

FLASH FICTION

Anonymous Roots

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Friday nights always felt immortal. The lights of Jefferson Memorial Stadium bathed the field in white and gold as the marching band thundered through the cool autumn air. Cheerleaders spun across the turf in perfect synchronization, and at the top of the final pyramid stood Alexa Stein, smiling down at thousands of cheering fans. Everything she'd ever wanted seemed within reach. College applications waited on her desk. Her parents had promised pancakes the next morning. Her little brother had begged her to help him finish building a model rocket after breakfast. Her boyfriend, Ryan, waved from the sidelines with the same confident grin that had stolen her heart two years earlier. Her life wasn't perfect. It was simply home. She had no idea she was living the last night of it.

The neighborhood was silent when she pulled into the driveway. Too silent. The porch light still glowed. The front door stood slightly open.

"Dad?" she called, stepping inside.

Nothing answered.

Only darkness.

Her heartbeat quickened. She crossed the living room. A family picture frame lay shattered across the hardwood floor. Another step. The metallic smell reached her first. Blood. She stumbled toward the kitchen. Her mother lay beside the table. Her father collapsed across the floor. Her

younger brother rested against the cabinets as though asleep. Only he wasn't breathing.

"No..." Her voice cracked.

"No... no..." Tears blurred her vision as she dropped beside them.

Someone moved behind her. She turned. A masked figure stood only inches away. Steel flashed. Pain exploded across her throat. She tried to scream. Only warm blood escaped. The last thing Elexa saw before darkness swallowed her was her family lying together in crimson silence.

Cold.

The world returned as cold metal pressed against her back. Chemical fumes burned her lungs. Someone screamed. Elexa gasped violently and shot upright. Doctors stumbled backward. The coroner dropped every instrument onto the tiled floor. Hands grabbed her. Machines shrieked. Someone shouted for security. Her fingers flew to her neck. The wound was gone. Impossible. Within hours the entire city knew. The girl who should have died...had come back. The news called it a miracle. Social media called it suspicious. The police called it an investigation. Everyone else whispered. How did she survive? Why was she the only survivor? Maybe she wasn't a victim. Maybe she was the killer. Friends who once hugged her now crossed hallways to avoid her. Teachers looked at her with pity. Neighbors stared through their curtains whenever she left the house. The home she'd

grown up in became another crime scene she wasn't allowed to enter.

She had survived.

Yet she'd lost everything.

Ryan picked her up one rainy evening.

"I figured you shouldn't be alone."

She almost cried with relief. At least someone still believed her. They parked beside an empty lake outside town. For several minutes neither of them spoke. Then he reached for her. She leaned into the embrace she'd been desperate for. Instead his kiss became demanding. His hands wandered farther than she wanted.

She gently pulled away. "I'm not ready."

His jaw tightened. "Seriously?"

"I just buried my family."

"You've been saying that for months."

She stared at him. He sighed dramatically.

"You know..." He laughed without humor. "...everyone thinks you killed them."

Her heart stopped. "What?"

"I'm just saying what everyone's saying."

"What do **you** believe?" Ryan hesitated. Long enough.

"I don't know." The words hurt worse than the knife.

She opened the passenger door. "I can't do this."

He didn't stop her. She walked home alone. That was the last time she ever saw the boy she thought she loved.

School became unbearable.

Until the new student arrived. His name was Adrian.

Quiet.

Soft-spoken.

Patient.

Unlike everyone else, he listened.

He never interrupted.

Never judged.

Never stared.

For the first time since waking in the morgue, Elexa believed someone finally saw her as a person instead of a headline. One afternoon they sat together beneath the old oak tree behind the school. She told him everything.

The blood.

The morgue.

The nightmares.

The loneliness.

When she finished, Adrian looked at her with an expression she couldn't read.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She smiled weakly. "So am I." Silence settled between them.

Then he asked quietly, "Do you remember the last thing you saw?"

She frowned. "A mask." "A knife." "My family."

He nodded. "I wondered."

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

His voice never changed. "I should have slit your throat deeper."

The world froze. "What...?"

His eyes held no sympathy now.

Only disappointment.

"You weren't supposed to wake up."

Footsteps sounded behind her. A girl emerged from the trees carrying a hunting knife. Adrian accepted it without taking his eyes off Elexa. Recognition slammed into her.

The blade.

The same blade.

The same shape.

The same black handle. Memory crashed into her like lightning. He had been there. He was the masked killer.

He smiled. "No mistakes this time."

He lunged.

Instinct—not thought—took over.

Elexa twisted aside.

His knife carved through empty air. She shoved him with every ounce of strength fear gave her. Adrian flew backward much farther than any ordinary person should have. His body slammed against the massive oak.

The trunk cracked.

Branches exploded overhead. He collapsed without another sound. His cousin screamed. Elexa stared in horror.

"I... I didn't..."

She hadn't meant to hit him that hard. She hadn't even known she could. The girl fled into the woods. Elexa remained frozen beside Adrian's motionless body, her own trembling hands lifted in disbelief. She had survived death. She had been hunted. And now... without understanding the impossible strength awakening inside her... Elexa Stein had unknowingly killed her first hunter. As distant thunder rolled across the evening sky, unseen eyes watched from the darkness. The monsters had found the impossible girl. And the war for her had only just begun.

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