

## Chapter 1: Home

It was a morning thunderstorm that rolled me out of bed before the alarm went off. While thunderstorms were common for August in Michigan, they typically threw their tantrums in the afternoon, wreaking havoc on the commuters along north bound I-75. The unusual storm set the tone for my whole day. It felt like the world was tilted slightly; off in some way. By lunchtime, the feeling was so overwhelming, I checked to make sure my shoes matched. I had wondered if perhaps my odd feeling wasn't all in my head but actually a fashion error and in the morning gloom I'd accidentally slipped a high heel and a pump over separate feet.

Nope. I checked my feet. Two matching, plain and oh so practical brown wedges stared lifelessly back at me as I listened to Tyler Montgomery make his third attempt at tackling Pacobel's Canon in D. His small hands begrudgingly hit each key on my antique baby grand. Six bars into the piece the third time through he sighed and slumped in the wooden stool. He looked up at me nervously.

"That was pretty good" I lied. "I think it just needs some more practicing" I continued. "Did you get some time to work on it this week?" As soon as I'd asked, I had regretted it. Tyler had a list of excuses for dodging his piano practices and lessons. With some students, it had been forgivable. Their made up reasons for coming in each week and sounding terrible were at least colorful; vivid. With Tyler this wasn't the case and I had heard all of these excuses before. He rattled off his week and my mind tuned him out. Occasionally I checked in with reality to find him still rambling about how his mother needed him to feed the dog and his weekly chore of mowing the front of the lawn took an entire afternoon! I stopped him before he made it to the Thursday checklist of mundane musts.

"If you hate your piano lessons then why don't you take a break for a while?" I asked, detecting a shameful amount of pleading on my own voice. "Music is meant to be a way of expressing yourself like drawing, painting even solving puzzles. If it isn't fun, then why don't you find something that is fun?" Tyler grimaced. I understood. Tyler's reason for all of his piano frustration concentrated in the eyes of his mother. In truth, she loved to hear him play. It was clear with each surprise visit she had made during his lessons that she was proud of her son.

Tyler wasn't a bad musician either. But the kid had obviously had enough. I hated to see children suffer through what could only give them a deep loathing for all music in their adult life. I sighed. "Maybe try another song? Something you like better" I suggested.

"No!" shrieked Tyler. "This is Mom's favorite."

I looked at him skeptically. "I think as long as you play it, she'll love it".

Tyler refused. "I'll learn it all this week. I promise."

I smirked. It was useless to argue. My half falling feeling was tough to fight. I was too tired to argue with students. "Ok. I'll see you next week then."

The day passed with much of the same conversations and plans for a better week; some kids who didn't practice but dreamed of becoming star musicians, the rare talented and dedicated students who struggled to afford the lessons. By the time Josh had arrived home, I had just finished teaching my last lesson and was making my way to the couch where I could take my shoes off. I nearly tripped on the lip of tile that lead from the studio to the kitchen and had to catch myself. I yelped at the prospect of crashing head long into the dog's dishes of food.

"You ok, Mom?" he asked.

I laughed at the ridiculous half landing I'd made; holding a shoe against the kitchen wall. "I'm fine. I think it's just a mild case of vertigo. It started this morning. "

"Not sleeping?" he eyed me with a little concern in his eyes. He knew me too well and that made me all the more determined to lie.

"Everything is fine" and I fought hard against the feeling of falling; straightening my spine as if I did, in fact, feel fine. I wasn't sure if he bought it but he didn't pursue the issue. Once I safely made it to the couch I let myself sink into the relative safety of the deep cushions and smiled. "How was the train ride home?"

Josh sat on the couch opposite me and stretched his long legs. He fell into the overstuffed cushions and began to relax. He was home. A smile spread across his mouth with the ends twisting; hinting at a joke or something slightly evil in what he was thinking. "Well let's see, at least there wasn't a homeless guy who smelled like gin and puke who fell asleep on my shoulder."

I glared at him. "That only happened to me once and the conductor made him move as soon as he noticed what happened."

"The guy snored from Ann Arbor all the way to Dearborn before you even said anything" he jabbed.

"Aren't you glad you have a nice mother?" I teased.

He rolled his eyes. "Too nice. That shit's gonna get you killed."

Some mothers would have cringed to hear their sons talk to them like Josh talked to me. Some parents, as he had grown up had chided me for being too liberal; too frank. But I liked it when we talked and kidded one another without fear.

"You've been living in the city too long. You're paranoid. Being nice never killed anyone" I continued; smiling.

He sat forward as if to align himself for a direct assault. I took a deep breath. The real argument was about to begin but at least we were both still half laughing. "First of all, Mom, Chicago really isn't a big city. And it's so safe where I live I think that I might be safer than you and dad here."

He was pruning back the bud of an old argument before it had started. I could see it and he had proven his point by living an academic year away in Chicago without a scratch or even a stolen pencil. I let him win because by all rights, he had been correct in his prediction all along. I sat back further in the couch to show defeat. He moved over and sat next to me. "The vertigo is pretty nasty?" he asked.

"No" I lied. "Why?"

"Because you're leaning against the arm of the couch like its sinking into the floor" he laughed.

"Ok!" I yelled half angry, half laughing. "I couldn't sleep. I was too happy thinking that within 24 hours you and your sister would be home for the summer." I paused. "And now I sound like some old, pathetic mother who doesn't have a life outside of her children."

Josh pressed to fingers over his nose holding in a laugh.

"What's so funny?" I pouted.

"Nobody said you were old..." And he let the following silence sink in. My hands searched until they found the closest overstuffed pillow and threw it at him. He had already predicted my reaction and left the room running and laughing at me. A few seconds later, he returned with water and a small medicine container.

"For the vertigo" he smiled and he was suppressing another laugh. I took the pill container and swallowed a tiny pill with water.

"The better to aim at you my dear" I teased.

"Speaking of aiming and throwing things at people, when's Libby coming home?" Josh asked.

"Dad's picking her up tonight on his way home from work and then I thought we'd go out for dinner to celebrate the return of the natives."

"No meatloaf and mashed potatoes?" he asked and his eyes made him look like a puppy.

"You think I can cook like this?!" I pointed to my head.

"You think you can walk in a restaurant and not look like a drunk like this?"

The spinning was starting to wear off thank so the medication kicking in and I was suddenly exhausted from trying to keep myself from falling down all day. I yawned. "I'm crashing. If I wake up and I feel better then late night meatloaf and potatoes it is.."

"And fried chicken" he interrupted.

"What?" I protested.

"If you make my favorite you gotta make Lib's too."

“What are you, four again? Are you kidding?”

“It’s your funeral”.

“As I was saying, if I feel better, I’ll cook. If not, the restaurant it is.”

“Won’t be the first time I’ve had a stumbling woman on my arm” he feigned cool.

I rolled my eyes. “Shut up. Don’t you have clothes to put away?”

“Nope. I strategically saved it all as dirty laundry to save myself some work.”

But I didn’t hear anything. I was already deeply asleep.

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While the vertigo had plagued me on and off for the past year, but with each day of that week since the kids had returned home from school I’d improved. Old friends of theirs starting showing up; strategically at dinner time and soon the house was a jumbled smell of onions, southern fried chicken, spicy sausages and earthy potatoes. I was glad I had followed my instincts and closed the music studio for a few weeks. The days began to flow into a regular, relaxed routine that included arguments about books, the best place to buy hiking shoes, swimming and sleeping by the pool followed by a new ritual, a nightly contest of who could make the best cocktails.

Each afternoon, before dinner Josh and Lib rushed out the door and into Josh’s car in search of some new drink ingredient for the evening’s pitcher. On Friday afternoon, I’d decided that I’d reach the comfort food limit and went out to pick up some steaks. By the time I’d returned, the driveway had yet another car pulled up near the entrance to the barn. “So much for steaks” I thought to myself and ran a list through my head. I confirmed I had enough ingredients in the house to turn a steak and potatoes cook out for four into a fajita party for at least eight.

Ray and Kathy had come down from Lansing to see the kids. They waved from the round plastic table and chair set on the deck. The party had already started again and Josh was in full swing in his bartending duties. Once Gabe had arrived home from work I set out to julienne the peppers and made a dry rub of cumin and cayenne for the steaks. Kathy, Ray’s girlfriend, came in to help and soon everything was sizzling on the grill. Josh poured his latest concoction into small glasses for a taste test.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were moonlighting as a bartender at school” I suggested as I took a sip. Lemon, mint and a hint of sweet cherries were quickly followed by a subtle bitterness. I noted the gin.

“Pretty sophisticated” Ray jabbed “for a city college boy”.

Josh laughed.

“What do you call it?”

Josh peered over his glass. “Actually Libby named it.”

Libby glared angrily back at her brother and tried to stall by taking another swallow.

“Oh come on, how bad can it be? What do you call it?” Gabe prodded.

Libby grimaced and sat down. I watched as her blue green eyes met Josh’s. They were having an entirely private conversation. Plotting. Josh had clearly set her up to lead but he was in on this as much as she was. I sat down. I’d seen silent exchanges like this between them before. Some story was about to break. I took another sip of my drink.

“I call it” her voice half squeaked “Breaking it to the Parents”.

Ray thundered a deep belly laugh and then rubbed his hands together greedily. “I’m SO glad we picked tonight to stop over. Kathy, quick sit down. This is gonna be good”.

It was clear Kathy didn’t know if it was appropriate to tuck into dinner where questionable news was about to be chewed over by a set of parents she had only just met. Ray pulled at chair close to his seat for Kathy. I looked nervously over at Gabe and he returned my ‘brace for impact’ expression.

I smiled at Kathy who eventually did sit down since no one had objected to Ray’s seating arrangement. I sighed, took another sip of a drink I hoped never to sample again but knew all too soon I probably would and said, “Ok, spill it. What do you have to break to us?” Gabe found my hand under the small table and squeezed it gently as if to remind me to stay calm. In these situations, I was the one with the temper.

Libby looked pleadingly at Josh. Clearly she had made the introductory statements but wanted Josh to take the helm. He leaned casually against the deck railing and smirked. “Chicken” he directed to Libby. She shrugged back.

“Ok. Well, you know how you always said that travel would be good for us? Give us a better perspective on the world?” he looked at Gabe and I directly. Neither of us replied. “Well, first the good news. My film short is being shown at the Ann Arbor Film Festival this year.”

I breathed a small sigh of relief. That introduction could have been far worse. Maybe I was getting all riled up for nothing. Gabe didn’t seem to share my sentiments. He was leery of good news when it was given first.

“I talked to one of the promoters about how I’m double majored in film and library science. He thought that I should try doing some archival cataloging.” He had paused; looking for a reaction. I knew this was where he wanted me to be happy for him and then he would give us the bad news. Now it was my turn to squeeze Gabe’s hand. There’s the pitch, where would the batter take us?

“I got an internship archiving films for the BBC.....in London. I leave at the end of July to set up” he said somberly like he was well aware that I was both cheering for him and gawking at him incredulously. This was it. He was officially setting off to find his way. My heart jumped.

“And there is a spot for me in a small chamber orchestra who need a cellist” Libby had taken my moment of thinking to drop her own news. “Josh and I can share a flat and the local elementary has offered me a part time teaching position.”

I blinked, trying to get my brain to process what they were saying. Ray, feeling like he had to do something got up and poured more of the cocktail into my glass. I only half noticed him. I was trying to find my voice. Surely I should be over reacting here. After all, that’s what I was good at, gasping and shouting questions. If Gabe and I were the good cop/bad cop parents, I had always played the over bearing bad tempered bad cop. Gabe offered the deals and remained calm. A voice almost outside of myself was shouting in my head. Say something! Anything!

“You’re....both...going” I managed to piece together and spit out.

“Wow, she’s so mad she can’t even talk” Ray stared, bug eyed. Kathy elbowed him in the ribs.

“No. No. It’s not that we’re angry” my voice was returning. Gabe chimed in to finish my sentence.

“I guess we just didn’t realize you were leaving quite so soon” he found my hand and his fingers entwined with mine. I was nodding my head in agreement and following Gabe’s lead as we hugged each of them, telling them how proud we were of them.

Ray stood up and held out his glass. We clinked glasses and then he and Josh fell into fits of laughter. “Holy shit! You’re really going!” Ray’s large hands patted Josh’s wiry thin frame nearly making Josh stumble forward with each smack on the back.

Kathy and Libby hurriedly took the sizzling fajitas off of the grill of which I’d completely forgotten. Instead, I listen the rest of the night. Gabe took maps from his study and the five of them went over them in the evening light. When night fell, we lit candles at the table and around the deck. They each spoke of plans and travelling they hoped to get in during various breaks. I took it in. The sound of their voices, the laughing, the excitement. I had never before been so happy and so miserable all at once in my life.