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Missing Dad: Wanted

Written by J. Ryan

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Missing Dad

1. Wanted

J. Ryan



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Matador
9 Priory Business Park,
Wistow Road, Kibworth Beauchamp,
Leicestershire. LE8 0RX
Tel: 0116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador
Twitter: @matadorbooks

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Wanted

CHAPTER 1

Deep Water

'Do you realize how serious this is, Joe?'

I can't look the cop in the eyes. 'I know it was wrong…'

He shakes his head. 'Joe, you must know that driving underage isn't the half of it. A car that answers the description of yours was at the scene of an accident an hour ago. A lad's been run over.'

Feeling cold, I stare at him. 'I never ran anyone over.'

'You're to come and see Detective Inspector Wellington at the station, ten o'clock Friday. Your parents will need to be there too. Got that?'

'Not my dad…'

'Why not?'

'He went away, a long time ago.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Joe.' He holds open the door of his patrol car. 'In you get, then.'

Inside, it smells strongly of disinfectant. I clip on the belt and watch as cop number two, who took my car key off me, walks slowly round my Peugeot, looking at the tyres. He reaches inside and switches on the indicators to check them too. Then he gets in, starts the engine, turns on the lights and drives off. With a

dull shock, I realize what's going to happen in just fifteen minutes time. My stomach churns and my head starts to thump.

The cop who's driving me pulls away and follows my car. 'What did you think you were doing? Underage, so no insurance, no licence, not even an MOT… do you know how many laws you've broken? Not even counting the hit and run?'

'The hit and run wasn't me! I've never hurt anyone.'

'How many times have you been out in that car?'

'A few…'

'It's young idiots like you that cause the accidents. Is it your car?'

'My grandad gave it me.'

'He's going to be well pleased, isn't he?'

I don't reply. All the rest of the way from Stroud to my house I stare out of the window, wishing that the ground would open and swallow us up. As we turn into the road where I live and slow down outside our house, I can see Mum and Grandad at the gate, looking at my car and talking to the cop. He's handing Mum my car key. Her face is white and she keeps running her hand through her hair. Grandad has his arm round her. They turn as the cop car approaches.

'Dear God, Joe, what were you thinking of?' Tears are glistening on Mum's face.

I feel so sick that I can't speak.

'He has an appointment with Detective Inspector Wellington at Stroud station, ten o'clock Friday morning, Mrs St Aubin. You'll need to come with him. Now, we have to be on our way.'

I stare at the ground as Mum and Grandad watch the cop car drive off. She whispers, 'You know you're in terrible trouble, don't you?'

I nod, shivering in the night breeze. Grandad says, 'Well, standing out here in the cold won't help anything. Let's go inside.'

There's no sign of Jack as we go into the kitchen. Perhaps he's gone to bed and knows nothing about what's happened. Mum sits slowly down at the table and looks at me. 'Joe, if someone had asked me if you would ever do something like this, I would have said absolutely not, that you just weren't the type. Now, I feel as though I hardly know you.'

Grandad pushes his glasses onto the top of his bald head. 'Whatever possessed you, Joe?'

I swallow to try and get my gut back into line. 'I dunno… I s'pose I just really get a buzz out of driving and I thought, like, where's the harm in it?'

'Well, now you know, don't you? A boy's been run over.'

'Mum, you've got to believe me – I NEVER ran anyone over!'

'Then I do believe you, love. But the problem is, will the police?'

Grandad frowns. 'It's serious enough even if they don't charge you with the hit and run.'

'And how much else has been going on that you haven't told us about, Joe?' Mum picks up a pen and twirls it between her fingers. 'I mean, I had no idea you could drive. Who taught you?'

'Steve… in return for me teaching him some French… he's got this French girlfriend.'

'Becks' BROTHER taught you to drive? I don't believe it… how could he do such a thing?'

'We didn't go on the road… just used car parks…'

'And that makes it alright does it?'

'I didn't mean that…'

'God, Joe. This is enough to start me smoking again. How many times have you been out in that car?'

'Not many…'

'Well HOW many? Ten times? Twenty times? I want to know!'

'Less than ten times. Maybe four or five…'

'And where did you go?'

'Small country roads mostly.'

'Where you were less likely to be spotted by the police, I suppose.'

'Something like that…'

'And tonight your luck ran out.'

'Yeah…'

Mum rubs her forehead. 'And are there other things you've been getting up to without telling us?'

'No, I promise.'

'I hope for your sake and ours that we can trust you on that, Joe.' Grandad puts his glasses back in their case. 'Now I think you'd better get to bed, don't you?'

As I stare at the pic of a black Bentley Continental on my bedroom wall, Jack tiptoes in, pyjamas on and blond hair tousled. 'Sorry about all this, mate. I wish I could help.'

'Thanks, bud. I've been a complete idiot.'

'D'you want to come and feed my fish… like, it could take your mind off it?'

'Cheers mate, but nothing could do that right now.'

There's a grey dawn in the sky before I get to sleep, only to dream about flashing blue lights and men in black uniforms.

—

The next morning, I'm woken by the phone ringing persistently in the hall below. My eyes feel like they've been rubbed down with sandpaper. Mum answers, and from the tone of her voice I know it's not good news. 'I see. How long for?'

Pulling on my dressing gown, I stumble down the stairs as Mum puts the phone down. 'That was the school. The police have contacted them about last night. You're excluded until further notice, Joe.'

'I'm not sure I could face being there anyway.'

'Joe, it's your education that's suffering now! There are going to be so many consequences of what you've done.'

'I'm crap at school, everyone knows that.'

'Only because you don't try hard enough. All your reports say you have an excellent brain but you just don't use it!'

'Can we not go there again… ?'

Mum taps on her high heels back into the kitchen and grabs her jacket. 'I'll be late for work. You know what, Joe? You are your own worst enemy, vraiment!' The front door bangs behind her. Mum only resorts to her native French when she's really angry.

In the kitchen, Jack's in his uniform, munching sugar puffs. His saxophone case lies next to his school bag. He mumbles, 'It just got worse?'

'It just got worse.'

He pushes the sugar puffs box towards me. 'Want some?'

'No thanks, mate. I'm not hungry.'

When Jack's left for the bus, I go back upstairs to bed, feeling shattered, but I can't sleep. I just lie there and stare at the pic of the black Bentley Continental. Then, I must have nodded off because the next thing I know, the clock says half past four and the front doorbell's ringing as loudly as the phone did earlier. Looking down from the landing window, I can see a cloud of red hair swishing around as its owner tosses her head impatiently. Normally, I'd be over the moon to see that hair, but right now I'm not so sure.

I open the door and Becks' green eyes take me in. 'God, Joe, can't you even be bothered to get dressed? You look such a mess.' She marches into the kitchen and fills the kettle.

I follow her on shuffling feet. 'That's because I'm IN a mess.'

'They're saying all kinds of stupid things in school. You weren't actually driving, were you? You were just in a car with someone else who was underage, surely?'

'I wish it was like that.'

She stares at me, twirling a lock of hair in her fingers. 'So it's true – you were the driver?'

I nod, my face burning under her furious gaze.

'This is all Steve's fault! If he hadn't taught you in those bloody car parks… it was a bad idea from the start!'

'It's all my fault, Becks. No one made me do it.'

'How could you be so STUPID?'

'Because stupid is what I am, that's all.'

'And they're saying a kid got run over?'

'Becks, I had nothing to do with that! It's just that they're saying my car fits the description of the one that ran the kid over. Same colour, same make, same model – right down to the mashed exhaust.'

'I don't believe this!'

'You think I'm lying about the hit and run?'

'Of course I don't, you idiot! But it's because you were driving that you're in this huge mess now!' She pours the boiling water into two mugs, adds milk and pushes one of the coffees across to me. 'There must be something we can do to prove your innocence.' Her chair scrapes as she gets up and prowls around the kitchen. 'Is it alright if I grab a cookie – I'm starving.'

'Could you pass me one? I haven't eaten since last night.'

As we crunch custard creams, her eyes flash. 'I know! We'll set up a website – call it Justice for Joe – that's got a good ring. And we'll appeal for witnesses who got a proper look at the hit and runner.'

'D'you think the police would let you? I mean, it's like we're doing their job for them.'

'I'm not going to ask them, am I?'

'I dunno… I'm in enough trouble as it is.'

'We've got to do something, Joe! You can't just sit here and feel sorry for yourself.'

'If only Dad was here… I know he'd think of something.'

Her voice softens. 'You miss him an awful lot, don't you?'

'Don't you miss your mum?'

'I don't miss the rows before she split. And she always preferred Steve to me anyway.'

'That can't be true…'

'It is true.'

'How do you know?'

'She made a habit of telling me. No, I don't miss my mother. What was your dad like?'

'I can hardly remember, it was so long ago that he disappeared. But I know he had a job that was very secret, and you had to be very brave and clever to do it. I'll bet sorting out this hit and run would be a doss for Dad.'

'Can you remember anything else?'

'Only one thing. I'm like, standing on this old bridge in Bristol, way above the river, and he's holding my hand.'

'That must be the Clifton suspension bridge.'

'Your geography was always better than mine, Becks.'

'Stop rubbishing yourself and get some clothes on. We're going for a walk and we're not going to talk about cars at all!'

—

The walk with Becks and her buying us a Big Mac makes me feel a bit better. But it also brings back the huge ache for Dad. After she's gone home, I go up to my room and search on Google maps for the Clifton suspension bridge. I know I was there with Dad once, all those years ago. If I could just feel close to him again, it might help me get through this…

I wait till two in the morning and the whole house is quiet, then I creep downstairs to the kitchen. Has Mum hidden my car key? I wouldn't blame her if she had. I rummage through drawers and cupboards. I even check out the fridge. Then I see my key, hanging on a hook on the wall with all the other keys, right where it should be. That's when I feel bad. Mum trusts me not to do this. Seeing her reproachful eyes, I feel like something that just crawled out from under a stone. I hesitate for a moment. But Bristol's only half an hour away; I'll be back before anyone wakes up. And I just have to stand on that bridge again, feeling like Dad's near me. I lift the key off the hook.

The garage door squeaks as I swing it open. Terrified that a light will suddenly go on in the house, I slip inside my car with its Pot Noodle and crisps smell, and start the engine. Weaving round Mum's Citroën, I pause at the gate as a cyclist with no lights wobbles past. On the country road that leads to the M5, a fox dashes across right in front of me, his eyes red in the beam of my headlights; I slam on the brakes and just miss him. Then I'm on the motorway, heading south. A sign says it's twenty five miles to Bristol. The suspension bridge shouldn't be too hard to find; according to Google it's a big tourist attraction.

When I'm almost in Bristol, a cop car with flashing blue lights makes my hands go clammy with sweat; but it blasts on past, after some other bad men than me. A grey dawn is just tinting the sky as I drive through streets that are nearly empty, except for the odd dustbin lorry and milk float. Reaching the top of a hill where the road is

lined with fancy shops and restaurants, I catch a glimpse of a string of shining pearls hanging against the dark clouds; now I know I'm going in the right direction.

Locking my car, I gaze at this mighty bridge that swoops between the steep, craggy sides of the gorge. At the entrance to the bridge, a Samaritan's sign offers a phone number to anyone who might be planning to look down at that muddy river for the last time. Perched on the railing, a large crow surveys me watchfully as I walk out into the centre of the bridge and stand three hundred feet above the river Avon. The tide is almost out; the lights from the bridge reflect faintly in the dark ribbon of water far below. From the tree-covered sides of the gorge opposite comes the faint trill of birdsong, as the grey tinge on the horizon slowly turns to a smoky pink.

How old was I when I gazed out over this water with Dad? I wonder if he remembers it too. The crow flaps dark wings and floats off the bridge, cruising lazily along the cliff face. A drop of water touches my face. As rain starts to fall lightly, then more heavily, I stare down through all that empty air between me and the river. I haven't got away from anything by coming here. I've just made it worse. And I know what Dad would tell me to do.

A hand suddenly rests on my shoulder, and I turn, going cold all over to see the black uniform behind me. 'You're up early for someone your age, lad. Have you got a home to go to?'

'Er, yeah. I couldn't sleep so I went for a walk.'

'What was it brought you up here? Something on your mind?'

He thinks I was going to jump. It's not about my car at all. 'I have some good memories of being here with my dad, that's all.'

'And where's your dad now?'

'He went away…' Suddenly I can see this cop dragging me off to Social Services. 'But he's coming back soon.'

'So what's the plan?'

'I'm going home.'

'That's the ticket. Mind how you go, alright?'

'Yeah. Thanks.'

I can feel his eyes on my back as I walk right past my car and on down the street. It's now tipping with rain. I keep going for ten minutes until I've put a good distance between me and the cop. Then I double back, hoping frantically that he's not there anymore. The bridge is deserted.

Back in my car, I switch my mobile on and almost instantly it rings. 'Joe?' Becks' voice is urgent. 'Joe, where the hell are you? Your mum's just called me in case you went to my place. She saw your car gone and she sounds ill with worry.'

Staring out of the window, I see Mum's white face against the black clouds. 'Tell her I'm alright… I'm on my way back from Bristol.'

'Bristol! God, Joe…'

'I'm sorry, Becks. I'm sorry about everything.'

CHAPTER 2

Duel

The shining lights of the suspension bridge have just disappeared from my mirror when the engine splutters and dies. I look at the fuel gauge and swear. Only total pillocks run out of juice. Clutching my can, I set off at a run through the pouring rain. A middle-aged woman with a headscarf like the Queen is walking her spaniel. She stops and stares at me like she's going to call the cops to arrest this teenage arsonist. I take a left into a wider street. The Marks and Spencer and the other shops are all closed, but thankfully the Shell garage is open.

As I go in to pay up, a golden Labrador curled up by the counter thumps his tail on the floor. The fat guy at the till must think I look hungry. 'We're doing a meal deal, mate. Another one pound fifty, and you get a bacon and egg triple and a Coke, in with the fuel?'

'I've just eaten, thanks.' At least he's not interested in my age.

The Lab watches with friendly eyes as I head for the door. OK, it's a left out of the garage. Once out of sight, I break into a run again. Down to the end, then right. So why don't I remember this cafe doing Buy A Big Breakfast Get One Free? And where's the M & S?

Rain trickles down my neck as I stare around. Maybe I've gone right past the road where I left my car.

I sprint to the end of the street. On the left, there's a tacky pub doing widescreen footie, and a public toilet next to it. Beyond is a one-way system with a queue of cars in the early morning rush hour. I never came this way. Two men lurch out of the men's. They're about the same age as my grandad and they're looking at my petrol can. The taller man shouts, 'Goin' ter torch a car, chav? Why don'cher, then?'

Running on, I turn a corner into Arlingham Row. Is this it? House after house has a battered For Sale sign outside. Sacks of rubbish loll in the gardens. I'm getting this sick feeling that I had on my first day at my new school, when I couldn't find my way home. I stare at the dark windows.

Then, just as I'm crossing the road, I stop dead. A red Peugeot 206 that looks exactly like mine is parked on the other side. I hurry round the back and check out the exhaust. It's a sports tail pipe, all crunched up, like mine. But I didn't leave my car here. And that computes because this is not my car; the reg plates are different. This machine fits the description of the hit and run car, just like mine did. For the first time in this nightmare, I see a small glimmer of hope. My wet fingers fumble for the buttons on my phone. Click/flash. And another. Click/flash. I'm seeing me showing the photos to Detective Inspector Wellington at ten o'clock. Then, my neck starts to prickle.

She must have crept up behind me so quietly. There's something strange about those eyes, with their

cold stare. She's athletic-looking in her black tracksuit; her hair's so short it's almost shaved. 'What the bloody 'ell d'you think you're doin'?'

'I… I didn't mean any harm…'

'Course you didn't, you little shit. Now gimme that sodding phone.'

I turn to run. Her hand shoots out and grabs my arm. 'Oh no you don't!'

She twists until I gasp with pain. I throw a kick at her leg. She loosens her hold, 'Bastard!', and I sprint off like my feet are on fire. Seconds later, an engine revs furiously. Tyres spin in the wet, and there's a thump as her car mounts the pavement. I never thought the hit and runner would be a woman.

My flying feet take me down a narrow alley. At the end, I stop and listen before running on. Street names blur as I dash past. Then, one jumps out at me. Gloucester Close. That's it! I was in Gloucester Road before I took that turn and ran out of fuel. Maybe I'm not that far away from my car.

Gloucester Way. I run for the traffic lights at the end. And at last I'm in Gloucester Road. There's the side street; and there's my car! My twisted arm cramps up as I pour in the fuel. I keep thinking I can hear an engine. As I throw myself into the driving seat, her Peugeot skids round the corner. My engine fires at the second try, and I'm gone.

Her headlights are blazing in my mirror. I don't believe this, it's a car chase now; well, at least the odds are more even. The traffic lights turn to green just as I reach them. I take a right for the motorway; she's still horribly

close behind me. Then a double decker stops right in front of me and I get round it, but she can't because of oncoming traffic. All the way to the motorway there's no sign of her. A coach is filling my rear view mirror as I turn onto the M5 slip road so I can't be certain I've lost her. And now I've got another problem: eight litres doesn't look like that on the gauge.

The fuel needle's been jammed on zero for ten minutes when I reach Michael Wood services, but nothing follows me off the motorway. Sweating, I fill up my car, and empty my wallet. With a cheerful smile, the blonde-haired woman at the till says, 'You know, we've got this meal deal going? If you put in…'

'Another one pound fifty… thanks, but I'm eating out.'

The door of the service station closes behind me, and I stare around the forecourt. There's not a car in sight. My phone goes. 'Joe, are you alright? We thought you'd be home ages ago… ?'

'So did I… I've got to go, Becks.'

Back on the M5, two sets of headlights are following about three hundred yards behind me. The clock on the dash says six twenty. I could be home before seven, just when Grandad usually gets up to make a cup of tea for me and Jack. But he and Mum have probably been waiting by the phone most of the night. What am I putting them through?

One of the cars behind me overtakes, and powers away in the fast lane. Now there's only one pair of headlights following. Have I passed the Dursley turn-off? I can't remember. My right arm stabs as I rub my eyes. They feel gritty. It's hard to keep them open.

Suddenly, my rear view mirror blazes with headlights that just keep coming. With a huge BANG, someone drives straight into the rear of my car. My head jerks back and the crash barrier comes towards me so fast I can't brake in time. I bounce off it, fighting to get control. The car's spinning round. Lights flash all over the road, the night sky, and in my head. Then, they go out.

—

I can smell something hot, like burning rubber. My head throbs. Dimly, I hear the door of my car being wrenched open. She chucks me onto the hard shoulder. 'You just don't get it, do you, shitface?' She lands a kick in my ribs. 'Now gimme the phone, or I'll break your bloody neck.'

My head's banging so hard, I can't think what to do. Suddenly, I hear a voice that I know, whispering in my brain. With my good arm, I reach inside my pocket, and hold the phone towards her. Her hand darts out; not quite quickly enough, as I hurl the phone far out onto the motorway. She sprints after it.

Dragging myself into the driving seat, I glimpse a bright glow of headlights on the horizon. Must be about a mile away. Probably a truck, doing eighty. Maybe, thirty seconds before it arrives? She crouches to pick up my phone.

Not expecting much after that smash, I turn the key in the ignition. The engine roars into life. I shift into first. Then, I can't help glancing back. She's still crouching there, in the middle of the motorway, busily pushing buttons on my phone. She must be looking for

the pics of her car. The truck's headlights get bigger and brighter as it thunders towards her. I can see it now. It's a massive thirty tonner. But she's still just pushing those buttons. I'm sure the truck driver can't see her, or he'd be slowing down.

My hand reaches out and hits the horn. She looks up and makes a dash towards me. With a blast from its air horns, the truck howls past the place where she was stood less than a second ago. Her hands tug at my door handle, but the doors are locked. Accelerating back onto the motorway, I look in my mirror. She stands there on the hard shoulder, beside her Peugeot that's the twin of mine. I've thrown her my only chance to prove it wasn't me who did the hit and run. But I'm alive.

Five minutes later, I stare at those headlights again. Chill, idiot. We haven't passed a junction yet. She'll turn off at the next one. The Dursley exit comes and goes, and she's still there, getting closer. The phone's not enough, is it? She wants to punish me, for daring to kick her leg, when she wanted to break my arm. For making her run after my mobile, like a dog after a bone. That voice in my head whispers to me again.

I start to veer from side to side, as though I'm losing control. Then I slow down, like my engine's about to blow up. She's still getting closer. But this time, if she tries it again, I'm ready to snap down a gear and get away from her. Now I know she'll follow me wherever I go. And I know where I'm taking her; it's not far now. My eyes never leave the mirror.

Junction 13. I indicate left; the car behind does the same. I don't know how long it takes to reach Stroud;

my head's drumming so hard I've lost all track of time. I vaguely remember turning up Magistrates Road. She's still right in my boot, so out of her brain, she hasn't noticed.

I turn into the steep down-slope of the police station carpark and slam on the brakes. Hit the horn. And keep hitting it, bracing my arms against the steering wheel. There's another huge bang as she shunts my Peugeot right into the back of a really fancy Vauxhall chase car.

A twirling splinter of bumper flying up into the dark is the last thing I see. The last thing I hear comes from a long way off. Detective Inspector Wellington says, 'A bit early for your appointment, aren't you, Joe?'