

ANNE

Just last night I'd told Isaiah that he was grounded for two weeks. Straight home from school every day and no television or phone privileges. So why did I come home from work and he was nowhere to be found? He had my cell phone and I called it, and immediately got the voicemail, which meant that either the phone was turned off, or he had rejected my call because he knew his behind was supposed to be in the house. I looked at the kitchen trash, then at the sink. The trash hadn't been taken out, and the dishes hadn't been washed. Again. A quick trip upstairs confirmed that his room looked like a tornado had whipped through it, and he'd left a pair of his funky drawers in the middle of the floor.

I sat at the kitchen table nursing a glass of lemonade and wondering what the hell I was going to do about my son. He was spinning out of control and I was getting more and more tired of dealing with his crap. The scene from last night had nearly moved me to violence as it was. He clearly had no earthly idea who he was messing with, and I had almost shown him before I caught myself.

He came stumbling into my house in the middle of the night, smelling like a brewery and looking even worse. Pupils dilated to the point that the whites of his eyes were barely visible and marijuana smoke thick in his clothes. I wanted to slap him and hurt him the way he was hurting me, but I hadn't done that. I had simply informed him that he was grounded, laid out the rules for his grounding, and took myself to bed. What else could I do?

I thought he'd gotten the message last night that I meant business, but after two hours passed tonight, and he still wasn't home, I conceded the fact that he simply didn't give a shit. I tried the cell again. Still no answer. Then I got up and took a package of chicken breasts out of the freezer. I put them in the microwave to thaw, and snatched the phone up when it rang.

“Isaiah?” I barked. Whoever was on the other end said nothing for several seconds, which further convinced me that it was my son. I started in. “You’re supposed to be home doing your chores, boy. Where the hell are you?” I took a breath as alternate possibilities floated through my mind. “Are you all right?”

“This isn’t Isaiah,” the caller said. It was a man, but damned if I could catch his voice. Not many men called me, and if this was one of the select few, I would’ve recognized the voice instantly. I didn’t recognize this one.

“Then who is this? Has something happened to my son?”

“Your son is fine, unless you factor in the forty ounce I just saw him pulling from. This is Smoke, Breanne.”

“Smoke?” My voice went high and strange sounding. *Smoke?*

“Smoke,” he said definitively. “I got your little greeting card and I thought we should talk.”

“Oh . . . well, now isn’t a good time,” I stalled. “I’m waiting for my son to come home, and then I have to kill him. He was supposed to come straight home after school but—”

“But he hung out at school, shooting hoops and guzzling beer straight from the bottle. No class, your boy. I’m coming over.”

“Smoke, listen . . .”

“I’ll be happy to once you open the door and let me in.”

“What?”

“I’m pulling into your driveway now. Daddy’s home. Open the door, Breanne.”

He hung up on me and I raced to the living room and pushed the drapes back to look outside. I recognized the car instantly, the one from the other day, the one I had admired without

realizing that it belonged to him. The man had been sitting in front of my house, staking me out like I was a common criminal.

I was insulted and it showed on my face as I marched to the door and swung it open. We stood on opposite sides of the storm door staring at each other before I finally turned the brass knob and let him into my home. This was my sanctuary, and Smoke Avery was about to violate it.

“I can’t believe you’ve been sitting outside my house stalking me.” I backed away from the door one step at a time. Smoke stepped into my house and sucked up all the free space around him. I looked in his face for the first time in almost seventeen years.

“I can’t believe you had me served with child support papers.” The look in his eyes told me that he wasn’t quite as calm as his voice suggested, and I took another step backward. “I haven’t seen you in I don’t know how long, and suddenly you want me to be your baby’s daddy?”

“It’s not what you think. I didn’t want any of this, Smoke.”

“And stop calling me Smoke,” he snapped irritably. The next thing I knew he was brushing past me and walking through the living room toward the kitchen. Walking through my house like he had every right to do so. I closed the door and hurried to catch up with him.

“You identified yourself as Smoke when you called,” I reminded him as I came into the kitchen behind him. I busied myself with taking the chicken from the microwave and setting it in the sink.

“Momentary lapse of memory. Smoke is dead, Breanne.”

“So is Breanne. I never liked that country ass name anyway. I go by Anne now, so please call me that from now on.”

“Fine, *Anne*.” He rolled the name around on his tongue, took a seat at the kitchen table and watched me intently. “How did this happen, *Anne*?”

“You mean how did you end up with a child by a crackhead?”

“We haven’t established that your son is mine.”

“Yet,” I snapped. “You don’t think I know who my son’s father is, Smoke? You think I was so cracked out that I didn’t know who I was fucking?” He had the grace to wince.

“You have to factor in room for error here, and under the circumstances the boy could easily be another man’s son. You were—”

I’d heard enough. I whirled around to face him.

“I know what I was, and I know what I am now. I also know what you were, so don’t try to run that holier than thou shit on me, OK?” I picked up a hand towel and wiped chicken slime from my hands, thought about my next words carefully. I’d tracked Smoke down because I needed help with my son, not because I needed another negative influence to expose him to. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you leave now and first thing in the morning I’ll contact my attorney and call the whole thing off? Accept my apologies for the inconvenience, and we’ll pretend that this never happened. I’ll even reimburse you for your travel expenses. Does that sound all right to you?” He didn’t respond, and I took that as a yes. “Let me get my purse.”

I left the kitchen and returned a few minutes later, short of breath from jogging up the stairs in a hurry and digging through my purse furiously for my checkbook. I slapped it on the table and flipped through the carbons for a blank check, pen poised.

“What do you think, four hundred?” I looked him in his eyes.

“Woman, what the hell are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m a woman now? Just a minute ago you were doing your damndest to take that

distinction away from me. Wait, I think maybe five hundred since you rented that pretty little car and all. It couldn't have been cheap."

"Would you hold up a minute?" He reached across the table and dropped a hand on top of mine, then plucked the pen from between my fingers. "You always did have a bad attitude."

"Keep telling me what I always was, and it'll get worse. I don't take shit in my own house, Smoke. From anybody."

"Seems to me you're taking plenty of it from your son," he drawled.

"Excuse me?"

"Didn't you say he was supposed to be home doing chores? Where is he now, or do you even know?"

"I think I have a pretty good idea."

"The same idea you had last night?"

I blew out a breath and held out my hand.

"Give me back my pen. I need to write this check so you can get the hell out of here."

"I need some answers before I take your check and get the hell out of here."

"I don't owe you any explanations."

"You don't?" Smoke stood and came around the table toward me. "You served me with papers *at my job*, claiming that I owe you child support for a kid I never knew existed. I took time off work to come here from Indiana to see you, not to mention sitting in a car for damn near two days, and you don't owe me any explanations? Girl, I think you better think again."

He came so close I had to tip my head back to hold his stare.

"I'm not afraid of you," I said.

"You should be."

We both started when the door opened and Isaiah came strolling into the house like it was any other day and he wasn't grounded. I elbowed Smoke in the stomach, trying to signal him to step back, but he ignored me. He was still hovering over me when Isaiah walked into the kitchen, looking from me to Smoke slowly.

"That's your car in the driveway?" he asked Smoke.

I actually heard Smoke swallow before he spoke.

"It's a rental. You like it?"

"It's kinda sweet. Let me ask you this, though, why you been following me? I saw you at the school today."

I shifted and looked at Smoke. His eyes flickered away from Isaiah's face long enough to lock with mine. We stared each other down.

"You've been following my son?"

"Yeah, I wanted to see what all the fuss was about." He turned his attention back to Isaiah. "How long you been drinking?"

"What?" Isaiah was incredulous. "Who is this dude, Ma?"

I looked at my son and then at his father, convinced I was seeing double. They were nearly the same height, had the same coloring and the same face. One had a little more life stamped on his face than the other, but I could easily see what my son would look like in ten or fifteen years. Easily.

Smoke Avery hadn't changed very much in the years since I last saw him. The boyish roundness in his face was gone, replaced by lean jaws and a sculpted jaw line. His brows spread across his forehead like a bird in flight, and underneath them, his wide eyes still went from hazel to smoke in mere seconds. My son's did too, when he was working up to a temper. He'd given

my son his lips, too. They were full and the top lip was perpetually ashy so that it was necessary for him to touch the tip of his tongue to it periodically, to moisturize it. Isaiah kept ChapStick for such occasions and he was always rubbing his lips together to smooth it out. They were nearly carbon copies of each other, right down to the gap between their front teeth and the curved pinkie finger on both of their left hands.

It was almost too much to absorb. I waved Isaiah's question away nervously and pointed a finger at him.

"I thought we agreed that you were grounded? Where have you been?"

Isaiah flailed his arms dramatically and had the nerve to go bug-eyed on me, and in front of company no less.

"We didn't agree on nothing, Ma. As usual, *you* did all the talking and *I* was barely listening. I must'a forgot about being grounded. Anyway, I was out playing ball with Hood and them."

He turned to leave the kitchen, but Smoke's words stopped him cold.

"So you were out playing ball, drinking beer, *and* smoking weed?"

"Smoke, please," I begged just as Isaiah turned back around and came forward aggressively.

"Is that this cat's name? Smoke? Well, *Smoke*, why don't you get to stepping? Who is this dude, Ma, and why you got him all up in my business?"

"Let's start with the fact that *dude* isn't my name, and then let's move on to the fact that you don't *have* any business. Then let's get around to me telling you that I think I might decide to get all up in your business in a real way, very, very soon, son. You ain't seen nothing like me up in your business yet, believe me. Apologize to your mother for the way you just talked to

her.”

“Smoke . . .”

“Man, kiss my ass. This is my house, you just a guest, and an uninvited one at that. Like I said, *step*.”

Smoke tried to nudge me to the side, but I stood firm.

“Let me step around you for a minute, Anne. I just need to . . .”

He stepped around me and I stepped right with him, blocking his path.

“Enough,” I bit out through clenched teeth. I flattened a hand against Smoke’s chest and glared at my son. “Isaiah, this is my house, and in my house we don’t disrespect guests. Nor do you disrespect me. I think I told you that before. You just added two more weeks to your punishment, so congratulate yourself for your industriousness and go to your room.” He stood there ignoring me and staring at Smoke. “*Now*.”

“Your son is getting out of control, Anne,” Smoke told me after Isaiah had stomped up the stairs and slammed the door to his room loud enough for us to hear in the kitchen.

I ran shaky hands through my locks and met his eyes.

“*Your* son is getting out of control, Smoke. He’s smoking weed, and I think popping pills. What are those things called, the ones that have you hugging everybody and trying to stick your tongue down everybody’s throat?”

“Ecstasy,” he supplied with a grin.

“Right. Those things.” I paced in front of him. “I found them in his pocket. He’s sneaking out and ignoring curfews, which you know already, and I’m seriously thinking about strangling him in his sleep. You heard for yourself how he talks to me and his grades are bad now. I’m about to lose it. I actually thought about having a glass of wine with lunch this afternoon, if that

tells you anything.”

“What’s wrong with that?” He regarded me curiously.

“I don’t put any controlled substances in my body. Haven’t for over sixteen years, and I refuse to let him drive me to it now.”

“Not even a beer every now and again?”

“Nothing. Ever again.”

“Well maybe you need to get a bottle of beer, pour it out, and use the bottle to smack youngblood upside the head once or twice.”

I stopped pacing and shot him a look. He was dead serious.

“Could you see me wrestling with that fool? And when he’s drunk and high, too? It would be a blood bath.”

“Whose blood?”

“Smoke, this is not the time for corny ass jokes, OK?” But I thought about it for a second.

“His, definitely. I’ve fought much stronger shit than his little narrow behind, that’s for sure. I think I could take him.”

“Right. Why now, Anne? Why wait sixteen years to tell me I have a son?” He propped his hands on his hips and stared down at me.

“Because you were never supposed to know, Smoke. All these years he’s been *my* son. The way I see it, it was a fair trade. I traded you sex for drugs, and that was the end of it. I wasn’t supposed to get pregnant, but I did. That was my situation to deal with, and I’ve been doing just fine. Until . . .” I lifted a hand and gestured toward the empty doorway wearily. I smoothed a hand over my head and looked at Smoke over my shoulder. “He was an easy child, he really was. Always smiling and laughing, laid back and easy to get along with. Did you know that he’s been

on the honor roll every school year until the last couple of years? He was never a problem, and he was such a sweet boy. Now I don't know who the hell he is half the time."

"Imagine how I feel," Smoke said. "I don't know who he is at all."

"You're right," I said. "I should've thought this through more before I started looking for you. I had no right to barge into your life and try to force your hand. I'm sorry." I went back to the table, picked up the pen he'd dropped there, and started filling out the check. "I'll give you this and let you get on with your life." He leaned against the counter and watched me.

"Do you actually think I can just turn around and walk out after finding out I have a son, Anne?"

"Why shouldn't you be able to?" I was genuinely surprised by the question and it showed on my face. "He's *my* son and *my* problem. I didn't even ask, do you have other children? A wife?" It was just occurring to me the spot I'd put him in with my petition for child support.

"No and no," he said, "but if I did this would've caused some serious problems."

"Serious as hell." I tore off the check and handed it to him. "I said I was sorry."

"What about the child support? I mean, I'm sure we can come up with a fair amount and I could—"

"I don't need your money, Smoke. That wasn't what this was about."

"What was it about then?"

"It was about the weed and the Ecstasy and the liquor. I guess it was about me, too."

"Come again?" He studied the check carefully, nodded, and slipped it in his pocket. I watched five hundred dollars of my hard earned money disappear.

"You reminded me earlier of what I used to be. My son knows what I used to be, too," I said.

“You told him?”

“I have no secrets from Isaiah.” I flushed when his eyebrows rose. “Except for you, of course, but other than that, none. He knows that I was addicted to crack, and he knows how hard I struggled to build the life I have. I can’t understand why he’s choosing to follow that path, knowing what I’ve told him, and it scares the shit out of me. If anybody knows about drugs and how one drug can lead to using another one, it’s you and me. Especially me, and I don’t want that kind of life for my son.”

“So you thought hitting me with child support would help the situation?”

“No, I thought that if I hit you with child support you’d demand visitation rights and start spending time with Isaiah. I was hoping that I wasn’t the only one who had changed for the better, and that maybe you could help me put him back on the right track.”

ISAIAH

They thought I went to my room, but I didn’t. I slammed the door and came to sit on the step to listen to what they were saying. And I was getting madder and madder with every minute that passed. I was more convinced than ever that my mama was a trick.

My daddy? *That nigga down there was my daddy?* What the hell? He just shows up out of the blue, trying to put the smack down on a brotha, like he running thangs and shit. And she just stood there, looking all crazy, saying nothing when she should’a been telling that buster to step, right along with me. Who did he think he was anyway, with his crazy ass name? *Smoke*. What the fuck kind of name was *Smoke*?

I didn’t care what his damn name was, he ain’t no daddy of mine. If he tried to step to me again I would show his ass that too. Why niggas always wanna show up out of the blue, when

they kids damn near grown, trying to whip some ass? That cat got me messed up, got some serious shit twisted. He ain't never did shit for me. Nothing. My mama been taking care of me all these years, and she could keep right on doing it. Period. End of discussion.

I listened long enough to verify one crucial fact. My mama was a crack whore and my supposed daddy was a crack pimp. She paid for a rock with some ass and got me by that motherfucker. The more I thought about it, the madder I got until it seemed like smoke was coming out of my ears. Everybody else's mama was respectable and clean. Why did I have to get stuck with a crackhead for a mama? She always clowned me about smoking a little weed, but hitting a joint wasn't shit like smoking crack. Any day of the week that shit wasn't nothing alike. And she wouldn't be so uptight about drinking if she wasn't a damn junkie. Who the hell didn't drink a damn beer every now and again? A junkie didn't because they didn't have no damn control, that's who.

This shit was just too much. She was down there begging that nigga to be a daddy to me, like I really needed his sorry, absentee ass. And then again, she wouldn't have to be begging if she would'a told him about me in the first place. I could'a already had a daddy if it wasn't for her. Everything always came back to her and her bullshit.

I was down the steps and in the kitchen before I knew what I was doing. I could tell they wasn't expecting me to come back down by the crazy surprised expressions on their faces. My mama looked like she was 'bout to cry, but I didn't care. I was 'bout to cry too. But I wasn't sad. I was mad as a motherfucker.

"Look, dude, don't pay no attention to my mama, a'ight? She think I need you, but I don't, OK?" I stared at the nigga, standing there looking like me and shit. I peeped that out. If he wasn't my daddy, he was some damn body, my cousin or some shit. "So you can leave, a'ight?"

It's too fucking late for all that daddy shit now, and I don't want y'ass even if it wasn't. You feel me?"

"Isaiah!" my mama shouted. She had the nerve to let a few tears fall. I flapped a hand at her.

"It's cool, Ma. I see how this shit went down. You was buying crack and bought me too, right? It's cool. You should gone ahead and add a few more dollars to that check you gave his sorry ass and see if he got a few rocks in his pocket. Then you wouldn't need to be thinking about drinking and shit because of me."

I wasn't through saying what I wanted to say, but that was all I got a chance to say.

ALEC

Before I knew what I was doing, I had the boy by his neck, pressed against the wall, damn near choking his scrawny ass. He was almost as tall as I was, but nowhere near as strong. I heard him choking, but the sound didn't penetrate the wall of black that suddenly dropped over my eyes. I couldn't believe the shit coming out of his mouth. If I had ever dreamed of talking to my mother like he'd just talked to Anne, I would've still been looking for my teeth, all these years later. I thought about knocking out a few of his, just on GP.

He was grasping at my arm, trying to pull my fingers from around his neck, and I hardly felt him touching me. I locked eyes with him. Hard.

"Check it, youngblood," I growled. "You might not want me, but you're stuck with me anyway. And don't think that I'm checking the shit out of you just because I'm your *sorry ass* daddy. The fact is, any man with a dick in his pants would be on your head whether he was your daddy or not. You don't talk to women the way you were just talking to your mother. It's not

nice, and it's not very manly of you, either. I don't want to ever hear it again. Understand?"

He nodded stiffly, eyes bugged out. I took pity on him and loosened my grip. Slightly.

"You got something to say to your mother?" I asked. He nodded again and I let him go, stepped back expectantly.

"Yeah, I got something to say," my son croaked. I tilted my head to the side, waiting.

"Crack kills," he said and ran out of the kitchen.

I dropped my head and massaged the bridge of my nose. Then I looked at Anne. She was sitting at the table, staring at me through shocked eyes.

"I could go after him and pop him in the mouth," I offered.

"You already half killed him. I think that's enough excitement for one night."

"I didn't see you doing anything," I snapped. I just knew she wasn't getting ready to make all this shit my fault.

"What could I do, Smoke? This is what I was talking about. Where is all this coming from?"

"You could try standing up for yourself every once in a while. That might help."

"I'm tired," she said, and looking at her I could see that she was. "I'm too tired to stand up for myself. All I want to do now is go somewhere and sit down."

"He said some hurtful things." I pushed my hands in my pockets and rocked back on my heels, searching her face.

"He's said worse, and I've heard worse. The words themselves stopped hurting me a long time ago. The fact that he feels whatever he's feeling strongly enough to say them is the thing that gets me every time. That and the fact that he feels that it's OK to say them to my face. You want something to eat or drink? You said you've been in your car for two days."

I shook my head and moved closer.

“I got a hotel room a few hours ago, and food before that. Ask me how I knew I needed to come here with a full stomach.”

She cracked a smile and dropped her head in her hand. Her nails were nicely manicured, oval shaped, and painted a soft shade of pink.

“You can still walk away, you know. In fact, I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

I thought about the boy. My son. With my mother’s mouth and my ears, my father’s height and big feet. My forehead and eyes, my gap between his front teeth. He was me fifteen years ago. Another me and then again he was another chance to do something right. I knew him even if he didn’t think I did. I knew the little punk swigging beer and smoking weed, running with the wrong crowd and thinking it was cool. It was how I’d started slinging dope like there was no tomorrow. One step led to another and to another until, before I knew it, I was no longer Alec but Smoke. *Smoke the Dope*man.

I felt something bloom in the center of my chest, where I used to have a heart. Then I chuckled despite myself.

“Who would’ve ever thought that the two of us would be parents, let alone parents of the same child? I’m still a little pissed about that, by the way.”

“Come on, then, I’ll walk you to the door,” Anne told me as she got to her feet. I planted my hands on her shoulders, and pushed her back down in the chair. “Smoke . . .”

“Nah, I think I’ll stick around for a while. I’ve changed a lot over the years, Anne, but I never did like to be openly challenged. Youngblood just challenged the hell out of me, and you know I can’t walk away from that.”

“Smoke . . .”

“I thought I told you to stop calling me Smoke?” She ignored my question.

“I don’t want this to get any uglier than it already has.”

“It’s probably a little late for that. It was on when he called me *dude* for the third or fourth time. You and me, though, we need to talk.”

“Where There’s Smoke” is contemporary fiction, with an urban vibe...

Will you be able to stand the heat?

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