

Excerpt from *What Jonah Knew* by Barbara Graham

One

Helen Bird wasn't in the habit of breaking the law, but the heartless creep in the motel office left her no choice. She had to find her son. She had to see for herself if Henry had left something behind, some subtle trace of himself that no one else would notice but would point her maternal compass in the right direction. He'd never been out of touch before, not like this, not when he was expected home two days ago, and especially not now, when his girlfriend, Mira, was due to give birth in a matter of weeks. Luckily, the window in his motel room was open a crack and Helen was able to jimmy it just enough to squeeze through. If the creep who refused to give her the key happened to see her and called the cops, so be it. In a way, she wouldn't mind. Maybe Saratoga Springs' Finest would show more concern than the smug detective in Aurora Falls who tried to convince her that Henry's disappearance was voluntary.

Helen knew better.

Didn't she?

As soon as she was inside, she closed the musty drapes, then turned on the mini flashlight that had been a party favor at her friend Abby's fiftieth and waved it around the room. Nothing jumped out at her, but that wasn't surprising. The woman who'd answered the motel phone earlier in the day told her that Henry had taken all his belongings. She'd also let it slip that number 11 wouldn't be cleaned until tomorrow.

The room was thick with late summer heat, but Helen didn't dare turn on the air conditioner. She undid the buttons on her shirt still dusted with flour, then shined her flashlight in the closet, the nightstand, each of the bureau drawers, and the bathroom, including the shower stall with dark green fur growing around the edges and in the cracks.

Nothing.

She got down on her knees and peered under the desk, then ruffled the covers on the unmade bed. It wasn't until she cast her light on the worn carpet that she noticed a lone gray sock sticking out from the foot of the bed. She picked it up and sniffed. There was no mistaking who the sock belonged to. Her beautiful boy had famously stinky feet.

"Where are you, my love?" Clutching the sock, Helen sat down on the edge of the bed. "Where have you gone?" She tried to feel her way into her son's mind. In the past she'd been able to do that. Together, they'd been through so much—running away when he was five and

forging new identities so Kip could never find them—they'd become experts at reading one another's thoughts. "It's like we're in our own witness protection program," Henry once joked. But ever since Stuart Rock, his best friend and Dog Radio's lead guitarist, had phoned this morning looking for Henry, Helen's usually sharp intuition felt jumbled by fear, like a TV signal that turns to snow.

Stuart's explanation simply didn't add up. "We fell apart during the second set on Labor Day. It was a shit show, and Henry was pissed because there was a record guy there, so instead of waiting to ride back to the motel, he decided to walk." Stuart hadn't heard from Henry since and neither had Mira, who'd been visiting her mother at the assisted-living place in Albany. "He probably just hitched or took the bus back and is up at the cabin trying to forget the whole thing," Stuart offered, clearly trying to put a positive spin on Henry's unexplained absence.

Helen did the math. Her son had been out of touch with the people closest to him for thirty-six hours, behavior that was completely out of character for a responsible young man—shit show or no shit show.

"I'm on my way up to the cabin now, and if he's not there, I'm going straight to the police," Helen said, hanging up.