

# WHISPERS

BONNÉ BARTRON



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*This book is dedicated to all the children who have been exploited by the  
powerful.*



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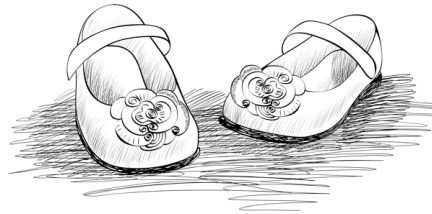
I'd also like to acknowledge those in the press who have been fighting to get the truth to our people. We see you.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who I didn't have enough words to thank individually for your support. You know who you are.





## PROLOGUE



IF THE TALBET COLONIAL FAMILY HOME WERE CUT IN HALF, IT WOULD resemble a wormy apple. Abnormally large rooms with luxury surroundings and accents of old money work hard to obscure the places where the gleaming network of brass tubes reach beyond the obscurity of wooden walls. The metal veins that connect every room are there for the convenience of the important family and to ensure Mr. and Mrs. Talbet never have to see the help unless they want to. Which, they rarely do.

Lucy Ann Talbet, a fairy of a human being, just five years old, quietly pads down the darkened hall into the overstocked family library. Stepping into the moonlight painted room, she swiftly crosses to the wall opposite the gilded bay window and built-in reading nook.

On her tippiest of toes, she runs her little hand along the smooth wallpaper until she feels what she is looking for. She pushes her tiny footstool, from its position in front of her similarly sized reading chair, flush with the wall, aiding her reach. Lucy digs her little fingers into the grooves around an ornate piece of molding. It is almost imperceptible from the rest of the hand-carved sculpture spanning the room at the halfway point in the wall.

Lucy Ann pulls until her fingernails turn white and finally the

piece gives way, nearly toppling her as it opens on its hinge. Lucy Ann smiles with anticipation, bringing her little mouth to the hole and whispers, "Jeffery! Ally ally oxen free!"

Her voice vibrates the ingenious metal contraption and races through the house along the network of talking tubes.

Lucy Ann puts her ear to the hole and waits. Another voice, this one a little older and male, returns, "Are you in the library?"

Lucy Ann giggles. "How did you know on first guess? Did you leave the kitchen?"

Jeffery responds, "I don't cheat! I could tell you weren't in the attic because I couldn't hear the wind, and you always pick one or the other. It's my turn now, so be quiet. If Nan wakes up, Mom is gonna know too."

Lucy Ann speaks into the tube. "Okay, I'll wait right here, and I'll whisper." Her voice softens as she speaks the last word.

Lucy sits down on the little footstool and swings her legs, eagerly waiting for her turn to guess which intercom tube her brother will call her from next.

A moment later a clownish falsetto faintly asks, "Hello? Are you still there?"

Lucy is confused, but she stands up and puts her ear to the hole in the wall again, then turns to speak into it. "Jeffery! You're supposed to say, 'Ally ally oxen free.'"

The exaggerated childish voice responds. "You said it for me!"

Lucy becomes unsure and timidly whispers into the speaking tube, "Why do you sound like that?"

"Don't you like it? I'm being silly!"

Lucy smiles. "Oh! Okay, do I get to guess now?"

The falsetto responds, "Yes, guess!"

Lucy thinks really hard, gripping the sides of the hole with excitement and tries to keep her voice down. "Are you in the kitchen still?"

The high-pitched voice pauses, then responds, "Yes, come meet me in here. I have a treat for you!"

Lucy grins. "Is it a strawberry?"

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The voice responds, "You'll have to come see."

Lucy runs from the room, not even bothering to replace her pedestal or close the intercom.



A FEW MOMENTS LATER, JEFFERY'S FINGERS REVEAL ANOTHER SPEAKING tube in the pantry bathed in flickering candle light. He puts his mouth to the tube and giggles. "Ally ally oxen free, Lucy Ann!"

A full beat passes before Jeffery decides to try again. "Lucy, ally ally oxen free!"

This time another voice answers, a gruff woman's tenor crackling with sleep and irritation. "I swear to the Lord Himself, Jeffery, you and your sister better be in bed when I come up to check on you!"

Jeffery's eyes widen and betray his eleven years in a moment. "Nan! I, uh, we're in bed!"

The boy blows out his candle and races from the pantry back up the long, polished hallway, bits of hot wax dribbling on the marble floor.



THE KITCHEN IS IN DARKNESS AS NAN OPENS THE DOOR AND WALKS across the rich boards to where the tile surrounds a large wood-burning stove and a clean stack of logs beside it.

Nan glares as she looks around and doesn't see anything of note.

She wipes her eyes, walking with purpose down the long hallway and up the stairs to Jeffery's open door. He's in bed, his back to Nan.

"Mmm hmm. Goodnight, Jeffery. We'll talk about this in the morning."

Jeffery twitches and snores audibly but looks back at Nan who catches him with an accusing purse of her lips.

Jeffery rolls back over, resigned to the knowledge he's been caught.

Nan continues down the hallway to Lucy Ann's room, where the

door is ajar. Nan pauses outside and shakes her head, opening the door to reveal an empty room fit for a princess.

Nan stalks back into Jeffery's room. "Jeffery, where is your sister?"

From down the hall, a hair-whitening scream echoes, its pitch like struck crystal, a warning of innocence dissolving, terror replacing its fleeting memory.

Nan runs from Jeffery's room into the kitchen, the door now wide open. Her own son, Brandon, a boy of about eight, stands framed by the gray trim.

The scream reverberates from him uncontrollably, tears streaking down his stunned little face. Brandon closes his mouth, cutting off the cry only when his mother reaches him. Nan is on her knees instantly, checking him for wounds.

The rest of the estate, awakened, clamors to the kitchen. Jeffery enters the doorway in time to see Nan take her little boy in her arms. After a long hug, she pulls back and sternly asks, "What happened, Brandon? What happened?"

Mr. and Mrs. Talbet enter behind Jeffery. Mr. Talbet moves the boy aside as sleep rushes from both of his parents' expressions.

Mr. Talbet slowly crosses to Nan and Brandon. "What is it, son? What's wrong?"

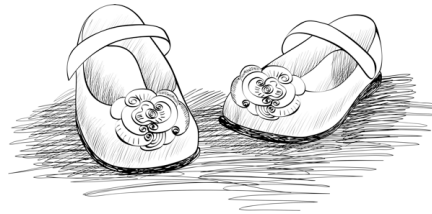
Mrs. Talbet unconsciously takes Jeffery in her arms. "Where's Lucy?"

Brandon looks at Mrs. Talbet and manages to squeak out, "I saw him take Lucy Ann. I saw it!"

A shriek escapes Mrs. Talbet's lips as Mr. Talbet quickens his pace, crossing to Nan and her son. Squatting down to look the little boy square in the eyes, Mr. Talbet asks, "Where, Brandon? Who took her?"

The little boy stays his quivering lips and speaks with a clarity beyond his years. "Mister Tasty Treats took Lucy Ann. He took her out there. I couldn't stop him!" His tiny hand points into the darkened woods beyond the family estate. Fresh tears pour from his eyes.

## CHAPTER ONE



I CAN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I ENJOYED A DAY OUT WITH A girlfriend. Like, actually enjoyed it. Lately it's become such a chore to listen to my friends complain about their dating life, or their kids or whatever surface nonsense seems to control their conscious minds. Why is it that every time something shitty happens in their mini-world, it has to trump the catastrophes and enormous wins of my own? Perhaps that's the only real way women are treated differently from men. Our female friends think that marriage and children are the only purpose of existence, and thus my choice to abstain from motherhood, at least for the time being, has made my life less important to others of my gender.

These were my exact thoughts when Jennifer showed up for our coffee date and I was considering texting her to reschedule. In retrospect, if I had flaked in that moment, the rest of this, well, it may not have happened.

As far as my "squad" goes, Jennifer is probably the most like me. She is twenty-eight, and though she and her boyfriend have been together almost five years now, she is in no rush to marry or procreate. However, her relationship with Victor is often the focus of

her conversation, and that was the reason I was seriously considering getting my coffee to-go.

Jennifer floated out the coffeeshop door onto the patio holding her venti vegan skinny latte, wearing her perfectly tailored yoga pants and effortlessly cool oversized tank-top that cut off just above her high-waist pants. She managed to find me without looking up from her phone until the last possible second. She greeted me with an excited squeal and after setting down the impossible number of things she held in her hands, she threw her arms around my neck. "Oh my gosh, Stacey! How long has it been, girl? It feels like weeks!"

I nodded and tried to return the same energy to her. She's a sweet person; I should really try not to be so critical. "Yeah, it's been at least a week, sorry about that. I have a new client and he's being sued for something different every day. It's been exhausting."

Something about what I said must have been wrong because instantly Jennifer's excitement was abated. "Oh yeah? No worries, I've been *super* busy too. You should see how crazy Victor's mom's gotten about us getting engaged. It's like every single day there's another hint..."

She continued to rattle on like this, and I tried my hardest to stay engaged. Nodding my head and sipping my coffee contemplatively. As she talked, my attention slipped to a mom and her teenaged daughter who seemed to be really enjoying their coffee date. The daughter laughed, speaking about something I couldn't really overhear, but it seemed to pertain to playing trumpet in band.

Jennifer must have noticed my focus had shifted, because she stopped mid-sentence and asked me if I thought she should say something to Victor's mom.

I tried to look like I had been listening the whole time and was just really pondering her question.

I took a deep breath and then forced a decisive sigh, "Yeah, I think you should. I mean, if you don't, then you're going to have to put up with whatever she wants."

Jennifer studied me, trying to suss out if she should be upset with me for taking a lucky guess or if I was giving her sound advice.

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Hesitantly, she responded. “Hmm, yeah, I think you’re right. Anyway, did I tell you I decided to take the contract for this summer?”

Finally, something interesting! Since obtaining her master’s degree in engineering, Jennifer had become a leader in female advancement in STEM and even started a summer camp for young girls and teens. The past few years, however, her efforts moved to her relationship and her body, which were absolutely #goals, but I couldn’t help but feel she was wasting her hard-earned education.

I felt myself sitting up straighter in my seat, engaged for the first time since she arrived, “Oh, wow! Congratulations. What’s the project?”

Jennifer smiled a proud smile, showing her perfect teeth and reminding me why we had connected so deeply back in college. She proceeded to tell me the ins and outs of a cleverly designed composting project that would allow restaurants and industrial service providers to contribute to a safe, easy, and effective way to renew the soil in overworked farmlands.

I could have listened to her talk all day about the way she was arming the next generation with the knowledge they needed to change the world, to take the environment back to a healthy state of being, but that was when the mom and young teen daughter I had been eavesdropping on changed my life.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the mother get up and take her purse with her to the bathroom. I saw the daughter take her phone out and start texting someone. Then I saw a man approach her.

I still couldn’t hear everything and it didn’t seem strange to me that an older white man would stop to talk to this young black woman. Perhaps he was her father; who was I to guess? I was focused on Jennifer, but I did hear him tell her she shouldn’t be outside all alone.

Between genuine moments of camaraderie with my blond bombshell of a badass friend, I heard him ask her age and I heard her respond that she was thirteen. It must have bothered me, because in retrospect, I remember feeling a little strange when I heard him tell her she looked very grown-up for thirteen.

I wasn't going to say anything to him. I'm not even sure I perceived him as a threat, mostly because of the gated patio, but I didn't have a chance to, in any case. That was when her mother, the smiling and agreeable woman I had just admired moments before, came flying out of the glass door leading to where we were all sitting. She held her purse in her hand like a weapon and began shouting at the man. "What the hell you doing talking to my daughter? She is a child! Who are you? Huh? Tell me your name!"

Jennifer stopped talking and turned to look at the furious mother. "What the living hell?"

I didn't say a word; I was shocked. I had never seen anyone explode on someone so quickly before and the tense energy hit the surrounding public like a bolt of lightning.

The older man in question seemed to notice he was now the focus of all of our collective attention and responded, in a very cool and collected way. With his innocent hands in the air, he instantly took a tone with this woman like she were a wild animal he was afraid would bite him. "Oh, whoa whoa whoa there. I don't know what you think was happening here, but I was just asking this young lady for directions to the entrance. As you can see, there's a big gate between us, and I'd like to get a coffee."

This very loud and theatrical response seemed to have an instant effect on everyone surrounding us. A few of the men started talking again as if nothing had happened, while a few of the less generous ones, a group of bros drinking yerba mate, muttered unkind things about the woman.

This mother, however, was not about to back down. "Bullshit! What did he say to you?"

The teen girl shrunk in her chair, embarrassment flushing her cheeks. "Mom, everyone's staring at us."

The mother demanded, "You didn't tell him your name, did you?"

The older man laughed and started to walk away as the rest of the patio began to chatter again, keeping their judgmental voices mostly low. Jennifer and I couldn't take our eyes off the train wreck.

The mother pointed at her daughter. "You stay here." Then, she



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hopped the gate with little difficulty and had her phone out recording. “Hey, where do you think you’re going, huh? You think it’s okay to hit on little girls, you old pervert? Well, I have you on video now. Smile for the damn camera!”

The man walked away, flipping her off without turning around again and the mother watched him until he turned left and walked out of sight.

Jennifer spun back to me, her eyes wide and alive. “Wow.”

I nodded, not quite sure what we had just witnessed. I looked away as the mother reentered the café through the adjacent main door. I noticed everyone else do the same as she hurried to her daughter, sitting down.

I tried not to stare but I could feel her vibrating, and I stole a peek in time to see her daughter slump even further in her seat and the mother wipe a betraying tear from her own eye. I watched her collect herself instantly, put her tough veneer back on, and say gruffly to her daughter, “Sit up. He’s the one who should be embarrassed. That was unacceptable behavior...predatory.”

The girl shifted uncomfortably again. “Mom, just stop. Let it go already. He’s gone.”

A particularly douchy looking bro decided to say under his breath, “Sapphire alert!”

The other bros laughed, and I felt my blood heating up, even though I couldn’t be sure I’d ever heard that terminology in my life. It didn’t matter. I felt what he was saying, what he meant.

“What the fuck did you just call me?” The mother asked, a specific kind of fury I recognized taking over her face.

He was calling this woman, who just stuck up for her daughter, an angry black woman. And there it was. Angry. The most dismissive slur a man can wield at a woman. Not just hurtful and degrading, but something that can’t be argued without becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. A killing blow.

No woman wants to be known as “mad.” Even the word has implications of insanity, a person not to be reasoned with. That kind of depiction is enough to end a career. It’s worse than a scarlet letter, a

slap of the masculine, an undermining of all that it is to be feminine. Women simply cannot be graceful *and* angry. The beautiful one, the strong one, even the brave one, sure...but the angry one? No. Angry is bad, it's malicious, it's untrustworthy, it's abusive.

Angry is a darkness too deep for any woman to wear as her mantle. Here I was, experiencing the delicacy of this woman's predicament, as it was being hurled at this mother I couldn't help but feel sympathy for.

Beyond all of this, it was racist as fuck, too! So, this is where I stood up, right? Just like any decent human being would? No, I can't lie to you. I didn't say a fucking word. I didn't move, I didn't do shit.

He, now emboldened, looked her dead in the eyes. Bro responded, "You just continue to prove the point. That guy was harmless. You ruined all of our day with your drama."

Jennifer was growing increasingly uncomfortable. She looked like she wanted to leave but needed to make sure we were on the same page before she stood up. She indicated all of this to me expertly with her eyes, but something wouldn't let me go just yet, so I played dumb.

There was something else in the air, too, a fear. This mother made me fearful. I wasn't afraid she was going to hurt me, or anyone at all, but I quickly realized I was afraid someone else was going to hurt her. The realization was terrifying. She was talking out of turn, and this guy, who I call a bro because it conjures the image of what he personified, was acting to put her back in her place. I saw it all in slow motion. I felt her eyes on me before I was compelled to look into them, then I watched the fight leave her when she realized the only voice out of the crowd was going to be one to humiliate her further.

I should have said something. What was bro going to do, attack me too? Call me a femi-nazi or something? I knew I should have told him to shut the fuck up, but I didn't. I sat there and watched her and her devastated child leave the cafe with everyone else trying desperately to pretend they didn't exist.

The last thing I saw as they left was the young daughter's face. She scanned the crowd and I watched her learn a lesson that wouldn't ever leave her. She stood up a bit taller and a sneer pulled at her lips as she

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caught my final glance. I tried to portray sympathy with my eyes, but she only saw my silence.

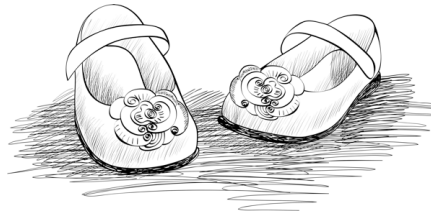
Jennifer waited until the door shut, then whisper-chorused with the rest of the patio, some very quietly condemning the bro's actions to their companions.

"Woof. Women like her make feminists look like crazy people."

That was the last thing Jennifer ever said to me. I was done with her after that day.



## CHAPTER TWO



OKAY SO I LIED AGAIN; I WASN'T DONE WITH JENNIFER. I WOULD END UP being her maid of honor inside the year. Sometimes I'm not the amazing person I wish I was, the person I tell myself I'd be if I could live in retrospect. I'll try to keep it to the facts, but sometimes it's hard to look my actions, or inactions, directly in the eyes.

That experience, however, would be a catalyst for me in a way I never expected. So, I guess it's important I don't shy away from the regret I still feel over leaving that woman to twist.

About six months later is where the real story begins. I talked my younger sister, Emily, into flying in with her two girls to meet me at Disney World while her husband, Dustin, was away on a work trip. I also coordinated it so that my sister-in-law, Amalia, and her two slightly older girls could drive up from their house in Miami.

My brother was a little upset at first, but when he heard it was just going to be the seven of us ladies—my long-time boyfriend Kent was also out of town shooting some commercial or music video for whomever was willing to pay top tier for a talented cameraman—he quickly changed his tune and lovingly helped them pack for the trip.

On a side note, I didn't mention Kent before because he wasn't

integral to the story, but he does become exceedingly important. I mean, he was always important to me, but this story really isn't just my own.

Anyway, we booked a big Airbnb house right near the parks and I took a full week off from the firm. I didn't even bring research for any of my cases, so we could do Orlando right. I hired a driver so we didn't have to rely on Uber, and we could get as close to the entrances as possible. No one turns a stretch limo away and it was about the same price as renting a car with seven seats, plus parking, every day.

I admit, it's fun being the childless auntie. I get to spoil the kids rotten with no repercussions.

I got the girls the first appointments of the morning at the Bippidi Boppidi Boutique and let Emily and Amalia sleep in. I even sent the limo back to the house at 11:00 am to pick them up after they enjoyed a rare, leisurely morning to themselves.

At first, Lana, the eldest of the girls and just about to turn twelve, wasn't sure she wanted a princess dress. So, I did the only thing any self-respecting auntie could do—I got an adult-sized Elsa dress and even allowed a little sprinkle of glitter spray to silver up my natural blond locks, proving Lana was not too old for anything. This did end up being a major miscalculation on my part as we were stopped all day for pictures with small children who were sure I was the real McCoy.

I, however, being the inexperienced babysitter that I was, forgot that kids need food and quickly realized we should have eaten before all five of us were doused in sparkles and glittery lipstick.

The girls didn't rat me out to the moms, though. All four of them were little troupers and easily forgave me once I revealed we would soon brunch with a mermaid or two.

I was still pretty proud of myself for my bravery wearing the stiff and rather warm gown over my cutoffs, when I heard a comment I tried to tell myself wasn't directed at our pride of princesses. Yes, pride is the correct terminology for a group of us. A man with bulging eyes approached Lana, who had chosen to dress up as Cinderella, and

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demanded to know why she had selected that particular princess to embody.

Suddenly, I felt the same fury I'd recognized on the face of the mother I let down. I felt it boil under my skin as I turned around from the sparkling cloud the five of us made to look this man straight in the eyes. He sneered at me, knowing his words would cut into us all and declared to Lana, my sweet, beautiful, perfect niece, my brother's child, my blood, "Cinderella ain't black. You can't dress like her. It ain't right."

This time, I did say something. It's funny how when it becomes personal it suddenly becomes very clear that it is *always* personal, and someone should *always* stand up to such hateful ignorance.

I was cognizant that I had four impressionable minds with me, and Bug-Eyes had his rather sad-looking daughter in an off-brand princess dress with him, too. This knowledge kept my words as civil as they were when they flew from my mouth. "Who on earth are you to say what a princess looks like? Perhaps instead of policing other princesses, you should pay attention to your own. She looks like she's at a funeral, not the happiest place on earth, and I am fairly sure you just illustrated why."

The eloquence of my delivery felt like how I imagined I'd sound if any of my cases ever had to be argued in court. I mean, I don't really do litigation, but I knew if I did, I'd be amazing at it. Especially at that moment. I knew I had told him and done so in a respectable way.

I lifted my obscenely glittery dress, straightened my crown, and pushed my nieces ahead of me, staring the man down. To my surprise, he smiled at me. "Looks like you went black and came back, or maybe you're just not sure if you like chocolate in your milk or not."

I did not respond to that. I thought of something equally hateful to say to him, something to obliterate his world, but choked on the words. What he said was so unexpected, it threw me off-guard and somehow, I knew no matter what I said, one of my nieces would end up hurt, or embarrassed.

At that point I thought the encounter would ruin everyone's whole day, but the most heartbreaking thing of all, Lana put her hand on my

back and looked at me with a hardening expression, saying, “It’s okay, Auntie. I have to deal with people like that all the time. The best thing to do is ignore them.” Then she took her sister’s and my younger niece’s hands and led them ahead of me.

The saddest princess in the world watched us leave her hateful father behind. I felt her wish she could have been swept up in our glitter, but knew she was doomed to sit in the darkness with him.

As we approached the Italian restaurant I booked for Disney’s fabled Bon Voyage brunch, I felt sick. I was starving just minutes before the encounter, and now I scanned the crowd looking for the next motherfucker who was going to try to ruin my little princesses’ magical week.

When we were finally seated at our booth with adorably themed pastries awaiting, I felt myself calming down and tried to lean into that. So, I ordered a Bellini with a mimosa chaser, hold the orange juice. I didn’t want my energy messing with the spectacle I knew awaited us. I checked my phone—it was already 10:00 am. The Moms would be here as soon as we finished eating.

The Disney level production was fantastic, as expected, and turned out totally worth the thirty bucks a head for breakfast. I say that with limited sarcasm, as I found my mimosa was included. Bravo Disney, bravo.

My youngest niece shares a name with a Disney princess—Briar Rose. We mostly just call her Rosy, but she insisted she get to meet her namesake as soon as Ariel and Eric left the dining room. So, I sent Emily and Amalia a text letting them know we would be at the princess meet and greet area, and that it would be a good place for all of us to convene.

The rest of the day went as I had hoped, and though I earmarked the experience to discuss with Amalia and Emily later that evening, I was grateful that all four girls seemed swept up in the magic. Lana even took pictures with all the princesses, and when Prince Charming stopped in the middle of his performance to run up to Lana and tell her she was the most beautiful girl at the ball, well, I saw the little girl swoon in the most innocent way. It warmed my



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heart. Finally, there was my baby niece again, enjoying her childhood.

That night we watched the parade and the younger girls fought sleep the whole time. We decided to call it a little early, reassuring the girls the magic would be waiting for them the next morning. Lana made us promise she could swim in the private pool at our Airbnb, but as expected, all four of them were out cold before we even drove off the enormous grounds.

My sister had the cork out of the Sauvignon Blanc before I even realized the girls had brushed their teeth. She came down the stairs, hair wrapped in a towel, a look of bliss softening her already naturally beautiful features. My glass was about three-quarters filled with the contents of the bottle, and I snickered when she topped hers off and sipped the edge to keep it from spilling.

She caught me and jokingly snapped, "What? I had to make some room in the fridge. We have two bottles we gotta down before they get room temp."

I suppressed a grin and took a sip. "Did I complain? Cause I didn't hear myself say anything."

Goodheartedly, she replied in her normal, cute-snippy tone, "That's right, you didn't. Now hurry up! Where's Amalia? We *need* her right now."

I sucked in my breath to holler for Amalia with the deep varsity cheerleader voice I broke out for such occasions, but Emily had her hand over my mouth in a second, "Don't you fucking dare. You wake up the kids and you are on your own. You hear me? Mommy gets a moment to herself."

I laughed so hard I sucked her hand into my mouth, and she overreacted, acting like I had just smeared snot on her palm.

Amalia entered the room at that very moment and raised her eyebrows at me. "Do I want to know?"

Emily responded by over-pouring a goblet and handing it to my sister-in-law. Amalia fought a giggle, poorly, and Em and I joined in. We were all in tears by the time Em finally squeaked out, "The grocery delivery made the fridge too full!"

Well, that set us off. I will spare the details, but we had a wonderful evening. I was soon too drunk to talk of anything more serious than if we had to pee and if we should risk waking up the kids.

The next morning, we did not use our early access passes. We were so hungover it was a miracle we were out of the house and pulling up to the park by 10:30 am.

The princess dresses had been an event, but that day the kids all wore matching Mickey Mouse shirts and shorts. Lana used safety pins to outline the silhouette of the ears printed on her shirt. It looked cool as hell if I'm being honest, but other than that one act of rebellion, she seemed to be in full-on kid mode with the other three. I was grateful, but it was in observing her during a moment of pure innocence that I remembered the conversation I needed to have with Amalia.

Amalia, Emily, and I were watching the girls ride Dumbo with Rosy for the third time that day when I decided to bring it up. I observed how uncomfortable it made me to have to talk about it with Amalia, and this woman was family to me. Not just you're-stuck-with-her-cause-she's-blood kinda family, this woman was as much my sister as Emily, and we had been friends long before my brother got his head out of his ass and asked her to marry him.

I took a deep breath, knowing I was about to let a shadow out in this perfect atmosphere, but I also had a responsibility to report the trauma that was inflicted on my watch. "Amalia, I hate to have to bring something like this up right now, I mean, I fucking hate that it happened at all..."

Emily hit me softly and indicated with her head that there were an *incredible* number of children within earshot. I always forget the cursing rule when it comes to kids. Probably because I love it so much and feel it is unfair to deny children the power of such words, but hey...not a popular opinion so I played along. "Oops, sorry. Well, what I'm about to say is much worse than that, but I'll try to keep it low, k? No more four letters either. Promise."

Emily gave me a look. "Can't it wait until tonight?"

I guess my face became, incredulous is probably the right word for it, because she dropped it. "Or now, whatever."

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She looked at the mom she had witnessed become offended with my language and mouthed, "Sorry, no kids," then shrugged. It stung. I wasn't sure why, but it did.

Amalia was patiently waiting for me to continue, but I could see her getting nervous. The side interaction was making this worse for her. I unconsciously rubbed the sweat on my palms into my hands and unloaded the whole sequence of events.

Amalia was visibly angered by the tale and didn't wait for me to tell her my response to the confrontation. "So what did you do?"

I told her my brilliant lawyerly retort and felt myself deflate. I could tell from her expression it wasn't enough. She hadn't said a word yet, but I could already feel myself getting defensive. I hadn't even gotten to the horrific reveal of Lana's own chilling words and already I saw I had failed the child. I was responsible for her phrase that broke my heart as much as any other observer.

"So, you didn't report him to someone? I mean, this is Disney World! If anyone is going to make sure blatant racism like that is not tolerated, it will be motherfucking Disney goddamn world!"

Emily's eyes got wide. Her teeth clenched and the horror of having no frame of reference from which to pull a suitable reaction froze her in an almost comical expression that made me think of the emoji it so perfectly depicted.

The annoyed mom from before covered her child's ears and I watched all the families physically move away from us. I was so upset because as soon as she said it, I realized that should have been my first thought. I am a lawyer for fuck's sake. What was I thinking?

*This is why I am a contract lawyer and I don't litigate, this right here.* I thought that over and over as my ears rung with her undeniable truth and my eyes observed the rest of the park treating her like she was the pariah, once again.

The only part of this I am proud of is what I did next. I swallowed that pride, my own impertinence, my instinct to deflect and attack...and nodded my head. Fighting tears, I responded, "You're absolutely right, I failed her. A blonde woman calling out racism... Well, I failed her, and you. I am so sorry." With this, I felt

selfish, embarrassed tears fighting at my eyes. My vision blurred but I held it together.

Amalia put her hand up, tears burning her own eyes, but her tears were righteous. They weren't self-pitying like mine, and yet she held them back too. With her usual casual elegance only tainted by the tightness of her mouth, she said, "Excuse me for a moment." Then, she walked off, the crowd parting around her like the Red Sea.

Emily stared off in shock for another full minute, then she threw her arms around me. That set me off and I sobbed, feeling like the lowest of the low. Calming myself, I could feel empathy from the people surrounding me and I realized how few of them were People of Color. It seemed like the whole crowd was an echo of my experience; no wonder Amalia had to escape us.

I asked my sister to wait for me and decisively went to seek out a cast member who could find me a manager. I don't know what the hell I thought was going to happen. There are literally thousands of different people visiting Disney World every day; there was no way to find this guy again. I, of course, knew this but convinced myself I would find a way to rectify the situation.

Very quickly, Goofy himself walked me to a whimsically dressed authority figure who whisked me straight to a top-level park executive. A quick ten-minute conversation later and we had dinner reservations at the legendary Club 33, free dining passes, and VIP passes for the rest of the week. All in all, a pretty sweet score.

Now I had something to show for the pain we had endured as a family. I was quite proud of myself. The executive even offered to comp a hotel in-park for a few nights, but I assured him we preferred our Airbnb. He thanked me repeatedly for bringing it directly to his attention and assured me Disney has a zero-tolerance policy for bigotry. I wanted to believe him. So, I did.

By the time I made it back to the Dumbo ride, I saw Amalia and Emily standing with the kids. They both looked uncomfortable, while overcompensatingly miming normalcy for the kids'—and probably their own—sake.

As I approached, I saw a struggle on Amalia's face, but she came

quickly to me and took my arm as she spoke. "Stacey, I'm sorry. I can't expect you to know how to react to things you have no experience with. I shouldn't have allowed myself to feel...so intensely. Can we forget about this and just have a good rest of the trip? Please?"

"Wait, I am the one who should apologize. I don't know what I was thinking. I've been going over it in my mind, and I know you're right. I should have *done* something, not just said something. I am so grateful that you told me that because now I can see how majorly I fucked up."

Tears threatened both of our eyes as we hugged, then Emily came over and wrapped her arms around us both.

"I think we all need a margarita or four. Stat," Emily said and pointed to the path out of the Magic Kingdom. "Come on, girls, we're gonna check out Animal Kingdom next!"

All four girls jumped with glee, as if the decision had been made for them alone. Emily winked at us and left us behind to wheel the rented baby cart full of snacks, sunblock, and quite possibly an entire wardrobe worth of extra clothes she had packed "just in case."

Amalia and I held onto each other's arms as we walked, both eager to reassure the other that any hurt feelings were things of the past. She started telling me updates about her business, a private investigative firm that specializes in copyright infringement, a tedious branch of the law to say the least. She always makes her cases sound somehow interesting. That is one of her many superpowers, giving people an opportunity to become excited even about the mundane.

After co-founding the small but successful firm with three of her college friends, she had taken a few years off to have the babies. She was always loosely involved, but she confided that she was considering starting back full-time once Morgan, Lana's little sister, was settled into school again in the fall.

Morgan was going into the third grade. We both reveled in the knowledge of that and let it sink in. I couldn't believe how quickly the next generation popped up, and now here they were, little people firmly in a part of their life they will always remember.

When we reached the restaurant Emily selected, we noticed she had somehow made it to the front of the line and was mid-order.

Amalia and I laughed that she could move mountains for a good margarita. “Or not even a good one, like, an okay one would suffice for the effort.”

We both laughed harder, catching up with my sister and the pride. Princesses don’t need to wear crowns, so this collective noun remained accurate.

“I ordered the kids a quesadilla to split and I already put in the margaritas. What else do you two want?” Emily waited for our response, a little impatiently.

I thought about it. I was getting snacky and since we had free dining, I listed a few things. “Hmm, I’m thinking some nachos for the table, a plate of tacos... You know what? Let’s do a table-side guacamole and uh...”

Rosy and the girls all started chanting, “Guacamole! Guacamole!”

“Did you win the lottery or something? I brought sandwiches and every kind of granola bar I could find. We have groceries at home, too. Let’s just do a snack here,” Emily said while she glared at me.

Honestly, I don’t know why I didn’t tell Amalia right away. Maybe I had an inkling that my experience with the Disney executive could have been perceived as white privilege, but no matter what, my choice to spring it on her in front of the kids and my sister like that, well, it’s another one on the huge heap of my regrets.

I produced the free dining card and Amalia and Emily protested instantly. Emily told the girls to sit down at a nearby table and then turned to me with a hushed voice. “You don’t need to keep buying them stuff. Trust me, this is already top level.”

Amalia nodded in agreement. “You’re the best auntie in the world. You don’t need to go broke trying to prove it. We already know!”

Emily nodded as well. “Trust me, the kids know, too!”

It was at that precise moment I realized I had fucked up again, and I, a little softer than I wanted, responded, “I didn’t buy them. Um, I’ve actually got some great news. I found a manager and told him about what happened with Lana, and he gave us free food for the rest of the week.”

Amalia looked a little put off but turned it into a smile. “Wow!

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Good on Disney. I didn't know that's where you went. I would have come with you, but yeah. It's nice to see they stepped up."

I nodded, relieved she had taken it so well, and why wouldn't she? We got free food, quite possibly the real catch that makes Disney World so freaking expensive.

Emily was wide-eyed. "Wait, are you telling me I don't have to make another fucking sandwich this week?"

Emily turned back to the attending cast member and started listing food items she wanted: ceviche, fajitas with all the meats, the list continued, then she stopped cold. Thinking for the first time since her mommy brain started dancing. "Wait, sorry Amalia. You should order first."

Amalia was taken aback. "Uh, why? I wasn't there, Stacey is the one who was compensated."

I quickly corrected her. "Well, Lana, really."

Amalia snorted a little. "If Lana had been the one to speak to the manager, I doubt this would have been the result."

I could feel the defensive gurgle in my stomach again and this time couldn't control it, I blurted out, "I did something. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Amalia looked like she wanted to say something else but instead she nodded. "Okay, I see how it feels like you can't win here. I'm sorry."

Her apology made me feel worse.

Emily interjected, "I'm gonna see what the kids want," then slipped off.

"I don't know what to do now. I mean, there's more and now I feel like I can't tell you without upsetting you. I really thought I was doing the right thing. It's not like they could find the guy. I already screwed that up! So, this was the next best thing, I thought."

Amalia nodded, fully hearing and understanding me. "I get it. I see your position here, you're not the one to blame for any of this. Tell me what else you need to say."

"It's not like that. It's not something I need to say, I just mean the executive I spoke with..." I began.

“Executive? I thought you said manager.” Amalia was surprised and didn’t try to contain it.

“Uh, yeah, the cast member brought me to a manager who brought me to an executive because they are the only ones who can do comps or something,” I said. I could see the resignation in her eyes.

I didn’t really understand at the moment, but looking back, I see just how privileged my interaction was. I’m not only a white woman. I am a hot ass, fairly successful, thin, blonde woman, and as far as privileges go, I acknowledge I am shielded even from the awareness of how easy some things are for me.

Emily made a conscious decision not to join us again until after she listed the many desires of our little pride and the order was completed. “Uh, I hate to break this up, but I think we’re holding up traffic.”

The two people standing behind us were still looking at the menu, but this was my sister’s way of trying to end the second uncomfortable interaction of the day.

Amalia nodded, lost in other thoughts she was either unwilling or afraid to share with us. “Uh, you’re right. Let’s sit down, and uh, what else did the... “she couldn’t help but spit the word, “...executive decide to gift us?”

Emily lit up with cautious excitement. “There’s more? What did they give us? VIP passes or something? Oh my God, they didn’t, did they?”

I nodded, a little deflated, as we sat down with the kids. “Yeah, and we have a table for dinner tonight at Club 33.”

Amalia looked confused. “What’s Club 33?”

Emily was so excited she was coming out of her skin. “Are you serious? Oh my GOD! That’s like celebrity status!” She turned to Amalia to let her in on the excitement. “It’s a lounge Disney built to entertain investors and movie stars, the whole sha-bang! Oh my god! I bet there are some faces we recognize up there tonight!”

Ironically, it was only hearing my sister gush about how elite Club 33 was that made me think it really was a huge and possibly overcompensation. I ran some numbers in my mind and realized



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that executive gave us over a thousand dollars in gifts, and I don't even think I mentioned to any of them that I'm a lawyer. It made my blood run cold when my brain processed the next thought. What if Amalia had been with me? Would he have been so generous? Was it because he knew Lana was my niece, not my child? I have absolutely no way of knowing now. This isn't a rail against Disney—they were more than accommodating and apologetic for something they had no control over, but my lawyer brain was twirling ... Why?

I had never had to think thoughts like this in my life. Whenever I had been compensated for something in the past, be it broken items or bad service, I had always chalked up the results to my amazing way with people. I am charismatic as fuck, if you ask me, thank you very much, and that's always what I thought was to credit for my advancements.

I knew I worked my ass off in college. To even gain acceptance, into my lower level Ivy League school, my high school career was intense. I paid for most of my schooling by working odd jobs and tutoring. I did get a small grant, and though my parents were not wealthy growing up, they did contribute about \$20,000 toward my tuition. It wasn't much compared to most of my classmates, but it was more than some, and I knew that. I was grateful, am grateful, to them.

To be honest, I was never really a believer in "white privilege." I mean, I thought there was something to be said about disproportionately inherited wealth and I would have had to be blind not to see the double standards in the law's evolution, but I figured for the most part, Americans were all equal. Some are born poor but, we all have the chance to build our own futures, and I even looked down on the ones who choose to stay in minimum wage jobs. I figured it was lack of ambition or laziness, that kept the poor down, no matter what their skin color was.

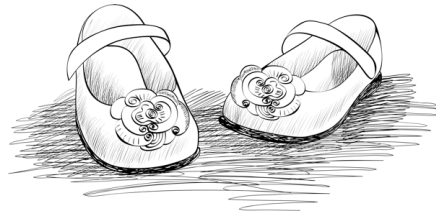
I never heard the shift in tone sales people took with melanin-blessed Americans. Or the way they could be assaulted by comment section trolls in real life at any moment. I didn't realize how many single-parent households existed because one was in jail for a crime

BONNÉ BARTRON

most cops would have waved off if it were someone of a similar experience and background as the officer, or the judge, or the D.A.

My epiphany wouldn't happen until much later. I, like most human beings, had to see it first hand to believe it. That day, however, at the most comforting and safe place in the world, was when I first noticed the cracks and as they say, the crack is where illumination begins.

## CHAPTER THREE



OKAY, ACTUALLY I AM NOT SURE THAT I GOT THAT QUOTE QUITE RIGHT. I don't really think it matters because the point is that trip was the most pivotal experience of my adult life. I wish it were because I'd spent so much time with my family and learned important lessons, but it wasn't. The Orlando trip changed everything because it was there I first encountered what is now my obsession.

That evening, Amalia made an excuse about not feeling great and went home early, leaving me and Emily to take the kids to the exclusive dining event. Something about her leaving made me want to go with her, but my sister would have been so disappointed, and the kids would have missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So, I talked myself into staying.

I observed the entire event, my mind trying to decide why I felt like a traitor. I couldn't make any logical sense of it and tried like crazy to bring myself into the present moment, to enjoy. I couldn't. When we got back to the Airbnb, Amalia was already asleep.

The next morning, we were all up at 7:00 am and I came downstairs to Amalia making sandwiches for herself and the girls. I almost didn't say anything, but I still felt uneasy about the night

before and thought we should clear the air so we could get on with our fantastic trip.

Amalia saw me and quickly began speaking before I could get a word out. "Please don't be mad. I don't really want the girls eating that much junk food anyway. Everything at the park is either fried or they don't want it. Sandwiches make it an easier fight."

I nodded, not wanting to start an argument either. "That makes sense. How about I jump in there and put something together for Emily, the girls, and me, too? We did all pig out yesterday, wouldn't hurt any of us to go a little lighter today."

Amalia smiled gratefully just as Emily, still swollen with sleep, walked in carrying a hysterical Rosy. Emily was barely functioning, and her daughter was gulping down air before another big sob. "Shhh Shhhh. Let me see, sweetie."

Giant crocodile tears poured down her bright pink face as she pointed at her heels. Both of them had little blisters. "Oh, ouch!" I said.

I should not have said that. Rosy howled as soon as I confirmed her wound was fatal, or at least worthy of comment.

"I shouldn't have let her walk around so much. She's never worn those Sleeping Beauty tennis shoes before. I didn't even think about it. I should have had you in the buggy."

"NOOOOOO!" Rosy managed to wail between gulps of air.

Emily rolled her eyes and looked at Amalia and me. "She's still a little tired."

"No, I'm not! I want to..." she hiccupped but still tried to talk, "... walk with sissy and Lana and Mor-hiccup-gan!" Then her accompanying wail split the air.

Amalia didn't react, but I couldn't help it. My hands covered my ears before I realized I was even taking cover.

That pissed my sweet little niece right off. Her face was suddenly bright red, furious that I could escape her pain so easily. "And thank you for that, Stacey," Emily said before walking away with the inconsolable child.

"What? What did I do? No, seriously how the hell was that my fault?"

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Amalia shook her head. "We're all just a little tired. It's been a lot over the last few days."

I thought about it and noticed the pool outside the kitchen window. "You know what? Why don't we skip the parks today and just lounge around the pool? I mean, we haven't even used it once yet, and you're right, a week of the parks is a lot. What do you think?"

Amalia was visibly relieved. "You wouldn't mind?"

"I mean, as long as we go to Harry Potter World at Universal before the trip is over, I'm down for whatever. Honestly, the only thing I've been itching to do is get a wand, some butterbeer, and cast spells at the shops."

Amalia laughed out loud and shook her head. "I know you're telling the truth."

"Hell, yes I am. I was a kid when those books first came out, and I had to wait more than a decade to experience the real deal. So, that is absolutely happening. It just doesn't have to be today." I smiled at her. "I'll break the news to Em and the kids."

Amalia nodded and let out an unwitting but audible sigh. I felt her mood lighten. "I'll make some Dutch babies for breakfast, then. See if Em's down for blueberries or strawberries for the girls. I saw them both in the fridge."

Emily loved the idea of staying in for the day to enjoy the amenities. Surprisingly, the kids did too. We lounged around the pool and when we all had enough sun, I logged onto my Steam account and bought Minecraft for the gaming computer in the basement. I even let the girls play with my recent purchase, an Oculus Quest.

I originally bought the wireless VR system for on-the-go workouts. I'm *obsessed* with the boxing games and Beat Saber is a better upper body workout than I ever expected, but there were a number of scary games I ended up buying later and I warned the kids not to play them. In the back of my mind, I had a sense they'd play them anyway, or maybe because I told them not to, but I figured they'd learn, one way or the other.

I helped them try it on and showed them how to resize the headband. I signed into my Netflix account on the tv, but Emily came

downstairs and stopped me. She told the kids it was Minecraft, Beat Saber, and Music only. Then, she synced her phone with the Bluetooth speakers and started playing hits from the 90s.

Sometimes my sister is the coolest mom ever. Forcing her children to listen to a soundtrack of nothing but young Gwen Stefani and Billy Joe Armstrong shuffled with Disney classics. It's just a perfect illustration of that fact. We left the kids to their devices and were pleasantly surprised to see the first thing they did was check out the air hockey and foosball tables.

"You're really doing right by them, sissy," I said as we admired the kids and headed upstairs.

"I try," Emily accepted with comical exasperation.

Upstairs, Amalia was arguing with her phone. It sounded like she was on a call with my brother. "I was! I just don't know what to do. I'm an asshole either way."

We could only hear one side of the conversation, but it was still something that felt too intimate for us to eavesdrop on. "Yes, I know. I know she doesn't. I know, okay, you're right, it's about them. Okay, thank you. I love you, too. I'll tell them. Okay, bye. Goodnight." Amalia dropped her hand from her ear and slipped the phone into her pocket before she noticed Emily and me, frozen at the top of the stairs.

"Oh, hey, the kids find stuff to do down there?" she asked, embarrassment flickering across her beautiful face.

"So much. Morgan's teaching Rosy how to play air hockey," Emily offered, not missing a beat.

"Morgan's never played air hockey in her life, but I am glad they're not watching Brave for the thousandth time."

Emily pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Tv's off. I've got them plugged into our childhood right here." She showed Amalia her Spotify account playing "Redundant" by Green Day.

"That's your childhood?" Amalia laughed. "I thought you'd be a NSYNC-Brittany Spears kinda girl."

Emily was deeply offended by this. "Um, no. First of all, is that how you see me? I mean, do you think I live for pumpkin spice lattes

or something? Dashboard Confessionals, All American Rejects, Good Charlotte, these are the bands that rocked the world in a way nothing else ever can.”

Amalia was careful not to laugh, and I saw her eyebrow cock.

Emily looked to me for backup and I shrugged. “I mean, I’m a Tom Petty and Disturbed kinda girl, a Cradle of Filth, Bob Marley fan who knows Eminem was like, the worst thing to happen to women in a minute, but I still secretly loved him...or if I’m being honest, love him currently, and Ice Cube, and Manson, and Soulfly, oh, and AFI was pretty cool too.”

Both women stared at me with half confused, half disgusted expressions on their faces.

“Um, but I also love Green Day! They’re the best. Inspired Em and I to dye our hair blue.”

Emily started to shake her head, a grin on her face as she remembered. “With Kool-aid! Our hair smelled like blue raspberries for a week straight.”

I laughed. “Yeah. What even are blue raspberries?” We all giggled at that. “Has anyone ever seen one, like in the wild?”

There was a point in the early aughts where everything was blue raspberry flavored...everything. “I’m pretty sure it was a blend of the remainders of all the other flavors!” Amalia answered.

“That actually makes total sense. Oh, man. Remember, the color lasted like maybe three days and then it turned kinda sea-foam greenish.” Emily snorted.

“Damn, we were cool as hell,” I reminisced.

Amalia laughed. “Oh, my god. Please tell me you have photos of this.”

Emily shook her head. “I sure as hell hope not. I’m positive it looked way worse than we can even remember.”

“Kids today don’t know how good they got it with this unicorn dye. If I were a teenager right now, I’d be a living rainbow, like 24/7,” I confessed.

“You still can be,” Amalia reminded me with a twinkle in her eye.

“Yes, I think holographic hair would go over really well with the partners.” I laughed, but it hit me that I actually did miss out.

It sunk in for all three of us. For better or worse, we had moved out of that phase of our life, and we weren’t even sure if we could remember the exact moment it happened.

Emily and Amalia mirrored my mood. “Guess there really is a time and place for everything,” Emily said thoughtfully.

We commiserated for a moment, sadly wallowing in lost youth. “When did we get so lame?” Amalia asked.

Emily shook her head emphatically. “Lame? Screw that. We couldn’t afford this kind of luxury back then. Life is way sweeter now. We’re in the happiest place on the globe, my lovely sisters, and it’s time to make some lemon drop martinis.”

She set a classy limoncello liqueur on the counter in front of us and two giant, beautifully shaped, lemons. “And the drinks used to sssuuuuuuck back then. Now we can drink whenever we want, and we don’t have to choke it down.”

“Also, we know our limits now,” Amalia said, eyeing my sister and me.

“Oh, boo. Are you saying you don’t want to drink?” Emily’s lip was pouting in the same way it had since she was five months old.

“No! What? No! I just mean we know them now. God, no. You really thought we weren’t getting drunk tonight? The kids are literally in an inescapable room entertaining themselves. If we didn’t get drunk right now, we would be doing a disservice to mothers everywhere.”

“Oh, thank God.” Emily finished making the drinks magically fast and we all clinked glasses, taking a sip.

She was right. That lemon drop was better than anything I drank before I turned twenty-five. Did it taste better than unicorn hair feels? I’ll never know.

We were about to start on our fourth drink when I had to get up to use the bathroom and overheard something terrifying coming from downstairs where the kids were...silence. I was pretty buzzed, but I stopped at the top of the stairs to listen for a moment. Maybe they



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were all playing video games. I yelled down the stairs. "All okay down there?"

No one answered me.

I quietly walked down the carpeted steps, fully expecting them to be passed out from the long day of swimming, but to my surprise, when I rounded the corner, I saw all four of them facing the far wall. They were sitting in a line under the only window in the entire playroom, still as statues.

"Hey little boo-goos, what are you looking at?" I asked them as I walked over. The kids didn't respond or move.

Now, I love these girls with all my damn heart, but I won't lie—I was totally creeped out by them in that moment.

"Yo, girls!" I bellowed, but that was when I noticed little Rosy was trembling. "Girls?" I asked again. This time I could hear the trepidation in my own voice. I was growing increasingly worried with every single second. I ran to Rosy and spun her around to face me.

Her skin was ghost-like, her eyes wide with terror, and tears streaked down her sticky cheeks. I grabbed the other girls who all wore the same expression of horror. They looked me in the eyes, but none of them were talking.

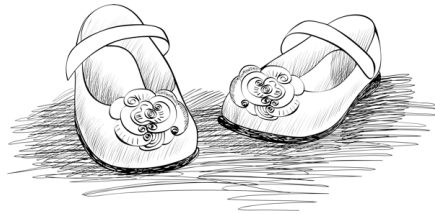
"Stop it, stop right now. Whatever you're doing stop it! Hey! Listen to me, talk to me right now, say something!" I didn't mean to scream at them, but this was too much for a drunken auntie.

Rosy's eyes filled with more tears and she said, as quietly as her first-grade vocal control would permit, "We aren't allowed to."

Then I screamed for my sisters, feeling very much like a child myself. Utterly helpless.



## CHAPTER FOUR



I CAN'T BE A HUNDRED PERCENT SURE WHAT WE WERE THINKING THAT night. We were in the sun all day and three drinks were more than enough for any of us to end up hungover the next morning, especially the way Em poured.

I do know that we all decided the kids must have logged onto one of my VR experiences that scared them. I couldn't guess which one; a lot of them I just downloaded one manic night and hadn't even had a chance to test them all out. I knew of one in particular that was too extreme, even for me, but I didn't see it, or any of the scary ones, on the history bar in my Quest. That didn't mean no one played it. It just meant the last five games played were not the scary ones.

In any case, we decided the kids didn't need to be in VR anymore and that they may have been too young to differentiate VR and AR from reality. It was a question I knew my sister would explore at great lengths later, but at the time we were all trying to forget the whole scene.

Emily was a criminal psychology major when she was at university but switched her focus to child psychology before she applied for her masters. She met and fell in love with Dustin her first year of graduate school and they were pregnant ten months later. She never finished or

used her education, beyond armchair advice for all her friends, which she was exceptional at. I will say, she is also an adept manipulator... when she wants to be. Though I must admit she mostly usually uses her powers for good. I bring it up because the obsession I've been talking about, the one that's not just my own, is hers. It's a lot of people's, more than anyone wants to know, and my sister's cunning didn't just come from nowhere.

None of us logically thought there was a reason to fear anything in real life at that point, but something made us all want to stay close that night. Amalia wheeled the extra bed out of the girls' room and into the master, relinquishing her own queen bed to sleep on the twin in front of the master bedroom door. I shared the bed with Emily and all the kids lay on piles of pillows on the floor with their sleeping bags.

I didn't sleep much. I had obsessive thoughts that wouldn't stop racing through my head. I considered getting up and going downstairs to sift through and find which game it was that the kids encountered.

What kind of sick designer would make something that would not only petrify children, but also control them and make them afraid to communicate? I mentally composed the letters I'd write when I found out which company was to blame for unleashing this trash on the world.

I was also beating myself up. Why didn't I delete the questionable titles before letting the girls play? Of course, the kids would find the scariest, most forbidden shit. I always did when I was their age. Kids are incredibly intuitive and somehow the darkest curiosities always seem to have a way of leading a child right to them. It's like that song Sara Sanderson sang—a dog whistle only children are young enough to recognize, and unaware enough to follow.

The next morning the girls were quiet, even as we were sitting down to breakfast. Emily was trying to hype them up and asked them which pre-chosen themed outfit they wanted to wear to the park. The girls didn't volunteer any ideas; they weren't even eating.

"Hey girls, come on, it was a game. Just let it go. I know it was

scary, but we're in Orlando!" She said "Orlando" like Oprah in the 90s. "Don't you want to go Hogwarts?"

That got Morgan's attention. "Can we get every flavor beans? Or chocolate frogs? Or whizzing fizzes?"

"Um, obviously," I said, like it was the most ridiculous question in the world. "And wands. And... Should we show them?" I asked Amalia and Emily.

"I don't know if they can handle it..." Amalia said, baiting the children. It worked.

"Is it wizard robes? Because I would wear it if you got me a Slytherin." Lana perked up, showing the first signs of life since I found them all the night before.

"Slytherin? What? You're not Slytherin. You're a Ravenclaw, aren't you?" I asked, playing dumb.

Lana was shocked and a little disappointed as she looked down her nose at me. "No. Ravenclaws just read stupid books. I want to be powerful. I'm Slytherin."

"Slytherin are evil, though. What about Gryffindor? They're the most powerful. Harry Potter himself, right? And Hermione, Ron, the best of the best." I playfully argued with her.

She took it a little more seriously than I had anticipated. "I hope you didn't get me a Gryffindor robe. Those are some basic witches."

"What did you just say?" Amalia asked, a warning on her face.

Lana rolled her eyes. "I said basic *witches*, Mom. Geez."

"Who are you calling basic? I'm a Gryffindor!" I said in mock offense.

"Pshh, yeah, right. You can lie to yourself all you want, but you're a Slytherin, too, and deep down you know it," Lana retorted instantly.

I was taken aback, but I had to be honest. "That's creepy and...also what your uncle Kent says. And the stupid Pottermore test," I relented, under my breath.

That made everyone laugh and soon we were all—Emily and Amalia included—wearing our Harry Potter robes and in the limo, headed for the park. The nightmares of the previous evening had been put on hold, at least for the moment.

I am happy to report that Hogwarts was just as amazing as I had hoped. I would live there, honestly, if they let me. I'd sleep above any number of the stores. Hell, I'd take a flat in Knockturn alley.

I know it's become somewhat cliché for cute girls to cling to something nerdy, but my Harry Potter love is 100% genuine and I am willing to die on that cross. That's the one way I'll never let eleven-year-old Stacey down. We will always keep our candle burning for the Wizarding World...and Viktor Krum, no matter how secretly.

The pride and I did every one of the rides; a few we rode numerous times. We took the train from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters to the second part of the park. The interactive trip was so well done I felt like I had actually stepped into one of my favorite moments from the story. A tear may or may not have welled up in my eye when Hermione encountered Ron and Harry in our train car. The magical day really was a *long* time coming. I felt myself flicker in and out of being a supervising adult and a small child, awestruck as I discovered the beloved universe all over again.

I knew the trip was supposed to be about the kids, but I had to stop myself from pushing them out of the way to try a spell with my newly acquired wand. I was genuinely jealous when a random eight-year-old was chosen at Ollivander's to select her wand with the man himself, and I only got to watch. I did feel a little bad for allowing that emotion. A very little.

Safe to say I was fairly distracted by the magic, but I noticed that Rosy was terrified to look out the window in the train car, even when we explained the Dementors were all make-believe. She was genuinely not having it. She also *hated* the goblins in the Escape Gringotts ride, possibly the best coaster in the whole park, so we decided to meet up with the moms for dinner and a Rosy handoff before the older girls and I rode it four or five more times.

We ate at The Hog's Head, and I drank so much butterbeer I was sure I was going to throw my entire system into sugar shock. Emily and Amalia had a surprising number of purchases filling up the buggy's undercarriage and told me to stop being nosey when I riffled through their bags. I knew they had found me a Christmas present,

and quite possibly my next birthday present, too. I couldn't have been happier to know that I would soon be the owner of even more Harry Potter paraphernalia.

The girls all got their themed meals, which looked considerably better than true British cuisine, and sat at their own table away from ours. Emily and Amalia thought it was cute, but it made me kinda sad. All day I had been one of the kids, albeit the only one who could mix vodka into her butterbeer, but still. That separation made me realize they were living a different life, in their own world among their true peers, and even though I was the cool auntie, I was not one of them.

I wasn't one of the moms, either. It was a weird time to feel it, but I was very aware that I didn't really fit into their world in an undefinable way. I couldn't be a kid, and if I was being honest, I wouldn't want to be for more than a day or so. I became very sure of that while having my second "mixed potion" of butterbeer and vodka. I could be a mom, of course, but the idea of spending all day tending to the needs of another human being without any promise of time for reflection, expression, or even concentration—well, that sounded as bad as being stuck as a kid. What was I?

Those questions were drifting through my head as I listened to Amalia and Emily talk about the upcoming school year and how the kids had fared the year before. I acted interested as they discussed each child's challenges and how they planned to help simplify the curriculum and tailor their approach for each of the girls based on their individual strengths.

It was excruciatingly boring to listen to and I had a jolt of empathy for the girls. If it were this bad to listen to the planning phase, I imagined the kids were not going to enjoy these carefully crafted lessons, but I was not going to say a word either. No way did I want to get pulled into the conversation any more than the occasional nod of my head or audible *mmm* to let them know I was hearing them.

I tried to listen to the kids instead. They were only a table away, but they were sitting at the far edge, close to the water. The open-air patio was pretty full, and the ambient noise made it difficult for me to be sure I heard them correctly. Also, Emily is loud as hell when she

drinks. She's got a pleasant voice so usually no one complains, but moments of impassioned explanation drowned out important words in the conversation I was trying to piece together from the girls.

At first it was just cute stuff, something about a treat they saw or wanted to look for, talk about making a TikTok from inside Gringotts, and how they could get into trouble if anyone saw them. I resolved right then and there to help them with it, no matter how frowned upon it would be. That made me happier than it should. It was a little mischief to look forward to.

Then, Lana glanced over at me and caught me trying to read her lips. She said something to the three younger girls who all turned in creepy ass unison to stare me down. I panicked for a moment, before I remembered to just smile and wave at them. When I did, they all mirrored me, but they looked suspicious. I turned back to the moms.

That was when a bit of fortune struck for an eavesdropping auntie. The boisterous family, who were dining at the long table just behind us, left and when they did the sound on the patio lowered a considerable amount. I could hear the girls without looking at them. I was laughing like an evil genius inside my head as I focused my eyes on my sister's face and my attention on the pride.

"I don't think they can hear us. Auntie Em's pretty loud," Lana said, turning back to the girls but lowering her voice.

*Fools! All of them!* I suppressed another cackle.

"Rosy, don't look over there," her elder sister warned her.

Rosy must have obeyed because Lana started talking again, using a clandestine voice. "The adults will never believe us. They think we don't know the difference between a game and real life. We are on our own here, understand?"

From my peripheral vision, I could see the younger girls nod their heads, but Rosy's sister protested. "I think we can tell Auntie Ace. She'll know what to do. She's a lawyer."

Auntie Ace is my favorite nickname anyone has ever given me in my life, and I was elated to learn my niece trusted me with whatever major secret she felt she had to hide from the rest of the adults in their lives.



## WHISPERS

Lana didn't look so sure, but the girl continued. "Lawyers know how to break contracts, right? She can figure out how to get rid of ours."

Contract? Did she say contract? I couldn't be completely sure, but it sounded like that to me. What on earth could a kid know about a contract? Kids can't legally sign anything anyway. It didn't matter because Lana answered quickly. "No, we can't bring her into it. He said she'd get hurt." I heard Rosy snuffle and inhale in her patented way, her final warning before a total meltdown.

At that moment I realized I needed to say something to the girls, but I also needed to make sure they were in a place where they felt safe to talk to me. So, I decided to make my case for bringing them back to our favorite ride and leave Rosy with the moms. If I was going to have a chance of the girls telling me what the hell was happening, this was my best shot.

It wasn't a hard sell to anyone. Rosy was in Emily's arms, self-soothingly rubbing her ear and fighting the urge to suck her thumb—a habit that Emily had sworn a mission to break before all of Rosy's adult teeth grew in—as soon as I suggested the ride. To my chagrin, Morgan seemed to be wary of my enthusiasm, as if she guessed I had ulterior motives. I decided to play it cool on the first go-around and didn't say a word except to comment on the artfully constructed details of the waiting area for the ride.

It was the right move. As soon as we were locked into those harnesses, the energy shifted back to joy and childlike abandon. The ride was more experience than it was G-force, which I deeply appreciated. Nevertheless, the overfull bubble in my stomach started sliding from one side to the other. I began to doubt my timing and intestinal fortitude as we rounded the first bend and a real-life fireball flew from a roaring dragon's mouth. The girls shrieked as it hit us with a blast of dry heat.

The heat didn't stop for what felt like an eternity. Sweat stuck my shirt to my armpits and I felt a dribble cascade down my forehead into my lazily posh, bushy, eyebrows. At least they were good for something.

The muggy Florida air boiled in the flame, making the temperature intolerable. Then, mercifully, it puffed and sputtered out. The metal beast jerkily thrashed and tore at the sky in a death loop. The fire exploded again, a little too close for comfort once I realized the robot was malfunctioning. The kids were giggling. The sense of real, possible danger elevated the moment for them. I relaxed and told myself it was just a machine breaking down. No scarier than a plane waiting on the tarmac.

Then the ride went completely dark and still. A full turn it off and back on reboot. When the darkness fell, so did silence. I could tell that was frightening the kids more than the crazed dragon and its fireball. They hadn't said a word, but I heard a whimper. I quickly recognized it was a good time to ask the kids some questions. It could be distracting from the scary moment at hand, and there wouldn't be a better time to get some undivided attention with all three of them. "Hey, everyone okay?" I asked, just to be sure.

The girls sounded off. They were fine; I didn't even detect fear in their voices. Lana, not missing a beat, added, "I bet they'll let us go twice because of this." I instinctively nodded in agreement with her, but didn't get a chance to voice it out loud when my sister's oldest child blurted out, "Auntie Ace, you know when you came downstairs and saw us by the window?"

That's my girl right there. She thinks just like me, always has. She seized her moment and beat me to it. I felt myself swelling with pride. Sure, we share the coveted glacial eyes our family wears as the crown jewel of our lineage, but more than the shape of our noses or the wry way both of our mouths curled when we knew we were in command of the room, this kid was like a miniature, more pure, evolution of my own brain, and she recognized this mishap as the opportunity I also knew it was.

"Shut up!" Lana yelled back at her with an anger I'd never seen from the girl.

"Whoa there, you little fury you. What's..." I didn't even finish my sentence before I was interrupted. Clearly the dialogue was among the children and I was going to have to wait to see if I was getting

clued in. It was a strange feeling, realizing for the second time that day I was really just a B-plot in their world.

"There's no one else near us. Can you hear anyone? No! This is the best time!" The girl retorted before Lana spit back at her.

"He hears every whisper, you fucking idiot!"

"Okay now, none of that, Lana. Listen to me, all three of you. Your moms and I have an understanding. If you're afraid I'm gonna tell them something you want to keep secret, I promise I would never tell anyone anything unnecessary, ever."

Lana was hyperventilating, and the other two were silent for a full beat. I began to speak, "Voice it, girls, it'll help..."

Morgan interrupted with a bout of verbal diarrhea. She didn't breathe until it was over. "It wasn't a video game! We know what VR is, we're not stupid. It was the radio! He was talking to us through the radio. He told us he could always see us and that we can't say anything. He knows where we live and he said he'd take us away." She sucked in a huge breath of air then sobbed silently.

"What the actual fuck is she talking about? Both of you! Right now, out with it," I said to the older girls, trying to sound stern because none of us could actually look each other in the eyes on the ride.

No one spoke for a long five seconds, then I surprised myself with the timbre of my voice. "Right now, Lana, start talking!" That was when I heard my pre-teen powerhouse crying. "What the literal hell, ladies? Seriously? Are you all crying?"

At that moment the ride whirled back to life and we passed the action cam. It flashed. I never checked afterward, but I'm sure that image was one for the books—three girls mid melt-down and an auntie with fire in her eyes.

