

Know it All

Part 1

Mary & Stephen

In a small rural area of a small state in the American midwest, nestled between the bustling cities of Oakayah and Hollando, lies the town of Jensonburg. A town of only about 2000 people, Jensonburg isn't much known for anything at all, really. A half decent football team, a small local meal known as the Fish Dish, and for occasionally appearing in movies when a director is in need of a rural area but doesn't much like the smell of freshly laden manure. In this town, just a bit east of the shopping district, is a cul-de-sac. A small dead end where a few people, lucky enough in this day and age to own a home, spend their days cutting their lawns, having neighborhood picnics, and complaining about everyone that doesn't look and act like they do. In one of the few houses of this little suburban paradise, Stephen and his daughter Mary sat down with their bowls of cereal in front of the TV.

Stephen took his place in his armchair, balancing his bowl in his lap while his daughter plopped herself down on the carpet in front of him. Mary sat there, eating her sugary, marshmallow filled bowl of cereal, gazing at the TV with the focus that only young children can have when watching cartoons meant more for selling toys than actually entertaining anyone. She was a tad too close to the TV for Stephen's (or any parent's) liking, but considering it was a pleasant Saturday morning, and he had spent all week working instead of spending time with his dear daughter, he decided against chastising her. This little moment of peace was shattered, however, when Mary turned to her father and spoke.

"The mailman is going to die tomorrow."

Stephen choked on his spoon and spat out chunks of marshmallows, brown things that aren't marshmallows, and milk. He took a moment to steady himself.

"You... I... erm..." he stammered. "W-why do you say that dear?"

Mary gave a little shrug. "Because he is... I know he is."

Stephen stared at his daughter for a moment. He wasn't always sure about how to go about this parenting business. Since the passing of his wife a few years ago, taking care of a toddler like Mary felt like he was constantly balancing multiple spinning plates that were all on fire during an earthquake. Mary was just about the most well behaved, good natured little girl that any parent could hope for, but that doesn't change the fact that when you become a parent, parental instincts are installed directly into your mental operating system, so pretty much every cell in Stephen's body was devoted to making sure that Mary was happy, healthy, and safe. So, when his child suddenly drops a something like "the mailman is going to die" on him, it hit him like a bag of bricks would hit an ant from a 10-story drop.

"Well, honey, that's... not very nice to say. People don't just pass on for no reason."

Mary scrunched her face, this thought having not occurred to her until just now.

"I guess not... I'm really sure, though." She said.

"Well, honey, sometimes even if you're really sure, real life doesn't always work out the way you think it does. And, Mary, sweetie, don't go around telling people they're going to die, ok? Even if you think you're right, it's rude."

"Ok daddy!" Mary said brightly.

The matter was settled, the lesson was learned, and all was right with the world again. Mary and Stephen returned to the TV, and Saturday relaxation was allowed to continue.

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Monday came, as it always does. Monday went, as it often does as well. It was about 5 PM in the evening of this Monday when Stephen pushed open the door to his home with a weary groan that

matched the squawking the door itself made, something he was always too exhausted to try and fix every night.

“Urrrggg!” he whined.

“And good afternoon to you to, Stephen.” Came the friendly, if sarcastic, voice of a woman from his dining room. This voice belonged to Beatrice, one of Stephen’s neighbors who was kind enough to babysit for him on a regular basis. Stephen was a little weary of Beatrice at first, having someone else watch your child is always going to trigger that response. It didn’t help that Beatrice was, in Stephen’s mind at least, a stereotypical teenage rebel. Always wearing dark clothing and too much eye shadow that made Stephen wonder if she was late for a nu metal concert. But Mary and Beatrice got along well and she worked for cheap, which were really the only two things that concerned him, so he set his biases aside. Beatrice was gathering her things as Stephen entered the dining room, where she and Mary were in the middle of a session of coloring.

“Thanks again, Beatrice. You’ll have to wait until the end of the week to get paid, if that’s OK...”

“Oh hush, I know you’re good for it. Besides taking care of this little sweetie is reward enough. Bye Mary!”

“Bye Bee!” squealed Mary.

Stephen was helping Beatrice with her assorted bags and other such things women often carry around with them when, as she opened the door to leave, she stopped and spun around.

“Oh! Nearly forgot. The guy next door stopped by, he said don’t forget to get the rent check to the post office today.”

“Huh? The check’s not in the mail?” Stephen’s face contorted. The last thing he needed was for his damn rent check to be late. “Why not? Don’t you usually hand it to Mark when he stops by?”

“Well of course, I would have, but he didn’t show up today, obviously.”

“Obviously? What do you mean, obviously?”

“Oh, you didn’t hear? Mark passed away yesterday. Mail service is in an uproar cause they only found out today and- “

Beatrice continued on with her sentence, but Stephen had stopped listening. Well, less that he had stopped listening, and more that the realization of what was said had seeped its way into his brain and drained his ears of their function. Did he just hear that right? Mark, the person who delivered their mail, every day for the last decade or so, had just died? And it happened yesterday? As in, the day Mary told him it would happen? His whole head felt lighter than air and his breathing fell short. What did this mean? What was happening?

“Erm, huh?” Stephen said, finally returning to reality. “Right, right, I’ll remember that ok thanks Beatrice see you tomorrow.”

Beatrice looked momentarily confused at Stephen’s sudden departure but remembered that Stephen worked 50 hours a week with no time off, and simply shrugged it off as an exhausted father moment. She said her own goodbye, walked out of the house and continued down the street. Stephen shut the door behind him and glanced at the entry way to the dining room. Parenting was hard enough as it is, and now his little girl out of nowhere is some kind of... psychic? Is that even the word for it? Was it a prediction? A premonition? An ancient curse? No, she said she *knew*. What did that mean though? Where did the knowing come from? Stephen shook himself.

*Calm down, he told himself. You’re an adult. Not just an adult, a grown-ass man. A single grown-ass man, who desperately needs someone who can help you with the chores and the parenting and of course the physical needs and... ok we’re getting off track. Point is, you’ve raised a child by yourself for years now. If you can do that you can handle... whatever the hell this is.*

He steadied himself and entered the dining room. Mary hadn’t moved from her seat, still absorbed in her coloring. He glanced at what she was drawing, and after finding there weren’t any demonic looking figures in it, relaxed a bit and sat down across from her.

"Hi Daddy." She said, not even looking up.

"Hi honey..." he trailed off. Not sure where to go next.

"Mary... did you hear about the mailman?"

At this, Mary stopped coloring. She looked up at her father with that innocent little look all toddlers seem to have. The kind of look that told Stephen that her daughter was still untouched by all the ills of society that gradually wore down a person until... well until they're more like Stephen.

"Yes." She said. And for a moment there was silence.

"Do you... how do you feel about that?" Stephen said with caution.

Mary shrugged.

Stephen couldn't hold it in any longer, it was time to be upfront about it. "Mary... you said on Saturday that you *knew* that the mailman was going to die. How... how did you *know* that, Mary?"

Mary shrugged again.

Stephen leaned in and clasped his child's hands in his own.

"Mary, honey... this is important. I'm not mad, or anything, I promise you that. I just need to know... anything. Anything at all you can tell me about how you knew. Did you hear that the mailman wasn't feeling well? Did you hear from a neighbor? Did you hear it from someone at daycare? On TV? Anything?"

Mary's lip started to tremble, and her eyes started to water. Even though she was still an innocent little toddler, she could tell that this was serious.

"I... I don't know daddy. Honest. I just did." She said, almost ready to burst.

Stephen nodded. "Ok honey. That's Ok. Thank you. You can go back to your coloring now."

Mary sniffled and went back to her work. There was a giraffe desperately in need of a shade of blue.

Stephen stared up at the ceiling. He was frustrated at the situation but couldn't think of anything else to do about it. He closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. Exhale. "Ok Mary," he began.

"There's one last thing I want you to do for me, don't tell anyone about what you told me, OK? And if you get that... feeling again, like you just know something, tell me, and only tell me, OK?"

Mary nodded. "OK Daddy."

"Thanks, honey."

Stephen got up from the table.

"Daddy?"

"Yes honey?"

"What's an investment?"

Stephen raised an eyebrow. "Um... it's what grown ups do with money."

"Oh... and are investments bad?"

Stephen opened his mouth to explain the many negative impacts of the stock market, remembered who he was talking to, and decided to simply reply with "Not always... why do you ask? Stuff like that is for grown ups, and even then, it's not always fun for grown ups."

"Well... I was playing with Timmy in his yard today and he told me his daddy was doing a bad investment. Even though his daddy thinks it's a good one."

Stephen blinked. His ears were shutting down again.

"Mary... how did Timmy know that?"

He could barely get the words out as is, every syllable was a struggle. Stephen couldn't hear anything anymore, but he didn't need to. He knew exactly what Mary said next.

"He just knew."

## Part 2

### *Timmy, Marie, & James*

Just a few doors down from Mary and Stephen, is the house of Marie, James, and their son Timmy. It's no use describing what it looks like, since this is an American suburb, and to describe what a single home in an American suburb looks like is to describe what a single blade of grass on a freshly cut lawn looks like. It was this particular house that Timmy entered, panting from his outside exercise, calling out "Hi mooom!" to his mother, who was inside washing dishes.

"In here, honey!" Marie called back.

Marie was a housewife and proud of it. Having a family was always her lifelong goal, and shortly after marrying her college sweetheart, she had been blessed with Timmy, and the rest was history. Timmy marched into the kitchen, along with a repeating *squish squish squish* noise that made Marie whirl around. Timmy's shoes were caked in mud, and he was currently leaving large brown mud pies behind him with every step.

"Oh-oh-oh! Timmy!" she tutted, "You're absolutely filthy and I just cleaned the kitchen. You go wash up right now, young man, and get ready for dinner. Your father will be home soon and when he gets here, we're all going to sit down and have a nice meal."

"Okay mooom!" Timmy said, drawing out the "mom" for no other reason other than he found it fun. He raced off to the bathroom, trailing mud every step until he finally took off his shoes and placed them in the cubby by the door. Marie shook her head in a "what *am* I going to do with that boy" manner and returned to her dishes. Already she was mentally calculating how long it was going to take to do the dishes, scrub the floors again, and cook dinner before James would get home.

Suddenly she felt something on her neck. It was a warm, moist, puff of air that made the hairs on her neck stand up. She shivered at the odd yet delightful feeling this gave her. A romantic tingling of her most sensitive spot. She brought her hands up behind her head and embraced the figure standing behind her, as the figure's arms wrapped around her waist with care. Marie craned her neck back a bit and kissed the person standing behind her. After the long, deep romantic expression, she turned around and looked into the figure's soft brown eyes.

"Hi honey... I thought I told you not to do that. You startle me when you do that."

James was biting his lip and examining his wife up and down like a tiger examines his next meal. Marie recognized this look as the universal male "I'm too horny to even think straight" look.

"Hmm hmm sorry babe. You just looked so damn good in that apron; I couldn't help myself. Where's Timmy?"

"He's upstairs getting ready for dinner."

"Oh? Sounds like we have time, then." He smirked and brought himself closer, embracing his wife and planting another kiss on her cheek, moving slowly down her neck.

Marie giggled, "Oh cut it out, I haven't even gotten dinner ready yet. I didn't think you'd be home until later."

James continued his romantic advances. "Ehh that can wait. Or hell, let's get a pizza."

Marie finally pushed him away but got a firm grip on his tie.

"Later." She said with a devious smugness. "I spent all afternoon prepping this meatloaf and you're both going to eat it."

James leaned in, "Oh I'll eat your meatloaf, all right".

Marie flipped his tie around his shoulder. "Shut up and get ready for dinner. Or even better, make yourself useful and mop the floors for me."

James rolled his eyes. "I'll pass."

"Ok if you don't want to mop my floors then I guess I won't let you *mop my floors*."

"Those floors won't know what hit 'em!" shouted James, yanking the mop out of the closet.

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After Timmy was tucked in, Marie came down the stairs and joined her husband on the couch. They snuggled together in each others' arms, and James pulled a blanket over the both of them. The TV was on low volume, but they barely paid attention to it as the two talked about their day and drank champagne. The two could rarely see each other, what with James having a full-time job and Marie taking care of Timmy all day. But when Timmy was finally tucked in, the dishes were washed, and there was nothing left to do but enjoy each other's company, enjoy they did.

Marie exhaled a big, relaxed sigh. "We have a wonderful family, don't we?"

"We sure do." Replied James.

"And that boy of ours... he's so innocent and full of life. And such a wonderful imagination."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Do you know what he told me today? He said he wanted to go on the run from the mob."

"Oh yeah?" Said James with a chuckle.

"Hehe, yeah. He said mean ol' Mr. Joey is going to send some 'wiseguys' looking for money and-

"

James grabbed his wife's face and pulled it close to his own, a stern frown suddenly filling Marie's vision.

"What did he say? When did he say that? Who told him?"

"I- I- what?" Marie stammered in surprise. "Well, I- I- I don't know. He just said so this afternoon."

"Who told him? What does he know?" James said, clearly upset. He threw the blanket off him and started towards the staircase. "I'll wake him, I need to talk to him, now!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Marie said, running after him and grabbing his arm. "He just fell asleep, and you're acting insane. I already told you everything he said. I don't know why you're so upset. You know how he is; he loves those cops and robbers games of his, I assumed he just got some funny ideas while he was playing pretend."

Marie stared at her husband, who was rubbing his chin and scrunching his face in thought.

"Pretend, huh? Yeah... that's all." James regained his composure and began walking back to the sofa. "Sorry to scare you, honey, come back to the couch."

Marie slowly made her way back to the couch but did not sit down with him. "James... are you ok?"

"Of course I am, why wouldn't I be?"

"Because I just told you about one of our son's little pretend games and you just had a meltdown. James please... talk to me."

James gave his wife a hard look. And after a moment he finally said, "OK... I'll tell you. But you have to let me explain everything first."

Marie sat down next to him. "Ok James... whatever it is, please just tell me."

"Ok... I... may have... *acquired* a sum of money from a Mr. Joey for a certain business opportunity. And this Mr. Joey, may or may not, have some connections to some... less than reputable business associates."

Marie stared at him, eyes narrowed. But they rose and rose until they were wide with shock.

"James. Stop. You can't be serious. You didn't take money from *that* Mr. Joey?"

James said nothing, and his wife turned away in disbelief.

Mr. Joey referred to Joseph Steccotti. A man who (allegedly, of course) was the head of the Steccotti crime family, known for having their fingers in just about every underground pie in the town of Jensonburg. But while most people knew of him, few people had actually seen him, or actually

interacted with any of his various “business partners”. So mysterious was his dealings that even the man himself became a bit of a local legend, no one even knowing if the man himself was fact or fiction. The youngsters who had heard of his various dealings eventually wound up calling him Mr. Joey, and the name had become synonymous with boogeyman.

“I can’t believe you.” Marie said, rubbing her temples. “Not only did you manage to find *the* Joseph Steccotti, you actually took money from him. Why on earth did you do that?”

“I told you, Marie” James said, spreading his hands wide. “It’s a business opportunity. One of my old college roommates caught up with me the other day and said he was starting a new business. They are going public almost immediately and when they do, they’re going to pop off. Picture it, Marie. A stock that opens at pennies on the dollar and closes for *hundreds*. I’ll turn Joseph’s ten thousand dollars-

“Ten thousand dollars?!”

“Yes honey, ten thousand dollars, I’ll turn that ten grand into a hundred grand in an instant! This isn’t me just taking his money and running, it’s a proper investment!”

“I can’t... I can’t... oh dear god I think I’m going to faint.” Marie was fanning herself while the world spun around her. “Why? Why on earth did you fucking do this?”

“Marie, honey, listen.” James got down on his knees in front of his wife and held her hands in his. “I did this for *us*. Joseph Steccotti might be a bad guy, allegedly, but he’s also got power. Power and money and authority. Don’t you see? I turn his ten grand into a hundred grand, and I’ll be on his good side forever! We’ll be set for life. I could call in any favor I want. Get Timmy into one of those nice private schools, never have to worry about a college fund, a new car, anything and everything we need all at our beck and call.”

“James...” said Marie, shaking her head in disappointment at her dear husband. “James... you’re not thinking clearly. Joseph Steccotti is a bad man and one wrong move and... oh I don’t even want to think about what would happen.”

“It won’t happen, it won’t” James said, and pulled Marie close to him. “I won’t let that happen; you have my word.”

“James... I want to trust you, I so dearly do, but this is just so much. Too much. What business venture was so important that you thought you had to get money from the mob?”

“Honey, it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity for a surefire investment. It’s a gum scraping business.”

Part 3

Mary & Beatrice

Stephen hasn't been sleeping well. Ever since Mary told him about Timmy, he had a sense of unease that he couldn't shake. An ever-present feeling in the pit of his stomach somewhere in between sea sickness and a panic attack. Those days had been bad but what really sent him spiraling was what happened sometime after. Marie, James, and their son Timmy had all disappeared. No one in the neighborhood seemed to know for sure what happened. Go door to door and ask whoever answers what happened and they'll tell you what they heard from the person next door and so on in a never-ending game of telephone. But as Stephen pieced together what he could from his neighbors, certain details started to line up in such a way that he couldn't just write them off as neighborhood gossip.

What Stephen gathered was that one day, a few months ago now, James's car screeched into his driveway. He got out in a hurry and burst into the house. A few minutes pass, all the while shouts and yelps could be heard. Nothing intelligible, of course, but clearly urgent and even scared in tone. Supposedly, James could be seen herding his family out of the house in a big hurry throwing overnight bags and little else into his car as fast as he could. Once they were in, James floored the gas, and the car peeled out of the driveway, and out of the cul-de-sac and there hasn't been a word from them since. Though what happened next certainly allowed the imagination to run wild. Shortly after James and his family had booked it out of the cul-de-sac, it was reported that another car drove up to his driveway. After stopping, four men, all tall, wearing dark suits and sunglasses (even though it was overcast) marched into James's house. One of Stephen's neighbors even claim he heard them break down the door, with one mighty kick and a loud BANG. After a few minutes of silence, the men left the house and began asking the neighbors if they had seen the man whose house was now deserted. Upon getting some kind of lead, the men got back in their car, and left.

Stephen could read between the lines of the details he was given. He didn't know James well, but he did know he was some kind of investment banker. That coupled with the aggressive sounding men looking for James, and Timmy's supposed knowing of a bad investment, it wasn't hard to come to a conclusion about what happened to them... even if the conclusion wasn't exactly savory. And this conclusion weighed on his head like a gorilla finding the worst spot to rest for the afternoon. This conclusion also brought some other nasty thoughts along with it, thoughts he didn't want to fully confront. Thoughts like, *did Timmy really know something was going to happen to his family? Just like Mary and the mailman?* Surely it had to be a coincidence, right? Little kids don't just start to... *know* things like that. Surely it had to be a coincidence. Mary must have overheard him talking to the mailman about his pacemaker once or twice, Mark always talked about that to anyone who would listen. And that must have happened to Timmy as well, James and Marie must have talked about work in front of him and he just spouted out what he knew while he was playing with other kids. Yeah, that must be it...right?

And so, Stephen found himself unable to sleep. Night and day started to blur together more and more, as Stephen swapped between laying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, pacing nervously around his bedroom and staring out of the window, his mind eased (if only slightly) by watching the stillness of a neighborhood still asleep. It didn't help that each new day brought with it his adult responsibilities, with which he was falling behind as his anxieties built up. Keeping track of things like bills was already a difficult task when he wasn't paralyzed by paranoia, to say nothing of keeping up with Mary's needs.

So, it was no surprise that one day (Stephen really couldn't keep track of the days anymore so "one day" will have to do), Stephen opened the door to Beatrice who let out a yelp of surprise.

"Yikes! Stephen are you OK? You look awful."

"Hrm, huh? Yeah, I'm fine" said Stephen, furthest from fine one could be.

"Bullshit," Beatrice responded, "When's the last time you slept?"

"What day is it?"

“You know what, never mind that’s enough of an answer.”

“I’m sorry Beatrice... I haven’t been sleeping well, but that’s no matter I’m fine and scientists know there’s a rainbow in space, when was the last time you washed your dog’s feet?”

“Stephen for gods sake stop it!” cried Beatrice. She walked into the house and pulled Stephen by his sleeve. “You need rest. Go lie down in bed, call your office and tell them you’re sick or something. I’ll just take Mary to the park, and we’ll let you sleep all day.”

Stephen tried to resist, there was far too much on his mind to simply take a break and sleep it all away, but the instant Beatrice managed to get him to his bedroom and sit him on his bed, he suddenly felt his entire body relax. It was like his entire body, mind and soul were being clenched tightly by a giant fist, and sitting on the bed was the one move needed to make this giant fist unclench, suddenly allowing his body to flow over the soft mattress as if he transformed into syrup. Stephen made a noise that sounded like “Murr-gurr, nor blim gor...” and that’s as far as he got before his eyes shut and he began to snore.

Beatrice quietly shut the door to Stephen’s room and shook her head dismissively. She really did *not* get paid enough to deal with things like this, but it was a small town with not much else to deal with anyway, so her options were more than a little limited. Besides, what little motherly instincts that currently resided within her couldn’t bare to see Stephen so disheveled. What would happen to Mary if he fell asleep on his way to work or something? She shook the thought away and made for the kitchen, where Mary was eating her breakfast.

“Hi Bee! Where’s Daddy?” she asked, waving a hand that still had a piece of toast in it.

“He needs a nap, little lady. So, while he’s sleeping what do you say we go to the park?”

Mary bounced up and down in her chair with glee. “Yippie! I love the park!”

Beatrice tousled Mary’s hair, “I know you do, so why don’t you get your shoes on, and we’ll go.”

A short while later, Mary was putting her shoes on humming to herself playfully.

“What are you singing, little lady?”

“Numbers song.”

“Numbers song? Like a little song to help you remember your math? That’s cute, I used to do that in school.”

Mary scrunched her face, she hated math. “No, just a numbers song.”

Mary sang the song in her cute way. The poor thing had absolutely zero sense of rhythm or pitch, but she sang it with passion all the same, careful to emphasize each number on a beat even if it didn’t make sense.

“11, 22, 63, 3, 30, 81” she belted out.

Now Beatrice’s face scrunched. That didn’t sound like any song she’d ever heard, even if it was currently being transferred through the medium of a small child. Regardless she maintained a smile and said “Oh wow that’s a nice song. Did someone teach you that at Daycare?”

“No,” said Mary “I just made it up.”

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The park was nice, as parks tend to be. Mary loved getting to play with the other children, while Beatrice didn’t mind being able to sit on a bench and people watch in the nice afternoon sun while getting paid to do so. The lazy afternoon came and went, and Mary finally walked back over to Beatrice, sweaty and tired from a hard day of fun, to be taken home, as dinner time was just around the corner, and nothing works up an appetite like a long day of being a kid. Mary took Beatrice’s hand and the two began the walk back to the cul-de-sac.

The walk back was pleasant, with Beatrice humming along to Mary’s song, and Mary skipping along side her. For someone who just spent the entire morning and afternoon running around a park like



a little hellcat, she still had enough energy to sing and skip like she had just gotten out of bed. That's the magic of being a toddler, supposed Beatrice. Her own demeanor was wanning a bit, however. Beatrice truly cared for Mary but even the best of caretakers get tired, especially when they hadn't had their nicotine break that day. Beatrice was usually pretty good about her cigarettes. She never smoked around or even in line of sight of Mary, and new of her own patterns enough to always maintain a fresh supply when she needed them. This morning being so hectic however, she had forgotten to sneak away and grab a fresh pack. So as the two walked down the street and came across the tiny gas station/convenient store combo that lay on the corner of the street before the cul-de-sac, she couldn't resist.

"Hey Mary, let's stop for a snack huh?"

Mary stopped skipping and singing and looked up at her. "But Daddy says no snacks before dinner."

Beatrice swooned at how innocent the child before her was. She got down on one knee, winked at her and said, "I won't tell if you won't." At this, Mary giggled and nodded. *That's how you deal with kids.* Beatrice thought. *Just let them think they're getting away with something.*

The two pushed open the door to the convenience store. With no other customers to be seen, and a bored looking middle-aged cashier waiting for them, Beatrice strode up to the counter.

"Hey. A pack of Keys and whatever the little one wants." She gestured to Mary, who was not currently in sight, but currently stalking the snack isles in search of something tasty. Once she found a snack cake that looked properly sugary enough, she ran back over to the counter and tossed it up, since she was a little too vertically challenged to set it normally, being a toddler and all.

As Beatrice was taking out her wallet, an ad started playing on the small TV hooked up behind the counter. It had been there the whole time, quietly doing its thing, but since this advertisement was paid for by the state lottery board, it was just a smidge louder than everything else on TV, just in case there was someone in the vicinity who hadn't heard of the lottery. Beatrice looked at the ad currently playing, showing some sad office worker suddenly transforming into a muscley stud holding a giant bag of dollar bills, and sneered.

"Dollar and a dream? Get fuckin' real."

The bored looking cashier shrugged and responded "Hey, you never know."

Beatrice rolled her eyes. Yes, actually, she did know. She actually happened to know that it was far more likely for her to encounter flesh eating bacteria than it was for her or anyone else to win the lottery.

Mary tugged on Beatrice's sleeve. "Bee! Bee! That's where my numbers song came from!"

Beatrice followed Mary's pointing finger to the TV. She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean? The jingle?"

"No no no, the numbers, that's what they're called! Law-tree."

Beatrice narrowed her eyes at the TV again. "Mary, honey, I know this is hard for you to understand but the lottery isn't... good. Like it's not fair. So, whoever told you about those numbers is probably someone trying to be funny."

"But-but-but," Mary was stammering and bouncing up and down, unfortunately this was something that she couldn't quite explain as toddlers lack a vocabulary for this type of occurrence. "But I know." She finally declared. Beatrice opened her mouth to speak but before she could, Mary started up again. "I'll tell my dad you gave me treats!"

At this Beatrice gave pause.

"No, you wouldn't, you're too nice. Besides you'd get in trouble too."

"Nooo I won't. My Daddy likes me."

Beatrice knew that Stephen and she got along just fine and that Mary was just being fussy, but this remark still caused her to narrow her eyes. *The absolute audacity of this bitch.* She thought. *Whatever, if it will get us out of here faster, what's the extra dollar worth?*

Beatrice made a sassy pose, her fists on her hips, and added a layer of smugness to her tone. "Alright then miss sassy pants. How about I get the lottery ticket, and if you're wrong you give *me* a dollar?"

Mary giggled and made the same pose. "Fiiine." She sneered back.

It was after all this that Mary and Beatrice finally made their way back to the house. Stephen answered the door. Beatrice noted he looked much better than he had that morning. After a brief bit of conversation, the two said their goodbyes and Beatrice left while Stephen began making dinner for Mary. Mary, meanwhile, was making her way to the TV. Stephen had been watching the news when Beatrice and Mary had arrived.

"And now for the local lottery numbers, today's lucky numbers are 11, 22, 63-"And that's as far as the anchorman got before Mary switched the channel to her favorite cartoons.

#### **Part 4**

*Mary, Stephen, Beatrice, & James*

RING RING RING RING

RING RING RING RING

Stephen's smartphone rang in the most dull way possible. Regardless of how dull it was, it still woke him up before his alarm was supposed to, and that meant whoever was calling at this hour better be ready to face the wrath of a very tired man with a toddler to feed. Not even opening his eyes he pulled his phone from his nightstand, flicked it open, and brought it to his ear.

"Whoever this is, it's five fucking AM, and I- "

A shrill voice on the other end of the phone hooted and hollered something unintelligible before calling out "Woow, it's only five? I thought it was like... 6 lmaooo".

Stephen suddenly sat up in bed.

"Beatrice? What the... where have you been? It's been days since anyone has seen you. Also did you just say, out loud, lah-mao?"

Beatrice hooted and hollered some more, this time interspersed with some erratic giggles.

"Hahaha yeaah I did hehehehe."

"What the hell is wrong with you? You sound drunk."

Beatrice gasped, offended. "I'll have you knooow. I am *not* drunk. I'm *stoned*, thank you very much. And I'm drunk. And I'm RICH."

"What the hell are you talking about, you're not making any sense."

Beatrice hooted and hollered and giggled once more. This was getting old. Somehow, she pulled herself together and managed to get some actual words out. "Ok, Ok, Oh-kayyy. Let me try and explain. I... won... the lottery!" and thus she entered another fit of squeals and giggles.

Stephen shook his head, bewildered. "Huh? You? You actually won the lottery?"

Beatrice managed to find herself again. "Yeah, can you fuckin' believe it? I bought a ticket with your little lady's help and I somehow fuckin' won! Been a bit blurry after that, I sort of went on a bender. Haven't been outside in days, not even sure where I am, actually."

Stephen wasn't listening anymore. How could he? He was too hyperfixated on the pieces slowly drifting together in his mind.

He spoke slowly. "Beatrice... what do you mean Mary *helped* you win the lottery?"

"Means what it means. I played some numbers she gave me and- "

Stephen let out a string of annoyed grunts, moans and curses. *She did it again.* He thought. *She... knew something, and now... now that knowledge is affecting the world around us.* Stephen drummed his fingers on his nightstand. He beat his phone against his head, bounced his knee, doing any manner of activity that could let off some of the nervous energy. *This isn't right. Whatever is happening is going to end badly, I just know it.* Stephen's nerves were already shot. His eyes twitched and his entire head ached, like his brain was trying to make a break for it. In these situations, he used to rely on his wife, as having someone, ANYONE dealing with the same problems as you, in the same room, no less, is enough to cut anyone's anxieties in half. His wife no longer present, his brain had developed a new form of self defense: focus on one thing. That one thing most often being "protect Mary." Stephen supposed that in this particular situation, that idiom probably extended to "protect Beatrice." Mary liked Beatrice, after all, and so did he.

His head finally in a state of some kind of satisfaction, he returned to his phone call.

"OK Beatrice... let's start here. Where are you right now?"

"I just said I don't even know; I've been so crossfaded these last few days it's all a blur. Like... OK I'm looking around and I see some black curtains, gothic metal posters, and a really big mirror, like Cinderella big."

Stephen blinked. "That's your bedroom."

Silence.

"Ohhhh yeahhh hahaha that makes sense hehehe."

Stephen blinked again. *We are so fucking doomed.* "Ok listen, just stay there and I'll come over and- "

"Oh, that's actually why I'm calling. See, I called the lottery people, and they said I have to claim the money at one of the big centers in Hollando. That's like, an hour plus drive and I don't have a car. So, I was hoping you would give me a ride. After all, since it's Mary's numbers I figured I owed you both a little something, plus a little extra for the drive."

Stephen paused. She wanted to give him some of the money? The nervous twitches started again. No, no, no, that won't do. That money is cursed. Or enchanted, or evil, or SOMETHING. It can't be trusted. Getting his hands on any of that money would mean becoming a part of whatever forces were currently at play regarding his daughter's... talent. But on the other hand... how much money was she willing to give? Even if it was only 1%, this is a lottery jackpot, they have so many zeros that the number stops making any sense at all. Money was something that, unfortunately, everyone needed, and Stephen was no exception. After some more nervous tapping, Stephen shook his head. Whatever the deal with the money is, it would have to wait until it was actually in front of him. Right now, there was only one goal: protect Beatrice.

"Look we can discuss the money later... I'm getting Mary and driving over right now. We'll pick you up in about 30 minutes... and for god's sake try and sober up."

"Kayyy byeee-" BEEP! The call ended.

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30 minutes later, Stephen and Mary sitting in Stephen's tiny sedan, honking the horn outside of Beatrice's house. She came out, stumbling toward them, a can of beer in one hand, an iced coffee in the other, and a joint between her lips. 30 more minutes later, after a rather passionate screaming match between the two of them about what exactly was appropriate to do in front of children (regardless of how "fuckin loaded" the person is), they were on the road heading east toward Hollando. The drive was quiet, Beatrice more than a little pouty over the fact that she was forced to give up her joint and beer in the name of sobering up, and Stephen not really wanting to talk to anyone. How can he talk when all of... *this* is happening.

The hour or so passed and the tiny sedan pulled into the parking lot of the lottery office building as dawn was just barely creeping over the horizon. The trio entered the building, and a few minutes later, came out each holding two large duffel bags, each fill to bursting with cash.

"Why duffel bags?" said Stephen, grunting his way back to his car. "Might as well just have it all in a large sack with a dollar sign on it. And cash? Not like, a check?"

Beatrice threw her bags into the trunk of the car, landing with a mighty FLUMP. She wandered over to the passenger side door. "I dunno, I don't work for the lottery office, I don't know how they do things. I just smiled and nodded and said, 'money now please'."

"How much did you win again?"

Beatrice said the number again for Stephen. Even though this was probably his third or fourth time hearing it, he still couldn't quite wrap his head around it. Living paycheck to paycheck, you basically become used to seeing your bank account number bounce between 'zero' and 'a little', but suddenly having a number so big, you couldn't even spend it all in a week, was a bit hard to understand. To say nothing of the number being so big, you probably couldn't spend it all in your lifetime.

"Right," said Stephen, still not fully understanding, but not wanting to discuss the issue further. "Let's get going then".

CLICK!

"Don't move."

Stephen froze. A hard, metal object was suddenly against the back of his head. This coupled with the very loud CLICK he heard just a moment before, turned his blood to ice. It didn't sound like it did in the movies... but it wasn't too far off either. It was the click of a hammer on a revolver being drawn back and snapping into place.

"Oh my god, Stephen!" shouted Beatrice. She opened her door.

"Don't you fucking move either!" the assailant yelled. Stephen kept still but saw a flash of a reflection moving quickly back and forth from him to Beatrice. The assailant was waving his weapon back and forth between the two.

Mary! Where is Mary?! Stephen's brain screamed. Moving only his eyes, Stephen scoured his vision for Mary. She was in the backseat of the car, currently huddled against the window closest to him. He could see that she was terribly frightened, but calm. Her big eyes seemed all the bigger as they looked up in fear at her father's situation. Simply laying eyes on her put Stephen into a state of ease... or at least, he wasn't 100% anxious anymore, given the current situation, more like 98%.

"Alright now that we're all on the same page..." began the assailant. "Here's what's going to happen. I have a car. You're going to put that money in my car, nice and easy like. Then, I'm going to get in my car, and drive away. You do all that and no one will get hurt. Alright, slowly now, just you, buddy. The rest of you stay put."

Stephen stayed where he was. The gears in his brain were finally turning again, instead of just stalling due to fear and doubt. Something about this person was... familiar.

"One thing before I start... can I turn around... James?"

There was a muffled sound that was a combination groan and curse word. Stephen did not wait for permission. He slowly turned around and stared down the barrel of the revolver, and by extension, the face of his attacker, James.

To say James wasn't looking well was an understatement. Normally clean shaven, he had grown a thick layer of stubble that didn't look like it was being groomed properly. His eye sockets were sunken, with thick ugly bags hanging off of them. They were so thick and dark compared to the rest of his face, to Stephen, he looked like he was wearing half of a racoon mask. The rest of his body didn't fare much better, in Stephen's eyes. James pretty much always wore a shirt and slacks whenever Stephen saw him, but this particular pair of slacks looked worn and soiled, the normally bright white dress shirt was starting to yellow, to say nothing of the fact that there were dark patches all over the shirt, implying that James had been wearing and sweating in this shirt for quite some time. The worst part was his eyes. They were twitchy and erratic. Never looking away from Stephen but never maintaining their position in such a way Stephen could be sure he was the point of focus. Feral was the word that crossed Stephen's mind to describe them. Not the eyes of a man, the eyes of a rabid animal, the kind of eyes that can only do one of two things: fight or flight.

"How- how did you know my name? Are you Joey's men?"

Stephen squinted. "What? We're neighbors. We've been neighbors for years; our kids play together."

Now James squinted. "Hmm... Stephen... yes... Sorry, the mind's a little foggy as of late. That's what happens when you've been sleeping with your eyes open for the past few months. That wasn't a figure of speech by the way, I actually taught myself how to do that, very useful survival technique..." James suddenly looked left and right wildly before returning to Stephen. "No, it isn't, SHUT UP!"

Stephen resisted the urge to flinch, it was quite hard, but he managed.

"Erm... what?"

"Sorry about that," James said, grinning like a demented barber. "My friends tend to get a little rowdy when I'm in my moods."

Once again Stephen resisted the urge to flinch, run away, and all sorts of things that would probably have gotten him shot.

"Erm... you seem alone?"

"Yeah, sorry about that, I seem to have gone a little, how you say, insane. You see when I said, 'my friends' I was referring to the imaginary folks that keep me company. Funny what the brain does to keep itself occupied when you're alone for so long."

"So, you *are* alone... where are Marie and Timmy?"

James made a series of gestures that were hard to follow. He bit his lip, tapped his feet, shook his weapon, and more. If it were Stephen doing these gestures, it would just be another one of his nervous fits, but James doing it made his actions seem all that more unstable.

"Yeah, they uh... aren't around anymore. See a lot has happened in the few months since that whole gum scraping shit went sideways."

Stephen quickly surmised that keeping him talking was better than him having a chance to shoot. "What happened, James? I've only heard rumors."

"Well see, I'll make it short and sweet. I got in with a bad crowd, oh yeah, some real bad dudes. I took ten grand from them and said I'd make them a couple million. Then I couldn't make them a couple million and had to give them back the ten grand. The ten grand I no longer had, see? So, I packed the family in the car and told them we were off to start a new life, one far FAR away from ol Joey. But life doesn't always turn out the way you want it to. So, they caught up to us, sure did. And so, I did the only thing a guy like me can really do. I made a deal. I said I'd get them back the money and then some, just as long as they didn't hurt my wife and kid. Course, at the time I had no fucking clue how I was supposed to get that money. They let them go and Marie and Timmy took off. I don't know where they are now. Probably for the best, if I knew where they were, Joey's guys would find them eventually. I was on the streets for god knows how long, just watching my back and praying to god Joey didn't get impatient and send one of his goons after me to finish me off. But then I got word that the winner of the big jackpot was from our little town. I knew they would have to come to the lottery office eventually to collect a prize that big... so here I am."

"So... you're going to steal someone's lottery winnings to pay off some gangster?"

"Basically yeah. Way to summarize my overwhelming trauma in one sentence, jagoff. Though to be honest I'm kinda getting used to being on the run. It's kinda fun sometimes. Maybe this is the life for me. After all, I have tons of friends and my health has never been better."

Stephen couldn't figure out if James was being sarcastic or not.

"Hell, I got a gun and I've never even killed someone before. I've shot at a range once or twice but shooting a live person is different ya know? On account of how they move and yell and cry and all that. Who knows, maybe I'll like it. See this is why you should always try new things. Anyways, get a move on!"

Stephen took a deep breath. 98%. The time for talk was over. A deep exhale. 80%. When your next actions could be your last (50%), you have to make them count (20%).

Stephen pointed to his right (10%) and shouted. "Who the hell is that?!"

An instant. A second. That's all I need (5%). And that's all he got.

PROTECT MARY!!! (0%).

James took a second to look to where Stephen was pointing. In that second, Stephen grabbed James' arm and forced it upwards. The barrel out of his face, Stephen reached up and found James' finger wrapped around the trigger. He hooked his own finger around the trigger and pulled as quickly as he could.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!

Empty. That's all I needed.

With all of his strength, Stephen placed both hands on James' chest and pushed him as hard as he could. James was still caught off guard at all the sudden action and had no time to react, he fell over and landed on his back, the revolver clattering as it hit the ground and skidding off somewhere in the early morning dusk. Stephen heard a sickly SNAP as James hit the ground, followed by a yelp of pain. He was definitely hurt, but Stephen wasn't exactly in the mood to figure out how badly he was hurt. He threw himself into the driver seat of his car, didn't even bother to put on his belt and yelled "Hang on!"

CLICK! The lever went into Reverse.

STAMP! Stephen's foot hit the gas.

VRRR! The tires went backwards.

BA-BUMP! The back tires rolled over something big but soft.

CLICK! The lever was thrown into Drive, and off they went into the distance, as the tires gave one last BA-BUMP, rolling over what remained of James.

Epilogue

Mary, Stephen & Beatrice

The group had been on the highway for a few minutes before Stephen finally took his foot off the gas. A few minutes at incredible high speeds, however, is more than enough time to get a bit of distance between you and someone waving a gun in your face. He eased his foot off the accelerator and let the car come to a safe speed. His hands hurt. Only by looking down at them did Stephen finally realize he had been gripping the wheel so tightly his hands were bone white, and the wheel was starting to look deformed. He relaxed his hands and flexed them. They felt a little better.

Stephen surveyed the other passengers. Beatrice was leaning against the window, staring out it intently. Whatever joyous spirits she was in about her sudden influx of funds, she probably got the wind knocked out of her sails once someone with a gun tried to take it all away. She hadn't said a word since they had driven off, and she probably wasn't going to say anything for the rest of the drive. Hell, she probably wasn't going to speak to either of them ever again. He looked in the rearview mirror to check on Mary. She was sitting quietly, kicking her dangling feet, absentmindedly. Stephen always found it hard to get a read on what Mary was thinking. This was partly because he was just a parent doing his best, and partly because their recent adventures were more than a little tough to handle.

Stephen wasn't sure if he should, given everything that happened, but he needed to do something besides stare at the road, so he spoke.

"You were both very brave... I'm proud of you both."

Silence.

"I know what happened is... yeah it's not... yeah..." he trailed off. What exactly could he say anyway?

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Mary?"

"I love you."

At this Stephen felt his eyes water. *Not now, I can't fall apart now, not until we get home.*

He reached back behind him, eyes still on the road and felt out for his daughter's hand. He took her hand in his and rubbed his thumb over it.

"I love you too, honey."

"Daddy?"

"Yes, honey?"

"I knew you were going to be ok."

Silence.

Stephen nodded and returned his hands to the wheel. He stared at the road ahead. The world disappeared into the distance ahead of him. It was only a trick of the eyes of course, but Stephen wished this road could just go on forever.