



DIVINE
HOTEL

NICOLE LOUGHAN

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BY
NICOLE LOUGHAN



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Divine Hotel
By Nicole Loughan

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CHAPTER 1

A long time ago, before most people can remember, a palace stood over Philadelphia. It was a place of refuge for the weak and weary of the city, a shining monument of marble, oak and brass that towered over the metropolis.

Good and evil were kept in balance there, until one day the scales tipped and evil won out. As the years passed, the marble and brass were stolen, and the oak was stripped of its shine. As the hotel fell into ruin, its inhabitants followed. All was not lost, though, for there was one chance to save the hotel—and its inhabitants—from this fate. Hidden not far away was an otherworldly gift meant to right the wrongs of the past, if only the right person could find it.



2002

“You can’t catch me,” the boy shouted as he flung open the doors to the dilapidated dining hall. The room was lit by slivers of sun that peeked through the cracks in the high ceiling, and sporadic beams of light that shone through hastily fastened boards covering the room’s many broken windows.

All that was left of the once great hall were water-stained plaster ornaments positioned high up on the ceiling, far out of reach. Everything of value was gone. The light fixtures, hardwood floors, door knobs, and every last bit of shined marble and brass had been stripped away. The floors were an uneven terrain of warped wood and broken boards. The edges of the room were a tapestry of trash, but the center of the great space, which had once housed long oak dining tables, was completely bare.

The girl in pursuit walked gingerly over the broken boards. She kept her eyes on the ground and squinted to keep the dust floating

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through the air out of her eyes.

“Slow down, Darrius!” she shouted.

She paused in front of a hole in the floor, which blocked her passage into the great room. She stared down and saw only darkness, which could mean the hole opened only down to the next floor, or could possibly reach as far down as all ten floors.

“Come on, Carol,” he shouted. “You aren’t gonna fall going over that tiny hole.”

She watched him move with feline grace over the broken boards and gathered her courage. She involuntarily held her breath, took two steps back, and focused her eyes on a point just past the opening.

She ran as fast as her legs would carry her toward the gap. She pushed off and wobbled as a loose board slid away from her. She fell awkwardly forward and threw her arms out to catch herself. She scratched her palms reaching out for the ledge and only managed a precarious hold. If she’d weighed just a bit more she might have fallen in.

Darrius raced to her. The strain of holding on was too much for her, one by one her fingers were slipping, the pinkies first, then the ring fingers, and then all at once the rest gave way and she fell. Darrius grasped her wrist just before she slipped out of sight. He grunted as he pulled her up and out of the hole. As soon as he had her over the edge he fell backwards and she landed beside him with a thud.

Carol lay back and caught her breath as Darrius joked, “I could’ve made that jump with you on my back, you chicken.”

She stared up at the ceiling and pointed at a plaster fruit basket. “Darrius, look, the ceiling. It’s changed again.”

He looked up and said, “I don’t see anything different. You always think that ceiling looks different. Who do you think would get all the way up there and fix the ceiling?”

“It does change,” she exclaimed. “It always looks like it’s about to fall apart, then it’s patched back up. Yesterday that fruit basket was just a hole in the ceiling.”

He laughed so hard the ground shook beneath him. When he stopped he realized the floor was shaking without any work from him, and he bolted upright.

“What is that?” Carol demanded, as she jumped up and looked down at the floor.

“It’s somebody pounding,” Darrius yelled as he, too, jumped up

to his feet.

More knocks rang out around the hall, shaking up dust, which floated freely through the room. Suddenly a shout could be heard below their feet. “Keep it down,” followed by a more distant yell, “Shut up.”

When the pounding ceased they could hear the wail of sirens outside. Darrius jumped up and ran to peek through the boards.

“What?” Carol asked.

“It’s the cops.”

“What do we do?”

“We run.”

CHAPTER 2

Sarah was startled out of a deep sleep when her phone rang, beating her alarm clock to its job. She answered the call and jotted down the important details. “Divine Hotel... woman arrested... little girl missing.”

She was barely awake as she wrote. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something just outside her window, and dropped the phone. It was him again, but as soon as she turned her head to look, he was gone. She leapt to her feet and ran to the window to try to catch a glimpse of him, but just like every other time, he was gone before she was sure of what she had seen.

She walked back to her bed, set her phone on the receiver, rubbed her eyes, and stared at the window. Her heart raced as she thought of him, because she knew it was going to be a bad day. He only ever came to her on bad days. She had seen him the morning her parents died. She saw him again just after a house fire, and once more when a childhood friend was in trouble.

He was so fast she could barely remember what he looked like. She didn’t think he was particularly short or tall. He was slender with either blonde or white hair. She tried to recall what she had just seen, but again all she saw was an outline. She decided perhaps the light was playing tricks on her and he was never there at all, but she was anxious just the same.

She looked back at her piece of paper, snatched it off the nightstand and hurried to her closet. She quickly dressed in wrinkled khakis and a powder blue blouse. In her rush to leave she neglected her hair, opting to brush her big brown curls with her fingers so they wouldn’t frizz with the interference of a brush. She grabbed a Pop Tart on her way out the door and ran to catch an early train.

She was the only person walking through the wide-open lobby of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services that morning. The

gleaming white foyer was empty except for one security guard who barely glanced up from his newspaper as she walked past. She went to the turnstile by the elevator and swiped her card at the pad. The beep of the machine and creak of the turnstile as she walked through echoed loudly in the empty room. She walked into the elevator and began her ascent. She felt as if she had forgotten something and went through her pockets, finding her wallet, money, and I.D. badge. She pulled out her badge on its lanyard and placed it around her neck. She patted her front pocket and realized she had forgotten her can of pepper spray.

“Damn it,” she said to herself. She opened her wallet, pulled out a ten-dollar bill and put it in her front pocket. This was a distraction technique taught to her by Ruth, her mentor. Ruth was a middle aged no-nonsense Caribbean woman, who the day she met Sarah said, “You look like Mary Poppins. You wear polyester shirts and flat shoes. Everybody going to know you ain’t Philly, and that’s bad. You need to protect yourself. Always keep ten dollars in your front pocket, and if somebody tries to rob you, pull out the bill, throw it hard on the ground, and run like hell.”

Sarah got off on the sixth floor and jogged down the beige carpeted hallway to her office. She grabbed a fresh notepad, intake forms, and two pens. She booted up her computer to report the call she had received that morning. She scribbled a note to her cube mate letting her know she was going to the Divine Hotel, and rushed back to the lobby.

She left the building and walked briskly down the street to the gated parking lot reserved for state vehicles. When she got there the gate attendant was out of sight and the shack was locked. She looked around and saw the lot attendant at the end of the middle row filling a tire with air. “I’ll be there in a minute, Sarah,” he shouted.

“I’m kind of in a hurry, Herb,” she yelled back.

“You’re going to have to give me ten.”

There was no rushing him. She was already going to be late so she darted across the street to the diner where she ate most of her daily meals. The small restaurant looked as if it was from another era, with shiny vinyl booths, Formica table tops, and chrome bar stools. The front of the store had an old-fashioned tin façade that announced the restaurant’s name in neon. In good repair the neon would have said “Phillies Diner,” but most of the bulbs were broken, leaving only an illuminated “P.” Sarah liked the food at the little restaurant, but ended

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up there more often because it was cheap and close to work.

The booths and barstools were empty, and the only person inside was the elderly man behind the counter, polishing the mahogany bar to a bright shine. He was the same man she'd seen there every morning for the past year. If he wasn't working the register, he was sitting in the corner drinking a cup of coffee.

She stepped up to the counter and said, "Good morning. I need one cup of Joe, please."

"I'm sorry, but that's going to be a few minutes. We just started a new pot."

She groaned and said, "A Coke then. Anything with caffeine will do."

He turned around to the fountain and filled a large Styrofoam cup. He placed the lid on with shaky hands, spilling a bit as he handed the drink to her. She fastened the lid tight and handed him two dollars. When he tried to give her the change she pointed to the can on the counter and said, "No thanks. You can give it to the charity. Thanks."

She bounded out of the restaurant thinking she should have gotten a diet soda because her pants had been mysteriously shrinking. She got as far as the sidewalk by the street, went to take a sip of her soda, and realized she had forgotten a straw. She let out a huff, looked up, and turned to go back in.

"Oh," she yelled. The man from the counter was behind her, hunched over and reaching his hand out.

"Miss, you left this." He was holding a straw out to her.

"Thank you." Sarah was surprised he made the effort to come out to give her the straw. He looked so frail. She thought it must have taken a lot of his energy to walk out after her. "Thank you, mister... um, oh I'm sorry. I never got your name."

"I'm John. Thank you for asking, Sarah."

A look of terror spread over her face, as she realized she had never told him her name before.

"How do you..." she started.

He pointed to her chest. "You're wearing a badge."

"Oh" she said relieved. "I forget it's there. I'm sorry I've never thought to ask you your name. Sometimes I get so busy."

"Perfectly understandable, young miss. You're a social worker, right? Must be a tough job," he said.

It was a tough job, and she was starting to hate it, but she was not

going to tell a perfect stranger that. She nodded her head and forced a smile. He smiled back. He was handsome for an old man. He had a strong jaw line and bright blue eyes, and though the skin sagged around his neck, his face was smooth.

He continued. "It seems to me it would take a person who had seen a lot in their young life to take on a job like that."

The hair on the back of her neck stood up. He said it like he knew about her. She looked to the ground and searched her mind for how he could know what she had been through, and determined that he couldn't. She looked back up and said, "Well it was nice to meet you..." but trailed off when she realized he was already gone.

She stared at the spot where he had just been, confused. She looked back into the diner and saw him standing behind the counter already. He waved at her and she waved back. She shook off the feeling that she'd missed something and started for the parking lot. When she got there Herb was at the gate holding up her keys. She checked them out, got her car, and left.

CHAPTER 3

“They’ve got Mom. We gotta get out of here and find Grandma,” Darrius shouted as he watched the police through the slats.

Carol agreed.

Darrius turned away from the window and searched the floor of the room for a board big enough to make a bridge. He found one that was wide, long, and solid, and placed it over the hole.

“Go across,” he said. “I’ll hold it for you.”

He placed his hands on either side of the board and steadied it for her as she inched across. She was nearly to the other side when she was startled by a deep voice from the corner of the room.

“Darrius,” the voice echoed off of the empty space. “Your mother has my stuff and she looks like she’s about to lose it. You’re the man of the house now. You’re gonna have to pay for it, little man.”

“Hurry up,” Darrius shouted, and Carol leapt off the board onto the other side of the hole. The board fell and bounced around again and again before it made a distant thud. Footsteps fell behind Darrius, and Carol squeaked in fright.

“Run, Carol. Find grandma and don’t tell the cops who you are. Don’t say anything. Just go.”

She ran to the other side of room, past the broken elevator and into the dark stairwell. Just before she slammed the door she heard her brother scream. She turned around to run back to him when he shouted, “Find grandma and I’ll find you.”



Sarah drove through the gleaming blocks of Center City, still golden with the light from the morning sun bouncing off of the skyscrapers. Hot dog and pita vendors were propping up their awnings

and waving at each other. She loved Center City. It was her home. She was on her way to a place she had grown to loathe. Her stomach churned, and it only hurt worse the closer she got.

As she drove, her surroundings became more distressed. The grass and trees disappeared, giving way to uneven concrete sidewalks, and graffiti marred buildings. The streets appeared to narrow because the shoulders were littered with abandoned cars with flat tires and missing license plates. The golden light of Center City did not exist where she was headed, and she longed to get back to the light and the safety.

She passed the last of the gated-in alleys filled with trash and reached her destination. When she arrived at the Divine Hotel she parked on the street in front of a line of police cruisers. The officers were inside the ten-story brick building which announced its name, Divine Lorraine Hotel, with a tall sign on its roof in red letters that had once been lit. It had probably looked quite modern and fashionable forty or so years ago. The building stood out on Broad Street like a sore thumb. It was Victorian in style with keystone arches and castle-like towers capping its corners. She could tell that it had once displayed ornate stone adornments, but they had worn away.

She knew a little of the building's history. It was cherished by some in the neighborhood; they talked about it like an old friend. An historical marker announced its importance in history as the first high-class, fully integrated hotel on the East Coast, but the sign had been neglected just like the building, and left to rot. The hotel was officially condemned and meant to be empty, however people always seemed to find a way inside and squatted there.

Sarah walked past a man sleeping on a bench in front of the building. He was using a cardboard box as a sleeping bag. He had no covers or pillows, only newspapers balled up under his head for support. He didn't move as she approached. When she walked into the building she noticed there was not a functioning light in the lobby. The only light came from a dirty front window.

There was a small office, visible through a window, marked "*information*." The darkened room beyond the glass held one desk and mounds of garbage. The desk was festooned with spider webs which reached to the walls and ceiling. It appeared the room had been out of use for many years.

There were also small tin mailboxes built into the wall. More than half of the doors were gone, but it looked like the carrier still delivered

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to the broken boxes, many overflowing with jammed-in envelopes. While she was looking at the boxes, trying to read the names, she was greeted by a heavysset officer trudging down the stairs, kicking garbage as he went.

He tipped his hat to her as he approached. "You must be DHS?"

"Yes, Sarah," She replied holding out her hand.

"We found the little girl we were looking for. We caught her running down the stairs. She hasn't said a word to us though," he said, making his way back up the stairs. "This is a nasty place; little girl and her mom living in here with all these scumbags. There's no electricity, no heat, no water. They just squat here. Mom stole food from the market down the street this morning. Grocer said she does it all the time. He's not having it anymore. We get up in here and we find all sorts of stuff: shoes, electronics, CDs. We have to take her in."

He stopped for a moment and took a few labored breaths before they continued up the stairs.

"Anyway, we arrested the lady. Her name's Linda, and she said she wants us to phone her mom. The problem is, the number she gave us is disconnected."

Sarah arrived at the threshold of the apartment and a pungent ammonia smell hit her nostrils. Cats, she thought. There was that and the faint odor of human waste. She must have shown her disgust because the officer said, "Oh yeah. They've been using a bucket in the bathroom. No running water."

When she walked in she found a young girl sitting on a bare mattress in the living room. Not that it was much of a room to live in. There was an opening in the wall for a fireplace, but there was no mantle and there were only a few tiles left inside the pit. The floors were untreated wood so warped the light from the apartment below was visible between the slats. The ceilings were high and pink insulation poured out of gaping holes. The mattress where the girl sat had little black dots in the crevices and clusters of similar flecks massing at the corners. Ugh, bed bugs, she thought as she shrugged her shoulder uneasily.

Sarah knew bed bugs were rampant in the city at this time of year. One of the other DHS cars was so badly infested the year before they had to wait for winter to come and leave the doors open overnight to finally freeze them out.

After the last run-in with bed bugs the department issued protocol

to deal with them, starting with putting any clothes that came in contact with bed bugs immediately into a dryer on high heat. Sarah looked at the little girl, then around the apartment for clean clothes.

She bent down to the little girl and said, “Where’s your bedroom, sweetie?”

She cocked her head to the side and held out her hand, sweeping it around the room.

The heavysset officer said, “There’s only the one room.”

There was nothing for children in the room. Just the mattress, a red ripped up couch, and garbage.

“Where’s all your stuff?” she asked.

The girl looked to the kitchen table, then down at her feet.

“That bag?” she asked as she made her way to a duffel bag on the kitchen table. She went to it and brought it over to the girl.

“Can I look through this?” she asked. “I’m just looking for clothes.”

The girl nodded and Sarah pulled out army toys, Barbie dolls, and finally some clothes, only pajamas and one t-shirt. No pants, no underwear. The pajama shirt looked too big for the slender girl.

She held it out and said, “My name’s Sarah, sweetie. What’s yours?”

When she didn’t answer she said, “I just want to help.”

The girl shook her head and Sarah turned over the pajama shirt in her hand. It had dinosaurs on the front and the tag had a name written with a Sharpie, “Darrius.”

She pointed to the tag, looked to the little girl and asked, “Who’s Darrius?”

The little girl's eyes grew big. Sarah watched her as she looked from Sarah to the door. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Is he here? In the building?”

The girl sobbed and Sarah put her arm on her shoulder. “Sweetie, if he’s here I have to find him. We can’t leave him in here.” The girl nodded and pointed up.

Sarah popped up and interrupted the police officers in the hallway. “There’s another kid, a little boy named Darrius. Stay with her. I’m going to find him.” The cop who had shown her upstairs offered to go up with her, and she accepted the help. She darted down the hallway, over broken boards and glass, back to the stairwell. The stairwell on the upper floors was pitch black with no windows or lights to guide

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them.

Sarah took the flashlight from the officer and shone it on the steps in front of her. They made their way up the stairs slowly to avoid stepping on trash and broken steps. Some of the concrete steps had broken away leaving a steep slope in their place.

Sarah moved faster than he, and was nearly a flight ahead of him when he slipped and fell. She rushed back down to him, and found that he had bashed his shin. The fall had ripped his pants, and she could see blood soaking through his pant leg.

“Are you okay?” she asked, flashing a light on his silver name badge that said J. Trudge. “Officer Trudge. I’m sorry...”

She stopped talking when she heard the sound of a door slam.

“That was the door we went in downstairs wasn’t it?” she asked.

He nodded. “Go ahead without me. I’ll make my way down.”

She pointed the light at the steps and darted down them, quicker this time and knowing the terrain better.

She rushed down six flights of stairs, skipping every other step, and emerged in the grimy lobby she had been in before. It was still empty and dark, but she saw no sign of anybody in the room. She dashed to the front window but was unable to see anybody walking away from the building. She turned back to the room and noticed that some of the garbage behind the desk had shifted. She slid onto the desk, flung her legs to the other side, and waded through the piles of garbage. She walked to the back of the room and discovered a door near the moved garbage. It opened onto a long wide hallway lined with faded white columns, all crumbling and decorated with graffiti. The cracked slate floor led to an archway which housed a revolving door. The glass of the door was broken and the metal had bent under the pressure of insulation stuffed between the doors.

There were identical staircases on either side of the room near her. She flashed her light up each set, and found that they were boarded up at the top. She walked past the stairs and saw two identical sitting rooms. One was engulfed in black mold, the other held teetering piles of trash. She bypassed the rooms and ran toward the revolving door. On either side of the back wall there were two doors facing opposite directions.

She flashed her light to the floor by one door and saw that it was still littered with bugs and dirt, the other door the same. She turned around and ran back to the moldy room. She flashed her light in it and

found many alcoves along the wall. She flashed her light in the alcoves one by one and found that the last alcove held a door. She pointed the flashlight to the floor and saw a cleared quarter circle in front of the door and a line of bug corpses along the outer edge of the circle. She pulled open the door and found herself in the courtyard of the Divine.

Balconies soared overhead in the courtyard, eight on either side reaching up to the top of the building. On the front of the building there were two large arches set in the brick, one on top of the other. The tops of the arches were open air bridges to get to the other sides of the building. The entire structure was built as two almost completely separate buildings held together by the walkways.

At the farthest end of the courtyard she saw a man walking with his hands on the neck of a young boy. They were walking away from the building.

“Hey,” she shouted, running after them.

The boy turned his head, but the man holding him pushed his head back around and moved faster.

“Stop, right now,” she shouted. The man quickened his pace, and she took off at a sprint in towards him. When the man turned and saw her running for him, he pushed the boy forward and looked as if he was preparing to run, but instead slowed down and turned the boy around. When Sarah caught up she saw a police car round the block and understood why he slowed.

“Just taking my son out for a walk,” the large man said in a deep base. He bent his head forward to look down at her.

“What’s your son’s name?” she asked, smiling at the young boy.

“Kevin,” the man replied.

She held her hand out, “My name’s Sarah and I’m looking for a little boy named Darrius. Either of you seen him?”

The boy gave an almost imperceptible smile. The man refused to take her hand and said, “Nope.”

He turned the boy back around and Sarah saw the tag sticking out of his shirt, labeled Darrius. She said firmly, “Darrius, come with me.”

The boy took a step in her direction when the man tightened his grip. Sarah felt the heft of the Maglite in her hands and made a split second decision. She yelled, “Catch,” and threw the light as hard as she could at the chest of the large man. He took his hands off the boy to grab the light and Sarah yelled, “Run!”

CHAPTER 4

Back in the safety of the apartment, she bent down on one knee to stand eye to eye with the children. She held her hand out to introduce herself. "I'm Sarah," she said.

"Darius," the boy said, holding out his hand. "This is my sister, Carol."

The little girl leaned into her big brother. He was slender, and Sarah guessed he was nine. Carol was thin as well, but she had chubby cheeks, which may have made her look younger than her years. Sarah thought she was probably six.

"I'm going to find you a nice place to stay tonight while we look for your grandmother. You guys want to come with me?"

They agreed. "I need to get you some new clothes, too; do you know of any stores nearby?" Darius offered the flea market opening around the corner at nine o'clock.

Sarah and the children left together, leaving the police behind to search the rest of the building. It didn't take long for Darius to lead the group to the flea market. He walked with the surety of a much older boy, knowing exactly where he was going. Carol walked slower and kept her head down. After nearly ten minutes in motion, Darius was very far ahead of them. He turned and looked back every few moments to make sure he was not too far ahead. He finally slowed enough for them to catch up. Then he asked, "Is my mom going to jail?"

"I don't know," Sarah replied.

"Will we ever go home?"

"That's not my decision, Darius. It's up to a judge."

"Our mom ain't bad," he said. "Please help her. We got no clothes 'cause she buys new clothes when ours get dirty. She don't like laundromats. People be gettin' attacked at our laundromat. They steal while you wait. They ain't nothing but common criminals, my mom says. Plus, these ain't even dirty," he said holding out his nearly clean,

patterned shirt with a small smattering of food stains down the front and smudges around the collar. “She gets new clothes when ours are nasty. And she gets us everything we want. We never go hungry. Tell her, Carol.”

Carol nodded her head in agreement.

“There’s lots of kids hungry with holes in their clothes. We better than those kids. Our mom ain’t like that. She never hit us neither.” Darrius pleaded, “Please tell the police to be nice to our mom.”

Sarah said she would, and she was telling the truth. She would add his statements to her reports. She also observed that the children didn’t appear starved, mistreated, or dirty. Their clothes did look nearly new; that would go in the report also, but she knew it was unlikely to be enough to detract from their mother’s multiple shortcomings and the state of their home. The kids would never be allowed to live in the Divine again.

“Who was that man who was trying to take you?” Sarah asked.

“Oh, that guy. They call him Runty. He’s pretty mad about my mom gettin’ busted by the cops. That was his stuff in our house.”

“You should have told the police that, Darrius. They need to know. It might help your mom.”

Darrius looked at Carol and then back at Sarah. “Nope.”

“Why?” she asked.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

She spent the rest of the morning with the kids. First, they went to the flea market, which was hastily set up in a roped-off block. The merchants used folding card tables set up unevenly in long rows on either side of the street. The vendors stood behind the tables on the sidewalk leaving the center of the road open so people could walk freely. The market sold everything from live fish to knives, food, clothing, and even furniture.

Carol, Sarah, and Darrius stepped into the flow of patrons already making their way down the row of tables, bypassing those who stopped to make purchases. Carol tugged on Sarah’s blouse and pointed to a table selling knock-off Disney and Nickelodeon products. “I like her,” she said, pointing to a Dora the Explorer t-shirt with a smiling Dora decal waving at them. Sarah pulled out her wallet and purchased the shirt she was sure was not a legally licensed Dora product. She got a plastic bag for her purchase that said, King Chinese Buffet, and no receipt.

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Darrius enjoyed looking through the bootlegged video tapes. The vendor assured them, “They are of the finest quality and are in English.”

Sarah said no to movies but did let Carol buy a pinwheel from the man.

When they came across an enclosed aquarium with a frog Darrius said, “Sarah look. He’s just like Kermit. I’ll take great care of him.”

She was not convinced and continued walking down the row. Darrius jumped in front of her, opened up his eyes as wide as he could and said, “I’m going to have such a rough night sleeping in a strange place. Don’t you think it’ll be easier if I had a friend to keep me company?”

She stopped, turned around, and went back for the aquarium. After a good amount of haggling, she bought Darrius a new striped Ralph Lauren polo and shorts from the man who also sold live aquatic animals, and talked him into a reduced rate for the frog. They took their purchases back to the Divine where the children changed clothes and then left, throwing their old clothes in the trash pile in the lobby on their way out.

Sarah pulled into IHOP and when the kids saw the sign they smiled ear to ear.

“Yes!” said Carol kicking her feet excitedly. Darrius held up his palm and she gave him a high five. They leapt out of the car and took off skipping down the sidewalk. Sarah let them run for a moment and then wrangled them into the building and ushered them to the bathroom to wash their hands. Sarah stood in the doorway to the bathroom, to watch the kids while still affording them some privacy. She noticed when they placed their hands in the water it ran dark brown.

“Wash your faces and your arms too, please,” she said. “Behave in here; I’m going to make a call.”

She stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind her. She could hear the two of them giggling and splashing. She worried about what the state of the bathroom might be when they were finished.

She pulled out her phone and called her boss to arrange housing. She jotted down an address and the kids came out, wet all over, but smiling and ready to eat.

They both ordered pancakes in the shape of clown faces and on the side they got chocolate milk. They ate everything on their plates as if there was a world record at stake. Once their plates were clean they

both leaned back and held their tummies.

Carol rubbed her stomach until she let out a burp that was so loud people in the surrounding booths turned around. She covered her mouth and her eyes went wide with embarrassment, “Sorry,” she said. “I never ate so much.”

After pancakes Sarah got them back in the car and started for the address on the paper. She looked at the kids in the back seat, both smiling and staring out the window. “I’m going to take you to a nice foster home,” she said. “I know this lady. She’s very nice.”

“It’s just temporary, right?” Darrius said.

“It is. We will have to see if we can find your grandmother.”

“What about Runty?” Darrius asked.

“What do you mean?”

He replied, “If Runty finds us, we’re going to be in big trouble. What if the people we are staying with let him take us away? You need to find our grandma fast.”

“I’ll find your grandmother as fast as I can,” she promised. “And I’ll give you my phone number. If you need me, call anytime.”

He seemed satisfied with that answer and continued the ride without another word. They pulled up to a row home neighborhood on the cusp of Center City and Sarah walked them up to the corner lot home. It was bright and inviting with a large grassy front lawn. They made their way to the front porch of the house and Sarah started to say her goodbyes, but then she remembered her file.

She pulled a Polaroid camera out of her bag and asked the kids to pose for a photo. When she got back to the office she would have to create a new case file for the kids, and the first entry in the file would be these photos.

She took Darrius’s photo first. He wanted to look tough so he frowned and put his head down. After the photo he laughed. Carol smiled into the camera and said, “Cheese.”

The foster mother walked out to the porch to greet the kids and Sarah explained that Darrius came with a frog. The woman looked down at him and said, “I love frogs,” and then invited them in.

Sarah took that as her cue to go. She found herself very sad saying goodbye to them. She was only with them for a few hours, but they had filled her with more joy than she had felt in a long time. She really wanted to make sure she took good care of them. When she pulled away, Darrius was already inside but she could see that Carol had run

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out to the curb and was waving to her with one hand and holding the pinwheel in the other.