

Chapter One

Michael

Michael stops at the top of the ridge and considers the suicidal blanket of orange and green treetops. Gus comes up next to him and sticks out his big tongue, licking the air, and he can almost taste the forest. A blaze of maple, the heady pitch of the pines, blackberries and moss, tall grass, tepid ponds, wet bark. A climax of summer.

He pets the dog, tugging on his perked ear and letting his mind work at the trouble. A gust comes over the trees and the branches jostle into one another like boys wrestling for no other reason than to feel their limbs tangle. He breathes again and tastes a primordial danger that sends a shiver up the back of his spine.

He shudders at the impossibility of all these trees. They harbor secrets older than civilization. The wind blowing through the hickories and hawthorns is interminable. He can't say what land it came from, any more than he can say what lake or river birthed the rain.

It's hard for him to believe that Dent is just a few hours behind him. The city is an island; fly a plane over main street and you might miss it amidst the mountains that keep it prisoner. Now he's adrift in the sea and if he isn't careful, he'll be caught in a current and dragged out further than he can swim, into the big waves. What's waiting out there for them?

Something that eats boys.

He clutches the handle of his hatchet and shakes the terrible thoughts away. He's marked his path. Dent is four or five miles north. Even if he did get lost, he'd go to the closest town over. It's at least an hour drive through winding backcountry roads, and most of those seem to be flooded out or blocked by fallen timber more than half the time you try to drive down them—but

he wouldn't be driving, would he? No, he'd hike there, and maybe it would take an extra day, and he'd be real tired and have to sleep out in the woods, but he'd get there.

Then he'd tell a wild story about a little city called Dent with a one man police force. He'd tell how every summer for as long as anyone could remember two boys go missing from Dent and no one in the damn world seems to care. But *he's* trying to put a stop to. Then when it came time to go home he found he couldn't quite find where to go and...

But no, none of that is real. He's here, looking out at the woods he grew up in, breathing in the horror that looms in and around them. Yes, Michael thinks no one knows the Ozarks better than him. He follows Grandpa's rules to keep safe, which aren't even Grandpa's rules according to Dad, no, they were *his* Grandpa's rules, and Michael thinks probably someone taught him the rules, too.

The first and most important is to never walk in the woods alone. There's something in the 1900 square miles of national forest that hold Dent prisoner that doesn't belong. There's something (*hungry*) that came, perhaps, a long time before people lived here and will maybe be around a long time after they're gone. Something that grinds its teeth on young white bones and eats sweet meat like Michael's dad eats sausage for breakfast. A grownup might call it an animal, or a predator, but Michael knows the truth.

It's a monster, and it's been around since before God made the green Earth.

The problem is that adults don't like to think there's something they don't know about, and so they blame everything on things they *do* know about. Michael hacks a path through a dense bit of brush and moss, shaking his head angrily at the thought. This brush is another one of the troubles. The forest is thick enough to hide the truth. The streams and lakes that pool and run around the base of the plateaus are deep and swift. He couldn't swim deep down in those lakes

and look around at the caves and rocks and muck even if he were brave enough to try. How far down do they go? What's in them?

It's convenient, really, all the ways a kid could go missing. It keeps people from thinking too hard about it. It keeps them from really considering just how often it happens. Just how long it's been going on.

Twice a year for a hundred years, like a sick kind of holiday.

But he knows kids aren't falling in rivers and getting swept into deep lakes. He knows they aren't tumbling off cliffs or getting lost following overgrown trails.

They're being consumed.

The woods around Dent have a power that pulls at curious minds. The Ozarks are a dream, a fantasy of untapped potential and unlimited possibility. But they're also an iron trap that can snap and break a leg and hold you fast and never let you go. They're wolf jaws that crave fawn blood and tear live flesh right off the screaming neck of—

Now summer's almost over and no one has gone missing. With every day that passes toward the start of school the danger mounts. The shadows grow longer, the trees are taller and the rivers run swifter and deeper. The wind blows through the restless woods and screeches against the mountains and bits of old moss and dirt that haven't stirred for a hundred years go airborne and they talk about what the trees looked like and felt like a century ago.

The simple truth is that Michael wants to penetrate the Ozark's secret. He wants to pull the cover off the magicians table and show the whole damn town what's under it. Because the time's coming for another set of boys to disappear; boys just like him, maybe a few years older or younger, but just like him, nonetheless. They just want to walk in the woods and feel the bark

of the oak trees under their palms and scratch chigger bites the day after while they lie in bed and dream about all the things they've seen.

The key is that the boys are always alone when they disappear, and the two that go are always gone before it's time for school to start. Michael found a clever workaround for the problem of being alone: Gus. And Gus isn't the only thing, either. Aside from his loyal dog, he has an old hatchet and a big KA-BAR from what his father calls *the second Great War*.

It's not the hatchet and knife that keeps him safe, though. Only an idiot would think that. Gus is the real magic; he's like a charm that works to counteract the evil, kind of like how he works to counteract cats and skunks and old ladies that want to yell at you for riding your bike too fast across their lawns.

If there's real evil in the world—the kind of evil that's interminable and lives way out in the deepest corner of the least explored bits of America, that eats children and drinks blood and chews white fat like bubble gum—then dogs are the opposite of it.

He started exploring the mountains by following his compasses needle south and chasing Gus through the deep brush where the last men to walk had been native men (and surely they knew not to walk *there*). There weren't any trails to follow except the ones deer made, so largely he and Gus made their own. That meant thorns and rocks, blood and scabs, spider webs that stretched like bridges and angry blue jays that dove and pecked and chirped.

They trampled brush and sang songs. Michael grabbed pieces of bark off 200-year-old pine trees just to hold the skin in his sweaty palms. They made the kind of trail that only a boy and his dog might have made. He thought some of the things they stepped on probably hadn't ever been stepped on before. At least not by anything that walked on two feet.

They chipped away at the woods like archaeologists. The pressure mounted as Autumn neared.

And suddenly it was the last Friday of summer and he knew that today was going to be the day he discovered the truth about Dent. There was a hint of promise in the air, not unlike the thing that built as Christmas grew steadily closer and then erupted as the sun came through the frosted window on Christmas morning and lit up the little drops of water coalesced on the outside of the glass and dripping down the ice.

Yes, he thought today was a bit like Christmas morning. Something big was going to happen and all he had to do was hold steady.

He woke at dawn, offering the lame excuse to his folks that he was working on the old motorcycle he'd pulled out of the junkyard—the same excuse he'd floated all summer.

Just one more day. That's all he needs.

Cause next week school will be back in session and that means the curse will be lifted until next summer.

That means something *is* going to happen. Today, two boys are going to go missing in Dent.

And he barely has time left to figure out how to put a stop to it.

By noon, he's dripping sweat and covered in fat black Arkansas ticks. The trees weave in the wind like Grandma's needle, concealing secrets only they know, hiding before his curious gaze. He watches them anyway. He calls out, telling them he's coming to see what's under their branches whether they like it or not.

Gus barks importantly.

It gets gradually cooler as he fights deeper into the reserve, and somehow quieter even through the ruckus of wind rattling the plums and cherries crowding around the oaks and maples. Gus drops his head and plows forward. He scrambles against bare rock and claws through rich dirt and Michael follows dutifully, thinking that four legs are better than two not for the first time.

The breeze grows as they climb. It smells like wildflower and pine pitch and fresh rain. They both stop to take in that summer smell.

“We can go for another hour or two,” he tells Gus absently, just talking to see what it’s like to have a human voice reverberate in the untouched wild around him.

He sinks into silence as they continue. Here where the trees and plateaus and mountains loom over you and seem to press with a real and verifiable pressure the deeper you get, silence is easy. He’s infiltrating the mountains in an effort to learn their secrets, and it occurs to him that these secrets might not be things that are meant to be known. He can feel them when he stands at the edge of a clearing and looks into the shadows, and especially when he holds at the top of a ridge and looks down at the tight treetops that hug one another so close they’re like a roof.

What’s beneath them?

They go further. Gus helps break a trail, always south, and Michael hacks at thorns and vines and little saplings crying for life with his hatchet, both to mark their way and to make it easier the next time they come. He imagines himself like Lewis (or Clark—he doesn’t care much which) making his way across America and wonders if they had any dogs with them. None of his teachers ever said they did, but he learned a long time ago that people don’t give dogs the credit they deserve.

Eventually they find themselves on a rabbit trail and Michael hews an X into a river willow, knocking the bark off to expose the bright, live wood beneath it. The wind's blowing through the kaleidoscope of leaves overhead and creating a roar of branch and frond and needle that drowns out the sound of their steps. It sweeps through the tree trunks, reaching down and onto the untouched ground. It pulls dust off old rocks and pollen off flowers.

The wind tells secrets and Michael listens while the Ozark Mountains swallow him whole.

They go like that for a long while, plain hiking, until they're interrupted suddenly and unexpectedly by a young buck with a rich coat of velvet on its antlers. The big deer appears in a clearing a good stone's throw beneath them.

Gus freezes and points, like all good dogs do when they notice something that can breathe and bleed out in the woods, and Michael follows Gus's nose and drinks in the sight of the fledgling deer. It's a big bodied specimen, the kind of deer that flirts with you all summer long and then disappears come hunting season.

It inhales and turns its head. He can almost smell the foreign scent that fills its nose. It'll be a scent heavy with human and dog. A scent rich with intruders that don't belong. It takes another breath and thinks about what it tastes and smells.

He watches it wistfully, wishing he could fill himself with the spirit of the woods like animals could, wishing he could taste the bark and breathe the flowers, wishing he could—

A gunshot ruptures the afternoon and Gus hits the ground. For a wild moment, Michael thinks he's hit.

Then the deer staggers.

He grunts, both relieved and bewildered to see a red spot blooming just before the deer's shoulder. The blood spreads like ink on a tablecloth.

It takes a step, almost thoughtfully. It drops its head, as if to study a spot on the ground. He thinks it looks like its praying. Then it falls.

“Stay,” he hisses at Gus. His blood is thick old oil that was left in a machine for thirty years and his heart is an ancient engine that can't pump through the sludge. He tries to breathe—tries to still his roaring blood—and he feels ancient gears getting bogged down in all that muck. His pulse beats in his temple, his breath wheezes in sharp, quick gasps even though he knows he needs to be quiet and calm.

He scans the tree line for any sign of movement. He strains his ears to pick up anything beneath the wind. The ridge is only a bowshot away. It's so close Michael heard the sound of the deer's body hitting the ground. But who shot it?

A man moves out of the shadows and comes to stand in the clearing, as if to answer his question. He looks so plain, so ordinary, that Michael's heart starts to still. He has a rifle over his shoulder, what looks like a .308, and an old cap on his head. His jeans are torn and caked with dirt, and it doesn't look like he's wearing shoes. Under the hat, he's bald, and Michael can't tell if he looks so old because he has no hair or because of the unkempt white beard on his face.

The man turns and says something. The words are lost in the wind. Michael curses himself for not having better ears—and then a boy walks into the clearing and his mind stops working for a few seconds.

He knows that boy. *He knows that boy because that's Thomas Vokey, and Thomas Vokey went missing two years ago.* Thomas was a few grades ahead of him, a quiet kid that lived on the

other side of town near Floyd and Doug. In school, he had long blonde hair that he kept back in a ponytail. Michael's father called him a hippie. But now he's bald. And he has no shoes.

It looks like he hasn't washed his clothes since the day he went missing.

Thomas stands next to the old man and the two of them gaze at the deer thoughtfully. Their mouths don't move. They stare as if confused about how it ended up there. Then the old man's lips part and Thomas looks up from the deer and says something in return. The wind has shifted and it's carrying their words away from him.

He wants to sneak closer to hear what they're saying, but he's also rooted to the spot in fear. He thinks if he could just close the distance by half, he'd be able to pick up on the conversation.

His mind can barely move for the uncertainty. Does he have it all wrong? Is it possible there's no monster at all, and all the sense that's pressed into his mind with real, almost palpable, veracity, is just an overactive imagination, like his folks would probably say if he'd ever been dumb enough to bring any of this to their feet?

But then... that old man can't have been stealing boys a hundred years ago.

Thomas turns and calls something out into the trees.

Michael has just enough time to wonder if someone else is waiting in the shadows before the tree line shimmers with an impossible flurry of movement. A rush of bald, dirty men come fast out of the trees like fog off the hot ground on a cool morning. More than a dozen, maybe more than two dozen—too many to count.

The shock of seeing so many peculiar people so far away from Dent makes his heart well up in his throat. He feels like he's going to choke on his blood and he has to put a hand over his mouth to keep from screaming.

He tries hard to look for familiar faces among the twenty or thirty curious people. His mind works hard to remember names—*what were the other boys names?*—and Michael’s horrified to realize he can’t remember. He can’t remember any of the other boys, even though it’s impossible for him to have forgotten so fast, even though it’s absolutely intolerable for it to have become such a regular part of life that all he can remember from all the names, from all the faces, is Thomas Vokey.

How can he not even remember the other boy that went missing last summer? How could he have already forgotten?

A pair of older boys, probably in their late teens, are struggling with something at the tree line and Michael strains his eyes to see. They wrestle it into the open and Gus whines slightly. It’s a dead black bear, hung on a big green branch. They bring it next to the deer and then step back.

The old man raises a hand, and the frantic movement in the clearing stills. He takes off his cap. Those simple actions—the raising of a hand, the taking off of a cap—somehow capture the collective attention of the whole group.

This time his voice carries far enough for Michael to hear his words clearly. “We pay this sacrifice so that we may worship.”

Spurred to action by that curious statement, a trio of boys begin making a fire. They build it with the lazy practice of scouts that have built a thousand fires and probably will build a thousand more. It quickly become a big thing, with a spout of flame that licks 15 or 20 feet into the sky. The clearing smells of burning wood and smoke.

The congregation turns to the trees they came from. Michael studies their backs, then the trees.

He holds his breath.

Nothing happens.

Still, a horrible feeling bubbles up in his belly that what they're waiting on isn't a good thing, that what they worship isn't a good thing. He searches for the courage (or cowardice) to get up and run. The overwhelming sense that something is about to happen blots out all the curiosity that's driven him this far in the first place. The secret he came to expose, the horror he set out to stop, is so potent he can barely breathe.

He starts to get to his feet and freezes.

The trees are moving.

He squints, so afraid he can barely breathe. He thinks he sees something in their shadows, hiding in the dark like a rat in a cellar. Gus lifts his nose. They see it together, hulking close to the ground. Or is it looming thinly at the very top of the branches?

Michael thinks, for no particular reason, that it may be grunting. He thinks it may be breathing out of a mouth that has a thousand teeth and dripping drool down an ancient chin. He thinks there might be bits of boy meat in its mouth, rotting and festering.

Grandpa says the strong hand that reaches from the grave is the hand you want on the wheel. He feels that hand now clawing from fresh tilled earth and trying to pull him down into the muck and suffocate him. The terror tries to yank him into the tomb it climbed out of and he fights it off by grabbing at Gus's neck and squeezing his eyes tight.

The trees stop moving. He notes how quiet it is with a chill. A moment ago, the woods were alive. But now... the wind must have gotten trapped in a valley. The branches are glassy, and the leaves are like carpet. The congregation of bald worshippers are silent; Thomas is among them—a *part of them*.

He settles back into position carefully and listens harder; there are no birds singing, no insects buzzing. Gus is behind him and he doesn't seem like he wants to be in front.

He takes a deep breath to calm his mind and he smells an animal smell, an old barn smell, a broken shotgun smell; a smell like a coffin in a funeral parlor where Grandpa rested like an old scarecrow. There's something other than the bald men and the fire and the dead bear and deer.

Gus crawls next to him on his belly. He sticks his nose just past his knee, but doesn't dare go even an inch further. He licks the dirt and tastes iron and nitrogen and sulfur. He sniffs and smells the deer and blood and all the other things beyond them... but...

Gus whines.

Michael turns to him, puts a hand on his head and pets him. His ears aren't perked anymore. His head is down, his tail is tucked between his legs. He follows the loyal dog's gaze and looks over the bald heads in the clearing.

He feels a wild flash of fear. The lunatic dread from before come roiling back in like a semi-truck, it comes like an avalanche of snow off the peak of a mountain, it comes like a trailer full of cement that has no breaks and is tumbling down from a big height.

The trees move again. He looks around him and sees the branches over his own head are still as dirt.

No, he thinks madly.

Branches crack. A groan comes from the woods, as if all the world is collectively sighing. The ground moans.

A gargantuan, primeval figure takes shape; for a moment, Michael can't register what he's seeing. Then his mind absorbs it, and he feels himself go insane like a punch to the gut.

The barefoot worshippers collapse.

They bury their faces into the grass and lie perfectly still.

They don't make noise or cry out.

A tattered green dress of moss and vine drag the ground as the atavistic dread emerges.

Every animal in all the Ozarks pauses. The wind itself in every corner of the state, in every corner of the country, abates for a crazed moment.

God looks down from his spot in heaven and his lips part in fascination.

Michael has no name for what he sees, but one comes unbidden into his mind anyway. *Malice*, he thinks, and feels himself go senseless as the word thunders in his mind and echoes there like a grenade in a cave.

The monster scans the glade. Long, skittering legs click and rub together in a kind of frenzy. It stands very still.

It raises its round, grotesque face and looks into the trees. Its burning eyes search. They scan the foliage. They narrow, slow, and fall on Michael like spotlights.

Its mouth parts; its eyes blaze.

It screams, and the last sane thoughts run hot like blood from Michael's rent mind.