

Counterfeit Son

Elaine Marie Alphin

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
Boston New York

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Summary: When serial killer Hank Miller is killed in a shoot-out with police, his abused son, Cameron, adopts the identity of one of his father's victims in order to find a better life.

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This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, and events portrayed in this book are the product of the authors imagination. Any resemblance to any event or actual person, living or dead, is unintended.

*For Art,
who has a rare staying power*

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Prologue

He chose the Lacey family at first because of the sailboats. For as long as he could remember he'd dreamed of sailing. He imagined it would feel like flying, the wind rushing past his face and the waves scudding like clouds beneath him. And he thought he would feel safe—no people around, just him and the boat and the open water.

He knew about the sailboats because he'd seen them in the newspaper photographs. He had read everything about the boys, all the clipped articles on yellowing newsprint, all the magazine features on slick paper so limp it had lost its gloss. Reading about someone else's life was almost as good as dreaming about sailing.

He couldn't remember exactly when he had discovered the file cabinet in the corner of the small cellar storage room. Pop always locked him in the cellar while it happened. He hated the cellar—he hated the blows and the cries from upstairs, muffled only slightly by the locked door and the flooring, and he hated the smell. Pop kept spreading quicklime and fresh earth over the dirt floor, but the smell never went away completely. You could hardly smell anything upstairs, but when he was shut down in the cellar the thick, sickly sweet odor got inside his nose and he couldn't get rid of it. If he breathed through his mouth, he tasted it—a heavy taste like a rabbit a dog had torn apart and left half-buried in rotting leaves.

He remembered that he had been trying to blot out the smell when he first stumbled onto the file cabinet. If he closed himself in that little side room, the odor wasn't as bad. He had shut the door and pulled a dangling chain, and a single lightbulb flicked on overhead. There were cardboard boxes piled in the room, sodden from the damp, and he had seen the gleam of metal halfhidden behind them. The file cabinet was up on two-by-fours, and if he slipped around the shadowy side of the boxes he could open the drawers easily. The clippings were inside.

He wasn't the greatest reader. He couldn't remember much about starting school, but he knew he'd been kept back. One of the boys had tried to help him with his reading once, and he'd gotten better, but he didn't like to think about that. That boy was in the cellar now, with the others, and he didn't have to think about him anymore. He could think about sailing instead.

In school his classmates were always younger, and the teachers never bothered about him. He stayed quiet and kept to himself and didn't learn much, but Pop said that didn't matter. What mattered was not getting noticed. Other kids were problems and took all the teachers' attention. Grown-ups didn't waste any efforts on a kid who kept his mouth shut and stayed out of trouble and passed, even with Cs. So when he first looked through the files he had trouble reading the articles. He recognized some of the pictures, though, from the boys he remembered, and he started with the articles in those files, sounding out the letters until the words made sense.

His reading improved, and over the years he read every article in the file cabinet. Some he read over and over. He knew each boy's family as if it were his own, and he chose the Laceys because of the sailboats. He also chose them because the boy's looks and age were close to his own, and because they had moved into their house only six months before their son disappeared. That would help explain his not knowing his way around.

And he also chose the Laceys, in the end, because of their money.

1. Return from the Dead

"What?" The officer ran a hand through his uncombed hair and bent down across the high counter in the Buckeye police station lobby. "Say that again."

Cameron Miller swallowed and forced himself not to back away. If he couldn't make himself go through with it now, he might as well give the whole thing up.

"I'm Neil Lacey," he whispered. "I got away. I need help."

People rushed past the policeman, phones rang, and from the look of his rumpled uniform and his bristling jowls, the officer staring at him must have been up for a couple of nights straight. This was the only police station in Buckeye, and Cameron thought they'd probably been taking the heat on Harlan Miller's shooting.

"Kid says he's Neil Lacey," he heard the officer at the counter tell another officer. Cameron swallowed again and made himself look steadily at the two of them. It wasn't easy, after years of ducking his head so no one could look him in the eye.

"But—" The second officer pressed his lips together and didn't finish.

"I know." The rumpled officer looked perplexed. "What do we do with him?"

The second officer shrugged. "I'll take him into B. You call Simmons." He beckoned. "Come on, uh, Neil."

Cameron followed the officer down the hall, his knees weak and trembling. *Don't tell the cops anything, Pop had told him the time police officers came to question them about Cougar. If you do, they'll see just how bad you are. They'll take you away and lock you up, and you'll find out what punishment really is.* He'd known he was bad, so he'd done what Pop said. He'd acted the part, like he did at school, and the cops had gone away. So had Cougar.

Now, after trying so hard to obey Pop's rules for as long as he could remember, Cameron had broken this rule, blown it to bits, and he was terrified of the consequences. But what other choice did he have?

The officer led him into a room with a metal table and four folding chairs. "Sit down, uh, Neil. Look, can I get you anything? A Coke, maybe? Or a sandwich?"

Cameron wondered what he should do. What would ring true? "Could I have a Coke, please?" he asked. Then, on an impulse, he added, "When can my parents get here? I really want my dad."

The officer twisted his gold wedding ring. "I don't know—I'm sure they'll be here soon. I'll get you that Coke." And he fled the room.

The walls were blank except for a chalky gray-green coating of paint. The room didn't have any windows, just like the cellar storage room. There weren't any boxes or file cabinets, but Cameron didn't need to look in the files. He had learned everything they could teach him.

He looked at the door. It was probably locked, but he was used to being locked into rooms, and ~~this one was okay. There was plenty of light, and it smelled of a mixture of fresh pine cleaner and stale cigarette smoke—safe smells.~~ And, in spite of the fear, he didn't hurt as much as he usually did. His left arm and side still ached from the last beating, but the worst of the pain had worn off. Pop had been excited about looking for a boy again, after so long, and had left him in the house alone for a few nights before ... before the shooting. Cameron felt a strange ache in his chest, and he wished he could run home and find Pop waiting for him. He'd confess what he'd done and take his punishment gladly, if only Pop could still be there to look after him. Now he had to look after himself, and he didn't know if he was strong enough.

Cameron laid both hands flat on the tabletop and stared straight ahead. He'd had plenty of practice in shutting out his surroundings and his fears. In his mind, he sailed across deep blue water shimmering with flecks of gold. The wind blew fresh against his cheeks, spattering his eyelashes with a fine spray.

The door banged open and he jumped. There were three men now: the officer, who placed a can of Coke on the table, and two men in suits.

"Here's your Coke, son," the officer said. "This is Detective Simmons and Special Investigator Colbert."

Cameron stared at the two men and wrapped his hands around the cold can. "Are my parents coming?" he asked.

The men looked at each other. "In a little while," Detective Simmons said, sitting down facing him. "Now, Neil—why don't you tell us what happened? You told Officer Norton you got away. How did you do that?"

He placed a small black tape recorder on the table.

Cameron licked his lips and eyed the tape recorder, listening to its soft hum. "He put me down in the cellar—" he started.

"He—who?" the detective asked quickly.

"Hank Miller. He always put me down in the cellar." The words came, painful but convincing, because they were the truth. "He'd lock the cellar door until it was over." Cameron swallowed some of his Coke and stared at the recorder. Knowing what to say was easy—saying the words aloud was hard. *They'll know*, he heard Pop's voice. *They'll know how bad you are.* His stomach cramped from the cold drink.

He made himself go on. "He hadn't had anybody in a while, so I hadn't been down there in a long time. But then he brought home Josh." He saw the two men in suits look quickly at each other.

"That night, he locked me in the cellar. I tried to warn Josh." Cameron felt tears sting his eyes, surprising himself. "I told him to do what"—he caught himself before he said *Pop*. Neil wouldn't think of Hank Miller as Pop. He went on, hoping they hadn't noticed—"Hank said, but he didn't listen. None of them listened." He gripped the can tightly to stop the words. He didn't want to talk about the other

boys.

"When Hank was finished he unlocked the door. He was real nervous, though, and angry. He made me help him dig another hole in the cellar floor—it's all packed dirt down there, hard to dig deep, but just dirt."

Words—how could they show these men in their pressed suits what it was like to stand on the shovel, using your weight to make it bite deep, then pull back on it with all your strength to lever the dirt out, all the while panting with the effort and choking on that smell?

He didn't try. "It was morning by the time we finished, and I asked him if I should go to school. He said yes, he didn't want to attract any notice by messing up the routine. He was real big on routine. But I thought I'd get in trouble because I was so tired, and anyway, it was the last week of school so I didn't think the teacher would tell him I'd cut. So I left like I was going to school, but then I went in the woods behind the house and I hid there to go to sleep."

The special investigator hadn't said anything yet, but Detective Simmons nodded. Cameron thought the cops were probably almost as familiar with that patch of eastern Tennessee woods as he was. When they'd closed in on the house, some of the officers had come through the trees.

"I woke up when I heard people moving in the woods," he went on. "I got my book bag and stayed out of sight, and I heard them come up to the house. I heard talking and then shouting. I don't know what happened next, but then I heard gunfire and more shouts." He knew what had happened, all right, but he didn't think Neil would have cared enough about Hank Miller to figure it out. *Pop must have fought back*, Cameron thought. He knew Pop had a gun, though he'd never shot any of the boys, of course. *He must have shot at the police, and they shot back.*

Cameron turned the can around in his hands and stared at the shiny red metal. Then the distorted reflection of his face in the slick redness made him feel sick, and he put it down. "So I ran away."

"Why did you run?" the detective asked him.

Cameron shrugged. "I was scared. I was afraid Hank was in trouble because of Josh, or the other. I was afraid I'd get in trouble, too."

The two men glanced at each other again. "What did you do then?"

"I hid out that night. Then, in the morning, I went back to see if things were okay. But there were cops all over the place, and those yellow streamer things circling the house. I didn't know what to do, so I listened for a while." He swallowed, remembering how his brief surge of relief had quickly been replaced by fear, and by a loneliness so intense it had shocked him. "That's when I heard Hank was dead."

"So you came here," Detective Simmons said, leaning back in his chair.

Cameron shook his head. "Not right away. I was scared. I thought about it for a while first. I mean—I'm fourteen. I thought maybe I could get home to Freeport on my own, but I was afraid to try."

The detective stared hard at him, his eyes narrowed. *He doesn't think much of me*, Cameron realized, flushing helplessly. *He thinks I'm a major wimp. Well, I guess I am.*

After a few moments Detective Simmons nodded, and the rumpled officer brought in another man, a young officer in a crisp uniform. This man looked like he'd gotten some sleep, not like the others. He must not have been in on the raid.

"Do you recognize this man?" the detective asked.

Cameron stared harder at the officer. He did look familiar. ... Then Cameron started. "I—yes, I do."

"When did you see him before?"

"He—he came to the house," he stuttered, remembering the young officer and his questions about Cougar, who had once been Pop's friend. Cameron felt as though he were going to throw up the Coke he'd drunk. "He asked me questions."

"Why didn't you tell the officer who you were then?" the detective asked, his voice hard. "Why did you say you were Hank Miller's son, Cameron?"

"He—Hank always said to say that—he told everybody I was his son—he said not to say anything to the cops—he told me they'd lock me up and punish me—he said he'd kill me—"

"Why did he keep you alive?" Detective Simmons demanded. "He killed over twenty boys—why were you special?"

"Ease up," Investigator Colbert said, but no one paid any attention to him.

"Because I did what he said," Cameron whispered. He wanted to tell them he'd bought the right to stay alive, bought it with nights of white-hot pain and days of aspirin-choked silence. He'd paid the price because he'd dreamed that someday Pop would finally tell him he was good, and the nightmare would stop. But he couldn't say that to these men. They'd see how bad he was and know he was lying, and he'd never get his chance to sail free.

The angry face swam in front of his eyes. "Are you Cameron Miller?" Detective Simmons asked.

Cameron pushed his chair back from the table and stood up unsteadily. The room spun around him.

"I'm Neil Lacey," he said, through lips that felt numb and swollen, as though Pop's fist had smashed his mouth. He slid into blackness as the table edge slipped away from his fingers and the floor rushed up to meet him.

2. Positive I.D.

In the dream, he lay on a hard bed in a darkened room. *You've been bad*, the man told him. *Now be good, and everything will be all right.* The man lay down beside him and drew a single sheet over the two of them. *Don't cry*, the man said. *Don't make a sound.*

He lay on his side and felt the man pressing close to his back, strangely comforting but also threatening. He willed himself not to shudder as the man reached one arm around to hold him and turned him face down on the mattress.

Don't cry, the man repeated, his voice low and his breath coming in hot jabs against his ear. *Don't struggle. Be good.* And he lay still, wide-eyed in the dark, the wrinkled sheet dry beneath his face, his teeth clenched, and he let the man do what he wanted.

Cameron made himself wake up when he felt the damp pillow under his cheek. Pop would beat him, he thought wildly, or worse—the cellar! He never cried—

Then he remembered that Pop was dead. Cameron lay there rigidly in the strange bed, his eyes closed, the damp pillowcase pressed against his face. The empty space inside him that Pop had left seemed to swell like a balloon, pressing against his lungs until he could barely breathe. He wished he could slip back into the familiar dream, and he wished he could forget it forever. Suddenly he realized he could hear voices, and he strained against the ache in his chest to make out what they were saying.

"I think we'd better call his parents right away."

"Are you sure they *are* his parents?" Cameron recognized the hard voice. That was Detective Simmons.

"Everything he said rang true," the first voice said.

"And the scarring and other physical damage is consistent with his having endured six years with Miller," a different voice added. "He's got eleven different bones that were broken and left to heal badly. He's suffering from—"

"Why only six years?" Simmons interrupted. "Why not his whole life? He said he was Cameron Miller before. Maybe he *is* Miller's son."

"Then why say he's Neil Lacey?" the first voice asked.

Someone, probably Detective Simmons, snorted. "Obviously he wants a fancy home, well-off parents. Look, Colbert, you're new to this business. I've seen too many hysterical parents and too many unhappy endings. If this were a fairy tale the kid would be Neil Lacey, but this is real life."

There was a heavy thud, as though a meaty fist had slammed into a wall or something. "These serial killers make me sick!" Simmons went on, his voice thick with disgust. "Miller was a monster who tortured kids, and that boy went along with it. Now he doesn't want to be charged with being an accessory."

The detective's harsh voice seemed to pulse with a controlled fury. Cameron shuddered inside. ~~The tone sounded like Pop's when he was explaining why he was about to use the belt.~~ "Look, Colbert we're talking about a crime here. What Miller did—that had nothing to do with sex or love. We're talking kids—the youngest was just seven. It's not love at that age—it's not a gay man who's trying to find someone to love—it's a man who hates and despises and uses someone who's weaker than he is! That's why they call it abuse—it's about being in control, it's sadistic violence, it's torture, and it's criminal! And this kid was part of it. Even if he gets off juvenile detention, he'll be stuck in the child welfare system and given potluck with foster parents."

Cameron winced and forced himself to lie motionless. The sheets were smooth and smelled like the fresh air in the woods behind Pop's house. He couldn't remember sleeping on smooth, cool sheets like these.

"Whoever he is, he's a victim, not a criminal," the first voice, Colbert's, said mildly.

"He stood by and let Miller kill over twenty kids!" Detective Simmons said, his voice barely below a shout. "Don't tell me he didn't know what was going on—he probably even participated in the torture! He could have told someone, a teacher at school, a cop—but he didn't."

The hate in Simmons's voice swept over Cameron. The aching emptiness in his chest was dwarfed by the weight of his guilt over the boys, and that weight seemed to press him into the clean hospital sheets. It was no different from Pop's weight crushing him into the sagging mattress back home. He wanted to scream out, *It was Pop who hurt them, not me! I was in the cellar—I never hurt one of them.*

But Cameron knew he was guilty anyway. He couldn't have told anyone, not told and survived, but he should have tried harder to make the boys be good. If they had only listened to him ... He dimly remembered one boy who had tried to do what he said. The boy had been obedient and let Pop do what he wanted, and he'd stayed with them for more than three weeks. Cameron had thought he'd have a brother, and things might not be so hard. But then the boy cracked. He began screaming and throwing things, and Pop shoved Cameron into the cellar, where he squeezed himself into the far corner of the little room and covered his ears and still felt deafened by the boy's cries. How could he ever explain that to Detective Simmons?

"He was afraid," Colbert was saying. "He was tortured, himself, from the day Miller kidnapped him. Those scars—"

"Those scars are something else," Simmons said. "They date back six years, right, Dr. Oshida? Well, why not seven? Can you positively say that those early scars couldn't date back seven years, to before Neil Lacey disappeared?"

"Of course not," said the other voice. So he must be a doctor. "There's no way to be sure."

"I'm sorry, Simmons, but you've got nothing to prove he's Cameron Miller," Colbert said. "Personally, I think he's Neil Lacey. He looks exactly like the latest computer-enhanced projection of what the Lacey boy should look like at this age."

Cameron nearly sighed aloud in relief. He'd thought from the photographs in the magazines and

newspapers that he was a good match, and now he was sure. How could they argue with a photograph

"Brown hair, hazel eyes, short, and skinny?" the detective scoffed. "Couldn't be more ordinary. Am I right, Dr. Oshida?"

"Ordinary, yes," the doctor said. "But his facial features are consistent with the Lacey features."

"Look," Colbert said urgently, "if we hold him and don't inform his parents, his father could slap us with a lawsuit so quickly—"

"To help Cameron Miller?"

"To make us release Neil Lacey."

"I say we don't trust those happily-ever-after maybes you'd like to believe in," Simmons insisted. "Wait for positive identification."

Cameron lay rigid. How could they identify him positively?

"If we wait," Colbert said coldly, "and the hospital prints match, his father is going to break you to a beat. And I'm not going with you."

"Fine! Okay! Call them," Simmons told him. "Tell them their son is back from the dead. They'll believe it because they'll *want* to believe it. Then when the prints come back and say he's not their boy, you take the rap. Because then the father sure as hell *is* going to sue!"

There was a pause, and Cameron's thoughts raced. He hadn't figured on prints. Why would anybody print a little kid?

"How long will it take to hear from the hospital?" Colbert asked.

"It will be quicker if we inform the parents," the doctor said. "I explained that from the beginning. You can't very well send a routine inquiry to every hospital in Knoxville asking if Neil Lacey was born there and would they fax his toeprints to us. If the mother tells us what hospital he was born in, and authorizes the inquiry, we can have the data within twenty-four hours."

"This is a serial killer investigation—" Simmons started.

"This is a child," the doctor said. "Whoever he is, he's not your serial killer. You've already taken care of Hank Miller."

The voices were silent for a few heartbeats. Then Colbert said, "I'm going to call his father."

There was a loud crash, as though a door had been jerked open violently and slammed against a wall. "You do what you want," Simmons said, and his footsteps faded into the distance.

"Is he awake?" Colbert asked after a moment.

"I doubt it," the doctor said. "I gave him a sedative, and he should still be out. Who do you think

he is?"

"I think he's Neil Lacey," the special investigator said flatly. "He's got to be. How in the world could he get away with walking into a strange family and pretending to be their long-lost son? He'd be caught the first time they expected him to know something and he drew a blank."

"Not necessarily," the doctor said. "Complete or partial amnesia is perfectly consistent with the sort of trauma this boy has lived with. Considering his age at his abduction, he may well have only the vaguest memories of his life before Hank Miller took him. His family isn't going to get back the eight-year-old they lost, you know."

Amnesia, Cameron thought, feeling strangely relieved. That would explain a lot—not only how he could deal with the Laceys, but a lot about himself, too. He'd never had a very good memory. Other kids at school remembered all sorts of weird things—birthday parties when they were four or five, how they fell off their two-wheeler learning to ride it without training wheels, the first time they camped out or went fishing.

Of course, he'd never done any of those things, or at least he didn't think he had. Cameron definitely didn't have any memories of that sort of specific moment in his life, and that bothered him sometimes. He especially didn't like the fact that he couldn't remember his mother. But the doctor said people could tell what Pop had done to him by the marks on his body. And he said that the beatings, and the other things, could cause amnesia. Maybe it was because of Pop that Cameron couldn't remember things like other kids could.

"You mean," Colbert said slowly, "all he has to do is say he can't remember anything he used to know?"

"Well, I'm sure he'll find memories resurfacing," the doctor said. "His family will certainly try to stimulate his memory. What I'm saying is that if someone wanted to pretend to be Neil Lacey, and if he had enough nerve, he could probably pull it off."

"*Could* he be Cameron Miller?" the special investigator asked.

"Right now he could be anybody," the doctor said. "But not for long. As soon as we look at those toeprints from the hospital we'll know for sure. If you have a gut feeling, I'd advise calling the parents now."

The door opened again, and closed. Cameron listened to the silence for a while, then cautiously opened his eyes. He was lying on a hospital bed with metal railings on the side. They didn't make him feel caged. The railings made him feel curiously safe.

There was a second bed in the room. A boy lay on it with tubes hooked up to his arms and his nose. He seemed to be unconscious.

They had thought Cameron was sleeping, too. He was glad of that. But what could he do about these toeprints? He hadn't realized anybody would take prints of a kid. What would they do with him after they compared the prints? Lock him up, like Simmons had threatened? *Punish you*, Pop's words whispered in his memory, *because you've been so bad*.

Cameron forced himself to lie quietly, something he was good at. Maybe they had known he was awake. ~~Maybe they were trying to bluff. Maybe they didn't know who he was, and they knew they couldn't find out, so they were trying to scare him into falling apart.~~ But if he just stuck to his story he'd be all right.

At least they were going to call Neil's parents. The cops had said his father was a lawyer, and Cameron remembered that from the newspaper articles. Detective Simmons said the parents would want to believe in him. Once the Laceys got there, they'd protect him. He felt a wrench of guilt at the lie he was handing them. Could he really use the Laceys like this after they'd lost their own boy?

Then he stopped feeling sorry for them. Where had all the grown-ups been who should have helped him when Pop hurt him? He couldn't tell them—the teachers and coaches—but they must have seen the bruises even though he tried to hide them. The grown-ups should have known—they should have helped him. And what about the parents who should have kept their sons safe, and instead let Hank Miller take them? Cameron didn't owe adults anything. This was his chance, and he was going to take it.

Cameron closed his eyes again. The sheets were so smooth and comforting, tucked around him. He rolled over, away from the damp patch on his pillow. *It's okay to cry*, he told himself, *but you don't have to lie in it.*

3. Pet Names

New voices woke him. Wary, he lay motionless again, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Neil?"

It was a woman's voice, tense, afraid, but hopeful, too. Cameron felt the world spin crazily around him, as though the bed rested on a giant Tilt-a-Whirl, like the ride at the school carnival. What had happened with the prints?

"Son?" This voice was cautious. It was the voice of a man who might ask questions and listen to the answers before administering punishment.

"I gave him a sedative," the doctor told them, "but it should have worn off by now. Come on, Neil, wake up."

Cameron felt a hand fall unexpectedly on his shoulder, and he jerked away, his eyes flying open.

The doctor stepped back, looking alarmed. Then he said, "I'm Dr. Oshida, Neil. Do you know who these people are?"

Cameron blinked his eyes, shivering. The sheet had fallen away, and he was wearing some twisted wraparound garment that barely covered him. He saw Investigator Colbert standing behind the doctor and pulled the sheet up. Then he looked at the two people standing beside the bed, and he caught his breath.

The woman had long golden hair swept back neatly into a knot at the nape of her neck. She had deep brown eyes, and she was trying to smile at him, although her lower lip was trembling and her eyes were wide and glittering with unshed tears. But the man—he had Cameron's own long nose, and his too-big ears. And he had the same hazel eyes. Cameron couldn't believe it.

"Dad?" he tried to say, and the word came out a croak. *Not "Pop,"* he thought, *not "Pop" ever again.*

"Yes," the man said, blinking his eyes rapidly. "Neil—oh, Neil. We'd nearly—" He broke off abruptly.

Cameron turned to the woman. She was crying now, silently, tears slipping down her cheeks as she tried to smile.

"Mom?"

"Baby—" And suddenly her arms were around him, enfolding him, smothering him. He went rigid with shock, his brain screaming at the memory of strong arms crushing him against another body. But this embrace was different—he shut his mind to the other vision and leaned against her, breathing the soft flower scent of her hair.

"When can we take him home, Dr. Oshida?" the man asked. "Tonight?"

"No," Dr. Oshida said firmly. "I need to complete some tests before we can release him, Mr. Lacey, and some of the labs aren't open over the weekend. You or your wife will be welcome to stay with him, of course, but I can't let him go home before sometime on Monday, at the earliest."

"I'll stay," the woman was saying. "I can stay through the rest of the weekend, and I'll call the museum and tell them I won't be in the first part of the week. Glenn can take over for a few days—he always wanted the curator job, anyway."

Cameron wondered who would stay with Neil's brother and sister. Their father? Their mother didn't seem worried about them. He supposed she was just so relieved to get Neil back, she wasn't thinking about the kids who hadn't disappeared.

"What tests?" Mr. Lacey asked, his voice expressionless.

Dr. Oshida lowered his voice. "We've taken complete X rays, but we also need to run a CAT scan and a battery of psychological tests—"

"Oh, but—" The woman released Cameron and sat on the side of his bed, one arm around his shoulders. He felt confused and frightened. Could those tests prove that he wasn't Neil?

"No." The man's voice was flat.

"But, Mr. Lacey—" the doctor began.

Investigator Colbert spoke for the first time. "This is part of an official investigation, Mr. Lacey"

"I understand that. Dr. Oshida may run any tests the police and your task force require to check Neil's physical condition," the man said. "But his family will be the judge of what psychological examinations he needs."

The doctor and the investigator glanced at each other. Then Dr. Oshida said, "Mr. Lacey, I explained that this trauma may have caused amnesia and other psychological problems—"

"I understand," the man said. "I appreciate your concern, Dr. Oshida. But Neil is coming home with us as soon as the last physical tests are complete. We will arrange for private counseling as soon as he has settled in, and it will be with a therapist who is not answerable to the police. As long as Neil stays in the hospital, my wife or I will remain with him at all times, and if you attempt to order any unnecessary examinations or cause any delays, I will apply for a habeas corpus to immediately remove my son from this facility. Do we understand each other?"

Investigator Colbert nodded. "Perfectly."

Dr. Oshida said stiffly, "We will require the dental records to confirm your identification."

"Of course. We'll have the children's dentist fax them to you Monday morning. Feel free to give Neil a full dental examination before he leaves so you can be sure of the match."

Cameron wondered what had happened to the toeprints, whatever they were, but the man—his *father*, he reminded himself—was staring at him. "Personally, I'm already convinced," he told the

doctor.

Dr. Oshida looked back and forth from him to the man. "Yes," he said, smiling gently. "I can understand why. It's too bad we couldn't have the maternity ward toeprints to make a positive identification immediately, but as he was born at home—"

"We explained that," the woman—*Mother*—said sharply. "I believe in natural childbirth unless there's something wrong. Neil's birth was perfect."

Dr. Oshida bowed his head. "You were very fortunate, Mrs. Lacey."

"Gentlemen," the man said, "could we have a few minutes alone with our son?"

"Of course," Dr. Oshida said, and he left the room with a polite smile. The investigator followed him, but Cameron saw that he left the door slightly ajar. He was listening from the hallway.

Investigator Colbert didn't believe him, after all. Probably Detective Simmons was there, too, waiting for him to make a mistake.

Cameron looked up at Neil's parents. "I'm sorry," he said quickly, confessing before the accusations could start.

"Neil—" his mother started.

"I'm sorry I went off," he said. "I shouldn't have gone to the video arcade. And I shouldn't have gone with him. I'm sorry."

His father moved quickly toward him, and Cameron barely prevented himself from shuddering when the man reached out and smoothed his hair, then hugged him roughly. But the touch was nothing like Pop's embrace, and Cameron felt his shoulders relax.

"Oh, Neil, we'd nearly given up," his father was saying, his voice muffled because his mouth was pressed against his hair. Cameron could feel the man's breath blowing jerkily down his neck, and it made him tense up again. "We were afraid you were gone forever," his father said hoarsely.

When he was released, Cameron looked up at them. Why weren't they reminding him how bad he'd been? They were glad to see him now, but punishment was sure to come later. He thought he could take it, but there were so many pitfalls—he still didn't understand exactly about those toeprints and what about dental records? What would they show? And nobody had said anything yet about the brother and sister he'd read about in the articles—how would they take Neil's return? He was so tired and the acting had only begun. He'd been good at acting like a normal kid at school, but he didn't have to act with Pop, just obey. Would he be able to sustain a role all the time?

The tears were still sliding down the woman's cheeks. His *mother*, he told himself again—he had to start thinking of her as his mother. He wondered what had happened to the mother he couldn't remember. Had she left because he was too bad, and the amnesia had wiped the memory out? Or maybe she had been bad herself and Pop had punished her, or even killed her. Was she buried with the boys?

Cameron had blanked out so much—deliberate blanks, so he wouldn't make a stupid mistake in school and say something he shouldn't, but also blanks that were an escape. When he was with Pop he'd blank out what was happening, and think of sailing instead. And afterward he'd blank out what Pop had done to him, except for the pain. He couldn't completely escape that, though the bottles of aspirin helped. But how could he have blanked out his mother?

He wondered what it would be like to have a mother now. Mrs. Lacey was still weeping silently, and Cameron wanted to tell her not to cry. What would Neil have said to his mother? Cameron searched his memory of the articles about Neil, the interviews with his parents. He had a sudden image of Neil's mother sitting in a sunlit room, holding a worn picture book about Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Cameron remembered the story Had Pop told it to him? Probably one of the boys had. There were three bears and a strange golden-haired girl who snuck into their house and took their things, but the little bear caught her in the end. Cameron thought he remembered a newspaper photograph of Mrs. Lacey, because he was sure the caption said that she was pleading for Baby Bear come home to Mama Bear.

"Don't cry, Mama Bear," he whispered, hoping the words would comfort her.

The effect was electric. Her eyes widened, and her lips parted. The tears disappeared. Cameron was terrified—why had he said that? Had Colbert and Simmons heard? Would they rush into the room and arrest him? How bad would the punishment be this time?

"Neil!" she cried, and threw her arms around him again. Over her shoulder, he saw the man—*Father* he reminded himself—staring at him in stunned delight.

"You remembered!" she was saying, rocking him in her arms. "You used to call me Mama Bear when you were a toddler and I'd get upset!"

Cameron closed his eyes and sagged against her in relief, letting her rock him. He couldn't believe how lucky he'd been to remember the picture in the clipping. Whatever the doctor's positive identification disclosed now, they would believe he was Neil.

Except, somehow, he hadn't expected the Laceys to be so nice. As the woman held him tightly, Cameron remembered Detective Simmons's accusations, and felt bitterly like Goldilocks, the interloper.

4. Tears

His mother stayed with him Saturday night, although he slept through most of it. Cameron woke in the night and saw her in the light from the hospital corridor. She sat propped awkwardly in an uncomfortable-looking hard chair, her head leaning back, her eyes closed. In her sleep she was still smiling. Both she and the man were beside him all day Sunday, through more tests and poking and prodding. They talked to him, telling him about the house, and about his brother and sister. His mother stayed through the night again, still talking, crying sometimes, and sometimes just smiling at him.

On Monday morning his father came back, this time carrying a small blue nylon duffel bag. He got more X rays taken of his teeth, and Cameron worried about this after what they'd said about dental charts. But the Laceys didn't seem concerned. They'd made up their minds about him.

Finally, one of the army of nurses took him back to the room where the other boy still lay unconscious. She pushed him in a wheelchair, as though he were too helpless to walk for himself, but Cameron didn't argue. He was exhausted from keeping his balance on the tightrope. His mother walked beside the chair, holding his right hand and still talking. Her voice was getting a little hoarse, but he liked the throaty sound of it.

"Diana and Stevie just can't wait to see you," she was saying. She had said this so often that he couldn't help wondering whether it was actually true. Perhaps they weren't as glad to get a big brother back as their parents were to get a first son. Probably Stevie was ticked off, after being the only boy for so long.

Cameron had read about the smaller children. Stevie probably wouldn't remember Neil too clearly, since he'd just turned three when Neil had been abducted. But Diana had been almost seven—old enough to know Neil pretty well. In the pictures she'd looked sad, and in one newspaper interview she'd said how much she missed her brother and wanted him to come home.

"Stevie started cleaning up his room as soon as that Investigator Colbert called to say you were safe," his mother went on.

Cameron felt sick to his stomach. Apparently Neil was supposed to share a room with Stevie. If the younger boy had had the room to himself all these years, he would probably be mad at having to start sharing it again. Not the best way to make friends with the kid.

And Cameron was nervous about sleeping in the same room with somebody. He was used to sleeping alone, except when Pop was there. He could remember waking suddenly in the dark to the sound of Pop's breathing, and knowing what was about to happen. Could he ever sleep with another person breathing so close to him? Also, he dreamed a lot. He'd had plenty of practice in keeping his dreams quiet, but what if the kid noticed anyway? He wished he could ask for a room alone, but he guessed instinctively that Neil's parents wanted to pretend everything was just the way it had been before. If Neil had shared a room with Stevie six years ago, then he would have to share one now.

His father looked up as they came into the hospital room. "I've got you all checked out, Neil," he said, and picked up the blue nylon bag and tossed it gently at him, grinning broadly. "Don't want to g

home in your designer gown, I guess."

Cameron smiled back and unzipped the bag. Inside he found new underwear, still in the plastic wrap, and white socks with the paper band still around them. There was a stiff new pair of jeans, and new Dallas Cowboys T-shirt. He looked at it a moment before remembering they were a football team. Had Neil been a big football fan? Pop mostly watched wrestling, and so Cameron stared at the TV with him, but he didn't like it much.

His mother went out while he dressed, fumbling a little with the new clothes, and with the effort of keeping his back turned away from his father without being obvious about it. The last thing in the bag was a pair of green-and-white running shoes, so new that fresh rubber and leather smells filled the bag. *Expensive, like the other stuff*, Cameron thought. He'd been right about the money. He wasn't greedy, but he still thought he'd be safer if the family had money.

He finished tying the laces and looked up. "Thanks," he said, meaning it. "Dad," he added quickly.

His father blinked his eyes rapidly. "Oh, Neil," he said huskily. "A few clothes—it should have been years of clothes—" He turned away, interrupting himself.

"Dad..." Cameron started.

"Neil—I've got to say this—you've got to know—" He broke off again and stood, leaning against the wall with his fists pressing against the clean white paint, the tendons stiff and knotted beneath the sleeves of his striped golf shirt. "That man—what he did to you—"

Cameron's hand clenched on the handle of the blue nylon bag as his stomach lurched. He'd been stupid to try to hide his back. Of course they knew—about the scars, and about the rest. The doctor had said he could see what had happened. For all Cameron knew, they could figure out from the bodies of the other boys what had happened to them, too. Pop always told him not to tell. *They llknow you've been bad*, Pop's memory reminded him. This man, his father now, was going to punish him, just as Pop had said.

"I'm so sorry—" his father was saying, his voice thin and strained. "I wish the police hadn't killed him. I'm so furious I want to take him in my own hands and kill him myself for what he did to you. Neil—" His father suddenly turned and gripped his arms, and Cameron was shocked to see tears running silently down his cheeks. He hadn't realized the man was crying. He couldn't hear it in his voice.

"Whatever he said to you, Neil, don't believe it. It wasn't your fault. He was an animal, Neil, and you survived, and I'm so proud of you, son."

Cameron stared into the hazel eyes that mirrored his own so uncannily and realized that this man wasn't blaming him. He wasn't going to punish him. Pop had lied.

Something cracked inside of him. His eyes blurred, and Cameron felt salty warmth on his cheeks and discovered that he was crying. He caught his breath, and then knew it was all right. If Neil's father was crying, it must be all right for Cameron to cry, too.

His father loosened his grip on his arms and pulled him close in a rough embrace. Cameron should have been frightened by being held so close, but all he could do was cry. He couldn't remember ever crying like this. He had even been afraid to cry down in the cellar, in case Pop came looking for him before he was finished with the other boy. He'd done that a few times. Cameron cried once in a while in a corner of the school yard, but he didn't dare cry much. He was afraid Pop would find out. *After those years of held-back tears, he thought. That's a lot to make up.*

"What's this?" It was his mother, and he could hear she was frightened. His father hugged him tightly, then released him and gave him a watery smile. "Just a man-to-man talk," he said, wiping his eyes without any sign of embarrassment.

Cameron ducked his own head and grabbed a corner of the sheet from his bed to scrub his own eyes with.

"Neil, are you all right?" his mother asked, still worried.

"Yeah," he said, surprised to hear how strong his voice was. "I'm fine, Mama Bear."

And she laughed at that, so he guessed she wasn't frightened anymore.

"Come on, then," she said. "We're going home."

He followed them down the hospital corridor, on foot for the first time instead of in a wheelchair. Double glass doors fell open in front of him with a gentle *whoosh* of air, and then he was outside, under a clear blue sky, hearing the rush of engines and spinning of tires.

"They let me pull the car around to here," his mother said, and Cameron followed them to a new Lincoln Town Car, sleek and dark blue. He was certain it couldn't be six years old, and he felt relieved at not having to recognize it.

His father held the passenger door open for him. "You sit in the front seat," he said, his voice light and full of happiness. "I'll get in the back and try to close my eyes while your mother drives."

"You'll do no such thing," she said, laughing. "You go ahead and drive, Jon."

"I'll sit in the middle," Cameron suddenly volunteered. "You can drive, Dad. And Mom, you can sit on the other side."

His father cocked his head to one side. "It'll be crowded."

Cameron smiled. "I don't mind."

Cameron slid over the soft blue plush of the seat and sat in the uneven space in the middle. He was a little scared at being sandwiched in between two people, but at the same time it felt strangely safe, like the metal railings around the hospital bed. He leaned against his mother to give his father room to work the gearshift, and felt suddenly tired.

As the car backed smoothly out of the parking space and swung around, Cameron caught sight of a police car on the side of the ambulance parking area. He flinched at the sight.

"Neil, are you all right?" his mother asked.

"I'm sorry," he said automatically. "I'm okay."

He was glad he'd sat securely wedged between them. The driver's window of the police car was rolled down, and through the Lincoln's windshield he could see the face of the detective who had questioned him so closely—Detective Simmons, the man who didn't believe he was Neil Lacey.

5. Homecoming

Cameron wasn't sure what he'd expected. The pictures of the sailboats in the file had just shown a wide green lawn with a few trees, a small redwood dock, and the boats. He hadn't really thought much about the house itself.

It wasn't a mansion, Cameron knew that. One of the boys had come from a real mansion, a white house with towering columns, half hidden behind ornate iron gates. He'd seen pictures of that house in a magazine clipping. Cameron remembered the article said that the boy's parents had offered to pay a big ransom. Not that money would have made any difference to Pop.

But this was an expensive house, made of tan fieldstone that gleamed golden in the late-afternoon sun, with a curving drive that ran up to a stone entryway. There was money in this house, like the money in the Lincoln; enough money to make him feel secure. There were also roses blooming against the fieldstone, and bright pansies lining the entryway. And beside the house, the lawn ran down to a sparkling lake rippling gently in the slanting sunlight.

He'd slept during most of the drive home, giving in to the tiredness and the strain, and blanking out his fear at seeing Detective Simmons. There was heavy traffic getting out of Knoxville during the Monday afternoon rush hour, and his father muttered that he was glad he'd driven after all. After a while, Cameron just leaned against his mother and drifted off into dreamless sleep, swaying gently in the smooth, quiet car.

It was the bump as they turned off the main road through Freeport onto the lakefront road that woke him. He sat up apologetically, but when he looked at his mother, it seemed as though she hadn't minded. She had a peaceful look on her face for the first time since he'd seen her.

He watched the houses pass by, with the shimmering lake visible between them. They weren't too close together, not like houses in the city. But they weren't as isolated as his house had been. Pop had built it himself, though Cameron couldn't remember him doing that. Pop had told him he'd deliberately bought that large lot on the edge of the woods. It was far enough from the next lot so that no one could hear Pop when he shouted at the boys—or hear the boys, for that matter. And no one could smell anything strange, even right after he and Pop poured the lime and mercuric acid into the cellar before filling in a new hole. These houses beside the lake were a comfortable distance apart. You had some space, but somebody would hear you if you needed them.

The Laceys' house was at the very end of the lakefront road. For a second Cameron felt a surge of fear, because there were no more homes on the far side of the big stone house. The lake continued past the house to the northwest, but there was nothing on the shore but woods and a plowed field. Then he got hold of himself and saw there was a house next door to the Laceys' on the near side, so it was all right. He made himself look again and saw metal towers supporting power lines running down the field and cutting through the woods, and he guessed that was why there wasn't another house there. It didn't mean anything threatening.

"Look familiar?" his father was asking, his voice a little worried.

"Of course, we've done a lot over the years," his mother said quickly. "We'd just moved in—the

wasn't any garden yet."

Cameron nodded. "It looks wonderful," he said, and meant it, and he could feel his father relax beside him.

The garage door swept open suddenly, and his mother opened the passenger door and climbed out, beckoning for him to follow. He was sliding across the seat when he saw two kids come running out beneath the still-rising door and skid to a stop, staring at him. Cameron got out slowly and tried to smile at them.

The girl—his *sister*, he thought—looked a lot like her mother. She had the same deep brown eyes and golden hair, only hers was sun-bleached paler and cut short, curving around her face. And her face didn't look as friendly as her mother's. Her eyes were narrowed, and as she stared at him she chewed on her lower lip.

The boy was worse. Short and stocky, with thick brown hair and his father's hazel eyes, he slouched behind his sister and glared at Cameron.

"Diana, Stevie, come say hello to your brother," their mother was saying awkwardly.

"Kids," their father said, in a careful voice, "remember what we talked about last night?"

Diana suddenly stopped chewing her lip and walked forward a few steps. Cameron realized that even though he was older, she was a few inches taller than he was. He hoped it wouldn't make anybody suspicious.

"Hi," she said. "Welcome home, and all that."

Her voice was neutral, a lot like her father's. Cameron's throat suddenly constricted. Did Neil have a nickname for his kid sister? She'd expect him to call her that. He tried to remember the clippings, but his mind was suddenly blank. How could he ever have been so stupid as to think this would actually work? Cameron nearly turned and bolted, thinking incoherently that at least he could keep the clothes that way. Or had Detective Simmons followed him from the hospital? Was he just waiting for Cameron to make a mistake? He felt more trapped than he had ever felt in the cellar.

Suddenly Stevie ran right up to him, and Cameron took a step back before he could stop himself.

"Hi, okay? I cleaned out half my stuff, okay? You can have the bed by the window, since you always liked that best, okay?"

"Okay," Cameron said before he knew he was speaking, and he heard their parents laugh.

Stevie frowned at him, then nodded. "Okay, then," he said, and turned and went back inside.

His mother sighed. "He's only eight," she said.

"And he can be a pain," Diana added, smiling at last.

Cameron smiled back at her. "He's probably mad at giving up half his room, too, I'll bet."

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