



Earl Turns Things Around

Earl loves his job, he takes his responsibility seriously. He also takes life seriously. In the life of a police officer, life can change quickly, Earl has learned how to think on his feet and how to make things work out for the best for all those around him. When there is a sudden discovery about his own sister, Earl does all he can to make her life right again. Earl continues to do that for many others, until finally someone is doing it for him.



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Earl Jacobs is a police officer, who has been called to the same house four times already for domestic abuse in the past eight months without any arrests. But tonight, things are different. Tonight, he and his partner are following their gut, not a lead or call, they have decided to spontaneously stop by to see how things are going.

As they walk up to the front door, they already hear the yelling, “What are you doing?!!! I told you to change clothes the minute you get home!!! I don’t want to see you in your stupid uniform. You think being a doctor makes you special?!!! Like you’re better than me because you went to more school than me?!!!! I said change when you get home!! No one wants their food to taste like whatever is on your clothes, who knows what germs you’ve brought home!!!! Now we have to throw this food out!! You think I’m made of money?!!!” A loud crash is heard next and some loud female screaming. Earl quickly calls for backup and is relieved to find out that there is a patrol nearby.

He knocks on the door and calls, “Police!!”

“You called the police?!!!! You think I’m going to hurt you?!!!! You think I’m not allowed to rule my own house?!!! I am the law in here bitch!!! This will teach you to think I’m not in charge here!!!!” The next thing they hear is a loud crack of something that sounds like a whip and glass crashing.

“We’re here, let’s go in.” Another officer says behind Earl. They heard that crash too.

There are three officers now that barge through the front door and run towards the screaming. What they see surprises them. There is a man standing over his wife with a horse whip, she is on the ground in her scrubs from work and he is about to come down again on her back. Earl grabs the whip from behind and when the man turns to see them he becomes enraged and tries to attack them. It takes all three officers to tackle this man to the ground. He does not stop screaming the whole time about how he is the ruler of his house, his castle, his rules. The screaming doesn’t stop, the rage in his voice harsher and harsher as he is taken down to the floor.

When they finally have his hands cuffed behind his back and his legs in shackles because of all of his kicking, the back-up officers bring him out to their car. Unbelievably, the man is still screaming. Earl checks on the wife and calls out to see if the ambulance has arrived yet. He calls again and hears no response. For the first time Earl notices his partner is not near him. But before he has time to put too much thought into it two men from the ambulance come in.

They push him aside and begin to assess the woman on the floor. They call in her identity because they recognize her from the hospital. Earl’s first thought is that if the injuries don’t kill her the humiliation at work will. Then Earl makes his way outside and sees that his partner is still standing in the same place she was when they were first on the porch.

Think Earl, think, what has her so frozen? He thinks to himself. Earl stands there as the ambulance workers walk by with the victim on a stretcher. He sees that his partner won’t even look at the woman, or the front door for that matter. He takes a step back closes and locks the front door. Then he walks up to his partner and puts his hands on her shoulders and turns her around to walk back down to their car, she needs physical guidance all the way to the car. Once she is sitting down, Earl’s mind starts to work more clearly.

In the past few months her behavior has changed, she has been very introverted. Quiet when in the squad car too. Tonight, is the first time it has affected her work. Earl’s mind begins to work quickly in trying to remember all that has occurred recently, all that he knows about her in general. His first thought goes back to a few months ago when she came in with a black eye and told him she must have accidentally gotten hit during a training session. Then, after a shift where they had to work overtime recently she had come back in the next day limping hard on one side and icing her lower back more than once.

One of the other female officers told him she had bruising on her back after they came out of the locker room and that he should try and speak to her because she won’t talk to them. She never admitted

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the bruises were there nor denied them either. Earl met her husband at the last community event they had, he saw how he hovered over her, watching her every move, not as a man in love but as a man watching to make sure she behaved properly at all times. At the time he put it in the back of his head but now all the pieces have come together. She probably gets the same argument at home each night. Or, worse. He looks over at his partner, she has not moved. Hasn't even blinked. He picks up her personal phone which she left in between the seats and steps out of the car. He looks up her sister's number, he remembers her name because his partner once told him he shares a birthday with her. He calls from his own phone.

"Hello, this is Officer Jacobs, I am your sister's partner. Do you remember me?" he asks.

"Yes, Earl, I believe. Is everything ok?" She says as her voice quivers.

"Right, I'm going to be blunt here. Does your sister's husband know where you live?" he asks.

"No. Why?" she asks slowly.

Earl quickly explains what has happened in the past hour. "I'm going to bring her to you but I'm worried he has her phone tapped so I'm going to throw it out at the nearest place I can. I don't want him looking for her tonight. She is vulnerable and needs protection. I'll file all the paperwork necessary when I get back to the precinct. We will protect her and say she has gone AWOL, absent without leave, and we don't know where she might have gone. If you think I'm wrong now is the time to say something but since I've been speaking with you just know she is still sitting in the car staring straight out the front windshield. I'll do whatever you ask." He says.

"Earl, I knew you were a good guy when I met you. We've all felt the same way about her husband, ever since they got married. Believe it or not, he tried to cut her off from us. When one of my brothers pushed him and asked what he is afraid we will find out, he dropped the idea of pushing us away. But he doesn't make it easy for us to be in touch. I'll text you my address and call everyone over. Should take you about an hour to get here, is that going to be a problem for you?" she asks.

"No. I'll take care of things from my end. She needs support and she *needs* to get out. Now. Don't let her go back. No matter what she says." He says firmly.

"We won't, we have lawyers and therapists in our family who will talk to her tonight, tomorrow and the next day, whatever it takes to get through to her. My neighbor is a counselor too. We will take care of her here, I promise you that. Thank you Earl. I will never forget this kindness you've done for us." She says crying now. She turns to her husband to explain what is going on.

The wheels are set in motion from her side, now she has to pray Earl can get her sister here tonight before the husband picks up on what is going on.

Before Earl gets back into his squad car, he calls the Chief to explain what is going on and what he is doing about the situation. "Good, I'm glad someone is finally taking action. I've tried three times already with her. Even offered her to go out to my vacation cabin to hide out. You're doing the right thing officer. We will back you up here. Your shift is not over for another hour plus some, so we won't be hearing from him until about a half an hour after that. Does he know your name?" he asks.

"Possibly. No, make that probably, he most likely needs to know who she is with all the time." Earl says.

"Ok, when you get back here, park the squad car in the back of the lot where we might not see it right away and can easily say we don't see your car. Then take your own car home, pack and take a cab to a nearby hotel for a while. If the department won't cover this, I will. No sense in putting yourself in danger. We'll talk when you get back. I'll get the paperwork started for a restraining order. Her family will get her to at least sign that tonight, I hope." He says and hangs up.



With a heavy heart, Earl gets back into the car and begins to drive. Still no reaction from his partner. No words. She is in a state of shock and he is not sure when she will come out. He drives on, preparing himself mentally for the moment she bursts through.

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Last night was definitely one of the hardest nights Earl has had on the job. He has seen many things in his years as a street officer but he has never had to deal with these dark issues personally. He couldn't even get his partner out of the car. It took her brother's hand on her shoulder for her to wake up, then she finally fell apart. They asked Earl to stay but he couldn't, he made the excuse that he had to get back to the precinct with the car. Her sister hugged him before he left.

Now he sits in his hotel room. His chief told him not to come in today because of how the husband reacted last night to his wife not coming home. He showed up before the chief left and began screaming and yelling about his rights as a husband. The thought of what he might have said gave Earl a large pit in his stomach.

The woman he called his partner for the past two years had been one of the strongest people he knew. But at home she was merely a subordinate, much like it appeared the good doctor was. One of his fellow officers told him that the official announcement this morning at the precinct is that she has taken a leave of absence and will be back when she can.

Earl decides it is time to reconnect to his own family, he so rarely has a day off, he wants to take advantage of the time. "Hey sis, what's your schedule today? I have a day off and would sure love to see you and the kids." He says cheerfully.

"Wow, a whole day? Are you hurt? Is your partner ok? Is the precinct under siege?" she asks knowing full well that it is possible his partner was hurt or something went down yesterday and they are giving him a mental health day.

"A story for another day, what are your plans today?" he says trying not to let his thoughts of last night invade his mind again.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I'd love to see you but I'm stuck at home. Your lovely niece has had the flu the past couple of days and your nephew broke his leg yesterday at a game. End of season break, the doctor told us. He has to be completely off of his leg, no weight at all, for the next three days at least, then we reassess. Want to bring us lunch?" she asks.

"Lunch? Why wait? I'll come now so you can do your errands and when you come back I'll go out and get lunch. You've got me all day." He smiles. "If you can put up with me that is."

"Really? You'd do that for me?" she asks hesitantly.

"Any time, you never asked before." He says wondering why her voice is wavering.

"You're always so needed on the job. I hate to take you away for my petty needs over the needs of the whole community." She responds

"Ella, my dear, family is always first to me. Next time call me. Often times I can switch my shift, nothing is written in stone. Guys switch all the time. I once babysat for one of the guys I work with at the precinct because he was in the middle of a big case and needed to be in, I didn't. I spoiled his kids the whole day like a good uncle would.

Do you ever call Mica? I know he is the baby brother but we're all adults now and he, too, is single. I'm sure he'd make time for you as well." He says somewhat cautiously.

"Not for long, he has a girlfriend you know, but no, I haven't called him either. You're right, I never have used you two and Denver's family lives out of town. I'm sorry if I've kind of pushed you away. I welcome you coming today though. Thank you Earl." She hangs up because her tears begin to fall. Recently

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she has felt so alone but she isn’t and Earl has reminded her that she does have family around but there is danger around family too, she has been so confused. Denver’s mother had offered to come stay with them until her son gets back on his feet but her son and she don’t really get along. But Earl? He loves the boy and her son looks up to him. Why had she not thought of her own brother? She is not alone. But then her back stiffens and she remembers why she didn’t call her daughter’s uncle.

Ella calls her baby brother, “Guess who is coming to spend the day with me?” she asks.

“That’s and easy one, you’re friend Marcy.” He says.

“Nope, you’re so wrong. Earl is coming! He has a day off and chose me over anything else he has to do today. He called me and asked if he could come.” She says proudly. That simple act of calling her has put her in a much better place emotionally at least for the moment.

“Hey, you need someone that badly I would have come, I work freelance, easier for me to take off for you. What’s going on Ella? You ok?” he asks concerned.

Ella’s first thought is, wow, I am so loved by my brothers and never really acknowledged that love back to them. “I’m good. Trevor fell at the game, broke his leg, he is non weight bearing for a couple of days and out for the season. My daughter has the flu. Earl’s day off just happened to come at the right time I suppose.” She says.

“So you would have called one of us? No, you’d try and tough it out by yourself as usual. Ella, we’re family why don’t you trust us around your kids?” he asks more concerned now than before.

There is a long pause. Mica thinks for a moment and decides to change the subject quickly, “Is he bringing lunch? Because if he does it will be all that healthy food he likes to eat. So, I’ll come by at 3:00 and bring the kids ice cream. It will help cover up the after taste of all that rabbit food he will feed them.” Mica tries to joke.

Ella shakes her head back into the conversation. Trevor was two years old when she met Denver and the two men fell in love with each other almost instantly. Trevor has never known any other father. Now he is ten and she is thankful he looks exactly like her and he is built more like her father than his own. Big and strong. Still, bones don’t like being crushed at a game after falling down.

Her princess came a couple years later. Denver wanted to name her princess but Ella refused, she said she needed a real name so together they chose Selena.

“3:00 sounds good. See you then.” Ella hangs up lost in thought.

Mica calls his brother immediately in hopes to catch him before he gets to their sister. “Answer damn you.” He says out loud to his phone.

“Hello Mica what a wonderful surprise. You caught me on a day off. I’m enjoying relaxing so much already I may take more of these.” He jokes.

“So now you’re the family comedian?” Mica jokes back but this is no laughing matter.

“Listen Earl, I figured something out and I need you to put on your detective head for a moment. And yes, we need to do this discussion before you get to Ella’s.”

“Ok, I’m yours. You talk, I’ll listen. I have to pick up some breakfast because I haven’t eaten yet. Maybe I’ll get some muffins for the kids too.” He says.

“Wow, one day off work and you’re eating like a human again. Ok, here is the deal.” Mica explains what he said to his sister and her silence in response. “So, I did the math quickly in my head. When was the last time we saw, heard from and/or about Uncle Stephen? Ok, your turn.” Mica says.

Earl walks to the check-out counter and pays for his food. As he sits down in his car, Mica impatiently tells him to answer. “Well hell, now you’ve gone and put this in my head too.” He says exasperated. “No charges were ever made but Dad knew, didn’t he? The only time we saw him after that



was at their older brother’s funeral and he almost came to fisticuffs with our uncle right there at the cemetery after he asked where Ella was.

She fears for Selena in the back of her mind. She pushed us away, but not really. It isn’t like she never talks to us or doesn’t invite us for family bar-b-ques. But she never has us there alone, and definitely not there alone with the kids without her or Denver around. That son of a bitch. Now I wish I let Dad punch him, I would have joined him.” Earl sits back in his chair.

“I promised her I’m coming so I can’t be late because we’re having this conversation. What are you thinking though, because I know you are.” Earl says.

“Earl, you’re a cop. Can’t you get Trevor’s DNA or something and prove the rape happened without involving Ella or Trevor?” he asks “We have a lot of female cousins on that side of the family. I wonder if he has done this before. No way for us to know though, we’ve been away from them for so long. Trevor is ten years old already.” He says.

“Mica, I understand what you’re saying but I don’t know if we can do that. It won’t be nice for her, you know whomever he gets as a lawyer will want his own proof. Maybe even call Trevor in for another test and that would be devastating, he is still a young child. The best we can do is talk to her quietly one day, alone, the three of us. Tell her we figured this out on our own and that we don’t care and we support her. I know you want him dead now but I don’t think we can do anything, legally.” Earl says half in thought and half out loud.

“If you’re sure I’ll go with it but if you have time to check into things, I’m supporting it all. We have to protect Trevor and Ella.” Mica says.

“I agree. You coming by later?” he asks.

“3:00, I’m bringing the ice cream like a good uncle would. See you then.” Mica hangs up feeling a little calmer.

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Earl and Mica spend the entire afternoon with their niece and nephew. Earl teaches Trevor how to play chess and other board games that make you think, to help him get away from staring at the computer all day while he is laid up at home. Mica helped catch him up on the day’s homework and they read ahead of schedule in his book for literature class.

Denver walks in to his home to the site of his brothers in law sitting around playing with his kids, but where is his wife? What happened to Ella? “Gentlemen?” he asks.

Earl turns around, “Hey Denver, how was your day? I had a day off and decided it was a good idea to come spoil your kids. You’ve got a champion of a chess player here Denver. A quick learner.”

“Ella?” he asks softly.

“I believe we kicked her out and told her to go get a haircut. She should be back soon. I’ll be ordering dinner; real food not rabbit food as Mica says.” Earl smiles.

Denver sits down with relief and his daughter runs to his lap. “Daddy, did you know that Uncle Mica is going to get married soon? I told him to get married next week.” She smiles and kisses him all over.

“Well, if I get this kind of greeting each time then your uncles should come over more often.” He smiles. “How’s the leg son? Selena how is your stomach feeling my dear?”

“Great Dad, Uncle Earl here has taught me a lot of games. I challenge you after dinner. Bet I can beat you at least on two of them.” Trevor smiles.

“I’m good too Daddy, my uncles made me drink lots of tea and made me soup.” Selena smiles.

“Definitely making you guys come over more often.” Denver laughs again.

“Why? You guys having some quality boy bonding time?” Ella asks as she walks in.

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Denver turns to see his wife, “Ella you look fabulous, you want me to take you out to dinner to show you off to the world? Looks like we have two of the best babysitters around.”

Ella stands still for a moment, Earl and Mica notice the quick change in her posture and Mica quickly says, “Hey, no fair, we came to spend time with all of you. Ella, Earl says he is buying dinner, that doesn’t happen often. He promises he is ordering real food but I didn’t check the list yet. Maybe if you play your cards right you can call back and order extra to have for tomorrow night too. When you’ll be missing us already.” He smiles at her jokingly.

“Oh good, that means he is ordering Italian food. I’ll go set the table. Serena go wash up. Trevor, Uncle Mica will take you to wash up, he is strong and can carry you.” Ella says.

The family enjoys an evening together with promises to do this again next week. Denver walks the men all the way out to their cars after carrying his son to his bed, as they get to their cars he asks, “What’s the real reason you came guys?”

“Seriously, I was off today and Mica heard I was coming from Ella, he didn’t want me to serve your family healthy food so he insisted on coming to bring ice cream.” Earl looks to Denver. “Why? What’s going on Denver?”

Denver throws his head back as if he was laughing at something they said, he knows his wife is watching him. Earl and Mica respond in kind, catching on quickly. “Ella has been feeling down lately. You know a few years ago, when Selena was three, she lost a baby before we had time to tell anyone she was pregnant. I know we have Selena but I think she wants more only lately she has been hovering over her a little too much. I don’t know what to make of her change in behavior. Can she still be post-partum after all this time?” he asks still smiling again.

Mica pipes in, “How much do you know about Trevor?” he asks.

“That it was rape but that she loved him the moment he started moving inside of her and her parents have always protected her as well as Trevor. Is there something else I should know?” he asks looking at the two of them.

“We had a hunch about something regarding him recently but we don’t want to tell you until we know for sure, can you trust us with that and wait?” Mica asks.

“Yeah, you really coming back next week?” he asks.

“Yeah, we’d love to. Is there a day better than others?” Earl asks.

“I saw her respond to my question tonight, I haven’t taken my own wife out on a date in over two years. We always have the kids, or she says she likes to do dinner and a movie at home after they are asleep but with Trevor getting older, that becomes later and later in the day. The past eight months have been even worse, always looking over her shoulder, even in the grocery store. I’d love to be able to take her out for dinner. But I’ll settle for her being happy at least, like she was tonight. Now I’m going to hug you and we are all going to laugh because I know she is watching. I’m going to tell her how we decided to plan a guys’ night out and can’t decide what to do.” He looks from one to the other.

“Yeah, let’s do that. Tell Ella that I challenged you guys to paint ball. I’ll bet you dinner that she says I will cheat because I shoot guns for a living.” Earl says.

The three men laugh for real and Denver heads inside. Moments later he sends them a text, “*Her exact words, I can’t believe I owe you two jerks dinner now☺.*”

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Earl and Mica have been talking each night for the past few days. Mica is convinced that something happened between their uncle and sister before the night she became pregnant. Earl was away in school at the time and Mica was away at a competition. When Mica came home he was told she was raped and that

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was the end of the discussion. Earl heard the same quick explanation. They decide that they need to get her out of the house to talk to her, some place she thinks of as safe.

“Earl, why don’t we simply meet at your apartment? I’ll tell her I want both of your opinions about how to propose to my girl.” Mica says.

“Ok, I hope it works. I’m available around 6:00 tomorrow night. You’d best clear it with Denver though. It’s dinner time at home.” Earl says.

“Ok. I’ll text you later what his response is.” Mica hangs up and calls Denver.

Earl sits at a desk and wonders what has happened to his uncle. He decides to do a simple search to see if he has any record with the police, any kind of charges made, of any that were able to stick or not stick. He finds exactly what he wants to find, but the whole thing makes him sick to find out. A cousin of his filed a sexual harassment suit against her own father, Uncle Stephen. He was found guilty and served only five years. Must have turned out to be more than harassment. Earl keeps looking. Another one filed by a co-worker a year before that. He looks at the dates, they are all after Trevor was born. He doesn’t want to but he keeps looking. What he finds disturbs him even more. There is a letter to a judge asking for a new restraining order against him. This was filed only eight months ago, around the time Denver said Ella stopped going out in public without being with the kids.

Dear Judge Madison,

You may remember me from when I was a youngster, your daughter Mira and I were friends in high school and college. My name was Ella Jacobs then, now I’m Ella Winter. I don’t know what the right channels are but I know there are ways you can get a restraining order against someone.

My brother is a police officer and would do it for me but I’m too embarrassed to tell him and you’re, as they say, a few degrees of separation away. I received the following handwritten letter from the man who raped me over 10 years ago. We never filed charges because it was a family member and my parents didn’t want to cause more damage to my reputation, publicly. At the time, being pregnant was hard enough to recover from. So, they promised to never have him around, and they promised to support me always – they have. But now this.....

Ella,

I’ve been away for a couple of years, but did you think you could hide my only son from me all these years? He is mine and I want him back now. I can easily take you to court you know and make you give me visitation rights. I can tell the whole story but it won’t matter what is mine is mine.

Orrrrr, you could be a good girl and meet me at the hotel any time I ask you, you’ve grown up just fine. I see you have a fine young girl yourself, how old is she now? Is she ready for me? She looks about the same age as you were when we first ‘got together.’

If you take this to the police they’ll never believe you. I am sure it is easy to say that at the age of 16 you were ready, willing and able to participate. It was consensual and you know it.

Uncle Stephen

I just want a restraining order, nothing else, don’t make this public I beg of you. I have to protect my family.

Ella Winters.

Earl needs to set this right. The man is a perpetual predator and they let him go free? He practically said that he wants to do harm to a young child and all the judge did was sign a restraining order? Something is very wrong here. Very wrong. He slams his hands onto the wall above his head as he leans his forehead there for support.

“Earl!” someone yells.

Earl looks around his back to see his boss. “Yes Chief?” he asks



“What has you in such a tizzy? You’re pacing like a trapped tiger. What is this on that screen?” the Chief walks over to the desk, pushes Earl aside and sits down to read what Earl has been reading. He takes a minute and sits back in his chair to contemplate this. How can he set this right? Earl can’t do it, he is too close to the situation. Chief recognizes the last name right away, it’s Earl’s sister.

“We need to make a couple of phone calls from my office.” He says. Earl follows him in and closes the door.

“Madison! Just the man I wanted to speak to, but I say the word ‘man’ loosely, I know you’re about to retire and you don’t want any problems but we’ve got a big problem on our hands and it is because you never called an item to our attention. You’re letting sexual predators go with a restraining order now?!!!! I don’t give a damn what was asked of you, this should have been handed down to our office the day you received it you moron! Protocol means nothing now that retirement is in your face?!!! We found it by accident looking for something else. You’ve got a lot to answer for, if that child has one hair plucked from her head, this will be on your conscious, forever. Sleep on that!!!!” he slams the phone down.

“Never liked that man. He has gotten away with doing minimal work his whole career. This isn’t the first mess I’ve had to clean up from him but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let this one go without a fight, and a big one at that. Earl. You pretend you never saw this if you can. You were sitting in Mac’s chair and I’m going to say he found this information himself. It’s on his screen. Besides violating his parole, this is a whole new level of sick. You have my word that I will take care of this personally, do you believe me? Do you trust me, more importantly? I will be all over this today and I’m going to push this through to the highest it can go.” the Chief asks.

Earl stares at his chief in disbelief for a moment, he will take this on himself? “I don’t want to burden the department sir. I was going to try and talk to my sister. My brother and I recently figured things out for ourselves. Now, after finding this, her behavior matches our thoughts and it sucks even more. The fact that she couldn’t come to me? That part really hurts.”

“Earl, I’m addressing you by name as a friend. We’ve worked together for almost 10 years now, I was happy you came to our precinct and I’m happier you’ve stayed here. We work well together and you’ve done nothing less than excellence in your work. But today, today is personal and that’s ok. It happens, we’ve all had garbage happen in our lives where we’ve been lucky enough to have a great support team around us, you’ve got that too.

I’ve seen you support people in the neighborhood patrol as well. We overlook those favors because it gets the job done sometimes, but this is not to be overlooked. This *has* to be done, I don’t care what that damn judge says nor do I care that he is a judge, this is borderline corruption. I know he wanted us to find the letter which is why he put the whole letter on the digital file to begin with, he just didn’t want to bother notifying us because that would be doing the right thing, that would take effort, something he is not accustomed to doing. Sorry, that man infuriates me. I’m going to make him pay for his actions this time I don’t care if he can taste retirement, maybe it will be forced on him and that’s not good for him. Judge or not. If you’ll excuse me I have to call my own superiors on this one.

Again, if anyone asks, it was Mac who found the information. I will have him read the whole thing and he will probably go crazy all on his own. Because of what happened to his own daughter, you know about that, right?” he asks.

“No sir, I’m not very close with Mac.” Earl says.

“Oh, I thought people knew. In this case I think it needs to be shared, his daughter was raped by her coach in college. Nearly killed him until he got that man behind bars. I was worried I might have to bail him out. We’ll take care of this. I know a lot of lawyers, good ones who aren’t fond of the judge either. Yeah, I guess I have it out for him at this point. But Madison knew exactly what I was talking about which

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makes me feel as if he was waiting for us to accidentally find the letter. Eight months, he could have sent it to us immediately. Damn fool. Not your problem. We will keep you and your immediate family out of all of this. I can’t believe no one caught this upon filing, I suppose secretaries are told not to read now a days. I’m so upset I could spit fire. Go back to your desk, or better yet, take a long lunch break, try and breathe. Maybe go downstairs to the gym and give the old punching bags a good go around.” The chief stands and opens the door. Earl walks out, Chief follows him.

“Mac!! You’re going to want to see this one!” the chief calls to him.

Mac passes Earl on the way in, he pats Earl’s shoulder and keeps walking; somehow he knows this is serious and involves Earl. “Yes sir?” he asks as the chief turns his own computer around for Mac to read.

Earl calls his brother from his car, he had taken a picture of the screen and sent it to him moments before he was called in to the Chief. “What are we going to do? Forget we know this? How is that possible?” Mica asks.

“She doesn’t want us to know. I feel like garbage; my own sister couldn’t trust me with the information. I’m on the force, I could have done something right away, but she has been looking over her shoulder all this time. I should have known, I should have protected her.” Earl says in a sigh.

“Denver says he is ok for tomorrow night Earl. Now we really do need to talk to her. Get this all out, we used to share everything, remember?” Mica hangs up with his brother and lays his head on his desk for a few minutes. He has to process all that he has learned.

~ ~ ~

Mica comes with the ring he wants to give his girlfriend, a few brochures on places to take her to and a stuffed panda that he thinks his sister will like. At least he hopes it’s a fond memory for her.

Earl answers the door and sees Mica’s hands full. “Well, I guess you really do need our help.” He jokes. Ella comes to the door and sees Mica carrying a handful of stuff.

“Wow, if Mom knew you were asking us and not her I think she would be crushed. But I’m glad it’s us.” She kisses Mica on the cheek and they all walk over to the table where Earl has already set out dinner.

Dinner conversation goes well, easy and soft subjects. Then Mica takes out the ring and the brochures to show everyone. Earl comes up with the best way to propose and where. “Well, if I didn’t know better big brother I’d think you were planning one for yourself.” Ella smiles.

“Only one love for me right now, that’s the force. But one day it will happen Ella. I want what you have.” He smiles at her.

“Oh, I have one more thing.” Mica says as he takes out the panda and hands it over to his sister. “I saw this in the store and it brought back fun memories for me and since I was seeing you tonight I thought I’d buy one for you.” He hands it to Ella.

Ella looks down at the panda, the zoo. They used to hang around the zoo for hours. The three of them would run over to the panda and eat lunch by him and sit and watch him. When she was nine months pregnant with Trevor they took her to the zoo to see the new baby panda that had been born. Ella looks to her brother and smiles, but she can’t keep the tear from running down her cheek.

“I’m sorry Ella, I thought those were good memories.” Mica says.

Ella stares at her brothers, they would never hurt her, never hurt her kids. Look at all this love, why didn’t she let herself feel their love? Earl walks around the table and sits next to his sister, he takes her hands in his and softly says, “We’ve figured things out Ella, we know it was Uncle Stephen but what we don’t know is why you were too scared to tell us. Did you think we’d kill him and end up in jail? Because

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that was a very real possibility. Still is.” Mica leans forward and puts his hands on top of Earls, they are all together.

She stares at them, one to the other. “Why do I believe you?” she whispers.

“Because we’re your brothers, we’d take a bullet for you or any of your kids. I’m on the force Ella, I saw your letter recently by accident, I have to be honest. No more secrets in this family, not between us three anyway. We never did as kids and I don’t want to start now. Remember how we used to cover up for each other with Mom and Dad, this time is no different. Only honesty.” Earl says.

“It was the most horrible night of my life. He showed up and I didn’t think much of it until he turned around and locked the door, then he dragged me up to my room and the rest is easy to picture, I wasn’t exactly a muscular person as you may remember. Not to his wrestler sized body and strength. When I was younger it was not so physical, he would touch but not forcibly or for more than a second or two. So, I dismissed his actions as that weird uncle everyone has. It was shortly after I wrote you that letter Earl about the guy I was pinning for in school that the event happened. Well, no secret there, that never became a thing.

Dad came home early and saw Stephen in his living room and he saw the smug look on his face like he got one over on our dad. I was coming downstairs to make him food because he said I had to and I didn’t know what else to do except listen. Dad took one look at me and you’ll never guess what he did. Our father, the man eight inches shorter than his brother, gave him a one two punch. First one was to his face and the second one was to his balls, as hard as a man could do and with enough force to knock him onto the floor. Then he literally dragged him outside by his shirt, face down and dropped his face by his car, spit on him and came running in to me. We sat and cried together for an hour or so.

When Mom came home the car was gone, we don’t know when he dragged himself up, but at some point, he left. We explained what happened and we all cried together, again. With you guys being gone, it was maybe best. Dad called his own father and said that he and his brother have had a falling out and that no amount of apologies will ever make him see that man again. If he is invited to a family event, we won’t be there, he had said. Then he hung up. Mom called her doctor and they had me come in. They did a rape test at his office for the record, it is all in the office in my file. He said he would keep everything there until we wanted the results, not that we needed any. He took pictures of my body as well, showing some bruising. He asked me to come back the next day because sometimes more show up, they did. Mom drove me. Again, all in my file.

I can’t believe I said all that without breaking down. I’ve been such a nervous wreck. He said he was away, was in in jail?” she turns to Earl.

“Yes, some charges from a different cousin. Doesn’t matter who or what.” Earl says.

“My Selena is in danger Earl.” She says now, scared.

“No, my chief saw what I found and he is on top of the whole situation. Turns out your friend the judge was required to report that letter, it is a parole violation at the very least. But threatening the child isn’t going to look good for him. The whole rape thing might come up though, I don’t know what the legalities are about how long you can wait to file the charges. But Chief said he is not long for this side of the cell and I believe him.” Earl squeezes her hand a bit.

“You have to tell Denver, Ella, he is a nervous wreck watching you become so scared without telling him, he can’t protect you, or his family if he doesn’t know. He isn’t going to care. He may be upset at our parents for not pressing charges, but never at you. He loves you from deep in his core. We both want that, I’m hoping that’s what I have.” Mica tells her.

“Let’s drive home together. I’ll drive your car and when it’s time to leave Mica will drive me back.” Earl says.

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“My brothers, always there to protect me, one on each side. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I never told you the truth. I’m sorry for so much.” Ella’s tears begin to fall and the three of them hold on to each other and rejoin the closeness they had as children. Together, supported, she is able to let go of some of her fears.

~ ~ ~

Once on the case, only a few days later, the Chief had Earl’s uncle back in jail. The letter to his sister wasn’t the only one he wrote. Talk about stupid. So much for being reformed, he came out looking for and expecting more of the same. Chief kept his promise though, no one in the family was involved. They didn’t need to be, the paper trail he left spoke volumes to the judge the case was brought before.

As for Judge Madison, all of a sudden, he retired early but that isn’t stopping Earl’s chief from putting an internal investigation on him and all of his cases for at least the past five years. There will be more depending on what they find in these.

Earl’s phone rings, “Hello?”

“Earl, hi. I believe I owe you a thank you.” His old partner says.

“No, just move on and be well.” He says wanting to hang up, he doesn’t want details.

“Well, know this. I’ll be ok. I have support. Take care of my plants please.” She hangs up.

Now he has an answer, she isn’t coming back. A shame, in some ways the husband won, but maybe she will be able to be a cop again, somewhere else. It’s been a tough few weeks.

“Earl?”

“Yes Mac, how are you?” he asks.

“I’m here to let you know I’m your new partner. Chief says he thinks we will work well together and since both our partners up and left, well, here I am.” Mac says.

“I didn’t know your partner left, sorry to hear that. I’m nothing like your previous partners Mac, I hope you know that. Nothing like them at all.” Earl says trying to explain, he isn’t one for going to a bar after a shift but before being out of uniform. He doesn’t play games of showing off his authority to anyone. He simply thinks that is mean and only gives the public a worse opinion than some already have of the force.

“I hear you, lollipops and rainbows. No problem. We got a call about a disturbance over near the high school. They’re sending four cars out, ours included. You want to drive, or should I?” he ask.

“I’ve seen you drive. I’ll take the wheel thank you.” Earl says as they walk out together.

They are the last car to show up, Earl sees the other officers look as if they have things under control, but then he sees two other youths hanging around the back of the bleachers and shows Mac where they are. They sneak up behind them and Mac says, “Looking for something or hiding from someone?”

The boys jump and turn around quickly to face the officers. Mac looks at them stunned, Earl catches this quickly, “Friend or foe?” Earl asks him.

“Used to be friend.” Mac says looking right at one of the youths. “If anything is on you, anything at all, you’re on your own this time.” He says.

“Mac?” Earl asks.

“Brother’s kid. Decided he was above the law last year and keeps testing his boundaries. I’m done, you can check him. By the bulge in his pants I’d say he is carrying far more than he normally does physically and his friend’s bulge doesn’t look any smaller.” Mac says.

“You’re dealing drugs?” Earl asks the boys.

“no.” they say quietly.

“If I pat you down you may want to revise that answer, I’ll give you one last chance. You tell the truth, we’ll listen. You lie, your ass becomes the property of the county government.” Earl says frankly.

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Mac’s nephew reaches into his pants and pulls out a wad of cash, the other boy follows; at least it isn’t drugs in their pants, Earl thinks to himself. “Go on, we’re listening.” Earl says.

“We aren’t with those guys, they were here to fight, something about fixing a game and one group blaming the other for the loss of last night’s game. We were scheduled to meet,” he bows his head.

“Keep going, you’re on a roll.” Earl says somewhat sarcastically.

“We were scheduled to meet prostitutes. But as they were coming, they turned around because you guys showed up and we were hanging here to figure out when to leave.” The two boys put their money back into their pockets.

“Hey Earl, long time no see.” Earl turns to see one of the women these boys were probably waiting for.

“What are you doing here Maxi? Minors now?” he asks.

“Money is all green.” She answers.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. Mac we’re going to the airport. Maxi here needs to go home. I’m buying.” He says.

“And the boys.” Mac asks.

Earl says “I don’t care, if they want to get some kind of sexually transmitted disease that will affect them the rest of their lives, why should we care?” Earl says flatly.

“Good point. Ok Maxi let’s go to the car, Earl here doesn’t like the way I drive.” Mac says leading the woman to their car.

“Excuse me sir.” One of the boys says. Earl stops and turns around. “Is that true? About the diseases?” he asks nervously.

“In a word, yes. Go home. Look up porn or something. Don’t be stupid.” Earl walks away not wanting to continue this conversation. Did he just tell them to look up porn? He laughs at himself.

In the car he turns to look at Maxi, “I’m going to watch you get on the plane this time.”

“Earl, why are you doing this?” Maxi asks.

“Because you really don’t want to be here and your brother loves you damn it, always has. You have a good head on your shoulders, learn to use it for better things. You’re not 20 anymore darlin.” Earl says in as nice of a way as he can.

The drive out to the airport is quiet. He walks her to the desk and takes her phone and calls her brother, “I’m sending Maxi home. Where is home these days?” he asks.

“Earl? Hot damn. I’ll be waiting, I’ll send you a pic when she gets off the plane. Same place, I’ve been waiting for you to get pissed enough. What happened?” he asks.

“Minors.” And he hangs up and looks at the cashier, “One way ticket to Dallas please. First class.” He says.

Maxi looks at him and begins to cry. Earl is the only man in her life that has ever treated her like a person. Besides her brother that is. They walk her towards the gate and stop at a store, Maxi takes off her heels and buys sneakers, she is wearing black leggings so she also buys a sweatshirt and puts it on over her clothes, she squirms out of her sequined shirt and hands it to Earl; he throws it away. She takes her hair down from its high knot and brushes it out to a simple ponytail. And so he won’t think she is running away again, she doesn’t even go in the bathroom, she washes the make-up off right in the drinking fountain.

They sit in silence until her plane boards. She hugs Earl one more time. “I will miss you Earl.” She says. “Good luck my dear, stay safe.” He says. She hugs him one more time and boards with tears in her eyes.

“Damn Earl, is there anyone you don’t save?” Mac asks.



“She is a good person, thinks she isn’t worth anything, her own father said she only got good grades because she probably slept with the professors. So, instead of proving him wrong, she did what he thought she would do anyway. Only her brother knew where she was all these years. She is only 30, plenty of time to change things around. I think she is ready now.” Earl says as he begins to walk away to leave.

Mac follows him to the car in silence. “Still, damn nice thing to do. You let my nephew off too.” He says.

“Nothing to really charge him with, but I think I scared him off a bit, father needs to talk to him or that boy will really get in trouble. He asked if it was true about the diseases. I said yes. Hope you don’t mind.” Earl says.

“Nope, that kid has always been a snot to me, thinking he knows better than me. If he was involved in the mess that was taking place in the field, I would have beaten him right there and told his father it happened in a school brawl. You know that, right?” Mac says.

“Your family, your fight.” Earl says.

“Speaking of, your sister doing ok?” Mac asks.

“Yeah, she and her husband had a long talk, they decided that when Trevor is old enough to understand, they will explain the story all to him. They want him to know before he finds out accidentally. I think they may try for more children now too.” Earl says quietly.

“We only have one. My wife had such a rough pregnancy I couldn’t let her do that again. We decided it best for me to get something done permanently instead of her because there are less side effects for me, that’s what our doctors told us. But I was thinking of looking into adoption. No reason we can’t still have a big brood.” Mac says.

“You can do a surrogate too.” Earl says.

“Sometimes, sometimes it doesn’t work out. I’d rather a sure thing.” Mac says with a bit of a shaky voice.

The rest of the ride back is quiet, each man to his own thoughts. The more Mac thinks about the idea of adoption, the more he wants to look into the idea himself. They aren’t getting younger. Maybe they will find siblings that need a home, that would be best.

Before Earl goes home for the day he receives a picture of Maxi and her brother, both in tears. With a caption that says, ‘thank you’.

Earl nods to his phone and shows the picture to Mac, he smiles. “Damn nice thing Earl, damn nice.” He says. “I’m headed out to go show my wife some appreciation.”

~ ~ ~

Mac and Earl have eased into a very comfortable partnership. They get along well professionally and even personally. No more bars for Mac, and his wife is thrilled. He comes home straight after his shift and his wife has been very appreciative. Having Earl as a partner sure has changed his home life. So much so he feels everything has turned around when he didn’t even know it needed to be.

“Earl, what would you buy your wife for the hell of it? No birthday, or special day just because I feel like a newlywed again and I’m loving every minute of being with her again. Almost as if I’ve been absent for a while.” Mac says.

“Ah, keeping normal hours isn’t such a bad thing huh?” Earl laughs and so does Mac. “Well, if she likes jewelry and you haven’t bought any in a while. Go over to Pearl’s on Weston Avenue. In fact, lets head over there for lunch, there is a great sandwich place right next door. I’ll introduce you to Pearl herself. You tell her what you want and she will find the exact thing you need.” Earl says.

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They head out to lunch and go straight to Pearl’s first. “Hey Pearl, this is my new partner Mac, he needs an ‘I love you because you are you’ gift for his wife.” Earl says.

“Well, do we have a price range?” she asks.

“How about I say same as a dinner for two at Louie’s Grill.” Mac says.

“I know the perfect thing.” Pearl says.

Earl pushes his elbow into Mac’s side, “Told ya she would.”

Pearl brings back a simple gold and pearl necklace. It has one tiny pearl after each gold piece. “Perfect. How about a nice box too?” Mac says.

Purchase done, they walk into the deli next door. They order at the counter and sit down in a nearby booth to wait for their meal. A man calmly walks up to them, “Earl?” he asks

Earl looks up wondering if he knows the man but before he can answer the man pulls out a gun and shoots Earl in the chest, thankfully not on the side of his heart. Mac shoots the man a millisecond later. He knew exactly where to shoot, and it was close range too, then he calls for an ambulance. He also looks around and asks, “Did anyone see what happened? Will anyone testify this was unprovoked?” he looks around. Everyone who works there has tears in their eyes, they all knew Earl when they walked in, Mac had noticed that part immediately.

The owner runs over with a towel and he puts pressure on Earl’s wound. “Damn that fool has been in here three times recently looking for Earl. I never asked why. I should have, damn I’m the idiot than, aren’t I?” he asks looking at Mac.

“You know his name?” Mac asks as he bends down to check the man’s wallet for identification.

“No, kept saying he was looking for him and knew he came around here from time to time.”

“I asked.” One of the waitresses says. The men look at her, Earl is trying to hear what is being said around him; he is trying to stay focused so he stays awake. “He said something about talking to Earl about stealing another man’s wife. It didn’t make sense to me because I know Earl ain’t married and I also know he’d never touch another man’s wife.” She says.

“Partner.” Earl whispers out. Mac hears him and searches more for any identification, he finds something in his shirt pocket. He recognizes the last name. Earl’s old partner’s name. Well, now she is safe for sure.

As the ambulance pulls in the deli man gets off of Earl and lets them do their job. Earl is wheeled out to the ambulance moments later as Mac waits for an official investigator to show up before he can leave.

Pearl runs out to the ambulance before they put him in. “Hand me his phone, I know the family. I’ll call them.” She says because she realized she forgot hers as she ran out.

She knows them because Earl is her soon to be brother in law. But she stays as strong as she can before she calls her fiancé “Mica?” she says, “Earl’s been shot, right next door. They’re taking him to Old River Hospital. He was at the deli, I don’t know what happened yet. I’ll meet you there. Ok”

Mac is standing there a moment, “Pearl?” he asks.

“I’m engaged to his brother Mica.” She says softly.

“Come, I’ll drive you. Do you have to close up first?” he asks.

“No, my partner is here today, I already told them, you sure you don’t mind? I’m kind of nervous to drive.” She says.

“It will be my pleasure, I’m not as bad as Earl says, I think he simply likes to drive. Come.” Mac says.

At the hospital Mac meets the whole family. Brother, brother in law, sister, kids everyone. No parents he notes. He had called his own wife on the way over. She found a babysitter and came too.

“What happened?” Mac’s wife asks as they sit on the other part of the waiting room.



“We went to the jewelry store, because I wanted to buy you an ‘I love you every day of my life’ present. Here.” He hands the box to her, “then we went next door to the deli to get a sandwich and this guy came up to him, said Earl’s name and shot him. Then I had to shoot him because who knew what he was going to do next. I had to shoot the man while looking right at him. I’m not ashamed to say, I’m a bit shaken by all of this myself.” He says

Before she gets to respond the Chief walks in. “Mac, any word?” he asks.

“No, took it in the right shoulder so hopefully not life threatening but close range so who knows what kind of damage there could be.” He says.

“The deli owner gave us a full report along with three other witnesses there, all very forthcoming with the information. Old partner’s spouse. I notified her already because this way she won’t live in any fear anymore, I said that the bullet only grazed Earl so she wouldn’t worry. I hope she doesn’t follow up.” He says.

“Someone here for Earl Jacobs?” the doctor asks.

Many hands go up, “Next of kin please.” He says.

Ella and Mica walk over to the doctor, “I’m afraid his shoulder is pretty messed up. Close range and all. He will live, bullet got lodged in bone and believe me that is a good thing. Better than bouncing around, that’s when they do more damage. It wasn’t a high caliber gun, I can tell by the bullet. Long rehab, plenty of pain. Probably a desk job for a while too.” He says.

“He is allergic to some pain meds, that’s going to be difficult.” Mica says.

“Do you know which ones? That would have been helpful to know going in.” he says almost annoyed.

“Here, I have them written here in my phone, we have each other’s allergies. Um, here is the list.” Mica turns his phone around for the doctor to see.

The doctor quickly writes them down and runs out of the room. “Are we too late in telling them?” Ella asks nervously.

“His allergies won’t kill him but he will be miserably uncomfortable if he gets too much of the wrong one. My guess is he went to check, we should tell everyone the news, they’re waiting.” Mica says.

Mica does all the talking, Ella stands holding her husband and her son and daughter. All of them, she needs all of them right now. They oblige.

“Keep me posted.” Chief says to Mica. Mica nods.

They hear a gasp and all eyes turn around Mac’s wife had opened up the box and can’t believe what she is seeing. The very necklace she has seen a dozen times but was always afraid to buy herself. She never told him, the tear running down her cheek and the smile on her face tells Mac he did well. He looks over at Pearl and smiles. She turns to explain to everyone who they are again and why she met Mac today.

~ ~ ~

“How’s my patient?” the doctor asks. “I hear you are a model citizen around here. Much appreciated.”

“No reason to get in trouble.” Earl says frankly.

“Many don’t see things that way here.” He says in a serious tone. “But how are you, really?” he asks.

“Pain sucks, I won’t be able to use my gun for a long time. My typing is slower than a pregnant snail and I can’t shower myself yet, other than that I guess I’m doing fine.” He says.

“Heard this was an unhappy husband.” He says.



“Yeah, I pulled someone away from an abusive husband, his boxing bag gone he had to show his dominance over something I suppose I was his next target.” Earl says.

“Wow, I thought dealing with my aftermaths were hard. Your blood pressure is still not back to normal, do you have a normally high pressure? In the family?” he asks.

“No one has ever said anything, why?” Earl asks.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to monitor that particular part of you for another two days. Will that kill you to stay here?” he asks.

“I’m good. If I go home, I’m alone, here at least I have all the nurses to talk to. Plus, all the policemen who show up all day and family all night.” Earl smiles

“Ok, I’m sure the cause is the trauma itself, but I like to be sure, I’d hate to send you home to have you show up back here in two days with a serious problem.” The doctor says.

“Perfectly understandable.” Earl says.

“Pain, on a scale of 1 to 10?” he asks

“17, but don’t worry. I’m good as long as I don’t go bowling.” Earl laughs and the doctor leaves.

The door swings open, “I thought he’d never leave!!” a woman’s voice says

Earl looks over at the door and sees Maxi’s old roommate. “Hey. What are you doing up so early in the morning?” he asks jokingly.

“Word on the street is that you got hit by an abuser and your partner took him out. Any of that true?” she asks.

“All.” He says softly.

“Who would have the balls to shoot you Earl? I mean, we all love you to pieces. Anyone mistreats you and the whole lot of us is in an uproar. People wanted a chance to kill him.” she says. “Everybody was talking about how they would contact people on the inside and let them know this man needs attention, if you know what I mean.”

“Well, that’s mighty nice of you my dear but clearly unnecessary. My partner took care of the situation right away. What really brings you here?” he asks again.

“Earl, don’t you get it? You, *you* brought me here. You may hate our lifestyle choice and for some of us it is the only choice, but you still treat us as ladies, you treat all the people you meet as people. You took that boy out from living under the highway and found him better accommodations, we all know it was you. You finally sent Maxi back where she belonged, you even taught a lesson to my old pimp and don’t say you didn’t. We on the street, we know who cares. So, you Earl, you big idiot. You brought me out this early in the morning. I wanted to make sure personally that you were ok. Not a lot of you out there, we want to keep you around.” She finishes with a sigh.

“You listen to too much gossip. I’m flattered you came for me. Keep me updated, where is the old gang now?” he asks.

She regales him with who is with whom now, who left the business, who is new. Then she tells him about the guy who keeps coming back to her and taking her out on dates. He says he doesn’t care what she does right now, that he wants to take her out of her situation and show her how to live like a lady. But she doesn’t trust him. She is waiting for something to switch, some light he is going to shine in her face and say she now owes him something.

“Want me to check him out for you? I could find out if he is legit, married, whatever you want.” Earl says.

“Earl, you’d do that for me?” she asks tentatively.

“Do you like him? Is there a part of you that would like to leave given the chance he is offering?” he asks.

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“No one ever asked me that before.” She contemplates.

“I’m asking now, and he has been asking you for a while is my guess.” Earl says.

“Will he find out? I don’t want him to find out.” She says.

“He won’t but you have to understand something. You won’t be making as much money working in a more traditional job is my assumption. Not if he is giving you a modern position. There will be taxes and all that.” He says

“I understand. Here, this is the name he tells me. This is the car and license plate of the one he picks me up in each time. You have my number. He usually sees me every Wednesday night at 7:00” she says handing Earl a piece of paper.

“I’m not being rude, but these pain meds really knock a guy out. Do you mind if I sleep?” Earl asks.

She leans down and kisses his forehead and then his cheek. “I’m happy you’re ok is all.” She smiles at him, squeezes his hand and leaves quietly.

When Earl wakes up he sees Mac in his room. “Why do you have a name and license plate number on this piece of paper?” Mac asks.

It must have fallen, Earl thinks to himself. He explains the whole story of his morning visitor to Mac. Why not, he is his partner still. “Earl, did you see the name?” he asks.

“No. I was kind of loopy towards the end. Do we know him?” he asks wondering if the guy has a rap sheet already.

“He is one of the wealthiest bachelors in this city. Is she that good?” Mac asks. “Sorry that was rude. Not what I meant, you know that. I mean a good person.”

“I wouldn’t know personally. I know she is a good person though, smart, funny, can make a great apple pie too. He takes her out on dates, according to what she has said, they haven’t slept together at all. He wants to date her. Wants to take her away from all of she has known her whole adult life. But why is my question. Does he think he can pay to keep her to himself? Then what? She loses some luster and he dumps her? I’d kill him.” Earl says getting angry.

“Watch the blood pressure buddy.” Mac says, gently touching his friend’s arm.

“I want him to know he may have expensive attorneys but I have the whole precinct on my side and judges I’ve known since childhood. My connections are as far reaching as his. She isn’t a toy, she isn’t someone to be bought in the literal sense. I need to know what his intentions are. Or I will tell her to dump him. But she came to me. She wants to know, she wants out. Finally.” He says after taking a deep breath and then another.

“I hear every word you’re saying. Is your laptop here? Mica said he was bringing you one.” Mac says.

“Yeah, in the drawer.” Earl says.

“Ok, let’s sign in to our database and see what we can find. I have heard he is quite eccentric in many ways. Makes tons of money but lives in a simple Victorian house right outside of the city. Has some exotic animals or something like that and no household help. Here we go, he is in here for a parking violation, it was his car but he was not driving, he paid the fine anyway.

His name comes up a few times about paying bail money for troubled kids. No follow up listed. How about we look him up in the business realm.” Mac looks up and sees Earl has fallen back to sleep. He keeps searching. He finds contact information because of his paying the bonds, his name and phone number are on the paperwork. He will call him tonight, maybe show up at his house. Earl must be rubbing off on him, he thinks. He feels too protective over this woman and he doesn’t even know her as well.

Mac is still on the computer when Mica walks in. “Afternoon, how’s the patient?” he asks.

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“On and off sleeping today. You know this man?” He asks Mica.

“No, and from his reputation I’m glad I don’t.” he says.

“Meaning?” Mac asks.

“In business he is known to be ruthless, personally, people say he is as eccentric as they come. Word is that he came from nothing, doesn’t tolerate people throwing their lives away. On that he has made good. Opened up a women’s shelter, a place for kids to hang out where the gangs won’t get to them. Things like that. Why, are you investigating him?” Mica asks.

“Personal favor of my partner.” He says.

“Then the other rumor must be true. There is a rumor that he has been taking a known prostitute to dinner once a week at a place he thought was discrete but they keep leaking out his information all the time. I think someone there gets paid to report who comes in and out. I’ve heard other things reported that shouldn’t be and it always seems to always start there.” Mica says.

“Names.” Mac says in his serious police tone.

Mica gives him the name of the restaurant. Mac looks down at his watch, 6:00. He has time to get home and over to the restaurant to watch what may happen in an hour. He will report back to Earl tomorrow.

Walking into the restaurant with his wife, Mac looks around, the couple he is watching for isn’t here yet but he sees on the reservation list where they are going to sit, he sees a table for two open and asks for that one specifically. The hostess asks for his reservation and he shows her his badge, he has never done that before but tonight he needs to. “Right this way sir.” She says startled.

“Is there anything you need?” she asks

“Menus, unless you think I came here to watch you?” Mac says

She walks away, “Don’t be so gruff.” His wife says

“Had to or she wouldn’t believe me. I’m sorry. I promise you I’ve never used my badge like that before, but this is for Earl and his friend. It’s important.” He says.

She smiles at him, “I think I love Earl.” She laughs and so does he. He hasn’t had the chance to take her out like this in a long time. A good thing they have people to call last minute for babysitting.

When the right people sit down in the next table, his wife gasps a little and covers her mouth and fakes a cough. He looks at her with questioning eyes.

“Do you know who that is?” she whispers.

“Yes.” He says.

“And that beautiful woman? She must be something special for him to bring her here,” her voice barely audible because she doesn’t want to be heard.

“She is Earl’s friend.” He says.

She looks again and looks at her husband. She understands now, he has to keep an eye on things. But this place is so nice, she will forgive him. Shortly after they place their orders a man walks over to Mac and bends down to say in his ear, “I don’t want any arrests made in my restaurant, you can wait until they leave and do it outside.”

Mac looks at the man and says, “You are who may I ask?”

“The manager.” He stands tall to say as if he is insulted not to be recognized himself.

“Then go manage, I’m perfectly capable of doing my job on my own. But right now, I’m eating dinner with my wife.” He says in disgust. This must be the leak. He quickly sends the name from his nametag to someone he has waiting to hear from him tonight – ‘check him out, where did he used to work, does he have ties to socialite pages?’



“I’m sorry for the phone interruption dear.” He looks at his wife longingly. She smiles. She will definitely have to thank this Earl. He gave her husband back to her, he is attentive, he is kind, he is back to being the man she married. Caring for others. Yes, a great big thank you for Earl. “You do what you have to. Can you hear what you need to?” she asks, all her words being very quiet.

“Yes, thank you.” He picks up his wine glass to toast her. Oh yes, a very, very big thank you, she thinks to herself rubbing her pearl necklace with her other hand.

With their appetizers served the waiter stands there a moment, “Yes?” Mac asks.

“You need anything, anything at all, you ask for me by name, ok?” he says.

“Just do your job please.” He says a little less gruff this time, his wife smiles at him.

The man winks at him and walks away, this is weird. First of all, how do they all know who he is? They shouldn’t. But they do. The hostess? She is the leak? What was her name? “Verna” his wife whispers. “I saw you look again. I think she told everyone who you are.” She says. She keeps looking over here. Is it us or them?” she asks.

“Both.” Meanwhile, he only hears normal conversation coming from them. Nothing even overly flirtatious. After the main course is served, the man leaves to use the facilities and leaves Earl’s friend there alone. No sooner is she alone when the manager comes over, he sits down in front of her and says, “We all know who you are and what you do for a living, I don’t take kindly to your type in my establishment. You’d best leave while you have the chance. I can easily have you escorted out you know.” He says.

Mac is about to stand when she says to him, “Interesting that you say that. Number one, it is not your establishment, and number two, I believe you are the only one who knows I have a history with men, and why is that? Hmmm, let me see, because you’ve approved of my services in your hotel room before. I find it very rude that you are claiming this place to be yours, you could never afford to buy a whole meal here nor do you have the brain power to actually run anything, you barely run your own life. Seems to me you’re the only one with the problem, afraid I might tell the wife? You think I have pictures or something? Don’t pride yourself so much, you weren’t worthy of a camera, now move away you’re making me lose my appetite.” She shoos him off.

He stands but he doesn’t leave, Mac looks to his wife, she nods. He walks over and sits down in front of the woman, the manager grins, he thinks she is going to be arrested, he crosses his arms in front of his chest as if he has won. Mac reaches out his hand to shake the woman’s hand. “You must be Earl’s friend, he has told me so much about you. Is this man bothering you? I can have him removed you know. Escorted out even.” Mac says smugly.

“As a matter of fact, every time I come he says something about my personal life to me directly, he always waits for my date to walk away. Don’t you think that is weird?” she asks.

Her date shows up and asks, “Is there a problem gentlemen?”

Mac stands and shakes his hand, “Your date and I have a mutual friend, I didn’t want to bother you two before because you looked deep in conversation. My apologies.” The man shakes his hand but he is looking at the manager.

Mac’s wife jumps up and grabs Mac’s phone which was on the table, she saw what it says. She plays as if she is a school girl excited to meet a rock star, “Oh my, excuse me but you are as nice as they say. I’m sorry miss to disturb you. What a wonderful couple you make. Enjoy the steak, I hope yours didn’t come with as much attitude as ours did though, it tastes good though.”

Mac has stepped aside to see his phone which she stealthily handed to him when she came over. It reads, *‘the man you went to look for owns the restaurant, the manager has a rap sheet and is on payroll to the Chronicle. Easy to find, idiot, getting paid twice. Order the ice cream for dessert, I hear they make their own and it is magic in your mouth.’*

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“Attitude?” the man asks. “Maám, can you tell me who your server is please, I don’t tolerate that kind of behavior here.” He says firmly. He turns to see the manager still standing there with his arms folded as if he has done a good thing.

Mac’s wife sees wheels turning in both the men, she decides she needs to intervene again. “That is very nice of you but no need. You can ask my husband, he might remember, he remembers everything around us and who says what. All the time.” She looks at the manager. Then she looks at the woman sitting at the table, she is scared. Mac’s wife sits down with her and begins to talk about the décor of the place and how it matches this or that. The woman catches on fast, Mac looks to his wife in awe, she knows exactly what to do with who and when. Damn he loves that woman even more.

Mac pushes the owner over towards the bar, “Can we talk?” he asks showing him his badge quietly.

“One second.” He sends a text to someone. By the time they reach the bar, someone is escorting the manager to a back room. “Let’s go sit back at your table, quieter.”

“I’m sorry to say this, your manager has a rap sheet, he was harassing your date because, well, I’m going to be honest here, because he has used her services in the past. He asked me when I was seated to arrest her outside and not in *his* restaurant. Your waiter told me I should always ask for him if I need anything. Oh yeah, and the woman you’re dating is a close friend of my partner, a man with far reaching connections and he wants to make sure you’re being honest about your intentions with her or you will have more trouble than you ever wanted, all from him. Ok, there I said it all.” Mac says exhaling and realizing it isn’t as hard as he thought to be blatantly honest with someone.

“The man who took the manager in the back is my personal bodyguard, is he our leak?” he asks

“I believe so, he works for the Chronicle, not hard to find, but he knew who I was rather quickly, could be the hostess.” Mac says.

“That would be too easy, but then again, my cousin thought she deserved to be manager, she can barely take reservations, but family, you know?” He shrugs.

“Family or not, your personal life should stay that way. No way that the hostess knew your date, unless you told her. But he certainly does, and the manager is married believe it or not. The waiter, I think is young and hasn’t learned the finer things about confidentiality. People come here expecting discretion as they do most upscale restaurants, if they don’t get that, they won’t come back.

It is probably better to teach the young man what he needs to know than release him out to the world for him to tell anything he remembers or do the wrong thing somewhere else and never be able to hold down a job. Pay for him to go take some kind of classes. At a place that trains real butlers or something. Otherwise he may get paid a lot more to say what he sees here from some other tabloid newspaper and who is to blame a starving young guy? He needs to be shown he has potential and that someone believes in him.” Mac says

“Your friend must be really important for you to do this for him.” he says.

“He is a great friend, treats the world like they all matter, your date included. Everyone matters to Earl. He will haunt you the rest of your life if you harm her in any way physical or emotional. That’s a promise.” Mac says seriously, “I’ll be right next to him.” he says.

“I wish I had friends like you guys in my life.” He says

“You do now.” Mac smiles and reaches out to shake his hand again.

“Really? Wow. Can you bring your friend here tomorrow night? I have a big celebration planned, only she doesn’t know it yet.” He smiles.

“He is currently in the hospital. Gun shot, occupational hazard. Oh, one more thing, I used my badge to get in tonight. I’ve never done that before. I apologize but she is that important to my partner.” Mac says.

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“No apologies necessary. I understand why you did what you did. Do you think I need to ask his permission first?” he asks quietly.

“That would go a long way for both of them.” The man looks over to his date and smiles. She smiles back.

“I’ll do it. This night is turning out even better than I thought. Ok. I’ll wait until I ask him. I should fire the manager but I’d rather arrest him for threatening my patrons. What do you think?” he asks

“Call someone else tonight, technically I’m off duty right now and my wife and I are out on a date.” He says.

“Works for me.” He sends a text to his bodyguard. “Ok, he’ll get it done. Classes for the waiters, what a great idea. I’ll have them all come in early for the next two weeks to get trained, the whole lot of them. I guess I have to pay them, but I’m good with that. This way, no one feels singled out for good or bad. My cousin though? Suggestions?”

“Well, why don’t you start by asking her what she likes and what skills she actually has, she may surprise you. Maybe one of your other businesses would be better suited for her?” Mac says.

“I’ll check into that.” He says slapping the table, and he stands up, so does Mac, he walks over to collect his wife. “Oh no you two, you’re not leaving. You didn’t touch your food yet and now it’s cold. We’ll move over to this table for four and enjoy a meal as friends. Yes?” the owner asks.

Mac’s wife looks at him with pride. “We’d love to.” Earl’s friend stands and walks over to her date, for the first time in a very long time, she voluntarily pulls a man into a kiss.

“Wow, I knew you’d be special.” He says and bends down to kiss her back.

Dinner lasts a couple of hours, Mac’s wife had to call the babysitter to say they were delayed, good thing it’s only a neighbor.

When they leave she is holding onto Mac’s arm as if she will never let him go. “I have something to tell you, I’ve been dying to tell you all night.” She says.

“Can it wait till we get home? I’m a little talked out.” Mac says softly not wanting to hurt her feelings.

“Hmmm, sure love.” She smiles a knowing smile.

~ ~ ~

The knock on the door startles Earl, he has been concentrating on his computer; there she is again, this time with a man. Mac sent him a blow by blow email of what took place last night. She looks happy. Genuinely, internally happy.

“Earl, I’d like you to meet Aron, Aron, Earl, the best friend a gal can have.” Her tear falls involuntarily out of her eyes, she knows he put his friend up to going last night. She can’t believe he would do that for her.

Earl extends his good hand and Aron takes it. “Nice to meet the friends of my girl. We met Mac and his wife last night. He told me I was no longer friendless.” Aron says cautiously.

“Not with us around.” Earl says, “We’re awfully hard to get rid of, your gal Opal knows that firsthand.” Earl smiles at her.

“I’m not good with friends, never had many as an adult, most want things from me, most of the time I give in because it makes me feel as if I had a friend at least for a few minutes.” Aron says honestly.

“Best not to give what you don’t want to give, people might respect that more. In business you wouldn’t give someone something because they said they were your friends this week, don’t do it personally. I’m sorry, not my place.” Earl says.

“Ah, but you see, that is where you’re wrong. Only real friends are honest to the core. Thank you. And to return the honesty I came here for two reasons. One is to meet you. Mac spoke very highly of you

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and Opal didn’t shut up about all you’ve done for people she knows and knows of. I had to meet the man who is almost a legend on the streets. You’re more than a friend to Opal here and that brings me to the second reason I’m here.” He looks Opal in the eye and smiles then he turns to Earl.

“I would like to ask for your permission sir to marry your girl here. I have never been so smitten in my life. She makes the world sing for me, lights up any room she walks into and most of all she makes me feel real. Like I’m a somebody, that I actually count.” He says and he looks back at Opal to see tears running down her cheeks.

“Some people want romance, flowers, a giant ring, their name in lights at a ball game, to be taken to the place of their very first date. But Aron what you just did is the single most beautiful thing any man has ever done for me. You valued me enough to get permission and not assume. I don’t know what to say.” Opal says looking at him and trying to stop the tears from coming but they keep coming.

Earl looks at her, he heard every word she said, wow, did this happen in front of him? “If I were you Opal, I think I’d say yes.”

Aron looks at Earl and smiles, he looks to Opal who has lost her words and can only shake her head yes. Aron picks her up as if she is no heavier than a toothpick, he swings her around and dips her back into a movie scene like kiss. As he brings her up they hear, “Opal?! Oh my gosh, what happened here?”

It’s Ella, she has been sick and couldn’t come back to the hospital until now. Opal turns to see Earl’s sister, she met her a few times over holidays when Earl brought her and Maxi home so they wouldn’t be alone or working for that matter on days they should be with family. “I believe I’m getting married.” She whispers. Ella screams again and pulls Opal in for a large hug, a tight one. Opal is happy to receive this. Family is not something she is used to.

“Oh, we have so much to plan. You *will* let me help you right? And Pearl, oh she is going to go nuts!!” Ella looks at the man next to Opal now, “Ella, Earl’s sister.” She says holding out her hand.

“Aron, Earl’s newest friend.” He says proudly.

“Do you have a ring? If not, go to Pearl she’ll help you. Oh Opal, you’ve made my day, my week!!” Ella is beside herself with excitement.

Aron pulls a box out of his pocket, “It’s not the official ring, but I couldn’t ask without you having something on you at all times. Will this do for a while?” he asks.

“This will do forever, I don’t need anything fancy.” Opal says. “This will do.” She points her hand around the room at Earl and Ella.

“No this isn’t about need Opal, my love, this is about showering you for the rest of your life with good things to prove to you how amazing you are and how lucky I am to have you. For the rest of our lives.” He smiles again.

“Opal, your apartment?” Earl asks softly, introducing a bit of reality into this day of fantasy.

“Oh no, she isn’t going back there. She is coming home with me. That is not negotiable Earl, I’m sorry. I can’t have her anywhere near the place, unless you have something sentimental there that you want to get.” He asks her with love.

“No, I pay month to month, rent is due next week. If I don’t pay, he’ll get someone new.” Opal says. “Earl?” she asks.

“Ella darling, I know you just got here, but could you do a fellow a favor and go shopping with her today. Take her to all the places you love, my treat.” He says.

“No, I appreciate that Earl, but I believe this is my responsibility now, here Ella, take my credit card. Whatever Opal wants. A whole new wardrobe is fine with me, from top to bottom.” Aron says.

“I want only you.” She says smiling.

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Aron holds her one more time and kisses her deeply. Opal has never been kissed like this before, the kind of kiss she actually can feel deep down inside your heart. No more emptiness. “I can’t wait to do that every day.” He says quietly to her. “Do you want a big wedding, or a small one with friends?” he asks.

“This is all I have Aron, in this room and maybe one or two more.” Opal says.

“Ok, You, me, your friends, correction, our friends and maybe about 10 business associates I think I’m obligated to invite. Ella, can you arrange this for next week? I don’t want to wait long.” He says.

“Well, if that’s the case then Opal lives with me, she’ll move in with you *after* the nuptials. Deal?” Ella says looking at both Opal and Aron.

“Ella?” Opal says.

“Oh poo, you know my family already, they will all be excited. Especially Selena, she may beg you to be a flower girl though. Besides after recent events, the thought of planning a wedding will really make all the difference to me. I promise.” She smiles, but mostly to Earl, who returns the smile knowing she is moving past her fears now. He will have to notify Denver.

“A flower girl? A Fancy dress? The whole thing?” Opal looks at Aron.

“As big as you want, as small as you want. One week and we will live happily ever after, I assure you.” He says.

“I’m dying here, come on Opal, all this love in one room is suffocating for the rest of us. Let’s go make a wedding!” she pulls Opal’s hand and the two of them walk out giggling.

“Well played Aron. A short engagement is perfect for Opal.” Earl says.

“I have to admit, too long for me though. That kiss nearly knocked me out of my socks. I knew she had love in her heart but never received any, I could feel it when I first met her at a party. I didn’t know her profession, she assumed I did and when we went for a walk away from the party, well, she kind of made a move on me and I backed away looking at her funny. I remember she said, ‘listen honey love is money’. I laughed at her and then I saw her face, she had meant what she said. But I said I only wanted to walk with her, I wanted to spend time getting to know her.

I think she thought it was a ploy to push things off at first, then she opened up to me on our third date. We began to really date. I took her bowling, me and my clumsy hands, we rode a bike for two, that was hysterical too but we managed not to fall. Earl, she is one hell of a lady, I want to show her that the rest of her life. Thank you for showing her that up until now.

I hope you realize you’ll be walking her down the aisle in a week. Get better soon ok?” Aron says smiling. He can’t stop smiling

“Well if I’m walking her down you’d best ask Mac to be your best man, unless you have brothers or something.” Earl teases.

“No brothers, sisters, only one I actually speak with. I’ll invite her. A couple of cousins. We may be 50 people, I hope that is good with Opal. I’ll have to write a list and go over it with her. I suppose I’ll need Ella’s address.” He says.

Earl gives out his sister’s address and tells Aron to get Opal a new phone and new number so she won’t be bothered by her past. Then he watches as Aron leaves with a giant smile on his face. “Well that turned out better than I assumed.”

“Yes it did.” Mac says walking in, “Saw the grin on his face and asked what happened. How’d it go?” he asks.

Earl explains all that took place before him. “Well. I hope others don’t come banging down the door thinking we will set them up with guys like him.” Mac jokes.



“I don’t really know the others as well. These two seem to stick with me. I think they’ve been looking for a way out for a long time and didn’t know how to leave. Not all make it out, but I think these two will be fine, and we gained another friend.” Earl laughs.

~ ~ ~

The day of the wedding everyone shows up very excited. Opal and Aron haven’t seen each other for the past four days. They’ve only talked on the phone. Ella and her family are at the venue getting the bride ready when Earl shows up.

“Hey everyone, I hear there is a wedding today!” he calls to them.

Opal comes running over to give him a hug. “I feel like a new woman. Ella is amazing, she did my hair, we bought me a whole new wardrobe, I can’t thank you enough Earl.”

“Hey, no crying you’ll ruin your make-up, so they tell me. You look amazing Opal, I’ve known you for years but today, you radiate beauty as I’ve never seen from you, from deep inside of you. I’m so honored to be the one to walk you down.” Earl leans over and kisses her cheek.

“Ok everyone the photographer is here and we need to get the bride’s side all done before the groom and his group get here!” Mica calls out.

Once the photographer is done with the bride, Ella takes her to a private room to wait until the ceremony. She is staying hidden from Aron until she walks down the aisle. She wants him to be surprised. Opal had read about how in some cultures they do this and she loved the idea.

Mac and his wife show up with the groom and his two cousins that he invited. It is all the family he has according to him. His sister turned down the invitation saying she was busy with her own love life. The photographer jumps on him and begins to do what she has been hired to do. Capture the love of the day.

With the ceremony beginning, Aron walks down flanked by his two female cousins, next he has Mac and Mica walk down as his groomsmen. Mac’s wife and Pearl have a seat in the front to watch their men with pride. As the music changes all eyes are in the back of the room; first comes Ella’s kids, Selena spreads petals out as she walks down and Trevor is carrying a pillow with a ring on the top of it. He still walks slowly so this job is perfect for him. The music changes once more and everyone in the room stands up as they see Earl and Opal walk in. The gasp at the end of the aisle has everyone turn their heads towards the front of the room. Aron is standing there with his hand over his mouth and a tear running down his cheek. His emotions taking over.

Everyone looks back at the bride as she is walking slowly down with Earl. Her face is bright and she has a tear running down her cheek as well. Earl is standing tall as he would if he was walking down his own sister.

The rest of the wedding works beautifully. The last toast is being made by the groom, “I’d like to thank all those who have come to join us in this beautiful day. You’ve made this lonely man feel very loved. With family and friends my bride and I will cherish this day always. To you!!” he holds up his wine glass to toast everyone in the room.

On the way to the car Mac’s wife pulls him over to sit down on a nearby bench in the gardens. “Yes?” he looks at her suspiciously.

She smiles at him from ear to ear, “Remember when we first met Aron?”

“Yes.” Mac says cautiously

“And I told you I had news for you but you were talked out?” she asks again

Mac can only nod now. She takes his hands hers, takes a deep breath and says. “We won the lottery.”

“Excuse me? You hate gambling.” Mac says.

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“Not that lottery. A bigger one. Mac, I’m pregnant. I had it confirmed the day you came home to tell me we were going out for dinner.” She watches for a reaction. Mac is stunned.

“And you’re ok with this? Honey you were so sick last time, so miserable. The bedrest, the vomiting, the headaches, then the back labor. I did this for you, for us. We decided this together. I’m so confused.” Mac says rubbing his hand through his hair.

“I know darling and at first I didn’t know what to do. I remember all the times we talked, all the tough decisions we had made, and you did the ultimate act of love for me. As if you took a bullet for me. So, I called my old friend LuAnn and asked her for a private meeting as old friends, I called in a favor to get into her practice.

She became a fertility specialist when she saw so many of her friends unable to have children. She is good and I needed her opinion on all of this. I went to get my chart from the doctor we used last time. I told them my insurance changed and I can no longer come here. They believed me, sorry for the lie.”

“I understand why you did that, I think I would have too. Go on. How did the meeting go?” Mac asks.

“Once she saw what I went through the first time, she called me and made an appointment for me. I saw her partner, LuAnn didn’t want to be too close to the situation. She sat with me during the consult though and the two doctors asked a lot of questions. They even called the doctor who performed your surgery.

Bottom line is, I’m pregnant and things look wonderful so far. I go in for an ultrasound in a few weeks. They took me on as a patient and said they can definitely make this a smoother pregnancy if I follow their directions closely. Does this disappoint you? I know you mentioned recently about adoption.” She is still holding his hands.

“I’m nervous for you, I’ll probably be nervous for the next seven months. But another beautiful baby from you? How can I not be excited?” Mac smiles at her, but it is a soft smile.

“I’m nervous too. Do you want to come to my next appointment? Ask questions? I’m sorry I went without you.” She says.

“Stop being sorry. You’ve had some time to get used to this, can you give me some too? I promise I’m not angry. Maybe still confused is all.” Mac says.

Earl sees Mac and his wife holding hands and talking, he wants to say goodbye but they are in a deep discussion. He finally decides to walk over. “I’m headed out. See you tomorrow?” Earl says to Mac.

Mac looks up at Earl who is now standing over him. “My wife tells me we are going to have another baby.” He says calmly.

Earl thinks fast, how is that possible? “One day at a time, you’ve got a lot more caring friends this time. Call me for anything.” Earl bends down and kisses Mac’s wife’s cheek, pats Mac on the shoulder and goes home. Been a long day.

~ ~ ~

Earl sits at his desk and sifts through some paperwork. He and Mac have been working a few cases together and are near the end of most of them. With everything settled with his sister and even with a few of his former acquaintances, Earl should be feeling some sense of closure but he is not, he is feeling quite uneasy.

“Mac, which case is still open? I can’t tell.” He says.

“Just got word from the district attorney that the young man who robbed the older couple, is confirmed finished. The rape case has been given to special victims’ unit and the accidental death that we proved as murder has been moved to homicide already. The only one left we have to look at is the new

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case. The rest of the files you should put back in the cabinet.” Mac watches as Earl moves in slow motion. He can tell something is bothering him. He and Earl have become great partners and even better friends.

“Earl?” Mac asks.

Earl turns and looks at Mac, “Been a crazy couple of months hasn’t it?” he says.

“Yeah, but not all of it was bad. I have to admit I regret not being your partner earlier in our career.” He jokes.

Earl smiles. “How about we take off early today? Nothing much going on. Lunch, my treat.” Earl says.

“Sure, let’s go.” Mac says. “But you know I have to drive, your arm isn’t quite ready for that yet.”

Earl and Mac go out to lunch quietly. Mac looks over at Earl as they finally sit down to eat, “Hey Earl, is this about the shoulder? They are letting you come in and do desk work, we haven’t been out on patrol since the shooting. But you’ve been going to physical therapy, doing your exercises and still trying to hold on to your job, Earl. I see you’re a bit down. Is this a depression of some kind? Could you need to see a therapist?” Mac asks cautiously. “I’ve used the people on staff, it’s not so terrible. It’s our job, we see and do things most don’t. Help is sometimes needed.”

Earl looks up and over the table to Mac, his new closest friend. “I think I’m done with turning things around for everyone. Everyone I know is set now. It’s a good feeling, almost a strange feeling, almost like a loss. I heard from Opal the other day and she is still sounding like a newly wed woman. My sister and Denver are doing well, Mica is engaged to Pearl, you and your wife are behaving like you’re back to the newlywed stage of marriage. Life couldn’t be better. Ok, the whole shoulder thing is a bit of a damper but otherwise, things have been great, but what am I missing?” he says.

“Lunch. Here it is boys. How’s the shoulder Earl?” the waitress asks.

He smiles up at the waitress, “Who told you Conie?” he asks.

“Um, let’s think about that Earl. Maybe my brother, the one who owns the deli where it happened. Hmmmm, could that be it?” she asks sarcastically.

Earl had no idea, he never put the two together. “Sorry Conie, I didn’t know. I’m not so in tuned as you may think. Shoulder is doing better, going to take some time and a lot of rehab. You and your brother both own food establishments? Interesting.”

“No Earl, my brother owns both of them, I work at this one in front and do the books for both of them on the side. We do well together but not in the same building, we’d kill each other.” She smiles at him. “Enjoy your lunch, on me today.” She walks away.

“Maybe I’ll go talk to the psychologist at the precinct. Good idea Mac.” Earl says as he begins to eat again.

~ ~ ~

Earl walks downstairs and knocks on the door of the psychologist, “Morning maám, got a minute?” He asks.

“Sure, come on in.” she answers.

Earl sits and talks with her for a long time, in the end he realizes what he is feeling is normal after having such a close call. They speak of more personal items as well, Earl walks out not necessarily feeling completely better but definitely feeling calmer.

He goes upstairs to his desk, he doesn’t see Mac so he sends him a message “*Out on a call?*” he asks, not expecting an answer if he is.

“*No, baby girl is sick, wife has to work. Stop by if you’re bored.*” He says.

“*K*”

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Earl walks into the chief’s office. “Mac is out today, mind if I leave?” he asks.

“Nope, you probably came back too soon anyway. Go ahead.” He says and looks back down at his desk.

Earl leaves and goes back to the diner he went to with Mac a few days ago. “Morning Conie.” Earl smiles.

Conie looks over at Earl, that man does things to her no one else does. When she heard about the shooting her brother had to keep her from running over to the hospital and spilling her feelings to him to give him a reason to hang on. He told her that only works when both people feel the same way, so Conie came home disheartened.

“Regular booth is open, mind if I join you for breakfast?” she asks.

“I’d love company.” He smiles again. Earl realizes that every time he comes in here he is smiling. “Bring over some fresh juice too please.”

“Coming right up.” She smiles back.

Conie brings over some fresh rolls, juice, eggs and jam and sits down with Earl. She watches as Earl begins to spread jam on a roll but before she takes one for herself, he puts the roll down on her plate first. Then makes another one for himself. He pours the juice and separates the eggs so half of it is on her plate and half on his, always giving her first. The diner usually serves family style which is why he is plating the food out.

“This is nice.” Earl says quietly.

“Yes, I agree.” Conie says. “Earl?” she says softly. Earl looks up and over at Conie, the woman’s eyes are very inviting. “You are looking very beautiful today.” He says honestly.

Conie finds herself blushing, “Why did you come today Earl?”

“To see you. I realize every time I’m here I’m in a good mood, could only be one reason. Certainly not the food.” Earl looks at her sincerely.

Conie sits back in the booth and stares at Earl, “Do you know that I’ve had a crush on you for the past couple of years? I nearly fell apart when I heard you were shot.” She says back to him with equal sincerity.

“Conie, I’m not completely whole anymore. They gave me a desk job on the force, not sure when I will recoup enough to even shoot my gun. I don’t know where my life is headed.” He says. “But I don’t want to lose all of my friends, like Mac, he has been great.” Earl looks at Conie. “I can’t believe I’ve been so open with you. You make it easy. Why have we never done this before?”

“How about we spend the day figuring this out? I can leave as soon as the other waitress comes in.” Conie looks to him longingly.

At that moment Earl feels his heart fill up. Everyone always tells him he has turned their lives around, maybe Conie is here to do the same for him. “I’d love to spend the day with you, and if I’m being honest with myself and with you, I think I’d like to spend many more days with you too.”

As Earl waits for Conie to be able to leave he sends a message to Mac, *‘going out with Conie from the diner, my insides are churning. Maybe I’ve found mine.’*

‘About time, she’s had a crush on you for a long time. Go for it, I couldn’t be happier for you.’

Next he sends a message to Ella and gets an identical response.

“Ready.” Conie says to him.

Earl stands and leans over quickly to give Conie a kiss right on the lips. “Me too.” He smiles.