

CHAPTER 1

THE SUN SITS FLAT AGAINST THE BLUE SKY like someone pressed it on there with a giant thumb. The day's half over, but it happens to be Saturday so we're free. David and I are walking down the crooked sidewalk, kicking up dust and stepping over cracks and fissures. There aren't many cars or houses this way, so sometimes we walk on the yellow line in the middle of the warm black top. We stop to throw some rocks at an abandoned filling station sitting in a big empty lot of weeds and kudzu before continuing our journey. The satchel with the video camera's bouncing off my left hip.

"What's with the suit and tie?" David asks me.

"It's been a year since, you know . . . my mom . . ."

"Aw, crap, that's right. I'm sorry, man."

"It's okay. We just had a little ceremony. I'm completely over it."

"Did Jim show?"

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“No, he said he was busy with school. But he just didn’t want to come.”
I point up past the jagged tree line in the distance. “Look at that.”

“What is it?” David puts his hands up to shield his eyes from the sun and follows my straight-as-an-arrow finger into the blue sky.

“There’s a hawk.”

“Where?”

“See, it’s coming back around from those trees.”

“Sure it’s not a buzzard?”

“Yeah, you can tell by the V shape in the wings. It’s good luck. At least that’s what the Native Americans say.”

We watch it make larger and larger circles over us before it glides beyond the tree line. The light sweat on our necks is cooled by a light spring breeze that smells like honeysuckle mixed with the rotten smell of the dead opossum we passed by a while back. “We’re almost there,” he says.

We keep walking until we finally reach a poor residential area in the backwoods on the southern end of the county line. There’s a street sign at the corner that reads Underwood. It’s surrounded by a cloud of swarming gnats.

“I’ve never been to this part of town before,” I say. I take off my jacket and wrap the sleeves around my waist. I’m starting to really sweat.

“Me neither.”

The houses here are all faded and old looking. Trees and bushes run amok in between and behind the houses. It’s as if the houses have grown out of the woods like tumors. Some look abandoned, just ramshackle relics where you might find a squatter or stray cats. The cars sitting in front yards and alongside the road have the same broken-down look about them: rusted and forgotten. An old husk of a Chevy truck sits on four cinder blocks amid weeds and tires. A dark Cutlass lies with its rims sinking into the ground like a legless skeleton.

“Are you scared?” David asks ominously, with a smile. The smudge right above his lips is really a thin little brown mustache he’s been trying to grow. He’s lanky like me, but he’s got a big rectangular head that makes him look a little bigger than he really is.

“Scared of what? Bring on the bogeyman.”

“Who said anything about the bogeyman? Ogres are what I heard.”

“Ogres, bogeymen . . . I don’t care as long as I got something for this damn video project. I plan on getting an A+ in that class.”

We keep walking along the shoulder of the road lined with cigarette butts and discarded fast-food containers, passing broken-down houses and empty lots. In a front yard a bony-looking old man is burning trash, stinking up the whole neighborhood with bad smoke. He doesn’t wave as we go by. He just stares at us with dull eyes for a second before turning back to his fire.

“What’s his problem,” says David.

“Just keep walking.”

We walk past a big pile of scrap metal and rust buckets to a house where a couple of middle-school-looking kids in dirty torn jeans and sneakers are hitting a Wiffle ball with a plastic yellow bat in a small fenced-in yard. The smaller, freckled face one of the two scrambles for a ball hit in our direction. “Where you guys goin’?” He asks when he sees us walking by. He’s wearing a grass-stained Panama Jack T-shirt. I haven’t seen one of those in years.

“Nowhere,” David says.

“You’re not going up that hill, are you? Because if you are, be careful on your way up,” he warns us.

“Shut up, Dusty,” yells the bigger kid who’s wiping his face with the bottom of his shirt. He looks like an older version of Dusty. He swings the plastic bat against the ground a few times, *fwap fwap!*

“What I do? I’m just sayin’ . . .”

“And there’s no reason to say it.”

“Say what?” I ask.

“There’re some aliens in that house. They’re real aliens,” says Dusty.

“I’m gonna tell Momma you spooking strangers,” says the older one.

“What are they, Mexican?” I ask.

“Nah, they’re not right. Not human.”

“Where are these aliens now?” David asks.

Dusty points to a house up the way. “You see them at your own risk.” Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog starts barking, then squawks like someone kicked it.

“Would you throw the ball?” Dusty goes back to hitting the Wiffle ball with his brother. I have the urge to join in, but I got a school project to finish, whether I like it or not.

“See, I told you,” says David. “Are you scared now?”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

We walk up a small hill until we finally get to the house. It’s washed out and gray, with a white porch surrounded by shrubs and crabgrass. The white paint’s all chipped away from the porch, and the swing that used to be there’s been replaced by a moldy old burgundy couch. But the roof looks like it’s been newly reshingled. The screwed-up thing is, it’s almost as if I’ve seen it somewhere else, maybe in some bad horror movie. That doesn’t seem likely though, because I don’t even watch horror movies. They give me the heebie-jeebies. It’s more like I’ve seen it in a long forgotten nightmare—forgotten but still there somewhere. We walk up to the front porch and stand there listening for any signs of life. The house looks empty and very dark. I can see some toys on the hardwood floor through the screen of the door. I hear a buzzing at my ear and slap at a mosquito on the side of my neck.

There's a splotch of blood on the palm of my hand. A half dozen or so hover around our heads.

"Hurry, before we get eaten up," I say.

David knocks. After a minute he knocks again and says, "Hello? Hello? Anyone in there?"

"I'll be right there," says a woman's voice, and then a large dark figure appears behind the screen door.

"Mrs. Greenan?" asks David.

"Yes?" she says.

"I'm David. David Mabry."

"Are you the young man that wanted to look at my little ones?" says the woman's voice.

"Yes, ma'am. Me and Samuel here, we're the tenth-graders from Central of Sugweepo High."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, ma'am. Samuel here's gotta project to do, and my mom told me about you. She knew your sister back when she lived in Mobile."

"Well, if she's a friend of Margaret . . ." The door opens all the way, and I get a clear look at the dark, imposing figure. She's about the biggest woman I've ever seen. Not fat, mind you . . . just tall and big as a lumberjack. But she has a real pretty face, innocent like a Kewpie doll. It doesn't make sense at all—that head on that body.

"You boys want some sweet tea?"

"That'd really hit the spot," says David.

"I'll pass," I say.

We followed her into the kitchen.

"Sure you don't want a glass?" she asks me.

"I'm okay."

"All right, then," she says, and pours out a glass for David and one for herself. "Summer's not too far away by the feel of it. Bet you boys are looking forward to that."

“Vacation’s what I’m thinking about,” says David, and drinks down his glass.

“You were thirsty. Well, come on. They’re out in back,” she says, wiping her hands on a towel. “You can take some pictures if you want. No flashes. It scares them.”

“Could I use your bathroom?” I ask.

“Sure. The one down here’s backed up. Can’t afford no plumber. Go upstairs and it’s the first door on your left. We’ll be in the back. Just holler if you can’t find us.”

Mrs. Greenan and David go out back and I head for the stairs. I stop at the bottom of the staircase and look up first. It’s really dark up there. Almost pitch-black. It almost doesn’t seem natural how dark it is, like looking into a deep hole in the ground, except up. Then I think I see something. It looks like an outline of a face peaking from behind the edge of the wall up there, but it’s too dark to see clearly. Just to be sure, I say, “Hello? Anybody there?”

There’s no answer. I just keep staring up there, with my hand gripping the banister, and the longer I stand there, the more frozen I feel. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, it gets to where not only do I see the outline of a face, but I see the whites of two eyes glaring down on me.

“Hello,” I say again. “Somebody there . . . are you there?”

I can feel my heart thudding against my chest. Forget the bathroom, I just want to escape, but I can’t move. Like if I do, whatever’s up there is going to get me. Minutes pass. It feels like an hour. I think I’m going to pee in my pants. Then I hear a floorboard creak. Out of the darkness those glaring eyes blink. That’s when I begin to back away slowly from the stairs. As I do, I look down at my hand, where I feel something crawling. A hairy little spider’s scuttling up my arm. I swat it away and head back the way David and Mrs. Greenan went, down the dark corridor following the light to the

back of the house. Once I get out onto the screened-in back porch where David is, I feel relieved. Then I hear murmuring and whispering from behind me. I turn around and nearly scream. There's another burgundy sofa where three little things lie side by side wearing blue flannel pajamas. At first I think they're mechanical dolls, but the way they're squirming and moving around is too natural to be fake. Their heads are way too big, and their arms and legs are all different lengths. Some long, some just stumps with little fingernails stuck in a semicircle. Even their eyes are different sizes, one larger than the other, and their twisted little noses are hardly there. It's like seeing them through the bottom of a Coke bottle, making everything misshapen. The strangest things are their mouths. They're the only things on their faces that look normal, and because of that they look so perfect compared to everything else on them. And those lips are moving like they're talking but nothing's coming out. Then a door slams upstairs real loud, almost angry. I can hear someone upstairs stomping around in what sounds like heavy work boots. It isn't until David puts his hand on my shoulder that I realize I'm standing and staring.

"You okay?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Man, you're shaking."

He's right. I can feel my body, and it's like cold electricity in my insides vibrating me like an electric razor. "Yeah." I nod. "I'm okay." But I'm not. I can hardly even look at those things without feeling faint. Everything gets kind of dark, and my blood feels like it's cold. "I've never seen anything like it. It's like some horror movie."

"Keep it cool, man," he whispers, and nods back toward the kitchen, where Mrs. Greenan's coming. "Ready with the camera?" He seems calm like everything's normal.

"Here, you do it," I take out the digital camera from my satchel

and prep it. “All you got to do is press this button to record. It should focus on its own.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Here, take it. I . . . I’ll ask the mother some questions.” Mrs. Greenan’s leaning against the open doorsill watching me with a suspicious eye. Maybe it’s the sweat beading up on my forehead. I can hear more stomping around upstairs. Then I hear a toilet flush and then a door slam real loud again. It sounds like someone’s punching the side of the house with an iron fist.

“What’s wrong with them?” I ask with a wavering voice.

“There’s nothing *wrong* with them. They’re my babies. Joseph, Moses, and Noah. They’re my miracles. There’s nothing wrong with a miracle, is there?”

I walk to the edge of the porch and look out into the backyard with my arms folded. I can’t stand the sight of them to be honest. I think I’m going to puke but I hold it back.

“Miracles? What do you mean by that?” asks David.

“They were immaculately conceived.”

“You mean there was no father.”

“I guess you could say God was the daddy.”

“God, huh,” David says.

“Don’t they appear as miracles to you?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. I can’t say I’ve ever personally witnessed a miracle, but they don’t look like normal babies, that’s for sure.”

“Sure they don’t. They’re not. Doctor told me some of what they got, but I couldn’t understand what the hell he was saying. Neuro mumbo jumbo something or other. All he knew was that they couldn’t change a thing and that the rest was left to God.”

“Shouldn’t you find out what they have? Right, Samuel? Samuel?”

“She’s right,” I say, looking out at the backyard. “It doesn’t matter. That’s just the way they are.”

“You damn straight. Those doctors still, they still wanted to take them. They wanted to study them like rats or something. Microscopes . . . needles . . . X-rays . . . I told them hell no!”

When she yells “hell no,” one of those things squeals, “Eeeeeek!” Each time I thought I’d vomit I was able to hold it down. But I knew if I turned around to ask to use the bathroom again, I’d lose my puke-blocking focus. So I gingerly walk off the screen porch and proceed to vomit the chili burgers David and I had just had at the Dairy Queen down the road. I make sure to bend over so as not to soil my Sunday suit. David stops filming and comes over.

“I’m okay,” I say before he can say anything.

“You sure don’t look okay.”

“I’ve seen this before,” says Mrs. Greenan. “Can’t even stand the sight of them. Time for you two to go.”

“C’mon, man.”

“Okay.”

“Well, go on then. Go on out the back way. You don’t have to look at ’em ever again. Should have known. You’re the same.”

David helps me back around to the front, where I take some deep breathes. “Man, what the hell just happened to you?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I freaked out,” I said. “I wanted something cool for my video project, not that!”

“That wasn’t cool?”

“Cool? That was cool?”

“Sure.”

“I wanted artistic cool, about an intriguing-life-story-in-the-South cool, not batboy-in-the-*National Enquirer* cool,” I say, while taking off my tie.

“I guess it’s true what they say. There are monster babies around

these parts.” David raises his hands zombie-style and stumbles forward.

“Let’s get out of here.” We walk back to the Dairy Queen, where we had left his maroon Cavalier convertible parked. I get in the passenger seat and lay my head back. “Shit, I should have gone with my dad,” I say.

“Where’d your dad go?” He rolls the sleeves of his blue T-shirt up to his shoulders and lights a cigarette, letting his free arm dangle out the window.

I roll my sleeves up to my elbows. “After the service he wanted to take me out for lunch.”

“Why didn’t you say so? We could’ve come any time.”

“I needed to finish this video project. I was desperate. But not that desperate.” I sit back up. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“You said something strange or interesting. Pretty strange, no?”

“Would you just drive?” David takes us out of Underwood into the countryside, over the small wooden bridge spanning the narrowest part of the swamp, North toward downtown Sugweepo. It’s pretty quiet town, not much excitement, a lot of the small-town blues. I look at the name of our town name on a sign with an arrow and remember reading a description in the AAA guide:

Two hours west of Atlanta and two hours east of Birmingham, Sugweepo straddles the border of Georgia and Alabama. Population of 200,000, its main sources of income include a small college, the West Georgian, and Eastwire, a large wire-making plant.

“WHAT’RE YOU GONNA DO ABOUT your project?” David asks.

“I’ll figure something out.” With the spring air coming in through

the windows and the slight smell of honeysuckle and wisteria, I begin to feel normal once more. Normal. I miss feeling normal.

“You goin’ out to the mall tonight?”

“I’ll stay home with my dad.”

DAVID PULLS INTO MY SUBDIVISION and down past all the houses. My house is up on the left. After I get out of the car David says, “Hey, I didn’t know it’d freak you out like that.”

“You’re not the only one. I’ll see you at school.” I go inside, and Dad’s out of his Sunday clothes watching a Braves baseball game. He’s aged a lot this past year. More wrinkly, more gray hairs on a slightly balding head, a little hunched over but still sturdy. I immediately feel guilty for ditching lunch, so I decide to make it up to him. “How’d it go?” he asks from the couch, his Sunday sweatpants and sweatshirt already on.

“I just saw something. Something I never want to see again. I don’t want to even think about it.”

“Sounds pretty awful.” He smiles. “Did you get an idea for your video thingy?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You goin’ out tonight?”

“No, no.”

“Good, I got some steaks we can put on the grill. Get out of that monkey suit and watch some of this game. We’re up three-one.”

THE NEXT MORNING I GO TO CHURCH, something I started doing regularly after Mom died. It’s funny—I started and Dad stopped, which I can kind of understand. I go to remember and he doesn’t to forget. There were times when she managed to get us all to go, but Dad usually just