

FAMILY COURTHOUSE
PRESENT

CLARICE

On the day that was to determine the course of the rest of her life, and Eric's, Clarice's mind raced over the events of the last two years as she waited in the anterior office of the judge's chambers. Seated in a gray vinyl chair with metal arms that were cold to the touch, she gathered her thoughts. She'd been rehearsing what she'd say for a week.

How strange that Eric should be the calm one today, and she so anxious. Her grandson showed unusual tranquility as he moved each of his rubber snakes, dangled between his pinched fingers, from one end of the room to the other. He sniffed each snake before setting it down on the linoleum floor. When all seven were in a large heap, he repeated the process.

"Like an angel from heaven with those big blue eyes." That's what the grocery store clerk often said about him. Of course, Eric was always agreeable at the grocery store, provided Clarice bought him exactly what he wanted. And she usually did, because she'd learned to avoid an argument with her grandson in a public place. Over four feet tall and pudgy, he was much larger than most ten-year-old boys, and he outweighed her. Last year, she could restrain him by sitting on him but not anymore.

She wondered how much Eric understood about the consequences of today's actions. Maybe it was better he wasn't fully cognizant. If he had a strong opinion, it would make her decision much harder. What grandmother could be fully confident left with a choice between institutionalizing her grandson or adoption?

Eric looked up at her and rewarded her with a big smile that reminded her of her husband Ted, who died when Eric was a toddler. He had the same wide grin, framed by dimples on either side. When Clarice had first seen Ted, she was immediately taken in by his eyes, which were

more violet than blue. He was a senior, and she a college freshman, at the University of Michigan. It didn't take long for her to realize he was the one. On the night of his graduation, in a rare drunken, celebratory haze, he'd asked her to marry him. Soon after, they moved to California, where he had accepted a job as an engineer at an aerospace company.

Ted would have found a lot in common with his grandson. In many ways, he collapsed into his own world like Eric did. Clarice often found herself trying to pull Ted away from his books so that he would join her in activities. Eric, too, loved words, and he often exhausted Clarice with spelling challenges that went on for hours. If Eric had the ability to stay focused on a book, Clarice was sure that he could also slip into the world of fiction. It was not that Clarice didn't enjoy a good read, but she much preferred the challenges and excitement of everyday life. At least she had until Ted passed away. That was when her whole world began to unravel. In truth, she would have traded a good novel for the events of the last several years.

She wished sensible Ted were here now to reassure her.

TWENTY-THREE MONTHS EARLIER

FEBRUARY

CLARICE

Clarice looked forward to the dinner with her daughter and grandson even though a visit with Megan and Eric always came with some trepidation. The level of enjoyment was based entirely on Eric's unpredictable behavior, and she hoped the evening would go well. Earlier in the day, Megan had telephoned Clarice and expressly warned her that this was Eric's night, and he could eat what and as much as he liked. Clarice silently vowed to keep quiet.

Clarice had picked Javier's to celebrate Eric's birthday because of the restaurant's informal setting and fast service. Eric seemed to take little notice of the piñatas hanging from the

ceiling or the bright walls painted in blue, pink, and yellow. Instead he gobbled up a basket of tortilla chips like a Tyrannosaurus rex. He shoved the chips with an open hand into his mouth. Bits and pieces fell around him on to the table and the booth. Clarice found it increasingly difficult to focus on her meal. She was afraid Eric would choke.

Megan ate her dinner, methodically separating each bite of her enchilada into equal parts with her fork. An outsider watching might assume Megan paid little attention to her son, but Clarice knew better. To maintain the peace, Megan had perfected a way of being around Eric when in a public place.

As a single parent, Megan's whole life revolved around her son. She'd been only twenty-one when Eric was born. To Clarice's dismay, she'd missed the parties and the travel most young girls her age experienced. To her credit, she'd finished her education and taken a good job as a teacher. Clarice admired her daughter's tenacity but worried that she had no happiness in her life.

"What do you have planned for spring break?" Clarice took a bite of the chile relleno from her plate. The spicy pepper sauce burned her chapped lips.

Megan tucked a strand of short, loose blonde hair behind her ear. "I hadn't really thought about it. Take Eric to the pool. Maybe try swim lessons again."

"I have an idea. Why don't you call a girlfriend and plan a little getaway? You could drive to Palm Springs, have a few days to yourself."

"What would I do with Eric?"

The waitress approached with a full basket of chips. Clarice intended to decline them, but Megan took the overflowing basket and set it in front of Eric.

"He can stay with me."

"That would be too much for you, Mom."

“We would manage; wouldn’t we, Eric?”

Eric examined a chip, twirling it in his fingertips, then crushed it, letting the pieces fall where they may.

“I appreciate the offer, but we’re just going to hang out over spring break.”

The sweetness in Megan’s voice belied the truth. Clarice squirmed in her seat. Megan didn’t trust Clarice to take care of Eric. She didn’t think Clarice was capable of handling her own grandson. Well, she’d raised Megan, and she’d turned out alright. No missing limbs. Certainly, Clarice could handle Eric for a few days. It would probably do him some good. His mother coddled him way too much. It was true that he wasn’t your average eight-year-old, but still a little discipline never hurt any child.

Eric shoved the last handful of chips into his mouth. “I want more.”

“Don’t you think he’s had enough?”

“I want more.” He pushed the empty basket away from him.

Megan responded patiently, “Why don’t you try some of your enchilada? You usually like it.”

“Humph.” Eric pinched his elbows to his side. His eyes scoured the table before he reached out and opened a packet of sugar, slurping it down. Megan moved the sugar container across the table out of his reach. “You’re not eating that.”

Eric bounced up and down on his haunches. His bushy eyebrows furrowed together above his flared nostrils. He lunged across the table for the sugar, but Clarice snatched it away out of his reach. “Your mother told you no.”

“Mom, I can handle this.”

“He’s testing you, you know.” As soon as she said it, Clarice regretted breaking her vow to keep her trap shut.

“He’s not testing me. When he wants something, he doesn’t understand why he can’t have it.” Megan rolled her eyes in a gesture to declare Clarice knew nothing.

How could Megan be so blind? She was a teacher. That’s what frustrated Clarice more than anything. Her daughter should know better.

Eric screamed, “I want more chips!”

“You’re not getting more chips.” Clarice turned the empty basket upside down, unable to stop herself.

“Yes. I want them!” he shouted loud enough to draw the attention of nearby diners.

Megan snapped up her purse. “We’re going home.” Clarice wasn’t sure if Megan was irritated with Eric or with her. Maybe both of them.

“No. I want chips.” Eric pitched a fork, and it sailed across the room, narrowly missing a woman with a gray pixie cut before it bounced off the back of her booth. Clarice wanted to apologize, but the situation with Eric demanded her attention. Out of control, he screamed and then kicked at the side of the table with his feet. He was strong, and the heavy table rattled as if the earth was moving under it. They had the attention of every person in the busy restaurant. Megan, small in stature, tried unsuccessfully to restrain him. She slid out of the booth and stood to her full five feet, four inches. With her eyes determined and her voice coming through clenched teeth, she commanded Eric, “Get up.”

“No.”

“Eric, I am not kidding. Now.” Each word was pronounced as a threat.

“No. No. No.” His legs pummeled the side of the table, a jackhammer gone wild.

Megan grabbed Eric by the arm and yanked him from the booth. Crying out, he dropped to the floor where he continued to kick and thrash about. Trying to get a hold of Eric when he'd lost it was like trying to harness a bucking bronco.

"Mom, help me." Megan took hold of Eric's right arm and leg.

Clarice latched on to Eric's left arm, taking a blow to her leg when he kicked out. She grabbed his foot. His body torqued and went rigid. Together they hauled him out of the restaurant.

They set Eric on the sidewalk next to Megan's car. He bounced up and punched Megan in the chest. She doubled over in pain. It was the last straw for Clarice. She hurt to see her daughter take such abuse. Clarice pointed her finger in rage at Eric. "Do not hit your mother. Do you hear me? Do you?" This only sent him into another fit of grunting and sputtering.

"Mom, you're not helping the situation." Megan shoved Eric into the back of the Honda SUV fighting his flailing body until she was able to lock the seat belt around him.

"You cannot let him get away with hitting you." Clarice never believed in corporal punishment while raising Megan, but Eric pushed the limits. Maybe there were some children who needed a spank on the bottom to set them straight.

"He doesn't understand what he's doing."

"He does, Megan." Clarice knew that he wasn't like other children, but she'd seen him remorseful after an episode like this. If he could feel contrite, certainly he must understand what he was doing.

"He's having a meltdown," said Megan—as if that would explain everything. "This happens every time we go out with you. It's exactly why I can't leave him with you."

Clarice's jaw dropped in disbelief. "Megan, it's not my fault."

Eric continued his rant in the back of the car. Tears coursed down his face—he gagged on his own saliva.

“Why couldn’t you let him have the chips?” Megan climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Because . . .” Clarice couldn’t say that her feelings had been hurt and that she’d broken her own vow of silence, because it angered her that Megan didn’t trust her with her own grandson.

Megan slammed the car door in her face.

“Megan, wait.” Clarice called after her, but she drove off without a single look back, the exhaust from the car filling Clarice’s nostrils.

This wasn’t the first time they’d clashed over Eric, but she had hoped they’d make it through dinner in harmony. As it was, it seemed she and Megan had little time together. Clarice admonished herself once more for her lack of self-control. The night was cold, and without her jacket, a chill ran through her.

She made her way back into the restaurant, her head hanging low, eyes diverted from the other diners. She slipped into the booth to retrieve her purse, and the waitress came over with the check. Clarice could barely look at her, embarrassed that the whole episode had played out in front of strangers. After leaving the money for the bill, she stopped to address the woman who was nearly hit by the flying fork. “I apologize for my grandson’s behavior.”

The woman smiled at her. “Please, I’m a grandmother too. They’re not always angels, are they?”

Clarice nodded and walked on. The woman couldn’t possibly understand. Eric was unpredictable and often violent like he was tonight. She worried Megan would not be able to

cope with his ever-changing personality—especially as he grew. His mere size would make it impossible to handle him.