

THE REAL MOTHER

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Ashlee fidgeted as she sat in the second row of bleachers in the middle school gym. It was decorated with yellow and pink streamers, and poster boards cut into giant red tulips. Someone had made a white picket fence out of wood that was the backdrop for the spring concert. Ashlee had worn her best pair of black slacks, best meaning the least worn out of the two polyester pair she owned. She had polished the scuffs of her shoes with a Sharpie and thought they looked just as good as those of the other mothers in the crowd. Still though, they cast their eyes down on her. It was as if they could just tell, like she was wearing a big sign that said, “Hello, I’m homeless. You got a problem with that?”

Surely, they did all seem to have a problem with it. But really, she wondered as she sniffed her armpit, how could they tell? She didn’t stink. She had taken a shower at the shelter this morning with one of those donated bars of hotel soap. Her gray roots were showing but she wasn’t the only one who needed a visit to Miss Clairol. Ashlee wore a nice sequin top, not cheap—six dollars at the Goodwill. Maybe one of the stuck up moms had donated it and that’s how they knew.

Well, no matter. She wasn't here to win friends or be invited to tea or whatever it was the married cul de sackers did socially. She was here to see her daughter sing.

The Department of Social Services had snatched Catie away when she was only four. Ashlee had tried more times than she could remember—remembering was tough sometimes with all the meds she took, or didn't take—to get her back. But something always went wrong. Like she'd start talking to herself at an interview so the social worker would deem her “mentally unfit to raise her child.” Or before a custody hearing she'd spot someone from the government in the court parking lot and would have to run away. The Feds were relentless. The custody judges frowned on missing appointments and her insistence that men in black suits were conspiring to capture her didn't sit well with them.

It was useless to try anyway, Ashlee figured. She'd only seen Catie a few times in the last eight years. Since then only supervised court visits were allowed and Ashlee was always afraid if she walked into a courthouse, she might never get out. Never could be sure what charges the government would fabricate when they wanted someone like her out of the public—locked away like a little rat in a cage, rat in a maze, rat in a haze . . . filling her with their psychotropic mind altering chemicals and—

“Are you all right?”

Ashlee looked up to see a man standing above her. He was sweaty, pink and porcine, in a gray suit and tie. She thought for a minute the jig was up, that he was one of Them, but then she remembered he was the principal. She'd seen his picture on the school's website when she used the library's internet. She leaned back and stuck her palm into some old green gum. Yuck. She lifted her hand and started picking it off in long stretchy strands.

“I'm fine.”

“Do you have a child here?” He asked. She started to take offense but then he added, “I haven't seen you before.”

“Catie Black. My girl is Catie Black.”

“Oh.”

“What's the matter? Is she a bad kid or something?” Ashlee jutted

her chin at him. Let him try to say something about her little girl.

“No, she’s a wonderful child. She has a solo in the concert. Great kid.” He leaned in closer. “She just looks so much like you, it’s uncanny.” He turned and walked away without another word.

Good let him run. Run away little piggy man, Ashlee thought. Whoops. She’d said that aloud. Maybe. She started chewing her thumb cuticle.

Looks so much like me, she thought. Maybe that’s why the people were all staring at her. Because they knew, she was the *real* mother. Ashlee had never met the family who was raising Catie. The social worker said they were a very nice couple, devoted to Catie’s welfare.

Ashlee was her mother and thought about her girl night and day, day and night. These cardboard suburban TV show parents didn’t know what loving a child was. Not like Ashlee did.

She never should have lost her in the first place. Had never laid a hand on that child. Not a hand. All she’d ever done was try to keep her baby safe, give her a good life. Sometimes that meant they didn’t leave the house for days on end, or lived without electricity or heat because Ashlee didn’t trust the utility companies. Sometimes she worried Catie’s food might be poisoned and so fed the child only peanut butter crackers from sealed packages. And if she ran out, Catie had to wait until Tuesday because she could only leave the house on Tuesdays . . . And a couple of times she’d *had* to leave her home alone to throw the government off their trail.

But to take her away? Forever? Didn’t make any sense. The social worker had reminded Ashlee that she’d signed away her rights but she had no recollection of that. Surely, someone forged her name.

Not a day went by she didn’t think about regaining custody of Catie. But a lot of time went by, too much maybe. Ashlee lost track of whole months and years. She banged her head with her fist. Stupid brain! Stupid brain!

A flashy attractive couple perched themselves in the row in front of Ashlee. The guy was tall and the back of his head looked like a movie star head. Thick glossy black hair and a profile that looked like one of those shaving ads. Ashlee figured he must be a

stockbroker or something. His wife had a practical haircut. Short and curly, but it looked as if the curls had been set in the exact right places to look even. Like she was trying to look reckless. Yeah, a goody goody pretending to be all tousled and tawdry.

Ashlee slid over to peer between their shoulders to view the makeshift stage.

"I don't care what they say, she is not going to see that woman," the lady said to the sexy husband. She had a voice like Velma on Scooby Doo.

"She's twelve, Marie." He sounded like Alec Baldwin. "Legally allowed to decide. It's not as if she wants to go live with her. Catie just wants to see what her mother is like. Don't worry. You've been the only mom she's ever known."

Ashlee felt all the blood rush out of her head and she fell back into the bleacher behind her, smack into the knees of a woman who wasn't too happy about it. Fat thighs and fake-tan nylon knees bulged out from under a sea green skirt. "Watch out!" the chubby squid spewed.

Catie wants to see me. Catie wants to see me, she thought. Oh, that's right. That was why Ashlee had come. She had been invited, sort of. How could she have forgotten that? She sat straight up, pulled her shoulders back, stuck out her chest. Yes, she was going to see her little girl. Even if just for a few minutes. She could hug her. Hard.

Then she'd have to let go because she wasn't her legal custodial guardian. But once Catie saw and hugged her back, they could go to court and fight together. And maybe she could come home. Of course, Ashlee didn't have a place to live. She spent her nights in the shelter and her days wandering around trying to stay warm. She tore at her cuticle again. It bled and she sucked on it. She pulled her hair hard, trying to calm herself down. Where would they live?

"What if she likes her better?" Marie asked the husband, oblivious to Ashlee's presence right behind them.

"Kids aren't like that. A mother is a mother till the end," he replied.

"But I'm not her mother. That woman is." Marie was trying to keep her voice down so was yelling in whispers. Must be a middle

class thing, Ashlee guessed. “And if Catie sees her, she might get all mixed up, feel sorry for her. Want to fix her. She’s only a little girl and needs to focus on her own life, not helping her homeless crazy biological mother find her way.”

Ashlee fell back again and this time got a harsh kick in her back ribs. She scooted forward and hovered in between the bleacher seats. I’m not a homeless crazy woman, she wanted to say. But she was. They had her dead to rights.

But that didn’t mean she didn’t love her daughter. Didn’t want the best for her. Just because her mind was a little mixed up sometimes didn’t stop her from remembering how natural and comforting her little girl had felt cuddled in her arms. Or the hope that filled her when she was pregnant. All those months of skipping her meds to keep her fetus safe. Every day, rubbing her tummy and singing to Catie. They were going to have the best life ever, she’d told her growing abdomen. They’d live in a big house, and have a dog and a swimming pool. And a husband. Ashlee would find an amazing stepfather who would make everything okay. Make all their dreams come true. And Catie would be the coolest kid ever. Brilliant and popular too. All the other kids would want to be her friend.

“Why, Ray? Why would she come here now, after all this time?”

“Wouldn’t you? If you got a call from your social worker that your daughter wanted to see you? Wouldn’t you?” Ray asked his wife, which made her cry.

“No. Okay, yes. I’d come just to see her, but I’d hide, wouldn’t let her see me. I wouldn’t show up brazenly and introduce myself. All Catie’s friends think I’m her mom. Do you have any idea how much damage this woman could do?”

“No. I didn’t.” Ashlee said barely above a whisper. Maybe not even that loud. Maybe only in her head. They didn’t hear her.

“Where do you think she is?” Ray asked, scanning the crowd on the other side of the gym.

Here I am. But Ashlee didn’t say it. Didn’t even think it too loud.

“Ladies and gentlemen, time to start the show,” the principal announced. “Please take your seats.” The lingerers sat. The lights dimmed.

“We’d like to start the evening off with our school’s proudest musical accomplishment. This student is only in the sixth grade but can out sing most high school pupils. Without further ado, here is Catie McLean.”

McLean? She hadn’t been adopted had she? Her name should be Black! She chewed her cuticle some more. Then Ashlee remembered the social worker explaining that Catie was just using the McLean name to make things easier. Ashlee nodded to herself. Like a nickname. That was all. That was all.

The school’s piano teacher began to play and Catie opened her mouth to sing. Back when Ashlee was in college, at Berklee, before things got out of control. Before her parents locked her up. Before the shock therapy, the halfway houses, and the one-night stand with the guy who bought her a winter coat and gave her half of Catie . . . before all that, in another life, everyone used to tell her she had the voice of an angel. Ashlee didn’t do much singing these days but prayed now that Catie had inherited her voice.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,” Catie sang in a way that took her breath away. Ashlee sang that song to her every night before Catie was even born. And every night after, to help her to sleep. Every single night until social services took her away. Tears sprang to Ashlee’s eyes.

She remembers me. Remembers that there were some good things I did.

“Why would she sing that song?” Marie asked Ray quietly. “That wasn’t what she was supposed to sing. That’s her other mother’s song.”

“Just listen okay? Let her sing,” Ray said. Ashlee liked Ray. He was a good father.

By the end of the song, Ashlee wasn’t the only one in tears. Catie’s voice was like magic. Like God coming in the room and saying, “It’s okay.”

She was a lovely girl. She had perfectly shaped curly hair too, like Marie’s, and was wearing what must have been a very expensive dress. In the light, a gold cross shone around her neck. Ashlee hadn’t been to church in so long. Was afraid of the stained glass and the bricks. Too many bricks. They could fall in at any time. Ashlee sucked on her finger again, pulled off a ragged hangnail.

The child in the spotlight grinned ear to ear. So happy. So normal. The McLeans were taking really good care of her.

What could Ashlee ever offer her? Living in the street. A group home. Moving from place to place. Forget jewelry and nice clothes and church.

Catie was better off with them.

The girl looked from the audience right into Ashlee's tear-filled eyes. "I love you, Mom," she mouthed.

"See that," Marie said. "She looked right at me and said she loved me. You were right, Ray. I had nothing to worry about."

Ashlee knew though that the message was for her.

"I love you too," Ashlee mouthed back to her daughter. The girl nodded. It was enough. Just a glimpse at her life. Just to know they were both okay and there was still love.

The rest of the choir joined her and they sang the next song.

Ashlee leaned forward. "You have a remarkable daughter," she said in Marie's ear.

Marie turned around and let out a small gasp. Catie had the same face as Ashlee so there no denying who the woman behind them was, who had heard everything they'd said.

"Please," Marie said, tears overflowing. "Don't Take—"

Ray looked at Ashlee. "I'm glad you got to see her. She's wonderful isn't she? Thank you for letting us raise her."

"Thank you both for giving her everything I couldn't."

Before anyone could speak again, or Ashlee lost control and ran to the stage to wrap her bony arms around Catie, she left. Marie was her real mother now and it was time for Ashlee to go. Quietly, in the sub darkness of the decorated gym, she walked out the door.

