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ELEVEN DAYS

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CHAPTER 1

The Lost Three Days

Tamara came down the stairs at ten past five with her parka zipped to the throat and the transit vest under it, because Route 4 went at six and the bus had to be warmed up and checked over first. Vera was at the mirror in the front hall, the one the landlord had hung for a taller family, so that a girl of five foot seven had to stand back from it to see her whole face. She had the bathroom eyeliner on and the dark polish, and she was working at the polish with her teeth between looks, which Tamara had told her a hundred times was a filthy habit.

"You eating at Dana's?" Tamara said.

"They make pizza."

"Test Monday?"

"Algebra." Vera leaned closer to the glass, which only showed her one eye at a time at that range. "That's the whole reason. Dana has the notes from Friday and I slept through it."

"You didn't sleep through it, you were at your father's every other weekend and it's his fault, is that the story now." Tamara got her keys off the hook by the door, the SAT keys and the house keys on the

same ring because she had never bothered to split them. “You take your key?”

“In my jacket.”

“Which jacket.”

“This one.” Vera pulled the side of the hood out to show her, gray with the fur trim, and the canvas sneakers below it, the ones with the worn-through heel. “Mom. It’s one night.”

Tamara looked at the sneakers and decided against it. She had two minutes to get to the depot and the argument would take five, and the girl was half a head taller than her anyway and dressed herself for school every morning of the year. “Text me yourself when you get there. From your own phone. So I know you got in.”

“I’m going two blocks.”

“Text anyway.”

“I will.”

The thermostat said sixty-eight. Tamara turned it down to sixty-four because the house was empty until midnight and there was no one to keep warm. Vera was still at the mirror. In the glass Tamara could see the back of her daughter’s head, the dark dye from September grown out three fingers at the roots, and past her, the kitchen with the phone on the wall and the answering machine with its little red number, a two, both of which were for Tamara and nobody else anymore.

She went out the door at 5:32. From the porch she could hear the lock turn behind her, the deadbolt, which the girl never forgot. That was the last ordin-

ary thing: she remembered the sound of the deadbolt for years, and not one minute after it.

Tamara put Vera's leaving at about 5:40, and that was an estimate, not something she saw. The last she saw of her was the mirror in the front hall at 5:32, when Tamara went out the door herself and walked to the depot. The Kovach house was five blocks over now that they had fenced the shortcut, four before, and Vera had said she wanted to be there before Dana sat down to eat. Tamara worked it out on the walk, out of habit: girl leaves at 5:40, gets there by 6, texts by 6:15. The bus pulled out at 6:05. At 6:15 she was letting off the hospital crowd at Fifth and Market and expecting the text on her own phone, and she did not check, because the phone was in her bag in the fare box shadow where it always was, and a driver does not look at her bag between stops. She assumed nothing had come, or that whatever had come could wait for the layover. By the layover the loop had its hold on her and the text had slipped. There was nothing to come. Vera's own phone was on the little plywood desk under the window upstairs, charged to full, plugged in with the cord threaded behind the lamp where it would not get stepped on. It had been left there at some point Friday afternoon or evening, and Tamara would not see it until Saturday.

The shift ran its loop. Four turns of Route 4, the transit center, the high school, the long stretch on Beltline Road where the apartments came up out of the dark and then fell back. Twelve riders, eight, thirteen, nine. A man vomited by the rear door on the third turn and she gave him a transfer and a

plastic bag and wrote the incident in the log. She parked the bus at 12:20, signed out at 12:35, and walked the six blocks home with her hands in her parka pockets.

The house was dark. The deadbolt was thrown. The thermostat read sixty-two, which was the house cooling the way it cooled. She did not go up to Vera's room, because Vera at Dana's was the ordinary condition of the world, and the stairs were cold and there was soup on the second shelf. She ate standing at the counter, set the machine for five-thirty, and was asleep by one.

She would try afterward to recall what the girl had worn, and could get only the hood, pulled out sideways, and the sneakers. Later there would be flyers with a photograph from eighth-grade graduation, bangs and all, and people would look at that face and then at Tamara, and she would know it was wrong, and not be able to say what was right.

* * *

Saturday she woke at five-twenty out of habit, silenced the alarm before it rang, and lay still until she understood which day it was. Vera came home from Dana's around ten, usually, sometimes eleven, and ate standing at the counter and complained about the Kovach dog. Tamara got up at seven anyway, made coffee, and sat with it in the kitchen where the phone on the wall could see her.

At ten she called the Kovach house. She let it ring six times. She dialed Dana's mother's cell at ten-fifteen and got the voicemail, a woman's voice saying

the usual thing, and Tamara hung up without leaving a message because the girl was five blocks away, asleep, that was all, sixteen-year-olds slept until noon on Saturdays and their mothers let them.

At eleven she called the house again. This time a man picked up, Dana's father, gravel in his voice, and said, "She's still in bed, hold on," and she heard the phone set down on a table and a dog bark twice somewhere in the house. She stood with her hand flat on the counter. Then Dana's mother came on and said, sleep still in it, "Tamara? What's up?"

"Is Vera there?"

A pause with a television behind it. "Vera's not here. She's at your house, isn't she?"

Tamara said no. She said it plainly, and then again, because the first time hadn't landed anywhere. She said Vera had gone to their place Friday at dinner time for a sleepover before the algebra test Monday, the pizza, Dana had the notes. She heard her own voice arranging the details like a schedule, the way she announced stops on Route 4, and she heard the silence on the other end doing the same arithmetic she had already done twice this morning.

"She never came here," Dana's mother said. "Tom, put your coat on and check Dana's room." Then, into the phone, "Tamara, she never came here."

The Kovach house was four blocks, five with the shortcut fenced off, and Tamara walked it in her parka with the vest still under it from last night. The morning was wet and bright, wet snow on the parked cars that the sun was already taking off. She went up the steps two at a time, which she never did,

and rang the bell, and Dana opened the door half asleep, glasses off, braid over one shoulder, a robe over flannel.

"Where's Vera?" Tamara said.

Dana looked at her and looked past her at the street. "She's not at your house?"

"She said she was sleeping here. Friday. The test."

Dana's face opened and then shut. She was a girl who cried easy and knew it and hated it, and Tamara watched her get control of the crying and not the question, because the question had no answer in her. "She told me she was staying home," Dana said. "She said her mom wanted her home this weekend. I have the notes, she was going to come get them Sunday. I texted her Thursday and she said."

"You texted her Thursday."

"Thursday, yeah. Friday after school I didn't see her. I figured she went straight home."

Tamara stood in the front hall. There was a dog somewhere in the house and a television and Dana's mother coming down the stairs saying something. Tamara held the banister, the newel post under her hand, because the floor had moved a little and the banister was the fixed point. Dana was saying, "I text her now, hold on, I'll text her right now," already thumbing at her phone, and Tamara thought of the phone in her own hand, in her bag by the fare box, and of something she had not said to anyone yet, a weight she had been carrying since ten o'clock without a name for it.

"Let me see your phone," Tamara said.

Dana held it out. Tamara looked at the last message from Thursday, two gray bubbles, one gray reply. Then she turned and went home to look in her daughter's room, which she had not done since Friday, and which she now understood she had been not doing all morning.

* * *

The walk home was five blocks with the shortcut fenced off, and the snow was going off the parked cars as she went. She could not make the blocks take longer. At her own door she stood a moment on the step, because the door was hers and the house behind it was hers and something in her was asking to be let off before it.

She took the stairs on her hands and feet. She did not notice she had done it until she was at the top, and then she did not think about it, because there was the room.

Vera's room faced the street. The bed was made. Vera made it every morning out of a habit neither parent had given her, and the sight of it struck Tamara in the sternum, and she moved past the bed to the desk under the window. Three pencils in a mug. Beside them, on its back, the phone.

The cord was threaded behind the lamp, the way Vera arranged it so it would not get stepped on. The charger was in the strip and the strip was on. Tamara pressed the button and the screen gave her the time and nothing else. She held the button and the battery came up in a green ring, full, all the way around.

The house was quiet enough to hear the refrigerator in the kitchen below. She stood with the phone in her hand and did the schedule out of habit, because the schedule was the machinery she had. Friday she had said text me when you get there. The text had never come in, and here was the reason, sitting in her hand: the girl had gone out the door without it. Vera took it everywhere. She took it into the bathroom. It sat beside her plate at dinner until Tamara told her twice a week to put it down. There was no errand in that child's life that did not have the phone in it — except walking out the door without one.

She set it back where it had lain, in its own outline on the desk.

Downstairs her own phone buzzed on the kitchen table. Two numbers, from Dana, and then the words *she has to be somewhere*. She read it three times. Then she put her coat back on, because the calls she could make from this table she could make at any table, and the phone company's book was upstairs, and Dana had given her a job.

Lena K. first. Lena's mother answered on the second ring, a voice already up and busy on a Saturday. Tamara said who she was, twice, because the first time did not land anywhere either. A door opened somewhere on that end of the line. Then Lena came on, sixteen and dragged out of bed, polite in the way of girls who are afraid of other people's mothers. She had not seen Vera since Thursday, last-period study hall. No, not Friday. No sleepover, nobody had said anything about a sleepover. Lena's mother asked, from another room, whether everything was all

right, and Tamara heard herself say it was a mix-up about a weekend, and heard how level she said it, and hated the levelness.

Katie B.'s number went to a man who said Katie was at her grandmother's until Sunday night. He offered to take a message. Tamara gave him one, Vera's name and her own number, and knew as she said it that no one would carry it anywhere.

Two numbers, two dead ends. She stood at the counter and thought about the calls left in the world: the school, which was closed; the friends, of whom Dana could produce more names; and the one call in Harrisburg, which she set down on the counter the way you set down a heavy bag, to be picked up or not.

There was a place for this. She had read it on the city notices, on the door of the bank: the police, a storefront, walk-ins till four. It was two blocks off the square. It was Saturday, and it was not yet two.

She got the parka from the hook and put it on. The card, when there was a card, would go in the pocket. She took the keys off the same hook and went out, and pulled the door shut behind her, and did not lock it, and then stood a second and locked it.

* * *

The substation took walk-ins until four. She was there before two, and the glass door stuck at the bottom the way storefront doors do, and she pulled it hard, and a bell over the top of it rang in a room that did not turn toward the sound.

One desk, one officer. The heater in the corner ticked and stopped and ticked. The officer had a

sweater on under a civilian jacket, which she had seen before on men who worked Sundays and were not working this one, and he typed while she talked, and for the first five minutes he did not look up, and she did not take it personally because she had been a stranger telling a story to a counter before, at the hospital, at the school, at the garage on Ninth when the car was stolen. She gave it in order, the way she gave stops: Friday, she had last seen Vera at 5:32, in the house, as Tamara herself went out the door for her shift. Vera would have left around 5:40, give or take, and that was an estimate, not a clock. Vera had said she was sleeping at the Kovach girl's, algebra test Monday, Dana had the notes. Sixteen. Sophomore at the high school.

He typed 5:32, last seen. He typed 5:40, estimated. He typed sixteen. Then he said, without turning, "Phone?"

"Home." She had rehearsed this part on the walk, because she had understood on the stairs of her own house that it was the part that mattered. "On her desk. Plugged in, charged to full. She didn't take it."

Now he looked up. He looked at her for a second and then at the screen, and he typed it, and she watched him type it, left phone home, charged, and she had the feeling she got when a fare was rung up right, the small correct click of a thing entered where it belonged.

The questions came in the right order and she could tell they were the right order because they were the same ones she had already asked herself, standing at the desk in Vera's room with the full

green ring in her hand. Temperament. Ever run before, ever stay out, ever go to Harrisburg, to the father. Did you fight, Thursday, Friday, anything said at the door.

"She's not a runner," Tamara said. "No fight. She did her makeup in the hall mirror and asked for pizza."

He asked the fight question twice more, at a slant, wearing different coats — school, the father, a boy — and she answered it and the answer did not change, and he wrote it down each time anyway, which she decided was thoroughness and not doubt, and later was never able to decide which it had been.

He leaned back from the screen. "Here's what happens now. I enter her as a runaway, which is not an opinion, it's a category — it puts her in the system, so if a trooper in Erie or a deputy in Cumberland stops a girl her age, her name comes up with a flag on it. It gets her looked at. Nine out of ten of these walk in Sunday night on their own. Sunday night, dinnertime Monday. That's what I've seen."

"And the tenth?"

He didn't answer that. He said the detective division would pull it Monday if the girl wasn't back, and that they were short, the weekend before a holiday, and she understood he was telling her a fact about staffing and not a fact about her daughter, and she also understood that no one in the room could have said which fact she was supposed to put in her pocket.

He wrote a number on a card, printed the name, the date, the number of the desk. "If anything

End of sample

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