



WAYWARD

a novel by jason garrett

# WAYWARD

A FINE PLACE TO CALL HOME

a free preview of the novel by

jason garrett

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# ONE

Chaos. It could keep a first-year teacher frazzled and a tenured educator landlocked behind a desk. Chaos came with a warning bell, every afternoon at a quarter past three. Ten seconds later, the halls overflowed with the eleven hundred and ninety-three students obtaining an education at Shelby County Public School, District 7. As true as clockwork, chaos produced a wave of noise that rolled across the metal lockers and waxed floors.

Iris Porter was immune to all the commotion and the last to leave homeroom, classroom number three. She looked over the sea of bobbing heads and cold weather coats with a smile that could calm a room full of rambunctious students. One of two first-grade teachers at the school, she was only in her fourth year as a full-time educator, but had the steadiness of a seasoned veteran. She avoided the stampede with effortless grace, all the while watching as students struggled with coat sleeves and book bags.

Tending to a frayed corner of construction paper artwork on display over the lockers outside classroom number five, she read the artist's name and

turned to find the student laughing with friends. Moving along toward the door, she received smiles and waves from various students, some of whom singled her out by name. Iris was *that* teacher, the one children adored and excitedly circled in hopes of a glimmer of recognition and fond attention. What they did not know was that Iris lived for those moments, nowadays more than ever before.

Seeing a pink bunny key ring fall to the tile floor, she knelt down to protect it from being trampled. Taking the brightly colored keepsake between her fingers, she offered it back to the little girl from whose coat pocket it had fallen. A fair-haired girl with bright blue eyes, she resembled Iris in many ways, and smiled in surprise as she recognized her key chain in the teacher's hand. Before Iris allowed her to take it back, she dispensed some teacherly advice.

“Remember to be careful walking home, and mind who you talk to and invite in. Okay, Ella?”

“Yes, Missus Porter.”

Giving her a wink, Iris stood and exited the school. The children racing toward cars and parents trampled freshly fallen autumn leaves, kicking colorful mounds and flinging handfuls at their friends. She felt the afternoon sun on her face and inhaled the brisk air as deeply as her lungs would allow, savoring its rejuvenating affect. Her long blond tresses shimmered, looking even more lustrous against the chocolate-brown cable-knit sweater she wore.

Taking gentle, steady strides across the yard, she took a seat on a bench which was painted blue and gold, the school colors. On the back boards of the bench, the school mascot's owl had been painted. Iris happened to like that owl. She thought it far better than the ridiculous mascot who danced along the sidelines at football and basketball games. With eyes fixed on the sea of chaos streaming away from the school, she kept the owl under arm and restfully crossed her leg.

“Addy, let's go!”

Overhearing a familiar name coming from the yard in front of the nearby band room, she looked hopefully and found an adorably dressed, cinnamon-haired girl ducking into the backseat of a bright blue, contemporary muscle car. Recognizing the boy behind the wheel, her eyes grew dim. Ignoring the driver and the driver's sister, she watched the girl in the backseat, who never noticed her as they drove away. Reflecting internally, she was immune to the gusts of wind that caused the blanket of leaves in the yard to start to dance and circle.

Covering her right hand with the left, she ran her fingertips over an etched pewter ring containing a cut diamond and an aquamarine gemstone. Breathing deeper, she tuned out the chatter as parents and children hurried through the increasing wind. Subconsciously, she began twisting the ring around her ring finger. Thinking of everything the ring symbolized, Iris closed her eyes and remembered a night one decade ago, when that same adorable girl entered her life...



Iris Meynell had not stepped foot in Shelby County for more than five years, having left her hometown of Elfordult an hour after graduating high school. Standing in the heart of the town's annual Harvest Festival, she went unrecognized by people whose names and faces she remembered as though she had seen them only yesterday. Her own reflection was as much a stranger to her as she was to her former neighbors, no doubt enhanced by her layered clothing and the way her face hid behind locks of dull, dirty-blond hair. Finding great comfort in her anonymity, she drifted into the shadows and watched all the festive partakers who blocked her true target.

A man who called himself "Jeremiah Jest" had set up a stand in the heart of the festival, amusing the locals with feats of magic and illusion. Jest hid behind a colorful outfit and face paint, lulling his audience by convincing them he was a harmless oaf peddling for tips. In truth, he was one of the most powerful, cutthroat magicians active in North America. He had risen from the trenches of pickpocketing and evolved into the type of criminal who crept into the homes of those he had entertained hours earlier, terrorizing them, or worse.

Iris had first learned of him after doing some breaking and entering of her own. She had snuck into the apartment of Jest's former assistant, a woman he had blinded in one eye after she spoke to the police about him. Jest's

assistant was one name in a list of dozens that Iris had tracked all around the world in her quest for a reckoning she thought might bury the pain she harbored. Jest was the worst of the worst on her list, but she knew he did not work alone.

In the few years that she had been aware of the magic in the world, she had become painfully aware of the abuse and neglect of magic too. The death of her younger brother some years earlier had been enough to open her eyes. She could no longer turn away from those who had no concern for lives destroyed or powers unbalanced. Their recklessness enraged her enough that she had drifted in search of those who needed defending and, especially, those who needed to be reined in.

She was hardly heroic, not according to the morality often associated with famed heroes. At times, she was the most frightening monster in her life. She tried to restore the balance by targeting her rage at those who were far more terrible. Inevitably, she believed the day would come when someone came searching for her, just as she searched for her examples to be made.

Like others she had crossed paths with, she had heard horror stories about Jest and seen firsthand what he was capable of doing. The police were too close-minded or overwhelmed to capably deal with Jest's brand of trouble; Iris was not. She thought she had gone unnoticed, but questioned her autonomy when Jest led her back to her hometown. Whatever he had planned for her, home was as good a place as any for Iris to kill a monster.

Slipping a hand from her coat pocket, she pinched a small, red burlap ball between her thumb and index finger. Containing a mix of herbs, strands of Jest's hair and a coin she had managed to swipe from a street vendor who sold him a cup of coffee, the bag was her second line of defense. Dropping it at the base of a honey locust tree, she had established a triangle around Jest's booth and was ready to make her move. Waiting for the last members of his audience to wander away, Iris' cold glare broke at the sound of whimpering.

Hiding under the skirt of Jest's booth, a small girl with remarkably big hazel eyes wept. She sat with her arms around her legs and her freckled, tear-stained cheeks pressed to her knees. Her cinnamon-red hair had been pulled into two uneven ponytails, wrapped in marble-like holders that clashed with her coat and a hooded sweatshirt she practically swam in. Iris searched for the girl's parents, expecting them to be within sight of her, but found no one.

"There, there, little one."

Jest's voice cut through Iris like an icy wind and made her gasp as she redirected her attention toward his hands. Finding the magician kneeling down, she watched his finger curl as he hooked the girl's chin to lift her head. From his other hand, Jest produced a silk flower and swept it across the girl's cheeks and nose. Offering a toothy smile in reply to her giggle, he reached for her hands and pulled her to her feet.

"No!" Iris gasped.

She watched as Jest held the child's hand and led her around to the back entrance of his booth, near where his parked van awaited. Pushing aside two

guys trying to impress their dates at the ringtoss tent, she barreled across the aisle as they jeered at her. Without even thinking, she swept the girl up in her left arm. Protectively nestling her, Iris used her other hand to strike Jest in the back with a defensive jab, knocking him to his knees.

Propping himself upright, Jest bared his teeth as he hissed at the one who had kept him from taking the child. Unafraid, Iris held the girl tighter and pressed her foot against Jest's hand. The magician practically broke his teeth in pain, buckling at the shoulders and elbows before collapsing on the ground. Stooping down, Iris pressed her palm against Jest's oily face and warned him with words spoken in Portuguese.

“Você está marcada, seu doente!”

Laughing at the threat of being marked, but offended by being called sick, Jest noticed a wooden medallion and crystal tethered to a leather cord around Iris' neck. Glaring at her in recognition, he was not prepared when she raised her foot and struck him across the cheek with the heel of her boot. Pivoting, her heart pounded out of tandem to the soft beat of the child's heart as she rushed away from Jest's booth before being recognized.

“It's all right,” she repeated with every other step.

“It's all right,” the girl whispered back to her.

Startled, Iris had forgotten the child, and came to a sudden standstill in the crossroads of two streets dedicated to the Harvest Festival. Looking around at all the people passing them by, Iris felt how warmly the little girl kept her arms around her neck. The streetlights sparkled in the child's eyes

and, as they both stood staring at each other with their mouths agape, the little girl smiled. Iris could not remember the last time she had seen such innocence, and could not help but smile back.

“Hi,” she heard herself say to the child. “It’s okay.”

The child stared back at her inquisitively, and then turned as she recognized a voice in the crowd.

“Addy! Addy Porter!” a panicked voice shouted. “Addy!”

Iris saw a man rushing toward her and felt her heart start to pound even harder. The girl, Addy, stretched out her hand and wriggled her fingers at the man, who reached out to hold her hand. He was a plain enough looking man, but the film of tears in his eyes and the look of relief on his face softened Iris. Kissing the hand of the child, who could not have been more than five years old, he smiled as Addy recognized him.

“Hi, Daddy,” she said, petting the crystal around Iris’ neck with her other hand.

Looking at Iris, he said, “You found her. Thank you.”

Iris could do nothing but nod her head.

Giving Addy’s hand a playful tug, her father said, “No more wandering off, Tweetums.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

Putting her head down, Addy snuggled against Iris and rested her cheek against the woman’s neck. Feeling her own eyes sting with tears, Iris had not felt compassion or human connection in far too long. Instinctively, she

cradled the child, stroking her leg with the pad of her thumb. The gesture was slight enough, tender enough, to draw the eye of the girl's father.

"Graysen. I'm Addy's dad, Graysen Porter."

"Iris."

"Iris," he repeated with a smile.

"You call her Tweetums?"

Grinning, as she hoped he might, he explained, "It used to be 'sweet one' but she's always been a mumbler, so..."

"Tweetums," Iris said, making Addy smile at the sound of her pet name.

Not letting go of Addy's hand, Graysen used his left hand to shake Iris' right. When they released hands, Iris brushed long strands of hair away from her cheek, tucking it behind her heavily pierced ear. Having four piercings in her ear and one in her nose, she hardly fit the image of the town. Even so, there was a feeling of belonging she had lacked too long that she suddenly felt in the company of Addy and Graysen.

"This one's always running off on me. My fault, though. It's been too long since I've taken her anywhere. She was right beside me one second, and then not at all the next. Where did you find her?"

"Uh, over that way," Iris said, being purposely unspecific.

"Daddy, I want ice cream!"

Both adults laughed at her excitement.

Addy stroked Iris' hair and said, "Come too."

“It’s the least I could do,” Graysen agreed. “If you don’t like ice cream, I could buy you a kabob or coffee at least.”

“No,” she was quick to say and, realizing both that she was hungry and that she had been dismissive, smiled, saying, “I love ice cream.”

Showing a boyish grin, Graysen could not hide the weariness in his eyes. It was the same with Iris, and as they walked toward the corner ice cream shop, they kept quiet about their painful pasts. Both adults smiled at each other as Addy practically squirmed out of Iris’ arms. A child’s joy over such a simple thing as ice cream, and being allowed to share that joy as Graysen held the door open for her, made Iris feel as though dark times might finally and unexpectedly be behind her.



“Are you waiting for a ride, little girl?”

Drawn away from her memories by a familiar voice, Iris looked upon the face of Addy’s father, aged a decade. Standing in front of the afternoon sun, his lean shadow shielded her eyes, but did not hide the turbulent shards of blue and green hues. His smile was just as charming now, but she could still see hints of fatigue in his mannerisms. All around Graysen Porter a wall of leaves fell, surprising Iris as much as the sudden appearance of her husband.

Looking around the schoolyard, she saw a wide ring of leaves had fallen around her bench, having plucked clean the grassy perimeter inside and

outside of its boundaries. Crossing in front of her, Graysen said nothing about it. He took a seat on the other end of the bench, only slightly out of reach from her fingers. With an easy grin, he watched a group of boys ride by on their bikes, laughing and egging one another along. They behaved the moment they recognized the teacher sitting next to him and made him smirk in understanding.

Planting the palms of her hands against the bench, Iris locked her arms at the joints and hung her head as she leaned forward. Her pristine beauty was marred by a type of darkness; a coldness that crept in and haunted her even at her happiest times. Those times had revolved around Addy and Graysen for ten years. Now her heart pounded hard enough to leave her short of breath, and she could feel sweat on the back of her neck that intensified the scent of lavender oil that she wore.

Breathing in gently he asked, “How was your day?”

The wind rang in her right ear, but in her left she could hear that Graysen was measuring his breaths. She also knew he was too smart, too observant, not to have seen the pattern in the leaves. She shut her eyes and patted her fingers along the underside of the bench, mimicking his breathing rhythm in order to calm herself. Instead of answering verbally, she nodded her head and stared at the dual-gemmed ring on her right hand.

“Good. The Harvest Festival starts tomorrow. We were going to meet an hour ago and try to find those boxes you needed.”

Gasping, she asked, “An hour ago?”

“It’s half past four,” he told her and looked toward the sun, which sat low in the sky now. “Have you been sitting out here since the bell rang?”

Swallowing, Iris noticed the chill she felt and said, “Yes.”

Pulling a partially full bottle of water from the front pocket of his blazer, Graysen removed the lid and passed the bottle to Iris. Accepting it, she drank more than half the contents in a couple of long gulps. Shutting her eyes as the ache in her throat was reduced to a tickle, she coughed softly and took another swig. The air was colder as she breathed in, and she shivered when the breeze cut through the eyelets in the sleeves of her sweater. Opening her eyes, she saw that Graysen had stood to remove his blazer, and shrank in embarrassment as he draped it around her shoulders and back.

“Thank you.”

“It’s what I live for.”

Shaking her head and trying to resist giving him a pleased smile, she bit at her lip and squinted into the spirited sun.

“Are you good to drive?”

Nodding, she braced her shoulders and elbows, even as her feet and hips drifted toward him, saying, “I am.”

“Good. My car’s in the shop.”

“The shop?”

“She said with surprise in her voice,” he quipped.

“Not surprise, just ... yes, surprise,” she laughed.

“Surprised I couldn’t fix it on my own?”

“No, surprised that you finally took it to the shop.”

“I’m patient and determined, but not proud,” he shrugged.

Quietly, she nodded in agreement.

“Do you think I could get a ride home?”

Seeing his smile, she could not help but laugh, and accepted his hand as he helped her to her feet. Passing through the ring of leaves, she fidgeted by continuing to twist the ring on her right hand. Glancing toward the windows of the school for any watchful eyes, she noted that the only person looking at her was her husband. When he batted his eye at her, she smirked and nudged him playfully with her shoulder, as they walked toward the faculty parking lot.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JASON GARRETT** is the author of eight novels. His novel *Pursuit* was named a finalist in two categories at the 2012 National Indie Excellence Awards. His novel *Troubled Souls* was awarded winner of both the 2013 National Indie Excellence Award for Horror and the 2013 Beverly Hills Book Award for Horror.

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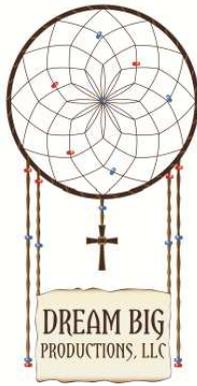
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