

FLETCHER

THE MAN SHE TOLD HIM ABOUT

The door is buzzing. *OK*, Fletcher thinks. He grabs the handle and lets himself through; he crosses the grimy vestibule littered with discarded direct mail brochures, and he begins to climb the stairs. He will climb to the fourth floor, and on the fourth floor there is an apartment, and in that apartment Cassandra, his love, will be waiting for him. This has played out in exactly this way many times before. But what makes tonight different, what makes Fletcher think *OK, I'm ready for this* as he gasps his way up the stairs, is that tonight Cassandra will not be waiting by herself. Tonight Leander, her son, will also be there, and Fletcher will meet him for the first time. It needs to go well, Fletcher suspects, even though he has no good idea how to win over a four-year-old boy. *You should have learned a magic trick or something*, Fletcher thinks, as he stands in front of the door to Cassandra's apartment, and knocks.

—Hey, Cassandra says, as she opens the door. Fletcher leans in and kisses her on the cheek, and then, beyond her, he sees the boy, standing in the doorway to the kitchen, peering up at the two of them with great brown eyes. *I shouldn't have kissed her*, Fletcher thinks, in a panic, *not in front of the kid. What's the psychological impact of that, seeing some strange dude kissing your mom?* Then, perhaps in an attempt to get a grip on the situation, he thinks *it was only a kiss on the cheek; everybody does that; it's continental; surely seeing that can't fuck a kid up too bad; it's not like we're making out—*

—So, Fletcher, Cassandra says, —this is Leander, and Leander, this is Fletcher. Remember? The man I told you about?

Leander stands there peering up at them, and then he looks down at the floor.

—Come here, Cassandra says. —Come here and say *hi*.

—Hi there, Fletcher says, and he attempts a little wave that he hopes will seem non-threatening.

—C'mere, says Cassandra. And Leander crosses the room, looking up at Fletcher warily, and then he stands behind his mother's legs. He grasps the loose denim of her pants in his fists.

—Leander, Cassandra says, a note of warning in her voice. And then, to Fletcher:
—He’s a little shy, at first.

—That’s understandable, says Fletcher.

Cassandra pries Leander’s hands free and does a complicated step-around so that he’s in front of her instead of behind her. She crouches down so that she can lean over his shoulder and she whispers into his ear —Go ahead, it’s OK, say hi.

—Hey, Fletcher says. He crouches down as well, hoping he’ll seem less intimidating if he’s closer to eye level. —Hey slugger, he says to Leander, and he reaches out to kind of half-poke him. *What are you doing?* he thinks. He’s ending up sounding exactly like what he didn’t want to sound like—someone trying to ingratiate himself with a kid primarily to score with the kid’s divorced mom. Leander, for his part, turns away, hiding his face against Cassandra’s shins.

—So this is the way it’s gonna be, eh? Cassandra says, looking down at him. —Sorry, she says to Fletcher.

—It’s me, Fletcher says. —I understand. I’m hideous.

—See, says Cassandra, down to the top of Leander’s head. —You hurt Mr. Klingman’s feelings, with all this hiding. You’re going to make him cry, if you don’t come out.

Leander peeks out at Fletcher, who makes a sad-clown’s face.

—The funny man’s gonna cry, she says, and she reaches down and sticks a wiggling finger into Leander’s ribs. Leander begins to giggle. —Yes he is, she continues, poking him again. —Yes he is.

Fletcher contorts his face into a mask of misery, rubs his fists exaggeratedly in front of his eyes.

—Look at that, Cassandra growls. —Look what you did. She sits on the floor, Indian-style, and hauls Leander up into her lap. —Look at the funny man. Now say hello.

—Hi, Leander says.

—Hi there, Leander, says Fletcher. —My name’s Fletcher.

—I know, says Leander. —My mom told me.

—She did? Fletcher says. —You know why?

Leander shakes his head *no*.

—Because, Fletcher says, —because she loves you. She said to me *I have a little boy named Leander, and I love him very much, and so I'm going to teach him the names of everything in the world*. What else do you know the names of?

Leander screws up his face, thinking. —Dinosaurs, he says. Cassandra rolls her eyes.

—Always with the dinosaurs, she says.

—Dinosaurs have some pretty complicated names, Fletcher says. —You must be a smart little boy. What dinosaurs can you name?

—Ankylosaurus, says Leander. —Tyrannosaurus. Stegosaurus.

—Do you know the triceratops? Fletcher says.

Leander nods. —Proceratosaurus, he says.

—Proceratosaurus? Fletcher says. He looks at Cassandra. —What the heck is a proceratosaurus? He is careful not to say *hell*.

—Don't ask me, Cassandra says. —This is not my thing.

—I have a book about dinosaurs, Leander says. —My mom bought it for me.

—Yeah? Fletcher says. —Do you want to show me?

—It's in my room, says Leander. He clambers out of Cassandra's lap and runs around the corner.

—Well, says Fletcher, —I guess I'm going to go check it out.

—Have fun, Cassandra says.