

## Tracy's Chance.

The application sat there on my desk like a floodlit miracle. Beams of light from my desk lamp sang from its glossy cover, the name across the front almost glowed and, sitting back in my plush leather seat I crossed my legs and swung around to stare out of the large picture window. Always blue sky here, and today it seemed even bluer - to think the success or failure of this application rested entirely in my hands. It was an intoxicating thought and, in a strange way, a frightening one.

Considerably sobered I turned back and flicked open the cover, running my gaze down the half page of neat handwriting inside - she had never been able to produce neat work at school, I remembered. Not that I had been too bothered about her academic qualities back then; too busy keeping out of her way, rarely successfully if my memory served me...

When we had been ten years old, our small Cornish school and another local primary had shared a bus to visit the comprehensive school we would be attending in September. We were the first group on the bus, and when we stopped to pick up the others I saw her for the first time. You know the feeling you get when you clash with someone without really knowing why? There must be some kind of chemical released on first meeting someone, an unfelt reaction that colours your future relationship with that person no matter what you do. It works the same way with friendships, but sadly it's rarely so obvious. Tracy was the first of her school to get on the bus, and she headed straight for the back where I and my friends were sitting. I sat in the middle. Flipping her gimlet gaze from one end of the long back seat to the other, she paused at no-one, so my assumption that she had singled me out was probably completely inaccurate. But later I was to remember that cold, pale blue stare too often - it seemed to mark the beginning of a beautiful hatred.

Maybe she'd picked on me because I had been one of the few girls at the school who had been plainer than she was.

Or maybe she hadn't even needed a reason.

It had taken some time once we were actually pupils together at secondary school, for our mutual dislike to evolve into something more tangible than the looks that flashed between us. But it had obviously been

stewing gently, cooking in its own juices, growing anything but tender. I don't remember for certain, but I think it lay dormant until we were both in the third form. I can't recall any incident before that, but once she realised I was terrified of her it was as if someone had flicked the bully switch and then stood back to watch the fun.

Tracy had a group of four or five hangers on, depending on who was in favour and who wasn't. It wasn't that she was popular, although she would probably disagree, it was simply that people were scared of her. She had the kind of influence that meant you were either 'in' or dead, or at least thoroughly roughed up at regular intervals. And I most assuredly wasn't 'in'.

It began on a wet cross-country run. My friend and I had been ambling along at our usual pace, talking about the relative merits of our favourite boys.

"Tristan's much taller than Paul," Michelle pointed out. This was true, I admitted, but Paul had a nicer singing voice. And besides, I wasn't exactly over-endowed in the height stakes myself. Tristan could sing too, I was informed. Yeah, but Paul had smiled at me the other day in physics, and anyway, Tristan was a whole year younger than us; Michelle was practically cradle-snatching. The discussion followed its familiar, comfortable format, and it wasn't until we rounded the corner that would take us down the track back to the school field that we smelled the cigarette smoke.

"Hell..." muttered Michelle, who was slightly ahead of me. "It's Tracy and Alison."

I stopped short, a cold feeling sneaking up my chest. So far nothing had happened with Tracy Bolt, so I still don't know to this day how I knew, but I did; there was going to be trouble. I glanced around, wondering if there was another way back to the school field. Michelle shook her head, sensing what was on my mind.

"We have to go this way," she said, turning to see if there was anyone else in sight we could mingle in with. There was no-one. I took a deep breath and started jogging along the track, past Michelle and towards Tracy and Alison. They both looked up from where they stood, sheltering their cigarettes from the spitting rain. Their expressions were a blur as I ran past, my face fixed ahead of me as if I hadn't recognised them. Michelle was right behind me and I heard Tracy call out as soon as we had gone past her.

"Oy! Anyone finds out and we'll get you...."

I breathed a sigh of relief as I realised they weren't coming after us, and my spirits lightened

immeasurably as I turned onto the slushy school field and saw a group there playing hockey. There was nothing she could do to me now, my fears had been for nothing. The games teacher approached us as we plodded damply into the changing room.

“Have you seen Tracy Bolt and Alison Borlaise?” she demanded. Her face suggested that she had heard something not to her liking, and we shook our heads, feigning ignorance. I watched her expression harden, her lips growing tight with disapproval as she turned and marched out towards the field. Michelle glanced at me, and I suddenly felt sick. Really, *physically* sick. There was no way Tracy would believe we hadn’t said anything, no way at all.

“Should I go after her and pretend we saw them coming along by the hockey pitch?” I suggested.

“Not now we’ve just said we don’t know,” replied Michelle flatly, “she’ll just think we’re covering up, and then we’ll get it from all angles. Don’t worry, she hasn’t done anything yet, has she?”

“She’s had no reason to - so far,” I pointed out. I sat down on the hard wooden bench, hunched over to try and rid myself of the nauseous fear that wormed around in my belly. My hands shook and I had to blink back tears as I pictured Tracy’s fury, inflamed by the trouble she would be in.

I did not have too long to wait; after about ten minutes, Mrs Hailey, the games teacher came striding back in, followed by Tracy and Alison. Both girls were wearing ‘I don’t care what *she* says’ expressions, but when Tracy caught sight of me, the venom I saw in her face made me shudder; I had never seen such a look of intense hatred aimed at me. Before I could stop myself, I snapped:

“I didn’t say anything, she already knew.”

“Now you’ve done it,” she hissed, as if I hadn’t spoken. “You just better watch out ...”

It happened during the last break of the day. I was walking past the library, my head full of Paul as was usual in those last weeks of the Christmas term. We had been rehearsing the school production of *Godspell*; Michelle and I were in the chorus and Paul was in a principal role. I was humming one of his songs to myself when I felt something slam into the middle of my back. I went sprawling to the ground, unaware for the moment that I had drawn blood on both knees and the palm of one hand. My bag was flung from me by the force of the tumble, and I remember seeing my English notes fluttering loose from my folder. The ink ran in ugly blue stains across my homework, but before I had time to feel more than a dull disappointment at having to redo the work, I felt a kick land sharply in the top of my thigh. The muscle there spasmed and I felt

suddenly sick at the bone-deep pain.

Turning to scramble to my feet again I saw Tracy's foot swing again, but managed to shuffle gracelessly back so that the kick was no more than a brush across my hip. I gained my feet somehow, and the moment I was upright I turned to her. All thoughts of fighting back were pushed to the back of my mind as four of her friends formed a circle around me.

"Teach you to grass me up..." Tracy muttered. She swung her bag at me, but I reached out and caught the strap before it could do any more damage than thump harmlessly against my aching thigh. I had backed up against Alison without knowing it, and a knee came up behind me; my leg buckled and I went down on one hand again, the one I had grazed earlier. I cried aloud at the fresh stinging, hearing the girls' slightly nervous laughter. Tears burned at the back of my eyes, and my throat felt thick. Don't let me cry, God, don't...

At that moment the bell rang and the group broke up. That was how it had all begun. Now Tracy knew I was basically a coward and would not fight back. I would have given anything over the next two years to have had the courage to at least stand my ground on that day, even if it had meant getting a beating, but I hadn't. Maybe it wouldn't have made any difference at all, but at least my self-respect might have remained intact.

I hadn't told anyone about this, except Michelle, until the fifth form. Things had gone from bad to worse; breaks were a nightmare and I had taken to staying in the library unless I knew Tracy was in detention or away from school. Her friends, although not pleasant, at least left me alone when Tracy herself wasn't around. But I quickly learned to dread lessons where we had video presentations in the dark, because I knew for a fact that *she* would somehow end up sitting behind me with a sharpened pencil, a compass, or just her vile self.

It had never even been properly resolved; one incident had brought the situation to the attention of the head of upper school but nothing had come of it beyond a small hiatus while she played it safe; a pool of calm before I was rudely shoved back out into the rapids. It had ended only when Tracy left school and by then I had left behind the outgoing, self-confident child I'd been, and turned into a timid, nervous teenager. Someone I had never met before and didn't like much.

Still, that had been a long time ago and sometimes emotions aren't accurate as memories; was I blowing things out of proportion? Alone in the office, I shook my head. No, my emotions had it right; she really had

been a vicious piece of work; snide and catty at best, violent at worst, she had ruined what should have been great years for me. The anger sizzled again as I remembered how scared I had been to go to school discos, parties, anybody's house who lived near Tracy's. Years I would never have back again; days when the most I should have worried about was whether or not I would bump into Paul when my hair was a mess. My exams were a blur to me; on top of the revision and stress there was always the terror of running into Tracy somewhere when we were alone. No. Not out of proportion at all.

And this was going to be my decision. Could I be the "bigger" person?

I arrived home a little later than usual, and parked my black Mazda behind my husband's highly decorated Beetle. He had painted it himself, and it always made me smile to see it there in the driveway of our home.

My thoughts turned back to my schooldays again, but this time Tracy was not a feature. Now it was the boy called Paul that I remembered. I had developed a crush on him in the third year, and finally made friends with him in the sixth form when we took drama together. His infectious smile had never left my thoughts, his wide green eyes seemed to be permanently laughing, and I had fallen totally in love with him the moment I had heard him sing in that audition for 'Godspell'.

Until then I hadn't paid him any attention, he was just this slightly mad boy whose hair flopped over his face, and who had appeared in various lessons with me, keeping to himself unless he was in the frame of mind to amuse everyone. From the audition onwards though, I had been his slave.

I smiled at the memories, and pushed open the front door. My husband looked up from where he was poring over his drawing board, and grinned engagingly. The smile hadn't changed since school.

"Just finished the last frame," he said of the new cartoon he was creating. I admired it for a moment, but knew I would burst if I didn't tell him soon.

"You'll never guess who's applied?" I said.

Paul considered. "Victoria Beckham?"

I threw a cushion at him then struck a dramatic pose; "Tracy Bolt."

Paul's jaw dropped, the effect was fabulous. His eyes opened wider, stunned. "You're kidding!" he managed at last. I shook my head, and flopped down into my favourite corner of the sofa. As one of my best friends by the end of the sixth form, Paul had been disgusted to learn of my misery in the preceding years, but of course Tracy had left school at the first opportunity, and hadn't continued beyond her fifth year. He

had been almost heroic in his condemnation of her, and I had fallen even more hopelessly in love with him on the strength of it. That we were here, together now, told me all I needed to know about how right I'd been about him –

“So are you going to approve the application?” he asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“You think she deserves it?”

Paul sighed and put down his pencil. He came over to me and sat down, taking my hands in his. “What if she's really sorry?”

“What if she is?” I pulled my hands away crossly but, undeterred, he took them again and laid his forehead against mine, staring into my eyes.

“This application came to you for a reason,” he said. “Out of all of you there, and all the applications that come in, that *you* should get *this* one? You know the boss wants to see how you're going to handle this. You must have all the facts in her file, so what does it say?”

“I'm calling her in. There's no mention of her schooldays in there. I need to know if she's got any regrets before I decide.”

“So if she shows remorse she's in?”

“More than likely,” I shrugged. We were quiet for a moment, then I stood up and kissed him quickly, heading for the kitchen. “Sit in if you like, she's coming in tomorrow at ten.”

The following morning at five to ten I was sitting behind my desk, with the application in front of me, alongside two large stamps: to accept or to deny...

I buzzed the secretary. “I'm ready, so as soon as she arrives you can send her in, thank you.”

Paul sat in the corner of the room, ostensibly to take notes on the interview, but we both knew it was because he was eaten up by curiosity. I thought she might recognise him, as he hadn't changed much since our schooldays, so he agreed to stay in the background. As for me, well... reaching into my desk drawer, I pulled out my make-up compact.

The mirror was tiny but just enough to reassure myself that I looked nothing like the way I had when I was sixteen; gone was the mousy brown hair, replaced by a sleek auburn bob. My skin had always been pale, but the freckles had faded and besides, a dab of foundation could make them all but disappear. My figure

wasn't exactly slim, but no longer bordered on chunky, and my nails were manicured and painted a business-like deep bronze. She might recognise me if she were looking for me, but why would she be? I couldn't even picture her, not properly.

At school she had been far more overweight than myself, but with the height I lacked. Her hair had been short, dry-looking and blonde, but I couldn't remember her face at all. Except her eyes. Those pale blue, small, nasty-looking eyes... I shuddered, then stiffened as the secretary announced Ms Bolt's arrival. She had reverted to her Christian name upon her divorce, I'd read that in her file yesterday, and wondered who had done something so vile in a previous life as to warrant living with Tracy Bolt in his current one. Still, whoever it was needn't concern themselves with it any longer, obviously ...

Then she came into the room and it was as if time had reversed itself, running quicker and quicker back to when this face had been the stuff of my frequent nightmares. How could I have forgotten it? Her hair was neater now, the style softer, the colour less obviously out of a bottle. The eyes though, they were what did it to me again. Just the barest graze scorched me the way it had so long ago and my skin flamed. For once I was glad my boss always insisted JC and Mike take up station either side of the door during interviews; just the sight of her brought back all the fear in one chilling wave. I forced myself to remember who was in charge here, and relaxed a little. The interview began.

It was very short.

"Ms Bolt. I've read your file, and you make a good argument for inclusion."

She smiled in relief and in that second I could see just how desperate she was that the application be approved. Hardly surprising. She had the look of someone who hated to be in the position where reliance on someone else was all she had. But I had to give her a chance, so now came the crucial question.

"I just want to ask one more question, one that hasn't been covered here..." I laid my hand gently on the shiny document, watching her face flick fearfully downwards as if the answer lay somewhere under my fingers.

"Did you *ever* do anything during your schooldays, that you regret?"

"No."

No hesitation. Relief even, that the question had been so easy. I looked at Paul, and he gave me the briefest nod. He had been right, the application had arrived on my desk for a reason. Taking a deep breath I peeled

back the transparent glossy cover, then picked up one of the stamps, double checking before slamming it down across the paper in a diagonal scar of red condemnation,

### **APPLICATION DENIED.**

Tracy started to her feet, her face white, and backed away from my desk even as JC and Mike gently took her arms. She struggled for a moment, and then suddenly stopped, staring at me in sick recognition.

“You...” she breathed, and I nodded. She glanced upwards, as if looking for intervention that was never going to be forthcoming, and Paul and I watched in silence as she was escorted out. Then he sighed and shook his head.

“Well, you gave her a chance,” he said.

I smiled tightly and filed the application in the furnace behind me. It would reach its destination moments before she did. “Yep,” I agreed, fluffing my wings and adjusting my halo. “Every last chance.”

The End.

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