The Stolen

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Extract

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Prologue

"Finished."

I saved the document and eased back in my chair. My body had grown accustomed to long days and nights spent in its discomfort. The last few months, I had arrived home nearly every night with a sore tailbone or stiff back, wondering if the supplies department would turn a blind eye and let me expense a newer model. Eventually I forgot about it. Then one day, I noticed I hadn't thought about the aches and pains in a long time. They were a part of me now.

The past three days and nights had sped by in a blur of keystrokes, Chinese food containers and discarded coffee cups. I was on the kind of crash deadline that a year ago would have had me sweating rivulets, but now barely raised my pulse. The fact was, without those deadlines to keep me focused, the pains might not have ebbed away.

Saving the file, I looked outside my window over Rockefeller Plaza. The view had changed—bright morning into gauzy summer afternoon, fading into the kind of New York night where the constant bright lights disguised any sense of time.

Until recently, the night always heralded the end of my

workday. I would file my story with Evelyn Waterstone, the *Gazette*'s Metro editor, pack up my things, throw some goodbyes to my night-shift colleagues and one or two guys at the sports desk who were putting together the box scores, and head home to meet Amanda. Good conversation, a hot shower, maybe a movie or a show we'd recorded, they'd all be waiting. Then I'd fall asleep with a whisper of her hair across my face.

Amanda.

We met two years ago. Our introduction wasn't exactly the setup for your average romantic comedy. Our paths crossed while I was on the run after being falsely accused of murder. I had nobody to turn to. Nowhere to go. And just when the situation was at its bleakest, Amanda offered a hand to me, a total stranger. She saved my life. She was running from her own demons, having come from a broken home, spending her childhood recapping her life in small notebooks because she assumed everyone she met would eventually abandon her. It was this that brought us together. We were both damaged, broken, but together we were whole. She was everything I wanted in a partner. Strong, brilliant, beautiful. And she laughed at my jokes that made everyone else cringe. I repaid her by offering all the love I had to give. Had I offered merely love, it would have been more than enough. It's the other baggage I brought along that was too heavy for our relationship to bear.

Six months ago, a killer began terrorizing the city by publicly executing those he felt deserved his wrath. I was able to weave together the strands of his mysterious past and learned the horrific truth about his ancestry. During my search, the killer turned his sights not just toward me, but to those I loved.

He brutally attacked my ex, Mya Loverne, and left her fighting for her life. He broke into Amanda's office at the New York Legal Aid Society and nearly killed her. It was then, in the aftermath of those acts of violence, that I realized what I had to do. To protect those I loved, I had to turn away. I had to shield them from myself.

There was nothing more I would have wanted than to spend the rest of my life with her, playing shuffleboard and eating dinner at noon, doing whatever old couples did. It should have been easy. I mean, everyone complains about how hard it is to find someone in New York City. Once you find the right person, you hold on to them for dear life. Unfortunately I had to do the opposite.

Amanda nearly lost her life because of me, because of my work. And because being a reporter was in my blood, I shuddered to think that it was only a matter of time before those odds caught up. So I left her. In the middle of the street. And every day since I've had ample time to think about my decision.

We have not spoken in six months. My apartment, once warm with her presence, was now cold and uninviting. The stove, where we used to burn our attempts at lasagna, hadn't seen a pan in weeks. The place reeked of carelessness, abandoned by a man who felt like a stranger in his own home.

Work had always been my passion. Now it was my whole life.

Underneath my desk was a small duffel bag in which I kept a clean shirt, slacks and a pair of loafers. Every other day I would venture back to that unfamiliar home, unload the dirty laundry and pack up a clean change of clothes. Every other week the accumulation of soiled attire would be sent to the cleaners, and the cycle would start again. I

would change in the men's room, always drawing a few *weren't you just wearing that?* looks from my colleagues.

I heard a noise behind me, turned to see Evelyn Waterstone striding up to my desk. Evelyn had barely given me the time of day when I first started working at the *Gazette,* but she'd warmed considerably over the past few months. Evelyn was in her late fifties, a solid tree stump of a woman who commanded attention, respect, and made everyone leap to the side when she walked by. Like many of the newspaper's top talent, Evelyn was unmarried and childless. She was also one of the best editors in the business. Somehow I'd grudgingly gained her respect. I figured as long as I kept my head down and did what I did best, it would stay that way.

"Got your story, Parker," she said, barely slowing down as she approached, then stopping abruptly before she knocked my desk over. "I swear you must have replaced your brain this year or taken basic grammar and spelling lessons. I haven't had to smack my head in frustration at your copy in almost a month. You keep it up like this, I might actually be able to cut back on the migraine medication."

"They say reading is the cure for all ills," I said.

Evelyn eyed me skeptically. "Who said that?"

"You know…they."

"Tell 'they' that they can shove their quotations up my keester. Anyway, keep up the not-so-terrible work. You're giving me more time to spend with crustaceans whose brains haven't fully grasped the '*i* before *e*' concept." Evelyn shot a glance toward Frank Rourke, the city's top sports columnist, to whom *grammar* was a term of endearment for his mother's mother.

Then Evelyn leaned forward. Sniffed. Scrunched up her nose.

"My God, Parker, you stink worse than O'Donnell the morning after St. Patrick's Day. Your pieces might be clean, but you reek like my nephew's diaper. Go home and shower, seriously, otherwise I'll tell Wallace he has a rodent infestation in the vicinity of your desk."

"I'm not that bad, am I?" I raised an arm, took a whiff, and immediately nodded in agreement. "I'm on my way."

When Evelyn left, I took the duffel out from beneath my desk, opened it. Sniffed. Closed it right up. Maybe it was best to just burn this load.

I grabbed the bag, left the office, took a cab to my apartment. I blew in the door, took a three-minute shower, and seven minutes after that I was wearing a fresh outfit with a spare packed away. Another cab brought me back to Rockefeller, where I strode into the office with a sense of pride that I knew was well undeserved. I waved to the night security team. They were too busy watching a ball game to wave back.

The newsroom was nearly empty. A quiet newsroom felt like an unnatural beast, but I'd grown used to it.

I opened my drawer, pulled out a down pillow I'd bought myself as a present. I took a fresh pillow cover from the bag, pulled it on. Buried somewhere in those drawers, beneath a mountain of papers, was a photo of Amanda. I'd taken it at a concert at Jones Beach last summer. It was raining. I was concerned the camera would be ruined. Amanda told me not to worry, that if special moments weren't worth some sort of risk, how special could they be?

Without saying another word I snapped the photo. She was right. The moment was worth far more than the risk.

Her brown hair was plastered to her cheeks, her neck. Her tank top clinging to her rain-slick body like silk. Her

eyes were closed, the music pouring through her. That was my favorite photo of Amanda. It used to sit on my desk. Now I couldn't even look at it, because it only made me think of the night I ended the best thing in my life.

Then I did what I'd been doing every night for the past four months. I placed the pillow on my desk, put my head down, and slept.

1

"James, get your behind down here and finish your greens!"

Shelly's voice boomed through the house, and even though it took eight-year-old James Linwood only thirty seconds to turn off his Xbox 360 and race down the stairs, his younger sister, Tasha, was already sitting at the table, eyeing him while munching loudly on a celery stalk. When James sat down, Tasha, six years old but already a grandmaster at winning the game of sibling rivalry, stuck a green, mush-filled tongue out at her brother, who was more than happy to return the favor.

"That's enough, both of you. James, baby, I never excused you from the table. You have to *ask* to be excused." James looked at his mother and gave an exaggerated sigh, then picked up a single piece of lettuce. He took a bite, grimacing as if it had been marinating in oyster juice. "I don't know what you're looking at me for," Shelly said. "Some people actually think vegetables taste good."

Tasha nodded along with her mother, opened wide and shoved a whole stalk of celery in her mouth.

"Those people are stupid," James said, nibbling at the lettuce.

"No, if you knew what kind of vitamins and minerals veggies had, you'd know those people are quite smart," Shelly said. "Did you know LeBron James eats a double helping of carrots before every game?"

"Does not," James replied.

"Does too," said Shelly.

"Does too," said Tasha.

James gave his sister a cold glare. He tore off a piece of lettuce and chewed it with vigor, letting several shreds of green gristle fall onto the table.

Shelly watched her children eat, their eyes more concerned with her approval than their nutrition. The soft jingle of a wind chime could be heard from the back porch, as well as the noise of a television set blaring from the house next door. Mrs. Niederman's hearing had begun to go last year, and now she watched Alex Trebek at a volume that could be heard from space.

Shelly took a moment to gaze around her house. Just a few years ago, the back porch was riddled with termites, the wood rotted, the whole structure ready to collapse. She never would have let Tasha and James play on it. Randy was never very good with tools, and they simply didn't have the money to rebuild it. Not yet.

After their terrible ordeal, when their family had been fractured, the Good Samaritans of Hobbs County had reached out to help the Linwoods. Now barely a day passed where James and Tasha weren't outside shooting off water guns, dangling from the railing like a pair of spider monkeys. At least the porch had been rebuilt.

While the kids were at school, while Randy was away at work, Shelly would often find herself looking at the old photos of their house, taken when they'd first moved in years ago. She barely recognized what it had become.

The white paint was fresh, blue trim even, the mailbox upright. Nobody egged their house on Halloween, and she never had to call the police to report the teenagers who used to drive by once a week and knock the mailbox sideways with wielded baseball bats. Those kinds of things never happened anymore. There were more cops; she could feel their presence. They stopped by every so often, just to see how she and Randy were holding up. *I'm fine,* Shelly would say. *We're fine.*

The cops always turned down a cup of coffee. As though being any closer to the sorrow might somehow infect them.

James was grimacing through his last scraps of food when Shelly heard the doorbell.

"That's got to be Daddy," Shelly said. "He probably forgot his keys again this morning. James, would you let your father in?" James didn't move. "Did you hear me?"

"I'm cleaning my plate like you told me. I can't answer the door and eat at the same time." He smiled at this catch-22. Shelly sighed, though silently proud of her son's intelligence.

"Fine, you can stop eating if you let your father in. But if I hear that video game start up before you finish your social studies homework, you won't watch television until you graduate college."

James sprung up like he'd been shot from a cannon, then bolted from his chair.

Shelly smiled at her daughter. Tasha. Her beautiful, young daughter, who would grow up to be strong and vivacious like her mother had never been. Shelly felt an ache in her stomach and placed her palm on Tasha's cheek. Tasha smiled at her, that big goofy grin full of baby teeth.

"Mom?" James's voice bellowed from the hallway. "There's a kid here. Do you know anyone named Daniel?"

A napkin fell from Shelly's hand and fluttered to the floor.

"Wha…what did you say, baby?"

"Daniel. There's some kid at the door says he knows you. Wait, huh? Uh, Mom? He says…he says you're his mom."

Shelly leapt from her seat. She dashed through the house, nearly knocking over the coffee table, and sprinted into the front hallway.

The wooden frame was open to reveal the screen door. A boy was standing behind the screen, looking confused as to why he hadn't been allowed in yet. Shelly covered her mouth to prevent a scream from escaping her lips.

On the other side of the door stood a boy Shelly both knew and didn't know. He was about five foot three with a lock of dark hair that fell over his hazel eyes. His father's eyes. His limbs were gangly, full of sharp angles, as if he'd grown a great deal in a short amount of time and the flesh hadn't caught up to his bones. Everything and nothing was just like she remembered.

"Baby, oh my God…"

She gently pushed James away from the door and tore open the screen. The boy stood on the front porch with a look of slight bewilderment, a twinkle of recognition, a blurry memory slowly coming into focus. He didn't move. Instead, the boy's eyes met Shelly's as though waiting for something, and before another second passed Shelly Linwood gathered the boy up into her arms and squeezed him like there was no tomorrow, until his arms tentatively wrapped themselves around her body and held on. She remembered how he'd felt in her arms, and though heavier, he was the same child she'd held in her arms for the first six years of his life. She showered the boy's head with kisses until he pulled away slightly, an embarrassed grin on his young face.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. Baby, is it really you?" The boy shrugged, then was muffled as Shelly attempted to squeeze the life out of him again.

Shelly heard a car pull up. When the engine cut off, she looked up to see Randy's silver V70 Volvo in the driveway. The door opened, and her husband climbed out with a groan. Randy was forty-one, just ten pounds heavier than when they'd met in high school. His jawline was still visible above a slight jowl, his arms still maintaining some of the tone from his linebacker days at Hobbs High. Shelly loved to run her hands down his arms when he lay on top of her, the definition of his triceps making her shiver. It had been a year since she last felt that, but now she needed to feel him closer more than ever.

Her family.

Randy stretched his back, ran his fingers through his thinning hair, then reached back inside to grab his briefcase.

"Honey," he said, noticing the commotion on the front porch. "Please tell me there's a Michelob left in the fridge, I—"

"It's Daniel," Shelly blurted. "He's back."

Randy looked up, confused. Then when everything came into focus, his briefcase fell to the ground. He stared for a moment, shaking his head, then ran up the steps to join his wife. He placed his palm over the boy's forehead, pulled his hair back, gazing into the young, confused eyes. Then he joined his wife in the embrace.

"You people are weird," James muttered. "I don't get it. Who is he?"

"This," Randy said, turning the boy to face him, tears streaming down his face, "is your brother. His name is Daniel. Do you remember him?"

James had been just three when it all happened. Shelly didn't take it personally when Daniel looked at his sibling, bewilderment reigning over his face, a slight twinkle of memory.

"My brother?" James said. "I thought he was, like, stolen or something."

"He was," Shelly said, stroking Daniel's hair. "But thank you, *God,* somehow our boy has found his way home."

James looked at Daniel. There were no bruises on his body; no cuts or scrapes. His clothes looked new enough to still have the tags on them. Though he was so young, Shelly wondered if James remembered all those people rushing in and out of their house. Men and women with badges, other loud people with cameras and microphones. Once on an Easter egg hunt, Shelly had entered the bedroom to find James and Tasha rifling through a trunk stuffed full of newspaper clippings about Daniel's disappearance. James had asked Shelly about Daniel once, and she answered with a single tear, a trembling lip. He never asked again.

To Shelly, this was God's will. It was fate that her family be reunited.

To James Linwood, though, he couldn't understand how his brother, who'd disappeared nearly five years ago without a trace, could simply reappear like magic without a scratch on him.

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