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## Preventable Conditions

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PREVENTABLE CONDITIONS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

*Preventable Conditions* is a collection of literary short stories intended to explore themes of familial communication, complementary dysfunctions, and the degree to which we all try to hide from or correct our own mistakes. The first five stories in the collection are related, while the last three stand alone. Each of the stories before “Fair Grounds” is told from the perspective of a different member of the Powell family, a fictional clan from Marietta, Georgia.

The Powell family stories largely adhere to the basic conventions of realism, while the three remaining pieces venture closer to the absurd.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

My thanks go out to Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés for her inestimable contribution to this work, and to my fellow M.F.A. students for all of their feedback and suggestions. Honorable mentions go out to my sister Rebecca, for cracking the whip over me, and to Kirsten and Leslie. They did all my worrying for me.

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## INTRODUCTION

This collection is to no degree a work of non-fiction, but I owe a great deal of the inspiration behind the Powells to my own family. We all know that family problems are messier than any other kind, largely because we can't get away. No family problem is ever truly buried, and is rarely resolved to the satisfaction of everyone involved. Even more frustrating, we can never fully blame a family grudge or argument on any one person, no matter how much we may want to. We've all got such a writhing mass of doubts, flaws, and insecurities that it becomes impossible to tell where bias ends and true fault begins.

I have tried to convey this concept through the Powells by grounding each piece in the point-of-view of a new family member. Each character has his or her own crippling flaws, habits, and strong opinions, and by spending a little time behind each new set of eyes, the reader will hopefully gain a fresh appreciation for the complexity of familial interaction.

This work does strive to entertain, especially with the last three stories, but its primary purpose is to explore complex human relationships.

May you enjoy meeting these characters as much as I did.

## CATCH AND RELEASE

Jonathan Powell

April 21, 2012

I was driving my father to Atlanta when he got the call.

I didn't pay attention to the words, just the sounds. He had a voice that creaked like a rusty hinge, and age had smoothed it not a bit. He'd always walked and dressed and sounded like an old man, as long as I could remember. Only now his body matched.

"I need to go to Caroline's," he said, after he hung up.

"Why?" I asked. I didn't look for a place to turn around, though we were driving in the opposite direction. I wondered if my sister had tried to kill herself again. I wondered why, after fifteen years, that was still the first thing I thought of.

Dad made one of his high-pitched grunting sounds. They seemed to mean anything. "She says she can't get out of bed, so I'm going to go help her."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Well, I don't know." He sounded baffled that I would even ask.

"You think you're just going to walk in, lift her out of bed, and leave? It's not going to get any more complicated than that?" An old, familiar anger kindled in my chest.

"Yes," Dad said. "You and I can still go eat after we're done." His mouth was set, and he kept his eyes focused on the gleaming cars ahead of us. He didn't look in my direction.

"That's ridiculous," I told him. "You're going to hurt yourself. If she really can't get up, then she should call 911. Or if it's not serious, call one of the neighbors." I wasn't sure exactly

what Caroline weighed, but she wasn't in the best shape. Dad was seventy-seven, frail, and never the biggest man in a crowd. There was no way he should be trying to lift her under any circumstances, and she should have known that.

Then again, what if she needed help? Caroline tended to play her own games, regardless of the cost to anyone else, I was still her brother. If I could do something for her, I probably should, even though I had left my wife and kids in North Carolina so I could take a vacation. Spend a little time with my father.

"No, I can do it," Dad said. "She doesn't need to call anybody."

"Dad, you don't need to be doing this." No matter what Caroline needed, Dad was going to get himself seriously injured one of these days if he kept doing things by himself.

"You don't have to help me. Just drop me off and I'll take care of it."

"Fine." I jerked the wheel around in a U-turn, harder than necessary, and headed back toward my sister's house. "You know this is a bad idea."

"I'm just going to help her," Dad said.

\*\*\*

My sister's house in Marietta, Georgia was a two-story brick-and-wood building, framed by longleaf pines and sprawling oaks, that looked as if it had stood since the Great Depression. It was in good repair, for the most part: fresh coat of paint, new curtains on the windows, that sort of thing, but it still felt old. The planks of the porch groaned as we walked up the wooden stairs to the door.

It took Dad three tries to find the right key and get it into the door. I was about to take the key-ring out of his hands and do it myself before the door gave. He pushed his way inside.

Caroline's house smelled like old paper, dust, and dogs. It had been three years since her last dog had died, but the house still smelled that way. Most of her furniture was heavy, dark wood, supporting the clutter of a middle-aged single woman: creased paperbacks stacked on top of a polished roll-top desk, a box of tissues and a gleaming iPad resting on an oak coffee table, a decorative Turkish mixing bowl on a shelf over her 72-inch flatscreen TV. She had done well for herself. Medicine paid well, and she'd never had a family to support.

Her bedroom sat in the back corner of the house. She lay there, in a four-poster bed that looked too big and heavy to have been carried in the door, covers tucked up to her pale chin.

We greeted her as we came in as if this were nothing unusual. It wasn't much out of the ordinary, actually, so it was hard to tell myself that something might really be wrong this time. Caroline had grown used to crying wolf over the years.

Sometimes she wanted attention, like when she would leave vague and ominous voicemails on my phone with no explanations. Those never led to anything more substantial than passive-aggressive conversations about why I never called. Her voice was usually vague and slurred during those calls. Drunk or high, one of the two. I never asked, but I had a good idea. Caroline had never been a drinker.

When she had real trouble, she kept it to herself. Her housekeeper was the only reason we had ever found out about her suicide attempt. The woman had walked in on Caroline holding a bottle of wine in one hand and a syringe full of veterinary barbiturates in the other. There had been other incidents, long before that, of Caroline overdoing the self-medication. And I got the impression that Mom knew some things the rest of us didn't, though I couldn't prove anything.

In the years since her suicide attempt, we had more glimpses of an ongoing problem: she would sound hazy over the phone, or would forget conversations hours after having them. If I suggested drugs, she would call me crazy. Then her speech would remain clear for a few days, as if she could prove me wrong by staying sober for half a week.

I had long ago stopped running when she called. Until now, I guess.

“What’s wrong, Caroline?” I asked, laying a hand on her coverlet.

“I don’t know. Tired.” Talking was obviously difficult for her, and her voice was breathy. I wondered if she was pretending--usually, if she was really sick, she would have some idea what was wrong. Medical training went a long way, after all. Maybe she really didn’t know this time, or else she didn’t want to say anything.

Her cell phone sat on the table at the side of the bed, next to a pair of pill bottles, all three in easy reach.

“What do you need?” Dad said.

“Help me up.” She lifted one arm and let it flop against Dad’s shoulder, and he reached down to try and pull her out of bed.

I had to intervene before he hurt himself, so I gently pulled my father back. “Caroline, if you can’t get up, why haven’t you called 911?”

“I don’t need to call 911. I can just drive to my doctor.”

“Caroline, you can’t even stand.”

“Then Dad can drive me.” She raised her arm again, asking for help, and my old frustration bubbled up. I hated to let her manipulate me into anything, but I couldn’t let Dad try

and help her or he would hurt himself. And I had to admit the possibility that she really did need our help. Reluctantly, I lifted her into a sitting position.

It took me almost ten minutes to get her onto her own feet, with Dad eagerly getting in the way every five seconds. Caroline still couldn't stand unaided, but had to lean heavily on my shoulder. She couldn't even dress herself. I had to move her like a doll in the awkward process of getting her into a pair of sweatpants and a clean shirt.

"Caroline, you need to go to the hospital," I said at last. If she couldn't even stand, why hadn't she called an ambulance already?

Probably because she has something to hide, I thought. Not a fun idea, and the very thought was probably condescending of me. My brother and sister used to accuse me of being overly judgmental, back when we all three spent time together. I wondered if they had a point.

"All right," Caroline said. She was breathing heavily, even with me supporting half her weight. "First let's go to a chair."

I eventually got her to a cushioned armchair in the living room, Dad hovering over her. Once she had settled in and Dad had headed into the kitchen to get her a drink, I took the opportunity to look around.

The bottles sitting by her bed were half full of Xanax and Abilify respectively, each prescribed by her a little over a week before. At different pharmacies, I noticed. The table on which they sat had a drawer, and I opened it. Besides a hair comb and some low-grade jewelry, the drawer was filled with pill bottles. Most were empty, some had a few remaining, but none was even close to full. I saw more Xanax, hydrocodone, many others I didn't recognize. I took a picture of these with my phone so that I could Google their names later.

One of the mostly-empty bottles was prescribed for “Richard C. Baker.” I had no idea who that was. Once I started looking, I realized that several of the other bottles bore strangers’ names, all prescribed by Dr. Caroline Powell.

I slipped some of the smaller bottles into my pockets for evidence--I suspected I would need it--and headed back into the hall. I would probably have to call 911 myself, but I wanted to give Caroline a chance to do it first.

As soon as I stepped into the hall, I sucked in an involuntary breath. Caroline was out of her chair, headed for the door. So was Dad. They leaned on each other like a couple of sloppy drunks, my father braced against her side as she threw her left arm across his shoulders. Obviously he’d tried to support her so that she could walk, but he wasn’t nearly strong enough. He clutched the back of her shirt to keep from falling himself.

I only watched for a second, frozen in astonishment. How selfish could she be? Dad, at least, was trying to help his daughter, but why was she letting him hurt himself?

Dad’s knees buckled under the weight. He started to drop, and she began to fall sideways on top of him.

I can’t remember ever moving as fast as I did then. Somehow I made it down the hall in time to catch my sister’s weight and keep it off Dad, just before they would have crashed to the floor in a heap. With the extra burden gone, Dad managed to stay on his feet, though he almost pitched onto his face.

“Whew,” he said. “That was close.” He held his arms out. “Here, I can take her now.”

I pushed his hands aside, levering Caroline into a nearby armchair. She didn't say anything, just breathed heavily as she sank into the cushions. That was good. If she had said something stupid, I might not have been able to hold back my response.

I pulled out my phone and called 911.

\*\*\*

Originally, I was supposed to be in Georgia on vacation. My wife's elementary school class had another few weeks before they took a break for summer, and NC State's spring semester hadn't quite ended, so my kids couldn't take any time off. But planting season at the nursery had gone, the dogwood blooms had faded, and there were no ongoing projects in the state parks that required my personal attention. So, for two weeks, I was free. I had intended to use this trip to spend some time with my father, hunting and fishing like we had when I was a kid. He had always refused to admit that his body was failing him, and maybe with me there he could enjoy himself without getting hurt.

Instead, we brought Caroline to the hospital. At first she insisted she could walk on her own, and I ended up having to all but wrestle her into a wheelchair. Once we got her registered in the ER, it took almost an hour for a nurse to come wheel her back to see a doctor.

At that, Dad complained for fifteen minutes about how we weren't allowed to hear what the doctor had to say. I suspected that was Caroline's decision, not the doctor's, but I didn't say anything to Dad.

By that time, Mom had arrived.

Rebecca, my mother, has a tower of gray hair that brings her all the way up to 5'6", and a stare that could cut a sapling in half. She walked into the ICU waiting room a hand-knit sweater

despite the April heat, and held a purse with its straps draped over one arm. Dad was taking a walk downstairs, which was good news for me. At least I would have a chance to greet my mom before she started lecturing her husband.

“Tell me how she is,” Mom said, giving me a quick hug.

“We don’t know anything,” I responded. “It looks like the drugs again.”

Mom tore her purse open. “Of course it’s the drugs,” she said. “I didn’t ask what was wrong, did I?” One hand fished inside the purse, rattling what sounded like eyeliner pencils.

I sat and she followed me, taking the chair next to me without interrupting her search.

“Dad’s going to kill himself if he keeps helping her,” I said.

“Yep.”

“Maybe if someone else--”

Mom cut me off by holding a gold-capped tube of lipstick up to my face. Only once she saw that she had my attention did she seize the tube in both hands, but she didn’t remove the cap. She just held the lipstick there, as if she might open it at any moment.

“Your father is a good man,” she said. “But he is not wise. And your sister is beyond help.” She pulled the cap off of her lipstick with a sharp pop.

I wasn’t sure if Caroline was quite beyond help, but she certainly seemed to make the same mistakes over and over. “I’m hoping that this time, if it gets bad enough, she’ll admit that she has a problem,” I said.

Mom waved the lipstick dismissively, left to right, as if she were erasing something from a chalkboard. “You don’t even know the whole story. I’ve talked to her about it, believe me, but she just spits on any help I try to give her. You can’t help her, Jon. But maybe we can still help

Harry.” She began applying the lipstick, so she had said all she meant to say on the subject. At least for now.

What she said did not sound good, but it sounded right. Dad just gave Caroline whatever she wanted, and it was killing both of them. She had abused our help long enough.

Maybe I was judging her too quickly again, but in this case the facts seemed clear. For her own good, I would have to let my sister go.

Assuming she lived through this crisis, whatever it was. Then again, my life would get much simpler if she didn’t.

\*\*\*

Only once another hour had passed did someone let us know what had happened.

“We think her kidneys have begun to fail,” the nurse said, leading me and my parents to a bank of elevators. She spoke with a peppy zest better reserved for other topics.

“What could have caused that?” I asked, with a sideways glance at my father. He kept his hands in the pockets of his windbreaker, staring into the window of the hospital gift shop.

“Oh, any number of things!” the nurse responded. “It’s too early to tell, but we moved her into the ICU so she’ll be more comfortable.”

“It’s the drugs,” my mother whispered, jabbing into Dad’s side with an elbow.

“Who knows what kind of drugs they’re giving her here?” Dad said. The nurse did her best impression of a deaf patient.

We followed her into a gaping elevator, and she pressed a number. We began to rise.

“When can we visit her?” I asked.

“We’re running some tests right now,” the nurse said. A second passed, then she seemed to remember that she hadn’t answered my question. “But don’t worry! Immediate family can visit from ten to two, and then from four to eight. You’ll be setting up in the ICU waiting room, which is just a step away.”

My father said nothing--he didn’t look like he’d even heard--but she patted him on the arm and gave him a comforting smile.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll do everything we can for her.”

\*\*\*

That ICU waiting room was perhaps the worst place in the hospital to spend any extended amount of time. The chairs were soft but not quite comfortable, and never arranged so that I could lay down and get some sleep. I’m no basketball player, maybe six feet even in the right shoes, but when I tried to stretch myself across the row of chairs either my ankles dangled off the end or my head did.

So I spent most of the time on my phone.

“I don’t think I can make it,” said my younger brother, Stuart. “Too much to do, you know? Work’s killing me.” He didn’t sound ashamed or tired. In fact, he sounded almost proud.

“Good problem to have,” I said. I hadn’t spoken with Stuart in almost a year, but he’d been on his way up for the past half a decade. Successful business selling custom lawn furniture, new house, two kids and one on the way. I never thought the kid I knew would have grown up into somebody with a mortgage and a metaphorical picket fence, but he had surprised us all.

He had succeeded in business, but he had also succeeded in cutting his family almost entirely out of his life. Of the five of us, Stuart and I were on the best of terms, and I still only

spoke with him maybe once a year. Just a mention of Caroline's name could set him on a fifteen-minute rant, and I wasn't sure his kids would even recognize their grandparents. Still, he was part of the family, and he deserved to be informed.

"I'm glad they have you there," Stuart said, which surprised me. They had snow days in Florida more often than Stuart gave compliments to a member of the family.

"Thanks," I said.

"I'm serious. You know I'm not Caroline's biggest fan, and she's spent most of her life building sandcastles and knocking them down. That's on her. But if she just had Mom and Dad to help her, she'd be screwed."

"I'm not sure about that," I said. My brother was seldom entirely objective.

"Dad hears what he wants to hear," Stuart said. "If I asked him for money to buy coke, he'd just ask me how much I needed and whether I could pay him back." I took a moment to realize he wasn't talking about Coca-Cola, which probably says something about my life.

"Mom's just here to help Dad," I said. "She thinks Caroline is past saving."

"See what I'm saying? She's already writing Caroline off. But look, let me tell you something." He lowered his voice to the register he uses when he wants people to take him seriously. "Caroline's got a better chance at life than I did. She can turn it around. As long as Mom and Dad stay out of the way."

The conversation took a lighter turn after that, and Stuart was soon called away. Some work emergency involving lacquered wood. After I hung up, I ran out of excuses, and I was forced to meet with Caroline's other visitors.

A steady stream of friends and relatives flowed in and out of the waiting room, leaving us their prayers and well-wishes. And whenever they weren't physically in the ICU room with Caroline, they needed an update. Dad was more than happy to oblige them with all the details he could remember, but he was just as likely to go off on a tangent about the doctors or the food or the ridiculous nature of Georgia medical law. So, for an accurate retelling of Caroline's condition, the visitors turned to me.

Whenever it got to be too much, I would call my wife, Kim. She wanted updates too, of course, but I didn't mind as much.

"Acute renal failure," I told her. "It just means her kidneys are shutting down. Or maybe they have shut down, I'm not clear on the difference."

"Bless her heart," Kim murmured. Something clattered over her end, like metal on metal, followed by the ratcheting sound of a socket wrench.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

"Oh, I just needed to change the mower blades. Don't worry about that. So do they know what caused it?"

I hesitated a moment to get my thoughts in order. "They haven't said. But I Googled some of the pills I found sitting around her house. One of them is a brand of potassium supplement, and it says that can cause kidney damage. Another one is a drug for rheumatoid arthritis that says 'Do not use if you are at risk of kidney disease or failure.' I'm telling you, it looks like she went too far this time."

As Kim processed the information I'd given her, the line went silent except for the clank of tools. At last she asked, "How's your dad?"

“Who knows?” I’m afraid I sounded more bitter than I intended. “You can never tell when he’s paying attention and when he’s off in Denial Land. He was telling me earlier that her potassium levels could be elevated because she loves bananas so much, and bananas have potassium. When we have a half-empty bottle of potassium supplements on her nightstand.”

“Thank God you’re there, then.”

“What does that mean?”

I could almost hear Kim’s shrug over the phone. “Your dad needs somebody along who can help him process. Caroline doesn’t have anybody in her life who tells her the truth. It sounds like you’re in the right place to help them both.”

I shook my head. “They won’t listen to me.”

“How hard have you tried? Not to point out what’s wrong with them, I mean, but to really help them?”

The harder I tried, it seemed, the more they resisted. Maybe I shouldn’t be trying to fix them, maybe I should just be trying to help. But it was Dad’s enabling that created this problem in the first place. So I had to find a way to help them without pointing out their flaws, and at the same time without enabling their destructive behavior.

Fantastic.

\*\*\*

Dr. Ndebele led me, Mom, and Dad into the hallway outside the ICU and pulled the door shut behind him, which was as much privacy as we were likely to get in a bustling hospital. As big as a professional football player, wide and thick with muscle, he spoke with a South African accent and the gentle elocution of a college professor.

“You are aware that we had to put her on an oxygen mask, correct?” We nodded, Dad only a second after I did.

“With the mask on, she became anxious,” Dr. Ndebele continued. “For a time, we had to physically hold her down in order to keep her from tearing it off her face. So we sedated her more heavily.”

“How did that work out?” My mom asked. If I didn’t know her, I would have had a hard time detecting the sarcasm.

“It did not. Even under heavy sedation, she would take the mask off her face, roll around in her bed, talk in her sleep. We were forced to put her on a ventilation machine because the sedatives did so little to help her with the mask. She showed massive resistance to the drugs.”

“How massive?” I asked. “Could you put that into perspective for me?” I knew what the doctor was getting at, but I had to make sure Dad was listening. If he heard a doctor say straight-out that something was wrong, maybe he would believe.

“The drug we have given her, it is what we use to put people under for operations.” Dr. Ndebele gestured toward his chest. “The amount she is taking could be used to put five of me under, and she is still not fully sedated. You cannot be like this if your body has not built up tremendous amounts of tolerance to medication.”

Dad kept his hands in the pockets of his jacket, shoulders hunched like he was enduring a blow. His expression never changed. He stared into the distant hallway, avoiding my mother’s glare.

I asked the doctor, “Have you ever seen something like this before?”

“Sometimes. In severe alcoholics, drug addicts. Those who abuse sedatives. In my professional opinion, this is a long-term problem caused by over-medication.”

Dad still didn't react, so I gave it one more shot. “Doctor, just to be clear, what are you saying is doing this to her?”

Dr. Ndebele shook his head. “She is doing this to herself.”

\*\*\*

Back in the waiting room, I took my father aside and stared him directly in the face. Mom seemed to sense the mood, drifting across the room to speak with our second cousin Perry.

Dad wouldn't meet my eyes, instead focusing on a spot somewhere behind me and over my left shoulder. His mouth was set in a thin, wrinkled line.

I rested one hand on his shoulder, trying to keep him grounded.

“Did you hear what the doctor said?”

“I heard him.” Only his mouth moved. His eyes kept searching the hall behind me, as if he expected someone to show up.

“Did you hear him say that Caroline's doing this to herself?”

“I heard what he said, but I still don't know what's wrong with her. You know, she's had diabetes since she was a girl.”

“Dad, engage with me on this. Did you hear the doctor say that Caroline is doing this to herself?”

Dad paused for long enough that I thought I was going to have to repeat the question a third time. Then he spoke, his voice slow and heavy with regret.

“Yeah, I heard that.”

Outwardly, I nodded and took my hand off his shoulder, but inside I sighed with relief. If he could admit what we heard, maybe he would start realizing the truth about Caroline. Then we could all move forward.

\*\*\*

Two days later, they took Caroline off the ventilation machine. Days of dialysis had taken the burden off her kidneys and allowed her to return to consciousness, though she would probably need regular dialysis for the rest of her life.

She was conscious hours after they pulled the machine from her throat, but it was a full day after that before she was stable and lucid enough for a conversation. I eased her along, sitting in her hospital room, visiting with her, fetching her nurses and drinks as requested. Meanwhile, Dad stayed with Mom in their hotel room, catching up on sleep.

More than once my sister asked me if the doctors had told me what had caused her kidneys to fail, but she was seldom that direct. She would idly wonder what the doctors may have said while she was unconscious, leaving me to fill in the blanks. Or else she would pretend that she had heard the doctor's diagnosis herself, but she was having trouble remembering, and could I remind her. They were infantile tricks, all the more pathetic coming from such an intelligent woman in her early fifties.

"They told me," I said, and left it at that. She never pressed it. She knew what the problem was as well as I did, even if she wouldn't say it out loud.

I let another day pass before I brought Mom and Dad into Caroline's room. I slid the yellowed curtain shut, casting a tan shadow over the room, but it gave us as much privacy as we

were going to get. There were others of the family I could have asked to be here, cousins and aunts and close friends, but no one had the knowledge of Caroline's history that we did.

"Caroline," I said, "you asked me if the doctors had told me what caused the renal failure. They said you've been abusing drugs."

Caroline's eyelids fluttered as if she was falling asleep, and her head lolled on her pillow. "I don't know why they'd say that," she said. Her voice was weaker than at any point since she'd come off the ventilator.

"Don't play stupid," Mom said. "You're better than that."

We confronted her with everything: the doctor's testimony, the amount of sedatives it had taken to put her under, the pills I'd found in her house, and our own years of observation. In my eyes, the evidence was overwhelming.

Unfortunately, the process also felt a great deal like ganging up on a victim. If we could have helped Caroline by providing her a list of her faults, we could have done so years ago. But we needed her to come face-to-face with herself. For her own sake.

"We just need you to admit it, Caroline," I said finally. "We already know. But we can't help you if you won't admit it. The second you come clean, I'll do everything I can to help you."

I wasn't sure I was telling the truth. I tried to imagine what I would really do to help if Caroline confessed to everything, but I couldn't picture it. Even as a momentary daydream, I couldn't believe that Caroline would really give in.

Still, Kim would have said that there was always hope. Even Dad chimed in: "We just want you to get well. I don't know why you're taking so much medicine, but the doctors say you need to stop."

Mom said nothing. Her face told us that she thought we were wasting our time, but she was here to humor her husband.

Caroline shifted her head slowly from side to side. Her lips twisted as she struggled with herself, and I held on to that one remote chance.

“I can’t admit it,” she said finally. “I can’t admit something that isn’t true. And that isn’t true.”

I would have expected her final refusal to make me angry. Instead, I almost felt relieved. I hadn’t been wrong to treat Caroline like she couldn’t be saved. No, I wasn’t wrong. She proved, time and again, that she would never change, would just keep using up those closest to her while she did whatever she wanted.

A person like that, I knew, was beyond saving. I could finally cut her loose.

\*\*\*

While he sat in the passenger seat of my car, riding down the highway, Dad made his decision.

Mom had her own car, so Dad and I discussed the obvious topic: Caroline’s immediate future. Someone needed to pick her up from the hospital when she was ready to be released, not to mention the rides to her regular dialysis treatments and the regular housekeeping duties she wouldn’t be fit to perform. She had a job as a medical consultant for a juvenile rehabilitation facility, and though she usually only worked three days a week, someone would have to drop her off and pick her up. Dad was prepared to take care of those things himself.

“She can hire someone to do that,” I said. “She’s got plenty of money.”

Dad grunted. “She doesn’t need to. I can go get her. I don’t know why she’d need to hire somebody.”

“Dad, you’re getting too old to drive yourself. It’s even more dangerous with Caroline in the car.”

“I can drive just fine.”

I decided to ignore that. “That’s not even the most important thing. We can’t keep helping her until she decides to help herself. If we do, she’s never going to get better.”

Dad snorted. “How can she help herself when they won’t even tell her what’s wrong?”

Without my approval, my hands clenched on the steering wheel. “They do know what was wrong, Dad. She’s abusing medication. She’s a drug addict. She is addicted to drugs.”

“We don’t know that.”

I wondered, not for the first time, what went on in my father’s mind. Part of the problem had to be old age, sure. But sometimes I thought that if we cut Dad’s skull open, we’d find nothing but a film reel playing the same Eastwood movie over and over.

“We do know that,” I said. “They told us. You don’t remember what that doctor said to us?”

“I remember.”

“Then tell me.”

“He said that she was on too much medication,” Dad said, and I released a heavy breath. If he could at least remember that much, maybe there was still hope. Maybe I could hang on to my father, even when I had been forced to abandon Caroline.

Then he continued. "But that wasn't her fault. She's been sick. It was those doctors, they don't know what to tell her to take."

I didn't bother to keep the astonishment out of my voice. "You don't remember him saying 'she's doing this to herself'? You don't remember that?"

He spoke without hesitation, as though I had asked him the same question a thousand times and gotten a thousand identical responses. "Nobody said that to me."

"You were right there in the room, Dad!"

"Nobody said that to me," he repeated. "These doctors don't know what they're talking about, anyway."

I almost wish it was his memory going. Sure, Alzheimer's was terrible, and I couldn't wish it on my father, but we'd had him tested more than once. That had been Caroline's idea, actually, regular check-ups to make sure that his mental slips were a function of his absent-minded personality and not something more serious. He'd taken his latest test only a little over two months ago, and the doctor insisted he wasn't affected. Somehow this was worse: he was perfectly healthy, which must mean that he refused to remember.

"Don't you realize what you're doing?" I said. "The only hope she's got is if she realizes she's got a problem. And she won't do that if we keep telling her she's fine."

Dad had started to fiddle with his phone, even though I knew he could barely see the screen in the direct sunlight. "That's fine. You don't need to help, I'll take care of her."

But who will take care of you? I thought.

In my mind I saw them again, as they had stood in Caroline's house less than a week before: each stumbling, falling, and leaning on the other for support. Neither strong enough to

hold the other up. I had tried catching them before they fell, but I hadn't helped. I had only made them more determined to try again.

My father's house was only fifteen minutes away from Caroline's, and we passed hers on the way. I forced myself not to look as we drove by.

They weren't going to stop, not on their own. I had done everything I could to change that. So this time, when they fell, there would be no one there to catch them.

## **LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER**

Rebecca Powell

June 16, 2001

I pulled my long-handled spoon out of the boiling water and rapped it on the edge, ringing that pot like a gong.

“Noodles,” I called, into the bare handful of quiet seconds my overwhelming volume had earned. A fragile blond bridesmaid hurried over with a Rigatoni box of elbow pasta. She wore a smooth teal dress, the one she wasn’t supposed to change into until just before the ceremony. I thought about telling her to get out and save her outfit for the wedding, but we were so short on hands in the kitchen we could even use hers. She had likely tossed on the dress early because she was afraid she might not get time later. Smart girl.

The bridesmaid pressed one box into my hands, then another, and I tore them open and dumped them into the murmuring pot. Boxed noodles, for a wedding. Really. They were fine for the home--my husband had the taste buds of a mud-spattered cinderblock--but I had looked forward to working with something real.

My youngest had finally decided to man up and get married, so I intended to make sure he at least enjoyed the reception. He might not take so well to the rest of married life, but there were some things even I couldn’t fix.

This spacious industrial kitchen was part of the reception building at Evergreen Chapel Methodist church, conveniently located less than half an hour from my house. In about two hours, we would all march across the parking lot to the chapel proper, there to witness the ‘Holy

Union of Mr. Stuart Powell and Ms. Caitlin Lowe, who will be Joined in the Eyes of God and in the Sight of Man.’ Afterwards, we’d flock back here for the reception.

The schedule was etched in stone harder than the Ten Commandments. I knew, because I’d helped write it. The ceremony itself was largely beyond my control, but I had my signature all over the reception. If the smallest detail failed to live up to my specifications, I was going to grease the squeaky wheel responsible until she pissed Crisco.

One of the kitchen volunteers stood over a chopping board, knife in one hand and half an onion in the other. She had taken a moment to turn, wiping her eyes with the back of her wrist and chattering away with her friend, one of the soup girls. Both laughed.

“Joanna!” I said, putting a snap into my voice that cut through the noise of the kitchen. The onion girl turned around at the sound of her name, startled. I pointed at the clock, high on the wall, and then at her chopping board. She nodded so deep it was almost a curtsy, and returned to energetically working over her vegetables.

Another member of the bridal party, a cousin I thought, hustled into the kitchen. He was fleshy and maybe fourteen. He spoke into the kitchen at large, not focusing on anyone in particular. “I’m looking for--”

I waved him over to me before he could bring his request to someone else. Chances were I could help him, and if he didn’t have a productive purpose, I could always find him an assignment.

“What do you need?” I said.

“I’m supposed to get the vegetables? For the people in the church?” He made everything sound like a question, but maybe that was just his voice.

“Not yet,” I told him, turning back to my section of the counter. I measured Cheddar Jack cheese blend into a bowl, milk into the other. The kid didn’t leave, shifting from foot to foot and trying to find something to say.

I looked at him. I didn’t have to speak. If the kid was anything approaching intelligent, he would only take another four or five seconds to realize that if he stayed, he was going to be put to work.

“Doctor Powell told me I was supposed to bring in the vegetables,” he said at last.

I dealt out a handful of paper cupcake liners into a pan, jamming my thumb into one to make sure it fit the sides of the cup properly.

“Well, I’m Doctor Powell’s mother,” I said. “And you can tell Caroline that the vegetable platters will go out with the rest of the finger food.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he muttered. Then he sulked his way out of the kitchen.

On his way into the hall, he passed Mary Lowe, the bride’s mother and a woman who looked like she should have her own cooking show. She had spray-on hair, press-on nails, half again my weight and an extra foot on my height. She beamed like a chandelier when she saw me, spreading her arms wide as if for a hug.

“Rebecca!” she called, and from the joy in her voice you would have thought it was my wedding day, not my son’s.

In reply, I sort of smiled. I’ve never had much practical use for beaming, and my smile wouldn’t light up so much as a closet.

Mary descended on me, pressing my face into her collarbone.

“Can you believe it’s finally here!” she sang. There was a note in her voice, like birdsong. I could almost call it a trill.

“No, I can’t believe it,” I said when she finally released me. Then I pretended to notice my ingredients, spread out on the counter, for the first time. “Oh, I’m sorry! I’m right in the middle of mac-and-cheese cupcakes. Let me just wrap things up here, and I’ll join you in the chapel.”

Mary laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. If I was made of flimsier stuff, or if my shoulders hadn’t been so padded, I might have stumbled forward a step. Instead I stood with my feet firmly planted and concentrated on not glaring.

“No, come join us!” Mary said. “Let one of the girls take over here. Besides, I hear your daughter has things ticking like a clock over in the chapel.”

I took the half-gallon milk jug out of my own fist before I turned it into a flat straw and a mess. “What has Caroline done?” I asked.

“Nothing, nothing. She’s just been talking to Brother Luke and the bridal party, made a few changes to the order of events. Far as I’m concerned, we’re here to celebrate. As long as those two say ‘I do’ and we all get together afterwards, I’m a happy woman.” She laughed again and slapped me on the other shoulder, presumably to even things out.

“Excuse me for a minute, Mary,” I said. “I want to have a few words with my daughter.”

“Of course,” Mary said. She immediately turned and started talking to the soup girl.

“Anna,” I called, and a cheery “Yes?” drifted through the crowd. I didn’t see her, so she must have been working in the back. Anna was a hefty redhead with an easy smile--difficult to miss--and a wit like a butterfly knife. I liked her.

“Macaroni and cheese,” I said. “I’ve got to go out for a while.”

“Say hi to Caroline for me,” Anna replied.

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The Evergreen Chapel was a kit-assembled model of everything a church should be. The windows were stained, the roof arched, and the polished pews lined with red velvet cushions. The bare wooden cross on the far wall could have built each member of the congregation a new woodshed.

For this occasion, we had outlined the hall in flowers. Starbursts of blue hydrangeas, each reaching out of a hand-crafted vase, stood on pedestals against the walls in precisely ordered rows. We had calculated their arrangement to highlight the bridal bouquet and the bridesmaids’ dresses, though I’d had to fight the florist. She had originally insisted on a ‘soft lavender bouquet, with sweet pea and pink tulips,’ but I had brought her to see reason.

And now my careful alignment of blue hydrangeas was ruined.

Caroline stood behind the pulpit as if by accident, directing a strike force of reluctant second-cousins, baffled groomsman, and anybody else she could scrape up. As I entered the chapel, one young man set the last of my decorative bouquets against the north wall, leaving the north crowded and the south bare.

“Perfect,” Caroline announced. “Now, who was supposed to attend to the vegetable platters?”

I drew myself up to my full height, which I will admit is less than impressive, and stalked forward. I am told that, when my temper is up, I have a tendency to bristle. Comparisons to angry cats are never welcome.

I made my way up the central aisle, tracing the steps that my youngest son would take in just a couple of hours. I almost prayed, then, for the strength to resist grabbing my forty-year-old daughter by the ear and dragging her off the stage, like one of those stepmothers from way too many Lifetime original movies. That would make quite the sight for the bride's party: Caitlin's new mother-in-law seizing sister-in-law by the ear, pulling her offstage, and bending her over the front pew for a spanking.

We were all adults, though, so I settled for a chill "Explain to me what you're doing, Caroline."

My daughter looked vaguely surprised that I would even have to ask. "Some of the flowers were blocking the south entrance. If our goal is to usher everyone in and out as efficiently as possible, we have to keep that entrance clear. I wouldn't want anyone to trip over a pedestal."

So that we could control the movement of our crowd, Mary Lowe and I had decided weeks ago to keep the south entrance blocked. Placing flowers on pedestals in front of the locked doors had been our way of tastefully and firmly reminding people to use the main entrance if they wished to enter or leave. Fire hazard? Sure it was. But we hadn't invited the fire marshal, and in a real emergency a few hydrangeas on a plastic stand weren't going to slow down a hundred panicked people.

Not that Caroline would have known any of that.

"I don't remember you planning this wedding," I said. "Why don't you go find Mary and see if she can find something for you to do? I think there are some mac-and-cheese cupcakes that require attention."

Caroline shook her head, pity in every line of her face. "Safety is our number one concern, Mom." She caught sight of something behind me and snapped her fingers in the air. "Stephen!" she called. "Where are those vegetable platters?"

The fleshy young man I'd seen earlier--Stephen, I guessed--shrugged as though he'd been asked the same question a thousand times, and the next person who asked him was going to get a patented fourteen-year-old outburst of temper. "Anna won't give them to me," he said. "She says she's not supposed to?"

Bless that girl. I was going to adopt her, never mind that she had been married fifteen years and had children of her own.

"My orders," I said, bringing Caroline's attention back to me.

Caroline waved one hand, taking in the whole room. "They've been working hard, and lunch isn't until one. Who's going to take care of these people?"

"I don't know," I said. "Bring me five loaves of Wonderbread and two trout and we'll see what Brother Luke can do. Barring that, stay out of my way." I kept my voice down, just in case someone didn't appreciate my blasphemy.

"You were off in the kitchen," Caroline said. "I had to take charge, unless you want this whole affair to fall apart."

"What are you, high?" I said.

Caroline's eyes died, as though she had retreated momentarily behind a doll's face. "Are you making an accusation?"

Over the past fifteen years I had resorted to everything short of kidnapping to get Caroline to give up her drugs, but even when she showed up on my doorstep with slurred speech

and bloodshot eyes, pill bottles filling her purse, she refused to admit so much as her own name. When she couldn't hide her symptoms, she blamed sudden and unpredictable illnesses that we uneducated masses couldn't possibly understand.

Then, in 1997, Caroline had attempted to self-administer a fatal overdose of sedatives. To this day, she insisted it wasn't a suicide attempt, she was just 'so desperate to cure her insomnia' that she 'went against her better medical judgment.'

Today, Caroline was as sober as Brother Luke. But she had a long way to go before she repaid the emotional stress she had caused me over the last four years. As far as I was concerned, she deserved to be reminded of what she'd done.

Sugar and honey never worked with Caroline. What she needed was a sharp prod from a long stick.

"I'm not accusing anything," I said. I didn't need to. She got the point. "But we will handle the preparations. I'm sure you can find somewhere you're needed."

My daughter sneered down at me, taking advantage of her three or four inches of extra height, and began to respond.

At that moment, the doors to the chapel crashed open, and Jon's family walked in.

Nathan, at twelve the oldest of Jon's children, pulled his foot back. Jon drew him aside, and though I couldn't make out his words, I recognized the tone of a parent lecturing a child about the proper and improper times to kick in the door.

Jon's wife, Kim, led her two daughters straight up the aisle toward me, pausing to greet a few familiar faces on her way.

Caroline and I, by unspoken truce, said nothing to one another.

Kim's wide shoulders made her look like she could carry me out of the room if she really had to, and her hair frizzed up at the slightest opportunity. I had to remind myself of her flaws each time I saw her, because otherwise I would get swept up in her usual deluge of baseless optimism. I preferred to remain rational.

"Rebecca, it's so great to see you!" she said, and I was forced to endure another embrace from a taller and stronger woman. This was a wedding, though, so I supposed I would have to tolerate a certain number of hugs.

Kim turned to face my daughter. "And Caroline, is that a new bracelet?" She flattered Caroline for a while longer before putting a hand on her forearm and steering her off the stage and down the steps.

As she walked out of the hall, Kim declared that she just had to have Caroline's advice on some personal matters. Caroline, of course, was happy to do whatever she could to help, and the two of them left the chapel practically arm-in-arm.

Optimistic she may be, but Kim wasn't stupid.

I rested my elbow on the pulpit and leaned my forehead on my palm, just for a moment. At least she was sober, but Caroline actually had the guts to start a tussling match with me now. Over the flowers, of all things. Why did I have this to deal with, on top of everything else? The ceremony could still go so wrong.

Footsteps padded up the carpeted stairs leading to the pulpit, and my son laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Tired?" he said.

I opened my eyes. Except for the glasses, Jon looked so much like his father. The spots of gray in his hair still surprised me, like he was trying to imitate Harry in some kind of prank.

“You know your sister,” I said.

“I know you,” he responded. His eyes crinkled in a sort of dry, silent laughter. He had inherited my sense of humor, which meant small and quiet. Jon rarely made jokes, and when he did, it was difficult for others to tell they were jokes at all.

I filled him in on the situation, beginning with his sister and moving backwards to all the tasks I had yet to complete.

Finally, once he had heard the complete list of my responsibilities, Jon shrugged.

“Why don’t you take some time to relax?” he said. “You can’t stop Caroline from being crazy, and this wedding is going forward with or without you.”

Without me? Without me at the wheel, this wedding would crash into a ditch before we hit the ceremony.

“No one else will step up,” I said. “Besides, someone who knows what they’re doing has to keep these others in line.”

Jon looked at me from behind his glasses. “Isn’t that what Caroline would say?”

I sometimes forgot why Jon’s siblings complained about him. Since he always followed the rules at home, I had trouble remembering what about Jon set other people off. Until times like this, when I had no trouble at all.

I stepped up under Jon’s chin. If I so much as nodded, my hair would slap him in the face. “You listen to me. Caroline has no authority and no business here. If I tell people what to

do, it's for their good. Take your father. He was wandering around, getting in the way, until I set him folding napkins in the dining room.”

Jon paused halfway through adjusting his glasses. “We just came through the dining room, and I didn't see Dad. We came here looking for him.”

If I shrieked like a bat in hell, I would embarrass the extended family. They were starting to pile in like rats into a rusted-out dumpster, and several second cousins waved at me from the velvet-cushioned pews. I forced myself into a pleasant mask and nodded to Jon, narrowly avoiding sweeping Jon's face with the top of my hairdo.

“If you will excuse me,” I said, and hurried down the stage.

Behind me, Jon sighed.

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The dining room had more in common with a thirty-year-old school cafeteria than with the chapel. The windows were plain glass and set high enough in the walls to make me think they were intended to prevent escape. The round folding tables set out around the room had been covered with pastel-colored paper tablecloths, and one long row of mismatched tables at the back would hold the food.

Three of the tables had bundles of silverware already. Only three. The fourth was half-set, four places with napkins and utensils both, but the center of the table held all the rest of the silverware, mounded like an anthill. Someone had abandoned his task less than halfway through, despite instructions to the contrary.

Ordinarily, I would have been fit to spew magma at anyone who had failed to carry out my orders completely. This time, I was torn between the volcanic dragon of my temper and an undertow of worry.

Harry had always been what we called an ‘absent-minded professor.’ On our honeymoon he had booked a hotel room early, forgotten that he had done so, and reserved a second room the night before our wedding. Same hotel. In fact, the second reservation was right down the hall from the first.

At the time, I had thought it hilarious, and we had spent half of our time shuttling back and forth between one room and the other so that we got our money’s worth out of both. Four decades later, I wasn’t laughing anymore. He had gotten worse.

Was this the same Harry who had once forgotten to pack a second pair of pants on a family vacation? Or was old age catching up to him far too early?

I found him down the hall from the dining room, inside a door decorated with crayon portraits of what I took to be Jesus and his disciples. A Sunday school classroom. There was a TV high in one corner of the room.

Harry sat on the corner of a desk with his back to the door, feet dangling over the edge, back straight and arms pressed down as if he was trying to keep himself from overbalancing and falling over. On the television, Gilligan listened to the Professor explain his latest bamboo invention.

“Harry, what are you doing here?” I said. My voice was stern, I’m sure, because it usually is, but I couldn’t muster up enough heat for anger.

“Watching TV,” he said, without turning around.

I reminded myself to treat him like I would my seven-year-old granddaughter. “I asked you to set the table,” I said.

“We’ve got plenty of time until the reception. I don’t see why you need it done now.”

Ah, there was my anger. I’d almost missed it.

“Harry, this is your son’s wedding. If you don’t care enough to pitch in and help, then who will?”

He still wasn’t listening, so I moved to stand between him and the television. The room was just dark enough that I could see the ghost of Gilligan in his eyes as he stared up, still not looking me in the face.

“Come with me,” I said, as gently as I could.

“Where’s Stuart?”

Talking with Harry could be confusing, sometimes. He tended to switch tracks in the middle of a discussion. Sometimes his reason for changing topics became clear later, and you realized he had seen a conversational path you never considered. Sometimes he had no reason, and his mind had just switched to something he found more interesting.

“Stuart is getting ready to be married,” I told him.

“Let me talk to him,” he said. “If I have something I need to do, I want him to tell me.”

I didn’t bother to stop my voice from catching fire this time. “Stuart does not have time to see to you this morning. Your job is to set the table.” I had given him that job to keep him occupied and away from the people with important tasks, but he didn’t need to know that. Besides, it clearly hadn’t worked.

“He needs to hear from me,” Harry said, and he looked straight at me for the first time that day. His eyes were clear and focused, but distant, as if he were ignoring the road under his feet in favor of heading straight for a distant mountaintop.

“Stuart won’t be able to see you until after he gets ready,” I said. “But after that, you won’t have time to set out the silverware. Why don’t you take care of that first, and then we can wait on Stuart together?”

Harry looked at me for a while, abacus clacking away behind his eyes. Then at last he nodded and slid awkwardly off the top of the desk.

“Very good,” I said. Someone would need to keep an eye on Harry. And I was sure Caroline had found some way to start handing out orders again. At least I didn’t have to worry about my sons, since they seemed to have themselves under control this morning.

I just had to babysit my husband, restrain my daughter, and somehow keep the wedding from collapsing into anarchy. Who had pushed all this responsibility onto me? If only someone else would step up, for a change, I would have been happy to follow orders. But no one knew what orders to give, so I was stuck at the rudder.

Stuart had better appreciate this.

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When I returned, Anna had the mac-and-cheese cupcakes sprinkled with ground Ritz and ready to go into the oven. Someone had added twice as much water as necessary to the soup, which called for quick and liberal use of spices and leftover squash. No one had thought to make a batch of unsweetened iced tea, for a little variety, and some of the frozen food had not thawed properly before making its way into the oven.

Anna knew what orders to give and what decisions to make, but she couldn't be everywhere, and I had almost forty years of cooking experience on her. Besides, it was my son's wedding, and I had no choice but to make sure mealtime ticked like a clock.

At the one-hour mark, I went looking for Stuart. I had seen to the food as best I could, and made sure that all the kitchen help knew what they had to face if anything came out less than delectable. Stuart and Caitlin had been sequestered separately all morning, and while I knew the bride's party was keeping her company, I heard whispers that Stuart had locked himself in an empty classroom alone.

The last symptoms of bachelor-itis, they said. Wedding jitters. Cold feet.

This looked like a job for Mom.

I didn't take long to find the right room. A small cloud of chuckling groomsmen were happy to set me on the correct path. When I walked up to the door, I immediately rattled the handle. Locked.

"Stuart, open up," I said.

No response.

"It's your mother."

Nothing.

Fortunately, I had prepared for this possibility in advance. Brother Luke had a master key to the facility, and Brother Luke was married to my first cousin. For today, I had a master key.

Wisely, the doorknob put up little resistance after that.

The room where Stuart had shut himself wasn't a classroom, after all. It was some kind of storage room, with blue-cushioned metal chairs stacked in towers six high against the walls.

Tables of all kinds--folding tables, card tables, kitchen tables, end tables, ping-pong tables--filled the middle of the room, some nesting on or under one another, creating a sort of island.

My youngest son, in a black suit he had bought himself, lay sprawled across the center of that island. He was face-down on the white line of a ping-pong table, his waist twisted and his arms stretched out in front of him as if he had run out of strength in the middle of a dry-land breaststroke. He gave no sign that he had noticed me enter, so I moved forward in silence.

As I got closer, I saw the thin shine of sweat covering his forehead. His eyes were shut. Was he sleeping on his wedding day? He must have been more nervous than I thought. Why had no one come to see him before this? Sure, I had turned Harry away from visiting his son, but if I had known Stuart was this bad I would have come myself.

Like a sleepwalker, Stuart raised one arm toward his face, tilting his lips back to receive it. As he did, I saw what he held in his right hand: a wide silver flask.

I don't remember crossing the room or slapping the flask from my son's hand, but I must have. I remember clearly the flask spinning like a Frisbee, spraying a clear liquid over the room like an out-of-control garden hose.

Stuart jerked up with a start, and I saw that he hadn't been sleeping after all. His hair had hidden the black plastic band of the headphones he was wearing, and his arms had covered up his ears. He tore the set of headphones from his head and tossed the CD player onto the table beside him without bothering to pause it. At this distance, the song leaking out sounded like a ghost choir of Latin-chanting monks.

"Eighteen months clean," I said. That was all I could choke out.

Guilt was stamped all over Stuart's face, which was a good sign. Even as a kid, he had always tried to hide when he was feeling guilty. At least he knew that he had done wrong.

"No, wait, I'm, don't worry," he said, his words tripping over himself. Then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and visibly re-focused. "I'm not drunk. I'm still sober."

I couldn't tell if he was telling the truth. His unsteady words could have come from surprise at having me slap the flask from his hand, and Lord knew he had enough reason to be nervous this morning. But I wasn't about to let him slip out of my sights.

"Today," I said. "Today of all days. Look at yourself. What would Caitlin say, if she could see you?"

Stuart flinched and pressed the heel of his hand over his left eye, as though he only had half of a vision he needed to block out. "I was nervous. I was just nervous, and one of the guys let me have a little bit."

I would find whichever groomsman had slipped him the flask if I had to Sherlock Holmes his fingerprints. Stuart had taken fifteen years longer than he should have to get to this day, but he was here at last, and no one would take that away from me.

"I should have seen this coming," I said. It was my fault, really. I had left my family to their own devices, thinking they could take care of themselves. "Even Caroline cleaned herself up today, but not you."

Stuart looked like I had hit him with a blowdart in the neck. Maybe I had gone too far--it was his wedding day, after all--but he was the one who ought to be ashamed. Not me.

Before either of us said anything more, Jon walked in. His eyes flicked to the flask in the corner, to me, to Stuart, back to me again.

“Looks like I’m just in time,” he said. “Again. Mom, could I talk to you for a moment, please?”

Well, I could show a little mercy and let Stuart marinate in his own juices for a while. Maybe Jon would know what to say to his brother.

When I reached the door, Jon asked me to stay put. He walked over to speak with Stuart, saying something I didn’t quite catch. Then he knelt, scooped up the flask, screwed the top back on, and slipped the whole thing into his chest pocket. The jacket bulged a bit, but I didn’t think enough to show up in the wedding pictures.

Jon led me by the arm out of the room and into the hallway, positioning me so that I couldn’t see into the room, while he had a clear line of sight on Stuart. I accepted this for the moment, assuming that he had a good reason, but I gave him a look that meant I knew what he was up to and I didn’t approve.

He matched me stare for stare, a new habit of his that I didn’t like. “What are you doing?” he said.

“Did you see him? On his own wedding day!”

“What are you doing?” he repeated.

“Everything!” I didn’t bother to keep my voice down. It was time somebody recognized what I was doing for this family. “All I wanted was to stay in the kitchen and keep to myself, but without me we’d have no soup, no hors d’oeuvres, and the building would probably burn down. Your sister thinks she runs the world, and I’m the only one who stands up to her, and if I didn’t sit on him, your father would have wandered home already. And let’s not even get started on your brother! Drinking at his own wedding, after more than a year!”

Jon placed both his hands on both my shoulders. He meant it as a pacifying gesture, I'm sure, but he had the unintended effect of reminding me how much taller and stronger he was. I stood as straight as I could, almost by reflex.

"I have a job for you," Jon said. "I don't think you can handle it."

"Don't you think I have enough to do?" I said. What I thought was, What does he mean I can't handle it?

Jon tightened his grip on my shoulders, just slightly. "Here's my job for you: do nothing. Go have a seat in the chapel. Talk with the family. I don't care what you do, but leave the wedding alone."

I pushed his hands off of me. "There's too much to do."

"But not for you," he said. "You planned this, and I'm sure you did a great job. But now your part is done. Sit back and relax."

Relax, he was telling me. Relax, and let other people do what I could do better. Let some stranger put her signature all over the wedding I had designed for my son.

"I'll have plenty of time to rest after the reception," I said.

"Caroline was driving you crazy earlier, right?"

"That's one way to say it."

"Why?"

Because she was conniving, manipulative, and controlling, and she couldn't keep her hands out of other people's business. "She was rearranging flowers that I had--"

Jon cut me off. “She was giving orders where she didn’t need to be, right? Telling you what to do, even though you were perfectly capable of doing it yourself. I bet she told herself she was just trying to do what needed to be done.”

I knew where he was going, where he had steered the conversation this whole time, but Caroline’s situation and mine were totally different. She had never been involved with planning the wedding from the beginning, she just wanted to feel involved in the eleventh hour. She wanted to feel involved, but more than that, she wanted to feel in control.

The thought made me furious.

“Don’t you dare compare me to Caroline!” I said.

He put his face close to mine. “Then show me you’re different.”

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I had to practically duct tape my mouth shut and handcuff myself to my pew, but I did nothing else to help Stuart’s wedding. The ceremony started twenty minutes late, when nobody could find Brother Luke and we found out he had run out of gas six blocks from his house. I carefully did not ask why no one had thought to look for him two hours before. During the ceremony, one of the ring-bearers tried to hand the ring to her father as she passed his pew. The family laughed when he put the ring back on its cushion and reminded his daughter of her directions in a hasty whisper.

Obviously no one had thought to make sure she understood her instructions clearly. I would never have made that mistake.

Jon had done a wonderful job cleaning his brother up: the sweat was missing, his suit had been straightened, and his skin even had a healthy color. I wondered idly how Jon had managed.

Once Stuart had the ring on his finger--I almost shed a tear, if only out of sheer relief--and we all stood, nobody told the milling crowd where to go. I had my hands raised to clap and signal for their attention, to tell them to head straight to the reception hall, but Jon caught my eye.

He held me in place for a moment, with a look he had surely stolen from my arsenal. Then he looked away.

Fine. I would show him that I was capable of holding my tongue still. Later, we would have a talk about showing proper respect to his parents, no matter how old he got.

Enough people knew where to go that, eventually, the crowd filtered across the parking lot on its own. The mac-and-cheese cupcakes were cool, the vegetable platters too warm and almost soggy.

The tables were set, though, and when Caroline ordered one family to get up and switch tables with another for no clear reason, they seemed not to mind.

After about twenty minutes, the wedding photography for the new couple was completed, and Stuart and Caitlin came through the doors of the reception hall, arm-in-arm. Caitlin was built along the same lines as her mother, Mary. Tall and striking ran in the family, and since Caitlin lacked the extra hundred pounds her mother had picked up, she did her wedding dress proud.

Stuart and his wife separated as they entered, Stuart sinking into a chair next to one of his friends, and Caitlin flitting around the room like a hummingbird, sampling a compliment from one table and a bit of conversation from the next before moving on.

When she reached my table, she said nothing before grabbing me by both arms and hauling me out of my chair, crushing my face to her chest.

“Mom told me about all the work you did for the wedding,” she said, holding me out to arm’s length. “I can’t tell you how good it is to know you’re looking out for us.”

Once I caught my breath, I responded, “I just wish we had something better for you. There were a few things that we couldn’t quite catch, but we tried our best.”

Modesty was the best makeup, and if she asked around she would find out that none of the little aches and pains around the reception had been my fault.

Caitlin laughed, and I discovered that beaming was another trait she had picked up from her mother. “We’re through, and everybody’s here. We could have Taco Bell and cupcakes, and I’d be thrilled.”

Like mother, like daughter, I supposed. She zipped from table to table, trading laughter and stories, never stopping for more than a bite to eat. At his table, Stuart had barely touched his plate, but he finished a story with wide, wild gestures and his friends all laughed.

I allowed the knotted muscles in my back to loosen, relaxing into my chair. Just a bit. For a short time, maybe, I could take a bench seat and watch as my children managed their own lives. I might even keep my mouth shut.

## STANDOFF

Harold Powell

July 11, 1994

The surviving bandit presses the barrel of his revolver against the nun's cheek. He screams insults and curses up the hill, jeers and taunts echoing from the surrounding rocks. The nun trembles without a word, probably thinking that her remaining lifespan will be measured in seconds. A handful of heartbeats left, dying one by one.

Clint Eastwood calmly lights a cigar.

I leaned back into my couch, hands laced over my belly. I knew what would happen next. I'd first seen *Two Mules for Sister Sara* in theaters twenty-five years ago, when my son Jon was a boy. Eight years old, he barely understood the story, but that didn't matter. Like any kid his age, he had gotten his kicks out of watching a cowboy shoot the bad guys.

Since I bought the movie on tape, I'd watched it five times. This made six. Modern movies were too fast-paced, so that nobody could tell what was going on, or else they didn't have enough action. Only Westerns had that perfect blend.

Ignoring the bandit's threats, Clint pulls a stick of dynamite from his vest and presses the end of his cigar to the fuse. It takes a moment for the fuse to light, but Clint's in no hurry. He looks at the sparking fuse for a moment, fearless, before casually tossing it over his shoulder and down the hill.

The terrified bandit fires a few wild shots into the sky before abandoning his target and running scared, proverbial tail tucked firmly between his legs. At the sound of boots on sand,

Clint turns and puts four bullets into the coward's back. The good guy wins again, and the bandits rot in the desert sun.

My doorbell rang.

I fumbled around for the clicker until I found the pause button, so I didn't miss a second more of the movie than I had to. Not that anybody should have bothered me at that time of the evening. Decent folks should be cleaning up after dinner or getting ready for bed.

I hauled myself off the couch--it took more effort than it used to--and stretched out my back before I headed over to answer the door. If they could bother me during my movie, they could stand to wait a few extra seconds.

My wife Rebecca walked into the living room from the hallway. Judging by the gray sweatshirt she held crumpled in one hand, it must have been laundry day.

"Who is it, Harry?" she asked.

"How am I supposed to know?" I said. "I haven't answered the door yet."

She clicked her tongue and waved the sweatshirt at me. "Well, hurry up."

I made an impatient noise in my chest. My wife hated when I 'Grunted like an animal instead of speaking like a human being,' but I didn't do it to annoy her. Sometimes you just couldn't express everything in words.

I walked over and pulled the door open.

Caroline, my daughter, stood on the other side of the front door, leaning against the doorpost. She'd put on some weight lately. Her hair hung, stringy and limp, down her shoulders, and, when she smiled, she showed me a mouthful of coffee-stained teeth.

“Hey, Dad,” she said. “My car is pretty much defunct.” Her voice sounded slurred and drawn-out. Maybe she’d been in an accident. I didn’t see any cuts or bruises, but they say that the worst damage in an accident doesn’t show up until a day or two later. She looked a little unsteady on her feet, and she might have been sweating. Could have been head trauma, I supposed.

I glanced over her shoulder at her car, sitting in our driveway. She’d bought the red BMW six months ago on her salary as a new doctor. She was so proud. My brother owned a Chevrolet dealership, and I’d gotten each of my kids a half-price Chevy whenever they needed a car. Caroline had bought this car to show me something. Maybe to show that she could take care of herself, or that she didn’t need my help, or that she had more sophisticated tastes than the rest of us. As if I didn’t know those things already. Caroline had a good life ahead of her, and a better chance than the rest of us.

Even by moonlight, I could tell that the car had been wrecked. The windshield’s crack caught the light, and a dent on the passenger door cupped the shadows like a shallow cave. A scratch ran down the side, winding like a crooked tree branch.

“What happened to your car?” I asked.

“Sabotage,” she responded. “The latest in a campaign of persecution.” Caroline gave me another smile, but her eyes never stopped moving, and she sounded as if she was about to cry. Something was definitely wrong. If she had hit her head, he needed to get her to the hospital as soon as possible. But then, she was the doctor. She would know that. Unless she was confused, rattled by the accident.

“Let her in!” Rebecca demanded from behind me, and I realized I’d been keeping my injured daughter out in the night. I stepped back to let her come in, but she had to lean hard on my shoulder to keep from losing her balance.

“Lay down on the couch,” I suggested, and Caroline followed my advice, taking my usual place across from the TV. She turned to face Eastwood, who was frozen walking down a hill toward the sobbing nun. Discolored lines from the video tape sliced the cowboy into thirds, tore into the nun just above the neck of her habit.

My wife crossed her arms, looking down on her daughter. I hadn’t seen the gray sweatshirt vanish from her hands, but now it was draped neatly over the back of her armchair. She probably didn’t trust herself to carry anything she might use to switch me, or maybe Caroline.

“What is wrong with you, Caroline?” Rebecca asked.

“I’m not feeling well. And now, with my car...” Caroline reached one hand into the air, slowly grabbing and releasing something I couldn’t see, like an infant newly placed into its cradle.

“I don’t buy that for an instant,” Rebecca said. “What are you on?” Caroline may have been halfway through with her thirties, but Rebecca had a way of treating her like a twelve-year-old. Not me. Come to think of it, Caroline had won a spelling bee when she was twelve years old, earning her way to the state competition. She had caught bronchitis the night before she was supposed to go onstage. She laid on the couch just like this, begging me between coughs to get her better so that she could compete. I’d handed her a glass of water and a couple of pills, and told her that her health was more important than anything else.

“I’m not on anything,” Caroline insisted. “Just my diabetes medication.”

“What happened to your car, Caroline?” I asked, trying to change the subject. Why was Rebecca pushing the issue? She had to see that her daughter wasn’t feeling well.

Rebecca huffed and walked out the front door, most likely going to check out the car for herself. But Caroline gave me a grateful look.

“It was Stuart,” she said. “Stuart messed up my car. I loaned it to him for the weekend, but when I picked it up tonight, he had demolished it. It was demolished. He demolished my car.” Caroline burrowed deeper into the couch. She didn’t sound upset, just careful, as if she were tasting each word before it left her mouth.

“Why did he do that?” I asked. Stuart wouldn’t do something like this. Would he? He was the least responsible of my kids, but he wouldn’t do something to hurt his sister.

“He hates me,” she said sleepily. “He always has. He’s drunk all the time, and he probably does drugs.” Her voice drifted off as if she were losing consciousness right in front of me. She lay still on the couch, eyes closed, breathing slow and even. It’d been twenty years since I had last watched one of my children sleep.

The front door slammed open and Rebecca walked in, holding up one hand triumphantly. When she got closer, I could see what she was holding: two orange cylinders.

Without a word she handed them over to me. Two medications, each prescribed by Dr. Caroline Powell to two different people.

“Glove compartment,” Rebecca said. Then she turned to her daughter, gesturing to the medicine. “Why do you have these, Caroline?”

Caroline said nothing. Her eyes never opened.

“She’s asleep, Rebecca,” I said. “Leave her alone.”

Rebecca snatched the medicines back from me and rattled them under my chin. “She’s high, Harry. She’s coming to our house high. The three of us need to talk in the morning, I’m telling you.”

“She’s a doctor. I’m not surprised that she’s got some medicine in her car.”

“These are for other people,” Rebecca said. “Doctors don’t deliver. And look at her!” She stabbed a finger at the couch. “Nobody falls asleep that fast! She’s been slurring her words since she walked in here.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” I said. “Maybe she was just sleepy.” Rebecca was grasping at straws, trying to see the worst in her daughter. I couldn’t imagine why. Caroline’s first toys, besides her books, had come in a black plastic doctor’s bag. I would be sitting in my armchair, watching the news, and she’d toddle over to me, press her little stethoscope to my knee, and hold it there for maybe fifteen, twenty seconds. “All better!” she’d say. “All better, Daddy!”

Rebecca should remember those days, too.

“You just keep your eyes shut, then, if you can’t use ‘em,” she said. “Your daughter is thirty-five years old, coming to her parents for help, and she’s high!” Rebecca stepped closer to me, the top of her hair just above my nose. “She is a grown woman,” Rebecca went on, “and she should be dealing with her own problems, not running from them. Again! She comes to us every time she screws up, and expects us to bail her out. We can’t keep on doing that, Harry. You know we can’t.”

“You’re right,” I said. “She’s a grown woman. But that doesn’t mean we can’t help her when she needs it.” I decided not to respond to what she’d said about drugs. Some topics were better to avoid.

“And what does it look like, helping her?” Rebecca asked.

“I don’t know. I could take the car to Bowie, get it fixed.”

Rebecca had the gray sweatshirt back. She kneaded it like she was trying to squeeze blood from the cotton. “How would that help Caroline, Harry?”

I tried to sidestep the question. “She says Stuart did it.”

“And you believe her?”

I wasn’t sure what to think, but for the purposes of this conversation, I was willing to pretend. “Now, why would she lie about that?”

The sweatshirt was twisted into a tight rope now, but Rebecca still gave a pointed look at the door that did better than an outstretched finger. “I suggest,” she said, “that you find out.”

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For now, my son Stuart lived on the northwest edge of Marietta, out by Elizabeth. The house he’d rented with his latest girlfriend--Martha? Marla? Maria?--was the kind of place I had tried to avoid in the years after I left the Air Force. The outside walls were a shade of green that might once have been yellow, and if Stuart pulled all the weeds in the yard he might not have anything left to mow. The fence of rotten planks that encircled the sides and back looked to have been built for containing Rottweilers, or else concealing crimes. Still, at least he was in a real house now, and not an apartment. He had finally stepped up, made a real effort to join society. Like his brother and sister.

Night had well and truly fallen, but I knew Stuart would still be awake. I rang his doorbell and waited, wishing it were cool enough for a jacket so I could have someplace to casually rest my hands.

After about thirty seconds, I rang the bell again, and my son pulled the door open like he'd been waiting for my second try. Well, he started to pull the door open. Apparently it wasn't a simple process. Three doors stood in my way: a screen door, a cheap white metal one, and a heavy wooden door shut with a deadbolt. Stuart first wrestled with the bolt for a while, then he couldn't seem to undo the catch on the metal door in the middle. Even the screen door, secured by a rusty hook into a homemade hole, took him a moment of contemplation to open.

While he worked, I stayed silent. There would be plenty of time to say my piece once I got inside.

Stuart usually looked something like me when I was his age: average height, wiry, short brown hair with a little bit of a curl. But now he looked like I had the morning after I rolled my truck in a ditch. He wore nothing but white briefs, mismatched socks, and sweat, with marks under his eyes that could have been dark circles or bruises. Once he managed to tame his doors, he leaned with one hand against the doorframe, exactly like his sister had an hour earlier.

Stuart held a bottle in his free hand, letting it dangle from his fingertips.

"Dad," Stuart said hoarsely. That was all. Then he blinked as if finally remembering how.

"Hey, how are you?" I said by rote. He didn't respond. "Can I come in?"

He stood back to let me enter. Dust carpeted the tile floor of Stuart's entry hall, tiny rolling balls of blue-grey that stirred into a new pattern when I stepped inside. Cardboard boxes, their flaps open to embrace the ceiling, lined the wall. The box nearest me was filled with the

sort of random collection that I would expect from a young man moving: a desk lamp pressed up next to a pile of books, the gap between them filled by a crumpled-up hoodie. The book on the top declared, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* There was dust on that, too.

The hallway soon opened up into Stuart's kitchen/living room combo. The air tasted like dish soap and charred popcorn, and the refrigerator rattled like a dying maraca. I couldn't see a spare inch of counter space. A short stack of spaghetti-stained plates stood next to the sink, sharing pride of place with a pile of screws, bolts, and metal strips. After a moment the curved edge of one particular metal plate resolved itself in my mind, and I recognized the pile of parts as a dismantled toaster oven. Their table was brown aluminum, portable, and made for folding up and carrying to card games, its surface all but hidden under a forest of beer bottles, thickets of crumpled chip bags, and fields of old newspaper spread to catch spills.

The living room half, just beyond the kitchen counter, mostly held a few chairs--none matching--arranged in a half-circle around a TV. The television was the only item in the room that seemed not to need a good dusting.

Stuart swept through the kitchen and sank into a padded armchair, holding the glass bottle against his temple. I chose not to sit.

"You're here, so I guess you heard from Caroline," he said.

"Yeah, somebody banged up her car."

Stuart gave a laugh that sounded like it came from an older, wearier man. "I'll bet somebody did."

I shuffled in place for a moment, trying to keep from sounding accusatory, but there was no way around what I'd come to say. "Well, she says she thinks you did it."

“That sounds like her,” Stuart said. “She runs to Mommy and Daddy and blames little brother for breaking her toy.” He shook his head so slowly, I almost thought he was just stretching his neck.

“Who messed up her car, then?” I asked.

“She probably did it herself.”

“Now why would she do that?”

Stuart stared at me as though he couldn’t understand what I was saying. “Dad, she is high all the time. Not just, like, some of the time. All the time. She’s got a pill to put her to sleep, a pill to wake her up, a pill to get her through work...”

I wasn’t going to listen to this any longer. “That’s enough of that,” I said. “She’s a doctor. And she says the same things about you, says you’re drunk all the time.”

“Not drunk now,” Stuart said. “Hungover. I just got up an hour ago.”

Rebecca and Jon complained about Stuart and his drinking sometimes, but I didn’t see how it was any of my business. He was a grown man, and he could drink what he wanted. Besides, Stuart had settled into his irresponsible lifestyle, like a raccoon burrowing into the garbage. I liked to think Stuart and I had an unstated understanding. As long as I left him alone and didn’t look too closely, he would never bottom out too badly. No, I didn’t have to worry about Stuart.

“Well,” I said, trying to stay on topic, “if you didn’t do it, I guess she must have just gotten in an accident.”

“I’m telling you who did it, Dad,” he said. He took another swig from the bottle in his left hand and grimaced.

He was blaming Caroline, I knew that, but I refused to consider the possibility. There was no chance, not really. She had once owned a little hobby horse, its broom handle body spray-painted chestnut, and little strips of leather for a mane. She would gallop around downstairs for hours, and whenever the horse bumped its stuffed-sock nose, she rubbed and patted the wound. She stole sugar cookies and crumbled them up, pretending to feed them to her mount so he would feel all better.

“It was probably just an accident,” I said. Then I realized something that I hadn’t noticed since I walked in. “Where’s your girlfriend?” I asked.

Stuart waved his bottle through the air.

“She’s gone away,” he said. “That’s why I borrowed Caroline’s car. Mine’s in the shop, and her new apartment is right down the street from Caroline’s house. We had to move most of her stuff out over the weekend. The rest goes next week.”

When Stuart was seven, maybe eight, he had dropped a wet blue pipe cleaner down the back of a little girl’s shirt at church. His Sunday school teacher had marched him up to me, her face stern, but Stuart giggled and told me proudly what he had done. “She was really scared, Dad,” he’d said. “I wish I could scare every girl in the world!” Four or five years later, I heard him promising the Heidecker sisters that, when he grew up, he was going to marry both of them. I had been so sure that he would be the one of my children most certain to settle down and start a family.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said to him.

Stuart shrugged and laughed, but there was a bitter edge to the sound I tried not to think about. Maybe he was just tired.

“Not worried about it,” he said. “Probably better off without her, right?”

There wasn't much I could say to that, so I moved back to a slightly safer topic.

“Caroline's car. Was it banged up when you left it?”

Stuart shook his head, then winced and held the brown bottle back up to his temple. “It was fine when I gave it back to Caroline, Dad. I'm sure it was.”

He could have been lying. No one was likely to just admit to committing a crime, after all. Even if he wasn't lying, he still might not be the most reliable witness. I had only been blackout drunk a couple of times, but once I had managed to get a 1955 Harley Davidson onto the roof of a Sears in Warner Robins, Georgia. The next day I'd sworn, honestly, that I had nothing to do with it. Only eyewitness testimony had convinced me otherwise. Maybe Stuart had just been stupid or irresponsible, and didn't want to own up.

I shook the traitorous thoughts away. What kind of father was I, doubting my own children? They deserved better from me. If they couldn't rely on me to take their side when they needed me, then I just wasn't doing my job.

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The next morning, I woke up early and took Caroline's keys from her purse.

My brother Bowie owned a Chevy dealership now, and that was his main source of income. But he'd started off at an auto body shop, and once he'd earned himself a little money, he had come back and bought the whole garage. He even pitched in himself every once in a while, just to keep his skills sharp. ‘Gotta keep a little grease on my hands,’ that was how he put it. If he couldn't help me, he would at least point me in the right direction.

When he saw me he gave me a smile and a firm handshake, taking Caroline's keys and sitting me down with a solid "For my niece? Don't even worry about it."

My friends back in college would have called that nepotism--come to think of it, Caroline probably would, too--but, in our family, that was just the way things worked. He actually had another car, a black 1967 Chevy Impala, rolled out of his garage to make room for Caroline's BMW.

"They're in no hurry," he said, gesturing to the other customer's car. "Among other things, somebody let the air out of their tires, bent the rims. Some people. Anyway, we'll put Caroline at the front of the line. Minor body damage like this, windshield replacement...as long as you're not looking for mint condition, we'll have it done by early afternoon."

In six hours, he had the car fixed. Dents hammered out, paint buffed and waxed, windshield replaced. If it wasn't good as new, the car was still better than half of what Bowie had on his lot.

I drove the car home, satisfied. The car had been fixed, and now Caroline didn't have anything to complain about.

When I pulled into the carport, Caroline was waiting for me. She seemed in much better shape than last night, smiling when she saw me and spreading her arms as if to embrace her newly repaired car.

"I don't know what to say," she said, once I had parked and left the car.

"Well, Bowie fixed it up for me," I said. "Not much to it. I think it looked worse than it was." With her happy like this, and the car fixed, I could almost imagine that nothing out of the ordinary had happened the night before.

Caroline swept me up in a hug. Her long, baggy shirt--left over here in case she ever needed to spend the night--still smelled like her dog. "Thanks, Dad," she said. "You're the patron saint of generosity."

She smiled again, but I felt a tiny prick of guilt. Caroline knew she could always count on me for help, and I should be glad of that. But something Rebecca had said made me wonder. Helping Caroline, really helping her...what would that look like?

I pushed Caroline away, just a bit, so that I could look her in the eyes. "Hey Caroline," I said. "What happened to your car?"

She seemed startled for a moment, but she recovered quickly. "Oh, that," she said. "I got a little lethargic driving home from work the other night, a little careless. Drove my car into the woods. I'm fortunate I didn't wrap my car around a tree."

That made sense. Accidents happened to everyone, and even Caroline couldn't be careful all the time. Didn't matter how smart you were when you ran your car off the road. I begged myself to accept her story, and last week I would have. Without question or reservation.

"Yesterday, you told me Stuart did it," I said.

Caroline waved a hand. "Oh, that. I was a bit disoriented from the crash, and I had something of an argument with Stuart this weekend. Just a little shaken up, that's all. I wasn't aware of what I was saying."

Again, I knew I should let her go. I felt like an intruder, like one of those abusive druggie fathers in the movies who can't trust his own children. But I had to push just a little farther. Now, where it was just me and Caroline, while we were still safe from outside interference.

“Your mother says you were on drugs,” I said. I wanted to look away, but I kept my eyes on her face.

Caroline sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, the picture of a long-suffering doctor besieged by patients who just didn’t understand what she was trying to say. “I have certain medications that I need to have on hand,” she said. “For my diabetes, and a few other conditions. Just in case of emergency. Don’t worry, I have everything well under control.”

“The medicine we found, it wasn’t prescribed to you. It belonged to strangers. Why was that in your car?” I picked up a hammer, sitting on the carport workbench, and turned it over in my hands as if searching for a crack. I couldn’t seem to keep my hands still, and if I had something else to work with, I wouldn’t have to look Caroline in the face.

Caroline’s tone turned amused. “Don’t worry, Dad, I know what I’m doing. Sometimes I have to bring medicine to a patient, or else a patient has a dangerous dependency and they rely on me to dispose of the medication. They don’t know what else to do, and I’m the one they turn to for solutions.”

She had a clear answer for everything, so I let the conversation drop. I was more comfortable that way, anyway. But I was already haunted by doubts, doubts a good father shouldn’t have.

Every Sunday I would go over the finances for the Evergreen Chapel Methodist Church, filing and recording expenses as well as balancing the budget and looking for discrepancies. It was messy. People made mistakes. Sometimes a simple transcription error, a clerk writing expenses down on a cocktail napkin so she would remember them later, might result in a

dropped zero or a four dressed as a nine. If I didn't catch it, that mistake could cost the church thousands of dollars. Errors were messy, and they were part of life.

But lies were clean. The only times I had seen perfect records, with every digit accounted for and every dollar in its place, were the times when someone had something to hide. Brother Isaac, a former minister at the church, had used his access to church funds to finance a year-long affair. He must have spent hundreds of hours making sure all his records added up. And Marian Walters, a young woman who used to be part of the congregation, she used to count the tithe. But every week, she would take a handful of loose change. Only sixty-three cents here, a quarter and a dime there. So little that no one would notice that their quarterly tithe statements came back a bit lighter than they should have. Especially since Marian made sure to record our altered income meticulously. She never missed a week. We always thought she was more devoted to an accurate decimal point than to God.

Only diligent research, a tireless dedication to the pursuit of truth, could uncover numbers that had been so carefully hidden. The errors weren't obvious, which meant they were worse, like intestinal bleeding compared to a paper-cut.

Inquisitions like that, though, were painful, awkward, and they required a thousand intrusive questions. And Caroline was my daughter.

She must have a good reason.

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Only an hour after Caroline drove away from my house, the phone rang.

I was slathering mayonnaise over wheat bread at the time, and not much inclined to stop. The machine would get it, if Rebecca didn't pick up one of the other receivers, and my sandwich had consumed the bulk of my attention.

"Harry," my wife called from upstairs, "can you get that? I've got bleach on my hands."

I grunted, even though she couldn't hear me, and considered just letting the call go to the machine. But she would know. Besides, the call might be important, as unlikely as that seemed to me at the moment.

"Hello," I said. I wasn't feeling charitable, so I didn't bother to sound cheery.

"Hey, Dad," Stuart replied.

"Stuart!" I cradled the receiver between my neck and shoulder, twisting to keep the cord out of the mayonnaise. "It's only two o'clock. What are you doing up?"

I had meant that as a joke, but sometimes my family forgot that I had a sense of humor.

"I've got to work sometime," he said. "But I just wanted you to know that I heard from Marla this morning."

I arranged a few chunks of ham on my white-smear bread, as evenly as possible. "Your girlfriend?" I asked.

"Ex-girlfriend, Dad, yeah," Stuart said. He sounded amused.

"Well, how is she?" I asked.

"She's fine, but that's not what I wanted to talk about. You remember that she moved in right down the road from Caroline?"

I responded that I did. I heard a click at the end of the receiver, and I glanced down at the phone base to make sure that the call was still connected. Sometimes the phone tended to hang

up on its own. The light was still green, though, so I figured nothing was wrong. Maybe it was something on Stuart's end.

"Well, she ran into Caroline this past weekend," Stuart said. "Says she knew it was her because of the car."

"Huh," I said, still arranging my ham. If I wasn't careful, I would get a mouthful of meat one bite, and then nothing but bread and mayo the next. Balance was the key to the perfect ham sandwich.

"Dad, Marla says that she saw Caroline beating up her own car."

I put the sandwich down, taking the receiver back up in my hand. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

Stuart's sigh sent static shivering over the phone line. "It was the middle of the night on Sunday. Marla was heading out to, like, see some friends, and she saw somebody holding a golf club over Caroline's car. She's never met Caroline, but she said it was a short, chubby girl with dark hair. Anyway, this girl went crazy on the car. Screaming and yelling and beating on it with the golf club. Marla just high-tailed it out of there."

"Why didn't she tell you this yesterday?" There was a lot to doubt about this story. A supposed eyewitness account, delivered secondhand, almost two days after it happened. If Marla knew the truth, surely she would have said something earlier.

"She didn't want to talk to me Sunday night," Stuart said, and his tone told me he was edging around uncomfortable topics. "She was pretty messed up Monday, too. But today she called and let me know."

"It might not have been Caroline," I said. "She's never met Caroline, you said."

“Come on, Dad. A woman matching Caroline’s description beating up on Caroline’s car? What are the odds of that?”

Those were pretty long odds, even I could admit that. But I didn’t want Stuart to think I was suspecting his sister. Caroline had been the one to teach Stuart to swim in the Community Center pool, pulling him along behind her in the shallow end of the pool, bribing him to leave his Donald Duck floaties behind. He shouldn’t have to hear these things about her.

“Thanks for telling me,” I said.

“I tried to call Caroline, but she won’t pick up. I think she’s screening her calls.”

I made a noise like ‘hrm,’ largely because I didn’t know what to say. Stuart brought the conversation to an end after that, having accomplished his purpose. I promised him that I would at least talk to Rebecca about the situation, then I returned to my sandwich.

I tried to focus on the food, but mayonnaise could no longer hold my attention. If Caroline really was on drugs, and she had gotten to the point of vandalizing her own property, her situation had gone far beyond slurred speech and impaired judgment. She might actually be a danger to herself. Not to mention the damage she could do if she started taking golf clubs to other people, instead of just to her possessions.

My wife can move like a cat’s shadow when she wants to, but when she’s upset, she lets me know long before she enters the room. As she stormed down the stairs into the living room, pictures rattled on the walls.

“So she’s been beating her own car,” Rebecca said. Her lips were curled up into a triumphant half-smile, though I didn’t think there was much in this situation worth smiling about.

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“I picked up the extension upstairs,” Rebecca said, without a lick of shame. “So what are we going to do about this?”

“Nothing to do. Car’s fixed,” I said. I knew what she was asking me, but I needed time before I could respond. Time to sort things out, maybe even to talk with Caroline again. She would probably have a reasonable explanation, and if she didn’t...Well, if she didn’t, surely she would be able to see that something was very wrong with someone who beat up her own possessions. Caroline was a doctor, she had to have some kind of clinical detachment.

“That’s not the problem and you know it,” Rebecca said. “We need to deal with this before it gets worse.”

“Deal with what? This is none of our business.”

Rebecca walked straight into the hall closet, pulling her purse from the inside of the door. “We’re heading to Caroline’s,” she said. “Right now. I’ve suspected something was wrong for a long time, but now we have some proof, and we’re going to throw it in her face. She’ll either respond, or we’ll make her get some help. Whether she likes it or not.”

In my mind I saw Caroline, cornered by her parents, accused beyond reason, every past mistake and incriminating rumor used against her as a weapon. We were about to back her into a corner. Over what? A car? The car was fixed, and Caroline was smart enough to work through any other problems on her own.

Then again, this whole situation could be her acting out. Some subconscious part of her mind, begging for help, asking for us to stop her. As a father, wouldn’t I have some duty to do whatever it took to help my daughter? Even if it hurt both of us.

I pictured myself walking up to Caroline in her own home, telling her that I thought she was a liar. I would be saying I didn't believe she could take care of herself, that she was too irresponsible to manage her own life. Worse, that she was nothing more than an out-of-control drug addict.

Caroline looked up at me from the foot of my armchair, stethoscope pressed against my kneecap. "All better, Daddy!"

"You go," I said to Rebecca. She looked at me like she'd walked in on me kidnapping an infant from its cradle.

"You're still too afraid to say anything?" Rebecca said. "Even now?"

"I don't know what you mean even now. She told us why the medicine was in her car. Besides, it's lunch time." I put my sandwich on a paper plate, grabbed a Coke, and carried them both into the living room.

Rebecca's mouth worked like she had a crick in her jaw, but after a few seconds she just turned and walked out the door.

I sank down on the couch, turned on the TV and VCR, and pressed Play.

Clint Eastwood saunters down the hill toward the still-lit stick of dynamite, taking his time holstering his gun. The nun in distress is obviously terrified, but Clint doesn't hurry. Just as the flame is about to reach the cylinder, Clint crushes it under his boot. Then he picks up the dynamite and sticks the end of the fuse between his lips, drowning any lingering sparks.

That was how every standoff with Clint Eastwood ended. The bandits, cowards at heart, would try to run, but Clint never flinched or hesitated. He dealt with the problem, boot to fuse or bullets in the back.

## CHRISTMAS SHOPPING, LAST MINUTE

Stuart Powell

December 24, 1986

I sat behind the wheel of my car, staring across the parking lot at Santa Claus and stalling.

He seemed young for Santa Claus, not at all like a fat old elf that had spied on sleeping children for God only knew how many hundreds of years. Maybe late forties, at best. The white beard was misleading, a distraction designed to fool children, and age makeup took the place of true wrinkles. The things people will do for a buck.

Besides, I doubted that the real Santa ever had to stand on the sidewalk ringing his bell up and down through my whole afternoon shift at Cobb's Grocery. My last shift. They'd given me my pink slip--a metaphorical pink slip, since the actual slip of paper was white--two weeks ago, only now the calendar had caught up. Merry Christmas, you're a jobless bum. I was sure the only thing I'd remember about my last day on the job was the non-stop ringing of that bell.

What was it that kept him there, ringing his bell, as the sun rolled behind the Quik-Mart across the street? I heard the weather might get down to freezing tonight, which is pretty cold for Atlanta, so he must have wanted to get inside. Though I bet red coats with fluffy white lining keep you warm enough. They would have to, if you're delivering presents to Iceland or somewhere.

Santa stayed cheery, waving his bell and ho-ho-hoing at my former boss Simon as he took out his key and locked up for the night. Simon dumped a handful of change into the little

red plastic bucket, and Saint Nicholas let out a “Merry Christmas” that rang in my ears from across the lot. That guy obviously enjoyed his job way too much. Then again, he still had a job, and an ironclad excuse to avoid going home for the holidays for just a little longer. That would be enough to put a little Christmas spirit in me, too.

I lifted my bottle of beer and took another drink.

My car waited alone in the parking lot. The Grocery windows grew dim, then dark. Every other soul vanished, headed off to put up last-minute lights or call and find out what their long-lost kids were planning for the holiday. Every soul except the Salvation Army Saint Nick, who kept on ringing his bell. My older sister Caroline would have said he had an “over-abundance of optimism,” with maybe the words “naïve” and “egregious” in there depending on her mood. She was a great source of SAT vocabulary words.

After a few more minutes, Santa turned to his left, then to his right, like he was about to pull out a flask and he didn’t want any kids to see. He reached up with one black glove and pulled off his white beard. It hung there, around his neck, like a patch of snow-covered Spanish moss.

A blue pickup--probably a Ford F-something--swerved into view, spinning a 180 in the empty parking lot, brake lights flaring as it came to a stop. Its rear bumper ended up just a few feet from Santa’s belly.

Santa Claus tossed his bell into the back of the truck, one more jingle to mark the end of a jingle-ful day. Then he unlocked his donation bucket and heaved it up, dropping it into the back of the truck like it weighed fifty pounds. Maybe it did. I pictured some old lady dumping a canning jar’s worth of old quarters into the bucket.

“That money was for Hawaii,” she’d have said, “but the kids need it more.” Now, if my mom saw something like that, she would have smacked the jar straight out of this hypothetical old woman’s hands, watched it splatter like a melon on the concrete, spraying quarters and glass shards instead of juice and black seeds.

“Irresponsible,” she’d say. “You’re stealing straight from your grandson’s college fund. No better than a thief, throwing your family’s money away to a stranger like that.” Responsible people saved their money, and those who gave to charity were--in my mother’s view--only a short step above other disreputable people. Like con men, beggars. The unemployed.

Boy, I couldn’t wait to see Mom for Christmas.

The truck pulled off, taking Santa and any excuse I had for continuing to wait in my freezing car. But as soon as the Ford pulled away, another blue vehicle took its place, driving straight toward me.

I couldn’t help but make the comparison: a Chevy, like mine, and I happened to know that this particular car was four years older than my own. My Celebrity, a 1985, wasn’t even two years out of the factory, so by rights mine should be the better ride. But his car was spotless, while mine had a few dents. I had put on an extra layer of dirt that I couldn’t be bothered to clean off, but his looked like he had just waxed it. Probably had, knowing him.

The blue Chevy pulled into the space next to mine--straight in, within the exact center of the white lines--my brother Jon got out of the car.

All this effort to stay away from home, I thought, and home comes after me anyway.

He was clean-shaven, his dark hair carefully arranged, glasses framing eyes that mirrored mine. No one would ever doubt we were brothers. In fact, despite the almost four year difference

between us, I could probably pass for a sloppy, unshaven version of my older brother. With better eyes.

Jon looked into my window, disapproving as ever, then walked around and opened my passenger door. An empty bottle rolled out of the seat and clinked as it met the asphalt.

“You’re drinking,” Jon accused.

“Glad to know that degree’s doing you some good,” I said.

“You shouldn’t be out here doing this. What if you got caught?”

I took another swig of beer, just to annoy him. “You were drinking at my age.”

“It was legal then,” Jon responded instantly. “You have to be twenty-one now, and the cops could drive up any minute. We need to get you home.” He gathered up a double handful of empty bottles and scooped them onto the floorboards, and I was struck by the perverse desire to see one shatter. Even when the seat was clear, Jon didn’t sit, just kept standing outside the car, peering in, holding the door open. A chill breeze swept in, but asking him to close the door would be giving up.

“Is Caroline here yet?” I asked.

Jon adjusted his glasses. “Still in Memphis. Says she can’t take time away from her internship.”

“Then I don’t have to be there either,” I said, feeling perfectly justified. “Caroline’s not coming back, so who cares if I’m around?”

Jon ignored me. “Let’s get going. I’ll drive.”

“Nah, I’m good here for a while.” I took another drink.

My brother sighed and reached into the car. Before I could react, he pulled my keys out of the ignition and tucked them into his jacket pocket.

“Those are mine!” I shouted. I made a clumsy grab for his jacket, lunging toward the passenger door, but I missed. “Give them back!” I was six years old again, trying to snatch a toy from my ten-year-old brother who had decided to play keepaway: I felt the same frustration, helplessness, futile anger. And now, the added embarrassment of being treated like a child.

“You were supposed to be at the house two hours ago,” Jon said. “We’ve been waiting on you.”

“Yeah, you know what? Keep waiting,” I said. “Merry Christmas.” If he could hold what I wanted just out of reach, I could do the same to him.

“Your stuff’s in the back,” Jon pointed out, gesturing toward my window and the suitcase waiting in the backseat. I had packed that this morning, back when I still believed I was going to get to my parents’ house. Losing my job had hardly come as a surprise, but at nine this morning some part of me had held on to hope. Maybe Simon would see my deft hand at stocking and surveying inventory and, in his infinite mercy, keep me employed. But he hadn’t.

“I changed my mind,” I said.

“You’re going to ruin Christmas for all of us? Fine. That’s on you. You’ll have to live with the consequences on your own.” His tone made those consequences sound many and terrifying. I almost laughed in his face.

“We done, then?” I asked.

“Do what you want,” Jon said. “Just give me the ham.”

Every year, my family had a roast turkey for Christmas. A turkey, not a ham. But last December 24th, as she speared us each a ragged slice of white meat bathed in gravy, Mom had finally discovered that none of us liked turkey. We tolerated turkey because, hey, Christmas meant turkey. So this year she had declared a change, and I was the one supposed to pick up a spiral-cut, honey-baked ham. Because I was the one who worked in a grocery store.

Naturally, I had forgotten. Another compelling reason to stay in my apartment while Santa made his rounds.

“Where’s the ham?” Jon asked.

“I got it,” I said, even though he could see my car was ham-free.

“Then where is it, Stuart?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Behold, my stinging wit.

“You forgot the ham,” Jon said. He sounded disgusted, not surprised. “Of course you did.”

“Oh no, Christmas is canceled!”

“We’ll have to find somewhere open on Christmas Eve,” Jon said, ignoring me. “Why didn’t you just get it when you were at work?”

“I can still get it,” I told him. I hadn’t planned to say that, it just sort of popped out. I had planned to let him find the ham on his own, once I was safely back on the way to my apartment, but I had to distract him from questions about my job. Besides, if I really could get the ham, that would prick Jon right in the judgmental ego.

“How?” Jon asked. He sounded suspicious.

Of course, now I had to show him I could follow through. I rummaged around in my glove compartment until I found a single loose key, small and bronze. I had gotten it copied only a week after I started working at Cobb's because, after all, you never knew when having a key might come in handy. Jon didn't know it, but I had made keys for both his and Caroline's houses as well. Not that I had ever used them, but having the keys around made me feel...secure, I guess. Maybe smug. Like I could do something, and no one could stop me.

I held up the bronze key. "This goes to the back door."

"We're not stealing a ham," Jon said.

"I'll pay for it!" I said, as if that had been the idea all along. "We've just got to get the ham, leave some money, and fill out the stock form so it shows the ham sold yesterday. No problem."

Jon stared at me for a moment and then nodded once, decisively. "All right, let's go."

"I don't need your help," I said, trying to sound scornful. Really I just didn't want him finding out I had lost my job. Letting him in the store after closing shouldn't tip him off, but I couldn't shake the irrational fear that bringing him inside would give him the chance to sense that I didn't belong. Like he would see my face on a "RECENTLY FIRED EMPLOYEES" wall, or something. But I couldn't argue too hard without making him suspicious.

Jon ignored me again and started walking around to the back of Cobb's Grocery. For a few seconds, I debated letting him wait. I pictured him, angry, face turning red in the cold wind, standing there outside the door and slowly realizing that I wasn't going to show up with the key.

In the end, I followed him anyway. Petty revenge wasn't worth getting caught, and the last thing I wanted was for someone to drive by, spot me in the parking lot, and wonder what a

former employee was doing trying to sneak into a grocery store. With my copied key, I let us inside.

Cobb's was almost entirely dark. Red emergency lights glowed sporadically on the ceiling, but they did little to dispel the shadows. The air smelled somehow cleaner and colder than during the day, when the store was packed with shoppers.

The first thing I heard was the alarm. Where most home security systems I had heard gave off a repetitive sort of deet-deet-deet sound, this one was a high, shrill whistle, one long and piercing note like a screaming teakettle. After maybe thirty seconds of this--I didn't know the exact amount of time, but I knew I wouldn't have long--the main alarms would go off, and then the whole block would know someone was here. I rushed over to the alarm keypad, index finger poised over the yellow plastic of the keys.

I needed a four-digit code, but for a moment the numbers deserted me. Locking up had never been my job, and the only way I knew the code at all was because I had used a pair of dollar-store binoculars to spy on my manager Debra a few months ago after closing. My key would be no good without disabling the alarm, I knew that, and I had wanted to be prepared.

After a few seconds of hesitation, my finger hit the right numbers on its own, and the alarm's whining stopped.

"So where's the form we need?" Jon whispered.

"You don't have to be so quiet," I said. "There's nobody in here." But I kept my voice down, too.

My boss's office sat behind the swinging Employees Only doors in the back of the store, and his door wasn't locked. Without a flashlight, I took a few minutes to find the appropriate

stock forms for the day, flipping through a filing cabinet and holding each form up to my face as if I were trying to sniff it. We didn't want to turn the lights on in the office, so we had to fill out the paper by one of the red emergency lights, walking over to Aisle 18 and holding the stock form flat against a Fruit Loops box, writing with a stolen pen.

"Hello?" A woman's voice called from two aisles over. Jon immediately dragged me behind the aisle cap, a display of assorted Kellogg's cereals.

"Get off me," I muttered, shrugging away from Jon. He turned toward me, and though I could barely make out his features in the half-light, I knew him well enough to tell that he was glaring, waiting for me to shut up.

"Is someone there?" The woman called again. Her voice sounded familiar, if a bit shaky and uncertain. "I'm going to call the police."

A heavy, middle-aged woman walked out not three aisles down. She was facing the wrong direction, but paired with her voice I could finally place her: Debra, the supervising manager of Cobb's. She had been one of the first to give me a shot at the job in the first place.

Man, how much trouble was I in? Was this, like, trespassing or something? If I still had my job, I could have pretended to be here on legitimate business, but now she would know for sure that I had broken in. She might really call the police. Or did she know I had been fired already? Maybe she didn't keep track of the exact date. Then again, I wasn't supposed to have a key in the first place. No matter what she thought, I'd be in some degree of trouble.

If she hadn't been standing between us and the exit I would have tried to sneak out, but she stood just between us and the back door. The front entrance was still locked, as always after hours, shutters drawn over the windows.

“Do something,” Jon whispered.

“Like what?” I tried to sound sarcastic, but I really wasn’t sure what to do. Maybe I could act like in the movies and throw something so she’d think we were down one of the aisles.

“What’s her name?” Jon asked.

“What?”

“Her name.”

“Debra.”

Debra turned around at the sound of our voices, and I froze. But Jon took the stock form from my hand, put his glasses on the ground, and stood up.

“Hey Debra,” he said. “I didn’t think anybody else was here.”

Debra cocked her head and stared at Jon. I should do something, I knew it, but I stayed crouched. “Who are you?” Debra asked.

Jon stood on the edge of one of the emergency lights, so most of his features were lost in shadow. “What? It’s Stuart. You remember me, right?”

“Stuart? Really? What were you doing on the floor?”

With a little laugh that sounded way more like me than like him, Jon flourished the form in his hand. “Dropped my paper. You scared me.”

Debra nodded. “You’re not supposed to be here, Stuart. Did Simon let you in? Is he around?”

A dozen things I could have said in response flashed through my mind. I could have turned the conversation back on Debra, asking her what she was doing. I could have pretended

that Simon, our boss, had sent me back in to correct a mistake. I could have claimed that I had fallen asleep in the back room.

But Jon had spoken up, not me.

“Let me in? The door was unlocked.” Jon’s voice was a perfect imitation of mine in confusion, which offended me for some reason. I had always thought that I was the better liar.

“Really?” Debra made a gesture that, in the dim light, looked like she was stroking her chin. “Well, your job here is over. Explain yourself.”

That was it. Debra obviously knew I had been fired, and now I was left with the hope that Jon might not piece my situation together. I did not put much faith in that hope. When I was twelve, he figured out I had been stealing cigarettes because of some mud on my socks and a charred twig in my hair. He had gone straight to Mom, too, and she had chased me out the sliding glass doors with her long wooden spoon.

Jon waved the paper again. “Stock forms,” he said. “Just realized that I made a mistake, came in to correct it.”

“After hours?” Debra asked. “On Christmas Eve?”

“Well, you know me. Trying to keep my job.”

Debra laughed once, a harsh and grating sound. “Better luck next time.” I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, hard enough that my eyelids hurt. Please, I thought, please, Debra, just don’t tell him.

“Now, get out of here,” Debra went on. “You’re not supposed to be on the property after business hours.”

“How about you, Debra? Shouldn’t you be at home?” Jon lounged in the open, fanning himself with the stock form as though he was hot, though the store was freezing.

Debra smoothed down the back of her hair with both hands. “I left my purse in the stock room. Now you had best get out of here, before I have to call someone.”

My knees were starting to cramp, so I shifted position, knocking into a Corn Flakes box with my elbow. The cardboard scraped softly along the metal shelf, and I froze, waiting for the twist of Debra’s head that showed she was curious, that she was searching for the source of the sound. Her face jerked toward my hiding place once, and I ducked behind a mound of Apple Jacks.

“Where is it?” Jon asked.

“I just told you.”

Jon nodded toward the front of the store, away from the stock room, and the direction Debra had come from. “Then what were you doing over there?”

A man’s voice echoed down the aisles. “Who are you talking to?” he asked. Then he stepped up beside Debra. He stood most of a head above her, a tall and respectable-looking guy. He was strapping a silver watch onto his wrist as he walked up, and he flashed Jon a confident smile.

Debra, on the other hand, looked anything but happy to see him. She hissed something at him, and pushed her left hand against his shoulder as though trying to shove him back down the aisle and out of sight. As she did, a ring on her left hand caught the red light. His left hand, in clear view above the watch, wore no rings at all.

Either Jon came to the same conclusion I did at the same time, or he had made the right assumptions all along. “How about we just all pretend this never happened, all right?” His voice was pleasant enough.

Debra wasn't willing to let us go with that, though. She flared up with indignant anger all of a sudden, shouting about how she was an employee of the store, how she resented any implications 'Stuart' was trying to make. Her hands bounced through the air, as though she conducted an orchestra at a wild pace, and I suspected she had gone red in the face. She brought up my history of showing up late, sneaking drinks on the job, mouthing off to customers. A rap sheet of things that I wished my brother had never found out. And with each accusation, Jon met her with a pacifying gesture and an offer to bring everything to Simon and let him sort things out.

Jon didn't really know who Simon was, but he obviously recognized the opportunity for a threat.

“I will call the police!” Debra said finally, beginning to wind down. “I'll do it!”

“You do that,” Jon said. “Call the police. Their number is nine, one, one.” Sarcasm had finally crept into Jon's voice.

“I'll do it!” Debra pulled on her companion's sleeve, headed for the back door. “This place had better be locked up when they get here, or they'll know who to talk to.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” Jon said.

She left, her companion beaming Jon an amused smile from over one shoulder. I let out a long breath and stood up, bringing Jon's glasses with me.

“We've got to hurry up before the police get here,” I said.

Jon shook his head. “She’s not going to call the police. Come on, let’s get that ham.”

In spite of myself, I was impressed. Usually I was the one suggesting we ignore the authority figures, and Jon reminding me that we should all follow the rules.

We hurried over to the deli, grabbed a spiral-cut, honey-baked ham, and stopped by the office. I slipped the stock form into the filing cabinet, double-checking to make sure I had found the right folder.

“You should have just let me handle it,” I told Jon, as I locked the back door behind me. He had done a better job of talking Debra down than I probably could have, but admitting that would have been admitting my defeat.

“You weren’t doing anything,” Jon replied. He held the massive ham under one arm and kept an eye on the parking lot entrance.

“I was going to,” I said. That sounded lame, even to me, like I was a kid making excuses to my father.

But Jon didn’t respond. He walked over to his car and loaded the ham inside. I looked from my car to his, trying to find a way to ignite our argument from earlier. But the moment had passed. I had gotten the ham, after all, and Jon hadn’t brought up me losing my job. That meant he didn’t know anything, so I was relatively safe to go home.

Meeting Mom and Dad was still a chore, but it was Christmas, after all. Some things had to be tolerated in the name of holiday spirit. I moved my suitcase from my car to his, sweeping the empty beer bottles under my seat as an afterthought. Just so nobody walking by caught a glimpse of the bottles and put them together with underage Stuart Powell.

Jon got behind the driver's seat of his car and popped the passenger's door open. I grumbled for appearances sake, but I did end up getting in the car. Jon drove us home.

The trip to my parents' house in Marietta usually took me half an hour, which meant Jon would take forty-five minutes. He drove like he was trying to spot a gas station, always riding his brake and glancing from side to side, unless he got angry. Then, he would drive like he was trying to go back to the future. He wasn't angry tonight. If anything, he seemed almost disappointed. In me?

Whatever. It wasn't like I had anything to prove to him, anyway.

I wished I had another drink.

Ten minutes into the drive, Jon spoke. "So you got fired," he said. My brother never liked to dance around.

I said nothing.

"When were you going to tell me?" he asked.

"When I found another job," I said. To tell the truth, I was hoping to avoid the issue entirely.

"So that's why you didn't want to come home," Jon said, his eyes stuck on the road.

"Among other things."

"You can't just keep these things to yourself," he said. "You have to tell us. When you don't say anything about it, that just makes things worse. You have to--"

"Have to what?" I asked him. This was Jon all over, taking every opportunity to lecture me and tell me what I had to do. "What do I have to do, Jon? How is it going to help me if I tell you? You'll just tell me how I should have said something sooner, and how it's my own fault.

Caroline's a doctor, and if Dad offers me a job with Uncle Bowie one more time I'm going to hang myself. And you know what Mom will say."

"They're going to find out."

"How? Are you going to tell them? And I've been drinking too, don't forget to mention that."

"I won't," Jon said, and for a while I couldn't speak through my choking anger. After the anger subsided into smoldering frustration, I just chose not to speak. What could I say, anyway, that would do any good?

Half an hour later, Jon and I pulled into our parents' driveway. The house where we grew up was two stories at the end of a cul-de-sac, covered in ivy and bordered on two sides by woods so deep we had just enough room to get lost. The cracked driveway sounded like gravel under Jon's tires, and when he ground to a stop in the carport, the sound held a gut-level satisfaction. Like a refrigerator door sealing into place, or the slide-click of a round being chambered in a hunting rifle.

No matter how I felt, the sudden silence of the tires sounded like coming home.

Without a word, I grabbed my suitcase from the backseat and followed Jon to the front door. When he stepped inside, the first thing I heard was my mother's voice: "Well, did you find him?"

"Yeah," Jon replied, heading inside. I followed him into the kitchen, keeping an eye out for Mom. I didn't see her, which I chalked up to good luck. Mom had a nose for alcohol. If I wanted to avoid an hour-long lecture, I would have to clean myself up before I ran into her.

"Hey, Mom," I yelled, as cheerfully as possible, into the hallway as I passed.

“And?” Mom called. “Where was he?” She said nothing to me, just addressed Jon.

“Still at the store,” Jon said, with a glance at me. For a moment I wasn’t sure that I had heard him correctly. Was he covering for me? Or just giving me a chance to tell Mom myself?

“He didn’t forget the ham, did he?” Mom said. She sounded as if she thought she already knew the answer.

“Nope, he got it,” Jon said casually. “Good thing I went for him, though, because he needed a ride back.”

“Well, I’m glad you were there, Jon,” she called. Not a word asking why I needed a ride or whether I was okay. “But you boys are late for dinner. Have a seat at the table and I’ll get the ham ready.”

I wasn’t hungry--if anything, I was feeling a little queasy--but being home for the holidays meant participating in family meals. If I was going to do the Christmas thing for the next few days, I might as well start somewhere. I headed upstairs and deposited my suitcase into my old bedroom.

When I came back down, Jon and Dad were seated at the living room table, with Mom bustling behind them in the kitchen.

Dad was a thin guy, skinny all over, like a version of Jon or myself left to dry in the sun until all the spare moisture roasted off. He greeted me when I came in, asked me how my day was, but he wasn’t really listening. He had positioned his chair so that he could see into the living room, where the TV was playing something that had cowboys in it.

I gave him the standard answers--fine, doing well, everything going great--and he gave me an affirming grunt. He uses grunts like a professional, with a thousand different tones for

pleased, displeased, curious, angry, or not really listening. This one meant that I should keep talking, but that he didn't care.

The table was set with traditional dishes for a holiday meal at our house: green bean casserole, creamed corn, black-eyed peas, rolls that had come from the freezer aisle. All the food was still in pots, which meant that Mom had reheated everything on the stove when we didn't come home on time. She didn't believe in microwaves.

I reached for a roll, but Mom ducked in from the kitchen just in time to stop me with a wave of her long-handled wooden spoon. "You wait!" she said. "It's your fault we couldn't eat after the food came out the first time, and now we have to wait on the ham. It's in the oven."

"So we can't eat anything until the ham is ready?" I asked. I tried to overlook the fact that she was essentially blaming me for ruining Christmas Eve dinner, when I could just as easily have not come home at all.

"We will eat the full meal when it is ready," Mom said, "and not an instant sooner." She was a small woman, with a curly hairdo that adds three inches to her height, but she had a voice like a whip-crack.

"Let's say the blessing," Jon said.

"But the ham's not even ready yet," Dad protested, his eyes still not leaving the TV in the other room. The volume was so low that I'm sure he could barely hear his movie, but that seemed not to matter. Maybe he didn't need to hear their voices to know what was being said. He liked to watch reruns.

"We might as well get it out of the way now," I said.

“Don’t you speak that way about the Lord’s blessing,” Mom snapped. Ah, there was nothing quite as refreshing as being home for the holidays.

We all bowed our heads, and Dad spoke for us as he always did.

“Bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies and us to thy service, we ask in Christ’s name. Amen.” He rushed it out, all in one breath, so fast that if I hadn’t already known the prayer I would have thought he was mumbling nonsense.

“Amen,” we all said. And then we looked at the congealing food, sitting uncovered on the table.

“Tell me how work was, Stuart,” my mother said.

Jon stared at me from across the table, daring me to tell the truth.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m thinking about looking for another job.”

Mom laughed. “Maybe you should have gone to college, then,” she said. “You really think you can get hired somewhere else?”

“I won’t know until I try,” I said. The closer I got to telling what really happened, the less likely Jon would be to correct me.

“You had better treasure that job at the grocery, then,” Mom said. She took her wooden spoon gave the corn a forceful stir, then moved on to the peas. “You don’t want to be out on the streets.”

“We wouldn’t let him live on the streets,” Dad said, still watching his movie.

Mom rapped her spoon against the rim of the iron pot. “Speak for yourself.”

Dad grunted.

Jon leaned across the table, eyes serious. “You need to tell them,” he said. “It’s the right thing to do.”

There was nothing he could have said better calculated to rouse Mom’s interest. He might as well have just told her I’d been fired. Her head snapped up.

The black-eyed peas still chased each other lazily around their pot after the passage of Mom’s spoon. Butter, smeared all over the pan of rolls, had gone from a warm runny liquid to a slimy solid, and the last wisps of steam fled from the creamed corn. I could not meet my mother’s eyes, and I would not meet my brother’s.

“They let me go,” I said, because it sounded marginally better than ‘I got fired.’

Mom tossed down her wooden spoon as though it had given her a splinter. The handle clattered against the edge of a pot. Jon nodded once in my direction, approving and condescending. Dad made a sort of whinnying sound, like horses on TV make when they’re startled.

“Well, he can get a job with Bowie,” Dad said, his attention back on the cowboys.

“What did you do this time?” Mom demanded. “Were you late again?”

I pushed my empty plate away, and somehow that made me feel like I had more room to breathe. “I don’t want to work with Uncle Bowie. And who cares why? I have to find another job. That’s it.” The discussion wouldn’t be over with just that, but I had to try.

“So,” Mom said. “So. My son is unemployed. Well, don’t think we’re going to co-sign for your apartment again, if you can’t find a job. Once this lease is up, you’re on your own.” She smoothed the front of her blouse, passing fingers over the blue-and-pink flower pattern as if they could calm her.

“I don’t see why he doesn’t want to work with Bowie.”

Jon was the one who came to my rescue. “It’s Christmas Eve,” he said. “And now you know. We can talk about this on Friday.”

Mom agreed that this made sense, with a hard look in my direction. Dad, though he didn’t say so, would have been happy if we never talked about my job again. Jon was just satisfied that everyone involved had done the right thing.

I started making plans to get back to my apartment as soon as possible. In the future, I would have to stay out of my family’s way. That was all there was to it. The less they knew about my life, the less ammunition they could use against me.

The bell rang on the oven, and dinner was served.

## PREVENTABLE CONDITIONS

Caroline Powell

September 14, 1976

When I walked downstairs to meet my dad, he was cleaning his gun.

I had chosen my moment carefully. Mom was out shopping for groceries, my brothers ran around upstairs, and Dad had moved to his workshop, where he was usually in the best mood. Conditions were favorable. I dumped a few Goobers into my palm and popped them into my mouth. The sugary rush of the melting chocolate soothed me, giving me the boost I needed. I swallowed, took a deep breath, and dove in.

Dad's workshop was a closet-sized room off to one side of our basement. He had hidden the walls behind racks of his equipment: hunting rifles rested on pegs beside handmade wooden shelves full of ammo, fishing lures, and neatly folded orange vests. Dull red extension cords, coiled, hung from nails in the wall above a collection of tackle-boxes and a still-unopened pup tent.

A workbench, a little taller than Dad's waist, took up most of the room's center. He always kept its surface completely clear of everything except what he was currently repairing, inspecting, or maintaining. Today he held a rifle's disassembled barrel up to the light. He closed one eye, peering through it, then pushed some kind of tool--like a long wire with a pipe cleaner at the end of it--through the empty barrel.

He hadn't looked up when I walked into the room. "Hello," I said.

Knowing him, he probably hadn't noticed my presence. Dad tended to lose himself in whatever he was doing. My little brother Jon and I had once convinced Dad that it was Saturday by waiting until he sat down in front of the TV to speak with him. Once he got lost in the ozone layer, he'd listen to whatever we told him. We stayed home from school all day, watching TV with Dad or playing in the woods behind the house. Until Mom found out.

Dad blinked at the sound of my voice and jerked back, startled. "Caroline, hey. What's going on?" He didn't sound hostile or angry, only surprised, as though he had never thought his only daughter might have a reason to speak with him.

"Well, Dad, you remember I'm going to the Quiz Bowl this weekend?" He probably wouldn't recall, but if he did, that would make my task much easier.

He grunted, another expression of surprise. "Quiz Bowl? Is that the club from your school?"

I wanted to sigh in exasperation, but I kept the impulse in check. I needed Dad on my side. "I told you about this weeks ago," I said. "We're going to the regional competition in Atlanta. I'll be gone until Sunday night."

"Oh, okay. That sounds like fun." As he spoke, he lifted barrel and brush back up, continuing to clean. Once Dad got stuck on a track, he had trouble shifting his focus. Today, that might work to my advantage.

"There's a formal dinner on Saturday," I told him. I didn't expect him to retain the specifics, but maybe something of the general picture would get through. Dad's attention was notoriously hard to pin down. "Other than that, we're expected to buy most of our own meals. And there will be souvenirs and bus fare and things."

By this point he had set the brush aside for a blue cloth and a jar of what smelled like shoe polish. He rubbed it vigorously on the outside of the barrel, then over a few other parts I couldn't readily identify.

I waited. He's not stupid, my dad. He earned a degree in Engineering from Georgia Tech, and made Captain in the Air Force before moving into the Reserves. He has the hardware, but sometimes he takes a few minutes to switch it on.

"So you need money, then?" he said at last.

"Yes, please."

"How much?"

"Well, the school's paying for most of the trip. I just need food and spending money. I think...five dollars would do it." I hesitated a little on the amount. To give Dad credit, he was a generous person, but I worried that I might be pushing it.

He grunted and wiped his hands off on a clean rag. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his leather wallet, from which he extracted a crisp ten-dollar bill.

"You want to make sure you have enough money," he said. "Have a good time, now."

I drew in a quick breath as I took the money, tucking it into my pocket as soon as possible. I would have to keep this a secret from Mom, of course, who would go off like a firecracker if she heard Dad had 'wasted' so much money.

I wasn't naïve enough to think she had forgotten about the Quiz Bowl trip. Mom remembered everything, forever, and never forgot the smallest detail. Just when you thought she had, that was when she'd pounce. I just hoped to avoid a lecture about the amount of money I

was about to spend. But Dad wouldn't say anything to her, that was for sure, and I only had to keep quiet until the weekend. I liked my chances of pulling this off.

"Wow!" I said. "Thanks, Dad!" He smiled, but he'd already gone back to cleaning his gun.

I pulled the door shut behind me as I left.

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Mom didn't ask me any questions until Thursday.

We were eating dinner together, all five of us. As usual, Dad had the TV on in the living room. Mom made sure the volume was low enough that he could barely hear what was going on, but that never stopped him. Stuart had snatched Jon's glasses from his face and was running laps around the table with them, though Jon stayed in his chair. He glared at Stuart, hand out, demanding that our little brother return what he had stolen.

Once Mom got irritated enough, she snatched Stuart by his sleeve. He was only nine, and small even for his age, so he came up short.

"I have cooked you a meal," she said. "If you do not sit down and eat right now, I will keep you from leaving this house until you do." We all knew that she would physically lock him in, if necessary. Once she had strapped Stuart to his chair with a boat tether until he finished his navy beans.

Mom made sure everything was in order--Jon's glasses back on his face and Stuart firmly in his seat--and she stared at Stuart, ensuring that he actually put food in his mouth.

When she spoke, she kept her eyes on Stuart. "Caroline, don't you have the Quiz Bowl this weekend?"

I shoved a spoonful of rice and gravy into my mouth, simultaneously covering my surprise and stalling for time. Ambush tactics already. That didn't bode well for the rest of this discussion. A twinge of a headache began to pulse at the base of my skull.

"I do," I said, once my mouth was clear.

My mother took her eyes from Stuart and unfolded a napkin, spreading it across her lap. "And?" she said.

I had no idea where she was going. Usually my mother had all the subtlety of a John Deere tractor, so you rarely had to guess her opinion. Was she trying to lead me into a trap? Or maybe she wanted me to bring up money myself.

"And I think we've got a good shot," I said. That statement was the truth, and totally devoid of detail. The safest kind of statement to make. "We've been doing really well in the last few practice rounds, and I've studied a lot."

"I don't care about the rest of your team," Mom said. "What about you?"

"I believe I have a good shot as well," I said.

Mom speared a chunk of venison on the end of her fork before wagging it at me like a finger. "Are you going to win?"

"We can," I said. My headache continued to blossom. "Nothing is certain, but I've been working hard."

After washing her venison down with unsweetened iced tea, Mom nodded. "Working hard. I'm glad to hear that. You're a smart girl, you have nothing to worry about. I'm sure you'll come in first. And then there's a national competition over the summer, is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am, but there's no guarantee that we'll win."

Mom threatened me with another forkful of severed deer meat. “That’s no way to talk. Whichever students studied the hardest will win this competition for their team. Now tell me, is that you?”

There was no doubt, this time, what response she wanted from me. “Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“Then you have nothing to worry about.” Mom turned back to her meal. Dad had never looked up from the television, and my brothers had each begun trying to steal bites of the other’s mashed potatoes.

My head shouted at me by this time, demanding my attention.

I reached for the Tylenol bottle, which was a regular feature of mealtimes at our house. I poured myself a couple of tablets and washed them down with tea.

Tylenol took time to dissolve and work its way through my system, but I imagined I felt the pain in my head ease immediately. The placebo effect, almost certainly, but what did it matter? I would use whatever worked.

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The 1976 Southeast Regional Quiz Bowl took place in the conference room of Atlanta’s luxurious Indigo Inn. Well, the bedrooms in the Indigo Inn were luxurious. The conference room left something to be desired.

Lit by a ceiling full of fluorescent lights rather than the electric chandeliers that made up much of the hotel, the conference room gave the impression of perhaps having begun as a warehouse rather than anything fit for occupation. Though easily large enough to hold several hundred people, at the moment the room contained about sixty: fifty bored and tired-looking adults, mostly parents or guardians of the participants, the Quiz Bowl staff, and the participants.

My parents weren't there, of course. Mom had to keep bringing the boys to school, and Dad had to work. I understood their responsibilities, and if part of me wanted them to be there to see how much I'd learned, it wasn't a rational part. I had to stay rational.

I re-focused, ignoring the audience. I kept my eyes locked on the host of the Bowl, whose name I had immediately forgotten. He was probably eighty years old, cleared his throat at the end of every sentence, and he had my entire attention. All the questions came from him.

My teammates, sitting beside me at a folding table covered by a white tablecloth, stared with equal intensity. Our opponents sat at an identical table to our right, but they whispered quietly among themselves. Strategizing, I presumed.

At last the host cleared his throat and leaned forward into his microphone. "Most of us have seen the Boy Scout salute, right? For twenty points, show me the scout sign."

Roger, a senior from my school whose face was covered in a mask of freckles, shot his hand forward to the buzzer, but I beat him to it. Out of the corner of my eye I saw someone on the other team lunge for their buzzer. They had no chance.

The little green Christmas light on the corner of the buzzer lit up, and it made the distinctive game-show sound.

"Whistler High School, Caroline Powell," the scorekeeper called. She sat between the host and the judge, and made more decisions than either of the other officials. The host asked the questions and declared what was happening, while the judge would only be called upon in case of a dispute. He looked ready to fall asleep in his chair.

I held up my right hand, thumb over pinky, first three fingers stuck up in the air. I started to lean toward the microphone before I realized I didn't have to say anything, but I covered by shifting in my seat.

The host nodded. "Very good, Miss Powell, twenty points to Whistler." He coughed as though trying to get rid of something in his chest. "Boys, I'm disappointed in you. You should have paid more attention to your scout leaders."

The more attentive members of the audience laughed.

"I would have gotten it wrong," Roger whispered. "Thanks." Terri, the other girl on our team, smiled at me approvingly. A warm feeling spread through me, and I smiled back at both of them. My mom always said you needed one of three things to survive in high school: good looks, brains, or a sense of humor. I told jokes only when the moon was full and the stars were aligned, and Stuart had already received more compliments on his looks than I had in my entire life. Brains, though, I could handle. I took a moment to bask in the feeling of a successful answer. I had studied hard; I deserved a little basking. But just for a moment.

Then, back to business.

"Political question this time, ladies and gentlemen," the host said. "Four-part question, twenty points total, five points apiece. Let's see if you can identify the current leaders of Congress. First, the Montanan who is Senate majority leader. What is his name?"

The other team got that one, and Terri buzzed in on the second question and missed. I answered the last two, correctly, speaking as clearly as I could into our team's microphone. I had to lean across Roger slightly to do it, which made me nervous. He wasn't the best-looking guy I knew, but he was smart and pleasant, and once he had lent me a Fozzie Bear umbrella when it

rained at the bus stop. I wouldn't say I had a crush, but he was certainly the best option available to me.

The day continued with us in the lead. We finished almost a hundred points ahead, with me scoring twice as many points as either of the other two members of my team. Our coach, Mr. Applewhite, a tall and handsome man with wings of grey in his temples, even asked the others after the first round why they hadn't studied like I had.

I felt like I would float away. Terri was pretty and skinny--prettier and skinnier than me, at any rate--and her family owned banks. Roger played the saxophone with the kind of skill that meant scholarships and career options. But me? I was the smart girl, the one you asked for Trig tutoring but didn't ask out. For once, my memory and my attention to detail had gotten me the attention I deserved.

During our free time that afternoon, I spent two hours going over strategies and last-minute studying for the second round the next day. I kept a Coke on the nightstand next to me, sipping periodically to keep my concentration from wandering. The rest of the team knew I was their best shot at first place, and by this time I was sure the other teams would know it too. Tomorrow was my chance to get back in the limelight, to really stand out.

I couldn't wait for my next turn behind the buzzer.

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Unfortunately, the formal dinner still stood in my way.

Unlike the conference room, the reserved dining hall at the Indigo Inn lived up to the hotel's reputation. Electric chandeliers nested so thickly that I could see the ceiling only in patches, and the quality of light reminded me of actual candles. Napkins waited on our plates,

folded in intricate ways so that they spread out like peacock fans. The plates, trimmed in gold designs, sat between a frame of silverware. The silverware looked gold as well, and I idly wondered if that made it goldware.

As I reached the table, the waiter pulled my chair out for me. I knew then that I was in trouble. I wasn't even sure how I was supposed to sit in a chair that someone had pulled out. Did I just sit down, and he pushed me under the table? Or did I sort of crouch in front of the chair, and the waiter would push the chair under me?

I figured it out without making a fool of myself, but the experience put me on my guard. I might not have studied enough for this.

Terri sat across the table from me, Roger and Mr. Applewhite on the other sides. She wore a burgundy dress and a matching smile that made her look at least five years older. Roger hardly looked at anything else, which irritated me more than it probably should have. I had no claim on him, that was for sure, and even I admitted that Terri was better-looking than me. Still, I resolved not to make eye contact with Roger for the rest of the meal.

"This place has a great reputation," Terri said as she sat down. She didn't seem to notice the waiter who pulled out her chair, accepting him as a matter of course. "I look forward to seeing what's on the menu."

I scanned the table surreptitiously, not seeing a menu. Did she mean that metaphorically? Or maybe you had to ask for a menu? Whatever the case, she clearly knew how to act in these situations, and I didn't. I would simply do whatever she did, then. If she violated courtesy somehow, at least I wouldn't be embarrassed alone.

I smoothed the skirts of my black dress, though they didn't need it. The dress really belonged to Mom, who had sent my brother into the attic looking for old clothes when she heard I needed something for a formal dinner. As a consequence, I wore a twenty-year-old dress that smelled of mothballs.

I was willing to bet Terri's dress didn't smell like mothballs.

"Ah, here's the salad," Mr. Applewhite said. He tucked into his with a will, but I couldn't tell which fork he had used.

For this specific situation, however, I had prepared. I was supposed to take my silverware from the outside in. Armed with that knowledge, and keeping an eye on Terri out of one eye, I started in on the salad.

It tasted expensive. A blend of greens I had only rarely heard of, highlighted by a delicate dressing that probably claimed vinegar as its principal ingredient. At home, a salad meant lettuce, chopped carrots, maybe a few croutons, and sliced cucumber smothered in Hidden Valley Ranch dressing. I liked my version of salad better.

After the salad came my first slip-up. It would not be my last. I placed my fork on the edge of my salad plate and, somehow, it slipped to the ground. My face flushed, and I hurriedly ducked under the table to pick it up.

Mr. Applewhite caught my arm, guided me gently back up to my seat. "Let the waiter get you a new one, Caroline," he said. "You don't need to do that."

No hint of accusation or mocking touched his tone, but I knew I had done something embarrassing. Terri kept her eyes locked on her salad, only half-finished, and Roger coughed slightly. Nothing too overt, but if we had been sitting at the lunch table they probably would

have laughed and then gone back to their meals. Somehow, this was worse. If they laughed at me, at least it would be over quickly, and then we could all forget. This silent treatment only made me feel like I had done something so bad we couldn't even discuss it.

I only thought I had blushed before. My face grew so warm, I was sure the others could feel the heat.

Roger rescued me with a comment about how likely we were to win it all tomorrow, and I rewarded him by relaxing my resolve not to look directly at him. For a while the four of us talked business. That was a relief. Here was something I understood, and to which I could contribute.

That was the high point of the evening. A while later, the chicken arrived, a moist and perfectly-grilled specimen covered in a rich lemon-butter sauce. I forced myself to slow and match Terri's pace, cutting bites only one mouthful at a time, chewing and swallowing completely before moving on to the next bite. It took at least twice as long as it should have, and I resented the fact that I couldn't just slice up my chicken all at once. Maybe Terri was making up rules, just so I would look silly. I toyed with that a moment, but since as far as I knew Terri had no talent for telepathy, I let her off the mental hook.

When she was about halfway done with her chicken, Terri set her fork and knife across her plate at an angle. She dabbed at her mouth with a corner of her napkin, then took a sip of her water.

Emulating her, I did the exact same things: silverware crossed, napkin to mouth, one sip of water. Maybe drinking more was a sign of rudeness, or something, and I didn't want to embarrass myself even further through ignorance.

A pair of waiters swept down on our table, lifting my plate and Terri's from their places. Why had he done that? I opened my mouth to ask why, but swiftly shut up, unwilling to risk further humiliation. There was some way to signal the waiter to pick up an empty plate, I knew that, and apparently I had somehow signaled that I was done. Once again, my lack of thorough research turned against me.

I blushed, and though I'm sure the others wondered why my face was on fire again, thankfully nobody said anything. This time, though, the mortification didn't embarrass me. At least, it didn't only embarrass me. It made me mad.

At that moment I made a promise to myself, and it stuck with me for years. I promised that I would never again let myself be embarrassed because of ignorance. Ignorance is a preventable condition, and in the future I would be sure to prepare. Next time, I would be the one who knew what she was doing. Not Terri. People would come to me with questions, and I would have answers.

Having answers. I was good at that.

That night, I was on my way back to the girls' hotel room when I passed Roger's room. School regulations required that male and female students stay in separate rooms, but since Roger was the only boy on our team, he managed to get a room all to himself. Mr. Applewhite roomed three doors down with the coach from another school.

The door to Roger's room was cracked slightly. Not enough for me to see inside, but enough that I might not seem rude if I just pushed inside without knocking. I debated for a moment, weighing the options. On one side of the scale, this was an out-of-this-world chance to

spend time alone with Roger. Maybe I could catch up the ground I'd lost to Terri earlier. On the other side, I might embarrass or surprise him by walking in.

I judged the risk worth the potential reward and seized the door handle, pushing gently inward so that I could shut the door before he saw me if I had to. He might have just gotten out of the shower, or something.

Roger sat on the edge of his bed, wearing the same old suit in which I'd seen him at dinner. Terri sat on his lap. Her mouth moved on his, and one of her hands was sliding around his waist toward the small of his back.

Her head started to jerk up, probably because she saw the door moving in the corner of her eye, but I pulled back before she could see me. I hoped she didn't see me, anyway.

I should have known better. When two students of the opposite sex shared the same hotel room for any period of time, they were required to keep the room door open. If Mr. Applewhite had found out Terri was in Roger's room with the door shut, he would have been livid. By keeping the door open a crack, they could technically follow school rules while still hiding themselves from the hallway. If I had taken a little longer to think, I would have considered the possibility. Maybe I would have checked my room for Terri first, and spared myself a painful sight.

Rushing down the hallway as fast as I could without running, I kept an ear open. I didn't feel up to trading pleasantries with anyone else just then. I heard a scuff on the carpet down the hall, but I didn't look, just ducked blindly into my room.

I would have expected to feel jealous, or maybe angry. Five minutes ago I thought I had a chance with Roger, and then I found out--in the worst possible way--that I was wrong. Maybe I

even had a right to be angry. But instead I felt sick. The other two members of the team now had a connection I couldn't share. They had cut me out. No matter how well I did in the competition, I couldn't erase the fact that our single team had now become two plus one.

I dug around in my suitcase, my movements almost frantic. I really, really wanted to be asleep when Terri came back to the room. I finally found the quart-sized Ziploc bag Mom had packed with any medication I might need for my weekend away. No sudden flu, cold, or fit of nausea would stand against my onslaught. But I was only looking for one bottle.

I poured a splash of NyQuil into the cap and tossed it down, savoring the burn of the artificial chemicals in my throat. After a moment, I added another few drops. I wanted to make doubly sure I could fall right to sleep.

As I drifted off, I forced my thoughts away from Terri's hand on Roger's waist. The competition was the only thing that mattered now, at least for the next twenty-four hours. I had one chance remaining to salvage whatever respect I had earned today: I would show them what I could do in the Quiz Bowl.

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On the second day of the competition, semifinals, Whistler High School went head-to-head against Red Lake. The winner of this round would get to face off in the finals this afternoon, with a chance at the state Quiz Bowl cup. Thanks to a particularly stupid response by Roger and a question that Terri completely ignored, we were fifteen points behind.

Part of my mind whispered that it wasn't all their fault. I had woken up at 5 AM. Unable to fall back asleep, I had gone down to the hotel lobby to buy a Coke and sat awake, studying. But the caffeine couldn't quite shake the sleep from my brain. On one question I had only earned

partial credit thanks to a vaguely worded answer, and another I hadn't even heard until Roger elbowed me in the ribs and told me to buzz in. So I was hardly at the top of my game, though that didn't excuse my teammates for their sloppy play.

The host leaned forward, licked his dry lips, and wheezed out a question about "A famous agreement made by the European powers in 1864." I stopped him there without even hearing the rest of the question. The answer was obviously the Geneva Convention, so I buzzed in and told him so.

The audience applauded, and Mr. Applewhite leaned forward and gave me a thumbs-up. I wanted to grin back, but I settled for a businesslike nod and settled back down into my chair. There was no need to look smug. I shot a glance to one side, to see how Terri had taken my successful answer, but she and Roger were whispering together. The reasonable part of my brain told me they were probably just consulting each other about the competition, but my stomach twisted again. They wouldn't pay me any attention even five seconds after I scored points for our team.

Well. Why should I need them? I could handle these questions myself.

The other team hit a slow pitch that sounded like a nursery rhyme, some riddle about plants and trees, putting them back in the lead.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the host intoned, "Red Lake is in the lead, heading in to our final question."

I leaned forward and gripped the edge of the table.

Clearing his throat again, the host began to read. "Take the number that a stitch in time saves--"

I interrupted him by ringing the buzzer. Even a child knew that saying. How was it an appropriate final question?

“Nine,” I responded confidently. “A stitch in time saves nine.”

The judges shook their heads in unison, and only a specific effort of will and focus kept me from spewing Coke and bile all over the white tablecloth of our team’s table. One of the judges rang a tiny bell, the one that signified a contestant had given the incorrect answer.

“I’m sorry,” the host said. “A stitch in time does save nine, but you didn’t let me finish the question. The complete question was ‘Take the number that a stitch in time saves and add it to the number of days in February on a leap year, and what do you get?’ The answer, of course, is thirty-eight.”

Murmurs among the audience, and a few scattered hands clapping.

“With that, Red Lake advances to the finals against Gardner, this afternoon at 3 PM. I hope to see everyone back here at that time. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for another wonderful round of competition.”

A heartier round of applause greeted that statement, but Mr. Applewhite had buried his face behind one hand, and Roger wouldn’t look me in the eye. Terri seemed disappointed, staring down at her shoes as if they could bring her back in time. In time to fix my stupid mistake.

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This time, Dad was re-organizing his tackle box.

I told him the story of the whole weekend, skimming over some of the more embarrassing moments, but giving him the big picture. He ‘hmm’ed and ‘ah’ed in all the right

places, and his hands kept moving, planting one electric blue lure in a box and another hook in a bag.

“I missed the question. I shouldn’t have risked it,” I said. “It was a stupid move.” I tried to sound matter-of-fact, but each time I thought about my failure I wanted to lose my last three meals. Admitting ignorance always hurt.

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad,” he responded, eyes still on his box.

“We ended up in third place, Dad. There were only eight teams in the whole competition.” Shamefully, I felt tears trying to form at the corners of my eyes. Tears! What kind of a child was I? I forced back the impulse to cry and presented the situation in a rational tone.

“Anyway,” I went on, “they didn’t do all the work they should have, either. Next year I’ll do better. By then, I’ll be able to answer all the questions without anyone’s help.”

I looked up to see that Dad wasn’t staring at the tackle box anymore. Pity looked strange on his face, out of place, as though he was trying out an expression he wasn’t built for. But he smiled reassuringly at me.

“Caroline, I know just how smart you are. You don’t need them to tell you that. Just keep studying, and you’ll get to a place where you can do everything you want to do. Keep it up. You’re on the right track.”

That was what I had wanted to hear, but I still couldn’t fight down some embarrassment. We didn’t do much encouraging in our family. That wasn’t our style. So I thanked him, he turned back to his hooks and lures, and I headed upstairs.

I returned to my room, settled into a chair, and opened a book.

## FAIR GROUNDS

Two hours before dawn, Joseph Bauker stood shivering in a smoggy London alley. Back home in California, he would never have had to put up with this weather. He needed a specialist, or he never would have been here. He had a firm policy of going anywhere in the world for top-quality ingredients. Then again, he had spent all of a day and half of the next night on or between flights to get here. He didn't see why they couldn't meet in a sunlit London park at high noon. Cane was picky, though, and twice as paranoid as Joseph thought he had any right to be.

A small figure rounded the corner and scuttled into view, jacket bunched up and hat pulled low.

"Are you Cane?" Joseph said.

"Sssssh!" The shorter man glanced around. "Keep it quiet! You might not care who sees us knockin' about in the dark like this, but I bloody well do."

Joseph lowered his voice. "Sorry. So, are you Cane?"

"Might be." Cane flipped up the collar of his coat to hide his mouth. "You got it?"

Joseph handed over a wad of bills. He hated to lose so much cash, but he couldn't get much farther without Cane's help. He came highly recommended.

Cane snatched the stack and began flipping through. Joseph had never understood what people were looking for when they did that. Did counterfeit bills somehow look different when flipped?

When Cane finished, he smiled.

"Right," he said. "We're square. So I got what you need."

Cane tossed him a package wrapped in rough brown paper. Joseph peeled back a corner of the wrapping: fine white powder. He dipped a finger in and raised it to his lips.

“Mmmmm,” he said. “Nothing sweeter.” The powder liquefied as soon as it hit his tongue. Allen should be delighted.

“Right, well, customer satisfaction is my highest priority,” Cane said. “Nice doing business with you.” With that he darted down and out the alley, head bobbing like a floating cork. Joseph turned and left the other way.

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Thirteen hours and two planes later, Joseph stopped in front of a storefront in Santa Barbara, California. The sign above the door announced the name of the establishment in flowing golden letters: Fair Grounds Bar and Coffee Shop. “Welcome to Fair Grounds,” Allen said as Joseph walked in. “How may I—oh, you’re back. How did it go?”

With a flourish, Joseph produced the brown package. “Success! Two kilograms of the purest, sweetest, highest-grade sugar in the world.”

“From a back-alley dealer you had to meet alone, in the dark, in London,” Allen pointed out.

Joseph laid his jacket on one of the tables and eased himself into a hand-carved chair. He had picked the furniture himself six years ago, when he had converted the crappy bar into a respectable coffee shop. The polished wood felt like home.

“As long as Cane gets results, I’m not going to question his methods,” he said. “How’s it going around here?”

Allen continued cleaning the bar without a pause while he delivered his report. Busy morning, slow afternoon. Lacie was doing dishes in the kitchen, George was out for creamer and salt, and the rest of the staff had the afternoon off before the Friday evening rush.

“That’s why I leave you in charge,” Joseph said. “Efficient as always. How about our little side project?”

“If you’ve got the sugar, we still need honey and beans.”

Joseph stood up and tossed the package of sugar onto the counter. “No problem. Put that in the back for me, will you?”

Allen tucked the sugar somewhere behind the bar and spoke dryly. “I suppose you’ll need my help next time.”

“It’s all for the cause.” Joseph snatched his jacket back up and began climbing the stairs behind the bar. “Only two weeks left,” he called down.

“I remember,” Allen said.

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Joseph’s one-room apartment above the coffee shop was crowded with piles of books and a tangled assortment of tables. There might once have been a bed against the wall, but such was purely the stuff of legend: Joseph slept in hotels, or in planes, or in the chair in front of his computer.

Each available surface was covered in cups of every description. Styrofoam cups and clay mugs shared shelf space with china teacups and a steel thermos, while paper cups and shot glasses graced the computer desk. Each cup, mug, and glass was, to one degree or another, filled with some flavor of coffee. No less than three coffeepots simmered around the room.

Joseph downed a mouthful of pale coffee from a shot glass, swished it around in his mouth, and swallowed. He scribbled a note on a yellow legal pad: Zimmerman's Saturday Morning blend—too bitter, too heavy on the cinnamon. Next to him on the desk, his phone buzzed. He pressed it to his ear.

“What's up?”

“They've announced the judges for the All-Around category,” Allen said.

“Who are they?”

“It's on their site.”

Joseph wheeled his chair backwards and spun toward his computer. Shaking off the screensaver, he opened a bookmark: the website for the Global Coffee Expo 2010 took over the screen.

“Break it down for me,” Joseph said.

Allen did so in short, snappy tidbits as Joseph scanned the site. Barbara Zergman had been a *New York Times* food critic since before Joseph was born. She was an extremist; with her, it was either five stars or one. But she had little or no background in coffee.

Gordon Baldwin was a different animal entirely. A card-carrying expert employed directly by the Expo, Baldwin had taken fresh-brewed coffee from the hills of Colombia in his baby bottle. He had taken it black. Baldwin couldn't stand anything too sweet, and his opinion carried serious weight with the other judges.

“You might not have heard of the other judge,” Allen continued. “Zoey Siegal. She's a newcomer to the Expo, but she's still one of the best new food and beverage critics on the west

coast. I don't have a lot of info on her, so I'm going to see if I can pull up some of her articles, find out what she likes."

Joseph said nothing, just stared at his computer screen.

"Joseph? Do you hear me? Joseph? Joe, you there?"

"I'm going to have to call you back."

"Joseph! Hey, stop it—if you hang up on me, I'm going to come up there and cut your head off!"

Joseph reluctantly returned the phone to his ear.

"What's the problem, Joe?"

"A problem? Yeah, yeah, I guess it's a problem. The third judge, Zoey Siegal? We were...well, we used to go out."

"Okay. So?"

"It didn't end nicely. She threw a mug at my head."

Allen was silent for a moment, and his voice was serious when he spoke. "Joseph, we've sunk a lot of money into this competition."

"I know," Joseph said.

"The fact is, we need this competition. We have too much invested to lose. We need the article in newspapers around the country. We need an award over the bar, and we need that Global Coffee Expo sticker in the window that says 'World's Best Cup of Coffee' and means it."

"I know that. It was my idea, remember?"

"Oh, I remember," Allen said. "Look, this judge thing isn't a big deal, right? It's not going to be a problem?"

Silence.

“Joe...”

“Look, she hates—”

“I don’t care how much she hates you. You know what the solution is? Get back to work and let’s make some awesome coffee. Now, what’s next on your list?”

“Honey,” Joseph said. “And if Zoey’s judging, we have to get the best.”

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An hour away from Guatemala City, Joseph and Allen stood within an ancient stone temple. The chapel was filled with busy golden-robed acolytes who all moved with exaggerated reverence around a series of pews. One wall was covered in an intricate carving of a giant bee, its six arms all dripping with honey.

In the center of the room, a dark-skinned native in a golden robe stood glaring at Joseph as if imagining his still-beating heart on an altar.

“Joseph,” Allen said, “this is Ernesto Valdez. He is a priest in the Holy Order of the Amber Queen.”

Ernesto said something in Spanish, with another dark look at Joseph. Allen made a placating gesture, responded in Spanish, and patted Joseph on the back.

“What is he saying?” Joseph asked.

“Don’t talk; he hates you. Pull out your money.”

Joseph pulled out a stack of 110quetzals, but Ernesto looked even more upset. At further prodding from Allen, the priest finally revealed a jar of perfect amber honey. He cradled the jar like a baby, launching into a stream of angry rapid-fire Spanish.

“Put your money away, put your money away,” Allen said frantically, then responded to Ernesto in a soothing voice. Ernesto finally handed over the jar, balancing it so carefully that Joseph wondered if it were likely to explode.

“Give him the money now!” Allen said. He placed the jar into a soft lunchbox padded with rags. “Hurry up!”

Grumbling, Joseph handed the priest his money.

“Good. Now, take the lunchbox and walk. Walk quickly, but don’t run. Faster. Faster.”

All but jogging, Allen and Joseph headed down the torch-lit stone corridors of the Temple of the Amber Queen.

“They’re very serious about honey around here,” Allen said as they hurried down the hall. “That’s why theirs is the best in the world. If they think you’re not going to respect the honey, they might kill you.”

“Respect the honey?”

“Well, the honey is the life-blood of their god, the Amber Queen, and...you know what? I’ll give you the Reader’s Digest version on the plane. Let’s get out of here.”

As soon as they cleared the temple gates, Allen looked around and broke into a run. Joseph followed.

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“Zoey likes a drop of honey in her coffee, but not too much. This kind has a strong flavor to it, so I’d say no more than one part honey to two parts sugar.”

Allen leaned back in his airplane seat and snorted. “Still too strong. If it’s too sweet for Baldwin, we’ve lost. One part total sweetener and two parts milk to seven parts coffee.”

“Fine, but you’ll never taste the honey in that. I used to flavor Zoey’s coffee with honey; she’ll remember that.”

Allen raised his eyebrows. “You do know that there are two other judges? Their votes count too.”

“I know that,” Joseph said. “It’s just...I’ve got to do something dramatic. She hates me, and I don’t blame her. If I were in her position, I’d hate me.”

“Seriously, what did you do?”

Joseph remembered the instant when he realized what he had done. It had felt like choking, like drowning.

“I’m just saying I understand where she’s coming from, that’s all.”

“And where is she coming from?” Allen said.

He remembered when she had found out, her blond hair sticking up in all directions, her face blotchy with tears.

“I...we...” Joseph couldn’t get the words out. “We had just opened the bar. All the critics were giving us great reviews. Zoey included. We threw this big celebration party for the press, but Zoey couldn’t make it. And everybody was happy, and drinking, and there was this one girl...”

It was long after sunset, the party was over. Decorations were strewn over Fair Grounds like nuclear fallout. She was the only customer at the bar, and he was mixing her a drink, and she was laughing. But she had black hair, not blond.

“You cheated on her?” Allen said.

Joseph took a sip of his water bottle and nodded. Allen deserved honesty, no matter how much pain it gave him to exhume the past.

Allen scrubbed his hands through his hair. “How much have we spent to winning this competition? And now it’s all in danger because you couldn’t keep it in your pants?”

*I deserve that*, Joseph reminded himself. Allen had the right to be upset, so Joseph resisted the urge to retaliate. He settled for a dry “Pretty much.”

“What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking that in the future I might need her approval to win a bunch of money,” he said. “In the future, I’ll keep the possibility in mind.”

Allen gave him a disappointed look, and Joseph relented. Allen had put everything he owned on the line to keep Fair Grounds afloat, and now Joseph’s poor decision could ruin both of them. He owed Allen an explanation, but it wasn’t easy to look the memories in the eye. When he tried, the ghosts of old feelings washed over him: the sudden desire, the fear of discovery, the nausea that accompanied pure guilt.

“We were busy back then,” Joseph said. “One of us was always gone. Half the time I had to drive two hours just to have dinner with her. I guess I thought I was sick of the whole thing.”

“Okay, okay.” Allen said. He glanced around the room as though looking for a way out. “Damage control. Each judge gives marks out of ten, so if we can win over two judges we can still make it into the mid-twenties even with a bad review from...”

Allen’s voice faded off as Joseph drowned in the pain on Zoey’s face, bunched up and wet with tears.

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“Ah, you need coffee beans,” Kaldi said. “It is good that you have come to Kaldi.”

Joseph stood in the middle of a blazing outdoor bazaar in Yemen. The morning air was already crowded with heat and dust, and the stench of a hundred open dumpsters warred with the scents of exotic spices and sizzling meats.

Kaldi’s stall was made of PVC pipe and covered in cheap cloth. A pile of burlap sacks crowded the back of the booth, stenciled with the word “COFFEE.”

“I know you have the best, Kaldi, and that is why I come to you,” Joseph said.

“Ah, see, you do know. I am the thirty-third Kaldi, stretching back a thousand years to the Kaldi who was the first man to touch coffee to his lips, and always Kaldi has the best coffee beans. Tell me, Joseph, why have I not seen you for so long? Do you not speak to your friends?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s been a tough couple of years.”

“You are American. What is tough about this? How is your lady Zoey?”

“I don’t know, Kaldi.” He couldn’t escape the woman even when she was three thousand miles away. “We’re not together anymore.”

“Ah, this is a sad thing. She was a fine woman, who knew the value of a good cup of coffee.”

“So I’ve heard.” That was as far as Joseph was willing to let this conversation spiral out of control, so he steered Kaldi back to business. “I need two bags today.”

Kaldi rubbed his bearded chin as if considering. “I normally charge twenty rials for a bag, but because you are an American friend, I will give you the special price of one hundred American dollars.”

Over fifty times the original price. “You drive the worst bargain in the world,” Joseph said.

Kaldi grinned broadly. “Worst bargain, best coffee beans. How can I lose?”

Lugging a sack of coffee beans, Joseph said farewell to Kaldi and set off down the dusty street. When he was away from the noise of the market, he ducked into the shade between two houses, lowering his burden to the dirt. A goat peered at him suspiciously from five feet away.

Joseph pulled out his cell phone and stared at it. It had been a long time since he had made this call, but Kaldi had gotten him thinking. Better now than later...but surely he should wait until he was back in the States. He only had maybe twenty-five international minutes left...but no, if he put off the call he would never make it. And he seriously doubted the conversation would take twenty-five minutes.

After another moment of stalling, Joseph punched a thirteen-digit number.

“What do you want?” Zoey said. She had answered on the second ring. Joseph’s heart pounded in his throat.

“Hey, uh, I didn’t...I didn’t think you would answer.”

“So I ask again: what do you want?” Even flat and cold, her voice leaked into him like a stinging balm.

“Well, I just saw that you were one of the judges in the Coffee Expo,” Joseph said. What a way to begin the conversation. How smooth. How coy.

“Ah,” Zoey said. A coffee grinder buzzed to life in the background. “So I suppose that you’re entering the Best All-Around category?”

“Well, yeah.” Not his wittiest comment, but he had never been able to keep up with Zoey in conversation.

“Surely you’re not trying to improve your chances in the competition by calling me. I had greater respect for your intelligence than that.”

“No,” Joseph said hastily. “I’m not trying anything. I just...I just started thinking about you again.” It was a lame shadow of what he wanted to say.

“Was that supposed to be a romantic line?” Zoey asked. “Because you were always bad with those. And it’s a little late anyway.”

“I’m just trying to apologize, Zoey. One more time.”

“It’s been two years, Joe. Let it go.”

“Then listen to me,” Joseph said. A note of pleading had entered his voice, but he didn’t care. “I know I don’t deserve...anything, but I just want you to know how sorry I am for what I—”

“No. There’s nothing you can say that will make up for it, and I’m not going to pretend that there is.”

“Zoey—”

“So we have nothing left to talk about. I will see you on Friday, at the Expo, as your judge.”

“Please wait,” Joseph said.

The call cut off. Joseph stood there in the Yemen heat, staring through the goat, grip slowly tightening on the phone. He wanted to scream, to rage, to cry. If she didn’t want to talk to

him, then why even try? It was her own fault that she wouldn't listen to an apology. He should give it up. He had thought the same a thousand times.

But giving up would not release him from the pain. More importantly, it wouldn't release her. Picking up the bag of beans once more, he turned and headed towards the airstrip.

The goat trotted along behind him.

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Back in California, Joseph and Allen stood surrounded by ingredients in the kitchen of Fair Grounds. Kaldi's coffee beans made an excellent brew: rich, full, strong but not too bitter. Almost worth the twelve hundred dollar ticket to Yemen. But it wasn't the beans alone that would bring home the prize.

"I'm telling you, less sugar," Allen said.

"Then the flavor of the milk is too strong."

"Then less milk! Baldwin likes the flavor of the beans."

"I'm telling you, Zoey—"

"Will you shut up about Zoey!" Allen said. "She's a lost cause!"

"I just...want her to know I'm sorry, I guess."

"Then apologize. Again. But we don't have enough time for you to waste it feeling guilty. The Expo is going to be here before you know it, and we've got work to do."

They continued working long into the night.

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Every year, Joseph attended The Global Coffee Expo. It was always a fascinating experience for any coffee aficionado, as the Expo encompassed all flavors, all styles, all levels of

coffee. Two Japanese businessmen in three-thousand-dollar suits walked down the hallway, passing Joseph, Allen, and some part-timer costumed as a walking coffee mug. Coffee beans changed hands right there in the hallway, encased in steel briefcases, plastic packages, Ziploc bags. Brewers of a dozen different ethnicities plied stalls and carts stocked with hundreds of specialty blends.

Joseph always enjoyed the buzz of tension in the Expo air, but the novelty was waning fast this year. On top of his anxiety about Zoey, he had finally remembered his shaky competition nerves. He had gone to the ends of the Earth for this coffee, but what if it wasn't enough? What if, after thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours, they lost? But was it worth it, if it meant Zoey finally heard his apology?

Choking down his nervousness, Joseph made his way to the conference areas. Allen followed. The major competitions took place in conference rooms the size of theaters, each packed with hundreds of critics and coffee connoisseurs. At five o'clock in the evening the room was jammed to capacity, just in time for the final event: the Best All-Around Coffee Blend in the World.

Three judges sat behind a long table on a dais, facing the audience. Two attendants stood behind each judge, strictly charged with silence: a single word could see the attendant barred from all future competitions.

A voice boomed over the room's speakers. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the final event of the evening: Best All-Around!"

The cheer rising from the crowd shook the walls of the room. Joseph clenched his fists together. Beside him, Allen fiddled nervously with a worn quarter.

“I’m sure you are all familiar,” the voice continued, “with judges Zergman, Baldwin, and Siegal...”

Another wave of cheers.

“...and tonight these three will judge their coffee in every imaginable category. Each blend must pass muster in a variety of categories, ranging from ‘Serving Temperature’ to ‘Originality of Flavor’ and even ‘Texture.’ From these criteria, our judges must reduce each coffee to the numerical score which will determine...the best cup of coffee in the world!”

The cheers were even more enthusiastic this time. Joseph tried to take a deep breath, and found it shaky.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, without further adieu...the first cup. All the way from Calgary, Canada: Zimmerman’s Saturday Morning Special!”

The crowd hushed in unison as, with all the formality of a christening, Charlie Zimmerman brought the first cup of coffee up to the judges. His hands were shaking as he poured for each judge, though he never spilled a drop. Joseph had been to school with Charlie, and everyone knew he made a better bartender than brewer.

In a lineup of almost a hundred different flavors, Fair Grounds was thirty-fifth to be tested. When his time came, Joseph poured the judges their cups with his own hand. Even though he knew hundreds of eyes were watching, it was hard not to say something when he passed so close to Zoey. Closer than he had been in months. But as he poured, she kept her eyes firmly locked on the featureless wall.

Barbara Zergman, a wafer-thin woman with a halo of white hair and a perpetually shocked expression, widened her eyes as if surprised at the taste of the Fair Grounds blend. She

scratched a few notes and raised a paper placard: ten. The announcer—crouched behind a curtain at the back of the dais—repeated the score, adding a few comments based on Zergman’s notes, which were slipped him by one of the attendants. The crowd murmured and shifted, but this was not the first ten Zergman had awarded today.

“That’s step one,” Allen whispered. Joseph quivered with tension. With all of his focus on Zoey, he had almost forgotten the pressure of competition. His nerves were already teetering on the edge... then it was Zoey’s turn, and his heart tried to lurch out of his chest.

Zoey placed her cup back down delicately and held the coffee in her mouth for a moment before swallowing. Her face was largely too smooth to tell anything, but he thought a smile twitched up one corner of her mouth. It had been too long since he had seen her smile.

She gracefully made a note and raised her own card.

“A solid nine!” the announcer said. “Well, so far so good. And Miss Siegal has very few notes here, but she wishes to compliment the creative use of honey in this blend. Well, I certainly wouldn’t mind a taste of that!” There was some cheering and a polite round of applause at this second judgment.

“Thank God,” Allen said. “Thank God.”

Joseph’s body flushed with warmth, and his shaking hands stilled. Zoey met his eyes. She gave him a small smile, a real one this time, but her eyes were conflicted.

Gordon Baldwin was a huge fifty-four-year-old man who had to squint and lean forward to see anything, even through his thick Coke-bottle glasses. He leaned over and whispered in Zoey’s ear, raising his own card.

Seven point five.

The announcer remarked on the high total score, and repeated Baldwin's comments about the added ingredients crowding out the flavor of the excellent beans. The audience murmured and broke into heartfelt applause: it was the highest score of the day so far, but nothing unbeatable. Allen muttered something hopeful, but Joseph didn't hear it: his eyes stuck to Zoey in hopes of another miniscule sign.

An hour later, the decision was final. Ida Shelton's new Shelton Family blend of milk coffee was the best coffee blend in the world. Fair Grounds was second.

Joseph's disappointment tasted like bile, but he pushed it back. He could still come out ahead. A high score wasn't his only goal today.

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The crowd around Ida Shelton was so thick it probably required specialized equipment to penetrate, so a handful of reporters had sought out easier prey until the feeding frenzy slackened. "It's not what we were hoping for, of course," Allen told some reporters. "But what we should take away from this is that Fair Grounds is one of the top places for real coffee lovers to go. The second best coffee in the world is still worth driving into town for, after all."

Joseph dodged his own questions and questioners, spinning to keep an eye on the entire hall until he saw what he was looking for: a head of long blond hair slipping out the back exit. Joseph followed.

Zoey was sitting out on the back steps, waiting.

"I decided to give you five minutes, then leave. The clock starts now."

Joseph nodded even though she wasn't looking at him, pulling out a silver thermos. "I figured that after an entire day of doing nothing but drinking coffee, you could probably use a cup of coffee."

She snorted a laugh, but didn't say no. He handed her a Dixie cup and poured it full of the second-best coffee in the world, then filled a second for himself. He sat down beside her as she drank.

"Mmmm. The honey pulls it all together," she said.

"It's from a crazy Guatemalan bee-cult."

"I see." She took another sip. "You know, Gordon doesn't like honey. Everyone knows that he doesn't prefer sweets."

"But you do."

She nodded. "This must have cost you a fortune."

"Yeah, kinda."

"Did the prize for second place cover your expenses?"

"Not even half."

"I see. So you spent thousands and thousands of dollars to make one pot of coffee, and then you give up the chance to recover your investment because you know that I like honey."

Joseph shook his head. "No. I spent thousands and thousands of dollars to make two pots of coffee. One of which we are drinking right now." He raised his paper glass, and after a moment she raised hers and tapped them together.

"Zoey..." he began.

“I know you’re sorry, Joseph.” She sounded weary, not angry. “You’ve said it a million times.”

“I’m not asking you to take me back.”

“You’d better not be. It’s been too long, and I’m not stupid enough to go through that twice.”

“I just want to make it right.” He struggled to speak through the ache in his chest. “I know it’s impossible, and I’ve got no excuse for what I did. But I am sorry, and I’m begging you to please, please forgive me.”

She stared at the glass building across the street, which blazed in the setting sun. She stared into it until Joseph wondered if he was supposed to say something else.

“I want you to understand something,” Zoey said. “You can’t make up for what you did. I’ll forgive you, but just because we both need to let go of this. I can’t keep resenting you, and you can’t keep feeling guilty. We’ve both got to move on.”

Joseph nodded. “Absolutely. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Then I guess I’ll try and forgive you. I’m not sure if I can, but I can at least make the attempt.” She forced a crooked grin and stood up. “Thanks for the coffee. I might come by the bar sometime for another cup.”

“Fair warning: it won’t be this good.”

She laughed softly and walked away.

He sat on the stairs, sipping coffee. His muscles released tension he hadn’t even felt. ‘Relief’ was too mild a word: he felt like a noose had been lifted from his neck. A door opened behind him.

“Break’s over,” Allen said. “I need you to get these reporters off my back.”

Joseph downed the remainder of his coffee, stood, and walked back inside. Through the door a dozen familiar smells drifted over him: the rich scent of coffee grounds, the spicy tang of cinnamon, and--standing out among the rest--the sweet smell of honey.

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Half-blinded by stage lights, Simon Santini gestured to an audience member he could not quite see.

“And for the first time, please tell us, what was your card?”

A young man’s voice called out, “The four of clubs!” The other eight hundred people in the room murmured to each other, but Simon waved them to silence.

“Not yet, not yet! I’m not through with you yet. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would all please reach under your seats, you will find something taped to the bottom.”

Everyone in the room leaned down at once. Some of them began to laugh, then clap, as more and more of them discovered the four of clubs that had been taped to the bottom of each chair in the auditorium. The isolated clapping swelled into robust applause, then waxed into a standing ovation.

“Please,” Simon said, “ladies and gentlemen, please. It was only magic.”

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Forty-five minutes later, Simon stood in the backstage dressing-room, a cramped wood-paneled closet stuffed with racks of clothes and boxes of props. He swapped out his performance top hat for a more casual baseball cap, all the better to conceal his lack of hair. He posed in front of the mirror for a moment, ensuring that his everyday clothes were neatly arranged in case he should unexpectedly meet a fan.

A woman cleared her throat behind him; she must have intentionally stood outside the mirror's view. Simon gave his hat one final adjustment and then swept it off his head as he turned, bending at the waist in a stage bow.

"Marlene," he said, "you are exactly on time. I've been expecting you."

"You're not onstage, Simon," she said as he straightened. Marlene was at least ten years older than Simon, and built like a barrel crammed into a purple suit. She was round, firm, heavy, and one of the few people Simon could physically look down upon. Her gray hair was tied back into a bun, and her eyes were as friendly as a pair of wasps. Marlene could make a needle look warm.

"I've got the numbers," she continued. "Ticket sales are up forty percent. The theater owner's about to name her new son after you." Marlene didn't sound happy, but at least she wasn't upset.

"I can't take all the credit," Simon said. "After all, what would a performer be without his lovely assistant?" He bowed to her again, not as deep this time. She was his office assistant, not his stage assistant, but a little flattery couldn't hurt. Except that flattery slid off of Marlene like rain from a windshield.

"Sure. Speaking of sons, yours called. You should call him back." She glared at him as she tossed him his cell phone. He couldn't carry his phone onstage, of course, so she held it for him during shows and made notes of any important calls.

Simon's eyebrows shot up as he flipped through his call history. "Daniel called?"

"You can read."

"I'm just surprised. It's been a while. I'll call him back later, I guess, unless you want--"

“You should call him back now,” Marlene said. She had practically adopted the kid after his mother had died; Simon preferred to give him a little more space. “He’s moving.”

“He’s headed to Africa, yeah. But he’s not moving. This is a summer thing, just a couple of months, or something.”

“Or something. I’m telling you, Simon, he just left you a message: he’s moving to Kenya.”

Panic bloomed in Simon’s chest as a half-memory floated to the surface: Daniel had told Simon he was moving, hadn’t he? Why hadn’t he remembered until now?

Simon listened to the message: Daniel wearily explained that he was reminding his father one more time that he was moving out of the country, and if he wanted to talk they should do it soon. Was this the last chance he would get to talk to his son?

Hopefully, he could remember Daniel’s address.

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By the time Simon found Daniel’s apartment building, squeezed into a parking space on the side of the road, and talked the property manager into letting him inside, it was almost 11:45 PM. He drew his denim jacket close around himself and shivered. He stood in the hall for a full sixty seconds, rubbing his arms and trying to use his own hypnosis techniques to talk himself into courage.

It didn’t work. He knocked anyway.

Someone inside thumped up to the door and opened it a crack. It was Daniel, dressed in baggy shorts and a T-shirt, long hair mussed as though he had been lying down. He was taller than his father; he had been since he was fourteen.

“Dad?” he asked.

Simon cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Uh, did I wake you?”

“What? No. I was working.” Daniel leaned out the window and looked both ways in the hallway, as if searching for someone else. “What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?” Simon said.

“I don’t know...it depends. Why are you here?”

“I’m here to talk to you about that Kenya thing,” Simon said. He was used to making declarations onstage; it was hard to keep his voice down to a level appropriate to an apartment hallway in the middle of the night. “I thought it was just for the summer.”

“No, Dad. No.” Daniel’s voice was weary. “I told you this. It’s a long-term assignment; we don’t know how long it’s going to be. At least a year, probably longer. It’s important coverage, and I have to be fully immersed to get it right.”

Daniel hadn’t just told him once. He’d said it again and again, but each time it had slipped out of Simon’s grip like wet soap. How could he have forgotten?

They only saw each other at Christmas; other than that, they stayed out of each other’s way. But Daniel was the only family he had. If he left, Simon would be alone.

“Don’t leave,” Simon said. “Not yet. We’ll go out, we’ll talk about it.”

“We’ve talked about it, Dad. You just didn’t take it seriously.” Daniel’s anger was rising to match his father’s. Simon could hear it, but he continued.

“You win. I’m taking it seriously now, okay? You got it. You’ve just got to give me a little time to get used to the idea.”

A weary smile tugged up one corner of Daniel's mouth, and he shook his head. "Look, man. I'm leaving in two days."

Two days? How had Simon let it get this close without realizing? It was time for desperate measures.

"Look into my eyes, Daniel," Simon said. Daniel did so, a little warily. Simon made his voice soothing. "You look very tired. It's hard to think when you're tired. It's like you're wrapped in a heavy blanket, and it's warm, and it would just be too much effort to get up. Too much effort. Now's not the time to make these decisions. Later, after you've had some rest, but not now. Now it's time for some sleep--"

Daniel blinked and began to laugh. "Are you trying to hypnotize me?"

"What? What are you talking about? We're just talking, and I thought you looked tired, so I was giving you a little advice."

"You were actually trying to hypnotize me," Daniel said. He continued to chuckle. "You get some sleep, Dad. I'll call you from the airport." Daniel pulled the door shut, then turned the lock.

Simon stood in the cold hallway for a few minutes, head empty, then he walked back to his car.

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After a night of fitful sleep, Simon woke late. He immediately stood up and began to pace, thinking. How could he convince Daniel to stay? It wasn't as if they had much of a relationship--Simon could admit that to himself, if not out loud--but by God, it was his son. The last real family he had left.

The rest of his morning was consumed by deliberation. He endured his shower, deep in thought. He brainstormed through breakfast. He worried on his way to work, which mostly consisted of driving downtown to the studio and making sure the equipment was operational for next weekend's shows. As noon approached, he brooded his way to a hot dog stand set up on the sidewalk outside.

As he perused the fairly simple menu, an idea drifted into his brain and stuck. He always kept a deck of red Bicycle playing cards in a little pocket sewn inside his jacket sleeve, and in the guise of checking his watch he reached into that deck and palmed the top three or four cards. In their current order the top five cards of the deck made a royal flush in clubs, but that didn't much matter.

"That's some cold weather we're having, isn't it?" Simon said to the hot dog vendor. He leaned casually against the stand.

"No kidding," the vendor replied. "It's not so bad, compared to real winter, but it's colder than I like. What can I get you?"

"A number three with onions, please. So, I was wondering, could you point me to the nearest grocery store?"

Simon kept up a similar stream of distracting questions until the vendor had prepared his hot dog and asked for the price. "Three forty-seven," the vendor said.

Nodding, Simon counted out the four cards while pointing to a bell tower across the street and talking. "One, two, three, four...if I wanted to tour that building, when could I begin?"

The vendor began to tell him, even as he provided fifty-three cents change.

“All right,” Simon said, filling with renewed confidence, “thank you very much.” He walked away as the idea continued to sink its tendrils into his mind.

If he could pay for lunch with a king of clubs, couldn't he at least persuade his son not to leave the country? Of course he could. He was the Spectacular Santini, and the Santinis should stick together.

“Hey, you,” the hot dog vendor yelled from behind him. “What is this? Playing cards? Are you serious?”

Simon turned around, made some joke, and paid the man. But his idea did not fade.

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After finishing his hot dog, Simon called Daniel. It rang four or five times, but Daniel did actually pick up, which Simon took as a good sign. The background noise was loud and crowded with clinking glasses, distant background music, and featureless chatter.

“Dad, hey, I can't talk right now. I'm at lunch. Can I call you back later?”

“I was just thinking we could meet for dinner tonight, around seven-thirty or so, maybe catch up a little bit before you leave.”

“Uh...” Daniel's voice creaked with hesitation. “Sorry, I'm kind of busy. I'm leaving in the morning, so...yeah. You're not hoping to talk me out of it again, are you?”

“I'm not hoping anything,” Simon said. “But if you don't have the time, you don't have the time. Speaking of time, though, when do you leave?”

“The plane leaves at eight-fifteen tomorrow morning.”

“The eight-fifteen flight to Nairobi, Kenya?”

“Well, sure, that's where I'm going, but it's not a direct flight--”

“Great,” Simon said. “Have a great trip.”

“Dad, what are you--”

Simon hung up. He had always prided himself on his dramatic timing.

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At six-thirty the next morning, Simon walked into Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The entrance was well lit by white fluorescent lights high above. The waiting area to his left comprised five or six rows of blue plastic chairs, and to his right sat the rows of check-in counters. There weren't many people around, maybe twenty or thirty within his line of sight. But they were more than enough of a crowd.

He was dressed for a performance: black shoes, pants, suit jacket, and a matching hat over his bare head. No tie; Simon's costume designer always said that including a black tie in the ensemble made him look like he was dressed up for his own funeral, rather than for a show. Therefore, he wore the jacket without one.

Simon took seven deep breaths, centering himself into a focused mental state. It was time to go into performance mode. He was Simon Santini, the Spectacular Santini, star of--

“Tell me what I'm doing here,” Marlene said. Simon let out a breath and turned to face her. She wore a violet suit today, barely distinguishable from what she wore at any other time, and she had capped the outfit with her sharpest glare.

“Marlene,” Simon said by way of greeting. “You are the very soul of punctuality. If you could go speak to security, please, and make sure that I have permission to perform a small show with these people in the waiting room. I've called ahead, but it can't hurt to be too careful.”

“Uh-huh. Somehow I don’t think security is going to have much of a problem with whatever you want to do.” Was her tone a tad more sarcastic than usual? It was hard to be sure. She was always sarcastic, and always dry as a pillar of salt.

Simon shifted his arms, checking the comforting weight of the deck up his sleeve, and adjusted his hat. “I thought an impromptu public performance would be good for my image,” he said. “There’s no such thing as bad publicity.”

Marlene lifted one eyebrow. “Daniel’s going to be here, isn’t he.” It didn’t sound much like a question.

“He’s flying out of here in less than two hours, and I think I can talk him into staying. You may have noticed I have certain powers of persuasion.”

“You’re telling me he’s flying to Kenya...from here? Is everything okay?”

Simon frowned; she actually sounded concerned. For him, not for Daniel. He opened his mouth to ask what she was talking about, but he turned at a tug on his sleeve. A tall young woman stood next to him, eyes shining.

“No way,” she said. “You’re Simon Santini!”

“The show must go on,” Simon said to Marlene. “Please talk to security, if you would.” He tipped his hat to the tall stranger, gave her his stage smile, and slid the deck from his sleeve.

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An hour later, Simon stood with his fingertips pressed to either side of an older gentleman’s temples. “You feel yourself relaxing, sinking into a warm pool. The water is so warm it’s loosening your muscles...making you relax...you realize you don’t need to stand anymore, the water will hold you...go ahead and relax...”

The old man slumped backwards, and Simon caught him, lowering him into one of the blue waiting-area chairs. Quite a crowd had gathered to watch his show; indeed, more than forty-five people stood bunched around the waiting area, hanging on his performance. Simon glanced away from them, to the side, and caught sight of someone pulling luggage through the doors at the airport's entrance. Simon's heart sped up, but he kept his voice smooth and even.

“You're feeling refreshed and recharged. You're on the verge of feeling stronger than you have in years. You know that if you do what my voice tells you, you will feel better and stronger than ever. When I say 'go,' you will open your eyes and see a skinny young man with long brown hair at the entrance to the airport. You will not let him get to his plane.” Simon saw the figure receiving his tickets from one of the airport personnel, and his stomach lurched.

“Three two one go!” Simon blurted.

The gentleman's eyes snapped open and he hurried over to the young man with the luggage. The old man stood in front of the younger, arms spread in a gesture of denial.

Daniel reacted cautiously. It was difficult to hear what he said over the steady background noise of the airport, but it sounded like “Do I know you?”

The gentleman, looking like a scarecrow planted in the middle of the airport, said nothing. A girl behind Simon giggled.

Simon turned back around to see the rest of the people he had similarly entranced earlier in the show: two women and two men, of various ages. He snapped his fingers and they rose to their feet. Someone applauded briefly, and more people gasped or laughed.

“Now, you four, that young man with the long hair is your best friend. You haven’t seen him in years! Go run over there and give him a nice long hug.” The four dashed off, piling on Daniel and telling him how wonderful it was to see him.

The crowd behind Simon burst into laughter and applause. Simon strode over to his son, who was flailing and asking for help. One of the nearby airport employees chuckled and waved at Simon.

“Daniel, we need to talk,” Simon said, pitching his voice to carry. “Is now a good time?”

The gathered crowd, back in the waiting area, laughed again.

Daniel groaned. “Dad. I was hoping that wasn’t you.”

“I can get them off of you at any time. Just agree to talk with me for a few minutes, and to listen to what I have to say, and I’ll tell them to let you go. Otherwise...well, they might just hang on tighter.” Immediately the four people clinging to Daniel squeezed harder.

“Dad, this is getting ridiculous. I’m about to leave.”

“Oh, I’m confident I can change your mind.”

Daniel began to address the people around him. “Look, you’re not hypnotized. No, get off me, you’re not hypnotized. You’re not! All right, fine, fine.” Daniel pitched his voice deep and resonant in a passable imitation of Simon’s stage voice. “You’re rising up, as if from the bottom of a lake. You see the light. You strain to reach it...your lungs are bursting...finally, you reach the surface! Take a deep breath!”

All four of the people on top of Daniel and the older man standing in front of him all gasped for breath. “Now your eyes are open,” Daniel said, “and you wonder what you were

doing.” The group blinked rapidly and let him go, laughing and pretending to wonder what was going on.

“Not bad,” Simon said.

“I studied. When I was a kid. I can still do a few decent card tricks, too.”

Simon smiled a little. “All right, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your cooperation. If you’ll return to your seats, you can resume waiting for your flight.” One of the women laughed again, and they all went back to the excited crowd by the chairs. The other audience members began to pepper them with questions.

“That was a pretty good way to break the induction,” Simon said. “With a little practice, you might be able to have your own show.”

Daniel coughed into his hand, but it looked like he was covering up a smile. “I don’t think there’s much of a market for that in Kenya.”

“Then stay here.”

“I can’t, Dad--”

“Your mother’s buried here.”

The old frustration was creeping back into Daniel’s voice. “I don’t think it’ll make much difference to her no matter where I go.”

“You won’t make nearly as much money over there. Here you have a future and a family; they don’t really need your help over there. It’s just a feeling, it’ll go away.”

“You still won’t stop, will you?” Daniel said.

“Stop what?”

“Trying to make me feel bad. Trying to manipulate me into staying. You don’t control me, Dad, so stop trying.”

Simon’s throat tightened, so he cleared it, but he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to do without the tricks, but if he did nothing, his son was going to leave.

“I don’t control you,” Simon said. He meant it, so it was one of the hardest things he’d ever said. “But I want you to stay. You’re all I’ve got, son.”

Daniel obviously covered another smile. “Could you repeat that?” he said.

“I want you to stay,” Simon said. “Please.”

Immediately, the room burst into applause.

Simon turned to see why everyone was clapping, but he felt his son’s hand on his shoulder. “Dad, look at me. Look at my eyes. Now look around this room, tell me what you really see.”

Simon broke eye contact and looked around the building: it was one big room, with a carpeted floor and fluorescent lights overhead. Blue chairs had been set up in imitation of an airport waiting area, but there was no terminal. No flights. People in airport uniforms stood behind cheap plastic podiums.

Daniel’s smile turned into a grin. “There was no flight to Kenya,” he said. “I left you a message every night; it’s hard to hypnotize people over the phone.”

Simon started to laugh. He couldn’t help it. It was difficult to catalogue how he was feeling: embarrassed, relieved, impressed, a little ashamed. But somehow it made him want to laugh, so he did. In response, the audience began to laugh too.

“And these fine people were lucky enough to win tickets to the one-time-only showing of the Spectacular Santinis magic act!” Daniel said. The crowd cheered louder.

“This is very impressive, son,” Simon said. “But don’t ever make me do that again.” He couldn’t keep a little laughter out of his voice.

“That’s not the only thing I can do,” Daniel said. He tossed an object to his father, who reflexively caught it. It was an old, worn deck of red Bicycle playing cards.

Simon felt at his sleeve. The pocket within it was empty. He laughed quietly to himself as Daniel turned and bowed to the audience.

## ROAMING GNOMES

It wasn't the first gnome Clark had stolen, but it was probably the heaviest. It was real glazed ceramic, not plastic as he had expected, and it took all of Clark's care to pick it up and place it into his bag without dropping it. If the gnome cracked, it would have defeated the entire purpose. Plus, he would have felt bad; he was here to steal Mr. Foster's gnome, not to break it.

Clark glanced around the garden. The moonlight turned bushes and vines into shapeless, menacing lumps, but nothing moved.

Hands shaking, Clark drew the strings tight on his bag and hoisted the gnome onto his shoulder. His car was parked in the grass of an empty lot over a block away, and he started running for it. He was in the open now, and anyone peeking out their window would see him.

He imagined Mr. Foster, his boss, lurching out of the house, disheveled from sleep, yelling into the night. Mr. Foster would realize the thief's identity the next day, and then Clark would be out of a job.

Oddly, that didn't sound too bad.

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Seven hours later, Clark strode into the Sanders & Morgan Office Supply building. Though he deserved his own office after six years of service, the one they'd given him was a former janitor's closet. The only light came from a bare bulb with a thin chain, the walls were an off-white that was almost gray, and the tiled floor sloped to a drain in the corner. It still smelled like Clorox.

Most of the equipment in the room had been issued to him by the company: one cheap imitation-wood desk, one black plastic phone that never rang, one Dell desktop that hadn't been upgraded since 2004, and one bookshelf that looked like it was made from recycled egg crates. It was sad, it was dreary, and it made Clark feel like he was stepping into a prison cell and slamming the bars shut.

But he had found something to brighten his windowless prison: his collection of garden gnomes. Wendel, a shaggy gnome with a bag of sticks on its back, leaned against two reams of printer paper. Two gnomes in bright red hats, Wolfram and Wallace, gazed at each other from across Clark's monitor. Several other gnomes peeked out from where he had hidden them behind office supplies or tucked them away in corners. In a few swift motions, Clark opened a space on his desk. Then he reached into his office bag with both hands, hefting the gnome he'd stolen up and onto the desk. The gnome was about a foot tall, with a red hat and a gray beard, carrying a bag of bread crumbs in one hand and a duck in the other.

"I'll call you Whitaker," Clark said.

It was probably the most satisfying conversation he'd have all day. Whitaker stared at him.

This wasn't where Clark had pictured himself at thirty years old: living alone, working a mindless job, having one-sided conversations with ceramic garden decorations. But it beat unemployment, right? Some people didn't get a steady paycheck, and if the job sucked, at least the gnomes kept him sane.

His tie was choking him; Clark loosened it.

For the next four hours, Clark compared spreadsheets. The same problems, over and over again: is Philip Jackson's sales report consistent with Jeffrey Miller's? Yes. Is the inventory list in Warehouse A consistent with the inventory list in Warehouse B? Yes. Is this shipping invoice the same as that sales invoice? Yes, it was the same. It was always the same. Everything had to be the same.

Clark glanced at one of the gnomes on his desk. Wallace carried a basket full of mushrooms and was reaching down to pick another. Clark had stolen that one from Julie in Human Resources, then he'd made up an emergency that would bring her to his office. Contrary to his expectations, she had not freaked out; in fact, she had said nothing about the gnome. A few indirect questions had revealed that she'd never known it was missing. That had almost made him stop, but without the thrill of imagined risk, his job was just too boring. He would have quit two years ago.

Two quick raps on the door shattered Clark's silence. Hope kindled in his chest; only Mr. Foster knocked like that. If he walked in now, he couldn't fail to see Whitaker, camped boldly on the corner of Clark's desk. How would he react? Would he show some anger? Would he demand an explanation? Would he just want his gnome back?

"Come in," Clark said. The door opened.

Mr. Foster was gray all over. He had gray eyes, gray hair, and unhealthy-looking gray skin. He wore a suit the color of gravel, and a silver tie. The overall effect was to make him look as if he had been cremated and then rebuilt from the ashes.

"I wanted to talk to you about the expense reports for this quarter," Mr. Foster said. He only spoke in a monotonous drone.

“Absolutely, Mr. Foster,” Clark said, adjusting Whitaker.

Mr. Foster’s eyes never left Clark’s. “Tina will need the finals by the thirtieth if she wants to release them in May. I told her you would be on top of it but I wanted to make sure.”

“Yes sir. I think I can have them in by the twenty-ninth.” Worry began to squirm through Clark’s chest. Would Mr. Foster not glance at the stolen gnome on the desk? Would he not even notice?

“Good,” Mr. Foster said, no hint of approval or disapproval in his voice. “Stop by my office when you need me to sign them.” Then he began to leave.

The air rushed out of Clark’s lungs. It was unbelievable. If no one noticed, there was no point. He would be just like everyone else in this place: a droid cranking out reports. How long before he quit or cracked?

Mr. Foster paused and turned halfway back toward Clark. “The strangest thing happened to me this morning,” he said. “I have a little man that lives in my garden. When I went out to water my begonias, he was missing. He must have wandered off.”

“I’m sure he’s in a better place now, sir,” Clark said gravely. It felt almost as good as laughter.

“I’m sure.” The corner of Mr. Foster’s mouth crept upwards, and he walked out the door.

Clark let out a pleased sigh and stretched, settling down in his chair to get back to work.