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Not So Little Things



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CHAPTER 1

In the split second the door was open, I locked eyes with the thin woman, her hair wrapped helmet-like in a scarf. Even with dark circles around her sunken eyes, the tube in her nose leading to a white box hanging off her shoulder, and the ridiculous-looking floral housecoat-type dress, I recognized Mary Jane Edwards instantly.

"Tina, come on, open up." She pounded with more strength than I thought possible. "Is this any way to treat your mother?"

"Go away. You're good at that. Just go away," I said under my breath and leaned on my side of the door. The battle line was drawn. I refused to let the woman who abandoned me when I was nine years old walk into my life like no time had passed.

"Tina, I'm not leaving until we talk," Mary Jane said as she wiggled the door handle.

You've got to be kidding me. Stretching and loosening my jaw, I backed away from her insistence. What on earth could she want from me after all this time? I stared at the door, shaking my head as if the action itself would send the woman away.

"Come on, Christina, we need to talk," she said with a crack in her voice as she wiggled the door handle and tried to force the door open.

With deep breaths in through my nose and then eased out through my mouth, I slowed my hammering heart, a technique I'd learned through years of therapy. But the long-buried memory of being dropped off at Aunt Liddy's house for an hour, only for it to turn into forever, ached all over again. "You haven't had a word to say in over twenty years, and I certainly have nothing to say to you... and don't break my frickin' doorknob." I yanked open the door.

Holding on to the doorframe, Mary Jane took a step forward. "Thank you."

Squeezing my eyes to expel visions from the last time I saw her, I allowed one word to exit my mouth. "Speak."

"I'm not going to talk to you in this hallway." She gripped the hanging white box as if using it for balance. "May I come in? Please?"

Still, the nine-year-old in me refused to budge.

Mary Jane took a breath. With her attempt at more words, she wheezed, which led to chesty coughing.

I winced as this woman, who was practically a stranger, dug a tissue from the purse hanging off her arm. She hiked up the strap on her shoulder, swung the white box to the front of her hip and adjusted a knob. After several deep inhales, she relaxed.

Aunt Liddy would have been horrified had she seen me treat anyone like this, let alone my own mother. Truth be told, my behavior was appalling, even embarrassing, but what was I to do? With my aunt's loving parenting, strategies from a knowledgeable therapist, and emotional support from my bestie, Nissa, I had painstakingly put in place a life that honored my late father, blocked out my estranged mother, and propelled me into an existence all my own, one I thoroughly enjoyed. I owed it to all of us not to go down this rabbit hole.

But I had already stepped on the trigger. The steel jaws had snapped, trapping me between head and heart. With thoughts of hashing things out and never having to see her again, I resigned myself. "Just this once." I lowered my shoulders and prayed I wouldn't regret letting her into my home. L'Air du Temps, the scent of my youth, passed by ever so slightly as Mary Jane entered.

With my forehead pressed against the closed door, I took two deep breaths and got ready for battle. I pulled a rubber band off my wrist, piled my long brunette curls into a bun on the top of my head, and reminded myself that my difficult childhood had very little to do with me and a lot to do with the woman sitting on my couch. I

peeked at the clock: 9:30 a.m. Was it too early to open a bottle of wine? Whipping around, ready to face my past, a loose curl fell down the side of my face. So much for being Miss Tough Guy.

Mary Jane seemed out of place, sitting slumped and focused on her breathing in my living room, which reflected the mid-century home my father had built for her where she always dressed picture-perfect, behaving like royalty. Seeing her now, in her unbecoming pink floral housedress in contrast to my sleek, custom-built, 1920s-inspired, fluted-back, Art Deco couch bewildered me. Who was this woman interrupting the ethos of my condo?

Even with a mildly warming heart, I couldn't let go of my veil of protection. "Talk." She began. "I know it's been a long time, and we have a few things to work out." "A few? Jesus, Mother, you're unbelievable. You. Left. Me. Remember?"

"Will you sit? Please? I need to explain a few things I thought Liddy had told you long ago. I'm surprised she never..." Mary Jane's cough snuck up on her again, but I still refused to sit.

Aunt Liddy? I paced, waiting for Mary Jane to get her cough under control. She had no business bringing Aunt Liddy into this. Liddy was like a mother to me. She had raised me from the age of nine. Liddy took me to buy my first bra. She listened when I lost my first crush and cheered me on when I graduated from high school and college, then moved into my own apartment as I attempted to enter adulthood.

"Aunt Liddy?" I questioned once Mary Jane's cough subsided. "You, Mom. Let's talk about you. I saw you last year at Liddy's funeral. You didn't stick around long enough to talk to me." I paced, unclasped my tense hands, and glued my arms to my sides to keep them from flailing in anger. "You know what? This isn't going to go anywhere. You need to leave. I can't do this. I don't need you to tell me we have to talk because I know there's nothing to say." I marched to the door and yanked it open.

"Tina, I know showing up like this is a shock, but I don't know how much time I have left to straighten things out with you. I have

lung cancer. I've quit my job and would like to be with you during the experimental treatment I've signed up for."

I froze. Oh, no. No way. No way will my mother do this to me. Mary Jane could not come into my home and drop a bomb of this caliber. The walls of my carefully assembled life began to crumble.

"Shut the door, Tina. We really need to talk." She pulled a large folded manilla envelope out of her purse and laid it on the coffee table.

Time slowed as I stared at the envelope with the door ajar and the door knob in my sweaty palm, my heart racing and my body numb. I let out a breath and focused on counting to ten.

Mary Jane continued, "...and I could move in with you just while I go through my treatment? I would like to get to know you. There are things, well, some family history I thought Liddy might have already explained to you. But it recently came to my attention that you know nothing about it."

My head spun around. Did she say move in? Family history? Things I didn't know? "Wait." I held up a hand. "Wait. What did I miss? Back up. You move into this apartment?"

I shoved the door shut once again and stared at Mary Jane. My stomach sank. This was such a bad idea. If only I could release myself from her snare and run to safety.

Any normal daughter would have blurted out, "Of course, Mom. I'm your only child. Where else would you go?" But Mary Jane wasn't any normal mother, and she made sure I wasn't any normal daughter. I had learned over the years that if I wanted to stay in control, if something had to be decided right then and there, then the answer was always no.

"As I was saying," Mary Jane continued, "they say I'll have some good days and some bad days, and the treatments are going to zap my strength. So, if I live here, we'll be able to spend time together on my good days."

Pacing, wanting to open the door again and push Mary Jane out, I scrambled to remember what enjoyable times we had spent

together. There were none. Those memories, if they existed at all, were pushed so far out of my thoughts that they didn't exist anymore.

A disturbing giggle bubbled up from my gut. "You can't be serious?" A manic titter crept from my throat. "No, you can't move in with me. No. No. No." I couldn't shake my head any harder. My demented smile and tone of voice sickened me, but I couldn't help myself. It was as if my brain held my heart in a wrestling hold while the unstoppable words came out of my mouth like hot lava that couldn't wait any longer to flow. "It's not going to happen. There must be a million other places where you can stay. If talking to me is so damn important, I'll come visit you. You must have another husband. Other children? Why can't you stay at your own house?" My fingers dug into my scalp. "You do have one, don't you? Geez, I don't even know where my own mother lives." I whipped around and locked eyes with her. "Do you hear me? I don't even know if you own a home or rent an apartment, or what job you had to quit. Why are you working anyway? You never had to work before."

This was nuts. How had I never thought about where my mother lived or what she was up to? My therapist did such a great job disassociating me from my past, it was a shock to recall it all now as it rushed in like a tsunami. "Don't you see? You cannot live with me. We are no more than strangers."

"Please, Tina. You're an adult, and I'm an adult. I understand. I truly do, which is exactly why I need to stay here with you. We need to spend some time together and..."

"Why now? I'm not a nurse. It takes everything in me to take care of myself. In fact, look around; I don't have a pet or even a plant. Plus, this isn't just where I live. I work here too." I flung my hand in the direction of my home office and workroom. "Nissa and I work here all day, five, sometimes six, or even seven days a week. We meet our clients here. In fact, that's what I should be doing right now, preparing for a delivery. So, please..." I pointed to the door, this time as a suggestion. A plea.

Mary Jane did not attempt to get off the couch, in fact, she settled in. "I know all that, dear," she said, surprising me. "I also know you have a guest room, a spare room you use for storage. Liddy kept me up to date."

One eyebrow raised. The conversation had veered into new territory, and I certainly wasn't going to discuss what options my condo might or might not have to offer.

"Liddy was very proud of what you've accomplished. As am I. Creating a business building miniature historical replicas is pure genius. Your father would have been so proud."

My jaw dropped. I halted my pacing and tensed like a wolf ready to pounce on its prey. "Don't you dare bring up my father."

It was Mary Jane's turn to shake her head. Her shoulders dropped, and I assumed she had surrendered and let me win. But as she sat on my one-of-a-kind couch decelerating her diatribe, it seemed her shoulders lowered out of pity.

"I'm not explaining any of this very well. Liddy kept me informed until the very end. After all, we were best friends before we were sisters-in-law, and we both loved you very much."

I couldn't. I just couldn't... anything... anymore. "Mom. Mary Jane. I don't even know what to call you. I have a lot on my plate right now." I was depleted of all logic, drained of any emotion. This had to end right here and now while I could still think relatively straight. "I have a delivery, a work trip coming up."

"I won't get in the way of all that. I have a nurse, a companion. You'll love her. She'll do all the cooking and make things easy for both of us. Just think of the time you and I could spend together. I know you're upset with me. I want a chance to change that."

"You think. You want." In my exhaustion, I betrayed myself. "What about me?" My stomach burned as cigarette smoke and pearls muddled my view. Repressed memories determined to surface. But long-ago buried questions fueled a second wind. "Don't you think for one second I don't have a lot of questions of my own."

Those answers couldn't be worth having Mary Jane move in. Living without explanations for so long had convinced me they didn't matter anymore. Not until now, anyway. The give in my resolve allowed Mary Jane to circle back around to the reason for her visit.

"And no, I never remarried. There are no other children." Mary Jane scooted to the edge of the couch and placed both palms on the coffee table. Her voice softened. "So, please?"

The thought that I had brought the proud Mary Jane Edwards to begging tore at my heart, the only problem was that it was still broken from before.

As she leaned over in her attempt to stand, the white box propelled forward, almost toppling her head-first. I held back from helping her. With just one inch, I could lose control over my hard-fought life. She caught herself, lifting from a squat to straighten and swung the box behind her. "It's called an oxygen condenser, and he's a pain in the ass. I call him Bob; he's my reluctant sidekick," she said with part jest and part grimace.

Her attempt at humor was foreign to me, a personality trait I always thought had bypassed her. I picked up the forgotten manilla envelope and slid it back where it came from.

She began to pull it out of her purse, only I stepped back out of arm's reach, hinting I wanted nothing from her, so she stuffed it back in with a sigh, then a cough. On her way out, she stopped in front of me. "I understand you need time to think about this, but my time is limited. It's important, so please don't take too long."

As soon as she exited, I closed the door with just a click. I squeezed my eyes shut, releasing my curbed tears. Shaking my head, I said to my now forever-changed home, "The answer is absolutely not. No. Never."

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