

## MEAT AND MOUTH



Maddy left Luke Dixon sitting in the bully's chair and went to the Christmas-lighted window, willing the boy's loser dad to drive that blue Ford truck out of the woods. His lateness was eating into her weekend. Snow covered her solitary car in the lot, and she would have to dig and scrape before following the buried road from Grace Evangelical Church and School through the pale brown trees and bald fields to town. She thought of her apartment's stale heat, of marijuana buds in a medicine bottle in the freezer, of the cheap red wine on the counter. She was thinking of her records, of the jukebox at her favorite bar, of that bass player from Saturday night.

At a table by the board, beneath crookedly arranged alphabet magnets, Luke sopped dregs of Campbell's Tomato with a cheese sandwich. His excitement over a dollar's worth of food was as troubling as his choice to sit in the chair of Davey Schwartz, a larger boy who just this morning pinched and poked him during art until Luke clipped off his own paper Santa's head. Maddy had tried intervening, had tried doing good, telling Davey he would stay inside for recess. But Davey sniffed out her insecurity, like always. It was probably her imagination, but he had seemed to almost smile just before he went and told her coteacher, Hank Osmond. And Hank Osmond, predictably, had undermined her with the familiar head tilt that enlarged his jowl, saying, "Come on, Maddy, it's snowing," as if she habitually tormented the boy. Yet Hank had been all too happy to leave her alone with Luke, so he could get back to his surround-sound home theater, despite having

recently told their director he had concerns about her temper. It had been a long week, and she was tired of male conspiracies. If Luke wanted to sit in Davey's seat, let him. You couldn't save them all.

Luke wiped his wet sleeve across his mouth and eyed his empty plate and bowl as if waiting for Maddy to notice and offer more, which would mean leaving the bright warmth of the classroom for the cold darkness of hall and kitchen, constantly bracing for the instant when the furnace clamored on downstairs.

"When do you think your dad will be here?" she said.

Andy Dixon was unemployed, and for some reason the kids all knew. Luke sighed, looking more sullen than usual.

Maddy put aside her exhaustion and stretched yet another smile. "It's okay, honey. I can stay here as long as I need to. Do you know if he had any errands to run?"

His lower lip began to tremble. She glanced at the window, pretended she had not noticed. "It's really coming down. You should eat some more before you go out there." She waited for him to finish sniffing and said, "Does that sound good, Luke?"

He nodded, then narrowed his eyes. His brow worked as if he were performing difficult calculations as he said, "Ms. Maddy, could we play a game?"

"Sure. What do you want to play?"

"I want to play pretend."

"Pretend what?"

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Can we pretend I'm Davey?"

"Oh." She reached out, saw the greasy blue shirt had not been washed in several wears, then gave Luke's shoulder a light tap. Now was probably the time to give a speech, the one about the importance of being yourself or whatever. As if she never needed a break from Maddy, the twenty-four-hour mess who pilfered from her father's cabinets because the drunk tolerated

it. "I don't know," she said. "Do you think Davey would like that?"

Luke's mouth dropped open. "It'll be a secret, Ms. Maddy. Don't tell!"

"Okay, Davey," she said, winking as she stacked his bowl on his paper plate, straining to grin. "If you don't tell, I won't tell. Come on down to the kitchen with me while I warm you up some more soup."

Luke shot to his feet and announced, "Davey wants chicken noodle."

"Well, then that's what Davey will get." She remembered something Hank Osmond said, that being a good teacher usually felt like it could get you fired. Watching Luke Dixon skip down the dark hallway to the kitchen, she hoped and doubted this qualified.

The building was shadowy and old, and the kitchen's steel surfaces and heavy-duty cooking instruments gave the room a torture chamber feel. While the microwave hummed and Luke cranked the steel lever of an industrial can opener, Maddy leaned in the window's light, pouring vodka into her coffee, planning to wash the mug at home. After a few sips she took out her phone and called Andy Dixon. When she reached his voicemail, she left a second polite message, letting the flatness of her voice speak for her anger.

"I bet he's in jail." Luke laughed like he'd broken a rule and gotten away with it.

"Why's that?" Maddy said, feeling thoughtful from her first few sips. "What would Andy Dixon do to get himself put in jail?"

"I don't know what he'd do!" Luke said, slamming the lever down. "Andy Dixon's a idiot!" With a burst of inspiration he added, "Andy Dixon's a fuckhead!"

"Luke!" she said.

The boy shook his head, his eyes bulging with excitement. "I'm Davey," he proclaimed with a shrug, and he began to cackle in a dry-sounding, high-pitched voice.

It was then, watching the child convulse and wondering if she had muttered *fuckhead* when thinking of his father, that she saw the man peering in the window at her. He was young with an unshaven, crazed look and pale blue eyes that made her joints stiffen. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then darted from the window frame. She hurried to the glass but saw no one, only the snow blanketing the playground and the slides and the woods beyond. Two sets of footprints crossed the field of white, one veering off toward the parking lot while the other proceeded to the window.

Luke was silent now. He looked at her, gaping as if he'd done something wrong.

The words to explain were out of reach. "Hold on," she said. Putting down the mug, she spilled coffee and vodka on the stainless counter. Cleaning it up appeared on her vague mental to-do list, just after calling 911, though before chewing some gum to cover the smell for the cops. At any rate, first thing was locking the school doors.

A second young man was standing in the corridor, his hat and face steaming. Maddy put out her hands and stopped, and Luke collided with her right butt cheek and hugged her leg. She hobbled upright and raised her arms defensively.

The strange man made no move to approach. Melted snow dripped from his long curly hair and wool coat. He was short and thin, with pale bluish skin and a pinched and hungry face. "Hey, we're lost," he said, enunciating with unusual slowness. "My friend and I, we're needing someplace out of the weather. Do you mind?"

The other one, the one from the window, was coming up the

corridor behind him, large and lanky in a black motorcycle jacket with clinking chains, one hand pocketed and the other a loose fist swinging back and forth. He was grinning in the same strange way, like he was on some drug. Meth, it's just some meth heads, Maddy thought with halting relief. They were meth heads on meth or something, probably harmless. She would make them all soup. She straightened her Luke-weighted leg and folded her arms, trying to not cry, to look like someone in charge of things.

"Did you tell her, Mouth?" The big guy elbowed the small one's arm. "Did you tell her we need out of the cold?"

"Sure did, Meat." He stared at Maddy in a semi-insulted way, as if they knew each other. "She understands our needs completely."

"Excuse me," Maddy said, the conviction dropping out of each word. "Do you know this is a school?"

"Fuck yeah," Mouth said. "I like totally did preschool here back in the day. Where's Mr. Osmond?"

"He went home," she said. "He's gone home for the weekend, and I'm afraid I have to leave soon, too."

"It's cool," Mouth said. "We can, like, lock up."

Meat pulled out his pocketed hand, and the cuff and hand holding a black object were smeared with red. The object was a knife handle with no blade. Maddy thought with cold clarity that this was a switchblade knife. The intruder was holding a switchblade knife. "This is dirty," the intruder named Meat was saying. "Where's a sink?"

"Whoa," said Mouth. "She's freaking out! Hey, don't freak out!"

Maddy backed into the kitchen, dragging Luke, and tried to unstop the door with the boy sitting on her foot. He was unbelievably heavy and resisted the hand prying him loose. He pressed his face behind her knee, crying through the denim. She let go of his short wiry arm and tugged at the lock-ring on the prop above her head. Meat with his bloody knife-hand was

coming, his face growing flushed as he drew nearer. She slid the ring down the prop and the door began closing very slowly, and she pushed on the back of it to make it close faster. She shut it with his grimacing face behind the thinly latticed window and reached for the dead bolt as he kicked it from the other side. The bolt knob slammed back, jamming her fingers, and the door swung in on her forehead. Her head snapped back and she fell fast. She banged an elbow on the floor. The tiles were cold, hard, shell-green. Luke had let go of her leg. He lay on his side, stunned eyes blinking.

Meat stood over her, pointing the knife down, the blade unsprung. "Don't fucking freak out," he said. Noticing the sink, he stepped over her and made his way across the kitchen, calling back, "I fucking hate that."

"I know, man, but chill." Mouth came in, looking down at Maddy with a mixture of pity and reproof. "You shouldn't have run. We're not here to hurt you. You're really very low on our list of priorities. We have ourselves to think of."

"He has a knife," Maddy said by way of explanation. She reached out toward Luke, and he crawled over and lay on her shoulder, sobbing through her blouse, pinning her, though she no longer thought escape was an option.

"All we need is a place out of the weather," Mouth said, impatiently, as if she'd let him down. "You don't need to freak out. You're going to be fine. I'm pretty sure you'll be just fine."

Meat was running the tap, talking in a loud voice as he rinsed sleeve, hand, and knife handle. He sprung the long, straight blade and turned it under the stream, holding it until the dark stain ran along its edge red and vanished. "Clean, look. Like the day it was made, like the day it was born. Clean and new."

"That's great," said Mouth. "That's awesome news. I told you it

would work out. See?" he said to Maddy. "Don't you see how it all works out?"

A techno song began to play, surprising them all. After a few seconds, Maddy recognized her phone's ring.

Meat stomped over and glared down. "What is it?"

"It's his dad calling," she said, her hand finding Luke's shivering ankle. "He's late picking him up."

"Don't answer," said Mouth.

"But he's coming here anyway."

"Then say everything's okay. But if you say something's wrong," he said in a slow teacherly tone Maddy had used many times herself and pointed his thumb at his angry friend. "Got it, teacher lady?"

"I got it," said Maddy.

"Go ahead. Answer it."

Maddy reached into her pocket as the phone stopped ringing. The two men looked at each other, and Luke let out a wail against her shoulder. "Shh, he'll call back," she said, then added, though she knew it was cruel, "Come on, Davey. Be tough."

The boy moaned and a second later the techno song resumed playing. She answered, feeling sober, fully in control of her voice. She glanced up at the intruders, saying, "Mr. Dixon, there you are."

"Hey, Miss Maddy," Andy Dixon said in an I'm-busy-driving voice. "Hey, sorry I'm so late coming to get him. I had a chance to get some work out on this house this morning and couldn't pass it up. Afterward, the foreman started cracking beers, and I didn't want to be rude."

She ignored his preposterous logic, saying, "It's fine. Everything's fine. We're waiting."

If he heard any fear breaking through her voice, he gave no sign of it. "Okay. See you in fifteen."

"Okay, bye," she said, though the call had ended.

"What's going on? What did he say?" Mouth said. "Is he coming?"

"Fifteen minutes," said Maddy. Feeling her forehead wet, she reached up and took away blood on her fingertip. "He drives a blue truck. No surprises. I'll tell you everything in advance."

Mouth turned and looked at Meat, staring until the bigger man lowered his eyes.

"You got yourself to blame for that cut," Mouth told Maddy. "Better hurry up and get clean before Daddy gets here. And get him calm." He held out his hand and shook his head when Maddy reached to take it. "Give me the phone, dummy."

They went back to the classroom, and Maddy went into the bathroom and bent at the miniature sink to examine her forehead in the mirror. The break in the skin was tiny, with a faint round bruise behind it. As she rinsed it and pressed a damp, brown-paper towel to it to stanch the bleeding, it occurred to her that the bathroom key was in her pocket. The door was reinforced with steel, and she doubted the intruders would be able to break it in if she locked it. She tried to imagine the various outcomes. The meth heads or killers or whatever they were tortured Luke until she came out or they killed him or they let him live and fled. They gave him to his father and tried to break in or took off. They killed Andy Dixon and Luke but not her. They killed her and nobody else. She fixed her hair and went out. They were all standing by the toy chest in the corner. Luke was holding a large plastic dragon. He was staring at her, terrified.

"Come on," said Mouth. "Isn't that like your favorite toy? It's the best one for sure."

"Go on," Meat urged the boy. "Do your thing."

Both men were frowning.

"He's scared of us," Mouth observed. "We've really got him

rattled over here. This one's got weak boundaries, for sure. Not a good sign, not a good sign at all."

"This kid sucks," said Meat. "Fucking waste."

"You'd probably be scared, too, man. Imagine if two big dudes came in and scared your schoolteacher. He doesn't know he's going to be just like us some day. You don't know that yet, kid, do you?"

"If we were kids, I'd hate him," Meat said. "Kick his ass and shit."

"We should come up with a story, guys," Maddy interrupted, smiling to show that, whatever they were on, she was willing to help, so long as they didn't hurt her. It reminded her of high school, driving friends on acid around the woods. She studied Luke. "I know we can trust Davey to keep a secret. Isn't that right, Davey?"

His eyes fixed with vague understanding, he nodded slowly and carefully.

"Why'd you say his name?" Meat wanted to know.

"It's a teaching tactic or something," said Mouth. "There's like a whole psychology."

"Is there like a psychology, Mouth?"

"Fuck you, Meat, you fucking lunk. You slab."

"Kick your ass, dude."

"You two should be our visiting teachers," Maddy said. "What are your names?"

"Tell him my name is Mr. Mund," said Mouth. He smiled around proudly. "That's German, you know."

"Fuck this," said Meat. "Fuck that." He turned and stalked solemnly toward the door.

"Where are you going?" said Mouth.

Meat stopped at the door and pointed back angrily. "Fuck you. I'll watch." The sound of his breathing faded as he went down the hall, and soon he appeared outside the window, crossing the

parking lot through falling snow until he stepped into the woods, moving among the trees until he was out of sight.

"Somebody's in a bad mood," said Mouth. "Fucking asshole." He eyed Luke. "Sorry. Frigging jerkwad."

"It's fine," Maddy said with false enthusiasm. "Let's finish our story. You're a student teacher, just here to observe today. You're from the university."

"Sweet," said Mouth. "I'm Mr. Mund, the student teacher. I wish there was another chick student teaching. All the student teachers we had when I was a kid were foxy."

"He's the student teacher." Maddy sent Luke a telepathic message to keep playing, to be brave, just a bit longer. She wondered if he received it. "You got that, Davey?"

Luke nodded and tried to smile, though he was pale and looked like he might throw up.

The minutes passed slowly, ticking loudly on the old analog clock above the door. Mouth leaned against the wall, looking bored with both Maddy and Luke. Ten minutes passed, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen. Maddy began to think Andy Dixon would never arrive, that she and Luke had somehow been left in a parallel universe, and Andy Dixon would arrive at another Grace Evangelical Church and School and find it locked and dark. He would call Hank Osmond, who would have already forgotten Maddy and Luke, and the police would find no record that either of them existed. In his bewilderment Andy would visit Maddy's father, a haggard drinker who, after listening to Andy Dixon's story, would bloodlessly explain that his wife was dead, that he had no daughter, and that he'd never heard of Luke Dixon. Gradually it would dawn on Andy Dixon that he was free of his son, that he could grieve as little as he could stand. Meanwhile, she and Luke would be trapped here, with Mouth and Meat, in an eternal

snowstorm. At least I'm not alone with them, she thought with a glance at the boy, though she knew it was selfish.

Headlights shined through the deepening blue air and falling snow. The pickup truck swerved quickly across the lot, stopping just outside the front doors, where usually the children stood in a group waiting for their rides. Without turning off the engine, Andy Dixon climbed out of the driver's side door, slipping in the snow, nearly going down on the snowy pavement. He stood upright and looked in at them, waving his hand high in the air, his face boozy and pink.

He came in smelling of timber and whiskey and bar smoke and reached out to his son, who ran up into his arms as if to the ladder of a piece of playground equipment. That was unusual, but Andy Dixon seemed too zotzed to notice. "Luke my boy," he said, then looked at Maddy with glossy red eyes, blinking, not noticing the cut on her head. Behind him, Mouth grimaced as if reappraising her character.

"Thanks for watching him. I won't let it happen again."

She put clenched fists on her hips, saying, "It's fine. But I do want to get out of here before the roads get much worse, so if you don't mind . . ." She gave a tight smile, then saw him looking with mild confusion at Mouth. "This is Mr. Mund, our student teacher."

Luke buried his face in his father's Carhartt jacket. Andy shifted his head and freed up a hand to introduce himself. "Andy Dixon," he said. "Pleased to meet you."

Mouth narrowed his eyes. "Nice to meet you. Hank Osmond says good things about you. Says you're a stand-up father. Glad you finally made it."

"Sure, sorry about that." Andy frowned. "You're a teacher here?"

"I specialize in teaching the kids strong boundaries," Mouth said. "Can't get ahead in this world with weak boundaries. With

those, pal, you're nowhere." Mouth made a swift, cutting motion with his hand.

Andy was looking at him more closely now. "I don't get it. What boundaries?"

"Mr. Dixon," said Maddy. "Please. It's late."

"Okay." He gave Mouth a final, doubting look and turned away. He smirked down at Luke, who pressed his face harder into the rough jacket. "Have a good weekend."

She watched them go, aware of Mouth's trembling hands and the way he was staring intently. "Don't worry," she said when they had gone down the hall. "Andy's too drunk to believe whatever Luke tells him. And even if he did, he won't remember it."

"I thought you said the kid's name was Davey. I thought you were going to tell us everything," said Mouth harshly. No longer leaning against the wall, he took a few steps toward her, raising his shoulders, his warm breath smelling of rot from several feet away. "Why should I believe you at all?"

He smelled like melted snow, like minerals and dirt, like the things that lay in the earth, shifting slightly from season to season, sorted by gravity and flow. She stiffened. She felt quite dizzy. Behind Mouth, outside the window, Luke climbed into the truck, and Andy Dixon stood by his door picking snuff out of a plastic tin. Meat had emerged from the woods and was walking up behind him rapidly, his knife in hand, blade sprung. There was no sound as he wrapped a forearm over Andy's face and tilted his head back, exposing his whiskery neck. Meat drew the blade across the exposed throat, leaving a red line which widened and wept dark red down the front of Andy's jacket. Andy's hands fell to his sides, dumping shredded black tobacco into the snow. Andy dropped to his knees and fell facedown in the snowy lot. He never struggled. It was as if he had felt nothing, as if the life just spilled out of him in a growing dark spot in the snow.

"Don't," Maddy said quietly to Mouth. Outside Meat opened the passenger door and took Luke Dixon by the hand to lead him back inside. "We don't even know who you are. We can't tell the cops anything."

Mouth twisted his lips into an expression of disgust. "Shut the fuck up. You're a fucking liar. That truck is going to get us a lot farther than your shitty little car."

"Oh my God," said Maddy.

"Cut it out," said Mouth. "Lying bitches make me sick. I can't even believe a word you say."

Meat came in with Luke and let the child stagger to her. She heaved him into her arms and felt he had wet himself. He was shivering and pale, his pupils dilated to different sizes, his arms hanging limp.

"Kill them or what?" Meat said.

"I hate killing a kid and a chick. Makes me all queasy." Mouth scowled at them. "Put them downstairs. I hate phony bitches."

High in the wall a small window looked out at ground level over gathering ridges of snow, up at snow falling through gray sky and trees. It was colder down here, but at least the men had gone. She imagined them on the interstate, Mouth driving, complaining about Meat's choice of radio station.

She sat against the silent furnace, cradling Luke in her arms. Darkness hid his face, and she wondered whether he slept, or if he stared into shadows, too. She adjusted her arm, and he pressed a cheek to her ribs, conforming to shape and body warmth. They had only to last the night. The minister would arrive in the morning. Even if the Saturday service was cancelled for weather, and she suspected it would be, someone would come by to check on the building. And maybe they would be lucky, and a policeman would drive by before then, planning to hide on the job

for a while, and see the lights on in the building and come close enough to see the body in the snow. Or, if the killers had moved it, there would be a lot of blood. Unless new snow had buried it. She imagined Hank Osmond driving back in the morning to check on the school, to ensure she had locked up properly. She could not put it past him, though she did not wish this discovery on him. However it went, things would go differently between them now.

A loud bang sounded within the furnace, and the pilot light flared up. Luke started, and she moved her hand to his head, lightly rubbing his scalp, letting him know she was there, watching over. The air warmed and he began to relax. She thought of her quiet apartment. In her bar, they were shouting over the music and each other's voices. A few miles away, in the house where she'd grown up, her father was drinking, listening to forty-year-old songs. How unbothered he would be, were he to call or find her not home and go days without hearing back. He would make this a gift to himself, a new reason to blame himself, a fresh cause to seek oblivion.

The boy whimpered softly, and when she touched his head and he sighed, she knew he was asleep and dreaming. She was glad he was able. He had a mother somewhere, but more likely the grandparents he sometimes talked about would take him. She supposed he would never return to this school, that after tonight she might not see him again, except to glimpse him around town and track his story as he claimed whatever space he could, a loner or a drinker, a criminal, a nobody, a bungler like his dad. Or maybe he would beat the odds, materialize triumphant from the cloud bank of the past, stun her and everyone else. Or maybe just everyone else. Whatever he became, she would not hold it against him. It was a long way off.

The basement was getting warm. For the first time since being locked down here, she felt the exhaustion in her neck and shoulders. She knew she must be hungry, but her stomach had clenched shut. She was almost comfortable. She would sleep through some of this, maybe all the way through, and in the morning she would find a way out. The furnace fired steadily. It was strange to think, down there in the dark, how lucky she was.