

**THE**  
**CLIFFSIDE**  
**CHRONICLES**

by

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FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

From *The Syphon*, Book 3 of THE CLIFFSIDE CHRONICLES.

PROLOGUE

*“Innocence, once lost, can never be regained. Darkness, once gazed upon, can never be lost.”*

—John Milton

That first Summer, after finishing our first year of high school, the Summer of '72, everything felt different. Everything had edges. Sharp ones. Our laughter, the cutting looks we gave and the kind we got, the ways we sliced the air as we walked. The shit we talked and wrote about each other and boys in Patty's slambook. The buzz we got drinking beer under the Dock Hill bridge. The tingles Kurt Sturdevant gave us when he took his shirt off at the reservoir. The way Todd Silver's Chevelle took Horseshoe Curve on 218 pushing 70. Even the early July air was sharp as a knife.

I figured it was a sign that we were growing up. That we were crossing from adolescence into adulthood, finally, without regret or wishing we were kids again. Well, that's what it seemed like at first.

The law, our teachers, and our parents might not recognize it, but fifteen's a girl and sixteen a woman, and you get no map, advice, guidance, counseling, or ABC after-school special to show you how to get from one to the other. Safely or sanely. Puberty pushes you out of a plane and kicks a bag with a bottle of Chantilly, strawberry lip gloss, cutoff Lees, Dr. Scholl's sandals, and a two-sizes-too-small Led Zep T-shirt after you.

As you're plummeting, trying to find the ripcord to open your parachute while reaching for that bag of tricks at the same time, you're told you're pretty, or that you've "blossomed," like that's some sort of gift, something vital to your survival, but it's not. It's just meant to distract you from pulling the ripcord at the right time so you don't land smoothly.

Because girls who land rough and break a bit on impact are easy prey.

If you're lucky enough to come down on your feet, your instincts tell you to head straight for the hills. You unbuckle your chute, grab your bag, and run like hell for the trees, lungs gasping for air and heart pushing blood to every part of you, because boys-disguised-as-men are being dropped in too. And they outnumber you. And God only knows what they've got in their survival kits, but it doesn't matter because boys-disguised-as-men do terrible things in packs, things they'd never have enough confusion, frustration, and even hate saved up to do alone. Things wolves, even the ones in sheep's clothing, wouldn't even do.

I didn't question any of it, not at the time. It turned out that some of the boys we thought we knew we really didn't know at all. And that cut both ways, if you know what I mean. It was simply part of growing up a girl in a small town in the USA and turning sixteen, and, like I

said, at first I thought that's why everything felt so sharp and cool and dangerous in the race to survive the sudden sprint from girl to woman.

But it turns out the sharpness wasn't because we were growing up.

Or it wasn't only that.

I know, because three of us didn't get to grow up that Summer.

Oh, sure, we looked the part in those cutoffs and bell bottoms and tight T-shirts and peasant blouses, drenched in Chantilly, our lips plump and glossy, pretending we liked the taste of beer, Boone's Farm, and Virginia Slims and boys-disguised-as-men on our tongues, and making out with Kurt Sturdevant to the Raspberries' "Go All The Way."

Easy prey.

Ready to be devoured.

So we had to sharpen our own claws.

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### *Third Landing Girl Reported Missing.*

That was the headline in the Landing Local a few days after the town began to wake up from its standard Fourth of July Budweiser and BBQ hangover. That was two weeks ago. It knocked everyone out of their stupors.

My name's Sara Raines and I knew all three girls.

I had no intention of becoming the fourth.

Beginning with the second disappearance, in May, Primo's Pizza rumbled with rumors of an escaped mental patient from Craig House or a perverted GI from West Point being responsible. In homeroom, creepy Donald Durning, sixteen going on eleven, drew a picture of a vampire with dripping fangs chewing on the neck of one girl and claws like knives impaling two others, until Mr. Bowman, shaking his head and looking terminally exhausted with such juvenile antics, told him it was disrespectful of the missing. He slowly and silently tore the drawing into pieces, tossed them into the air like confetti, and made Donald pick them up.

No one referred to the first two girls as dead because neither of them had been found that way.

Yet.

The Landing police suggested at first they might have run away together. Others said they were "wild," as if that explained what might have happened. They were called "white trash," "poor students," and "promiscuous." Reading between the lines, what I heard was "they got what they deserved."

But all the talk stopped with number three, because she was the only one they found. Well, most of her.

Mom even asked the usual question adults ask: “What kind of monster does something like that?”

Of course, no one thinks they mean an actual monster. They figure it’s gotta be one of those boys-disguised-as-men who just snapped. A human monster. A lunatic or a pervert.

Jenny’s number 1 suspect was Mr. Jeffries. A boy-disguised-as-a man all of 26 going on 18, and our social studies teacher freshman year. If James Franciscus and Joe Namath had a baby, he’d look like Barry Jeffries. Some girls claimed they were thinking of failing his class deliberately just so they could repeat it. And most of us, at one time or another, watched girls, even 8<sup>th</sup> graders, disappear into his red Volkswagen Beetle after school. But they always turned up the following morning in one piece, so we chalked Jenny’s suspicions up to her addiction to Agatha Christie mysteries.

Turns out Donald Durning’s drawing wasn’t too far off the mark. Except for the big boobs he always gave girls when he drew them.

And Barry Jeffries was eventually arrested, but not for what was happening to several girls-not-yet-women in the Landing that Summer.

You can’t arrest what was doing those things.

First you have to believe that it exists.

And then you have to kill it.

It all started in the tunnels.

And that’s where Sam said The Cliffsidiers had to end it.

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