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Character Reference

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Character Reference

“Jeremy’s in trouble,” my mother began.

Oh god, I thought to myself. What did he do this time?

This had become a routine—Jeremy Barber was always up to something, getting in trouble for minor things, whether it was getting suspended from school for stupid pranks or being busted by local cops for smoking a joint. He wasn’t a bad person, he just liked to push it, see how much he could get away with. Maybe this stemmed from being a bored only child and wanting to stir things up. Maybe he was trying to see how far he could push his parents to be anything less than accepting and supportive. They always took Jeremy’s side, always said he was “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” They never questioned whether *he* was the one in the wrong. But the tightness in the wrinkle of my mom’s eye told me something was different this time. This time, it was serious.

Mom told me she had just gotten off the phone with Jeremy’s dad, Paul. He and my mom had been best friends since high school. They grew up together in a small town in North Carolina and saw each other every day until Mom married my father and they moved to Westchester, New York to raise Eric and me. Paul married his college sweetheart, Edith, and they had a son: Jeremy. They stayed in North Carolina and lived in a nice town on the water.

When I was a kid, my parents bought a beach house right down the road from the Barbers. We spent every summer there since I was five. Over the course of those summers, Jeremy got to be like my second brother. We had fun together and he was always there for me. But despite his being two years older than me—he was twenty-three now—he was careless, made stupid jokes, and constantly bragged about his many “conquests.” He and Eric hung out a lot, though they didn’t seem to talk much—they mostly played

video games and got high. My parents sold the beach house last year when my college tuition made money tight.

“Jeremy’s being accused of sexual assault.”

She couldn’t look me in the eyes as she said it. I was genuinely shocked. Sure, Jeremy got in trouble a lot, but just because he wouldn’t take life seriously. Nothing he did ever hurt anyone else.

“Apparently he and some ex-girlfriend of his were at a party a couple months ago,” she explained. “They were both drinking and ended up sleeping together—without her *consent*, she claims.”

She emphasized that word, as if mocking its significance. I couldn’t picture it. I mean, I heard about these situations all the time, but this was someone I knew. Someone who was my friend—practically family.

“It’s just horrible,” my mother cried, “the things some girls will do for attention. She could ruin the poor boy’s life just for the sake of getting back at her ex-boyfriend.”

Jeremy did date a lot of girls and they usually didn’t end things on good terms. I knew his breakups were always messy and the girls often overlapped, so maybe this *was* some crazy ex-girlfriend seeking revenge. Maybe they hooked up when they were drunk, but that didn’t mean he raped her. Jeremy wouldn’t do that. Would he?

“They need us now more than ever, sweetie,” my mother continued, “they asked if you could write a little something for their case. It would really help them a lot.”

I paused. I didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“You know, a letter describing Jeremy’s character to show that he’s a good person and would never do this.”

A character reference. She wanted me to write a character reference for Jeremy’s case.

“Yeah, I guess I could do that.” I didn’t fully understand what I was agreeing to. “Is Eric gonna write one too?”

She gave me a look as though I should’ve understood that without having to ask. “It has a lot more weight coming from...a girl.”

Of course it did. This was a sexual assault case. No one cares about Jeremy’s guy friends; they wanted to know what other women thought of him and how he treated them. I nodded. My mother kissed me on the forehead, added that they needed the letter within the next three days, and left my bedroom.

I didn’t think that Jeremy did it. But I only knew Jeremy for eight weeks out of every year, and I hadn’t seen him in over a year now. Truth be told,

Jeremy and I only talk over Facebook message every once in a while to catch up on school and general stuff. How well did I *really* know him?

Dinner that night revolved around the news. Both of my parents kept saying things like, “Jeremy couldn’t hurt a fly,” and “this girl is absolutely insane.” Eric was pretty quiet, but that wasn’t anything new. We weren’t close, so I could never tell what he was thinking. I just sat there, nodding in agreement, playing all the drama out in my head like a bad teen movie.

The last summer my family spent at the beach house was over a year ago. I hung out with Jeremy a lot and crashed his and Eric’s bonding, even though Eric didn’t want me there. On one of the last nights, the three of us had plans to go out to a bar—Jeremy knew the bartender so he was going to sneak me in. But when Eric and I swung by Jeremy’s house to pick him up, he didn’t come out or answer any of our texts or phone calls, so we decided to just go in and get him.

As we walked down the hallway toward Jeremy’s bedroom, I heard faint cries and yelling in the distance. Eric and I looked at each other, both puzzled, and stopped. I couldn’t make out the words but it didn’t sound good.

Suddenly the door flew open and a girl came running out. Even with her face shiny with tears, I saw she was pretty and felt a stubborn stab of jealousy. She rushed past us and left, Jeremy following shortly after. His eyes were steely, but he got flustered when he noticed us.

“What a drama queen,” he scoffed, trying to shake it off, “girls, huh?”

I smiled back at him uncomfortably and asked what happened, but he just said this girl he was hooking up with got upset. Eric jumped in before I could ask more.

“You ready, man?”

“Yeah,” he looked relieved and grabbed his jacket. “Let’s get outta here.”

As I stared at the blinking cursor on my screen and thought about that girl, her red crying face, and my qualification to write the character reference, my mother came into my bedroom.

“How’s it coming, honey? Did you get a lot of good stuff down?” She asked cheerfully, as though this was something *fun* for me to do. She sat down on the edge of my bed and stroked my hand encouragingly.

“Yeah, I’m working on it,” I scanned her eyes for hints of doubt, “But I keep thinking... Do you think you can ever really know someone?”

My mother’s smile turned tight. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...do you think you can ever really know what someone is capable of?”

“What are you saying, sweetie?”

“Well, how do we know for sure Jeremy’s innocent? I mean, what if he really did it?”

“That’s ridiculous, Lucy.” She jerked her hand away from me. “Of course, he didn’t do it. You can’t be serious.”

“I’m not saying I *think* he did it, but I’m supposed to write this letter to get him out of trouble and to prove that girl is a liar. It’s a big responsibility, and you don’t seem to care whether Jeremy actually sexually assaulted her or not.”

“Lucy.” She looked sickened by me and yanked her body up. “I’ve known Paul all my life. He’s a good person and he raised his son right. Jeremy is a sweet boy; he could never do something like this. His reputation, his future—his whole *life* depends on this, Lucy, as does his parents’. They’re counting on you, and you better follow through.”

She walked out and shut the door behind her. I’d never seen my mother get so defensive. I sat for a moment, thinking of the irony of her questioning my integrity more than Jeremy’s.

I was thirteen years old when I started to hate the way I looked. It was a time when girls around me grew boobs that made their waists look tiny enough to wrap your hands around and started looking more like *women*. Every girl grew taller, wore makeup, and got a boyfriend—every girl but me. I’d always been a late bloomer. I looked much younger than the other girls in my grade, and I hated myself for it. I was short, had a round, protruding stomach—a result of being what my parents liked to call a “good eater”—and my chest was flat. I had crooked teeth that were too big for my thin lips, and I had never kissed a boy.

The first day of that summer, Eric, Jeremy, and I went to the beach together. After we settled on a good spot and laid down our towels and beach bags, we got ready to swim together in the ocean. As I undressed and started to put on sunscreen, I noticed Eric staring at me with disgust.

“You may wanna cool it with the sweets, Luce,” he said, laughing at me and gawking at my stomach.

My face got hot. There was so much wrong with me. In this moment, all the things I thought about my body were confirmed—other people saw me as ugly as I saw myself. Tears started to fill my ashamed eyes.

“What, you gonna *cry* about it or something?”

“Hey, cut it out, man,” Jeremy said to him, calmly at first.

My face got even hotter—it felt like it was on fire—and sand clung to my hands, sticky with sweat. Eric just laughed harder.

“I said stop it, Eric, Jesus!”

I’d never heard Jeremy raise his voice or snap like that before. Eric laughed, mumbled “whatever,” and walked away toward the ocean. I grabbed my baggy T-shirt and pulled it over my head to cover my awkward body. My face shook, holding back the tears.

“Hey,” Jeremy looked me in the eye, “you know you’re beautiful, right?”

Nobody but my parents had said that to me. I smiled back through my tears.

“Come on,” he said, reaching for my hand.

I knew I wasn’t beautiful, but with Jeremy’s hand in mine and the waves before us, I felt for a moment that I was.

After dinner, I returned to my bedroom and opened up a new Word document on my laptop titled “Jeremy.”

Jeremy is a kind person, I wrote. He’s been a good friend to me for practically all our lives, as our parents are very close. He’s like a big brother to me.

Is this even how you’re supposed to write these things? I was twenty-one years old. How the hell was I supposed to know how to write a character reference? I let the underside of my laptop burn my skin for a few more minutes as I stared at that taunting blinking line on the document, and then decided to get some sleep.

Eric and Jeremy loved to get high together, and since I was younger, I kind of got left out of that part of their world. But the summer I was sixteen, I got tired of feeling excluded. So even though I wasn’t invited, I went to Eric’s bedroom to join them.

“Hey guys,” I forced confidence, “what are you up to?”

Eric looked at me like I was stupid as he passed his joint to Jeremy.

“Want to join us?” Jeremy said as he sucked the smoke deep into his lungs.

I had never smoked before, and until this moment was never planning to. But Eric’s patronizing eyes burned through me.

“Sure.”

I sat down and they passed it to me. I breathed in deeply and my lungs felt like they filled with powder. My throat felt raw. I coughed uncontrollably, and the boys both laughed at my inexperience. Jeremy handed me a glass of water, and even though it hurt, I kept smoking. I didn’t want to be the “loser little sister” anymore.

“I’m kinda hungry,” Jeremy said after a while, “you guys wanna make some nachos or something?”

Eric nodded and we got up.

We wolfed down plate after plate of nachos before I realized what I was doing. Time seemed to slow down, and I was suddenly intensely aware of my body. I could feel the fat from the cheese slither through my intestines and the chips latch onto my hips.

Eric looked back at me with his lifeless red eyes and giggled, “Damn, Luce, you really went in on those.”

I felt dizzy. My insides turned to ice. I had lost over twenty pounds since freshman year and maintained it. I was eating, exercising, staying healthy.

My paranoid thoughts raced, and I couldn’t get Eric’s words out of my head. Jeremy was too intent on his nachos to notice my discomfort. Eric was wrong. I was five-foot-four and a hundred pounds. I wasn’t fat anymore. I kept repeating this in my head over and over, but the room was spinning. I needed to get rid of all that food.

I slipped off to the bathroom, stuck my finger down my throat and gagged. I tried to muffle my crying but I couldn’t help it—it happened every time I threw up. I heard footsteps outside the bathroom as I coughed up the remaining lumps and spat phlegm into the toilet.

“Lucy?” It was Jeremy.

I didn’t answer but he slowly pushed the door open. He peeked his head in and saw my red, tearful face and my hands wiping my mouth.

“Lucy, what are you doing?” He came in and shut the door with an urgent look in his eyes. I couldn’t face them. I just looked down. He knew what was going on.

He wrapped his arms around me and I couldn’t hold in my pain anymore. I was sick of my brother hating me, sick of his teasing. I was sick of my body—of *hating* my body and not being able to stop. He pulled me into his arms and rubbed my back as I cried.

“It’s okay, Lucy. It’s gonna be okay.”

Jeremy has always been there for me. He’s supported me in some of my toughest times and always picks me up when I’m down. He’s a genuinely caring—

I believed what I was writing, but something kept popping into my head: this mysterious girl accusing Jeremy of rape. Why was she doing this? I didn’t want to believe it, but could she be telling the truth?

I thought of my best friend from high school, Carey. We’d gone away to different colleges, but she called me crying one morning our freshman year saying she did something stupid.

“I woke up next to him naked, and I didn’t even know who he was,” I heard between cries muffled by the phone, “I don’t remember thinking I would hook up with him. I don’t even remember meeting him.”

He told her that she’d been into it. He felt bad in the morning because he said he didn’t realize she was too drunk—as far as he knew, the feelings were mutual.

Was this the same thing? Carey didn’t remember consenting, but the guy claimed she did. Did it count even though she was wasted? If Jeremy didn’t think he was doing anything wrong in the moment, did that make him innocent?

I didn’t know what to think anymore, so I turned to Eric. It was a last resort, but I thought he might give me some insight since he knew Jeremy just as well as I did, if not better.

Going into Eric’s bedroom always felt like crashing a secret clubhouse where sisters weren’t allowed. Eric was laying down on his bed playing video games. After some empty small talk, I spat it out:

“Do you think Jeremy did it, Eric?”

Eric stopped his game and looked at me. “I don’t know, Luce. I don’t *think* he would, I really don’t. He’s a good guy, but who knows.”

“What do you mean?”

“Guys are different with girls than they are with their friends. No matter how nice someone is, you never know how they can be with that stuff—what they can do.”

I let out a deep sigh and ran my tense hands through my hair. I was glad Eric was being honest, but this wasn’t helping my uncertainty.

“But,” Eric continued, “does it really matter?”

“What?”

“Does it matter to you if he did it or not?”

“Of course it does!” I was taken aback. “If I write this letter and Jeremy’s really guilty, then I’m proving this girl a fraud and letting him get away with it. But if I don’t do it and he’s really innocent, his whole life will get ruined because of me.”

“You’re overthinking this, Luce.”

That night, I recollected all the memories I had with Jeremy. There *were* good memories. Lots of them. He snuck me into my first bar. He taught me how to play poker. He helped me through my body image issues and showed me the self-worth I couldn’t see. He always answered my messages right away and checked in regularly to see how I was doing. He truly cared about me, and I cared about him, too.

I finished the letter that night and printed out a draft before sending it. I wrote about Jeremy's character, my relationship with him, and what I knew. When I handed my mother the draft in the morning, she read it through, nodding.

"Good girl," she said when she was done.

And I hoped I was.