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Opening Extract from...

The One in a Million Boy

Written by Monica Wood

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THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY

MONICA WOOD

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PART ONE

Brolis (Brother)



This is Miss Ona Vitkus. This is her life story on tape. This is Part One.

Is it on?

. . .

I can't answer all these. We'll be here till doomsday.

. . .

I'll answer the first one, but that's it.

. . .

I was born in Lithuania. In the year nineteen hundred. I don't recall the place. I might have, oh, the vaguest recollection of some farm animals. A horse, or some other large beast. White, with spots.

. . .

Maybe a cow.

. . .

I have no idea what type of cows live in Lithuania. But I seem to recollect – you know those spotted dairy-type cows you see everywhere?

. . .

Holsteins. Thank you. Oh, and cherry trees. Lovely cherry trees that looked like soapsuds in the spring. Big, frothy, flowering things.

. . .

Then there was a long trip, and a ship's crossing. I remember that in pieces. You've got a million questions on that sheet—

. . .

Fifty, yes. Fine. I'm just saying, you don't have to ask them in order.

. . .

Because the story of your life never starts at the beginning. Don't they teach you anything in school?

Chapter 1

SHE WAS WAITING FOR HIM – OR SOMEONE – THOUGH HE HAD not phoned ahead. 'Where's the boy?' she called from her porch.

'Couldn't make it,' he said. 'You Mrs Vitkus?' He'd come to fill her bird feeders and put out her trash and tender sixty minutes to the care of her property. He could do at least that.

She regarded him peevishly, her face a collapsed apple, drained of color but for the small, unsettling, seed-bright eyes. 'My birds went hungry,' she said. 'I can't manage the ladder.' Her voice suggested mashed glass.

'Mrs Ona Vitkus? Forty-two Sibley Ave.?' He checked the address again; he'd taken two buses across town to get here. The green bungalow sat at the woodsy edge of a dead-end street, two blocks from a Lowe's and a few strides from a hiking trail. Standing in the driveway, Quinn could hear birds and traffic in equal measure.

'It's "Miss",' she said haughtily. He caught the faintest trace of an accent. The boy hadn't mentioned it. She'd probably staggered through Ellis Island with the huddled masses. 'He didn't come last week, either,'

she said. 'These boys don't stick to things.'

'I can't help that,' Quinn said, suddenly wary. He'd been led to expect a pink-cheeked charmer. The house resembled a witch's hovel, with its dreary flower beds and sharply pitched dormers and shingles the color of thatch.

'They're supposed to be teaching these boys about obedience. Prepared and kind and obedient . . . kind and obedient and . . .' She rapped herself lightly on the forehead.

'Clean,' Quinn offered.

The boy was gone: clean gone. But Quinn couldn't bring himself to say it.

'Clean and reverent,' the woman said. 'That's what they promise. They pledge. I thought this one was the real McCoy.' Another weak echo of accent: something brushy in the consonants, nothing an ordinary ear would pick up.

'I'm his father,' Quinn said.

'I figured.' She shifted inside her quilted parka. She also wore a hat with pompoms, though it was fifty-five degrees, late May, the sun beading down. 'Is he sick?'

'No,' Quinn said. 'Where's the birdseed?'

The old woman shivered. Her stockinged legs looked like rake handles jammed into small black shoes. 'Out back in the shed,' she said. 'Next to the door, unless the boy moved it. He gets his little notions. There's a ladder there, too. You're tall. You might not need it.' She sized Quinn up as if considering a run at his clothes.

'If I lowered the feeders,' he suggested, 'you could fill them yourself.'

She dug her fists into her hips. 'I'm quite put out about

this,' she said. All at once she sounded near tears, an unexpected key change that sped things up on Quinn's end.

'Let me get to it,' he said.

'I'll be inside.' She aimed a knuckly finger toward her door. 'I can supervise just as well through the window.' She spoke with a zeal at odds with her physical frailty, and Quinn doubted for the first time Belle's word that Ona Vitkus was 104 years old. Since the boy's death, Belle's view of reality had gone somewhat gluey. Quinn was awed by her grief, cowed by its power to alter her. He wanted to save her but had no talent for anything more interpersonally complicated than to obey commands as a form of atonement. Which was how he'd wound up here, under orders from his twice-ex-wife, to complete their son's good deed.

The shed had peeling double doors that opened easily. The hinges looked recently oiled. Inside, he found a stepladder with a broken rung. The place reeked of animal – not dog or cat, something grainier; mice, maybe. Or skinny, balding, fanged rats. Garden implements, seized with rust, hung in a diagonal line on the far wall, points and prongs and blades facing out. He considered the ways the boy could have been hurt on this weekly mission of mercy: ambushed by falling timber, gnawed by vermin – Troop 23's version of bait and switch.

But the boy had not been hurt. He had been, in his words, 'inspired.'

Quinn found the birdseed in a plastic bucket that he recognized. It had once held the five gallons of joint compound with which he'd repaired the walls of Belle's garage – before their final parting, before she returned his rehearsal space to a repository for paint thinner and

plant poisons and spare tires. Inside the bucket Quinn found a kingsize scoop, shiny and cherry red, jolly as a prop in a Christmas play. On a nearby shelf he spotted nine more scoops, identical. The boy was a hoarder. He kept things that could not be explained. On the day before the funeral, Belle had opened the door to the boy's room, instructing Quinn to look around if he wanted, but to remove nothing, touch nothing. So, he counted. Bird nests: 10; copies of *Old Yeller*: 10; flashlights: 10; piggy banks: 10; Boy Scout manuals: 10. He had Popsicle sticks, acorns, miniature spools of the sort found in ladies' sewing kits, everything corralled into tidy ten-count groupings. One computer, ten mouse pads. One desk, ten pencil cases. Hoarding, Belle maintained, was a reasonable response to a father whose attentions dribbled like water from a broken spigot. 'Figure it out,' she had once told him. 'Why would an eleven-year-old child insist on all this backup for the things he needs?'

Because there's something wrong with him, went Quinn's silent answer. But on that solemn day they'd observed the room in silence. As Belle preceded Quinn out the door, Quinn palmed the boy's diary – a single notebook, spiral-bound, five by seven, basic black – and shoved it inside his jacket. Nine others remained, still sealed in shrink-wrap.

As Quinn lugged the birdseed out to Miss Vitkus's feeders, he pictured the rest of Troop 23 happily do-gooding for more appealing charity cases, the type who knitted pink afghans. The scoutmaster, Ted Ledbetter, a middle-school teacher and single father who claimed to love woodland hikes, had likely foisted Miss Vitkus on the one kid least likely to complain. Now she was tapping

on the window, motioning for Quinn to get cracking.

Between the house and a massive birch, Miss Vitkus had strung a thirty-foot clothesline festooned with bird feeders. At six-two, he didn't require the ladder, though the boy would have, small as he was, elfin and fine-boned. Quinn had also been small at eleven, shooting up the following summer in a growth spurt that left him literally aching and out of clothes. Perhaps the boy would have been tall. A tall hoarder. A tall counter of mysterious things.

Quinn began at the tree end, and as he uncapped the first feeder, birds began to light, foliating the shivering branches. Chickadees, he guessed. Everything new he'd learned in the last two weeks had come from the cautious, well-formed, old-mannish handwriting of his son. A future Eagle Scout, the mysterious fruit of Quinn's feckless loins, the boy had, according to the diary, set his sights on a merit badge in bird identification.

Miss Vitkus lifted her window. 'They think you're the boy,' she called to him as the birds flittered down. 'Same jacket.' Fresh air tunneled into his lungs, blunt and merciless. Miss Vitkus watched him, her sweater bunched across her deflated chest. When he didn't respond, she snapped the window down.

After dispatching the feeders and running a push mower over her lawn, Quinn returned to the house, where Miss Vitkus stood at the door, waiting for him. No hair to speak of, just a few whitish hanks that put him in mind of dandelions. She said, 'I give him cookies after.'

'No, thanks.'

'It's part of the duty.'

So he went in, leaving his jacket on. It was, as Miss Vitkus had pointed out, exactly like the one the boy wore: a leather bomber with rivets, which made Quinn look like a rock-and-roll man and the boy like a meerkat struggling out of a trap. Belle had buried him in it.

He expected cats and doilies, but Miss Vitkus's house was pleasant and airy. Her kitchen counter, though crowded at one end with stacked newspapers, shone whitely in the unmolested places. The sink taps gleamed. The exterior must once have looked like the other houses on the street – straight and well appointed and framed by precise green lawns – but she'd obviously lost her ability to keep up.

Her table had been whisked clean but for two mismatched plates, a box of animal crackers, a deck of cards, and a pair of ugly drugstore reading glasses. The chairs smelled of lemon polish. He could see how the boy might have liked it here.

'I heard you're a hundred and four,' Quinn ventured, mostly to fill up space.

'Plus one hundred thirty-three days.' She divided the animal crackers, one to each plate, over and over, like dealing cards. Apparently there would be no milk.

'I'm forty-two,' he said. 'That's eighty-four in musician years.'

'You look older.' Her greenish eyes glimmered over him. The boy had written, in his faultless spelling: *Miss Vitkus is* EXTREMELY *inspiring in her magic powers and* AMAZING *life events!!!* The diary was twenty-nine pages long, a chronicle of lists interrupted by brief, breathless transcriptions from the world of Miss Vitkus, his new friend.

'Do you have help?' he asked. 'Besides the Scouts?'

'I get Meals on Wheels,' she said. 'I have to take the food apart and recook it, but it saves me on groceries.' She held up a cookie dinosaur. 'This is their idea of dessert.' She looked him over again. 'Your boy told me you're famous. Are you?'

He laughed. 'In my dreams.'

'What style of music do you play?'

'Anything except jazz. Jazz you have to be born with.'

'Elvis?'

'Sure.'

'Cowboy songs?'

'If you ask me nice.'

'I always liked Gene Autry. Perry Como?'

'Perry Como or Gene Autry or Led Zeppelin or a cat-food commercial. As long as they pay me.'

'I've never heard of Ed Zeppelin but I've seen my share of cat-food commercials.' She blinked a few times. 'So, a jack of all trades.'

'A journeyman,' he said. 'That's how you stay working.'

She considered him anew. 'You must be quite talented, then.'

'I'm okay.' What had the boy told her? He felt like a bug on a pin. 'I've been working steady since I was seventeen.'

To this she had nothing to say.

'As a guitar player, I mean. I've been working mainly as a guitar player.'

Again, nothing; so Quinn switched gears. 'Your English is excellent.'

'Why wouldn't it be? I've lived in this country for a

hundred years. I'll have you know I was a headmaster's secretary. Lester Academy. Have you heard of it?'

'No.'

'Dr Mason Valentine? Brilliant man.'

'I went to public schools.'

She fumbled with her sweater, a relic from the forties with big glass buttons. 'These boys don't stick to anything. We had ongoing business.' She glared at him.

Quinn said, 'I guess I should go.'

'Suit yourself.' She drummed her fingers on the well-used cards, which looked a little smaller than regulation.

'My son says you do tricks,' he said, unable to resist.

'Not for free I don't.'

'You charge him?'

'Not him. He's a child.' She slipped the glasses on – they were too big for her face – and inspected the deck.

The boy had written: *Miss Vitkus is* EXTREMELY *talented. She makes cards and quarters* DISAPPEAR. *Then they* APPEAR *again!!! She smiles well.*

This was exactly the way he had talked in real life.

Quinn said, 'How much?'

She shuffled her cards, her mood changing. 'I shall regale you,' she said, a magician's misdirection. Quinn had run into all manner of flimflammery over the years, and this old bird was a champ.

'Just the trick would be fine,' he said, glancing at her kitchen clock.

'You're in a hurry,' she said. 'Everybody's in a hurry.' She was accordioning the cards now, hand to hand, less impressively than she seemed to think, but impressive enough. 'I ran off with a midway show in the summer of 1914 and learned the art of prestidigitation.' Her

eyes lifted, as if the word itself produced magic. 'Three months later, I came back home and for the rest of my days lived the most conventional life imaginable.' Her expression was intense but ambiguous. 'I do this to remind myself that I was once a girl.' Reddening, she added, 'I told your boy a lot of stories. Too many, possibly.'

He'd been right to fear coming here: the boy was everywhere. Quinn had never wanted children, had been an awkward, largely absent father; and now, in the wake of the boy's death, he was left with neither the ice-smooth paralysis of shock, nor the crystalline focus of grief, but rather with a heart-swelling package of murky and miserable ironies.

Miss Vitkus fanned the cards and waited. Her teeth were long, squarish, still white enough, her bumpy fingers remarkably nimble, her nails shiny and ridgeless.

'Five bucks,' Quinn said, taking out his wallet.

'You read my mind.' She took the bill and stowed it in her sweater.

After a moment, Quinn said, 'Where's the trick?'

She leaned across the table and gathered up the cards. 'Five gets you inside the tent.' He saw what was in her eyes now: anger. 'Five more, you get the show.'

'That's extortion.'

'I wasn't born yesterday,' she said. 'Next time, bring the boy.'