PROLOGUE

2019

The church resembles an alpine chapel, the kind you might find in the mountains outside Salzburg, and inside the cool air is welcoming. Because it's August in the South, the temperature is sweltering, made worse by the suit and tie I'm wearing. In my daily life, I generally don't wear suits. They're uncomfortable and as a physician, I've learned that my patients respond better to me when I'm dressed more casually, as they tend to be.

I'm here to attend a wedding. I've known the bride for more than five years now, though I'm not sure that she would consider us friends. Though we'd spoken regularly for more than a year after she left New Bern, our relationship since then has been limited to a couple of texts every now and then, sometimes instigated by her, sometimes by me. We do, however, have an undeniable bond, one that has its roots in events that occurred years ago. Sometimes it's hard for me to remember the man I was when our paths first crossed, but isn't that normal? Life endlessly offers us chances to set new directions and in the process we grow and change; when we

look in the rearview mirror, we catch a glimpse of former selves who sometimes seem unrecognizable.

Some things haven't changed—my name, for instance—but I'm thirty-seven now and in the early stages of a new career, one I'd never considered in the first three decades of my life. While I'd once loved the piano, I no longer play the instrument; where I'd grown up with a loving family, it's been a long time since I've seen any of them. There are reasons for that, but I'll get to those parts later.

Today, I'm simply glad to be here, and to have made it on time. My flight from Baltimore had been delayed and the line to pick up my rental car was long. Though I'm not the last to arrive, the church is more than half full and I find a seat in the third row from the back, doing my best to slip in unobserved. The pews in front of me are filled with women wearing the kind of hats you expect to find at the Kentucky Derby, extravagant confections of bows and flowers that goats might enjoy eating. The sight makes me smile, a reminder that in the South, there are always moments when it's possible to slip into a world that seems to exist nowhere else.

As I continue to take in my surroundings, the sight of flowers also makes me think about bees. Bees have been part of my life for most of my living memory. They are remarkable and wonderful creatures, endlessly interesting to me. These days, I tend to more than a dozen beehives—it's much less work than you might imagine—and I've come to believe that the bees take care of me in the same way they take care of everyone. Without them, human life would nearly be impossible, since we rely on bees for a large part of our entire food supply.

There's something impossibly wonderful about that concept, that life as we know it can come down to something as simple as a bee making its way from one plant to another.

It makes me believe my part-time hobby is important in the grand scheme of things, and yet, I further understand that tending beehives also led me here, to this small-town church, far from the landmarks of home. Of course, my story—like any good story—is also the story of events and circumstances and other people as well, including a pair of old-timers who liked to sit in rocking chairs in front of an old mercantile store in North Carolina. Most important, it's the story of two different women, though one was really just a girl at the time.

I'm the first to notice that when others tell their stories, they tend to frame them in ways that make them the star. I'll probably fall into the same trap, but I'd like to offer the caveat that most of the events still strike me as accidental—throughout my telling, please remember that I regard myself as no kind of hero.

As for the ending of this story, I suppose this wedding is a coda of sorts. Five years ago, I would have been hard-pressed to say whether the conclusion of these intertwining tales was a happy, tragic, or bittersweet one. And now? Frankly, I'm even less certain, as I've come here wondering whether the story might in some winding fashion pick up exactly where it left off.

To understand what I mean, you'll have to travel back in time with me, to revisit a world that despite all that has happened in the intervening years, still feels close enough to touch.

CHAPTER 1

2014

I first noticed the girl walking past my house the day after I'd moved in. Over the next month and a half, I saw her shuffle by a few times a week, head down and shoulders hunched. For a long time, neither of us said a word to each other.

I suspected she was in her teens—something about the way she carried herself suggested she was struggling beneath the twin burdens of low self-esteem and irritation at the world—but at thirty-two I'd reached the age where it was almost impossible for me to tell. Aside from noting her long brown hair and wide-set eyes, the only thing I knew for sure about her was that she lived in the trailer park up the road and that she liked to walk. Or more likely, she had to walk, because she didn't own a car.

The April skies were clear, the temperature hovering in the low seventies, with just enough breeze to carry the perfumed aroma of flowers. The dogwoods and azaleas in the yard had roared into bloom almost overnight, framing the gravel road that wound past my grandfather's house just outside New Bern, North Carolina, a place I'd recently inherited.

And I, Trevor Benson, convalescing physician and disabled veteran by profession, was shaking mothballs from a box along the base of the front porch, lamenting that it wasn't how I'd planned to spend my morning. The problem with doing chores around the house was never knowing quite when you might be finished, since there was always something else that needed to be done . . . or whether fixing up the old place was even worthwhile at all.

The house—and I used the term loosely—wasn't much by way of appearance and the years had taken their toll. My grandfather built it himself after returning from World War II, and though he could build things to last, he didn't have a lot of talent when it came to design. The house was a rectangle with porches on the front and back—two bedrooms, kitchen, family room, and two bathrooms; the cedar siding had faded to a grayish silver over the years, mimicking my grandfather's hair. The roof had been patched, air seeped through the windows, and the kitchen floor slanted to the point that if liquid spilled, it became a tiny river that flowed to the door that led to the back porch. I like to think it made cleaning up easier for my grandfather, who'd lived by himself the last thirty years of his life.

The property, however, was special. It was a shade over six acres, with an aging, slightly tilting barn and a honey shed—where my grandfather harvested his honey—and dotted with seemingly every flowering plant known to mankind, including clover patches and wildflowers. From now until the end of summer, the property would resemble a ground-level fireworks display. It was also situated on Brices Creek, where dark, brackish water flowed so slowly that it often reflected the sky like a mirror. Sunsets turned the creek into a cacophony of burgundy and red and orange and yellow, while the

slowly fading rays pierced the curtain of Spanish moss draped over the tree branches.

The honey bees loved the place, which had been my grandfather's intent, since I'm pretty sure he loved bees more than people. There were about twenty beehives on the property; he'd been a part-time apiarist all his life, and it often struck me that the hives were in better condition than either the house or the barn. I'd checked on the hives a few times from a distance since my arrival here, and though it was still early in the season, I could tell the colonies were healthy.

The bee population was growing rapidly, as it always did in spring—I could actually hear them buzzing if I listened—and I'd left them to their own devices. Instead, I'd spent most of my time rendering the house livable again. I cleaned out the cupboards, setting aside a few jars of honey to keep, and tossing the remainder—a box of stale crackers, nearly empty jars of peanut butter and jelly, and a bag of dried-out apples. The drawers were crammed with junk—out-of-date coupons, half-used candles, magnets, and pens that didn't work, all of which went into the garbage. The refrigerator was mostly empty and oddly clean, without any of the moldy items or disgusting smells I'd expected. I purged a ton of junk from the house—most of the furniture was half a century old, and my grandfather had a minor hoarding issue—and then hired various crews to do the more difficult work. I had had a contractor do a cosmetic remodel on one of the bathrooms; a plumber fixed the leak in the kitchen faucet; I had the floors sanded and stained, the interior painted; and last but not least, I had the back door replaced. It was cracked near the jamb and had been boarded over. Then, after bringing in a crew to clean the place from top to bottom, I got my laptop set up with Wi-Fi and picked up some furniture for the living room and

bedroom, as well as a new television for the family room. The original television had rabbit ears antennae and was the size of a treasure chest. Goodwill declined the donation of my grandfather's used furniture, despite my argument that it could all be regarded as antiques, so it ended up at the dump.

The porches were in relatively good shape, though, and I spent most of my mornings and evenings there. Which is how and why I'd started with the mothballs. Spring in the South isn't only about flowers and honey bees and pretty sunsets, especially when you live adjacent to a creek in what seemed like the wilderness. Because it had been warmer than usual recently, snakes had begun to wake from their winter slumber. I'd spotted a big one on the back porch when I'd wandered outside that morning with my coffee. After having the bejesus scared out of me and spilling half the coffee down the front of my shirt, I quickly ducked back inside the house.

I had no idea whether the snake was poisonous or what kind it was. I'm not a snake expert. But unlike some people—my grandfather, for instance—I didn't want to kill it, either. I just wanted it to stay away from my house and live *over there*. I knew that snakes did useful things—like killing mice, which I'd heard scurrying in the walls at night. The sound creeped me out; despite spending every summer here when I was a kid, I'm not used to country living. I'd always considered myself more of a condo-in-the-city guy, which is what I had been, right up until the explosion that blew up not only my entire world, but me as well. Which was why I was convalescing in the first place, but more on that later.

For now, though, let's get back to the snake. After changing shirts, I vaguely remembered that my grandfather used mothballs to keep snakes away. He was convinced that mothballs had magic powers to repel all kinds of things—bats, mice,

bugs, and snakes—and he would buy the stuff by the case. I'd spotted plenty of them in the barn, and figuring my grandfather must have known something, I seized a box and began to scatter them liberally around the house, first in the back and along the sides, then finally in the front.

That was when I again spied the girl trudging down the road that led past the house. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, and when I lifted my gaze, she must have felt my eyes on her because she glanced in my direction. She didn't smile or wave; instead, she ducked her head as if hoping to avoid acknowledging my presence.

I shrugged and went back to work, if dropping mothballs could actually be considered work. For whatever reason, though, I found myself thinking about the trailer park where she lived. It was at the end of the road, about a mile away. Out of curiosity, I'd walked down there shortly after I'd arrived. It had sprung up since the last time I'd visited, and I suppose I wanted to know who the new neighbors were. My first thought upon seeing it was that it made my grandfather's place look like the Taj Mahal. Six or seven ancient and decrepit trailers appeared to have been dropped haphazardly on a dirt lot; in the far corner were the remains of another trailer that had caught fire, leaving only a black, partially melted husk that had never been cleared away. In between the trailers, clotheslines drooped between slanting poles. Scrawny chickens pecked an obstacle course of cars on blocks and rusting appliances, avoiding only a feral pit bull chained to an old discarded bumper. The dog had teeth the size of bacon and barked so ferociously at my presence that spittle flew from its foaming mouth. *Not a nice doggy*, I remembered thinking. Part of me wondered why anyone would choose to live in a place like this, but then again, I already knew the

answer. On my walk back home, I felt pity for the tenants and then chastised myself for being a snob because I knew I'd been luckier than most, at least when it came to money.

"Do you live here?" I heard a voice ask.

Glancing up, I saw the girl. She'd doubled back and was standing a few yards away, clearly keeping her distance, but close enough for me to notice a spray of light freckles on cheeks that were so pale as to seem almost translucent. On her arms I noted a couple of bruises, like she'd bumped into something. She wasn't particularly pretty and there was something unfinished about her, which made me think again that she was a teenager. Her wary gaze suggested that she was prepared to run if I made the smallest move toward her.

"I do now," I said, offering a smile. "But I don't know how long I'll be staying."

"The old man died. The one who used to live here. His name was Carl."

"I know. He was my grandfather."

"Oh." She slipped a hand into her back pocket. "He gave me honey."

"That sounds like something he'd do." I wasn't sure if that was true, but it struck me as the right thing to say.

"He used to eat at the Trading Post," she said. "He was always nice."

Slow Jim's Trading Post was one of those ramshackle stores so ubiquitous in the South and had been around longer than I'd been alive. My grandfather used to bring me there whenever I visited. It was the size of a three-car garage with a covered porch out front, and it sold everything from gas to milk and eggs, to fishing equipment, live bait, and auto parts. There were old-fashioned gas pumps out front—no credit or debit accepted—and a grill that served hot food. Once, I

remember finding a bag of plastic toy soldiers wedged between a bag of marshmallows and a box of fishing hooks. There was little rhyme or reason to the offerings on the shelves or displayed on the walls, but I always thought it was one of the coolest stores ever.

"Do you work there?"

She nodded before pointing at the box in my hand. "Why are you putting mothballs around the house?"

I stared at the box in my hand, realizing that I'd forgotten I was holding it.

"There was a snake on my porch this morning. I've heard that mothballs will keep them away."

She pursed her lips before taking a step backward. "Okay, then. I just wanted to know if you were living here now."

"I'm Trevor Benson, by the way."

At the sound of my name, she stared at me. Working up the courage to ask the obvious.

"What happened to your face?"

I knew she was referring to the thin scar that ran from my hairline to my jaw, which reinforced the impression of her youth. Adults usually wouldn't bring it up. Instead, they'd pretend they hadn't noticed. "Mortar round in Afghanistan. A few years back."

"Oh." She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. "Did it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Oh," she said again. "I guess I'll get going now."

"All right," I said.

She started back toward the road before suddenly turning around again. "It won't work," she called out.

"What won't work?"

"The mothballs. Snakes don't give a lick about mothballs."

"You know that for sure?"

"Everyone knows it."

Tell that to my grandfather, I thought. "Then what should I do? If I don't want snakes on my porch?"

She seemed to consider her answer. "Maybe you should live in a place where there aren't any snakes."

I laughed. She was an odd one, for sure, but I realized that it was the first time I'd laughed since I'd moved here, maybe my first laugh in months.

"Nice meeting you."

I watched her go, surprised when she slowly pirouetted. "I'm Callie," she called out.

"Nice to meet you, Callie."

When she finally vanished from view, blocked by the azaleas, I debated whether to continue putting out mothballs. I had no idea whether she was right or wrong, but in the end, I chose to call it a day. I was in the mood for some lemonade and wanted to sit on the back porch and relax, if only because my psychiatrist recommended that I take time to relax while I still had time.

He said it would help me keep *The Darkness* away.

My psychiatrist sometimes used flowery language like *The Darkness* to describe PTSD, also known as post-traumatic stress disorder. When I asked him why, he explained that every patient was different and that part of his job was to find words that accurately reflected the mood and feelings of the patient in a way that would lead the patient along the slow path toward recovery. Since he'd been working with me, he'd referred to my PTSD as *turmoil*, *issues*, *struggle*, *the butterfly*

effect, *emotion dysregulation*, *trigger sensitivity*, and of course, *The Darkness*. It kept our sessions interesting, and I had to admit that darkness was about as accurate a description of the way I'd been feeling as any of them. For a long time after the explosion, my mood *was* dark, as black as the night sky without stars or a moon, even if I didn't fully realize why. Early on, I was stubbornly in denial about PTSD, but then again, I'd always been stubborn.

In all candor, my anger, depression, and insomnia made perfect sense to me at the time. Whenever I glanced in the mirror, I was reminded of what had happened at Kandahar Airfield on September 9, 2011, when a rocket aimed at the hospital where I was working impacted near the entrance, only seconds after I'd exited the building. There is a bit of irony in my choice of words, since glancing in the mirror isn't the same as it once was. I was blinded in my right eye, which means I have no depth perception. Staring at a reflection of myself feels a little like watching swimming fish on an old computer screen saver—almost real, but not quite—and even if I were able to get past that, my other wounds are as obvious as a lone flag planted atop Mount Everest. I've already mentioned the scar on my face, but shrapnel left my torso pockmarked like the moon. The pinkie and ring finger on my left hand were blown off—particularly unfortunate since I'm a lefty—and I lost my left ear as well. Believe it or not, that was the wound that bothered me the most about my appearance. A human head doesn't look natural without an ear. I looked strangely lopsided and it wasn't until that moment that I'd ever really appreciated my ear at all. In the rare times I thought about my ears, it was always in the context of hearing things. But try wearing sunglasses with just one ear and you'll understand why I felt the loss acutely.

I haven't yet mentioned the spinal injuries, which meant having to learn how to walk again, or the thrumming headaches that lingered for months, all of which left me a physical wreck. But the good doctors at Walter Reed fixed me up. Well, most of me, anyway. As soon as I was upright again, my care shifted to my old alma mater Johns Hopkins, where the cosmetic surgeries were performed. I now have a prosthetic ear—so well done I can hardly tell it's fake—and my eye appears normal, even if it's completely useless. They couldn't do much about the fingers—they were fertilizer in Afghanistan by then—but a plastic surgeon was able to diminish the size of my facial scar to the thin, white line that it now is. It's noticeable, but it's not as though little kids scream at the sight of me. I like to tell myself that it adds character, that beneath the surface of the suave and debonair man before you exists a man of intensity and courage, who has experienced and survived real danger. Or something like that.

Still, along with my body, my entire life was blown up as well, including my career. I didn't know what to do with myself or my future; I didn't know how to handle the flashbacks or insomnia or my hair-trigger anger, or any of the other crazy symptoms associated with PTSD. Things went from bad to worse until I hit rock bottom—think a four-day bender, where I woke covered in vomit—and I finally realized that I needed help. I found a psychiatrist named Eric Bowen, who was an expert in CBT and DBT, or cognitive and dialectical behavioral therapies. In essence, both CBT and DBT focus on *behaviors* as a way to help control or manage what you're thinking or feeling. If you're feeling put-upon, force yourself to stand up straight; if you're feeling overwhelmed because you're faced with a complex task, try to lessen that sensation with simple tasks of things you *can* do, like starting with

the first easy step, and then, after that, doing the next simple thing.

It takes a lot of work to modify behavior—and there are a lot of other aspects to CBT and DBT—but slowly but surely I started to get my act back together. With that came thoughts of the future. Dr. Bowen and I discussed all sorts of career options, but in the end, I realized that I missed the practice of medicine. I contacted Johns Hopkins and applied for another residency. This time, in psychiatry. I think Bowen was flattered by that. Long story short, strings were pulled—maybe because I'd been there before, maybe because I was a disabled vet—and exceptions were granted. I was accepted as a psychiatric resident, with a start date in July. Not long after I'd received the congratulatory notification from Johns Hopkins, I learned that my grandfather had had a stroke. It occurred in Easley, South Carolina, a town I'd never heard him mention before. I was urged to come to the hospital quickly, as he didn't have much time left.

I couldn't fathom why he was there. As far as I knew, he hadn't left New Bern in years. By the time I got there and found him in the hospital, he could barely speak; it was all he could do to choke out a single word at a time. Even those were hard to understand. He said some odd things to me, things that hurt me even if they made no sense, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was trying to communicate something important before he finally passed away.

As his only remaining family, it was up to me to make the funeral arrangements. I was certain he wanted to be buried in New Bern. I had him transported back to his hometown, set up a small graveside service, which had more attendees than I'd imagined there would be, and spent a lot of time at his house, wandering the property and wrestling with my

grief and guilt. Because my parents were so busy with their own lives, I'd spent most of my summers growing up in New Bern, and I missed my grandfather with an ache that felt like a physical vise. He was funny, he was wise and kind, and he always made me feel older and smarter than I really was. When I was eight, he let me take a puff from his corncob pipe; he taught me how to fly-fish and let me help whenever he repaired an engine. He taught me everything about bees and beekeeping, and when I was a teenager, he told me that one day, I would meet a woman who would change my life forever. When I asked how I would know if I'd met the right one, he winked and told me that if I wasn't sure, then I'd better just keep on looking.

Somehow, with all that had happened since Kandahar, I hadn't made time to visit him during the past few years. I know he worried about my condition, but I hadn't wanted to share with him the demons I was battling. Hell, it was hard enough to talk about my life with Dr. Bowen, and even though I knew my grandfather wouldn't judge me, it felt easier to keep my distance. It crushed me that he was taken before I had the chance to really reconnect with him. To top it off, a local attorney contacted me right after the funeral to let me know that I'd inherited my grandfather's property, so I found myself the owner of the very home where I'd spent so many formative summers as a kid. In the weeks following the funeral, I spent a lot of time reflecting on all the words I'd left unspoken to the man who had loved me so unconditionally.

My mind also kept returning to the odd things my grandfather had said to me on his deathbed, and I wondered why he'd been in Easley, South Carolina, in the first place. Did it have something to do with the bees? Was he visiting an old

friend? Dating a woman? The questions continued to gnaw at me. I spoke to Dr. Bowen about it, and he suggested that I try to find the answers. The holidays passed without notice, and with the arrival of the new year I listed my condo with a realtor, thinking it might take a few months to sell. Lo and behold, I had an offer within days, and closed in February. Since I'd soon be moving to Baltimore for residency, it didn't make sense to find a place to rent temporarily. I thought about my grandfather's place in New Bern and figured, why not?

I could get out of Pensacola, maybe get the old place ready to sell. If I was lucky, I might even be able to figure out why my grandfather had been in Easley, and what on earth he'd been trying to tell me.

Which is how and why I found myself scattering mothballs outside his rattletrap old cabin.

I didn't really have lemonade on the back porch. That's how my grandfather used to refer to beer, and when I was little, one of the great thrills of my young life was getting him a lemonade from the icebox. Strangely, it always came in a bottle labeled Budweiser.

I prefer Yuengling, from America's oldest brewery. When I attended the Naval Academy, an upperclassman named Ray Kowalski introduced me to it. He was from Pottsville, Pennsylvania—home of the Yuengling Brewery—and he convinced me there was no finer beer. Interestingly, Ray was also the son of a coal miner and last I heard, he was serving on the *USS Hawaii*, a nuclear submarine. I guess he learned from his dad that when you're working, sunlight and fresh air are overrated.

I wonder what my mom and dad would have thought about my life these days. After all, I haven't worked in more than two years. I'm pretty sure my dad would have been appalled; he was the kind of father who would sit me down for a lecture if I received an A– on an exam and was disappointed when I chose the Naval Academy over Georgetown, his alma mater, or Yale, where he'd received his law degree. He woke at five in the morning every day of the week, read both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* while having his coffee, then would head to DC, where he worked as a lobbyist for whatever company or industry group had hired him. A sharp mind and an aggressive negotiator, he lived to make a deal and could quote large sections of the tax code from memory. He was one of six partners who oversaw more than two hundred attorneys, and his walls were decorated with photographs of him with three different presidents, half a dozen senators, and too many congressmen to count.

My dad didn't simply work; his hobby was work. He spent seventy hours a week at the office and golfed with clients and politicians on the weekends. Once a month, he hosted a cocktail party at our home, with still more clients and politicians. In the evenings, he often secluded himself in his office, where there was always a pressing phone call to make, a brief to be written, a plan to be made. The idea of him kicking back on the porch and having a beer in the middle of the afternoon on a workday would have struck him as absurd, something a slacker might do, but never a *Benson*. There was nothing worse than being a slacker, in my father's eyes.

Though he wasn't the nurturing type, he wasn't a bad father. To be fair, my mother wasn't exactly a cookie-baking, hands-on PTA member, either. A neurosurgeon trained at Johns Hopkins, she was frequently on call and was a good

match for my father in her drive and passion for work. My grandfather always said she came out of the wrapper that way, belying her small-town background and the fact that neither of her parents went to college. But I never doubted her or my father's love for me, even if we ate takeout for dinner every night and I attended more cocktail parties as a teenager than family camping trips.

In any case, my family was hardly unusual for Alexandria. Everyone at my elite private school had high-powered and prosperous parents, and the culture of excellence and career success filtered down to their children. Stellar grades were the norm, but even that wasn't enough. Kids were also expected to excel at sports or music or both and be popular to boot. I'll admit I got sucked into all of it; by the time I was in high school, I felt the need to be…*just like them*. I dated popular girls, finished second in my class, made all-state soccer in my junior and senior years, and was proficient on the piano. At the Naval Academy, I started on the soccer team all four years, double majored in chemistry and mathematics, and did well enough on my MCATs to be accepted to Johns Hopkins for medical school, making my mother proud.

Sadly, my parents weren't around to watch me receive my diploma. The accident was something I don't like to think about, nor do I like to tell others what happened. Most people don't know what to say, conversation falters, and I'm usually left feeling even worse than had I said nothing about them at all.

Then again, I sometimes wondered whether I just hadn't told the story to the right person, or if that person was even out there. Someone should be able to empathize, right? What I can say, however, is that I've come to accept that life never turns out quite like one expects.