JAY HORNE'S
BOOKFLURRY INC PRESENTS
THE HAMPER OF HORRORS

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Jay Horne's
The Hamper of Horrors

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Dedication

For Jaymat and Montanna.
Thanks for believing.

Chapter One

Right around when I turned thirteen, I'd gotten into the world's worst habit of leaving my dirty clothes on the bedroom floor.

So, sue me, right?

Mom had started to take notice when she found Gabe, that's my baby brother, rolling around in a pile of my dirty underwear. Mom had also noticed then that I had a disproportionate number of thongs at that point in my life.

Could our relationship have been any more strained?

Around that time, Dad tripped over a pair of my stretch pants one morning. He was quick to remind me that I was not too old for a spanking. Had anyone been staying over that night I may have literally died from embarrassment at the comment.

I guess it was all amusing to Gabe because he laughed from his crib. I'd have punched the little terd If he wasn't two. Instead, he gets the tongue. A child-friendly version of flipping the bird.

If Gabe were telling the story he'd be all like, "Tanner almost got a spay spay from Dada!"

Not then though, he'd still be blubbering.

Don't ask me why I baby talk with my little brother. Maybe Mom did me that way.

Not to worry, there won't be much of that in this story. I'm seventeen now, and my dad's a writer. I'd just like to leave behind a little something for my baby brother to remember me by.

Besides, this story is not for babies, but he'll appreciate it when he's old enough to read it. If it doesn't scare him half to death!

You're gonna say that some things in this story sound like a load of crab. And well, somethings were a total load of crap! You'll agree when we get there. But I'm gonna tell it like it happened and I won't elaborate too much. Dad says that's how amateurs write.

The main thing is, when Gabe reads this, I just want him to know how much I loved him and will always love him.

About at the point in my teenage life that I decided I'd been paying my dues far more than I'd been enjoying myself, Mom must've been out shopping for secondhand clothing.

I say that because, that was when she came home with 'the thing'.

I was at school that afternoon so I can only tell you how I think it likely went with her. Even though, I can be mostly sure of the details because later in that strange week, I personally came to know the store that my mom ended up in.

The shop was one of those jobs with stained glass windows, featuring more cracks, than rod iron. Mom liked those kinds of dives; homes converted into places of business. She called it the Art District. I called it the ghetto.

Back before Gabe, when mom used to paint a lot, I would steal the Mardi Gras beads off of the pilings out front of those places while mom shopped for antique frames.

That kinda gives a picture of the district. Seawall pilings in driveways, topped with moldy pelican statues. Not the proper ones, but the skinny ones that you'd have a hard time telling if they were plastic or real cement.

Who'd ever heard of a skinny pelican?

Inside the shop, Mom would be riffling through the clothes hangers, already having decided that she wanted the cursed thing she had found. She never starts flipping through clothes until she's cased the good stuff.

"What a great selection of children's clothes you have here," she'd say.

To which the lady of the shop would reply, "Thank you, Dear."

You can imagine teeth like bacon grease and splinters, she is the antagonist after all.

"A lot of things fall into my lap around these parts. Do you see anything you like?" she'd ask.

"Actually, I am most interested in this wicker piece over here. How much for the hamper?"

You see? That's how Mom rolls.

It was then that the crone would've looked at her with one milky eye and replied, "Oh, I couldn't charge you for that old thing. If you like it you can have it for free."

And here you might say that sounds like a heap of crap, but I am telling you now, milky eye? Yes. I know, because later, I was there. And we will get to that!

In fact, I've always referred to the old witch that owned that shop as Mrs. Partridge, because she looked like one of those squat bag-ladies who'd have a bird perched on her shoulder. Her outfit more or less made up of too many scarves. Then there was the wooden chopstick which impaled the grey ball of yarn, that she called hair, on top of her head.

Besides, I thought it more unbelievable that she gave Mom the thing for free!

"No. I couldn't possibly take advantage of your generosity like that!" said Mom. But who was she kidding? The only thing Mom had been worried about were the possible bedbugs going home with her.

Since an infestation a few years back, she practically runs everything through an industrial sized dryer for an hour before carting things inside. Yet still, she can't stay out of those shops.

"Oh, but I insist, Dear," said the shop keeper, "In fact I will be glad to be rid of it!"

If that wasn't a hint then I don't know what was.

"Okay," says Mom, "If you insist. But I must buy *something*. Perhaps I will get this blouse here for my daughter, Tanner."

"What a beautiful choice, Dear."

"It looks almost brand new and it's just her size!"

Another questionable finding now that I'm finally writing about it.

Mrs. Partridge took the garment and snipped the price tag from the sleeve then placed it in a brown paper bag, directing her eyes to the Square reader on the table when she saw Mom's credit card.

"Just, select there if you would like a receipt, Dear," she said.

Mom took the bag and thanked her again for her generosity. Then, she left with her paper bag in one hand and the wicker hamper under-arm.

Again, this is how it most likely happened.

And most likely, Mrs. Partridge was wringing her hands in delight.

Chapter Two

"Nan's Curiosities?"

That's what was on the bag when she handed it to me that afternoon. I can attest to that truth, as I was present.

"Just open it!" she said.

I did.

Then, when I lifted up the blouse to admire it Mom said, "It was a little shop in the Art District, and look, I got a hamper for you and Gabe's room."

I may have been looking at the hamper mom had brought home with a bit of disgust, but not because I saw anything evil about it. Actually, it had to do with the fact that I thought I'd recognized the blouse from somewhere else.

I guess that's the catch when it comes to secondhand.

"What?" Mom said sharply, "A hamper will keep your father from tripping over your clothes, if you don't fail to use it."

It was an obvious spot to insert an eyeroll. So, I did.

I followed her into my room where she cleared a small space by the bedroom door.

"There, see. It matches your dresser."

"Uh, it's great, Mom." That's when I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror from the backside of the bedroom door. I held up the blouse.

"It's gorgeous. You should wear it to school tomorrow."

"Do you really think?" I don't always disagree with Mom. The little agreements are what kinda kept us going back then.

"Cool," said Gabe from his side of the room. He had one leg over the edge of his playpen.

He kinda coo's, really. But, when I mimic him, I always say cool, just to give him benefit of the doubt.

Mom stepped over and caught him before he fell to the floor. "No, no, Gabe. Not unless we say! You stay in your pen. No climbing!"

Just then, Dad called from the kitchen that dinner was ready.

"Well, guess he smelled the grub," I said.

"I guess so. Go wash up and I will get Gabe ready for dinner."

This is where I do the classic teenage thing and go take my shower, leaving the rest of the family waiting around the dinner table for my fashionably late arrival.

It's never intentional!

It's as I said. My dues were paid up. I was making good grades. Good choices. Plus, there's things to do in the shower.

Hair, shave, not to mention the loofa-on-a-stick is heavenly. I'm just saying, I'm not going to rush that stuff. Cleaning yourself is something you shouldn't feel forced to do quickly.

If I wanted to do that, I'd join the Navy.

Whatever. They had started without me. But, things were all-in-all okay. I missed the prayer, but it's always the same anyhow and Gabe was being fed little slivers of steak cooked medium rare. Another carnivore in the making, I guess.

I had been scrolling through Instagram when Mom said, “Tanner! Phone.”

It was possibly another eyeroll moment, but Dad was watching, so I slid it under the table and onto my thigh.

“I mean it. Gabe is gonna get all your bad habits.”

So, I took the hint and visibly turned off my phone, sliding it under my thigh.

We’re a no-tv-at-dinner family. I mean, not all the time. But most of the time. That’s okay, I get it. Dad’s always at work so we like to at least eat together so he can see our faces. Would suck to work all day and not once get to enjoy what you work for.

Eew, why am I feeling sorry for military people again all of a sudden?

Anyway, dinner was great after that, actually. Then it was dishes and couch for television. Well, there’s a short interlude while Mom gives Gabe some milk just to make him sleepy and the whole place is quiet. Usually, she’s finished up about the time I get done doing the dishes.

Then I can kiss the little guy goodnight and Dad and I are free to turn on the tube while Mom lays down the baby.

Not really a baby anymore, but still. The baby. Classic family night, I guess.

But of course, just as I’m getting into whatever weird thing Dad has chosen on Netflix, here comes Mom. Fuming as quietly as she can over my clothes on the bedroom floor.

Must’ve forgot to put them in the new hamper, even though she just bought it for me. And that’s what really is rubbing her wrong. Not that I didn’t do it. It’s that she just bought me it.

Whatever. And I would never get a chance to say this to her, but I wasn’t gonna rush my washing thing. At least getting directly to the table afterward should have meant something?

Guess not.

That ended in me going to bed early. Which was fine, I’d rather swipe Instagram anyhow. Feel bad for Dad though, we don’t ever get to spend time together.

I listened to the living room TV from my bed until my Dad finally came into the room. He leaned down and picked up my dirty laundry, which still was heaped defiantly in the crack of light from the opened door.

I watched as he eyed the new-to-me wicker hamper for a moment, tested its lid, which was just a simple flip up type of deal, then roll the bundle of dirtys under the lid and into the bin with a swishing sound.

He came over and sat down on the edge of the bed, putting a gentle hand on the back of my shoulder, which was intentionally facing him now.

“Ya know. We’re not all that bad,” he says. He gives a little pat at the statement. “You don’t have to try and kill us with your dirty laundry.”

Then he takes a deep breath like he’s done with the humor, but maybe his dinner was just settling, “She’s trying to make it easy on you. We’re just asking for a little effort.” Then he gently shakes my shoulders, “That’s all.”

Then he was probably making to kiss my head and leave it at that, but I had to say my part. And he listened. And I felt better.

Sometimes, I miss being younger. Even if I was treated like a baby.

Anyhow, I resolved to use the damned hamper after that. Another hour flipping way too much through my phone, and I was ready to pass out regardless. Water under the bridge.

The next morning, I woke up surprised to see Pixie sleeping on the lid of the antique that Gabe and I had acquired. Pixie is a Calico.

Last year, Mom would have gone ape shit had she found Pixie anywhere in the vicinity of Gabe. Something to do with cat-baby disease or something.

Recently, however, the poor thing's been allowed a little more freedom.

The danger of her falling asleep on Gabe's face and smothering him to death had seemed to pass, though Dad still liked to joke about how cats like to steal your breath at night with a kiss.

To be honest, I woke up once with a cat on my chest, not Pixie, staring right at my mouth once when I stayed at a church lock-in. Every time Dad says that it creeps me out thinking of it.

The tv was on, but no input was selected.

I rolled over and checked Gabe's crib. Nothing.

Remote on shelf? Nope.

Well, that explains that.

Just for the heck of it, and since I was already leaning over, I looked under the bed. No kid. Not that I was expecting him to be there, Mom for sure had him out in the living room for a morning slurp. But, hey, no clothes under there either.

Found the remote though.

I took the opportunity to hop up, which scared Pixie off the hamper and out of the room. Then pushed my door shut. Did my morning necessaries and changed. Nothing really to it. I've been sleeping in just a t-shirt lately, so my undies went into the hamper, which Mom had already emptied. Figures. And the tee I tossed over the bed post.

I wasn't going to disgust you with details of the whole underwear situation, but what the hell. Yes, a thong. They're comfortable.

Besides, you wear 'em while you've got the chance. Part of the month you won't be able to, what with a damn diaper hidden in your panties and all.

Too much? Yeah well, we girls wear something called bras too. Get over it.

Anyhow, I was looking forward to wearing the new blouse, but the thing smelled like moth balls so, back in the bag it went. Same old heart tee it is.

I put on my only pair of jeans that fit and made the arbitrary hall crossings to the bathroom until all was ready.

All being me.

This was Thursday morning. And not that it's your job to keep track of how many undies hit the bottom of my hamper, but that made at least one pair of panties.

Things really didn't start weirding me out till two days later, but on Friday night, I shoulda seen it coming.

Chapter Three

Between dance, and my afternoon exercise, you'd have thought that I would have at least some fresh clothes to put away on Friday night after dinner, but it just wasn't the case. Not that I would have noticed. But you kinda do that when you get accused of throwing your own clothes in the garbage.

But that wasn't the first weird thing that happened. First, the cat went missing.

Not that we would really notice Pixie missing right off the bat. Like I said, she had been on parole for a while. So, most likely, she had just been let out and not return. But no one had seen her.

That confusing situation was side railed when mom found my night shirt halfway under the bed and we got into an argument about where my panties were disappearing to.

She had said, "Well, if you'd bring me the clothes in your hamper, I would wash them for you."

I had said, in shear confusion, "What clothes?"

And that's when she scooped my shirt up off the bedroom floor and started in about the clothes I always fail to put into their proper places.

Now, you have to give me some credit here. I *had* decided to use the damn hamper. And I had been.

Okay, maybe a stray sock, or my nightgown, for God's sake, didn't make it into the antique maws of the blasted hamper, but I had been doing my duty. Now, I was in the hot seat again over some stupid clothing issue. Plus, I could tell where this ended up. Namely, with me in my room indefinitely.

I mean, if Mom and Dad wanted to spend a little time together alone, they could have just asked. But, looking back, I'm not sure they wanted to do that at all.

I could hear them out there in the living room arguing, it was embarrassing really. Who in their right mind would think I had thrown my own clothes out?

"She's doing it on purpose," then some hushes from Dad.

"Why would she do that? I had a talk with her, let's just try and calm down — "

Then Mom again, "She knows. She knows it will piss me off. I'm about to lay Gabe down and she knows it will get me upset right before his bedtime."

Then things seemed to calm down a little when they moved the argument into the kitchen.

Meanwhile, I was replacing Gabe in his crib after he had climbed out.

I always give the kid a little leeway. He had made it all the way to the dresser before I knabbed him this time.

Little escape artist.

Then, Gabe seemed pretty content, just lying in there with his blankie and his puppy dog stuffy. So, I got content too. Leaned back against my bed and started doing this connect the dots thing on my phone for a bit.

It kept me from live streaming the entire ridiculous dilemma, so, hey, give it up for patient teens. And babies.

Then I could hear Mom and Dad out there on the couch and the tv came on. One of Dad's stupid fantasy shows we watch together. Well, they're just stupid as long as you let them be. But I kinda understood what was going on.

I was just gonna let them cuddle awhile. Obviously, Mom had decided Gabe could be put down a little later, tonight. I guess sometimes, Moms need Dads too.

It had been about half of an hour. Me connecting dots, Gabe almost napping, and Mom and Dad fleetingly content when something amazing happened.

The hamper shook, nearly scaring me half to death, and Pixie's paw came over the lip of the wicker hamper, punching the lid up. Then her head popped through the top. And there she was!

"Kiki!"

Gabe was clearly excited. Seeing as that was more or less the best he'd done at naming anything but Mamma or Dadda. He was swaying there on his two feet holding the rail when she came pouring out of the hamper like nothing was amiss.

His crying out was the bedtime alarm if there ever was one. It wasn't two seconds before the tv in the living room flipped off and Mom and Dad were doing the combination tap on the door while they open it gig.

It's the parental sign of minor respect.

"Pixie," exclaimed Mom, a bit over-joyed for my blood. Usually, she'd be worried that she'd rile up Gabe, being his bedtime and all. But considering the night's events I just went with it.

"Where have you been girl?" Mom gave her all of one scratch behind the ear before Kiki, as Gabe would say, escaped to the safety of the under-bed cave.

Sure as heck beat me. I guess she'd been in the hamper all along, and that ended up being my meager response.

I was all out of eager ones. Eager was gonna have to wait till tomorrow afternoon when Mom and Dad were supposed to be going to the movies for a matinee. That was the only thing I was eager about. Gabe I can handle. House basically to myself.

Yeah, I was eager.

Dad asked if I'd like to come watch TV with them for a bit after Gabe was down, but I declined. I cranked down the brightness on my phone and lay there in my bed while Mom patted Gabe's back and got him fully to sleep. Then, I did what all good kids do at night. Give their parents space to just be.

When Mom kissed me good night and went to leave, I stopped her with a, "PSST."

I motioned for her to lift the lid on the little hamper of horrors. Then, when she did, I pulled my feet from under the quilt and stripped my socks off, turning them back right-side-out to appease her. Then, I chucked them into the basket for three points.

She shut the door with a smile.

One thing I remember above all else that night, is Pixie scaring the crap out me when she jumped up in the bed just as I was crossing over into sleep. But the one thing I remember, was her smell.

She smelled, and I know that smell now —

of old Mrs. Partridge.

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