

## ONE

The boy is standing in the doorway again. He's smiling, which hardly seems right. A smile means he's not sick. He didn't have a bad dream. He didn't wet the bed. None of the things he usually says when he enters the room uninvited. Kyung nudges his wife, who turns over with a grunt, face-first into her pillow. He sighs and sits up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "What's the matter?"

Ethan, still smiling, takes a step forward, holding a remote control in his outstretched palm. "Battery," he says, pronouncing the word "buttery."

"You want batteries now?"

He nods. "To watch cartoons."

The curtains in the bedroom are open. The sky outside, a pale silvery blue. It's early still. Too early to be thinking about batteries, but Kyung resists the urge to say so out loud. At this hour, he doesn't trust himself to do it nicely. He kicks off the sheets, grazing Gillian's leg as he gets out of bed.

"Five minutes," she says. "I'll be up in five."

The night-lights flicker as they make their way downstairs,

past floorboards that creak and sigh under their weight. Kyung finds a dusty package of batteries that he doesn't remember buying. He swaps out the old for the new and hands the remote back to Ethan.

"You want some breakfast now?"

Ethan climbs onto the sofa and turns on the TV. "Okay," he says, flipping from one channel to the next.

The boy always agrees to eat and then doesn't. If given the choice, he'd probably subsist on a diet of grapes, popcorn, and cheese. The kitchen is down to the dregs of the week's groceries. A spotted brown banana. A cup of cereal dust. Half a cup of almost-expired milk. Not much to work with, but enough. Kyung slices the banana into the cereal with the edge of a spoon, making a face with the pieces because Ethan is more likely to eat something when it smiles. As he tosses the peel into the trash, he notices the calendar pinned to the wall. There's a circle around today's date. Inside the thick red ring is a single word that disappoints him. *Gertie*. Weekends are best when there's nothing to do and no one to see. A visit from Gertie is the exact opposite of nothing.

"Did your mom mention someone was coming over today?" he asks, depositing the bowl of cereal in Ethan's lap.

"She said I have to clean my room."

"I need to go talk to her for a minute. Will you be okay here by yourself?"

"Dad, shhhhh." Ethan points at the screen as a bright blue train speeds past. "I'm missing Thomas."

Upstairs, Gillian is making the bed. The realtor is coming at ten, she says, confirming what he hoped wasn't true. He wishes she'd mentioned this the night before, but he knows why

she didn't. Selling the house is her idea, not his. Kyung glances at the ornate paisley comforter, the expertly arranged pillows and bolsters, piled high like a soft hill. He wants to climb back into them, to pull the sheets over his head and wake up to a day that isn't this one.

"I'm not canceling again," she says.

"I didn't ask you to."

"But I can see it on your face."

What she actually sees is surprise—surprise that Gertie would agree to another meeting with them. At his insistence, Gillian canceled their last three. It was dishonest of her to plan it this way, but he realizes he gave her no choice.

"Come on," she says, taking his hand. "We have a lot to do before she gets here."

They eat their breakfast standing up—a stack of dry toast on a paper towel. Kyung searches for something to moisten the stale bread, but finds only a thin pat of butter, flecked with crumbs, and a jar of crystallized honey. He misses the pancakes and omelets that Gillian used to make before Ethan was born, the lazy meals they shared after waking up at noon. These days, breakfast is what they consume in large, distracted bites while attending to other things. Gillian is leaning over the counter, reading him the to-do list on her computer. *Sweep floors, clean up laundry room, vacuum carpets, take out trash.* It seems odd to go through so much trouble for a realtor, he thinks, someone they're paying for a service. Gertie Trudeau is supposedly the best in town. She should be able to price the house whether they do these things or not.

"What about the garbage disposal?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

“Don’t you think I should fix it?”

“We’ll just tell her the sink’s clogged. It’s more important for everything to look clean.”

“I think I’ll try to fix it,” he says, because trying is his only means of protest.

Gillian puts on her shoes and opens the door to the garage. “Fine,” she says, in a tone that suggests just the opposite. “I guess I’ll start with the trash, then.”

Kyung has never fixed a garbage disposal before. He has only a vague idea of how it works—blades, motor, plumbing, pipes. He’s not handy like some of the other men in the neighborhood, the ones with toolboxes as big as furniture, always borrowing and lending the contents as if they were books. Kyung isn’t friendly enough with any of them to ask for help, although he sometimes wishes he could. The sink is half-full with foul gray dishwater—it has been for days. He’s not sure what to do about it except plunge his hand into the murk. An inch shy of elbow-deep, he finally touches the bottom. There’s a thick layer of grease in the chamber, solid like wax.

“Well, no wonder it’s clogged,” he shouts.

From the garage, a muffled “What?”

“I said ‘no wonder it’s clogged.’”

Gillian doesn’t respond. He’s about to remind her that cooking oil settles in the blades, but his wife is a selective listener. If she didn’t hear him the first time, she’s not likely to hear him now. He loosens the edge of something with his fingertips and removes a jagged shard of congealed fat. The air suddenly smells like rotten meat, the remains of a thousand family dinners. He feels an urge to gag that he traps with his fist and then a tug on the hem of his shirt.

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“What are you doing?”

Ethan is standing behind him, still dressed in his pajamas. Around his waist is a tool belt with multicolored loops, most of which are empty. From the original set, the only pieces that remain are a bright yellow hammer and a miniature tape measure.

“I’m trying to fix the garbage disposal.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Things just break sometimes. Have you cleaned your room yet?”

“I can fix it with you.” Ethan gets up on his tiptoes and bangs away on the chipped Formica.

Kyung pinches the bridge of his nose, massaging the dull rings of pain around his eyes. Every time the cheap plastic hammer hits the counter, he feels a little worse. “Stop,” he says, placing his wet hand over Ethan’s. “Please stop.”

Although he barely raised his voice, Ethan’s lower lip starts to tremble and his crusty brown eyes well with tears. Kyung doesn’t understand why his son is like this, so quick to cry. He’s not the source of it, and Gillian, who comes from a family of policemen, hasn’t cried once in the half decade he’s known her.

“It’s okay,” he says quietly. “But it only takes one person to fix a garbage disposal. Maybe there’s something upstairs that you can fix? Or outside, with Mom?”

Kyung watches carefully, waiting for the threat of tears to pass. He’s grateful when Ethan slips the hammer back into its loop and runs off to his room. The banging resumes almost immediately, still annoying and persistent, but less so with distance. He turns his attention back to the sink, throwing lumps of grease in the trash until the pileup resembles a tumor, opaque

and misshapen and thick like jelly. After scraping the chamber clean, he runs hot water from the tap, hoping to see some improvement, but the water level doesn't drop. Instead, the surface shimmers with a slick, oily residue in which he catches his reflection. He looks disappointed, as he often does on weekends when a minor household task unravels into something that resembles work. He imagines the rest of his day wasted on this project—driving to the hardware store for a new tool, disassembling things that he shouldn't, searching the Internet for a clue. Nothing in his house works anymore, which is part of the problem.

By the time the realtor arrives, Kyung has completed exactly zero tasks on the to-do list. The garbage disposal, still broken, might even count as minus one. He watches from the window as Gertie rolls up in a silver Mercedes, sleek and recently washed. She parks in the driveway and surveys the lawn before ringing the bell, wrinkling her nose at the weedy flower beds. She looks different from her photographs, the ones posted on every other bus and billboard in town. Older, he thinks, and heavier too. When he greets her in the foyer, he notices that her teeth have been whitened, and she's wearing diamond solitaires the size of erasers on her ring finger, in her ears, and around her neck. He distrusts her immediately, the way she screams *sales*.

"Pleased to meet you," she says, shaking his hand as if pumping water from a well. "I'm glad we could finally make this happen."

Gillian and Ethan join them in the foyer. They've both changed clothes. A pair of blue denim shorts and a button-down shirt for him. A yellow sundress for her, dotted with orange flowers. Kyung is still wearing the T-shirt and shorts he slept in. His

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feet are callused and bare, outlined with dirt from the sandals he wore the day before.

“Now, who is this precious little boy?” Gertie asks.

Ethan steps backward, hiding behind Gillian’s leg.

“Say hello to Mrs. Trudeau,” Kyung says.

Ethan extends his small hand to her, which she takes between her thumb and forefinger.

“How old are you?” she asks.

“Four,” he whispers, retreating behind Gillian again. She makes no effort to stop him, which they’ve discussed in the past. The boy is shy because they coddle him.

“What a gorgeous child,” Gertie says agreeably. “Biracial children are always so beautiful. The best of both parents, I think. You two are what? Chinese and Irish?”

“Korean,” he corrects.

Gertie quickly depletes her reserves of small talk and asks for a tour, which they start in the living room. Gillian takes the lead and tries to point out the nicer features of the house, describing even the smallest things too cheerfully, as if the person she needs to convince is herself. Kyung brings up the rear, occasionally stealing a peek over Gertie’s shoulder as she jots down notes in a leather-bound legal pad. The brick fireplace in the living room receives a check-plus, along with the bay window, the wood floors, and the size of the adjoining dining room. The kitchen appliances, the worn carpets on the second floor, and the water stains in the bathroom all receive a check-minus. Pantry and garage, check-plus. Wet basement and old boiler, check-minus. He isn’t insulted so much as impressed by the skill and speed with which she catalogs the good and bad. Gertie

sees dollars, not disappointment, which is exactly what he needs right now.

After the tour, they sit down at the kitchen table while Gertie removes a manila folder from her briefcase. The label on the tab reads MCFADDEN—Gillian's last name, not his.

"I pulled up some sales data on comparable houses in the neighborhood." She flips through a few sheets of paper, frowning as if she left something behind at the office. "Of course, you know the market's down right now."

Under the table, Gillian taps nervously on Kyung's leg. Get to the point, he thinks. Get to the point already.

"I'd say your biggest selling point is the neighborhood. The taxes are a little high here, but you're in an excellent school district, and the commute to Boston is pretty reasonable. As for the house . . ."

He wants to cut her off and tell her about their plans. They had so many of them—a new kitchen, a sunroom, replacement windows, and a deck—but what does it matter now? It's obvious they couldn't afford to do any of it. That's the hesitation he hears in her voice.

"... the house could use a fair amount of remodeling. And that boiler will have to be replaced soon, which won't be cheap. Ah, here it is." Gertie pulls out a piece of paper from the bottom of the stack and adjusts her reading glasses. "I'd probably suggest a list price of three hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars. Maybe you could go as high as three ninety if you're not in a hurry to move, but I wouldn't necessarily recommend that route."

It doesn't matter what she would or wouldn't recommend. Even the higher price is less than what they hoped for, less than



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what they owe. Kyung forgets himself for a moment and rests his forehead in his hands. This is exactly why he put off the meeting for so long.

“I’m sorry. Is that not what you expected to hear?”

He can’t quite bring himself to answer the question. Although he knew Gertie wouldn’t be able to save them, at the very least, he thought she might throw them a rope.

Gillian sends Ethan into the living room and tells him to turn on the TV. “Can we be completely honest with you?” she asks.

“If you expect me to sell your house, you shouldn’t be anything but.”

“Well”—she picks at a line of dirt under her nail—“we’re kind of embarrassed about this, but you might as well know . . . my husband and I refinanced at the height of the market and took cash out against our mortgage, so we actually owe the bank about four hundred and eighty thousand for this place.”

The books and Web sites that Gillian always asks him to read refer to this state as “underwater” or “upside down”—terms he actively dislikes. It’s bad enough that everything in the house keeps breaking. He doesn’t need to imagine himself drowning too.

“So it’s a short sale,” Gertie says. Her expression gives away nothing. “They’re much more common these days. The trick is getting your bank to take a loss on the difference between what you owe them and what you can sell for.”

Her matter-of-fact tone should encourage him, but it doesn’t. He already knows their bank won’t agree to a loss unless they fall behind on their payments. By some sort of miracle, they haven’t yet, although they’re behind on everything else. Gertie

fails to mention that a short sale would be disastrous to their credit rating, almost as bad as a foreclosure. No one would be willing to lend to them for years. Kyung can't stand the idea of being reduced to a renter at his age, asking a landlord for permission to paint a room or hang up some shelves. He was raised to believe that owning a home meant something. Losing a home like this—that would mean something too.

“An alternative to selling now is renting this place out until the market picks back up. You could easily get twenty-five hundred a month, maybe even as much as three thousand.” Gertie turns to him. “Would you have somewhere else to go if I found you a good tenant? I actually know of a couple. They're relocating to the area and want to get acclimated for a year before they buy.”

They do have a place to go, a place that makes sense financially, but it would wreck him to exercise the option, to explain why he had to. His parents live three miles away, just past the conservation land that separates their neighborhood from his own. As Gillian keeps pointing out, they have plenty of space, they could live there rent-free, and it's what his parents wanted all along—to spend more time with their grandson. He just can't imagine living any closer to them than he already does.

END OF 10-PAGE EXCERPT  
CHAPTER CONTINUES