

CHAPTER 1

Present day

CALEB SAUNDERS DASHED through the woods, dodging low-hanging branches, jumping fallen trees, snaking around saplings and undergrowth. He had decided to trek along the untouched forest floor rather than the well-worn path that wove through the trees all the way to Hunter's Creek.

The path the others were on.

His lungs burned in the chilly November air, but he pressed forward, faster and faster until the trees whizzed by in a brown blur. His eyes darted back and forth, scanning the uneven terrain, calculating, planning every step, every change of direction. Thickets pulled at his jeans and camouflage jacket like tiny claws, trying in vain to slow his progress. Leaves crunched as his feet found footing in the loose soil.

A spotted canopy of orange and red leaves provided the perfect shade cover, allowing only thin rods of light to poke through and slant toward the leaf-covered ground. There were so many hiding places, so many shrubs and fallen trees under which to find concealment, but Caleb knew where he was headed—he had been there a hundred times.

He ran faster, ignoring the slender branches that smacked at his chest and arms. He was the fastest kid in the fifth grade and knew these woods like his own backyard.

Caleb came to a descending slope, paused, quickly surveyed the best route—something he had become very skilled at doing—and then plunged down the hill. His arms flailed wildly, legs pounded the ground. In control, out of control, in control. He fought the pull of gravity and uneven terrain to maintain balance as the leafy ground below rose faster and faster to meet him.

In the small clearing stood his destination, a long-abandoned stone house that had been burned to a blackened shell long before Caleb was born, long before his parents were born. It was last occupied over eighty years ago by a hermit known only as Old Man Yates.

Rumor had it that Yates's ghost still haunted the site.

Caleb never paid much attention to ghost stories, though. He was getting too old for that. And besides, he'd used the hollowed-out Yates place as a hideout hundreds of times and never saw or heard any ghosts.

He approached the old stone structure and stood in the doorway, resting his hands on the moss-covered stone. The roof was gone and only the first-story walls remained, stained with the residue of ancient smoke and flames. Toward the back of the house there was only a partial remnant of the second-story floor, broken floorboards charred black and supported clumsily by what was left of the wall dividing the dining room from the living room.

In the distance, Caleb could hear the excited laughter of Jeremy and the others. *They make so much noise, I can hear them coming a mile away.* They would certainly find him if he used one of his usual hiding places—under the first-story staircase or around the back of the house behind the raspberry bush.

Caleb brushed a shock of sweaty hair from his face and searched the ruins for a place to hide, somewhere the others would never even think to look. Of course. The cellar. The boys had a standing dare between them to spend ten minutes in the old cellar. Caleb had been down there once, but he never left the security of the stairs and lasted only four minutes before his panicked nerves pushed him up and back toward the light of day. He had to admit, the place gave him the creeps.

Running his right hand along the rough, moss-and-vine-covered stone foundation wall and his left hand along the brittle wood railing, he slowly descended the chipped and cracked concrete stairs. There were no windows in the cellar, and any light filtering down from above was quickly swallowed by the thick darkness. A musty smell hung in the damp air mixed with the pungent odor of rotting meat.

When he reached the bottom of the steps, Caleb extended one leg in front of him and felt the dirt floor with his sneaker, searching for any obstacle that might trip him. Leaving his hand on the railing, he squatted next to the stairs, not daring to wander too far from the light. He remained crouched in the darkness for a few minutes, slowing his

breathing and listening for the sound of his pursuers. Outside, in the world of light and fresh air, birds chirped, a squirrel chattered, and a flock of geese honked overhead, but there was no sound of Jeremy and the others. Maybe they were looking elsewhere, thinking the Yates house too obvious a hiding place.

Or maybe they're scared. Caleb grinned in the darkness. They'd be talking about this one for weeks.

All at once, the outside world fell silent. Dead silent. The cellar was airless, as if a great vacuum had been placed at the top of the stairs and sucked every last ounce of oxygen out of it. Caleb could hear nothing but the quiet wheeze of his own breathing and his pulse tapping out a steady rhythm in his ears.

He held his breath and listened. Something moved. Was that footsteps? He listened closer, straining his ears to focus on the muffled sound. It was footsteps, but not from outside, not even from upstairs. They were soft and barely audible, like someone walking barefoot or wearing slippers. But they were near.

He listened closer. A chill raced down his spine. The hair on the back of his neck bristled. His blood ran cold, and a clammy sweat dampened his forehead.

The footsteps were in the cellar with him! Yates's ghost!

His pulse pounded so loudly in his ears now that he could barely make out the faint steps inching closer. The footsteps fell too softly and unevenly; one was barely distinguishable from the other. Whatever it was in that cave of a cellar was not human.

Caleb shut his eyes and gripped the railing. The footsteps drew closer and stopped right behind him. He could now hear the thing breathing—long inhale; short, quick exhale—and feel its hot breath on the back of his neck. He wanted to run, scream, fight, anything, something, but fear paralyzed him, nailed him to his spot next to the stairs. He was frozen, eyelids pressed together so tight they hurt, the rough square edges of the railing digging into the soft skin of his palms while his body trembled uncontrollably.

Please God, please God, please God.

The thing behind him snorted, and its putrid breath filled Caleb's nose. He swallowed hard, holding back the bile that rose in his throat. An image of a hideous spirit, all tangled hair and rotted teeth and bulging eyes, screamed in his mind, tying his stomach in a knot.

Finally, after what seemed like hours but was actually only mere seconds, the footsteps retreated and then fell silent. Caleb slowly opened his eyes and turned toward the darkness. Something was there, a vague form, but huge, at least as large as a man. He made a quick move for the steps with every intention of bolting up them into the daylight and screaming for help.

But he was too slow.

The thing lunged out of the blackness, teeth and claws flashing death in the muted light.



At the edge of the woods, the trees met a field that had lain fallow throughout the year. A man's thin frame was silhouetted against the pale blue sky, breaking the monotony of tall, straight trunks of centuries-old oaks and walnuts.

The man twisted his face and took a long, deep breath, inhaling the aroma of the wild. "Mmmm, how's that suit ya?" he said in a low hiss.

He then changed his voice, high-pitched and feminine. "Don't fret, little Stevie; they won't be botherin' us anymore. Momma's gonna protect ya."

He pulled his hands out of his pockets and rubbed them together, shifted his eyes from side to side, and drew in another breath. "Yeah. Good. We make a good team, ain't?" His voice was back to the low hiss.

He ran a hand across his stubbled chin as his lips parted in a crooked smile. "I hear ya. I hear ya. You and me, Momma. You and me."



Exactly three hours later and ninety-five miles north, Joe Saunders had just slipped into a shallow sleep in front of the TV when his eyelids jerked open. He bolted upright on the sofa, forehead wet with sweat, hands trembling, heart banging behind his ribs like a tight drum. He dragged a cool hand across his brow and sucked in a deep breath.

Though he'd only been asleep seconds, he'd had a dream.

Still somewhere between sleep and full consciousness, he sat back against the sofa and closed his eyes. The images were still pasted to the inside of his lids, the vivid detail remarkable. Caleb, his brother's son,

teetered on a rocky precipice. His arms flailed in wide circles. Fear distorted his face. Joe tried to reach for the boy's hand, but he couldn't. He was no more than five feet away, but it might as well have been a mile. He was out of reach.

Joe could hear the rush and crash, the thunderous roar of waves pummeling the rocks beneath them. He hollered Caleb's name. Panic gripped his chest like a vice. Sweat and tears stung his eyes.

Caleb's right foot slipped on some loose gravel, his arms shot skyward, and he tumbled backward off the cliff.

That's when Joe awoke.

He sat on the edge of the sofa and rested his elbows on his knees, head in his hands. Caleb loved the water, but to the best of Joe's knowledge he'd never acquired a heart for cliff diving. This was not a plunge for bragging rights. It was a tragedy.

What a dream. What a terrible, terrible dream.

He had to call Rosa and make sure Caleb was OK.

He picked up his cell phone.

It rang in his hand.

"Hello?"

"Joe." It was Rosa, crying. "Caleb's missing."

Joe held the phone to his ear, but only a few random things registered after that: the faint sound of rushing blood in his ear, the trickle of sweat that lodged itself on the corner of his nostril, the sweat on his palm making the phone slick. And Rosa's voice, weak and thready, fading in and out, "... woods... lost... Dinsmore... search party... pray..."

Pray. She wanted him to pray. But Joe had given up on prayer ten years ago.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," he said. And then she was gone.