

# The Devil Crept In: A Novel

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An unforgettable horror novel from bestselling sensation Ania Ahlborn-hailed as a writer of "some of the most promising horror I've encountered in years" (New York Times bestselling author Seanan McGuire)-in which a small-town boy investigates the mysterious disappearance of his cousin and uncovers a terrifying secret kept hidden for years.

Young Jude Brighton has been missing for three days, and while the search for him is in full swing in the small town of Deer Valley, Oregon, the locals are starting to lose hope. They're well aware that the first forty-eight hours are critical and after that, the odds usually point to a worst-case scenario. And despite Stevie Clark's youth, he knows that, too; he's seen the cop shows. He knows what each ticking moment may mean for Jude, his cousin and best friend.

That, and there was that boy, Max Larsen...the one from years ago, found dead after also disappearing under mysterious circumstances. And then there were the animals: pets gone missing out of yards. For years, the residents of Deer Valley have murmured about these unsolved crimes...and that a killer may still be lurking around their quiet town. Now, fear is reborn-and for Stevie, who is determined to find out what really happened to Jude, the awful truth may be too horrifying to imagine.

Ania Ahlborn is the bestselling author of the horror thrillers *Brother*, *Within These Walls*, *The Bird Eater*, *The Shuddering*, *The Neighbors*, and *Seed*, and the novellas *The Pretty Ones* and *I Call Upon Thee*. Born in Ciechanow, Poland, she lives in South Carolina with her husband and their dog. Visit [AniaAhlborn.com](http://AniaAhlborn.com) or follow the author on Facebook and Twitter @AniaAhlbornAuthor. *The Devil Crept In* 1

JUDE BRIGHTON WAS missing. Stevie Clark stood at the edge of the woods, his small hands clasped together, watching people comb the trees for his friend.

Jude had disappeared that Sunday, after he and Stevie had spent hours ransacking the backs of buildings for broken two-by-fours. Their fort was almost complete. All it needed was a couple more boards and a replacement set of ladder stairs. The ones they'd nailed to the tree trunk were treacherous, like climbing up Sauron's tower. But they both liked the danger-clinging to splintery planks with their bare hands, comparing scratches and scrapes once they got to the top, nearly breaking their necks climbing down from the turret every single time. Because Life is no fun without the risk, said Jude. And if Stevie knew anyone who sought out peril, it was definitely his cousin. His best friend. Now vanished like a ghost.

Stevie had been sitting on the couch, watching TV, when his aunt Amanda knocked on the front door. "Is Jude here?" she'd asked, wearing her usual glass-fragile smile. But there was something in her voice that put Stevie on edge, something festering, like a scourge. "It's time to come home," she said. "Dinner is in the oven."

Stevie loved his aunt Mandy. She was a pretty lady despite her exaggerated features. Her face was long and her eyes were huge. She's got a horse face, his stepdad, Terry, had guffawed. Horse face Brighton. We should enter her in the Kentucky Derby and win us

some dough. Terry Marks was a giant asshole. Stevie hated him, probably more than he hated anyone on earth.

And yet, despite loathing "The Tyrant" for being such a dick, Stevie occasionally found himself resenting his mother even more; partly because she didn't defend Aunt Mandy when Terry insulted her, but mostly because she let him detonate their lives. She'd worn a black eye for the better part of two weeks once. Walked right into the corner of the kitchen cabinet, she had said, laughing. I swear, if my head wasn't screwed on . . . You know how it goes. Yeah, Stevie knew. The whole town knew, despite the ruse.

It was why Aunt Mandy was on edge whenever she came over. Terry wasn't exactly what you'd call hospitable. It was a wonder she let Jude play at Stevie's house at all. Luckily, she did, because her house gave Stevie a headache. It smelled pink, like flowers. That, and he was pretty sure there was a snake living in her toilet. He'd seen it, regardless of whether or not Jude swore he had imagined the whole thing.

"He's not here, nope," Stevie said.

The fact that Jude hadn't come to hang out that afternoon or that he had yet to make it home didn't seem like that big a deal. Jude played by his own rules. If he wanted to hang out in the woods all day, he would. If he felt like missing dinner, he did. There wasn't anyone who could stop him, especially not his mom. But Aunt Mandy's thinly veiled panic assured Stevie that, despite Jude being a rule breaker and the old saying that boys will be boys, this was much more than her son being his usual, defiant self. This was something different. Far more serious than missing a curfew. Aunt Mandy's wavering smile fractured into a thousand shards of worry.

"Do you know where he is?" she asked.

"Nuh-uh." Stevie supposed Jude could have been at the fort, but that was a long trek, one that was boring if made alone. That, and the fort was top secret. With a single park and a half-mile drag of shops making up Main Street, Deer Valley wasn't exactly a hip and happening place. They'd spent all summer building that citadel, had discussed building another one-bigger and better-after the first was complete. They fantasized about installing a zip line fifteen feet in the air; just another way to kill themselves when they weren't shooting foamy Nerf darts into each other's eyes or lobbing water balloons at each other's heads. If they were lucky, they'd locate a pipe at the scrap yard long enough to make a fireman's pole. These were all upgrades they'd thought of after the fact, far too late to implement into their original design. Stevie wasn't about to squeal their secret just because Aunt Mandy was a little worried about Jude being late.

For any kid other than Jude, there would have been places to suggest. He could have been hanging out at a friend's house across town. There would have been neighboring houses to visit, parents to call. But Jude didn't have friends. Not in the facetious He's such a loner way, but in a genuine Nobody likes Jude Brighton way. It could be said that the only reason he'd spent hundreds of hours building a tree house with Stevie, a cousin two years

his junior, was because his reputation preceded him. Kids didn't like Stevie because he was weird, because he had fingers missing off his right hand. Their distaste for Jude was simpler: they didn't like him because he was a jerk.

Parents, on the other hand, didn't like Jude because he was trouble. He used words like goddamn and shit and asshole, even around adults. Once, he'd dropped an f-bomb for no reason other than to use it; just threw it out there to make conversation more colorful. Stevie had heard words like that blast through the walls of his house on the regular. His big brother, Duncan, would let an occasional curse fly. And Terry had quite the vocabulary, one he didn't mind the whole neighborhood hearing. But Dunk was in high school and Terry was a full-grown man; Jude was only twelve. Hearing the sharp edges of that curse word come from a kid had left Stevie's nerves fizzing like a bag of wet Pop Rocks.

Jude was tough, unforgiving. He'd been that way since his dad-Stevie's uncle Scott-had died. Nothing scared him. Two summers ago, while playing in the creek, he had shoo'd off a snarling coyote; skinny, probably starving, ready for a midafternoon snack. But Jude just grabbed a downed branch and ran at it like he was going to skewer it through, bellowing a battle cry as he blasted toward the animal, leaving Stevie to stare wide-eyed at his ballsy brother-in-arms.

"Jeez," Stevie had said after Jude came trudging back. "What if it had attacked you instead of running off?"

"Then it would have ended up dead instead of scared," Jude had said, as though killing coyotes with his bare hands was no big deal. When the coyote had found them, Uncle Scott hadn't been gone for more than a year. Jude had been ten, but his rage was big enough to fill a man twice his size.

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By the next morning, there were already rumors that Jude had up and run away, and the theory wasn't hard to believe. Everyone knew Jude had issues. He was Deer Valley's problem child; a menace, always getting in trouble. And Amanda Brighton wasn't exactly a stern or assertive woman. She had tried to take Jude to therapy, but it only seemed to intensify his furor. Giving up after a couple of tries, Jude had been allowed to run wild.

More than a few times, he'd gotten busted by the cops for petty stuff like shoplifting. There were counts of vandalism and trespassing, though that infraction was just on someone's bazillion-acre farm. The owners hadn't posted signs to keep people out, so it was a total bogus charge, if anyone asked him. But the police, like everyone else, didn't like Jude, so they gave him hell.

The worst of it had come when Jude was caught wielding a plank of wood-rusty nails crooked and jutting out like a medieval mace-taunting one of Deer Valley's countless strays behind one of the Main Street shops. The sickly-looking cat had scrambled up a tree in search of safety. Meanwhile, Jude swung the two-by-four convincingly enough to have the

shop owner call for help. Stevie was pretty sure Jude had only been trying to help the dumb animal down, but nobody cared about what he thought. Jude ended up with a warning for attempted animal abuse. One more slipup and he'd get full-blown probation, maybe even end up in juvie thirty miles outside of town.

Somehow, Aunt Mandy managed to talk her son out of each and every infraction. There was a lot of pleading and explaining involved. Lots of Aunt Mandy having to relive the death of her husband while telling the tale of how the loss of Jude's dad had hit her only child hard. Assurances were made: Jude was a good boy, just lost and angry, struggling to cope with his grief. And honestly, sometimes that made Stevie mad, because he was pretty sure he'd rather have a dead dad than Terry Marks looming over his each and every move.

But this wasn't about Stevie.

Less than an hour after Aunt Mandy left his house, the cops were next door, taking a report. Stevie had watched enough investigation shows to know the first forty-eight hours were crucial. After that, the chance of finding a kid became next to impossible. And no matter how much Jude grandstanded and wanted to believe he was an adult, he was still a kid. What Stevie's mom referred to as an overgrown baby and his stepdad called a no-good little shit.

First thing Monday, there was a report on the early-morning news: Jude Brighton, age twelve, had taken off. To those who didn't know him, it was as good an explanation as any. Stevie, however, knew it was a load of crap. Because Jude didn't keep his mouth shut about anything. When he had a wise idea, Stevie was the first to know.

By that first morning, bored reporters were trying to get interviews with anyone who would talk. Stevie's mom demanded he stay away. He watched through the windows as neighbors leaned into microphones-those people didn't even know Jude, yet there they were, giving statements all the same. Oh, that Brighton kid. Just a whole lot of trouble, if you ask me.

Aunt Mandy was hysterical. Stevie's mom was preoccupied with trying to keep her sister from losing her mind, and so-left to his own devices-Stevie shoved a granola bar into the back pocket of his shorts and hiked out to the fort, just to check that Jude wasn't there. Not a single loose board or nail had been disturbed. There was no sign of him.

Pivoting to face a different direction, Stevie stared through the forest toward an altogether different destination, their other secret: the house. Did he dare? No. He turned tail and booked it back home, because that house was a place neither one of them went by themselves. Not ever. No way.

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Tuesday morning, Stevie was up with the birds, and he'd just about made it out the door

when his mom caught him by the arm. "Where are you going?" she asked, looking dubious as usual.

"To h-help look for Jude." But all that got him was a tug away from the front door. Nicole Clark confiscated his little spiral notebook and mechanical pencil-the stuff he used to take field notes-and slid them on top of the fridge. Unless he scaled the counter or dragged a chair across the room, he wouldn't be able to reach them. She sat him down at the table and fixed him a Pop-Tart as though a breakfast pastry was an appropriate alternative for aiding in the search for his missing best friend. "You need to stay here," she told him. No explanation. Just a command.

"But why?" Stevie asked. If he wasn't allowed to look for Jude, he sure as heck wanted a better reason than Because I said so.

"Because . . ." Terry's voice cut through the conversation. He filled the kitchen's doorway, his square shoulders blocking out the sun that filtered in through the front-room window. A second later, he entered the kitchen with his hulking gait. "No one needs a funny-farm nutcase hanging around while they're trying to get shit done, that's why." He shot Stevie a stern, reproachful look. Then again, every look seemed hateful from eyes as deep-set and narrow as The Tyrant's. He was as ugly as he was mean with his high, shiny forehead and his sandy-brown mullet. But it was that mustache that grossed Stevie out the most-an ugly upside-down U that crawled down the sides of his mouth like a dying caterpillar.

"Oh, Ter." Stevie's mom. "Leave him alone." Except she didn't mean it. If The Tyrant decided to lay into Stevie then and there, she'd quietly shuffle out of the room.

Stevie looked down at his paper plate and glared at his Pop-Tart. Other than dinner, every meal was served on disposables. That's what happened when the dishwasher broke and, no matter how much Stevie's mom pleaded, it didn't get fixed.

"So, if I don't help they'll find him faster?" That seemed pretty unlikely, especially since the cops weren't asking many questions. Those guys hardly seemed to be worried at all.

His mom sighed. "Stevie . . ."

"Maybe." Terry said. "And maybe if you don't ask so many stupid fucking questions, you won't piss me off this morning." Terry wasn't the least bit affected by Jude's disappearance. He would have cared more if someone's dog had taken a dump on their weedy front lawn. Except that nobody had dogs in Deer Valley. Cats, neither. When Stevie was younger, his mom convinced him that there were no pets around because they were germy and not allowed in town. When he deciphered that bullshit story, she explained that, after the "incident" with Dunk's dog, there would be no more pets for the Clarks, end of story. She never did elaborate on what that incident had been.

Stevie glared at his plate, then dared to look up at his mother. Of course, her back was turned. She was busying herself at the counter, as though not hearing a word of his and

Terry's exchange.

He sat there, unmoving, until The Tyrant gulped his instant coffee and scarfed down the doughnut in front of him—glazed chocolate that made Stevie think of a crumbly old tractor tire. He kept his eyes averted, silently ticking off the seconds inside his head—one, two, ten—until his stepdad pushed away from the table and stepped up to the counter where Stevie's mom continued to loom. Stevie didn't look, but the sounds coming from next to the sink accompanied the pictures in his head: Terry pressing himself against his mom's backside, his giant block-like hands gripping her hips, jerking her backward toward his crotch. Sometimes, he'd slide his hand down her front and between her legs as she stood frozen and unresponsive, like perhaps she was scared or even secretly grossed out. And then, without so much as a good-bye, Terry Marks detached himself from Stevie's mother like a pilot fish releasing a shark, grabbed the keys to his giant pickup, and left.

Dunk liked to say that Terry's truck was big because his dick was small.

Stevie didn't want to know a damn thing about that. All he knew was that he sometimes thought about sabotaging his stepdad's stupid truck or poisoning his food, but had yet to go through with any of those grand, homicidal plans. Because that was the thing about Stevie. He was a chicken shit. A pain in the ass who had tough thoughts but did nothing in the end.

"I know it's hard, sweetheart." His mom's voice cut through the stifling silence that Terry had left in his wake. Her uncanny ability to pretend as though Terry existed in some parallel universe never failed to creep him out. One second, she was being mounted by a horndog, and the next she was asking Stevie if he wanted grilled cheese for lunch, as though pet names like sweetheart and honey made up for the fact that she let a grown man beat on her and her kids.

But that was the thing about Terry: he had a decent paying job. And ever since Stevie's real dad had bailed, bills were hard to pay.

"I know you're really interested in all this investigation

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