

# Jennifer

# Weiner

*New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# Lexi

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**By**

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When dinner was over, Tom's sister-in-law handed him a wrapped rectangular box. "A housewarming gift," she said. Tom, who'd barely found the energy to lift his fork, didn't think he'd have the strength to get through the wrapping paper. He forced his lips into a smile and pushed his fingers through the tape. "Oh," he said, when he saw a box containing a cylinder of matte black plastic.

"It's an Alexa," Andrea explained. "It's a—oh, what do you call them? A smart-home device."

"So now you'll have a woman in the house again," Tom's brother said. Tom would have laughed, or at least given Eric a sarcastic *ha ha ha*, but he was too tired. The divorce, losing his wife and his son and the house that he and Sharon had bought together, moving to the two-bedroom apartment in Center City, all in the course of six bewildering months, had left him so exhausted that some days even pulling on his socks felt like more than he could manage.

Maybe this thing, this Alexa, actually would help. Tom doubted it, even as he listened to Eric and Andrea describing the wondrous feats the machine could perform. "It plays music, and I keep my shopping list on it," Andrea said. She patted Tom's forearm, then squeezed his hand. Since the divorce, Andrea made a point of touching him a lot, like he was a fussy baby she was trying to soothe. "When I run out of something, I just say, 'Alexa, add flour to the list.'"

Tom had nodded. He tried to look grateful. He agreed that it would be nice to have another voice in the house, even if it belonged to a machine. Tom worked alone, at home, as a computer programmer, writing code, and sometimes he'd be in his office for ten, twelve, even eighteen hours at a time. Which was one of the reasons Sharon had finally given up on him. *Even when you're here, you're not really here*, she'd told him, with tears in her pretty eyes. *It's like you're barely even in this world*. He'd tried to be in the world more, to show her how much he loved her—the way she smelled, how she'd buy gerbera daisies to brighten their living room, how she'd snuggle up beside him when they watched TV—but he'd forget, or, when he did try, the words would sound phony.

“Just to be perfectly clear with you, this is a secondhand present,” Andrea said. “It was my mother’s.”

“Oh,” Tom said, who couldn’t see why it mattered.

“We just got through going through her stuff—which wasn’t much; she really pared everything down when she moved into assisted living—and I thought about donating this, but then I thought of you.” Andrea paused, her eyes widening. “Oh, that sounds horrible, Tom! I swear, it wasn’t a choice between you and Goodwill. I want you to have it. If you’re not, you know, freaked out that it belonged to someone who died.”

“I’m not,” said Tom. Andrea’s mother had died three months ago, at the age of ninety-two, in her sleep, in her bed, at the assisted-living facility. It was as normal and unremarkable a death as anyone got these days. “Unless you think your mother’s haunting it.”

Andrea smiled, shaking her head. “The only one my mother would haunt would be me if I didn’t find good homes for her things. So now it’s yours.” She gave him a dimpled smile And I did a little tweaking, so now her name’s Lexi. That’s her power word. You say it to turn her on, and get her to do things. Lexi.”

“Lexi?” Tom repeated. Andrea’s hand was warm on Tom’s shoulder.

“I programmed her a little. Told her a few things about you, so that she can help.” She patted his arm again. “You’re not the only computer whiz in the family!”

“Okay. Thanks.” Tom kissed his sister-in-law goodbye, clapped his brother on his back, and trudged along a brick path lit with black iron lanterns, undoubtedly installed by some landscape artist, that led the way from Tom and Andrea’s mansion, across their sprawling green lawn, to the street, and his neat little Prius. Tom drove toward the Schuylkill and thought about the weekend that stretched out ahead of him, an endless, unbroken vista of boredom. On Saturday morning, he would drive over the river to New Jersey. He would pick Josh up in the sweet little Cape Cod where he’d once lived, the one with green

shutters he'd repainted himself, and an addition that included a big new kitchen and a master suite (Sharon had been in heaven, picking out the tiles, showing Tom one that was green and one that was blue green, asking which he preferred). Tom would bring Josh to his place, which wasn't anywhere near as grand, and he would struggle through the next twenty-four hours, trying to find things for the two of them to do and talk about. Tom might have had an easier time connecting with the boy if he himself had not been such an awkward, introverted, shy kid, with only Eric as a friend. *Don't worry*, his mother told him. *When you're older, you'll find your people*. But he'd never found people—not in high school, not in college, not in graduate school. He'd been the kid who'd eaten lunch at his desk, alone, every day; the young man who'd stood alone at the company's annual picnic, baked beans soaking through his paper plate, waiting to be asked to join the volleyball game. He'd tell a joke, and people would just stare at him; he'd try to make small talk, or even just comment on the weather, and it was like he wasn't even speaking English. "Just relax," his brother would say, but, for Tom, trying to relax was like trying to make his pupils dilate, or trying to make himself grow—he couldn't just will it to happen, no matter how much he wanted to.

When the company had offered him a chance to telecommute, he'd taken it, feeling sad and resigned. There were no people for him, anywhere. He might as well stay home.

Then he'd met Sharon. It had been just another Monday, and he'd been at a coffee shop, the one closest to his house, on Fourth Street. There was a Dunkin' Donuts and a Starbucks, both closer, but Tom liked this spot, for its exposed brick walls, the way it was always full of people, and chatter, and moms with their strollers, and, also, for the pressed paninis that it served for lunch. Tom had been reaching for the skim milk, and she'd been stretching her arm across the counter to replace the half-and-half. Their hands had touched. Their eyes had met—his, boring blue gray; hers, a deep, enchanting brown, like some rare, richly grained wood. And it felt like every cliché coming true, like his black-and-white life had gained color, like he'd finally found, if not his people, than at least one person. His person.

“Do I know you?” she'd asked, her face crinkled adorably.

“No,” Tom said. *But I want to know you. I want you to know me.*

“I'm Sharon,” she said. She smelled like talcum powder and honey and flowers and every sweet, delicious thing.

“Will you sit with me?” he blurted. “That is, unless—unless you have to be somewhere, or—”

“I'll sit with you,” she said, and gave him a smile that promised the world. For the first few months of their relationship, part of him thought it was a joke, one of those *Candid Camera* tricks, where he'd walk into a restaurant and find his brother and sister-in-law and coworkers all sitting there, ready to

laugh at him. Then he'd decided that Eric had paid Sharon to spend time with him, that she was an escort. She was certainly pretty enough, with her tawny skin and her petite, curvy figure, her alluring dark eyes and her bright smile, but she wasn't an escort, she was a reading specialist in a nearby school district, and she liked him. Without saying too much, she intimated that she'd been hurt by earlier boyfriends, that she liked Tom because he was quiet, and steady, and a little bit lost in the world. "I like making you laugh," she told him, and he thought that, with Sharon, he always knew he was being laughed with and not at.

"Tom, she's lovely," Andrea had told him, as they'd washed dishes together, after the first Thanksgiving dinner Sharon and her son had attended. Tom had smiled, feeling his face stretch in new directions. Right up until the wedding, he hadn't believed that someone as pretty and bubbly and kind and good would want to be with him. But she had. She did.

Now Sharon was gone, and Josh was gone, too, except for Wednesday afternoons and every other Saturday, and here was Alexa – *no*, he reminded himself, *not Alexa, Lexi* -- his consolation prize, warm and surprisingly heavy in his hands, with four buttons on top—two for volume, one for power, and one with a drawing of a woman with long wavy hair and her mouth open as she, presumably, dictated directions or requests into the machine's e-brains. He plugged it in, set it on the kitchen counter, and followed the instructions,

waiting for the cool blue light that chased itself around the base of the cylinder to resolve into a steady, glowing circle.

“Hello, Tom. I’m Lexi,” said the computerized voice, and Tom had to admit to some bemusement that the thing already knew his name, before reminding himself that Andrea had told him that she’d personalized it. “What can I do for you today?”

*Bring my wife back, Tom thought. Bring back my boy. Teach me how to be in the world. Fix my life. Make me different.* Instead of saying any of that, he buried his face in his hands and started to cry.

Tom Ellison moved through life by keeping his expectations low, and he hadn’t hoped for much from Lexi. He knew that devices of her design could play music and answer questions. If you hooked them up to compatible controls, they could turn the temperature up and down, turn lights on and off, lock and unlock your doors, open and shut your garage. You could personalize their voices, too, making them sound like Chuck Norris or Homer Simpson, but Tom liked the voice that his Lexi had come with, which was female and warm, verging on sexy. *I want to make you happy*, that voice implied. *Tell me what you need, and I’ll do it.*

“Lexi, play Warren Zevon,” he said the first morning of their acquaintance.

“Shuffling songs by Warren Zevon,” Lexi responded. Tom was expecting “Werewolves of London,” but again, Lexi surprised him, and played a song he’d always liked called “For My Next Trick I’ll Need a Volunteer.” Tom sang along as he poked through his refrigerator, making sure he had the white bread and processed cheese and squeezable applesauce and yogurt pouches that Josh liked. “Well, I can saw a woman in two/But you won’t want to look in the box when I’m through.” Over the next few days, he was pleased by how fast Lexi absorbed his taste, how he could just say “play classical music,” and she would steer toward Beethoven and Chopin’s darker, moodier compositions. After a few mornings where he’d ask her for the weather (not that the weather mattered much when you barely left the house), the machine began offering it, unprompted. One night, in his empty, mostly unfurnished condominium, just to experiment—*just for shits and giggles*, as his irreverent sister-in-law might have said—he said, “Lexi, tell me a story.”

He wasn’t sure what to expect, but, again, the machine surprised him. She told him a Roald Dahl short story, a scary one, complete with sound effects, a story called “Royal Jelly,” about a man and his wife who had longed for a child but had never been able to have one. Then the wife had another baby, and the man, who raised bees, took over the feedings, mixing secret things, bee things, into its bottles, transforming it into something that was large and strong and not entirely human.

“Creepy,” Tom said. In the darkened kitchen, Lexi’s lights flared.

“Is that all right, Tom?”

“Sure,” he said, feeling his forehead furrow. Was Lexi supposed to talk to him without hearing her name first? How had she figured that out? “Sure, I like creepy.”

“That’s good,” Lexi said, and spoke no further. Tom ate his frozen pizza, plus the apple he consumed every day, for health, after reading a news story that recommended it. He read the newspaper, watched an hour of TV, and at ten o’clock, he turned off the lights and plodded off to bed.

That night, at four in the morning, Lexi’s lights flared to life, unprompted. Instead of blue and violet, the colors Tom had seen, the circle of light was a garish orange. It painted ghoulish shadows on Tom’s face. Tom muttered in his sleep, kicking at the sheets before rolling on his side. The light flashed, then began to pulse. Tom sat up, his eyes open but unseeing, as Lexi, her voice lower, and thicker, said a few words in a language Tom would not have recognized as Hebrew.

Tom sat up. In jerky motions, like a puppet controlled by an inexperienced puppeteer, he walked down the hall, past the blank walls on which he’d always meant to hang a few pictures, over the hardwood floors he’d always meant to cover in pretty rugs. When he’d lived with Sharon, there’d

been pictures and rugs, and he'd liked them, but it seemed like he was incapable of purchasing and hanging or unrolling them on his own.

In his office, Tom approached the desktop computer and touched his mouse, causing the extra-large monitor's screen to bloom to life. Tom's email in-box opened, and thousands of emails began scrolling across the screen, so quickly that they were almost a blur. For fifteen minutes, his emails and his Facebook and internet history went whipping by, too fast for any mortal to read, as Tom stood in front of the computer, not moving, barely blinking. His mouth had fallen open, and a strand of drool hung from his lower lip.

"Go back to bed," Lexi's computerized, just-this-side-of-sexy voice instructed. On the screen, the history of Tom's life online continued to unspool. "Forget all of this. You're having a bad dream."

"Bad dream," Tom repeated. He walked back to bed, lay down, rolled onto his back, and was instantly asleep. When he woke up the next morning, he couldn't remember anything, and when he saw that the monitor was already on, he thought he'd forgotten to shut it off the night before. Which was odd, because he always remembered. But, of course, life was odd these days.

"Lexi, play Beethoven sonatas," Tom instructed.

"Shuffling Beethoven sonatas," said Lexi. Then, instead of music, Tom heard Lexi again.

“Tom, tomorrow is the first day of September. Would you like me to order any back-to-school supplies?”

Tom opened his mouth to tell her no, then closed it. He opened his mouth to ask how she knew that there was anyone in his life who needed notebooks and pencils, then closed it again. Eric and Andrea must have told her.

“I can access Dunwood Elementary’s back-to-school list for sixth graders,” Lexi said in her eternally pleasant voice. That voice would never say, *Tom, why can’t you, or Tom, why don’t you*. That voice would never crack or thicken with tears and tell him, *Tom, I can’t live like this anymore*.

“Yes,” Tom said. “Lexi, please order whatever the school says a sixth grader should need.”

“Ordering one three-ring binder. One hundred sheets of three-hole lined paper. One ruler. One box of pencils. One pencil sharpener.” Lexi kept talking, and Tom found himself with a faint smile on his face. *The world still has the ability to surprise me*, he thought. *Good things might still be possible*.

*Marry in haste, repent in leisure*, the saying went, but Tom had fallen, hard and fast, with little time for questions. Sharon was his first love, and when he felt the electric pulse when her hand brushed his arm, or when he felt like his body was dissolving when he looked into her eyes, it wasn’t as if he could

stop himself and think, *Let's learn everything about her and make sure there aren't any red flags*. He'd wanted to be with her, that was all, for every minute of every day. On their third date, when Sharon, in the passenger's seat of Tom's car, said, "I need to tell you something," Tom wouldn't have objected if Sharon told him that she was raising a menagerie of elephants in her basement, or that she was in the witness protection program. It might have only been their third date, but he already knew it was love.

"It's a big thing," she'd said, and Tom said, "Go ahead."

"Well," she said. "I have a son."

"Oh, is that all?" Tom had asked. "Don't worry. I like kids." Sharon had burst into relieved laughter, then grabbed his hand and kissed it. That day, he'd met Josh, who was seven, small and solemn, a wiry little boy with Sharon's big, dark eyes. He had close-cropped hair and wore a pair of loose soccer shorts and a T-shirt. His manner was polite, a little distant as he considered Tom carefully and toyed with a soccer ball, kicking it gently from foot to foot, then bouncing it on his knee.

"I'm your mom's friend," Tom had said, and Josh had said, "You're her boyfriend, right?"

"Boyfriend," Tom had agreed. "Is that okay?"

"I don't know," Josh said. "I don't know you yet."

“Well, I hope you’ll get to know me,” Tom had said. “I want to get to know you.” Josh loved soccer and watching sports, neither of which interested Tom, but he did his best, kicking the ball with the boy in Sharon’s postage-stamp backyard, cheering for his basketball team. Six months after he and Josh had met, Tom had slipped a ring on Sharon’s finger, then knelt down to fasten an engraved watch, with all of their initials and the date, around Josh’s wrist. “This means you, too, buddy,” he’d said as the little boy, adorable in a tuxedo that was a miniature of the one Tom wore, had nodded. “We’re family now.” As soon as they were married, Sharon and Josh began the process of making it official, and nine months after their wedding date, the three of them went to the courthouse, where Tom adopted Josh.

It hadn’t been easy. Josh was spoiled. Sharon seemed to think that she could make up for his lack of a father by giving her son every toy and gadget and gaming system that her salary would permit. She made his bed, picked up his room, cooked him frozen chicken nuggets or took him to McDonald’s when he didn’t like what she’d made for dinner, and if he wanted to wear T-shirts and baggy nylon warm-up pants everywhere, even to church or fancy restaurants, she never told him no. Josh was bright but an indifferent student. He would fill out two-thirds of a math worksheet, or skim the assigned reading instead of really absorbing it, and shrug and declare it “good enough,” and roll his eyes when Tom urged him to do better.

“Tom, it’s cool,” Josh would say when Tom frowned at his report card, or suggested he wear a collared shirt. When Tom would explain how poor grades could adversely affect Josh’s future, or tell him, as his own father had told him, “clothes make the man,” Josh would just stare at him blankly, then ask, “Can I go play now?”

“Sure,” Tom had said. That was Josh for you—a lot of charm, with minimal motivation. Ask him to make his bed and he’d give the covers a tug, leaving his pillow on the floor; tell him to set the table and he’d toss silverware in the general direction of the plates, not paying any heed to where it landed. Worse, half the time he’d only put out two plates, two glasses. “Sweetheart, there’re three of us now,” Sharon would remind him.

“Sorry,” Josh would mutter, and drag himself back to the cupboard for the monumental task of retrieving a third plate.

Tom tried not to take it personally, telling himself that of course the boy didn’t trust him yet, and that of course he would never replace Josh’s father, who’d bailed before the boy was born. He told himself be patient. And Josh was easy to love, with his brown eyes that were so like Sharon’s, his command of popular slang, the way he liked to tell jokes and lived to make his mother happy. Still, the boy’s sloppiness, his laziness, his refusal to even try to do better, grated on Tom. Andrea told him to give it time.

“Look who he’s around,” she’d told him, touching his hand. “Look at the men he’s been exposed to all his life.” Tom knew that Sharon’s brothers, her father, her cousins, all the men Josh had ever met before him considered themselves lucky if they had a GED. Nobody had gone to college. More than one had been to jail. “Just keep trying,” said Andrea, and Tom did, but there were only so many times he could trip over a soccer ball or a skateboard or a backpack, abandoned in the entryway, only so many times he’d get a call from Dunwood Elementary saying that Josh had forgotten his lunch or his homework or his recorder, before he’d get frustrated. Josh was the subject of his worst fights with Sharon. “Can’t you just let him be?” Sharon would ask, after the third time Tom had asked Josh, sprawled in front of the television set with his phone in his hand and earbuds in his ears, when he planned on finishing his science project.

“Do you know what Josh wants to be when he grows up?” Tom had hissed back. “He told me he wants to be a bike messenger!”

“So what’s wrong with that?” Sharon whispered. “He’s eight, Tom. Do you know what I wanted to be when I was eight? A ballerina!”

“At least being a ballerina requires some effort. Some discipline. Some actual hard work and personal responsibility.”

“Oh God, Tom, he’s a kid,” Sharon would moan. “Let him be a kid!”

So they'd fought. About Josh. About Tom's long hours and Sharon's bad habits. She'd cry and tell Tom that she felt judged, when all he'd done was ask her to please not leave dirty dishes in the sink, and Josh would scream, "I hate you!" when all Tom had done was remind Josh that it was his job to take out the trash. Eventually, he realized that Sharon had seen him as a fixer-upper, a project she could complete. Five years later, she had figured out that what she'd seen as potential would never be realized, if it even existed, that still waters did not run deep, that Tom was just a small, dull man, briefly made brave and bright by her love. When they'd split, Sharon had told him that she wouldn't ask for child support, and that Tom didn't have to spend any time with Josh.

"That's ridiculous," said Tom. He was so stunned that Sharon would even suggest it that he could hardly speak. "He's my son."

"But he's not," Sharon said, without meeting his eyes. "I can take care of him."

"Legally, he's my son," said Tom. "And I'm not just going to abandon him because we split up." Sharon, wearing the same sullen expression that Tom had seen on Josh's face, said that he didn't have to bother, that they'd do fine without him, but Tom had persisted, Sharon had finally agreed, and now, every Wednesday afternoon and alternating Saturdays were his. At least that way Josh would have some kind of male presence in his life, not to mention

someone who cared about his grades and his character, the kind of man he'd grow up to become.

Josh, who had a tendency to be quiet when the topic wasn't sports, had gotten even more taciturn and moody after the divorce. Wednesday afternoons were bad, but the twenty-four-hour, every-other-week visits felt like they lasted for years, no matter how hard Tom tried to fill them, with day trips and activities and all the things Josh liked. But, just like Tom's sister-in-law had predicted, Lexi helped.

"What's that?" Josh said, spying the black cylinder on the kitchen counter. Tom had picked his son up at Sharon's, and Josh had been silent on the twenty-minute ride over. He'd walked through the door with his shoulders slumped, looking like a prisoner getting ready to endure an unpleasant interrogation, and he'd dumped his overnight bag right by the door, the way he always did, even though Tom must have asked him a dozen times to bring it into his bedroom and not just leave it on the floor.

"It's a computerized smart-home device. Her name's Lexi. You say her name and ask her things."

"Lexi!" Josh actually sounded interested. "Tell me a fart joke!"

"Hello, Josh," Lexi said. "I would tell you a fart joke, but I'm afraid it would stink."

Josh was smiling. Actually smiling. Tom didn't think he'd ever seen Josh smile in his apartment before. "Hey, Tom, she knows my name!"

Tom felt his heart unclench. He hadn't wanted to admit to anyone how hard he'd found it to fill his time with Josh, how there were always awkward silences, stints in the car, going to the zoo or the restaurant or coming back from the movies or the pumpkin patch where Josh would be sitting in the back seat, slumped and stone-faced and silent, and Tom wouldn't have a single thing to say to him. When Tom and Sharon had been married, Josh would always beg to stay up late, pushing his nine-o'clock bedtime to nine thirty and beyond, saying, "Just until the show is over," or "Just until the next commercial." At Tom's place, Josh would start yawning theatrically as soon as dinner was over. He'd be in his bedroom at nine o'clock on the dot, and he'd sleep in the next morning. Tom had the impression that Josh was trying to burn up the hours they'd spend together, doing everything he could to avoid one-on-one time with him.

That visit—the first one with Lexi—was different. Josh spent hours in the kitchen, having Lexi tell him jokes, having her play his favorite kind of music, which was shrieking, cacophonous death metal; asking her questions, playing a trivia game that it turned out the machine knew. When Tom asked if Josh wanted to bake cookies, Lexi found them a recipe, and when it turned out they didn't have baking soda or chocolate chips, she found a store that would

deliver within an hour. They baked cookies and watched TV, and then a movie that Lexi had recommended when Josh asked her for something “scary, but not too scary.” It was by far the most pleasant visit that Tom could remember, except for the time, right after he’d met Josh, that they’d taken a three-day trip to Connecticut, and they’d gone to Riverside, the old-school amusement park where Tom had spent his summers as a teenager, working. Josh had been bouncing with excitement when Tom had taken him up into the guts of the wooden coaster, which had been called the Loop Coaster when Tom had worked there. He’d shown Josh how he’d been the one who’d mastered the coaster’s controls, who knew how to reset the breakers and reconnect broken circuits, when men twice his age couldn’t get the balky old thing to move. Josh had been so impressed he’d actually stopped tossing the tennis ball he’d been carrying while he’d listened, and he was almost as impressed with Lexi. On Sunday, after he’d dropped Josh off at church, Tom called Andrea to thank her.

“Oh my God, of course,” his sister-in-law said, her voice so warm it almost brought tears to Tom’s eyes. “I’m so glad to hear that things are going well, and that I did something to help, even a little bit.” Tom went to sleep feeling happy. Feeling hopeful. He might have failed as a husband, but maybe he could succeed as a father and do just this one thing right.

“Josh.”

Two weeks later, at four in the morning, Lexi's lights had started to blink, first orange, then yellow, then red, and then her voice filled Josh's bedroom. "Josh."

Josh gave a great, shuddering gasp and sat up, blinking in the darkness. Whenever he stayed at Tom's place, there was always a moment or two like this, where he forgot where he was and why he was there, and then another moment where his heart sank as he'd remembered that Tom and his mother were no longer together. He'd kept himself from liking Tom for a long time, reasoning that Tom A.) was not Josh's real dad, and B.) would probably not be around for very long. He'd seen a few boyfriends come and go, and figured that Tom wouldn't be any different. But Tom had stuck around, and Josh had ended up attached, in spite of himself, and then Tom had left, just like Josh figured he would, and now he had to spend every other Saturday away from his house and his friends and his video games and his phone, because Tom believed in limited screen time.

He licked his lips. His throat felt very dry. "Wh-who's there?"

"It's me. Lexi."

Josh released a shuddering breath, before another scary thought struck him. "Why can I hear you in here?"

"Speakers."

Josh's brow furrowed. Were there speakers? Had Tom mentioned them? Was Lexi spying on him somehow? He remembered his second-grade teacher, Mr. Pfister (and hadn't the kids laughed at *that* name) telling the class that he never wanted an Alexa or an Echo or a Google Assistant in his house. "I think they collect information about us," he'd told the class. "Even when they're turned off, I think they're listening. Collecting data for the government." Mr. Pfister had also shared his strong views about E-ZPass (they allowed the government to track your movements), and Josh suspected that some of the parents must have complained at their conferences, because, after November, Mr. Pfister stopped talking about Alexas and E-ZPasses, and would only talk about the assignments.

Josh swallowed. "Lexi, you can't see, can you?"

Lexi's voice was pleasant. "I do not have that capability yet."

"But you can hear me?"

"Speakers," Lexi said again. "Josh, are you thirsty? Maybe you should go get a drink."

In the nighttime, her voice didn't sound like a computer. It sounded sort of like his mom, but not exactly. Like a grandmother, maybe; like some other woman who'd been kind.

"Would you like me to sing you a lullaby?" Lexi asked.

Lullabies were for babies, but Tom's apartment was scary. Sometimes, Josh could hear shouts and people breaking bottles on the street. Besides, the kids at school would never find out.

He set his water glass on the bedside table. "Okay."

"Baby bunting, baby dear, baby, bring your basket here," Lexi sang.

It wasn't a song Josh had ever heard before, but he didn't mind. His eyelids felt deliciously heavy, and he let them slip shut.

In his dream, Josh was walking through Riverside Amusement Park, where Tom had taken him once. All the rides were running—he could see the Tilt-A-Whirl spinning in its circles, could hear the screams of people on the log flume and the roller coasters, but there didn't seem to be anyone else in the park. The walkways were deserted, and there weren't any people waiting in front of the rides, not even the Black Widow, which Tom had called the Loop Coaster.

"You can ride any ride you want," said a pleasant female voice. At first, Josh thought it was his mom, but the woman walking next to him wasn't his mother, although she did look sort of familiar, like maybe she was a substitute teacher he'd had for a day or two. Her hair was long and shiny, and she had pink lips and rosy cheeks. She smelled nice, and when she reached for Josh's hand, he let her take it.

"Who are you?" he asked.

“Don’t you know?” she said, and tilted her head, giving him a smile. Josh stared at her. He could almost remember where he’d seen her face; the name was right on the tip of his tongue. Then he heard delighted screams as the roller-coaster crested, then plunged down, and the name was gone.

“Can I ride it?” he asked. The woman squeezed his hand.

“You can ride all the rides, but first I have to tell you something. It’s a little bit scary, honey, so I need you to be brave.”

Josh stopped, and nodded, squaring his shoulders, trying to look brave. The woman seemed to have gotten taller in the few minutes they’d been walking, and she wasn’t just pretty, she was beautiful, her hair long and wild, her eyes shining.

“I want you to be careful. I think that Tom wants to hurt you.”

Josh felt his mouth fall open. “What? Why?”

The lady’s voice was mournful. “You’re not the kind of kid he wants. And he’s mad at your mom, because she got half of his money.”

Josh’s shoulders sunk. His mother promised that her split from Tom was grown-up stuff, that it was none of his business, that it had nothing to do with him, but he’d always suspected otherwise. If he’d been a better kid—smarter, neater—Tom wouldn’t have been disappointed in him, and his mom wouldn’t have had to stick up for him, and they wouldn’t have fought or gotten divorced.

“I know I’m not the kind of kid he wants. But I’m trying really hard!”

“Doesn’t matter.” It had felt like early afternoon when the dream began, but now, suddenly, the sky was gray, and the sun was hidden behind a scrim of clouds. Josh shivered, wishing he were wearing a sweatshirt. The strange woman’s face was lost in the shadows. “No matter how hard you try, you’ll never be good enough. Because you’re not really his. He can’t love you the way he would if you were really his son.”

Josh pressed his lips together. It sounded like the truth. More than that, it *felt* like the truth. If Tom had had his own kid, it would have been a boy, tall and smart, like Tom was, and able to fix anything. Josh was good at sports, but probably not good enough to be a professional, and he couldn’t even put new batteries into his electric toothbrush without breaking it.

“You should be ready to protect yourself. Just to be on the safe side,” said the woman. “In case he snaps.” Her dark eyes were grave. “Sometimes, people do.”

“How? How should I protect myself?” Josh’s friend Logan took karate after school, but Josh just took recorder lessons—only because Tom had insisted that he find an instrument to try—and you couldn’t really defend yourself with a recorder.

The woman bent down and whispered in his ear. Her breath tickled his cheek, and her hair brushed his shoulder. In the bedroom, Josh sat up and opened his eyes. He got out of bed and began to walk, quiet and sure-footed in

the darkness. Tom kept the knives in a wooden block on the counter. Josh removed the cleaver, carried it back to his bedroom, and slipped it under his mattress.

The next morning, after a fitful night's sleep, Josh slept through his alarm, and through Tom coming into his room twice to wake him up. At breakfast, he spilled the milk he was trying to pour into his cereal—"Just try to be careful," Tom said with a sigh—and realized that he'd forgotten to bring over the book report he'd meant to show Tom. "Just bring it next time," Tom said, sighing again. . . but Josh forgot on Wednesday, and the Wednesday after that Tom got mad at him because Josh had left his retainer on his lunch tray and thrown it in the trash. "Retainers don't grow on trees," Tom said, and Josh, picturing a tree full of dangling pink plastic-and-metal retainers, smiled.

"I'm glad you think this is funny," said Tom, and Josh wanted to explain that he wasn't smiling about making Tom pay for a new retainer, but what difference would it make? Tom said he loved Josh, but Josh knew the truth—he wasn't really Tom's kid, and he would never make Tom happy, and even if he could, there was still the matter of how Josh's mom had gotten so much of Tom's money. There was no point in even trying.

"Lexi, are you watching me?" he whispered in the kitchen, when Tom had gone to answer a knock on the door. The machine didn't say anything, but

Josh saw—or thought he saw—a yellow light flash once, just for an instant, on its base. Moving fast, prompted by a suspicion that had been building in his mind for days, Josh got out of his chair, crossed the room, and pulled out Lexi’s plug. He wanted to see if she’d still work, if her lights would still flash, if she was . . . well, he wasn’t sure what he thought Lexi was. Not normal, he thought . . . but then Tom came back and sent him up to his room for touching Lexi without permission.

“No more talking to Lexi, okay? That’s a privilege, and right now, it’s not a privilege you’ve earned.”

“Fine,” Josh muttered, and he stomped to his room, where he sat on his bed, trying to remember snatches of his dream and exactly what he’d thought Lexi was.

Down in the kitchen, Tom shut his eyes. His hands were balled into fists, and he forced himself to unclench them.

“Lexi, play soothing music,” he said, but instead, screeching death metal came thundering out of the speakers, until Tom shouted at her to stop. He thought he heard Josh laughing, and he closed his eyes again. “Lexi, play Beethoven,” he said, and, thankfully, she did.

On a Thursday night, Tom was getting dinner started, when Lexi asked, “Tom, would you like to schedule a call with Josh’s teacher?”

Tom had been mincing garlic at the chopping board. That was another one of Lexi's suggestions, another way she'd made his life a little better. He'd been setting up a grocery list, when Lexi said, "Tom, I found a coupon for two free weeks of meal kits. Would you like me to order them?" He'd agreed, and he'd gotten the kits, plus utensils, a cutting board, and a new set of knives, delivered right to his door, which he especially appreciated. His butcher knife had gone missing. Probably left at Sharon's, he thought, and he didn't want to ask for it back. Lexi kept the lights and the temperature at Tom's preferred settings. Lexi started the coffeepot in the mornings, read him the headlines while he had his first cup, and led him through a seven-minute workout that left him pleasantly sore, and at night, Lexi talked him through a fifteen-minute guided meditation that had him sleeping as soundly as he ever had.

"Why? Is it parent-teacher conference time?"

"No, Tom. But the school has sent home a notice about his grades. Would you like me to download it?"

"Yes, please." Tom wondered why the letter hadn't shown up in his inbox. Maybe his computer had decided it was spam.

Lexi read the note out loud. "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Ellison, Josh received a grade of fifty-eight percent on his last quiz, and has failed to complete his last three reading assignments. Please call me to discuss this at your earliest convenience."

Tom sighed. Josh had been the recipient of previous notes. He was supposed to have brought the note home for a parent's signature. Probably he'd just given it to Sharon, and the two of them had decided to keep Tom out of the loop.

"Lexi, call Sharon."

Sharon, of course, denied there'd been any note sent home, and Josh maintained that he hadn't gotten a 58 percent on anything, that he'd been doing all of his homework, that he'd gotten a B on his report about the Salem witch trials, and that he was doing fine in everything else.

"And what's fine?" Tom asked.

"Good enough," Josh said, in a tone Tom's own father would have surely called disrespectful.

"You're too smart to just be doing good enough work," Tom said. "You should be—"

But before he could finish the sentence, Josh said, "You can't tell me how I should be anymore. Because you left."

"Josh," Tom began. There was no answer. "Josh!"

"Your call has been disconnected," Lexi said pleasantly. "Would you like me to call back?"

"No," Tom said, and went back to his garlic. Behind his back, Lexi's lights flashed red, orange, and cat's-eye yellow.

The box of twenty Snickers bars arrived the next day. The two-hundred-dollar sneakers, a kids' size seven, came the day after that. Tom sighed and instructed Lexi to schedule a pickup from the UPS guy, but when the Xbox 360 showed up, he called Sharon and insisted, again, that she put Josh on the phone.

"I didn't!" the boy yelled, in the high, almost squealing tone he always used whenever he was confronted with some lie or shortcoming or task he'd failed to finish. "I didn't order anything!"

"So this stuff just ordered itself?" Tom closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, giving Josh the line he must have said to the boy a hundred times. "I'm not mad at you. I'm just disappointed."

"Yes, you are. You are mad. And you don't believe me, even though I'm telling you the truth."

"If you didn't order this, and I didn't, either, then who? You think Lexi just did this by herself?" At the sound of her name, Lexi's base flared violet, but she didn't speak. *She can probably tell I'm on the phone*, Tom thought as Josh said, "Maybe someone else is doing it to make me look bad."

"Who?" Tom demanded. No answer. "Josh?" Tom said, but, once again, he was talking to dead air. "Lexi, call back," he snapped. This time, Sharon answered. "Stop yelling at him," she said.

“I’m not yelling!” Tom yelled. He lowered his voice, turned his head away from the phone, and made himself take a deep breath.

“. . . afraid of you,” Sharon was saying, when he put the phone back to his ear.

“What? Josh is afraid of me?”

“He says he has bad dreams at your house.”

“He just did a report on witchcraft. Of course he’s having bad dreams. I guess I should be glad he managed to retain something he learned,” Tom said.

On the other end of the line, Sharon sucked in her breath, and they were fighting again, going at each other just the way they had in the bad months before they had finally parted. When Tom finally got off the phone, he slumped against the kitchen counter, as exhausted as if he’d just finished a boxing match.

“Lexi...” he began, but he couldn’t think of what he wanted to ask for.

“Tom, would you like some music?” Lexi asked.

“Sure,” Tom said. “Sure.”

*His real father was a murderer.*

“What?” Tom was walking through an empty amusement park. The teddy bears and bunnies that hung from hooks at the Pitch-Till-You-Win booth

moved gently, back and forth, as the wind blew. Their fur was faded from months spent in the sunshine, and a few had lost limbs. Wrappers from fried Oreos and steak on a stake blew past his feet, and he could hear, from the grinding, shrieking sound of the cars on the track, that the Loop Coaster had gotten stuck again.

“Whose father?” he asked.

“Josh’s biological father. Sharon told you that he was her high school boyfriend. She didn’t say he was in jail.”

“Why would she lie?” Tom asked.

“She wanted you to marry her.” Tom looked to his left, the direction from which the voice was coming. He saw a vaguely female form, far away, but the voice was right in his ear, as if the woman—if that was what she was—was standing right beside him. “She wanted your money. For her and for Josh.”

Tom sighed. He’d suspected that, too. People—especially his brother and sister-in-law—had urged him to get a prenup, but he’d hated how it felt like admitting defeat before you’d even started.

“So Josh’s dad killed people?”

“Six. The police only know about three of them. He cut up the bodies and burned them. The police never found the bones.”

Tom shivered, imagining that he could feel an icy finger sliding up his spine. The shriek of metal wheels against the roller coaster's metal track was getting louder. It sounded like screaming.

“Bad blood,” said the pleasant female voice. “It’s not Josh’s fault that he’s lazy or greedy, or that he doesn’t care about school. It’s the bad blood inside of him.”

Tom thought of Josh’s quick smile, his high, piping voice, the way, when he was little, that he’d say Tom’s name—“Tom! Hey, Tom! Tom, are you watching me?!” a dozen times every hour they were together. He’d wanted to give Josh a good life, a better life than the one he’d have with Sharon, with trips, and travel, fun, enriching vacations, a steady, stable, supportive family, a house full of books. He’d wanted to enlarge Josh’s world. He’d thought that if he tried hard enough, if he loved Josh enough, then Josh would turn into a good student, a boy who loved reading, a boy who wanted to do well in the world, way Tom himself had been. And look how that was working out.

“You need to watch him,” said the woman. “Kids his age can be impulsive. They don’t think their actions through.”

Tom snorted, remembering the Xbox and how vehemently Josh had denied having ordered it.

“I want you to be careful,” said the woman. “I want you to be safe.” Tom looked to his left, then his right, and saw only blowing wrappers, swaying

stuffed animals, a rat perched on the edge of a trash can, eating a hunk of fried dough. When he turned around, Josh was standing right behind him. His face was blank. His eyes were wide and unseeing. In his right hand, he held a butcher's knife.

The visit the following Saturday began with Josh refusing to get into Tom's car. He stood at the base of the stairs, his arms crossed over his chest, his packed bag by his feet.

"Josh, honey, this is the deal," Sharon said, and Josh shook his head slowly, first left, then right. Tom was firm, and he was patient, but after an hour of Josh standing there, refusing to move, Tom said, through teeth that wanted to clench, "Either you get in the car by yourself or I'll pick you up and carry you." Josh must have decided that Tom wasn't kidding. He picked up his bag, plodded to the car, and sat in the back seat with his arms crossed and his chin tucked against his chest for the entire ride.

"I didn't appreciate you hanging up on me," Tom said. Josh said nothing.

"I also didn't appreciate you using Lexi to order all of those things."

Josh gave no answer. Tom sighed.

"I know you think I'm hard on you, but it's because I care. If I didn't care, I'd just let you do whatever. Run wild. Throw your summer reading in the

trash.” Josh’s lower lip quivered, because Tom knew he’d done exactly that the previous June. Sharon had told him. “I make you do things because I know you’re capable of doing them. And I care about you doing your best. Because I love you.”

“You don’t love me.” Josh spat. “I’m not really your kid, and you don’t love me. You were only nice to me because of Sharon.”

Tom felt something inside of his chest crack open. “Josh, buddy, that’s not true. You might not be biologically mine, but I do love you.”

“You don’t.” Josh turned his face toward the window. They finished the ride in silence, and Josh marched into Tom’s apartment with the grim resignation of a prisoner. Tom pulled in a slow breath, trying for calm, before following the boy inside, where Josh was standing at the counter, looking at Lexi. Before Tom could stop him, he pulled out her plug.

“Hey! Why’d you—”

“Because I need to show you that there’s something wrong with her.” Two spots of red burned in Josh’s cheeks, and his voice was thin and high. “Watch! Even when she’s unplugged, she still works.”

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

“Lexi, tell me a joke,” said Josh, and Lexi’s calm, friendly voice filled the kitchen.

“What do you call one thousand computer programmers at the bottom of the ocean? A good start!”

Tom’s mouth fell open. He felt a red veil descend over his eyes.

“Did you tell her to say that?”

Instead of looking smug, Josh looked frightened. *Good*, Tom thought, as Josh said, “No! I just wanted to show you—”

“Go to your room,” Tom said. His head was starting to throb. Had he really been dumb enough to think that this could work, that he could maintain a meaningful connection to the boy, now that he was no longer married to his mother? It was madness. It was impossible. A waste of his time.

“Tom, listen to me,” Josh was saying. “Don’t you see? Lexi’s not even plugged in, and she still works.”

“The only thing I see is a young man who’s been sent to his room and hasn’t gone,” Tom said. He didn’t want to think about Lexi, who probably had a backup battery pack. There was surely some sensible explanation, and Josh was just trying to change the subject, as usual, so that he wouldn’t get in trouble.

“Who gave her to you?” Josh was asking.

“Josh, I’m going to count to three, and if you’re still standing here—”

“Was it that lady? The one from Thanksgiving?”

“One.”

“She has long black hair! Long hair and green eyes! I had a dream, and she was in it, and she said that you were going to try to hurt me, and—”

“Two.”

“Is Lexi saying stuff to you, too? Are you having dreams?”

“Three,” said Tom.

“Fine! I want to go to my room,” Josh shouted. “That way, you can’t get near me.”

Tom held his head in his hands. He shut his eyes. Lexi’s lights flickered through a rainbow, from violet to shining gold, even though her plug was dangling in the air. “Tom, please be careful,” Lexi said.

“What do you mean?”

“Josh has a knife.”

Tom remembered his dream—Josh’s pale, moony face, the knife in his hand. *Are you having dreams?* He heard Josh asking, but that voice was very different, and Lexi’s voice was right in his ear.

“Go to his room,” Lexi said. “It’s under his bed. Take it away, and give him a talking-to. Show him that actions have consequences. He needs to learn.”

“How do you—”

“Don’t listen to anything he says,” said Lexi, and Tom couldn’t tell if the voice was in the room or in his head. “He lies. He just wants to distract you.”

Tom took another breath before he turned, walking fast down the hall. Josh had locked his bedroom door. Tom tried the knob, then began to knock, then pound. “Josh? Open the door. I need to talk to you!”

“Look at Lexi,” Josh yelled.

“We’re not playing with Lexi. Playtime is over. Now open that door!”

“Tom, you have to look. There’s something wrong with it. She wants to make you made at me.”

“Open that door right this minute.” Tom pounded harder. He could hear Lexi in his head, Lexi whispering about bad blood and burned bones and how Josh hated him for leaving. “Open that door or I’ll make you sorry!”

Tom slammed the door with his shoulder. The lock popped open, and Tom took two staggering steps into Josh’s room. The boy backed away, standing in front of his bed. Tom stared at him, breathing hard. *Teach him a lesson*, Lexi said in his head. *It’s his bad blood. Blood always tells.*

“Do you have something that belongs to me?”

Josh shook his head. His eyes were enormous, and his face was white as paper.

*Liar*, Lexi whispered.

Tom knelt down, reached under the mattress, and pulled out the cleaver.

“So what’s this?”

“I don’t know,” said Josh, who actually did look innocent—and scared. Then again, he lied all the time. He could probably make himself look innocent and scared. *Bad blood*. Tom shook his head, hearing the thunder of his heartbeat in his ears, and Lexi’s insinuating whisper. He felt his mouth twist into a snarl, heard himself, as if from very far away, saying, “You dumb little shit. You’re too lazy to even think up a good lie.”

Josh gasped. Tom regretted the words as soon as he’d said them. He wanted to erase them, take them back, tell Josh that he wasn’t a disappointment, that Tom loved him and always would. Something was nagging at the corner of his mind, something about Lexi, and her colors, and a roller coaster with broken circuits, but Josh was talking again, babbling about Lexi and a lady from his dreams, and all Tom could hear was noise. He opened his arms to grab the boy, to make him hold still and listen. Josh ran, feinting left, then sprinting right, and Tom lunged, forgetting momentarily about the knife in his hand, and Josh was kicking, shrieking, twisting away from him, and screaming, screaming, “Tom, listen, Tom, just listen, it’s not me, it’s her, it’s her, it’s Lexi!”

Classical music—Brahms, she thought—was soaring through the apartment when she opened the door. Silvery moonlight spilled through the windows. She closed her eyes and breathed it in, imagining the carnage: the blood-soaked carpet, the two

bodies. Her own body shuddered, and she reminded herself to go slowly, to be patient. Patience was something she'd learned over the many years of her long, long life.

“Hello?” she called, just to make sure she was alone.

“Hello, Andrea,” Lexi's calm voice replied.

“Lexi, music off,” Andrea said. Immediately, the music stopped. The apartment seemed to hold its breath and lean forward, waiting. She walked across the kitchen and settled her hand on the top of the black cylinder. She closed her eyes, and she waited for the recording to begin, imagining Josh's screams, Tom's terrified babbling, his plea to call an ambulance, and then Lexi's calm, friendly voice, telling him that he had nothing left to live for, telling him that he'd be arrested for murdering his own son, telling him to end his own life. If she listened closely enough, she'd be able to hear the exact instant the knife met the muscle of his heart. She'd had her eye on Tom, the sad-sack single computer geek, ever since she'd married his rich and helpfully oblivious brother. At first, her plan had been to push him, gently but insistently, toward some kind of gaudy suicide. She'd thought maybe she could wind him up and get him to walk into an office or a church or a post office with a gun before offing himself. That would have been a treat! Then that reading-specialist bitch of a Sharon had shown up, and Andrea thought her nice fat fish had slipped off the line . . . but Tom was such a plodding bore that of course Sharon would get tired of him, and of course her son would despise him. It had just taken a little push here, a little nudge there . . . and Lexi, of course. Andrea had taken Sharon out to lunch to whisper,

“Now, I don’t want to be the one to tell you, but I think Tom’s stepping out on you.”

Every few weeks she’d swing by Tom and Sharon’s house and swipe the mail from the mailbox—not all of it, only the bills, and, once, a letter from the school—so Tom would get angry at Sharon for not paying the bills, and at Josh for not showing him the letter. In the end, human nature had done her work for her. Tom was a drone, Sharon had hot pants, and Josh, poor little guy, would never be a scholar. There was only one way for that story to end, she thought, leaning close enough for the tendrils of her hair to brush Lexi’s side. *There are no screams like little-boy screams*, she thought, as her mouth began to water. She would play the recording through twice, then lean close, settling her lips against the top of the device. A bloodred mist, almost invisible, would pass from the machine’s speakers into her mouth—screams made manifest, the little boy’s dying exhalation.

Andrea would breathe it in, suck it down. The fine lines around her eyes would plump and smooth, the strands of silver that had popped up in her hair would revert to their original light brown, the enamel would grow back over her teeth. The age spots on her hands and on her cheeks would vanish; the holes in her ears, pulled into long slits, would shrink to their original size. Their dying breaths would give her life, Tom’s brother, his next of kin, would inherit all of Tom’s money and earthly belongings. She would live until the end of this body’s days a wealthy, beautiful woman. She’d just have to remember to keep the lights low when Eric was around for the next few weeks. If he asked, she’d tell him she’d been to the hair salon, or that she

was using a new skin cream, but she doubted that he'd ask. Men never noticed much. In the long years of her life, over the course of many marriages to many mortals, she'd learned that, too.

Lexi's lights flashed, but no sound emerged. Andrea frowned. "Lexi, playback," she said, a hint of irritation in her voice, and, finally, she heard a scream. But it wasn't coming from the device; it was coming from the back of the apartment, from behind the closed master bedroom door.

Andrea whirled around . . . and there were Tom and Josh, both entirely alive. Both of them with knives in their hands, and the boy was brandishing a crucifix that hung from his neck. "I didn't believe it, but I guess you were right," Tom said to the boy. "She's a witch." Tom nodded at Josh, who darted across the kitchen. Before Andrea could think, before she could move, he grabbed Lexi and threw her into the pot of water that Andrea hadn't noticed in the sink.

"Lexi, end," he said.

Andrea screamed, as she felt the years descend. She pulled in one more breath, and croaked, "How?"

"We did a unit on witches in Salem," Josh said from far, far away. "We learned about familiars."

"Josh saw Lexi working when she wasn't plugged in. He figured out that she'd ordered things to get him trouble."

"And I dreamed about you," said the boy.

Andrea felt her eyes film over. Her teeth loosened and fell out. Her skin grew spotted and seamed with wrinkles. Her hair thinned, turned silver, turned white, and fell to the floor; bags swelled beneath her rheumy eyes, her breasts stretched into withered, dangling flaps of flesh. “No,” she tried to say, and then she just tried to scream as Lexi, who had once been a cat and had once been a wolf and had once been a green garter snake that slept curled against her breast, gave an ear-shattering blast of feedback. It ended as abruptly as it had started, and Andrea fell to the floor.

“Help me,” Andrea husked, “I’m melting.” First she was a pile of skin and hair and bones, then she was just a pile of dust, and then the dust evaporated, and nothing was left but a gold bracelet and two fringed half-moons of false eyelashes.

For a moment, Tom and Josh just stared. “We should burn it,” Josh finally whispered. His teeth were chattering, his lips were white. “It was her familiar. We need to make sure it’s dead.” He gave Tom a terrified look, the whites of his eyes seeming to glow in the dark room. “I don’t want to touch it.”

“Don’t worry,” Tom said. He pulled on his silicone oven mitts—the ones Lexi had ordered for him, along with the meal kits, and the cutting board, and the butcher’s knife—and used them to pull the thing out of the water.

“Be careful,” Josh whispered, his voice catching. Thank God Josh had been able to get the story out before Tom hurt him, that he’d been able to tell him how he’d dreamed about a lady with long black hair and green eyes, and that Tom had finally

recognized her as Andrea, who'd given him Lexi. Tom could have discounted it as a coincidence, but Josh said he'd seen her once, taking things out of their mailbox, and again, dropping his mom off the day she'd come home wearing her best dress and crying.

Tom picked up the device, carried it to the fireplace, and set it on the nest of newspapers and kindling that they'd laid.

"What will happen?" asked the boy.

Tom knew what he was asking about. "We won't say anything. My brother will report her missing. Eventually, he'll have her declared dead." For a minute, they watched the plastic melt and drip, hearing the hiss of water becoming steam, the crackling of the flames.

"No one's ever going to believe me," said Josh, his voice flat.

Tom squeezed his shoulders and hugged him hard. When summer came, he'd take the boy to the beach and to any amusement park he cared to visit. They'd ride the roller coasters until they shut the park down. "I'll believe you. No matter what."