

June 10, 2022

THE NIGHT THEIR HOUSE GOES UP IN FLAMES, APRIL stumbles out the front door with her baby in one arm and a book in the other. Otto points his little finger over her shoulder at the house, yelling unintelligible warnings.

Leo is still inside, grabbing Sadie from her bed.

A fist of dark smoke punches through a window and races out into the sky. At the sound of glass exploding, April glances back. The fire is coming from the kitchen.

Her legs carry her away from their home of almost a decade, her lungs eagerly drawing in air. She blows on Otto's red face as she runs—the heat came fast. Sixty yards down their driveway, she turns around mumbling, “Why aren't they out yet?” Coughing, she can't do anything but watch flames pour from the kitchen window. She doesn't realize it, but she is repeating Sadie's name.

The wail of a siren gets closer. Everything is happening too fast and too slow. April's vision blurs as reds and blues swirl across her skin, strands of hair sticking to her forehead.

Moving lips appear in front of her. “Is anyone still inside?”

Another face beside the first. “She's in shock.”

A heavy hand on her shoulder. “Ma'am, look at me.”

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She does, and the eyes she sees are green like Leo's. The lips repeat, "Is anyone still inside?"

April nods. "My—"

But the men are already running toward the blaze.

As they sprint to the house, Leo busts through the door with an arm shielding his face and Sadie slung over his shoulder. Behind him, the front corner of the house begins to yaw. Then, a deafening crack.

Pressing Otto to her chest, April sprints back up the driveway toward her daughter as more men emerge from the truck with oxygen masks and hose lines. Their feet are moving faster than April's thoughts. But through the forest of helmeted men, she sees Sadie start to cry. April's own eyes prickle in relief, her knees giving out. She sinks to the ground, her book and baby still in her talonlike grasp. Otto pats her face. Flames dance across his wide, dark irises.

The sight before them is mesmerizing, the fire a bright and beautiful terror. April has never had such a hard time believing something that's happening right in front of her eyes. It's as bright as the middle of the day, as though the sun has dropped into their very kitchen. But surrounding this inferno, it's dark. And unlike the kitchen side, the other side of the house stands unbothered. Smug, almost.

Then Leo is standing in front of her, panting. "Sadie's hyperventilating over with the paramedics. She wants you."

April looks up the six feet of her husband as he lifts Otto into his own arms. He's pouring sweat, with smears of soot across his shins. Before Leo became a dad, April knew he would be a good one, and she was right.

"April."

Dazed, she asks, "Are you okay?" It strikes her as dangerous that his feet are bare.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

She rises, nodding. Sadie needs her. Otto needs her. Leo does not need her.

Her knees quake again as she realizes how the fire must have started:

she had boiled pasta for dinner. As she spooned it onto plates for the kids, Leo had told her quietly that he wants a divorce. She had figured this was coming, but had she checked that the burner was off?

With a swell of regret in her chest, she pushes the book into Leo's hand and then dashes toward Sadie.

Leo is left watching firefighters pop windows from their frames. Hours ago, you could have looked through those windows and seen their two children giggling at cartoons, waiting for buttered noodles. They had left the kitchen a mess. Dinner dishes and sippy cups. Then it was the middle of the night and smoke was creeping through the house. By the time it was dense enough to trigger the alarm, it was bad. There was so much distance to cover: smoke had to travel to the alarm, then the alarm had to break through the barrier of sleep. Of dreams. Leo had jolted awake on the floor in Otto's room, where he had been sleeping for weeks now. As soon as he did the groggy math of sound plus smell plus heat, he scrambled to his feet and started running. Started shouting, *APRIL!*

April.

Leo's pocket vibrates. He tucks the book under his arm and pulls out his phone, which he grabbed when he realized that something was very wrong.

It is 1:19 in the morning, and the text is from Deb. *STAY WITH US.*

Leo looks toward his wife, who is smoothing their frightened daughter's hair. April must have gotten out with her phone too, and she must have just called her parents.

Otto's head gets heavy with sleep on Leo's shoulder as firefighters line the burning side of the house. Their hoses snake across grass, boots clomping through flower beds. Leo could be wrong, but it seems like the fire is spreading. He thinks about the table and chairs recently inherited from April's late aunt. The groceries they just purchased yesterday—he had thrown Sadie's favorite pretzels into the cart last-minute as a surprise. He thinks about this while the fire rages, about the pretzels he had bought for his daughter.

All their clothes are still in the house except the ones on their backs: Otto's duck onesie, Sadie's ruffled nightgown, and April's beige sweats.

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Leo sleeps in nothing but boxers, so only now does he look down to check what he managed to throw on: an ancient Radiohead T-shirt and a pair of American flag swim trunks, the first things out of his drawer in the dark. Between the second his clothes were in his hand to the second they were on his body, he had started to taste the smoke.

A new panic stabs him now: his son could have lost consciousness from smoke, not sleep. So Leo jostles Otto, who wakes easily and fusses. It has only been a matter of minutes—seven, maybe eight—since they escaped.

Leo takes Otto over to the paramedics who are with Sadie. Her breathing has steadied. A paramedic turns and says, “Let’s get that bleeding cleaned and bandaged.”

Alarmed, Leo and April both scan their baby’s body. They hadn’t realized Otto was bleeding. But the paramedic says, “Not him.”

Leo looks down to find a gash on his own arm. He has no idea how he got it. It was hard to see anything as he tumbled out of the house with his daughter. Some details are hazy while others are hauntingly vivid: Sadie’s whimper as he pulled her from the island of her bed, the smallness of her arms as she latched them around his neck. Leo had considered hurling her out of the house just to get her out faster.

The paramedic dabs Leo’s arm with ointment and says, “It will take a while to put this one out. We recommend you go ahead and evacuate. Officer Nelson can escort you to a hotel, and the department will be in touch with reentry details.”

It startles Leo that they might just leave their home in its distress.

April says, “We can go to my parents’ house.” She hesitates and looks at Leo. “Right?”

Leo frowns, registering this entire devastating situation. He would have died for April tonight, no question. But he’s trying to end this marriage—not go stay indefinitely in her childhood home. He and April have barely been speaking, have been sleeping in different rooms. He can’t manage all these wearisome logistics with her. And he definitely can’t stay at Deb and Billy’s house.

But when he looks from April to Sadie to Otto, he knows that he will. Of course he will.

Behind the young man with his medical equipment, their house burns. The crew is moving through ventilation tactics, the smoke and flames changing color but not giving up. One of the men shouts something about orders to take the roof.

Otto stares down his nose in fascination at the paramedic checking his vital signs.

“Baby sounds beautiful.” The man smiles. “Y’all are clear.”

The air undulates with heat as the family of four piles into Officer Nelson’s Tahoe.

When Nelson shifts into reverse, Leo and April lock eyes. This seems so wrong. They can’t just leave everything behind.

Except that’s exactly what they’ve been trying to do.

So, shoulder to shoulder in the back of a police car, they both turn their gazes away.

It’s easier to look at their burning house than at each other.

Part One

SPARKS

APRIL

2011

I TAKE ARGYLE HIGH SCHOOL'S FRONT STEPS TWO AT a time. The marching band is practicing in the parking lot. The speaker-amplified metronome echoes through the morning air like a giant ticking clock. I'm a college graduate who still hasn't mastered the art of getting places before eight in the morning. Jonathan will be waiting for me at that scuffed desk, his pencil beside him with the eraser chewed off.

"There a fire or something?"

I startle at the deep voice.

I turn to see a tall guy in corduroy pants. "What?"

"I've just never seen a student run so fast toward summer school."

My cheeks warm. "I'm a tutor, actually." I hike up my backpack, wishing I hadn't worn braids. "A late tutor," I say.

"Ah." He transfers a binder from one arm to the other. "I'm Leo." He extends his hand. "A late teacher." In-service has just started for the new school year.

I chuckle and shake his hand. "April."

He releases my hand and opens the school door, nodding for me to go ahead.

I walk into the familiar blast of cool air. Behind us, the door closes and mutes

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the marching band. The hallway is dark after the bright eastern sun, and I glance back. With polite nods, the teacher and I turn, and we go our separate ways.



“Sorry I’m late!” I drop my backpack onto a blue plastic chair.

Without looking up, Jonathan Gutierrez grins and shakes his head. “Hey, miss.”

I take him in: his hoodie and ear gauges. His book and eraserless pencil. It’s been a great summer, and I’m dreading the approaching autumn, when I’ll have to make some sort of decision about what to do with my life. I’m already doing what I want. But as far as I know, tutoring is a job for adolescents. For summers and part-time hours and minimum wage. Not for a college grad whose parents have been asking for a year what I’m *going to do* as though what I *am doing* counts for nothing.

Jonathan won’t admit it, but I can tell he’s enjoying *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Some days, he asks for just a few more pages, and on those days I stay as long as I can. It merits celebration when someone with dyslexia wants to keep reading.

When I got my own diagnosis in elementary school, I wondered why they gave it such a hard name. For years, I called it *dills-hex-ya* until my sister, Josie, said I sounded like a spell-casting pickle. After that, I didn’t say the name at all.

I’m barely seated before Jonathan begins reading. I relax into the starts and stops of his voice, so much smoother than a few months ago. Now I hear inflection and emotion, which doesn’t just tell me he understands the story—it tells me he’s enjoying it. Last semester, he flunked everything related to reading comprehension.

While dyslexia is one of the most difficult things I’ve faced, for Jonathan it’s only one page in a whole book of hardships. Teachers know home life is part of education, which means it comes into the job. But it needs a delicate touch, and the learning curve is real. Like when I brought some

hand-me-down clothes from my brother and Jonathan only mumbled thanks, stuffing them deep into his bag as pink spread across his face. Despite Jonathan having only two ragged outfits, Cameron's clothes remain nowhere to be seen.

Food is different, though. Jonathan accepts it, even asking for vending machine change he knows I'm not supposed to give. *Just one bag of Cheetos, miss.* But Mom has started cooking extras for him, so at the end of our sessions, I pull Tupperware from my bag.

Today I have muffins, boiled eggs, and tangerines. Jonathan dog-ears his page. He peels one of the eggs with great effort, and I refrain from helping.

Instead I say, "So, junior year."

He lifts his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

"You ready for it?"

"Don't know. Am I?"

I nod. "Absolutely."

"You know, miss?" He finally gets the eggshell off. "This shit's been all right. I've, uh, learned a lot." He puts the whole egg into his mouth and somehow manages to chew.

I smile. My superiors cautioned against a thick book for a kid with dyslexia, but I respectfully disagreed. In the right hands, it doesn't feel like expectation but invitation. Belief, even.

"You've made incredible progress, kid."

He swallows the egg. "Let's just hope I get Mr. Torres this year."

At this, I roll my eyes. All summer, it's been Mr. Torres this and Mr. Torres that. Jonathan talks like the only way he'll be able to graduate is if the scheduling stars align and he gets *Mr. Torres* for history.

"You're going to do awesome no matter which teachers you get."

He takes a crumbling bite of muffin. I check the time and start packing the empty Tupperware. I have half an hour to get across town for my next student, so I stand and slip my backpack straps onto my shoulders. "Okay, J, see you tomorrow."

"Later, miss."

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As I'm leaving the school, the teacher from earlier darts out of the front office.

"April, right?"

I pause, nodding to confirm.

"You're working with Jonathan?"

I glance over my shoulder. "Yeah?"

"How's he doing?"

"Great, actually." I beam. "Tons of progress."

Relief washes over his face. "That's so good to hear."

This is when I note his name badge: *Leo Torres*.

"Oh, *you're* Mr. Torres!"

He follows my gaze down toward his badge as if checking. "Afraid so."

"No, it's just that Jonathan adores you. He really wants to be in your class."

Leo laughs. "Great kid dealt a hard hand." He leans in. "I've got him for history and study hall."

"Oh, good!" I notice the clock on the wall and cringe.

He steps back. "I won't keep you. Thanks for working with him."

"Of course!" I wave and dash away.



The next day I wear my hair down.

On my way out, I cross paths again with Leo, who slows to a stop. "Hey."

"Hi."

"What a doorstopper you and Jonathan are tackling."

My copy of *Monte Cristo* is in my backpack, which means that at some point during my tutoring session, Leo Torres was looking at me. My skin warms. But also, my defenses rise. "I know it's a thick book, but he really can do it—he has done it—a little at a time."

"I don't doubt it."

"Really?"

“Why would I?”

“I sometimes get flack for reading dense books with dyslexic kids, but I swear they need good books, same as anyone. Even if the process is slow as molasses.”

Leo leans against the cinderblock wall beside a crooked poster that’s shouting in primary colors: *Amazing Things Happen Here!* A swoop of dark hair rests above his eyebrow as he asks, “So, what are some of your favorite books to read with them?”

I spout off six books before I find myself giving a soliloquy about the importance of getting good books into “bad” schools. I only realize I’m rambling because of how Leo is smiling at me.

“Sorry, I get carried away.”

But he picks up where I left off, talking about his own curriculum and students. He talks with his hands. He’s passionate about this, about them. After twenty more minutes of discussing education, I begin to think I’ve met my match. He cares about this like I do. Most people don’t.

A woman walks by with a steaming lunch, and my stomach growls.

Leo straightens. “I’ve kept you way too long.”

I say, “No, it’s okay. I have a long break today.” I almost say, *Keep me longer.*

“Want some trail mix or something from the faculty lounge?”

“Um—”

“Here, come with me.”

He leads me a few doors down, where there is indeed a basket of trail mixes. I choose one, but instead of saying bye, Leo walks me back out. “Really sorry you missed lunch. Could I make it up to you?”

“What do you mean?”

This is when I learn that even a very tall man can look shy. Glancing down before meeting my gaze, Leo asks, “Could I take you to dinner on Friday?”

I bite back my smile. “Sure.”

When we met to the beat of the marching band, there was no spark. There is now.

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Later, I sit by the pool with Josie as she rambles about her freshman welcome events at Emerson. There's a divide between us now. Josie is living childhood's last gasp while I've been thrust into all that comes after. A bit jealous of my pink-shouldered sister for having college still in front of her, I nod along, lulled by her verbosity and the shimmering blues of water and sky.

I say zilch about Leo Torres, but my thoughts float toward him. The passion with which he spoke about history. The dignifying way he talked about his students. And the way that, when we parted, he touched my arm and said, "See you soon." His eyes were as warm and green and inevitable as springtime.

APRIL

The Morning After the Fire

BEFORE OPENING MY EYES, I CAN—INCREDIBLY—SMELL

Juniper Breeze from my high school summer job at Bath & Body Works. For a minute I'm seventeen years back in time, about to jump out of bed, lather on sunscreen, and drag Josie to the pool. My son's squeak from the corner of the room reminds me of how time moves.

I peel my eyelids open to check on them: Otto with his sleep-squeaks in the playpen and Sadie beside me in the bed, two appendages who didn't exist and now do. I turn toward my sleeping daughter and smell smoke. One day I'm a newly driving teen with my Juniper Breeze and Coppertone, and the next I'm a mother in my childhood bedroom, with ashes where I had a home. Where I had a marriage.

"Knock knock." Mom creaks open the door, sees the children sleeping, and makes a *whoops* face, though neither Otto nor Sadie stir. I have no idea what time it is.

Mom asks quietly, "Breakfast?"

On cue, my stomach turns over and I nod.

She disappears back downstairs, where I can hear the faint clatter of a pan in the sink, the faucet turning on and off. This is the first time I've slept in this room since I got married nine years ago, but Mom's morning sounds transport me back in time.

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I creep down the stairs, relieved to see the French doors to the front room still closed. Leo hasn't emerged, which means I can have Mom's cooking and a minute to think.

In the kitchen, I sidle up beside her and slice into a grapefruit. Rays of sun reach between the branches of the old sycamore and in through the picture window over the sink. It's enough for a cruel mind trick, the early light making me believe for a second that all is well.

Then from behind us, Leo says, "Morning."

With his voice, the room darkens around me. Morning is all over him: in his uncleared voice, his mussed black hair, the way his dirty feet shuffle to the Breville. I squeeze my eyes closed.

He clears his throat. "What would we do without you?"

I open my eyes to see my five-foot-two spitfire of a mother hugging the gentle giant of my soon-to-be-ex. It was only a matter of time until he uttered the word *divorce*. We just didn't know our house would go up in flames on the very same night.

Mom looks up at him. "I'm just so sorry."

I shut the silverware drawer loudly. She makes apologizing sound so easy.

The sugar bowl is extended in front of me, and I follow the trail from bowl to hand to arm, all the way up to my husband's cypress-green eyes, which I meet for the first time since we arrived at my parents' house. I hate how kind those eyes are, and how he will forever know that I take exactly one spoonful of sugar on my grapefruit. I want to shove him or kiss him or wilt into the floor and disappear. Instead, I mutter a weak "thanks" as I take the sugar bowl.

Then a hand is on my shoulder, and I turn to find Josie's concerned frown. She sweeps me into an embrace, and I melt. I completely forgot that she arrived in Dallas yesterday.

"A house fire? Always the flair for the dramatic," says my sister, who actually majored in drama. I offer a tired fraction of a laugh because we all know I'm not the sister with a flair for drama. She squeezes me tighter, saying seriously into my smoky hair, "God, I'm glad you're okay."

Sadie appears, begging for juice. Right behind her, Dad enters with his babbling grandson in tow. Otto must have cried from the playpen. He's holding a big plastic tooth in his doughy hand, no doubt surplus from Dad's dentist treasure box.

We set the table and sit down, passing around Mom's fresh quiche. We pour glasses of orange juice while the table fills with condolences and offers to help. Out in Argyle, our shoes and lamps and doors are sitting in piles of debris. I've already been making a mental list of things to check, like whether our fireproof box worked, and whether our wallets survived. Then there's Sadie's bin of artwork. The stroller. My wedding dress.

When Cameron joins us, home for the summer after college graduation, I can tell there's something he isn't saying. He and I are the quiet ones: the two slices of plain white bread that sandwich the meat, the flavor, the color that is our middle sibling—who is currently teaching Sadie a hand-motion song like the child didn't just lose her home.

I observe the scene with a sense of detachment. Sadie giggles in the very spot where I learned, decades ago, how to zest a lemon. It makes me want to believe that Argyle was a dream, that I've been here in Dallas on Lexington Avenue this whole time.

Leo's cell rings.

It's the fire department, so he puts the phone on speaker.

Our house is now safe for reentry. They tell us not to turn on utilities. The only structural concern is the pantry, which they've roped off. Otherwise, since it's a one-story and they took the ceiling over the kitchen, we're all clear. Though we should dress appropriately, they say. Watch for glass, and no children on the premises.

The premises. The home where Sadie took her first steps.

After getting a few more details, Leo hangs up and stands. "I should head over." His tight gaze flicks toward me. "Take photos and contact the insurance company."

I look down at my thumb and peel a cuticle. "I'll come with you."

Everyone watches us. As soothing as Mom's nice breakfast is, we're

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going on only a few hours of sleep and haven't showered. We have no identification or credit cards.

Sadie pipes up. "Is our house going to be okay?"

I turn. How terrible yet necessary it is to give children hard answers. "We don't know. But we're okay, which is most important." I swallow, because I'm not actually sure we're okay. Alive, yes. But I've ruined my daughter's life twofold, and she doesn't know the half of it yet.

Mom jumps in. "And you can stay with us as long as you need. We'll find some fun things to do with you kids, I promise." She winks at Sadie, who nods solemnly.

Dad asks if we need him to join us.

Leo says, "I'm sure there will be days when we need more manpower, but today will probably just be a bunch of phone calls."

I blink. I was going to say yes, that I need my dad.

Mom says, "You can take my car."

"Do you have a commission today?" I ask.

We grew up helping with her custom desserts whenever she let us, during holiday seasons or when business doubled after Cameron made her a website.

"Not today." She looks down. "Haven't been taking many commissions lately."

This reminds me that Leo is off for the summer. I don't know how we would manage the days ahead without him having this time. But the thought of the days ahead forms a pit in my stomach, because regardless of the state of our house, our marriage is crumbling.

Josie snickers, and everyone looks at her with varying levels of impatience.

"Sorry, I shouldn't laugh." But she laughs harder.

Cameron shoots her a glare as she gives Leo an amused once-over. "I know this is a crisis, but you might want to rethink your OOTD."

Dad glances blankly over a forkful of quiche at Mom, who shrugs.

Leo looks down at his patriotic swim trunks and threadbare Radiohead

shirt as I register my own sweats and our children's pajamas, all blanketed with smoke as though we had a wild night out at the club together. Then Leo smiles. And with this permission, chuckles domino through us. Leave it to Jo to find the pressure release valve.

I want to burrow into the moment. But at the same time, laughing with Leo in my childhood home stings. So I suck in a breath, entrust Sadie and Otto to Gramma Deb for baths and a Target run, and ask my sister if I can borrow some clothes.

I take a quick shower and come back downstairs in baggy black pants and a T-shirt that says *Stage Crew Does It in the Dark*, which Josie claims is the tamest option she packed for her brief visit.

Dad insists that I wear his steel-toed boots, so I slide them on and lace up, having to shuffle forward so my feet won't lift out.

"Ready?" Leo is waiting by the door in one of Cameron's name-brand tracksuits. It infuriates me that Leo looks as good in that fancy activewear as he does in his usual unassuming wardrobe of secondhand corduroys and button-ups.

I wonder if it's too late to say no.

No, Leo, I'm not ready to see our charbroiled home.

No, Leo, I don't want a divorce.

No, Cody, you can't do that; I'm a married woman.

No, Leo, I won't marry you. Run.

But I nod and follow him to the car.

After the roar of the fire and the hubbub of my parents' house, the silence is earsplitting as we wind our way down Farm to Market Road 407, the city fading behind us.

LEO

2013

I VISIT APRIL'S PARENTS IN SECRET. THE WISTERIA IS IN bloom on Lexington Avenue, and I wipe sweaty palms on my corduroys. Billy and Deb are wonderful, but I'm not just stopping by for burgers and bocce ball. I'm here to ask for April's hand in marriage.

We don't need permission, I know that. But I want to acknowledge the value of a good parent. Nobody appreciates good parents quite like someone who didn't have them.

Of course, I'll still have to ask *her*. My stomach flutters as I'm taken back to the steps of Argyle High, that braided blur of April running toward the building. At first, it was simple intrigue. Then, I saw her with Jonathan. She talked with him like no one else existed. She had raced up the school steps for an overlooked kid, and she had gotten that kid to read. Willingly. It was no small thing. Ideals can be the sparks of love, and for us they were. By that week's end, I was pulling out her chair at Mesero as her honey-brown hair brushed my arm, sending a shiver of want through me. We talked until the restaurant closed.

I sit now in my idling car as a neighbor pulls away from their house in a Range Rover. Admittedly, I was shocked to discover that April is rich. She doesn't *talk* like a rich girl. But her family has dismantled my prejudices. I genuinely love them, and from them comes April. *April*, her name a note

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of springtime curling on the tongue. She is hewn of her father's loyalty and her mother's strength.

Billy appears on the front porch and hollers. "You planning to sit out there all night?"

I chuckle and turn the car off.

Inside, it smells delicious, as Deb's cooking always does. The Russos don't entertain, they welcome. There's always jazz on the stereo and just enough clutter to make it comfortable: bicycles propped on kickstands outside, board games on tables, shoes kicked off willy-nilly, tubes of toothpaste on bathroom counters. But beds are tidy and appliances sparkle, and—though it took me a minute to acclimate to the square footage—I admire their pride of place. Even a slight rip in a throw pillow receives a proper patch.

"Come in, come in!" Deb sets a lid on the Dutch oven. "Cameron has a scrimmage tonight, but he said to tell you hi."

I set a bottle of chardonnay on the counter. "Sorry to miss him." I uncork the wine. When I look up, both of my girlfriend's parents are grinning. They know exactly why I'm here.

We take our seats at their antique trestle table that is set with three steaming bowls of tortellini soup, and I take a deep breath. "So . . ." I clear my throat. If I'm this nervous now, I can hardly imagine asking April. They nod as if to say, *You can do this*.

"I'm wondering if I might get your blessing to ask April to marry me."

Their smiles could downright break their faces. Billy says jovially, "Absolutely you can." William Russo is not a pull-out-my-shotgun type. He's a dentist who fixes smiles with his hands, wins them with his humor, and sustains them with his loyal care. He wants people to be happy, and with me, he says, his daughter is the happiest she's ever been. He stands and pulls me up for a hug. He smells like spearmint. I turn to hug Deb, who is almost a foot shorter than I am but has a grip to confute it. She looks up at me, beaming. "We just love you two together."

When we all sit back down, my pulse slows to normal speed. I show them the simple solitaire ring, not letting on how much it drained my savings.

Deb fawns over it. If April says yes, she will be the first of the Russo kids to get engaged. After a few bites of soup, I joke that the only reason I'm proposing is for a lifetime guarantee of Deb's food. As their chuckles fade, Billy asks more seriously, "Is there anything you need?"

I frown and look between them, trying to decode. Their warm faces are so much like April's. I clear my throat. "Um, what do you mean?" This must be a test, their way of telling me that I lack something necessary to deserve their daughter. It's no secret that I come from nothing.

But Deb sops her soup with a piece of bread and says, "It's just something we ask our kids when they do something big. We want you all to have what you need." A wave of slate-gray hair falls in front of her face, and she tucks it behind her ear.

Our kids. I replay her words. *We want you all to have what you need.* I can't remember the last time a parent was concerned about what I need.

"Thank you." I inhale. "Actually, there is one thing."

I dab my mouth with a napkin, and I confess that I want to bring April home to a modest house of our own—and that I'm about five thousand dollars short of a down payment. I ask them to consider a loan, something I had considered doing, but not tonight. I tell them to think about it, of course. Zero pressure, of course. My heart races again: I've never asked anyone for money. Will it just serve as a reminder that I'm from a different tax bracket?

But Billy grins. "We were actually planning to bring this up. It can be hard starting out." The two of them squeeze hands conspiratorially. "We want to cover that gap as a wedding gift."

"I—um—" I look into my empty bowl. "Wow. Thank you."

I've never known anyone like Deb and Billy. Never.

And with them, I don't feel like a charity case. I feel like a son.

Over second helpings, they ask for the inside scoop on my proposal plan. I smile and disclose that I'm going to slip the ring into a book of Ada Limón's poetry. They don't know her poetry, but they love my plan.

We go on to talk about what April was like as a child, Josie's latest theater

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production, whether one can substitute floss for cooking twine, and my favorite things about teaching history. I leave their home full and filled, but not before turning and saying, “Oh, obviously do *not* tell Josie.” I love April’s sister, but her mouth is as big as her personality.

From their front porch, Billy makes a lip-zipping motion as Deb says, “*Obviously.*”

We chuckle, and I pat the ring in my pocket.

Two years ago, I had not met April.

In two weeks, I will get down on one knee.

And as I walk from the Russo home out to my car, life bursts with promise.