

**Redwood Writers 2015 "On the Edge" Short Story Contest
First Place Winner**

**"Secret Recipe"
Patsy Taylor**

Ava stirred the broth with a slotted spoon, breathing in the aroma of garlic and oregano. Dinner might be late tonight, but it would be worth waiting for. This meal would be special.

"Ava?" Her mother-in-law wandered into the kitchen. "Where's Julie?" She leaned over the kettle and inhaled. "Funny smell. What's in it?"

"Old recipe of my mother's." Ava had learned to ignore her mother-in-law's little digs and not take the bait. "You'll love it."

"Humm." Mother-in-law poured a glass of water. "Where's my little angel? I want to read her a story." She peered out the window overlooking the play yard behind the vegetable garden. "She's not on the swing I bought her."

"Play date." Ava set the spoon on the counter and went to the dish cupboard. "Probably stay at her friend's for dinner." She chose three plates and soup bowls and set them on the counter. "Just the grown-ups tonight." Ava turned and smiled at her mother-in-law.

"I don't understand you parents today. I can't imagine letting a four-year-old spend an entire day with strangers."

Her frown ages her even more than her years, Ava thought but said nothing.

"Jim certainly can't approve of these *play dates*." Mother-in-law refilled the glass. "Well? Does he?" Her voice had taken on a shrill tone.

"Jim leaves Julie's care up to me. His work is so demanding." Ava stared at her mother-in-law. "You know that. Jim's father practiced law too."

"Well, of course, I know. But still--When I was raising *my* son I made sure our home was pleasant and welcoming. He didn't need to go off with strangers."

"The Neals aren't exactly strangers, Mother. Brad Neal is Jim's partner. You know that, too." Ava saw the flash of anger pass over her mother-in-law's face.

"I didn't hear anyone come to the door. Don't tell me you just let Julie jump in the car and drive away?"

"We waved goodbye."

Mother-in-law rolled her eyes. "What is that smell?" She walked to the steaming pot. "Oregano?" She glared at Ava. "My son hates oregano."

"Oh? I didn't know. Jim seems to like my cooking, Mother." Ava smiled, wiped her hands on her apron. "Would you mind stirring the broth?" She turned to put out the place mats and napkins before her mother-in-law could object.

"What time will Jim be home? I need to take my heart pills before dinner." Mother-in-law picked up the slotted spoon and made small circles in the broth. She stopped stirring and looked at something in the pot.

"He didn't say, but I imagine about seven. That's his usual time." Ava watched her mother-in-law peering into the pot. "I left some soup bones in there. Would you spoon them out for me? Just drop them in the bowl on the counter there."

"What kind of meat did you use? I don't remember bones like these."

The ping, ping, ping of bones dropping in the bowl set Ava's teeth on edge.

“Good grief. How did this get in here?” Mother-in-law ladled out a long blond hair. She held up the offending strand for Ava to see.

“I can’t imagine. Won’t spoil the soup, do you think?” Ava put three crystal wine glasses on the table. “I mean it *is* boiled after all.” She hoped her mother-in-law wouldn’t notice the curl of smile working at her lips.

“Well, Ava.” Mother-in-law banged down the slotted spoon and turned to face her son’s wife. “I don’t think it matters if you boil hair or not. It’s hair! Hair in food! You can’t serve food that has hair in it!” She put her hand to her chest as if to feel the beat of her heart.

“Mother, are you all right?” Ava stopped arranging the silverware and looked at her mother-in-law. “Do you need your pills?”

“No. I’m fine.” She stepped to the window and looked out. “What time did you say Jim would be home?”

“Any time now.” Ava didn’t try to hide her smile this time. “It’s almost seven.” She put a vase of roses in the center of the table. “Are you sure you feel okay?”

“It’s just --I wanted to read a book to Julie. She loves when I do.”

“You spoil my daughter!” Ava didn’t intend to sound so angry. “I mean, she isn’t used to so much attention, Mother.” She softened her tone. “And after your visits she expects more from us.”

“Jim told me you never wanted children, Ava.” Mother-in-law let out a breath. “I only want what’s best for Julie. I love her.”

“I know you do.” Ava smiled at her mother-in-law. “Would you mind emptying those bones in the trash?” She pulled the curtains closed.

“Ava?” Mother-in-law stood in the doorway to the service porch. “What is this?” She held up a child’s pink sweater.

“Why, I believe that belongs to Julie.” Ava didn’t look up. “The one you bought her.”

“I found it in the waste basket.” Mother-in-law leaned against the door. “It’s spotted with blood.”

“I think you’re right, Mother.”

Mother-in-law clutched at her chest. “Where is Julie? What have you done?” She managed to speak the words before she slumped to the floor.

Only minutes after the ambulance carried Mother-in-law away, Jim barreled into the driveway. Ava met him as he jumped out of the car. “I got here as soon as I could.”

“Oh, Jim. It was so horrible.” Ava wrapped her arms around him. “She must have forgotten to take her pills.”

“It was only a matter of time.” Jim gripped Ava’s shoulder. “But still, it’s a shock.” He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“We were having such a good time. I don’t know what happened. She simply fell and that was it. Paramedics couldn’t revive her. I’m so sorry.”

“At least Julie wasn’t here to see it.” Jim smoothed Ava’s hair and kissed her forehead. “The Neals said Julie could stay overnight. Under the circumstances, I thought she should.”

“Thanks for taking care of that.” Ava gave him a hug as they entered the kitchen. “Well, come have your dinner. You must be starved.”

“Smells good, but my gut’s in knots.” Jim took a deep breath. “Maybe later though. What is it?” Ava gazed into his eyes. “Mother’s secret recipe.”