

Regularly Scheduled Program

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Tracy is a shoot from the hip accidental guardian to her much younger brother, due to a very absent mother.
Simon is a determined teen with Cerebral Palsy, and an amazing amount of facts about aircraft.

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Chapter 1

Chapter One

"I hate my mother," Tracy said, to the landscape passing her by at sixty-five miles an hour. Tracy was running late, she had missed her brother's Boy Scout troop at the church, and now they had to drive all the way out to the camp. James Island, actually Wadmalaw Island just past James Island, was an hour in the wrong direction, she needed to be headed to work in Goose Creek.

Simon turned to her and raised an eyebrow.

"But," she said, turning towards him, loosening her death grip on the steering wheel briefly. "I love my brother." Simon returned her easy smile, one corner of his upper lip curled up and his mouth opened a smidge to reveal the colorful bands on his braces - Simon's smile. A faint color came to his cheeks, then he returned his attention to his Nintendo DS.

"Did you remember to pack your wax?," Tracy asked, aware of the discomfort the new braces were still giving him.

"Donna did," he replied. Her mother had packed the wax, but Tracy had probably bought it, as she had the braces. Donna had signed the permission slip, and taken Simon to get his yearly physical, but Tracy had foot the bill for camp and the doctor. Simon had no idea, their mom had ditched him to go on a cruise with a stranger, but it was enough for him Donna had packed his bags.

Simon had been a late addition to Donna's life, and as much as she loved him in her own way, he really was too much for her to handle. He had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy and a seizure disorder shortly after birth. The doctors said they didn't know why, and simply passed her onto a social worker to help her get services. Donna got a list of providers, but the only person she called was her eldest child, Tracy, who just happened to be in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

Tracy didn't actually get the call from Donna, it came from the Red Cross, because at the time she was on deployment in the Mediterranean. When her Division Officer told her she had received a Red Cross message she had become immediately afraid something might have happened to her father, or maybe one of her brothers, then remembered she had also made sure to give her mother the information in case of emergency, as well. Now, she was torn between fear and embarrassment, because an emergency to her mother was not having found enough change in the couch for a pack of cigarettes.

When the Radioman handed her the sealed message, his face was emotionless. Tracy stood there a moment, started to peel open the envelope, but decided to wait until she was back in her division office, where there would be more privacy. Tracy walked fast towards the front of the ship, navigating ladders, a fancy name for dangerously steep metal stairs, to the cargo deck. The black non-skid rising to meet her eager feet as the ship plowed through the Atlantic waves. Tracy ungracefully dropped in to a large swivel chair that had it's wheels removed, she tore into the envelope and stared blankly with wide eyes. She was glad she had waited.

The message was brief and demanding.

HAD BABY THREE DAYS AGO, HE HAS SEIZURES ALL DAY LONG. NEED HELP. MOM

With that message her life was turned completely upside down. Requests were sent up the chain of command, she sought out signatures to be released on emergency leave from the bridge to the lower depths of the engine

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room, and in a week she was back stateside. None of the people that approved her request asked Tracy if this is what she really wanted to do. She would have told them heck no, what did she know about babies, what did she know about anything other than maintaining equipment, and standing watch. Luckily, no one asked Tracy why her mother couldn't handle it by herself, she wouldn't have known what to tell them.

Tracy and her two younger brothers counted themselves lucky to have gotten out of childhood alive. Tracy, being the oldest, got the majority of Donna's maternal instinct, and motherly affection, by the time the boys rolled around, well, Donna had grown tired of the mother gig. As soon as Ben, the youngest was old enough for preschool, there he was dumped, and Donna got a job. She didn't need to work, Tracy's father was a policeman and provided a decent life for his family. They wanted for nothing, but for whatever reason Donna felt she had something to prove. But nobody cared what she was proving, they were latchkey kids, and they were miserable.

And the three of them were miserable until their parents divorced, an action provoked by their mother, and then they became completely unglued. An action the children saw no reason behind. Their questions were answered patiently, and no real reason was ever given. The children were reassured there had been no infidelity, but the children didn't care about that, they just saw their family dissolving, just because it could. Their father moved down the street and took up residence with their widowed grandfather, and a few days later, Michael, the middle sibling followed. Donna refused to deal with his acting out, so he was removed from her freedom equation, because she just didn't have the patience.

Sadly, Donna may have a genuinely good reason for dissolving her family, but nothing she ever said in her own defense made sense. She talked about her husband, as good a man as he was, was domineering and miserly, and she needed her freedom and she needed to spend money without feeling guilty. Maybe she had been trying to say her husband treated her more like a father would, maybe she was trying to say, she didn't feel like an adult anymore. But these are not things kids need to hear or try to understand, especially when the middle class decent life you gave your children is wiped out by divorce lawyers, and there is now no money to spend guiltily, or otherwise. In trying to become an adult and take charge of her own destiny Donna actively thrust her own children's future's out of her way, so she could better focus on herself and her own needs. So, now, two years removed from her family, Tracy was the one to be burdened by her mother's consequences once again.

Luckily for Donna, Tracy's ship was closer to the United States coast than to Europe, her six month deployment had been drawing to a close, so she got a helicopter flight from the ship to Virginia, and from there took a commercial airliner into Charleston International Airport. From the airport, it was just a short taxi ride to the apartment where Donna had been staying while Tracy was away. Donna eagerly opened the door, put Simon into her arms and then was gone.

Simon fit into her arms perfectly, and she shrugged her sea bag off her shoulders without disturbing him. They looked at each other with clear crystal blue eyes, and Tracy delighted in his slightly turned up nose, and the dimple in his chin.

"Mom's gene pool is real shallow," she whispered to him, she smiled at him, and then he began to twitch in her arms. Tracy sat on the couch, startled, holding him until he stopped, at which time he closed his eyes and dozed. She started at the sound of something falling outside the door. She put him in the bassinet next to the couch which still had the Goodwill price tag on it, and walked over to investigate. In front of the door lay a stroller, a car seat, and what appeared to be a diaper bag, Tracy pulled everything into the apartment in a pile and sighed.

She then walked into the kitchen, and frowned when she saw the full sink, and set herself to frown harder when she opened the refrigerator. She had apparently come home just in time, there was half a bottle of

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Coca-Cola, and three prepared bottles on the door, and not much else on the shelves. She turned her attention to the counter, which was littered with unpaid bills and random post-it notes. Tracy swept them all into a neat pile and went through them one at a time, deciding to wait for Simon to rouse himself, she would give him a bottle, and then they would go food shopping. She had two weeks of emergency leave to make things right, but she was going to allow herself the rest of the day to let things sink in, a week ago she didn't even know her mother had been pregnant.

So, thirteen years had come and gone and Tracy was still covering for Donna, and her selfish irresponsibility. She didn't mind though, she did love her brother, disability or no. In fact, she counted Simon as one of her biggest blessings, she could hardly think of where she would be now, if God hadn't given her exactly what she had needed in the disguise of a baby boy with some seizures.

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

Tracy had been home less than two days when her boyfriend John showed up. She had pulled into the apartment complex in her Mustang she had just gotten out of storage, as she had flat out refused to let her mother drive it in her absence, when Tracy saw him leaning against the hood of his car. There was no way it could be anyone other than John, she would recognize his tall frame, broad shoulders, and screaming red hair anywhere. She groaned, and looked at Simon, sleeping peacefully. She was tired, too, she just wanted to get home, so a hero lap around the neighborhood was out of the question. It really didn't look as if John was going anywhere anytime soon. She was just not in the mood to deal with him right now, but she had no other choice, so she pulled up right next to him.

She returned his smile as casually as she could as he approached, his arms opened, ready for an embrace. Tracy pushed through it.

"So, when were you gonna call?", he asked, the hidden edge coming through loud and clear, to familiar ears. His southern accent rolling off the harsh consonants, sounding almost sweet.

"I'm so sorry," Tracy replied, trying to get to the passenger side door to get the car seat. She saw John's reaction reflecting in the window, realizing he had shaved his ridiculous mustache, which would make it easier to talk to him, what a distraction that thing had been. He had let his hair grow out a little since she had been deployed, his bangs flopped a little in his eyes, but the sides were shorn to military standards.

"Hao," he uttered. "What the heck is that?" He was visibly shaken, and crossed his arms across his chest. "When Mick told me you were home early, I didn't believe him, I couldn't think of a single reason." He let out a nervous deep breath. "But, now it all makes sense. You weren't even gonna tell me?"

"Tell you what?," Tracy said, putting a hand up to stop him. "John, this is my brother." She grabbed the diaper bag on the front seat with her free hand, and slammed the door with her hip. "I'm home because of a family emergency."

She began to walk towards the apartment, and John followed close behind, but not offering to carry anything. She juggled the diaper bag and her keys, and John helped by turning the door knob, but then stood outside until she invited him in.

"So, what was the emergency?" he asked, looking around the apartment.

"My mom had a baby." Tracy set the carseat down in front of the couch, Simon was still sleeping, so she just let him be. She opened the diaper bag, and began sorting papers on the kitchen counter. She had a pile for doctor receipts, pharmacy receipts, and forms to fill out for WIC, and other programs that would keep her mother afloat.

"Oh, yeah," he replied, sarcastically. "How was it an emergency?"

"Ugh," Tracy groaned, aloud. She really did not want to get into this with John, not now, not ever. John was the kind of guy that was fun to be around for a few weeks, but the novelty of his rugged good looks, and neanderthal like mentality wore thin very soon. Tracy figured, his raw masculinity would take the low road while she was gone on her ship's six month Mediterranean Cruise, and she would come home to no boyfriend. This didn't really upset her, in fact she was kind of hoping for it. Tracy found herself ignoring his question,

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and wondering when he would be leaving on his Med cruise, she smiled when she realized there was indeed hope.

"Women have babies all the time, how did you manage to get out of your cruise?" he asked again, louder, starting to light a cigarette.

"Wait, wait," she said. "Not in the house." She pulled him off the couch and pushed him towards the sliding glass door. "Not around the baby."

John took the cigarette out of his mouth, as she began to shut the door behind him. He stuck his hand out and stopped her.

"Tracy, are we going to talk about this?"

She looked at him quizzically. "What is there to talk about?"

"Like the fact that you ditched a Med Cruise to babysit, for starters."

"John, I have been home, for like two and a half days," she stated. "My mom handed me Simon, and I haven't seen her since. I have two weeks to figure everything out, before I have to go meet my ship, and I really don't know if my mother is coming back. I really have better things to do than to try to explain this mess to you, you were supposed to have a new girlfriend by now." John raised an eyebrow, as she sunk to the floor, tears streaming down her face. Her whole body was bawling, tears were dripping from her chin, leaving dark wet spots on her jeans, but she wasn't making a sound.

"Hey, hey," John said, crouching beside her. "Hey, come on now, it can't be that bad?" He had dropped his cigarette and wrapped his arms around her. "Is it that bad?"

Tracy wiped her arm across her nose, met his gaze, and nodded silently.

"It is," she moaned. "John, it is so bad." She looked up into his rust colored eyes and saw he was really listening to her. "I have managed to avoid anything and everything that would interfere with my plans." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I have avoided long term relationships, and all that goes along with them, security, dependence, and love, and all that, mostly because the biggest interference would come from a baby, or a family, having to be concerned about other peoples needs and desires.. And, look, for all my good choices, I still get strapped with a baby that is going to interfere with my plans." She started to bawl again, her shoulders shaking.

"When is your mom coming back?" John asked, gently rubbing her shoulders.

"When?" Tracy asked. "More like, if?" She laughed to herself, tears still coming. "That woman is like...is like..." Tracy growled. "I never know when she plans on coming or going. She just shows up whenever she feels like." Tracy looked up at John. "She showed up two weeks before I left, she was pregnant then." Her eyes blazed with anger. "She never told me, she could have told me she was pregnant. She knew I was going away, she just wanted to crash a few days, she said." She slapped the palm of her hand on her forehead. "She totally played me, she planned this. She didn't plan Simon would be sick, but she planned this!"

"Calm down, Babe," John said. "You don't know what she was thinking." He looked over at Simon, still sleeping peacefully. "Simon is sick?"

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Tracy got to her feet, she needed a tissue, and the realization that her mother had planned all this was sobering, and she began coming to her senses. She did not want to be some ultra feminine crumpled mass of tears, and she certainly didn't want John to be a part of this whole break down. She didn't want to feel indebted to him, for his concern. She splashed water on her face, and tried to compose herself. He was having an affect on her she had not anticipated, his strong arms around her, his reassuring glances. John was actually listening to her, thinking about what she was saying, she needed him to go.

Tracy had spent enough time in the bathroom for John to finally smoke his cigarette. She grabbed a large glass of ice water, and began making a bottle for Simon, who would be awake anytime now.

"So," John said, hesitantly. "Your brother is sick?" He leaned against the archway separating the kitchen from the living room. He was six inches away from Tracy. He was gazing down at her waiting for an answer, his eyes full of concern. He made her feel so small, so fragile. His snug t-shirt was spotted with her tears from pulling her tightly into his chest. He looked like John, he sounded like John, but he wasn't acting like John, he demeanor had changed dramatically when her water works had started.

"We were at the doctor's most of the morning," Tracy explained. "He isn't sick, he was born with cerebral palsy." She peeked around John to check on the baby, he was awake, starting to wind up with his hungry cry. "Listen, John, I really need to take care of this." She walked past him. "You really just need to go. I'm sorry, I would have called you eventually to let you know I was back, but as you can see things are just really weird here right now. " This was mostly a lie, she probably never would have called him, however things here were really exceptionally weird, she had a baby to take care of, and she had nearly melted into a heap when she had realized how crazy things actually were.

He turned and watched as she unstrapped Simon. He leaned against the arch again. Tracy had to look away. The shirt, the thumbs looped on to his front pockets, the jeans hugging his body, his hair dangerously close to being out of military standards hanging in his eyes, it was all too much for her. She doubled down on focusing on Simon. "You really should just go."

"Okay," he said, nodding his head ever so slightly, his thinking nod. "I'll be back in the am, help you get things together." His nod became more determined, as his thoughts were coming together. "I'll give you a hand for a few days." He walked towards the door, but stopped and walked back to the couch where Tracy sat, trying to get Simon to take his bottle.

"That's really not necessary," Tracy said. "We'll be fine." Simon thrashed and refused the bottle.

"You might want to change him first," John answered, kneeling down watching Simon. Tracy stopped and looked at John, and he leaned over and kissed her. She stared at him unblinking. "I know you'll be fine, but I wouldn't be your friend if I let you do it alone."

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Donna's returned three days later after Tracy brought the bills current and filled the refrigerator. To her credit Tracy also had the phone and cable turned back on, and as a bonus got herself some Internet. Donna silently moved all of her things out of the single bedroom and piled it all in the corner of the living room, and then made room for Tracy's things on the bathroom counter. For a few days things were very quiet between the two of them, Tracy enjoyed the quiet, because she expected things to get noisy real quick once one of them actually said anything.

"I have to go back to work in a week," Tracy said cautiously. "What are your plans?" Donna shrugged her shoulders like a teenager, who knew more than she was telling. She had been sleeping on the couch for the past few days, and doing the bare minimum to keep Simon happy, spending most of her time on the balcony chain smoking and a talking on her cell phone. Tracy wasn't all that excited to get back to work, when she anticipated how the Simon's days would go. Tracy had showed her all the papers she had managed to collect from WIC and social services, but Donna didn't take any interest in them. "Well, I have some errands to run, is there anything you need?" She was just being polite, she really hadn't expected a serious answer, but Donna replied cigarettes and a bottle of coke. "No."

"Well, then why did you ask?" Donna asked, looking up from her text messages.

"Because, I wanted to give you the opportunity to say, thank you, I have enough," Tracy replied. "Because you showed up two weeks before I left on a cruise, on your "way to Florida". Tracy looked at Donna in the eye while making quote fingers, but Donna turned away. "Convinced me to let you stay here, while you were pregnant, which you didn't think to tell me, and now what?" Tracy passed her arm around the apartment. "I come home to my apartment, trashed! I will never get my deposit back because of the nicotine coating the walls. It cost me a hundred bucks to have the filters cleaned, because I could not sleep!" Tracy began packing up Simon, she really had no intention of taking him out with her, but the deeper she dug, the better she thought it would be. "Your baby has seizures, and you still haven't managed to quit smoking, what is it gonna take?"

"I smoked through my whole pregnancy with you," Donna shouted. "and your brothers, and you turned out fine?"

"Really, really, mom?" Tracy shouted back. "If that is what let's you sleep at night, you just go on believing that." Tracy grabbed her keys from the counter. "I'm going out for a while, get you and your crap out of my house."

"Tracy, you're not taking my baby?" Donna asked, she stood starting to protest.

"I am," Tracy said. "I can only babysit one of you at a time, and I refuse to babysit you any longer." Tracy slammed the door, and Simon jumped in his seat startled. "I'm sorry, Buddy, but enough is enough."

Tracy drove to Barnes and Nobles, and phoned John in the parking lot. She left a voicemail, maybe he had duty, she wasn't sure of his schedule, she didn't even know why she had called. He had kept his word and had helped her get to some appointments, and even kept her latte tank full. He still didn't understand why all this was Tracy's responsibility, and every time she tried to explain she had stopped herself, he didn't need to know all the gruesome details about her childhood.

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She then dialed her father, it was about time she talked to him about all this, he would know what to do.

"I really don't know how I can help, Trace," her dad explained. "This is a legal issue, you need to talk to a lawyer."

"Where am I gonna get money to talk to a lawyer?" She asked. She looked out the window at the bookstore, and figured she at least had a few bucks for some books on stealing your mom's kid. "Maybe someone over at Legal can point me in the right direction."

"You're not going after custody of this kid, are you?" he asked.

"Dad, I just don't know what to do," she replied. "I was set up from the beginning. I get the message and get home, there are ashtrays and dirty diapers everywhere, and she just takes off. I've taken him to his pediatrician, and he's got some serious issues, he is not going to have the ability to raise himself like your kids did. He doesn't appear to have anyone like you in his life, other than me that is."

"Tracy, calm down," her dad said. "Your mom is a lot of things, irresponsible maybe, but she's only doing the best she can with what she has."

"What she has, Dad, is all that I give her," Tracy whined. "But it never seems enough." Tracy groaned aloud. "I just don't know what to, Dad, tell me what to do."

"Tracy, I can't tell you what to do," he replied. "You have come so far, I'm so proud of you, but I don't know about this. This may be a lost cause, but seriously, Honey, I can't tell you what to do. This is between you and your mother."

Tracy said goodbye, and hung up her phone. She checked her watch, she had only been gone an hour, she needed to find something to do, she didn't want to go home too soon.

"Hey," John hollered over his radio, as he pulled up beside her. "Whatcha up to?"

Tracy could not help herself from smiling, she actually felt herself light up from the inside out.

"Nothing much," she answered. "I had to get out of the house, so I figured get some books to help me with all this."

"Cool," he said, getting out of his car. He leaned casually against the driver's door and tucked his thumbs in his jean pockets. "Do you have Simon?"

"Yeah, of course" Tracy answered, as A smile crossed John's face. "but when I got here, I realized, I didn't have the stroller, Donna took him for a walk last night, and didn't put it back in the hatchback. So I have just been sitting here." Tracy opened her door and got out.

"No worries," John said. "I'll carry him while you browse." Tracy was sure her jaw visibly hit the cement. He walked around the car, and pulled Simon out of his car seat. "You might want to get a shade for the back window."

"Ugh, you don't want to carry him in his seat?" She asked, as she processed his suggestion..

"No, all that extra weight, no," John replied, shaking his head and grabbing the diaper bag from the front seat and slung it across his torso. "We'll just go find a chair and chill out."

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"Sure, okay," she agreed. Tracy took a long look at John, standing there smiling with Simon in his arms, and a diaper bag over one shoulder. Six months ago, she never thought this picture would have been possible.

But as puzzled as she was with her own recently odd behavior, she was becoming more and more amused with how John was reacting to the whole mess. Tracy was never the maternal type, all this trouble with Simon had brought some weird mama bear instinct out in her. She never used to fawn over men wearing wedding rings, or carrying babies around before, but now John had an extra helping of sexiness whenever he handled Simon. His gentle giant side shone right through. The sight of his tight hard muscles draped with a soft baby blanket made her feel flustered.

She browsed for an hour or so, looking at books that would help her with Simon, and books that would help her with her mom. She even let herself look at some new fiction. Tracy would pause every once in a while in her browsing and look over at the two boys, sitting contently in the chair. Occasionally, John would look up and wave his hand as to say, we're good, go back to what you were doing. She left with an armful of books, very happy she had not let her Barnes and Nobles rewards card expire, she was always happy to save a lot of money.

John got Simon all situated, and leaned his forearms on the roof of the Mustang, he absent-mindedly fiddled his thumbs

"Look," he said, seriously, focusing on his hands. "I'm glad I found you, I tried your place first, after I got your message."

"Was my mom there?" Tracy asked, placing her hands on the roof.

"I don't know, I didn't see your car, so I didn't stop." He looked up, shrugging. "Listen, we need to talk." He met Tracy's gaze, but then looked back at his own hands. "Trace, I understand you are going through a lot, probably more than we both realize." He shifted his weight from one side to the other. "I've been thinking a lot about what you said the other day, about me having gotten over you, and you not expecting me to come around." John looked up at her, and opened his palms. "I know what you meant, we did have a good time together. I didn't realize that was all it was to you." Tracy opened her mouth to say something, but there were no words waiting. "Tracy, it was more than just a good time to me." John reached across the roof of the car and held the tips of her fingers in his hands.

"John, I-" she said. John's eyes looking into her, making her heart beat a little bit faster. She tried to smile.

"Listen, I'm not asking you to marry me or anything," he said, lightly. "And, I know right now is not the best time to have a "define the relationship" talk. I just want you to know I am here for you, and for Simon." He clapped his hands together to break the tension, then slapped the top of the car. "Shoot, I hope I didn't wake him." He looked through the hatchback window, but Simon was still asleep.

"Thank you, John," Tracy said, wondering if thank you would ever be enough.

John walked around to his car, and stood in front of her. He looked down into her eyes.

"Simon is not too much," he said. "You, and all your baggage about being independent and successful is not too much." He tipped her chin up and kissed her gently for a moment. "I think you are just right." He kissed her again, and wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly to him. Tracy felt herself melting, and accepted all his kisses, and found herself kissing him back with a passion she had not known before.

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"Come over," she whispered, as she pushed away. "later, if my mom is gone." She turned from him and got into her car.

"How will I know?" he asked.

"You'll know, " she replied. "When you get there you won't hear things getting thrown against the wall."

He laughed to himself as he got into his car.

"Later, then," he called through the open passenger window.

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