

The Found Child

by Diana Rankin

A sample of the opening pages

Chapter 1

The Child at the End of the Lane

Since moving to the country, I've become accustomed to picking up people's half eaten fast food sandwiches, beer bottles, and pop cans tossed out of car windows. I've even taken in the dogs and cats people have abandoned, but none of this prepared me for the day I found a child. There he was, a blue-eyed, blond-haired little boy at the end of my gray-graveled lane. He just stood there looking down the long lane, a child waiting like the great stones on this land wait for eternity.

My legs fell over one another as I ran toward him, the still-mending broken one nearly giving way. It had been years since I had run so hard and my legs and lungs weren't so sure they liked it. I was more used to standing in front of a college classroom or sitting in front of a computer these days than I was to running, but I was so fearful he might step backward into the road. There was no need to be. No cars were going by. That's not something I realized at the time, only something I came to think about later, how unusually quiet that day was. The tree's leaves were stilled, no rustling from even a slight breeze. Not even a fly was buzzing, and there was not a vehicle in sight as far down the road as you could see. The child just stood there, patiently waiting for me as I rushed to him.

He tilted his head upward, offered me his smile. I received it, and felt a movement in my body like the shifting of the tectonic plates beneath Earth's surface. As I sat down on my heels to match his height, the thought slipped through my mind that he must only be about seven or eight years old.

"Seven-and-one-quarter," he said, his pure blue eyes looking right into me. "That's how old I am. Seven-and-one-quarter. You were wondering, so I told you. Seven-and-one-quarter."

A strange shiver skittered through me, but I shook it off. All my concentration had to be on this little boy. Now I sure don't know much about seven, ah, seven-and-one-quarter-year old boys never having any children of my own, but I know enough to know he shouldn't be wandering alone out here in rural Ohio where there are more horses and cows than people and the closest neighbor is barely within shouting distance. In that moment, it didn't even dawn on me to question how he knew I was wondering how old he was. I was more concerned about making

sure he was okay, and then finding his parents. Besides, most children pick up a lot about what adults are thinking. Don't they?

"They're not here. My parents, they're not here," he said, again answering a question I had only thought about, but not spoken aloud. But it was a question most adults would ask a child under the circumstances, and he answered it like he had been asked the same question before. I had the feeling this wasn't the first time this child had been out roaming alone. Maybe his dad was on the tractor out in the fields and his mom was at the grocery or at work, and he just wandered off. Or what if his parents were alcoholics or drug addicts or just plain neglectful? Or what?

He was clean, dressed in a green tee-shirt the color of spring grass with the picture of a baby wolf on the front. His blue jeans were spotless, not a single worn thread or speck of dirt on them. Even the laces on his sneakers were tied, and his hair, the golden color of summer wheat right before the harvest, was short, neatly parted and combed in a manner reminiscent of an earlier era. It was his eyes that I noticed the most. They were blue, an unusually dark blue, the same color as mine, and when I looked at him, looked into his eyes, I couldn't help but feel I was seeing some lost part of myself.

"May I have a glass of water, please?" he asked politely.

"Yes, yes, of course you can," I said. "We have to go back to the house first. That okay?"

He looked down the lane. "It's a long walk," he said, and then gave me a sweet smile and reached out and took my hand easily as though we had long been friends. We headed toward the house, hidden in a forest of hardwoods on the other side of a curve in the lane. Neither of us spoke. Only the hush-hush of pine needles falling onto the grass beside the lane and my own thoughts came through the quietness. When we reach the house, I reasoned, I could call the Sheriff's office. This child's parents must be frantic. Then he spoke and the silence was shattered.

"Davey," he said. "That's my name. You forgot to ask." The smile he gave me was as sweet as heaven, and then it faded as he grew serious. "You were hurt pretty bad," he said thoughtfully, and then added, "But you didn't die."

I stopped, couldn't take the next step. I looked deeply at him. His eyes were illuminated, exploding with multiple shades of blues and magentas that imploded over and over, pulling me deeper and deeper to him.

"Don't fret," he said.

Thoughts stumbled over each other in my mind. No rational words came out my mouth. All I came up with was that fret was a rather grown-up word for such a small boy.

"It means don't worry," he said.

"Don't worry?"

"Yeah, don't worry about nothing."

I looked away from this strange child, looked at the blue expanse of the summer sky. A few white clouds floated along. A quick breeze rustled over the soybean fields on both sides of the lane and ripples of velvety green shone with sunlight. He must live on one of the farms nearby, I thought. His parents must have told him about my motorcycle spill. I mean everyone around here knows about it. That must be what he's talking about. A red tail hawk whooshed overhead on his way across the fields from the north woods to a utility pole at the edge of the south woods.

"I'm really thirsty," Davey said as he pulled at my hand.

I regained myself, determined to not let this child throw me off balance again. "Let's go get you that glass of water. Ok?"

"Yeah. Then we can get your letter." He took off at a trot pulling me along behind him the way my big mixed breed country dog Paco does.

Letter? What letter is this child talking about?

"The one in the mailbox," he said. "The letter from him."

So much for my regaining any sense of balance.

Chapter 2

The Letter

I was calling the Sheriff's office when Davey looked up and looked directly at me. With the glass-water rim still to his lips, he said, "Don't forget your letter."

Unnerved, I did my best to ignore him as I concentrated on the phone in my hand, but still I was startled when the Sheriff's dispatcher asked, "What's your emergency?"

"I . . . I found a child," I stammered.

"Your name?" The dispatcher said this as more a statement than a question.

"Diana, Diana Rankin," I said, working to compose myself.

"Where did you find this child?"

"At the end of the lane where I live. His name is Davey." I went on to give my address, phone number, the few details I knew about the boy, and his description. "I'm sure his parents must be worried sick," I added.

The dispatcher ignored that and kept right on talking. "We'll have a Sheriff's deputy out your way within an hour," she said.

"Within an hour?" An hour! Why weren't they rushing out here, sirens blaring? This is a

seven-year-old child. It just didn't seem right.

"May I have more water, please?" Davey asked, his eyes round and pleading like a new puppy begging to play.

I took in a deep breath. The Sheriff's deputies would be here soon enough. There was nothing I could do to rush them out here.

"May I have more water, please?" Davey asked again.

"Of course, of course, Davey. I'm sorry." I pulled the water jug out of the refrigerator and had turned half way back toward the counter where he sat when he said, "Your letter. It's from him." The water jug dropped, but I flicked my wrist up and caught it with my other hand before it fell. A few drops scrambled across the wooded floor, but I ignored them. As calmly as I could, I poured water into the child's glass. Without looking up, I asked him, "Davey, how do you know I have a letter? Did you look in my mailbox?"

"Nope. That would be wrong." He hesitated, looked down at the counter, and then looked directly at me the way someone with a secret looks at you, not wanting to tell you, but hoping you'll guess. "I just know. That's all." Then he looked away, looked toward the water jug, and pushed his glass across the countertop. "May I have more water, please?"

Sesame, my Siamese cat, brushed against Davey's leg and that of the stool where he sat. She purred, and then sat back and looked up at both of us. Davey leaned over. "Can I pet her?"

"Sure."

"She's soft. Like cashmere. My aunt had a sweater. She said it was cashmere. That's how I know. I heard her talking," he said.

I started to tell him Sesame looks a lot like my first Siamese cat, Cashmere, who was so named because as a kitten she had curled up on a brown and tan sweater in my closet. Sesame even acts like Cashmere sometimes, like the way she follows me everywhere and the way she holds her front paw up in the air whenever I scold her, but I didn't tell Davey this. It wasn't something a seven-year old needed to know. Instead I said, "Sesame has a cat brother. His name is Puff. She also has two dog sisters and a dog brother."

"She's lucky."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Nope."

"Do you have a dog?"

"Nope."

"A cat?"

"Nope."

"Any pets?"

"Nope," he said a little sadly. "I wanted a dog." He laid his head down on his arm on the countertop, and then with a bit of impatience, he said, "We should go get the mail."

I took a breath, put my hand over Davey's, and gave him my best soft smile. "We'll get it later. It can wait." I pulled away, turned toward the other side of the counter. "I bet I can even find some ice cream if I look in the freezer, and I bet you like ice cream."

"That's where you were going," he insisted. "When you saw me. You were after the mail, but you never got it."

"It can wait, Davey. Really. I'd much rather talk to you. Besides the Sheriff's deputies will be here soon, and then we'll get you home and your parents will be so happy to see you."

"They aren't coming," he said with assurance. "No Sheriff."

"Sure they are. They want to help you get back home to your parents. I'm sure by now your parents are very worried."

"They love me," he said.

"I'm sure they do, Davey. And I'm sure they're very worried, but we'll get it all straightened out real soon." Sesame pawed the air near Davey, meowed, then pushed her tail up and took off in a run down the hall. Davey giggle and my shoulders relaxed a bit, but that didn't last long.

"What about your letter?" he asked. His wide-open eyes were big, rounded, pure, with a depth much older than his years. This child has seen a lot, or been through a lot, I thought. There was the childhood innocence about him, and yet, yet there was something else, something I couldn't quite put my fingers on other than to say there was something very old about him.

"It's an important letter," he said. "It's from him."

"Davey, the mail can wait. Besides I don't know who you mean by him." I filled Davey's water glass again and dropped a spoonful of chocolate mint ice cream into a bowl. "Hope you like chocolate mint." Before he had a chance to answer or say more about the letter, I added, "I know, let's play a game. Do you know how to play Go Fish with cards?" Thankfully he nodded yes. I was becoming quite rattled with all his talk of a letter from a him. I just needed to keep this child entertained for a short while longer until the Sheriff's deputies arrived, then we could find his home and parents and sort this all out.

We played Go Fish, ate chocolate mint ice cream, and stopped all talk about the mail, or any letter. Sesame mostly stayed in the bedroom with her cat sibling, both sleeping soundly, the way cats do much of the time. A couple of times she came out, wandered about, and then returned to the bedroom. Once or twice Paco barked from his run outside in the woods.

About the time I was beginning to wonder where in the world the Sheriff's deputy was, Davey asked, "You do remember him don't you?"

"Who, Davey?"

"Jeremy."

The cards shook out my hand. I caught my breath. "I knew a Jeremy once," I managed to breath out slowly. "It was a long time ago."

"Don't be sad," Davey said, surprising me away from my thoughts of Jeremy the boy I loved so many years ago, the boy who died a man in Vietnam.

"You're right," I said, ruffling his hair on the top of his head.

He giggled. "I like that. I'm glad I have hair."

"Me too."

"I didn't always."

"Have hair you mean."

"Unhuh," he said.

"You didn't, Davey?"

"I lost it," he said matter-of-factly, "when I was sick."

I wanted to ask him about being sick, but didn't. Better to keep everything on the upbeat. Besides before I had time to think, he caught me off guard again with another question.

"Will you take me for a ride on your motorcycle?"

Okay, so he knows I ride a motorcycle. Everyone around here knows that. They just have trouble believing I'm big enough to hold one up, but it doesn't take size. It takes balance, and that's what I lost that day.

"Will you, huh?" he broke into my thoughts.

"Take you for a ride on the motorcycle?"

"Yea!"

"Ah, Davey, I'm not so sure that's such a good idea."

He pouted out his lip and put his chin down into his chest. When I mimicked him, he started laughing, which made me laugh so much it brought tear to my eyes, and that felt good. It had been too long since I had laughed that hard.

"Will you?" Davey persisted.

"Will I what?"

"Take me on your motorcycle?"

"I'll make you a deal, okay? Let's find your parents, and then we'll talk about taking rides on

motorcycles. Okay?"

He thought about this for a few minutes, and then said, "I'd really like it. I'm all well now. I promise to not fall or nothing."

His look tore me apart. It was so beseeching and so innocent, a puppy begging for attention. "I can't promise, but when we find your parents, if they say okay, I'll ask a friend of mine if he'll take you for a ride. Fair enough?"

"Are you afraid to take me?"

I felt my shoulders rise, and then fall with a sigh. "I think you'll be much safer with my friend," I said.

"But are you afraid to take me?"

I looked deeply into those familiar eyes of his with the deep blue irises. "Yes, Davey. I am afraid to take you on my bike."

"Is that because of the wreck?" he asked.

Everyone in the community knew of the motorcycle accident. The hospital helicopter flew right over my house on the way to pick me up off the road where gravel and a curve took me down. Still, I was surprised Davey knew. I looked at my hands, at the scars nearly healed from the road rash and broken bones. Davey blinked once, then twice. "Hey, you know what?" I said. "I bet those Sheriff deputies are on their way, but what do you say we call them again, just to make sure?" I jumped up, went to the other side of the counter and dialed the Sheriff's office. Again.

"What's your emergency?" the dispatcher asked.

"This is Diana Rankin again," I said. I called about an hour ago to report a lost . . . actually a found child. We've been waiting for the Sheriff's deputies, but no one has come yet."

"What did you say your name is?"

"Diana Rankin," I said again, and then spelled it. I gave the dispatcher my address, phone number, all the same information. "I called about an hour ago and made a report," I repeated.

"Could you hold on for a minute, please ma'am," she said.

I winked at Davey. He sat quietly on the stool next to the counter. What a good child, I thought. He said he had been sick. Maybe that's what gave him patience. I'll have to ask him about his illness. I'm glad he's well now. The world needs more children like him. And so my thoughts went round and round, melting into each other like the leftover ice cream in Davey's bowl.

"Ms. Rankin," a male voice said. "This is Deputy Arrowman."

"Hello. I was telling the dispatcher that . . .

End of sample

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