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The Boy No One Loved

Written by Casey Watson

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CASEY WATSON

*The Boy
No One Loved*

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In order to protect privacy, names, identifying characteristics,
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To my wonderful and supportive family

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Prologue

His little brothers, the boy saw, were both covered in shit. They'd removed their full nappies and smeared each other in it, while their mother's dog – a spiteful brown terrier – was busy licking what remained from the bars of their shared cot.

He shooed the dog away and, gagging now, lifted both boys out, and then went to fetch a quilt from his mother's bedroom. Where had she gone this time? Why was she never there?

He took the boys downstairs, used the quilt to wrap them up warmly on the couch, and tuned the TV to a channel that was showing cartoons. 'We're hungry,' the older one kept repeating plaintively. 'We're hungry, Justin. Please Justin. Find us some food.'

There was nothing. There never was. Though he looked for some anyway. In all the cupboards. In the drawers. In the big dirty fridge. He felt tears spring in his eyes. And he

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also felt anger. He looked at his little brothers, at their hopeful, expectant faces. What was he supposed to feed them with? What was he supposed to do?

Then, suddenly, in that instant of despair, there came clarity. He didn't have to think. He knew *exactly* what to do. As if on autopilot now, he took his brothers out into the front garden, sat them down on the grass – still wrapped in the grubby quilt – and told them to stay where they were.

He then returned to the house and looked around the living room for the lighter. Picking it up, he calmly flicked it at the couch. He continued to do this till the couch began burning and then he went and set fire to the curtains.

The dog came downstairs then, its face all smeared with the contents of the brothers' nappies. The boy ran to the kitchen, to the cupboard under the sink, where there was a container of fluid which he knew was for the lighter. Grabbing this, he returned to the living room again, and squirted the fuel all over the animal's filthy face.

Taking one last look around, he walked out of the front door, closing it carefully behind him. He then joined his brothers under the quilt, on the grass, and calmly watched while both home and dog perished.

His mother was located, by the police, three hours later. She'd apparently spent the day at a friend's house. The little boy was just five and a half years old.

Chapter 1

Funny the little details that tend to stick in your mind, isn't it? The day Justin, the first foster child to ever be placed with us, was due to arrive – a bright but chilly day on the last Saturday before Christmas – all I kept going back to were the same old two things. One of them was just how desperate the social worker seemed to be that we should agree to have him, and the other was the fact that I had black hair.

And it wasn't just me either. My daughter Riley, now 21 and so supportive of the whole project from day one, had the same head of black hair that I did. We'd both of us inherited our raven locks from my mother and one thing I knew – and I really knew so little about Justin – was that he had a very powerful aversion to women with black hair.

I straightened his England football-team-themed duvet cover for the umpteenth time that morning, and tried to put the negative thoughts right out of my mind. I was trained to do this job, I told myself. So was my husband,

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Mike. Plus I already had several years of experience looking after difficult children. And this was the new career I'd chosen for myself, wasn't it?

But along with the anxiety, I also felt proud. I looked around me and found myself smiling with satisfaction at what I saw. I certainly couldn't have thought harder about the way to do his new bedroom. Because one of the few things we did know was that Justin liked football, we quickly settled on that as a theme. So we'd done out the spare room in black and white and splashed out on some special wallpaper that made one of the walls look like it was a crowd at a stadium. We'd laid a green carpet, for a pitch, added a football-themed frieze, and I'd trawled charity shops endlessly for the books, games and jigsaws that I knew my own kids had enjoyed at his age. We also knew he liked movies, especially Disney films, apparently, so we'd bought him a starter pack of those too. I had agonised over every detail, every decision, every tiny item, because it meant so much to me to do everything I could to help him feel at home. The one thing I didn't know was what team he supported, so, till I did know, I'd pinched my son Kieron's old duvet cover for him. I reasoned that England was a pretty safe bet for any football-mad eleven-year-old boy.

I checked the time on the big blue clock Mike had fixed on the wall. Almost eleven. They would be here any minute, I realised. And, as if by magic, I heard Mike call my name from downstairs.

'They're coming up the path, love,' he said.

* * *

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I had met Justin already, of course, just the previous Tuesday. In fact, it had only been a week since we'd been asked to consider our first placement at that point, and only eight days since I'd left my old job at the local comprehensive school. It had been an intense week, too, with everything seeming to move so quickly, and even though the way all these things were done was still new to us, Mike and I had both felt there was a real sense of desperation in the air. John Fulshaw, our link worker from the fostering agency we worked for, had been clear: this was not something we should undertake lightly. How little did we understand then just how true his words would be.

We'd been assigned John as our link worker when we'd first applied to be foster carers and we'd struck up a good relationship with him right away. By now we also felt we knew him quite well, so if John was anxious it naturally made me anxious too. Not that we weren't anticipating challenges. What Mike and I had signed up for wasn't mainstream fostering. It was an intense kind of fostering, intended to be short term in nature, which involved a new and complex programme of behaviour management. It had been trialled and was proving very successful in America, and had recently started to be funded by a number of councils in the UK. It was geared to the sort of kids who were considered unfosterable – the ones who had already been through the system and for whom the only other realistic future option was moving permanently into residential care. And not just ordinary residential care either – they'd

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usually already tried that – but, tragically, in secure units, many of these kids having already offended.

‘The problem,’ John had told me, during our first chat about Justin, ‘is that we know so little about him and his past. And what we do know doesn’t make for great reading, either. He’s been in the care system since he was five and has already been through twenty failed placements. He’s been through a number of foster families and children’s homes, and now it’s pretty much last chance saloon time. So what I’d like to do is to come round and discuss him with you both personally. Tomorrow, if it’s not too short notice.’

As a family, we’d talked about that phone call all evening, trying to read anything and everything into John’s few scraps of information about the child he wanted us to take on. What could the boy have done to end up having had twenty failed placements in just six short years? It seemed unfathomable. Just how damaged and unfosterable could he be? But since we knew almost nothing, it was pointless to speculate. We’d know all that soon enough, wouldn’t we?

Not that, come morning, there was much more to know. John had arrived and, as soon as I’d made us all coffee, he got straight down to the business of telling us.

‘It was a neighbour who alerted social services initially,’ he explained. ‘He’d been to their house several times, it seems, begging for food.’

We remained silent, while John sat and read from his notes. ‘Family Support followed it up, by all accounts, but

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it seems the mother managed to convince them that she was coping okay – that she had just been through a bad patch at the time. Justin himself, it seems, corroborated this – certainly managing to convince them that the right course of action was to let things ride for a while. And then two months later, emergency services were called out to the family home by a neighbour. Seemed he'd been playing with some matches and burned the house down. Apparently the mother had left him and his two younger brothers –'

'Younger brothers? How old were they?' I asked him.

John checked his notes again. 'Let me see ... two and three when it happened. And they'd all apparently been left alone in the house while she went off to visit a boyfriend. Seems the family dog died in the fire as well.'

Mike and I exchanged glances, but neither of us spoke. We could both see there was more for him to tell us.

John glanced at us both, then continued. 'It was after that that the mother agreed to have him taken into care. Under a voluntary care order – seems no fight was put up there about holding on to him; she was happy to let him go and accept a support package for the younger two – and he was placed in a children's home in Scotland, with contact twice monthly agreed. But it broke down after a year. It seems the people at the home felt they could do nothing for him. He was apparently' – he lowered his eyes to check on the exact wording – 'deemed angry, aggressive, something of a bully, and unable to make and keep friends. They felt he needed to be placed in a family situation for him to make any sort of progress.'

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He leaned back in his chair then, while we took things in. The language used could have been describing an older child, certainly – an angry teenager, most definitely – but a five-year-old child? That seemed shocking to me. He was still just a baby.

‘But he didn’t,’ I said finally.

John shook his head. ‘No, sadly, he didn’t. Because of his behaviour, he’s been nowhere for more than a few months – no more than a few weeks, in some cases – since then. He’s physically attacked several of his previous carers and has simply worn the rest of them out. So there we are,’ he said, closing his file and straightening the papers within it. ‘Twenty placements and we’re all out of options.’ He looked at both of us in turn now. ‘So. What do you think?’

And now here I was, just a few days before Christmas, and this child, this ‘unfosterable’ eleven-year-old child who’d burned down his home at the tender age of just five, was about to become our responsibility.

I walked down the stairs just as I could see a shadow approaching in the glass of the front door. I noticed how smoothly my hand slid down the banister, and smiled. I’d been cleaning and polishing like a mad woman all morning, flicking my duster manically here, there and everywhere, and moving all sorts of stuff around the place. Mike, bless him, had been getting on my nerves since we’d got up, assuming, with his man-wisdom, that since I was obviously so stressed, that he’d be doing me a favour by anticipating

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my every next move, and being one step behind me at all times.

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ I’d snapped at him, not half an hour earlier. ‘How can I get anything done in this place with you on my tail all the time?’

He’d shot off then, probably grateful to get out from under my feet. But he’d been right. I was so nervous that I actually felt physically sick. I’d never been so nervous about a new job, ever. Probably because this was going to *be* like no other new job. Because it wasn’t just a job, it was a whole lifestyle. This was not nine till five, this was twenty-four-seven. Gone would be our cosy evenings in, cuddled on the sofa, just me and Mike together, and gone would be the lazy weekends we’d begun to start enjoying since Riley had moved out and Kieron had turned nineteen. There was no turning back, though. I’d said yes. I was committed. *He’s only eleven*, I kept telling myself sternly. *He’s been through some bad times*. It was just the lack of knowing *what* that was so worrying.

I reached the bottom of the staircase just as Mike reached the door. I took a deep breath. This was it, then.

‘Hi Justin!’ I said brightly as the door opened to reveal him, accompanied by Harrison Green, Justin’s social worker, who’d brought him along for our initial meeting the previous Tuesday. I hadn’t been sure about Harrison when I first met him; he seemed a scruffy sort of character to be a social worker, to my mind. In his mid-fifties, he had a mop of unruly, greying hair that looked like it hadn’t seen a comb in a long while, and a generally unkempt air about

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him. But perhaps that was what long-term social work could do to you. I'd got little sense of what Justin himself was like on that occasion, other than that he was surly, a little awkward around us and a little lacking in all the normal social graces. Offered a biscuit, for example, and he'd immediately pounced on the plate, taking as many in one hand as he could get his fingers round, and immediately stashing half in his trouser pockets. But his lack of etiquette was hardly surprising given his situation, was it? So I wasn't concerned about such small, trifling details. Not at all. Those sorts of things could all be learned. It was the deeper stuff, the psychological damage, that most concerned me. Could the manifestations of that damage be *unlearned*? That was what was key.

One thing that had happened was that we'd been given more background to chew over. While Mike had been showing Justin around our home that day, Harrison had taken the opportunity to fill me in on more of the details of his own.

'The truth is that he's attacked a number of his carers,' he'd told me gravely. 'With both fists and with kitchen knives, apparently.' He'd paused then. 'He's also threatened to take his life on a number of occasions, and did once actually try to hang himself. From some goalposts on the school playing fields.'

I'd listened in shock, mentally storing everything up so I could recount it all back to Mike later. It was then, too, that Harrison had passed on the news that Justin seemed to have a particular aversion to women with black hair. But

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he'd also been positive about the potential for his future progress. Justin's current situation had been as much to do with the carers as him, it seemed. According to Harrison, at any rate, they were too inexperienced to deal with Justin's refusal to accept boundaries. And boundaries were what he needed more than anything.

I'd not been convinced, at the time, that Harrison had really thought we'd be any better. He had a world-weary air about him that seemed to suggest otherwise. John's words about last-chance saloon came flooding back. Were Mike and I considered to be Justin's? Might our first placement be already doomed to failure?

I tried to dismiss the idea, telling myself I was being silly. We *were* last-chance-saloon fosterers – that was the whole point of the programme we were there to implement. But looking at Harrison now I sensed little had changed. That Harrison wasn't holding out a lot of hope, deep down. Just needed somewhere to place the child, and fast.

'Come on in,' Mike said warmly, standing aside to let them all enter. Justin did so with a fair degree of confidence compared with his last visit, I noticed, pulling Harrison along behind him into the living room.

'Is that all he's got?' I asked Harrison, following them, and gesturing to Justin's single battered suitcase. Yes it was big, but it still seemed very little in the scheme of things. Could it really contain all he had in the whole world?

'Um ... er, yes,' Harrison replied, looking slightly flustered by my question. He seemed preoccupied with an agenda of his own.