

ONLY DAUGHTER

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I've always been good at playing a part: the mysterious seductress for the sleazebag, the doe-eyed innocent for the protector. I had tried both on the security guard and neither seemed to be working.

I'd been so close. The supermarket doors had already slid open for me when his wide hand clamped on my shoulder. The main road was only fifteen paces away. A quiet street lined with yellow-and-orange-leaved trees.

His grip tightened.

He brought me into the back office. A small cement box with no windows, barely big enough to fit the old filing cabinet, desk and printer. He took the bread roll, cheese and apple out of my bag and laid them on the table between us. Seeing them spread out like that gave me a jolt of shame, but I tried my best to hold his eye. He said I wasn't going anywhere until I gave him some identification. Luckily, I had no wallet. Who needs a wallet when you don't have any money?

I attempted all my routines on him, letting tears flow when my insinuations fell flat. It wasn't my best performance; I couldn't

stop looking at the bread. My stomach was beginning to cramp. I've never felt hunger like this before.

I can hear him now, talking to the police on the other side of the locked door. I stare up at the notice board above the desk. This week's staff roster is there, alongside a memo about credit card procedures with a smiley face drawn on the bottom and a few photographs from a work night out.

I have never wanted to work in a supermarket. I've never wanted to work anywhere, but all of a sudden, I'm painfully jealous.

"Sorry to bother you with this. Little skank won't give me any ID."

I wonder if he knows I can hear him.

"It's all right—we'll take it from here." Another voice.

The door opens and two cops look in at me. It's a female and a male, both probably about my age. She has her dark hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. The guy is pasty and thin. I can tell straightaway that he's going to be an asshole. They sit down on the other side of the table.

"My name is Constable Thompson and this is Constable Seirs. We understand that you were caught shoplifting from this store," the male cop says, not even bothering to hide the boredom in his tone.

"No, actually, I wasn't," I say, imitating my stepmom's perfect breeding. "I was on my way to the register when he grabbed me. That man has a problem with women."

They look at me doubtfully, their eyes sliding over my unwashed clothes and greasy hair. I wonder if I smell. My bruised and swollen face isn't doing me any favours. It was probably why I got caught in the first place.

"He was calling me foul names when he brought me back here—" I lower my voice "—like *skank* and *whore*. Disgusting.

My father is a lawyer and I expect he'll want to sue for misconduct when I tell him what went on here today."

They look at each other and I can immediately tell they don't buy it. I should have cried.

"Listen, honey, it's going to be fine. Just give us your name and address. You'll be back home by the end of the day," the girl cop says.

She is my age and she's calling me pet names like I'm just a kid.

"The other option is that we book you now and take you back to the station. You'll have to wait in a cell while we sort out who you are. It will be a lot easier if you just give us your name now."

They're trying to scare me and it's working, but not for the reason they think. Once they have my fingerprints it won't take them long to identify me. They'll find out what I did.

"I was so hungry," I say, and the tremor in my tone isn't fake.

It's the look in their eyes that does it. A mix of pity and disgust. Like I'm worth nothing, just another stray for them to clean up. A memory slowly opens and I realize I know exactly how to get myself out of this.

The power of what I'm about to say is huge. It courses through my body like a shot of vodka, removing the tightness in my throat and sending tingles to the tips of my fingers. I don't feel helpless anymore; I know I can pull this off. Staring at her, then him, I let myself savor the moment. Watching them carefully to enjoy the exact instant their faces change.

"My name is Rebecca Winter. Eleven years ago, I was abducted."

1

2014

I sit in an interview room with my face down, holding my coat tightly around myself. It's cold in here. I've been waiting for almost an hour, but I'm not worried. I imagine what a stir I've caused on the other side of that mirror. They're probably calling in the missing persons unit, looking up photographs of Rebecca and painstakingly comparing them to me. That should be enough to convince them; the likeness is uncanny.

I saw it months ago. I was wrapped up with Peter, a little bundle of warmth. Usually I got teary when I was hungover and just spent the day hiding in my room listening to sad music. It was different with him. We woke up at noon and sat on the couch all day eating pizza and smoking cigarettes until we started feeling better. That was back when I thought my parents' money didn't matter and all I needed was love.

We were watching some stupid show called *Wanted*. They were talking about a string of grisly murders at a place called Holden Valley Aged Care in Melbourne and I started looking for the remote. Butchered grannies were definitely a mood killer. Just as

I went to change the channel, the next story began and a photograph came up on the screen. She had my nose, my eyes, my copper-coloured hair. Even my freckles.

“Rebecca Winter finished her late shift at McDonald’s, in the inner south Canberra suburb of Manuka, on the seventeenth of January 2003,” a man said in a dramatic voice over the photograph, “but somewhere between her bus stop and home she disappeared, never to be seen again.”

“Holy shit, is that you?” Peter said.

The girl’s parents appeared, saying their daughter had been missing for over a decade but they still had hope. The mother looked like she was about to cry. Another photograph: Rebecca Winter wearing a bright green dress, her arm slung around another teenage girl, this one with blonde hair. For a foolish moment, I tried to remember if I had ever owned a dress like that.

A family portrait: the parents looking thirty years younger, two grinning brothers and Rebecca in the middle. Idyllic. They may as well have had a white picket fence in the background.

“Fuck, do you think that’s your long-lost twin or what?”

“Yeah, you wish!”

We’d started joking about Peter’s gross twin fantasies and he forgot about it pretty soon. Nothing stuck around long in Peter’s mind.

I try to remember every detail I can from the show. She was from Canberra, a teenager, maybe fifteen or sixteen at the time she went missing. In some ways, I was lucky the side of my face was bruised and swollen. It masked the subtle differences that distinguished us. I’ll be well and truly gone by the time the bruising fades. I only need to buy myself enough time to get me out of the station, to the airport maybe. For a moment my mind wanders to what I would do after that. Call Dad? I hadn’t spoken to him since I left. I had picked up a pay phone a few times, even punched in

his mobile number. But then the sickening sound of soft weight crashing against metal would fill my head and I'd hang up with shaking hands. He wouldn't want to talk to me.

The door opens and the female cop peeks in and smiles at me.

"This won't take too much longer. Can I get you something to eat?"

"Yes, please."

The slight embarrassment in her voice, the way she looks at me and then quickly averts her eyes.

I had them.

She brings me a box of piping-hot noodles from the takeaway next door. They're oily and a bit slimy, but I've never enjoyed a meal so much. Eventually, a detective comes into the room. He puts a file on the table and pulls out a chair. He looks brutish, with a thick neck and small eyes. I can tell by the way he sits down that my best chance with him is ego. He seems to be trying to take up as much space as possible, his arm resting on the chair next to him, his legs wide open. He smiles across the table.

"I'm sorry this is taking so long."

"That's okay," I say, wide eyes, small voice. I turn my face slightly, to make sure he's looking at the bruised side.

"We're going to bring you to the hospital soon, okay?"

"I'm not hurt. I just want to go home."

"It's procedure. We've been calling your parents, but so far there's been no answer."

I imagine the phone ringing in Rebecca Winter's empty house. That was probably for the best; her parents would just complicate things. The detective takes my silence as disappointment.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll get a hold of them soon. They'll need to come here to make the identification. Then you can go home together."

That's the last thing I need, to be called out as a fraud in front of a room full of cops. My confidence starts to slip. I need to turn this around.

I speak into my lap. "I want to go home more than anything."

"I know. It won't be too much longer." His voice is like a pat on the head. "Did you enjoy those?" He looks at the empty noodle box.

"They were really nice. Everyone has been so amazing," I say, keeping with the timid-victim act.

He opens the manila folder. It's Rebecca Winter's file. Interview time. My eyes scan the first page.

"Can you tell me your name?"

"Rebecca." I keep my eyes down.

"And where have you been all this time, Rebecca?" he says, leaning in to hear me.

"I don't know," I whisper. "I was so scared."

"Was there anyone else there? Anyone else held with you?"

"No. Only me."

He leans in closer, until his face is only inches from mine.

"You saved me," I say, looking him right in the eyes. "Thank you."

I can see his chest swell. Canberra is only three hours from here. I just need to push a little harder. Now that he's feeling like the big man, he won't be able to say no. It's my only chance to get out of here.

"Please, will you let me go home?"

"We really need to interview you and take you to the hospital to be examined. It's important."

"Can we do that in Canberra?"

I let the tears start falling then. Men hate seeing girls cry. It makes them uncomfortable for some reason.

“You’ll be transported back to Canberra soon, but there is a procedure we need to follow first, okay?”

“But you’re the boss here, aren’t you? If you say I can go they have to do what you say. I just want to see my mom.”

“Okay,” he says, jumping out of his seat. “Don’t cry. Let me see what I can do.”

He comes back to say he’s worked it all out for me. I will be driven to Canberra by the cops who picked me up, and then the missing persons detective who worked on Rebecca Winter’s case will take it from there. I nod and smile at him, looking up at him like he’s my new hero.

I’ll never reach Canberra. An airport would be easier, but I’m sure I can still get away from them somehow. Now that they see me as a victim, it won’t be too hard.

As we walk out of the interview room, everyone turns to look at me. One woman has a receiver pressed to her ear.

“She’s here now. Just let me ask.” She puts the receiver against her chest and looks up at the detective. “It’s Mrs. Winter—we finally got a hold of her. She wants to talk to Rebecca. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” the detective says, smiling at me.

The woman holds out the receiver. I look around. Everyone has their heads bent but I can tell they are listening. I take the phone and hold it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Becky, is that you?”

I open my mouth, needing to say something, but I don’t know what. She keeps going.

“Oh, honey, thank God. I can’t believe it. Are you okay? They keep saying you aren’t hurt, but I can’t believe it. I love you so much. Are you all right?”

“I’m okay.”

“Stay where you are. Your father and I are coming to get you.”
Damn.

“We’re just about to leave,” I say, in almost a whisper. I don’t want her noticing my voice is all wrong.

“No, please, don’t go anywhere. Stay where you’re safe.”

“It’ll be quicker this way. It’s all sorted out.”

I can hear her swallowing, heavy and thick.

“We can be there really soon.” Her voice sounds strangled.

“I’ve got to go,” I say. Then, looking around at all those pricked-up ears, I add, “Bye, Mom.”

I hear her sobbing as I hand the phone back.

The last glow of sunlight has disappeared and the sky is a pale grey. We’ve been driving for about an hour and the conversation has dried up. I can tell the cops are itching to ask me where I’ve been all this time, but they restrain themselves.

This is lucky really, because they would most likely have a better idea than I do where Rebecca Winter has spent the past decade.

Paul Kelly croons softly on the radio. Raindrops patter on the roof of the car and slide down the windows. I could fall asleep.

“Do you need me to turn the heater up?” Thompson asks, eyeing my coat.

“I’m okay,” I say.

The truth is I couldn’t take my coat off, no matter that I was starting to feel a bit hot. I have a birthmark just below the crook of my elbow. A coffee-coloured stain about the size of a twenty-cent piece. I’d hated it as a kid. My mother always told me it was the mark left by an angel’s kiss. It was one of the few memories I have of her. As I grew up I sort of started to like it, maybe because it made me think of her, or maybe just because it was so much a part of me. But it wasn’t a part of Bec. I doubted that either of

these idiots had looked closely enough at the missing persons file to see the word *nil* under *birthmarks*, but it wasn't worth the risk.

I try to force myself to plan my escape. Instead all I can think about was Rebecca's mom. The way she had said "I love you" to me. It wasn't like when my dad used to say it, when someone was watching or when he was trying to get me to be good. The way she had said it was so raw, so guttural, like it was coming from her core. This woman that we are zooming toward really does love me. Or she loves who she thinks I am. I wonder what she is doing right now. Calling her friends to tell them, washing sheets for me, dashing to the supermarket for extra food, worrying that she wouldn't sleep because she was so excited? I imagine what will happen when they call her to tell her that they lost me on the way. These two cops would probably get into a lot of trouble. I wouldn't mind that, but what about her? What about the cleanly made-up bed waiting for me? The food in the fridge. All that love. It will just go to waste.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I say, seeing a sign for a rest stop.

"Okay, honey. Are you sure you don't want to wait for a servo?"

"No." I'm sick of being polite to them.

The car veers onto the dirt road and stops outside the brick toilet block. Next to it is an old barbecue and two picnic tables and behind that is solid bushland. If I get a decent head start, they won't be able to find me in there.

The female cop unclicks her seat belt.

"I'm not a kid. I can take a piss by myself, thank you."

I get out of the car, slamming the door behind me, not giving her a chance to argue. Raindrops fall onto my face, ice against my sweaty skin. It feels nice to be out of that sweltering car. I glance back before I walk into the toilet block. The headlights beam through the rain, and behind the windscreen wipers I can see the cops talking and shifting in their seats.

The toilets are disgusting. The concrete floor is flooded, and scrunched-up wads of tissue float around like miniature icebergs. The place stinks of beer and vomit. A bottle of Carlton Draught rests next to the toilet and the rain beats against the tin roof. I imagine what my night tonight will be like, hiding in the rain. I'll have to wander until I reach a town, but then what? I'll be hungry again soon and I still don't have any money. The last week has been the most horrible of my life. I'd had to pick up men in bars just to have somewhere to sleep, and one night, the worst one, I had no other option but to hide in a public toilet in a park. Jumping out of my skin at every noise. Imagining the worst. That night felt like it would never end, like the light would never come. The toilet block looked a bit like this one.

For a moment my resilience slips and I imagine the other alternative: the warm bed, the full stomach and the kisses on the forehead. It's enough.

The bottle breaks against the toilet seat easily. I pick a large shard. Squatting down in the cubicle, I hold my arm between my knees. I realize I've started to whimper, but there's no time now to be weak. One more minute and that cop will be checking on me. Pushing down on the brown blotch, the pain is shocking. There's more blood than I expected, but I don't stop. My flesh peels up, like the skin of a potato.

The lining of my jacket slips against the open wound as I pull it back on. I throw the gory evidence in the sanitary bin and wash the blood off my hands. My vision is beginning to blur and the oily noodles swirl in my stomach. I grip the sink and breathe steadily. I can do this.

The slam of a car door is followed by footsteps.

"Are you all right?" the female cop asks.

"I get a bit carsick," I say, checking the sink for blood.

"Oh, honey, we're almost there. Just tell us to pull over if you want to be sick."

The rain is heavier now and the sky is a rich black. But the icy-cold air helps to fight the nausea. I clamber into the back of the car and pull the door shut with my good arm. We veer back out onto the highway. I rest my throbbing arm up next to the headrests, afraid of the blood beginning to drip down to my wrist, and lean my head back against the window. I don't feel the sickness anymore, just a floating feeling. The even patter of the rain, the soft tones of the radio and the heat of the car lull me into a near sleep.

I'm not sure how long we've been driving in silence when they start talking.

"I think she's asleep." The man's voice.

I hear the squeak of leather as the woman turns to look at me. I don't move.

"Looks like it. Must be tiring work being such a little bitch."

"Where do you think she's been this whole time?"

"My guess? Ran off with some man, married probably. He must have gotten sick of her and given her the boot. I reckon he was rich, too, by the way she's been looking down her nose at everyone."

"She said she was abducted."

"I know. She's not acting like it, though, is she?"

"Not really."

"And she looks in pretty good nick, considering. If she was kidnapped, he must have been pretty fond of her. That's all I'm saying. What do you think?"

"I don't give a shit honestly," he says. "But I reckon there might be a commendation in it for us."

"I don't know. Shouldn't she be in a hospital or something? I

don't know if ass hat was really meant to just let her leave when she clicked her fingers."

"What is the protocol, then? I know what we're meant to do when these kids go missing, but what about when they come back?"

"Fucked if I know. Must have been hungover that day."

They laugh, and then the car is quiet again.

"You know, I've been wondering all day who it is she reminds me of," the female cop says suddenly. "It just hit me. It was this girl back in high school who told everyone she had a brain tumor and took a week off school for the operation. A bunch of us started a drive to raise money for her. I think we all thought she was going to die. She came back right as rain on Monday, though, and for a few hours she was the most popular girl in school. Then someone noticed that none of her hair was shaved, not even an inch. The whole thing was a crock of shit from start to finish.

"That girl, she looked at you just like our little princess back there looked at us when we met her. The way she takes you in, surveys you with that cold glint in her eyes like her head is going a million miles a minute trying to figure out the best way to fuck with you."

After a while I stop listening to them talk. I remember I have to speak to the detective when I get to Canberra, but I feel too dizzy to try to plan my answers. The car pulls off the main road.

I wake to the jolt of the brakes and the light going on as the female cop opens her door.

"Wake up, little lady," she says.

I try to sit, but my muscles feel like they're made of jelly.

I hear a new voice.

"You must be Constables Seirs and Thompson. I'm Senior Inspector Andopolis. Thanks for pulling the overtime to bring her down."

“No worries, sir.”

“We better get started. I know her mother is over the moon, but I have a lot of questions for her first.”

I hear him pull the door next to me open.

“Rebecca, you can’t imagine how pleased I am to see you,” he says. Then he kneels down beside me. “Are you all right?”

I try to look at him but his face is swirling.

“Yes, I’m okay,” I mutter.

“Why is she so pale?” he calls sharply. “What’s happened to her?”

“She’s fine. She just gets carsick,” the female cop says.

“Call an ambulance!” Andopolis snaps at her as he reaches over and undoes my seat belt.

“Rebecca? Can you hear me? What’s happened?”

“I hurt my arm when I was escaping,” I hear myself say. “It’s okay, just hurts a bit.”

He pulls my jacket to the side. There’s dried blood all the way up to my collarbone. Seeing that makes my vision fade even more.

“You morons! You absolute fucking idiots!” His voice sounds far away now. I can’t see the reaction from the cops; I can’t see their faces paling. But I can imagine.

I smile as the last of my consciousness fades.