

CURSE

STEVEN JAMES





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*For
Tom and Rhonda,
friends and family*

*The markings of madness ring true in my soul.
Each day is a scream and a chore.
The echoes of bedlam won't let me be whole.
For they've eaten the dream by the door.*

—ALEXI MARËNCHIVEK

PART I
TAKEN

CHAPTER ONE

*FRIDAY, JUNE 7
COUNTY HIGHWAY G
5 MILES OUTSIDE OF BELDON, WISCONSIN*

Dusk.

The forest, thick on each side of the road, lies caught in the deep shadows of the coming night. Lake Algonquin sits nestled among them.

A net of darkness settles across the woods.

Though I'm driving, there's no traffic and I'm alone in the car, so I sneak a quick glance at my phone.

No texts from Kyle.

His house is exactly eight miles from the corner up ahead, so at this speed I'll be there in just under twelve minutes and forty seconds.

I don't even have to consciously think about it.

Math comes naturally to me. Sometimes it's helpful.

Sometimes it's just annoying.

We're going to spend some time planning for our upcoming trip to Georgia next Saturday.

In my headlights, I glimpse movement ahead of me on the right side of the road and I brake.

Two skittish whitetail deer stare at the car, then bound in front me. I wait for them to clear, make sure there aren't any more coming, then pull forward.

Two weeks ago when I received the invitation to the basketball camp in Atlanta, I was surprised. I'd had a good season, but it's an elite camp and usually fills up early, so just getting an invite was a big deal. But since it was half-way across the country, getting there was going to be a challenge.

Because of their work schedules, neither of my parents could take me.

Apparently, there was some anonymous donor who gave money to cover the tuition and travel costs of students from out of state to help assure "diversity."

At first we weren't sure if the camp scholarship was legit, but everything cleared, my coach told me it wasn't breaking any college recruitment rules, and I sent in my registration. But there was still the issue of getting down there.

The camp is at Northern Georgia Tech, a private university just outside of Atlanta.

Not a short trip from Beldon, Wisconsin.

Right around eighteen hours, actually.

Then Kyle's girlfriend, Mia, mentioned that she had an aunt in Atlanta whose house wasn't too far from the campus and it got us thinking.

Dad told us his college roommate lived half an hour south of Champaign, Illinois, which is about halfway down there. After he brought that up, things came together quickly. Kyle, Mia, and Nicole, the girl I was dating, would go down with me.

All of us are rising seniors, getting ready for our last year of high school. Three of us are seventeen, but Mia is eighteen and that helped our case.

Her aunt could show everyone else around Atlanta while I was at the camp. Just the right amount of freedom for us and the right amount of supervision for our parents.

Ground rules: Check in every day. No drinking. No drugs. Nothing stupid.

The first three, no problem.

That last one might take a little more work.

Now, as I come around a curve that follows the shoreline of the lake, I catch sight of some movement again, about a hundred feet away.

I slow to a stop.

But this time it's not a deer.

A little boy emerges from the woods. He's maybe five or six years old and seems distracted as he wanders to the middle of the county highway.

He stops at the centerline.

I wait to see if his mom or someone will follow after him, but after a moment it's clear that he's alone.

I let the car idle, then, stepping out, I call to him, "Hey, are you okay?"

The summer day has cooled off. There's a slight chill in the air.

Crickets chatter in the shadows.

After a quick glance toward the forest, the boy faces me. Pale complexion—even in the dim light I can make that much out. He reaches one hand toward me as if he somehow wants me to hold it from this distance, but he doesn't leave the road.

Beyond him, around the bend, headlights cut through the darkening day and the rumble of a logging truck rolls toward us from the direction of the sawmill.

I start the boy's way. "You need to get off the road."

He doesn't move.

As I get nearer, although I can't place him, I have the sense that I've seen him before.

"Hurry!"

Nothing.

The truck doesn't slow.

Now I'm running.

Its headlights come sharply into view, glaring toward me, backlighting the boy.

As it barrels toward us, I yell again for him to move. His back is still turned to the logging truck as he stands completely still with that one arm held out to me.

"Hey!" I gesture wildly. "Get off the road!"

He stays there, but lifts the other arm.

Both hands outstretched now.

He wants you to help him.

He needs you to save him.

I bolt as fast as I can toward the oncoming truck to sweep the boy into my arms and get him to safety.

My mind is calculating speed, distance.

Math.

Second nature.

There isn't time to get there and save him.

Yes there is. There has to be.

Go!

I do.

The driver blares his horn and slams on the brakes, but he's going too fast and there's no way he'll be able to stop in time. The sharp smell of burning rubber fills the air. As the cab begins to slow, the truck bed, which is loaded with logs, starts sliding sideways along the road.

When I'm just a few strides away from the boy, he finally looks over his shoulder at the truck.

I throw out an arm to pick him up, but my hand passes through empty air.

I spin to see how I could've missed him, and my back is to the truck as it clips my left side and launches me into the air toward the ditch.

Time somehow slows and slurs around me while I'm in midair. The night becomes liquid and I'm aware of the cool evening air brushing against my face, of the rich scent of pine trees surrounding the road, of the sound of the wailing brakes. The glaring sweep of the headlights. The rocky ground beneath me. Coming closer.

Time collapses.

Rips forward.

Impact.

I careen down the embankment, rolling toward the lake until I smash into a tree and come to an abrupt stop about fifteen feet from the road.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

You're okay. You're going to be okay.

It should hurt. It will hurt, but right now adrenaline is blocking the pain—during all my years of playing football I've taken my share of hits. I know how this works.

But right now, I don't care about any of that.

All I can think of is the boy.

You didn't get to him. You missed him. He's gone.

My left arm hangs loose and useless from a dislocated shoulder.

It's happened to me before in football and every time it does, seeing it like that is pretty shocking, but the pain hasn't quite registered yet.

I get to my feet and scramble up the bank toward the pavement.

The logging truck has skidded past me and finally come to a stop. One of the straps holding the logs in place must have snapped because the logs have spilled sideways off the bed and are strewn across the road, blocking it.

Terrified of what I might see, I scan the pavement, but can't find the boy. No blood. No sign of a body. I gaze into the ditch I landed in.

It's shrouded in lengthening shadows, but from where I'm standing I can't see the boy—or what might have been left of him if he was hit by that truck.

My ankle got wrenched when I landed and as I take a wobbly step forward to scan the other side of the road, it buckles. I collapse and the driver of the logging truck comes hurrying toward me.

“You okay?” he shouts.

Using only one arm, it’s tough to push myself to my feet again, but I manage. “Did you hit him?”

“Who?”

“The boy. The little boy.”

“What boy?” He stares at me dumbfounded. A mixture of confusion and fear. “We’re the only ones out here. You came running at my truck. What happened to your arm?”

“No, no, no. The boy who was in the road.”

“Listen, I’m telling you, there wasn’t anyone else. Just you. What’d you think you were doing?” He offers a hand to steady me. “You could’ve been killed. Are you okay?”

I take a step, but lose my balance again and barely catch myself by grabbing his arm before toppling over.

“We need to get you to a hospital. Is your shoulder . . . ?”

“Dislocated. I’m okay.”

“You shouldn’t be walking around.”

“We have to find the boy.”

The pain is finally tightening around me. I gaze at that left arm. By the awkward angle, anyone could see that things aren’t right. The last time this happened the physical therapist told me it might sublax again.

So.

His prediction came true.

Either I get it back in place myself or I wait for a doctor to do it—and it’s going to hurt just as much then. And in the meantime the tissue will continue to swell, so it’ll only get harder to pop back into place if I wait.

“Help me,” I say to the driver. “I need to get to your truck.”

He tells me once more that I shouldn’t be walking around, but when I start limping forward, he joins me, supporting my good arm.

We arrive at the flatbed and I wedge my left wrist into a gap between the boards on the back.

Okay, this is really not going to feel good.

The man gasps. “What are you doing?”

“Traction. I have to get . . .”

I clench my teeth and lean backward.

A sharp explosion of pain.

I almost collapse.

But, I didn’t go back far enough. The shoulder remains out of its socket.

Relax. You need to relax the muscles. It’s the only way it’ll go back in place.

“Give me a sec.” I take a deep breath, close my eyes, ready myself, and pull back again, harder. I twist slightly and finally, after what seems like the longest three seconds of my life, the shoulder grinds as it slides back into place. There’s a shot of relief but, at the same time, a wave of a heavier, duller kind of pain.

The driver’s face blanches. “Did you just . . . ?”

“Yeah.”

I use my right hand to support the weak arm and to keep it from swinging. Based on how things went the last time this happened, it's going to be sore for a couple weeks at least.

"You might have internal injuries." The man produces a cell phone and punches in 911. "You should lie down until help gets here."

"We need to find the boy."

Finally, he gives in. "Listen. I'll look for him. But you, rest."

When dispatch picks up, I say to the driver, "Tell them I'm Daniel Byers. They'll know who I am."

"They will?"

"Yeah. My dad's the sheriff."

CHAPTER TWO

After the driver hangs up, it's clear that he's worried about the fact that my dad is our county's sheriff.

"You're the one who ran in front of my truck. I tried to stop. I couldn't help it."

"I know. I was just trying to get that kid out of the way."

"I don't want to get in trouble for—"

I'm losing my patience here. "Just look for him. Okay?"

"Yeah. Alright. Wait here. I'll be right back."

He digs a flashlight out of his cab and starts scouring the ditch that I'd been thrown into.

I shuffle over and take a seat on the guardrail that's meant to keep the logging trucks from toppling over the side of the road if they take this curve too fast.

The smell of burnt rubber still hangs in the air.

I notice the crickets chirping from the shadows just as I did when I first got out of my car. I don't know if they've been doing it this whole time or if they were quiet for a while and have just started in again now.

It's odd how certain things at certain times attract our attention. It's almost as if our brains focus on one sense or impression at a time. You get hurt—you notice that. Then, as the pain starts to fade, you realize you're hungry. But the thing is—were you hungry that whole time and your brain just didn't tell you? Or did you suddenly start to get hungry right when you stopped focusing on the pain?

It makes it hard to tell how much of the world passes by every day in that slipstream between what's really happening and what our brains register as real.

Sometimes it can be a pretty big gap.

That's one thing I've been learning this last year, ever since the blurs started.

An ambulance siren echoes off the water, somewhere around the other side of the lake.

I wonder if my dad will be the first one from law enforcement to arrive.

I'm sure that as soon as he hears his son was hit by a truck he'll break every speed law in the county to get here.

Mom would too, but she's at a graphic design conference in Madison this week for work. Even though she isn't supposed to get back until Sunday night, I'm guessing she'll start the five-hour drive back home right away when she finds out what's happened.

The ambulance's siren swells over the other night sounds, but it's still a few minutes out.

While I wait, I watch the truck driver finish checking this side of the road and move to the other side.

Evidently he hasn't found anything yet.

Letting my attention drift away from my ankle and shoulder, I consider what he said about me possibly having internal injuries. Gently, I prod at my side to see if there are any broken ribs. I can't tell for sure, but I've got some tender spots.

Finally, his flashlight beam comes bobbing back toward me.

“Anything?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

*Well, if there was no boy, then you were seeing things.
And that would mean—*

The driver arrives by my side and asks me concernedly, “How are you doing?”

“I'm alright.”

But that's not quite true.

Because I know I saw a boy out here.

I know I did.

The ambulance comes into view.

By now, darkness has nearly devoured the forest.

Because of the logs in the road, the paramedics aren't able to pull all the way up to me, so I hobble toward them as they hustle my way, rolling a gurney along the road.

As they check my vitals and give me a quick eval, they tell me that my dad was over in Pine Lake—which is on the other side of the county—but that he'll meet me at the hospital. Then, they load me up, and when they swing the doors shut it's almost like they're closing off a time in my life when things were normal again, the way they used to be before last fall.

Before the blurs began.

But now, it sure looks like they're back. And if I'm starting to have them again, it almost certainly means that something terrible has happened.

It almost certainly means that someone is dead.