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Blue

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Stretching in bed, her back popped. Anna looked over the once familiar room. Her boxes had taken on a dangerous tilt during the night. It was Saturday and her first day home after graduating. She thought she’d fix the boxes later. Inhaling, she took a long whiff. Her room smelled like bacon. Every weekend, mom had breakfast on the table at eight. She’d missed that. Emerging in slippers and pajamas, she headed downstairs. Mom, Dad and her brother Jason were already eating. They all paused, surprised to see her down so early.

After breakfast, Dad turned on the news and Jason sprawled on the couch, headphones in place. Anna cleared her plate from the table as Mom stuck her coffee mug into the dishwasher. A mower fired up and Anna looked out the kitchen window. A riding mower pulled out of the garage next door and disappeared around the side.

“Who’s mowing the Fenderson’s yard?” she asked.

“Shhh…” Mom tried to wave her to silence.

“Is he out there already?” Dad growled. He stood to join Anna at the window, coffee mug in hand.

“Now you’ve got him started.” Mom grumbled. “I’m not in the mood for this,” she said and disappeared to her bedroom.

“You’re not in the mood for this?” Dad checked his watch. “It’s just past nine in the morning. I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Does he always start this early?” Anna asked.

“Kid starts early. Then, he’s going to weed whack, then edge, then trim the hedges.” Dad glared at Jason. He raised his voice to be heard over the earphones, “Jason, I bet he’s gonna start making topiaries soon.”

Anna wasn’t sure where the anger was coming from. “That’s good, right? Keeping the neighborhood nice?”

Dad looked at Jason again and scowled. “The wind knocked at least a dozen oranges off the trees last night.”

Jason ignored the conversation. Anna tried to be helpful. “I can get a bag and pick them up.”

Dad stared at her for a second. “You remember how to use the weed eater?” he asked.
Dressed in ragged shorts and a t-shirt, Anna poked around in the garage. Jason followed her in, skateboard in hand. “You should tell Dad you’ll do it Monday, then pay the guy next door. Sometimes he’ll take the cash, if he has time. Guy has a day job, so you better ask before he disappears.” Jason gave the board a push and slow rolled down the driveway. Blowing a plume of smoke, he gave a backward glance and added, “He lives over the Fenderson’s garage.”

Anna wasn’t going to pay someone. She had this handled. An hour later her wrist ached and the glass of iced tea shook as she tried to take a sip. Next week she might pay the new guy.

In the early evening she checked emails at the counter when Dad came down. He was wearing one of his good suits. He paced a bit then went back up. When he came back down again he said, “Go help your mother. Tell her we should have left ten minutes ago.”

Anna peeked into her parents’ bedroom. Her mom was dressed in green. “Nice dress, Mom,” Anna said.

“Why does this look uneven?” Mom said, gesturing at the neckline.

Anna tugged it even more to one side. “There. Now, it’s supposed to be that way.” The uneven neckline showed off a sparkling emerald and sapphire necklace.

Her mom squinted into the mirror for a second longer. “Good enough,” she said and headed down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs her dad helped her mom put on a coat. Across the lawn, the sun had dipped below the horizon. A light was on inside the Fenderson’s garage. Dad glared as he opened the door. “You know, I don’t even know if it’s legal for them to rent that out. Did they ever finish it?” he asked, closing the door behind him. Anna looked out at the light. She could tell from her dad’s hands he was still talking about the Fenderson’s garage. His gestures were punctuated by pointing at the darn thing. He was not subtle.

As her parents drove away, she saw movement in the garage window. The guy next door watched her parents drive off then closed his blinds.

Monday, fresh from the shower, she heard a noise. It was the Fenderson’s garage door rolling closed and locking. The guy pushed a junky motorcycle down the driveway. There was a big dent on its black tank and a blue scrape down the side. The sad thing looked like it had been dropped more than once. When he reached the street, he started it and zipped off. She laughed. The bike was quieter than her dad’s truck.

After a few days of seeing the guy in the garage more than the Fenderson’s themselves,
she asked, “Mom, the Fenderson’s still live there, right?”

“Sure honey. Why do you ask?”

“I haven’t seen them since I got home.”

“You will. They’ve been taking it easy. Sara was in the hospital last month. She’s better now, but Shaun’s been having a rough time. That’s why I want your dad to stop beating them up over that kid in the garage. Shaun can’t mow anymore, and I think the extra income is helping them stay in their house.”

“Maybe Dad can just pay him to mow our yard, too.”

“I’ve asked your dad. He insists that with grown children living at home, he shouldn’t have to.”

“The guy does a nice job.” Coffee in hand, they stood by the front window and examined their own imperfect front lawn.

“Don’t tell Dad. Last week I had him spruce up the crummy trim your brother gave the front bushes.” Mom shook her head. “They were so lumpy, I thought it couldn’t be fixed.”

Anna laughed. Mom did not.

A hectic week went by. Anna was too busy to worry about neighbor sightings, either the Fendersons or the guy over the garage.

Stepping out of a coffee shop, she slipped her sunglasses onto her nose. Her car was almost out of the lot when she glanced behind the motorcycle dealer and spotted a black bike with a blue scrape. It sat in a row of motorcycles out back. Dented, dinged bikes waited their turn.

Veering back into the lot, she pulled in front of the dealer. Inside, salesmen in nametag shirts gave her a nod while she wandered among the bikes. The smell of new motorcycles overwhelmed the quiet showroom. A guy in leather sat on a bike, checking it out. A bearded man carrying a long brown box shoved through a set of swinging doors. She could see a whole stock room behind the doors. From the back, a motorcycle roared to life then abruptly cut off.

Giving up, she headed back out to her car. A side door sat propped open and a bike emerged, pushed towards a row of tagged bikes. The neighbor was doing the pushing. He disappeared back inside before she figured out what to say. As she stepped up to her car, he came back out. Like a man with a purpose he hurried over to a burger joint a few stores down the strip, dusting himself off on the way.

She followed him in and got in line right behind him. He was younger than she thought.
He smelled like the motorcycle shop, like cleaners and grease. There was a layer of dust in his dark hair, grease on his elbow, and a vague smell of oranges. As he pulled out his chained wallet he glanced up at her and did a double take.

“Hey, do you live on Grove Avenue?” she blurted out, like she didn’t know exactly who he is. In reality, it was the only thing she knew. She didn’t even know his name.

He smiled at her. A glimmer of teeth and crinkled eyes. “Yeah. You moved in next door. I’m Blue,” he said. He reached out to shake her hand, but she pulled back. “They’re clean. I swear. You’ll smell like oranges. It’s hard to eat with the smell if you’re not used to it.” He was next in line and ordered with experience. “Let me get yours,” he offered, and she let him pay.

They sat together and she asked, “So, Blue is an unusual name. Is it because of the blue stripe on the tank?”

“No. That came later,” he said shoving a big bite of burger into his mouth. “It’s just a nickname. You never said your name.” He added some fries to his mouth.

“Anna.” She said while rolling a fry in a pool of catsup. “Are you a mechanic?”

He grunted, “No. I do all the shit work. I push the bikes in and out, clean up the bays. Pack the shipments and do inventory. All the stuff nobody wants to do.”

“Oh. Do you like it?”

“It pays the bills,” he said around another mouth full of burger. He was almost done and she had only taken a couple bites of hers. She was in the middle of a bite when he shoved the rest into his mouth. Chewing, he tapped a watch dial on his wrist and gestured back to the shop. “I’ll see you around,” he said, dumping his trash. After he disappeared back into the dealer, she checked her phone. Less than thirty minutes.

That evening she noticed that his blinds stayed open later than normal. She’d figured out his routine. Out at seven and in by seven. Sometimes the evenings varied but never the mornings. He’d be gone before she dressed and be home after dark.

One evening she’d been taking out the trash when he pulled in. The bike was quiet as he stopped in the street and pushed it into the garage.

“Why do you do that?” she said, and he jumped, almost dropping the bike.

He barked a laugh. “I didn’t see you. Why are you out in the dark?”

She held up the bag. “Why do you push it? They know you live here, right?”

“Fenderson said to push it when he saw it. He didn’t want me to wake his wife.”
“I don’t think it’ll wake anybody. Not exactly the ‘loud pipes save lives’ kind of bike. More of a stealthy ninja kind of bike.” She laughed at her own joke. He just stared. He had dark rings under his eyes. There was a smudge of grease on his cheek.

“Yeah, I guess.” He looked down at the bike, about to go in.

She had a thought. “If you come home so late, how did you do all that yard work for us?”

“I took extra time off at lunch.” He gave the bike another push before putting down the kickstand.

“You take time off work to come work in my yard?”

“I’m a nice neighbor,” he said and then smiled. The smile was all teeth. “Plus, your brother offered what I make in a day.”

“What about my mom?”

“She just paid in cookies. But that’s cool because I was fixing what your brother had me butcher the same day. It felt wrong leaving that mess, but he told me to hack them up. He wanted a crap job.”

She stared at him for a second. “You should raise my brother’s rates.”

He smiled at her and slowly pushed the bike into the garage. “Later,” he said disappearing into the darkness, not bothering to turn on the light.

That next Saturday, Blue was up at nine making the Fenderson yard immaculate. Her dad glowered and stared at Jason, who took everything in stride.

The day stayed mild. That afternoon, Blue’s windows were open to a gentle breeze. Anna wandered into her yard to fetch a few oranges to make some juice. Music came from the window. Distracted, she stuck the back of her hand on a big thorn. She sucked on it for a second.

Blue looked out. “You okay?” he asked, leaning on the sill.

“Thorn.”

“Yeah. Learned about them the hard way when I moved here.”

She stepped towards the garage, craning her neck to look up at him. “Where did you move from?”

“Up north. I wanted to go somewhere warm.”

“Well, Florida is warm.”

“I’m going to the beach. You want to come?” he asked.

She paused.
“Not swimming. Just walking,” he added.

“Do you need me to drive?”

“I have an extra helmet.”

She was glad the ride was short. The bike could hold two, but it wasn’t something she wanted to do for more than ten minutes. It seems romantic in movies; in real life his seat was too short.

“Maybe next time you should drive,” he said when they pulled up. “Until I get a bigger backrest, or sissy bar—or a car.”

They walked the beach for a while. He looked different cleaned up in shorts and a t-shirt. He smiled easier and smelled of soap, with only a lingering hint of orange. They spent the afternoon exploring tidal pools and resting their toes in the sand. The day was sunny but cool by Florida standards. He dipped his feet into the water anyway.

It had been a while since she’d had such a relaxing day, a day to do nothing. By the time the sun was setting she was sad to see it end. The horizon looked postcard perfect with pink and orange clouds over glistening water. As the sky changed to twilight, they made a stop at a restaurant. It wasn’t fancy, but it was close to home.

When the evening ended, she handed back his helmet, and glanced up to his apartment. He looked behind her with a raised eyebrow. Turning, she could see the perfect silhouette of her dad watching them from the window. They exchanged awkward goodbyes and separated. By the time she was inside, her dad was back to watching TV with her mom.

First thing Monday she had emails from three job applications. Two of them were positive. She had worked part time through college and was willing to take a couple part time jobs until something better came through. She saw some inexpensive apartments during the afternoon. They were all very similar. Tiny beige rooms and cramped kitchens with a balcony with a view of trees. The third apartment building had a tiny pond. She stared at the manicured little pond and sighed as she leaned on the railing of the balcony. She had enough saved to cover it.

That night she waited for Blue. He didn’t return until late. He arrived smudged and slumped, a dark shadow on an unlit driveway. She checked her watch. It was after eight. When he looked up, she could see him smile. He gave her a wave and headed inside. The next few days she didn’t see him much, if at all.
It was after dark when it happened. She was surfing on her laptop in a spot where she could watch the Fenderson’s garage. There was the dim glow of a lamp in Blue’s window, but his blinds were drawn.

A quiet police car stopped in front of their house, and an officer with a flashlight hopped out. Anna was certain he also held a gun. She jumped up and hissed, “Mom, Dad?” and headed for the side door. When she put her hand on the knob, she heard the shot. Opening the door, she watched Blue jump from the window. He landed hard in the hibiscus below and tumbled from the crushed bush. He dashed down the alley, sticking to the shadows. Another policeman ran up from the other side, missing Blue.

A large hand pulled Anna back inside and Dad stepped around her. Another police car pulled up in the Fenderson’s driveway. Anna’s mom hugged her. Dad walked up to a tall policeman searching under Blue’s widow with a flashlight.

“Excuse me officer, we live next door,” Dad said.

The tall policeman paused and looked up. “Sir, we have a report of a burglary and intruder in the garage.”

“That young man lives here in the apartment over the garage. He’s been renting it.”

The tall policeman stopped what he was doing. His flashlight dipped. A bald policeman inside the garage stepped out. “I was telling you, he’s no squatter,” he said to the other cop.

“Sir, you’re sure that kid lives here?” he asked Dad.

The tall policeman said, “The dispatcher said the homeowner was distressed on the phone. She said someone’s in her garage. She said he must have been in the house too because her jewelry is missing.”

“I can’t say about the jewelry.” Dad noticed his family was now in a huddle behind him. “But the young man has been renting the apartment from Shaun Fenderson, the homeowner. Shaun told me himself before he rented it out.”

Leaning on the wall the bald officer needed to catch his breath. “If that damn lamp hadn’t blocked my shot I woulda killed that kid.”

The tall policeman turned. “Easy Caleb. You were doing your job.” He was trying to get Caleb to shut up.

“You shot him?” Anna stepped towards Caleb. “Where’s the ambulance?”

“I winged him. Got his arm,” Caleb said. “I thought he had a gun, but he dropped a pipe.
The lamp was in the way. Thank god for that giant ugly lamp.”

“Shouldn’t somebody call for an ambulance?” Anna insisted. A man was taking photos of the hibiscus Blue fell into and the window he fell out of.

“For what?” The tall cop turned to her. “The kid’s long gone.”

Caleb turned and went back to the house. He emerged with Sarah Fenderson and another policeman. Sarah looked smaller than Anna remembered. “Ma’am,” Caleb said, “your neighbors said that a young man lives over the garage.”

Sarah looked between all their faces. “He does? I don’t remember that.” Sarah focused on Anna’s mom. “Jessica, I think he stole my mother’s sapphire and emerald necklace. It wasn’t on my dresser.”

Mom’s hand went to her mouth. “Sarah, I borrowed it for the wedding remember. I told you the clasp broke and I took it to the jewelers.”

Sarah looked at the tall cop for a moment. “You shot the boy who mows the lawn?”

Caleb cringed. The tall cop said, “Ma’am, that will be investigated.”

“But why isn’t anyone looking for Blue?” Anna asked. “He could be dead somewhere.”

“Miss, I think there are quite a few squad cars looking for him right now, and every hospital is keeping an eye out for him. If he is injured and you know where he has gone, you could help him out and tell us.”

Anna shook her head. “I only know where he works, but it’s a twenty-minute drive from here. It would take forever on foot.”

“Well that’s a start. Tell us what you know and help us find him,” the tall cop said.

It turned out the tall cop’s name was Officer Andrew Jones. Before he left he gave them his card. Caleb did too. Anna wanted to be angry with Caleb, but the truth was she felt bad for him. She heard him say that in eighteen years this was only the second time he had fired his weapon on the job.

Shaun didn’t get home until late and Anna listened while her dad relayed the story. They discuss putting Sarah in a home. Anna wept as she turned back to the house.

The next morning, Anna called Caleb about Blue. She hoped to guilt him into telling her what he knew. The call went to a voicemail saying Caleb’s mailbox was not available. Next, Anna dialed Andrew and left a message. She had worn a hole in the carpet by the time her phone rang. Andrew had no news. Blue had not been seen at any local hospitals or his work.
“Shouldn’t the cops be doing more? You shot him.”

“I can’t discuss current investigations. But, if you should happen to find him, he can get medical assistance courtesy of the victim’s relief fund. Call me and I’ll get you in touch with them.”

When she hung up she had the feeling that Andrew wasn’t going to find Blue. She stared out the window. Her mom came up behind her. Mom had taken the day off.

Anna walked over to the Fenderson’s garage. The screen still lay twisted on the ground below Blue’s window. She found the spare key under a few bricks and let herself in. Her mom was a silent shadow behind her as they walked up the stairs.

The top of the garage had a finished floor, but that was the only thing finished. Anna immediately saw the big green lamp. It sat on the coffee table next to scattered old motorcycle parts and a few tools. Blue had been sitting on the couch holding a piece of chrome pipe. The pipe sat on the floor with a rag half wrapped around it. She could see the side of her house from the window.

Anna looked over at her mom picking up Blue’s library books from the floor. The pile had been knocked off the side table. Anna helped. One hardcover was tacky. She saw blood spattered on the wood floor when she looked down.

Mom took the book from her hand and said, “He’ll be fine.” Then she wet a paper towel and started to wipe the blood from Anna’s hand. When Anna’s hand was clean, Mom wiped the blood spatter from the book and floor. “Anna, go home. I’ve got this.”

Anna stayed and helped her mom clean up. They gathered the parts, leaving a neat pile on the coffee table. Mom even washed his plate and took out his trash. Blue didn’t have much and he kept the little he owned tidy. Two pairs of boots sat lined up by the wall. She wondered if he had shoes on. His bike was still downstairs, missing the pieces that sat in here. He would have been sitting on the ratty couch when a policeman opened his door. The doorjamb wasn’t damaged. Caleb would have walked right in. The lamp had blocked Blue from Caleb and Caleb from Blue.

On their way down, they saw Shaun. He asked about Blue. They asked about Sarah.

That evening, Anna drove to the beach. She walked the tidal pools and wandered down the sand. She saw a familiar shape on a secluded bench by the pier. He was pale and his eyes watched her approach, but he didn’t move or smile. She noticed he was huddled in a jacket, but
the day was sunny and mild. As she got closer she saw the jacket had a nametag that said Carl.

“Blue, thank god you’re okay,” she said and he nodded at her. “The police said…”

“Did you call the police?” He sat up, checking around them.

“You know you’re not in trouble, right? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“What?”

“It was a mistake.”

“How?”

“I guess Sarah has Alzheimer’s. They’re sorry.” She said. He sunk back deflated. “You need to see a doctor about the arm. Is it bad?” she asked.

“I don’t have money to pay a doctor.”

“Officer Jones said they have a victim’s fund.”

He scowled at her. “There’s a special fund for people who get shot by the police?”

“I think it’s a fund for victims in general.”

He grunted at her. It sounded like an angry laugh that didn’t finish.

“My car is over in the lot.” She looked down. He wasn’t wearing shoes. “Let’s go to the hospital.”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Let’s get you home at least.”

“To the Fenderson’s?” he asked. “So they can call the cops on me again?”

“I’m sure all the cops in town know where you live right now.”

“I don’t think that place is legal.”

“I don’t think so either,” she said. “Do you have anyplace else to go? Can your parents help you out?”

“Not an option.”

“You don’t get along?”

“They’re dead.”

That stopped the conversation.

She thought about all the things her parents still helped with: the tuition, the car, the room she was in right now. She worked, but it only paid a part of it. “I have money saved…”

“I’m not taking your money.”

“I didn’t offer,” she said. “If you let me finish. I have money saved and I’m about to get
an apartment.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“You think living in a place without drywall is better? Or, is living under the pier more your style?”

He didn’t have a smart answer for that.

She added, “You work. You pay the bills for the Fenderson’s place. I’m not giving you a free ride. I’m offering a bedroom in a two-bedroom apartment. You pay your share.”

She joined him on the bench and they watched the gulls dance over the water.

“So, is your real name Carl?”

Blue gave a wolfish smile. “Carl needs to remember to lock his pickup but thank god he kept a stocked first-aid kit.”