

## CHAPTER 1

*God, it's cold.* Rumor Shoff checks his digital watch. 10:45 p.m. The Marburg State Park ranger won't start his nightly rounds for another fifteen minutes. It will take him at least half an hour to forty-five minutes, to reach this end of the park. Rumor has plenty of time to accomplish his task. *Perfect.*

At the bed of his Ford F-150, he lifts a duffel bag with R. Shoff sewn into the canvas, and throws the strap over his shoulder. He pulls the trucker's cap tighter to his balding head, the air rushes through its vented rear and prickles his dome. Chills walk up his skin. He zips his coat to his chin. *Christ, it must be near zero with the windchill.* The crisp, dry air burns his throat, and the scent of the oncoming snowstorm tickles his nose.

He's alone in the Serpentine Trail parking lot. Only the forest trees are watching. Silent observers who won't tell a soul what he is up to—even after killing plenty of their kin.

*Good.* But Rumor needs to move. If caught by the park ranger at a quarter to eleven, he'll arrest Rumor and charge him with trespassing on state land after dark. That's the least of Rumor's concerns. What's in his duffel bag, however, is.

Heaving the strap to a more comfortable position on his shoulder, Rumor starts toward a large ranch-style gate serving as the entryway onto Serpentine Trail. The white moonlight casts the gate's arch onto the gravel trail winding its way through the forest like a snake, past the Shoff Family Cemetery, and down to the shoreline of Lake Clarke, directly across from the abandoned summer camp.

Rumor starts past the gate and into the forest, the moonlight has trouble penetrating the leafless trees; the branches so thick and interwoven they block all but a few streaks of white light

cutting through the bare canopy. But Rumor doesn't need a flashlight to guide him; he's taken this trail many times to get to the cemetery—day and night—before the land was stolen from his father.

Rumor's face grows warm even in the bitter cold at the thought of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) stealing his father's land. The DCNR came to his father a year and a half ago with an offer to buy thirty-two acres of woodlands that made up the southwestern shore of Lake Clarke, excluding the small plot of land on which the Shoff Family Cemetery rests. *No sir! Uncle Sam won't pick up the tab to take care of that.* They planned to add to Marburg State Park's already sizable acreage. With his father's refusal to sell, the DCNR made an eminent domain claim—the right of the government or its agencies to expropriate private property for public use. His father sued. But it was a losing battle from the start, and the courts ruled in favor of the DCNR, forcing his father to surrender the land with zero compensation.

The DCNR can claim eminent domain or whatever fancy legal jargon the lawyers invented to sugarcoat the truth, but to Rumor, it was theft—plain and simple.

The trail curves sharply to the right, and the Shoff Family Cemetery appears on the left. Behind an old wrought iron fence, fifteen tombstones jut from the forest floor like crooked white teeth. The wind blows with a haunting whistle. The bare branches sway back and forth, casting long shadows across the front of the tombstones that look like skeleton fingers caressing the grave markers. Rumor pauses by the gate. Even in the shadowy darkness, he spots his mother's tombstone. Feels his heart ache.

*Fuck cancer.*

Rumor starts again. The gravel trail fades away and turns to dirt, worn-down over time by hikers making their way to the lakebed on the backside of the hill. He hasn't been past the cemetery since August 1997 and doesn't want to go down there now. Still, the DCNR needed to pay for what they had done. And by God, Rumor was going to collect in spades, even if that meant scaring up the memory of that dead girl he and his father discovered the morning of the camp massacre.

Along the shoreline, where the cold water of Lake Clarke laps at the rocks and bankside like a soft kiss, Rumor pauses to catch his breath. The smell of mud and fishy water mixes with the crisp night air that smells both clean and repugnant to him. The full white moon is visible above, and its reflection ripples across the water. In the open, the cold wind cuts across the lake bowl. It stings Rumor's face and makes his nose leak. He slides the sleeve of his jacket under his nose and sniffs back a glob of snot. The last time he stood there was the morning of the massacre at Camp Southwoods, when he was six.

Across the inlet of water, the steel cable *tinks* against the flagpole in the courtyard at Camp Southwoods. It's a lonely, eerie sound that causes Rumor to shiver, as if a ghostly voice speaks from the past. The moonlight casts an eerie white glow across the rundown mess hall, tucked between two identical shotgun-style buildings—the boys' and girls' bunkhouses. The dilapidated structures stand out against the clear northeastern sky—though it's about to be overtaken by the dark snow clouds rolling in from the South.

The ghost-town vibe of Camp Southwoods still resonates with residual energy from the grisly murders in the early morning hours of August 5, 1997. Rumor's stomach churns as the vivid memory unpacks itself and his eyes drift to where they found the girl, washed up on the shore. She was lying on her side, facing away from them, her brown hair tangled with lake

weeds, wet leaves, and interwoven sticks. On the back of her yellow T-shirt was a word in large red letters: COUNSELOR. Rumor thought she was sleeping. But when his father rolled her over to check on her, Rumor saw her pretty face was split from her hairline to her mouth, leaving a fleshy fissure where the axe had struck her. On either side of that gory canyon, two lifeless, milky-white eyes were locked on him in a death stare. An arrow was through the swell of her left breast. Deep lacerations scarred her forearms, and the first two fingers on her right hand were gone. She was from Camp Southwoods, just across the inlet—the torn and bloody yellow T-shirt with the camp’s name and logo affirmed this.

Rumor remembers screaming in horror at the sight of the dead camp counselor. Then, his father was next to him, hurrying them back up the trail to call the police.

Her name was Alice King, and how she ended up there raises the hackles on Rumor’s neck. He tugs his coat closer. But she wasn’t the only camp counselor found slain. Kurt MacReady, Virginia Steel, and Ted Charno also met their demise at the hands of fifteen-year-old Douglas Lee Carver, who, for reasons unknown, decided to hunt them down with a bow and arrow (taken from the camp’s archery range) before stealing their faces with a violent strike with an axe. Three of the victims, Rumor has learned in his research of the murders, were disposed of quickly. But Alice King had valiantly fought back. Sadly, she fell to Carver’s wrath by the lake before washing up a few feet from where Rumor now stood.

Since the murders, a local legend arose of a curse on Lake Clarke and a curse on Marburg State Park itself. Locals claim to see shadow people on the trails or around the camp, hear whispering and laughing, and see lights emanating from the rundown cabins. The lore has grown exponentially over the years. So much so that locals have reimagined an old nursery rhyme,

“Bye, Baby Bunting,” to scare the bejesus out of one another for nearly three decades. Rumor knew it well:

Little counselor running,  
Douggie Carver’s gone a-hunting  
Gonna catch that counselor,  
Gonna cleave that counselor,  
Little counselor done running.

But those campfire tales are just that...tales. *You have work to do.* Rumor checks his watch. 10:55 p.m. *Get your ass moving.*

He continues to follow the trail south along the lake to an area known as Ice Fisherman’s Cove. It’s a favorite spot for ice fishermen to set up because the water freezes fast and hard in the winter. By a large oak tree leaning dangerously over the trail, Rumor drops the duffel bag and squats beside it. He unzips the bag and pulls out a gardening shovel. A battery-operated DeWalt drill with a three-inch wooden drill bit in its jaws. A 350ml syringe. And a bottle of Tardon—an herbicide that kills woody plants. He drops to his knees at the oak's base and begins clearing away a small patch of earth with the shovel. The January ground is frozen and tough to dig up. Perspiration dampens his back even in the cold. But he’s persistent, despite the challenging work, and continues removing the earth until the oak’s root system is bare.

He rechecks his watch. 11:10 p.m.

*Need to hurry this up.*

With the drill, Rumor bores into the oak's most prominent root. Once done, he opens the Tardon bottle, takes out the syringe, dips the wide plastic needle into the herbicide, and extracts a barrel full of blue liquid.

*What was that? Footsteps?*

Rumor searches the trail ahead but sees no one in the moonlight. *It could be an animal. A deer?*

The legend of Camp Southwoods, and its murderous boogiemán, has lit his imagination. *Stop it. There ain't any ghosts in these woods. I'm alone.*

Rumor shakes the silly thought away, plunges the 350ml of Tardon into the root, and empties the barrel. *Drink it up.* The Tardon kills the trees slowly over several weeks. He's poisoned many trees around the park. Some are on trails like this one. Some in parking lots where a tree collapse could damage structures, costing the DCNR a lot of money in time and repairs. That's just what Rumor wants. He refills the hole with dirt, replaces his equipment in the duffel bag, and stands.

Gazing upon the oak leaning precariously over the trail, Rumor knows it's just a matter of time before it topples. He smiles jovially. Poisoning the trees is only one of the many subterfuges Rumor has committed around the park: clogging the toilets in the guests' facilities, wrecking the well pumps so the park didn't have water for drinking and cleaning, dumping trashcans, spray painting obscenities on the public pavilions. He even lit a few fires that burnt some acres on the park's western side in late September. *Maybe I'll drill holes in the canoes this summer. Or put wasps' nests in the garbage cans. Or poison the drinking water.* He has little concern about someone getting hurt from his shenanigans: *people are collateral damage.* Pride flows through

his veins, pure like holy water, warming him. He's giving it to the man for stealing his father's land.

But the warmth is quickly blown away as another gust of wind howls across the lake. Rumor shivers and looks at his watch again. 11:22 p.m. *Time to get going.*

He returns to where the trail winds back into the woods, past the Shoff Cemetery, and eventually to the parking lot. The desolate *tink, tink, tink* of the cable snapping against the flagpole at the abandoned campground cuts across the inlet.

Footsteps! On the trail again.

*Someone is there!* Cold fear shoots through him and tightens his chest like a clenched fist. *I can't get caught. Not now. Not when there's so much more to do.*

He ducks behind a large white sycamore and checks his watch. 11:29 p.m. The park ranger may be down there, checking for trespassers or even looking for him after finding his pickup in the Serpentine Trail parking lot. Or it might be a few local kids hiking to the abandoned campground to get high, drink, or make out. They might even tell each other ghost stories about Carver's victims haunting the area.

Rumor peers around the tree and scans the trail from which he just came. No one lingers about. The tightness in his chest eases. Still, he tries to tune out the wind and focus on the sounds of approaching footsteps. But if they were there and not a figment of his imagination, they're gone now. He lets out a slow, grateful breath and feels the tension in his muscles relax.

Rumor steps out from behind the tree. He's about to turn away when he sees a human silhouette step off the trail and duck into the forest about twenty-five yards away.

*I'm seeing things*, he thinks, as his balls shrivel into his pelvis and goose pimples rise from his feet to his scalp. He's heard stories about hikers seeing shadow people on the trail, ducking in and around trees. Is that what he's seeing now? A shadow person? *No! There's no one out there. It's the wind causing the tree branches to swing and the shadows to move, nothing more.* He swallows. His throat is dry like dust. *But you heard footsteps—twice now—and saw the shadow. Someone or something is out here with you. Maybe one of Carver's victims?* An unseen frozen hand clasps upon his lungs in a powerful, vicelike grip.

*Fuck this!*

Rumor turns on his heels to bolt up the trail when a loose rock gives way, and his right foot slips out from underneath him. He loses his grip on the duffel bag, which slides from his shoulder into the dark somewhere, and falls hard on his right elbow. The impact with the unforgiving ground peels the flesh back, and the sting of cold air bites at the raw, bleeding wound. He stifles a scream. He can't risk someone hearing. Through the discomfort, he pulls himself to his feet and darts up the trail toward the dark, concealing woods where he'll be safe from...well, whatever it was that he saw duck off the trail.

He doesn't stop or look back until he's far enough from the shoreline, hidden deep within the woods where no one—man or ghost—can see him. He bends at the waist to catch his breath, to allow his heart rate to slow. It beats in his ears like a sinister drum. He now understands what it must be like for people who say they've seen Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster...

"A ghost," Rumor whispers in the dark.

Of course, Rumor will never admit ghosts are real. Just like Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster are nothing more than stories made up by fringe outliers looking for attention. What he

saw tonight were moving shadows, brought on by the wind and an overactive imagination. Rumor feels that the only ghosts down there are memories.

*Then why were you running?*

He doesn't entertain this thought and looks at his watch. 11:40 p.m. *Christ! I need to—*

*My duffel bag!* It isn't slung over his shoulder. *You must've dropped it when you fell.* His bloody elbow begins to thump with discomfort at his carelessness. *How could you be so stupid!* He can't leave it behind. If found, the Rangers will easily link the tree poisoning and the vandalisms back to him because his damn name is stitched on the side.

No. Leaving the duffel bag isn't an option.

Rumor gazes down the trail into the dark hollow and listens for footsteps again. But only the breeze blows through the trees, rustling what leaves remain on the branches. He's positive that everything he's experiencing—the footsteps, the shadowy figure—is a manifestation brought on by the camp's violent history and his memories of that fateful day. His head was full of enough lore about Carver and Camp Southwoods to trick anyone's brain into thinking someone was out there, maybe even following him.

Steeling himself against his fears—real or imaginary—Rumor takes a step. Then another. Soon he's heading back toward the lake to find the duffel bag. In his mind, he keeps repeating:

*They're only stories.*