

WAKING LAZARUS

a novel by

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Chapter 1: Drowning

24 Years Ago

The first time Jude Allman died, he was eight years old.

It happened after a day of ice fishing with his father William. Mid-January. Duck Lake. Twenty degrees above zero on the thermometer, and something far below that on the wind chill scale. Jude sat on an overturned pickle bucket most of the day, occasionally threading a hook through fresh corn or salmon eggs before dropping his line into the inky hole. A few times, when he was impatient for a bite, Jude put his face over the hole and cupped his hands to peer at the watery world beneath. He saw a few sunfish, but no perch--none of the perch his father considered such "good eatin."

"Should be headin' back," William finally said after a few hours. The comment startled Jude, partly because he himself had

been ready to leave for hours, partly because it was only his father's third sentence of the day. (The first two, respectively, had been "Ready to get goin'?" and "Hungry?") Jude slid off the bucket and reeled in his line the last time. His hook had no salmon egg. Maybe an unseen good eatin perch had nibbled it, or maybe the egg had shriveled and slid into the chilly water, resigning itself to fate.

They gathered their gear and started toward the pickup. Jude counted each footfall: from memory, he knew it would be 327 steps.

For a long time, all Jude could hear was the steady crunch of their boots, amplified into a hollow echo by the ice. Every so often, a forced cough from his dad, one of those quick huffs to clear his lungs. Jude stared down at his boots, watching as he continued to count. Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight. He lifted his gaze again to stare at William's broad back, wishing he could match his father's long, loping strides. It was 327 steps for him; how many would that be for his father? Seventy-two, seventy-three, seventy-four. He pictured his mother, waiting at home with a steaming cup of hot chocolate, maybe a cookie or two. Chocolate chip. Eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty--

For a moment, he felt like he was on the roller coaster at the county fair, gravity's pull licking at his stomach.

Instantly, he knew what was happening. The lake was swallowing him, pulling him in, whispering his name.

He opened his mouth to call for his dad, to scream, to do

anything, but the water was alive as it raced down his throat, and the bitter cold was a red starburst as he closed his eyes, and the world was a dark, fading memory as he felt himself sinking.

Sinking.

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William heard a whispered sound that seemed out of place, like a sudden gust of wind, followed by something even more unsettling: silence. The steady chunk-chunk-chunk of Jude's footsteps behind him had disappeared.

William turned, wondering why Jude hadn't cried out if he had slipped on the ice.

Jude was gone. Only a dark patch of water, swirling like a drain. It was an auger hole (Jude fell through) left by previous fishermen (Jude fell through), and it wasn't possible, wasn't possible at all for Jude to slip through--

Jude fell through.

Following this thought, another idea came to William, an unsavory idea he chewed on for a moment while looking at the black hole of water before him. He glanced up at his old Ford pickup parked at the lake's edge as he mulled the thought.

Then, he dismissed the idea and dropped to his knees.

William reached his arm deep into the gaping hole. The frigid waters of the lake made him suck in a deep breath, a ragged gasp of protest more from his body than from his lungs. Images of Jude flooded his mind. He pictured Jude's thin body sliding through the

ice. He pictured Jude's mouth stretching into a small "o" as the last breath of air was pushed from his lungs. He pictured Jude's limp body floating beneath the ice, forever out of reach just inches from his fingers.

William's hand found nothing. Nothing at all.

He pulled his arm out of the water, trying to banish the rapid-fire display of images dancing in his brain. Cold and snow swirled around him, but his throat became a desert of grit as panic slid into his stomach.

William plunged his head into the hole, not really knowing why, but driven by a need to try something else, anything else. He tried to open his eyes under the water, really tried, but his body refused to cooperate. He pulled his head from the water, gasped for air, and felt rivulets beginning to freeze as they ran down his forehead.

A few more seconds. Rushed panting. Thinking.

William willed his arm back into the murky water, stretching as far as he could go. Although he'd never been a religious man, the subconscious part of him pleaded with God to--

Something. His finger brushed something. And then, not just his finger, but his whole hand. He pulled, and the dull purple of Jude's winter coat surfaced, now slick and shiny with water. Using both hands, William reclaimed his son's motionless body from the lake.

Water poured from Jude's clothing as if he were a sunken

treasure lifted to the surface after centuries in the murky depths. William rubbed at Jude's face, tried to open the eyes, find a breath, a heartbeat, anything. Jude was still.

William looked to the pickup again, then tore off his own coat and wrapped it around Jude's lifeless body. He picked up the body and began moving toward the shore; after a few steps, he slipped and sprawled across the ice.

But he wasn't going to lose his grip on Jude. Not now.

William crawled to his feet and resumed shuffling toward shore. He listened to the slow drizzle of water draining from Jude's lifeless body. Or maybe it was the sound of time draining away from William. For a second--just for a second when Jude slipped through the ice--he had thought about ... He pushed the idea from his mind once more. Couldn't think about that now. Couldn't think about that ever. Had to get his son to the hospital.

He opened the passenger door and pushed aside a jar of pickled beets so he could slide Jude into the cab. He ran to the other side of the pickup, put the key in the ignition and turned it. The old Ford roared to life, and William had it in gear before it was hitting on all cylinders, spraying snow and ice from the tires as he turned and started the 20 miles back to town.

As his pickup and his heart raced each other down the icy county road, an odd realization settled into his brain: Dead. His mind didn't reject the thought, but instead embraced it. Dead, and

ain't nobody gonna change it. He knew they were easily half an hour from the nearest telephone, maybe 45 minutes from the hospital. Jude's last breath had been something like 10 minutes ago. So, Jude's body would be at least 40 minutes gone before ...

William skidded around a lazy corner, chirping across the road and toward the ditch. At the last moment, he regained control of the pickup and straightened its path again. The adrenaline circulated in his veins, and the word returned to his mind: Dead.

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The hospital's automatic front doors slid open. William blinked a few times before stepping inside. Pink, the damned lobby was pink. What in the hell were they thinking? He pushed the irritation from the front of his mind, then took in more of the scene. A woman sat behind a large desk. Evidently, she hadn't heard him come in, because she hadn't lifted her eyes from whatever she was reading.

But how in the hell could that be? Couldn't she hear the deafening roar of water leaking from Jude's clothes and spilling onto the floor? He looked at Jude's lifeless body, then shifted the weight to his other foot. Okay, the water wasn't really coming out in a stream now, more like a steady drip, but the damned drip was deafeningly loud. Drip. He could hear the sound bouncing off the harsh pink-tinted walls. Drip.

The nurse still hadn't acknowledged him, so he took another step toward her oak-finished desk and cleared his throat. She

finally looked up and focused tired red eyes on William. Then, those eyes widened. William thought maybe she'd accidentally cut herself or stubbed her toe. But of course, that wasn't it. More likely, she was a bit surprised to see a man standing in front of her with a drizzling, lifeless boy in his hands.

Drip.

William didn't have to say anything, after all: the nurse shifted gears, dialed a phone, said something he couldn't quite make out, then rushed around the counter. William heard running footsteps approaching, and in a moment, another woman and a man--a nurse and a doctor--came to take Jude from his arms.

It wasn't difficult to let go. It was a relief, really, to get the wet body out of his hands. Now all he wanted to do was fill one of those hands with a nice cold can of Schmidt. He had a couple of them out in the truck still, didn't he? No, no he didn't: he'd left all of the equipment on the ice.

"I said, you his father?" The doctor's question brought him back into focus. Guy didn't have one of those white lab coats, but he had to be a doctor: he was obviously in charge of the situation, directing the two women to cover Jude's body with some kind of blankets. Blankets. Yeah, those would help a boy who's been dead half an hour.

The doctor must have sensed William's thoughts. "Hypothermia. Need to bring up his core temperature," he said.

"Yeah," William answered.

The doctor and the nurses started to push Jude's cart down the hall, toward a pair of large steel doors with small windows. He looked back toward William again. "What happened?"

"Fell through the ice," William answered.

The doctor looked as if he wanted to hear something else, but the front of the gurney crashed into the doors. "Just wait here," he said. "We'll--" He barked something as the steel doors swung shut behind him, but William couldn't catch what it was. Not that it mattered. Jude was dead. He knew that. Hell, the doctor knew it.

Damn, he could use a Schmidt.

He walked down the hallway to the steel doors, peeked through one of the windows, and saw nothing. A large sign told him HOSPITAL STAFF ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT.

William stood at the door for what felt like five hours, occasionally looking through the small glass window. No sign of the doctor. He tried to ignore the gaping, insistent hole in his stomach that begged for just one beer (his son was dead, dammit, this wasn't any time to think about beer), but his willpower was only so strong. He had just decided to make a quick dash to the corner store to pick up a fresh six-pack--five minutes, tops--when the doctor returned.

William saw the look he expected on the doctor's face.

"I'm sorry," the young doctor said. "We couldn't save him."

William nodded, thinking the doctor would take that as a cue

to leave. The doctor had to go first; if William did, it would seem shallow, callous.

"We tried to raise his temperature," the doctor offered. "Tried to search for signs of--" William noticed the doctor was studying his own face now, gauging how the news was being received. "I'm sorry," he finally finished. "We tried everything we could."

William nodded again, hoping that would be enough to send the doctor on his way.

It was. The doctor backed through the steel doors and disappeared into the bowels of the pink-tinged hospital.

William would have to go home and tell his wife their son was dead. But first, he had to make a stop at the corner supermarket.

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When Jude awoke, he didn't move. Didn't even open his eyes. He felt the crisp linen of a sheet on his face--on his whole body--as he realized his clothes were missing. And something was tied to his toe: a piece of string, from what he could tell. Where was he? He concentrated. He could remember doing ... something ... with his dad. Grocery store? Movie? Wait. Ice fishing. They were ice fishing, and that was all Jude could remember.

He wanted to throw off the sheet, but he was afraid to move. He had spent many nights under the protective cover of a sheet in his own bed, hiding from the creaks and moans that blew through the farmhouse where they lived. Even now, he told himself that's

where he was: home in his own bed, huddled under his own sheet. But he knew this wasn't his bed. The cold metal biting the bare skin of his back said otherwise.

Outside the sheet, he heard a sound: a tap, a click, repeating. Footsteps, he realized. Someone was walking toward him, because he could hear the steps coming closer. Jude closed his eyes again. No, this wasn't his home, wasn't his bedroom. And that meant the person walking across the floor wasn't his mother. Maybe, if he was very still, he wouldn't be seen. He held his breath and listened.

Suddenly, the sheet lifted from his face: he felt it, but kept his eyes closed, not wanting to see whoever--or whatever--had come for him.

Silence. No movement, no voice. After a few seconds, Jude ventured a peek, thinking he had perhaps imagined all of it. The harsh fluorescence of the hospital morgue's lighting flooded his pupils, forcing him to squint against the glare.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw a woman staring down at him. He didn't know her, but her warm smile seemed ... safe. He waited for her to break the silence and speak to him, but she didn't. Instead, she simply offered her hand. He returned the smile and reached out, guided by a need to touch her hand. To make sure she was real.

Jude Allman was back from the dead.