

Excerpt from Chapter 1:

Gaylen sat with his back against a large moss-covered boulder, unaware that piercing blue eyes spied on him from Candlewood.

He snacked on his lunch of spiced deer jerky, fresh-baked bread covered with sweet butter, and a pint of the best cider found in Maupin Valley, all while staring at a hole in a large fir standing atop the scree-covered hillside in front of him. A small squirrel jumped out onto the tree limb that formed the front porch of its home.

Gaylen continued eating, careful not to make any threatening movements that might frighten his forest friend. He finished his cider and stretched his lanky frame out on the ground, rested his head on a small tuft of grass, and watched a single cloud drift across the sky as he pondered his uncertain future. Friends his age were leaving home to begin careers and families, the events in life that marked the beginning of adulthood. By social and physical standards, he was still a boy, but sensed he differed from others his age, a feeling he couldn't explain to his parents.

It was time for him to begin a life on his own, but he lacked direction since his parents prohibited him from doing what he wanted most, to enter and explore Candlewood. His mother got hysterical when he expressed a desire to venture into the mysterious forest and his father supported her position on the matter, without question. Gaylen realized his only option might be a declaration of independence followed by a quick departure into Candlewood.

Conflicting tales about the forest only fueled Gaylen's imagination, and he longed to know the truth surrounding the numerous fantastic stories told about the mysterious forest. He'd heard it was the home of wizards, elves, and many other miraculous inhabitants. Silver cities glittered in the sunlight, and rivers of honey flowed into cisterns for everyone to share. Dark tales claimed ogres, dwarves, and fiercer creatures lusted after the mere taste of human blood. He loved and feared the stories told around campfires; some thrilled and delighted him, while others raised the hairs on his neck and arms.

As Gaylen closed his eyes, the squirrel chattered a warning to his kin in distant trees. Gaylen jerked up on one elbow and searched for the source of the disturbance. He spotted an old man often seen during his outings along the edge of Candlewood. The locals called him Ol'man. Gaylen crouched behind the large boulder, afraid the man, thought to be quite eccentric, might discover him.

Ol'man was one of a very few travelers known to enter and leave the forbidden forest. The local folk told tales about people who entered Candlewood, people never seen again. A few of the most suspicious neighbors believed Ol'man was a wizard capable of powerful dark magic.

As Gaylen nervously watched the old man from his hiding place, the scorching sun brought beads of perspiration to his brow. He sucked in the musty air that drifted from the dank forest, where lichen and moss swung from every branch of every tree. A light breeze shifted, as it often did when spring turned to summer. It would blow steadily west out of Candlewood by the time the dry summer arrived. Where dappled sunlight pierced through the thick canopy, towering ferns, and a deep carpet of moss covered the ground.

Ol'man stepped out of the dense undergrowth amid the rustle of stiff fern fronds. He walked with his head down and shoulders hunched as he poked around in the thatch and grass with a long staff. Some locals thought he might be as much as 150 years of age. He was balding on top, but still had long white hair falling down over his shoulders, an untrimmed beard, long twisted mustache, and bushy eyebrows. His many wrinkles showed great age, hardship, or both. Gaylen didn't know anyone acquainted with Ol'man, but whispered gossip condemned the 'crazy old man' for being a friend to demons living in Candlewood.

Ol'man lay down his staff, picked up something, and put it into a basket dangling from the dark-red cord tied around the waist of his tattered brown robe. Without raising his eyes, he continued to poke through the grass, and meandered toward Gaylen's hiding place.

Gaylen shuddered with sudden urgency, his pulse raced. He was hiding behind the largest boulder sitting at the bottom of the pebble-strewn hillside, and couldn't climb up the hill without bringing down a landslide of rock. He remained concealed by working his way around the massive boulder.

Ol'man moved toward the forest for a few minutes, then changed direction again, and came closer to Gaylen's hiding place.

Gaylen could hear the old man approaching, the staff making a slight hissing sound as it passed back and forth through the stiff grass. He pressed his flushed, damp cheek against the cold stone, shifting to keep opposite the rock face where Ol'man was now poking in the pebbles. His heart went up into his throat and he felt faint."

Oho!" Ol'man hollered as he jumped to the top of the flat boulder with ease.

Gaylen gasped and leaped to his feet, Ol'man looming over him. He tried to back up, but the pebbles on the slope went out from under him and he landed on his butt. He looked up into the sunburned, wrinkled face of the old man, and felt like pitiful prey under the watchful eyes of a hungry predator.

"What have we here?" Ol'man said, cocking his head from side-to-side and rolling his eyes. "A fine boy for roasting in my largest stew pot at home? It's been a long time since I tasted the sweet flesh of a young human." He let out a booming laugh...