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REMAINS

by Butch Maxwell

Excerpt: Scene 1 through Scene 2 (pages 1–16 of 60)

CHARACTERS

MAGGIE BOWEN-WRIGHT – 38, divorced, mother of one.

SIMON BOWEN – 32, unmarried.

DANNY HAWTHORNE – 30, divorced, father of one.

CAROL HAWTHORNE – 27, unmarried.

4 actors: 2 female, 2 male.

All roles may be played by actors of any race or ethnicity.

SETTING

A remote lake cabin early winter, 2011. The action unfolds over a single stormy night, from arrival through dawn. Time is continuous.

Scene 1 – The Arrival

Late afternoon. A remote lake cabin in early winter, 2011.

The cabin is tidy but impersonal—a vacation home never quite lived in. Boxes line the walls, unopened. Snow flurries gather outside the windows. Inside, the air is cold and still.

As lights rise, MAGGIE is already in motion, briskly bringing the cabin to life — turning on lamps, brushing dust from a table, checking outlets. She carries a clipboard tucked under her arm and wears an oversized men's cardigan — worn corduroy, clearly not hers. SIMON stands near the doorway, hoodie up, a duffel bag on his shoulder.

MAGGIE:

All right... heat's on, power's good —

She checks her phone.

One bar. If Lily needs me, I need to know.

SIMON:

One bar? Luxury. I had zero the whole drive up.

(Checking his phone)

Still no service. Probably just as well.

MAGGIE:

Avoiding someone?

SIMON:

(Slight pause)

My thesis advisor. I owe him a revision from...

(Stopping himself)

2005. Six years avoiding it.

MAGGIE:

2005? Simon, that's—

SIMON:

(Cutting her off)

Six years. I know. Where's the bathroom?

MAGGIE:

Through that door.

He exits. Maggie works. Scratch overhead.

What was that?

SIMON:

(Offstage)

Probably the squirrel Mom was obsessing about.

MAGGIE:

There's a squirrel?

SIMON:

(Re-entering, drying hand on hoodie)

Three voicemails worth. Still saved. Haven't deleted them.

MAGGIE:

We'll need to deal with that.

SIMON:

You brought a clipboard to sort dead people's belongings?

MAGGIE:

It's easier if there's a system.

Simon nudges a closed box with his foot from center toward stage right, then casually lifts a framed photo from Maggie's "keep" pile and drops it into another box.

Maggie crosses to intercept, pulls the photo back, and slides the box upstage to reclaim the space.

The two of them begin a quiet turf war: He drifts SR; she counters by pulling items UC, establishing a diagonal tug-of-war across the room.

Simon takes in the space.

SIMON:

This place is just what I expected.

Door bursts open; a swirl of cold air and snow. CAROL and DANNY enter, bundled, stamping snow from their boots. Carol balances a covered casserole and a purse that keeps slipping from her shoulder.

CAROL:

Oh! You must be Maggie.

(A beat)

And you're Simon?

Carol offers a handshake while holding the dish; the lid rattles. The handshakes never connect.

Sorry — I brought food. Chicken divan. Grandma's recipe. It fixes everything.

She sets the casserole on a side table, nearly tipping it; Maggie steadies it.

MAGGIE:

Thank you. That's... thoughtful.

CAROL:

Dad always said, "Carol will handle it."

(Gesturing)

This is Danny.

DANNY:

Hi.

CAROL:

Danny's truck broke down in Morgantown, so I picked him up.

DANNY:

Would've been here on time otherwise.

CAROL:

(A beat, carefully neutral)

Of course you would have.

(She resets)

Dad told us a lot about you. Good to finally meet.

MAGGIE:

Yes, well, with everyone spread across the country, there just never seemed to be a good time...

SIMON:

Or reason.

A beat. Danny smirks. Carol glares at him.

CAROL:

Dad kept trying to get everyone together back then.

Maggie crosses to the nearest box and lifts a framed photo of Angela and Jim, showing it without quite meaning to.

Carol sets her casserole down on the side table and compulsively smooths the lid with her fingertips.

MAGGIE:

Right after they eloped? Yeah, that went great.

SIMON:

Some of us were still in shock.

DANNY:

We were just old enough to fake being fine.

CAROL:

(Softening)

Dad told us about this place. Sent us pictures once. But we never...

She trails off, glances around.

Angela kept inviting us—"Family weekend at the lake"—but I always had excuses. Six months, and I guess nobody's been back since they...

She trails off again; Danny gently sets down his thermos.

DANNY:

Caretaker shut everything down after the jacuzzi incident.

SIMON:

The world's first romantic electrocution.

Maggie shoots Simon a look.

MAGGIE:

(Sharply)

Simon.

DANNY:

(A snort)

Clock radio. One good gust of wind, and...

Pause; Carol fusses with her casserole lid. Danny looks around.

So, this is a day trip, right? Please tell me no one packed pajamas.

Danny crosses to a nearby box and lifts the lid just enough to peek inside. Maggie watches him.

CAROL:

I figured we'd sort things, maybe grab a bite, and drive back tonight before the snow starts again.

Carol lifts a trash bag, then sets it down.

MAGGIE:

That's the plan.

A charged beat. Simon crosses to the window, fogging the glass with his breath.

SIMON:

So. First time we've all been in the same room. They got married — what? — five years ago?

DANNY:

No proper funeral. Just that quick cremation notice from the lawyer.

SIMON:

No service, no eulogies — just paperwork and ashes in matching urns.

MAGGIE:

Mom wanted a memorial. She called it a "celebration of love."

(A beat)

But after how they died, I think everyone just... lost their nerve.

CAROL:

So, this is the memorial, then. Six months later and surrounded by boxes.

Danny opens his thermos.

DANNY:

Estate business makes great grief therapy.

He drinks; offers it to Simon.

SIMON:

What's in that — closure?

DANNY:

Whiskey. Close enough.

MAGGIE:

(Dryly)

Classy. Mom would be proud.

Danny takes another drink, then passes the thermos to Carol.

SIMON:

Mom believed in communion. She never said what kind.

Carol drinks.

The fridge still works. Found beer in there — six months old, but cold.

DANNY:

Vintage.

Simon heads for the fridge.

SIMON:

Communion.

MAGGIE:

The lawyer insisted we do this in person. Mom would have approved...

Maggie picks up a church bulletin from a box.

Everything had to be —

(Searching for the word)

— proper. Especially after the divorce.

CAROL:

From Bob?

MAGGIE:

(Surprised)

Yeah. My dad, Bob. You knew about—?

CAROL:

Dad mentioned him. Once or twice.

MAGGIE:

(A small beat.)

She joined every committee. Church, library, PTA. I was in college by then. She wanted to prove something. Then somehow in all that... your dad was there too.

SIMON:

“Meet your new siblings.” We’re not fourteen. We’re adults with lives.

MAGGIE:

(Quietly)

They wanted us to be a family.

DANNY:

They got remarried. That doesn’t make us a family. That makes them married.

SIMON:

I got those email invitations to come here for “family get-togethers.” Replied to exactly none of them.

DANNY:

Same.

MAGGIE:

(Quietly)

I came here once. By myself. She cried when I left.

Silence. Danny takes a sip from his thermos; the fire pops softly.

SIMON:

Hard to believe Mom and Jim ever made sense together.

DANNY:

Guess the hot tub outside was their middle ground — and their Waterloo.

SIMON:

How does a clock radio even end up next to a hot tub?

MAGGIE:

Mom liked music.

CAROL:

Dad liked... not drowning in silence.

SIMON:

Well, they got the silence part.

MAGGIE:

(Sharply)
Could we not?

CAROL:

I think the statute of “too soon” expired last week.

A brief laugh — awkward, human.

DANNY:

She sang hymns; he wore peace signs.

CAROL:

Yet, they called it love.

They all sit with that line.

A long scratch from overhead, louder, more insistent. They all freeze, looking up.

Danny chugs from his thermos, Simon drinks from his can. The sound continues, then stops. Silence.

Snow falls heavier outside. The sound of the wind intensifies for a moment, then settles into a steady hiss.

Lights dip to dark then fade up subtly toward early evening.

Scene 2 – Sorting the Vestiges

The step-siblings drift into the practical business of sorting boxes. They begin opening boxes, forming small piles. The mood is cooler now, but the storm is building. Snow slants hard against the windows.

The once-neat space is now littered with half-opened boxes—framed photos, clothes, paperwork, and small, forgotten trinkets scattered across the floor. At the upstage wall, Maggie has established her “command center” — a grid of day-glow Post-it notes on the wooden paneling. Her clipboard lies on the table.

As the scene begins, they’re already mid-sort. Carol hovers mid-room, having just moved her covered casserole out of the oven; Danny cracks another beer from the refrigerator. The fire burns lower. Simon inspects Maggie’s Post-it wall.

SIMON:

Color-coded. Naturally.

(To Carol, quietly)

Our mother once alphabetized her spice rack by Latin name.

MAGGIE:

(Adjusting a Post-it with deliberate precision.)

It helps.

SIMON:

Worked great. Until it didn't.

Carol sets down a stack of artifacts.

CAROL:

Where do these go?

MAGGIE:

Blue.

Carol hands them over without questioning the category. Maggie places them under a blue square.

MAGGIE:

Mom’s things here, Jim’s there.

SIMON:

Define “things.” Philosophically, everything’s borrowed.

Simon immediately lifts a framed photo from Maggie’s sorted pile and drops it in the wrong box. Maggie crosses to correct him.

MAGGIE:

(Without looking up)

Not there.

Carol crouches to gather packing paper. She glances toward her casserole on the side table, touches the lid briefly—still warm—then returns to sorting.

Danny, who is not listening, opens a box.

DANNY:

Well, this one’s definitely Dad.

He pulls out a flask, a lighter, and a Rolling Stones shirt.

Flask, lighter, and a tour shirt from ‘89 that smells like regret.

He tosses the shirt vaguely toward the couch, then immediately gets up again, restless, sifting through the box.

CAROL:

I remember that shirt. He wore it constantly.

(A beat.)

1989 was right before the divorce.

Danny picks up a photo.

DANNY:

My sixth-grade concert. First chair trumpet.

He sets it down.

He wasn’t there. Too busy doing something important.

Carol starts to say something, swallows it, and shifts toward the casserole again, then stops herself.

CAROL:

We should really eat before it gets cold —

MAGGIE:

Carol. We'll eat when we're done.

Carol nods, lifts a trash bag, then sets it down, uncertain where anything belongs. Danny closes the box he's been sorting through, pushes it aside.

Maggie opens another box and pulls out a framed photo.

And here's Mom's "personal" file.

She shows them: Young Angela on a motorcycle in a bikini.

CAROL:

That doesn't look like Sunday school.

SIMON:

That doesn't look like the woman who made us say grace before dinner.

Danny takes the photo.

DANNY:

Maybe your mom had a secret wild streak.

Simon pulls out a folder, reads aloud.

SIMON:

And a spreadsheet. "Cabin – Pest Plan."

He scans it.

"Trap Type vs. Ethical Outcome."

A beat. He flips pages, baffled.

She had a moral rubric for squirrels.

Maggie straightens her piles. Danny takes the spreadsheet from Simon.

MAGGIE:

(Defensively)

Mom's system was practical.

DANNY:

She was relentlessly practical. There's a column labeled "emotional impact on intruder."

Laughter that isn't really laughter.

SIMON:

What about that box labeled "Private?"

MAGGIE:

We'll get to it.

DANNY:

"Private" as in private from who?

MAGGIE:

From anyone who isn't Mom or your Dad.

(Cutting this off)

It's not important right now.

DANNY:

Okay, okay. Just asking.

A small beat. Then a loud, insistent scratch from above. Everyone freezes.

CAROL:

Maybe it knocked something over.

DANNY:

I'll check.

He disappears upstage. Muffled thumps. He reappears almost immediately, brushing insulation from his coat.

The squirrel built a condo out of Dad's old band T-shirts.

CAROL:

(Forcing brightness, again)

Okay, seriously — can we eat before this gets cold?

SIMON:

Well. If we're going to spend an afternoon with him, we should name him.

MAGGIE:

Name the squirrel?

SIMON:

He's clearly a long-term tenant.

(A beat)

"Gerald."

DANNY:

Gerald?

SIMON:

He has strong Gerald energy.

CAROL:

(Despite herself)

He does.

DANNY:

Gerald's living his best life up there.

MAGGIE:

(Sharper than intended)

That's one word for it. "Destructive" is another.

Simon absentmindedly drops a stack of papers onto the wrong pile as he passes. Maggie notices.

SIMON:

Sounds like he's doing better than the rest of us.

MAGGIE:

Maybe if someone actually dealt with problems instead of just —

She stops herself. The energy shifts.

DANNY:

(Standing)

Instead of what? Say it.

MAGGIE:

Nothing. Let's—

DANNY:

No. Say it.

Danny swings around too fast while grabbing another box, his arm brushing the corner of the table. A stack of papers wobbles dangerously — Carol lunges to steady them, shifting her casserole dish in the process. The dish teeters.

MAGGIE:

Careful —

Too late. The dish slips. It flips in slow motion. Creamed broccoli and breadcrumbs explode across the floor, splattering boxes, a few Post-its, and the hem of Maggie's pants.

Silence. They freeze together in the aftermath. Carol clings to the dish, with most of its contents spilled and stares at the mess — her grandmother's recipe, her attempt at peace, ruined.

She immediately drops to her knees, starts trying to scoop the food back into the dish.

DANNY:

Carol, it's—

CAROL:

(Not looking up)

It's fine. I can salvage some of it. We can still—

The dish slips in her hands; more spills out.

SIMON:

(After a beat, crouching)

I'd still eat it.

A Post-it, loose from the wall, drifts down and lands sticky-side-down on the mess. Maggie looks at it, then tears it off her shoe.

Carol stands there, staring at the spilled food.

CAROL:

(Quietly, to no one)

Dad always said it fixed everything.

A beat. She looks at Danny.

But maybe some things can't be fixed. Not with food. Not with pretending –

She gestures at the mess.

DANNY:

Carol –

Maggie wipes her hands on a dish towel, staring at the mess. Quietly, she moves to clean it up. Simon helps.

CAROL:

You want to know what I think?

(Something harder in her voice now)

I think you – you –

She stops herself and turns away. Danny steps toward her.

DANNY:

What?

CAROL:

Never mind.

DANNY:

No, say it.

Carol turns back, directly to Danny.

CAROL:

Fine. You tear things up and call it freedom. Happy?

DANNY:

At least I'm not afraid of chaos.

CAROL:

You've been afraid of everything else since Mom left Dad.

DANNY:

You think I'm a screw-up. Say it.

CAROL:

(Not backing down now)

I think you could have been great. But you quit before things got hard.

He exhales, turns away, moves to the bed and sits.

DANNY:

Hard like parenting? Like marriage? Yeah, I learned from the best.

CAROL:

Dad loved you.

DANNY:

Dad barely knew me. "My boy the electrician." Never asked if I actually wanted that.

SIMON:

(Softly)

Did you?

DANNY:

(After a beat)

I wanted him to ask.

Silence. The fire pops. Maggie sits down, gently this time.

CAROL:

(Softer now)

They weren't perfect. But they tried —

DANNY:

Trying to *appear* perfect. There's a difference.

CAROL:

(Harder now)

You know what's not fair? You get to be the "authentic" one because you're a mess. I hold things together and I'm "pretending."

The others stare.