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THE WRONG SIDE OF YESTERDAY

By

Jacob M. Hall

THESIS

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THE WRONG SIDE OF YESTERDAY

This thesis by Jacob M. Hall is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

THE WRONG SIDE OF YESTERDAY

By

Jacob M. Hall

These chapters start off a novel that follows Simon Jones, a man brought back to the city of Decatur, Illinois by the death of his sister. Simon is left taking care of Jeffrey, a ten-year-old boy with an arm that loses skin constantly and glows a dull white. While Simon and Jeffrey navigate their grief and uncertain futures, the city is rocked by a series of murders that target “divergents,” people with physical abnormalities like Jeffrey’s arm. *The Wrong Side of Yesterday* is a novel that uses elements of magical realism and mystery to explore issues of grief, disability, poverty, and identity, all within the confines of a dying Midwestern city.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

On Nov. 21st, 2016, the *Chicago Tribune* released the first in a series of investigative articles revealing the hidden abuse of intellectually and developmentally disabled adults at Illinois group homes. I have a developmentally disabled sister who, if not taken in by me or another sibling, would end up a ward of the state when my mother dies. Perhaps, would end up a victim of the state. Without the *Tribune*'s investigative work, no one would have known the extent of group home abuse. Group home residents were physically and sexually abused, repeatedly neglected, sometimes even lost. Reports were obfuscated or falsified in an effort to protect abusers. This knowledge—and this very personal worry about my sister—led directly to my project. My thesis is the first few chapters of a novel that uses magical realism as a platform to represent disability abuse in Illinois. *The Wrong Side of Yesterday* tells the story of Simon Jones, a man left responsible for his magically disabled nephew after his sister's death, forcing him back to Decatur, Illinois, a city gripped by mysterious fires and murders.

The *Tribune* has published over a dozen related articles and videos since the release of that first report, “Suffering in Secret: Illinois Hides Abuse and Neglect of Adults with Disabilities,” by reporters Michael J Berens and Patricia Callahan. Early on in the series, they tell the story of Tina Marie Douglass, a 48-year-old disabled woman who informs group home staff of her intent to leave, again. Nobody intervenes, and she does just that, walking into the street where she was struck by a car and killed (Berens and Callahan). When the Inspector General's office received the report on her death, they

did not visit the group home to investigate, or interview any witnesses. They instead relied on the accounts of group home employees—who have a vested interest in seeing cases go away—as their sole source of information. The investigation into Douglass’ case found no evidence of negligence. Berens and Callahan argue that this is “a flawed system that conceals the silent victims of abuse and neglect—some, literally voiceless—while allowing investigators to close as many cases as possible with the fewest consequences” (Berens and Callahan). The *Tribune* goes on to explore the callous and dehumanizing actions of Illinois government, including an auction where disabilities were read out so group homes could bid on potential residents—the “less” disabled, the easier to take care, the more valuable they were. My sister is 31 years old, and I am not in a position to care of her, if I needed to. Most of her days revolve around playing *Grand Theft Auto* with her disabled boyfriend and finding a way to get Taco Bell. Yet, if things go wrong, she could easily end up another Tina Marie Douglass, or a resident reduced to an object on the auction block.

It was these stories, more than anything, that inspired the direction I went with my project. In *The Wrong Side of Yesterday*, Simon is an unemployed man who returns to his hometown of Decatur, Illinois, after the death of his sister. Simon is put in the position of taking care of Jeffrey, his young nephew. Jeffrey is divergent, a term used within the world to identify those with a physical anomaly that has a magical component. In Jeffrey’s case, his left arm has glowing skin that constantly peels away. I use this divergence as a metaphorical manifestation of disability. Like those on auction in Illinois, the divergent in my thesis have a wide variety of divergences, no two identical, with some causing more hardship than others.

My goal is to give people a new way of conceptualizing disability. In particular, I'm interested in representing the hardships faced by a broad spectrum of physical, mental, and developmental disability. One of the things I've tried to remain cognizant of as I work on this project is the potentially reductive quality of magic representing disability. I think science fiction and fantasy have long served as genres that tackle oppression and injustice through fantastical metaphors. But those representations are not always accurate or inoffensive. In an effort to avoid this, I amped up the unique and magical traits given to each divergent character I present in the story. My goal was to both distance the metaphor and accentuate the unique and individual aspects of each character. I also worked to make the magical realism a part of the plot, beyond just a motivating force behind some character's actions. For instance, Simon is searching for a missing Jeffrey when he notices a "hole in the floor, like in the living room, only this one surrounded by pieces of skin, each one of them glowing" (44). This function, while small, helps tie divergence with the mystery element of the plot in concrete ways.

As part of my research, I looked into the field of disability studies, a relatively new politics that has developed with the goal of bringing new critical awareness to an often unrepresented group. Richard Devlin and Dianne Pothier write in the introduction to *Critical Disability Theory*, a disability studies anthology, that it's time for "new ways to conceptualize the nature of disability, a new understanding of citizenship that encompasses the disabled" (2). While disability studies is interested in conceptualizing through criticism, this call to action was one I was ready to follow. Finding a way to both conceptualize and articulate disability remains elusive—in fact, landing on the term "divergent" was one of the greatest challenges for this thesis—and that problem is one we

need to resolve. We need those definitions “because, historically, we have tended to adopt a binary conception of disability: there are the disabled (them-us) and then able-bodied (us-them)” (Pothier and Devlin 5). Even today, with new language, we struggle through these binaries. Neurodivergent, the basis for the term “divergent” I use, contains this same binary. The counter to it is neurotypical (NT), and there’s little flex between the two. The primary difference between older and newer terms is one of scope, not function.

More important even than the term used is the way people in an environment react to the term. In one scene, where our protagonist notices someone’s discomfort around the subject of divergence (disability), we get an interior monologue where Simon responds to people who say things like “God loves her.” He notes an “unspoken, unfinished thought: God loves her even though she’s wrong. Julia always hated these sorts of comments. The endearing ‘he’s special,’ the kindly ‘how strong you both must be.’” Julia is Simon’s sister, the one that left him taking care of Jeffrey after her death. Simon goes on to say “Only the children got it right: “‘What’s your name? How old are you? What’s wrong with your arm? Want to play?’” (12). My goal was to provide the audience with a clear parallel to the comments received by all those disabled or around the disabled. Divergence is meant to function like disability, and people should engage with divergence in the same unhelpful and derogatory tone that is so often used for disabled children and adults.

Even the academic and political ideologies associated with social justice have often proven harmful and/or tone deaf. Much of this failing is again a product of conceptualization. David L. Hosking, a critical disability scholar, argues that liberalism “traditionally conceive[s] of disability as personal misfortune preferably to be prevented

and definitely to be cured, privileges ‘normalcy’ over the ‘abnormal’; presumes ablebodied norms are inevitable” (6). More binaries, even from those ostensibly invested in bettering disabled living, because of erroneous conceptualizations. In reality, Hosking argues, “disability is best characterized as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and social environment” (7). The importance of social environment is what I honed in on in my thesis. Group homes have the capacity to be, sometimes are, nurturing, lively, safe communities. This is particularly true for the group homes that are not created by states and funded by Medicaid, but are rather private institutions funded by financially stable family members of the disabled. These are not the group homes presented in *The Wrong Side of Yesterday*. These homes are underfunded, understaffed, and unsafe, and I started off my work with these environments in mind.

One of the earliest decisions I made in drafting was to use divergent teenagers and children. This, at times, felt counterproductive, given that the research I’d done around this topic was focused entirely on disabled adults. The care for disabled children in Illinois is vastly superior to that for adults. The primary difference is one of resources. Group homes send children to schools until they’re 21, giving them access to a wider array of individuals and programs that can facilitate growth and independence, though even these resources are being stripped away at a steady pace under the current administration. But the issues that I cover in my thesis have little to do with resources at group homes. Disabled adults aren’t suffering because of a lack of resources. They lack resources because of the way society (mis)treats all disabled people. If not for the schools, the children would be suffering in a similar fashion. By using younger

characters, I'm able to explore disability at its plastic stages, and when the audience is likely to have more concern for Jeffrey's care (and Simon's unwillingness to care for him) than they would if he was older.

This change to a younger cast of divergents also altered which works I used to inspire my writing. For instance, the decision to have Simon be an uncle derived more from *Manchester by the Sea* than it did my experiences. That film depicts a depressing search for a home after unexpected death(s), and it helped me develop Simon as a character. *Atypical*, a comedy show that follows an autistic protagonist through puberty, gives a rare example of a strong disabled point-of-view in art, which helped me develop Jeffrey as a character. This show also gave me a new disabled perspective, because autism is very different from the developmental disability I was most familiar with from my sister and her social circles.

Navigating two genres, the fantastical and mysterious, was a new experience for me. Prof. Howard suggested I read *The City and the City*, by China Miéville. The book combined fantasy and mystery via a detective that investigates crimes in the fictional cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma, two cities which overlap but contain citizens who forceably "unsee" the other, creating a surreal effect of multiple dimensions. Perhaps the best part of Miéville's world-building is the way he leaves a lot deliberately unanswered, letting his audience figure things out. I probably leaned too hard on this concept, however, as my early drafts made the awareness and proliferation of divergence unclear. I also enjoyed the way *The City and the City* dealt with absurd binaries given physical form. I found that thematically relevant to my work and have modeled off that concept.

My thesis does not limit itself to exploring disability. Decatur, Illinois, is at the heart of all my writing, and the earliest comments I got on my thesis writing noted the way setting became character. I am still working to make sure regular interior moments never lose the thread of the city, and other threads that I'm exploring through the city. Poverty plays an important role in my work, and it manifests physically through fires (and the aftermath of fires) in *The Wrong Side of Yesterday*. Significant scenes take place in burned out ruins, and various moments of dialogue and interior monologue explore the origins of these fires, the motivations behind them—namely, to “improve” the city landscape. Like with the murders in my thesis, so often the answer to problems seems to be improvement through willful ignorance and wanton destruction.

Unfortunately, there is little reason to hope for things to improve quickly. Illinois has tried to change, but those attempts have been half-hearted and unsuccessful. As Berens noted in an update to the *Chicago Tribune's* series, “despite Illinois’ promise to reform troubled group homes for disabled adults, allegations of abuse and neglect have risen, staffing levels have fallen and state oversight has been sluggish” (Berens). That article was published in February 2018, just a few weeks before my thesis deadline. It will take more than newspapers, more than a few texts and shows, to capture enough attention to garner change. We need awareness. We need a language to articulate the sufferings of a silenced people. *The Wrong Side of Yesterday* is my attempt to push closer, in some small way, to a better future for the disabled.

Chapter One

Church bells fought against a rumbling train at the memorial for my dead sister. The tracks lay just beyond a chain-link fence that surrounded the church's overfilled parking lot. Making my way inside took several minutes, with every person stopping to offer condolences. Some addressed Jeffrey, too, walking along at my side. He never responded. He hadn't said more than a few words since I'd arrived in Decatur yesterday morning, but that wasn't unusual. Jeffrey was quiet long before Julia died.

After a dozen handshakes and somber nods, I reached Pastor Michael. Another "wish it were under better circumstances" from a perfectly trimmed beard, collecting sweat along the neck and brow. I never liked Michael. I never liked this church. I think we only went because it was two blocks from home, and our mother had some preconceived notion of what proper parenting looked like: cereal every morning and church every Sunday, until the fights stopped being worth it. She gave up on making us go to church when I was ten or so, around Jeffrey's age.

I hadn't been back in the church since her memorial all those years ago, when Julia inherited the house we grew up in, just after high school, before she ever got the chance to move out. Mom we put in an urn. Julia was in a box at the crematorium. I still hadn't picked her up, or decided what to do with her. Pastor Michael was kneeling now, matching Jeffrey's height, offering more kind words that the boy didn't reciprocate.

I walked past Michael and his sweaty beard, left him to the few stragglers behind me. I gravitated toward my favored back pew from childhood, but I could see Mackenzie at the front, head turned toward me, waving me to the front of the nave. I waited for Jeffrey to catch up before following the red carpet to the very front, just before the raised

altar. Mackenzie hugged Jeffrey and we took our seats. I could see her eyes now, somehow cold even through the tears. At least they were when she looked at me.

Mackenzie and Julia were high school friends, which meant I'd known her since I was in grade school. I texted her to see if she'd take Jeffrey the day after Julia died. She hadn't spoken a word to me since. I turned away from her.

And there was Julia. A younger Julia in a framed photograph, hair still thick, skin still aglow with a brightness I didn't inherit. Jeffrey's father hadn't done his damage then. She hadn't suffered a stroke that year. It was a picture of the Julia I remembered, from the last visits I made to Decatur, three years gone now. Pastor Michael walked up to the altar and stood to the side of Julia. The room fell quiet, but not still. I felt the whispers in the back, the gazes sweeping over me.

"We are gathered here again, too soon," Michael began. A murmur of agreement from the crowd. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I seemed to be the only one confused. "We've come to pay our respects to a young woman called home. Julia was a child of God, through all her days." It was hard to follow the thread of his voice. I knew Julia went to church at times, but Michael made it sound as if she was the most devout of his parishioners.

It wasn't until "Amazing Grace" that I started to feel something. A cloying in the back of my throat, pressure blocking up the nostrils. I tamped it down, breathed through my mouth until the song was through. I looked away from Julia, from Michael, from any pair of eyes. I looked down and settled on Jeffrey, still at my side. His hands were hidden, linked together in the touching cuffs of his plaid shirt. I knew he'd been picking

at his arm, pulling the loose skin away again. If I pulled the sleeve up, I'd see the mangled skin and exposed flesh, all of it aglow. His permanent burden.

After the service, I tried to make my way out first, but the aisle was packed with soft voices and long hugs. Mackenzie squeezed beside me and said, "We'll talk soon," her teeth clenched through every word.

Before we'd made it another three pews, Pastor Michael called out to us. "Thank you for letting me send Julia off. Julia was a wonderful person. I was always happy when Julia walked into the church."

"Yes, I'm sure she felt the same," I said. "That was a good ceremony, Michael. I imagine that took a while to put together."

"Oh, not too long. Julia really speaks for herself, you know?" I did not know, so I defaulted to a non-committal nod. "It's a sad business, especially with two in one week. Both so young. I don't remember ever having a week like this one. Not in all my years or my father's, back to the start of Grace Bible." I stopped nodding. He saw my interest. "You don't know?"

"About another memorial? No."

"Well, that one was a funeral. We held it at Grace Park." He looked down, as if gathering himself, though I knew he was really pausing for suspense. "Alice Harkins was murdered last weekend, and we buried her three days gone. The day Julia died, as matter of fact."

That name itched at something. Some innocuous memory that just now gained weight, if only I could dredge it up. A girl with a bubble-face, skin swollen up on one side, glowing bright. All the veins visible. The endless staring.

“I knew her grandmother. I met Alice over there when she was young.”

“Oh yes. Miss Mary Harkins. Campbell, now. She remarried some years ago, though her new husband passed too. Actually, they married eight years ago. I remember now.” Michael described officiating the wedding, but my thoughts hovered around an overcrowded living room years ago, a girl younger than Jeffrey was now, long brown hair covering up what she could.

“She was divergent,” I said. It wasn’t a question. Michael looked taken aback. I’d cut him off mid-sentence, though I had no idea what he was saying. He answered anyway.

“Yes.” He was uncomfortable. I could see it, and I felt a sudden compulsion to see more of that discomfort.

“Do you remember exactly how?”

He shifted.

“Her face,” he said. I looked at him, waiting for more, though I could see he wanted that to be the end of it. “Not like Jeffrey, of course. At first, they thought it might be a birthmark. It was a few months later before they officially classified her. But God loved her. You know that? God loved her.”

I nodded along, even though I had no idea what he was talking about. Why was divine love even in question? Assuming I believed made sense. We were in a church, after all. But comments like these always had something else at their core. An unspoken, unfinished thought: God loves her even though she’s wrong. Julia always hated these sorts of comments. The endearing “he’s special,” the kindly “how strong you both must

be.” Only the children got it right: “What’s your name? How old are you? What’s wrong with your arm? Want to play?”

“What will happen to Jeffrey?” he asked. Now it was my turn to look uncomfortable. He latched onto my unease immediately. “I know she would’ve wanted you to take him, Simon. But these things are a challenge.”

“Jeffrey’s a good kid,” I said. And I meant it. I hadn’t spent a lot of time with Jeffrey, but we’d always connected during Julia’s visits. “I want to take him. I will take him, one day. But not right now. I’m unemployed, Michael. I can’t afford to keep the house. I certainly can’t afford to keep the kid.”

Michael nodded. We walked toward the door. “You might consider Trinity home. They do great work there.”

“Yeah, I’m planning on visiting Trinity,” I said. We reached the church door with an old piece of paper taped up, the same one I remember from my childhood: “Please make sure door is shut!”

“You should visit. I can set that up and call you?”

I agreed. We shook hands again, and he shut the door behind me. I thought about walking the two blocks home, but I knew Mackenzie would be there with Jeffrey. I wasn’t ready for that. I walked to the car and started it up, but I didn’t go anywhere. The church bells sounded again, four chimes now, with not a train in sight.

Chapter Two

The green steel doors held firm when I tried to go inside. I could see the inside of Trinity House, into a large open area where kids were running around. Each door was flanked by large windows, wire-mesh glass panes with painted frames. A voice called out from a speaker overhead I hadn't noticed: "You need to buzz in." I looked around, but there was nothing to buzz near the doors. "On the wall, before you come up the steps. You need to press the button and buzz in." The drone in her voice indicated this was something she said a lot. I went around and pressed a faded red button. A second later, the click of metal bolts.

I walked into a cavernous room full of children's voices bouncing off the walls and high ceiling. On either side of the entrance, stairwells led up to a second level that wrapped all the way around the open center. Tables with attached benches packed the room, cafeteria style, though I could see no food. What I could see were children. There had to be a hundred, perhaps more, and each of them divergent. A girl with two right arms sat next to an older girl with an unnaturally long torso. A teenage boy was walking between tables, mouth open too wide, jaw unhinged. At a nearby table sat a boy the size of a five-year-old with a thick and curly beard. He wore dark glasses that made me think he couldn't see, though he was staring right at me.

"Simon Jones?" The voice from the speaker. The woman was standing in a doorway near the stairs. In a stiff plaid suit, she didn't wait for a response before turning around and walking back the way she came. I took that to mean I was supposed to follow. The bearded boy had lost interest in me and focused on a half-finished puzzle.

We walked along a cramped hallway past small offices and exam rooms. At the end of the hall, we dipped into a room packed full of filing cabinets. Each had a set of keys dangling from the lock on the topmost drawer. The woman sat down at a pale wooden desk. I felt nervous in these confines, like I'd done something wrong by stepping foot inside. The woman didn't even look at me. She dug through a drawer until she found whatever paper she was looking for.

"My name is Laura Berm. You can sit, Mr. Jones."

I took my seat on a tiny plastic chair with steel legs, the sort you'd find in a kindergarten classroom. Despite being just over six feet, much taller than Laura, I had to look up at her.

"You know why I'm here," I said.

"Yes, your sister. My condolences. Mr. Jones, is there nobody else who could take the boy?"

"No one. Mom's gone. My mom, I mean. And now that Julia's gone, it's just me."

"The boy's father?"

Distant memories, packing while Jeffrey's father slept in the other room, Julia barely able to move. A dropped box of toys, the fights, sirens, courtrooms to follow. "If he's not still locked up, he should be. It's just Julia and Jeffrey, ever since he was three."

"I see."

She asked for my social security number and date of birth, her pen never stopping on the page. I looked around at the office. Where the walls were visible behind stacks of manila folders, I could make out crosses and framed verses, epitaphs about humility and

sin, “The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity: *We Have an Eternal Home!*” All the information online said the institution wasn’t parochial anymore.

“Mr. Jones, surrendering guardianship will make Jeffrey a ward of the state? You will not receive any further Social Security Disability checks.”

“I never did. That was all Julia.”

“I need a verbal confirmation that you understand.”

“I understand.”

Laura turned away and started typing. Occasionally she’d ask me a question, like Jeffrey’s age, but I mostly waited. The desk was piled with papers, like everywhere else in the office. The only decoration was a collection of snow globes, five in total. Each was of Niagara Falls. When Laura walked over to a printer, I pointed at them. “You’re a fan of Niagara Falls.”

She lit up. “It’s my favorite place. I’ve been four times, and I always love it. The fifth one is from my daughter, the little one there.”

“I’ve never been,” I said.

“Oh, you must go! I like it more than the Grand Canyon by far,” she said, as though these two were the only possible vacation destinations. She sighed and sat back down in her seat, more papers in hand, though she seemed to have forgotten them. She looked at me then, really looked at me, and seemed to hesitate before speaking.

“Mr. Jones, if you have another option, if you can keep Jeffrey or find a distant relative... As homes go, Trinity is not the worst. We do the best we can, but we’re swamped. We swapped to bunks a few months ago and we’re already near capacity again. We’re running at staff minimums more often than not. If it wasn’t for volunteers

from the church, we'd be falling apart here. If you need to leave him here, we'll do the best we can. But if you have another option, you should take it."

"Thank you," I said. And I meant it. "But there's nobody else."

Michael came to escort me after Laura had me sign a few forms. Nobody else was available to lead the way. He wasn't in any religious garb, just a pair of dress pants and a white button-down shirt with sweat circles at the armpits. He led me up to the second story to show me the rooms. When we reached the first door, he knocked once and entered before anyone answered.

"All outside this time of day."

Much of the room was taken up by the bunk bed, a bright red frame set with two twin mattresses. Both beds were neatly made. Two dressers were cramped in against the wall, one old and missing its bottom drawer, one new and covering part of the light switch the pastor flicked. The light wasn't needed. The lone window in the room had the blinds pulled all the way up, and I could make out the sounds of shouting children again, now coming from out in the sunny yard. The desk below the window was the only personalized surface in the room, littered with colored pencils, stuffed animals, Pepsi cans. On the left wall, opposite the beds, was a large chalkboard. The pastor noticed me looking at it.

"It was a school, once. This was a classroom. All of the second floor was, 'til they sectioned it off decades ago to make these rooms. Some still have a chalkboard wall." He ran a finger along the metal frame at the bottom where chalk once lay. It came up thick with white dust. "Guess it was easier to leave them up than deal with what's underneath."

We went back outside and looked over the railing at the open area below, now empty. I could see the tables better now that the children were gone, the way the legs could be pushed up, the tables folded into metal sockets set in the wall. The floor looked different up here, brighter, white tile reflecting fluorescent lights. We walked past the showers and a tiny library, a storeroom for cleaning supplies.

“When they’re not doing their chores or in class, they spend most of their time playing here or outside. The classes are held on the first floor. Would you like to see the classrooms?”

“No, that’s all right.”

We walked down the stairs and crossed the center area before heading into the yard where the kids were playing, except for the boy in the dark glasses. He stood in the doorway, staring at us as we walked past. Two swing sets, a climbing dome, and monkey bars were all being used heavily. Everyone ignored the tic-tac-toe panel next to the swings. Along the sidewalk, a few kids drew the outlines for hopscotch over and over in chalk, though no one seemed to be actually hopping. A few scattered adults watched over the kids.

“This is a good place, Simon. He’ll be all right here. He won’t have to hide his arm.”

He said this last part with significance, and maybe it was significant. Jeffrey didn’t seem to mind wearing his cast, but he did mind what was underneath it. It was comforting to think he’d be more at home here than in the home he grew up in, but I knew this was my way of trying to feel better about the situation. The pastor walked forward and turned to me. I found myself staring at the sweat circles on his shirt again.

“I think he’d like that. Not having to hide,” the pastor said.

“Yeah. Maybe,” I responded. I turned away from Michael again. Trinity’s yard ended at a cornfield, even though we were in the center of town. Decatur was littered with these tiny fields, testing grounds for new lines of seed, far enough away to not mingle in with the corporate farms that surrounded the city on every side. The children all stayed far away from the stalks and tassels, rustling against each other in a westward wind.

Chapter Three

While Jeffrey was at his first day back in school, Mackenzie knocked on the door. We'd been arguing through texts since the memorial. She was furious after I told her about the Trinity visit, and when I opened the door part way, she slammed it forward, pushing me back and bouncing the handle off a well-worn hole in the wall.

"It seemed like a nice place," I said, before she had a chance to speak. She threw up her arms, but I pressed on. "Not perfect, Mack. Cramped, yes. Probably understaffed like you say. But they had food. They were playing. They looked like they were having fun."

"And what about Alice?" she asked.

"Who the heck is Alice?" I said, but then I remembered. "The girl who died a few days before Julia? What does she have to do with Jeffrey?"

"Not with Jeffrey. With Trinity," she said. She turned back toward me, standing uncomfortably close. Like with Laura at Trinity, I felt short again, like I was back in elementary school staring up at her and Julia. "Michael didn't tell you? She was there, Simon. Her grandmother pulled her out, but she was never the same. And then she died. They killed her, damn it."

"You think Trinity killed her? Michael?"

"No. Maybe," she gave an exasperated sigh. "I don't know who killed her, but I know that she was a different person before she went into Trinity."

I walked over to the couch and had a seat. She started pacing in front of me, until she suddenly turned toward the door.

“I’ll be back,” she said. She walked out of the house just a minute after arriving, calmer than she came in, which frightened me more. I didn’t see her again that day.

Jeffrey didn’t make it through his second day back at school. The secretary called to let me know Jeffrey left class and walked out of the building. He was seen crossing the street and entering a vacant that recently burned. It wasn’t safe to enter, so I’d need to come and get him out, else they’d have to call the fire department.

When I arrived, Principal Knight was across the street. She looked flustered, and her brow was damp with sweat.

“I need to call the fire department, Mr. Jones,” she said, holding up her cell phone as if to demonstrate her commitment. “That building isn’t safe, and he won’t come out.”

“Give me a minute, please,” I said.

The two-story house was directly across from the school. A long porch wrapped around part of the building, white colonnades attached to the railing, holding up the roof. The picturesque porch was the only nice part of the house left. A combination of fire damage and stripped siding blackened the exterior walls. All the windows were broken out, half of them covered with swollen plywood. A dogwood ran up the side of the house, dipping to the inside toward the top of the first story, poking back out through the roof, the canopy dotted with pale flowers that clashed with black shingles. I walked up to the front door, also covered in plywood. I could see that it was loose, however. I lifted it up and set it aside. There was no front door behind it. “Sir, you can’t go in there,” I heard Ms. Knight call, but I was already inside. A strong wave of mildew permeated everything, the wood moldy where water used to put out the fire soaked in.

Jeffrey was inside what once was a living room, next to a fireplace that maybe once had a couch in front of it, perhaps had decorations on a gleaming mantel. The only part left whole now was the tempered fireplace door. Jeffrey had it open, his hands both immersed in a pile of ashes under the blackened cast iron grate. The dim glow of his arm looked bright next to the all soot. I knew he'd heard me entering, was aware of me standing behind him, but he never turned around. He just kept swirling the ashes around, lifting them up and letting them fall between his fingers.

"Hey buddy," I said, but no response. I walked up toward him, avoiding a hole in the center of the floor. "Your hands are getting all dirty."

"That's alright," he said. I sat down beside him.

"Yeah. That's all right." I picked up a piece of wood turned Styrofoam by the heat, whether from the house burning or some long ago hearth fire I couldn't say.

"I knew the family that lived here," I said. "Year and years ago, when I was your age. A boy named Ocatvius was in my class. He walked across the street right when our bus pulled into school every morning." I broke the piece of wood in half, my hands covered in a perfectly smooth layer of soot, like the board was really a marker.

"I came over here once with my Pokemon cards, before they got stolen. He wanted to trade me for my movie edition Mew." I laughed. Jeffrey was looking at me now. "I mean, they made millions of these things, but Tay was convinced. If he traded for all the Mew cards in the school, they'd be valuable again." I broke the wood again and again, until my lap was littered with Styrofoam chunks. "I wonder if he still has them."

"He didn't die in the fire?" Jeffrey asked.

“Oh no. No,” I said. “They left here years ago, long before the house burned. It caught fire while it was vacant. Sometimes people come into these empty houses at night, and if they light a candle or maybe try to start a fire because they’re cold, it can go wrong. That’s what happens sometimes, anyway.” I knew that wasn’t the case here. All of the empty houses on this block burned within a year of each other, each of them started with gas doused along the back of the house. The living room was still standing, the porch undamaged. But I knew the kitchen would be rubble without looking.

Decatur used to tear down vacants. Every year an excavator would come along and tear off the roof. After pulling off the top, a quick push on the walls brought the whole place down. In only a few minutes, the house was a pile of wood, shingles, brick foundation. It’d take another few hours to scoop it all up, dump it into trucks and haul it away. I used to watch it happen every summer, lured in with the rest of the neighborhood by the cracks of breaking boards, the shattering glass and mangled pipes. I threw the crumbled wooden peanuts back into the fireplace. They hadn’t demolished a house in years, I knew. No money for it now.

“Will Ms. Knight suspend me?” Jeffrey asked. “She sounds pretty mad.” He wasn’t wrong. I could hear her muffled yells, more insistent now.

“I don’t think so, buddy.” I leaned back, letting my palms sink into the edges of melted carpet and soft wood. “But maybe we’ll wait here a bit longer, just to be safe.”

Chapter Four

In the kitchen at home, the white cabinet paint was starting to peel off in ribbons, little scrolls dangling from the bottom. I couldn't resist the temptation to grab them and slowly peel upward, leaving zebra stripes of speckled dark wood behind. I opened each cabinet, looking for anything to make for dinner. I found a pile of plastic bowls, lids pushed to the side. An assortment of spices, four shakers of salt, two open bottles of olive oil, no pepper. Six cans of kidney beans and a few boxes of stuffing mix.

Jeffrey sat in the living room watching *The Land before Time*. He quoted every line. It was his third time watching it today. Eight days had passed since Julia's death, and I still had no idea what I was doing. Watching a movie where the mother dinosaur died within the first few minutes of the film probably wasn't healthy, but what did I know?

"Hey buddy, you up for a weird dinner?" I asked.

"No more leftovers?"

"No more leftovers."

He shrugged. We'd spent the past few days powering through all the food people brought for Julia's memorial, but what we hadn't finished was too far gone now to eat. I went back to the kitchen and started boiling some water and margarine. The stove and fridge were harvest gold. I stirred in the beans and stuffing mix at the same time and set a plate over the pan to let them soak up the liquid.

I called Jeffrey over to the dining room table, had him pour us each a glass of water. He got distracted at the sink, picking at the loose skin on his arm again.

"Quit it. Just let it fall."

We sat at the table. The beans were bland, and some of the stuffing was still crunchy. Jeffrey didn't complain. He almost never did, not even about Julia being gone or me taking her place. I thought it might be time to tell him about Trinity, to tell him I was going to sell the house and get out of Decatur. After he finished eating.

"Do you think dinosaurs shed their skin like snakes?" he asked. "The ones without feathers?"

"I don't know." I swallowed a clump of bread crumbs glued to beans. "I suppose they must've, if they had skin like snakes. Crocodiles shed their skin."

"They do?"

"Yeah," I said. "I heard that once on the Crocodile Hunter show. Not like snakes though, not all at once. They lose it in patches or individual scales, and they scratch it off by rolling around on the ground."

"Oh."

Each of us finished our food, though it took a while. We rinsed our plates and went to the living room, where Jeffrey started up the movie again. Littlefoot, Ducky, Cera, and Petrie were all running from the Sharptooth. The boy sat on his knees, head bent back, looking up at the screen. All the dinosaurs escaped through a tunnel, and I found myself feeling relieved, even though I'd watched this same scene a couple hours ago.

"Hey, buddy. I'm going to get us some money tomorrow and we can go to the grocery store. Get some real food. Maybe go to the park before, yeah?"

He nodded without looking away from the screen. "Yeah."

The next day was Jeffrey's first back at school since he ran away. I offered to drop him off since I had an appointment to donate plasma anyway, but he took the bus instead. I drove to CSL Plasma, set in a gleaming stucco building surrounded by long-empty strip malls in downtown Decatur. Inside, I followed the sign to a check-in kiosk and ticked off my name. I sat down and waited a few minutes, until I heard my name called and followed the sound of it.

A woman in a faded white jacket ran her fingers along my veins. Tight bands wrapped around my arms and dug into flesh. At the crux of each elbow, a bulge below the skin rose up as the pressure built. She gripped each vein between her index finger and thumb, gave a slight tug. She said my veins were nice, that either arm would do. I felt proud for a moment. We walked back to the check-in counter and she stamped a form for the front desk. I never saw her again.

A man in a faded white jacket asked me which finger I didn't need. He looked impatient as I took my time and deliberated before offering up my left ring finger. A plastic pen shot a needle out and retracted it faster than I could see, though not faster than I could feel. Blood welled up, and the man scooped it into a small vial. He capped it, set it in a centrifuge, let it whirl.

"Proteins look good. Not too much fat."

A new woman in a crisp white jacket tapped me on the shoulder and led me past banners telling me about all the lives I'd be saving, and how I could get an extra \$40 on my second plasma donation each week. We went into an exam room where she handed me pamphlets full of smiling faces and fine print. She railed off a series of questions about medications and allergies, grilled me on my tonsillectomy, about my treatment for

depression. She had me lay down over white parchment paper and pushed her hands firmly on my abdomen. I tried not to flinch.

She had me stand up and walk across the short room to the door before turning around again and walking back. I repeated this twice before she seemed satisfied. She offered me a chair, pulled out a bag of Cheez-Its and a bottle of water.

“Eat this and drink up. You’ll need it.”

Her fingers started humming away on the keyboard while I sipped my water. She had me repeat my name and birthday and social security number before taking my fingerprint, “for identification.” Another piece of paper made it clear it would not be shared with any law enforcement agencies. The woman turned a monitor toward me and told me to answer all the questions on the screen honestly. She left me with headphones and a fingerprint scanner.

The screen lit up with questions that a female voice narrated with practiced inflection. The “Yes” and “No” buttons were grayed out until the voice finished speaking. Blocks of text appeared, one after another, asking if I understood the risks of a weakened immune system, if I had gotten a tattoo within the past year, if I’d ever had sex with another man. The voice listed the side effects of the anticoagulant they’d use, detailed the required water intake to complete the donation within the expect hour time frame, defined sodomy with precision. After each section, the computer asked me to scan my fingerprint in place of my signature.

A man in a wrinkled white jacket came to fetch me a few minutes after I finished. He took me back toward the front, to a series of stations with scales and blood pressure cuffs. He wrapped my arm up tight and pressed a button to inflate the cuff. I stepped on

the scale while my blood pressure was being measured. After a few seconds, all of the air released, and the man said, “You’re good. 150 over 92.”

“Isn’t that really high?”

“Yeah. You’re probably just nervous. If we ever send you away for high blood pressure, go straight to the hospital.” The only two possibilities were perfectly safe and life-threatening, apparently.

He escorted me to a wide space full of oddly shaped beds. A dozen people were scattered around, hooked to machines and staring upwards. The beds were raised in the front and back, so your head and legs were always elevated. This made the blood flow faster. The man asked me which arm I wanted to use. I chose left and positioned myself in a bed. I tried to turn so I could see what he was doing on the machine next to me, but he told me to stay on my back. He came into view with a swab of iodine. The scrubbing left my arm amber and cold. He stared at his watch, counting down, and then pulled out a large syringe.

“Don’t move your arm at all now.”

The syringe felt hot as it slid into my arm. Thick, syrupy blood flowed into a tube that ended with a clamp. The man in the wrinkled white jacket attached a vial and filled it up with blood. He re-clamped the tube and brought it over to the machine. There was a monitor on the side, visible to me, but I couldn’t see where the tube went in. He fiddled around for a few moments, and then I heard a loud tone.

“Any time you hear that, start pumping your hand into a fist, over and over,” he said, and handed me a foam football. “You want to squeeze this gently. The monitor will tell you when to stop.”

He walked away, and I lay back and waited. I started to feel cold all over, and I watched as the monitor slowly filled a meter with each mL of plasma the machine took from my blood. After a couple minutes, the machine made the tone again, and the man returned.

“Pump faster.”

He pressed a button and walked away again. I scooted myself forward to look at the front of the machine. I could see my blood being poured into a canister, where it spun around, separating into a thick, black liquid on top, and a thin, pearlescent liquid on the bottom. The blood on top flowed back into my vein. The clear plasma dropped down into a large bottle in the bottom of the machine.

The minutes dripped by. I tried to make eye contact with the man in the bed next to me, but he was staring forward, his skin sallow and pallid. His hand was empty but flexed much faster than mine. I tried to match him, but I started to feel the syringe under my skin with each pulse, to notice the difference between the cold feeling of blood leaving, and the sickly warmth of blood coming back in. The nausea crept up before fifteen minutes had passed. I spent the next hour with my eyes closed, breathing in through the nose, and out through the mouth.

The machine let out a series of beeps. I was finished. A woman in a thick white jacket came over and unhooked me. She wrapped my arm in gauze and thick medical tape before escorting me to a bench.

“Sit here for fifteen minutes. During that time, I’m going to go over all the benefits of donating.”

She handed me a pamphlet and a prepaid MasterCard with \$50 on it. She listed all the fees associated with various transactions, from checking your balance at an ATM to transferring money from the card to your bank more than once a month. I tried to remember them all, but she moved too fast for me. After she finished, she walked away. I sat in a daze, arm pulsing, skin damp with sweat, waiting for the minutes to pass.

Afterward, I still felt hungry, so I drove to the nearest Krekel's for a burger. I pulled in to the parking lot, and there it was. A 1983 4-door Cadillac De Ville, in near mint condition, and decorated like a gigantic chicken. I'd forgotten all about the absurd car. Just past the massive grill were red and white pinstripes that went half the length of the car and then transitioned to feathers, painted in detail along every surface of the rear. On the top of the car was a large chicken's head, almost as tall as the car itself. A collection of tail feathers was attached to the trunk. The car had tires, but was slightly elevated off the ground by a frame underneath. It had no sign or labels, no advertisements. It was just a chicken car in a parking lot next to a burger joint.

I got out of my car and turned to go inside for a burger, but the lights were off. It was just before noon. A sign said the store opened at 11 a.m. every day, but when I tried the door, it held firm. I cupped my hands around my face and stared through the window. I was trying to make out anything in the dark interior when a pickup truck pulled into the parking lot. I was suddenly nervous, like I'd done something wrong.

A man got out of the truck who was at least three of me. He was a full foot taller with old jeans held up by suspenders, a plaid shirt, and a John Deere cap. I gave a hesitant wave.

“Howdy!” he shouted with a big smile. “You won’t get in there today, stranger! Place caught fire a few months ago. There’s another Krekel’s on Wood Street, if you’re craving a burger. They say the burgers are better there. That’s the first one he opened, Bob Krekel, over there on Wood. I don’t much care for the burgers, though. I go for the lemon ice cream. That’s the best stuff. What’s your name?”

It took me a minute to process everything he’d said. His energy left me feeling breathless.

“Simon Jones.”

“Oh! Were you kin to Julia? Sad, that was. I can tell you about it. It was a grease fire. At least, that’s what they say. There have been a lot of fires in Decatur lately. Got the popcorn shop, Krekel’s here, Mi Gordito, but they were worse than Guadalajara, plus you got all them vacants. Bad luck, I figure. My name is Albert.”

He looked at me, waiting, face red and sweating slightly.

“Well, nice to meet you,” I said. “And yes, Julia was my sister.”

“Ho boy, that’s tough. Not a great time in Decatur, right now. You got Julia, and you got poor Ms. Campbell, losing Alice not so long after she lost Jim.”

“Do you know anything about Alice’s death?”

“Sure don’t. I heard about it on the news when it happened. I listen to the radio each morning in my truck. I’m a plumber, though I do just about anything that needs doing. When I heard about Alice, I thought it was about the worst a person could feel. Good kid, she was. Real special, y’know? Of course, Ms. Campbell was part of the church, ever since she got Alice. Ain’t been back since she died. I heard she went back to

Grace Bible for the funeral, though I can't quite figure why. 'Course Jim probably knows, at our church. Main Street."

"Main Street Church?"

"That's right. They got a pastor there by the name of Jim Conneley, good man. He knows Decatur inside and out. They do a service at eight o'clock every night. I don't go every night, but he's good, real good. His church is on Main. That's north south, not east west. You go on east west you'll end up at Millikin and then Westminster Church, run by them Pres-buh-tyrians. Never much cared for them."

"Thank you, Albert. I'll check that out." I had no intention of checking that out.

"Yessir, he'll get you what you need. Knows all about it, seeing as how he was the one that found Alice's body."

That changed things.

Chapter Five

At the corner of Division and Monroe, Mackenzie told me to pull into a driveway next to a small white house. I hadn't seen her since visit a few days ago. She texted me in the morning telling me to get ready and brought me here. The house looked like it had been well-kept, with a nice garden and clean aluminum siding. But I could make out weeds in the dusk light, and the grass was overgrown. Leaves had started to pile up in the yard. A collection of teddy bears in front of the stairs led to the stoop. They were arranged in tidy formation, all looking out at the street, but they had a damp, dirty look to them.

"This is the place," Mackenzie said. The home of Ms. Harkins. Campbell, now, according to Michael. "Her husband passed a few years ago. She took Alice in after that."

"Is she expecting me?" I asked.

"Go knock on the damn door."

It took a while for the woman to answer, but she eventually came. She was in a nightgown already, though her unkempt hair made me think she hadn't taken it off from the night before.

"Good evening, ma'am. You probably don't remember me, but I was a friend of Alice's some years ago." Friend was a bit strong. I had no memory of her outside of a previous visit to this house, and no idea why I'd been here then. "I'd like to ask you about her."

The woman had looked bleary eyed until I said the girl's name, then she swung the screen door open. I had to step back quickly.

"Who sent you?"

Before I could respond, I heard the car door open. Mackenzie stepped out and gave a nod. She walked over to the driver's seat and started to get in.

"He's Julia's brother, the woman who just died. She left a divergent behind," she said. She got into the car and drove away. I stood there for a minute, hands shoved into my pockets, waiting Ms. Campbell to speak.

"Alright then. Get inside."

The air inside the house smelled like a graham cracker. The carpet was a faded tan, with streaks where feet had tread over the years, in and out. All the light came from two lamps flanking a padded rocking chair in the center of the room. A small loveseat and another chair were off to the side, afghans draping both.

"Have a seat." She gestured toward the loveseat. I stifled a sneeze as a cloud of dust shot up. She was still standing.

"Mackenzie says that Alice was at Trinity for a while."

"That's right, though I didn't have any say in that."

"Why not?"

"You want the whole family history, mister?" she said, but she sighed and made her way to the rocking chair. She turned it slightly toward me before sitting down.

"My daughter, Cassandra, lost her way some time ago. Drugs, like a lot of others around here. My first husband, God rest his soul, lost his job when all that price fixing stuff went down at ADM. He wasn't no part of that, but they did layoffs anyway. That's how they do."

I nodded. A shorthaired cat poked out from another room and walked toward me while she spoke. It jumped onto my lap, fur splashed with gray and orange.

“We were hard for money, so I took a job washing dishes at Paul’s. Wasn’t nobody home when Cassandra finished school. Guess that’s when she started doing her own thing. Got into the drugs. It was crack for her.”

The cat purred.

“A few years ago, Cassandra come back around here. We hadn’t seen her for a long time. Stopped letting her in the house after she cleaned out my purse Lord knows how many times. She told us she’d dropped Alice off at Trinity, and that she needed money again.”

The woman stopped for a moment, shook her head.

“Maybe if we had left it alone Alice would be alive, but I couldn’t do that. I’d remarried by then, and I was ready for another child I’d never have. I called my daughter in to social services, got that child removed from Trinity and put in my care. I knew I was doing the right thing, and at first, it went well. It wasn’t until Jim died that things got bad. I wasn’t old enough to retire, and I couldn’t be there for her every day. I tried, Lord knows. I tried to put the fear of God into that child.”

The woman didn’t speak for a while, and when she spoke again, her voice was thick, strained. I looked around for a box of tissues, but the woman pulled out a large hand towel that looked well used. The cat jumped off my lap and slinked away as the woman cleared out her nose.

“Trinity changed that child. I tried to cover it up, but it didn’t work. I thought maybe a different church could help.” She shook her head, wiped her nose again.

“What did you cover up, ma’am? What other church?”

“You ain’t going there. They’re gonna tell you she had the devil in her. That’s what they said. But they’re wrong, mister. I prayed over that girl, I know. She brought light into the world, you hear me? She brought light wherever she went.”

There was a pause, like she might have expected me to respond, but I didn’t know what to say. Maybe by cover-up, she meant Alice’s divergence. Even knowing Jeffrey, it was still tough to navigate these conversations. Divergents were usually ignored, hidden in obvious ways so people could feign a comfortable ignorance, like paper bags over beer.

“One night, she came home late. She wasn’t a perfect child, mister, but that girl was never late. I asked her about it, but she just said she was tired, and I decided to let it go ‘til morning. That was two weeks ago. I don’t know when she left again, and I don’t know why. All I know is I didn’t see her again until the morgue, all covered up. They even put bandages on her face.”

I could see anger in her. The same anger Julia so often had. But I couldn’t understand this bouncing between churches, the motivations behind Alice’s death. I wanted to know more about her, about what happened, about Trinity and the churches, but Ms. Campbell didn’t have any more answers for me. I knew where I needed to go.

Chapter Six

Service had just finished when I arrived at Main Street Church. I waited in my car for most people to leave while watching the man who was presumably Father Connelley shake hands with his parishioners. The church was a single-story brick structure with brown metal sheeting for a roof. It had a plain sign and plain appearance. I liked that.

Connelley noticed me waiting in my car as the last few people were gathered around talking. I got out and made my way over.

“What can I do for you, young man?” he said.

“Are you Father Connelley?”

“Jim, please.” He had a deep voice that fit his tall frame perfectly. He was still wearing flowing robes, or whatever they’re called. He held out his hand and grasped mine.

“I’m Simon Jones. A man named Albert sent me to you. I wanted to ask you about what happened to Alice.”

Connelley sighed. His face had a slack pull to it, like it was slowly losing the ability to hold on. His brow had lines from years of furrowing. “Go inside, son. I’ll be in soon.”

The church was still sticky and warm from all the bodies that had just left it. There were a few people cleaning around the bare wooden pews littered with old hymnals and bibles. I didn’t have to wait long. Connelley came in and brought me to a cramped office in the back, two chairs facing a cluttered desk with an old, hulking CRT monitor on top.

“Please, have a seat.”

He sat beside me, rather than at the desk, legs crossed. He looked amicable, but tired.

“You wanted to know about the Alice?” he asked.

I nodded, but he paused for a while. A man came in, a few years younger than the priest, and handed him a glass of water.

“Thank you, son.” He drank for a moment, and then started up. “Well, there’s not too much to tell. I didn’t know her well. I found her lying on the side of Wykels Road. I was on my way here from home.” He shook his head.

“Was she dead then?” I asked.

“Yes.” He didn’t offer anything further. I began to feel that Ms. Campbell had reason not to come back here, even though I felt nothing menacing about the pastor in front of me.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been in a church. Yours reminds me of Grace Bible a bit.”

“Where’d you grow up, son?”

“Here in Decatur, though I’ve live in Plainfield for many years now. It’s just outside Joliet.”

“Oh, I know where Plainfield is,” he said. “Been there a few times. It’s different. Got that small town feel right next to a big city.”

“Not quite like Decatur,” I said. Plainfield was surrounded by farms like Decatur, true, but the similarities ended there. It was nearly connected with Joliet, a short drive from Chicago. And it hadn’t burned like Decatur. “This city’s changed a lot since I was last here. I don’t remember much, it seems.”

“I suppose all the changes must be jarring,” he said.

“It feels like this place has been through a lot that I missed.”

“Oh yes, it has.” That kicked him off. I don’t know how long we talked, about the city’s namesake, Stephen Decatur. About ADM and the price fixing scandal that rocked the city, crop subsidies that kept the town afloat, Warren Buffet’s son running a farm and becoming sheriff. About a beautiful piece of stained glass on the corner of his desk, a dove surrounded by streaking orange light, with blue waves crashing along the edges, “a sample from when I thought this church would one day have money.”

I told him about going to Krekel’s and seeing the chicken car again, and he laughed. “And the tiny Transfer House? Gone to see that yet?”

“No. It’s on my list. Maybe I’ll go back and see the street sign in the tree off Nelson while I’m at it. I remember that, though I was too young to remember it happening.”

“Yeah, that one’s not as funny. I was here when those tornadoes hit, one night on that side of town, the next on the other. They ripped this city apart. We made national news over that. Hillary Clinton came to visit, back when she was the First Lady. I got to shake her hand. That was something.”

He sat back in his chair and took another drink. He seemed to be enjoying himself now.

“Yeah, we were in the news a lot around then, none of it good. We had the Firestone plant, of course. You probably remember that. And then the business with Jesse Jackson, coming to protest some kids getting expelled for a little fight at a football game. That was almost 20 years ago now. Been a long time since we made headlines.”

He finished off his water. I knew I was out of time. I considered asking him about Trinity, but I didn't think he'd say much on that, so I went with what was really on my mind. "What do you make of all the fires?" Perhaps so much time away from Decatur had changed my perspective, but things felt worse than before.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Albert, the man who sent me here. He thinks there's been a lot of fires lately. Do you know why that is?"

He shook his head, took his time to gather his thoughts. I stared at the stained glass. "They used to knock down vacant houses. The Detroit solution. Now they don't." He stopped there, with that same old answer. He yawned and stood up, so I followed suit. We shook hands again, though I found my eyes drawn, not to him, but to that piece of stained glass again.

"You should come to service some time. We can talk again after. But, for now, I need to get home."

When he turned around, I grabbed the stained glass and stuffed it in my pocket, where it barely fit. I followed him outside, and he locked the door. We said good night, and I took my time getting back to the car.

I stayed out in the parking lot, holding the piece of stained glass in my hand. I didn't know why I took it. I felt an urge to go into the church and put it back, but I knew the door was locked now. I couldn't set it down, or stop moving it around in my hands, feeling the edges dig into my skin, staring at those deep oranges, those blue waves.

Chapter Seven

Near the public pool in Fairview Park, there is a tree with a painted-on bikini. People visit the tree each summer to see the bikini design. The Park District paints a new one each year. Nobody seems to know how the tradition started. Perhaps some teenager committed a random act of vandalism that turned into a decades-long tradition. Or perhaps some local artist noticed a tree, bent back from growing in the wind, split five feet up into two large limbs like arms stretched toward the horizon, and this artist decided that the tree looked like a woman falling back into water, seconds away from being submerged. Years ago, on Facebook, Julia took a picture of Jeffrey next to the tree. And now, I was looking for Jeffrey near it. I remembered seeing the photo, arm uncovered, hanging limp at his side. A rarity for him, to be so confident. I started my hunt there.

He'd ran away fifteen minutes earlier. We were outside the fire station, next to the grocery store by the park, when he bolted. I took off after him, down the block and into the park, but lost sight in the thickets that littered Fairview. This wasn't unexpected. I was telling him about Trinity. Just like at school, Jeffrey had a knack for disappearing when he felt uncomfortable. I felt an irrational certainty that he was perfectly safe. That I'd find him soon, if I just followed the right steps, waited out his frustration, his fear. I walked along brick roads, ankle bending uncomfortably on the uneven surface. Yelled out his name across low hills on my way toward the back of the park, until I finally reached the tree, the first place I could think to look.

I sat outside the nearby entrance to the public pool for a while, asking anyone who walked out if they'd seen Jeffrey. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Arm with skin falling off, glowing just a bit. Most ignored my questions. The few who stopped hadn't seen him. A

clerk behind the admittance window called me over after a while, recommended I drive down to the skate park and basketball courts, a popular spot for kids. I drove the loop around the park, past a pond and war memorial, duck crossings and tennis courts, pine trees and pavilions. The skate park was near Fairview's entrance, but no one was there. I went on to the basketball court and found several kids playing, mostly teenagers. No Jeffrey in sight.

I got out of my car and stopped the game to ask if any of them had seen Jeffrey. After my description, most of the players walked away to the other side of the court, a few laughing. This wasn't an unusual response to divergents. Teenagers are so often overt reflections of their parents' views, not yet tempered by age. They resumed their game, but a pair of boys stayed behind.

"Please. I don't know where he is. I'm not his father. I need help," I said. There was silence across the court, but for the lazy dribbling of a ball. They were all listening in. The two who stayed seemed taller than the others, one stocky with short-cropped hair, the other slim with braids. "Did either of you see anything?"

The pair paused before the stocky one spoke up. "Just like Alice." He shook his head, looking sad.

"Alice?" I asked. I could see discomfort fly between the pair, spreading to the others who played on, pretending they weren't listening.

"She disappeared too. Ran away from Trinity. If he's divergent and ran away, they probably got him, too," the skinny boy said.

"Wait, wait. What are your names?"

"Colton," replied the slim one. The stocky boy was Tyler.

“This Alice,” I said, voice faster now. “She ran away from the park too?”

“No man,” Tyler said. “She ran away from Trinity. She was divergent, like your boy. And then they got her.”

“Who’s they?” I asked, but they just shrugged. “And you knew this Alice?”

“I mean, we knew her last year. She didn’t come back this year,” Tyler said.

“To Trinity?”

“No, to school. She was in school with us for a while. That’s how we all knew her.”

“Why didn’t she go back?” The boys shrugged again. The rest of the kids had stopped their game and were moving in closer now. I looked out at them, but they didn’t seem to have any answer either. I felt myself latching on to the story of this girl, like if I could find out what happened to this girl, find out why she had to be buried just days before Julia burned, I could find Jeffrey.

“What was Alice like? What did she look like?”

“Ragged,” said one boy. I asked his name, but before he answered, another replied: “She always smelled bad.” The others joined in now, talking about moving bus seats, how nobody wanted to sit next to her so Mrs. Peoples put her at her own table in homeroom, about the way she talked. “Like she was missing teeth, but she wasn’t.”

“That girl was weird,” finished Colton, and they all nodded.

“Well, Jeffrey wasn’t ragged,” I said. “He had on clothes. Good clothes, I think.” I was starting to get desperate. Jeffrey had been missing over an hour now. I had no idea when it was appropriate to call the cops, but I felt certain it was at least 30 minutes ago. I walked back toward the car, hesitating, hand on my phone, an embarrassing hesitation

keeping me from making the call. What if they yelled at me for waiting? I wasn't cut out for this.

The cops did not yell. They did call DCFS and report me for negligence, threaten me with charges of child endangerment, told me they couldn't issue an AMBER alert for a runaway boy last seen wearing light-up shoes with a peeling brontosaurus on the sides. Only abducted children, those in imminent danger, got AMBER alerts. It was all I could remember about his outfit. They grilled me for an hour about where I'd last seen him, what we'd been doing, what I said to make him run away. Whether I touched him or not, over and over again. Every time they asked I got more upset. It was only worse after barrages of "calm down, sir. We're trying to help."

They sent me home to wait for him or a phone call. Neither felt practical. I couldn't sit still. I kept imagining Jeffrey hiding behind the trees near Stephen's Creek, peeling back skin and waiting the hours away. I kept expecting an FBI van to pull up, for people to knock on my door and ask to listen in on any potential phone calls, but there was nothing of the sort. Jeffrey was a runaway, nothing more. They'd look for him as best they could. I should ask around and do the same. I made it until nightfall before I grabbed my keys and went hunting for him again.

The plywood door lifted off easily again. I set it aside and moved into the vacant house. The smell of decay filled the air, getting worse as I walked further in, stronger than the mildew I remembered from my last visit with Jeffrey. I pulled out my phone for a flashlight, held it up. I was in the living room again. I went toward the fireplace, but

there was no sign of the boy. I walked toward the rubble of the kitchen, and something caught my eye.

There was a trap in the center of the floor with a dead raccoon inside. Its body had a flat look to it, like it had deflated some since being captured. Its mouth was bloody, little teeth broken off in places where it tried to chew its way out of the cage. The floor was thick with dirt and soot, the walls blackened, peeling paint, fur stiff and matted. Only the cage was clean, metal catching the light and scattering. And not just the light from my phone. Another hole in the floor, like in the living room, only this one surrounded by pieces of skin, each one of them glowing.

An alarm sounded, an alarm I'd been waiting for without knowing it. A ten-year-old boy, missing since this afternoon, now feared abducted outside Roosevelt School Apartments. I left the decaying house, looked at a telephone pole surrounded with teddy bears, soaked down, dark with mildew. A vase with no flowers, just brown water, sat in the center. I didn't know what to do next. I went to the vase and emptied it out, set it back down amidst the bears. There was a picture above them, attached to the pole, but rain and time had stripped the color away, blended it together, until there was nothing left.

A cop drove by with lights on, then another. I watched them go up a hill, further into town. I could feel the world looking with me, eyes turned toward Decatur once more.

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