

HELLO, CALIFORNIA

An original story by David Goforth

"There is no way in hell that you're going to get me to move to California when it's two-thousand miles away."

The man ran his fingers through his blond hair as he shook his head at the disaster. He quickly scanned the surface of the floor, trying to pick out any stray pieces of the porcelain plate that had slid into his blind spot, his lips curving downward daftly.

His wife gave a confirming huff before dropping the wet rag onto the edge of the sink, shaking her head. "I swear, Eugene. Are you sure you haven't been drinking again? This sounds just like one of those insane propositions you'd come up with if you were drunk!"

Gene licked his lips before bending his knees and lowering himself closer to the floor. "Charlotte. That was just the idea. I haven't even told you how I'm gonna pull the whole thing off."

The woman undid her robin-egg-blue apron and draped it across her arm for the moment before she started

to lift herself up on her toes to step through the minefield that she'd accidentally created. Once she made it to the pantry door, she hung the apron on its brass hook before setting a hand on her hip. The other hand brushed over the embroidered patch that spelled out *Indiana* in faded yellow. "Yes, hon. Just like you pulled off two failed businesses and a car wreck."

Gene had brushed up the loose pieces of porcelain into a small pile. He started to look for the little bits he was sure that had escaped his first two sweeps. His wife's response left him sitting back on his rear and shaking his head. "Those are just obstacles. Every story has them, you know. That's what being a writer does to you."

He gave the floor one last glance over from that level before pulling himself to his feet with anguished groans and a wincing expression. He carried the remains of the plate over to the waste bin and flipped his hand right over the opening. A few shards missed the target, leaving

Gene to lower himself back down and pinch at them with his unsteady fingers. He recovered all of them, but at the cost of cutting himself. He took a moment to watch a small drop of blood pool over the incision with an unadulterated sense of wonder and intrigue before smirking. "Every injury just makes a man learn how to heal even better."

He dumped the escapees and pointed to his wife. "That's one for a line right there. Get me a pen, darlin'."

She blew out a short burst of air, moving over to him and offering the pen before looking at the cut. "You just come up with that nonsense to make yourself seem like a man, I swear."

He feigned offense, his brows furrowing as he took the wet rag and dabbed his finger into the cloth. "That's not true! I wanna write those kinds of quotes that every father rattles off to their son! Sammy would love them!"

Charlotte braced herself against the counter, wiping her forehead. "He's nine. He'll love anything you tell him."

"He's got an imagination, Charlotte," Gene countered, raising a finger and laughing. "That kind of stuff will make you rich in any business."

Charlotte sighed, her countenance hardening. "Film-making, though, Gene? I've heard horror stories about California and the stuff it does to the people that live there," she said before shuddering. "It'd take us three days to get there if we left right now. Sammy couldn't handle that long of a drive. We couldn't."

"Oh, come on. Sammy would get to see the States! He'd grow up with an appreciation for the place he lives in if he knows the kind of things that are in it."

"If he'd remember them at all," she said, pushing herself off of the counter so she could step over to the refrigerator and pull out a pitcher of iced tea.

"If we make them worth remembering them," Gene fired back. "It'll be the trip of a lifetime, I guarantee it."

She rolled her eyes, moving across the kitchen with

her eyes cast downwards before reaching the right cabinet and pulling down another glass and pouring the liquid into it. "You sound like one of those filthy car salesmen I have to go by every day."

"Hey, you gotta sell with the same sort of imagination that you buy," he rattled before his eyes sparkled and he fumbled for the pen and jotted down his words. "God, I'm so good at this already."

Charlotte brought the cold glass to her lips and sipped from it before shaking her head while she swallowed. "This has gone to your head, Eugene."

"You used to be so in love with my sense of adventure," Gene said, crossing his arms.

She let out a short chuckle. "Yeah, it dulls after eleven years."

Gene frowned but brushed it off. "Let's reignite it, then! Come on! Let's be crazy teens again."

"Crazy teens wouldn't lug around a disabled child

with them wherever they went," Charlotte said, setting the glass down onto the surface of the counter before pulling her shoulder-length, raven hair into a ponytail.

"Charlotte, we agreed not to call him that," Gene said, letting his arms drop.

"What else do we call it? Sick? Messed up? He's seeing a doctor, Gene. That is what we call him."

"Imaginative, Charlotte. He's imaginative. Having a brand-new look on the way of things is a gift and should be treated as such."

She took the glass back up and sipped from it, rocking lightly against the counter, eyes fixed on her husband. "I'd be more than happy to believe that when his teachers do. It took this long for him to get settled in with people that are willing to be patient with him. How are we gonna find somebody to in California to give him a chance when we've had this hard of a time doing it here?"

"It'll be easy because of all of the people in

California that will give him more than just a chance."

Charlotte endured several long moments of her husband staring her down, expectant of a shift in her stance on the issue. She shut her eyes and brought a hand up to pinch at the temples of her forehead. "It's a lot to pull off, Gene. We'd have to figure out what to do with the house and I'd have to talk to Trisha and settle things with the school and there's just so many more things that we would have to take care of."

Gene moved over to her, placing his hands on each side of her waist and smiling at her. "What if I told you we could have the whole deal taken care of by tomorrow night?"

Her eyes shot wide and stared into his before crooking her eyebrow. "Eugene, you're so many things but I can promise you that a miracle-worker is not one of them."

"Please, just play along just this once. Pretend with

me that we're in a movie and the script already has laid out how it's all gonna work," he said, his words soothingly coursing from off of his lips in as romantic a style as he could manage.

Charlotte's eyes darted away from him at the attempt, retreating closer to the counter-top before sighing and looking at him, smirking on her own. "And who is writing this script? You?" she asked, pressing a finger to his green button-up. "Because if you are, we're gonna have to live through five or six more scenes of shenanigans before we get the actual plot moving."

Gene retreated away from her, defeatedly bringing his hands up and rubbing his face. He sighed into them before turning back to her. "I swear, you're my worst critic."

Charlotte brought up the topic of her romance novels in response and Gene lost all interest in the conversation. With every mention of how much more

enjoyable they were than him, he lost the motivation to keep up with her. He'd call them "children's books, but for women" and she'd either laugh at him and insult him further or get so upset him that more plates would be broken. Before either happened, Gene tried retreating into the living. He collapsed into his favorite recliner and braced his elbow on the arm of the chair, holding his head up by his chin.

Charlotte meddled in the kitchen and appeared at the doorway, sipping another freshly-made glass of tea before coming to sit down on the couch beside Gene's recliner, folding her legs and looking over at him. "Is this settled?"

Gene dance around with the issue in his head for a moment before sparking the conversation up again. They argued about it even longer, getting nowhere with it before Gene sat quietly for several minutes, still perniciously avoiding the gaze of his wife. He began to drum his fingers

against the velvety fabric of the recliner's arm. When she started to assure herself that they had more than enough time to sort the whole ordeal, Gene cowered even more. In his peripheral vision, he could see the growing descent of his wife's lips as her body shifted towards him in an attempt to get confirmation. He shut his eyes as if to brace for some horrible impact. He didn't want to be able to know when it struck.

"Right?"

Gene nearly shattered in the same way as that plate, bringing his hand up to cover his eyes and tightening his hold on his eyelids.

"Eugene."

He swallowed, shaking his head now. "We don't, Charlotte," he said finally. "We have until Wednesday morning."

Charlotte flung her legs out from under her, leaning forward. "What in the world are you talking about?"

He opened his eyes and stared her down, his fingers pressing into the side of his head as he tried to get his words out. The tension building up inside of him was obvious. "Exactly that, Charlotte," he said. "We're going to have to vacate the place before Wednesday morning."

Charlotte stood up, her fingers gripping the much-thinner arm of the couch as she stood over her husband. "I want an explanation," she said, looking up at the grandfather clock by the front door. "What did you do?"

Gene gave a shaky sigh, his hand returning to cover his eyes that remained open. "I signed off on a deal for the house, Charlotte."

"Without telling me?" she snapped, her voice rising in pitch. "Oh, no. No. You've been drinking with that sketchy Foster man from the real estate office, haven't you? That's why you signed off on it, isn't it?"

"He promised us twice the value of the house, Charlotte. That's nearly four-thousand dollars in straight

cash and it's more than enough to jump-start a business in Los Angeles or, practically, anywhere in California for that matter. It all played out this way and I... I couldn't just say no!"

Charlotte fingers intertwined with the strands of her ponytail. Her breathing quickened and her eyes didn't stay focused on one thing for very long. "Dammit, Eugene!" she said. The restraint she forced herself to exercise displayed itself by the trembling of her hands.

As Charlotte's trembling morphed from a stress-ridden worry to aggression, her hands lowered from her hair and rested at the same level as her chest, balled up and primed. "That's because those things are always too good to be true!" she screamed before lashing out at him.

Gene instinctively braced his hands above his head, absorbing each blow before finding the chink in the rhythm to push her away. "I took a chance and went with my gut, Charlotte. You should be proud of me!"

"Your drunk rear end sold the home that's been in my family for four generations, you-" Charlotte said, cutting short to groan and storm back into the kitchen.

Gene braced his weight from underneath himself, trying to peer around the furniture to see into the next room. He tried calling after her, but he knew there was no stopping her. The sound of a crashing plate and another wail of frustration was indication enough of that. Soon, the ringing of fallen silverware against the tiled floor sounded over his words. Gene pushed himself out of the chair and nearly skipped a step to the doorway into the kitchen. His form drooped at the sight of the porcelain on the ground.

Once she saw him, Charlotte stopped to shoot a charged finger in Gene's direction. "I swear to God! You just love taking advantage of every last thing I've worked to keep around, don't you?"

"Charlotte, it's not like that. I wanted something better for us," he said, an arm reaching out to her. "You

said yourself that you were tired of seeing the same old thing come out of this silly time!"

She wailed again, arms cast upwards to the heavens before heaving more dishes to the floor. "Oh, my God! I- oh!- Eugene! Not every little thing I say should be a justification for your foolishness! That's what women all around the country spout to their husbands. It's what they do! That kinda thing- adventure and surprise and daring- that's for the novels."

"You don't want to spend your entire life reading about other people living exciting lives when there's an opportunity to do it right here in front of us, do you?"

She stopped, forcing her hand against her leg and digging her nails into the fabric of her skirt. "You don't think that everything you put me through *here* is not enough excitement for me? You don't think that fighting all of the issues that our son has to go through so that he can live a happy, normal life like every happy-go-lucky kid in

this town is gonna be enough excitement for me?"

She caught her breath quickly, shaking her head menacingly as her eyes mercilessly centered in on her husband. "Oh, Eugene Thompson. Let me say it right here before you and God that you are the most incredibly-arrogant and insipid son of a-"

There came a knock on the door.

The two exchanged glances. Charlotte made her frustration more obvious in the twisting of her lips before she huffed and looked towards the door before calling to let the person know that she heard them. She crossed the floor, unafraid of the shrapnel scattered by her own doing. As she passed from the kitchen to the living room, she glared right at Gene the entire time before covering the rest of the distance. She placed her hand on the brass knob of the front door, pausing to suck in a calming breath and shaking off the excess tension in her shoulder before putting on a model smile and hoisting the door open.

A red-headed woman, not even out of her twenties yet, stood holding the seven-year-old sleeping in her arms.

Charlotte smile grew at the sight of the exhausted girl, reaching out to take the child from her and mouthing a thank you before gesturing with her head towards the living room.

Gene still stood in the doorway of the kitchen, looking into the room at the mess. He absent-mindedly started to nibble on the cuticle of his finger of one arm while the other wrapped itself around his upper torso. His head bobbed from side to side before sighing deeply and turning to face into the living room, his eyes tracking his wife move to the back part of the house towards Sammy's bedroom. Once out of sight, he moved his attention to the girl, stepping back to his recliner. He offered her an exhaustive smile. "Did he behave well enough?"

The girl returned a smile in kind, nodding. Her fingers folding over each other. "Of course, Mister

Thompson."

He loosely nodded before chuckling briefly. "That's a relief. I didn't need another headache."

"I didn't interrupt something, did I?"

The two exchanged glances. Charlotte smiled sweetly, coming over and offering the girl a spot on the couch. "Not at all, Trisha, dear. We do need to talk to you about something, though."

Trisha slowly lowered herself onto the seat of the couch, bringing her knees together. "Oh, alright."

Charlotte sighed, turning in her seat to so she faced more towards Trisha, placing a hand on the younger girl's arm. "Eugene, here, has cost you a job."

Trisha's eyes shot open, her hands coming up to her chest. "What?"

Gene flung his hand out towards his wife. "Don't you go telling her things like that. You know that's nothing like what is actually going on here."

"Fine," Charlotte said, letting her hands come to rest in her lap. "Since you're the mastermind, you tell her."

Gene returned a smug look before shaking his head.

"Trisha, we're gonna be moving to-"

he started to say before catching the fatal look from his wife. He waved her off and started again. "We're gonna be moving out to California. I got an offer from a fine gentleman to pursue my love of film-making."

Trisha nodded hesitantly. "Okay, so you're going to be leaving Indiana?"

"Exactly," Gene said.

"If you don't mind my asking, when are you planning on leaving? A month from now? Two?"

"Wednesday, actually."

The hesitation snapped into a panic. Trisha's eyes started to dart around and she stiffened in her seat.

"What's the matter, dear?" Charlotte asked.

"I was hoping I could keep working for you until

the start of the next school year," she said, bringing a hand to rest against her mouth. "I would've made enough working for you guys to pay the whole year off in six weeks, but-"

"You'll get paid so much more working for someone else," Gene said.

Charlotte's frown began to reform. "This is Indiana, Eugene. There's not really a competitive job market."

Trisha's eyes snapped to Charlotte, signaling her fear of possibly offending Gene.

"Come on," Gene replied. "She's got a history now, working for us. I'm sure she'll make twice as much watching the Malcolm twins."

Trisha opened her mouth, but Charlotte beat her to the punch standing and pointing a finger at her husband.

"You are not gonna make this young woman drive an hour every day to babysit the brattiest set of boys this precious town has ever seen."

"It was a suggestion."

Charlotte huffed before looking at Trisha and then at her husband, putting more weight behind her finger. "I've had enough of this whole deal, Eugene Thompson. I am sick and tired of sitting here thinking about how that sleazy- oh!"

She stomped her foot down before snapping towards the door and barreling towards it, nearly ripping her coat off of the hook and pulling the door open.

Gene got up out of the chair. "Charlotte, what are you doing?" he asked. He blinked when he saw her disappear outside before shaking his head and going after, followed by Trisha.

The headlights of their cream-colored Buick nearly blinded Gene as he stopped on their stone porch.

"Charlotte!" he called. "Where do you think you're going!"

"I'm going to go and give that horrendous man a piece of my mind! Oh, I swear! Buying my family home!

Leaving a poor girl with no way to care for her mother!

Making me leave for California of all places!"

Gene rushed down the steps, rushing to the front of the car to set his hands on the top of the hood. "Don't do it! You could jeopardize the sale!"

"Does it look like I care?" she responded, stabbing the key into the ignition and starting the car. The headlights burst to life, causing Gene to rear backward with his hands over his eyes. Charlotte smirked before pulling the car into reverse, looking over her shoulder briefly before turning back to stare Gene down. "I'm not gonna let that devil, Foster, take my home from me!"

Gene brought a hand to his forehead, shaking all over and muttering dozens of little negatives under his breath as he watched his wife pull the car right out of the driveway and face towards the street. Gene made one last-ditch effort to jog down the length of the driveway, stopping at the end of it as Charlotte had already made off

down the street. The red glow of the taillights was the last thing he saw of his wife before it shrank into the darkness, leaving Gene to mutter softly to himself as he wrapped his arms around him to fend off the chill of the evening.