

CHAPTER ONE

Mother Nature held her breath. The woods were quiet. There was no breeze to rustle the few leaves still clinging to the trees, or to toss around the fallen ones littering the forest floor. There were no crickets chirping. No locusts or bees buzzing. No mosquitoes or gnats. No birdsongs. Richard Henry couldn't remember ever being in the woods and not hearing at least one bird. There were no squirrels either. Usually, if he stood still long enough, he'd hear them playing in the branches and chattering at one another—but not now. Back at the forest's edge, near the dirt road where he'd parked, the woods had been alive with activity. He'd seen rabbits, insects, birds, squirrels, and even a mangy stray cat hunting a field mouse. But now there was nothing. Not even a pinecone or dead branch falling to the ground. Everything was still. Even the clouds in the sky, glimpsed between the treetops, remained motionless.

As if the forest was dead.

The silence felt like a solid thing; invisible walls pressed down on him.

Worse, something was out there. Watching him. Rich was sure of it. He felt eyes staring at him through the thick foliage, and the sensation made the hair on his arms bristle. He was nervous. Jumpy. His skin tingled. His mouth was dry and it

was hard to swallow. Rich stuffed an unflavored Skoal Bandit in his bottom lip and tried to work up some spit. He cleared his throat. It sounded very loud. The wind briefly whistled through the trees, bringing more sound to the stillness. Shivering, Rich zipped his jacket up to his chin. When his saliva was running again, he spat onto a pile of dry leaves. Normally, Rich smoked, but lighting up a Winston out here would only give him away to the wildlife—if he ever found any, that was. Nothing warned off animals like cigarette smoke. That's why he preferred the unflavored Skoal. Mint or wintergreen flavored would have also warned the animals off. He stuck the round tobacco can into the back pocket of his faded jeans, retrieved his .30-06 from the rock he'd propped it up against, and continued on his way, trying very hard to ignore that watchful sensation.

He felt like an idiot for being nervous.

People in York County told all kinds of stories about the forest, but that didn't make them true. They were just legends. Bullshit folklore. LeHorn's Hollow was supposed to be full of ghosts, demons, witches, Bigfoot, the Goat Man, and hellhounds—but none of those things existed in real life. In real life, there were other things to fear. In real life, Rich had to deal with things like terrorism and cancer scares and health insurance and bills. And his only son, Tyler, getting killed in a war that didn't make any sense—a war that nobody seemed to care about anymore. At least not enough to get off their couches, turn off their televisions, and protest about it in the streets. His parents had protested Vietnam in the sixties. That's how they'd met each other. Rich had a picture of his parents standing at the Mall in Washington D.C., wearing bell-bottoms, carrying placards, and flashing peace signs. His father had been in 'Nam the year before. He'd decided America shouldn't be there and did what he thought was right. Came home after finishing his tour and added his voice to the dissent. Protested. Spoke up about things.

Rich's generation—they'd dropped the ball. Nobody cared anymore. People didn't give a shit about the war. As long as they had Paris Hilton and Britney Spears and George Clooney and Bran-ge-fucking-lina or whatever the hell they called themselves, that was all people cared about. Democrat or Republican—both were part of the problem, rather than a solution.

He'd lost Tyler. And as if that wasn't enough, after his son's death, life poured it on and turned up the heat. It was a mixed metaphor, but Rich didn't give a shit. It was how he felt. Rich had to cope with getting laid off from the feed mill because they said his drinking was out of control. Said to clean himself up if he wanted to keep his job. What the hell did they know? Of course he drank. They would, too, if they had to put up with the shit he put up with. The government—the same government that was responsible for Tyler's death—said he owed back taxes. And now the bank was threatening to foreclose on his home. They wanted their money and didn't care if he was out on the street. The old house sat empty now, except for Rich; the other inhabitants would never return. Tyler was dead. The little bit of him that had made it home was buried in the Golgotha Lutheran Church cemetery; the rest was scattered across the sand. Rich's ex-wife, Carol, was shackled up with another guy. A dentist. They lived in Windsor Hills with the rest of the yuppies. The only things that lived in the old place with Rich were the ghosts of his happiness.

The forest was haunted by the boogeyman? Bullshit. Terrorists and politicians and bankers and bosses and ex-wives and the pain he felt when he looked at Tyler's pictures and remembered when he was so little—those things were the real boogeymen. Real life was scary as hell all by itself. Real life had enough monsters without adding make-believe monsters to it as well. Real life was a horror movie. Pretend monsters were an escape.

Rich had just turned forty-two, but he felt much older.

Middle age had not agreed with him so far. It wasn't the catastrophic loss of hair on top of his head or the coarse, gray hairs sprouting in places they had never been before—his ears and nose, shoulders and back. It wasn't that he ran out of breath quicker these days. Or that he was tired all the time. Or that his head ached from the moment he woke up until he went to sleep. Or the extra weight around his waist, or his declining interest in sex and subsequently declining erections, or the way his back and joints hurt after doing simple tasks. He'd expected those things, had watched his own father suffer through them. They were all just part of the aging process. These things didn't depress him, except when he was really drunk.

What got to him, what really brought him down, was how his life had seemed to disintegrate in the last few years. Ever since he'd turned forty, fate had delivered one kick in the balls after another. First there was Tyler's death, then the divorce, a mountain of debt, and now the loss of his job and the foreclosure on the house. Everything kept falling apart and there seemed to be no end in sight. His days were one long, endless slide downward. It wasn't fair. This was supposed to be the second half of his life, the path leading to the golden years, the twilight years. But sometimes Rich didn't think he wanted to stick around for the second half. Things were supposed to get easier. When would that happen, exactly? It felt like things were just getting tougher instead. Could the golden years even be worth living?

He felt betrayed and alone.

Sometimes Rich just wanted to die. He imagined it was a lot like sleep. No cares. No worries. No pain. Just sweet, welcome oblivion, forever and ever—and if there was nothing after this, no Heaven or afterlife, he wouldn't care anyway because he'd be dead.

Of course, if that happened, the family name would die with him. He had no siblings, no uncles with sons. Rich was

the last male Henry from his father's line. When Tyler had died two years ago in Iraq, a big part of Rich had died with him. The military had never revealed the whole story; just that Tyler had been riding in a convoy across the desert when a roadside bomb—an IED, the government man had called it—shredded his Humvee. One of Tyler's friends, a kid from Mississippi, had died right away. Not Tyler. He'd lingered for almost fifteen minutes. At the memorial service, an American flag was draped over his closed casket. His high school graduation picture sat on top of it in a nice frame from the Hallmark store. In the picture, Tyler was smiling and whole. In the coffin, he wasn't. The preacher talked about God and country and sacrifice. Then Tyler was buried.

The rest of the world moved on.

Rich did not.

Carol left him soon after. She said she'd been planning it for years, and had just wanted to wait until Tyler was grown and out of the house. She'd delayed her plans when he joined the army and went to Iraq. But now . . .

She never finished the last statement. She didn't need to. Sometimes, things unsaid spoke louder than words.

Carol had left him everything—the car, the house, the dirty dishes in the sink, their empty bed, and a mountain of debt. The credit cards were at their maximum, and they still had five years' worth of payments left on the house. Whether she'd done it out of pity or guilt or just an eagerness to be done with him, the end result was the same: she'd fucked him one last time before moving in with her dentist boyfriend. Here he was, one year later, unemployed, almost homeless, poaching deer out of season. All so he wouldn't have to spend his meager unemployment check on groceries, and could instead hold off the bill collectors for another few weeks.

No wonder he fucking drank. "Out of control," his boss said? Not yet. Maybe soon, though, if things didn't get better—and if he had enough bullets . . .

Yeah, he could get *out of control*. Go postal. It would be so fucking easy.

Rich glanced back through the forest. There were no paths or trails. No wide spaces or clearings. This part of the woods had been unscathed by the big forest fire of 2006. Here the trees grew close together, and the rocky soil was covered with dead leaves and twigs. As dense as it was, he was surprised to see thick clusters of late-season undergrowth thrusting up from the ground: fragile ferns, poison ivy, Queen Anne's lace, milkweed, blackberries and raspberries, snake grass, pine and oak seedlings dotted the landscape. All of it would be dead in another week or so. Already, the leaves were turning brown. He couldn't see more than fifteen feet into the foliage, but that sense of being watched remained. It gave him the creeps.

Probably a deer, he thought. *Come on out here and let me put some punkinballs in you, sucker.*

That would be nice. Bag a good-sized buck, field dress it, and haul the carcass back to the truck. Then hide it beneath the tarp and head home. Move it from the truck bed and into the garage without any of the neighbors seeing (Trey Barker, who lived next door, would call the game warden if he knew Rich was poaching). With luck, he could have it strung up, butchered and in the freezer before dark, and he would then have the entire evening to drink a few beers and watch whatever was on the tube. Maybe he wouldn't even cry tonight when he went to bed. That would be an excellent change of pace from his normal routine.

He'd parked on the side of one of the old dirt logging roads. Rich wasn't worried about someone spotting his truck. He was way off the beaten path, hunting along the border of the state game lands. If a game warden or someone else happened to drive by, they'd just as easily assume the truck belonged to a hiker or a fisherman or somebody digging up ginseng roots as they would a poacher. They might

even think it was broken down or abandoned. As long as he was careful when he dragged the deer's carcass out, he'd be fine.

Of course, first he had to shoot one. Hell, shoot anything, something.

But there was nothing.

It was late October—almost Halloween. Small-game season had just ended and deer season was still a month away. The only thing he could legally shoot right now were coyotes and crows, but eating a coyote was like eating a dog and crows didn't have enough meat on them—and what little meat they did have tasted like shit.

But even the crows were absent today.

Rich wondered if he'd have had better luck coming in from the Shrewsbury side of the woods. Maybe so. He hadn't come in that way because the volunteers from the fire department and other civic groups were busy working on their Ghost Walk—a haunted attraction that would open Halloween eve and run until the first weekend in November. Even though it was the first one, the organizers had said they expected thousands of people over the next month, ferried back and forth on hay wagons, walking the trail through the forest while people in masks jumped out and scared them. It only took up a small section of the woods, but there were a lot of people working there currently, and he couldn't risk anyone spotting him poaching.

He spat tobacco juice again and listened to the silence. Then he walked on. As he wound his way through the trees, he reconsidered his skepticism. He could understand why people told ghost stories about this area. This far in, the woods had atmosphere. The stillness was unsettling. He wondered what it meant. Did the wildlife know there was a predator in their midst? He'd been quiet, had walked lightly, dipped instead of smoked, made sure not to wear any deodorant. He'd even worn dirty clothes rather than clean

ones that would smell like detergent. But nothing was out there.

Well, almost. Something was out there. He just didn't know what it was.

He felt those invisible eyes boring into him again, right between his shoulder blades. When Rich wheeled around, there was nothing there but trees and foliage.

"Come on," he whispered. "Give me a rabbit. A pheasant or squirrel—anything, goddamn it."

He was smack-dab in the middle of over thirty square miles of protected Pennsylvanian woodland, zoned to prevent farmers and realtors from cutting it all down and planting crops or building housing developments and strip malls. The pulpwood company and paper mill in nearby Spring Grove had logged a great swath of the forest in years past, but lawmakers, the raging forest fire, and the rising availability of cheaper paper from China had put a stop to that. The old logging roads still existed, however. They were rutted and washed out in some places, but even so, they still provided access to the deeper parts of the forest. The adjoining land on the outskirts of the woods that hadn't been ravaged by the fire was zoned agricultural and filled with corn, strawberry, and soybean fields. Other outlying areas housed hunting cabins. Beyond the farms and hunting cabins were the small towns of Shrewsbury, Seven Valleys, Jefferson, New Freedom, Spring Grove, Glen Rock, and New Salem. York County's heartland.

Rich had grown up in Seven Valleys, and other than a four-year stint in the Marines during the early eighties, and a vacation trip to New York City when Tyler was ten, he'd spent his whole life there. Rich had been in these woods thousands of times, but he'd never gone farther than he had today. With the game nonexistent, he forgot about the unseen presence spying on him and pressed on, ignoring that creepy feeling and venturing into areas he'd never seen before. He wasn't worried about getting lost. He had his compass and he'd be

able to find the road and his truck again. His only concern was not finding some meat in time to get home and watch some TV. He wished now that he'd shot something when he had the chance, closer to the road where he'd parked. At the time, he hadn't wanted to risk somebody hearing him. But it appeared that all the wildlife had gone deeper into the forest, so Rich did, too.

This close to the center, the woods seemed lifeless.

And that damned sensation of being watched didn't go away.

The distant drone of a chainsaw broke the silence, and Rich jumped at the sudden sound. The buzz ceased, and was followed by pounding hammers. Rich shrugged. Probably the volunteers from the fire department, building something for the Ghost Walk. It occurred to him that maybe that was why the game was so scarce. Maybe all the noise had scared the wildlife away. He hadn't realized that he was so close to the haunted attraction's location. Grumbling to himself, Rich pushed through the foliage and moved on.

A few minutes later, he came across the first of the dead trees. Soon, the tangled undergrowth cleared, replaced with a vast swath of desolate, barren ground. He was nearing what had once been the true heart of the forest: a burned and blackened area known as LeHorn's Hollow, named after the farmer who'd once owned it. The big forest fire in the spring of 2006 had destroyed over five hundred acres of woodlands and totally eradicated the entire hollow. Several people died in the inferno. Investigators suspected arson or perhaps an accidental blaze, but they were never able to determine the exact cause. In the end, it was speculated that a careless cigarette or an untended campfire had sparked the conflagration. The event made national headlines. CNN and FOX News even sent reporters out to cover it. For five minutes, York County, Pennsylvania, was in the news for something other than the Intelligent Design versus Evolution court case.

A lot of Rich's friends and coworkers had been relieved to see LeHorn's Hollow burn down. It had been the main source of most of the ghost stories and legends associated with the forest, including a violent murder in the eighties, a series of cult-related killings in 2006 (right before the fire), and whispers of everything from witchcraft and devil worship to crop circles and flying saucers. Then there was the more recent legend of a Bigfoot-like creature called the Goat Man who was said to haunt the area. All of it was bullshit, of course, but standing here among the burned-out tree skeletons, with no breeze blowing and no sound or movement, and that persistent feeling of being watched—Rich could understand how folks would believe the old tales.

His stomach grumbled. His tobacco tasted sour, so he spat it out and then put a new dip in. Rich checked his watch and sighed. Then he pressed forward. Burned tree limbs disintegrated beneath his feet. A splintered log crumbled into charred bits as he clambered over it. With each step, ashes and dust shot up into the air, swirling around him and clinging to his jeans and boots. It was like walking through black baby powder. He wondered why the vegetation hadn't started to come back yet. There should have been green shoots and fragile saplings thrusting upward from the soil. He shrugged. Probably because it was so late in the year. Next spring might bring it back to life. Maybe the lack of new growth to forage on explained why the hollow was empty of wild game. The surface was devoid of any tracks or footprints, except for his.

He was just about to give up and start back to the truck when he came across the stone. It was gray and stood out sharply against the dark landscape. It reminded Rich of a tombstone: knee-high, curved, rounded edges, and covered with carvings. It had definitely been shaped and smoothed by human hands. Despite the fire that had obviously raged around it, the stone appeared untouched. There was no soot on its unmarred surface. No burn marks or heat-induced damage.

Curious, Rich approached the rock and knelt down beside it. The carvings looked weathered, which meant that the stone was probably old. Had it been here before the fire, or had someone brought it here after? And if it had been here before, then how had it escaped undamaged? He studied it closer. There was no moss or lichen clinging to its sides, and no cracks or crevices in its surface. The rock was totally featureless except for the weird carvings. They weren't like anything he'd ever seen before. They looked like runes of some kind, or maybe Native American symbols, like the ones they showed on the History Channel documentaries. He remembered the cult that was supposed to have been based here before the fire. Could they have carved these? It didn't seem likely. Rich couldn't explain it, but the strange symbols felt much older than that.

Maybe it was worth some money. A stone like this, covered with what might possibly be Native American glyphs? That was a pretty big archeological find. Maybe he could sell it to the Indian Steps Museum near Wrightsville. They had all kinds of artifacts there—spears and arrowheads, stone clubs, bowls, and other things. If he remembered correctly, they had some rocks with markings on them, too: displayed in a showcase were several pieces of slate that somebody had pulled from the bottom of the Susquehanna River, each segment containing several ancient carvings. He'd seen it on the local news.

Rich nodded his head and spat again. Yeah, the more he thought about it, the more certain he was. This had to be worth some money; if not to the museum, then maybe to somebody at York College, or maybe even down at the Smithsonian in Washington. How much? He didn't know. Surely enough to get him out of debt—allow him to pay off the house and credit cards, and stop all the phone calls and letters from the bill collectors once and for all.

He'd be free. Suddenly, Rich had options again. A way out that didn't involve eating a bullet or drinking himself to

death. There was a light at the end of the tunnel and it wasn't an oncoming train. He could keep the house, or at least pay it off and then sell it to someone else. Get a fresh start. Be free of his family's ghosts.

Faint hammering sounds drifted to him again. He wondered if any of the people working on the Ghost Walk had discovered this yet. Probably not. If so, he'd have seen their footprints in the ashes.

He sat his rifle down and pulled out his compass, trying to figure out where he was. He blinked, staring at it. The needle was slowly spinning around, not fixing on a location. Almost as if there were no true north.

"That's weird. Cheap piece of shit."

Rich glanced around and spotted three more stones jutting up from the ground. Each of them looked just like the other. They were spaced out about ten feet apart forming a half circle of sorts. Could there be others, hidden beneath the ash? An entire circle, perhaps? An American version of Stonehenge? If so, then his fortunes had just gotten even better. One of these markers had to be worth money, but a dozen of them? He'd be set for life.

"Payday!"

Grinning, Rich placed his hands on the stone. It was cool to the touch, and for a brief moment he thought he felt it vibrating beneath his fingertips. He paused, wondering if the ground was shaking. An earthquake? Although rare in this part of the country, they'd happened before. But it wasn't. The soot and ash remained still, as did the burned hulks of timber. They didn't shake. Only the stone moved—and only this one. He could definitely feel it. Its brethren, the ones he wasn't touching, remained still, at least to the naked eye. The flat surface warmed slightly as he ran his palms across it. Then the vibrating sensation faded and the rock turned cool again. He noticed that the woods were quiet again, too. The hammering sounds had faded.

"Spooky shit."

Even though he spoke softly, his voice boomed across the blasted landscape, sounding too loud in the silence. It occurred to Rich that he hadn't felt watched—hadn't felt those unseen eyes on him—since discovering the stones.

Thoughts of money helped him brush his fears aside. He pushed the stone, wiggling it back and forth, disturbing the scorched soil. Flakes of ash fluttered into his face, sticking to his sweaty forehead and cheeks. Brown tobacco juice dribbled down his chin as he pushed harder, grunting with the effort, trying to determine how much of the stone was buried beneath the ground. The rock was heavier than it appeared. His fingers found purchase in the carvings. Again he felt a warm sensation in his palms and fingertips. The hard surface throbbed. He was sure of it this time.

Bewildered, Rich gave it a final shove. The rock tore free of the dirt and tumbled over onto its side, sending more ash into the air. Rich coughed, his eyes tearing up as the cloud obscured his vision. He tasted soot in the back of his throat. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. It came away grimy and black. His skin itched.

When the dust settled, Rich peered down at a small, round hole where the stone had been. He couldn't see the bottom, just a deep shadow. He leaned closer, peering down into the crevice. The air seemed colder at ground level. Rich's eyes widened in surprise as the darkness inside the hole moved, swirling around just like the cloud of ash had done.

The darkness was a solid, shapeless thing.

Still on his knees, Rich shuffled backward, gasping as the darkness floated out of the hole and into the air, forming into a small funnel like a miniature tornado. It moved in silence and of its own volition, slowly spinning round and round. There were no breezes to twirl it. The black cone glided backward, away from Rich and the stones. Rich saw more rocks sticking up now. They did indeed form a circle. He was standing outside of it. The cloud hovered in the center of the circle. Its speed increased.

“Oh shit . . .”

Still coughing from the ash in his throat, Rich jumped to his feet. His knees popped and his head pounded. The darkness continued turning. His stomach lurched as he watched it. His feet and hands felt like lead. The darkness spun faster. His mouth was suddenly parched; the plug of tobacco felt like a dry sponge between his gums and lip. Forgetting about his discarded rifle, he stepped away from the hole, watching the funnel cloud with wide, fearful eyes.

“I believe,” Rich whispered. “Okay? I believe now. Everything they say about this place is true. You win. You proved your point. I believe. I believe in God and the Devil and the motherfucking boogeyman. I believe in it all. So just let me go. I won’t come back.”

The darkness spoke. It sounded far away.

Dad . . .

Rich sobbed. He knew that voice.

Dad . . . it’s me. The voice grew louder.

“T . . . Tyler?”

The darkness coalesced, its form shifting again, changing into something else.

Changing into his dead son.

“Tyler . . . is it . . . what is this?”

This couldn’t be happening, but it was. His dead son’s ghost stood before him, still dressed in his desert khakis, as if he’d just returned home. Just like that, Rich became a believer. He couldn’t deny his own eyes. This wasn’t a vision or hallucination. This was Tyler, solid yet ethereal, his feet hovering inches from the forest floor. His death had been horrific, but now Tyler appeared unharmed and complete, looking as perfect and proud and strong as he had the day he left for boot camp.

Dad. Tyler held out his arms and smiled. *It’s good to see you. How’s Mom?*

Rich tried to respond, but he couldn’t. His words died in his throat, strangled by his sobs. His eyes blurred with tears.

“Oh, Tyler . . . I miss you. I miss you so fucking bad.”

I miss you, too, Dad. You and Mom both.

Rich took a hesitant step into the circle. As he did, Tyler seemed to grow clearer.

It's so cold here, Dad. Not like the desert. It's really cold.

Wiping his tears away with the back of his hand, Rich stepped fully into the circle and reached for his son. Tyler drifted toward him, drawing closer. Weeping, Rich touched him. As he did, Tyler changed shape. The darkness returned. Rich's fingers sank into the substance. It felt like frigid cotton candy. Black, smokelike tentacles erupted from its center and snaked across his hand and up his arm. Whimpering, Rich tried to pull away, but the darkness held fast. It slithered up his shoulders, wrapped around his neck and raced toward his mouth.

Rich screamed, frozen in place.

More of the darkness flowed over him. It poured through his mouth and ears and the corners of his eyes, slipped beneath his clothes and snaked into his anus and urethra. Anywhere there was an opening, the darkness found it. The black cloud grew smaller and smaller as more of it pulsed into his body. Rich screamed throughout it all.

When the cloud disappeared, Rich's screams turned to laughter, echoing through the dead trees. The voice wasn't his. Nor were the thoughts inside his head. There were no more worries about his financial situation or unemployment. Gone was his depression and anger. Gone were his memories of Carol and Tyler and everything else. Those memories, just like their owner, didn't exist anymore. They were just ghosts.

Richard Henry was no more. He'd been replaced by something else.

He would not be missed because there was no one to miss him.

As night fell on the hollow, the laughter ceased. The moon shone down through the burned trees, but the light did not

penetrate the desolate spot. The figure that had once been Rich retrieved the .30-06 rifle and went hunting. There was much to do and only a short time to do it. Halloween was coming and the barriers between worlds grew thin.

CHAPTER TWO

Maria Nasr held her breath and counted to ten.

I will not snap. I will not snap. I will not snap.

She repeated the mantra over and over in her head. It didn't help. Her anger swelled. This was ridiculous. Her hands curled into fists and her long fingernails dug into her palms, the French manicure from the day before all but forgotten. Her legs twitched in annoyance, rocking the tablet, pen, and digital voice recorder precariously balanced in her lap. The clock on the wall refused to move, the hands seemingly frozen in time. Maria's temples throbbed.

At the front of the room, the fat man, Orvil Hale, one of the town commissioners, droned on and on about his kid's private Christian academy and how marvelous it was and how all of the other board members should consider enrolling their children at the school, too. His bald head shined under the fluorescent lighting. Hale's pudgy, red-splotched cheeks jiggled as he talked. Long hairs dangled from his nose, swaying with each breath. Maria could see them even from where she sat. And he wheezed between words, as if the very act of talking left him breathless. So why didn't he just shut up? Weren't they on taxpayers' time? Yes, of course they were. But rather than getting down to business, Hale kept talking.

It pissed her off. She had better things to do on a Wednesday night than sit here and listen to an elected official proselytize on township time. Okay, maybe laundry, cleaning her apartment, and grocery shopping weren't exciting, and sure, these meetings were about as thrilling as watching flies have sex, but enough already! Get to the matter at hand, address the taxpayers' concerns: the new sewage system and who was going to pay for it. That's what she was here to cover for the newspaper, not this personal fucking nonsense. They could save that for after the meeting.

Occasionally, Maria would skim through *Writer's Digest* and other magazines and websites directed toward writers. They always made freelancing sound glamorous and fun.

This was neither.

Maria exhaled, took another deep breath, and forced herself to relax. She stretched her fingers and toes and twisted her head from side to side, cracking the cartilage in her neck. The guy in front of her, a writer for the *York Daily Record*, turned around and smiled. Maria smiled back.

Don't get the wrong idea, buddy, she thought. You're like twice my age and still working as a freelancer. No career drive or higher financial aspirations there, obviously. And besides that, you pick your nose and wipe it on your pants.

It was true. She'd seen him do it at dozens of these township meetings, as well as other municipal government meetings, car wrecks, ribbon cuttings, Jaycee bean suppers, Lions Club pancake breakfasts, and everything else they covered.

The reporter—Mark was his name, she remembered now—turned back around and focused on the front of the room. His index finger crept toward his nose again. The township supervisors were discussing last week's episode of *American Idol*. Maria glanced at the clock and sighed. The hands had barely moved.

Somebody kill me now . . .

She hated this. Hated her job as a freelancer and every-

thing it entailed. This wasn't how she'd pictured things would be after graduating from college three years ago. She'd imagined moving to New York City or Los Angeles and getting a job for a major newspaper, or maybe writing for *Time* or *Newsweek* or *Vanity Fair*. Instead, she was stuck freelancing here in York County, Pennsylvania, scrambling to sell articles for anyone who would send her a check, and barely making a living at it.

Maria had grown up in Paramus, New Jersey. Her father was a Jordanian Muslim and her mother was a Brazilian nonpracticing Catholic. Both had immigrated to the United States to go to college, and both had ended up living here afterward. They'd gotten married, after her mother converted to Islam. Maria's father was an engineer. Her mother was a doctor. Both had wanted the best for their daughter, especially since she was an only child. But they also insisted that she earn things on her own. Her father was especially adamant about this. They could have sent Maria to the finest journalism schools in the country and paid her tuition in full, but instead, they'd declined to help her financially. "You must do it on your own," her father had said. "If you do not work hard now, you will never appreciate the opportunities you are given. You may hate us for it now, but you will thank us one day."

Maria had ended up picking York College. It was highly accredited, yet still affordable on her college loan. Moving from Paramus to the small Pennsylvania town was a bit of an adjustment, but she managed. She got a job working part-time at a video store, shared an apartment off campus with five other girls, and stayed focused. No boyfriends during her four years in school—there was no time. Becoming a journalist was what mattered. Serious relationships could come later, after she'd graduated and went to work for the *New York Times*.

Except that it never happened. Maria received her degree, but the job offers weren't forthcoming. She applied

in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New York, Washington, D.C., and all the other nearby cities. When she had no luck there, she tried the smaller cities like Allentown, Scranton, Trenton, and Richmond, but they weren't hiring either. Some of them offered her other positions or freelance work, but nothing that was financially feasible. She needed full-time employment—a staff gig. Maria had her student loan to pay off, as well as the cost of living, and moving expenses to wherever she took the job. She couldn't move back home. Her father remained adamant that she do things on her own, so living with her parents again wasn't an option. She could have asked them for a loan, but that would have been admitting defeat—and besides, she was already far enough in debt.

In the end, Maria opted just to stay in York. She got a small apartment in York City, bought a Hyundai Accent, and added even more to her debt. Then, still working at the video store—full-time now, rather than part-time—Maria started supplementing her income with freelance assignments. After all, what good was her degree if she didn't put it to use? So in the evenings, after she got off work, Maria began writing for various markets. It was slow going at first. She had to build up a list of editors and markets that she could submit regularly for. Webzines, travel guides, magazines, newspapers—all of them were looking for freelancers, even the papers who had refused to hire her as a full-time employee. After a year and a half, she had an impressive amount of clippings and could afford to quit her job at the video store—even though she was really only earning the same amount she'd made working there. She continued working hard and stayed prolific, and so far, she wasn't behind on her bills and could buy groceries and hadn't crawled back to Paramus to tell her parents she was a failure. The key to being a successful freelancer was the ability to write quickly for a variety of clients.

Like now. Maria focused again on Orvil Hale. She hadn't missed anything. The officials were just now calling the meeting to order.

Finally, she thought. *It's about fucking time. Maybe we'll be out of here before Halloween.*

Maria crossed her legs. She needed to pee.

Tonight, Maria was freelancing for the *York Dispatch*. Unlike their rival, the *York Daily Record*, they used freelancers to cover most local government meetings. Maria earned sixty dollars per story, and while it didn't seem like a lot of money, every check counted—that was the freelancer's mantra. On any given week, she could get paid for several magazine articles, half a dozen reviews online, and two or three freelance stories for the newspaper. It all added up. And besides, the local government stories only took her a few hours to write. They weren't exactly hard work. The only drawback was sitting through the tedious meetings themselves. Maria had yet to discover a way to make sewer lines, street repair, or refuse collection interesting and exciting. No matter how you dressed it up, it was still the most boring shit in the world. Still, she wasn't getting paid to make it thrilling. She was simply supposed to report the facts, no matter how uninspiring they might be.

The other downside was the fact that she had very few personal relationships and little time for socializing, other than with business contacts and peers she met on the Internet. Maria posted regularly on a few message boards for freelance writers, and had several friends she exchanged e-mails with, but she didn't go out much. She couldn't. There was no time. She spent her days and evenings working on the next assignment or trying to line up more. As a result, her social life outside of the Internet was almost nonexistent. Three years after college, she still had no serious boyfriends. Maria could count the number of dates she'd been on with one hand. And other than a drunken one-night stand with a guy she'd met on assignment six months ago, she'd slept alone.

Yep, she thought, *the thrilling, glamorous life of a freelance writer.*

Nuts . . .

Two long hours later, the township officials finished their business and Hale adjourned the meeting. Maria turned off her digital voice recorder, put it in her purse along with her notebook and pen, and stood up. Her notebook was filled with doodles—cat and dog faces, a hexagon, and labyrinthine, concentric circles. She hadn't taken any notes, confident that the important stuff was on the recorder. She'd play it back when she got home, transcribe it, and make sense of things. Boil two hours' worth of discussion into a four-hundred-word news brief that would end up buried on the last page of the local section, right after the farm report and church worship schedules for the week. She'd e-mail it to her editor before her one A.M. deadline, and then get some sleep.

Maria filed out with the rest of the attendees. Mark from the *Daily Record* smiled at her again. His pants legs were covered with dried boogers. She smiled back, and then looked away, pretending to be interested in some Halloween decorations hanging on the wall.

Yeah, her life was really working out the way she'd planned.

Maybe tomorrow she'd look into moving again. Try getting out of York. Search Craigslist for an apartment in New York or Philadelphia. And maybe she'd win the lottery, too. That was the only way she could afford to move, after all.

Like it or not, she was stuck here. Alone.

On her way out the door, she glanced back at Mark. His finger was in his nostril up to the first knuckle.

So she wasn't the only thing that was stuck.

Maria finished her assignment half an hour before the deadline and e-mailed the attachment to her editor. Her little television flickered in the corner. Conan O'Brien was interviewing Canadian stand-up comedian Pete Zedlacher. The two were laughing at something, but Maria couldn't tell what because she had the sound muted.

Her apartment was small but comfortable—bathroom,

living room, kitchenette, and two bedrooms, one of which served as her office. The place was furnished with a curious mixture of leftover dorm furniture from her college days and more recent purchases from Ikea and Target. A new couch. A used futon. The eggshell-colored walls were sparse—a framed Monet print, a montage of photos from high school and college, and a collectible spoon rack. There was only one picture of her parents in the whole apartment, subconsciously hung above the entertainment center where she didn't have to look at them every day. Maria spent little time in the living room—when she was home, her evenings were spent sleeping or working. Her office wasn't much. Two desks had been lined up in an L-shape in the corner. One held her laptop and the other her older desktop. A two-drawer filing cabinet contained her various clippings and bylines, as well as contracts, receipts, and financial records. Two bookshelves leaned against the wall. One overflowed with paperbacks and compact discs. A green vase sat precariously at the top. The other bookshelf held her television and more books.

Conan gave way to an annoying commercial for a headache medicine. She was just about to turn the television off and go to bed when her laptop beeped, signaling a new e-mail. She clicked on Outlook Express and saw it was from Miles, her editor at the paper.

It read:

Got the piece. Thanks. Will run in the local section tomorrow. Meanwhile, how would you like a bigger assignment? Looking for a special feature on a new local Ghost Walk. At least one full page, plus pictures. Maybe more, if material warrants. One of the staff photographers has already made arrangements for pics. Just need someone to do the story. Normally, Hilary would cover this, but she's still on maternity leave and the Ghost Walk's owner, Ken Ripple, is adamant about coverage. The attraction opens the night before Halloween,

so we've got to get hopping. Not a lot of time. It's a rush job. You interested? —Miles

She was surprised to see that Miles was still awake this time of night. But then again, judging by how often he complained about his wife and kids, maybe he was happier at work.

Maria hit **REPLY**. Was she interested? A full-page feature? That paid a lot more than a sidebar item about local government. Hell, yes, she was interested, and she told him so. A few minutes later, Miles responded with Ripple's contact information and a suggestion that Maria come in and go through the newspaper's archives tomorrow. There was a lot of history associated with the haunted attraction's location, and since she wasn't a local, she'd have to brush up on it.

Assuring him that she would, and promising to stop by the office in the morning, Maria logged off and went to bed. It was a long time before she fell asleep.

When she finally did, she had a nightmare about her parents. They were displeased with the path she'd taken in life and had decided to talk to her about it—with knives.

They were very angry, and the knives were very sharp.