

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

A photograph of a bed with white linens. A white pillow is at the top with a blue pacifier on it. In the center, the title 'LAST CHANCE: THE MAKING OF A BABY' is written in blue, hand-drawn style letters. In the bottom right, there is a stack of folded baby clothes, including a white onesie, a yellow onesie, and a blue onesie, with a blue clothespin on top.

LAST CHANCE: THE MAKING OF A BABY

MICHAEL BENT

Last Chance: the making of a baby

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by

Michael Bent

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Last Chance: the making of a baby

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Chapter One – Veronica

The smell hit her the moment she opened the door.

Veronica Harland had been dealing with wet sheets for four years, and she still hadn't gotten used to it. You would think, after four years, a person might. You would be wrong.

She stood in the doorway of her son's bedroom and surveyed the damage. Joshua was still in bed, face turned to the wall, one arm hanging off the side. The quilt had been pushed to the foot of the bed at some point during the night, probably because the heat of the wet patch had become uncomfortable even for him. The sheet beneath him was a deep, obvious yellow from the pillow all the way down past his hips. All the way to the pillow. Again.

“Joshua.” She kept her voice level. “Get up.”

Nothing.

“Joshua, I am talking to you.”

A grunt. The arm was withdrawn from the edge of the bed.

“It's seven o'clock. Get up and shower.”

“In a minute.”

“Now, please.”

“I said in a minute, Mum.” His voice was thick with sleep and already irritated, as if she were the problem. As if she had been the one to soak the bed from pillow to knee.

Veronica walked to the window and pulled the curtain back. Sharp morning light fell across the room and across her son, and he immediately flung an arm over his face.

“Oh, for... seriously?”

“Up,” she said simply. “Now.”

Joshua Harland sat up slowly. He was eighteen years old, broadly built, dark-haired, and had the kind of scowl that suggested the world owed him something and had so far failed to pay. He looked at the bed beneath him without any obvious reaction. Not shame, not embarrassment. Just a brief, flat acknowledgement of the facts, quickly dismissed.

He reached for his phone on the bedside table.

“Joshua.”

“What?”

“The sheets.”

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“What about them?”

Veronica looked at him. “You need to strip the bed.”

“I’ll do it later.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“And I’ll do it today. Later.” He was already looking at his phone, scrolling through something with his thumb. Entirely elsewhere.

Four years of this. “You said that on Monday as well.”

“Mum.” He looked up at her with an expression that managed to combine boredom and contempt in equal measure. “I said I’ll do it. Just leave it, yeah?”

“The sheets have been on that bed since last Sunday. That is six days, Joshua.”

“Congratulations on being able to count.”

Veronica took a breath. She was a composed woman by nature, tall, sharp-eyed, not given to raised voices or theatrical displays of frustration. She had raised two children largely alone after her husband’s departure when the children were still small, and she had done it well, with firmness and without excessive drama. Felicia, her eldest, was evidence of that. Twenty-two years old, steady, capable, working a good job and still living at home by choice.

Joshua, however, was evidence of something else entirely.

“Get in the shower,” she said. “And when you come out, those sheets are coming off that bed.”

“Fine.”

“I mean it.”

“I said fine, didn’t I?”

He was already getting up, and the movement revealed the full extent of the overnight damage. His underwear was soaked through. He walked past her without a word or a glance, phone in hand, and disappeared into the bathroom across the hall. The door did not close quietly.

Veronica stood in his bedroom for a moment.

The wet bed. The discarded clothes on the floor, among them a pair of football shorts that had been there since at least Thursday. The desk covered in empty glasses, a plate with a fork dried into it, and several crumpled tissues that she was not going to look at too closely. The bin, two

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feet from the desk, which had apparently not been used since some time in the previous week.

She pulled the sheets off the bed herself.

She had told herself she wouldn't. She had told herself this every week for months. And every week, after waiting long enough, she stripped the bed herself because a wet mattress that was not dealt with developed its own problems, and she was the one who had bought the mattress. The ever-present plastic protector was straining to keep the mattress dry, but she knew that just one small tear or dislocation and the mattress would get wet.

Felicia Harland found her mother in the laundry, loading the machine with the expression of someone performing a task they have already performed too many times.

"Again?" she said, though she already knew the answer.

"He's been in those same wet sheets since Sunday."

Felicia leaned against the doorframe. She was tall like her mother, with their mother's dark eyes and her father's jaw, and she had developed over the last few years a particular quality of stillness that gave the impression of careful observation. She watched people. She watched Joshua especially, with the combination of exasperation and protectiveness that older sisters often carried for difficult younger brothers.

"Did he strip them?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I need to talk to him."

"He's in the shower."

"He can hear me through the door perfectly well."

"Felicia," said Veronica, closing the machine lid. "Don't start the day with a fight. There's been enough of those."

"There wouldn't be fights if he'd strip his own sheets."

"I know that."

"Or shower before noon."

"I know."

"Or not leave the kitchen looking like a... "

"Felicia." Veronica turned around. "I know. I am very much aware of all of it. But I need to think, not argue."

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Felicia was quiet for a moment. “Are we talking about the other thing?”

Veronica didn't answer immediately. She set the machine running and then walked out of the laundry and into the kitchen. Felicia followed.

The Harland home was a generous property about twenty minutes outside the city, set on what the real estate listing had called a 'substantial rural block', which amounted in practice to just over three thousand square metres of established garden, a wide back lawn, a double garage and a modest but well-kept timber house that Veronica had renovated slowly and carefully over fifteen years. It was her home in a way that few people's homes were. She had chosen every tile, every fitting, every paint colour. It represented fifteen years of determined independence, and she was proud of it.

Joshua's bedroom sat at the rear of the house, and on the worst mornings she could tell, even from the kitchen, whether the night had been a bad one.

Last night had been a bad one.

Felicia sat at the kitchen table while her mother made coffee.

“Are we talking about it?” she asked again.

“Yes,” said Veronica. “We're talking about it.”

The 'other thing' had a longer history than the wet sheets, although in Veronica's mind they were connected. Everything was connected when it came to Joshua. The bedwetting, the attitude, the laziness, the complete absence of any sense of consequence. And now the other thing.

Three weeks earlier, Veronica had received a phone call from a Detective Senior Constable whose name she had immediately written down because she did not trust herself to remember it through the fear. The details were not ones she would share with anyone casually. Joshua had been caught on the edge of something serious. He hadn't quite stepped over the line, which was why he was home and not elsewhere. But he had been standing right at the edge of it, in the company of people who had since stepped over it themselves.

The detective had been blunt. One more incident and there would be no grey area. The next call would not be a courtesy. It would come with handcuffs.

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Joshua's response to this information, when Veronica relayed it to him, was to shrug and say that he hadn't actually done anything. She had not slept properly since.

"We can't keep going like this," Felicia said.

"No."

"He doesn't listen to you. He barely listens to me. And the stuff with... with his room..."

"I know."

"We can't just ignore it and hope he straightens himself out."

"I'm not ignoring it."

"Then what are you doing, Mum?"

It was not asked unkindly. Felicia was the only person in Veronica's life who could ask her something like that without it feeling like an attack.

Veronica sat down with her coffee. She wrapped both hands around the mug.

"I spoke to his Parole..." She stopped. "Not parole. Sophie. His contact at the Department."

Felicia looked up. "He has a contact at the Department? Since when?"

"Since the detective made a recommendation. It's informal. She is just keeping an eye on things to try and avoid it going further." Veronica looked at her daughter. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want to make it bigger than it already was."

"Mum."

"I know."

"You should have told me."

"I know. I'm telling you now." Veronica took a sip of coffee. "I rang Sophie yesterday evening and told her I was at my wits' end. I told her about the sheets, about his behaviour, about everything. I didn't leave anything out."

"And?"

"She was very understanding. She said she's seen a lot of boys like Joshua, and she said most of them need someone specific. Not just a threat from a department or a night in a police station. Someone who actually comes in and does the work."

"What does that mean?"

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“She gave me a name. A young woman. She said she had helped someone in a situation not completely unlike Joshua's and that the results had been remarkable.” Veronica paused. “She was quite insistent about it, actually. She said she wouldn't normally suggest something like this, but that she'd seen the outcome herself.”

“What's her name?”

“Connie. Constance.” Veronica looked at her mug. “Her last name is Airesdale.”

The bathroom door opened, and Joshua appeared in the hallway, phone in hand, wearing nothing but a pair of tracksuit bottoms riding low on his hips. He had not, apparently, used the shower for its intended purpose of washing his hair. It was still flat and damp-looking from the night.

He stopped when he saw both of them at the kitchen table.

“What?”

“Sit down, please,” said Veronica.

“I need breakfast.”

“Sit down, and then you can have breakfast.”

He dropped into the chair opposite his mother and leaned back in it with an ease that suggested he expected nothing that was about to be said to be especially relevant to him.

“We need to talk about some things,” Veronica said.

“Here we go.”

“Joshua.”

“What? You've been giving me the talk since I was fifteen. Can we just have breakfast first?”

“No.” Veronica set her mug down. “We are going to talk now, and you are going to listen without interrupting and without that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“That look.”

He shifted in his chair, a minimal concession.

“I stripped your sheets this morning,” she said.

“You didn't have to do that.”

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"I've stripped your sheets every week for the last three months, Joshua. Every week. Because you won't do it yourself. You seem content with pee-stained sheets."

"I was going to do it."

"When?"

"Today. I told you today."

"You told me Monday. You told me Tuesday. You told me..."

"All right!" He sat up straighter. "All right, I get it. I'll do the sheets. Are we done?"

"We are not done." Veronica held his eyes. "You have wet that bed every single night for months. You haven't changed your sheets without being forced to. Your room is a mess that I am embarrassed to look at. You were rude to me this morning, you were rude to me yesterday morning, and the morning before that."

"I wasn't rude, I was half asleep."

"You are rude when you are asleep, Joshua." Felicia's voice was quiet and even. "You've always been rude when you're asleep. That's not new."

He looked at his sister. He and Felicia had the same argument differently. With their mother, it was loud and repetitive and went nowhere. With Felicia, it was briefer and sharper and usually ended in him leaving the room.

"And there is the matter," Veronica continued, "of your recent activities."

The shift was immediate. The lounging posture tightened slightly.

"I've already said I didn't do anything."

"And I've already said that being present is doing something."

"I wasn't..."

"The detective was very clear with me, Joshua." Veronica's voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. "He said one more time. One more incident. That is not a lot of margin for error."

"It won't happen again."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know."

"You knew last time, and here we are."

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He pushed his chair back slightly. Here it comes. "So what do you want me to say? I've said sorry. I've said it won't happen again. What else do you want?"

"I want things to actually change," said Veronica. "Not just the words. The actual behaviour."

"I'm trying."

"You are not trying, Joshua." Felicia leaned forward. "Trying would look different from this. Trying would mean the sheets get changed. Trying would mean I don't have to knock on your door to tell you it's eleven o'clock and you need to open a window."

He looked at the table.

"I'm going to ask someone to come and help us," said Veronica.

His head came up. "What? Who?"

"Her name is Connie. She helped a family nearby with a similar situation and got a very good result."

"A similar situation." He stared at her. "What does that mean, a similar situation?"

"It means a boy who was heading in the wrong direction and needed to be turned around."

"I don't need to be turned around. I need everyone to stop acting like I'm some kind of..."

"Joshua."

"I'm not a child!"

The kitchen was quiet.

"No," said Veronica, after a moment. "You're not. But you are behaving like one. And until that changes, I am going to get whatever help I need to make it change."

He pushed back from the table and stood up.

"I'm getting breakfast," he said.

"Sit down."

"I'm hungry."

"Sit down, Joshua. I am not finished."

He stood for a moment longer than he needed to, making the point, and then sat back down. His jaw was set.

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“You will be here when Connie comes. You will be polite, and you will listen to what she has to say. And from this moment, things in this house are going to be different.”

“Right.”

“That is not a question.”

“I said right.”

“I mean it.”

He said nothing. His eyes went to the window. Outside, the morning light was moving across the garden in the way it always did at this hour, long and flat and indifferent to the mood inside the house.

Nothing's going to change, he thought. Someone will come and have a chat, and everyone will feel better for five minutes, and then everything will go back to how it is.

He had seen it before. The school counsellor. The two sessions with the psychologist that his mother had paid for, and he had sat through with his arms crossed. The detective's little lecture in the police station anteroom, delivered to him and his mother while he stared at the ceiling tiles.

Another person with another plan.

“Fine,” he said. “Invite her.”

He got up again, and this time, Veronica let him go.

Felicia found her mother standing at the kitchen window twenty minutes later, watching Joshua kick at the back lawn with the aimless energy of someone who had nowhere to direct themselves.

“He'll fight it,” Felicia said.

“Of course he will.”

“You know that, right? Whatever this Connie suggests, he will fight every bit of it.”

“I know.” Veronica picked up her phone from the bench. “Which is why I am going to call her before I lose my nerve and before he finds some way to convince me everything is fine.”

Felicia watched her mother dial.

Outside, Joshua had given up kicking the lawn and was sitting on the back step with his phone, slumped forward, his dark head bent over the small screen.

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He looks like a little boy, Felicia thought. He always looks like a little boy when he thinks no one can see him.

“Good morning,” said Veronica, as the call connected. “My name is Veronica Harland. Sophie from the Department of Corrections gave me your number. I believe you spoke to her yesterday about my son.”

She listened for a moment.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s exactly it.”

She glanced at Felicia, who gave a small nod.

“When can you come?” Veronica asked. “The sooner the better, I think.”

She listened again.

“Thursday would be perfect. Thank you, Connie.” A pause. “Yes. I think it has gone on quite long enough.”

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Chapter Two – Connie

Thursday arrived grey and cool, with the kind of persistent drizzle that made the garden look dark, and the inside of the house feel smaller. Veronica had been up since six.

She had cleaned the kitchen twice. She had drunk three cups of coffee. She had stood in the hallway outside Joshua's bedroom at seven-thirty, listened to his slow, oblivious breathing, looked at the pale, damp outline already visible at the edge of his sheet, and quietly closed the door again. By nine-fifteen, she was simply standing at the front window, watching the driveway.

“She'll come,” said Felicia, from the kitchen.

“I know she'll come. I'm just watching.”

“Watching won't make her arrive faster.”

“I'm aware of that.”

Felicia appeared in the hallway with a tea towel over her shoulder. “Is he up?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you want me to get him up?”

“No.” Veronica kept her eyes on the driveway. “I want him to still be in bed when she gets here. I want her to see it.”

Felicia said nothing to that. She went back to the kitchen.

At nine forty-three, a small white hatchback came through the front gate and parked neatly behind Veronica's car. A young woman got out. She was perhaps twenty-three, well-presented, dark-haired, and she moved with the kind of easy confidence that suggested she was not especially nervous about what she was walking into. She had a bag over one shoulder, and she looked up at the house with a brief, assessing look before coming to the door. Veronica had it open before she could knock.

“Connie?”

“Mrs Harland.” She smiled and extended a hand. The handshake was firm. “Thank you for having me.”

“Thank you for coming. Please come in.”

They sat at the kitchen table, the three women, with the rain coming down steadily outside and the sound of the house settling around them. Felicia had made more coffee, and Connie had accepted a cup and now sat with both hands around it, not unlike the way Veronica had sat on Monday

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morning. It was an observant, attentive posture. Not defensive. Just watching.

“Sophie told me the basics,” Connie said. “But I’d rather hear it from you, if that’s all right.”

Veronica had prepared for this. She told it plainly. The bedwetting, the duration, the sheets left unchanged for many days, the behaviour, the attitude, the incident with the police and where it had nearly led. She did not spare Joshua in the telling, but she did not overdo it either. She stated facts. Connie listened without interrupting.

“How old is he?” she asked, when Veronica had finished.

“Eighteen.”

“And the bedwetting. Was there a period when it stopped? Or has it been continuous?”

“He was dry for about two years when he was twelve and thirteen. Then it came back, and it’s never really left. His doctor says there’s no physical reason for it.”

“There usually isn’t,” Connie said. “With boys like this, there usually isn’t.”

“Boys like this?” said Felicia.

“Boys who haven’t grown up properly.” Connie said it without any particular edge. It was simply a category, like left-handed or short-sighted. “The bedwetting is a signal, not the problem. The problem is underneath it.”

She looked at Veronica. “Does he change his own sheets?”

“Very rarely. And only when I’ve asked him multiple times.”

“Does he seem bothered by the wet bed? Embarrassed?”

Veronica considered it. “No, actually. Not really. He’s annoyed that I mention it, but the bed itself doesn’t seem to...”

“Concern him,” Connie finished.

“Yes.”

“That’s important.” Connie turned her coffee cup slowly in her hands. “Can I ask about his room? The general state of it?”

“It’s a disaster. Clothes on the floor, dishes, tissues...” Veronica paused. “He’s not discreet about certain things.”

“Masturbation?”

Felicia looked at the table. Veronica held Connie’s gaze. “Yes. A great deal.”

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“Does he know you're aware of it?”

“He must. But he doesn't seem to care.”

“Again,” said Connie, “that's the pattern.” She sat back slightly. “Mrs Harland... Veronica... I should tell you about my own situation before we go any further, so you understand why Sophie sent you to me specifically.”

“Please,” said Veronica.

Connie told it the way she had learned to tell it... directly, without the excessive softening that made people uncomfortable in a different way. She had found that plain telling was kinder than cautious telling in the long run.

She told them about Jordan. About the burglary, the court and the home detention. About her mother, Claire, buying the house in Barnsdale with the extra space, and about the nursery she had noticed on the first walk-through.

“Your brother was a criminal?” said Felicia.

“He was an idiot who followed the wrong person,” Connie said. “There's a difference, even if the law doesn't always see it.”

“Fair enough.”

“He was also an eighteen-year-old bedwetter who had never once in his life changed his own sheets without being told to, who had been stealing my underwear since he was ten years old, and who had...” she paused briefly, “certain masturbatory habits that he conducted in my underwear, which I won't go into in great detail.”

Veronica's eyebrows went up very slightly.

“Our mother found the book,” Connie continued. “Saving My Son. Have you heard of it?”

“No.”

“It was written by a woman who had a similar situation with her own son, and it gave Mum a roadmap. The central idea is that some boys haven't developed properly, and the way to address that is to go back to the beginning and let them grow up again. Properly this time.”

“Back to the beginning,” Felicia repeated. “Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning nappies.” Connie said it the same way she might have said meaning trousers or meaning breakfast. “To start with.”

The kitchen was quiet for a moment.

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“And Jordan accepted that?” Veronica asked.

“Not at first.” A small smile. “Not even slightly at first. Mum bought a paddle.”

“A spanking paddle?”

“Yes. She hadn't spanked him since before Dad died, and he assumed that was still the case. He was wrong.” She picked up her coffee. “The first morning she got him into a nappy, she used the wooden spoon. After that, she bought a proper paddle, and the next time he fought her, he found out quite quickly that she meant business.”

“Did he fight often?”

“For the first week, constantly. After that, less. He had two significant spankings early on, and after the second one, the fight mostly went out of him.” She set the cup down. “That's the thing about boys like Jordan, and I suspect Joshua is similar, they have a lot of anger and rebellion on the surface, but underneath it, they're exhausted by it. They don't actually want to keep fighting. They just don't know how to stop.”

Felicia was looking at her with the focused expression she normally reserved for things she was trying to commit to memory.

“His bedwetting got worse after the nappies started,” Connie continued. “Significantly worse. He'd been wetting at night for years, but when the nappies came in, it was like... like a door opened somewhere. He was soaking them. The bedwetting during naps surprised everyone, including him.”

“He napped?” said Veronica.

“He started to, yes. That was part of it.” Connie looked at her. “I should warn you now. This process changes boys. It changes them quite fundamentally. In Jordan's case, it changed him in ways none of us predicted, and I won't pretend that everything that happened was exactly planned or controlled, because it wasn't.” She paused. “What I will tell you is that today, Jordan is...” She stopped. “Caitlyn,” she corrected herself quietly. “Today, Caitlyn is the happiest she has ever been in her life. Genuinely happy. Calm and content and not in any danger of hurting herself or anyone else.”

The two women across the table were both still.

“Jordan is a girl,” Veronica said carefully.

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“Caitlyn always was. It just took us a while to work that out.” Connie's voice was even. “I don't know what Joshua is. I won't know that until I've spent some time with him. What I do know is that what my mother did worked, and what Sophie has seen of the outcome, she agrees.” She looked at both of them. “The question is whether you are prepared to do what's necessary. Because the first part of it is not comfortable.”

“The spanking,” said Felicia.

“The spanking,” Connie agreed. “It's not the whole programme, but it's the start of it. A boy who has no respect for rules or consequences needs to learn both, quickly, and the paddle is the fastest way to do that when everything else has already failed.” She looked at Veronica. “Sophie told me there's no father in the picture.”

“Not for many years.”

“Then the discipline has to come from you. Both of you.” She glanced at Felicia. “Are you prepared to be part of that? It won't just be your mother. You'll need to be involved.”

Felicia took a moment. “Yes.”

“And Veronica?”

“I bought a paddle last week,” Veronica said.

For the first time, Connie smiled properly. “Sophie said you were straightforward. I'm glad she was right.”

They talked for another hour. Connie went through the outline of the programme methodically, the discipline structure, the bedroom door, and the journaling requirement. She talked about the nappies in practical terms, the cloth and pins and plastic pants, the morning check, what to expect. She talked about the panties question, which she suspected would arise.

“You said Jordan stole your underwear,” Veronica said. “Has Joshua...?”

“I don't know yet. It's worth keeping in mind.”

Felicia shifted slightly in her seat. Said nothing.

“He will resist everything,” Connie said. “Loudly, at first. That's expected, and it's actually a good sign. The ones who are completely passive from the beginning usually have a harder road. The fight means there's something to work with.”

“That's a generous way to look at it,” said Veronica drily.

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"I've had some practice." Connie looked toward the hallway. "Is he still in bed?"

"Almost certainly."

"Can I see him?"

Veronica stood and led her to the hallway. They stood in the open doorway of Joshua's bedroom. He was on his back now, one arm across his face, the bare mattress visible where Veronica had stripped the sheet five days ago. He had not put a clean sheet on it. He had been sleeping on the naked, waterproofed mattress since Monday, apparently without complaint or concern.

Connie looked at the room quietly. The floor. The desk. The bin. She looked at the mattress and the yellow staining that years of wetting had mapped permanently into it, regardless of the protector.

She looked at Joshua.

Big, she thought. Bigger than Jordan was. Angrier looking, even asleep.

She turned to Veronica and spoke in a low voice. "Leave him until he gets up on his own. I want to be here when he comes out."

They went back to the kitchen. It was eleven twenty-three when Joshua finally appeared.

He came down the hallway in yesterday's tracksuit bottoms, and no shirt, phone in hand, hair flattened on one side from sleep. He stopped dead in the kitchen doorway when he saw the stranger sitting at his kitchen table.

"Morning," said Connie.

He looked at his mother.

"This is Connie," said Veronica. "I told you she was coming."

"You said Thursday."

"It is Thursday."

He stared at Connie with undisguised assessment. She was younger than he'd expected, which had clearly thrown him. He'd been bracing for someone middle-aged and official-looking.

"Hi," he said, with the aggressive neutrality of someone trying to seem unbothered.

"I've been hearing about you," Connie said pleasantly.

"Great." He moved toward the pantry. "Are we doing this now? Because I haven't had breakfast."