

AUNT CHLOE

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Inheritance

Bad men were sent to the hogs. I saw it happen when my daddy couldn't stop drinking and hitting Mama. It was the only way to stop him. "The only

way," Mama whispered just before she pushed him over the fence. She didn't know I was watching, curled up in my secret spot like I always did when the

fighting started. That I could hear the excited squeals as they tore into him, the pulling of the flesh and crunching of the bones. Or that I saw what was in her

eyes when she turned and looked up at the moon: power. She had taken care of herself and of me. She wiped a streak of mud from her cheek and went back

into the house; I stayed in the bushes a bit longer as the munching sounds quieted into soft snorts and there was no trace of my daddy in the pen.

People in town and at school looked at me differently at first, when they heard my daddy was gone. Left, that's what they called it. "He just up and left

them," I overheard the secretary say to my teacher, before they both looked at me with sad, droopy faces. The school was full of kids with divorced parents and

single parents; there was even a girl in my class who claimed she didn't have any idea who her father was. Still, folks liked to pretend that life in rural North

Carolina was just like the TV shows from the 1950s. It was easier to buy drugs at the local high school than in any surrounding city, according to the teenagers

at the diner, and we all saw the frequent raids on the meth dens around town, but that didn't stop the adults at school from shaking their heads and saying

Things like this don't happen in Dunston every time they happened. Or from looking at me with pity every time I walked by the front office. I could almost

hear the "Poor girl," forming on their lips.

I didn't miss my daddy—not really—because any time I'd get sad thinking about how he used to lift me up high onto his shoulders sometimes or help me

build a campfire in the backyard so we could roast marshmallows, I'd also remember the sound of his fists on Mama and the smell of myself when I crouched

hidden in the closet for two whole days waiting for the yelling to be over. Then I wasn't sad. Because I was safe. Life was easier with just Mama and me; we had our

routines and we didn't have to think about what we said or walk around quiet and careful in the middle of the day. I breathed with my full lungs.

But Mama missed the company of a man, the way their deep voices and thick scents filled up the small house. I could see it when the police stopped by,

again, to check in on us and find out if we heard anything from daddy—who was officially missing but assumed to have left town on his own. “A deadbeat,” the

one with the big arms said, and nodded when Mama asked if he wanted to come in for some coffee. “You deserve better than that, Jo.” He took off his hat

when he stepped through the open front door. “You both do.” Mama tilted her head to the side and thanked him. Then she handed him coffee and let her hand

rest on his arm a minute before she turned to ask his partner if he wanted cream and sugar. She didn't pay attention to the gold band on the man's finger

because she was too busy soaking up his words.

A busted picker—that's what auntie Denise called it. “Your mama has never been able to tell a good man from a bad,” she said. “Not since she was younger

than you.” I knew what she meant, under her words. A warning to be prepared. It wouldn't be long before our life of ease was gone, replaced with an unworthy

man in the house and a kowtowing mama who forgave all his sins the moment he smiled. And that's exactly what happened. It wasn't one of the cops—thank

goodness—but Mama brought home a man who carried a duffle bag over his shoulder and called me “Little Thing” like it was my name even though I was

twelve years old and no matter how many times I refused to answer. A man who spread out on the sofa like it was his and put his feet on almost every piece of

furniture in the house. A man who did little else but direct my mama around like he owned the place and her.

His name was Stan and every time I said it a gagging feeling started at the bottom of my throat; I could feel the edges of my lips curl. But I plastered on a

happy face for Mama and pretended that her new boyfriend didn't make me want to puke. I sat next to him at dinner and passed the potatoes, I didn't complain

each time I had to use the end of the plunger to put the toilet seat down, and I even tried to ignore it when he found my daddy's clothes in the attic and started

wearing his shirts. I played the good, compliant daughter. Until the yelling started.

First it was about chicken—he was sick of the same thing for dinner every night and why couldn't they have steak once in a while. The next time it was

when she walked in front of the TV while he was watching a game. Then he was mad at her when he overslept and couldn't find his favorite boots—why was

she trying to fuck things up for him, he wanted to know. Each time the yelling was louder and lasted longer as if it were building to something. Because it was.

I knew that from watching the anger take over Daddy's face and move out to his body. And I heard it for myself when Stan got mad at Mama for smiling at the

bank manager. The closed bedroom door didn't keep out the yelling or the sound of his hands on her—rage like that couldn't be locked in.

The next morning Mama called in sick to work and wore long sleeves and sunglasses, even inside. But she couldn't cover up the way her shoulders rounded

near her ears or her slow and cautious steps as she moved through the house. Our house, not his. She told me to spend some time with my friends after school,

even handed me a five dollar bill and suggested we go for ice cream. She was trying to get rid of me—it was obvious. I smiled and thanked her for the money,

promised to be back in time for dinner. I let the screen door slam behind me and I didn't look back. Because I knew what it meant: she was sending Stan to the

hogs.

But when I got home, Stan was there. Alive and well with his dirty boots up on the coffee table and one hand in the front of his pants. Gross. He looked

away from the TV when I walked in and yelled something garbled to my mama in the kitchen. "She's been waiting dinner on you," he said, to me, in a slurry

voice that dribbled out the words at the end. He picked up the beer in front of him and took a long swig, then glared at me and turned up the volume on the

TV. Already halfway to stupid drunk.

Dinner was a drawn-out mess. Mama had made separate courses and she tried to bring them out one at a time, but Stan wanted to pile everything onto his

plate at once; he made an opening in the center of his mashed potatoes and poured the soup inside. He ate loud and sloppy, but Mama just wouldn't give up—

she kept initiating conversation that he wasn't capable of matching. He grunted when she asked about his day and didn't notice the hint to ask about her; he

looked over his shoulder every few minutes to keep an eye on the TV in the other room. She was trying to make up, but he clearly wasn't interested in the

effort. I helped her fill the empty space around the table with talk of what went on at school, the gossip I picked up at the diner, and an update on the new foal

in the neighbor's barn. Even stories of her favorite horse and how the neighbors fixed up the house she grew up in weren't enough to make her smile. The

attempt at a meal ended with the clang of Stan's silverware against his empty plate and the clatter of his boots back to the living room. Mama and I finished our

food in silence.

When I got up in the middle of the night I found Stan passed out on the sofa with the TV on, like I knew I would. Patterns were as easy to predict in my

mama's house as following the paths from our back door to the land our family used to own, the farm that used to be ours before granddaddy brought on the

trouble. I turned off the TV and Stan woke with a start, looked around the room and blinked. He rubbed his eyes and mumbled something that sounded like a

question about the time. Instead of an answer, I pointed at the empty beer cans on the table and shrugged. He sat up and swung his feet off the sofa and onto

the floor, picked up one can and then another, shaking them and setting them down with a frown; he was sleepy drunk, and could have easily laid back down

and closed his eyes—returned to liquid dreams—but still he wanted a drink. "There's more in the barn out back," I said, and took a step toward the door. He

pushed himself up to standing and followed me to the door. That's when I knew it would be easy.

I led him outside, his steps slow and wobbly behind me. He made a few attempts to talk but nothing came out in a way that made sense and eventually he

stopped. At the barn I told him to wait while I went inside—it was easier for me to find the neighbor's stash on my own, not that Stan needed an excuse to have

someone do the work for him. He didn't move from where he leaned against the fence when I handed him the beer, just wrapped his fingers around the can and

tilted his head back. Which made it all the easier to knock the can out of his hand and onto the other side of the fence. He looked over at the beer, then back at

me, then back at the can. And then he draped his body against the fence and used his legs to hoist himself over. He landed in a twisted heap in the pen but

smiled when he held up his hand with the can of beer, like a triumph. He took another swig and didn't seem to notice when I whistled, or hear the clomp of the

neighbor's hogs as they made their way out of the sleeping area and toward him. There was one short yelp and then a gurgling sound when the hogs reached

him, but I didn't hear any screams on my way back to the house. In the morning the only thing left was the bottom of the crushed beer can, in the corner of the

pen.

Mama was sad for a bit. There were a few days she spent in her room, ignoring the phone and the TV and me; she only left the house to go to work, her

make-up runny with tears. After that, she kept a box of tissues handy in case she cried but she mostly wanted to talk. She said she didn't understand why Stan

left us when things were going so well—which for her meant he was coming home most days and only hitting her sporadically. She wondered why he didn't

take all his clothes or have the balls to leave a note, but she never questioned that he left. That he was out there somewhere sprawled on someone else's sofa and

drinking some other woman's beer. The tears came when she thought about the someone else, as if she were in a competition for the shittiest love possible and

she still didn't want to lose. I sat close to her, rubbed her back and handed her tissues. I listened while she talked nonsense and made Stan into some man that

he had never been. It didn't matter to me how she remembered him, because he was gone. I could live with that.

What helped Mama get over her sadness the most, always, was the attention of men. It was unfortunate, but it was true. As much as I tried to get her to

find other ways to be happy again, to laugh when we stayed up watching old dance movies or letting her win when we played gin even if I had a great hand, it

wasn't until I made her get dressed up and we went out for dinner that she actually did smile. "You need to get out of the house for something other than

work," I said, and she agreed, even if she didn't want to. We just went to the local diner but that was enough for her. The owner and cook, a fat man who

always had a giant stain on the center of his apron, called my mama pretty and asked where she'd been, the bus boys rushed water and cokes to our table and

smiled at her while they refilled her glass, the cops eating two tables over sucked in air through their teeth when she walked by and one of them said that Stan

was an idiot to leave. Each compliment and turn of the head propped my mama up and shined her until she was back to who she used to be. Happy and

smiling but not because of herself.

The happy did last for a while. We went into town more often and she spent more time at work, being social she called it. It became more than social the

night one of my mama's co-workers showed up at the door for dinner in a pressed shirt and jacket, flowers and a bottle of wine in hand. His name was Kevin

and he was different—that was the first thing my mama said about him. Different. She was right: he had soft hands without dirt under the nails, like he'd never

lifted a tool or worked on a farm, and he used words like penchant and hoity-toity that he learned from the Word of the Day calendar he kept on his desk. But

different wasn't altogether good. He had some sort of degree from the community college two towns over and though Mama thought it made him seem smart,

he dangled it over her head like a carrot she could never reach. She tried to be enough, she changed who she was for him, and yet there was a sharp edge to the

sweetness in his words as if she ever got too close they could cut her. But Mama never saw what was right in front of her.

Kevin didn't have to worm his way into our life—Mama opened the door and welcomed him in. She cleaned up the house, repainted the bedroom and

turned the small back room into a "man den" for him like she'd seen in some magazine at the doctor's office. I had to help carry boxes and plaster a phony smile

on my face. Another new man, another new and improved Mama, and another new routine for me. I adjusted, like I always did. Kevin must've sensed my

disapproval, though, found the feeling underneath the smile, because he went out of his way to be kind to me. In a way he wasn't even to Mama. He smiled

when he talked to me, used a soft voice and put his hand on my elbow. "I know this must be hard for you," he said, when he sat next to me on the sofa for

family movie night his second week living with us. "But I promise I am not trying to replace your daddy."

The kindness grew at the same rate as my mama's purrs of contentment, and crossed over the line into uncomfortable so slowly I didn't see it until his

hand was on my knee and my stomach was a hard knot of hash browns and ketchup. He stood too close, lingered after conversations were over, and seemed to

be there—watching—every time I turned around. I couldn't get away from his eyes or his hands. I tried to hint at Mama, call him touchy-feely, but she just

smiled and said it was nice to be with an affectionate man for once. Said she'd stopped flinching whenever he moved. So I crossed my arms over my chest and

kept my backside to the wall, every exit from the room in my sight line.

I spent more time in my bedroom and at school, found chores to do for the neighbors who didn't mind having the original family around for guidance, as

they said. Anything to be out of the house that no longer felt like mine. When Mama found me cleaning out the stalls and asked if I wanted to go shopping,

“Just us girls,” it seemed like the perfect time to talk. We went to the outlet mall way outside of town and Mama kept the music low, made awkward comments

about friends and school, as if she were attempting to work her way to a particular topic without being obvious.

“You're growing up so fast,” she said. “So many changes.”

The knot in my stomach expanded. Something was coming—something big. “I'm not any different,” I said, and looked down at my body that

contradicted my words. I pulled at the seatbelt that grazed my throat and turned to look out the window. I didn't want to change, and I definitely didn't want to

grow into being my mama. I wouldn't let my life and my body be ruled by shiftless men—I made a promise to my reflection in the window.

We went to the underwear store first. Bra shopping. “It's time,” Mama said, but it didn't feel like that was the big talk she was working up to. She picked

out bras in different styles and colors, and a couple of panties to match, all the while chatting away about nothing in particular. The words house and family

kept popping up—and she wasn't talking about when my grandparents were still alive and the whole family lived together on the farm. She was trying to hint at

something else. So I took the leap.

“How long is Kevin going to stay with us?” I pretended to look at a nightgown so she couldn't see my face.

“Why?” Mama asked. “Don't you like him?”

“He makes me uncomfortable.” I fingered the silky nightgown and focused my eyes on the pattern of the lace.

“You're just not used to being around a man who's educated and refined.”

“No, it’s more than that.” I let go of the nightgown and looked right at her. “He sits too close. He’s too touchy.”

“Now you’re just being silly.” Mama steered me away from the rack and started heading toward the dressing rooms. “You’ll be happy once we start planning the wedding.”

Mama wasn’t willing to listen. She was going to marry Kevin and pretend that everything was perfect. A man who didn’t hit or yell was one to hang on to,

that’s what she told me on the car ride home. So what if he was a little awkward. We’d get used to it. But no matter how hard I tried to hold my breath and

make it stop, or disappear into the background, I couldn’t get used to the feel of his hands on my skin or the smell of his aftershave in my face. It wasn’t right.

And his hands kept staying longer, moving further. The fear and anger wouldn’t stay inside my body—it had to find a way out.

A friend’s mama had a magical medicine cabinet filled with an array of little plastic bottles to choose from, so I did some research online during study hall

in the library and found a muscle relaxer that caused drowsiness and blurred vision. I crushed a couple of pills and mixed them into Kevin’s drink the night he

brought home a ring for Mama, with a tiny diamond in the center to distract her. Luckily it kept her attention enough that she didn’t notice when I invited

Kevin on a walk outside—to show him the lay of the land now that he was going to be family, I said. “Even though it’s not our land anymore.”

He brought his drink with him and the ice clinked against the glass with each step next to me, almost in time with the warm breath on my neck. There

weren’t any questions as I rattled off the family history: who had first bought the farm and the fight between my great granddaddy and his brother over the girl

two farms over who didn’t want to marry either of them, but he oohed and ahed at all the right places, nodded along like he knew the details already. When

we walked by the goats he wrapped cold fingers around my elbow and swayed—that’s how I knew the pills were working. He leaned heavy against me and I had

to pull a little to get him to the hogs, but I got him to the fence and draped his arms around one of the posts. His eyes wouldn’t stay open, his words were a

slurred mess, and he’d lost the glass somewhere along the way. He must’ve thought he was still standing next to me because he nuzzled his head against the

wood and made a sound somewhere in between a purr and a whimper—even in his state he was trying to take advantage of what he thought was me. That

made it easier to do what came next.

I couldn't get him to go into the pen on his own and he fought against me, as best he could, while I shoved and pushed and lifted with my legs like Mr.

Wheeler told us in P.E. class. Sweat rolled down my forehead and cheeks, pooled up under my arms, and Kevin kicked me in the chin, twice. There was a lot of

straining but I pictured myself like the Hulk in those superhero movies, and in a way I was saving a small part of the world. He tried to hang on to the post but

his hands were too loose and when he tried to scratch me it was more like a windmill in a storm—flailing and wild. He couldn't get any traction and after

enough work on my part, he dropped over and into the pen. I didn't stay to watch it happen—I had clothes to pack up and a goodbye letter to write instead.

But I did hear the watery yelping sound as I made my way back to the house.

Mama took longer to get over Kevin than with the others. She kept the letter in her bedside drawer and read it over and over, looking for a clue as to what

she could have done differently, to make him stay. She let his empty side of the closet stay that way and the glass she found outside, along with the locker at the

bus depot in his name, became the answer she needed—it was this country life he left, not her. It worked, so I helped her build the details until she could

eventually picture him all the way in New York going after some big dream he never had. Then at least she stopped wondering. Stopped looking for him or

rushing to the phone when it rang. She let him go and went back to focusing on her job and how the men in town fawned over her predictably when she

started coming around more often. She wanted to spend more time with me, but even when we did it wasn't the same. She couldn't see the stupidity and lies in

the chick flicks we used to love watching together and she never wanted to go to the library with me or sit outside and just listen to the frogs. My mama needed

to be entertained. So it was no surprise when the next pretty distraction came around.

He was perfect on paper—they'd been in the same class at high school and he'd joined the Navy and gone off to have his adventure before coming back to

town to settle in to his old life. Alan had an ex-wife and two daughters of his own, which meant he was only available to stay over with my mama every other

weekend. She thought it was good to start off slow. At least that's what she said to her reflection and mine standing behind her as she got ready for one of their

dates. But I knew the first time I shook his hand that he was bad news. That he would hurt my mama in ways I didn't have to imagine because I had seen them

before, overheard them while they were happening. The skittish look in both of his daughters' eyes when Mama and I pretended to run into them at the movies

strengthened my resolve—they'd be better off without him, too.

It was best to do it quick, before he had the chance to hurt her; after so many years of bad men I knew how the pattern played out. Instead of an

invitation, I used a bottle to the head and a wheelbarrow to get him outside—while Mama was in the shower with the bathroom radio turned up loud. I

wheeled him to the pen and opened the gate, dumped him directly in front of their food trough. The warm blood that still oozed slowly from his forehead got

their attention and I backed out of the pen fast but steady. I was comfortable on the sofa, reading a magazine, when Mama came out of the bathroom and

started looking for him. There weren't many clues to trace since he didn't keep anything at the house. When they found his car abandoned down the road a

ways they focused their investigation on where he was headed and left Mama and me out of it. His ex and daughters weren't surprised. "He probably had

another family, in another town," they said, and shook their heads on the local news, every day for a week straight. And then everyone moved on.

Everyone except Mama. She wallowed a bit, like I knew she would. Just like I knew there'd be another bad man on the way if I didn't do something to stop

it. She wasn't willing to be alone and my auntie was right, her picker was definitely busted. But I got a true sense of men the first time I met them; the

movement of their eyes, the smell of their breath, the feel of their hands—who they were at their core showed through. So I set my sights on the right kind of

man for Mama and he wasn't hard to find.

I found him at the shop when we went to get our car fixed, again. The new mechanic. I saw him before Mama did. The name on his shirt said Garrett,

and he wiped his hands on a rag from his back pocket before he offered one to us. His face was honest and sincere, as was the way he looked at me like I was

still a child, not almost a woman the way most of them did. Garrett was younger than Mama—that was obvious—and not special in any way that stood out to

her. The age difference bothered her, she said, but it didn't get in the way once I invited him to the house to look at my daddy's old, dead truck. He came to

take a look, stayed for lunch, and never really left. "Simple," she called him after their second official date. "But good with his hands." That was good enough

for me.

He asked for a tour of the farm once, after he'd been living with us for a few months, and Mama and I both obliged. We walked him through all the good

memories that accompanied each of our favorite places: the pond where I learned to swim, the stable where Mama met her first horse, the field where I

discovered ants lived in colonies, and even the tree that used to hold the swing where I lost my first tooth, unnaturally, and learned the difference between a

break and a sprain. He laughed and nodded at all the right places, and squeezed Mama's hand when the stories were about her. Then he stopped in front of the

muddy pen behind the barn. The hogs.

"What's in here?" he asked, and pointed with the hand still connected to Mama. Mama and I looked at each other.

"Just the hogs," I said. "Nothing you'd want to see."

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