

Inheritance

Sam's frantic fingers beat a staccato sound on the cheap laminate table, rhythm drilling into his brother's nerves and fighting with the buzzy drone of fluorescent light overhead. "I'm just saying, that barn's always been a death trap."

"Jesus." Jamie slapped a palm flat on the table, the sharp crack punctuating Sam's drumbeat.

"Someone had to say it. This time next year we'll probably be back here."

Their older sister shook the vending machine and a second bag of M&Ms dropped. "I always said we should've sold the farm after Mom died. This wouldn't have happened if Dad didn't work so hard."

"Right, Claire, because no one could possibly have a stroke in Evanston." Sighing, Jamie stretched his arms behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "Damn!" He jerked upright as it nearly fell over and muttered angrily about county funding.

Claire's boots scraped across the linoleum as she approached her brothers at the table and ripped open a bag of M&Ms. "We can't say it was a stroke yet. Either way, Dad could see actual doctors in Evanston, not just Dr. Miller who's probably delivering the Krueger's sixth kid right now." As she spoke, she separated the green candy on a clean napkin. "I can't afford to keep flying back here for emergencies."

Snagging a green piece from Claire's neat pile, Jamie popped it into his mouth. "But it's the only time we see you. How's the baby, by the way?"

“Fine. This year’s just been hard.” Without looking up, Claire started organizing the blue candy next and swept beads of sweat off her forehead. The nearby air conditioning had given up hours ago, leaving the hospital’s break room with vending machines stifling and thick with the smell of burnt coffee.

As outside heat pressed against the windows, Sam’s fingers picked up a sharper, more urgent rhythm on the laminate. “Do we have to talk about this while Dad is dying?”

“Sam, don’t be dramatic.” The words were barely out of Jamie’s mouth when Nurse Deb appeared in the doorway, hand raised in a calming gesture.

“You can go sit with him now. Room 203, through maternity and past the construction.”

Sam was already on his feet. Trailing behind, Claire and Jamie followed yellow arrows through corridors that smelled of industrial disinfectant. Somewhere in the maze of peeling paint, a phone rang unanswered. The bright arrows pointed past an abandoned wheelchair, construction dust coating its metal in fine grit, and a bulletin board advertising a blood drive three months past.

As she walked, Claire thumbed through her phone screen and nearly collided with Jamie in a narrow corridor. “Sorry, is this boring you?” he scoffed.

Grip tightening on the phone, Claire said, “It’s important.” Her gaze never left the screen.

As Jamie peered over her shoulder, his voice dropped low. “Is that an attorney?”

“Our land’s worth \$800K to developers if Dad can’t farm anymore,” Claire said, deflecting. “Reichert’s always said if we ever sell—”

“Not so fast. Did you get another DUI?”

“That was fifteen years ago, Jamie. I’m just worried about Dad.”

“You’re worried about a lawyer.”

Claire finally looked up. “If you must know, divorce isn’t cheap.”

Sam stopped walking and turned to face them. “You’re leaving Richard? Did I miss something?”

Claire brushed past him. “Just that he’s into redheads.”

Then Jamie stopped walking, too, and wiped his glasses on his stained shirt. “He’s cheating?”

Now they all stood still beside a men’s restroom and a landscape poster encouraging them to *be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle*.

“Like I said,” Claire retorted, irritation in her voice, “weird year.”

As Sam ducked into the bathroom, he said, “Sounds like you’ve got a lot to talk about. I’ll catch up in a second.”

Ignoring his brother, Jamie started to ask, “How long—”

“Two months.”

“Who else knows?”

“Dad knows. He always knows.” Claire’s phone buzzed and she ignored it. “Last month, I suggested therapy. Never thought it would lead to this...discovery, but that’s therapy for you.”

After Jamie forced a chuckle, the bathroom sink across the wall filled the silence. “So,” he finally said, “this is serious.”

“And now you know why we stopped visiting.” Claire leaned against the wall and rested a hand on her swollen belly. “It’s not...optimal timing.”

“All this time, this is why you’ve been so vague on the phone?”

“You never asked.” Claire shrugged. “And honestly, I feel embarrassed.” As Jamie’s brow furrowed, Claire’s phone buzzed again. “I can’t add to your stress helping Dad. And Sam’s never in one place long enough to talk.” Her gaze shifted to the bathroom. “Should you check on him?”

When Jamie nodded, it was a quick and almost imperceptible dip of his chin. “Sure. And...” His voice softened. “Claire, I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks, Jamie.” She smiled before looking back down at her phone.

Hoping to splash cold water on his face, Jamie pushed through the bathroom door to find a mini bottle of laundry detergent, travel toothbrush, a stack of compressed towel tablets, a small bottle of body wash and what looked like three days’ worth of clean socks curled in a drugstore bag. “Sam?”

By the mirror, Sam stiffened mid-motion and then resumed smoothing his shirt, the fabric a road map of creases that suggested air drying. “Just freshening up. Long drive.” He shoved the laundry soap behind his deodorant.

As a car freshener tumbled out of Sam’s sweatpants, Jamie said, “Please tell me you’re not living in your car.”

“Not permanently,” Sam mumbled, bending down and shoving the freshener back in his pocket. “Just since the school cut arts funding.”

Jamie turned the faucet off and on again. “Why don’t we tell each other anything? How long, Sam?”

“Since May.” Sam’s shoulders hunched forward, making him look smaller and younger. As soon as he’d packed up his kit, his hand was already on the handle and Jamie followed toward the door. “Don’t tell Claire,” Sam whispered.

They pushed into the hallway where Claire tapped on her phone. “Sam’s living in his Honda,” Jamie announced.

Claire’s head snapped up. “What?”

Shaking his head, Sam said, “Not forever, just...can we focus on Dad?” Claire’s lips parted as he cut her off. “Come on,” he said, pushing past her. “Room 203, right?”

As Claire mouthed to Jamie, *Later*, the siblings’ footsteps toward their father’s room never quite fell into sync.

The door to room 203 hissed shut behind them and the hallway’s antiseptic faded into another faint, coppery odor where Earl lay in his hospital bed, skin so flushed it looked bruised against the white pillow. His work boots sat neatly under the visitor’s chair, still caked with mud. His John Deere cap hung from the IV pole like a flag at half-mast and the green flannel Jamie gave him last Christmas draped over the radiator. Wires snaked from his body into a cluster of machines that blinked back at the siblings as the heart monitor’s long, sparse intervals haunted the room.

While Sam picked at a hangnail, Jamie stood still except for his jaw that clenched and unclenched until Claire broke the silence. “So we agree? Jamie manages until we list?”

Staring at the monitor, Jamie said, “I can’t manage it without Dad. You know I’ve hated it since 4-H.”

“I never knew,” Claire admitted. “You hid it well.”

"If things like this keep happening," said Sam, gesturing at his father's hospital bed, "who knows what else we'll find out about each other?"

"Not helpful," Jamie shot back.

"Well, the sooner we sell, the sooner I can pay this attorney," Claire said, her tone hopeful.

Frowning, Jamie slumped into the visitor's chair. "We can't just sell a century farm."

"Let me take care of it," Sam chimed in. "Not like I have a job anyway."

"You'll regret it," Jamie warned.

"Not as much as working for that school district."

"This is crazy." Jamie's voice cracked. "Claire's getting divorced, you're living in your car and Dad's—"

"Reichert's offering 800k," Claire interrupted, holding up her calculator app. "Split three ways, Sam will be out of his car, I'll be divorced and Jamie, you'll be doing whatever you want by this time next year."

"You move quickly," Earl remarked, his eyes closed and drawl unmistakably clear.

Claire's phone clattered on the floor. "Dad!" She nearly tripped over her feet running to his side as Sam bent down to retrieve her phone.

"Just bad dehydration, by the way. Not a stroke. Dr. Miller got pulled to the newest Krueger."

"How much did you hear?" Jamie was pale.

“Enough. Claire, glad they know about Richard. Sam, finally shared your housing update?”

As Sam set Claire’s phone on the bedside table, he said, “It’s good to hear your voice, Dad.”

“And Jamie?” Earl turned his head slightly. “Since when do you hate farming?”

“Since always. Since every morning at 4:30.”

“Your mother suspected. I just wanted you to tell me.”

“But it’s a century farm,” Jamie protested, “and Sam or Claire weren’t volunteering. Someone has to—”

“You know what’s funny?” Earl shifted, wincing. “You’ve been talking to me about this. Claire’s marriage. Sam’s housing. But it took a medical emergency for you three to tell each other.”

“You ask questions,” Claire said quietly.

As Earl pressed the button for the nurse, he said, “Let’s sell it. The farm.”

“It’s been in the family forever!”

“So was your great-uncle’s drinking problem. Some things need to end.”

Nurse Deb appeared, looked at all their faces, and backed out again. “Five more minutes, then he rests.”

Outside the hospital room, a patient was being wheeled past, laughing about something, and Deb stepped back again to let them pass as Earl continued. “Sam, please reconsider my offer to stay with me now that your siblings know anyway. Claire, feel free to join. Sounds like we could all use time together. Jamie, what do you really want to do?”

Jamie looked at his hands. "I'd...like to try grad school again."

"One more thing," Earl said, finally opening his eyes fully. "The cafe M&Ms are free if you hit B4 twice."

Clutching the other bag still in her pocket, Claire exclaimed, "Seriously?"

"Everything has a secret," Earl said. "On your way out, please tell Deb I want real food. Jamie, call Dorothy Linn from my book club—tell her I'm fine but I'll miss dinner tonight."

They all stared at him.

"What? I can have secrets too. Just a second date." He closed his eyes again but they could see him smiling. "Holidays will be more fun now that we're caught up."

"Dad?" Claire nearly whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Sam and I can move back in?"

"As if I'd want my first grandson anywhere else?" The monitor's rhythm had perked up and the sixth Krueger baby cried somewhere in the distance.

"So we're really selling?" Jamie asked.

"Unless you secretly love farming?"

"God no."

"Next year, it'll be gone and we'll all know each other a little better." Earl closed his eyes. "Sam back on his feet, Claire free of Richard, Jamie in grad school and maybe I'll have had that second date with Dorothy. Predictions aren't so scary when you're honest about what you want. Now, nearly dying, that's scary."

"Except you didn't," Sam said. "You were dehydrated."

“I’ve earned the drama, dammit.” Claire started laughing and then her brothers. Though Earl kept his eyes closed, they could see his faint smile.

As the sun descended outside, light peeking through the window softened everything it touched. The hospital television murmured weather predictions while Sam sat remarkably still, hands quiet in his lap. Claire hadn’t even remembered to pick up her phone again and Jamie’s shoulders had dropped from near his ears for the first time in a long time. Past the window, among scattered vehicles in the parking lot, their three cars clustered together.