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The Last Child

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Asphalt cut the country like a scar, a long, hot burn of razor-black. Heat had not yet twisted the air, but the driver knew it was coming, the scorching glare, the shimmer at the far place where blue hammered down. He adjusted his sunglasses and threw a glance at the big mirror above the windshield. It showed him the length of the bus and every passenger on it. In thirty years he'd watched all kinds of people in that mirror: the pretty girls and the broken men, the drunks and the crazies, the heavy-breasted women with red, wrinkled babies. The driver could spot trouble a mile away; he could tell who was fine and who was running.

The driver looked at the boy.

The boy looked like a runner.

Skin peeled from his nose, but beneath the tan he carried the sallow kind of pale that came from sleeplessness or malnutrition or both. His cheekbones made sharp blades beneath skin stretched tight. He was young and small, ten maybe, with wild hair that rose black on his head. The cut was jagged and uneven, like something he'd done himself. Frayed cloth hung from the collar of his shirt and from the knees of his jeans. The shoes were just about worn through. On his lap, he clutched a blue backpack; and whatever it held, there wasn't much of it.

He was a good-looking kid, but what struck the driver most were the boy's eyes. Large and dark, they moved constantly, as if the boy was overly aware of the people around him, the hot press of humanity typical of a broken-down bus on a sun-blasted morning in the North Carolina sand hills: a half-dozen itinerant workers, a few busted-up brawlers that looked ex-military, a family or two, some old folks, a couple of tattooed punks that huddled in the back.

The boy's eyes most often found the man across the aisle, a slick-haired

sales type in a wrinkled suit and sprung loafers. There was also a black man with a creased Bible and a soda bottle tucked between his legs; he seemed to catch the kid's eye, too. In the seat behind the boy sat an old lady in a parchment dress. When she leaned forward to ask a question, the boy shook his head in a small way and answered with care.

No, ma'am.

His words rose like smoke, and the lady settled back, blue-veined fingers on the chain that held her spectacles. She looked through the window and her lenses flashed, then went dark as the road sliced into a stand of pine with shadows that pooled green beneath the limbs. The same light filled the bus, and the driver studied the man in the wrinkled suit. He had pale skin and a hangover sweat, unusually small eyes and an edginess that scraped the driver's nerves. Every minute or two, the man shifted in his seat. He crossed his legs and uncrossed them, leaned forward, then back. His fingers drummed one knee of the ill-fitting suit and he swallowed often as his gaze drifted to the boy, then flicked away, drifted again and lingered.

The driver was a jaded man, but he ran things clean on his bus. He refused to tolerate drunkenness or debauchery or loud voices. His momma raised him that way fifty years ago and he'd found no reason to change. So he kept an eye on the boy, and on the drawn, shiny man with eager eyes. He watched him watch the boy, saw him push back against the greasy seat when the knife came out.

The boy was casual about it. He pulled it from a pocket and folded the blade out with a single thumb. He held it for a moment, visible, then took an apple from his bag and sliced it in a sharp, clean motion. The smell of it rose above the travel-stained seats and the dirt-smeared floors. Even above the diesel stink, the driver caught the sharp, sweet tang of it. The boy looked once at the man's wide eyes and slick, washed-out face, then folded the knife and put it back in his pocket.

The driver relaxed and watched the road, uninterrupted, for a few long minutes. He thought that the boy seemed familiar, but the feeling passed. Thirty years. He settled his heavy frame deeper into the seat.

He'd seen so many boys.

So many runners.

* * *

Every time the driver looked at him, the boy felt it. It was a gift he had, a skill. Even with the dark shades on the driver's eyes and the big curve in the face of the mirror, the boy could tell. This was his third trip on the bus in as many weeks. He sat in different seats and wore different clothes, but guessed that sooner or later somebody would ask him what he was doing on a cross-state bus at seven o'clock on a school day. He figured the question would come from the driver.

But it hadn't happened yet.

The boy turned to the window and angled his shoulders so that no one else would try to speak to him. He watched reflections in the glass, the movements and the faces. He thought of skyscraper trees and brown feathers tipped with snow.

The knife made a lump in his pocket.

Forty minutes later, the bus rocked to a stop at a one-room gas station depot that felt lost in the great swath of pine and scrub and hot, sandy earth. The boy made his way down the narrow aisle and dropped off the bottom step before the driver could mention that nothing but the tow truck sat in the lot, or that no grown-up was there to take possession of him, a thirteen-year-old boy who could barely pass for ten. He kept his head turned so that the sun seared his neck. He rocked the pack onto his back, and the diesel cloud rose; then the bus jerked and was rolling south.

The gas station had two pumps, a long bench, and a skinny old man in blue clothes stained with grease. He nodded from behind smudged glass but did not come out into the heat. The drink machine in the shade of the building was so old it only asked for fifty cents. The boy dug into a pocket, fingered out five thin dimes and purchased a grape soda that came out of the chute in a cold glass bottle. He popped the top, turned in the direction from which the bus had come, and started walking down the black snake of dusty road.

Three miles and two turns later, the road diminished, asphalt gone to gravel, gravel gone thin. The sign had not changed since the last time he'd seen it. It was old and abused, feathers of paint lifting to show the wood beneath: *ALLIGATOR RIVER RAPTOR PRESERVE.* Above the letters, a stylized eagle soared, and on its wings, the paint feathers rose.

The boy spit chewing gum into his hand and slapped it on the sign as he passed.

It took two hours to find a nest, two hours of sweat and sticker bushes and mosquitoes that turned his skin a bright, splotchy red. He found the massive tangle of limbs in the high branches of a longleaf pine that grew straight and tall from the damp soil on the bank of the river. He circled the tree twice, but found no feathers on the ground. Sunlight pierced the forest, and the sky was so bright and blue that it hurt his eyes. The nest was a speck.

He shrugged off the pack and started climbing, bark rough and raw on his sunburned skin. Wary and afraid, he looked for the eagle as he climbed. A stuffed one sat on a pedestal at the museum in Raleigh, and he remembered the fierceness of it. Its eyes were glass, but its wings spanned five feet from tip to tip, its talons as long as the boy's middle finger. The beak alone could take the ears off a grown man.

All he wanted was a feather. He'd love a clean, white tail feather, or one of the giant brown feathers from the wing; but in the end, it could be the smallest feather from the softest patch, a pin feather, maybe, or one from that downy soft place beneath the shoulder of the wing.

It didn't really matter.

Magic was magic.

The higher he climbed, the more the branches bent. Wind moved the tree and the boy with it. When it gusted, he pushed his face into the bark, heart thumping and fingers squeezed white. The tree was a king of trees, so tall that even the river shrank beneath it.

He neared the top. This close, the nest was as broad as a dining room table and probably weighed two hundred pounds. It was decades old, stinking of rot and shit and rabbit parts. The boy opened himself to the smell, to the power of it. He shifted a hand, planted one foot on a limb that was weathered gray and skinned of bark. Beneath him, pine forest marched off to distant hills. The river twisted, black and dark and shining like coal. He lifted himself above the nest and saw the chicks, two of them, pale and mottled, in the bowl of the nest. They opened splinters of beaks, begging for food, and the boy heard a sound like sheets on the line when the wind got up. He risked a glance, and the eagle dropped from a perfect sky. For an instant, the boy saw only feathers, then the wings beat down and the talons rose.

The bird screamed.

The boy threw up his arms as talons sank into him; then he fell, and the bird—eyes yellow bright, talons hooked in his skin and in his shirt—the bird fell with him.

At three forty-seven, a bus rolled into the parking lot of the same one-room gas station depot, pointing north this time, a different bus, different driver. The door clattered open and a handful of rheumatic people shuffled out. The driver was a thin, Hispanic man, twenty-five and tired-looking. He barely looked at the scrawny boy who rose from the bench and limped to the door of the bus. He didn't notice the torn clothes or the near despair on the boy's face. And if that was blood on the hand that passed the ticket over, it seemed clear that it was not the driver's business to remark upon it.

The boy let go of the ticket. He pulled himself up the stairs and tried to hold the pieces of his shirt together. The pack he carried was heavy, stuffed near to bursting, and something red stained the seams at the bottom. There was a smell about the boy, one of mud and river and something raw; but that, too, was not the driver's business. The boy pushed deeper into the gloom of the bus. He fell once against a seat back, then moved all the way to the rear, where he sat alone in the corner. He clutched the bag to his chest and pulled his feet onto the seat. Deep holes punctured his flesh and his neck was gashed; but no one looked at him, no one cared. He clutched the bag tighter, felt the heat that remained, the broken body, like a sack of shattered twigs. He pictured the small and downy chicks, alone in the nest. Alone in the nest and starving.

The boy rocked in the dark.

He rocked in the dark and wept hot, bitter tears.

CHAPTER ONE

Johnny learned early. If somebody asked him why he was so different, why he held himself so still and why his eyes seemed to swallow light, that's what he'd tell them. He learned early that there was no safe place, not the backyard or the playground, not the front porch or the quiet road that grazed the edge of town. No safe place, and no one to protect you.

Childhood was illusion.

He'd been up for an hour, waiting for the night sounds to fade, for the sun to slide close enough to call it morning. It was Monday, still dark, but Johnny rarely slept. He woke to patrol dark windows. He rattled the locks twice a night, watched the empty road and the dirt drive that looked like chalk when the moon rose. He checked on his mom, except when Ken was at the house. Ken had a temper and wore a large gold ring that made perfect oval bruises. That was another lesson.

Johnny pulled on a T-shirt and frayed jeans, then walked to the bedroom door and cracked it. Light spilled down the narrow hall, and the air felt used up. He smelled cigarettes and spilled liquor that was probably bourbon. For an instant, Johnny recalled the way mornings used to smell, eggs and coffee and the sharp tang of his father's aftershave. It was a good memory, so he drove it down, crushed it. It only made things harder.

In the hall, shag carpet rose stiff under his toes. The door to his mother's room hung loose in its frame. It was hollow core and unpainted, a mismatch. The original door lay splintered in the backyard, kicked off its hinges a month back when Ken and Johnny's mother got into it after hours. She never said what the argument was about, but Johnny guessed it had something to do with him. A year ago, Ken could never have gotten close to a woman like her, and Johnny never let him forget it; but that was a year ago. A lifetime.

They'd known Ken for years, or thought they had. Johnny's dad was a contractor, and Ken built whole neighborhoods. They worked well together because Johnny's dad was fast and competent, and because Ken was smart enough to respect him. Because of that, Ken had always been pleasant and mindful, even after the kidnapping, right up until Johnny's dad decided that grief and guilt were too much to bear. But after his dad left, the respect disappeared, and Ken started coming around a lot. Now he ran things. He kept Johnny's mother dependant and alone, kept her medicated or drunk. He told her what to do and she did it. Cook a steak. Go to the bedroom. Lock the door.

Johnny took it in with those black eyes, and often found himself in the kitchen, at night, three fingers on the big knife in its wooden block, picturing the soft place above Ken's chest, thinking about it.

The man was a predator, pure and simple; and Johnny's mother had faded down to nothing. She weighed less than a hundred pounds and was as drawn as a shut-in, but Johnny saw the way men looked at her, the way Ken got possessive when she made it out of the house. Her skin, though pale, was flawless, her eyes large and deep and wounded. She was thirty-three, and looked like an angel would look if there was such a thing, dark-haired and fragile and unearthly. Men stopped what they were doing when she walked into a room. They stared as if a glow came off her skin, as if she might rise from the ground at any moment.

She could not care less. Even before her daughter vanished, she'd paid little attention to the way she'd looked. Blue jeans and T-shirts. Ponytails and occasional makeup. Her world had been a small, perfect place where she'd loved her husband and her children, where she'd tended a garden, volunteered at church, and sang to herself on rainy days; but no more. Now there was silence and emptiness and pain, a flicker of the person she'd been; but the beauty lingered. Johnny saw it every day, and every day he cursed the perfection that graced her so completely. If she were ugly, Ken would have no use for her. If she'd had ugly children, his sister would still sleep in the room next to his. But she was like a doll or something not quite real, like she should be in a cabinet with a lock on it. She was the most beautiful person Johnny had ever known, and he hated that about her.

Hated it.

That's how much his life had changed.

Johnny studied the door to his mother's room. Maybe Ken was in there, maybe not. His ear pressed against the wood, and breath caught in his throat. Normally, he could tell, but sleep had dodged him for days, and when he finally crashed, he crashed hard. Black and still. Deep. When he did wake, it was with a start, like he'd heard glass break. That was at three o'clock.

He stepped back from the door, uncertain, then crept down the hall, and the bathroom light hummed when he flicked the switch. The medicine cabinet stood open and he saw the pills: Xanax, Prozac, some blue ones, some yellows. He picked up a bottle and read the label. Vicodin. That was new. The Xanax bottle was open, pills on the counter, and Johnny felt the anger fill him up. The Xanax helped Ken come down after a night with the good stuff.

That was his term.

The good stuff.

Johnny closed the bottle and walked out of the bathroom.

The house was a dump, and he reminded himself that it was not really theirs. Their real house was clean and kept up. It had a new roof that he'd helped to install. He'd gone up the ladder every day of spring vacation, passed shingles to his dad, and held nails in a tool belt that had his name scratched into it. It was a good house, with stone walls and a yard that boasted more than dirt and broadleaf weed. It was only a few miles away, but felt farther, a different neighborhood with cared-for homes on big, green lots. The place was steeped in memory, but the bank owned it now. They gave his mother some papers and put a sign in the yard.

This was one of Ken's rentals. He had about a hundred, and Johnny thought this was probably the worst, a crappy dump way out on the edge of town. The kitchen was small, with green metal and scuffed linoleum that turned up in the corners. A bulb burned above the stove and Johnny turned a slow circle. The place was disgusting: butts in a saucer, empty bottles, and shot glasses. The mirror lay flat on the kitchen table and Johnny saw how white powder residue caught the light. The sight of it spread cold in his chest. A rolled-up hundred dollar bill had fallen to the floor. Johnny picked it up, smoothed it out. He'd not had a decent meal in a week and Ken was snorting coke with a hundred.

He picked up the mirror, wiped it off with a wet towel, and hung it back on the wall. His father used to look in that mirror, and Johnny could still

see how he worked at his tie on Sundays, his fingers large and stiff, the tie unforgiving. He only wore his suit for church, and he'd get embarrassed when he caught his son watching. Johnny could see it: the sudden red flush and then the reckless smile. "Thank God for your mother," he'd say, and then she'd tie the knot for him.

His hands at the small of her back.

The kiss and the wink that came after.

Johnny wiped the mirror again, then straightened it, tweaked it until it hung just right.

The door to the front porch moved stiffly, and Johnny walked out into the damp, dark morning. A streetlamp flickered fifty yards down the road. Headlights crested a distant hill.

Ken's car was gone, and Johnny felt a shameful, sweet relief. Ken lived across town in a big house with perfect paint, large windows and a four-car garage. Johnny took a deep breath, thought of his mother bent over that mirror, and told himself that she was not that far gone. That was Ken's deal, not hers. He forced his hands to unclench. The air was scrubbed, so he concentrated on that instead. He told himself that it was a new day, that good things could happen; but mornings were bad for his mother. There was a moment when her eyes opened, a flash before she remembered that they'd never found her only daughter.

Johnny's sister.

His twin.

Alyssa was born three minutes after Johnny, and they'd been as similar as nonidentical twins could be. They had the same hair and face, the same laugh. She was a girl, yeah, but from twenty feet it was hard to tell them apart. They stood the same, walked the same. Most mornings, they woke at the same time, even in different rooms. Johnny's mom said they'd had their own language when they were small, but Johnny didn't remember that. He remembered that for most of his life, he'd never been alone; a special sense of belonging that only the two of them had ever understood. But Alyssa was gone, and everything with her. That was truth, unavoidable, and it had carved the insides out of his mother. So Johnny did what he could. He checked the locks at night and cleaned up the mess. Today it took twenty minutes; then he put on coffee and thought about the rolled-up bill.

A hundred bucks.

Food and clothing.

He made a last check of the house. Bottles, gone. Signs of drug use, gone. He opened windows to let the outside in, then checked the refrigerator. The milk carton rattled when he shook it. One egg in the carton. He opened his mother's purse. She had nine dollars and change. Johnny left the money and closed the purse. He filled a glass with water and shook two aspirin out of a bottle. He walked down the hall and opened his mother's door.

The first raw light of dawn pushed against the glass, an orange bulge beyond the black trees. His mother lay on her side, hair across her face. Magazines and books covered the bedside table. He made room for the glass and placed the aspirin on the scarred wood. For a second, he listened to her breathe, then looked at the stack of bills Ken had left by the bed. There were some twenties, a fifty. Maybe a few hundred dollars, wrinkled and smudged.

Peeled off a roll.

Discarded.

The car in the driveway was old, a station wagon that Johnny's father had bought years ago. The paint was clean and waxed, tire pressure checked every week, but that was all Johnny knew how to do. Blue smoke still belched from the pipe when he turned the key; the passenger window did not go up all the way. He waited for the smoke to turn white, then put the car in gear and rolled to the bottom of the drive. He was nowhere close to having a license, and looked carefully before edging into the road. He kept the speed down and stayed on the back roads. The nearest store was only two miles away, but it was a big one, on a major road, and Johnny knew that people there might recognize him. He added three miles to the trip and went to a small grocery store that catered to the low end of things. The gas cost money and the food was more expensive, but he didn't really have a choice. Social Services had already been to the house twice.

The car blended with those already there, most of which were old and American. A dark sedan rolled in behind him and stopped near the entrance. Sunlight mirrored The glass and a lone man sat faceless behind the wheel. He did not get out, and Johnny watched him as he walked to the store.

Johnny had a great fear of lone men in stopped cars.

The cart wobbled as he went up one aisle and down another. Just the basics, he decided: milk, juice, bacon, eggs, sandwich bread, fruit. He bought more aspirin for his mother. Tomato juice also seemed to help.

The cop stopped him at the bottom of aisle eight. He was tall and broad, with brown eyes that were too soft for the lines in his face, the hard angle of his jaw. He had no cart, stood with his hands in his pockets, and Johnny knew at a glance that he'd followed him inside. He had that look, a kind of resigned patience.

And Johnny wanted to run.

"Hey, Johnny," he said. "How you doing?"

His hair was longer than Johnny remembered, same brown as his eyes, shaggy and curling over the top of his collar with a bit of new silver threaded in at the sides. His face had thinned out, and some part of Johnny recognized that the year had been hard on him as well. Big as the cop was, he looked pressed down, haunted, but most of the world looked like that to Johnny, so he wasn't sure. The cop's voice was deep and concerned. It brought back so many bad memories that, for an instant, Johnny could neither move nor speak. The cop stepped closer and brought with him the same thoughtful expression that Johnny had seen so often, the same look of gentle worry. Some part of Johnny wanted to like the man, to trust him; but he was still the one who let Alyssa fade away. He was still the one who lost her.

"I'm good," Johnny told him. "You know. Hanging in."

The cop looked at his watch, then at Johnny's grubby clothes and wild, black hair. It was forty minutes after six on a school day. "Any word from your father?" he asked.

"No." Johnny tried to hide the sudden shame. "No word."

"I'm sorry."

The moment stretched, but the cop did not move. The brown eyes remained steady, and up close he looked just as big and calm as the first time he'd come to Johnny's house. But that was another memory, so Johnny stared at the man's thick wrist, the clean, blunt nails. His voice cracked when he spoke. "My mother got a letter once. She said he was in Chicago, maybe going to California." A pause, eyes moving from hand to floor. "He'll come back."

Johnny said it with conviction. The cop nodded once and turned his own head away. Spencer Merrimon had left two weeks after his daughter was grabbed. Too much pain. Too much guilt. His wife never let him forget that

he was supposed to pick the girl up, never let him forget that she would not have been walking down the road at dusk if he'd only done what he was supposed to do.

"It wasn't his fault," Johnny said.

"I never said it was."

"He was working. He forgot the time. It wasn't his fault."

"We all make mistakes, son. Every last one of us. Your father is a good man. Don't you ever doubt that."

"I don't." Sudden resentment in Johnny's voice.

"It's okay."

"I never would." Johnny felt the color fall out of his face. He could not remember the last time he'd spoken so much to a grown-up, but there was something about the cop. He was old as hell, like forty, but he never rushed things, and there was a warmth to his face, a kindness that didn't seem fake or put on to trick a kid into trusting him. His eyes were always very still, and some part of Johnny hoped that he was a good enough cop to make things right. But it had been a year, and his sister was still gone. Johnny had to worry about the now, and in the now this cop was no friend.

There was Social Services, which was just waiting for an excuse; and then there were the things that Johnny did, the places he went when he cut school, the risks he took when he snuck out after midnight. If the cop knew what Johnny was doing, he would be forced to take action. Foster homes. The courts.

He would stop Johnny if he could.

"How's your mom?" the cop asked. His eyes were intent, hand still on the cart.

"Tired," Johnny said. "Lupus, you know. She tires easily."

The cop frowned for the first time. "Last time I found you here, you told me she had Lyme disease."

He was right. "No. I said she had lupus."

The cop's face softened and he lifted his hand from the cart. "There are people who want to help. People who understand."

Suddenly, Johnny was angry. No one understood, and no one offered to help. Not ever. "She's just under the weather. Just run down."

The cop looked away from the lie, but his face remained sad. Johnny watched his gaze fall to the aspirin bottle, the tomato juice. From the way

his eyes lingered, it was obvious that he knew more than most about drunks and drug abusers. "You're not the only one who's hurting, Johnny. You're not alone."

"Alone enough."

The cop sighed deeply. He took a card from his shirt pocket and wrote a number on the back of it. He handed it to the boy. "If you ever need anything." He looked determined. "Day or night. I mean it."

Johnny glanced at the card, slipped it into the pocket of his jeans. "We're fine," he said, and pushed the cart around him. The cop dropped a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"If he ever hits you again . . ."

Johnny tensed.

"Or your mother . . ."

Johnny shrugged the hand off. "We're fine," he repeated. "I've got it covered."

He pushed past the cop, terrified that he would stop him, that he would ask more questions or call one of the hard-faced women from Social Services.

The cart scraped against the counter at the register, and a large woman on a worn stool dipped her nose. She was new to the store, and Johnny saw the question in her face. He was thirteen but looked years younger. He pulled the hundred from his pocket and put it faceup on the conveyor belt. "Can you hurry, please?"

She popped gum and frowned. "Easy, sugar. Here we go."

The cop lingered ten feet behind, and Johnny felt him there, eyes on his back as the fat lady rang up the groceries. Johnny forced himself to breathe, and after a minute, the cop walked past. "Keep that card," he said.

"Okay." Johnny could not bear to meet his eyes.

The cop turned, and his smile was not an easy one. "It's always good to see you, Johnny."

He left the store, visible through the broad plate glass. He walked past the station wagon, then turned and lingered for a moment. He looked through the window, then circled to check out the plate. Apparently satisfied, he approached his sedan and opened the door. Slipping into the gloom, he sat.

He waited.

Johnny tried to slow his heart, then reached for the change in the cashier's damp and meaty hand.

The cop's name was Clyde Lafayette Hunt. Detective. It said so on his card. Johnny had a collection of them tucked into his top drawer, hidden under his socks and a picture of his dad. He thought, at times, of the number on the card; but then he thought of orphanages and foster homes. He thought of his disappeared sister and of the lead pipe he kept between his bed and the wall that leaked cold air. He thought that the cop probably meant what he said. He was probably a good guy. But Johnny could never look at him without remembering Alyssa, and that kind of thinking required concentration. He had to picture her alive and smiling, not in a dirt-floored cellar or in the back of some car. She was twelve the last time he'd seen her. Twelve, with black hair, cut like a boy's. The guy who saw what happened said she walked right up to the car, smiling even as the car door opened.

Smiling right up until somebody grabbed her.

Johnny heard that word all the time. *Smiling.* Like it was stuck in his head, a one-word recording he couldn't shake. But he saw her face when he slept. He saw her looking back as the houses grew small. He saw the worry bloom, and he saw her scream.

Johnny realized that the cashier was staring, that his hand was still out, money in it, groceries bagged. She had one eyebrow up, jaw still working a wad of gum.

"You need something else, sugar?"

Johnny shied. He wadded the bills and stuffed them into his pocket. "No," he said. "I don't need anything else."

She looked past him, to the store manager who stood behind a low glass partition. He followed her gaze, then reached for the bags. She shrugged and he left, walked out under a sky that had blued out while he shopped. He kept his eyes on his mother's car and tried to ignore Detective Hunt. The bags made rasping sounds as they rubbed together. The milk sloshed, heavy on the right side. He put the bags in the backseat and hesitated. The cop was watching him from a car that car angled out, less than twenty feet away. He gestured when Johnny straightened.

"I know how to drive," Johnny said.

"I don't doubt it." The answer surprised Johnny. It's like he was smiling. "I know you're tough," he said, and the smile was gone. "I know you can handle most things, but the law is the law." Johnny stood taller. "I can't let you drive."

"I can't leave the car here," Johnny said. "It's the only one we have."

"I'll take you home."

Johnny said nothing. He wondered if the house still smelled of bourbon. He wondered if he'd put all of the pill bottles away.

"I'm trying to help you, Johnny." The cop paused. "People do that, you know."

"What people?" The bitterness spilled out.

"It's okay," Detective Hunt said. "It's fine. Just tell me your address."

"You know where I live. I see you drive by sometimes, see you slow down when you do. So don't pretend like you don't know."

Hunt heard the distrust. "I'm not trying to trick you, son. I need the exact address so that I can have a patrol car meet me there. I'll need a ride back to my car."

Johnny studied the cop. "Why do you drive by so often?"

"It's like I said, Johnny. There are people who want to help."

Johnny wasn't sure that he believed him, but he recited the address and watched him radio for a patrol car to meet him at the house. "Come on." Hunt climbed out of the unmarked police car, crossed the lot to the station wagon. Johnny opened the passenger door and the cop slid behind the wheel. Johnny buckled up, then sat very still. For a long moment, neither moved. "I'm sorry about your sister," Hunt finally said. "I'm sorry that I couldn't bring her home. You know that, right?"

Johnny stared straight ahead, his hands clenched white in his lap. The sun cleared the trees and pushed heat through the glass.

"Can you say something?" Hunt asked.

Johnny turned, and his voice came, flat. "It was a year ago yesterday." He knew that he sounded small. "Are you aware of that?"

Hunt looked uneasy. "Yes," he said. "I am aware of that."

Johnny looked away. "Can you just drive? Please?"

The engine turned over, and blue smoke rolled past Johnny's window. "Okay," the cop said. "Okay, Johnny."

He put the car in gear. They rode in silence to the edge of town. No words but Johnny smelled him. He smelled soap and gun oil, what may have been cigarette smoke on his clothes. He drove how Johnny's dad drove, quick and sure, gaze on the road, then on the rearview mirror. His lips compressed as they neared the house, and Johnny thought, one last time, of how he'd said he'd bring Alyssa home. A year ago. He'd promised it.

A marked car was waiting in the driveway when they got there. Johnny climbed out and opened the back door for the grocery bags. "I can help with that," Hunt said.

Johnny just looked at him. What did he want? He lost her.

"I've got it," Johnny said.

Detective Hunt held Johnny's eyes until it was obvious that he had nothing to say. "Be good," he finally said, and Johnny watched him slip into the police cruiser. He held the groceries and he did not move as the car backed into the road. He did not respond to Detective Hunt's wave. He stood on the dusty drive and watched the cruiser rise on the distant hill, then fall away. He waited for his heart to slow, then took the bags inside.

The groceries looked small on the counter, but they felt like more: a victory. Johnny put them away, then started coffee and cracked a single egg into the pan. Blue flame popped in the iron ring, and he watched the egg turn white around the edges. He flipped it with care, then put it on a paper plate. The phone rang as he reached for a napkin. He recognized the number on caller ID and answered before it could ring twice. The kid on the other end had a scratchy voice. He was thirteen, too, but smoked and drank like a grown-up. "You ditching today? Let's ditch."

Johnny cut his eyes to the hall and kept his voice low. "Hello, Jack."

"I've been looking at some houses on the west side. It's a bad area. Real bad. Lot of ex-convicts over there. Makes sense when you think about it."

It was an old refrain. Jack knew what Johnny did when he cut school and snuck out after dark. He wanted to help, partly because he was a good kid, partly because he was bad. Jack was eager, he enjoyed it; but that's not how it was for Johnny.

"This is not some game," Johnny said.

"You know what they say about a gift horse, man. This is free help. Don't take it for granted."

Johnny pushed out a breath. "Sorry, Jack. It's one of those mornings."

"Your mom?"

Johnny's throat closed, so he nodded. Jack was his last friend, the only one who still treated him like he was not some kind of freak or pity case. They had some things in common, too. He was a small kid, like Johnny, and had his own share of problems. "I should probably go today."

"Our history paper is due," Jack said. "You done it?"

"I turned that in last week."

"Shit. Really? I haven't even started mine yet."

Johnny shrugged, even though no one could see it. Jack was always late, and teachers always let him get away with it. Johnny's mom once called Jack a rascal, and the word fit. He stole cigarettes from the teacher's lounge and slicked his hair on Fridays. He drank more booze than any kid should and lied like a professional; but he kept secrets when he said he would and watched your back if it needed watching. He was likable, sincere if he cared to be. For a second, Johnny felt his spirits lift; then the morning landed on him.

Detective Hunt.

The wad of greasy bills by his mother's bed.

"I gotta go," Johnny said.

"What about cutting school?"

"I gotta go." Johnny hung up the phone. His friend's feelings were hurt, but Johnny couldn't help that. He picked up the plate, sat on the porch and ate his egg with three pieces of bread and a glass of milk. He was still hungry when he finished, but lunch was only four and half hours away.

He could wait.

Pouring coffee with milk, Johnny made his way down the dim hall to his mother's room. The water was gone, so was the aspirin. Her hair was off her face, and a bar of sunlight cut across her eyes. Johnny put the mug on the table and opened a window. Cool air flowed in from the shady side of the house, and Johnny studied his mother. She looked paler, more tired, younger and lost. She would not wake for the coffee, but he wanted it there just in case. Just so she'd know.

He started to turn, but she moaned in her sleep and made a violent twitch. She mumbled something and her legs thrashed twice, then she bolted up in bed, eyes wide and terrified. "Jesus Christ!" she said. "Jesus Christ!"

Johnny stood in front of her but she did not see him. Whatever frightened her still had its grip. He leaned in, told her it was just a dream, and for that second her eyes seemed to know him. She raised a hand to his face. "Alyssa," she said, and there was a question in her voice.

Johnny felt the storm coming. "It's Johnny," he told her.

"Johnny?" Her eyes blinked, and then the day broke over her. The desperate gaze collapsed, the hand fell away, and she rolled back into the covers.

Johnny gave her a few seconds, but she did not open her eyes again. "Are you okay?" he finally asked.

"Bad dream."

"There's coffee. You want any breakfast?"

"Damn." She flung off the covers and walked out of the room. She did not look back. Johnny heard the bathroom door slam.

He went outside and sat on the porch. Five minutes later, the school bus pulled onto the dirt verge. Johnny did not get up, he did not move. Eventually, the bus rolled on.

It took most of an hour for his mother to get dressed and find him on the porch. She sat beside him, draped thin arms across her knees. Her smile failed in every way, and Johnny remembered how it used to light up a room.

"I'm sorry," she said, nudging him with a shoulder. Johnny looked up the road. She nudged him again. "Sorry. You know . . . an apology."

He didn't know what to say, could not explain how it felt to know that it hurt her to look at him. He shrugged. "It's okay."

He felt her look for the right words. She failed in that, too. "You missed the bus," she said.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to the school."

"I make perfect grades. Nobody cares if I'm there or not."

"Are you still seeing the school counselor?"

He studied her with an unforgiving eye. "Not for six months now."

"Oh."

Johnny looked back up the road and felt his mother watching him. She used to know everything. They used to talk. When she spoke, her voice had an edge. "He's not coming back."

Johnny looked at his mother. "What?"

"You keep looking up the road. You do it all the time, like you expect to see him walking over the hilltop." Johnny opened his mouth, but she spoke over him. "It's not going to happen."

"You don't know that."

"I'm just trying—"

"You don't know that!"

Johnny was on his feet with no recollection of standing. His hands were clenched for the second time that morning, and something hot pushed against the walls of his chest. His mother leaned back, arms still crossed over her knees. The light fell out of her eyes, and Johnny knew what was coming. She reached out a hand that fell short of actually touching him. "He left us, Johnny. It's not your fault."

She started to stand. Her lips softened and her face slipped into a look of pained understanding, the kind of expression grown-ups gave to kids who didn't quite get how the world worked. But Johnny understood. He knew the look and he hated it.

"You should have never said the things you said."

"Johnny . . ."

"It wasn't his fault that she got taken. You should have never told him that." She stepped toward him. Johnny ignored the gesture. "He left because of you."

She stopped midstride and ice snapped in her voice. The sympathetic twist fell from her lips. "It *was* his fault," she said. "His fault and nobody else's. Now she's gone, and I've got nothing."

Johnny felt tremors start low in the backs of his legs. In seconds, he was shaking. It was an old argument, and it was tearing them apart.

She straightened and started to turn. "You always take his side," she said, and then was gone, into the house, away from the world and her last child's place in it.

Johnny stared at the faded door and then at his hands. He watched them shake, then he swallowed the emotion. He sat back down and watched wind move dust on the roadside. He thought about his mother's words, then he looked up the hill. It was not a pretty hill. There was an edge of ragged forest dotted with small houses and dirt drives, telephone lines

that curved between the poles and looked especially black against the new sky. Nothing made the hill special, but he watched it for a long time. He watched it until his neck hurt, then he went inside to check on his mom.