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# WHO'S MY FATHER?

Is this Meghan Reynolds?"

I see a name I don't recognize on the screen. *Avery Burnside.* Probably a cold call. But she sounds young, not like a telemarketer. I'm curious.

"If you're Meghan Reynolds, I need to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Don't hang up. It's important. Your dad. Is he Jordan Reynolds?"

I tap the red button, but not before I hear, "If he is, he might be my dad too."

It's a scam.

My cell rings again. I don't pick up, but I listen to the voicemail.

*If you are Meghan Reynolds, please listen. My name is Avery Burnside and I've been having my DNA checked. And it looks like Jordan Reynolds could be my dad. Please, please call me!*

"How irritating," my mother says, when I play the voicemail for her. "I bet It's one of those identity theft things. We should report it. Ask your father."

I'm sitting on the wooden bench in the front hall, waiting, when my dad bursts through the door. It's summer and he's been running in all this heat. His black curls are soaked in spite of the white bandana he's got tied around his forehead. I watch him take a towel from his backpack, wipe his sweaty face and neck. He's all wiry and athletic.

"Hi sweetie," he says. "What's up?"

"I've had a crank call," I tell him. "Mom says you'll know what to do."

"Sure. Give me half an hour to shower and change. I'll be right on it."

That's my dad. He's not like so many fathers who work all the time. He might be the head of Spotswood Finance, but you'd never guess it when he's weeding the vegetable garden with me on Sunday afternoons in torn khaki shorts and a beat up straw hat. He takes me to Charlottesville at least once a month during football season for the UVA games. Helps me with chemistry, edits my essays for English class.

He listens to the voicemail while we sit together on the leather sofa in the den. His hair's still wet from the shower and I can smell Dove shampoo. For a few minutes, he just sits there, saying nothing.

Then, "It's some kind of scam, honey. I wouldn't worry."

"But maybe they're coming after you," I say.

"Not likely, but I'll put somebody on it. My office has a way of checking identity theft."

"Do I have to give you my phone?"

"I have her name and number. That's all I need."

The next evening, I ask Dad what he's found out.

"It's nothing," he says. "My people checked it out. No one's trying to steal my identity. Or yours. It's just a crank call. Forget about it."

But I can't, because Avery Burnside has started sending texts. I don't answer them, of course. And I don't tell Dad. I'm not sure why. The texts vary:

*I've tried to contact your father directly but his phone lines are blocked. So I have to keep bothering you.*

*Why don't you do your own DNA research? Then I'd know for sure. I used Searchgen.*

The most disturbing text is just a photo of a teenage girl with dark curly hair and blue eyes. She looks about my age, seventeen. I delete the other texts, but not this one.

They keep coming; whenever I think she's given up, I hear the little musical phrase that announces a text and there she is. I figure that whoever Avery Burnside is, she's not trying to steal my identity; Dad checked that out. Maybe she's pretending Dad's her father to get money?





My cell rings. It's her. Every instinct tells me not to tap the green button. But what if… ?

"Thank God, you've finally picked up," she says really fast. "Don't hang up. Please. Just listen. I'm not trying to make trouble or scare you. But if Jordan Reynolds is my father, I deserve to know him."

I should hang up, but I don't.

"My mom told me my father disappeared before I was born." She's talking really fast. "She wouldn't tell me who he was. She'd only say I was better off not knowing him. Are you still there?"

I keep quiet, but I don't hang up.

"Then two years ago, Mom got sick with breast cancer. I tried really hard to get her to tell me who my father was before she died, but she wouldn't. Are you still there? The nurses finally made me stop what they called 'haranguing' her. She died last May. Don't you see? I don't have anybody. I have to meet your dad."

"He's not your dad!" I blurt it out.

"The DNA says he *might* be. Look. There are these little kits you can get. All sorts of companies send them. It's easy. You spit into a container, add some fluid they send you, and mail it back."

"Yuk."

"It's science. Just listen. The company emails you all kinds of information, including a list of folks who share some percentage of your DNA," she says. "Those are people, like me, who are looking for relatives. There's information about where they live and how old they are. So you can contact the ones who live near you."

"My dad wouldn't be on any list," I say.

"Of course not. But I found a woman who lives in Virginia and shares around 4% of my DNA. Searchgen predicts she could be my second cousin. I contacted her, and she sent me a genealogy chart she'd had some company prepare. And, bingo, your dad's on it. So are you. There are no other men in her line who are the right age and live in Virginia. So it could be he's my father."

"Stop," I yell.

I hear her call out, "Look at my photo," before I cut the line.

Just four percent of her DNA! I don't believe it. Besides, he's not like that. He doesn't keep secrets. He would never just abandon a child, leave her out there in the world with no father. I know that because of the way he loves *me*.

I think about my fifteenth birthday. Dad gave me the choice of any trip in the whole world: Paris, Rome, New York. Just the two of us. I chose New Orleans, because I'd watched that series on HBO, Treme, and I loved all the jazz and the street scenes.

Dad got us rooms on the top floor of the Monteorleans Hotel in the French Quarter. From the window, you could watch a steamboat moving up and down the Mississippi, which was muddy and brown. The hotel was really fancy. The curtains in my room were some kind of gold material, and there were crystal chandeliers in the lobby. We ate hot puffy beignets for breakfast and took long strolls on Bourbon Street, where everybody was drinking just right there in broad daylight. At a music hall, my dad introduced me to Chris Thomas King, who's won Grammys. My dad knows people.

One afternoon, we wandered through Lafayette Cemetery, where the tombs are as big as houses and all above ground because of flooding. We took turns reading the engravings and taking pictures. There's something about them I'm trying to remember. I take out my cell and sweep back through the photos.

*John Selvedge, 1840-1892.*
*Long lost father of Mildred Calhoun,*
*Now Found, Praise be to God*

*Anna Rendon, born 1834*
*Taken by Our Lord 1870*
*Daughter of Louise Rendon*
*Father unknown*

Of course. It's all those missing fathers. I even pointed it out to Dad at the time.

I remember walking the two and a half miles back to our hotel, trying to keep up with my dad, who walks really fast with his shoulders hunched forward. He threw coins in the hats of sidewalk musicians, laughing and even dancing a step or two to the beat of their banjos.

He couldn't be Avery's father. It would mean he was involved with her mother at the same time he was getting me started. He wouldn't do that to my mom. That's not who he is.





I'm coming out of school and I hear my name. I know that voice. She's taller than I expected, but thin and wiry, and she has those thick, black curls. She's wearing jeans and a white t-shirt with *Blue Ridge Mountains* scrawled across it. And pink high tops.

I walk the other way, pretending I don't recognize her. But she runs to catch up with me.

"I don't want to talk to you," I tell her, as she comes up beside me.

"I expected your hair to be darker," she says. "You don't look as much like him as I do."

"How do you know?"

"Easy. His photo's on the Spotswood Finance website."

I freeze. This girl facing me has my father's deep blue eyes, his bouncy way of walking, with the shoulders hunched forward like he's ready to take off.

"We have to talk," She sounds agitated. "Now. I've driven all the way from Charlottesville."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Look, I'm here. And maybe you're right. Maybe he isn't my father. But I have to know."

I feel sick to my stomach. I want her to disappear. But she stands in front of me, frowning, her face red.

"Can we just walk?" she pleads. Her resemblance to my dad makes me shiver.

I start off down Jackson Street, because none of the school kids live that way. Avery follows right behind me, past doctor's offices, and pharmacies, and produce stores. Neither of us says a word. There's a small park at the end of the street where tangled weeds almost hide a rusty swing set and the maple leaves are starting to turn red. On the other side of the park there's a deserted path bordering the Red River. It's called that because it's full of red mud. She motions me to sit beside her on a bench. It's worn and dirty and I want to run away. But I know she'll follow me. She'll find out where I live and . . .

"Please listen," she begs.

I stand there, looking at the weeds next to the river, not willing to sit.

"I've been bugging you, because I don't have a choice. I told you, my mom died. I live with my aunt outside Charlottesville. She pretends, but she doesn't really care about me. I never had siblings. That's why I have to find out."

I sit down on the bench.

"I don't know why my mother wouldn't tell me who my father was," she says. "I begged her, but she kept it secret. She did tell me one thing; he went to UVA. She met him afterwards when he would come to Charlottesville for football games. She said she wanted me to know he was educated, that I had good genes."

I have to ask. "Did he know about you?"

"She didn't say. He stopped calling her when I was born. So he must have known."

"Why my dad? It could be anybody."

"Did your dad go to UVA?"

He did, but I don't tell her.

"Does he come to UVA games now?"

"Sure. So do millions," I say.

"I know that doesn't prove it, but there's the DNA and the genealogy charts." She hands me a manila folder with papers inside. "Check those out." She grasps my hand. "Look at me. You know I look like him."

"He says you're a scam." I stand up. "He's right. Four percent is no proof. My dad would never do what you're saying. Leave me alone." I run back through the park toward the high school, gasping for breath.

"Check *your* DNA," she calls out. "Then we'll know." Her voice sounds thick, like she's crying.

We're at the dinner table eating pork chops. Dad's telling a story about some kid who showed up at his office with ten dollars, wanting to open an investment account, when the doorbell rings. I stiffen.

Avery follows my mom into the dining room. I can tell from her embroidered black wool mini-dress and knee-high leather boots that she wants to impress us. Impress my dad.

"I told you to leave me alone," I say.

Mom looks surprised. "She told me she was a friend of yours."

"I'm sorry," Avery says. "But there's something I have to know. And if Meghan won't help me, I have to do it this way."

"Do what?" my dad asks. He's smiling, like having some unknown girl burst into our house in the middle of dinner is the most natural thing in the world. But surely he sees . . . He has to.

"I think you could be my father," Avery says. Her voice squeaks.





"Are you crazy?" Mom says.

But Dad puts his hand on Mom's arm to quiet her, then says, "That's absurd." He's still smiling.

Avery shrugs off her backpack and digs deep inside.

"Here are your copies," she says as she pulls a sheaf of papers out of the pack and hands them to Dad. I know those papers.

He reads each page slowly, taking his time. Sitting next to him, I hold my breath. The pork chop sits uneasy in my stomach. Finally, he looks Avery full in the face and smiles.

"I'm truly sorry, young lady," he says, "but these papers prove nothing. I have one daughter, only one. And you have caused that daughter unnecessary anxiety and pain." He puts his arm around me. "I must ask you, from now on, to leave Meghan alone."

Avery sits down in the chair across from us. Her face is red and she looks like she might cry. "Look at me," she says. "No matter what you say, I look like you. I do."

He stands up. "Please, now, leave my house."

"Give me my papers then."

"You said they were my copies. I think I'll hold on to them. If you continue to pester my daughter, I may have to use them."

He says all this in a calm, even friendly voice, like he's being patient with a defiant child. Then he hands Avery her backpack and walks her to the front door.

I hear her sobbing as the door closes.

I can't get it out of my head. The two of them. I want to believe my dad; I do believe him. He couldn't possibly have betrayed my mother. He wouldn't lie to me. But, there the two of them are. Locked In my head. The same black curls, parted on the left, swirling about the ears. The eyes, deep blue, intense. The same sharp shoulders and wiry build. The way they stared at each other across the table, both hunched forward. Did Mom notice? I wonder what she's thinking.

I'm waking up in the middle of the night, arguing with myself, unable to sleep. Every time the doorbell rings, I jump. Every buzz of my phone scares me. And so I open my computer and click on Searchgen. I'm doing this to prove Dad is telling the truth. The DNA test will put this behind me. Because I need to stop thinking about it. I order the kit. When it arrives, I hide it in my underwear drawer for a couple of

weeks, afraid to take the plunge, afraid of the truth. But I've gone this far; I need to know. So I spit into the tube, add the solution, mail it all back and wait.

We're walking together in Charlottesville. It's my spring vacation, and Dad is excited because I will be going to his university next September and he wants to show me everything. Like I haven't walked all over the campus a hundred times before. The Lawn, lined with columns and a long row of one-story brick buildings, where the Seniors get to room if they're lucky. The imposing Rotunda, designed by Thomas Jefferson. The serpentine brick wall, the wood paneled McGregor Room in the library. The rolling hills, now yellow green with new grass. The walnuts and maples, thick with leaves, spreading their branches over the grounds.

I watch him as he races ahead of me, in jeans and an orange and blue jersey with UVA printed on the back, pointing out the room he lived in on the Lawn, the field where he played baseball. He looks so young, my father, so full of joy.

I want to forget what I now know. That this handsome, vital man who is my father is also the father of Avery Burnside. And Avery Burnside is my half-sister. I know that because I now have my own DNA report from Searchgen. And Avery Burnside shows up on my list of relatives as sharing 24.8% of my DNA, which Searchgen predicts to be a half sibling. It's impossible to persuade myself that it's a coincidence.

We're staying in one of those quaint little inns so typical of Charlottesville. A small wood frame house, on a back street, with a wide front porch, small bedrooms, and a parlor full of 18th century furniture. We're sitting after dinner in armchairs with deep velvet cushions in Dad's room, which is the largest in the inn.

I blurt it out. "Dad, I think Avery Burnside might be right."

"God dammit," he explodes, "I don't believe it. You're too smart to believe that pseudo-science shit."

I almost lose my courage, but I have to know. "I want you to tell me the truth," I say. My voice breaks.

"I have. This is crazy, Meghan. I've read all about it. Those tests are full of errors.

You're my only daughter."

I go into the adjoining room, my room, and bring the papers. "Here," I say.





He flips through the pages, stopping here and there to read. I wait, my stomach churning. Don't lie, I silently beg him. I need you not to lie.

Finally, he says, "I don't know anything about this DNA business, but this has to be some kind of fluke, because it isn't true."

I'm crying now. "That's why I ordered the test. To find out the truth. There's too much similarity between us to be a coincidence."

"You don't know that," he says.

I can tell he's trying to keep his voice under control, that he's on the verge of anger. But I keep going.

"There's only one way to find out," I whisper.

"What?"

"You have them test your DNA."

"Bullshit," he spits out. "That damn girl has mesmerized you. You don't even trust your own father."

"Tell me the truth, Daddy," I beg. "I just want you not to lie."

My mother comes into my bedroom the night we return from UVA. "Your dad is very upset," she tells me. She sits down beside me on the bed and puts her hand on my arm.

"I know. Did he tell you why?"

She pulls her arm away. "You can't believe that little bitch." Her voice is harsh, like I've never heard it before. And I've never heard her use that word.

"It's not that I believe her," I say. "But did he tell you, I did my own DNA research?"

"How could you?" she says. "I don't believe you've fallen for it, smart as you are. But I know one thing for sure. You've hurt your dad real bad."

"I don't want to hurt him." I'm crying now. "But I want him to be honest with me."

"He is," she says. "He's the best man that ever lived." She goes on about how he was Spotswood Citizen of the Year and Chairman of the Food Bank, as if that has anything to do with it.

There's something I have to ask. "Was Dad away a lot before I was born?"

She looks up, puzzled. "What?"

"You know, like on business trips."

She looks in the direction of the window. "Of course, he's always going to conferences."

I take a deep breath. "Did you ever worry?"

"About what?"

"You know, like maybe he wasn't always on business?"

She jumps up from the bed. "How can you even think that?"

I want to say, you're right. You're right, Mama. It's a scam. But I can't.

It's May and I'm back at UVA for the incoming freshman tour. We've visited classes, lunched on pizza in the cafeteria, inspected freshman dorms, toured the grounds, and even attended a fraternity party. And I'm ready. Ready to shake off the dust of Spotswood, more than ready to escape the silence at home.

I'm sitting in a café near the University, staring at the menu. And there she is. Standing beside my booth, notepad in her hand, my waitress. Avery. Her black curls are pinned back behind her ears, her shoulders hunched.

Why did I think I could avoid her? She lives here. The words on the menu run together.

"Have you decided?" she asks.

"Actually, I'm not hungry," I say. "I have to go."

"No you don't." She slides into the booth across from me. "I knew one of these days you'd turn up." Her voice sounds harsh.

My stomach is turning and my hands feel sweaty. I want to run.

"Stay," she says. "We have a lot to talk about."

She's right.

"You're my sister, you know. Half-sister." I can tell she's close to crying.

"I can't . . ."

She interrupts. "Look at me, stuck in this lousy diner, wiping up after all these rich college kids, like you."

"What do you want from us?"

"That's easy. A family. A father. When your name popped up on my DNA report, I thought you'd face the truth and we could get on with it."

"I can't," I say.

"Can't what? Admit your dad . . ."

"He won't . . ."

She interrupts again. "Of course he won't. But what's to keep us from seeing each other? Being sisters?" Her voice breaks.





I look her in the face. "You forced your way into our life and nearly wrecked it. I can't be anything to you. Don't you see? He's my dad. I can't lose him."

She stands up and throws her notepad on the table with such force it flies to the floor. "You're so cold," she says, sobbing. "My father rejects me, you reject me."

People at nearby tables are staring. A man, probably the manager, comes through a swinging door and heads to our table.

I get up quickly. "We didn't do anything to *you*," I say. "You're the one. You screwed up everything." And I run from the café without looking back.

It's August. Hot as hell. I'm working at Dunkin Donuts, hanging out at the pool on the weekends, while my friends are buying clothes for college, figuring out course schedules, packing the family car. I'm taking the year off. A Gap Year, they call it. Dad tries to hide his disappointment. But I'm not sleeping; I'm gaining weight. And college seems more and more like a steep hill I don't want to climb right now. So I bailed. I've applied for this program called City Year, where kids volunteer to work with high school kids in inner cities. It sounds kind of grim, but I have to get away. I've got a lot of things to figure out.

I haven't heard from Avery since May. I think about her a lot.

In the mornings, I watch Dad leave for work, his hair still wet from the shower, his boyish face flushed, eager, and I love him so much. At the dinner table, he spins tales of the paranoid misers and greedy millionaires he serves and secretly scorns. He makes me laugh. Now that it's clear that Avery is out of our lives, Mom has forgiven me. Everything seems normal on the surface.

But we don't go to football games. We don't garden. And we don't talk.

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