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DISAPPEARING ACTS

A Novel by

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*Eddie*

We live at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere. People pass through on their way to anywhere but here. Long ribbons of highway tie together in the middle of the country, pale gray concrete stretching into the sunset in all directions. Never-ending.

Our town is set in the crux. The center of the heartland, the middle of the middle of Missouri.

“Misery,” a cousin who lives in New York called it once. “No one goes there on purpose,” she said.

She’s right, of course. No one stops here for fun. It’s those of us that live here who see it differently. At the center of the world, everything spins around you.

*Mandy, January 1989*

Sometimes I think that I didn’t exist before Sean Monroe.

No. I know I didn’t exist before Sean Monroe.

That’s what I told Mrs. B, the school counselor, during week four of our weekly sessions. I waited until the minutes hand on the clock on the wall swung around to ten minutes ‘til eleven. Thirty seconds before the bell rang.

I chewed on my jagged thumbnail when I said it, head down, long hair hiding my

face and the small scar that runs like a tiny river along my jawbone. I twisted the toe of my white canvas shoe into a groove between the tiles on the floor. I shrank inside my sweatshirt, Sean's gray hooded one that my mother didn't even know wasn't mine.

It was a sleight-of-hand trick, enough to guarantee a return session.

The counselor was my mother's idea. I didn't say yes or no – didn't bother to – but I gave up study hall on Thursday mornings to show up at Mrs. Bandansky's office for the sessions my mom thought would fix me.

After the accident, my mom sat me down each night for a heart-to-heart, but the talks didn't take long to fizzle out to a few questions here and there during dinner, sitting in front of the television, plates balanced on our laps.

The best answers fit during the commercial breaks.

I didn't really get it – the benefit of counseling – until I figured out they were the reason I was getting out of the nightly mother/daughter sessions. I figured it out about the time Mrs. B was getting frustrated because I wouldn't say anything. She was about ready to give up on me. I couldn't let that happen.

The bell rang outside Mrs. B's office right after I made my big announcement. It rang at the same time she got that grand look on her face. Breakthrough.

She was so proud.

It was time to change classes. Clanging metal lockers mixed with the rising voices outside Mrs. B's closed office door.

I stood up and stepped toward the hall. Time to go.

"You can stay through next hour, if you want to keep talking," she said. "I have a meeting, but I can cancel it. If you want to stay."

She looked hopeful.

I wasn't. I walked out, into the moving mess of people.

*I didn't exist before Sean Monroe.*

I told her that to make her happy. It was the only truthful thing I'd told her about us. Saying it was easier than I thought. It was the next part that would have been harder to say.

*After Sean Monroe, I didn't disappear. I am still here, so what the hell do I do now?*

No one understood that the story wasn't about him, wasn't about anything that he did or said. My mom and Mrs. B wanted the blame on Sean. Sean's mother, Mrs. Monroe – Edie – wanted the blame on her. No one understood or considered the real truth, that it was me.

It was all about me, and that was the hardest thing to bear.

## PART ONE

*Fall 1988*

### **Chapter One**

*Edie*

Her mother called every Tuesday. I knew who it was when the phone rang between five and five-thirty, and I still answered the phone. Every time I moved my hand to the receiver, let the phone ring twice, then answered. I never said more than hello, but I let her have her say – “What kind of a mother are you? Keep your kid away from my daughter. Dammit. Keep him away.”

I could hear her anger rise when I wouldn't say anything, but the one thing I could think to say wouldn't have helped either.

“What took you so long to call?”

I had been waiting someone to call me out for 12 years. But then when it happened, I had no idea what to do. I had been expecting someone to say those words, call me names and ask what right did I have to raise a child, even if he was my own flesh and blood, but I had never thought beyond the moment when my heart stopped, my ears burned and my mouth went so dry I couldn't swallow.

What are you supposed to do in a situation like that – when somebody calls you up in your own home, cuts into your quiet little night and asks what the hell is wrong with your child, what is wrong with you? Do you yell back and say you've done nothing wrong?

But that's not true. Everybody's done something wrong at one point or another. Even worse, they keep changing the rules and so even if you think you're playing it safe, you find out years later that you've done it all wrong. Ignored them when you should have yelled. Spanked when you should have stopped and just given them a kiss and said try harder next time.

Next time. Next time. Next time. That's the problem with raising a kid. There's always a next time. You can't catch your breath for all the next times. Spilling Kool-Aid on the floor, throwing Play-doh in the living room, leaving the cereal box out in the kitchen until the cat buries his head in the Cookie Crisp. Growing up is just a battle to see who has more strength and stamina. You hang on during those days that don't seem to ever end and you wait to reclaim control, so you can feel sane again. You feel that thin thread between the right thing and the easy thing stretch and stretch.

### *Mandy*

In the middle of the night at Sean's house, there is no noise. His mom doesn't come out of her room whenever we would come in. It's as if she isn't even there.

We disappear into his room without turning any lights on, without talking. I like the darkness of his room. I can barely see his bed and I trip on his tennis shoes on the

floor, but then we are lying there together and he pulls his comforter up around me. I still have my clothes on, and he doesn't even try to take them off.

"We can just sleep," he says. "I just want to sleep beside you."

That makes me want to kiss him long and hard, so I do. I kiss him and kiss him until I can tell he's getting worked up. I bring my hand down between his legs and rub his jeans and he moans in my ear. I want him because he says we can just sleep.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

I don't answer. I just kiss him harder and love him more.

### *Edie*

Sean was five years old the day I left him. He was "all boy" as Bill would say on the days he was home. Sean would run and run through the house as fast as he could, fighting battles with imaginary enemies, kicking wildly into thin air, lost in his own world. He wouldn't settle down or listen to me, even though I pleaded and screamed at him. He was a freight train racing away from me, every day getting older and stronger and more and more a boy with his own mind that I couldn't control. Hands, feet, arms, mouth constantly in motion, constantly knocking down anything in his path.

I needed him to get his shoes on. It was that simple. I asked him nicely once, then twice, then screamed. Tennis shoes. In your closet. *Now*. We had to go to the store. We needed milk. He got it in his head that he didn't want to go, screaming "no" back at me. I followed the rules and counted to ten. He took his socks off and threw them. *Pick them up now*. He ran up and screamed in my face, his little body rigid and his face hard. My

arms shook as I dragged him to the car and pushed him into the backseat.

I pulled up to Bill's mom and dad's house and let Sean out. He stood there, barefoot, on the broken sidewalk and just stared at me with a look of severance and defiance and fear that neither one of us wanted to admit. I didn't even tell his grandparents he was there or what I was doing, but I watched him in the rearview mirror as I pulled away. His figure got smaller and smaller, a shrinking shadow, until he finally dashed toward their front door.

I told myself that I was just going to drop him off so I could go to the store in peace, but three hours later I was still driving and finding it easier to breathe with every mile. Glenda and George had called Bill's dispatcher by that time and left the message about what I had done, and he was on his way home to get his son. One quick phone call and he was on his way back home. It only took him two days to get there.

The first time that woman – that girl's mother – called, it was August. I was cooking canned spaghetti. It was late in the afternoon. Bill was on the road, between here and Little Rock, 18 hours away from the end of a three-day haul. Cold gray sunshine seeped like fog into the house, through the window over the kitchen sink, dulling everything it touched. I was thinking about the piles of laundry in the bedroom, about the crumbs in the corners and crevices of the kitchen floor that I hadn't swept all week. I let the phone ring two times before I answered.

“What kind of a mother are you?” she screeched.

“What? Who is this?”

“What kind of a mother raises a son like that, who'll treat my daughter that way?”

You know damn well who this is.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I answered, staring at the wall in front of me. “Wrong number.”

“Tell him to stop screwing my girl. Tell him to leave her alone.”

Her voice was tiny and distant as I moved the phone away from my ear and hung up. I turned, tensed and waiting for the phone to ring again, but it didn’t. The house stood empty and silent, the world unmoving.

I gripped my wooden spoon and stirred the pot in front of me twelve times. The bright orange sauce popped from the heat and splattered against the yellow stovetop. “Harvest Gold,” the salesman at the appliance store had called it fifteen years ago.

Sean had been almost two at the time and just learning his colors. “Ellow – ellow,” he repeated over and over, pointing and pushing out of my arms to get at the dials.

“Harvest Gold,” the salesman enunciated as he waited for Bill to write out the check.

I didn’t know her, and I didn’t know her daughter. I didn’t know what she was talking about.

That first night she called, Sean was working at the Pizza Inn. He would have been punching pizza dough into a soft crust and joking with his friend Brad in the kitchen. The restaurant was probably filling with people, families with small children begging for quarters for Donkey Kong, young couples out on a date and sitting on the same side of the booth.

I didn’t even know her daughter’s name. Sean had never brought her to meet me,

and I never asked.

But late at night, when I was already in bed, there were footsteps down the hall, hushed voices, sometimes muffled laughter. I'd hear the sounds of the toilet, water running, and then the bedroom door opening and closing.

In the morning, I would walk past his room and get ready for work. I never made much noise, but in the early stillness of 4 a.m., the dark amplifies every sound. I don't know if I ever woke them. Sean was used to my routine and wouldn't wake up that early even if I'd wanted him to. Maybe she laid there in his bed, under the sheets I washed and tucked underneath the old mattress. Maybe she watched the narrow stream of bright yellow light under his dark door, watched my shadow cross as I moved down the hall without stopping. She might have been scared or nervous that I'd open the door. She might have been annoyed, or she might not have cared at all.

I didn't know what the girl thought, and it didn't really matter. I'd never seen her face.

I kept stirring the spaghetti, making small, round circles in the well-worn groove at the bottom of the pot until I was sure the phone wouldn't ring again. I took a lime green plastic bowl, a leftover from some summer party long ago, and filled it with noodles – one, two, three, four, five, six meatballs mired in the sauce. The wooden legs of the chair squeaked against the linoleum as I sat down at the square white table. It wasn't a very big table and it was just one piece, no options of leaves for company. If we'd had more children, it wouldn't have worked, but with just Bill, Sean and I, it was enough.

I could have felt indignant about the phone call, self-righteous. But I didn't. I thought about calling my best friend Lisa and letting her be indignant for me, but I didn't.

Lisa would tell me to call Sean, make him explain. She'd roll her eyes and ask "What's he done now?" Lisa likes to see things in black and white, and she doesn't understand that life doesn't always fit neatly into this side or that side. She believes that blame can always be cut and dried.

I let the spaghetti sit in front of me, the limp noodles sinking further into the sauce, the orange swirling with a sick hue against the green sides of the bowl.

The low horn of the 5 o'clock Amtrak to Kansas City sounded outside, the rickety sound of the metal clacking against the rails and rolling closer. The bell at the railroad crossing two blocks away rang out, the sound carrying through my open kitchen window.

A line of cars would be accumulating behind the crossing bars, the first guy in line tapping his fingers against the steering wheel, ready to get home and wishing he'd been ten seconds faster. The train always moves too fast or too slow, depending on if you are waiting in the road for the railcars to get out of the way or if you are at home listening to the glass shake in your china cabinet.

No one I know has ever ridden the train, but it's always there in the background. The noise rushes by, cutting into our lives. I thought about taking Sean on it once, years ago, just to say we did it, but we never did.

"Why would you want to do that?" Bill asked when I mentioned it. "Where would you go?"

I didn't have an answer. I didn't know.

Bill's used to going places, so when he's home, that's where he wants to stay. He doesn't understand why I'd want to go anywhere else, when everything we need is at

home. He doesn't understand *want*, not like I do, and he doesn't understand how someone could leave without knowing where they were going.

I sat there with my spaghetti and let the room get dark. My ears buzzed with the sound of the phone not ringing. The train was long gone, but phantom motion still rocked inside my chest, an echo that was slow to fade away.

### *Mandy*

I didn't tell my mom about Sean. Most of the time she didn't know where I was anyway. I was half-living at Sean's and she didn't notice. She probably still wouldn't know except she got sick one night and had to quit her shift at the nursing home early. She works nights, sitting up and making sure nothing happens to old people.

After she came home and I wasn't there, she acted like she cared. She asked me over and over and over where I was going and who I was going to be with. I lied to her so often, making up stories about friends and parties and sleepovers and studying for tests that it all blurred together, reality and memory and imagination rolling up into one. At the center of it was Sean, always Sean, but my mother didn't know that.

She started calling at night to see if I was home. She threatened to send me away, to my dad in California, when the phone rang and rang with no answer throughout the night because I wasn't there.

I knew she'd never do it. She'd never send me away. She had no one else, and I knew it. And she knew I knew. She had nothing to take away, nothing that she could hold over my head, so she yelled and I ignored her.

I didn't hurt her intentionally. Or maybe I did. I walked through days in a daze, my heart closed up in a box within my chest, beating with no feeling. I didn't care what she said to me, that she didn't want me to see Sean anymore. I lied to her because I wouldn't give Sean up.

With Sean, I was safe.

"No one will love you like I love you," he whispered in my ear, in his bed, in the dark. "No one. Ever."