

Chapter One

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Benny Assissi lay flat on his back underneath the kitchen sink, squinting up into a spray of water. He put his wrench down and turned his head to blink the water out of his eyes. Around the curve of the drainpipe he saw the legs of his wife, Lisa, standing in front of the sink in her jeans. Even though he couldn’t see his baby boy, he could hear Michael crying as she bounced him on her hip. He watched her foot tap ripples in the puddle spreading from underneath the sink across the kitchen floor. Grabbing his wrench, he went back to work, looking up into the spray of water. Barely able to see, he reached out and felt for the nut connecting the cold water supply to the faucet, latched the wrench onto it and twisted. The spray of water eased, but didn’t stop. Cursing under his breath, he dropped the wrench, reached above his shoulder for the shutoff valve and turned it as far as it would go, cutting off the water supply. The spray of water became a slow drip, then stopped altogether.

“A gasket broke,” he said. “The water has to stay off for now.” He pushed out from under the sink and got to his feet. He wiped his hands on a dishrag and sighed as Lisa walked out of the kitchen into the front hall. Tossing the dishrag in the sink, he followed her, his jaw tight.

“Just don’t use the sink for one night,” he said, his voice rising. “It’ll be fixed by morning. I’ll do it later tonight as soon as I get home from work.”

“Goddammit, Benny,” Lisa yelled. She turned to face him and bounced Michael harder, making him cry louder. “You do this every time! You let something go until it breaks and then it’s, ‘Oh don’t worry about it. I’ll fix it later.’” She put her hand on Michael’s forehead. “I don’t even care about the stupid sink. Michael’s been sick for two weeks. First chicken pox and now this. But how would you know? All you do is eat, sleep and grunt at me before walking out the door.”

Benny stepped toward her into the doorway separating the kitchen from the front hall, reaching for Michael. “Let me have him. You’re bouncing him too hard.”

She turned her shoulder toward him, shielding Michael. “No. I’m not letting you touch him. Somehow you’ll screw him up even worse. Make him sicker than he already is.” She ran her fingers across Michael’s forehead, through his damp bangs. Her brow wrinkled. “This is

crazy, I'm taking him to the emergency room." Her gaze locked on Benny. "And don't say a word about how much it's going to cost. He's sick and I'm taking him—end of story."

With that final announcement, she turned her back on Benny and walked toward the front door.

Benny stood frozen, watching his wife yank open the front closet. The metal hangers dinged and rattled against each other. Turning away from the noise, he closed his eyes and rubbed his face. He could feel the floor vibrate as the refrigerator compressor sighed, clicked, and let out a loud hum. He opened his eyes to the sight of a cockroach skittering along the edge of the puddle in the kitchen. Leaning against the doorframe, he watched the cockroach dart under the refrigerator.

Perfect. Sink's broken. Michael's sick. Lisa's about ready to walk out on me. And now cockroaches.

He shook his head and looked over his shoulder at Lisa. She knelt in the front hall, rummaging through the bottom of the closet while Michael flailed and cried behind her on the floor. Her elbow peeked through a frayed hole in her white sweater as she backed out of the closet, dragging an infant car seat with her.

Even with anger etched across her face, Benny thought she looked great. All big curves and long dark hair. The first time he'd seen her, he'd thought she was out of his league—that he'd be lucky to have a chance with her. Funny thing was, she'd told him *she* was the lucky one after their first date. He wondered how lucky she felt now.

Stepping out of the kitchen doorway, he gripped the doorframe with one hand, willing her to look his way.

C'mon babe. Show me that smile. Things will get better. You know they will.

He smiled in anticipation, ready for her to look up, see his smile, and smile right back at him. But, just as she began to lift her head, just as she caught sight of him, Michael screamed loud enough to rattle the windows.

Instinctively, Benny took a step forward to help, then stopped. Eyes blazing and lips pressed into a thin line, Lisa's look said it all—"I don't need your help. I'll take care of it myself, like I always do."

With his back against the doorframe, he watched her and tried to decide if it would help to tell her that he'd worked out a new work schedule a couple weeks back; one that gave him an

extra day off starting this week. By the looks of her washed out complexion and the dark circles under her eyes, he was pretty sure it wouldn't. The extra day off might mean more time to help with Michael and the house—exactly what she'd been begging for—but it was going to tighten the budget even more. And the extra day off wasn't going to change the fact that she'd still be broke and alone every other day, doing her best to take care of the house and Michael by herself because her husband had lost his job and now worked nights at a convenience store and took classes at a community college all day. Today's special of a flooded kitchen and a sick baby was just another shiny red ribbon tacked onto the storybook life he'd given her, and he figured he was lucky she hadn't greeted him at the front door today with a knee to the groin before walking out for good.

He tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling of their rented townhouse, wishing fate or whatever was behind his losing streak would show its face so he could wring its neck.

He looked down at Michael kicking in his car seat while Lisa struggled to zip up his coat. Jaw tightening, Benny's anger began to build as he focused on the car seat.

That was the car seat Lisa's mom, Diana, brought over with an embarrassed smile, doing a bad job of acting like she wasn't worried out of her mind that a clerk at a corner convenience store supported her daughter and grandson.

Benny clenched his right hand into a fist, remembering how she made a point of walking past Lisa to hand that car seat to him, even though Lisa had tried to take it from her. He remembered that day well. From the back, Diana was a woman who could've passed for being in her thirties; thin with short, blonde hair. The hair color looked good for a dye job, but her face—nothing but pursed lips and a furrowed brow—made her look years older than her fifty-something age. He could remember looking at her disapproving, pinched-face as she pushed by Lisa with the car seat, holding it out toward him. Not saying a word, but sending him a message he knew by heart. She'd given him that same message many times. Never with the same words or gestures, but always the same meaning, which was along the lines of, "My daughter could've had her pick of men that were doing something with their lives, or she could've finished college and done something with her own life. But look what she got instead—a thirty-one-year-old clerk that can barely support himself." Shoving that car seat into his hands, however, added a new dig. She hadn't said a word, but he remembered how she turned her back on him and left

without saying a word, her silence screaming, “You couldn’t take care of my daughter, and now you have a son that you can’t take care of either. Nice job.”

He stared at the car seat and, before he could stop himself, he reared back and punched the wall, sending a shiver through his shoulder as his fist cracked the cheap sheetrock. White dust from the broken wall floated in the air. Lisa looked up from her struggles with Michael. Michael stopped crying and craned his head back, snot running down his face and over his chin as he looked at his daddy.

Benny’s face reddened, his ears burning as he pulled his fist from the caved-in plaster. He glared at Lisa and shook his hand. His voice trembled and came out louder than he expected.

“You know, I don’t ask for much. When I got laid off, I didn’t complain. When you were pregnant and couldn’t work, I didn’t say a word. I just kept looking for a job. I scraped up money however I could to make sure we didn’t get kicked out onto the street. And now that I finally found a job, now that I signed up for college classes to try to give us a leg up, what do you do? You ride me, acting like I cooked up some plan to be gone all day and night to make your life miserable.”

He paused for a moment and watched her gaze at the hole in the wall and then back at him. Eyes wide and mouth slightly open, she stared at him, not saying a word. He took a breath and lowered his voice, frowning.

“Look, I know things aren’t easy for you, but it’s no party working all night and going to school all day. And, for your information, I’ve known that Michael’s been sick all week.” He held his hands out, a smear of blood between the ring and middle fingers on his right hand. “But what am I supposed to do about it? You tell me and I’ll do it. What can I do that I’m not doing already?”

He stood, hands out, waiting on her answer. Waiting to explode if she said the wrong thing.

Lisa looked away. She took a deep breath, snapping the car seat buckle between Michael’s legs. Michael stayed silent, tilting his head back to stare wide-eyed at his daddy. She picked up the car seat and moved for the door.

“Where you going?” he said, shrugging his shoulders and looking around as if he were talking to a crowd of onlookers. “Now you’re just gonna leave and act like I’m not here? Like I’m some kind of pathetic bum that doesn’t even rate an answer when I ask a question?” He

glared at Lisa, his vision narrowing to a tunnel, the collar of his polyester “Fast Stop Convenience Store” work shirt tightening around his neck as he shouted, “I asked what you want me to do about Michael being sick!”

Spit flecked his lips and he wiped at it with a shaking hand. Lisa turned toward him, her eyes glassy and unfocused. He stepped back, unsure of what to do as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Nothing,” she said, looking at Michael. “I don’t want you to do anything. Just go to work.” She bent down and grabbed a teddy bear lying on the floor, giving it to Michael. She turned her back on Benny and opened the front door.

Benny looked out the front door to the small oak he’d planted near the curb. It glowed in the gray light of the setting sun. Wind rustled the tree’s branches, knocking a handful of bright red leaves into the air. He stared at Lisa as she turned toward him and sniffed, wiping her eyes.

“I’m sick of this, Benny. None of it matters anymore. None of it. It’s just not worth it. The bills. The working all hours of the day. The fighting. None of it.” Her voice trailed off as she stepped out the door, closing it gently behind her.

For a moment Benny couldn’t move. His whole body went slack and he felt his anger drain away to nothing. Sick to his stomach, he wiped at the blood welling from his knuckle. He shook his head, wondering what just happened.

I’m cursed—that’s what happened, he thought, flexing his throbbing hand and wincing at the needle of pain that shot through his middle knuckle.

He walked to the closet, reached in and grabbed his coat. As he put it on, he wondered why he ever took it off. It was almost as chilly in the house as it was outside, and with winter only three months down the road, it was only going to get colder.

Stepping out on the porch, one hand holding the doorknob, he watched Lisa put Michael into the back seat of their white Toyota. Pockmarks of rust covered the hood and side panels. The front right quarter panel was patched over with putty and had an empty hole where the running light should’ve been. Benny made a mental note to rig up a light before a cop wrote them a ticket. He stepped onto the porch and gripped the cold, wrought iron railing.

“Let me come with you, Lisa. Just give me a second. I’ll call someone to cover my shift.”

The way she shook her head, not even looking at him as she walked around the car, stopped him before he had a chance to go back inside.

“No.” She waved her hand at him and opened the driver’s side door. “Just go to work. I’ll take care of it. Just go to work and try to be the man of the family for once.”

Benny’s hand slipped from the doorknob. A gust of wind hit him, making his shoulders tighten. Unable to move or speak, he watched as the car pulled away from the curb and drove out of sight.

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