

CHAPTER ONE  
THE DRAGON

1

*Wake up.*

Not so much a voice in her head as a needling urgency prodding the base of her spine.

*Wake—*

Ellen McBride came reeling from the depths of some black, angry dream that roared like a dragon, only to find that the dragon was real. It shook the house, stressing the foundation and rattling picture frames on her bedroom wall in the dark. By the sound, it was carving trenches in the roof with its terrible claws, too. Pitch blackness all around her . . . but then a flash of lightning pulsed at the window above the headboard, momentarily projecting a blazing rectangle upon the opposite wall, blinding as a mortar explosion, and Ellen thought, with a finger of rising concern, *Storm. A big one.*

She lay in the dark for a moment listening to the storm rival the labored sound of her own respiration. Her heart was slamming in her chest, funneling a rush of blood through her ears. The nightmare she'd been having just a moment ago still floated close to the surface, some amorphous and sinister shape gliding beneath the murky sheen of a dreamscape sea, but she could not recall a single detail about it—only the sensation of acute apprehension that continued to tighten like piano wire around her throat. Her entire body felt coated in a slick of sweat.

Then, between a lull in the thunder, Cory's voice called out to her from somewhere deep in the house—

“Mom?”

She climbed out of bed just as the wind outside whipped debris against the corner of the house and at the windowpane above her bed. The thundering dragon exhaled what sounded like buckshot against the glass—*chattle chattle chattle*. She banged a hip against the nightstand—

“Ouch, damn it!”

—then staggered forward, blind, hands pawing at the darkness ahead of her.

It wasn’t just the storm.

Something felt *wrong*.

Not so much a notion or a thought, but that same needling urgency that had followed her out of sleep.

The hallway was as dark as a mineshaft. She ran one hand along the wall, felt the nub of the light switch poke her sweaty palm, and thrust the switch upward. But the hallway remained dark. The storm must have knocked out the—

“Mom? Are you there? Something’s happening.”

She hurried to his bedroom and threw open the door.

Her son was sitting bolt upright in bed, his frail, shaggy-headed silhouette a shadow puppet against the intermittent flashes of lightning that kept illuminating the world outside his bedroom window. Cory’s bed sheet lay in a tangled heap around his waist, and when she went to him, feeling for him in the dark, she found that the sheet was damp from night sweat.

“Mom . . .” His voice was a hollow drum, veined with a pulse of dread.

“I’m right here, Cory. It’s all right. Everything is all right.”

“It found me. It’s trying to get me.” Panic rising in his voice now.

“It’s just a storm.”

She slid beside him in the bed, pulled him close. She could smell him in that moment—the clean, sleepy, familiar scent of her ten-year-old son. He was small for his age, his shoulders knobby, his ribcage a delicate assemblage of quaint and tidy things bound together within that baby-bird torso. She held him against her now, and could feel

## THE HIVE

his heartbeat, hummingbird-quick, frantic against her breast. For a moment, Ellen's mind summoned an image of him as an infant, a pair of wide, sleepless eyes gazing up at her from the darkness as she paced for hours and hours around the house in the middle of the night, desperate to get him to sleep.

"No," he said, the word partially muffled against the fabric of her nightshirt. She ran a hand down the nape of his neck and found his flesh hot and blistering with perspiration. At the feel of her touch, he drew away from her, glanced at the window beside his bed, then said, "It's something else. Something's happening. It's so loud—"

Outside, the dragon—

*(not a dragon)*

—roared again. Cory's fingers dug into her.

The sound of something cracking above her head caused her to look up at the ceiling. She saw nothing in the dark, but felt a dusting of drywall powder her face and sting her eyes.

Cory was right—it *was* so loud. Maybe not just a normal thunderstorm after all. Those dragon's roars didn't sound like ordinary thunder, and those flashes of light outside Cory's bedroom radiated with a sickly electric-white hue unlike any lightning she had ever seen: not just a flash, but a vast tapestry of light that seemed to linger. Ellen McBride had never experienced a hurricane, except for on television and in the movies, but that was the thing that launched itself into her mind in that moment.

Something heavy thunked against the bedroom window, startling them both. The glass didn't shatter, didn't even crack, but it was loud and abrupt enough to make them both cry out in unison.

"Get up, Cory. Quick."

"It's *here*," he said. There was an eerie sense of finality to his voice that sounded very much unlike him. "It's *here*, Mom. It *came*."

She didn't have time to process what it was he'd just said, nor to decode what it might mean. Instead, she was climbing back out of his bed, a bit more urgently now, one arm still wrapped around her son's narrow shoulders, tugging him toward her, urging him to follow.

“I think we should go to the basement,” she said, her face suddenly next to his. Cory’s breath came at her in warm, panicked jabs. “Everything is going to be okay. I promise. But we need to go downstairs where it’s safer. Do you hear me?”

“I’m scared.”

“Don’t be.”

They hurried together down the hall, and she knew she was squeezing his hand too tightly while pulling on his arm, their bare feet slapping hollowly on the hardwood floor, *pat pat pat*-ing along the dark train-tunnel of the small ranch house on Cloister Road. It was darker than it should have been, even at this hour. The power outage must have extended to the whole block, because when they scurried by the front windows, she could see that none of the streetlights along their stretch of road appeared to be on. Even that strange white light she’d seen simmering through Cory’s bedroom window was no longer visible. It was as if a thick black cloak had draped itself down around the entire house.

Another roar directly above them—a deep rumbling sound, steadily gathering momentum, like a tractor trailer barreling down on them. Wind galloped across the rooftop, audibly stressing the ceiling joists. Cory paused, his bare feet skidding to a halt on the floor, and Ellen could feel her son’s heartbeat throbbing in the palm of his sweat-slickened hand.

He seemed to be staring at something in the darkness ahead of them.

“We need to *go*, Cory.”

She dragged him toward the basement door, which was nestled in a nook in the hallway between the dining room and the galley kitchen. She wrenched the door open, revealing a yawning rectangle of even greater blackness. A fragment of her nightmare rushed back to her then: running from some faceless, shapeless *thing* as it pursued her through a series of honeycombed corridors. That piano wire constricted more tightly about her throat.

*Just a nightmare.*

## THE HIVE

*Just a storm.*

But then something in the atmosphere shifted, causing the hairs along her arms to stiffen into quills. She turned to face the window above the kitchen sink, and saw that the world beyond was once again aglow with that same eerie, listless light. Beyond that light, she glimpsed the swirling, soupy miasma that was the world around them. In a moment of rising terror, she wondered if the goddamn hurricane had descended *directly onto their house*, and if they were currently in the eye of it, watching the rest of Mariner's Cove swim by in a rotating torrent of horror. Or worse: that the house *itself* was the thing twirling through the air, just like in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Cory was staring at the scene beyond the window, too.

Hypnotized.

She once again tugged at his hand, urging him toward the open basement door. "Cory, we need to—"

The window over the sink exploded.

Arrowheads of shattered glass fired across the kitchen, borne on a blast of furious wind and cool summer rain. Ellen shrieked, and wrapped protective arms around her son, whose body had gone rigid. She shielded him as best she could, her own eyes squeezed shut, face pressed against his, and braced herself for those countless shards of glass to drive themselves mercilessly into her flesh.

But that did not happen.

Trembling, holding her breath, she raised her head and opened her eyes. She still had her arms wrapped protectively around her son, his sweat-dampened hair now blown back from his forehead, his body as unyielding as the bole of a tree.

She saw that his eyes were impossibly wide.

She saw he was holding both his hands straight out in front of him, elbows locked, his palms out in a halting gesture.

She turned her head and followed his wide-eyed gaze.

The arrowheads of broken windowpane hung suspended in the air before them. Countless glittering glass teeth, shimmering in the eerie static-white glow issuing through the shattered kitchen window.

Dead leaves swirled about the kitchen counter, whisked along the tile floor, and stirred all through the air, a cacophonous whirlwind of leaves, but those sharp daggers of glass remained motionless in midair mere inches from them. Even the storm seemed to be holding its breath.

*This is not real, she thought. I am still in bed and dreaming.*

Crazily, she thought she might be able to reach out and *touch* one of those shards of glass floating inches from her face, just pluck it right out of the air or perhaps flick it with her finger, and maybe it would even make a pleasant chiming sound, *tink*, like flicking the rim of a wineglass. But she found herself powerless to move.

*This is not real.*

Cory's body shuddered in her arms. He swept both his hands toward the floor and the collection of glass shards obeyed the command, plummeting to the kitchen tiles with a tinkling, almost musical clatter.

Ellen felt her son's exhalation exit his lungs and a second shudder travel down the entire length of his body as she clutched him more tightly to her chest. It seemed as if his whole body had deflated. Rain rushed in through the busted window over the sink and danced along her face, and his skin felt so hot, she imagined those raindrops sizzling to steam. She stood there, staring at the arrangement of shattered glass among the slick black blanket of dead leaves that were slowly gathering along the kitchen floor.

Cory's voice, traversing across some distant plane of existence: "Mom . . . ?"

She couldn't move. A part of her was still staring at those jewels of broken glass hovering there in midair, staring at them in her mind, where they had only been—impossibly—just a moment before. And yet another part of her—

*(run chase run something's coming something)*

—was certain she was still snared in the nightmare, confident that she *must* be there, and that all the things that didn't make sense didn't *have* to make sense, because this was nothing more than a bad dream, a bad dream, a bad dream . . .

"Mom."

## THE HIVE

He was facing her now; somehow, he'd worked his way out of her arms without her knowing. She could feel the warmth of his breath against her rain-speckled face. It took a moment before her eyes could focus on him.

"You're right, Mom. We need to go in the basement where it's safe," he said. Her words in his mouth now.

A reversal of roles.

A tripping of a wire.

Something—

—*she knew*—

—had transpired between them.

"*Yesssss*," she said, and the word, snakelike, hissed out of her.

His hand in hers, gripping tightly. His palm no longer sweaty, but cold—nearly ice. That sudden reversal of roles, continuing, protracted and stretching in her mind like taffy: her son leading her down that yawning black throat that descended into the basement, step after blind step, closing the door behind them and letting the darkness swallow them whole. Yet a part of her mind still lingered in the kitchen, still gaped at those bright, shimmering teeth of glass, hanging there, suspended, all of them, impossibly so, frozen in time, and in her mind's eye a finger extended, a flick on the glass—

*Tink.*

It resonated in the echo chamber of her skull.

## 2

They huddled together on a pile of old clothes and bed sheets covered in dried splotches of paint in one darkened corner of the basement. Above them, the house creaked and moaned while the storm raged on. There was only a single narrow hopper window above the washer and dryer at the opposite end of the basement, but the fierce winds had dammed it with muck, preventing even the most stringent flashes of lightning—that odd, lingering, spectral lightning—from penetrating.

With her back against the cold cinderblock wall, Ellen pulled her son close to her. He went without protest, but his body remained stiff. She slipped an arm around his shoulders then waited to feel the soft presence of his head against hers. But he kept at a distance from her, even in such proximity; his head very close to hers, but their minds not touching. They did not speak, and she could not see his face in the dark.

*Tink.*

She was thinking about those arrowheads of broken glass.

*How long are you going to play dumb, Ellen McBride?*

Her son stirred beside her.

“Cory? Baby?”

No answer.

She listened and could hear him breathing. Deep and drawn out. He'd fallen asleep sitting up against the basement wall, supported by her arm around his shoulders. Gently, she pulled him toward her until he laid his head in her lap. She ran her fingers through the damp, matted curls of his hair while he slept.

*Tink.*

She was his mother, and she loved him dearly . . . yet she couldn't deny the sense that something between them—something that had forever existed heretofore within the shared universe of their blood—had just been terribly, irrevocably altered.

### 3

And then she was there again, pursued through a series of dark, narrow chambers by some unseen thing that shook the world with its dragon's roar and tore apart the atmosphere with its horrible claws, its sulfur breath filling the air, and with each corner she turned, another corridor stretched out before her: never ending.

## 4

When Ellen awoke, it was to an eerie stillness. Thin shafts of daylight poked through the meshwork of leaves, twigs, and mud that lay pressed against the hopper window above the washer and dryer.

Cory was not here.

She crept up the basement stairs to find that the kitchen had been cleaned while she'd slept: a trash bag sat by the side door, full of dead leaves, yard muck, and other garbage that had blown in through the broken kitchen window during the night. As she peered inside the bag, she could see those shards of broken glass, revelatory in their thereness, causing a shiver to trace down Ellen's spine. She tied the bag closed, then ran a pair of shaky hands through her hair. There was a dustpan and broom leaning against the wall in one corner of the kitchen, and a bottle of Clorox and some old towels on the countertop. The broken window was now covered with the corkboard from Cory's bedroom. Pinned to the board were some of Cory's drawings (he was a good artist) along with ticket stubs from movies she had taken him to see, coupons for the bowling alley off the highway, his last report card (straight A's, what a kid), and a few photographs. Her eyes lingered on one photo in particular—of Cory propped up on Ellen's brother's shoulders, impossibly wide grins on both their faces. Her brother was wearing a ratty Testament concert T-shirt and Cory had a baseball hat tugged down too far over his eyes so that his ears were flattened like airplane wings. The photo had been taken about two years ago. Just looking at it caused a pang of grief to well up inside her.

She drifted into the dining room and stared out the bay window and onto Cloister Road. There were tree limbs and random garbage in the street and the gutters were swollen with rain. The sky above the houses on the opposite end of the street was nothing but a bank of receding gray storm clouds; what daylight managed to penetrate them was an eerie, listless yellow. For a moment, she stared at a paper Dunkin Donuts cup as it bobbed along in the torrent before vanishing

down a sewer grate. Next door, a tree had come down, and poor Mr. Zachs was out there on his front lawn in a blindingly white terrycloth bathrobe and rubber boots staring down at it with a look of utter defeat on his round, jowly face. As if sensing her eyes on him, he glanced up and seemed to catch Ellen standing in the bay window. But when she raised her hand in a languid salutation, Mr. Zachs just turned away and trudged back into his house.

Ellen continued down the hall, hesitating for a moment before Cory's bedroom door, which stood partway open.

*How long were you planning to deny this?* spoke up a voice at the back of Ellen's head. For a moment, it sounded like the voice of her estranged brother. *How long were you going to force yourself to remain willfully ignorant of everything that has been happening around here lately?*

The lights that would sometimes flicker when Cory walked into a room.

The drinking glasses that would spontaneously launch themselves off the kitchen counter and shatter on the floor when he was upset or angry.

The way the television in the living room would sometimes turn itself on and flip indiscriminately through the channels.

She eased the bedroom door open and found him lying asleep on his bed, the bed sheets bunched about his bare feet. His back was toward her, and he was curled in a fetal position, snoring gently.

*Can we pretend last night never happened?*

*Can we keep playing dumb?*

The room looked stressed: she followed a hairline crack in the drywall, all the way up to the ceiling, where it wove in and out of the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars that were glued there. A crack that hadn't been there before the storm.

It wasn't from the storm, she knew.

*Can we keep playing dumb?*

She went to him, carefully untangling the sheet from his feet, then pulling it up and over his slumbering body. He did not stir.

She felt a charge ripple through the air then—something akin to

## THE HIVE

static electricity, but like the guitar amps in that *Spinal Tap* movie, dialed to eleven. The charge collected about her body, causing the hair on her arms and along the nape of her neck to stand at attention. She felt, too, a sudden and disagreeable buzzing sensation in her back teeth—a sensation that began to grow painful the longer it persisted.

On the bed, Cory shifted in his sleep but did not wake.

The house creaked.

The walls seemed to be breathing in and out all around her.

She thought of the broken shards of glass tucked away in that trash bag in the hall. The way they'd hung there, suspended in midair the night before.

*Tink.*

Ellen McBride silently backed out of the room.