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Legal Repercussions

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Description

This short story attempts to transport the reader into the life of a lawyer who has just discovered that her boyfriend was abused as a child. As she is legally required to report this within twenty-four hours of her discovery, she finds herself facing the dilemma of doing what is morally right and ultimately most loving, or keeping her boyfriend happy by never calling CPS about his experiences.

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LEGAL REPERCUSSIONS

HANNAH SMITH

No one ever told me love could make you sick, but the burn of vomit in my throat proved otherwise. I hadn't been able to sleep all night and finally padded out of my bedroom in sweats and my comfiest oversized sweatshirt at three a.m. My sleepy-time tea hadn't shut my brain down, and the overpriced foot massager my parents had given me for my birthday hadn't removed any of my tension. My forehead throbbed with an approaching migraine, and my stomach was cramping like it did on my worst period days.

My phone sat on the kitchen table in front of me.

It lit up with another text from Eli. The time read 5:49 over our graduation caps.

I had another seventeen hours to make the call before I'd be in contempt of the law requiring me to report this after twenty-four hours of knowledge. Not enough time. Too much time to sit and stare at the phone and ignore his texts and phone calls. His inevitable banging on my apartment door and demanding we talk. His telling me it was years ago, that it wasn't happening anymore. That if I loved him, I'd stay out of it.

He had never sworn in front of me before, yet he did last night. He once told me that there was a reason foul language existed, but he didn't use it unless a situation truly called for it. He cussed me out last night. Called me every foul name in the book and more I hadn't heard of.

That's when I dropped the phone on the tiled floor and fled to the bathroom. My iPhone now has a large crack straight through our clasped hands on graduation day.

He'd thought we were sharing life last night. Finally trusting each other with our childhoods. I'd been sickened by his story, holding back my tears as I learned the true story behind the long scar slashed across his forehead and into his eye-

brow. As I learned why his older sister jumped when people yelled in jest. As I learned why he avoided talk of his parents as much as possible.

He told me last night that he'd long ago learned to deal with it. Learned to move on, accept it had happened, but nothing could be done about it now. He told me they loved him, despite it all. That they were truly good people. They'd just had crappy childhoods themselves and had been doling out their own experiences.

He had said he loved them. Had long ago forgiven them. Had said it wasn't completely their fault.

I can still hear the earnestness in his voice as he admitted that he hated to think of it happening to Alyssa and Laney, but that splitting up their family hadn't ever been an option. His voice had broken as he admitted that Alyssa had sat him and Laney down one day and asked if they wanted her to make a phone call to CPS. He'd exhaled especially slowly as he said that Alyssa would've actually filed against their parents if he'd wanted it. He'd sounded like he couldn't believe it. The waver in his deep voice, the catch of his breath, the way he whispered that a small part of him wondered if he'd made the right decision because of Laney.

I'd barely gulped in another breath as I finally understood his idiosyncrasies. His refusal to ever consider punishments should we have children. His awkward air around the police when I'd been pulled over. His nervousness when we had an argument over how to divide the holidays between family.

And he just went on and on, his exhaustion from an all-nighter freeing his usual inhibitions. He talked for three hours straight, sharing details of the abuse, things I could hardly fathom.

When he'd finally stopped, leaving me mentally gasping, shock eeking my breath out of

my body, I'd whispered, "You do know I'm a lawyer, right?"

I still don't know why that's what I first said—surely I should have whispered something besides my incessant, "Oh, Eli, oh, no, oh, I'm so sorry" that I'd babbled as he'd talked. Surely I should have given us both at least a moment to process what he'd just said.

But he'd just told a lawyer that his parents had abused him. And for some horrific reason, that part of me stood up in that moment and shouted that legal justice must happen, that the things he and his sisters had experienced couldn't go unpunished.

And silence had been his answer.

So I'd continued down the verbal path I'd already placed myself in. "I am legally required to report people who abuse minors. I'm going to have to call the CPS, Eli."

The silence on the other end was broken by him cutting off the call. The phone had trembled in my hands as I had laid it down on my bedside table. But I'd barely set it down before it violently jolted the silence.

"Eli, I—"

"Don't do this, don't allow your sense of righteousness to manipulate you. It doesn't matter what the law says in this instance. My parents aren't a danger to anyone. They haven't laid a hand on me since I was fifteen. They haven't touched either of my sisters since they've graduated. They aren't hurting anyone, anymore. I'm okay now. I love them. I've moved on and learned to deal with it. They love me. Sure, they messed up, but what parent doesn't? Things may have been a bit extreme at times, but—"

"Eli, your parents abused you. They've manipulated you. They've—"

The words, the words hurt to think of. To

accept his increasingly coarse responses to my statements. To realize that his parents had him honestly believing he should overlook their past abuse. To fully understand that he would protect them at any cost. That though they'd actually been the ones to break his trust, he thought I was the one doing so.

That I was the person breaking up his family, tearing it apart, when it had been his parents. That he believed I was failing him.

And the sickness cramping my stomach told me I was failing him, betraying him. Attempting to break his family, cruelly attacking them for something that had long ago ended. That had been resolved, moved on from.

And the knowledge that he would lie straight to the police should they actually contact him—the realization that my doing the right thing was ultimately purposeless, made it feel more useless than I can even begin to explain.

His words from earlier, on repeat in my head, competition for thoughts of Can I really make this call? and, How can I not?, telling me that even if I were to make the call, it wouldn't matter. He'd deny it all. His sisters would deny it all. That it was pointless from the start. Why jeopardize our relationship any more than it has to be at this point? He's right, he's not going to do anything, not going to make any accusations against them. There's no point. I'll only be causing absolute division between us.

I had to force myself to count out my breaths, force myself to count 1,2,3 as I exhaled. Remind myself that not only was I legally obligated to report his parents, but also it was the right thing to do. If I truly loved him, more than I loved the comfort of peace in our relationship, I'd do this. I'd fight for him when he couldn't fight for himself. I'd show him he was worth it.

But the knowledge that he didn't want this reported, that he'd never reported it when his sisters were being abused—it wouldn't seem like love to him. We'd be over the moment I made the call. It was something he wouldn't be able to forgive.

This was breaking trust. This was destroying us. This was more than adding kindling to the flames, this was throwing dynamite in the fireplace.

He would never forgive me for this, and how could I blame him? Living his life in utter terror that someone would discover what his parents did to him, yet terrified no one would ever find out—the way those fears balanced on a cliff ledge, keeping steady so that neither actually tumbled him down into an abyss.

Living with the reality that those who should have first loved him didn't, that those who should have protected him—they didn't see him as worthy. And the fact that people had turned blind eyes, that his teachers hadn't noticed, that his aunts and uncles never questioned his safety after he received injury after injury—protection and justice hadn't existed for him.

And I couldn't change any of that. Couldn't change his past, couldn't make him believe he was worthy of my protection, as little and as late as it now was.

My phone rang again, hesitation pulling at me as I saw his number flash across the screen.

"Eli, I'm sorry." I choked out. "I don't know what to do." My sobs filled the silence of my living room.