

JC GATLIN



PREY
of **DESIRE**



Prologue

Friday, May 24, 1974
11:32 PM

Beneath a brilliant swirl of stars, the Black Moon Forest stood like an impenetrable wall of twisted pines, cypress trees and thatch, and from deep within its bowels came an eighteen year old man, running bloody and scared.

Brian Williams, the popular senior on the varsity wrestling team and son of the wealthy state governor, was neither aware nor cared that he was covered only by his underwear, still wet and torn from a frantic rage through the hushed swamp. His vulnerable feet were bleeding and left a splattering red trail behind him. And, in his bare arms, he held the lifeless, naked body of his girlfriend.

He ran faster out of the thorny brush, holding her tightly to him, struggling to warm her skin.

Directly ahead, outlined in the night, Brian could make out a farmhouse. Its black windows reflected moonlight like a warning beacon. As he approached, he fell to his knees and screamed for help. He nearly dropped the naked girl, but tightened his grip then screamed again, a wail more agonizing than before.

Lights flipped on inside and, from the deep shadows of the porch, the screen door opened. Someone approached. Clothed in a blue robe and night slippers, a man stepped to the edge. He paused there with an expression of surprise on his face. It turned to shock, then to unimaginable horror.

Brian's eyes met the young father's as he struggled to hold Bonnie upright. Her skin was now pale and bloated, her long black hair matted and stuck to her head. She wasn't breathing, and it was his fault. He tightened his grip on her body and trembled, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Help her," Brian cried. "Please."

Her father leapt from the porch edge and raced toward them. Brian watched him approach.

“W-we were at the lake when something happened.” The boy could barely speak. “She just disappeared under the water and I - I - I didn't know what to do.” He coughed, expelling water from his own strained lungs.

The father knelt in front of them. He reached out and touched his daughter's arm, then her face. He immediately removed his robe and placed it over Bonnie's bare shoulders, covering her breasts.

He didn't ask what happened, or how, or why. A dead stillness had overcome him, and he said simply, quietly, “We need to get her inside.”

Brian shook his head, looking at his girlfriend's body, then at the stoic father, then back at the body. “S-Shouldn't we get her to the hospital? Don't we need to do something? Call someb...”

“We need to get her inside,” he said again.

Brian didn't know what to do. Everything around him seemed to be moving in slow motion. The ground was spinning; stars above him blinked out of existence. There were crickets chirping and then silence, then chirping.

“Young man,” the father said again for a third time. “We need to get her inside.”

Cringing, Brian shifted and grabbed hold of her legs. The father slipped his arms around her torso, lifting her up. Together, they carried her through the dark as her arms dragged across the damp grass. The robe fell away. They trampled it as they brought her to the porch, stepped up and opened the screen door. They carried her inside.

Laying her on the kitchen table, the father covered her bare body with the table cloth. Her eyes rolled open and, with every move, water trickled from her mouth and nose.

Brian lost control.

“We need to call somebody.” He brought his hands up to his temples and turned away. His fingers ran up his forehead and through his wet hair, pulling and tugging at it. He paced around the kitchen. “We got to do something for her. Tell somebody.”

Without a word, Bonnie's father walked away. Brian watched him.

“What are you doing?” He stopped pacing. “We can call my Dad. He'll know what to do.”

The father returned to the kitchen with his tool box. He set it on the table next to Bonnie. Opening it, he took out a hammer and a tape measure. There were other tools, and he fumbled through them, searching.

“Are you listening to me?” Brian yelled, fighting back tears. “My dad, he knows the best doctors. He can help. We gotta do somethin' for her.”

The stoic father paused, turning his head. His eyes pierced the teenage boy with sharp, brutal stabs. He turned back to his task, removing nails and a level. He found a spiked awl.

“What are you doing? This is crazy.” Brian stepped closer to Bonnie's corpse; his own wet, near-naked body trembled. He was crying now. Unable to comprehend what was happening, he touched her hand dangling over the table and held it tightly in his own. Her palm felt like clay and her fingers like rubber. He shut her eyes as tears rolled down his cheeks. He looked back at her father.

The man lunged forward and jabbed the spiked awl into Brian's right eye.

It was one, swift motion.

The father stepped back as Brian's body twitched violently, his hands flailing toward the wood handle sticking out of his eye socket and pressing against his nose. A second later, he collapsed to the floor.

The father stood there and watched the teenager die, then turned to his daughter's corpse.

“Oh, Bonnie,” he whispered. “If you forget me, there's something I want you to know.”

25 years later...

1

If You Forget Me...

Friday, December 31, 1999
7:10 PM

He may have been the only person in the entire world alone on this New Year's Eve. He sure felt like it.

Like any average twenty-year-old boy with a broken heart, Ross McGuire stood in the parking lot of the Flying J Truck Stop, twenty miles north of Tampa, Florida, at a pay phone. He didn't want to be alone. He pressed the silver buttons with frantic urgency, but paused before hitting the last digit. *What was he going to say? Would she even accept his call?* It had been three weeks, four days and sixteen hours since he pulled his Camero to the side of the road, let her out and drove off, leaving her sobbing in the rearview mirror.

Three weeks, four days and sixteen hours.

A semi truck pulled into the parking lot, grumbling loudly as it rolled past the frail phone booth. Ross slammed down the receiver. Turning to his blue Camero parked a few feet away, he made the decision: He was leaving. For good. *She* called off the engagement; not him. *She* ended this relationship; not him. It was time to move on.

And it was the perfect time to do so. It was about to become a new year. A new century. Time to start a new chapter of his life.

With keys in hand, he shook his head and looked out at the dark parking lot. The semi pulled around and slowed. Brakes squealed as steam released above the tires. Halting, the large truck blocked his view of the storefront and engulfed him in deep shadows. Almost as if it was cutting him off from the world.

Standing in inky blackness, Ross paused. Or, more accurately, he was stopped by the weight of a small diamond ring in his shirt's breast pocket. He removed it and held it in his hands for several seconds.

Despite the oppressing shadow of the semi, the small Solitaire diamond sparkled, reflecting the swirling starlight above him. He really loved this ring. Its thin band was two-toned, and contained a small, studded diamond indicating elegance and intricacy. To him, this symbol truly represented Kimberly, the love of his life. He picked it out nearly two years ago, and had saved and scrimped and sacrificed to buy it. When he finally proposed and slipped the ring on her finger, her reaction was a resounding, "Yes!"

Barely twenty-four hours later, she gave it back. In a fit of rage, he'd pulled off the highway and left her standing at the gravel shoulder. Their relationship was over.

Or was it? Could he ever really stop? They had their ups and downs; he knew that. He admitted that he'd hurt her. And, he really did love her. Squeezing the ring in his palm, he returned to the phone booth and dialed her number. All seven digits this time.

The line rang.

He waited.

It rang again. A female voice answered on the other end.

Before Ross could respond, a hand wrapped around his throat, cutting off his windpipe. Shocked, he struggled and flailed his arms. The grip tightened and a second later he felt a sharp pain in his right eye. The thin spiked awl penetrated his upper eye cavity, through the skull and pierced his brain. Ross slumped forward, dead.

The diamond engagement ring dropped from his palm and clinked onto the pavement just beyond the phone booth. The black handset hung wildly above Ross' body as his girlfriend's voice rippled through the receiver.

"Hello...?"

A man leaned down and picked up the ring, then nodded toward the phone booth. Reaching out, he picked up the swaying handset and listened to the woman on the other end.

"Hello?" she asked again. "*Is someone there?*" He hung up the phone.

"Oh, Kimberly," he whispered. "If you forget me, there's something I want you to know..."

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"Hello...?" she had asked into the phone in her living room. "Is someone there?" But there was no answer. She could hear breathing, then a muffled uuumppfff. The phone clicked and the line went dead.

Kimberly Bradford thought little more about it and hung up the phone.

It was New Year's Eve, the dawn of a new century, and her first evening out since getting dumped three weeks, four days and 16 hours ago. Nothing was going the way she

expected. She was running late for a blind date she'd been reluctant to accept in the first place. Then the kitchen garbage disposal exploded and drenched her evening gown with black muddy grime, making her even later. The landlord said he'd be right over to fix it, but Kim couldn't wait. She grabbed the nearest towel and ran next door with Zeus, her Doberman, to her best friend's townhome.

Now, an hour later, Kim was borrowing evening wear from a woman with a fashion sense somewhat more liberal than her own. To add insult to injury, she was having a bad hair day.

She walked to the bedroom mirror and turned, carefully studying the low-cut, blood red gown with leopard print breasts. She shook her head, mortified.

"Don't you have something black?" she asked, turning away from the mirror. "How about that dinner jacket you wore last week?"

"You look fine" Her friend's reply was muffled behind the bathroom door, which was slightly ajar with the shower running. Kim shook her head.

"I don't think so. Reds just not my color..."

The bathroom door opened wider and Mallory poked her head out, glancing at Kim. At twenty-two, Kim was a college student at Stillwater University and, as Mallory liked to describe her, a "book worm" Kim had only one boyfriend her entire life - an aimless but incredibly good looking grease monkey named Ross McGuire. Mallory always made it clear that she never understood what Kim saw in him, other than it was the boy who took her virginity. But that's another story.

Tonight, Kim had let Mallory talk her into joining the rest of the world --- where tonight everyone would be ringing in the New Year. Here, the entire town of Stillwater would be attending the Congressman's New Year's Eve party at Black Moon Manor. It was the perfect opportunity to find the new love of her life.

"Wear red or nothing at all," Mallory said. "This is your first night out since you cut that 180 pound tumor out of your life. You need to look young and vibrant and energetic."

"I can't wear this. This looks like something a drag queen would wear in a Madonna video." She ran her hands through her thick black hair, piling it on top her head then glanced at Zeus. The Doberman lifted his eyes and huffed. Kim laughed, receiving the message loud and clear.

Mallory continued. "If I know Dr. Whitman, that dress will really turn him on."

"I'm not interested in turning him on." Kim really didn't want to meet this man, but Mallory was always pushing her into uncomfortable situations.

Kim had known Mallory a few years now. She was ten years older, but not nearly as mature. Mallory had lived next door ever since Kim moved into the gated townhome community, and in that time had become, by default or by convenience, her best friend. In her heart, she wanted to describe their friendship as Lucy and Ethel. But it was Mallory, not her, who was the adventurous red head. By Kim's standards, Mallory was a wild, free-spirited force of nature who, inexplicably, was a magnet for both men and money. Now Mallory was introducing her to one of those men. *Why couldn't it have been the money?* Kim thought, then added, "Besides, he's not a doctor... he's a head shrink."

"What do you think a shrink is?" Mallory flipped through a small closet crammed full of clothes, belts, shoes, hats, scarves and who knows what else. In the clutter, she

found a skimpy royal blue dress and pulled it off the hanger. "Besides, you're missing the point. The man's crazy in love with you."

Kim shook her head. "He's never even met me."

"But I've told him all about you. He's crazy in love with you. There's no other way to describe it."

"Well, he's going to think I charge by the hour if I show up at the party wearing this dress." She turned her back to the mirror and reached for the zipper. "I want to wear that navy blue skirt and matching jacket. The one with the little white buttons."

Mallory made a disgusted face and pretended to gag. "You can't wear that. I already told you, you look depressing in dark colors."

"It's understated. Muted," Kim said. "And besides, it's how I feel" She unzipped the gown, letting it fall to the floor. "I really don't want to go. I'm not into head shrinks with obsessive personalities."

A knock on the door downstairs interrupted the girls and the Doberman leapt to his feet, barking. Mallory turned her head as a deep voice echoed through the townhome.

"Ladies, time is of the essence. We're in a fantastic hurry."

It was Mallory's date, a tall, rather well-fed chap dressed in a tuxedo. He was considerably older than either Mallory or Kim, with graying temples and a carefully trimmed salt-and-pepper beard and mustache. People often compared him to Sean Connery, and Mallory loved that about him.

Zeus barked excitedly and scrambled down the spiral staircase.

"It's Addison," Mallory said under her breath. "And damn it, he's early."

Kim glanced at her watch. It was a quarter after eight. Actually, he was almost forty-five minutes late, she thought. Mallory had been dating Addison for as long as Kim had known her - just not exclusively.

Mallory often described him as necessary, like going to the dentist. It's not something you enjoy doing, but it's something you have to do if you want to look your best. And Addison did make Mallory look good; he bought her clothing and jewelry. A solid twenty years older, he was wealthy, owning a successful insurance business and properties throughout Stillwater. He was nice though, and sometimes Kim felt bad for the way Mallory treated him.

As Zeus tripped over his feet to welcome him inside, Mallory leaned over the banister at the edge of the loft and waved.

"We're not dressed yet, Pudd'n Toes," she called to him. "Give us just a minute."

Addison stepped into the living room, glancing at the Doberman and then up at her.

"Now, Mallory, I must insist..." He placed his hands on his hips and leaned forward, looking up at her. "It's after eight, and you know dilatory entrances are one of my issues."

"Oh, baby... Take a Valium," she yelled back at him. "And make yourself comfortable." Zeus watched Addison's every move with intense interest, his large brown eyes growing as the man paced the living room.

"Where's the shrink?" Kim joined Mallory at the banister and leaned over the railing, trying to see past Addison and out the door. But he blocked her view. "I thought you were both meeting us here."

“We're rendezvousing with Dr. Whitman at the benefit precisely at nine o'clock.” His voice was stern and authoritative, and he had no intention of being late. “Dr. Whitman stated he received a call from a patient who was abnormally anxious of the Y2K bug,” he added.

“I can't believe this.” Kim pulled away and sat on the bed. Mallory turned and followed.

“It's okay. The Y2K is an urban myth.” She sat down on the bed beside her. “Your computer will be fine.”

“That's not what I'm talking about.” Kim put her face in her hands. “This is my first date in over four years and I'm already getting ditched.”

Mallory stood up, grabbed an arm and pulled her back to her feet. “He's waiting for you at the party, okay?”

“I'm not going.” Kim picked up the red gown, returning it to a hanger in the cramped closet. There was barely room for it, but it didn't matter. Mallory immediately grabbed the gown and handed it back to her.

“Yes. You are. Now quit whining.”

“The guy sounds old,” Kim continued, pleading her point. “I'm not into old guys like you are.”

“He's not old, he's seasoned.” Mallory thrust the gown in her face. Kim hesitantly took the dress as Mallory continued. “And he has money. And he's a doctor.”

Kim looked at the gaudy red dress clutched in her hands, and resigned to her fate.

“He's a shrink,” she said.

Thirty minutes later Kim and Mallory appeared at the top of the spiral staircase and posed like fashion models on the steps. Mallory swayed her hips and shoulders, her body squeezed into a tight, short-skirted, royal blue slip of a dress. Her eyes were outlined in dark mascara, her lips in scarlet, and her silky red hair pinned-up and wrapped around her head like a crown. She waved to Addison and blew him a kiss.

Kim, dressed in the red gown with leopard print breasts, her hair piled into a mass of black curls atop her head, stretched her arms and mimicked an exaggerated pose from a fashion magazine.

“Well, Addison,” Mallory said in a husky voice. “Get a load of us.”

“Were we worth the wait?” Kim blushed, a little embarrassed. Addison looked up at them. He flashed a vague smile, stepped back, then shook his head.

“Frankly, no.” He took Mallory's coat from the entry hall closet and moved toward the front door. His arm bumped the keys hanging on a hook and they dropped to the floor with a rattling clink. Addison bent over to pick them up as he glanced at his wrist watch. “We should've departed an hour ago.”

“But doesn't Kim look delicious?” Mallory insisted, as if completely oblivious to his bad mood. She stretched her arms outward to present her creation to the awaiting public. “I picked out the gown myself.”

“Yes. Simply divine.” Agitation grew in his voice. “I'm sure she'll have the attention of every man in attendance. Now, I must insist. We're in a fantastic hurry.” After returning the keys to the hook on the wall, he held up the coat and opened the door.

Mallory hesitated.

“Every man?” Her eyebrows narrowed. “You really think Kim looks that hot?”

“She's positively breathtaking. Stunning. Exquisite.” The coat still in his arms, he pointed to his watch. “Now, it's almost nine o'clock...”

Mallory paid no attention. She was studying Kim with her arms crossed.

Kim took a quick breath of utter astonishment. “What's wrong now?”

“I'm sorry Kimberly, but you just can't leave the house wearing that outfit.”

Mallory shook her head, placing her hands on her hips. “You look like a drag queen in a Madonna video.”

“You want me to change? We don't have time.”

“Girls please!” Addison flailed his arms. He dropped the coat.

“I know! I know,” Mallory said, pushing Kim back upstairs. “We're in a fantastic hurry.”

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Next door, inside Kim's dark townhome, the front door unlocked and creaked open.

A man stepped into the living room, the porch light bright behind him. He shut the door, locked it, then took a flashlight from his jacket. The long, narrow beam pierced the blackness as he stepped through the townhome.

The kitchen was obviously a mess. Even in the limited light he could see the grime from the garbage disposal that covered the sink and cabinets; soggy towels laid across the floor.

The man moved from the kitchen and aimed the light back toward the living room, shining it on the wrought-iron staircase spiraling up to a bedroom loft. Cautiously, he stepped upstairs.

Clothing was scattered on the floor and from the radio beside the bed came a quiet static. The man moved to the bed, setting down the flashlight. He glanced out the sloping skylight above it. He was alone, engulfed in darkness.

Quickly he turned, grasped the bed sheets and pulled them to his face, inhaling deeply. Shutting his eyes, he sighed.

From the bedroom window, he watched Kim and Mallory leave for the night, alone.