate to think I'm tilting at windmills, but I probably am. You can call me Don Quixote."

"It sounds like you're doing something courageous, Don," she said.

That got a smile out of him, along with more head shaking. "I wish I was that noble," he said, "but the reason I'm pursuing this case is because of Blake's death."

Anna's voice was unsteady. "I am so sorry about that," she said.

Jake nodded. "His death really threw me for a loop. I never saw it coming, so it was a real shock."

She didn't speak for a moment, and he could see that she was blinking away tears. He hadn't meant to make her sad.

"What about you?" he asked. "I heard you went off to college but then came back."

"A dream deferred," said Anna, nodding. "My mom got cancer, and I came home to help her fight it. Unfortunately, it was a fight we lost. And right after her death, Daddy had his stroke. I've sort of been a recluse myself since Momma died. And for a while there, Daddy needed round-the-clock care. Luckily, he's better now. That's allowed me to go out and work a part-time job."

"Doing what?" asked Jake.

"I've been modeling."

7 / Mike Papantonio

"That doesn't surprise me," he said, "as pretty as you are. What kind of modeling?"

"I've been an art model for Clint Smith for a while now," she said. "Oakley's native son made good."

Jake nodded. In high school he'd had a crush on Anna, but then again, just about every male in his class had. Back then, he'd thought Anna was out of his league. She was classy, always doing and saying the right thing. Whenever he found himself in her presence, he had the hardest time uttering a complete sentence. In his daydreams he wasn't tongue-tied; in *them*, he dared to ask her out. But that never happened. Besides, she'd always been arm candy for Blake. The two of them had looked great together. In fact, the school had voted them homecoming king and queen. They had dated a few times before mutually agreeing they were better off as friends. Jake wondered if Blake had sensed how he felt about Anna, and backed off to give him a chance. He guessed he would never know.

"This morning I made some floral bouquets to put on gravesites," Anna said, gesturing to her basket. "I made one for Blake's stone, assuming that's okay with you?"

"Okay? At this very moment, Blake is strutting around the clouds, saying, 'The prettiest woman in all of West Virginia is leaving me flowers.' And loud enough for me to hear, he's saying, 'What do you think of *that*, little brother?'"

"You were the younger twin?" She laughed. "I don't think I ever knew that."

"By only twenty minutes," said Jake. "But he loved lording that over me."

Anna's hands rose to her face, and a frown creased her expression.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I'm not feeling well," she said. "If you don't mind, I'll give you Blake's bouquet."

8 / LAW AND ADDICTION

As Anna passed him the flowers, Jake couldn't help but notice her shaking hands. Pale red blotches had formed on her fair skin.

"I better walk you to your car," he said.

"That's not necessary," Anna said, her voice sharp. Then she softened it. "I'll feel better after a warm bath and a little rest."

She smiled for him and began walking away.

"It was great seeing you," Jake called after her.

Anna paused in her escape, waved to him, and said, "It really was. Don't give up on your dreams, Jake. Or should I say . . . Don't? Keep dreaming those impossible dreams. I hope you'll call me."

Her words, and her invitation, made Jake smile. "I will," he said.

Anna waved again and kept walking. Jake watched her go. Her illness would give him a reason to call to see how she was doing.

Maybe he wouldn't even wait until tomorrow to call her.