THE VAN APFEL GIRLS ARE GONE

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PROLOGUE

The ghost turned up in time for breakfast, summoned by the death rattle of Cornflakes in their box.

She arrived on foot. *Bare feet*. Barelegged and white-knuckled, in a pale cotton nightie that clung to her calves and slipped off one shoulder as jaunty as a hat. Her hair was damp with sleep sweat – whose wasn't that summer? – and stiff strands of it fenced in her thirteen-year-old face like blinkers strapped to a colt.

By the time we got there she was already halfway across the cul-de-sac. Her unseeing eyes, her stop-me shuffle, they'd taken her as far as that and she might have made it further too, if it wasn't for the car that sat idling at a ninety-degree angle to her path. A right angle made from her wrongs.

The driver's elbow pointed accusingly out of the window and he leaned out and shouted to each neighbour as they arrived on the scene: 'She came from nowhere!' as if *that* was her crime. This girl who appeared from thin air.

We came running when we heard shouting. We ran into the street and that's when we saw her, illuminated against the heat haze and the headlights that hadn't helped and that weren't needed anyway now the sun had sat up.

'Cordie! It's Cordie Van Apfel!'

'Jesus Christ. Is she *sleepwalking*?'

'Can she hear us? Can she see us, you reckon?'

Then Mr Van Apfel appeared, stepping forward with his arms outstretched and his palms to the sky as if coming in from the Lord's outfield. In that instant he blocked the sun. Then he took another step closer and the eclipse was over and the sunshine streamed back in just as sinister as before.

'Nothing to see here, folks,' he declared in his lay-preacher's soothe. 'Nothing to see here.'

CHAPTER ONE

Dusk. That limbo land. And the world blurred by Baltimore rain. The windows of the cab were smudged with grime and muck mixed with the misting rain so that each time the wipers flicked over the glass they made a greasy arc like a smeary sunrise. The driver smelled of smoke and spearmint Tic Tacs, and when I'd got in his cab he'd asked me if I was feeling better.

'Better than what?'

'Than before?'

We were both confused now.

He must have mistaken me for someone else – the sort of someone who could be cured.

'But the hospital,' he said and pointed past the gilt crucifix that hung from his rear-vision mirror, towards the tower of dazzling azure glass that stood by the curb in the rain. 'You came from the hospital.'

'Working,' I explained. 'I work in a lab. At the hospital.'

I held up a pile of papers now damp and softening in my hands. But the driver was looking past me. He was staring at the tower, which was lit up so that a light burned in practically every window and the whole thing – the shiny blue tower, the grid of illuminated windows – looked like a gas flame, despite all the rain.

The trip downtown was slow and wet, and the air in the cab was humid. We crawled along the expressway behind a yellow school bus, its tyres sending up spray. Inside, the bus was devoid of life apart from a driver I couldn't quite see. Our cab turned left onto the avenue and into more traffic. Three lanes inching along. Outside Burger King a fight was breaking out, but you could tell, even from this distance, that their hearts weren't in it.

Past Subway. Past the pawnbroker (*We buy Gold! 411-733-CASH!*). Past the abandoned mini-mart. Past the Union Temple Baptist Church with its arches and its turrets and its torn-in-two sign, ripped clean between the 'l' and the 'c'. Once upon a time that sign must have encouraged sinners to feel 'Welcome'; now it simply commanded they 'come'. Past red-brick behemoths and abandoned car yards. Wrecks turning to rust in the rain. Past row houses in candy colours and past the Candy Bazaar, which stood white as a mausoleum.

And that's where I saw her.

There. *There.* Bag swinging. Coat billowing. Long hair loose like a kite. The past sashayed down North Avenue (west) caught up in the peak-hour push for the station. (The 'metro' they call it here. Only tourists and Australians go all the way to Maryland and ask directions to Penn-North *subway*.) Yes, there. She was caught up in the crush surging to Penn-North

station, but also not caught up at all. Because she walked just the same after all these long years. As though hovering slightly above the earth.

'Pull over!'

The driver looked at me, startled.

'Here? You want me to —'

'Please! Pull over!'

It was the first time we'd spoken since we hit North Avenue and he said nothing more as he yanked the steering wheel towards the curb. The crucifix swung wildly from its mirror and threatened to take out someone's eye.

'It's a wet walk,' he warned, though the drizzle had stopped. Had vanished with the last of the grey day. I paid and then slipped out of the cab, scanning the pavement for her.

Only, in the time it had taken us to pull over, I'd lost sight of her in the crowd. I tried not to panic, tried to keep my breathing calm. On my left traffic roared, on my right – industrial blocks. I fell into step with two men in cheap suits fast-walking in the direction of the station and complaining about someone who worked in their office.

'She's a fake.'

'You're right,' his friend agreed. 'Total fake. She acts like she wouldn't but when it comes down to it? She's no better than all the rest.'

I could see the station up ahead. Its blue metro signs were the same shade as the hospital: regulation Baltimore blue. We crossed a side street together, the cheap suits and I.

And just like that I saw her again, maybe ten people ahead. She cut along the path beside North and Woodbrook Park,

scaring the crows. Sending them up in a black fume above the trees. My heart lurched.

'Cordie!' I called. 'Cordie! It's me!'

She didn't hear me. Couldn't have heard because she never looked back.

'Cordie!' I yelled again. '*Cordelia!*'

She crossed the road ahead of me and walked quickly across the small paved square before she disappeared inside the blue-lipped mouth of the station. I broke into a run, crossing the street and then the square, before following her into the metro.

Inside I glimpsed her briefly, then she was swallowed up. Swept out and over the abyss of the escalator.

'Cordie! Cordelia!'

I pushed past crowds of people.

'Cordie!'

'Freakin' shut up,' someone muttered.

Down on the platform: wet floor, wet wall tiles. Vast overhead beams dripped. Commuters stood shoulder to shoulder while the departures board counted down. I had two minutes, now one, left to find her.

'Sorry, sorry,' I shuffled along the platform on the wrong side of the fierce yellow line. 'Sorry. Excuse me, I just need to —'

And then there she was. Leaning against a pillar at the far end of the platform. Coat no longer billowing. Hair rain-darkened and shrouding her face. She held her bag under her arm.

'Cordie!' I shouted, and I reached out to touch her. In that same instant the train rushed into the station. A hot wind blasted my back, propelling me forward. I flung myself at her and she turned to me in surprise.

'Sorry,' I stammered. 'Wrong person. Oh God, sorry.'

She waved dismissively – *no big deal* – then she picked up her umbrella, closed it, edged around me and walked to the train doors as they hissed opened.

She disappeared inside the carriage without looking back.

'I thought you were someone I haven't seen —' I called after her, but my words fell short and they landed in the crevice between the train and the platform.

'Someone I haven't seen for a while,' I finished.

Actually, it was twenty years ago that week.

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I'd seen so many Cordies over the years that it became a nervous tic. Seeing the back of her head. Spotting her in a crowd. I saw her in the line at the supermarket checkout, buying petrol, at the dentist. She surfaced in the lane next to me at the pool, her stroke inefficient but beautiful to watch.

I was unnerved at first. As a kid, I was spooked. But as I got older I found it comforting. It calmed me somehow, and I felt disappointed if too much time elapsed between sightings. On my way to exams and job interviews, blind dates arranged by friends, I'd settle my nerves by trying to find Cordie.

And it was Cordie, always Cordie. Never Hannah or Ruth. Cordie was the one that came back. Who appeared and then evaporated before my eyes. Often it would be nothing more than a flash of eyes set ever so slightly too far apart. A wisp of stringy blonde hair. But that would be enough for my brain to make the leap, and I'd reach out and

ask and she'd turn and face me, puzzled. *Do I know you? Can I help you? Have we met?*

And when she turned around, the illusion would shatter in an instant. *Sorry, wrong person*, I'd mutter. And she'd smile and shrug and melt back into the day, and I'd be left standing on the street, wondering where she learned such a trick.

* * *

I lived in a rundown row house in Baltimore. Red brick, white window frames. It leaned on its neighbours like crutches. It had rained so hard and so often during the time I had lived there that some days I expected to come home from work and find the whole row had spilled into the gutters and sluiced down the hill into Chesapeake Bay.

Not that I would have been home to see it happen. I was at the lab every weekday between eight-thirty and six and on more weekends than I liked to admit. There I watched the world through the glass eye of my microscope, pinning things under my focus. I worked as an assistant lab technician at a medical research centre, coaxing cells into existence and then towards survival. *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, *Bifidobacterium lactis*, *Streptococcus thermophilus*. I grew them in tubes of sterile milk, baptised them in water baths, and once they'd turned into curd I streaked them out onto agar plates to check for purity.

On a good day I could get through around a hundred and twenty plates. Standing with one hip hard against the lab bench, one foot forward, the other behind, streaking out cells. Standing and ignoring the dull ache in my Achilles, the twinges

of fire at the backs of my knees. Standing because – despite what Detective Senior Constable Mundy instructed all those years ago – I never got the hang of sitting. ('Sit tight,' he told us after the disappearance of the girls. 'Sit tight and we'll find your friends.' Sit tight he'd said, and we'd more or less done as asked. Had done nothing else for twenty years.)

It took forty-eight hours to incubate each plate in the lab. From there they were suspended in sterile milk and transferred to tiny cryotubes that were stacked, packed and frozen – thousands of tiny vials like bricks in a wall – and shipped off to bigger labs elsewhere on campus. They went to other parts of the research centre where people investigated the effect of various strains on chronic medical disorders. Where those same people wrote papers, presented symposiums. Slept with their PhD students. Where they came up with answers to critical questions. While all I ever learned was how to get good at waiting. Streaking out life onto tiny agar plates while my own slipped quietly away.

But those were the good days. On a bad day – and there were a few – I'd be distracted. My mind would wander. On those days, dropped curd would puddle on the floor, flecked with shards of smashed glass.

Each December the bad days outnumbered the good. The anniversary of the disappearance always left me unsettled. There were days in December when it seemed like more cells got slopped on the floor than ever made it safely into cryotubes.

Sometimes I could go for days, even weeks without thinking about the Van Apfel girls – though even that made me anxious at first. As if I was scared of letting myself off the hook. But

I soon learned that I didn't need to worry. The sorrow, the shame – I could conjure them in an instant, as sure and as real as growing bacteria in a lab. *Escherichia coli* and a lifetime of remorse. I could streak them out onto agar plates to prove their purity. I could pile them high in their tiny vials.

Things had got worse six months ago, at the start of the Maryland summer. Tuesday 12 June 2012 – I have the clipping stuck to my fridge. That was when the Chamberlain case was in the news again, this time because the coroner had ruled the death certificate be changed to acknowledge what everyone knew: that a dingo had snatched and killed nine-week-old Azaria Chamberlain more than thirty years ago. And as the coroner pointed out, that meant it was more than thirty years, too, since the baby's mother, Lindy Chamberlain, had been wrongly convicted of murder. Since she had been sentenced to life in prison and had served three years in a Northern Territory jail cell, before the baby's jacket was discovered outside a dingo lair. That was when Lindy Chamberlain had finally had her conviction overturned.

The most notorious court case in Australian history, they reckoned. The Chamberlain case was the background to my entire childhood. Outside, we had smiling *Safety House* signs screwed to each letterbox in the street. Every house safe. Every house a refuge. While inside, the court case of a mother alleged to have murdered her child played out each night, in prime time, in the lounge room.

And even though Azaria Chamberlain disappeared twelve years before the Van Apfel girls did, and almost three thousand kilometres away, even though the Chamberlain case was

resolved, while what happened to Hannah, Cordie and Ruth is still a mystery, the two things are tied so tightly together in my mind that I can't think about one without fixating on the other.

And so, ever since I'd walked past an electronics store six months ago and seen a wall of Lindy Chamberlains looking back at me (still wearing those dark glasses, still wearing her hair short, though it was lighter and spikier now), ever since then I'd had that old familiar feeling of dread.

It never stayed buried for long.