

THE  
**BUILDING** THAT  
**WASN'T**



**ABIGAIL MILES**

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# THE BUILDING THAT WASN'T



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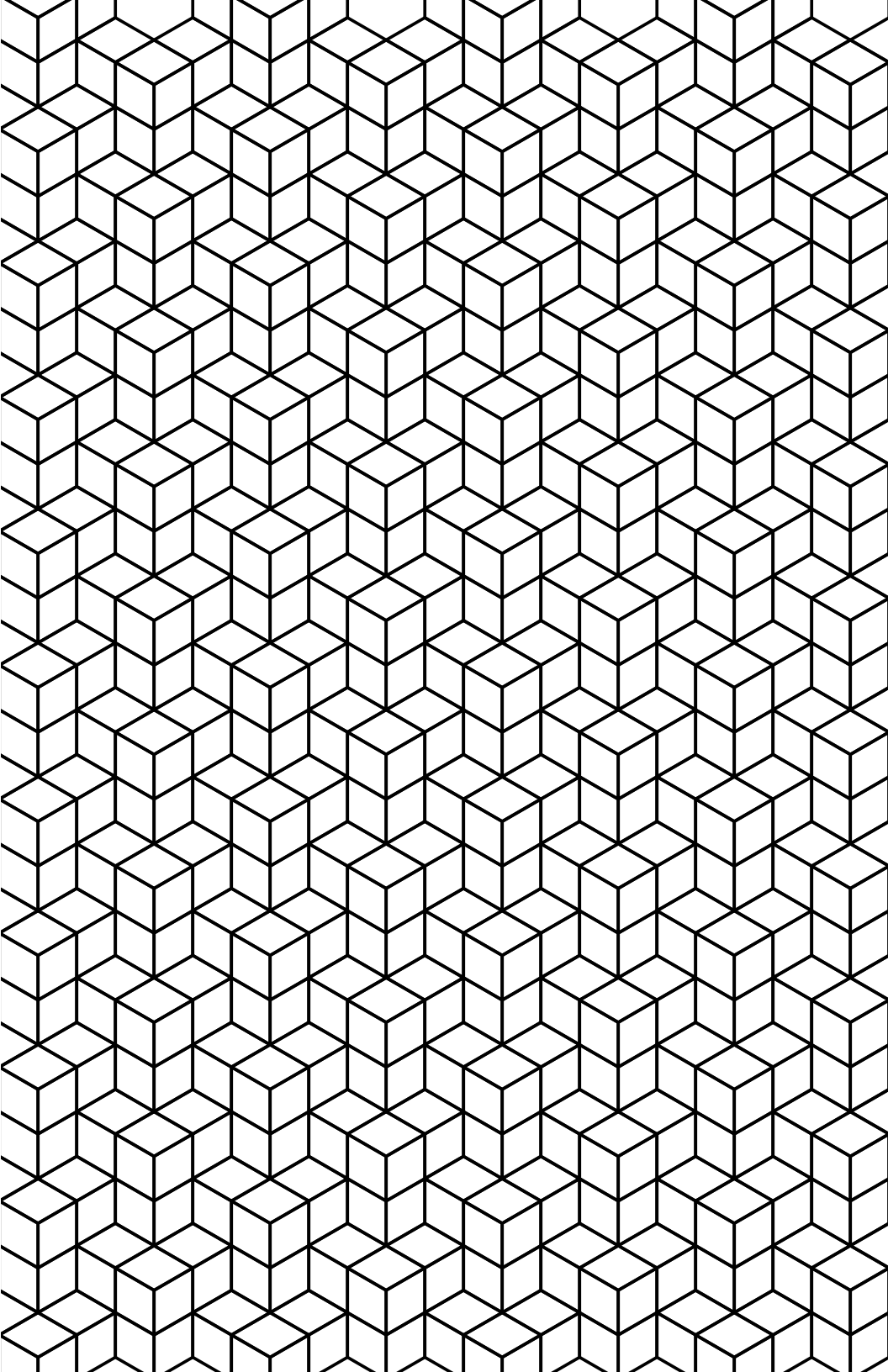
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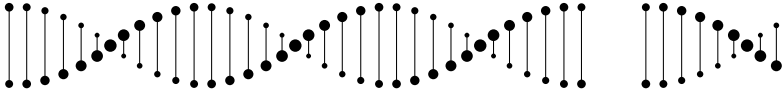
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# 1



THE ROOM WAS WHITE—almost blindingly so, with surfaces that had been scrubbed to a shine, so that by staring at the floor or a wall it was nearly possible to see one’s own reflection. It was clean and fresh and sterile. The perfect canvas.

The most beautiful aspect of the white room was how stark contrasting shapes and colors appeared on the initial blankness. This was an aesthetic quality that the man found particularly pleasing to explore, and so he did as such extensively, to a near-compulsive rate. He fancied himself an artist, with the borders of the room providing the ideal location to bring his masterpiece to life.

Keeping that in mind and aiming for the truest form of artistic perfection he could conjure, the man gripped the tool in his hand—his paintbrush of choice—and hefted it before him. His arm dropped in an almost graceful fashion as he completed a full swoop, similar in form to that of a baseball player setting up to bat. Then, pausing once to allow the moment to settle in its resplendent glory, the man slowly lowered his arm, tool in hand, and looked around at what he had created.

The white backdrop truly was perfect, he thought. It made the red look so much fresher—sharper and more potent. And the shapes the droplets

formed, the pattern they enacted across the room. Perfect. The man admired the final product and couldn't help but think that this may have been some of his finest work yet.

Not to mention the added pleasure derived from the screaming.

While some find the sound of a human scream to be unpleasant, the man found it to be more precious than music—a chorus of varying pitches and volumes coming together in a resounding crescendo at the final moment. He would do it all for that, for the symphony that was forged as a result of the fear, the excitement. The pain.

That's why he was there, after all. To create such a stupendous pain in the people they supplied.

Well, that was not technically true. Technically he was there for many, many more reasons. Glorified kidnapper being one, rubber duck watcher another.

But the pain. That was his favorite.

Though usually the pain was accompanied by a distinct factor of *more*—the unraveling of the universe and all that.

Not this time. This was only an ordinary body, with no spark of the otherworldly in sight.

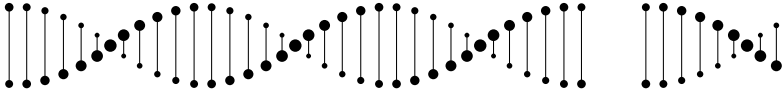
The man didn't care.

Maybe others would, but he found purpose enough for himself in the beauty of what he could fashion there, with or without the ulterior motive. In some ways, one could say that having a secondary reason for the pain only tarnished it, whereas this belonged solely to him. This moment, right here.

The man took a deep breath, savoring the complete ambiance of the space he was in, before he turned back to his subject and assessed his options. Settling on a different, more precise tool—one with a much sharper edge—the man once more lifted his arm and continued with his ordained task.

From a different room, a set of eyes casually observed on a screen as the man set to work on his masterpiece, nodding once in approval before turning away. The screen left on displayed the white walls, no longer pristine, which echoed back the horrendous chorus the man's work produced.

# 2



THERE WAS AN ELDERLY MAN Everly had never seen before standing behind all the black-clad patrons, and his eyes had been focused on her for the duration of the service.

She blinked and realized that wasn't quite right. There was an elderly man Everly recognized, as if from a dream, as if from a memory, lodged deep and low down in the recesses of her brain. She squinted at him, because if she could just . . .

She blinked again, and of *course* she knew him, why wouldn't she know him, why would she ever not recognize—

Blink. Everly shook her head. The man was still there, and she didn't know why a second before she had recognized him, because she did not, though she felt oddly unsettled by the memory of recognizing the man. Not as unsettled as she was, however, by his mere presence or by the fact of his staring at her.

He was too far away for her to actually see his eyes, to know for sure, but she could feel his attention pierced on her like a dagger through her spleen. The sensation was disconcerting, but in a strange way she appreciated the man and the mystery he presented. It gave her something to focus on. Something to puzzle over.



Someone to look at other than the form in the coffin on the elevated platform in front of her.

The man wore a bowler hat over his tufted gray hair, and a brown tweed coat, which worked even further to set him apart from the sea of faces that encircled him—the rest of whom were all adorned in shades of black or blackish blue, all at least a little familiar to Everly. The friends, the coworkers, the distant acquaintances and associates.

But not the family. There was no other family. None but her.

The preacher had finished speaking, Everly realized with a start, and was gesturing for her to step forward. She didn't want to. She wanted to go back to pondering the mystery of the peculiar man in the bowler hat, trying to work out how he had found his way there, and why, but they were all staring at her, so she stood, refusing to breathe as she crossed the distance between her chair and the platform ahead of her. A sharp pang flashed through her skull when she reached the front. Everly grit her teeth, resisting the urge to lift a hand to the side of her temple.

She couldn't look at the body. They had asked if she wanted to beforehand, to make sure he looked okay—like himself, she supposed—but she knew it would be no use. He would never look like himself. Never again.

A car accident had led her here, to this raised platform, in front of all the vaguely familiar forms in black and the solitary strange one in brown. Or at least, that is what they had told her, when it was already too late for the cause to even matter.

But according to them, it had been a car accident, and so he hadn't been quite right. Or his body hadn't been. They told her it would be okay if she didn't want an open coffin, but she wasn't able to stand the thought of locking him up in there any sooner than she needed to.

So even though she refused now to look, she kept him out in the open. She kept him free.

Afterward, Everly was ushered to a dimly lit reception room, where she had scarcely a moment to herself before the other mourners came flooding in to report how very sorry they were, how devastating of a loss it must

be, how much she would be kept in their prayers. Everly hardly heard any of them. She leaned against one of the whitewashed walls of the hall and rubbed her temple, trying not to close her eyes, though she wanted nothing more than to shut out everything and everyone around her. She wanted them all to go back, to their lives and their families and their homes. She wanted to go back.

But back to what, she couldn't help but ask herself. Back to the empty house with too many rooms and the life that she wasn't sure she could picture any longer in his absence.

Her father's absence.

She was too young, all of Everly's neighbors had tried to claim. Too young to be all alone. But at twenty-four, she was hardly a child anymore, and really, what would anyone have done anyway? Where would she have gone?

She had nowhere else to go, no one else to go to, and they knew it as well as she did.

She was on her own.

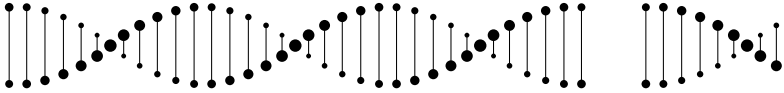
Everly considered leaving. She thought better of it a moment later, looking around at all the people who had come out to celebrate her father's life, but an instant after that she realized she didn't even care. None of them had truly known him anyhow. They had only come for the cake, which was now set out on a plastic folding table by the door, the words *Our Most Sincere Condolences* traced out in poorly scripted black icing across the center of the buttercream sheet. They probably wouldn't even notice if she left, Everly thought, and even if they did, she could see no reason why she should care. No reason at all.

Everly stood up from the wall to leave, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible as she walked between the well-wishers, making her way toward the doors of the reception hall.

As she stepped out into the deepening evening air just beyond the doors, she caught sight of a blur of brown fabric far ahead of her. Straining her eyes against the dusk that was swiftly descending, Everly could just make

out the shape of the strange man from before—the one she remembered and knew yet was certain she had never met—as he strode off into the night, the shadow of his curved bowler hat protruding distinctly above his head as he left without so much as an insincere commiseration offered her way.

# 3



IT WAS HIS OWN FAULT, and he knew it. Luca shouldn't have told Jamie that he'd take on the second shift, but he hadn't been able to resist. It had felt like the right decision at the time, and like all the worst decisions, it was only through the harsh lens of retrospect that he could see how little he had thought this through. After nearly a full twenty-four hours in front of the screens set up around the cramped surveillance room, Luca's eyes had more than glazed over, and he was becoming afraid they'd get stuck that way if he stayed in there much longer: frozen in a state of half-awareness.

Struggling—failing—to suppress a yawn, Luca leaned back in his chair and ran his eyes over the screens again, searching for anything he might have missed the past thousand times he had scanned the camera feeds. It was proving to be an unusually dull shift—doubly so, for the added hours of monotony. Despite the long hours and unending boredom, it was almost worth it for the chance to be alone, if only for a little while.

To be the eyes instead of the watched.

(As far as he was aware, at least.)

And to use his eyes for his own purposes.

If only he could stay awake to use them. Luca could feel himself fading, and every few seconds he had to jerk his head up to prevent himself from

collapsing from exhaustion. If only something interesting would happen, he thought. Something to wake him up.

Unbidden, his mind began to drift, in a half-conscious state, to the dreams that haunted him during the night—not the only reason, but certainly one of the reasons that had driven him to make the ill-guided decision to stay awake through the night in front of those awful screens.

Though, perhaps *haunt* wasn't the right word. Haunting implied ghosts from a past lived through and regretted. If anything, Luca's dreams hinted at something that hadn't yet come to pass, if he was feeling high-minded enough to label himself as being prophetic.

And really, would he have been that far off?

He was never able to place a finger on what it was about his nighttime visions that unsettled him so, but more often than not, Luca would jerk awake during the night, drenched in sweat and with fleeting images filling his head, then vanishing moments later. He didn't ever retain much from them—mostly just a feeling of dread—but occasionally he would find something tangible to hang on to, something that he thought he could remember, if only for that brief instant.

Sometimes he saw her. She was always different: sometimes a child, with strawberry-blond pigtails and a lopsided grin; sometimes older, with a sharp chin and mouth perpetually turned down on the ends; most of the time she was a young woman in her twenties, around his age—fierce, tall, defiant.

Always she burned.

Last night she had returned, the auburn hair a fiery halo encircling her head, her eyes burnished with their own kind of flame as they met his in sleep—and in memory. But she always left far more quickly than he would have liked, and in her absence Luca was always more shaken than he could reasonably account for. He didn't think she was the cause of the fear that always gnawed at him after such dreams—though he could not have said why—but nonetheless, where she walked, so did the shivers that racked his body the next day, casting all his thoughts into a shadow of doubt and worry.

They were getting worse. When he was a kid, Luca would find himself awoken by a fiery nightmare once, maybe twice a year. They were always vague, already distant by the time he had shaken himself fully awake.

That changed years ago, for no clear reason that Luca could think of, but now they were arriving more and more frequently.

Most days now, he was afraid of closing his eyes for too long, afraid that that alone would be enough to hurtle him back into the dreams.

So, to avoid further encounters with the girl and her flaming hair and everything else that would inevitably follow, Luca had volunteered to stay on watch well into the night—long past when his normal shift would have ended. It gave him time to think, he had tried to tell himself. But really, by that point he would have attempted nearly anything to evade the dreams.

(A secret unbeknownst to Luca: he wasn't the only one in that building to dream.)

Luca didn't have a way to track the passing of time in the surveillance room (clocks in the building had an uncanny knack of being disobedient), but he knew that the night must have faded away when he heard the sharp beeping of the alarm that signaled the start of the morning. A few minutes later, the door behind him creaked open, and with the sound, Luca tensed, sitting up straight. Pretending he wasn't doing anything wrong. Even though, for the moment at least, he wasn't.

Taking in shallow breaths, Luca steeled himself, then turned his head, slumping immediately back in his seat when he saw that it wasn't one of the building's runners, but rather Caleb's slim form stepping into the room.

Cast in the pale lights emanating from the wall of screens, Caleb Arya looked cold, in the way that he always seemed to lately. Racked with shivers from an invisible force Luca never felt himself, his friend held his arms tightly wrapped around himself even now. Adding to the ensemble that was Caleb were the permanent dark circles painted beneath his eyes, the clammy sheen to the skin of his forehead, the hitch in his breath every few seconds that was only audible if you were listening.

And Luca was listening.

“Long night?” Caleb asked, trying to arrange his features into a smile. He was always trying, for Luca.

As Caleb settled into the seat next to his, Luca tried to return the favor. “Not too bad,” he managed, though he knew it couldn’t have sounded all that convincing. “Nothing interesting, if that’s what you mean.”

Caleb offered a mock sigh, tilting his head toward the ceiling. “Shame. I know how much you value your midnight breakouts and breakdowns.”

Luca knew he was joking, but it still struck a chord in him. That was the other reason he took the night shift, though he hadn’t been as productive in that regard lately.

His illicit use of the surveillance room’s cameras was his most treasured secret. And his most dangerous one.

“Roll call?” Luca asked, without looking at Caleb.

“Five minutes.”

“Right. Well, I’ll be there soon. Need to wait for one of the blues to come in here and relieve me.”

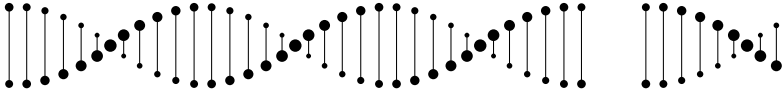
Caleb sighed. “Don’t be too late this time. You know how the runners get when you aren’t in the lineup. You don’t want to anger them, Luca.”

“I know,” Luca said. “I’ll be there. I promise.”

Luca heard more than he saw Caleb get up and leave. Alone again, if only for a few minutes, Luca took one last opportunity to glance over the screens in front of him. His eye caught on activity in one of the uppermost screens, and he paused, watching.

“Sorry, Caleb,” Luca mumbled to himself. For a moment, his mind sliced to what the repercussions for not showing up to roll call could be—Caleb was right, he really couldn’t afford to anger the runners—but he steadied his resolve, bracing his fingers on the keyboard. “I’m going to be a few minutes late after all.”

# 4



A PERSON FINDS THEMSELF AT the building through one of three means.

One: They walk in. This used to be the most common ground by which new residents arrived at the building. They would be strolling along, enjoying a beautiful day, when suddenly their feet would take them on a new path, through grass a little browner and more dried up than the surrounding lawns, down brick lanes that felt out of place in the city or suburb or rural area that they had previously been strolling through. It doesn't matter which of the latter is true; the brick lanes always feel out of place. Then, rising before them like a beacon out of the mist: a towering structure with gray paneling and darkened windows. And an allure, a call, a feeling of rightness that leads them up the endless steps, through the opaque glass doors, and into the lobby within.

No one finds the building who isn't supposed to.

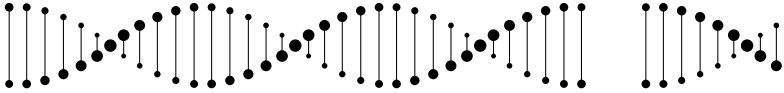
Two: They are brought in. This is a feat far more easily accomplished when the person being brought in is a child: smaller, lighter, more easily convinced to get into the van with the strange man because, hey do you want to have an adventure young man! When this is the method of transport, they usually do not have the opportunity to see what the outside of the building looks like as they are brought in (usually because they are in



some phase of unconsciousness), so all they know is what they see inside: gray walls, small rooms, endless hallways.

Three: They are born in the building. In the history of the building—which is both unfathomably long and hardly anything at all—this has only happened once.

# 5



SHE WAS BEING FOLLOWED.

Everly could think of no other reason why the man from her father's funeral would appear here, in her neighborhood park. He was even in the same outfit he had worn at the funeral—the same outdated bowler hat and faded tweed coat. The only difference from their first noninteraction was that now she *knew* he was looking at her. Not twenty feet away from where she stood, the man had halted in the middle of the path, his eyes unwavering as he watched her. Everly knew she should have been more alarmed at his repeated appearance in her life—knew that she should have run, should have called someone, should have hidden. But against her better judgment, Everly instead found herself pulled toward the stranger, and she didn't know why.

No. That wasn't quite right. She did know why, or at least she thought she did. Now that she was seeing the man again, and much closer than before, when they had been separated by a church's worth of mourners, she could see his eyes. They met her own, and she felt like she knew them—like she knew *him*, despite the undeniable fact that before the funeral she was certain she had never seen him before. She also had that terrible sense of déjà vu again—the same as she had felt at the funeral. It nagged at the back

of her mind, like a string begging to be pulled, like static wanting to settle into place, like an itch needing to be clawed out.

It was more than feeling like she knew him—it was feeling like she had spent her whole life with him, like she knew his darkest secret. Like he knew hers.

But not even Everly knew her darkest secret.

For a minute the man only stared at Everly, and then he smiled. It was a slow smile, a kind smile—almost even, one could say, timid. He removed the bowler hat, held it between both of his hands, and took a tentative step forward. All the while, Everly didn't blink. She stood frozen and waited while the strange man approached her, curiosity now taking over in the roots of her mind, overruling any lingering sense of unease.

The man paused about two feet away from Everly and stood looking at her for another moment before he began to speak. "You look just like her," he said, and his voice was far softer than she had been expecting, full of a warmth that nearly caught her off guard. Everly was so mesmerized by these observations that she nearly missed what he said.

She scrunched up her brow. "Like who?"

"Like your mother," he said.

Now Everly knew the man before her was mad. Or a liar. Or both. No one knew her mother, and if they did, they would know that Everly looked nothing like her. "No," she said back to the man. "I don't. My mother was fair and blond. She was petite, and beautiful. I'm none of that." She knew all of this because of the smattering of memories that she still retained from her early childhood, those which she hadn't lost or closed away over the years since her mother's passing. She didn't really remember her mother anymore—not in any tangible sense. But she remembered enough to know that the man was wrong.

"No," the man agreed. "You're not. But you have her eyes. And her spark."

"Spark?" Everly bristled, wondering if this was a snide remark against the reddish auburn of her hair.

“Your life,” the man said. “The energy you radiate. I can see it now. It’s vibrant, just like you. Just like her. You’re marvelous, my dear.”

This made Everly pause, at a momentary loss for words. “How did you know my mother?” she finally asked, once she found her voice.

The man seemed to hesitate for the first time, but only briefly. He looked Everly directly in the eyes, and it gave her a chill—that same uncanny sense of déjà vu. “Your mother,” he said slowly, “was my daughter. Everly, my name is Richard Dubose. I’m your grandfather.”

Everly took a step back. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “You can’t be. My mother didn’t have any family.”

“She did,” the man said, almost sadly. “She does. Though, I’m afraid, you and I are nearly all there is left.”

Everly kept shaking her head, backing away from the man and his words, his impossible statements. She knew her mother hadn’t had any family because her father had told her so, and if someone had been out there, they would have found her long ago. She would have known.

The man’s presence in front of her was irrefutable, however, and now Everly began to realize why his eyes seemed so familiar, so much like a ghost from the past. They were her eyes—the exact same deep blue, with a hint of green around the irises.

Her mother’s eyes, if what the man claimed was true.

Everly’s breath caught, and she looked closer at the man, searching for further clues, further proof that this unlikely miracle might be true. That someone else may abide within the nonexistent circle that she could call her family.

The man didn’t say anything else while Everly examined him. “How?” Everly finally asked.

Again, the man hesitated for the span of a heartbeat before speaking. “When your mother . . . we weren’t on good speaking terms, when I last saw her. She blamed me for many things, most of which she probably had a right to be angry over. Your father, too. I wasn’t a very good parent, and so I figured it would likely be for the best if I stayed away from you and your

father in your grief. Better if you didn't have me interfering in your life as I did for your mother."

Everly, still not convinced, crossed her arms over her chest. "So why now, then? If you thought it would be better if you stayed away, why did you come here?"

The man searched Everly's eyes. "Something has happened," he said quietly. "Or something is going to. We're going to need each other, very soon."

She couldn't understand any of this—couldn't understand why this man whom she had only just met could need her help, could need anything from her at all. Keeping her arms crossed, Everly cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. "What could you possibly need me for?"

He opened his mouth, closed it. Pressed his lips together in a firm line, furrowed his brow. "I think," he said slowly, "it may be easier to show you. I want you to understand, I want you to be able to see the whole picture, and I don't think I can do that right here."

"You want me to go somewhere with you?" A twinge of alarm flared through Everly. With it came the familiar flash of a headache—quick and fierce, like a sharpened fork being jabbed between her eyes. Everly grimaced; she'd been getting more and more of them recently.

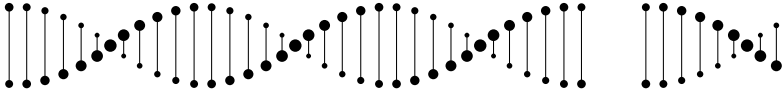
"I want you to meet me somewhere," he said, still twisting his bowler hat between his hands.

Everly wiped her face blank, trying to banish any evidence of phantom pains as she considered the man, considered his proposition. She thought about what her dad would have said, if he could have seen her with the man and all the impossibilities he had presented. Her dad would have told her not to go. Would have said to stay home, to stay safe.

But her dad wasn't here. She probably had dozens—hundreds—of reasons why she should say no. But in that moment, she really couldn't find it in herself to care about any of them.

Slowly, as her headache abated, Everly began to nod. "All right," she heard herself say. "Where do I meet you?"

# 6



IN THE BUILDING, BURIED TWO levels beneath the ground, was a dark room hidden on a dark floor. The room wasn't very large—few rooms in the building were—but it was full.

On one wall: screens. Nearly identical to the wall a floor above, in the surveillance room that at that very moment Luca Reyes sat in. The difference was that here, in this black room, this secret room, there were a few more screens than Luca was privy to.

On one such screen was an image of Luca himself—his tall, lean body reclining in a chair, his dark hair splayed haphazardly over his eyes, his mouth set in a firm, determined line. It could be almost hypnotic at times, that line. That mouth. The face it was set into.

On another wall: a door, the only way in or out of the room, and in front of the door a canvas divider that stood nearly from floor to ceiling, shielding the rest of the room from the vantage of one standing in the doorway.

And in the middle of the room: a desk, large and wooden and ornate. Too large for a room that size, one might argue, but then one wouldn't understand the value of a quality desk when one spends one's whole life behind said desk. Atop the large wooden ornate desk were few items, all things considered. A small stack of papers, files. A lethally sharp letter opener. A lamp that was

heavier than it looked. Behind the desk sat a person dressed in all black—black blazer over black collared shirt, with black trousers hemmed around the ankles and black socked-feet tucked into shiny black loafers.

The person in black had eyes trained on the wall of screens. Well, not the whole wall. That would be ridiculous. One particular screen.

The screen showed a small boy with dark hair and blue eyes—though you couldn't make out the specific shade of his eyes through the camera feed.

He wasn't doing anything, really. Sitting on a narrow gray bed in a narrow gray room. His room, the person in black knew.

He had been sitting there for a little over an hour now. This might not have been perceived as unusual, if the person in black hadn't known where the boy should have been instead.

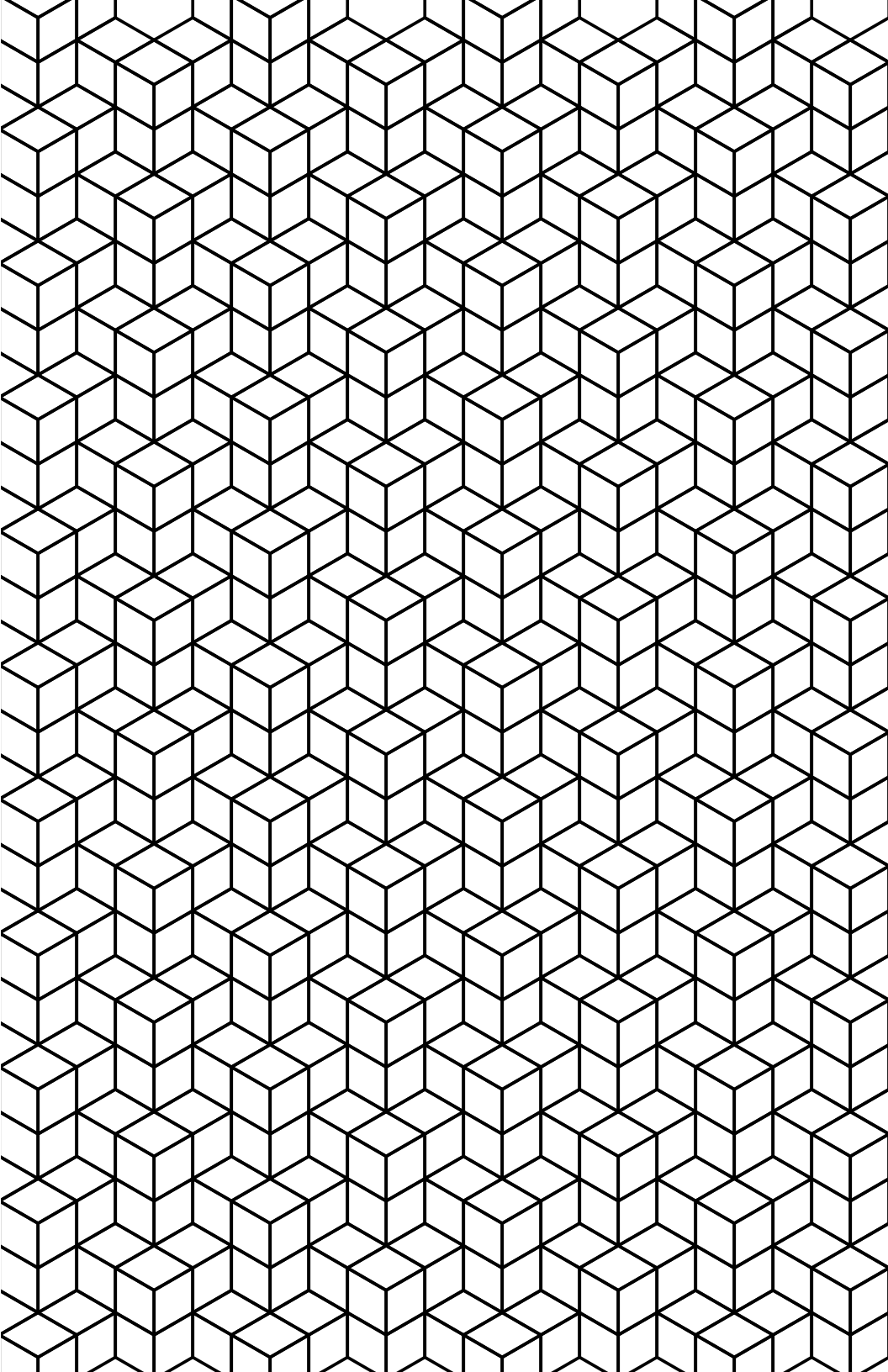
And where he had been an hour before.

Luckily for that boy, he had a guardian angel looking out for him.

And unluckily for the guardian angel, the person in black was also watching.

The person in black observed the small boy for a while longer, wondering idly what might happen next.

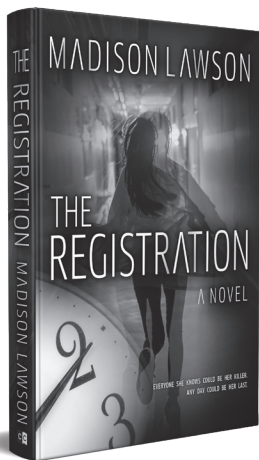
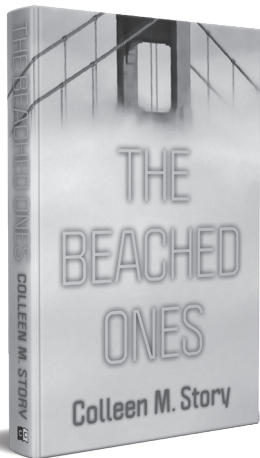
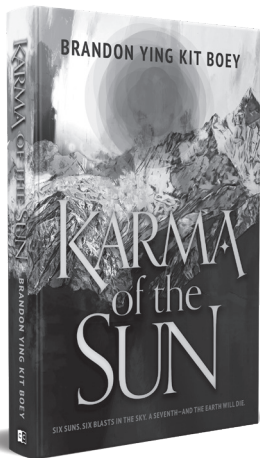
For the first time in a long time, the person in black did not know.





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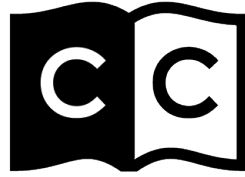
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# THIS STORY ONLY EVER HAS ONE ENDING.

**W**hen Everly Tertium encounters a strange man in the park claiming to be her grandfather, she is invited to visit a mysterious building. There, she finds herself in a constant state of déjà vu, impossibly certain that she's already lived through these moments, already been introduced to these people, and already visited all of these rooms and floors. So why does she have no idea what's happening to her?

The longer she stays in the building, the more Everly becomes convinced there is more going on than meets the eye. Something is off, time seems to pass differently, and the people living there seem trapped. Slowly, Everly begins to wonder if she is trapped too. But would she even want to leave, if she could?

**THERE WAS ALWAYS THE PATTERN. AND IT NEEDED TO BE RESTORED.**



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