

## THE PACT

by

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Lara shuffles college brochures like she's a blackjack dealer. Glossy and slick, they slide through her hands every time the car shifts gears as we climb the winding back roads. Tightening my grip on the steering wheel does little to ease the rocking and shaking. The force reverberates from my insides, out to my trembling fingers.

The same question plays in my head: *Is she ready to launch or at least perch on the ledge of her father's life? Can I turn her over to Roy and his crusty mother, Adeline?*

I steal a sideways glance, like that will buy us five more minutes, when I really want five more years. When I think of a home without her present, the tears well up.

"How am I supposed to decide?" Lara asks.

I release a breath. "You'll know when you know." *Or you'll learn to live with your decision.* I quickly usher that errant thought out like a trash can of dead fish. "And if it turns out to be the wrong choice, leaving is always an option."

"Kind of like your philosophy for falling in love?" Her squinty eyes and twisted mouth are proof that she pays more attention than I give her credit for.

I've never given her the details leading up to the divorce for fear of facing her disgust. I stayed a decade too long with a man whose love affair with whiskey was more passionate than

anything he felt for me or the other women he bedded. The ones who left his clothes smudged with spray tan, his skin glistening like a disco ball.

For now, the southern sun warms her and casts a gentle glow on her father. Lara doesn't dwell on the fact that Roy chose to move back to South Carolina, instead of staying in New York to be near her. In fact, his residency might save the day if she attends Clemson University and can qualify for the in-state tuition rate. And isn't that just like Roy to get all the glory without working at it, like me. He hasn't had to sit through soccer tournaments in the rain, and trips to the ER for x-rays. The college searches, essay writing, and the school visits—all carefully mapped out to avoid missing her soccer obligations—everything managed by me. All so I can turn her over to him?

After miles of monotonous driving on dirt roads, I turn in to the mouth of Adeline's driveway. Shrouded by unruly brush, the wild branches strain to clutch at us.

*Nature shouldn't be so ugly.*

I hold my breath, stomping on the gas pedal to blow through the quarter-mile tunnel of dreary greenery. And as we come out on the other side, into the pebbled clearing, I release my breath, but it catches it when Roy leaps off the sagging front porch. He lands with a thud, kicking up dust from his boots.

I cut the wheel and force myself not to spin us fully around, back down the driveway. Instead, I coast, prepared to pull over and park. Lara rolls down her window, waving with an enthusiasm she hasn't possessed since grade school. A fleeting, rare moment, and Roy gets to bask in it, unaware of how precious it is.

Trotting alongside the car, he reaches in and grabs Lara's hand. He puts on a show,

flapping his arms like a windmill, huffing, pretending that he can't keep up. And Lara indulges him by throwing back her head, laughing wildly. He is the funniest man alive. If I tried something playful like that, she would tell me that I was embarrassing her.

“Dad!” she shrieks. Tears trickle down the side of her face.

“I've got you, darlin’,” he pants.

I pull up behind a red pickup and shift into park to kill this game. But Roy keeps playing. He doubles over and drops his right hand to his chest. Still holding on to Lara with his left, he raises both of their hands higher.

“Told you I wouldn't let you go.”

*I suppose the past two years don't count.*

He yanks open the door, and Lara busts out like being near me one more second might kill her. I climb from the car and stand useless, watching Lara squeal as Roy spins her in an air hug. That sound hasn't come out of her in years, not around me, at least. I want to be happy for her, so I push down the salt gathering in the back of my throat and steel myself for high alert. My role as protector hasn't changed because she believes she's an adult. Roy might seem like he's harmless fun, but I know better. It has taken me years to repair my heart and my credit score.

“Mama made lunch. You hungry?” Roy's first words to me are nothing but a reminder that the only woman he clings to is Mama Adeline.

“I'm starving!” Lara answers, thinking every question is for her.

“Beth?”

My eyes itch just looking at him. Only three years older than I am, he looks weathered by over a decade; his crow's-feet deep as coin slots. Tired smile, dull eyes, he's lost the sparkle that

was bright enough to make the most homely or boring person feel special.

“Beth?” With his head tilted to the ground and his eyes raised, he peeks at me through his hair, like a sorry dog who ate the Sunday roast beef.

Lara glares at me. “Aren’t you going to say hello?”

He hasn’t said hello, either. But there are never free passes for me. She saves them all for him.

“Hi.” I nod and raise my palm in a flat wave.

“Aw, come on, now! Don’t be so New York cool.” Roy slides his hand around my waist and yanks me in for a hug. He folds his body around mine as if we’ve never been apart, and the familiarity of it all, right down to his aftershave, makes my spine tighten like it might snap. He doesn’t get to have any more of me. I pat his shoulder much like a wrestler taps out. And as I push away, Lara shakes her head and stomps her foot once.

What does she expect from me? I’ve been alone with her, no help from him—money or otherwise—for nearly two years. Truthfully, long before he left, I was on my own. And while I don’t want her to hate Roy, her enthusiasm for him leaves me feeling barely tolerated. A stupid, irrational thought creeps in, wishing there were a younger child to devote myself to, to make me feel like I matter again after Lara leaves. A child who would understand that good parenting requires being present, not putting on a show.

Adeline’s arrival on the porch is announced with the slap of the screen door. My ex-mother-in-law stands like a harmless flamingo on thin, delicate legs, cranes her neck, and squints. Her limited eyesight is the only sign that she’s a few years older than when I last saw her; unlike her son.

“Lara?” Adeline calls, her voice dripping with Southern syrup. “Look at you, girl, all grown up!”

Lara hops on to the porch and embraces her grandmother. Adeline hugs her back and, over my daughter’s shoulder, gives me a fleeting glance served with a side of serrated silence.

I plant my feet and fold my arms. Adeline never liked me, and she can continue to hate me all she wants. Weeks away from turning eighteen, Lara can decide the place Roy and Adeline will have in her life, and she will arrange any future visits on her own. This is my last family reunion.

“You must be starving,” Roy says; Adeline shoots him a look that freezes him in place.

“Actually, I need to use the bathroom,” I say.

As he trails after me, Adeline snaps, “She knows where the bathroom is, son.”

Open-mouthed, Roy twists his neck between me and his mother, like he wants to cross a highway on foot and is afraid of becoming roadkill. I shake my head and smile. She can have him.

I yank the screen door open, and it slams loudly behind me. From outside, Adeline starts what she is good at—running commentary fueled with bitterness.

“Well, she’s in a huff,” Adeline squawks.

“Mama, you know as well as I do that the door shuts quickly.”

“Yes’m, it most certainly does.”

In some circles the faded turquoise Formica countertops and dull farmhouse sink would be considered shabby chic. But here, it’s pure dinge. The wooden table Roy’s father, Amos, made held up the best. I imagine Roy oiling it regularly for fear that Amos’ ghost will come back

and continue the beatings where they left off.

In the center of the table sits a sweating pitcher of tea, with hunks of lemon brightening the murky brown liquid. A blue-checkered cloth napkin cinched with a wooden ring sits in the middle of each of the three plates. *Three.*

I was going to check in to the motel while Lara visited. But Adeline's desire to steer this visit is a claw on my neck. Why should she get her way? Yet, it's complicated. There is no winning with Adeline. If she gets me to run off to the motel, she has control. If I stay and I lose my temper at some insult she is bound to hurl at me, she'll get to say, *See, I told you she's a no-good, stuck-up Yankee bitch.*

She married an abusive alcoholic and lived out her marriage like a prison sentence, freed only by Amos' death. She expected the same of me, especially since her son's abuse never left me bruised and battered.

*"We don't do divorce in our family. That's a sin against God," she chided me once we announced our split.*

*"Adultery isn't?" I shot back.*

*"That's the sign of a woman who can't make her man happy."*

*"That's like saying a woman deserves her beatings."*

*Adeline gave a stunned, slow blink and said, "He's better off without you. You and your fresh mouth."*

*"Because he's such a prize," I muttered.*

Lara's shocked laughter wafts through the screen door to punch my gut. "Grandma!"

I try not to imagine the jabs being made at my expense, my daughter's giggles fueling

Adeline's nasty impulses. As I start off for the bathroom, I catch myself.

*Don't make her happy.*

The silverware drawer sticks, and I hold my breath while I shimmy it open. I pluck a fork, knife, and napkin ring. From her linen drawer I get a yellowing white cloth napkin; there aren't any more with the blue-checked pattern. I take a plate and glass from the thick wooden shelf over the sink, careful not to ping them. Once my place is set, I head to the bathroom. And when I emerge, Roy is waiting, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"You find everything okay?" His lopsided grin used to make my stomach flip around with hot swirls. Now, his charm feels like illusion, a cheap show.

"Bathroom's still in the same place."

The corners of his mouth droop, the smile melting off his face.

"Lara, she's just...so grown-up, so beautiful." Thick with emotion, he finally seems regretful of cheating his daughter of time she'll never get back.

"She has a big future ahead of her. Lots of decisions." I sound like her college counselor and not her mother, because Roy needs to understand Lara's college search is the only reason I'm here. This isn't old homecoming week.

"Do you think she'll really go to Clemson? That must be killing you." He laughs.

Her leaving is difficult enough. Choosing Roy's alma mater and, worse, moving in with him feels like a hot backhand to my face.

"She's had some great offers in New York too. It would be more affordable and closer to home. We'll see."

"I can't imagine that in-state tuition at Clemson will be more expensive than New York

schools.”

“Certainly more convenient if she stayed in New York,” I say, my voice trembling. *Please, I want to say, please tell her you can't help her.* And this time, when my gut clenches, it's on account of my selfishness. Lara won't tell me for certain, but Clemson is her top pick.

He stares at me, his eyes softening. “I'm sorry if I made you sad,” he whispers. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“It's Lara you should be saying this to. I've long given up on feeling hurt. You moved away from her and haven't been part of her life in years.” The crack in my voice says otherwise.

“We talk on the phone,” he whines. “I'm here for her. I'm not going anywhere.”

*Indeed.*

A familiar rage bubbles in me. I chose him to be her father. I knew a baby would never change him, yet still, I gambled with her life the moment I tried to conceive. Even if he wanted to, he was incapable of putting a child first. He didn't value his own life; how could I have expected him to treasure hers? And now that he's able to make things right with her, I don't want him to—just so I can keep her near me.

“Well, let her know that, because if she picks Clemson, the only way this works is if you're sober and she stays with you. Can you do that?” I glare at him, challenging him to give me a sign that he's not fit. But instead of smiling and brushing over it, his eyes brim with tears.

“I promise. I know I have a lot to make up to her. To both of you.” He blinks and looks away. I'm not sure who is more stunned by his honest admission.

The zipping sound of air moving through the screen door is the period on the end of this conversation. Adeline totters in, her head jerking like a mother duck in search of an errant



duckling. As Roy wipes his face on his sleeve, her mouth twists, and her eyes stab at mine.

Lara's eyes widen at the sight of her father's blotchy face, and she shoots me an accusatory glare, like I'm responsible for all that ails Roy.

"That's some truck out there," I say, searching for a harmless topic.

His face brightens, until Adeline starts in. "It's not new like your car. He bought it cheap and put a lot of work into it. It's not worth much."

I shrug. I don't know much about trucks, or their value. But I do know how she thinks. She's worried I'm coming after whatever assets he has. I waived my rights to anything of Roy's when we divorced; besides, a used truck can't settle us up. No, being there for Lara is how he can make good.

"Well, you did a nice job," I tell him. It's the truth, but it also elicits a huff from Adeline, who stares at the extra place setting and scowls at Roy. I smile and let her think that he overrode her slight and made room for me at the table.

"Is that iced tea?" Lara says, grabbing the pitcher and pouring a glass. Adeline shoots her a look, like Lara opened the refrigerator without asking.

"I'd like some too, if it's not too much trouble." The sharpness in Adeline's voice causes Lara to tilt her head.

"Sure, Grandma. Is everyone having?" Lara doesn't wait for us to answer; she fills three glasses.

Roy looks at the floor. "You know, there's no need to stay at the motel. We have plenty of room," he says. "I can sleep on the couch, and you two can have my room."

Before I can refuse him, Lara gives an enthusiastic *great* just as Adeline whispers loudly,

“Now, we talked about this already, son.” Tight, her mouth looks like a beak ready to peck out his eyes.

Watching my daughter’s face fall, I push my nails into the palm of my hand to remind myself not to give Adeline a reaction.

“I’ll be more comfortable at the motel, but thanks. She can stay here.” Lara’s chin quivers, and she sips her tea, and my stomach turns. *Did she expect a romantic reunion?*

“You can sleep with me, sugar.” Adeline’s voice is sweet as honey.

Lara guzzles her iced tea as if that will cool the red splotches crawling up her neck. Embarrassment, anger—it’s hard to tell what she’s thinking.

“Hey, we forgot the gifts,” I say. “Come to the car with me?”

She nods and follows. The thwacking sound of the screen door is like a karate chop to my neck.

“Honey, are you okay?” I say once we’re at the car.

“I’m fine.” Her high-pitched tone is the same one she gives me when she wants to freeze me out.

I pop the trunk and dig out the two gift bags that Lara put together. She snatches the bags from my hands.

“Why are you so upset?” I reach to brush away a stray hair from her face, but she backs away.

“I’m not. God! Just stop talking; you’re so annoying.” She rolls her eyes, and I take my hurt out on the trunk, slamming it with a force that vibrates up my arms. We trudge back up to the porch. I keep quiet because anything I say will travel into the house. Adeline would like

nothing more than to hear us fight.

Lara's mood brightens as we enter to find Roy pulling out a plate of fried chicken from the refrigerator.

"No, that's for another time," Adeline snaps. "Grab the cold cuts and the potato salad."

"But she loves fried chicken. We all do," he pleads, but his mother shakes her head, and he reaches back into the refrigerator to switch out the plates.

"Here you go," Lara says, handing the yellow bag to Roy and the green one to Adeline.

Roy gives an embarrassed smile. It wouldn't occur to him to have a little something for his daughter, and my heart sinks for her. Adeline didn't think to do anything, either. And the one thing she can do—the stupid fried chicken—she won't because she knows I like it too. She'd rather win than do the right thing. Hurting me is more important than enjoying Lara.

Adeline takes a box out of the bag and opens it, pulling out the coffee mug. She squints.

"Don't you like it?" Lara asks.

"What is this supposed to be?" Adeline turns the mug; it is the one intended for my father, a picture of him dancing with Lara at the father-daughter dance. "Is this some kind of a dig?"

"Now why would she do that? It's a mix-up, plain and simple." Roy opens his mug to find Lara's class picture on it. "Beautiful, sweetheart. Every time I use it, I'll think of you." Her face goes blank as he gives her arm a squeeze.

"What am I to do with this?" Adeline thrusts the mug back at Lara, who is too stunned to react.

I reach out and tear it from Adeline's grip while Lara looks on. *Don't give her what she*

*wants.*

“Thank you for thinking of me’ would do nicely.” Hands shaking, I pull the box out of her other hand and tuck the mug in.

Roy flops down with a sigh and starts to put potato salad on his plate. Whenever he doesn’t want to deal with something stressful, he quietly fades away. How will he ever be able to look out for Lara?

My mistake was making excuses for him, lying to my daughter until she wasn’t sure what was true. Any time Roy disappeared I told her he needed space to cool off. Because I didn’t want her to know he couldn’t get himself together; even for her, it seemed. But after a while I didn’t know how to explain his absences. She accused me of not caring enough to make sure he was okay. By the last time he left, I would have paid for his plane ticket. I told him where he should go—to hell and to his mother, because that was a twofer. It was the only time he ever listened. The truth is I gave him permission to leave his daughter.

Lara sinks down next to him, like she needs a rest; but I can’t sit. No matter what I do, Adeline is going to be happy. Where there is pain, she finds joy.

“I’m more tired than hungry. I think I’ll head over to the motel and take a nap.” Lara doesn’t react and neither does Roy.

“Of course, you will,” Adeline snorts. “You taking her with you?”

I look at Lara, but she’s staring at her hands. Sitting like that, next to Roy, I worry that she’s giving in to that pull, to dim her light just as Roy does in Adeline’s presence.

“No. She’s been looking forward to this visit for a long time now.” I won’t use my daughter as a weapon, even if that is the fastest way to make Adeline angry.

Adeline's face twists, like she's caught me in a lie. "I thought you were visiting fancy schools."

"She has some decisions to make. I wanted her to have another look."

"Expensive, aren't they?" She snorts. "You know he can't help you."

*When has he ever?* I look at Roy; his head hangs limply. "I don't recall having asked."

"What do you call living with us? I expect you'll pay us room and board, same as you would the school?" Adeline sniffs. "We got bills, same as you."

My eyes dart to Roy, who won't even look at me. This part he never covered with me or, judging by her wide eyes, Lara.

"Yes, I know all about bills, Adeline. Some, your son left me digging out from and then there's the pile I've been paying on my own for years."

"Not my fault you didn't ask for money from him." She clicks her gums, and my fist clenches.

"Mama..." Roy's warning crawls out of him, a weak beg.

"I don't want a thing from him, but it would sure be nice if he felt compelled to help his daughter for a change," I snap.

Eyes lowered, Lara chews her lip and shakes her head. Her silence as good as her screaming *Stop!*

If only she could see the pain in my eyes, maybe she would understand my worry. Roy is incapable of protecting her and Adeline is using her to torture me.

Lara slumps in her seat like sliding under the table, away from my gaze, is preferable to witnessing this exchange. In shielding her from Roy's shortcomings have I allowed her to create

a myth around him – that if it weren't for me, he would have stuck around and been a good father. How can I compete with a fantasy?

I grab my father's mug and walk to the door. "I'll call you later, Lara."

I pause a beat hoping my daughter will stand up and join me. And when she doesn't, I force away the impulse to scoop her up, run her out of here, because she would hate me for treating her like a child. Some decisions are hers to make, even if it guts me to watch her make a mistake.

Adeline's eyes are the only set that meets mine, like a shove to the chest.

Roy and Lara sit fixed, looking at their empty plates, hungry for something that isn't on the menu. I push the door and reach back quickly, catching it before it slams.

With every step my legs tremble in protest, but I keep moving forward. I can't look back. Adeline might be perched at the window, cheering any evidence that she has inflicted pain. I blink over and over to clear my vision before pulling away.

The car accelerates and brakes, turns on dirt roads and goes straight for miles, uninterrupted, as if it is driving itself. And when I find myself in the Motel 6 parking lot, I am too stunned to get out of my car. I don't want to be here. I don't want to check-in. Worst of all, I don't want my daughter to stay at Adeline's and yet that's exactly where I've left her.

I think of my own parents, how pained they were when I chose to stay with Roy after he crashed the car following yet another drinking binge.

My mother cried, "You could have been with him. He could have killed you."

I flinch when I recall my flippant reply. "No, I would have been driving and there wouldn't have been an accident." There was no telling me, then. Just like I can't reason with my

daughter, now.

As I drag myself out of the car, my phone vibrates in a string of quick, jerky buzzes, pent-up texts unloading from the queue.

*mom*

*mom*

*where are u?*

*can u come back?*

*?*

*????*

*911*

She's never used that before, but she knows the pact I made with her. *911. No questions asked. I'll come for you, day or night.*

I fire off a text and pull out, leaving a cloud of dust behind me as I hit the dirt road that brought me here.

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Lara stands outside the mouth of the driveway, the overgrowth of twisted branches reach for her, like they want to pull her into their clutches. When she spots me, she pushes back her shoulders and blows out a breath.

I breathe in slowly as I pull over and remind myself *no running commentary or lectures, no pushing her into talking*. I sink my teeth into my lower lip to lock my mouth shut.

She barely waits for me to stop before she tugs at the handle and climbs in. Dropping her pocketbook between her knees she sighs and slams the door.

There is so much I want to say, to ask her; most of all, if she's all right.

"Sorry, honey. Bad reception."

She presses her face to the window, like she's getting one final look at the dreary landscape around her.

"I'll say!"

I wonder if she means my cell service or Adeline.

We drive for miles in silence. My head spins. What made her leave? But does it matter? She's with me now.

I grip the steering wheel tightly when she rubs the heel of her palm in her eye, her sniffles filling the space between us.

"Your father *does* love you." I don't add that the best he can give her might not be what she needs.

Lara's voice hiccups. "I know. But she's terrible, Mom. Terrible. I won't come here ever again. Dad will have to visit New York. It's the least he can do."

My wise, beautiful girl is smarter than I was when I was twice her age. I open my mouth, then close it. What is there for me to tell her that she hasn't already figured out?

So, I say nothing at all.

And neither does she, even when I drive past the motel and head onto the highway, back to the only home she's ever known.

THE END