

## *10 YEARS*

My father sat with me for the first time as a free man in 10 years in a car outside my Aunt Mercy's trailer.

Everything I owned was in the back seat in a small suitcase I'd borrowed from my aunt, and a double-ply Glad Trash bag patched with electric tape I'd hung on to through four foster placements.

A shitty magic talisman I'd refused to let go.

Like my aunt's suitcase, the car wasn't my father's, either. I could tell by all the bumper stickers from faraway bars and strip clubs *not* in Star Hill, West Virginia. They even sounded like better, cooler places: *Double Down*, *Sunset Cantina*, *Gold Girls*. There was a broken tube of lipstick in the dash and a handful of hair ties that definitely weren't his, since his hair was a lot shorter than it had been at Prunytown. It was freshly shaved, flecks of it all over the shoulders of the same faded suit he wore the last time at court - the only suit he owned, or maybe he'd borrowed that as well.

His hair gleamed silver in the late afternoon light, but it was really just grey, going greyer. Prunytown had done that to him, made him older. He'd aged twice as much behind those walls in the years I'd grown up outside them.

That was the two of us – *older* – begged and borrowed and stitched from other people's lives and things.

We sat in the car where it was hotter than hell, blast-furnace hot, with Aunt Mercy and her husband Terry - Pastor Terry - watching from their trailer porch. Pastor Terry had his hand on her thin shoulder, like she might fly away. She was only pencil lines, a stick-figure, a hasty sketch of what a real person might be – a healthier, saner person. With Pastor Terry's help she'd been clean two years, just long enough to take me in from the last foster home, but not long enough to hold onto me. Every day was struggle and you saw it in her eyes, where she was always about to laugh or cry or both. It seemed Pastor Terry always had one of his heavy hands on her, too.

Always holding her up, or keeping her from running.

My father searched around in his suit pocket, found his cigarettes and a lighter – offered me one, not having any idea of whether I smoked or not, not caring either way. I didn't take it and he shrugged, lighting up and cupping the flame so I could see the blue prison tattoos on each hand - *Hard Luck* - written across his knuckles. He blew smoke, fumbling for a radio station and finding KROZ out of Charleston, sitting back to listen to songs I didn't know – ones he'd grown up with a couple of lifetimes ago.

My aunt once said he used to play a guitar, sing a little, but I couldn't imagine that now.

Even with the window down, the car grew hotter, and he didn't even try to start the AC we both knew was broken. Instead, he just watched me through the cigarette smoke, flicking ash out of the window.

I counted that ash floating and flying in the hot breeze, carried away, somewhere, anywhere, wondering what it would take to follow it.

My Aunt Mercy and her sister - my mom - were twins, but everyone said they didn't look that much alike, all things considered. All I had of my mom were pictures - bent, folded, coffee-stained - and I tried to see the resemblance while stealing glances at Aunt Mercy as she heated up fish sticks (Pastor Terry's favorite) in the trailer's oven, or when she stood on the chasing cigarettes, one after another, like it was a race.

Whatever similarity they shared had disappeared long ago.

It was easy enough to say that my mom had been the prettier of the two, but it was more than that, something you couldn't quite put your finger but knew was there all the same.

Like how there was a constant *dimness* around Aunt Mercy, a bulb on the verge of burning of out, but how my mom glowed.

She was the brightest thing in those old photographs – beautiful, laughing, her hair in her face – and everything else orbited her, fell toward her, got lost in her own unbelievable white light.

She'd been blonde, pure blonde, and I guess that means Aunt Mercy had been too, three or four or 10 colorings ago. Her hair didn't have a true color anymore, just odd hints and shades and patches of what it might have looked like a hundred times before, visible only when she stood in the sun.

I guess that's what my father was thinking as we sat in the car and he smoked, with my not-blonde Aunt Mercy and Pastor Terry looking on.

All about his dead wife, and how weird it was her twin sister looked nothing like her, but how I did.

Because that's when he touched me, reached out and took my jaw in a hand that was surprisingly gentle (even though I flinched when he reached for me), and turned my head my head from side to side – *looking* at me for the first time, as if he'd never seen me, and in so many ways, he hadn't. I was barely 6 years old when he went in to Prunytown – after that, I was just a ghost through the scarred visitation glass (and even then, only a couple of times), or a shadowed image always hiding its face in the handful of photos I knew he'd begged for and held on to as I grew up, and then, finally, a silent stranger across the long dark expanse of Judge Boren's family court room, where he'd stood uncomfortable in his borrowed or stolen suit – looking in my direction as he answered Boren's questions.

Holding my face in his hand, we were as close as we had been in 10 years, and I was as unknown to him as he was to me.

I thought he was going to admit that after all this time, after all the distance, he didn't really recognize me at all, but as his hand shook, touching me, I understood that he recognized me all too well.

“God, boy, you got your mother's eyes. You really do.”

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything at all.

Then he let me go, held his hand at his side to steady it, and tossed his cigarette out the window.

Aunt Mercy started to call out to him, or me, but I couldn't hear her over the engine as my father suddenly fired up the car. He turned up the radio, unclipped the cheap tie from his collar (I saw it still had a Peeble's price tag on it), muttered *fuck it* under his breath, and tossed that out the window, too.

Like a magic trick, he made a tall-boy appear out of thin air from somewhere near or under his seat, popped it open, and took a long drink of what had to be, at best, really piss-warm beer. Just like the cigarette, he tilted the foaming top to me, offering it. Then he raised the can in mock salute to Aunt Mercy and Pastor Terry, both of whom were bouncing down from their porch as if they were going to open my car door and pull me back safety, but we were already halfway down their dirt drive, rolling in reverse, leaving dust and rock in our wake.

I lost them in the sun flare on the car's windshield.

They were there one moment, and then gone, just like my father and me.

He finished the beer even before we hit the blacktop, spinning the car around and aiming it at Pastor Terry's mailbox - the one he'd painted with little blue-birds. They looked more like bats - weird, ugly, blue bats - but he'd been proud of his handiwork, and I knew he'd done it because he thought they might make Aunt Mercy smile whenever they came home. And she did smile - for him - but in truth it was always little more laugh than smile, because she'd been the one to tell me they looked like little horrible bats, right from the get-go, and neither of us had been able to shake that damn thought since.

Still, it was a nice gesture (and *that* was Pastor Terry - a mess of nice gestures) and I was working myself up to be mad if my father knocked down that stupid bat mailbox. He didn't, deftly turning at the last moment and only showering it with dirt, tossing his empty beer can in the tall grass that grew up around it.

A week before, I'd seen a snake down in that grass, moving through the depths, long and menacing, colored sand and stone and blood-drop red. I'd been afraid to check the mail ever since, dreaming of it sliding up into the trailer to nest beneath the couch that was my make-shift bed.

But then we were past all that - the tall green and Pastor Terry's crappy mailbox and the long dirt and rock drive back to the trailer and the long stands of purple ash and sugar maple that hid it from view. Just like that, another magic trick, we were free - blasting down Route 42 with the radio too loud to talk and the hot wind rattling twice as loud through the windows anyway, heading off to wherever it was this man, my father, called home.

After 10 years, four foster placements and two months with Aunt Mercy and Pastor Terry, it was now my home, too.

## CHAPTER ONE

I'd been living with my father and his girlfriend Dallas for about four months when Audrey Ellen Reese, who everyone called *Andy*, ran away.

She wasn't gone 24 hours before Sheriff Bob Keegan - Big Bob Keegan - drove up to our place himself to ask me about it. He leaned against the ticking hood of his cruiser and called out my name, then my father's (they had history...a lot of it), not even bothering with the courtesy of walking up to the door. Dallas put her hand on my chest to hold me still, while my father walked out alone on the porch to meet him; he stood leaning against our unpainted rail, just like Big Bob was levered against his patrol car, and then as politely as he could, told Big Bob to fuck himself.

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First, it was called *running away*, later it was a *disappearance*, and before all was said and done it would be something else altogether, but I believed on that very first day Andy Reese hadn't run anywhere, no matter how much she and I had talked about leaving Star Hill.

Even though Andy had more reason than anyone to run away from our shitty little town.

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Already that October, Verner Till's phone video had been passed around school - everyone had seen it - everyone was talking about it...everyone knew all about Andy Reese and the thing she'd done.

It was the sort of thing most people would run away from, if they could.

That's what made it so believable, so acceptable for so long, that she'd just packed a bag and headed out.

But I knew better because I'd talked to her the night before she was gone.

I was the last person to see her.

It was the whole reason Big Bob had made the long drive to our house on the far edge of Star Hill.

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Big Bob didn't waste a lot of time with pleasantries.

"I need to talk to the boy, Danny Mack...it don't concern you."

My father shrugged, ran his hand through his hair. It had grown out a bit since that day at my Aunt Mercy's.

"He's my son, it concerns me."

Big Bob laughed, spit something dark into the gravel at his feet and wiped his mouth.

"Son? You playing the caring daddy now? Ain't that rich. I heard it, but didn't believe it. I'd say there's about a dozen people around town who've been more a daddy to that boy than you. Hell, one of 'em might be his real blood, although I don't want to talk ill of the dead." Big Bob, who had eyes way too small for his heavy, pocked face, grinned; decided talking ill of the dead was



exactly what he wanted to do. “I mean, let’s be honest Danny, Faith did get around a bit... why, Little Bob once told me about this time...”

My father went very still. “Any more of that come out of your mouth, Bob, and I’ll take each word out of your skin. That’s a goddamn promise.”

“And you’ll go back to Prunytown, maybe for life this time. Exactly what you goddamn deserve,” Big Bob shook, just a bit, with real anger. “You’re on parole, Danny Mack, always and forever, don’t forget that.” But there was something in my father’s voice, in the way he flexed his tattooed hands while staring hard into Big Bob’s eyes that stopped the Sheriff from sparring anymore. “This is about the boy, anyway. I gotta talk to him about Audrey Ellen Reese. Her parents are up in arms ‘cause she ain’t at home. Snuck out Friday night, and didn’t come back.”

Hearing Andy’s name I must have tensed, flinched, because Dallas had pushed on my chest tighter, held me in place, her fake nails sharp against my shirt. I didn’t want to look at her, but I knew she was watching me close with those green eyes of hers. Her eyes were always smart, bright, even when she wasn’t wearing make-up.

“I’m not sure what that has to do with Luke, but I’ll ask him. Let you know. He’s not here right now anyway.”

Big Bob must have looked over to the side of the house, where the little Ford I always drove sat parked in the tall, uncut grass. “You a lawyer now, too, Danny Mack?”

“Are you here to read him his rights? Does he need a lawyer?”

Big Bob spit again. “Naw, not yet. But if he truly is your blood, well, we both know if it ain’t this thing, it’ll be another, right? Just a matter of time. He won’t be able to control himself any more than you.”

Big Bob pulled himself off the cruiser's hood, hitched his gun belt a bit higher. "I'll be back, or you'll be coming to see me, one way or 'nother. It don't matter." He paused, and through the window I could see him staring at my car, hard, his small, dark eyes trying to see right through it. "When you catch up with Lucas again, you ask him what he was doing last night... what he was up to, who he was with. I got some anxious parents who want to know, bad. And if Audrey Ellen don't turn up at home soon, well, then I guess I'm gonna want to know bad, too."

He cocked an imaginary gun at my father, pulled the trigger twice, and then got into his cruiser and drove back through the trees.

Long minutes after Big Bob had gone, my father still stood out on the porch, staring at the place where the Sheriff had fired two imaginary bullets into him.

One hand was up on his shirtless chest, searching... as if the wounds themselves might be real.