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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Smoke Jumper**

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# The Smoke Jumper

# 1

The important things in life always happened by accident. At fifteen she didn't know much, in fact, with each passing year she was a lot less clear about most things. But this much she did know. You could worry yourself sick trying to be a better person, spend a thousand sleepless nights figuring out how to live clean and decent and honest, you could make a plan and bolt it in place, kneel by your bed every night and swear to God you'd stick to it, hell, you could go to church and promise properly. You could cross your heart seven times with your eyes tight shut, cut your thumb and squeeze it and pen solemn vows on a rock with your own blood then throw it in the river at the stroke of midnight. And then, out of the black beyond, like a hawk on a rat, some nameless catastrophe would swoop into your life and turn everything upside down and inside out forever.

Skye later reckoned that on the night in question that old hawk must have been outside sitting up on the roof biding his

time and watching the rat have a little fun, because it all started in a real low-key kind of way when those two women came sashaying into the bar.

She didn't know who they were but what they were was plain for all the world. They were wearing more make-up than clothes and she could tell from the way they swayed on their high heels that they were already hazed with drink. They both wore tight little tops, one red, one silver and fringed, and the woman in front, who had long black hair and breasts propped up like melons on a shelf, had a skirt so short she needn't have bothered. The music in the bar was thumping loud and the black-haired woman tried a little shimmy to it as she walked and almost fell.

The men they were with were close behind them and obscured, steering them through the crowd. Both wore cowboy hats and from the corner booth across the room where Skye and her friends were sitting, she couldn't make out their faces. Not that she was remotely interested. She was more than a little hazed with drink herself. The lights were dimmed to a dull red glow and through the hanging curl of smoke all she registered was a couple of sad forty-something-year-old guys chasing their youth and doubtless cheating on their wives. Skye looked away. She picked up her beer and drank, then lit another cigarette.

She watched them mostly because she was bored, which was kind of sad too, considering it was her birthday. Jed and Calvin were slumped stoned and speechless beside her, Roxy was still crying into her hands at something Craig had said to her, and Craig was still cussing on and on about his goddamn heap of a car breaking down. Another great night in fun city, Skye said to herself and took another swig. Happy birthday to me.

The bar was a godforsaken dump so close to the railroad that the bottles shook and clinked whenever a train went by.

For reasons that weren't too hard to fathom, the cops left the place alone and so long as you weren't in diapers, the staff turned a blind eye to underage drinking. Consequently much of the clientele was around the same age as Skye. A lot younger for sure than the four who had just walked in. They were at the bar now and stood waiting to be served. They had their backs to her and Skye again found herself staring at them.

She watched the tall man's hands moving on the black-haired woman's hips and on her ass and up her spine to her bare shoulders and saw him lean in close, nuzzling her neck. God, he was *licking* her. How gross some guys were. What was it with women? How could they stand being slobbered over by jerks like him? The whole sex trip was something Skye still didn't get and doubted she ever would. Oh sure, she *did* it. Everybody did. But she still couldn't figure out why it was cracked up to be such a big deal.

The man must have whispered something dirty because the woman suddenly threw back her head, laughed raucously and made a playful attempt to slap him. The man laughed too and swiveled to avoid her and his hat fell off and for the first time Skye could see his face.

It was her stepfather.

In those few moments before his eyes met hers she glimpsed in his face a look she had never seen before, a kind of inner face that was still just a boy's, loose and joyful and strangely frail. Then she saw him recognize her and saw the boy vanish as swiftly as he had appeared. His face clouded and clenched and became again the one she knew and feared and loathed, the one she saw when he came back in the early hours to the trailer seething with drink and fury and called her mother a squaw bitch and beat her until she howled for mercy and then turned his foul attention upon Skye.

He straightened up and put his hat on the bar and said something to the woman who turned to consider Skye with

a look that lay somewhere between disdain and disinterest. Now he was heading toward the booth. Skye squashed out her cigarette, hoping he hadn't seen it. She stood up.

'Let's go,' she said quietly.

But she was trapped in the booth. On one side Roxy was sobbing into Craig's shoulder and hadn't heard and on the other Calvin and Jed were still out of it. Her stepfather reached the table, his eyes taking in the evidence: the beer bottles, the brimming ashtrays, the comatose bums she chose to hang out with.

'What the fuck are you doing in here?'

'Come on, it's my birthday.' It was pathetic but worth a try. She even thought of calling him 'Dad' as she briefly had when he and her mom married, before he revealed just what a mean, disgusting sonofabitch he really was. But she couldn't bring herself to utter the word.

'Don't give me that shit. You're just fifteen years old! What the fuck do you think you're at?'

'Aw, give her a break, man. We're only having a little fun.' It was Jed, who had resurfaced. Skye's stepfather leaned across and grabbed him by the throat, hauling him halfway across the table.

'You dare talk to me like that, you little slice of shit.'

Jed's weight made the table tilt and everything on it except for him slid off onto the floor in an avalanche of breaking glass. Craig was on his feet now and he tried to grab Skye's stepfather by the arm but her stepfather twisted himself around and with the hand that wasn't throttling Jed punched the boy full in the face. Roxy screamed.

'For godsake,' Skye shouted. 'Stop it! Stop it!'

She was aware that everyone in the bar was staring at them. One of the waiters was coming over along with the man her stepfather had arrived with.

'Hey folks, let's cool it here, shall we?' the waiter said.

Skye's stepfather shoved Jed back into his seat so hard his head slammed against the back of the booth. Craig was on his knees bleeding from the mouth and Roxy was sobbing over him, trying to help him. Skye's stepfather's chest was heaving and his eyes were narrowed and dark and he turned them on the waiter.

'Did you serve alcohol to these kids?'

The waiter held up his hands. 'Sir, let's keep things calm now, please.'

He was slightly built and about a foot shorter than Skye's stepfather. He had long hair tied back in a ponytail.

'Did you? Did you serve them alcohol?'

'They said they were twenty-one.'

'And you believed that? Did you ask for their I.D.?'

'Sir, could we talk about this—'

'Did you?'

Skye stood up and pushed her way out of the booth.

'Look, we're going, okay? We're going!'

Her stepfather spun around and lifted his hand to hit her and although all her instincts told her to cower, somehow she managed not to and instead stood her ground, glaring at him. She could smell his cologne and it was so cloying and the memories it stirred so foul that it almost made her gag.

'Don't you dare lay a finger on me.'

It was little more than a whisper. But it stopped him or maybe it was all the eyes upon him that did it. Whatever it was, he lowered his hand.

'Get your ass home, you little Indian whore. I'll see to you later.'

'The only whores in here are the two you came in with.'

He made a lunge for her but she ducked out of his reach and ran for the door. Over her shoulder she saw that his friend and the waiter had grabbed his arms to stop him coming after her. She burst into the night and started to run.

The air hung hot and humid and she could feel the tears running on her cheeks and it made her almost choke with anger that she should be so weak as to let that bastard make her cry. A freight train was going by and she ran alongside, watching the lights beyond it strobe between the wagons. There were lights on her side of the rails too, strung on a wire above her, each with its own frenzied aura of insects. The train seemed many miles long and from afar, already out of town, she heard the mournful wail of the engine like a verdict on the sorry place through which it had passed. Had it been traveling more slowly she would have climbed on board and let it bear her wherever in the world it was headed.

She ran and ran like she always ran. And it didn't matter where because wherever it was couldn't be worse than where she was and where she had been. She'd run away first when she was five and done it many times since. And it always got her into trouble but, what the hell, what kind of trouble was there that she hadn't seen already?

She ran now until her smoke-seared lungs could take no more, and as she stopped, the train's last wagon went by and she stood slumped with her hands on her knees, gasping and watching its taillights grow smaller and smaller until the night swallowed them as if they never had been. Somewhere way off in the darkness a dog was barking and a man yelled for it to cease but it paid no heed.

'Never mind. You can catch the next one.'

The voice startled her. It was male and close at hand. Skye scanned the darkness around her. She was in what appeared to be an abandoned lumberyard. She couldn't see him.

'Over here.'

He was sitting on the ground, leaning against a stack of rotting fence posts overgrown with weeds and he looked as if he might almost have melted out of it for his hair was long and tangled and so was his beard. He was a white boy, older than



Skye. Eighteen or nineteen maybe and very thin. He was wearing torn jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with a roaring Chinese dragon. A dust-covered duffel bag lay on the ground beside him. He was rolling a joint.

‘Why are you crying?’

‘I’m not. What the fuck is it to you anyhow?’

He shrugged. For a while neither of them spoke. Skye turned away as if she had other things to do or think about. She wiped the wet off her cheeks, trying not to let him see. She knew she should probably walk away. All kinds of freaks and psychos hung out down here by the railroad. But something within her, some hapless craving for comfort or company, made her stay. She looked at him again. He licked the cigarette paper and sealed the joint, then lit it and took a long draw. He held it out to her.

‘Here.’

‘I don’t do drugs.’

‘Sure.’

The car they stole belonged to somebody with small kids. There were little seats fitted in the back and the floor was littered with toys and picture books and candy wrappers. The boy knew what he was doing, for it took him only a couple of minutes to pop the door lock and get the engine going. They stopped after a few miles so he could switch the plates with another car.

He said his name was Sean and she told him hers and that was all they knew about each other except for some common hurt or longing that didn’t need uttering. Nothing else seemed to matter, not where they were going nor why.

They drove north until they hit the interstate then headed west with a river to one side and the dawn rearing in a widening red scar over the endless plains behind them. Neither of them spoke for a long time and Skye sat turned in her seat

looking back and waiting for the sun to show itself and when finally it did it set the land aflame with crimson and purple and gold and flung long shadows from the cottonwoods and rocks and from the black cattle that grazed beside the river and Skye thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her whole life.

On the floor she found a picture book that she remembered from elementary school. It was about a little boy called Bernard whose parents always ignore him. One day a monster appears in the backyard and Bernard runs inside to tell them but still they just ignore him. The monster eats him and goes into the house and roars at the parents but they think it's Bernard fooling around and ignore him. And because they're not scared, the monster loses all his confidence. Skye turned to the last page which always used to make her feel sad. The poor old monster has been sent to bed and is sitting all alone and forlorn in the dark, feeling a total failure.

They pulled off the interstate to get gas. There was a diner there that was just opening and they bought coffee and muffins and settled themselves to eat at a table by the window while an old woman mopped the floor around them. While they ate he asked her how old she was and she lied and told him she was seventeen. She said she'd been born in South Dakota and was half Oglala Sioux, on her mother's side, and he said that was cool but she told him that she didn't think it was and anyhow she didn't know anything about that people or their history except that it was full of pain and misery and she already had enough of both to be getting along with, thanks very much.

He told her he came from Detroit and that his parents and his older brother were all in jail though he didn't say for what and Skye didn't ask. When he was fourteen he had taken off and for the last three years had been traveling all over. He said he had been down to Mexico and Nicaragua and Salvador

and said he'd seen things he never could have imagined or believed.

'Like what?'

'Magic. Shamans. People walking through fire and not even being marked by it. People dying on account of being cursed. I saw a dead woman brought back to life.'

Skye asked him about it but he didn't want to tell her. She asked why he had come to Montana and he said it was because he wanted to meet a grizzly bear in the wild. He said he had learned in Mexico that it was his spirit animal and that he had been a bear in another life. She laughed because this skinny kid was about as unlike a bear as a person could get. A stick insect maybe or a giraffe or something, but a grizzly bear? No way. He looked hurt and went all quiet on her and so she apologized and, finding it hard to keep a straight face, asked him how he planned to go about finding a grizzly. He conceded that it wasn't going to be easy but figured they should head for Glacier Park, which he'd been told was a good place to start looking.

Skye nodded, trying to look serious.

'Right,' she said.

'You got a better idea?'

She could think of about a hundred.

'Whatever,' she said. 'I don't give a shit.'

They drove the rest of the day while the sun swung over them, heading like them for the snow-capped mountains that loomed ever larger before them. In the afternoon it got so hot they pulled off the interstate and meandered along narrow roads through a forest humming with insects. They found a creek with a swirling pool and swam naked and unashamed in the cold clear water then lay in a meadow full of wildflowers and dried themselves in the sun while butterflies danced around them. He said she looked pretty and she thought he might want to touch her and half wanted him to but he only

stared at the sky and smoked another joint and seemed hardly to know she was there.

By the time they got back on the interstate the western sky was filling with great gray thunderheads among which the sun crazed fitfully, pale and cold and metallic, while lightning flickered from their roiled bellies to the mountain mass below.

She saw the police car before he did. Something made her look back and as she did so the cop turned on his flashing red and blue lights. Sean looked in the rearview mirror and said nothing. He didn't look scared or even worried, just stoned. He slowed and pulled onto the shoulder and the police car behind did the same. The cop sat there awhile, no doubt checking them out on his radio.

'What do we say?'

Sean shrugged.

The cop got out of his car and walked slowly toward them. Sean lowered the window, watching him in the side mirror all the way. As he came alongside, the cop bent so that he could get a look at Skye. He was young, in his mid-twenties maybe, with a neatly trimmed ginger mustache and blue eyes that were wide-set and friendly. He touched his hat and Skye gave him her best smile.

'Howdy. Where you folks headed?'

'Glacier,' Sean said, not looking at him.

'Great. On vacation?'

'Yeah.'

'This your vehicle?'

'Belongs to a friend.'

'Uh-huh. Okay. Well, I'd like to see your driver's license, registration and insurance, please.'

Sean turned to reach for his bag. Skye suddenly had a bad feeling that he had a gun in there and that he was going to do something dumb and dreadful. But he seemed to change his mind and turned back to the cop.

'I forgot. All that stuff got stolen.'

Something shifted and hardened in the cop's eyes.

'Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle please, sir?'

He straightened up and reached for the door handle and in the same moment Sean gunned the engine. The cop yanked the door open and tried to grab Sean's shoulder but the car was already moving and he lost his balance and fell and in the fall his arm went down behind Sean's seat and twisted and got trapped. He cried out.

'Stop!' Skye shouted. 'Stop!'

There was a loud crack and Skye knew from the man's scream that it was the sound of his arm breaking. But Sean either didn't hear or care. He just hit the gas pedal harder so that the tires squealed and smoked and the car snaked its way back onto the highway dragging the cop beside it yelling and shrieking. Skye screamed.

'Are you crazy? Stop the car! For godsake, stop!'

But he didn't. She reached over to try to knock the shift out of drive but he shoved her violently back across the car and her head cracked against the passenger's side window. With his left hand, he was trying to unhitch the cop's arm from behind his seat but it wouldn't come free. The door kept swinging open and slamming shut again on the poor man's arm and when it opened Skye could see his face above the sill. There was a bloody gash all down one side of it and his eyes were glazed with fear.

The car was swerving across the lanes of the highway and Skye became aware of the blast of horns from other vehicles. They were passing a pickup truck and there was a big brown dog standing in the back and the driver was hooting and yelling at them and the dog was barking, trying to keep his balance as the truck lurched away to avoid them.

'You idiot!' Skye shouted.

'Shut up!'

Suddenly there was the tearing sound and then a loud thud and Skye looked back to see the cop's body bounce and twist and tumble across the road behind them.

'You stupid fucking idiot! What are you *doing*?'

The cop's severed arm was still jammed behind the boy's seat and he wrenched it free and threw it clear and slammed the door. Skye screamed and started to hit him and he struck her hard in the mouth. She felt a tooth break and blood start to flow and that made her want to hit him all the more and with all her strength and anger she lashed at him and tore at his face and hair until finally he punched her so hard she felt something give in her head as if she were being swallowed from inside and she slumped in her seat watching the world twirl away from her in a red numbing mist.