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The only way to learn is to survive the lesson.

To those whose lessons seem insurmountable.

Michael Poeltl

HER PAST'S PRESENT

By Michael Poeltl

Chapter One

September 15th, 2:00 am

It wasn't your fault. These are healing words; something Tess's therapist had her write out a thousand times when she was twelve. It became her mantra, a reassurance that what had happened to her baby brother could in no way be her fault.

Today, fifteen years after the suicide that had devastated her life and the lives of her parents, she finds power in those words once more.

"I'm sorry," says Sam, her husband, who is standing stock still in front of her. All that separates them is the granite topped island situated in the middle of a kitchen under renovation. It is the only working surface available to lean on should he confirm her fears.

"Please," she pleads. "Please just tell me it doesn't mean anything. Tell me it was just the one time and I can forgive you." She isn't hopeful for this outcome, but can't bear the thought of the consequences that follow such an act. To be a single mother amidst all the renovations and bills and contractors and sleepless nights; it's overwhelmed her the past few days and her already pale complexion is rapidly fading to a sickly, almost translucent white.

His head drops slowly, his eyes studying the grout lines framing the new tile at his feet. His heart isn't in this. He was far from ready to tell his wife of five years he'd met someone else; that since the last month of her pregnancy he'd been seeing another woman. That is a significant amount of time, Sam's decided and he is very much committed to this new woman. But not at all ready to tell his wife.

"Tess." He struggles with her name. His chin begins to tremble.

"Please, tell me it will be okay." She begs. "Tell me that you love me."

"I *do* love you, goddamn it," he manages through clenched teeth. His fist falls with a weak thump on the black granite counter while his other hand finds his face, defending her from his diminishing façade. He jerks and cries into his shield, turning away from Tess.

“Then why?” Tess begs, slowly sinking to her knees, coming to rest on the dusty tile, her back landing against the cupboard of the island.

“I don’t know why.” He turns and slides down the opposite side of the island. “I don’t know.”

“Please don’t leave me with nothing,” she begs.

“If I had an answer I’d give it.”

“Please.”

“I don’t have an answer for you. I haven’t an answer for *myself*.”

Her voice cracks. “If you love me, be with me.”

“Don’t you think I want that? Don’t you think I *want* to be happy here?”

“You’re not happy?”

“You know I’m not.”

“I’m sorry if I haven’t had the time to put into you. We have a baby.”

“Jesus, I know we have a baby, and I love her, but I feel like the walls are closing in on me.”

Tess shifts uncomfortably, the thin fabric of her pajama pants offering little insulation from the cool tile. “It’s okay to feel trapped, but you need to talk to me.”

“It’s not *you*.”

“Then what?”

“*Me*. It’s me.”

It’s not your fault. She tells herself. *It’s not your fault.*

Chapter Two

October 15th, Monday

Tess is up with her daughter. It's 3:30 in the morning. This is the second time tonight and she only put Emilia down at ten. At six months old Tess had hoped Emma would have gotten into a pattern of sleep that would take her through the night. Even if she wasn't going to bed until later in the evening, at least sleeping through the night would be a blessing. But neither was happening, and now that she no longer has Sam to lean on, her days and nights seem to run together, one bleeding into the next.

Sitting in Emilia's room, rocking gently to the soothing sounds of her daughter feeding at the bottle, Tess wonders, as she does every night at this time; what next? It has been a month since Sam left. Nearly that long since she'd heard from him too. He left her with everything including the bank account. She knows she could complete the renovations on their apartment and live comfortably for the remainder of the year if it came to that, but missed him endlessly; his presence in her bed, his turn with Emilia overnight, dinners, anticipating his return from work, adult conversation.

Tess cries silently over the baby, now convulsing in an effort to repress this reaction to her life. Every feeding ends up like this now; Tess crying over her infant daughter, a myriad of what if's tormenting her. *It wasn't your fault*, she reminds herself. There is nothing you could have done to change the outcome. Emilia now sleeping, Tess lays her in the crib, and careful not to make a noise, sneaks out of her room.

It's now that the exhaustion of the day, both physical and emotional, hits her. With the last feeding of the night over, so begins the long stretch of wakefulness until morning light. Tess has not been able to sleep past four in the morning since Sam left, and with the relentless barrage of scenarios attacking her at her most vulnerable; there is no point in trying. Even lying in bed is a challenge, reading a book a lost cause, nothing silences the onslaught of questions. So, like every morning before sunrise,

Tess drags her weakened spirit across the bedroom and into the nearly finished kitchen to begin her day.

After she makes a pot of coffee Tess sits in front of a pile of bills she has had no time or inclination to pay. This spurs on another panic attack. The first had happened the night after she and Sam had confronted his decision to leave. The experience was frightening to say the least, and this was no different. It comes on without warning and starts in her left hand, then travels up her arm and attacks her shoulder. The feeling resembles so closely a description Tess had read on heart attacks that she immediately moves her right hand to her chest. Sure enough the pain enters her chest and Tess grips her left breast, willing the pain away.

Nothing can make you feel more certain that you're having a heart attack than a substantial panic attack. Even a heart attack either takes you within seconds or goes mostly unnoticed. A panic attack on the other hand goes on and on and with each passing minute your heart fills with a dread that: this time it really is a heart attack!

Tess fumbles with her tablet and punches in a search for panic attack symptoms. This technique settled her nerves enough to allow the attack to subside three days earlier. Finding the page once more she scrolls down, reading hungrily in anticipation of the pins and needles sensation in her arms dissipating. Breathing in and out slowly also assists in alleviating the building panic. Each breathe in is an exercise in concentration.

After ten minutes the symptoms leave as suddenly as they'd appeared. Feeling one hundred years older now, Tess sits, bent over the dining room table, head in folded arms. Then the baby cries.

It seems that she will be given no quarter today, and with the men coming to complete the kitchen in just a few short hours, Tess predicts a difficult day of electric drills and skill saws buzzing in her ear while she and Emilia shut themselves into her bedroom to watch cartoons.

As nine o'clock approaches the buzzer sounds and Tess lets the men in with all their noisy equipment. She's happy to know the work will end after today, or so she's been told, but the barrage of questions concerning the specifics of the job is more than she can handle. This is their sixth time at the house and Tess is well versed in how to make small talk. She points out the coffee maker with a full pot brewed on the counter and relays her plans with the baby for the day.

The foreman assures Tess they will be done today and out of her hair for good, barring any unforeseen difficulties. She nods and realizes she's been staring at the man. He looks inquisitively at her and asks whether there was something else. Tess, embarrassed now shakes her head.

“Sorry. Just tired is all.”

“If I have any questions for you I’ll come knock on your door.” He smiles and turns to accept a coffee from his apprentice.

Tess turns around and walks quickly to her room with Emma on her hip. It has been a long time since she’s even considered the company of a man, but fixed in that gaze she felt a sudden yearning for the unshaven foreman dressed in a white tee, beige overalls and steel toed boots.

In her bedroom, Tess catches herself in the vanity mirror and stops. Studying her reflection, she chastises herself.

“Look at you, nobody would want *you*.” Her hair is in knots and her face blotchy from the embarrassment she felt breaking eye contact with the foreman. She had done nothing to fix her appearance since waking up in preparation for their arrival, never even considered it. How could she have let herself go like this, she wonders. Glancing over at the collage of wedding photos still adorning her wall, she sets the baby down on her bed and pulls them down, tossing them into the corner. The glass shatters on one of the frames and she again curses herself. She had thought leaving them in place served one of two purposes: Either Sam would return and everything would be as it was, or she was steeling herself against him. Nothing had changed, though. Not in the month since he had disappeared. He hadn’t returned to them, nor had she felt stoic against the black and white memories. She lives in a Mausoleum, she decides, a sad memorial to a marriage that didn’t work.

That afternoon the work is completed as promised and as the apprentice cleans up the foreman knocks on Tess’s door.

“All done,” he says. Tess opens the door and smiles at him. She’s made herself up; put on something more appropriate than the tights and loose sweater she’d been wearing to greet them and walks to the kitchen with Emilia again resting on her hip.

“Wow, that looks really nice,” she tells them. “I couldn’t imagine it finished for the longest time.”

As the men clear out of the apartment, tools in tow, the foreman hangs back a moment to collect his check. Tess places Emma on the floor in front of the TV and writes out the remainder of what’s owed him on the island counter. She pauses, wondering whether she could ask him out for a drink some time. She feels she needs to recover from the verbal beating she gave herself earlier in the day. A date would do that.

“Say, Remy, right?” She keeps her eyes on the check while she addresses him.

“Yes. Tess, right?”

“Yes, um, I was wondering, if you wanted to, I mean, maybe you’d like to get a drink some time?” Tess feels her face flush. Her gaze remains on the counter.

“Oh, uh, I can’t, but I would like to.” He pulls a ring from his pocket and places it back on his finger. “I, uh, I take it off when I’m working.”

Tess glances over and sees that his ring finger now wears a gold band. She stands up straight and hands his check to him, red faced. “I’m so sorry. I mean for me, not that you’re married. I loved being married.” She smiles awkwardly and walks to the door. “Listen, I’ll, um, give you good references if you need them. Great work. Thanks again.” She can’t stop talking now, wishing the moment away.

“Hey, I’m honored, really.” He tells her from the hall, quickly studying her own decorated ring finger.

“Oh, you don’t have to say that. I’m okay, I understand.” She runs a hand up and down her arm nervously.

“Well, you take care and enjoy your new kitchen.” He bows out and heads towards the elevator where his apprentice is waiting. Tess closes the door and sinks to the floor, humiliated.

Chapter Three Tuesday, 3:00 am

That night Tess wakes with a start. Her heart is pounding and she feels a chill on her back as she sits up. She's soaked through her night shirt and her hair is matted to one side of her face. She peels her shirt off and ties her hair back, lifting it off her neck. Looking at the alarm clock she sees it's nearly time for Emilia to wake for her feeding. It's not particularly hot in the house, in fact it's quite cool, so why all the sweat? Bad dreams, she faintly recalls.

Tess moves to the other side of the bed, avoiding the large damp circle and lies down again. Pathetic, she thinks, that she still practices sleeping on her side of the bed, while *his* remains vacant. Then the dream which woke her reveals itself in sporadic scenes, flashes of memory dance behind her eye lids.

There was a war going on outside her home. Not her current home, but her home all the same. It was dark save one electric light flickering with each vibration. Plaster fell on her each time a sound more threatening than thunder exploded overhead. The last thing she remembers of the dream was searching helplessly through the rubble of her home for her children, crying out to them, panic-stricken, wishing her husband were there.

I can't even escape into my dreams anymore, she tells herself, placing both hands over her face. The idea that she may find no peace in sleep now devastates her. She surrenders to the anxiety and turns to sob into the pillow, a pillow which still carries Sam's scent.

On this night Emilia does not wake for her 4am feeding, and Tess manages to collapse back into sleep after an exhausting hour of crying. At 7am she rolls over to look at the time. The house is silent. Tess is suddenly overcome by fear. How could Emilia not be awake if she hadn't eaten in the night? She hurries out of bed and rounds the hallway to her daughter's bedroom. She rushes in and finds Emilia on her stomach, in her crib. She is still. Tess is afraid to touch her. She's afraid to know. She's

heard of crib death in infants, she's heard of all kinds of awful ways a child might die.

Emilia coughs and Tess's heart leaps. She reaches down and pulls Emilia up to her chest. The baby is blurry-eyed and begins to cry. Tess savors the moment, hugging her and tearing up.

"Oh, Emma," she says over and over. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Emilia settles down and Tess walks her to the kitchen, opens the fridge and retrieves a bottle of formula. She had tried to breast feed early on but after a month of aggressive pumping she became discouraged and made the decision to go with formula. This did nothing to encourage her that she was a good mother, and she berated herself each time thereafter she prepared a bottle of store-bought baby formula.

Once the bottle is warmed Tess sits on the couch and thumbs at the television converter for a children's show. Emilia is happily feeding on the bottle when the phone rings.

"Hello," she answers, more enthusiastically than she'd meant to.

The other end is silent, and so she repeats herself, this time with a hint of irritation in her voice.

Still nothing from the caller. Tess listens a little more attentively, furrowing her brow as she leans into the ear piece. The other person hasn't hung up. They haven't done *anything*. Emilia lets out a satisfied burp and goes back to feeding.

"Sam?" She waits for some response. "Sam, is that you?" The phone drops at the other end. Tess jerks back from the receiver and hangs up. She looks down at her daughter.

"Your Daddy says hi." She smiles painfully and brushes her thin fingers through Emilia's short blonde hair.

The phone rings again and this time Tess checks the call display. *Unknown number*. Well, maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. She would take some comfort in believing it was Sam and lets it ring.

Chapter Four

Tuesday, 1:00 pm

That afternoon, Tess keeps a lunch date with a friend from her office. Amanda's asked Tess more than once to bring Emilia in so everyone could ogle over her, but Tess found one reason after another as to why she couldn't. Now, a month into her separation, she couldn't imagine facing the humiliation of an explanation.

Seated outside a trendy café, Emma resting comfortably in her stroller beside her, she waits for Amanda to arrive. Tess waves as she watches her friend approach from across the street. She stands to meet her and the women hug.

"You look fan-*fucking*-tastic!" she tells Tess.

Embarrassed by the compliment, Tess waves it off, shaking her head as she sits.

"Shut-up," Amanda continues. "I have to starve myself for a week to look like you. This is unfair. *I'm* having a baby!" She rounds the table and crouches next to the stroller. Looking up at Tess, she covers her mouth with one hand. "Oh, she's absolutely beautiful."

Tess has always liked Amanda, who would always include her in group situations, pulling her into a debate and offering Tess up as an expert on something she barely knew anything about. It was all at once fun, and frightening.

"Thank you, Amanda." Tess tilts her head and smiles.

"So this is Emilia! Love the name too!" She reaches out to cup Tess's hand and Tess closes her other hand over Amanda's. "Are you sure you won't bring her to the office?"

Tess shakes her head, her lips sealing into a tight thin line. "Not a good time for me right now to face everyone."

Amanda's expression falls but her beauty never diminishes. Just then the waiter asks if they are ready to order drinks. Amanda asks for the house white and Tess follows suit. Menus are left, but Amanda's stare is too engaging for Tess to ignore.

“Sam left me,” she puts bluntly. Amanda pushes back from the table. “About a month ago.”

“Tess.” Her friend is speechless. Her impossibly large eyes grow in size while her hands reach to cover her mouth.

“It’s okay,” Tess tries to reassure her, shaking her head. “I’m okay, Emma’s okay.” She reaches into the stroller and pulls the blanket level with her sleeping daughter’s bare neck. Tess had made up her mind in an instant that she would share this information with Amanda, saving her the painful and repetitive discussions when she went back to work in a few months, knowing her friend would relay the information systematically.

Over lunch Tess shares most of what she knows about what happened and why. They break to eat quiche and sip their wine, but the lunch is dominated by her sad news.

“You know, I have a friend who just went through something like this and he went to a counselor and swears it saved his life.” Amanda waves the server over and asks that her wine glass be refilled. Tess nods to another glass when asked and considers what her friend has suggested.

Looking past Amanda, Tess’s eyes are drawn to the hospital which sits atop the hill bordering the southwest end of the city. “I hear the hospital has a new wing dedicated to psychiatry. It’s one of those places that design programs around a person’s specific needs.”

Amanda follows her stare and then looks back in surprise. “You’re not *crazy*; you don’t need to go to a *hospital*. Just look into a counselor, they’re a dime a dozen.”

Tess smiles and nods, never taking her eyes from the hill top. “Yeah, it costs like eight-hundred dollars a day, but my insurance would pay a portion if my doctor signed off on the stay.” Tess finds a comfort in the architecture of the building and the idea that she could stay there for a time intrigues her.

“That’s a LOT of money! Just consider counseling.” Amanda cleans the lipstick from the rim of her glass. “This is one of those things that can play on your mind - you guys were together a long time.”

Tess listens with a blank stare, watching Amanda’s lips form word after word. She could never understand how anybody could talk so much about anything. Even in her career, Tess only spoke when absolutely necessary, to get a point across or give direction. She nods as Amanda continues on, undeterred, about how she ought to deal with this difficult time in her life.

As Amanda gets up to return to work Tess decides that therapy is the way to approach the emotions she’s been suffering of late and tells her friend that she will get help.

“It couldn’t hurt.”

Chapter Five
Tuesday, 3:00 pm

Tess walks Emilia back to the apartment after lunch. The October sun is warm on her face and feels invigorating. Waiting at a light she closes her eyes and faces the blue sky, allowing the healing properties of the sun to brighten her mood.

The vitamin D's she's been taking since Sam left promised to lift her depression, but she put little faith in herbal remedies and had always shied away from prescription drugs. Now with the idea of therapy on the horizon she can see an alternative to both.

But the pessimist in her finds new arguments regarding a shrink messing around in her head. She wrestles with the idea and confirms that it has worked for her in the past. When her brother had died she was inconsolable. Therapy was good for her.

Deep in thought, Tess moves forward as a crowd passes her, indicating the light had changed and it was safe to walk. Unbeknownst to her the crowd picks up their pace midway, as the light had gone from walk to stop. A car speeding toward the intersection anticipating the green light rushes through a red and strikes a van making a right turn.

The sounds of crashing metal and squealing tires shocks Tess, bringing her to a standstill in the middle of the crosswalk. The van careens into the light pole behind them, skidding within a few inches of her and Emilia. Tess's hair and dress lift with the powerful gust that accompanies the van's near hit.

A man rushes out to pull Tess and Emilia away as the van spills fluid from under its hood. Tess is frozen in place, but at the man's urgings she completes the crossing, her hands tightly gripping the stroller.

"Lady, if you had nine lives," the man tells her, breathless. Tess barely acknowledges him staring down at Emilia still sleeping, secure in her stroller.

The crowd that had surrounded her moves to assist those involved in the accident, while others direct traffic away from the scene.

“Thank you,” Tess manages in a stunned whisper. The young man looks Tess up and down and guides her further away, distancing them a block or more. She simply allows him to lead her.

“Thank you,” she says again but the man does not let go of her arm. Tess finally looks at him and suddenly doesn’t feel any safer than when she was standing in the middle of the street

“I’m fine,” she tells him, her grip on the stroller loosening a bit in case she needs to defend herself. He looks at her and smirks. She wonders what’s happening. This isn’t *normal*.

“I just want to get you to a safe place,” he explains. “I know a spot I can take you.”

Despite her shock, Tess knows something has gone very wrong. Now she is frightened. Looking back she sees they have travelled more than two city blocks from the gathering crowd.

“I’ll scream,” she tells him under her breath.

“You don’t want to do that,” he explains, showing a long knife at his belt, hidden behind his jacket. Tess can’t believe her bad luck.

“What do you want?”

“Just to get you to a safe place.”

“Is it money you want?”

“Yes, I want money.” He continues to lead her along the broken sidewalk. “But I may ask for something more than money.” A wink follows.

Tess is in no shape to fight a man with a knife. This is a seemingly impossible situation and she is becoming more and more alarmed the further they travel into a less populated section of the city.

The man’s hold on her arm is beginning to hurt and she struggles weakly to shrug him off. He won’t have any of it.

“I’ll give you what you want, I will, just promise me.”

“I don’t make promises,” he replies. “Too hard to keep.”

“I have a *baby* for Christ sake!”

“So do I. Two in fact, and they like to eat,” he says matter-of-factly.

“So take my money,” she pleads.

“I will,” he assures her. “But you see; I like to fuck.”

Tess goes cold. She was going to be raped. She was going to be raped, she says again and again to herself. But if that was all then she could survive this, she rationalizes. If she just cooperates then he will let Emilia and her go.

As she tries to process what the next few hours might be like, two police officers round the corner and head towards them. His grip on her arm increases tenfold and she winces at the pain as his filthy fingernails dig into her pale soft flesh.

He leans toward her and whispers a threat. "Say anything and I'll cut your throat, I swear."

"HELP ME!" Tess cries to the officers, pushing the stroller out in front of her. They eye the man and pull their weapons. He releases his grip and flees into the street. There a tractor trailer plows into him, sending his body dozens of feet forward as the driver slams on his brakes.

Tess watches on in horror as his corpse skids along the asphalt and the truck runs him over a second time pulling him under the right tire. The sound is unimaginable; the bursting and crunching. Tess falls to her knees and then crawls to the stroller where Emma is now stirring.

One officer rushes to Tess's aid while the other calls in the gruesome scene.

"Are you alright, Miss?" he asks, kneeling to meet her gaze. Tess pulls Emma from the stroller and hugs her tightly, leaning up against a building to steady herself. She's nodding to the officer, her mouth open and debating whether or not to lose her lunch. Hiding behind the baby's carriage, Tess is shielded from the mess in the street. Two close calls, she thinks. What's happening? Why is this happening to me?

Chapter Six

Tuesday, 6:45 pm

At the police station Tess gives her account of the afternoon's events, relating the lunch with her girlfriend, the car accident and the man who had been killed.

"Had you ever seen the man before?" asks a female police officer seated on the opposite side of a cluttered desk. Emma, who is now alert and irritable, plays with her mother's hair.

"I haven't, no." The image of the man being crushed under the wheel plays again and again in her head. A new reason to go to therapy, she thinks, as if she needed one.

Not wanting to upset Tess further, the officer doesn't tell her that the man's identity was pulled from his fingerprints and has been confirmed as a member of a crime syndicate operating out of the bowels of the city.

"This looks to be a random event, Mrs. Seager. He saw you in distress, standing in the middle of the street while an accident was happening around you and took his opportunity. You're very lucky. This happens all the time, and we almost never get involved until after the fact."

"He said he had children, two of them," Tess supplies, to her own surprise.

"Did he?" the tight faced woman asks.

"Yes, he said they were hungry, I just - I hate to think of two children waiting for him at home wondering..."

"You're a sweet woman, Mrs. Seager." But Tess knows she means naïve. "I can assure you he has no children. I didn't tell you this before, but we identified him a half hour ago and know who he is. He's got a rap sheet a mile long, but no kids."

Tess is satisfied with this explanation, grateful for the police intervention and ready to visit the option she and Amanda had discussed over lunch hours before, if only to gather more information.

At home Tess lays Emma down for a nap and takes a long shower, washing away the day's drama. She surprises herself at how well she seems to be dealing with the surreal events. Who survives an accident like that, only to be abducted and then survive that without so much as a scratch? With the thought lingering she lifts her left arm. Looking down she notices bruising where the man's grip had tightened when the police appeared. A strange thought occurs to her: the ghost of a dead man's hold exists even after he is gone.

She feels nothing for the man, certain he'd had it coming: Preying on people like that in vulnerable situations. She shakes her head at thanking him for pulling her free of the crosswalk.

Stepping out of the shower, she pulls her bath robe on and slips into bed. It's now eight o'clock and she and Emma hadn't really had a dinner. A coffee and a bagel at the station for her and two yogurts for Emma probably weren't enough, but Emma would be up in a few hours to eat again, and so Tess allows herself to drift off.

Chapter Seven

Wednesday 8:30 am

Surprisingly Emma woke-up just once to feed, and equally shocking, Tess slept soundly, even following the feeding.

Strangely, she considers, she hadn't suffered any terrible nightmares or visions connected to the accident or the abduction or the violent death of the man whose grip she still bears. She wonders whether she should force herself to cry over it, to cleanse herself of the scene, but feels no need.

"I must be tougher than I thought," she tells her daughter. "Maybe I'll call Lucy today and have her come over to watch you for a few hours while Mommy goes and runs some errands."

Tess grabs the phone and calls her babysitter. Once the time is set, she takes a deep breath, runs through a list of things to do in her head, and decides she'll visit the hospital.

It's a short drive from her apartment and as the new wing of the hospital comes into view, Tess feels a spike of anxiety rise in her chest. Despite her fear, she resolutely parks her car, opens the door, steps out and starts the long walk. She is hyper-aware of every movement and each decision she makes to push onward. Finally, she enters. The wing is so new Tess can't decide whether the smell upon passing through the front doors is that of new laminate flooring and paint or the usual sterile smell of disinfectants.

Either way it beats the last time she was in a hospital, in emergency at two in the morning with her daughter and the smell of blood and vomit permeating the place. Tess flashes back to that experience, mostly a blur now, but the anxiety she felt bringing her baby into that circus has stayed with her. She's never much cared for hospitals. Certainly the weak attempt to revive her brother and the resulting bad news her family had received following his suicide had something to do with that.

She takes a deep breath and moves away from the rotating doors and towards the information desk where three attendants are either on the phone or typing madly on their keyboards.

"Hello," she says, placing her purse on the counter. One of the attendants raises a finger to signal she'll be with her in a moment and Tess smiles and pans the interior of the foyer. A snack bar and gift shop adorn the right side while several rows of plastic molded chairs linked together by a steel bar occupy the space to her left. Two sets of double doors with security access panels are set against the wall just beyond the chairs. Children play against the windowed wall which overlooks the parking lot while their parents sit reading magazines. Tess wonders whether they were waiting to hear the diagnosis on their eldest child and go home to contemplate leaving him here for the rest of his life.

"How may I help you?" The woman's voice is pleasant enough, but Tess imagines she isn't thrilled over her position in life.

"I'm, um, I'm here to enquire about -" She freezes a moment, wondering what must lie beyond those locked double doors. Did they still practice lobotomies and electric shock therapy?

"Yes?" The overweight woman behind the counter interrupts, now perturbed.

"Well," Tess turns back to meet her gaze, "I read that you take people voluntarily? I mean, what do you call it?"

"You want to sign yourself up for in-patient care?"

"I would like someone to see me. I think if I stayed here a couple of week's maybe," Tess trails off as a young man is escorted into the foyer by what appears to be an orderly. The parents seated in the plastic chairs stand up and the boy walks past them to his sisters playing at the window. The orderly introduces a man, who could be the resident psychiatrist, to the couple. Tess wants to hear how the story she dreamed up ends but her attention is forced back to the fat lady whose cheeks are becoming flush.

"Yes," she nods absently. "I think I would."

The woman lets out a sigh as if this were the most difficult part of her day. She places a small booklet on the counter and asks Tess to take the paperwork home, fill out all the necessary fields, have her doctor sign off on it if going through insurance, and to bring it back when she is ready to enter the program. She also offers a brochure on the facility with doctor bios and amenities.

"We will set you up with a counselor first for an evaluation, and then once accepted you'll be interviewed by one of the doctors on staff to assess what sort of program they will create for you."

Tess thanks her, still watching the drama play out in the waiting room. The doctor is nodding. The parents look confused.

“I’ll be back,” Tess tells the woman, who nods and picks up her receiver.

Walking out the front door Tess’s attention remains focused on the family as they shake the doctor’s hand and gather up their children. She waits outside the door a moment, hoping to catch a conversation between the boy and his parents to get some closure on this story she has stumbled upon.

“You see, Mom,” says the teenage boy, pushing through the rotating door. “It happens.” He takes each of his sister’s hands and charges forward. “I’m not *crazy!*”

“Oh, Paul, I never said you were,” his mother pleads, fidgeting through her tiny purse.

“I told you this was a mistake,” the father tells his wife as he takes the car keys from her.

Tess begins walking with the couple, keeping a respectable distance, but still able to hear the rest of the conversation.

“*Cutting* isn’t something everyone does, Jim. There’s nothing *normal* about it.”

“I’m not saying its normal, I’m saying this was a mistake. Bringing him here and embarrassing him about it like this.” He thumbs at the button on his keys. “Where the hell did we park?”

“So you’d rather we ignore it?” she huffs. “You know he’s ending up with scars all over his forearm because of it.”

“We’ll discuss the doctor’s points with him tonight.”

As the family moves toward the car with the flashing lights Tess veers off to the right and gets into her own car, an Audi from the late nineties.

What is cutting? Tess wonders as she pulls up to the parking gate. Is it actually, physically cutting yourself? What benefit could that offer a confused teen? She pulls onto the road and in her rear view mirror sees the family’s hybrid pull out behind her. No one’s lips are moving. She envisions a hard night for the teenager and a sleepless night for the parents.

Chapter Eight

Wednesday, 5:30 pm

Returning home, Tess is happy to see Emilia playing with the babysitter. Lucy is sixteen and has been a great help to Tess the past week. The sleepless nights and long days of entertaining a toddler are vastly different than her 9-5 lifestyle before Emilia came along. Looking back even the pregnancy was comparatively easy.

Tess looks Lucy up and down and decides that she and the boy at the hospital are roughly the same age. Tess sits on the couch and addresses Lucy, who is kneeling on the ground, engrossed in a tug of war with a stuffed elephant.

"Lucy," Tess starts. "Could I ask you a question?" Lucy looks up and smiles, brushing the red curl from her forehead.

"Sure, Mrs. Seager."

Tess leans forward, her elbows digging into her thighs, hands tightly locked together. "Have you ever heard of *cutting*?"

"Like where you cut yourself?"

"I guess so." Tess isn't surprised to hear her initial assumption was correct, but was taken aback a bit by the immediacy of her babysitter's answer.

"I know like three kids at school that do it. It's so gross."

"Huh," Tess leans back. "But, why do they do it? Have any of them said why?"

"It's supposed to relax you or something. I don't get it. I couldn't relax if I were putting a razor to my arm. What if you went too deep? You know?" Lucy's face contorts as she shakes off the thought.

Tess laughs ironically at that.

"Why, is someone you know a cutter?"

Tess doesn't quite know how to answer this question. No one she knew, but she also didn't want to tell her she is now considering it as an alternative to anxiety. "Oh, I just overheard a conversation today where it was brought up. I hadn't heard of cutting before that."

“Well, I guess I’ll go if you don’t need me anymore.” Lucy stands up and walks toward the door. “Love your new kitchen by the way.”

“Oh, thanks. Hey do you want to stick around for dinner?”

“I should get home before it gets too late. But thanks.”

Tess smiles and hands Lucy the twenty dollars she’d promised her for the afternoon and opens the door for her. “Thanks again for being so available for me. Could you manage the same time tomorrow?”

“Yup My afternoons are all spares,” Lucy says as she walks the short distance to the elevator. Tess waves and closes the door.

Cutting. She thinks. Then thinks better of it and goes back to Emilia.

Wednesday, 10:15 pm

After the cutting, Tess finds she is hopelessly lost. She is curled up in the corner of her living room, the television running some ancient film in black and white and her daughter fast asleep on the couch. The feeling isn’t foreign to her: she hasn’t felt herself since Sam had admitted his deception and left her to fend for herself and their baby. Never mind the nightmare of the day before, being abducted in plain view. She is confused and not at all feeling the endorphins the cutting was meant to release. Maybe she shouldn’t have had so much to drink in anticipation of running the razor across her arm.

She sobs uncontrollably. Once driven by purpose and encouraged by progress, Tess feels she has become unhinged by the separation and feels different. Looking down at her arm and the seven bloodied cuts she’s inflicted on herself confirms her fears.

I am lost; she tells herself, standing and falling into the wall. She didn’t think she’d had so much wine that she could be falling over, but the bloodletting was likely part to blame.

Tess stumbles over to the couch and kneels down in front of her beautiful child. She feels embarrassed and ashamed to have done this tonight as she looks over the innocent features of her sleeping angel. *I’m sorry,* she tells Emilia. And she is. She is very sorry, for so many things. Sorry she was so stupid to have not noticed Sam’s growing discontent in their marriage, sorry she didn’t do something more to make him stay, sorry she was so weak and has done this thing to herself. Sorry she has lost her focus.

“I was happy, Em,” she whispers to her sleeping daughter. “I don’t understand what happened.” She kisses her baby lightly on her soft cheek. Tess looks down at the damage she’s inflicted on her forearm and instead of standing, crawls to the kitchen and pulls herself up to the sink. She turns on the tap and runs warm water over the cuts. They sting to life and she bites her bottom lip. The pain is sobering. She watches the dry blood

mix with the water and run down her white skin. Satisfied, she gives her arm a wipe with a dish towel.

Leaning back on the island and drying her arm, she notices the self-inflicted wounds have virtually disappeared. She grimaces at this and runs her fingers over the tiny imperfections.

The ringing phone snaps her out of her trance and she rushes to pick it up before it wakes Emilia. Tess looks at the time on the stove and wonders who would be calling so late.

"Hello?" She waits for the caller to return the greeting. Nothing. "Hello?" she repeats. Still nothing from the other end. "Who is this?" Tess demands in as angry a voice as she can muster. "I have a baby who is sleeping. Why are you being such an asshole?!"

"I – I'm sorry." It's Sam. Her heart jumps out of her chest at the sound of his voice. It's husky tonight. He's been drinking.

"Sam?" Tess whispers his name, not knowing how to continue.

"I'm sorry," he repeats.

"So am I," she tells him.

"I'm a bad father, and a worse husband." He coughs violently. "You must hate me."

I don't," she begins. "I don't know how I feel about you."

"I don't know how I feel about me either, babe. I don't know who I am or what I'm doing."

Tess thinks *how sad for him*, and then shakes her head. "Why are you telling me this, Sam?"

"Because you're my wife." Tess listens as a lighter snaps a flame and she knows he's in deep.

"You're smoking?" She listens as he inhales and he answers a moment later, affirmatively, dishearteningly. Tess takes some comfort in this; that he's so upset he would light up again after five years. A pang of guilt stops the sensation and she moves to the bedroom so not to wake the baby.

"What is her name, Sam?" She picks up where they left off, when Sam had stormed out of the apartment.

"What does it matter? She's obviously not right for me. I'm lost here, babe."

Tess flinches as he refers to her like that for the second time. It's too familiar. She sits on her bed and looks at the empty space next to hers. She moves her free hand over the cold sheets.

"I don't know what you want me to say. I wanted us to work. *You* left me, us, your *baby*, how could you?"

Sam is silent.

"Sam?" Tess halfway regrets having been so harsh with him. He's obviously hurting and to compound that hurt with more hurt isn't who she is.

“I’m sorry I messed this up so bad. I’m sorry. Tell Emma I love her.”

Asshole! Tess thinks as he hangs up on her. She punches in his cell number and listens. Voicemail. *Asshole!* She rings him again and waits. Nothing. Now she’s frantic. Sleep will not come easily tonight.

Chapter Nine

Thursday, 2:30 am

Hours later, lying in bed, staring at the shadows as they cross the ceiling, Tess recalls the dramatic scene which sparked Sam's disappearance, moments after Sam had blamed everything on himself.

September 15th, 1:30 am

All the color had left him. He had been caught in a terrible lie, his pale complexion contrasting starkly against Tess's fiercely red face, burning with humiliation and anger.

"You're everything to me," he admits.

Her delicate features twist into a pained expression of disbelief. "How can you say that? I'm nothing to you. *Nothing!*" Tess is spitting venom.

"Please, don't say that." His legs give out and Sam crumbles to the tile floor, his head shaking. "Please don't say that."

She too settles on the floor a few feet from him; the island between them, their backs to each other.

"I should have known. Jesus, I *did* know." The adrenaline is difficult to control, her toes shake inside her slippers.

"Forgive me my weakness. I couldn't do this alone."

"But you're okay with me doing this alone?" Tess points out.

"I'm so sorry." His forehead rests on his forearms which rest on his knees.

"So stop seeing this other person. I can forgive you if you stop."

"I'm not doing this to cause upheaval or drama. I don't know where this is going. I *don't*. I'm suffering through this too."

"Well, that's called consequence. Stings don't it?"

"That's not fair."

Tess turns, places her hands against the cupboard door of the island, and shouts through it. “Fair? You’ve just decided the whole of the rest of my life with your infidelity and you’re going to tell me what’s not fair? You’re a classic asshole!”

Sam’s voice rises to meet his wife’s. “Don’t do that. Don’t try to classify me. I hate when you do that.”

“No? Why not, you won’t.”

“You don’t know me at all.”

“Right, well, that’s because it’s impossible to know you. You’re a *psychopath*.”

“That’s great! Now I’m mentally ill because we weren’t working.” He stands and places both hands on the sink. Tess rises to meet his gaze.

“When did you decide we didn’t work? I’d be interested in knowing that.”

“Years,” he spits out, assuming a more passive aggressive position.

“How many years? Three? Four?”

“More.”

“So you fell out of love with me more than four years ago. Explain then to me why you had a baby with me! I mean, do the math!”

“I wanted a baby with you.”

“Jesus Christ. Are you listening to yourself? Do you hear how *selfish* that sounds? So you *tricked* me to make a baby.”

“No, I mean, we were good then.”

“But you didn’t *love* me!”

“I wasn’t *in love* with you, but I loved you. I still love you.”

“Jesus, the garbage that comes out of your mouth.” She turns away from him and pulls at her black hair. Turning back to Sam, she makes eye contact. “Do me a favor. *Stop* loving me. *Hate* me for all I care.”

“I could never hate you.”

“Say *goodbye* to me!”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?” She paces the small kitchen. “Why can’t you? Isn’t that what this is? You’ve chosen someone over me. You’ve made your choice. You don’t get to have it all, and I have nothing. You don’t get *that!*”

“I can’t not be your friend.”

“That’s... listen to yourself. We’ll never be *friends* now. You’ve lied to me for months. I can’t trust you anymore. That’s not how friends act. You can’t lie to me, sleep with someone else, destroy our marriage and think we’ll be friends.”

“None of this was done with the intention of hurting you.”

“Wow, and how did you think I would feel when I found out?”

"You weren't -" He stops a moment. "You weren't supposed to find out."

"Well, what, do you think you're on a *game show* or something? You think you're the fucking *bachelor* or something?"

"I couldn't do this alone."

"Poor you, couldn't do it alone. You make a decision that affects the rest of my and our daughter's lives and expect us to do it honorably, but not you, huh? *Not you.*"

"I'm sorry you feel like this is so easy for me."

"It *is* easy for you. You made the decision well into a new relationship. Jesus I'm a fool. I guess you and your girlfriend have been having a real laugh at my expense! 'What an idiot, I'm fucking this girl's husband behind her back?'"

"She only knows what I've told her."

"Fine, you're the *whore* here. I get it."

Sam loses what is left of his composure and breaks down. "Jesus, Tess."

She turns, recognizing Sam's limits have been reached and backs down. Leaning against the opposite counter she collects herself.

"Tell me *why* you're doing this."

"I don't know!" Sam whimpers.

"You need help. *Jesus*, I need help." Tess runs a hand through her hair and sits up on the counter top. Feeling a strange sense of calm overcome her she asks, "So, what's her name? What's she look like? Is she younger than me?"

"This isn't about her. It's about us. Always has been."

This is not the answer Tess wants, and so the anger resurfaces. Feeling suddenly cruel she lays out a future for Sam.

"At least we know whoever is unlucky enough to end up with you will suffer the same fate I have. Or maybe next time it'll be your turn. That's karmic. Either way, you'll end up alone."

The baby wakes in her room and Tess runs to fetch her. Upon returning with Emilia she sees that Sam has fled. This is the last time she would ever see him.

Chapter Ten

Thursday 11:00 am

The morning after the surprise phone call from her husband, Tess has no idea where to even begin to look for Sam. His private life the past year had been just that. When he went out he was off the radar. When he went on business trips he was incognito. When he ran out to get a beer with a friend she didn't hear from him again until he dropped himself in bed beside her.

She runs through their friend base, wondering who she could call. They had two couples friends; one an old college friend of Sam's and her husband, the other a friend Tess had made at work and her partner. Tess's other friends had, for the most part, moved away from the city they'd grown up in while she remained. Other work related friends pretty much existed only during working hours. Sam had the lion's share of friends between them. His buddies, work and otherwise, were many but Tess hadn't bothered with them, or at least, Sam rarely had them over to the house, so she had no idea of their contact numbers or even where any of them lived. Sam's online presence had been all but erased.

Tess calls the numbers she has and finds no one had heard from Sam in months. Some didn't even know he'd left her. This put the difficult task of telling them what had happened and accepting their sympathies on her. She is drained afterward and left to wonder where all her friends are during this time of need.

Tess had always cherished her time with Sam above all others. Family first, she thought. Once she was married she completely dedicated her personal and free time to him. Something he seemed to appreciate in the beginning. *Marriage deconstructs love*, she thinks to herself. That pretty much sums it up. Hindsight is 20/20. Tess has been doing a lot of ruminating on her marriage lately. She wonders; why did I pour all that love and effort into someone that didn't appreciate it?

Wasted time, she thinks. What could I have done differently with all that lost time?

But here she is, baby napping and her on the phone with mutual friends looking for the man who'd left her. How could she make such a mistake and marry someone who wouldn't stay? Why? Tess is getting angry at the universe now, questioning everything, her whole life up to this point. Was Sam asking himself the same questions?

Tess turns on the couch, reacting to Emma's shifting weight. This is the reason, she tells herself. This beautiful child, she is the culmination of every moment she has ever lived and every decision she has ever made; Emma, her baby, her angel. She wonders a moment if Sam would share her thoughts. Does he see his life only as his own, and now a failure, or does he see the bigger picture; that his daughter is here now, because of him? Too early in the day for such cumbersome thoughts, she thinks, and decides to call her mother.

Tess's parents had made the move to an adult living community three hours north a year earlier to enjoy their retirement. Not so far away from their daughter and new granddaughter to never see them in person, but far enough that they had a buffer. Tess had no problem with this arrangement at the time either. She loves her parents, and had Sam to help with the baby. What had been bothering Tess the past month is that she had yet to tell her parents anything about Sam leaving. She wasn't sure she could handle the coddling and pity and flurry of activity it would invite.

She finds herself punching in the numbers to her parent's house and lifts the receiver to her ear. It's ringing, three, four times, and then her mother's voice.

"Hello, Tess!" She greets her daughter with a smile you could hear across the void.

Call display, Tess thinks. She had hoped she'd have the option of hanging up if she chickened out, but now she is committed.

"Hi Mom," she replies, wondering whether she sounds as weak as she feels.

"And how's my baby granddaughter?"

"She's good, Mom. She's napping."

"Is she on her back? You know what I read last year about putting them on their stomachs. Imagine, that's what they were telling us to do when I had you, place them on their stomachs, they'd said. Now look, they're finding all these things about infant deaths and such and it's because of what they were telling us to do!"

Wow, Tess thinks, Mom can talk a blue streak. She smiles at the thought, shaking her head and waits for her to finish.

"Yup, on her back." Tess turns to look at Emilia on the couch, sleeping on her side. She walks over and moves her to her back.

“Good. You’re such a good mom, Tess. You know I always knew you would be. When we had Thomas, you know, you used to put him in your doll stroller and take him all over the house.”

“I remember,” Tess lies. “Mom, I wanted to call to tell you something.”

“Okay, Tess, is everything alright? Do you need us to come for a visit? I know we’re overdue but your father’s heart has kept him from driving and you know I can only drive a short distance now.”

“Mom, I know, I know. Listen, Sam has decided to leave me.”

No response.

“Mom, it’s okay, it actually happened over a month ago and I’m okay, Emma is okay. He’s left us everything. Mom?”

She seemed suddenly lost for words. “You’re okay?”

“I am.”

“Well, what happened?”

“He was just not, happy. At least that’s the story I got.”

“Oh, that’s such bullshit!” Tess, surprised at the language, takes the phone from her ear and reads the number on the display. Yes, it was her mother.

“I don’t want you to be upset about it.”

“Tess, whatever you want, you tell me now, okay? Your dad and I are happy to come and stay with you, or bring Emilia up to see us and stay awhile.”

Tess rolls the idea around in her head a moment realizing this may be the opportunity she needs to take a break, get away for a week or two. Gather her thoughts. Then it hits her; the hospital. She could fill out that submittal form and take the leap.

“I’d love it if you were able to come and stay for a while.”

“We’ll start packing. We can be there in two days. Your father has an oncology appointment tomorrow, but we’ll come the following day. What is it today? Thursday? Okay, so we’ll be at your place Saturday, honey. Don’t you worry, if you need to get your head straight you just do whatever you need to do and we’ll be more than happy to watch that beautiful daughter of yours.”

Tess had expected this kind of over the top support from her parents, and the reason she didn’t call right away, as much as she’d wanted to. The special brand of support that would arrive Saturday is something a person has to be ready for. Tess is ready now.

Chapter Eleven

Friday

The next day Tess busies herself in the apartment, cleaning madly in anticipation of her parent's arrival. It's a free day at the high school so Lucy is there to watch Emma and take her for walks while the work gets done.

Tess notices that she has made it through two hours without once thinking about Sam and her current life situation. No thoughts of sadness, no hurt feelings, and no panicked moments realizing she was on her own. The work kept her mind on the task at hand, centered in the now. Though exhausted she feels more alive than she has in a long time.

Stepping into the shower Tess catches a glimpse of her naked body in the vanity mirror. She doubles back slowly to look herself over. She has lost weight, no question. Her eyes carry dark circles under each and her forehead is creased with worry. Her hair, which she hadn't done more than tie up in a ponytail the past few months, looks lifeless. She places both hands on her rib cage and allows her fingers to run lightly up and down them, envisioning strings on a harp.

Her stomach is a hard mass of muscle, tense and not showing the trauma of childbirth. She is lucky, she surmises, she won't be marked all her life with the stretch marks and sagging skin many women are left to endure. Her breasts, though very small, map the ordeal of pumping milk that first month, five or six times a day. But then, she's never been fond of her breasts.

Her legs look thin, but strong. Tess turns to look at a profile and sees that her ass has also gotten smaller, but less taut. She also notices a slight hunch in her posture. Her skin is very white, and the dark hair on her head and pubic region play up the washed-out appearance.

She places her hands on her sunken cheeks; her fingers wander to her thin lips and slide down her neck. Suddenly her hands drop like weights to the counter top and Tess sobs. She has lost so much now, so much of herself that it shows in the landscape of her body. How could she hide

this from her mother? She couldn't. And her father, so protective of her, he will have a difficult time seeing his baby like this. She hopes he doesn't bring his sidearm and starts searching for Sam. Maybe I should cancel their visit, she wonders, but thinks better of it.

Tess takes a deep breath and avoids the mirror on her second attempt to the shower. The warm water doesn't feel warm enough. She fingers the cold water tap back until she feels the bite of heat on her flesh. She soaks her hair and begins to wash herself. She soaps up for a long time and after rinsing she soaps up again. She picks up her razor and shaves her legs and under her arms and pelvis. She wrings out her hair. It's too long, she decides. Tying it in a tail she picks up a pair of scissors and cuts it off at the base of her neck.

This is transformational. This is necessary. Stepping out of the shower the bathroom is filled with steam. She wipes at the mirror just where her face will appear and ruffles her hair. It falls just below her ears. She smiles. "I like it."

She picks up the scissors once more and cuts herself bangs. She plucks her eyebrows and waxes her upper lip. "I should get a massage," she whispers to no one. Her nails are next. Clipping, trimming and painting. In her bedroom Tess ruffles through her lingerie drawer and finds the perfect bra and panties. Then she sits at her dresser and pulls out her make-up. Next she rummages through her closet for a sexy little number and tries on a few options. Many are too big for her now, but not allowing herself to be discouraged she settles on an outfit. A nice heel would complete the look and she finds a pair of four inch stilettos. She pulls a comb through her hair while applying hair spray and runs her fingers through it.

When Tess emerges from her bedroom Lucy has returned with Emilia and they are playing on the floor beside the television.

"Wow!" Lucy says as she lays eyes on Tess. "Wow, Mrs. Seager. What's the occasion?"

Tess blushes and smiles brightly. "Do you think I could talk you into putting Emma to bed tonight for me and sticking around a few hours longer?"

"Well, uh, I'd have to let my mother know."

"Give her a call would you? I'd like to get out of the house tonight for a bit."

"Do you have a date or something?"

"Not yet," Tess replies coyly.

Lucy takes the phone and dials her mom. It isn't long before Lucy has her mother talked into the extra money and so Tess is free to go.

"Thank you, Lucy. I won't be very late. There is food for Emma in the fridge and a half a pizza in there for you."

“No problem, Mrs. Seager. Have a good time.”

With this Tess empties her wallet, phone and keys from her purse and places them in a much smaller, more appropriate purse for her outfit. Where she was going and to what end was as yet unknown.

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