

Chapter Two. Welcome to Hell

It was the beginning of summer in southern Maine, a time when the black flies were getting used to sleeveless skin and untouched ankles. It was sticky and unless you were at the coast, you were in a constant state of wetness. Nestled between the rugged Maine coastline and the pristine White Mountains of New Hampshire, Hellam Mills, or simply Hell as the local teens called it, was surrounded by rolling hills, stone walls, heritage-listed mills, and sparkling, crystal clear lakes. Situated about an hour southwest of Portland and two hours north of Boston, Hellam Mills was settled in 1776 when the first grist mill was built on the Salmon Falls River. In 1936, that same mill was closed after a boiler explosion took three innocent souls. A man and two boys were killed when caught in scalding steam and flying debris following a boiler explosion on Sugar Hill. It was grinding day at the mill. The town's farmers had all gathered with their turns of corn down at the mill on Salmon Falls River to wait their turn for it to be ground into meal when the boiler exploded. The boiler leaped from its anchors and tore through the mill building. It demolished several sections of fencing near the mill, struck the ground about a hundred feet from the mill site, shot off again, and landed in an orchard, where it uprooted an apple tree and finally came to a stop some 300 feet from where it had started its trail of destruction. Steam and dust blinded everyone in the vicinity and one of the injured boys was said to have had his overalls blown clear off him. When the blast was heard, those in the town hurried up and helped drag the dead and injured from the wreckage—a scene of confusion and horror before them. The building, crudely constructed with poor lumber, had in part tumbled down upon them. Ray James, the fireman of the boiler, was instantly killed, his brains knocked out of his skull. At his feet lay parts of the body of his young son, Billy, aged seven, also dead. 15-year old Glennie

Gwinn had his head crushed almost flat, dying instantly. So great was the force of the explosion that it threw Ray James' shoe a hundred and fifty feet from the mill. His left foot and part of his ankle were still laced in. Corn that had been brought for grinding was broadcast over a hundred-foot radius about the site. The hat of one victim was lodged at the top of a 15-foot spruce tree. The explosion occurred just after 8 am but it wasn't until noon before the dead were removed from the accident site. Due in part, to the locations of body parts scattered throughout the site. As to the cause of the explosion, those at the scene afterward were in virtual agreement that it resulted from water being injected into a near-empty boiler. But many of the survivors didn't believe that explanation. They spoke of something darker. Something more malevolent. Ray James would never be that careless, especially in the presence of his son, who he adored. Doctors chalked it up to trauma—scattered brains turned to mush in the blast. Many survivors were shipped off to Augusta and to the insane asylum where they spent their last days yelling about gremlins in the machinery and evil, unseen entities. Though rumors of other near accidents spread throughout the town in recent weeks. One mill worker's arm was near ripped from its socket as he was dragged into the mill's cogs and into the Salmon Falls River. A farmer, too eager to check the quality of his corn grounds, had the first three fingers of his left hand mangled in between the turning stones. But accidents happen and those were just rumors. The mill on Salmon Falls River was the last in town and it closed after that final tragedy of 1936. But it wouldn't be the last time people of Hellam Mills spoke of an evil presence emanating throughout the town. Though once described as picturesque and quaint in *Downeast Magazine*, a shroud of darkness seemed to envelop the town of Hellam Mills. Usually afflicting the most innocent of its residents—the children.