

A FAMILY MATTER

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PHOTOS:
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Christopher Caldwell crosses the space between the stove and kitchen sink for what could have been the fiftieth time tonight. He turns the faucet to fill the kettle he's holding. Returning to the stove he starts to boil water for more coffee. He then hears the door open and close in the adjacent washroom. His brother Michael now enters the kitchen. It's 11:40pm and a single light overhanging the tiny kitchen table illuminates the small room.

"You've been gone awhile," Christopher says. Michael pulls a chair from the table and sits without saying a word. Reaching into his pocket he grabs a pack of cigarettes, pulls one out and places it between his lips. Outstretching his arm, but without looking up, he offers one to his brother. Christopher quietly accepts one and the two brothers light their cigarettes in unison, and both exhale large plums of smoke, Michaels slightly larger.

"Did you find him?" Christopher asks

"Yeah," says Michael, as he takes another drag and shifts in his seat.

"And?" The kettle starts to whistle and Christopher quickly makes his way to the stove before the noise grows loud enough to fill the room. Michael makes a response but Christopher can't understand what was said.

"What? I didn't hear you."

"I *said* nothing happened." Christopher moves and places a cup of coffee in front of Michael. He then takes a seat opposite his brother and puts out his cigarette in the ashtray on the table. He then proceeds to pull out a

fresh one from a pack he just pulled from his pocket and places it between his lips. Outstretching his arm he offers one to his brother. Michael accepts, he jump starts his new cigarette from his old one and asks,

"Is she okay?"

"I think so. We should take her to the doctors in the morning to get her checked out." Christopher picks up his cup and blows lightly on the steaming liquid before cautiously taking a sip. "He beat her up pretty bad," he continued. "Her left eye is swollen shut and her lip is busted kinda bad. I don't know about her arm. It doesn't look broken but she was having trouble moving it, even a little."

Michael smokes from his cigarette and solemnly nods, as if he'd expected to hear nothing else. Without hesitating he lifts his still steaming cup of coffee and drinks without flinching, either unaffected by the heat or too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice.

"So what happened when you found him?" Christopher asks.

"I already told you. *Nothing* happened."

"But *something* must have happened. I mean you said you found him right?"

"Yeah, I found him but I didn't do nothin'." Michael stands and walks to the kitchen window and stares into the night. "The drunken son-of-a-bitch had run his truck into a tree. He wasn't hurt too bad. None that I could tell at least. The sheriff was already there with the doc. They hauled him out from the driver's seat and put 'im in the sheriff's car." He takes another drag of his cigarette and continues staring into the night, his eyes not focusing on anything in particular in the darkness. He then adds as an afterthought, "I didn't get a chance to do anything, even if I wanted to."

Christopher takes another sip and looks intently at his brother's back, as if trying to decipher a hidden meaning in his last words. "I should have been the one who went." He says after swallowing, "I'm the oldest."

"Yeah well, I'm the *bravest* so I went." Michael moves back to the table and takes another gulp of his coffee, avoiding his brother's eyes, then moves to the stove to refill his cup. After a few moments of silence Christopher hesitates and then finally asks the question that has been bothering him since Michael first stormed out of the house earlier that night.

"Did you take the gun?"

"What gun?" Michael quickly responds, acting as if accused of a crime.

"Sally and Jeff's gun. The one they usually keep in Jeff's nightstand." Reminding Michael as if he didn't already know.

"No. I didn't," Michael says. "You can check for yourself." He shifts on his feet then walks to the refrigerator and opens the door.

"I did check. It wasn't there. I looked when I put Sally to bed, once I got her to sleep that is, and it wasn't there."

"Well how the hell should I know where the goddamn gun is? It's not my house for Christ sake. Maybe *he* took it." Michael motions with his head to

the window and the darkness beyond. "There's nothing to eat in this god-damn place," he says, closing the refrigerator door forcefully enough to rattle the few glass bottles that are sitting on top. Looking in the direction of the noise he notices the label on one and pulls it down. Moving to the cupboard he opens it and takes out a glass, and pours a small amount of the brown liquid. He lifts the glass and tilts his head back with the flick of the neck. He pours another, slightly larger, and repeats the process. He pours a third drink and offers the glass to his brother. Christopher takes the glass and empties it in the same fashion.

"I'm going to check on her," he says rising, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

Michael doesn't move from his position at the counter. He listens to Christopher's footsteps leave the room and travel into the next and finally up the stairs. Reaching into his pocket Michael grabs another cigarette and lights it. Within moments Michael can hear footsteps on the stairs again and then coming back into the kitchen.

"She's still sleeping," Christopher says as he re-enters the room.

"Good," is Michael's only response. Christopher lights a cigarette of his own and takes his seat back at the table. Michael finally takes his eyes from the window and sits across from his brother, taking the glass and bottle with him.

"What time did she call you?" Michael asks, exhaling smoke towards the overhead lamp.

"Around ten," Christopher says, and then reaches across the table he pours another drink. "She didn't say much. Just that Jeff was drunk and real angry at something. She was crying a lot so it was kinda hard to get much outa her." Christopher takes a deep drag from his cigarette after draining the glass. He notices Michael staring at him from across the table. His dark eyes burning as he listens to his brother's report. "I heard Jeff say something in the background and then the line went dead," Christopher continued, holding his brother's stare for no more than a few seconds then looks down into his empty glass before going on. "That's when I called you and made my way over here." The two brothers sit and finish their cigarettes in silence.

At that moment the telephone rings. Christopher jumps at the abrupt break in the silence then immediately goes to the phone that hangs from the wall nearby.

"Hello?" he says, "Okay. Yes sheriff. Okay. Will do. Thank you. You too. Goodnight." Christopher places the telephone back and looks over at Michael. "They're going to hold Jeff overnight, on the account of being drunk and crashing his truck." Michael eyes Christopher and asks,

"Why didn't you tell him about Sally?" Christopher holds Michael's gaze and responds,

"It's not my place," he says.

"Not your *place*?" Michael asks, his voice rising with the question.

"What do you *mean* it's not your place? She's your goddamn *sister* isn't she?"

"She's a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions," Christopher says, his tone matching his brothers. "We're not kids anymore for Christ sake," he says as he moves to the other side of the kitchen where he takes up Michael's old post at the sink, in front of the window, his back to his brother. "This is a family matter." He adds, as an afterthought.

Michael stands and turns to face Christopher, who remains unmoved. "But she's still your *sister*. That's gotta count for *something*," Michael responds, his voice returning to a normal tone. "This isn't *right*. We've gotta do *something*."

Christopher moves his head to look at his brother. He draws a cigarette and lights it. Michael also draws and lights a cigarette of his own. "We already did something," Christopher says, slowly exhaling. He turns and leans back against the counter, resting his left hand on the cool, smooth surface of the tile, while he continues to smoke with his right. "We're *here* aren't we? What more do you want us to do? This isn't high school where you can just go beat up her boyfriends because they did something to hurt her."

"And what would you know about that?" Michael asks, his voice now rising again. "You never did *anything*. If it wasn't for me she'd probably have been killed by now, looking back at the guys she used to go around with."

"Alright, just calm down. I don't want to wake her," Christopher says. "So what then? Is that your proposal? To just go beat the shit out of Jeff? Do you *honestly* think that will solve the situation?"

"Who said anything about *solving* anything?" Michael asks. "I'm just sayin' this isn't right."

"Hell, I know this ain't *right*. This whole goddamn situation is one big helluva mess," Christopher says, taking one last drag of his cigarette. "But I don't think we should get too involved. Not unless it's something Sally *wants* us to do."

"I still think you should have told the sheriff about it," Michael says, casting his eyes to the floor. He turns and smashes the end of his cigarette in the ashtray and immediately lights another. Christopher shifts his weight between his feet, then walks and sits down at the table.

"Look," he starts, "I'm not sayin' we should just *walk* away or anything. I just think that if we tell the sheriff then that could make more problems for Sally later on. *Especially* if it's not something she's willing to do. What if she *does* want to stay with him—"

"Why the hell *would* she stay with him?" Michael demands.

"I don't know why. I'm just sayin' what if. Who knows why people do the things they do. She probably *loves* the son-of-a-bitch. I'm merely suggesting that if she does want to stay with him, then how do you think it's going to be with Jeff when he comes home in the morning? After finding

out that we told the sheriff what he did to her? Do you think she's going to be able to *smooth* things out?"

Michael continues smoking but doesn't say a word. Christopher reaches out and grabs the bottle, pours a drink and offers it to Michael, who after a moment's hesitation reaches out and accepts, and then Christopher continues, "I'm just sayin' we keep cool for now. She's going to *have* to talk to us about it."

"And what if she don't?" Michael asks leeringly.

"Then I suppose we have to talk with Jeff. And I mean just that, a *talk*. Let him know that this better not happen again or we *will* report it to the sheriff."

Michael slowly shakes his head. He pours a drink and with a quick motion finishes it and forcefully puts the glass back down. "You always think *talkin'* is the answer," he says with contempt. "That's not always the answer ya know."

"Well you go right on ahead and call the sheriff and tell 'im if you want," Christopher challenged angrily. He reaches across the table and takes the glass, that's sitting in front of Michael, and pours himself a drink. He sips slowly and holds the burning liquid in his mouth, then swallows. He finishes off the rest in the glass in one smooth swallow, and then looks across the table to where Michael is sitting. His brother is smoking and is looking directly at him. His legs are crossed, ankle on knee, and his foot on the floor keeps tapping.

After several moments of nothing but continuous tapping, a door is heard closing upstairs. The tapping suddenly stops. The brothers both look to the ceiling, raising only their eyes. Christopher immediately gets up and makes his way out of the room. Michael starts to rise but Christopher cuts him short by telling him, "Just wait here a minute will ya?" and motions with his palm to sit.

Michael sits and watches Christopher leave the kitchen. He waits until he hears his brother's footsteps clime the stairs before he then silently exits the kitchen through the washroom door and out into the night. After a few minutes Christopher returns.

"She's just going to the bathroom-" he starts, as he comes back to the kitchen, but stops short when he notices his brother's disappearance. He then returns upstairs to help his sister back to bed. Several minutes later he returns to the kitchen. Going to a drawer he pulls out a small telephone book and sits at the table and starts flipping through the pages. Not far into it he stops and goes to the stove to grab the kettle. He crosses the space between there and the kitchen sink for what could have been the fiftieth time tonight. He turns the facet, then seconds later he's back at the stove, heating the now full kettle.

He then returns to flipping pages in the telephone book. He stops on a page and traces his finger down the list until he finds one of Sally's close friends, Dawn Reynolds. He moves to the phone and right before he picks

it up to dial it rings. The unexpected noise startles him and he jumps and retracts his outstretched arm, as if a snake had struck out to bite him. Regaining his wits by the second ring he answers.

"Hello?" Christopher answers, he sits silent while listening to the voice on the other side of the line.

"Yeah, he was here tonight. Left a little while ago. Why?" Again he sits and listens attentively.

"What do you *mean* he shot him? *Michael* shot him?" Christopher asks in confusion. "Jesus Christ. Is he *dead*?" The voice answers. Christopher's cigarette, being left unattended between his knuckles, has a long stem of ash that can't sustain its own weight any longer and falls to the floor. Christopher takes no notice.

"I can't believe this. I had no idea he was going to do something like this," he continues, "he was here with me all night until just a little while ago. When I came back down the stairs and he was gone." He's asked another question.

"He told me that he *didn't* have the gun. Can I come down and see him?"

"Tomorrow? Okay, what time? Okay, I'll see you in the morning sheriff, thanks for the call." Christopher then hangs up the phone and stares blankly at his sisters kitchen wall, trying to figure out the night. He notices that his cigarette has burned out and proceeds to light another.

