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SAFETY PLANNING

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IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR TUESDAY STAFF MEETING, the red light blinks on my pager, and it sings its song. We're debating who will cover Debbie's shift. Sophie claims a wedding in the city. Rhonda says she has a date.

"I'm not taking this shift," I say. I told my boyfriend I'd call about the car, be home for dinner, act like a girlfriend.

I lose.

The page is from a volunteer at the Women's Community Center. "I have a woman here," she says. "Can you come?"

The center is in an old gray building on Geneva. It's run by volunteers, and funding cuts have reduced it to little more than an old lending closet: musty suits and dresses and shoes that can be borrowed for job interviews, for those who need the illusion of having a normal life.

The woman at the front desk directs me to the children's room, where two women sit on plastic Playskool chairs. I can tell which one is the client by the cliché black eye. I hold out my hand. She flinches. I apologize.

"Hi, I'm from the Outreach Center," I say. *I'm here to help. No. I'm here to pretend I can help. No, I'm here so I can feel like I'm different from you.* "I'm Laura. What's your name?" I ask.

"Her name's Marjan," the volunteer jumps in. "She's in

an abusive relationship, and she needs to go to a shelter, but she won't go."

OK, I think. *Thanks for managing to break every fucking rule in one sentence: you don't call a marriage an "abusive relationship" until much later in the game; you don't scare the shit out of her by talking about a shelter; and you don't say she won't leave.*

"Maybe Marjan and I could talk for a few minutes alone?" I say.

"Well, you need to understand: it took me over an hour to get this far," the woman says. "She's a refugee from Tibet. She won't tell you anything." In other words: *Back off. I found her. She's mine.*

"I'm sorry," Marjan says. Her first words in my presence: an apology for being difficult.

"Please," I say to the volunteer.

Her knees crack as she stands from the tiny chair. The door clicks shut behind her.

"How are you?" I ask.

Marjan holds her fingers over the top button of her blouse, then rests her hands on the table, then on her lap, then on her legs.

"You don't have to talk," I tell her.

She looks at me and says, "Very private."

I nod. We sit. She brings her fingers back up to her blouse. She unbuttons the top button, then the next, then the next. She holds her blouse open and turns her head away. There are small black bruises all around her bra and up the side of her neck. "Do I need. . . ?" She points to her bra.

I shake my head. "You can go ahead and . . ." I motion for her to put the blouse back on.

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry," I say. Which is the truth. "We have services that might be able to help."

"Oh, thank you," she says, "but it is OK."

"It looks very painful."

"Thank you. Not very bad."

This is how our first meeting goes, the way all first meetings go: She can't take the brochures with her because he might find them. No one else can know. He's not so bad; it's complicated.

I ask if there's anywhere she can write our hot-line number. "Maybe under a fake name, so he won't suspect anything?" We choose "Stacy." I write that name and the number on a tissue. She buries it in the bottom of her purse.

"Where does he think you are right now?" I ask.

"Grocery store," she says. "Thank you. I must go."

"What will you do if this happens again?" *If.*

"I go under the bed," she says. "I sleep there. He too big to get under." She smiles.

I smile back. "I hope I can talk to you again," I say. I walk her to the back door instead of the front. "You can call anytime, twenty-four hours."

"Oh, no," she says. "Thank you."

I watch her glance up and down the alley then straighten her shoulders and walk away.

I'M WORKING AT A SHELTER IN NEW YORK STATE, in a town where I went to junior high for a while. Three of the clients I end up meeting at the emergency room are girls I sat with in class nine years ago — girls who followed the rules, raised their hands in social studies ("The capital of New York is Albany!"), moved through the system, while I snorted poison, sucked off their boyfriends, fought and raged. Now I meet these women in the early-morning hours at the hospital and say, "Hi, I'm with the Outreach Center for Battered Women, and we're here to . . ." *help.* I stand there hoping they won't recognize me and throw their IV bag at my face and say: *What are you doing here?*

Who, me? I'm just pretending not to be you. Would you like a brochure? Support group meets on Tuesday nights. We have one bed left in the shelter. If you have a birth certificate and a state ID, we can get you emergency food stamps in the morning.

I DON'T SEE MARJAN AGAIN FOR TWO MONTHS. The next time I hear from her, she asks me to meet her at the Safeway coffee shop.

"Thank you," she says when she sits down. She puts her

purse on the table and glances around.

"I'm glad you called," I say.

"Thank you," she says.

"How are things?"

"Good, very good," she says. "Do you like to see?" She reaches for the buttons on her blouse.

"Um, no. I mean, how are *you*?"

"Not very much better," she says. "You said you could help. I would like to have someone talk to my husband."

This is common for the second meeting. I let her talk, explaining to me what a good man he is, how much pressure he's under, how he's not like this all the time.

"I would like to help you," I say, "but we don't work with . . ." *Don't say "abusers." Never call them that.* "We don't talk to the people who are . . . perpetrating the behavior."

She stares blankly at me.

"The ones who are doing the things — like your bruises."

"No, he's not bad," she says, understanding some of what I've said. "He's a good man. Someone just needs to talk to him."

After she's left, a cellphone goes off, and I jump. Every beep that sounds like my pager makes me jump. I don't sleep much. I curl up on the couch and stare at the pager, waiting for whispered voices on the telephone:

"He puts his hand under my hair," Rachel says, "on the back of my neck. It looks sweet, innocent, you know? Like he has his arm around me. But it's how he threatens me. One jerk means I'm doing something wrong — like maybe he thinks I'm looking at another guy. Two jerks is my last warning. Three jerks means I'm getting my ass kicked." She laughs. I hear the flick of a lighter, a deep exhale. "Fucked up, huh?"

Or maybe it's Lopita. She tells me he twisted the cat's neck last night: a warning. I can hear her kids screaming in the background. "Stop," she says to them. "Please, just stop."

Or maybe it's Vicki, who tells me she sleeps in the stable with her horse: "I still can't sleep in the house."

Sometimes it's who doesn't call. Renee's been silent ever since her order of protection was denied. She turned away from me at family court: "I don't need a fucking advocate. I need people to get out of my way." Fucking tribe of the broken. Tribe of heroes.

ONE NIGHT WHEN I MEET A CLIENT AT THE ER, she grabs my arm, forces me to her, and says: "This here will heal." She points to a broken nose, a smashed collarbone, a red eye. "But this won't." She thumps her hand against her chest.

I don't argue. I don't try to come up with things to say anymore. Because she's right. And sometimes the only thing that doesn't make sense is when people keep trying, keep starting over, keep planting gardens and writing in the journals the counselors give them, keep smiling and saying, "I really feel like things are going to be OK." I try to give the appropriate nod: *Right. Right around that next corner.* It's hard not to get jaded.

(end of excerpt)