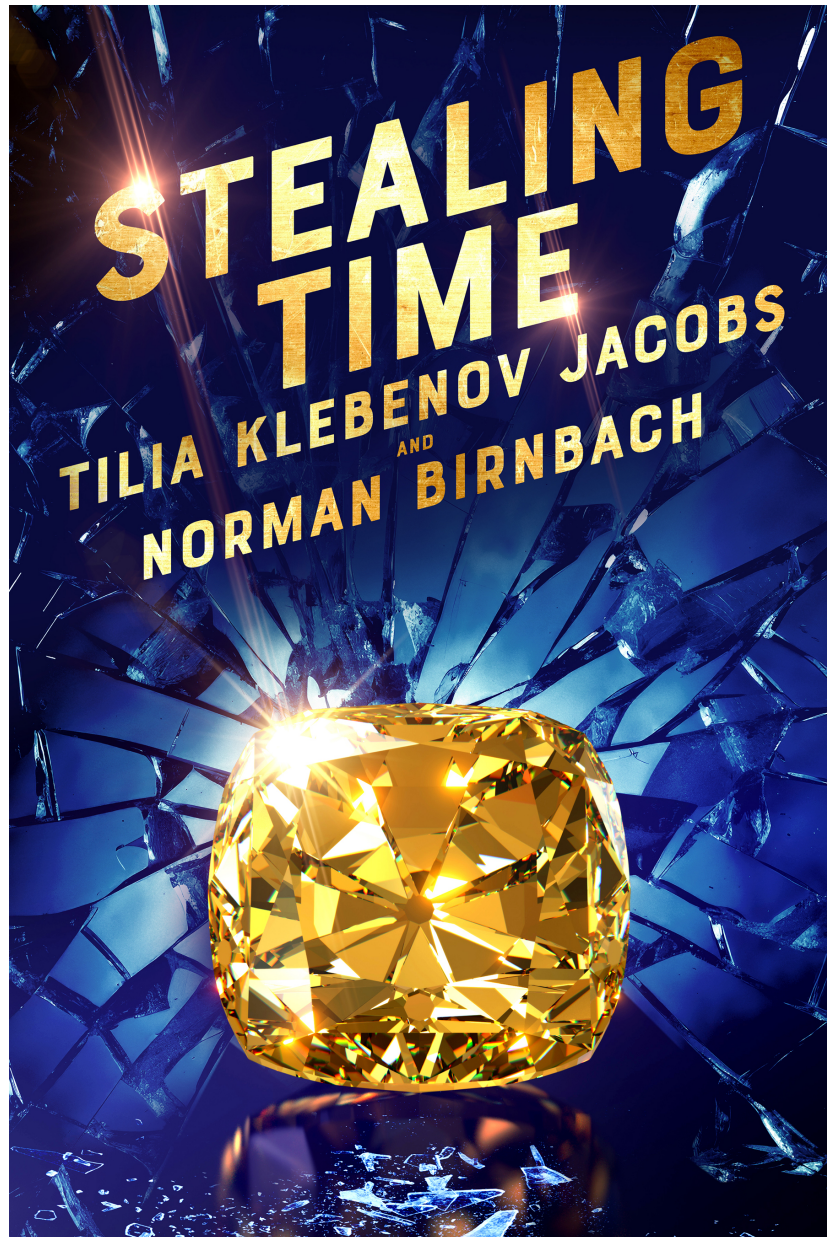


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Chapter 2

Who's Home in Whose Home?



Tori jerked to a sitting position, shaking her head violently. *What—the hell—was that?* Her hair flopped in her eyes, and she covered her face with her hands, trying to calm the shaking in her limbs. Her stomach churned, and she swallowed hard, hoping to keep everything down.

The door clicked open. *Oh, crap—it's Dad.* She looked up, ready to be angry again.

A boy stood in the doorway. Shaggy brown hair, heavy eyebrows, a Mets sweatshirt. Jeans and sneakers. About her age. They stared, then both spoke at the same time.

“Who are you?”

A heartbeat, and they both spoke again.

“What are you doing in my room?”

Tori gawped at him. She tried again, and so did he.

“This is *my* room. *Your* room? Yeah, *my* room! I *live* here. No, *I* live here!”

The boy goggled. So did Tori. *I know him from somewhere*, she thought. Not school. Camp? Maybe. But how had he gotten into her apartment? And why?

She tried one last time. “Where’s my father?”

The boy drew his heavy brows together. “How should I know?”

“He was here, like, a second ago.”

“I’m the only one here now.”

“Damn right you are.” Tori hurtled off the unmade bed and ran past the interloper, down the short hallway and out the front door. The apartment was on the sixth floor, but she wasn’t going to wait for the elevator. She skidded down all six flights, barely keeping her feet under her, and burst through the front door. Her foot slipped in a puddle of slush, and a cold wind, thin as a blade, sliced through her tee shirt. She slid to a halt, realizing two things.

One, she didn’t have a coat.

Two, she shouldn’t have needed one—it had been a warm, sunny day, but now the sidewalk was lumped over with pitted, gray snow.

The weather wasn’t the only thing that had gone haywire. The MTA busses were the wrong shape and color. Bulky yellow taxis detailed with black-and-white checker stripes splashed through the slush, and a station wagon with fake wood doors chunked over potholes. The sidewalk was

crowded, which it certainly hadn't been earlier in the day. Clumps of school kids, some carrying briefcases instead of backpacks; a young mom, cigarette dangling from her lips, pushing a stroller that didn't look sturdy enough to handle the city streets; and everyone walking around like they'd never heard the words *pandemic* or *lockdown*.

The clothes were all wrong too. Lots of brown cloth coats with wide lapels. Two women wearing fur jackets. *Fur!*

Tori's mind convulsed. Movie set? Hallucination/insanity? Climate change? She took a deep breath of cold air and started walking. In three steps, her sneakers were soaked.

At the corner, a blue newspaper kiosk displayed *The New York Times*. The paper was wider than usual. *Special coronavirus edition?* Hugging her elbows for warmth, she leaned down to see the front page. The photo story in the upper-left corner ("Late Winter Snowfall Snarls Traffic") was in black and white, and the lead headline blared, "CARTER PLAN IS DUE TODAY ON ECONOMY; 10¢ GAS RISE LIKELY; INFLATION CUT IS AIM."

The date on the paper was Friday, March 14, 1980.

Tori stood up fast. Whatever this was, it wasn't funny. She pulled her phone out of her pocket to call home, but the screen was black and unresponsive to either her touch or her whispered curses.

"What are you doing?"

Tori jerked around. It was the crazy boy who claimed to live in her room, wearing a puffy parka, unzipped as though he had pulled it on in a hurry.

"Trying to call my folks."

"What's that?" He pointed to her phone.

"Old 7S." She forced a smile. "They won't get me anything newer. Hey, look, my battery's dead. Can I use your phone?"

"I guess." He turned back to the apartment building, glancing back at her. She followed, stepping around the slush. *Why doesn't he have it with him?*

The boy already had his key in his hand, New Yorker-style. When they reached the entrance, he turned it in the lock while pulling up on the knob and pressing against the door with his hip until it opened.

Tori felt her chest constrict. The building was old, built in the forties, and as Adina said, it had gotten eccentric in its old age. You would have to open that door a hundred times before nailing the knack of it. Which this kid clearly had. How—?

To hide her confusion, she gazed again at the street, trying to pinpoint what was so different besides the weather and the clothes. And the fact that everyone was outside instead of hunkered behind closed doors taping cardboard over the air ducts. The street she had lived on her whole life felt off-kilter. But why? Forgetting that her battery was dead, she reached for her phone to take a picture so she could study it later. She froze, her hand touching the edge of her back pocket.

No one was looking at their phones. No one walked with their hands out and necks bent forward in the telltale sign that they were focused on their screens.

A hideous idea muscled into her mind.

No. Can't be.

“You okay?” The boy slipped the key back into his pocket.

Tori kicked the idea out and gestured at the passersby. “Where are the phones?”

“There’s one on the corner, but the cord broke six months ago.” He stomped the slush off his boots and stepped over the threshold, holding open the door.

Numbly, she followed him inside. Their wet shoes slapped against the thin carpet runner, echoing in the shadows of the tiled hallway. He pressed the elevator button, and the floor indicator moved from 14 to Lobby. Neither spoke. The silence was terrible, tight. What could she possibly say?

“My name’s Bobby,” said the boy.

Okay, so that was one thing.

“Tori,” she said. The elevator doors opened, and they stepped in. It looked the same, maybe a little cleaner than usual. Bobby hit the button. The doors hissed shut, and they clanked up, floor by floor.

“Is that short for Victoria?” he said as the door opened.

“Yeah. Family name.”

As they walked down the hall, Tori shuffled data points in her mind, willing the scene to make sense. First off, Bobby was clearly bonkers, thinking he lived in their apartment; but he did know the building and its quirks. Could it be he lived there, and they had somehow never crossed paths?

Nah. Neighborhood teens were easy to spot, hanging at Starbucks and the basketball court and stuff. Unless this guy was Boo Radley, she would have set eyes on him before now.

Second, what about all the weirdness at street level? Everything from the weather to the clothes was nutso.

She kicked off her wet sneakers as Bobby untied his boots, leaving them next to the mat. The door was ajar, kept in place by the chain. She checked the brass numerals—right number; good, good—and stepped inside.

It was her apartment, all right: same entrance hall, same layout. But now that she had a chance to take it all in—now that she was walking, not Usain-bolting out of her bedroom, tunnel vision on the front door—she saw that everything here was off too. The wood floor was darker, the walls were covered in pale-green, geometric wallpaper instead of yellow paint, and the furniture had a funky, retro-mod look. Weirdest of all, the stink of tobacco hung in the air so thick she could almost chew it.

“My father’s named Victor.”

Unfairly, Tori found herself irritated by the coincidence. “Well, my father’s named Bob, so I guess we’re even.”

“Didn’t know we were keeping score,” said the boy. “There’s a phone in my dad’s study.”

“My dad’s,” she snapped, and stomped past him.

Whoever was rearranging things had worked fast. Her dad’s big, wooden desk was on the wrong side of the room, and his *Empire Strikes Back* and *Star Trek* paraphernalia were gone. Instead, the walls sparkled with pictures of jewelry: hoop earrings in the shape of leopards’ heads; a bracelet that looked like a curved, gold nail; a necklace of amethyst grapes shaded by cloisonné leaves

sprouting from curling vines a-glitter with tiny diamonds. Another wall displayed action photos of old-timey baseball players. The big guy was probably Babe Ruth; another one showed a skinny dude in vintage Yankee pinstripes slouching before a teepee of microphones. A Barcalounger and a red, plaid couch took up the center of the room. Either one of them would have given Tori's mother an aneurysm.

"It's on the desk." Bobby gestured at a squat, black phone with a kinked-up cord. Another line led from the base to a plug in the wall.

"Old-school," said Tori, momentarily forgetting to be scared.

Bobby's heavy brows furrowed. "Old-school?"

"In a good way," she assured him. "It's cool." She examined the phone. *Right. I can do this.* She put her finger into the hole next to the number two, pulled it toward the bottom of the dial, and released it. It spun back with a rattling sound. Pleased with herself, she did the same with the number one but forgot to remove her finger, and the dial pulled it back up to the top as it unwound. The whole thing was slower and noisier than she had expected. But by the end of her mother's phone number, she had gotten pretty smooth, and felt a flash of triumph. "Now what?"

Bobby had backed away and was watching her from the doorway as though she might explode. "What do you mean, 'now what?'"

"Like, do I hit send, or what?"

Bobby's look of confusion deepened. "You pick up the receiver."

"Oh, right," Tori chuckled. *I knew that. I just wanted to see if you knew that.* She lifted the handset, and after an awkward moment figured out that the part with the cord must be the mouthpiece, which meant that the upper part was the earpiece, which meant that now it should be dialing.

Which it wasn't.

"Why isn't it dialing?"

Bobby gave up all efforts at politeness. "Have you seriously never used a phone before?"

"Not like this!"

"So you have, what, a party line or something?"

"I—" Tori waved the buzzing receiver around. "Just walk me through it, okay?"

Bobby sighed. "Hang up."

She hung up.

"Now pick it up again."

"But you said —"

"The receiver has to be off the cradle before you dial, or it doesn't go through."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

"I just did," muttered Bobby.

Furrowing her brows, Tori dialed her mother's number again, this time more smoothly. It didn't go through, and neither did the call to her father. Instead, she got a high-pitched beep and a robo-voice saying, "The number you have dialed is not in service."

"This is so weird," she sighed. "I'm not even getting voicemail."

"Bummer," said Bobby cautiously.

“Think maybe it’s a pandemic thing?”

“Sure,” said Bobby. “Definitely.”

“One more try and I’ll...” She paused. What *would* she do if she couldn’t reach her parents? “I’ll get out of your hair,” she said, reaching again for the phone.

This time, she tried the landline that she made fun of her parents for keeping. It was partly for emergencies but mainly so Grandma Louise wouldn’t have to learn a new number. Tori whispered the area code, prefix, and the final four digits to herself, and watched the slow turning of the dial.

Busy signal. She groaned and hung up.

“What number did you just call?” said Bobby.

“None of your business,” she snapped.

“You said it while you were dialing.”

“Then why are you asking me what it was?”

He abandoned the safety of the doorframe to stand next to her. “Did you dial 212-555-1177?”

“Yeah, so?”

“That’s our number.”

“Just like how my room is your room?”

“You’re calling this phone.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Bobby pointed to the smudged numbers on the circle in the middle of the dial. Tori peered at them.

212-555-1177.

She felt sick.

“What are you trying to pull?” demanded Bobby. For the first time, he sounded angry.

“I’m not pulling anything,” cried Tori. “Something’s—wrong.” Her knees shook, and she sat down hard on the plaid couch. “I need to call my folks.”

Her distress seemed to jolt Bobby back to sympathy. “Did you hit your head or something?”

“What? No.”

“You sure?”

“Why do you think I hit my head?”

“Because the number you dialed is our number, and the apartment you say you live in is our apartment.”

Tori groaned and hugged herself. Her eyes fell to an ashtray on the desk by a pile of magazines. *TV Guide*. *Omni*, recommending “Games To Play on Your Calculator.” *Time*, with Ronald Reagan on the cover.

“I don’t—this is so —” The idea she had thrown out cleared its throat loudly.

“Let’s look up your number,” suggested Bobby. He pulled a massive paperback out of a bookcase and let it flop open on the desk. “Maybe you’re just off by one digit or something.”

Tori nodded. “Okay. Yeah. Good idea.”

“What’s your parents’ names?”

“Robert Gold and—”

Bobby looked up from the book, finger still on the page. “Robert Gold?”

“Yeah, Gold like the metal.”

“I know how to spell it.”

“Well, sometimes people put a U in the middle.”

“I know how to spell it because it’s my name.”

“What?”

“Robert Gold.” He pointed to himself. “That’s me.”

Tori gaped. Brown eyes, heavy brows...images of family photos flashed into her mind: her dad at summer camp, her dad graduating from high school. Back when he had dark, shaggy hair. He looked a lot like—no, he looked *exactly* like this kid.

Whose name was also Bob Gold. And who was staring at her in a way that said at least one of them was whacko.

Tori looked past his shoulder. The window over the desk framed a postcard view of Manhattan, its skyline like a jumble of Lego blocks. It was all familiar...except for two tall, slender towers soaring over everything else, reflecting the cloudy sky.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

“What?”

Tori pulled her knees to her chest, shaking all over. The ugly idea was pounding on the door. She felt as though her brain had drifted free of its moorings and was spinning slowly and painfully in a whirlpool within her skull. Presently it stopped, presenting her with three options.

First, she was dead.

In a detached way, she saw how reasonable that was. New York was a pandemic cesspool. People were dying every day by the hundreds; she could certainly have been one of them. Maybe she got sick right after she and her dad fought, and the strain of dying had messed with her memory. Yes, that tracked.

But, pointed out her brain, why would the afterlife be her own apartment in 1980?

Second, she had lost her mind.

This, too, made a lot of sense. Being crack-ass bananas would account for everything: maybe she had fabricated her entire previous life.

But just as she was settling into the weirdly reassuring thought that she was one fry short of a Happy Meal, she felt something in her back pocket. Hesitatingly, she pulled out the iPhone. “Do you see this?”

“Sure,” said Bobby. “But I don’t know what it is.”

“Right.” Tori slipped the phone back in her pocket. If Bobby could see it, it was real, which meant 2020 was too.

The idea leered in triumph.

Time travel.

She was in her apartment in New York City, with her dad.

In 1980.

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