

## The Ticket

“You can’t do this to me.”

The words seemed to echo between the walls of the small room, hitting Carla like a slap to her face. She sat on the corner of Mitchell’s bed, her toes working nervously into the pile of the blue carpet. All of her clothes, except for her underwear, were strewn across the floor with his. They left a trail up the hall, through the kitchen, and on to the front door of the double-wide. Carla wanted to get her clothes and run, suddenly embarrassed by her near- complete nakedness. It took all of her concentration to stay where she was, to not let the blow of his words level her to the floor. She felt lightheaded, vaguely nauseous. So she sat, unable to even wipe the tears she felt snaking down her chest and soaking into the pink silk of her bra. She stared blankly at the walls of Mitchell’s bedroom, plastered with posters. Among the Ferraris and football players, a red and white wool “MC” was pinned to the wall. It was the first set of school letters that Mitchell had earned playing football. The set he earned last year was stitched onto the school jacket that he had given her. The jacket was crumpled up next to her feet. Mitchell stood, equally naked, with his back to her. He looked wordlessly out of the window.

Finally, she managed to whisper:

“We did this, Mitch. I ain’t doing nothing to you.”

“You know what I mean, baby. I just can’t deal with this mess right now-”

“And I can?” Carla shot back at him, her voice still a whisper, but sharp. She tried to look up at him, but the light from the window sent daggers through her head. Mitchell stayed at the window.

“Yeah. Why not?” he answered flatly. “You got your mama. She can help you. You can stay here with her. You know I got... plans.”

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“What about my plans? You think I want this?” Subconsciously Carla rubbed her belly, closing her eyes to shield her aching head from the torture of the morning sun stabbing through the window. Mitchell walked around Carla to the far end of the bed. He seemed to make an effort not to touch her as he maneuvered around her in the tiny room. He sat on the opposite end, as far away as he could get from her and still be there. The distance was only a few feet, but it might as well have been miles. Five minutes earlier they had been making love, and now for the first time in her life Carla felt completely alone.

“You don’t want it you know what you can do, then.”

She said nothing but dug her toes deeper into the blue carpet..

“Carla. Baby. You know I got scouts coming to see me. They recruiting me hard. Coaches coming to see me every week, I’m getting mail from them every day. This time next year, I’mma have a free ride to any school I want. Football will get me out of here, Carla.”

“What that got to do with this?” This was not the first time that Mitchell had told Carla about his plans. For him, those cleats and shoulder pads were like a plane ticket taking him anywhere he wanted to go. Many times, they had sat and talked about conference championships, graduating from Morton County High, punching that ticket and launching themselves into the adventures that only life beyond the county limits of Morton, North Carolina could offer. For the first time Carla realized that those adventures might not include her.

“They look at everything. My grades, who I hang with, if I get in any trouble. Carla, you know you just sixteen and-”

“My being sixteen didn’t bother you when we did it. And you are only one year older than me!” Now Carla was angry. She couldn’t decide whether to run or to hit him, so she continued to sit, working her feet against the floor. Her toes were numb. Her eyes were still

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clenched tightly, seeking some comfort in the darkness.

“This ain’t about me. It’s the coaches. You think they gonna give me a scholarship with a baby and a sixteen-year old baby mama dragging behind me?”

“So that’s how it is? That’s all I am, now? I thought you loved me, Mitchell.”

“Yeah, and I thought you loved me. I can’t believe you doing this to me, Carla.”

For a moment they both sat silently. Carla watched condensation form on the window pane. Here and there, tiny diamonds of reflected sunlight glinted on the trails of water drops that had broken loose and rolled down the glass.

“I am not getting rid of it.”

“Well, it ain’t mine, then.”

“God...are you serious?”

“You heard me.”

Mitchell stood and noisily started putting on his clothes. He grunted and sighed as if pulling on the shirt and zipping his denim jeans were manual labor. He kept his back to Carla, once even feeling around blindly on the floor behind his ankles just to stay out of her line of eye contact. Finally, he spoke. “Uhh, look, you know my mama’s gonna be coming back soon.”

The words were mumbled, more to himself than Carla. He stared at the wall in front of him, the ceiling, the floor, anything his eyes could settle on but her. “You know what I mean...”

Carla knew as well as Mitchell did that Mrs. Sinclair would not be back from work for hours. Her weekend shifts at the plant didn’t end until two o’clock. This was not the first Saturday morning that they had spent in his bedroom. It humiliated Carla to realized how stupid Mitchell thought she was. She realized just as quickly that he had been right. “Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.” She stood on numb feet, looking around to find her clothes. She

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grabbed what she could find and put them on as quickly as she could, following the trail of garments to the front door. By the time she found her shoes, the numbness in her feet was replaced with a dull ache. One of the socks she put on sprouted a small spot of blood at the big toe. Carla fumbled with her boots, trying to get them on and get the hell away from Mitchell and anything else that he had to say.

“Look, baby, I’mma call you later, you know, when you cool down and got some sense. We can talk this out.”

Carla found her shirt last, pulling it down over her head. She held the jacket he had given her in one hand, the door knob in the other.

“Fuck you, Mitchell,” she yelled, and slammed the door. She had hoped the small pane of glass within it would break, but it only rattled and held tight.

It was cold; the sharp morning air hit Carla like a slap and momentarily took her breath away. She put the jacket on, hating it but needing the warmth. She hated the red jacket, with its white wool sleeves. Even worse than the fact that it came from Mitchell, she hated the blocky red chenille ‘MC’ emblazoned on the front of it. Morton County was too small a place for anyone to really live a life. You breathed, you went to school, you ate, but real living, real 'honest-to-God-I'm-alive-and-living' living, could not happen in a place so small and so isolated and so...Morton. Every town should have subways, and places worth riding them to. At least bus stops. Morton had neither, unless you counted the school buses. Even before this morning, before she had told Mitchell that she was pregnant, and before he had decided that it was no concern of his, Carla knew she would have to get away. But she had not planned on doing so alone.

The coat did little to keep out the damp coolness of a November Saturday morning. The

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jacket and the big red Morton "MC" felt about as thin and warm as wet paper. Through the pockets she rubbed her belly, trying to keep it warm.

Carla had been walking forever. The country mile that separated Mitchell's trailer and her house stretched on a marathon's distance. Her legs ached, but at least the pain that had pounded in her temples like a hammer was starting to subside a little. She breathed deep, in and out, watching the wisps of vapor drift and disappear into the air. She looked at the fields, greyish-green with frosted dew, and the dull reds and yellows of the trees beyond. Patches of grass were turning a dry brown color, dead for the year. Carla was sick of trees, sick of fields, sick of everything. She was going to leave Morton, all of its country ways and country people; and most especially, she was leaving him.

Mitchell did not want her anymore.

The thought stopped her mid-step, bending her over in pain that was not physical but hurt worse than anything she had ever known in all of her sixteen years. Carla did not think that she could cry anymore and she was right. No tears came, but her stomach quivered and for a moment she was certain that she would vomit onto the asphalt.

She could not believe he had treated her that way.

Carla continued walking. All she felt was the cold and the shared pains of her head, legs and feet. Everything else was dead. Ahead in the distance, she knew that just past the next hill her house was waiting.

For two weeks she had known about it. She had not told her mother, nor anyone else. She did not plan to now. Carla was going to go home, pack a bag, and she was going to leave Morton and Mitchell and her family and any nosy neighbors that would care who she was or whose baby she carried. New York sounded about right. It had people, probably none of them

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from Morton. The Big Apple, the City That Never Slept, where everyone was all -the-way-alive all the time. It was big. It had subways and buses, and plenty of places worth seeing. It was nothing like small, tiny, country old Morton.

She truly thought that he would be happy when she told him.

Carla was startled to find herself so quickly at the corner of her own yard. The house was right there. Vaguely, she saw her mother on the porch, doing something. As tired as she felt, Carla did not have the courage to stop her feet. Even when her mother looked up at her, she continued past the driveway, fear keeping her feet in a steady cadence. Carla was scared, scared down clean to her bones. She was not even sure why. She had kept it secret this long, and by the time she was no longer able to hide it Carla planned to be long gone from Morton. Still, when she heard her mother call out to her, asking what was wrong, the only thing that Carla could do was run. She ran as hard and as fast and as far as her sore feet could take her.