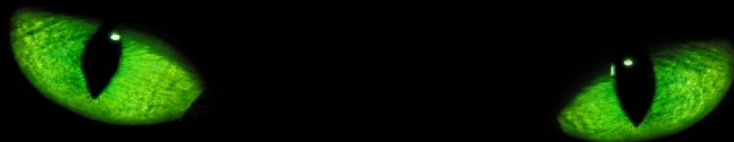


THE OTHERS



JEFF COLEMAN

The Others

Jeff Coleman

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Chapter 1

Jason liked magic.

When he was five years old, his dad had pulled a quarter out of his ear. He'd dedicated himself to learning the craft ever since.

Magic made him feel special. It made him feel as if he was part of something exclusive, something open only to a chosen few. He would traipse around the house in a black cape and hat and refer to himself as "Jason the Magnificent."

"More like Jason the Lame," his little sister Janie said, seated across the kitchen table from him one summer afternoon.

"Shut up, Janie." He was shuffling a deck of cards, sure he was going to impress her with his latest trick. He fanned them out in his hands, leaned across the table and said, "Pick a card."

"Hmm." Janie ran her fingers over the surface of the cards, giving the matter great thought. She made as if to pull a single card from the middle, flashed a sudden maniacal grin and grabbed a handful instead.

"Hey!" Jason squawked in protest.

Janie looked at the cards and laughed. "They're all threes!" she said triumphantly. "They're all threes! Cheater."

"Give them back!"

"You're just a big cheater, Jason the Lame." She got up from the chair and ran to the doorway.

"Mom!" she called across the living room. "Mom! I know how Jason does his card trick. They're all threes! They're all—"

"Shut up!" Jason shouted, pouncing on her and clawing at the cards in her right hand. "Give them back!"

"Ow! Mom!" Janie cried. "Jason's hurting me!"

"What's going on?" their mother asked, abandoning a laundry basket in the

living room. She rushed into the kitchen and pulled Jason off Janie. “Jason, what are you doing to your sister?”

“She ruined my trick,” he said, glowering at her. “She grabbed my cards, and —”

“Mom, they’re all threes! That’s how Jason knows which card you pick. They’re all—”

“Janie, shut up!”

“Jason, don’t talk to your sister that way.”

“But Mom,” he argued, “She ruined my trick.”

Their mother turned to Janie, who had taken up her former seat at the table. “Janie, leave your brother alone.”

“But he’s a cheater.”

“No I’m not!”

“Jason, that’s enough.”

“But Mom!” He looked back and pointed at his sister, who stuck her tongue out at him in reply.

“But nothing. Apologize or go to your room.” Their mother’s face was stern, her hands on her hips.

“Fine. I’m sorry,” Jason said. His tone made it quite clear he was not sorry at all.

“Janie,” their mother continued, “tell Jason you’re sorry, too.”

Janie rolled her eyes. “Okay. I’m sorry I took your cards and that you’re a cheater.”

“Mom!”

“Enough, both of you.”

Jason stormed out of the kitchen in a huff, made for the front door and slammed it behind him.

He hurried across the walkway before his mother could drag him back inside and headed out along the sidewalk. He walked fast, head down, brooding over the injustice of it all.

Life was so unfair. All Janie ever did was taunt him and ruin his tricks and he was the one who always got in trouble. Sometimes Jason wished he could make his sister disappear, like those professional performers with their beautiful assistants. Except in his case, the magic would be real and Janie would go away for good. “Abracadabra” or “hocus pocus” and he would wave his hands over the box in which she lay. A great billowing puff of multi-hued smoke would erupt from inside and that would be the end of Janie. Goodbye and so long, forever.

He reached the traffic light at the corner, where the quiet cul-de-sac fed into a busy street. He pushed the walk button and waited for the light to change. On the other side was the junior high school that he would attend in the fall and farther down was a small strip mall where he and his mother sometimes went to buy groceries. A new magic shop had opened there a couple of days ago, a small hole-in-the-wall kind of place. That was his destination.

Jason had been meaning to check out the goods. He rarely found quality product at the run-of-the-mill magic and joke shops, with their cheap plastic trinkets and mass-produced gags, and he often had to ask his mother to order online from specialty outlets that knew their business and catered to professionals. But this was the first time he’d ever seen such a small and cozy-looking store that dealt exclusively with magic and its related paraphernalia, and he thought it might be worth a look.

The light changed and Jason crossed.

The strip mall was pretty empty when he arrived. The adults were at work, and while most kids his age were still on summer vacation, there was little here that interested them. He turned toward the stucco building on his left. Above, a white sign with bold red letters proclaimed the shop “Hruby’s House of Magic.”

He pulled the glass door open. Bells hanging on the inside jangled. The air smelled faintly of cinnamon.

“Be right with you,” came a low gravelly voice from somewhere in the back.

Jason took one glance and braced himself for disappointment. Along the wall

on his right hung cheap magician's suits, complete with plastic hats and wands. At the head of the aisle he was standing in, Jason saw joke glasses with plastic noses attached, whoopee cushions and rubber lips. He turned the corner and saw, stacked on the shelves, magic kits that he'd outgrown long before the age of eight, trick cards like the ones he'd tried to use on Janie and various other odds and ends. Nothing worth a second glance. He reached out to finger a shrink-wrapped bag of stink bombs, the plastic crackling as he probed its surface. Stamped on the label were the words "Made in China."

Jason did not hold high hopes for this place.

"Can I help you?"

The voice had come from behind him. Startled, Jason jumped and turned.

"I'm sorry," the man said, raising his hands to show he meant no harm. "I didn't mean to scare you."

He had dark skin somewhere between tan and brown. Long raised veins were visible beneath the surface of his arms. He had a short, stubby salt-and-pepper beard, more salt than pepper. He wore an off-white T-shirt and faded blue jeans, and spoke with an Eastern European accent, with long drawn-out syllables and heavy sounds that rumbled from deep inside his throat.

"I'm Hruby, the owner. And your name is?"

Jason exhaled slowly. "Jason."

"Ah. Tell me Jason, are you searching for anything in particular?"

"No," he replied. "Just looking."

"See anything you like?"

Jason surveyed the pathetic merchandise. "Not really."

"Nothing? Surely there is something for a young man like yourself?" He offered Jason a condescending smile.

"Maybe if I was five," Jason said, and the red in his cheeks rose. He knew what he was talking about, and this guy was treating him like just another kid. He made a broad sweeping gesture with his arms, taking in the items on the shelves. "I'm a magician," Jason explained. "I don't want toys. Do you have

anything that doesn't suck?"

"Anything that doesn't suck?" Hruby peered at him more closely, his expression going blank. He stared so long that Jason began to feel uncomfortable. Finally, Hruby raised his eyebrows. "Something that doesn't suck." He stroked the stubble on his chin. "Yes, I believe I have something in the back. Wait here."

He limped to the back of the store and disappeared behind the door set into the far wall.

Jason thought that perhaps he'd insulted him, and he began to feel guilty. But the man had embarrassed him. Jason didn't like being talked down to, especially on a topic he knew so much about. But now he was intrigued and wanted to know what Hruby thought he might find interesting.

While he waited, Jason made his way down the aisle and turned the corner. Hanging from a hook was a plastic-wrapped mound of rubber barf. Printed on the cardboard label was the image of an old fashioned woman in a dress and apron gagging with disgust. "Instant Barf," read the title. "Gross out your family and friends!" He plucked it from the wall and examined it thoughtfully. He wasn't a fan of cheap tricks and gags, but he thought the fake barf might be good for a few laughs if placed in a strategic location, like under Janie's pillow.

He was eying the plastic dog doo next to it when the door to the back opened again.

Hruby emerged carrying a narrow wooden rod.

"Look at this," he said, holding the object out proudly. "My own creation. No 'Made in China' nonsense. You like?"

"What is it?"

"Take it," Hruby said. He held it reverently in both hands. Jason thought of a knight presenting a fine sword. "See for yourself."

Jason, not entirely sure what was so special about it, gripped the object with his right hand and held it up for examination. The surface was smooth and lacquered dark brown. It was the same thickness along most of its length, except

for the end where it came to a narrow round point. Jason hefted it, noting how light it was. He held it up to the stream of sunlight that shone through the window and watched a smooth sheen slide along its surface. He could discern nothing of particular interest.

“A stick?” he asked.

Hruby yanked it from his hand. “A stick, indeed,” he grumbled, almost a growl. “And you call yourself a magician?”

“Sorry,” Jason said, shrugging in apology. “It’s a nice stick.”

“Bah! I’m wasting my time.” Hruby raised his hand with exaggerated disgust. “Buy one of my *toys*—” He placed special emphasis on the word *toys*. *Your word*, his tone implied, *not mine*. “Buy one of my *toys* or go home.” He turned and began to hobble back to the rear of the store.

“Wait,” Jason called after him. “Please, come back.”

“Why?” asked Hruby over his shoulder. “So you can continue to insult my merchandise?”

“I didn’t mean to.”

Hruby stood there for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “I suppose you meant no harm.” He walked back to Jason. “This,” he said, holding the object out for Jason once again, “is a wand.”

“You mean a magic wand?” He grasped it once more.

“Yes. A very special kind of wand. It makes things disappear.”

“How?” Jason asked. “It’s so small.” He probed the wand for some sort of opening, looking for a compartment or a latch. The wood, however, appeared quite solid. “There’s nowhere for anything to go.”

“Why would there be?” Hruby asked, bewildered.

Jason suddenly felt as if he were explaining why the sky were blue. “If it makes things disappear, there has to be *somewhere* for them to go.”

“Of course,” Hruby said, eyes narrowed. “You state the obvious.”

“Well?” Jason asked, “where do they go?”

“Away,” Hruby said, spreading his hands as if that explained everything.

“How?” Jason pressed.

“Magic.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Aw, come on. There’s no such thing as magic.”

Hruby whipped the wand away from him again and looked at him with the kind of cold contempt reserved for a man who has just uttered the worst kind of heresy. “No such thing as magic? What right do you have to call yourself a magician?”

Jason laughed. “I’m not a little kid. I know how it works. It’s just tricks. It’s sleight of hand and misdirection.”

“Yes,” mused Hruby bitterly, “That is how it works...for someone with no imagination. Go home to your *tricks*.”

Jason hesitated. He thought he knew all there was to know about magic (at least in theory), but the man spoke with such sincerity and conviction. “I’m sorry.”

Hruby was silent. When that silence grew exceedingly uncomfortable, Jason sighed and began to head back toward the door. “Fine, I’m leaving.”

“Wait,” said Hruby quietly.

Jason stopped.

“I keep forgetting that the world, it does not believe as it once did. It is not your fault.”

Jason didn’t reply. A part of him, the rational, skeptical kid who had studied the science of illusion for years, scoffed at the idea that there could be something that reason alone could not explain. Another part, the five-year-old boy who had not yet lost faith in fantasy and childhood dreams, thrummed with excitement at the prospect of encountering something surreal and otherworldly, something he had only ever known through stories.

Hruby stared, and Jason had the feeling that the man was trying to see through him. Hruby hesitated. He opened his mouth. Closed it. He looked as if he was making up his mind about something. Then the penetrating gaze was gone and Hruby spoke again. “I tell you what,” he said, handing the wand back

to Jason. "Take it. Try it. No charge."

"What? Why?" Jason looked down at the wand. It no longer felt like an ordinary piece of wood. It wasn't that he believed it was something more, just that when he hefted the weight of the wand, he also hefted the weight of an unanswered question, an idea that had the potential to change everything he had been taught about the world and how it worked.

"Consider it an investment. The world needs less knowing and more believing." Hruby paused, absently stroking his beard with a finger.

"How does it work?" asked Jason. He wasn't entirely convinced that it would, but he was willing to try.

"Ah, that's the hard part, isn't it?" Hruby looked down at Jason and winked. "The wand, that's easy enough." He took it from Jason and pointed it towards the back of the store. "You point it at whatever you want to make disappear."

"Pointing the wand is the hard part?" asked Jason.

"No," Hruby said. "You must *believe*." He looked down at Jason knowingly. "That's the hard part."

Jason didn't reply.

"You must *believe*," Hruby continued. "You must will whatever you point it at to disappear, and you must believe that it will heed your command. If you don't," Hruby warned, "then for you it will just be an ordinary stick."

"Does it work on people?" An involuntary smile rose to Jason's lips as he considered the possibilities.

Hruby wrested the wand away again and fixed him with a stony glare. The skin beneath Jason's shirt began to tingle with discomfort and he backed away a step.

"This is no toy. If I give it to you, you must promise not to use it on any living creature, human or otherwise. Do you understand?"

Jason nodded.

Once more, the man seemed conflicted. He looked at Jason, then at the wand. There was a moment's hesitation, then he mumbled something that Jason

couldn't hear, nodded his head and thrust the rod back to Jason. "Just take it," he said, "before I change my mind. Come back tomorrow and tell me if it works."

"What if it doesn't?"

"Then," Hruby said, gazing down at him, "we know that you are not a magician."

Chapter 2

Jason walked home, the wand swinging loosely at his side. Every now and then he would raise it, assume a defensive pose and point it at invisible assassins behind bushes, poles, benches and trash cans. He would smile, knowing something his imaginary assailants did not, then strike with the wand at the last moment, mere seconds before they could pull triggers on semi-autos or machine guns. Of course, in each life-threatening encounter, Jason's timing was impeccable.

In the midst of his excitement and boyhood fantasies, Jason had forgotten all about the card trick. The sun was bright, the sky was blue and life was grand. Then Jason got home, marched up the concrete walk and opened the door. Life was no longer so grand.

When she saw the door open, his mother stood up from her seat at the dining room table, her chair scuffing the tile floor and screeching in a way that made it sound oddly like an off-key flute.

"Where were you?"

"I just went to the store," Jason said, the wand rising as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Ooo, Jason's in trouble," Janie chanted from the couch in the living room.

"Be quiet!" his mother snapped, and Janie turned back to the TV, still smiling. "What have I told you about wandering off?" she asked. "*Always* tell me where you're going. I was worried about you."

"Okay, fine." Jason said.

"Don't 'Okay, fine' me," she said, glowering. "Something could've happened to you, Jason, and I would've had no idea where you were or how to find you. If your father were here—" She stopped.

It'd been a couple of years since he'd died, and life had returned mostly to

normal despite a very long, very intense emotional gale that seemed as if it would never end. Their father was no longer a part of their lives, but Mom still brought him up from time to time. “Never mind. Just go to your room. And if you run off without telling me where you’re going again, you’re grounded.”

“Fine,” he said, biting off the word, and stomped down the hallway to his room. All his feelings of being put upon and treated unfairly had returned with interest.

He slammed the door and belly-flopped onto the unmade bed beside his window. He let the wand fall to the tan carpet and let out a deep breath.

What was the big deal? He hadn’t gone far. It’d just been a quick trip to the store and back. He certainly hadn’t been gone for more than an hour. Why was she so angry? And Janie. Why couldn’t she just leave him alone?

Jason thought of his father, and for a moment that feeling of despair and loneliness, of irrevocable loss and abandonment, that had become so familiar over the past couple of years threatened to return in full force. His eyes began to water and he quickly turned his thoughts to other things.

He looked down at the wand. It looked so unassuming, lying there in the late afternoon light. He bent to pick it up and ran his fingers along its smooth surface.

What if it worked? How would he react? His belief in a purely rational universe had been unchallenged for some time, but Hruby had spoken with such authority, sincerity and conviction that Jason was finding it difficult to ignore his words. He would have assumed he’d be thrilled at the idea of actually practicing real magic, but now the notion just scared him. The object in his hand had taken on an almost menacing quality.

Jason lifted the wand and pointed it at the light on the ceiling. He hesitated, feeling at once frightened and foolish. He thought about the light disappearing. He wished for it to happen.

Then he began to feel embarrassed. He began to imagine Hruby sitting in his back room after hours, laughing at how gullible Jason had been. Perhaps his tale

about the wand had been his way of getting back at Jason for insulting the items in his store.

The light stayed where it was.

“I knew this was stupid,” Jason mumbled under his breath.

And yet, a part of him still wasn’t convinced. Hruby had said he must believe, that he must *will* the thing he pointed the wand at to disappear and that he must *believe* that the wand would do as he commanded.

Jason got up from where he lay. He focused on the wardrobe in the far left corner, squinted at it in concentration. He lifted the wand and pointed.

“Hey Jason, what’re you doing?” Janie asked.

He jumped, startled. He hadn’t heard the door open. “Nothing,” he said. “Go away.”

“You’re weird.” Then, craning her neck in a way that made Jason think of a nosy giraffe, she asked, “What’s that in your hand?”

“Nothing,” he said, face flushing red. “Leave me alone.”

“Are you trying a new magic trick? I want to see!”

“Mom!” Jason shouted from the open doorway. “Tell Janie to leave me alone.”

Mom’s voice drifted back in reply. “Janie, get out of Jason’s room.”

“But Mom—”

“Now, Janie.”

“Fine,” she said, huffing indignantly, and skipped away.

Once again, Jason wished wholeheartedly that his sister would disappear.

Chapter 3

The light outside had begun to shine copper and gold as late afternoon slipped into early evening. According to the digital clock on Jason's nightstand, he'd been in his room for nearly forty minutes.

"Can I come out yet?" he called.

"You can come out when dinner's ready," his mother replied.

Jason mumbled, and kicked the threshold before closing the door again.

He paced back and forth, now and again glancing down at the wand lying atop the crumpled sheets. He'd picked it up a couple of times, had tried very hard to convince himself that it did have the power that Hruby had described. But each time he'd pointed the wand at something, a wave of embarrassment would rush over him and he'd put it down again.

Magic. It was ridiculous. Jason knew the truth of it, had known the truth of it from a very early age, ever since his father had pulled the quarter from his ear and explained how it was done. Jason had placed his trust in misdirection and sleight of hand ever since. These were rational things, things that could be measured and understood, things that could be explained. These were familiar to him. And yet... His gaze would return to that simple piece of wood and when it did, a spark of something—perhaps curiosity, perhaps excitement and anticipation, perhaps a little of both—flared in his imagination, and he found himself entertaining strange notions.

Jason sat down in the swiveling office chair beside his desk and reached for the deck of cards that was propped against the side of a narrow cubby. Unlike the rigged deck he'd been playing with earlier (the one that he could never use at home again, thanks to Janie), this contained the full spectrum of cards. It was presorted, and went from ace to king in alternating suits of red and black. The cards were still new, smooth and without creases.

Jason cut the deck in half. He fanned out the first stack in an overlapping row on the left side of his desk, going outward; then he fanned out the second stack on the right, going inward. In a manner that he imagined would evade the untrained eye, he slipped the end of the right row underneath the left. He then merged the two halves, trying to make them appear messy and random while in fact taking great care to ensure that both remained whole and unshuffled. When he'd pulled the cards back into a single deck once more, he opened them out into an arc, observing that all four suits remained sorted.

He performed this trick a few times, paying only casual mind to what his hands had grown accustomed to doing on their own. "The Mishmash False Shuffle"—that was what the YouTube video had called it. He'd picked it up a couple of months ago. It was one of the many tricks Jason used to pass the time when he was bored. When he tired of the cards, he boxed them and placed the deck back in its cubby.

The sky outside had already faded to a dull crimson and was quickly turning black. He flicked on the desk lamp and squinted as his eyes adjusted to the light. He glanced back at the foot of the bed and once again his eyes fell on the wand.

"There's no such thing as magic," Dad had said to him the day he'd pulled the quarter out of his ear.

He'd been sitting on his father's lap, cradled comfortably in his arms. Dad's chin had rubbed up against his cheek, brushing him with a clump of whiskers that'd tickled and made him laugh.

"What's this?" Dad asked. Jason's ear flushed with warmth as a finger rubbed against it. Jason felt smooth metal, and could hear a light tinny timbre as the coin pressed against his ear lobe. "Look," Dad said. "You had a quarter in your ear." He handed it to his son, who grabbed the coin, gaping.

"How'd you do that?"

"Magic," Dad said, smiling.

"Really?" The coin lay face down on his palm and Jason stared at it with the veneration due a holy relic. "Daddy, tell me how to do that!"

“A magician never reveals his tricks.”

“Please, Daddy? I won’t tell anyone.”

His father let his head fall back against the cushion, and Jason left his lap to sit next to him. For a moment Dad was silent and Jason thought he wouldn’t tell.

Then, “Are you sure you want to know? I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“Please?”

“Okay.” He took the coin from Jason and balled his hands into fists. “Now, where’s the coin?” He opened his fingers and presented both palms, demonstrating that they were now empty.

“Gone,” Jason said eagerly.

“Actually,” Dad said, angling his right hand upward, “it’s here. I had it hidden between two fingers so you’d think it was gone. Then, I pulled the coin from my fingers and pressed it against your skin so you’d think it came from your ear.”

“But,” Jason argued, “that’s not magic.”

“No, it’s not,” Dad agreed. “Jason, there’s no such thing as magic.”

“No such thing as magic?” He was crestfallen. He felt as if a part of him had just died. It was the same sensation he would experience later in life when he was told that there was no Santa, that the Tooth Fairy was actually his mother. It was the sense of something mysterious and transcendental being abruptly torn from his life forever, leaving the world a little less mystical, a little more rational.

“No,” Dad said, sounding sad. “I hope you’re not disappointed.”

Jason said nothing.

“Well, now you know. But,” Dad said, leaning in to whisper conspiratorially, “you can’t tell anyone. Remember, a magician never reveals his tricks.”

“I promise,” he said, and he meant it.

Now Jason was forced once more to confront a question he’d thought had been laid to rest years ago: Was magic real? He thought he still knew the answer, but deep down he wondered.

Jason rolled the office chair to the foot of the bed and took the wand into his

hands, lifting it in the air. The sky outside was now black and the light of the desk lamp cast harsh shadows across his bed and about the room. On the wall, mimicking his movements, Jason could see the bent and twisted silhouette of an arm raising the wand's flat, monochromatic double, turned somehow wicked in the unnatural light. A chill surged down his spine and his skin prickled with goose flesh.

“Jason, dinner,” came his mother's voice from the kitchen.

Jason threw the wand on the bed and sprinted out into the hallway, not bothering to turn off the light or close the door behind him.

Alone in the room, the wand waited.

Thank you for reading this preview!

I hope you've enjoyed the first three chapters. If you'd like to read more, you can purchase the e-book for your Amazon Kindle, Barnes & Noble Nook or Kobo device. For purchasing details, visit:

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