

—I AM MEAT, I AM IN DAYCARE

by Cameron Pierce

When Ted Branson called to ask the rate for Susan's daycare service, she didn't realize his child was a hunk of meat. But that's what the man who introduced himself as *Mr. Branson, but call me Ted* was dragging into her home.

"Should I put him with the other kids, or will you take him from here?" Mr. Branson said.

"Mr. Branson...Ted," Susan said, "I can't take your child. I'm sorry, it's just not..."

Not what? Susan wondered. She was paid to watch kids, and if this loon wanted to pay her for watching a hunk of cow, she would do it.

"I don't see what the problem could be," Mr. Branson said. Susan smiled. "Problem? None at all. Bring your son this way and I'll introduce him to the other children."

"His name is Scotty," Mr. Branson said.

"Excuse me?"

"My son's name is Scotty," he said.

"Oh, of course," said Susan. "His name is Scotty."

For the first time, Susan was glad the two-, three-, and four-year-olds she watched were, without exception, idiots.

She led Mr. Branson into the living room. The man dragged the hunk of meat behind him like it was a reluctant child. Where the hell had the meat come from anyway? Maybe it was just a large rib-eye steak, but Susan had never seen rib-eyes that size. Ever. She watched the six children watching Alice in Wonderland. "Everyone," she said, "I'd like you to meet Scotty."

Haley, a little blonde girl, turned from the television and waved both hands in the air. More like calling for help than waving hello, Susan thought.

Normally, there were over ten pages of paperwork to fill out for a new child, but since Scotty wasn't really a child, she skipped it and concerned herself with getting Mr. Branson the hell out of her home.

"Well," Mr. Branson said, "I'm already late for work, so if there are any forms to sign, I'll fill them out this evening, around five. Thanks again."

He walked out of the living room. Susan heard the front door shut.

Easier than expected.

She heard the door creak open. "I forgot to tell you, Scotty's allergic to chocolate milk," Mr. Branson called.

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The door shut again. Susan stared at the meat child.

Allergic to chocolate milk...

She expected to have an easier time lugging the meat into the kitchen. It couldn't have weighed more than fifteen pounds, but felt like fifty, maybe more. When she picked it up, legs, which she hadn't seen, uncurled from the thing's red underside. Susan recoiled before hurrying down the hallway into the kitchen.

She returned with oven mitts.

None of the other children said anything as Susan dragged the meat into the kitchen by its legs. Susan wondered what the little idiots would tell their parents about Scotty, the new boy, or if they would even remember someone new at all.

Scotty was too heavy for Susan to lift onto the kitchen table. Instead, she slid him into the corner, right beside Mr. Rat's food and water. She emptied the water bowl in the sink and cursed her husband for the empty bottle of Jack he'd left out on the counter. She understood how much he loved Mr. Rat. She loved Mr. Rat too. They'd gotten the cat over ten years ago, before they were even married. Still, the cat had been dead for a month. Leaving food and water out was a harmless means of coping, but if a parent were to see the empty Jack bottle and complain to the daycare board, she could lose her business.

Now that the bowl was clean, she searched the fridge for chocolate syrup. She realized it was no use. They were out of milk. Instead, she grabbed one of her Atkins chocolate-flavored protein shakes.

It was close enough, right?

Susan popped the tab and poured the liquid into the bowl. She set it on the floor beside Scotty. "Drink up," she said, but who was she kidding? Of course he wouldn't drink up.

She lifted the bowl and tilted it just enough so that a small stream dropped onto the meat. Nothing happened, so she poured more. Then she let the whole thing spill.

Still, nothing happened.

Susan left the chocolate-soaked Scotty on the linoleum floor and walked out of the kitchen. She peeked into the living room to make sure the kids were still alive and watching the movie.

While they seemed no less alive than before, Susan screamed when she saw these *new* children. She collapsed on the floor and covered her head. A nightmare, a very bad...

"Mrs. Mackery," said Charlie, the oldest boy she watched.

Susan looked up. Her insides tightened. A trail of red ran from the sofa where Charlie had been sitting to where he stood. The child didn't seem to notice that he was skinless. How could he be alive? How could he be without skin?

"Mrs. Mackery," he said.

"What is it, Charlie?" she said.

"That new boy, he hurt me."

Susan glanced at the other children. She looked at the cable box. It glowed green. How could it be over an hour past noon? Mr. Branson dropped off Scotty around eight. In that time, she'd done nothing but drag the meat into the kitchen and pour the chocolate shake over it.

Something moved in the hallway. She looked at the children again, taking count.