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Perfect Match

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Prologue

When the monster finally came through the door, he was wearing a mask.

She stared and stared at him, amazed that no one else could see through the disguise. He was the neighbor next door, watering his forsythia. He was the stranger who smiled across an elevator. He was the kind man who took a toddler's hand to help him cross the street. *Can't you see?* she wanted to scream. *Don't you know?*

Beneath her, the chair was unforgiving. Her hands were folded as neatly as a schoolgirl's, her shoulders were squared; but her heart was all out of rhythm, a jellyfish writhing in her chest. When had breathing become something she had to consciously remember to do?

Bailiffs flanked him, guiding him past the prosecutor's table, in front of the judge, toward the spot where the defense attorney was sitting. From the corner came the sibilant hum of a TV camera. It was a familiar scene, but she realized she had never seen it from this angle. *Change your point of view, and the perspective is completely different.*

The truth sat in her lap, heavy as a child. She was going to do this.

That knowledge, which should have stopped her short, instead coursed through her limbs like brandy. For the first time in weeks, she didn't feel as if she were sleepwalking on the ocean floor, her lungs fiery, holding on to the breath she'd taken before she went under – a breath that would have been bigger, more deliberate, had she known what was coming. In this horrible place, watching this horrible man, she suddenly

felt normal again. And with this feeling came the most wonderfully normal thoughts: that she hadn't wiped down the kitchen table after breakfast; that the library book which had gone missing was behind the dirty clothes hamper; that her car was fifteen hundred miles overdue to have the oil changed. That in the next two seconds, the bailiffs escorting him would step back to give him privacy to speak to his attorney.

In her purse, her fingers slipped over the smooth leather cover of her checkbook, her sunglasses, a lipstick, the furry nut of a Life Saver, lost from its package. She found what she was looking for and grabbed it, surprised to see that it fit with the same familiar comfort as her husband's hand.

One step, two, three, that was all it took to come close enough to the monster to smell his fear, to see the black edge of his coat against the white collar of his shirt. Black and white, that was what it came down to.

For a second she wondered why no one had stopped her. Why no one had realized that this moment was inevitable; that she was going to come in here and do just this. Even now, the people who knew her the best hadn't grabbed for her as she rose from her seat.

That was when she realized she was wearing a disguise, just like the monster. It was so clever, so *authentic;* nobody really knew what she had turned into. But now she could feel it cracking into pieces. *Let the whole world see,* she thought, as the mask fell away. And she knew as she pressed the gun to the defendant's head, she knew as she shot him four times in quick succession, that at this moment she would not have recognized herself.

I

When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should – so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again.

– Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

We're in the woods, just the two of us. I have on my best sneakers, the ones with rainbow laces and the place on the back that Mason chewed through when he was just a puppy. Her steps are bigger than mine, but it's a game – I try to jump into the hole her shoes leave behind. I'm a frog; I'm a kangaroo; I'm magic.

When I walk, it sounds like cereal getting poured for breakfast. Crunch. 'My legs hurt,' I tell her.

'It's just a little bit longer.'

'I don't want to walk,' I say, and I sit right there, because if I don't move she won't either.

She leans down and points, but the trees are like the legs of tall people I can't see around. 'Do you see it yet?' she asks me.

I shake my head. Even if I could see it, I would have told her I couldn't.

She picks me up and puts me on her shoulders. 'The pond,' she says. 'Can you see the pond?'

From up here, I can. It is a piece of sky, lying on the ground.

When Heaven breaks, who fixes it?

I

I have always been best at closings.

Without any significant forethought, I can walk into a courtroom, face a jury, and deliver a speech that leaves them burning for justice. Loose ends drive me crazy; I have to tidy things up to the point where I can put them behind me and move on to the next case. My boss tells anyone who'll listen that he prefers to hire prosecutors who were waiters and waitresses in former lives – that is, used to juggling a load. But I worked in the gift-wrapping department of Filene's to put myself through law school, and it shows.

This morning, I've got a closing on a rape trial and a competency hearing. In the afternoon, I have to meet with a DNA scientist about a bloodstain inside a wrecked car, which revealed brain matter belonging to neither the drunk driver accused of negligent homicide nor the female passenger who was killed. All of this is running through my mind when Caleb sticks his head into the bathroom. The reflection of his face rises like a moon in the mirror. 'How's Nathaniel?'

I turn off the water and wrap a towel around myself. 'Sleeping,' I say.

Caleb's been out in his shed, loading his truck. He does stonework – brick paths, fireplaces, granite steps, stone walls. He smells of winter, a scent that comes to Maine at the same time local apples come to harvest. His flannel shirt is streaked with the dust that coats bags of concrete. 'How is his fever?' Caleb asks, washing his hands in the sink.

'He's fine,' I answer, although I haven't checked on my son; haven't even seen him yet this morning.

I am hoping that if I wish hard enough, this will be true. Nathaniel wasn't really that sick last night, and he wasn't running a temperature above 99 degrees. He didn't seem himself, but that alone wouldn't keep me from sending him to school – especially on a day when I'm due in court. Every working mother has been caught between this Scylla and Charybdis. I can't give a hundred percent at home because of my work; I can't give a hundred percent at work because of my home; and I live in fear of the moments, like these, when the two collide.

'I'd stay home, but I can't miss this meeting. Fred's got the clients coming to review the plans, and we're all supposed to put in a good showing.' Caleb looks at his watch and groans. 'In fact, I was late ten minutes ago.' His day starts early and ends early, like most subcontractors. It means that I bear the brunt of getting Nathaniel to school, while Caleb is in charge of the pickup. He moves around me, gathering his wallet and his baseball cap. 'You won't send him to school if he's sick . . .'

'Of course not,' I say, but heat creeps beneath the neck of my blouse. Two Tylenol will buy me time; I could be finished with the rape case before getting a call from Miss Lydia to come get my son. I think this, and in the next second, hate myself for it.

'Nina.' Caleb puts his big hands on my shoulders. I fell in love with Caleb because of those hands, which can touch me as if I am a soap bubble certain to burst, yet are powerful enough to hold me together when I am in danger of falling to pieces.

I slide my own hands up to cover Caleb's. 'He'll be fine,' I insist, the power of positive thinking. I give him my prosecutor's smile, crafted to convince. 'We'll be fine.'

Caleb takes a while to let himself believe this. He is a smart man, but he's methodical and careful. He will finish one project with exquisite finesse before moving on to the next, and he makes decisions the same way. I've spent seven years hoping that lying next to him each night will cause some of his

deliberation to rub off, as if a lifetime together might soften both our extremes.

'I'll get Nathaniel at four-thirty,' Caleb says, a line that, in the language of parenting, means what *I love you* once did.

I feel his lips brush the top of my head as I work the clasp on the back of my skirt. 'I'll be home by six.' *I love you, too.*

He walks toward the door, and when I look up I am struck by pieces of him – the breadth of his shoulders, the tilt of his grin, the way his toes turn in in his big construction boots. Caleb sees me watching. 'Nina,' he says, and that smile, it tips even more. 'You're late too.'

The clock on the nightstand says 7:41. I have nineteen minutes to rouse and feed my son, stuff him into his clothes and his car seat, and make the drive across Biddeford to his school with enough time to get myself to the superior court in Alfred by 9:00.

My son sleeps hard, a cyclone in his sheets. His blond hair is too long; he needed a haircut a week ago. I sit on the edge of the bed. What's two seconds more, when you get to watch a miracle?

I wasn't supposed to get pregnant five years ago. I wasn't supposed to get pregnant, ever, thanks to a butcher of an OB who removed an ovarian cyst when I was twenty-two. When I had been weak and vomiting for weeks, I went to see an internist, certain I was dying from some dread parasite, or that my body was rejecting its own organs. But the blood test said there was nothing wrong. Instead, there was something so impossibly right that for months afterward, I kept the lab results taped to the inside of the medicine cabinet of the bathroom: the burden of proof.

Nathaniel looks younger when he's asleep, with one hand curled under his cheek and the other wrapped tight around a stuffed frog. There are nights I watch him, marveling at the fact that five years ago I did not know this person who has since transformed me. Five years ago I would not have been able to tell you that the whites of a child's eyes are clearer than

fresh snow; that a little boy's neck is the sweetest curve on his body. I would never have considered knotting a dish towel into a pirate's bandanna and stalking the dog for his buried treasure, or experimenting on a rainy Sunday to see how many seconds it takes to explode a marshmallow in the microwave. The face I give to the world is not the one I save for Nathaniel: After years of seeing the world in absolutes, he has taught me how to pick out all the shades of possibility.

I could lie and tell you that I never would have gone to law school or become a prosecutor if I'd expected to have children. It's a demanding job, one you take home, one you cannot fit around soccer games and nursery school Christmas pageants. The truth is, I have always loved what I do; it's how I define myself: *Hello, I'm Nina Frost, assistant district attorney.* But I also am Nathaniel's mother, and I wouldn't trade that label for the world. There is no majority share; I am split down the middle, fifty-fifty. However, unlike most parents, who lie awake at night worrying about the horrors that could befall a child, I have the chance to do something about them. I'm a white knight, one of fifty lawyers responsible for cleaning up the state of Maine before Nathaniel makes his way through it.

Now, I touch his forehead – *cool* – and smile. With a finger I trace the slight bow of his cheek, the seam of his lips. Asleep, he bats my hand away, buries his fists under the covers. 'Hey,' I whisper into his ear. 'We need to get moving.' When he doesn't stir, I pull the covers down – and the thick ammonia scent of urine rises from the mattress.

Not today. But I smile, just like the doctor said to when accidents happen for Nathaniel, my five-year-old who's been toilet trained for three years. When his eyes open – Caleb's eyes, sparkling and brown and so engaging that people used to stop me on the street to play with my baby in his stroller – I see that moment of fear when he thinks he's going to be punished. 'Nathaniel,' I sigh, 'these things happen.' I help him off the bed and start to peel his damp pajamas from his skin, only to have him fight me in earnest.

One wild punch lands on my temple, driving me back. 'For God's sake, Nathaniel!' I snap. But it's not his fault that I'm late; it's not his fault that he's wet the bed. I take a deep breath and work the fabric over his ankles and feet. 'Let's just get you cleaned off, okay?' I say more gently, and he defeatedly slides his hand into mine.

My son tends to be unusually sunny. He finds music in the stifled sounds of traffic, speaks the language of toads. He never walks when he can scramble; he sees the world with the reverence of a poet. So this boy, the one eyeing me warily over the lip of the tub, is not one I recognize. 'I'm not mad at you.' Nathaniel ducks his head, embarrassed. 'Everyone has accidents. Remember when I ran over your bike last year, with the car? You were upset – but you knew I didn't mean to do it. Right?' I might as well be talking to one of Caleb's granite blocks. 'Fine, give me the silent treatment.' But even this backfires; I cannot tease him into a response. 'Ah, I know what will make you feel better . . . you can wear your Disney World sweatshirt. That's two days in a row.'

If he had the option, Nathaniel would wear it *every* day. In his room, I overturn the contents of every drawer, only to find the sweatshirt tangled in the pile of soiled sheets. Spying it, he pulls it free and starts to tug it over his head. 'Hang on,' I say, taking it away. 'I know I promised, but it's got pee all over it, Nathaniel. You can't go to school in this. It has to be washed first.' Nathaniel's lower lip begins to tremble, and suddenly I – the skilled arbitrator – am reduced to a plea bargain. 'Honey, I swear, I'll wash this tonight. You can wear it for the rest of the week. And all of next week, too. But right now, I need your help. I need us to eat fast, so that we can leave on time. All right?'

Ten minutes later, we have reached agreement, thanks to my complete capitulation. Nathaniel is wearing the damn Disney World sweatshirt, which has been hand-rinsed, hastily spun through the dryer, and sprayed with a pet deodorizer. Maybe Miss Lydia will have allergies; maybe no one will notice

the stain above Mickey's wide smile. I hold up two cereal boxes. 'Which one?' Nathaniel shrugs, and by now I'm convinced his silence has less to do with shame than getting a rise out of me. Incidentally, it's working.

I set him down at the counter with a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios while I pack his lunch. 'Noodles,' I announce with flair, trying to boost him out of his blue funk. 'And . . . ooh! A drumstick from dinner last night! Three Oreos . . . and celery sticks, so that Miss Lydia doesn't yell at Mommy again about nutrition pyramids. There.' I zip up the insulated pack and put it into Nathaniel's backpack, grab a banana for my own breakfast, then check the clock on the microwave. I give Nathaniel two more Tylenol to take – it won't hurt him this once, and Caleb will never know. 'Okay,' I say. 'We have to go.'

Nathaniel slowly puts on his sneakers and holds out each small foot to me to have the laces tied. He can zip up his own fleece jacket; shimmy into his own backpack. It is enormous on those thin shoulders; sometimes from behind he reminds me of Atlas, carrying the weight of the world.

Driving, I slide in Nathaniel's favorite cassette – the Beatles' *White Album,* of all things – but not even 'Rocky Raccoon' can snap him out of this mood. Clearly, he's gotten up on the wrong side of the bed – the *wet* side, I think, sighing. A tiny voice inside me says I should just be grateful that in approximately fifteen minutes it will be someone else's problem.

In the rearview mirror, I watch Nathaniel play with the dangling strap of his backpack, pleating it into halves and thirds. We come to the stop sign at the bottom of the hill. 'Nathaniel,' I whisper, just loud enough to be heard over the hum of the engine. When he glances up, I cross my eyes and stick out my tongue.

Slowly, slow as his father, he smiles at me.

On the dashboard, I see that it is 7:56. Four minutes ahead of schedule.

We are doing even better than I thought.

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