

Becca: Lost and Found

by Noo Writer

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1. Beginnings

"Hey Honey, my meeting's over and I'm walking to the car. It's 4:30, later than I had hoped, so I'm going to catch some traffic. Shooting to be home by 6:00 but I will keep you posted from the road. Love you like crazy, can't wait to see you."

He couldn't help but smile as he hung up after leaving the message, although looking around him at the neighborhood in which he had had to park evaporated the happy thoughts of his wife rapidly. He looked around him more closely, trying to identify areas that looked particularly high risk despite the hours of daylight remaining.

As he passed a particularly seedy looking alley, his thoughts of home were interrupted by the unmistakable sounds of struggle coming from deep within the alley. While every survival instinct screamed in his head to keep walking, some other part of him, even deeper and more powerful, stopped him at the mouth of the alley. The long shadows made it difficult to see, but he could definitely hear voices. He couldn't make out any specific words, but the threat of violence was impossible to miss.

Against his conscious will he walked toward the end of the alley. As the words became clearer he was able to decipher snippets of conversation, the gist of which centered around threats being made against someone who was in big trouble.

As he stepped around a particularly disgusting dumpster he was finally able to see the events unfolding at the back of the alley.

A large, unkempt and very young man, barely past his teens if at all, was pacing in front of two other equally unkempt men who were holding a young girl. One glance was enough to set the stage; the younger man was obviously the leader of some ragtag group of thugs, and they were trying to get something from the girl. It was obvious that she either didn't have what they wanted or was willing to suffer to defend it, and it was equally obvious that the men, drunk or high on something, were not going to take no for an answer nor worry about being gentle in the pursuit of their prize.

The girl was the first to see him, and rather than start jumping around begging for help, she just stared at him with tired eyes, which he at first assumed meant simply that she was resigned to some horrible fate. But he couldn't look away, and as he looked deeper, he saw a faint glow of hope there, and a determination to survive whatever this turned out to be. Even here at the mercy of a band of thugs in a dark alley, she had hope, no matter how bad tomorrow might be.

Noticing her gaze, the young leader turned and saw him, able to immediately take his measure in a glance. Middle age, businessman of some kind, probably got a couple hundred on him. Definitely worth more than the girl.

"What are you looking at?" he asked arrogantly, knowing any help for this suburban Dad was far away and honestly curious what he was doing alone, in this alley.

"I don't want any trouble son, just let the girl go and we all walk away" the newcomer said, hoping he sounded more convincing than he felt.

"Come on old man, you and I both know there's no way you have any choices here. What the hell possessed you to come down here? Do you know this kid or something?"

The older man looked at the young girl, still calm despite her situation. She was too beaten down to allow herself to actually believe that he could get her out of this, but she was still young enough to have that stubborn shred of hope, despite it all. In that instant he realized that he and he alone represented that hope. And he could not walk away.

Instead he turned his attention to the leader and spoke with an authority he had not felt moments before.

"I am a father."

"I may not be HER father, but right now she needs one and it looks like I am going to have to do."

"So with the grace that is given to fathers, right here, for right now, I claim this child as my own, and declare that she is under my protection."

"If you wish to do her harm, you will have to go through me."

The leader had been staring at the Dad with rapt attention during his monolog, and upon hearing this last statement, he could not help but laugh, a harsh hollow laugh with no mirth.

"Now I understand that might not sound like much" the Dad continued, "but for her sake it will have to be enough because that is all I have to give."

"I would ask that you give me safe passage to take this child home to a decent meal, a warm bed and a mother's love, which all children deserve."

"Dude....look around you.... you are the craziest son of a bitch I have ever seen." the leader said, his cruel words tinged with true wonder.

"But I gotta say, if you got the balls to come in here and ask, I got a weird respect for that." he added.

"Ain't too many people would do that for a street kid; nobody even thought about doin' it for me, I can promise you that."

The Dad remained quiet, having said his piece. He understood that the Leader needed to come to whatever decision he was going to make on his own.

"I'll make you a deal" the Leader said, resuming his pacing and eyeing the Dad like an unknown species.

"You take the kid and get outta here and we'll let you go, as long as you never come back and I don't see no cops. If I catch any kinda shit for this I will make you regret it. Understand?"

The Dad breathed a tentative sigh of relief, believing the improbable offer in his gut but not wanting to risk letting his guard down.

"Got it" he replied "Deal. And thank you."

He wasted no time crossing the last few feet to the girl and helping her up as the goons holding her let her go, surprise clouding their features and anger permeating their body language at the lost payday.

The girl stood tentatively, not quite believing what was happening and unwilling to let the hope buried deep flare to the surface.

The Dad didn't want to risk the leader having a change of heart, so he just held out his hand and said simply "Come on, let's go home."

A lifetime of living in and out of institutions, foster homes, orphanages and the back rooms of police stations and welfare offices had given her a finely tuned intuition about danger, and she did not sense any from this man. She was far too cautious to think any farther ahead than getting to the mouth of the alley in one piece. But she was sure he could get her at least that far, and so she took the hand he offered. She didn't let herself even think of the word home...though she knew the meaning, it was not in her vocabulary.

As they turned to make the long walk to the safety of daylight, the Dad turned one last time toward the Leader and spoke the words he knew for some reason he must.

"I know you think you are bad through and through...and you probably don't want to hear this, but I see something else in you, something more and something better. I hope you see it someday before it's too late, because no matter what you have done and no matter what else you may do, for this, you have earned something good."

The Leader stared at the Dad with conflicted speculation, but something told him that the pair was now off limits, and he too had learned to trust his intuition for survival. So he simply let them pass and stared thoughtfully after them until they were lost in the shadows heading toward the light.

Once in the car, the Dad made sure the girl was buckled in, having to show her how to work the seatbelt.

"Do you have somewhere to go?" he asked as a courtesy, knowing the answer no matter what she said. But she didn't waste the energy to pretend, shaking her head slowly, staring quietly out the window.

"Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to head home. I'm hungry and tired and I miss my family. And unless I'm mistaken, you could probably use some dinner and a good night's sleep."

She looked over at him, holding his gaze with more courage than he thought there was in the world. She nodded, and said a very quiet "Thank you" before looking straight ahead again.

"And I know your Mom and your brother and your sister are going to be very excited to see you" he added, not sure why. But it felt right, somehow, and so he didn't question it.

He waited until he was on the freeway to call home again. For some reason he was nervous, even though he knew this was probably the rightest thing he had ever done. Before he dialed, he pictured his wife and children, imagining their reaction when he pulled into the driveway this night. Tears leaked slowly when all he could see in his mind's eye was their support and acceptance.

"Hey Sweetie, how ya doin'?" he said when his wife answered the phone. "Fine, fine, meeting went fine, I'm on the freeway and traffic does look nasty. My 6:00 estimate may be a little optimistic. Spaghetti sounds great, I'm starved."

After a moment of silence while he tried to figure out what to say, he simply told the truth.

"Hey Sweetie, it's kind of a long story, but I'm bringing someone home for dinner, ok? No, it's no one you know; I just met them myself. Like I said, it's a long story but could you set another place for dinner? No, no, it's not a new business contact or anything fancy, I'll explain when I get there."

He smiled as he imagined her face, full of curiosity but trusting that whatever was happening was what needed to happen. Her trust was one of the things he depended on in this life, and she did not let him down.

"OK, I'll let you know when I get off in town. Love you" he finished.

He looked over at his young charge and saw that she was thinking hard about what she had just heard.

"I hope spaghetti is OK?" he asked.

"Sounds great" she said, still staring straight ahead and obviously wrestling with a thousand thoughts.

"I'm Liam, by the way, Liam Holt" he said, realizing he literally knew nothing about her, including her name.

She paused so long before responding that he wasn't sure she had heard him, or was not going to reciprocate.

"Rebeccah" she said, sounding it out and savoring it like it was the first time she had spoken the word. He suspected that it probably was, but he did not press. It didn't matter what she had been called up to now; from here on out, she was Rebeccah.

The trip did indeed take longer than he had hoped, and it was 6:45 by the time he sent a quick text to his wife telling her he was 10 minutes from home.

The two had been mostly silent during the long drive, strangely enough not uncomfortably so. Rebeccah had, understandably, retreated inside herself, but he did not feel a nasty vibe in any way, she just seemed to be thinking really hard about a lot of things. He left her in peace, respecting her need to process what she had endured in the last couple of hours.

"My wife's name is Marie. I have one daughter, Lauren, who just started her senior year of high school, and one son, Seamus, who just started his junior year. They are two years apart in age, but only one grade. Do you mind me asking how old you are?"

"Sixteen" she said after a brief hesitation, like she had to think about it to remember.

"Do you go to school?" he asked, cursing himself for the stupid question as soon as he said it. "Sorry, I don't mean to pry, forget I asked" he quickly added.

Surprisingly she laughed at that, and he realized it was the first time he had heard the sound.

"Kind of" she answered.

"I have been to 11 different schools, none for more than 3 months. I have also been tutored, at least that's what they call it, at the Child Protective Services orphanage in between all the different schools. They may not be good at finding a place for kids like me to stay, but they ALWAYS push school, I guess so they can keep me busy all day" she added, her voice trailing off as the memory faded.

"Wow" he said, realizing that was all he could say.

"Well, this is our street, won't be long now" he added as he turned the final corner of their journey.

As he approached his house, he thought something must be wrong.

Even though it was still mostly daylight, every light, inside and out, was on, making the house shine like a beacon on the otherwise quiet street. He saw people and movement in the driveway, and realized as he got close enough to recognize faces that not only were his wife and kids standing right in the middle of the drive way, about a dozen other people, all parents and kids he recognized as close friends, were standing with them.

He was absolutely confused as he pulled in, and looking over at Rebecca realized that she was in a state of shock, surprise and fear etched in her face. She slumped down in the seat, trying hard not to be noticed.

He turned the car off and noticed that the group had formed a small knot about 20 feet from the car, giving him plenty of space as he opened the door.

His wife separated herself from the small crowd and wordlessly pulled him into a desperate hug as he got out.

He returned the embrace enthusiastically, wondering why but not caring, letting their intimacy melt all of the stress of the last few hours away. She finally pulled back and looked him in the eyes, more intensely than she had ever done. He was still trying to figure out what was going on.

She raised one hand and cupped his face tenderly, still staring directly into his eyes. "I am so glad you are ok. You are the dearest, sweetest, bravest, stupidest most wonderful man on this earth" she said, choking back tears.

He continued to stare into her wide, crying eyes, unable to tear his gaze from her face, until he finally found his voice.

"What is all this?" he said, gesturing toward the quiet crowd. "Is something wrong?" he asked, forgetting for the moment the story he had been planning to tell.

His daughter Lauren stepped forward from the group and put her hands on his arm.

"We saw it Dad. We saw what happened in the alley" she said with somber intensity

"What?" was all he could say, staring at her incredulously.

"Somebody walking by caught it on a cell phone camera and posted it on YouTube. Stacy Peterson saw it like right after it had been posted, and recognized you. She put it on Facebook and started texting and calling everybody telling them to look at it."

"I saw it about an hour ago and showed Mom. People have been calling and texting and coming by non-stop. Mom sent most of them away because she didn't want to make too big a scene, but she let these guys stay in case you need any help" she finished, gesturing to the small crowd behind her that was still silent.

Dad stared open mouthed at his daughter, his wife, and his son as Seamus also stepped forward, enveloping him in a macho hug.

"So where's my little sister?" he boomed, squinting to try and see in the window.

"Yes, where is this brave, precious child?" his wife said, wiping her eyes and getting down to the business of mothering.

Without another word she whisked around to the passenger door of the car and slowly opened it up, squatting down so she was level with the seat. Looking at the scared little girl huddled in the seat her heart broke for all the pain she knew she had suffered.

"Hello sweetie, I know you've met my husband. I'm Marie and these are Lauren and Seamus" she said, motioning to the children that were now standing a polite distance behind her.

The girl looked up at the sound of her voice, the motherhood in it reaching out to her like a gentle hand, wrapping around her frantically beating heart with calming peace.

"Would you like to come in and join us for dinner?" she said quietly "We're having..."

"Spaghetti" the girl finished for her, surprising all of them with the unexpected comment.

"That's right" Mom said, a huge smile transforming her face from intense concentration to joy. "It's Seamus's favorite, I hope you like it too" she finished, the spell of uncertainty broken.

The frail child made a decision then, that whatever was going to happen when she got out of this car, it was better than running away again. Something shifted in her heart and mind as she looked around the group of people gathered in that driveway, pieces to a puzzle she never knew she had been a part of falling into place in a way she did not understand. As she unbuckled the seatbelt and started to climb out of the car, she had the strange sensation of coming back to something, even though she had never been there before.

As she stepped out of the car she stood rooted in place, suddenly not knowing what to do, and she started to panic as the lights and the people began to swim before her eyes.

"Hey Sis, welcome home" Seamus's big, loud voice boomed, breaking through the panic and instantly anchoring her to this new reality again. "I know you and Lauren have a ton of girl stuff to do" he added, grimacing at the thought "but can you guys save it for later? I'm starving, so let's eat first and you guys can 'chick it up' later, ok?"

Rebecca stood transfixed, staring at this huge teen ager who just called her Sis and was talking about something to do with girly something, the unreality of it shocking her once again.

A pretty girl wearing jeans and a sweatshirt with her hair in a messy pony tail stepped up and pushed Seamus aside like he was nothing at all.

"Stop talking about food you big goon" she said playfully, turning her attention to Rebecca.

"Sorry about that, just ignore him. He thinks he is going to pass out if he doesn't eat every hour." She held out her hand, which Rebecca found herself taking, naturally, as if she had ever held hands with someone before.

"Come on, let's wash up and we can figure stuff out after dinner" she added as she beckoned her new Sister inside. Rebecca followed mechanically, tunnel vision shutting out all the people and noise that had commenced now that the silence had been broken.

Mom and Dad stood rooted in place, staring at the two girls as they retreated inside the house. Their befuddlement was broken by Seamus once again "Mom, I am telling you, if I do not have a plate of spaghetti in front of me in 60 seconds, I am probably going to faint, and I don't think you and Dad are going to be able to lift me by yourselves...so let's get going, I bruise easily".

The two parents burst out laughing simultaneously, the tension they had not realized they were feeling sloughing off their shoulders like water off a duck's back. They turned in unison to the families gathered behind them who were buzzing excitedly.

"I would invite you guys all in for some spaghetti, but I don't think we have enough" Marie said in a loud, affectionate voice as she looked around at her friends. "And unless one of you wants to carry an unconscious teenaged boy inside, we better get going". The crowd, who knew the Holt's all too well, laughed and started to approach Mom and Dad to say their good byes and good wishes. As the last

visitors drove away, Mom and Dad held hands as they walked inside, their silence communicating more than a thousand words could have done.

"Rebecca" Dad finally said as they entered the kitchen

"Rebecca" Mom repeated, thoughtfully, "that sounds just about right. I like it. And she is adorable!" she added, smiling at the thought of the girl as she heard two young female voices laughing down the hall.

Her expression suddenly hardened as she continued to stare down the hall to where Lauren was now busily talking a mile a minute, punctuated by occasional comments from the other girl.

Looking her husband in the eye and taking him by the shoulders, she spoke clearly and with unquestionable conviction "Just to be clear, we are now a family of five, right?"

"I think we've got some shopping to do" he said as he kissed her tenderly.

To say the YouTube video, formally titled "Now THAT'S a DAD!" went viral would be to insult even the Plague. By the time Dad and Rebecca had rolled into the driveway, the clip had over a half million views, and by the next morning it was already on the all-time top ten list for views and likes and everything else.

While this certainly brought with it some unwanted attention, such as calls from news networks and seemingly every crackpot that owned a computer, the combination of the clip and a friend in the local Police Department had gotten them a 72 hour Writ of Temporary Custodianship by noon the next day, which was Saturday, and an appointment with the Deputy Director of County Child Protective Services first thing Monday morning.

Saturday was a whirlwind of waffles and shopping, putting Dad in the position of having to turn down every manager of every store wanting to give them everything for free. He insisted on paying, but grudgingly compromised with the angry clerks by accepting a series of unannounced sale prices and special weekend discounts that made the total outlay for the day a fraction of what it should have been.

As Mom inventoried the bags and boxes, she noticed that there weren't many clothes.

As Becca was down the hall trying on one of the new outfits, she told Lauren "Honey, you guys didn't get many clothes. Becca's going to need more than just a couple of new things".

"She wouldn't take any more Mom. I tried, I really did, but she just kept saying that this was more than enough."

"Well, we can go again later, but you should have gotten at least a few more things, don't you think?"

"Don't worry Mom, we're the same size. We can share until we can talk her into getting stuff that she likes better."

Mom turned away, not wanting Lauren to see the tears that fell, a result of another moment that simply took her breath away. How did she get such unbelievable kids?

"Ok honey, great idea. Thanks for sharing!" she managed to say around the lump in her throat.

"No problem Mom, we got it covered".

That night found the five of them munching popcorn and alternately cheering and crying while Harry Potter tried his best to right the wrongs of his world, all of which was new to Becca, much to her delight.

As Mom and Dad made their final rounds late that night after teeth had been brushed and all was quiet, they met outside Lauren and Becca's room for a final check.

"Where's Seamus?" Dad asked. "Is he still in the bathroom or something? He's not in his room."

Mom held a finger to her lips and silently opened the door to Lauren and Becca's room.

The two girls were sleeping peacefully in their new twin beds, one on each side of the room, while Seamus was sprawled out on the floor between them.

Their black collie Tucker was curled up at the side of Becca's bed, while their black lab Daisy was in a similar spot on Lauren's side.

"I heard Lauren ask him to help Becca setup the group messaging app on her new phone so she could get the Family Messages, and each time I walked by after that he and Lauren were swapping Most Embarrassing Stories about each other.

When Seamus told the one about Lauren pooping through her diaper all over the floor while throwing a tantrum behind the baby gate in her room, Becca came out of there at a dead run, saying she was going to pee her pants if she didn't get to the bathroom in time. I guess he just fell asleep after the last story"

"Can you believe the dogs?" Mom asked, voicing a topic both had noticed but neither had had time to discuss.

"No...and yes I guess" Dad answered. "I mean normally they are so rambunctious when people come in, the neighbors, the kids' friends, even aunts and uncles and people they know well. So, yes, I was amazed when we walked in that first night. It was so quiet I thought you must have put the dogs outside until things died down. But there they were, sitting totally still, chins up, tails wagging, letting Rebeccah pet them like they had known her all their lives."

"Yeah, that WAS weird" Mom agreed. Usually we have to hold them down!"

"But...on the other hand" Dad said, "They know so much more that we realize...I am kind of not surprised that they figured out she needed them to be gentle and welcoming, instead of hyper and vigilant. They never cease to amaze me" he finished, shaking his head.

Just then they looked in the crowded room one more time, and Daisy raised her head up, looking back at them over her shoulder knowingly. She snuffled once, then put her head down, settling back into her watchful sleep. The message was clear; the pack's newest member was now one of their own.

The two lovebirds put their arms around each other and sighed contentedly, all their babies safe and sound for the night. The energy of three was different, but the feeling was as old as time itself. As they kissed briefly, then more passionately while still just outside the half open door Seamus did his best to whisper as quietly as a teen aged boy can...

"Ew gross you two. You HAVE a room, go use it!"

And so they did.

The four senior Holt's woke simultaneously on Sunday morning to the unmistakable sound of a frying pan hitting the floor, and each shuffled out to the kitchen to try and ascertain who had done what, and if someone else had bothered to make coffee.

"This is AWESOME" Seamus said loudly, surveying the huge stack of pancakes rising up from the mess of the kitchen counter. "You rock Sis!" he added as he grabbed a plate and started transferring large chunks of the stack to his plate.

"What's all this?" Mom asked as she took in the scene; Becca, covered in flour, concentrating on flipping a pancake in the big pan while Lauren schlumped sleepily down the hall.

"Looks like breakfast to me" Lauren said as she too plucked some pancakes from the stack before sitting down at the table. "Mom, can you grab the milk?"

Once all the Holts were seated around the table munching their pancakes contentedly Mom tried again "You didn't have to do this Becca...and where did you learn to cook, anyway?" she asked. "All Lauren and Seamus can do is fry eggs and make mac and cheese"

"You guys said yesterday that Saturday was waffles and Sunday was pancakes...I've never made them before, but when I woke up early and couldn't go back to sleep I thought I'd give it a try. It's pretty easy if you follow the directions on the box" she added.

"I haven't done anything helpful all weekend..." she added, and quietly finished by saying in a small voice "And since I'll be leaving tomorrow I figured I could at least try to say thanks."

The sound of all those knives and forks hitting plates simultaneously was deafening, especially combined with the roar of 4 people talking and yelling and gesturing wildly all at once

"What are you..."

"What do you m..."

"That's crazy..."

"Where are you"

The noisy tumult finally stilled when Dad raised his hand to quell the unruly mob.

"Hang on folks" he said with authority. "One thing at a time."

As he turned to Becca he saw the uncertainty and sadness in her eyes, and still didn't understand it.

"Becca, you caught us all off guard there for a minute...do you mind me asking what you meant when you said you would be leaving tomorrow?" he asked calmly with a gentle tone.

Becca looked down at her plate and quietly answered "Well I know you guys are taking me back down to the CPS people tomorrow so they can put me back in the orphanage. You guys have been so kind to me, I don't know how to say thank you. This has been the best two days of my life" she finished, trying to smother a snuffle.

Stunned silence filled the room. Dad was the first to recover, looking down to gather his thoughts before taking a deep breath and beginning.

"Becca, I need to apologize to you. In all this craziness the last couple of days, we forgot to ask you what you wanted."

Becca raised her head with a quizzical look on her face "What do you mean, what do I want?" she asked. "It doesn't work that way. You just do what the County tells you to" she finished with an unhappy sigh.

"Becca, it is absolutely true that we have an appointment with the County tomorrow morning to talk about you. We are going to be giving them a form called a Request for Lawful Guardianship and Permanent Adoption". Do you know what that means, have you ever heard of that?" Dad asked.

Becca brightened visibly "It sounds like maybe I would get to stay a little longer maybe?" she asked, the humble hope in her eyes breaking his heart, again.

"Not quite" he said, alarmed at the immediate look of hurt on her face and the slump of defeat in her shoulders.

"It's ok, I know it's hard with me around" she said, trying so hard to sound brave through her quivering lips.

"No sweetie, it's not that at all. We are going to be telling the County that we want to adopt you permanently, starting immediately, right away." He said, his voice quivering with emotion as well.

"What?" she asked, completely stopped. "Do you mean I would be, like, part of the family kind of?" She asked, not allowing herself to believe that she understood what he was saying.

"No" he said slowly and carefully, grabbing his wife's hand while looking her in the eyes. "Not 'like' anything, not 'kind of' anything. You would be our daughter, 100%, permanently, same as these two, forever."

Becca sat in stunned silence, not trusting that she had heard the words from outside, afraid that she had made them up in her head.

Lauren leaned over and took her hand "Becca, we need you in this family. I need you; having had a sister for two days now I can't imagine going back to being without you" she said earnestly.

"I second that" Seamus boomed with his usual full volume. "Lauren can get a little weird sometimes; she NEEDS somebody to keep her in line" he said, winking playfully at the two girls as he reached for yet another pancake.

"Why?" Becca whispered, her eyes closed and tears streaming down her face.

"Why would you do this? I don't deserve this! I am just a nobody that doesn't belong anywhere" she said softly, burying her head in her hands.

Mom spoke this time, rubbing her back as she spoke, gentle and sweet, the sincerity of her words like sunshine after rain.

"Becca, from the second I saw you on that video, I knew that you were special. And from the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew that you were my daughter."

"There is one thing about families that is more important than anything in this life, and that is that families just ARE. We don't choose our families, we don't earn our families, and we can't lose our families, no matter what."

"There is no answer to your question "why" sweetie; there are no reasons with families or "because" with families. Families just ARE, from A to Z from start to finish from first to last, till death do you part...and even then, you don't lose your family; you just get to meet the ones that came before you and greet the ones that come after you in heaven."

Becca was so still she hardly appeared to be breathing, eyes still closed, but the tears were no longer streaming down her face.

"A minute ago I apologized because we had never asked you what you wanted" Dad said quietly.

"We are so eager to have you in our family, we forgot to ask you what you want. I am so sorry we didn't think of your feelings. You don't have to answer now, with the pressure of all of us sitting here together. You can think about it, and you can tell the person at the CPS office tomorrow what you want to do. We will absolutely support whatever you choose sweetie" he finished.

Becca was silent a few heartbeats longer, and then raised her head slowly. She looked at each of the people around the table, one by one, her back straightening, her chin lifting, and her smile widening more with each face.

"Do I?" she asked, going for serious but unable to hold back the mischievous glint from her eyes.

The remaining Holt's looked at each other in confusion, not sensing a problem, but trying to figure out what she was talking about.

"Do you what?" Mom finally asked. "Becca, honey, I'm sorry, but we honestly have no idea what you're talking about" she added gently, joined by three other heads nodding in agreement.

"Do I look that stupid?"

Four equally astonished faces gaped with open mouths.

"What do you think I am, an idiot? OF COURSE I WANT TO BE A HOLT!" she yelled, unable to hold back the now happy tears.

"Oh Snap, you did NOT just punk all four of us you sneak!" Seamus yelled while the table dissolved in laughter.

That night after Mom and Dad made their rounds, locking doors and shutting windows, making lunches for the next day and starting yet another load of the unending pile of laundry, they once again met in the hallway between the kids' rooms.

"It's never dull, is it?" Dad asked as he closed Seamus's door gently.

"I can't stand being bored" Mom said as they held hands and walked to their room.

2. The Office

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice" Marie said as she got Rebeccah settled and then sat down herself. "I understand that these things are complicated, and I am so glad we could get started right away".

"Sorry about having to do this so early, but we're booked a few weeks out so the only time we could do this was before business hours" Barbara said, with only a hint of annoyance. "I'm Barbara Spalding by the way. I've seen the video, and you certainly have a special case here...I assume this is the girl you've brought with you?"

"Yes, this is my youngest daughter Rebeccah" Mom answered.

"Where is your husband?" Barbara asked.

"He had to go to the Health Clinic at Adoption Services to schedule her checkup. Rebeccah and I will be heading over there when we're through here" Marie explained.

Barbara smirked with a half-annoyed half-amused grin "Mrs. Holt, you do know that the temporary custody assignment the Chief issued ends tomorrow, right? While I appreciate that you are taking this so seriously, after tomorrow it's my job to see that the girl is placed in the best situation possible for her safety and development."

"Mrs. Spalding, this is my daughter. You said that she will only be my daughter for another 24 hours, after which it will be your job to find a better place for her. Well that means that I only have 24 hours to make sure you understand that the best place in the universe for her is as part of my family."

Barbara paused, the true pause of one really seeing something for the first time. "Well, we'll see how it goes" was all she said.

"Now I see that you've filled out the request not only for Lawful Guardianship, but Permanent Adoption as well. Are you sure that you want to take that big a step right away?"

"Absolutely Mrs. Spalding. As far as we're concerned, she IS a part of our family. We're just waiting for the paperwork to catch up" she added, sharing a smile with Rebeccah.

"Ok, you certainly seem to know your mind. Now I am going to ask you to step out of the room so I can speak with the girl alone. "

"Of course, I understand. But one thing please."

"Yes?"

"Can you please use her name? Rebeccah is such a pretty name, it's a shame to waste it."

Properly chastised, Barbara replied directly to Rebeccah "I'm sorry, she's right. I apologize Rebeccah."

"No problem Mrs. Spalding" Rebeccah replied shyly, not accustomed to being treated so respectfully inside this type of building.

"Ok I'll just be out here" Marie said as she stepped out and closed the door.

As soon as the door shut, Rebeccah looked over at Mrs. Spalding and before she could ask anything, Rebeccah just said simply "Yes".

"Yes what?" Mrs. Spalding asked, looking down at the stack of papers on her desk and pulling out the questionnaire she was supposed to go over with the child, Rebeccah, she corrected herself. It was designed to help a young orphan think about their current foster home setting and decide if they wanted to stay when the parents requested adoption. She had not done this often, as the adoption of teenagers was so rare.

"Whatever you're going to ask me about staying with my family, the answer is yes."

"So you are pretty sure that this family is the place you want to stay."

"Yes"

"Do you understand that this would be permanent?"

"I'm counting on it"

"Are you sure? This is..."

"Look, Mrs. Spalding, you can keep asking me all those questions on your sheet, I know you're supposed to do that kind of stuff, and if you need to, that's fine, I don't mind. But I can save you some time if you just put "Yes" on everything. I have spent all my 16 years in this system, and I can guarantee you that there is nowhere else in the world that I would rather be then back home with this family, MY family."

"Wow, it sounds like you are pretty sure Rebeccah, which is great. Are you absolutely sure there is nothing else we can..."

"Mrs. Spalding, if you would spend two days with this family, like I just did, you would want them to adopt you too. I'm not kidding".

Mrs. Spalding stopped writing, put her pen down, threw her head back and laughed.

"Rebeccah, I have been at this a long, long time, and I thought that I had seen it all. But that was a first. You've convinced me that you really do want to be with this family, and I am pretty sure they really want to be with you too."

"Mrs. Spalding, you can't imagine how much I hope so."

"Well if they're really as great as you say, maybe I'll just come home with you!"

Rebecca and Mrs. Spalding both laughed, but stopped suddenly when they heard a muffled voice from the hallway "I can hear you, you know!", prompting another fit of laughter.

After the questions were asked and answers recorded and the various papers were printed and signed, mother and daughter stood to leave. "We're open for business now, so things will be a little crowded out front. Let me walk you out" Barbara said as she circled past the pair and opened the office door. She led them down a short hallway, back to the "Employee Only" area which had been empty when they came through before.

When they rounded the corner, Barbara stopped in her tracks, causing Mom and Rebecca to pull up suddenly to avoid running into the back of her. "Mrs. Spalding, is there something wrong?" Mom asked, trying to peek around Barbara's shoulder to see what had caused her to stop so abruptly.

"I don't think so" Barbara said in a quiet, slightly awed voice, full of wonder and disbelief. Mom stepped to the side so she could see...and saw.

She saw dozens and dozens of Child Protective Services employees, all standing shoulder to shoulder, forming an impromptu receiving line leading from where they stood all the way through the warren of cubicles and printer stands to the front of the large office. The silence was absolute, each person standing patiently.

Barbara slowly led Marie and Rebecca through the human gauntlet, Marie smiling and nodding to each person, saying quiet "thank you"s as they passed. Rebecca walked hesitantly, in awe of all the people staring at her, even though their smiles were wide and their eyes friendly. She had never been the center of attention like this, and it made her feel self-conscious, knowing that somehow they all knew who she was and why she was here. Some of the women held out a hand to touch her or Marie gently, wanting to pass on their good wishes.

When they got to the front, all three of them turned in unison and looked back the way they had come. The staff members were active now, starting to hustle and bustle about, the hum of conversation beginning to swell to the level of barely contained chaos that was obviously the norm in the busy office.

Barbara was the first to surface and broke the spell by clearing her voice and saying with genuine astonishment "Well, you don't see that every day" and offering Marie and Rebecca a lopsided grin.

"I guess not" Marie agreed, laughing delightedly, full of the positive energy from so many well-wishers. The women looked at each other, really looked at each other, for the first time, and broke into a fit of giggles that sounded like two middle schoolers conspiring to plan the next round of truth or dare at a slumber party.

As their mirth subsided, Mom looked at Rebecca, who was still staring, shell shocked, at the now thriving office behind them, asking herself if that had just really happened... "Are you ready kiddo? We gotta meet Dad at the Health Clinic so we better get going". Rebecca tore her gaze and her thoughts away from the crowded scene behind her and nodded as she looked at the two women, trying to focus

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