"Last Tag"

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Ronnie heard laughter. They carried brushes and cans of paint.

"So, anyway," the little blonde girl was saying. "Me and Dylan, we need to sort some shit out."

"Oh Tammy," a taller girl with wavy brown hair, said. "You've got to let go of this Dylan-thing."

"I am not listening to chick-talk all day," one of the boys said.

"Me either," another said. "Let's just get this done."

"We probably shouldn't have left our community service till two weeks before graduation, huh?" The blonde one snorted.

"Whatever. It's a dumb requirement. What's it supposed to teach us?"

"Not to paint stupid-ass crap all over walls?"

"We don't do that. What kind of idiot does this shit?"

"Somebody with too much time to kill, man."

They glanced at the wall.

Ronnie had been in the alley since August. Jake and the quiet one were already here when he showed up. But Ronnie hadn't died here. He'd tagged the wall, then headed home. So the flowers and the crosses were on the corner of Eaton and River,

in the spot where he died. And here, where he'd lived, some kids were rambling on about proms and college dorms and a kid named Dylan.

The paint was like the summer sky. It dripped down the wall onto their sneakers.

Jake was first. His eyes were wide. Ronnie watched the blonde girl's slender wrist as it flicked up and down as paint zig-zagged over Jake's work. When Ronnie looked back, Jake flickered, then disappeared.

The quiet one was next. He vanished with unflinching eyes.

All day, they inched closer to Ronnie's tag. It wasn't his best. He was supposed to be watching his little sister that night. She was alone. She was waiting.

They painted and talked their way down the wall, till they were five feet from his tag.

"Where--?" Ronnie whispered. He clenched his fists and prepared himself for the answer.

"Fuck," one of the boys said. "We're out of paint. Can you believe this?"

Ronnie stood, trembling and alone, as the four kids picked up their brushes and cans and headed down the alley, away from him.