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MILK AND COOKIES

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“Not clean enough,” Catherine mumbled to herself. The pungent, white vinegar mixture burned her nostrils as she aggressively scrubbed at the teak wood floors. She heard the pitter-patter of little footsteps stop beside her but couldn’t bring herself to look away from the phantom dirt she’d convinced herself had coated the floors no matter how much she scrubbed and washed.

“Hi, Mama!” Theo, her one and only son, chirped as he skipped into her view, but Catherine continued to scrub away, leaving Theo unacknowledged. “Mama?” Catherine tossed her bristle brush into the bucket with a sigh, causing the warm vinegar water to slosh up and over the sides and onto the floor. “Yes, Theo?”

His face brightened with a smile identical to hers in the same lopsided way, with a deep-set dimple forming on either side. “Can I have milk and cookies, Mama?”

“Cookies make crumbs; crumbs make a mess. No, Theo.

“Please, Mama? I promise I’ll be careful. I won’t make a mess!”

“No, Theo. Absolutely not. Go play or sit down, but I’m not giving you any cookies.”

Theo stomped his little sock-clad foot, a dull thud vibrating the wood beneath Catherine’s knees.

“You can stomp all you’d like, Theo, but the answer is still no.”

With a contented sigh, Catherine stood, wiped her hands on her jeans, and sat beside her son, who remained on the couch with his arms crossed and a deep frown.

“Theo, give it up and stop pouting. I said no,”

Theo released a sob and flew up from his seat. “I just want the cookies, Mama! Please! I won’t make a mess!” Theo sobbed as he clawed at his mother's jeans.

“Theo, no—” Catherine began her scratching, opening fresh wounds in her skin as another screech reverberated through the room.

“Please, please, please, Mama!” Soon, Theo’s begging and screaming became unintelligible, sobs wracking his little body and leaving him breathless.

“Alright, Theo! Alright! Give it a rest!”

Theo’s sobs quieted, leaving him breathless and whimpering softly as he calmed himself. Catherine examined the blood seeping from her wounds and sighed, “Come on, Theo. You can have the cookies after I clean this up.”

Careful not to allow the blood to drip and stain her pristine white couch, Catherine slowly stood, using her free hand to catch the stray droplets, and rushed toward the kitchen.

“Once I’ve cleaned this, and you’ve calmed down, I can get you the cookies,” she said. She put her arm under the cold tap, taking a moment to stare at the blood and skin that gathered underneath her nails. She grabbed the brush beside the sink and scrubbed away.

When she’d finished, Catherine taped fresh gauze to her wounds, pulled a few cookies from the teddy bear-shaped cookie jar, placed them on a paper towel, and poured his milk into his favorite cup.

“Here, Theo. Be *careful*. The last thing I need is another mess,” Catherine warned as she placed the milk and cookies in front of him.

“I will, Mama, I promise!” His green eyes were wide with awe as he stared at the chocolate chip cookies.

Catherine observed him from her seat and started to fidget with the gauze that covered her arms. She watched Theo dip his first cookie in his milk; safe. Catherine watched, as if in slow motion, Theo reached for his second cookie and knocked his milk over.

“Mama?”

“Theo...go to your room.”

“But Mama—”

“Go, Theo! I told you no because you’d make a mess, and you scream, and you cry, and you make a mess, as I said! Go. To. Your. Room!”

Catherine’s body shook with rage. She watched Theo run off in tears to his room. She couldn’t help but feel guilt deep in the pit of her belly at the sight of Theo’s tear-filled eyes. Her anger smothered that guilt quickly.

Catherine wasn’t sure how much time had passed when she brought herself to stand over the milk pool. She’d spent almost half the roll of paper towels soaking up the spill. The anger had since subsided, and the guilt was now eating away at her as she sobbed over the pile of soggy paper towels.

“Cat?”

Catherine jumped at the break in the silence and whirled around to face Finn, her husband, with a furrowed brow and a deep frown.

“Oh...Finn, hey. How was work?”

“Cat, what happened?” he asked softly, grabbing her arm to examine the dried blood.

Catherine knew he knew what had happened, but he asked anyway and lovingly using the nickname he’d given her when they were in college.

Catherine sighed and wiped her eyes. The tears stinging the exposed cuts, “Theo asked for cookies, and I told him no because he’d make a mess, and he threw a tantrum, crying and screaming, so I gave in and gave them to him because I couldn’t take the screaming, and when I gave him the cookies and the milk, he knocked the milk over, and I just snapped. I feel awful, Finn,”

“I know, Cat,” He hugged her and stroked her hair. “Hey, how about I cook dinner and get Finn ready for bed?”

Catherine nodded weakly. “Okay...I wish I had some help sometimes, you know? Someone who can give Theo as much attention as he’d like while I clean.”

“I know. I’m sorry I can’t be here more, but after this business trip, I’ll be around more to help with Theo, okay? Now go rest, and I’ll bring you your dinner.”

Catherine nodded again and started toward their bedroom. She managed to peek into Theo’s room on the way. He sat at his desk with his back to her, aimlessly coloring in the coloring book he’d gotten for his fifth birthday.

Catherine thought of going in. She wanted to hug him, shower his chubby little cheeks in kisses, and tell him she was sorry and that she’d be a better Mama. But she didn’t.

It had been two days since the incident. Theo seemed normal, but the guilt consumed her whenever she looked at him.

Catherine had woken up the way she always did, showering and readying herself for the day, but when she went to wake Theo, she found him in the kitchen with Finn, happily scarfing down an egg sandwich.

“Good morning, Mama!” Theo smiled. His cheeks packed with his breakfast.

“Hey, good morning!” Finn smiled, wiping his hands on the dish towel he’d slung onto his shoulder.

“Hey, you two. Finn, how come you’re still home?”

“You remember Dane from work? Well, I mentioned how you were having a bit of a hard time with Theo, and he recommended the nanny he had for his kids before they went to live with their mom. I had an interview with her; she’s great! Theo loved her, and she’s starting on Friday when I leave for my trip!”

Catherine frowned. She finally would be able to clean the house and there’d be someone to give Theo the attention he needs, but on the opposite side who is this stranger he’d bring into their home to watch their son?

Finn had been on his business trip two weeks when Catherine started noticing the nanny’s slights toward Catherine and her parenting.

At first, Prudence had been kind and doting on both Theo and Catherine. Then she started going against Catherine’s decisions for Theo. Slipping in a cookie or cake when she thought Catherine wasn’t looking, watching over Catherine’s shoulder when she did anything with Theo, or commenting how the way she did it was better and that Catherine should look into parenting classes.

Catherine had finished cleaning and perched herself on the couch, smiling at Theo and Prudence, playing with his trucks in the middle of the floor.

“Theo, you’ve been so good today. How about some milk and cookies? Hm?”

Theo gasped, and his eyes lit up at the idea, “Yes, please, Mama!”

“No, Theo, you’ll spoil your dinner,” Prudence said, looking sternly over Catherine.

“Uhm, it’s three o’clock in the afternoon. Dinner is at seven. He can have them.”

“Well, considering I’m taking care of him, not you, what I say goes.”

Catherine stood stunned. “Well, considering I’m his *mother*, what *I* say goes. Not you. Come on, Theo.” Catherine smiled. She crouched beside him and stroked his soft auburn curls, but Prudence delivered a sharp smack to her hand before she could make contact. “Do not put your hands on me! What is the matter with you?”

“Maybe I wouldn't have to if you were a better mother instead of only playing nice when it’s convenient for you. Come on, Theo. Let’s go play.” Prudence snatched Theo’s hand and led him to the backyard.

Catherine's thoughts raced faster than she could process them, but the one that echoed about in her head, pinging back and forth. *How dare she?*

Catherine shot up from the floor and stormed through the house, flinging things about her room in search of her cell phone. She shoved the sheets from her bed, revealing her cell phone. Her hands shook aggressively as she tapped through the screens to dial Finn.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Wait–

”Hello?”

“Finn! We have a problem!” Catherine tucked her free hand underneath her other arm to calm her shaking.

“Problem? What’s the matter? Is Theo okay?” He sounded more frantic this time.

“Theo is fine, but Prudence is a problem, Finn!”

“What happened?”

Catherine relayed every detail. Her body shook as she relived the moment, and Finn didn't make a sound as she yelled through the phone.

“Catherine...I know how hard it must be to have someone else taking care of our son—”

“This isn't about jealousy, Finn, don't even go there!”

“Catherine, please. Dane speaks highly of her, Theo adores her, and I even interviewed her myself. You wanted help. You got help. Don't let your jealousy deprive our son,”

“Finn—”

“And Catherine, if I find out you've fired Prudence behind my back, we'll have to have a much bigger discussion. Now I have to go. I'll talk to you both tonight,” and he was gone.

Catherine took a deep breath, storming from her room to the kitchen. She snatched her car keys from their place beside the back door and called out to Theo.

“Theo, come on, baby, we're going to the park!”

When she peeked out to see if Theo had heard her, she noticed he was by himself. She went to call him again, but Prudence stepped into her line of sight, silencing her immediately.

Prudence laughed. Her laugh made Catherine feel like what little she had in her stomach was about to make a reappearance.

“I don't think so,” Prudence smiled, snatching Catherine's keys and fishing her Catherine phone from her pocket “don't need you going anywhere or trying to call for help like you just did, now do we?” Prudence shoved the keys into her waistband and slammed the phone against the marble countertop, obliterating any chance of communication Catherine had.

Catherine felt defeated. Her body was exhausted from cleaning, and her mind was exhausted from a fight she didn't know she'd been losing. She didn't even argue as her phone

was smashed. She just watched in silence and drifted back to her room like a soul without a body.

Catherine sat with her back against the wall for what felt like days, but it had only been an hour when she looked at her alarm clock.

Theo and Prudence had since returned from their time outside, and she could hear Prudence bathing Theo—their laughs and the splashing filled Catherine with rage once more.

Catherine crawled over to the door and closed it slowly so as not to alert Prudence. She slammed a piece of paper and a pen down on the ground and started to write so furiously that she ripped holes into her paper. She wrote out a plan to take Theo to her mother-in-law by bus in the night so she could call the police, have Prudence removed, and be in her house again peacefully.

She tucked the paper into her waistband and stood up when she finished. Her knees ached from not being stretched for so long. Catherine wandered down the hallway, peeking into Theo's room; empty. The bathroom; empty. She finally found Theo in the living room reading one of his books, wearing his favorite airplane pajamas, with his hair damp and brushed smooth.

Catherine surveyed the room and didn't see Prudence anywhere, so she took her chance, tiptoed toward her son, and sat beside him.

“Hey baby, you okay?” Catherine whispered.

“Yes, Mama, I'm—”

Catherine shushed him. “We have to be quiet, okay? How would you feel about going to Nana Ellie's tonight? Hm?”

Theo gasped. “Yes, please, Mama,” he said in a cute little whisper. “Can Mama Pru Pru come?”

Catherine felt disgusted at the nickname. “No, babe. It’ll just be us, okay? Mama Pru Pru has to stay here.”

“No! I don’t want to leave Mama Pru Pru!”

“Theo, shh—”

“What are you doing?”

Catherine nearly jumped out of her skin at Prudence’s voice. She whirled around and put on a brave face. “I’m taking *my* son, and I am leaving.”

Prudence stared at her momentarily—the two of them at a stand-off. Then all Catherine could feel was an impact to her cheek, knocking her off her feet. It wasn’t until she looked up did she realize Prudence had punched her. Catherine went to speak but was cut off by Prudence balling her hair into a fist and beginning to drag her through the house. Even as Catherine kicked and screamed, she could see the fear on her son’s face as she was dragged out of sight and to the garage. Prudence threw her in and slammed the door, leaving Catherine in a crumpled heap on the ground. She didn’t bother to try the door because she knew it automatically locked from inside the house. Catherine couldn’t help but cry. She sobbed until exhaustion overtook her grief, and she fell asleep.

Catherine had spent three days of quiet defeat in the garage. She couldn’t bring herself to try and pry the garage door open. But as Catherine flipped onto her back, she caught a glint of sunlight in her eye. She was up with a speed that impressed her and flung herself against the plastic shelf that blocked a window she’d long forgotten about and flung it to the ground. She pounded at the window with her bare fists until the glass shattered, shards spraying against her arms as she blocked her face.

With an animalistic ferocity, Catherine climbed up through the window, not worried about the glass that cut her clothes and her skin. She let herself out into the backyard and slammed the back door open. The day was still early, so Prudence stood at the stove making eggs, and Theo sat at the table in front of a plate piled high with pancakes, frightened by the sudden noise, but Prudence was unphased.

“I suggest you go back to the garage. Would be a shame if you found yourself with a broken ankle...or two.” Prudence said, keeping her focus on the eggs in the skillet.

“No. I am taking my son, and you are going to leave,” Catherine’s rage now began to bubble over, giving her newfound confidence.

Prudence laughed. Slowly turning her head to Catherine, “Excuse you—”

“No. Excuse *you*. Theo is *my* son. Not yours. This is my family. This is my home. He is *my* son.”

“You’re too worried about your perfect little house to even care for your son. You don’t deserve this family. *I* do!”

Catherine could see the spit flying from Prudence’s mouth as she screamed at her. Theo flinched at Prudence’s anger. He jumped up from his seat at the table and cowered behind Catherine’s legs. This sent Prudence into a rage. She charged at Catherine, screaming like a wild animal, but Catherine was fast. She snatched the skillet from the stove and swung with all her strength until the pan connected with Prudence’s head, and the sound it made was sickening. Prudence was strewn in a heap on the floor, unconscious and surrounded by egg fragments.

“Theo, go to your room, okay? Don’t come out until I say.”

Theo nodded and bolted to his room just as Prudence began to stir. Catherine straddled her body, wrapping her hands around her throat. When Prudence finally realized what was

happening, she began to claw and thrash against Catherine, a wild, panicked look in her eyes, but slowly, the light in her eyes faded, and she was gone.

With a smile, Catherine grabbed Prudence's body and dragged her to the barren patch of dirt in the back corner of her yard.

“Goodnight, Theo. I love you *so* much,” Catherine said as she kissed his head.

It had been three weeks since she'd buried Prudence. Finn had come home, and when he asked about Prudence, Catherine told him she quit. Theo and Catherine had been spending all their time together, and everything was wonderful.

Shutting Theo's door behind her, Catherine made her way toward her bedroom but stopped when she heard Finn's hushed voice.

“I don't know, Dane! I came home, and Catherine was still here. Prudence is nowhere to be found...you said she'd do it...well now I have to finish the job.”