

In Our Lovely Deseret

“It looks *just* like him, right? I’m not crazy?” Madilyn says. Her left eyebrow, freshly microbladed into a perfect chestnut arch, twitches.

Kami squints, leans towards the open MacBook. Her chest presses up against the mahogany table, making her fake boobs bulge from the neck of her pink Lululemon yoga top like overproofed bread dough.

“Okay, Mads? That’s *totally* Hunter,” she says. “Either he was separated from an identical twin at birth, which, I mean...didn’t his mom have, like, *seven* kids? I’m ready to give one away right now and I have *three*...”

In different circumstances, this would be a perfect gem to keep tucked away for the next time any of Madilyn’s other East Bench friends bring up Kami’s extraordinary ability to steer any conversation towards herself. She resists the urge to snap her fingers, the way she does when trying to keep Benson and Ava on task during homework time.

“Or?”

“Or he’s cheating on you.”

Madilyn runs her thumbs against the flat tips of her nails (freshly painted into perfect red rose petals) as she looks back at the Tinder profile. *Simon Walker, New York City, Consultant*. Studies the broad shoulders, the chiseled jawline, the manicured beard à la Chris Hemsworth. The man in the picture—Simon, Hunter, *whoever* he is—stares right into her eyes.

“I don’t recognize those clothes,” Madilyn says.

“He could hide clothes anywhere. Sweetie, he could *burn* a Billy Reid outfit a week and your bank account wouldn’t even flinch.”

“But isn’t the face thinner?”

“It’s the angle of the shot.”

Madilyn’s thumb slides up to the gold band on her fourth finger, traces the facets of the three-carat princess cut diamond on top. It was Hunter’s grandmother’s.

“Maybe he’s gay,” Kami continues, clearly not sensing the very steep cliff Madilyn is teetering inches away from. “There’s a show on Netflix about it. Guys you’d *never* suspect, all part of this secret network on the dark web. *Under the Closet*, maybe? Something like that.” She pulls a stick of spearmint gum from her Givenchy handbag, folds it onto her tongue. “What sucks is that you can’t call him out on it, at least not until you make a plan. He could pull a Mark Hacking. Did I ever tell you he went to high school with my cousin Courtney?”

Madilyn suddenly wants—*needs*—this insane woman, this stranger she inexplicably has on speed dial, out of her house.

“Okay, Kam, he’s not going to *murder* me.” She forces a laugh. “I think I hear Porter.”

“Really? I don’t hear any—”

“Weren’t you going to try and make that pilates class?”

Kami looks down at the Apple watch on her wrist. “Crap. It’s ten thirty. Call me if you need anything, k? We can brainstorm.” She stands, slides her bag off the table, and pulls Madilyn in for a stiff, one-armed hug in a single motion.

Madilyn recognizes the floral scent emanating from Kami’s skin as some saccharine Tom Ford perfume a Sephora clerk tried to sell her a few days ago at City Creek. It makes her nauseous.

She waits until the front door opens and closes before sitting in the chair, still warm from Kami’s Luon-suctioned backside, and studies the Macbook screen. Slides the cursor to the search

bar. Her fingers hover over the keyboard for a few seconds before reaching up and slamming the screen closed.

Her eyebrow twitches again. The sensation reminds her of something, but she can't quite put her finger on what.

Madilyn's boobs aren't fake. Her skin is naturally flawless, her Scandinavian-blond hair falls in wispy coils when she lets it air dry. Her nose is small. Her lips, full. She's 5'8" with heels on, 120 pounds fully clothed. The insides of her thighs don't touch.

The first time she was aware of her good fortune was in second grade. The boys were chasing her around the spider web dome, breathlessly trying to catch her so they could put her in prison underneath the aluminum slide. She knew the boys were chasing her, as opposed to Lily Reiser or Samantha Thompson or Sara Childers or any of the other girls in her class, because she was prettier than them.

The boys were chanting, "Ruth! Ruth! We're gonna get you, Ruth!" because that was her name then.

At eleven, the grandfather clock in the entryway (a wedding gift from Hunter's hedge fund manager uncle) begins to chime, echoing off the vaulted ceilings, reverberating through the walls and floors and up the legs of the chair and into her body, creating a syncopated rhythm against her heartbeat.

Porter cries.

She picks up her iPhone, clicks the baby monitor app. Her home screen wallpaper (a favorite wedding photo) is replaced by the scotopic outline of a bow-legged toddler grasping the

rail of his crib, bouncing at the knees as if trying to build up enough momentum to hurl himself over.

Normally she drags out the minutes between first cry and retrieval, giving herself enough time to swallow down any irritation that tends to accompany the end of naptime. Today, she's hit with an almost primal urge to reach him, to feel his warmth against her skin.

The crying stops as soon as she opens the door. Porter's tear-stained cheeks dimple, his blue eyes light up, framed by the blotchy red patches around his temples. Without daring to take his eyes off of her, he bends down and picks up the minky blanket with a plush monkey head sewn on one corner, then reaches his stubby arms towards her.

The theme of his nursery is 'Vintage Circus'. Madilyn knew Porter was going to be last, months before she even made the appointment to get her IUD removed. This, she told Hunter one night, was the reason she had to raid Anthropologie. Buy all the things.

He just laughed. They were lying in bed, his giant hand cradling her swollen belly the same way it had cradled an incalculable number of footballs. "You've had an excuse every time. Benson was the first, Ava was a girl..."

She wrinkled her nose at him, narrowed her eyes in mock scorn. "Well, if you'd quit knocking me up."

She crosses the wool rug (lions in red fez hats, smiling blue elephants) and lifts him out of his crib. He lays his head on her shoulder, nestling his blonde curls into the crook of her neck and tucking his arms and knees up in fetal position.

She strokes the soft patch of skin behind his ear. Stares passively at the red- and white-striped fabric draped like a big top tent in the corner, the merry go round mobile dangling

over the crib, the screen print of a seal balancing a ball on its nose, until her eyes land on a family portrait hanging over a slack strip of felt bunting on the wall.

Madilyn spent weeks planning everyone's outfits for that photo, settling on taupe and white with burgundy accessories: lipstick for herself, a bow for Ava, ties for the boys, a cardigan for Hunter. She paid the photographer \$1500 to meet them at Aspen Grove for an hour's worth of shots, then Photoshop the vibrancy away. Muted hues, somewhere between sepia and full color, are in right now.

Her arms suddenly feel like they might give out. She sits in the overstuffed rocker and Porter unfurls, reaching across her chest and pulling *Goodnight Moon* from his book rack. She reads it three times without noticing any of the words.

The twitch in her eyebrow is faster, more pronounced now. With Porter on her lap, she suddenly realizes what the sensation reminds her of: the first flutters of pregnancy.

Quickening, they used to call it before science stripped away all the mystery and intrigue of new life. The moment you know something foreign is growing inside you, something that exists completely beyond your control.

Ruth Gaskill became Madilyn Smoot in waves. The earliest stages of this transformation exist in her mind not in a fluent storyline, but a series of isolated images: a decrepit trailer home being swallowed in quackgrass, dark circles beneath her mother's eyes, a hunting rifle proudly displayed above the 32-inch television. Though she doesn't allow these images to haunt her often, they are sometimes conjured by smells (cigarette smoke, yeasty beer, body odor) or an occasional awareness of the topographical souvenirs on her palms where her father's belt more than once ripped the skin open. Hunter thinks she touched a hot stove as a baby.

For book club last month, they chose some True Crime thriller about a doctor who nearly got away with killing his pregnant wife. She told everyone she couldn't come because Benson had a football game.

Her parents' case got relatively little attention. Truthfully, public intrigue for murder-suicides is directly correlated with how much money is left behind. Luckily for Ruth, between the bank auction of the two-acre plot of land the trailer was parked on and Social Security survivor benefits, there was just enough that at sixteen she could run away from her twelfth foster placement (the true origin of most of her residual nightmares) and keep herself alive.

She hitchhiked from Oregon to Idaho, then from Idaho to Utah after she heard there were lots of jobs available. She was eighteen for three years. She found a room to rent with four girls going to hair school and let them practice on her whenever they wanted. She got a job as a bagger at a grocery store. When she actually turned eighteen, she learned you could change your name, bury your skeletons even deeper in the closet, for a relatively small fee. She got her GED. Enrolled in community college. Transferred to the University of Utah. Joined a sorority. Became the mysterious It Girl whose parents tragically died in a plane crash. Caught the eye of the first-string star quarterback at a party one night.

Her pixelated photo is probably still hanging on the Missing Children Network bulletin board in some Walmart in Eastern Oregon. Anyone who cared, if there was such a person, probably long ago accepted that she ran off with a manipulative, drug-addled boyfriend, setting herself up to suffer the same fate as her mother. Apples don't fall far from the tree, people say.

But Madilyn knows you can crawl your way not just out from under the tree, but into a whole different orchard. And if you're smart enough to act the part, and lucky enough to look it, no one will ask questions.

Madilyn turns on *Bluey* for Porter, gives him a juice cup and a pouch of Annie's Cheddar Bunnies.

She's overdue for an Instagram post for some start-up vitamin company that has been breathing down her neck over DMs. She moves into the kitchen, pulls a box of tiny glass vials from her cabinet. *Magic Magnesium. Essential Bs. Long Life Elixir.*

She hasn't tried any of them. Truthfully, she doesn't believe in vitamins.

Becoming an influencer was not a conscious choice: when you marry a Heisman nominee turned finance executive, the fifth son of a prominent Utah family who can trace their entire lineage on both sides back to the Mormon pioneers who began Salt Lake Valley's transformation from barren wasteland to bustling metropolis (Hunter is Brigham Young's great great great grandson) people want to know where you bought your dress and what your Christmas decorations look like and which organic snacks you feed your kids and how your Bali vacation went. And you feel obliged to tell them.

She picks up her phone and snaps a picture of the vials on the granite countertops, but the lighting isn't right. (*Sweet Things* paid her \$1,000 to post an Instagram story of her eating one of their sugar cookies.) She moves the vials to the table and arranges them in a neat semicircle, but it feels too forced, too formal. (Her friends keep saying she needs to start a TikTok account. Diversify.) She picks up one of the vials with her left hand, takes several shots of her holding it with her right.

They all turn out blurry. It's not until that moment that Madilyn realizes her hands are shaking.

"You don't have to keep doing it," Hunter said the last time she complained. They were in bed and he was sitting up, leaned back against a pillow with a MacBook on his lap, typing an email. His fingers didn't slow down as he spoke.

"I can't just *disappear*."

He shrugged. "Why not? They'll get over it, find someone else to obsess over. There's plenty of fish in that sea."

She played it cool, even though she felt the hollow cavity in the back of her throat expanding.

It was the same night he told her he'd have to start leaving a week at a time for work. "Just once a month," he said. "We can't lose this client, and it's getting too complicated to make it work long distance."

She played it cool again, even though the thought of single parenting more than she already did stung no less than a belt being whipped over and over across her palms.

"The one in Los Angeles?"

He shook his head. "New York."

She picks Benson and Ava up from school at three. The two of them are arguing before they even get in the car.

"Stop, Ava! Mom, tell her to stop *bugging* me!"

"Shut *up*, I'm not even *by* you!"

“You guys...just...” Madilyn pulls on the black lever behind the steering wheel. The windshield wipers spring to life, shuddering across the dry windshield. Their Audi Q7 is new, just purchased last month, and she keeps mixing up the blinkers and wipers. “Hurry, there are cars waiting behind us.”

She finally finds the blinker (click, don't pull) and waits for the slam of the backseat doors before merging back into the traffic circle.

“Mom, Brecklan is taking everyone to the Nutcracker for her birthday,” Ava says.

“Oh yeah?”

Ava keeps talking. Madilyn somehow knows when to appropriately insert interjections, the correct vocal inflection to use, without hearing a word Ava is saying.

The five minute drive is enough time for a shoving match, a heated argument over who is the better skier, and a meltdown after Porter drops his snack cup and it rolls just out of Benson's reach beneath the passenger seat. Madilyn can almost feel a spark traveling up her spine like a fuse.

“Who wants screen time?” she says when they get home, smiling over clenched teeth.

They shriek (the spark travels up, up) and race down the hallway. Two doors slam, one after the other.

Madilyn turns on *Bluey* for Porter, gives him a juice cup and a pouch of Annie's Cheddar Bunnies.

Her eyebrow pulsates. She becomes keenly aware of the tick of the grandfather clock.

In the quiet, her mind drifts from hypothetical to hypothetical: Erotic scenes in dim hotel rooms, Ladies Night interrogations, seven-hour meetings with drooling divorce attorneys, parroting rehearsed, euphemistic half-truths while the kids eat gelato.

She touches up her makeup, sorts the mail, reorganizes the pantry. Sleepwalks from room to room to room to room. (Who could ever need so many rooms?)

At four, she packs a bag with fruit leathers and water bottles, hair ties and mouth guards. Wrestles the iPads away. Shuffles her kids into the car.

They travel from home to football practice to ballet to football practice to home, arriving at each destination without incident, exactly on time, but she can't recall a single moment of the drive.

At six, Madilyn begins chopping vegetables in the kitchen. There's a Blue Apron box in the refrigerator, but she'll save that for tomorrow. Tonight, they'll have Sunday dinner: Instant Pot ribeye roast and mashed potatoes, sheet pan Brussels sprouts, tossed salad.

She chops quickly. Hunter will be home in half an hour.

It's meditative, the chopping. Her mind is a gallery of tableaux vivants, and she lets herself wander, searching the frozen images for hidden meanings. (She knows, somehow, that she must find the answer by the time Hunter walks through the door.)

Seven-year-old Ruth hiding in a closet, clutching a Dollar Tree stuffed rabbit and praying harder than she ever had before, or ever has since.

The sparkler tunnel at their wedding reception, long as a football field.

A gray cat casually licking its paw on the arm of an orange floral print couch, backdropped by a blood-splattered wall.

A triptych of three dusty purple babies being gently laid in Madilyn's lap.

Something about the moment—the urgency, the rhythmic slicing—catalyzes into the sudden release of shockwaves that pulse through her veins and condense at the back of her skull.

She blinks back angry tears, surprised to realize it's not Hunter's face she sees behind her eyelids.

Instead, she sees the face of a former sorority sister, the one who sent her a link to the Tinder profile at one a.m. last night, three question marks in the subject line and a single unpunctuated sentence (“OMG this guy looks exactly like Hunter”) in the body of the email. The one who married a charming Brooklyn architect and lives in a three million dollar apartment with exposed brick walls and barrel-vaulted ceilings, whose two cherubic, plumb-cheeked babies trickle incessantly from Madilyn's Instagram feed.

And who, for some unfathomable reason, has a Tinder account.

What she can't quite figure out about these people—yes, they are still *these people* in her mind—is why, insulated from a world full of unspeakable horrors, they choose to self-destruct.

She sniffs once, wipes her eyes. Continues chopping. The swelling subsides and the kitchen gradually comes into focus: a ceramic bowl brimming with fruit, two globe chandeliers above the island, the Vitamix blender on the counter, still plugged in from this morning. She smells the searing meat, hears the sound of Ava and Porter commanding Alexa to play Taylor Swift and Imagine Dragons in the playroom.

She realizes she already knows the answer.

Tonight, she will lock herself in the bathroom upstairs that no one ever uses, call Kami, and in the voice she's spent a decade perfecting, tell her that she created a Tinder account and messaged Simon Walker, actually *messaged him*, and he replied right away (“Um, yeah, of *course* he did, Mads,” Kami will say, joking but with just a hint of jealousy) and asked if she wanted to *video chat* and of course she said yes, and it turns out the whole thing is just a crazy coincidence because he was legitimately in New York City, he even showed her the skyscrapers

out the window, and the two of them talked until he asked her to take off her top and she hung up and blocked him, so, yeah, there's *no way* Hunter is Simon because Hunter is home this week, but it's *crazy* how much they look alike, and the whole thing reminds her of this podcast she listened to the other day about Simulation Theory, how we might all just be carbon copies of a prototype, and Kami will follow for a minute, but then she'll start talking about how she can't decide if she should get that tummy tuck, she hears it leaves a *nasty* scar, and Madilyn will somehow know when to appropriately insert interjections, the correct vocal inflection to use, and by the end of their conversation Madilyn will be certain Kami's already forgotten about the whole thing altogether. That it might as well have never happened.

The door opens, and Madilyn feels a sharp pain in her left thumb. She looks down to see blood seeping from a half inch-long gash that runs from the nail to the pad, collecting in the veins and tributaries of the lettuce leaf she's chopping.

Hunter's Berluti loafers click against the wood floors of the entryway.

She slides the cutting board to the kitchen sink. Rinses the lettuce in the colander, lets the cold water run over her thumb until it's numb, until all she feels is a dull pulsation. The cut is deep, but she'll bandage it and no one will notice.

Hunter appears in the doorway. He sets down his bag, slides his arms out of his black overcoat. Stares right into her eyes.