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findingthebirds



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# Necessary Lies - Sidney Stevens

Updated: 2 days ago

He rises from bed naked, glancing at me as he moves toward the bathroom to shower. I watch him through my hair, but he doesn't know. His look is always the same, not a smile exactly but a stamp of contentment. I used to think it was love, and maybe it is. But the part of me that's always doubted, doubts more every day.

He comes back and shakes me gently.

I groan and stretch, pretending to awaken.

"Time to get up...we don't want to be late." He seems to mean it. He's always sounded sincere.

He slips into the bathroom, muscular, nimble. His dark curls are sweetly mashed on one side from lying on his pillow. There was a time when Jamie was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Surely, I was luckier than any woman to be wanted by someone so beautiful. I've never said that out loud, and no one has ever said it to me. But it's what I know, and what everyone is thinking. He could have almost anyone. *Why me?*

I wonder almost every day, every time Jamie reaches for me in bed or takes my hand on the street, whenever we meet someone new. I feel the stares, the flit of confusion in their eyes. *Is she just a friend? A sister? Surely not more.*

I still think Jamie's the most beautiful man I've seen, but I don't feel lucky anymore. I feel trapped in a mismatch that can only end one way.

"I hope this place is half as good as it sounds," Jamie says, sliding closer on the seat and lacing his fingers through mine. The subway clickety-clacks through the underground darkness, rocking us together. I feel his anticipation, crackling around us like the glitter and snap of sparklers. We're getting married in less than six months.

"I'll be happy if it's got a decent view of the park," I say, raising my voice over the clatter, absorbing his excitement. He squeezes my hand and leans closer. I study our reflection in the window across the aisle.

The indistinct images staring back are more nearly matched than in real life. My hair doesn't look quite so frizzy or ashen dull. I'm not whey-faced. My eyes don't crowd together so visibly, and my chin doesn't jut as much. You can't see the full bulk of my frame, broad bones down to my fingers. And Jamie isn't so handsome. His glow, or whatever it is that catches stares, bounces off the smudged glass and scatters in the harsh subway light.

But we don't live behind glass. I see those veiled glances on the street, across cafes, from behind baby carriages. I watch the cashier's fingers linger on Jamie's as she hands him change. Even my friend Ruth finds a way to touch him, a pat on the knee. ^ friendly nudges that

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Jamie doesn't believe in the shine of his eyes, how it calls like a sorcerer's song. He doesn't see that his whole face crinkles into puppy joy when he grins. Or the easy way he bends in one motion to grab his cap off the floor before rubber-banding it at me with a Cheshire smirk. I could watch him forever.



"You're imagining it," he says, not a glimmer of knowing on his face. He seems genuinely perplexed, surprised that he might cause a fuss. We look like any couple, close and satisfied and in love. Except we're something else, too.

"What're you thinking?" He nuzzles my cheek. I can't tell him.

I giggle and roll my eyes in that goofy way he likes. "Just contemplating the presence of dark matter in the universe."

He shakes his head and chuckles, squeezing my hand tighter. "You kill me sometimes."

It's true, my humor kills a lot. But I can't answer his question. And he still can't answer mine – the one I asked in the beginning. At least not with the fullness of truth.

"What do you see in me?" It slipped out one morning as I untangled my hair at his bathroom mirror. We'd been together only a few weeks, and he gave me the answer any woman longs for. At least I thought so at the time.

"I like you better than anyone I've ever known." He moved behind me, fastening his arms around my waist and hunching down to rest his chin on my shoulder as we stared at our reflection.

No words ever worked better magic.

"But I'm not pretty."

"Don't say that." He pushed back fuzzy strands of hair from my forehead. "I've had pretty and you're so much more. It shouldn't matter what we look like."

*Yes, that's right.*

"It's how we feel inside."

Yes...

"There's a purity about you that I've never found before...a way of seeing only what's important."

Lovely words. I devoured them like I'd never eaten – and avoided coming clean when I still had the chance. How to explain my years of flipping through fashion magazines, obsessing over pretty girls at school, struggling for the key that would transform me, never quite handling the truth of my immutable unattractiveness? Was it eyeliner, the latest purse? I tried every beauty secret – exfoliating skin creams, cucumber face masks, eyelash curlers. I tried them all, even begged my mother for plastic surgery until she finally packed me off to a therapist to break my obsession.

But it wasn't until a girl named Naomi announced to the entire lunch table that I could pass for the school mascot without wearing a costume that I finally let go. Cold turkey. No more pretending I might ever be pretty or even good enough. I just stopped thinking about looks after that – mine or anybody else's -- and began looking deeper, into souls and behind smiles. I studied and watched and learned – things others probably didn't even know about themselves. Things about myself. I called it inner sight. And what I found was that surface really didn't matter. The shine and texture and hues on top were only a veneer covering the riches below – and the ugliness. Everyone had both, it was true. It's just that the beauties – male and female – rarely mined the wealth of character and depth underneath or worked to erase the internal blemishes. Surface beauty was enough. The rest was overlooked or forgiven.

Not so with Jamie. He seemed to have both good looks and luminous layers below – visible for all to see. He'd tackled inner flaws and expected to continue.

It shouldn't matter what we look like. A beautiful answer. Except for the implied recognition of our disparity.

'I've had pretty.' Yes, but now you don't. You know the difference.

That was Jamie. So certain that what counted were our matching soul mismatched exteriors. I'd once been certain, too. Yet that morning as we

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Everything I'd grown to cherish inside myself and others – kindness, soul dreams, wisdom, the swirl and dance of Life – suddenly paled beside Jamie's curls and dark eyes.

I could have spilled it all right then and saved us both. But his beauty electrified me, down to my toenails. Fireworks. Ringing bells. Angels in heaven. Jamie made me see and hear them all in ways that no boy – the mostly oddball boys I'd managed to attract thus far – had ever approximated. And in that moment I stopped seeing anything else. My mind froze on looks alone, and I lost my inner sight.

"You guys are going to love this place," says Rita, our realtor. Rita isn't beautiful, but there's an airiness in her manner, and she wears her blonde hair and expensive clothes well. Jamie seems oblivious to her charms, but I know how she plays.

The apartment is everything she's promised. Multi-windowed. Historic. A Washington Square address.

"So, what do you think?" she says, turning to face us, grinning. "Did I nail this one or what?"

"Wow, I really like it," Jamie says, stepping toward her and reaching back for my hand at the same time.

"I knew it," she gushes, glancing quickly at me before returning to him.

I'm used to it. He's the one they notice. I'm a side piece. A handmaiden to acknowledge, then dismiss. Do I imagine it?

My phone rings. "You guys go ahead," I say, waving them off. "I'll catch up."

I watch them move toward the bedroom, squeezing together as they both try pushing through the door simultaneously. Jamie laughs and allows Rita to go first. Nothing more than courtesy, but I watch nonetheless. She giggles, glances up at him, green eyes trying to catch and hold his. Is his return gaze and smile more than courtesy? Does he hold them too long? I watch, but never detect the smoking gun. He shows nothing beyond normal interest, nothing you can capture in time or words or accuse him of. No, "You said that" or "You looked at her this way." Nothing tangible to show he loves anyone but me. I love him, too. It's just that so do they. And I can't stop noticing.

My ad is basic: "Seeking efficient, dependable assistant for small public relations firm. Must be flexible. Talented. Good writing skills."

I want those qualities, but what I'm really after I can't say in an ad. I'll know it when I see it. I find her in Arta. Long, chestnut hair. Large eyes tinged with something past, a sadness to add depth and interest. Full mouth. Fragility tumbled with strength. Not classic beauty; more magnetic, offbeat winsomeness. Intelligent, witty, strong laugh, easy conversationalist.

I work out of the new apartment Jamie and I now share, the one we've declared we'll live in for years after we're married. I set up a desk for Arta near mine in the spare bedroom, and arrange to be with clients many afternoons when Jamie returns from his software development job.

### Day One:

I open my laptop and pull up the video feed. My stomach churns as I sink back into the corner booth and sip my latte.

There's Arta at her desk. Jamie pops his head in.

"Oh," he pauses, looking around. "Where's Sam?"

"She had to meet a client. She'll be back soon, I think."

"You must be Arta," he says stepping in, shaking her hand as she rises. "Nice to meet you." Polite. Sincere. Like always.

"You too." Arta watches as he exits the room, eyes lingering.

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"I'll just catch her later, thanks," Jamie says, ducking out.

#### Day Four:

Jamie hurries in.

"Oh, hi," my voice calls from outside camera range. "I'm just on my way out."

"Oh," he says, surprised. "I thought we were going to dinner."

"My God...forgot." I walk toward him, clutching my coat and papers. "I've got a client meeting and won't be home till later."

Jamie stands silently, studying me.

"Why don't you and Arta grab something? I'll try to be back by 8 or so."

He glances at Arta. Long pause. He looks down. "We'll just try for tomorrow night, okay?"

"Sure." I give him a quick kiss and run out the door.

Jamie remains staring at the floor for several seconds after I leave. "Well, gotta run," he finally mumbles to Arta, shrugging sheepishly before slipping out.

"Is everything alright?" he asks one night in bed. He takes my hand under the covers and presses it to his chest.

I'm glad it's dark. I won't manage if I see his eyes. If he sees mine. I slip my hand from his and turn away.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing...I've just been busy."

"If something's wrong, we should talk."

I sigh. Deeply. On cue. With all the feigned annoyance I can muster. How else to show him the error of our thinking? Jamie assumes I like him for himself. And I do – at least what I can make out through the shine of beauty. I've gone and done what he assumes I'm above – something I despise in others – I've fallen for his looks, allowing his physical perfection to overshadow the soul inside. But how long before he uncovers my secret: that I'm no different from all the others? I can be tempted, too, by looks. How long before I can't ignore the fact that my inner sight – my special gift in lieu of beauty – isn't as consistent or keen as I thought? And what if it returns and the moon dust falls away? What if I encounter something I don't like below Jamie's loveliness – less sincerity than I've imagined, a nub of truth behind my ever-present suspicions about his capacity to fully love me? What if Jamie's soul doesn't shine as brightly as his surface after all?

And how long before his eyes focus back on my face and flesh? Bless him, he's grown into someone better, someone with inner sight. But what if it fades, like mine? What if he glimpses someone prettier one day and realizes what I've come to see – that looks really can hold sway and I'm not enough? That he's not as beauty-blind as he thought he was?

We were better off before we met. Before my inner sight was put to the test and found wanting. Before its light dissolved into ordinary thinking. Was it nothing more than self lies – necessary lies – to keep actual reality at bay? No matter, I want it back.

"I just need to sleep, Jamie...can we talk about this tomorrow?" I feel him fighting those words. Everything in me fights them, too. But this must be clean. Maybe Jamie won't lose his inner sight. Maybe he's better than me, stronger. But I can't bear standing by, believing he might. Can't bear the thought of his pain when he falls short. And mine. There's no room for argument here. No way back to purity but out.

#### Day Twenty-Three:

Arta picks up the note I've left and gives a quick look in the mirror, smoothing her hair before leaving the room.

*Arta, please tell Jamie to eat without me. I'll be late again.*

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She returns shortly, presumably after conveying my message to Jamie, and works the remainder of the day. What did he say? Is he beginning to notice her – really see her – in the shadows of my absence?

#### Day Thirty-Nine:

*Arta, can you stay late to type these documents? There's lasagna in the fridge. Help yourself. I'll be late.*

*Thanks, Sam*

*P.S. Tell Jamie to have some, too.*

#### Day Forty-Three:

Jamie enters my office. "Any word when Sam'll be home?"

Arta shakes her head.

"Let me know if she calls, okay?" he says, frowning.

"Is there something...can I give her a message?"

He stops at the door, but doesn't speak. Finally, in a low voice, "Yeah, ask her what the hell's going on?" He sounds bitter, sad. "I'm sorry," he says, a flicker of embarrassment crossing his face. He softly closes the door.

Arta starts to rise, but decides against it. She sits for a long time, staring at the door.

#### Day Sixty-One:

"Hey, let me ask you something." Arta looks up, startled to see Jamie. He drops into the chair by her desk. "Has Sam ever mentioned who she's meeting when she's late?"

Arta sits frozen, thinking, puzzled. "It's always a client, if that's what you mean."

"I wonder...." His voice trails off. "Do you know that for sure?"

"Well....no....but I'm sure she's...."

Jamie rises slowly, stuffs his hands in his jean pockets and starts out the door.

"Jamie...hey, if you ever want to talk...."

He nods and disappears.

#### Day Sixty-Nine:

*Arta, I had to go to San Francisco on short notice – Reed account. Not sure how long I'll be gone. I left Jamie a message, but make sure he knows. I'll call when I get there.*

*Sam*

"That's all she said?" Jamie looks bewildered. Then the tears begin falling. "I'm sorry...she won't talk to me anymore."

Arta walks around the desk and stands beside him without speaking. She puts her hand on his back as his silent tears fall.

Later after they've left to talk through his pain over dinner, I slip into the apartment, grab the hidden tiny camera nestled among leaves of a potted plant, and pack my bags. Down on the street, I toss the camera into a waste can and hail a cab for the airport. I didn't write this in the note, but I won't be back.

Jamie's tears sting my eyes as the cab speeds through the night-bright Manhattan streets. An old ache I haven't felt in years rises in me until I can hardly breathe. The ache of losing something you want too much. Or is it the ache of never having it in the first place. Like Jamie.

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Maybe you did really love me...but then again you're with her now. I'm sorry, Jamie.

"You gotta be to La Guardia any special time?" the driver calls back.

"Whenever we get there."

In the flash of a streetlight I see my reflection in the rearview mirror. Eyes too close together. Hair a frizz. Chin protruding.

But something else, too. Something I haven't seen since Jamie stood in my way. Hidden crevices of character, memory, dreams and hope, a radiance and sparkle that Jamie outshone, not intentionally but by accident of beauty. The return of inner sight. Jamie and I never happened. Consider us a dream or a wish; nothing more. I've had pretty and it can't happen again.



Sidney Stevens is an author of fiction and nonfiction with an MA in journalism from the University of Michigan. Most recently, her short story "All in a Day's Work" was published in *The Centifictionist* and her story "Without Heart" appeared in *Viscaria Magazine*. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Newsweek*, *New Works Review*, *Sure Woman*, and a new anthology called *Nature's Healing Spirit* from *Sowing Creek Press*. In addition, she's published hundreds of nonfiction articles and has also co-authored four books on natural health.

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