

Steal Back: A Nicholas Lief Mystery
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PROLOGUE

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THE PROMISE

In Ansley's bedroom, Jude drew open the draperies and unlatched the bay window. Sunrise's reds and golds roiled the clouds, tangy salt-and-seaweed air swooped in from the Pacific, lavender and jasmine scents burst alive in the garden below... But shite, none of these chased away the room's gloom.

None of these chased away the stink of medicines and mortality.

"Stay, Jude," Ansley called, his voice firm and deep, the voice of bedrock. "You know I've got a terrific biz operation here. Information brokers, computer forensics experts, snitches, the works."

Jude did not turn, did not reply. Ansley, his mentor. Ansley, who moments ago he'd again discovered wandering the house. He'd guided Ansley back to the rented hospital bed, a bed

more practical than the enormous silk-canopied four-poster beside it.

More practical, aye—for his *own* purposes. But Ansley was often to be found huddled under the four-poster's rich burgundy brocade. A familiar comfort.

“Stay,” Ansley said. “Be my right hand.”

Hell.

Jude let fall his forehead against the window glass. Four months gone now, since he'd arrived at Ansley's L.A. home. And nearly every day, Ansley asked him to stay on—asked, and then promptly forgot his question. Jude's hand fisted, hungry to smash into something. Into that something that'd inflicted dementia upon the brilliant Ansley.

'Twasn't fair. The man was only sixty-nine years old.

“What do you say, Nicholas?”

So. Ansley had hung onto his thought. And even remembered he'd re-christened him “Nicholas.” But for how long? How long before the conversation toppled headlong off the same cliff, Ansley next speaking to his long-dead mother or to a teenaged Jude or to who the fuck knew who?

And then, Ansley would trail off and be lost to him for hours and yet more hours.

“’Tisn't me way, yeh know that. I only popped in to see if yeh had any interesting biz going on.” With Ansley, he didn't bother to hide his natural accent—his own mingle-mangle of low-class Irish English and British English.

“I won't always be around for you to come back to, son.”

Son. Tears sprang to Jude's eyes, and he squeezed closed his eyelids against them. Weeks had gone by since that word-of-the-heart last crossed Ansley's lips.

“I don't come back for me.”

“Yes, I remember. You don’t need me. You told me that in London at thirteen, and you’re still telling me at thirty.” A grin darted through Ansley’s voice.

“Ansley, I—”

“Son, I want you to have something here you need never leave.”

Jude pushed away from the window. In the adjoining jacks, he twisted the faucet and filled the shaving mug with hot water, Ansley preferring a straight-razor shave to an electric. He put the brush in to soak. Then he stood there—anything to avoid the “Stay conversation” yet again. But his insides ached. Ansley sounded so much like his old self.

After a few minutes, Jude stropped the straight-edge on the leather. He drained the mug—Victorian, sterling silver, adorned with Hellenic harp players strumming away, crafted for some Lord Muck-a-Muck, a gift to Ansley from a client—and he worked the brush on the sandalwood soap, the bright, cooling scent curling up at him like incense. When he’d whipped the soap into stiff peaks, he returned to Ansley’s side. He tucked a hand towel into the neck of Ansley’s pajamas, reached for the brush—but paused. An odd impulse was drumming in his head. The impulse to, *this very instant*, take a mental snapshot of Ansley. Quite odd. Occasionally, when he was soon to travel on, the impulse to mentally snapshot his surroundings would drum. But why now?

But why not now, Ansley in good form? So he took the “snapshot”: Ansley, timber-wolf-gray head borne high. Broad shoulders set firm. Chest and arms not as thick and hard with muscle as once, but still impressive enough to give pause to a fit opponent. Eyes holding a warm gleam, the gleam of Ansley’s generous spirit. Och! A thousand years more of life be granted each of them, and ’twould still not be time enough to repay Ansley for all the man had done for him!

He picked up the brush and lathered Ansley's cheeks, gentling his strokes over the jagged groove running from lower left eyelid to jawline—silly, since that slash-to-the-bone had long ago been struck. He too bore scars aplenty, hidden underneath his clothing: knife scars, bullet scar, other-means-of-splitting-the-flesh scars. Souvenirs from foes trying to keep him from his biz—recovering stolen goods.

He reached for the straight-edge and ran a finger along its cool, mammoth-ivory handle. The razor, another gift. This time, from himself. If only... He gave the handle another brief caress. Mostly his limitations were no great bother, but if only he could break free of them, right now, for just the next five minutes. He'd give everything.

But neither God nor a goatish Lucifer leapt forward to trade for his soul, so he steeled himself. Unfortunately, Ansley noticed.

"Jude, I'm sorry I can't do this without your help." Ansley's eyes veiled over. With inner pain? That old, inner pain?

But why Ansley's pain? Throughout their years together, he'd never understood. 'Twas as if Ansley felt himself to be a failure at some mentoring task he believed crucial. No, not a mentoring task. A "fathering" task. But Ansley hadn't failed him. Life threw things at you, and you ended up with cracks and fissures. One of his fissures: the dislike of another's touch.

"No need to apologize," Jude said. His choice, after all, for he could've let Ice Man shave Ansley.

To gird for contact, he sank deeper within himself. With careful fingertips, he stretched the skin—ashen, lately—on Ansley's cheeks and chin and razored it. After the first pass, shaving with the grain, he wiped away the remaining dabs of lather with a warm washcloth.

Ansley flashed a grin, that oh-so-familiar grin, Ansley's scar curving into a second,

sideways, and equally cheerful grin. “You recently finished a biz, didn’t you, son? Tell me about it.”

Again?

Jude’s breath clutched, as if someone had slammed a fist into his breastbone. No, not someone. Some *thing*. That gloating, gluttonous thing worming around in Ansley’s brain, eating Ansley’s memories. But he hung a smile on his lips, returning Ansley’s grin. This smile, a “charming” smile taught him by Ansley, had fooled thieves and con artists into handing over the goods, had fooled his social betters into thinking him one of them. Could it not somehow fool that *thing*, defeat that *thing*, and pin Ansley’s mind to outer reality? To him?

“A little Paris museum got hit,” he said, and a thrill zapped up his spine, despite the nth retelling. He lathered Ansley’s face and began the second pass, across the grain. “For sixty netsuke.”

“Netsuke?” Ansley’s green eyes flickered. Jude halted the razor above Ansley’s cheek.

“Aye, surely yeh rememb—”

But Ansley’s expression remained blank. Even though their very first recovery together, he fourteen years old, involved Japanese treasures. Soon afterwards, Ansley had taught him woodworking. They’d spent hours, side by side, sawing small pieces of exotic woods—Lacquer Tree, Pagoda tree, Katsura-jindai—and fitting the pieces together to create maze-like Japanese puzzle boxes. He’d gasped with delight at how Ansley could get the woods’ lustrous browns and creams and reds, their roughs and smooths and irregularities, to form elaborate geometric patterns.

Jude spun and strode to the opened window, clenching and unclenching the handle of the straight-edge. He sucked in a breath of balmy air, unavoidably inhaling the room’s smell—a

sweetish odor, like that of wilted roses left in water far too long. Ansley's reflection in the window watched him. And his own reflection... Christ, was that him? His hair, which he'd recently cut to above his shoulders, hung limply. His shirt and hidden-pocket trousers fit him more loosely than usual.

He affixed another smile, returned, and razored above Ansley's lip. "Netsuke are miniature Japanese carvings, usually of wood or ivory. Each more than three hundred years old, each worth about five thousand dollars." His favorite netsuke: the first one Ansley had shown him, a newborn puppy carved out of the ivory-like flesh of a two-inch Tanga nut. The tiny ears and paws, the "take me home" look in the animal's eyes, had made his heart catch. Desperate with the want for the netsuke, he'd argued they should keep it as part of their payment. But Ansley had taught him that wasn't how things worked.

"The museum," he said, "Maison du Japon, didn't wish the theft to become public knowledge—"

"And thus have their insurance premiums raised," Ansley supplied.

"Right yeh are, as always. So, it were typical biz: find whoever'd stolen the netsuke and steal them back. Which I did, from a powerful family, descendants of a samurai."

"Wonderful!" Ansley tipped him an imaginary hat—a white bowler hat, he'd told young Jude—and the merriment of old danced through Ansley's laugh. Sweet God, if only he could capture Ansley's mannerisms in a jar, like fireflies, to wink at him on cold nights in dark alleys when he needed their... what? Comfort?

"Let me guess," Ansley said. "They broke out their ancestor's swords and chased you."

"They did not—they were soft-bellied businessmen. But a couple of gun-toting yakuza did. As did a Parisian mobster. Didn't know mobsters came in a waiflike feminine variety these

days, and she nearly fooled me.” He and Ansley shared a chuckle.

Finished shaving under Ansley’s chin, he wiped off the lather and gave Ansley a hand mirror. His work passed inspection. He sat in the armchair at bedside, and before continuing his tale, he let his mental camera travel the room: on Ansley’s bureau, a foot-high sculpture fragment, Greek, second century B.C., depicting a muscular nude warrior; on the wall, a black and white abstract expressionist painting, Franz Kline, 1950’s; on the floor, a Persian rug, hand-knotted by tribesmen, circa 1880. All gifts to Ansley from clients. Ansley cherished these tangibles, both for their intrinsic worth and as expressions of gratitude, but he himself would’ve found them encumbrances. He accepted only cash payment and funneled it back into biz affairs.

“Also,” Jude said, “clients always a bit o’ the liar, the museum *neglected* to share with me a crucial piece of informa—”

But Ansley’s gaze skittered from Jude’s face. It landed on his own gnarled fingers twisting the bed sheets, and next skipped over to the Franz Kline. The thick black brush strokes seemed to transfix him.

“Ansley?”

No response. Och no, not again! Away with the fairies, for hours or days!

“Please, Ansley.” He reached over the bed rails toward Ansley’s hand, but didn’t touch.

He stretched out his fingertips farther. Farther. Almost touching. And something within him stirred, something loosed. A freedom, a freedom unexpectedly, miraculously, *jubilantly* born out of his long association with Ansley!—and he found himself grasping Ansley’s limp hand, his own hand trembling. But Jayzus Christ, for just this one instant, why couldn’t touching another person feel as benign as touching a tabletop, instead of making him nearly gag as if he were being tied down and force-fed shit?

“Jude.”

“Ansley? Ansley, mate?” Never had Ansley returned from the fairies so quickly! His touch, the reason for it? Oh blessed touch!

“Jude, keep making use of my people. Promise me. *Now!*”

“Wha— what?” The glorious sun that’d burst forth within his heart moments ago, roiling with reds and golds and splendiferousness, snuffed out. A convulsive shiver seized him. *Why was Ansley asking this now what was happening—*

He scrambled to his feet, grabbed onto the bed rail, thrust his face inches from Ansley’s, though his muscles and nerves screamed at him to jump back.

“Aye, I promise. Just, just stay wit’ me. Stay wit’ me, mate.” Willing it, Jude stared Ansley in the eyes—perfectly clear and lucid eyes.

“My biz clients, you’ll take care of them too? And Eloise?”

“Aye, fine, anythin’, *anythin’*. Just stay wit’ me, Ansley.” *What was happening dear God what was happening—*

Ansley gave him a grin as wide as the nearly twenty years of their shared history, the culmination of all the grins his mentor had ever flashed him.

A devilish grin.

“I’m holding you to this,” Ansley whispered.

Like a line drawn on water, Ansley’s grin vanished.

“Ansley, mate?”

An exhalation, and the gleam in Ansley’s eyes disappeared.

“No, Ansley, yeh can’t— *No!*”

Jude fell into his chair and buried his face in his hands. From a distance, or from inside

his mind, a banshee howled. He threw back his head and joined the cry.