

PROLOGUE

Suffer the Children

WHEN OWEN SADDLER was thirteen years old and his sister Lori was five, the two of them went down to the cool, clear waters of China Cove to play, on a rare summer day when the whole family was together. Owen loved his sister, but he'd taken her along with him only begrudgingly. What he didn't like, more than anything, was being told what to do, and as it was his stepfather who'd stuck him with looking after Lori, he liked the task even less.

Already he felt a strong loathing toward the man pretending to be his father, a man Owen's mother had told him to call "Dad," but whom she herself called "Gerald," and never "Gerry." Owen couldn't remember his real father, but he was certain the man couldn't have been more different from Gerald. His real father had been a *strong* man, a *determined* man. He knew this because his mother had often said so, and Owen had a vague sense—not enough to be called a memory—of its truth. Gerald was neither of these, but he was tall, was often quick to anger, and he usually drank so much on these infrequent little trips that Owen's mother would have to drive them home. Yet for all the man's faults, he had given Owen a younger sister to pal around with (or ignore, depending on his mood), so Owen supposed he owed the man at least a little credit.

Lori plodded along in her candy-striped tank top and Adidas swim shorts, scooping up bottle caps, pop tabs, and candy wrappers with her shovel, crinkling her nose in disgust, and flicking them away in a scattering of sand. Owen followed along a short distance

behind her. Farther down the beach, some older boys were throwing a football, chasing each other, and laughing once they'd piled on top of one another, fighting over the ball. Owen made sure not to be caught too close to Lori, for fear the boys might lump him in the same category as her and call him a baby.

"Let's go back this way, okay?" he said, taking her hand and directing her away from the boys.

"I wanna go swimming," Lori said, pouting. She knew all about his dislike of water, of lakes in particular—he didn't like to call it "fear," but truthfully that was what it was—and he supposed she knew he wouldn't take her much closer, let alone join her. The sun beat down on the beach in China Cove, where the islands of Georgian Bay and the endless blue of Lake Huron came together. Owen wore a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* T-shirt to cover his scrawny chest (the smart one, Donatello, was his favourite), long board shorts, and his shoes and socks. He had grown too hot not to cool off his legs, but just the idea of stepping into the shallow surf troubled him. There was no reason for it, as far as he knew. Gerald had called it a "phobia." His mother had held her tongue when he'd said it, something Owen had thought unlike her.

"Mom said no swimming," he lied.

Lori's scowl was deepened by the shadow of her sun hat. "That's not true!"

"It is. Go ask her if you don't believe me."

Lori turned away from the water, toward the trees, where Gerald and their mother sat in the shade, her reading, him blowing the foam off a can of beer from the cooler. It was too far to shout, so Lori squinted up at her brother as if to assess his honesty. He struggled to keep a straight face. "Fine," she said finally, sulking until he let go of her hand.

Owen recalled snippets of a hushed conversation in the car on their way up to the lake, while Lori sang along to the music from her colorful "My First Sony" Walkman. Their mother hadn't wanted to come here, that much he'd been able to hear. But Gerald, who was usually neither strong nor determined, had put his foot down—literally, stepping on the accelerator—and had refused to reply to Margaret Saddler's passive-aggressive comments about Gerald's

impending drunkenness until she'd finally given up her protests, saying "Fine," in the same sulky tone their daughter did now.

Lori trudged to within a few paces of the water and peered back, apparently waiting for Owen to follow. He did, but only after realizing, too late, what she'd had in mind. Once she'd figured out he was too far away to catch up to her, she turned and ran: the sort of deke-out the boys playing football might have applauded.

"Cripes," he muttered, and chased after her.

Lori's little legs carried her into the surf before Owen had made it halfway to the water's edge. She was already up to her waist when he stopped dead where the waves left shapes in the sand as they retreated, disintegrating bit by bit a small mound of wet earth that had once been a sandcastle. Suddenly Owen no longer felt the sun's baking heat; instead, a cold, shuddering fear gripped him from head to toe.

There were creatures in the water with sharp teeth and spiny fins. There were bloodsucking leeches and turtles with vicious alligator snouts. There were slippery, slimy things that squirmed in the muck at the bottom of the lake, hideous blind invertebrates that had never seen daylight.

A wind whipped his hair. He turned and watched as it swished through the trees, tilting pines and rustling the branches of enormous maples. A steel-gray cloud suddenly blocked the sun. Owen frowned uneasily, and turned back toward the water to see Lori's sun hat blowing from her head. She cried out, half-laughing, and chased it farther out into the lake.

Out where it should have been too deep to stand, a man Owen hadn't noticed before was standing up to his ankles in the lake. Dressed in a white buttoned shirt and loose-fitting black pants, from whose right pocket Owen caught a glimmer of gold, the man locked eyes with him, and Owen found himself unable to look away. The wind caught the man's dark hair, and a malicious grin spread below his moustache. The man stretched out a hand toward Owen.

"Lori!"

Owen hadn't meant to scream, had only meant to call her out of the water. But the boys farther down the beach looked over at the sound of his cracking voice and snickered. Owen wheeled around to see Gerald and his mother rising from the picnic blanket. *Oh God,*

they're coming over, he thought, feeling the familiar warmth return, rising up his neck to his cheeks as embarrassment seized him.

"What's the big idea?" Lori grumbled, having retrieved her hat and waded back to where Owen now stood. She looked back out over the water, following his troubled gaze toward the man standing in the lake.

"That man," Owen said. The dark grin on the man's vaguely familiar face widened. "I think he's dangerous."

Lori shaded her eyes with a hand and squinted out at the lake. Owen was certain she was looking right at the man, but Lori turned back to her brother with a look of curiosity in her blue eyes. "What man?"

"Right there! You don't see him?" Owen jabbed a finger at the man, whose grin widened even further as he began to stride toward them, his brown leather shoes splashing on the surface of the lake, dampening the cuffs of his pants. "He's *right there!*"

"Who's right there?" Gerald said, approaching the children with a smirk. Owen turned to face him. Gerald stopped just in front of Owen, and planted the hand not holding a can of Old Vienna beer on his hip, in a posture of obstinateness with which Owen was all too familiar.

"Nobody," Owen said to him, still feeling the presence of the man behind them, wanting to turn and look, as he would have when retreating from a darkened basement. Watching for the monster. Sensing its approach. Finally, he couldn't stop himself from turning back to look. But there was no one. The surface of the water was clear, flat, empty. The man was gone.

Owen turned to Gerald, not comprehending. His mother approached then, and stood behind her husband wearing a disapproving scowl under her mass of brown curls. Owen felt tears begin to well up as a wild urge to defend himself overcame him, despite his reluctance to admit what he'd just seen. The man had been *there*. He'd *seen* him. A man walking on water. It wasn't possible... was it?

Seeing things, he thought.

Lori peered up at him sympathetically.

"There was a man," Owen said, his voice starting to quaver, his lower lip quivering: the telltale onset of weeping. "He was... he was standing on the water. He was *right there!*"

His mother and Gerald made a show of peering out at the bay where Owen pointed, but it was obvious they didn't believe him. Owen wouldn't have believed himself if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

"I don't see anyone," Gerald said.

"That's because he's *gone* now. He must have... he must have gone underwater."

"Owen, don't be silly," his mother said.

"I *saw* him, Mom."

"It was your imagination," she said, scowling off toward the water herself.

"You don't know what's in my head."

"Don't sass your mother," Gerald said.

"Shut up, *Gerald!*"

"Owen!" his mother scolded.

Gerald crushed the beer can, his face expressionless. Gerald with his pale legs and potbelly, with his lame jokes and stupid crumpled Panama hat. "All right," he said calmly. "This has gone on long enough." He let the crushed can fall from his fingers into the wet sand, then made toward Owen. Lori saw it coming and stepped out of their way.

"Gerald...?" Concern like broken glass in his mother's voice.

Owen backed away from Gerald's reach, glancing cautiously at the water behind him. "What are you doing? Get away from me!"

"No more phobias," Gerald said, snatching out at Owen, who quickly sidestepped out of his reach. The fear Owen had seen in his mother's eyes caused tears that had been standing in his own to brim and fall. "You're going in that *lake!*" Gerald growled. His long fingers nabbed Owen's right arm, squeezing so hard the flesh around them went stark white. Owen swung with his weak left fist, pounding feebly at Gerald's ribs while the much larger man dragged him toward the water.

"Let me go! Let me *GO!*"

Tears streamed down his face. Lori followed their progress with wide, fearful eyes. The older boys stopped playing to watch the spectacle.