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Bloodlines

by Charlie Griffin

Mara's instincts for gambling never turned off. During Sunday family breakfast she counted each chocolate-chip pancake her step-son Hunter helped himself to, the same way that she counted cards at the blackjack table whenever she managed to sneak away to Tampa. The Seminole tribe had a monopoly on casino blackjack, and counting cards there was a form of meditation for her.

Slot machines irritated her. Only idiots perpetually push in tokens and pull levers in some dopamine-fueled Pavlovian endurance test that requires no skill at all. Betting on greyhounds felt even worse. The tracks were dirty and antiquated, and populated by shuffling old men. They carried their sadness in flasks, and their odors were geologic: sedimentary layers of booze, smoke, sweat, and whatever after-shave they'd grown so accustomed to that they'd forgotten about the possibility of something different.

She had, for a time, dedicated herself to developing the requisite skills to excel at Texas Holdem, but the high stakes made her nervous. Just like counting cards, calculating odds had become second nature. It was the added unpredictability of human interaction that alarmed her, but it also thrilled her. Discerning between feigned and real “tells” — those tics of involuntary or pretended behavior that signaled to rivals at the table one’s belief in the strength of one’s hand — in her dedicated effort to never be perceived as the patsy amongst her competitors, she had nevertheless found herself feeling like a patsy in her life outside the casinos, and couldn’t stand to see herself as her own victim. So, blackjack it was, whenever she could sneak off, which was often.

Seven pancakes for Hunter. Gwen had three. Mara herself had eaten two, and John had only just sat down. She watched Hunter take pancakes with his bare hands. As he licked and sucked syrup from his finger-tips, Mara recalled a documentary she’d watched that week about Jane Goodall. Goodall had asked: *In what terms should we think of these beings, nonhuman yet possessing so very many human-like characteristics? How should we treat them?* Mara watched with revulsion as Hunter slurped maple syrup from the base of his upturned plate. *Goodall wasn’t talking about chimps*, Mara thought. *She was talking about kids.*

When she’d started dating John, Mara resigned herself to her feelings of antipathy toward the children. She’d never wanted to be a step-mother, but she fell hard for the carpenter just the same. Mara’s body sang whenever she saw him. His broad shoulders filled his modest t-shirts. His long hair framed his square, stubbled jaw. The hard, denseness of his muscles shocked her. He had an easy, native intelligence, and listened to NPR non-stop on the job. He was one of the most informed people she’d ever met, tradesman or not.

John also had a softness and simplicity about him. He was easy for Mara to read. His doe-like brown eyes, with the longest lashes she’d ever seen on a man, gave away his every

thought, and that made him a safe bet. Mara liked that he was naturally taciturn, and it didn't hurt that he had a sizeable life-insurance payout from his first wife's death.

John had been a regular at the Dye Hard salon where Mara worked, and when John became a widower, the news spread quietly amongst the staff. Mara consulted his appointment schedule and contrived to plant seeds of opportunity at six-week intervals. At first, when she washed his hair, she massaged his scalp as sensually as she could, and complimented him enthusiastically on his hair. On subsequent visits, Mara put her cleavage in his face, smelled his neck, made conversation, and held him with her gaze until he broke it. Later on, she laughed easily and often, wore short skirts and low-cut blouses, shaved rigorously, and always smelled wonderful. When he finally broke her gaze with a shy smile, she asked him out. She ramped up the flirtatiousness of her text messages at exactly the right speed for his comfort. After their first breathless sex in the cab of John's pickup truck in the salon parking lot, she quietly and earnestly told him that her therapist predicted months ago that the love of her life was on his way. Mara told John that he was the answer to her prayers. She said she loved him. He said it back.

Gwen didn't rate much better than Hunter for Mara. Gwen had an unpredictable sass to her, and she said things that caught Mara off guard. One time, Gwen innocently asked Mara if the reason why she took so many selfies was because she had no friends who would pose for pictures with her. By ten years old, Gwen had mastered the art of plausible deniability. She pouted her lips and held her expression just long enough to declare that she had felt sorry for her step-mother. Mara replayed that conversation in her mind for days afterward.

John's form of meditation was to disappear for hours into his small workshop. Hunter and Gwen were unaware of how John's workshop spared them the burden of seeing their widower father bent by grief the year after their mother died. Everything arranged just so, his massive and sturdy workbench housed the things with which he would produce his every-day

and sometimes extraordinary magic. Sounds of sawing, hammering, and chiseling would fill the house, accompanied by the resinous smell of fresh sawdust, and eventually John would emerge with an intricate and painstakingly designed gift. Once, Mara felt a hard pang of jealousy when she watched John emerge with exquisite carved and polished locket for the children. Gwen's locket was shaped into a heart, and Hunter's was a star. Each was made of oiled and polished mahogany, with etched gold-leaf painted designs on their twistable surfaces. The front of each locket slid open, and the twisting action meant that each locket had two possible interior compartments. Mara was livid when she watched both the children delicately cut and insert photos of their mother in their lockets.

Mara watched in disgust as Hunter reached for an eighth pancake.

That's it, Mara thought. A coiled spring of annoyance, she slapped at Hunter's hand, expecting a triumphant whizzing across the room of a miniature flying saucer, but instead, Hunter's grip reflexively tightened, and the pancake remained mostly intact and in his hand. This was the fourth time she'd struck Hunter since she'd moved in with the Haas family nine months ago, but this was the first time he'd anticipated her.

Mara shrieked. "Hunter! You pig! Save something for your father." She tore at what pancake dangled from between Hunter's fingers. "You know what? Let me make you a new batch. There was a college girl, just last week, who choked to death in a pancake-eating contest. She blocked her own stupid airway with the things until they formed a block of paste in her throat. You're not eating fast enough."

Gwen looked imploringly at her father.

Hunter gently released the remaining pancake onto his plate with the solemnity of a burial rite. "I'm sorry, Dad. You can have it. I don't need it."

"I'm not hungry. Please, Mara. He's a growing boy. It's okay."

“He’s had enough pancakes! And half the bottle of syrup! How about having some consideration, or basic respect, Hunter?”

John laughed. “Food gained by fraud tastes sweet, but one ends up with a mouth full of gravel, eh?”

Mara waited for John to explain himself.

“What’s so funny about that?” Mara asked.

“It’s from the Bible,” Gwen said. Hunter nodded.

“I don’t give a shit where it’s from.”

“It’s just a pancake, Mara,” John said, and immediately regretted it, as he braced himself for the maelstrom that would now overtake their Sunday morning.

###

John paced the living room with an infectious anxiety. Mara was reminded of a polar bear she’d once seen at the Central Park Zoo. It moved in and out of the water in its pen in a nervous, perpetual, circuit. It was as if that bear knew it had to get out of there, that its sanity and survival depended on it, but it was in a zoo in the middle of Manhattan, for Christ’s sake, and there was nowhere for it to go.

“Mara, I’m sorry,” John said, and forced himself to be still. “I have to just come right out and say it.” He rubbed his chin and met her gaze. “I got laid off today.”

“Laid off,” Mara repeated, examining the strange texture of these new words in her mouth. Her mind filled with the inventory of hidden truths about her gambling that might get dragged into the daylight. Rather than reveal those truths, she said, “You mean, fired.” She calculated that guilt might spur him into immediate action in acquiring a new job. Control demands that the status quo must be maintained.

###

John's joblessness persisted. Given their new financial situation, Mara felt justified in heading back to the Holdem tables with her credit card. Differentiating between pretend and real tells was simply a matter of practice and memory. If Mara compared the body language to the hands laid down enough times, the data would eventually tell her the story she needed. Sometimes the lessons were expensive. And then there was Mako. He was a tornado of a gambler that showed up without warning, devastated his opponents, and disappeared just as unexpectedly. No one would speak his real name, but stories of his many paths of destruction trailed him in his wake. It was widely and silently understood that Mako was deeply connected and had deep pockets.

###

John sang Hunter and Gwen each a short song every night as part of their bedtime ritual. They'd done so for years, even when their mother was alive, and neither one of the children had yet outgrown the need to hear their father's breathy renditions of songs drawn from a small rotation of folk tunes, lull-a-byes, and made-up ditties about the children themselves in order to properly fall asleep. At the end of the day that John discovered the forensic proof that his bank accounts had been drained over the course of several months, he whispered apologies to Hunter and Gwen at their bedsides after the songs were sung.

He confirmed it with both the bank teller and also her branch manager, whose pitiful nodding made it clear that she'd seen this sort of thing before. The manager's embarrassment made John flush with humiliation. He didn't tell the kids that Mara had caused the disappearance of their sole financial cushion, but he did tell them that hunger was a thing they were going to have to become accustomed to.

John didn't raise the specter of Mara's theft with her. He was stoic and quiet when Mara made a show of it when he told her that they were penniless. John said nothing in response to

Mara's declaration that it was all his fault. Not long after that, they vacated the house. John found renters for it, moved his family into a nearby motel, and used the difference to keep his family fed.

When John first keyed open the motel room, with its ancient yellowed lamp shades and decades of cigarette smoke coating the wallpaper, John felt deeply claustrophobic. If only the symphony of struggle coming from the air-conditioner in the corner could overpower the voice in his head telling him how all of this was his fault, he could forgive it for failing to cover the penetrating smell of mold settled into the heavy carpet through decades of the Florida heat. He'd seen countless prostitutes and addicts arrested or chalk-lined in similar rooms in serial television dramas, on a black-box television similar to the one mounted to the wall. Crossing the room's threshold was like crossing the poverty line itself, a cliff edge he had allowed his family to fall from while he watched. He insisted that the kids continue school, and he made daily ventures to find work or to pick up day-laborer jobs. Sometimes he found work as a flagger for a construction crew or spent the day shoveling asphalt.

###

Mara was up fifty-eight thousand dollars and balancing beautifully on a tightrope at a Holdem table with five other players when Mako appeared out of nowhere. He asked to join in the next hand. The asking was a courtesy. No one would dare say no to him. Mako bought the button by posting both blinds to start the game in a power position at the table. Mara had studied long and hard about wet versus dry board textures and how each flop would affect the width of her and her opponents' card ranges. Mako operated at a higher level: he made a sport out of telling his opponents exactly what their hole cards were right before seeing the river card and after he bet big. His guess was usually right or close enough to intimidate an opponent into

standing down or folding a winning hand. Mako's tactic took on an air of cruelty, because everyone at the table knew that either a high-stakes bluff or a dramatic upset was underway.

By the time Mako chewed through or siphoned off three men's stakes, it left just him, Mara, and a man named Salomon still at the table. Mara was up another thirty-three thousand dollars, and when the dealer slid her pocket Aces in the hole, she felt confident enough to chum the water. Mara called the big blind to limp into the pot, and avoided the temptation to pre-flop raise. Mako had Queen-Jack off-suit, and Salomon had off-suit three-five. The dealer flopped Jack-seven-Queen. Salomon exhaled slightly and folded his cards.

Mako bet twenty-seven thousand. Mara check-raised an additional ten thousand. Mako didn't look up or speak. He called. Mara suspected that Mako had made either a Jack or Queen pair. Or he was bluffing.

The dealer dropped the turn card. It was the ten of spades. Mara calculated quickly. She went all in with one hundred and two thousand dollars: the ten-grand buy-in she'd put on her credit card that morning and everything she'd earned that day. Mako called. The dealer took their cards and laid them all face up. Both players took in the new information, and Mara immediately saw that the odds were with Mako. Her chances of winning were only twenty-seven percent. She knew that she had only twelve possible outs. Two Aces, four Kings, three tens and three sevens were still out there, and any one of them could give her the top hand. Mako sat back with his hands folded. Time stood still. She drew in her breath and held it.

In that breath, Mara relived a dream she'd had many times, ever since her mother died. The dream always ended the same way. With Mara on the verge of speech, the first syllable would be preempted by a sound like clicking marbles and a feeling of her mouth becoming full. Then she would gag and cup her hand to her lips, to receive a half-dozen of her own bloody teeth, as though her head were a vintage gumball machine.

Of god damned course, she thought, as the dealer slid a four of spades on the river. She'd thought she'd baited him. But it was the other way around. Mako watched Mara for a reaction. She gave him none. She wasn't going to go "nose open" for him: she wouldn't let him see her become unglued by her loss. Mako stood and offered her his hand. She clasped and firmly pumped it two times.

"That was a tough hand. You play well," Mako said. He tipped the dealer a thousand dollars and closed out. He didn't bother looking at Salomon, who was relieved to watch Mako walk away without taking all of his stake, too.

"Thank you," Mara said. She watched Mako walk off.

Salomon pulled a couple of hundred-dollar chips from his stack and slid them in Mara's direction. He said, "No shame in losing to him."

"There's not?" She walked away without taking the chips or expecting an answer.

Later, in the parking lot at her car, Mara cursed herself aloud as she fished for her keys. She didn't notice Mako and his entourage heading toward a pack of nondescript SUV's in the opposite corner. Mako gestured for them to proceed without him, and he walked over to Mara. She heard him approach and looked up. He looked her up and down. He waited for her to speak.

"No valet service for you?" Mara asked. "I'm surprised."

"In my line of work, I have enough risk in my life already," he said. "I'm not handing a stranger my keys and then walking away for hours."

"What line of work is that?"

"I feel bad about taking all your money."

"I don't think you feel badly about taking anyone's money. And what makes you think you took it all?"

“Didn’t I?” Mara didn’t respond. “Most of these mooks can take the losses. You, I’m thinking, not so much.”

“Well, money isn’t my only problem.”

“Isn’t that funny? Problem solving is what I do.”

###

“Come on, come on,” Mara pressed from the car window as Hunter and Gwen slid into the back seat, swinging their backpacks in first. “Let’s not start the week off with another tardy. God, you move so slowly.”

“I wonder what kind of work Dad will find today,” Gwen said to Hunter.

“Last week he was all the way up at Disney. Dad told me they’re working on a new Star Wars expansion,” Hunter said.

“I love Rey. I wonder if they’re doing Force Awakens stuff.”

“I don’t know about that. But Dad said they’re building a life-sized AT-AT!”

“I want to drive one!”

“I don’t think it — hey, why are stopping here?” Hunter asked as Mara pulled into a convenience store parking lot.

Mara sucked her teeth. “I need to buy something.”

“They’re not open yet,” Gwen said.

Mara said nothing as she parked, exited the car, and walked away. Hunter and Gwen watched her disappear around the back of the building. Hunter startled when Mako knocked on his window and lifted the door latch.

Mako smiled and said, “Let’s go.”

Hunter looked toward Gwen’s door, as another, bigger man opened hers. This man didn’t smile.

#

Dozens of day-laborers had taken all the work opportunities that morning by the time John got near the front of the queue. He drove back to the motel, lost in thought. The downward spiral his family was in was untenable, and he knew it. He paused when he noticed the backpacks still in the backseat of Mara's car in the motel parking lot when he walked up. *What are the odds that both children would leave their backpacks behind?* he wondered. Mara was sitting at the bistro table on the patio adjoining their motel room, watching a Cerulean Warbler perched on a fig tree when John walked up.

"They didn't have work for me today," John said. "Got the kids off to school okay?"

"Of course."

Mara watched John surreptitiously. As he sat across from her, he noticed the table was askant, a defect in its manufacture. He resisted a reflexive urge to upright it and examine its legs. He pulled his laptop out of his bag and booted it up.

"The kids didn't say anything to you about a field trip or something, did they?" John asked.

Alarm bells rang inside Mara, but she held steady. "No." She picked up a stone from the bed of river rock beside her and rolled it between her palms. Its grey-brown coolness was a transitory relief from the heat and allowed her to focus on slowing her pulse. *Be cool.* She rubbed it along her temples, drops of sweat forming a growing stain across its oblong roundness.

John furrowed his brow at the screen. He watched as Mara plucked several more stones from the bed. She lined them up by size in duck fashion on the table. He stood up and went inside without a word. She could see him through the window. He paced with the phone and gestured occasionally.

Mara tossed a stone in the direction of the warbler. A haughty flutter of flapping wings was the bird's only response as it made off to spend its day without Mara's interference and to offer its song to a more accommodating audience. John returned and together they watched the bird disappear. Mara picked up another stone.

"The police are on their way," John said.

"What?"

"I know they're not your kids." John sat. "But this?"

"What are you talking about."

"Come on. I know."

"Know what?" Mara squeezed the stone in her hand hard.

"Right. Why would you admit it?" They locked eyes. "The backpacks, Mara."

"The..."

"They're still in the car."

Mara chuckled. "John, the kids must've forgotten to take them when I dropped them off. You know what? Let's take advantage of your unexpected day off. Come, kiss me."

"So, you did drop them off at school?"

"Of course, I did." She leaned over and kissed his ear.

John shook his head. "Stop. No. You didn't. GPS, Mara."

"What?" Mara pushed off from the table, infuriated and terrified. The row of stones upon it fell to the ground with hollow clunks. John disliked that he still marked the table's wobble in the middle of all this.

"I put GPS trackers in their lockets, Mara. I know that they never went to school."

Mara stammered. *The lockets.*

John closed the distance between them so quickly that she flinched. He grabbed her arm, lowered his voice to a threatening growl, and said, “they’re at the airport, Mara! Why are they at the airport? What did you do?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I’m talking about the kids, Mara! You’re lying.”

“John. I…”

“I know about the money too. You stole from us. And I did nothing.” John’s neck and face were reddening. “But for it to come to this? I can’t possibly know who the hell you are.”

“Did you stop to think it might be better this way? They eat everything, take everything, they give nothing! It can be just us. No reminder of your dead wife, no baggage holding us back. We can be together the way we were meant to. This fixes everything. Everything. A fresh start, baby. I love you. So much.” Mara was momentarily stunned by her own arousal at John’s agitated state.

Just then, there was a loud rapping at the door. John looked into her eyes. John laughed. “Oh, good! The police are here.” He smiled, and it reminded Mara of Mako.

He led her by the arm into the room, and Mara froze suddenly, transfixed by the images skirting across the silent television screen on the wall. Right there was Mako in handcuffs, being pushed into a police cruiser. The ticker read, “Child Trafficking Ring Exposed.” John gasped when Hunter and Gwen appeared onscreen, surrounded by reporters jamming a bouquet of microphones into their beautiful, bloodied faces.

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John was already packed. Hunter, and Gwen watched cartoons on television and chuckled as they put their few remaining things into suitcases and cardboard boxes. John packed up Mara’s clothing to hand over to the detective who was coming to collect her things. She was

turning state's witness against Mako and was going to get a reduced sentence. John didn't care what happened to Mara anymore.

John went outside with a block plane in hand. He wobbled the bistro table to determine which leg needed shaving and went to work on restoring its balance. As he worked, he noticed that the warbler was back. John wondered, *is that the same one?* He decided it was, by its song.