



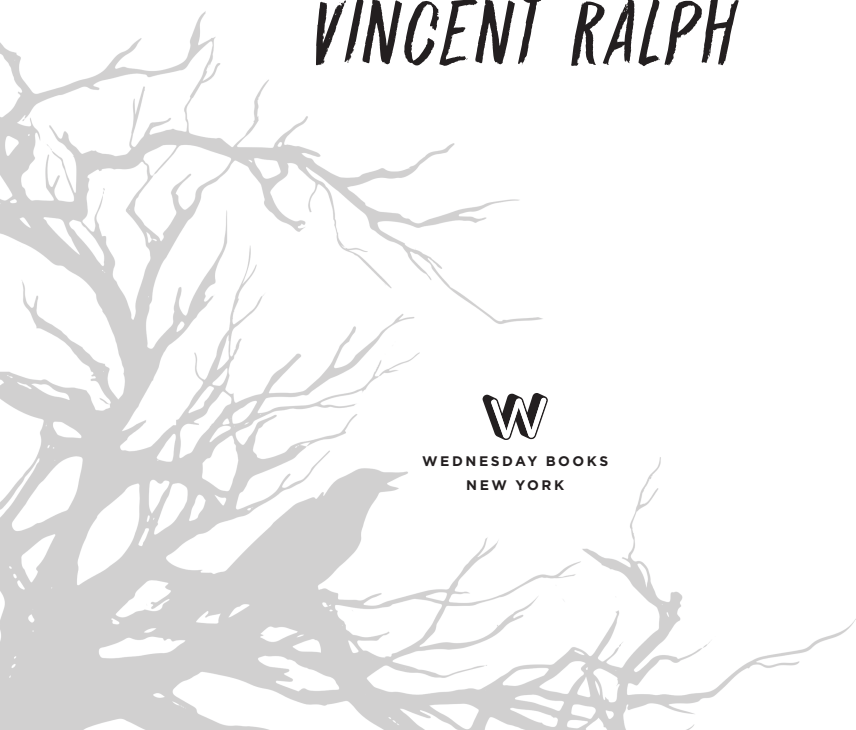
CORPSE CREEK

A BLEAK HAVEN NOVEL

VINCENT RALPH



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
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The boy's thin legs trembled as his toes gripped the edge of the jetty, his sunburned chest rocking back and forth while his father's arms formed a crooked circle in the creek below.

When he finally jumped, the water burned the bridge of his nose, and something sickly clung to the back of his throat.

Each time the boy dragged himself onto the groaning dock, his dad floated farther away, until there was nothing safe to aim for, just a dizzying mass of water bleeding into the horizon.

Still, he jumped, over and over, week after week, his fear shrinking in fractions until it was almost invisible.

Almost.

Eventually, his dad remained on the shore, shouting instructions then slapping his leathery palms together like each leap was a game-winning play.

He didn't notice the first time his father's encouragement was yelled from behind a newspaper, or when small talk with strangers proved more interesting than the sight of his son at the water's edge. But the

boy never forgot the moment he burst back to the surface only to see his dad staring in the opposite direction.

No distractions. No excuses. Just a son bobbing excitedly between the ripples and a father who no longer cared.

"Are you proud of me?" the boy asked on the ride home.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

The answer he craved was in there . . . somewhere . . . but it felt as out of reach as the bottom of the creek.

When he said he was tired of jumping, his dad didn't argue. When he returned eight years later, he no longer needed his parents' permission to do dangerous things.

Sometimes his limbs would shoot to the sides like a starfish, other times he'd yell "Cannonball!" clutching his knees against his chest before forcing plumes of foamy water toward the cloudless sky.

His friends would laugh, and clap, and cheer, and he was sure to do the same because, to him, a jump felt pointless if no one was watching.

He raced his classmates from one side of the creek to the other, gliding as they splashed, sucking in the hot summer air before sliding his face into the cool water.

That was where he felt safest, and strongest, and the most alive . . . until the day something grabbed his ankle and yanked him off course.

Never panic.

His dad's words filled his mind as his legs flailed.

You're always in control.

The grip tightened.

"Stop!"

Bubbles burst from his mouth as his hands snatched at the sun-dappled surface.

"Please."

The word dissolved in front of his stinging eyes; his body was dragged deeper until the light above began to fade.

He thought he heard a scream, echoes of his friends' frantic search swirling around him. Yet his ears throbbed so hard that he couldn't be sure what was real.

His lungs burned as he clung to his final scraps of oxygen, the pressure becoming unbearable until he imagined exploding.

For a moment the grip on his ankle loosened, and he tried to push away.

But his muscles were already too weak, the last wisps of life snaking from his lips before he succumbed to the darkness and his corpse rose slowly to the surface.

1

I'm the boy with the dead brother.

I wish there were a nicer way to start my story, but this isn't one of those choose-your-own-adventure books. In the real world, you get what you're given.

Some people have perfectly average lives, others have extraordinary ones, and the unluckiest end up in Bleak Haven.

If you want evidence that my hometown is cursed, my family managed to avoid all the murderers that have stalked this place down the years, only to be shattered by a terrible accident.

I used to be the goofy kid who loved performing in the living room, hiding behind homemade puppet theaters, or bellowing off-key renditions of the show tunes Mom played in the car.

In the home videos my parents no longer watch, you'll find me putting on one-boy performances of whatever Disney movie I loved that week, while my brother smiles from the couch.

Sometimes I wonder how many versions of me still exist, boxed-up and dusty, trapped in a permanent state of joy. Because most of us only film the fun stuff—parties, games, vacations.

People want to remember the good times because the bad times are fucking terrible.

My therapist says it's okay to be angry. Although, if she knew exactly how much rage lurks below my surface, she'd probably change her tune.

That's why I've learned to pretend, even around the people who say there's no need to. *Especially* around those people because, if I scare *them* away, there'll be no one left.

My friends sit in their usual places in my bedroom. Callum is retuning the guitar that leaves a thin trail of dust all over his T-shirt, while Madison puts the finishing touches on the homework that the rest of us haven't even attempted yet, and Jada glances anxiously at my calendar.

I don't need to follow her gaze to know exactly where she's looking—May 12—the date I used to cross out before realizing that only made it more obvious.

Now I fill in the days around it, with Callum's concerts, Madison's softball games, all the small moments that keep my demons at bay.

Jada licks her lips, then takes a deep breath.

"It's just a few days away," she says. "We should decide where we're doing it."

Callum rubs the beard he's been attempting to grow since last summer, light-blond wisps hanging unevenly from his white skin like he's marched chin-first into a spiderweb. Passing me the guitar, he smiles softly and says, "That should make the right sounds, now."

But it won't. Not if *I'm* the one playing it. The Gibson Les Paul that our parents bought for my brother's sixteenth birthday lost its magic the moment he died.

"Thanks," I mumble, propping the instrument against my bed as Madison slams her math book closed in typically dramatic fashion.

"Right," she says. "What's the plan this year, Ethan?"

All three of them watch me with the sickly sweet sympathy that I hate; my stomach churns as I wonder how they'll react to what I'm about to say.

"I want to go there," I mutter.

"Where?" Callum replies.

"The creek," Jada answers for me.

I nod. "You always say no idea is off-limits."

"Corpse Creek," Callum whispers.

It was called that long before Brody drowned, but my brother's accident gave more credence to the claim that something bad lurked beneath the surface.

"Didn't your dad tell you not to go back after—" Madison starts, but cuts herself off as Jada shakes her head, silently scolding her.

"It will be different this time," I reply.

Madison shudders, while Jada drags her hands inside her sleeves and Callum stares longingly at the guitar.

The air in my room grows heavy as they watch me, but they shouldn't worry. I'm not the kid I was four years ago.

"I know what you're thinking," I say.

"What's that?" Jada asks.

"You think I'm still looking for proof that Brody's death wasn't an accident."

Callum clears his throat. "Are you?"

I shake my head. "I just want closure."

Madison shuffles across the carpet and rests her hand on mine.

"That's a big step," she whispers.

Her smile may be genuine, but that doesn't stop her from sounding patronizing, her fingers patting my clammy skin like I'm a half-trained puppy.

"You guys don't have to come," I say. "If you don't want to."

Relief runs a lap around Callum's face before duty scares it away.

During some of my darkest days, my friends made a vow they've shown no sign of breaking. They are here for me, no matter what.

"If that's what you want," Jada mumbles.

"I think it will do you good," Madison adds, her smile finally fading.

Callum grabs the guitar and plays a somber tune that he's probably made up on the spot, his true feelings coming out in the low notes that match the slow groan of church hymns I can't listen to anymore.

I think of all the times I sneaked off to the creek alone, those first six months after Brody's death a storm of anger, heartbreak, and suspicion. But, these days, my friends are the three prongs of an anchor that keeps me tethered to a half-decent life. Without them, I'm afraid I'd lose myself entirely.

A few minutes later, they make their excuses to leave, as I knew they would.

Each of them needs to process what I've asked in their own way. Whatever fear or confusion they feel will be expressed away from here, and I wish they wouldn't talk behind my back. I wish they'd look me in the eye and tell me straight.

That's a bad idea.

You're making a mistake.

We don't want to.

But I'm also the boy who usually gets what he wants, because most people are afraid to say no to the dead kid's brother.

I don't really want to stare at that mass of murderous water. I'd rather not see what Brody saw in the last peaceful moments before he drowned. But I've tried everything else, and it still feels like my soul is being constantly cut away from the inside out.

I've read all I can find about death, grief, closure, and I'm beginning to think that the only way out of the darkness is to face it head-on.

2

I was fourteen when our world was destroyed, Mom's wail ringing in my ears.

As she and Dad clung to each other, I tried to decipher the meaning behind the sheriff's flat face. But he was used to giving terrible news, while my parents had no experience of receiving it.

Mom slumped to the floor, pawing at Dad's legs as he stared through me.

What's happened?

That's all I would have needed to ask, and they would have told me.

But suddenly the absence of an answer felt safer than the truth, so I watched silently as tears streamed down my father's face, and the space between us expanded.

"You're wrong!" Mom screamed at the sheriff. "You've made a mistake! It isn't him!"

Her palms slammed against the kitchen floor, a thin crack

snaking across the tile as she got to her feet. Then she was looming over the sheriff, daring him to change his story.

His head only shook, until Mom's shoulders slumped and she said it again, this time in a whisper, "You're wrong."

"I'm sorry," the sheriff said, always the first to apologize, for every bad thing that happens in this town.

"It's okay," Dad told him, even if it wasn't. Even though I didn't recognize Mom anymore, and my brother wasn't home, and horrifying words were scurrying into my skull like cockroaches until I had to ask just to force some of the bad things away.

"Where's Brody?" Mom's head spun toward me and I edged into the hallway. "I'm sorry, I . . ."

Dad's fists clenched as he stepped closer, and I suddenly felt relieved that the sheriff was there.

I'd seen my father lose his temper before. Plenty of times. But Mom's anger was usually quiet, tinged with unspoken disappointment. Now it was as though they were caricatures of themselves, with the wrong parts exaggerated.

While Dad tried to coax me into his outstretched arms, Mom scratched her skin until it broke, shaky breaths bursting from her lips as she groaned.

"We should give you some time," the sheriff said.

Only then did I notice his deputy standing by the refrigerator, her eyes drawn to the photographs of me and Brody held in place by chipped magnets.

His smile had always been better than mine. I tried too hard, forcing my teeth into awkward angles, while his face glowed with happiness. My big brother had never been self-conscious, even when he was eighteen.

But now . . .

“Is he dead?”

Mom gave a stifled shriek, while Dad stared at the opposite wall.

No one answered me. That was how I knew.

The sheriff bowed his head as he passed, his hand hovering in the space between us before falling back to his side.

Then they left us, to grieve, to question, to transform into balls of rage without warning. They left us like everyone else—all the well-meaning neighbors who came just long enough to donate another home-cooked meal that Mom would later scoop into the trash. All the distant relatives who visited even after Dad asked them not to. All the people whose faces I hated because they weren’t Brody’s.

I despised them when they were with us, and resented them when they left. Our tragedy was only a blip for them, a sobering moment in an otherwise perfect life. They came, they offered their condolences, and they left; their days no different and their ambitions intact.

But what would I be now? What would my parents be? With no big brother and no first son?

I felt it almost immediately—how I wasn’t enough—and I guess, in some ways, that was selfish; to be upset at my place in a world that Brody no longer inhabited. I’d always felt insignificant compared to him. Now that was paired with the belief that I’d become a burden.

At first, I assumed that grief suffocates love. But it’s more complex than that, because grief *is* love, shorn of all its light.

I wish I’d known that before Mom moved out. Perhaps then I wouldn’t have hated her for leaving. Some marriages don’t survive the death of a child. But I despised her with the

same unshakable urgency that she had loved my brother with, and Dad did nothing to stop it.

The truth is: Mom simply couldn't live here anymore, while my father couldn't bear to leave—the same shattered memories of my brother forcing them in different directions.

Now those memories reside in a single room in our house, everything that Brody ever created, inspired, or achieved filed in cardboard boxes; the tape that once held them shut rendered useless by cat fur and dust.

The first time I peeled back the tape, I didn't know what I was looking for, only that I needed to see all the things my parents had stealthily removed from windowsills and walls, all the reminders of my brother's life that had vanished almost as quickly as he did.

I picked a box marked with a thick black 4, Brody's pre-school photograph resting on top of sheets of art paper made rigid by bright colors.

My parents had kept everything—all the splotches of muddy-brown paint and random things glued to paper, all the drawings Brody did of dinosaurs and superheroes, all the family portraits where Dad was all legs, and Mom was mostly hair, and tiny versions of me held my brother's oversized hands.

I stared at those pictures until the paper darkened with my tears. Then I carefully placed everything back, my heart pounding as I looked from one closed box to the next, their sizes reducing the closer I got to the one marked 18.

Had Mom painstakingly filed Brody's things in the weeks before she left? Or was this how Dad kept busy when I finally returned to school?

I should have asked but, like so much back then, I was afraid to even try. Instead, I sat alone in my bedroom, listening

to all the small sounds my father made in a house that felt too big for us now.

The lone coffee cup clinking as it was placed in the cupboard. The brief rush of water through the pipes as he dragged a brush quickly across his teeth. The creak outside my door when he stood on the landing, a shadow of the man who used to read us bedtime stories, Brody begging for one more chapter until he finally slumped, exhausted, against Dad's shoulder.

Good night, I'd say, but not the other things. Never *Sleep well* or *Sweet dreams*.

Night, Dad would reply before disappearing into my brother's room, the sound of tape being pulled from another box as he tried desperately to travel back in time.

3

On Monday morning, I approach my friends with caution, attempting to catch snippets of the conversations they have when they think I'm not around.

The school corridor buzzes with the usual bullshit—relationships that didn't make it past the weekend, the fallout from the Bleak Haven Banshees' latest defeat, questionable choices judged differently in the light.

Callum and Madison stand by their adjoining lockers, him chattering excitedly as she sorts through her textbooks.

Madison is wearing a baggy white T-shirt with a giant red heart in the center, her brown side-bangs draped over her olive skin. I don't think I've ever seen her check her reflection, and I wish I was that confident in my appearance. Then again, we can't all look like Madison.

On cue, Callum squints at his mirror, repositioning strands from his messy blond hair, then smoothing out the oversized Blink-182 T-shirt he inherited from his dad.

Madison says something that makes Callum throw his head back, his gravelly laugh filling the corridor.

Not for the first time, I wonder if they'd be better off without me, because their happiness operates on a dimmer switch that they quickly lower whenever I'm around. But I know what it's like to lose them, and I don't want to feel that again.

"Are you stalking your own friends?"

I turn at the sound of Jada's voice. "Of course not."

But it comes out too high, and my back prickles with sweat as I try to make it look like this isn't a big deal.

Jada rubs one hand over her cornrows, warily eyeing the groups of younger kids hurrying past.

"You look great," I say as her brown cheeks darken slightly.

"Thanks," she mumbles.

Callum sees us from across the hall and hurries over, a bunch of freshmen stepping nervously aside. They must recognize him from his last gig, and I can't stop the quick jolt of jealousy from coursing through me.

There has only been one bona fide celebrity born and raised in Bleak Haven—and she's dead now—but some people think Callum has what it takes to make that two.

Before he drowned, my brother seemed destined for that honor, and my heart aches at the memory of Brody's fingers dancing across his fretboard like he was a miniature Jimi Hendrix.

I still remember the first time Brody passed his Les Paul to Callum, my brother and my best friend bonding in a way I'd never managed. That was why I performed one-person shows to parents who couldn't say no. I saw my brother thrill entire audiences and was desperate to copy him.

I don't have a musical bone in my body, and Brody never

mocked me for that. But I could see the joy in his eyes when he realized that Callum was a natural.

It wasn't long until my friend was talking about world tours, platinum albums, a life that we'd only seen glimpses of on MTV.

He still has those hopes, but these days he keeps them to himself. Assuming, I suppose, that I no longer want to hear about other people's happy endings.

I wish I could tell him that's not true. But I've experienced the foul taste of envy whenever he performs at an open mic night or a talent show. Callum has taken my brother's place as Bleak Haven's next big hope, and that will never stop hurting.

When he reaches us, Callum bumps my fist and pretends not to notice the two junior girls giggling as they dare each other to approach.

Madison follows, forcing the final textbook into a fraying backpack that's unprepared for her ever-expanding reading list.

When the girls see her, they hurry away, and Callum smiles to himself. Most people assume that Madison's presence acts as a force field between him and any potential girlfriend when, the truth is, Callum prefers guys.

When we encouraged him to come out to more people, Callum pointed to his DVD collection.

"The gay dude dies in that one," he said. "And that one. And that one. Why the hell would I send an invite to Bleak Haven's next serial killer?"

He smiled when he said it, but I could see the sorrow beneath.

It's never easy growing up in this town, but it's a lot harder growing up gay. So, aside from us and Callum's parents, it's no one else's business.

“Are we still on for Friday?” Madison asks.

“You mean, with a night to sleep on it, have I come to my senses?” I reply.

I look at each of them in turn, daring one of them to call me out. Maybe revisiting Brody’s place of death *is* a bad idea. Perhaps all I need is for one of them to tell me that as bluntly as they used to say everything.

Instead, they wait for me to answer myself.

“Yes, I still want to go to the creek.”

Madison nods. “Okay, then.”

As we pass the school’s memorial wall, fresh flowers rest below the photographs of students who died decades ago, while a sophomore girl lights a candle that the janitor extinguishes the moment she’s gone.

They still care, even though it’s been thirteen years since the Fear Farm massacre. I was only five then, when Bleak Haven was forced back into its never-ending cycle of horror and grief. It was almost another decade before I realized the difference between collective sorrow and personal tragedy.

Back in 1999, it felt like the whole town was crying. Yet it was only the families and close friends of those murdered by the Fear Farm Butcher who were truly scarred by the horrific pain my parents and I would later feel.

They were the ones I should have felt sorry for. Not the masses who wailed into the sky as if their own children had been torn from their grasp. But that’s what this town does—sensationalizing tragedy, binging on other people’s sadness like leeches.

It must have been the same after Mallory Crow went on a rampage in 1965, and when the Holt family hunted high school students twelve years earlier.

Their faces are on the memorial wall, too; the faded photographs of fifties and sixties kids still having pride of place in 2012.

But there's no space for my brother's picture. He wasn't murdered so, according to our school's rules, he doesn't deserve to be remembered.

Jada's touch drags me out of my daydream. "Are you okay?"

I nod, even though we both know I'm not.

This town has made a habit of mourning. But how many of the kids still laying flowers and lighting candles have any connection to all those dead strangers? And how many do it because of a duty to remember only the cursed, while the rest of our lost are swiftly forgotten?

The irony is that Brody was more cursed than most. How else could one of this school's strongest swimmers drown on such a peaceful day?

He might not have been the victim of a murderer, or a serial killer, or a bloodthirsty animal, but monsters are everywhere. And perhaps it's the ones we *don't* sensationalize, the ones that hide under the radar in the most paranoid towns, that we should fear the most.