

THE PARTY

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INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

To say the place is a bit of a mess would be an understatement.

Everything is halfway finished, the beginnings of a birthday party. PRESENTS sit on the table, waiting to be opened. A pack of BALLOONS lie on the counter, untouched.

A rather generic sign reads: HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

KATIE, late 30s, stands at the counter, icing a cake. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she tries to make it perfect, drawing a close approximation of Spider-Man's mask.

Beside her, cooking burgers on the stove, is her sister, MEGAN, late 20s, and much less stressed.

BRIAN, 11, full of energy, bolts into the room and comes to a stop in front of his mom and aunt.

BRIAN

Hey, mom, guess what?

KATIE

What?

BRIAN

I invited Dad to the party. He's bringing Danielle.

Katie immediately tenses up. Struggles to keep it together.

Megan stares at her sister, waiting to see if she's gonna pull through.

KATIE

You invited your father?

BRIAN

Yeah. Is that okay?

KATIE

Of course. It's fine. Totally fine.

It's clearly not fine.

Brian smiles, completely oblivious.

BRIAN

Awesome!

He turns. Sprints from the room.

Once she's sure he's out of earshot, Katie drops the knife onto the counter. Braces herself.

MEGAN
You all right, sis?

KATIE
Do I look all right?

MEGAN
Do you really want me to answer that?

KATIE
I can't believe he did that.

MEGAN
He probably just wanted his dad here.
It's not that big of a deal.

Katie rounds on her sister. Fuming.

KATIE
Are you crazy? If Christopher is bringing Danielle it's gonna turn into a mess. Jacob is coming over-- it was supposed to be a chance for him and Brian to spend some time together. Now it's gonna be weird.

MEGAN
It won't be that bad. Maybe you're overreacting.

Katie shoots her sister a death glare. Crosses her arms.

KATIE
It's gonna be a disaster. How am I supposed to deal with all of them at the same time? I can barely handle Christopher on a good day.

MEGAN
I promise it won't be that bad.

The door bell rings.

MEGAN
Is that them already?

Katie checks the wall clock. Her eyes widen in panic.

KATIE
It's Jacob! I told him to come early.

She storms from the room, still wearing her apron.

INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Katie opens the door, revealing--

JACOB, late 30s, dressed nice but not too nice, and smiling.
A gift bag in one hand.

JACOB

Hey.

He steps inside. Kisses Katie. Sits the bag down and removes his coat.

JACOB

Sorry I'm late. I wanted to find something Brian would like. Is he into--

KATIE

My ex is coming.

Jacob stops, his coat almost touching the hook by the door. He immediately retracts his it and quickly pulls it on.

JACOB

I just remembered I've got something to do. Tell Brian I said happy birthday.

He starts for the door.

Katie grabs his arm, pulls him back.

KATIE

Whoa, where do you think you're going?

JACOB

Literally anywhere but here.

KATIE

You can't leave. I promised Brian he'd get a chance to meet you for longer than two minutes.

JACOB

He'll be fine, he's got his dad.

Katie lets go of Jacob's arm. She stares him down, breathing hard. A woman determined.

KATIE

You can't go. I need you. Brian needs you.

JACOB

He won't even know I'm here.

KATIE

We talked about this when we started dating. You said you were okay with it.

JACOB

I didn't know it involved a get together with your ex-husband.

Katie gives Jacob the sad puppy eyes, really laying it on thick.

KATIE

Please? For me...

Jacob sighs. Removes his coat for the second time. Hangs it up.

JACOB

All right, but you owe me.

KATIE

What do you want?

JACOB

I haven't decided yet. But you owe me.

KATIE

Fine.

INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Jacob now stands between Katie and Megan, putting the final touches on the birthday dinner. All three wear aprons-- Jacob's pink and ruffly compared to the other two's muted, simple ones.

Brian sits at the table, anxiously bouncing up and down.

BRIAN

Is it done yet?

KATIE

Almost.

BRIAN
That's what you said ten minutes ago.

KATIE
And I meant it.

Brian looks at Megan.

BRIAN
Aunt Megan, has mom always been this slow?

MEGAN
Pretty much.

KATIE
Thanks.

Katie checks the clock again.

KATIE
What time did your dad say he'd be here?

Brian shrugs. Grabs an empty balloon from the table. Stretches it out, seeing how far he can stretch it before it rips.

BRIAN
He didn't say.

KATIE
Great. I love surprises.

JACOB
No you don't.

Katie steps on Jacob's foot. Shoots Jacob a look that says *shut up!*

Jacob groans, removing his weight from his injured foot.

JACOB
That was my foot.

KATIE
Oh, I'm sorry. It was an accident.

JACOB
Yeah... sure.

The doorbell rings again.

Brian jumps out of his seat like he received an electric shock.

BRIAN
Dad's here!

He runs into the other room, leaving the three adults behind.

KATIE
Oh, God...

Jacob wraps an arm around Katie's waist. Kisses her on the forehead.

JACOB
It's fine. You got this.

KATIE
Glad you've got faith in me, but you're wrong. Christopher's an ass and Danielle has to be one of the biggest--

Brian enters the room, holding a decent-sized box, flanked by CHRISTOPHER, 30s, clean cut, and DANIELLE, barely 22, but looks 19, blond hair styled to perfection.

KATIE
Hey! Look who made it!

Jacob and Megan stare at Katie, humored by her faux happiness.

CHRISTOPHER
Sorry, traffic was a beast.

BRIAN
Mom, look what Dad got me!

He holds up the box. A brand new NINTENDO SWITCH.

KATIE
Wow. That's nice. You've been talking about that for months. I wish I'd thought of that.

She shoots daggers at Christopher, who completely misses it.

Danielle steps forward and examines the food sitting on the counter. It's unclear whether or not she's impressed or disgusted.

DANIELLE

This all looks so good, Katie. You really outdid yourself.

Katie looks like she's getting a root canal without being numbed first.

KATIE

Thanks, Danielle. Everything's pretty much done, so if you guys wanna go to the dining room, we'll bring everything out.

CHRISTOPHER

Sounds good.

He grabs Brian by the shoulder and leads him out of the room.

CHRISTOPHER

Come on, buddy, you can show me how to set this thing up.

The three of them leave the room.

Katie immediately turns to Jacob and Megan, her face flushed. Her anger palpable.

KATIE

He knew I was getting Brian a Switch for his birthday. I told him.

MEGAN

Maybe it's a honest mistake?

KATIE

No, it's not. He's doing what he always does: trying to buy Brian's love instead of earning it.

JACOB

It's fine. I can take it back to the store.

KATIE

Don't worry about it. I got him some other stuff, I'll just give him his big present later. Thanks, though.

Jacob nods. He tried.

JACOB

Are you gonna be okay?

KATIE

Me? Yeah, I'll be fine. Might need a little bit of wine, but I'll get through it.

She grabs a plate of food and heads for the dining room.

Jacob turns to Megan. Removes his apron.

MEGAN

Don't look at me. She's your girlfriend.

JACOB

Yeah, but she's your sister.

MEGAN

You can't prove that.

INT. DINING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Everyone sits around the table, their plates mostly cleared of all food. Remnants of burgers and fries remain. Presents sit on the table. Forgotten in favor of his Switch.

Brian stares at it with undivided attention. His face as joyous as it's possible to be.

The room could be on fire and he wouldn't notice.

Katie drinks from her cup-- could be wine-- as her eyes dart from Brian to Christopher and back again. She's trying not to say anything, is mostly succeeding in keeping it together, but she's dangerously close to losing it.

KATIE

Sweetheart, why don't you wait to play until later?

BRIAN

But Mom... I want to show Dad how to play.

KATIE

I'm sure it can wait.

BRIAN

Fine.

He pauses the game and sits the Switch on the table. Crestfallen.

CHRISTOPHER

He's not hurting anything, Katie.
It's his birthday, let him do what he
wants.

KATIE

I don't want him to miss a minute of
the fun.

CHRISTOPHER

You don't want to make his miserable
either.

KATIE

Is that what I do, Chris? I make him
miserable?

CHRISTOPHER

Just saying.

KATIE

What are you "just saying?" I'd love
to know.

Jacob, Megan and Danielle stare at each other and pick off
their plates. All of them dying of secondhand embarrassment.
Wishing they were anywhere else in the entire world.

Brian looks down at the table. He looks sad, but also like
he's used to this. It barely even registers anymore.

CHRISTOPHER

Do you wanna do this? 'Cause I'll
start if you want to.

KATIE

(through gritted
teeth)

No, I don't want to start anything. I
want your son to enjoy his birthday.
We've been planning this all year and
I don't want to see it ruined.

CHRISTOPHER

I'm not ruining anything. I'm just
telling you--

KATIE

I know what you're telling me! And I
wish you'd shut up. Can you do that,
Chris? Can you shut up for five
minutes?

The room is deathly silent. Everyone uncomfortable.

Katie takes a moment to calm herself. Takes another drink.

KATIE

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get upset. Let's all just enjoy the party, okay?

JACOB

Sounds good to me.

DANIELLE

Me too.

Katie glances at Danielle. Gives her an *I don't really care what you think* kind of look.

BRIAN

Dad, are we still going to Florida for Christmas? I wanna check out Disney World.

Christopher and Danielle share a guilty look.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah, about that... Listen, buddy, I know we were gonna do that this year, but some... stuff came up and I don't know if we're gonna be able to make it.

Brian looks like his whole world is crumbling.

BRIAN

We're not going?

CHRISTOPHER

I'm really sorry. I know I promised but--

JACOB

Maybe you should your promise then.

He stares at Christopher with a look of contempt. Would love nothing more than to punch this guy in the face.

CHRISTOPHER

Maybe you should stay out of things that are none of your business.

Jacob swallows the frustration, not wanting to make things worse for Brian. He shovels down some fries.

Christopher rustles Brian's hair.

CHRISTOPHER

I promise we'll do it next year.
Deal?

BRIAN

Yeah... that's cool.

Christopher smiles. Clueless.

Brian is clearly upset. Picks up his Switch and gets back to his game.

Katie watches Christopher from across the table. Ready to choke the life out of him if she gets the chance.

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Katie and Christopher stand in the center of the room, in the midst of an argument. They keep their voices low, but full of anger.

KATIE

What the fuck is wrong with you? He sees you, what, three, four times a year? And you ruin it every time. Is it that hard to be a good dad for one day?

CHRISTOPHER

I'm doing the best I can, all right?
It's not my fault.

KATIE

Then whose fault is it, Chris? Is it your son's? Because he didn't do anything except want his father in his life. But you can't even do that.

CHRISTOPHER

Hey-- I'm trying. I got him the thing he wanted.

KATIE

Because that's how you do everything. You buy your problems away. Money doesn't fix everything.

CHRISTOPHER

You sure about that?

Katie rolls her eyes. The fact that she hasn't hit this guy is astonishing.

KATIE

He wanted one day-- one day! Is it that hard to give it to him?

CHRISTOPHER

I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have promised him I'd take him. Danielle wants me to come home to visit her family and--

KATIE

Wait a minute...

She looks like she's having trouble grasping what she's hearing.

KATIE

You're breaking a promise to your son so you can go to Danielle's house for Christmas?

CHRISTOPHER

I'll make it up to him. I promise.

KATIE

That's what you say every time. You can't keep promising him a bunch of stuff you're not going to do.

CHRISTOPHER

You just know everything, don't you. Like you're some perfect mother.

KATIE

What's that supposed to mean?

CHRISTOPHER

Maybe if you were doing a better job, he wouldn't be so upset all the time.

KATIE

Are you serious right now? I know you're not blaming me. You're stupid, but you're not *that* stupid.

She gives Christopher a moment to elaborate. He doesn't.

KATIE

You think that maybe he wouldn't be so "upset all the time" if you came around more?

CHRISTOPHER

So it's all my fault?

KATIE
Basically, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER
You know what--

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Jacob and Megan stand at the sink, getting an early start on the dishes. Danielle messes around on her phone, unaware of the world happening around her. Brian plays his game.

Despite their best efforts, Katie and Christopher's fight isn't as quiet as they thought.

Everyone tries to ignore it. Only Danielle succeeds.

Their voices go silent in the other room.

Jacob and Megan stare at each other like they're afraid someone was murdered.

A beat later, Christopher walks in.

CHRISTOPHER
(to Danielle)
Come on, let's go.

Danielle stirs from her social media coma. Gets to her feet.

CHRISTOPHER
(to Brian)
Hey, buddy, I'll call you later, all right? Happy birthday.

Brian refuses to look at his father.

BRIAN
Thanks.

Christopher looks like he might say something. Doesn't. Together, he and Danielle leave the room.

Brian gets up from his chair. Heads in the opposite direction.

Jacob looks at Megan. Wheels turning in his head. And some anger.

EXT. HOUSE - EVENING

Danielle gets into the car. Christopher is almost to his door.

Jacob exits the house, marching toward them with purpose. A fire behind him.

JACOB

Hey.

Christopher stops. Turns. Rolls his eyes.

CHRISTOPHER

What?

JACOB

That was pretty messed up. You couldn't even spend time with your son on his birthday?

CHRISTOPHER

Stay out of this! He's my son, okay? Not yours!

JACOB

Unfortunately.

(beat)

Look, maybe it'd be better if you just didn't come around anymore.

CHRISTOPHER

I'll do whatever I want.

Christopher steps around the car and gets in Jacob's face. Staring him down like he's ready to strike.

JACOB

I'm just saying maybe things would be better if you left him alone.

CHRISTOPHER

You gonna make me?

JACOB

If I have to.

He leans closer to Christopher.

JACOB

Don't make me have to.

Christopher sizes Jacob up, realizing he doesn't think he could take him.

CHRISTOPHER

Don't tell me how to be a father.
When you have kids, you'll see. It's
not so easy.

Christopher walks away. Gets in the car. Starts the engine.

Jacob watches the car back out of the driveway and head down the street. He turns. Starts to head back into the house when he sees--

Brian leaning on the fence in the backyard. Watching. He sees Jacob, turns, and disappears.

EXT. BACK YARD - EVENING

Brian stands in the yard, tossing a football into the air and catching it. He couldn't look more depressed if he tried.

Jacob walks up to him, causal and gentle. Hands in his pockets.

JACOB

How you holding up?

BRIAN

Fine.

JACOB

You sure?

BRIAN

Yep.

Jacob takes a beat. Decides to try another tactic.

JACOB

Did I ever tell you my dad took off
on me?

This gets Brian's attention. He catches the ball and this time doesn't throw it up again. He stares skeptically at Jacob.

BRIAN

Really?

JACOB

Oh yeah. I think I was five or six.
He went to the store one day and just
never came back.

Jacob steps a little closer, removing his hands from his pockets.

JACOB

Said he wasn't cut out for the family life. I think I saw him maybe twice after that. Both times sucked.

BRIAN

What'd you do?

Jacob holds his hands up, gesturing for Brian to throw the ball to him.

He does.

The two pass it back and forth during their conversation.

JACOB

Not gonna lie to you, it wasn't easy. For a long time I thought it was something I did. I kept blaming myself. Then one day I realized that if he didn't want me in his life, I was too good for him. Not the other way around.

BRIAN

I think he hates me.

JACOB

He doesn't hate you. He's just... he's just not dad material I guess. But don't blame yourself-- don't ever blame yourself. You did nothing wrong. It's his problem, not yours. I think you're better off without him.

BRIAN

Really?

JACOB

Yeah, I think you're gonna be all right.

BRIAN

How do you know?

JACOB

Because you're strong, like your mom. You get it from her.

BRIAN

That's what aunt Megan says. She says I also get her stubbornness.

Jacob smiles. He can't help it.

JACOB

A little bit. Don't tell your mom I said that, though. She might beat me up.

BRIAN

I don't think she'd beat you up. Probably yell at you a whole bunch though. She's good at that.

JACOB

Yeah, I noticed.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Megan puts up the dishes. Katie walks in. Sits at the table. She looks drained. Looks like she's been crying.

Megan clocks this immediately.

MEGAN

Are you okay?

KATIE

Great, just wonderful. I just wanted one day...

Megan joins her sister at the table.

MEGAN

I know. I'm sorry. I told you he was a dick from the day you started dating him.

KATIE

Is now really the time for an *I told you so*?

MEGAN

Sorry.

KATIE

I can't believe him. Was he always this bad?

Megan nods.

KATIE

I was just too stupid to notice, huh?

MEGAN

You're not stupid. You were young and in love. We've all been there. Don't beat yourself up.

KATIE

Thanks.

She looks around the room. Sees Brian's unopened presents sitting on the table.

KATIE

Where's Brian?

MEGAN

I sent him out to get us some liquor.

Katie glares at her.

MEGAN

Calm down, I'm kidding. Last time I saw him he was in the back yard.

KATIE

Have you seen Jacob?

MEGAN

Nope.

KATIE

If he's smart he probably ran away. I would. Who wants a woman with all this baggage?

MEGAN

If he did, then he's not worth it.

Katie gets up from the table. Slides her chair in.

KATIE

Thanks for your help today. I couldn't have done it without you.

Megan flips her hairs.

MEGAN

I know.

EXT. BACK YARD - EVENING

Katie emerges onto the back porch and almost immediately stops in her tracks. A look of pure relief washes over her. Like a thousand pound weight was removed from her shoulders.

She leans against the doorway, watching Brian and Jacob toss the football, still in the midst of their conversation.

Brian looks happy. So does Jacob. It's a nice image. One Katie doesn't mind seeing.

Tears well up in her eyes. She watches them for only a few more seconds, then turns and heads inside.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Katie and Megan sit on the couch, watching TV.

Jacob and Brian enter. Brian has his energy back.

BRIAN

Mom, mom! Can Jake come over tomorrow? I wanna show him something on my game.

Katie looks over Brian's shoulder at Jacob. Mouths *Jake?* at him.

Jacob shrugs. It doesn't bother him.

KATIE

Yeah, if you want.

BRIAN

I do.

He whips his head around to look up at Jacob.

BRIAN

Awesome. I'll see you tomorrow.

JACOB

Sounds good. I'll see you then. I promise.

BRIAN

What time?

JACOB

What time do you want me here?

BRIAN

Three?

JACOB

I'll be here a two forty-five.

Brian smiles.

BRIAN

Okay. See you tomorrow.

He turns. Sprints up the stairs.

Katie yells after him--

KATIE

Where are you going?

BRIAN

I gotta pee!

KATIE

Okay then.

Megan gets up off the couch. Gives Katie a hug.

MEGAN

I'm gonna get going. I'll call you later.

KATIE

All right, thanks for your help.

MEGAN

No problem.

She turns to Jacob. Pats him on the shoulder like a horse that just won the race.

MEGAN

Thanks.

Jacob looks confused.

JACOB

I didn't do anything.

MEGAN

Yes you did.

Megan leaves.

Jacob looks at Katie, more confused.

JACOB
What was that about?

Without answering, Katie gets to her feet and runs to Jacob, wrapping him in a tender embrace. She clings on for dear life. Like she never wants to let go.

KATIE
Thank you.

Again, Jacob looks confused.

JACOB
I didn't do anything.

KATIE
Yes you did.

Jacob smiles. Wraps his arms around Katie.

JACOB
I'm sorry today was a disaster.

KATIE
It was... for a while. But it ended pretty good.

JACOB
You sure? I don't know if you noticed, but it was kinda awful.

Kate laughs.

KATIE
It was, wasn't it?

She buries her face in Jacob's chest. Moves back and forth, almost like she's dancing.

Jacob looks at her for a beat, then joins her, swaying to the nonexistent music.

KATIE
So he wants you to come over tomorrow?

JACOB
I know, right? I think that means I'm in now. I mean, I didn't sign anything... but it's gotta be a good sign.

KATIE
I guess so.
(MORE)

KATIE (CONT'D)

(beat)

If you break your promise, I'll break your kneecaps.

JACOB

I wouldn't dare. He deserves someone who can keep a promise.

They dance around for a moment, lost in their own world.

JACOB

He's really a good kid. You did a good job.

KATIE

Thanks. It's hard to believe he came from Christopher.

JACOB

At least he's good for something.

KATIE

I can't believe I ever loved that guy.

JACOB

I can. You've got bad taste.

Katie playfully slaps him on the chest.

Jacob smiles.

Brian comes down the stairs. Sees his mom and Jacob locked in each others arms. Stops halfway down.

BRIAN

Sorry-- I didn't know you guys were having a moment or whatever.

He turns. Heads back upstairs.

Jacob and Katie burst into laughter as they watch Brian scramble up to second floor.

JACOB

He's something else.

KATIE

I know, right?

Jacob looks down at Katie--

JACOB

Just like his mom.

--and kisses her.

Katie smiles. Lays her head on Jacob's shoulder.

They keep dancing. Still no music.

They don't care.

FADE TO BLACK.