

# New Fiction by Claudia Hinz: Excerpt from “Safekeeping”



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## SAFEKEEPING

Before she opened Chance’s draft letter, Tenley was pissed. She’d been on hold for twenty minutes only to be told her vacation ownership was charging her \$650 to upgrade to the six-bedroom, ski-in/ski-out chalet.

“Do you know how much I pay in yearly fees?” she barked. “I could have *bought* a condo in Vail!”

If Chance brought a friend to Vail, Connelly would insist on bringing a friend, and then there wouldn’t be enough room for Tenley’s four kids, their guests, *and* her and Harrison. This was her fault. She should never have encouraged Chance to invite his college roommate, but she couldn’t risk his being lured by more appealing invitations to the Caribbean.

Chance left for college four months ago, but every day, she caught herself listening for the clatter of his backpack on the mudroom tiles. The thunder of his feet as he took the stairs two at a time. She was always waiting for him to come home.

“I understand your concerns, ma’am,” the villa agent said.

“You *don’t* understand my concerns.” Tenley knew she was being

difficult. It wasn't the agent's fault that the company was gouging property owners. "Could you please get a supervisor on the line?"

The agent put her on hold, and Tenley drifted into the foyer to pick up the mail.

The envelope was mixed in with the bills. Her son's name, CHANCE ANDREW LARRIMORE WARD, and their address in Dallas, were printed in an old computer font. She pictured a room of massive computers, running 24-7, churning out hundreds of thousands of names. Millions of names. Had she really imagined her son's name wouldn't be among them? That the wars wouldn't touch them? Up until now, they hadn't. Gas prices in Dallas soared and dipped, and spiked again, and she and Harrison kept filling their tanks and buying exorbitant plane tickets. But the wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the standoff in the South China Sea, sometimes it was more than she could bear. In the grocery store, her phone would beep with another news alert, and she'd grip the bar of her cart, her heartbeat whooshing in her ears. *Was now when the worst happened?* How could she keep her family safe? And what the hell was she doing buying almond flour crackers and Post-it notes, when the country was on the brink on World War III?

Now, here was the letter with Chance's lottery number, and her first thought was karma. There *had* to be a karmic equation in her favor. All those years of working full-time and still showing up for every baseball and hockey game. In the past five years since quitting her job in TV to be home with the kids, she had attended everything. Every award ceremony, school event, field trip. In her desperation, it all came down to this moment: Had she been a good mother? Could she protect her son from the worst?

The envelope was slim. Maybe there'd been a mistake and they'd sent it empty. She tore it open. Inside was a form letter with only two personal details: her son's name and his lottery

number.

She was aware of dropping the letter and falling to her knees. And then, she was rocking, moaning the way she had in labor. The number was low. He'd go in the first wave. If the number was higher, he would have more time, maybe nine months, a year before reporting to boot camp, and by then, who knew what the world would look like? He might have been spared. But not with this number.

She rolled onto her side and drew her legs into her belly. It wasn't possible. Her beautiful boy who that very minute was suiting up for baseball practice, clueless that the government had robbed him of his future. She covered her mouth even though no one was home to hear her.

The envelope had slid under the entryway console. She nudged it further until only the stamp stuck out. She could claim they never received the letter. Mail got lost all the time. She sat up. Her finger lingered at the edge of the envelope. The cleaner was thorough, but she might overlook it.

Tenley traced the whorl of wood grain on the console. It was the palest spot in the walnut, a bleak eye squinting back at her. Even if she hid the letter or buried it in the trash, another would arrive. It was probably waiting in Chance's email. Had he opened it yet? She didn't want him to be alone when he read the letter.

All her life, there had been people she could call. She thought of the University of Texas alumni boosters who underwrote the baseball team. One alum had reached out to Chance his junior year of high school offering him a penthouse suite and a Porsche during his campus visit. It was all hush-hush. How pathetic that her first thought was to call these old cronies to find out who they knew in the Department of Defense, so they didn't lose their star left fielder to a war zone.

She fished out the letter. Chance needed to confirm receipt within twenty-four hours or risk fines or even a prison sentence. Heart racing, she grabbed the edge of the console and pulled herself up.

She gazed down the hall to the stairs. Family pictures lined the staircase in alternating black and white frames. Her eyes bounced over the photos of Chance over the years. The towheaded toddler splashing in a kiddy pool. High atop Harrison's shoulders, an orange popsicle dripping sticky streaks down his chubby arm. Squatting over his dinosaur collection, meticulously separated into rows of carnivores and plant eaters. Clutching another spelling bee award and grinning, the frilly tips of adult teeth poking through his gums. His first baseball portrait. She remembered how he kept adjusting his socks and apologizing to the photographer for making her wait. Her sweet, sweet boy. A boy no longer.

Her cell phone beeped with another call. It was Jen, her best friend and co-chair for the Academy's auction. Tenley had been on hold with vacation ownership for ten minutes. She switched over to answer Jen's call. Jen had two daughters, fifteen and thirteen, years away from registering for the draft.

Jen launched into update on the Academy's spring auction: a week in Mexico, a spa package... Their auction committee had gathered tens of thousands of dollars of merchandise and trips. How many times had Tenley looked around the room at one of their meetings and thought, these women should be running the country, not wasting their time on fundraising?

She interrupted Jen. "Have you ever organized a protest?"

## PRIVATELY IN THE BLIND

I'm flipping through channels looking for the ballgame when my thumb freezes on the remote. I turn up the volume. *Bakesale mama takes on the draft*. I don't know much about bake sales, but I can guess enough about this woman. Highland Park mansion, a garage of luxury sedans.

She's being interviewed by a brunette chick in a living room with not one, but two Christmas trees. There's a massive white fireplace and four red stockings with posh names in cursive.

Tenley Ward sits on the edge of her chair, her legs crossed. She's got killer legs. She looks tensed, revved to pounce. I wouldn't be surprised if after the interview, someone takes her aside and says, *Maybe bring it down a notch, doll*. I get the sense she'll tell them where to stick it.

"You started off as bake sale moms from your children's school," the reporter says. "Does it bother you that the nickname's stuck?"

Tenley smiles. "Our organization is actually called MOMS, Mothers Opposing More Senselessness. They always say, if you want something done, give the job to a busy woman. The hashtag bake sale moms seems to have struck a chord with mothers everywhere. Most of us have been active in our children's classrooms, PTA, fundraising. And now, we've created a regional movement. In just four weeks, MOMS has thousands of women working throughout the state to organize against the draft."

"From school bake sales to the anti-draft movement!" The reporter leans back and smiles like she's a goddamn genius for making this connection. "That brings me to your jumbotron outside the Selective Service Office. Why is it important to broadcast the s's death toll where people are registering for the draft?"

"We want people to remember how many American lives are at stake," Tenley Ward says. She's still talking but instead of her face, they're showing a jumbotron on a corner a few blocks from my house. "It's one thing to talk about these wars requiring more troops. But we can't ignore that Americans are being killed every day. And so many more will die if we send tens of thousands of draftees into all these war zones."

"And what about the cost of the jumbotron?" The reporter looks down at her notes. "Isn't it a lot of money to keep running every day?"

"It's expensive but critical to our movement. We plan to fund jumbotrons throughout Texas, and ultimately, through MOMS chapters across the country, so Americans can't look away from the death toll. We must stop the draft before a single American is called up."

"This movement strikes close to home, doesn't it? Your own son Chance is nineteen. I understand he drew a low number in the draft lottery so he could be one of the first to go."

I'm braced for a photo of her kid. But lucky for me, the camera stays on Tenley Ward's face. Big hazel eyes. Full lips.

"Yes, the draft hits close to home, Debra. For me, and hundreds of thousands of mothers across the country, and we are taking our protest straight to the White House."

My phone's in my lap. I could google her and see why she's so familiar, but I don't want to take my eyes off her, Scoob.

"Thank you for your time, Tenley," the reporter says. "Tenley Ward, former Dallas television reporter, now founder and director of MOMS, an organization opposed to the draft. Best of luck to you, Tenley."

*Former television reporter.* The news cuts to commercials, and I enter her name in my phone. The first few search results are

for this anti-draft thing but then I see a picture of her holding a microphone. I glance through the google searches to see her stories: a local pastor's fundraising scam, an emergency flash flood warning system. Now I remember her. She was the one they stuck out in an ice storm or up to her waist in flood waters. In a helicopter heading into the eye of a tornado. Maybe the woman had a sadistic boss, or she was seriously bad ass.

There are a bunch of recent pictures of her in front of her outdoor jumbotron. It's massive. I've only seen them hanging from the ceilings of sports arenas, but this one's parked on the sidewalk, twenty feet high. Flickering over the screen is a big flag which looks more patriotic than the S.S. office's lame sign.

I zoom in on the jumbotron screen to read the countdown to the first drafted troops being called up. But it's the number in the center that's huge. The American death toll. It's a jumbotron of death, Scoob. In each of the pictures on my phone, this number is different. One week ago, three days ago, four weeks ago when she put up the jumbotron. I bounce between the different pictures and do simple arithmetic: how many of us killed each week? Every day? And what number did she start with? From how long ago? How far back would this bake sale mama have to scroll on her jumbotron to find the exact digits for you and Hank and Drake and Lou and Radar and Mac. You must be in there. All six of you. And that feels like something. It feels like a start.

## 2.

### TENLEY

When she hears the front door open, Tenley races to the

window. *Please*, she prays. *Let it be Luisa!*

Tenley breathes a sigh of relief when she sees the nanny's blue Honda parked in front of the house. She still expects to find the lines of cars from the early days of MOMS when everyone congregated with laptops in her kitchen. That was a month ago. Now around one hundred volunteers work at the protest site in front of the Selective Service Office where Americans, ages 18-28, register for the draft.

She listens for noises downstairs. It's quiet. But then, it isn't even seven a.m., and the kids are still on Christmas break. Her daughter Connelly will sleep until ten, but the twins will be up any second. Tenley yawns. The past few weeks have been a whirlwind. Each day, more people are connecting through social media about starting new MOMS chapters. Tenley has a team of social media specialists handling everything from content to audience development. Her Director of Communications, Gretchen, should arrive soon.

Tenley grabs her phone from her bedside table. She scans the headlines, her heart settling when she sees Europe wasn't wiped out by nuclear weapons while she slept. Then, she checks her followers on her socials. The number has budged a little from last night. They have more than 250,000 followers. Retweets and likes from unicorn Democrats in the south, and a handful of liberal-leaning Texas celebs, musicians, and actors, have grown their numbers, but they have a long way to go to hit a critical mass. They need someone big to give her and MOMS a national platform before their rally in three weeks when the president comes to Dallas.

Heading into her master closet she surveys her clean (cleanish?) options for today's uniform: navy silk blouse, dark denim jeans, and ballet flats. She's tempted to add a touch of red but worries the color combo will read as an obvious attempt at patriotism. She draws her blonde bob into a low ponytail, and heads downstairs to the kitchen.

Her nanny Luisa is bent over the dishwasher. Coffee is already percolating in the machine. Next to it, the ugly coffee urn that her assistant Gretchen rented when the moms were meeting in the kitchen. The urn is another item on the to-do list. One more item that won't get checked off unless her husband Harrison returns it to the catering company and pays the late fee. Not likely after last night.

"Good morning, Luisa," Tenley says. "How are you?"

Luisa straightens. "Good, thank you. I started coffee for you."

"You're a life saver. Thank you."

Luisa wears her black hair parted sharply and pulled tight in a low bun. She is fifty-five, already a grandmother, but she looks annoyingly younger than Tenley who's ten years her junior. As usual, Luisa is in her standard work uniform of hospital scrubs. Today they're winter themed with snowflakes and snowmen. She clearly doesn't want to risk ruining her nice clothes around the twins. Tenley doesn't blame her.

Luisa swivels a towel up inside each glass before setting them upside down in the cabinet.

"Thank you for coming in early again," Tenley says, pouring coffee into a mug. "I don't know how we'd survive without you."

"No problem," Luisa says.

On the floor is a box of MOMS supplies. The twins have been messing with the badges and tee-shirts. Tenley stoops to refold the shirts and move the cardboard inserts into a plastic baggie. She'll ask Gretchen to order more supplies for the photo badges moms make of their kids and their draft numbers.

"May I fix you a latte?" Tenley asks Luisa.

"No, I'm good. Thank you."

"You sure? It's easy enough," Tenley says. Luisa wasn't around last night to witness the fight with Harrison, but maybe she senses that the effort of fetching another cup, pressing a button, and steaming milk would be Tenley's tipping point.

Luisa smiles and shakes her head, and Tenley is so grateful that she almost hugs her. Instead, she turns sideways to allow Luisa to slip by with a stack of clean cereal bowls.

Tenley sips her coffee, desperate for that first surge of caffeine. She needs a second before checking her email. Everything is moving so quickly now: more donations, volunteers, greater visibility. Only Harrison isn't thrilled.

She sets her coffee on her desk next to the sticky notes Harrison leaves every morning. Usually, there's a silly knock-knock joke for the twins, which Tenley has to read aloud because the boys are still not sounding out words. Harrison's message for Connelly is typically some hype for her next hockey game. Every note is signed, "I love you. Daddy."

Today, Tenley's note reads: "I'll pick up dinner." It is the only note of the four that doesn't end with "I love you." Not even an "xo." How long has it been since Harrison called her "My " his silly version of her nickname Ten, his "perfect Ten"? After twenty-one years of marriage and four children, she has no illusions about being perfect, but five years ago they struck an equilibrium with her staying home that felt doable. Until she started MOMS. She feels a spike of anger. Last night, she knew Harrison was picking a fight when he accused her of missing the deadline for T-ball sign-ups.

"I'm on it," she said, blinking quickly the way her teenage daughter did when cornered. Tenley turned back to the pile on her kitchen desk. Buried in the mess and somewhere in her email inbox were the forms for Pre-K T-ball. She couldn't have missed the deadline. The season didn't even start until March.

"You're too late," Harrison said. "I heard there aren't any more spots in the West

League."

"So the twins will play in the East League."

"The East League sucks. Who can you call? We must know someone."

"I said I'd take care of it." Quietly, so he wouldn't hear, she sifted to the bottom of her pile. She was sure she'd requested two sign-up forms from the West League. She knew she did. And if she had forgotten, Harrison could go online and get the boys on the cancellation list.

She spun around to tell him this. He was standing in the middle of the kitchen, his sleeves bunched at his elbows, his dress shirt so rumpled he must have fished it out of the dirty hamper. His hair had grown out, and she watched him brush it back with the heel of his hand, the way the twins rubbed sleep from their eyes in that clumsy, sweet way. Surely, he could feel her thinking these things and would reach for her. He would hold her, and say, *I respect your monumental efforts to keep our son safe. You are still my perfect Ten.*

But Harrison wasn't reaching for her. He was glaring at her. "I know you're doing your best, but everything feels a little out of control around here." He yanked on the long hair at his forehead. He'd missed a haircut. Also, her fault, because she was the one who scheduled his appointments. But if his hair was bothering him, he could call his stylist or have his assistant call. At what point would he step up and start doing more than collecting the twins from playdates, grabbing dinner, and shuttling Connelly to and from hockey? He was doing a lot these days, she reflected. Was it fair to ask more of him? He had a long work week, but so did she.

"What are you doing, Tenley?"

She spoke calmly. "I am trying to find the T-ball forms."

"I'm talking about all of this." He swept a hand over the piles on her desk, the boxes of MOMS' supplies, the Christmas decorations that she still hadn't taken down. "What is this really about?" She started to protest but he held up a hand to shut her up. "I know, I know. A critical number of followers and then you'll do some big live Facebook event or TikTok thingy with a million people. And then what? You convince Congress to make exemptions for college students? You convince the president to change his mind? Is that what you imagine?"

There was a box of MOMS' supplies at his feet, which he had toed inch by inch out of his way, but now, the box toppled, spilling brochures.

*Imagine?!* Imagine was what nursery teachers said before passing out paper and crayons. There was nothing imaginary about what she had created in less than a month: a non-profit organization with members across North Texas. She was making news every day. People were listening. They were paying attention to her. Lots of people. Just not her husband.

She was raging but her voice was cool as she knelt to right the box and restack everything. "Yes, Harrison. That is exactly what I *imagine*."

She plops down on a kitchen stool. This is the home she has created for her family. The life she has built, a life she was in control of before the draft. Before she made MOMS a full-time job and put a nanny in charge of her children. Before her husband started communicating in passive-aggressive sticky notes.

She runs a hand over the French bistro counter stool and scrutinizes her choices: the antique brass pendants over the island, the white Carrera marble, which reminded her of the

café in Paris where she spent afternoons her junior year pretending to read Marguerite Duras in French. Tenley has taken great care to ensure that the marble patinaes *sans* chips or stains. Absolutely no homework projects involving glue, glitter, or permanent markers. The twins are only allowed plastic cups at the counter. Her fifteen-year-old daughter Connelly graduated to glass a long time ago but still makes a show of replacing her cup in slow motion, as if to say, *you are so neurotic*. Even Harrison has been trained never to leave a glass of orange juice or—God forbid!—red wine.

Sprigs of holly in tartan ribbon hang from the range hood, the ribbon's loop curling stiffly into a question mark. On the island is a glass vase of faux branches, so convincing that she caught Gretchen pinching them to test. The "water" inside is a clear gel, probably some cancer-causing chemical. This has been her life, these curated details: fabric, marble, synthetic branches, fake water. And for what? In three months, her son could be heading off to boot camp.

"How is John Patrick?" Luisa asks. "Is the rash on his back better?"

Was that yesterday? Or two days ago that Tenley sent Luisa to the pharmacy for a steroid cream? Tenley needs to follow up with the pediatrician.

"I haven't looked at his back," Tenley says. Luisa was probably the last to lay eyes on JP because she's bathing the boys every evening.

"Good morning!" Gretchen calls out from the back door.

"Good morning," Tenley says. "Do you need coffee?"

"I've had my matcha, thanks." Gretchen slings her bag down on a counter stool. She shrugs off her coat and Tenley catches a whiff of cold air, and then, the rush of Gretchen's perfume, which Tenley could probably name if she wasn't sleep deprived.

Gretchen drapes her coat over the back of a stool.

"Hey, Luisa," Gretchen says without looking up from her phone.

Luisa dips her head in greeting. "Good morning."

Gretchen spins back to Tenley. "Our numbers look good, right? Have you seen the news?"

Tenley's baffled by how wide-awake Gretchen always is. It must be because she's in her mid thirties, young but lucky for her, too old for the first flight of draftees. As usual, Gretchen's face looks freshly scrubbed and glowy. She's wholesome in a vaguely Scandinavian way with high cheekbones and pale eyelashes. Her sole product—as far as Tenley can tell—is lip balm, whereas Tenley is laying on foundation with a trowel.

Gretchen slides an iPad with the morning's news under Tenley's elbow. It's a map of the wars, but Tenley always sees weather alerts. She's spent her whole life in these colors of North Texas: HOT! HOT! HOT! It feels important to identify every country on this map, not because a reporter might quiz her, but because she should know where Chance might be sent to die. Ukraine, the Baltic states, the Middle East, the South China Sea. Red, red, red, red, red for active fighting. Gretchen has written the numbers of troops, "BOG" for boots on the ground, over each country. So many zeros at the end of every number. Tenley feels that familiar pinch between her eyebrows. She has to think about the meaning of boots on the ground. Not *two* boots for one soldier. One boot=one American. At the bottom is the overnight death toll. Will the number be high enough to knock the Dallas Cowboys or a freak winter storm off the front page?

"Are we still good to go on today's live shots from Command Central?" Tenley asks.

"Yup," Gretchen says, digging in her bag for her water bottle. "We'll have plenty of content for our social media."

“Good. You’re still working on the networks about national interviews? And what about those podcasts? The ones with young hosts and lots of followers?”

“On it.”

Were they doing enough? Tenley was on camera every day with the local stations. Live shots generate content, but she knows young people don’t watch the news or follow the stations on socials.

“We need a younger audience,” Tenley says.

Gretchen sets her stainless-steel water bottle on the counter with a loud clang. Tenley fights the urge to check for a chip in the marble.

“Jean’s working on it,” Gretchen says. Jean was their “new audience” gal, charged with regular posting and content pillars. In addition to learning about the regions involved and military branches, Tenley’s getting a crash course in social media.

“What about finding an angel investor?” Gretchen asks.

“Huh?”

“To fund more jumbotrons.”

Tenley can feel the coffee hitting her bloodstream. Does her team know how much she is spending on their salaries alone? Not even Harrison knows the exact amount, beyond the cost of Luisa’s forty-hour work week. All MOMS’ expenses are coming out of Tenley’s family trust, not Harrison’s salary. He can complain about her time away from the family, but he can’t accuse her of squandering *his* money.

“I’m more concerned about getting a bigger spotlight on MOMS to blow this all up,” Tenley says.

"I know," Gretchen says. "I'm meeting with the team after I've confirmed your live shots today."

"Mama?"

JP shuffles into the kitchen.

"Good morning, love," Tenley says. "Where's your brother?"

"Sleeping." JP rubs his eyes with his fists. She remembers Harrison brushing his hair out of his eyes. What if she had gone to him last night? What if she had said, *I need your support?*

JP heads to her desk for his morning note. He runs his finger over the words, and she watches him mouth, *I love you, Daddy.*

He frowns. "Daddy's gone?"

"Yes." She reaches for him. "Come here, love."

Tenley sits down on a stool and pulls JP onto her lap, tucking his legs into her. He only tolerates cuddling first thing in the morning when he's still half asleep. She dips her head into his hair and inhales. He smells of bubble bath and the clammy heat of his blankie, which he won't let her wash. She snuggles him closer.

"How's the rash on your back?" Tenley starts to lift his pajama top, but he bats her hand away.

She'll check later when he's not grumpy. Or have her grumpy husband check. She can't remember how long they're supposed to apply the steroid cream, and she's embarrassed to ask Luisa. "What would you like for breakfast, JP? Pancakes?"

He nods.

"Could you please ask Miss Luisa to make you pancakes?"

"Buenos días, mi amor," Luisa says, retrieving the box of

pancake mix from the pantry. “¿Cómo estás?”

“Bien,” JP mutters.

“And?” Tenley whispers, her lips grazing his pudgy cheek.

“Gracias. ¿Y tú?”

Luisa sets the glasses she’s holding carefully on the counter before clapping quietly. Tenley isn’t comfortable with her son’s use of the informal “tú.” It lacks respect. Although of course he would use the familiar tense with a woman who spends more time with him than his own mother. Tenley squeezes JP tighter and vows to be home for bedtime every night this week.

JP wiggles out of her lap, jabbing her with his elbow.

“Careful please,” she says.

He climbs up onto the adjacent stool. “C’n I have orange juice?”

“Please may I?”

Luisa slips a placemat under JP’s elbows. “I’ll bring your juice, chiquito.”

“Thank you, Luisa,” Tenley says. She is the only one in the family who doesn’t attempt to speak Spanish because Connelly mocks her pronunciation.

Tenley picks up her phone. *Tuesday, January 3, 2027.* On Monday, the kids will return to school and resume all their activities. Harrison will have to step up chauffeuring duties. Unless the shitty East League doesn’t have open spots. Honestly, they could all use a break. Connelly’s U-16 hockey team travels all over the state, and since Tenley started MOMS, she’s depended on other moms to drive Connelly to the out-of-town games. Which reminds her— she needs to write a thank you to the mom who took Connelly to Houston last

weekend.

She scans the news for mention of Brothers of the Militia or BOM, as they call themselves. They're former military guys. They haven't threatened violence, but the acronym BOM is worrisome.

She flips to other news sources. The president's war campaign with the same slogans: the battle for democracy, the war on fascism. There are photos of kids protesting in Austin, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston. Close-ups of college students with placards reading HELL NO, WE WON'T GO! Kids burning draft letters.

JP retrieves his toy figure from the other end of the island and clicks a machine gun into its arm.

"Not at the counter please," Tenley says, extracting the killing machine from JP's fist and setting it out of reach. When Chance was little, she never let him play with guns, not even water guns. She can't picture him with a weapon. How would he survive boot camp when he can't even stay on top of his laundry? The last time she visited his dorm room, she gagged at the stench. Thankfully, his workout clothes and baseball uniform are laundered at the field house. He is nineteen years old, and all his needs are taken care of. The worst he's had to contend with was elbow tendinitis that sidelined him for a season in high school.

Luisa sets a pancake down, cut into bite-sized pieces. Tenley squirts a pool of syrup on the edge of the plate. She watches JP spear a piece of pancake and hover his fork before carefully lowering it to dab at the syrup. *Normal behavior?* she wonders, as he again dips, lifts, and sets the fork down without even tasting the pancake. *OCD?* He's already being evaluated for ADHD. She can't handle another diagnosis right now. Maybe he'll outgrow the weirdness about food. Aren't most five-year-old boys a pain in the ass about something?

She checks her phone for the time and stands.

"I have to go, baby." She kisses JP's cheek. "Please listen to Luisa today, alright?"

JP mumbles goodbye. The hair over his ear looks wet. She sniffs. *Syrup?* Now, he'll need a shampoo. She hopes Luisa's up for a bath time battle. One more standoff Tenley won't be around to witness.

"I'm off," she says to Gretchen. "I'll touch base after the morning live shots."

Gretchen flashes her a thumbs up, her eyes on her phone. "Go work your magic, Mama!"