

**THE
VALLEY
OF THE STRANGE**
DASHE ROBERTS



*nosy
crow*



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“Dashe Roberts is the queen of cliffhangers! I fell in love with the world of *Sticky Pines*.”

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For Ellison

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CHAPTER 1

A Rocky Start

By the time we're finished digging, we'll have turned this whole valley inside out. Silas Sladan wiped his sweaty brow with a gloved hand, leaving a gritty streak across his face. "Fire in the hole!" he yelled, holding on to his safety helmet.

Behind him, a tight cluster of workers plugged their ears and braced themselves as he pulled the switch to the dynamite detonator.

PRAKOW! PRAKOW! PRAKOW!
PRAKOW! PRAKOWWWWW! A series of thunderous explosions peppered the end of the mining tunnel in a fiery spiral. The rocky wall blasted apart, sending a gust of hot dust

billowing down the long, tight corridor a quarter of a mile underground.

“Hooeey,” shouted a tattooed miner with a ratty goatee. “That was a big ’un!”

“You said it, Riley.” Relieved, Silas relaxed his tense muscles. *No cave-ins. No flooding. Nobody flattened by a falling boulder. I’d call that a success.*

Five months had passed since the Nu Co. pine sweetener factory was destroyed in a freak earthquake. The valley-shattering catastrophe had left many of Sticky Pines’ residents unemployed, and revealed a startling discovery: massive rivers of thick, black goo flowed far below the region in enormous quantities. Baffling the local scientific community, the mysterious goo was identified as Nucralose – the sweet and highly valuable sap that seeped from the pines from which the town got its name. How tree sap could possibly be flowing underground, and where it was coming from, was a mystery that Nu Co.’s CEO, Mr Fisher, was determined to solve.

As soon as he'd learned of the subterranean goo, Fisher had set up a mining operation to collect the stuff day and night. Among several other former factory workers, Silas Sladan was retrained to join a special team tasked with uncovering the source of the Nucralose. Unfortunately, Silas was finding his new job to be dank, dreary and just plain dreadful.

When the soot from the blast finally settled, Silas removed his protective breathing mask and inhaled. The air smelled sweet. *That's a good sign.*

He unfurled a map on a folding table near the tunnel's entrance, showing the rivers of goo they'd discovered so far. They seemed to be more numerous closer to Black Hole Lake, so that's where he and his diggers were heading. But mining too close to the lake bed was a perilous operation.

"The explosions are the best part of this lame job," said a young man with a short Afro. He'd graduated from Sticky Pines High School just

the year before, and he still had the acne to prove it. “Can I rig the dynamite next?”

“Sorry, Sam,” Silas responded. “Your mom made me promise not to let you near any explosives. Wouldn’t want you to lose any limbs, would we?”

Riley snorted as Sam flicked him on the arm.

A cage-like elevator descended into view, travelling down the smoky shaft leading to the surface. Packed with tired workers in grimy coveralls and dinged-up hard hats, the cage jolted to a stop on the mine floor.

A stout, soft-chinned man jostled past the other passengers to be first through the gated doors. His yellow helmet was so clean it was gleaming.

Silas greeted Fisher’s second-in-command with a forced smile, the ends of his bushy black moustache turning up towards his dimples. “You smell that, Mr Murl?”

Murl closed his eyes. “The sweet stench of success.” He clapped Silas on the shoulder.

“Good work, Sladan. With any luck, we’ll locate the source of the goo in a matter of hours.”

“About that.” Silas rubbed his sore neck. “I was hoping to make it home for dinner tonight. Miranda’s making *tamales* and my kids have been missing me lately.”

“Fraid I can’t let you off early, Sladan.” Murl shook his head. “Fisher’s on a tight schedule. You understand.”

Not really. Silas sighed. “You heard the man, *compadres*,” he shouted at the crew disembarking from the elevator, their shovels and pickaxes in tow.

The clangs of metal against rock soon echoed through the tunnel, the seemingly endless day wearing on under the glare of artificial lights. *Just a little while longer*, Silas told himself for the zillionth time.

A pair of perspiring women trundled a cartful of rocks past him on their way to the disposal ramp. “Looks like we hit a cave system,” said the taller of the two.

“Caves?” Silas’s spirits lifted. *Sounds like we’ve found something interesting for once.* “Sam, Riley,” he called.

He located them near the back of the tunnel, playing “hockey” with stones and sledgehammers. *Someone needs to teach those two some discipline.* Silas wished someone had talked some sense into him when he was their age, instead of letting him waste so much valuable time playing his guitar. *My father always said, there’s no money in melodies.*

“We’re going spelunking,” he told the younger men.

“Sweet.” Sam pumped his fist. He and Riley cheerfully followed Silas past the piles of debris, down to the rocky hole they’d just blasted open.

“Now, listen up,” said Silas. “Caves can be very dangerous. You remember what I told you about mining this close to a big body of water?”

Sam raised his hand. “If we’re not careful, we could accidentally bust through the lake bed.”

“Which could have disastrous, even deadly,

consequences,” Riley recited.

“That’s right,” said Silas. “We’ll need to keep an eye out for cracks and leaks in the rock face. Once we’ve determined it’s safe, we can continue the dig. You guys ready?”

“If I say no, can I go home?” said Riley.

“Just follow me,” Silas grumbled as he led them into darkness.

The three men crouched low, sometimes crawling, as they made their way through the freshly exposed tunnel. Silas gagged as the sweet scent of Nucralose grew overpowering. Soon the narrow chasm they were probing yawned into an enormous cavern. Despite the workers’ headlamps, it was difficult to make out much of their surroundings. Silas could hear a trickle of liquid coming from somewhere. *That had better not be water.*

“Hello,” Sam shouted into the gloom. “Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh...” His deep voice echoed breezily around the void. “Your band should do a show down here, Mr Sladan. The acoustics are amazing.”

“I don’t want to discuss The Sticky Six,” said Silas. He’d had to disband his beloved music group when he’d started his new job. He just didn’t have enough time for hobbies any more. It was still a sore subject. “Can we get some light, please?”

Riley whipped out a flare and set it aflame with a SHGXXXSHH, bathing the cathedral-sized cave in flickering orange hues.

Silas’s breath escaped all at once. *What on the round blue Earth...* A thick river of Nucralose, as black as night, slowly gurgled along the side of the domed cavern. Above it, sinewy twists of wood branched like exposed blood vessels down the jagged wall, straight into the sticky goo.

“Are those tree roots?” asked Sam, agog.

“This far underground?” scoffed Silas. “We’re more than four hundred feet below the surface. Don’t be stupid.”

“No, I think he’s right,” said Riley. He sauntered closer, shining his headlamp at the woody protrusions. “I reckon these are sticky

pine roots. Think they're sucking up the sap from all the way down here?"

"Like a bunch of silly straws?" Sam nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense."

Silas smacked his forehead. "My wife taught you both middle school science. You know very well that's not how trees work."

"Maybe sticky pines aren't normal trees," Riley ventured.

"And maybe that stuff's not sap," said Sam.

The hair on the back of Silas's neck stood to attention. *What else could it be?* He shook his head to fend off an impending headache. "Let's get to work and make sure this cave is safe. Riley, check the right side. Sam, head towards the back."

The three men split up, weaving carefully through the dim cavern, their headlamps casting looming shadows across a landscape strewn with towering stalagmites and mounds of rubble knocked loose from the explosion.

Silas shone his headlamp up along the impossible tree roots until they disappeared

into the cave ceiling. He narrowed his eyes as he spotted strange shapes carved into the rock high above. *What the...* The dome was covered in time-worn depictions of creatures big and small, all of which had been etched into the stone centuries ago. Some were normal woodland animals, but others looked like they'd been ripped out of old legends. A snake with nine heads, a wolf with curved fangs, a creature with the body of a man and the head and legs of a bison, and many more.

"Monsters." Silas shivered.

"What'd you find?" asked Riley. He directed his torch up towards the centre of the ceiling, highlighting a colossal figure: a dragon with a scaly, moustachioed snout and eagle-like talons on its hands and feet. Its winged, dog-like physique curled around an enormous orb.

"Cool." Riley scratched his patchy beard. "How'd prehistoric hillbillies carve that junk all the way up there?"

"Beats me," said Silas.

“Hey,” Sam called from the far side of the cavern. “Look over here.”

Cripes. What now?

Silas jogged round a wide pillar of rock, then shone his torch towards the back of the cave. Sam was standing fifty metres away, pointing at a trickling waterfall of viscous goo that oozed out of the ceiling and ran down the back wall like syrup down a stack of pancakes. The gloopy substance dribbled down jagged stones, pooling in nooks and crannies before it spilled into the thick river flowing below.

Riley whistled. “Well, I guess we know what’s feedin’ that crick.”

“Could the source of all the Nucralose be just behind this wall?” Sam rubbed his hands together excitedly.

Silas’s pulse quickened with hope. “Let’s not jump to conclusions.” He tried and failed to hide his delight. *I’ll definitely be getting a bonus for this.*

“Let’s blast through the goo-fall now,” said Riley. “I’ll go and get the dynamite. BING, BANG,

BOOM, we finish the job and we can get back above ground and see some daylight for once.”

“We can’t just blast through.” Silas knocked on Riley’s helmet. “You want the whole lake to crash down on us?”

“Hey, guys,” Sam called out. He’d found a cove off to the right, hidden behind a group of lumpy stalagmites. “I found some more carvings.”

Silas and Riley hustled over, their tools jangling on their belts. Riley set his flare down to light the shallow tunnel. Inside was a shiny black onyx slab the size and shape of a door. At chest height, someone had engraved a large circle surrounded by squiggly lines. *Looks like a kid’s drawing of the sun.* Silas peered closer, noticing that the lines were made up of many small holes, each big enough to fit the tip of a pencil. There was a series of strange symbols inside the sun, all encircling a thumb-sized white stone embedded in its centre.

Sam leaned in. “That looks like a button.”

Silas pulled him back. “Don’t touch it.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t know what it does.”

Riley jostled between them. “So what? I bet nothing would happen. I say we push it.”

“Do not do that,” ordered Silas.

“Oh, come on,” Sam laughed. “We’re only human. You see a mysterious button, you gotta push it, right?”

Silas pinched the bridge of his nose. “OK, boys, we’re heading back to the tunnel right now, and we’re going to report all of this to—”

Before he could finish, Riley reached out and punched the button with the side of his fist. There was a CLICK, as if some unseen gear had shifted.

Silas’s throat tightened. “What did you just do?”

All three men fell silent, waiting. Nothing happened.

“See?” said Riley. “I told you it wouldn’t—”

GKSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSHHHHHHHHHH.

A mist of glittering black dust blew out of the carved holes, engulfing Silas, Riley and Sam in a

shimmering cloud. The three men doubled over, coughing.

“What is this stuff?” Sam wheezed.

“I don’t know,” Silas sputtered. It felt like dozens of tiny fingers were tickling the inside of his lungs. He might have laughed if he weren’t so terrified. “Let’s get out of here,” he cried, his head spinning. He ran, accidentally kicking Riley’s flare and sending it careening into the river, where it was extinguished.

Guided only by the jiggling lights attached to their helmets, the disoriented miners stumbled towards the tunnel entrance, tripping over loose stones, their own feet and each other. When they finally reached the blast hole, Silas shoved the other two in first, then tumbled after them. One by one, gasping, they spilled out the other side.

Silas collapsed by a pile of gravel, taking slow, juddering breaths until the tickling sensation subsided. After several minutes, his coughing eased and his heart slowed. He looked up to find a short, auburn-haired worker named Carleen

with dirt-smudged cheeks peering down at him. The unlit lamp on her helmet mirrored back his own face. His normally brown irises were emitting bright-green light, like starry emeralds.

Whoa.

“Hot jeepers,” Carleen yelped. “What’s the matter with your peepers?”

Dazed, Silas rubbed his eyelids with the heels of his palms, then blinked blearily at the half-dozen workers watching him from afar.

“Wait.” Carleen leaned in closer, chuckling nervously. “Sorry, Sy, for a minute there I could’ve sworn your eyes were *glowing*.” She shuddered. “Maybe I’ve been down here too long.” She helped him to his feet.

Sam and Riley were across the tunnel, still coughing. Two burly workers pounded on their backs until they were once again breathing freely.

“What happened back there?” asked Carleen.

Silas screwed up his face as he tried to remember, but everything seemed fuzzy. In a rush, his head cleared, leaving a sensation of pure

joy. He, Sam and Riley turned to one another and began giggling uncontrollably.

“What’s the joke?” said one of the burly miners.

Silas grinned like a golden retriever. “Listen up.” He cleared his throat, attempting to put on a serious tone. “Those caves are not safe,” he announced. “There are ... water leaks! And cracks. Cracks allllll over the place.”

Riley smirked and Sam nodded earnestly.

Carleen threw her helmet on the ground. “You mean all this digging’s been for nothing?”

“I guess so.” Silas shrugged. “Tell you what – why don’t we all take the rest of the day off?”

Riley clapped. “That’s a wicked idea.”

“You, uh, sure we can do that, Sy?” Carleen perked up.

“I’ll let the bossman know we can’t possibly dig through such a dangerous cavity.” Silas nudged his way through the throng of pleasantly surprised miners, none of whom seemed likely to complain.

Carleen stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

A serene smile graced Silas’s face. “Oh, yes.” He took a deep breath and let it out with a satisfying whoosh. “I’ve never felt better in my life.”