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Where Are You Going?

The directional sign suspended from the ceiling read Aisle 13, but Rebecca couldn't have been more lost if it were written in ancient Greek. She may as well have worn a sandwich board proclaiming her unfit to care for small children. Her leaden feet rooted themselves to the floor, and she shrunk in shame as her niece's frilly green skirt upended, showing the world her soggy, store-brand diaper. Emma's back shimmied on the tile, probably giving it the best polish it had ever had, and her orange Dora the Explorer Crocs thudded against the floor one after the other as she let out an ear-piercing screech punctuated by sobbing gasps.

Abby would know what to do.

She silently pleaded for help from her five-year-old nephew, Ricky. He shrugged his shoulders and meandered over to the yogurt multipacks.

Her chest tightened. Had she discovered yet another area where she didn't measure up? If she couldn't handle two children on her own for a day or two, what kind of mother would she make? The knot in her chest loosened, leaving in its place a familiar, sad ache. She had a better shot at becoming the next *American Idol* than at marriage and motherhood. She'd be lucky if she snagged the interest of any decent guy, let alone one that passed muster with her domineering dad.

At least she'd done something right. Putting forty miles — the distance from Gettysburg to Harrisburg — between her and her dad was proving to be the best decision she'd ever made.

Momentarily paralyzed by the stares of the other shoppers, Rebecca took a deep breath and scooped Emma up off the floor, cradling her against her chest. To her amazement, Emma calmed. She continued to sob and hiccup as Rebecca stroked her silky, golden hair, but the thrashing and screeching subsided, ending as suddenly as it started. Who knew the little girl would get so upset about being denied the Mickey Mouse DVD on the end of the aisle?

She placed Emma on her feet, held her hand, and headed toward the dairy case where she spotted Ricky. The boy's thin frame looked even lankier as he stood on tiptoe to scan the selections.

"Emma, honey, it looks like there's only one Chocolate

Underground left.” The moment the words left her mouth she wanted to take them back. What was she thinking? She was all but begging the child to have another tantrum.

Emma’s face fell. You’d think her favorite Disney princess had died. Rebecca braced for a second outburst.

“Chocolate Underground?” said a masculine voice to her right.

She turned to see a young store clerk.

“I’ll see if I’ve got some more here,” he said, squatting to peruse the boxes on his dolly.

Did he get some kind of dairy commission? Never had she come across someone so helpful in the supermarket.

After a few moments he added, “It’s not looking good.”

He shifted boxes of yogurt cups from a cart filled with a variety of cartons, apparently having overheard Emma’s favorite flavor. Had he witnessed the tantrum at the other end of the aisle? Probably. When he stood and gave her a look of bittersweet disappointment, heat rose in her cheeks.

He was young. And good looking. Very good looking. Short dark, almost black hair, blue eyes, and a beautiful, dimpled smile that radiated joy.

“Thanks for checking. It’s a major staple of her diet.” She turned to Emma, whose little hands clutched the last of her beloved chocolate yogurts.

“You could try the pudding.” He pointed to the tapioca cartons on the top shelf.

“Thanks, but I like to hold onto the illusion that because it’s yogurt, I’m buying her health food. You know, all that good bacteria and stuff. And it’s organic.”

He gave her a bright smile that lit his whole face. How long could she draw out a conversation about yogurt?

A gangly teenager emerged from the swinging double doors at the end of the aisle carrying a carton of what looked to be cream cheese. “Hey, Chris.”

Rebecca’s ears perked at the use of his name — Chris. As in Christian or Christopher? She smiled at Chris one last time. “We’ll get out of your way now.” She grabbed a box of organic yogurt tubes with one hand and held onto Emma with the other.

“No problem.”

She didn’t know what she expected him to say then. Something along the lines of, “In that case, I’d like to take you

away from here and spend the rest of my life meeting your milk-related needs.” Instead, he went back to work.

She gathered the kids and headed down the aisle.

Two near-tantrums and two frozen food aisles later, Rebecca struggled to find the shortest line at the check-out. While the kids twirled around alongside the cart, Rebecca couldn't help overhearing the fracas in the next lane.

A cranky toddler whined and pulled at the drawstrings of a thirty-something guy's hoodie from where she sat in the shopping cart. The man grumbled and cursed. A slew of children's cough and cold medicines lined the belt of the selfcheckout. The young man working the registers approached and asked him if there was a problem.

“My credit card hasn't been activated, and I forgot my cell phone. Watch my little girl here for a minute—I have cash in the car.” He extricated the child's hands from his hoodie, kissed her forehead, and jogged through the sliding doors. Faced with a fussy baby, who had now dropped her pacifier beneath the cart and broken out into a howl, the cashier looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

Rebecca longed to help, but she couldn't leave Emma and Ricky unattended.

Chris approached the self-checkouts and handed a yogurt multipack to the flustered cashier, who said something to him before gesturing toward the little girl in the shopping cart. Chris nudged the cashier aside. “I got this.”

Smiling at the little girl, he said, “Hey sweetie, where are your toes?” At first she offered only a scowl, but then as Chris gave the underside of her knees a little tickle, she giggled. “Where is your nose?” This time she placed a finger near her nose. After cycling through the main body parts twice, he started a game of peek-a-boo. That's when she pushed him away and let out a wail.

Rebecca couldn't suppress a smile.

Chris must have felt her staring at him because he stepped back from the cart and looked at her with a smile and a shrug that made her cheeks heat.

She glanced away, but when she turned back a couple of seconds later, Chris's gaze and his smile remained fixed on her until the little girl's daddy jogged back, money clip in hand, and broke the spell.

Rebecca's attention turned back to her own lane as she

finally moved forward. She checked to make sure Ricky and Emma were still in tow and discovered Ricky examining the cover of *Cosmopolitan*. *Great. Bounteous cleavage at his eye level.* She thanked God he couldn't read yet and lifted the magazine up and turned it around in its rack. "Help me with the groceries, Ricky," she said as she placed her items on the belt.

A candy and magazine rack obstructed her view. *Where had Chris gone?*

Chris watched the pretty brunette stop in front of the sliding glass doors. She zipped the little girl's jacket and pulled up the boy's hood.

Trey, the cashier with no kid skills, stood watching with him. "Cute."

Chris's gaze didn't stray from her as she pushed the cart through the exit. She couldn't be more than five foot four, and her wavy brown hair hung well past her shoulders over a short fleece jacket. She wore a long loose skirt that flowed to her ankles, revealing flat white sneakers. "Very cute. Nice, too."

He stood rooted to the floor for a few seconds and then realized Trey might have been referring to the children as cute, not Rebecca. He turned and noticed Trey's gaze fixed on her behind. Nope, not referring to the children. "I think I'm supposed to go after her."

"You're supposed to? Why? Did she lift something?" Not only was he bad with kids, Trey was not the sharpest cheddar in the dairy case. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I have to ask her for a date." Chris jogged through the exit and rushed through the doors. It took a couple of seconds for him to spot her. Halfway up the second row of cars, the little boy dragged a couple of bags and tried to hoist them into the trunk of a silver minivan.

He started toward the van, realizing too late that it had rained, and he sloshed through a giant puddle. Cold rainwater splashed his shin, making his pants adhere to his leg.

She emerged from the side of the van where she must have been buckling the little girl. She relieved the boy of his burden, placed it in the trunk, and shoed him into his side of the van. By the time she secured his belt, Chris reached her.

"Can I help you with the rest of these?"

Her eyes widened, but her lips turned up in a trace of a

smile. Good, maybe she liked him. He certainly hoped so, considering what he was about to ask.

"Thanks. I don't know how my sister does it."

Her sister? So, the kids *weren't* hers.

"I guess it takes practice." He reached into her cart, pulled out a fistful of bags, and laid them in the trunk. Bottles and cans clattered together noisily, so he checked to make sure nothing broke. *Smooth move, idiot.*

"Then there's hope for me yet," she said and placed a gallon of milk in the trunk. She slammed it shut and moved to take hold of the cart.

"I'll take care of that for you."

She thanked him, and an awkward silence followed.

"My name's Chris." He held out his right hand for her to shake. "Chris Reynolds."

"Oh, nice to meet you, Chris. I'm Rebecca Rhodes." She grasped his outstretched hand.

Her hand was warm compared to his cold fingertips. Stupid refrigerated section.

"You're babysitting?"

"Yes. My sister is in labor. My niece and nephew are with me until their baby brother or sister is born."

"Well, maybe I'll see you here again. Do you live nearby?"

"Not anymore."

"If you're in the area again, could I meet you for coffee, a beer, a milkshake—whatever you like to drink?" She paused too long for his liking, and he feared the next words out of her mouth would start with, "I'm sorry, but..."

Instead she smiled, and her brown eyes lit up. "I'd like that."

He let go of the breath he held and smiled, too.

****End of excerpt****