

The MAN
HE NEVER
WAS

James L. Rubart



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Man He Never Was

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For Theo

“With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to the truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two.”

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

“Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.”

—MARK TWAIN

CHAPTER 1

TOREN DANIELS ROLLED OVER IN BED AND LIGHT PIERCED his closed eyelids, which meant five a.m. had come and gone. Which meant Quinn was already at the gym, into his third set. Which meant Toren would be buying lunch at the end of the week. And Quinn ate like a whale when he was training heavy. Toren groaned. He'd set two alarms on his phone and still overslept. Not good.

Toren opened his eyes for a second, then immediately closed them against the sunshine, far too bright. His head. Yeah, he'd been pushing his conditioning hard for the past seven weeks, but the haze swirling through his mind along with the dull ache that pressed in from all angles in his skull didn't feel like the usual day after hard sprints and heavy weights. It felt like the day six years back, the only time he'd ever been rip-roaring drunk, after he'd made the team and all the vets forced Toren and the rest of the rookies to drink far past a rational level. At least he hadn't puked. Right now? Same feeling. And his stomach might win this time. What was wrong with him?

He lay still, head on the pillow, eyes closed. Took in a deep breath, a vain attempt to clear his senses. Didn't help. He ignored the pain in his head. He had to ping Quinn, apologize for blowing the workout. Toren covered his eyes with one hand and with his other reached for his cell phone, which he always placed in the same spot on his nightstand, a few inches from the edge, a few inches from the front. His fingers searched the smooth surface of the wood in widening circles. He blew out a sigh of exasperation, turned his head to the side, and opened his eyes again. The phone wasn't anywhere on his nightstand.

Worse, this was not his nightstand. Toren's heart hammered.
"Sloane?"

He twisted and clutched a handful of the white sheets on the king-size mattress, blinking. Except for three pillows lumped up against the headboard, the bed was empty. His wife wasn't there. His heart pumped. This wasn't their bed, their room. The increased pulse brought a new level of throbbing to his brain.

Toren did a slow half-circle spin until he sat upright on the edge of the bed, still squinting against the light. Why was it taking his eyes so long to adjust? He blinked and rubbed his eyes as he took in the room. A hotel room. Why? It made no sense. He'd gone to bed last night at home after a movie night with the kids, Sloane next to him, his alarm set for four forty.

Toren staggered to his feet and wobbled over to the bathroom door. "Sloane?"

No response. Toren pushed open the door. No lights. No Sloane standing under a rainfall of steaming water. He was alone.

His pulse increased as his gaze swept the room and spotted nothing familiar except a pair of Nike sweats and a Seattle

Seahawks T-shirt lying over the back of the overstuffed chair next to the window. Toren slipped on the sweats but hesitated with the shirt. His old team. The one he wanted to rage against for releasing him—but the cutting truth was he'd pulled the pin on that grenade all by himself. Still, whoever was behind this had a distorted sense of humor.

A quick inspection of the room revealed no wallet, no cell phone, no keys, nothing. A TV. A coffeemaker. A clock that read eight thirty-nine. That was it. Toren strode over to the beige phone on the faux mahogany desk and stared at the name of the hotel stamped in tiny letters at the bottom of the keypad.

THE WILLOWS LODGE

Woodinville, WA

Toren snatched the phone and pressed zero. The front desk picked up after one ring.

“Yes, Mr. Daniels, how can I help?”

“How did I get here?”

“Um, I’m not sure I understand the question.”

“How did I get here?” Toren repeated. “And what am I doing here? I need answers. Now.”

“I’m, uh, I don’t know.” The kid on the other end of the line sounded nervous.

“I go to sleep last night in my home and wake up twelve hours later feeling like I’m drugged, with nothing in the room except a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. That’s a problem. Major problem.”

“Yes, I can certainly see how that would be.”

“And?”

“I don’t know why you’re here, but—”

“Can you help me find out?”

“Yes. I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Thanks much, I appreciate that.”

As the words slid off his tongue, an emotion hit Toren so hard he slumped into the chair. An overwhelming sense of patience. He should be freaking out, riding a wave of frustration and anger till he got an explanation for what was going on. It was there, but so deep he barely felt it. The overwhelming sensation was tranquility.

“Of course, sir. If I’d been here when you checked in last night, I might have an answer, but I wasn’t. And there aren’t any notes next to your entry in the computer. Would it be a problem if I put you on hold for a moment while I go find out what I can about your situation?”

“No, that’s not a problem at all.”

Light instrumental music drifted through the phone.

Toren puffed out a puzzled laugh. What had he just said? Not a problem all? It was a massive problem. He had no cell phone, no clothes, no wallet, no idea how he’d gotten to this hotel. And yet he felt no compulsion to raise his voice. He wasn’t ticked off. Even mildly. The shortest fuse in the universe, his all-too-familiar companion, simply wasn’t there. Yes, he’d been getting more control over his anger lately, but this was different. A complete serenity from no place he could fathom surrounded him like cool water on a blistering day.

As he waited for a response from the front desk, Toren wandered over to his window and stared out at two massive maple trees, thick with green. Not much longer. Another four weeks, six

at most, and half the leaves would be on the ground. It would be three or four games into the season, and the odds said a few guys would be hurt. If God was still answering prayers, Toren would get a call from at least a few teams asking him to come try out.

He was ready. He'd stayed in shape, been working on his emotions. Mastering methods to keep himself in check. Succeeding. Definitely in public. And even with Sloane and the kids, he'd made some strides. Not nearly enough, usually just inches at a time, but he was trying.

"Sir?"

"Yeah?"

"My apologies for the length of time it took to get you an answer."

"No worries."

There it was again. Patience. Then a peace that flooded his mind in a way he hadn't known in years. Not a quality anyone had accused him of having in abundance since he stopped playing ball.

"I checked with my manager, and there's a package here that we were instructed to deliver to your room as soon as you called us. Would it be okay if someone brought that up to you now?"

"More than okay. I'm grateful for the help."

Through the phone, Toren heard the concierge direct someone to bring the package.

"Sir?"

"Yeah?"

"I followed your career at the University of Washington. You were one of the best defensive ends ever to play for the school. I played the same position in high school. I wasn't good enough to go on and play for a major college, or even a small college, but

during high school you really inspired me. And I love that they used to call you Torenado at UW.”

“Wow.” Toren laughed. “Haven’t heard that name in forever.”

“It fit you like a custom-made glove. Powerful. Unstoppable.”

“That’s kind of you to say.” Toren smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir. And I’m sorry you didn’t last longer in the pros. What they did was wrong.”

No, it wasn’t wrong. The Hawks had done the right thing. They’d given him multiple chances to keep his boat from sinking, but he kept punching holes in the hull till the whole thing went under.

“I appreciate you saying that, um . . .”

“Landry.”

“Thanks, Landry.”

“That package is on its way, sir.”

“Not sir. Toren.”

“Yes, sir . . . Toren.” A nervous laugh floated through the phone. “If you don’t mind, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure. Anything.”

“I don’t want to pry—it’s none of my business or anything.”

“No, really, it’s fine.”

“Okay.” Landry hesitated. “Where have you been, Mr. Daniels? I mean, my manager says we’re not supposed to tell anyone you’re here, like TV people or the radio or . . . but a lot of people are curious, you know? And since we’re talking, I just thought I’d ask. I won’t tell anyone. I promise. But if I’m stepping over a line, please just tell me to keep my questions to myself.”

“What? Who’s curious? Tell anyone . . . I have no idea . . .” Toren squeezed his forehead. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m wondering where you’ve been for the past eight months.”

A shiver shot through Toren’s body. “I haven’t been out much if that’s what you mean. But I’ve been here in town. I’ve been working out, going to the gym, doing stuff with my wife and kids, that’s about it. Staying around the house.”

“Oh, I see.”

But by the way Landry said it, his vision wasn’t even close to clear.

“But when they . . . Why didn’t you let folks know after they started searching . . . and . . . I mean, it’s just that . . .”

Landry trailed off, and heat shot through Toren’s body.

“Searching for what?”

“For you.”

“What are you talking about, Landry?” Toren paced on the dark-brown carpet. “What do you mean searching? Why would anyone be searching for me?”

Landry’s voice sounded puzzled. “You vanished eight months ago. No one has seen you since.”

“What are you talking about? I was at the Seafair Parade three weeks ago and saw a bunch of people. Took a few shots with people who recognized me.”

A deep sigh came through the phone.

“What?”

“I’m not sure how to say this, Mr. Daniels.”

“Say it.”

“Everyone thought you were dead, sir.”

“Dead?” The heat pushed through Toren’s skin and sweat broke out on his forehead. “Why would anyone—”

“It’s been over eight months since Seafair,” Landry said, his voice soft.

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“What?”

“Eight months. Are you all right, sir?”

“What are you talking—it’s only mid-September.” Toren stopped pacing and stood at the end of the bed.

“No, sir, it’s not.” Landry paused. “It’s the middle of May.”