

## CHAPTER 1- -INSTINCT

Elijah Hawk mindlessly separated his mashed potatoes into four even piles on his plate, twirling each pile with his fork until they turned into a sort of creamy whip that looked like thick soup. Dinner was the last thing on his mind. His mom always made delicious food that took him just heartbeats to devour, but at the moment, it was as appetizing as a plate full of fish bait. Elijah continued staring at his uneaten food as he half-listened to his sister, Kyria, talk about her day.

“I’ve heard that Mr. Walker is the hardest of the advanced teachers, but my friend Wendy says I shouldn’t have any trouble in his class as long as—”

Elijah couldn’t keep up with Kyria. She could sure ramble! The schedule for her first year of high school came through the mail the other day, and that was all she could talk about. It was just as well. Elijah much preferred this side of Kyria than the past six months, where she kept to herself up in her room, writing in her diaries. She always had a look of worry on her face, and any time Elijah came in to talk with her or play a game of Monopoly in the back room like they had on countless occasions, she looked upset.

“Are you okay, dear?” Elijah’s mom asked, interrupting his moping. He nodded his head half-heartedly.

School was just around the corner, and he knew what that meant. It meant the start of a giant rat race to become noticed—especially by girls. Despite doing everything he could during the summer to bulk up, he remained as skinny as fishing line. Elijah had hopes of returning for his last year in junior high with everyone talking about how buff he had gotten. But that wouldn't be the case. He couldn't understand it. Both his father and his father's brother, Uncle Stan, were broad and muscular. When was it his turn? Elijah sighed, knowing that he would now be spending his thirteenth year trying to avoid the lucky kids who *had* filled out this summer. He returned to his mashed potatoes.

“Elijah, are you sure you're okay?”

Mothers. They always know.

“I'm fine, Mom.”

“Do you want me to make you something else? You haven't touched your pork chop.”

Elijah continued building his mashed potato fortress.

“I'm just not hungry.”

Kyria looked over, studying him. Her anguished look returned when he made eye contact with her, which sent him even deeper into his self-pity.

“I'm sorry, sweetheart.” Elijah's mom walked over and kissed him on the head which made him feel better, although he would never admit it. “When your father gets home, Elijah, the two of us want to talk with you.” Kyria lit up for some reason.

“About what?” he asked.

“We can discuss it later. It will be late, but it's important.”

Super. That can't be good. He excused himself and left his mother at the table looking concerned.

Later that evening, Kyria found Elijah upstairs in his room reading a book at his desk. She flopped down on his bed and held her chin in her palms.

“So, what’s got you all twisted?”

“Nothing.”

“HA! Liar. Is it a girl?”

Elijah blushed. “No. It’s just—” Kyria waited patiently while Elijah calculated the risks of telling his sister what bothered him. “Nevermind.” She didn’t push it. Instead, she rolled over on her back and stared up at his bedroom ceiling.

“Well, whatever it is, I hope you snap out of your funk. You’re no fun like this.” She looked at him playfully, which made Elijah smile. Kyria could always get him to smile. Last year, they attended a funeral for some great aunt named Florence, and while everyone else was grieving, Kyria and Elijah spent the entire time trying to stifle their nervous laughter. It was highly inappropriate! Elijah finally had to quit looking at his sister, but even then the visions of her giggling kept popping into his head and he had to excuse himself, pretending that he was too overcome with emotion to stay in the sanctuary.

“Well, you’re one to talk, loser. You’ve spent the last six months holed up in your room. Talk about a funk.”

She turned and smiled at him.

Kyria was as beautiful as she was clever. Her dark brown hair was long and straight, usually tied in a careless ponytail. Though she never wore braces, her teeth were perfectly aligned. She had big green eyes and her skin was golden tan with just a sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks, which stood out more in the summer. She stood tall and thin and had she not been so

consumed with school, she would have had the boys lining up at the front door to go out with her.

As for Elijah, he was also tall and thin. But that was the problem. He was too thin. He wished he would fill out soon. Elijah had light brown hair—some would call it blonde—and deep-blue eyes that in the right light would rival the color of the ocean. His parents had dark hair like Kyria’s, which made Elijah stand out when they traveled together, and he hated that. It was like a constant reminder that he was somehow different even though it was his own family.

“If you tell me what you’re so upset about, then I’ll tell you what I’ve been writing in my diary,” Kyria said.

“Like I care about all the hot boys with dreamy skin you’ve got a crush on!” Kyria reached over and punched Elijah in the arm. “Ow!”

“Serves you right. Fine, I won’t tell you. At least not now.” Kyria had a look that made Elijah curious. Like she was being sneaky and liked it. She stood up and headed for the door. “Promise me you’ll tell me what Mom and Dad talk to you about, will you?”

“Sure,” said Elijah. “See you tomorrow.” Kyria walked out smiling. It was good to have her old self back.

Elijah never did find out what his parents were going to talk with him about because he fell asleep long before his dad came home.

One in the morning.

Elijah’s eyes popped open.

Quiet.

Dead quiet.

Something wasn't right.

Elijah suddenly jolted upright knowing one terrifying truth. He was in danger! Staring up at his bedroom ceiling, he felt an unsettling warmth from the depths of his gut surge through his body. This strange sense warned him that if he didn't move now, he wouldn't survive the night.

Elijah sprang up from his bed and immediately darted to the darkest corner of his room, hiding from something he couldn't see or hear. For what seemed like hours, he froze, covering his mouth to muffle the sound of his breathing. He tried to calm himself down to think more clearly about what he needed to do.

He had to warn his family! Elijah was certain of the danger he sensed, but he didn't know what, or where, it was. He thought of his parents and sister who were still in their beds, sleeping unalarmed. They hadn't been startled awake by this strange sensation—this instinct. It was up to him to somehow warn them, but still remain quiet.

The telephone! He could call them to warn them. That would be silent—at least from his end of the line. The problem was, the nearest phone was downstairs in the kitchen. He would have to make it downstairs without being seen or heard, call the separate phone line in his parents' room, and then make it to safety. Suddenly, his body began to warm up again. It was time to move!

Elijah instinctively crawled out his door. His heart raced and pounded against his chest as he reached the top of the staircase. He felt exposed and vulnerable, but he continued trusting his instincts. He kept moving.

Many times during his terrifying descent down the stairs, Elijah was tempted to bolt for his parents' room and wake them up, but something inside told him that was wrong. If he only

knew why! Elijah finally reached the bottom of the staircase and made an immediate right turn toward the kitchen.

For a moment, an unexpected panic set in. He had just a few steps to go to get into the kitchen, but his legs refused to move. Elijah bent down next to the staircase and cowered, suddenly sensing that whatever was in the house was on the move.

“Pull yourself together, Elijah,” he demanded silently. “You’re safe so far. Whatever it is doesn’t know you’re here, or it would have gotten you already. And if it *is* after you, it would be looking upstairs.”

Elijah reached the kitchen and picked up his pace. He quietly handled the phone and crouched down in the corner with it, his hands shaking violently as he dialed the other line. In just seconds he could warn his family and everything would be okay.

“C’mon, c’mon, ring.” He knew it sometimes took a second before the phone registered the call, but it seemed like an unusually long time.

Click.

Silence.

His heart was about to explode out of his chest!

The phone was dead.

Looking around, Elijah noticed that all power to the house was gone, leaving the room in almost complete darkness. He looked around to gather his sight. The only light, which was peeking through the front window, was from the moon. As Elijah scanned the room from under the kitchen counter, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, something flickered through the moonlight. It was so fast that at first Elijah wondered if it was actually in the house, or if it was just a shadow from outside, made by a bird or an insect. Nothing human could move *that*

quickly! Just as he was about to dismiss what he'd seen, a figure appeared, stopping right in front of the kitchen doorway.

It was the figure of a man! Elijah did everything he could to keep from screaming out in horror. He was tempted to close his eyes and curl up in a ball, but as terrified as he was, he needed to be alert enough to react. The figure didn't seem to notice him, and then, just as quickly as he moved the first time, the figure was gone.

Elijah fought the rising wave of panic as his reality set in on him. There was a dangerous man in his house. This man was able to move very quickly—almost animal-like. And now, Elijah couldn't see him.

After a deep breath, Elijah decided to make a break for the front door. He thought that once he was outside, he could yell and scream and make all kinds of noise to wake up anyone in the neighborhood to call the police. But he couldn't seem to move.

“Let's go Elijah,” he thought to himself. “Just a few steps and then explode toward the door.” He resisted the urge to stay still as he crept back through the kitchen, inching closer and closer to the door.

“Only a few more steps and you can run.”

He looked behind him to see if he was safe.

No one there.

He turned back to the front door.

His body tensed up to make his move, but suddenly, the figure reappeared directly between Elijah and the door. Elijah felt his heart in his throat, and he held his breath. If the figure turned around, he would see Elijah. If Elijah moved, the figure would see the movement. His only option was to stand still, just feet from the dark figure, and hope to remain invisible.

His mind raced. Why was this figure here in the first place? He didn't seem to be stealing things. The figure had to be searching for something, or—Elijah gulped—*someone*. Just as he thought this, the figure's head began to scan the room.

And then, he saw Elijah!

For a split second their eyes met, and Elijah saw two terrifying, yellow eyes glaring back at him. The rest of the figure's face was hidden in the shadows and his body was covered by dark material. Elijah's focus blurred and he briefly thought he was going to pass out from fright before his survival instincts kicked in. He quickly scampered toward the back door just as the figure started chasing him.

He turned the corner yanking his mother's china cabinet down. It fell with a deafening crash! He didn't look back to see if that slowed his attacker.

Elijah reached the back bedroom and bolted toward the door, throwing behind him anything he could grab. Just before he reached the back door, his body pulsed again with heat. He trusted his instincts. Instead of continuing for the door, he turned immediately to the window on the right. Had he slowed down to open the door, the figure would have reached him. As it was, his attacker's momentum slammed him through the door hard enough for it to break.

Elijah had the window open in moments and dove out into the side yard. The figure would be in the backyard now, so Elijah immediately turned toward the front yard. Suddenly, in mid-step, he felt strong arms grab him tightly and a hand clapped over his mouth.

“Elijah, ssshhhhh!” An immediate sense of relief hit him. It was his dad. Elijah began to sink into the strong arms for comfort, but his dad quickly thrust him back to look into his face. “Listen to me, Elijah. There's no time to explain, there's no time to think. You have to do exactly what I say, and you have to do it immediately, understand?” Elijah nodded, choking

back a sudden stream of tears. He wanted nothing more than to stay with his dad who would make everything better.

“You need to run somewhere and call for help. Stay there! Do *not* come back tonight under any circumstances. And this is the most important thing to remember, and you *have* to remember it. There is a plan and we love you very much. GO!”

Elijah wasted no time. He ran as fast as he could toward the front yard and jumped over the fence. He fell on the other side, which knocked the wind out of him. Elijah knew he shouldn't have turned around to look, but he did. The figure stood calmly, looking at Elijah with those fierce yellow eyes. But this time, his dad was in the way, protecting him. He had risked enough to look back for just that instant, so he quickly turned and ran down the street toward the neighbors' house.