

3 Floating Redundant

“Jamie, Jamie, look!” Twelve-year old Zoey Fitzpatrick stopped her bike and pointed at the side of the gravel path, down the hill.

Her ten-year old brother stopped his bike. He saw a deserted, partially collapsed Quonset hut which the nearby jungle had begun to reclaim. Another path leading to the hut was nearly obliterated with high weeds.

“They say that was once the old church, but now it’s haunted,” Zoey declared.

“Who’s they?”

“The kids at school.”

“Huh.”

“C’mon, let’s check it out.”

“No.”

“Why?”

He looked again at the old church and then looked away. “Don’t you see it?”

“Jamie...”

“It’s all covered in black. It’s not a good place. Let’s go somewhere else.”

“Jamie...”

“It’s oozing, Zoey.”

“Jamie...”

“I know, I know. I’m not supposed to talk like that.” He crossed his arms, his thin face sullen.

“We just moved here, Jamie. We’re new, nobody knows us. We need to fit in.”

“*You* do. I don’t.”

“Jamie --”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Look, I’m not you, okay? I don’t need friends. But promise me you won’t go there, okay?” He nodded his head angrily down the hill.

“Seriously?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

Zoey’s blue eyes met her brother’s dark eyes. “All right. It’s probably time for dinner, anyways.”

#

“Meow.”

Not-quite forty-year old Zoey Fitzpatrick looked up from her morning cup of coffee, eye to eye with the golden eyes of her calico cat.

“Sorry, Ozzy-girl. Does kitty want breakfast?” Zoey went to the pantry and scooped out a portion of kibble, the sound of which had her cat springing from the kitchen counter to her food and water below.

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: / Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” Zoey recited, her voice low and booming.¹ She knelt down and scratched Ozzy between the ears, appreciating her cat’s momentary distraction from old memories of her past.

“Why am I remembering this?” she asked her cat. “I don’t want to remember this.” For that first memory was like a train car, linked to another memory, to another, barreling down out of control as she, like Pearl Pureheart, was tied to the tracks, watching the train getting closer and closer with no Mighty Mouse to save her.

It was Saturday, and Zoey had no business to feel melancholy on a Saturday. She surveyed her surroundings, taking in the familiar walls and furniture of her childhood – and now grownup – townhome apartment. Ozzy fed, coffee and cereal bars on hand, still in her pj’s, she had a morning of syllabi preparation for the impending fall, a mid-morning of a movie or two with a big plate of homemade queso and nachos, a post-lunch cat-nap, and a bit of retail therapy for music and books (one could never have enough music and books), all before dinner, which may or may not be shepherd’s pie.

By the time Zoey had left her favorite bookstore, having found an actual 1912 grammar school Latin primer, an illustrated copy of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and a couple of Beatles LPs, shepherd’s pie and an ale – even in the early August heat – still sounded powerfully good.

After dropping off her purchases, gulping down another quick cup of coffee, and feeding a particularly peevisish Ozzy, Zoey managed to grab the commuter train just before the last whistle, grateful that, what with working downtown, she needn’t mess with finicky ticket machines as long as she didn’t lose her transit pass.

The train she boarded was a double-decker, so she climbed up the narrow stairway and quickly claimed a window seat with a table, as an automated female voice perkily announced, “The next station is – Medical/Market Center.” As the train lurched forward and then picked up speed, she pulled out the slim volume of Blake, randomly opened it, and read what was there.

¹ Shelley, Percy Bysshe. “Ozymandias.” Lines 10-11.

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.²

Zoey looked up, as the memory came.

#

Zoey was running and running, trying desperately not to cry.

Promise not to tell, she heard his voice in her head. *It's our special secret.*

She ran and ran and ran from that lonely little church, up the gravel path, where she nearly slipped and fell. Ran and ran to the nearest slip of beach and water, and she stripped off her little sundress and sandals and went into the sea, to wash it off, to wash it all away.

It's a game that grownups play, the voice echoed in her head.

“No!” she cried out, finally out loud, even though she had kept that NO inside the whole time, wanting to fit in, wanting to belong. “No no no no no!” she cried out, kicking with each no.

The little bit of blood, diluted in that vast ocean, swirled and then swept clear. Zoey cried until her teeth began to chatter, as the sun went down and the wind picked up. Emerging from the ocean, the salt water still streaming off her body as her feet became coated with sand, she pulled on her sundress and sandals. Painfully, she walked back to the gravel path and the hill, and, nearly blind in the deepening dark, she found her bike and walked home.

Her mother, seeing her through the kitchen door, began to yell, “Zoey call --”

But the command was sharply interrupted with Jamie’s screams.

Jamie, rooted to the kitchen floor, pointed at his sister, shrieking, “Mama, she’s oozing, Zoey’s oozing black, she’s covered in it!”

Alarmed, her mother was trying to calm down her brother. “Jamie, Jamie, it’s okay --”

As Zoey stumbled through the door, Jamie jumped as if shocked, fell down hard on the floor, and scrambled backwards away from his sister. “Can’t you see, she’s covered in evil evil evil --”

² Blake, William. “The Sick Rose.”

“Zoey! Call an ambulance! Zoey!” her mother yelled as she grabbed after Jamie, trying to control his flailing arms and legs.

Zoey felt like Lot’s wife, turned into a pillar of salt.

“Zoey!”

#

“This station is – Medical/Market Center.”

Zoey’s eyes came back into focus, as more people boarded the train, heading for a fun Saturday evening in the city of Dallas.

“The next station is – Victory Station.”

Zoey’s eyes stared dully at the vast medical district slipping past her window as the next memory arrived, which was always attached to the previous one.

#

Zoey’s parents were fighting.

“They don’t have the facilities here, Zack. Don’t you want Jamie to get better?”

“Amy, of course I do! You’re just not giving the treatments a chance --”

“Oh please! It’s been two months, and he’s no better off than he was when he broke down in the kitchen. He’s ten years old and a paranoid schizophrenic, Zack. You think this tiny island will cure him? Do you?”

CPO Zachary Fitzpatrick threw his hands up in frustration. “You *know* we can’t move. We’re stationed here for two more years.”

“You mean *you* are.”

“What are you saying?”

Zoey, who had been trying to keep quiet for all of these months, finally could not keep the sound of pain from her voice as she staggered into the kitchen. “Mom – Dad – I’m sorry.” Then she collapsed onto the kitchen floor.

When she woke up, she was in a hospital bed, in a private room, IV tubes running from her arm. A nurse arrived to check on her, her face looking at her with infinite pity.

“Where am I?”

“The base hospital, dear.”

“Where are my parents?”

“They’ll be here soon. They’ve visited you every day since you were admitted.”

“How long have I been here?”

“It’ll be a week as of today.”

Zoey stared at the two needles buried securely into her vein. “Why am I here?”

The nurse struggled a little, her face shifting with tiny, tight muscle movements. “Father Tony Macinas.”

Zoey recoiled at the name and, in spite of herself, she began to cry.

The nurse pulled a side chair and sat down. “You’re – what – twelve years old? But I’m sorry to say you’re no longer a child. Your parents may not tell you this and they may not want others to tell you what I’m about to say, but you need to know.” She looked at the closed door and at her watch. “You had an acute case of PID – pelvic inflammatory disease. That means all of your girl parts – all of them – became infected. You must’ve kept the symptoms either hidden or didn’t feel them until it was too late because the PID did horrific damage. You could’ve died, your fever was that high.”

Zoey’s body shook as she tried to understand what the woman was saying.

“Your case of PID was caused by one or two STDs – sexually transmitted diseases – chlamydia or gonorrhea. You tested positive for both. When you were delirious with fever, you spoke about this... man.”

“W-what did I say?”

“Enough to know that he’s the reason you’re in this hospital bed and *you are not to blame.*”

Zoey’s cries turned into deep, gasping, ragged sobs.

The nurse glanced at her watch and the closed door. “What I’m about to say will be very hard for you, but you need to know. First, the damage to your body has likely made you infertile – that means you likely won’t be able to have any kids. Second, this island is small, so everyone eventually hears everything. This man Macinas – he was a young priest at one of the local churches, right? Two days ago his body was found, floating near Orote Point. Police have ruled it an accidental drowning.”

At the sound of the doorknob clicking open, the nurse stood up, pushing aside the chair, and checked the tape of Zoey’s IV needles. She left as Zoey’s parents entered the little, sterile room.

Forcing herself to stop the tears, Zoey stared at her hands as her mother cried and embraced her, and her father stood and said -- nothing.

#

“This station is – Victory Station.”

Zoey looked at the large group of boisterous children making their way down the stairway, their parents following behind them. She glanced out her window and saw an electronic marquee advertising that the circus had come to town and that the first show was in an hour from now. She

smiled at that, and then she smiled wistfully at a woman just a little younger than herself, a laughing toddler girl riding on her mother’s shoulders. Behind them was the last parent, a man – also just a little younger than Zoey – bedecked with a backpack and diaper bag, smiling as he carried a collapsed umbrella stroller and followed the mother and child.

She breathed deeply as the unexpected ache of loss hit her heart and lungs.

“The next station is – Dallas Union Station.”

#

Zoey, who had fallen asleep at the kitchen table, woke up to the sound of the apartment door opening, the familiar jingle and rattle of keys and low squeak of hinges needing oiling.

“Hi, Mom,” Zoey called out, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

Her mother kicked off her worn sneakers, peeled off her socks, and, barefoot, padded into the kitchen, blinking at the bright ceiling lights. “You awake? It’s nearly midnight.” She set down her purse and the two bags of groceries that she had picked up after work.

Zoey sprung up to put away the groceries. “Did you have dinner yet?”

“Yeah, I got a burger before I went to the store.”

“Another burger? That’s not very healthy, Mom.”

Her mother gave a dismissive snort. “I deal with ‘healthy’ for twelve hours, young lady. A burger dinner won’t kill me. But I could go for a cup of coffee.” She sat down heavily before the table.

“Decaf coffee?”

“Okay – *decaf* coffee.” She yawned and stretched, the zoo animals on her nurse’s scrubs momentarily unwrinkling with her stretch.

The groceries put away, Zoey microwaved a mug of water, stirred in some decaf instant, and added a couple of splashes of low-fat milk.

“Thanks,” her mother murmured, her glasses steaming over the hot coffee. “Now, tell me why you’re not asleep in bed.”

“It’s this.” Zoey patted the clasp envelope in front of her. She opened it and pulled out a stiff, heavy-stock sheet of paper. Flipping it over, she pushed it towards her mother.

Her mother paused in mid-sip and set down her mug. “It’s your high school diploma.”

“Yes.”

“You graduated this year?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re only sixteen.”

“Mom, I finished all the requirements early. I took on extra classes for the usual year, and I took summer classes. There’s nothing for me to take. I’m done.”

Her mother picked up the diploma, her eyes sweeping over the fancy lettering, the official signatures, and her full name: Zoey Jane Fitzpatrick. After a heavy pause, she declared, “Zoey, I’m so proud of you.”

Zoey let out a relieved sigh. “You’re not mad that I didn’t tell you that I was graduating early? You’re not mad that I skipped the ceremony?”

“No, no, sweetie,” her mother assured. “But why so fast? No chance for clubs, for friends, no senior year --”

Now it was Zoey’s turn to give a dismissive snort. “I may be sixteen, Mom, but I’m not a kid. *They’re* the kids. Partying, snarky comments, cheating on assignments, and all that whining. I got tired of feeling sorry for all of my teachers – except for those who saw their job as part babysitter, part prison guard, part party buddy. Yechhh. I have better things to do.”

“Like what?”

“Like getting a job and helping you out.”

“Zoey, you are too young --”

“Mom. I’m not too young to know that you’re working yourself to death. I’m not too young to know that Jamie’s treatment program is expensive and that Dad’s alimony and child support barely pays for it.” Zoey’s jaws clenched, letting the familiar anger spark, then settle down. “I’m not too young to know that Dad’s payments arrive later and later, but the bills still need to get paid. Mom, you’ve been worrying about me and Jamie all of this time; won’t you let me take some of that worry away?”

She hadn’t meant to make her mother cry, but there she was – quiet tears sliding slowly down her tired face. “I’m sorry!” She stood up and went to the other side of the table, hugging her mother.

Her mother sniffled and then laughed, “Ah, you’ve made me snotty,” which, as she intended, made Zoey laugh, too. She held up the diploma. “Suitable for framing.”

“Mom?”

“Mmmm-hmmm?”

“Do you think Jamie will ever get better to go to school? To graduate?”

Her mother set down Zoey’s diploma. “I don’t know, sweetie. But I’d like to see that.”

#

“This is – Dallas Union Station,” declared the melodious female voice.

“Oh Mom,” Zoey said softly, seeing Union Station getting closer from her window. “I’m glad you didn’t live to see what happened to Jamie.”

She stood up, stuffing her Blake book into her purse, and made her way down the stairs, off the train, and onto the waiting platforms, crowded with Saturday sightseers, local and tourist. She crossed the tracks to get to the other side of the platform, to catch the light rail line to her waiting shepherd’s pie and ale – lots of ale.

Teeming with Saturday visitors, the rail car she entered was so crowded that she only had enough room to step inside, grab a pole, and feel the doors swoosh shut behind her. Even though the loud passenger chatter drowned out the garbled announcer’s voice, Zoey didn’t need an announcement since she got off at the West End station every time she went to work, at the nearby downtown college campus. Like yesterday, when a homeless person nearly knocked her down –

The lurching of the rail car was not why Zoey nearly fell over.

I dreamed him, she suddenly realized. *I dreamed him last night.*

Instead of continuing down the red line to Mockingbird Station, she got off at West End. *This is crazy*, she thought, but she headed towards the college anyways, a swirl of the past flashing through her mind.

#

Zoey’s supervisor, dressed in the same button-up black polo shirt, khaki pants, black sneakers, and blue work apron, tapped her on the shoulder and said, “Zoey, you have a phone call in the back.”

She looked up, harried, seeing the long line of customers returning merchandise. After Christmas was always horrible, as disgruntled people flocked back to the store with gifts either defective or unwanted. “Joe, I’m kinda busy here.”

Joe exhaled deeply, debating whether to speak in front of that long line of disgruntled customers, and then replied, “Zoey, it’s Parkland. Something’s happened to your mom.”

Zoey didn’t hear the sound of her scanning gun drop as she abandoned the cash register, leaving Joe to deal with duties that didn’t matter anymore.

“Hello?” she asked, trying not to yell at the phone.

“Is this Zoey Fitzpatrick?” a tired but professional-sounding voice responded.

“Yes.”

“Okay, this is Lisa Murphy, the charge nurse on your mom’s floor. Your mom and I work together.”

“Yes?”

“Zoey, there’s been an incident.”

“What?”

“There’s – oh, honey. Come to Parkland now. Your mom’s had a stroke, and it’s bad. ICU, room 42. Hurry.”

“Okay.” Zoey heard the buzzy sound of a dial tone as Nurse Murphy hung up. “Okay,” she whispered. She looked around, suddenly unsure of where she was, but then hit her head with the palm of her hand. “Gotta get a ride.”

She ran to her little storage locker, grabbed her bag, and rushed back to the returns counter. “Joe, I gotta go.”

“I know – you’re good here, just go.”

“But – I don’t have a car. My mom drops me off here on the way to work, then picks me up when she gets off. I don’t have a car, Joe!”

Joe, a middle-aged man with kids of his own, looked at the desperate, watering blue eyes of the eighteen year old girl in front of him. He fished out a small ring of keys from a khaki front pocket. “Take my truck.”

“Oh – Joe --”

“It’s the little white Ford Ranger, parked in front of Yard and Gardens. Blue rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror, you can’t miss it.”

She took the keys, still warm from his pocket, and hugged him tightly.

“*Vaya con Dios, mija,*” he whispered.

Zoey tore away, running as fast as she could to Joe’s truck. Not caring whether she would be caught speeding or not, she raced to Parkland, normally a familiar place of her mom’s job, but now suddenly unfamiliar and frightening.

In ICU, room 42, she saw her mother’s little body, hooked up to machines that were breathing for her. She could tell, even at age eighteen, that her mother was already brain dead from a massive stroke. Next to the sterile hospital bed, Zoey held her mother’s listless hand. *Mom... Mom...* She looked up at the machines, at the lifeless body with wires and tubing connected to those machines. She bowed down, her forehead touching that well-worn, caring hand for the last time. *Goodbye, Mom.*

Jamie’s caregivers at his hospital didn’t want to let him go to the funeral service, but she stood her ground. “It’s our mother’s funeral, goddammit,” she said over and over again to their bureaucratic protests, until they eventually gave in, discharging him for that day only, hopped up on antipsychotics. Holding his hand as if he were a little boy instead of the tall, sixteen-year old teen he was, she silently

guided him along the small pathway to the church gravesite, where a priest gave his blessing to the cremated remains of Amanda Hernandez Fitzpatrick before the small, silent audience consisting of Zoey, Jamie, her mother’s co-workers, and Joe.

Once the last bit of dirt covered the urn containing their mother’s ashes, Zoey, who did not want a reception for the sake of her brother, endured well-meaning tears and hugs and watched the others walk away.

Jamie, still staring at their mother’s new grave, asked in a quiet voice, “What happens now?”

“Now? I take care of you.” Also staring at their mother’s grave, she felt the weight of her new responsibility – being the legal guardian of her little brother, as her mother had wished in her will.

After a long silence, Jamie softly declared, “Dad should be here.”

That old anger sparked up. “Jamie --”

“He should, Zoey.”

Trying not to clench her hands, Zoey replied, “Jamie, Dad’s been gone for six years. Why the hell would he even care?” Her eyes burned. “He doesn’t deserve to be here.”

Jamie, whose hand was still in Zoey’s, gave a small squeeze. “Zoey – don’t.”

She shook her head, never understanding why Jamie still believed that their father would ever come back -- in spite of their parents’ divorce, in spite of his broken promises to keep in touch, in spite of his obvious abandonment. “I’m sorry, Jamie.” Zoey, dry-eyed throughout the funeral, suddenly found herself crying, the tears silently spilling down and dropping onto the fresh-churned earth. With the palm of her free hand, she furiously wiped her face dry. “Let’s go home.”

After much fighting with the hospital bureaucracy, Zoey was able to secure Jamie’s discharge to her care as an outpatient in treatment since his condition was stable and he gave no outbursts that entire day of the funeral.

“But a caseworker will have to check on him since he is still a minor, Miss Fitzpatrick.”

“Okay.”

“He’s completed his GED, so he’s done with formal schooling. Do you have any plans for Jamie continuing his education?”

“Why are you asking me? He’s right here. He’s not stupid, by the way.”

Jamie coughed and then asked quietly, “Can we go now?”

His counselor squinted at Zoey and Jamie, leaned back in his chair, and answered, “Yes.”

In the parking lot, Zoey murmured, “Jesus, Jamie.”

“It’s all right, Zoey,” her brother said. “Let’s just go home.”

For Jamie, it was a return to his childhood room, in the same two-story townhome apartment that they all lived when they moved to Texas when he was ten. At first, Jamie was just happy to be home. While staying at home, he would see Zoey go to work at the big box store that had been her job since graduating from high school. Luckily, she didn't have to work as many hours as she had done before, as their practical mother had made sure her death benefits and a small insurance policy took care of their financial needs for the time being.

Yet, Zoey had forgotten that Jamie could pick up on her worry – of how intrusive the caseworker would be in their lives, how long she could pay for his continuing treatment, how long she could pay for all of those expensive pills, which Jamie would need to take for the rest of his life. While she would always say, “It’s no problem, Jamie,” she had always been a terrible liar. Even if his ability to see her color was blunted by the powerful antipsychotics that kept him moored to the world around him, even as those drugs sedated him and made him feel like a lazy slug, she could see Jamie being bothered by his inability to take of himself or even to help her out.

“It’s not fair,” seventeen-year old Jamie once said in one of his more lucid, active moments. “It’s not fair, you being stuck with a crazy, jobless brother.”

“Hush, Jamie,” she had replied then. “You’re my little brother. It’s my job to take care of you.”

But even Zoey could see that her reassurance only made him feel worse.

Then one day, a year after their mother’s death, Zoey came home from work, only to find her brother outside, screaming at an unknown man as a young woman, whom Zoey recognized as one of her apartment complex neighbors, cowered behind him. The man, obviously aware that Jamie was some kind of crazy person, only held up his hands, saying, “I don’t know you, man – I want no trouble.”

“Jamie!” Zoey yelled from her car, distracting Jamie enough for the man and woman to flee into the woman’s apartment.

Once she got her brother, who obviously was off his meds, back inside their apartment, she hissed, “Jamie – you could’ve gotten beat up or – Jesus – what if they’re calling the cops on you right now?”

“They won’t,” Jamie said, angrily, pacing the kitchen floor.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because he’s a black-oozing criminal, that’s how,” Jamie said, wringing his hands and clutching the hair on his head. “God, if that woman doesn’t leave him, she’ll either be beaten up or dead, I can see it!”

Zoey sat down, feeling the weight of her responsibilities on her head. “Jamie, why didn’t you take your meds?” she asked calmly.

“Because I got fucking tired of being a lazy fucking zombie, that’s why!”

“Jamie --”

“This isn’t working, Zoey.”

“Jamie, please --”

“There’s no place for me in this world, Zoey. I see that now.”

“What are you saying?”

Jamie stared into the ceiling, looking for an answer. “Never mind.” He angrily opened the kitchen cabinet, pulled out his five pill bottles, and shook out a capsule or tablet from each. With five little pills in his hand, he stuffed them in his mouth and choked them down dry.

“Jamie --”

He only shook his head. “I’m sorry for scaring you, Zoey. That was stupid. I promise – I won’t do that again.”

Zoey reached up, and her brother walked over and kneeled down, and they hugged in silence for what seemed like a very long time.

The very next day, after work, Zoey had come home to an empty apartment, with only a note in Jamie’s manic scrawl, left on the kitchen table: *I’m sorry. Goodbye.*

First her father, then her mother, and now her brother. Her fingernails dug hard into her palms, drawing little half-moon arcs of blood, as she tried not to scream or cry so as not to bother the neighbors.

A year after that note, her neighbor’s face and the face of her boyfriend showed up on the ten o’clock evening news, a local story of love gone bad, ending in the woman’s murder and the man’s suicide.

Zoey could only turn away from the TV in the break room, forcing herself not to scream or cry, because she was still at work.

“Are you okay?” asked Rania, her new supervisor, when Zoey walked out of the break room to return to her duties. Joe was long gone, promoted to a different store with better hours and more money.

“I’m fine,” Zoey lied. “Just tired.”

Zoey shook away the images of those two lost faces on the TV and then her brother’s note on the kitchen table, as she stood on the sidewalk next to the college loading dock. She shivered, remembering how startled she was by the man’s dark, reeking form nearly touching her, and then shocked as she recalled the sensation from behind his eyes: cutting left to avoid the woman, then weaving out and away from a truck with shattered windshields.

“But you’ve been dead,” Zoey murmured at the bustling street. “You’ve been dead for twenty years.”

The images and sounds of last night’s dream, of a day in the life of a very strange homeless man, rushed back, paralyzing Zoey on the sidewalk, various pedestrians warily giving her a wide berth. When she had woken up this morning, where did the dream end?

She unfroze and half-ran, half-walked, to Thanks-Giving Square.

Five years ago, Zoey began having insanely vivid dreams about angels. Every dream she had were about angels and, even odder, every dream was from the first-person perspective of one specific unnamed angel. She never heard his name and yet was certain that the angel did have a name. The Creation of the Universe, the War in Heaven, the Garden of Eden, the Nephilim, Noah and the Flood – these surreal events projected into her mind like film, Zoey the only person in the theatre, immersed in 3D action, trapped behind the eyes of the same main actor. Then the dreams shifted into the narratives and images of a type of Ancient Mariner – never the same person, but always the same type, living and begging and surviving through the centuries.

But last night’s dream was especially vivid, for it didn’t feel like a surreal movie but someone’s memory in the here-and-now. When she finally recognized some of the landmarks of this photorealistic dream – especially when she saw herself through someone else’s eyes –

This is crazy, Zoey thought again, entering the quiet courtyard of Thanks-Giving Square.

It was later in the day than her dream, and she knew Thanks-Giving Square would be closing soon. Trying not to get creeped out by a weird feeling of *déjà vu*, she marched straight down the main pathway, up the bridge walkway, and entered the chapel.

It was empty.

She laughed at herself. Of course it was empty. It was only a dream after all.

“Ma’am, we’re closing.”

In mid-laugh, Zoey turned towards the doorway, seeing a custodian arrive with keys and a vacuum cleaner. “Oh, hey – I’m sorry, this must look strange, finding a woman alone, laughing in a chapel.”

“Oh, no, ma’am. You should’ve been here yesterday.” He shook his head in amazement. “I found a street person, passed out on the floor, twitching with seizure. The whole square was lit up like Christmas, what with all the emergency crew on the scene – are you okay, ma’am?”

Zoey’s legs had given way, and she had sat down hard on the carpeted floor, her hand on one of the chapel chairs to help keep her upright. “I – yes, I’m fine.” She got her bearings again and hoisted herself up. “Where did they take him?”

“It’d be Parkland, ma’am,” the custodian replied, naming the nearby county hospital with its perpetually busy emergency room.

“Thank you.” Zoey took off running, to grab the nearest rail car back to Union Station.

In a blur of stations and a bus ride, she was at Parkland Hospital’s emergency room, stunned by the clamorous sea of waiting people. Not knowing where to start, Zoey stared plaintively until she heard a surprised voice call her by her professional name.

“Professor Fitzpatrick?”

Zoey swung her head towards the voice, surprised and relieved to see a familiar face in the ocean of strangers: British Literature, just this past summer session, the quiet woman from Nigeria with the beautiful voice. “Lilian?”

“Are you okay?” her former student asked, looking her over with the expertise of a certified nurse’s assistant in the ER.

“No – I mean, yes. Physically yes. But I’m looking for someone who was admitted here yesterday. Ambulance from Thanks-Giving Square.”

Lilian’s face changed from concerned assessment to astonished. “Oh – *him*? You know him?”

“Yes. I think he may be my brother.”

Lilian stared at Zoey for a very long second. “Okay. Please give me a minute, Professor.” She quickly weaved her way back to the nurses’ station and conferred with a nurse on duty. Even from where Zoey was standing she could see the look of astonishment that crossed the woman’s face. Lilian returned with some paperwork. “Okay, please fill these out, since your brother was admitted as a John Doe.”

In a daze, Zoey scribbled through the paperwork and handed the forms back to Lilian, who had attended to a couple of people in the waiting area and conferred with the nurse at the nurses’ station again.

Lilian glanced at the name. “Zachary James Fitzpatrick Jr.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She waved down a student volunteer. “She’ll bring you to one of the nurses’ stations in ICU. They’ll be expecting you, Professor.”

“ICU?” Zoey asked, but Lilian was already back to her duties, and the volunteer motioned her forward.

“Through this door, ma’am.”

The labyrinth of smooth walls, echoing floors, rushing medical staff, and claustrophobic elevators barely registered in Zoey’s mind as she followed the pony-tailed teenage girl in clogs and Tweety Bird scrubs. What she noticed was the smell, as the sweet, metallic stink of unwashed bodies and blood in the ER dissipated the farther into the maze of Parkland she was, as the artificial odor of antiseptics, bleach, and plastic dominated.

The image of her brain-dead mother, her tiny body floating in a sea of tubes in a hospital ICU, was what the smell brought.

Arriving at their destination, Zoey’s guide left with a sweet, “Bye, ma’am.”

“Ms. Fitzpatrick?” one of the three nurses inquired. “So our John Doe is your brother --” she glanced at her screen “—Zachary James Fitzpatrick Jr.”

“Yes. Jamie.”

“Has a nurse or doctor talked with you yet?”

“No.”

“Ah.”

Zoey recognized the look of infinite pity. “What’s wrong with him? Why is he in ICU?” She saw the nurse glance at the other two. “Look, my brother disappeared twenty years ago. I didn’t know he was even alive until today. Please.”

The nurse sighed. “Ms. Fitzpatrick, your brother *shouldn’t* be alive.”

“What?” She grabbed onto the counter.

“Cancer. Cancer, riddled all through his body, like Swiss cheese. In his bones, in his liver, in his lungs, in his pancreas, in his brain. We have no way of knowing where it originated, as it had metastasized all over. Too late to treat. Too late to do anything. It’s a miracle that he’s still even breathing on his own, and it’s a blessing that he’s fallen into a coma, as the pain must be unbearable.” The nurse sighed again. “I’m sorry.”

Breathe, Zoey, breathe. “Where is he?”

“Three doors down, to your left. Room 22.”

“Thank you.”

At the door, she paused, and then she turned the knob and opened the door.

The image of her comatose brother, his body floating in a sea of tubes and wires, punched her chest.

Yes, it was the face she saw in her dream – the skeletal face, the tangled beard, the dark hair. But he was washed and clothed in the flimsy garb of a hospital gown, and so she could see just how painfully thin and old her thirty-eight year old little brother looked.

She stumbled to his bedside. “Jamie.” She touched his forehead.

Darkness suddenly fell. And, like unsuspecting Alice, down the rabbit-hole Zoey fell.