



UNTITLED

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CHAPTER 1

Where am I? My temples throbbed as I slowly got to my feet. The light purple twilight of the sky cast a beautiful eerie glow and lumpy ill-defined shadows across the different tall grasses and wild flowers of the field. The ground has sucked all the heat from my limbs. My teeth chatter and I began to walk to get warm. Quick movement brought sharp lines of pain from my left temple down my jaw. White and blue lines flashed diagonally across my eyes and I walked more gingerly.

I walked in tight circles not knowing exactly where to go. I felt the sharp tingling pain as the cold left my fingers and toes. The purple edged to pinks and reds as the sun neared the horizon. In the gaining light I noticed the outline of a large house on the opposite west horizon. With no better options I set out over the dew-covered grass towards it. *Where is everything?* The stark stillness of nature bothered me. No insects chirped, no clouds of gnats gathered above the grasses, no snakes slithered out of my way. The only movement was the occasional breeze on the tall grass.

I walked with my back to the rising sun. The sun had cleared the horizon and evaporated the morning dew by the time I reached the house. The bright rays of sunlight peaking above the horizon triggered sharp stabbing pain behind my left eye. Packets of intense pain bounced around the left side of my face.

The house was old and once grand. Rose bushes with so many blooms they were more pink than green overgrew the front of the house. The front steps bowed with time and had lost their paint. There was a wide porch circling the house with a collapsed roof on the right. *Please hold, Please hold.* The stairs creaked and groaned as I climbed. The knob turned easily but the front door was swollen with moisture and expanded in the jam. Taking a few steps back I rammed my shoulder in the door trying to break it open. It gave on the seventh or eighth try and with the wind knocked out of me I collapsed on the cool dusty floor and waited for the pain in my head to become

manageable. *Creak. Creak.* The door swung freely on the hinges. It was clear it would never fit properly again.

I inhaled deeply listening to the air move through my chest. The dark interior was easy on my head. Thick cobwebs coated the high ceiling above me. My breathing echoed in the room. *Pain is mental. Pain is mental,* I told myself. Feeling that my mental state was anguish, after a few minutes I stood up.

I was in a grand entryway clearly designed to impress with expensive looking carpet and heavily framed art. The entryway opened into a large foyer with a grand staircase and hallways to the left and right. *I need something for my head.* At random, I chose the right hallway. Some doors were open, some were closed. I peaked in rooms until finding a small bathroom with a sink and toilet. The mirror above the sink had been broken, only about half remained in the frame. Large shards of glass had fallen to the floor. I gasped at the sight of myself. Fresh blood was trickling out of my ear. More had formed huge dried clots, matting my hair to my scalp. I turned on the sink and watched the rust colored water flow out, so cold it fogged the faucet. I wetted a towel and pressed it to my throbbing head and laid down on the cold floor with the broken glass trying to collect my thoughts. They circled back to same question, *What is happening?*

CHAPTER 2

What the ...? Movement in a mirror shard caught my eye. Startled I sat up and found myself looking over a mosaic of mirror pieces. My fragmented reflection looking back. Watery blood dripped down the side of my face and down my neck and I began to wipe it with a towel. When I removed the towel, I saw a knot, the size of pea, on the left side of my head, along my hairline, slightly above the ear. I leaned in closer to examine it. My mouth opened in shock, my heart pounded in my ears, and my eyes opened wide. It was growing. It had tripled in size now bigger than a hickory nut. And then I could *hear* it. In between my heart beats. A low sucking sound like cake batter slowly being stirred. I watched stunned as the knot began to move. A tendril slithered out along my hairline around my eye and up my forehead. It moved like a snake uncurling. I watched its movement in the jumble of shattered mirror.

Pain radiated from deep in my head. But this pain was different. It had purposeful movement associated with it. It was another reptile like motion, boring, tunneling, moving to the front of my head to meet the tendril wiggling across my forehead. *Ahhhh.* I finally found my voice, but it was weak. Barely louder than the wet movement sounds within my head. I shot up grabbing the sink, panting, looking at myself in the framed broken mirror pieces.

My face it was smooth, no bump, no tendril, or snake like motion. Just the brown smears of partially cleaned blood. The only sound in my ears was my beating heart and my hyperventilating gasps. I furrowed my brow and slowly brought my hand to where the movement had been. *Nothing.* Smooth.

CHAPTER 3

Trembling I stared at my reflection in the mirror and inspected my face once more. *What was that? Was it really there? Confusion? Hallucinations? Tricks of the dim light and my throbbing head?* My hands stopped in their tracks. My head, it felt, fine. Partially cleaned blood still dripped down the side of my face, but my ear had stopped bleeding.

My stomach growled. I was hungry. I grabbed the last disintegrating towel from the rack and quickly finished cleaning my hair and face. I hadn't eaten in... I wasn't sure. Suddenly overcome by hunger I could focus on nothing else. I stepped into the hall. It was dark with morning light drifting in from the open doors and a window towards the front of the house. The floor was thick with dust, and I could see the outline of my footprints. My eyes traced the route I had taken earlier along the hallway edge, next to the inner wall. I was eager to find the kitchen and see if there was anything edible. I tried the door directly across the from the bathroom, locked or stuck.

I looked up and down the hall trying to decide what to do next. Suddenly I jerked my head back the direction I had been looking. *No. They were on the edge of the hallway. I know they were.* My footprints were now clearly in the dead-center of the hallway.

I stared trying to make of it when... all my hair stood on end. They began to move. As if they were all segments of a continuous snake. They began to whip back and forth in slithering motion... right towards me. "Yeeaaahhh," I screamed a startled surprise. I had no trouble finding my voice this time. I jumped back across the bathroom threshold and watched them snake past me towards the back of the house.

The moment they slithered past I ran back the way I had come, up the hallway, into the foyer, past the grand staircase, through the entryway, and out the swinging front door. Not trusting the stairs to hold in my mad dash, I cleared them with a single leap landing hard on my feet, knees buckling, the jarring impact with the ground vibrating up my body.

I shot up and turned around facing the house, backing away slowly. *Did it follow me?* I stared at the front door expecting a dust billow in the shape of an open snake mouth to fill the doorway. Creak. Creak. The door swung slowly. The sound brought me to my senses and without a second thought I turned and ran, as fast as I could.

CHAPTER 4

Oww. Oww. OWW. Thorns tore at my clothes and scratched my skin. Something wet and dark hit my arm. I looked down. A berry. A blackberry. I was on the edge of an overgrown blackberry patch. Not just a patch, I was on the edge of what must have been the house's garden, about 300 yards away. Nearby there were tall fruit trees, with fruit of various ripeness. What remained of a vegetable garden was mingled with weeds in a sunny patch. Famish I collected the best looking peaches, pears, and apples from the trees and sat down to eat.

I sat facing the house, eyeing it distrustfully. Warm peach juice dripped down my chin. I began to relax, the food calmed my nerves and added a new perspective. I tossed one pit aside and began on an underripe pear. *Something is not right.* The longer I sat eating my fruit, the more I began to feel something in my surroundings was off, and unable to put my finger on it.

I stared at the peach pit, laying in the grass with the pieces of pulp and a juice ring surrounding it. *Where are the ants?* It hit me. I had not seen another living thing since... well since the mirror? Maybe? If that was real? As if on cue a dull throbbing began at my left temple. I dug a small hole in the ground. Nothing. No worms, no spiders, no beetles... just dirt and roots. *How?*

I glanced up and scanned the horizon. I noticed some dark clouds to the north, distant but moving quickly. A thunderstorm. "Aahh-huuunn," I sighed. I was going to have to find shelter before they reached me. Soon the wind would pick up and bring in the smell of rain. *I don't want to go back into that house.* I walked away from the trees to get a 360 degree view of the horizon, desperately seeking any other option.

On my second slow spin, I saw something new. A lower, large, quickly contorting cloud, moving like water boiling. *Strange.* I squinted hoping to make more sense. Quickly I realized there was no need to squint. It was coming, fast. It would be over me in minutes. I quickly began to assess my options. *Run back to the house, never. Shelter under the...* My thoughts stopped midway. *What's that noise?* Coming from the direction of the cloud was a low, deep, white noise, like lots of sounds overlapping.

The cloud has closed miles in the short time I was gathering my thoughts. *No, not a cloud. It's too low.* The black mass with its bubbling, changing hazy outline reached the ground. It looked like a pseudo-solid wall. The edges streamed and swirled, billows and tendrils snaking out and refusing. *Swarming.* I felt the blood drain to my feet as a wind picked up my hair. It flew back from my face and off my shoulders with increasing force. The dull pain in my temple shot white hot bolts of pain across my vision. I felt blood drip from my ear and fly back with my hair. I knew what the wall was.

CHAPTER 5

I watched the wall move closer, eyes wide, not fully believing what I was seeing. Panic was rising inside me. *Move, move, move!* I tasted the bitter spike of adrenaline, instinct took over and I ran. My heart must have pounded, my lungs must have ached, my feet must have tingled with the vibrations of the hard impact, but I felt none of it. Acting only on instinct I ran. The wind picked up, the low white noise grew louder, the overlapping sounds were beginning to separate. I sucked in deep and gave it another burst of exertion. Everything ceased to exist besides the wall and my distance from it.

The noise was deafening. The wind blew grass parallel to the ground. Tendrils of the cloud snaked in and out of my peripheral vision. The low white noise was now a cacophony of buzzing, bumbles, zips, trills, and chirps, all of different distances, all of different timbres. The fuzzy wall

outline was enclosing me now, the small bodies of different sizes and shapes darting in front of me. I slapped one off my cheek. I inhaled several more and began to cough. *No. I've got to make it. They'll choke me for sure if I don't.* A small one caught in my eye. Some stuck to the blood in my ear.

As the fuzzy outline moved past me and I was being plunged into the thick, concentrated, quicksand wall, I was there. I'd reached it. *I'm going to make it.* CRACK! The center step broke under my weight, my shin smacked and slide down the porch edge. I barely paused for the sharp, spasming pain. I scrambled up the porch and crawled.

The wood was rough and grainy on my palms. Thousands of bodies collided with mine. Different sounds darted past my ear. It was unbalancing. CREAK. *I'm in.* I began pushing the door closed. It groaned in protest, shoving thousands and thousands of bodies back. I strained against the resistance. The swollen door, the one I forced out of the frame, it wouldn't close. It wouldn't seal. I turned my back braced my legs and shoved with all my remaining strength. I was tired from the running and weak from only having fruit to eat. CRRAANT. The door twisted and contorted as I tried to force it in.

I could hear the soft pinks and loud thuds of hard bodies colliding. They began to pour in around the gap, wasps, mosquitoes, hornets, cicadas, moths, gnats, flies, beetles, all the insects that were missing from the world were descending in a solid mass at once. Some harmless, some dangerous, all deadly in a dense engulfing cloud.

With a sound like rain they ran into the windows, so thick they blocked most of the light. Their legs clinging to the glass, crawling over one another. With a final shove and my shin stinging my feet slipped out from under me and back scrapped down the door. I could hear insects crack and crush in the movement. The foyer began to darken as insects covered more of the windows. *Forget this. It's not going to close.* Insects streamed in around the sides of the door and expanded to clouds in front of me. I got to my feet, and ran deeper into the house.