

Eternally Screwed

1

THIS IS the story of the wandering of Jolie Anne Mills, the once beauty pageant queen of Beelin Falls, who married Jimmie Mills, a loyal and hardworking clock repairman of meager means and with him gave birth to their precious son, Anthony, who was born with an undeniably sweet temperament and perpetually apple-red cheeks. It is also the story of the fantastic and particular hell the small and pretty woman soon would be transported to because of her sin.

Jolie and Jimmie were married seven years when Jolie started her part-time job at Lankford's Speech Pathology Clinic on Ladora Avenue near Olsen Park. Every Saturday during the warmer months the park's farmer's market grew rivers of shoppers eyeballing local flowers, art and food. Every young lady shopping hoped to meet the delicious new doctor near the park who was rumored to be a child-whisperer who could tinker apart even the most difficult stutter or lisp in only a session or two and give weak, spit-mouthed children a new tongue and raise great peaks of confidence in their hearts.

Dr. Lankford was tall and handsome and wide in the shoulders, neck and jaw. His eyes were as dark as marbles and seductively minute and squint and the only thing as big as his smile was his laugh, which sounded like a big engine barreling then erupting to life. Many a blushing housewife was made wet by his big laugh overheard at Blaggin's Café and Pie Shop. He would backslap with the local men and inspire considerable riots of laughter at his hardly dirty jokes while the wives gazed wide-eyed like hypnotized mannequins at their magazine or husband across the table, but all the while drinking in the good doctor in their periphery.

Jolie started work at the clinic partly because she and Jimmie needed the money because the clock repair business was quickly drying up due to a large trending away from clocks towards digital gadgets, and partly because between attending to the new baby and Jimmie working from home, she had grown increasingly afflicted with a most stifling case of cabin fever. Without a lot of work to keep him busy, Jimmie had begun hovering around her, attempting conversation and trying to take her to bed while the baby was napping, an idea, which frankly because his recent shortcomings as a provider, only served to push her farther from him.

Her first day at the clinic was a thrill. She hadn't worked since the last time she untied her white starched apron over seven years ago at the end of her last shift at the Dairy Drop. Jimmie had promised her she would never have to work again unless she wanted to and they, with bright eyes and blushing cheeks, had laughed about how she wouldn't have the time anyway since they planned to have at least a dozen beautiful children who would fill their eventual manor with laughter and runny noses. She had been so excited to leave that job and now, seven years and so many disappointments later, she was tickled to become Jolie Mills, Executive Assistant. Executive had a nice ring to it and admittedly Dr. Lankford was gorgeous, something she had pretended not to notice around Jimmie or anyone else. Truthfully, she had more than noticed, which was rather apparent from the assortment of warm reds she could feel rolling under her painted face the day of the interview. He had only asked her a few short questions, bid her good morning and asked her to start Monday.

THAT FIRST Monday Jolie Anne Mills noticed that Lankford's Speech Pathology Clinic was clean, yes, but entirely too dark and hard and blank. Everything in the entry where she sat and inside his big adjoining office served a purpose and save for a couple of diplomas and certificates, the dark green walls stood naked and the whole place smelled of fresh paint. Jolie was already organizing in her mind where she would hang paintings, pictures and

inspirational quotes and where she would place a little table by the entry on which she could set the fat vase she would fill flowers— so that a patients' first impression of Lankford's Speech Pathology Clinic would be the sweet smell of lilies from the farmer's market. And perhaps she'd find a plant for her desk, something small and friendly. She knocked on his open door and asked him what he thought of the idea.

“It's a nice idea, I think. I'm certain we shouldn't rely on me to make the place inviting. I would only embarrass us. My mother would tell you my talent as a decorator is dreadfully morbid. I'm afraid the place would be covered in deer heads and rifles if it was left to me.”

“I didn't know you were a hunter.”

“Not to worry. I'll spare you my hunting stories. I know how squeamish you girls can be.”

“I'm not so delicate, you know? In my experience it's us *squeamish* girls who end up playing nursemaid to overgrown boys.”

“I suppose there are a lot of boys in men's clothing out there. Would five-hundred do the trick?”

“That should be more than enough.”

The doctor fumbled around, opening his desk drawers and scratching his head, looking around for the money, opening the same drawers more than once. Jolie hid her smirk as best she could, that a man with a reputation for such intellect and precision in his work could be so befuddled and disorganized; she couldn't help but find it a little endearing.

“There you are!” He said looking at the money then he looked up and smiled as he handed her five hundred dollar bills.

“Any requests?”

“No, Mrs. Mills, I trust you completely,” then he smiled his big, famous smile.

On her way to the market Jolie began to think. They were thoughts she did not mind thinking to herself, but would be ashamed for anyone else to know she was thinking. Everything Jimmie was not, Dr. Lankford was. Jimmie’s business was failing and his ambition shriveled more every day; Dr. Lankford intended to grow his practice and had the mind and wherewithal to see it through. Jimmie wouldn’t hurt a fly; Dr. Lankford hunted and killed for leisure. Jimmie was pudgy and plain; Dr. Lankford was strong and handsome— and he was going somewhere.

“It’s just easy love a rich man as it is to love a poor man.” That’s what her mother had told her just after she announced that Jimmie had proposed. She was furious at her mother for years and her mother’s shallowness had served only to affirm her love for Jimmie. But now. Years later. Those words. What was there so noble in giving all her love, her body, and her most beautiful years to a man who had only found ways to make her life less and less than the life he had promised?

The fates heard Jolie’s thoughts and began constructing the room.

She found a bouquet of lilies for the entry, a small green succulent for her desk, and a big print of a painting of Beelin Falls by a local artist down at

the farmer's market. The yellow tree in the foreground told her it had been painted in autumn when things were dying. She thought about the way autumn and its deaths give way to spring and life and how perhaps some things needed to die so that new life could be allowed to begin. Perhaps she and Jimmie were approaching their autumn.

But she had promised him forever and she had meant it and so had he. They had been so in love and back then she could not have imagined another man for her for all of eternity. But now. Jimmie still did all the things he had always done— that charming smile when he would look up from his work and say, “ma'am, could you please stop being so beautiful— I'm trying to concentrate,” but it no longer charmed her, and the way he would always find her across a crowded party and wink, but it no longer comforted her. She still smiled back at him but it was a farce, an unfeeling ritual on her part— though Jimmie still loved her fully. If anything, he loved her more than ever because those seeds of young passion from years ago had taken root and grown into true love and Jimmie being a good man and therefore a fool, saw Jolie's love to be as unwavering as his own.

BY THE time winter began spreading his cold, old bony fingers across Beelin Falls, Jolie Anne Mills' love for Jimmie was but a flicker, if not completely extinguished, and she and the handsome doctor had begun to look at

each other longer, smile more warmly, and laugh harder than mere employer and employee— mind you, nothing had happened. She behaved like a lady and he was never less than a perfect gentleman, but there, in the air of that now cozy carefully decorated office quivered strong vibrations of friendship and arousal. Had it not been for an impromptu celebration nothing might have ever happened between them except that on a particularly windy evening in January, and after months of effort on both of their parts, it appeared that Dr. Lankford’s essay, “Musical Muscle Memory and the Tongue,” had been selected for publication in the New England Journal of Medicine. His was a radical new approach to speech therapy and somewhat controversial in its simplicity, but it worked well—very well, in fact, and it seemed that the doctor could expect some celebrity over the next few months and more than a few speaking engagements at prestigious universities to explain what the journal had already referred to in their congratulatory letter as the Lankford Method.

Jolie had spent months helping him organize his thoughts and put them into words and it had been a lot of work and long hours together and she, having already been attracted to him physically, had now developed an even more intense attraction to his mind and his passion for his work. All of their work had paid off and as she finished reading the letter from the journal to the doctor they both blushed and beamed with pride.

“I don’t believe it,” he said.

“Isn’t it wonderful?”

“The Journal— I’d always hoped, but I never thought— enough of my bumbling. I’d say a drink is in order.”

He walked to the little cabinet in his office and reached for a bottle. He poured himself a scotch, neat, and added soda water and ice to hers. When he turned around she was already smirking then she grabbed his drink from his hand leaving him with the scotch and soda. She winked at him and said cheers. He shook his head and laughed, “Cheers.”

They drank and laughed and reminisced over how they had bitten their nails over every word and turn of phrase in the essay.

“You know, Jolie— this never would have happened without you. You put me together. Somehow you took my incoherent ramblings and pieced them into something that made sense.”

He touched her hand and she, as if she had been waiting her whole life for him to touch her, froze. She stood and their eyes met.

“I’ll make us another drink,” she said and took the glass from his hand, feeling his warm knuckles and their tickly hairs.

As Jolie Anne Mills walked to the cabinet to make another round of drinks she knew full well what was about to happen, what she was about to do and she was of sound mind and she even thought of Jimmie and of Anthony, but it would not stop her, nor could it for she had been building toward this moment since shortly after she began working for the doctor. She had already given herself to him again and again in her mind and now she would give him her body and consummate her metastasizing ache for him. They would make love

and then they both would *know* and they would be in love and she would leave Jimmie and she would have a clean slate and a new life, the life she deserved, the life Jimmie had promised her but failed to deliver.

If only poor Jolie had known just how angry and rigid a mood the fates were in that cold January evening.

She walked back to the doctor, drinks in hand and as she came closer to him heat grew inside her and in her mind he was already taking her, already saying he loved her, already pushing his body into hers, her new life beginning, marked by tremors of pleasure.

And he did take her, but not as she imagined. His breath was sour and smelled of scotch and assumed that peculiar smell like he might be coming down with something. He took her in his arms and held her tight— a little too tight and kissed her mouth hard enough to hurt her lips. He ripped her shirt open and pushed her skirt up around her waist and there she stood, naked and cold as he pressed himself against her, quickly cracking the combination of his belt, button and zipper. He lifted her onto his desk and the further he pushed inside her, the more she noticed that it was not the soulful lovemaking she had imagined and that something in the air of the room had changed and that he felt more like some clunking industrial machine.

It was then that she knew it was a mistake and she thanked God it would soon be over. He would have his way with her then slump down in his chair and she would tell him, tell him that this didn't happen and that this couldn't happen and that she belonged with Jimmie and that it had all been a big mistake.

As the doctor continued she was relieved that she had come to this decision to remain true to Jimmie and Anthony— save for this one act of betrayal. And what was it but a small indiscretion when compared to the already years of devotion to Jimmie and the future years she would devote to him and sweet Anthony? She lay there prostrate and exposed on the doctor's desk as he continued to push into her, slamming her little tailbone against the hard desk bruising it again and again.

Again and again she thought, *soon this will be over*. She looked up at Lankford's eyes, but she did not see him anymore, the man whose mind she had thought she loved. Instead she saw hollow, demonic eyes and they frightened her deeply. *Something is wrong*, she thought as the room altered further.

And something was wrong— or right, depending on whom you ask. Jolie Anne Mills was cursed never to find relief but to live in that moment, inaccessible to anyone of this earth who might stir to save her— even God himself. And there she remains forever, violently pounded by a machine of fate wearing Lankford's limp, twisted face— somewhere out there in that unfindable cosmic office she decorated herself.

