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COUNT MY LIES

SOPHIE STAVA

C

CENTURY

1

I'm a nurse." The words fall out of my mouth before I can stop myself from saying them, loud and clanging like a pair of tin cans tied to a back bumper. If I could reach out, catch them by the tail, and reel them back in, I would, but it's too late. They've been heard; two heads turn.

I should walk away. Or laugh, say I was just kidding. But when the dad and little girl look up at me from the park bench, his eyes shining with hope, her eyes shining with tears, I feel such a rush that I don't do either. Instead, I kneel beside the girl and smile broadly, first at her, then at him.

"You need to ice it," I say to the man, my voice clear and steady, the slightest air of authority that I assume someone in the medical field would naturally possess.

The thing is, I'm not a nurse. I never have been. What I am is a liar.

I had heard the little girl's wails from across the playground, long drawn-out sobs that drew me toward her. I've always been nosy, leaning in to hear strangers' conversations, taking a step closer to read over someone's shoulder, glancing at the person next to me on the subway,

straining to see the text messages on their phone. It's another bad habit of mine. Add it to the list, okay?

"Let me see," the dad was saying to the little girl as I walked up, holding her bare foot in his hand. "Where'd it sting you? Here? Or here?"

I'd wanted to help; he'd seemed so flustered, so unnerved by it, that, almost without thinking, I'd opened my mouth and the lie had dropped out. Clunk, onto the sidewalk, startling them both. I meant well, really, I did. I know, the road to hell, right?

Now, I glance around at their belongings. Just a paper sack lunch beside them, contents strewn over the bench. A half-eaten sandwich. Apple slices, already browning, carrot sticks. Two drinks: a can of grapefruit-flavored sparkling water, a juice box.

I grab the can. It's cool, not cold, but it might help. "Here," I say, holding it toward the man. He takes it. Our fingers brush, just slightly, his surprisingly soft. "Is the stinger out?"

The dad frowns at his daughter's foot. She's still whimpering, but the intensity has lessened. She's looking up at me, eyes wide. Her face is tear-streaked. Snot leaks from her nose. She's doll-faced with bangs and long lashes, a real cutie. So is he, to put it mildly. I can still feel his fingers against mine.

"I think so," he says. "Would you mind taking a look?"

A flick of pride. He trusts me. Of course he does. I'm a good liar—and, well, there's the convenient fact that I'm wearing scrubs.

"Sure," I say, smiling. Still kneeling, I reach out and lift up her little pink sole smudged with dirt. She's four or five, her foot tiny in my too-big hands. They've always been large for a woman, even when I was a kid. Mitts, my aunt would always tease, holding her palm up to mine. I'm still self-conscious about them, keeping hand-

shakes brief, tucking them into my pockets, under my thighs when sitting.

I squint at the bottom of her foot. There's a small red welt and, in its center, a black dot. The stinger. I suck in air between my two front teeth, shaking my head. "It's still in there."

He frowns and peers down at it. "Should I—?"

"You need to scrape it out. With a credit card or something with a flat edge. Don't squeeze it; it could make it worse."

I'm pleased by how competent I seem, how knowledgeable, like I actually know what I'm talking about. I do, I guess; I also happened to step on a bee in this very park, late last summer. I'd spread out a blanket and kicked off my shoes before I lay down to read. When I got up, my sneakers still in the grass, I felt a sharp jab on the bottom of my foot. I sat back down to examine the injury, cursing under my breath, and saw the crushed bee, the stinger still stuck in my skin. I squeezed carefully, forcing the stinger to the surface. It was only later, when I googled it in a blind panic, that I realized my mistake.

By the end of the day, my foot had almost doubled in size, turned bright pink, swollen as a little sausage. It took three days for the itching to stop and another four before the swelling went away entirely. I limped on it dramatically for the whole week, recounting the saga to anyone who so much as raised an eyebrow in my direction. Although, truth be told, I might have claimed it was a swarm, not a single bee. The point is, I do have *some* experience in this area.

The dad reaches into his back pocket, returning with his wallet. "Thanks," he says gratefully. "If you weren't here, I'd probably have called 911." He smiles to show me he's joking. His teeth are bright white, straight and even. He's handsome in an obvious, teenage-heartthrob sort of way, probably early thirties, my age.

He slides a credit card from one of the wallet's slots. "Let me see your foot, sweetheart," he says.

As he drags the card across her sole, I see the name on the card. Jay Lockhart. *Jay Lockhart*. I like the sound of it, like it would roll off my tongue if I said it out loud. Jay as in *Gatsby*, love-crazed millionaire, charming, hot-blooded. I look back at the man—Jay—and decide it fits him, with his boyish smile, playboy face.

"Got it!" Jay announces, triumphant, holding up an infinitesimal black speck—the stinger, presumably—between his thumb and forefinger. "See?" He shows it first to the little girl, then to me.

"Good work!" I say, smiling at him. He looks so proud, like he's just placed in an Olympic event. Maybe not gold, but bronze, still very respectable.

When he smiles back, I feel a slight blush color my cheeks. It feels like we're sharing the victory together, like he might reach out and hug me, his winning teammate.

"Feel better?" he asks the little girl. She nods, stops sniffing. He reaches out and wipes her wet cheeks with his thumb, smooths her silky bangs. I notice he isn't wearing a wedding band.

"You should ice it when you get home," I say, standing back up, "to keep the swelling at bay. And you might want to give her some Benadryl, just a half dose, maybe. It'll help with any itchiness."

"Seriously, thank you. Can you say 'thank you,' Harper?" Jay turns to the little girl. "Say, thank you, Miss . . . ?" He trails off and looks back at me, for my name.

"Caitlin," I say. Another lie. I don't even know where it comes from. Have I ever even met a Caitlin? Once, maybe. When I was younger, I think I did ballet with a girl named Caitlin. Or was it Carly? We were in the same class at a local community center, but that's where

our similarities ended. She had long, waist-length hair she wore in a beautifully woven braid down the center of her back, sparkly barrettes clipped into the sides, and brand-new ballet slippers, their pink satin gleaming. I danced in old socks. She was the best, whatever her name was, the lead in the recital. I was Sugar Plum number six. The young girl with the bee sting, Harper—her name bougie, but cute, exactly what you'd expect in this neighborhood—also has a single, glossy braid, her bangs neatly combed. Maybe it's why I thought of the name: she reminds me of her.

"Thank you, Miss Caitlin," Harper dutifully recites.

"My pleasure, Harper," I say. "I hope your foot feels better soon."

She offers me a tentative smile, staring up at me with her big brown eyes. Then she looks back at her dad. "Can I finish building my castle?"

Jay nods, smiling, and she slides off the bench to a scattering of sand toys on the ground.

He looks back to me. "I'm Jay, by the way," he says, standing up and extending his hand to me. He's taller than I expected, well over six feet.

"Nice to meet you, Jay," I say. When we shake, there's a current. At least, I feel one. He didn't have to introduce himself, but he did. That's something.

There's a pause, then he says, "Everyone's a liar, right?"

My heart stops beating, lodges itself in my throat. "What?" I manage. *How could he—?*

Jay smiles, then gestures toward my hand, dangling by my side. I'm still holding my book, the one I was reading when I first heard Harper wailing, my fingers tucked between the pages where I left off. It's a well-worn paperback copy of *Murder on the Orient Express*, the edges of the cover curled up, soft with wear. "Sorry." He grimaces apologetically. "Did I spoil it? It looks like you've read it before. I just assumed—"

“Oh.” I let out a little laugh, exhaling in relief. “No, it’s probably my tenth time. You’ve read it, too?”

Jay nods. “I loved the detective, Hercule Poirot. My parents gave me a box set of the series for my twelfth birthday. I always tried to solve the case before he did. But I never could.” He shakes his head ruefully.

I laugh. “My favorite Agatha Christie is *And Then There Were None*. The ending was—” I make an explosion noise. “Whoa. I never saw it coming.”

“I haven’t read that one. It’s that good?”

“I could bring you my copy,” I offer. “Do you come here a lot? I’m usually here a few times a week.” I hold my breath and feel my heart-beat accelerate. I’m probably overstepping. I often do.

But here’s the truth. I know this isn’t their first time at this park. I’ve seen them here before. Twice, actually, earlier this week. I’d been hoping for another sighting today, pleased when I saw them approaching. Harper’s crying really did catch my attention, but I’d also been keeping an eye on them as I leafed through my book, glancing up every few pages or so, watching her on the monkey bars, the swing.

That first day, Tuesday, I noticed Jay before I noticed Harper. I’m pretty sure all the women at the park did. Not only because he was one of the few men here, but because he looks like he belongs on a movie set in LA, not on a playground in the heart of Brooklyn.

Like I told him, I’m here most days, ducking out of work for an afternoon breather, so I’m familiar with the regulars. I often see the same kids with the same nannies, the same groups of moms sitting next to each other, chatting on the benches as their offspring bound through the playground, shrieking. I like this park, how happy everyone seems, the sunlit patches of grass, the smell of the honeysuckle

bushes that line the perimeter. It's busy even in the colder months, the kids bundled up, their cheeks rosy.

"That'd be great," Jay says, responding to my offer, "but my wife is usually the one who brings Harper here. I had the week off, so I've been the one on park duty. It's back to the grind on Monday."

When he says "my wife," my heart sinks, which makes me feel even stupider than I already do. What, did I think this was the start of a romantic comedy, that I'm Liv Tyler in *Jersey Girl*? I know it's an outdated reference, but what woman doesn't fantasize about a widowed Ben Affleck finding comfort in their arms, grief-stricken and vulnerable? A motherless little girl gazing up at them adoringly? Yes, it's a little morbid, but I can't be the only one. Oh god, am I?

"I'll tell her to look for you next time she's here," Jay says. "Apparently, this is Harper's new favorite park."

I force a broad smile as if the thought of meeting his undoubtedly beautiful wife fills me with unbridled joy. "Great," I say, hoping to sound chipper. "I'm usually here around this time. Maybe I could bring the book to her."

Here's how I know I'm not pretty. No married man would tell his wife about the gorgeous, single woman he befriended at the park. Not unless his IQ was below functioning, or he was hoping to be smothered in his sleep later that very night. And Jay doesn't appear to be stupid, or to have a death wish.

But I'm not surprised. I know I'm not the sort of woman who is a threat to other women. My nose is slightly too large, jaw angular. On good days, I tell myself that I'm handsome, like one of those black-and-white movie actresses, strong-featured. Greta Garbo, maybe, if the lights are low. And I don't do myself any favors. I know I could spend more time on my appearance; I don't have to look quite as schlubby as I do.

I could dress better, for one, but instead I wear what's comfortable, clothes I've had for years that should have been donated—or tossed—ages ago: high-waisted jeans with holes in the knees, button-up flannels, oversized, stretched-out sweaters. Thanks to the ebb and flow of fashion, it might actually be cool if it was intentional—or if it wasn't paired with half-brushed buns and cheap, plastic-framed glasses, scuffed sneakers. I do have contacts (and a hairbrush), but most mornings I'm running late, scrambling out the door partially dressed, just-burnt toast crammed in my mouth; the contacts (and hair brushing) usually fall to the wayside.

It's not that I don't have nicer clothes—I do—I just haven't had a good reason to wear them recently. Because instead of cardigans and slacks, I wear scrubs to work. Mauve-colored, to be specific. My boss, Lena, handed them to me on my first day with a proud smile. She picked the shade herself.

I'm not a nurse, but a nail technician at a small, boutique day spa that offers seventy-five-dollar manicures and pedicures, sugar waxing, and a three-page menu of signature facials. Nurse, nail tech, what's the difference, really? Oh, right, everything. The chasm between fixing a broken arm and a broken acrylic is wide and deep.

Currently, along with the scrubs, I'm wearing the aforementioned plastic glasses, a pair of gold studs, and a chain-link choker I grabbed on my way out.

I touch my hand to the necklace. I found it at a little shop I passed on my way home from work a few weeks ago. I'd stopped in to kill time, not intending to buy anything, but as I walked by the check-out counter, I noticed it through the glass case, the gold glinting. The salesgirl offered to put it around my neck so I could see how it looked. It fit perfectly. The chain was delicate, tiny links woven together,

with, right at the base of my neck, one tiny iridescent pearl. I paid for it and wore it out. When Natasha, my coworker, commented on it the next day, I told her it was a family heirloom, passed down from my grandmother.

But—prepare to be shocked—even with the earrings and choker, I'm no ten. Jay's wife probably looks more like Liv Tyler than I ever will. The Daisy to his Gatsby. Lithe, with high cheekbones. Full lips, curls spilling down her back. No frizz in sight.

"Five more minutes, Harp." Jay stoops to touch the top of the little girl's head. She nods absent-mindedly. She seems to have forgotten about her bee sting and is now playing happily by our feet, pouring sand from a shovel into a bucket, then tipping the bucket upside down.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. I should go—I'm due back at work in less than ten minutes—but Jay is far more interesting than what waits for me there. And he said he only has five more minutes. If I walk quickly, I'll be able to make it back on time. So instead of leaving, I say, "You said you had the week off?"

He nods. "Harper's preschool is closed for spring break, so I took the week off, too, to spend some time with her."

"What do you do?" It's another bad habit of mine, talking too much, asking too many questions. It's probably the same reason I lie: to fill the silence, keep people from walking away.

Look, I'm painfully aware of how pathetic that sounds. It's just that my job is so boring. My life is so boring. Bland and dreary. I'd do almost anything for a sneak peek into someone else's. And his seems especially interesting. Technicolor, so bright you have to squint. I'd bet everything that I'm right.

"I started my own company last year, in online game development.

Which basically means I'm a big nerd," Jay jokes, smiling, eyes flashing. I notice he has a dimple in his right cheek.

He's not a nerd. Far from it. He never has been. You can tell just by looking at him. Like I said, he's tall, really tall, at least six-three or six-four, with dark hair that he keeps raking his hand through, brushing it from his eyes. His jaw is strong, clean-shaven, skin tanned and smooth.

"Sounds exciting," I say. "Starting your own company."

"It can be." He shrugs. "Not as altruistic as a career in nursing, but it pays the bills."

Right, I'm a nurse. I smile modestly as if I deserve his compliment. I wish that I did.

Jay glances at his phone. "Shit, we have to head out. I promised I'd have Harper home by three."

"Is it that late already?" I say, feigning surprise. "Shoot, I have to run, too." Of course, it's back to my real job, nary a patient in sight. "It was nice to meet you."

"You too, Caitlin." His smile makes me feel like he means it, my stomach flip-flopping. "Like I said, I'll tell my wife to keep an eye out for you."

I grin back, showing my teeth. "I'd *love* that." I'm a liar, remember?

I watch as he and Harper leave the park, hand in hand, their arms swinging. When they reach the gate, Jay turns, gives me one last wave. I wave back but wait until they disappear from sight before I turn and leave, too.

It occurs to me, though, on the walk back, that the reason I'd thought he might be single is that he wasn't wearing a wedding ring. I can't help but wonder why not.

2

Mom?" I call out when I get home from work, easing the front door shut behind me and setting my keys on the little table in the entryway. "I'm home!"

"Sloanie? Is that you?" That's my real name, Sloane. Sloanie, Sloanie, full of baloney. And yes, I live at home with my mother. I know, I know, another notch on my belt of accomplishments. I'm working on it. Really, that's the truth. Hand to heart.

"Yeah, it's me, Mom," I answer loudly. I kick off my shoes, drop my purse next to them, and walk down the short hallway into the living room. She's in her recliner with the TV on, wearing a light blue tracksuit and thick wool socks like a character from a seventies sitcom. I cross the room and bend over to drop a kiss on her cheek, glancing at the screen. *Murder, She Wrote*, her favorite old show. She's likely seen this episode at least three times before.

"How was work?" she asks, lowering the volume from blasting to blaring. She squints up at me, looking far older than her age, her short, wiry hair almost all gray, the lines across her forehead, around her eyes and mouth, deep.

"Fine," I say, shrugging. "I'm going to get dinner started. You hungry?"

She nods and points the remote back at the TV, the sound returning to an assaulting level. I'm surprised the neighbors don't complain.

Both my mother's eyesight and hearing are declining. Years of working on her feet as a house cleaner have ruined her back, leaving her hunched and aching, her joints stiff. She's had rheumatoid arthritis since her thirties, managed by medication, but it's taken its toll, finally rendering her unable to move most days, let alone work.

She spends her days in a well-worn corduroy armchair in the corner of the living room, a heating pad on her backside, legs stretched out before her, peering through smudged glasses at the TV as reruns of *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Forensic Files* degrade the screen. She drinks cup after cup of oversweetened, lukewarm coffee, followed by one whiskey at five, then another cup of coffee before bed, this time, decaf. It wasn't my plan to be living with my mother in my thirties, but at least I can keep an eye on her. By now, taking care of her is second nature, something I've done for as long as I can remember.

I head into the kitchen and open the fridge. There's some leftover roast chicken from the dinner I made last night that I warm up and shred into a bowl, along with a handful of chopped-up cucumbers and carrots, some romaine lettuce. A modest attempt to counterbalance the Chinese takeout my mother frequently has delivered for lunch. I divvy the salad between my plate and my mom's, then head back into the living room.

"Thanks, Sloanie," my mom says, taking the plate from me. Then she mutes her show. She likes to hear about my day when we eat.

"I did Dolly's nails today," I say, biting into a carrot.

I've been working at the day spa—Rose & Honey—for almost a year

now. I wandered in one afternoon when I saw the *Help Wanted* sign posted in the window. I'd walked by the black-and-white awninged storefront at least a hundred times, but had never gone in. By that point, I'd been out of work for months. I couldn't get hired anywhere, at least not doing what I was qualified for. I'd get through a few rounds of interviews, but no job offers materialized. I knew why, of course, so it didn't come as a surprise, but that didn't make it any easier. Doing nails sounded like a reasonable alternative, something I could be good at if I tried.

The woman at the front desk looked pleased when I asked for an application. She pumped my hand vigorously, introducing herself as Lena, the owner of the spa. She was a heavyset, Eastern European woman with impeccable makeup, kohl-rimmed eyes framed by long lash extensions, porcelain skin, pouty red lips. She'd opened the shop a few years ago, she told me in thickly accented English, and she was adding another manicurist to her team, someone reliable, someone she could count on. Why not, I thought, how hard could it be?

When Lena asked if I had a cosmetology license, I said that I did, that I'd recently passed the exam. I figured I could find a certificate to doctor, if and when she offered me a job. I was invited back for a practical interview, which, she explained, meant I'd be demonstrating my skills and giving her a manicure. I spent the next week on YouTube, pausing the videos at each step to practice on my mother, filing and refiling, painting and repainting. I memorized the steps, which were easy enough—clean, clip, file, buff, cuticle care, exfoliate, moisturize, base coat, paint, top coat—and showed up with my own set of manicure tools that I'd bought at a local beauty supply store with a twenty-five-percent-off coupon. When I was done, Lena examined her nails, smiled, and offered me the job.