

## LIZ LYDIC

*ALL WE WON'T KNOW*

Nathan's mother was stalling returning his call. He'd left three messages this week, and Kitty listened to each several times, in her usual place at the dining room table.

"Can you call me, Mom? Please? I want to talk about this Grandfather trip. I'm at work until 5:30 p.m. my time. Love you."

In one hand, Kitty pressed the sideways triangle on the answering machine to restart the message, while tapping the edge of a plane ticket on the table with the other. She had planned to send it in the mail today to her ex-daughter-in-law, in whose name it was. *Sara Gwendolyn Butler*, mother of Kitty's grandbaby boys; the next generation's first woman to take the Butler name; the wife Kitty's son had left.

"I just don't understand," was all Kitty could say to Nathan a year ago. Nathan sighed a lot, and responded methodically, in four-word sentences. "You don't have to." "I've already explained it." "Things change, you know." Kitty didn't know.

"Where did we go wrong?" she'd asked her husband, Carter James, who simply shook his head. Kitty tried her best friend, who was also her cousin. "Where did I go wrong?" she asked, pushing her pinky into the inside of the phone cord's curlicue coil until it swelled.

Odessa sighed on the other end. "It's not you, baby. These kids are just so . . ." But she'd never completed the sentence.

Once Kitty got the gumption to tell her father about Nathan's divorce, she received her answer. "Don't blame yourself," Buddy Stetson had told her, then patted her hand. "There's a lot we won't know in life."

Now Buddy was in hospice, his formerly hulking body depleted to a skeleton with skin. His main doctor predicted two more weeks of "significant life." When Kitty made the call to her only child to tell him of Buddy's fate, her voice had shaken badly. "I'm okay, baby," she'd told Nathan. "I'll be OK."

I just . . . oh, baby, I'm so glad Daddy knew you before all this." She halfway meant the cancer and halfway meant Nathan's divorce.

At 5:30 p.m. Nathan's time, Kitty reached her son. Nathan offered soothing statements to Kitty, memories from times when everyone was younger, specifics of Buddy's influence on Nathan's life. The words helped Kitty's breath return to normal, but she focused on her main purpose for the call. "You'll be here, of course. I've got the tickets for you all. The boys need to see Buddy one last time. It'll be so good for him."

"Yes, Mom. I'll be there. The boys and I will be there."

"And Sara? Sara can come too, right? Daddy loved—Daddy just loves Sara. Do you remember the Trivial Pursuit night—"

"Mom! Sara? Wait. Did you already call her?" Nathan's voice was tinny, far away.

Kitty twisted her yellow gold wedding ring counterclockwise with her left thumb, until a place on her palm cramped. "Well, no, baby. I figured you could just ask her. Maybe at one of your hand-offs? For the boys? Just let her know the dates, but the ticket is already bought, since I know her birthday and all."

"Mom!"

Kitty sat back at Nathan's sharpness. She rose. The phone cord stretched to its maximum length, as she crossed the kitchen and began rinsing dishes.

"Mom, please turn off the water."

Kitty looked out the kitchen window. The tomatoes needed weeding and the birdfeeder was running low. She'd ask Carter James if some time in the backyard would be nice for them later. She could make iced tea. If he said no, she'd go out there anyway, grabbing the dried vines and pulling them up roughly until her shoulders ached, hoping Carter James would see her work and change his mind about joining her.

"Mom, are you there?"

"Yeah, baby. Sorry." Kitty turned off the water, and began scrubbing the sink with a yellow and green sponge from the windowsill. It was browning, and she'd need to buy a new one. She ought to start a list for the market.

"Mom, you remember I told you about Jamie?"

At the name, Kitty stopped scrubbing, as if she'd been caught doing something wrong. She had no picture of Jamie, but in her mind, Kitty had conjured Nathan's new girlfriend as a young, sharp-haircutted brunette with thick eyeliner, melancholy and rigid. "Right, yes, how's she doing?"

"Mom. She's fine. She's great, actually. Things are going really well." Kitty heard Nathan's voice brighten, and now he sounded closer to his phone receiver than he had before.

"Great, honey!" Kitty's voice was high and too loud. "Send me a picture, will you?"

"Sure, Mom," Nathan said. "Or . . . actually, I'd like to bring her home to meet Grandfather."

Kitty heard Nathan swallow to control tears.

*Good he's crying*, she thought. *Good he feels something about Daddy*. Her own breath caught.

"Baby, I'm glad things are going nicely between you all. But I'm not really sure how it would go, Jamie and Sara here. I don't know if—"

"No, Mom," Nathan interrupted. "Only Jamie. Sara wouldn't be there."

Kitty's neck ached from the strain of holding the phone receiver between her ear and shoulder. "Ow!" she said.

"Mom! What?"

"It's nothing, baby." Kitty switched the phone to the other side and went back to the dining room table. The plane ticket was to the right of a printout from Dr. Acker, recommending exercises Kitty could do for the pain in her right elbow. Kitty looked at the third picture where a lone peach-colored cartoon arm held a blue ball that was to be rotated inward eight to ten times. "I don't know if I mentioned, but I have some great news on that physical therapy appointment," she said, picking up the flyer.

"Mom! Please. Please, don't avoid this," Nathan said. "Answer the question."

"What was it, baby?" Kitty asked, putting the paper back down. She slid the plane ticket and it caught on something sticky on the table's surface. *Sara Gwendolyn Butler* it said above the flight information.

*How pretty she'd looked on her wedding day*, Kitty thought. Normally reserved, Sara had handled her guests graciously and kept warm with all of Nathan's cousins, great aunts and uncles, and, of course, with Buddy. She'd held his hand as he shared advice of never going to bed mad and always saying "I love you" when parting, laws Kitty knew drove Buddy and Carol Ann's marriage for those fifty-eight years until Carol Ann's death. Sara had cried, and dabbed her eyes while embracing and thanking Buddy before being led away by Aunt Leanne.

"She's a good woman," Buddy had told Kitty the first time he met Sara;

then at that moment at the wedding; and then once more last week when he'd ask if she was coming to see him in hospice. Kitty had said she'd make sure of it, that she'd come, but didn't know if Sara's heart—already so keen to sensitivity and now further destroyed by abandonment from the men Kitty loved—would allow her to pick up a phone call from her ex-mother-in-law.

"Jesus, Mom. I asked—or actually said—I want Jamie to be there, not Sara, for Grandfather's last . . . to say good-bye to Grandfather."

Kitty pressed her pointer finger on the dining room table to collect crumbs, then flicked them to the floor. "Well, baby, I'm not sure, since Daddy never really knew this Jamie gal."

"Mom, I know. It's . . . she's not a Jamie gal, she's my girlfriend, and we care about each other a lot." He paused, and then sighed and Kitty pulled the receiver away from her ear. "I knew this would happen."

"Baby, I just don't want to upset Daddy, and I know how much he wants to see you and also the boys, and he said Sara, too."

"I get that, Mom. But what about what I want? I want Grandfather—and you, and Dad—to meet Jamie. Jamie is my life now. She never got to meet Grandfather. Sara did."

Kitty looked out the front window. The first time she met Sara, when Nathan had flown her back with him from across country where they attended graduate school together, Kitty had spied from this same place to see her son and his new girlfriend walking up the front driveway, Sara holding Nathan's forearm. Nathan looked down at her and the way their heads dipped toward one another before they pulled back in laughter was certainty to Kitty that her son had found someone who loved him. "She's right," Kitty had told him in a whisper that night while Sara was in the restroom. Nathan had looked at her puzzled. "She's right for you. And she'll do right by you."

Nathan had nodded and taken Kitty's hand to squeeze it. "Right," he'd said. "I'm so lucky."

The day was graying, and Kitty wanted to get to the leaves on the front lawn.

"Mom?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Well?"

Kitty paused and stood, the plane ticket still in her hand. "Okay, Nathan. I understand. I'd like to meet Jamie."

Nathan breathed out and his tone lightened again. "Thanks, Mom. I

know it's hard, or that you don't like—"

"No, baby. It's not hard. And please don't tell me what I don't like." Kitty's own tone surprised her. Her elbow ached. "What's Jamie's last name? I'll need to call the airline. Please make it quick, I have things to do."