

### The Pick Up by Lisa Hill-Corley

I pull up to the high school and spot Sadie on the curb by the bus lane, chewing chipped black nail polish from her stubby fingers. She has put on that crazy blond wig of hers, but hasn't shoved her spongy dark hair far enough underneath it, so it poofs around her head in an uneven crown.

"Get in," I say.

The smile she had when she saw my car fades a little bit when she sees my face. "I thought you had an afternoon shift."

"I switched, c'mon."

"How do you know I'm not busy?" she says, leaning towards my passenger window.

I know, as well as I know that my husband is out with Sadie's whore classmate, that she isn't busy. "Doing what? Yearbook? Homecoming Committee?" My voice comes out sharper than I mean it to and she stands up to go.

"I found a receipt in Jack's wallet for a card and another one from that store with the prissy quilted bags," I say.

Sadie folds her arms and looks down at the ground. "It's her birthday today."

My hands shake as I shove the worn canvas purse I've been carrying for five years from the passenger seat to the floor. Sadie looks up and watches the purse fall and spill out its contents, then gives me a look of pity. I take a breath and blow it out before leaning over to open the passenger door. She slides into my car.

"So just get your own nice bags," she says. "What about all those cute ones in the closet? I like that black one with the pink dots..."

I cut her off. "Those are *diaper bags*."

Sadie's eyes get big. "Oh, I didn't know. Sorry," she says, picking up my wallet and makeup from the floor. She pauses as she picks up my cigarettes, then holds them out to me.

"Forget it." I take the cigarettes from her and toss them onto the backseat.

I ignore her grin and point to her backpack, which has little black skulls all over it. It is jammed between us and sitting right on my gearshift.

"Put that in back."

"But my lunch is in there. I wanted to eat it before work," she whines.

I look at the clock on my dash. “You haven’t eaten lunch?” I say, then stop myself from going on. We don’t have time for the ‘you’re-not-my-mom-hell-girl-I’m-better-than-your-mom’ argument if we are going to find Jack and the whore before the dinner shift. So I just play it off and say, “Figures, why eat at a table in the cafeteria when you can get crumbs on my seats instead?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she says.

“How’s that turkey?” I say as she unwraps a sandwich I made for her this morning.

“Okay. I still say baloney tastes better. But this is good.”

“Yeah, good *for you*,” I say.

I hit the roof when Sadie told me that when her mother’s boyfriend’s car was parked in the driveway it meant her mom had locked the door for a couple of hours and that Sadie had to find somewhere else to go, like a mother/daughter version of the sock on the doorknob thing. One time after that, her mom came into the diner, to borrow money from Sadie of course, and I stomped over there, ready to bitch her out right there in Section C. Sadie dragged me off and promised to come to my house the next time she got locked out, if I would just *calm down*.

Now, she usually just stays the night. I never ask Sadie if her mom wonders where she is all night – I can guess the answer and I have too many other depressing things to think about.

I am just about to pull away when two lanky boys step off of the curb and cross in front of my car without looking. I stomp on the brake and beep the horn. One peers at me through fried, overlong bangs. He looks annoyed at first, and then he looks at me, rolls his eyes and walks on. The other boy barely glances up as he lurches past. He says something to Bangs, who looks over at me and laughs. I beep again.

“Stop!” Sadie leans over and puts a hand on my arm. “Those guys keep a site where they rate all the girls in school. They put up nasty things about anyone that pisses them off. Trust me; I do not need to get their attention.”

“Seriously?” I say. “Don’t they have anything better to do?”

“Guys like that never have anything better to do,” Sadie says. Sometimes she can make her voice go dark and sound like she’s twice as old as she is, and has seen it all. All I can think about when she does that is what must be happening on the nights she isn’t locked out of her mom’s house.

“Well, who cares what those idiots think?”

“Easy for you to say; they only post about high school girls,” Sadie says.

“Figures. Jack can come over here and get an 18-year-old girlfriend, but I’m all ready an old biddy,” I say.

Sadie wrinkles her nose and sounds like a kid again. “You want an 18-year-old guy?”

“Why is that grosser than Jack and the whore? Why am I old and he’s not?”

“Whatever, twenty-four isn’t old.”

“I know. That’s not the point,” I say, stomping on the gas. The car jerks away from the curb.

Sadie grasps the door handle. “God, Nicole! Quit tweaking or we’re gonna get pulled over.”

It’s quiet for a while as she eats her sandwich and I drive in the general direction of downtown. Usually I’ve made some excuse by this point, about how I happened to be near the high school and thought I’d give her a ride to work – even though we both knew why I picked her up. But whenever I feel bad about dragging Sadie in the middle of this I remember her studying me as I kept pressing repeat to dial Jack’s number and cursed when I got his voice mail.

“I think I have art class with her,” she said. Just like that, as if we were in the middle of a conversation about me suspecting that Jack had a girlfriend. She used that dark, old voice, and something just told me she wasn’t making it up.

Finally Sadie finishes her sandwich and says, “She was supposed to go out after school to the Amphora with Mindy and them for her birthday, but I saw her walking out by the back field at the beginning of sixth period. I couldn’t see if his truck was back there though.”

“Where were you supposed to be for sixth period, Missy?” I was trying for a joke, but my hand slapped down hard on the bar for the turn signal.”

“It’s just a crap study hall. Besides, do you want to know this stuff or not? I can’t be in two places at once. Where are we going?”

“The park with all those woods, where else would he take her for a birthday treat?” I wrench the car around in a U-turn.

Sadie wads up the sandwich bag into a little ball. “I can’t go for long. I have to work and my stuff’s back at your house.”

I glance down at the backpack and don’t see the uniform we wear at the diner. “Why didn’t you bring your work stuff?”

“Not to school!”

“I don’t mean wear it to class, Dork.” Not that I blame her. The diner uniform wasn’t as ugly as some I’d had, but they all look depressing on a kid.

“Why do you want to see that anyway?” she says. “Screw all of this and just kick his ass out.”

We go quiet again, then I reach over and palm the top of her head. She starts squeaking about how I’m messing up that dumb wig and I laugh at her. Then we both spot Jack’s truck sitting on the side of the road.

Through the cab window I see that at first he is reclining, with one arm slung over the back of the passenger seat. I spot the back of a smaller head next to him, which quickly disappears as Jack yanks his arm down and turns back to look at us.

“I knew it.” I mean, it wasn’t like Sadie hadn’t told me months ago. I *knew* he was doing this. But actually seeing them together makes my throat close, plus I can feel my heart beat through a vein in my neck.

“Oh shit,” Sadie slides down in her seat.

“Sit up, what are you hiding for?”

“I don’t want her to see me; she’ll know I’m the one that told you!”

We pass by Jack’s truck and I look over, catching his eye. My car is crawling, barely at school zone speed. Calm and cool, Jack lifts up two fingers from the hand that rests out of the open window. It is just like we are passing by each other on any normal day. Just like when we were the high school kids in that truck, me saving my tips to take him to Red Lobster for his eighteenth birthday; when we had long day drives and sexy nights on that bench seat. Just like later on when we would play fight over what to name the baby as he rested one hand on my belly, before we started to have screaming fights every day after we found her cold and blue in her little crib, and he started disappearing. Lately, our boss had to stop scheduling me and Sadie together, since we spent most of our shift in the bathroom – me crying and her rubbing my back.

I look at Jack and for a second I just want to us to laugh, or even cry together over the heads of our hidden passengers; the whole situation was just so stupid. But his eyes are little slits with no expression; he just sits there, waiting for me, and us, to pass him by. I honk and drive past the truck, which I figure has enough room for all of his crap once I toss it out of my house.

“Hey,” I yell down to my passenger side floorboard. “We’re cleaning house Saturday. Hell, bring your stuff too. Screw your mom, screw all of them.” I fumble in the back for my cigarettes.

Sadie sits up with a look that is the opposite of the dark, old-sounding Sadie: hopeful, excited and concerned all at once. She swivels her head around to see behind us. “What happened?”

“Don’t look back,” I say, driving on.