

THE LOST CHILD by Thomas Grant Bruso

EXCERPT

Chapter One

One year later

Eight-year-old Daniel Thompson Hadley, a boy who dreams of becoming a NASCAR champ someday, pedals down Olive Way on his new birthday bicycle.

A light September wind ruffles his sandy-brown hair. Six houses down, his mother and father watch from the stoop of their Victorian home, eyes intent on the erratic movement of their only child.

“Not too far,” Penny Hadley warns him over the rim of her tea mug.

Peter looks down at his wife and whispers softly, “He’s fine. Let him be a kid.”

She tugs the collar of her winter coat closed as if it will keep her warm from the chill and gazes up at the sky. “It’s getting dark.”

Peter tucks his hands into his pants pockets, slightly put off. “Let him enjoy his new wheels, Pen.”

She scoffs at her husband’s remark. “Daniel. Daniel Hadley. Come back right now,” she calls.

But young Daniel does not hear his mother’s voice. By this time, he is at the end of the unlit street, hidden in the shadows of the Jettisons’ ash tree. The elderly couple, close friends of the Hadleys, sit on their porch swing beneath a yolk-yellow light. Betty busies her fingers knitting Wendell a cozy afghan. Wendell sips his usual nightcap: scotch on the rocks.

“Did you hear your mom and dad, Daniel?” Mrs. Jettison calls out.

Wendell touches her arm, shaking his head. “Don’t bother. Kids will be kids.”

“Wendell, please. It gets dark sooner these nights.” She grips the arm of the swing and heaves herself to her feet. She stumbles, crying in mild pain against arthritis in her knees and legs. She ambles over to the edge of the wraparound porch. “You hear me, Daniel? Your mother and father said not too far.”

The young boy turns his eyes up to the raspy voice of his neighbor in a you-are-not-my-parent stare. He continues across the neighbors' unkempt lawns, strewn with late fall leaves, to the adjacent apartment complexes a few houses down.

He wheels along, whistling against a windy night, in astonishment at his newborn freedom. The gears of his bicycle rattle around the corner, fading down the street.

Penny feels a pinprick of tears at the corners of her eyes as she races down the street, tea sloshing over the rim of her mug. Peter can't catch up. Not after his triple bypass surgery five months ago. He follows a few feet behind his wife, wheezing, blathering obscenities under his breath. The heat of his sweat-glossed face stops him from running.

"Daniel!" Trembling, he fingers beads of sweat out of his eyes.

The Jettisons stare down at the sidewalk as Penny and Peter pass the house in a moonlit blur.

Tense with frustration, Penny glances up at the couple, scared-looking, panting. "Did you see Daniel?"

Mr. Jettison mumbles something Penny can't quite hear. His wife points a finger down the street. "I think he went that way, dear."

The stricken mother yields at the end of Palmer Street and Olive Way and gazes around the neighborhood she has called home for the last eight years. Daniel is nowhere in sight.

She runs into the middle of the four-way intersection, looks behind cars and in neighbors' front yards. She stands on her tiptoes to see over the tops of hedgerows and crouches to peek behind rhododendrons and quinces. Daniel is known to carry his hide-and-seek games too far, she knows. Tonight, though, is different. Her exasperated breath and beating heart tell her something is wrong.

She kneads the side of her neck. "Daniel!" Ugly images of a lost child invade her thoughts.

Peter pants closely behind her like an obedient dog. His unsteady hand skims the top of her shoulder. "Where is Danny? Where's my son?" He peers around frantically, calling out for Daniel.

The panicked expression on Penny's sour face and the discomfiting rhythm of her voice tells him she doesn't have an answer.

The sudden sound of a thrumming bicycle chain stirs the air, and Daniel appears around the corner. And the bold escapee knows, as he pedals closer toward his parents, noticing their scared wide eyes, that he has frightened them. He knows he is in big trouble.