

## Accusation

*Angela Hallstrom*

Nathan hears the accusation during bishopric meeting.

“Helen Sheeney is convinced,” the bishop says. “She pulled my wife aside after homemaking meeting. Once she started in, it took nearly an hour to calm her down. Helen’s certain Becky Mikkelson is trying to steal her husband.”

Gary, the first counselor, tilts back in his chair. A small sigh escapes his chest. “How far has it spread?”

“Not far,” the bishop answers. “That’s why I’m telling the both of you. Just in case you hear any rumors floating around, do your best to quiet things. Sister Mikkelson doesn’t deserve to have her good name questioned based on a suspicion. And we know how Sister Sheeney can sometimes be.”

Nathan, like everyone else in the Taylorsville 25th Ward, knows exactly how Helen Sheeney can sometimes be. She looks innocent enough: curly-haired, partial to floral prints, so tiny it seems impossible she’s borne eight children. But come to Gospel Doctrine class when Helen’s in attendance, and it’s easy to peg her as the resident doomsayer, a whirlwind of paranoia and irrationality. When she’s not reminding the ward of the coming apocalypse—for which she is fully prepared, having not one but two years’ worth of food storage she will *not* be sharing with the less obedient members of the ward, as a lesson to them—she’s bragging about the letter she sent to the Presiding Bishopric regarding the low-cut swimwear on display at youth conference. Among young women and their leaders alike!

“I’ll keep my ear out,” Gary says. “Are you going to speak to Sister Mikkelson, then?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary right now,” the bishop says. “So far, the only evidence Sister Sheeney gave my wife is ‘looks’ and ‘feelings’ and such. So I need to talk to Helen first. Get a better handle on whether

there's any merit in this at all. Hopefully, it will blow over without Sister Mikkleson even knowing about it. Does that sound all right to the two of you?"

Nathan sits silently in his chair, his palms clammy, a fist of dread in his stomach. He's been second counselor for three years now. He knows how these things work. He should speak out; he should say, "Wait, Bishop. Just hold on. Maybe Helen's not as crazy as we think she is." But he can't bring himself to tell the bishop why he believes Helen could be telling the truth. While nobody would call her husband, Peter, a great catch, he's a good guy. Polite. Easy to talk to. For years he's been the object of ward sympathy for his horrible luck in finding himself eternally hitched to Helen. Gossip has it that she was pretty good-looking as an eighteen-year-old and didn't seem all that crazy when Peter married her. The fact that he's put up with her this long they all know is a testament to his being a stand-up guy—exactly the kind of man Becky Mikkleson wishes she had for herself. Nathan knows this from personal experience.

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The first time Becky came on to him, Nathan wasn't sure how to take it. Becky and Nathan's wife, Alicia, went way back. She was one of Alicia's first good friends when they moved into the ward, and Nathan had always been cordial to her. Friendly. She was an undeniably pretty woman: tall, curvy, blessed with a wide, willing smile and bright eyes. Nathan was self-consciously careful never to give her too much attention, a reflexive fear of the appearance of impropriety that went all the way back to his mission days. Not that Nathan had any reason to let his eye wander. His wife Alicia was beautiful, too—almost forty and she could still fit into her size six jeans from high school—but a man could never be too careful.

Nathan and Alicia double dated with Becky and her husband Tom only once. Nathan had never really considered Tom his kind of guy. Everything about him was clipped and severe, from his imperious voice to his meticulous hairstyle. Alicia didn't like him, either, calling him a jerk and a male chauvinist. Nathan was stunned to learn that Tom had yet to change a diaper after fathering four children in eight years. Alicia often wondered aloud how her friend put up with him, especially since Becky "didn't take crap from anybody else, ever."

But one way or another, Nathan got wrangled into this double date. They went to see some spy thriller—a James Bond, maybe? Nathan could-

n't remember—but it was the way Tom treated Becky at dinner afterward that Nathan would never forget. They went to the Old Spaghetti Factory, and not only did Tom interrupt Becky almost every time she opened her mouth, but he confiscated her complimentary spumoni ice cream. Literally snatched it away from her the minute the waiter turned his back.

“We both know who doesn't need this,” he said. Nathan remembers Tom trying to keep his tone light and playful—as if his comment was part of some hilarious marital game the two of them regularly played—but it didn't work. He sounded cutting and cruel. Almost scary.

“Whatever, Tom.” Becky sighed and rolled her eyes in Alicia's direction. Alicia pursed her lips.

After that, the conversation was uncomfortable and stilted, and the night ended early. Nathan and Alicia came home to an empty house—their girls were spending the evening at his mom's place, and she wasn't due to bring them back for another couple of hours. Alicia took the opportunity to run to the store and get some groceries. Nathan sat down and flicked on the TV. Moments later, he heard a soft knock at the door.

Becky stood on the front porch. She looked a mess. She'd cried off all her makeup, and her face and neck were mottled pink.

“Oh, for Pete's sake,” she said. She wiped her runny nose with the back of her hand. “Just my luck that Alicia doesn't answer. Ha!” She tried to laugh.

Nathan wasn't sure what to say, so he apologized. “Sorry,” he said, a little embarrassed for both of them.

“Oh, no,” Becky said, waving her hands in front of her face. “I can't believe I just said that. I didn't mean it that way. I mean, against you. I'm just such a wreck. I hate having anybody see me looking like this.”

“Don't worry about me,” Nathan said. “Don't worry about what I think. Really. You're fine.”

“I'm fine. Oh yes! Fine, fine, fine.” She sang out the final sentence in frantic soprano that made Nathan nervous.

“Alicia's not here, though. Right now. Sorry.” He tried to sound sympathetic.

Becky sighed and leaned her head against the doorframe. She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Of course,” she whispered. “Of course she's not.”

“But I'll tell her . . .”

She interrupted before he could finish. "I mean, I shouldn't have to take it anymore. I shouldn't!" Her head remained bowed against the door frame, obscuring her face, but Nathan could see her shoulders shaking and she began to cry in earnest.

Nathan wasn't sure what to do. Here Becky was, a woman in real distress, standing on his front porch and sobbing and making no move to leave. Would Alicia understand if he invited her in, he wondered? What would she think if she came home and found the two of them alone in the house? But how could he send Becky away in such a state?

"Do you need to come inside?" he offered.

She immediately nodded and sniffed and shuffled through the front door. She headed straight for the living room and curled up in the corner of the couch like a teenager, her legs tucked in, hugging her knees with her arms.

She lifted her eyes up at Nathan as he stood in the entry. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"Tom is a terrible husband, you know," she said. "He yells at me. Yells at the kids. Tells me I'm fat."

Her face was pleading, naked with emotion. Nathan felt ridiculous standing so far away from her—twenty feet? thirty?—when she obviously needed consoling. The last thing he should be conveying to her was more rejection. Yet he didn't know how he should respond. She wasn't fat—far from it. More voluptuous, really, but he couldn't say *that* to a woman who wasn't his wife.

She continued looking up at him, her eyebrows raised, expectant.

He walked toward her and sat gingerly on the edge of the couch. "He shouldn't say that," he said softly. He hoped this response would do the trick, make her take a deep breath and sit up straight, but instead she covered her face with her hands. Soon the sound of choking sobs escaped through her splayed fingers.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, now." He reached out a hand to touch her sympathetically on the shoulder, but then he remembered himself and pulled away before he made contact.

Becky's head was down, she didn't see. "I'm such a mess," she moaned. She reached over and grabbed a tissue from the end table and blew her nose, then looked up and smiled sadly.

"No. No, you're not," Nathan said. Even though, obviously, she was. But she wasn't always a mess. Usually she looked great. Just not right now.

“You’re not a mess at all. Don’t say things like that about yourself. Don’t use that negative talk.”

“You think that’s negative talk? You should listen to Tom. He could teach you a thing or two about negative talk.”

Tom. It was guys like him who gave men a bad name, Nathan thought. And a good woman like Becky—wait, any woman, really—didn’t deserve his kind of treatment.

“It’s not right that he should treat you that way. I mean it. Negative stuff. There’s no place for it in a marriage. You’ve got to stay positive, build each other up. It’s the only way.”

“I know!” Becky exclaimed. “Exactly! That’s exactly what I tell him. But does he listen to me? Ever? No.”

“Well, he should. You deserve it.”

“I do deserve it.” She looked up at Nathan, suddenly full of conviction. “You’re totally right. I deserve a lot of things, you know. I’m a good wife.”

“I’m sure you are,” Nathan agreed. He noticed her shoulders losing tension and a more balanced color coming into her cheeks. He saw her countenance changing, brightening and relaxing, and felt a flash of satisfaction charge through him. He was doing it, he thought. He was helping.

“And I’m not going to take his crap any more,” Becky said.

“And you shouldn’t. Never again!” He raised his fist in the air and shook it, smiling.

Becky looked at him fondly, her eyes still misty with tears. “Alicia’s so lucky.”

Nathan slowly lowered his fist. “She is?”

“She is. She’s got a guy like you. She doesn’t even know how lucky she is.”

She placed her hand on his leg, just above his knee, and squeezed. Nathan drew in one sharp breath.

“If I had a husband like you, I’d appreciate you.” She looked at him earnestly, not moving her hand.

“Well. Yes. I don’t know.” He turned his face away from her, simultaneously flattered and terrified, his heart thumping loudly in his chest.

“You’ve helped me so much, Nathan. Just in these few minutes. You’ve said more nice things to me just now than Tom has said in . . . I don’t know. Years. You can’t even realize.” Then, before he knew what was happening, she gathered him up in an embrace. She held him tight, her

warm breath tickling his neck. He leaned into her for one brief moment and felt how soft she was, soft and sad and undeserving of all the pain her husband was causing. Then she released him from her grip and the realization of who he was—a married man, alone in his house with a vulnerable woman—rushed in and filled his chest with an uncomfortable tightness. He pulled back, flushed and blinking.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I get wound up like this and I just go on . . .”

Nathan stood up quickly. Could she see the panic on his face, he wondered? Could she tell?

“No, no, don’t you worry. You’re fine. Everything’s fine. I’ll tell Alicia you came, okay?” He could hear the tenor of his voice. Strained. Unnerved. He concentrated on his face, rearranging his expression to one of calm neutrality.

Becky stood. She ran her fingers through her hair and took a deep breath. “I know I’m emotional. Crazy. This whole night has just been crazy!” She smiled. “But I needed someone to talk to or else I just might have exploded. And you were the perfect guy to talk to. The perfect one.”

“Oh, no, no. Anybody would have . . .” He let the sentence trail away. He walked to the front door and opened it.

“I mean it.” She stood beside him in the open doorway. “You’re the best.”

“I don’t know about that.” Nathan gave a little laugh, staccato and unconvincing, then turned to look down the street. Alicia’s car wasn’t coming. “Like I said, I’ll tell Alicia you came by.”

“Sure,” she said. “But you can tell her I’m okay now. After talking to you, I’m really okay.” She walked out to her car, but before Nathan had the chance to close the front door, she turned and looked up at him one last time. She smiled. Her eyes were teary and bright.

“Thank you,” she mouthed. She raised her hand and waved.

Nathan closed the door quickly. It wasn’t until she was safely away from him and down the street that he realized he’d forgotten to wave back.

After that day, he avoided Becky as best he could. But she and Alicia were friends, they were in the same ward, and once a little time passed Nathan convinced himself he’d misread her signals. Becky was a good person—maybe a bit lonely, and married to a jerk—but not the type to make an intentional pass at the husband of one of her best friends. A few years went by without another incident, and Nathan had almost put the significance of that day out of his mind until the ward Christmas party. Nathan

had stayed late to help the short-handed activities committee clean up. He knew Becky was on the committee; still, he was surprised when she popped her head into the Primary room, where he'd been cleaning up all alone.

"Hey," she said. "You need help?"

He did. The room was a mess: candy cane wrappers on the floor, chairs scattered everywhere, sprinkles from the Christmas cookies ground into the carpet. He paused for a moment, feeling a brief pang of concern. But why should he be concerned, really? If he couldn't trust himself, whom could he trust? "Sure," he said. "The quicker this goes, the quicker we're out of here."

"Well, I'm a good little worker bee," she said, and climbed on a chair and began pulling down the crepe paper attached to the ceiling. He looked up because he was concerned for her safety. The chair was rickety, he'd seen it wobble, and he wanted to make sure she wouldn't fall. But he let his eyes linger a fraction of a second too long as she lifted her arms over her head and stretched her body to reach the decorations, and she caught him. Like any woman used to being looked at, she could feel it, even with her back to him. She turned and glanced over her shoulder, a hint of a smile playing on her lips.

"So, you going to work or what?" she said, her voice a little breathy. Flirtatious. Her eyes flashed vivid blue.

Nathan looked away. "I'm getting right to it," he said, a bit too cheerfully.

They worked in silence for a moment, then Becky said, "I still think about that day you comforted me, you know."

"What was that?" Nathan kept moving, folding and stacking chairs.

"You know what I'm talking about." She hopped off her chair and walked over to where Nathan was working. She leaned casually against the wall. "I know you remember."

Nathan didn't answer.

"Sometimes I think about it when things are bad between Tom and me. How kind you were. And then I think about Alicia and how she complains and I just get . . ."

Nathan stopped working. He met Becky's gaze, curious now. "She complains?"

"Oh, you know. Little things. Petty things. Drives me crazy, though. Here you are, such a nice guy, good to her, and handsome . . ."

Nathan felt his pulse accelerate.

"You are!" she laughed. "You're the kind of man I should have picked, if I'd only known better."

"Come on," he said. He knew, now, he should stop the conversation. Politely excuse himself and leave. But Becky's bright eyes, her open smile, even her way of standing with her shoulders thrust back and her arms hanging loose at her sides seemed so easy and nonthreatening at that moment. Inviting.

"Do you ever have those thoughts?" she asked. "Like if I had it to do all over again, I would have done it differently? I could have made my life happier?"

In a flash, Nathan imagined a life with Becky: her easy laugh, her attentiveness. For just a moment he even thought about her body, so full and yielding, completely different from Alicia's. Alicia. Her name snapped his mind back into focus.

"Becky, we shouldn't be talking this way."

A flicker of irritation moved across Becky's face. "Why? Why not?"

"Just . . . we shouldn't. I don't think. It just seems . . ." He paused, searching for the word.

"Inappropriate?"

"Yes! That's it. Inappropriate."

"Fine. We'll work then." She grabbed up an armful of chairs and dragged them across the room. She didn't even try to stack them neatly, letting the chairs fall against each other in uneven rows, the clang of metal on metal ringing through the room.

"Becky?" Nathan offered, afraid he'd hurt her feelings, hoping if he appeared conciliatory she'd stop making such a racket.

"I'm just so *sick* of that word," she said, her voice tight with anger. "'Inappropriate.' I'm not doing anything wrong. Neither are you. We're talking—*talking*—and that's somehow against the rules? I get so tired of tip-toeing around everybody all the time. Especially men." She pointed her manicured finger at Nathan. "A woman should be able to talk to a man. I mean, are men that weak? I can't even mention that I think Alicia should treat you better without you turning it into some kind of sexual thing?"

Nathan stiffened. "I never said it was a sexual thing."

"Then why shouldn't we be talking this way?" She folded her arms across her chest. She stared at him, bold, unflinching. "You tell me."



He shifted his eyes away from Becky's face. It was late. Soon, Alicia would be missing him.

Becky sighed. "Like I would even try, anyway. Like I don't know how much you love your wife."

"And I do love her."

"That's all I was trying to say. That she's lucky, and doesn't even know to appreciate it." She put her hand on the knob of the closed door beside her and turned it. Then she smiled. "And don't worry. I won't tell."

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After the bishopric meeting and all during sacrament, Nathan thinks about his responsibilities: to Helen. To the bishop. To Becky. To the truth. The minute the bishop started telling Helen's story, Nathan knew the accusation had some validity to it. It probably hasn't gotten to the point of outright adultery—Peter is a good man, and he doubts if Becky, even, would go that far—but he also knows Becky and how desperate she is. Alicia tells him that her marriage to Tom is only getting worse. And it isn't fair to Peter, having to fend off advances from such a beautiful, needy woman. The poor guy's married to Helen, for heaven's sake. Catch both Peter and Becky on an especially weak day, and who knows what could happen?

He decides that instead of going to Sunday School, he'll take a detour past the Primary room and try to catch Becky, hopefully alone. She was recently called to be the Primary president and she's often out in the hall, rummaging through her closets, making sure the Primary runs like clockwork.

The hall is empty. He walks over to the Primary room, peeks his head in, and sees Becky up in front of the children reading a story from the *Friend*. She's a good storyteller. Even though she's reading from a magazine, she has all the children in the room quiet, listening attentively. She's an excellent Primary president, so good the bishop often says he doesn't know what he'd do without her. She looks up from her magazine and sees Nathan. Without missing a word in her narrative, she raises one finger to indicate she'll be right out to speak with him. Nathan nods his head and retreats to the hall.

He becomes more and more nervous as he waits. He scans up and down the empty hall, hoping—praying—that the bishop, or Alicia, doesn't

stumble upon him and ask what he's up to. He's never been a good liar. They would see right through him immediately.

Finally Becky bursts out of the Primary room. Her cheeks are red and she seems a little breathless, almost winded, and he wonders how a person could get herself so worked up reading a story to a bunch of kids.

"Official business?" she asks.

It's been two years since that Christmas, two years since Nathan has talked to her in any capacity other than as a courteous fellow ward member—or as second counselor. She probably assumes he's here at the request of the bishop.

"Not really," Nathan says. He runs his hand through his hair. "Well, kind of. Maybe."

"So is it or isn't it?" Becky says lightly. "Fess up! Are you guys in the bishopric letting the Relief Society steal my music leader or something?"

"Not quite." Nathan takes a deep breath. "I just have to ask you a favor."

"All right."

Nathan looks over his shoulder. Two deacons have escaped from Sunday School and are messing around near the back door, pushing each other into the coat hangers. The sound of jangling metal ricochets down the hall.

"Hey, guys," Nathan yells. The deacons glance at him sullenly, then shuffle away.

"There's got to be a way to keep those kids in Sunday School!" Becky is smiling, completely unaware. "I hear bribing them with candy sometimes works."

Now the hall is empty. This is the time to say what must be said. Move on. Be done. He leans in. Becky follows his lead and leans in too, her brow creased with curiosity.

"I'm going to have to ask that you stay away from Peter Sheeney," Nathan says softly.

Becky blinks and cocks her head to the side. "Meaning?" She is whispering, too.

"You need to stay away from Peter Sheeney. Helen's been talking. She has some—what should I call them?—some, um, concerns." Nathan can feel the sweat starting along his hairline. His lungs constrict inside his chest, and he's afraid she can hear his quick breathing.

"She's got *concerns*?" Becky backs up. "You can't be serious."

“Don’t worry, though. The bishop and Gary don’t believe her.” Nathan realizes he’s looking down at the floor and quickly glances up to read her expression, but she doesn’t seem worried at all. In fact, she’s twisted her mouth into a smirk. The look of disdain reminds him of his daughter Tina, who is thirteen years old and never sorry. Never wrong.

Becky gives a derisive snort. “I’ll have you know I’ve probably spoken to Peter all of five or six times in my entire life.” Her voice has returned to its normal volume.

Nathan gathers up his courage. “But given our past history, you know . . .”

A slow smile spreads across Becky’s face. “So that’s what this is all about.”

“No, no. It’s not. Trust me! This isn’t about me. It’s about Peter. And Helen. And you.”

“Right,” she says slowly. “Well, Peter’s a friendly acquaintance. Nothing more.”

“Like I was a friendly acquaintance?”

“Oh, geez,” Becky rolls her eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Now Nathan is upset. He was there. He knows what happened. She came on to him, not once, but twice. She knows her power over men like him—men like Peter, too—and she uses it. Gets a kind of charge from it. And she can’t pretend she doesn’t.

“I’m only saying that Peter is probably vulnerable to your advances.” Nathan realizes his voice, as well, has increased in volume. He scans up and down the hallway, relieved to find no one within earshot. “It’s dangerous, is all,” he whispers. “You’re walking a thin line.”

Becky tilts toward Nathan, as near to him as she’s been in years. Her face is just inches from his. Her breath smells like peppermint.

“What are you,” she whispers. “Jealous?”

Nathan’s mouth falls open. “What? You’ve got to be kidding me. What?”

“You accuse me, I accuse you. It’s only fair.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” Nathan says. “Not a thing.”

“And neither have I.” She pulls her shoulders back and stands up straight. With her heels on, she’s a very tall woman. Her eyes are burning and her cheeks blaze pink. “Remember that.”

After church, the bishop pulls Nathan into his office.

"I spoke with Sister Sheeney," he says. "Helen agrees now that she was overreacting. Just so you know. So you don't think anything, well, unjustified about Sister Mikkelson."

"Oh, of course not," Nathan says. "Of course I don't."

"Nothing worse than having crazy rumors flying!" The bishop claps Nathan on the back. "But if you hear any talk going around, make sure you put the rumors to rest. If you hear anything from your wife, or anyone."

"Definitely, I will."

"Good, good. Glad to see this episode pass."

The ward clerk taps on the door, and the bishop excuses himself. Church is over and Nathan is ready to go home. He leaves the office, eager to search for his family in the halls. He wants to find them fast, get home, have dinner. Put this day behind him.

Nathan scans the foyer. He can't find his family, but he sees Becky across the room, her husband standing beside her, his hand at the small of her back. She turns her head and sees Nathan looking and she holds his gaze, unafraid. Nathan is the first to look away.