

TELL ME NO LIES

by Holly West

My Aunt Patsy got a gun for Christmas. It was a .38 special with a pink grip, finished in matte black.

Uncle Ray leaned forward in his recliner as she opened it. “I know you asked for one of those Louis Vuitton bags, honey. But with me being away so much, I thought you could use this.”

“It’s just what I wanted, Ray.” Aunt Patsy smiled as she lifted the gun from its molded foam nest, but there was disappointment in her eyes. It was obvious she was lying, but I didn’t know why—a gun was so much cooler than some dumb purse, even if it was pink.

Uncle Ray beamed. “I’ll take you out back after dinner. Show you how to use it.” He turned to me. “What about you, Janelle? You want some shooting lessons, too?”

Hell yes, I did. I was about to say so when Mom said, “No, Ray.”

“C’mon now, Melanie.” He winked at me. Gross. “You let this girl get a tattoo but you won’t let her learn to shoot? She’s a country girl for God’s sake. Oughta at least know how to fire a weapon.”

I turned my arm over so the tiny black-ink bird on my wrist didn’t show. Mom hadn’t exactly *let* me get it. I’d lied about my age so the guy at the tattoo shop would agree to do it

and paid for it with cash I'd stolen from Mom's top dresser drawer. That was six months ago, and she was still mad.

I wondered if she'd rat me out to my aunt and uncle, but she only said, "Not gonna happen, Ray."

The last thing I wanted to do was spend any time alone with my skeezy uncle, but I didn't want to pass up the chance to go shooting. "Yeah, c'mon Mom. I'll be safe, I promise."

"Out of the question."

I pouted. "Everyone I know has shot a gun but me." I had no idea if it was true, but it didn't matter.

"What did I tell you about lying, Janelle?"

Mom handed me a garbage bag and told me to gather up the torn paper and ribbons while she and Aunt Patsy finished dinner. When we were alone, Uncle Ray sidled up close. I smelled the booze on his breath from downing spiked eggnog all afternoon. "I'm glad Melanie and Patsy made up. We needed more beautiful women in this family. 'Course, you'd be prettier if you smiled more often."

Ugh. Like I gave a shit about what he thought.

He continued as though I'd asked him for his opinion. "And why'd you cut your hair so short? You had such pretty long hair when you were a kid." He shook his head. "Tattoos, shaved heads, dressing like boys... I don't get why girls today don't want to look good."

I touched my recently shaved head, enjoying the way it felt. Like velvet. But I still had my heart set on a shooting lesson, so I let his comments slide. "You think you can get Mom to let you teach me to shoot?"

"Sure, I can." He gave me another wink. What a perve.

I took the bag to the kitchen. "I can't believe he got me a gun," Aunt Patsy said as I walked in. "And a pink one, no less. He knows I hate pink."

“Yeah, pink sucks,” I said.

“Maybe you can return it,” Mom said.

“Or maybe I should just shoot the bastard and get it over with.” Aunt Patsy smiled halfheartedly. “Don’t worry, I’ll divorce him before I shoot him. He’s not worth going to jail over.”

While they were occupied with dinner, I snuck a sip from Mom’s wine glass. It wasn’t my first stolen drink of the day, and I was beginning to feel tipsy. With any luck, I’d be able to sneak outside later to smoke the blunt I had in my pocket.

It was shaping up to be a crappy Christmas, just like I’d predicted. I told Mom I didn’t want to spend it here, but she’d recently reconciled with Aunt Patsy, so she felt obligated. I begged her to let me go to my best friend’s house instead, but of course she said no. It wasn’t fair. Just because she felt guilty for refusing to speak to her sister for thirteen years didn’t mean I did.

Mom opened the oven to check on something. “Face it, Patsy,” she said. “If you haven’t divorced him yet, you never will.” She closed the oven door and focused on me. “Janelle, did you take some of my wine?”

“Ew, no, gross.”

This time, Mom let the lie slide, probably because she needed a drink of her own. She rolled her eyes and moved the glass out of my reach.

She was right about Aunt Patsy divorcing Uncle Ray, though. Everyone knew he played around. It was a small town, and people talked, which was one of the reasons I couldn’t wait to get out of this stupid place.

But what would she do if she left him? Mom said all she’d ever done was take care of the house and raise my cousins Toby and Ray Jr. while Uncle Ray made a fortune developing real estate. “He controls the money,” Mom told me. “Promise me, if you ever get married,

you'll keep your own bank account.”

She didn't have to worry because I was never getting married. But if I ever did, I wouldn't let my spouse get away with that bullshit.

My cousins were now both married and living out of state with kids of their own, and, according to Mom, they rarely came home to visit. Aside from Mom and me, Aunt Patsy had no other family, which is probably why she reached out to Mom six months ago, saying they should bury the hatchet.

“Janelle,” Aunt Patsy said, interrupting my thoughts, “will you tell Ray dinner's ready, please?”

The four of us ate in the family room at a table for six. Still too big, but the formal dining room table seated twelve, leaving eight empty chairs to remind Aunt Patsy that her sons and grandchildren weren't coming. Didn't matter—Aunt Patsy had spared no effort in decorating their McMansion for the holidays. When Mom commented on the display, she told us she'd spent years collecting Christmas decorations, making their home a star attraction in the El Dorado Hills Holiday House Tour.

I liked the small, two-bedroom house we lived in a lot better. It took Mom ten years to save up the down payment, but she did it. Uncle Ray had custom-built this home, but it was a cheap knock-off of an Italian villa full of ridiculously ornate furniture and cheugy wall art. Grotesque.

When Uncle Ray's cell phone rang, Aunt Patsy frowned. “Really, Ray? At Christmas dinner?”

He glanced at the screen. “Sorry, honey, I've got to take this.”

He left the room, and Aunt Patsy seemed to crumble. “It's that woman. He doesn't bother to hide it anymore.”

Mom reached across the table and touched her wrist. “Leave him, Patsy. Make an

appointment with a lawyer. You're a beautiful, intelligent woman, and there's no reason you can't make a new start. Put all that experience you've got entertaining to use and start an event planning company. Or do some catering. You'd be so good at that."

"Easy for you to say, Melanie. You managed to get your degree and work full-time, all while raising Janelle by yourself. I don't know how you did it."

"You think it's been easy? It's not. But you're right, I'm doing it, and you can, too. And it will be so much easier for you with the boys grown up now."

Hearing Mom say this made me feel guilty for the trouble I caused her over the years. I rubbed my tattoo. Maybe I'd get a job over the summer so I could pay her back. I'd stop lying, too. And I'd quit skipping class so she wouldn't have to take off work to meet with the principal.

Aunt Patsy said, "Do you know the reason the boys never come home for holidays?"

Mom chewed and swallowed. "I assumed Kelly and Robin preferred to spend it at their own homes."

Aunt Patsy shook her head. "Two weeks ago, I called Toby and told him I wanted my whole family together for Christmas. He said no. Turns out, Ray cornered Kelly when they visited two years ago and told her he wanted to sleep with her." She lowered her voice, as if speaking to herself. "What kind of disgusting person does such a thing?"

"Was it that much of a surprise? Ray tried to bed me when I was seventeen years old, for Christ's sake. You forgave him and let him kick us out of the house."

This was news to me. "We lived here?"

"Your grandparents weren't happy when I got pregnant," Mom sighed. "You know that, of course. But Patsy and Ray agreed to take us in for a while, until I refused Ray's advances. I never told you because it didn't seem appropriate."

"You'll always hold that against me, won't you?" Aunt Patsy asked.

“I don’t think you understand how rough Janelle and I had it after we moved out. It took a long time for me to get over it.”

“I’ve been as good a sister as I know how to be, Melanie. I’m sorry that hasn’t been enough for you. What Ray did was terrible, but I had two boys of my own to think about—I didn’t want to take them away from their father.”

I hated when adults talked like this in front of me. It’s not as if I could solve their problems. I had enough of my own.

Aunt Patsy didn’t notice my discomfort. “I’m not perfect, and I never expected Ray to be perfect, either. But now, my daughters-in-law refuse to set foot in my house.” Her face scrunched up as she started to cry. “I feel like I’ve lost my family.”

Mom’s expression softened. “You haven’t lost the boys. And Kelly and Robin love you, you know that. But you can’t expect them to spend time in this house with Ray.”

Uncle Ray sauntered back in and glanced at us before resting his eyes on Aunt Patsy. “Looks like I missed something interesting,” he said. “What’ve you been chattering about?”

Aunt Patsy tapped the table next to his plate. “Who was that on the phone?”

“Jack wants to discuss a project in Tahoe tomorrow morning. I asked if it could wait until next week, but he insisted. I’ll be going up later tonight, probably be gone a couple of days.”

“It’s *Christmas*.”

“Honey, you know how business is.” He winked at me. “Sorry, kid, I’ll have to give you a rain check on that shooting lesson.”

Now I was mad. Not only did I have to spend Christmas in this stupid, ugly house, but I wasn’t going to get my shooting lesson.

“You’re lying, Ray.” Aunt Patsy said. “Tell me who was on the phone.”

“You’re disappointed,” he said, his tone sharp. “I understand that, but it’s no reason to be rude in front of our guests.”

Mom's eyes pleaded with Aunt Patsy. *Stand up to him*, they said. *Tell him to get out*.

Aunt Patsy's own eyes glittered with tears. Her headshake was almost imperceptible. She wasn't going to leave him, not ever. It didn't matter how many shitty things he did, how many holidays he skipped, how many women he hit on. She was going to stay.

"You're right, Ray," she finally said. "Janelle, Melanie, I apologize." Then she stood up, dropped her napkin on the table, and ran upstairs.

I thought about it as I watched my aunt take the stairs two at a time. Maybe there was something I could do to help.

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I knocked on Aunt Patsy's craft room door, and she told me to come in. I found her slumped on an ottoman with a square of quilting fabric in her hands.

"Are you all right?" I asked, closing the door behind me.

Aunt Patsy blew her nose into the fabric. "I'm fine. I'm so sorry I ruined everybody's Christmas."

"It's okay. Mom's downstairs, cleaning up. I told her I'd check on you."

"I appreciate that, honey. I hope you're not upset by anything we said. Adults are sometimes more childish than kids."

"I'm not upset." I stepped further into the room. "Not about that, anyway."

"Is something wrong?"

I'd practiced what I was going to say in the bathroom before coming up. "I'm not sure if I should tell you. It might make things worse."

"Janelle, if something's bothering you, you shouldn't keep it bottled up inside. Sit down and tell me."

I sat on the stool in front of the sewing machine. "You have to promise not to tell Mom."

"Of course."

“Today, when I was cleaning up the wrapping paper with Uncle Ray... he... well, he touched me.”

Aunt Patsy’s face went white. “What do you mean, he touched you?”

“I was bending over to pick up paper and he touched my butt. I thought it was an accident, but when I turned around, he told me I had a pretty smile and he caressed my cheek.”

I wasn’t sure how far to go with my story. The only experience I had with boys was from watching TV or the movies. It had to be believable, but it also had to be bad enough that Aunt Patsy would do something.

“It was super weird,” I continued. I wasn’t lying, exactly. Uncle Ray had made me feel uncomfortable. This was just tweaking the truth a little. “I thought maybe he was just trying to be nice. But then he put his hands on my arms and asked if I’d ever been held by a man.”

Aunt Patsy put her hand to her mouth and shook her head, incredulous. “Oh, honey. Please tell me he stopped there.”

I hung my head. It would be better if I could shed a few tears, but those were hard to fake. “After that, he put his hand on my breast. Then, he tried to kiss me. I blocked him with the garbage bag and went to find you and Mom.”

“Oh my god.” Aunt Patsy was shaking. She stood and hugged me close. “That goddamn bastard. I’m not going to let him get away with this.” She was quiet for a moment, thinking. Then she said, “You go downstairs now and tell your Mom to take you home. Tell her I’ll call her later.”

I went downstairs like she said, pleased with myself because I thought I’d finally convinced Aunt Patsy to leave Uncle Ray. Our family would be happier without him. Mom could have her sister back, and I wouldn’t have to spend any more lousy Christmas’s at their house.

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In the kitchen, Mom was wrapping up the remaining beef tenderloin. “How’s Patsy doing?” she asked.

“I think she’ll be all right.”

“I hope so. But I swear, Janelle, this is the last holiday we’re spending with them. I should’ve never brought you here.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I’m pretty sure she’s going to leave him.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

We both winced when we heard the first gunshot. “That sounded like it came from upstairs,” Mom said.

I thought so, too. But before I could respond, I heard Uncle Ray shouting. “—I always knew you were stupid Patsy, but I never knew you were a goddammed idiot. How many times have I told you never to point a gun at anything you don’t want to shoot?”

Uncle Ray entered the kitchen holding the pink gun by the barrel. Patsy followed, looking more defiant than contrite. Had she tried to shoot him?

“Janelle told me what you did,” Aunt Patsy said. “I want you out of this house, now.”

Mom looked from Aunt Patsy to me, eyebrows raised. “What did Janelle tell you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Uncle Ray said. He waved the gun’s butt in Aunt Patsy’s direction before setting it on the counter. “But I’ll be damned if I let you talk to me this way.”

“Get. Out. Of. My. House.”

“Your house?” Uncle Ray laughed. “You’re joking. *I* built this house. *I* paid for it and every stick of furniture inside of it. This is *my* house.”

Aunt Patsy snatched the gun off the counter and pointed it at Uncle Ray. “You need to leave. Now.”

“Really, Patsy? You’re going to shoot me?”

She slid the gun’s hammer back. “If that’s what it takes.”

“Get out of here, Janelle.” Mom’s voice was firm, but I didn’t move. “Now! Go into the bathroom, shut the door, and don’t come out until I say so.”

Mom was going to kill me when she found out what I’d done. She repeatedly warned me not to lie, and I finally understood why. I hurried toward the foyer and hid behind one of the twelve-foot columns flanking the house’s foyer.

“Put down the gun, Patsy,” Mom pleaded. “Shooting him won’t solve anything.”

“Listen to Melanie.” I heard fear in Uncle Ray’s voice. “We’ll work this out, I promise, honey.”

“He touched Janelle.” Aunt Patsy’s voice was flat and icy. “He’s a pedophile piece of shit.”

“The hell are you talking about?” Uncle Ray said. “I never laid a hand on her!”

I peeked out from behind the column, but a wall blocked my line of sight. I slipped into the dining room, where I could see what was going on without being seen myself.

Mom charged at Uncle Ray, pummeling his chest with her fists. “You fucking bastard, how could you? She’s only fourteen! You fucking keep your hands off my daughter!”

I was scared now. Mom was much smaller than Uncle Ray, but she was strong. She looked like she was trying to kill him with her bare hands. But Uncle Ray fought back, connecting his fist to Mom’s jaw. Stunned, she stumbled backwards onto the floor.

I ran toward her. “Mom!”

She scrambled toward me. “Get out of here, Janelle! Get my keys and get in the car!”

Aunt Patsy took advantage of her clear sight line. She aimed the gun at Uncle Ray and pulled the trigger. But instead of a bang, there was a click. Uncle Ray stood still for a moment, incredulous. Then he rushed Aunt Patsy and knocked her against the kitchen island.

The gun clattered onto the floor. She reached for it, but he kicked it away and pinned her to the floor so she couldn't move.

"I'm calling the cops, you stupid bitch."

He shifted his position so that his knee was on her neck. He raised himself up to take his phone out of his pants pocket, and Aunt Patsy wriggled beneath him, her arms flailing, trying to push him off.

Mom lunged at him. "Get off her, Ray! She can't breathe!" He elbowed Mom in the stomach. She doubled over for a second before she picked up the gun. She tried to hit him with its butt, but he backhanded her and the gun skittered across the floor.

The gun landed at my feet, and I picked it up. Uncle Ray didn't see me coming. I struck him over the head, over and over again, until my arm went numb. Aunt Patsy rolled out from under him, and Mom tried to pull me away. Only then did I see the blood on my hands.

Mom gently took the gun from me. Aunt Patsy knelt beside Ray, feeling for a pulse. Then she looked up at Mom and me and shook her head. She put her hand across her mouth.

Mom fell back against the kitchen counter. "Jesus, Patsy...how are we going to explain this?"

Patsy stood and took a deep breath. "Go home. This is my mess to clean up."

"I won't let you," Mom said. They locked eyes, silently communicating.

We were a family again. Mom and Aunt Patsy gathered around me, and we hugged. Then, we put our heads together and came up with one last lie.

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