

**“Drugs. He actually asked me if you were on drugs.”**

That was all Richter Berry said to his son during the long march back to the parking structure, after which he fell into a boiling silence broken only by the sound of his angry breathing, a labored whistle that issued from his nose as he stared vacantly ahead, trying to calm down enough to start yelling.

Richter was silent during the interminable elevator ride down into the parking structure’s muggy bowels. Silent during the whole drunken elephant ballet that was getting out of the congested garage—a procedure made more difficult by the awkward length of Leopold’s ancient Volvo station wagon and its lack of parking sensors, backup cameras, or any other modern conveniences. Silent as Leopold struggled to click his frayed seat belt into place. That Richter hadn’t even made a comment about the Volvo, a family embarrassment which he consented to ride in only when his Porsche was in the shop—as it was today—meant he was well and truly about to explode.

They reached the pay booth without incident, only to discover that three seventy-five was owed even though Leopold had gotten their parking stub validated, that the garage only accepted cash, and that aside from an old movie ticket stub and his driver’s license,

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Leopold's wallet was empty. He knew better than to ask his father for the money, or he'd get the You're Never Prepared lecture on top of whatever tirade was already in store for him. In a panic, he ran his hands through the cup holder, the side-door pocket, and the never-used ashtray, which netted him a grand total of three fifty, still a quarter short. As a car honked somewhere in the line forming behind them, Leopold apologized to the old lady attending the booth, unbuckled his safety belt, and jammed his arm down into the crack of the cloth seat. That earned him a cut on his finger, a smear of belt actuator lubricant on his wrist, and two sticky dimes. He gathered the coins and wadded bills and held them out in cupped hands.

Accepting them with a lugubrious sigh, the attendant began to tally the change. She was of young grandma age, just elderly enough that Leopold wondered what had gone wrong in her life that she had to work a job like this, forced to make change all day in the lightless belly of a Beverly Hills office building. She wore a rumpled green vest with the words *Underground Parking Corp* stitched above a name badge that read *Rochelle*.

Another horn bellowed in the rumbling gloom. Sweat trickled down Leopold's collar. Rochelle finished her leisurely count and looked up at him, expressionless. "You owe me a nickel."

"I know. I'm really sorry. That's all I have." Leopold prayed she would just shrug and wave him through, but she only stared.

Leopold tried again. "Could I come back with it later?"

Richter sighed, leaned roughly across Leopold, and thrust a hundred-dollar bill at the woman. This meant the You're Never Prepared lecture was now unavoidable. The attendant pursed her lips and pointed to a sign that read NO BILLS OVER \$20. Richter Berry retracted his hand with imperial slowness before folding the money carefully into his crocodile-leather wallet. He preferred cash and

## RANSOM RIGGS

never carried anything smaller than a hundred, on principle. A principle covered in chapter four of *Think Like a Winner*.

“You have five days to pay via mail,” the attendant monotoned, “or your debt will be turned over to a collections agency. I’ll give you the address.”

Even in the dark, Leopold could sense his father turning purple.

The attendant swiveled on her stool to grab a slip of paper, and that was when it came to Leopold’s attention that she had a pair of wings sprouting through the back of her vest. They were dull gray, about the size of a backpack, and lay folded against her shoulder blades, the feathers a bit rumpled from long hours of sitting.

Leopold sat blinking, his face going tingly.

He seemed to lose a bit of time: One moment he was staring at the wings and wondering how she’d gotten her clothes on over them, and the next he was jolted by another car horn, the attendant having swiveled back to face him. She gave him a strange look while waving the slip of paper in his direction.

He reached out to take it, his eyes fixed on her vest. He was sure the words stitched above her name badge had changed. With the addition of a single letter, they now read SUNDERGROUND PARKING CORP.

He whispered the word aloud, his lips forming it involuntarily.

*Sunder.*

The woman snatched his outstretched wrist. Her hand was icy, and the strength in her arthritic fingers was unbelievable, like talons digging into his skin. She leaned toward him and whispered in a voice that was low and raspy and slightly threatening:

*“It ain’t polite to stare.”*

The ghost of a smile touched her lips, then vanished just as quickly.

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She let him go. He reeled back into his seat. The barrier arm swung upward as another car blasted its horn.

“Drive!” Richter snapped, looking up from something he’d been typing on his phone. “What’s wrong with you?”

Leopold eased the car forward, watching the woman’s reflection shrink in his mirror until sunlight blasted the windshield, erasing her. As Richter wondered aloud whether his son might really be on drugs, Leopold waited for a break in traffic, gripping the wheel tightly so his father wouldn’t see his hands shaking.