

Read an excerpt of SIGN by Lou Rera

As they turned the corner to the back of the tomb, he tried to light up the tree line, but the beam from the flashlight was too weak. There was a window in the back wall, about the size of a horizontal poster, made of stained glass. Jim raised his hand to the window and ran his finger along the lead strips that held each piece of glass together. The light revealed a scene from the Bible—Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

“Holy shit! You’ve got to take a look at this!” he said.

“What?”

“This stained glass window depicts Jesus with horns of the Devil. And his face, it—”

“It’s starting again. Demons, devils, whatever—something is going to happen. I know it. Just like the noises in the truck, before the explosion.”

She felt the tingle of goose bumps crawling up her thighs, spreading to her arms and up the back of her neck to the base of her hairline. She took a deep breath. Deirdre grabbed Jim’s arm above the wrist. In that instant she became aware of where they were—out behind a mausoleum tucked back off the road, a country road without a house, probably for twenty miles in either direction. They were helpless.

“Did you hear anything I just said?”

“Yeah, I did,” he said flatly. “I *know* this isn’t good, but what the fuck can we do? We can’t freak right now. If there is someone here, we’re making it easy for them if we come unglued.”

He turned and lit up the ground behind the back of the building and bent down to get a closer look.

“The grass has been burnt. But it’s been raked clean. That’s why we didn’t see it before. Most of the charred patches are gone. If it was done today, the smell would have been stronger.”

“They burned it because of Satan,” she said.

The mausoleum had been built in the middle of nowhere. This was not a graveyard for a Christian, not with the horns of Satan sticking out of the head of Jesus. They walked along the right wall, then back to the front. When Jim got to the mausoleum door, he turned the handle.

“It’s locked—”

“They usually are, right?”

There were spaces between the bronze stalks where he could squeeze part of his fingers and the flashlight through for a better look. Deirdre walked around behind him to see what he’d see. The last breath they took locked in their chest. Deirdre dropped her pepper spray, and put her hand over her mouth. Jim slipped off the granite step and fell backward, jumping back to his feet as if the ground had been electrified.

“Jim, did you—did you see?”

Nothing came shrieking out of the tomb, nothing to physically hurt them except for the horrific vision inside. But there was something to be afraid of—a scene so horrible that they could be sure this was not the work of a sane man.

The tomb was empty, no burial vaults or even a place for one. But the floor was covered in black oily mud with thousands of worms glistening—writhing on the surface, like sea serpents leaping out of the sludge, diving back again. Worms did not dive in the gardens of rural America. There were dozens of crows with their wings ripped off, stumps flapping in spastic motion. They stretched their necks and plucked worms from the oily slime, jerking their heads back and sliding the noodles of flesh down their hungry gullets. Some of the birds were helpless, buried up to their necks in mud, as the worms circled, doing the impossible, coiling and squeezing like snakes;

choking the life out of them. The lucky ones that escaped that fate smashed their beaks into a bloody pulp against the granite walls as though they were lunatics in an asylum. The horrific scene was the animal kingdom version of Dante's Inferno. In the moment Jim and Deirdre looked through the glass, a rancid smell seeped through the walls. The nose-pinching odor of rotting flesh.

The mausoleum was an empty shell. The bizarre zoo-like exhibit, other than the horror of it, made no sense. But sealed inside the interior of this place was the same message from the Texaco station. Blood-red lettering, still dripping its wet message on the back wall, underneath the stained-glass window of a horned Jesus—SIGN. The beam of the flashlight lit up the wall like a jack-o-lantern. The light brightened, as bulbs do before they burn out. Jim could understand how someone could spray the cinderblocks of a gas station wall, but how did they pull this off?

Then Deirdre saw them—a line of green needles like they'd seen in the back of the truck, only these were much bigger; the needles were now spikes. They were growing on the edges at the bottom of the door. And like the ones they had seen in the truck, these moved. Some of them were crushed—the ones Jim had stepped on.