

CHAPTER 1

FRIDAY

Heldrick sharpened his knife with slow, deliberate strokes, and wondered if he would find use for it again.

He glanced out the window. From the darkened cupola atop his old house Heldrick could observe the entire neighborhood, unseen. Clouds still darkened the sky, though the last drops of rain had fallen in the early morning. A group of youngsters played ball in the vacant lot across the street. The new boy and a few of the others wore jackets, for the air had an October chill, though August still clung to the calendar.

He expected no danger from the locals; he simply felt more comfortable keeping tabs on his surroundings, so he already knew where the new boy lived. The moving van had unloaded this morning, on the far side of the block across the street. And, later, he'd watched as the other boys pointed out Heldrick's house and filled the youngster with their juvenile tales of terror. Heldrick knew the stories: *Old Mr. Heldrick'll slice you up and put you in his soup. He'll hang you by your ears and torture*

you in his basement. If you step in his yard he'll come to your house at night and chop off your feet.

The children's parents, he had little doubt, believed quite the opposite: that, in fact, he rarely ventured past the door of his house. He'd taken steps to ensure that belief. He even had his groceries delivered. And yet—there were doors, and there were doors. He often left the house. The stories told by the children, though foolish, struck closer to the mark. At least they portrayed him as dangerous. He'd lost count of the men he had killed in his time.

Heldrick set the knife aside and picked up the shotgun, checking it over. He didn't expect to need it; he kept it for emergencies only.

Satisfied, he laid the gun down and reached once more for the knife. The clock on the wall ticked away the minutes.

One more trip, he decided.

Soon.