

THE LISTENER

written by

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Scene 1

INT. NICK'S APARTMENT - DAWN

SOUND of muffled city traffic, then a low, persistent WHISPER that grows in intensity. Darkness still clings to the edges of the room. A cheap ALARM CLOCK on a nightstand reads 4:37 AM.

NICK SHUSTER (40s) lies tangled in sheets, sweat beading on his forehead. He's clearly in a restless, troubled sleep. His face is etched with a familiar weariness, even in slumber.

A YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.) - sweet, high-pitched, but urgent - begins.

YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)  
The bad shadows are coming. To the  
big noisy place.

Nick stirs, a groan escaping his lips. He tries to burrow deeper into his pillow.

The voice grows louder, joined by a YOUNG BOY'S VOICE.

<YOUNG BOY'S VOICE (O.S.)  
Yeah! The Westfield! Concourse B!  
Four-oh-five PM! Big heavy bag!

Nick's eyes snap open. He bolts upright in bed, heart pounding, disoriented. He looks wildly around the dark room, as if expecting to see children there. Silence. Just the hum of the city. He rubs his eyes, runs a shaky hand through his messy hair. He reaches for a glass of water on his nightstand, draining it.

He slowly swings his legs out of bed, the exhaustion evident in every movement. He shuffles over to a small table where a worn map of the United States lies spread out. He traces a line from his current location to a major city on the West Coast.

NICK  
(Muttering to himself, voice rough  
with sleep and frustration) >  
Westfield Mall, Los Angeles. Again?  
That's... a two-day drive.

The voices, though quieter now, are still there, a persistent echo in his mind.

YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)  
No time for questions, Nicky!

YOUNG BOY'S VOICE  
(O.S.) The chaos! It's planned!

Nick flinches, rubbing his temples. He glances at a prescription bottle on the table, then pushes it away, a look of grim determination setting in. He grabs a beat-up duffel bag.

## SCENE 2

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY (NEXT DAY)

Nick's old, slightly dented sedan is pulled off to the side of a desolate highway, steam billowing

from under the hood. Nick kicks a tire in frustration, muttering to himself. The sun beats down.

NICK(MUTTERING)  
Perfect. Just perfect.

The children's voices are a constant murmur now, a low thrum of anxiety.

YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)  
The clock is ticking, Nicky.

YOUNG BOY'S VOICE (O.S.)  
Gotta get there!

Nick throws his hands up, defeated. He looks down the endless stretch of road. No cars. Then, in the distance, a speck. He grabs his duffel bag and starts walking, holding out his thumb. Minutes turn into an eternity. The speck grows into a beat-up, dark SEDAN. It slows and pulls over.

The passenger window rolls down, revealing a YOUNG MAN (20s), tense, a little fidgety, with surprisingly intense eyes. He has a large, dark backpack on the passenger seat beside him, practically filling the space.

YOUNG MAN  
Where you headed?

NICK  
Los Angeles. Anywhere close. Car broke down.

The Young Man considers him for a moment, then nods.

YOUNG MAN

Get in. I'm going that way.

Nick doesn't hesitate. He climbs into the back seat. The car smells faintly of stale fast food and something metallic. The Young Man glances at him in the rearview mirror.

<YOUNG MAN (A LITTLE TOO QUICKLY)

Name's Alex.

NICK

Nick. Thanks for the ride, Alex.

### SCENE 3

INT. ALEX'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Hours pass. The conversation is sparse. Alex seems distracted, his hands gripping the wheel a little too tightly. Nick is exhausted, trying to filter the incessant whispers of the children's voices while making sense of his urgent mission.

The voices are a growing crescendo in his head, almost drowning out the road noise.

YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)

He's close, Nicky. So close.

YOUNG BOY'S VOICE (O.S.)

The secret thing! In his bag!

Nick rubs his temples, trying to focus. He glances at Alex's backpack on the seat. It looks heavy, almost rigid.

Alex takes an exit. Nick looks out the window, recognizing the sprawling urban landscape. He sees a sign: WESTFIELD MALL - NEXT RIGHT.

A jolt goes through Nick. The voices suddenly coalesce into a chilling, undeniable clarity.

YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)

The heavy bag! The concourse!

YOUNG BOY'S VOICE (O.S.)

IT'S HIM! THE DRIVER! IT'S HIM!

Nick's blood runs cold. He stares at the back of Alex's head, then at the backpack, the pieces clicking into place with horrifying speed. Alex glances in the rearview mirror, catching Nick's intense gaze. A flicker of something, unease or suspicion, crosses Alex's face.

ALEX

Something wrong? We're almost there. Just dropping this off...

Alex gestures vaguely towards the mall entrance they're approaching. Nick glances at the dashboard clock: 4:03 PM.

Alex pulls into the mall parking lot, heading for the main entrance. His hand, almost imperceptibly, brushes against the backpack.

Nick knows he has seconds.

NICK VOICE TIGHT WITH SUPPRESSED  
PANIC)

Pull over. I need to get out here.

ALEX

No, I can drop you right at the door. Easier.

NICK< (MORE FORCEFULLY)

Now! Stop the car!

Alex's face hardens. He eyes Nick in the mirror, then the backpack. He speeds up, heading directly for the nearest pedestrian drop-off point, already crowded with shoppers.

Nick doesn't hesitate. He lunges forward, grabbing Alex's arm, yanking the steering wheel sharply. The car swerves wildly, narrowly missing a parked vehicle, then SCREECHES to a halt, hitting a curb hard.

Alex cries out in surprise and rage. He tries to fight Nick off, reaching for the backpack.

ALEX

What the hell?! Get off me!

NICK(STRAINING)

No! You're not going in there!

A nearby SECURITY GUARD, hearing the commotion and seeing the erratic driving, quickly approaches the car.

Alex, desperate, shoves Nick off him, unzips his backpack, and starts to pull something out.

NICK (SCREAMING) > GUN! HE HAS A GUN!

The Security Guard hears Nick's yell, sees the glint of metal emerging from the bag. His eyes widen. He doesn't hesitate. He draws his own weapon, shouting commands.

SECURITY GUARD  
FREEZE! DROP IT!

Alex freezes, caught between Nick and the approaching guard. His face contorts in a mixture of fury and despair. The gun, barely out of the bag, falls to the floor with a clatter.

Other shoppers stare, some screaming.

Nick is breathing heavily, disoriented, but his eyes are fixed on the fallen weapon. The children's voices in his head, for a brief, blessed moment, are silent. A profound, almost painful quiet descends.

The Security Guard quickly secures Alex, handcuffing him as police sirens are already wailing in the distance.

The Security Guard looks at Nick, then at Alex, then back at Nick.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

TO NICK, BEWILDERED)

How... how did you know?

Nick pushes himself up, leaning against the car. He's pale. He looks at the Security Guard, then around at the bewildered but safe shoppers. A profound weariness settles over him, but also a flicker of something else - a fleeting, unreadable emotion. He offers a small, almost imperceptible shrug.

NICK  
A little birdy told me.

He starts to walk away, past the arriving police cars and curious onlookers, trying to disappear into the crowd. He leaves his broken-down car and his duffel bag behind.

Scene 4

EXT. MALL PARKING LOT - LATER

Nick walks away from the mall, slowly, his shoulders slumped. He has nothing now but the clothes on his back.

The silence in his head is fleeting. The children's voices begin to hum again, softly at first, then growing.

YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)  
You did good, Nicky.

YOUNG BOY'S VOICE (O.S.)  
The old spooky place! Ohio! Friday!  
Midnight!

Nick sighs, a long, deep exhalation. He glances up at the setting sun, then down the road, wondering how he'll get there. The cycle continues.

FADE OUT.