**RIBBON OF LIGHT**

By Claire Yezbak Fadden

Julie Rafferty slipped off her linen jacket and placed the wrap next to her, wishing she had worn something less boardroom to the basketball court. Sandwiched between her two daughters, she didn’t mind the school’s hard wooden bleachers. Her son Jason’s junior varsity basketball game provided the perfect distraction from her workday responsibilities. She had left the office early—something she rarely did—excited to join her husband Trevor in cheering for Jason and his team. Today was a chance for the five Raffertys to spend time together as a family.

She caught Emily’s eye and planted a quick kiss on her seven-year-old’s chubby cheek. Nicole, on the verge of tweenhood, scooted quickly away, mortified Julie might kiss her in public.

“Your mother loves you.” She kissed Nicole anyway.

“Mom, not here.” Nicole dragged her palm across her skin, wiping away lipstick traces. “Not in front of Ethan.”

*So, he’s the boy you have a crush on this week.*

“Did you get your homework done during afterschool care?”

“I didn’t have any homework,” Emily answered, her blue eyes brimming happily.

Nicole frowned. “I have a chapter to read in history. I’ll do it later.”

“Yes, you will. Right when we get home. I don’t want your grades slipping because you’re spending time impressing Ethan.”

“Mom.” Nicole voiced her disdain. “Not so loud.”

“Just kidding. Where’s Dad?”

“Not here yet, I guess,” her oldest daughter snapped, clearly annoyed at her mother’s presence in her orbit.

“Maybe he’s not coming because you came,” Emily added.

“What does that mean?”

“Usually he’s here and you’re not. Maybe he’s taking a break.”

*Just like him to complain that I’m the absent parent and then not show up. And after the big scene he made this morning about how I’m missing our children growing up.*

Julie was familiar with solo parenting. Her mother couldn’t attend many of Julie’s or her sisters’ events. So, when Monica and Kate looked to the sidelines of a soccer game or into the audience at a school play, she was the one they saw clapping.

Julie proudly possessed many of their single mother’s strong qualities, but the one trait she didn’t want to imitate was being an absentee parent. Her endless commitments as the founder of FunWorks, a fledgling software toy company, had quickly turned her into the role she had feared most. But not today. Today she arrived at the gym early, making certain Jason saw her. She wanted Trevor to see her, too. *Where was he?*

She unfastened the top two buttons of her silk blouse and fanned out her collar a bit, hoping to capture a sexy wife look. She wore the oversized bib necklace, a gift from Trevor, even though the clasp rubbed relentlessly against her skin. As soon as she opened the box on Christmas morning, Trevor hurried to put the jewels around her neck, saying, “I couldn’t resist. I knew how beautiful the gold and turquoise would look with your blue eyes and auburn hair.”

Why had she not worn that necklace before today?

The gymnasium’s noisy commotion and high energy served as a welcome contrast to her workday, riddled with suppliers and shipping companies. She wanted nothing more than to watch her son make layups and free throws.

Julie marveled at the strength of Jason’s legs, hairier than she remembered. With his knees bent slightly, her son kept his wrist loose and swished in both free throws before searching the stands for his dad. Julie did a quick scan of the gym. Still no Trevor.

The buzzer signaled the end of the first half. Julie cheered, hoping her enthusiasm would make up for Trevor’s absence. Jason rewarded her with a steely glance and joined his teammates on the bench guzzling water from a squirt bottle. Her throat tightened at her son’s disappointment. Trevor hadn’t seen a single basket scored today.

Things weren’t going well between her and Trevor, even after they had hired Teresa Desmond to help around the house. Grateful for Teresa’s many talents, she had been the only plus to emerge from one of Julie and Trevor’s many fights.

Old-fashioned, Trevor wanted his wife to meet him at the door at the end of his workday, the way his mother did. Be the goddess of the home. That wasn’t Julie’s plan and she told him so. Their blowout several months ago started innocently enough. Nicole couldn’t find toilet paper. Somehow that was Julie’s fault.

Emily jammed an elbow into her mother’s side. “Jason has eight points now.”

“What?” Julie shouted, not realizing the third quarter had begun.

“Jason. He just made another basket. Weren’t you watching?” Nicole chided in her preteen, know-it-all voice.

“Yeah, I saw. Way to go, Jason,” she shouted as an afterthought. “Where’s your dad? He missed the first half.” She checked her phone. No message. Was he mad about her not being in the mood last night? How could he expect her to feel romantic toward him after the cruel way he had spoken to her? She had laid nestled against him, escaping in his kisses from the day’s stress, treasuring his embrace. And then he told her he wanted to sell FunWorks. All the passion and love warming her body seconds earlier erupted into icy shards.

“Can I have money for the snack bar?” Nicole asked, ignoring Julie’s inquiry.

Julie handed her a five-dollar bill. “Get a little something but don’t ruin your appetite. Mrs. D will have dinner ready when we get home.” The sisters scurried down the stands, racing toward nachos and licorice.

Minutes later, Nicole plunked down next to her mom, spilling cheese sauce on her tailored jacket. Emily slid in next to her sister, one hand holding a soda and the other a candy bar.

“Oh no! Sorry Mom. I didn’t mean—”

“That’s all right. That’s what I get for wearing work clothes to play.” She was as much at fault as Nicole for the accident. She wasn’t about to let spilled cheese sauce ruin the evening. She reached for a napkin, poured water on it, and gently blotted the fabric. “Don’t worry. The jacket can be cleaned.”

Nicole held the nacho-filled cardboard bowl toward her mother, smiling. “Want any?”

Julie slipped a tortilla strip into her mouth and grimaced at the mixture of salty and stale. The cheese sauce coating the chips staved off her third-quarter hunger pangs.

She gazed around the gymnasium, hoping for a sign of Trevor. During the timeouts, she spied Jason’s blue eyes scanning the stands, searching for his father, too. His broad shoulders and solid frame reminded her of a young Trevor. Her firstborn, a full head taller than most of his teammates, knocked hard on the door to manhood, seemingly overnight.

Trevor was staying away on purpose, she realized, her eyes misting over. His way of getting even because she was leaving on a business trip.

“Hey.” A familiar hand touched Julie’s shoulder, causing an electrifying charge to pulse through her body.

“I was wondering if you were going to show up,” she said with more bitterness than she meant.

She was relieved to see Trevor. She wanted to be near him, touch his face, hold hands like they used to. Instead, she made a snarky comment, driving another wedge between them. Seemed like inflicting hurt and pain became the goal of every conversation they shared recently. Somehow their loving, supportive relationship had turned spiteful and vindictive.

Julie couldn’t put her finger on when things changed, but she knew why. Trevor hated the time she devoted to growing FunWorks. He never understood her need to stand on her own two feet and take pride in something she created. He would never understand how her company gave her a sense of security he never could.

She moved her jacket to make room for him. Instead, he squeezed in between the girls. “Don’t start with me. I work too, you know. I got here as soon as I could.”

“What’s Rickman got to do with you missing half the game?”

“He wouldn’t stop rambling about nailing down sales figures before next week’s shareholder meeting. Man, that guy is paranoid.”

“Hi, Daddy. Want some nachos?”

“Sure, sweet cheeks.” Trevor hugged Emily and Nicole before grabbing a chip. “Finally, I told him I had to leave. What did I miss?”

“Jason went on a scoring run. He has twelve points, eight from free throws.” Julie allowed her pride to slip out. “Guess all that time you spent in the driveway teaching him how to draw a foul paid off.”

“Someone has got to be home with our kids,” Trevor said, his words dripping with judgment.

“Nicole, Emily. Go wash that sauce off your hands,” Julie ordered.

“I can just lick them clean,” Emily said.

Nicole stood. “Come on, Em. Let’s go. I think they’re going to fight again and Mom doesn’t want us to hear.”

“We’re not fighting,” Trevor said. “Just go wash your hands like your mother asked.”

She watched the girls head toward the bathrooms. “They’re right, you know. All we do anymore is argue.”

“Not true. You’re not at home long enough. I can’t believe you have another weeklong business trip.”

“I have a commitment to the company and the people who work there,” Julie said in hushed tones. “If you can’t or won’t accept that, then there is nothing I can do to make things better between us.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Trevor slid closer, swiping at a lock of his sandy blond hair. “When we were first married, all you talked about is how your dad deserted you and your sisters. How awful life was growing up without a father. Well, growing up with a mother who’d rather be somewhere else is just as bad. How do you think the kids feel about you never being around?”

“You’re going to start that argument here? Now?”

“You’re more like your dad than you realize.”

She trembled at the insult. “Don’t say that. I’m nothing like him. Our children never want for anything.”

“There’s all sorts of abandonment, Jules. Money isn’t everything.”

Julie gathered her jacket and purse. Her anger boiled on the edge, ready to topple out and scald Trevor. “I thought for a change we could skip the fighting, but I was wrong.”

“You’ve got to take your foot off the gas pedal before it’s too late. Our kids are growing up and you’re rarely here for them…or for me.”

“Things will improve after this product rollout. I’ll be around more. I promise.”

“Just answer this: Is it really that awful to be married to a man who wants to be with you?”

“Trevor, don’t do this now. Just when the company is about to move to the next level.”

“Yeah. The next level. And then the next.”

Emily bounded toward her mother, displaying her hands for inspection. “Are these clean enough?”

“Perfect.” He shifted enough for Emily and Nicole to slip between him and Julie.

“I’ve got to return a few calls and answer some emails. I’ll see you at home after the game,” Julie said to Trevor.

He shook his head in disbelief. “Gotta love this tag-team parenting.”

“Obviously we need to talk, but not here.” She leaned toward him. “Later tonight, at home. You know that place you want me to be.”

“I can keep wishing,” he said, now facing the basketball court, more interested in Jason’s breakaway. “Drive to the basket. Drive to the basket!” He leaped up and shouted, “Yeah! Nice bucket, Jason.”

Julie clomped down the bleacher steps, the sound of Trevor’s cheers echoing in her ears. She didn’t turn back, fuming at him for ruining the evening. She wanted them to be on the same side for a change, cheering together. Instead, he insisted on playing games, manipulating her to get what he wanted. She had witnessed her mother endure those same tricks.

Trevor had grabbed the final thread holding their already faltering marriage together and yanked hard, like a child wanting to unravel a wool sweater.

A harsh realization slithered through Julie’s chest and took hold. *We can never weave these strands back together. Things will never be the same.*

Julie straightened her frame to her full five feet six height, convinced of her wisdom in investing herself fully in her company. Her strides lengthened until she reached the exit.

Outside the gym, she leaned against the wall, her chest exploding in anguish and despair instead of vindication. The reality shattered her heart, but at least she and her children wouldn’t endure poverty the way she and her sisters had done.

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Twenty minutes later, Julie turned into their driveway, still steaming at Trevor for ruining what she had hoped would be a family evening. Imagine him blaming his boss Joe Rickman for his own tardiness. Trevor had rambled on about how Joe wanted to nail down sales figures before next week’s shareholders’ meeting.

Something about a hostile takeover or some such nonsense.

Julie didn’t care. She wanted what she wanted. And tonight, what she wanted most was for her and Trevor to be the perfect parents; at least in appearance if nothing else.

Wallowing in her self-pity, she nearly missed Zeke, Teresa’s son, parked a few houses away. He leaned against the hood of his car while his mother stood at the curbside, her back toward Julie. Even in the dusky light, she could read Zeke’s body language, see his faded T-shirt, torn jeans, and uncombed hair.

Julie crept to the front of the house, outside of Teresa and Zeke’s line of vision, but close enough to watch Teresa reach into her apron pocket and hand an envelope to her son.

Zeke, Trevor’s boyhood friend, grabbed the thick envelope, kissed his mother hurriedly, and slipped the packet into his jacket pocket. With his mission accomplished, he started his car and raced away, leaving his mother’s slumped silhouette behind.

Her heart ached for Teresa. Being a single mother of an adult child was no easier than the hard life Julie’s mother had shouldered. Teresa’s only child drifted from job to job. After her husband’s death, she had used what little money left from the life insurance policy to bail Zeke out of financial trouble, spoiling him at every turn.

Zeke could never seem to pull the pieces of his life together and Julie suspected the reason why.

Teresa stepped from the curb and quickly wiped tears with the corners of her apron.

Julie met her on the concrete path to the front door. “I see Zeke’s back in town.”

“For a little while,” Teresa said.

“What did he want?”

“Oh, nothing. Some mail came to the house,” she replied, moving away.

“Is he in trouble again?”

“He’s getting out of trouble.”

Julie recognized her tone—the same one Julie had used minutes ago when she tried to convince herself of something she hoped for rather than believed.

“Marilyn threw him out,” Teresa continued, her eyes staring at the Rafferty doorway as though the answer laid just inside the opening. “Told him if he wants her back, he has to stop gambling.”

Julie wrapped her arm around Teresa’s shoulders and pulled her close. The tension in her body released slowly as they headed toward the door.

“He’s joined Gamblers Anonymous. This time he’ll make it, you’ll see.”

Julie nodded, never breaking her stride*.* Every parent wanted to believe their child’s story, no matter the evidence to the contrary. Teresa was no different.

She wished Teresa’s motherly conviction would be strong enough to change Zeke, but in her gut, Julie saw only more heartbreak ahead.

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“Can I stay in your room for a little while?” Emily’s squeaky voice emanated from Teresa’s open door into the dark hallway a few hours later.

“Sure, sweetie,” Teresa responded, arms opened wide. “Did you have a bad dream?”

Emily nodded and clutched Horace Hardbuckle, her scraggly rainbow-colored stuffed animal, a bit tighter.

“Well, you and Horace come sit with me for a minute.” Teresa threw back the blankets and scooted over to make room.

Emily didn’t hesitate to jump into the bed. Teresa cuddled the child and gently rubbed her arm. For the third time in two weeks, Emily had turned to her for late night comfort. The child’s warm body curled against Teresa.

“You’re shaking. Was the dream that scary?”

“I wasn’t asleep.” Emily wiped a kernel of sleepy sand from her eye. “They’re fighting again. About Daddy missing the basketball game.”

“Your parents are just talking, honey. That’s how adults talk.”

Emily shook her head. “They say mean things. They try to whisper, but I can still hear.”

Teresa agreed. In nearly sixty years, she had never witnessed such vitriol and cruelty between a married couple. During the past five months, she sought every chance to defuse the mounting pressure building between them. She wasn’t always successful.

Their arguments boiled down to the same thing: Trevor wanted Julie to be home. That meant selling FunWorks. Teresa knew that wouldn’t happen, even if keeping the company cost Julie her marriage.

In recent weeks, Julie and Trevor’s volatile relationship escalated to heightened levels. Each day only magnified the fact that Teresa’s extra help around the house provided an inadequate bandage on a festering wound. Trevor and Julie’s love affair needed a much stronger remedy than what Teresa could offer.

“It’s late and there’s school tomorrow,” Teresa reminded. “How about you stay here tonight. We’ll have a sleepover in my room, okay?”

Minutes later Teresa heard Emily’s gentle snores. If only she could solve her own problems this easily.