



IT'S HALF YOUR FAULT

by Meghan Leigh Paulk

Texas writer Meghan Leigh Paulk is also an attorney. This is her first published fiction but she was a finalist in the 2019 Writers' League of Texas manuscript contest for her novel *Hollywood Down Low*, which was also selected for Pitch Wars 2022.

A shadow falls across the open doorway. Lingers there.

I ignore it. Stay focused on my task like the good handmaiden I am. The last elastic corner of the snow-white fitted sheet snaps into place. I circle the bed, tugging at each side until the cloth stretches as flat and smooth as a blank canvas. If I keep my hands busy, they won't shake. I unfold the matching flat sheet. Fling it open. It flutters over the bed like an open parachute, unleashing its straight-from-the-iron, crisp cotton smell. For a moment, that clean scent almost masks the stinging stench of bleach.

But the moment passes.

His presence hangs heavy in the delicately decorated bedroom even though he hasn't crossed the threshold yet. He lurks there, instead, like an uninvited vampire.

"You're home," I say, at last, to break the screaming silence. But I can't look at him.

"Yeah, I had to drive all the way out to—"

I hold up a hand as if I can block his words from reaching my ears. "Don't," I say. "I don't want to know." He can keep his misdeeds to himself. Carry them like Marley's chains in the afterlife.

He falls silent. I watch him from the corner of my eye as I spread and tuck the flat sheet. He glances down at the blush-colored carpet, scuffs his boot against the fibers, disappointed, as if he'd already carefully crafted a lie and wanted to share it with me. He's still dressed in work clothes—the worn blue-jeans, navy-and-green flannel shirt, and University of Texas ball cap he wears to supervise a build site. Not the sharp suit and silk tie he wears for clients.

His head rises. I feel his eyes on me. A pang hits my heart as I remember the first time I felt his eyes on me. Back then, it felt like victory. Each of us wore a uniform. His football. Mine cheerleading. Both color-blocked with red and blue bright enough to put Crayola crayons to shame. August humidity and a threat of lightning hung heavy in the night air. Sweat rolled down my back

beneath the one-hundred-percent-polyester vest but, on the outside, I glowed golden brown with my summer tan and freshly highlighted hair.

He stood on the sidelines, his white helmet tucked under one muscled arm, his shaggy blond hair sweat-slicked against his forehead. His eyes were pinned to me. Long-lashed blue eyes, as clear and pale as the Bombay Sapphire Gin bottle my parents reliably brought out at five P.M. He had a girlfriend at the time, but I didn't care. My desire for him burned through any moral objections. And our mutual passion burned hot enough, long enough, to yield marriage and a child before flaming out to ashes.

How did we get here?

"Room looks good," he says.

I flinch. His voice is closer. He crept up behind me while I worked. His hot breath laced with whiskey brushes the back of my neck.

The room does look good. Spotless.

"Yes. I know how to clean a room, don't I?" I say, sliding away from him.

What I can't clean from experience and memory, I can Google. You can find anything on the Internet these days. *Mix one tablespoon of scent-free liquid dish detergent with two cups of cold water. Dab with a clean white cloth.* Yes, I know how to clean a room. No one else in this household has ever even picked up a dish. I tell him, "Your daughter wouldn't know a mop from a broom."

Of course, Ava is my daughter too. But she might as well have sprung solely from him, like Athena from the head of Zeus, for all the resemblance I can see between her and me.

"Where is Ava?" he finally asks. He leans near the doorway, heaving a sigh, as if he's deflating and needs that ballet-slipper-pink wall to prop him up. His whiskey breath smells like self-pity.

Our teenaged daughter watches us from every photograph in her bedroom. Fifteen-year-old Ava grins in a red-spangled dress with the dance team. Her scarlet lipstick sets off her white, white teeth—fresh from braces, straight and sharp. Fourteen-year-old Ava dressed in her karate gi hoists a trophy above her head with a defiant look in her ice-blue eyes. Seventeen-year-old Ava sitting in the lap of Duncan, her latest boyfriend. Her latest victim. My eyes flick to another picture. Sixteen-year-old Ava stands with her arms slung over the shoulders of two friends, all of them mugging for the photographer—tongues stuck out, fingers thrown up in peace signs. Ava is in the center. She is always in the center.

Those photographs are the most I see of my daughter these days. She lives with us like a spy in a safe house—hiding in her darkened bedroom, having hushed conversations that go quiet whenever our footsteps approach, slipping silently in and out of our home at all hours for school or practice or parties. I've given up tracking her surreptitious comings and goings.

But tonight I know exactly where she is.

"Jail," I say, harsher than I'd intended.

He gives me a hard look.

"She should be," I add under my breath as I unfold the white cloud of her comforter, smoothing it over the queen-sized mattress like vanilla icing. Then I tell him the truth. "Ava is sleeping over at Charlotte's house."

"They'll make her go to church in the morning," he observes, which is true and one of the reasons I ordered her over there. He adds, "She'll hate that."

Also true. “A little church won’t hurt her,” I say. Understatement of the year. I tug the comforter level-straight at the foot of the bed. “She called me a few choice names before she left.”

“Well, she inherited your temper.” He offers that loaded statement casually. Too casually, under the circumstances. Because tonight that statement can’t be anything less than an accusation. It strikes like a blow, tightening my chest, momentarily stealing my breath.

“Fuck off,” I snap before I can catch myself.

Okay. He has a point. I do run hot. In our family, I am the one who snaps. The one who yells. But my anger used to come and go as quick as the rain storms in Texas. I never nursed my grudges, hoarding them like Smaug with his treasure, like he and Ava do. Living with them has turned me bitter. As hard as the marbled granite countertops in our remodeled kitchen.

But maybe not hard enough to get through this.

“I don’t have a temper. I have passion,” I say, my throat so tight it threatens to strangle the words. “And I could never be as mean as she is. Do you remember what happened to her guinea pig?”

“That was an accident.” His retort comes out fast, but weak.

We bought Ava a guinea pig in fifth grade. A calico-colored little thing with fur as soft as her toddler curls had been. It entertained Ava for a month or so before she tired of its noise. The repetitive rattle of its water bottle. Its constant chirping squeaks. One day during the sweltering mid-Texas summer, Ava took the guinea pig out to our garage and left it there in its cage. By the time I discovered it, the poor thing was dead.

Ava claimed she meant to clean the cage, but her friend Madison invited her to the Galleria and, in her hurry to get ready, she just forgot. Ava cried on cue as I buried the stiff little body in our backyard, but there was a sly undercurrent in her manner. A few furtive glances from beneath her feather-duster eyelashes held something like amusement. The next week she asked for a pet rabbit. I said no—maybe for the first time—and a chip of ice began to form in the part of my heart that belongs to Ava. A cool scepticism started to mix with my love for her.

Of course, *he* didn’t care about the guinea-pig incident. Of course, he still doesn’t take it seriously. Even now. He said, “Good riddance to the rodent.” He never wanted a pet in the house anyway. So. No, I could never be as mean as Ava is. But he could be. Ava might have inherited my passion, but that streak of meanness is all his fault.

“Think she’ll be okay at Charlotte’s tonight?” he asks.

“She had herself together, sweet as pie, when Charlotte showed up,” I say.

Ava knows how to pretend—like her father, who should have gone into acting instead of real estate. They each know how to hit their marks and deliver their lines. But tonight he’s off his game. Hesitant. I can’t help but find morbid satisfaction in his struggle.

As I strain to stuff a plump pillow into a silky rose-colored case, he picks up another pillow and case. Sets to work helping me. He’s never done that before. Maybe his hands need something to do too. He says, “We should’ve sent Ava to counseling after she busted the windshield of my truck. We should’ve made her talk to someone about that temper.”

We’re back to blaming Ava’s behavior on me, I guess.

“Are you sure you want to dig further into that incident?” I ask with a warning edge in my voice, knife-sharp. I’m surprised to hear him bring up that night. The one last year when Ava took her softball bat to his truck like a piñata. But he doesn’t know that I know the real story. Maybe he suspects. Maybe he’s fishing to see what I’ll say.

I was in Dallas for work when it went down. The company had put me up at a five-star hotel. For dinner, I’d ordered the pan-seared sea bass from room service. I ate the sweet, buttery fish with its side of roasted asparagus while I watched *The Bachelor*, washing the meal down with a crisp sauvignon blanc, completely uninterrupted by family and chores. It seemed the height of luxury. After being a stay-at-home mom for fifteen years, the return to adult life was as intoxicating as a stiff martini. But the next day I arrived home and found myself in the midst of a hot war turned cold.

He said Ava had come in past curfew and thrown a tantrum when he told her she was grounded. She’d broken his windshield in retaliation. She was out of control—hysterical, he said. After he left the house for a meeting, I slipped into my daughter’s darkened bedroom. I expected to find her sobbing into a pillow. Instead, she was on her back in the middle of the mattress, eyes fixed on the ceiling, as if in a trance. I perched on the edge of her white-painted, wrought-iron bed. Reached out a tentative hand. As I stroked the warm skin of Ava’s arm with its baby-fine golden hairs, I said, “Sweetheart, what were you thinking?”

“He’s lying,” she replied in a voice filled to the brim with contempt. “I came home early last night. He was here with some slut.”

I hadn’t thought his wandering ways could hurt me anymore, but my heart tightened as if squeezed by a fist. A bitter bile like bad coffee rose in my throat. I’d never wanted my child to become privy to this private pain.

The first time he’d cheated, I’d wanted to break something too. I remember picking up a fluted glass flower vase. Preparing to hurl it against the wall. The thing was slippery slick in my damp palms. But then I thought how disappointed I’d be to lose that vase, how much work it would take to clean up each shattered, scattered glass shard. So I put it down. Instead of breaking something, I drank a bottle of chardonnay. When he got home, he brought me an armful of red roses. Three dozen. He apologized with tears in his eyes and promised me a romantic weekend getaway. It was a mistake, he said. A terrible mistake. I forgave him.

It became a dance we do every couple of years.

I told Ava, “Grown-up relationships are complicated, honey. You need to let me handle things with Dad. You can’t just break his windshield because you’re mad.”

“Yes, I can,” she replied coolly. “This is my family too. He needs to know that he can’t do that. Not again.”

I played with the golden threads of her hair that lay splayed across the satin pillowcase. *Oh, my sweet summer child*, I thought. He’s been doing it for years. Your tantrum won’t stop him.

Her head turned toward me. Her ice-blue eyes studied my face. There was sympathy in them, but also steel. “You think he’ll do it again,” she said flatly. “But he won’t. Trust me. I scared him.”

Her gaze shifted to the ceiling as if I’d been dismissed. The realization hit

me. Ava saw me as weak. Someone quick to appease. To make peace. Someone who can't do what needs to be done. Ava would have thrown that vase, and she would have left the glass shards on the floor as a reminder to whoever had crossed her.

I never told him what Ava had confided in me. Never confronted him. I let him think our daughter had gone along with his cover story. Maybe because Ava did what she did because I wouldn't do it—and that made it my fault. He and I discussed sending Ava to a therapist. But I didn't like the idea of a therapist learning family business, and he seemed wary too. In the end, we dropped the idea.

"It's water under the bridge now," I tell him. "Therapy probably wouldn't have helped anyway." *Probably. Probably.* Probably wouldn't have helped. Probably did the best we could. The mantras of every parent.

I survey my handiwork. The bed is freshly made. The carpet is a uniform shade of rosé again. I scrubbed out any trace of the cabernet-colored stains. The other comforter, sheet set, and mattress pad have been washed in cold water with detergent and bleach. They've been put in the dryer. Ava's karate trophy—a blunt, sharp-edged block of faux-marble—is gone from her bedside table. It left with him. Everything from the scene has been cleaned. Sanitized. My stomach lurches at the momentary flashback of the blood and the boy. I remind myself a bottle of chardonnay is chilling in the refrigerator. I can gulp that down tonight. I'll DoorDash another, if necessary. Drink myself insensible.

I sag against the wall. He and I stand with the bed between us like a game board. But we can't be opponents. Our interests are literally bound together with blood. I search his face for traces of the teenager he used to be. The one on the football field during that sultry August night so long ago. His skin has softened like butter with alcohol and age, but his sharp blue eyes remain the same. They lock on mine with all the intensity of youth.

I figure we're past any pretending so I say, "I know why Ava broke your windshield. The real reason. She told me."

He grimaces. His eyes drop to the carpet. "You never said anything."

I sigh. My previous rants never changed his behavior. "What was there to say anymore?"

"You know it didn't mean anything."

"I know."

It never means anything. Smug people like to say the way you get a man is the way you'll lose him. I stole him from his girlfriend. By that logic, someone will steal him from me someday. I could live with that, I think. Trouble is, I haven't lost him yet. Here he is. Ava won't let him leave, that's for sure, and she would never understand if I left either. Neither of us will test her. So, here we stay, going through the motions. It reminds me of that *Twilight Zone* episode where the kid traps an entire town with his mental powers.

"I haven't been the husband to you that I should've been." His gaze meets mine again, but his voice quavers. His eyes are wet and red-rimmed, making the blue irises even brighter. "I haven't been a father like I should've been either."

"No, you haven't," I agree. "Sometimes. Sometimes you haven't."

He wraps his arms around himself as if he needs a hug. "This is all my

fault.”

I wanted him to say that. To let me off the hook. But now that he’s shouldering all the blame, I can’t bring myself to let him carry it. I say, “No. It’s not all your fault. Not all of it.”

He blinks. Registering the gift of my partial forgiveness. He nods. Accepting it. After a quiet beat, he says wryly, “At least we don’t have to worry that Ava is out with Duncan.”

He can still make jokes, even at the worst of times. I used to like that quality.

And I never liked Duncan. Never trusted that kid. A shiftless boy with a pretty face and a thin layer of charm that sweetened his impudence only slightly, like a cake glaze poured over spoiled meat. He was gangly, with a cockatiel haircut, dressed all in black like a burglar. But he was a baby once—cute and harmless. I tolerate teenagers by reminding myself they were all babies once upon a time.

Duncan grew up to be trouble, though. A liar . . . and a cheater . . .

But, in the end, no match for Ava.

Tonight, I’ve avoided reality by focusing on my tasks. Numbing myself with the drudgery of chores is my coping mechanism. After Ava laid her mess before us, like the family cat presenting its kill, we had a problem to solve and a room to clean. He and I divvied up the work.

Now Duncan is gone.

The room is spotless.

In the void, reality strikes hard and fast—a sucker punch to the gut that doubles me over. A sob builds in my body. It pushes up through my ribcage and my throat, escaping as a keening wail. Carpet fibers scrape my skin, burning my knees as I fall to them. I grab a rough wad of paper towels from the floor, press them to my face, mopping up tears because I cannot have saltwater staining my handiwork.

His boots brush the pile carpet, moving toward me. His arms wrap around my shuddering shoulders, warm and still strong. I burrow into his embrace. “We’ll get through this,” he assures me in a rough whisper. “We said for better or worse. We’ve had a lot of the better. This is the worse.”

“It’s so much worse than anything I expected.”

“We’re not perfect people. We weren’t going to be perfect parents. But Ava is our girl. It’s our job to protect her.”

“Even when what she does is monstrous?”

“Especially then.”

I nod. My cheek brushes against the damp spot my tears have made in his soft flannel shirt.

He’s right. Ava is half my fault, but she’s half my pride and joy too. It’s the same for him. We’re in this together. So, I can’t let him carry his part alone. I ask, “Where did you bury that boy?”

“In the backyard of a new home in that development off 183. They’re set to pour a pool first thing this morning. I’ll be there to supervise. No one will ever find him.”

No one will look very hard. Duncan’s father isn’t in the picture. His mom is a drunk. He was a druggie and a sporadic student at best. Everyone will think he ran off. But it’s an ignominious end for someone who was a baby once, after

all. Probably his own parents' pride and joy, once upon a time.

But I can't think about that.

Shifting my head to look over his shoulder, I find the framed school picture of Ava from kindergarten that now sits on her bedside table. It took the place of the karate trophy. The frame is silver wound with a pink gingham ribbon. Ava is rosy-cheeked and golden-haired with a shy smile. Her eyes are wide and ice-blue like her father's. Was there an emptiness behind them even then? Did I refuse to see it?

Doesn't matter, I guess. As I told him, it's water under the bridge.

But, for a minute, I let myself marinate in memories of kindergarten. Waiting for the bus with Ava on the first day of school with her hand in mine. Watching her play a dancing daisy in the school play. Hearing her first stumbling attempts to read aloud. All those times when a warm glow of pride filled my chest like May sunshine.

Back when I thought it would all be for the better.

When I thought we could create something perfect.

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