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Stolen Shadows

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1:** The White Room
- **Chapter 2:** Unfamiliar Faces
- **Chapter 3:** Pieces and Paint
- **Chapter 4:** Echoes of Scandal
- **Chapter 5:** Against the Glass
- **Chapter 6:** Vanished
- **Chapter 7:** Fragments Return
- **Chapter 8:** The Sketchbook
- **Chapter 9:** Tangled Lies
- **Chapter 10:** Across the River
- **Chapter 11:** Hidden in Plain Sight
- **Chapter 12:** False Reflections
- **Chapter 13:** Between Friends
- **Chapter 14:** Shadows Gather
- **Chapter 15:** What Remains
- **Chapter 16:** No Safe Places
- **Chapter 17:** Eyes Watching
- **Chapter 18:** The Unsaid
- **Chapter 19:** Splintered Trust
- **Chapter 20:** The Warning
- **Chapter 21:** Memory Games
- **Chapter 22:** Truths Unveiled
- **Chapter 23:** Those Left Behind
- **Chapter 24:** The Final Portrait
- **Chapter 25:** Shattered Light

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Introduction

The first thing I remember is the hollow click of my heartbeat, echoing in a room brimming with too much light. Walls blinding, sheets stiff and scratchy, voices around me as distant and blurred as half-forgotten dreams. I didn't know my own name, not really, not until the nurse pressed a hand to my shoulder and called me "Cassie." Even then, the syllables felt alien—an echo of something I'd lost along the way.

They told me I'd been found in the street, clutching a set of keys and a crumpled charcoal sketch. There had been an accident, or maybe something more, an "incident" no one would define. The doctors spoke in gentle tones about retrograde amnesia—how my memory had become a flickering film, spooled out before I could catch it. Five years gone, just like that. In their place: a void, a shadow where myself had once been.

The world I woke to was both familiar and foreign. My body moved like a puppet's, awkward and unmoored. Faces drifted in and out, some affectionate, some hesitant, all of them strangers in disguise. My mother's eyes gleamed with worry; my friends whispered behind the curtain's pale divide. There was a man who squeezed my hand—he said he was my boyfriend—but his gaze skipped away from mine. I could feel their expectations weighing on me, pressing me to remember, to perform the person they insisted I was.

But every attempt to summon the past was met by a wall, a blind spot glaring in my mind. It wasn't just the lost years; it was the sense that something vital, something dangerous, had vanished with them. Whispers of scandal and betrayal drifted in the corridors outside my room, hints of rifts that had left my old, comfortable life in tatters. I saw it in the way they watched me, carefully editing their conversations, and in the fearful glances that followed me down fluorescent-lit hallways.

I left the hospital with a box of possessions that felt like props from another life, and instructions to "take it slow." But slow wasn't possible. The world outside was a jigsaw puzzle missing too many pieces. Friends I'd once trusted recoiled from my touch. Neighbors peered from behind lace curtains, their eyes sharp and suspicious. And then the news broke: a local woman—someone eerily familiar—had disappeared. I didn't know her, or at least that's what I told the police. But I recognized the haunted uncertainty, the sense that the past was hunting me just as surely as I was hunting it.

Now, every mirror in my house reflects a stranger's face. Every familiar corner feels laced with threat. I am Cassie Reynolds, or so I'm told. But as I begin unraveling the tangled knots of memory and betrayal, I can't shake the icy certainty that someone

wanted me to forget. And for the first time, I wonder not just who I am—but who I might have become.

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CHAPTER ONE: The White Room

The hospital room smelled of antiseptic and something faintly metallic, like old coins. It was a clean smell, sterile, but it couldn't quite mask the underlying scent of fear that clung to the sheets, to the air, to me. I lay there, staring at a ceiling tile with a smudge that looked suspiciously like a forgotten fingerprint, trying to recall how I'd ended up in this perfectly white, utterly alien space. Nothing came. Only a dull, throbbing ache behind my eyes.

A nurse, a kind-faced woman with eyes the color of sea glass, entered, pushing a cart laden with small plastic cups and a thin, lukewarm broth. "Good morning, Cassie," she said, her voice a practiced balm. "Sleeping well?"

Sleeping? I didn't know if I had. My dreams, if they'd existed, had dissolved the moment I'd opened my eyes, leaving behind only a restless, hollow feeling. "I don't know," I managed, my voice raspy from disuse. "What day is it?"

She smiled, a tiny crinkle at the corners of her eyes. "It's Tuesday, sweetie. You're doing well. Dr. Evans will be by shortly." She placed the broth on the bedside table. "Try to eat a little. You need your strength."

Strength for what? To face the blank canvas of my mind? I pushed myself up, wincing as a sharp pain shot through my left arm. It was bandaged, tightly, and I could feel the faint tremor in my fingers. "What happened to my arm?"

"Just a few scrapes and bruises," she explained, her tone deliberately casual. "You took a tumble. Nothing serious." She paused, her gaze lingering on my face for a moment longer than necessary. "You're very lucky, all things considered."

Lucky. The word felt like a lie. How could I be lucky when five years of my life had simply evaporated? Lucky felt like a cruel joke. I glanced around the room, searching for something familiar, anything that might spark a flicker of recognition. There was a vase of wilting daisies on the windowsill, a stack of magazines on a small table, a single, unremarkable painting of a sailboat on a stormy sea. Nothing. Just an anonymous hospital room, a temporary prison for my fractured mind.

Dr. Evans arrived soon after, a man with a tired but sympathetic face and an air of quiet authority. He explained the amnesia again, slowly, patiently, as if talking to a child. "Your brain is like a hard drive that's temporarily corrupted, Cassie. The files are there, somewhere, but they're inaccessible right now. It's not uncommon after a traumatic event."

“Traumatic event?” I echoed, the phrase hanging in the air between us like a bad smell. “What traumatic event?”

He hesitated, a subtle shift in his posture. “That’s what we’re still trying to piece together. You were found... in the street. Disoriented. Some signs of a struggle. But no clear injuries that would explain the memory loss.” He looked at me expectantly, as if waiting for me to fill in the blanks. When I didn't, he continued, “The police have a few questions for you when you feel up to it. Nothing urgent.”

Police. The word sent a cold shiver down my spine, despite the warmth of the room. It suggested something more than a simple tumble. It suggested something criminal, something dark. “What kind of questions?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

He gave a noncommittal shrug. “Standard procedure, Cassie. Just trying to understand the circumstances. Don’t worry about it right now. Your focus needs to be on recovery.” He checked my charts, jotted down a few notes, and then smiled thinly. “Your mother’s here, by the way. She’s been very worried.”

My mother. The word tasted strange on my tongue, like a foreign currency. I knew, intellectually, that I had a mother. But her face, when she finally entered the room, was a blur. She was a woman of medium height with a worried frown etched between her brows, her hair streaked with more silver than I remembered—or thought I remembered. She rushed to my side, her hand fluttering to my forehead, then gripping my uninjured arm.

“Oh, Cassie, my darling,” she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. “Are you all right? You gave us such a fright.” Her eyes, though full of concern, also held a flicker of something else—an unspoken question, an underlying tension. It was almost as if she was seeing a stranger too, but one she was desperately trying to recognize.

“I’m... fine,” I said, the lie tasting bitter. “I just... I don’t remember anything.”

Her lips thinned. “We know, sweetheart. The doctors told us. It’s just... it’s been so difficult.” She patted my hand, then pulled up a chair and sat beside the bed, her gaze sweeping over my face as if searching for clues. “Your father called. He sends his love. And your friends, Mark and Chloe, they’ve been asking about you constantly.”

Mark and Chloe. Names, nothing more. No faces, no memories, no emotional resonance. It was like being told about characters in a book I hadn’t read. “That’s... good,” I mumbled, feeling an unexpected pang of guilt for my blankness.

My mother sighed. “It’s been a chaotic few months, Cassie. A lot has happened. But we’ll get through this, won’t we? We’ll help you remember.” Her voice was firm,

reassuring, but her eyes darted away, to the window, to the wilting daisies, anywhere but directly into mine. There was something she wasn't saying, something that coiled like a snake beneath the surface of her concern.

Later that afternoon, a police officer arrived. Detective Miller, a broad-shouldered man with a neatly trimmed beard and eyes that missed nothing. He sat on the edge of the chair my mother had occupied, his posture relaxed but alert. He introduced himself, his voice calm and even. He wasn't aggressive, but his presence filled the small room with a quiet intensity.

"Ms. Reynolds," he began, "I understand you're suffering from amnesia. We're not here to press you, just to gather any information you might have. Do you recall anything at all about the incident?"

I shook my head, my throat tight. "Nothing. Not even where I was going, or where I'd been."

He nodded slowly. "Right. And the keys you were holding? Do you recognize them?" He pulled a small, clear plastic bag from his pocket, holding up a set of keys. One looked like a house key, another a car key, and a third was a small, ornate key, almost like a miniature skeleton key.

I stared at them, my heart thumping an erratic rhythm against my ribs. They looked utterly foreign. "No," I said, "I don't."

He then produced a crumpled piece of paper, unfolding it carefully. It was a charcoal sketch, just as the nurse had mentioned. It depicted a woman's face, shadowed and indistinct, but with a haunting quality. Her eyes seemed to follow me, even in the crude rendering. "And this sketch?" Detective Miller asked, his voice unchanged. "Do you recognize the woman?"

I leaned closer, my breath catching. The woman's face stirred something within me, a faint echo, a whisper of familiarity. Her eyes, though only charcoal lines, seemed to hold a sorrow I recognized, even if I couldn't place the source. But who was she? And why had I drawn her? "I... I don't know," I stammered, the words feeling inadequate. "She... she looks familiar, but I can't place her."

Detective Miller studied me for a long moment, his gaze unwavering. "Right," he said again, a faint note of skepticism in his tone that he tried, unsuccessfully, to hide. He gathered his things, then paused at the door. "We'll be in touch, Ms. Reynolds. And if anything, anything at all, comes back to you, no matter how small, please don't hesitate to call us."

As the door clicked shut behind him, I was left alone in the sterile white room, the

image of the sketched woman's haunting eyes burned into my mind. Who was she? Why had I drawn her? And why did the detective look at me as if I was hiding something, as if my amnesia was a carefully constructed lie? The hospital, once a sanctuary, now felt like a cage, and the blank slate of my memory, instead of offering freedom, felt like a dangerous void, ready to swallow me whole.

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