



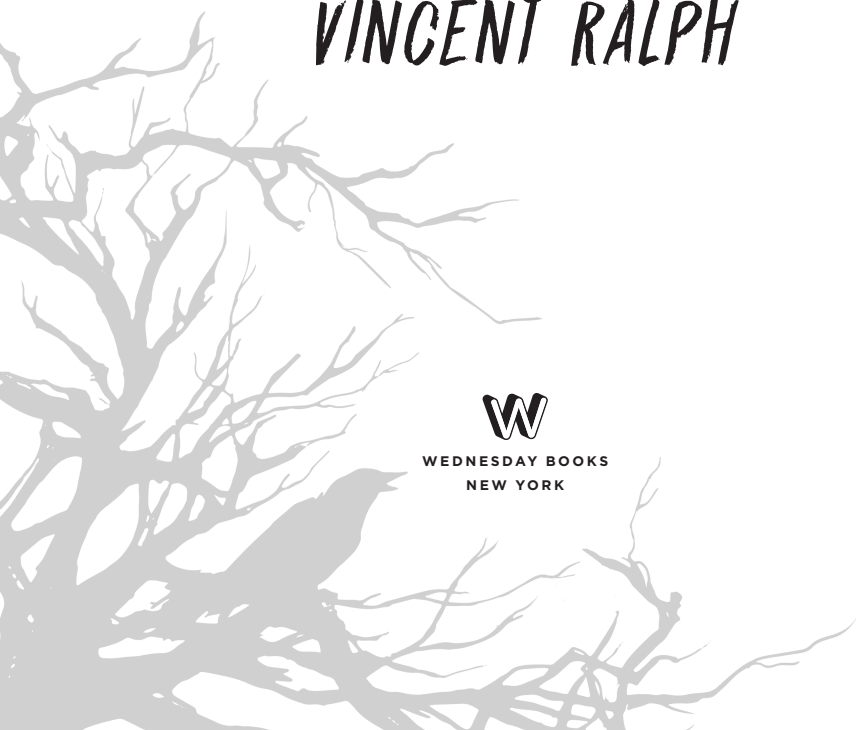
FEAR FARM

A BLEAK HAVEN NOVEL

VINCENT RALPH



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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They came to watch her die.

Stinging tears smothered her face as they bared their teeth in wicked smiles, some laughing, others feigning disgust.

No one warned her as the figure approached, his axe coated in her friends' thickening blood. They talked, but only to one another, sniggering over their secret.

Safety in numbers is a lie because they were everywhere—a few close enough to touch, most lurking in the shadows—yet she was almost alone.

Only he was really with her. The rest felt like tricks of the light.

Terror dragged its crooked claw down her spine as she heard heavy panting under the mask and his stale breath forced her to stifle a gag.

She turned to escape but it was already too late. His huge frame was a wall, closing in as her heart hammered against her chest.

He rested the axe blade under her chin and waited, daring her to run.

It would only delay the inevitable, but she tried anyway, spinning on her heels and dashing in the opposite direction until his elbow crashed into her lower back, knocking her to the ground.

Moonlight shimmered across the thick blade as it hung over her head.

"Help me," she whispered, some of the eyes turning away but most savoring her panic.

When the axe split her stomach she wailed, her limbs twitching as she choked on her blood then spluttered, "What's wrong with you people?"

The figure gripped the back of her head and forced her closer to him, his hazel eyes barely visible through the rusty slats of his mask.

"Do it!" someone shouted.

"Finish her!"

"I'm cold, Mommy."

She flinched at the final voice, composing herself before giving the tiniest nod.

The killer nodded back, slowly pushing the axe through her skull until warm blood pooled beneath her limp body and her eyes slammed shut.

1

I've never been murdered with a chainsaw, but there's a first time for everything.

I don't know whether to scream my heart out or slump silently to the floor, so I settle on something in between. What escapes my crusty lips is a gargle that morphs into a groan. Then I frantically paw at my leaking guts before my eyes roll back in my skull.

I count to twenty in my head, then add ten more, uncertain how much they're expecting from me. The oxygen I refuse to release burns my tightening lungs but I hold my chest steady, stilling every flicker of my closed eyelids.

I can feel them watching, their first impressions shifting or solidifying as I milk every . . . last . . . second.

"You can breathe now," the woman says, but my body only stiffens.

The man clears his throat, then adds, "Victoria. It's over."

I made that mistake last time, and the time before. In this

place, death is only the beginning. It's what you do afterward that seals your fate.

"Is she okay?" the man asks. "Should we . . . help her?"

"She's fine." My right arm twitches at the girl's voice, and I tense it before they notice.

When she speaks, I can smell fresh chewing gum, and if I open my eyes, she'll be smirking down at me, challenging me to break character.

Try again next year, they used to say and then, when I did, Come back when you're ready.

They didn't say I'd never be good enough. They don't tell anyone that.

"We've got lots more people to see," the man says, his voice cracking as someone—probably the woman—taps her pencil so hard on the tabletop that I imagine the graphite inside turning to dust.

"Okay," she says at last. "You're in."

Even then I don't move.

"Seriously," she says. "You've made the cut, Tori. Congratulations."

I squint at the overhead light then roll onto my side, shielding my grin.

"You did good," the girl says, and her name slowly comes back to me. Layla Myers, returning to the seat between her mom Wanda and stepfather George.

None of them smile. Only George looks beyond the loose sheets of paper that the others push back and forth, his eyes pleading with me to leave.

"Thanks," I say. "I'm excited to be on the team."

Layla cringes at the final word, muttering to her mother as I reach for the door handle.

When I walk back into the corridor, every eye shoots past me, desperate for a look at the family that will decide who makes it into this year's show.

It didn't used to be like this. When Wanda Myers came up with the idea of hosting a fright-fest on her farm in 1991, only a handful of drama-loving seniors auditioned and no one left disappointed. Eight years later, people are lined up out the door.

"Tell me you nailed it," Jen says, her chair legs screeching against the floor tiles.

"I got in!"

My best friend stifles a scream, while the girls either side of us scowl at their scripts.

"I told you," Jen whispers. "Didn't I tell you?"

"You did."

"So it worked, forgetting who you were auditioning for. Leaving all the bad juju behind and starting afresh."

I shrug. "I basically stayed dead until they gave me a role. I'm a pretty good murder victim, but I'm a fabulous corpse."

Jen watches the next kid head in—a sophomore boy I vaguely recognize from school—then goes back to picking the lime-green polish from her fingernails. "This is a big deal, Tori."

"Now all we need is for you to ace your audition."

Jen pushes her lips together and shrugs—playing coy as perfectly as she plays every other role.

The mobile unit George built specifically for these auditions may be crammed with excitable hopefuls, but Jen is the only great actress I know. The one yearning to leave Bleak Haven for bright lights and starring roles. All I can do is try not to lag too far behind.

Three minutes later, the boy hurries out, head bowed, then Layla peers into the corridor and yells, “Jennifer Quinn!”

“Here we go,” Jen whispers, squeezing my thigh before standing.

When the door closes, I stare at the framed photographs hanging above our heads, a mixture of posed and candid shots from previous events. There’s Jen when she was still in middle school: fake blood trickling down gaunt cheeks and thick rings of mascara around her wide eyes.

Even then, she insisted on doing her own makeup, her tongue poking out as she scowled at each terrifying reflection in her bathroom mirror.

My parents said twelve was too young to audition for Fear Farm. But Jen’s dad only had three rules. No liquor in the house. No mentioning his ex-wife. And no waking him unless the house was on fire.

Jen needs to leave this town as soon as she can. For *both* their goods. His sadness has morphed into an unshakable laziness made stronger by her refusal to call him out on it.

At the far end of the corridor, there’s a signed movie poster for *Ready, Set, Die*. Mercy Sinclair’s sickeningly cute autograph, including hearts above both *Is*, written across the masked killer’s jagged blade.

All things considered, it’s no surprise this town produced its own slasher star.

That’s one of the reasons so many of my classmates want to be a part of Fear Farm. A few, including Jen, hope to be the next Mercy Sinclair. But most use it as a twisted form of therapy, reframing the terror that previous generations felt, successfully running from make-believe monsters because others didn’t get that chance.

Bleak Haven's first known murderers were the Holts, a depraved trio of father and sons who killed four high school students in the 1950s. Twelve years later, Mallory Crow celebrated her graduation by slaughtering almost everyone on her hate list. In 1971, the Lullaby Man kidnapped the first of five babies who were never seen again.

We all cope with those horrors in our own ways, but only one of us took that trauma to Hollywood.

Mercy's face is all over these walls. Not only front and center on the movie poster, but in at least half the photos surrounding it. This is where she was discovered, after all, screaming bloody murder every October night while Wanda Myers raked in the cash.

Word of Mercy's performances spread far beyond Bleak Haven, until a talent scout came to watch her die. By the time she was wiping the blood from her face, she'd been offered the kind of opportunity we don't usually get in places like this.

As I look around the waiting room, I notice more new faces, and wonder who's here to release the pent-up terror we've been taught to feel since birth, and who else has been inspired by Mercy. Whatever their reasons, the 1999 edition of Fear Farm looks to be the biggest yet.

And what does that mean for me? I haven't auditioned for three years straight because I want to be a movie star, or to feel the final frenzied thoughts of a murder victim.

There's something the Myers family doesn't want people to know about their annual event.

Alongside all the people pretending to be killers and their prey, I think a genuine murderer is preparing to strike.

2

The first two Fear Farms were relatively quiet affairs.

I was nine when Wanda opened the gates to her property, charging people five dollars each to be terrified.

A few years earlier, four of Bleak Haven's own had been killed in bizarre circumstances at the mall, so it was no surprise when some residents objected to the event. But Wanda has a way of getting what she wants.

It was only after the third year, when rumors started about people being poisoned, that Fear Farm grew into something bigger.

As the crowds increased, Wanda began selling popcorn, soda, everything she needed to create her own immersive experience. Except, some of the drinks were laced with gasoline, and a handful of visitors got real sick, real quick.

Wanda swore that it was a terrible accident. That somehow an unmarked bottle of the gas they used for the bladeless chainsaws some of the actors hunted people with must have been left at the concessions stall.

No one died, but suddenly everyone was talking about it. If you went to Myers Farm, it wasn't only the actors you had to be afraid of, it was everything.

The following year, Wanda watched that stall herself, carefully labeling everything in advance, having somehow convinced the sheriff not to shut it down.

By the end of the month, her profits had skyrocketed.

I heard whispers about people daring one another to drink from the plastic cups as if they were playing Russian roulette. How one girl downed three drinks in ten seconds, then had the mother of all panic attacks when she was convinced that she could taste gas on her tongue.

On the rare occasions that my parents discussed it, Mom called it clever PR, while Dad muttered that he wasn't so sure.

Growing up in Bleak Haven—its horrifying history twisted into campfire ghost stories and cautionary tales—I couldn't envision Fear Farm as all fun and games. After the gasoline incident, I felt certain that something was wrong.

I listened for clues sprinkled into schoolyard chatter, keeping a close eye on Wanda if I saw her at the grocery store. And I tried to eavesdrop on Layla's conversations whenever the chance arose, which wasn't often.

Even by eleven, Layla clearly had no interest in being my friend. Which was fine by me. Jen was the only friend I needed. But I was still naive enough to think that I could learn something from Layla, something useful that could prove what I couldn't bring myself to say aloud.

After everything Bleak Haven had been through, the scenario Wanda created to fill her pockets seemed the ideal opportunity to awaken another monster.

My paranoia fed on thoughts that screamed the loudest in

the dark, my fitful sleep growing even more restless the year Jen joined the Fear Farm cast.

My parents used to call me a worrier and maybe I was, about some things, but what I felt for that place wasn't worry. The more I imagined what went on beyond those gates, the more eager my best friend was to join the "fun," the more my dread grew.

In the end, it wasn't Jen who got hurt next. It was a senior boy who broke both his legs after falling from a barn roof.

Even then, Wanda just increased her insurance and carried on. But there was no arguing about what happened in '96.

My sister, Ashley, was one of three actors tasked with bursting from closed caskets scattered around the grounds. It was supposed to be a cheap jump scare, but while two coffins opened without a glitch, the third was clamped shut by six-inch nails.

By the time they pried it open, Ashley wasn't breathing, Wanda and George taking turns with CPR until, finally, she gasped into the late October air.

Some claimed it was part of the show. Others called Wanda a hero for saving Ashley's life. Barely anyone asked why the casket lid had been hammered shut in the first place or, more importantly, who did it.

Accidents happen every day. But when they keep happening in the same place, it's harder to blame them on bad luck.

As I watched my sister fidgeting in her hospital bed that night, dread coursed through my veins.

Ashley must have heard the nails being hammered in place. Surely, she screamed for them to stop. Even if it *was* part of the show, why did they wait so long to set her free?

Every question I wanted to ask her cowered deep inside my throat, while Mom bombarded the nurses with questions, and Dad's relief morphed into a quiet rage.

When we drove home the following day, Dad twisted the leather steering wheel cover until it creaked, his tired eyes glaring at my sister from the rearview mirror.

"You're not to go back there," he said. "That farm is dangerous. We should never have allowed you to audition."

Ashley's grip tightened around my fingers and I expected her to argue back, like she always did. Instead, she waited until we were home before muttering, "It was just a prank."

"Who did it, then?" Dad asked. "This 'prank'? Who should I pay a visit to?"

A nervous laugh slipped from Ashley's cracked lips. "I don't know who did it. The actors play jokes on each other sometimes. It's usually nothing serious."

"Like the girl who drank gasoline?" I asked. "Or the boy who broke his legs? Were they pranks, too?"

My sister's eyes widened as she watched me. "Maybe. You don't hear about most of them because no one gets hurt. And I didn't, either. See? I'm fine."

"You could have died," Mom said. "Your father's right. Fear Farm is off-limits."

"But my friends . . ."

"Your friends are part of the problem," Dad said. "If trapping you in a damn coffin is their idea of fun, you're better off without them."

"What do you know about friends?" Ashley snapped.

"That's enough," Mom whispered, pointing to the living room doorway until my sister marched upstairs.

"I should've listened to my gut," Dad said. "I've never agreed with what Wanda does on that farm. Do you think she's encouraging these pranks?"

Mom shrugged, then shuffled over to me on the sofa. "I'm sorry, Tori. Tomorrow will be better."

She stared at Dad until he nodded. "We all need a good night's sleep."

Maybe he was right, but that didn't happen. Instead, Ashley screamed herself awake at two in the morning, her arms wrapped around her knees as she rocked back and forth on her bed.

"Can I come in?" I asked, and she dragged the balls of her hands across her puffy eyes, then nodded.

As Dad's droning snores drifted across the landing, I pictured Mom sleeping next to him, her luminous yellow earplugs glowing in the gloom.

"Did you have a nightmare?" I asked.

"Something like that."

Ashley was eighteen, less than a year from leaving for college, but in that moment, she looked like a middle schooler again. Her thumb and forefinger rubbed the collar of her pajama top, her tired eyes scanning the shadows as I stepped warily forward.

Neither of us were kids anymore, but so often in her company, that was what I felt like—the annoying baby sister, even when I was fourteen.

It had been months since she'd told me anything about her life, years since she'd hugged me under the covers. Yet that night was different. We fell effortlessly into each other's arms, until I almost felt brave enough to tell her the secret that gnawed at my nerves like starving rats.

But as her breathing hitched, and her heart hammered against my palm, I knew I'd have to be the one to protect her now. It was up to me to figure out what was going on at Fear Farm.

"Who pulls the pranks?" I whispered. "Is there a ringleader?"

"It's not like that."

"What's it like then?"

The silence expanded until Ashley sat up, the sudden chill of her bedroom filling my bones. "People goof around sometimes. It can be intense, acting like a killer or a victim every night. Some people like to blow off steam."

"Which people?"

The scorn that so often filled my sister's eyes snapped back as she glared at me. "It's just a game, Tori. I'm fine."

Ashley's voice raised an octave on the final word, but I let it slide because I was holding tightly to another one: "game." If that's what those people were doing, then it was my turn to play.

The following year, I unsuccessfully auditioned to be part of the Fear Farm cast. And the year after that.

Now that I'm finally in, I can see for myself what goes on behind the scenes, because I know firsthand that some games aren't as harmless as they appear.

3

Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. The ones with terrifying titles, like the Lullaby Man. Those who hunted in packs, like the Holts. And some, like Mallory Crow, whose crimes were so sadistic they turn stomachs three decades on.

But there are other kinds, too. Monsters who don't get the headlines because they are just getting started. Those whose hearts are still darkening, their methods evolving with circumstance.

I was eight when we met Daniel Johnson: a pale eleven-year-old who spent Sundays wandering Bleak Haven's streets with a Polaroid camera around his neck.

When Jen called out for Daniel to take her picture as she twirled on the opposite sidewalk, his head slumped farther toward the ground.

"Come on!" my friend called. "Don't you think I'm pretty?"

His lips moved as they always did, a constant mumbled conversation between Daniel and whatever voices only he could

hear. I didn't realize then how there were two versions of him: the one we playfully mocked, and the other one.

"That boy is super weird," Jen said, and for a few weeks, I had no reason to doubt her.

Not until I was walking home alone one afternoon, and I saw him photographing a bright pink blossom in Mrs. Adeoye's front yard, while a broad smile spread across his gaunt face.

When I asked what he was doing, he jumped so hard that any unease I felt was immediately shattered. How could I fear someone who was so obviously afraid of *me*?

Daniel's brow creased as he waited for the insults that I pretended not to be aware of.

"It's okay," I told him, his fingers fidgeting across his camera as he edged away. "Can I see your photos?"

His head shook so violently that I took two steps back.

"No worries," I added. "I just think this is really beautiful."

As the wind blew, petals drifted toward my feet, and Daniel raised his camera toward me, making that moment immortal.

"Is that okay?" he mumbled. "Dad says I should always ask first."

"It's fine," I replied. "Can I see?"

He pulled the Polaroid free and passed it to me, tiny flecks of pink covering my sneakers as others fell into the frame.

"Keep it," Daniel said. "If you want."

I did. For a long time. But I don't have it anymore.

When I told Jen what had happened, she smirked and said, "I told you he was weird." But the next time she saw him, she watched silently as he photographed birds flittering between branches, his eyes never once turning our way.

Looking back, I realize we treated him like a newborn kitten—a painfully wary creature whose trust we needed to earn.

Every Sunday, Daniel managed to find more beauty in the mundane. And when our neighbors passed by, they would have only seen him taking nature photographs and us ten steps behind.

I never told my parents about the slightly odd sixth-grader who was almost our friend, but watching Daniel take pictures was joyous. He taught me how to see the world differently—for better and for worse.

“Who’s this?”

As I turned, shielding my eyes from the sun, his shadow turned the sidewalk cold.

“No one,” Daniel replied, the confident voice I was growing used to suddenly broken.

“It doesn’t look like no one.”

The shape loomed over me until I felt like one of the ants scurrying through the cracks in the sidewalk.

“Victoria, isn’t it?”

“Tori,” I replied, my heart slowing then quickening again as the man’s face came into focus. “And you’re Daniel’s dad.”

The man nodded. “Who’s your friend?”

“Jen,” she answered for me.

“How do you know my boy?”

“We’re just . . . helping him with his photos.”

Ritchie Johnson chuckled. “Is that so?”

When I turned, Daniel was edging away, all the trust we’d worked so hard to earn lost in an instant.

His dad didn’t take his eyes off Jen as he said, “I saw your mom at the store.”

“Really?”

Ritchie nodded. "It's your birthday soon, right?"

"It is." Jen's voice went higher. "How did you know that?"

"She was talking about it to the store clerk. She's very proud of you." Ritchie scowled as he watched his son. "You should hang out with kids your own age. My boy prefers being alone."

The following Sunday, Daniel wasn't in any of his usual spots. It wasn't until a month later that I saw him at the opposite end of town, that camera still hanging around his neck.

As I approached, he began walking away, then spun back. "We shouldn't talk anymore."

Fear filled Daniel's eyes as I replied. "Why not?"

He stuffed his trembling hand into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled Polaroid. It had been taken the day his father spoke to us: Jen's fuzzy features in the background while Ritchie's expression was crystal clear.

I felt sad as Daniel walked away. But that sadness evaporated quickly. In its place came the excitement of turning nine and the promise of summer break.

On the rare occasions we saw Daniel, Jen and I slipped into separate silences. We missed his weird ways, although we never admitted that to each other.

It wasn't until Ritchie Johnson's pickup pulled alongside me one lonely Sunday afternoon that I remembered the elation of hearing his name.

"Daniel's been working on something," his dad called from the opposite window. "Where's your friend? He'd love to show her."

I kept walking as his tires crackled slowly on the asphalt.

"Her name's Jen, right? If she's not around, I could take you instead."

I searched for other cars, but Sundays sucked the life out

of Bleak Haven. Maybe that's why I nodded—because Daniel used to make those days less boring.

"It's not far," Ritchie said. "Not far at all."

His lips tremored, then settled, his smile widening until I could count his coffee-stained teeth.

The pickup was so dirty that someone had written *Also comes in white* in the grime. But the words JOHNSON'S POOL CLEANING were still visible on the side of the truck.

The bad people we'd always been warned about didn't drive through town with their names on display, yet the greed swirling in his eyes turned to anger as I whispered, "I've changed my mind."

I scanned the street for a familiar face, desperate for a name I could shout, or someone to wave at, so Ritchie would know we'd been seen. But the sidewalks were empty as he hurried out of his truck.

"What are you doing?"

"I told you," Ritchie replied. "Daniel's waiting for us."

My wrist stung as he pulled me toward the idling vehicle and I should've screamed. I should have kicked and punched and bitten. But he was already strapping me into the passenger seat and we were driving away, and when I tried the door handle, Ritchie muttered, "That won't work."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The creek. Daniel spends a lot of time there now."

My fingernails dug into the torn leather seat as my mind raced. "We're not allowed to go to Corpse Creek."

Ritchie chuckled. "Corpse Creek. Just because they found a body there once."

Not just one, I thought.

“This town and its nicknames. It’s still a beautiful place. Perfect for Daniel’s pictures.”

“I want to get out,” I said. “Please.”

The car sped up slightly, then settled. “You could be in the back right now. But it’s messy in there with all my cleaning equipment. I did you a favor sitting you up front.”

I clung to that thought, because he hadn’t hidden me. I could be seen by anyone driving the other way . . . except no one did.

My brain ached as I thought of the photograph Daniel showed me; the covetous look his father had had when he’d first met Jen.

He was warning us.

“What are you going to do to me?” I asked.

Ritchie’s flat laugh made me shiver. “We’re going to play a game.”

My limbs locked as we drove down the gravel track that led to the creek, sunlight spilling over the still water.

I waited for Daniel to step out from behind a tree or wave from the edge of the stream.

But I already knew the truth: Daniel wasn’t coming.

“I’ve made something for you,” Ritchie said, his fingers opening slowly to reveal a wooden figurine in his palm. “Do you like it?”

I wanted to slap it from his hand and scream, “No!” But my muscles tightened, squeezing that thought into submission.

“Daniel isn’t the only artistic one in our family,” he said. “These are extra special.”

I dared myself to look closer, at the dark red wood carved into the shape of a pocket-size girl. I could see every line on

her face, her lips dragged downward as her tiny eyes stared up at me.

Ritchie opened his door, the hot air smothering my skin. “Do you want to know the rules?”

I turned my head away, searching for the courage to shake it.

When he chuckled, my blood curdled in my veins and I wondered what would happen if I burst free and ran. I was fast. But he was probably faster.

“I have ten minutes to knock this carving over,” Ritchie said. “If I don’t manage it, you go home. If I *do* hit it, I get to keep you.”

My lungs burned as I fought for breath, my body jolting when he rested a stopwatch on the dashboard and clicked Start before locking the door behind him.

He walked around the hood, my useless fists quivering in my lap. Then he edged down the grassy bank and crouched, selecting stones from the shore before rising again.

Ritchie glanced back at me with his sickening smile, then rested the wooden girl on one of the plinths that stretched evenly along the dock.

I slammed both hands against my skull, kicking the car door until my leg muscles burned. I’d ignored everything my parents had ever warned me about, and the horrible stories of Bleak Haven’s dead quickly merged with my panic.

Ritchie Johnson may have been known to everyone in town, but so were Raymond Hartwell and Franklin Holt. So was every single person who took a life here, shattering the perception they’d spent decades faking.

For all of them, there was a moment when everything changed. As I watched Daniel’s dad toss the first stone toward

the carefully balanced carving, I wondered if this was *his* moment.

He missed, raising his eyes to the sky before launching the second stone. Like the first, it landed harmlessly in the water, ripples spreading like gossip.

I prayed for the high school kids who used to cannonball from tree branches, the fishermen dozing behind loose lines, anyone who didn't believe the rumors about Corpse Creek. But no one came anymore, unless they were doing something they didn't want anyone else to see.

More ripples scurried across the surface as the third stone missed its target, then the fourth.

With each horribly slow minute, it felt like my brain was being pulled apart strand by strand, pain and panic morphing until I was certain the carving would fall.

Finally, the stopwatch said 9:51 . . . 9:52 . . . 9:53 . . .

Ritchie tossed the last pebble into the air and caught it, his lips moving like Daniel's always did. Then he wound his left arm back and threw.

For a moment, the wooden girl shuddered, my guts lurching at the thought of what would happen if she fell. But the stone flew harmlessly past.

Ritchie swayed on the spot, watching the water gradually settle once more. Then he trod slowly back to the truck.

I forced my body closer to the passenger door as he got in the driver's side, the engine roaring to life before he pulled away.

When I finally found my voice, it shattered the moment it left my barren throat. "What now?"

"Now you go home," Ritchie replied.

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"You took me," I said. "You . . ." The word formed slowly on my tongue. "... abducted me."

Ritchie laughed like he did when other people were around, with all the fake joy of a department store Santa. "No, I didn't. It was a game, Tori."

He watched me until I forced out a smile.

"A game?" I repeated.

"Exactly. Who do you think I am?"

"I don't understand."

"You didn't seriously think . . . ? I was never going to hurt you, Tori. Daniel told me you liked games."

Did he? We'd never played one together. And yet, dread suddenly washed over Ritchie's face, his hands held out to me as if in prayer. "Daniel and I prank each other sometimes. I'm sorry if I went too far. I saw you on your own and thought you might be bored. I got it wrong. Oh man, am I in trouble?"

His character was shifting too quickly for me to keep up and I didn't know how to answer. *Was* he in trouble? Did *I* suddenly have that power to decide? Because he looked so afraid, the consequences of his "mistake" making his legs bounce frantically and his neck snap back and forth. And yet . . . my bruised wrist still burned with the memory of his grip.

"I'm sorry," Ritchie said again, a single tear creeping down his tanned cheek.

He let me out five minutes from home and I should have sprinted all the way, pounding on our front door before my heart burst clean through my chest. But I had no idea what to say. The story was already unraveling in my nine-year-old brain, until the only thing that I could see clearly was Ritchie's regret.

All I knew for certain was that Jen would never do what I had. She was everyone's first choice, for everything, and that thought made me shudder.

"Never get in Ritchie Johnson's truck," I told her the following Monday. "Do you hear me?"

"What are you—"

"Do you hear me?!"

Jen's confusion turned to sadness as she realized something that I'd never have the courage to confirm.

"What happened?"

There it was—all the space I needed to tell her the truth—and I slammed it shut with a single word.

"Nothing."

A few months later, my family drove past Daniel as he stomped alone through the snow, a new camera in his gloved hands. I wanted to ask Dad to pull over, so I could ask that boy if he knew just how monstrous his father was. But, like always back then, fear cut my confidence to the bone.

By the time I finally told Mom what had happened, the Johnsons were long gone. In the years it took me to accept the truth about that day, I never thought of the girls Ritchie was yet to meet.

When I was twelve, he was arrested nearly three hundred miles away, after trying to bundle a high school girl into his truck. He'd remarried by then. Daniel had a half sister. But that man was still evil.

When people recall Bleak Haven's monsters, no one talks about Ritchie Johnson. If you want to know how messed-up this town is: a guy who abducted girls and left their fate up to chance wasn't twisted enough to be remembered.

Mom said I shouldn't feel guilty, but I could see in her

hollowed-out eyes that she understood. If I'd spoken sooner, the sheriff could have caught Ritchie before he left town.

That's why I can't let whatever is happening on Myers Farm go unchecked.

I've seen it before—how someone evil can creep undetected through a place that should know better. How we can be tricked into thinking that some of our worst experiences are just pranks.

This time, if there's something to shout about, I'll raise my voice until it's impossible to ignore.