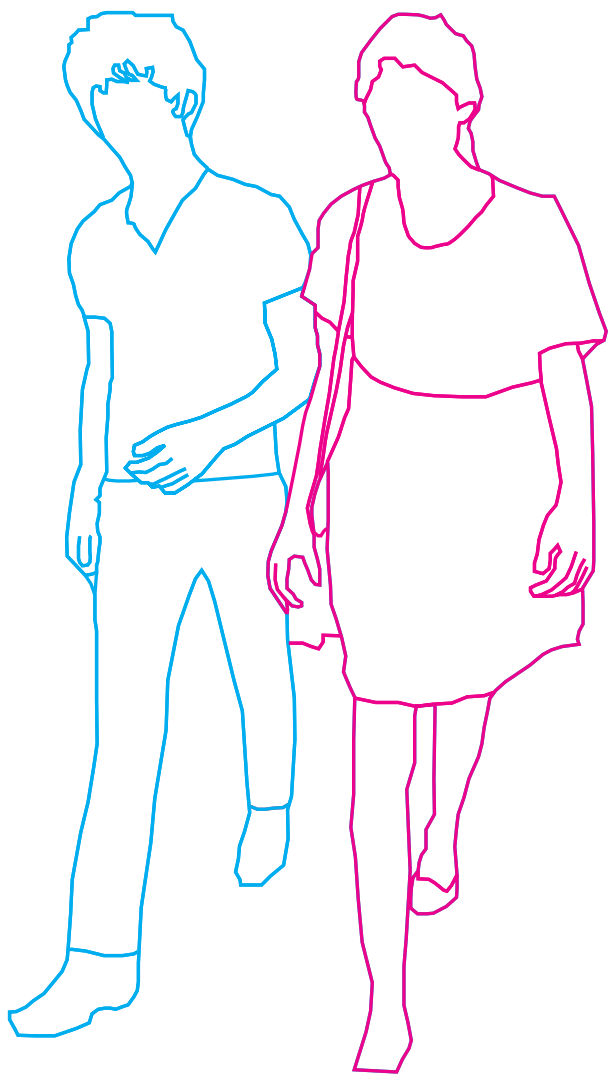


# EVERYBODY REPRODUCES

(#1 IN THE EVERYBODY \_\_\_\_\_S SERIES)



*by Nathan Vix*

## RYAN

"I have a totally platonic favor to ask that involves alcohol and babies."

Sofi says this upon entering the restaurant's back office, the sentence falling out of her mouth like it was just another hum-drum element of her pre-shift ritual, as though the potentially life-changing favor carries no more weight than locking her purse up, strapping on the black apron, or straightening her tie and checking her crisp white dress shirt for wrinkles.

I know better, though. She has a tendency to keep her Tupperware and china on the same shelf; and, likewise, on more than one occasion, she has used spur-of-the-moment decision-making processes in monumental situations. This one in particular sounds like something I could get locked up for in at least two ways—physically, by the state, or emotionally, by Sofi. It could be either. Or both. Potentially, the latter preceding the former.

"No way."

"You owe me," she says. "Remember, I helped you quit smoking."

"You did *what*? How the hell did you help me quit smoking? I did that myself!"

"I bought you that first box of Nicoderm, and that set you on your way."

"You bought me *one* box. And it wasn't even for me—it was a joke gift at that white elephant exchange, and I just happened to end up with it."

"It was destiny. *And*, since it was your first one, that makes it perpetual. You can even look at it as me saving your life. Thus, I can call on you for a favor whenever I want."

"Setting aside the fact that your reasoning and mind are warped, your claim doesn't hold up anyway, because I haven't totally stopped smoking."

“What?”

“Yeah, I kinda started up again.”

“Why?”

“Because...I don't know...”

Because smoking distracts me, and distraction is my nicotine these days as life meanders along.

“How can you even ask me why I'm still smoking?” I say. “You still smoke. Until you stop, you've got nothing to say to me.”

“Well, you smoking again is just another reason you should be my date to this ‘couples’ baby shower’ being thrown for Lana and Aiden in Spring. There'll be lots of kids running around, so you won't be able to smoke anywhere—not without getting the stink eye from every mom there.”

“Let's back up a second...two seconds, actually. First, Aiden and Lana had the gall to reproduce again?”

“Ha!”

It's a genuine gut-bust laugh—the kind you can't keep down because what was said rings so true that it hits your core like a lumberjack slamming a mallet onto the pivot of the boardwalk game Ring the Bell. The laugh shoots up and bursts out, since there's no bell at the top to collide with.

Through the frosted glass of the office windows, I can make out the silhouettes of the customers dining nearest the office as they turn and look our way, searching for the source of the joyous bark that interrupted their candle-lit Italian meal.

“Hey, keep it down,” I chide.

“But it's so true! What the hell were they thinking? Don't they understand the inevitable perversion they're releasing on society? They're breeding future date rapists.”

“Damn masochists is what they are,” I say. “Instead of a name bracelet, the hospital might as well get a security guard to clamp on a GPS ankle tracker and alert the probation officer. *Anyhoo*, secondly, you said it was a ‘couples’ baby shower?”

“Yes, I did,” she says, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes and settling back down.

“But we’re not a couple.”

“We used to be a couple.”

“Well, according to your past arguments, that was never the case.”

“Well, we used to sleep together,” she counters.

“That didn’t make us a couple—it just made us confused and awkward around each other...made *me* confused and awkward, you cold, cold...”

“Aw,” she says, thrusting out her lower lip as she pulls the bow tight behind her apron. She rounds the desk and sits on the side of my rolling chair before putting an arm around me, leaning in close, and squeezing me against her like she’s comforting a little brother with a scraped knee. “But it also made us best friends, right?”

“God knows how.”

“And best friends who used to sleep together have to pretend to be a couple from time to time so all their old friends from high school, who are now married with kids or gay, don’t think they’re losers or gay, openly pity them, and offer to set them up with other singles who really are losers.”

“Or gay.”

“Yup, or gay.”

“Or,” I counter, “best friends who used to sleep together and are now single and approaching thirty could just not go to places where they could be misconstrued as losers. Or gay.”

“Like the suburbs?” she asks.

“Exactly.”

“You can get mistaken for being a loser or gay here in The Montrose,” she says.

“But nobody gives a shit in The Montrose, because everybody here *is* a loser or gay.”

“And that’s why we love it,” she says. “You can’t be scared of going home, though. Plus I already told Lana we were coming, so we’re committed.”

“In other words, there was no way you could get out of it, so you’re dragging me down with you.”

“Yup. Dragging you home with me.”

“Just like old times.”

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I hadn’t seen Sofi so attached to a permanent marker since fifth grade, when she used to hold it under her nose while we waited at the bus stop (and on the bus...and down the school hallway...and pretty much until Mrs. Ulrich snatched it away in study hall, leaving her with a streak of black on her nostril and the promise to return it at the end of the day). It had only been in her possession for two or three minutes tops when yet another fifth grade teacher snatched it out of Sofi’s hand, which was dangling with apathy at her side. The thief fast-walked away, a throaty cackle drifting back over her shoulder in her wake. It took five seconds of bewilderment for Sofi to conjure the appropriate response.

No, wait. I conjured the *appropriate* response. Sofi stuck with the study hall refrain.

“That bitch!”

Despite being nearly two decades on from elementary school, she still mumbled it under her breath.

“What?” I whispered. “It’s just a marker. You didn’t want it anyway.”

“If she would’ve just asked, I’d have given it to her,” Sofi replied, training a stink-eye of her own on the lady, who was in the living room raising the spoils above her head for all to see and thus congratulate her on her subversion.

“Now, though, it’s on. My only goal today is to get that marker back.”

“What about preserving your sense of accomplishment in life?”

“Who cares? That bitch stole my marker. I’m gonna make her pay.”

And she probably will, but almost definitely not in a proportionate manner.

When Lana had invited us into the house, her best friend had attempted to hand us the markers and an explanation. Sofi and I tried to decline both politely, insisting we weren't the games type, but were instead the wallflowers necessary to fill the quorum.

Brandi, "with an i and not a y," as she proudly informed us (which immediately piqued our collective interest, as it provided the potential that she was more than simply another teacher, but might also moonlight as a stripper), told us, "everybody has to play, y'all!"

"No, really, it's ok," I insisted, the sentence losing momentum as she dropped a marker into the front pocket of my lightweight flannel button-up.

Sofi didn't have a front pocket, but she had cleavage, something she made sure of before we left—she may not have kids yet, but at least her boobs were still at their original height. She could hold onto that (as have many a man).

When Sofi refused to put her hand out for the marker, Brandi spent a moment waving it around in front of her, as though the teacher/stripper was also an instructor at Hogwart's. Exactly one second after Brandi realized the marker would rest comfortably in the natural nook between Sofi's breasts, Sofi realized the teacher/stripper/witch might actually drop it there.

The former wallflower accepted the baton, entering us in a competition equally as silly and entertaining as watching pencil-thin freaks of nature wearing short shorts and oversized numbers sprint in an oval pattern around an inexplicably long running track.

The rules of the game were simple: collect as many markers as you could. The person with the most would win a prize. You could obviously steal markers, but, as the day went on, we discovered you could also barter for them, cajole the smaller of the group, employ people's kids as double-agents, and even parlay former high school glory into residual dominance, taking advantage of still low self-esteem.

Well, other people could. Sofi was immediately handicapped by three middle school years of smoking cigarettes with long-haired kids in Pantera t-shirts behind the 7-11, four high school years of smoking pot behind the gym with the kids in rap-rock bands, and a lifetime of art classes and

paintings that “peeled back the façade of who we want people to think we are” to reveal “the ordinary beauty at our core.”

After that juried show in our Junior year, with “the Incident” where Sofi took the hypocrisy she witnessed among her fellow students as the major inspiration for her blue ribbon collection, everyone was inherently suspicious of her at any and all times. They all knew that when she watched and listened to a conversation, she *watched* and *listened* to the conversation, noting and analyzing, and, eventually, interpreting. When she came around, markers, handbags, and dignity were clutched tightly to party-goers chests.

I would have had no problem with someone stealing my marker and taking away the subconscious pressure of having to guard it, but, for some reason, nobody bothered to snatch it. Actually, one person did, but only jokingly. She quickly returned it, accompanied by a laugh, saying, “I’m just kidding. I couldn’t do that to you.”

Sentiments like that were peppered into many conversations I had over the course of the party, and it fueled my theory that everyone there knew all the details of everyone else’s personal life, even if they feigned ignorance. The need to make sure Ryan’s marker stayed in his breast pocket, keeping his heart company, probably stemmed from the presence of Nic—short for Nicole—my ex-girlfriend.

Everyone knew her—she was nominated for Homecoming Queen and Miss Woodlands back in high school—and everyone knew me through her. Better said, everyone *talked* to me because of her. They already knew me—even though I was a few years older than most of them—because I was the nicest of the upperclassman smoking under the bleachers everyday in high school. Even still, they never talked to me then, unless they wanted to bum-and-run, which was a source of great entertainment for us outsiders. The greatest fun was had when we lied about having a lighter on us, forcing them to light off the cig we were smoking. Why was it fun? We never took the cig out of our mouth while they were lighting. Our cigarettes were good enough for them, but we weren’t.

I was granted talkable status when Nic and I inexplicably started dating during her first year at community college. That was at the genesis of her “drift,” as she likes to refer to the shifting of friends and interests she underwent as a result of not being able to go to UT-Austin with her cheerleader and jock friends, and having to slum it at Montgomery Community College with me, Sofi, Aiden, and her own friend, Lana. It took awhile for

her old friends to realize I hadn't cast a degenerate spell on her, and that her transformation truly was genuine and thought-out. When they came to terms with her new interest in art and dive bars and music they'd never heard of, they were finally able to see me as more than a catalyst of grime. They warmed to me over greasy, Counting Crows and Gin Blossoms-soundtracked double dates at chain restaurants.

Then she left me.

Not only me, but the whole damn country. Did the whole backpacking around Europe thing, then settled in London for awhile, working for an art gallery.

I never understood why she left. I was already at my lowest point, and I needed her to be there. But she took off.

And now she's back. Apparently. I point this out to Sofi.

"She's back. Apparently."

"Yeah..." Sofi replies, dragging the word out as she probably figures out what to tack onto it.

"You don't seem surprised," I say.

"Yeah..."

"Because you already knew," I say, filling in all the things I can tell she can't figure out how to admit to me.

"Yeah."

It doesn't drag out like the others, because it's a confession.

"Did you know she'd be here?" I ask.

"No. She told me she was gonna be out of town. Come on—I'd never do that to you."

I know she wouldn't, too, so I can't be upset with her.

"Well, at least she's alone," I mutter. "I'd totally split if she was here with some new guy. Hey, if she came alone, you could've come alone, too."

"Yeah..." she says, letting it drag out again. I just shake my head as her lips

curl in a devious smile.

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I manage to avoid being in the same room as Nic for a good half hour, though it costs me being able to avoid *other* conversations I didn't want to have, like the one where all the guys grab a beer and head into the garage.

Honestly, the guys gathered in the garage thing was something I didn't expect—not at Aiden's house. At the house of any other guy present, yeah; but all one would ever really find in Aiden's garage in years past was a drum set and posters of Victoria's Secret models.

Times had changed, though. His garage was now like the garages of any of the guys we'd never have hung out with back in the day. They were the garages of our dads—tools, workbenches, hunting equipment, and the subject of our visit, his latest All-Terrain Vehicle. It was called The BOB, and it was a stroller. Not just any stroller, though; it was an SUS—a Sport Utility Stroller.

"It's a beaut," says the night manager at Gander Mtn., himself a stroller aficionado as the father of three kids, the oldest of which is 11. Gander Mtn. guy is a year younger than me.

"What are those wheels—12 inches?" he inquires.

"Yup," Aiden says as we all stand around it, beers in hand. "Five-point padded harness, too. State of the art suspension. Bought the weather shield to go with it," he adds, nodding over at a gargantuan piece of plastic that resembles a HazMat mask. The BOB and shield seem a terrific combination for showing your kid the eye of a Category 4.

"Whole thing set me back four bills," Aiden states proudly.

"Damn, man," I say. "That's a helluva investment in child transportation."

"Yup. Had to sell the drums to free up the cash for it."

I turn, eyebrows raised. The drums were complete trash, but Aiden had always refused to upgrade from them, even when his parents offered to front him the cash. He'd learned everything he knew about percussion on them, and I wouldn't be surprised if there had developed some masochistic attachment between drummer/punisher and kit/slave.

“You take it down to the creek yet?” asks the other guy present, who manages a local DirecTV installation crew. With Aiden managing a Discount Tire location, all four of us had somehow ended up in positions of minor authority, stumbling ass-first into them as we killed time waiting for something to happen after dropping out of college.

“Naw, not yet,” Aiden replies. “I’m gonna, though. Gotta wait for a day when Lana’s out of town, just in case things get too messy to clean up in an hour.”

I don’t know if he’s talking about the stroller getting too messy or the kid. He sighs a satisfied sigh.

“Yup, never before in my life have I wanted to take my kid through so much rough terrain.”

“Gotta get ‘em hooked young,” Gander Mtn. guy says, the other guys murmuring their agreement. Gander Mtn. guy then asks the question he’s been waiting to pop since he first set eyes on The BOB.

“Mind if I take it for a spin?”

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An half-hour later, it’s game time inside. *Couples’* game time. Fortunately, adult refreshments are involved, though we’re down one vodka-filled watermelon (no moms—especially not his wife—would allow Gander Mtn. guy to take any of their kids for a “spin” in The BOB, which proved to be a shrewd move, considering the vivid image of a watermelon splattered across the driveway after he lost control of the SUS on a flower bed jump. An *awesome* flower bed jump.).

The girls are already seated in the living room, gossiping in bunches as the guys enter and join their respective partner. Sofi, Nic, and Lana have taken up residence on the main couch. Lana attempts to rise when she sees me step in the living room.

“No, don’t get up—you’re cool where you are,” I insist, raising my voice a bit to be heard above the chatter and commotion around us. “I’ll stand.”

“Nah, you gotta sit with your lady for the games,” she says, shifting one labored breath at a time into position to hoist herself up off the couch. “And there’s no way we’re getting a fourth on this thing—not with my fat

ass taking up half of it. My beautiful, skinny girls over here are already practically sitting on top of each other. But that's ok, 'cause they're so light anyway. Everyone's stayed so skinny. It's wonderful. Just wonderful."

Aiden comes over, helps pull her up, and then leads her over to a large recliner. She settles into her throne as he stands next to her. He then leans on the back of the recliner, which slowly pushes it down and in a clockwise motion.

"Baby, don't do that," Lana says.

"Oh, right—sorry," he says, standing up straight, but not moving to leave his spot next to his woman. I've never seen him so obliging in his life.

I give Nic an awkward smile as I sit one over from her on the couch, Sofi in the middle.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey there. How are you doing?" she asks.

"Good, good. And you?"

"Good."

"Great," I say.

I'm gonna need a drink for this.

Brandi hops up and claps her hands and talks at the same time, trying to get our attention as though we were a room full of her little wizards and witches.

"All right, y'all—it's game time!"

A few "woo!"s go up from some of the girls.

"I'm gonna need another drink for this," Sofi says to Nic and I as she leans back into the couch. "Does anyone else find it ironic that the one person who could really use getting hammered right now is the only one who can't?" she asks, nodding our attention toward Lana.

Sofi downs the rest of her beverage, and it's only then I notice she's been holding and drinking from a sippy cup.

“Really?” I ask, nodding toward it.

“I saw it sitting in the dish strainer earlier,” she explains. “I’ve always wanted to try one, so I mixed my Jack and Coke in it instead of the disposable plastic cups. Honestly, if I ran a bar, I’d insist every drink was served in one of these. They’re perfect for drunks, who act like children anyway.” She holds it out by one of the handles, shakes it around, and turns it upside down, the ice inside rattling.

I shake my head.

“It got a big laugh when I came back into the living room earlier,” she says. “Don’t be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“You will be when you go home with your inevitable spill down the front of your shirt, and I go home clean as a whistle,” she replies, giving me a wink.

“We’re gonna play the ‘dirty’ diaper game first,” Brandi says, picking up a tray filled with diapers that have been soiled with melted chocolate bars.

“Whoa, buddy,” Sofi says, leaning forward. “I’m gonna get that drink *right now*.”

She eases off the couch and high-tails it toward the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Brandi asks after her, but Sofi ignores the question and disappears down a hallway. “Where’s she going?” Brandi then asks Nic and I as she continues to pass out the diapers.

“I don’t know. She saw the diapers and suddenly started muttering about something she needed to do, something having to do with kids and a pool,” I say.

“I thought she didn’t have kids,” Brandi says.

I shrug and bite my lower lip. Brandi returns my shrug and moves on with her tray. Nic had been leaning forward, legs crossed, elbow on knee, arm straight up, and her palm cupping her chin. She’s since allowed her head to tilt down so her palm covers her mouth. Her tiny hands aren’t big enough to hide the edges of her smile, though.

I instinctively smile back, which prompts her to shake her head slightly.

“You’re terrible,” she mutters into her hand.

“You know you like it,” I respond.

Brandi leads everyone through the diaper game, where we have to taste the melted chocolate and try to guess which candy bar it is. We then play a similar game where we have to taste unlabeled baby food and try to guess the flavor.

Sofi has yet to resurface, so the only thing filling the distance between Nic and I are the occasional instinctive knowing glances one shares with a good friend. As the games progress and the glances continue, I think we both feel alternately guilty and warmed by their reoccurring nature.

“All right, everyone on their feet,” Brandi says, yet again clapping her hands. My reluctance to rise brings back memories of fifth grade Ryan, on the cusp of adolescence and too cool to be caught willingly participating in organized fun. I think fifth grade Ryan was on to something.

Then, a realization about Brandi fills my mind that is so adult in nature, I’m somewhat ashamed to admit it hatched in my conscience. It dons on me that her enthusiasm and knack for directing activities and keeping everyone focused and involved would be commendable if she was *my* child’s teacher.

I look over at Nic, and she smiles back, causing me to look away quickly. Everything is reactive. I don’t know what the hell is going on, and I can’t corral my actions or thoughts.

“What?” Nic asks.

“What? What what?” I reply, trying to shake off this thing.

“Oh, I thought…” she says, stopping short, confused. “Nothing. Nevermind.”

The room is quiet, and Nic and I notice Brandi staring at us, waiting patiently for us to stop talking.

“Ok, then,” she says, “we’re going to play Tennis Ball Trouble. Grab your partner and make some room for yourself.”

Sofi still hasn’t returned. I know she hasn’t left because I drove, so she has to either be outside smoking and talking on her phone, or upstairs playing Wii with the kids. I see her absence as an excuse to decamp to the kitchen and fix myself a drink before seeking her out, but Brandi catches me as my

knee bends to take the first step.

“Where are you going?”

“Um, well...my partner seems to have disappeared, so I’m gonna go see if I can find her,” I say.

“The game’ll be over by the time you return,” she says, seeming genuinely worried that I’ll miss the satisfaction this particular game can bring to a person. “No, we can’t have that,” she continues. “You know Nicole, right? Well, she doesn’t have a partner either, so you two can be each other’s partner.”

“Oh, uh...um...” Nic stutters.

“Good—it’s settled then,” Brandi says, turning away to make sure everyone else is partnered up.

Nic and I look at each other and force smiles, the awkwardness of earlier suddenly having crept back in.

“So, we’re partners again,” she says.

“Yeah, guess so.”

“Well, as long as I don’t have to hum *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* for you to guess, I think we’ll be ok,” she says, referring to the disastrous way a game of Cranium ended the night we first hung out and got to know each other.

“Yeah, for real,” I reply. Thoughts and questions and theories fill my mind, breaking up any substantive response to continue the chit-chat.

“So, um, how you been?” I ask. She opens her mouth to respond, but it closes again when Brandi steps up and hands me a tennis ball.

“Here’s what you do...” Brandi says to everyone. “Guys—take the tennis ball and hold it against your forehead like this,” she instructs, demonstrating. I obey. “Now...ladies, step forward and press your forehead against the other side of the tennis ball, so the ball is wedged between each of your foreheads.”

I must be quite a sight with a tennis ball pressed against my forehead and my mouth dropped open, which it does when it hits me just how uncomfortable this game is about to get, literally and figuratively. Nic takes a deep

breath and looks at all the other couples as they bend down and adjust to make their foreheads meet just right. They're all laughing and dropping the ball and bickering about who does what to make the ball stay—"No, you lean forward, and I'll stand still." "No, baby, it's not gonna work unless we both lean into each other."

I've been standing for too long by myself with this stupid tennis ball held against my forehead, so I motion her toward me.

"Come here," I say. She approaches, and I lean down to line up my forehead with hers.

"I never thought I'd stoop to your level," I say, and she shakes her head at the bad joke. It brings a brief smile back, though.

Then fucking Brandi takes forever explaining the simplest instructions, forcing Nic and I to stand leaning against each other, a tennis ball apart, nowhere else to look but into the other person's eyes, nothing else to smell but the other's breath and cologne or perfume (the same perfume that turns my head in every department store every damn time to this day), nothing else to do except try to focus on what Brandi's saying while warding off all the memories of what it felt like when our heart rates rose every time we got this close and time stood still and everything seemed possible and probable and just perfect.

In her intent eyes, I see yearning for what could have been—what *should* have been. I also see fear. It's the fear of what might have been, what might still be. It's the same fear I saw one night, a month before she left, when she sat across from me on her bed, waiting, shaking the pregnancy test, and waiting some more. When she realized nothing had shown up yet, positive or negative, her eyes had focused on mine again, searching them out and finding nothing to comfort her.

I was ready that night. My heart was in my throat, and I did everything in my power to will a positive result. She had cried when it finally showed up negative, and I think I shed a tear, too. We cried for different reasons. Hers was relief and fear of what came next. Of what could come next.

Perhaps we didn't cry for different reasons, then, because my tears were also out of fear of what would come next. I could already feel her pulling away.

And now life had brought us back together, distanced only by a furry green

round thing.

The goal, of course, was to keep the ball from dropping. Brandi barked out directions, and each couple moved left together, then right, then down, up, left quicker, right quicker, a hop, a full turn, and, finally, a lowering all the way to the ground—on our bellies—and back up again.

Nic and I made it all the way through the hop, which we were surprised we pulled off. Instinctively, wide eyes and wider smiles stretched across our faces. Moments later, though, Nic pulls away unexpectedly halfway through the full turn. I thought we were going to make it—the chemistry was just right and the adrenaline was flowing—but she backs off and the tennis ball drops onto the carpet, barely bouncing.

“Damn,” she says.

“We almost had it,” I say, confused. “What happened?”

“I think our balance was off,” she replies.

“It didn’t feel to me like our balance was off.”

She bites her bottom lip and shrugs.

“You’re out of the game!” Brandi yells, pointing at us.

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A stream of kids flood down the stairs, through the living room (to kiss mommy and daddy), and out the door to the backyard, and Nic and I use the commotion to slip in with them and head outside.

I follow her as she walks to the edge of the patio and stops, all the kids leaving us behind as they converge on the jungle gym. She looks to the left side of the backyard and squints into the late-afternoon Texas sun. A breeze blows, and she takes it in with a big, reinvigorating breath. She closes her eyes and smiles.

A straggler with dark hair passes me and approaches Nic from behind. He creeps up and swings his little arm at her butt. His palm slaps the cheek as hard as a five-year-old can, which is hard enough to make Nic yelp and swivel around, her eyes narrowed and brow furrowed as she locates the source.

“Nice ass, baby!” the kid yells with a lisp before throwing his head back, giggling, and running out to join the rest of the group.

“That little jackass,” she says, astonished. “Can you believe he just did that?”

“Well...yeah, actually. That’s Aiden and Lana’s kid. Or, to pinpoint responsibility even more, that’s *Aiden’s* son.”

“Holy crap, I haven’t seen him since he was a baby. I didn’t even recognize him.”

“You mean he didn’t come out of the womb staring at and reaching out for your boobs?”

“Well, yeah, he did, but I just assumed it was because he was a baby,” she says.

“See, you’d think that, but it was just the perfect cover for the Spawn of Aiden. In fact, I would bet every man in that family wishes he could go back to being a baby for that very reason.”

We each take a seat on patio chairs, and for a few seconds, I allow myself the false notion that this is our patio, our backyard, and that one of the kids out there is also ours.

If Aiden and Lana’s kid turned out the way he did, what would our kid have turned out like? Polite and graceful like its mother? Shy like its dad? Would it have had her bright eyes and cheerleader smile, or would it have had my dark, suspicious gaze and devious half-grin?

Would it treat people with respect and patience, or would it go wherever its heart led it, regardless of other people’s feelings?

What physical and character traits would get reproduced, and what would it fight against inheriting?

“So, how long are you back for?” I ask.

Her smile doesn’t falter, but her forehead scrunches.

“What do you mean? I’m back for...well, I’m back permanently, I guess.”

“Here in town?”

“Yeah, here in town,” she says, laughing. “I’ve got a place in Midtown.”

“Midtown? Really? You been tanning a lot, too? Wearing a lot of shirts with zebra prints? Thinking about getting streaks in your hair? Dating a guy with streaks in his hair? Frosted tips?”

She rolls her eyes and laughs.

“Very funny. No, he doesn’t have frosted tips. He does have a goatee, though, and I assume there’s a hipster penalty in your book for that, too.”

I merely smile. If I tried to say a single word, it would come out choked. Her seeing someone else hadn’t even been a realistic possibility in any of my thoughts, so the fact that she had sought some other guy before me when she got back in town is crushing, to be honest.

“Sofi said you’re still in the apartment in Montrose and still at Fiorentina’s,” she says.

Still. Stil, still, still. Nothing ever changes for me.

I nod and clear my throat.

“I am indeed. Your job’s still available, if you want to come back.”

“Hah! Really? You never filled it?”

“Well, I mean, I filled it...but I can always make room for one more person on staff.”

“Yeah, no, I’m good. I’m helping to curate a gallery in Montrose.”

“Oh...right. I see your time in London paid off. Well, you should definitely stop in at the restaurant for a drink sometime. Maybe for happy hour or something.”

“You hate happy hour.”

“Yeah...”

It was my turn for the word to drag out and encompass everything I didn’t know how to explain, such as how I’m trying to accommodate the fact she’d be leaving work nearby around that time, and that I’d withstand any number of tipsy “Woo” girls and metro guys to have her stop in.

“Well, it’s good to see you learning to evolve,” she says, looking back at out the kids.

What the hell does she mean by that?

The back door opens, and Sofi flutters out, her eyes scanning the jungle gym. She doesn’t even see us.

“Hey,” Nic says, “where have you been?”

Sofi jerks her head our way, and her wide eyes swallow us for a second before spitting us back out and refocusing on the kids.

“No time to explain. I’ve gotta…”

Her words trail off as she steps onto the grass and arrows toward the closest toddler. When she reaches him, she talks in a voice too low for Nic and I to make out. The kid stares blankly at her. She reaches down, gently takes his sippy cup out of his hands, and holds it up to her nose. With a shake of the head, she returns it to the kid, who waddles off toward the slide.

“Hey!” she says to a toddler waiting his turn to slide down. “Um…Colby. No…Corbin. No. Crap. What was your name? Casey! Come here, Casey!”

Like the first kid, this one simply stares at her. She moves to the edge of the bridge running between the two wooden towers and reaches up, motioning for the toddler to come to her.

“Come here, buddy. Give me two seconds of your time.”

The kid isn’t budging. Sofi turns to her right and climbs the stepladder into the tower opposite Casey. Being a foot too tall for the tower, Sofi has to stay crouched when she reaches the top. With both hands, she picks up a little girl and moves her out of the way so she can cross the bridge. The girl’s face puckers and a low bay ensues. Sofi ignores it and wobbles across the wooden planks, nearly losing her balance at the midpoint.

She reaches Casey just as he’s about to go down the slide, and she grabs the tail of his tiny Skittle-green polo and pulls him back to her. He’s perplexed. When Sofi yanks his sippy cup out of his hands, the sheer injustice of it all becomes too much for his little heart to take, and he cries close to a fifth interval above his future princess in the opposite tower, the two wailing in harmony.

“What on earth is going on out here?”

It's the fifth grade teacher. She uncrosses her arms, a batch of markers clenched tight in her right hand. She shifts them to the left as she steps out on the grass and strides toward the tower where Sofi is bent over, sippy cup in hand, a spooked look in her eyes.

“What are you doing to my kid?” she demands.

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“God, I'd be the worst mother,” Sofi moans in the passenger seat, her body leaning against the passenger door, her fist planted firmly in her cheek, propping up her head.

It's the first thing she's said in the half hour it's taken us to pass all the car dealerships, furniture stores, taquerias, and strip clubs lining our journey down I-45 and back into the heart of Houston.

“Be glad I never got pregnant when we were together,” she continues. “As a matter of fact, I'm going to stop having sex across the board out of fear that there might be the slightest chance I'd get pregnant and inflict myself on a child.”

“There's probably a decent chance that would be the result if you keep having sex,” I say.

“Then that's it. I'm done. I'm gonna become a nun.”

“It wasn't your fault,” I say.

“I know, right? I mean, I just set the cup down without thinking while we were Wii Baseballing upstairs, and then Mary called, and I went into the other room, and then...”

She just shakes her head.

“See, you're not a terrible person,” I say.

“Really, though, who gets asked to leave a baby shower?” she counters. “I've been kicked out of my fair share of parties, but never one where I've Wii Baseballled with toddlers.”

“Don't take it personal.”

"I know everyone there! How can I not take it personal?"

"Lana wasn't upset, and that's the most important part. She didn't want you to leave."

Sofi cracks a smile.

"Yeah, her water could've broken with how hard she was laughing."

"And at least you got your marker back," I add.

Sofi reaches up and feels the welt just under her nose.

"I'm sorry I dragged you out to that," she says. "It wasn't exactly a great afternoon for either of us, with you having to deal with Nic and all."

"I'm kinda glad I went, even though Aiden badgered me the whole time about reforming the band, but trying alt-country and roots rock this time around."

"He's gone too far the other way. He needs you to help him balance things out again."

"Yeah, that's what I figure, too. And seeing Nic again wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be. We're back on speaking terms, I guess. I suggested she swing in during happy hour sometime next week."

"Oh, Ryan—you know she's seeing someone, right?" Sofi asks, pity in her voice.

"Yeah, she told me. It's just a drink."

"But...happy hour? Really? You suggested that?"

"Yeah..."

She simply shakes her head and then turns her attention toward the highway again.

"I can't believe I gave a toddler his first Jack and Coke."