

—YOU'RE A GOOD GIRL, DELILAH

by Petra Miller

Delilah lay quietly next to her son, helping him fall asleep with her presence. His eyes were shut, not yet sleeping, not yet dreaming, but certainly on his way. She watched his eyelids flicker every so often, and each time they did, his dark, long lashes brushed against his smooth, baby-like skin with little butterfly kisses. Delilah's eyes dropped to his tiny little bump of a nose, and watched as he took in air with an even rhythm, constricting slightly and then flaring open as he inhaled and then exhaled, keeping time with the rise and fall of his miniature chest.

As she watched him breathe, she was suddenly struck by how tenuous a hold there is on life; a hold that could be broken with just a pinch of the fingers.

She felt the thing inside her start to stir.

As if it had heard her thoughts, it began to uncoil itself like a snake, stretching its sinuous form from one end of her body to the other, until it filled every inch of her with its scaly coldness. She fought it down with panic and revulsion, turning her thoughts away from the child and focusing instead on the room itself; the Batman bedspread that covered her son, the Superhero posters that adorned the walls. Every mundane object that filled the little-boy room, until at last she felt the thing inside her settle back down for the night. Its limbs retracted slowly, as if reluctant to turn away.

Next to her, little Peter began to stir, as if sensing her tense thoughts, her stiffened body. Six years old and so perceptive. So intuitive. With an effort, she relaxed her breathing, creating the illusion that she herself was close to sleep. She did this for both. For the thing she was afraid of, and the little boy she was afraid for.

The thing had been inside her for as long as she could remember. A giant, slippery thing, growing in her like a child. Biding its time with patience that it had stolen from her, little by little as the years moved on. And now it was swollen inside her, straining toward its freedom. Waiting for the one moment when its bindings would be loosed and it could be released.

As she lay nestled in his bed, the illusion of sleep became a reality, and Delilah's slow breathing matched that of her son's.

* * *

She dreamt of her father. The fireflies were out and the twilight had given way to the dark. The only sounds were the rhythmic creaking of the porch swing and the

YOU'RE A GOOD GIRL, DELILAH

crickets playing their evening concert. She was eight again, and sitting on the right side of the swing while her father perched on the left. A mere three feet apart, and yet it stretched like so many desolate miles.

Delilah was afraid. Despite the lively performance of the insects in the dark and the cool breeze that ruffled her cotton nightgown, her heart would not be still. And she knew her father was afraid too. He stared at the softly rustling grass below the porch steps, never looking up, never looking directly at her. Yet a sense of relief was also in the air. It mingled with the fear like oil and water, never quite coming together, each one fighting for the upper hand. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the shotgun in his lap, glinting softly in the moonlight, winking almost, as if she were its co-conspirator and they had a secret. When finally her father spoke, his gaze never wavered from the night. He stared straight ahead and his words were just as straight.

“You know what we’re here for, Delilah?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

“You’re a good girl, Delilah. That’s never been truer. But this has gotta end. You know that, right?” His normally jovial twang was tinged with pain, and this time, he *did* turn to her, begging her to look at him. She could feel his gaze on her, pulling at her, but she fixed her stare on the wooden slats in the porch. And then he picked up the shotgun. Just like so many years before, only this time, in her dream, he turned the gun on her, instead of through the roof of his mouth.

She awoke with a start, the shotgun blast echoing through her mind and seeming to bounce off the walls of the darkened bedroom. Disoriented, she looked around, her eyes blinking in confusion, until they settled on Peter. He was sitting up in bed, looking down at her as if she were a stranger, his eyes black stones in the inky darkness. She could see the fear reflecting in his pupils, feel it in his tense little body.

“Momma.” His voice was a whisper, as if he too, were afraid of waking something from sleep. “I don’t want you to sleep here tonight. Your dreams scare me.”

Delilah could only nod, her mouth dry and tasting like metal. Maybe their dreams were shared. Or maybe that was a ridiculous thought, and in reality the simple explanation was that he had never completely drifted off and she had been talking in her sleep. Whatever it was, she kissed the top of his head as she sat up in his bed, and her heart clenched as he shrunk almost imperceptibly from her. She smoothed his covers over him and left him to brave the night alone.

* * *

Peter Brady Corraeo was born on September 15, 2000, yet only his mother Delilah had been present. Peter’s father hadn’t been around since the night he had found out Delilah was expecting. And after he had walked out the door, Delilah never heard from him again.

Maybe Michael Corraeo thought that marriage didn’t include children. Or maybe he knew something more. Something Delilah knew as well, yet pretended didn’t exist. Whatever the reason, when Delilah refused to abort the child within, Michael kissed her sadly on the cheek and walked out of their lives forever.