# THE RIGHT SHADE OF RED 749 words

I covered the twelve feet from threshold to table in three strides. “I know you’re mad, Jess.”

Jess slipped his glasses to mid-nose and shot me a look.

I straddled a chair, held my fist above the table, and one finger at a time, released my treasure. Metal keys skidded across polished oak.

“What the hell, Eric?” Jess’s chin jutted toward the keys. “All week you’re withdrawn. Today, without a word, you disappear. And now, without even talking to me, you buy a car?” He tapped the ash off his cigarette, raked nicotine-stained fingertips through untamable hair, and stared into his tumbler of scotch.

“When you hear my story, I’ll be forgiven. You’ll even laugh. I promise.”

Jess raised his Macallan’s in mock salute. He paused to savor his drink before speaking. “I’m listening.”

I slid my hands across the tabletop toward him.

“Jess, I saw Owen, my father.” The words tasted bitter on my tongue. In our six years together, I’d never spoken about my estrangement from my father.

Jess raised one eyebrow. “Go on.” He sounded reluctant to let me off the hook but traced a fingertip down my forearm. The edge of the tabletop cut into my elbow; I didn’t move.

Jess pushed his scotch to one side. He leaned back, tilting his chair on its hind legs.

“You know, doing that can ruin…” I stopped myself, shifted into a more comfortable position, and began.

“Owen was a lousy father, Jess. He was never comfortable around children, his own in particular. In his world, a child’s purpose was to validate virility and grow up to exemplify his parents’ values. I was a disappointment. I hated Boy Scouts and sports. Owen was embarrassed by my lack of overt masculinity. And then, I registered Democrat.”

The corner of Jess’s mouth twitched: the birth of a smile.

“Owen’s benign disappointment turned malignant after my high school graduation. Mom dragged my father and me into a boutique to see an evening bag. It was pleated red satin, very expensive. Mom turned to me and asked if I thought the bag would complement her new, red cocktail dress. I said, ‘Mom, it’s elegant, but are you sure it’s the right shade of red?’

“I saw the veins on my father’s neck bulge. He reeled around and--his expression--I will never forget it: disgust, revulsion, recognition. His jaw was so clenched, he could only hiss, ‘the *right* shade. . . only a GD faggot would care about*…’,*and he strode out of the shop*.*”

Jess dimpled when he smiled. “Ahhh. Your coming-out party.”

“The following week, Dad shipped me off to college for summer classes. That was ten years ago. Mom passed away during my sophomore year.” I drew in a deep breath before continuing.

“I wasn’t tossed penniless into the street, but my father never contacted me again. Then last week, out of the blue, he called. He wanted to see me. He would make it worth my while. He would send a car.”

Jess rubbed his thumb along his jawline and, lips compressed, gave me a sidelong glance.I laid my hand over his. “I’m sorry. I just wasn’t ready to share.”

He shrugged and lit another cigarette.

“Today I was greeted with hearty backslapping and handshaking. ‘Dad’ said the past was a closed door that should remain closed. Turns out, the old fart is remarrying. She’s a youngish liberal with two preteen girls, who are her world. I realized that Owen needs me as Exhibit A: proof of his parenting skills and progressive thinking. He wants to keep a lid on our estrangement and his bigotry. Either could be a deal breaker.”

I scooped up the keys.

“And, to make amends for the missed birthdays, Christmases, and college graduation, Daddy compensated me with a red, 2012 Subaru BRZ.”  Never subtle, I shrieked, tossing the car keys into the air.

Not prone to theatrics, Jess high-fived me.

“I let Owen blather on, then said to him, ‘I show up, testify to your being a wonderful father, and then disappear after the wedding. You’ve lined-up a private boarding school for her brats?’

“You should have seen him, Jess. The old man puffed up like a beta fish and bellowed, ‘Now see here--.’ I smiled, turned him toward the mirror, pointed to his enraged face and said, ‘Now THAT, Daddy, is just the right shade of red.’”