

Chapter One

Hawkins Hallow

Maryland

July 6, 1987

Inside the pretty kitchen of the pretty house on Pleasant Avenue, Caleb Hawkins struggled not to squirm as his mother packed her version of camp-out provisions.

In his mother's world, ten-year-old boys required fresh fruit, homemade oatmeal cookies (they weren't so bad), half a dozen hard-boiled eggs, a bag of Ritz crackers made into sandwiches with Jiffy peanut butter for filling, some celery and carrot sticks (yuck!) and hearty ham and cheese sandwiches.

Then there was the thermos of lemonade, the stack of paper napkins, and the two boxes of Pop Tarts she wedged into the basket for breakfast.

"Mom, we're not going to *starve* to death," he complained as she stood deliberating in front of an open cupboard. "We're going to be right in Fox's backyard."

Which was a lie, and kinda hurt his tongue. But she'd never let him go if he told her the truth. And, sheesh, he was ten. Or would be the very next day.

She put her hands on her hips, a pert, attractive blonde with summer blue eyes and a stylish curly perm. She was the mother of three, and Cal was her baby and only boy. "Now, let me check that backpack."

"Mom!"

"Honey, I just want to be sure you didn't forget anything." Ruthless in her own sunny way, Frannie unzipped Cal's navy blue pack. "Change of underwear, clean shirt, socks, good, good, shorts, toothbrush. Cal, where are the Band-Aids I told you to put in, and the Bactine, the bug repellent."

"Sheesh, we're not going to Africa."

"All the same," Frannie said, and did her signature finger wave to send him along to gather up the supplies. While he did, she slipped a card out of her pocket and tucked it into the pack.

He'd been born, after eight hours and twelve minutes of vicious labor, at one minute past midnight. Every year she stepped up to his bed at twelve, watched him sleep for that minute, then kissed him on the cheek.

Now he'd be ten, and she wouldn't be able to perform the ritual. Because it made her eyes sting, she turned away to wipe at her spotless counter as she heard his tromping footsteps.

"I got it all, okay?"

Smiling brightly, she turned back. "Okay." She stepped over to rub a hand over his short, soft hair. He'd been her tow-headed baby boy, she mused, but his hair was darkening, and she suspected would be a light brown eventually.

Just as hers would without the aid of Born Blonde.

In a habitual gesture, Frannie tapped his dark-framed glasses back up his nose. "You make sure you thank Ms. Barry and Mr. O'Dell when you get there."

"I will."

"*And* when you leave to come home tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am."

She took his face in her hands, looked through the thick lenses into eyes the same color as his father's calm gray. "Behave," she said and kissed his cheek. "Have fun." Then the other. "Happy birthday, my baby."

Usually it mortified him to be called her *baby*, but for some reason, just then, it made him feel sort of gooey and good.

"Thanks, Mom."

He shrugged on the backpack, then hefted the loaded picnic basket. How the hell was he going to ride all the way out to Hawkins Wood with half the darn grocery store on his bike?

The guys were going to razz him something fierce.

Since he was stuck, he carted it into the garage where his bike hung tidily—by Mom decree—on a rack on the wall. Thinking it through, he borrowed two of his father's bungee cords and secured the picnic basket to the wire basket of his bike.

Fox finished weeding his section of the vegetable garden before hefting the spray his mother mixed up weekly to discourage the deer and rabbits from invading for an all-you-can-eat buffet. The garlic, raw egg and cayenne pepper combination stank so bad he held his breath as he squirted it on the rows of snap beans and limas, the potato greens, the carrot and radish tops.

He stepped back, took a clear breath and studied his work. His mother was pretty damn strict about the gardening. It was all about respecting the Earth, harmonizing with

Nature, and that stuff.

It was also, Fox knew, about eating, and making enough food and money to feed a family of six—and whoever dropped by. Which was why his Dad and his older sister, Sage, were down at their stand selling fresh eggs, goat's milk, honey and his mother's home-made jams.

He glanced over to where his younger brother Ridge was stretched out between the rows playing with the weeds instead of yanking them. And because his mother was inside putting their baby sister Sparrow down for her nap, he was on Ridge duty.

"Come on, Ridge, pull the stupid things. I wanna go."

Ridge lifted his face, turned his I'm dreaming eyes on his brother. "Why can't I go with you?"

"Because you're eight and you can't even weed the dumb tomatoes." Annoyed, Fox stepped over the rows to Ridge's section and crouching, began to yank. "

"Can, too."

As Fox hoped, the insult had Ridge weeding with a vengeance. Fox straightened, rubbed his hands on his jeans. He was a tall boy with a skinny build, a mass of bark brown hair worn in a waving tangle around a sharp-boned face. His eyes were tawny and reflected his satisfaction now as he trooped over for the sprayer.

He dumped it beside Ridge. "Don't forget to spray this shit."

He crossed the yard, circling what was left—three short walls and part of a chimney—of the old stone hut on the edge of the vegetable garden. It was buried, as his mother liked it best, in honeysuckle and wild morning glory.

He skirted past the chicken coop and the cluckers that were pecking around, by the goatyard where the two nannies stood slack-hipped and bored, edged around his mother's herb. He headed toward the kitchen door of the house his parents had mostly built. The kitchen was big, and the counters loaded with projects--canning jars, lids, tubs of candlewax, bowls of wicks.

He knew most of the people in and around The Hollow thought of his family as the weird Hippies. It didn't bother him. For the most part they got along, and people were happy to buy their eggs and produce, his mother's needlework and hand-made candles and crafts, or hire his dad to build stuff.

Fox washed up at the sink before rooting through the cupboards, poking in the big pantry searching for *something* that wasn't health food.

Fat chance.

He'd bike over to the market—the one right outside of town just in case—and use some of his savings to buy Little Debbies and Nutter Butters.

His mother came in, tossing her long brown braid off the shoulder bared by her cotton sundress. "Finished?"

"I am. Ridge is almost."

Joanne walked to the window, her hand automatically lifting to brush down Fox's hair, staying to rest on his neck as she studied her younger son.

"There's some carob brownies, and some veggie dogs, if you want to take any."

"Ah." Barf. "No, thanks. I'm good."

He knew that she knew he'd be chowing down on meat products and refined

sugar. And he knew she knew he knew. But she wouldn't rag him about it. Choices were big with Mom.

"Have a good time."

"I will."

"Fox?" She stood where she was, by the sink with the light coming in the window and haloing her hair. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Mom." And with Little Debbies on his mind, he bolted out to grab his bike and start the adventure.

The old man was still sleeping when Gage shoved some supplies into his pack. Gage could hear the snoring through the thin, crappy walls of the cramped, crappy apartment over The Bowl-A-Rama. The old man worked there cleaning the floors, the johns—and whatever else Cal's father found for him to do.

He might've been a day shy of his tenth birthday, but Gage knew why Mr. Hawkins kept the old man on, why they had the apartment rent-free with the old man supposedly being the maintenance guy on the building. Mr. Hawkins felt sorry for them—and mostly sorry for Gage because he was stuck as the motherless son of a mean drunk.

Other people felt sorry for him, too, and that put Gage's back up. Not Mr. Hawkins though. He never let the pity show. And whenever Gage did any chores for the bowling alley, Mr. Hawkins paid him in cash, on the side. And with a conspirator's wink.

He knew, hell, everybody knew, that Bill Turner knocked his kid around from time

to time. But Mr. Hawkins was the *only* one who'd ever sat down with Gage and asked *him* what he wanted. Did he want the cops, Social Services, did he want to come stay with him and his family for awhile?

He hadn't wanted the cops or the do-gooders. They only made it worse. And though he'd have given anything to live in that nice house with people who lived decent lives, he'd only asked if Mr. Hawkins would please, please, not fire his old man.

He got knocked around less, whenever Mr. Hawkins kept his father busy and employed. Unless, of course, good old Bill went on a toot and decided to whale in.

If Mr. Hawkins knew how bad it could get during those times, he would call the cops.

So he didn't tell, and he learned to be very good at hiding beatings like the one he'd taken the night before.

Gage moved carefully as he snagged three cold ones out of his father's beer supply. The welts on his back and butt were still raw and angry and they stung like fire. He'd expected the beating. He always got one around his birthday. He always got another one around the date of his mother's death.

Those were the big, traditional two. Other times, the whippings came as a surprise. But mostly, mostly when the old man was working steady the hits were just a careless cuff or shove.

He didn't bother to be quiet when he turned toward his father's bedroom. Nothing short of a raid by the A-Team would wake Bill Turner when he was in a drunk sleep.

The room stank of beer sweat and stale smoke, causing Gage to wrinkle his

handsome face. He took the half pack of Marlboros off the dresser. The old man wouldn't remember if he'd had any, so no problem there.

Without a qualm, he opened his father's wallet and helped himself to three singles and a five.

He looked at his father as he stuffed the bills in his pocket. Bill sprawled on the bed, stripped down to his boxers, his mouth open as the snores pumped out.

The belt he'd used on his son the night before lay on the floor along with dirty shirts, socks, jeans.

For a moment, just a moment, it rippled through Gage with a kind of mad glee—the image of himself picking up that belt, swinging it high, laying it snapping hard over his father's bare, sagging belly.

*See how you like it.*

But there on the table with its overflowing ashtray, the empty bottle was the picture of Gage's mother, smiling out.

People said he looked like her—the dark hair, the hazy green eyes, the strong mouth. It had embarrassed him once, being compared to a woman. But lately, as everything but that one photograph was so faded in his head, when he couldn't hear her voice in his head or remember how she'd smelled, it steadied him.

He looked like his mother.

Sometimes he imagined the man who drank himself into a stupor most nights wasn't his father.

His father was smart and brave and sort of reckless.



And then he'd look at the old man and know that was all bullshit.

He shot the old bastard the finger as he left the room. He had to carry his backpack. No way he could put it on with the welts riding his back.

He took the outside steps down, went around the back where he chained up his third-hand bike.

Despite the pain, he grinned as he got on.

For the next twenty-four hours, he was free.

They'd agreed to meet on the west edge of town where the woods crept toward the curve of the road. The boy from the middle-class home, the hippie kid, and the drunk's son.

They shared the same birthday, July seventh. Cal had let out his first shocked cry in the delivery room of Washington County Hospital while his mother panted and his father wept. Fox had shoved his way into the world and into his laughing father's waiting hands in the bedroom of the odd little farmhouse while Bob Dylan sang *Lay, Lady, Lay* on the record player, and lavender scented candles burned. And Gage had struggled out of his terrified mother in an ambulance racing up Maryland Route Sixty-Five.

Now, Gage arrived first, sliding off his bike to walk it into the trees where nobody cruising the road could spot it, or him.

Then he sat on the ground and lit his first cigarette of the afternoon. They always made him a little sick to his stomach, but the defiant act of lighting up, made up for the queasiness.

He sat and smoked in the shady woods, and imagined himself on a mountain path in Colorado or a steamy South American jungle.

Anywhere but here.

He'd taken his third puff, and his first cautious inhale, when he heard the bumps of tires over dirt and rock.

Fox pushed through the trees on Lightning, his bike so named because Fox's father had painted lightning bolts on the bars.

His dad was cool that way.

"Hey, Turner."

"O'Dell." Gage held out the cigarette.

They both knew Fox took it only because to do otherwise made him a dweeb. So he took a quick drag, passed it back. Gage nodded to the bag tied to Lightning's handlebars. "What'd you get?"

"Little Debbie's, Nutter Butters, some Tasty Cake pies. Apple and cherry."

"Righteous. I got three cans of Bud for tonight."

Fox's eyes didn't pop out of his head, but it was close. "No shit?"

"No shit. Old man was trashed. He'll never know the difference. I got something else, too. Last month's *Penthouse* Magazine."

"No way."

"He keeps them buried under a bunch of crap in the bathroom."

"Lemme see."

"Later. With the beer."

They both looked over as Cal dragged his bike down the rough path. "Hey jerkwad," Fox greeted him.

"Hey, dickheads."

That said, with the affection of brothers, they walked their bikes deeper into the trees, then off the narrow path.

Once the bikes were deemed secure, supplies were untied and divvied up.

"Jesus, Hawkins, what'd your mom put in here?"

"You won't complain when you're eating it." Cal's arms were already protesting the weight as he scowled at Gage. "Why don't you put your pack on, and give me a hand."

"Because I'm carrying it." But he flipped the top on the basket and after hooting at the Tupperware, shoved a couple of the containers into his pack. "Put something in yours O'Dell, or it'll take us all day just to get to Hester's Pool."

"Shit." Fox pulled out a thermos, wedged it in his pack. "Light enough now, Sally?"

"Screw you. I got the basket and my pack."

"I got the supplies from the market and my pack." Fox pulled his prized possession from his bike. "You carry the boom box, Turner."

Gage shrugged, took the radio. "Then I pick the tunes."

"No rap," Cal and Fox said together, but Gage only grinned as he walked and tuned—until he found some Run D.M.C.

With a lot of bitching and moaning, they started the hike.

The leaves, thick and green, cut the sun's glare and summer heat. Through the thick poplars and towering oaks slices and dabs of milky blue sky peeked. They aimed for the wind of the creek while the rapper and Aerosmith urged them to walk this way.

"Gage has a *Penthouse*," Fox announced. "The skin magazine, numbnut," he said at Cal's blank stare.

"Uh-uh."

"Uh-huh. Come on, Turner, break it out."

"Not until we're camped and pop the beer."

"*Beer!*" Instinctively, Cal sent a look over his shoulder, just in case his mother magically appeared. "You got beer?"

"Three cans of suds," Gage confirmed, strutting. "Smokes, too."

"Is this far out or what?" Fox gave Cal a punch in the arm. "It's the best birthday ever."

"Ever," Cal agreed, secretly terrified. Beer, cigarettes and pictures of naked women. If his mother ever found out he'd be grounded until he was thirty. That didn't even count the fact he'd lied. Or that he was hiking his way through Hawkins Wood to camp out at the expressly forbidden Pagan Stone.

He'd be grounded until he died of old age.

"Stop worrying." Gage shifted his pack from one arm to the other, with a wicked glint of what-the-hell in his eyes. "It's all cool."

"I'm not worried." Still, Cal jolted when a fat jay zoomed out of the trees and let out an irritated call.