

An AB Discovery Book

ELIJAH'S ULTIMATUM

MICHAEL BENT

Elijah's Ultimatum

by

Michael Bent

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Elijah's Ultimatum

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Chapter One – What the Magistrate Said

The magistrate was a small woman with reading glasses on a chain and the particular manner of someone who had said the same things many times and knew they rarely landed. She looked at Elijah over the top of the glasses for a moment before she spoke, as though taking a measurement.

“You're twenty years old,” she said. “Not fifteen. Not twelve. Twenty.”

Elijah looked at the table in front of him. The wood was pale and scratched, and someone had carved initials into the corner near the edge, small and careful, as though they'd had time.

“A video game,” the magistrate said. “Sixty-four dollars and ninety-five cents.”

Laura, in the seat behind him, did not move. She had worn her good coat, the charcoal one she kept for interviews and funerals, and she sat with her handbag on her knees and her hands folded over it, and she did not move at all.

The fine was three hundred and twenty dollars. The magistrate described it as a minimum, and her tone suggested she was being generous with the description. There was a lecture about trajectory, about the difference between a single mistake and a pattern, about what the next appearance in this room would look like if there was one. Elijah listened to it the way he listened to most things, which was from a considerable distance.

Outside, the air was cold and flat, and the carpark was nearly empty. Laura walked ahead of him to the car. She unlocked it without turning around, got in, and sat waiting. Elijah folded himself into the passenger seat, and the smell reached her immediately, that faint insistent sourness she had lived with for years now, and she turned her face slightly toward the window and said nothing. They drove for ten minutes without speaking.

“Three hundred and twenty dollars,” Laura said at a red light. Elijah looked out at the intersection.

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"I don't have it," he said.

"I know you don't have it."

The light changed. She drove.

"I'll pay it," she said. "Because the alternative is not something I'm prepared to deal with. But I want you to understand something."

"Mum..."

"I want you to understand," she said again, and her voice had something in it that was past anger, something quieter and more final, "that I am at the end. I am genuinely at the end."

He didn't answer. He pulled at a loose thread on his cuff and looked out the window at the passing streets and the grey mid-morning sky, and his expression was the same as it had been in the courtroom, the same as it was most of the time, a kind of flatness that she had once thought was teenage indifference and now, two years past any reasonable definition of teenage, she no longer had a name for. She smelled it again as they pulled into the driveway. She turned the engine off and sat for a moment.

"Have you wet yourself?" she said.

"No."

"Elijah?"

"It's from last night."

She got out of the car.

The house was a weatherboard on a narrow street, the garden was kept up because Laura kept it up, and the inside was clean for the same reason. Elijah's room was the exception. She had stopped going in there six months ago, not as a decision exactly but as a kind of self-preservation, the way you stop looking at something that upsets you. She could smell it from the hallway. She had been smelling it from the hallway since he was fifteen and had never entirely worked out how to address the fact that a twenty-year-old man still wet his bed every night, still apparently considered changing the sheets an optional activity, still wandered the house in

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damp trackpants at eleven in the morning as though this were unremarkable.

She hung up her good coat. She put her handbag on the kitchen counter and filled the kettle. Elijah had gone upstairs.

She stood at the kitchen window and looked at the back garden, the small square of lawn she mowed herself, the rose bushes along the fence that were her mother's roses, transplanted when her mother died and tended ever since. The kettle boiled. She made tea and didn't drink it. She heard him moving around upstairs. Then the door closed. Then silence. She drank the tea cold, standing at the window.

Carly came for dinner, as she did most Thursdays. She was twenty-eight and had her mother's eyes and a directness that was her own, and she worked in practice management for a physiotherapy clinic and had a small flat twelve minutes away and a life that was, by most measures, organised. She brought wine and a container of the pasta she'd made the night before because she knew Laura sometimes didn't eat properly when she was stressed, and Laura was always stressed now, largely because of Elijah.

"How did it go?" Carly said, unpacking the container onto the counter.

"How do you think?"

"Fine or community service?"

"Fine. Three hundred and twenty."

Carly was quiet for a moment. She found two glasses and poured the wine. "He doesn't have it, right?"

"No."

"Are you going to pay it?"

"I already said I would."

Carly handed her a glass and leaned against the counter. From upstairs came the distant sound of a game console, gunfire and score music through the ceiling. Carly looked up at it briefly and then back at her mother.

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"He needs to get a job," Carly said.

"He's been asked to leave two jobs, Carly."

"I know."

"The second one, the man called me." Laura set her glass down. "He called me because apparently I was listed as a contact, as though Elijah is sixteen and I need to be notified. The man was very polite about it. He said Elijah had thrown a stapler at a coworker."

Carly said nothing.

"A stapler," Laura said.

The pasta went into a pan on the stove. Carly stirred it without being asked, and Laura set the table, and they moved around each other in the kitchen the way they always had, the two of them, the same routine they had settled into slowly over the years since it had become clear that it was mostly the two of them.

"How was he in court?" Carly asked.

"He was how he always is."

"Which is?"

Laura considered this. "Elsewhere," she said. The answer carried all the information that was necessary.

They ate at the kitchen table. The console sounds from upstairs continued through the meal and then stopped, and then there was a long silence, and then something hit the floor hard enough to feel it through the ceiling.

Laura put her fork down. Carly looked up.

A string of language came down through the ceiling, loud and rhythmic and foul, the kind of swearing that wasn't directed at anything in particular but was simply weather, a front passing through.

"He loses a lot," Laura said, by way of explanation, meaning the game.

Carly refilled both their glasses.

After a while, the noise stopped. The house settled back into quiet. Outside the kitchen window, the garden was dark, and the

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roses were shapes in the dark, and Laura sat at her table in her clean house and thought about the magistrate's face as she said the words *next appearance*, and drank her wine, and Carly sat across from her, and neither of them said anything more about it that night.

Later, after Carly had gone, Laura went upstairs. She paused at the top. The strip of light under Elijah's door had gone out. She stood there for a moment, one hand on the wall, not knocking.

The smell from his room was considerable. He'd had those sheets on the bed for at least four days, probably more. She knew the pattern, the way the wet ones just stayed until she said something, and sometimes stayed even then, and the way he'd wear the same damp trackpants through a morning and into the afternoon as though he were simply waiting for the problem to resolve itself. She had bought mattress protectors. She had replaced the mattress once. She had, at various points, been angry about it and embarrassed by it and sad about it and had eventually arrived somewhere beyond all three, a place that was mostly just exhaustion. She went to her own room and sat on the edge of her bed in the dark for a while.

Three hundred and twenty dollars. The magistrate's glasses on their chain. *Twenty years old. Not fifteen. Not twelve.*

She lay down without undressing and looked at the ceiling, and after a long time, the house was completely quiet, and she listened to the quiet and thought about what the end of something felt like, and whether this was it, and what would come next if it was.

She didn't have an answer. She turned onto her side and closed her eyes, and eventually, sometime after midnight, she slept.

Chapter Two – Sophie's Call

The call came on a Tuesday, three days after the court appearance, while Laura was at work.

She was a medical receptionist at a bulk-billing clinic on the high street, a job she had held for eleven years and was good at, the kind of good that came from genuine organisation rather than performance. She knew the patients by name. She knew which ones were anxious about waiting and which ones needed to be reminded about their referrals and which ones, if you let them, would stand at the counter talking for twenty minutes about things that had nothing to do with their appointment. She was patient with all of them and efficient in a way that didn't feel like efficiency, which was a skill not everyone had.

Her personal phone was supposed to stay in her bag during work hours. She had made that rule herself. But she had softened it after Elijah lost the second job, in the same way she had softened a number of rules about herself over the past few years, gradually and without quite acknowledging it.

The number was unfamiliar. She let it ring through and then, at lunch, sat in her car in the carpark behind the clinic with a sandwich she wasn't eating and listened to the voicemail. The woman's voice was clear and unhurried, not a sales call and not a robo-message, a real person who had chosen each word with some care.

"Mrs Hartley, my name is Sophie Watson. I'm calling from the Department of Corrections, from a unit that works with first-time and low-risk offenders who may be suitable for an alternative to standard sentencing conditions. I've been assigned Elijah's case, and I'd genuinely like to speak with you when you have time. I want to be clear that this is voluntary on your part and completely confidential. There's a program I think may be relevant, and I'd welcome the chance to explain it. Please do call me back when it suits you."

She left a number.

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Laura sat with the phone in her hand and the uneaten sandwich on the passenger seat. Through the windscreen, the carpark was ordinary and grey, a skip bin along the far wall, a gum tree dropping leaves onto the bonnet of the car next to hers. She listened to the message again. *Alternative to standard sentencing conditions*. She put the phone back in her bag, ate half the sandwich and went back inside.

She didn't call back that day, or the next. She told herself it was because she was busy, which was partly true. She told herself she'd think about it over the weekend. On Friday evening, she took a bath, lay in the warm water, looked at the ceiling and thought about it properly for the first time, the way she hadn't let herself during the week.

What bothered her was not the call itself. What bothered her was what the call meant, which was that Elijah's situation was significant enough that someone at the Department of Corrections had looked at the file and thought, *this family might need help*. That someone had made a judgment about her household and found it wanting. That a stranger named Sophie Watson now knew things about her son, about the stolen game, possibly about the jobs, possibly about more than that, and had formed a picture, and the picture was apparently concerning enough to prompt a phone call to his mother. She was aware this was not a rational way to feel about it. She was aware that the call was, by its own description, helpful. She felt what she felt regardless.

She got out of the bath and dried off and stood in front of the mirror for a moment, and then she went downstairs and made a cup of tea and sat at the kitchen table, and from upstairs she could hear the console going and underneath it, faintly, something that might have been Elijah talking to himself or might have been him on a headset with someone online, she had stopped being able to tell the difference. Her phone was on the table. She turned it face down.

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She called Sophie back on the Monday, from her car, before her shift started.

"Mrs Hartley, thank you for calling." Sophie's voice was the same as on the voicemail, the same steadiness. "I really appreciate it. I won't take too much of your time."

"You said it was a program," Laura said. "Can you tell me what kind of program?"

"I can tell you the broad shape of it, yes. It works with young people in Elijah's situation, first offenders, low-to-moderate risk profiles, where there's been some, let's say, accumulating difficulty at home alongside the legal matter. The aim is to address behaviour and self-management in a more intensive and personalised way than the court's standard conditions would."

"What does that mean in practice?"

"The specifics are really best explained by the practitioners themselves. What I can tell you is that it's home-based, it involves the family, and the results we've seen have been," she paused briefly, "honestly quite remarkable. In cases where it's been a good fit."

Laura looked through the windscreen at the clinic's frosted glass frontage. "Who are the practitioners?"

"Two women with long experience in this area. I would put you directly in contact with them. My role is really just to identify families who might benefit and make the introduction."

"Is it funded by the department?"

"It operates independently. There's no cost to the family."

Laura was quiet for a moment. A car pulled up beside her, and a woman got out and fed coins into the parking meter, not looking at anything in particular.

"I appreciate the call," Laura said. "I do. I just, I'm not sure that, I think we're managing."

A short pause. "Of course," Sophie said.

"He had his day in court, and I think that was- I think it made an impression on him, and we're, we're getting on top of things."

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Even as she said it, she could hear how it sounded, the specific sound of someone saying a thing that they did not believe.

"I completely understand," Sophie said, and her voice was neither disbelieving nor unkind. "I'll leave my number with you in case your thinking changes. And Mrs Hartley, I do want to say, there's nothing to be embarrassed about in this. The families I speak to are, without exception, people who are doing their best with a difficult situation. That's all."

Laura looked at her hands on the steering wheel.

"Thank you," she said.

She ended the call and sat for a moment. Then she got out of the car and went into work.

That evening, she came home to find the kitchen bin knocked over, rubbish scattered across the floor in a short, rough arc. From upstairs, there was silence. She stood in the kitchen doorway and looked at the mess. A cereal box, an empty milk carton, a coffee pod and the remains of whatever Elijah had eaten for lunch, a torn crust and a bit of cling wrap, all of it spread across the lino. She bent down and picked it up, item by item, and put it back in the bin.

She made dinner and called Elijah down, and he came, in trackpants and a worn grey hoodie, and he sat at the table and ate without speaking, and his presence was large and absent at the same time, the way it always was, as though most of him were somewhere else and only the basic functions had bothered to show up.

"Did you knock the bin over?" she asked.

He looked up.

"Earlier," she said. "In the kitchen."

He looked back down at his plate. "It was in the way."

"Of what?"

He shrugged.

She looked at him for a moment, at the top of his head, the way he was eating with his elbows on the table and his eyes down, and she thought about Sophie's voice on the phone saying *the results*

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have been quite remarkable, and she thought about the magistrate's glasses on their chain, and she picked up her fork and ate her dinner.

After he'd gone back upstairs, she did the dishes and wiped the counter and turned off the kitchen light and stood in the hallway for a minute. She could hear him up there. The console had started again, the distant sounds of whatever world he'd retreated into.

She went to the bottom of the stairs, and then, instead of going up, she stood there. She could smell it from here. Not strongly, not the way it was in his room, but the trace of it, the faint reliable sourness that drifted down the stairs with him and back up again, that she had long since stopped commenting on because commenting had never changed anything.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs with one hand on the newel post and the sound of the game coming down through the ceiling and that smell, and she thought about the word Sophie had used. *Remarkable*.

She went to bed. She left Sophie's number in her phone, in the recent calls, and did not delete it.

Chapter Three – What Was Under the Mattress

She had told herself she was going to do it on Saturday.

By Saturday, she had found other things to do, the garden and the grocery shopping and a phone call with her sister in Bendigo that ran longer than expected, and she had let the day fill up the way days would if you let them, and Sunday was the same, and by Sunday evening, she had more or less stopped thinking about it.

It was a Wednesday when she finally went in.

Elijah had taken the bus into the city. He'd mentioned it the night before in passing, something about meeting someone online that she hadn't quite followed, a username rather than a name, the kind of social arrangement she had learned not to ask too many questions about. He'd left around eleven. She'd watched him go down the front path from the kitchen window, his hands in the front pocket of his hoodie, his walk that particular loose-limbed shuffle that she found, she had to admit to herself, faintly exhausting to look at.

She waited until the bus would have come and gone. Then she got the clean sheets from the linen cupboard and went upstairs.

She breathed through her mouth at first. She'd learned to do that early on. It didn't help much, but it was something. She opened the window as wide as it would go and stood for a moment letting the outside air move in, which it did slowly and with limited ambition.

The room was not as bad as it sometimes was. There were clothes on the floor, but not as many as usual. The desk was a landscape of charger cables and empty chip packets and a single dirty plate, the kind of archaeological record she had given up finding distressing. The blind was half-down and let in a dull rectangle of light.

She pulled the doona back. The sheet underneath was stiff in the centre, yellowed, three or four days of wetting mapped in overlapping rings of pale colour. She had bought mattress protectors. There they were, doing their job, containing the damage, at least. She