

# Prologue

The girl pushes through the thick brush, gasping for air and stumbling barefoot over rocks in the damp earth. Razor-sharp thorns reach out to grab at her bare skin, catching and tearing in a hundred places. Blood trickles down her arms, torso, and face, but all this is nothing compared to what will happen to her if she's caught.

It's dark and damp and the smell of decay is all around her. The moon is too low to help her see where she's going, but even if it had been directly overhead its light probably wouldn't penetrate the dense foliage. She's forced to reach out, feeling her way through the harsh terrain while ignoring the pain as she searches ahead for branches that might hit her in the face.

Biting on her lower lip helps suppress the cries when she steps on rocks, or when a stubborn thorn embeds itself into her skin. She needs to be quiet—noise of any kind will lead *him* to her. The girl pauses a moment and holds her breath, listening for the sound of breaking branches from behind. When she doesn't hear anything, she moves on.

Her heart is so loud that she wonders how it is he can't hear it, too. The impressions of his fingers on her ankle still ache. That's where he grabbed her. But her skin had been wet with sweat and blood, making her ankle slippery,

and she'd been able to pull free. The girl had run into the trees—as fast as she could, but she knows it will take a miracle to get away completely.

## CHAPTER I

# Jim

*Friday, September 25, 2015*

Jim walked south along First Street, his limp more pronounced than normal. He was passing Victorian-era houses, large wooden structures with deep porches, all painted in various shades of white and yellow and brown. Older homes lined the streets on the south side of town—the old part of Bosworth. Jim could hear Bo’s nails clicking on the sidewalk beside him.

They were a little more than halfway home when Jim caught a whiff of late-blooming honeysuckle; it probably came from the bed-and-breakfast run by Mr. and Mrs. Norman. In the past, its sweet perfume had always made him feel happy and safe, taking him back to the first home he’d ever known—Jackson, Mississippi. He’d lived there with his grandmother those first three years of his life. His family had visited her as often as possible, in part to renew a sense of permanency so often denied to people in military families. But today the smell of the flower made him uncomfortable, and he didn’t know why. Jim stopped and backtracked several steps, trying to find the scent again. He hoped it might help him remember why his feelings had

changed so much—why honeysuckle made him flinch now. He gave up after just a short while.

It was past six-thirty already—the sun had dipped behind the maple trees across the street, casting deep shadows into the yards of the more-than-hundred-year-old homes. Maples lined the west side of the street and marked the boundary of Bosworth Park—an open space of fields, woods, and ponds, one the size of a lake. Jim was looking forward to fishing there next spring.

As he drew closer to home, Jim glanced over at his old friend, Bo. The beagle had come to him when he was little, but looked no older now than when they'd first met. As his head was turned, Jim saw movement behind them. It was the girl, the one he'd seen downtown—the one who might have been watching him. He hadn't paid her much attention at the time, but now he couldn't ignore her. He paused briefly to let her catch up, but almost as soon as he stopped, her footsteps slowed and then she stopped, too.

“Hello,” he said, trying not to sound too unfriendly. He didn't much like being followed but he frowned for a different reason. Was the girl real or just his imagination? He closed his eyes for a few seconds, trying to clear that special part of his mind. When he opened them again she was still there.

The girl didn't say anything, but stared at him with wide eyes and partially in a crouched position, her arms and hands extended away from her body, as though preparing to run. What did she think he was going to do to her? After a few heartbeats, she scampered across the street and disappeared behind the maples.

“That was weird,” he said, still gazing after her. Bo sat down and glanced over to where Jim was looking. “Was

she real? Or did I imagine her?” he asked. Bo yawned, but didn’t reply. “Okay. If you won’t talk, you won’t talk. Let’s get going. Mom will be worried.”

Jim knew the days would be getting shorter now. The town had already lost a quarter of its summer population. People came to Bosworth for the weather and the parks, but once the school year started, tourists packed their things and drove off for home—back to their real lives, leaving empty cabins and houses and apartments and ghost towns throughout the region.

The house his mother rented was old—old and tall and tired-looking. Its paint peeled in curls that looked as though someone had scraped a sharp knife across the surface, all around the exterior walls. Whole sections of the wood siding needed to be replaced altogether. The roof was in pretty good shape—flat on top, it abruptly transitioned to a steep slope around the edges, and there were two dormer windows protruding from the front.

Their landlord said that there was once a turret rising up in the front of the house, accessible only from the third-floor attic. Jim had wandered through the house and found remnants of the spiral stairway that ended in a discolored patch of ceiling. But from outside, the roof appeared smooth, with no evidence a turret had ever existed.

He crossed the lawn, following a path he’d been creating through the weeds that served as their garden before climbing the front porch steps to enter the screen door.

“Stay here,” he told Bo. “You know how she can get. I’ll come back before I go upstairs.” The beagle circled twice before settling down with a sigh.

“M home,” Jim announced, letting the door bang closed.

“Hey, honey—careful o’ the door,” his mother reminded him. She’d absentmindedly slipped back into the Mississippi accent of her childhood.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Hungry?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Maybe. A little. What’s for dinner?”

“Chicken, mashed potatoes, and okra. Wash your hands.”

Jim crossed the room to clean up in the kitchen sink. He stared out the front window, thinking about the girl again.

“Who were you talking to outside?” she asked.

“Just Bo,” he said, too preoccupied to be careful.

His mother frowned, and a familiar look of disapproval crossed her face, but it passed quickly. She didn’t say so out loud, but Jim knew she didn’t like Bo. She didn’t like the fact that Jim talked to him—she never had.

They ate in the kitchen, like always. The house had a formal dining room but, like most of the empty rooms, it was closed off and kept dark. The kitchen windows were open, desperately hoping to catch a little of the evening breeze. It was almost October, but fall weather hadn’t yet arrived and the kitchen was hot and steamy. A fan was mounted in the corner, near the ceiling. It rotated back and forth as though searching for something. And every time it looked Jim’s way cool air would wash over him.

“How was your day, honey?” his mother asked. Her accent had faded again. She’d worked hard in school to shed the Mississippi drawl, as well as the way people back home used words.

“Fine,” Jim said.

“Does your hip hurt?”

“No, ma’am—well, not much,” he amended. His mom’s family came from a strict southern tradition where people said ma’am or sir to their elders, even if they were only senior by fifteen minutes or so.

“How was school?”

“Ah, you know—school’s school.”

“Did you go to see Dr. Herschel?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And? What did he say?” She was being patient with his brief answers, but she’d rolled her eyes when she didn’t think he was looking.

“Nothing much. He just asked a bunch of questions about how I felt.”

A silence settled over the table, and when the fan wasn’t rattling, he could hear ticking from the clock in the hallway, the one his great-grandmother had given them. Once he’d finished eating, Jim took his plate to the sink, saying he had homework to do.

“Okay, honey. I’ll wash up. Don’t forget to brush your teeth before you go to bed. Now come give me a big hug.” She said almost the same thing every night.

“I won’t forget.”

The nightly hug was a new thing. Sometimes she squeezed so hard Jim had trouble breathing, but he never complained. Not now. After saying good night, he stopped by the front door to let Bo in, being careful not to let it slam this time.

The main stairway started in the foyer, not far from the door. It hugged the right-hand wall and was steeper than a normal staircase. Jim climbed slowly tonight; whenever he’d walked a lot his hip was stiff and sore, making it harder to lift his right leg. Jim’s room was on the third floor and

had a window that looked west, toward the park. He'd convinced his mom that he could cope with the extra steps to reach it, although not without a long discussion first, and a demonstration that he could climb them without hurting himself. Afterward, she reluctantly agreed to let him take one of the attic rooms as his own.

He walked over to the window without turning on the light. It was easier to see out with the room dark. The moon had risen now, but was behind the house where he couldn't see. Moonlight touched the tops of the trees, creating a silver cast that spread out across the maples and oaks and ash and chestnuts that filled much of the park. And he wondered about the girl again.

"What do you think?" he asked Bo, leaning heavily on the windowsill.

*About what?* the dog asked.

Jim had never questioned how Bo could communicate with him—there were lots of things about him Jim didn't understand, but that had stopped being important a long time ago.

"The girl, of course. Was she real? It was already almost full dark when we saw her. Where do you think she was going?"

*I'm not sure,* the beagle said. Jim couldn't decide which question Bo had answered, but could hear the hesitation in his voice. He knew it would be a waste of time to press Bo further.

Bo had come into Jim's life at a critical time—not long after he started talking. Before Bo, others...strangers...used to visit him in his room at night. Most of the visitors were children, but there were adults and odd-looking creatures, too. The adults always seemed angry. Bo told him



that these intruders were unimportant and mostly a part of his imagination—not real. He said Jim should ignore them, and that he should pretend he couldn't see them. Soon after that, the others stopped coming, but Bo stayed.

At first Jim didn't realize his mom and dad couldn't see Bo. But there were so many odd things in the world that this one little discrepancy didn't seem all that significant—odd things surrounded Jim his whole life. It was hard for a boy his age to know what to pay attention to and what to ignore, but Bo helped him to understand what was important, and he stayed with Jim through the numerous changes in his life—houses and cities and even countries, as his family moved from place to place.

Jim's father was in the army and for some reason that meant the family had to move a lot. Then one day, about three years ago, Bo simply vanished. His parents told Jim it was because he no longer needed an imaginary friend—that he'd outgrown such things. But Bo had returned last year while Jim was in the hospital, still recovering from the accident.

Sometime in the early morning hours Jim's mother touched his arm, pulling him from a deep sleep. His pillow and hair were wet with sweat. He couldn't see his mom's face. It was hidden in shadow from a lamp in the hallway. He looked toward the window and saw the moon outside. That meant it was close to sunrise.

“Wha...?” he asked, yawning.

“You were yelling again, honey,” she said.

“Sorry.” Jim turned his pillow over to the dry side.

“You want to come sleep in my room?”

“No, thank you. I’m okay.” *Bo’s here*, he added silently.

It was hard to remember what he’d been dreaming about at first, not that there was any real doubt in his mind. He’d been having the same nightmare now and then for more than a year. It all started back in the hospital. Jim was still learning to deal with the dream, just as he’d learned to deal with everything else the accident had changed. It always started the same way, although over time little differences had crept in—details he was still remembering about that awful night.



He’d been riding in the back of their old Jeep, drifting in and out of sleep. Every time he opened his eyes he’d see his dad up front, staring out into the darkness ahead of them. It made him feel warm and safe to know he was so alert. Even in sleep Jim could feel the car moving as it followed the curves in the road. He’d seen a map of their route before they left DC. It sometimes ran through hills, and sometimes followed a river through a long valley.

They were on their way to the United States Military Academy at West Point. His father would be teaching there in the fall. Mom had flown ahead to find a temporary place for them to live. Maybe a house or an apartment they could rent, until they decided whether to buy something or to request housing from the academy. Jim’s dad was thinking about retiring from the army in this area—it was a decision they hoped to make soon.

Instead of flying with his mom, Jim asked to drive with his dad. He wanted to have more alone time with him. So, they'd packed up the Jeep and waved goodbye to his grandmother—his dad's mom. They'd been visiting her in Washington DC after staying in New York City for several months. His dad had been granted a kind of sabbatical that summer, so he could research a new paper and develop a new course for students at the academy.

The Jeep's screaming tires jolted Jim awake, but he was only conscious for a few brief moments. A loud thump and a crunching noise filled the night as he was thrown into the back of the front seat. Then something heavy hit him from behind and that was all he could remember for a long time. But after months in the hospital, Jim began to piece together other fragments of his memory from that night. Today he'd remembered something new.

The scent of honeysuckle had been coming through the Jeep's window just before the accident. His dad had cracked one open to let in fresh air. Another piece of his past fell into place, probably triggered by the sickly-sweet smell during his walk home. Last fall he'd remembered awakening in fire. It burned his face and the upper part of his arm. His right leg had been numb at the time, as though it were no longer attached to his body. Not long after he regained consciousness, the car tilted and broke free of whatever had delayed its fall, and then it rolled over and over before landing upside down in the river.

Cold water rushed in through cracks in the body and through the open window. Jim remembered how much he'd struggled to get free from whatever was pinning him in place at the time. He was trying to keep his head above water, to gasp in the small amount of air still trapped near

the floorboard. He remembered how his side and abdomen felt ‘funny’ and that his leg had begun to ache. He knew he couldn’t hold on for long. The water level kept rising until just his mouth was able to reach that one last tiny pocket of air—and then he lost consciousness again. The water had put out the fire, but now he was drowning. The next time Jim woke up he was in the hospital.



Jim’s mom sat on his bed for at least another fifteen minutes. Eventually he pretended to sleep so she could go back to her own bed. As soon as she shut the door behind her he opened his eyes again.

Moonlight filled the room now; he could see Bo curled up on the floor, halfway between his bed and the window. His head was down between his paws, but Jim could see Bo’s eyes staring back at him.

*It’s okay, he said. Go back to sleep.*

## CHAPTER 2

# Allie

*Saturday, September 26, 2015*

Allie could hear her mom getting ready. She peeked out the window, lifting one of the blind slats to see if anyone was parked outside. There was just enough light from the elementary school down the block to see that the driveway was still empty and that no one was parked out on the street. She knew how nervous her mom was tonight, after all this was the first time she'd be going out on a real date since the divorce.

"Allie? Have you seen my good earrings?" her mother yelled from the other end of the hallway.

"Which ones are those?" she called back.

"You know, the ones with the red stones."

Allie went out into the hall before answering again. "You mean the ones Grandma gave you?"

"Uh-huh."

"I think so, but I can't remember where."

"Shit. Alright, I'll go with these." Mom came out of her room wearing a short black dress that was maybe a smidgeon tighter than it used to be. Allie knew how hard her mother worked to stay fit, but the battle with time was a losing one. She still didn't have her shoes on, but a pair of

golden earrings glittered in the hallway's light. Her mom had on more makeup than Allie remembered seeing her wear before.

"You look great!" she said, meaning it.

"Do I?" Her mother stopped in front of the full-length mirror in the hallway and pulled the dress down a little. "You know it's been so long since I dated, I'm afraid I don't know what to do."

"You'll be fine. Just remember to be home by nine."

"Ha-ha."

Allie tried to smile back—she wanted to reassure her mom, but a part of her was sad, because this was another milestone in the breakup of their tiny family. Not that Allie had any real hope that her parents would get back together again. She shuddered every time she thought about that last year they were all together.

"Okay. Now I can't find my shoes," her mom said, stomping from one room to the other.

"They're in your hand."

The interval between panic episodes was getting farther and farther apart, and had reached a reasonable level before the doorbell rang downstairs.

"Shit," her mother said again; there was panic in her eyes. "Would you get that? Please tell Tom I'll be down right away."

"Okay, Mom."

When Allie opened the door, she saw Mr. Hopkins' face fall. He'd obviously been expecting her mother to answer.

"Hello, Mr. Hopkins, would you like to come in? Mom's almost ready—she'll be down in a minute."

"Hi, Allie. Sure. There's no hurry."

Tom Hopkins stepped inside and took a seat in their living room. He was a little shorter than her dad, with graying brown hair and a small paunch. Allie politely stayed with him, taking a seat at the end of the couch. That way she could face him and still see upstairs if she turned her head a little.

“How’s Billy?” she asked. Billy was Mr. Hopkins’ son—he attended Bosworth High School.

“Oh, he’s doing great! He made the football team.”

“What position?” Allie’s cousins both played football and she’d learned a lot about the game while watching them with Uncle Jack.

“He wants to be a running back but for now he’s on the kickoff squad.”

“That’s a good place to start,” she said, glancing slightly over her shoulder to see if her mom was ready yet.

“You’re in eighth grade this year, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yep. Last year of middle school.” She sounded more enthusiastic than she felt.

“You look like you’ve grown up quite a bit this summer.”

Allie self-consciously crossed her arms and shrugged. “I guess so. Here’s Mom now.”

Her mother was coming down the short stairway, and Mr. Hopkins stood up to greet her. They exchanged a brief hug and complimented each other’s appearance before leaving.

But Allie’s mind had already drifted to recent changes in her own body. She self-consciously assumed this was what had prompted Mr. Hopkins’ comment. Everything seemed to have accelerated this summer as if to make up for the last two years, and she didn’t feel comfortable about it yet. Most girls in her class had begun developing much earlier. Some

had even secretly dated boys from the high school this past summer—Allie had mixed feelings about that, too.

After her mom and Mr. Hopkins had driven away, she went up to her room and stared into the mirror. The girl there was still recognizable—shoulder-length brown hair and familiar brown eyes, but her hips were wider now than they'd been just six months ago, and her breasts had grown proportionally. Last year she felt out of place because she was so much behind the other girls. She'd gotten used to that—except during gym. She and her best friend had this in common—both stuck in pre-puberty. “Why now?” she asked, sighing before she went back downstairs.

The house looked a lot neater than usual. Mom had spent the day cleaning and Allie had been assigned vacuum cleaner duty. The living room was close to the front door and fairly small, but they had a family room down another half flight of stairs. Their home was called a split-level ranch. You entered on the middle level and the bedrooms were up a half flight of stairs to the right, and the family room and the guest bedroom were beneath them, down another half flight of stairs. When she stood in the living room she could almost see the entire house.

They lived on the north side of Bosworth in the new part of town, along Third Street and a block north of the elementary school. Her mom had worked at the grade school for more than ten years now. Recently, two of her mom's friends had transferred to the middle school Allie attended, so she always felt like she was being watched.

Allie heated cold pizza in the microwave and took it down to the family room to watch TV. Highlights from Saturday's college football games were on ESPN. The school her cousins played for wasn't mentioned—their



team wasn't in the top 25. After an hour, she tried calling Jan but her friend didn't answer. Allie took a deep breath and let out another sigh, then turned on Netflix to look for a good movie.

Later that night she heard her mom come home and then voices in the living room. She waited until Mr. Hopkins had left before going downstairs.

"How was the date?" she asked.

Her mom smiled. "Good. We had dinner and went to a movie in Middletown."

"What did you see?"

"The new James Bond film—*Spectre*."

"Was it good?"

"I liked it, but then I like anything with Daniel Craig in it."

"Sooo, are you going to see Mr. Hopkins again?"

Her mother frowned. "Maybe. But I'm having second thoughts about dating someone from the school."

"Most of your friends work at one school or another, don't they?"

"Yeah. I should probably do something about that—maybe try an online dating service, or something. It's not a good idea to mix dating and work."

Allie followed her mom into the kitchen, where she poured herself a glass of something brown from the open bottle in the cabinet above the stove. When she saw the expression on Allie's face, her mom chuckled.

"Don't worry. It's just one drink."

"I didn't say a thing."

"But you were thinking it," her mom said.

"I was thinking about Dad. But you're not him."

"No. I've never had a problem with alcohol. I just feel like I need to relax tonight, so I can sleep. I'm a little

worried—about you, too. It wouldn't feel fair to bring someone into our little family if you don't like him."

Allie crossed the room and put her arms around her mom's waist. "Don't worry about me, Mom. I want you to be happy."

"I am, dear—it just feels like I've been stuck in a rut."