

September

by Keppiehed

Family dynamics with a twist.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Warnings: language, mature content

Prompt: "The Elephant in the Room."

A/N: This was written for Brigit's Flame, week #3.

The bell rang.

"Come in, come in!" Judy ushered them into the front hall. "I'm so glad you could make it. How was traffic?"

"It was fine, once we got past I-75," Herb said.

"Well, you're the last ones here. Please, come in!" Judy laughed gaily and led them through the foyer and into the kitchen.

"What's that smell?" Oscar whined.

"Oh, hush!" Gail said, embarrassed.

"I made a turkey *and* a ham this year. I decided, why not go all out?" Judy said.

"I wish you'd have let me bring something," Gail gently chided.

"I wanna hamburger!" Oscar shouted.

Judy froze. "Oh, we have all sorts of goodies, sweetie. I've been baking for this for weeks!" she said, her voice a little too bright.

"Oscar!" Herb said sharply. "Don't mind him; he's at that age ... "

"No worries!" Judy smiled. "Well, everyone is waiting to see you. Go on in, I'm just going to check on the turkey."

They stepped into a living room teeming with people. It was uncomfortable in that way that rooms full of bodies combined with oven-stewing meats often were. Gail felt a line of sweat trickle between her breasts.

"Aunt Gail!" A little boy, almost nine years old, ran over to them. "You're finally here! Mom said we could open presents when you got here!"

Gail felt her breath catch when she saw her sister's child, but she knew the rules. The eyes of the room were upon her, and she felt Herb's hand squeeze her elbow. Somehow she managed a tremulous smile. "We brought a bunch of presents for you, Kevin." Her own voice sounded hollow in her ears. She was afraid that her smile would crack, but she kept it plastered on. It was probably more like a grimace, but it was the best she could do.

"Where?" he asked. "Did you get me the new Hightower Three game? That's what I asked for, but Mom keeps saying no."

"You'll have to wait and see," Gail said.

"Here are the gifts," Herb said from behind her. He hefted a huge bag into sight. "Will this do?"

"Wow, yeah!" Kevin exclaimed, a big smile breaking out on his face. "Can I start?"

Judy stepped in behind them. "Did I miss anything?"

Gail felt her smile falter for a minute as she took in her sister's appearance. Judy had her hair done perfectly, her makeup and earrings on. She even managed to dig up a silly Christmas sweater with some reindeer on the front of it. She had gone to so much effort, but Gail could see what it had cost her, how her bones were poking beneath the sweater, how she couldn't hide the bags under her eyes with make-up. Gail felt the tears well up. "Judy, I can't ..."

Judy took in a sharp breath. "Gail! The restroom is the first door on the left, there. After you come back, why don't we let little Oscar open the first present?" That hard smile, though slightly strained, never left her face.

Gail nodded and left the room. She could hear the chorus of good-natured arguing amongst the children behind her. She closed the bathroom door and took a trembling breath. She had to get herself under control. This was harder than she had ever dreamed it would be. This was what Judy had asked for, though, and if she had the strength, then Gail had to dig deep and find it, too.

Gail splashed some water on her face, bit her quivering lip and fixed the fake grin on. She stepped out and played her part. When she felt tears rising she pinched the inside of her arm. There was no amount of external hurt that even matched what she felt on the inside. It fixed and grounded her. She tried to keep her voice light, to match the tone of everyone else. They all chatted about nothing. It should have been soothing, but instead it was off-putting.

There was a certain surreality to the day, although it went off without any noticeable hitch. It was probably because everyone was being polite that it seemed unreal; holidays usually had some sort of bickering involved. As the day wore on, Judy became more fixed and plastic. Gail just felt depressed.

They were nearly in the clear and ready to make their exit when Oscar mentioned it. "Will Santa come later if he comes now, too?"

His voice had been louder at other parts of the day, certainly. When he had been arguing with a cousin, when he had been refusing his Brussels sprouts...but right now that tiny, plaintive question sliced through the chatter in the room and silence crashed down.

Judy's hands stilled. Everything stilled, as if time stopped.

Gail held her breath. She willed things to just go back, go back to the way they were.

"I mean, Santa only comes once a year. Why did he come in summer? He *never* comes in summer!" Oscar's voice was puzzled, as if he was slowly working out a difficult riddle.

Judy had been hanging an ornament back on the tree. She froze, her hand poised midway to the branch. The silver orb swung gently in her outstretched fingertips, the only sign of movement in the entire room.

Gail didn't know what to say, what she should do to make it better. This wasn't in the script. She was afraid of shattering the whole thing, but she knew it had already broken long before they had even walked in the door.

"Oscar, later," Herb murmured quietly.

"But I just want to know why Christmas is now. Isn't that *weird*?" Oscar asked, oblivious to the rising tension.

"It's because I'm dying," Kevin said matter-of-factly.

"Kevin!" Judy gasped. "Don't say that!"

"It's true, Mom," Kevin said. He was sitting on the floor, cross-legged. "Just say it, already. Everybody knows it."

"You don't talk like that!" Judy hung the ornament but didn't turn around.

"You're dying?" Oscar asked.

"Oscar," Gail said softly.

"Yeah, that's why you're all here now." Kevin picked at the hem of his pants. "I won't be here in December. Don't worry, kid ... you'll still get your regular Christmas, okay?" He winked at Oscar. "And you can have my Hightower Two, if Aunt Gail lets you play it."

"Kevin! Stop it, just ... stop it!" Judy clenched her fists. "I'd like everyone to please just leave now!" She turned and stormed from the room.

"I have to go after her," Gail said, and climbed the stairs to Judy's bedroom. She expected to hear crying behind the door, or maybe the smashing of things being hurled and broken. That's what she would be doing. But there was just silence. Gail knocked tentatively. "Judy?"

"Come in," Judy said quietly.

Gail walked in. Judy was sitting on her bed. She was staring out her bedroom window, dry-eyed. "I just wanted one last holiday. One more thing to remember. Something good, for once."

Gail drew in a breath. "You have to accept..."

Judy whipped around, her eyes blazing. "Don't stand there and tell me to *accept*, Gail. Jesus! You waltz in here for one day! I have been watching my child die, okay? I have accepted, whatever the hell that means. Like you can accept something like that. All I asked you for was to show up and act normally and not bring it up. You think I don't have enough to cry about every single day of my life, like I haven't wanted to crawl in a hole and die? Like I won't be crying every day from now on? What good does that do? I'll have all the time in the world to cry, Gail, but he doesn't. *He doesn't!* You think that I don't feel, like I don't want to buy that casket for myself?"

Gail took a step back under the force of Judy's wrath. She felt her heart breaking for her sister, but Judy wanted none of it.

"That's right, all I asked was that you try not to blubber for one afternoon, and I suppose that was too much for you. Thanks so much for your support. Get out."

Gail turned at the the top of the stairs to look at her sister, but Judy hadn't moved, was still sitting there as motionless as a statue on the bed. Her arms wrapped around herself, the only comfort she would allow.

They drove away from the house in silence. Gail watched the window where she knew her sister's bedroom was until the car turned the corner and it was lost to her view. The curtain didn't even twitch. Gail cried the whole way home.

The call came a month later. It was September.