

#ThatsLife

A NOVEL



SHANNON PEEL

TYPE TO ENTER A CAPTION.

#ThatsLife

Family

Shannon Peel

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About #ThatsLife

#ThatsLife was formally published as 40 Something. It is a novel written as a series of novellas of approximately 14 000-20 000 words. Think of it as TV show episodes. Each takes about one hour to read. They are meant to be commuter reads, lunchtime reads, or just before bed.

Come by the author's website www.shannonpeel.com for extras and information on the series, the author, other works by the author, and her social media.

Reviews posted on any bookselling site are very appreciated. The author hopes you enjoy the story as it unfolds and that you will share your experiences with her.

Justine

Was there ever a time when life was simple for women?

Was it easier back in the day when men were men and women were women and everyone knew their place? I doubt that made it any simpler. At least I hope it didn't because if their lives were simpler, better, more productive than ours are today, what was the point of struggling for feminism and equality?

It doesn't always feel like it made women's lives better. It feels like more pressure, more stress, and more responsibilities. It also feels like something is missing. Like this can't be all there is to life? Like it's all one big revolving wheel going nowhere. For instance every morning at our house is exactly the same:

"Mom where are my shirts?" My daughter Emma yells.

"Shirts? In your closet?"

"No."

"Folded in a basket?"

"No."

“Damn. Are you sure?”

“Ya. Never mind I found them.”

“Where?”

“Wet and stinky in the washing machine. When did you wash them?”

I try to think. I can't really remember when I did.

“Uhm. Do you have a dirty one that you can wear?” I ask.

Sending my daughter to school in dirty clothes, what would my mother say? Thing is I know exactly what she'd say, she told me just last week.

“You just need to do things during work breaks. You work from home, how hard can it be to stop, take a break, switch out the laundry, do a load of dishes, sweep the floor, then go back to work?”

It is a good question. I generally don't take breaks and if I do, I'm surfing the net or checking my social media. I don't really think to do the laundry. Hence my daughter yelling at me about how hard done by she is because she has to wear a shirt she already wore to school. Heaven help

us, what will the kids think? What will her teachers think? Will they call social services if her shirt gets dirty enough?

My husband comes down to save the day. He does this a lot. He grabbed a couple of clean shirts she doesn't like out of her dresser, walks into the kitchen, and says, "Your choice the dirty one, one of these, a smelly one, or you could just go in your PJs. Up to you."

I choke on my coffee. *'And if she'd chosen to go in her PJs, then what?'* She doesn't. She just says Daaaad in that oh you're so embarrassing way teen girls have and grabs a clean one out of his hand.

"I'll go run the load in the washer, pour me a cup of coffee." He says and disappears into the laundry room.

My gawd, I can't even imagine what my great-grandmother did before washing machines were invented. I turn, pour my husband a cup of coffee, add two teaspoons of sugar, and pop a bagel into the toaster for his breakfast. Then I feel his strong arms come from behind me to grab the mug of coffee. It feels so normal.

"Yuck."

Our ten-year-old son's voice interrupts us and I am twirled around to face my husband who kisses me, while our son makes fake gagging noises. The kiss is just a kiss, a passionless peck, normal, boring.

"Your coffee, kind sir."

"Sugar?"

I look at him, shake my head, and turn to butter his bagel.

"Gus and Rose's place Sunday afternoon?" He asks and I nod.

"Girls' night after?" I nod again. "And I'm stuck babysitting?"

"Parenting dear. It's called parenting when the kids are yours."

"Are you sure they're mine?"

"Positive."

That's a typical morning. Every day is the same. A chore I forgot to do. My husband swooping in to fix things. My kids needing something or disapproving of something I did or didn't do. Each day is pretty much the same - chores, kids, work, bed. Always the same. Perfectly the same. Perfect. The perfect life.

I am forty years old. I have a wonderful, loving husband, two well-adjusted kids, a gorgeous home in a suburban neighbourhood, and a career. I have a good life and I feel like I am missing something, like I've forgotten something, done something wrong.

Did my mother feel this way? Did my grandmother? Did my great-grandmother?

Did my grandmother ever forget to switch over the wash and have to wash the load two more times before it made it into the dryer? Did she own a dryer? Did she have to run her kids around from one activity to the other, help them with homework more advanced than when she'd gone to school? Did she feel the pressure of friends, family and society to be perfect? Always feeling judged? Did she ever look at her life and wonder if she made the right choices?

Will it be different when my daughter is forty? By then everyone will probably just swallow a pill and say, "that's dinner." So, if women have more time because they don't have to cook, will life be any

different? Or will my daughter be looking at forty saying I think I forgot to do something.

Will she have regrets?

I hope not.

I hope she knows what she wants and can be satisfied, happy, and in love.

Rose

I love my children, I do. Being a mother is the best job in the world.

It's just, well, who are these people who live in my house?

One minute they are my sweet amazing well behaved children, the next they became these things, these hormone driven crazy teenagers who can drive a sane woman, crazy. I'm on my way to the loony bin, I tell you.

Take my oldest, Alexis.

I endured 26 hours of labour getting her into this world, on top of a difficult pregnancy. I thought my stomach was going to come out my mouth I was retching so much. Ever have the stomach flu? Well this was that for months on end.

She was a good baby, the cutest toddler, and a good kid. I have so many wonderful memories of her sweet face smiling up at me. We loved to bake cookies together for the family, she was a great little helper.

Then something happened, she turned 13 and it became World War 3 in

our house. One night she went to bed a sweet little angel and the next morning an alien had taken over her body.

My perfect little helper became a daily adversary always trying to get away with wearing too much makeup, too little clothes, and missing curfew. If I said turn right, she turned left. Suddenly, friends became more important than family and it is always a fight to get her to show up for family events. She has become so hard headed and stubborn I nicknamed her donkey.

Next came Isabella and being pregnant with her was easy, well by then they'd invented these pills for morning sickness and I was popping them like gummy candies. They were a Godsend. I gained so much weight, I thought I was going to burst. The labour was a struggle, at first, and then the monitors started going off because she was in distress. It was terrifying as I was wheeled into the O.R. for a c-section.

Seriously, you should consider booking one of these the day you find out you're pregnant. It is an easier way to get the baby out of you.

Isabella, like Alexa, was a model child. She loved to play dolls. I remember spending hours creating elaborate stories, dressing them up, and doing their hair. I loved brushing my girl's hair, braiding it, and tying it up in ribbons. They were always the best dressed girls in Sunday School.

Then, she turned fourteen and met a boy. Not just any boy, she had to fall for Johnny an eighteen-year-old rebel with long multi coloured hair, a tattoo and facial piercings. At one point, I counted seven pieces of metal in his face. Not to mention what that kid did to his ear lobes. I thought Gus was gonna shoot him the minute he saw the boy and we don't own a gun. Since then, she's been a struggle with one outrageous request request after another, which Gus and I put a stop to. No way is my daughter walking around with a nose ring, or any part of her face pierced, her body tattooed or her hair any colour, except the rich brown God intended. For mercy's sake. Give that girl one inch and she'll be headed to hell.

Jessica, my third girl was always a quiet, serious, little girl, such an easy child. She never gave me any trouble as a toddler or preschooler. She brings home the best marks from school. Every night I'd read the girls books and Jessica was always asking for one more chapter, it was so cute. She's perfect. Quiet, studious, smart, and keeps to herself. Always reading or doing homework in her room. When she became a teenager, not much changed. Well, her moods became a little darker at times and she seems to mope more than I'd like, still, she is doing just fine.

Then came Aiden. Finally, a boy.

My pregnancy with him was so perfect. Barely any morning sickness and I had lots of energy. Right from the minute that boy could move, he was into everything. I was forever running after him. It was exhausting. Busy, busy, busy, that boy. He's grown into a talented athlete, a natural Gus says. At 13 he's already on the school Football team. There isn't any sport he can't excel in.

He just turned 13 and I am beginning to see the signs of him becoming a teenager already. He stopped hugging me, I was quite upset the first time it happened, but he's becoming a young man, you know, and a mother has to expect these things. He hangs out with friends after school somewhere. I am not sure exactly where. I find it quite frustrating at times. I need to know where he is at all times, I tell him, of course he doesn't listen. Such a boy, my Aiden.

I enjoyed my children's toddler years, preschool years, elementary years. They were always so sweet, so loving, and we had so much fun together. Now, oh my. God give me strength to make it through a day without wanting to strangle one of them, especially Alexis or Isabella.

Being a mother is wonderful, I'm just wondering, is there a place I can send them for their teen years, a place where I could visit on occasion and then when they are normal again, they can come home?

Just asking.

Charlie

Just sign the offer.

I'm waiting with my client in the other boardroom waiting for her ex-husband to sign the divorce papers and settlement offer. He's drawn this out way too long and it is costing my client too much money. It should have been simple, easy, a 50/50 split. There is no such thing as an easy divorce. People think the law is black and white, it's not, it's full of loopholes, precedents, arguments, and procedures.

I like practicing law. I enjoy putting a case together and arguing the points to get the best deal for my client. It's like a game of chess. You figure out what your client really wants and what they are willing to compromise, then you build a game plan.

In my opinion, it's best when my client makes the first move, that way we can ask for everything they are legally entitled to and have more control over the chessboard at the start. Then it's just a matter of give and take. She'll give you the car in exchange for the home's contents. He'll give you the savings account balance and you waive rights to his

pension plan. The key is to figure out what the other side will be willing to give and making the right moves.

This case. Not so easy. Some divorce negotiations go sideways because one party believes the laws do not apply to them. They think their situation is special in some way. Usually, when things are hard it's because they want to punish each other or make someone pay for inflicting pain and hurt feelings. In this case, my client's soon to be ex-husband wants to prove how smart he is.

He's cocky and believes he knows the law better than I do because he read some textbooks and got some free advice. He's using every trick he can come up with to draw this out and my client is left holding the bill. Thing is, I still have one ace up my sleeve and if we have to go to court, I'm using it, that is if my client doesn't chicken out.

“Maybe we should just give him what he wants. I don't want to do this anymore. I want it to be over.” My client is pacing back and forth. “I mean I don't really use the vacation house. He can have it. I can't take the stress anymore.”

“STOP.” I almost yell at her and she stops pacing. “I know you’ll give away the farm just to have this over. You have to let me go at him with everything. We’ve been as nice as we can. If he’s going to cost you more, you have no choice.” I add.

“I don’t know. I just can’t do this anymore. The stress is too much.”

“I understand. I’ve been there. Right now, you’re only fighting for what’s fair, in fact, less than fair. You’ve already given him more than he’s legally entitled to. The mediator is going over it with him now. Let’s just wait and see what happens first.”

Judges don’t like it when someone wastes the courts time or plays games to punish the other party by using the system and that is what this guy is doing. He thinks he’s pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes, but he’s not. I hate men like him.

The door opens and the mediator comes in.

“I am sorry, he won’t listen to reason. I’ve tried explaining the laws to him and what will happen if he goes to court. He’s determined to play lawyer. He wants his day in court.” The mediator says.

I smile.

“No. No. No. We should just give him what he wants.” My client panics.

“Sherry, listen. I know this is hard.”

“It’s expensive, that’s what it is. And now you want me to pay for experts.”

“I know. He wants it to be expensive for you. He’s punishing you.”

“I know. I just... Oh, I am tired.”

“We’ve talked about the next step. Are you prepared to go ahead with it?”

“Do I have any other choice?”

“Not really. This is for the best. I know court is scary and that you are scared about what a judge will say. I can’t say for certain which way

it will go, but if we do this, I believe you will come out better off than that deal we just gave him. OK?”

“Are you sure it’s going to cost that much?”

“I’m afraid so, but if I’m right, then you’ll have the money to cover it.”

She nods. I open my briefcase, take out papers, and give them to the mediator.

“I have a petition for a full psychological assessment of both parents, the children, and everyone who lives in the homes. Names are there.”

“Let’s take a look.” The Mediator reads the paperwork. “It all looks in order.”

“I’m not done.” I say.

He cocks his head at me, curiosity in his eyes. I smile at him and hand him another set of papers.

“This is a letter stating my client rescinds all offers up to this point and requests copies of all financial documents again.”

“Again? Why do you want those?” The mediator asks.

“Because my office’s forensic accountant believes he may have some money hidden. He’ll go looking for it now. Don’t tell him we are looking.”

“They always think they can get away with it.” He says.

“I know. He’s not going to be happy when he gets these. If you want I’ll get security up here before you present him with the papers. He has a temper.”

I turn to my client. She’s as white as a sheet, I’m scared she might faint. I grab her arm to guide her to the closest chair.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m gonna be sick.” With that, she pukes all over my new suit.

Sophie

I'm standing in line at the local food bank. You know, I used to drive by here every day and I had no idea it was here.

It's humiliating. I... Sorry... I mean... I'm grateful.

I'm thankful that the kids are at Rose's place and not here. I told her I had a doctor's appointment. I couldn't tell her I was at the welfare office and then coming here. I couldn't.

When I check in, the nice lady gives me a card for three and another for two. This means I'm able to collect food for three people and two school lunches. I should be grateful, and in a way I am, but I mean, it's just, I'm not supposed to be here.

I'm supposed to be able to take care of my kids. I'm supposed to be living in a nice house in an upscale neighbourhood. I'm supposed to be married with 2.5 kids and two cars in the driveway. That's what adults are supposed to do, right?

You know, I had that, I did. Really. Before I had to leave. I lived in a five-bedroom house on a cul-de-sac, backing onto a quiet green belt. I

lived there. I did, honest. I had four cars in the driveway. Well only one was mine, the oldest one, and the other three were my husband's...

Oh right, my ex-husband, now. I have to remember that.

It's not fair. I did everything right. I did what I was supposed to do and here I am standing in line for food other people didn't want. I guess it's fitting somehow, because like this food, I am not wanted.

Craig, that's my ex, he still lives in our five-bedroom house. He still has three cars and a good job. He hates his job, but the pay is really good. It was good enough to keep us in the house. Good enough to keep the kitchen stocked with food. Good enough to keep the kids in good quality clothes and buy him lots of shiny toys.

It is a good paying job. He should be happy with it. He's not. He says he will be happy now that I'm gone. He'll be happy without me.

I moved into a small two-bedroom basement suite in an old house outside town with my two kids. We fit into it, somehow. I sleep on the couch because the nice lady at the courthouse said it was better for the kids to have separate rooms 'cause they're a boy and girl. The courts

will be happier if they have separate rooms, she told me. It'll make it harder for Craig to take them, she said. I'm supposed to be giving them the same life they had before the separation, she said. I'm not. I can't. I don't make enough on welfare. Craig, when he feels like it, and I beg for it, gives me a few hundred dollars. I'd rather stand in this line than beg him for money.

I wonder if she likes the kitchen?

I miss my kitchen. The thought of her, Craig's girlfriend, in my kitchen, in my life, it makes me sick. The pain in my throat burns and my eyes have started watering, right here in this stupid line. I wipe the tears away quickly. I hope no one saw. I look down at my feet. I need new shoes.

"Tuna or ground beef?" The lady behind the counter asks me.

"Ground beef," I answer.

She gives me two frozen packages. I shuffle on to get a couple carrots and some potatoes. I am grateful for the food. I am. It's just, I'm

used to roasts, steaks, and chicken. Ground beef? What am I supposed to do with it?

Boxes of Mac n Cheese made with toxic orange food colouring. Craig would beat me for feeding the kids this. They aren't allowed to eat this processed food. It's food though. I can't afford to say no to food.

Rose wants me to get a lawyer and take him to court. Demand child support and my share. I can't. She doesn't understand. I'm not sure I understand. When Craig told me we were getting divorced, he told me no lawyers. He'd be fair, he said and we could do this without the courts, he said. We'd both be fair. This doesn't feel fair

He told me the courts will mess everything up and cost a bunch of money. Money we could use for the kids. The lawyers would take our kid's money. He said the courts would decide where the kids lived. We could do this on our own, he said. He'd be fair, he said.

Can the court make the kids live with him because he can afford them and I can't? He says they can. The court lady said she couldn't say

what a judge would do. She said that the court would assess each situation and do what was best for the kids. What is best for the kids?

My neighbour Liz, she went to court and they took her kids away. She used to have them almost as much as I have mine, all the time, but now she has them only half of the time. Liz said the judge hated her and was unfair. Will a judge hate me? Will he force my kids to go live with him instead of always living with me? I can't lose my kids. I just can't.

I put the apples and oranges they've given me into my bag, a weak smile on my face.

"White or Brown?" Another woman asks.

"Brown please."

She hands me two loaves of day old bread and I'm grateful for it. I am. Without this, I would have nothing.

"Are your kids allergic to peanuts?" I shake my head. "Here, you look like you could use this." She passes me a large jar of peanut butter and another jar of honey. I can't even afford to buy my kids peanut

butter and honey. The inside of my nose is burning. My eyes are blurring. I'm sobbing.

I feel someone's arms around me. It's one of the ladies from behind the counter. I feel her pushing against my shoulder moving me towards the back. Hide. Hide the broken woman whom no one wants.

"Here sit down. Here's a box of tissues. Are you ok?"

Her words sound absurd, but I nod.

OK? Am I OK?

Am I ever going to be OK again?

Lindsay

Oh my head. The light's too fucking bright. Fucking sun.

Hangovers are the worst.

I roll over and my hand connects with a hard warm body. Who is this?

I open my eyes. At least he's cute. Maybe twenty-five. Great, he'll wake up all hot to trot and my head feels like a freight train ran over it. I've got to get him out my condo. I roll over and my eyes begin to focus.

Where the hell am I?

It looks like a dorm room. Really, a dorm room? I'm at the University? This is the only way I'd ever get on campus.

Shit.

I slip quietly out of bed and try to locate my clothes, which seem to be everywhere. Thank God the room is a closet and he sleeps like the dead. I can't seem to find my panties. Was I wearing panties? I doubt it. Hell, if I was, he gets a souvenir.

Opening the door slowly, as not to wake the young buck, I slip into a hallway filled with more half naked young bucks. Damn. So what. I look young enough to be a student and they'd be lucky to get an education from a woman who knows her stuff like I do.

I walk out of the building with my head held high.

Shit, there are kids all over the fucking place. I need a drink. Can someone please turn off the fucking sun already?

Fumbling in my purse I find my phone and call a cab. I have got to stop drinking so much. I try to piece together last night. There was dancing and of course, drinking, lots and lots of drinking.

Who'd I start the night with? I check the calendar on my smartphone. Date with Joe and a number. I text.

What the hell happened last night?

No responds by the time the cab shows up. I feel too crappy to be angry. I call Charlie and tell her where I woke up.

“What about this Joe guy? Where is he?” She asks.

“I don't know. I don't remember much about last night.”

I like to party. I party all the time, but I never get so out of control I don't remember what happened. I've woken up in men's beds plenty of times and I always remember how I got there, eventually. Last night though is a complete blank. Damn, I don't even know if the kid was any good. Now that pisses me off.

“Lindsay, what's the last thing you remember?”

“Drinks with Joe at that new wine bar downtown, the one we went to last weekend.”

“OK then what?”

“I don't know. He was kind of awkward, just kept staring at me while I talked. He barely said two words. Just asked me questions and stared at me like I was the best thing he'd ever seen, and damn it, I probably was.”

“Where did you go after drinks? Did you eat anything?”

“I don't remember food, I remember wine, plenty of wine. The waiter kept filling my glass. I think we left to go dancing, 'cause I

remember dancing. I don't know where. That's it. I don't remember anything else. I sure as hell don't remember hooking up with that kid."

"Write it down. Get some water into you, better yet, sports drinks, and write down what you remember. I'll be by your place in an hour. Get cleaned up"

That's Charlie. She's a lawyer. She's always telling me to write it down. God like writing it down is the most important thing in the world. I'm not a fucking writer.

"I'm fine."

"Good, 'cause you promised to come with me to my sister's place today."

Oh shit. I stumble into my condo, paid for by my lovely jackass of a second husband, and drop into bed. Finally, someone turned off the fucking sun.

Rose

House cleaned, check. The roast is in the oven, check. The potatoes on the stove, check. The cake is iced, the pudding's chilled, check. Buns. Oh no, I forgot the buns.

“Alexis... Alexis...” My voice gets louder as I scream up the stairs. “ALEXIS!”

“Ya what do you want? I'm busy.”

“Doing what?”

“None of your business.”

“It is my business. Forget it. I need you to go and pick up some dinner buns from the store. Everyone will be here soon.”

“Why does everyone have to come every week?”

“Seriously? You've asked that question every week since you were fourteen and the answer has always been the same. Now get me the buns.”

“Yes M'am.” She salutes.

I hate it when she does that. I don't have time to discipline her, I'll just store it for later. Now where was I? Buns, house, roast, potatoes, buns, cake, and pudding, drinks.

"Alexis... get ginger ale." I yell at her back as she leaves the house.

"Moooom." Isabella comes bounding down the stairs. The girl truly does bound like a rabbit or some kind of stair-bounding kangaroo.

"Yes, Isabella?"

"Isa, Mom it's Isa."

"I named you. It's Isabella and I'm not having this conversation again. What?"

"Aiden is messing around in my room."

"Tell him to get out."

"He won't listen."

No surprise there. That boy has selective hearing.

"Tell him I have some cookies here for him."

"Cookies? Can I have one?"

“And ruin your dinner and your figure?” She glares at me.

I know it was an unfair remark, still the girl would live on junk food if I let her. It’s so hard to get her to eat a healthy meal. One day she told us she was going to be a vegetarian. More like a carbotarian. The girl only ate bread and cheese, mainly in the form of cheese pizza. It didn’t last long. I sat her down with a good healthy meal of meat, potatoes, and vegetables. Wouldn’t let her get up ‘til she ate it all. A growing girl needs a healthy meal.

“Isa said you had cookies?” My son’s voice comes through the door before he does.

“It’s Isabella, Aiden, and yes, if you go help your father with the lawn.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes, you do. Next time, don’t bug your sister. Now out you go. Your father shouldn’t have to do it all on his own anymore, you’re thirteen, plenty old enough to help out. Hurry, everyone will be here soon.”

“Is Davie coming?”

“Yes, I think so. He was at his father’s last week, right? So he’s here this week. Now off you go or you won’t be playing with Davie or getting any cookies.”

With that, he’s out the door to help Gus with the yard work. Oh damn I should have given the boy a beer to take to his dad. Gus will be thirsty. Beer? Oh no. I rush to the garage where there is another fridge usually filled with beer and wine. I forgot to check our supplies.

“Hey honey, how’s the dinner coming?”

“Gus.”

He is pulling cases of beer and bottles of wine out of the car. Oh, he remembered. I can’t help smiling at him and being grateful for his help.

“Let me help you.” I say.

He bends down kisses me on the cheek and then hands me a couple bottles of wine. I look up at him. My man. Tall. Solid. My heart floods with joy and I want to be in his arms.

That will have to wait. It's Sunday and everyone will be here soon.

So much to do. Always so much to do.

I love Sundays. Family days. It is a lot of work having everyone over here every week to get caught up and reconnected and I love it.

Family is so important and the kids really need to spend time with their grandparents before they are gone. Not that it will be anytime soon, mind you.

Sophie

Craig is late. I'm sure he will be here soon to pick them up.

The kids are ready to go. They've had baths, are in clean clothes, and I've packed a bag for the day. I don't know what I'm going to do all alone. I can't remember the last time I was alone.

Rose invited me to her place for dinner before going out for a girl's night. I could call and see if I can still come. When she invited me it sounded so overwhelming. I shouldn't be so selfish, but it is so painful to be around people. To be around families who are normal. To see what I had, what I desperately want, and will never have again. It hurts. I know I'm being jealous and petty. I can't help how I feel.

I look at the clock on the mantle, one of the few things I took with me from the house. He's half an hour late. The kids are restless. They are looking forward to seeing him. Where is he? How could he be late? I grab my cell and dial his number.

"Hello."

Craig's voice comes over the phone and I want to cry. His voice. I miss him, my heart clenches in my chest and I want to see him.

"Hello. Who is this?" he says again.

"Craig. It's Sophie."

"What do you want Soph?" The annoyance in his voice cuts me.

"You were supposed to be here half an hour ago to pick up the kids. They're waiting."

"Shit. Soph, I'm busy. I can't make it. Tell them I'll see them soon."

"Busy? Craig they are waiting for you. Why didn't you call? What are you so busy doing that you can't see your kids?"

"None of your business, Soph. I'm busy, that's all you and the kids need to know. I'll come by and get them in a few days."

"What day? What time?"

"Does it matter? I'll pick them up when I can."

"What if we have plans? We might be out."

“No, you won’t. You have no plans. You have no life, Soph. Tell the kids I’ll drop by.”

I hear his girlfriend’s voice in the background, calling his name and the knife cuts deeper. The hurt mixes with the injustice of it all.

“Craig, you can’t do this.” I’m angry. “You’re their dad and they are waiting for you. Come pick them up. What kind of father ditches his kids for some slut bitch? A deadbeat crappy one.”

I’ve never talked to him like this, never. I can’t believe it. My blood is boiling, my breathing is fast and I want to punch him. I’m shaking. I never get mad. I never talk to Craig like this. Never. To do so... Ice freezes in my veins, as I realize what I’ve done. I turn and see my son. His face is covered in tears.

“Wyatt is crying.” I whisper.

“That’s not my fault. You’re the terrible mother yelling in front of the kids. You are the one who made them cry. It’s your fault they are upset, not mine. Don’t turn this on me. It’s not my fault. It’s your

problem. Not mine. Get a grip, Soph, or I'll raise them. I won't have you yelling in front of my kids. You're such a useless waste of skin."

With that, he hangs up, and I'm standing in my small basement suite looking at my son, who is wiping his face and my daughter, who is beginning to sob. I kneel down. I can feel the tears. I can't stop them.

All three of us are huddled on the floor, crying.

"I'm sorry. I never should have yelled. I'm such a bad mommy for doing that. I'm sorry."

"You're a good mommy." My daughter says and gives me a big hug.

"Mom. You're a good mom. I love you." My son hugs me.

My kids think I'm a good mom. So, why do I feel like such a crappy one?

Charlie

Dishes are piling up in the kitchen. The kids are already running around screaming. My sister, Rose, has told them to go upstairs to play, if they don't start listening soon, I may lose it. My son Davie comes running around the corner chasing his cousin Aiden, who is a spoiled brat. Who am I to say anything bad about the kid? I'm just the aunt and my sister is the mother of the century.

“Davie.” In my sternest voice. He stops. “What did Auntie Rose tell you?”

“To go upstairs.”

“And? Why are you running around in here then? Do you boys want to do the dishes or something?” I look squarely at Aiden when I say this.

“No, Aunt Charlie.”

“Then?”

“Going Mom.”

I turn, grab a piece of cake, and shove it into my mouth. It's good. One thing I can say for my baby sister, she can bake. I look at the women in the kitchen, my sister, my mother and my friend Lindsay, who graciously agreed to come with me today. I asked her to come because she knows how to have a good time and Rose came up with this bright idea for a girl's night with her friends, no way was I going to be outnumbered. Oh my God, Lindsay is pouring me another glass of white wine with that sparkle in her eye.

"What?" I ask.

"Let's go out to the garage and see what the men are getting into."

She winks.

"If we do, Rose will freak out, then she'll tell dad and he'll lecture me the whole way back into the city about how men need their time together and I need to help my sister. My mom will tsk-tsk or yell at me or something." I take the glass of cream coloured liquid and take a big gulp. "So grab a dish Lindsay, it's time to clean up."

"You do this every week?" Lindsay asks.

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“It’s family.”

I haven’t met her family, yet. She doesn’t talk about them at all. If they are anything like her, I’m sure they go out to restaurants for family dinners so others will do the cooking and cleaning. I pull her over to a pile of dishes, throw her a towel, and smile. She looks horrified. I’m not sure if the girl has ever washed a dish in her life.

“Lindsay, it’s wonderful to have you over today.”

“Thanks. Rose? It’s Rose right?”

“Yes. You’ll have to come with Charlene every Sunday. You are staying for girls’ night?” She looks right at me. “Right Charlene?” It’s not a request. You’d think she was the big sister.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” I say.

Why do you think I brought Lindsay? To liven up the night.

“Oh hey, Charlie.”

“Hi Justine, how is the family?”

“Good. Really good.”

I bet. This chick’s life is just like Rose’s, right out of a fucking Norman Rockwell painting. Gus’ brother’s perfect wife, Justine, is gorgeous, smart, successful, and has amazing tits. Perky, perfectly sized tits, unlike my huge watermelons. I take another large swig from my glass, emptying it, before holding it out to Lindsay who already has the bottle poised to pour. Thank God for Lindsay.

“So, Charlie how’s the law practice?” Justine asks.

“Busy. I really should be working. I’m behind, like always.”

“Charlene, you wouldn’t work on a Sunday? The Lord’s day? It’s for family.” My sister’s horrified, judgemental voice stabs at me.

“What’s this about working on a Sunday, Charlene?” Oh shit. My dad just walked through the door. Perfect timing. I swear my sister does it on purpose.

“No dad. I’m here, aren’t I? I only said I was behind at work is all. I didn’t mean it literally.”

“Good. God wouldn’t want you working.”

I notice that he didn't mention, "On Sunday." My dad thinks I shouldn't be working. A teacher, a secretary, or retail are all acceptable part-time jobs for women. What's not acceptable, is a career where I have to put in sixty to seventy hours a week because that is what ruined my marriage according to him and is the reason I still can't find a husband five years later.

"What do you need, Daddy?" Rose, his perfect princess, asks.

I finish the second glass with one gulp. I'm beginning to feel light headed and drunk. I put my hand over my glass and shake my head as Lindsay holds out the bottle to fill it up again. The last thing I need is to be drunk right now.

"Come on, I need a drink, and it isn't my family." Lindsay whispers in my ear. I nod and remove my hand. What can it hurt to have one more glass? I'll only sip it this time.

Rose

I wish Charlene hadn't brought that woman with her. What was she thinking?

I'd never let my daughters out of the house wearing a skirt that short and with fake breasts falling out of their tops. Both Alexis and Isabella have tried to dress slutty before and I cut the clothes up. Proper girls don't dress like that. Boys only want one thing from those kinds of girls and it isn't love. No boy loves a slut. I've told the girls this, but they don't listen. Maybe they will now that they've met this woman, who obviously is not loved by any man.

I'd caught Gus staring at her with his mouth open, when she came through the front door. He was just staring, his eyes flicking up and down. He shouldn't be looking at her, especially like that. He's married - To me. I'm going to tell him exactly what I thought about his behaviour after everyone is gone.

"Rose. Do you have any tea?" My mom is constantly drinking tea.

“Yes mom.” I plug in the kettle and grab the box of tea bags.

“Anyone else want tea?”

Both Charlene and her friend shake their heads. They’ve drunk too much wine and could use a pot to sober up. Charlene is making a fool of herself.

“Charlene, how was your week? Did you get to the gym?” My mom asks.

“No time this week, not with Davie.”

“You really need to keep going Charlene. You are beginning to look slimmer, you can’t stop now. You are always sitting in front of a computer. Sitting is the new smoking and you need to move more.”

“I know mom. I will. What about you Rose, get to the gym?”

What? I hate it when Charlene does that. Mom was asking her, not me.

“I have too much to do with four kids and a husband. Unlike you, I don’t have any me time to go spend at a gym.”

“You think I have time with a full time law practice and Davie?”

“You don’t have to work so many hours. Right mom?”

“Rose has a point Charlene. You need to lose some weight, you want a man to find you attractive don’t you?”

“I don’t want a man mom. I’m good on my own.”

“Of course you need a man. Life meant to be shared.” Mom says and I agree with her. If I didn’t have Gus life wouldn’t be as wonderful.

“Mom, I’m good. I have Davie.”

“Davie will grow up and move out, then what will you do?” I ask

“I’ll figure it out then.”

“You’ll be ten years older and probably heavier if you don’t start exercising regularly and keep eating junk like that.” Mom says, as my sister takes another piece of cake. I think that’s her fourth piece.

“Charlie has been going to the gym with me and has plenty of men chasing her.” Lindsay interjects.

“Really? That’s great Charlene.” Mom says. “Just be careful. You know men. Don’t go sleeping with a bunch of them. You need to choose a good one.” Mom says.

“You think there are good single men? I’m pretty sure all the good ones are married.” Charlene says.

“Well, maybe you’ll find a nice widow.” Mom says.

“Seriously mom, I’m good. We have this conversation all the time. Nothing has changed since last week.”

“Charlie is really smart.” Lindsay says. “You don’t have to worry about her. She is the smartest person I know.”

I’m not sure that is saying much considering the people she probably knows.

“Well that is good. What about you Lindsay, do you have a man?” I ask.

“I have a few.”

“A few? Anyone special?” I ask.

“They are all special in their own way. Hard to find one who is the full meal deal.”

“I see. I’m sure you’ll find ‘the one’ soon.” Mom says.

“I’ll have fun until I do. There are lots of single guys online.”

“You meet men online?” Mom asks shocked. “Charlene, you shouldn’t be meeting strange men online.”

“You don’t meet men online do you Charlene?” I ask.

“Yeah. I mean it’s where the single guys are.” Charlene says.

“I don’t think that is a good idea Charlene.” Mom says. “I read about a woman who gave \$200 000 a man she’d met online and he disappeared when she stopped sending money.”

“Mom, I don’t talk to scam artists and I would never send them money.”

“I don’t know. You better be careful Charlene. It would be better for you to go to church and meet a nice Christian man there instead of going online. I’ve heard bad things about online dating.” Mom says.

“Mom, I met a great Christian guy online the other day. We were chatting and then he told me he was married. I asked him why he was cheating on his wife and he said they hadn’t had sex for some ridiculous amount of time. I suggested she might be screwing some other guy and do you know what his answer was?”

“No. What?” I say.

“There was no way she was cheating on him because they were devout. I thought oh, maybe they’re Catholic and that’s why they aren’t getting divorced because they can’t. He said no, we’re Baptist. Church does not mean a guy is worth dating, I’m finding out the devout guys are cheaters just like the non-devout and some of them are into some pretty kinky stuff.”

“Charlene, you don’t talk to them about that kind of stuff.” I say.

“Yeah. How else am I to find out what kind of weirdo he is. It’s really amazing you know. It’s like when they look at their device, the social filters they developed growing up fall away and the door to their brains open up revealing some really weird fantasy crap. Stuff you’d never know by meeting them at church. It’s a good way to find out if they are weird. They’d never tell you this stuff to your face on a first date. This way I weed them out without getting attached to some guy who wants to dress up in women’s underwear.”

“Charlene, mom doesn’t want to know about your dating life.” I say.

“She’s the one who brought it up.”

“I’m sorry that I did.” Mom says.

“That’s all it takes to get you to stop asking if I found a man yet? I got plenty of dating stories.” Charlene says.

“Well, you can keep them to yourself dear. I’m sure you know what you’re doing. So, what do you do for a living, Lindsay?”

“I’m an actress.” Lindsay says.

Well, that explains a lot.

“Interesting, anything I would have seen?” Mom asks.

“I do more commercials and extra work.”

“What’s it like to be in a commercial?” I say. It does sound interesting.

“There is a lot of hurry up and wait. You spend most of the time waiting for them to call you for your scene. The food is amazing.

Everything is catered. Days can be long but they treat the talent really well. I like it.”

“Ever meet anyone famous?” I ask.

“Not on set. But I know...” She starts dropping names she can’t possibly know. I turn around to make tea for my mom and I. She’s obviously a liar.

“Tea is ready. Lindsay are you sure you don’t want a cup?”

“I’m good.”

Justine

I enjoy a good book. Rose's library is limited to mostly romance, which isn't my favourite, still I'd rather read than be in the kitchen listening to the same old conversation. It really is becoming a broken record, I'm not sure why Charlie shows up every week to have her life held under the microscope and measured against some ideal. It's not like Rose and Mrs. Reed ever held a full time, high stress job while raising a kid. The world is different now. Very different. It is easy to lose sight of what is truly important.

"Mom, I'm bored."

I look up to see my daughter standing over me.

"Isa and Alexis are busy?" I ask. We are lucky the girls spend any time with Emma considering they are so much older. "What about the boys?"

"Davie and Aiden won't let me into the room."

"Where is your brother?"

"I don't know."

“What do you want to do?”

“Can I walk over to Ashley’s?”

“Sure.”

She starts texting into her phone before she runs off. Somethings never change from one generation to the next. At a certain age, friends are always more important than family.

“Justine, can you come into the kitchen?” Rose’s voice is shrill.

Standing in the kitchen are Rose, Gus, and Charlie. Rose is in a panic.

“What’s happened? Are one of the kids hurt? Is it Austin?” I ask

“The kids? No. The kids are fine.” Rose says. “It’s your husband.”

“Gary? OK, What happened to Gary?” I look at Gus, he isn’t upset. If it was bad Gus would be upset.

“He went for a walk with Lindsay. Alone.” Rose says.

I look at her.

“Did you hear me? He left the house with Lindsay.” She repeats.

I almost start laughing.

“Why are you smiling. Your husband...” Rose starts.

“Yes, I get it he went for a walk with Lindsay. I’m sure they’ll be back soon. Is that tea? I could use a cup.”

“They’ve been gone for over twenty minutes. Charlene you really should not have let her out of your sight. How could you bring her here?”

“I just went to the washroom.”

“For fifteen minutes?” Rose’s voice is shrill.

I pour a cup of tea before starting to make my way back to the living room.

“Justine, I think we should go look for them.” Charlie says and I look at her.

“Why?”

“Well...” Charlie looks down at her feet and seems to be squirming. I look at her.

“Charlene. You have to do something.” Rose says.

“OK. Charlie and I will go look for them, if it will make you all happy.” I say

“I’m coming too.” Rose says.

“No.” Both Charlie and I say at the same time. The last thing I need is Rose on the hunt.

“Rose, can you check on Austin for me?” I ask. “I’d really appreciate it. Charlie and I will be right back. I’m sure you are worrying for no reason.”

Charlie and I leave the house without knowing which way to go.

Lindsay

Wow.

In one way I envy Charlie. I mean, she has a family who loves her, they care about her, help her. She matters to them and she isn't alone in the world. There is so much love in this room I can barely breathe.

It's so normal.

Perfect.

I thought this kind of family was only in the movies.

I've drank too much wine trying to calm my nerves. It isn't working. I hate them. I hate them for having such a wonderful, loving family. They've almost made me cry twice now by being so damn nice. Interested in my life. Interested in each others' lives. They aren't even pretending to care. They really do care. Charlie doesn't completely fit and they love her anyway.

Her sister Rose is a piece of work. She is quite the control freak, bossing everyone around and so old fashion in her thinking. It doesn't

make any sense to me why the guys are out drinking in the Garage, relaxing, and having fun, while we were cleaning up. Haven't these people ever heard of caterers?

I counted seven kids. I can't help but wonder if my daughter Destiny was like them at their ages. Fuck. I can feel the pressure behind my eyes. I need to get out of here before I start crying. I don't want my mascara to run.

I walk through the back door just as one of the brothers walks in. Of course I'm not paying attention and walk right into the gorgeous brick wall. The brothers are sexy men. This one's wife is gorgeous, I get why they are together, but what does Gus see in Rose?

"Lindsay, right?"

"Yeah. Hi." I try to get around him.

"Hey. Are you OK? What's wrong?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You're about to cry. Do you want to take a walk?"

All must not be good in their perfect suburban paradise. I flash him the sexiest smile I can.

“Lead on hot stuff.”

I’d follow his hot ass anywhere. Fuck, it’s perfect. I want to kiss it, lick it, grab hold of it while he goes deep inside me. I imagine my fingers slowly undoing the buttons of his shirt to reveal his chest before exploring every inch of his body with my tongue, especially the sexy spot at the base of his neck. I want to play with him, get to know all his ticklish spots, his hot spots, and then when he’s busting with passion, I get on my knees and go for the gold.

“Hey Gus, just going for a walk with Lindsay. Can you let Justine know I’ll be right back.” He yells to his brother.

“You’re letting your wife know we are going for a walk? So, you have an open marriage.” That could work. That could work quite nicely.

“An open marriage?” He asks with a puzzled look on his face.

“Yeah, where you fuck other people, have a girlfriend, she has a boyfriend, and you are still committed to each other. You know, an open marriage.”

“No.” He’s laughing. “I don’t understand how people can think that is a marriage or even acceptable as a relationship. Each to their own I guess. If they are happy, who am I to judge.”

“Why the walk then?” I’m confused.

“You looked like you needed a break from the family and could use someone to talk to.”

“Are you for real?”

“Yes.”

This hot, sexy man only wants to talk to me? Nothing else? Yeah right.

“I can blow you if you want.” I’d love to see this man’s package. His dick is probably huge and thick. My mouth is watering just thinking about being on my knees servicing his cock while he moans in pleasure.

He looks at me, cocks a sexy eyebrow and with a look of pity in his eyes, shakes his head.

Pity? The asshole.

“No, I don’t want you to blow me, Lindsay. Has a man ever just wanted to be your friend?”

“Friend?” Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Not unless he’s gay.”

“Well consider me your first, straight, male, friend. I’m Gary by the way.”

“Hi Gary. It’s nice to meet you.” I’m disappointed and confused.

“I know that the family can be a bit overwhelming.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Be glad the rest of the Reed and Fischer clan isn’t around. It’s quite the large Christmas and Thanksgiving gatherings.”

“There’s more of you?”

“Yep, one more Reed girl and two more Fischer boys. And then there are my parents.”

“Are any of your brothers single?” They will probably be sexy too.

“Yes, the youngest, Greg is. I have no idea which country he is in at the moment. He travels a lot for work.”

“Sounds like a good life.”

“He likes it. I prefer mine.”

“What about the other brother?”

“The oldest, Grant, is in Chicago, with his wife and six kids. There are too many of them to travel all the way here, except for at Christmas. My parents are out there visiting this week.”

“Six kids?” Did I hear him right?

“Yes six. They’d have had more if Carol could’ve. The last one almost killed her and Grant insisted on going and getting fixed to ensure it wouldn’t happen again. I think he was scared of being a single father of six kids, all a year apart.”

“Oh my God. You’re not kidding.”

“You look a bit horrified.”

“I am. The seven back there were loud and busy. I can’t imagine that every day.”

He's laughing again. I really like his laugh.

"Do you have kids?"

"Yes. Two. Two girls."

"How old are they?"

"Ah. Destiny is around thirty, I think, and Evelyn is eight."

"That's quite the span and you don't look old enough to have a daughter who is thirty. What are you? Thirty-eight?"

"I love you. Add nine years to that."

"Wow you look good for thirty-eight plus nine." He winks. Oh my God when this man winks. Fuck. I want to drop to my knees and worship him. Fuckin' hell, maybe Charlie is right, all the good guys are taken. "You should have brought them."

"It's complicated."

I can imagine the phone call to Destiny.

"Hello Destiny, it's Lindsay"

"Who?"

"Your mother."

“My mother is Donna. You are just the egg donor.”

With that, she'd hang up on me and that would be the end of it.

Can't blame her.

“Divorces usually are.” Gary was saying. “We only get Davie every other week, it's not easy on Charlie. I feel for her and Davie.”

“We?”

“Well, yeah. Davie is a part of the family and we like to see him. You should bring Evelyn when you have her on a Sunday. I'm sure she'd like to play with Davie and Aiden.”

I smile to hide the pain as it cuts through me in a hot gash. Sure, I'll just bring along the court appointed social worker while I'm at it. That won't be awkward. Not all families are perfect. Not all mothers are considered fit to be one, least of all me, according to my ex and the courts.

“Evelyn would love to, I'm sure. She doesn't get to play with kids very often, unless her nieces and nephews come to visit their grandfather.”

“An aunt? At eight years old?”

“She was born an aunt. My ex has kids a decade older than I am. I’m his fourth wife. They aren’t like your family. They’re all too busy running businesses for my ex to get together for dinners, unless it’s business related. Then it’s usually only him, his kids, and adult grandchildren to discuss business. Not their wives or kids. They just don’t have time to get together like you do.”

“You said Evelyn doesn’t get to play with kids her age. Doesn’t she have school friends?”

“She doesn’t go to school.” He looks shocked. I smile. “My ex husband retired when she was five. A year later he divorced me and they travel the world with a nanny slash teacher.”

Slash whore. Considering her age and looks, I am certain she is my replacement. He just didn’t marry her. Would he have married me if I hadn’t gotten pregnant with Evelyn? I wonder how long before the slut gets herself pregnant for a nice big ring.

“When do you get to see her?”

“I don’t. I get twelve visits a year, three per quarter, at his discretion.”

“Excuse me? How did that happen?”

“He had good lawyers, deep pockets, and my other daughter, Destiny. Then, when it looked really bad for me I grabbed her and ran. I was charged with parental kidnapping. Once everything was done, I was declared unfit and that was it. Now I get one hour supervised visitations. It’s what it is. Evelyn has a good life.” I’ve made so many mistakes in my life. The memories start flashing behind my eyes in high definition replay. The cops tearing her from me, handcuffing me in front of her, her screams. Her voice, screaming mommy over and over. Regret is making me sick, I can’t breathe. Stop it. Stop it. I can’t think about the past. I have to focus on the now, right here, right now, with this handsome man. I stand up straighter, force an award winning smile on my face and focus on his lips.

Lips I'd love to kiss. That's it, think about those sexy, strong lips. Focus on him. Focus on the pleasure he can give you, if you could get him naked.

“What about you?” He asks.

“What about me?”

“How do you feel about not having your daughter?”

“Angry. I was a shit mom to Destiny, but I was a good mom to Evelyn. I was.”

“I believe you.”

One second I am smiling at the hot man walking beside me and the next, without warning, I break down in sobs. I was smiling, thinking about his lips, then a sharp pain quickly went through my gut, up to my throat, and out, like I'd been run through with a sharp sword. Before I could catch my breath, a burning heat penetrated from the cut, burning me from the inside out. This heavy heat rising up, increasing my body temperature, putting pressure behind my eyes, filling them with water. A barely audible sound escapes from my mouth before I am sobbing. My

throat is raw from the slices of each sob scraping at it as they make their way from my gut out through my open mouth. I'm close into him, my face is buried in his chest, his shirt is wet with my tears. His arms pull me tighter to him, his strong arms hold me up, and I feel safe. Safer than I've ever felt in my life. He has me and I want to live in this space for the rest of my life.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie’s voice.

“We were talking about things and I think she just needs a good cry.” Gary’s voice.

I can barely comprehend what they are saying to each other. I take a deep breath in and pull away from the man, wiping the tears from my face.

“I’m fine. Really. I’ll be fine.” I say, my head bowed as I work to get my emotions under control and my face dried off. My eyes clear of tears and begin to focus. I raise my head prepared to talk like a normal person to Charlie and Gary. I freeze in horror. Justine is standing there.

She just found me in her husband's arms sobbing. This is not going to be good. I don't say anything, what can I say?

"Are you sure?" Justine asks.

She steps towards me and I take a step back. I'm too vulnerable to win a fight. I can feel the pain still ready to cut through to the surface again. I do nothing. Why isn't he doing something? Coming up with some dumb excuse? Anything.

"Do you want to go for a coffee?" Justine asks me.

I look at her dumbfounded. She wants to have coffee with me? What kind of game is she playing? I'm too messed up to play any game.

"Why don't you and Gary go back to the house. Lindsay and I will be there shortly." Charlie says and I nod. I do not want to face this woman right now or ever.

Gary. Sexy, kind, wonderful Gary, starts walking back to the house with his perfect wife. I don't want to know what he's telling her, what awful things he's saying about me. I am such a fool. The pain claws at my throat and I can feel the tears coming again. I hate crying. I always

look so old when I cry. I take a deep breath and calm myself. I force myself to smile.

Happy.

Be happy.

It doesn't matter.

It's over.

Focus on right now.

You've got this.

Push down the pain.

Push it back into the box.

"What just happened?" I ask.

"Gary Fischer happened."

"But his wife. I mean..."

"I know. He's Mr. Wonderful and completely in love with his wife."

"I don't get it."

“It’s Gary. He has some sort of emotional radar. The guy can get you to tell him anything. Even your deepest, darkest, secret. You want to tell him everything about yourself, you can’t help it. He turned me into a blubbering mess after I caught David cheating. I tell ya, I fell in love with Gary’s big strong shoulder and soaked it on more than one occasion.”

“He’s a God.”

“Lindsay, word of advice, don’t talk to Gary. He loves Justine. He’s just a nice guy. He won’t do anything with you. No matter how much you want him to, he’ll never love you.”

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“I am. After my separation I fell in love with him and still get butterflies when I see him. It wasn’t mutual. Don’t take his concern for anything, but what it is. He helps everyone. It’s who he is. All the Fischer boys are like that. They learned it from their dad. I used to think they were all nice guys, nothing to get all ga-ga over, until I grew up and realized how wonderful nice guys really are.”

“All of them are like that?”

“The three oldest are. I don’t know the youngest. I kick myself for not marrying Grant, he had a crush on me in high school.”

“Did you go out with him?”

“No. He was too good. A nice guy. I liked the bad boys.”

“Me too. Do you think there are any nice single guys out there our age?”

“Nope. We backed the wrong horse and we are now paying the price.”

“Shit.”

“You said it sister.”

Sister. I like the sound of that. I always wanted a sister.

Rose

Another Sunday dinner done.

I survey the damage. Not so bad. I putter away putting things in their place and tidying up. The kitchen's cleaned up. Leftovers are in the fridge in case the men get hungry while us girls are out. The kids are busy doing their thing. I could go and find Gary and Charlene's new friend Lindsay. Annoyance and anger swirl around at the thought of Gary disappearing with that woman and Gus just letting him. I told Gus as much. He says I'm overreacting, but I don't trust that woman. I hope Justine gives him an earful. I don't understand why Charlene brought her.

The first time I met her I could see she was a slut, a complete whore, just by looking at her. In her short skirt and too tight top, with too much makeup and fake everything. I have no idea why Charlene hangs out with her. I punch one of the throw pillows to fluff it.

“Rose.”

“Yes Mom?”

“Do you have any more tea?”

“Sure come into the kitchen and I’ll make you another pot. How are things at the new place?”

“Oh lovely. It really is a nice place. Too nice I think.”

“Well, you and Daddy can always move in here with us.”

“Oh no, Rose. You have enough with the kids and Gus. You don’t need your old mom and dad to take care of too.”

“I’d love to take care of you.”

“And bless your heart. Don’t worry, the girls have set us up in a nice place.”

I don’t say anything. What can I say? Gus and I couldn’t afford to contribute. Especially to something as expensive as the place Charlene picked. It is like a luxury hotel complete with pool, dining room, events planner, and exercise room. I breathe deep.

“As long as you like it. I’d just rather you were here where I could take care of you.”

“After your dad’s heart attack, I didn’t feel comfortable living on our own. This way a nurse is right down the hall. It is nice to have our meals cooked for us and the staff nutritionist has been able to get your dad eating better for his heart. It really is best for us.”

“But we can’t afford –“

“Why are you feeling guilty Rose?”

It’s eerie how she does that. She knows what I’m thinking, how I’m feeling. I’d be having a bad day and just when I need her to, she calls me.

“It’s just that we can’t afford to help. It’s like Charlene and Grace swooped in with their money and took you and Daddy away from me.”

“No one took us away from you.”

“But if you’d just waited a few more years the girls would be gone and you could have moved in here.”

“And been a burden to you? No.”

I pour the hot water into the mugs and drop in the tea bags. I miss tea with Mom. I had planned on having tea everyday with her here in my kitchen, if it wasn't for my sisters and their money.

“Rose. Look at me.”

I raise my eyes and look at her.

“You. Are. Blessed. Look at your life. You have a wonderful man who loves you, four beautiful children, a gorgeous home full of happiness and love. You are richer than your sisters. Charlene, for all her success, is alone and only sees Davie half the time. She works so hard she misses out on so much of his life. Grace's life may sound exciting with all the nice things, the travel and adventures she has, but it's empty. She has no children. No one to share it with. It's just her. You have everything those two want. You are the rich one.”

I walk around the island and give my mom a big hug. She always knows.

“Got a hug for your old Dad?”

“Oh Daddy. I've always got a hug for you.”

“Don’t worry you’ll always be my princess. Your mother is right, you’ve done it right. You’ve got a good life here. The city is too loud, too busy, too expensive.”

“Now Howard. We are just fine in our place and we get to see Charlene and Davie more. Not to mention that nurse you keep flirting with.”

“Daddy.” I am a bit shocked.

“Daddy nothing. Your mother is drooling all over the personal trainer and the widow down the hall, right along with every other woman in the place.”

“Mom.” They are both laughing at me.

“Oh honey, by the time you’re our age, you get your excitement where you can. It’s harmless fun.”

“Now where is everyone?” Dad asks.

“Ah. Gary went for a walk with Lindsay. I insisted Charlene and Justine go find them.”

“I should think so.” Mom says. “Charlene shouldn’t be hanging out with a woman like that. And to bring her here, I’ll be talking to your sister.”

“Leave her be. She’s a grown woman.” Dad says.

Gus walks in with Gary and Justine, ending my quality time with my parents and I can’t help but feel resentful. I miss having them all to myself. With Charlene in the city and Grace in New York, I was the only one still in town. I visited them almost every day. Now, I miss them.

Gus comes over and gives me a kiss on the cheek. I smile at him. He always knows how to make me feel better. Justine makes herself a cup of tea and the guys grab beers. I sit back sipping on my tea, taking in the conversation, happy.

This is family. This is what it is all about.

Justine

Rose does not like Charlie's friend Lindsay. She made it abundantly clear while we drink tea. She even lectured Gary about his behaviour and told him how to be the perfect husband. He *is* the perfect husband. That's the problem. I'm not jealous because I know he wouldn't do anything beyond offer comfort and a shoulder to cry on. He loves me, perfectly.

So, why am I not happy? I should be thrilled. My husband loves me so much he wouldn't cheat on me when a pretty woman hits on him. I should be possessive like Rose. I'm not. I didn't even care when they disappeared.

Lindsay is an interesting woman. She's alive. She's expressive. She's passionate. She is everything I am not. Does that make her the epitome of evil to the married women of this world? I don't know, maybe. Does it matter?

What if Gary did stray? What if he was tempted enough to betray our wedding vows and have an affair with her? Would I care? He'd be flawed then. He'd no longer be perfect. Could I love him then?

Wait. I love my husband. Of course I love Gary. I do. At least I think I do. I mean he's the perfect husband and every woman who knows him tells me how jealous she is of me. How much she'd like her husband to be more like mine because, let's face it, my husband is perfect.

What is love anyway? Is it a feeling? If so, what is it supposed to feel like? Is it a choice, like some believe? I've chosen to love my husband every day. To stand by him, support him, and care for him. Is that love though? What does love look like?

I looked at my husband. He's comfortable. He's like the old teddy bear you had as a kid, the one who kept you safe at night. He's like a blanket you wrap yourself in on a rainy day while you read and sip coffee. I know he'll always be there. Always be saving the day. Always

fixing my mistakes. Always taking care of me. Always there, like a safety net.

Isn't that what a husband is supposed to be? Isn't that what marriage is?

Charlie and Lindsay came in sometime later laughing, really laughing, their faces shining with the joy of it. When was the last time I laughed? When was the last time I cried? Lindsay feels so intensely. When she was crying, I could hear her sobs from down the street. When she laughs, it fills the room. She fills a room. I want to be around her to just feel the emotions coming off her, to be caught up in her joy, her sorrow.

Rose can't see that. She can't see past the tight sweater, the boob job, the short skirt, and the makeup. She doesn't see what I see. I wish she could. Rose is so full of fear, worry, and scared of everything. It wasn't my marriage or my husband she was fearful for, it was her own. When Lindsay walked in the room Rose's eyes immediately went to Gus

to see where his were. Of course they were on Lindsay, how could they not be?

That was enough to send Rose into a dither, cleaning an already clean kitchen, being short with the kids, mean to her sister, and rude to Lindsay. Gary caught it, of course he noticed, and nudged Gus to pay attention to his wife, which obediently, Gus did. Making a big scene of kissing her and holding onto her for the rest of the afternoon, giving her a possessive triumphant smile. She looked like she was the queen bee who'd just won.

Won what?

A man who has loved her since grade school? A man who wouldn't stray from her and risk losing everything he's built? A man so rock solid it is impossible for him to think of infidelity? Rose has nothing to worry about, ever. Neither do I. Gary is always there to fix my mistakes and be my knight in shining armour.

"Any wine?" Charlie asks

"Haven't you had enough, dear?" Her mom says.

“With the two of you spouting off like you do? Not really.” Charlie grabs the bottle and two glasses. “Rose is driving to the pub.”

“Remember you promised to help Sophie.” Rose calls after them.

“If I can, I will.”

The doorbell rings and we hear Isabella yell ‘I’ll get it.’

With that, Charlie leaves the room with the wine and I want to follow. I don’t. To do so would inadvertently put me in Charlie’s camp, in Rose’s mind. It is easier to not upset Rose.

“Mom, Sophie is here.” Isabella yells and Rose hurries to the front door.

“Sarah, can I get you another cup of tea.” I ask Rose’s mom.

“Thank you dear. You are such a good girl.”

“Sophie, this is Justine.”

“Hello Sophie.”

I smile and hold out my hand. She takes it gingerly. She looks so scared, fragile, like she’d break if I say the wrong thing. I guess that’s what happens when your husband wants a divorce. Rose has told me a

bit, however, I don't think she knows much, otherwise I'd have the whole story. Rose can't keep a secret and loves a juicy piece of gossip.

Why do women gossip? Why do we feel the need to rip some poor unsuspecting person apart? Put each other down? Categorize and stereotype each other based on judgements of character that may or may not be true?

I think it must have to do with our need to be making the right decisions. To feel like we are doing the right thing. Take the whole breastfeed or bottle feed fight new mothers have and are very verbal about. Does it matter if a baby is breastfed or bottle fed? Whether a mother stays home or goes to work? Does it really matter? Meet a mother and they'll tell you that you are doing it wrong and they are doing it right.

By the time you've run into three women who do things differently, you feel inadequate as a mother. You feel like you are doing everything wrong and the guilt is a heavy weight. At least that's how I

felt. Motherhood is hard enough without every mother you meet telling you, you're doing it wrong.

Why do we do this to each other though? Why do we feel the need to tell someone we are right and they are wrong? Why must we degrade, hurt, judge, and criticize others? Are we so insecure, competitive, and insensitive that we must make others feel they are wrong in order to feel we are right? These questions plague my mind and clutter it with thoughts, driving me crazy. There are no answers. Why does my mind keep burdening me with these questions?

“Charlene hurry up it’s time to go.” Rose yells to her sister, who barks back something about calling a cab.

Rose

“Sophie this is my sister Charlene. She’s a divorce attorney and will be able to help you.”

“Hi Sophie, we can talk later and see what I can do to help. For now, where is that hunk of a waiter I saw last week.”

“Charlene, he’s seventeen years younger than you. Last week, your were embarrassing yourself by flirting with him.”

“I wasn’t going home with the kid, just having a bit of fun. Take a pill, Rose.”

Take a pill? I don’t want her making a fool of herself. Doesn’t she know how desperate she looks flirting with a younger man? She needs to find a solid, good, older man, someone in his fifties with a good job. A man who can take care of her and Davie.

Charlene wrangles the cute thirty-year-old server from last week and he is flirting with Lindsay and her as we order. It’s embarrassing. I look at Justine, who only smiles and looks at the menu. She’s never any help.

I order a cola.

“What’s the most expensive wine you have?” Lindsay asks.

The server rattled off a couple and the price tag was over seventy dollars a bottle. Lindsay orders three bottles with glasses all around.

“Lindsay, I don’t really drink, but thank you.” I say.

“That’s why we got a cab, so we all could let loose. Oh, you have to try this. It’s not terrible.”

She proceeds to pour some into my glass. I sip it and it is good, fruity and not too sweet, I take another sip, I can’t put my finger on it. It’s good. Before I know it, I’ve finished one glass and we haven’t even ordered an appy yet. We drink and eat and talk. I’m having fun, laughing. I know I’m getting drunk.

“Sophie, Rose says you’re separated, how long?” Lindsay asks.

“About seven months.”

“Gone on any good dates yet?” Lindsay asks.

“Oh no, I’m not dating.”

“Why not?” Lindsay asks.

“I have the kids, I can’t leave them alone they are only ten and seven.”

“So you get a babysitter. I’m sure Isa would babysit.” Charlene says.

“Isabella.” I correct.

“Or Jess.”

“Jessica.” I correct.

“I don’t remember meeting a Jessica today.” Lindsay says.

“She was there. Came in, grabbed her food and went back to her room to read a book or something. Jess is shy.” Charlene says.

“I can’t, really.” Sophie is saying. “I thought my ex was going to have the kids tonight. I am not supposed to let others watch the kids. I only do it if I have a doctor’s appointment I can’t take them to.”

“Who says?” Charlene asks

“Craig.”

“He’s the ex right?” Charlene says and Sophie nods. “He didn’t show up, right?” She nods again. “Then what does he expect you to do?”

“Stay home with the kids. I’ve never been away from them. This is the first time I’ve gone out on my own without them for something fun.”

“What? You must have been away from them sometimes?”

Charlene says.

“Never, they are always with me, from the moment they wake ‘til they go to sleep.”

“What about school, you don’t go into the classroom with them?”

“I homeschool them.”

“That is insane. How are you sane?” Lindsay asks.

“I love my children.”

“I love Davie too, but I need my own life. Just like you do.”

Charlene says. “We’ll figure out something, don’t worry.”

“Never. Like never?” Lindsay says and fills Sophie’s glass to almost full.

Even I am flabbergasted. If I didn’t have my time, girls’ nights or school days, I’d have killed somebody, probably Alexis. Who would expect a mother to always be with her kids, without a break?

“We’ll help you with the online dating profiles, won’t we Charlene?” Lindsay says.

“That will be fun. Just don’t be shocked by the guys online, some are complete jerks.”

“You’ll get asked for naked pics and you’ll get plenty of unsolicited male email.” Charlene adds.

“Huh, What’s that?” Sophie asks.

“You know cock shots.” Lindsay says like it’s no big deal. “Guys send women pics of his cock standing to attention.”

I spray the sip of wine I had in my mouth and start choking.

“Rose, you OK?” Justine asks.

I nod.

“You’re kidding right?” I ask Lindsay. “Men don’t just send you pictures of... Their... You know?”

“Yeah, all the time, even if you tell them not to.” Charlene says.

“Charlie has the best online dating message stories. Tell them the two craziest requests you’ve gotten.” Lindsay says.

“Without even saying hello first, I’ve been asked if I’ll breastfeed, if I like it up the ass, if they can cum all over my tits, and the piece de resistance, ‘Miss will you use me as a footstool and spit in my face.’ ”

“You’re making that up.” I say.

“I wish. It’s like they think online dating is like ordering off an a la carte sex menu and I’m the main course. It’s degrading and humiliating. If I’m bored I’ll mess with them. Mostly, I just ignore the idiots.”

Charlene adds.

“Don’t put up with the bad behaviour, Sophie. There are so many men out there you just hit delete and move on.” Lindsay says. “There’s always another one. It’s like catalogue shopping.”

“You can’t take any of it personally. If you do it’ll rip you to pieces. No way any woman should online date by herself. Men are too ruthless.” Charlene says.

“They are not. They just don’t think. They’re fun. You figure out what you want from them, you fuck em and then find the next one, until

you find one who knows what to do to please you. You keep him, even if it's just as an FWB." Lindsay winks.

"An FWB?" I ask.

"A friend with benefits. A guy you hang out with sometimes and fuck but you aren't in a relationship with him. You don't even have to really like him as long as he gets you off." Lindsay explains.

"That's terrible. Why would she want to do that? Sex is supposed to be between two people who are committed, married to each other. It's a merging of souls." I say.

"This isn't high school, Rose. We all have needs, even if we're not married or in a relationship." Charlene says.

"I love sex. Can't get enough of it."

"Lindsay." I am shocked, really shocked. I can't believe she just said that. In a pub. With people around. I look around and no one seems to have noticed.

"Come on, Rose, Gus must have a nice cock and after all these years, I'm sure he knows how to please you with it. You must know how

to please him too, considering how he can't stop looking at you and touching you. You too, Justine." Lindsay says.

"Gary's OK I guess. I mean it's nothing special."

My jaw just hit the floor. How could Justine say that? About Gary? She rarely talks and when she does it's to tell Lindsay about her sex life? This isn't right.

"You must have had passionate sex with a man like that." Lindsay says.

"Not really."

"That's disappointing. Damn girl, you need to teach that boy how to get you off and how to do it right. If a man isn't good in bed, I'm not interested. No matter how hot he is or how great he is outside the bedroom. It's not worth it for bad sex." Lindsay says.

"Gary loves Justine and they are very happy together. This isn't appropriate conversation." I say.

“Oh Rose. Take a chill pill. Grow up. It’s sex. We all have it. No one here is a virgin, no immaculate conception took place. You and Gus had sex at least four times.” Charlene says.

“It’s none of your business.”

“Shame on me. I have sex. Shame on me. I talk about it. I’m going straight to hell.”

“Charlene, don’t talk like that.”

I’m quite upset. This isn’t appropriate conversation. Good women do not talk about sex. Good women don’t discuss sex with their husbands, let alone each other. This is wrong. None of my other friends talk about sex. We discuss kids, husbands, errands, the news, hobbies, God. Those are appropriate topics.

“Please excuse my sister, Sophie. She got married at the young age of sixteen and hasn’t grown up yet. Sex is a shameful, guilty topic, just ask our parents.”

I am about to say something when Lindsay speaks up.

“Charlie that’s enough. We are supposed to be having fun, all of us, not making Rose uncomfortable. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Like what?” Charlene asks.

“I found a new recipe.” I say.

“Rose. Come one. You’re not eighty years old. You’re forty.”

Charlene says.

“First I’m a teenager and now I’m 80. Make up your mind.”

“I love this song.” Lindsay yells and grabs my hands. “Come on Rose show us what cha got on the dance floor.”

I love dancing. Gus doesn’t like to dance and I rarely get the chance to. Lindsay keeps a firm grip of my hand and leads me out to the dance floor. I didn’t know the pub had a dance floor. That’s when I realize we’re the only ones on it and Lindsay is motioning for the others to join us. Charlene has both Justine and Sophie up on the dance floor before I can escape off of it.

Soon, I forget to be self-conscious with the five of us dancing in a circle. Another song comes on and we continue to dance. We even start

singing along, shouting out the lyrics. I'm having fun. I can feel the wine's warmth moving through me. I don't care what others are thinking anymore. I don't care about what's proper, what's not. The room is beginning to move on its own a bit. The edges are getting blurry. I lean over to Lindsay and say.

“Gus has a big, thick cock and he knows how to use it.”

“I knew it.”

Sophie

I'm having so much fun. We're dancing. I forgot how much fun dancing was. I'm not in any pain, I'm happy, really happy. I don't want this to end. Even Rose looks like she's having fun. Actually, she looks drunk. Lindsay is jumping up and down doing the whole head banger thing with her hair. It's hilarious and I'm laughing so hard. I can't remember the last time I laughed this hard.

A hand grabs my arm, pulling me back and around. I can hear myself screaming and then, I see Craig's angry face.

"What are you doing Soph? Where are the kids?"

I don't know what to say I'm stammering, pulling back. The fear is intense and I try to curl up into myself.

"The kids, Soph? Where are they?"

"At a friends." I stammer.

"You have no friends."

He's pulling me off the dance floor, out the door, I can't keep up with him and stumble. He pulls at my arm harder. I can see everyone

looking, gawking, as we pass. Curious eyes, open mouths, and fingers pointing. I hang my head in shame. The heat of it pushes down on me. The cool air of the night hits my face, freezing the tears.

“Stop crying. Just tell me where the kids are and I’ll go get them.

If this is how you take care of them, I guess I’ll have to do it.”

I don’t say anything. He’s going to take the kids.

“Your kids are safe and having fun with my nieces and nephews.”

I hear Charlie’s voice and cringe. *No. Don’t you’ll make it worse.*

“Who are you?”

“I’m Sophie’s lawyer, Charlie Reed-Reynolds. Now let go of my client before I call the police.”

Lawyer. Police! No. Now the panic is really setting in. Craig will be furious and he’ll take the kids, I’ll never see them again.

“Craig no. She’s not. She’s a friend.”

“Shut up, Sophie.”

They both say to me and I do. I always do as I'm told. I'm a good girl. I follow the rules, do as I'm told, obey. I don't need to be punished. Don't take the kids.

"You heard her, she doesn't need a lawyer. We will sort this out for ourselves. It doesn't concern you."

"Actually, it does. Sophie here is my friend and my friends are my concern." Charlie says.

The door opens and out come Lindsay, Justine, and Rose with our coats and purses. I feel the panic rise in me again. I look at Charlie, she looks calm, in control, strong. I keep my eyes on her.

"What's your name again?" Craig asks.

"It's Charlie Reed-Reynolds. I am a divorce attorney and I am taking on Sophie as a client as of this very moment. So I suggest you let her go."

Craig doesn't say anything. He stands there staring Charlie down and then lets me go. His hand just opens up and my arm drops. Then the

whole area erupts in blue and red lights. Everyone turns to see a cop getting out of the car.

“Officer, thank God. You need to arrest that man.” Rose is saying, pointing at Craig.

“What is the problem here ladies?”

“He assaulted our friend. Her arm. He man handled her.” Rose is saying while Lindsay pulls her back.

“Rose, let’s let Charlie and the nice officer here have a chat with Sophie and the man, OK? We’ll wait over here.”

“But... But...” Rose’s face is flushed.

“OK, which of you is Charlie and which is Sophie? I take it this is the man.” The officer says.

Charlie tells the officer what happened. Craig is arguing with him saying that we are lying and he didn’t do anything. He’s telling the officer I abandoned the kids somewhere and we were just having a chat. That’s when Charlie takes my arm, very carefully, pulling up the sleeve.

I look at my arm. It has four long bruises. So? I don’t understand?

The officer handcuffs Craig and puts him in the back of the police car. He's gone and we are getting into a cab. I hold on tight to Charlie's hand and for the first time in my life, I don't feel alone.

For the first time I feel like someone cares.

Charlie

That's one way to end a girls' night, in a cop shop making a statement. I call my assistant's number and leave a voicemail telling her I'll be late tomorrow, to push my appointments around, and schedule an emergency hearing with the court to request a restraining order.

It's after midnight when a cab deposits us onto Rose's doorstep. The guys are still up, all the kids and my parents are asleep. It's still going to be a long night. They'll let Craig out in the afternoon with a warning to stay away from his ex wife. He won't be charged, he'd pulled at her but that is hardly a case for assault and battery justifying jail time. This is the system. Take them away, let them cool off, send them out with a warning, it's all the protection these women get.

Rose is pattering around the kitchen, making tea, getting snacks and settling everyone into the living room. I tell Gus and Gary everything and their 'protect the woman,' instinct instantly takes over.

"She can't go home. We need to find somewhere for her and the kids to go where he can't get a hold of them." I say.

“They can stay here, right Gus?”

“No question, we’ll make room.”

“Actually, it’s probably best to find them a shelter somewhere away from town. You don’t want him to run into her like he did tonight.”

I say.

“They aren’t going to one of those shelters.” Lindsay says. “They can stay with me until we can find them a better arrangement. No women’s shelter.”

“We couldn’t. We’ll just go home. It’ll be fine. We will be fine.”

Typical abused woman response. They don’t believe they are worth help. Don’t believe they deserve better. They always want everyone else to be happy, to keep the peace, even though they know they never can. The idea of making someone else angry on purpose terrifies them. I’ve worked with abused women on many occasions and usually I can’t do anything to help them because they have to help themselves first. Yet, they can’t. It’s very frustrating.

“Sophie, just until everything blows over.” Lindsay is saying.

“I don’t want to be in your way. Those city apartments are so small and the kids –“ Sophie says.

“Small.” Lindsay is laughing. “Sophie I own a three bedroom, 3000 square foot, two floor penthouse. I’d hardly call it small.”

I can see Rose’s eyes open, her mouth drops. Yep, she ain’t trailer trash sis, she’s penthouse trash. I chuckle to myself. My sister is so predictable.

“That would work.” I add. “What do you think Sophie? A vacation into the city until Craig calms down and we can get everything settled. Then we will find you a place.”

“You have no choice Sophie. You’re coming, that’s it, end of story. You don’t have a choice.” Lindsay says.

That really is the best way. Don’t give her a choice. Make her go. Abused women aren’t good at accepting help, they don’t know how to ask for it. They don’t know how to say yes when it’s offered. They don’t believe they deserve it. They are scared what accepting it means. I’ve seen it so many times.

“Well, I have to get the kids things.”

“You’re not going back to your place alone.” Gus says.

“I was hoping you guys would take her to collect her things tomorrow. I don’t think they’ll release him until the afternoon. You never know. It might be sooner. I don’t want her anywhere near her place by herself.”

“We’ll go with her.” Gary agrees.

“Lindsay I’ll leave you my car. Gus can you drop me off at the train in the morning. I have a full day tomorrow. Sophie I’m going to petition the court for a restraining order. It’s only a piece of paper, but it’s a start. It’s something to protect you.”

She nods.

“Give me your phone.” Lindsay is holding her hand out and Sophie hands it over. “He has your number. We’ll get you a new phone number tomorrow. For now. NO PHONE. Don’t call him, don’t text him, don’t think about him. Got it?” Sophie nods.

I look at Lindsay. I didn't even think of the phone. I am liking the idea of Sophie staying with her more and more. She seems to know what to do.

With the plans made and the night's events calmed down, we settle back into regular chatter. Trying to calm our nerves enough to fall asleep. To remind ourselves that life is good, things are normal and everything is safe enough to close our eyes.

Aftermath

In the next episode of #Thatslife, the women discover their lives are forever changed by the events of the night before. As they help Sophie and her children into a safer place, they are confronted with new decisions to protect themselves and their families.