

THE HAUNTING OF  
HOUNDS HOLLOW

J E F F R E Y S A L A N E



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*Breathe in, breathe out.*

*The boy with tousled brown hair huddled low behind a tree, trying hard to steady his rapid breathing. He leaned into the shadows as the bright moon cast a glow like a searchlight overhead. Forest sounds shuddered to life, and the leaves whispered a warning on their branches. This world was out to get him. The warm wind blew down his neck like a breath in the darkness as smaller animals scurried past in sudden bursts. He wasn't alone anymore.*

*The boy stayed put and kept still with his fingers pushed into the soft, damp earth, like a sprinter waiting for the start signal in a race for his life.*

*Breathe in, breathe out.*

*The silence was deafening. There was no other noise than his own thin breath. Still, he clenched his jaw and waited, preparing for what came next.*

*And then, the signal. A lone howl cracked through the empty forest, scaring everything away, even the wind. The horrible sound was like a monster breathing through a dead animal's bones. When the boy heard it, his insides froze. He had no idea what made that terrifying sound. He hoped he never would.*

*Breathe in, breathe out.*

*As the cry went silent, the boy sprinted. He ran violently. He didn't care about what was in his way. Trees, rocks, cliffs, snakes, he darted past everything to keep away from the howl at his back. His knees hurt from running over the uneven ground, but the boy kept moving forward. It was the only way he might be safe.*

*The forest behind him erupted. The beast had found his scent. Steady, unsettling gasps chugged like a hungry train chasing him. The boy's breath sped up to match the beast's wild rhythm.*

*Breathe in, breathe out.*

*Breathe in, breathe out.*

*Breathe in breathe out breathe in breathe out breathe in breathe out breathe in breathe out breathe in breathe out breathe breathe breathe breathe breathe breathe breathe breathe.*

*A sharp pain tore across his shoulders, shoving the boy face-first to the ground. Dirt flew into his eyes as a heavy weight stepped onto his back and legs.*

*"Please, please," the boy pleaded as he spit earth from his mouth. "What do you want?! What are you?!"*

*But there was no answer. There was only the wet smack of a tongue licking its chops followed by a low growl that resonated through the boy. The race was over.*

*Even though he was filled with fear, the boy opened his eyes. The forest was illuminated by a light cast from behind him. He could see the trees and bushes, but they seemed to look away*

*somehow, as if nature itself did not want to witness what was about to happen. But the light . . . maybe someone had come to stop this from happening again?*

*“Anyone? Please! Someone! HELP!” he screamed.*

*That’s when the beast took its first bite.*

# CHAPTER 1

Lucas Trainer woke up in his bed for the last time.

It was dark, but the city streetlights gave his room a twilight glow through the closed venetian blinds. He hated those blinds. They always let in too much light. But after Lucky, the family cat, shredded the curtains Lucas had picked out, he was left with the blinds that had been installed when they first moved into their New York City apartment. And now they were moving out.

But the streetlight wasn't what woke him. It was the dream again. A strange nightmare for a kid who lived in the city, but when were nightmares ever supposed to make sense?

Outside, a sound rang out—most likely an animal scrounging the trash for food. Lucas had learned to tune out most of the neighborhood sounds in the city. People on their phones loved to stop in front of his window to have their deepest, most personal conversations. Dog walkers, kids singing at the top of their lungs, skateboarders, police sirens, fire engines . . . they were basically white noise to him. There was even a guy who collected cans from the building's recycling bin under his window. He always whistled a creepy tune while he foraged through the clinking glass bottles and crinkling soda cans. Lucas had asked his mom one time why the guy whistled.

“Probably to announce himself,” she had told him. “That way we know he’s not a stranger or a thief.”

But he *was* a stranger, thought Lucas. And he could be a thief, right? He was stealing their recycling, wasn’t he? Of course, Lucas never said that to his mother. She would have gone off on how society forgets people on its march into the future, and how it’s our responsibility to remember and help all those left behind. She was a social worker, after all. With an emphasis on the *was*. But it wouldn’t matter in the morning: Everything in their lives was about to change. This was his last night at home.

The sound in his dreams, though . . . *that* was a different story. It was a mixture between a howl and demented laughter—a guttural and haunting sound that tugged him out of a deep sleep like a claw reaching into his dreams.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, Lucas sat up. He removed the face mask that covered his nose and mouth, the hiss of air from the oxygen tank filling the room. Rubbing the bridge of his nose and around his chin, Lucas tugged on his necklace, which was suddenly tight. He still wasn’t used to it. The small key attached to the necklace flipped out from his collar. He traced it, then reached over and shut off the machine. The hiss stopped. Lucas took a breath of the night air for the first time and shifted to the lip of his loft bed.

His father built the bed into the wall seven years ago.

“Are you sure it will hold me and all my stuff?” Lucas had asked.

“Oh, definitely,” Dad told him. “This bed is a monument. It won’t break even if your room is invaded by an enemy army. Heck, I don’t think I could get it down again if I tried! If we ever move from here, we’ll have to leave this bed behind.”

Lucas stared down at the floor as his feet dangled over the edge. The bed had seemed so much taller when he was five years old. Now it felt like a little kid’s bed. His feet almost touched the ground, for crying out loud! He was kind of happy never to sleep in it again.

He jumped and landed with a thud. The entire room shook under his weight. He winced at the sharp pain in his knees. His parents had warned him about jumping down from bed in his condition. Not that anyone really knew what his condition was. But still, he had a long list of things that doctors said he couldn’t do. Lucas interpreted that as things he *shouldn’t* do. So every now and then he broke the rules.

Lucas made his way to the window through the shadows of packed moving boxes. He flicked the shade open with two fingers to search the street. No one was there.

“Just a dream,” he mumbled to himself. “What’d you expect? A werewolf? Come on. With your luck, maybe you’d spot a vampire rat. *Maybe.*”