

CHAPTER 6

By midnight Jake was in the middle of the recurring nightmare he'd been having since he was fifteen years old. It was so real, so vivid. It never changed—he's walking to a deer stand in the predawn darkness. For every step he takes he hears something or someone following him. He walks a bit faster and then stops. Whatever's following him stops and stands still, in step with him. He begins walking and can hear it following him again. It sounds heavy. He shines a flashlight, expecting to see glowing eyes—he can't see a thing. Then suddenly he steps on something out of place. There's a body, someone familiar to him, lying there dead. Brutally murdered. His throat's cut. There's blood everywhere. The exact moment the flashlight turns on, there is a high-pitched cackling scream...demonic...from whatever was following him.

Jake always wakes up at this point, sweating and chilled. He can never go back to sleep. For twenty-two years this nightmare has haunted him. Jake knows a psychiatrist could have a field day with this. He's never told a soul, and to this day he won't go in the woods, day or night, without a flashlight.

Jake was roused from the nightmare by the sound of a vehicle on the gravel road leading into the camp. The camper was toasty from the orange glow of the electric heater. *That's gotta be Tate*, he thought as he sat up and rubbed his eyes. Getting out of bed, he slipped on his boots and checked on Katy. She was sound asleep, snuggling with her Beanie Babies. *I'll ask him to stay in the camp house; his snoring is louder than a freight train*, Jake thought. Wearing nothing but his boxers and

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boots, Jake cracked open the camper door and immediately heard several male voices and Hank Jr. singing "Whiskey Bent and Hell Bound." Jake couldn't see who it was. The gate was about 150 yards from the camp. He strained to hear what they were saying. Multiple voices. This was odd. His heart was in his throat. He didn't like it at all. Jake could tell that they were arguing. He heard a gravelly voice say, "The gate ain't locked." When he heard another voice say, "Then we won't be breakin' in," Jake knew that he had trouble on his hands.

He quickly stepped to his truck, opened the door, and grabbed his pump shotgun. He fumbled through his turkey vest for his shells. He found the only three he carried on a hunt, fed them into the magazine, and quietly worked the action, loading one in the chamber.

Two pickup trucks slowly approached the camp with their lights off and parked side-by-side with their windows down. Jake had stepped into the shadows next to the camp house. He had no idea what to do next.

"I ain't never seen that camper before," one stated.

Another said, "Let's steal the truck."

"And beat the shit out of the owner," a third one added with way too much enthusiasm.

"Shut the hell up and let me think!" the fourth guy commanded.

All four men got out of their trucks and gathered at the rear of Jake's. Without saying anything, they started approaching Jake's camper like they owned the place. He saw the biggest one pull a pistol and work the action. Jake couldn't believe this was happening. He'd never pointed a gun at anybody. He couldn't imagine shooting someone, but he was in a bad spot and needed to make good decisions. Jake's heart raced so fast he was dizzy.

From the shadows, Jake said loudly, "That's close enough. You boys need to leave right now. I got a gun pointed at you."

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They all stopped and looked at the skinniest one in the group. With a wicked laugh and a confident step forward, he asked, "Is it bigger than mine?" pulling a .44 Magnum Ruger Blackhawk from his boot and pointing it in Jake's direction.

This can't be happening, Jake thought. He said, "I'm serious, you need to leave.... NOW! This is private property."

"He ain't got no gun, Johnny Lee!" the fat one yelled out.

"Quit using my name, you stupid shit!" the one with the .44 said in a fit of anger.

"Look; I don't know anybody or remember anything. Y'all just leave right now!" Jake yelled.

"I don't think he's got a gun either. Else why would he hide in the shadows?" one of them said with an air of confidence.

"I'm here turkey huntin', and I've got a shotgun pointed right at y'all, so I suggest you leave." Jake was really getting nervous. He thought about showing himself so they could see his shotgun. *But just how intimidating could I be in plaid boxers?* Jake wondered.

They seemed to be weighing their options. The group didn't look like they were capable of making change much less a decision of this magnitude. Then things started happening in slow motion. Jake could tell that the skinny one, Johnny Lee, wanted trouble. Jake sensed that the others would follow his lead, so he kept the shotgun pointed at Johnny Lee and pushed off the safety.

"They ain't no turkey hunters in this club...I know...he's bluffing. He's out here cheating on his wife with his sport-model girlfriend, I'll bet," one of them said excitedly.

"That true?" Johnny Lee asked calmly although Jake could see his eyes getting wilder. "Where is she?"

The wolves smelled an opportunity and were getting more eager by the second.

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Staring straight in Jake's direction, Johnny Lee shouted orders, "Check out the camp house." He motioned to the muscular one, who went through the front door with unbridled enthusiasm. Jake could hear him stomping around, slamming doors and cabinets.

Jake kept his shotgun trained on Johnny Lee.

In a few minutes the big guy was back outside and rejoined the group.

"Ain't nobody inside."

"Check the camper, Reese." Johnny Lee grinned.

"You said my name!" the one named Reese said quickly, not moving yet.

"It don't matter anyhow," Johnny Lee said confidently. "Because I got an idea...a plan."

Jake didn't like the sound of that. His heart was pumping rapidly, and his palms were sweating. He was trying to think of something to say to disarm this situation. An impossibly vivid scenario was unfolding, and to Jake it was like being in some sort of parallel universe, almost like an out-of-body experience. The movement of one of the guys snapped him back to reality. Reese started toward the camper and Jake instantly spoke up.

"No! Stop. Take another step and I'll shoot you!" Jake tried to keep them from hearing the fear in his voice.

Johnny Lee yelled, "Bingo! She's in the camper!" and the whole pack started laughing and cat-calling.

Jake kept quiet. He was thinking. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up. These guys only understood one thing—violence. They weren't rational. He could pump the gun...that would let them know he did in fact have a gun, but he would lose a shell in the dark high grass.

Johnny Lee, sizing up the situation, suddenly looked like he had made his decision.

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"I think we'll jack this dude's world upside down. Then we'll take his woman out on a little *date*...and we'll steal his ride," Johnny Lee said calmly to his pack of jackals. Then alluringly he spoke directly to Jake, "Step out of the darkness, my brother, and let me see you. Can you 'squeal like a pig'?"

Everybody but Jake laughed hard.

"What's she look like...black chick?" one asked, laughing even harder.

"It's all good!" another one added, and they all laughed.

"It's just me and this twelve-gauge and I don't want any trouble. Please just leave."

Sweat chuckled and pulled a knife out of his back pocket. He loved forced sex. This was the most excited he had been in years.

Less than ten yards separated the mob from Jake, but they could not see him because of the shadows and the floodlights shining directly in their eyes. He couldn't believe their brazenness.

Should I shoot the leader in the leg? Shoot up in the air? I've only got three shells. I've gotta make 'em count. Looking in Johnny Lee's eyes, Jake saw pure evil. At that moment, Jake knew he would have to kill him. He glanced over his shoulder and thanked God that he couldn't see Katy. He prayed she was still asleep.

Johnny Lee pointed the huge pistol right at Jake's head. Jake swallowed hard, looking straight down its muzzle. Suddenly, Johnny Lee swung the pistol at the camper and fired. *KABOOM!*

Jake jumped with surprise and fear. *Oh my God! Katy!* He looked at the camper then back at Johnny Lee. He was grinning. The rest of the guys were laughing. In slow motion Jake saw Johnny Lee thumb-cock the pistol and aim at the camper again.

Jake screamed, "Nooooooo!" then put the shotgun's front bead on Johnny Lee's chest and pulled the trigger. *BOOM!*

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All hell broke loose as fire shot out of Jake's gun barrel, blinding everyone for a second. Johnny Lee was knocked off his feet. Reese shot twice in Jake's direction, then grabbed Johnny Lee by the shoulders, dragging him toward their trucks. The fat one tripped over a barbecue grill. Jake pumped another shell in the chamber and was ready to shoot anyone that moved toward him or the camper. Two more shots rang out, hitting the camp house wall just over Jake's head. They were hiding behind their trucks, frantically talking to their leader. Johnny Lee was screaming in pain. They quickly loaded him in the back of the black pickup. Gravel flew as they backed out and scratched off down the road; then they stopped at the gate. Jake could hear them arguing. One was extremely emotional.

Jake stood in a trance, soaking wet with sweat. Slowly breaking out of the haze, he told himself, *I had to shoot him. They forced me. I had to protect Katy.*

"Katy! Oh, shit!" Jake screamed, running into the camper.

"Oh, God, Katy! Are you all right?! Katy, are you all right?!" he screamed again as turned on a light. Her tiny head was peeking from underneath her sleeping bag. He raced to her and hugged her.

Jake picked her up and ran to his truck. She was about to cry. He put her in the front seat and ran back inside, jumped into a pair of blue jeans and grabbed a shirt. A thought stopped him before he got to the truck. He ran back inside and grabbed Katy's camo gear. Slinging it all into the truck, he could hear the mayhem at the gate.

They were screaming at him, "You killed him! You killed him! You son of a bitch...! We're gonna make you pay...you...you're dead!"

One guy kept yelling over and over, "You're a dead man walking!"

There were only two ways for Jake to get out of the camp. The main one was the gravel road the rednecks were blocking. The other was a seldom-used logging road that snaked through the woods for

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several miles until it hit an old railroad bed called the Dummy Line that ran for several miles, eventually ending on a county road. Jake had never left the camp by way of the Dummy Line.

Jake caught a glimpse of the gang by the gate as he turned south heading toward the Dummy Line. He was slinging gravel as he slid around the corner.

“Daddy, what’s going on? What’s happening?” Katy pleaded.

“Some very bad guys were going to hurt us, and I had to shoot one of them. Now we gotta get out of here. Please listen to me and do exactly what I say...okay? Please? I need you to help me. Okay?”

With tears in her eyes, she nodded. Jake grabbed his cell phone. *One bar of service.* He slammed on the brakes, opened his glove compartment and found his address book. His first instinct was to call the sheriff; he didn’t know the number or really how to tell anybody where he was, but he tried *HP anyway. The call wouldn’t go through. He punched the gas and took off; rounding a couple of curves, he took out several small trees. As it got muddier he slowed and shifted into four-wheel drive. Suddenly he thought of his friend Mick Johnson, who lived only fifteen miles away. Mick had introduced him to the members of this club. He slammed on the brakes again. *Two bars. This might work.* He looked up Mick’s number and dialed.

“Come on, come on, go through. Katy, why don’t you start getting dressed...there’s your stuff.

“It’s ringing!” he said excitedly almost out of breath. “And then fasten your seat belt.”

Mick Johnson had been in bed since 9:00 that night. He turkey hunted almost every day of the season, and by mid-April he was exhausted. When he heard his phone ringing he immediately turned off his alarm clock and thought how short the night was. His wife jabbed him in the side and told him it was the telephone.

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"Hello," he answered groggily on the sixth ring.

Trying not to talk too fast, Jake tried to keep it simple. He didn't have faith that the signal would hold up. "Mick, this is Jake, I need the sheriff at the hunting camp. It's an emergency. There is a bunch of red-necks trying to kill me...Hello, Mick...can you hear me? Mick?"

The call dropped. Jake cursed under his breath. He needed some distance between him and those lunatics. He threw the phone down and drove on, certain they were coming after them. *Damn it! I've got no idea if Mick heard any part of that.*

"Who was that?" Mick's wife asked sleepily.

"I think it was Jake Crosby on a cell phone. It sounded like he said it was an emergency," Mick said, pulling himself up on one elbow.

"Why would he call you?"

"I don't know," he replied, lying back down.

"What kind of emergency?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his eyes.

"Well...what are you gonna do?" she asked as she rolled over.

"I guess I'm gonna go and check on him. I can't sleep now."

"Be careful. Why don't you take Beau?"

"Yeah...I think I will."

He slowly got out of bed and got dressed. Beau, the family's Golden Retriever, met him at the back door, stretching and yawning, tail wagging.