

GAR ANTHONY HAYWOOD

A NOVEL

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S L A N T



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For Donna

Your faith is my salvation

HE WAS A BEAUTIFUL LITTLE BOY, but the young woman with him was not his mother. She was just an adult he trusted, perhaps as much as he trusted his own parents. He thought of her as a friend, and believed she felt the same way about him.

She had stolen him away from school today, in broad daylight. It was a kidnapping; that's what all the police and media people looking for them were calling it, though he thought they were just on an adventure. No one had told him she was deranged, and had anyone suggested she was dangerous—that she was angry and confused enough to do him harm—he would have laughed.

But the woman herself was not so sure. She was angry, so much so that outrage blurred her vision, and what had brought her to this place, to this crime, could not be excused as mere confusion. She was tired of being made a fool, and she didn't want to be tired a moment longer.

The boy could end her misery. He was the only one left who could. But kindness had gotten her nowhere with him, and time was running out for them both. If she had to become the monster they believed her to be to save herself, she would. She'd find the strength somewhere. As for the how of it, that remained a mystery.

Until she remembered the gun in the glove box of her car.

SUNDAY

IN HER DREAMS, the boy never returned at night.

It was always in the morning, as she was making breakfast, alone in the kitchen of the tiny house his absence had rendered so vacant. She would be at the coffee machine or the stove, idly stirring sugar into a cup or turning bacon in a pan, trying to lose herself in what for anyone else would be a menial, automatic task. The quiet, as usual, would be suffocating. And then she would hear his footsteps as he entered the room, and turn to see him climb onto his favorite chair at the table, wearing the pale blue pajamas she had packed away long ago with the rest of his things. His little face would betray nothing, answer not one of the questions she had been struggling to answer for herself for nearly a year.

And that would be fine. Because the questions would no longer matter. Their place in her life, like the pain they engendered, would immediately cease to exist.

When the miracle she'd been praying for was finally granted, it came against all her expectations, not in the light of day but by the cover of night. As she always did, she went to check the boy's room before turning in, and there he was, fast asleep in his bed, exactly as she remembered him. Not a hair on his head had changed since the last time she'd seen him, silent and lifeless and dressed for his own funeral.

Tears came first, then relief, followed by an overwhelming wave of gratitude that brought her to her knees and kept her there.

She wanted desperately to touch him but didn't dare. Acts of God were fragile things. Taking the child in her arms, cradling his face in her hands, could be perceived as a need for proof that what she beheld was real, and she knew this was hardly the time to demonstrate such lack of trust. Her faith had brought her this far; it would take her to the coming dawn at least.

Tonight she would sleep, in her own room, in her own bed. Life was worth living again. Her son was home.

TUESDAY

ONE

BEFORE HIS DEATH, Adrian Edwards had been Laura's favorite student. She had been teaching for only two years, but Laura had the feeling her fondness for the boy would withstand the test of time. She couldn't say why. What had made Adrian special should not have struck her as particularly endearing. He was droll rather than precocious, serene as opposed to happy, and his sarcasm had a bite no seven-year-old had any right to possess. Adrian was silent in the face of chaos and resolutely neutral in all playground disputes. If he hadn't been the heart and soul of Laura's second-grade classroom at Henry Yesler Elementary, he had at least been its spiritual compass, the true north she had always been able to count on.

Eight months had passed since the accident that took his life. His classmates had long since moved on, the ensuing weeks of tears and questions and memorials thankfully forgotten. But Laura was still recovering her balance. Lost innocence had come for her far too soon. At twenty-six, she was still unfettered by the doubt and pessimism that eventually afflicted so many in her profession, and she had planned to remain that way for many years to come. But the tragedy of a dead child proved to be a great equalizer. It ended any illusions of control she may have had, any hope that the children in her charge were hers to shape and mold. She could see now they weren't hers at all, any more than they were their parents'. They belonged to fate. As it had with Adrian Edwards, fate could take a hand at any moment, turn Laura's designs for this child or that one to dust.

Once, she would have laid the blame for such random cruelty at the feet of God. She'd been raised a Presbyterian, taught to believe He (it was always a *he*) was behind everything that happened in the world, both good and bad, big and small. But Laura had lost the capacity to embrace such fantastic notions many years ago, while she was a senior in high school.

The more educated she became, the more aware of the world around her, the less she could reconcile a belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing God with an abiding faith in the provable universe. She found increasing comfort in only those things the science of man had established as incontrovertibly true. It made the injustices of pain and suffering, illness and death easier to accept because they required no explanation; they were simply inexplicable parts of an inexplicable whole.

So Laura hadn't searched for reasons when sixty-eight-year-old retiree Milton Weinman—or was it Weisler?—hit the accelerator pedal rather than the brake one Saturday last March and plowed his car into the playground at Lakeridge Park, killing Adrian Edwards instantly. She knew there were no reasons to be had. Adrian's death was not a mystery to be solved but a blow to be absorbed, a natural disaster that could be survived but never fully understood. She braced herself for the pain of his loss and let it come, comforted by the knowledge her grief would someday pass.

Of course, the same could not be said for Adrian's parents. Their grief, Laura knew, would be everlasting, a cloud over their lives that would diminish over time but never completely subside. It had already taken a heavy toll on the boy's mother in particular. Prior to her son's death, Diane Edwards had been that rarest of rarities, a stay-at-home mom who seemed at peace in her own skin, a woman with bright blue eyes and an infectious laugh who was neither bored by nor resentful of her station in life. Though she'd carried more weight than Laura could have tolerated and, from all appearances, spent her days running the same household errands over and over again, only a Buddhist monk could have projected more spiritual contentment than Diane Edwards.

But now that woman was gone. What Laura had seen in her place, on those rare occasions they had run into each other after the funeral, was a specter: a wispy outline in human shape that moved like rolling fog and spoke in halting whispers. Adrian had been Diane Edwards's only child and sole purpose in life, and when he died, he took all but a hollow shell of his mother with him.

If Adrian's father had been similarly devastated, Laura was unaware of it. It was rumored Michael and Diane Edwards were separated now, and sightings of Michael were rare. A recording engineer by trade, he had always been painfully taciturn in Laura's presence, a big man with slits for eyes and a granite chin who seemed perpetually on the verge of being

rude. The last time she had seen him, in her classroom at the first of two memorial events she'd organized for her kids in Adrian's honor, Michael Edwards had appeared only slightly more surly than usual. His words to the children had been kind and sincere enough, but he'd had little to say to Laura and the other adults, save for a few standard expressions of gratitude for their sympathy and support.

In any case, however he and his wife were coping with the loss of their son eight months after the fact, Laura was confident she was farther along in returning to a life of normalcy than either of them. These days, she thought of Adrian only occasionally, and almost never for very long. In the beginning, his empty chair in her classroom would stop her cold, cause words to catch in her throat mid-sentence. Tears would come and her legs would threaten to give out. It could be hours before she was right again. But now that empty chair, still there by the window in the midst of the other children, held little sway over her. She thought of Adrian only when something or someone in her class evoked a fond memory of him, and the twinge of sorrow she felt was mercifully fleeting. It seemed her days of being haunted by Adrian Edwards would soon be over.

Or so she had thought.

This morning, ten minutes before the start of class, he walked through the door of her classroom and took his old seat, exactly the way he had a hundred times before that day last March, and Laura realized in an instant he had only begun to place his indelible mark upon her life.

TWO

“WHAT THE HELL do you make of it?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t.”

Howard Alberts, Yesler Elementary’s principal, and Betty Marx, his vice principal, were huddled on the walkway outside the main office. As word spread of Laura Carrillo’s breakdown, one teacher after another was coming into the office to find out what had happened, and Alberts, having few answers for them, was now deflecting them back to their classrooms the minute they reached the door.

“Has she been under any kind of strain lately?” he asked Marx. “Either here or at home?” A tall, gangly man who resembled a stork, he had to fold at the waist to meet Marx’s gaze.

“No. Not that I’m aware of.”

“There must have been something. A person doesn’t just suddenly lose their mind like that for no reason.”

“You think she’s lost her mind?” A short, cherubic woman with an ample bosom and red hair crowned with a bun, Marx seemed horrified at the thought.

“Well, you heard what she said. She thinks the boy’s a ghost. That he was killed in a car accident last spring. She’s *convinced* of it. If that’s not insanity, what is it?”

Marx didn’t know and she was loath to guess. It sounded like madness but she wasn’t a doctor. Laura was in Alberts’s office now with Sonia Fedin, the school nurse, and Sonia was better qualified than Marx or Alberts to make assumptions about the young teacher’s state of mind.

That something had gone seriously wrong for her was obvious. Twenty minutes ago, Laura had rushed into the office in an apparent state of shock, having committed the cardinal sin of leaving her kids

unattended. "I can't go back in there. I won't," she told Edie Brown, Yesler's desk clerk.

Edie immediately thought something had happened to one of Laura's children, but Carrillo shook her head. "He's in the room right now," she said, eyes as wide as two dinner plates. "Go see for yourself."

"Who?" Edie asked.

"Adrian. He just walked in. I know it sounds impossible, but. . . ." She pointed in the direction of her classroom. "Go look. He's just sitting there." She started to sob. "He's just sitting there."

Edie had called Alberts out of his office. Marx, who'd been on the phone, was right behind him.

"What's going on?" Alberts asked.

"Something must have happened to Adrian Edwards," Edie said. "Somebody needs to go check on Ms. Carrillo's kids right away."

Marx volunteered and took off.

* * *

Alberts, fearing the worst, searched Carrillo's face and body for blood and was momentarily relieved to find none. "Laura, what happened? What's wrong?"

She barely registered the question. Her gaze was vacant and unfocused, and she was listing like a drunk who could drop to the floor at any second.

"Laura—"

"He's dead," Carrillo said. "I don't understand. How can he be in my room if he's dead?"

"Oh, my God." Edie brought a hand to her mouth.

Alberts told her to call 911.

The clerk was talking to a dispatcher when Marx reentered the office, recognized what she was doing, and shook her off. "The children are okay," she said. "They're all okay."

"Are you sure?" Alberts asked. "She says Adrian's—"

"He's fine. Everybody's fine." As Edie hung up the phone, Marx glanced at Carrillo, who remained oblivious. "They're a little confused and frightened, but they're all okay. I put them in with Mr. Gianetti's class for the moment."

"Fine?" Carrillo flared. "He's *not* fine. He's dead! How can you say he's fine?"

"Laura, what are you talking about?" Alberts demanded. "Adrian isn't dead. Nobody's dead."

"You're wrong. I went to his funeral. You did, too." Glaring now, she turned to Marx. "And you." Then Edie. "We were all there."

She studied their faces, saw the same mix of pity and disbelief on each one. "Why are you all looking at me like that? You're acting like you don't *remember!*"

Their silence told her that was exactly the case.

"Oh, my God." She buried her face in her hands and began to weep.

Alberts and Marx sat her down in Alberts's office and tried to console her. On Alberts's orders, Edie summoned Sonia Fedin to join them. Eventually Carrillo grew lucid enough to answer their questions, and the story she told only made them fear for her well-being all the more. She said Adrian Edwards had died earlier that year at nearby Lakeridge Park, crushed under the wheels of a car driven by an old man who'd lost control. She continued to insist most of the school staff had attended the boy's funeral at St. Bernadette's Church six days later, including everyone presently in Alberts's office, with the exception of Fedin. She was able to describe the days and weeks that had supposedly followed in great detail, from the flowers she'd ordered for the service to the way some of his classmates had responded to his death. It all had the ring of truth, except every word was impossible.

At Fedin's request, Alberts and Marx left the nurse to talk to Carrillo alone, and now the two of them were here, standing outside the main office, struggling to make sense of Carrillo's behavior.

"Do you think Adrian might know what this is all about?" Marx asked. "Could he have said something, or done something to her—"

"To what? Put the idea in her head that he's dead? No. How could he?" Alberts had never been as taken by the boy as Carrillo was—he'd always found Adrian's unshakable calm to be unsettling in a child his age—but he couldn't imagine the boy disturbing the teacher to such a grave extent, deliberately or otherwise.

"I don't know. I just thought. . . ." Marx paused. "Why *him*? Why would Laura choose to believe such a terrible thing about Adrian?"

"You tell me. You just saw him. Did you ask him what happened?"

"Of course."

"And?"

"He said what all the other children said, that Miss Laura got scared and ran out of the room. He didn't know why."

"He didn't do anything to frighten her?"

"No. All he did was come in and take his seat. At least, that's what he and all the rest of the children say."

Alberts decided to go talk to the boy himself. As a precautionary measure, they were sending all of Carrillo's students home, but most of them, including Adrian, were still here, waiting for their parents to pick them up. Alberts found Adrian in Chris Gianetti's classroom, where Marx had left him, and brought him out to the vacant lunch area, where they could sit and chat alone.

As always, Adrian was clean and neatly dressed, today in khaki shorts and a crisp blue T-shirt. Dark-haired and hazel-eyed, of average height and weight, he would have blended right into any second-grade class photo. As they took their seats at a table, Alberts studied him, looking for some sign Carrillo's actions had upset the boy in some way, but Adrian appeared as eerily imperturbable as ever.

"Adrian, I just want to ask you a few questions about what happened with Miss Laura in class today."

"Okay."

"Can you tell me what happened? In your own words?"

The boy shrugged. "She just started yelling 'no.' And then she got up and went to the corner."

"No?"

"Yes. 'No, no, no,' like that."

"Do you know why she said that?"

Adrian shook his head.

"You told Ms. Marx she was afraid."

The boy nodded.

"What was she afraid of?"

"I don't know. But. . ."

"Yes?"

"She was looking at *me*." He shrugged again.

"Why would she be afraid of you? Did you say or do something to frighten her?"

"No." His head swiveled emphatically from side to side, his Zen-like façade finally giving way to the hurt of a child falsely accused. "I didn't do anything to her."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I just sat down. That's all."

"And that's when she started saying no over and over and got up to . . . stand in a corner? Is that what you said?"

"Yes."

"And then she ran out of the room after that? Without saying anything else?"

"She said it couldn't be."

"It couldn't be? I don't understand."

"She said, 'It can't be.'"

Alberts's throat was suddenly dry. He took a moment to ward off a growing sense of unease. "And when she said that, she was still looking at you?"

"Yes. But I don't know why. I didn't do anything. I just sat down. Am I in trouble, Mr. Alberts?"

Adrian was almost in tears. Alberts was both ashamed and relieved to see the boy react, at last, with some genuine emotion. "No, no, of course not. You haven't done anything wrong, Adrian, I promise."

He got up and drew the boy to his feet, tossing an arm over his little shoulders. "Come on, we're done. Let's go back to class."

When they arrived at the classroom, Adrian's mother was there waiting for them. Alberts remembered her name was Diane, though they had met only once before, three months earlier at a Yesler fund-raising carnival. She looked concerned but not afraid, which struck Alberts as a little odd. Edie Brown had been instructed to offer people only the merest whiff of an explanation for sending their children home only hours into the school day, and the principal was expecting many parents to show up in a state of panic. Diane Edwards seemed significantly more relaxed than that.

"Are you okay?" she asked her son, hugging him close.

"Yes."

His mother turned to Alberts. "I understand Miss Laura had some kind of a breakdown. Is that right?"

"That's probably too strong a word for it, 'breakdown.' A slight panic attack would be more like it."

"Is she okay?"

"I'm sure she'll be fine. We're only sending the kids home because some were a little spooked by it all, as you might imagine. Adrian, included, I'm afraid."

"Adrian?" She looked down at the boy. "Is that right? Were you spooked?"

Before her son could answer, Alberts said, "He seems to think, because it happened just as he came into the room, that he had something to do with Laura's behavior. Of course, I've told him that's not possible. Is it?"

He had asked the question just to see her reaction.

"No. Of course not," she said. Choosing the exact words he would have chosen in her place—if he had been addressing Adrian. She should have been trying to reassure her son, but she'd been looking straight at Alberts when she spoke, as if hoping to allay *his* fears and not the boy's.

Alberts didn't know what it meant, or if it meant anything at all. And he chose not to care. He let Diane Edwards take her son home and turned his attention back to Laura Carrillo. Because whatever had caused the teacher's meltdown, it hadn't been a little boy risen from the dead.

Of that much, Alberts was certain.