

114

**BRYCE LEE
WYNN**

HALO

Fiction Excerpt

Craig licked and ran his thumb over the wiggling toddler's chin, wiping away remnants of cinnamon and sugar. He sat the tiny spoon with the teddy bear handle into the half-eaten bowl of oatmeal and hoisted the child from her highchair. She squealed and talked in her indecipherable baby speak, each word punctuated with spit bubbles and flecks of oatmeal. He did the *jiggle thing* that every parent learned early on and ran his thick fingers through her thin, light-brown hair.

"It's nappy time, Hannah," he told her. "That way Daddy can get some writing done." She began to cry and fidget and he hugged her pillowy body close to his own as he moved around the kitchen. Looking up, he saw Rose enter the room, the thick heels of her leather, zip-up boots clacking against the tile floor, her auburn hair pulled back into a severe ponytail and dressed in a black, knee-length skirt and a red turtleneck sweater. "There's Mommy." He held her arm up and waved it. "Say good morning, Mommy."

Rose slammed her leather attaché case down on the kitchen table, popped the latches and pulled it open. She flipped through its contents until she found what she needed. "I need you to pick up the dry cleaning by four." She handed him a manila envelope. "Here's the check for the rent and for the utilities. It's due by five. We're also out of milk and diapers so you'll need to pick some up. I've transferred over some money into the household account so please don't go over like last time. I have a meeting at five so that should put me back here around 7:30." She closed and locked the attaché case and picked it up.

"You coming home for lunch?" he asked, setting the envelope down on the counter next to the coffee maker.

"I'm meeting a buyer outside of town at noon so I'll just grab something quick. By the way, if you should call the office and I'm not in, please *do not* leave a message with the receptionist. She's extremely incompetent and, frankly, I would prefer you not to call 'les it's an absolute emergency." She looked down at her watch and frowned, the three lines across her forehead becoming tight and pronounced, her painted lips practically nonexistent. "I'm late and traffic's gonna be hell. Bye." She snatched her car keys off of the counter and *clack-clacked* out of the room.

It was half past nine when he heard Rose's keys in the lock. Prime rib, steamed broccoli, and mashed red potatoes had long been thrown into the trash; the pots, pans, and utensils had been washed and returned to their cabinets and drawers; and the tiny vein running along the side of Craig's face pulsed rapidly in time with a heart of the verge of meltdown. She came through the door, flicked on the light in the

front room, and tossed her attaché case onto the chaise. Looking up, startled, she found him standing in the doorway to the kitchen. She slipped off her fur-trimmed coat and draped it over the back of the couch before moving over to where he was standing.

“You remember to pick up the dry-cleaning?” she asked, leaning over to unzip her left boot. “I need one of the blouses for a presentation tomorrow.” She kicked the boot from her foot.

Several seconds elapsed before Craig answered. “You’re standing there asking me about fucking dry-cleaning?”

“Excuse me? Craig-.”

“Craig, what? What you got to say, *Rose*?” His nostrils flared.

She folded her arms across her chest, eyes squinted in examination. “You been drinking?”

“You hungry?”

“Am I hungry?”

“There’s food in the garbage if you’re hungry. Do you even give a shit that I spent the last two hours waiting for you to get in?”

“Look, I told you I would be in at-.”

“7:30,” he cut her off. “So to answer your question, I picked up your Goddamned dry-cleaning; I went to the grocery store to pick up the diapers and the milk; and you know what, I used one of *my* checks from *my* bank account to pay the fucking rent.”

“I swear to God, Craig.” Rose’s voice matched his in loudness and emotion. “How dare you get pissed at me for asking you to do something that you have more than enough time to do. I work all day long and last time I checked, it’s *my* money that’s paying the Goddamned bills. Now I’m not gonna feel bad for asking you to get off your ass and run some freakin’ errands.”

“Off my ass? Not only do I work hard, but I run this household and I take care of our daughter. I try so fucking hard to be perfect for you, *Rose*. So fucking hard.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Where’s Hannah?”

“Across the hall.”

“You left her with Mrs. Lemley, *again*?”

Craig cleared his throat, his body shaking. “Forgive me, *Rose*, for wanting to spend the evening with my wife.”

Rose threw her hands up and turned to face the front door. “I can’t deal with this right now. Got too much shit to do. I’ll go get her.”

Craig watched as the door slammed shut behind her, his body warm and trembling. The anger emitting from the two of them had sucked all of the air out of the room, making it hard for him to breathe. He braced himself in the doorway, squeezing his eyes closed. He could hear Mrs. Lemley’s door open and her and Rose exchanging pleasantries. Craig turned around, stormed through the kitchen, and made his way back to his office.