

Prologue

Niggles of noise pierce through the fuzzy haze of sleep. I burrow into my Hello Kitty comforter, making a nest of warmth, a baby bird seeking safe shelter. But the noise grows louder. I recognize the distinctive edge of words, and the sound becomes familiar.

Mom's shouting voice. She and Dad must be back at it.

I wiggle deeper into the pink cheer of cartoon kitty cats. Maybe they'll stop soon. I'll fall asleep, and when I wake up in the morning, it will all be over. Dad will be at work, and Mom will smile and point to breakfast on the table—bacon and grits and orange juice. Then it's off to Normal Elementary School. Just another day, same as before.

Jimmy's door creaks open across the hall. Bad move. My brother, only four years old, pads his way across the upstairs landing. I know what he'll do, what he always does: jump between them and beg them to stop. As if that ever did any good. All it will land him is a sharp thump on the rear from Dad.

Should I try to stop Jimmy? That usually doesn't work, although sometimes he'll crawl in bed with me and go back to sleep. I lie there for a second, considering. It'll be really cold if I get out of bed. Jimmy might not mind me. Then Dad will get all red in the face at both of us when he spots us on the stairs. I think of his belt.

Reluctantly, I throw back the comforter. I'd rather get whooped with Jimmy than lie in bed and do nothing. I'm not a great sister, but I'm the oldest, and certain things are expected. I hurry to my bedroom door. The moment of hesitation has cost me. Jimmy has already made it to the bottom of the stairs. A great wail resounds through our house.

"Moooommy!" he screams.

There's something about that scream. It chills me all the way inside, so deep my tummy hurts. Something is really, really, really bad. My mouth dries, and I can't move, can't make myself walk down the seven steps and see whatever Jimmy sees.

Another scream—but this time, it's Mom. Moaning rumbles through my chest, and I stand rooted. I press my fingers in my ears, but I can't completely block the screams.

The police! The answer flashes in my brain like lightning. Dad will be super mad, but I have to stop this. I race to Mom and Dad's bedroom and dial 911 on the phone by their bed, just like I've been taught in school. I tell them to come. To hurry. I give them the address, my name, my parents' and brother's names.

The screaming stops. It's over! The nice lady on the phone asks if I want to talk to her until the police come. I want to so badly. But if Dad comes up here and finds me on the phone . . . "No," I tell her, hanging up. I'll jump back in bed and get under the covers. I leave their bedroom, then pause at the top of the stairs. Listening. Waiting.

The dead silence begins to frighten me as much as the screams had done. Did they all go outside? But why would they? A footstep echoes on the hardwood floors below. A faint tinkling of bells cuts the silence.

I ease down the wooden steps, avoiding the spots that creak the loudest. The den's overhead light is on, and I see a man is dressed all in black, including gloves and a ski mask. His back is toward me, and he's scooping something up from the floor. This doesn't make sense. Is it Daddy? If so, why is he dressed like a Halloween monster?

And then I see them. Mom. Jimmy. On the floor, not moving. Dark red seeps from their bodies, forming huge pools of crimson. The same shade of red is splattered on the back wall. Like the weird paintings we've seen in art class. Abstracts, Mrs. Moody called them. The blood seeps into the rug in ever-widening arcs. An endless red-on-red-on-red that blinds me. I feel dizzy, and a trembling seizes my body. I know it's blood, but my brain is slow and thick and doesn't want to accept what that means. More wails break through the night. With a start, I realize they are coming from me. The man in black stiffens and begins to turn his head.

Danger! My brain finally catches on, and my body leaps to action. I race back up the stairs and to my room. Footsteps pound behind me. I slam my bedroom door shut and turn the lock. Maybe he'll go away now. I strain my ears, hoping to hear a police siren. The monster slams a fist on the door. Over and over. The cheap pressed wood splinters and cracks. Soon, he'll explode through the flimsy door. There is no one to save me but me.

I grab my Hello Kitty comforter and fumble with the window sash. The cracking behind me grows louder, and I dare not look back. I fling the window open and then punch at the screen until it breaks and pops off. The winter air is bitter and cold, a slap against my face. One of the few Alabama nights that will hit freezing.

He's almost broken through the door. If it's Daddy, it's a scarier, meaner version of him than I've ever seen and that I want no part of. I don't even hesitate as I climb out the open window and stare at the second-story drop-off to the frosty ground below. I jump. A freefall of air, and then thump, I land on my right side, my ankle twisted beneath me. Pain burns and travels up my bare leg. My gaze rises to the window. The monster leans out over the sill, backlit by my bedroom light. He's staring down, searching, then seems to look straight at me, although it's too dark, and he's too far away for me to know for sure. He suddenly disappears, and I cry in relief . . . until moments later, when the back door swings open.

I scramble to my feet and limp toward the rear of the property. The wooden tree house looms before me, as though offering a safe hideaway. But no, that would be too obvious. I keep running, my bare feet slick on the frost, and I feel like I'm half running, half skating to the tree line.

Tears ice my cheeks and the front of my neck. Another look back, and I see the man headed toward me. Moonbeams flash on something silver in his gloved hand. He'll

never stop chasing me. I choke back sobs and run past the first copse of pines. The woods are scary, but that man scares me even more. I body-slam fully into trees, and branches slap and claw into every inch of my chilled skin. I might as well be naked for all the warmth of my flimsy pink nightie.

Can't think about that now. Keep moving.

Dead leaves and twigs snap and crunch from behind. I blindly press forward, lost and confused. All I know to do is to keep going.

I'm tired, so very tired. There's a stitch in my side I can no longer ignore, and my right foot burns with pain. I lean against rough bark and pitch forward, clutching my tummy. My lungs are on fire, and my breaths form little puffs of smoke.

Where is he?

I try to breathe more quietly and focus. I hear nothing. I'm going to rest now. I violently shiver and then realize I'm still clutching my comforter. Quickly, I throw it over my shoulders and sink to the ground. I stare up at the crescent moon and wait. I shut my eyes and again press my fingers in my ears. I can't run anymore. If he spots me, if he's still out there in the darkness, then I don't want to hear and see him the moment he catches me.

Darkness settles on me, as thick and heavy as the comforter. All I hear is the blood pounding in my ears. Beneath my eyelids, red explodes—an ocean of hot crimson that threatens to drag me under and suffocate the air in my lungs.

The unexpected scent of smoke fills my nose and mouth. My eyes pop open, and I stumble to my feet, leaning against the tree to keep the weight off my right ankle. Orange and red flames shoot up in the air like the firecrackers we watch every year after the Fourth of July parade downtown. It takes me a minute to realize it's our house burning. The sky is scorched with the blaze.

I can never go back now. Not ever. Nothing is left of my old life. Mom. Jimmy. Dad? All gone. My mind floods with images of red—the fire and the blood that destroyed my world.