

PATERNITY LEAVE

written by

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COLD OPEN

1

INT. DANIEL'S BATHROOM - DAY

1

A cramped, dim bathroom. Rust rings in the sink. A crooked medicine cabinet mirror reflects DANIEL FIELDS, 30s, pants around ankles, slouched on the toilet like he's clocking in for a shift he didn't apply for.

He's scrolling three phones—yes, three. All cracked. One buzzes with a notification from "BarkPal," another from "Groceries2Go," and the third is mid-freeze from an app labeled "YoRydz."

He mutters as he swipes.

DANIEL

Nah. Can't walk no huskies today. They got murder in their eyes.

(flicks another screen)

YoRydz's rating system racist. Four stars and they still send me to the airport like I got TSA clearance.

(taps again)

Okay... what's this?

He squints at an email from the "Department of Family Equity."

DANIEL (CONT'D)

"The Department of Family Equity is proud to announce expansion of the Universal Paternity Leave Fund..."

(beat)

Okay, big words. Go on, then.

SCREEN (V.O.)

"If you may be the biological parent of any minor, you are entitled to up to 90 days compensated leave—no questions asked. Designed for equity and accessibility, the UPLF provides support to all individuals seeking to reconnect with possible dependents."

DANIEL

May be the parent? We out here honoring hypotheticals now?

SCREEN (V.O.)

"To qualify, simply upload the names of any potential offspring or biological connections.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SCREEN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

A follow-up confirmation process will be initiated. Payments begin upon digital affirmation."

DANIEL

So lemme get this straight... all I gotta do is name names like I'm testifying at the Maury trials?

He looks at the cracked wall. At the mildew creeping up the shower curtain. At the ramen packet resting solemnly on the sink. Back to the screen.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Three months paid... just for maybe being trash in the past?

(beat)

Finally. A system that rewards moral ambiguity.

He exhales, pops his neck. Cracks knuckles like he's about to code the next Twitter.

Pulls a half-used notepad from under the sink, marked "POSSIBLE BABY MAMAS (TIERED)" in highlighter. Scribbled names: "Julia A.," "Ellie??" "Maya (Red Car)," "Jazzmine? Jasmine?"

He opens his dusty Chromebook on the sink.

ON SCREEN: A spreadsheet loads.

Header reads: "PATERNITY PORTFOLIO v2." Tabs include: "HIGH PROBABILITY", "FIRE ALARMS / LEAVES / UNCONFIRMED".

He clicks into the first cell. Types: Julia (eyelash tech, allergic to mango)

Pauses. Looks proud.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Look at me, securing the bag and doing community outreach. I'm basically a nonprofit.

FADE TO BLACK.

END COLD OPEN.

ACT ONE

2

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

2

A battlefield of takeout containers, Styrofoam lids, and crumpled napkins. A battered coffee table overflows with soy sauce packets and half-drunk 40s. A dusty lava lamp gurgles like it's been crying for help for years.

DANIEL sits on the floor in a hoodie and boxers, hunched over his ancient Chromebook. An Excel sheet glows like cursed treasure. He types "Ellie (used to do bottle service, maybe twins?)" into a cell.

UNCLE JAY, mid-40s, eyes half-lidded from weed or wisdom, sprawls across the couch. He's shirtless under a camo vest. A conspiracy podcast rambles on from his phone:

PODCAST HOST (V.O.)

—so what the deep state doesn't want you to know is that pigeons were decommissioned in 1993 and replaced with drone proxies—

UNCLE JAY

(gesturing vaguely)

That part's true, by the way. I ain't seen a real pigeon blink since Obama.

DANIEL

Bro, what does that even—never mind. I got more urgent delusions.

(points to screen)

Okay, so listen. I need like... six names minimum to look "statistically fertile." Ten if I wanna seem "community-engaged."

UNCLE JAY

Then you gotta throw in some documentation. Something juicy. Ultrasound. Baby sock. Facebook fight thread from 2016.

DANIEL

I ain't forging no ultrasound. That's how you get ghost babies coming back for child support.

UNCLE JAY

I'm just sayin'—you don't lie big, they gon' see right through you. They got fraud radars, bro. Use misdirection. Like magic.

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL

This ain't a magic show, man. It's government-funded hustle. You gotta keep it just *credible enough* for plausible belief.

(slides screen toward Jay)

Check this out. Tier One: Julia—probably mine. Birthday matches. Hairline too. Tier Two: Ellie—drank a Four Loko while ovulating. That's a statistical hazard.

UNCLE JAY

What about that one girl with the bird tattoo on her hip? Looked like Twitter's evil twin?

DANIEL

Oh, Nah-Nah? Nah-Nah moved to Tulsa. She got a baby for real, but she blocked me after I said "Happy Birthday" two days late.

UNCLE JAY

That's still valid! You could list her under "Unconfirmed But Spiritually Accurate."

DANIEL

You tryna get me indicted off vibes?

UNCLE JAY

You tryna not get a check off vibes?

DANIEL

(pointing at screen)

I got a tab for that. It's literally called "Maybe Me Spiritually."

They laugh. Daniel taps out another entry: "Desiree (called me Daddy by accident once)."

He leans back, exhausted but smug.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

This might be the most responsible thing I've done in years.

UNCLE JAY

Technically you applying for parental leave before parenting. That's like putting on a condom after the baby shower.

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL

We rewriting the rules, Jay. Reclaiming
lost time... and lost wages.

Jay swigs from a bottle of off-brand Henny. The podcast
shifts gears—

PODCAST HOST (V.O.)

—and that's why the moon ain't real,
it's a surveillance balloon. Sponsored
by Pedigree dog food. Think about it.

UNCLE JAY

(pensively)

Yo... you think child support is just
emotional taxation?

DANIEL

Don't start. I'm trying to center
abundance.

UNCLE JAY

Mm. Just don't center yourself into
prison.

Daniel ignores him, eyes glowing as he clicks "SUBMIT."

DANIEL

It's done.

(beat)

Daddy leave, baby. Let's ride.

The screen pings: "Your UPLF Application has been received.
Review pending."

Daniel leans back like he just filed taxes on time. Jay
lights a blunt with the toaster.

UNCLE JAY

You think they really gon' pay you?

DANIEL

I think if the system can screw me by
accident, I should get to finesse it on
purpose.

Jay grins.

UNCLE JAY

A'ight. But if a baby shows up on your
doorstep with your eyebrows, I'm movin'
out.

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL
You ain't even on the lease.

UNCLE JAY
Exactly. Ain't tryna inherit your karma.

Daniel exhales, calm for the first time in a while. His screen glows with a countdown: "Review Status: 72 HOURS UNTIL VERIFICATION."

They sit in silence. The podcast drones on about fluoride and lizard blood.

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

The glow of the screen reflects off Daniel's face. His expression is a cocktail of pride and panic. He clicks into a portal labeled: "UPLOAD PARENTAL MATERIALS - Optional (But Strongly Encouraged!)"

He sighs, clicks "Add Files."

INT. ONLINE PORTAL - MONTAGE

Daniel begins uploading... whatever he can dig up.

ON SCREEN: A blurry photo of a woman smiling with a baby in the background. The caption: "She said her cousin got pregnant the same month. I think? Might've been her though."

Next: A screenshot of an old DM:

JULIA: "You were wild that night lol"

DANIEL: "Yeah, still wondering if we used protection tbh"

JULIA: "👍"

Next: A picture of a baby shoe—on a CVS floor.

Next: An Instagram story screenshot from 2017:
@Ellie_Dollface: "No shade but men who ghost their own kids are actual garbage 🤢"

DANIEL
(murmuring to himself)
That one's got emotional resonance.
Government loves closure arcs.

He uploads an old Facebook post:

DANIEL FIELDS: "Happy Father's Day to all the kings who might be fathers and don't even know it yet."

(CONTINUED)

He nods. Sips flat soda.

Uploads a photo of himself holding a baby that clearly isn't his. Baby's face is cut off. He's in a club. Holding a Red Bull.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Evidence of practice. They can't say I never held one.

Final upload: A crumpled receipt from a Walgreens run labeled: "Diapers, Plan B, Reese's Big Cup"

He stares. Thinks. Nods. Clicks the final checkbox:

"I affirm I may be the biological father to at least one child under 18."

Clicks "Submit."

PORTAL (V.O.)

Thank you for your submission.
Verification process will begin shortly.

A meter pops up: "Pending Verification: 72 Hours"

Daniel leans back, exhales.

UNCLE JAY (O.S.)

You ever wonder if you manifested this life by saying "I got it" when you didn't?

DANIEL

Nah. I think life manifested me out of boredom.

Jay tosses him a bag of chips. They eat in silence. The screen flickers. From the speakers, the conspiracy podcast shifts tones—

PODCAST HOST (V.O.)

—so that's why the U.S. government secretly wants you to have children you can't afford. It builds docility. Dependency. Economic despair wrapped in baby wipes.

UNCLE JAY

He spittin'.

Daniel takes one last look at the portal. A thought flickers across his face—guilt? Hope? Doesn't matter. He minimizes the tab and opens YouTube.

(CONTINUED)

Searches: "how to hold a baby without looking scared."

The first video loads. He watches.

Then quickly opens a second tab: "Lottery scams that actually worked."

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO5 INT. RIDESHARE - DAY

5

Rock drumsolo rattle the windows of a well-worn Prius. DANIEL is behind the wheel, sunglasses on, one hand on the wheel, the other waving an imaginary flag of victory.

His phone is recording a VOICE MEMO.

DANIEL

(into phone)

No work. Just vibes. Three months, fully paid. Fatherhood is finally paying out. Shout out to Julia, Ellie, and my good sis with the peach emoji name—y'all made this possible. Couldn't have done it without at least one of y'all ovulating irresponsibly.

He cackles to himself. The volume goes up. Rock lyrics hit a new height of vulgar celebration.

In the backseat, a woman in her 50s—KAREN-ADJACENT, floral scarf, visibly annoyed—clutches her purse and grimaces.

KAREN-ADJACENT

Excuse me. Driver?

Daniel doesn't hear—or pretends not to.

KAREN-ADJACENT (CONT'D)

Sir? Sir. Could you please turn that down? It's extremely... explicit.

DANIEL

(smirking, eyes forward)

App got a mute button, ma'am. Feel free to live your best quiet life.

KAREN-ADJACENT

You're going the wrong way. This is taking me through an underpass.

DANIEL

You marked "no highways." Underpass is just broke-person infrastructure. Embrace it.

Her jaw drops. She taps angrily on her phone.

KAREN-ADJACENT

You'll be hearing from customer support.

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL

They hear from me every day. We close.

PING.

His phone buzzes. A new EMAIL NOTIFICATION rolls across the top of the screen.

SUBJECT: URGENT - RANDOM CLAIM REVIEW SELECTED

FROM: UPLF COMPLIANCE DEPT

"You have been randomly selected for a Paternity Leave Verification Interview. Please confirm availability within 24 hours."

Daniel's smile flatlines.

He stares. The car veers slightly.

KAREN-ADJACENT

Are you intoxicated?!

He doesn't respond. The Rock music becomes absurdly upbeat behind his frozen stare.

He tries to laugh it off. Clears his throat. Hits "Reply."

His thumbs hover above the keys. "No worries," he starts typing. Then deletes it. Types again: "Totally available." Then backspaces. His confidence fractures visibly.

He ends up typing:

"Yup. I'll be there. Bringin' the dad vibes."

He hits SEND.

Karen-Adjacent narrows her eyes.

KAREN-ADJACENT (CONT'D)

Are you even a father?

Daniel glances at her in the mirror.

DANIEL

(slow, uncertain)

I mean... that's what we're about to find out.

6

INT. FAMILY EQUITY DEPT - INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

6

A government-issue gray room. Windowless. Cheap chairs. The kind of fluorescent light that turns skin the color of old printer paper.

DANIEL sits at a desk with a cracked water cup and a rapidly fraying sense of confidence.

Enter SHANICE—early 30s, sharp-suited, clipboard tight to chest, hair flawless, mouth set to default unimpressed. She doesn't sit immediately. She closes the door behind her with precision.

SHANICE

Daniel Fields?

DANIEL

In the flesh. Verified.
(extends hand, grins)
How you doin'?

She doesn't take the hand.

SHANICE

You've been selected for Random Claim Verification under Section 13.1.4 of the Universal Paternity Leave Act. Do you understand what that entails?

DANIEL

I do. It means fate pulled my name out the hat 'cause I shine too bright. Happens a lot, actually.

She sits, opens the folder. Thick. Tense silence as she flips through.

SHANICE

Let's begin with your submissions.
(she reads dryly)
"Julia A." "Julia with the back tattoo."
"Julia, maybe with braids?"

DANIEL

Technically, that's one person. Or three extremely aligned universes. Depends how you look at it.

SHANICE

You also submitted a screenshot of a text that simply says: "You wild for what you did that night."

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL

Which, in context, strongly implies paternity.

SHANICE

No date. No name. No corroboration.

DANIEL

But it had tone. Intent. That text had *energy*.

SHANICE

You attached an Instagram story from 2017 where a woman writes, quote, "men who ghost their kids are actual garbage."

DANIEL

Poignant social commentary. And possibly autobiographical. Which would make it documentary evidence, right?

She slides another page forward.

SHANICE

This child, listed as "Munchie," you claimed might be "between six and newborn." Care to clarify?

DANIEL

So here's the thing—time's a construct. You ever seen a toddler and thought "Wow, that baby's been here before?" That's the vibe I got.

SHANICE

And yet you've never met this "Munchie."

DANIEL

Not physically, no. But spiritually? We've been circling each other.

SHANICE

And this baby shoe?

DANIEL

That is an authentic baby item.

SHANICE

Found on the floor of a Walgreens.

DANIEL

Babies shop there too.

(CONTINUED)

A beat.

She closes the folder with quiet finality.

SHANICE

Mr. Fields. The UPLF was designed to offer legitimate caregivers the support they need. Not to reward speculative inseminators.

DANIEL

That's fair. But I'd like to respectfully pivot.

(leans in)

See, I'm not denying these women—or the children. I'm leaving room. Room for truth, room for error. Room for life. Isn't that... kinda what being a dad is?

She stares at him. Zero blink rate.

SHANICE

No.

(sits back)

Here's what happens now. We're going to reach out to all individuals you listed. If even one confirms you are biologically linked or legally acknowledged, the leave will stand.

DANIEL

Boom.

SHANICE

If none do—

(slides paper across)

—you'll be in violation of Federal Fraud Clause 27-B, subject to repayment, civil penalties, and potential misdemeanor charges.

DANIEL

Misdemeanor. That's the chill one, right?

SHANICE

We'll also flag your data in the Federal Benefit Integrity Grid. That means no FAFSA. No WIC. No disaster relief. And probably no lottery wins, since they're running all that through the same filter now.

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL

Y'all really cracked down on hope, huh?

SHANICE

You have 72 hours. One confirmation.
That's all you need.

(stands)

Don't make me waste my time. I get paid hourly, and I'm very expensive.

DANIEL

Noted. Just out of curiosity... what happens if like... three or more confirm?

SHANICE

Then congratulations. You're not a fraud. You're a statistic.

She opens the door.

SHANICE (CONT'D)

Clock's ticking, Mr. Fields.

Daniel watches her walk out. He mutters to himself, rubbing his temples.

DANIEL

Cool, cool, cool. Just need one baby mama with short-term memory loss and a soft spot for mess.

He looks down at the paper she left. At the words "72 HOURS."

Then at his phone.

Then back at the paper.

He picks up his phone. Dials.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

(into phone)

Yo, Jay? We got a situation. Start pulling names and block histories. It's time to call the Avengers of my bad decisions.

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

7

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

7

The place is a mess again. Half-eaten Chinese food. A conspiracy podcast plays low in the background.

DANIEL paces in a hoodie and slides, chewing on his thumbnail like it's government-issued anxiety gum. His phone is in one hand, a flash drive in the other. The 72-HOUR CLOCK on his wall is now a whiteboard with "DOOM" scrawled in red Sharpie.

UNCLE JAY is at the kitchen table, building a conspiracy board. A half-drunk Big Gulp. Push pins jammed into a pizza box. Red yarn everywhere.

Pinned to the board:

Julia A (text thread: "you up?")

Ellie (note: "blocked me after brunch")

Alia (???) (note: "might be Aliyah?")

"Girl from New Year's" (no name, just a drawing of fireworks and boobs)

DANIEL

Delete, delete, delete—why is Gmail showing me her baby's birthday post? I didn't even know she had a Pinterest.

He flips open a dusty laptop, hits "UNSEND" on five-year-old messages like that matters.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

God, I knew the cloud would come for me. I just didn't think it'd be for child support.

His phone buzzes.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Please don't be her. Or her. Or—

VOICEMAIL (V.O.)

"If this is Daniel Fields, lose this number. For real this time."

DANIEL

(beat)
Honestly fair.

He tries another. Ringing. No answer.

(CONTINUED)

UNCLE JAY

(sipping)

You ever think maybe it's not about the women... but the choices you made while undercooked as a man?

DANIEL

Jay, you once tried to name a stray raccoon "child support loophole." I don't need moral clarity from you.

UNCLE JAY

Still a good name.

DANIEL

They're gonna fry me, man. Full-on W-2 rotisserie. I got seventy hours left and my only alibi is a Walgreens baby sock.

Jay picks up a marker and draws an arrow from "Maya?" to a question mark labeled "\$700 Venmo?"

UNCLE JAY

What about the girl who let you use her Netflix after y'all broke up?

DANIEL

Blocked. Got replaced by some dude named "Marcus - Don't Skip Episodes."

Suddenly—

DING.

Daniel freezes. Looks at his phone.

ON SCREEN: New Email - UPLF VERIFICATION UNIT

Subject: Parental Confirmation Received — Subject(s): Multiple

Status: APPROVED

DANIEL (CONT'D)

...No.

He opens it. Scrolls.

More names than expected.

"The following individuals have independently confirmed a biological and/or legal connection:"

Julia A.

(CONTINUED)

Ellie N.

Desiree (Instagram handle only)

Aliyah/Aaliyah (spelling unclear)

"New Year's Girl" (user-submitted video attached)

Lola (via notarized letter)

"Maya's Mom" (marked: 'Filed years ago')

UNCLE JAY
(reading over his
shoulder)
Wait—Lola? She had that baby?

DANIEL
I thought she said it was her brother's.

UNCLE JAY
Might've meant baby daddy's brother. You
know she talks like a divorce lawyer.

DANIEL
Nah. No way. This ain't real. This ain't
—

—JULIA in a cramped salon, blowing someone's hair out,
scrolling on her phone, half-shrugging to a Fund Agent on
Zoom.

"Yeah, that idiot probably is the dad."

—ELLIE in a gym locker room, pulling off boxing gloves.

"I told him years ago, but he blocked me. Let him pay now."

—DESIREE, breastfeeding with one hand, phone in the other.

"If I confirm, do I get like a check too or...?"

—ALIA? ALLYAH? stoned in a backyard kiddie pool. "He was...
persistent. Might be mine. The baby got his nose. And his
WiFi password."

—NEW YEAR'S GIRL, filming a shaky TikTok-style confession
with the caption: *"Storytime: I might've created life with a
rideshare driver."*

—LOLA, filing a notarized form at UPS like she's paying a
parking ticket.

(CONTINUED)

—MAYA'S MOM, tired, no makeup, straight to camera: "You already have my paperwork. I'm not resending it again. Tell him to show up this time."

BACK TO:

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Daniel sits in stunned silence.

DANIEL

Wait...

(beat)

Wait. I'm actually... a father?

Jay throws a hand up like a game show buzzer.

UNCLE JAY

Eight times over, bruh. You just leveled up to Side Quest Hell.

DANIEL

How... How did I win the scam *by accident*?

He looks around like the walls are closing in, then stares at his own hands.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

What do I do with these? Do I build a treehouse? Sign field trip forms? I don't even have a printer.

Jay points to the approval email.

UNCLE JAY

Congratulations. You played yourself... and now you gotta play catch with your consequences.

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR10 INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

10

The air is still now. Filled with the aroma of microwave grease and dread. Rock music is off. Conspiracy podcast paused mid-rant. All that remains is Daniel—slumped on the couch like someone told him the Earth's flat and he's the reason.

He swipes through baby videos on social media: chubby cheeks. Giggles. Tiny hands reaching. A time-lapse of a dad building a crib from scratch.

DANIEL

(pained)

Man, I can't even fix the drawer on the junk cabinet...

He flips to YouTube.

Types:

"how to talk to kids you forgot you had"

Auto-suggest kicks in:

"how to tell a kid you're the dad"

"how to fake knowing your child's name"

"parenting for dudes who slept through it"

He clicks a video titled: "5 Things to Say to Your Child When You Reconnect (Without Sounding Like Trash)"

The host is too upbeat. Daniel pauses it mid-smile.

UNCLE JAY (O.S.)

YouTube's not gon' save you, man. Ain't no tutorial for catching up to the rest of your life.

Jay's posted up in the kitchen now, eating cereal from a colander.

DANIEL

I was just trying to chill, Jay. Take some fake leave. Sleep in. Play 2K. Now I'm in a crossover episode of *Who's The Daddy* meets *Intervention*.

(CONTINUED)

UNCLE JAY

Congratulations, my guy. You went in for a scam... and got hit with the Circle of Life.

(raises spoon)

Simba'd yourself.

DANIEL

And they didn't even give me a lion to hold up. Just screenshots and side-eyes.

UNCLE JAY

Let this be a lesson: don't fill out government forms high.

DANIEL

I wasn't even that high! I was... ambition-high.

He clutches the approval email printout like it's a prophecy.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

What if one of 'em actually shows up, though?

Jay shrugs.

UNCLE JAY

Then you open the door. Try not to say anything stupid. Maybe keep your shirt on.

DANIEL

I can't do this, man. I don't even know what juice kids drink now. Is Capri Sun still in or did they cancel it?

UNCLE JAY

You don't gotta have it figured out tonight. You just gotta not run.

DANIEL

I'm a runner, Jay. That's what I do. I once ducked a phone call from Jury Duty for two years.

Jay walks over. Looks him dead in the eye.

UNCLE JAY

This ain't Jury Duty. This is Jury of *your character*.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

(CONTINUED)

Both men freeze.

A long beat.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Daniel walks toward the door like he's approaching a Rockdoor on a game show.

Opens it.

Standing there: MAYA.

Nine years old. Braids tight, expression tighter. Hoodie, backpack, laminated medical card swinging on a lanyard. Her face is unreadable, but not unkind.

She looks him straight in the eye. No fear. No hesitation.

MAYA

Mom says you're picking me up now.

Daniel blinks. Processes.

DANIEL

I-uh-what?

MAYA

You said you wanted to be part of my life.

(beat)

Well. I'm here.

(eyes him, beat)

You got juice or nah?

DANIEL

(quietly)

I... might have Sunny D?

MAYA

That'll work.

She walks past him. Just like that. Into the apartment. Like she's been here before in a dream and now it's real.

Daniel doesn't move for a beat. Then turns, watches her drop her bag by the couch and start peeling off her hoodie.

Jay raises an eyebrow.

UNCLE JAY

And just like that... your pilot episode begins.

(CONTINUED)

10 CONTINUED: (3)

Daniel stands in the doorway, staring at the storm he summoned, the quiet he wasn't ready for.

He slowly closes the door.

11 INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT 11

The lights are dimmed now. The chaos has settled into something eerie-like the eye of a storm.

MAYA is curled up on the futon with headphones in, watching something on a tablet. Her backpack's spilled open: sketchbook, fruit snacks, a few dog-eared library books. The laminated medical card dangles from the doorknob.

DANIEL sits at the kitchen table, staring at a near-empty glass of knockoff orange soda like it owes him child support.

UNCLE JAY has long since retreated to the back room. It's quiet.

Daniel opens his laptop. Starts typing.

GOOGLE SEARCH BAR:

"how many kids do I legally have to raise if I just wanted money"

Auto-suggestions pop up:

"can I return parental leave money if the kid stays over?"

"minimum age to get custody revoked politely"

"parenting hacks for broke men"

"how to be a decent dad in 5 steps"

He clicks none of them.

Instead, his mouse hovers.

He stares at the blinking cursor.

Then slowly deletes the entire sentence.

He opens a new tab.

Types: "Things kids like to eat that aren't sugar"

Pause.

Then adds:

(CONTINUED)

"+ dinner ideas for picky 9 year olds"

He presses ENTER.

From the couch, Maya's voice breaks the silence. Not looking up.

MAYA

I like mac and cheese. Not the powder kind. The real kind.

Daniel turns, surprised.

DANIEL

You psychic now?

MAYA

No. Your keyboard's loud. And you breathe hard when you're stressed.

(beat)

Also, the powder kind is an insult to my time.

DANIEL

Duly noted.

A long pause. Maya closes her tablet.

MAYA

You don't have to try so hard. Just... don't disappear again.

DANIEL

(soft)

Yeah. I'll... try not to do that.

She nods like that's fine for now.

MAYA

Also, I know about Santa. So don't start lying this early.

She gets up, pads over to the futon blanket, climbs under it.

Daniel watches her for a moment. Then turns back to the laptop. The page now says: "Baked mac and cheese recipes for beginners"

He clicks the first link.

And for the first time, he actually starts reading.

FADE OUT.

END ACT FOUR