

Little Green Men

The alien abduction occurs around ten p.m. on a Tuesday, just as I'm trudging through the tail end of a ten-hour Target shift. I'm restocking the greeting cards when my cell vibrates with an incoming call from Amanda, the brace-faced redhead who watches Jamie for me on the weeknights I can't get off work. I slip into the bathroom and, after prodding open the door of each stall to make sure I am alone, flip open the phone and lift it to my ear.

"Ms. Locke," Amanda's tinny voice says before I can even open my mouth. "Thank god."

My heart lurches. "What's wrong?"

"Um." In her moment of hesitation, I hear drawn-out wails in the background. I plant a steady hand on the counter.

"What happened? Is Jamie hurt?"

"No, no," Amanda hastens to add. I wrap the hand on the counter into a fist and bring it up to my forehead. I release a quavering breath. "But he's pretty upset. I can't get him to calm down."

"Nightmare?"

"I think so, but." Amanda pauses again. "He says...I don't know. He thinks he's been, uh, abducted or something?"

"What?"

"I know you're coming home soon anyway, but if you could just hurry." There's a desperate lilt to her voice now. I hear the thump of a closing door and suddenly the din of Jamie's distress is muffled.

I check my watch. Ten minutes to clock out. "On my way," I tell Amanda and clap the phone shut.

I find my manager, Josh, crouched in the card aisle, finishing up my abandoned task. "I have to go," I tell him, digging around for keys in my purse. "Just got a call from Jamie's sitter."

Josh raises his eyebrows, but he's not the type to stand between a panicked woman and her child—one of the many things I appreciate about him, and might even look for in a guy if I had the time or energy to date these days. "Everything okay?" he asks.

"Obviously not," I tell him with more bite than I intend.

But Josh is good about it. "Sure. I can take care of closing. See you tomorrow?"

"Yup," I say, already striding around him towards the door.

I gnaw my lip the whole drive home and take the stairs to our four-story walk-up in twos. When Jamie was younger and he couldn't be trusted to follow me on his own two legs without getting distracted by the veins of moss peeking through sidewalk cracks or knobs of gum under hand railings, I used to climb these stairs with him in one arm, stroller in the other. Those journeys seemed to take forever, as I paused at each landing to lean against the wall and muster the courage to plow onward.

This ascent somehow feels longer.

When I finally push open the door to our apartment, I find Amanda sitting on the edge of the living room couch.

"I thought it would be best to wait til you got back," Amanda says as I drop my purse. "He bit me." She extends her arm to reveal an arch of red dashes.

I mumble an empty apology as I brush past to Jamie's room. In the slice of light from the open door, I can make out the dark lump of my son under the comforter. I sit down on the edge of the mattress and rest a hand on the top of the lump. "Jamie, what's wrong?"

He wriggles around to reveal a face puffy with tears.

"I was sitting in bed and these green people came to my window," he says between jerking breaths and wiping snot off his nose. "They took me back to their spaceship."

"It was just a nightmare," I tell him, carding my fingers through his hair.

"It wasn't." Jamie pushes himself up on his elbows and fixes me with a determined stare. "I was in bed reading and they came in here and took me."

"Honey, you fell asleep."

"I *didn't*." He's working himself up again, chest heaving, lips mashed together.

"Okay, okay. Lie back down. Please, Jamie," I add when it looks like he's set on arguing the point further. "You're okay." When Jamie concedes to recline against his pillows once more, I reach over to the radio on his desk and slide in his *Sounds of the Ocean* CD. "Try to sleep," I say, dropping a kiss on Jamie's forehead, but he just stares up at the ceiling without response. Feeling useless, I make my exit, closing the door behind me.

Out in the kitchen, I find a post-it peeling up from the kitchen countertop, on which is scribbled *Hey Ms. Locke, don't worry about the money, I can come by tomorrow or something!* I crunch the note in my hand and go to the fridge, hoping a glass of the boxed wine I picked up at the Shell yesterday might file down the sharp sense of anxiety still jabbing at my chest. I've never been overly fond of Amanda, who spends most of her working hours on her laptop in the living room instead of engaging Jamie. But Amanda's also the only neighborhood sitter that charges less than twelve bucks an hour. The audacity of some of these kids.

I sit in bed for a long time, nursing Franzia from a glass originally purchased as a jam jar and pretending to read a novel that my sister Beatrice lent me. It proves difficult when I can still hear Jamie moving around in the adjacent room at one in the morning. I should go in and tell him to sleep, but I don't. He won't come into my room, either. Jamie's always had trouble shutting off his brain at the end of the day, and I used to wake up at all odd hours of the night to him crawling into bed next to me. When I started taking five-to-noon shifts at CVS, I had to wean him off the habit. There was also the fact that it didn't seem normal for a seven-year-old to crawl into his mother's bed every night. Or that I found it oddly comforting to hear the soft expulsion of air from another set of lungs whenever I was kicked awake.

I probably wasn't supposed to be a mother—this based on the fact that, for one thing, I never planned to be one, and for another, since I've become one, the general consensus seems to be that I'm not much cut out for it.

By all accounts, I should have been a mathematician. That's what I was studying to be, anyway, at Ohio University's honors college, where I spent nearly every waking hour hunched over jagged equations until they blurred like a barcode before my eyes. I met my boyfriend, Kurt, the week before spring finals freshman year when I purchased some of his Adderall. We fell together mostly out of

convenience—as a biomedical engineer in the making, he had about as much spare time as I did, and while everyone else around me seemed to have a stake in my failure, whether it was one less exam to grade or one less competitor, he was someone I could just *be with*. Well, until midway through sophomore year when I finally choked and slunk back home to Beatrice.

Beatrice and I have never been particularly close, even though I lived with her and her husband Rick the last three years of high school, having given up on my own parents, who had a proclivity for drinking too much and bickering too loudly most weeknights. Beatrice is a wedding planner, which I guess is the kind of frilly job you can have when your husband is a neurosurgeon. After I dropped out of OU, Beatrice hired me on for a couple of events. I think she wanted to get me out of her house, mostly. At one of these events, I was swaddling silverware in crisp white napkins when Beatrice came over with the hotel manager. "Victor tells me the Marriott is hiring," she said, and I took that to mean I should ask for an application.

Two years later, I was still pushing trolleys of fresh linens and pillow chocolates down the same golden-lit hallways. Occasionally, if I changed into my street clothes first, I could drop down to the hotel bar and sip a drink or two before walking home. That's how he found me, the man staying in room 208. Even now, I'm not quite sure whether he was that charming or handsome; it might have just been that he was the first person I'd spoken to all day whose only response wasn't "Come back later!" or "Occupied." It might have been that I hadn't slept with anyone since Kurt who, I'd recently heard, had been accepted to his number-one choice Master's program.

What I do remember is waking up the next morning at five, per my usual schedule, blindly shimmying back into yesterday's uniform, and slipping out the door, only to return five hours later with my trolley. There was no answer when I knocked. At first I was regretful that I didn't even know his last name. Then it occurred to me that I didn't know whether he had a wife, or a girlfriend, or his own kids, either, and suddenly I was hoping he was already on a plane with states of distance between us. Even six weeks later, when I was hunched on a toilet seat, one hand fisted in my hair while I read and reread the verdict of a little plastic stick, I was glad to be alone.

Thirty-six-fifty minus thirteen-ten is...carry the one...twenty-three-oh-four. I jot this latest deduction down on the scrap of loose leaf I've been scribbling on since I entered the grocery. If there's anything more embarrassing than stopping mid-aisle to use a Cheerios box as a clipboard for your budget calculations, it's arriving at the register only to be told that *you'll have to put something back, ma'am*.

In the produce aisle, I shuffle past cardigan-clad women tying off plastic baggies sagging with vegetables, probably for a salad they saw Ina Garten make last week. Homemakers. I'm just edging up to the shelf with the pre-packaged baby carrots to discreetly compare prices when my phone vibrates. I consider ignoring it because it's probably Beatrice, "just checking in," as she says. I'll call back later. I drop the carrots into my cart, even though that knocks me down to nineteen bucks, because despite what Jamie tells me, no ten-year-old boy chooses the baked potato or salad options in the school cafeteria when fries are the alternative. And damn it if I'm going to let him eat like that at home, too.

The phone goes off again. Which means either a) Beatrice is in a particularly dogged mood, or b) something's happened to Jamie. Since the abduction incident last week, it's been difficult not to jump to the worst conclusions right away. I pick up on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Ms. Locke? It's Sarah Curtis, from Peters Elementary."

Once upon a time, I only recognized the name from the monthly *Letters from the Principal* that announce school plays and fall festivals and other activities I never have the time to attend with Jamie. Unfortunately, nowadays Sarah Curtis and I are on much more familiar terms. "Yes, hi." Still, I'm never sure what to say.

"I was hoping you could stop by my office a few minutes after dismissal today to talk about Jamie."

Having received these types of calls about Jamie many times before, I don't really have to ask what this is all about: *Inattentive. Disinterested. Distracting to the other students. Difficulty making friends.*

"That would be fine," I say, and pick up a bell pepper for inspection, not quite sure what I should be looking for.

"Excellent. I can expect you around three?"

I put the pepper in the cart and wipe my hands against my pants. "I'll be there." I forget to write down the pepper's price, and get asked to put something back in the checkout line. I hand over the bag of Jelly Bellys, which were supposed to be a surprise for Jamie because he's been a bit withdrawn these last few days.

"Ms. Locke, please have a seat."

I sit stiffly in the chair before Mrs. Curtis' desk, feeling like a miscreant child.

"Jamie," she says, and then pauses, as if she doesn't even know where to begin. She finally settles on, "He was sent to my office earlier for causing a disturbance in Ms. Taylor's class. Not altogether an unusual occurrence." Here she pauses to give me a sympathetic smile, like we're on the same side of the joke. I kind of want to slap her. "But the nature of this disruption was particularly concerning. Apparently, during their lesson on the solar system, Jamie stood up on his chair and started to rail about how he'd actually been to outer space, and Ms. Taylor had gotten the lesson all wrong. During the, ah, episode, Jamie threw a sharpened pencil at another student, very nearly missing his eye." Mrs. Curtis pinched her lips and let that sink in before continuing. "I excused Jamie from class for the rest of the afternoon so that he could speak to Doug Hannon."

I nod. It's not the first time Jamie's been in to see the school counselor. That was back in the first grade, when Jamie took "playing dog" a bit too far, lying under his desk during lessons and bellowing woofs at anyone who ventured too close for the better part of a week. That made for an uncomfortable fall parent-teacher conference, though not as uncomfortable as last year, when Jamie's fourth grade teacher called to inform me that Jamie refused to speak to anyone in English, and instead was spouting the gibberish of his own made-up language.

"Ms. Locke, given the somewhat violent nature of your son's latest disruption, I'm going to request that he be removed from the classroom until you have him assessed by a pediatric psychiatrist,"

Mrs. Curtis says. "Childish fantasies are one thing. But these delusions are obviously not only impeding Jamie's learning, but also making an unsafe classroom environment for the other students."

"Oh." I feel a traitor, like I should defend Jamie somehow. I can imagine the kind of progressive private school Beatrice would have Jamie in if he was her own kid, how she'd stand over the principal's desk and go off about how her Jamie was gifted yet tragically misunderstood, and that they'd better put him in special classes that better fostered his creative energy. But with Mrs. Curtis raising an expectant eyebrow at me, all I manage is clearing my throat and saying, "Right. Of course."

"Thank you for your understanding. I'm sure Doug will have some suggestions, regarding whom Jamie can talk to. I can take you down to his office, if you'd like." I shadow her past the secretary's desk, avoiding eye contact as studiously as I did when Beatrice led me out of my own high school principal's office over a decade ago, after I was caught cheating on a chemistry exam.

When we enter, Mr. Hannon is working on his computer while Jamie sits in one of three plastic chairs lined up against the opposite wall, legs kicking back and forth while he hunches over his Sudoku book. I got it for him a few weeks ago because I needed something to keep him quiet in the car—otherwise he has a penchant for filling the whole trip with a stream of *did you know* facts related to whatever book he got from the library this week.

When Jamie sees me, he immediately slides off his chair. "Am I in trouble?"

It sounds like a dumb question coming from the kid who's been to the principal's office today, but I know what he means: is he in trouble with *me*. I almost want to say no, because Jamie's wearing the kind of pinched-brow, pinched-lip expression that practically demands motherly reassurance. But a school suspension is serious business, and I have to be firm here, so I say, "You nearly took a kid's eye out. What do you think?"

Judging by Mrs. Curtis's eyebrows, that's not how she would have answered that question.

Jamie looks down and thumbs the pages of his book so they fan out with a soft *vrrrrrip*.

I sigh. "We'll talk about it at home." I gather up his backpack from under the chair and sling it over a shoulder.

Before I can step out, Mr. Hannon says, "Ms. Locke, I'll send along my list of referrals." I give a polite nod before I close the door and lead Jamie down the hall.

I didn't tell Beatrice that I was pregnant until the test had been sitting on my bedside table for almost a month. When I finally went over to her house to break the news, Beatrice's first words were, "You can't keep it," like I was a child who'd just stumbled upon something and was attempting to play finders-keepers.

"Excuse me?"

Beatrice gave me a pitying look, complete with a head tilt, and crossed her hands at the wrist over one knee. "Meredith," she said, "you can barely take care of yourself. This is a big commitment. Eighteen-plus years."

Right, and I hadn't even been able to follow through on the four-year commitment that had cost Beatrice tens of thousands of tuition dollars.

But it's mine, I thought, which I didn't dare voice aloud. "I can't kill it," is what I said instead.

Beatrice was silent. "Adoption," she suggested.

I shook my head. For the past three weeks, after I'd gotten over my initial shock, I'd taken to shucking my uniform in front of my full-length mirror after work and scrutinizing my belly. It looked pretty much the same, but I could feel the difference. I was the keeper of some silent, invisible, but achingly precious existence. For once, I'd made something *good*, and as I sat in my minimalist apartment, I was no longer alone in myself.

"What happened?" I ask Jamie as he tugs the passenger side seat belt across his chest.

"I threw a pencil at Mark Newport because he was being a jerk." Jamie crosses his arms and props his feet up against the dash.

Mark Newport's name has come up often enough at home that I don't have to ask. I submitted a formal complaint after the second time Jamie came home with dirty clothes, admitting he'd been shoved to the ground at recess, but to no avail. I suppose the administration had more important things to deal with, like kids thinking they'd been plucked out of their beds to travel the solar system with little green men.

"You should take Jamie out of public school," was the advice I got from the mother of Alex Yaqoob last year when she invited me over for tea. Throughout grade-school, Jamie had been friends with Alex, who endured similar taunts from his peers on account of his pronounced lisp. But Dr. Yaqoob moved Alex to Dillard Country Day halfway through fourth grade. "Children are vicious to one another. The only way around it is to transfer to an institution that has a zero-tolerance policy for that kind of behavior."

Right, because tuition is a non-issue, I thought, and wished I were the kind of mother who could swoop in and save her soon like Dr. Yaqoob.

"You can't go around throwing pencils at everyone you don't like," I say to Jamie, which is a perfectly reasonable thing to say, yet somehow feels childish coming out of my mouth.

"He called me a liar. I wasn't lying!" Jamie kicks his feet against the glove compartment.

"Hey!" I reach over to push his feet onto the floor.

Jamie arches his spine away from the back of his seat and then collapses back with a frustrated huff. "You believe me, right?" Jamie says after a minute.

"I believe Mark Newport is a jerk," I say, which is enough to get a small smile out of Jamie. "But I also believe throwing pencils is no way to solve a conflict." We pull up to a stoplight and I turn to fix Jamie with a stern look, raised eyebrow and all. He lowers his eyes to his lap.

When we get home, Jamie flops down on the couch, planting his face in one of the cushions. I head for the fridge and pull out some of today's haul from the grocery, chopping up vegetables and placing them on a dish with some ranch. I pull out a couple yogurts and some cheese and crackers. And then decide to hard boil a couple of eggs, because if I don't even turn on the stove to prepare dinner, it feels too much like I'm a kid playing grown-up, rather than actually living it.

I take our feast over to the coffee table in the living room and flip on the TV. "Wanna watch a movie?" I say to Jamie's prone form, which is maybe not what I'm supposed to do after my son has been suspended from school. I'm probably supposed to be taking away his TV privileges, sending Jamie off

to his room to get ahead on the schoolwork he'll miss. I should be figuring out what I'm going to do with my ten-year-old for however many workdays will pass before I can get him in to see someone, and how I'm going to pay for it. But the kid really looks like he could use a movie night and honestly, so could I.

Jamie lifts his head. "*Star Trek*?" he asks, like we haven't already seen every single one of those movies a dozen times. After checking out a series of instructional audio cassettes last year, Jamie even tried picking up some Klingon. More successfully than me, I might add. He eventually abandoned the project because I couldn't keep up with the lessons and he had no one to practice with. "No one in my class wants to learn it with me either, not even Alex," he told me. "They all think it's stupid."

I tried not to feel guilty for encouraging something that made Jamie's school life that much more difficult. By my recollection, all the parenting books I'd ever read had instructed me to encourage Jamie's imagination. Beatrice thought his interest was great. "Our little linguist," she'd said. When Jamie brought home a D on his Social Studies test and it became apparent that my son's energies would be better spent reading a textbook, though, the Klingon debacle felt like yet another in a long series of ways I'd failed him.

"Maybe we should watch something else," I tell Jamie. "I picked up *How to Train Your Dragon* from Redbox today."

Jamie hoists himself up to put together a cheese-cracker sandwich and says, "Did you know that for the dragon sounds in this movie, they mixed up lots of different animal noises? Like, seals, elephants, tigers, and horses and stuff. I read that online."

"I did not know that." I pop in the DVD and drop back onto the couch. "Vegetables," I insist, swiping a carrot through the puddle of Ranch and handing it to Jamie, who sucks the dressing clean off with a grin. "Why do I even bother," I say, and soften the question with an eye roll so it seems like more of a joke than it is. My phone buzzes with another call from Beatrice, but I ignore it.

The following morning, I call in sick and take Jamie to the library. I could have Beatrice watch Jamie while I'm at work. When Jamie was a baby, I used to drop him off at Beatrice's nearly every day. She mostly worked from home, and loved to trundle around with him in the crook of her arm while she met with bakers, florists, and the happy couple. Beatrice still watches Jamie in the summers. She takes him to the art museum and the science center on her free afternoons, or to the park, where he can reign over the playground from atop the wooden castle construction, entertained for hours regardless of whether he finds another kid to play with.

Jamie loves Beatrice for those afternoons. He'll come home abuzz, bubbling with stories about what he and Aunt Bee have been up to. No invented world or made-up game of Jamie's is too ridiculous to Aunt Bee. Her ceaseless encouragement puts a light in Jamie's eyes that should make me happy, rather than resentful.

I know I can't be the fun aunt. I know that. Sometimes a kid has to be told to eat his vegetables, or that it's not okay to chuck pencils at classmates. Or that little green men didn't abduct him last week. As far as the Mrs. Curtises and Mr. Hannons of the world are concerned, that someone is *me*. Which doesn't mean I want it to be. There's nothing worse than seeing the hunched-shoulder, dipped-chin look

Jamie gets when I tell him to quit playing pretend, or remind him that some fantastical scenario he's dreamt up is just that: a fantasy.

God, I do not want to have the conversation I know I need to have with Jamie about this alien business—so much so that I fleetingly consider ringing up Beatrice at the last minute. She wouldn't mind. Beatrice would take Jamie all the time, if I'd let her; Rick has never wanted kids, and I know that Beatrice's compliance not to have them has always been more a sacrifice on her part than an agreement on the issue. But even now, the petty part of me, which still hasn't quite forgiven Beatrice for the way a two-year-old Jamie once called her "Mom," won't let me do it.

Inside the library, I sit at one of the computers to check my email while Jamie heads straight for the corner where the *Goosebumps* series is shelved. He's become a bit obsessed as of late. No wonder the kid's having nightmares.

Mr. Hannon has, as promised, sent along an extensive list of contacts. I scroll through, clicking on the attached websites and scribbling down some phone numbers. When I'm finished, I head back to Jamie, who's sitting under a table in the children's section with a stack of books. There aren't any other kids around since it's a weekday, but Jamie's always been more content with solitary activities. When I would pick him up after school in pre-K and kindergarten, I noticed how the other kids accreted into little exclusionary packs while Jamie stood alone, usually staring up at the sky and yanking the teacher's sleeve so that he could recount the entire plot of the latest *Magic Treehouse*. When Alex came along in the second grade, I was so relieved I didn't even mind spending fifteen minutes of gas both ways to get Jamie to the Yaqoobs' house.

A couple of phone calls make it clear that the pediatric psychiatrists Mr. Hannon's recommended are booking out four to six weeks out. And that having health insurance at neither of my part-time jobs means this ordeal is going to put a sizable dent in my savings. I wonder if Rick has any contacts from medical school he could call, but shove that idea out of my head. In the meantime, Jamie has to shadow me around all day.

"It's against store policy for employees to bring their children to work," Josh informs me when Jamie bounds into Target, eager to hit up the toy section. I have told him that after his stunt in Ms. Taylor's class, I want him to take it easy for a few days. I have not told him about the impending mental health assessment.

"Josh," I say, not really sure what to say next other than, "please."

Josh bites his lip, looking torn. "Okay," he says—an act of charity for the poor woman who can't even get her life together enough to keep her child in school.

At first, Jamie keeps himself pretty well entertained, but by the end of the day, even he's finding the fluorescent aisles of Target and a little lackluster. He's already finished his book of Sudokus. "I'm bored," Jamie says at eight p.m., dragging out the "r" and slumping against the counter, chin digging into his crossed forearms.

I throw him a tired glance as I continue ringing up a customer. Normally I might indulge him, but it's been busy for a Wednesday evening, so I rifle around in the drawer behind the counter and pull out a pencil and paper for him. "Why don't you draw something?"

Josh comes over around quarter-after to restock the gum. “Whatcha got there?” he asks, pointing at the artwork Jamie’s laid out on the counter.

“Drawings,” Jamie says.

Josh presses the pad of his finger against the topmost sketch: a humanoid creature with a bulbous head and disproportionately tiny limbs with delicate fingers. “What’s that?”

“One of the aliens I met last week,” Jamie says.

“Really.” Josh, to his credit, keeps his cool fairly well.

“Yes,” Jamie says as a woman approaches the counter with her purchases: curtain rod and bathmat. Homemaker. “They came to my room and kidnapped me.” The customer, who’s been rifling around in her purse for a wallet, looks up with raised eyebrows.

I wince. “You were not kidnapped, Jamie. Stop saying that.”

Jamie frowns. “Yes I was.”

“No,” I say, “you weren’t.”

“I was!” Jamie bellows.

The woman across the counter takes a step back. There is no sound save for Jamie’s labored breathing. I don’t know what the proper move is here. Do I ignore it? Do I yell at him? A bit difficult to do either when it feels like I’m about to cry. Calm as I’m able, I reach into my purse and withdraw my keys. “Wait for me in the car.” I hold the keys out to Jamie. “Go.”

Jamie shuffles his papers into a neat stack and gathers them to his chest before following my instruction.

The woman swipes her card and informs me, “You really shouldn’t have your children with you in the workplace. It’s totally unprofessional.”

I hand over her bags with a plastic smile. “Have a nice evening.”

When she’s gone, Josh says, “Meredith, I think you should get Jamie a sitter till he goes back to school.”

I wipe agitatedly at the corner of my eye with a forefinger, in a way that might be passed off as me itching my nose. “I know.”

We drive through Wendy’s on the way home, because Jamie’s been that special kind of intense quiet he usually reserves only for tearing through the climactic chapters of a book. I buy him a Frosty with his sandwich, partially as an apology (though I’m not quite sure what for) and partially because if he’s sucking down a chocolate shake at least he has a reason to be so unnervingly silent.

We arrive back at the apartment to find Beatrice standing outside our door, looking down at her phone.

“Aunt Bee!” Jamie rushes toward her, arms out.

“Jamie, baby.” Beatrice engulfs her nephew in a hug and glares at me over his head.

“Where the hell have you been?” Beatrice demands, for once not even checking her language for Jamie’s sake. “I’ve been calling you for days.”

“Yeah, sorry, this week’s been a bit crazy.”

Beatrice snorts. "One text would've done. And what's he doing with you?" She nods at Jamie. "Where's Amanda?"

"I've been at work with Mom all day," Jamie says. "We're on a vacation."

"Vacation, huh?"

I reach down to twist the key in the lock without looking at her, but I can feel Beatrice's eyes on the crown of my head. "Jamie, why don't you go take a shower?" I say as I open the door, and watch him close the bathroom door before heading into the kitchen. Beatrice follows.

"Why isn't Jamie in school?"

I place Jamie's half-eaten Frosty in the freezer. "He got in a bit of trouble. I'm handling it."

"Trouble?" Beatrice's frown deepens. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Meredith."

I sigh and concede to look over at my sister. I am way too tired for this tonight. "He thinks he was abducted by aliens last week, and made some big stink about it at school. Now he's suspended until I can get him assessed by a psychiatrist."

"What?" Beatrice looks scandalized. "'Assessed?' Like they think he's crazy, or something?"

"He threw a pencil at another kid in his class."

Beatrice snorts. "That's hardly aggravated assault."

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Jamie's a good kid, Meredith. He's got an active imagination, which, contrary to what the public school system seems to think, is not a bad thing. Don't let them squash it out of him."

"A bit hard to defend his mental faculties to the administration when he thinks he's been kidnapped by extraterrestrials," I snap.

"You're his mother," Beatrice says, like she knows better than I do. "Listen to him. Support him."

"I have been! Look where that's gotten us. Everyone else is under the impression that my son is crazy, and they're not entirely unjustified in thinking so."

"I'm not crazy." Beatrice and I turn to look at Jamie, who's just rounded the corner, face crumpled into an expression of utter betrayal.

"Jamie," I say, but then stop, because I don't really have any excuse for what just came out of my mouth. And also before I can say anything else, Jamie is gone down the hall. I flinch when his door slams.

"Do you want me—" Beatrice begins, but I shake my head.

"No. I'll talk to him."

I knock on Jamie's door twice before entering, for once glad that the doors inside our apartment don't properly lock because Jamie once jammed them all full of chewing gum. He's sitting against his headboard, where he's posted his sketch of the alien abductor with a strip of Scotch tape. "Go away," he says without even looking up from his comic.

"Can we talk?"

After several moments' consideration, Jamie gives a jerky shrug. I sit down next to him.

"You're supposed to believe me," Jamie mumbles. "You're my mom. You're supposed to believe me."

"I'm sorry."

Jamie gives a wet sniff and pulls a sleeved arm across his nose. "This sucks."

Language, my Good Mom brain supplies, but I don't tell him off because this does suck.

Listen to him, support him, Beatrice's voice whispers in the back of my mind.

"Why don't you tell me about it," I say.

"What?" The blatant surprise on his face is heartbreaking.

"The aliens you met. Tell me about them."

Jamie looks at me skeptically for a moment. "They didn't have any names," he tells me. "And they didn't talk at all, but I knew just what they were saying. They came to my window, and all the sudden we were up on their ship."

"Like a transporter on the Enterprise."

My voice is wooden but Jamie takes the words as encouragement. "Exactly. We went exploring together, but I don't know where. Not anyplace Ms. Taylor was telling us about in class. But they were really nice. I could tell they liked me."

I hook the edge of my thumbnail behind my top front teeth and consider. "You were crying, though." It comes out of my mouth before I can think of a more maternal way to say it.

Jamie gives his right shoulder an awkward sort of twitch that might be construed as a shrug, eyes on his lap. "'Cause they brought me back," he says. "I didn't want them to bring me back."

"Oh." I feel light as air, as if the fingers burrowed into the mattress on either side of my hips are the only thing keeping me from just floating away and bobbing around on the ceiling. At the same time, I feel absolutely leaden. Immovable.

Jamie continues to recount his close encounter of the third kind, because I'm no longer equipped to fill the silence between us. My tongue feels too big, too dry for my mouth. I'm not really listening. When finally I tell Jamie that it's time to go to bed, he doesn't even argue.

"Am I going back to work with you tomorrow?" he asks.

"No," I say. "You'll be with Aunt Bee tomorrow." I reach up to make sure the window is locked before flipping the light off and closing the door behind me.