

Irregulars

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Camille was too numb to cry. Her mommy, now sitting to her left, speaking through her tears to the man in black, told her that crying was okay, that she simply had to, and that she would, in time, be able to. This was probably true, like all the things that Mommy told her. But for now, no tears came. Just numbness, a numbness that had wrapped itself like a cold blanket around her, when her mother, tears streaming down her face, picked her up from school.

"Daddy," she'd said, gripping the steering wheel. "Daddy's had an accident." And then Mommy was sobbing, not just crying, but sobbing and sobbing and almost screaming.

Daddy's accident was why they were here, talking to the man in black.

Earlier, led by the man in black—a short man with a round head and a belly like Santa Claus's, and close-cropped hair graying at the temples and receding from a smooth, shining forehead—they drifted through a sea of coffins, each floating in its own little pool of light.

Distant, she paid little attention to what her mommy and the man in black had discussed, but the words "a closed-casket service" had been once uttered, and her mommy's tears had flowed harder.

Now, the job of selecting a casket behind them, Camille and her mommy were in the man in black's office. Like the rest of the place, it smelled like wood and flowers. Pine maybe—she wasn't sure. Roses surely. There was one, freshly cut and looking quite alive, in a small vase on the man's desk. On the side of the desk nearest Camille, four glass jars, their tops removed, were lined side-by-side. Within each were what appeared to be candies, each neatly wrapped in wax paper.

Her mommy continued to talk. The man in black talked, as well, but mostly he nodded, a faint smile occasionally touching his lips, his fat little hands folded before him. From time to time, the man looked at Camille, that faint smile growing a little less faint. From time to time, her mommy's grip on her shoulder became almost painful.

Camille's eyes moved across the man's office, from the framed painting above where he sat to the bookcases laid into the wall on either side of it. To her left were various framed documents, one of them a yellowed newspaper clipping advertising something called THE JENKING COMPANY. The logo was flanked on either side by a drawing of two very different, yet similarly shaped, pieces of woodwork: a cradle and a coffin.

She stared at the framed ad, stared through it, and her daddy's face filled her mind. Only a week ago,

he was tucking her in, reading to her one more chapter of *The Black Stallion*, and kissing her goodnight. And then she went to sleep and woke up and ate breakfast and went to school, and Daddy was already gone, off to work and about to have an accident.

Through her numbness, she wasn't aware that a single tear was coursing down her freckled cheek. The man in black was saying something, but she heard only Daddy's voice.

"Hon?" Her mommy, nudging her. And again. "Hon?"

"Hm?" Looking up at Mommy, blinking.

"Mr. Burdick is talking to you."

"Oh."

The man in black was smiling. His teeth didn't look real. He was indicating the jars.

"I noticed you looking at these. Would you like one?"

"Um."

"These are peppermint. These are strawberry flavored, these cherry, and these are butterscotch. You look like a butterscotch girl to me. Would you like one?"

She looked at Mommy, who smiled, giving her a nod, and then back to the man in black.

"Sure." She'd prefer a box of Nerds, thank you very much, but butterscotch would be okay.

He fished a neatly wrapped candy from the jar and dropped it onto her upturned palm.

Gingerly, she unwrapped it, looking at the oddly shaped butterscotch. It looked as if it had been bitten in half.

"Oh, don't worry, Camille. Nobody's been munching on it. It's an irregular."

She frowned at the man in black. Mommy was still crying.

"Before I started work here, oh ... over 30 years ago, I think it is now, I worked for a candy factory, much like Mr. Wonka's Chocolate Factory, but without the little helpers." He seemed to have amused himself with this.

Camille simply stared at him.

"Every successful batch of candy produces hundreds—thousands even—of irregularly shaped candies. They're not fit to be packaged and sold, but they're perfectly fine to eat. The workers used to take home the irregulars, but mostly they're just thrown away. I still have friends at the factory, and they send me irregulars once every few months. It's become a hobby of mine, sorting and wrapping them, and my grandchildren do love them so. And love me for them."

"Oh." It was all she could manage. She popped the irregular butterscotch into her mouth.

"Thank you," Mommy said, nudging again.

"Oh. Thank you, sir."

"You're very welcome, little lady. Here. For your tears."

She was crying now. He handed her a clean white handkerchief.

"And for you to share with your friends, if it's all right with your mother?"

Mommy nodded, and the man in black, leaning forward, placed in her hand a small baggie filled with candy.

She dabbed her moist eyes, her mother's grip tightened. They cried.

Matthews peeled the gloves from his hand, tossed them into the waste bin, and removed his glasses, rubbing his eyes. He'd just run the final stitch through the Y-incision in number 1007's chest, and he was ready to go home, to get away from the smell of open body cavities and embalming fluid and disinfectant spray, to get away from death.

He'd gotten used to the smell. He'd gotten used to the sight of bodies opened like books before him, each line of entrails a line of text with a story to tell. He'd gotten used to the many faces of death, save one.

Kids were never easy.

This one, a girl of twelve, drowned during her brother's birthday party, had been particularly hard, her body a frozen bud of a womanhood that would never blossom.

He tossed the sheet over her, careful in draping it across her face. The cartilage in the nose was very fragile after death, and even the weight of a sheet could distort it. This was going to be an open-casket service, and there was nothing more important in an open-casket service than making sure that the deceased looked like themselves.

The door opened and in strode Mr. Burdick. As always, the fat man was as neatly dressed and as properly combed as a corpse fresh out of Salon Sally's little beauty parlor down the hall, where this poor dead girl, merely a shape under a sheet, would soon be, for the last time, getting dolled up.

"Anything?"

Matthews winced, hoping that it wouldn't show.

"Yes, Mr. Burdick." He motioned toward the stainless steel pan into which stomach contents are placed.

Burdick looked down. He reached into the pan and brought up the one solid found in 1007's stomach. He passed the small brown shape beneath his nose, smiling.

"Root Beer Barrel," he said, touching it to his tongue. "Remember these?"

"Nope."

"Oh, it's been years since I've had one. I think I'll have this one myself ... save it for later." He produced a square of wax paper, wrapped the chunk of candy, and slipped it into his pocket.

"Goodnight, Matthews."

"Goodnight, sir."

Spinning on his heel, Burdick left.

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