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Freedom's Child

Written by Jax Miller

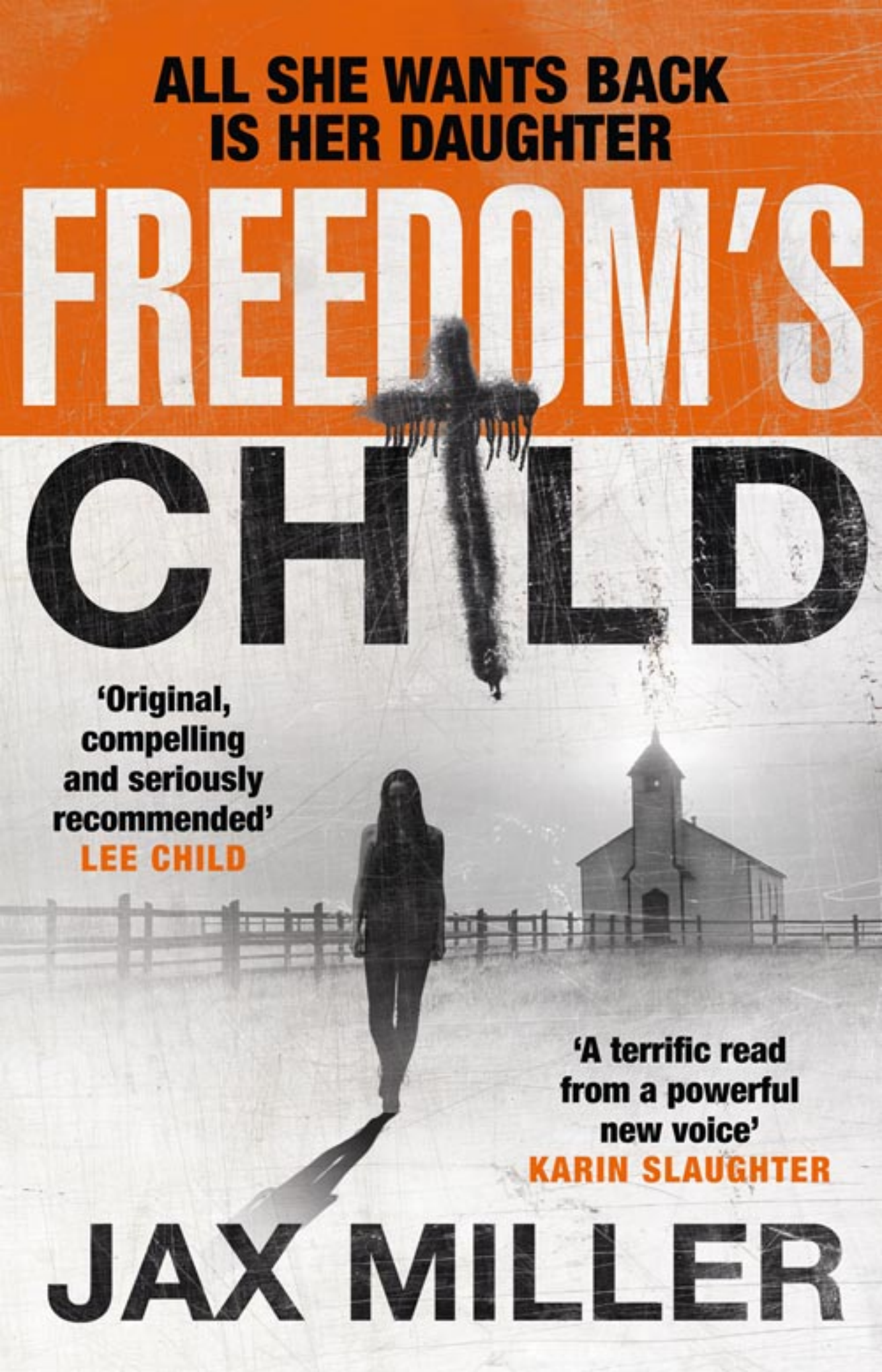
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ALL SHE WANTS BACK
IS HER DAUGHTER

FREEDOM'S CHILD



'Original, compelling and seriously recommended'
LEE CHILD

'A terrific read from a powerful new voice'
KARIN SLAUGHTER

JAX MILLER

FREEDOM'S CHILD



JAX MILLER



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Prologue

My name is Freedom Oliver and I killed my daughter. It's surreal, honestly, and I'm not sure what feels more like a dream, her death or her existence. I'm guilty of both.

It wasn't long ago that this field would ripple and rustle with a warm breeze, gold dancing under the blazes of a high noon sun. The Thoroughbreds, a staple of Goshen, would canter along the edges of Whistler's Field. If you listen close enough, you can almost hear the laughter of farmers' children still lace through the grain, a harvest full of innocent secrets of the youthful who needed an escape but didn't have anywhere else to go. Like my Rebekah, my daughter. My God, she must have been beautiful.

But a couple weeks is a long time when you're on a journey like mine. It could almost constitute something magnificent. Almost.

I catch my breath when I remember. Somewhere in this field, my daughter is scattered in pieces.

Goshen, named after the Land of Goshen from the Book of Genesis, somewhere between Kentucky's famous bourbon trails in America's Bible Belt. The gallops of Thoroughbreds

that haunt this dead pasture are replaced with the hammering in my rib cage. The mud cracks below me as I cross the frostbitten field, steps ripping the earth with each fleeting memory. The skies are that certain shade of silver you see right before a snowstorm; now, the color of my filthy fucking soul.

I'm reminded of the sheriff behind me with an itchy finger and a Remington aimed between my shoulder blades. I'm reminded of my own white-knuckled grip on my pistol.

Call me what you will: a murderer, a cop killer, a fugitive, a drunk. You think that means anything to me now? In this moment? The frost pangs my lungs in such a way that I think I might vomit. I don't. Still out of breath, I use the dirty robe to wipe blood from my face. I don't even know if it's mine. There's enough adrenaline surging through my veins that I can't feel pain if it is.

"This is it, Freedom," the sheriff calls out in his familiar southern drawl. The tears make warm streaks over my cold skin. The cries numb my face, my lips made of pins and needles. There's a lump in my throat I can't breathe past. *What have I done? How the hell did I end up here? What did I do so wrong in life that God deemed me so fucking unworthy of anything good?* I'm not sure. I've always been the one with the questions, never the answers.

1

Freedom and the Whippersnappers

Two Weeks Ago

My name is Freedom, and it's a typical night at the bar. There's a new girl, a blonde, maybe sixteen. Her eyes are still full of color; she hasn't been in the business long enough. Give it time. Looks like she can use something to eat, use some meat on her bones. I know she's new because her teeth are white, a nice smile. In a month or two, her gums will shelve black rubble, and she'll be nothing but bone shrink-wrapped in skin. That's what happens in that line of work. The perks of being young are destroyed by the lurid desires of men and the enslavement of drug addiction. Such is life.

A biker has her by her golden locks, heading for the parking lot. The place is too busy, nobody notices. He blends in with the other leather vests and greasy ponytails, the crowd crammed from entrance to exit. But I notice. I see her. And she sees me, eyes glassed over with pleading, a glint of innocence that may very well survive if I do something. But I have to do something now.

"Watch the bar," I yell to no one in particular. I'm surprised by my own agility as I jump over the bar and into the horde, pushing, elbowing, kicking, yelling. I find them, a trail of perfume behind the young girl. I take the red cap of the Tabasco sauce off with my teeth and spit it out. The biker can't see me coming up behind him as he tries to leave the bar; he towers over me by a good foot and a half. I cup my palm and make a pool of hot sauce.

* * *

I still own the clothes I was raped in. What can I say? I'm a glutton for punishment. My name is Freedom, though seldom do I feel free. Those were the terms I made with the whippersnappers; if I did what they wanted, I could change my name to Freedom. Freedom McFly, though I never got to keep the McFly part. They said it sounded too Burger King-ish. Too '80s. Fucking whippersnappers.

Freedom Oliver it is.

I live in Painter, Oregon, a small town showered in grit, rain, and crystal meth, where I tend a rock pub called the Whammy Bar. My regulars are fatties from the West Coast biker gangs like the Hells Angels, the Free Souls, and the Gypsy Jokers, who pinch my husky, tattooed flesh and cop their feels.

"Let me get a piece of that ass."

"Let me give you a ride on my bike."

"How 'bout I give you freedom from those pants?"

I hide my disgust behind a smile that convinces the crowd and stick my chest out a little more; it brings in the tips, even if it makes me shudder. They ask where my accent's from and I tell them Secaucus, New Jersey. Truth be told, it's from a shady area on Long Island, New York, called

Mastic Beach. It's not like the peckerwoods can tell the difference.

I tear out my umbrella in the early morning after my shift is over and the bar is closed. I squint through the October rains and the smoke of a Pall Mall. I swear to God, it's rained every day since I was born. To my left, adjacent to the Whammy Bar, is Hotel Painter. The neon letters drone through the rain, where some key letters are knocked out so the sign spells HOT PIE. Appropriate, given that it's one of those lease-by-the-hour roach motels that offer ramshackle shelter to anyone wanting to rent cheap pussy. The ladies huddle under the marquee of the reception desk to hide from the rain and yell their good-byes my way. I wave back. Goldilocks isn't there. *Good*. Looks like the night's slowed down.

Fuck this umbrella if it doesn't want to close. I chuck it to the dirt lot and climb into the rusty hooptie of a station wagon. I remove my nose ring and put the smoke out in an overflowing ashtray.

"Jesus Harry Christ," I scream, alarmed by a knock on the window. I can't see through the condensation and open it a crack to find a couple suits. "Whippersnapping jack holes." They look at me like I'm nuts, but I'm pretty sure they expect it. People have a hard time trying to understand what I say most of the time. "Isn't it late for you guys?"

"Well, you keep making us come out here like this," says one of them.

"It was an accident." I shrug as I get out of the car.

"Trying to blind a man with Tabasco sauce was an accident?"

"Semantics, Gumm," I say as I fiddle with the keys. "Guy got rough with one of the girls, so I slapped him

on the cheek. Only I missed his cheek and got his eyes. I only just so happened to have Tabasco sauce spill in my hand not a moment before. Besides, he's not pressing charges, so I'm sorry you guys had to make the trip from Portland."

"You're walking on thin ice," says Howe.

"Tabasco won't blind you." I shake the rain from my hair. "Just hurts like fuck and keeps you awake."

"Well, he was mad enough to call the cops. If it weren't for us, you'd be sitting in jail right now," says Gumm.

"Besides, an eye patch suits him." I lead them into the closed pub, turn on the power, and grab three Budweisers. They eyeball the beverages. "Relax. I won't tell," I offer.

The lights are dim, borderline interrogational, above the island bar in the middle of a large, old wooden floor furnished with the occasional pool table. The scent of stale smoke hangs heavy, etched in the wood's grooves like a song impressed on a vinyl record. The music turns on to Lynyrd Skynyrd. U.S. Marshals Gumm and Howe each flip a stool down from the bar and sit.

"You know how it goes," says Agent Gumm, with his salt-and-pepper hair, handlebar mustache, and sagged jowls. He doesn't want to be here, I can tell. I don't want him here either. Court-mandated. Fuck the system. Let's get this over with. We'll fill out the forms, I'll get a lecture. *Consider this a warning*. Yeah, yeah, it's always considered. To Gumm's side is Agent Howe, who does a quick read over the files in their manila envelopes. "How's this job treating you, Freedom?"

"I'd come up with a clever remark, but I'm too tired for the bullshit." I wipe my leather jacket with a bar towel. "Just slap me on my wrist and we can all be on our way, why don't you?"

"Was just asking about the job, is all," says Howe, a handsome man in his early forties with jet-black hair and green eyes. I'd bang him. Well, maybe if he wasn't such an asshole. Though I doubt that'd stop me anyway.

"Let's cut the shit. You two didn't come all the way here from Portland to get on my ass about a tiny bar scuffle."

They twirl their bottles between their palms. Gumm uses his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his beer off the wood. They look at each other with those raised eyebrows, the kind of look that says, *Are you going to tell her or should I?*

"Will ya just spit it out?" I roll my eyes and hop onto the bar in front of them. I pull their envelopes from under me and sit Indian-style, their eyes level with my knees.

"Freedom, Matthew was released from prison two days ago. He was granted an appeal and won." Gumm pretends to cough with the words. Well, isn't that just dandy? I rest my elbows on my knees, chin on my fists. Which facial expression shall I feign? I go for ignorance, as if I have no idea who this Matthew is that they're talking about. But I do. It's why I am a protected witness. In the Witness Protection Program. WPP. Whips. Whippersnappers. But lucky me, I was dismissed with prejudice, meaning I cannot be charged for the same crime twice. Thank God for small favors.

"And?" I don't want them to know that my heart is pounding and I'm starting to sweat.

Gumm leans in closer. "For a time to be determined, we are heightening your protection. We'll have one of ours come see you on a weekly basis. Keep a low profile."

"You mean lower than a biker bar in the middle of nowhere?"

"A small cross to bear for killing a cop, Freedom." And

there are those nasty looks and curled lips from these guys that I know all too well. "C'mon, you've got nothing to lose if you admit it already. I mean, you can't be tried again for it. We know you did it."

"Good luck proving it. And nice of you assholes to give me a heads-up." I chug my beer and aim my chin at the door. "Be careful driving back to the big city in that rain. Don't want you two dying in some terrible accident." I finish the beer. "That'd just be terrible."

At least they take the hint. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they overstay their welcome. Sometimes they do it on purpose just to piss me off. "By the way." Howe rises from his stool and closes his coat. "I have to ask. Procedure, you know . . ." He speaks through his teeth like he has thorns in his ass.

I'll save him the trouble, if only to get them the hell out of here faster. Their files stick to my wet boots as I bounce from the bar. I grab the soggy pages from under me and hand them over. "Don't worry, I'm still on my meds," but this is a blatant lie. And I think they know it's a lie but don't care. "No need to ask."

* * *

I think about Matthew, released from prison after eighteen years; eighteen years of his imprisonment that secured my eighteen years of freedom.

Alone in the shitty apartment, I crawl out of wet clothes and dry my naked body against the cushions of a musty tweed couch. Alone I cry. Alone I look at an old picture of my dead husband, Mark, the one photo that survived an incident with a sink and a book of matches a couple decades

ago. Alone I open a bottle of whiskey. Alone I whisper two names in the dark.

"Ethan."

"Layla."

Alone. Fucking whippersnappers.