

## Chapter 6--Through Misery

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JT opens his eyes. He can breathe. He is not drowning in the pit as he suspected he would. He looks around at the world around him. He is in the place he just left, Uncle Henri's property just outside Houma. Still, he cannot find comfort. Something is wrong here. Night is approaching. He sees a little boy walking a dog. From a distance, the boy is eerily familiar. JT creeps closer to the boy, trying to comprehend what he is seeing.

The boy is about seven years old, and he is walking Uncle Henri's hunting dog. It cannot be possible, but JT is sure that the dog is a golden retriever named Wheels. Wheels was a good dog by all standards: protective of the family, good swimmer, and never loses a duck. JT remembers Ben telling Momma he wants a dog like Wheels when they go home, but she told him that JT is allergic. He also remembers that instead of pouting, Ben asked Uncle Henri if he could take Wheels on a walk before sunset. JT suddenly realizes why the boy looks familiar. It is his kid brother. How? JT continues watching Ben and Wheels from afar. They're walking back to the house from the swamp's edge. The sky is a beautiful orange. "Look, Wheels," Ben says, "the Sun is going over the edge, and it's painting before it leaves." Those are the words that Grandma Gladys always told the brothers when they watched sunsets together, and he tells the dog the same words now. Wheels looks at him with loyal eyes that have seen more sunrises than sunsets, and Ben takes his look as confirmation. "What do you say, Wheels? Should we stay out and look at the stars?"

JT tries to call out to younger Ben. Warn him of what he knows is coming, but his mouth is held shut, and no matter how hard he struggles to open it to shout, “Go home! Go home!” he cannot force the words out. Some evil is keeping it closed. JT wonders if he can run in behind Ben, chase his younger brother home and to safety. Somehow, his feet that were moments before standing on solid ground, are now being swallowed by the swamp mud. He fights to free them, but the more he fights, the deeper he sinks. Before he knows it, he is waist deep in swamp water. The more he resists the worse his situation becomes. He realizes there is nothing for him to do except watch what he knows will unfold.

All the while, the dog continues staring at Ben and sniffing the clean swamp air. “I’m glad you agree with me, boy,” Ben tells the dog, “I think you’re the best dog in the world. What do you think?” Wheels barks in what Ben believes is agreement. “I’m glad you think so too.” He plops down onto the grass, dog by his side and arches his neck in wonder, taking in the twilight sky. He imagines how he will describe the scene to Momma. The sky is the color of the flowers that grow on the trees in their neighbor’s yard throughout the summer.

JT knows their neighbor, Mrs. Gremillion, often caught him sitting, staring neck-breakingly upwards, at the foot of one of her hibiscus plants. She let him sit and stare for hours, wondering what in the world was going through such a gentle, little soul’s mind. One day, he even surprised her by ringing on her doorbell to ask, “Mrs. Gremillion, may I please pick one of your flowers from the trees out front to give to my momma? I think they’re the prettiest flowers in the whole world.” She obliged, of course. All sweet, old southern ladies love to share their flowers with the children. Ben picked one carefully, as if it was his most prized possession and by dropping it the wind would steal it forever. Then, he reached into his pocket, scrounging uncomfortably for something wedged deep down inside. He managed to retrieve a quarter, and

extended his arm upwards and outwards towards his older neighbor. “Thank you for your flower,” he said with confidence, “Here is this coin in exchange. I found it faceup walking from my house to yours. That means it’s good luck,” and before she could return the quarter to him, he turned, and ran down her driveway, stopping to look both ways before crossing the street, and finally into his momma’s house.

JT remembers those events and the flower like he remembers Grandma Gladys’s grits. He cannot forget it. He was the one who suggested getting Momma a flower to Ben, and Momma saved that flower until it wilted and the last petal fell off of it. Now, from his entrapment, he watches Ben conjure the flower’s image in his mind’s eye while watching the setting sun’s last breaths. Yes, he will tell Momma that the sun painted the sky the same color as the flower he gave her from Mrs. Gremillion’s tree. She will like that, like it a lot. Wheels barks. Ben opens his eyes, returning from his imagination to the real world. The Sun has set, and the moon is high in the sky.

The stars are out in a show of force, dazzling the sky, the full moon their coat d’arms. Ben loves military history, and he loves Star Wars, and he loves the telescope that he can look through at the LSU Space Museum. He sees rays of light from one star lead to another and plays connect the dots with the night sky. There are two swords clashing behind the moon. Above the bay there are boats firing cannons at each other. JT can hear Ben make explosion noises and laser sounds from where he is trapped. He has slowly risen back to the ground, and the water has receded. Still, he dares not risk attempting to open his mouth or running towards his brother. Ben will have to face this tragedy alone.

Wheels howls at the moon. It is the wolf left in him. Ben cracks up with laughter. “Awoooo!” he yells with the dog. “Awoooo!” He is growing sleepy. It is hard work imagining

space battles and sunset flowers. “Let’s go home now, Wheels,” he says. The dog jumps up, wagging its tail in excitement. Ben begins running towards the house lights in the distance. Running to safety, JT thinks. Still, he fears something terrible is going to happen. He knows it. He has heard this story before. Ben’s laughter is growing fainter and fainter as he nears the house.

Just as JT believes Ben might actually make it home without tragedy, the swamp waters catapult him onto the land. He lands with a crash, busting his lip open and nearly biting his tongue off. His mouth is still held shut, and he can only muster a pained grunt on impact. He stays on the ground for a breath. “What does this place want from me?” he forces through his shut lips. “What am I supposed to see?” He looks up to the sky. Something dark and cold is crawling over the moon, swallowing it. He turns behind him to see the whole swamp is being consumed by the darkness. The cypress trees are vanishing, the crickets and birds fall silent, the sky itself is empty. The swamp is dying, and if he does not soon move down the path towards Uncle Henri’s house, he will be devoured. Suddenly, he hears a dripping. How is that possible? There are no clouds in the sky. He looks upwards to see the darkness has coagulated and is reaching downwards like the stalactites from the cavern he was in only moments ago. A singular drop of the dark ichor falls from above him. It lands on the palm of his hand. Agony. It burns cold, blistering his skin open and burning all the way through him. The drop feels like an ice cold nail driven through his palm. He forgets to scream, realizing that the darkness is forcing him down the path towards Uncle Henri’s house. It is forcing him to follow Ben. He takes off running. The dark rain begins falling in torrents.

When JT catches up to him, Ben is oblivious to the danger he is in. He still laughs with glee and talks to the dog. JT wonders, when will it happen? Maybe he can warn Ben. If so, he

can save him, but just as he draws close enough that Ben might be able to see him through the darkness, he trips and falls to the ground. The dog suddenly freezes, faces towards the swamp, and growls a low pitched snarl. The hairs on the back of Ben's neck stand straight up. It dawns on him that he is on the edge of the swamp, alone with a dog, and it is the blackest night he's ever seen. The stars have disappeared, and the moon has followed suit. Black clouds brood in the sky, and the air chills. Ben, even at age seven, knows that South Louisiana doesn't get cold in August. Something is terribly wrong. Wheels barks into the swamp. There is some terror inside it that the dog smells or sees and is trying to intimidate. Ben fumbles with a flashlight. His thumb slides the switch on, and light beams into the swamp.

Eyes. That's what Ben sees and JT knows has been there the whole time. Watchful, red eyes reflect the light from Ben's flashlight back into him. Wheels growls again at the eyes, a warning. The growl means stay away, but the eyes slowly draw closer. Ben remains frozen in terror. "Gators" he manages to stammer out. The gators have encircled Ben and Wheels. They are on land now, outside of their domain but in great enough numbers that Ben has no hope of escape. JT watches in horror, as he tries to climb to his feet. Wheels growls for a third time, crouching forward.

JT remembers what Uncle Henri always tells Ben, "Don't you worry about a dead dog because all dogs go to heaven." Ben begins to shake in terror. Wheels looks up at him and barks. "Run!" and pounces at the closest gator.

"Run," JT's jaw is unlocked. "Run, Ben!" he shouts as he barrels through the swamp towards his brother. The gators tear Wheels to shreds, but in their rush, allow Ben to slip through, running towards the house, towards safety. He runs as fast as his seven year old frame can, barely able to breathe when he bangs on the front door in hysterical tears. JT watches Uncle

Henri yank him inside and shut the door. He returns with a shotgun and a spotlight, stepping out of the house to scare off or kill any gators left on the land.

JT stops running to breathe. Ben is safe. He can rest now, figure out where the hell he is, and how it's possible for Ben to be seven again. He has so many questions, but he sees red eyes encircling him. He looks around in a panic. The swamp waters are still, black, but there are no cypress trees around. He cannot find Uncle Henri's spotlight or the lights from the house. He is in complete darkness except for the red glare of the gators' eyes. There is nowhere to run. He is utterly alone in the darkness surrounded by gators. In an instant, one launches itself at him, biting down on his left thigh. It pulls him from the little land he stands on, into the swamp's murky waters. It rolls, and JT feels his leg pop out of his socket. "I'm going to die," he thinks, with complete acceptance. What else can he do? He wonders for a fleeting moment if the gators might be full after eating Wheels and just let him survive, but then the rest of them clamp their teeth through him, dragging him deeper and deeper into the swamp's black waters.