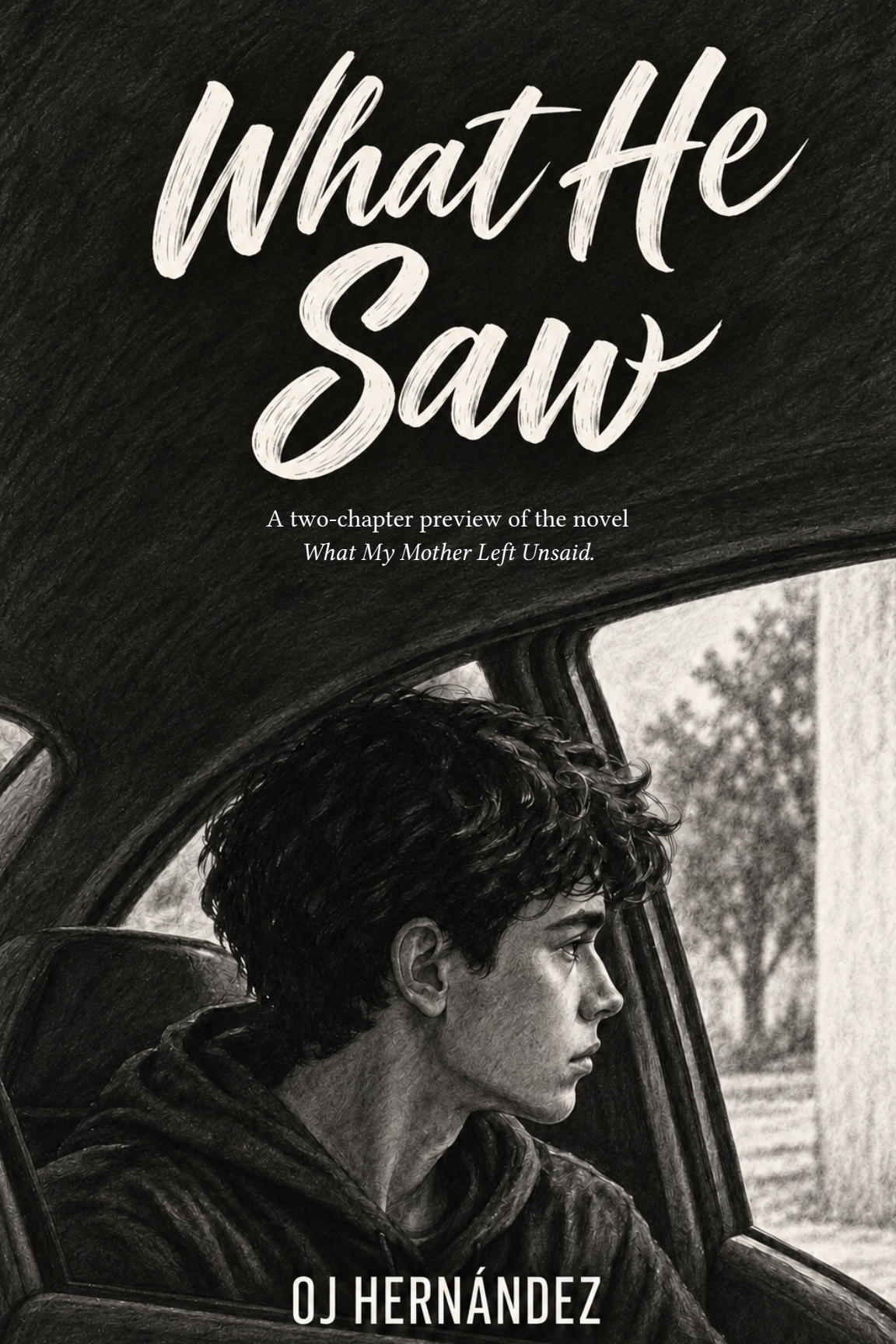
# What He Saw

A two-chapter preview of the novel
*What My Mother Left Unsaid.*



OJ HERNÁNDEZ

# Note to the Reader

These pages contain the first two chapters of the novel *What My Mother Left Unsaid.*

The story is inspired by real events and experiences. Names, places, and circumstances have been changed. It does not portray any specific church or seek to reconstruct a particular case.

What Sebastian sees in these pages is the beginning. It is not yet the explanation.

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CHAPTER 1

# What He Saw

*Mount Hope, North Carolina · Spring 2011*

Lorraine left the keys in the ignition and told him to wait in the car.

"Aren't we going in?"

"I'll be right back."

Sebastian looked at the store. They'd come to buy poster board for a school assignment, but his mother had parked at the far end of the shopping center, beside a storefront with its blinds down. They'd have to cross most of the parking lot to get there. He was fifteen, and all afternoon she'd been telling him he was old enough to remember what he needed without being reminded.

"I can go ahead and buy it."

Lorraine kept one hand on the open door. She looked toward the street, then back at him.

"Wait here, please."

She didn't sound angry. That made him stay put.

Sebastian settled his backpack between his feet. He'd brought it so he could show her the sheet from his teacher if they got the size wrong. He didn't like his mother treating him like a little kid, but he didn't want to go in alone and buy the wrong thing again, either.

He watched her walk away along the sidewalk. Her purse was tucked tight under her arm, and she walked quickly, without looking in the store windows. A gray car turned into the parking lot and drove past. It stopped near the closed storefront.

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The man who got out was Pastor Elijah.

Sebastian sat up straighter. He recognized him before he could quite make out his face, by the way he rested one hand on the roof as he got out. At church, someone was always coming up to greet him, taking his Bible for him or asking him something. Here he shut his own door and walked over to Lorraine.

His mother stopped beside a column. Elijah came up to her. They didn't hug. She started talking almost at once.

Sebastian reached for the door handle. If the pastor had seen them, it would be rude to sit there without saying hello. But Lorraine had told him to wait, and neither of them was looking toward the car. He let his hand rest on the seat.

The window was only cracked open. He could hear traffic on the main road, the wheels of a shopping cart bumping over a seam in the pavement and, closer by, the engine of a truck idling in front of the store. He couldn't hear his mother.

Elijah tilted his head. Lorraine made a short motion with her hand, the way she did when she stopped someone from explaining something she already knew. The pastor stayed still. Then he turned toward the parked cars.

Sebastian bent down to pick up the assignment sheet, though he hadn't dropped it. He felt embarrassed as soon as he did it. He wasn't spying. He was where his mother had left him.

When he looked up, Elijah had his hands in his pockets. Lorraine was still talking. It was strange to see her with him like that: standing face-to-face, no table of food between them, no other women from church nearby, no waiting her turn to ask him to pray. Sebastian knew what conversations after church were like. Some went on so long that he ended

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up sitting on the floor beside his mother's coat. This one wasn't like any of those.

He took out his phone. Reuben had texted to ask if they were on their way home. He started to write that they were buying his school supplies, then stopped. They hadn't bought anything yet.

"Just about," he typed.

He watched the screen until it went dark.

When he looked back toward the column, his mother had taken a step back. Elijah said something; this time his hands moved. She listened and slowly shook her head. Then she stepped aside for a woman pushing a wheelchair. They both waited until the woman turned toward the store.

Sebastian thought about getting out. He could tell them his father was asking when they'd be back. He wouldn't have to make up a reason.

Before he could decide, Lorraine turned toward the car. Elijah stayed beside the column a few moments, then went back to his own. He didn't raise a hand to wave at Sebastian. Sebastian couldn't tell whether he'd seen him.

Lorraine opened the door and sat down. She put her purse on her lap instead of leaving it in the back, where she always kept it. Her phone began ringing inside it. She found it, checked the screen and silenced it.

"Was that the pastor?"

"Yes."

"I saw him."

His mother looked at him then.

"I needed to talk to him for a minute."

"About what?"

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Lorraine pulled a strand of hair away from her mouth. She didn't answer until she'd let it fall out the window.

"Something I needed to take care of."

"Why here?"

"Because we could talk here."

Sebastian looked down at the paper. He'd folded one corner so many times it was beginning to tear.

"Dad asked if we're on our way."

"Did you call him?"

"He texted me."

Lorraine rested a hand on the steering wheel. Sebastian expected her to ask to see the message; she sometimes did when she didn't want to look for her glasses. But this time she kept looking through the windshield.

"What did you tell him?"

"Just about."

"That's fine."

Her answer made him uncomfortable. He hadn't had to lie to his father, but now it seemed as though his mother was grateful for something he hadn't done on purpose.

Lorraine turned toward him, her purse still on her lap.

"Honey, don't say anything about this, okay?"

Sebastian looked at the spot where Elijah had been standing. The gray car was already leaving the shopping center.

"About you talking to him?"

"For now."

"Not even to Dad?"

She took a while to answer.

"Let me tell him when I can explain it properly."

"What's there to explain?"

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"Sebastian, please."

His mother put her hand on his forearm. He knew that touch: when he was sick, when she wanted to wake him without startling him, when he closed himself off in a rage he couldn't yet put into words. He didn't pull his arm away, but he didn't turn his hand over to touch hers, either.

"We didn't do anything wrong," Lorraine said.

Sebastian hadn't asked her that.

A few seconds passed. His mother took her hand away and put her purse on the back seat.

"Let's go get your poster board."

This time they went in together. Lorraine asked him for the sheet, checked the size and showed him two colors. He chose white because it was the first one. While they were paying, she added a bag of the candy he liked. She set it beside the poster board without a word.

In the car, Sebastian held the roll between his knees to keep it from getting creased. The candy stayed in the compartment beside the gearshift. His mother turned on the radio, lowered the volume and, as they left the shopping center, switched it off again.

"Do you have a lot of homework?"

"Some."

"Let me know if you need help cutting it out."

"I can do it."

They didn't speak again until they got home.

Reuben was by the front door, crouched beside a toolbox. He stood when he saw them and opened Sebastian's car door to help him with the poster board.

"Was it made of gold?" he asked. "You were gone a while."

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Before today, Sebastian would have said his mother had gotten sidetracked. He could have told him about the parking lot, the conversation, what the pastor had asked if he'd been able to hear it. Reuben waited with the roll in one hand and the other still resting on the door.

"We couldn't find the right size," Sebastian said.

It was true that they'd had to look for it.

Lorraine passed behind them with her purse and the little bag. She didn't correct him. Sebastian took the poster board from his father and went inside without waiting for him to shut the car door.

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CHAPTER 2

# Reuben's Question

*Mount Hope · Two Days Later, Saturday Night*

Reuben caught the glass before Sebastian tipped it all the way over.

"Your sleeve," he said.

Sebastian moved his arm away. His mother had just set the serving dish on the table, and he'd tried to make room for it without looking. A little water was spreading beneath his plate.

"Get the dishcloth, son."

Sebastian got up. Since Thursday he'd been trying not to be alone with either of them. With his father, he felt he'd have to talk; with his mother, he'd have to make another promise. He'd finished his homework in his room, with the door closed and the unopened candy on his desk.

He wiped the table. Reuben held Sebastian's plate up until he was done, then set it back in front of him.

Lorraine served the rice. Her phone vibrated beside her glass. She glanced at it and kept serving. When it vibrated again, she picked it up and stood.

"Go ahead. It'll get cold."

"Can't you call back later?" Reuben asked.

"It'll just take a minute."

Lorraine left the kitchen. Sebastian heard the back door open and close.

His father kept his hands on his knees. Then he bowed his head.

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"Lord, thank you for this food. Bless this home and everyone in it. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Sebastian's amen came a little late.

They ate with the television off. Reuben had started talking about a noise the car was making, but he stopped midsentence when he looked out back. Sebastian could see his mother through the glass. Her back was turned, one arm folded across her body and the phone to her ear. He didn't know who she was talking to.

"Did you finish your school project?" his father asked.

"Yeah."

"Did it turn out okay?"

"I think so."

Reuben tasted the rice. He pushed aside a grain that had stuck to the edge of his plate.

"Has Mom talked to you yet?" Sebastian asked.

His father looked up.

"About what?"

Sebastian put down his fork. He hadn't thought the question through before asking it. Now his father was waiting, and he couldn't find a way to take it back.

"Nothing. I thought she'd told you something."

"What was she supposed to tell me?"

Sebastian looked out back. Lorraine still had her back to them.

"We saw Pastor Elijah on Thursday."

"At the store?"

"Outside."

Reuben stopped eating.

"Did you run into him?"

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Sebastian ran his thumb over the tines of his fork. He didn't know if they'd run into him. He'd seen the pastor arrive after his mother got out of the car. No one had told him they'd arranged to meet.

"Mom got out. She told me to wait for her. Then he showed up."

His father didn't move. Sebastian began describing the parking lot, the closed storefront and the column, as though saying exactly where they'd stood could keep it from sounding bad.

"What did they talk about?"

"I don't know. I was in the car."

Reuben looked at him a moment longer, then lowered his eyes to his plate.

"All right."

The back door opened. Sebastian felt relieved: she would come in, say what she hadn't been able to explain on Thursday, and he would no longer be the only one who had to remember not to talk.

Lorraine set the phone on the sideboard.

"Aren't you going to have any more?"

Reuben looked up.

"Sebastian tells me you saw Elijah on Thursday."

She stayed beside her chair.

"Yes. We talked for a minute."

"Had you arranged to meet him?"

Lorraine adjusted the serving dish on the trivet, though it was already in place.

"I needed to ask him about a few things."

"What things?"

"Personal things, Reuben."

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"I understand that much."

He hadn't raised his voice. Sebastian would have preferred it if he had. He knew his father's anger when something broke or a bill came with a charge that shouldn't have been there. He knew how long it lasted and how to help him get past it. This stillness was unfamiliar.

"Was that him just now?" Reuben asked, pointing to the phone.

"No."

"Do you talk to him on the phone?"

"Sometimes. He texts me, too."

Reuben leaned back in his chair.

"Since when?"

"I don't keep track."

"Well, I notice when you stop talking as soon as I come in. Or leave the room to answer. I'm not asking about just one call."

Lorraine looked at him. Sebastian expected her to get angry at the way he'd said it, to start bringing up his father's calls, his work conversations, all the things each of them did without explaining. But she sat down slowly.

"He's given me spiritual support."

"With what?"

Lorraine looked at Sebastian.

"Honey, go to your room for a minute."

He didn't get up.

"You told me not to tell him."

Reuben turned toward him.

Lorraine closed her eyes for a moment.

"I asked you to let me talk to him."

"But you didn't."

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"I was going to."

"When?" Reuben asked.

Lorraine didn't answer. The phone vibrated again on the sideboard. This time no one looked at it.

Sebastian noticed that his father's right hand was clenched beneath the table. He opened it on the tablecloth, one finger at a time.

"Look at me, Lorraine. Is there something between you and Elijah?"

"No."

"Nothing?"

"There's nothing between him and me. There never has been."

She'd said it without hesitation. Sebastian looked at her with a brief, almost impatient hope. If that was true, all she had to do was tell them what they'd talked about. They could still finish dinner.

"Then tell me what's going on," Reuben said.

"I can't explain it right now."

"What would it take for you to tell me?"

Lorraine put her hand on the edge of the table. Sebastian saw a small burn near her thumb, still red. He'd watched her take the dish out of the oven with a folded cloth.

"I need a little time."

Reuben moved his chair back. He didn't push it hard, but one leg scraped the tile, and the sound made Sebastian flinch.

"I'm going outside for a minute."

"Reuben."

His father stopped at the door.

"I don't know what you want me to do with this."

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He went out back. Lorraine stayed seated until they heard him walk away on the other side of the glass. Then she began clearing the plates.

"I'm not done yet," Sebastian said.

She let go of his.

"Sorry."

He wasn't hungry. He pulled the plate closer and cut a piece of food with the edge of his fork. His mother stood beside him.

"Honey, what I told your dad is true."

"I asked you in the car."

"I know."

"You didn't tell me anything."

Lorraine held the other two plates against her body.

"I didn't know how."

Sebastian looked toward the door. He didn't want to stay with her, but he didn't know whether his father would want him to follow, either. He got up and carried his plate to the sink. As he passed, his mother touched his back. This time he kept walking.

Reuben was sitting on the back step. Sebastian stayed by the doorframe until his father saw him and moved over.

"Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

"Come here."

He sat down. The wood felt cold through his pants.

"I only said what I saw."

Reuben rested his forearms on his knees.

"You shouldn't have had to keep that to yourself for us."

Sebastian began picking at a loose splinter in the step.

"I'm going to ask him."

"No."

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"If she won't say anything…"

"You're not going to confront him."

"Then what?"

His father took a while to answer.

"Tomorrow I'm going to talk to someone who can give me some guidance. I need to know how to go about this."

"Are you going to say something at church?"

"I'm not going to stand up in front of everyone and accuse anybody."

Sebastian left the splinter where it was. Reuben put a hand on his shoulder.

"You don't know what you didn't hear, son. Neither do I. Remember that if anyone asks you."

"But I saw her."

"Yes. You did."

They stayed where they were. From the kitchen came the sound of running water and dishes. Sebastian thought his mother would come out to get them when she was done. Every time the faucet stopped, he looked toward the door.

Reuben asked him to pray with him. Sebastian bowed his head but didn't close his eyes. He saw his father's hand on his shoulder and a rice stain on his shirt cuff. He heard him asking for help not to cause any more harm. He didn't ask for anyone to be punished.

When they went back inside, Lorraine had put food aside for both of them. Reuben took the containers and put them in the refrigerator. Sebastian picked up the damp dishcloth beside his glass, rinsed it and draped it over the edge of the sink. His mother stood beside him. Neither of them spoke as he spread it out to dry.

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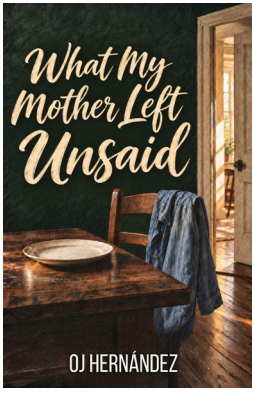
# Keep Reading

Sebastian saw his mother with Pastor Elijah.
He heard her ask him to keep quiet.
He told what he had seen.

He still doesn't know what they talked about.

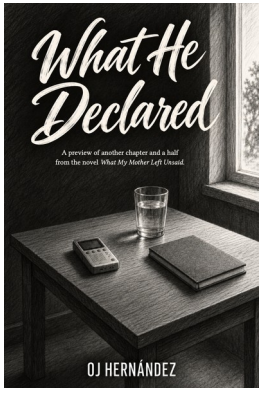
That question isn't answered in the parking lot. The story continues in *What My Mother Left Unsaid*: what that night costs the family, what the church does and fails to do, and what Sebastian discovers six years later.

The truth won't give him back the years he lost.
He'll have to decide whether he still wants to hear his mother out.




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