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Opening Extract from...

Blue Heaven

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Published by Corvus

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Friday, 4:28 P.M.

IF TWELVE-YEAR-OLD Annie Taylor had not chosen to take her little brother William fishing on that particular Friday afternoon in April during the wet North Idaho spring, she never would have seen the execution or looked straight into the eyes of the executioners. But she was angry with her mother.

Before they witnessed the killing, they were pushing through the still-wet willows near Sand Creek, wearing plastic garbage bags to keep their clothes dry. Upturned alder leaves cupped pools of rainwater from that morning, and beaded spiderwebs sagged between branches. When the gray-black fists of storm clouds pushed across the sun, the light muted in the forest and erased the defining edges of the shadows, and the forest plunged into a dispiriting murk. The ground was black, spongy in the forest and sloppy on the trail. Their shoes made sucking sounds as they slogged upstream.

Annie and William had left their home on the edge of town, hitched a ride for a few miles with Fiona, the mail lady, and had been hiking for nearly two hours, looking in vain for calm water.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," ten-year-old William said,

raising his voice over the liquid roar of the creek, which was angry and swollen with runoff.

Annie stopped and turned to William, looking him over. A long fly rod poked out from beneath the plastic he wore. He had snagged the tip several times in the branches, and a sprig of pine needles was wedged into one of the line guides.

"You said you wanted to go fishing, so I'm taking you fishing."

"But you don't know anything about it," William said, his eyes widening and his lower lip trembling, which always happened before he began to cry.

"William . . ."

"We should go back."

"William, don't cry."

He looked away. She knew he was trying to stanch it, she could tell by the way he set his mouth. He hated that he cried so easily, so often, that his emotions were so close to the surface. Annie didn't have that problem.

"How many times did Tom tell you he was going to take you fishing?" Annie asked.

William wouldn't meet her eyes. "A bunch," he said.

"How many times has he taken you?"

He said sullenly, "You know."

"Yes, I know."

"I sort of like him," William said.

Annie said, "I sort of don't."

"You don't like anybody."

Annie started to argue, but didn't, thinking: *He may be right.* "I like *you* enough to take you fishing even though I don't know how to fish. Besides, how hard can it be if Tom can do it?"

An impudent smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah, I guess," he said.

"Look," she said, raising her plastic bag to show him she was wearing Tom's fishing vest. She had taken it without asking off a peg in their house. "This thing is filled with lures and flies and whatever. We'll just tie them to the end of your line and throw 'em out there. The fish can't be much smarter than Tom, so how hard can it be?"

". . . if Tom can do it," he said, his smile more pronounced.

That was when they heard a motor rev and die, the sound muffled by the roar of the foamy water.

THE BETRAYAL occurred that morning when Tom came downstairs, asked, "What's for breakfast?" Annie and William were at the table dressed for school eating cereal—Sugar Pops for William, Frosted Mini-Wheats for her. Tom asked his question as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but it wasn't. Tom had never been in their home for breakfast before, had never stayed the night. He was wearing the same wrinkled clothes from the night before when he'd shown up after dinner to see their mom, what he called his fishing clothes—baggy trousers that zipped off at the thigh, a loose-fitting shirt with lots of pockets. This was new territory for Annie, and she didn't want to explore it.

Instead, she found herself staring at his large, white bare feet. They looked waxy and pale, like the feet of a corpse, but his toes had little tufts of black hair on their tops, which both fascinated and disgusted her. He slapped them wetly across the linoleum floor.

"Where's your mom keep the coffee?" he asked.

William was frozen to his chair, his eyes wide and unblinking, his spoon poised an inch from his mouth, Sugar Pops bobbing in the milk. William said, "On the counter, in that canister thing."

Tom repeated "canister thing" to himself with good humor and set about making a pot of coffee. Annie bored holes into the back of his fishing shirt with her eyes. Tom was big, buff, always fake-friendly, she thought. He rarely showed up at their house without a gift for them, usually something lame and last-minute like a Slim-Jim meat stick or a yo-yo he bought at the convenience store at the end of the street. But she'd never seen him like this—disheveled, sleepy, sloppy, talking to the two of them for the very first time like they were real people who knew where the coffee was.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He turned his head. His eyes were unfocused, bleary. "Making coffee."

"No. I mean in my house."

William finally let the spoon continue its path. His eyes never left Tom's back. A drip of milk snaked down from the corner of his mouth and sat on his chin like a bead of white glue.

Tom said, "Your house? I thought it was your mother's house." *All jolly he is,* she thought angrily.

"Is this *it* for breakfast?" Tom asked, holding up the cereal boxes and raising his eyebrows.

"There's toast," William said, his mouth full. "Mom makes eggs sometimes. And pancakes."

Annie glared at her brother with snake eyes.

"Maybe I'll ask Monica to make me some eggs," Tom mumbled, as much to himself as to them. He poured a cup of coffee before it filled the carafe. Errant drips sizzled on the hot plate.

So it was *Monica,* not *your mother,* Annie thought.

He came to the table, his feet making kissing sounds on the floor, pulled out a chair, and sat down. She could smell her mother on him, which made her feel sick inside.

"That's Mom's chair," she said.

"She won't mind," he said, flashing his false, condescending smile. To him they were children again, although she got the feeling Tom was just a little scared of her. Maybe he realized now what he'd done. Maybe not. He pointedly ignored Annie, who glared at him, and turned to William.

"School, eh?" Tom said, reaching out and tousling the boy's hair. William nodded, his eyes wide.

"Too bad you can't take the day off and go fishing with me. I really got into some nice ones last night before I came over. Fifteen-, sixteen-inch trout. I brought a few to your mom for you guys to have for dinner."

"I want to go," William said, swelling out his chest. "I've never gone fishing, but I think I could do it."

"You bet you could, little man," Tom said, sipping the hot coffee. He gestured toward the cluttered mudroom off the kitchen where he'd hung his fishing vest and stored his fly rod in the corner. "I've got another rod in my truck you could use."

Suddenly, William was squirming in his chair, excited. "Hey, we get out of school early today! Maybe we could go then?"

Tom looked to Annie for clarification.

"Early release," Annie said deadpan. "We're out at noon."

Tom pursed his lips and nodded, his eyes dancing, now totally in control of William. "Maybe I'll pick you up and take you after school, then. I'll ask your mom about it. I can pick you up out front. D'you want to go along, too, Annie?"

She shook her head quickly. *"No."*

"You need to ease up a little," Tom told her, smiling with his mouth only.

"You need to go home," she replied.

Tom was about to say something when her mother came down the stairs, her head turned away from the kitchen and toward the front door. Annie watched her mother walk quickly through the living room and part the curtains, expecting, Annie thought, to confirm that Tom's vehicle was gone. When it wasn't, her mother turned in horror and took it all in: Tom, Annie, and William at the kitchen table. Annie saw the blood drain out of her mother's face, and for a second she felt sorry for her. But only for a second.

"Tommmmm," her mother said, dragging his name out and raising the tone so it was a sentence in itself meaning many things, but mostly, *"Why are you still here?"*

"Don't you need to get to work?" her mother finally said.

Tom was a UPS driver. Annie was used to seeing him in his brown uniform after work. His shirt and shorts were extra tight.

"Yup," Tom said, standing so quickly he sloshed coffee on the table. "I better get going, kids. I'll be late."

Annie watched Tom and her mother exchange glances as Tom hurried past her toward the front door, grabbing his shoes on the way. She thanked God there was no good-bye kiss between them, or she might throw up right there.

"Mom," William said, "Tom's going to take me fishing after school!"

"That's nice, honey," his mom said vacantly.

"Go brush your teeth," Annie said to William, assuming the vacated role of adult. "We've got to go."

William bounded upstairs.

Annie glared at her mother, who said, "Annie . . ."

"Are you going to marry him?"

Her mother sighed, seemed to search for words. She raised her hands

slowly, then dropped them to her sides as if the strings had been snipped. That answered Annie's question.

"You told me . . ."

"I *know,*" her mother said impatiently, tears in her eyes. "It's hard for you to understand. Someday you'll see, maybe."

Annie got up from the table and took her and William's bowls to the sink, rinsed them out. When she was through, her mother was still standing there, hadn't moved.

"Oh, I understand," Annie said, then gestured toward the stairs. "But William doesn't. He thinks he's got a new dad."

Her mother took a sharp breath as if Annie had slapped her. Annie didn't care.

"We'll talk later," her mother said, as Annie avoided her and went straight outside through the mudroom to wait for William in the yard. She knew her mom would be heartbroken because she hadn't kissed her good-bye. *Too bad,* Annie thought. *Mom had been kissed enough lately.*

AT NOON, Annie waited with William at the front of the school for Tom. They looked for his pickup and never saw it. When a UPS truck came down the block, William pumped his fist and growled, *"YES!"*

But Tom wasn't driving the truck, and it never slowed down.

After taking Tom's fishing rod and vest, Annie and William walked along the damp shoulder of the state highway out of town. Annie led. She knew there was a creek up there somewhere. A woman driving a little yellow pickup pulled over in front of them.

"Where are you two headed with such dogged determination?" the woman asked in a high-pitched little-girl voice. Annie disliked her immediately. She was one of those older women who thought they were young and pert instead of squat and wide.

"Fishing," Annie said. "Up ahead, on the creek."

The woman said her name was Fiona, and she delivered rural mail, and she would be going that direction if they needed a ride. Even though William shook his head no, Annie said, "Thank you."

While they drove deep into the forest and began to see glimpses of a stream through the trees, Fiona never stopped talking. She acted as if she was interested in them, but she wasn't, Annie thought. Fiona was de-

termined to convince them that delivering mail was a very important job and not just anybody could do it. As if she expected Annie to say, "Wow—you deliver the *mail*?" Fiona's perfumed scent was overpowering inside the small cab. Annie's eyes began to water, and she threw an elbow at William, who was pinching his nose shut.

"Can you let us off here?" Annie asked at no particular landmark except that she could see the creek.

"Are you sure this is okay with your folks?" Fiona asked, well after the time she should have.

"Sure," Annie lied.

They thanked her and got out. William was concerned that the fish would be able to smell him because his clothes were now reeking of perfume, but Annie convinced him fish couldn't smell. Not that she knew anything about fish.

MAYBE, ANNIE THOUGHT, the men didn't notice William and her because the dark green plastic they wore over their clothes blended in so well with the color of the heavy brush. Maybe, the men had looked around for another vehicle, and not having seen one, assumed no one else was there, certainly not on foot. But Annie could certainly see *them*; the profiles of four men parked in a white SUV in a campground space.

Everything was wet and dark under the dripping canopy of trees, and it smelled of pine, loam, and the spray of the creek. Other than the white car, the campground looked empty. There was a picnic table next to the SUV, and a low black fire pit.

Annie watched as the driver got out and shut his door, looked around the campsite, then turned back to the vehicle. He was middle-aged or older, lean, fit, and athletic in his movements. He had short white hair and a tanned, thin face. Three more doors opened, and three more men climbed out. They wore casual rain jackets, one wore a ball cap. The man in the ball cap put a six-pack of beer on the picnic table and pulled out four bottles and twisted the tops off, putting the tops into his jacket pocket.

The men seemed to be comfortable with one another, she thought, the way they nodded and smiled and talked. She couldn't hear what they said because of the sound of the rushing creek behind her. The Ball Cap

Man offered bottles of beer to everyone, and took a long drink of his own. They didn't sit down at the table—too wet, she thought—but stood next to each other.

Annie felt William tugging on her arm through the plastic. When she looked over, he gestured back toward the path they had come by, indicating he wanted to go. She gave him a *just-a-minute* nod and turned back to the campsite. It thrilled her to spy on the men. Men fascinated and repulsed her, maybe because her mother attracted so many of them.

What happened next was terrifying.

The Driver circled the group of men, as if returning to the car, then he suddenly wheeled and jabbed a finger into the chest of a wavy-haired man and said something harsh. The wavy-haired man stumbled back a few feet, obviously surprised. As if a signal had been given, both the Ball Cap Man and a tall, dark man stepped back, and stood shoulder to shoulder with the Driver, facing down the wavy-haired man, who pitched his beer bottle aside and held his hands out, palms up, in an innocent gesture.

"Annie . . ." William pleaded.

She saw the Dark Man pull a pistol from behind his back, point it at the Wavy-Haired Man, and fire three times, *pop-pop-pop.* The Wavy-Haired Man staggered backwards until he tripped over the fire pit and fell into the mud.

Annie caught her breath, and her heart seemed to rush up her throat and gag her. She felt a sharp pain in her arm, and for a second she thought that a stray bullet had struck her, but when she glanced down she saw it was William's two-handed grip. He had seen what happened in the campsite, too. It wasn't like television or the movies, where a single shot was a deafening explosion and the victim was hurled backwards, dead, bursts of blood detonating from his clothing. This was just a *pop-pop-pop,* like a string of firecrackers. She couldn't believe what had just happened, couldn't believe it wasn't a prank or a joke or her imagination.

"Annie, let's get out of here!" William cried, and she started to backpedal blindly, toward the creek.

At the water's edge, she looked over her shoulder, realizing they had lost the path and could go no farther.

"No," she yelled at William. "Not this way. Let's get back on the trail!"

He turned to her panicked, eyes wide, his face drained of color. Annie reached for his hand and tugged him along, crashing back through the brush toward the path. When they reached it, she looked back toward the campsite. All three men stood over the Wavy-Haired Man, firing pistols into his body.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop.

Suddenly, as if Annie's own gaze had drawn him, the Driver looked up. Their eyes locked, and Annie felt something like ice-cold electricity shoot through her. It burned the tips of her fingers and toes and momentarily froze her shoes to the ground.

William screamed, *"He sees us!"*

SHE RAN like she had never run before, pulling her brother along behind her, yelling, "Stay with me!"

They kept to the trail that paralleled the lazy curves of Sand Creek. The stream was on their left, the dark forest on their right. Wet branches raked her face and tugged at her clothing as she ran. She could hear her own screams as if someone else was making them.

Pop-pop. A thin tree in front of them shook from an impact, and half-opened buds rained down. The men were shooting at them.

William was crying, but he was keeping up. He gripped her hand so tightly she could no longer feel her fingers, but she didn't care. Somewhere, she had lost a shoe in the mud, but she never even considered going back for it, and now her left foot was freezing.

How far were they from the road? She couldn't guess. If they got to the road, there was the chance of getting a ride home with someone.

William jerked to a stop so suddenly that Annie was pulled backwards, falling. Had one of the men grabbed him?

No, she saw. His fly rod had been caught between the trunks of two trees. Rather than let go of it, he was trying to pull it free.

"Drop it, William!" she cried. "Just drop it!"

He continued to struggle as if her words hadn't penetrated. His face was twisted with determination, his tears streaming.

"LET GO!" she screamed, and he did.

She scrambled back to her feet and as she did she saw a shadow pass in the trees on their right. It was the Ball Cap Man, and he had appar-

ently found a parallel trail that might allow him to get ahead so he could cut them off.

"Wait," she said to William, her eyes wide. "We can't keep going this way. Follow me."

She pushed herself through heavy wet undergrowth, straight at the path she had seen the Ball Cap Man running on. She hesitated a moment at the trail, saw no one, and plunged across it between two gnarled wild rosebushes, pulling William behind her. This time, she didn't need to prompt him to keep running.

They were now traveling directly away from the river through heavy timber. Annie let go of her brother's hand, and the two of them scrambled over downed logs and through masses of dead and living brush farther into the shadows. Something low and heavy-bodied, a raccoon maybe, scuttled out of sight and parted the fronds in front of them.

They left the roar of the river behind them, and it got quieter in the forest. At one point they heard a shout below them, somewhere in the trees, one of the men shouting, *"Where did they go, goddammit?"*

"Did you hear that?" William asked.

She stopped, leaned back against the trunk of a massive ponderosa pine, and nodded.

"Do you think they would shoot us if they found us?"

She implored him with her eyes not to talk.

William collapsed next to her, and for a few minutes the only sound in the forest was the steady dripping of the trees and their winded breath. Even as she recovered from exertion, the terror remained. Every tree looked like one of the men. Every shadow looked momentarily like a man with a gun.

She looked down at her brother, who had his head cocked back on the trunk, his mouth slightly open. His clothes were wet and torn. She could see a cut oozing dark blood where a bare knee was exposed by an L-shaped rip. His face was pale white, streaked with dirt.

"I'm sorry I brought you here," she said. "I didn't know what I was doing."

"They killed that man," William said. "They shot him and shot him again."

She didn't say, *They'll do the same to us.* Instead: "If we keep going in this direction, we should find the road."

"What if they're already up there?"

She shrugged, sighed. "I don't know."

"How will we get home?"

"I don't know."

"They just kept shooting him," he said. "I wonder what he did to make them so mad?"

THEY DIDN'T SEE the road so much as sense an opening in the canopy ahead. Annie made William squat down in the wet brush, and they remained still for a few minutes, hoping to hear the sound of a car or truck.

"We're like rabbits," he said, "just sitting here scared."

"Shhh." She thought she heard a motor. "Stay here."

She pushed through the low brush on her hands and knees. She could no longer feel her bare foot, which was cut and bleeding. The grass got thicker as it neared the road, and she crawled on her belly to the edge of it. For the first time since the initial *pop,* she felt a twinge of relief.

Then she felt a tug on her pant leg, and gasped.

"It's just me," William said. "Man, you jumped."

She hissed, "I told you to stay back there."

"No way," he said, crawling up next to her. "What are we doing?"

"We're going to wait until we hear a car," she said. "When it gets close, we're going to jump up and try to get a ride to town."

"What if it's the white car?" he asked.

"Then we keep hiding," she said.

"I thought you heard something."

"I thought I did. Maybe not."

"Hold it," William said, raising his head above the grass, "I hear it too."

ANNIE AND WILLIAM looked at each other as the sound slowly rose, the baritone hum of a motor spiced by the crunching of gravel beneath tires. The vehicle was coming from the wrong direction, from town instead of toward it. But Annie figured that if someone was likely to stop for them, they would be just as likely to turn around and take them home.

And if the vehicle was coming from the direction of town, it was unlikely it could be the white SUV.

She inched forward, parting the grass. She could feel the approach of the vehicle from the ground beneath her, a vibration that made her feel more like an animal than a girl.

She saw an antenna, then the top of a cab of a pickup, then a windshield. She raised her head.

It was a new-model red pickup with a single occupant.

Whooping, she scrambled to her feet and pulled William along with her, and they stood in the road.

At first, she wasn't sure the driver saw her. He was going slowly, and staring out into the trees off to the side instead of at the road. But just as she began to step back toward the shoulder, the pickup slowed and she recognized the driver as Mr. Swann. Mr. Swann had once dated their mother, and although he was much older than she, and it didn't work out, he had not been unkind to them.

As Swann stopped and leaned over and opened the passenger door, Annie Taylor began to weep with absolute relief, her hot tears streaming down her face.

"Whoa," Mr. Swann said, looking them over, "are you two all right? Did you get lost out here?"

"Will you please take us home?" Annie said through her tears.

"What happened?"

"Please take us home," William said. "We saw a man get killed."

"What?"

As William climbed into the truck, Annie heard another motor. She looked up the road where it curved to the right and could see a vehicle coming, glimpses of it flashing through the trunks of the trees.

It was the white SUV.

"Get on the floor," she yelled to her brother. "It's *them*!"

"Annie, what's going on here?" Swann asked, frowning.

"They want to kill us!" Annie said, hurtling inside and shutting the door behind her. She cowered with William on the floor of the pickup.

"Oh, come on now," Swann said.

"Please, just drive," Annie said, her voice cracking. "Please just drive ahead."

Swann slid the truck back into gear, and she could feel it moving, hear the gravel start to crunch.

"Maybe I should just stop them and ask them what's going on?" Swann asked. "I'm sure it's a misunderstanding."

"NO!" Annie and William howled in unison.

She looked up at Swann as he drove, saw the confusion on his face. What if the men in the SUV waved Swann down to talk? It wasn't unusual on these back roads to see two vehicles stopped side by side as the drivers exchanged information and pleasantries.

"Please don't stop," Annie said again.

"I don't know what's going on," Swann said, "but it has you two scared to death, that's for sure."

Swann pursed his lips and looked ahead. She wished she could see how close the white SUV was, and what the men inside were doing. Instead, she wrapped her arms around William and watched Swann.

"They want me to stop," Swann said, not looking down.

"Don't. Please."

"If I don't stop, they'll wonder why."

Annie felt another imminent, choking cry, and tried to stifle it.

The pickup slowed. She tried to push William down even farther into the floor, and herself as well. She could feel his heart beating, fluttering, where her hand held his chest. She closed her eyes, as if by not seeing the men they couldn't look in and see *her*.

"Afternoon, Mr. Singer," Swann said as he rolled his window down.

"Afternoon," Singer said. Singer was the Driver, Annie guessed. Mr. Swann *knew* him.

Singer said, "Hey, did you see some kids anywhere along the road?"

"They yours?" Swann asked.

"No, not mine. Mine are grown and married, you know that. I don't know who they are. Me and my two compadres here were fishing and horsing around down on the river, and we scared a couple of kids. We were target shooting, and we didn't know they were there. We think they might have thought they saw something they didn't."

"Target shooting?"

"Yeah, we try to get out every couple of months to stay sharp. Anyway, we want to make sure those poor kids know we meant no harm."

Annie cracked an eye to look at Swann. *Don't do it,* she wanted to shout.

"Scared 'em pretty good, eh?" Swann said.

"I'm afraid so. Anyway, we want to find them and let 'em know everything's okay."

"Is everything okay?" Swann asked.

Singer didn't respond.

"It will be when we find those kids," another man said with a trace of a Mexican accent. Annie guessed it was the Dark Man with the mustache.

"So you haven't seen them?" Singer asked again.

Swann hesitated.

Annie closed her eyes again and tried to prepare to die. She didn't hear the bulk of the conversation that followed because it was drowned out by the roar of blood in her ears, although she did hear Swann say someone had come up behind him and was waiting for him to go.

"Yes," Singer had said, "you had better go home now."

She couldn't believe her luck—their luck—when she realized the truck was moving again.

"I think you kids should stay down," Swann said.

Annie asked, "Where are you taking us?"

"My place is just up the road, and I need to make a call."

"Why aren't you taking us home?"

"Because I don't want to run into those boys again," Swann said. "I know them from back on the force, and that story they just told me doesn't make a lot of sense."

"That's because we're telling you the truth," Annie said, feeling the tears well up in her eyes.

"Maybe," Swann said. "Keep your heads down."