



OAK ORCHARD

BRIAN DURSKI

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*This book is dedicated to my mother
Geraldine Durski.*

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My wife, Catherine Durski***

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An individual that is passionate about helping new authors. I can attest to that fact!

CHAPTER 1

The barn's rain streaked window faced a tall forest and was covered in spider webs; dead flies littered the sill. From the hayloft Brad stared through the glass and watched the tree line intently. He thought he detected some slight movement just outside the trees to the south, but it wasn't definitive and only seemed to be a swaying of tall weeds growing freely in the now unattended fields.

A constant feeling of something observing him from within the deep recesses of Oak Orchard Swamp now completely dominated his life. Whatever it was seemed very wary and must be skilled at appearing only when there were no humans in the immediate vicinity.

He turned away from the loft window and glanced down at his two dogs lying on the cracked concrete of the barn's first floor. Both Daisy and Quenten looked up at him when he moved to the edge of the loft. "Not today because those fields are soaked. Tomorrow we'll go for a long walk in Oak Orchard; I want to look at the cave again."

Rain started to come down harder and he could hear it hitting the rusting tin that comprised the barn roof. Brad glanced out the loft window across the field while he thought.

I'm so damn tired of being alone. Day after day it's just me and two dogs. My only living relatives are my grandparents far away in Watkins Glen. I'm going to sell this farm and get the hell out of here. There's no reason to stay; no cattle anymore and hundreds of acres growing nothing but weeds.

On the far left side of the hayloft were several boxes of his mother's

possessions he still had to sort through. The boxes sat there untouched for many months because he hated looking at the contents. Every piece of paper and every item only made him recall a sad or painful memory. Brad took a deep breath and forced himself to move closer. He opened the first box that had on the top marked in her writing, *Brad's school papers*. A drawing was on top of the stack that he'd done when he was in school. It depicted tall trees that grew just beyond the field at the edge of Oak Orchard Swamp. He had even drawn the cave and titled the picture, *Oak Orchard*, in very large red letters.

“God, how long have I been obsessed with that damn swamp? I couldn't have been more than ten years old when I drew this.”

He put the picture back in the box and returned to the loft window. He thought about the swamp and glanced to the left.

Near that large oak that grows on the forest's fringe is the place I usually enter. A couple hundred yards further the creek slowly flows west. The dead maple tree that spans Oak Orchard Creek is where I always cross. About a half mile into the deep swamp is the limestone formation that holds the cave.

Lush vegetation near the cave entrance was never disturbed; he surmised that whatever was out there walked only on the rock near the entrance to avoid leaving any trail. He'd never even known there was a cave in the limestone outcropping because brambles and nettles grew all around it. Until his now dead father had shown him the dark entrance years ago he'd never been afraid of the large rock formation. Brad knew they were in there. His father told him so many times when they'd hunted near the entrance and even threatened when he was only a small boy to throw him in the cave. He remembered his words vividly.

“Boy, stay away from that damn cave. They'll grab your ass and haul you down into the rock. Do what I tell you or I'll throw you in there with them.”

He watched the tree line and thought about his mother never disagreeing or trying to protect him. She'd known only too well that the consequences of any protest would mean another beating for them both. He loved his mother so much, but his father he dreaded. The bastard was long

dead now and could never hurt him or his mom who had suffered so long. She was in heaven and he hoped his father was burning in hell. So many years of pain and suffering; threats that were sometimes idle and sometimes real. How had his mother stood the abuse for so long? He'd never understood.

The farm was very isolated by its rural location. His nearest neighbors lived almost three miles away on the dilapidated asphalt of Hanscom Road that eventually meandered its way into a small town. Oak Orchard Swamp bordered his land on two sides and the federal government had declared almost all of it a "Wildlife Preserve" several years ago.

The swamp was named for Oak Orchard Creek that drained the area. It was filled with migrating geese in the spring and fall and its dark waters marked the boundary between his property and the preserve. The creek's water was always stained a deep tea brown due to innumerable leaves that fell into its murky depths from trees growing along the muddy banks.

When he explored the area inside the swamp Brad always crossed Oak Orchard Creek on the same large dead maple tree that had fallen across the water years ago. Oak and maple trees were dense in the drier areas. Large poplar and willows would direct the way to the wetter areas of the preserve. The huge trees weren't second growth in some areas and had never been harvested. He imagined some of them must be at least two hundred years old growing freely in the undisturbed depths of the swamp. Their leafy canopy effectively blocked the majority of sunlight from penetrating to the forest floor. The shadowed ground beneath the trees was covered with areas of poison ivy, large ferns, and other plants that only required mottled sunlight to grow and flourish. When the previously cultivated fields of his now inactive farm ended he would enter the forest and find himself only a few hundred feet from Oak Orchard's deep swamp. It had its own distinctive odor. One of rotting vegetation and stagnant water filled with frogs and insects.

He had been recently puzzled when he explored the wildlife preserve bordering his land because tracks of deer had almost disappeared. In the last four months Brad hardly ever saw any in the early morning moving out of the dense foliage to feed in the now fallow fields. When he was younger they were everywhere; now he only rarely caught a glimpse of any forest creature that had previously been so plentiful in the area.

Maybe whatever was watching him had driven them away. Brad had even penetrated into the swamp's depths at night and sat totally immobile

trying to get a glimpse of something. Swarms of mosquitoes attacked relentlessly after dark. Night entry into Oak Orchard was only possible in the early spring or fall when the innumerable insects would be lethargic from the chill after sunset. The dogs would sit quietly at his side on command and he'd hold a flashlight prepared to turn it on at the slightest noise. Occasionally, a possum or raccoon would move through the vegetation and he would startle it with the light. He never saw anything else. At night the feeling of being watched by something became so intense that he had to physically resist the urge to turn on the light or get up and run.

He had no idea how big the things that he suspected dwelt in the limestone cave were or any other details about them. If the cave was truly their den they must be smaller than he was. He'd shined a powerful flashlight into the cave entrance several times and could see that in order to pass a narrowing of the rock they'd be somewhat smaller than an adult human would.

Brad never shared the fact that he thought he was being watched or that he knew some sort of unidentified animal was secretly dwelling in Oak Orchard Swamp. He assumed some people thought him strange living alone on the hundreds of acres that comprised his inactive farm far away from anyone else. His scarred face always made him feel self-conscious around people and he wasn't by any stretch of the imagination a part of the local mainstream.

Again, he thought he saw movement through the loft window but knew from his many hours of vigilance that the mind and eyes would play tricks on a person if they concentrated intently on a single spot for very long. There was little wind today. On windy days watching was simply impossible and made him extremely uncomfortable. Trees would sway and the forest would be filled with moving limbs almost like it was a conscious entity beckoning him to approach.

The rain from an overcast sky stopped and he left the barn to take up a new position on the north side of the old farmhouse. A few more minutes of watching and he'd go inside to fix a meager supper. His two dogs followed him from the barn and he motioned for them to sit at his side. He raised the scope from his father's rifle and watched the perimeter of the trees closely. The scope was all he'd bothered to keep from father's old rifle; the firearm itself fostered too many bad memories. He'd burned all remnants of his