

Stolen

By

Candace Meredith

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Dedicated to my beautiful family: my youngest son Jaxon, my middle child and only daughter Lilian, my oldest Paton and my fiancée Todd.

Chapter One

She dips the quill in ink she uses to write in a journal. The ink is jet black, and she thinks of it like poison; the good, the bad, and the ugly stain the parchment paper.

The stain is as permanent as her predicament: He is gone.

You went away like the night sky ...

Her journal entry begins. She sits by the fire. She thinks of Christmas. Her back is to the darkness in the room where she writes. He died the year before. Her hand shakes and a single trace of her tear stains her face with mascara.

We were engaged five years before we finally got married...

She is unable to write another word. She drinks from a wine glass; the red is reminiscent of the pool of blood that stained his clothing. His face. They were both in the accident. He perished there while she held his hand. He was suspended between the steering wheel and the seat; his belt made him feel cramped. He turned cold in her hand as the paramedics and the firemen worked to remove the hood to free them from the wreckage. Her heart stopped when they notified her; the surgeons could not repair him. There was a hole in his chest where the windshield had been. The car was like a crumpled piece of tin.

Jo-Jo, he said, I will always love you ...

The last she heard was a deep breath before his pupils dilated to an unusual amount of black. She thought she could see stars in them like the entire Milky Way galaxy. She got lost in the moment, like he was pulling her in, before they got to the hospital and she would get the news. She went to the compound where she found the pitiful little sedan – their rental – and wondered what might have been if they had their 4Runner instead.

The boy made a left turn, and we did not have time ... before the brakes locked up.

Then there is a knock on her front door. She checks the peep hole to find her roommate standing there. She opens the door...

“Jolene, I lost my key...” she says, and Jolene takes a step back. Her roommate enters the door as she closes it softly.

“It’s fine Kim, I wasn’t asleep.”

Kim is ten years younger than Jolene. They met at the hair salon, both in desperate situations. Kim styled Jolene’s hair after the accident. Kim never met Dillon. Jolene needed a roommate in order to keep up the house; Kim needed a place to stay. Jolene offered her a cheap room. Her Beverly Hills home is immaculate, and Kim is in awe of it. She uses the pool and the other amenities. Jolene’s husband, Dillon, was a corporate attorney. He was the prosecuting lawyer for the firm that filed suit against the oil company; that was the last case he’d ever win and Jolene didn’t need the money – she needed the company, but at the price of some things going missing.

“I would never take anything from you, Jo,” Kim has

said and Jolene wants to believe her. She goes away sometimes for overnight stays at the Royal Caribbean where Dillon would take her so they could get away. Dillon was born and raised in California but closer to LA, and Jolene lived in Orange County growing up. They both loved the sun, the beach, the in-ground pool. Jolene would stay there in the suite they shared. She would cry herself to sleep; she tells herself she will not stay anymore, to not cry, and to not leave the house with Kim who hosts parties. Jolene turns forty next year around Memorial Day, and Kim has just turned thirty.

Jolene sits back down to write.

We would have had a baby if I could carry ...

She finishes the entire first chapter after she writes about her three miscarriages, and she closes the book. She stores it away in the drawer at her massive oak desk – her husband’s desk – his office. She now uses the space to write her memoir: *Letting Love by the Lake ...*

That part is a secret. A grand ending.

Jolene turns out the light and heads toward her bedroom. She can hear her roommate chatting, likely with Nate, her boyfriend, who surfs the Pacific Coast and works as a Coast Guard. He seems friendly. Mature. But not all their friends seem that way. Jolene thinks about her day tomorrow as she takes a late night shower; she is traveling for work. She is a writer and a photographer. She has started photographing weddings. She thinks of her own wedding; they were married in the fall at her sister’s house in Montana. Her sister, Gwyneth, married a rodeo star. His name is Jack. She needs to visit her sister

soon. The wedding she will be covering is set for December – a Christmas-themed wedding, but it's not cold enough in Beverly Hills. She knows the fire has died; she enjoys its ambience even if it has no practicality. The flames are the inspiration that heighten her mood for creative inspiration. The wedding is white, red and gold themed aboard a Cruise Liner and set for December 2nd. Jolene is anxious to do her first wedding; she's done baby, high school graduations, and holidays, but this is her first wedding as the widow of Dillon Page. He was well known in Hollywood – the prosecuting attorney for a legal dispute among directors and production rights. The settlement went well and his rise in fame bought the house. Jolene turns the shower off and settles into bed. Her alarm is set for five o'clock in the morning. She is taking pre-wedding photos to get herself content when the wedding is in five days.

At the sound of her alarm she finds she slept well and she lets the dog out; Dillon brought home a French Bulldog weeks before the accident and they named him Cash. She pours wet food into the bowl and adds the dry. She starts the coffee pot. She hears an argument and goes to the porch where she can enjoy the breeze and the ocean out her door. She is traveling to Southern California to Carlsbad where she'll be taking photos of the couple along Coastal Highway – the couple wants photos at the beach before sailing aboard the cruise ship. As she gets dressed, the front door slams and she finds Kim in the kitchen.

“Everything okay?” The silence is awkward.

“Yeah, everything will be fine.” Kim pours a mug with coffee.

“Alright. I'll be going. Let me know if you need anything.”

Kim flashes her a smile. Jolene leaves as Cash returns indoors. She takes off for Southern California where she'll photograph the sun rise. The couple is there early as she pulls into a lot reserved for public parking. She finds Vanessa and Dan who are elegantly dressed; Dan in blue button down and khaki, and Vanessa in a summer dress. Jolene grabs her gear and stages the camera in the cool sand. The air is chilly, but it's still sixty-nine degrees in California. They are photographed looking at and away from the camera; Jolene captures as many natural poses as she can. They hold hands before a purple sky; the scenery cannot be any more beautiful. Jolene counts 100 photos taken; the private photo shoot lasts an hour and she gives them her card. She compiles the photos onto a USB drive and sends them the best she has. The whole affair costs a few hundred and although photography is not paying the bills it buys Cash chewy toys and she's satisfied. She stops by the gas station to fill the 4Runner she thinks about not having during the accident – keeping it only because he loved it so much – and when she turns off Coastal Highway she sees lights in her rearview and realizes she's being pulled over. She triggers her turn signal and pulls off to the side, and when the officer approaches she lets down her window.

“Good afternoon,” his voice is in control, in character, for a police officer. His badge says Police Officer Jodi McCain – a state policeman for California.

“Hello, Officer McCain.” She musters a smile.

“Do you know why I am pulling you over today?”

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“Was I speeding?” She is modest.

“No,” he gives her a sideways glance.

“I’m sorry...”

“I’ve pulled you over on a safety violation ... your rear light is out ... and your tags have expired.”

“Oh, okay...” she is perplexed. “My husband always took care of those things.”

“And where is your husband?”

“Beverly Cemetery ... he died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Officer Jodi McCain tears a paper from his notepad and makes his notes, “This will give you a month to get things squared away...” and he tears another, “and this one here is on me.”

“Thank you.” She takes both folded pieces of paper.

“Have a good day, Miss.” He tilts the bill of his bucket hat.

“You, too.” She says and winds up the window.

She drives off without looking them over and heads toward the San Diego Gaslamp District where she is meeting a colleague for lunch.

“Old Sorority Sisters,” her friend laughs as they enter together and are seated outside.

Jolene tells Vicky of the drive there.

“But whatever does he mean by ‘it’s on me?’” Her

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laugh is infectious.

“I don’t know.” Jolene sips from a glass of ice water with extra lemon.

“You mean you haven’t looked?”

“No, I haven’t.” Jolene wails and her voice carries.

Vicky has moved back to California following her divorce after a marriage that took her to New York for twelve years.

“What are you waiting for? Open it.”

Jolene has both pieces of paper in her purse and she retrieves them as the server approaches.

They both order a salad and are served endless soup and salad with buttered rolls.

Jolene’s hands shake as she pulls away at the bit of folded letter.

“It’s a notice of violation,” she says, and Vicky takes a margarita from the server.

“Any day is a margarita day when you’re in California.” She laughs. “But go on...” she gestures with her wrist.

Jolene takes the other paper, unfolds it, and on the note is a number.

“A cell number,” Jolene says.

“Not just any cell number,” Vicky winks, “it’s his cell

number.”

Jolene doesn't take another look; she folds the paper and tucks it back into her purse.

Vicky chats about a magazine she is developing in the area; her work in advertising in New York pays well and she is set to develop a local magazine on Cruise Life. She invites Jolene to do the photographs for the magazine, and entices her to consider working together. Jolene is impressed with her friend's sincerity, even after not seeing one another for years, but staying connected over social media as time allowed.

“So are you gonna call him?” Vicky's voice chimes in as they receive the bill.

“I don't know.” Jolene says casually, “I don't know that I should.”

“Oh, why not?” She waves.

“Is it appropriate?”

“And if not? So what...”

Vicky's words stay with her through the night and by morning she thinks about the pending wedding and her plans to visit Montana –and places the note in her bedside table.

As she does each day, she takes out the journal she uses to write her memoir and feels a bit differently but she brushes off the feeling and she begins...

Dillon stole my heart with a proposal on Valentine's Day... although he thought it might be cheesy, he did it because the ring

came attached to the most beautiful roses. Then he got on one knee.

Jolene and Dillon were starting life together after college. After graduation with their Bachelor's they went on to law school and a Master's program. Jolene excelled in writing, and her first book *Twist* went on to be represented by a renowned literary agent and was later published to become a NY Times best seller. Jolene hopes for her memoir to help other women who have been widowed, and she plans to release self-help guides after its release. She feels that Vicky's proposal has come at the right time in life; she wants to extend her photography business to include commercial sales. After the wedding photo shoot, she intends to visit her sister and has packed ahead of time. Her nieces Anna and Clara are in high school: one a freshman and the other a senior. She knows they'll be off to college and she won't see them as much. Visiting her sister on Christmas in Montana is like going to the Caribbean in spring; *the snow is wild there*, she thinks. They typically pick her up from the airport with chains on their tires. Gwyneth and Jack include her in the rotation on Christmas morning; Jolene feels special there, and her nieces are the ones who fill the void from not having her own children.

On December 2nd she heads to the wedding that is reserved at four o'clock in the evening. She mingles aboard the cruise ship and they leave port to cruise the Pacific and head out toward Alaska where the groom spent his childhood. Vanessa and Dan's ceremony commences on time, and during sunset their vows are read. Jolene captures more beautiful photos over the sun that is cast in the West. It reminds Jolene of the scene from the *Titanic* as the main cast is filmed among an orange sky. Photos continue into the reception and then

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again when they port outside of Alaska. The wedding is held over five days during the cruise and there are two hundred guests on the ship; Jolene cannot help but think that wealth has some advantages – not everyone can afford a wedding like this one. They bust their champagne bottle against the bow of the ship and the hundreds applaud them; there is not a moment to miss as Jolene captures every moment.

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Chapter Two

“How was the wedding?” Kim asks as they have their morning cup of coffee.

“It was a luxurious and fabulously wealthy wedding.” Jolene is triumphant.

“Must be nice,” Kim sniggers.

“But what about you? Not everyone gets to do hair and makeup for celebrities.”

Kim huffs sarcastically. “What? Like all us cosmetologists get fancy weddings.”

“Some might,” Jolene shrugs. “By the way, can you watch the house while I go to my sister’s?”

“Of course.”

“And how about Cash?”

“Oh, he’s fine. Let him stay here with me.”

Jolene thinks about her decision, but lets it go – she wants to trust Kim. She’s a sweet young woman. She takes to the office and finds her husband’s files in a drawer. She fills out the appropriate paperwork and attaches a check. She intends to place it in the mailbox before she heads out to meet Vicky; they plan to get a run in. Jolene opens the desk drawer and retrieves the journal and she stencils on its pages...

We were about to arrive at my sister’s when he turned left; we were