

Chapter One

New Jersey, 1990

Four teenage boys drove down a deserted road in the middle of the night. Ben Bradshaw sat in the passenger's seat and studied a map with a flashlight. "Slow down. It's going to be to the left up here."

A boy in the back asked, "Where we going, anyway?"

Ben said, "Miller's Chapel."

The boy groaned, "Ah, come on, not again. That place doesn't even exist."

"Yes, it does. Joe Mullen, from Algebra, he's been there. He said it's on this road."

Ben looked at the road and then at the map. He wondered if they were where they should be, since the map showed a straight road, but they obviously approached a bend to the right a hundred yards away. "Damn, I don't think we're on the right road."

From the back of the car came the sound of beer cans opening. One of the boys handed a beer up to the driver and opened another one. The driver steered the car in the general direction of the road, held his head back, guzzled the whole can with one swallow, and let out a loud belch with his eyes closed. He still had his eyes off the road, indifferent to the approaching bend as the car drove itself at sixty mph.

Ben yelled, "Oh, my God!"

Ben grabbed the wheel and tried to pull it to the right, but the driver held it fast with his leg to keep it straight. "Hey, Ben, stop that. You're... holy shit..."

The driver slammed on the brakes. His empty beer can tumbled to the floor and drifted under the brake pedal. He pushed hard, but it wouldn't go down. The bend arrived fast. All the boys, front and back, gawked at the road and at the right turn ahead, only fifty yards away.

The driver stood up in his seat and pushed down with his full body weight. Finally, the can crunched under the pedal. The car slowed and crawled to a halt.

The driver picked up the can and threw it out the window. "Holy shit."

Ben said, "Let me check again for that bend." He shined his flashlight on the map.

A teenager in the back said, "Jesus Christ, Ben, you almost got us killed."

"Me? I didn't do that. Stop drinking."

The driver said, "We're getting out of here."

"No, I see where we are now. See? We're on the right road, I think."

From the back came, "Aw, come on, Ben, let's just go."

"No. We came this far. I'm pretty sure this is the road. Wait a minute. Joe Mullen said it's just past a bend. I remember he said that. I think this is the road now."

The driver reluctantly pulled ahead and rounded the bend at thirty mph. Ben leaned across the console and peered out the driver's window into the darkness. Ben said, "Slow down a little. It's going to be to the left up there."

The driver pushed him back. "Get off me, Ben. Jeez, what are you doing?" He turned around to the boys in the back. "He's getting fresh." They laughed. "Give me another beer."

A boy in the back sent another unopened beer up to the front. The driver aimed the car with his knees holding the steering wheel and steadied it with his legs. Good enough. The road was straight here. He adjusted his aim a little to make the car curve smoothly to the right into the middle of the road, then back left to straighten it. With both hands off the wheel, he popped the beer-can top, took his eyes off the road, looked up, and put the beer to his mouth.

Ben shouted, "There it is!" His mouth was right at the driver's ear.

The driver pushed the brake pedal as hard as he could, both feet. He dropped the can into his lap and tried to recover it, but the momentum of the full beer carried it forward, where it smacked into the dashboard and dropped to the floor, beer all over the place. The boys in the

back plowed into their seats ahead, their open beers spraying the cloth and ceiling of the car. The car stopped.

The driver screamed, "Dammit, Ben, what the hell are you doing? Now my dad's car stinks of beer. I'm in deep shit."

"I saw it, back there. Back up."

The driver laid his head on the steering wheel. "Ah, Jesus Christ, this is ridiculous. I'm turning around. We're going over the bridge like we planned."

The boy behind the driver wore a pair of tan shorts, which were now soaked with beer. "We can't go over there now. It looks like I peed myself. Fuck you, Ben. Let's go home."

Ben said, "No, it's just back there. I saw it."

The driver shook his head. "This is the last time I'm doing this, Ben. You don't like it, get your own car. And if this place doesn't exist, I'm going to beat the shit out of you." The car backed up slowly.

Ben squinted through the driver's window. The boys in the back watched out the left side for a dirt road. One of them spotted it. "There's a road there."

Ben said, "Yes, that's what I saw. That's it."

The driver stopped and drove forward, turning left onto the dirt road. They came to an overturned tree blocking their way. Ben said, "Joe said you can't drive that far. You have to walk. This has to be it."

"Ah, come on, Ben, it's getting late."

"No, let's get out. It's just a little farther."

The boys got out of the car, stepped over the tree, and walked down the dirt road. It was pitch black, except for a rising full moon that barely cleared the trees. Ben shined his flashlight on the ground ahead and waited while the boys relieved themselves in the woods. Ben led,

watching for obstacles, and then turned around so that his friends would have some light as they caught up. They came to a clearing in the woods, an unusual place for the trees to be so sparse.

A boy yelled, "Oww. Oww. Something bit me."

Ben cautioned, "Everybody stay still." He walked back to the boy, carefully feeling his way among the branches. The boy with the tan shorts sat on a log.

"Something bit me on the leg."

Ben stooped down with the flashlight. There was a one-inch scratch on the boy's leg, but no blood. The boy looked down at Ben angrily, but with a plea for help. "What is it?"

Ben said, "It's not so bad."

Ben shifted the flashlight left and right, peering closely at the ground. The others watched as the various logs, stumps, rocks, and dead branches were illuminated by the faint and fast traveling light. There was nothing dangerous so far.

The driver yelled, "What if it was a snake?"

That did it.

"Oh, my God, let's get out of here."

The boys all panicked, except Ben. "It wasn't a snake. Calm down."

The wounded boy said, "Well, what the hell was it? Look at this." Ben shined the flashlight on the boy's leg again. It was indeed getting more and more red, but it was a long scratch, not a snake bite.

Ben searched the ground for a stick, or a rock, or anything that would indicate what caused the scratch and disprove the snake theory. "It was probably just a sharp stick. I'll see what it was. Stay here." Ben went just five feet behind the boy and pointed his light at the floor of the clearing. A young plant rose a foot out of the ground where the clearing ended. "This is it. See, look. It's got thorns on it. You probably brushed against this plant."

"I don't care what it was. I want to get out of here."

Ben knelt on the ground to remove the plant and bring it over, but the spikes were too numerous. Curiously, his right hand sank into the dirt when it supported his weight, but when he shifted to his left hand, it didn't go down. The ground there was as hard as stone. He wiped away some dirt and grass with his left hand.

There it was, a row of broken bricks. Beaming his flashlight across the clearing, another row of bricks rose an inch out of the ground, eight feet away, and aligned in the same direction. The ground between the bricks was perfectly flat.

Ben walked to the middle of the clearing, stooped down, and rubbed some more dirt off the eight-by-eight area. A flat stone appeared. Another stone lay next to it. "Oh, my God."

The driver yelled, "What is it, the snake?"

Ben said, "No, this is the chapel. This is the chapel, where they used to give the eulogies."

"What? What the hell is a eulogy?"

"A sermon, you know, to talk about the dead people when they died."

The driver glanced over to his friends. One of them whispered, "He's nuts."

Ben heard that. "No, I'm not. This is Miller's Chapel. This is the chapel, see? Right here. Wow, this is the Chapel, where it used to be. This is the chapel, Miller's Chapel."

The full moon peeked over the dense trees to the east, illuminating the clearing. Ben turned off the flashlight. A dozen headstones appeared as the boys' eyes became accustomed to the brightening moonlight. Ben said, "This is it, Miller's Chapel, the lost graveyard."

The driver said, "Can't be too lost, here's a beer can." He kicked it to the side.

Ben said, "I can't believe we found it."

The boys peered into the woods. More and more headstones became visible in the diminishing darkness.

The moon spread shadows across the ground like ghostly fingers. Mysterious shapes were all dark against the rising light. In front of the boys, and curving around the chapel, stood solemn headstones. They all slanted one way or the other.

The boys gawked at them. "This is weird."

A boy said, "Let's go."

"Yeah, Ben, this is spooky."

Ben went into the graveyard and shined his flashlight on a leaning grave. He had to get on his knees and angle it up against the tilt. "Look here. This guy died in 1850. I can't read his name. Can you make it out?" Ben rubbed some dirt off the headstone and asked, "Do you know what life was like in 1850? Only like," he paused to calculate, "forty-one years old."

"Come on, Ben. That's enough."

"Only forty-one years old. How did he die? Was he sick? Don't you see?"

"Yeah, so he died. So what? Come on. We've got to get out of here."

Ben, on his knees, focused the flashlight to the left. Another headstone was far down in the ground and leaning west at thirty degrees. Ben walked over to it, then went behind the headstone and gripped it tight with his thin-skinned teenage hands. If he could just pull it up straight, he might be able to read the name on the stone without crouching down. And another thing, maybe if the last marker of that man's life were pointing skyward instead of slanting west, maybe Ben could restore a little dignity to the man who rested there.

Ben pulled, with no effect. He pulled again, hard. It hurt. He looked at the scrapes and bruises on his hands. "Help me. Help me straighten this."

The boys got it now. Ben was nuts. One of them whispered, "We've got to get him home."

The other boy agreed. "This place is giving me the creeps." An invisible rabbit scurried through the brush in the eerie quiet. "Whoa, what was that?"

“Holy shit, the snake!”

The two boys from the back seat ran down the dirt road, crashing into trees and each other, falling down, trying desperately to get away from the imaginary snake. The driver watched Ben foolishly walk into the woods. “Ben, we’re leaving.” He looked back at his two cowardly friends behind him, running to the car. “Ben, let’s go, right now.”

Ben wandered farther away from his friends toward a certain headstone that stood straight up. “I’ll be right there. Give me a minute.” This particular grave was newer than the others, not slanting.

The driver was alone at the edge of the chapel. The headlights of the car bit into the woods from fifty yards away, but they pointed far to the left, no help against the evil creatures who no doubt watched them now from their secret hiding places in the trees. He shouted, “Come on, Ben, right now.”

Ben was able to read the name and dates on this headstone without crouching down. He shined his flashlight on it and said, “Wait, it’s a lady.”

The driver said, “God damn it, Ben, come on.”

The inscription read, ‘Molly Childress, 1960-1980.’ Ben said to himself, “Wow. Twenty years old.”

The driver headed for the car. “See you, Ben, we’re leaving.”

Addressing the headstone, Ben asked, “Why did you die, Molly? I’m sorry, very sorry. And why are you here?” He looked around at the graves, all so much different in posture than hers.

Focusing again on her grave, Ben turned to go, but just as the light moved, his eyes caught an unusual marking. He stooped down and steadied the flashlight. The initials ‘MC’ were scratched into the lower-left corner of Molly’s headstone.

“Hey, guys, come here. Look at this. Somebody carved her initials in here. See, ‘MC’, Molly Childress, see? That’s her name.” He said to himself, “Or Miller’s Chapel.”

The driver ignored him, and the other boys were already at the car. Ben heard the engine of the car start and shouted, “Hey, guys, wait. Wait for me.”

A last look at Molly’s grave, and the initials, and the black woods, and the moon, and the crooked headstones, all of these things stirred a feeling of senselessness in Ben’s heart. “Sorry, Molly, very sorry. I’ve got to go. Maybe I’ll see you again, Molly. Sorry, Molly.”

Ben ran through the cemetery and caught up with his friends. They all got into the car and drove off.