

HEAR  
ME  
SCREAM

*A Novel*

R.M. JAMES

V

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*To my son Joey, I hear you, I love you.*



*“The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.”*

Thomas Jefferson



# PART ONE



## ZEMI

Raven collapsed face down on the grass, her mouth wide-open. The sharp pasture stabbed at her swollen tongue. She forced her sunken eyes to blink. No tears spilled. No tears reached her dry lips. Her body weighed her down and insisted she sleep. Forever. She panicked then, heart pounding loudly in her chest. She pictured herself standing, even running. Yet the real task required some sort of effort.

The subtle sound of footsteps on brittle grass impelled her to lift her head and squint into the glaring sun.

A flash of blue hair poked through the brush. Yellow eyes gazed at her with furious intensity, the fixed stare of a feline on the prowl. The figure emerged with caution, blue locks falling along its shoulders. A girl, the healthiest young person Raven had ever seen.

“Hi, I’m Ata.” Her citrus scent triggered Raven’s hunger. Her stomach growled. “What’s your name?”

She was not another mirage but a real person.

The girl reached into a backpack and pulled out a flask. “Here.” She crouched to reach Raven’s lips. “It’s water, drink up.”

Raven guzzled down the few ounces left and then instantly regretted consuming the stranger’s offering.

“Slowly,” the girl said. “Do you mind telling me your name?”

“Yes, I mind.” Raven coughed, choking on her own saliva. Her throat ached. “Alone . . . I travel alone.”

“Alone,” the girl repeated. “It’s amazing what little replenishing Sorrows need in order to recover.”

“Replenishing a what?”

“Can I have your name, please?” Ata’s eyes shone with goading concentration, demanding obedience.

Raven usually avoided other travelers for fear of robbery, rape, or slavery. There wasn’t a single person worth trusting outside of Glasgow’s suburbia. Children were the worst. Abandoned by adults, they would do anything for food and water. In Graves County, one of those starving brats had appeared out of the bushes and begged her for help. When she refused to give it, the boy’s allies ambushed her. They stole her survival bag and a full jug of water. It would have lasted her another two days.

“Raven,” she answered, surprised at how easily she submitted her name to a stranger.

“Hi, Raven. Where’re you headed?” Ata strapped on her backpack and stood. “Maybe we can travel together?”

“No.” She needed to arrive in Spencer County unseen, a problem with Ata in tow. “I’m a lone traveler.”

“But I have water,” Ata pointed out, “and you don’t.”

“Were you hiding in the farm house?” Something was off about the girl—besides her eyes and hair. “And how old are you?”

“Just turned twenty a couple of days ago. And you, Raven? How old are you?”

“I’m not sure anymore.” Raven drew her knees to her chest and rolled into a sitting position. With her hands pressed on the grass, she pushed herself upright. “You look no older than sixteen.” She brushed the sweat off her brow, squinted.

“And you look all better!” The girl flashed a white smile. “Do you heal quickly?”

“No,” she said. “Do you?”

“Healing quickly is a sign of natural selection, you know, like the books say.” When Raven didn’t reply, Ata spun around several times as if giving the whirls a chance to explain her logic. “Do you read books?”

*Hear Me Scream*

“Yes.” Raven slogged her way past the grassy farmland in search of a better view over the land. She was taking chances with a stranger, and though Ata seemed harmless—

*She won't hurt you*, a ringing in her ears announced.

The afternoon's rare breeze failed to stir the bare trees. The decaying farmstead, a few yards away, creaked and groaned. She had ransacked the old place for valuables earlier that day before the roof collapsed. None existed. Old manure was the only indicator the stables had once sheltered horses. The cow-house, rabbit hutch, and the pig sty were also empty. Raven had loitered about the farm expecting nothing and getting nothing, not even a cart or a wheelbarrow. No ducks swam in the pond. No pond existed. No one wasted precious water on strangers.

*She's not a threat*.

“Can I join you?” Ata sprang from behind, close enough the scent of oranges made Raven's mouth water.

“Why do you smell like oranges?”

“I just ate one. My hands still smell like the *frrruit*.” Ata pronounced fruit as if it were a new word. “Do you want an orange?”

She turned to her. “What?”

“An orange, are you hungry? I have two oranges left, two fruits.”

“I don't have anything to offer you in return for your water and orange. Why are you helping me?”

The girl tipped her head up, facing the scalding sun's brightness. “I'm alone now,” she said after a pause.

“You haven't been alone for long, have you?”

“No.” She rummaged through her backpack and pulled out an orange. “I had to leave my home to find Zemi.”

Raven snatched the fruit from Ata's hand and bit into it. A burst of citrus exploded in her mouth, igniting her unused taste buds. She devoured the orange, peel and all. “Who's Zemi?”

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“I don’t know.” Ata said, tilting her head slightly to the left. “Zemi might be looking for me.”

Raven spat the orange peel stuck in the back of her throat. “Is Zemi a family member?”

“Zemi can answer all of my questions,” she said.

“What kind of questions do you want answered?”

“All of them, any of them. Zemi—”

“Well, thank you for the orange.” She licked her juicy lips dry and her sticky fingers clean. “I have to get going.”

“Can I come too, please?” Her desperate gaze, or maybe a foreign internal need, gave Raven no other choice but to let Ata join her, if only for the water.

*And oranges, don’t forget.*

Borrowing water from Ata was a lot easier than stealing it from well-guarded creeks and ponds. Avaricious land owners shot at anyone who drank from their precious, muddied, disease infected, and life-sustaining liquid.

*Now you’re thinking.*

Raven and Ata headed up a crescent hill. They hiked their way to the top where the peak revealed what to some stimulated disappointment, a longing for a lost era. For Raven, the empty highway was the quickest way to her son.

“Eureka.” She didn’t remember drifting from the main road in the first place. “Okay, Ata, we’re going downhill, and we’re going to stay on the blacktop.”

“Where do you need to go?” Ata bent to scrub insects and dirt off her bare knees. “Is this going to be a long journey?”

“You need to find Zemi, and I need to find my family.”

The trip ahead required another set of eyes since Raven’s were more than exhausted. Her legs ached from a week of endless walking. The skin on her rough body had been peeling for days. Her stomach hurt. A persistent fever wouldn’t go away. She would

*Hear Me Scream*

have lingered on any grassy bed were it not for her son. He needed his mother. She needed to find him.

“Mind over matter,” Raven said. “She who thinks health gains health.”

*The water and the orange don't hurt, either.*

“Where’s your family?” Ata asked.

“Alive, I hope.”

She controlled her descent and tried not to slide downhill. Her boots had already sustained an eight day journey. But smooth concrete would palliate her leg muscles.

*Follow the green traffic signs to Spencer County and this time stay in Kentucky, no more wrong turns to Indiana.*

*Yes.* She answered the buzzing noise in her ears. *I'm on track again.*

“Why wouldn’t your family be alive, Raven? Do they need water?”

“They have plenty of water, a whole creek, in fact,” she said. “Rebels—”

“I thought there was no such thing as rebels?”

Raven halted and glared at the girl. “Don’t tell me rebels don’t exist!” She grabbed Ata’s arm and shook it in anger. “Rebels exist!”

*Let go of her!*

For as long as she could remember, the buzzing from inside her eardrums had made it almost impossible to sleep in the silence of night. To her advantage, the discomforting sound had also kept her on a steady pace forward. When had the noise become an inner voice? She waited for an answer, but was relieved when no one replied. Insanity was unacceptable. She lacked the energy for another disadvantage.

*Mind over matter,* she told herself, *unless my mind is the matter.*

“Do you think rebels are the reason I can’t find Zemi?” Ata jerked her arm free without wincing, screeching, or even complaining about the sudden attack.

“Probably.”

Raven’s feet came in contact with the asphalt. Warily, she observed her surroundings. One could never be too sure. Other survivalists possibly lurked around, especially while she and Ata remained in the open. “We stay on the shoulder lane, north. If we hear any noises, we run back to the woods, over there, on the other side.”

Across the road a heavily wooded area abided untouched. Hydrated trees flourished uncut. If she had noticed the woods earlier, she wouldn’t have trekked through open farmlands. But there was no use in regretting the past. Besides, her companion was useful bait. Rebels were always on the prowl. If any ever approached her, she would run, leaving the brutes to have at it with Ata.

*No, you will not.*

Raven ignored the voice.

Ata was friendly, sure. But a girl stupid enough to share her water with a stranger while smelling like a dome of oranges and showcasing an abundant amount of shiny blue hair was asking for whatever she got.

One fact Raven never forgot on her journey north was her gender. When laws were no longer in place, women and children suffered most. Females were not as quickly killed off, not if savages could have their fun. Raven was cautious enough to dress like a boy: an old baseball cap hid her hair, and only her hands and stern face were visible to the wandering eye. Her sex was indistinguishable from a distance and nothing gave it away, not her walk, baggy garments, or her voice. Costly was the price of being a girl.

“Ata,” she said.

“Yes?” Ata skipped alongside with a nursery rhyme gait.

“What happened to your fellow travelers?”

“What do you mean?”

*Hear Me Scream*

“Why did you leave your family?” Someone like Ata was not supposed to have survived, not with all the evil lurking. “You do know someone can hurt you, don’t you? I easily could have.” And did.

She smiled. “Dying from thirst isn’t very threatening.”

“But still—”

“Raven!” Her elated pitch left an actual ringing in Raven’s ear, a humming sound. “You were barely alive a little while ago. I’m positive that you, like me, are different.”

“What does that mean?”

“Different.” The girl grinned, sure of her nonsense. “We both need to look for Zemi.”

“I need to find my family.”

“Zemi will find your family.” Ata was almost not worth the extra food and water—almost. “Aren’t you curious to know what brought us together? I saved you from a certain death.”

“No, I wasn’t dying. I was thirsty. Besides, if Zemi really knew the answers to everything, he’d know where we are.”

Her smile beamed with curiosity. “Do you think Zemi’s a man?”

“It’s always a man, Ata. If you don’t even know the gender, why are you looking for him?”

“Because,” she started, “because there’s a lot I don’t understand about the world.”

“Who does?”

“I want answers.”

“Answers to why the world goes round?” Raven mocked. “Who cares about that? In your search for this mythical creature, you might end up dead.”

Ata’s smile widened. “Mythical?” She stopped skipping. “What does that mean?”

“Who sent you to find Zemi?”

“I’ve always known.”

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Raven measured the odd girl and her bulky backpack and briefly contemplated theft. “What makes you so sure you’ll find him?”

“Maybe he’ll find us.”

“Will he?”

Her nod was exaggerated. “I’m sure of it!”

Raven sighed. “Yeah, I’m sure he will.” She lacked the strength to disagree. “Let’s keep going and if we’re lucky, Zemi might find us sooner.”

Ata pointed ahead. “I think he already has.”

The dark hooded man emerged from the trees, a lone traveler. He was disgustingly familiar, and his stink of decaying limbs stung Raven’s nostrils. He limped, probably an act. His slouched and wounded appearance had to be a trick. The man would kill them both. He was no average survivalist. He was a rebel in disguise.

*Run. Run now.*

She sprinted with tumultuous, chaotic strides, desperate strides. Her pain lay somewhere forgotten. Raven ran for her life. The highway was no longer cracked asphalt but a runner’s track. Her erratic breathing amplified with each sore stomp. She was afraid, terrified. The road dipped and then lifted sharply transforming the afternoon sun into a blinding object in her way. She ran in dizzying zigzags in case the rebel carried a weapon.

The memory of Ata’s huge, amber gaze haunted Raven for a split second, a second she almost stopped to think. A violent shake of the head later, and her guilt evaporated into the muggy air.

*Good luck and good riddance.*

## HEALER

Nico knelt to study the manmade pond. The chirping crickets and the bellowing frogs had been replaced by a silent sadness. He dipped his hand in the murky water and inspected the coat of algae clinging to his finger.

“Your pond is sick.” He wiped his hand against his pants. “I hate to say it, but the surrounding trees are blocking the sun. You’re going to have to sacrifice a tree or two. Or you could drain—” He could hardly instruct the farmer to let the pond die. The trees provided oxygen. “The water has to stay clean.”

“Stupid pond. I knew I should’ve purchased property near a creek.” Mr. Sears paced about, accusing the trees with an occasional glance. They were all too lush, crowding the pond. “That’s well and good, Healer, but why is my son having stomach pains? Gavin’s been vomiting for days. Wife says he’s cramping and thirsty all the time.”

“The water is polluted with whatever artificial fertilizer you use for your crops. Rain washes the excess chemicals into nearby water sources, and in your case, that’s this pond. I’m guessing you haven’t lived here very long and don’t know the land’s history, or who used it before.”

“How do you know all this, kid?” The farmer’s anger reddened his cheeks. Nico didn’t need to look up at him to know. “Ain’t you supposed to be a healer, not some pond expert? Tell me what’s wrong with my damn boy!”

“I already healed your son. Your wife knows to ensure he drinks clean water.” Nico paused for a moment to listen to the skittering

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footfalls of his father, hurrying toward them from the Sears' house.

"Your boy had cholera, Mr. Sears."

"But we always boil the drinking water."

"Yeah, but I can smell your latrine."

"What does shit have to do with any of this?"

"Have other passing or maybe sick travelers used your latrine, Mr. Sears?"

"One or two in the last month, I think. They didn't strike me as sick."

"And how do you get rid of your feces?"

"Dug a hole in the ground."

"Excrement has seeped into your water from the latrine. You should find a more efficient way to dispose of your—waste."

"That's ridiculous!" Mr. Sears stomped on the ground with the ill temper of a toddler. "We always boil the water."

"Yeah, but you don't boil the bath water. All your water comes from the pond, no?"

"What's the problem with that?"

"Your son's been drinking the bath water."

Kurt, who had made it down the hill, approached Mr. Sears and patted his back. "Gavin's nine. Nine-year-olds do that sort of stuff. Why, when Nico was nine—"

"We need to get moving, Dad." Nico turned to his father. "We've spent enough time here."

"Don't go, please." Mr. Sears urged them. "Why don't you stay for a while? We have plenty of food. You know, the rebels are making their way down here, stealing land as they go. There's safety in numbers, right?"

"That sounds tempting," Kurt said. "But most of our income comes from being on the road. Others need my son's medical skills."

"I understand all that, I do." Mr. Sears spotted his daughter on the other side of the pond. He waved her over. The girl approached

them with an empty water bucket in hand. “Sophie’s fifteen, my lovely girl. Say hi, Sophie.”

She was small, lacking the muscle of a healthy teenager. Sophie wore a stringy white dress, miserably similar to her dry, brittle hair. She was pale, with skin rougher than sand. Wounds, not properly healed, marked her legs. But it was her heart’s irregular beats that bothered Nico. And so did her respiratory system’s struggle to keep the girl from crumbling.

“Isn’t she a beauty?” Mr. Sears asked, grinning. “If you stay, she could be your wife. If you choose to wed, that is.”

“You are a beauty,” Nico told the girl, not disregarding her presence as her father had. “Can I ask you something?”

“I assure you, Sophie hasn’t been touched by a man.” Mr. Sears felt the need to confirm. “She would make a fine wife. She can cook, sew, clean, and she’s especially good at—”

“May I speak to Sophie in private, if that’s not too much to ask?”

“Is that too much to ask?” The man cackled, amused. “There ain’t nothing you, Healer, can ask that I won’t oblige to, not after you healed my son and possibly my pond. Will you save the pond, too?”

“I already told you what’s wrong with—”

“We’ll speak about this later,” interrupted the man. “Come, Kurt, let’s give the couple some privacy.”

Mr. Sears was originally wary of the two travelers believing them rebels out to steal his land. Yet it didn’t take him long to offer up a worthy asset, Sophie. He had raised his daughter as a way to a better life, or a good trade. Girls were always excellent barterers and sometimes, if the bid was too low, men would offer their girls for a single night. Nico found it strange that Mr. Sears hadn’t bothered to keep Sophie healthy enough to tempt a man. She was malnourished, sickly, and simply unappealing.

Nico approached Sophie. “If your disease progresses, your organs are going to start failing. Are you a vegetarian?”

“What’s a vegetarian?”

“Someone who doesn’t eat meat.”

“There’s barely any meat around here, and when Father does catch a rabbit, the animal is too small to feed us all. Father needs the meat the most. He’s a man.”

“A selfish man.” Nico reached out and stroked the girl’s warm cheek. “You need protein in your diet, more so than he does.”

She smiled, and the simper was pretty, in spite of her cracked lips. “What do you suggest I do? How can I become better for you?”

“You’re too sick to concern yourself with marriage. Take care of yourself first. And Sophie?”

“Yes,” she mouthed softly, “Healer?”

“Nico. Call me Nico.”

Sophie set the empty bucket on the ground. “I used to eat eggs before the chickens died. Will I die as well?”

“Sophie.” Nico took her hand, pressed it firmly. He waited for her to look him in the eyes; hers were a shallow green. “You’re going to get well, but from this day forward, you have to start eating meat.”

“Meat is hard to come by, Healer.”

The outer wounds took seconds to rectify but normalizing her body temperature was a longer process, maybe not as long as building her immune system. Luckily, for the girl, there were no permanent damages. “All better.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He let go of her hand. “Let’s go hunting, Sophie.”

Finding the warren was easy enough since the burrow’s system was tunneled deep, a maze of many entrances. The dark, black hole

was an indicator of the many furry creatures resting inside. Nico moved slowly, listening and settling near the creature's blind spot.

The rabbit's long ears swiveled from one side to another, detecting the slightest sound. While scanning for threats with its twitching nose and wide field vision, the creature grazed from the green pasture near its burrow. Sophie coughed. The rabbit froze in place. Nico pounced. It tried to hop away in zigzags, an escape which would have succeeded in the past. Back when Nico was a young hunter, prey running tactics had usually left him hungry. Not anymore. Once caught, the rabbit's hind legs kicked. The animal bit him in the struggle. Nico still snapped the creature's neck.

"Do you know how to make rabbit stew?" he asked Sophie.

She gaped in disbelief.

"You and your mother should prepare stew." Nico was better off not explaining how he had mastered his hunting skills. "Sophie, aren't you hungry for something other than fruits and vegetables?"

Her eyes remained glued to his grip on the bunny ears; the body dangled from side to side. "I make good stew," she finally answered.

"You go do that, then." He bagged the buck and handed Sophie the brown sack. "Run along now. I'll meet you after I've gathered a few more."

"Are you going to catch them like you did this one?" Her breathing had improved, but her immune system still struggled to regulate. "Do you catch all the animals in that fashion?"

Nico did. He was a good hunter, better than most. "I do. You should see me bringing down deer." He laughed, and she laughed as well, unaware his answer was no joke.

They left the Sears a day later. Sophie was especially unhappy, and in all fairness, Nico would have married her if only to remove her from her father. What kept him from agreeing to such a commitment was the acceptance of surrender. Natural reproduction

was difficult. He could never commit to visiting the roaring city, spending days in a lab, trying to pretend he could impregnate Sophie. He had an instinctive way of meeting his mate, not that he believed she existed anymore, but if she did, if she were to beckon him.

“You’re young, Nico,” Kurt said. “There’s no rush to tie the knot so soon, but I do doubt you’ll find a prettier girl.”

The sun shone bright on the narrow paved road. Nico and Kurt rode on horseback, destination unknown. Eventually, someone would need their help.

“She was sick, Dad.”

“All girls look ugly and sick to you.”

“She would’ve died if—”

“Did you heal her?”

“Yes, I did. I know what you’re going to—”

“We could’ve bargained for more goods, doubled the price. You can’t go around healing people without getting anything in return. I don’t know why you think we have to spare folks hardship. Everything we have—”

“Dad.” He refused to humor his father. “Would you prefer to go the bounty hunter way again?”

“Now, Nico.” Kurt pulled the reins back toward him, bringing the bit backward in Sable’s mouth. Sable was his mare, a gift from a man who had nothing left to exchange in return for his health. “Son, I’m not trying to make you selfish, but your mother was exactly like you, always wanting to help everyone, and now she’s dead.”

“Slow down, Bronte.” Rarely did Nico have to pressure Bronte into stopping or decelerating. His stallion had been a faithful companion throughout the years, since his colt days, before his entire herd had died of starvation. The horse was loyal, fast and perceptive. “Easy, boy.” And to his father, “I cured an innocent girl today. Mother would’ve been proud.”

*Hear Me Scream*

“She would’ve wanted you to marry the girl. She was a fertility doctor after all.” Kurt wiped his forehead, sweat dripped down his face. “You show no interest in reproducing, and you hardly pretend to care about a single lady. Something can’t be wrong with every girl alive. You don’t give yourself time to get to know them.”

“They’re sick, Dad, all of them. The entire human species is sick.” Nico knew for sure. “You don’t see them like I do. You can’t smell that . . . that stench of decay . . . that hopelessness of will. The entire species is fading, Father. Can’t you taste that in the air and in their food?”

“What, by the name of pie, are you going on about?” Kurt reached inside one of his saddle bags, dug deep. He retrieved a yellow piece of paper. “I’m starting to think you’re a shallow man.”

His father had never quite understood him. “What do you have there, Dad?”

“A nice bounty for—”

“You said you weren’t—”

“I know what I said, but this one is offering more than all the grateful farmers combined could ever afford.”

“I want to see Mother’s grave.” Nico’s need to visit Rosetta’s resting place sprang from an abrupt gut ache, a cinching in his core. “I want a break, right now. I’m tired of helping, always helping. I want . . . I don’t know what I want, but it sure isn’t another favor for another person.”

“Favors that pay aren’t favors, Son.”

“We have enough supplies. Let’s do something different.”

“Do you want to take a vacation?”

“A what?” His father often invented words. “What’s a ‘vacation?’”

“Time off from work,” Kurt answered. “Isn’t that what you want?”

“Yes, that sounds exactly like what I want. Vacation, huh?” He liked the term and was tired of battling the never-ending diseases.

Some infections affected patients more than once. Folks failed to take simple precautions. “Let’s go on a vacation, see Mom.”

After several aimless miles, the wind moaned and tugged at him. The fresh, fruity air eased the beating sun. Nico took a breath, happily knowing a vacation awaited him. He closed his eyes as a refreshing breeze swept in from the west. The need to follow the wind constricted his chest. The pull was new and frightening, forcing him onward. The lure was in his bones, tugging, contracting his muscles. The scent of oranges wafted from miles across. It was strong, enveloping, compelling. It beckoned him. How long had he waited to feel so much, to care about a nameless living organism?

*Where are you?*

“We’re going west, Dad.” Nico wanted nothing more.

“Why west?” Everything had to have an explanation with Kurt. He left nothing to chance. “What new idea has you thinking you can change our route?”

Nico ignored the man. He closed his eyes to take another whiff of ecstasy. His muscles hardened. The smooth fragrance shifted his insides over and over again. Internally, his body was on fire. His heart raced. His blood pumped. His gut ached. A pungent odor emerged. Iron, pennies, the smell overwhelmed his nose. It was strong, pouring, spilling on the pavement.

“Nico,” Kurt complained, “there’s nothing west.”

“I smell her.” Nico couldn’t explain the urgency to his father. The man lacked sharper senses. “She’s bleeding, Dad. We have to save her.”

“What?” Kurt yielded Sable, not happy; he seldom was. “What in the world is the matter with you? Are you insane or—”

“I’m not going to argue.” Nico flicked the reins and Bronte galloped. “I won’t risk her dying, Dad. I need to find her. We’re going west.”

