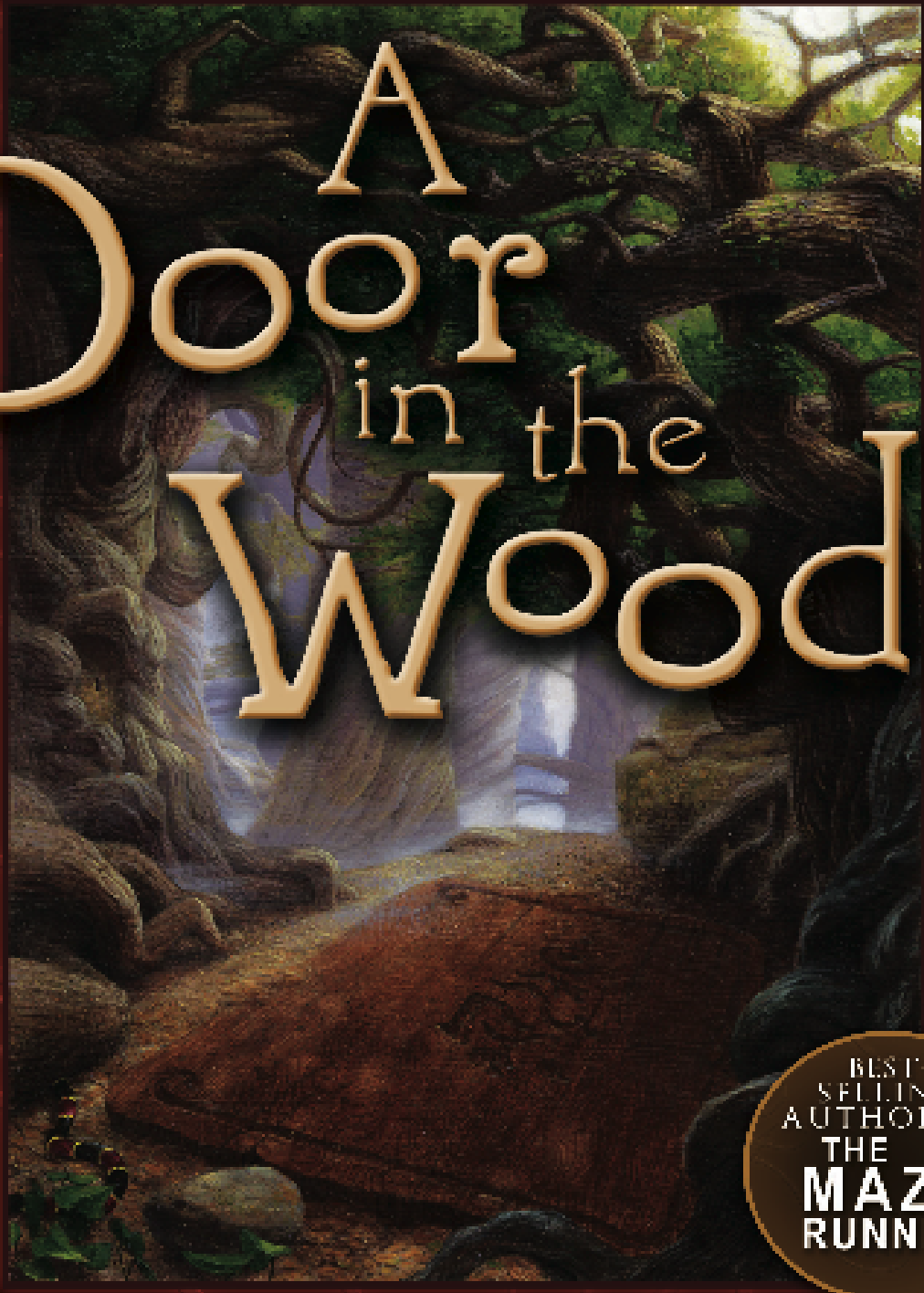


BOOK ONE
JIMMY FINCHER SAGA



A
Door
in the
Woods

BEST-SELLING
AUTHOR OF
THE
MAZE
RUNNER

JAMES DASHNER

ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL PHIPPS

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SWEETWATER BOOKS
AN IMPRINT OF CEDAR FORT, INC.
SPRINGVILLE, UTAH

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ISBN 13: 978-1-55517-697-6

Published by Sweetwater Books, an imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.

2373 W. 700 S., Springville, UT 84663

Distributed by Cedar Fort, Inc., www.cedarfort.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Dashner, James, 1972-

A door in the woods / by James Dashner p. cm. -- (The Jimmy Fincher saga ; bk. 1) Summer: From Duluth, Georgia, fourteen-year-old Jimmy Fincher sets off on a quest that takes him across the country and to other, sometimes terrifying, worlds, armed with

a powerful gift and a mission: to prevent the evil Stompers from destroying the Earth.

ISBN 978-1-55517-697-6

[1. Science fiction.] I. Title. II. Series.

PZ7.D2587Do 2003

[Fic]--dc21

2003004511

Cover design by Rebecca Jensen

Cover design © 2012 by Lyle Mortimer Printed in the United States of America 1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on acid-free paper

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CHAPTER 1

Ole Betsy



The nightmare started on a really nice day at the beginning of summer vacation.

My mom's azaleas were still flowery, the dogwoods blossoming all white and pretty, and the backyard smelled like heaven with the honeysuckle. Like I said, I know I'm a young guy, but I appreciate a beautiful day. The air was warm, but not too hot, and the humidity hadn't started suffocating us yet. It was, simply, the kind of day in which a fourteen-year-old boy must climb a tree. Birds were chirping, the sun was shining, and I had just had tomato soup and peanut butter toast for lunch.

Life was good.

I set out across the street from my house that fine day, wearing my Braves hat, with nothing in my head but wanting to climb a tree. Ever since I'd had legs and arms—which was from the very beginning mind you—I'd been a climber of things, and I figured it was a good day to climb the beast of all trees in Duluth—Ole Betsy. Only crazy people name trees—I'm guilty. She was a good tree, and she deserved a name, even if it was a cow name. Ole Betsy was back in the woods behind Mrs. Jones' place, and speaking of cows ... that poor woman. She looked as big as a barn, and not nearly as pretty. We always used to joke that she'd have to stand in the shower one leg at a time.

Anyway, by the time I got to Ole Betsy, I tingled with excitement. As I hopped up on the first limb, I took a second to sit there and enjoy the surroundings for a minute—the smell of the woods and the sounds of the birds. It seemed a cruel trick of nature to make me so happy right before I would become so miserable.

I started up the tree. As each limb passed, I grew a little more tired and a little more excited to see the top. Little flecks of this and that jumped in my eyes every now and then, making them burn like fire, but nothing could stop me from climbing. I was a man—or kid—on a mission. I twisted my hat around backward, like a catcher, and eventually, all those limbs and green leaves started showing signs of blue sky, and my heart pumped like gangbusters.

I had almost reached the top of Ole Betsy, about forty feet above the ground, when things kind of went topsy-turvy. Life for this guy was about to take a turn for the worst.

I remember one time when I was about ten, I rode my bike down a steep road close to my house, going a hundred miles an hour, wind flapping in my face and roaring in my ears, trees and houses and people flying by like hummingbirds, just as happy as a Junebug, when all of a sudden I was lying on the ground, hurting all over, bleeding like a slaughtered hog. It turned out someone had thrown a stick at me, and beating the best odds in history, landed it right in my front tire's spokes, flipping me like a bad NASCAR wreck. I went from happy to dazed-silly in a split instant.

That same sort of thing was about to happen to me on that early summer day.

As I reached for the next limb, I heard some rustling in the woods below me, and then the piercing scream of a lady. The horrible sound from her throat filled the woods like a bombing raid siren in an old World War II movie. I looked down, scared to death, trying to be quiet and see what was down there. A man in a dark, old-guy suit dragged a woman through the leaves, fighting her constant struggles. I couldn't make out much through the branches and leaves. All I knew for sure was that below me stood the worst man I had ever seen. There he was, right below me, just dragging and hurting this poor lady for no good reason. I had the sudden fear that maybe he was going to kill her.

I was scared like I had never been scared before. I started crying. I tried to keep to myself, sobbing with fright, but I must've looked like one of those freakies at the Lawrenceville Carnival. I was so suddenly and unexpectedly terrified, my efforts to stay quiet must've been quite a sight.

Things got worse. I did the dumbest thing you can do when you have yourself a murderer under you. I sneezed. I let out a sneeze that would've made that Snow White dwarf retire. I don't know where it came from, but lucky for me, Mr. Killer didn't hear me. But I did get a nasty little something on my finger, which I proceeded to wipe on my pants like any good, upstanding young man would do.

Mr. Killer continued his struggle with the woman. After another few seconds of fighting, the poor lady collapsed like a drunk skunk. I figured then and there that her life had just been cruelly and unjustly extinguished, with all the feeling of putting out a fire after a campout, and that there would be some awfully sad people come evening. I felt an immediate dagger of pain in my heart for that woman's family, imagined the life-changing hurt that her husband and kids would feel. Death had always scared me, and I had just seen it face to face, and my insides filled with sadness.

But then it turned right into something else. Hatred. I hated that nasty man more than I hated the devil himself. I never knew a person could be that evil before then, and it would prove to be the first in a never-ending series of hard lessons in my life. Every part of my scrawny body filled with anger and hatred toward that beast of a man, and I almost fell out of the tree on account of it.

And then, for the first time in the short history of my life, cutting my thoughts short, I saw something that was completely irrational and unexplainable. Nothing in my life had prepared me to see things that were strange or beyond belief. I was a simple kid in a simple town in a simple family. But what I saw then, right after the collapse of the woman, ripped the "simple" out of my understanding of the rules of the world, and changed my life forever.

A sudden crackle filled the air that sounded like a mixture of static electricity and ripping paper. Below me, although it was impossible to see everything perfectly clear, I saw a strange darkness pass over the area where

the man stood, like a plane had just flown over us with the noon sun right above it. Except this shadow was much darker, and it didn't pass on by. I had a hard time seeing it, but it looked like there was suddenly an area below me that had forgotten what time it was and had become the middle of the night, with the light of the day around it doing nothing to its darkness. The branches of the tree below me were silhouetted by blackness.

And then, as soon as it had come, it was gone. All was light again, and I could see the man still standing there.

But the woman had disappeared

I stretched and craned my neck and shifted this way and that on the branch holding me at the time, but I couldn't see her anywhere. With the coming and going of the strange darkness, the lady had vanished from sight.

Unless Mr. Killer had just performed the fastest burial in the history of mankind, that lady had just up and disappeared. My fear and sadness and anger turned into bewilderment and shock. I wondered in vain at what I could have possibly just witnessed. I started to shake, and the tears came back without me knowing that they had ever gone away. I felt alone and scared and hopeless, and panic began to swell inside of me. What I had just seen could not possibly be possible.

Then two things happened, and my day-gone-bad got even worse.

The first is that I finally realized who the killer man was. I didn't know him at all personally, but it finally registered in my brain that I had seen this guy many times. He was none other than the mayor of my little town of Duluth, Georgia. The second thing that happened was worse. All of a sudden that devil in a dark suit looked up, straight into my watery eyes.

As mine met with his, I had the strangest thought that this would be a good time to be one of those flying monkeys from *The Wizard of Oz*.



CHAPTER 2

Nightmare



Due to several deficiencies in my heritage, I'm not a flying monkey, nor am I Superman, so I was in one heck of a bind. Here I had myself in a tree above the latest murderer of Duluth, Georgia, with no where to go but down. And *down* just happened to be the only and quickest route to where Mayor Borbus T. Duck Jr. was standing, looking up at me.

Yeah, no doubt about it, it's an unfortunate name, even for a killer mayor. And to make matters worse, the man is a junior, meaning his parents were cruel enough to pass the name on to him. If they'd had an ounce of decency in their bones, they would have at least given him a respectable first name to offset the joke-waiting-to-happen awfulness of his last name. And despite his murdering ways, this man had a wife, and her name was Bobette. Borbus and Bobette Duck. Unbelievable. Might as well be called Stinky and Butt-Ugly.

Anyway, there I was, skinny little good-for-nothing, looking down on Borbus T. Duck, city-mayor and woman-killer. I was so scared, I thought I was going to heave up tomato soup all over the place. But I didn't. I wet my pants instead. The shame and embarrassment of knowing that a fourteen-year-old was still capable of doing such a thing filled me. But I promised to tell the truth about my strange journey, and there it is.

Mayor Duck began to climb the tree.

Before I knew it, he climbed up those branches like there was no tomorrow. (Which, by the way, is a phrase that I've never understood. If there was no tomorrow, I guess it'd just be the day after tomorrow. Would a man really climb branches differently if he knew that tomorrow would really be the day after tomorrow? Well, I guess it doesn't matter much, and I better quit straying from this story or it'll never get done. The point is I had a killer named Borbus T. Duck climbing a tree to get me. I sure didn't care if tomorrow was really next week or if yesterday was the week before last Monday. I was a mouse stuck in a cat litter.)

After a few moments of climbing, the mayor stopped, panting like he had just finished a marathon, not more than ten feet below me. And then a real mayor of a real town spoke directly to me. His voice was low and grumbly, just like you'd imagine for a fat guy.

“Son, you're in big trouble. Does your mama know where you are?”

“Yes, sir. And I swear I didn't see you kill that woman down there.” As soon as I said it I realized how stupid it was. I shook so bad you could've made scrambled eggs on my head. Actually, that didn't make any sense whatsoever, but you get the point. I'm sure as we get along in this story-telling business I'll get better at it.

“Son,” the mayor said, “I didn't kill no woman. My ... friend and I were just wrastlin', that's all. We're done now, and she ran off back home.”

I couldn't help but wonder if all old people really think kids are *that* stupid.

“Yes, sir, I know, sir. I'll never say you're a killer. You were just wrestling, that's all,” I said, failing to mention the small fact that I had just seen someone disappear.

Borbus T. Duck looked at me for a long time. I had seen him a hundred times before, but never this close. He was so incredibly ugly and fat as a heifer. It pained me just to look at him, especially with sweat all over his pale, fat face. I guess I had no idea what true fear was like until that moment. I knew if the mayor could kill that woman, he could kill a little squirt like myself. Good thing I'd only downed one root beer that day, or I might have had another accident right then and there.

After having stared at me for what seemed like hours, without saying another word, Mayor Duck started climbing again.

Eight branches, six branches, four branches below me. I tried moving farther up the tree, but I'd already come just about as far as I could go. His grunts as he climbed reminded me of the pigs on my Aunt Lorena's farm. Limb by limb, breaking off leaves and twigs, branch by branch, he inched closer by the second, and there was nowhere for me to go but ...

It was then that I jumped.



I had never before done something so crazy in all my life. I was fifty feet in the air, and all of a sudden I decided I was one of those flying monkeys after all. But I guess I just didn't have much of a choice. I figured I'd rather risk breaking a few bones than getting strangled by the mayor of Duluth, Georgia.

I jumped straight out from my limb, in the opposite direction of the side that the evil old mayor was climbing up. I thought I might be able to catch a limb of the neighboring trees on my way down. For about two seconds, I was having a dandy of a time, but it ended quickly. I grabbed at every limb and branch and who knows what else as I fell, but I couldn't hold on to anything. Limbs and twigs and leaves slapped me and poked me and scratched me. Nothing would stop my fall, despite my desperation in trying to grab anything I could.

Then I hit the bottom branch with something my mom says is hard as a rock—my head.

And it hurt. Bad.

It flipped me back the other way and I landed plumb on my back. At that very moment, I thought I was going to die. My head felt like it was in ice-water, and my back felt like Rusty had just gone to new levels in his torture tactics with me. The only thing I saw before blackness came over me was Borbus T. Duck clambering down Ole Betsy, like a fireman going to his fire truck, with his wicked eyes glaring straight at me.

And that's how my nightmare started.

CHAPTER 3

The Mansion



I hear Mom yelling my name, but I don't listen; I just keep running. I know I have to get back soon, but I just want to swing on the tire one more time. Rusty is yelling at me that I'm going to be in big trouble, but I can't care less. I get me a great running start, feel like I have run a mile, and then I jump up on the tire and take off over the river like a 747. I'm flying, I'm a bird, I'm a dragonfly! Then I hear the snap, and then I feel the absence of anything holding me back, and then I see the broken rope dangle down past me, and then I am falling fast. My heart is in my throat, and the rushing air as I drop roars around me. The only other sound I hear is an evil laughter, like an angel of the devil come to take me away. It is loud and shrill, like a bird that has just been shot. It reminds me of one of those clown toys I saw at the flea market that just didn't sound quite right when you pulled the string and let it go. Then I realize how strange it is that I haven't hit water yet. I'm just falling and falling but the river isn't getting any closer. I look down, and there is no river in sight. It's been replaced by a thick blackness, empty of light. And all I can hear is that horrible laughter, calling me ... calling me ... waiting to swallow me whole ...

I jerked up from my sleep, sweating like a pig in August. My breath was heavy, and my hair stuck to my forehead. At first I couldn't see a thing—it was pitch black—and I couldn't hear a sound coming from anywhere. I lay

in a soft bed, with covers over me, and a nice fluffy pillow. I panicked, but I couldn't get myself to move.

Soon, my eyes adjusted a bit, and I could see a window to my right. Barely any light was coming through at all, but I could tell it was a window. I waited longer still.

A little bit later I finally got the nerve to get up and try to find out what the heck was going on. I sure wasn't in my bed at home, and I sure wasn't in Rusty's room. All I could remember was lying under that tree looking at Mayor Duck coming down at me. As if brought on by the thought, I felt the pain in my head and back again. It ached like nothing else, and I had to sit back down before I passed out.

I felt hopeless. I either started crying again or just kept crying from the first time, I couldn't remember. I was scared to death. Where was I? Where was my mom? Did that devil of a mayor drag me to his shack or what? Where could I—

The door to the room opened.

I gave out a little shriek and jumped back onto the other side of the bed. Before I landed, the light switched on.

Standing in the doorway was the biggest man I had ever seen. He must've been seven feet tall and three hundred pounds. His hair was the color of lemon frosting and his skin as dark as a lifeguard in late summer. He wore one of those fancy suits that old people tend to wear—it was a dark charcoal color. He had demon eyes bearing down on me like a wolf's on a rabbit. Needless to say, I didn't think this monster was going to be too friendly.

Then, the Monster spoke.

“You, get up. Time to go see the Sheriff.”

I gave a quick sigh of relief. Monster-boy wasn't going to kill me after all! In fact, he was going to take me to the police and everything would be just fine. Well, I might as well tell you right now, that was not the case.

I slowly got up and gave a quick, “yes, sir,” and followed him into the hall. I could finally see what kind of place I was in, and it was nothing but a mansion. The walls were wallpapered all nice and fancy, with frilly wooden thing-a-ma-jiggers along the top and bottom. The white carpet could have made a bed for normal folks like my family, real cushy-like. It felt good

under my toes. That was how I realized that I didn't have my shoes on. Somebody had done me the favor of taking them off for me.

We walked down the hall a ways, down some curvy wooden stairs—I think they were made out of cherry wood—through a foyer I swear was bigger than the White House itself, and finally into a huge room that I guess was a library of sorts. You talk about your rich folks. I swear I saw this library in one of those boring movies about England that my mom's always watching. I didn't get too much time to see what it looked like because I wasn't in there more than two seconds before all the lights suddenly went out and I was in the pitch dark, alone with the beast of a man that had brought me there—or at least I *thought* we were alone.

I coughed, and it sounded like a sonic boom in all that silence.

“Hello, young Jimmy, my boy,” a raspy voice spoke from the darkness. “Don't be alarmed. Now, you've gotten yourself into a bit of trouble, but everything is going to work out just fine. What you saw yesterday in the woods was not what you thought it was. But it was something very profound, and because of it, your life will never be the same.”

CHAPTER 4

Nothing



I don't know if profound was the best word to use, but there was no doubt that my life was about to change. Mostly for the worse.

After the voice spoke from the darkness, a small light switched on in the middle of that huge room. It was a lamp sitting on a large wooden desk. Behind the desk, propped on a cushy leather chair, sat a man that made the monster look like your neighborhood barber. It had nothing to do with their size. The man at the desk was a lot smaller than the villain who had led me to the library. But his face looked as mean as a snake. He had thin eyebrows, a skinny, pointy nose, jawbones that were about to poke through the skin, and eyes that were black as tar. His hair was gray, and he wore a fancy suit, similar to the one worn by the Monster. After looking at him and those evil eyes, I had second thoughts about my earlier conclusion that Mayor Duck was the devil. If the devil was human, he was sitting right in front of me.

I'd like to think at that point I could have acted brave, and made that mean son of a gun see that I wasn't someone to be toyed with. But all I could get my poor soul to say was, “Sir, I don't know what the heck's going on, but I'm downright scared, and I want to go home.”

“Go home?” His raspy voice spoke again—I wanted to tell him to clear his throat or something. “Well, I don't really think you'll be going home anytime soon, son. You see, what you saw yesterday is a lot bigger than you