

PROLOGUE

The woods were silent, other than the screaming. It was a summer's night. Nothing in the forest moved. Somewhere in the darkness, things wailed hoarsely.

There were miles of empty pathway rambling past old logging trails and older ruins. There were aisles of trees, motionless. The blind river ran through the shadows. And crouched, listening in the bracken, his breath fast and frightened, was a real estate developer. He wore shorts, and a T-shirt that read, ME, A CHOWDERHEAD?

He should not have come into the woods. There were signs marked NO TRESPASSING by the road. The signs were so old that the trees had grown around them, and gray vines laced their edges like witch macrame. Signs like that, these woods devoured.

But Milton Deatley had paid no attention to the signs. He liked to walk in the forest by night and picture it his. He liked to dream of bulldozing the trees, leaving wide

tracks where the messy scrub now grew. He pictured the forest cut down and subdivided into smooth lanes full of luxury homes with carpeted rec rooms, with Peg-Board tool racks in the garages, with walk-in freezers and sauna baths, with concrete elk out on the lawn. He wanted this land to develop. In his brain, he called his estates *Rumbling Elk Haven*.

He had been walking for an hour through the stillness when he heard the screaming. The woods were silent, and there could be no mistake. This was not something misheard.

It was something evil.

In the moment that he first heard it, it seemed to him that nothing else existed: nothing but darkness, and heat drizzling off the leaves, and the sound of several human voices howling.

Carefully, he moved through the woods. He knew the paths well, because he had strolled there in the day. He had named them things in his mind, things they would be called when they were paved. He liked it when paved spaces — roads, cul-de-sacs, rotaries — were named after baseball stars, or vice presidents, or girls who refused to go out with him in middle school.

The path was coated with needles. His tread was soft on them. The screaming did not stop. Sometimes it was only one voice. At those times, it sounded like a man screaming in falsetto. Sometimes it sounded like several people, all being cut with different instruments.

The boughs of the trees were perfectly still. None of

them moved. A bird was motionless on a branch, its eye open. The moon was not bright.

Milton Deatley saw a light through the forest.

Carefully, he moved toward it. He put down his feet quietly, but there were twigs on the path that snapped.

The light was a fire. He could see the rippling shadows of flame.

He walked toward it, crouched.

He came to the verge of a clearing in the pines. He huddled there, squatting close to the ground, ready to run.

The fire was from an abandoned snowmobile. Someone had poured oil on it and had thrown on a match. It lit up the clearing. By its light, Milton Deatley could see the screaming ritual.

There was a mound, a tall, steep hillock, and on its sides were scattered people in robes, with hoods that hid their faces. Their arms were stiff at their sides. Their mouths could be seen when they opened them to scream.

Before them stood a figure in a robe. He had some kind of tablet, a mystical tablet, lying before him, and he pointed to it by the light of the burning Ski-doo. Each time he pointed to a different square on the tablet, someone new shrieked. It seemed like an alien kind of singing. Then the keening-master would raise his hand, and pour more oil on the fire from a watering can. The fire would flare.

Milton squinted at the tablet. Now he saw that it was actually a game. A board game, with spaces to move pieces, and spots to put stacks of cards. It was open on an

old Formica-topped kitchen table. The table's legs were rusted.

The conductor touched spaces on the board. The eerie choir cried.

Milton watched them. Their voices intertwined. Some shrieked one note; some gasped; others wailed strange sighs.

From behind the mound, from out of the shadows, several more figures came. They carried the limp figure of a woman.

Her head rolled back. Her hair hung down limply.

"She is finished," said one of the men who carried her.

"Indeed," said the conductor with the game.

Milton Deatley's heart beat in panic.

The group with the woman moved toward the fire.

And Milton turned to run.

He pushed aside branches and jumped toward the path. He heard a scuffling behind him. He was on the path now, barreling as quickly as he could go toward the road. His chest felt giddy and queasy. Twigs slapped at his face.

A small man was standing on a stump, saying to him, "Now things will not go well for you."

He found himself in a maze of mounds. He scrambled from gully to gully. He clawed at the needles and loam and catapulted over rises. He slid down knolls. He could not hear if anyone pursued him.

He broke out into open woodland. There were lights floating through the trees. Perhaps insects. Deatley kicked up leaves as he ran.

He kept thinking: *This is no joke.*

Deatley paused in the midst of the wood. He was on a slope. He realized he was running up the mountain, not down toward the road. The bonfire lay between him and his SUV. He was trapped.

As he stood there and pondered this, he heard hunting horns.

Someone was coming down the mountain. Someone with many legs.

Horses.

Riders.

Weapons. Things made of metal.

They were all around him.

He fell on his knees.

And still, from the forest, they came in droves.