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PLAYER ONE

Just past sunrise, pallid light pours in freely through a broken window onto every parent's worst nightmare: the bed is empty, the child gone.

Maggie Dawson is standing in the bedroom doorway paralysed, trying to process the scene. Her eyes go from the tousled bedsheets to the shattered window, to her little boy's blanket on the fire escape outside. Her legs are heavy, lungs too small. She drops his breakfast, Pop-Tarts falling, and when air finally returns she can barely scream his name.

'Jackson!'

The room is so cold there is frost on the carpet. Maggie stumbles forward, bare feet treading glass, and then hesitates at the window, too terrified to look, her thoughts a siren, a wailing litany:

He fell, oh Jesus Christ he fell, he's down there on the ground, sometime in the night, he fell, he's hurt, he's dead, he fell, he's—

Outside is the wrought-iron fire escape, one of those zig-zagging staircases you see on mid-rise apartment buildings

all across the States. Maggie lives on the highest floor, five storeys up; even the fresh snowfall wouldn't have done much to cushion a fall. She wants to close her eyes, to turn away, but she has to see. Through the cracks between her fingers she glances down, holding her breath.

No Jackson. No tracks in the snow. Nothing.

Just his Spider-Man blanket caught up on the handrail, the fabric frozen stiff as if he wet it in the night.

Has he run away from her? Would he do that? Last night's forecast was for twenty below freezing. A grown man couldn't cross the city in that, let alone a boy. *Her* boy. Her son.

She focuses on the window: shards on the floor, broken inwards. A heavy gust might have done that, or something to do with ice; fluctuations in temperature? She has to get her head together. This is Saint Paul, for Christ's sake. The land of Minnesota Nice. It isn't Mexico or Venezuela or Brazil. Children don't just vanish here. Do they?

Her palms slap the pockets of her flannel dressing gown and come up empty. Sprinting back through the flat, she finds her phone charging beside the sofa where she woke up only minutes ago. There's something onscreen: a text message. Without pausing to read it, she dials.

'911, what's the address of the emergency?'

'My son! My son is gone! I-I think—' The words are heavy. Choking. Impossible. 'Somebody took him! Somebody took my boy!'

The voice on dispatch is firm, trained. 'Can you give me the address?'

'Apartment 13, Laurel Flats, Western Avenue North.'

‘OK.’ The clicking of keys. ‘A car is on the way. How old is your son?’

‘Eight. I went into the room and he’s just ... He’s just *gone!*’

‘What’s your name?’

‘M-Maggie. Margaret Dawson.’

‘How old are you, Maggie?’

‘Twenty-four. No, twenty-five.’

‘Are you alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is the apartment secure?’

‘The window in his room, it looks as if it’s been broken from outside.’

The rest of this conversation is hurried and indistinct. Did she see anything? No. Did she hear anything? No. The woman tells Maggie not to touch anything. She tells her to wait.

Help is coming.

Maggie hangs up and tries to steady her lungs. Breathe. She looks around the living room. An empty Southern Comfort bottle by the sofa. It was only half full to begin with, but it paints a lousy picture. The roach of a single joint is lying like a dead bug inside the bottle. Just enough to help her sleep, she’d told herself. Enough to pass out on the couch and sleep through anything. God, she wishes she could wake up from this nightmare.

She snatches up the bottle, the last of the weed, the papers and the lighter, and stuffs them all into a grocery bag. Then she bursts out of her apartment and drops the bag into the chute at the end of the fifth-floor corridor. From somewhere far below, she hears the contents crunch. Her head is light. Turning back, she sees slick, bloody footprints leading from the front door. The glass in her feet. ‘Fuck!’

Tears finally come as she hurries back inside for paper towels. All she needs now is for the cops to find her mopping up blood by the rubbish chute. Way to go, Maggie. Who ever said you were irresponsible? She checks her phone before making it to the kitchenette, to see how many minutes have passed.

Only now does she pay attention to the notification onscreen.

She opens the text message, stopping dead, and reads. It isn't long, but it takes her a while, as if the words are composed of another language altogether. They aren't. Concise, clear, cutting, their simplicity is chilling. She gets to the end and starts again. Twice.

There's a photograph attached. She downloads the image. It's hard to take in.

She drops to her knees. She is surely having a heart attack.

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Moments later, the phone is back against her ear.

This time it's a man. '911, what's the address of the emergency?'

'I-I just called about my son,' she croaks. 'He's—'

'What's the address?'

'Western Avenue North.'

'Western North ...' Tapping keys. A casual sniff. 'Are you Maggie?'

'Yes.'

'You reported your child missing?'

'Y-yes, but—'

'Officers are on the way, they should be there in—'

'I found him!' She says it so fast it sounds like a scream.

‘You found your son?’

‘Yes.’ She can’t quite believe what she’s saying. If she hangs up now, the help will arrive. There’ll be sirens. Uniforms. Guns. But they’d never find Jackson alive. The message she just read was simple. The photograph speaks for itself. The rules are clear.

‘He was hiding,’ she hears herself whisper. ‘A prank.’

‘It says here that you reported a broken window on the premises.’

‘I panicked. It’s open, that’s all. The room was cold. So cold ...’

For a while, the man is silent. Silence is bad. In her mind, Maggie can already hear this atrocity being played back on the evening news.

‘OK, Maggie,’ he says. ‘You sound as if you’re in shock. I’m going to let our officers proceed as planned, and—’

‘No!’ She’s close to hysterics. ‘Can’t you hear what I’m telling you? He’s fine! I don’t need them here!’

‘Ma’am.’ Just like that, the tone has somehow changed. ‘I need you to remain calm and stay right where you are. The officers are only two minutes away. If you need any—’

She hangs up. Her thumb does it for her, her body working faster than her brain.

Two minutes away. Two minutes. She needs to move. *Now.*

One more glance at the image on her phone – the photograph of her boy – is enough to get her going.

She yanks a pair of red high-tops onto her feet, bursts out of her apartment and hurtles past the bloody footprints and down the staircase through the belly of the building.

One minute.

She runs out into the snow in her dressing gown and underwear, with nothing but her phone in her hand. Her son has been taken, the police are almost here, and yet Maggie Dawson is fleeing the scene.

It's a little past eight o'clock on a January morning.

The Game has just begun.