

THE
CONFESSIONS
OF
JONATHAN
FLITE

BY MATTHEW J. BEIER



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THE CONFESSIONS OF JONATHAN FLITE

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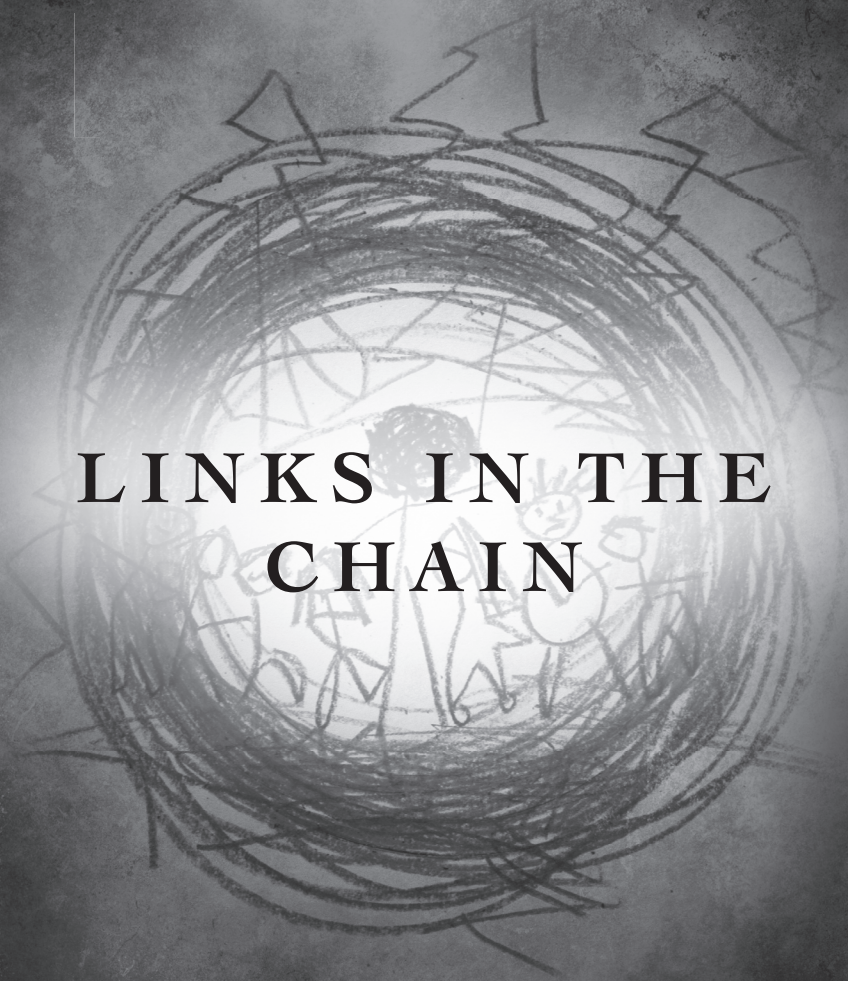
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PART 1

LINKS IN THE
CHAIN





2010

HERE'S SOMETHING folk attached meaning to, for a time:
In 2010, seven teenagers disappeared from Idle County, a place on the western edge of Minnesota that most people no longer know about. Their names were Molly Butler, Elijah Bryce, Lindsay Thorsen, Gabriel Creed, Pauline Gilbert, Clayton Graf, and Jillian Pope. Sometime during the night of July 4, 2010, they simply vanished. A local news anchor named Alice Winterblume, after their eighth night gone, first referred to them as the "Idle County Seven." The name stuck.

Their story up to that point wasn't exactly a mystery, at least for those who had read about them in local newspapers. They were a close-knit group of kids, brought together over the years by a curious mixture of coincidental circumstance and public scandal. There was Molly Butler and Elijah Bryce's discovery of a human skeleton at Spinner's Lake in 2005, the murder of Lindsay Thorsen's four-year-old brother Drew three months later, the notorious Gateway Project run by Jillian

Pope's father, Max, and the gas explosion at the Sparks family household, where the hulking Gabriel Creed had been found at two o'clock in the morning, sobbing and screaming about the bodies burning inside. Had people from the outside taken more notice, they might have realized that Idle County was a quiet corner of the world where reality was often worse than rumor, where people had to lock not just their doors but also their minds, for some indefinite, unacknowledged reason simmering beneath the surface.

When those seven children went missing in 2010, however, Idle County briefly became a place of legend. It was the CNN news story everyone clicked on, only to feel prickles of unease on the backs of their necks. It was the place kids in Minnesota mentioned in tree-house sleepovers, with flashlights under their eyes, always in the direst of midnight tones. It was, when the police investigation finally unraveled into loose ends that couldn't be tied, "the case that got away" for all those people who tried to crack it.

For many, the Idle County Seven eventually faded into obscurity.

For a few, they became an obsession.



2020

WINIFRED FLITE KNEW NOTHING of the Idle County Seven when her son Jonathan was born. She also never predicted that his psychosis (as she called it, always with a smirk to cover the storm of panic in her chest) would last longer than a few good sessions of child therapy. In fact, she was barely thinking about Jonathan's well-being at all when she went in for her cesarean section. He was simply a test—of her character, of her metamorphosis, of her ability to shed the cloak of worthlessness her own parents had slipped onto her so quietly over the years.

May 30, 2020, was a stormy morning in Newport, Rhode Island. Hoping to bid farewell to the chains of her youth, Winifred entered the hospital with almost bitter resolve. There was no father, she had already told everybody, just an anonymous donor. This lie became a secret that would eventually splinter her sanitized understanding of the universe, but on Jonathan's birthday, it appeared there was no story set, no track to follow, just a trail to blaze.

He came out with blond hair and steely hazel eyes, almost the exact opposite of her own upswept black hair and the dark brown irises her childhood schoolteachers had always hesitated to look into. Jonathan cried, nuzzled against her, and slept the way he was supposed to, but on the first night he was home, when Clarette the nanny had taken over the after-hours formula feeding (Winifred was *not* going to let this baby prevent her from getting much-needed rest), she felt her life tilting in a way she had not expected. And sure enough, every step she took in the weeks, months, and years that followed felt like one on a crooked sidewalk.

JONATHAN DANIEL DIDN'T FUSS MUCH. He cried when he was hungry, remained quiet when he was not, and started sleeping through the night at four weeks. But when it came time for him to start smiling and engaging with the world around him, he kept cool, detached, silent. This went on for one year, then another, then another. He exhibited no other signs of being deaf, but he did show signs of a photographic memory at three and began reading at four. He was completing thousand-piece puzzles by the time Winifred swallowed her pride and took him to see Dr. Fred Ganzer, Providence's leading child therapist.

That's when everything began falling apart.

"Here's something interesting," Dr. Ganzer said to Winifred after his second session with Jonathan. He handed her a sheet of paper stained by waxy crayons. It depicted seven stick figures—children, judging by their sizes—and one larger figure behind them. They stood stick-hand-in-stick-hand under a canopy of pine trees. Surrounding them was a circle of light blue, scribbled in a mad ring with so much force that it had stiffened the paper.

"What do you think it is?" Dr. Ganzer asked.

Winifred could only stare at the picture. What on Earth had she done to put that image in Jonathan's mind?

Drawing these figures became a theme. Sometimes, he drew what looked like a wooden table with two figures on either side, backed by a dazzling circle filled with every color in the crayon box. Other times, he drew what looked like a house on fire, often with a boxy looking figure sitting outside of it. On one occasion, he drew what looked like a lake with a fountain of water shooting upward, into the sky.

Winifred made a routine of folding up the drawings and bringing them home in her purse. At night, when wind rattled her bedroom windows and Newport Harbor chopped outside, she wondered who the boy sleeping down the hall from her really was. She had brought him into the world, and here he was, a silent mystery that the mothers around her—whom she had never quite warmed to anyway—were already whispering about.

“Lily and Danny are scared of him. He never actually *plays*,” Beth Eigor said to April Heisenberg at Starbucks one sunny winter morning, when they hadn’t yet realized Winifred was checking her voice mail in the coffee line behind them.

“I know, I’ve seen it,” April replied. “I feel like he’ll grow up to be a serial killer or something.”

Winifred, who hadn’t quite pressed the phone to her ear, felt mortification’s heat ensnare her heart, then rise to her face. April must have glanced at the floor just then, because suddenly her eyes were on Winifred’s new Chanel boots, the ones she had fawned over during their last coffee meeting. She clenched her mouth so tight that her jawline went pale. And then Beth saw Winifred, too, and her red curls bounced backward in shock. Winifred, never one to linger, turned around into the cold to find new friends.

OVER THE NEXT FOUR YEARS, Jonathan grew, started school, drew and painted pictures as always, but remained ever silent. Dr. Ganzer died of

a stroke in 2026, and Dr. Glenn Coyle replaced him two months later. He offered nothing new. Even so, Jonathan's eighth birthday brought a surprise. Winifred had asked Clarette the nanny to organize a party and invite Jonathan's fellow second graders. Nine of them showed up with their parents close in tow. When it was time for cake, Jonathan blew out his candles as any good birthday boy would. Then he said, "*Est-ce que quelqu'un veut du thé avec son gâteau?*"

Only Clarette was able to keep from staring at him, agape. She went to the kitchen to boil a kettle of water. Only then did she realize Jonathan had spoken—in French.

In the weeks that followed, Winifred asked questions, and Jonathan answered.

"How long have you known French?"

"My whole life."

"Because of Clarette? Does she speak it when I'm not here?"

"No, she always speaks in English."

"Then how do you know it?"

"I just do."

"And could you always speak English, too?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you? Don't you know how worried I was?"

"Because I've been confused."

"What confused you?"

"Molly and Elijah and Jillian and the others."

"What do you mean? Who are Molly and Elijah?"

"The kids who went into the Moon Woods."

"What are the Moon Woods?"

"A place I remember."

"You've never been to a place called the Moon Woods. What on Earth are you talking about?"

Jonathan shrugged, then sauntered to the living room and grabbed

his reading tablet. When he returned, he handed her a display of Google results for the search term “Idle County Seven.” Most of them were headlines dated eighteen years earlier, in 2010. Some were from a publication called *The Circle Gazette*, others were from the *Wind Prairie Tribune*, and yet others were from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

“Seven Idle County Teens Disappear Without a Trace.”

“No Clues Yet in Idle County Seven Disappearances.”

“Celebrity Victor Zobel Organizes Search for Missing Teens.”

“Police Find Evidence Teens Left Town.”

After confiscating the reading tablet and putting all of Jonathan’s internet usage under close monitoring, Winifred did her own research. Jonathan’s search history showed that, since learning to read at age four, he had visited at least two hundred web pages relating to the disappearance of these seven teenagers. Most were archived old news sources, but a few were conspiracy sites relating to unsolved FBI investigations. One site in particular outlined the history of Idle County, a small and isolated region in western Minnesota that seemed like a sordid place indeed. From what Winifred gathered, it consisted of four towns that lay scattered around a large, circular forest locals really did call the Moon Woods. Online maps showed that End Haven, the largest of the towns, lay about five miles due west of the forest; Stone Ridge lay two miles to the north; and Blue Hill and Deadwood were about eight miles apart, to the east and southeast.

According to the websites, Idle County had attracted the FBI more than once—first for an investigation involving a cult and two murders, then again for help with a kidnapping, then finally again when those seven teenagers disappeared, apparently into thin air. To cap off the ridiculousness of Jonathan’s sudden fixation with them, one of the teenagers, Jillian Pope, had been the stepdaughter of Victor Zobel, the founder of New Naturalism, a rebranded version of atheism that took society by storm in the late 2010s. Victor Zobel was one of

the richest men alive, the ex-neurosurgeon son of an international real estate tycoon. He owned companies, ran charitable organizations, and spoke around the world about health, peace, the rationality of science, and the dangers of religion and blind faith. He had introduced his New Naturalism movement at a time when younger generations had widely begun to question the efficacy of organized faith structures, and within two decades, it had spread rampantly around the globe. Winifred proudly still owned a hardcover of his first manifesto, *In God We're Dust*, released in 2005. Jonathan knew it was one of her favorite books.

Most disturbing, however, was a bread-crumble trail of website visits relating to reincarnation and past lives. As Winifred perused each one, the butterflies in her stomach transformed into flying dead weights. Jonathan was trying to manipulate her. He had to be. He had chosen to be mute for eight years and then, seemingly at random, thrown the charade in her face with a game of deception. After a week of it, Winifred stood in Dr. Coyle's office, backlit by a dazzling orange sunset, dealing out what might as well have been the wrath of God.

"Is it normal for a kid to be silent for eight years, then suddenly spout off a bunch of lies?" She almost spat the words, because all she could think about were the drawings she had taken home in her purse years before. "And is it normal for a psychiatrist like *you* to be absolutely incompetent in finding answers?"

"No, not altogether normal," Dr. Coyle replied, hot in the face.

"He's not just talking about those seven kids who disappeared. He's talking about ghosts. About stuff he can't possibly believe in. I'm a New Naturalist, for Christ's sake. I don't fill his mind with that kind of garbage. But then, just yesterday, he started talking about quantum physics. *Quantum physics!* He can't possibly know what that is!"

All Dr. Coyle had to offer were theories of parapsychology that would be nothing short of embarrassing. Yes, there were therapists out

there using hypnosis to regress patients into so-called past lives, but that was pseudoscience. Mumbo jumbo. A treatment unproven.

As the year progressed, Jonathan grew quiet again but not altogether mute. He tried exactly nine times to tell them he had extra sets of memories in his head, that they were clear enough to be his own. But Winifred would have none of it, and Dr. Coyle's fear for his own reputation led him to ignore Jonathan's notions. He decided to chalk up the boy's French skills to Clarette, who must have spoken the language around him secretly, and to blame his New Agey claims on articles he read on the internet. The boy's stoic, matter-of-fact discussion of it all made Dr. Coyle decide (at least outwardly) that it was simply an attempt to make his atheist mother's skin crawl. Jonathan was fiercely intelligent, with an IQ measured that same year at 145. If he had read all the hocus-pocus about past lives to coincide with his interest in these children—and the famous Victor Zobel—it would make for a perfect, elaborately planned manipulation. But why would he do it?

The question kept Dr. Coyle awake at night.

Guilt began keeping him awake a year later, when ten-year-old Jonathan, who finally seemed to have abandoned his story about the so-called Idle County Seven, put young Melinda Berry in the hospital with a severe brain injury. He had swung a board spiked with rusty nails into the girl's head at summer camp, where Winifred had sent him as a last resort for her sanity. She had caught him reading about the Idle County Seven on her cell phone the Sunday prior, and it sent her into a rage. Summer camp had been a moment of her own weakness, a sentence on Jonathan for not being the child she had always envisioned. Winifred admitted it to Dr. Coyle on the phone the first night her son was locked in the Rhode Island Training School. She should have known, she said, that his asocial tendencies would have scared the other children, that he might act out against them for being normal. Dr. Coyle had spoken words of calming counsel to Winifred, but in his heart, he feared for

Jonathan. His mother had created him for all the wrong reasons, and now, she wasn't ready to handle the consequences.

He hoped Melinda Berry would be the last to suffer at Jonathan's hand.

It didn't turn out that way.

It was with a heavy heart that, a year after his retirement in 2033, Dr. Coyle learned Jonathan had been incarcerated for killing a woman named Ellen Graber. He was just thirteen, and she had been his nurse.



2033

ELLEN GRABER'S FIRST IMPRESSION of Jonathan Flite was that he was a boy who had never been loved. His hazel eyes were both sharp with caution and heavy with knowledge, and when he arrived at Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence with his lower left arm covered fully in a thick bandage, her first inclination was to rush to him, give him a hug, and say, "Chin up! I'm here to help you! I want you to feel at home here!"

But of course she couldn't do this. Jonathan's propensity toward violence had been noted on his chart, and she was a small woman; her white-blond hair hung over a frame not much bigger than a seventh grader. She was thirty-two and still got carded at bars, on the rare occasions she and her husband Craig were able to escape the kids for a date night. The Roman-nosed, thirteen-year-old boy easing his way down the hallway was taller than she was, looked strong in a rosy sort of way, and walked as if on eggshells, which was always a sign of constrained energy.

“He cut into his arms pretty deep yesterday morning,” Dr. Shivske whispered when she saw him in the hall just after the intake. “He’ll be in one of the single rooms. Private and family therapy over the next two weeks.”

Ellen smiled at Jonathan as he passed her. For just a moment, the sadness in his eyes flickered toward cordiality.

About ten steps behind him was a woman caked in makeup that her beauty didn’t require. She was on her phone, adjusting the tight, dark bun of hair atop her head, hissing like a snake. “Yes, I’ll be stuck here almost every day for family therapy. I had to cancel the Mykonos trip. I can’t *fathom* why he would do this to me right now. . . .”

Jonathan squinted as he eased into his bright hospital room, inspecting the spotless bedding and the shiny, tiled floor. Ellen watched, unable to help thinking how *hugless* the boy looked.

That night, just before the end of her shift, she trotted into Jonathan’s room with a beaming smile. “Do you mind if I change your bandages, Jonathan?” The boy shook his head and gave her a smile that wasn’t really a smile. It looked more like a twist of his face, perhaps just an effort to fit into the space he was occupying. Ellen thought of her own children, how happy they looked when they played on the swing set or pranced through the Atlantic’s sparkling surf. This boy had no such youthful exuberance. Despite his physical teenage appearance—that dirty-blond hair was at least a centimeter past tidy—he looked older than anybody she knew. His eyes shimmered with tears. She wondered how often he allowed himself to cry.

“How’s your night going?” Ellen asked, unpacking a large spread of gauze.

Jonathan set his book down and fixed his eyes on the gauze. He spoke with the cadence of a broken robot. “It was . . . good. I did everything they wanted.”

Ellen cocked her head. She didn’t yet realize that nobody would ever find out about this conversation. “Oh? How so?”

"I told the doctors I wanted to kill myself. But I didn't really. Well, I did . . . but only to prove that it wouldn't matter. I'd just . . . go on."

"Go on where?" Ellen Graber chose the words carefully, trying to smother them in love so that this boy knew he could talk to her if need be. She wasn't a psychotherapist, but she was the only person he had warmed to over the afternoon. He needed an ear, and by God, she would give him one.

Except he grew quiet. He was looking straight forward, as if into another world entirely. He swallowed air, breathing lightly through his mouth.

Ellen waited. After about ten seconds, Jonathan gave her a quick shake of his head. His moment of transparency had passed, indicating it was time for her to provide some good-natured nurse filler. "Well, you seem like a smart young man," she said. "Sometimes it's just really hard being your age. You don't have to feel bad or guilty about what happened." Ellen could have sworn she saw Jonathan relax at this, just a little. "So, you go to Saint Michael's, is that right?"

He nodded.

"Do you like your classes?"

He shrugged.

"What's your favorite subject?"

No response this time. And it was just as well; she could tell he didn't like being grilled about mundane things.

"My daughter is in kindergarten, and she just *loves* the Train City books," Ellen continued. "She wants to be on the Providence City Council, just like her dad. She thinks that means running the Amtrak station."

Jonathan sat there, limp. Not even a chuckle. No movement as she began wrapping his arm.

"And my son, he's three—"

And suddenly he ripped his arm away and exploded toward her. At

first it was a hug—he was hugging her, holding on for dear life, before she even had time to process it—and then he was crushing her neck. It couldn't be; no, it couldn't be. Jonathan was a good boy. You could see it in his eyes. And because she had always been an optimist, Ellen didn't even consider that these might be the last moments of her life. It was just an incident she would later talk about with the other staff members, report to Jonathan's doctors and therapists, and discuss with law enforcement officials if it became an issue with the Family Court. But her husband Craig would have to be kept in the dark at all costs. He had been worrying for years that one of her patients might someday become a threat.

"Nobody believes me," Ellen thought she heard Jonathan whispering, over and over, as he choked her. Then, she felt herself drifting as the blood in her carotid arteries failed to reach her brain. That was when she finally remembered there were no cameras in the room, and she had to reach for the alarm button clipped to her pants. But it was already too late.

Her eyes lost blood and oxygen, formed a tunnel around the remaining light of her life, and then: black.

Whether it was a second or a day or a lifetime later, she was standing outside her own body, watching this poor, young boy clutch it until the physical part of her brain died. And after somebody from outside the room finally noticed, it was too late. But no matter. Inside the fog behind her was a presence she would recognize the minute she turned to follow. She would check in on her husband and children first, but she already knew they would be okay, eventually. This was a part she had agreed to play.



2034

DR. THOMAS LUMEN FIRST SAW the *PsychWire* article on Jonathan Flite in 2034.

It was March 31 in Wind Prairie, Minnesota, and the season's first leaf buds dotted the trees outside his kitchen window. Trying to deny the headache from last night's bottle of Shiraz, he sipped his English breakfast tea, listening vaguely to the ticking dolphin clock on the wall nagging him to jump in the shower. Sean, his son, had made it in shop class seven years ago. Dr. Lumen liked the ticking; it was one of the few reminders that he still had children, that they had once loved him. True, it commemorated his mistakes, all of them, but these days it kept him in line, whispering of a future made of better choices. Except now was not the time for rumination. His first patient of the day, a depressed widow named Valerie Stedman, was due in his office in forty-three minutes—at nine o'clock sharp—and she was never late. But the *PsychWire* article's headline caught Dr. Lumen's eye.

***Raising Eyebrows: Juvenile “Nurse Killer” Avoided
Adult Court on Past-Life Claims.***

Dr. Lumen’s initial interest was purely academic; his years of medical school and subsequent decade as a psychiatric officer for the CIA had stamped out most of his interest in folksy parapsychology. By the time he finished reading the second paragraph, however, the walls of science he had built around himself had begun ever-so-slightly to crumble. His hands were clammy.

Flite, whose legal proceedings with the Rhode Island Family Court were closed, has not escaped the public outrage of Providence city councilman Craig Graber, husband of the victim. In public statements and ActoVid posts that have flagrantly breached the Family Court’s confidentiality regulations, Graber has not only identified the boy by name but also provided reporters with multiple verbal accounts of his court proceedings, explaining that the juvenile’s homicide defense rested on his psychological history—of being called “crazy” by his mother and doctors after claiming “multiple times” to have past-life memories of seven teenagers who disappeared in Minnesota in 2010.

The sweat on Dr. Lumen’s palms grew cold.

Next came facts about Jonathan Flite’s defense, about why his judge, Barry Wallace, had sided with the boy’s public defender to try him as a juvenile and work toward rehabilitation: the silence for his first eight years, the drawings of stick figures (always the same, before he could even read), and finally how he inexplicably spoke his first words in French, because Jillian Pope, one of the girls whose memories he

claimed to have, had learned the language while living in Geneva, Switzerland. The boy argued that he hadn't wanted to speak until he found a good way to prove that his memories were legitimate, but everyone had thought he was crazy anyway.

Then came an offhand detail that made the dolphin's ticking sound like a death clock.

Flite claimed that one particular drawing, shown in the courtroom, depicted the Idle County Seven in the Moon Woods, the forest where he says they disappeared.

This tickled Dr. Lumen in all the wrong spots. There had been a search of that forest high and low. The place had swallowed people before—both their sanities and their lives—but it would seem like a sick joke if the Idle County Seven had actually disappeared there. And the fact that this random boy in Rhode Island had made these claims at all was beyond preposterous. Wasn't it?

Yet Dr. Lumen spent the next fifteen minutes scouring his tablet for anything else relating to young Jonathan Flite. All he found were different versions of the same story, and only the *Providence Journal* seemed to have covered it at any length.

“Newport Boy Strangles Nurse.”

“Attorney General Seeks Adult Trial for Nurse Killer.”

“Victim's Husband Enraged at Juvenile's Move to For-Profit Rehabilitation Center.”

Dr. Lumen showered. As he ran soap over his graying body hair, he realized just how many years had passed since Idle County propped open his intellectual door to the supernatural. There had been too many events to ignore, too many facts screaming to be justified. He was fifty-one now and had worked in twelve different countries, yet here he was, living once again in Minnesota, just seventy miles from Idle County. He

had returned to save an already broken marriage, and now he was alone under the place's shadow, forced every day to remember why he had left in the first place. Idle County's poison lived in his very blood, and no, he had never told his children about it. They didn't have to know.

Hey kids, you know Auntie Mary, the one who killed herself before you were born? Your Grandpa Joseph and all his cult buddies forced her to do it. And you'll never guess why!

Dr. Lumen doodled between his notes as Valerie Stedman spent her hour of therapy speculating about the nature of the universe and why anything mattered at all. Only after the session did he take any real notice of what his doodles actually were: scribbled circles of varying sizes, ringing all over the page.

Not a good sign.

With a sigh, he slipped on his ActoGlasses—a bulky older model—and scanned the page into his encrypted cloud file for Valerie. The pixel-equipped glasses' software, always smart, ignored the scribbled rings. But it was as if they had flowed out of him like a sign, a push whispering, "*It's time.*"

He limped into his empty house later that evening, his cell phone in hand and thumb hovering over the call button. Autumn Hornbeck was about to retire from the FBI, but she would want to know about this Jonathan Flite boy. Her involvement in the Idle County Seven case in 2010 had been peripheral, but the Moon Woods cult scandal six years earlier had been her first corruption case out of the academy. She had personally arrested all but one member of the Idle County Sheriff's Department, along with Dr. Lumen's father, Joseph, and a number of other local men. Her pulled-back auburn hair, no-nonsense demeanor, and deceptively staid expression had been intimidating but dazzling at the time, proof of what one could achieve in life. Dr. Lumen had still been a month shy of his twenty-second birthday then, and it was a wonder she had allowed him to stay in touch.

But it was late. He would call her tomorrow.

On his way to the kitchen, Dr. Lumen stopped next to the living room mantel to look at the LED picture frames he still had running on repeat. His ex-wife Lilya, his daughter Sarah and son Sean, and their old dog Feebles were all smiling as if time hadn't dripped between the cracks in their lives and blown everything outward. He chuckled as the screen transitioned to an old photo of Feebles licking Sean all over the face. That had been on their trip to the Amalfi Coast during the years in Zurich. They had almost—*almost*—made the globe-trotting work.

In the kitchen, the dolphin clock ticked.

After pouring himself a whiskey, Dr. Lumen grabbed a notepad from his briefcase and scratched on the first line a book title—one that had been swimming in his head for almost twenty years.

Idle County: A Living Mystery.

By the end of the night, he had a mess of notes, a chapter outline, and a four-page bullet list of all the challenges, questions, and concerns he would surely face in writing about Idle County. What he could not predict this night in 2034 was that, despite all the work he would do over the next three years, his eventual meeting with Jonathan Flite would prevent the book from ever being published.



2010

WHEN MOLLY BUTLER AND HER FRIENDS disappeared in 2010, her father Andrew first thought it was a sick joke. He had known by that point that Molly's time on Earth was limited; it had been the very thing to shake away the stupor he had lived under in the years following his wife Miriam's fatal car accident. Molly's diagnosis in 2008—a brainstem tumor, untreatable—had somehow pulled the veil of grief up from his eyes and made him realize how precious time really was, how much he still wanted to share it with the only person left in his life who was worth a damn.

On the morning of July 5, when the ash of fireworks was but muck washed into sewer gutters by the storm that had rolled in at 2:00 a.m., Andrew had gone to his daughter's room with breakfast on a tray. It had become their tradition since she had taken a turn for the worse and he had gone on sabbatical from his accounting job. By late June, Molly had become a bit more dazed, and her walking had slowed.

He swung through her door, into an empty room. Bed made. Ten-

nis shoes (which she always kept at the foot of her bed) gone. Everything might have suggested one of the early starts Molly had been known for before the tumor began affecting her behavior and motor functions. It would have been perfectly normal for her to be out of bed by 9:00 a.m. Perfectly normal.

But not since her diagnosis.

Not since then.

Andrew whipped out his brand-new iPhone and called Molly's matching one, which he had purchased so that she could be plugged into her friends, even when stuck in bed. When he heard its Harry Potter ringtone play from her nightstand, he ignored the concern coiling in his gut. Molly had begun to disconnect from the world in recent months, so it wasn't surprising that she would have left her phone. He grabbed the device to check her text messages, but it was password-protected.

Okay, he thought. I can have the phone company send them to me if need be. No biggie.

He called Molly's boyfriend, Clayton Graf, the skinny, tattooed recovering drug addict (and a recently graduated high school senior) who had shown up in her life like an angel in 2008 and given her reason to smile. They were a match beyond understanding, but Andrew had come to love him like a son. Clayton would know where Molly was. Maybe he had taken her for a romantic night out—surely it would be one of their last. Andrew wasn't about to stop his daughter from experiencing love while she still had time.

No answer.

He tried Pauline Gilbert. No answer.

Then Elijah Bryce, Lindsay Thorsen, and Jillian Pope. None of them answered.

He didn't have Gabriel Creed's number, so he next scoured the internet for everyone's home landline numbers, wondering all the while

if he had overlooked a doctor appointment, if Clayton might have come to bring Molly instead.

But they would have woken me up. I would have known she was gone.

Just as he found David and Sandra Thorsen's home number, his iPhone buzzed. It was a local call.

"This is Andrew."

"Andrew? Hi. It's Shelly Bryce. I'm just calling . . . this is weird, and I don't yet know what to think, but . . . is my Elijah over there? I can't find him this morning, and his phone is going straight to voice mail. I figured he was trying to spend as much time with Molly as possible, and maybe . . ."

It was only the first such call of the day. By 11:00, he had spoken with all pertinent parents except those of Gabriel Creed (but it turned out David Thorsen had spoken to them—they had fed him some crazy lines about Jesus Christ and the rapture), and the consensus was clear: their children were also missing. All their phones were going straight to voice mail, and there seemed to be no rhyme or reason for it.

By noon, the sheriff's department knew of the problem. "Stay at home," they told everyone. "If the kids come back, you need to be there."

David and Sandra Thorsen, who had experienced the loss of one child already, somehow seemed the most calm. But Andrew called David every hour, and every hour, David's voice seemed a bit more brittle.

Late afternoon, still nothing. All the kids' cell phones appeared to have had their batteries removed, because police couldn't track a single one of them by GPS. As Lindsay, Jillian, and Clayton had iPhones, this seemed odd—it would have taken special tools to open the phones and remove the batteries. Even with the phones off, their locations could be

triangulated. But it was as if the phones no longer existed. This more than anything sent a chill down Andrew's spine.

Another day passed.

Then another.

By Wednesday, dread had made a home in Andrew's heart. He had already faced the reality that he would soon lose his daughter, but this was *too* soon. He had expected at least a few more months, maybe even a year, if they were both lucky. But something had happened; he was sure of it. Search parties were already forming, and he had it on good authority that Jillian Pope's stepfather, the celebrity Victor Zobel, was personally overseeing a team that would search the Moon Woods. Where her real father Max was, Andrew had no clue. But it was a good riddance. Max Pope, though he had been fun to party with during Andrew's college years, now trailed discord wherever he went.

Early that morning, Andrew opened Molly's bedroom door and stood just inside the door frame, taking everything in: her faded red bedspread, her nightstand full of odd knickknacks, her mirrored dresser conspicuously devoid of typical girly items like hair dryers, makeup, and lotions. Molly was a simple girl.

Too simple for this world, Andrew thought. A sob growled in his throat, but he wrestled it down as he stepped into her room.

Nothing incriminating in her closet, under the bed, or in her clothing drawers. He hesitated before opening the drawer to her nightstand. She was a teenage girl who probably did teenage things, and if he was jumping the gun by going through her private belongings too soon, he might blush when facing her later.

But inside the drawer were just five items: a smashed-up knob of metal, a strip of tattered white cloth, a pressed flower dried almost to the point of dust, a small rock with a circle carved into it, and a crinkled pink notebook with yellowed edges. Against his own inner judgment, Andrew lifted out the notebook and opened it to the first page. On it

were three words—big, blocky, and inked-in with black pen—the etchings of a much-younger Molly.

THE GHOST HUNT

It was then that, through no other means than his own unpolished intuition, Andrew Butler sensed this was the closest he would ever come to seeing his daughter again.



2004

FEET RUNNING OVER FRESH SNOW. A black-haired girl's mingled feelings—fear and exhilaration—at breaking the rules. Her sense just a moment too late of hidden ice under her feet.

It was February 3, 2004, and Molly Butler was running around the corner of Saint Andrew's School with her friend Karen Young. They had been putting on red lipstick near the gym doors, against school rules, when their teacher Mrs. Stone had noticed and started walking toward them. Running was probably an immature move, but they weren't even twelve. Who could blame them?

It was snowing hard that day. Karen had claimed the lipstick was just an experiment to see if they could make Principal Doty raise his bushy eyebrows, but Molly had noticed her eyeing Jacob Jenkins the whole time they were putting it on. This had stung in a way that made her want to put on makeup, too, because Jacob was her next-door neighbor and best friend. The thought of Karen trying to swoop in felt slimy.

And suddenly Molly's foot caught the patch of hidden ice. She

tumbled to the ground and hit her head on a stretch of cracked pavement. Everything went black, and as it does in dreams, time stopped.

She was in a garden.

"Molly . . ."

A voice. Warm and familiar. Her mother?

"Wake up, Molly."

She looked around, but the garden was empty. Tulips dazzled; the aroma of roses enveloped her. And there, fluttering from lily to daffodil, was a—

"Come on, honey, open your eyes!"

Then Molly was rushing toward the sky. Or was she falling to the ground? It was hard to tell, but she knew the feeling well, knew what it meant. In the split second it took for consciousness to dawn, a gentle rush moved through her. *Like a butterfly*, she would later remember thinking. *It felt like a butterfly was flying right through me.*

"Molly, wake—"

So soft . . .

"—up!"

Snowflakes hit her eyes like frozen pins. She was on her back. Mrs. Stone was kneeling over her, probably hating the lipstick Karen had so carefully applied just a few minutes before. The woman's greenstone necklace—the one she wore every day—had fallen out of her jacket and was dangling over Molly's eyes like some hypnotic pendant. The schoolyard's lone pine tree crept into her peripheral vision; the falling snow made it look gray. Karen Young was standing off to the left, behind Mrs. Stone, who was snapping her fingers. "Honey, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Molly moved her neck. No, not hurt. Stars in her vision, maybe, but everything was coming back into focus. Mrs. Stone ignored the lipstick.

"I'm going to check if your head is bleeding, okay?" Mrs. Stone

cradled Molly's head and lifted, patting the back of it with her fluffy white mittens before pulling away. "No blood. But we need to have Mrs. Hexible look you over. You could have a concussion."

There were tears in Mrs. Stone's eyes. Something was wrong. It wasn't just the wipeout.

"Jesus Christ . . . such perfect goddamned timing," the woman whispered to herself.

Molly was alert enough by that point to look at Karen with a raised eyebrow. Karen raised one back. Swearing like that at Saint Andrew's School was most likely a mortal sin.

"Molly, honey, after we make sure you're all right, your dad'll be taking you out for the rest of the afternoon. Something happened."

Molly wobbled to her feet. Mrs. Stone seemed to pick up on the question she had not yet uttered aloud.

"Maybe it'll be best if we do your checkup in Principal Doty's office, okay? I'll have Mrs. Hexible come down there." Mrs. Stone ushered Molly toward the front steps of Saint Andrew's School, then stopped at their base and turned to Karen, who had followed along like a forgotten pup. "Karen, I've got to take Molly now. We'll all meet back in class after the bell, okay? I'm going to wait with her until her dad gets here. If it takes me a while, please tell everyone to read quietly."

Her friend did not ask, "Why is her dad coming?" She simply nodded. Molly's last view before walking into the school was of Karen, her dark-skinned face dazzling in red lipstick, standing alone under the falling snow.



2010

SIX AND A HALF YEARS LATER, the morning Andrew Butler found Molly's journal with "THE GHOST HUNT" blocked in on the first page, his immediate reaction was that he had failed as a father. As he made his way through the journal's entries, it became obvious he had overlooked something incredibly important, something that had irrevocably changed his daughter's life in 2004, long before her near-drowning on Spinner's Lake, her Gateway Project volunteering in Blue Hill, or her brain tumor diagnosis. This had been the summer following her mother's car accident, when she was just eleven.

The first entry was dated June 5.

Here is the official journal about the ghost hunt! I'm actually writing this in July, but I should have started back in June. That's why the dates are off. Last night Jacob and I finally had something weird happen. Our first four ghost hunts were boring and pointless. The first was

Old Mill Road. Then it was the reservoir, the cemetery (not mom's), that creepy bookstore on Main Street, and then that empty house by Heart Park. But we think Saint Andrew's Grotto was something real. Nobody will believe it though. They'll think we're crazy. I'm going to go back and write about all the ghost hunts, even the ones where nothing happened.

Jacob had the idea for it when we were walking to Mrs. Grime's library in March. Mrs. Stone took us there to get resources for our final reports. (!!! Mrs. Stone loves the word "resources.") We were at the back of the line. He was whispering that he had an idea for summer. He said he was going to spend it hunting for ghosts, because his dad saw one once out by the Moon Woods. I laughed at first and made fun of him. He got all mad. He didn't talk to me until after we got our resources. We both tied at Mrs. Grime's contest.

Andrew's hands shook as he read the journal. At what point had he failed to notice his daughter becoming an independent human being?

I don't really remember the walk back to school. I just know that when I was at the library I wondered if Mrs. Grime had any books about ghosts and I wondered about all the books she had in the grown-up section upstairs. I decided I wanted to do the ghost hunt. I told Jacob so, and he was still mad but said he'd think about it. That's how it started. I'll write about different days on other pages.

For the first time, Andrew heard how quiet his house really was

now. No giggles from Molly, no text tones, no rolls of Monopoly dice. He racked his brain for memories of the summer of 2004 and felt a sting behind his eyes when he found a few. He remembered Molly talking vaguely about bike rides with Jacob Jenkins, how they went out late a couple of times, and, hell, how they had even mentioned looking for ghosts at one point. At the time, he had been so lost in grief that he had embraced it as child's play simply to cope. But there seemed to be more in this notebook. Much more.

Molly and Jacob hadn't just gone on blind searches for ghosts. For at least three of the hunts, they had done research and rationally chosen the spots to conduct their investigations. They had become friends—close friends, by the sound of it—with Mrs. Grime, the old woman who had owned the nameless library on Lemon Avenue. And by the way Molly's descriptions and words began to descend toward the macabre and metaphysical, it was clear she thought they had experienced things. Frightening things. Things Andrew didn't even believe in.

A bird call from outside Molly's open bedroom window rattled him back to the present. After a few aimless seconds, he stood up, marched through the living room and out the front door, and turned left, across his yard, toward the Jenkins house. It was already sweltering, and the last of the morning's dew made the fresh-cut grass stick to Andrew's bare feet. When he reached his neighbors' front porch, he knocked on the screen door.

A shadow moved inside, then gained color as it neared. Jacob. The deadbolt rolled, and there he was again, the boy who was no longer a boy. Six inches of height one year, muscles the next. Now, according to an offhand comment from Molly a few weeks ago, he would soon be leaving for JROTC summer camp in the Twin Cities. His strawberry-blond hair was already buzzed short.

Jacob's eyes were wide, waiting. "Did you hear anything?"

Instead of forming a coherent answer, Andrew held up the pink

notebook. "Do you know what this is?" He opened its cover to show the journal's title page. There, big and bold, were Molly's blocky letters.

Jacob flushed red in the face.

"It seems my daughter was under the impression that you guys saw ghosts way back when."

Another bird tweeted from somewhere in the yard. A Cessna buzzed overhead. A car, somewhere off toward Main Street, honked its horn.

"I never saw any ghosts," Jacob said. He glanced over his shoulder when a toilet flushed somewhere in his house.

"But you heard them? It says here you heard them."

Jacob teetered on his feet. He was a little boy once again. "That was Molly. Mostly." His gaze flitted away from Andrew's, to somewhere (anywhere) beyond, out in the neighborhood. After a few moments, he said, "Nothing ever came of it." In the dingy house behind him, his father Jim staggered with his usual hangover toward the kitchen.

With tears in his eyes and a sputter in his throat, Andrew whispered, "Was my daughter out of her mind?"

Jacob straightened his posture but let the screen door close between them. "It was just a summer thing," he said, finally looking Andrew in the eyes now that there was a barrier. "Molly ended up making a bigger deal of it than I did. I think because she was dealing with Mrs. Butler dying. But I don't think she was crazy." Strain colored Jacob's face, and he looked over his shoulder. "I'm about to go for my run. Let me know when you find her. Right away. I was hoping I'd get a chance to say good-bye before camp. Just in case . . . you know."

When Jacob didn't cry, all Andrew could do was contort his face, squint against the tears forming in his own eyes, and give Jacob a mixture of a nod and a head shake. He turned around and walked back across the wet grass.



2036

FOR WHATEVER REASON, fifteen-year-old Mason Witzel shivered whenever he saw the old “missing person” image of Molly Butler.

He hadn’t paid attention to the Idle County Seven the first time he heard NBC 10 connecting them to the so-called nurse killer, but on June 24, 2036, the day he arrived at Crescent Rehabilitation Center and actually *met* Jonathan Flite, he started researching them. And it was Molly’s picture posted first on all the websites—always the same one, most likely her last high school portrait. Her black hair was just a shade darker than Mason’s, and her skin was slightly more pale. The very fact that he was suddenly connected to her through the nurse killer left him with a sense of exhilaration he couldn’t quite explain.

He had received word of his acceptance into Crescent the Wednesday prior, and when it was finally time to leave the Rhode Island Training School, it happened in an old, empty bus owned by the state. Bumping south along Harrison Avenue in Newport, he imagined that the smell reaching his nose might actually be the sea, and he might soon be

able to see the water every day, maybe even from his locked bedroom window.

As he rolled into Crescent's freshly paved parking lot, his heart raced with luck. He gaped at the facility's finely kept lawn, its main round turret, and the American flag flying majestically in its rear yard. Could it even be real? All his life he had dreamed of escaping his rage-fisted father, even if it meant shooting him in the head; never would he have imagined living out the punishment in a place like this. Despite the low, gray clouds rolling in the sky, it seemed like a soft haven compared to the Training School. It was clearly a place for people with money. Mason had none, not even a dollar to his name, and here he suddenly was, because his Uncle Ned had pitied him after hearing about the shooting—and the lifetime of abuse, hunger, and neglect. Uncle Ned was rich and gay and wore suits, and even though he lived in London, the state of Rhode Island had allowed him to intervene and enroll Mason at Crescent. Only once since the shooting had Mason actually seen his uncle, but the man's casual posture and unhurried smile—he had actually taken the time to *talk* with his nephew—had been enough to let the boy know he had, for the first time in his life, an ally.

Sissy McFarlane, the therapist who doubled as Crescent's welcome staff, had been no-nonsense as she checked Mason in, introduced him to a muscular, stoic-faced guard named Paul, and brought him to the nurse's office for the insertion of a security nanochip in his leg. It would, they explained, activate a GPS alarm if he crossed the underground electric fence that bordered Crescent's grounds.

"This won't hurt at all," a nurse named Kent assured him. "It's just a quick local anesthetic because of the needle, which is a little big. Works best if you just look away and think about your favorite place in the world."

Mason, who had no favorite place, simply suffered through the shot.

Sissy gave him a pat on the shoulder. “We’re medium-security here. The chip won’t hurt if you cross the fence, but it’ll send an alarm to the police station and track you. Nobody has felt the need to test how well it works, at least not yet. Our residents *love* living here.”

She exchanged a raised eyebrow with Kent, who seemed to take it as a prompt for agreement. “Pretty much the truth,” he said with a wink. With a wave of his arm, he gave them permission to leave his mini medical chamber.

Pretty much the truth.

Mason wasn’t smart, and he had trouble reading, but he could feel things in his gut. That’s why, when he saw a dirty-blond-haired boy sitting alone during lunch, he knew it was the resident who had warranted the raised eyebrow from Sissy. All the other boys were clustered together around tables, but not this one—he was sitting unaccompanied near the window at a table much too big for him. Mason’s options were to sit at his own table and risk being made fun of by the other boys, or look as if he belonged with somebody.

He carefully set his lunch tray on the blond boy’s table, aligning it to the square corner at first, waiting for permission to move it further. The boy looked up. Their eyes met, bored into each other, and found something like recognition.

“Hi,” the blond boy said with a polite smile.

Mason watched the news. He had seen this kid before. It was the nurse killer, the one people said was crazy. Instead of saying anything back, because he couldn’t quite coax words past the ever-existing feeling of shame and embarrassment that lived under his skin for no good reason, Mason simply slid his tray forward and started eating his chicken lo mein.

When the nurse killer finished his own lunch, he quickly stood up, grabbed his tray, and then dropped a fortune cookie in front of Mason. “Here,” he said. “I don’t really like these.”

Mason, whose dad had always eaten both fortune cookies whenever they got cheap takeout, accepted it with a blush and a smile. When he opened the fortune, it was simple enough to read, even for him:

Friends make life better.

THAT AFTERNOON, Mason spent much of his online time reading about Jonathan Flite and the Idle County Seven. He still had to sound out some words by whispering them to himself, but he found out quickly that Craig Graber, who had been entitled to copies of the Rhode Island Family Court records, had broken confidentiality regulations and gone to the press with details of his wife's murder. He had also shared why the judge, Barry Wallace, had ultimately favored Jonathan's defense.

It seemed Jonathan had convinced the judge that he knew things he couldn't possibly know—details that seemed too random to be imagined, like the supposed shooting star Molly Butler saw the night of her mother's funeral, her visit to the cemetery later that year (and the butterfly carved into the flat headstone), and the interior description of what he called the Lemon Avenue Library, which had been torn down in 2009, just nine months before the Idle County Seven disappeared. Craig Graber, who had shared these smaller details on his public ActoVid page, was still calling for a higher court to intervene in Barry Wallace's "insane" decision. Jonathan Flite, tried as a juvenile, was set to begin his reintegration into society on his eighteenth birthday. It would be a one-year process.

Mason ate lunch with him every day after that first fortune cookie. At first they barely spoke, except about their tutors and lessons. While Mason was still studying algebra, Jonathan had already started studying trigonometry, physics, chemistry, and biology—subjects Mason knew he would never be smart enough to learn. He had enough trouble with basic equations.

A month into Mason's residency at Crescent, Jonathan came to lunch with a scowl, briskly placing his tray on the table and launching into an apple.

"They keep wanting me to make progress, but they won't listen to anything I say," he growled with a full mouth.

"You mean Dr. Freede?" Mason didn't mind Dr. Freede. For some reason, the man's voice made him feel like a feather.

"And my mom. I sit there and try to tell them stuff, and they keep hinting that it'd all be better if I stopped lying. But I haven't ever lied. Ever in my life."

Following that conversation (and subsequent ones), Mason continued to spend his online time looking at those Idle County Seven websites, and every time, the most striking thing was that school photo of Molly Butler—her black hair, her dark eyes, her troubled smile. Jonathan said he had Molly's memories, that he remembered them like a movie. As Mason looked into the girl's eyes, he wondered how the memories they created back in the early 2000s could possibly have been transferred to his new friend. It did sound pretty crazy, but it also made Mason wonder, for the first time ever, what his own life really was.



2004

WHAT HAD COME NEXT FOR MOLLY BUTLER on that snowy day in 2004 was a slow drive to Saint Mary's Hospital with her father, where a doctor gently told them that her mother Miriam was dead. A man named Carl Logger had slid east through the intersection of Main Street and Hunter Avenue, hitting her car square on the driver's side as she was heading north, toward the local Supervalu. Ribs had punctured her lungs and heart, and she was dead by the time Molly and Andrew arrived at the emergency room.

And that was that. It was all there was. They were to go home, eat dinner, and keep waking up in the days to come as if their lives hadn't shattered into a million pieces. And the most awful, unspeakable part? Molly's last words to her mother had been, "God, you're the worst mom in the world!"

It was the makeup. The *stupid* makeup. It all seemed so silly after the accident. Molly had asked permission to wear eye shadow earlier that morning, but Miriam had put her foot down. No, Molly was not

even twelve; she would not be wearing makeup anytime soon. End of story. Of course Molly would never have told her mother that she was competing with Karen Young for the attention of Jacob Jenkins. Instead, she gave the silent treatment—no “I love you” as she ran out of the house, no last hug, no final glance. She had to avoid her father’s gaze after they returned from the hospital, because he had no idea about the fight. All she had in her head were visions of him kicking her out of the house, into the blustery snow.

The day of the funeral, Molly wore a pink dress. It had been her mother’s favorite color. A few of the funeral guests balked, as if the bright color were some big mistake. She had been doing her best to honor her mother, but all she ended up feeling were people’s judgmental eyes. By the time the coffin had been wheeled into the hearse and the funeral guests were swallowing their stale lunch in the church basement, Molly felt as though she were in a coffin herself. Without asking permission from her father, she stood up from the lunch table, grabbed her coat, and walked up the stairs. She pulled the coat as far down as she could to cover what showed of her pink dress.

Sitting on the front steps of the church, her rear end numb from the freezing cement, Molly stared at the hearse’s dark windows and cried. It was the worst moment of her life up until that point, knowing that the body lying inside that silly automobile—inside that silly *coffin*—was all that remained of her mother.

I’m not sure I can do this drummed in Molly’s head over and over. And then, after a length of time measured only by her painfully cold ears, Jacob Jenkins’s voice cut into her grief like an angelic knife.

“You’re going to freeze your eyes shut.”

He had slipped out of the church and into the freezing cold day without a sound. When Molly turned to smack him in the shins for sneaking up on her, he was standing with straight and somber posture, hands buried in his threadbare jacket pockets. His strawberry blond

hair glowed against the afternoon sun, somehow reminding Molly that there were good things yet to experience in the world.

“What are you talking about?” She asked it like a demand.

“It’s six degrees out. You’re going to freeze your eyes shut if you keep crying.”

Molly hadn’t even noticed that he was already correct; her tears were getting crunchy. An unexpected burst of joy filled her heart. Jacob cared for her; he really did. And that particular day was so surreal that Molly accepted it as love—whatever type they were capable of. They had lived next-door to each other their whole lives. They had no siblings. They had shared everything.

“Why are you out here?” Molly asked him.

“Came to see the hearse. This was my first funeral.”

“Mine too.” She wiped her crunchy tears. “Are you going to the burial?”

“Yep. My mom says we have to.”

Molly stared at the hearse; Jacob continued to stand; their floating breath kept them company. Finally, Molly peeled a thin layer of ice off the step she was sitting on. She threw it to the sidewalk below, where it shattered into frozen dust.

“Do you think . . .” Jacob started, then shook his head. Molly pried her eyes from the hearse windows and looked at him, waiting. He sighed. “Whatever. Never mind.”

“Do I think what?”

“Just . . . never mind. It’s stupid.” He jumped to his feet.

“Jacob, do I think *what*?”

“Seriously, nothing. I’m going to go grab another sandwich. I think your dad was looking for you, too.” He walked briskly toward the door, the way he did when he was embarrassed.

She pulled her skirt out from under her coat and over her knees. Jacob hadn’t made her feel stupid for wearing pink, which meant more

to her that afternoon than she could ever have put into words. What she would have given for him to stay with her on those steps, she could never have said. Instead, her parting words were—



2037

“See you at the cemetery.”

Jonathan hung Molly Butler’s words on silence, and Winifred Flite sipped her Bloody Mary. For a long moment, the old video of her son’s session with the now-retired Dr. Coyle conveyed only a confused, nine-year-old boy sitting patiently, waiting for another question.

It was midmorning on August 12, 2037. The video was now almost eight years old.

Winifred adjusted the clear, fragile pair of ActoGlasses on her nose and decided a sip wasn’t enough. She downed the whole Bloody Mary, then thought perhaps it might be time for breakfast. She kept the glasses on as she prepared her oatmeal (and mixed another Bloody). In her left peripheral vision, where she had positioned the video panel, the much younger version of her son—his hair was lighter blond then—sat in a chair, clutching a closed paperback book. *Bleak House* by Dickens, it looked like. Quite a tome for a nine-year-old.

Dr. Coyle continued his questions. This had been one of the few times he got Jonathan to talk at length about the Idle County Seven.

"And does it make you sad to think about your friend's mother at the cemetery?"

"She wasn't my friend. But she's in my head."

"Do you think about her a lot?"

"Sometimes." Silence. Then: "There's lots of other stuff."

"Like what?"

"Just . . . stuff. She was scared a lot that summer. And then the basement thing. Except my mom thinks I read it on the internet. But that wasn't on the internet."

"Well, Jonathan, it's okay to read things and have imaginary friends. A lot of kids do that."

"I already told you. They aren't my friends. They're just there."

Winifred ripped the glasses off and said, "TV—CNN. Volume low." The kitchen television, flat on the far wall to the left of the granite island, flipped on. It was perfect background noise for the decision she was about to make. The psychiatrist from Minnesota—ex-CIA to boot—had started calling her again. Doctors, doctors, and more doctors, all as clueless as the next about how to help her son. But this one, Dr. Thomas Lumen, had been oddly persistent in asking for a meeting. His interest in what Jonathan had to say about Idle County appeared to be strictly academic and unrelated to his psychiatric practice; he claimed instead that it concerned a book he was writing about the region.

On his most recent voice mail three weeks ago, however, the doctor's tone had been different than on his other voice mails over the last two years. There had been an edge under his politeness, a newer sense of urgency. He had scheduled a trip to Oregon to visit this Molly Butler girl's father, who was still alive but succumbing to dementia, and he had recently stumbled upon some peculiar coincidences about the Idle County Seven's disappearances. If there was any chance Jonathan really

did have information about what happened twenty-seven years ago, it could make a huge difference for the teenagers' loved ones, some of whom didn't have much time left.

Winifred glanced at her stainless-steel appliances, the sizable television wall on the left side of the kitchen, and the crystal drink glass sliding across the marble counter top between her fingers. She had everything, more family money than she knew what to do with, and if she could help some people, perhaps—

The television.

Something was happening. Panicked reporters. Video footage of a mountainous horizon looking perfectly normal, then white.

Her vision was already blurry from the morning drink, but something about this looked altogether wrong. "Volume high!" she yelled.

"—have limited visuals and no word yet as to what caused the explosion," came a male reporter's shaky voice, playing over the repeating video, "but we're getting information that countries across Europe are declaring martial law. If you are just now joining us, we have received a report of an explosion in Geneva, Switzerland, that appears to have been nuclear—"

Tingles ran down Winifred's spine. Clutching her Bloody Mary glass, she said, "ABC!" The channel switched. More footage this time, another view, this one appearing to be from someone's live ActoVid feed. It showed a mushroom cloud, the kind from history books and science-fiction movies, billowing into the sky.

And just like that, for no reason other than that the world had just fallen apart and she might as well, Winifred decided to give Dr. Thomas Lumen permission to interview her son.



2037

DR. LUMEN APPROACHED ANDREW BUTLER in the rear garden of Sun Pines Assisted Living Center. To his left was Kara, Andrew's twenty-three-year-old daughter, whose black hair and dark eyes looked so much like the old high school photos of Molly that he couldn't stop staring at her. All that immediately differentiated her were the dark-rimmed glasses framing her face, which made her the first person Dr. Lumen had met in years who, like himself, had not undergone corrective eye surgery. She had been kind enough to fit in a visit before her cognitive development lecture at ten o'clock.

"I'll make it back in time," Kara assured him with a solid handshake and a flip of that long black hair. "You say you have a private practice now? How has that been for you? I keep thinking that's what I want to do once I finish at PSU."

Dr. Lumen grinned. "It's great, actually. I love the freedom, and I always have patients. But this book project has been a distraction as of late."

He glanced at young Kara with a nervous smile. For a moment, he wondered if he was crazy for making this trip, for even considering putting his credibility on the line by posing questions that could potentially rekindle interest in the Idle County Seven case. Since starting research for his book in 2034, however, Dr. Lumen had unearthed a number of peculiar coincidences that all led back to one man: Victor Zobel, the eminent (and still-living) stepfather of Jillian Pope, one of the vanished teenagers.

Just over a year ago, Zobel had become the first-ever human to take up full-time residence on Star Island, the luxury space station whose hotels and restaurants had opened to the public in 2035. Behind his celebrity and New Naturalism philanthropy, however, three things had struck Dr. Lumen as extremely odd. First, Zobel owned (distantly under his empire-umbrella, Zobel Enterprises) a company called New-Lux Ventures, which had acquired the Moon Woods land in 2011, just six months after he had formed and directed search parties there for the Idle County Seven. Second, and seemingly unrelated, reports had surfaced of money laundering happening through five banks in the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, all owned by a company called Intelitrust Financial. Intelitrust, too, was a well-buried subsidiary of Zobel Enterprises. Finally, there existed a multitude of internet forums dedicated to presenting Victor Zobel as a master manipulator, a sociopath, a man who cared only for himself. But this last warning bell was just a lark—internet forums were full of crazies.

Dr. Lumen worried he had overstepped his bounds by flying all the way to Portland to drag this young woman and her father into the mix. But Kara Butler looked like the type who understood hard work and doing the right thing. If he ended up being wrong, perhaps she would forgive him.

“Well, I’m glad you’re catching Dad now, before he gets worse,” Kara said. “He started having symptoms when he was about fifty-eight.

Pretty early for Lewy body disease. He tried to hide the dementia by making notes about what day it was, how to get to the grocery store, things like that. We knew something was wrong when his gait started shuffling, though. In some ways I think he's lucky. Two wives dying and a daughter disappearing? I'd be happy to forget all that." She followed this with a wan smile that didn't reach her eyes. "My mom died already, so I know what that part is like," she continued. "But with my dad, I guess the worst thing was the first time he ever forgot who I was. I felt like it was *me* about to be erased. Stupid, probably."

"I don't think it's stupid at—"

Dr. Lumen's limping foot caught on an uneven brick, and he lurched forward. With almost lightning speed, Kara reached out, caught his arm, and steadied him. Instead of asking why he limped, she just smiled.

The garden was lush and green, glittering with rays of early sun falling through the trees. Fragrant white roses lined a walkway large enough to accommodate two-way wheelchair traffic, which ended at a circular common area overlooking a small pond scattered with lily pads and paddling ducks. Sitting alone on a wooden bench across from two elderly love birds (who were laughing and cooing sweetly to each other in whispers) was a man who looked too young to be in a facility of this sort, save for the uncontrolled shaking of his arms. His salt-and-pepper hair capped a chiseled, minimally wrinkled face—one touched by the same expression of determination present in Kara. He had a handful of caramel candies and a small pile of empty wrappers on the bench next to him. They rustled in the morning's light breeze.

Funny how people just keep going until they don't, Dr. Lumen thought.

Andrew Butler was sucking on a caramel, staring at the couple on the opposite bench with a half-grin that looked more nostalgic than confused. When Kara jumped into a trot and ran up to him with her

flip-flops smacking the pavement, he turned toward her with bright eyes.

“See them, honey?” he said. “They’ve been married sixty-two years. Can you believe it?”

Kara turned to Dr. Lumen with raised eyebrows. “Daddy is *obsessed* with marriage.”

“Find a good man,” Andrew continued. “I want to leave my little girl in good hands.”

Kara wiped a piece of white fuzz from his hair. “I’ll be just fine, Daddy.”

“What ever happened to that boy, Jacob? He was always such a nice kid. And ripped, too, the way you like ‘em.”

His daughter’s smile crimped a bit. “He was Molly’s friend, Daddy. And I’m a lesbian.”

Andrew frowned, then nodded slowly with renewed enlightenment.

Kara turned to Dr. Lumen and grimaced. “At least he’s on the right track for you today.”

On the edge of the pond, a squirrel chased six ducks off a rock. They fluttered into the water, quacking their quacks, then paddled away, their interruption forgotten. Andrew lay his fingertips on the bench’s surface while watching them, as if bracing himself for something unpleasant. He squinted at the water’s sun sparkles. “Kara here says you wanted to talk about my other daughter. Molly.”

“That is why I came,” Dr. Lumen said. “My name is Thomas Lumen, and I’m a psychiatrist from Minnesota. I grew up in Stone Ridge, the next town over from where you raised Molly. I even met her once, if you can believe that. At Benedict Wise University’s First Annual Ghost Symposium in 2006.”

Andrew squinted for a moment, as if finding the memory, then relaxed in a smile. “She went with Lindsay and Elijah.”

Dr. Lumen nodded, returning the smile. “Mr. Butler . . . I came here for two reasons, mainly. First, I wanted to let you know I’m writing a book that will involve your daughter and her friends, and I’m seeking your blessing on it.”

The man’s grin widened. “I always knew my Kara here would be famous!”

Kara—bless her heart—placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “He means a book about your other daughter. Remember? Back in Minnesota, before you met Mom? Her name was Molly Jane.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid,” Andrew said, recoiling from her. “I just thought she’d be around a while longer.”

Dr. Lumen glanced at Kara. She shrugged, then nodded.

“Mr. Butler,” the psychiatrist resumed, “the other reason I’m here is because there’s a boy out in Rhode Island claiming to know what happened to Molly and her six friends. His name is Jonathan Flite, and he’s currently in juvenile lockup. He says Molly and her friends went into the Moon Woods, and that’s where they disappeared.”

A cloud covered the sun just as Andrew’s smile eased into a frown. “Why the hell would they have gone in there?”

“I’m not sure,” Dr. Lumen said. “I’ve been trying for almost two years to get permission from this Rhode Island boy’s mother to interview him. He claims to have memories of the event, which I know sounds strange, but if he agrees to talk, it might be the closest we get to finding out what happened. It might be a hoax, but there were enough peculiarities in the boy’s case for a judge in Rhode Island to—”

“I ruined her,” Andrew said, his shoulders starting to twitch under Kara’s soothing hand. “She was ruined before she ever got that god-damned tumor. It was me. I—”

“Daddy, you didn’t ruin Molly,” Kara said. “You—”

“*How would you know?*” Andrew hissed, ripping himself away. “You don’t know anything about that!”

“Daddy—”

Andrew turned to Dr. Lumen, all business. “What do you want to ask? I’ve already told you everything I know. You police need to learn how to do your job.”

The psychiatrist glanced at Kara, whose grimace made it clear: this was the fence between lucidity and meltdown. She nodded to him, but with warning in her eyes. If Andrew thought he was back in the days following the Idle County Seven’s disappearance, however, maybe . . .

“I’m wondering what you can tell me about Victor Zobel,” Dr. Lumen said.

Dread filled Andrew’s eyes, and he twisted his head into half a shake, like a slingshot held in a stretch. “He’s a liar,” Andrew whispered. “None of the other guys believed me, but he’s a liar. And now he lives on that goddamned space station.”

“He helped search for Molly and his stepdaughter Jillian?”

“Jillian the redhead,” Andrew said with a smile. “Molly liked her a lot. She could speak French.”

“But Zobel? How many people helped him search the Moon Woods?”

“Jillian’s real dad Max was off God knows where, so that even bigger creep took charge. Unofficially.” Andrew adjusted himself on the bench. “There were about two hundred of us. We each took sections of fifty feet or so. He paid for all our food.”

“And why do you say he was a liar?”

“You cops were all impressed that he was helping, because he wrote that book and got all famous. But I don’t think he was really trying to help. He kept us away from things. Like that big ravine with the little river that ran underground. He said we didn’t have the right safety gear to check down there. But I guess we could see the bottom good enough. There wasn’t anything. It was something in his face, though. Lies. Can you take me back? I’ll show you the spot.”

Dr. Lumen's bad leg tingled, the way it always did when Idle County made him fret. "We can't go now, but I want you to know that I'm going to do everything I can to find out what happened." And then, even though it might hit deaf ears, he added, "If I can get an interview with this boy Jonathan Flite, I might have some new answers for you."

"*You find her*," Andrew whispered, leaning into Dr. Lumen's face just as the sun returned again. "*You find my little girl*."

The psychiatrist turned to Kara, ready to give her a satisfied nod, but she was staring with furrowed eyebrows toward the main building of Sun Pines. Dr. Lumen turned to see what had caught her attention.

A middle-aged nurse was half-skipping, half-running toward them, her open mouth pulled back to reveal teeth gritting together like somebody bracing for pain. She reached them and leaned over, putting a hand on her knee.

"I'm sorry, I just had to interrupt. Somebody bombed Geneva. Switzerland. Nuclear. It's all over the news. I had to tell you. All airlines grounded traffic, and . . . I thought you all needed to know right away." She stood up, shifting her left hand to her heart. With a forlorn look at Kara, she continued. "Kim has a nephew working there. World Health Organization."

Kara was already digging a phone out of her pocket. "Kim's the nurse who usually takes care of dad." Her fingers raced over the screen, and a few seconds later, she held it out for everyone—even her father—to see.

"Jesus Christ," she whispered.



2037

MASON WITZEL AWOKE TO THE SOUND of seagulls and boats. He was lying in bed at Crescent Rehabilitation Center, his second-floor room's window cracked open as much as the electric controls would allow. He could see right away that it was a sunny morning. Calm. Peaceful. He could smell the sea.

His morning agenda was the usual: a shower, oatmeal and hard-boiled eggs in the cafeteria, and then a mug of tea (which he almost liked now) with Jonathan on the deck outside, as usual accompanied by the security guard Sounder, who always liked to visit with them. Sounder was huge; Sounder was wise. If any of the boys at Crescent stepped out of line, he would kick them back. Mason rarely had to worry now about people making fun of him for being slow, or being dumb, or being worthless. Whenever Sounder was there, it was like having a bodyguard.

He got as far as showering and walking down the stairs. When he came to their base, he glanced left and stopped. All of Crescent's staff

and most of its young male residents were standing in front of the main television wall, watching the news. Dr. Freede stood staring with his forefinger and thumb cupping his chin, wearing a perturbed expression Mason had never seen on his face. He looked like an actor in a movie. About ten feet to his right was Jonathan, whose usually tan face (he walked outside on the grounds a lot) looked pale and clammy.

The wall flashed with a frenetic amalgamation of satellite footage, news anchors looking wide-eyed and colorless, and reporters on the ground in what looked like European cities, gesturing wildly as they spoke.

“The city is gone,” a blond, female reporter said. Her face looked like glass about to break. “Just . . . gone.”

Mason needed nobody to tell him that all plans for the day had been canceled. The question didn’t even have time to rise in his brain, because what he saw on the television, rising instead, was a mushroom cloud, recorded from a distance, deceptively slow in its horrifying fury. It played from a hundred different angles, over and over. On the bottom of the screen was a headline scrolling almost too fast to read, “Nuclear Explosion Rocks Geneva, Martial Law Declared Across Europe.”

All Mason could think of were the mysterious Geneva memories Jonathan had told him about: the city trams, the restaurants, the bakeries, the fountain shooting water sky-high out in the harbor. He didn’t even register the fact that Jonathan had never been there. What he saw in his mind instead were images of the city’s residents as they had probably been earlier that day, chattering away in French before feeling—for what must have been a long, terrible second—a sudden shift in the atmosphere, a knowing that something was dreadfully, dreadfully wrong.

Mason glanced at Jonathan, whose eyes were vibrating as he took in everything on the television wall. Tears glossed their lower rims. When they escaped down his cheek, he turned toward the window to hide his face.

“Well, guys, the world just changed,” Dr. Freede said. He stared at the screen for another ten seconds, then pulled out his cell phone and left the common room.

Everyone who was hungry brought in plates of food (an activity that was usually forbidden) and ate in silence, watching this unfathomable bit of history unfold. Mason settled next to Jonathan, who acknowledged him with a lonely, devastated nod. Everything had stopped, even for those half a world away from Switzerland—the country of peace, science, and beauty. There was nothing yet to indicate who had set the bomb off, where it had come from, or why anybody would have done it.

All the boys could do was sit back and watch.



2037

TEN HOURS AFTER THE BOMBING, Dr. Lumen was sitting in his Portland hotel room wearing only his boxer shorts, his finger dialing his ex-wife Lilya's cell phone on repeat and his body numb from all the angles of the mushroom cloud he had seen that day. The news networks were offering little more than fiery speculation, but they were still in operation, which meant Earth had not broken out into nuclear war. This came with a level of relief so intense that Dr. Lumen recognized for the first time ever his own shock at the actual possibility of such a calamity. As Geneva was home to the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and CERN (among other international groups), conjecture over the day had ranged from Islamic terrorism to some sort of atomic experiment gone awry.

He was about to switch off the television and go to bed when a fresh news report invaded the screen. Dominique Jackson, CNN's exhausted-looking anchor, sat in silence for a moment as the facts congealed, and then she began delivering a choppy update.

“We have . . . okay, this is coming brand-new . . . we have reports of an ActoVid that was uploaded to the company’s streaming site just seconds before the blast.” She paused, listening to her earpiece. “And here it is. We have not broadcasted this yet, so if you are just joining us, this is a *new* video posted from Geneva, Switzerland, at 4:47 p.m., Central European Time.”

The television cut to a jowly man with matted gray hair and an unevenly trimmed gray beard. It was clear from his red cap, black top, and priest collar that he was a cleric of some dwindling Christian religion—probably a Catholic.

Just as the man started talking, something clicked through the phone in Dr. Lumen’s ear, and he heard his ex-wife Lilya’s tired voice. “Yes, we’re fine. We’re in Albuquerque. I would have called you if we were—”

“Wait, are you watching this?” he interrupted.

Lilya yawned through the phone the way she used to, when the CIA had first stationed him in Bahrain, and she hadn’t yet joined him. “Hmm? The bomb you mean? All damned day. I can’t even think.”

“No, not the bomb . . .”

He turned up the hotel television’s volume.



2037

WINIFRED FLITE, alone in her dark house on Columbus Avenue, sat awash in the light of the video coming off her living room wall. This new footage was shaky; it appeared the man who looked like a priest had been holding a pair of ActoGlasses and pointing them at his face.

“It is a dark day in history when faith in God is abandoned,” he began in a very calm, quiet French accent, as if delivering the beginning of a sermon. “I am Cardinal Jean-Claude Apostol, and what I do today I do in desperation, in hope that humanity will awaken and see the fallacious path it is stumbling down.”

On the screen, the cardinal’s jowls vibrated slightly. His face sparkled with sweat.

“We are progressing toward a Godless world where those who seek Spiritual Truth”—he spoke these two words with the weight of capitalization—“will be hated, persecuted, and dragged through the mud like dead swine.”

He paused to cough, then glanced to his left. Out a van window, perhaps? When he turned back to the camera, his beady, bloodshot eyes vibrated back and forth, never quite finding the lens.

“Many churches now stand deserted. Secular Godlessness has replaced infallible Christian philosophy in the West. Those who remain faithful have become laughingstocks. Humanity’s young are growing in a world stumbling through the dark, and to this, we must say *no*.”

Cardinal Apostol emphasized this last word with a fierce shake of his head. When he steadied his face once again, Winifred saw that it was red, shaking with a manic blend of fear and rage.

“Through tragedy and despair shines the true nature of humanity: that we are all God’s children, brothers and sisters in Christ, and we bind together as one, able to work together to build the kingdom of Christ here on Earth.” More shakes of his jowls; more shakes of the camera. “I make this sacrifice in hopes that God will show himself to the world once again, through human beings who will experience this event together, the world over, and unify so that harmony can rise from the ashes.” The camera shook, rushed in a circle, then landed once again on the Cardinal’s face. Now, his eyes were closed. “In Jesus’s name—”

White.



2037

THAT NIGHT, AFTER THE WORLD had confirmed the legitimacy of Cardinal Jean-Claude Apostol (he was a Catholic cardinal known for his militant Christian beliefs; church officials had publicly expressed concern about his psychological state numerous times; he had always refused therapy in favor of prayer), Paul the night guard allowed Mason and Jonathan to go out to Crescent's backyard, lie on the ground, and stare at the stars. Mason had a green laser pointer that was strong enough to make a visible beam in the darkness, and he began pointing out some of the lesser-known constellations, which he had learned about earlier that week from the astronomy books his uncle had bought him. Mason would never claim to be smart, but he loved the stars.

"Funny to think that from up there, all the stuff happening down here is kind of meaningless," Jonathan said.

Mason remained silent, kept moving the green beam from star to star.

“You think we’re alone, Mason?”

“You mean like aliens?”

“I guess, if you want to call them that. Do you think there are other worlds?”

“It would make sense.” Mason said it firmly, with more confidence than he was used to having. He stewed over his response for a good long while, even after Jonathan accepted it with a gentle nod.

“It’s so damned big,” Jonathan said.

Never taking his eyes off the stars, Mason nodded.

“Seems weird I’d have these memories,” his friend continued. “Of Geneva and everything else, I mean. Like . . . what’s the point?”

“Dunno,” Mason said. Somewhere past their feet, the ocean’s low waves were washing up against Crescent’s rocky shoreline. He flashed the laser to the top of the flag pole that stood twenty feet to their right. The green beam hit the decorative glass bulb that capped the pole, and for a second, it reflected the light in a million directions, irradiating the night.

“Why do you think any of this exists, seeing as we all just die anyway?” Jonathan asked.

Mason surprised himself by having an immediate answer, this one even more confident than his previous one. It came out of nowhere, but it felt warm, right. “So we can learn.”

A shooting star passed over them. As if well-practiced, Mason gave the instruction for Jonathan to make a wish.

He never found out if Jonathan did.