

The Incident

by Paul de Denus

"Got two little girls missing," Sheriff Meeks says, nodding back to the Hables standing separate on the porch. *"Look for anything... everything... any clue."*

Behind the farmhouse, thin trees along the fogging distance wait on us, black scratch marks against a slate colored sky. It's as quiet as the dead. Our formed line wobbles, each of us eight to ten feet apart like we were told, eyes on the ground over Len Hable's furrowed field. In summer, this farmland is tall and friendly, walls of wheat that wave right back at you - so full of life - but not this autumn day.

Black crows hop about the upturned soil, sift through collateral debris in search of their own evidence of life, and warily bounce away as we approach. Kathleen Hable stumbles up behind our line, Sheriff Meeks's hand at her elbow like she might fall. Her worn linen coat doesn't seem enough for this brisk day but she wouldn't wait. The wind sends wisps of thin blonde hair searching around her face, catching in the crooked ravine of her open mouth. Len Hable is down at the stationhouse, answering questions along with several men who work his farm.

"Just routine," Sheriff Meeks tells Kathleen with a stare, the same stare he gave all of us who volunteered to search.

Stevie Fenwick who works at Burwell's Hardware sidles along next to me, adjusts the collar of his seam-sealed fleece jacket and tucks his neck down inside like a turtle, causing his glasses to fog. *"Them girls just didn't up and disappear. Think someone took 'em."* It doesn't come across as a question. The Jeremy brothers flank opposite. They've come over from their farm three miles up wearing down hunting vests, one blue plaid, one plain red, to tell them apart I suppose but I'm not that familiar with their names anyway, only

know one's been in trouble with the law off and on and I think it's odd he's out here in the shadow of the sheriff.

A lot of folks turned out to help. Farming neighbors and townies alike, members of the church, several high school kids, a few from the grain exchange. There are some I don't recognize. My gaze lingers for a second. It's bad business this. Brings out the best and worst in everyone.

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From the trees, the missing girls watch the bobbing line of advancing adults. Missy Hable wears a petulant, six-year-old frown. It's getting dark and the incident from earlier that morning has almost been forgotten.

"I wonder if we're in trouble?"

"You are," her younger sister says, eyes dead tired shooting down on the approaching specter of their mother. She wanders away, out of the woods.

