

Azrael Stops By

by Hechicera

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Chapter 1 of 1

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I am dead asleep—the first solid, uninterrupted sleep I've had in weeks—and Reed comes in and wakes me.

Wake up. Sweetheart, I need you to wake up. The police are here.

Downstairs, a half dozen uniformed police, and Eli, lying still and white on the sofa, a dark stain dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

"Your daughter called? From Greensboro? They were on the phone. She thinks he took something."

An officer, a woman, comes over and hands me a prescription bottle. It's mine, the Xanax the doctor insisted on prescribing for me when I began to lose my shit over the whole nightmare of Eli's arrest. My hypercompliant son who has never been in trouble a day in his life, arrested and expelled from school because of the tiny penknife on his keychain. Which I gave him. For his birthday.

"Do you know how many were in here?"

"I never took any. So whatever it says on the label."

The label says sixty. I pour the pills out onto the dining-room table, and she and I count them.

There are thirty-three left.

Paramedics come in, and the policemen around Eli step back to give them access. The policewoman asks me, was he depressed?

I tell her about the arrest two weeks ago, and the hearing, the outraged letters from his teachers.

"It was over. They dropped the charges, he was supposed to go back to school tomorrow." The lawyer's voice on the phone, jubilant: "This never happens. I don't know what his teachers did."

The officer has her hand on my arm. I can't tell whether it's for comfort, or to keep me out of the paramedics' way. I can't see what they're doing, only that he is terrifyingly still. It's quiet except for the dogs, barking from the side porch where Reed has shut them.

Finally the paramedics lift Eli onto the gurney and wheel him out. I ask one of them if I can ride in the ambulance, and he says yes, looking briefly at my legs. "Pants," he says, with an apologetic little smile, and that's when I realize that I'm just wearing the t-shirt and underpants I sleep in.

"Fuck," I say, and turn to run upstairs, but Reed is already holding out a pair of sweat pants, and I pull them on and stick my sockless feet into a pair of shoes.

"I'll follow you in the car," he says.

I sit up front in the ambulance, which is good, because the driver gets briefly lost and I have to show him how to get back onto the highway.

It takes a long time to get to the hospital and I sit twisted around in my seat, looking back at my brilliant, fragile boy, thinking *just let him live*.