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by a deeper sentiment and characters you can’t help but feel for’

BURIED UNDER BOOKS

ALL THE WICKED GIRLS

CHRIS WHITAKER

ZAFFRE



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*For Charlie and George, my boys.
And for Ayisha Malik (because I honour my bets).*

Grace, Alabama

1995



1

Summer

There ain't no meaning.

That's where the fear lay all along. That's what they didn't get, all those people yellin' and screamin' on the television, those preening pastors crossing the air, those parents lockin' down their teens like they could keep grip on their wanderin' souls.

And when it was over they couldn't take it—that discovery. They went on mourning, they spoke of before like before was real or somethin'. The death of ideals.

I get it though—the need for good and evil—but that endless stretch of gray between, that's where you'll find me and Raine, and maybe Pastor Bobby too.

Raine's my sister. I got a photo of us on my nightstand, in a sparkly frame shaped like a heart; gaudy as hell but my daddy bought it for me. We're young in that shot, arms linked, bubble-gum smiles and eyes squint 'cause we never did keep our sunhats on. We were camping up by the Red River, the part where the bank runs low and the water breaks for brown rocks so slick we weren't never allowed to wade out. That's the best spot for fishin'.





Daddy reckons he's pulled out striped bass just as big as the kind Uncle Tommy caught when he fished the Coosa.

That's also the very same spot where Chief Black found a penis in the fall of 1985, back when the whole country was hot with talk of the McMartin preschool case and the couple hundred kids they reckoned was ritually abused there.

It's far and away the most excitin' thing that's ever happened in the town of Grace so we all know the story by heart.

The penis belonged to Richie Reams. Richie was a high school football stud—big arms and light eyes and fingers that smelled of pussy most days. He lived with his momma in a single-wide over in the scratch-ass town of Haskell, though she spent her nights with a hard-drinkin' trucker she met at the bar she tended.

Coach said Richie was destined for greatness if he could stay outta trouble, but that weren't Richie's way. Too much of a weakness for girls. Supply was dwindling though, especially being as Richie had a leanin' toward blond-haired, blue-eyed innocents. There weren't many of those left in Haskell. 'Course they still had the hair and the eyes, but Richie had fucked the innocence right outta them. That's why he'd ventured into Grace. Virgin huntin'.

He set his sights on Mandy Deamer. She went to Westview, same high school I do. I've seen her photo: Farrah hair and dimpled smile, the kinda pure that turned Richie's insides out.

He made sure to bump into Mandy outside Mae's Diner on the first day of summer break. Might've made his move



straight off but she kept a bull of a girl as her sidekick: Franny Vestal. Franny was the cruel kinda big; six two and wide, and dressed head to toe in black most days. She had her eyes set hard on Richie from the get-go, like she could see through the smoke in his mind. He'd tried to soften her with a couple throwaways—*nice eyes, tall like a model, had a friend for her*—the kinda lines Richie thought a fat girl should've swallowed whole. Not Franny. Richie told Black he'd reckoned she was a dyke.

Mandy caved two weeks later. Realized her mistake after Richie's gold promises died hard in the blessed light of day. He was safely back in Haskell by the time she found out she was carryin' his baby.

Four months into the pregnancy Mandy took her own life. The shame got to her; hot stares and cold whispers and holy judgment.

Her brother Harvey found her hangin' from the long beam in the barn behind their place. Messed him up bad enough for the Deamers to pull their kids from Westview and school them at home from then on.

Franny came for Richie in the dead of night. Black later told the *Briar County News* she'd held chloroform over his mouth, so he didn't wake when she stripped him naked, though he did when his cock came off.

She left him bleedin' and screamin' but called 911 'cause she weren't no murderer, she was just rightin' a wrong. She tossed his dick into the Red on her way home. A few hours later it washed up on the bank.



Lottie Stimson's dog found it, picked it up in his slobberin' mouth. Lottie wrestled it from him, screamed, then fetched Black, and Mitch Wild, who was Black's partner back then.

They sent Lottie on her way, she was cryin' bad. Black told her he'd stop by her place to take a statement, also told her to keep her mouth shut till then. 'Course she'd been straight on the telephone; said she'd heard noises in Hell's Gate, probably the killer gettin' a good look at her. She dressed it up nice enough for my mamma to head straight over with a bottle of Barton.

Lottie also called her husband, Jasper, home from the logs; gave him an excuse to sit out front with his shotgun, his retarded brothers and more than a couple beers too. Itchy fingers. Now Jasper was known 'cause he'd just served a five bid in Fountain Correctional Facility for beatin' a cop, so Black made a mental note to call ahead before he walked up their track. Though he forgot to pass that note on to his partner.

Mitch Wild was shot dead when he stopped by the Stimson place after dark that evenin'.

Franny handed herself in once she'd cooled. Talk was the cops found all kinds of dark at her house: wicker pentagrams hanging from the trees in her yard, sketches of Babylon and evil eyes, and that LaVeyan book on her nightstand. Black said it was bullshit but that didn't stop it from burnin', and the kids at school reckoned the flames fired blue and the smoke twisted into the face of Mandy as it rose.

I've heard that tale maybe fifty times, each a little different, but at the end I ain't in no doubt who the devil in that story is, and it ain't Franny.



Mandy is buried in a pretty spot in the cemetery beside St. Luke's. She was my age when she died. Fifteen. That's a long way short of a decent life.

I'd stop by her grave when I went to church and Momma would always say to me, "*Keep clear of boys, Summer. They ain't got nothin' to give you but trouble.*"

Raine sometimes complains that nothin' excitin' is ever gonna happen in Grace again.

Daddy told her careful what you wish for.



2

A Cautionary Tale

Summer Ryan went missing in the night hours of May 26. Her daddy called his boys before the cops 'cause he reckoned they'd move quicker. And also 'cause Joe Ryan had spent the better years of his life keeping far from law enforcement.

The group fanned out and moved slow. Flashlights cut stuttered lines beneath ink sky and moonlight fell blue between longleaf pines that rose tall in the distance.

Most had kids of their own so knew that cold fear that was rolling over Joe and Ava. Having a daughter loose all night, fifteen, smart or not, their part of the world rarely saw mistakes go unpunished, prizes unclaimed.

Tommy Ryan led them, the missing girl's uncle, and he carried a gun and a bow and was handy enough with both.

They walked the flat fields behind the girl's house 'cause that's the way she might've gone. There were rumblings she'd packed a bag before she ran, which meant they were probably wasting their time; that she was probably holed up with a friend or a boy or was laying low till whatever caused her to flee worked itself





out. Still, the land weren't safe and hadn't been for a long time. Not since the first girl was taken.

That nightmare had stretched for over a year then stopped sudden. Five girls: all from Briar County, all young, and all church girls. They reckoned it was over 'cause thinking anything but meant they'd go on holding their breath, and they were tired of that terror that saw them wake at all hours and creep down their hallways to check on their own.

They were ten in number. They'd run with Joe back when he was young and did bad things. They'd straightened out when Joe went down 'cause eight years was sobering. They lived in Grace and the close surround, their wives talked, their kids hung out. Most weekends they drank beer together, ate barbecue, watched football, and joked and laughed.

When the sun rose, those with jobs would break for work of different kinds—a couple in construction, a couple hauled freight, one fixed air-conditioning units—then they'd come right back. They'd listen out for the telephone. They'd get tight on their own kids; tell them to be home before dark, to stick to the streets and not even glance at Hell's Gate National Forest.

If they caught the guy—newspapers called him the Bird—they'd kill him before calling the cops. It weren't said but they knew that's what they'd do.

*

The Grace heat got up early. By eight, the streets baked and kids stood by sprinklers, screaming on each pass.





Noah Wild wore his father's badge on a length of twine he looped twice over his head. He'd polished it till sunlight bounced from the eagle's wings.

Stores crept to life; A-frames were hauled to the street by slow-moving keepers, most a decade past retirement but clinging to purpose with iron grips.

He stopped outside the Whiskey Barrel. Purv was hosing the sidewalk, his worn sneakers deep in a puddle as the spray pooled.

Purv saw him and grinned, then reached out and thumbed the badge. "You look mean, like a real cop."

Noah wanted to return the compliment but Purv wore an apron that fell low, the shirt beneath drowning him. Purv was a funny kinda small given his father stood a tough six three. He flicked his hair up to give him inches but weren't fooling nobody, especially when the wind blew. He had one eyebrow, thumb thick and running the width of both eyes. They'd once tried to split it, with some duct tape and a whole lot of cussin'.

"I still reckon it's missin' somethin'. The badge alone ain't enough," Noah said.

Purv studied him careful. "How about a toothpick? Just let it hang, like Cobretti. I'll pick some up."

"I'll need a gun belt too."

"You reckon you'll get a gun on your first day?"

"Yeah . . . probably low caliber though, just till I show Black I know how to handle a Koch."

Purv looked away, bit his lip hard.

Noah sighed. "K-o-c-h."



"I saw your grandmother pass by just now," Purv said. "She was wearin' a housecoat and rollers, talking to herself. I tried calling out but she looked at me like she ain't never seen me before."

"Thanks for tryin'."

Purv nodded then yawned.

"Rough night?" Noah said.

"Someone stole my father's truck. He weren't happy, had to walk it back from Merle's place."

"Shit," Noah said, 'cause he knew what that would've meant for Purv.

Purv's father was a bully, not the misunderstood kind that cowered beneath, just the misshapen kind that'd be stone through if you sliced him in half. If Purv knew a beating was due, Noah would crouch at the end of his yard and wait for the signal that he was still living before he headed home. One flip of the lights, on and off.

Noah reached a hand out and gripped Purv's shoulder tight. "We're brave."

"We're fierce."

"Catch you later," Noah said.

"Good luck."

Purv went back to hosing.

Noah headed for the center of the square, for the stretch of Bermuda grass watered day and night during the hot months.

He found a bench and reached for his sunglasses, a birthday gift from Purv a year back, expertly lifted from the drugstore in Brookdale, along with two packs of Marlboros. Smoking and stealing were just about Purv's favorite pastimes.



They'd been friends since Noah could remember. They spent summers in the Kinleys' fields, racing down lines of corn and firing stick guns at the shiny twin-engines that buzzed low, then stopping by the Red to try and glimpse the senior girls in their bathing suits. They spent winters trampling through white woods, trying to follow buck tracks but making so much noise they never caught sight of one.

Noah watched a couple old guys amble into Mae's Diner and take a seat by the misted glass. Noah liked Grace before it got up. He'd once worked a paper route, rising at dawn and pedaling his rusting bicycle down the pretty streets with the tall houses and the watercolor yards. Each Christmas he walked that same route with Purv, and they stared in warm windows at distant scenes.

He sat back, breathed deep, and thought of summer break rolled out ahead. He was about to enter junior year; his grades were shit but that was all right, he'd worked out long ago that school weren't for him. Purv was faring worse, but then it weren't no secret that God took with both hands when he created Purvis Bowdoin.

They didn't complain 'cause they were brave and they were fierce and they never forgot that.

*

Raine Ryan moved fast. She followed the snaking line of the Red River, shooting a glance at the water, dark and rushing right alongside her. There were breaks farther upstream, calm enough to swim but skimmed with algae and fifty deep if you believed the rumors.





There was a tree by Abby Farley's place that hung right out over the bank, Abby's brother had slung a rope over it and tied an old tire to the end. Their momma said it weren't safe, like that'd stop them. Summer wouldn't ever take a turn, she just sat on the bank reading a book and smiling every time Raine hollered at her to watch.

Raine caught her foot on a cypress root and went sprawling in the dirt. She lay still for a moment, her breath coming short, her head over the edge. She wondered what would happen if she fell in. She could swim good but the Red was quick. She'd be claimed, sucked beneath as the water roared louder than her screams.

She kept tight hold of the note, hauled herself up, and saw a deep cut on her knee. Blood rolled steady down her shin and she leaned down and wiped it with her finger then brought it to her lips. The taste of blood never bothered her all that much.

She set off in the direction of town, the trees clustered tight as she looked down and ran.

When she reached the square she slowed and calmed and wiped sweat from her head. She glanced up at the Grace Police Department. It occupied a grand building at the head of the square, stone and painted a shade of parchment that dulled a month after it was done.

Inside she asked for Chief Black and was swept into his office by Rusty, with his heavy stomach and half limp. He was eating a sandwich, ketchup by his mouth and a spot of grease on his necktie.

He left her and she sat, pressed her hands flat against the table; fingers splayed, nails bit short. They weren't allowed to





wear varnish. Their momma said they were too young, said it like a lick of red on their nails would part their legs for the boys.

She crossed the room and rifled through the desk drawers, saw empty bottles before she found Black's wallet and slipped a twenty from it. She moved quick back to her chair and sat still.

The door opened and Trix stuck her head in. "You okay, Raine?" Trix worked the front desk, had her hair cropped boy-short and dyed dark.

Raine nodded.

"Is it important? Lot of shit goin' on this mornin'."

"Like what?"

"Ray Bowdoin. Someone stole his truck last night and he ain't happy."

"I gotta talk to Black. My daddy sent me."

"I'll grab him soon as I can."

For the most part Raine did as she pleased, and what pleased her were acts that saw her in shit, so she weren't no stranger to Trix, Black, and the others.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a crumpled photo of Summer. Twins, similar once, though nature had other plans as they grew. Summer was quiet and smart and all kinda other things Raine weren't.

She leaned down and checked the cut on her knee, licked a finger and cleaned the blood from it.

Black came into the room and she caught the smell of booze that trailed him.





He sat down and rubbed his eyes before he spoke, maybe to show he was busy or tired, or maybe just tired of her.

“What did you do this time, Raine? If you’ve been messin’ with those Kirkland boys again it’s on you. Ain’t my business to go meddling in family matters, got enough on.”

“It’s Summer,” she said, a trace of heat in her voice. She had her daddy’s temper, her nose turning up in a snarl.

He looked up.

“She’s gone missin’.”

He tried to keep level but she saw the color drain right from him. He made to speak but fumbled his words.

She watched him close, the creased shirt and the dry lips.

“Since when?” he said.

“Last night. She left a note.” Raine slid it across the table.

He picked it up with a shaking hand. “*I’m sorry.*”

She nodded.

“So she ran,” he said, the color returning.

“Looks that way.”

“What’s she sorry about?”

Raine shrugged.

“Where’s your daddy?”

“Out lookin’. Said he’d walk the flat fields then follow the Red to Hell’s Gate. He wants you to send Rusty and Milk and anyone else you can spare.”

“Milk’s out sorting the mess from last night. Ray Bowdoin’s truck –”

“I know,” she cut in.





"You tell your daddy I'll put a call out, but I need him to keep a cool head. Reckon you can do that?"

"Why don't you tell him yourself?" she said, bait in her tone.

"Summer left a note. She probably just needed some space . . . like you do sometimes."

He stood and made for the door.

"Black."

He turned.

"It still ain't safe out there. Y'all didn't catch him."

*

The station ran silent as Ray Bowdoin filled out the papers. Noah watched him close, the way he stood and the gold rings jutting from fists so big Purv didn't ever stand a chance.

When Ray was done he tossed the pen at Trix.

"I ain't holdin' much hope you'll find it," he said as he drew a cigarette and pressed it to his lips.

"You can't smoke in here," Trix said.

Ray lit his cigarette and Rusty stood, a hand on his gun.

Ray walked to the door then turned. "The dog, that fuckin' mutt my neighbor got. I told Purv to come tell y'all 'cause it won't shut up."

"He told us," Rusty said.

"And?"

"Dogs bark, Ray. That's what they do. You tried petting it?"

Ray smiled, winked at Trix, then headed out.

"You should've shot him," Trix said.



Rusty nodded 'cause he knew she weren't kidding.

"When do I get my gun, Trix? I'll need two . . . crossfire. I ain't gonna be a house mouse like Rusty," Noah said.

"Remind me again why he's here?" Rusty said.

Trix ignored him. She'd arranged for Noah to spend the summer with them, a couple shifts each week, answering the phone and working the file room. Trix had been friends with Noah's momma since they were small. She'd sat with her through the last days, then held Noah's hand at the funeral as he stared at the casket but wouldn't let no tears fall. Tough like his daddy was.

Noah pulled out a chair, spun it round, and straddled it. "Can we talk about my powers?"

"You got the power to answer the phone. Nothin' more."

They fell quiet as Raine walked through. Noah felt her look over, their eyes meeting for a moment which stretched till his knees shook and his gaze dropped. There was something wild there, some kinda draw that went beyond the obvious and got the boys dreaming and drooling. He'd pass her by at school, back when she used to show up, but they ran in different circles—Noah's consisting of Purv alone, and Raine's just about every senior with access to a car and booze.

Black followed a minute after she left.

"What's up?" Rusty said.

"Summer took off last night," Black said.

"Summer?"

Black nodded.

Trix looked up, worry in her eyes. "Summer ran?"

"And?" Rusty said.



“Probably ain’t nothin’. She left a note,” Black said, rubbing his temples. He looked over at Noah, eyes settling on the badge he wore.

The phone rang. Rusty glanced at Noah then pointed to it.

Noah reached across the desk, brought the receiver to his ear, and took a breath. “Detective Noah Wild. Homicide.”

Rusty shook his head. “What is it?”

“Smoke comin’ from Hell’s Gate last night,” Noah said, the phone against his ear.

“Another fire. Fuckin’ holy rollers from White Mountain, hollerin’ at the devil again. I’ll take it,” Rusty said, reaching for the handset.

Black parted the slats and watched Raine cross the square. She passed a couple guys but they kept their eyes low. Even with Joe Ryan outta sight they wouldn’t risk a glance at one of his daughters.

His mind slipped from Summer to the missing girls from Briar County, then to the sketch of the Bird that’d run in the newspapers. Big and feathered and frightening. A cautionary tale about heading lone into the woods at night.





3

Summer

There was moments so pure and perfect I almost can't bear them. Maybe a sunrise so stark that line between us and the heavens blurs to nothin' but a smudge.

I dreamed in stills, in frozen time and melted clocks, but 'stead of desert there was the steady turns of the Red River 'cause that was my constant.

I saw us sittin' by the bank. We were camping with Daddy and we snuck out after he was sleepin' and laid back and held hands. The sky was stretched so deep and dark and heavy it might've smothered us had the stars not pinned it high. We saw one tumble and Raine reckoned it was a firework, but in the mornin' Daddy told us it was a fallin' star and we should've made a wish on it.

I reckon that's my moment: the point so high life can't do nothin' but pivot and fail. Maybe it came too young but that's all right 'cause at least I got it.

The first time I told that to Bobby he asked me if I knew what a nihilist was and said it with a straight face 'cause that's how Bobby makes jokes. Like they ain't jokes. But that's bullshit 'cause morality don't come into it. Maybe he meant pessimist. Or realist.





I once heard Daddy say faith is reliance and reliance is weak, and Momma got real mad at him 'cause he weren't long out and we hung on his words.

Not long after Richie Reams lost his cock, the Etowah County Sheriff's Office were on the news talkin' about a site they found out in Walnut Grove. I looked it up in the Maidenville library and there's grainy photographs of dead dogs and flipped crosses still standin' in the dirt. They made routine inquiries but never got nowhere.

I grew up with the Panic; with evangelical Christianity askin' questions and Mötley Crüe providing the answers. The propagators' message was simple, a vast network of Satanists lived amongst us, and they were claimin' young souls and the country was goin' to shit 'cause of it. These Satanists, they hid their message in music and books and video games, they rippled the still waters of suburbia till Washington Wives began to fight back with Parental Advisory stickers and conservative hysteria.

There was a big sign hammered into the grass in Mick Kinley's sixth acre, showin' a cartoon devil holding a scythe and promisin' to "come get you" if you don't go to church. It's that kinda thinkin' that lit the touch paper and fanned the flames till the whole of Grace was molten with fear.

I spent a lot of time in church. Momma said it was my second home and she said it with more than a lick of pride.

St. Luke's is the fifth-oldest church in the whole state. It's stone and tall, with a bell tower that chimes every hour till late. I'd sit on the bench by the colored glass, and in the summer months, if I timed it right, the sunlight would spill through and





paint me with a rainbow. It's beautiful. I mean, I know people say that a lot, especially about grand old buildings, but St. Luke's is so beautiful it's hard to breathe when you're inside.

Isaiah Lumen was the pastor for a lifetime and more, then he had a stroke right in the middle of a sermon. He was renouncin' and burnin' and he just fell back and kicked his legs up. People were gasping, but a part of them was wonderin' if it was part of the show, 'cause Pastor Lumen can turn it on sometimes. Now, he was mad like that since I can remember, but it got worse after Deely White's cattle got slaughtered, 'cause up till that point the devil was just circling Grace, he hadn't come inside. Black reckoned it was kids but he didn't say it with no conviction 'cause takin' a blade to animals like that, it ain't what kids do.

Folk reckoned it weren't all that bad, that Pastor Lumen would be back preachin' in no time, but that first stroke was followed by another. And that's when Pastor Bobby came to town. Bobby Ritter. Momma said she ain't never heard of a pastor callin' themselves by a nickname. Said he oughta call himself Pastor Robert or somethin' decent. She likes to go on like she's high cotton but she ain't never lived nowhere but Grace.

Now if Pastor Lumen was be-angry-and-do-not-sin Jesus, then Pastor Bobby was love-endures Jesus. He carries himself with this quiet confidence, like shit don't bother him; even if Merle rolls into service lit and loud, Bobby don't pay him no mind. And he's real young too, and he's got a nice smile but he don't smile much, so when he does you kinda feel like you're special or somethin'.

Yeah, Bobby's popular in Grace.

By his second service the church was heavy with sweet perfume and flutterin' hearts.

