

## PROLOGUE

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

—1 PETER 5:8

**S**TORM'S COMING."

When he was ten, Eldon Granger broke his arm, and the bone was never set right. Even now, at age sixty-five, he felt it ache whenever a storm approached. Today, although the skies over the small town of Greensboro were bright blue and thickly populated with dramatic cumulous clouds, Eldon felt the approaching storm in his bones.

He sat in his tattered clothes atop one of the charred stone foundations that lay scattered in the tall grass of the North Woods, which bordered Greensboro, using an old buck knife to scoop beans out of a can. At his feet sat a semicircle of children, boys and girls, ages ranging from nine to thirteen, ashen-faced and speechless as Eldon continued spinning his tale.

"Mighty big one's coming, I reckon. You know, a storm came through these parts over a hundred years ago. A *bad* storm, if you know what I'm saying."

The children blinked back at him, spellbound.

"Some storms, see, they just make a racket with all the thunder before they blow on through. Harmless, you'd say. But other storms..."

Eldon lifted a row of beans to his scraggly face and slurped

them down. Gulping, he leaned toward the kids, lowering his voice to a whisper.

“...other storms, you see, they have a way of staying. Sometimes they leave something behind.”

He sat up and dug in his can for the last scraps of his meal.

“That’s what happened back then. Something got left behind. Not from this earth, neither. No sir, came from the world beyond.”

One of the kids looked to the sky, squinting against the sun as if hoping to see a flying saucer pass overhead on cue.

“No, no,” Eldon grumbled. “Not up there, boy!” With a jerk of his wrist, he stuck his knife hilt deep into the soft earth, eliciting a gasp from the girl sitting directly across from him. “Down *there*.”

He could almost hear the thumping hearts of the frightened listeners. Reaching down, he plucked the blade from the dirt, wiping it off on his stained jeans then using it to scrape the last remnants of beans from the can.

A couple of the girls made “eww” faces at each other as Eldon finished his canned supper.

“They come up from time to time,” Eldon began again. “Devils, they are. Walking the earth. Looking for little boys and girls who don’t mind their elders.”

He leveled an appraising glare at each of the children, his eyeballs bulging to almost grotesque proportions.

“I sure hope that ain’t none of you. I don’t wanna be seein’ your pictures on the news, how no one can’t find ya. Too many kids have already gone missing ’round these woods ever since that first storm. *Creatures* out here, haven’t you heard?”

Eldon took a deep breath, his mind wandering.

“Maybe that’s why you come. You out lookin’ for the monsters of the North Woods, that it? Thinking you might spot some-

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thing out there? A bogle, perhaps? Or maybe the king himself, the *bogeyman*?”

He gestured at the yawning forest beyond, dark and imposing despite the brightness of the afternoon.

Some of the kids turned to face the woods, imagining they saw strange shapes and heard otherworldly noises.

“Well, God be with ya, if that’s yer intent,” Eldon said. “Believe you me, you don’t want to see those monsters. Because once you do . . . you don’t see nuthin’ else, if you catch my meaning.”

One of the older boys interrupted him. “Ah, come on. Everyone knows those are just stupid stories.”

Eldon’s eyes grew wide, as though he’d been slapped across the face. “You don’t believe in the bogeyman?” he asked.

The kid stood and turned to his friends. “Come on. My dad was right. This guy’s just a crazy old man.”

The old-timer rose, towering over the children. “You callin’ me a *liar*?”

Deflating just a bit, the boy said, “How are we supposed to believe you?”

Eldon’s eyes darkened. “That’s the scariest story of them all.” He sat down again. “Y’see, I had a friend back when I was a runt. Name was Joe Hallerin. Not much younger than some of you. He ran afoul of the thing out in these woods . . . Terrible, terrible.”

“Tell us.” The boy sat.

Whether the boy was eager to hear something gross—as most boys are—or he wanted to ridicule the vagabond further, Eldon didn’t care. He was fearful and excited, all at the same time, at the prospect of telling his best story.

“All right,” he began, scanning the small group, “but don’t say I didn’t warn you. What I’m about to tell you is not fer

young ears. Yet seeing as how your parents ain't doin' a good job a teachin' you the fundamentals, I guess it's left to me."

Once he was certain he had their attention, he dove into the tale, splaying his hands in front of them as though warming himself on the fire of their anticipation. His eyes lit up with mystery.

"Folks in the hills speak of a nasty bogle-king, one that even Sally-Bally, Gowerow, and Old Raw Head are afraid of. No one knows from where he comes. They say he comes for all bad children who pay no mind to their mamas.

"Folks don't speak much about Wolf Hollow anymore, but it used to be that every autumn old-timers and youngins alike would go to the apple orchards there and pick the sweetest apples you ever did taste. And it was up there in Wolf Hollow that there used to live an ornery cuss of a boy named Joe Hallerin.

"When Joe was just a baby, his father took ill and passed on, leaving his mother to raise the boy on her own. She worked day and night, that poor woman, but that ornery son of hers never gave her no respect for it. He would practice his moans and groans so he could lay out from school on Monday. And when his mama went to work, Joe Hallerin would sneak off to the fishing hole and catch frogs all day. And even iff'n his mama managed to drag him to church, he would plug his ears when the preacher started talking about hellfire and damnation. Some said Joe Hallerin stole chickens from his neighbors, though they never could catch him in the act.

"One day, after catching a whole sack full of frogs at the fishing hole, when it was getting late and the sun was hiding behind the trees, Joe Hallerin made his way home. As he was passing by the old woods of Wolf Hollow, he heard the most peculiar thing. Something from the bushes said:

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O Joe Hallerin, where are you off to?  
O Joe Hallerin, where have you been?  
When our master comes to get you,  
Open the window and let us in.

“When ol’ Joe heard that, he went white as a sheet and lit a shuck outta there. When he got home and his mama asked him why he was late, Joe wouldn’t tell her. Fact is, he wouldn’t tell no one but me.

“A couple days later, Joe was on his way to town. He always liked to go off to town and hide in the bushes and throw mud at all the ladies in their fancy new dresses. On his way there, though, he happened by them same old woods. The peculiar sounds came again, and this time Joe stopped to take himself a look. What he saw in the bushes is indescribable in human words. The closest thing he could make out was that it was a whole bunch of critters with smoky, hollow, black eyes and mouths full of needles. They had long knives for fingers, and they all huddled close together, like a swarm of angry bees.

“‘Who goes there?’ he asked.

“Again, the critters spoke:

O Joe Hallerin, where are you off to?  
Going to do no good, I’d say.  
At the stroke of twelve, we’ll come for you.  
Open your door and come out to play.

“Again, Joe became all stricken with a fright and lit outta there, all the way home. And when his mama asked why he was in such a hurry, he never did say, ’cept to me.

“Now it happened that evening that Joe Hallerin was off to bed. He was all tucked in for the night, the covers pulled to

his little chin, when he heard the most awful clatter outside his bedroom window.

“What...Who goes there?’ he stuttered from under his covers. And a voice that sounded great for storytellin’ called back to him from t’other side of the window:

O Joe Hallerin, where are you off to?  
Gone to the land of dreams?  
I am the master, and I’ve come to you.  
Open your window; it’ll be such a scream.

“Joe pulled the covers up a little bit tighter, afraid to go out into the dark, y’see. He remembered the times the preacher told him to stay away from evil, but evil seemed to be so much fun. He thought of his mama, but even though he would miss her so, Joe wanted to go and see what the matter was with the stranger at the door.

“So, throwing the covers aside, he got out of bed and loosened the latch on the window. There was such a gust of wind come in that it blew out the fire in the woodstove. The house grew cold, and Joe saw his own breath.

“Then a crooked man with a crooked smile came a-hoverin’ in that old cabin, looking like a hanged man at the gallows. The man had a snow-white face and lips black as a thick pool of blood, and he grinned wide to show his yellowed old teeth and said:

O Joe Hallerin, where you off to?  
Never did listen to what the preacher would say.  
Now you’ve got a lot of paying to do,  
*Your name will be sadly remembered today.*

“And just like that, Joe Hallerin was whisked away on the wind, never to be heard from again. His mama woke up the

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next morning, her son gone from his bed, and she let out such a cry, knowing that Joe's dirty deeds had finally caught up to him.

"That's why ever after in ol' Wolf Hollow, this sad, strange tale is told to all the little boys and girls to keep them mindin' their mamas and their preacher-folk and to remind them to stay far away from Old Scratch and his kin."

Eldon hunkered down, suddenly quiet.

"And if the Strange Man ever come knockin' at your door"—he stood tall and roared—"don't you ever, *ever* let him in!"



Story time was over. With Eldon's tale complete, the breezy pre-storm cool called to the youths, appealing to their greater sense of adventure. Gathering their bikes from their resting places in the tall grass, the children rode off to live out the rest of their Saturday afternoon, talking excitedly about crazy old Eldon and his ghost stories.

Meanwhile, Eldon resumed his regular duties, using a pike and black garbage bag to collect discarded beer cans and other trash around the Old Greensboro ruins. "People just don't have no appreciation for heritage," he grumbled, marveling at the refuse left behind in such a historic location.

These days it seemed the ruins served only as a giant receptacle for the town's garbage. Teenagers would sneak here at night to hold wild parties, far from their parents' watchful eyes. In the morning, all that remained of their revelry was smashed cans, broken bottles, and cigarette butts. Eldon did his best to keep the place clean—as much as the weed-entangled remains of a forgotten settlement *could* be kept clean. Nature had reclaimed the ruins, true, but there was no reason why the place had to be treated with disrespect.

Still, the teenagers' disrespect was Eldon's gain, as he was sure to earn a small fortune after handing in the cans and bottles for recycling at Don's Barber Shop in downtown Greensboro.

Eldon had dropped out of school after the sixth grade and wasn't fit for much but factory work. He eked out a decent living over the years without a family to support. His was a simple life of work, drinking with the fellas, and watching bad TV. But hard times hit Greensboro a year ago when the highway moved. Factories closed. Men lost their jobs. Families lost their homes. Eldon was an unfortunate casualty of the economic downturn. The bank foreclosed on his house, his car, his life. The North Woods became his sanctuary. This far out in the country there were some rotten old cabins abandoned by Greensboro's early settlers, and the bank didn't seem to have claim on any of them. Eldon moved in with the raccoons and cobwebs with nothing but the clothes on his back, a crate of Jim Beam, and the last of his earnings. Now living at a level slightly above homelessness, Eldon spent most of his days like today, scouring the town and surrounding woods for salable junk.

Every once in a great while he'd come across something spectacular, like an old pocket watch half-buried in the dirt that might fetch ten bucks at one of the pawn shops in town. But this Saturday he seemed destined for another catch of beer cans and bottles. If he were *really* lucky, the bottles would still be in one piece.

Like Ahab battling Moby Dick, Eldon raised his pike high and brought it down, piercing an aluminum can. His quarry impaled on the end of the stick, Eldon stuffed it in the bag with his other felled prey and continued the hunt.

Life in the North Woods wasn't that bad, for the most part. His daily sojourns in the country gave him ample time to think about things and enjoy his golden years. After spending so



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much of his life slaving away in the factory, it was refreshing to be among the trees with the warm sun on his face and open air as his companion.

Only at night did Eldon second-guess his decision to live in the woods.

In the beginning nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but these days the nighttime made him feel thin and frail. Lately he'd been having bizarre nightmares, at first sporadically, but now they were increasing in frequency and intensity. Sometimes at night he had fevered visions of strange, man-shaped dark figures, their slippery arms raised to the starless night sky, dancing and uttering horrible, gut-twisting wails of pleasure and pain. On those nights, when he woke up, soaked in sweat, he'd swear the shadows surrounding his bed were looking at him.

Watching him.

He never told anyone about the things he saw in his nightmares, not even the kids who came to listen to his stories. Truth be told, Eldon Granger never knew a boy named Joe Hallerin and was pretty sure there was no Wolf Hollow in Maribel County. It was all just a story his mother told him when he was little to keep him in line, and he supposed she heard it from her mother in a time when every mother in Greensboro told her children that story or one like it. But time had moved on, life had changed, and Eldon didn't hear the old stories anymore. The world no longer believed in such things. Eldon himself didn't believe in monsters or bogles or bogeymen or any of the colorful creatures he sprinkled into the receptive minds of children.

But the dreams...they were almost enough to change his mind.

As the blue day turned a smoky orange Eldon's dilapidated

shack beckoned to him, despite the words KEEP OUT he had spray-painted in black on the windows. The setting sun, now a big ball of red in the late afternoon sky, continued its descent as charcoal-colored clouds formed in the distance, promising a night of wind and rain. Eldon was glad to be home and sighed in sweet liberation as he hefted the black bag off his shoulder and dropped it onto the rickety porch. He'd tarried in the forest longer than he meant to and was glad to have made it back to the cabin before dark. Tomorrow he'd make a trip into town to exchange his garbage for greenbacks. After that, a trip to the store for groceries. He thought he might make a day of it.

Entering the dark house, he fumbled for the box of matches he kept by the door and lit the gas lamp. He intensified the flame, moving into the sparsely furnished living room. Here, arranged in front of the cold fireplace and dusty mantel, a moth-eaten couch he'd collected from the curb, three milk crates, and a scratched-up coffee table awaited him. He set the lamp on the table and called out, "Honey, I'm home."

An old sandy-colored basset hound named Cougar sauntered into the room. Its jowls hung loose, giving the dog a perpetually sad expression. Eldon smiled and bent down to scratch the dog's neck and back.

"Hey, ol' Cougar. Ya miss me? Huh?"

The dog obviously did not reply, but that didn't stop Eldon from snuggling up to its loose skin.

"Hey there. Been a long day, hasn't it? Sorry I've been out so late, boy. Found some good stuff today. Tomorrow it's the best stuff for you, don't you worry. The *canned* stuff."

Grinning to himself, happy to be home, Eldon stood and chuckled as Cougar hobbled toward the front door, his interest piqued by the sound of some critter outside.

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“What did you make me for supper?” Eldon inquired of the hound’s retreating backside. “Ah, I guess it’s up to me. *Again.*”

Bent low, Cougar sniffed at the crack beneath the door. Suddenly, the dog jerked back with a whimper, then growled. Eldon looked over his shoulder, mildly curious.

“What is it, boy? Huh?”

Cougar stepped away from the door and took a defensive stance, growling once more. Eldon’s smile faded, replaced by a frown. He moved toward the door and knelt at his faithful friend’s side.

“What is it, Cougar? What’s spookin’ ya?”

Cougar let loose a thunderous bark, and Eldon bolted to a standing position, startled. The dog gnashed and scratched at the floor, clawing at the wood, then began jumping against the door.

Eldon shouted, “That’s enough, now! Enough! What’s wrong with ya? You smell that storm coming or what?”

But the dog could not be sated. It barked and growled and scratched and clawed, determined to get outside. Eldon pushed the dog aside and threw open the door, looking out into the ginger light of dusk. Dark clouds hovered on the horizon.

“What is it, boy? There’s nothing out here!”

Nevertheless, Cougar tore through the open doorway toward the sooty, overcast sky, barking all the way before disappearing into a dark thicket.

Eldon yelled after him, “Hey, now! Git back here, boy!”

He stepped onto the rickety porch, listening to the yapping of his hound in the woods. Sounds of struggle replaced the barking, and Eldon’s aggravation with the dog’s erratic behavior melted away. A somber hush blanketed the woods, time drawing out like an eternity.

Finally, a lone yelp split Eldon’s heart.

“Cougar?” he called urgently. “You all right out there? What’ dya find?”

His questions were answered with silence.

“Cougar?”

A rumble of whispering snickers undulated between the thin trees as a subtle green fog roiled the fallen leaves, turning them crispy and colorless. The mist unfurled like emerald tendrils, a fitting prelude for the tempest that hovered patiently overhead, biding its time. Cold unlike anything Eldon had ever felt before crept into his bones, freezing his soul.

A second yelp was followed by another round of impish laughter.

His heart beating fast, Eldon grabbed a rifle from just inside the doorway and headed into the North Woods, the darkness surrounding and terrifying him.

“Don’t worry, Cougar! I’m comin’ for ya!”

As the old man stomped through the forest, the chilly green mist moved between his feet, veiling his path. Overhead, low-hanging branches grew together, shutting out the few remaining rays of sunlight.

From somewhere deep within the murky woods, Eldon heard Cougar yelp again. He picked up speed, determined to save his last remaining friend on Earth.

“Hold on, boy! I’m right here!”

The gloom enveloped Eldon, mocking him, but he did not relent. Drumbeats pounded inside his mind, and he felt as though he’d stepped out of the waking world and into the landscape of his nightmares, a place where the shadowed man-shapes of his dreams slithered and danced beneath starless skies. His eyes widened, and he prayed that he might find Cougar and return home before the storm claimed them both.

“Cougar! Where ya at?”

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Eldon paused, his eyes scanning the dim forest, fighting to see through the strange green mist. Then, as if the North Woods themselves conceded, the fog parted like curtains to reveal a stage. The stage was the Old Greensboro ruins, and sitting atop one of the stone foundations, as if prepared to tell a story of his own, was none other than Cougar.

The dog just sat there on his haunches, sadly facing his master.

“Cougar?” Eldon asked, a curious smile forcing its way onto his lips. “What is it, boy?”

Whispers, soft cackles, and voices rippled in the shadows of the tall trees. Old Cougar whined, bent low, and covered his head with his paws.

“What is—?”

Eldon gasped and watched in dumbstruck horror as the shadows surrounding his mutt suddenly came alive. Numerous shapes—impossible to count—flew past Cougar, leaving the dog unharmed as they initiated a frenzied pursuit of his master.

Screaming, Eldon dropped his rifle and tore back through the North Woods, the sounds of wild beasts bearing down on him while Cougar, the bait of this tragic charade, continued to whimper and hide his face in his paws.

The fog lifted and the branches split, allowing Eldon to glimpse the dusk’s welcoming light. His humble shack before him, he tore free of the woods’ entanglement and the storm’s baleful glare on his back. He raced for the front door, nearly tripping up the steps of the porch before crashing into his home. Landing hard on the floor, Eldon picked himself up and hurled his full weight against the door, desperately holding it shut as the things outside pounded on it and cackled.

“No...No...Go away...Go away!”

To Eldon’s dismay, the green mist seeped beneath the crack

in his door. He began stomping at it furiously, hoping against hope to send it away.

“No... Please, no!”

Eldon never believed the stories about Joe Hallerin and the bogeyman. But now he thought of Joe Hallerin—if such a boy had ever existed—and wondered what shadowed lands the bogeyman had taken Joe to on that fateful night. As he fought against the mist, Eldon worried he’d discover that hellish place soon enough.

Suddenly, a powerful force caved in the door, throwing Eldon across the room. He staggered to a standing position as shapes invaded his sanctuary. Futilely, he shielded his face, crying out in shock and agony, but the living shadows overwhelmed him, and soon his cries were forever silenced.

Meanwhile, dark clouds continued looming in the east.