

Promise Me

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

The missing girl—there had been unceasing news reports, always flashing to that aching ordinary school portrait of the vanished teen, you know the one, with the rainbow-swirl background, the girl’s hair too straight, her smile too self-conscious, then a quick cut to the worried parents on the front lawn, microphones surrounding them, Mom silently tearful, Dad reading a statement with quivering lip—that girl, that *missing* girl, had just walked past Edna Skylar.

Edna froze.

Stanley, her husband, took two more steps before realizing that his wife was no longer at his side. He turned around. “Edna?”

They stood near the corner of Twenty-first Street and Eighth Avenue in New York City. Street traffic was light this Saturday morning. Foot traffic was heavy. The missing girl had been headed uptown.

Stanley gave a world-weary sigh. “What now?”

“Shh.”

She needed to think. That high school portrait of the girl, the one with the rainbow-swirl background . . . Edna closed her eyes. She needed to conjure up the image in her head. Compare and contrast.

In the photograph, the missing girl had long, mousy-brown hair. The woman who’d just walked by—woman, not girl, because the one who’d just walked by seemed older, but maybe the picture was old too—was a redhead with a shorter, wavy cut. The girl in the photograph did not wear glasses. The one who was heading north up Eighth Avenue had on a fashionable pair with dark, rectangular frames. Her clothes and makeup were both more—for a lack of a better word—adult.

Studying faces was more than a hobby with Edna. She was sixty-three years old, one of the few female physicians in her age group who specialized in the field of genetics. Faces were her life. Part of her brain was always working, even when far away from her office. She couldn't help it—Dr. Edna Skylar studied faces. Her friends and family were used to the probing stare, but strangers and new acquaintances found it disconcerting.

So that was what Edna had been doing. Strolling down the street. Ignoring, as she often did, the sights and sounds. Lost in her own personal bliss of studying the faces of passersby. Noting cheek structure and mandibular depth, inter-eye distance and ear height, jaw contours and orbital spacing. And that was why, despite the new hair color and style, despite the fashionable glasses and adult makeup and clothing, Edna had recognized the missing girl.

“She was walking with a man.”

“What?”

Edna hadn't realized that she'd spoken out loud.

“The girl.”

Stanley frowned. “What are you talking about, Edna?”

That picture. That achingly ordinary school portrait. You've seen it a million times. You see it in a yearbook and the emotions start to churn. In one fell swoop, you see her past, you see her future. You feel the joy of youth, you feel the pain of growing up. You can see her potential there. You feel the pang of nostalgia. You see her years rush by, college maybe, marriage, kids, all that.

But when that same photograph is flashed on your evening news, it skewers your heart with terror. You look at that face, at that tentative smile, at the droopy hair and slumped shoulders, and your mind goes to dark places it shouldn't.

How long had Katie—that was the name, Katie—how long had she been missing?

Edna tried to remember. A month probably. Maybe six weeks. The story had only played locally and not for all that long. There were those who believed that she was a runaway. Katie Rochester had turned eighteen a few days before the disappearance—that made her an adult and

thus lowered the priority a great deal. There was supposed trouble at home, especially with her strict albeit quivering-lipped father.

Maybe Edna had been mistaken. Maybe it wasn't her.

One way to find out.

"Hurry," Edna said to Stanley.

"What? Where are we going?"

There was no time to reply. The girl was probably a block ahead by now. Stanley would follow. Stanley Rickenback, an ob-gyn, was Edna's second husband. Her first had been a whirlwind, a larger-than-life figure too handsome and too passionate and, oh yeah, an absolute ass. That probably wasn't fair, but so what? The idea of marrying a doctor—this was forty years ago—had been a fun novelty for Husband One. The reality, however, had not sat as well with him. He had figured that Edna would outgrow the doc phase once they had children. Edna didn't—just the opposite, in fact. The truth was—a truth that had not escaped her children—Edna loved doctoring more than motherhood.

She rushed ahead. The sidewalks were crowded. She moved into the street, staying close to the curb, and sped up. Stanley tried to follow. "Edna?"

"Just stay with me."

He caught up. "What are we doing?"

Edna's eyes searched for the red hair.

There. Up ahead on the left.

She needed to get a closer look. Edna broke into a full-fledged sprint now, a strange sight in most places, a nicely dressed woman in her mid-sixties sprinting down the street, but this was Manhattan. It barely registered a second glance.

She circled in front of the woman, trying not to be too obvious, ducking behind taller people, and when she was in the right place, Edna spun around. The possible-Katie was walking toward her. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments, and Edna knew.

It was her.

Katie Rochester was with a dark-haired man, probably in his early thirties. They were holding hands. She did not seem too distressed. She seemed, in fact, up until the point where their eyes met anyway,

pretty content. Of course that might not mean anything. Elizabeth Smart, that young girl who'd been kidnapped out in Utah, had been out in the open with her kidnapper and never tried to signal for help. Maybe something similar was playing here.

Edna wasn't buying it.

The redheaded possible-Katie whispered something to the dark-haired man. They picked up their pace. Edna saw them veer right and down the subway stairs. The sign read C AND E TRAINS. Stanley caught up to Edna. He was about to say something, but he saw the look on her face and kept still.

"Come on," she said.

They hurried around the front and started down the stairs. The missing woman and the dark-haired man were already through the turnstile. Edna started toward it.

"Damn it."

"What?"

"I don't have a MetroCard."

"I do," Stanley said.

"Let me have it. Hurry."

Stanley plucked the card from his wallet and handed it to her. She scanned it, moved through the turnstile, handed it back to him. She didn't wait. They'd gone down the stairs to the right. She started that way. She heard the roar of an incoming train and hurried her steps.

The brakes were squeaking to a halt. The subway doors slid open. Edna's heart beat wildly in her chest. She looked left and right, searching for the red hair.

Nothing.

Where was that girl?

"Edna?" It was Stanley. He had caught up to her.

Edna said nothing. She stood on the platform, but there was no sign of Katie Rochester. And even if there was, what then? What should Edna do here? Does she hop on the train and follow them? To where? And then what? Find the apartment or house and then call the police. . . .

Someone tapped her shoulder.

Edna turned. It was the missing girl.

For a long time after this, Edna would wonder what she saw in the

girl's expression. Was there a pleading look? A desperation? A calmness? Joy, even? Resolution? All of them.

They just stood and stared at each other for a moment. The bustling crowd, the indecipherable static on the speaker, the swoosh of the train—it all disappeared, leaving just the two of them.

“Please,” the missing girl said, her voice a whisper. “You can’t tell anybody you saw me.”

The girl stepped onto the train then. Edna felt a chill. The doors slid closed. Edna wanted to do something, do anything, but she couldn’t move. Her gaze remained locked on the girl’s.

“Please,” the girl mouthed through the glass.
And then the train disappeared into the dark.

CHAPTER 2

There were two teenage girls in Myron's basement.

That was how it began. Later, when Myron looked back on all the loss and heartbreak, this first series of what-ifs would rise up and haunt him anew. What if he hadn't needed ice. What if he'd opened his basement door a minute earlier or a minute later. What if the two teenage girls—what were they doing alone in his basement in the first place?—had spoken in whispers so that he hadn't overheard them.

What if he had just minded his own business.

From the top of the stairs, Myron heard the girls giggling. He stopped. For a moment he considered closing the door and leaving them alone. His small soiree was low on ice, not out of it. He could come back.

But before he could turn away, one of the girls' voices wafted smoke-like up the stairwell. "So you went with Randy?"

The other: "Oh my God, we were like so wasted."

"From beer?"

"Beer and shots, yeah."

"How did you get home?"

"Randy drove."

At the top of the stairs, Myron stiffened.

"But you said—"

"Shh." Then: "Hello? Is someone there?"

Caught.

Myron took the stairs in a trot, whistling as he went. Mr. Casual. The two girls were sitting in what used to be Myron's bedroom. The basement had been "finished" in 1975 and looked it. Myron's father,

who was currently lollygagging with Mom in some condo near Boca Raton, had been big on two-sided tape. The adhesive wood paneling, a look that aged about as well as the Betamax, had started to give. In some spots the concrete walls were now visible and noticeably flaking. The floor tiles, fastened down with something akin to Elmer's Glue, were buckling. They crunched beetle-like when you stepped on them.

The two girls—one Myron had known her whole life, the other he had just met today—looked up at him with wide eyes. For a moment no one spoke. He gave them a little wave.

“Hey, girls.”

Myron Bolitar prided himself on big opening lines.

The girls were both high school seniors, both pretty in that coltish way. The one sitting on the corner of his old bed—the one he had met for the first time an hour ago—was named Erin. Myron had started dating Erin's mother, a widow and freelance magazine writer named Ali Wilder, two months ago. This party, here at the house Myron had grown up in and now owned, was something of a “coming out” party for Myron and Ali as a couple.

The other girl, Aimee Biel, mimicked his wave and tone. “Hey, Myron.”

More silence.

He first saw Aimee Biel the day after she was born at St. Barnabas Hospital. Aimee and her parents, Claire and Erik, lived two blocks away. Myron had known Claire since their years together at Heritage Middle School, less than half a mile from where they now gathered. Myron turned toward Aimee. For a moment he fell back more than twenty-five years. Aimee looked so much like her mother, had the same crooked, devil-may-care grin, it was like looking through a time portal.

“I was just getting some ice,” Myron said. He pointed toward the freezer with his thumb to illustrate the point.

“Cool,” Aimee said.

“Very cool,” Myron said. “Ice cold, in fact.”

Myron chuckled. Alone.

With the stupid grin still on his face, Myron looked over at Erin. She turned away. That had been her basic reaction today. Polite and aloof.

"Can I ask you something?" Aimee said.

"Shoot."

She spread her hands. "Was this really your room growing up?"

"Indeed it was."

The two girls exchanged a glance. Aimee giggled. Erin did likewise.

"What?" Myron said.

"This room . . . I mean, could it possibly be lamer?"

Erin finally spoke. "It's like too retro to be retro."

"What do you call this thing?" Aimee asked, pointing below her.

"A beanbag chair," Myron said.

The two girls giggled some more.

"And how come this lamp has a black lightbulb?"

"It makes the posters glow."

More laughs.

"Hey, I was in high school," Myron said, as if that explained everything.

"Did you ever bring a girl down here?" Aimee asked.

Myron put his hand to his heart. "A true gentleman never kisses and tells." Then: "Yes."

"How many?"

"How many what?"

"How many girls did you bring down here?"

"Oh. Approximately"—Myron looked up, drew in the air with his index finger—"carry the three . . . I'd say somewhere between eight and nine hundred thousand."

That caused rip-roaring laughter.

"Actually," Aimee said, "Mom says you used to be real cute."

Myron arched an eyebrow. "Used to be?"

Both girls high-fived and fell about the place. Myron shook his head and grumbled something about respecting their elders. When they quieted down, Aimee said, "Can I ask you something else?"

"Shoot."

"I mean, seriously."

"Go ahead."

"Those pictures of you upstairs. On the stairwell."

Myron nodded. He had a pretty good idea where this was going.

“You were on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.”

“That I was.”

“Mom and Dad say you were like the greatest basketball player in the country.”

“Mom and Dad,” Myron said, “exaggerate.”

Both girls stared at him. Five seconds passed. Then another five.

“Do I have something stuck in my teeth?” Myron asked.

“Weren’t you, like, drafted by the Lakers?”

“The Celtics,” he corrected.

“Sorry, the Celtics.” Aimee kept him pinned with her eyes. “And you hurt your knee, right?”

“Right.”

“Your career was over. Just like that.”

“Pretty much, yes.”

“So like”—Aimee shrugged—“how did that feel?”

“Hurting my knee?”

“Being a superstar like that. And then, *bam*, never being able to play again.”

Both girls waited for his answer. Myron tried to come up with something profound.

“It sucked big-time,” he said.

They both liked that.

Aimee shook her head. “It must have been the worst.”

Myron looked toward Erin. Erin had her eyes down. The room went quiet. He waited. She eventually looked up. She looked scared and small and young. He wanted to take her in his arms, but man, would that ever be the wrong move.

“No,” Myron said softly, still holding Erin’s gaze. “Not even close to the worst.”

A voice at the top of the stairs shouted down, “Myron?”

“I’m coming.”

He almost left then. The next big what-if. But the words he’d overheard at the top of the stairs—*Randy drove*—kept rattling in his head. *Beer and shots*. He couldn’t let that go, could he?

“I want to tell you a story,” Myron began. And then he stopped. What he wanted to do was tell them about an incident from his high

school days. There had been a party at Barry Brenner's house. That was what he wanted to tell them. He'd been a senior in high school—like them. There had been a lot of drinking. His team, the Livingston Lancers, had just won the state basketball tournament, led by All-American Myron Bolitar's forty-three points. Everyone was drunk. He remembered Debbie Frankel, a brilliant girl, a live wire, that sparkplug who was always animated, always raising her hand to contradict the teacher, always arguing and taking the other side and you loved her for it. At midnight Debbie came over and said good-bye to him. Her glasses were low on her nose. That was what he remembered most—the way her glasses had slipped down. Myron could see that Debbie was wasted. So were the other two girls who would pile into that car.

You can guess how the story ends. They took the hill on South Orange Avenue too fast. Debbie died in the crash. The smashed-up car was put on display in front of the high school for six years. Myron wondered where it was now, what they'd eventually done to that wreck.

"What?" Aimee said.

But Myron didn't tell them about Debbie Frankel. Erin and Aimee had undoubtedly heard other versions of the same story. It wouldn't work. He knew that. So he tried something else.

"I need you to promise me something," Myron said.

Erin and Aimee looked at him.

He pulled his wallet from his pocket and plucked out two business cards. He opened the top drawer and found a pen that still worked. "Here are all my numbers—home, business, mobile, my place in New York City."

Myron scribbled on the cards and passed one to each of them. They took the cards without saying a word.

"Please listen to me, okay? If you're ever in a bind. If you're ever out drinking or your friends are drinking or you're high or stoned or I don't care what. Promise me. Promise me you'll call me. I'll come get you wherever you are. I won't ask any questions. I won't tell your parents. That's my promise to you. I'll take you wherever you want to go. I don't care how late. I don't care how far away you are. I don't care how wasted. Twenty-four-seven. Call me and I'll pick you up."

The girls said nothing.

Myron took a step closer. He tried to keep the pleading out of his voice. “Just please . . . please don’t ever drive with someone who’s been drinking.”

They just stared at him.

“Promise me,” he said.

And a moment later—the final what-if?—they did.