

Excerpt from *Kingdom Come*, CA by Judy Strick

The temperature had hit 89 degrees by nine AM. Fortunately, the fierce winds of the evening past had left us for the day, no doubt fueling up for sunset, as those ill winds are prone to do.

I checked on my animals; fed them, reassured them; they were very edgy. Well, shit; so was I.

I did the things you're supposed to do. I hauled out my heavy-duty hose with the high spray nozzle and hosed off my roofs. Under a turgid hot sky, I flushed away dead leaves, dead brush, fallen sticks from last night's big winds. I hauled branches away from my perimeters until my back started aching. I got the animal trailers ready, just in case.

It was about eleven AM when I left my house and walked down the driveway to hang out with Hannah and Finn and watch the fire coverage with someone of my own species.

Tonto tagged along.

The black cloud was more diffuse now; it had spread our way. The sky was smokey-orange, the sky of an alien planet. The fire was moving closer. The air was thick with heat. I covered my nose with my arm as I walked.

The wind was blowing now in our direction and ash, like snow drifting down, dusted the leaves and fence tops.

Hannah hugged me when I walked in.

"There's ash," I said.

"Should we leave?"

"No. We should just be more watchful."

I followed her toward the kitchen. My dog followed me.

"Where's Finn?"

"Usual place."

"Does he know what's going on?" I asked quietly.

"I've been minimizing it, and keeping the TV off. Mischa will be here soon. He insisted on driving up before they close the Grapevine. I told him not to come, but he insisted. I guess if we have to evacuate... this all feels so unreal. Like I'm watching it from afar. Kind of out-of-body."

"Hi Finn," I called out as we passed the playroom. Dooley had sprawled himself across the opening of the room, like Cerberus guarding his station. The two dogs sniffed noses, but Dooley stayed put.

Finn was under his desk reading. He ignored me. As expected.

The air conditioning was blissfully brisk and there was no smell of smoke in the house. If it wasn't for the oddness of the ominous light coming through the windows, you'd never know there was a fire happening not all that far away.

Hannah and I watched the TV monitor in the kitchen with the sound turned off, so as not to attract Finn's attention.

"I don't want him obsessing about this. I told him it was very far away. I think that he consulted with the Wizard and the Wizard reassured him."

The wildfire was now lapping at the north- western flank of Mt. Pinos... fueled by drought conditions... Hannah flipped off the TV. "No point in driving ourselves crazy... is there?"

"No point."

We sat, Hannah and I, at our usual places at the counter. This time Hannah was pouring wine - even though it was not yet noon.

“When Rome is burning...” she said, filling our glasses.

“Well, why not.”

We sipped delicately, as became ladies who were drinking before lunch.

After the first sip, Hannah shook her head and lowered her voice. “Finn... he had the granddaddy of bad dreams last night.” She sighed, and covered her eyes with her hand. “The poor little kid. He was terrified. I went running into his room as soon as I heard him screaming. He was hiding in a corner, crouching, holding onto his damn stick like a little cornered mouse. He kept insisting that a big black monster deer with lightening antlers and yellow eyes was right outside his window, trying to get in, banging at the glass. He said it was the one he had seen in the meadow. The Bad Thing...”

That was the point at which I was starting to feel unsettled.

Hannah continued. “I kept telling him it was the wind- a branch tapping the window, but I couldn’t convince him. I kept telling him it was only a dream, I reminded him that deer can’t fly up to second story windows. But he was beyond listening.”

“What time last night?” I asked her.

She looked at me as if it were an odd question. Perhaps it was.

“I don’t know. Late, way after midnight.” Her eyes were quizzical, and I had no immediate response. To say I was stunned is a profound understatement.

“I guess we were all spooked last night,” I finally muttered inanely. And then I drew a deep breath and put my reputation as a sane person on the line.

“Okay; this is going to sound very strange, but... shortly after two AM...”

And I told her about the deer on the deck; and my own encounter with a pair of yellow eyes that had nearly scared the life out of me.

“No...” she kept saying. “No, no... that’s too weird...”

And she refilled our wine glasses. And we looked at each other in profound silence; which Hannah finally broke.

“I simply don’t know what to say. My god, how extremely odd,” she murmured shaking her head.

“Mmm hmm...” I said carefully. “Can I talk to Finn about his dream?”

She frowned and shook her head. “Let it go for now. He’s pretty much calmed down. He was really upset last night.”

I nodded. “So was I.”