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Word count: 3,186

THE PHOTO JUMPER
THE MISSING CHAPTER

Tony Bible

Adult

Contemporary Fiction

FOREWARD

Spoilers ahead. Read book one first.

“Kill this darling,” my editor said.

Ugh.

“Really? Why?” I asked in dread as I cocked my editing shotgun and eyed the chapter with preemptive remorse. She gave her reasons but all I heard was “blah, blah, blah” (sorry Charlene, but it’s the truth). Like any rational human, I tuned out. You can’t blame me—I didn’t want to hear it. And then she delivered a comment with such finely veiled condescension that it was almost unrecognizable.

“I mean, I guess you could leave it in.”

Oh ... you sly, smart cookie you. What I heard from that subtle, backhanded hint was, “You could, by your own choice, make a mistake by leaving it in.”

Congratulations. You win. She cleverly persuaded me into thinking it was my own idea, or at least forced me into reaching acceptance, without a gun to the back of my head.

Dammit.

But ... Matt’s backstory though ... and all the time I spent developing it ... and beta readers telling me, “Ooh, I don’t know Tony,” and “Great imagery but I wish I could unsee it.” It was those reactions that made me fight to keep the scenes alive.

“Okay. I’ll cut it but on the condition that I make this free as a *Missing Chapter*.”

“Ooh, I like that.”

There. Compromise. I lowered my editing shotgun with a weighty exhale and much relief. I’d saved it.

This missing chapter is split into two sections. The first half is Matt’s early origin, and the second half is, well, Matt being Matt as an adult.

For anyone paying attention, there’s *a really big reveal* here, with a valuable addition to *The Photo Jumper* lore. A genetic connection. After reading the first passage here, flip to Chapter 14 in Book 1 if you’re still stumped. Your head should kick up with a start as chills rifle through you. But this is leading the reader so shame on me. Forget I said it (smirks to self).

If you weren’t convinced Matt was a villain before, you will be.

THE MISSING CHAPTER

“This kid’s hitting the jackpot.”

The adoption specialist drove up a winding hill. Each time, Angela was awed by the mansion and lavish wealth. Like previous appointments, she topped the hill that resembled the Biltmore Estate; a stately home on massive acreage dominated by manicured green lawns cradled by tall trees. An all-brick driveway was accented by red inlays that curled and tapered to ends like wind whisps. Bruce Wayne would envy this residence. Fit for a celebrity wedding if it were sunny, but the sky was overcast. Grey shadows painted the manor as a creepy mausoleum.

She switched the radio to classical music. It seemed fitting and brightened her mood set by the gloomy weather. Listening to Mozart’s Piano Concerto No.21, she drove slowly and hugged the steering wheel for a better view of the grandeur.

She saw something new each visit. A Greco-Roman statue, ornate tile inlays in the fountain, servant living quarters in the distance. The massive Chateausque-style mansion was fit for royalty. The guard at the gate was overly genial. Clearly instructions from the family, eager to adopt and close to the end.

But is it fit for a deserving child? Money and fake charms don’t make a home. She had her reasons. Bruce Wayne became a hero, but without parents, he was a dark knight with inner demons, and never exorcised, despite Alfred’s best efforts.

“Expense clearly isn’t a challenge. But what about values, and emotional support?”

No amount of paperwork could divulge it. Angela knew time would tell, but the hopeful couple had made it this far. The rigorous, at times bureaucratic process to match child with prospective parents had taken almost two years; multiple interviews, excessive background checks, legal requirements, and the need for thorough documentation. Quarterly face-to-face

inhome visits to the adoptive home were extensive but necessary. The couple's willingness to adopt any race, even accept challenging medical needs, eased the process. They completed the required training and home studies faster than most, an indicator of sincerity. This accelerated their advancement to the top of the agency's waiting list. Wealth and notoriety helped.

She parked and strode around a tall stone fountain. A happy cherub on top emptied water into widening tiers that cascaded into a circular pool. The smiling couple in their late thirties stood in the arched double doorway. The welcoming husband and wife seemed ready for the final home study. Affable greetings began before she reached the doorway.

"Hi Angela," and "Welcome," they said at the same time.

The couple could have adopted privately, but chose the public foster care system instead. The process was emotionally taxing for all parties due to uncertainty, waiting periods, and legal complexities. It stressed everyone, the adopted child, prospective parents, and birth parents, but not in this case. The birth parents were deceased. This made it easier because the adopting family didn't need to bother with legal termination of rights, finalization in court, or issuance of a new birth certificate. Angela didn't worry about this case. Fraud, unethical practices, or situations where birth parents were coerced or misled didn't apply. This adoption was going smooth even if the undertaking was slow-moving.

"How are you today? Any problems getting here?"

Their greetings seemed scripted regardless of prior visits and familiarity. Still, proper etiquette was necessary. The couple had a reputation to uphold. Subconsciously dubious, Angela smiled impartially. She was the last line of defense for the child, the decision maker or breaker for this child, and she didn't take her responsibility lightly. Too much was at stake for a child in formative years. The same was true with good-intentioned, but unproven parents. One could easily feel subordinate in this Bastille of success and prosperity. But the unarticulated, *'I flaunt*

wealth because I am better than everyone else,’ didn’t apply to Angela. She was Alpha here—

and they knew it. She gave thumbs up or down to their dreams of raising a child.

Angela ascended the brick stairway that gracefully fanned at the base and narrowed at the top. She noticed a butler behind the couple. This time he held simple clear glasses of sweet iced tea.

They’ve learned, Angela observed.

On her first visit, champagne in Waterford crystal was offered on an engraved silver platter. She shopped for a pair of the toasting flute glasses. She laughed at the price, more at the platter’s cost. Unaffordable. She wondered about the butler’s salary and briefly questioned her career choice. A second later, Angela realized her job was a labor of love. Deciding the fate of another, in this case a helpless toddler, to strangers. No, believed social work, although undervalued, was incalculable. The profession had a weight heavier than gold but when a child was adopted to a nurturing family, the payoff was priceless.

They didn’t exchange hugs—the couple had tried this before only to receive an extended straight arm and formal handshake. Premature affection would only muddy expectations and establish an unwarranted expectation. If the adoptive couple was declined, any caresses although good hearted, would make rejection more bitter in the end. Cold professionalism had to be maintained. Refusal was acidic no matter the situation, but easier to swallow from a neutral party than from someone who’d earned your trust through fondness. Hugs were only an option *after* placement.

The man of the house held the door that he rarely opened himself. He motioned Angela beyond the high ceiling vestibule. They walked in a museum of revered interior design, passed the salon, through the tiled loggia that overlooked a private garden, through a library until they reached a den. This sitting area was full of antique furnishings. Greek-styled rugs hung on walls

accented by vases and sconces. Vibrant oil paintings from celebrated artists hung in ornate gold frames. Each antiquity had been hand selected by the lady who was fond of older styles.

Angela wasn't herself when she first visited. She was afraid to sit or stand, and uncertain where to place her drink. She'd forgotten how to act covered by wealth. The riches of the mansion had judged her unworthy. Unmoving, she sat tense, confined in an invisible cage, hands clasped between knees, shoulders scrunched to ears, and clenched jaw. She felt a thousand times smaller than her company, an ant before a mountain. Now, she relaxed as a coach before inevitable victory in a game she understood very well. The couple sat together on a brown English roll arm couch with a paisley design, half-leather, half-fabric. They gestured for Angela to sit opposite them but she remained standing.

"I know you're both anxious and this has been a long journey so I'll get right to it. After careful consideration and review, the adoption committee has decided you're *approved* to adopt. Congratulations! This is a significant milestone towards parenthood." The man exhaled and slumped with relief. The lady loosened her clasped fingers from prayer to hug her husband excitedly and cried with joy.

"We believe you will provide a loving and nurturing environment for a child in need of a forever home. Your commitment and enthusiasm throughout this process is commendable, and we are confident you will make wonderful parents. Now that your approval is finalized, we can move forward to next steps preparing for the arrival of your child. We are here to support you every step of the way."

"Again, congratulations on this exciting news, and I look forward to assisting you further on your adoption journey. Do you have any questions?" The man rose his hand.

"This is terrific news and a dream come true for us since we couldn't ..." He stopped abruptly catching himself and looked at his wife. She looked down with a sense of shame. He

started again quickly, but it seemed to Angela the unintentional damage had already been inflicted. *For a lawyer, that was a major slip up.*

“I mean, since we can now be loving parents. I admit, I anticipate questions about how to be a good father. I know there will be difficult times, especially since they boy has demonstrated impulsive ... um, assertiveness.”

“You can call it what it is. You mean his conduct. Poor emotional regulation and attention problems are common at this age. But early identification and appropriate interventions can significantly improve outcomes for children at risk of developing behavioral or emotional difficulties. The adoption agency will schedule periodic check-ins to monitor how you and the child coexist as a new family unit.” The wife nodded and leaned back accepting Angela’s answer but her husband wiggled forward to the edge of his seat.

“I know I’ve asked this before, but we were hoping for more transparency regarding the child’s background, more than what has been previously shared. It may help his transition.”

Angela knew what he was after. Every adoptive parent did.

“I will share again what can be shared. The boy has no special needs and is from the local area. Both parents are deceased. He has been persistently aggressive since he was placed into our care three years ago but this passes once a child is placed into a permanent loving home.” The rest was protected by legal and privacy considerations. Angela couldn’t share the mother’s suspicious murder. Similarly, she couldn’t reveal the father had died in early retirement from complications in the line of duty. “There’s nothing else to share. My recommendation is not to drive forward looking in the rearview mirror. If anyone can raise a child and steer them away from trouble to a path of virtue as a contributing member of society, it’s you.”

The man had lost his appeal but his frustration was boosted by Angela’s confidence. As one of the most successful lawyers in the country, Angela was sure he’d be as good a father as

anyone and his wife a role model mother. She couldn't share all the specifics of the boy's violence at foster care. And she hoped they wouldn't connect the boy's last name with the local police officer as the father, Ruford Keelman.

“Again, congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Sleeman. We're sure you're the best match for Matt.”

Decades later.

Thud.

His strike vibrated the soggy earth beneath him, sending a tremor through his knees and shins. The lead pipe, topped with a corroded pipe fitting, swung fast with the power of a medieval mace. Blood drained from a petite, squishy body, pooling into an earthen divot before slowly soaking into the ground. Sitting on his knees, pipe in fist, Matt scooted back. Chunks of dirt and blades of grass fell from his weapon as he raised it again.

Thud.

They squealed constantly and occasionally cried like mice, but not because they felt threatened. Hours old, their newborn eyes hadn't opened yet. They couldn't hear the slaughter of their siblings next to them. Perhaps they smelled it, but were too young to know what was happening, and too weak to escape.

“My god. The noise!” he huffed, shaking his head as if he could draw the sound out of his ears.

Gotta keep my voice down. The pipe rose again. White specks of bone and crimson-wet black fur clung to the pipe now, a muddy mix of soil and blood caked over rusty metal.

Thud-squelch. A high-pitched, pain-endorsed yelp escaped its half-crushed skull, followed by silence, its exhale, its last, helplessly surrendering to Matt's brutality.

"God dammit—quit writhing!" Irritated, he lifted the pipe quickly, spraying small bits of clay and gore into his face as it flung over his head. He hammered the body again, more forcefully, angered by the clumsiness of his first hit. His aim was true, and the second pounding provided a clean death stroke and the largest hole yet in the ground. Hot and itchy with filth, the feeling of warm blood on his face triggered a ferocious adrenaline-fueled frenzy.

Whump-whump-whump-whump! The others were lucky. He targeted their heads and dealt swift deaths. This puppy felt the first blows damaging nerves, causing it to flinch wildly before the last ended its life. The smell of innards and damp iron filled the foggy air. His lungs pumped, ballooning his chest with rage.

"Damn stray! Why my yard? Why not—" His doorbell rang. His head turned quickly towards his house as if caught in the act, fearful of being caught.

"Who the hell?" He looked back at the last remaining whelp, rolling and squirming. He raised the pipe for one last savage strike.

Ding-Dong.

His strike missed, sinking deeply into the ground next to the tiny dog. Screaming an expletive, he lurched quickly, slipping on wet grass, and left the pipe stuck in the ground at an angle. Regaining balance, he stomped across his backyard, marched over his back porch, and sped through his house to the front door. A shadowy figure turned through the door's opaque glass. Dirty as a construction worker, Matt flung open the door, startling the frail man outside.

"I don't want any!" Matt slammed the door and turned to finish what he had started in the backyard, noticing muddy prints on his floor. He cursed.

“Your car lights are on,” came a deadened voice through the door, and “Asshole,” but he didn’t hear it. Matt turned, seeing the shadowy man walk away, and noticed a faint glow in his driveway where there shouldn’t be any.

He thought about getting his car keys to shut off his headlights. It would wait. His mind was obsessed with eradicating the litter of stray pups from his property. He eyed a closet where a shotgun was stored, considering a change in weaponry.

“Nah. Bullets cost money.” Never mind the gunshot and the alarm it would cause the neighbors, the close range that risked dangerous blowback or rebound, or the bigger mess it would make. He didn’t consider those things. Removal. That’s all that was on his mind. He walked fast to the backyard where puppies lay with smashed heads, one a crunchy lump of bone, fur, and red sinew. The drizzle thickened into a dull rain, and dark clouds squeezed the life out of the setting sun, ushering in a damp, early night.

“Where is it?” He listened, but the patter of thick raindrops increased, and thunder rolled. He picked up one of the bodies and threw it like a baseball beyond the tree line, unhappy with his distance. He repeated it with the others, trying to launch them farther with each throw, more like footballs, his hands becoming bloodier in the process, except for the last. Like an Olympic athlete performing shot put, he tucked the tiny corpse under his neck, feet wide, his back leg bent down, then spun around three times, launching the last limp carcass into the air with explosive malice. The corpse landed, rustling wet leaves. He achieved his greatest distance. Like a bodybuilder, he flexed his biceps and contracted back muscles, feigning greatness. Nostrils flared in manic delight on his thin nose under bushy eyebrows, and his muscled jaw relaxed. Lightning lit the sky, but no sound followed, pulsing at whim.

Hearty bursts of raucous laughter left him gasping for breath, accompanied by amused tears. He doubled over to catch his breath with erratic pauses. There was no reason, and no one

would understand his frenzied glee or why he reveled in chaotic mischief. Crazy, his face fell, stopping abruptly mid-cackle like a car wreck. With each slow breath, his hunched body uncoiled, gathering energy as he straightened with a determined expression, the world around him fading into the background. He stood suspended in time, enveloped in the rhythmic patter of the rain, feeling droplets accumulate on his ear lobes before dripping to his neck. Silent. Staring.

I need to tend to my other pet.

He pivoted, becoming aware again of his car lights that created a bright glow over the fence and a glare on his house as they shined. He stripped down at the doorway, wearing only white underwear. A dark farmer's tan of bloody muck was speckled over his face and arms, a

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great contrast to the rest of his pale white skin. Grabbing keys, he unlocked a door to a wooden staircase that dropped away to his unfinished basement. The steps groaned with each step as he lumbered down. The double-click of a thin pull chain illuminated a singular dirty light bulb, shedding dismal yellow light on the dungeon, and his captive, handcuffed to a metal pipe extruding from the wall.

Gagged, lying atop a crumpled blanket on the floor, she didn't bother to lift her head but squinted open a purple-puffy eye cracked from dried tears. It was day four, and by now, she knew pleading for her release didn't matter, but her dread was the same.

AFTERWORD

See?

Nothing solidifies a villain like brutally killing puppies.

I hope you *love* to *hate* Matt. I do.
