

Chapter One

Five years had passed. And maybe a million miles. He was caught and he knew it, caught in a dream or a nightmare or one of Hyacinth's stories, and there seemed no way out of anything anymore, certainly no way of his own choosing. Even though he had come to love the little girl they called Canny, he continued to miss his sons. But when he tried to think about his dilemma, he would be seized with a helplessness so vast and so paralyzing that the only voice in his head would be hers, Hyacinth's, ending it her way. *Nothing anyone can do. Not after all this time. No way to make things right. He dug his hole too deep.*

Too deep, too deep, too deep, his heart kept beating, had been beating all night while he waited in these two unlighted rooms, waited with his eyes keen on the door and its unseen corridor and stairs, and outside, the long empty street. His head cocked now with the first sound of her, of her heels, of the click, click, click of her high heels, and then a man's harsh voice dissolving in the unmistakable caress of Dotty's laughter.

The minute she came in, he told her they had to go. It wasn't safe here. Not anymore.

Cursing, she grabbed her albums and he could hear her sliding

them into a box he'd left by the table. One of the records fell to the floor with a flat, faint thud. He froze.

In the dark, Canny's eyes opened wide. He couldn't see her, but he knew by the catch in her breath that she was awake now and ready to go. She had been asleep on the couch. Except for her rubber sandals, which he had told her to pack in her toy bag, she was all dressed.

"Shit," Dotty muttered, picking up the record. She lurched toward him with the box.

"I can't put nothing else in," Wallace whispered. "The trunk's full."

"Put 'em in the back seat then," Dotty whispered back.

"There's just room for Canny!" he said.

"These records're going!" she warned.

The little girl sat up now and swung her legs over the side of the couch.

"The box is too big," he said. "Get a littler box."

"And where the hell'm I gonna find a littler box at four in the morning?"

"Down cellar," he whispered, knowing she wouldn't go.

"I ain't going down there!" she said, her voice rising thick and heedlessly. "You go down and get one."

"Shh! They'll hear ya," he said nervously.

"Let 'em! Let 'em fuckin' hear me!"

"Shh. . . ."

"I just wanna go to bed," she groaned. "I'm so smashed. . . ."

"Shh! You can sleep it off in the. . . ."

"Don't shh me, you little creep. You probably made the whole thing up anyways."

"No, I didn't. Honest, Dot."

"Jesus Christ," she moaned. "Every time I start having too good a time, it's the same old thing. We gotta go cuzza her."

"It's true," he whispered. "She was here. Ask Canny." His voice shivered and thinned. "We was eating supper and she knocked on the door and I said, 'Who's that?' And she said, 'Truant officer,' and then I said, 'What do you want?' and she

said, 'You gotta little girl that's school age and I gotta find out how come she ain't in school.' "

"I hope you told her to go f . . ."

"I tole her, 'No, ma'am, we ain't got no little girl.' And she said, 'Well, that ain't what we been tole, Mr. Wallace.' She knew my name and everything! She said, 'We been tole you and your wife don't send yer little girl to school and that's against the law,' she said, so then I didn't say nothing else and after a while, she left and I started packing."

"Jesus Christ," she groaned. "I'm so sick of this. Here," she said. He groaned and staggered a little under the weight of the box she shoved at him. "But there's just the one little spot for Canny!" he protested weakly.

"Okay," she whispered fiercely. "Then the records go and Canny doesn't! That what you want?"

At that, the little girl's feet scurried across the floor. "Momma?" she whispered, groping through the darkness. "Momma!"

"She's right here," Wallace whispered. "By the door."

Dotty laughed uneasily. She reached down and swung the girl up onto her hip. "Had you going there for a minute, huh?" she said with her mouth at Canny's ear.

Canny's thin arms knotted tightly around Dotty's neck as they tiptoed down the creaking stairs past the landlady's apartment. Wallace held his breath. If they could just make it out of here without the landlady stopping them, they'd have the rent money to live on until they found a new place.

They left the front door ajar, then hurried along the sidewalk to the corner, where, earlier in the evening, he had left the car parked at the top of the hill. Dotty bent low and set Canny on the back seat atop a nest of blankets and pillows. Wallace pushed the box of records next to her and gently, ever so gently, pushed the door so that it barely clicked. Then he and Dotty slid into the front seat and held their doors closed. With one hand on the shift and the other on the emergency brake, he put the old car into gear and snapped down the brake. Then waiting, still not breathing, he looked neither right nor

left, but straight ahead. Suddenly, through the dark musky heat, came a tomcat's howl. Dotty turned toward the sound. She seemed to strain forward. He imagined her hand closing over the door handle and her foot easing to the curb. Closing his eyes, he jerked his head back and forth as though to pump the car into motion. Just then the weighted-down tires began to turn. Slowly. Heavily. Ever so slowly. She was still looking back. And then they were rolling, picking up speed, turning, rolling faster, until all at once, at the bottom of the hill, the car came alive. The door banged shut and the motor roared and the headlamps burned and the tires spun and Aubrey Wallace gave a nervous little snort. He looked over at Dotty, who stared glumly out the side window. She reeked of beer and sweet perfume. She belched softly into the back of her hand, then looked back at Canny. "Look at her, sound asleep," she sighed. "What the hell does she care how shitty my life is." She rolled down the window and trailed her arm through the rushing night. Her hair caught in the wind and blew back across her face. When she did not lift it away, he knew she was probably crying. After a few miles, she'd be all right. Once they got going, she'd get into the spirit of things. She always did.

When she finally spoke her voice sounded flat and numb. "You know how many different places we been in the last year?"

"Nope."

She looked at him. "Eight," she said.

He nodded. Somehow it hadn't seemed like that many.

"Coulda been eighty for all you care," she said, still looking at him.

He hunched over the wheel and peered into the bug-shimmered silvery light of the headlamps. She lit a cigarette and the smell stung his nostrils. His nose began to run.

"Year before was five." She sucked in so deep on her cigarette that in the light of a passing car, her face appeared hollow and as high-boned as a skull. "And the year before that was four," she said in an exhale of smoke.

VANISHED

He glanced at her with an uneasy grin, then wiped his nose on the back of his hand. She was getting him mixed up.

"Pretty soon, at the rate we're going," she said, "we won't even have to unload the car." She glanced over her shoulder at Canny, who moaned in her sleep. "She looks hot."

"She don't feel good," he said, glancing into the mirror. "She said her head hurt."

"Where we goin'?"

"Don't matter," he said. "Figured we'd just go till we come on a market."

She laid her head back on the seat. "Tonight, I was coming home and I saw the way you had the car ready to go, and I had this crazy feeling inside like I should keep on going. Just keep on walking and let you go without me."

"I wouldn'ta done that."

"Yah," she said wearily. "That's what I figured." She leaned forward and turned on the radio full volume. The sudden blast startled the girl. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. She winced painfully with the thunderous beat of the music. "Momma," she said gently, but Dotty did not hear. Her head rocked and her shoulders shimmied as she clicked her long, painted fingers in time to the music. She sang the words she knew in a loud, husky voice.

"Hey, lonesome lady,
There's gonna be hearts to break.
And gonna be love to make,
You lonesome lady, lady there. . . ."

Wallace's hands tightened on the wheel. His eyes darted to the rearview mirror, where a blue light spun in the distance. His first thought was the landlady. She'd set the troopers on them for the back rent.

"Dammit," he muttered as the blue light grew in the mirror.

"Little, lonesome lady come on home," Dotty sang. She reached back and patted Canny's cheek.

"Dammit," he muttered again.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" she snapped.

"Cops."

"Jesus Christ!" She turned to look. "How the hell damn fast were you going?" she screamed, as the blue light loomed around them. A siren began to wail.

"Fifty," he said, wiping the sweat from his eyes.

"You asshole!" she screamed, as the cruiser broke loose. "This is it! It's all over now!" she shrieked when the cruiser was alongside. She cringed down in the seat with her hands over her face. "This is what you been wanting! Here it is! Here it comes! They're gonna shoot us! They're gonna shoot us dead, you stupid bastard!"

"Momma! Momma!" Canny screamed in terror. "Don't let them shoot us, Momma!"

"I hope they do! Oh God, I hope they do and then it'll be over!"

"Momma!"

"Shut up, goddammit," he groaned. "The two of you both!" he called over the throb of the radio and their screams. Like a quick, bright fish into the deep, the cruiser flashed ahead, then vanished. "They's gone! They's gone!" he cried, pulling into the breakdown lane. Dotty was crying. He turned off the radio and tugged at her arm. His hands still trembled. "It wasn't us! They's gone," he told her over and over again.

She continued to sob with her face buried in her hands.

"Don't, Dotty," he pleaded.

"Goddamn cops!" Canny gasped, her bony chest heaving up and down. "Goddamn, sonofabitchen cops. . . ."

He grabbed her wrist. "You watch your mouth!" he warned.

"I wish I was dead," Dotty was moaning. "I wish I was dead."

"It's okay, Momma," Canny said, wiping her eyes. She took a deep breath. "Nobody's here but me and Poppy. Look, Momma. It's just us."

"I can't take this anymore," Dotty sobbed. "Always scared. Always running. . . ."

VANISHED

"C'mon, Momma, it's gonna be all right," Canny said, running her fingers through Dotty's long hair.

"No, it won't. Nothing ever goes right for me. Never did, never will. . . ."

"Yes it will, Momma!" Canny kissed the back of Dotty's head.

"All I ever wanted was a little fun," Dotty wept. "That's all, just some fun for once. . . ."

Wallace closed his eyes. He was tired.

"We'll have fun, Momma," the little girl insisted. "We'll have Poppy look for a circus or a park and we'll go on all the rides. We'll have fun! You'll see!"

Dotty sat up. "You mean that? About the rides?"

Canny nodded.

"You won't chicken out like last time?" Dotty laughed and sobbed all at once. "'member? You said you were gonna throw up?"

"I won't," Canny said.

"Even the roller coaster?" Dotty asked, wiping her eyes with the hem of her skirt.

Canny nodded solemnly, then sank back into her boxed crevice.

As Wallace pulled onto the highway, his eyes met Canny's in the mirror. Tired as she was, she smiled. All of a sudden, the strangest urge came over him. He wanted to tell her something. Something wonderful. Something beautiful. He glanced back at her.

"Canny," he said softly.

"What, Poppy?" she murmured sleepily.

"Nothin'," he said fastening his eyes on the dark road ahead. It only took a few miles before he was dreaming—wide awake and dreaming, which was just how it used to happen when he was little. Only then they called it a spell. He liked these moments; never struggled to flee them. Here was a sun-curtained window through which filtered all the voices and all the faces he had ever known. It was here at the center of things he had learned to exist; here, where there was quiet—a quiet so still it

had substance and color and sound. Here were all the things he did not know or understand and here they did not matter. This was the place where he kept Hyacinth and Answan and Arnold and the little white house with its bottle-blue door and a crazy girl with blood cuts on her arms who held a baby girl nobody wanted, or so she said.

"Where we gonna go now?"

"Just drive, dammit. I'll think of something."

"Drive where?"

"There! Turn there, and down that road. . . ."

"Now what?"

"Just keep going, dammit!"

Just keep on going. Turn when she says turn. After a while he barely knows the states through which they pass. The baby is getting so pretty and so big. She calls him Poppy.

"And who'm I?" Dotty giggles.

"Momma," the little girl says. "Momma." Says it like a song that runs through his thoughts day and night. "Momma," she says, closing her eyes.

Some nights he wakes up in a cold sweat and there she is. The other one in her skinny brown dress and her raw red hands on her ridged hips. In the doorway. So bright, he can't really see her face too good anymore.

"Where you been?" she keeps wanting to know. "We been waiting all this time. Where you been?"

Funny thing is, he doesn't know. And in here it doesn't matter. Because he's been here all the time, but acourse, try and tell *her* that.