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Chapter One

From *The Ballad Kentucky Johnson*

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Chapter 1: Ain't Got Time

Kentucky Johnson had been up since five, same as every morning. By now, she was used to the rhythm of it—roll out of bed, pull on yesterday's jeans, pour what was left of the coffee into a travel mug, and head to work. Some folks lived their lives by the seasons, but for her, time was measured in shifts—one at Ruby's Diner, another at Waffle House, with barely enough space in between to breathe.

This morning had started like all the others.

Except Perkins hadn't come home last night. Again.

She hadn't gone looking—yet. Maybe he was holed up with one of his buddies, maybe he'd crashed in the shed out back like he sometimes did when he wanted to be left alone. But something about it didn't sit right. And she'd learned a long time ago to trust that feeling in her gut.

Mornings at Ruby's always smelled the same to Kentucky, and she knew it without lifting her head. It was coffee first—old coffee and new, the ghost of yesterday clinging to the pot, today's brew burning its way on top of it—bitter and steady, like something you learned to trust even when it disappointed you. There was bacon grease worked so deep into the walls it had become part of the wood itself, a warm, salty hum that never quite went away. Burnt toast lingered low, just shy of bitter, and underneath it all sat that clean-but-not-clean smell of bleach and mop water, sharp and honest, trying its best to keep order in a place that lived off mess. Add to that the faint sweetness of pancake syrup crusted on tabletops, the metallic tang of the grill heating up, and the soft breath of cigarette smoke that still clung to coats and hair no matter how long it'd been banned. Kentucky sat there chewing the end of her pen, half-thinking about Perkins—her boy, not her daddy—half-listening to the low, familiar murmur of men talking about weather and aches and things that wouldn't change. The bell over the diner door jingled, and she looked up just in time to see Curtis Perkins walking in, nodding at a couple of old-timers on his way to the counter. He took his usual stool, dusting sawdust off

his sleeves. Even at this hour, he smelled like pine and sweat, the scent of a man who worked for his living.

She poured him a cup of coffee before he could ask. “You seen Perkins?”

Curtis lifted the cup, took a slow sip. “Saw him this morning. Said he had plans.”

Kentucky leaned against the counter, arms folded. “What kind of plans?”

Curtis set his coffee down. “The kind that got him walkin’ toward the gas station. And the kind that had Red Bill’s truck parked outside.”

The words landed like a hammer to the chest. She sucked in a breath through her teeth. “You sure?”

Curtis gave her a look. “I don’t say things I ain’t sure of.”

She gritted her teeth, fighting the instinct to grab her keys and go hunt her son down. “That boy’s gonna learn real quick that he don’t want no part of Red Bill’s business.”

Curtis took another sip of coffee, watching her over the rim. “He might, but you know as well as I do that wantin’ out and gettin’ out ain’t the same thing.”

She knew. God, she knew. She had seen too many boys—good boys—go down that road and never come back. Some wound up in jail, some in graves, and the ones who made it out? They weren’t the same.

The diner door opened again, the bell ringing out clean and curious. Elias North came in carrying himself like a man used to other people’s rooms—radio studios, panel tables, places where words mattered—but his boots told a different story. Mud still knew him. He shook the rain from his jacket, glanced around like he was filing mental notes for later, then caught Kentucky’s eye. He tipped his head, Crescent Hill courtesy laid over Bairdtown grit, and took a booth by the window. Close enough to hear things he wasn’t supposed to quote. Close enough to remember why he never stopped coming back.

Above him hung one of the old black-and-white photographs Ruby never moved. A young woman. Seventeen, maybe. Dark hair pulled back too tight. Eyes steady in a way that didn’t belong to girls that age.

Elias clocked it without asking. Around here, pictures like that didn’t hang by accident.

Ruby poured his coffee and never once looked up.

Back at the counter, Kentucky dried yet another mug and set it down harder than she meant to. Elias North liked to call himself an observer. Trouble was, observers always noticed too much. “You want me to talk to him?” Curtis asked, voice low.

She hesitated. Curtis had a way of getting through to people, especially when a lesson needed to be learned the hard way. But this was her son.

“No,” she said. “He needs to hear it from me.”

Curtis nodded, but there was something unreadable in his eyes. Like he knew something she didn’t. Like he wasn’t sure if talking would be enough.

Neither was she.

The clock over the register crept toward seven, the early light cutting through the blinds. Kentucky had spent the last hour flipping between watching the door and checking her phone, waiting for Perkins to call--or walk through the door. But silence sat heavy between them all.

Ruby, the owner, stepped out from the back, wiping her hands on a rag. “You’re burnin’ a hole through that door, hon.”

Kentucky forced a smile. “Just waitin’ on something.”

Ruby wasn’t fooled. The older woman knew all too well what it was like to wait on a man— young or old—to come back from something you weren’t sure they’d survive. “You need to go, you go,” Ruby said, voice softer. “I can cover.”

Kentucky glanced at the clock again, then at Curtis, who hadn’t moved from his spot at the counter. He was still nursing the same cup of coffee, like he was waiting too. Like they both knew this wasn’t going to end well.

She exhaled. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I do.”

Kentucky drove through town, past the rusted-out gas station where Perkins had last been seen. Red Bill’s truck was gone, but that didn’t mean anything. She took the backroads, gravel crunching under her tires, following the path her gut was screaming at her to take. If Perkins had gotten himself tangled up in Red Bill’s world, she needed to pull him out before the roots got too deep.

She found him behind the old feed store, standing with a group of boys she didn’t recognize. And Red Bill.

Her stomach clenched. Red Bill was leaning against his truck, cigarette in one hand, the other tucked into his pocket like he didn't have a care in the world. But Kentucky knew better. Men like him were always calculating, always waiting for the right moment to strike. Now this snake was in her henhouse, and she was not happy.

Perkins turned at the sound of her tires on the gravel. His eyes went wide, then narrowed. "Mama—"

"Get in the car," she said, voice like steel.

Red Bill exhaled smoke, grinning. "Now hold on, sweetheart. We were just havin' a conversation."

She leveled a glare at him. "And now it's over."

Perkins hesitated, glancing between his mother and Red Bill. He wasn't a boy anymore, not really. He was fourteen, caught between childhood and something darker, something she had tried to keep him away from. And right now, he was making a choice.

Red Bill smirked, like he already knew what that choice was going to be.

Kentucky's heart pounded, but she kept her voice even. "Perkins. Car. Now."

For a long second, he didn't move. Then, without a word, he shoved his hands in his pockets and walked toward her truck. Kentucky waited until he climbed in, then turned back to Red Bill.

"If I see you sniffin' around my boy again," she said, stepping closer, "I won't be so polite next time."

Red Bill held up his hands like she'd pulled a gun on him. "Ain't no need for threats, darlin'. I was just showin' the boy how the world works."

She didn't answer. Just turned on her heel, climbed into her truck, and drove.

Her hands were shaking on the wheel, but she didn't stop, didn't say a word until they were miles away.

Then, finally, she looked at her son.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Perkins stared out the window, jaw tight. "I can handle myself."

Kentucky gritted her teeth. "You have no idea what men like that do to kids like you."

Silence stretched between them, heavy and unspoken. But she knew, in that moment, this wasn't over.

The morning light was already burning the mist off the ridgeline, bleeding gold and rust across the sky. Kentucky turned the truck onto the long stretch of road that led home, the wheels crunching over loose gravel. She felt the weight of the silence between them settle in her chest like an anvil.

She thought about what Curtis had said back at the diner. *Wantin' out and gettin' out ain't the same thing.*

She'd seen it too many times. Boys who swore they'd just "help out" a little, just do a favor, just run an errand. They always thought they could walk away. But the world didn't work like that.

Perkins was fourteen—old enough to think he was a man but young enough to be led straight into hell with a grin and a pat on the back.

"Does Eli know?" Perkins asked suddenly, his voice quiet.

Kentucky's grip tightened on the wheel. "Know what?"

"That I was talkin' to Red Bill."

She exhaled through her nose. "Not yet."

Perkins nodded, but she saw his fingers twitch where they rested on his knee. He was nervous. That was good. It meant he still had some damn sense in him.

"He's gonna be mad," Perkins mumbled.

"Yeah," Kentucky said. "He is."

Her husband, Elijah "Tucker the Timberwolf" Johnson, wasn't the kind of man to shout. He didn't have to. When he got quiet, *real* quiet—that was when you knew you were in trouble. And when it came to their boys, he didn't play.

The thought of Eli finding out sent a fresh wave of anger through her. Not anger at him—anger at the whole damn situation.

Because it was always the same. The men like Red Bill held out their hands, grinning with their gold teeth, offering an easy way out. Money, respect, a name. And the boys—especially boys like Perkins, who grew up hearing stories about their daddy fighting in underground rings, about their granddaddy staring down the barrel of a gun just to protect his land—they ate it up.

She turned onto the dirt road leading to their house, the headlights sweeping over the tree line. The holler still held onto the night, and she could feel the weight of the forest pressing in around them.

Blue was waiting on the porch. The white maned massive Malamute lifted his head, ears pricked forward, watching as the truck came to a stop.

Perkins hesitated for half a second before pushing the door open. He barely made it three steps before Blue was on him, sniffing his hands, pressing his cold nose into his stomach like he was trying to sniff out trouble.

Perkins rubbed the dog's thick fur absentmindedly.

Kentucky killed the engine and got out. The night air smelled like pine and damp earth, heavy with the promise of rain.

Inside, Eli was waiting.

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