

## Chapter 1: Frog Giggin'

### Near Future: Briarcliffe Acres—Myrtle Beach, South Carolina USA

Early Sunday Morning

Sander lies in his bed listening in the dark. Silence. His parents are asleep. He looks to his younger brother's bed across the room. Heavy breathing. Good, the little brat's asleep. Sander checks the time: 1:00 a.m. He needs to get moving. His best friend, Brody, will be waiting down the street.

Sander slides silently out of bed and quickly puts on the clothes he'd tossed to the floor earlier. The boy's bedroom features a window at a height of five feet. A few months earlier, Sander had removed the screen from the window and hid it behind the bushes in the backyard.

Sander also moved his old toy box to rest beneath the window creating a perfect step. Now the window is waist height; easy for him to get out. It's a six-foot jump from the window to the grass. It's a perfect way to sneak out of the house.

He has snuck out many weekend nights to meet up with Brody and other friends to hang out or go frog giggin' in the South Carolina wetlands. After slipping on his shoes, he steps up on the wooden toy box, and begins to slide the window open.

"Where are you going?" The voice of his younger brother, Colton, breaks the night's silence. Sander is startled. He's snuck out and back many times without waking Colton.

"Shush. You'll wake up Mom and Dad," Sander says in a hushed tone.

"Going out for a date with your boyfriend, Brody?" asks Colton.

Sander responds to Colton's comment by deftly stepping from the toy box to his brother's bed then dropping to his knees, straddling his brother's body. He lowers his fist slowly to the center of Colton's chest. "One punch, brat. One hard punch, right here, and your heart will stop beating. You'll be dead. Good riddance!" Sander presses his knuckled fist hard into Colton's chest, knowing it's painful.

Colton raises his hips forcefully attempting to buck his brother off. The headboard of the bed knocks against the wall with a loud *thunk*. Both boys freeze. They listen for parents awakened by the noise. Colton whispers, "Let me go with you."

Sander grinds his fist into Colton's chest, once more for good measure, before rising and stepping adroitly back to the toy box. "Find your own friends, wimp. We don't want you tagging along," argues Sander, in an equally whispery voice.

"I won't bother you guys. Come on. Dad said I should get out of the house more," Colton pleads.

"Yeah, he said you should make your own friends, not hang out with mine," Sander replies, as he slides the window open wide enough to scramble through.

"I'll tell Mom you've been sneaking out."

"You tell Mom and I'll kill you, you friggin' little brat. God, why couldn't I have been an only child?"

"Let me go with you and I won't tell."

"All right. Shit! Don't make any noise and stay away from me."

Colton throws back his blankets to reveal he's fully dressed and ready for adventure. The boys then crawl out the window and jump to the grass. Brody, a tall, thin, fifteen-year-old boy with unruly dark hair and a face full of acne is waiting a few houses down the street.

Brody spots the boys approaching. "Hey, Sander. I almost gave up on ya. What? You brought the little Colt? I thought he's afraid of the dark."

"He begged me to bring him along."

"Hey, Colt. Better watch out, the swamp monster might get you!"

"Yeah, let's feed him to the swamp monster, or dump him into the pond and frog gig him," exclaims Sander excitedly as the three boys walk along the street heading toward the wetlands of scattered ponds and tall grass.

"Ah, knock it off, guys," Colton replies. "I'm not afraid. The only thing to be afraid of, out here are the coyotes. Didn't you hear on the news? Last week a couple teenagers were found out in the wetlands. Their bodies all chewed up by coyotes. It was a bloody mess."

"Coyotes! We've never seen any coyotes out here, have we, Sander?" Brody asks, the panic evident in his voice.

"Nah, Colton's probably making it up. I don't think we have coyotes on the Carolina coast," Sander says.

The boys walk along a dirt trail that winds through tall grass, leading into the wetlands. "If you listen carefully you might hear a coyote howl in the distance," Colton whispers in his creepiest voice.

“Shut up, Colton! You’re not going to scare us,” Sander says, as he picks up his pace to walk abreast of Brody. Colton walks quietly behind the older boys, then pulls his shirt over his mouth and lets out a soft howl, trying to make it sound like the howl is coming from a distance.

“Colton, knock it off. I know that was you. I should have tied you to your bed and gagged you, so you can’t squeal to Mom.” Then Sander hears another howl. He’s startled and stops for a moment to listen.

Brody tries to keep his composure, but when Sander looks at him, he can’t contain himself and breaks into a giggle. Colton howls again. Sander smiles, then makes a loud, exaggerated howl. The boys walk through the wetlands howling in the night, like a pack of coyotes.

After several howls, the boys reach their favorite frog gigging pond. Howls are replaced by the sound of croaking frogs. Brody goes to a nearby tree to retrieve the frog gigging sticks he and Sander had prepared earlier. They had cut long thin branches, stripped them of leaves, and sharpened one end to make six-foot-long spears. Brody hands one of the spears to Sander. “We only have two spears, so you have to watch our deadly attacks,” Sander says to Colton as he holds his spear like a warrior.

Colton doesn’t look disappointed.

“Don’t worry. If I get tired, I’ll let you use my spear,” says Brody.

Sander walks to the edge of the pond, holding his spear at the ready. He listens and looks for nearby frogs, then jabs his spear into the weeds at the pond’s edge, making a sound: “Hi-ya!” He extracts the spear from the weeds. No frog.

Brody tiptoes along the edge of the pond, looking for a good spot to mount his attack. He steps closer to the edge. Water seeps into his shoes. He sees a frog, raises his spear, and thrusts. The frog jumps just in time to miss certain skewering. “Damn it! I missed,” cries Brody. Sander and Brody search for their next quarry.



Colton quickly loses interest in the frog-spearing expedition. He studies the sky. It’s a cloudless night and the absence of the moon allows the stars to shine brighter. He can make out some of the constellations he’d learned about at scout camp. As he gazes at the stars, a bright light appears in the eastern sky over the Atlantic. Growing bigger and brighter, the light is moving fast toward the shore. A few seconds later, it’s obvious the bright light is headed straight for the wetlands.

“Hey, guys, look at the sky,” Colton yells. “It’s a shooting star.”

Brody and Sander look up, spears in hand. The object becomes blindingly bright before it explodes in the sky. For a few seconds, the explosion is so bright, it's as if night has turned to day. The boys instinctively cover their eyes, shielding them from the sudden brightness. They see the explosion first, then hear the sound.

Brody jumps and hollers, "Wow, did you see that? It exploded!"

"Dang, that was awesome! Maybe it's an alien spaceship crashing to Earth," exclaims Sander.

Twenty seconds after the explosion, a tremendous hot wind knocks the boys over. A strange *sphit, sphit, sphit* sound accompanies the wind. The wind passes swiftly, and then all is calm. Sander attempts to stand. He gets up on one knee.

Colton, laying in the mud, looks to his brother and sees several blood spots staining Sander's shirt. "You're bleeding."

Sander looks at his shirt and notices the blood spots. "I don't feel anything." Sander looks at Colton. Colton has several spots of blood on his shirt, as well, and they're growing larger.

"You're the one bleeding, don't blame me." Sander looks over to Brody, who's lying in the mud. He isn't moving.

Colton struggles to move. He tries to get out of the muddy patch he fell in, but he can't move his body. He whimpers, "I'm telling Mom." Those are Colton's last words. He lies quiet and still at the muddy edge of the pond. The blood spots on his shirt swell, growing into one big blood stain.

Sander feels warm blood run over his night-chilled skin. The blood is his. He tries again to stand. With great effort, he gets to his feet and stumbles over to Brody. In the dim light, he can see Brody's face. There's a black hole where his friend's nose was. Brody is dead.

Sander turns and takes a few steps up the trail then slumps to his knees before toppling over onto his side. He lies in the muddy trail breathing in halting gasps. He doesn't try to move or cry out. Sander's eyes are open. He observes the wetland grass and watches a small bug climb up a stalk. "Damn, I left the bedroom window open." He exhales. Sander is dead.



## CTBTO Monitoring Station

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) is a network comprised of forty-five infrasound stations designed to track atomic blasts across the planet as part of the nuclear test ban treaty. The strange thing is, beginning in the year 2000, they started intercepting strange sounds that were not atmospheric atomic blasts. Through the year 2030, the infrasound system had catalogued 186 major explosions on Earth. It turns out, none were caused by A-bombs; they were all the result of asteroid strikes.

The CTBTO started digging into the reports. The asteroid events ranged in energy from one to six hundred kilotons. By way of comparison, the bomb that destroyed the Japanese city of Hiroshima was a fifteen-kiloton device. Fortunately, most of these space rocks disintegrated high in the atmosphere and caused few problems on the ground. Some of the events people will have heard about, such as the twenty-meter-wide object that ripped across the sky above the Russian city of Chelyabinsk in 2013 or the forty-meter-wide asteroid that lit up the skies over Buffalo, New York on a winter day in 2024. But many of the asteroid strikes on Earth went unseen and unreported because they occurred over the oceans.

The CTBTO began listening for atmospheric asteroid impacts in 2013. What they didn't know was another government agency began listening to the feed as well. And that agency does more than listen.



Early Sunday morning the CTBTO detects an atmospheric asteroid explosion over the South Carolina wetlands. The signal is picked up by a remote monitoring site. Because the impact is over a populated region, a surveillance satellite outfitted with cameras and infrared imaging is directed to scan the impact area to determine if there has been any damage.

A young woman sits in a dark room. Her young face glows from the light of several screens arrayed before her as she views the drone footage in real time. She wears a blue tunic; her long hair is pulled back. She is professional and stoic as she surveys the impact site. Three heat signatures appear on a screen. She presses an icon and reports. "We have three down located at 33.786435° latitude, 78.749677° longitude."

There is silence for a moment, then a monotone voice replies, "Confirmed. Dispatching."



### **Before Daylight—Wetlands near Myrtle Beach, SC**

Fog lingers lazily over the silent wetland pond. A team of four men dressed in flat-gray, digitally generated camouflaged suits work efficiently and nearly invisibly in the predawn light.

The four men do not attempt to eradicate the scene. The dead are dead. No one can change that, but they can control the perception of the cause of death. Brody's body is already stiffening. Rigor mortis is setting in. All the easier to stand him up. One of the men squats down and struggles to keep Brody standing while another man positions a shotgun in the dead boy's hands, pointing the barrel at his face.

The team's leader, a tall muscular man with a bald head receives a call on his VUE lens. He views a stout, Caucasian man, wearing a white business shirt and thick black framed glasses. The chubby man speaks. "Kobalt, is the site under control?"

The team leader, dressed in the same gray camouflage as his team, wears no markings to indicate rank or military affiliation, yet his physique and the way he moves conveys that he is military or ex-military. He speaks sharply, with a deep raspy tone. "We're almost finished."

The shotgun blasts. A mist composed of pulverized brain and bone fills the air. The kneeling man holding Brody allows the teenage body to jolt backward. The body falls stiffly in the grassy mud. The frogs are silent, watching.

The white man displayed in the VUE lens speaks. "The gun shots will be reported to the police. Local news will report an accidental shooting followed by suicide. A late-night teenage adventure gone wrong. Another episode of an illegal gun used by juveniles."

Kobalt nods. With hand gestures, he directs his men to begin sweeping the ground to cover their footprints. He looks in his VUE lens to continue his report. "Understood, sir. That's what local law enforcement will find when they arrive to investigate the scene."

The white man with the black frame glasses gives an approving nod. "Truly tragic for the families. What happened is out of our control. We can only control the perception."

Kobalt and his team move gingerly through the grass of the wetlands, sweeping the trail of their boot prints while leaving the imprints of the boys' shoes, leading the way for investigators to discover the gory scene.

Kobalt speaks softly but with a force that is picked up through the microphone of his VUE lens. "We can't keep this up. My team is exhausted. The frequency of events is increasing. We've been chasing these things around the globe. How long do you think can we keep going like this?"

The man in the VUE replies, “Kobalt, the time is near. We have controlled the news and information to keep the masses peaceful. We have worked ceaselessly to keep them unaware of what’s coming, and we have been supremely successful. Even the highest levels of government around the world are oblivious to what’s about to happen. It’s nearly time. Once you have secured the scene, bring your men and join us in the city.”

After the sun rose on the wetlands that morning, police investigators and the coroner came to the desired conclusion. There is no news about the threat of asteroids impacting Earth, killing teenage boys.



Later that morning, the portly man dressed in the white button-down shirt and black rim glasses watches a video stream from the Myrtle Beach news. He watches a young female reporter recount the story: “Three boys are reported dead this morning, apparently after playing with an old rusty, outlawed shotgun they found in the wetlands. Police are calling this a terrible accident. They believe one of the boys accidentally fired a shot striking his two friends. The boy with the gun, then took his own life. It’s truly a sad day for our community. Our condolences go out to the boys’ families.” The report moves on to an interview with the chief of police, who warns citizens not to pick up or use illegal firearms.

The news is controlled.

Control. This is the objective of the man who observes. He watches the screens displayed in his VUE, satisfied with the outcome of this event.