

# The Red Sun

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## Chapter One

Have you ever found yourself somewhere unexpected and wondered: How did I get here? Maybe you jumped on your new ten-speed to go to a friend's house and ended up in the ER nursing a broken collarbone. Or you stuck your head in between the rungs of the railing and had to wait, embarrassed down to your toes, for the firefighters to get you unstuck.

Or maybe you ended up hiding in the boys' locker room because your English teacher is a witch and is trying to kill you. That ever happen to you?

I thought not. My name is Sam Baron, and I have some advice for you: If you find a strange dwarf in your garage, don't let him into your house and don't—I repeat do not— let him take you through a stonefire.

I live in a small town in eastern Oregon called Pilot Rock, named for the gigantic ten-story boulder that sits just outside of town on the Umatilla Indian reservation. You can climb to the top if you know the way. There's a trail, but you need to be a mountain goat to get all the way up.

I like to get up early and ride my bike out to the edge of town and watch the sun rise over the top of the rock. The sun is my anchor. Seeing it rise every day takes away the emptiness that claws at me. Somehow it gives me hope that things will work out.

Because for me, things have a way of not working out.

You should know from the start, I'm no hero. For one thing, I've got a temper. I could tell you stories about the number of times I've gotten into fights with kids twice my size, but its best to start a few months ago on the day I turned twelve.

One minute I was enjoying my slice of birthday cake, the next, I had Ronnie Polk down on the ground, pounding his face into the dirt like a punching bag. The little creep had called my dad a deadbeat.

Yeah, I've got dad issues. He took off a few years ago. No note, no card. Just disappeared one night. Anyway, Ronnie had been taunting me all day. I think he was jealous of my new bike. It was silver and shiny and more than my mom could afford.

I was looking forward to spending the summer riding bikes with my best friend, Howie, when Ronnie opened his big trap. Howie said I turned bright red. All I remember is the sun felt too hot on my face, like I was burning up inside. The cake slipped out of my hands. A roar in my ears sent me sliding into a pot of boiling rage. I don't even remember hitting him, but when they pulled me off, his nose was squashed flatter than a pancake.

He'd called me a freak as his mother rushed him away, looking at me like I was some kind of monster.

Get the picture? Not a hero.

I spent the rest of the summer on lockdown, mowing endless lawns to pay Ronnie's mom back for the doctor bills to straighten out his nose. I didn't get to ride my new bike even once. The start of seventh grade was my chance to turn over a new leaf. Besides, my mom had threatened to send me to military school if I so much as talked back to a teacher once.

Things started off well even though everyone had heard about how I'd plastered Ronnie's face. It became a game with the eighth graders to see if they could get me to lose my temper.

They tried to pick fights with me almost daily, but I kept my head down and ignored their taunts. I didn't even flinch when one of the jocks dumped a cherry soda on my head. Nope, I was a new man.

Until the day Ms. Endera showed up.

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I rolled into first period English five minutes late as usual. I wasn't too worried. Mr. Platz didn't mind if you were a little late as long as you brought him your old *Gamer* magazines. Only today, the front of the room was empty. Kids sat on desks throwing wads of paper, chattering like hyenas. One girl, Keely Hatch, sat quietly with her head bent over a book. A crowd of boys was teasing someone in the back. It didn't take a genius to figure out whose red tennis shoes were sticking out.

Howie got picked on a lot. He hadn't grown into his skinny arms yet, and his pants were usually an inch or three or four too short. Top that off with a pair of oversized glasses and a mop of curly hair, and he might as well have a bull's-eye on his back.

Pulling off the first two kids, I saw Howie on the ground. Ronnie Polk was on top of him, squashing a grape jelly sandwich all over his face.

I yanked Ronnie off and spun him around. The look on his face was priceless, like he was about to wet his pants when he saw me. Kids started chanting, "*Fight, fight!*"

A twinge of guilt made me loosen my hold. I didn't want to be that guy anymore. But Ronnie had other ideas. He twisted free and punched me hard in the stomach. The air went out with an *oof*. Blood zinged between my ears, and a red mist covered my eyes. I cocked my fist back, grabbing him by the shirt, and was about to reflaten his nose when the door opened with a loud bang.

A woman walked in on spindly high heels, dressed in a black suit cinched tight around the waist. Ebony-colored hair was tied back in a sleek bun. Dropping a leather satchel on the desk, she turned to face the class, folding her arms primly. She arched one eyebrow at me, and I realized I was still holding Ronnie by his collar. I dropped him, sure I was about to get suspended.

“Sit down.”

She rapped out the command with quiet authority. Kids scattered to their seats. I helped Howie to his feet. Chunks of grape jelly dripped from his face. I handed him his glasses, and we slunk to our desks.

“My name is Ms. Endera,” she announced to the silent room. “I will be taking over for Mr. Platz.”

“What happened to Mr. Platz?” a girl up front asked.

Ms. Endera looked down at her and said, “I turned him into a lizard. Would you like to see? Raise your hand if you would like to see a magic trick.”

Our hands shot up. This was a lot more fun than grammar lessons. She rummaged in her black satchel and pulled out a silk handkerchief. “Observe.” She put the scrap of fabric over her left hand and waved her other hand around it. Something tugged at me, some recognition as she muttered words to herself.

“*Fein kinter, reptilia,*” she whispered.

The words lit up in my brain. She was calling on her magic. How did I know that?

Ms. Endera whipped the handkerchief away, and in her hand was a fat, green iguana. Its pink tongue slithered out of its mouth. I half rose out of my chair, sure it was Mr. Platz. Its eyes looked so forlorn. The class *oohed* and clapped as she held the lizard up high.

Howie grabbed me and yanked me back down. “Dude, how’d she do that?” he whispered.

I had no idea, but it was pretty cool.