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# Fistful of Shovel

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FISTFUL OF SHOVEL

A Thesis  
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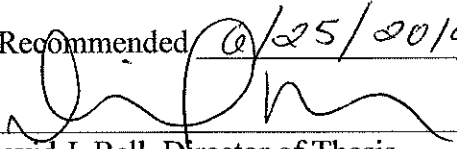
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

By  
Marcee Wardell

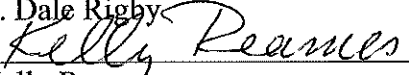
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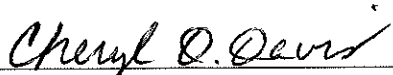
FISTFUL OF SHOVEL

Date Recommended 6/25/2019

  
Dr. David J. Bell, Director of Thesis

  
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6/27/19  
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## PREFACE

My thesis project is a draft of a novel. It is literary/realistic fiction telling the story of a single father of a young daughter who struggles with navigating complicated relationships and building a meaningful life for himself and his daughter in their small town. In this draft, the protagonist, Clint, deals with developing new romantic relationships while managing his relationships with his daughter's mother, her family, and his, as well as recognizing his portion of the blame in the dissolution of his romantic relationship with his daughter's mother and the biases and expectations that prevent his healing and development.

### **Origins and Influences**

This piece began several years ago as a flash fiction exercise based on the "Man Walks Out" prompt. (The prompt is to write a story around this predetermined plot: a man walks out of a house, gets into a car, drives, arrives at a building, enters the building, goes up the elevator, gets out of the elevator, knocks on a door, a woman answers the door, and the man steps inside). In my piece based on this plot, the yet unnamed Clint is leaving his daughter with his parents to pick his girlfriend up for a date, and he decides whether to move his daughter's car seat and in doing so, whether to let his girlfriend into his life more. Though I laid it aside for years, when coming up with short story ideas for my first fiction workshop at WKU, I remembered that situation and those characters and found them compelling. How would a single parent pursue a romantic relationship with a partner who was not their child's parent? And how particularly would that happen for a single father? What would happen if a mother didn't want her child?

As work on the piece progressed, I became increasingly interested in the idea of an unwilling mother. This is taboo in American culture (and probably most others), given

the unrealistic and impossible ideals we have for women and mothers. First, that women are expected to necessarily become (biological) mothers, and that mothers are necessarily nurturing and desirous of children. As many states are passing restrictive abortion legislation in an attempt to challenge *Roe v. Wade*, this issue is also timely. Women may no longer have the option to end unwanted pregnancies, and so will be forced into motherhood, whether they choose to give their children up for adoption or not. In a society that offers little support for pregnant women and mothers—e.g., no legally required paid maternity leave and paternity/parental leave, pay inequity and inequality, poor maternity and post-maternity healthcare and insurance coverage—that burden is intensified.

Maternity has indelible effects on women's bodies, minds, and lives, ones that are ignored and minimized by our cultural norms. Not only are women expected to give up sole ownership of their bodies for years at a time incubating and nurturing new life, they sacrifice along with it career and professional opportunities and advancement, their appearance and physical health, their time and energy—in ways that are not expected, nay, demanded of fathers in the same way. Indeed, our current cultural conception of motherhood requires a sacrifice of women's individuality and selfhood—what one could argue is one of the greatest possible sacrifices.

I was also interested in exploring issues of gender and parenthood, which is why I chose to write about a single father and unwilling mother, as well as a single father raising a daughter. The narrative of the single mother is one that culturally we are quite familiar with, but in placing the burdens of single parenthood solely upon a father, issues of gender and what we expect from mothers become even more apparent. Clint is lauded

as a good father when he is a mediocre one at best, and were he female, would be considered a bad mother. Many of the issues that single mothers face he neatly avoids—he has a relatively high-paying job for a low level of education, numerous free resources available to him to help with childcare, no physical effects of parenthood enacted upon him, and no harmful judgements or expectations hindering his career success or social standing.

The title of this piece, “Fistful of Shovel,” comes from the song “Banded Clovis” by bluegrass/outlaw country artist Tyler Childers. Childers’s lyric goes “You can’t hold a girl with a fistful of shovel,” which I took to mean that one could not pursue love or a romantic relationship when one had too much work to do. I found this a fitting metaphor for Clint’s situation: he is unable to maintain his romantic relationships because of the immense amount of work he needs to do, figuratively, on himself. Also, the phrase “fistful of shovel” is poetic and masterful (perhaps moreso than the draft itself and unearned by it).

It is difficult to isolate other specific influences, since I’ve been influenced in some way by everything I’ve ever read. The most obvious literary influence on this draft in terms of style has been Marilynne Robinson. Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* was a particular influence on the writing of this draft because of the masterful depiction of domestic scenes and domestic life. The subject matter was also relevant to my thesis, as the *Housekeeping*’s protagonist and many other characters are unable to fit the social roles and modes prescribed for them, including motherhood and domesticity.

## **Writing Choices and Revisions**

I chose to write this as limited third person from Clint’s perspective because he is the character who experiences the most growth throughout the novel, also, he is the connecting point between the other central figures: Mercy, Tori, Kacey, and Rachel. Though I found Mercy’s and Tori’s perspectives compelling, to focus on one would necessarily exclude the other. I also considered writing from multiple POVs; however, this proved to be extremely challenging, and I was unable to create balance between chapters with different POV characters. The majority of chapters focused on Clint, so I rewrote the chapters to be limited third person on him for consistency and cohesion. As a woman writing a male main character, I have some concern for whether I portrayed Clint authentically, though I do feel that as a reader of classic literature, most of which written by and about men, I have some idea of how to write authentic male characters.

Another important choice that I made was that of setting. This novel takes place in a small town on Michigan’s west side, near one of its major cities, Grand Rapids. Despite the proximity to the seemingly cosmopolitan city, this area is very socially conservative and highly rural. In the years that I lived in the area, I observed much of a culture that would create situations like the one the novel describes: daily protests outside of Planned Parenthood, anti-abortion “pregnancy crisis centers,” and social conservatism masquerading as religious conviction. Aside from the city and the university, the place stagnated. You were born there and you lived there forever, repeating the patterns of your parents and grandparents. This kind of traditional society breeds such problems as the novel explores—if you get pregnant there, you have the baby—while presenting some benefits that we are perhaps too soon to dismiss or throw

out: close family relationships and community. This setting offered me the opportunity to explore those things and to explore the realities of life for people in these kinds of places, and perhaps how one can make a meaningful life in such a place.

The major notes I received on the first draft of this piece were that not enough happened in the story in terms of the plot (there were no subplots and the piece was hyper-focused on the single conflict) and that Mercy was totally unlikable and unsympathetic. Additionally, some notes were made on the timeline and dialogue and events that were too on-the-nose. To expand the story and the lives of the characters, I introduced a subplot: Kacey's birthday party planning. Kacey's birthday party and Clint inviting Mercy to the party were in the original draft, but there was no other mention or planning of that event. Adding the planning of the party also illuminated more of Clint's relationship and dependence upon his sister and family for their help in raising his daughter. Had I had more time, I would have also expanded upon Clint's work life as another subplot.

As for Mercy being unsympathetic in the initial draft, I hadn't noticed until it was pointed out to me. I was so concerned with ensuring that Tori was sympathetic, since she is the character most likely to be deemed unlikable for abandoning her infant daughter, that I hadn't considered that Mercy was cold and distant, and that it was unclear what made Clint interested in and attracted to her. In my revisions, I reworded some of her harsher lines and attempted to make the attraction in their relationship clearer. I also added another scene of Mercy interacting with Kacey in Chapter 2. Mercy having a good relationship with Kacey explains some of Clint's attraction to her as well as softening out what was an unsympathetic character.



My revisions were somewhat successful in addressing the issues in the first draft of my thesis; however, given more time, I would have made other changes as well. I don't think that I've included enough subplots in the text, nor do I think I've resolved all the issues with dialogue and situations being too overt or didactic. Given the constraints on my time and energy over the course of writing this thesis—June 2018 to June 2019—which included an internship, teaching, working, and a full-time course load as a student, I've produced the best novel draft of which I was capable; however, to truly make this a publishable novel, I would need more time and freedom than this project and timeline allowed. To make this novel of publishable quality, I think a near total rewrite would be necessary.

### **Goals for this Project**

My goal in writing a novel draft as my MFA thesis project was simply to force myself to write a draft of a novel. As a reader, novels have comprised most of my reading, and are the most widely read form of fiction; writing one myself seemed a worthwhile and necessary goal for my development as a writer of fiction and a writer generally. My longest standing life goal has been to write and publish a novel. The thesis requirement seemed to me to be the best way to pursue the first part of that goal. It was necessary for me to obtain my degree, forced me to be accountable to other people (my thesis committee, my peers, etc.), and it provided a timeline within which to complete the project. I was aware that most first novel attempts are failures, in the sense that they are never published or publishable, so using my thesis as a means of attempting my first novel was deliberate; even if this novel draft failed spectacularly as a novel and was

immediately abandoned, it would serve two meaningful purposes: it would help me develop novel writing skills and complete my thesis requirement to obtain my MFA.

This novel draft has fulfilled those two purposes. Writing this thesis has been an edifying process. As my first serious attempt at writing a novel, this process has helped me develop my writing stamina and write many, many more words than I had previously written on a single project. This is not something that my education has otherwise afforded me, as the workshop format is better suited to short stories. Additionally, it is volume of work produced rather than solely genius or talent that results in good work. Prior to writing this novel draft, I was simply not writing enough to get to anything good. Building my stamina and writing more prolifically has allowed me to write better stories. I work through and get past bad ideas and poor writing more quickly and have more good ideas, simply by having and exploring more ideas overall.

As a process, this thesis has been extremely valuable to my development as a writer. As a product, I don't consider this novel to be satisfactory, nor do I consider it representative of my writing ability or the improvement I have made during my time in the MFA program. As I mentioned before, the workshop works best for short stories, and I believe I've drastically improved my short story writing in this program, perhaps even to publishable quality from what would best be described as the sophomore stories I wrote before gaining admittance. The process of writing this novel has even helped my short story writing, as I am now better able to write longer stories (twenty to thirty pages rather than ten to twelve), write them more quickly, and to write stories in which things happen and there is a discernable plot.

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## FISTFUL OF SHOVEL

Marcee Wardell

August 2019

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Directed by: Dr. David J. Bell, Dr. L. Dale Rigby, and Dr. Kelly Reames

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

My thesis project is a draft of a novel. It is literary/realistic fiction telling the story of a single father of a young daughter who struggles with navigating complicated relationships and building a meaningful life for himself and his daughter in their small town. In this draft, the protagonist, Clint, deals with developing new romantic relationships while managing his relationships with his daughter's mother, her family, and his, as well as recognizing his portion of the blame in the dissolution of his romantic relationship with his daughter's mother and the biases and expectations that prevent his healing and development.

## Chapter 1

It was just about to rain; the sky was half light, half dark, with heavy, blue-tinged clouds that did not appear to be moving east or west, but down, closing in. There was a breeze cutting the misty humidity some, shaking the leaves of the trees slightly, enough to disturb the birds perched therein. They signaled loudly but erratically to one another, flitting from perch to perch in last minute efforts at readiness for the upcoming storm.

Clint sat in his truck, looking at his phone. Beside the notification for a missed call was the tiny icon of a woman, face pressed close to the camera, smiling wide, eyes nearly shut. Tori, his daughter's mother—his ex—had called while he was at work. They heard from her every six months or so, on the kid's birthday and at Christmas, but it wasn't either: it was late March and Kacey's birthday was in May. Clint dreaded listening to the message. He doubted it would say anything other than *Hey, it's Tori. Call me back.* Regardless, he didn't want to deal with it right now. He didn't know what she wanted or had to say, but it wouldn't be anything he wanted to hear.

He pressed *Ignore*, got out of the truck, and walked across the lawn to his sister's house. Rachel had three kids of her own, and on her days off from the hospital, she watched them and Clint's daughter, Kacey.

He opened the front door to the sounds of children arguing over the movie they were going to watch: *Moana* or *Frozen*. They stood in the middle of the living room, just off the entryway, in front of a large TV displaying the DVD player wait screen, the manufacturer's logo bouncing from the bottom edge of the screen to the top, then back again. This discussion had clearly been going on for some time.

“I swear,” Clint’s sister called from the top of the stairs. “If I hear another word about it, you’re not watching anything.”

Clint remained in the foyer, if that was what this entryway could be called, unwilling to track dirt and sawdust through the house and incite Rachel’s wrath. Not that the place wasn’t already a holy wreck, it was. Every surface from the brown, microfiber sectional to the mantel was cluttered with the paraphernalia of children: Barbie doll shoes, little dump trucks, discarded sweatshirts, pieces of paper covered in multiplication tables. But the house was just messy, not dirty. It was a distinction that Rachel was careful to preserve.

“Kacey,” he said, loudly enough to make his presence known.

A little, blonde girl bounded over to him from where she had been standing in the living room, staunchly advocating for *Moana* by clutching its DVD case firmly to her chest. She was dressed in clothes that she herself had selected that morning, a denim jumper and a yellow t-shirt, speckled with what he assumed was spaghetti sauce. Clint could not remember if the shirt had looked like that when he dropped her off that morning.

“Leave that here.” He pointed to the case.

She set the movie down and stepped into her shoes, which Clint bent down to fasten for her. Despite using Velcro rather than a buckle or laces, they were still too difficult for a four-year-old to fasten securely, quickly.

“Bye, kids.”

“Bye, Uncle Clint. Bye, Kacey,” the still-feuding niece and nephews responded in unison, without looking over or waving goodbye, unwilling to break their stares.

“Bye,” Kacey said, in the general direction of her cousins.

“Rach, we’re leaving”

“All right,” Rachel said, descending the stairs with an empty laundry basket. “I’m working Thursday, so Mom’s watching them.”

Clint nodded.

“Have you thought about what you’re doing for someone’s B-I-R-T-H-D-A-Y?”

“I know what that spells!” Noah said.

“Keep your mouth shut about it,” his mother returned. “Well?”

“No.” Clint rolled his eyes. “It’s in two months.”

“More like five weeks.”

“Six, but whatever.”

“I’m just saying, start thinking about it now.”

As if Clint had ever stopped thinking about it. Kacey’s birth had changed his entire life, and not entirely for the better.

Clint and Kacey headed out to the truck, a fifteen-year-old maroon F150.

“Do you think we’ll make it home before it starts raining?” he asked.

She laughed. “Yes.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s going to be close.”

Kacey laughed again. It was a game they played, trying to beat the flood. “It’s getting closer now,” he would tell her, “I don’t think we’re going to make it.” She’d tell him to drive faster. If they didn’t beat the rain, Clint would tell her that they were trapped, that the car was their home now, and he’d pretend that his parents were paddling by in a canoe or that their furniture was floating past the windows. She’d giggle and play

along or tell him that he was a silly daddy, but sometimes to Clint, it really did feel like they were the only two people left on a flooded and godforsaken Earth.

They were turning into their driveway when they heard the first drops on the roof of the truck, tinny plunking from big drops, intermittent but picking up in frequency. He got out of the truck and ran over to the passenger side, then he unbuckled Kacey, picked her up, and set her on the gravel driveway. They ran, the tall man matching the pace of the girl's little legs, up to the house.

It was an old, white farmhouse that had once belonged to Clint's grandparents. It was on his parents' land, maybe a hundred yards from their place. It had been the original building on the property when it was a working farm rather than a just hobby farm, and his grandparents had lived there, splitting the land with Clint's father when he had gotten married. His parents had first planned to build on the other side of the thirty acres, but his grandfather's heart attack had prompted them to stay closer. After the grandparents had passed, they'd tried to rent out the house for a time, but there were never any takers, as it was too far from town to be convenient, too big for most renters in the area. When Tori found out she was pregnant, Clint's parents offered up the house cheaply, without conditions. It had a five by ten cement block for a porch and creaky old floors. The upstairs was nothing more than a landing that led to two bedrooms and a dinky bathroom. But it more than met the needs of a small family, and he valued the closeness of his parents, who often took care of Kacey.

"Can I please watch a movie?" Kacey asked immediately upon entering the house.

"Did you watch TV at Aunt Rachel's?"



She shook her head back and forth several times, her hair swishing around her face. “Only during lunch.”

“Okay, go ahead. What did you have for lunch?”

“Grilled cheese.” Clearly the spaghetti sauce stains were not from lunch at Rachel’s, and the shirt was ruined.

“How about chicken nuggets for dinner, then?” Frozen chicken nuggets took the same amount of time to cook (ten to twelve minutes) as asparagus, and only a few minutes more than pasta and canned alfredo sauce, he’d learned.

When he heard the television turn on in the other room, he took out his phone again. The message was what he expected. He called back, hoping for voicemail. Tori answered.

“Hi,” he said, “It’s Clint.”

“Is Kacey okay?” She sounded for a second like an actual parent, and Clint was surprised to detect in her voice a hint of real concern.

“She’s fine, I’m fine. I’m just returning your call.”

“I was just thinking about you guys, missing home. Everything good? Work good?”

“Just fine,” he said. “Where are you?”

“Oh, still in Toledo, for now.”

Clint had no idea why the fuck anyone would choose to live in Toledo, an epicenter of Rust Belt white poverty, a city of crumbling concrete, used needles, and ever diminishing GM jobs. The police were too busy writing speeding tickets on I-75 to attend to the overdoses and break-ins. Ever since he’d learned that she’d moved there, about a

year ago, Clint had been worried for her, but unable to express his worry. He couldn't tell her that he was concerned for her safety without implying that he didn't think she could take care of herself, and that would only fuel her resentment. Why that resentment existed in the first place, he didn't know.

He wondered too why she was clarifying "for now," as if there were ever a time when she would come back. It had only taken him two of the last four years to realize that she wasn't coming back, at least, not in the way he'd hoped she would.

"Can I talk to Kacey?"

"Sure," he said, walking into the living room. "We're about to have dinner, but you can talk to her for a few minutes while I finish up. Kacey, your mom is on the phone for you."

She cocked her head to the side and looked at him, confused. It had been a while since Kacey had spoken to her mother, and Clint realized that she might not even remember it.

He covered the bottom of the phone and said, "Mommy called, and she wants to talk to you. Can you come and say hi to her?"

Kacey hopped off the couch and took the phone from him, no more visibly excited than if he'd told her they were going to go run errands. Clint went back into the kitchen to see whether the pasta water was boiling yet. He salted the water some more, wondering what this call was about. Perhaps Tori was coming into town, though she would have told him if she was. Maybe she really did just miss them, miss home. He listened for sounds of the conversation but couldn't hear anything over the TV. He wasn't sure how much you could miss someone who you only saw once or twice a year, even if

you had given birth to that person. Clint was taking care of Kacey every single day, and he wasn't sure a week apart would be sufficient to make him miss her— and depending on how annoying she was being or her favorite song at the time, perhaps even longer.

When the food was ready, he called Kacey into the kitchen to eat. “Say goodbye to your mom,” he said. She did and returned his phone.

“Couldn't I have a few more minutes?” Tori asked.

She could have had an infinite number of minutes, had she wanted them. But she didn't. Clint didn't say this to her, but he thought it at her, and maybe she could feel it.

“We've got to eat, and then she needs a bath and to go to bed.”

“Daddy, the phone was beeping in my ear,” Kacey said. “Why was it doing that?”

“Hold on a minute,” he said to Kacey, pointing to her seat at the table to get her to sit down. To Tori: “If you want to talk more, how about you call tomorrow? The house phone.” Clint did not actually expect that she'd call again the next day. They said goodbye and ended the call.

He put pasta onto the dinner plates, then asparagus, then chicken nuggets, still hot to the touch, handling them quickly as possible. Clint nudged his daughter and they both folded their hands and bent their heads to say grace, a quick *Bless this food to our bodies*.

“Daddy, the phone was beeping.”

“I know,” Clint said. “I can remember things people *just* said to me.” He cut his asparagus, knife clinking against the plate. “Eat your food.”

It was a text from Mercy, Clint's girlfriend. She'd just gotten off work and would be at his place soon. She was an adjunct librarian at the community college in Grand Rapids, about thirty minutes away. With Tori's call, he'd completely forgotten that

Mercy was coming over. He'd hoped to have Kacey in bed, or bathed, at least, before she arrived. Based on the rate at which she was eating her food—approximately one bite every two minutes—that wasn't going to happen.

“Mommy asked me how was school, but I said I don't go to school, not till I'm five.”

“Yeah.” Did Tori really not know how old their daughter was, seriously? He speared another piece of asparagus.

“Mommy said she wanted to come see me again. When did I see Mommy? I don't remember.”

“At Christmas, at Grandma and Grandpa Carter's.”

“Oh,” she said, nodding as if mulling it over, as if it were something she could conceptualize, as if she actually remembered. “Mommy gave me a horse, and she has yellow hair like me, like in the picture.” Kacey pointed to a picture on the fridge that she'd drawn while at Tori's parents' last Christmas, meant to depict her and her mother. It was mostly just scribbles, but there were discernable smiley faces and yellow scribbles above the smileys that must have been their hair. “Mommy said—”

“Did Mommy tell you to eat your food? Because I know I did.”

When Clint heard Mercy's tires on the gravel, Kacey had just finished eating, and they were headed up the stairs for her bath. He'd told Mercy to let herself in, and from the bathroom, he heard her open the front door, take off her shoes, and walk around the house, looking for them.

“Up here,” he yelled, and then heard her footsteps grow louder on the stairs. “Floor's wet,” he said, when she was in earshot.

She walked in anyway, shrugged. Mercy was a short woman, maybe five foot two, and though she took up little physical space, her presence could be felt when she entered a room, as if she were taller, displacing more air. She had long, nearly black hair tied up in a thick ponytail on the back of her head, just beginning to fall with the day's gravity. He felt the brush of her pantleg against his back, and he turned his head to look at her.

Mercy put down the toilet lid and sat as if on an ordinary chair. Water splashed the hems of her grey slacks, soaking up from where they rested on the ground, puddling around her feet and ankles. Her feet were ringed with a red line from her shoes.

"Hi, Mercy," Kacey said, squirming under her father's hand, which lathered shampoo into her hair.

"Hi, Kace. You know, if you keep moving, you're going to get shampoo in your eye."

"You're going to get shampoo in your eye," Kacey said, fake-squirting the fish-shaped bottle at her.

The bathroom was tiled in white with blue flowers, imitation Dutch delft, and it was small enough for Mercy to put her feet up on the edge of the tub from where she was sitting, which Kacey took as an invitation to squirt water onto them from the mouth of a squeezable, hollow frog toy. It had unnervingly large eyes and looked nothing like any frog Clint had ever seen in person. For some reason, the cutesy-ness of the bath toy annoyed him.

"Are you playing around or washing up?" Clint asked.

“Playing around,” Kacey and Mercy said, at the exact same time. Clint found it jarring to hear them speak in unison like this. The whole scene struck him as disconcertingly domestic, the three of them in the tiny bathroom, eerie in the way of gender-swapped fifties ads, the wife in a suit, the husband in an apron. It wasn’t the role reversal that made them off-putting, but the artificiality, the staging.

After Kacey was in bed, Clint and Mercy put on a movie, one from Netflix that neither was invested in watching, the kind of movie that when they were first dating, they would put on as an excuse to cuddle and then make out. Now, they watched them so that they could talk through them or fall asleep watching. The only light came from the television and the stairway behind them, giving the room a dull illumination conducive to nodding off. Clint was sitting upright, his feet on the coffee table, an arm around Mercy. He’d very nearly closed his eyes when he felt her stirring.

She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked up at him. “Does Kacey like me?”

“She’s four, she likes everyone.”

Mercy rolled her eyes.

“Yes, she likes you. Every time I brush her hair she tells me that you can do four kinds of braids.”

Mercy laughed. “Sounds like that’s been harmful to your self-esteem.”

“Very,” he said, squeezing her with the arm he had around her. “I can only do regular braids.”

Mercy turned back toward the screen, and Clint reached over with his free hand to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “Why, are you worried about it?”

“No,” she said. “Well, of course I want her to like me. I think she does, but I just wanted to know what you thought.”

Clint kissed her forehead. “I think she likes you. I like you.”

“You like me? Sure you do,” she said, lips on the verge of a smile.

Twenty minutes later, Clint’s phone buzzed from beside the couch, rattling against the end table, which amplified the sound and enhanced its menace. He reached for it, and upon reading the message, informed Mercy that he’d have to work late the next day and that they’d have to cancel their plans, all-you-can-bowl for ten dollars apiece at the local bowling alley. Bowling, it turned out, was one date activity that was not entirely hindered by the presence of a four-year-old. It was also one of the few places in town where one could bring a four-year-old and have a beer.

“I’ll see if Mom can keep her,” he said.

Mercy shifted away from Clint and positioned herself on the couch so that she was facing him. She crossed her arms and looked at him, expectant.

“What?”

“You can ask me for help.”

He took a breath. “It’s not a big thing. My mom is watching her tomorrow, so I can just ask her to keep her a little longer.” He looked at Mercy, trying to decide whether she was just earnestly offering to help or was offended that he hadn’t considered asking her first. He didn’t think she was angry—her lips weren’t tightly cinched; her eyebrows weren’t lowered—but he couldn’t tell for certain.

“It doesn’t have to be a big thing. I was planning to come over anyway to go bowling, I can watch Kacey until you get home.”

While Mercy was speaking, Clint texted his mother about watching Kacey for longer the next day. If he'd already asked her, this didn't have to be an issue. Clint wasn't sure why it was an issue to begin with. He'd never once lamented not being asked to babysit. In fact, he was relieved when Rachel asked their mom to watch her kids rather than him. If anything, this was an act of kindness toward Mercy, not asking her to babysit. It would be unfair to stick her with that responsibility, and he was showing respect for her time by not imposing on her.

"I already texted her, and she's fine with it," he said, placing the phone back on the table, face down, and settling back into the couch.

"Oh, okay. So this is how this conversation is always going to go: you'll ask someone else really quickly and then I'm supposed to just let it go."

He waited for her to speak, knowing that more was coming.

"What is it? Do you not trust me? Why don't you ever ask for my help?"

This was a little thing—nothing, really—and for some reason, she had to turn it into a symbol for whatever she thought wasn't perfect in their relationship. He tried to downplay it: "It's just more convenient for everyone for my mom to watch her, that's all."

"I didn't realize that this relationship was about convenience."

"Mercy—"

"I ask you for help. When my car got stuck in the snow, I called you to come pull me out. I'm sure it wasn't convenient, but you didn't seem put out. Why can't you ask for my help?"

"That's not the same, that's a rare thing."



“Less rare than you asking me to babysit.” She wasn’t wrong: Clint never asked her to babysit. Not because he didn’t trust her or think that she wouldn’t be able to handle it, he was sure that she could, but because it wouldn’t be right. He couldn’t ask his girlfriend to watch his kid, especially when family was around who could do it just as easily. He knew he could come to depend on her help, to take it for granted, and that wasn’t a position in which he wanted to find himself.

“I’m not going to text Mom back and change the plans again. I’ll think about it for next time.”

“Start thinking about it now, maybe you’ll be able to come up with a good excuse by then.” She turned back to the television, and her ponytail swished against Clint’s arm, outstretched behind her on the couch. He caught the end of it, twirled the strands around his fingers. He reached for her with his other hand. From upstairs, he heard the noise of a door creaking open and footsteps on the hardwood.

## Chapter 2

A few days later, Clint texted Mercy and made plans for dinner. It seemed like a way to sand out the week's snags, not just between him and Mercy, but overall. The night before, his plans for a distraction-less eight hours of sleep, since Mercy wasn't coming over for the evening, were completely spoiled when Kacey woke up a second time, this time after wetting the bed. It was one o'clock, and she'd roused Clint from what had been the beginnings of a deep sleep. He was too tired to strip and replace the sheets as he normally would have done, and so he put down a couple of towels on the couch, in case Kacey peed herself again, and put her to bed there. Five minutes later she was at his bedside—the shadow of the tree in front of the house moved in the wind and was scary, playing across the blinds. Clint grabbed the towels and laid them out on the other side of his bed and tucked Kacey in there. At least if she was going to wake him up to complain about something else, he wouldn't have to get out of bed.

After work, Clint stopped by his parents' to see if they could watch Kacey for a few more hours, then he took a quick shower and headed to Mercy's. She lived in an apartment complex in Walker, about 20 minutes away. It was a no-frills kind of place, no pool, no community center, but it was relatively nice, considering that the only other apartment building in Walker was a small step above a trailer park. He pulled into the spot next to Mercy's car, a silver Fusion.

Mercy's apartment was on the third floor. The front door opened into the living room, which was separated from the kitchen only by a high counter, bereft of bar stools. In the space was a futon, folded upright into a couch position, a TV atop a short bookshelf, and two other small bookcases, doubling as end tables. There was also a small

kitchen table, off to the side of the kitchen counter. The furniture was all attractive and new-looking, but inexpensive. It was evident that it was a child-free home—the only clutter was a stack of junk mail on one end of the counter, and a couple of unwashed spoons in the sink. There were no small, invariably sharp, plastic objects on which to step, no pieces of toy food wedged beneath the couch pillows.

Mercy was in downward facing dog. Her blue yoga mat was unfurled on the living room floor, between the futon and the little, twenty-four-inch TV screen, on which was playing an instructional yoga video. “Sorry,” she said. “I thought you weren’t going to be here for at least an hour.”

“I let everyone go a little early. Couldn’t do any more work today, we have to wait for the electrical guys to come in on Monday.”

*Three-legged dog*, the yoga instructor said, and Mercy lifted her left leg up, making a straight line from her pointed toes down her back to her palms on the mat. *Runner’s pose*. She drew the leg down, placed it between her hands.

“I thought you worked out at the gym on campus?”

“The class I go to was cancelled this week. I’ve only got five minutes left, I think.” She lifted her hands from the mat and drew them up overhead, bringing her chest up with it.

“I don’t mind,” he said, and sat down on the couch. “I could watch this for five hours.”

Clint imagined that yoga was not intended as an erotic practice, but there were certain positions that he couldn’t help finding so. Mercy’s hair swished around her

shoulders in its ponytail during each transition between poses, and the arch of her back in cat pose was mouth-watering.

The session ended in a less scintillating fashion: Happy Baby pose, in which Mercy lay on her back with her knees to her chest, legs bent at 90 degrees—*more like Delivering Baby pose*, Clint thought—then Corpse. No wonder so many women did yoga, prenatal; from what Clint had witnessed, the positions and sequence seemed pretty similar to giving birth. He focused on the bottom edge of Mercy’s shirt, which had come up slightly as she stretched her arms over head and showed an inch of flat stomach and the barest hint of the top of her right hipbone, to avoid thinking about it further.

She moved, suddenly, in a rather un-yoga-like manner, stood up and rolled her mat, leaning it against the shelf holding the television. She punched the power button on the TV, then turned to face Clint. “I need to rinse off, quickly,” she said.

Clint nodded and pulled out his phone to entertain himself.

Before he’d opened an app, Mercy stepped backward into the living room. She was smiling, invitingly. “Want to join me?”

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It was a thirty-five-minute drive into Grand Rapids, but it was worth it to Clint, since there they could eat at a restaurant that wasn’t a chain or a dive and that didn’t have a children’s menu. The place they decided on, Tin Roof, was a restaurant that billed itself a “gastropub,” which Clint knew meant essentially nothing but that the beers would all be craft and the prices would be high. He assumed that it would be busy, also, so as they got in the truck, Mercy called ahead to make them a reservation for forty-five minutes from then.

The gastropub was packed with yuppies and hipsters, the kind of people who wore pricey outdoor gear and cuffed their jeans. Despite being ten minutes early for their reservation, Clint and Mercy still had to wait twenty minutes for a table. The one they got was in the corner against the front window, a high top. For some reason, a couple seated near them—a woman, twenty-five-ish, with a dark bob and clear-framed, octagonal glasses, and her husband or boyfriend, a ginger with a heavily waxed mustache—had brought their baby. The plastic baby carrier clashed jarringly with the reclaimed wood and wrought iron of the stools and table, the pint glasses and anemic-looking servers with septum piercings and pink hair. Naturally, the child began wailing.

“Who brings their baby out?”

Mercy smiled with one side of her mouth, looked up at him under raised eyebrows, lowering her menu. “You think people with kids should just stay home all the time?”

He laughed. “You can take your baby to a Big Boy, but this place?” He looked out at the room, gestured to a passing waiter, a man with a full sleeve of tattoos and a man-bun.

“Well, I might not, but if you can’t get a babysitter...” She shrugged.

“Crying baby wasn’t really the ambiance I was hoping for with my fourteen-dollar cheeseburger. I could get that for a dollar at McDonalds.”

“Or at home for free, huh?” She said it in a jokey tone, but she was getting at something and she knew it, something Clint wasn’t sure he wanted gotten at.

“Maybe I picked this place because I’d just like to have a nice date with my girlfriend, just us. No kids, no distractions.” He reached across the table for her hand. She

squeezed his, let hers rest in it. He rubbed his thumb over the soft skin on the back of her hand, tracing the blue vein from where it surfaced near her knuckles to its conclusion at her wrist. Her hands were not as delicate as he'd thought they would be, as their size and the thin, smooth skin on the back of her hands would indicate. The palms and fingers, while not rough as his, were dry and callused. "Books," she'd told him, when he first noticed it to her, "paper is very drying." He wasn't sure if she'd been serious. He'd learned over the course of their relationship that being a librarian wasn't as much about dealing with books as he'd imagined. She still dealt with books, but they had student workers to check them in and out and shelve them. A large portion of the job was dealing with databases, helping people search for things, things that might not even be books.

Clint looked up at Mercy's face and she smiled at him, squeezed his hand again, and withdrew hers. The baby at a table over had stopped crying, though the restaurant maintained a high noise level, the sounds of rattling dishes and conversation echoing against the hardwoods and high ceilings. It was too loud for Clint and Mercy to hear each other, unless they nearly shouted, so they relaxed into a silence that wasn't uncomfortable. They had been together for nearly ten months, and they no longer had to fill every silence. Clint lapsed into thought. Tori had called, again, that day. It seemed that she tried the house phone, but had gotten voicemail. Clint was the only person he knew who was under the age of sixty who still had a house phone, but with a kid, he needed to know that in an emergency, he could call for help—or Kacey could.

*Seems like you're out somewhere or busy,* Tori said in her voicemail. *I'll try you again later.* Clint was surprised that she'd called, more surprised than he had been when she called a few days before. He could not account for this exponential increase the in

frequency of Tori's communications, but then again, he knew nothing about her. She'd proven herself not to be the person he thought she was when she left him and their newborn daughter, a month after giving birth, and he knew nothing of her since except the place where she lived. It could just be a freak, random, vestigial maternal instinct; that was the most likely explanation. But it still seemed strange and full of potential motives, benign and not. Was it guilt? Regret? A change of heart? It bothered him, not knowing.

Mercy said something to him, but Clint didn't catch it. He jerked his head back from the window, which he had been seemingly staring out, and looked at her.

"You seem preoccupied," she said.

"I think we're going to have to work another Saturday this week."

"There's only one Saturday in a week."

"Very funny, smart ass. I'm going to have to work on Saturday this *upcoming* week, like I did today. We're in a big rush on this job."

"I was hoping we could make up for our cancelled plans."

"Me too."

Mercy looked at him rather significantly, raising her eyebrows and making a kind of smirk. He'd walked right into this one—Clint knew she was waiting for him to ask her to babysit. He'd hoped to delay this conversation by a month, by then she'd have probably forgotten about it, or at least no longer feel strongly about it. Though Mercy got upset quickly and brought it up right away, she hadn't been able to maintain that state for very long, and after a fight, if he was strategic in avoiding that subject and in being attentive and sweet to her, she could be pacified for a time. Before this point, a new subject or problem at work or event had shifted the focus off of issues of contention—

thank God for Easter. They'd almost had this exact same fight then, but the egg dyeing and family dinners and attendant busyness had been distraction enough to buy him time. But not enough.

These kinds of things were slippery slopes. If she babysits once, a precedent has been set, and breaking that precedent will cause as many problems as avoiding the issue altogether. She'll keep watching the kid, and then she'll expect more from the relationship, from him, or she'll grow to resent him and his dependence on her help. But there was really no way out of it, this time. He was going to have to let her watch Kacey. At least he could get ahead of the game here and ask her to babysit, rather than waiting for her to ask if he was going to.

“Are you free on Saturday?”

“I am.” She was clearly enjoying this and wanted to draw it out.

“Would you mind watching Kacey while I'm at work? Should be like seven to five. I can leave money for pizza—”

Mercy rolled her eyes. “I can make mac and cheese. Or grilled cheese. Or spaghetti. Or anything else kids like to eat.”

“Okay, okay. Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she said, pointedly, or seemingly so.

Their waiter appeared with their food. Clint wondered if the guy, a slight blond with a dramatic skin fade and wire-rimmed glasses, had sensed an argument and waited to bring their food until it was over. He'd be sure to leave a good tip.

Though he'd agreed to it—actually, suggested it—Clint was still apprehensive about Mercy babysitting. Now that he thought of it, he'd never had anyone who wasn't



family watch Kacey. His parents watched her, his sister, Tori's parents; he'd never had to take her to daycare or hire a babysitter. That was how it should be, he thought, that was what family was for. Mercy wasn't a stranger or a fifteen-year-old neighbor girl, but she wasn't family, either. *Yet*, he thought, but quickly dismissed it. He wasn't ready to consider marrying her—she hadn't even watched Kacey before. They weren't at that level.

Mercy took a bite of her sandwich, turkey and brie with some kind of sprouts, and set it back on the plate delicately, to avoid losing some of the fillings. "We came here on our first date," she said. "We sat over there." She pointed to a table across the restaurant, closer to the door.

He nodded and smiled. "We should have asked to sit there tonight."

She shook her head. "Then we never would have gotten a table, last minute. I remember seeing you and being surprised that you were so tall. I knew you would be tall, but not that tall. Maybe it was just the way you carried yourself."

"Maybe it's just that you're an elf."

She laughed. "Maybe so." If Mercy had a catchphrase, that would be it, *maybe so*. It floated from between her lips like a breath, she used it so often, so naturally. If ever he told her he loved her, or asked her if she loved him, he imagined it would be her response. *Maybe so*.

"I remember what you were wearing, that black skirt." He remembered the skirt distinctly, as it was how he recognized her. It was straight, black, and went down to her knees. It wasn't the kind of skirt he saw women wearing, excepting TV lawyers and executives in movies, and definitely not around Hudsonville. It was the kind of skirt that

required confidence, a diploma, and those stupid little heels that Clint could see no purpose to, as they were shorter than the heel of a good boot.

“I’d just come from work.” She took another bite of her sandwich. “I don’t think I ever told you this, but you were my first friend here. The first person I met, outside of work, I mean.”

“Really?”

“Really. I think we started talking on my third or fourth night in town.”

“Wow, I had no idea you were such a loser, or I wouldn’t have talked to you.”

Mercy laughed—he wouldn’t call it a chuckle, but a small laugh—and smiled at him.

Clint crunched a bite of his pickle spear. “I’m glad I did.”

“So am I. It’s hard to be alone in a new place.” She looked out the window, holding her sandwich in both hands, as if about to take another bite, but seemingly having forgotten that she was doing so. Mercy had moved to the West Side for her job. Before that, she’d worked part time as a library tech and lived with her parents, in Chelsea, while she got her master’s.

When they walked out of the restaurant, Clint put an arm around Mercy’s shoulders. The air was crisp, threatening a morning frost, and she leaned into him, shivering. The streetlights were on, casting a dull, orange-ish light on the unvariegated gray of the sidewalk cement. They’d parked a few blocks away, and though it was not yet late enough for most of the bar-goers to be out, they passed a few: a group of women wearing dark, high-waisted jeans with crop tops and either suede heels or ankle boots, the inch of skin between their pants and their shirts a moony pale; some guys wearing suits,

jackets unbuttoned, indiscreetly passing among themselves a flask; a couple, staring intently at their phones, like they couldn't find the bar they were looking for or were having difficulty getting an Uber.

Clint squeezed Mercy closer. "So, you know how we had to cancel our plans? I had some other plans—do you remember?—that got interrupted, too. Come home with me, stay the night." While there had been many times Mercy had left Clint's late at night, and that he'd stayed at her place, when someone was watching Kacey for him, this was the first time he'd invited her to sleep over. It was as much a concession to her anger with him of the days before as his desire to be with her, which at this moment, overshadowed his usual reservations: that it would set a bad example for Kacey, that his parents would see her car, that she'd become further entangled in their lives.

She looked up at him and smiled. It was a closed-lip smile, but it reached her eyes. When excited, Mercy had the habit of, rather than screaming or squealing, losing the power of vocalization altogether and instead mouthing her words. It was as if her delight in these moments was too exquisite to dilute with loudness and echo, that instead it was something intimate, shared only between her and her interlocutor. *Are you being serious?*

"Yeah, I'm being serious. I have to go get Kacey from my mom, but she'll go right to bed."

"All right," she said. "But slow down, your legs are a foot longer than mine."

"Sorry," he said and slowed his gait to accommodate her. "Got a little excited."

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It was early still when Clint woke, early enough that Kacey was not yet awake, barging into the room to demand television or breakfast. The blinds were drawn tightly;

no light entered between the slats, but it snuck in at the sides, streamed in from the bottom where the blind did not quite rest upon the window frame: it could not be kept out. A sliver of it sliced across the middle of the bed, interrupted by covered lumps of body, his abdomen, her hip. The second striped the dark wooden bedpost at the foot of the bed, giving it a yellow wash. The house was quiet, but it was not hushed, rather it sounded softly of their resting breaths, regular and unself-conscious.

He heard Kacey's feet pattering across the wood floor of the hallway and knew that she would be at the bedroom door in a second. He heard the knob turning, saw the door swing open, and there she was, polka dot nightshirt and sleep-tangled hair.

"Don't you dare jump on this bed," he said in a low voice. He pointed to the lump under the covers that was Mercy, mouthed *she's sleeping*.

"I—"

He put his finger to his mouth to quiet her.

"I'm awake," Mercy said, without moving at all or opening her eyes.

Kacey took this as an invitation and sprinted the five feet between the door and the bed, launching herself onto Mercy's half-awake form.

Mercy made a muffled grunt from beneath the blanket.

"What'd I say, Kacey?"

"I'm all right." Mercy sat up, rolling Kacey off of her, onto the bed between her and Clint.

"Can I watch cartoons?"

"Yeah, if you do it quietly. The volume stays at ten." Clint reached over for the remote on the nightstand and turned the TV to the *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*.

Kacey crawled down to the end of the bed, closer to the television, which sat, facing the bed, atop Clint's dresser in the corner of the room. She lay on her stomach, her knees bent and her feet up, legs swaying to the theme song slightly, unintentionally.

Mercy lay back down and curled up around a pillow, eyes closing.

Clint kissed her on the forehead. He stacked his pillows against the headboard and leaned back against them, halfway sitting up. "This is nice," he said.

"Mhm," she said, smiling, eyes still closed.

"I wish every morning were like this."

She nodded against the pillow. Her dark hair spread over it, fanned out, looking soft and touchable.

He leaned down and kissed her again, this time on the corner of her mouth. "Tori, I..."

Mercy's eyes snapped open and her face hardened, like solidifying lava or burning pizza crust. She pulled down the covers and sat up, placing her feet on the floor. "Jesus, Clint," she said, looking back at him, voice low enough to avoid notice by young and distracted ears. "Get your shit together." She stalked off to the bathroom, her steps heavy.

"Mer—"

But he could already hear the faucet running in the bathroom.

"Kacey," he said. "Go watch that downstairs."

The little girl dutifully tumbled off the bed and ran down the stairs in little thudding steps. Seconds later Clint heard the noise of the television. He lay back on his

pillow and shut his eyes for what he thought was a moment. When he opened them again, the shower was no longer running, but Mercy hadn't come back to bed.

Clint looked in the bathroom, but there were only the faintest remnants of steam on the mirror. He walked down the stairs. In the living room, Mercy and Kacey were sitting side by side on the couch, sharing a blanket, each eating a slice of toast and drinking out of matching sippy cups. One sippy cup bore the image of one princess from a kid's movie, the other cup had the sister princess. Kacey handed her crust to Mercy, who began eating it, and then climbed onto Mercy's lap. Clint sat down on the stair behind them and just watched, unwilling to interrupt.

## Chapter 3

After hitting the pothole in front of the Johnsons' driveway, Clint slowed the truck to a more reasonable speed. He'd heard a worrisome rustling of the plastic grocery sacks and clinking of cans, and had seen the jug of milk go airborne, achieving about three inches height off the floor beside his feet. If he didn't slow down, he'd have to go back to the grocery store, add another hour to this already unending day. It was nearly nine, and before buying groceries and grabbing a quick dinner, he'd been on the job site for eleven hours. He reached down and lifted the gallon of milk. It did not appear to be leaking.

Once home, Clint went into the house through the kitchen door. Mercy stood at the sink, her back to him, washing dishes. She had tied her hair up in the loose, lazy way she had when she didn't care how it looked, she just wanted it off her face, but she had long, thick hair and the knot would never stay, breaking free from the hair tie she'd used with every passing minute, stray pieces falling out around her ears and the back of her neck. It was unbelievably sexy because it was entirely unattractive; every time she put her hair up like that, Clint had an intense urge to undo it, to go over to her and pull the elastic out of her tangled hair, let it fall onto her shoulders as he kissed her neck, put his hands on her hips.

He set his items on the counter and put a hand on Mercy's back. "Is she asleep?"

Mercy turned toward him, slightly. Smiled. Nodded.

He went up to Kacey's room, quietly, simultaneously hoping to wake her and not. He opened the door slowly, but heard no small, sleepy voice asking if it were him. Kacey was asleep, sprawled out like a starfish, her covers half kicked off. He moved toward the

bed to fix the blankets, but thought better of it. He'd missed her terribly at bedtime, about an hour earlier, as he was pushing his cart up and down aisles at the Meijer. He'd bought seven boxes of the macaroni he would never buy, the kind that came in special shapes: dinosaurs, princesses, animated characters. They cost more than the regular kind, and there were fewer noodles in each box, but she insisted that they tasted better.

He shut the door and went back downstairs to the kitchen.

"Kacey's mother called today," Mercy said. She was putting the groceries Clint had bought into the fridge, as naturally as she would have in her own home. It was strange to see her so comfortable in the space, his kitchen, and he was not sure whether the strangeness was born of fear or joy. She hated his kitchen, for which he did not blame her. The cabinets and drawers did not have pulls. It was cramped, galley-style, in which two people could barely stand, stuck at the back of the house as so many old farmhouse kitchens were. He meant to tear it all out someday.

"Tori called?" The third time in the past week and a half. She'd never even called that many times in a six-month span. Something was clearly going on with Tori—this was no accident, no fleeting motherly impulse. Clint cracked his knuckles.

Mercy nodded.

"What did she say?"

"She asked for you. I said you were out, and that I could take a message or that she could try your cell."

"She didn't call me," he said.



Mercy wadded up a plastic bag and put it inside another. “She talked to Kacey for a few minutes.” She wadded up another bag, did not make eye contact. “I hope that’s all right.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what’s allowed.”

“Tori can talk to Kacey. She is her mother, after all. She didn’t tell Kacey that she was coming to see her or anything, did she?”

Mercy shook her head, twisted a bag in her hands. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Kacey will tell me if she did, I guess.” He sighed. “As long as she’s not making promises she won’t keep, I don’t care if she talks to the kid. It’s not like she’s trying to take custody from me.” He realized after he’d said it that the edge in his voice was too harsh, too obvious, and he worried that Mercy would think it was directed at her. He changed the subject. “God, I need to take a fucking shower.” He had a patina, a second skin of dirt and drywall dust.

The groceries had all been put away. Mercy looked up at him from the bag full of bags in front of her on the counter. She looked something: uncertain, maybe.

Clint reached across the corner of countertop between them and touched her hand. “Did I say thank you for watching Kacey tonight?”

She smiled, slightly, not showing any teeth, not relieved of whatever it was that was bothering her—he could see that, at least—but slightly, something. “No,” she said.

“Thank you for watching Kacey tonight. And for helping with the groceries.” He inclined his head toward the sink. “And for washing the dishes, which you didn’t have to do.” She was always doing things like that when she was over, switching a load of

laundry for him, washing the dishes piled up in the sink, as if she took pleasure in doing them. Putting on a shirt she'd folded—he could tell when she'd folded it, her folds were neater, squarer—felt like an embrace.

She shrugged. "It's no bother."

"But I hate to impose on you."

She withdrew her hand. "You don't want to *impose* on me?" Something cold and hard had crept into her voice, Clint could feel it.

"No," he said, "I don't. Kacey shouldn't have to be your responsibility."

Mercy turned away from him to put the accumulated plastic bags under the sink. She snapped the cupboard shut, and he wasn't sure if it was too loud, or the room had gotten quiet. He wasn't even sure what he'd said that was wrong.

Stiffly, she walked past him into the living room and picked up her things from the end table: her phone, her bag, her jacket. He followed her.

"Mercy—"

"What?" She was feeling around in her bag for her keys, and when she found them, held them loosely in her hand, but with a looseness that belied great force—he could see that her knuckles were white—resisting the urge to clench into a fist.

"What are you doing?"

"Going home," she said, gesturing with her laden arms toward the front door, just outside the living room. "You should shower, get some sleep."

Clint sat down on the couch, near the end table. "Don't leave like that."

She stopped, still within arm's reach. "Like what?"

Clint caught her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap. She still held tightly onto her stuff. Her bun was now barely holding any hair at all, and, if she moved much, was at great risk of falling out altogether. He kissed her. She neither resisted nor reciprocated. "Please stay."

"Why?"

"Because I want to spend time with you."

With acid: "Girlfriend time?"

*Sleeping time*, he thought. He wanted to take a shower and fall asleep with her warmth against him, just sleep. He wanted to fall asleep so quickly and deeply that they'd wake up in the morning in the same exact positions in which they'd closed their eyes.

Clint moved to kiss her. Mercy turned her head; he kissed her cheek instead.

"Are you being obtuse, or do you really not know why I'm upset?" she asked.

"And if you don't know why I'm upset, are you going to fucking ask?" Her volume and tone never changed, but Clint knew that this was an escalation. She crossed her arms over her chest, pressing her jacket and bag closer to her, no longer resisting the desire to clamp down on the keys in her right hand.

Clint inhaled, deeply. He didn't want to do this right now. He'd been awake since 5 AM. "I think it has something to do with what I said about imposing on you, but help me out from there, Mercy, please."

She said nothing.

"I'm tired, I don't want to sit here all night. If you're going to yell at me, yell at me. Let's get it over with." He released her from his hold.

She stood up and pointed at the ceiling.

“Okay,” he said. She was right, they shouldn’t wake the kid. “Can you put down your stuff, at least?”

She set her things on the table, then sat beside him on the couch, facing him but not touching him at all. She had one leg bent like she was going to sit cross-legged, the other hanging off the couch to the floor, like she wasn’t fully committed to sitting. “I’m composing my thoughts,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘girlfriend time’?”

She exhaled, audibly. “Exactly that. That I am your girlfriend and I exist during ‘girlfriend time’ and for ‘girlfriend purposes.’ That’s all.”

Clint nearly began to say that this wasn’t true, but she’d anticipated him, and her face read clearly *don’t fucking say it*.

He knew he needed to walk back what he’d said earlier, and quickly; there would be consequences—he was not sure what they would be—that would be impossible to undo. “When I said that Kacey shouldn’t be your responsibility, I just meant that you shouldn’t feel obligated to watch her or anything like that, that I shouldn’t make you feel obligated or put you in an awkward position where you don’t think you can say no. You didn’t ask for this. You didn’t sign up for a fucking kid.”

She had been sitting taut, poised, coiled. She sprang without effort to her feet. She threw down her hands in some combination of confusion, anger, indignation. The quickness of the motion startled him. The words had not come out yet, but he knew that she intended to yell them, even if she spoke them at a low volume.

“Yes, I did, Clint. I wanted to babysit tonight. I knew when we met that you had a daughter. I know that being with you means being with her, too. So let me.”

“Why do you think I don’t?” He’d entrusted her with everything that mattered to him, that day, if only for twelve hours. It was a significant concession, gesture—how didn’t she see that? How was that not enough?

“Because when I do something for you, like watch Kacey this *one* time, you thank me like it’s a big deal, like you’re surprised.”

“Her own mother doesn’t take any responsibility for her,” Clint said. “How can I expect you to?” He hoped she wouldn’t know what he was really saying: *Her own mother left her—left us. How can I expect you not to?*

Mercy wasn’t crying, but her eyes were wet, their rims red. Clint looked at her, her arms tightly crossed, her body still tense and tightly coiled, her things piled on the end table, and knew that in a minute, a second, that she could grab her things and leave, that there was a tenuousness to her presence here.

“Earlier I heard Kacey explain to Tori who I am,” she said. She didn’t sound like she wanted to yell anymore.

“What did she say?”

“You tell me. Who am I to Kacey, to you? Where is this going?”

How could he, when he didn’t know himself? She asked him for a certainty that he couldn’t give. He could only tell her part of the truth. He wasn’t sure it would be enough.

“You’re a part of my life, and you’re a part of Kacey’s life, too.” He pulled her back onto his lap. The motion had—finally—liberated her hair.

Mercy looked at her bag like she'd let someone down, like she was anticipating future regret, and sighed. "Okay," she said. She let Clint comb his fingers through her hair, she kissed him back.

"Now can we please take a shower and go to bed?"

"We?" She raised her eyebrows. He could tell she was still bothered, but in a mood to be peaceable. She too had had a long day watching Kacey, who had surely been active and demanding. If he could get her to smile, to laugh, he could dispel the tension, for now.

"I said what I said."

She laughed, even smiled, but still gathered her things to go, and kissed him, not reluctantly, on her way out.

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A few days later, Clint stood over the stove, searing a couple of steaks for dinner. His back was to Mercy, who stood behind him at the counter, cutting up bell peppers for a salad. The kitchen was tight, and there were only a few inches of space between them.

He looked over his shoulder at her. She was carefully slicing an orange pepper into long thin pieces, then chopping those into tiny squares. He said, "Rachel let Becca cut her hair short. Like, my hair short. I don't think I'd want Kacey to do that."

"Why? I bet it's cute. Plus, it's got to be so much easier to wash."

"Yeah, but I don't know. I feel like she'll get teased for looking like a boy."

"Everybody's going to get teased for something." The rhythmic sound of the knife against the cutting board continued. Without looking at her, Clint could tell when she paused to slough off the vegetables into the salad bowl beside her, could hear the dull

scrape of the knife edge against the plastic surface. He wondered what she'd been teased for. She didn't have a big nose or glasses and her teeth were only slightly crooked, one of her front teeth overlapping the other, just on the bottom corner. She must have been made fun of for being a nerd. The only teasing he ever got was standard, so boring as to be inoffensive, *drive your tractor to school today?* kind of ribbing, maybe a *yee haw* if he wore his boots.

"Yeah, but why make problems for the kid? If a girl looks like a girl, she'll have it easier." He looked over his shoulder briefly to see that she'd stopped what she was doing and put a hand on her hip.

"What do you mean by easier?" she asked. "And what are girls supposed to look like?" She sounded like she had a hand on her hip.

"Oh no." Clint laughed. "What'd I get myself into?"

He heard the knife come to rest on the counter, and Mercy turned around and put her hands on his waist, squeezing. "I want to know now, what are girls supposed to look like?"

"I don't know, long hair, clothes that aren't baggy, hair and nails that are taken care of..."

"None of that is inherently female."

"Well, seems like it is. Most girls and women dress like that. You do." He turned to face her.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't drop her hands from his sides. "Okay, well it's not because my lady hormones make me like frilly skirts and pink and purple."

“You can’t tell me that there aren’t hormone differences between men and women, you just can’t.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Yes, there are biological differences between men and women. And those result in some appearance differences and role differences, but they aren’t as many or as stark as you think. A lot of those differences are socially conditioned rather than innate.”

“Woo-ooo, here comes that one feminist theory class you took in college,” he said, raising his hands up and exaggeratedly pantomiming fear.

Mercy refused to respond.

“You know I’m just kidding,” he said, and he watched her face soften, though it didn’t fully relax. “I’ve changed a lot of diapers and made dinners and cleaned house. I’ve got no problem with any of that, I don’t think it’s ‘women’s work.’ But women are more nurturing and, you know, emotional.”

“Bullshit,” she said. She stepped back and leaned against the counter where she’d been working, crossing her arms over her chest. “Yes, maybe a biological mother of a child has different nurturing instincts than the father, who didn’t carry the baby for nine months or breastfeed it, but those instincts aren’t the only thing that affects behavior. Women are conditioned to be more nurturing, too. When people give little girls baby dolls, they’re conditioning that nurturing behavior. And more emotional? Really?”

“You don’t think that’s true?”

“It’s not true. Maybe women are conditioned to more freely express their emotions, and maybe women express their emotions differently than men do, generally, but it’s not ‘more.’ Crying isn’t more emotional than yelling, it’s just than one is



considered more feminine and the other more masculine. They can be the result of the same magnitude of feeling.”

He processed for a moment before responding. “Okay, fine. I see what you’re saying. But women still express their emotions more than men.”

“And that’s conditioned.”

“Not totally.”

“Pretty much. ‘Boys don’t cry’ sound familiar?”

“Yeah, but I tell Kacey that big kids don’t cry all the time, no different than if she were a boy.”

“Sure, but you’re not the only person who’s influencing her. And you’re not necessarily the norm, either.”

“You know my sister, she’s telling always her kids to quit their whining and crying, boy or girl.”

“Again, that’s anecdotal.”

Every so often, she would say something that he didn’t understand, a word or a phrase he didn’t know or that had another meaning from the one he knew. He dreaded these moments, at least when they were arguing, not because it bothered him that she knew so many things he didn’t—he liked that about her—but because he thought he would lose his footing in the conversation—and perhaps in general— that she’d be able to dismiss him as ignorant and uninformed and, perhaps, not worth her time. “What’s that?”

“It’s one example that’s from personal experience, not necessarily representative of what’s normal.” She turned back to her cutting board and resumed chopping.

“Okay, fair enough. But I still think there must be something,” he paused around her word, “*inherently* feminine about the way women and girls dress and act.” Clint stepped close behind her, put his face into her neck and wrapped his arms around her waist, tightly.

“Quit,” she said, looking back at him, smiling. “You’re going to make me chop a finger off.”

He squeezed a little tighter. “I thought no one could make you do anything you didn’t want to do, since you’re a strong independent woman.”

Mercy rolled her eyes again, but she was still smiling. “Beware a strong woman with a knife,” she said, holding up the blade, flecked with thin orange pieces of pepper, clinging to the metal. “I, too, am a product of my conditioning, and I’ve not been conditioned, nor have I made an effort to learn, how to use a knife without hurting myself when you’re all over me.”

Clint stopped squeezing and kissed her, just below her left ear. “Knives are a little too kinky for me, anyway.”

“I know I haven’t convinced you of anything,” she said. “Whether it’s inherent or not, I guess what’s important is that you don’t treat us like it is.”

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Clint’s conversation with Mercy bothered him that week while he was at work, not because it had been contentious or tense, it hadn’t, but he kept thinking about the things she’d said. Wednesday was a relatively busy day on the jobsite, subcontractors finishing rough electrical and the plumbing supplies arriving. Every laborer, subcontractor, and delivery driver was male. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had

a woman working on a project for him, maybe once or twice on a painting crew, when he'd been on a tight deadline and needed to hire that out.

Clint left his office, a shitty little trailer like every on-site construction office in existence, and headed into the building, looking for the super of the electrical crew to find out whether they were still on schedule to finish up that day. Nothing had gone that way with this project, one of those chain daycare/preschool centers, and he was really trying not to lose this client, with their potential for more locations, because some electricians and roofers couldn't stick to the timeline.

As he approached the back door, he noticed a group of his guys, sitting on a stack of pallets, jawing. One had a skinny, stick body that made his helmeted head look like it bobbed, and he spat into a plastic Coke bottle. Another, with a tired, wrinkled face and budding gut that could only be described as a dad bod, was beside him, drinking from a thermos. The third was standing beside them, chugging a Monster—who drank those, beside high school kids?—and nodding when the others spoke. Bobblehead, who Clint seemed to remember was named Jeff, just like every other white trash wannabe-Casanova, was talking about his sexual exploits, making no attempts to be discreet. Clint was still at least fifteen feet away and he could hear nearly everything Bobblehead was saying.

“You would not believe the shit this chick was saying to me last night.” He pulled out his phone and passed it to Dad Bod, who smirked when he read whatever was on the screen. “No way I don't smash this bitch.”

“Yeah,” said Monster Drinker, when the phone was passed to him. “But what's she look like?”

Bobblehead shrugged. “She might not be a ten, but my dick can’t tell the difference.”

Monster Drinker laughed.

“Good thing, too, because your dick doesn’t have the luxury of being picky,” said Dad Bod. He and Monster Drinker laughed this time, the latter a higher pitched cackle, the former a low chuckle.

“What are you talking about? Your wife’s no dime.”

“Fuck you, man, she just had twins.”

By this point, Clint was near enough to speak to them. “You guys on lunch or waiting for the truck?”

“Waiting for the truck, then taking lunch,” Bobblehead said, before expelling dark brown sludge into his spitter.

“Truck’s not going to be here for at least forty minutes. Take your lunches then get rid of those pallets.” He walked inside, hoping not to catch any more of their conversation. It wasn’t that he’d never heard conversations like it before, or even been a part of such conversations, though at least he’d never been the one saying “smash” or “bitch.” But he was starting to see what Mercy meant. He certainly wasn’t inspired to give his daughter Tonka trucks and a toy tool set, so that she could end up making 30K a year listening to Jeffs and their cronies talk about whomever they intended to fuck.

He wondered what that meant for Kacey. He’d thought that he let her be herself, as herself as a little kid could be: he let her choose the toys she wanted to play with, the movies she wanted to watch, the clothes she wanted to wear—from her cousin Becca’s hand-me-downs and the cutesy dresses her grandparents bought her and the girls’ section

at Target. It was clear that that was a limited source from which to construct a personality and cultivate interests. What else was telling her how to be?

## Chapter 4

“What’s in that bag?” Clint asked. Before him stood Kacey, wearing a backpack that was absurdly large for her small frame, pink and purple and bearing the likeness of some character from some cartoon, a princess or unicorn or fairy. They were at the foot of the stairs, by the front door in their house. It was still morning, about eleven, and cool white light flooded the living room from the shade-drawn windows, spilling out into the stairwell, across the scratched and faded hardwood flooring.

Kacey played with the long ends of the backpack straps, the excess where the straps had been tightened to fit her.

“Clothes for tomorrow?” Nod. “Clothes for Sunday?” Nod. “Pajamas?” Nod. “Underwear?”

She dropped the backpack and ran up the stairs. In her absence, Clint looked inside, counting the number of shirts, pairs of pants to ensure that she had enough to last the weekend. From the hook by the front door he grabbed one of her sweatshirts, folded it roughly, and put it in the bag.

Kacey descended the stairs, carrying, in addition to three pairs of underwear, a stuffed dog, sunglasses, and a plastic tiara.

“No,” Clint said, shaking his head. “You don’t need all that.”

“But I can wear them,” she said, putting on the tiara and sunglasses.

He lifted the tiara from her head gingerly to avoid pulling her hair. “The dog can go, but you have to leave the sunglasses in the car when we get there, or you’re going to forget them at Grandma and Grandpa’s.”

The girl sighed heavily, then slipped into her rubber-duck-yellow Crocs. Years ago, Clint had made fun of the ugly footwear, but now, he celebrated any type of shoe that he didn't have to help buckle, tie, or otherwise fasten. He had even considered getting a pair for himself. Hers, in their ugly color had, of course, been her own selection, as was her outfit today: green and orange flowered leggings and a white and blue striped shirt. Clint had a feeling that her grandparents would notice how poorly it was matched and find it a failing on his part, or perhaps assume that she just didn't own any clothes that matched. For her birthday they'd probably get her sets of Garanimals or something similar, outfits with shape-coded tags in order to ensure that a kid didn't wear clashing colors. In fact, Kacey just had no interest in matching her clothes, and Clint had no interest in picking out her clothing. But her grandparents, his not-exactly-in-laws, would read into the occurrence, seeing it as the result of the absence of a woman, their daughter, in Kacey's life, an absence for which they felt guilt and must alleviate with matching outfit sets and overly pink backpacks.

The house was on the other side of town, and by the time they had arrived, Kacey had removed the red, heart-shaped sunglasses she'd insisted upon and dropped them onto the floor. At the house, Clint stood in the doorway, shifting his weight from foot to foot, while Kacey's grandparents talked at him and the girl.

"What time should we expect you on Sunday?" Trish asked. Ed had by this point bellowed his customary greeting and left the room, presumably to put Kacey's things in her mother's old bedroom, where she slept on these visits.

"Does six work?"

“Of course,” she said. “But you’re welcome to come earlier and have Sunday dinner with us. We eat at five.”

Clint demurred. Every time Kacey spent the weekend, which was once a month, Trish asked this same question, and he made the same response. Once he had agreed, and the event had been strange, echoing the many times he’d sat at that table beside Tori. But Ed and Trish were overly solicitous, Tori’s absence too conspicuous. They sat in their beige carpeted dining room, a room surely used only on Sundays and holidays, passing mashed potatoes and green beans in heavy, matching Corelle dishes, Trish remarking on every single thing Kacey had said and done over the weekend, down to what they had at each meal and what time they all went to bed. He’d thought that she wanted to fill the silence to avoid talking about Tori, but once she’d finished recounting the weekend in detail, she started in on the topic of her daughter: when they’d last heard from her, where she was working, how she’d said she’d visit in a month or two. Clint looked down at the gold, somewhat floral pattern on the edge of his plate. The butter pooled in his potatoes was beginning to congeal slightly. He reached over to help Kacey cut her meat, and vowed to avoid another of these dinners if possible.

He shifted his weight again to lean against the doorframe.

“Well, I’m sure you and, uh, have plans,” she said. Trish could never bring herself to say Mercy’s name, or perhaps Clint had never mentioned it to her, he wasn’t sure. She touched her hair, a light blonde poof of frizzy curls, showing signs of white and grey. It made her look like the mother from the movie *Meet the Parents*. There were other comparisons to be made there, but Clint avoided thinking about it further.



“Kacey,” he called out, for she had escaped the entryway to some other part of the house.

She sauntered back in, a cookie sticking out of her mouth.

“Say goodbye to your dad, sweetie.”

Back in his truck, Clint leaned against the steering wheel, enjoying the relief from duty. Seeing Kacey’s sunglasses on the floor made him miss her for a moment, but it passed. When Trish and Ed had first requested weekends with Kacey, the whole time she was gone he’d felt anxious, unmoored. He would putter around the house, looking for chores to do, feeling like he ought to be doing something, without knowing what that something was. Since they were not taking Kacey to offer him a break from responsibility, but rather to get their time with her, to use it as such felt wrong, like using money for the electric bill on a six-pack. But by the time a routine was established and they were taking her once a month, he’d come to enjoy the freedom, the ability to sleep in, get drunk, or just do nothing with impunity, though now, more often than not, those weekends were spent with Mercy, who could occasionally score a whole weekend off.

She was working tonight, but Saturday they were going kayaking on the Grand River, so when he reached home, instead of pulling into his own driveway, he pulled into his parents’ and went around the house to the barn where he believed the kayaks to be stored, the one that would more rightfully be called a shed, as it was no bigger than a single car garage. The lemon-yellow paint had faded to pastel and in places peeled to reveal the white of previous paint jobs or the grey of weathered wood. If the weather held on Sunday, he’d repaint it before picking up Kacey. An unopened can of the color was just inside the doorway, on the floor. He used it as a doorstep. Without bothering to

search for the lightbulb string to illuminate the space, Clint lifted first the red then the blue kayak down from the rafters and placed them in the bed of the truck. They were both a little longer than the length of the bed, and he contemplated strapping them down, but there weren't any ratchet straps in the truck.

His mother came out the back door of the house, about twenty yards away, to put a bag of trash in the can.

"I'm going to repaint this on Sunday," he said to her, as he pushed the paint can aside with his foot and closed up the barn. "If it doesn't rain."

"Is there enough paint?" The bag hit the bottom of the garbage can with a loud thud and the tinny clanking of aluminum cans against one another.

"Whole can."

She nodded. "Dad was just saying that needed done, but you know he hates painting. Kacey at Trish and Ed's?"

"Yeah," he said.

"You two going kayaking?" She didn't use Mercy's name often either, despite claiming on several occasions that Mercy was "a lovely girl." It was evident from such proclamations, to Clint, at least, that the use of the word "girl" was intentional, and that it signified a supposed lack of seriousness or maternal desire that one would require to garner consideration as a woman. Clint's mother wiped her hands on her pants, a pair of stained and holey carpenter jeans that had, probably ten years prior, belonged to Clint's father.

"Yeah, Mom, that's why I'm getting out the kayaks."

"A little cold, isn't it?"

“I’ll bring the skirts.”

She grabbed hold of the screen door, but paused before entering, holding it halfway open. “Make sure there’s no bird nests in there. I swear a bird is living in that barn somewhere.”

“All right.”

Weekends without the kid always made him wonder what his life would have been without one at all. He wasn’t sure it was something he could even imagine. Before Tori had found out she was pregnant, they were students, and that was an irregular life he had nearly forgotten, sleeping until two, drinking every weekend, working part-time jobs with odd hours. He could just as easily go back to living that kind of life as one without Kacey. Without her, his time would be free in ways that now he wouldn’t know how to fill. Even Mercy’s life was one in which he could not see himself. She worked, cooked, did dishes and laundry and housework, watched movies, all things that he did, but other things too that had once been a part of his life, seeing friends, going out, taking trips, going hiking. He couldn’t go hiking with Kacey—she would need help tying her shoes, she would complain about the bugs, she would run up ahead then lag behind, and not even halfway through she’d get tired and he’d have to carry her on his shoulders, where she would pull his hair. It wasn’t that he missed those things exactly, or at least always, but that they were the fat he’d had to cut from his childless life to create space for his daughter; once the fat was been cut, it couldn’t be added back in.

In that other life too loomed something he did not want to touch: Tori. It was possible, likely even, that if Kacey had never been born, that Tori would never have left, and they wouldn’t have broken up. He didn’t know what to do with that. He couldn’t

blame his daughter for Tori's abandonment any more than he could blame Tori for their daughter. Did he, could he want that other life? Childless, he and Tori could be like his friends and their wives and girlfriends, eating dinner late and having sex in their living room. Maybe twenty-five and twenty-six would have found them more ready for a baby than twenty-one and twenty-two; maybe twenty-five and twenty-six would have found them wise enough to know what to do. They would argue about who should do the dishes and he would find her long, blonde hairs on the bathroom sink, the shower drain, the pillowcase, and they'd do karaoke on Thursday nights at the pub and trivia on Tuesdays. She'd sit on the front porch with her feet up on the railing to paint her toenails white, always white.

"It makes you look tan," she'd told him once when he'd asked her why she only used that color. "Come here, I'll do yours." And then she'd chased him around the little apartment where she'd lived the year before Kacey was born, brandishing the open bottle, walking only on her heels to avoid mussing the drying polish. One of Tori's complaints during her late pregnancy was that she couldn't reach her toenails to paint them. Clint had obliged and painted them for her, but he got the sense that it was the ritual itself she missed, rather than just the look of freshly painted toes. It was a skill he made use of now, painting Kacey's nails, per her request. She was perhaps a little young for nail polish, but he found it a useful tactic for bribing his daughter to behave on tedious errands. She always wanted some bright and exciting color, neon green or sunflower yellow or electric blue. He never bought her any white polish, and he hoped she wouldn't ask.

When Clint pulled into the Carter's on Sunday afternoon, he was surprised to see another car in their driveway, a dingy white Cavalier, rust creeping up from the bottom. It was parked in the turnaround, and he walked past it slowly, looking for clues as to its owner. The plate was from Michigan and the holder was just plain black plastic, broken at the top right corner and indicative of nothing.

He knocked—it had been years since he had entered this house without knocking; despite Trish's entreaties to "just come on in," he could not bear the intimacy of it—and it was Tori who answered the door. She was pretty, but in an ordinary way, not like a movie star or supermodel but like someone one could know. Her smile was straight and fairly white, and her nose was not too big, though her eyelashes were short and sparse and her eyes were slightly too far apart, like prey. She looked as she ever had, dressed in yoga pants and a v-neck t-shirt, her blonde hair still long, but lighter now than its natural color and drawn up into a ponytail. Clint did not look down to see whether she was wearing socks, and if not, whether her toenails were painted white. Though Clint had seen her a couple times over the past four years, every time he compared her not to the last time he saw her, but to how she had looked before she left: her eyes dark circled, her face puffy, her stomach like overstretched elastic, skin seersucker rippled and wrinkled.

"Hi, Clint," Tori said. She smiled and made way for him to come in.

Clint remained standing on the doorstep. "What happened to your old car, the Cherokee?"

She pursed her lips to one side, not quite a frown or a smirk. "It died," she said. "Maybe a year ago? But I've only had this one for a couple of months."

He wanted to ask why she was there, but couldn't think of how to say it. He swallowed hard. Tori still stood expectantly beside the door, but he couldn't yet force himself to step inside. Her parents had been awkward when he dropped Kacey off on Friday, but that interaction was always awkward. He could see now that they had been hiding the news of Tori's visit from him.

"When did you get into town?" He stepped inside, and Tori shut the door behind him, but they didn't leave the entryway of the house. He could hear Trish in the kitchen, rummaging through cabinets and talking to Kacey.

"Yesterday."

"How long are you staying for?"

She looked at the ground. Her arms were crossed over her chest, but not tightly, and she drummed the fingers of her right hand against her left elbow. "A while."

"A while?" Tori had never, to his knowledge, stayed in town for more than a week since she'd moved out. He took a deep breath to counteract his climbing heartrate. Whether it was shock, excitement, anger, or fear that elicited this reaction he didn't know.

"I'm looking for a job." She had stopped averting her gaze, but she made eye contact only tentatively. It made her seem younger than she was, like she was nineteen and shy again. Clint couldn't determine whether he found it endearing or repulsive.

"How long have you been planning this?"

"A couple of months."

Clint nodded. He crossed his arms, tightly. "And you're just telling me this now?"

"I wanted to be sure."

He swallowed a venomous reply.

“I was hoping that I could see Kacey more, now that I’m here.”

“You’re already seeing Kacey more than you ever have.”

“I mean, like, every week.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? She’s my daughter.”

“You never have before.” It was true. When Tori came to visit her parents for Christmas from wherever it was she’d been staying before Toledo—Clint wasn’t sure, but he imagined it to be a trailer park in Florida, for some reason; not the kind that old people live in, with pools and exercise centers, but a real dump where she shared a trailer with two other women, making their rent waiting tables and selling makeup at a department store in the mall—she refused to see him, and would have refused to see Kacey as well, except that her parents insisted on having her on Christmas Eve. Trish and Ed had come to pick her up from his house, without Tori. It was snowing heavily, the big, thick, soft snowflakes, that came straight down, without wind, blanketing their heads and shoulders as they struggled to buckle in Kacey’s car seat. He watched them from the front window, seething and aching, searching for Tori’s form inside the car, occluded by the snowfall and the car’s tinted glass. She wasn’t there.

When he went to pick up Kacey that next morning, Tori was also absent from her parents’ house, visiting a friend, he’d been told. He thought that she was avoiding him because she knew that if she saw him again, with their daughter, that she would be unable to stay away. The whole week she was in town he prowled around the grocery store, hoping to catch her there with her mother, picking up a few, last-minute things for dinner

with her grandparents, and at the gas station near her house, to intercept her on her way out of town or while she was picking up lotto tickets to give to all the cousins as Christmas gifts. But he never ran into her. When he did finally see her, a year later, it was only for a few moments, handing off the kid. They'd said hello and Merry Christmas, but nothing of consequence; the meeting was brief and perfunctory.

“Well, now that all the diaper changing is over...” she trailed into a weak laugh that dissipated quickly once she saw Clint's face, a suppressed scowl. “Joking, joking.” She put up her hands, as if to say she was unarmed. Then she re-crossed her arms. “I want to be part of her life.”

“That's always been an option.”

“So, when can I see her next? Can I come over next weekend?”

“I don't know yet.” He called to Kacey, who came bouncing in from the kitchen. Her bag was on the floor beside the door; Clint pointed to it and she picked it up. “I'll let you know. Say thanks to your parents for me.”

Tori nodded. “Bye, baby,” she said to Kacey, scooping her into a hug.

Clint realized that this had been coming for a while. The increasing frequency of Tori's calls, which had previously only occurred before her Christmas visit and at Kacey's birthday, should have tipped him off to her arrival. It was only inevitable that she would show up. He wondered if maybe she'd even been seeing Kacey at her parents' house for a couple of months now, without his knowledge. But surely Kacey would have told him. He wasn't sure that she had much capacity for keeping secrets at her age.

All he wanted for his daughter was a life that was good. Somewhat normal. He didn't want her to feel that she was unwanted. That they had not planned to have her, that



Tori did not want her, complicated this for him immensely. But Tori's re-emergence made him think that perhaps Kacey's life could be somewhat normal after all. She would probably not remember, when she was older, that Tori had ever been absent.

But he did not know what Tori wanted. Maybe she had just needed time to see that she really did want to have a family. Or maybe she just found the world too cold and hard outside the shelter of a place where everyone knows you and everything you could do there is too easy at which to fail.

Once out of the house, he texted Rachel, *you still at Mom's?*

*Home now*, she responded. *Why?*

He told her that he was coming over. When he arrived, Rachel told the kids to go play on the swing set and told Jamie to watch the kids. She and Clint sat at the kitchen counter, which was spread over with the tri-folded pages and torn envelopes of the bills she'd been paying, her hands inked from checks.

"Why don't you just that online?" Clint asked. "It's automatic."

"Well, I don't always have the money to pay them when they try to automatically take it." She stamped and licked an envelope, then set it aside. "So, what's the problem?"

"Tori's here."

"That's a problem?"

"Like, she's back. She's looking for a job, she says." Clint cracked his knuckles, one at a time, then his thumbs. His sister looked away, cringing. "She wants to see Kacey once a week."

"How'd you find all this out?"

"She ambushed me, she was at her parents' when I picked up Kacey."

“She didn’t tell you—”

“No.”

Rachel ran a hand through her hair, pushing the short strays that had broken off at her bun off her face. “Well, this seems like a good thing. No one can say whether it will last, but you can’t fault her for wanting to see her kid.” She looked at her brother’s face, as if to confirm something she already knew. “You can, apparently.”

He picked at flecks of paint stuck underneath his stubby nails, inadvertently driving them deeper. “Where’s all this coming from? Since when has she wanted to be an involved parent?”

“Why do you need to know why? She’s back, and she wants to see the kid. It’s not like she asked for full custody.”

“Sure, fine. But she abandoned her own daughter, and she might do it again.”

“And she left you, huh?”

“Well, fuck you, too.”

“I’m not saying you don’t have a right to be mad or hurt or confused. I’m saying that you’ve got to stop acting like this isn’t partly about you.”

Clint said nothing.

“So, what did you say to her?”

“That I didn’t know. I didn’t say anything to Kacey about it, either.”

“Or Mercy?”

“No. I don’t know.”

Rachel had stopped stuffing the envelope in front of her and just looked at him, wearing an expression that he did not care to interpret.

## Chapter 5

Clint and Kacey arrived at the McDonalds about fifteen minutes after six, when they were supposed to meet Tori. Despite having been remodeled to look more like a coffee shop, the ketchup red and mustard yellow striped booths replaced by furniture in shades of cream and toffee, this franchise still had a play place. This was the main reason that Clint had selected it as the location of their meeting, other than that it wasn't an atmosphere that encouraged lingering over one's food; Kacey would play, and they could speak in relative privacy. When they entered, Tori had already gotten a table in the play place area and had french fries and a drink in front of her on the laminate tabletop. Her hair was down and hung straight and limp around her face, and she wore a loose Detroit Tigers sweatshirt. Clint waved and sent Kacey over, then ordered them food: for himself, a black coffee and a Big Mac, for Kacey a Happy Meal of chicken nuggets. When the cashier asked what kind of toy he wanted for the kids' meal, Clint froze, momentarily. "I didn't catch that," he said, to cover for his distraction.

"Hot Wheels or Barbie toy for the Happy Meal, sir."

He hadn't asked Kacey which she wanted. Normally, he'd have just answered "Barbie" or whatever the "girl" toy was, but after his conversation with Mercy, he felt self-conscious doing so. Maybe a toy car would make the difference between his daughter growing up to idolize Danika Patrick and the women on the cover of fashion magazines. *Was that even the point?* He wasn't sure, but he'd already been thinking about it too long, and he needed to make an answer. "Hot Wheels, I guess."

His food was out promptly, as the dining room wasn't very busy. All the traffic at this time of the day came from the drive thru, people on their way home from work. The

only people eating in were wan-looking parents in the play area and a group of teens in the back, crushed into a corner booth, laughing loudly and shooting straw wrappers at each other.

At the table, Kacey was bouncing around on the seat, raring to be set loose upon the playground, stalled only by the novel presence of her mother and her knowledge that she had to eat all her food before she was allowed to go play. Once her box was placed in front of her, Kacey busied herself with disemboweling it. She was sitting beside Tori in the booth and when she reached the toy, enlisted her mother in opening the thick plastic around it.

“Help, Mommy,” she said, holding the toy in front of Tori’s face. Clint cringed, knowing that this could not help Kacey’s case, could not endear her to a mother who had no interest in the demands of motherhood.

“Please,” Clint said, giving Kacey what he imagined to be a parental look. “We say, ‘Mom, could you please help me open this.’”

Tori was already engaged in ripping open the package, but Kacey asked her again, following the script her father provided.

“What else?” he prompted.

“Thank you,” Kacey said. She examined the toy for a moment, a red sports car with a racing stripe and spoiler, then proceeded to drive it along the edge of the table, ramming it into a chicken nugget at full force.

“Don’t play with your food.”

Kacey quickly shoved the entire mangled chicken nugget into her little mouth, her puffed out cheeks making her look eerily like a miniature of Tori after she’d had her

wisdom teeth removed. Clint and Tori had just started seeing each other, just over a year before Tori got pregnant. Tori had been optimistically cavalier about how the surgery would affect her, and she and Clint had a date scheduled for that same night. When he arrived at her parents' house to pick her up, she was wearing two ice packs secured by an ace bandage and yoga pants.

“I forgot,” she said, letting a small rivulet of bloody spit escape the corner of her numb mouth, speech impeded by her swollen jaw and Tylenol with codeine.

It was endearing and naive and Clint found it easy to excuse her. He went out and got her a milkshake—from McDonald's, actually: strawberry, no straw—and returned and watched movies with her until she fell asleep beside him on the couch, staining the shoulder of his plaid shirt with pink-tinted drool.

It was a very different first date than the one he'd had with Mercy, who he'd met on a dating app. Clint and Tori had met the old-fashioned way, not just in person, but in the way their parents and their grandparents had met: They lived in the same town their whole lives. Their biggest break in tradition was that they hadn't gotten acquainted until college. They had the same statistics class at GRCC, and it seemed miraculous to them that they hadn't met, officially, before. They had gone to the same high school, but Tori was a year younger than Clint, and somehow it happened that they'd never had a class together, never spoken. Not that it was a big school, it wasn't, but even if they had, both were plagued by the ugliness of adolescence: Tori had braces, Clint was thin and gangly and wore too-loose carpenter jeans. But by the time Tori sat down in front of Clint in Stats, aged eighteen and nineteen, respectively, they had shed their former awkwardness, filled out and filled in, grown up—or, at least, so it had seemed.

While Kacey was eating, the conversation was mostly small talk or about Kacey. It was one of the benefits of children, they prevented unpleasant subject matter and provided endless topics for conversation, or better yet, dominated it themselves. Clint chewed his burger, and Tori plied Kacey with the questions that awkward relatives usually use on children with approaching birthdays: *Are you excited for your birthday coming up? How old are you going to be? What kind of presents do you want?* Clint was surprised to hear her asking these questions, mainly because he'd forgotten that Kacey's birthday was a month away. He thought bitterly that it was a surprise that Tori could remember it.

Kacey, after driving her Hot Wheels all over every available surface and piece of food within her reach, had finally finished her chicken nuggets and stared longingly at the play structure with its bright plastic slides in pink, orange, and blue, the netted sides, the kids shouting through tunnels at one another and chasing each other up the slides.

“Are you done with your milk?”

Kacey nodded.

“Then you can go play.”

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the table. Tori languidly dragged a limp french fry through a puddle of ketchup on her tray, avoiding eye contact. “So,” she said. “Have you thought about it?”

“About what?”

“About me getting some time with Kacey.”

“Yeah, I've thought about it.”

“And?”

“I guess that’s all right. You’re her mom.”

“Okay, well how do you want to do this?”

“Aren’t we doing it right now? Isn’t this a visit?”

“Yeah, but I want to see her regularly, like every week.”

“Every week? Don’t you think that’s a lot, to start out with? That’s a lot for me to work around. I work and raise a kid by myself, Tori.”

“I just want to spend time with Kacey, to get to know her. I am her mother.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” he said, not quite under his breath, just loud enough that she could hear it.

Her brow drew downward and so did the corners of her mouth. “One visit a week is reasonable. I looked into how people do joint custody, and that’s a common one.”

Clint had never even considered the issue of custody from a legal standpoint. He’d never gone to court to have Tori’s custody rights revoked, and really, he probably couldn’t. Mothers almost always win custody, that was what he had always heard, even when they were mothers like Tori, mothers who just up and left—or mothers who were worse. And that meant she had rights, the right to make decisions about Kacey, and it seemed as if she were threatening to use them. That she would use that word, “custody,” awakened in him a new uneasiness. He couldn’t believe her to be the kind of person to hold it over his head, to manipulate him with it, but he also hadn’t believed that she would abandon him and their child, until she did. He could feel the word hanging over the conversation like a threat.

“Fine,” he said. “We can try once a week. How about Thursday nights?” Mercy worked late every Thursday evening, just about, and it was no small factor in this

decision. If he hadn't been ready for Mercy to watch Kacey, he definitely wasn't ready for her to meet Tori. Clint wondered what Mercy was doing. He hadn't talked to her at all that day; he hadn't wanted to tell her what he was going to be doing, for obvious reasons. He snuck a quick look at his phone, but there were no new texts or missed calls.

Tori smiled, thin-lipped. "Yeah, that would be great." She turned away from him, toward the play structure. Clint caught a glimpse of Kacey's pink dress—a gift from Tori's parents—at the top of the slide, and seconds later, the little red car came shooting out of the bottom of it, and landed on the ground near the edge of the mats covering the floor surrounding the playscape.

Kacey soon followed, giggling loudly. When she reached the bottom, she retrieved her car. Clint called her name, motioned for her to come over. "Hey," he said. "Don't do that again. You could hit somebody with the car."

"Okay," she said, swaying impatiently and looking back toward the slide.

He put his hand out. "Leave that here."

Kacey reluctantly placed the toy in his palm.

"Ten more minutes, okay?"

Kacey turned back toward the slide and ran, as if to get in as much play as possible before the ten minutes elapsed.

"What if we need more time to talk?" Tori asked. She was still playing with her remaining french fries, which were by now, cold and soggy, pressing them into salt that had been shed on the tray to get it to stick.



Clint shrugged. “Kacey doesn’t know how to tell time.” He wondered what, other than logistics, they’d need to discuss. Unless Tori was ready to talk about her leaving. The kids’ area of a fast food restaurant didn’t seem like the right setting.

Tori laughed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” She left off with the fries, to Clint’s relief. He’d found it incredibly distracting, simply because it was disgusting.

“So, do you want to just drop her off at a certain time, do you want to be around, too...?”

“I don’t know.” Clint wasn’t sure how comfortable he was leaving Kacey alone with Tori. Yes, she saw Kacey at her parents’ house, but her parents were around, and they’d been actual parents. But he was likewise averse to spending much time in Tori’s presence, with things as they were. Besides, he couldn’t ask to supervise all their visits without coming off like he was possessive or bitter or unreasonable. To himself, he wouldn’t deny being at least two of those things, but he wasn’t trying to admit them to Tori, upset her, and ensnare himself in a custody fight he couldn’t win, but couldn’t bear to lose.

“Do you want to bring her to my parents, or should I come over to your place?”

“It would make things easier for me if you could come over to my house,” he said. “I don’t need to hang out for the whole time or anything—I’d probably just do chores around the house, you know, but I’d be there if you needed anything, that way I’m not rushing around to bring her over and pick her up.

“Yeah, sure. That works for me.”

“So, are we good?”

“Time?”

“I don’t know. I usually pick her up around four, four-thirty. So, any time after that, maybe five or later?”

Tori nodded.

Clint looked at his phone. Seven-o-one. What remained of his coffee had gone cold and the sauce on the residual bite of hamburger, laying on the crinkled wrapper, looked like a congealed bodily fluid of some kind, like something that would come out of a blister or boil. He wrapped it up in the paper, concealing the mess completely. The other parents and children who had been in the section when he’d arrived were no longer there, but had been replaced by equally jaundiced specimens. One woman wiped the nose of a child who Clint could tell had a perpetually wet upper lip, snot streams like oil leaked onto concrete, ineradicable, shiny and slick. She did so not without a bit of disgust, holding the kid by the upper arm and the nose before releasing him, the biohazard, into the maze of plastic and netting. Another woman sent a text while her two children battled Hot Wheels on the table, knocking over ketchup cups and empty dipping sauce containers.

“It’s about time for us to get going,” Clint said. He got up and stood at the base of the slides, which despite different origins, concluded in the same spot. She was going to come down one of the slides at any moment, and waiting her for her was going to be infinitely more effective than shouting for her in the general direction of the structure, or going in to look for her. Clint was sure that he could not fit up the tiny tube of the slide or through the narrow passages.

After a few minutes, Kacey appeared at the bottom of the orange slide. Before he even opened his mouth, Kacey knew what her father was going to say, and attempted to climb back up the slide to escape him.

“Kacey,” he said. “It’s time to go.”

She had made little progress and was still near the bottom, in the open part of the slide. Her socks proved the limiting factor, as with every upward step she slipped back half a stride. She ignored Clint and continued to struggle, vainly, against the slickness of the plastic.

Clint had no patience for this game, not today. He grabbed the back of the pink corduroy jumper she was wearing and lifted her off the slide, placing her on the ground at his feet. Midway through this action, he’d realized that it might look bad, not to the surrounding parents—they weren’t even watching their kids, they certainly had no interest in his doings—but to Tori, who had just revealed her leverage. He wasn’t sure if picking up a preschooler by the collar of her clothes was exactly a use of physical force, but he was sure there were lawyers who could make it seem that way. Not that Tori could afford a good lawyer, she couldn’t, but neither could he. “Kacey,” he said. “I told you it was time to go. Let’s go say goodbye to your mom.”

She obliged, sullenly, stamping her feet as forcefully as she could all the way to the table. She buried her head in Tori’s abdomen.

Clint cleared away their trash, picked up the toy car. He looked at Kacey and inclined his head toward the door.

“Let’s walk out the car together, huh?” Tori said with the enthusiasm of a first-day kindergarten teacher. “Want to hold my hand?” Kacey did.

Clint held the door for them. For a moment, they looked like a real family: mother and daughter hand-in-hand, father following, keys out to unlock the doors and let them in. They could have just stopped in off the expressway on the way home from a trip up north or from a trip to Grandma's. The illusion ended when Tori kissed Kacey goodbye and got into her own car, and Clint was left to strap Kacey into her car seat and head home, in opposite the direction Tori would take.

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The days until Thursday crawled like mudpuppies: on their bellies. On the way home from work, Clint drove slowly, so slowly that an old couple going forty in a champagne-colored minivan passed him. He got Kacey from his mother's, alerting her briefly to the situation. She didn't respond, only pressed her lips into a thin line and nodded. It made the creases around her mouth more evident, made her look old. It was clear to him that Rachel had already told her, and that whatever his mother's opinion on the situation was, he wasn't going to hear it.

Clint got Kacey home and quickly pulled something together for them to eat—bananas, carrot sticks, Goldfish crackers, and chicken breast that he'd originally planned to take in his lunch the next day. He poured Kacey a small portion of crackers, then finished the rest of the bag, which had been nearly full, himself, before circling the house, in search of some household task to occupy himself before and during Tori's visit. He was wiping down the kitchen counters when he heard her car in the driveway. Like a dog, Kacey was at the front window in an instant, peeking out at their guest. Clint half expected her to bark or lift her leg and piss on Tori's shoes when she walked through the door. He wasn't opposed to it.

He let Tori in and they exchanged greetings—they could hardly be called pleasantries—then Clint excused himself to do laundry. It needed doing, but more critically, the laundry room, a room off the kitchen that had likely once been a lean-to and not an actual part of the house, was conveniently located. He couldn't see Tori and Kacey from there, but if he was quiet and the TV wasn't on, he could pick up most of the conversation.

He ascended the stairs to collect dirty clothes and towels from his bedroom. His work clothes were the priority: they stank. Kacey's clothes were always last to be washed, because she had an unending supply of them. For whatever reason—perhaps because she was a cute little girl—people loved to buy her clothes, for Christmas, her birthday, for any holiday or occasion. Kacey, of course, cared little for such gifts; she was four, she wanted toys. Instead she got endless outfits with itchy tags, impractical fabrics, and excessive sequins, rhinestones, and bows. All of his relatives and Tori's—even, on occasion, his own mother—liked to dress her up like she was a mannequin or a baby doll. Anything with glitter, Clint dropped at the Goodwill.

He didn't sort the laundry by color so much as by stench and soil. Work clothes were washed together, regardless of hue. The colors had never bled, and if they did, he wouldn't care. It was mindless work, easily accomplished, and he could expend all mental energy decoding the fragments of sentences and muffled voices coming from the other room. As he listened to Tori play with Kacey—Kacey was a veterinarian and Tori voiced the sick animals—it seemed to Clint that she was trying too hard, being too silly, talking too much, the way people who are never around kids and are slightly afraid of them do. It was jarring to see, well, hear and picture, a mother self-conscious and

uncomfortable with her own daughter. But strangely, he couldn't imagine her any other way. He couldn't imagine Tori responding to Kacey's pleas to play with her with Mercy's good-natured gameness or to her cries with his sister's experienced calm.

At the conclusion of the visit, Clint could hardly stand the smell of sweaty, grimy clothing and laundry detergent, which had mixed in the closeness of the small room, even with the door open, to the point of noxiousness. Given the awkwardness with Kacey, he feared that the experience was enough to curtail Tori's visits, or perhaps to make them more infrequent. And yet, when he'd said goodbye and began to close the door behind her, she said "Same time next week?" like she was excited about it, and he'd just nodded.

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Clint pulled in around six forty-five, just after sunset. It was a Tuesday, two weeks after Tori's first visit. When he got close to the house, he could see that Mercy was sitting on the porch, a plate of cookies on the swing beside her. She was not swinging. The headlights shone bright in her eyes and she squinted, raised a cookie to her mouth, and took a bite.

She watched him get out of the truck and walk up to the house, and her eyes felt sharp to him, pricking him all over. He kept his steps measured, unsure what exactly he was walking into, only knowing that he was walking into something.

"Hey, how was it?" he asked. He moved to sit down beside her, but the plate was there, and Mercy showed no inclination to make room for him. "You made cookies?" He took one.

Mercy took another, keeping one arm crossed over her chest. "We did." She took a bite, her motions stiff, wooden. The incongruousness of her actions and the way in

which she performed them was funny to Clint, but he knew better than to laugh. She said, “I just put a movie on for Kacey, about five minutes ago, she should be all right for a few.”

He nodded. It was dusk, but not dark, and Clint could see Mercy—patches of flour on the thighs of her jeans, the long braid draped over her shoulder, jaw somehow simultaneously clenched and chewing—well enough to see the very obvious signs of her ire. “These are good,” he said, mouth full, reaching for another. He didn’t feel like playing this game—if she were mad about something, she’d have to come out and say it.

“Yeah,” she said, re-crossing her arms, tighter. “We made some extra for her mom’s visit on Thursday.” "

Clint hadn’t lied about anything, but he felt like he had. The bottom fell out of his face, whatever cork kept the blood in his head had popped, and it all drained out. Somehow, he hadn’t realized this would happen; it was clear now that it was inevitable.

“Is that what this is about?” He leaned against the side of the house.

“It seems like she’s been visiting regularly, every Thursday.”

“Yeah.”

“And that’s all you’re going to say about it?” Her lip trembled when she spoke, like she was a little kid who was trying not to cry. But she didn’t seem like she was going to cry, or if she was, it wasn’t because she was sad or hurt—she was angry. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He hadn’t told her because he didn’t want her to know. Nothing good would have come of her knowing, and this ambush was evidence of it.

“Is it because you have feelings for her? Because you’re sleeping with her?”

“Feelings for” was a tricky one, one he’d have to evade. How could he not have feelings relating to the woman who’d birthed his daughter, who’d left them, who’d been his first—only?—serious relationship, who he’d planned to marry? And how could he explain that to his angry girlfriend, who would clearly not take it well? He guessed sleeping with Tori would be the logical extension, in Mercy’s mind, of having feelings for Tori. She might have grown up somewhere else, lived in a city, gotten a couple of degrees, but when it came to relationships and suspicion, Mercy was just the same as all the men and women who Clint had gone to high school with, the ones who never went to college and never left home: acting like this was still high school and they’d catch their boyfriend or girlfriend texting someone else or making out with their ex under the bleachers at track practice.

“What? God, no, I’m not sleeping with her.”

“How am I supposed to believe that? You’ve been lying to me for weeks.”

“I haven’t been lying. I never lied. You just never asked.”

“You’re right,” she said, rolling her eyes and shaking her head, throwing her hands up. “I should have specifically asked whether your ex with whom you have a child has been coming around to visit said child and whether you’re fucking her—or want to.”

“I’m not having sex with Tori,” Clint said. “The last time I had sex with her, it ruined my life.”

“Ha. Ha,” she said. “Then why the secrecy? How long has this been going on? What *is* going on?”

“Why are you even asking me? Haven’t you been pumping Kacey for information?”



“Don’t accuse me,” she said, her voice raising slightly, but sharply. “Kacey told me that her mom comes over on Thursdays and that she wanted to have enough cookies to give her some. Unprompted.” She crossed her legs, away from Clint. “I’m not crazy enough to invent things you’ve been keeping from me. I don’t have to.”

“I haven’t been keeping it from you. I just didn’t tell you. I didn’t think—”

“That it mattered?”

“That it mattered, yet. She’s been in town for maybe a month, and I’m not sure that it will last.”

“Tori’s involvement or this relationship?”

“Mercy, come on.”

“I’m being completely serious.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I didn’t know that it would be so important to you to know.”

“It’s not just important to *me* to know. You might not care much about me or what’s going on in my life, but don’t assume the same is true for me. If you wanted me to be a real part of yours, you’d be forthcoming with me.”

“That’s not true. You know that I care about you.”

“I don’t know that. You don’t act like it.”

“I think I do,” he said. His arms were crossed now, too.

Mercy shook her head, shaking loose the braid from where it rested on her shoulder. “How? You barely trust me to watch your kid for a few hours, let alone tell me when something big is going on in your life. I want to be with someone who loves me

and shares his life with me. If that's not what's happening here, I'm not going to waste any more time."

"Waste *any more* time?"

"I should have seen this, months ago."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I'm not sure you want to know the answer. I'm not sure I do."

Clint said nothing, but continued looking at her, feeling like his eyes were straining against their sockets.

"I don't know, Clint. Maybe I thought things could change or that it wasn't this bad or that I couldn't bear lose you. But what is there to lose? I'm not part of your real life, and you don't want me to be."

"I don't know what you want me to say."

She stood up, and picked up her bag, which Clint now noticed was beside her feet. She'd been prepared for it to happen like this, been ready to end it. That almost bothered him more than that she was breaking up with him. He'd known it could happen, had felt it building up, but he hadn't thought it would, at least, not yet.

"Just say goodbye to me, then." She walked over to Clint and kissed him on the cheek, then walked to her car. She'd kissed his cheek the way one would kiss the corpse at a funeral, light, dry, quick, just an acknowledgement that there had once been love and duty between the kisser and the kissed and that now that connection was irrevocably severed.

He watched her car pull out of the driveway, and stood there on the porch for longer than he ought, until her taillights disappeared, and he remembered that his

daughter was inside, watching a movie. He worried that she'd been left alone too long, but when he walked into the living room, he found her ensconced in a blanket twenty times bigger than her little frame required, staring with unwavering attention at the television, smeared chocolate chip on her left cheek.

Clint sat down beside her, but Kacey said nothing, too engrossed in the doings of the animal-people on screen.

“Wow, you're not going to say hi to your dad or give him a hug? I guess you really missed me.”

“Hi, Daddy,” Kacey said, without looking over at him.

Even the one person who depended upon him solely for survival had no interest in him. It was not inconvenient, since he was in no mood to enjoy the prattle of a preschooler, but it stung, regardless. “Let me have some of that blanket,” he said, grabbing an edge and pulling his feet up onto the couch so that they lay feet to head.

The movie seemed to be about a rabbit police officer in a world of stronger, more dangerous, talking animals. It didn't hold his attention. Instead he was caught in a strange and unprecedented experience of pure feeling, without words or thoughts, unidentifiable and total. It couldn't be called angry or sad or even hurt, exactly, he could determine only that it was negative, uncomfortable. He wondered if this was how babies experienced things, before they had words to put to them. He looked at his child, just barely still awake at the other end of the couch, imagined her experience as a baby. Thinking of his daughter as an infant, Clint envied her, not of her life, which he felt could be difficult and full of hurt, but of her in that moment. She was complete, and he was not. Though totally dependent on their parents for survival, food, shelter, clothing, diaper changes, babies

were born knowing everything they needed to know. They knew to cry when they were hungry, when they were wet, when they were sleepy or cold. They knew how to suck and how to cry. They did those things and were nourished and nurtured, and they were happy. To say that humans learn more every day that they live was a lie—every day one lived, one moved further away from that state of perfect knowledge. The longer one lived, the less one knew of what one needed to know to live and be happy. Clint knew how to live, but he didn't know anymore how to be happy, or if he could be.

Clint only fully came back to himself when the credits started rolling. He looked down at the other end of the couch. Kacey lay, mouth open, in a patch of her own drool, dark against the cushion. He got up, gingerly to avoid kicking her in the head, and then scooped her up from underneath the blanket. Semi-consciously, she wrapped her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist as he carried her up to her bed.

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Gray morning sunlight streamed through the slats of the blinds and across his bed, but it was not warm or inviting, nor did it illuminate the outline of any form beneath the blankets but his own. The air in the bedroom was chill and belied a cold day for April. Clint hoped it hadn't frozen. He had no desire to get out of bed. During the night, Clint had—more than once—half-consciously reached across the bed to pull Mercy close to him, and had been surprised when she wasn't there. Then he would remember. It was like getting dumped again.

The day promised to be bleak. Kacey was difficult to wake and sour with him as he helped her dress. She didn't want to wear pants, she wanted to wear a dress, and refused to abide by Clint's determination that it was too cold. He gave in and stuffed her

into a pair of leggings to wear underneath it. He had no time to argue with a child; he had to drop her off at Rachel's, which meant that he had ten less minutes to get ready to go than if he'd been taking her next door. The dress argument and her unwillingness to get out of bed had already set them behind.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head vigorously.

“Are you sassy today, little miss?”

“Maybe so.”

Clint started for a moment, surprised to hear his daughter use such an incongruous, adult phrasing, echo Mercy so perfectly. He'd often been struck by Kacey's physical resemblance to her mother, but this was something new entirely. He hadn't admitted this to himself earlier, but it was one of the reasons he'd limited Mercy's time with her—he hadn't wanted Kacey to be influenced by her, to pick up her mannerisms and phrasings, to serve as a constant reminder of another loss—she already served as a reminder of one.

## Chapter 6

Clint pulled into his sister's to pick up Kacey at around four on Thursday. Rachel was sitting on her porch steps in a bleach-stained t-shirt and a pair of her husband's old sweatpants, smoking a cigarette. She moved as if to stub it out as he approached, but he waved a hand to say *go ahead* and she put it back to her lips.

"I thought you quit before you had kids," he said as he sat down beside her.

She exhaled smoky dragon's breath, a quiet sigh. "I did. I've just been missing it. It's once in a while, when Jamie's gone and I think the kids won't see."

"Whatever."

"The kids are out back playing wiffle ball. They'll be tired of it in about fifteen minutes." She turned over her hand, watching the smoke drift upward. "So, what are we doing for Kacey's birthday?"

Do we have to do something? Clint wanted to ask. "I don't know, I haven't really thought about it. Sunday dinner like usual at mom and dad's but cake afterward?"

"That's what we do every year."

"Kacey is four, she doesn't even remember last year."

"Almost five," Rachel said in mock-preschooler voice. "I just think it would be nice to do something. Especially since Tori is back. It's an olive branch. And it will force everyone to be in the same place and be nice to each other."

"It sounds like you already have it all planned out, so why don't you just take care of it, then?"

"Um, I've had a few kids, but Kacey isn't one of them."

“So, you’re going to tell me I have to have a big birthday party for her and then not help me plan it.”

“Oh my God, it’s almost like you’re a parent or something. Get used to it.”

“Have you told Tori that? She’s been coming over on Thursday nights to spend time with Kacey.”

“Fuck, dude,” Rachel said, taking another deep drag. “How’s it been going?”

“I don’t know, fine. Tori just plays with Kacey for a couple hours. But Mercy gave it to me when I got home the other night.”

“What for?” The kids were yelling in the backyard, but Rachel ignored it. It seemed benign, the sounds of play rather than pain.

“Because I didn’t tell her about Tori’s visits, about her being in town.”

“You didn’t tell her?”

“Spare me, okay. It didn’t affect her, I don’t know why she needed to know.”

His sister shook her head. “You really are a dumbass.” The breeze picked up, and she shivered, holding her arms closer to her body. The wind smelled of damp earth and melting snow: a reminder that winter could return tomorrow and ice the ground and tree branches, drive them all back inside and into thick coats.

Clint flipped her off. “Good thing you quit smoking, I forgot it made you ornery.”

“Shut up,” she said, brandishing the cigarette as one would a knife, waving it close enough to the skin of his arm to make its danger felt. “She’s not in the wrong here, Clint. How long have you been together, a year?”

“Like,” he said, counting back in his head. “Ten months?”

“You didn’t let her meet Kacey for the first three months, and I know, you were ‘just being careful’ then, but at this point, you should know whether you see a future with her or not.”

Clint shrugged. “She’s not Kacey’s mom.”

His sister looked over at him, eyes wide as if she were incredulous. Clint knew better. “Exactly. She’s not Tori. She didn’t leave you and your newborn with no warning, Tori did. Stop punishing her for it.”

“I’m not. I’m saying that Tori is Kacey’s mom, and she’s back in the picture.”

“Just because she’s in Kacey’s life again doesn’t have to mean that she’s ‘back in the picture.’ If you’re not getting back together, why fuck does it matter if she’s here?”

Clint couldn’t remember, aside from this conversation, the last time he’d heard Rachel say *fuck*. She must have given it up when she’d given up smoking. “It would be real messy if—”

“If what? It’s already messy.”

Clint shrugged. Messier than it needed to be, but not as messy as it would be if he involved Mercy. If Tori was trying to make things right with more than just Kacey, maybe it didn’t have to be messy at all.

“You act like you’re the first person to ever have problems with his baby mama. People break up or get divorced and remarried all the time. There are plenty of stepparents in the world and parents with shared custody.”

“It’s not just that.”

“What that she might leave? If you want a lifetime guarantee, buy some new brakes for your truck. Everything else is an if, every day. Every day, Jamie and I wake up



and decide to make it work. Maybe one day he won't. Or I won't. But I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it." She took a drag, then passed him the cigarette.

It was as bad as it was those times in high school when he and his friends used to steal packs from their parents and smoke them furtively in someone's basement or outside the gas station while one of them pumped. He could already feel the awful nicotine headache.

Rachel took back the cigarette and took a final drag before putting it out against the concrete step. She dug a little hole in the flowerpot beside the steps and buried the butt in it. It made sense that the daffodils in it were mostly dead.

He shook his head. "That's not it either." It was one of those cloudy days where, despite the darkness of the underside of the clouds, the sun shone remarkably brightly, giving the cloud it was hidden behind a kind of halo, a golden lining. The sun reappeared in a gap between two clouds, briefly, blindingly, before obscuring itself behind the next cloud, heavy like a wet cotton ball.

"Then what is?" She pulled a stick of gum out of her pocket. She pointed it at Clint. He shook his head. She unwrapped it and stuck it in her mouth.

"I've got to do what's best for Kacey. What's best for Kacey would be two parents who are together, not women coming into and out of her life."

"Bullshit is this about Kacey. I know you've spent the last four years with your head up her ass, but that little girl can't and shouldn't be your whole life. If you want to be a good dad and role model, you need to be a functional person." She shook her head, ground some dirt from the flowerpot into the cement with her toes. "Besides, she's going

to grow up and move out. You going to put your life on hold for the next fourteen years? Are you going to wait until then to get serious about anybody?"

"Jesus, Rach, don't spare my feelings."

"And don't pretend this is about Kacey when it's really about you being scared or confused or whatever. You've sure been doing your best to drive Mercy off."

"Yeah, well I've already done that. She's done. That's it."

"Then I don't know what you're doing talking to me about it, you should be talking to her." Rachel turned her head toward the side of the house. The kids were yelling, angrily now, about who did or did not cheat, their voices getting louder as they approached, still hidden by the gray siding of the house. "Fifteen minutes," she said. "Just like I told you."

The oldest, Noah, rounded the corner first. "Mom, Quentin's cheating. I got him out, but he wouldn't get off the base." The other three kids came around the house, running, Quentin looking less than contrite.

"Am I wearing a striped shirt? Do I look like a referee?"

"Hi, Daddy," Kacey said. She was wearing a little pink fleece, unzipped, and her rainboots. Both were flecked lightly with mud, mostly dried.

"Ready to go?"

Kacey nodded, and she and Clint started toward the truck.

"You better talk to her," Rachel said.

Clint looked back over his shoulder and shrugged. At the truck, he lifted Kacey and strapped her into her car seat.

"Talk to who?" she said, once they'd pulled out of the driveway

“Mercy.”

“Why?” She’d started asking *why* at two years old and had never stopped. It had also never stopped annoying Clint.

“She’s mad at me.”

“Why?”

Apparently, he was in for a lecture from Kacey on the subject, too. “Mind your own business.” He didn’t know how to explain to her the concept of a break up. That he and Tori had broken up didn’t make it any easier.

She swung her legs, kicking the seat and transferring mud from her boots onto the fabric. The boots were blue, with handles on the side: a hand-me-down from Rachel’s kids, because Rachel, ever practical, bought only the most androgynous items in hopes that each kid would wear it in turn, without complaint.

“But can you please say sorry so she can come over? I haven’t seen her in *forever*,” she said, drawing out the final word, twisting it out of shape.

“Dude, it’s been three days.” He missed Mercy, too, achingly so.

“So?”

He wasn’t sure where she’d picked up this sassiness, whether it was his sister’s kids or she’d just been watching too much TV. “We’ll see,” he said. He turned the radio up a little bit in hopes that Kacey would be distracted by it enough to leave him to his thoughts. He knew he’d fucked up, and he was tired of hearing about it.

A stick snapped beneath one of the truck tires with a loud pop. Kacey looked over at her father, eyes wide.

“Just a twig,” he said. The road was littered with them, the day had been windy and the bare and skeletal trees lining the road had been weakened by winter. He wondered why Halloween was in October when this was the most menacing time of the year, when the naked trees looked like the bones of dead, grasping hands, the fields gray and ghastly pale. It was bleak, cold, and lonely.

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That Saturday night, after he took Kacey to his parents, Clint walked back across the yard to his yellow-lit front porch, its single, naked bulb, attracting moths. He realized that he had no plans, nowhere to go or anything to do. He wondered what Mercy was doing. Perhaps she was lying on her squeaky futon couch, watching a movie adaptation of some book he'd never read. Maybe she was still at the library, steeped in cold fluorescent light as she sat at the reference desk, making up the next week's schedule for the student workers between infrequent questions. In response to some inquiry she'd say, *You'll find those on the second floor, to the left of the computers* and smile accommodatingly before turning back to her screen. She'd chew on the cap of her pen, she'd cross and re-cross her legs at the ankle beneath her desk, demure in her modest, knee-length pencil skirt that despite its length was incredibly suggestive. More likely, she was out with her friends, enjoying herself as he could not.

Clint flopped down onto the couch and turned on the TV but didn't reach for the other remote to turn on the cable or Netflix, instead leaving it on the glowing welcome screen. He thought about calling Mercy, texting her, and pulled up their message thread on his phone, only to scroll through it, re-reading messages. The most recent ones were mostly transactional: *be there in twenty minutes, running a little late, what time do you*

want to grab dinner tomorrow? He caught himself smiling at an exchange from a few weeks ago, one in which she'd communicated with him only through pictures of book covers. It had been a late shift at the library, and she must have amused herself by finding book titles that would fit their conversation. *Thinking About You* was the first title, a blue book with scrolly script. Probably fiction. *What about me?* he'd asked. The next book featured a photo of Mother Theresa, but it was titled *The Missionary Position*, and upon seeing it he'd snorted water out his nose at the dinner table. He laughed again, recalling it, but then he reminded himself of their breakup. He had not heard from Mercy in over a week, not that he had said anything to her. The right words would not come to him, any words, and he closed out the messages.

Before he'd met Mercy, he'd spent many of this weekend nights this same way, or at a bar in town with his friends, playing pool and bullshitting until they went home to their wives or girlfriends and he went home alone. He considered texting a friend to go grab a drink but couldn't think of who to ask. The others all had wives and girlfriends still, someone to occupy their Saturday nights. Ever since he'd had Kacey, Clint's group of friends had dwindled steadily, incurring losses to marriage, children, dates. Clint had been one of these casualties, and he wasn't sure, now that he was released, how he could be revived.

"Why don't you try a dating app?" His sister had asked him one day when he was picking up Kacey, after discovering that his weekend had been the same as the one before and that he had no date to their cousin's upcoming wedding.

"Because I'm not a frat boy trying to get laid?"

She waved a hand, dismissively. She was standing over her dishwasher, filling it from the sink, which held a seemingly endless supply of sippy cups. “Oh, they’re not all that bad.”

“How would you know? You’ve been married for eight years.”

“I met Jamie because of Tinder.” She struggled with the lid of one cup for a moment before holding it out for Clint, who took it and, with some difficulty, opened it.

“Didn’t you put the lid on this?” he asked. “And bullshit.”

“Yeah, but I’m not letting kids spill juice all over my house. And, yes, it is! He thought I was his Tinder date. He sat down at my table at Biggby while I was studying for a pharmacology exam. I completely told him off for interrupting me, but then he brought me a refill and sat with me until the girl showed up. And he came back to sit with me after she left.”

“Which rom-com is that the plot of?”

“Shut up, it’s true.”

“I just feel like it’s desperate.”

His sister looked at him as if to say that he was desperate.

He shrugged. “Maybe I will.”

“Can’t be worse than spending every weekend at that cesspool.”

“The pub’s not a cesspool,” he said. “It’s a pit.” The local pub was indeed a pit, if not also a cesspool. Clint had never been inside during the day time, and he hoped that he never would. It was a small, poorly lit room with only two windows, high up on the front wall, and the walls and floor were a dark color to hide dirt and stains. The vinyl of all the booths and stools was cracked and the place was frequented by drunks and construction

workers. Its one virtue was a pool table that didn't take quarters, where Clint might play a few games to ease the monotony of sitting at the bar.

That night, after he'd put Kacey to bed, he'd downloaded one of the dating apps he'd heard his friends mention. The blank profile it presented him, six squares for photos, a box to fit five hundred characters "About me," seemed to shrink a person down to something very small. What was worse was that he was unsure whether his life could fill that small container. Describing himself felt awkward, and there was the issue too of what not to include. Should he say that he was a single father? Should he use pictures of him with Kacey? Nearly every photo taken of him since Kacey had been born was with Kacey. She was endlessly amused by Snapchat filters and making funny faces at the camera, and his phone storage was filled with pictures of them with puppy ears, fake glasses, and giant eyes.

When he'd finally gotten something down, found a few pictures that weren't too old and weren't too Kacey, and started swiping, he was surprised, both pleasantly and not. There were so many more women nearby between the carefully selected ages of twenty-three and twenty-nine than he had expected, and many of them women he didn't already know. He expected to see girls he'd gone to high school with, his sister's single friends, his buddies' ex-girlfriends—and he did—but there were others, too. Had he been missing them in grocery aisles, Sunday service, the hardware store? Had he just not been looking?

Or perhaps, the most likely answer, they were, like him, at home, on the couch, ignoring episodes of a show they'd seen before. He read the things they wrote about themselves, to see whether what he'd written was okay. If the variety of women was

greater than he'd expected, the variety of bios was lower. *Dog mom. Tequila is my drink. Looking for the Jim to my Pam. I love tacos. Take me on an adventure.* Based on how many of the profiles attempted to poke fun at these tropes, he could only imagine that the male users' profiles were the same. It seemed so unserious, and he wondered how he was supposed to take it seriously, whether he was supposed to take it seriously. He couldn't see a "dog mom" being able to step into his life, where there was an actual child. Dogs don't need the same kind of mothering that children do. You can't leave your kid home alone in a kennel.

Mercy's profile wasn't the only one that he'd swiped right on, nor was she the only woman with whom he initiated a conversation. He'd made some risky swipes on "adventurers" and women who lived too far away, some women with children who might be okay with his daughter, but these interactions had always fallen short of meeting. It had been weeks of intermittent swiping, usually at night after he'd put Kacey to bed, when he had to face the yawning darkness of the quiet house, before he came across her profile. It wasn't anything remarkable in and of itself, but when compared to the myriad others filled with stock TV quotes and emojis, it was a lit sparkler. She had the usual photos, one with a group of friends, all holding drinks; one in a kayak; a selfie; one from a wedding—she was attractive in all of them, of course. But they accompanied an unusual name and an unusual bio: *Academic librarian with interests beyond the academic. Let's trade book recommendations.*

That they matched, the next night, was something of a shock to Clint, though not unwelcome. Thinking back on it, he wasn't sure what she'd seen in his profile that she liked, and he hadn't ever asked. Perhaps she just found him attractive—he knew he



wasn't bad looking—but he had to believe there was something more. There had to have been something more to keep her around for as long as she stayed, he didn't know what that could be. It was a small town, it might have just been that there weren't a lot of other options. It wasn't the way he treated her, not like a girlfriend whom he loved and cared for, but Girlfriend.

Girlfriend was a miniature Barbie, the hard, solid plastic kind that came as Happy Meal toys, and she was the romantic interest of Clint's favorite Batman action figure when he was a kid. She didn't have a name, just Girlfriend. Clint had no interest in girls at the time, and Batman didn't either—Batman and Girlfriend never kissed or hugged or held hands, or even spoke, more than “Batman, help!”—but Girlfriend was necessary to a variety of heroic scenarios: rescue from Penguin, the Riddler, the Joker. Perhaps in his treatment of Mercy, Clint had been more courteous, more chivalrous--after all, Batman was known for being gruff--but really, Mercy was just there to play the role, just like Girlfriend. *Girlfriend time* came back to him, with chilling resonance.

When he'd matched Mercy, Clint deliberated for longer than he'd ever admit to on how to open. He hadn't read a book that didn't include pictures in a couple of years, but he rifled through his meager bookshelf for something that might impress the woman on the other end of this profile. Or perhaps he could play it humorously with a recommendation of one of Kacey's books. Then he would have to tell her about Kacey, but maybe he wanted to get that out of the way.

*Hey! I have a book rec for you. The Little Engine That Could.*

*Hi, Clint :) Why do you suggest that?*

*I think everyone should read it. My daughter thinks I should read it every day  
haha. What do you recommend?*

*I need to know a little more about you to make a good recommendation, she  
responded. Tell me what you like to read for yourself.*

That she'd responded at all after he'd admitted to having a daughter was pleasantly surprising to him; there had been some who hadn't. Those rejections didn't hurt his feelings so much as confirm his suspicions: he was forever handicapped in this field. Not that he didn't understand it, he did. He had his own hesitations when it came to women with children, and had he been truly single, childless, he wouldn't want to play daddy to someone else's kids. He wasn't even sure how to let women into his life, because it wasn't just his life, it was his daughter's life, too. That he got few matches was almost a comfort, a deferral of a decision that would be difficult and fraught. It was one he clearly hadn't been able to make.

Now, ten months later. Clint sat with phone in hand and redownloaded the dating app. He'd deleted it, once he and Mercy became exclusive, but he'd never deactivated his profile, so once the app had downloaded, he logged in and could immediately begin swiping. There was very little to see that he hadn't seen the first time around; in fact, some of the profiles he had seen before. Once again there were dog moms and women pictured with metallic birthday number balloons and obvious fake profiles, and he swiped left on them all, uninterested in the words and images rapidly repopulating the screen after each subsequent dismissal. There was no satisfaction in the possibility of a match or a conversation or something more, all the satisfaction came from the act of swiping, of moving his finger across the screen.

He wondered if he would see Mercy on there, having reactivated her profile at the behest of her friends, all of them crowded around her phone screen as they waited for their drinks to come to the table, commenting on whether she should swipe on various profiles, vicariously enjoying her singleness and all its opportunity. He wondered if he would see Tori, and if he saw either woman's profile, would he try to match them. Would they try to match him? He swiped faster, only just registering the faces and names, until he exhausted the supply of profiles. His loneliness had grown, but the town hadn't.

He looked up from the phone to see that the room was lit only by the porchlight streaming in through the windows and the blankly glowing television screen, his bleared eyes reading the clock across the room: one thirty-seven. Clint didn't bother getting up and going to bed or changing out of his clothes, he just grabbed a blanket from the foot of the couch, rolled over, and fell asleep.

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Clint walked over to his parents' to get Kacey around eleven the next morning, having awoken on his couch, uncomfortably wedged between the back of the couch and the cushions, the blanket tangled around his legs. He'd slept poorly and dreamed of screaming babies.

"You're early," said his mother, as he stepped through the kitchen door. She was making scrambled eggs, for herself, he assumed, as his father had never gotten out of the habit of rising early, and Kacey had doubtless gotten up early as well, early enough to eat breakfast before church. His mother had always liked to sleep in.

"Hello to you too, Mom. Where's Dad and Kacey?"

“They went out looking for bird nests after church and they haven’t come back in. Probably out in the long grass on the other side of the property.” She moved the eggs around in the pan. “If you’re here this early, you didn’t see Mercy last night. You go out with the boys instead?”

“We broke up,” Clint said.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She turned off the burner and scraped the eggs onto a thick, cream-colored plate that was sitting ready beside the stove.

“You don’t have to be, I know you didn’t care much for her.”

“Now that’s not fair,” she said. “When did I ever say that?” She set the plate down hard on the table, rattling the fork perched atop it and making a heavy thud against the wood of the tabletop.

“You didn’t have to.”

“What did I do that made it seem like I didn’t like her?”

Clint looked at his mother and shook his head. “The pie, Mom. The pie?” She’d asked Mercy to make a dessert for Easter dinner, but had herself made a pie.

“Where can I set this?” Mercy had asked Clint’s mother, lifting the glass dish she held wrapped in dishtowels. She stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room in Clint’s parents’ house, Clint behind her. The kitchen was a relic of the eighties, dark wood cupboards and tan, peeling laminate countertops. The dark, cramped room was sauna-steamy from the hot dishes set to cool, littering its surfaces: mashed potatoes, cooked carrots, dinner rolls. Janine stood over a major source of the steam, a fragrant ham, crusted in cinnamon sugar.

“It’s still warm.” It was a large pan of blueberry crumble, one that had required her to go to two different grocery stores to find enough usable blueberries, as in late March, they were long out of season. It had clearly been a big deal to her, because she’d mentioned it to Clint twice.

“Oh, thank you for bringing that, how nice.” Janine set down the electric knife she had been using to carve the ham and looked over at Mercy. “Is it a cobbler?”

“Blueberry crumble. I bought a pint of ice cream for it, but Clint said you’d have some and not to bring it. But if we need it, it’s in his freezer. I can just run over—”

“No, no, we have plenty.” Janine waved a hand. “Here on the stove is fine.” She turned back to the ham on the countertop before her.

Mercy stepped forward to set down her dessert. On the stove, a freshly-baked pie was cooling—peach. Clint could smell it from the doorway.

“How many people are coming to dinner, Janine?”

“Just us, you, Clint, Rachel, Jamie, and the kids. Why?”

“Just wondering,” Mercy said, unwrapping the nine by thirteen pan and folding her dishtowels in three folds the long way, once the short way. She stacked the folded towels, smoothed the one on top. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Not at all, everything is ready. You go ahead and have a seat.”

Mercy turned to leave the room. As she walked toward him, Clint could see that her expression, a polite smile, had been distorted, had melted off her face like a frosted mouth on a too-hot Christmas cookie. He lifted a hand to touch her shoulder as she passed, but she waved him off and sat down at the table, steadily recomposing her civil expression.

Due to the surplus of dessert, at least a third of the crumble remained after dinner, and Clint ate the rest of it for breakfast—in part because it was delicious, in part to soothe Mercy.

His mother held her fork aloft, loosely. “I didn’t know it was a bad thing to have extra dessert. I didn’t do it to hurt her feelings. Her crumble was very good.”

“Mom, please. You know it’s rude to make a backup of something you asked someone else to bring to dinner. If Jamie’s mom had done that to Rachel, or Granny had done that to you, you would have been offended about it for weeks.”

“Well, I’m sorry then.” She pursed her lips and stared down at her plate. “She’s a nice girl and she’s good with Kacey. You got to go out and have fun and be young. It seemed like she made you happy.” She peppered her eggs violently, two hard shakes of the peppermill that showed strain in the muscles of her arm, as if they were clenched. “That’s all I want for you, for you to be happy.”

He looked at the lines in his mother’s face as she chewed her eggs, thinking that she looked more tired than old. Her hair was graying, but it was still mostly a dusty brown, worn long, in a loose knot. She was an exasperated mother more than a grandma, even though she had four grandchildren. Maybe he still needed too much of her help, watching Kacey three times a week or more, telling him how to get out the tomato sauce stains from Kacey’s shirts and whether her fevers were high enough to necessitate a doctor. “I know.”

“So, I’m sorry about Mercy. Are you doing okay?”

Clint shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“You’d better sit down, they’ll be a while.” She skewered another piece of egg.

“You want anything to eat?”

## Chapter 7

“You’re doing a good job,” Tori said. She sat on the toilet, lid down in the tiny bathroom as Clint cleaned up the excesses of bath time, draining the tub, corralling the bath toys. It was another Thursday night, and this time she had stayed to read a bedtime story and tuck Kacey in.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You’re much better than I would have been. Or am now. But I want to be better.”

*You could start by learning how to give baths, or at least help clean up,* he thought. “I think you could have been a good parent. You would have had help. My family, your family.” He realized what he said, and hurriedly corrected it: “You can be a good parent, I mean.”

She shook her head. “I know, but I couldn’t do it, then. I couldn’t handle it. I was stuck in something I didn’t want and could never get out of.” She picked at her chipped nail polish. Clint noted that it wasn’t white, but a very light blue, like a little bird egg or a cold winter sky.

“You had a choice.”

“I didn’t, not really.” She looked down at her feet. Clint had a vague sense of seeing Mercy there, in that same spot, and realized that he was clenching his teeth when the muscles of his jaw started aching.

“I didn’t tell you what do to. I would have supported you, no matter what you decided.” He turned on the shower head and stood so that he could reach it, angling the stream at stubborn patches of slick soap bubbles, slowly forcing them toward the drain.



The last time Clint had forgotten to rinse the tub after one of Kacey's baths, he'd slipped on a smear of shampoo residue and nearly fallen. *What if I'd hit my head and knocked myself out?* He imagined being found the next day by Kacey, the water turned cold, still running, his face discolored and swollen, drowned in an inch of water at the bottom of the tub. He shut off the faucet.

"Yeah, I knew abortion existed, but not having her wasn't really an option. When you get pregnant here, you have the baby. That's just what you do. I didn't know how to get one, where to go. My parents would have thrown me out, for good."

"Eventually they would've—"

"No, Clint, they wouldn't have. Ever." She was right, and he knew it. At the time, at least, Tori's parents were vehemently against abortion, the kind of people who thought Planned Parenthood was giving free abortions to any woman who walked in. More than once, Clint had heard, in a distant room, the whine of some Fox pundit, saying something about mammograms, baby parts, and "our tax dollars." He wondered if that had changed at all, secretly if not outwardly. He wouldn't be surprised if it had. If there were no atheists in foxholes, it was equally true that there were no loving parents who wanted to see their child suffer needlessly.

"They wouldn't have had to know."

Tori just shook her head. There were tears in her eyes, but she wasn't crying. Though watery, her gaze was sharp, pained.

"We could have given her up for adoption."

"You think that giving her up would have made any difference? Maybe it would have, for you."

“How the fuck can you say that? You basically did give her away.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “And you think I’m okay? My body, my relationship, my life were all ruined. I was skinny and pretty and happy. We loved each other. I had plans for my life. Now what? I’m alone because no one wants a girl with a kid. I’m back home, working a shitty job for no money because I only have an associate’s.” She pinched the fat on her lower stomach. “I have a spare tire I can’t get rid of, and I pee every time I sneeze. I can’t get away from it. I felt guilty when I left and miserable when I stayed. What would your consequences have been? A little guilt sometimes when you thought of giving her away?”

“It would have been hard for me too, okay? I’m not trying to say that it’s the same.” He looked at her, looked to see the changes she’d mentioned. Her arms were still crossed, beneath her breasts, which perhaps sagged more than they did before. Her stomach too looked like the stomach of a mother. He couldn’t pinpoint what it was, but there was something about it—he’d seen women getting out of cars and before they’d even moved to take the baby out of the back, he knew they were moms—a protrusion of the lower belly, a lack of integrity there, like pudding in a Ziploc bag. “You made an entire human being in your body and then pushed it out, your body is going to get a little beat up. That’s normal, that’s life. So, you have to work out a little harder. But you were so young, you can bounce back. Your body isn’t ruined.”

“Bounce back? Bounce back?” She rolled her eyes. “How can you say that to me? You don’t know what it’s like. I am literally scarred.” She stood up, throwing down her hands. “I was myself before I got pregnant, but then she invaded me. I wasn’t even alone in my own body. You can’t understand what that feels like. She hollowed me out to make

space for herself. I could never be that past self again after she was born. Maybe before, if we'd—but not after. You didn't carry her for nine months, give birth to her. For months after I left, if I heard a crying baby at the pharmacy or the grocery store my breasts would ache. Once, I lactated and had to leave the store with milk splotching my shirt. I couldn't escape motherhood. You could have lived the rest of your life like it never even happened." The bathroom was too tight for both of them to stand, and she sank back onto the toilet with a frustrated sigh.

"We still could have given her up for adoption. Your body would have changed, yeah, but your life could have been like before, or close enough."

"Close enough? What's close enough?" Tori crossed her arms again. "Besides, those kids are all messed up," she said, shaking her head. "That's even worse."

"Than leaving your kid?"

"It is. Getting raped and abused and—" Her eyes had welled up and she covered her face with her hands for a second, then let her fingers slide down her brow bone toward her cheeks, then gripped the back of her neck. "I left her with you." She looked at him, breathed in and out slowly, twice, before continuing. Clint watched the rise and fall of her chest. "It wasn't right, but it was what I had to do. I've had time now to do things, to be on my own, to learn how to take care of myself without having to take care of somebody else. And I know you didn't get that, and I'm sorry."

"It's not just me you have to be sorry to." No, she had Kacey to answer to, too. In what unfathomable ways had Kacey's life been marred by an absent mother? Clint had one time looked up "traits of children with absent mothers," and had been fearful of their manifestation in Kacey ever since. Would she have problems developing relationships

with other people? Would she wonder what she had done to make her mother leave?  
Would she wonder why her mother didn't want her?

“Kacey is fine. She's a normal, happy, healthy little girl. She's not permanently screwed up from not having a mom around all the time. And I want to be around now.”

“How do you know that she's not permanently screwed up? It sounds like you're trying to convince yourself.” He hadn't seen these problems with Kacey—yet. But she was still so young, and he wasn't going to give Tori any outs—there was no expiation, no relief from guilt. Their sins were inexpungable, perhaps even cyclical. In his lonely, late-night searches he had encountered other disturbing trends: that daughters of young mothers were more likely to become young mothers themselves, daughters of unmarried mothers more likely to become unmarried mothers. It wasn't a fate he wanted for his daughter, but it was one with which he didn't know how to contend, other than by marrying her mother.

“She has everything she needs from the rest of her family, from you, your parents, and your sister, and from mine. And me, now.”

“It's not the same.” Clint looked at his knuckles, cracked them, right hand then left. He had the towel he had used to dry Kacey slung over his shoulder, and its dampness had just permeated his shirt, cool and irritating against his skin. He hung it on a towel bar.

“She doesn't know anything different.” It was true. She probably wouldn't remember the first few years of her life, God knows he didn't. It was all a blur of anger and soft pastels and powdered formula. If he hadn't been up all night because of Kacey, he'd been up all night because of the lack of her mother, and it had eroded his memory

into a few dusky moments of rocking the baby and closing his eyes in the interval between her cries.

“If she doesn’t need you, then why come back and try to be a part of her life at all? If we’re all just better off without you?”

“Because I need her. Just because I’m not cut out to be a full-time mom doesn’t mean that I don’t care about, don’t love, my daughter. I didn’t want to, but I can’t help it.”

He could feel his face contorting with his disgust; he made no effort to conceal it. “There’s no such thing as a part-time mom, Tori. You don’t get to be her mom just when you feel like it, you have to be a parent all the time, or never.”

“That’s not what I meant. And that’s not true. There’s joint custody.” There it was again: custody. He wasn’t sure whether it was intended as a threat. “Is that what you want, to go to court and get joint custody?”

“No. I don’t care about what the label is. But I want to be around my kid. I want to be a family with her, you know?”

“You want to be a family?” Clint raised his eyebrows. She couldn’t mean what he wanted her to mean, had wanted her to mean since four years ago.

“Not like that, I know you have a girlfriend. I’m not trying to mess that up.”

He thought about Mercy, about “We broke up.”

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry.”

Clint looked at her, unable to detect triumph or disappointment in her response. He shrugged. He fought off unwelcome thoughts of Mercy: asleep, comforter pulled up close to her face, covering all but her eyes and forehead, or standing at his kitchen sink,

hair tied up in that abominable knot. “So, you don’t have to worry about messing anything up. Be honest.” That was what the problem had been this whole time, hadn’t it? that she wasn’t being honest with herself about what she wanted, who she was, what she owed to Kacey, what was the right thing to do.

“Honest?” Tori sighed, brought a hand to her temple. “That doesn’t change anything for me. We tried our try, and it didn’t work for us. I think we both know that it ended between us for a reason.”

“I don’t know that.” His words sounded familiar to him, and he tried to place them. He felt a tightening in his chest, like the muscles of his heart were being strained when he realized that Mercy had said them to him.

“Having a kid together just brought it to the surface, you know. I didn’t just feel stuck with her, I felt stuck with you. Like we were both trapped.”

“Don’t hold back now,” he said, the words constricted by the hard set of his jaw.

“I’m not trying to be mean.” She wiped the corners of her eyes with her sleeve, pulled down over the heel of her palm. “We just weren’t right together. You want to be a family and live the same life that our parents lived and that’s not wrong, I’m just not like that. I don’t want what you want. The pregnancy wasn’t all my fault, Clint, just as much of it was yours. If I should have been more careful, then so should you. But I was the one who was going to suffer for it, and I couldn’t help resenting you. And I still do.”

“Well, I’m sorry. How many times do I have to say I’m sorry?”

She said nothing, just wiped at her eyes again.

“And thanks,” he said. “I really feel better knowing that. Really makes you leaving me and our kid completely understandable and painless. Is that what you came back to say?”

“Of course not. I know I did wrong, but it was what I had to do. I just want to be a part of Kacey’s life now. I grew up.”

“We’ve both grown up. We both want to be with our daughter. Wouldn’t that be what’s best for everyone, for her? To have a mother and father who are together? How can you say that we couldn’t make it work now?”

“Because I don’t want to. What we had wasn’t right for me, and for us to get back together and then break up wouldn’t be good for anyone, especially not Kacey.”

“How would you know? You don’t have any place to say what’s good for Kacey.”

“Fine, fine. You can play that card forever. But it doesn’t change anything. I’m sorry, but it doesn’t change anything.”

Clint said nothing. He gathered up Kacey’s dirty clothes from the floor and left the room to throw them in her hamper. As he did, he heard Tori descend the stairs and let herself out, then the sound of a starting car and wheels on gravel, quickly fading.

He was in Kacey’s room, where she slept deeply, nose whistling slightly, high pitched like a bad, still humanly audible dog whistle, with every one of her small breaths. She was curled up around a stuffed animal, the species of which it was difficult to determine, as only one leg was visible, poking out of the girl’s embrace beneath her armpit. The leg was gray, Clint assumed it was an elephant. As usual, her covers were haphazard and tangled, and Kacey’s feet were uncovered.

Clint shut the closet door, slowly and silently, and turned to walk over to the bed to adjust the quilt. He was free from Tori, no longer fueled by the shock of the encounter, and the pain was bitter and total. He interlaced his fingers behind his head and leaned against the closet door, sliding down it until he was sitting on the floor, head between his knees. It was a position he'd assumed often in the months after Tori left. The sleeping baby had forced him into quietude, prevented him from screaming and yelling and breaking things, from sobbing noisily. His daughter had the same effect on him now, when everything that he had felt upon Tori's leaving broke free within him anew. It was like she had left him again, like he had picked away a months-old scab to find the wound not yet healed, blood streaming forth, hot and thin-sticky. It was the disappointment of being wrong again, of thinking that things had changed when they never do.

He felt tears leaking from the corners of his eyes and blinked hard until his eyes were no longer wet. Moisture on one of his eyelashes caught the light from Kacey's nightlight, a neon Blue Moon sign that he'd fished out of the shed when she'd become afraid of the dark a couple of years ago. He meant it to be a temporary measure, but Kacey was attached to it. After he'd read her *Goodnight Moon* she began saying goodnight to it, and she refused any more conventional nightlight options: glowing stars, lamps with pink shades, light-up unicorn heads. He'd tried no nightlight at all, but after a consecutive week of Kacey begging to sleep in his room, he gave up the effort to wean her. Besides, she didn't know Blue Moon was a beer, or even what beer was, or that her father, at twenty-one, had stolen it off the wall of a shitty college bar and used it as décor. It cast the room in blue, saturating everything and giving the child's skin an unearthly



pallor, counteracted only by the light streaming in from the hallway, through the bedroom door Clint had left open.

Clint wondered what he should have said differently. He'd been angry, accusatory, dismissive; he should have been conciliatory, apologetic, calm. He should have swallowed his pride, his righteous indignation—*it was righteous, wasn't it?*—if it was what would have appeased her, would have made her stay or at least consider it. His daughter and their family were more important than his moral superiority. He should have told her that he was sorry, and meant it; he should have told her that he'd get a vasectomy.

He wasn't just giving up Tori, he'd given her up already, so many times, but he was giving up any chance of a normal family for Kacey, for himself. He was giving up family dinners and attending parent-teacher conferences together and the ability to say *go ask your mother* to Kacey when a friend invited her to spend the night. Comfort, normalcy, a blueprint, a script.

He'd been dumped, rejected by a woman he wasn't with—and it might have been more devastating than being rejected by the one he had been with, the week before. In their rejections of him the women were the most similar they'd ever been, which to until that point, had been not very. Both cut him down with bitterness like bee stings and had retreated wounded themselves.

Thoughts of Mercy compounded Clint's misery. He'd been able to bury her absence in his hope for reparation of his broken little family, a hope he no longer held. He yearned for comfort of her touch, her scent, the softness of her favorite sweater against his cheek. He hadn't knocked her up or destroyed her body or otherwise ruined

her life, per Tori's grievances, and yet he still couldn't keep her around, either. He'd thought he'd gotten over that well enough, but now found instead that it was another straw on the pile of straws that were crushing him.

## Chapter 8

It was four-thirty in the afternoon on a Monday when Clint's phone rang, unexpectedly. He was on a jobsite, but he ducked behind a parked backhoe to answer it. In the direct sunlight, he couldn't read the screen of the phone, coated in a layer of dust, but he knew who he hoped it would be. The voice belonged to his sister, instead.

"Hey, I need you to come pick me up from work. I broke my foot. Dad and Jamie can't."

"What happened?" He plugged his other ear with his finger to block out the noise of the site.

"I was helping a patient get out of bed and she knocked a monitor onto my foot."

"Are you all right?"

"I work at a hospital, Clint, they fixed me right up. But I'm about to take a Vicodin, and it's my right foot and I'm not supposed to use it, so I can't drive."

He wasn't sure whether Rachel thought the Vicodin or the injury to her driving foot that would disqualify her to drive. He was glad it wasn't her left. "All right, I'll be there in like, half an hour." He waved the crew's supervisor over, let him know that he was leaving, and headed for his truck.

When Clint arrived at the hospital, Rachel was not in the emergency room; she was on her usual floor, Obstetrics, sitting behind the nurses' station in a wheelchair that had one leg holder sticking straight out. She was still wearing her scrubs, toothpaste mint green, but her foot was in a cast. The toes sticking out of the end of the cast were purple like a bruise.

"You good to go?"

She nodded. Her purse was in her lap, along with her right shoe and an opened and slightly crinkled paper bag from the pharmacy on the first floor. “I can’t walk and I’m super fucking high,” she said. “You’re going to have to lift me into the car.”

“No problem,” he said, and grabbed hold of the wheelchair handles, maneuvering around the edge of the station’s desk and toward the elevator.

“Sorry. I would’ve called Dad but I don’t think he could pick me up with his back.”

“Yeah, definitely not. Jaime at home with the kids?”

“Mhm. No way he was going to be able to handle those psychos and get me out of here.” She played with the laces of her shoe, a gray, lightweight running shoe, tracing the logo on the side of it with the ends of the shoelaces.

“When will you be walking again?”

“A week?” she said, her speech beginning to lilt in a way that indicated the increasing effects of the pain medication.

For the rest of the drive, Clint focused on the road, trying not to wince when he passed the building where Mercy worked. He wondered if she was there now, and almost looked to see if she was walking out, heading home.

When they reached the house, Clint called his brother-in-law to let him know they’d arrived before getting out and carrying his sister to the house. Her things were still in her lap. Jamie held the door open for them and directed Clint to the couch, which was uncharacteristically free of debris.

“How’re you feeling, Rach?”

She smiled clumsily, her eyes not fully open. “Good. Think I’m going to take a nap.”

“You three,” Jamie said to his children, all of whom were staring with morbid interest at their mother from the other side of the room. “Go play outside until I say you can come back in.”

“Need me to go pick something up for you guys for dinner?”

“Nah, I got a pizza coming.”

“Tomorrow’s Rachel’s day to watch the kids.”

“Shit, I forgot about that.” Jamie looked like he was about to collapse. Clint was taller, but Jamie had at least thirty pounds on him, and Clint didn’t want to have to catch him and carry his dead weight over to the other side of the couch.

“Want me to do it?” Clint knew that with Rachel missing work, even though she’d get workers’ comp, they couldn’t afford for Jamie to miss work, too. Now that he was no longer seeing Mercy, Clint had no reason to use any vacation time. He could use some of it now.

Jamie crossed his hands behind his head, looked up at the ceiling. “Yeah,” he said, “that would be good.”

“Kacey and I will come over here, that way if Rachel needs anything, I can take care of it. And you and I don’t both have to miss work.”

Jamie nodded.

“I’m sure Mom will take Thursday.”

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The next morning, Clint and Kacey headed over to Rachel's. When they arrived, Jamie was in the process of getting Noah and Becca ready for school, while Rachel shouted directions from her position on the couch. Quentin, not yet old enough for school, was throwing Cheerios up into the air and trying to catch them with his mouth. He did not catch any, and the floor and table surrounding him were littered with cereal.

"Buddy, eat the cereal, don't play with it," Clint said. To Jaime, he said, "I'll take over from here."

Jamie thanked him and headed out the door.

"Bus comes in five minutes," Rachel yelled.

"Did you eat?" Clint asked Becca and Noah. The two schoolchildren nodded.

"Backpacks packed?" They nodded again. "Put them on, put your shoes on, and let's go. Kacey and Quentin, shoes on, ready to go outside."

After the bus, Clint and the two youngest children returned to the house. It was still early, just after eight, and the sun had only been up for an hour, and it was not yet warm enough that the kids wanted to go outside to play. Instead they began by digging into a large bin filled with stuffed animals, selecting their favorites for a game that involved the animals fighting to the death in a cage match. Clint instructed them to stay away from the couch where Rachel was laid up and went into the kitchen to clean up the breakfast mess that occluded the surface of the table, counter, and several chairs. As he was finishing this chore, Quentin came into the kitchen and began filling a plastic teacup from the water dispenser on the fridge door.

"Dude, what are you doing?"

Quentin turned to look at his uncle, tipping the cup in the process and splashing water onto the floor. “Mom asked for water.”

“Well, that’s nice of you to help, but I think she’ll want a big cup,” Clint said, reaching for the cabinet where the cups were stored. Two sippy cups fell onto the counter when he opened it. Clint filled an adult-sized cup and handed it to the boy with an admonishment to carry it carefully and not to spill it then sent him out of the room.

Within ten minutes, both kids were tired of their game and were clamoring for snacks. Rachel wanted to change her clothes, but couldn’t climb the stairs to get clean ones, and two telemarketers had called.

“Actually,” Rachel said, over the droning of the children’s program that Clint had turned on to appease Kacey and Quentin. “I really need to take a shower.”

“Rach, no.” He had no desire to see his sister naked. “Could you wait until your husband is home for that one, please?”

“There will be two more kids here by then and he’ll have to make dinner, help them with homework, get them washed and put to bed—”

“Okay, I get it, fine. What do you need?”

“A big plastic bag to go over this cast and something to keep it on and sealed, and clean clothes.”

“All right. Let me get them a snack first.” He went into the kitchen and after a few minutes, emerged with a bag of Goldfish, which he placed on the floor between the two kids where they sat, looking at the TV.

“Oh, no way,” Rachel called from the depths of the couch where she had sunk, pushing herself upright with her arms. “They will eat the whole bag and then not eat any lunch, and I don’t want those things ground into my carpet.”

Clint rolled his eyes, and returned with two child-sized bowls, emblazoned with cartoon characters, into which he poured equal and reasonable amounts of the orange crackers before closing the bag with a chip clip and throwing it to his sister. “Have some yourself, you’re a little hangry.”

“And my carpet?” she said, sweeping her arm in a grand and frustrated gesture.

“I’ll vacuum it if they drop any.”

After Rachel’s shower, for which Clint insisted she at least wear a bathing suit, a two-piece bikini from her honeymoon that she could tie on instead of having to pull over her bulbous, encased foot, he helped her return to the couch and handed her the remote. They didn’t have a shower chair, nor any chairs that were not wooden that were big enough for grown-ups on which she could sit, so Clint had been forced to hold his sister by the waist to keep her steady as she shampooed her hair and shaved her armpits, shower water sprinkling onto him past the half-closed shower curtain. If it had been warm enough, he would have just put her on the deck outside and sprayed her with a hose. It would have been easier.

He handed the kids coloring books and crayons and sat them at the kitchen table, where he could watch them while fixing lunch, three boxes of Kraft macaroni and cheese—enough to feed himself and Rachel as well— grapes, and carrot sticks.



“I don’t want carrots,” Kacey whined. Quentin tried to stick a grape up his nose. Rachel yelled from the other room for Clint to bring her crutches. It was only twelve thirty-seven.

Clint had spent days and nights taking care of his daughter, and he was familiar with three AM feedings and diaper changes, complaining about vegetables and scraped knees. But he hadn’t realized just how much his sister and mother had been helping him out by babysitting, both while he worked and when he needed a night off. Without their help, Clint wasn’t sure how he would do it, the cost of daycare and babysitters, never getting a break to see friends or run errands or just take a shit by himself.

When Jamie pulled in at five-thirty, the kids were all outside playing on the swing set in the backyard, where Clint could see them from the kitchen window. He was making spaghetti, pots and pans on every burner, empty sauce jars resting unrinsed in the sink.

“Damn,” Jamie said as he stepped inside, smelling the cooking odors. “You’ve got dinner ready for me? Maybe I should’ve married you, Clint.”

Clint laughed. “Don’t say that until you’ve tasted it.” He hollered out the back door for the kids to come inside and eat, Rachel hobbled in on her crutches to take her seat at the table, and they all sat down to dinner.

The meat was a little overcooked and the sauce was generically watery, like all store-bought tomato sauces. Clint twirled limp noodles onto his fork. “How do you do this all the time?” he asked his sister.

She shrugged, still chewing. “I do it because I have to.” She swallowed her food. “And I have help. Jamie, you, Mom and Dad, even Jamie’s parents, occasionally.”

“If something like this happened to me, and you and Mom weren’t—”

“I don’t want to hear it. Yeah, it would suck to do it alone. It would be hard. But you would do it, because it’s your kid. And you do have help, from me and Mom.” She hefted a forkful of spaghetti up to her mouth. “And maybe you’ll be able to trust someone else to help, someday.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Rachel shrugged and picked up a serving bowl to pass to her husband. “Maybe Tori will take on a bigger role.”

Clint plunged his fork into the mound of pasta on his plate, hitting the bottom of the dish a little harder than he’d intended. “Yeah, that’s what you meant.”

Rachel put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed before reaching over his plate to grab a napkin from the pile in the middle of the table.

The kids were done eating, or at least, had given up on it. Quentin was half turned around in his chair. Kacey pushed around a couple of noodles on her plate, which was otherwise, miraculously clear of food. If Rachel had had a dog, Clint would have suspected Kacey of feeding it.

Becca was the elected spokesperson of the group. “Can we please be excused from the table?”

Jamie looked up from his freezer section garlic bread and surveyed the plates. “Go ahead.”

“Put your plates by the sink,” Rachel called after them. All of the kids had left their dirty dishes at their seats. She looked at Jamie. “They do this every damn day.”

“Kids!”

After the plates were cleared from the table and the kids clustered around the TV, the adults remained sitting at the table. Jamie was still eating, Rachel couldn't walk, and Clint had no desire to get up to go home or to start loading the dishwasher.

"You know," Rachel said. "I never really liked Tori, anyway."

Clint looked over at her. "What? Where is this coming from?"

"I'm continuing our conversation from dinner. I wasn't going to say anything in front of Kacey about it, but I'm not a fan."

"No. No, no, no. You don't get to retroactively dislike her. You never told me that you didn't like her when she and I were dating."

She shrugged. "You never asked me."

"Come on. What didn't you like about her?"

"Too perfect, too blonde." She looked at Jamie and he nodded, not looking up from his plate.

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. What, were you jealous?" Rachel, like their mother, had dusty brown hair without much luster, and while no one would call her heavy, after three kids, no one would call her slender, either.

She rolled her eyes. "No. She was too perfect, like, always trying to make everybody happy you know, like submissive."

Jamie nodded again, without prompting, this time.

"I didn't know that submissive women up and left their fiancé and kid."

"How do you think she ended up with the fiancé and the kid?"

Clint shrugged as if to say *fair enough*.

“I can’t say it was the right thing to do, or that I respect it, but, Clint, that might have been the first time she ever said no to anybody, anything she didn’t want.”

He didn’t say it, but he thought it: *maybe so*.

Jamie stood up and piled Clint’s and Rachel’s plates atop his own and took them to the sink. He turned on the water and began rinsing the dishes.

Clint started to stand up, but Rachel grabbed his wrist.

“I meant it when I said that I do it because I have to,” she said. “I didn’t want kids, necessarily. I mean, Jamie wanted kids, and that’s what you do. Not that I don’t love my kids, I do. But I don’t always like them.”

“Heartening stuff, Rach, thanks.”

“I’m trying to tell you that you’re not the only one who didn’t want or doesn’t like their kid. You love them and take care of them, and that’s good enough.”

“I don’t hate my kid,”

“I didn’t say you did. Just that you didn’t want one and that kids are as much a burden as a gift, and when you don’t want them, more of a burden than a gift.”

“Yeah,” Clint said. He sat there for some time, looking off at the wall opposite, long enough that Jamie finished washing the dishes and lumbered into the living room to gain possession over the TV remote. Rachel sat at the table still as well, scratching something out with a dull pencil no longer than her thumb.

“Here’s another gift-slash-burden for you,” she said, handing him a piece of paper. Rachel had generously offered to take over the guest list for the birthday party Kacey apparently had to have, which she presented to Clint on the back of an old grocery list upon which at least two different children and possibly Jamie had written poorly

disguised requests for donuts. On the back of a letter from the school reminding parents that it was cold and flu season, she'd written some notes on food and other party planning necessities. *Inside or outside?* Was the first line item. *Outside is easier to clean up and needs less decorations but weather might be bad—need backup location.*

*Folding chairs and tables—Mom and Dad have a bunch + tablecloths*

*Decorations—Dollar General has best prices*

*Cake—get from Sam's Club or grocery store, marble makes everyone happy*

*Food—something easy, maybe grill hot dogs? Need at least a meat, bread, fruit, vegetable, and some kind of side. Ask me and Mom to make a dish. Maybe dad will grill?*

*Drinks—something easy like powdered lemonade and water bottles?*

*Invitations—have Kacey make something but also call/text people to invite them.*

It wasn't an unhelpful list, given that he'd never planned any sort of birthday party that didn't involve getting the aging friend tanked and showing up at a bar to be overserved. All of Kacey's past birthdays had been simple—a cake after family dinner and then she opened presents. For her first birthday, she hadn't even had a cake. Clint hadn't really found it to be an occasion worth celebrating, though Tori's parents found this offensive. Even Rachel and his mom didn't push it. They gave gifts, but didn't wrap them, practical things rather than hair bows and frilly outfits, and they didn't push him to let the baby smash a cake or to take a bunch of pictures of her with the number one. Kacey had shown no serious signs of neglect at lacking a momentous first birthday, but perhaps Rachel intended Clint should make up for it with this party for her fifth.

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On Thursday, Tori came over for her regular visit. Clint used this opportunity to mow the lawn for the first time that season. Mowing the lawn was always a chore, either he had to find someone to watch her, or her had to force her to sit on the riding mower with him for the hour it took to trim the acre or so that he kept short. Inevitably she would get bored or hungry, or she'd have to pee, and usually, all three, before they'd been on the mower for more than fifteen minutes.

Tori and Kacey were out in the front yard. Tori pushed Kacey on the swing, and as he drove the mower up and down the expanse of the yard, Clint watched them, intermittently. Once, as we turned the mower, he caught a glimpse of them in his peripheral vision, and Tori, in a baseball cap with a ponytail, looked to him for a second like Mercy. It carried the twinge of a pinched nerve, and he had to look twice to remind himself what he was seeing.

Clint was far down the yard when he looked over at them and saw Kacey, at the height of a swing, let go of the rope, smiling beatifically as she flew about ten feet from the swing, onto the ground.

At the end of the grass he turned and headed back toward the house. The old riding mower did not move faster than five miles per hour, and it took several minutes to move back up the property. He stopped parallel to where Tori crouched on the grass, holding Kacey.

“You’re okay, you’re okay,” she said, shakily, as much for herself as for Kacey, who was sobbing into Tori’s lap. Tori looked up at Clint. “She just let go, I...”

He nodded. "I saw." He picked up Kacey. She had a grass stain on her forehead, along with scraped forearms and knees, but was otherwise intact. "Let's go clean you up."

He walked into the house carrying the child, and Tori followed. He set the girl on the bathroom counter and rummaged through the cabinets to find peroxide, Neosporin, and Band-aids. "You're going to live," he said, wiping a stream of tears from her face with his thumb. "Arm over the sink."

She sniffled and obliged, then her father poured peroxide over the shallow scrapes, repeating the process for the other arm and both knees. "What kind of Band-aid do you want?"

Still solemn, she pointed to one covered in pink, yellow, and orange stars, which was then placed on her left elbow, which had borne the brunt of the impact and still bled, slightly.

"Why did you let go of the rope?"

"I wanted to fly," she choked out.

Clint desperately wanted to laugh but held it in to avoid hurting the little girl's feelings. "Honey, you're a person, and people can't fly. They just fall, and that hurts. Don't try that anymore, okay?"

"Okay."

Clint ripped off a length of toilet paper and wiped her eyes and nose with it. "Look at your forehead," he said to her. "It looks like you colored it green with a crayon."

She turned to the mirror and laughed at her reflection. Clint gently scrubbed the grass stain off with a washcloth, revealing the beginnings of a bruise. He lifted her off the counter and she sped out of the room in search of her cup of juice. Tori stood in the bathroom door frame, eyes still wide, watching Clint. He'd almost forgotten that she was standing there, only noticing her again after putting away the first aid supplies and turning to leave.

"I didn't know what to do," she said, looking down, arms crossed.

"You haven't had much practice." He leaned against the counter. "Crying is usually a good sign, actually. If they can cry they're not unconscious or dead. After that, you just make sure they've got all their teeth and fingers and toes, and if they do, clean them up and they'll be fine."

"You just seemed like you knew what to do, like it was instinct. You were so calm."

"Once when she was really little, like five months old, I was changing her diaper. I was reaching for a new box of wipes, and they were just out of reach. I let go of her for a second and she rolled off the changing table. She screamed and cried for so long, I was sure that she'd broken her skull somewhere or her spine, and that I was a horrible dad for letting that happen. I held her until she fell asleep, and after, too scared to set her down. I called my mom to come over, and she checked Kacey out and put her to bed. You know what she told me?"

Tori shook her head.

"She said, 'your sister and I dropped you plenty of times, and you only turned out a little stupid. Just be a little more careful next time.'"



She giggled, tentatively. “No, she didn’t.”

“You know Mom, and you know for a fact that’s exactly what she would say,” he said, and smiled.

“Yeah,” she said, and laughed again.

Clint put a hand on her shoulder and followed her out of the cramped bathroom and down the stairs.

She looked back at him and stopped, mid step. “I wasn’t ready for this,” she said. “I’m not sure I am now.”

“I know,” Clint said. “I know.” And he really did know that. What he’d seen in her as the pregnancy drew on and Kacey was born as the natural anxieties of a first-time parent, similar to his own, then the throes of post-partum hormone changes, he now recognized as unshakable fear and claustrophobia. She’d held Kacey like a china doll that contained a bomb.

“You think I can do it?”

He nodded.

Tears reappeared in her eyes. “You don’t know how they look at me,” she said.

“It’s a small town, people know your business. You did something that wasn’t right, and people are going to judge. They’re not right to do it, but they’ll get past it, eventually.”

“They don’t look at Brent Whitmer like that.”

Brent Whitmer, at twenty-three, had impregnated his seventeen-year-old girlfriend. She was a year behind Clint and Tori in school. Statutory rape aside, which no one appeared to find objectionable, Brent Whitmer, after the birth of the child, got a job

with DTE where he traveled to fix powerlines and never acknowledged the baby or the girlfriend again. She now worked at the GreatClips inside Meijer, and she and the kid still lived with her parents in a shitty little apartment.

“It’s like I’m evil,” Tori choked out. “Unnatural.”

“Like you’re wearing a scarlet letter?” Mercy had recommended it to him, maybe the week before they broke up. He’d shrugged it off, saying that he didn’t need to read it, it was like Moby Dick: so saturated in the culture that everyone knew the premise. The full import of her suggestion was now evident, and struck him with bitterness. He thought of Tori in the condiments aisle of a Meijer, milk leaking down the front of her shirt.

Tori’s brow drew down and she looked at him through tears, not comprehending.

“You’re not evil or unnatural,” he said, placing a hand on her shoulder, lightly. It felt strange to him to say this, not because it was untrue, but because not long ago he had believed the opposite, or at least, something like it. He hadn’t ever thought her evil, but unnatural, perhaps. Certainly cruel, selfish, unfair. And maybe she had been selfish and unfair, but he wasn’t really the victim of that selfishness, and neither was Kacey. She was a happy, normal kid; she’d never even asked why her mom didn’t live with them or why her mom and dad weren’t married like other moms and dads. Someday these questions might plague her, but her world now was generally untroubled. And while it had been hard for him to take care of her alone, he’d had it much easier than he could have, much easier than that girl with her kid.

Once he’d finished the lawn and Tori left, Clint sat down in the living room to play with Kacey. She chose Clint’s least favorite game: babies. How or why his daughter had so many baby dolls, he had no idea. He’d purchased exactly zero.

Kacey brought out all the dolls, in order to select her favorites of the day to actually play with. The others would remain on the floor, looking, unblinking and forlorn, up at the ceiling. The two she chose were a chubby, soft-bodied doll with blond hair and a smaller, all-plastic doll with no hair at all. Neither had on any clothes. Kacey raided the plastic tub of doll clothes for an outfit that fit the chubby one, and upon finding it, handed her father the onesie and the doll. The onesie wasn't doll clothing, originally; it had been one of Kacey's when she was a baby. The tag read six to nine months, and on the front was a circus elephant, ball balanced on its nose. It was obviously a baby shower gift, clearly given before the sex of the baby was known—there was not a trace of pink on it. Ever since they'd learned Kacey's gender, the house had been overrun by pink. Clint had never gotten used to it.

As Clint dutifully dressed the doll, he asked, "What's this baby's name?"

Kacey was still digging around in the container of clothes for something for the other baby to wear. She looked over at Clint. "Um, Barbara?"

Clint laughed. "Okay." He wasn't sure what the hell kind of name Barbara was for a baby, but someone else, somewhere must have, because there were women named Barbara. He wasn't sure were Kacey would have even heard the name Barbara. "Barbara is dressed. Want me to put her to bed?"

"No! You have to rock her."

"Like this?" He stood up and held the doll by an arm and a leg, swinging her back and forth.

"No." Kacey shook her head, her blonde pigtails swinging.

“How about like this?” He put the doll on his hip and bounced it like he was an impatient mother in line at the grocery store.

Kacey giggled. “No, like this.” She cradled the still-naked second baby in her arms and rocked it. “Do it right.”

Clint let out an exaggerated sigh and rocked Barbara as instructed. Kacey finally found suitable clothes for baby number two, and handed her off to Clint in exchange for Barbara, who Kacey began bottle feeding with her sippy cup of apple juice.

“What’s this one’s name?” He asked, pulling the sleeves of a nightgown over the doll’s surprisingly rough, half-open fists, the thumbs of which impeded the dressing process.

Without hesitation: “Puppy.”

“What? That’s not a person name, that’s an animal. What about Sophia?” It was the name of one of the characters on the unending loop of children’s programming he was subjected to, and he was fairly certain that would win her over. There was no way he could maintain a straight face and play this game if he had to keep referring to his doll as “Puppy.”

Kacey shrugged. “Okay. Rock her.”

Clint obliged. Kacey finished feeding Barbara and abandoned her for a moment to grab the doll stroller, another pink plastic contraption. It was way too small to fit Barbara, despite Kacey’s efforts to thread her legs through the leg holes and fit her girth into the seat.

“Daddy,” she said. “Help.”

“Barbara is too big for that stroller, but Sophia will fit,” he said, offering her up.

Kacey pouted, but made the exchange. Clint rocked the doll he'd been given, hoping that Kacey's plan was to take her doll on a walk around the house, and he could quit for a few moments, until she made her round of the house pushing the stroller, through the dining room, kitchen, and office, then back to the living room. It was.

He couldn't help but think of his conversation with Tori. Tori's abandonment was perhaps more than an abdication—it was a stage of grief. Depression had been first; Tori was listless and apathetic at the end of her pregnancy and in the month after Kacey was born. Clint remembered coming home from class one evening around six. It was about this same time of year, mid-April, so it was one of his last classes, and Tori was about eight months pregnant. He was surprised, upon entering the front door, to find the house dark, no lights on, no shades open. They had recently moved in, and the paraphernalia of moving still littered the house: empty boxes, half-unpacked totes, boxes that were still sealed. Tori had stayed home with the stated intention of unpacking, but no progress had been made since Clint left that morning. He moved a box that seemed to contain only packing fill out of his path as he headed toward the staircase. Tori hadn't gone out alone—her car was still in the drive—and if she'd gone into labor and been taken to the hospital by his mother or hers, someone would have let him know. He took the stairs quickly, praying that nothing had happened, that he wouldn't find her on the bathroom floor unconscious after slipping coming out of the shower or lying in a pool of her own blood, from a head wound or a miscarriage. Was it too late for her to have a miscarriage?

She wasn't in the bathroom or the room intended for the baby, in which only the pieces for a crib leaned against a wall, unassembled. He opened the door to their bedroom. It smelled close, like unwashed body and hair grease. The TV was on, a rerun

of Law & Order, but Tori was not watching it. She faced away from the door, toward the closed blinds, half covered by the tangled sheet and comforter. She wore a pair of Clint's high school wrestling team sweatpants and a sports bra. Her old bras no longer fit. From this angle, one wouldn't know Tori was pregnant at all. Clint pretended she wasn't. He climbed onto the bed, lying down beside her, spooning her. He ran a hand up and down her side. She didn't say anything or turn to look at him.

After a long while, she said, "What if I can't do this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what if I can't do it."

"You have to do it. It's not a choice anymore."

"Well what if I can't?"

"You just have to."

"You're not answering my question. I'm not asking for motivation, I'm saying what if I physically can't do it, what happens then. Do I just die?"

"No, there's just no can't. You will do it, there isn't another option."

"That can't be true."

"They'll do a C-section."

"They can't always do a C-section. It could be too late for that."

"Then I guess you'll just die. Is that what you want me to say?"

"What if I can't do it, but I don't die. Will I just suffer until I do?"

"It's going to hurt, but it won't last forever. You'll be okay. It takes time to recover but everything will go back to normal and you'll be fine."

“No, it won’t. You don’t understand what I’m saying. I can’t do this, I can’t do any of it.”

He hadn’t realized that she meant more than just childbirth, but also motherhood. What should he have said to her, that she didn’t have to? Of course she had to, had a responsibility to. Actions have consequences. Even mistakes. They hadn’t been reckless, Tori was on the pill. They just didn’t know that the cold medication she’d taken could make it less effective. Even though they’d made just one mistake, they still had to suffer those consequences. He had shouldered his responsibilities, his share of the burden, though not without help. Tori’s burden would have been greater—he realized that now. He’d wanted to believe that if Tori’s burden was greater, than she had incurred more of the blame. How was that right though? Was all of the responsibility for birth control really hers? Yes, she should have made sure that the cold medication wouldn’t interfere with her birth control—and so should have the doctor who prescribed it and the pharmacist who dispensed it—but Clint should have worn a condom. Or pulled out, for Christ’s sake. It wasn’t that fucking hard. The guilt was the same and yet the consequences were levied unfairly. Tori had to endure the pain and bodily ruination of childbirth, he didn’t, but there was no way for him to take on any of her suffering, to alleviate it in any way. She had to do it alone. The only things he could do to help her were to alleviate some of her other responsibilities, to provide for her so that she didn’t have to go to work—but that was as much an evil as it was a help, because it took away everything from her but mothering. He didn’t want this and she didn’t want it either, and yet somehow, he’d still expected her to be the primary caregiver, to be a mother in the way that his mother was, her mother was, his sister was. He expected to parent when he

was home, but most of his time wasn't spent at home, but at work. In that way, his life was no different now than it would have been then, except perhaps he'd run less baths and make less dinners. Clint's mother and sister were Kacey's real mother, her primary caregivers, not Clint. He'd thought of himself as doubly burdened, forced to be her father and mother, when really, he was just forced to be slightly more involved in caring for her than he would have liked. It was the life he would have wanted anyway, just a few years from when he got it. But for Tori, it was a life ended early. Her life before was the life she'd wanted, and she'd been right, that Tori couldn't do it, and she died. Suffered unto death and was reborn as a new person, a person who lived a life that was not just joyless for her, but worse than joyless by comparison to the life she could have had, the life she had before, the life she wanted.

Tori had hit anger only once—during childbirth. Never had Clint been berated in such terms, and in such feral screeches and moans. Every expression of hurt was his doing, and he accepted it as his punishment, though it was a difficult one to bear: he'd have rather given birth himself, given himself lashes like some ancient saint, mortified his own flesh rather than hers. Tori's mother tried to soothe her, to tell her that it was just the pain. Trish wasn't entirely wrong, just about the kind of pain.

Tori's leaving was denial: she wasn't a mother, she didn't have to be. He wondered what can snapped her out of it, what had made her continued denial impossible. Maybe he didn't want to know, because whatever it was confirmed what she had said, that she was forever altered, forever scarred. She was back—was that acceptance, or bargaining? It seemed more like resignation.



When Kacey reentered the living room, Clint had placed Barbara on one end of the couch and tucked her in under a baby blanket the size of a bandana. He lay down on the other end of the couch and pretended to be asleep.

“We’re back from our walk,” she said. “Why are you sleeping?”

“Shhh,” he said. “It’s Barbara’s nap time.”

She walked over to the other end of the couch and made a baby’s cry. “Uh oh, she’s crying.”

“Will you sing to her for me? You’re better at it.”

Kacey sang “Rockabye Baby” and Clint pretended that it put him to sleep too, and began softly fake snoring.

“Waaahhh,” Kacey said. “You woke her up, she’s crying again.”

“No, your baby is crying. Maybe she’s hungry.”

Kacey procured a doll bottle and held it to her doll’s mouth. It was incredibly easy to distract and redirect her, it wouldn’t always be. She’d have questions about her mother, about their relationship, about having babies, and the answers he did have weren’t answers he wanted to give.

Clint loved Kacey but didn’t like her—that was fair. But he’d felt justified in not always liking her, because he’d had to raise her alone. Except that he really hadn’t had to raise her alone, and it was an excuse, anyway. He loved her more than his own life, but still knew that his life, their lives, would have been better if she had never been born. He was allowed to feel that way, no one begrudged him it, but Tori was not. She was right that people perceived her as evil and unnatural—Clint had. “Shouldn’t have gotten

pregnant” was what was lobbied at her, whereas he was congratulated for taking responsibility.

Maybe they wouldn't have been more ready if they had been older, maybe they would have been more able to admit, and in Clint's case, accept, that parenthood was more than they could handle, was as much misery as potential for joy. After Kacey was born, Tori could have gone right back to work. They could have a nanny, daycare, sitters every Saturday night. Maybe that would have made them bad parents in the eyes of other people, or just bad parents, no qualifiers. But they probably still would have better parents than they'd turned out to be.

## Chapter 9

Tori's car was idling in the parking lot when Clint pulled into Lincoln Lanes, and he pulled into a spot across from her. It was a Wednesday night, not a league night, and the lot was nearly empty. The only other cars were an old, burgundy Buick with paint missing in a few places, above the front wheel well and beside the gas cap, a fifteen passenger van with a decal that read "First Reformed," and a red Tacoma. Clint checked his phone for messages. There was one from Tori saying that she was pulling in, none from Rachel or Jamie, who were supposed to be meeting them at the bowling alley. Clint figured the presence of his sister, brother-in-law, and their rowdy children would be enough to normalize the gathering. Then it wasn't just him, his ex, and their kid, it was Kacey's family. If this was how they were going to be a family, everyone was going to have to get used to it. It was easiest to start with Rachel.

She must have coached her kids on what to say during the car ride over, because when they pulled up, a minute or two later, all three of them exited the car said polite hellos to "Aunt Tori" and restrained themselves from asking any impertinent questions, like "Who are you?" and "What do you mean you're Kacey's mom?"

Rachel herself was equally polite in her greeting, then lined up her children in age order. "My oldest, Noah, next Becca, then Quentin."

Tori mumbled the appropriate hellos and remembrances. Clint watched Kacey, who he thought might be doing a peepee dance. Quentin laughed, and Kacey stopped and laughed herself. *Thank God*, Clint thought. He didn't have any backup clothes for her in the truck if she wet her pants, not since she'd wet her pants when he'd taken her to the movies with Mercy in January. *Mercy*. He was supposed to take her bowling, when he'd

had to work all those Saturdays. They'd never made up for their missed date. Now he was here, with his sister and his ex—poor substitutes.

Noah started to speak, but before he got out more than “Wh—” Rachel drove her knee into the back of his, not hard enough to hurt but enough to merit notice. He buckled slightly then looked back at her and saw her clear face of warning; he was quiet and sulky on the walk in.

The bowling alley was like every other bowling alley in existence—black carpet with abstract shapes and lines in neon colors, the noise of ball returns wheezing out air, and the occasional clattering of pins from one end of the room. The van outside clearly belonged to the church youth group occupying lanes one and two, eight or nine teens sitting either too close or too far away from each other, eating limp, greasy slices of bowling alley pizza, the kind everyone pretended was not just microwaved. One chaperone was a man, clearly the youth pastor, who was over-enthusiastic about the act of bowling; the other, a mother of one of the youths who busied herself pouring rip-off Sierra Mist and distributing napkins.

At the desk was a teenage girl, absently spraying the perennial red and blue bowling shoes with disinfectant and Febreze, and a man in his mid-twenties with a lopsided, shaggy bowl cut. Both were wearing black and white bowling shirts emblazoned with the name of the establishment on the left breast pocket and the back, embroidered in fading neon threads. Clint wouldn't have been surprised if these two weren't the original owners of these shirts, especially since the girl's was about two sizes too large for her double zero frame.

“Can I bowl with this thing?” Rachel pointed to the walking cast on her foot. The male attendant looked over the counter and shrugged.

“What do you guys think, two lanes? One with bumpers, one without?” Rachel asked.

“Whatever you want to do,” her husband said, turning around to follow the kids, who were hunting for bowling balls they could use, five- and six-pounders with holes little enough for small hands. Clint had bet Mercy once that she couldn’t fit her fingers into a six-pound ball, one of the first times he’d brought Kacey along on a date, maybe four months in. She’d done it, easily, and bowled a spare. It was only later that evening that she’d revealed to him that she’d greased up her hand with the napkin she’d used to blot the oil off her pizza. It was so damn clever that he conceded that regardless, she’d won the bet, and should keep his five dollars.

Rachel looked at Clint, then Tori for a response.

“That’s fine,” Clint said.

“Shoe sizes?” asked the girl behind the counter. As Rachel rattled off everyone’s size, the girl pulled them from the cubbies beneath the countertop and slid them across. Her arms were thin, like she had bird bones, and it seemed the weight of the shoes would snap them.

Tori accepted her bowling shoes and turned toward the lanes. She chewed the inside of her cheek. It made her look younger, it reminded Clint of their first few dates. There was something endearing about it, a lack of self-consciousness. She’d chewed her cheek like that in line for ice cream at the Dairy Queen, probably even in this same bowling alley, waiting for shoes.

Clint got his shoes, and the attendant told them their lane numbers, fourteen and fifteen.

“Come on,” Rachel motioned to the kids, who were still crowded around a rack of bowling balls. “We’re over here.” She had two pairs of shoes in each hand and had handed Jaime’s off to Clint to carry to their lanes.

Jamie, trailing Kacey and Quentin, joined them at fourteen and fifteen, and placed the light balls into the ball return. Noah and Becca waddled over, bowling balls under their shirts like grotesque tumors.

“This baby is so heavy,” Noah said, in what Clint guessed to be his impression of a mother, a high, nasal whine.

“My baby is coming,” Becca said, feigning franticness, letting the ball slide out from underneath her shirt a little bit.

Clint might have laughed, had it not reminded him of Tori’s words. He looked over at her to gauge her reaction, but she didn’t seem to have noticed. Perhaps she was distracted by Kacey, who had taken to hanging on her mother now that she had an audience. She had both arms around Tori’s neck and was attempting to wrap her legs around Tori’s arm, which was engaged in tying her bowling shoes.

“Kacey, enough,” Clint said. “You can tell her to stop,” he said to Tori.

“I really don’t mind,” she said, wincing as Kacey’s grip tightened and snagged some of her hair.

“Kacey!”

Kacey let go, momentarily chagrined, until her cousin rubbed his baby belly against her, causing an eruption of giggles. “Bad baby,” she said, slapping the ball. Becca

had given up on the game and was removing her street shoes. Quentin had crawled beneath the table. Rachel entered their names into the computer, kids on fourteen, adults on fifteen.

“I don’t want to bowl with bumpers, Mom,” Noah said. “Those are for babies.”

Rachel looked over the keypad at her son, then down at his stomach. “Yeah, I know.”

Jamie laughed. “She got you there, son.”

Noah dropped the ball out of his shirt. It hit the floor with a loud crack, loud enough that the male attendant looked up from the cell phone he was using beneath the counter.

“Get us kicked out of the bowling alley, why don’t you?” Jamie said.

His son placed the ball on the rack beneath the computer counter and slunk, arms crossed, onto a chair.

Clint went up to the bar and ordered a pitcher of beer. The bartender was the guy from behind the front desk, he must have come over to the bar when he saw Clint headed there.

“Cups?” the guy asked, filling the pitcher from the tap, stopping every few seconds to let the foam die down.

“Yeah,” Clint said. “Four.” They were flimsy, semi-opaque plastic, smaller than a pint: the place was too cheap even for Solo cups or their better imitations.

He returned to the table, bowled his round, and helped Kacey bowl hers, carrying the ball up to the end of the lane for her and telling her to push it. It rolled at about two

miles per hour, max, and he wasn't sure it would reach the end of the lane before the adult game was through, or before the other kids got antsy.

“Beer?” he asked. Jamie had already availed himself of a glass, and Rachel shook her head no.

“Maybe just one,” Tori said. As he handed her the cup, Clint noticed that she was wearing jeans. It was the first time in years that he'd seen her in a pair, in fact, he couldn't remember her wearing jeans since she'd started showing.

Tori hadn't realized that she was pregnant until more than three months in, and it wasn't long after that she started showing, about four. The day she'd noticed a bump, she left Clint a breathless and incoherent message, the only part of which he understood was a request that he come over, now.

When he arrived at her apartment, Tori sat cross-legged on her bed. She had a pillow in her lap and was kneading it with the palms of her hands. The sheets and blankets were tangled like the bed of someone who hadn't slept, and the blinds were pulled up, but only on one side, and they hung crooked—half of the Cheshire Cat's smile. Clint joined her, sitting up on the bed, back against the wall, beside her.

“What are we going to do?”

“Well, when do you want to get married?”

“What?” she said. Her cheeks were still salt-stained, her eyes still red-rimmed.

“We should get married, don't you think? When do you want to get married?”

She started crying anew, big, ugly sobs that shook her whole body.

“Tori, baby, what's wrong?” He put his hand on her back, but she shook it off.



She was unable to speak for a few minutes, managing only to get out a syllable before breaking down again. “When do you want to get married?” That’s romantic. That’s what I always dreamed of as a little girl. Someday, I was going to” —another sob—“get knocked up and my boyfriend was going to say ‘We should get married, don’t you think?’”

He drew her into his arms. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” He wondered if he’d ever be done saying that he was sorry, or if this was what his life would be, from now on. “I should have done it right with a ring. I just wanted to show you that I’m in this too, that I’ll take responsibility.”

“I don’t want you to ask me because you have to, I want you to ask me because you want to. And I didn’t want you to ask me now, not like this.”

“Why can’t it be both? Just because I have to doesn’t mean I don’t want to,” he said. “I want to.” She was still crying, her shoulders shaking against his chest, but softer, more quietly. Clint stroked her hair. “I’ll do it right. You can look at rings and tell me what you like.”

She looked up at him, shook her head. “I don’t want to do it now, not like this.”

“Well what do you want? What would make you happy?” He knew he’d asked the wrong question, for Tori’s eyes filled up again. He knew what would make her happy, but that wasn’t possible. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry. How do you want to do it?”

“What if I start to show? I don’t want to get married looking like a fat cow. I’ll look huge in a white dress.”

“That’s not true, you’re beautiful, you’ll be beautiful. But we don’t have to do that if you don’t want. We can go get married at the courthouse, as soon as possible.”

Tori flopped back onto the bed and covered her face with her hands.

“I know, I know, that’s not very romantic. If that’s not what you want, we can figure something else out.”

“Can we wait?” She uncovered her face and looked at her stomach like she was both disappointed and angry with it.

Not unlike a mother at a misbehaving child, Clint thought. *Too soon, too soon.*

“Until after?”

“You want to wait until after you have the baby to get married?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Then we can have a real wedding.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “That’s just fine.”

It became clear to Clint later, once she was gone, that putting off getting married was about more than looking fat in a wedding dress: Tori didn’t want to get married—to him, anyway. He’d thought it was the right thing to do, and he wasn’t sure he’d do anything differently if presented the choice again. If Mercy had gotten pregnant, he’d have asked her to marry him, too. That’s what you did. When he thought of unmarried women who got pregnant, he always thought of them as wanting the child’s father to marry them, except in cases of abuse and assault. He hadn’t considered that Tori could feel pregnancy trapping her into marriage, rather than vice versa. Women faked pregnancies to get diamond rings, not men. Though, it would be difficult to convince your girlfriend or hookup that she was pregnant to get her to marry you. Clint nearly laughed at the thought.

After her first beer, Tori had started to relax. “Ever since I had Kacey, my tolerance has been so low,” she said. She had ceased chewing on the inside of her lip and Clint had even seen her smile, more than just her put-on, polite smile.

She helped Kacey bowl, and returned to her seat, across the table from Clint.

Jamie was up on their lane, and he bowled fairly well, but got too into it. He was beating them all handily, by at least thirty points, and yet every turn, he focused intently, as if they were really competing.

“Jamie!” Tori barked, startling him. Jamie turned around to look at her, messing up his throw. The ball didn’t go into the gutter, but hit off center and only knocked over four pins. In a quieter voice, she said, “Great game, man.”

He shook his head, and Clint and Rachel laughed. Clint had forgotten that Tori could be funny. He refilled her cup.

“Tori, I hear you’re looking for work?” Rachel asked.

“I have a job now, actually. I’m a billing specialist at Ogden and Doyle Dentistry.”

“Clint, you didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t know,” he said. “When’d you start?”

“On Monday,” she said, and took a sip of her beer. Before Kacey, she’d wanted to be an accountant. She’d always been good at math, she said, and accountants had it good, good pay and benefits, only busy in April and November, taxes and the end of the fiscal year. She hadn’t completed enough coursework to become a CPA. Now she was working for the dentist’s office as a billing specialist, a thirteen-dollar-an-hour job for thirty hours

a week. Hardly what Clint would call a win. “The hours are good, and it’s got benefits,” she said. “I still get to work with numbers.”

He imagined too that she liked getting to wear scrubs every day. She’d always enjoyed comfy clothes, leggings and yoga pants and sweatshirts. She looked happy, as she spoke about her new life here, but worn out, not happy like she had when they were younger. Her face was thinner and paler, her smile less ready.

Clint carried the ball up to the lane and set it down in front of Kacey. He stood behind her and leaned over her little body, putting his hands beside hers on the bowling ball, helping her push it down the lane. As they released the ball, he looked back and saw Tori, smiling at them. He smiled back. When he returned to the table, Tori reached across and squeezed his arm. It was the kind of moment, Clint thought, that could very easily be the moment that brought them back together. Sure, they had done what they’d done and said what they said, but none of that would hold up well against the alcohol and their history. They could make it work, they could make that choice, if they wanted to. In this moment, perhaps Tori wanted to, but Clint didn’t. Not anymore. His relationship with Tori would have been a comfortable life to slip back into, one with fewer challenges than the one he now wanted. He was no longer sure that easier was better.

He wanted Mercy. He imagined her sitting there, across the table, smiling and grabbing his arm. She could help Kacey bowl just as well as Tori could, in fact, probably better. Mercy had spent more time with Kacey than Tori, and more consistently, even though he’d limited that severely. He hadn’t wanted Mercy to be too great of an influence on Kacey, and yet who was a better influence, the woman who’d left her, or the woman who’d chosen her when she hadn’t had to, who had a college degree, a career, a plan, a

life. If he wanted a partner who made an effort to love his daughter, she would have been it. These comparisons were perhaps unfair to Tori, Clint hadn't known Mercy when she was twenty and twenty-one and couldn't say that she wouldn't have made mistakes. He couldn't help but think that her mistakes would have been different, would have been less significant and lasting. Better mistakes than his.

Clint withdrew his arm.

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The next day after work, Clint stopped to buy Kacey a birthday gift. Standing in the middle of the Walmart toy aisle, he realized that most people probably did this online. Probably even from their couches, sitting next to their oblivious children. Something about standing in front of an eight-foot wall of toys was intimidating, made him feel like a new father again, unsure what the difference was between different brands of diapers and formulas. All of it was flashy and gimmicky, brightly colored and endorsed by or covered in images of various animated characters. None of it was anything Kacey needed, or even anything she'd enjoy playing with any more than any of the other toys that had overtaken his living room and her bedroom. She had everything she needed to be happy, except for a perfect family, and he was as much to blame for that as anyone else, and just as unable to satisfy the lack.

After staring and staring, Clint decided to capitalize on the opportunity to buy Kacey something practical: school supplies. She knew that turning five meant that she was going to start school, so even though the gift was utilitarian and not a toy or game or candy, he knew that she'd enjoy it. She'd already started playing school with her cousins and stuffed animals, despite having no notion of school, except Sunday School and what

she'd seen on TV. When he located the right set of aisles, Home Office, he was able to find what he wanted: a backpack, lunch box, and various other school supplies, a pencil box, brand new sets of twenty-four crayons and twenty-four colored pencils, two-pocket folders in every color. She'd be excited about the new backpack, an appropriately sized, appropriately gender-neutral but not offensively bright yellow that both Rachel and Mercy would've been proud of him for. The lunch box matched, and the set was on clearance, since school would be out for the summer soon. On the clearance rack in the kids clothing he found her a pair of snow pants for eighty percent off, since they were even more out of season. She wouldn't need a winter coat, since she'd get Becca's cast off, which was too purple for Quentin to agree to wear, but there was no set of hand-me-down snow pants in the pipeline, the knees of each pair entirely shredded after use by more than one child.

Clint walked toward the checkout with his odd purchases, the fluorescent lights gleaming up at him from their reflections in the floor. When he got to the front of the store, there she was: Mercy, in the line for the self-checkout. She was carrying a hand basket with a couple of items he couldn't distinguish, a few items she'd forgotten when she'd gone grocery shopping maybe, things she needed for a new recipe. She too must have stopped on her way home from work, as she was wearing a skirt, button-down, and heels. She shifted on her feet, revealing red creases on the backs of her ankles from the shoes. Her hair was in an irritatingly controlled knot, low on the back of her head.

Mercy looked down into her basket and smiled absently, as if reminded of something pleasant. Clint wondered what her purchases were for. Perhaps she was making dinner for a date tonight, a date she was looking forward to. Whatever she was

buying and whatever it reminded her of, she didn't look sad or even slightly unhappy. Clint felt like a flush was creeping up his neck from under the collar of his shirt, hot but somehow also clammy.

The line shifted and she stepped up to an open checkout terminal, and he walked past to enter another checkout line. He couldn't see her anymore from where he stood, and she hadn't seemed to have seen him. He looked over the checkout aisles filled with black and red beef jerky packages and candy bars wrapped in bright, glossy plastic, but couldn't see the top of her head and or the back of her smooth, dark hair, tightly wound. He couldn't see that small, impulsive smile at nothing and discern what caused it. Whatever the cause, it, damnably, wasn't him.

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That night was dark and moonless, no light seeped through the space around the blinds, and though the day had not been above fifty degrees, the bedroom was stiflingly hot, air thick like a humid night in August. Clint lay awake, tortured when he would close his eyes with strobe-flashes of memory—the curve of her naked back, the feel of her skin against his, the sensation of falling. Mercy's wet scent, the half closing of her eyes.... He couldn't stop thinking about it, imagining it. A friend had told Clint once that when he was young, in Catholic school, to avoid erections at inappropriate times, he'd imagine nuns cutting off his dick with rusty cleavers. Clint had his own standby—remembering Tori give birth. If the crying, screaming, hospital smell, and bodily fluids didn't do it, then the image of that beloved bit of anatomy being stretched and torn and distorted would. But today even that was not graphic or disturbing enough to quell unbidden

desire. Clint ached for Mercy. His flesh called out for hers, her small, wiry body, her soft skin, the light, clean smell of her hair, like clothes hung out to dry in springtime.

The fulfillment of that desire was no fulfillment at all, leaving him achingly alone in the still, impregnable dark of the room. He wiped his hand on a (now) generally unused patch of the sheet, not on his side of the bed, relief being edged out by a rising pathetic disgust. With it was the immensity of his error. Night trapped him with his thoughts and feelings, the trials of the day having eroded his discipline, leaving emotion to rule. Everything felt more urgent at night, perhaps because he couldn't do anything about it. It was too late to call or text, too late to make a declaration of love or change his life. He had lost the woman who loved him in half-assed pursuit of one who didn't. Of all the colossal ways in which he'd fucked up in his life, this one pricked the most. He'd had other people and circumstances to blame before—he had Tori as his equal partner in the blame for her accidental pregnancy, and when she left, as a scapegoat for all the difficulties and frustrations thereafter. This was entirely his own fault. He was tempted to blame Mercy for staying too long. She'd said she had, and he could see that she was right. He had kept their relationship stagnant, unmoving, and she'd tolerated it for far longer than he could have expected—she shouldn't have tolerated it at all. It was less than her due. He had done wrong, and from this vantage point, legs half tangled in the twisted bedsheet, staring at the black abyss of ceiling above his bed, that wrong was irremediable, unfixable.



## Chapter 10

Clint pulled into Mercy's apartment complex and parked in front of her building. Her car wasn't in the lot, but he went in and up to the third floor to knock anyway. There was no answer. He went back down and sat on the tailgate. He knew she was likely to be home from work any time, and he couldn't leave without feeling cowardly, pathetic. The night was warm, but fairly free of bugs, as it was not yet consistently warm enough for them. A single moth flapped about in the weak ochre glow of the light by the entrance, portentous of muggy summer nights filled with mosquitos and june bugs.

It reminded him of a night, early in the relationship, when Clint had come to pick Mercy up. He'd walked out of his parents' house, after standing in the doorway with one foot in and one foot outside, as if he were suspended between two magnets of equal strength, unable to move toward either. He watched the clock on the wall, wishing alternately to freeze and speed its measure, then looked back at his daughter with ice cream on her nose. He stepped inside, but was arrested by the movement of the clock hands to seven thirty. He bit his lip and turned to leave, waving back at Kacey.

The house was yellow, like a lemon bar with powdered sugar doors and trim, and there was a light on in the kitchen where his mother sat drinking Earl Grey and watching Kacey eat ice cream. This was their Saturday night ritual. He left her there to stay the night in her little girl pajamas patterned with little horses and lassos; he let her pick them out herself. Even then, she picked out all of her own clothes. Kacey had just turned four and was adorable in the way that all small children are. He was sad to leave her, though she was not sad to leave him. She was happy to stay with Grandma and Grandpa, to eat

ice cream in the kitchen, to fall asleep to the noise of the television on the arm of Grandpa's chair.

"Be good, Kacey," Clint said when he left.

"Okay," she said, plunging her too-big spoon into her bowl of chocolate sprinkle. "Have fun, Daddy."

When Kacey was just over a month old and Tori a month gone, Clint's mother insisted that he go out once a week, on Saturdays. He was still so young, she said. He needed to get out of the house. So, every Saturday those first few months, he'd sit alone in a booth at a place he used to frequent, picking at the frayed and pitted vinyl of the seat with his short fingernails and following the movements of the mirrored clock above the bar that proclaimed it was "Miller Time."

Clint felt the gravel of the driveway under his boots. He wondered if he was wearing the wrong shoes, and if he should go into the house to change them. The boots were not very dirty but they were not clean or new or expensive and he hoped that it would not matter. He was never sure what would matter. When he reached his pickup, he knocked his boots against the side to loosen any dirt, pausing to consider the car seat on the passenger side of the bench. He always took it out so that it wasn't in the car when he picked up Mercy. He had been dating Mercy for three months, and she'd never met Kacey. Mercy, Kacey. He never realized that their names kind of rhymed, because he never before thought of them together.

He knew the way well enough that he could allow himself to be preoccupied. He drove, failing to avoid potholes and big rocks that studded the dirt road. Tree limbs heavy with leaves hung low over the road, some brushed the top of the cab. He looked at the car

seat beside him on the bench. When Kacey came home from the hospital, the baby carrier was in the middle, as the car seat was now, where it couldn't be crushed by airbags. Tori sat on the opposite side. She looked at the baby like the child was something she didn't comprehend.

Clint arrived at the apartment complex and threaded his way through carports and parking spaces. Again he looked at the car seat. If he moved it, things could stay the way they were. But he didn't know if that was what he wanted, and it was difficult to unfasten.

He entered the first dirty eggshell colored building. It was not the kind of apartment building where one has to be buzzed in, and he was grateful for that; it was the kind of apartment building with an outside light that flickered old mustard-colored light to ambivalent mosquitoes and moths, where the front right burner never worked right, and where the maintenance man was kind and ineffectual and half-stoned. Mercy was on the third floor, and he took the narrow stairs at a half-jog. He collected himself in the stairwell, brushing invisible dust from his jeans before approaching her door. She opened it, thin and tan and invitingly pretty. He had not moved the car seat; it would be a presence between them, one that would have to be acknowledged

“I just need to get my shoes.” She looked down at her bare feet. “Come in for a second?”

He could have told her to meet him out front, and while she searched for her shoes, moved Kacey's car seat. But he didn't. He walked into the room.

Clint looked around the parking lot again, then checked his phone for the time, or so he told himself. He'd asked his mother to watch Kacey for a quick run out—he hadn't

said for what—because he couldn't bear to bring her, it felt cheap. He couldn't use Kacey as a buffer between him and Mercy. If she wanted to be angry with him, yell, cuss, insult, she had a right to, and he wouldn't prevent her by bringing his kid. Even if he was here somewhat pathetically. He had in his pocket a construction paper, sticker, and marker contraption that Kacey had made for Mercy—an invitation to her fifth birthday party. Clint had had to write the necessary information himself, the recipient's name, the date, the time, the valediction: *Love*. The phrasing Kacey had insisted on, for all the invitations. His hand burned while writing it on Mercy's.

Mercy pulled in, parking a spot over.

“Hey,” he said, once she'd gotten out of the car.

“Hi,” she said. She was holding a half gallon of milk in one hand, a paper grocery sack in the other. She was wearing a blue oxford, the bottom wrinkled from where it had been tucked into her slacks. Her mouth was a tight, lopsided line. “What are you doing here?”

“Could we talk?”

“Let me go put this in the fridge.”

He nodded. He wondered whether he should be concerned that she hadn't invited him in. But the night was pleasant, and she'd agreed to talk, and that was more than he could have asked for, showing up uninvited, unannounced. When Mercy returned, she hopped up onto the tailgate, awkwardly, because of her height, and sat on it, as far from him as possible.

“How are you?”

“I'm well,” she said, “You?”

“I’m fine, Kacey’s fine. She misses you. I miss you.” He watched her face for the slightest change in expression, but there was none.

“I miss her too.” She looked down at her legs, swinging above the ground.

“She wanted to invite you to her birthday party. That’s part of why I’m here.”

Mercy nodded. “What’s the other part?”

It took Clint a moment to answer, to get words to come out of his mouth, past his constricting throat and heavy tongue. “To say that I’m sorry. That I fucked up. You were right, I was holding out. I didn’t tell you about Tori being around because I didn’t know why she was back or what that meant.” He took a breath, looked at his feet. “I’m not holding anything back now, even though it’s going to make me look bad. I deserve to look bad here.”

Mercy’s eyes were trained on him, steady and unwavering. He could tell that she agreed with what he’d just said. He hated being right. “Maybe so,” she said, and it landed on him like a kiss on a bruise.

“I thought maybe she wanted to get back together. And part of me wanted that. I wanted to have a whole, normal family. Parents together, kid happy. But I know that was naïve and stupid. I thought she left because she wasn’t ready to be a parent, and now she is. But we weren’t right together. I see it now. I threw away what you and I had, and it was better than that. We could have worked it out, and we deserved that chance. “

“I appreciate your apology and your straightforwardness.”

He waited a moment, but she didn’t say anything else. He had turned to face her, his left leg up on the tailgate, the right dangling from it, and he leaned forward, watching

her face. She was now looking straight forward at the trees lining the parking lot, not back at him. “But?”

“But I don’t know if that’s good enough. Tori is Kacey’s mom, and she’s always going to be that, and I’m always not. If you weren’t over wanting that family with her a couple of weeks ago, how can I know you are now?” She met his eyes. “You were having a hard time letting me into your life, with Kacey and without Kacey, before Tori showed up again.”

“She hurt me when she left, and I think it kept me from realizing what would have happened if she’d stayed. How we would have hurt each other more. I thought the leaving was the problem. But it was more than that.”

“I’m glad you’ve come to this better understanding of yourself and your relationship with Tori, but that doesn’t prove to me that things will be different. Nothing you said was about *me*, Clint. Why do you want me, specifically me, back in your life? It’s not enough that Tori’s wrong for you, how am I right for you? How are you right for me? I don’t think you’ve thought about it. I don’t think you have an answer.”

“I don’t have an answer, in words. You told me before that it wasn’t what I said that mattered, but how I acted. And I wasn’t acting like I cared about you. I’m acting like it now, or I’m trying to, if you’ll let me.”

“Where’s the invitation?”

He pulled the folded page from his back pocket, carefully to avoid tearing it or shedding glitter onto himself. He was only partially successful, and silver flakes of glitter clung to the creases of his hand, his finger joints.

She opened it and read. “I’ll try to come,” she said. “For Kacey.”

It was exactly what he had wanted Tori to say, when she came back into their lives and he suggested that they try again. He was glad now that she had seen what he hadn't. Hearing Mercy say, "for Kacey," he knew that she meant it, and that everything she'd do for Kacey was also for him.

"That's why," he said.

"What?"

"That's why you, specifically you. That's my answer."

He saw tears form in Mercy's eyes, but she blinked them away. He stood up and drew her to him. They stayed there for a moment, and as soon as she began to draw back he released her, resisting the urge to hold her tighter, longer.

She wiped her right eye with the back of her hand. "I'll see you at the party," she said.

It was all the answer she would give him, all he could ask for, and for now, it was good enough. He walked her to the door, held it for her as she walked inside.

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The day of Kacey's birthday party was warm for May, though there was a slight breeze that persisted in coolness, and the day was sunny, with only a few high, wispy clouds. Kacey was running around behind the house with Rachel's kids, playing tag, while Clint and Jamie set up folding tables out front on the lawn.

Rachel came out of the house, carrying two pitchers of lemonade. She was still in a walking boot, noticeable against the bare shins of her shorts-clad legs.

"How many people are coming to this thing, Rach? Do we have to set up all of these?" Jamie gestured at the stacked folding chairs.

“There’s us, Mom and Dad, Clint and Kacey, Tori and her parents, Mercy—” she looked over at Clint, “maybe, Fred and Anita, and the Jacobsens from church, so that’s twenty-one.”

“Who the hell are the Jacobsens?”

“They have the four kids that are around our kids’ ages. You know them.”

Jamie rolled his eyes, then started unfolding chairs, which Clint placed around the assorted card tables. A six-foot rectangular table at the head of the arrangement was designated for food, and Rachel placed the lemonade there before disappearing into the house, presumably for more.

Clint’s mother appeared, arms laden with tablecloths. “Put these on, will you?” she said, dumping them onto the table nearest the house, then also heading back inside. The children ran around the house to the front yard, racing to the swing.

“Hold onto the swing this time,” Clint yelled after them, though neither Kacey nor any of the others looked back or responded.

By two o’clock, the tablecloths had all been laid, the food all brought out from the house, and Aunt Anita and Uncle Fred, Tori’s parents, and the Jacobsens had arrived. The kids were ogling the small pile of presents that had accumulated at the end of the food table, each conjecturing as to what could be inside without touching, which had been sternly prohibited by Rachel, who sat very near the table to protect the heavily-frosted sheet cake from impatient swipes at the frosting by greedy fingers. It was a yellow and chocolate marble cake—*then everyone’s happy*, Rachel had said when she told Clint what to order—with thick white buttercream edged in purple, decorated generously with



those flat, round, multi-color sprinkles that are only found on cakes from grocery store bakeries.

Tori pulled in and emerged from her car with two large boxes and a handful of overinflated mylar balloons of assorted birthday messages and shapes, attached to foil-wrapped weights. Clint walked over to her and relieved her of the wrapped gifts.

“Are you trying to spoil the kid?” he asked, pretending to stagger under the weight of the boxes.

She shrugged, laughed. “It’s stuff for her to have at my place. One of those kid couches that folds out into a little bed, and a doll house.” She looked anxiously over at the swing, where Noah and Quentin were pushing Kacey.

“You got a place?”

She nodded. “Off Randall, the apartments there. In two weeks I move in.”

“Good for you.” They were shitty apartments. Clint and Tori picked up their feet in exaggerated motions to avoid tripping on the uneven lawn or stepping into a groundhog hole, which had begun cropping up the week before in unusual abundance.

“Maybe Kacey could stay over once in a while?”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. They had reached the cluster of tables and he set the boxes beside the table where the rest were piled. The children crowded around them eagerly and immediately began guessing what was inside. Tori placed a weighted balloon on each table, then made her way over to where her parents were sitting and took a seat beside them.

“Clint,” his father called. “What about starting the food?”

They both looked at Rachel, who nodded. Clint shrugged and said, “Everybody go ahead and fix yourself a plate.”

About fifteen minutes later, a small, silver car pulled in and parked at the very end of the yard. It could only be Mercy, and Clint’s stomach roiled as he watched for her door to open.

“Dad, can you fix my sandal?” Kacey said from the seat beside him.

He turned and took her foot into his lap. The sandal had gotten unbuckled and her smallest toe was sticking out between two of the straps at the end. He adjusted it on her foot, then re-buckled, one notch tighter than it had been before. He took her other foot and re-buckled that shoe as a precaution. “You’d better finish all that food, or you won’t get any cake.”

“All of it?”

“The hotdog and the grapes, at least.”

When he turned back to look for Mercy, she was already halfway across the yard, and he rose to meet her. She was wearing a dress that he hadn’t seen before, a sleeveless gray sundress dotted with purple flowers, and her hair was straight and hung long over her shoulders and down her back. Somehow, though it was too early in the year to lay out, her arms and legs looked tan, setting off their delicately delineated muscle. A white sweater was slung over her purse, and in her left hand she held a gift bag bearing the phrase “Happy Birthday” over and over in rainbow colors.

Clint got up and walked over to meet her. “It’s good to see you,” he said, when close enough to be heard. He reached for her, and she hugged him with her free arm, not closely, just letting her shoulder touch his chest for a few seconds before releasing. He

had forgotten what she smelled like and though it was subtly applied, the fragrance momentarily overwhelmed his senses.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. “I didn’t have any wrapping paper, so I had to stop.”

“I’m just glad you could make it.”

“We’re just about to do cake,” Rachel said as they walked past her, standing over it, knife in hand. “You go ahead and make yourself a plate first.”

“Thanks, Rachel. I will,” she said, setting her gift beside the others and picking up a paper plate. Kacey ran up and wrapped herself around Mercy’s legs, who then squatted down to talk to her.

Clint returned to his seat but stood beside it instead of sitting down.

“Kacey,” Rachel shouted. “Time to blow out the candles.”

She ran around the table to where Rachel and Clint’s father stood. He picked her up and held her just above the candles, which Rachel was lighting, positioning Kacey to blow them out.

“Are you ready?” he heard his father ask.

Kacey nodded.

“You’re turning five,” he said. “Everybody let’s sing, then she’s going to blow all these candles out on the count of five.”

The group started singing “Happy Birthday.” Rachel clapped a hand over each of her sons’ mouths to prevent them from blowing out their cousin’s candles prematurely, still holding the cake knife in her right hand, the blade of it pointing away from Noah’s face, but still alarmingly close. The Jacobsen children stood on the other side of the table,

gripping the edges of it and staring longingly at the cake. Their parents were nearby, clustered with his aunt and mother, all singing with unnatural enthusiasm.

Clint watched Mercy walk over to the table where his brother-in-law was sitting alone, at the moment, scarfing a mound of cheesy potatoes.

“One!”

She balanced her plate carefully atop her plastic cup of lemonade as she pulled out her chair. Her hair swished across her back with the motion.

“Two!”

She set the plate on the table, saying something to Jamie, who nodded and gestured for her to take a seat.

“Three!”

She sat down, then turned sideways in the chair to face Kacey and the cake, crossing her tan legs at the ankle, gracefully.

“Four!”

Clint looked briefly at his daughter, her cheeks puffed out with air, prepared to loose it on the candles before her in the next moment, her eyes glinting with the reflected candle flame. A table over, Tori stood on her chair, phone in hand, poised to take pictures. He turned back to Mercy.

“Five!”

She glanced his way, and when she found him looking at her, smiled, slightly.