Part 1

"Ruth Watson?"

"Yes?" Ruthie twisted in the uncomfortable examination room chair that felt entirely too small for its purpose. She shifted her weight, glancing at the clock on the wall. Her lunch hour was slipping away.

"We have the results of your field vision test." The optometrist sat in the chair across from her, opening a thick, manila folder. "We detected a visual field defect."

As he pressed a button, a machine hummed to life behind him. Two large grey circles marked with intersecting vertical and horizontal lines illuminated a screen. "A *homonymous* visual field defect." Realizing the clinical jargon did little to clear things up, he pointed a pen toward two blurry, dark smudges on the display. "It's a fancy term for blind spots. We ran the test twice in both eyes, and you are definitely missing vision in this quadrant. This is normal, but this other one…" He tapped the gray spot in the lower right quadrant of the image, "…is not."

"There must be a mistake," Ruthie muttered, offering a small, humorless laugh. "I don't see any blind spots."

The doctor rolled his chair closer to her, waving a hand in front of her face. "You can't see it?" He dropped his hand low and to the left. "It should be right about here."

She squinted, trying to force her eyes to see what he was describing. "No, I see just fine." Working to keep her growing irritation in check, she added, "except for needing my contacts."

Ruthie needed to get back to the office. She only had a single hour for lunch and was hoping to get this appointment out of the way, drop off some movies at Blockbuster, and get back to her cubicle before her boss would notice.

As she wondered if she even had time to grab something from the food court, the doctor droned on. "What concerns me more is that it appears in the identical location in both eyes." He retreated to his desk, clicking his mouse. The office printer whirred to life, spitting out a thermal printout of the test. "This tells me the problem isn't in your eyes. The problem is in the brain."

"My brain," Ruthie repeated, flatly unconvinced as she glanced down at the paper. "Does this mean you can't renew my lens prescription?"

"Yes, we'll renew it, but I would strongly suggest you see a neuro-ophthalmologist first."

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Three weeks later, Ruthie found herself pacing the length of Dr. Chung's waiting room, glaring at a stack of outdated magazines. She loathed waiting rooms. Her earliest childhood memories of medical visits always involved endless hours sitting on uncomfortable vinyl chairs. Her mother's love language kicked in whenever her two daughters were sick or injured. Just a hint of a fever earned an emergency visit to their pediatrician, and since they never had an appointment, they had to wait.

The irony was that those long waiting sessions never amounted to anything serious. Ruthie remembered sitting for hours in an emergency room while she waited for her ankle to be X-rayed to rule out a fracture. It was just a sprain. Another time, her mother insisted on a visit to the ER when something flew into her eye. After the long wait, the nurse flushed the mysterious irritant out with some saline. When her sister fainted once, their mother dragged them both to the hospital. At 15 years old, Ruthie begged to be allowed to stay at home.

"She seems fine now," Ruthie had argued. "Why do we all have to go to the ER?"

"This could be a serious medical condition," her mother declared. "You should be concerned about your sister and want to find out what's happening!" After hours of waiting, they determined the fainting spell was due to teenage hormones.

"Ruth Watson?"

Ruthie jumped up. Following the nurse, she was led to an examination room and was eventually sitting in another uncomfortable chair with a doctor staring into her eyes. Ruthie held her breath, hoping the doctor wouldn't catch the scent of the Taco Bell she had just wolfed down in her car. She knew she wouldn't make it back to the office and would have to take a half-day, but she desperately hoped this appointment wouldn't derail her entire afternoon.

"Don't move," Doctor Chung instructed. "Look right here." She pointed to her own left ear as she flashed an aggressively bright penlight into Ruthie's eye. "Now look at the other." Eventually snapping the light off, she reached for another device and scooted her stool an impossible inch closer.

After inspecting both eyes for a ridiculous amount of time, the doctor stood up abruptly and vanished into the hallway. Moments later, she returned with a male colleague in tow, her expression bordering on excitement. "Take a look at these penlight responses, Frank. The right pupil is a five, but the left barely opens at three."

Now trapped between two intense gazes, Ruthie exhaled slowly, focused entirely on her breathing.

"Notice the mild ptosis?" Dr. Chung said.

The other doctor grunted his affirmation, leaning in. “Yep, and there’s partial anhidrosis on the ipsilateral side.”

“There could be a disruption somewhere along the sympathetic pathway.”

“Good catch, Silvia.” The male doctor spoke, already heading out of the room. “Let’s run a pharmacological test before scheduling neuroimaging.”

Dr. Chung settled back into her seat facing Ruthie. “You’re showing classic signs of Horner’s Syndrome.”

“Horner’s Syndrome?” Ruthie furrowed her brow. “What is that?”

“It’s a neurological condition that occurs when there is a disruption to the sympathetic nerve pathways in your brain.”

“That’s what’s causing the blind spots?” Ruthie asked, leaning forward.

“No.” The doctor shook her head. “Although we were able to duplicate the visual field test results from your optometrist, I’m far more concerned about the asymmetry in your ocular region.” She held up a small hand mirror. “Do you see how one of your eyes appears smaller than the other?”

Ruthie stared into the reflection. Barely registering her eyes, she offered a self-conscious smile and jutted out her chin, hyper-aware of how wide her face looked in the glass. Not liking what she saw, she thrust the mirror back at the doctor. “It’s always been that way.”

“Since you were a child?”

Ruthie shrugged. “Yes.”

“Well, that’s quite normal. However, the pupil in your left eye is significantly smaller than your right as well, which is highly unusual. Have you ever seen someone where it looks like half their face is shrinking? That is what could happen to you if this is left untreated.”

Dr. Chung stood up, scratching notes onto a chart. “We are going to start with a pharmacological test. We’ll administer a few eye drops and ask you to wait in the lobby. It only takes about thirty minutes.”

“Okay,” Ruthie sighed. Another thirty minutes, she thought with annoyance.

“Now, be aware, these drops do contain topical cocaine.”

Ruthie’s head snapped up, her eyes widening. “Cocaine!”

“Just a small amount. Don’t worry. You shouldn’t feel systemic effects.” She cocked her head as she added practically, “However, if you’re stopped by the police on the way home, you will fail a drug screen.”

Ruthie looked at the doctor, dumbfounded. “Wait…no…I’m really not comfortable with this.”

“Miss Watson, it’s the definitive way to verify whether you have Horner’s Syndrome.” The doctor gave Ruthie an insistent look. “I will also be ordering an MRI. We need to rule out any structural lesions along that nerve path.”

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Eight days later, Ruthie was back in a waiting room. She looked at the clock, hoping she could get on I-44 before the traffic got too heavy. What a waste of time, she thought irritably. Blind spots she couldn’t see that may cause half her face to shrink! It sounded completely ridiculous. She knew this would, again, amount to nothing.

Irritated over the loss of an entire day of work this time, she let her mind wander, thinking of the project she was working on in her office. The company kept giving her department software with no training on how to use it, but she loved the challenge. They had just installed something called Microsoft Access, and she had been fiddling with it all week. She had mastered Excel, so she knew she could figure out Access. Once she worked out how to create queries, she would not have to rely on the completely dysfunctional IT Department.

“Ruth Watson?”

Led through the clinical corridors, she was ushered into an inner office lined with binders and glowing computer monitors.

“Come in, Miss Watson. Sit down.” Dr. Chung was scanning the papers in front of her. “Well, you don’t have Horner’s Syndrome.” Ruthie could have sworn she caught a flicker of disappointment in the doctor’s eyes. “However, reviewing your MRI results, it appears your facial asymmetry stems from an old perinatal stroke.”

“A what?”

“Did my nurse call about you bringing the photographs as I requested?”

“Uh…oh, yes,” Ruthie dug into her purse. “I found these.” She slid a small stack of faded photographs across the desk. Dr. Chung flipped through the snapshots, chronicling Ruthie between the ages of five and twelve. Nodding slowly, she murmured, “The structural remodeling of the bone and soft tissue was already well underway.”

“What are you saying, doctor? What do I have?”

Handing the pictures back, Dr. Chung leaned forward. “Apparently, you suffered a stroke when you were an infant. Likely secondary to severe trauma.”

Ruthie let out a short, incredulous sound, shifting back in her chair and crossing her arms. “I’ve never had a stroke, Doctor.”

“Are you sure?” Dr. Chung asked. “It would explain the blind spots as well and why you can’t see them. When trauma occurs early in life, it’s the brain's automatic mechanism of extrapolating surrounding visual information to mask a scotoma.”

Ruthie instinctively reached up, her fingertips tracing the small indentation on the left side of her face just beneath her lower lip. She had carried that mark for as long as she could remember, rarely giving it a second thought. “Oh, well… I was in a car accident when I was a baby, but no one ever mentioned a stroke.”

“I see you have another on your temple.” Dr. Chung traced a path in the air from Ruthie’s eyebrow back into her hairline. “When did this accident happen?”

Ruthie thought back, looking past the doctor toward the row of medical texts on the shelf. She tried to reconstruct the fragments her mother had shared over the years. “I was a baby - about seven months old, I think. So…it would have been 1968.”

The doctor nodded slowly. “Almost 30 years ago. Before car seats were required.”

“But I was told everything turned out fine,” Ruthie insisted, a slightly defensive edge to her tone. “We were all fine.”

Dr. Chung offered a sympathetic nod. “Well, you may want to get additional information from your parents.”

Part 2

Lucille placed the heavy, black receiver in its cradle.

“Who was that, Lou?” Edward asked, emerging from the hallway bathroom. He had just finished shaving and was scrubbing his face with a terrycloth towel.

“It was your sister.” Lucille looked entirely distracted, her hands hovering over the glass jar of applesauce she had been spooning into their daughter. In the highchair, the chubby baby smacked the plastic tray, letting out a bright laugh as she watched a flurry of Cheerios scatter across the linoleum floor.

“Which one?” Edward ambled into the kitchen, buttoning a crisp button-down shirt over a fitted t-shirt, paired with sharp, pleated chinos.

“Antonia,” Lucille responded, not looking up. “She wants me to come down to her office.”

“Right on!” Edward grinned, stepping closer. “I’ll tag along with you.”

Lucille finally lifted her gaze, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Ed, don’t you have to get down to your office? You said you had a heavy meeting with some investors this morning.”

Edward waved his hand dismissively, pacing over toward the counter. “That's not until later. I'm good with time.”

“Well,” Lucille asked cautiously, her voice dropping as she straightened from the counter, “will you actually be getting paid this month?”

“Of course, Lou. I’m the president of the company,” he scoffed, walking over to the percolator to pour himself a fresh cup. He leaned his hip against the edge of the counter, crossing his ankles. “What did Toni have to say?”

“It didn’t concern you, Edward,” Lucille said, turning her back to wipe down the counter with a damp rag. “I need to go in for some test results.”

Edward took a slow sip of his coffee, his eyebrows hiking up as he watched her rigid posture. “You just had her a few months ago. Everything’s fine.”

“I’ve been bone-tired, Edward. I asked her to take a look. The district wants me back teaching full-time in the fall.”

“That’s complete bullshit. You should stay home and look after your family.”

“And you’ll pull enough weight with what *you* bring in?” Lucille gestured sharply toward the small side table, where a stack of bills sat half-hidden under a magazine.

“Don’t hassle me, Lou!” Edward snapped, abandoning his coffee cup. He strode across the kitchen, swooping down to scoop the baby out of the highchair. He hoisted her high toward the ceiling, instantly shifting back into a playful facade as the baby squealed with delight.

Lucille ignored them, her eyes scanning the room as she searched for her handbag. “We’re going over to Antonia’s office. And then I’m making a run to the market for a few things.”

“I’m rolling with you,” Edward said, snagging his windbreaker off the back of a chair.

“Ed, that is entirely unnecessary.”

“Jesus, Lou, she’s my sister. I need to see her anyway. I need her to renew some scripts for me.”

Lucille paused, turning away just enough to hide a tight grimace. Edward was always asking his sister to renew his prescriptions. What medication was her husband even taking? She pressed him about it once, and he muttered something about indigestion. Lucille knew the answer was a lie, but keeping the peace felt safer than picking at a loose thread.

“Fine, then. Let’s get a move on. I have things to handle today, and I want to beat the traffic over on Crenshaw.” As Lucille looped her purse strap over her shoulder, she reached out to take her daughter back.

“I’ve got her,” Edward insisted, keeping the baby clutched to his chest. “I’ll carry her out.”

Lucille let out a long, quiet breath. “Suit yourself.”

As she walked past him toward the small ceramic bowl by the front door to grab the car keys, Edward called out, “We’ll take the Lincoln. You can drive.”

Lucille stopped, turning to glare at him. “I am not driving that tank, Edward.”

Her husband chuckled, shifting the baby to his other arm as he strode toward the door. “Yes, that’s a real man’s car,” he cooed down to the baby.

“The stroller and diaper bag are in my car,” Lucille said, her tone absolute. “We’re taking the Chevy.”

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Dr. Antonia Clarke’s private practice sat tucked away in a quiet, professional medical building, just minutes from her brother’s apartment. As a general practitioner, she served as the physician for the entire Watson clan. When the family of three stepped out of the warm Los Angeles sun into the air-conditioned waiting room, Edward strode right past the other patients, straight up to the sliding glass partition where the receptionist sat.

She looked up, breaking into a warm grin. “Hi there, Mr. Watson. How you holding up?”

“Hey, Wanda,” Edward flashed a high-wattage smile. “Is Toni free?”

“She’s with a patient right now.” Wanda smiled, playfully wagging her ballpoint pen between her fingers.

Without missing a beat, Edward sidestepped to the heavy wooden door leading back to the examination rooms, rattling the brass doorknob. It didn't budge. “Come on, Wanda, just buzz me through, huh?”

“Sorry, Mr. Watson,” Wanda replied, shaking her head. “She said I can’t do that anymore. Doctor’s orders. You’ve got to take a seat.”

Edward dropped his hand from the knob, his eyes darting restlessly around the waiting area as if mapping out an alternate route. The nervous energy practically radiated off him. “Ed, for heaven's sake, just sit down,” Lucille muttered, her voice tight. She moved toward an empty vinyl chair near the corner, settling the baby onto her lap while quickly unzipping the diaper bag to fish out a pre-mixed bottle.

Right on cue, the interior door clicked open, and Dr. Clarke poked her head out into the reception area, instantly spotting her brother pacing a groove into the carpet. “Eddie, do not move another inch! I will see you as soon as I can!”

“Toni, just real quick!” Edward jumped to his feet.

Toni ignored him, crossing the room swiftly to pluck her niece from Lucille’s lap with a loving grin. “How’s my favorite girl?” Then, turning to hand the baby right back to Edward, she commanded, “Here. Hold your daughter. Come on back with me, Lucille.”

Over her shoulder, she shot a final warning glare. “Eddie, you stay put!”

With that, the heavy door swung shut behind the two women, cutting off Edward’s protests entirely.

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“This is simply not possible.”

“It’s entirely possible, Lucille.” Toni flipped briskly through the manila pages of her sister-in-law’s medical file, her white lab coat rustling in the small exam room. “You’re due in six months. Probably mid-October.”

Lucille sat frozen on the paper-lined examination table, looking utterly shell-shocked.

“Eddie is going to be over the moon,” Toni said, looking up with a bright, encouraging smile.

“No,” Lucille whispered, her expression hardening into fear. “Toni, you don't understand. I just had a baby. My body hasn't even recovered. It’s far too soon.”

Toni let out a light, dismissive chuckle. “Well, life has a way of surprising us, girl. It is happening. You just have to accept it.”

Lucille lowered her voice to a harsh, trembling pitch, leaning forward. “Toni, I can’t do this. You don't know what it’s like. Edward is not…” she choked on the words, unable to describe the dark chaos humming beneath her husband's polished exterior.

Toni’s smile faltered. “Yes, Lou, I know how he gets. But you’ll manage. He’s been so happy with his baby girl. If you bring him another… especially another girl… he’ll settle down.”

“Settle down?” Lucille’s voice cracked. “He is not the man you think he is. He’ll be talking crazy one minute, and completely normal the next. That company he’s always bragging about is just an empty classroom with some old desks. He doesn’t have any employees, and he rarely brings home any money. Strange people are always coming to our place at odd hours...”

“I know, honey.” Toni offered a slow, placating nod, leaning against the counter. “I know how he is.”

“You know?” Lucille demanded, her hands gripping the edge of the paper table. “I was told Edward Watson was the catch of Baldwin Hills! A great businessman! In February, you were with us… standing in that senator’s office… accepting that award for… whatever.”

Toni sighed, picking up a clipboard. “Yes, well, Edward has always been very good at getting politicians to give him plaques.”

“What are you talking about?” Lucille stared at her, stunned.

“Tom Bradley owed our family a favor,” Toni admitted quietly, holding the chart to her chest. “Eddie drafted up the wording for that citation himself, called in a couple of favors from the press, and orchestrated the whole photo op. It’s good PR for the councilman, and it gives Eddie additional credibility. You know,” she waved her hand in the air, “corporate legitimacy. It’s a win-win. It’s how he operates.”

“But he doesn’t do anything!” Lucille’s voice rose, desperate and sharp. “He’s not teaching anyone about computers! He had a handful of kids come by last semester to look at some teletype machine, but nothing since. He gets dressed to the nines every morning, walks out that front door, and plays pretend while our bills pile up so high we can’t see the bottom!”

“Relax, Lucille. He’s always been that way, and he always lands on his feet. Now that he’s tied down with a family, he’ll find a way. Especially since you gave him a daughter. I’ve never seen him look so proud as he did carrying that baby.”

“No, Toni.” Lucille violently shook her head, sliding off the examination table and backing toward the door. “No. I can’t live like this anymore.” She stopped, looking straight into her sister-in-law’s eyes. “I’m educated. I can teach anywhere.”

Toni stepped forward, her voice dropping. “What in God’s name are you talking about, sister?” Lucille froze under the sudden, sharp glare. “Are you out of your mind? Are you talking about walking out on my brother?”

“Toni,” Lucille took a breath. “When we’re alone, he doesn’t treat me well. You all don’t see how he is when it’s just the two of us. He’s good with the baby, but…” Lucille stammered, her courage wavering under the social weight of her sister’s glare. “I had good men courting me back home. Men who treated me with the respect I deserve!”

Toni closed the distance, her fingers gripping Lucille’s forearm with an unyielding, protective vice. “That’s where you think you’re going to go? Back east and teach in some small town in southern Indiana?”

Lucille winced, looking down at the hand clamped on her arm. “It’s southern Illinois...”

Toni scoffed, shaking her head. “What do they pay colored teachers out there? Do they even get benefits? You’ll be scrubbing floors by fifty, girl!” Her eyes narrowed. “And even if you stay in California, do you think you’re going to find a respectable colored man who is going to step up and marry a divorced woman with two babies?”

The heavy silence stretched between them until Lucille pulled her arm away, turning blindly out of the room. As she stumbled back out into the waiting room, Edward immediately shoved the baby into her arms without a word, brushing past her to meet with his sister.

Lucille sat heavily in one of the vinyl chairs, clutching the baby tight against her chest. Her mind raced with a suffocating panic. What would her parents say if she returned home from California with two babies and no husband? Her marriage was announced in the *East Saint Louis Monitor* for god’s sake. There is no way she could live down the shame. For as long as she could remember, she wanted a better life for herself. Something better than the backwards town she grew up in. Edward was supposed to be something. He was supposed to be her ticket out! How could this be happening to her?

Suddenly, the inner door slammed back against the drywall with a sharp crack. Edward came stomping out, his face flushed, and jaw clenched. “Let’s go!” he barked into the room, storming out toward the exit before waiting for an answer.

Lucille scrambled to her feet, frantically stuffing loose bottles and diapers back into her bag. Just then, Toni hurried out into the waiting area, scooping up a plastic teething rattle the baby had dropped. Thrusting the toy into Lucille's overflowing bag, Toni spoke in a brisk, dismissive whisper. "He'll pout for a few days, but he'll get over it. Pour him a heavy glass of scotch tonight, and he'll be right as rain."

"What's he so upset about?" Lucille asked, her voice trembling with exhaustion.

"I told him no refills on those downers for another full week," Toni said dismissively, waving a hand in the air. "And he knows damn well the schedule. He thinks he can sweet-talk me."

With a firm hand on Lucille's shoulder, Toni guided her toward the glass exit doors. "He'll be fine, Lou. You just focus on taking care of my niece," she murmured, giving the baby's curls an affectionate pat before the heavy door closed behind them.

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The sedan hummed beneath them, but the silence between the couple was suffocating. Lucille kept her hands locked at ten and two on the steering wheel, staring straight ahead through the windshield as if she could force the road to untangle itself. Edward sat beside her, bouncing their infant daughter on his lap, his legs restless.

Without looking over, Edward broke the tension, his voice dropping into a cold, probing tone. "Toni says another baby is coming."

Lucille's grip on the steering wheel tightened as she kept her eyes fixed on the asphalt rolling beneath them. "She told you?"

Edward shifted the baby. "Is it mine?"

Lucille rolled her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I know about that dinner you had with that superintendent." Edward's voice rose, his knee bouncing furiously against the glove compartment.

"Mr. Johnson? Oh, Edward! Don't be ridiculous!" Lucille shot back, her voice cracking with indignation as she flicked her eyes back to the road.

"Well, you haven't let me touch you. How did this baby happen?" Edward demanded, his hand tightening protectively around little Ruthie.

"You know exactly how it happened, Edward." Lucille's chest heaved with anger. "And you've touched me plenty!"

“Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on, Lou. You’re looking for a new man, aren’t you?” Edward’s voice sharpened into an accusatory hiss.

Lucille let out a sharp, bitter laugh, shaking her head as she glanced at him. “Why shouldn’t I? You can’t take care of us. I deserve better than this!”

Edward stiffened. “You’re not taking my baby from me, Lucille. Ruthie is my girl!”

“How are you going to take care of her, Edward?” Lucille fired back, turning her head to throw the words right at him. “With your fine suits and sweet talk?”

“Don’t mess with me, Lou.” Edward pointed a finger. “Not in this town. My oldest brother is a lawyer. My family knows people.”

“Take that finger out of my face, Edward!” Her eyes darted back to the windshield. “Don’t you threaten me…”

“Watch out!”

Part 3

Reggie knew the crash was coming the second he heard the high-pitched squeal of tires tearing against asphalt. He had been retired for four years, but he was in the business for 40 years before that – elbows deep in grease and metal. He knew what a car crash sounded like and knew this one would not be good.

Pushing himself up from the couch, he reached out and flicked the dial to turn down the drone of the late morning news on the black-and-white television. He strode across the living room to the large picture window framing the front yard. Through the glass, he watched the two vehicles slowly settling from the impact they just endured. An olive-green pickup truck and…

Reggie caught his breath. He jerked the front door open, stepping out onto the porch. "Oh, geez," he muttered out loud, his eyes locked on the wreckage. "A Corvair?” He mumbled, “Whoever’s in that Corvair is dead."

The rear-mounted engine was the stupidest idea Chevy ever came up with, especially when there were crashes like this. With the trunk in the front, head-on collisions meant there was nothing to stop the driver from getting crushed. And that was what he was looking at right now – a crushed Corvair.

Reggie bolted down his front steps, his boots hitting the pavement as he rushed toward the street. Across the lawn, his neighbor, old-lady Wilkins, burst through her front door wearing her signature melon-colored bathrobe, her hands flying to her face.

"Oh my! Praise Jesus! Praise Jesus!" she cried out, her voice trembling. "Joey!" she yelled back into the dark interior of her house. "Call an ambulance!"

Reggie bypassed her, sprinting first to the pickup truck. He leaned through the shattered window, seeing a blond man slumped awkwardly over the steering wheel. Reggie reached in, touching his shoulder and pushing him back to check his face. Dead. That man was gone.

He pivoted away, running through the littered street as he rushed to the Corvair. Another man Reggie didn't know jogged up from down the block and peered through the opposite window. Inside, a couple sat motionless, their bodies forced back into their seats, crushed by the intrusion of the front end. The woman's face was covered entirely with dark blood and broken bits of glass. Neither of them stirred.

"Looks like everyone's dead," the stranger muttered, shaking his head.

Reggie stared past the wreckage into the crushed cavity of the dashboard, his eyes catching a faint, erratic twitch of movement. What was that? "Jesus!" Reggie cursed, plunging his hands past the twisted metal toward the motion. "It's a baby!"

He scooped up the infant, drawing the small form close. Blood was smeared across the child's head, matting curly black hair. As he cradled the bleeding scalp with trembling fingers, the baby squirmed weakly, letting out a soft, pathetic whimper. He caught sight of chubby little legs kicking against the devastation.

Another woman he recognized as Muriel, his neighbor, appeared at his side. "Oh, Reggie!" she gasped, peering over his arm. "Is that a baby?" They stared at the child together, as a thin stream of blood ran through Reggie's fingers onto the concrete sidewalk below. "It's a little negro child," Muriel's eyes widening. "You need to take it to a hospital."

"Yeah," Reggie breathed, his gaze darting across the grass toward his car parked in the driveway.

"Here," Muriel said, slipping her light sweater off her shoulders and quickly wrapping it around the infant, swaddling the tiny frame as best she could.

Reggie patted his pants pockets frantically, searching for his keys before his fingers finally located them in his front right pocket.

"Hurry, Reggie," Muriel said, handing the bundled baby carefully back into his arms. "Take it to a hospital."

Reggie sprinted across the lawn, leaped into his Mustang, and pressed the baby against his chest as he roared away toward California Hospital. He slammed his car to a

halt at the emergency entrance, bolting through the double doors with the child while the sweater grew steadily red with blood.

“This baby is bleeding!" he shouted at the front desk, demanding the attention of anyone who would listen.

A nurse rushed over, peering down and carefully peeling back the fabric of the bloodied sweater. "This is a colored child," she said, looking up sharply at Reggie.

Reggie blinked, catching his breath. "So? What’s the difference?"

"What are you doing with a negro baby?" the nurse demanded, stepping back. "Are you this child’s father, or legal guardian?"

"No," Reggie snapped. "What does that matter?"

"It matters," the nurse said, holding her hands up defensively. "We cannot touch this baby unless we have the parent’s permission, or authorization from a paramedic or police officer."

“The parents are dead!” he exclaimed. “Well, I think they are,” he mumbled. “There was a car accident!”

The nurse narrowed her eyes, pressing her lips into a tight, defensive line. “It’s a liability issue, sir.” Glancing around, she lowered her voice. “Listen.” She stepped closer. “Take the baby to County General. They take good care of their people over there.” Straightening, she resumed her professional volume. “I’m sorry, sir. You have to take this baby to whoever has the right to tell us what to do with it. That’s the law. You should have let the paramedics bring it in.”

Frustration boiling over, Reggie scooped the infant back into his arms, spun on his heel, and bolted out the hospital doors. He dove back into the driver's seat of his Mustang, gunning the engine as he headed out into traffic toward County General.

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“What are you doing with a colored baby?” This time the question came from a black woman, as she stepped out from behind the high intake counter and strode directly into Reggie’s path.

“I know,” Reggie said, his voice cracking while his hands twitched from the weight of the now listless child. “The parents are dead. There was a car accident.”

The woman, clearly balancing institutional authority with a protective urgency, stepped back as she sized him up. “Why didn’t you let the paramedics bring it in?” she

asked, her eyes narrowing as she reached out and took the blood-covered infant from his arms.

“There wasn’t time,” Reggie explained, exhaling a breath full of exasperated heat. “Can you help?”

The woman nodded curtly. Turning on her heel, she carried the infant across the crowded emergency room floor and carefully set her down onto a stainless-steel pediatric bassinet. Peeling back the bloodied sweater, she gently touched the now unconscious child, its skin an ashy brown beneath the smears of red blood.

She didn't look back as she raised her voice, cutting sharply through the chaos of the room. “Code pediatric trauma! Get me a cutdown tray, IV start kit, and prep for acute hypovolemic shock. I need volume expansion stat!”

As Reggie stood staring, two other medical personnel rushed over, physically boxing him out as they swarmed the bassinet. Feeling the space close in around him, Reggie instinctively backed up, retreating toward the edge of the waiting room.

The nurse left the cluster of doctors for a moment, crossing the gap back to where Reggie stood. Leaning in close and lowering her voice to a harsh whisper, she said, “You need to go.”

Reggie looked at her with a surprised, confused expression. “What?”

“Since you’re not the guardian, we cannot legally admit this child unless we receive proper authorization,” she whispered fiercely. “But if it’s treated as abandoned, a minor left in our care, emergency protocol kicks in. Then we can try to save its life. You need to go. Now.”

Reggie looked at her, the gravity of her words finally landing. He swallowed hard and nodded, standing frozen for a heartbeat before looking down at his t-shirt, completely soaked and stiffened with the child’s blood.

Slowly backing out of the emergency room, he kept his eyes locked forward, watching as the nurse and doctors tightly hovered around the mobile examination crib, shielding the tiny body from view.

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Wanda was standing, looking out the front window of the medical office. Dr. Clarke came out with a chart in her hands. “What are you looking at, Wanda?”

“There are all these fire trucks and ambulances down the street, so I figure there must be a fire somewhere,” Wanda said.

Mrs. Jackson walked in just as Wanda was speaking. She was scheduled for 11AM and was ten minutes late. “Oh, that’s no fire. It’s some big car accident. That’s why I’m late. Traffic is a mess.”

“Okay, Mrs. Jackson, let me get you checked in,” Wanda said, turning away from the glass and moving back to her desk.

Toni Clarke stood frozen at the window, her gaze fixed on the flashing red lights and the rising congestion just two blocks down from her practice. *Something is not right*, she thought, a cold knot tightening in her stomach. She took an abrupt step toward the front door, pushing it open into the warming late morning air of the parking lot. She vaguely heard Wanda calling her name from behind her, but the sound faded as she broke into a fast, purposeful walk down the pavement. As the wreckage came into view, her pace quickened into a desperate run.

Debris was scattered across the asphalt. Then she saw the vehicles – an unfamiliar olive-green truck, and right beside it, the older white Chevy her sister-in-law always drove.

“Oh my God!” she cried, sprinting the final yards.

A police officer threw out an arm, blocking her path to keep her from getting too close. Through the chaos, she saw a fireman working with a heavy hydraulic rescue tool, trying to pry open the twisted metal frame. A moment later, she saw her sister-in-law being lifted gently onto a gurney. She was conscious, talking rapidly in a breathless, disjointed stream, clearly deep in shock.

“Where’s the baby?” Toni cried out, straining against the officer's barrier.

A fireman paused, turning to look at her with a furrowed brow. “What baby?”

“There should be a baby in the car!” Toni exclaimed, her voice cracking with rising panic.

“There is no baby, ma’am,” the fireman stated.

A neighbor appeared by Toni’s side, breathing heavily. “Reggie took the baby,” she blurted out.

“What?” Toni whipped her head around, staring at the woman in sheer disbelief. “Took the baby where?”

“To a hospital,” she said, gesturing frantically toward the crushed white vehicle. “He thought they were dead, so he took the baby to the hospital since it was bleeding so much.”

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Dr. Eugene Hickman adjusted the weight of his leather medical bag against his thigh, his muscles humming with the persistent fatigue of a twenty-hour shift. Fortunately, a couple of well-timed power naps on the surprisingly comfortable breakroom couch had kept total exhaustion at bay.

Although his primary background and specialty lay in radiology, Gene was currently rotating through various disciplines at Kaiser Permanente Memorial. For the past two months, the administration had deployed him as the primary physician covering the Emergency Room.

The morning had settled into a steady, moderately busy hum. As he walked down the main corridor toward the exit, his thoughts drifted back to the one woman with severe abdominal pain who refused to let him examine her. Gene was glad those situations were becoming fewer. Even though Los Angeles was extremely diverse, compared to his hometown in the Midwest, it was still difficult for some white patients to allow a colored doctor to treat them.

He caught the eye of a nurse who had been invaluable the previous night during the frantic admission of a gunshot victim. He offered a warm, steady nod and waved. "Good job last night, Karen. Make sure you get some rest."

“Have a good day, Dr. Hickman,” Karen returned, offering a tired smile.

As he turned back toward the exit, the heavy double doors of the ER crashed inward. Paramedics rushed a fresh trauma gurney across the linoleum. Gene caught the sharp, clipped exchange between his replacement, Dr. Fleming, and the paramedics detailing the injuries.

“We’ve got an unstable pelvic fracture with suspected internal bleeding… severe compound lower-extremity trauma... disarticulation of the left leg is most likely… she’s stating she’s pregnant… there’s active abdominal rigidity… BP is dropping, pulse is thready… she’s sliding into hemorrhagic shock…”

Gene was three feet from the exit door when a sharp voice cut through the chaos.

“Dr. Hickman!”

He exhaled a slow, heavy sigh, his shoulders sagging slightly as he pivoted on his heel. The possibility of an uninterrupted departure vanished instantly. He crossed the floor toward the gurney, his eyes sweeping over the scene in a rapid visual assessment. The patient’s face was masked in a lattice of dried blood and glass shards. He looked below her waist and saw her left leg resembled hamburger meat mixed with broken glass.

“Do you mind?” Gene glanced up at Dr. Fleming.

“Be my guest,” Fleming replied, stepping back to give him room.

Gene bent over the woman and brushed the broken glass out of her face. He looked up at Dr. Fleming. “This is a *young* woman,” he said with mild surprise. Dropping his medical bag on the floor with a dull thud, he pointed decisively toward an empty trauma bay as the orderlies began wheeling the gurney forward. "Get me a full pack of hemostatic forceps, surgical tweezers, and a basin of water. Every fragment of glass has to come out before we risk closure." He took in a deep breath. “Let’s see if we can save that leg.”

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Toni was driving frantically through the streets of Los Angeles. She had to find that baby. Eddie had a daughter. This little girl was the blessing he had waited for. He couldn’t lose her. I have to help my brother by saving his daughter, she repeated to herself like a mantra.

Toni’s mind raced as she pulled into the parking area of Cedars Sinai. Slamming her car door, she made a breathless dash into their Emergency Room. After a frantic request, the front desk staff confirmed they had no record of receiving an infant from an accident, and the clerk quickly lectured her that they couldn't intervene without parental consent anyway. Toni didn't wait for the woman to finish. She turned and sprinted back out the sliding doors.

She had to figure out which hospital her niece had been taken to. She knew hospital policy. She worked in them for years. They would not touch the baby without authorization from a legal guardian or the police. Even if the baby was bleeding to death, bureaucratic red tape would tie their hands. And if some random man had carried the child in off the street… Peeling out of the lot, she thought to try County General next.

She slammed her car into park right in the red zone, abandoning it amidst the idling ambulances. Bursting through the ER doors, her eyes scanned the room until she spotted a cluster of medical staff crowded around a small stainless-steel pediatric bassinet. She shoved her way through the personnel, her breath catching in her throat as she saw her niece lying there, shaking violently.

Her color was ashen, her breathing irregular. Dr. Clarke’s eyes dropped instantly to the infant’s ankle where a clumsy, high-pressure line had been forced into the vessel.

My God, they’ve thrown a clot straight to her brain, she realized with a jolt of horror. *They’re feeding an arterial spasm!*

Without hesitation, she ripped the failing line out of the child's flesh.

“Discontinue that infusion!” Toni yelled. “She’s having a focal cerebral event!” Her voice overriding the chaotic room, she ordered, “Get me a pediatric scalp vein needle, draw up IV phenobarbital, and prep mannitol – stat!”

Someone in soiled scrubs spun around, narrowing their eyes at the intrusion. “Who are you, lady?”

“I am Dr. Antonia Clarke, and this is my niece!” Toni fired back, her eyes blazing with fierce, unyielding authority. “I am her legal guardian. Get me those medications right now, or I’ll make sure none of you ever practice medicine again!”

Part 4

Four and a half months later, Antonia Clarke stood in front of the mirror in the dressing room at Robinson’s downtown Los Angeles clothing store. They had just launched one of the first dedicated Page Boy Maternity boutiques in the city.

Holding a vibrant yellow dress up to herself, she turned toward the louvered door. “What do you think of the blue one, Lucille?”

“I’m trying it on now, Toni,” Lucille spoke from behind the slats.

Toni dropped onto the edge of a large, upholstered armchair. “How’s Eddie doing?” she asked, while smoothing her skirt.

“Oh, the same,” Lucille said, the sound of fabric shifting as she spoke. “Grumpy as ever. He hates the wheelchair and uses the crutches mostly.”

“Is he getting to his physical therapy appointments?” Toni pressed, showing clinical concern.

“Yes. One of your brothers always shows up to take him,” she reported.

The louvered door clicked open, and Lucille stepped out, wearing a blue tailored dress featuring a high empire waist and large white buttons. Clutching a wooden cane tightly in her right hand, she walked with a slow, uneven limp to face the full-length mirror. “Do you like this, or the yellow?”

Toni stood up, walking closer to examine the cut and draping of the garment. “I think the yellow is better for your coloring.” Holding the other dress up for comparison, she

said, “You should really get both. You’re not due for a few weeks, and you’ll need a couple of outfits.”

Lucille smiled, resting her hand protectively over her large belly before turning back toward the dressing room. “My physical therapist said I won’t need my cane if I keep improving.”

“You’re doing wonderfully, Lucille.” Toni stepped aside to let her pass. “Even without the patella, your knees healed beautifully considering the trauma.”

“What is this meeting about?” Lucille asked as she re-entered the dressing room. “We already met with the lawyers.”

“This meeting is with the insurance adjusters. My oldest brother will be there working with your counsel, and as your family’s physician, he asked me to be there as well. This is the important one, sister. We can’t have you showing up wearing what you wore to the last meeting.”

As the blue dress was passed over the door, the salesclerk silently appeared at Toni’s elbow. “Have you decided?”

“Yes,” Toni said. “We’ll take both of these.” She handed the garments to the young woman.

“Excellent. I’ll ring them up for you,” the salesclerk smiled and just as silently disappeared.

Toni walked back to stand directly before the louvered door, crossing her arms loosely. “Do you need help in there?”

“No,” Lucille said, rustling as she changed. “I think I got it. Why is this meeting the important one?”

“They’re going to determine the final settlement amount.” Toni moved closer to the door, her voice lowering with excitement. “They’re talking six figures! *Mid* six figures! You and Eddie are gonna really make out from all of this!”

Lucille came out of the dressing room wearing cropped pants and a white baby doll blouse. She walked slowly, heavily pregnant, leaning on her cane. “Six figures? How much is that?”

Toni laughed, amused by her sister-in-law’s naiveté. Stepping forward, she looped her arm through Lucille’s to steady her, lowering her voice conspiratorially as they slowly headed toward the counter to meet the salesclerk. “It’s enough to buy a house, a car, pay all those medical bills, and set you and your babies up for life! That was a Bell Company truck that hit you. Phone companies are big money, girl. Big money!”

“Do you think there will be enough for me to buy a mink coat?” Lucille asked, her eyes widening. “I’ve always wanted a mink coat.”

Toni laughed, giving her arm an affectionate squeeze. “Anything you want, Lucille.”

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“Mama, how come you never told me anything about this?” Ruthie asked, dropping her car keys on to her mother’s kitchen counter next to a stack of mail.

“Oh girl, that was a hundred years ago!” Lucille said, waving a hand dismissively as she wiped down the table. “I don’t remember all those details.”

“It was 28 years ago,” Ruthie clarified, determined not to let her mother brush aside this topic like she always did. “You never told me how serious everything was! Dad almost started crying when I called him about it.”

Lucille finally paused, setting the sponge down in the sink and drying her hands on a dish towel. “Oh, yes. He was very emotional about the whole thing. He was jealous of me because I was able to walk after all of that, and he still walks with a cane.”

“Aunt Toni said you all made a lot of money.” Ruthie asked, leaning against the door frame of the pantry. “What happened to all of that?”

“Oh please!” Lucille scoffed, pulling out a chair at the dinette set and sinking into it with a tired sigh. “The last thing anyone should do is give someone like your father money. He went crazy spending all that. We both did. I was so young and stupid. When I finally left him, I took you girls and the shirt on my back and came home. I don’t ever want to think about California again.” Abruptly she rose, heading for the refrigerator. “Do you want something to eat, honey?”

Ignoring her mother’s question, Ruthie pulled out a chair to sit at the kitchen table. “You told me you and Dad were arguing when you were driving, but you never told me what the fight was about.”

With her back to her daughter, Lucille pulled a plastic container out and pried off the lid. “Oh, something silly. Your dad was getting riled up about something and I told him to cut it out, and that’s when that truck swerved into us. If he wasn’t arguing with me, I probably would have seen that truck.”

“Dad said they took you to a different hospital than us. Why?”

Lucille turned around, holding the container, and leaned her hip against the counter. “I’m not sure. Probably because of the insurance. Or maybe because of my injuries.

Kaiser Permanente was the best hospital at the time. I received wonderful treatment there."

Ruthie narrowed her eyes, sliding her hands flat across the table surface. "So, you were there without me? Weren't you concerned about what was going on with me – your baby?"

"Oh, I'm sure I was," Lucille said, stepping away from the counter to set the container down near the center of the table. "Toni kept an eye on you and your father. You were fine."

"Mom, growing up, you had us in emergency rooms for every cough or sprained ankle, and you don't tell me that I had a stroke when I was a baby!"

Lucille stood over the table, crossing her arms defensively. "I took care of you, didn't I? You and your sister were healthy kids. I made you take vitamins and everything. Why are you bringing up all this mess?"

"So, you bought a house and stayed five more years. All for the money?"

For a long moment, the kitchen went quiet, as they listened to the hum of the refrigerator. Lucille stood still, munching slowly on the cracker. Although she spoke softly, her voice did not lose its defensive edge. "I know you think I was a bad mother, Ruthie. But I did my best after the divorce. I always made sure you and your sister were healthy and safe." She paused, taking another small bite of food. "You should call your sister. She got a new job."

"She did?" Ruthie looked up. "She doesn't work at the law firm anymore?"

"She's at a new one." Turning on the kitchen faucet, she turned to face the table. "When was the last time you talked to her?"

Ruthie dropped her gaze, saying nothing as she leaned back into the wooden chair. She thought about the blind spot that apparently is there, but she will never see. She sighed, "I don't know, Mom. I'll call her. But she'll probably be busy."

"I know," Lucille said, picking up the empty container, rinsing it under the faucet before moving it to the dishwasher. "That's how she is. But call her anyway. You two should be closer."