

## *Hide*

She hears the door and looks up from the old wooden counter. She is absolutely beautiful.

*Man . . .*

You'd think that I—of all people—would not focus on how someone looks, but I can't help myself. Her face is really great. Prominent cheekbones. Bright blue eyes. Amazing symmetry.

Studies have shown that individuals—when presented with photos of different people and asked to pick which ones they find most attractive—tend to choose faces that are more symmetrical. Even with the blood on her sweatshirt, hands and face, this woman's photo would definitely get picked first.

Her blond hair is pulled back into a ponytail and a few strands have worked their way loose. She reaches to tuck them behind a perfectly shaped ear.

*Man . . .*

“You must be Teddy,” she says, smiling at me.

I manage to nod, acknowledging that I am indeed Teddy.

She stands up and comes around from behind the counter.

“Charlie had to run home for a second,” she says, extending a hand toward mine. “I'm Meredith.”

We shake, and—on this cold January day—her warmth spreads through my entire body.

“Nice to meet you,” I somehow say.

I called Charlie over an hour ago to make sure he had room in his cooler for another deer. He did not bother to mention Meredith to me, but it's obvious he has mentioned me to her. He has told her not just to expect me, but also what to expect. This can be the only explanation as to why her bright blue eyes haven't widened at the sight of me. She keeps the smile on her face and her eyes on the good side of mine.

Everyone in Santee County knows me. They know about me. They know about the accident. They know exactly how I look. They've protected me and loved me for twenty years—ever since I was a baby.

They don't mind that my photo would be chosen last.

When I was a thirteen I asked my dad if we could look into some reconstructive surgery or a partial face transplant or something like that. He blanched. Literally the blood drained from his face and I thought he was going to pass out. Come to find out they'd already tried reconstructive surgery when I was two years old . . . *that* was when I'd almost died. Bone infection. Antibiotics. Surgery. Another bone infection. More surgery. Staph infection. Blood transfusions. Midnight prayer vigils. Apparently by the time everyone was finally assured that I was going to live, the fact that I was missing an eye and an ear suddenly didn't seem like such a big deal.

After Dad explained everything to me and pulled himself together, he said that if I wanted to look into doing something that he and Mom would help me however they could. But the thought of more surgery obviously scared him a lot (and hearing what had happened scared me more than a little). I decided to leave well enough alone.

It wasn't as if I was ever going to look normal anyway . . . I'd lost way too much for that.

But now I'm wondering. If I *had* tried something . . . anything . . . would I still be standing here wishing that my stocking cap hides a lot more than it actually does?

Meredith is still looking at the good half of my face.

“So what have you got?” she asks.

What I've got is just a doe. Meat for the freezer.

We walk out to my truck and Meredith helps me drag the deer into Charlie's shop, getting even more blood on her sweatshirt. She asks me what kind of cuts I want and dutifully fills out the

order form accordingly: tenderloin, roast, stew meat and sausage. She tells me that Charlie will call me when it's ready.

"Hey, listen," she says just before I turn to leave. She hands me a business card and I listen. "If you ever need any taxidermy work, I'm opening up a shop over in Foscoe."

I look carefully at her card and notice the address. "Are you renting the old upholstery shop?"

"Yep." She nods.

"That used to be my great grandmother's shop," I tell her.

"Really?"

"Yeah," I answer, giving her a nod of my own.

"So you're related to Tim?"

"He's like my second cousin once removed or something like that," I answer with a confused shake of my head and a small shrug. Meredith gives me a small, appreciative laugh.

I saw Tim less than a week ago at his son's high school basketball game. He somehow failed to mention his new symmetrical tenant to me.

Meredith says, "He seems really nice."

I nod again.

"Well, anyway," she continues, pointing at her business card, "I'm new around here and I'm just getting started, so if you ever need any work done or anything or know someone who does, I'd really appreciate the business."

I nod for a third time and ask, "Where are you from?"

"Most recently, State," she answers, "I just graduated last month."

"And you're working for *Charlie*?"

"I'm opening up a taxidermy shop," she reminds me, pointing at the card. "I figured working for someone who processes game might give me some good leads."

This actually makes a lot of sense.

"I didn't know you had to go to college to do taxidermy."

"You do if your dad is *my* dad," she tells me. "He didn't care what I wanted to do—not going to college wasn't an option."

"What was your major?"

“Biology,” she replies. “With a minor in business.”

I nod. This also actually makes a lot of sense.

“Well anyway,” she says again, pointing once more to her business card. “If you ever need anything done . . .”

I nod again.

I don’t bother to mention to her that I’ve been hunting and fishing for almost my entire life and I’ve never once had anything mounted.

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It has been exactly twenty-four hours since I met Meredith and it’s the last day of both deer season and pheasant season. I chose to go deer hunting, saw absolutely nothing, and now I’m standing in my dad’s shop listening to him and my younger brother Justin tell me how I should have gone pheasant hunting with them instead. Apparently it was an unprecedented day as far as flushes go. Both of them bagged their limits and Dad holds up a plastic bag full of meat for me to see.

“We’ve got plenty,” he says. “Why don’t you see if Joe wants to come over for lunch tomorrow after church?”

I run an automotive body repair shop with Joe. He’s always looking for a free meal, and when I call him, I’m not surprised to learn that he’d love to come to lunch at my parents’ house tomorrow. I am, however, surprised to hear that he went deer hunting today and shot a buck. But not just any buck, mind you . . . a twelve pointer.

*Twelve* points?

Seriously?

I really don’t even want to go to lunch tomorrow.

Of course I go.

I smile and laugh at all the appropriate moments while the hunting stories from the day before unfold across the dining room table. Finally I manage to steer the conversation away from all of the animals that I didn't shoot and onto a new topic: turkey hunting. Turkey season is nearly three months away, but I'd probably better start figuring out *now* exactly how I'm going to bag a Tom with a beard so long that it's practically dragging the ground.

"Since when are you into turkey hunting?" Justin asks.

"I've been turkey hunting before," I answer defensively.

"Yeah, like maybe twice . . ."

"Is there a reason I can't go turkey hunting?"

"What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem—I just don't understand why you have to give me the third degree just because I might go turkey hunting this spring."

"I wasn't giving you the third degree!" Justin cries. "I just asked you why you're so interested in turkey hunting all of a sudden. Why are you jumping all over me?"

"All right," Mom interrupts, pushing away from the table and looking at him. "How about if you help Kaitlyn clear the table so we can have dessert."

"I didn't even do anything!" he protests.

"I didn't say that you did anything," Mom answers patiently.

"I just asked you to help clear the table."

Justin sighs and scowls after her as she heads into the kitchen before rising from his chair to help our little sister Kaitlyn gather dirty plates. They've barely started when we hear Mom exclaim, "Oh, would you look at that!"

Kaitlyn and Justin both rush into the kitchen to look at whatever "that" is.

Almost immediately we hear Kaitlyn's, "Oh my gosh!" followed by Justin's, "That is so *cool*!" and the rest of us quickly head into the kitchen.

Through the window over the sink, we see a squirrel hanging upside down on the bird feeder. A solid black squirrel.

“What *is* that?” Justin asks.

“It’s a fox squirrel,” Joe answers authoritatively. “A fox squirrel in its black phase.”

“That’s neat,” Justin says. “I’ve never seen one of those before.”

Everyone is busy gushing their agreement over how “neat” and “cool” it is. They don’t notice me until I’m standing on the patio with Dad’s 12 gauge leveled at the bird feeder.

“What are you *doing*?” I hear Mom’s voice call out in alarm.

In response, I pull the trigger.

Kaitlyn is mad because I killed the cute little squirrel. Mom is mad because I killed her bird feeder. My dad and Justin and Joe, on the other hand, all seem to appreciate that this squirrel was a trophy worth taking. They agree that I definitely should have it mounted.

They’re men. They understand these things.

And they haven’t even met Meredith.