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BROWNIE BY NELS HANSON

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Angie was feeling shaky and low—she'd just been dropped by a married man named Dick Spencer, a big-wig lawyer in Fresno—so I went over to cheer the two of us up.

I'd met Angie at the Miracle Spa on Blackstone. She was lots of fun, with a figure as good as mine, short blonde hair, and a real pretty face. She had a heart of gold.

That was her problem. She was from the country. She was too trusting. I could see that, the few times we had double-dated. Spencer didn't deserve her. I knew Spencer. He'd been a friend of Nick's.

Angie was renting a townhouse out beyond Herndon, past St. Agnes Hospital, near the tracts of big houses just south of the Bluffs where I lived then. I had a place right above the San Joaquin River, a three-story brick and timbered stucco, the kind with rounded eaves, like a thatched roof. I had half an acre of lawn.

Nick had bought the house for me when his divorce came through. On one side was a doctor, Jeb Fisher, and on the other a builder, Grant Lord. Spencer lived down the street and sometimes he and Angie had met at my place during lunch. Nick and I were separated now.

Like Angie, I was a bit at loose ends. This was before Grant and I got together and moved to San Francisco, before Angie went back to the dairy in Hanford to live with her parents.

That afternoon Angie was worried about money and I asked her to move in with me. We lived together for six weeks, before she got sick and had to move home and Grant and I finally decided to get married.

Angie always reminded me of myself, when I was younger and just starting out. I guess I felt protective of her. I was ten, maybe 12 years older, but except for the difference in our hair, we might have been twins. Like all my friends, Angie called me Brownie.

I found Angie in her nightgown sitting on the sofa, with a glass, a bottle of white wine, and a kleenex box. There were crumpled tissues all over the rug. The curtains were drawn and the room was stuffy and dark.

She had on a soap opera, the one that starts with the big egg timer and the guy saying, "Like sands through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives." Angie began to sob every time the heroine, something Seaforth something, had a flashback of her husband kissing his first wife. In real life,

Seaforth and the guy who played her husband were married.

“Honey,” I said. “How about changing the channel?”

I gave her a hug but she cried harder and I got up and sat in the chair next to the coffee table.

She began to surf around the dial, round and round, crying again each time the soap came on.

“No, Angie,” I said. “I mean the topic of conversation.”

I took the remote and snapped it off.

“Let me tell you a story. I think it’ll ring a bell.” I lifted an imaginary hammer. “Ding,” I said. “Okay?”

Angie looked at me with her swollen eyes.

I smiled at her, reached over and took the wine bottle from the coffee table.

“You want a glass—” She dabbed at her eye.

I raised the bottle to my lips. I took a big swig, then set it down, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, like a cowboy in a movie.

““Fasten your seat belt!” I joked in my Bette Davis voice. “It’s going to be a bumpy ride.””

Angie began to giggle, before she remembered Spencer and broke into fresh tears.

“You’re not a good audience,” I teased. “Can’t you read the sign? ‘No Weeping Until the Feature Starts.’”

Angie blinked, looking at me.

“How can I get your attention?”

I unbuttoned my blouse and Angie giggled again as I leaned forward in my bra and grabbed the bottle. I took a gulp.

““What do you say, Pilgrim?”” I did my John Wayne imitation.

“Go on,” Angie said. She blew her nose.

I began to tell her about the afternoon that Anders finally proposed, how it came out of the blue, just at the right moment, when everything seemed like it was coming apart.

I told Angie how it was a lesson to never jump to conclusions—bad luck can look like good and vice versa before things play themselves out.

“Who was Anders?” Angie said. She wiped her nose with a fresh tissue.

“My first husband,” I said. “It was a Saturday and we were working alone at the office like we often did. Anders was all upset. Let me set the scene—

““Do you think he knows?’ Anders said, he’d said it ten times. I had my file out. I was working at my nails. ‘Brownie!’

““I don’t know!’ I answered. I made short, quick strokes. In my mind, already I’d left him. I was already in love.”

“You were in love with someone else?” Angie’s red eyes were open wide. I nodded and went on.

““I get the feeling he does,’ Anders said. ‘Don’t you?’

““From what he said yesterday?’ I kept working the file. I was just waiting.”

Now Angie sat forward on the couch. I was the soap opera that had her attention.

We used to joke a lot at the spa between exercises and then afterward, in the shower. We’d loufa each other’s backs as I’d tell her some of the screwy things dates had said and done. Angie had a good sense of humor.

“You’re kidding!” she’d say, like a high school girl, then hit me with the sponge.

I went on:

“Anders frowned and ran a hand through his hair. ‘That,’ Anders said. ‘And other things. Something Griffith said.’”

“You were in love with Griffith?” Angie asked. I shook my head.

““What did Griffith say?’ I said. I held out my hand to make sure the nails were even. I thought about the Wednesday before, when I’d met Griffith after work for drinks at the Butcher Shop. He’d asked me if Anders and I were breaking up, insinuated he’d like to go out with me. I told him ‘No way,’ that anyway Anders and I were just friends.”

“But you were sleeping together—” Angie sat on the edge of the couch.

I winked at Angie. “‘It’s just a feeling,’ Anders went on. ‘I can’t pin it down.’

““I don’t think he knows,’ I said, I was testing him, touching my nails to my palm. They were smooth and even.

““Well,’ Anders said. He dropped his arm to his side, then patted his leg. ‘We better hope he doesn’t.’

““He might use it.”

“Use what?” Angie said.

““Broomfield would!’ Anders said.

““It could be bad,’ I agreed, turning the file. ‘Not good.’ I felt like rubbing it in. I was sick of Anders. Sexually, he wasn’t very exciting.”

“Who’s Broomfield?” Angie said, but I kept going.

““Not good?’ Anders said suddenly, he was mimicking me. He leaned forward, raising his brows and jutting out his chin. ‘Are you kidding?’

““Terrible, a complete disaster,’ I said, I stared back at Anders. ‘He could hurt you,’ I went on, I looked back at my nails. ‘Especially now, with the Board.’

““You bet he could hurt me,’ Anders said. ‘Why—’ Anders turned. ‘Broomfield could ruin me.’”

“Who was Broomfield?” Angie said again, she was confused, but I went right on, to lay out the beginning of the story.

““He doesn’t know,’ I broke in. I said it as if Anders were a child who wouldn’t stop. I put down the file

to look at Anders. 'He couldn't.'

“‘How could he?’

“‘There's no way.'

“‘Unless—'

“‘He might suspect”

“‘Suspect what?’ Angie said. “Brownie!”

“‘He might,' Anders nodded. 'That's the trouble. Everyone's touchy. They don't want it in the company.'

“‘I know,' I said.”

“‘Affairs,'” Angie said. Her face lit up. “That's it, isn't it?”

I nodded to Angie.

“I shook my head so my hair swung back and forth, with the part falling the right way. It was my best feature, people said, dark and shiny. Everybody called me Brownie.

“‘Like now, I was trim and pretty but it was my hair people noticed. For a second, I saw Anders looking at it under the office lights.”

Now I could see it all again, for a second I forgot Angie was there watching me swing my hair, admiring it. But then I was telling the story for Angie, to make her feel better.

“‘He does or he doesn't,' Anders said. 'It's as simple as that.'

“‘You have to assume he does.'

“‘You bet your life,' Anders said. He turned to look out the picture window. Except for his car, and my Honda Accord, and someone's big blue Lincoln, the parking lot was deserted. Yellow leaves were falling along the front walk to the office. It was fall, October.

“‘You've been very foolish,' I said. I rubbed it in some more. 'Remember? I told you. That time at the retreat, at the lake—”

“‘What happened at the lake?’” Angie asked eagerly.

“‘We made love in the women's bathroom, during a speech.’”

“‘You're kidding!’” Angie said. She started to giggle.

“‘God,' Anders said. He hit the back of his hand against his forehead. 'How'd I get into this?'

“‘What about me?' I said. I'd begun to leaf through the rolodex on the desk. 'I can't believe I'm talking like this.'

“‘Well, you are.' Anders looked back out the window, at the office across the breezeway. At a window, a man and woman in business suits stood talking. From my desk I couldn't see them clearly. I didn't pay any attention. 'You better believe it.'

“All right,’ I said. I skipped past the punched plastic cards of names and numbers with my fingernail. I pretended to look up Broomfield’s number. I already knew it. ‘No need to roll around in it.’

“Anders swiveled and took two quick steps toward my desk. He reached across the computer and grabbed me by the shoulders. Real hard.

“‘It’s your fault,’ Anders said, his lips were stretched tight. He shook me once, then again, so my head jerked back. I thought for a second he was going to strike me.”

I moved my head back and forth, showing Angie how it was.

“God,” Angie said.

“‘You started this,’ Anders said. ‘You. You. I’m the one to lose.’ He let me go, then reached toward me, to touch my arm. ‘Brownie—’

“I pulled away, lifting my hand to stroke my throat. He could have broken my neck.”

“God yes!” Angie said.

“‘You’re crazy,’ I said.

“‘Get his number,’ Anders growled. ‘Get Broomfield on the phone.’”

“Who’s Broomfield?” Angie repeated. “I’m getting confused.”

“‘You do it.’ I spoke just above a whisper. I kept my face turned to the side.

“‘Look, I’m sorry,’ Anders said. He lifted his hands, but I leaned away. ‘I don’t know what’s got into me.’”

“I guess not,” Angie said. She shook her head. She had a grim look on her face. “Because he was pissed at Broomfield?”

“He was afraid of Broomfield, of what he might say.”

“About you and Anders—”

“That’s right. ‘I don’t know,’ I mumbled. I shook my head, looking at the wall. It didn’t hurt that much but I acted like it did. In a way I was playing ‘possum. It was already over and now it was his fault, not mine. If I wanted, I could sue Anders.”

“Sexual harassment,” Angie said.

“‘Brownie?’ Anders said. My hair whirled as I swiveled in the chair, looking up at Anders. I set my jaw.

“‘I’m sorry. You know what you mean to me. Why, you’re closer to me—’” “That’s what Spencer said,” Angie said. “Whatta rat!”

“I lifted a finger, pointing at him. ‘Never do that,’ I said, my voice was shaking. ‘Ever.’

“‘I didn’t mean—’

“‘I’ll spill everything myself,’ I told him, ‘you won’t have to worry about him.’”

“Broomfield,” said Angie.

““Sure, sure,” Anders said. He edged back toward the desk. ‘Of course.’ He reached out to touch my hand but I pulled it away.

“‘I’m not myself,’ Anders said. He stepped across the carpet, staring toward the window. In the other office the man and woman stood close together, head to head. They were about the same height. The man waved an arm in the air so his white cuff flashed. I couldn’t see his face.

“‘I haven’t been, since this came up. Remember,’ Anders said, ‘at the start, how everything was?’

“‘I don’t care,’ I said. ‘That was uncalled for.’ I looked down, plucking at my blouse.”

I started to do it, to show Angie, but my blouse was already undone. I went on.

“‘I apologize,’ Anders said. ‘You hear me? Brownie?’

“‘I hear you,’ I said. ‘I wish I didn’t. Don’t touch me again. I mean it.’

“‘I won’t.’

“‘You better not.’

“‘It’s just that, you know—’

“‘Blame yourself. You’re the one who started it all. You’re the one who couldn’t keep hands off.’”

“That’s right,” Angie said. She was angry.

“‘I won’t, I promise to God I won’t,’ Anders said. ‘Trust me.’”

“Just like Spencer,” Angie said. “Just like him!”

“‘I turned back to the rolodex. Everything was working out. ‘I’ve got his number,’ I said.

“‘Yes, I need to call him, I guess—’ Anders moved back toward the window. The man and woman were having what looked like an argument. You could tell, the way they stood. I was glad they were arguing.

“‘Here,’ I said. ‘I’ve got his home phone.’”

“‘Whose?’ Angie asked. “Broomfield’s?”

“‘Wait a second, honey,’ I said to Angie. “You’ll find out.

“‘What’s their problem, anyway?’ Anders said.

“‘I’m going to call,’ I said. ‘I want this settled. Now.’ I said it just like that.

“‘Come look,’ Anders said. ‘Just for a second. It’s fascinating.’

“‘What is it?’ I frowned, then got up and stepped to the window, leaving a space between myself and Anders. He and I were definitely through.

“‘See?’ Anders said. Now the woman in gray was waving a pointed finger. She looked familiar but I couldn’t place her. A redhead. She stepped back, picked something off the desk. She shook it. She

opened her mouth in a shout. I could almost hear it.

““She’s going to throw it!” Anders said as her arm came back, something glinted as it flew from her hand. With a reflex, Anders stepped away from the window as the man in the blue suit jerked his head to the side, the thing went past him, a paperweight or something.”

I watched Angie’s blank attentive face.

““You see that?” Anders said. ‘That was close.’

““God,’ I said then. I took a step back. Anders watched the two square off. They stood still, six feet apart.

““Do you think they’re going to kill each other? Maybe we should call the police.’

““Wait,’ I said. I was trying to think.

““I wonder who cheated on who.’ Anders grinned, watching them. ‘I feel better. Things are rough all over.’

“I didn’t answer. I could hardly breathe.

““I don’t think he’ll hurt her.’

““No,’ I said. It was all I could say. I could barely talk. You could have knocked me over with a toothpick. I stood to the side, close by the drapes away from Anders. I couldn’t believe it.”

““What?” Angie asked.

““What’s wrong?’ Anders looked at me by the curtains.

““It’s him,’ I said, looking.”

““Who?” Angie said.

““Who! Tell me, Brownie—’

““Him,’ I hissed. I was half afraid they’d hear in the other office.

“Anders squinted, shading his eyes, then moved fast to the other curtain. ‘Are you sure?’

““Of course I’m sure.’

““This is something.’

““I can’t believe it,’ I said.

““Whose office is that?’ Anders said. ‘What’s he doing there?’

“Anders and I stood on either side of the picture window. Broomfield and the woman stood apart. They were talking now, not shouting.”

““Broomfield was having an affair?” Angie frowned.

““I don’t know,’ I answered. Like Anders, I peeked around the bunched curtain. ‘It’s been empty, until a week ago.’

““A week ago? What firm?”

“I shook my head.

““I don’t know!” I said. ‘I think I’ve seen her at the deli.’

““I wish I could hear what they’re saying,’ Anders said.

““Tell me about it.’

““I wonder. No,’ Anders said, ‘I don’t think he’s talking about me.’

““Who is she?’ I said. ‘Who is it?’

““Never seen her,’ Anders said, raising his voice. No one could hear us. ‘She’s attractive, though.’

““Her?’ I said. She wasn’t even pretty.

““Sort of,’ Anders said. ‘I can’t see her clearly.’

“The two of them gestured, now Broomfield started to swing down his arm, then brought it back and with an open hand smoothed his dark hair.

““That’s not his wife, is it?’ Anders said. ‘What’s her name?’

““No,’ I said. ‘I’ve met her.’

““When?’

““At a reception.’ The woman turned her head. ‘At least they’re not friendly,’ I said. I was talking out loud, to myself. ‘That’s a good sign.’”

““You were in love with Broomfield!” Angie said now.

I smiled back at Angie.

““No,’ Anders said. ‘Something’s wrong.’

““It is.’

““But what?’ Anders said. ‘It could be anything.’

““It could.’

““Do you think he knows?’ Anders asked again. ‘About us?’ Anders’ nose was pressed to the glass as Broomfield turned and stepped away from the woman. Now Broomfield moved toward the window.

““Look out,’ Anders said pulling back. ‘Here he comes!’

““I don’t care if he see us,’ I said. I was furious.”

““I don’t blame you,” Angie said. “What a shit.”

““Get back,’ Anders hissed, waving an arm, and we both stood to the sides of the big window, our shoulders to the wall.

“‘What’s he doing?’ Anders said. ‘Can you see?’

“‘He’s taking off his coat.’

“‘Oh. What now? Brownie?’

“‘He’s, he’s—’ I stared.

“‘What?’

“‘This is crazy,’ I whispered.

“‘What?’ Now Anders stood in full view of the window.

“‘Look at that,’ Anders said, with satisfaction. ‘There it is.’

“‘I can’t believe it,’ I said. I stood at Anders’ shoulder. I nearly fell over.

“‘Me either,’ Anders said.”

“‘You’re kidding,’ Angie said. “They were doing it? Right in front of you?”

“‘Broomfield and the woman touched one another. Then they kissed again, holding each other.

“‘For a second I remembered the feel of Broomfield’s face against mine, when we’d stood together in the parking lot of Sundowners’ after drinks. I smelled his cologne. I’d told him what a jerk Anders was, how I was having an affair with Anders and it was a big mistake. Broomfield promised that he and I we’re going to be together, it would just take a little time. We went to a motel.

“‘Then the woman’s hand pulled the curtain shut.’

“‘That’s so sad,’ Angie said.

“‘Well,’ Anders said, he was still looking out the window. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

“‘No,’ I said. I stared at the pulled curtains. I thought of Broomfield and the red-haired woman with the freckled face, of what they were doing. ‘This changes things,’ I said. Now everything was different.”

“‘I can imagine,’ Angie said. “You must have felt sick.”

“‘I felt naked, the way you do now,’ I told Angie. She looked at me with her big blue eyes, then away, at the wall.

Just then the phone rang. She jerked her head back so our eyes met.

“‘Answer it,’ I said. “If you want.”

“‘No,” she said, “I don’t want to.”

There was a beep and Spencer came on, in his understanding, caring-hurt voice he used for special occasions.

“‘God,” Angie said. She made a face and put her legs up on the couch. She wrapped her arms around her knees. She put her head down.

“Pick it up, Angie,” I said. “I’ll go upstairs.”

“You’re my friend,” Angie said, looking up. “He’s not. He’s, he’s—”

Spencer finished his message and the answering machine tape rewound.

“Well,” I said. “Do you want to hear the rest, about Anders?”

“Yes,” Angie said. “Tell me.”

“I told Anders the scene with Broomfield and the girl had changed things.

“‘Changes things?’ Anders said, suddenly, so I stepped back. I thought he was going to grab me again. ‘That’s an understatement.’

“‘And lucky.’

“‘Lucky?’

“‘For you,’ I said. I lowered my face, shy, like I was embarrassed.

“‘For us,’ Anders said.

“‘Is it?’ I said. I looked up at Anders, waiting.

“‘Sure it is,’ Anders said, he was beaming. ‘In a big way. Broomfield’s not Mr. Clean. He’s got a few kinks. We should have a drink. We should—”

“‘Oh no,” Angie said. “Here it comes. Just like Spencer, just like him. That’s why I didn’t answer the phone.”

“I turned my back, glancing toward the bookcase of leather-bound books. I waited.

“‘Let’s have a drink.’”

“‘Sure,” Angie said “That’s how it starts.”

“‘I didn’t turn. I felt Anders staring at my back.

“‘Brownie?’

“‘You grabbed me,’ I said. I said it like that, like a little girl. ‘You grabbed me and shook me. You hurt me.’

“‘I didn’t mean to,’ Anders said, stepping toward me. ‘Why, I’ve never struck a woman in my life—”

“‘What a liar,” Angie said. “He’s Spencer’s twin.”

“‘I moved away but Anders touched my shoulder and I stopped. I let Anders bring me to him.

“‘I didn’t mean to, Brownie. Brownie Brown,’ he teased, he put his cheek against my hair. ‘My Brownie.’”

“‘How sickening,” Angie said.

““Didn’t you?’ I said. I kept my head turned from Anders.

““No, I didn’t,’ Anders said. He gripped my arms, turning me to him. ‘I love you. I was just worried,’ Anders said. ‘About us.’

““Us?’ I said. ‘I don’t understand.’

““You know, that Broomfield knew.’

““Knew?’ I said, I stared up at Anders. ‘How could he?’”

““But you told Broomfield, about you and Anders—” Angie stared at me.

““After that we went to my apartment. Once I thought of Broomfield and the woman in the other office, how they were doing the same thing and in my mind I switched with the other girl, I was the one with Broomfield.

““Then Anders asked me and without thinking, I guess I was all turned around, I said yes. He drove me straight to Clairissa’s and I picked out a big clear diamond with a platinum band. Anders wrote a check for \$10,000. That night he moved in and the next Monday he had his lawyer start the divorce.

““It was almost as big as this,” I told Angie, holding out my hand. “Ten carats.” Angie sat straight on the sofa looking at me. She didn’t look at Nick’s ring.

““Anders and I were together for two years,” I told Angie. “Before he had his second heart attack and I met Nick.”

““You were married when you met Nick?”

““I’ll always have a soft spot for Anders, though I knew he was too old for me. If I hadn’t been with him I would never have met Nick. At the San Joaquin Country Club, Sunday brunch.”

““I didn’t know that,” Angie said. She looked confused and sweet. “I thought Nick—”

““Nick is all right,” I said. “In a way. Maybe we’ll get back together again. Anyway, last spring I saw Anders, in a restaurant in Cambria. He looked a lot older and sort of bewildered. His hair was white. Martha and he had got back together but she seemed more like a nurse than a wife.

““Brownie? Is it you?’ Anders said.

““I asked about Broomfield, if he were still with the company.

““Broomfield,’ Anders said. ‘Broomfield?’ His face got red. I thought he was going to have a stroke. Before I left Anders for Nick, I had a fling with Broomfield, Anders knew about it.

““Martha gave me a hard look, then led him away. She pulled his arm when Anders stopped and tried to turn back. I watched them get into a little Toyota, it was parked next to the Infiniti Nick had bought me for Christmas.”

““You’re making this up,” Angie said suddenly. “To make me feel better.” She smiled now. She looked relieved. “None of it’s true. Admit it. It’s straight out of Days of Our Lives.”

““It must have been hard on Martha,” I said. I didn’t smile, I was serious, remembering the scene at the restaurant. “The way things had turned around. But it was a lesson.”

““A lesson?” Angie asked.

“To stay on your toes.”

It was hot in Angie’s apartment, the wine and the talking had dried me out, so I reached back and unhooked my brassiere.

Angie watched me from the couch. She was staring at me.

“Come on,” I said, “it’s just a story.” I swiveled in my chair, so the straps slipped from my shoulders and my breasts swung back and forth. I have pretty breasts. Lots of men and women have told me so. “How ‘bout offering me a glass for my wine?”

But Angie didn’t get up. With one hand she touched the neck of her nightgown. Her face looked white. Her eyes shone even bluer in her white face.

“It is true,” she said. Then, like a kid: “You better hope there’s no life after death.”

“I’m not stupid,” I snapped.

Angie looked shocked. Her eyes got bigger. Then I giggled.

“Brownie!”

“Come on,” I said, “don’t you know when I’m kidding?”

“You had me going,” Angie said. She shook her head so her short blonde hair touched her cheek, the way it did at the spa when she pedaled the exercise bike. “I feel like a fool.”

“Sure,” I said. “Come on. Get real.”

“But what if there is a hell?” Angie said. She frowned. “Think about it.”

I took another drink from the bottle. “Doesn’t every boss need a secretary?”

Angie couldn’t help laughing at that. I remembered again what a funny girl she was as she jumped up and ran into the kitchen. From the back she looked just like me, same shape, same movement when she ran. I could hear her laughing from the living room. I knew she’d be okay, that my story had done the trick. It was better than sitting in front of the stupid TV.

The phone rang again, again Spencer’s gooey voice came on, but Angie didn’t pick it up. When she came back I was sitting on the couch.

She started to go to the chair and I said, “Come on, tell me all about it, girl to girl.” I touched her wrist. “I don’t believe Spencer was that hot.”

“You know,” said Angie, seriously, standing in front of the sofa, “he really wasn’t.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said. “Did I tell you he came on to me?”

“He did? When?”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“I want to hear it,” Angie said. She put down the wine glass. “That s.o.b.”

“You first,” I said. I lowered my eyes. “Let it all hang out.”

Angie smirked, then dipped her head and slipped off her nightgown and tossed it in the air so it floated

for a second like a scarf. Her face was flushed. I poured more wine.

“Screw Spencer,” I said.

“Screw him,” she said, clicking my glass. “If you want to.”

“Are you kidding?” I said. “I already have.”

Angie stared at me for a second and then we both broke up. We couldn't stop laughing. Angie rolled on the floor. She wore only her panties. The phone rang again and we both laughed even harder, making jokes as Spencer left his third long, heartfelt message.

“I wuv you dwearly,” Angie said.

“It's been so soft without you,” I said, making Angie laugh harder.

Finally, I patted the cushion and Angie sat down to tell me all about it. Pretty soon she began to cry again and I put my arm around her. Our breasts touched.

She was upset over money, rent, never getting married, not having kids, getting old, going out with too many men, too many lawyers. What Spencer had done, dropping her like that. She suspected there was another woman.

“Hush,” I said, “hush. It'll all work out. Trust Brownie.”

I felt her hair against my cheek. She was like a little girl, like my daughter or younger sister. Like my other self.

I kissed her once, on the forehead, and she snuggled closer. When I asked her she said she wanted to move in with me, she didn't want to be alone anymore. After a while I got her up. I helped her pack a bag. While she was in the bathroom Spencer called again.

I told Spencer to leave Angie alone, that he'd hurt her enough already. I told Spencer if he didn't I'd tell Angie about him and me. I'd tell his wife and she'd take everything. He begged me not to. I told him I'd ruin him if he peeped a word to anyone. He hung up as Angie was coming down the stairs.

“Who was that?”

“Fireman,” I said.

“Fireman?” Angie said.

“Sure,” I said. “Policemen don't have—”

Angie doubled over. It was good to hear her laughing again. “Brownie,” Angie said, wiping her eyes, “you're a devil!”

“Come on,” I said. “Let's roll.”

“Isn't that a song?”

“‘C'mon, Baby, Let the Good Times Roll'?”

“Yeah,” Angie said, thinking for a second. “That's it.”

I squeezed her arm, then took her bag as she locked up and we went out to Nick's long silver car.

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Nels Hanson graduated in literature and creative writing from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and earned an MFA in fiction writing at the University of Montana, where he studied with Richard Hugo and William Kitteridge. Hanson won the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award in Literature for a novel-in-progress, "The Long Slow Death of Joe Dan Martin," and two years later received an Honorable Mention in the Foundation's Joseph Henry Jackson competition for a story collection, "Lives of Famous Americans." His short stories have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Texas Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Leviathan*, *Southeast Review*, *Long Story*, *Short Story*, *South Dakota Review*, *Westview*, *Transpacific*, *Zahir*, *Confluence*, *Convergence*, *SNReview*, and *New Times*, and in *California Heartland*, an anthology of San Joaquin Valley writing. He has just completed a Montana novel, "Sleeping Child Lake."