

ABSTRACT

WHAT WE LOST

By

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What We Lost contains chapters from a novel about two sisters whose relationship is irrevocably changed after one of them suffers a miscarriage at six months pregnant. Sarah, a mother of two children, and the sister of Lacy, who loses her baby, narrates the novel. *What We Lost* is a story about what happens when sisters, who have been at odds with each other their entire lives but are still best friends, have to deal with a real tragedy. Sarah and Lacy will have to decide if they will allow this tragedy to finally wrench them apart or bring them together at a time when they both need each other the most.

WHAT WE LOST

A THESIS

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I am a writer. I have not always been able to say that with conviction. Before joining the MFA program, I thought writers were people who had books on shelves at Barnes and Noble, who could share links to their novels on Amazon, or whose books I had read in my many years of school. Writers were successful. Writers were published. Writers did not write in bits and spurts in journals that no one would ever read. They wrote with ferocity, and they wrote well, which is why their books were out in the world.

When I joined the MFA program, I had been out of school for twelve years. In my undergraduate studies, I barely remember stepping into a library, I did not own a computer, and class registration was done over the phone. When I joined the MFA program, I had to relearn what my younger peers took for granted, having only recently obtained their BAs. I had to learn how to write a research paper from the ground up—from researching almost

exclusively online, to figuring out how to correctly cite a source.

In addition to the mere logistics of doing the work, I also had to learn how to be a student at the same time as taking care of the family I had created in those twelve years. I had to learn how to get dinner on the table at six o'clock for two kids even if I was at school until seven-thirty that evening. I had to find a real babysitter for the first time who would love my children as fiercely as I would love them if I were there. Most of all, I had to learn that the expectations I had set up for myself would fail miserably, but that I would eventually learn a new method that would work for two years.

Two years is what I gave myself. Two years to be a writer. Two years to *become* a writer. By the end of the program, I wanted to say with conviction that I was a writer. The first time I felt like a writer was in Patty Seyburn's poetry workshop. At first I hated the class. I was no poet. I did not read poetry, and I most certainly did not write poetry. I did not understand what made some poems "work" and what made others "not work." In those weeks with Patty, she changed my entire perception of poetry. She made me look at language as I never had before

as a prose writer. When I was in Patty's class, I dreamt in lines of poetry and woke up in the middle of the night to write them down, like I always imagined a writer to do.

The next time I felt like a real writer was when my novel really began to form into a story, and I would bring chapters into workshop, and people would get really into what I was writing. I was excited when my classmates told me they were moved by what I was writing, and they gave me suggestions to make it better. Then I sat and thought about what they said and edited my work to make it even stronger.

What cemented my writer status in my mind was reading at Gatsby Books as part of our Rip Rap Writer's Series. I invited friends who, before this point, did not realize how important writing was to me, and they were amazed that I had another layer that I had kept hidden during our many years of friendship. I was a writer in their eyes, and I slowly had become one in mine as well.

The best part about this program was having so many eyes and ears on my work, in workshop and at the readings. Sometimes it took someone else's viewpoint to make me see something that I should have seen all along. That happened my second year with Lisa Glatt. When I gave her my thesis

for the first time, I was at about one hundred pages, and I was at a standstill. I did not know how to make my novel progress, and I felt like the most recent chapter I had written was simply restating actions in a different way. She told me I was too tightly focused on the story, and I needed to "mess it up" a little. I needed to put my characters in the world and have them do day-to-day activities even though they were going through the most traumatic experience of their lives. Lisa likened it to when her mother was ill, but Lisa still had to get up and make it through the day—she still had to live her life. That advice helped me get started writing again. I put my narrator in the world and had her deal with life's daily frustrations at the same time as dealing with grief.

This program has made me a writer, and I cherish every moment of it. It was the hardest two years of my life, but I have come to the end with over one hundred strong pages of a novel, a 4.0 GPA, and an immense feeling of pride. This program has shown me that writing is messy and frustrating and most often unrewarded, but putting words on a blank page and turning them into a story with real characters that people care about is something to be proud of.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Writing has always been personal for me, a secret scribbling of words that I kept to myself, not wanting to share because putting my words out in the harsh, judgmental world would expose a fragility in me that I have always wished to keep hidden. I did not tell anyone except my husband that I was applying to the MFA program until I was accepted, maybe knowing that sharing the news would be confessing that I *needed* this acceptance. Through years of practice, I have conditioned myself not to need things.

After my father abandoned my pregnant mom when I was seven years old, my older sister turned to drugs, drinking and sex and has never been able to completely turn away from their addicting draw. This left me, as the middle child, to the task of appearing "friction-less." The incredible inner pressure to do everything perfectly, to keep everyone happy at all times, and not to express any personal desire is exhausting, which is why I turned to writing.

I keep most of my childhood memories in the past, where they belong, yet there are images that are so stark and crisp that I cannot help including them in my writing. The image of the two perfect circles of blood from my sister's nostrils after a line of cocaine that she left on a towel hanging in the bathroom the four of us shared appeared in the first novel I wrote. The memory of the brightly-colored, almost play-looking, food stamps my mom used to buy groceries with while I fiddled with my shoelaces appeared in that novel as well, exactly as I remembered, the feelings of shame and resentment as palpable as if I were still standing in line at Food For Less. But most accounts of my childhood remain hidden in journals, squirreled away in cupboards.

Although I have been an avid reader and writer my whole life, I never believed that *choosing* to be an author as a career path would be a viable option. I was the only daughter out of three to graduate high school with an actual diploma, as opposed to working for a GED with a baby on my hip, the route both my sisters had taken. I was accepted to UC Santa Barbara with an "Undeclared" major because being seventeen and figuring out the application process, financial aid forms, and deciding where to go all

on my own was hard enough without deciding what I wanted to "be when I grew up."

I soon began working toward my major in Geology because science made sense. I could get a job with a legitimate degree. However, I still took the occasional creative writing class and enjoyed them. I "dabbled" in writing, which is what I thought mature adults did. Then when it came time to officially declare my major, I balked at the idea of two more years of math, labs, and utterly boring lectures. Emboldened by my best friend who was choosing English as her major because she liked to read, I decided to do the same thing. I cannot say it was the best reason to change majors, but it was the one that has brought me to the path where I am now, and I have never regretted it.

Upon graduating, I was faced with the reality that I could either teach English or apply for a menial office job. I took the office job because I had no intention of moving back home, and I needed to pay the rent. After bouncing from one job to the next—always staying at the periphery of the literary world by technical writing or editing for an education company—I finally got up the courage to quit my job and devote a year to writing a novel

full time, a year for which I will forever be indebted to my husband who faithfully drove every day in Los Angeles traffic to work while happily encouraging my new lifestyle of zero income and yoga pants.

When I wrote my first novel, I worked from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day for about a year. I sat in a room at a white desk that faced a white wall. That left me absolutely nothing to distract myself from writing my novel—a project that left me emotionally spent at the end of every day. There were days where I sobbed as I wrote, imagining the agony my character was going through because I was finally able to *feel* and *express* feelings through my character. Through this character, I was able to deal with my devastation of being abandoned by my father and to allow myself to suffer along with her.

My writing exposes a dark sadness and hopelessness that I keep captive inside. That is why I kept my passion for writing a secret for so long. It is hard to explain why *needing* something makes me feel weak, but I suppose that is my own artist's turmoil.

Even my writing process is very personal. I cannot sit in a crowded coffee shop or in a living room with the television blaring to create believable scenes. In one

workshop, a fellow writer told me my writing reads like a screenplay because he could see everything in the scene with vivid detail. In order to get a scene right, I need to be in a quiet room with no one in the house, and picture the room, the clothes of the character, what that character is physically doing—basically I need to live in that scene. That is how I create a successful moment in my writing.

It has taken a long time not to let my self-consciousness appear in my writing. I am always afraid that others will see themselves in what I am writing and take offense. I come from a family of sensitive women, and I can see attributes in my characters they would bristle upon seeing because they would see those characteristics in themselves. Or, if I write about a mother, I always wonder how my own mother will read it. The biggest obstacle I face in my writing is not to censor myself.

Books have been, and always will be, an integral part of my life. If I could admit addiction to anything, it would be reading. If I am not reading, I am jittery, looking around for something—anything—to read. I was the kid who read the shampoo bottle in the shower so by the time it was ready to be tossed in the trash, I had memorized every line written on it. The precious few books

I owned as a child are not salvageable, the pages yellowed and falling out, the spine cracked and unreadable, the entire thing held together by rubber bands.

Ironically, reading a good novel does not inspire me to write. In fact, it is the opposite. A good book makes me depressed because I know that I will never write anything even close to the level of what I have just read, which basically includes anything written by Joyce Carol Oates. I read a quote one time that when you marry narcissism with crippling self-doubt, you have an artist. That is the most apt description of a writer I have ever heard.

Given the events that occurred in my personal life during the MFA program, it is almost unbelievable that I finished the program at all, and I am proud that I completed it with a 4.0 GPA. It is most likely this pride that kept me plodding on even when life was at its most bleak. A week after I sent in my letter accepting my place in the program, my husband's family decided they were breaking up their family-run business and we almost had to move out of state, thus ending my opportunity to be part of the program before I had even begun. Over the next year and a half the details were painfully ironed out, and I was

never on solid footing at home, cognizant of the fact that any moment I may have to drop out of the program to move for my husband's job.

A few weeks into the program, I was about to step into class when I got the news that my writing mentor—Les Plesko, the man who had written my letter of recommendation to get me into the program—had killed himself. That Thanksgiving, my brother-in-law collapsed at work and my mom and I had to fly to Oklahoma to help take care of my little sister's children while he went through open-heart surgery.

In the second week of my second year of the program, I had to go to my hometown because my niece was on suicide watch, and my mom and I had to wrestle custody of her away from my alcoholic older sister. Later in the semester, I injured my foot and was in a walking boot and crutches for three months and had to squeeze in physical therapy twice a week. Then, I missed the first week of the Spring Semester of my second year when we had to fly to Montreal because my seventy-eight year old mother-in-law was undergoing surgery for stomach cancer—a surgery we were not sure she would survive, but she did after losing an ovary, five feet of large intestine, and her bowel.

I also have two small children at home with a husband who works sixty hours a week, and during the program, I went through three babysitters. I had to be the one to sacrifice homework time or miss the occasional class to take care of a sick child or make up for the lack of childcare. In addition, to make up for the massive guilt of having my toddler cling to my legs sobbing every time I left for a class, I attempted not to miss one second more of their lives than I absolutely had to. Therefore, I volunteered in both their classrooms as Room Mom, coached my youngest daughter's soccer team, and cut myself off from any sort of downtime so that I could be an active part of their lives even though the program required so many hours of my day.

It seems fitting that the novel I have been writing for my thesis deals with grief on such a personal level. In the novel, two sisters learn how to cope when one of them suffers a miscarriage at six months along. The idea for my novel came from a single journal entry I made after my close friend miscarried at thirty weeks. To deal with the conflicting emotions I felt because of her loss, I had written about a page of rambling, inconclusive thoughts that I first turned into a short story that I brought into

workshop with Lisa Glatt. Listening to her advice and the advice from my peers, I decided to turn the short story into a novel. The only concrete ideas I had when starting the project was that I wanted the novel to be about how the relationship between the two sisters changed from this event, and I wanted the miscarriage to be at the heart of the novel.

This novel is unlike anything I have written in the past because it involves research. Because of the incredible responsibility I believe authors have to create believable (though not always true-to-life) scenes, I have been poring over websites, articles, and even picking the brain of a nurse practitioner at an OB/GYN's office to ensure the terms I am using are correct, the images I am portraying are what actual women have seen on an ultrasound screen, and the trauma of losing a child that a mother has named and prepared for is as accurate as possible.

I also read memoirs from women who have lost their children to explore this grief so I can incorporate it into my novel. *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*, by Elizabeth McCracken, deals with a baby lost in the ninth month of pregnancy. The grief I am looking to emulate is

the grief McCracken feels at her loss and she describes in her memoir:

I am the thing worse than a cautionary tale: I am a horror story, an example of something terrible going wrong when you least expect it, and for no good reason, a story to be kept from pregnant women, a story so grim and lesson-less it's better not to think about at all. (43)

I also read the memoir, *The Still Point of the Turning World* by Emily Rapp, in which Rapp delivers a baby who seems healthy, but at nine months begins to regress and dies at the age of three, not as a toddler, but as a toddler-sized infant. Rapp's grief is angrier than McCracken's, and both memoirs have helped me in their own way. McCracken had to deal with losing an abstract baby, while Rapp was given a baby to hold and love and watch grow, only to watch him die a little bit every day.

Both women's grief is uncontrollable and fierce, but they are different, because they are different women. I have two women in my novel, and I am learning that their ways of grieving will have to be their own and different from each other. Whether their relationship will be

stronger or weaker from this event will be the focus of my novel.

It took a long time to tell my friend that I was writing a novel about her tragedy. I waited until she gave birth to a healthy baby girl before sharing the details of my novel. She was supportive of my writing, and hopes that it gets published—not just because I am her friend, but also because she feels the same way McCracken does: that her story is a shameful secret. In her experience, no one knows what to say when they learn that she has lost a baby and always respond in one of two ways—either uncomfortably changing the subject or overreacting with sympathy. She would prefer neither.

After her miscarriage, she suddenly discovered a group of women who keep these deaths to themselves and bury their grief inside because of reactions such as these. My friend's hope is that if more people are aware of these "grim" stories, that people can eventually learn how to talk about them in constructive ways. I do not feel like I am doing a public service by writing my novel, but I am glad to be writing with her full support.

Being in the MFA program and writing over a hundred pages of a novel in a workshop environment is an experience

that I will treasure forever. Being a solitary person by nature, exposing my writing to the public has been a step I would not have taken without the support of my fellow writers behind me. In fact, the first encounter my closest friends have had with my writing has been at Gatsby books, as part of our Rip Rap Reading Series. It has been a long and arduous road to my MFA, but it has made me the strong writer I am, and for that, I am thankful.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Writing is solitary and lonely, but in an MFA program, that all changes. In an MFA program, everyone is there to do the same thing and everyone is on the same journey no matter what period of life they are in. When before all you have is the lonely sound of keys tapping in a silent room, now you have a captive audience.

I was told time and time again during the program that this was the best experience I would ever encounter to improve my writing. At no other point in my life would I have this many eyes on my work, giving me advice, pushing me forward, and making me better. I have come to agree with that. I have become a better writer.

I am not the same person or the same writer I was two years ago. From Patty Seyburn, I learned to look at and listen to language. I am still most comfortable writing prose, but I pay more attention to the words I choose rather than focusing solely on the idea. Stephen Cooper simply pushed me to be better. His constant, "You're

almost there!" made me look at my scenes more closely to see how I could tell my story more clearly. Suzanne Greenberg helped me live in my characters' minds and encouraged me when I was still trying to put the pieces of my story together. Her dedication made me sit down with the chapters and figure out how I would structure my novel. Lisa Glatt helped me out at a crucial time when I was stuck in the manuscript with nowhere to go. She took my overly focused manuscript and helped me make it three-dimensional.

In addition to the faculty, I credit my fellow writers for helping me realize where I needed to take my writing. Whether it was one of them telling me to "slow down" when I rushed through a scene or asking, "Where's Paul?" when a key character disappeared for a few chapters, their comments have helped me turn twelve chapters into the foundation for a novel.

I have a long way to go to bring this novel to a conclusion, but the MFA program has given me the skills to bring it to fruition. Whether Sarah and Lacy reconcile after this tragedy is unknown; however, they, like me, are forever changed.

APPENDIX
WHAT WE LOST

Chapter 1

April 17, 2015

My sister's house was a soft yellow with a bright white trim, white window boxes shining clean, no spot of grime visible. Mark and Lacy had saved for five years for a deposit and when they bought the house Paul and I came over every weekend to help them fix it up. The day Mark and Paul finished painting the white railing that framed the porch, we celebrated with a bottle of Dom Perignon. I drank only half a glass because I was six months pregnant with my second baby. Lacy turned down a drink for the first time in her life. It turned out that she, too, was pregnant.

I pulled into their driveway. Their curtains were closed, and the soft ding of the wind chime echoed through the air. The sprinklers were on, and I timed my walk up their stairs to avoid being sprayed. I knocked softly on the door before letting myself in with my key.

"Hello," I called quietly.

I slipped off my shoes and walked through the darkness of their living room. I glanced in the kitchen as I passed

and saw my brother-in-law sitting at the table, his head in his hands.

"Mark," I said, still quietly. The only sound was from the ticking clock that hung over the sink.

He looked up. His eyes were red and his hair was flat on his head, like he'd just taken off a ball cap.

"I was getting Lacy some water," he mumbled, standing up. The chair scraped the floor when he scooted it back, and the noise felt like an intrusion.

"She's sleeping," he said. "Finally." He ran his hand through his hair and avoided my eyes.

"I'm gonna go check on her," I said, the strain evident in both me and my brother-in-law. It was as though grief and anger were actual people standing between us, and I didn't know if I should push them aside and hug him or give him space.

I chose space. I turned around and walked more quickly to their bedroom. I pushed open the door. Lacy was lying on her side in the dark room. The TV was on and a *Sex and the City* rerun played silently. I didn't make a sound, but Lacy opened her eyes when I walked in.

"Lace," I said. Their bed lay low on the ground, so I sat on the floor next to it. I didn't want to risk jostling her.

I stroked my sister's hair and looked into her eyes. They were flat, a change from the energy that usually burned in them. I knew it wasn't just from the sedative and the morphine. I tried to keep my eyes looking into hers, but they travelled down. Down to her motionless six-month bloated stomach, where Ben was floating lifelessly in the amniotic fluid. Down to the thing that would change my little sister forever.

"How do you—" I broke off. "Are you in pain?"

She lay motionless. "It's not bad," she said, her voice monotone. "The pain. Now."

Mark had called me at five A.M. to say it had happened. I had been breastfeeding Nathaniel, rocking him back and forth, exhausted, but feeling guilty for being exhausted. Wanting to cry from fatigue, but knowing it was selfish. Because Mark was calling to tell me that their baby, the one that we'd had the shower for just two weeks ago, had died. The rush of blood that we had all been hoping for and not hoping for at the same time had come.

Only seven days ago, everything had been normal. Seven days ago Lacy and I had talked in the morning, like we did every day, and I had been crying about how tired I was. How Nathaniel had to be the worst sleeper who'd ever lived. How I would kill for three hours of solid sleep. How all I wanted was a nap. Lacy promised she would stay for a couple of hours in the afternoon after her doctor's appointment.

"You're gonna miss this when Ben is born," she had teased me. "I won't be there to bail you out anymore."

"Just wait," I had warned her. "This is the hardest thing you will ever do."

She would have plenty of time to throw that statement back in my face. I thought about Nathaniel while I looked at Lacy lying on her bed with sticks in her cervix, a barbaric procedure I couldn't even believe they still performed in the twenty-first century. A procedure where she'd lain in the doctor's office, her husband holding her hand, legs spread wide while her doctor inserted seaweed sticks inside her to prepare her body for labor. Because Lacy's body had to prepare for labor. Ben wasn't due for three more months so her body was still squeezed tight

around him, keeping him safe from the world outside. They were inducing her so she could give birth to her dead son.

Lacy shifted like she was going to sit up.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a disaster in here," she said.

I looked around. There were books on the dresser, used tissues strewn on the comforter, a bowl of cereal congealing on the nightstand. It didn't look unlike my bedroom on a typical day, but this was Lacy's bedroom. Lacy's house didn't have piles, her life didn't have mess.

"I'll get it," I said, taking over the role of big sister, the one that was mine, but that I'd never had to own before last week. The take-charge role that Lacy had been born with. I gathered the tissues and balled them up into a tight, moist mass in my hands. Without looking at her, I moved the pregnancy books down to the floor. I put the remote on the nightstand and grabbed the bowl to take to the sink.

"I'll be right back," I said and walked out to the kitchen. Mark was nowhere to be found, so I grabbed the water glass he had been bringing to Lacy. Beads of condensation dripped down and fell on my shirt, mixing with

Nathaniel's spit up. I saw the bottle of sedatives and grabbed that too.

When I walked back into the room, Lacy was rubbing her belly. I swallowed hard and went to sit next to her.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't..." I trailed off, not knowing what to say to my sister who no longer resembled my sister at all. And what could I say that I hadn't been saying for the past week? The days in which we had learned that Lacy wouldn't be having a baby, while I sat in the corner and nursed mine.

Lacy didn't say anything, but started crying harder, still silently, but shaking. "Do you think it hurt?" she asked in a voice only I could have understood.

"Do I think what hurt?" I asked.

"Dying," she choked out. "Do you think Ben was in pain?" She caressed her belly and asked me like I really knew. Like I was the expert.

I needed to think of something to say because Lacy had both arms wrapped around her stomach, hugging it. I was conscious that the next room over was the nursery, the paint still fresh on the walls, the stenciled kite floating above the park mural Lacy had painted on the wall herself. How the car seat, properly installed by our local fire

department, was sitting prominently in the backseat of their brand new minivan. The minivan they had bought last month that still had the new car smell, her old two-door BMW sold to CarMax.

"No," I said. "No, it didn't hurt." I opened the bottle of pills and shook out two. "Shhh, now." I helped her gulp the pills down. "Shhh," I whispered. I gathered her to me, like she was my three-year old daughter instead of my sister and shushed her as she fell asleep.

Chapter 2

June 29, 2011

I lay in bed and listened as Paul and Lacy talked, as if I wasn't three feet away willing them to leave.

"You've got to eat something," Lacy said to me. She turned to Paul. "She's got to eat something."

"I know," Paul said. He was gripping his chin, his thumb fingering the fold of skin under it. "She's down ten now." He wasn't looking at me nor was he looking at Lacy. *Men can be so weak sometimes*, I thought.

Lacy lay down next to me, face to face, brushing hair off of my forehead. "I know you don't feel good, but you need to...eat *something*."

I looked at Lacy and wondered how she could say *she knows*. If she did know, she wouldn't be asking me to eat. It was impossible to describe how *not good* I felt. *Good* wasn't even in the ballpark. But I couldn't tell them what I actually felt. Because even though Paul and Lacy were the closest people to me, people who were an actual part of me, there were some things you could never say out loud. Like how I wanted to make an appointment with the doctor, not for an ultrasound, but for an abortion. Because I actually hated this baby. Hated it.

It was my first pregnancy and for the first five weeks I had loved it. Loved it like I could never imagine loving anything in the world. Paul and I had stopped gorging ourselves at Taco Tuesday at *Sharkeez* after beach volleyball and had cooked every meal from a prenatal cookbook, juicing kale and beets for smoothies. I had loved the way Paul came home from his lifeguard shifts smelling like salt and sand and kissing my belly before heading off to shower, reminding me of how much I loved him too. We took sickeningly sweet pictures of me in profile, each week perceiving a slightly larger bulge on my flat stomach, Lacy always saying I was sticking it out. But I had loved it. We were the first of our friends, the first in my family to have a baby, the first time in a long time my mom had taken an active interest in anything I had done.

Even when the morning sickness started, I didn't mind. A book Lacy had given me that I'd thumbed through while watching *Saturday Night Live* had said most women get sick at the beginning. But when it quickly got worse and didn't go away after those initial months, I lost my ambivalence about it. I still nibbled saltines and drank ginger ale though. I had entire school days to get through, didn't I? Twenty-seven third graders were expecting me to stand

upright and teach them about fractions and space and how to write a proper paragraph. But there was that metallic taste on my tongue that wouldn't go away no matter how many times I brushed my teeth. I tried sucking on candy. Then popsicles. Then drank pickle juice. Used a teaspoon to measure it out because I'd read online it helped with the nausea.

But the school year had ended two weeks ago, along with my pretence of normalcy and any desire to prove to anyone that I was strong enough for this. I was now twenty-six weeks pregnant, and I hadn't eaten a proper meal in those two weeks. They had attached me to a pump of anti-nausea medication, and I could push a button and drugs would flow straight into my vein from the tube that was always in my arm.

"What about the baby?" Paul had asked as the doctor set up the IV. Paul was a search-and-rescue lifeguard for the Los Angeles County Fire Department and he had come straight from work, his red sweatshirt hurting my eyes.

At that moment, I had hated him too. Paul, who when he threw up gagged and choked and spluttered as if he were coughing up his very soul, when usually it had just been vodka. Paul, who had a nervous stomach too, for whom I'd

had to give up some of my favorite restaurants because at some time in the distant past, he had gotten sick from eating there.

Paul, who was so worried about our unborn baby that when I'd had that high fever early on in my pregnancy, had made me take a cold shower and use cold washcloths instead of Tylenol. Had refused to let me cuddle in blankets even though my body shook with chills. Paul, who made me feel so inferior and guilty for not being able to handle pregnancy like so many other women, like his own sister for instance, who had four kids and never a touch of morning sickness.

"No drugs are completely safe during pregnancy," my OB/GYN had said as she pulled on rubber gloves. She looked at me accusingly, as if I had somehow caused this. But how would this smug, superior non-mother know? She didn't have any kids herself. She ran an OB/GYN practice and had never been pregnant, never given birth, never felt like she was as close to dying as she would ever get while still being alive.

That had been six days ago when I'd gone in for my checkup and was eight pounds less than I had been before getting pregnant. I had been already underweight when I

got pregnant so now I just looked frightening when I saw myself in the mirror. Like one of those babies in the pictures that Sally Struthers always held out in telethons. I was a walking skeleton with a bloated belly, minus the walking part. I hadn't gotten out of bed in a week, except to pee.

"Do you want some water?" Lacy asked.

I nodded. At least that would get her out of the room for two minutes.

Paul stared at Lacy's back as she left and then turned around to me, nervous, like I was poised for attack, instead of just lying in the fetal position. Paul, who dove for lobsters and encountered sharks almost every time, was useless against the danger of a nauseated pregnant woman.

I turned over in bed, my back toward him. "I'm going to sleep," I said. "Tell Lacy I said forget about the water."

Paul didn't move, but I could feel him staring at me.

I knew they all wanted me to get up, to be normal, but I also knew they didn't understand. It was impossible to feel this bad and still be alive. Impossible to love the thing that was making me feel this way.

And the IV was small comfort. I had been hoping for even a placebo effect, but nothing. It didn't even take the edge off. I often twisted the tube around and around my finger like a worm, tugging at it softly, wanting to pull it out sometimes, but I still did have a small hope. It was supposed to start working immediately, but sometimes it took a week. I had one last day to get there.

"Sarah?" Lacy had come back in and sat on the bed. She touched my shoulder softly. "I brought over some chicken soup."

Homemade, I'm sure, I thought as I reached for a piece of ice from the glass she had nestled next to me in bed. I glared up at my sister who had probably stirred and seasoned the soup between clients, proving she could run a successful interior design company and be a homemaker at the same time.

She tried again. "I can get you just the broth, but you need to get some of it down." She rubbed my back, and I closed my eyes, trying to ignore her. "I don't think you understand. You don't eat, your baby doesn't eat."

Lacy was used to getting what she wanted, between the two of us anyway. She was my little sister, but she had always run the show.

"She's a little girl with a big personality," our dad had always said of Lacy. His line had originated back when Lacy was a toddler, after she had insulted someone at the grocery store, or kicked sand on someone at the park, or the one time we had been at his coworker's house and Lacy saw a picture of one of her kids and said the kid was ugly.

That was still Lacy. She said what she thought, no filter applied. To her, it looked like I wasn't trying. But what was impossible to explain was that I had tried. For weeks I had tried. They kept badgering me to eat this or drink this or try that or try this. Everything made me nauseous. Lying here made me nauseous. Listening to Paul and Lacy talk about me like I wasn't here made me nauseous. Thinking about being nauseous made me nauseous.

I rolled over. "I'll try it tomorrow," I said. They both looked at me quickly, as if they hadn't been expecting me to answer or even move. But, God, anything to get them to shut up. To get their anxious faces out of my room. All I knew right now was that I hadn't thrown up all day, and I was not going to start now.

"Tomorrow Dr. Read is going to admit you to the hospital, Sarah," Paul said. He was frustrated and playing his trump card.

I hate you all, I thought and closed my eyes.

When I woke up I saw my dad sitting in my grandmother's old chair, the one whose back had the stitching of geese flying over a lake toward the trees, a hunter's rifle visible in the reeds. I had been petrified of this chair when I was a kid, but as I got older it just became "Grandma's chair." My grandmother had died right after we bought our house, and I had taken the chair with me when I had gone with my mom to pick out a burial dress.

"Oh, Sarah," my mom had said when I had lugged it outside. But that was what my mom said to most of the things I had done throughout my life, so I had hardly heard it, would probably have heard more its absence if she had not said it.

The chair was hideous, I had to admit. So I had just lugged it into our tiny bedroom, the room in the house we were waiting to decorate until we had done the remodel we were saving for.

It would help if the chair were comfortable though, I thought as I looked at my father. He was trying to lean back in it, one ankle resting up on his other knee, his

Kindle in his hands, his elbows at his sides—the chair not having armrests, its complete unfunctionality quite glaring if you took the time to look at it. Lacy and I had bought our father the Kindle for Christmas the year before, thinking he would resist it, but thinking how convenient it would be now that he had retired from his job as an elementary school principal and our parents were supposed to be starting a tour of the world.

The tour had started with a road trip up to Napa, gathered steam with a cruise to Ensenada, and then fizzled out when they realized that they, in general, disliked other cultures. Maybe that was putting it too harshly. It wasn't so much the cultures they disliked as much as the new cuisine. Eating fish of questionable origin that was cooked over a fire on a beach in Mexico by locals had been more of an adventure than our middle-aged parents had been up for. More specifically, more than my middle-aged mother was up for. However, the Kindle had survived and our father now spent much of his spare time looking for free books available for download.

My dad looked up and caught me staring at him. He pushed his glasses farther up on his face and set his Kindle down on the table. He stood up, and the chair

creaked, a little shriek of annoyance perhaps. Or maybe a call of the geese.

"I hear you're still not feeling well," he said, putting on his elementary school principal face.

I sighed. "You got a haircut," I said.

He rubbed his head thoughtfully. The three strips of hair he'd been using to cover his shiny scalp for the past two years were gone and the sides were cut short.

"Someone told me it was time," he said, winking.

Last week when my parents were over, I had grabbed a pair of scissors from the dresser drawer and practically thrown them at him, saying enough was enough. He looked like a moron. I hadn't been in a teasing mood. I had just wanted to take the attention off myself for five minutes. Five minutes where people weren't watching for signs of my recovery.

My mom, of course, had been furious. We had all gracefully ignored his comb-over, not wanting to fracture a man's fragile ego. But I knew it wasn't pride that made my father smooth his remaining hair over the bald spot. It was simply routine. My father hadn't changed a single habit in twenty years and he had been combing his hair to the side for as long as I could remember.

"Lacy and Mom made some soup," he said. My mom and Lacy had made something other than soup. They had made plans. They knew it was impossible for me to resist my dad. I had always been his number one fan, which is why they sent him in.

"It's there," he said, nodding toward my bedside table and then sitting back, picking up his Kindle again.

He had poured it into a Styrofoam cup with a lid and stuck in a straw with a purple and pink pinwheel attached to it. Thank God for the clean, white Styrofoam. Had I seen the tan, murky liquid and smelled the gamey broth, it would have been over. And, of course, he had known it.

I was having a moment of calm, no queasiness, nothing sitting in my throat that I needed to swallow. I lay there for a few minutes thinking maybe, maybe, I could do it. But I wasn't going to move so fast. I had been fooled before.

Chapter 3

April 17, 2015

Lacy fell asleep while I was rubbing her hair. She had cried for half an hour, muttering words that I could only half understand. I heard *incompatible with life* and *died* and *Ben*, but everything else was mashed together noises that just sounded like moaning. After she fell asleep, I eased off the bed. I couldn't lie there anymore with her. Watch her caress her belly in her sleep and know that Ben wasn't alive to feel it. Know that the little face we had seen in those grainy black and white ultrasound photos was now slack, motionless, not sucking on his fingers or grasping for nothing.

I went off in search of Mark and found him in the nursery. I stood in the door and looked at the room that they had just finished decorating in varying shades of green, blue and white. The rustic white crib sat in a prominent place on the far wall, with bumpers that Lacy had made from fabric she and Mom had scoured downtown to find. The rocker was in the corner by the closet, its plush cushions and coordinating pillow offsetting the blue wall behind it. It looked like a designer nursery, and they had taken pictures of each angle of the room and had

already put them in Ben's baby book, the first chapter of his life already begun.

"Mark?" I said.

He was sitting against the wall on which Lacy had meticulously painted a version of her ideal park. She and a graphic designer friend from college had set up a projector and took a full day to sketch with pencil before painting with non-toxic, nursery-friendly paint. Mark was hunched on the floor beside the bookcase staring at a board book in his hand, a cardboard box by his legs. More boxes were piled in the corner.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"We've got to get rid of this stuff," he said, closing the book.

I knew he read to Lacy's belly every night before bed and I wondered if that book had been significant. "I know," I said. "But do you think—" I broke off and tried to think about the best way to go about this. "Don't you think Lacy wants to see the room again?" I didn't know how Lacy felt. Did she want to see the room set up for Ben one last time? Was it part of the grieving process? Should she walk in tomorrow to an empty room?

"She doesn't," Mark said.

"She said that?"

Mark didn't answer and instead started grabbing books off the shelf and stuffing them in the box. *Peter Rabbit*, *Bear Snores On*, and *Where is Baby's Belly Button?* disappeared inside.

I hesitated in the doorway not wanting to make the wrong move. It sometimes upset Mark that Lacy and I were so close, that we read each other's minds, that sometimes I was closer to her than he was. And I sometimes hated that he acted like he knew Lacy better than I did. But right now, we were both in the dark. I had to make a decision, and I had to make it quick.

Maybe this is his grieving process. "I'll start with the crib," I said.

Mark nodded.

I went to the crib and stared at it, its sense of expectant waiting harder to bear than I thought. I ran my hand over the soft fabric of the blanket and then pulled it up to begin folding it. The blanket that our Aunt Marcia had made for Ben, carefully stitching together the fabric Lacy had mailed her. It smelled like *Dreft*, a smell as familiar to me as my own kids. I gathered the blue and green blanket into a nice, neat rectangle, a train

precisely in the middle. A Lacy fold. A fold that would keep the blanket from wrinkling, from losing its perfection. A method so alien to me that I had to try it three times before I was finally satisfied. A fold I would never try to master at home, where laundry was an ever-invading enemy that constantly advanced and I could never keep up with. An enemy that I would never conquer, but one I would just submit to and give up on folding and give into pulling items I needed out of an over-stuffed laundry basket, wrinkles not something I'd ever cared about.

I put the blanket in the crib and looked around for something to put it in. I found a bin in the closet labeled *Toys* in bright blue, made on Lacy's prized label maker. A few toys shifted in the bottom as I pulled it off the shelf. I took the lid off and saw cloth blocks, a teething book with crackly pages, and a wooden train still in the package. I took the toys out and laid them on the floor, then ripped off the *Toys* label. I put the blanket in the bottom of the plastic bin.

I pulled the blue checked sheet off the mattress and held it up to my nose. I nuzzled the soft fabric on my face and then folded it into a tight-enough rectangle. I put it on top of the blanket in the bin. Then I untied the

bumpers from the crib rail and tucked those in too. With each sniff, I felt the familiar hardening of my breasts. I hadn't fed Nathaniel in two hours and my breasts were as hard as rocks. Paul was at work so my parents were at my house now with him, and I knew my mom would be calling me any minute saying Nathaniel was refusing the bottle I had left there.

I went to the closet and found the extra sheets and mattress covers Lacy had washed and folded in expectation of the messy blowouts she was in for. Then I removed the green polka dot cover off the changing pad and put it and the changing pad in the bin. I wrestled with the pad, fitting it in with all the bedding while attempting not to wrinkle anything. I snapped the lid on the bin and pushed it over to the doorway.

Mark had finished with the books and was folding the box top in on itself. He looked up and saw me staring at him. "You done?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. I pointed to the bin. "Where are you putting it all?" I asked.

He shook his head and swallowed. "I don't know," he said. "The garage, I guess."

I bit my cheek and looked around the room. "Do you have a ladder?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

I pointed to the mobile hanging over the crib. "I need to take that down."

Mark stood up. "I'll get it," he said. He picked up the box of books and headed out of the room.

I walked back to Lacy's room to check on her. She was still asleep, her body facing the door. I looked at her stomach. I couldn't help it even though I wanted to look at anything but that. Part of me was thinking that it hadn't happened. Her stomach was just so big. It was so unreal that he wasn't alive in there, kicking around, nudging the walls of his tiny home for more room.

I wiped tears from my eyes and walked back to the nursery. Mark had brought the ladder back and unhooked the mobile from the ceiling. It was dangling from his fingertips.

"Here," I said. "Give it to me."

We had hung it on fishing line so I found some scissors in the bathroom and cut it off. It was a handmade mobile Lacy had ordered from Etsy. Green, blue and white felt trains hung from white yarn, engine in front, the

caboose three cars back. When you wound it up, it played *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*.

I rummaged around in their cupboards until I found some tissue paper and wrapped the mobile in it gently. I went back to the nursery where Mark was still standing. Just standing and staring. I opened the bin with the bedding and laid the mobile on top.

He turned around. "Do you still need this?" he asked, pointing to the ladder.

"No," I said. My voice was barely more than a whisper.

He folded the ladder and walked out of the room.

I grabbed another bin out of the closet, this one labeled *Blankets*. It was full so I added it to the other bin. There were no more bins so I grabbed another cardboard box and brought it over to the closet. I started taking the clothes off the little hangers. Lacy had wanted her shower early so she could have everything prepared in advance, and all of the clothes had been washed. They were ready. I folded the blue and gold onesie from Cal, the school where Mark and Lacy had met, the sailor outfit Aunt Marcia had sent from Maryland, and blanket sleeper after

blanket sleeper until I got to the green, furry two-piece outfit Lacy had planned to bring Ben home in.

I sat down on the floor in the middle of the pile of clothes to catch my breath. Oh, God. I didn't know what to do with this. I thought of Nathaniel and my breasts began to tingle, the clear sign that my milk was going to start flowing. I thought of Lacy and wondered what would happen after Ben was out. If she thought of him, would her milk come in? What would she do with it?

Mark walked back in suddenly with a tool kit.

"What are you doing?" I asked, knowing the answer, but hoping I was wrong.

"Taking apart the crib," he said, his voice gruff.

I stood up, pushing the clothes off my lap.

"Mark," I said.

He ignored me.

"Mark," I said again. "I don't know—" I stopped then went on. "I don't know about this." I needed everything to slow down for a minute. I had the feeling again that we were doing the wrong thing at the wrong moment.

"Sarah," Mark said. "Just stop. Alright?"

"No," I said. "How is Lacy going to feel when she comes in here and *nothing* is left?" I knew taking the crib

apart was going too far. "Today or tomorrow, or whenever she gets out of bed, she's going to come in here and everything will just be gone." I walked over to his side, but there was enough in his posture to tell me not to touch him.

Mark stood with his hands wrapped around the crib railing, not answering.

"She has to do some of it herself," I said. "She can't come in here and have nothing left." I swallowed over the lump in my throat. "It will be like it wasn't real."

Mark finally turned to me, his eyes red. "I-can't-have-it-in-here-anymore," he choked out. Tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes, and he used the sleeve of his shirt to wipe them away quickly.

Tears fell down my cheeks as I looked at him. Mark, the linebacker in college, the guy who lost three teeth playing hockey. Mark, the guy who had held it all together at his father's funeral last year.

"OK," I said finally. I wiped the tears away from my face with a quick swipe, just as he had done. "Hand me an Allen wrench."

He bent down and opened the toolbox. He handed me an Allen wrench silently, and we went to opposite sides of the crib to begin taking it apart.

It took twenty minutes until we were surrounded by the pieces of wood, wire and metal. Mark hadn't been gentle when taking out the screws, and there were little nicks all over the wood. He also just dropped the pieces haphazardly on top of one another so I could only imagine the scratches underneath. *Dad can fix this*, I told myself as Mark threw the metal mattress frame down on the wooden crib railing.

Mark began grabbing the pieces to take out to the garage.

"You should lay them on something," I said. "They'll get ruined on the garage floor." I went into the laundry room and grabbed some sheets and a couple of beach blankets. "Put them on these for now," I said.

Mark took them from me and headed out to the garage.

I walked out to the living room to get my purse. My mom had called and texted. I grabbed my pump case and headed to the bathroom, phone in hand, reading her texts as I went.

10:03: *How's Lacy?*

10:13: ????

10:48: *Do you need me to come over?*

11:15: *N is asleep. He drank his whole bottle. See? I told you! Should I come over?*

I looked at the time. It was 11:30. I plugged in my pump and hooked both my breasts up to the machine. I closed my eyes and tried to relax so my milk would release. I took ten calming breaths and then opened my eyes. I watched my nipples being sucked in and out of the tube, watching until I saw the yellowish milk begin spraying. It dripped down into the bottle. I called my mom.

"Hi, Mom," I said when she answered.

"It's about time. Did you get my texts?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. *All eight hundred of them.*

"Where's your sister?"

"Sleeping. Is Nathaniel still asleep?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "He drank his entire bottle." I rolled my eyes. "He'll probably want another one when he wakes up."

"I know," I said. "I'm pumping now." I turned the pump up higher, and the little motor whirred even louder.

"How is she?" my mom asked.

"Not good," I said. I lowered my voice. "Neither is Mark."

"God. Maybe I should come over," she said.

"In a little bit," I said. "I don't want the kids over here. That would be—horrible." I pulled my phone away from my ear and looked at the time. "I have to pick Stella up at noon. Why don't you come over here when I get home?"

"OK," she said. "I'm going to make your father some lunch. Did you eat?"

"No," I said, remembering. I hadn't eaten anything yet today.

"I'll make you a sandwich," she said. "Give Lacy a hug for me and tell her I'll be there soon."

I said goodbye and finished pumping. I packed up and went back to the nursery. Mark had taken all the pieces of the crib to the garage and was now pulling the drawers out of the dresser.

I took a deep breath. "I have to go pick up Stella," I said. "My parents were going to come over later." I paused. "If that's OK?"

Mark nodded.

"My dad can help you with that," I said.

Mark shrugged. "I got it," he said.

"OK," I said, still standing in the doorway, feeling like he really didn't want me there. "So, I'm going to check on Lacy before I leave."

Mark was silent.

I waited a few seconds more and then turned away. I stopped in the doorway to Lacy's room and saw that she was still asleep. I pulled her door closed again and walked away. I scooted to the side in the hallway to let Mark pass with an armful of dresser drawers. He walked by without another word.

I grabbed my bags from the living room and opened the front door. The sunshine blinded me and I reached in my purse for my sunglasses. After the coldness of my sister's house, the warm rays felt good on my skin. I put my pump down on the ground outside my car to rifle in my purse for my keys. My fingers found Nathaniel's pacifier. I gripped it in my hand and got in the car quickly. Suddenly, fiercely, I needed my children.

Chapter 4

April 10, 2015

Lacy pulled into the parking lot of her doctor's office and looked for a spot. "There should be special parking for pregnant chicks," she said.

"Amen," I said. We stalked the parking lot and waited for someone to come out of the office. "Of course, here everyone would have priority."

"True," Lacy said as she followed a woman waddling out to her car. The lady got into her minivan and started to pull out. "Score," Lacy said.

"Wanna bet this is her first kid?" I asked.

"Shut up," Lacy said.

I was teasing her because of their minivan purchase. I had been mocking her relentlessly since she'd brought it home and installed the infant seat. She was only six months along, but she was ready to bring the baby home tomorrow. And five of the baby's friends because they had seating for eight now.

I got out of the car and opened the back door to get Nathaniel. I hadn't heard him in a while so I figured he had fallen asleep in the forty-five minutes it had taken us to get to the doctor. Although there were plenty of overly

qualified OB/GYNs five minutes away from her Redondo Beach house, Lacy had chosen one in Santa Monica that one of Mark's clients had recommended. I had told Lacy that the doctor was the least important person in the delivery room, so she might do better researching the nursing staff because they were the ones you spent the majority of your time with. But supposedly this doctor had delivered Mariah Carey's twins so that had been the deal clincher for Lacy.

"Think of what that doctor had to deal with?" Lacy had said. "Mariah Carey? *And* twins? That's the kind of doctor I want in my delivery room. She's gotta know what she's doing."

I rolled my eyes. "Lacy, we are in LA, not some African jungle. Thousands of people every day give birth. With the help of 'regular people' doctors. Your body knows what to do. It doesn't need a doctor of the stars guiding it."

Of course, my opinion meant nothing, which meant every time she went to the doctor, she dragged me with her and then we went to lunch on Third Street. The doctor's office was just down the street from Mark's accounting firm, so he normally joined us for the doctor appointment and then

headed back to work, but today he had a lunch with clients so we promised to try to capture a face shot for him.

I peeked into the car seat and saw Nathaniel chewing on his stuffed giraffe, his eyes wide open. "Do you ever sleep?" I asked him. "Geez."

"What?" Lacy asked.

"He's awake," I said. "I swear, this kid requires no sleep."

Lacy opened the trunk to get the stroller.

"Leave it," I said. "I'm just going to wear him."

"You sure?" Lacy asked.

"Yeah," I said. "That waiting room is tiny." I pulled the Ergo from the backseat and strapped it on. Then I pulled Nathaniel out of his seat and squished him into the carrier. "Now, go to sleep," I said. I grabbed the blanket from his car seat and nestled it around him, hiding his eyes from any possible distractions.

"Ready?" Lacy asked.

"Yup," I said. I grabbed the diaper bag and pushed the button on the door, watching the door slide shut by itself.

Lacy caught me watching. "See?" she said.

"Convenient."

"No way in hell," I said. I drove an SUV, but I had always driven one. We used ours for surfboards, bikes, and camping trips. I wasn't one of those new parents who rushed out to buy an SUV or minivan the second the two pink lines appeared on the stick.

We crossed the parking lot and entered the lobby. Lacy checked her watch.

"I'm hungry," she said. She walked toward the café. "You want something?"

I shook my head. "I have a bar in my bag. Thanks." I had never gotten my appetite back after having Nathaniel. Now, I just ate to survive. Of course that gave my mom even more ammunition in her arsenal of complaints about my parenting. She said if my breast milk was more fatty, Nathaniel wouldn't have to eat so often and would sleep more. She also said that I gained too much weight during my pregnancy with him, so my only option, really, was just to ignore her.

I walked around the lobby, swaying, hoping Nathaniel would fall asleep. Today was ultrasound day, and I didn't want to be stuck in the hallway with a screaming baby instead of looking at my nephew on the screen.

Lacy came out of the café with a banana and a container of yogurt and we headed upstairs. We walked into the waiting room of the doctor's office and looked for two chairs next to each other. There were three other pregnant women there, and they were spread out on all three sides of the room. Each of them had their faces buried in a baby magazine, where they were learning all kinds of helpful tips that editors of parenting magazines liked to pile on to inexperienced, sleep-deprived mothers. That encouraging advice warned you that formula was basically akin to rat poison so if you couldn't breastfeed your child, you had already failed him in the most basic way. Also, new parents needed to let their infant scream in a dark room lying in a crib by himself in order to let him learn how to soothe himself. Those magazines truly were a gift to nervous, first-time parents.

"I'm gonna stand," I said. "I want Nathaniel to fall asleep anyway."

Lacy nodded. She went to sign in and then went in the back to pee. I stood, rocking side to side, peering in at Nathaniel every few minutes to see if his eyes looked droopy. They didn't.

Lacy came back into the waiting room and grabbed a baby magazine before sitting down.

"Where do you want to eat after this?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, opening the magazine.

I pulled out my phone and clicked on my *Yelp* app, something I always consulted first before offering any selections to Lacy or Mark. "Burger? Sandwich? Salad? What?" I asked.

"I'm not eating meat so look for a vegetarian place," she said, not looking up from her magazine.

"Of course you're not," I muttered. She and Mark vacillated between being vegans, vegetarians or meat eaters so often, it was hard to keep up. She had always been like that—following whatever food fad was going on at the moment. Now that she was pregnant she counted every calorie to make sure she wouldn't gain more than the twenty recommended pounds.

I typed in *vegetarian lunch*, not excited by the possibility. I clicked on the first link. It had four stars and over seven hundred reviews, so it met Lacy's first criteria—being popular. I saw chicken, salad, and hummus on the first few reviews, so I figured I was safe.

Lacy could eat a black bean burger and I could eat real-person food.

"There's a place called *Real Food Cafe*," I said.

Lacy looked up from her magazine. "Oh, I heard about that place. It's supposed to be good."

"Ugh, it's at the mall though," I said.

"That's fine," Lacy said. "I wanted to go to Nordstrom anyway. Do you have time?"

I shrugged. "Sure. Mom is picking Stella up from preschool. I'll just tell her to put her down for a nap at her house."

I closed the *Yelp* app and went to my texts. I quickly tapped out a message to my mom. A thought occurred to me, and not for the first time. I had had exclusive babysitting rights to my parents for the past four years. In three months, that would all change. Soon, my kids would have competition. In all ways.

The door to the back opened and a young blonde girl leaned out. "Lacy Miller?" she said, with that cheerful smile all OB/GYN and pediatrician employees have.

Lacy stood, and I followed her into the hallway.

"Hi, I'm Carrie," she said, holding the door open so we could pass.

Lacy walked over to the scale. "Judgment time," she said, grimacing.

"Come on, Lace," I said.

"One hundred and thirty," Carrie said.

Lacy smiled. "Not bad," she said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I said, waiting for her to put her shoes back on. I had put on forty pounds with Nathaniel, but it looked like she was going to hit her goal of only twenty.

Nathaniel started to fuss, and I scooted out of the way as Lacy got up on the exam table.

Carrie took Lacy's temperature. As usual, Nathaniel quickly went from fussing to crying. I unbuckled him from the carrier and took him out. Carrie wrapped the blood pressure cuff around Lacy's arm and watched the clock. I looked up at the clock too. Nathaniel was probably hungry.

"OK, OK," I said. I sat in the chair and fumbled with my nursing bra while trying to keep him from kicking off my lap and landing head first on the linoleum.

Lacy watched him with her typical amusement. "You know, if your milk was more fatty..." she joked.

"Ha-ha," I said, when I finally got him latched and he calmed down. "Your turn will come, and then Mom can give

you all kinds of helpful advice too." Of course, my mom's advice would be much different for Lacy. Lacy wouldn't make all the "mistakes" I did.

Carrie unwrapped the blood pressure cuff with a loud rip that made Nathaniel jump.

"Shhh," I said, patting his butt.

"Sorry," Carrie said. She wrote down the results and looked torn for a moment. "Are you feeling OK today?" she asked Lacy.

"Yes, fine," Lacy said, her face changing as well.

Carrie hesitated again and wrapped the cuff around Lacy's arm once more. "I'm just going to do this again." She looked at Lacy. "Do you mind? I just want to make sure I did it right."

Lacy nodded.

"Breathe naturally," Carrie said.

I watched Lacy's face as she watched Carrie's. I couldn't tell if she was worried Carrie was doing it wrong, or worried about the results. It was a long sixty seconds. I looked from Carrie's face to Lacy's. I could see a million things running through Lacy's mind. She Googled symptoms every day, and I knew she was just waiting to hear what Carrie would say so she could look it up. Nathaniel

had drained one breast so I quickly moved him to the other before he could make a noise.

Carrie looked at the reading, frowned and wrote it down. She looked at Lacy, saw the expression on her face, and smiled.

"It's just a little high," she said brightly. She reassumed her medical briskness. "I'm sure it's nothing to worry about." She reached under the table and pulled out a paper sheet. "Now, remove all your clothing from the waist down. You know the drill." She paused. "When you're undressed, go ahead and lay on your left side while you wait for the doctor. Sometimes moms get a little nervous when they come to the doctor. If you lay on your left side, it helps to bring your blood pressure down."

She whipped the curtain closed and quickly opened the door. She bustled out, and Lacy and I were left in silence.

"Hand me my phone," Lacy said.

I grabbed her bag and rifled through it to get her phone, trying not to jostle Nathaniel too much. I put the phone in her waiting hand. She tapped furiously, then scanned the results.

"I'm sure it's nothing," I said. "Remember, this happened to me with Nathaniel." Almost as reflex, I pulled him closer to me. "And remember, it was nothing."

When I was eight months pregnant, I had gone in for a normal checkup and my blood pressure had been through the roof. The doctor had sent me immediately to the Emergency Room with the possibility that I had preeclampsia, a condition that would put me on bed rest, or worse, make them take the baby early. Paul had rushed from work, met me at the hospital and we waited an anxious hour for the doctor on duty to tell me my blood pressure had returned to normal and it was OK to go home.

"Preeclampsia...hypertension," she mumbled as she read through.

I gently unlatched Nathaniel from my breast and carefully maneuvered him into the carrier again. "Lacy," I said, standing up and touching her arm. "Relax. It's nothing." I handed her the sheet. "Get undressed and lay on your side."

Lacy held on to her phone for another minute and then handed it to me so she could get undressed. She lay down on the exam table on her left side and began breathing deeply.

I stood beside the table, gently swaying to keep Nathaniel asleep. "Do you want some water?" I asked.

Lacy nodded.

I moved the curtain aside and went out the door. I walked down the hallway to the water cooler and filled a cup with cold water. I saw Carrie talking to the doctor. Carrie handed the doctor the chart and the doctor began walking my way. I turned around and walked back to Lacy's room.

"Here you go," I said, handing her the water. "I think your doctor is on her way."

A couple of seconds passed until we heard the soft knock on the door followed by the doctor peeking in.

"Hi, Dr. Greene," said Lacy.

"How are you feeling?"

"A little nervous." She looked from Dr. Greene to the chart. "She said my blood pressure was high."

I sat back down in the chair to get out of the doctor's way.

Dr. Greene sat down on her stool and scooted over to the exam table. She looked over Lacy's chart. "Your blood pressure was a little elevated today," she corrected. "Not

high." She read through the chart again. "Weight gain is good."

She scanned more of the chart and looked up. Lacy still looked worried and the doctor said, "Don't worry, we'll check your blood pressure again at the end to make sure it's OK." She smiled. "I usually find it seems to resolve itself after Mom has seen her baby." She gestured to the ultrasound machine. "OK, let's get you turned on your back and take a listen."

The paper crackled as Lacy scooted from her side to her back.

Dr. Greene squirted the gel on Lacy's belly and used her wand to spread it around. "Baby moving around?"

"Yes," Lacy answered automatically, smiling. Then her face changed. "Actually, I don't know if I felt him much today."

"Well, he's getting bigger. There's less room for him to move around in there," Dr. Greene said. "You *have* felt him today though, right? At some point?"

Lacy put her hand on the top of her belly. "I think so," she said, looking at me, her eyes wide.

"Ok, let's take a look," Dr. Greene said. She clicked on the machine and the loud *whoosh whoosh whoosh* of a fetal

heartbeat filled the room. Hearing that, I relaxed my arms from the grip I didn't realize I had around Nathaniel. I kissed the top of his sleeping head.

"Sounds good," Dr. Greene said, clicking off the machine.

She turned on the ultrasound machine and used the wand to spread some more gel around. "Let me get some measurements first, then we'll try to get a good look at him for some pictures." She clicked around the images, drawing lines and capturing shots. A foot kicked. "See, there you go," she said. "He's moving."

Lacy smiled. I pushed back Nathaniel's blanket and saw that his eyes were still closed. I rubbed my finger over his little clenched fist. I turned back toward the monitor anxious to see Ben, but found myself watching Dr. Greene instead.

Dr. Greene moved the wand around on Lacy's belly some more and frowned. Lacy was watching the monitor, but I saw it. The change in the doctor's face. I moved closer to the screen.

"I hope we get his face today. Mark has a frame on his desk just waiting for a face shot," Lacy said, turning

her face away from the monitor and to the doctor's.

"What?" she asked, her voice changed. "What's wrong?"

Dr. Greene wiped the gel off the wand and set it back in the stand. "I just want to check something," she said. She flipped through Lacy's file and pulled out the previous ultrasound scans. She looked carefully at one. She put it down and picked up another one. She held it closer to her face.

My heart raced at the thought of what she might have seen on the monitor. The first time I saw Stella's face in an ultrasound, her nose was in shadow so it looked like it was missing. Initially I thought she was going to be born without a nose and I had nightmares about it for my entire pregnancy—even after the subsequent ultrasounds where you could clearly see she had one.

"Dr. Greene?" Lacy asked.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Greene said, straightening up. "I don't think we ever got a good scan of his head before. Let me—" She squirted more gel on Lacy's stomach and started over with the wand. This time she went straight for Ben's head. She rubbed the wand over and over his head from all angles, clicking and drawing lines. She scribbled notes on Lacy's chart. After what seemed like thirty

minutes, but was most likely just two, she turned off the machine and swiveled her stool to face Lacy.

"What's wrong?" Lacy asked.

Dr. Greene used a towel to wipe the gel off of Lacy's stomach and offered Lacy her arm to help her sit up. "OK, I don't want to scare you so I need you to just listen to what I'm saying and then we'll go from there."

I stood up and quickly walked over to Lacy, grabbing her hand. Lacy's eyes were focused on Dr. Greene's face.

A million things raced through my brain this time. I had seen his arms and legs so I knew he wasn't missing a limb. We had heard his heartbeat so he was alive. His head. She was looking at his head. I flashed back to Stella's skeleton face and shook the thought away.

"It looks like the baby may have some swelling on his brain." She pulled out one of the ultrasound images she had printed. "You see—here." She pointed to Ben's head and rattled off some numbers.

I didn't know if Lacy knew what she should be looking at because I didn't. Dr. Greene had drawn a white arrow pointing to something but I couldn't tell if it was the dark spot or the light spot I was supposed to be looking at. I hadn't been following what the doctor had been

saying, but when I looked up from the ultrasound picture, I knew all I needed to know by looking at Lacy.

Lacy swallowed hard and I saw tears starting in her eyes. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"I'm going to call the hospital and figure out what the next step is. We need to rule out a couple of things before we panic, OK?"

Lacy pulled her hand out of mine and wiped her eyes. "Now?" she asked. "You're going to call them now?"

Dr. Greene nodded. She closed Lacy's chart. "Sit tight," she said. "I'll be right back."

She walked out of the room and Lacy got off the table. She ripped the gown off and used it to wipe the gel off her stomach. She pulled her clothes back on and reached for her phone. She had the ultrasound picture in her hand and she was typing information from it into her phone.

"Enlarged ventricle...sixteen millimeters...in utero..." she said as she typed. She was crying and tears were dripping on to her phone.

"I'll call Mark," I said. "Should I call Mark?"

She nodded so I pulled out my cell. "Mark?" I said when he answered.

"Hey, Sarah," he said.

"You need to get to the doctor's office." I turned my body slightly away from Lacy. "There's something wrong."

Chapter 5

April 17, 2015

I walked into Stella's classroom while she was eating lunch. A few of the kids had already finished and the teachers were pulling sleeping mats out of plastic bags and putting sheets on them to get ready for naptime for the kids who stayed all day.

"Mommy!" Stella shouted, dropping her sandwich on the table and running over to me.

I leaned on the floor and held her close, breathing in the scent of kid sweat. I gripped her and felt my eyes well up with tears. Stella squirmed out of my grip and ran back to the table to start packing up her Disney Princess lunchbox.

I stood up and followed her, wiping any evidence of tears from my eyes. One of her teachers walked over to me.

"Hello, Mrs. Carroll," she said, then turned to Stella. "Did you tell Mommy the good news?"

"It's my turn to take the turtle home!" Stella squealed.

"The-You-What?" I asked.

"Each child gets to take Turtley Turtle home one weekend of the school year," her teacher said. "It teaches

them responsibility," she added, clearly noting my hesitation.

Stella was three. The only responsibility I needed her to have was to make it to the toilet before she peed in her pants.

"It's not a good weekend," I said. "Could we reschedule?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Carroll, but this schedule was made at the beginning of the year." She led me over to the board of "*Announcements!*" and pointed to the print at the bottom of the "Turtle Responsibility" paper.

"I wrote here that if you needed to make any changes to the schedule, you would need to contact me at least two weeks ahead of time."

"I'm sorry, but we can't take the turtle home today," I said.

Stella grabbed my arm. "I want to take Turtley home," she said. She scrunched her face up, getting ready to throw a fit.

I leaned down and looked in Stella's eyes. "Not today," I said. "Aunt Lacy is sick, and Mommy needs to take care of her." I stood up and walked over to her cubby

to grab her sweater and the pile of artwork she had accumulated that day. "Grab your lunchbox."

"No!" Stella shouted.

"Stella."

Her body prepared for full meltdown mode. I could see all the signs, the full-body jiggle that came before the howling, incoherent monster.

"Listen. Next time. I promise," I said, pulling her close so I could whisper in her ear. "What about ice cream? You want to go get ice cream?"

She squirmed in my arms and pulled away. "Yes," she said, in the snottiest voice she could muster, which seemed to me at least a decade older than she was.

I chose to ignore it. "OK, go get your lunchbox and let's go."

She stalked away from me and threw the rest of her lunch into her lunchbox.

"I'm sorry," I told her teacher while I watched Stella struggle to zip her lunchbox closed. "My sister is really sick and I'll be at the hospital with her this weekend." While that was only somewhat true, I felt like I needed to say something to this preschool teacher who was acting like I would scar Stella for life if we didn't take the turtle

home this weekend. What kind of name was Turtley Turtle anyway? Maybe a play-based preschool wasn't the right place to send your kid if the best name the staff could come up with was something you'd expect to hear on Barney.

Stella grabbed her lunchbox and walked up to us, still sniffing. We maneuvered out the half-door of her classroom, me all the while looking for any rogue three year old who would try to sneak out with us, which is something that happened more often than you'd think. When we got to the car, Stella looked in and asked, "Where's Aunt Lacy?"

"At her house," I said. "Grammy is at our house. She's going to watch you this afternoon while I go take care of Aunt Lacy."

"I *really* wanted to bring Turtley home," she said grumpily.

"I know," I said, buckling her in. "I'm sorry."

She stuck out her lower lip, and then her face instantly changed. "Can I skip a nap?"

"No," I said, a little too sharply. "No," I said again more calmly. "Not today." That was the last thing I needed. To come home to an over-exhausted three-year old

tonight. "Maybe you and Grammy can make cookies after you wake up from your nap."

"You said ice cream."

I started the car. "Yes, and ice cream." I sighed and pulled away from the school.

We got home, and I unbuckled Stella from her car seat and heaved her up, slamming the door with my hip. I opened the front door and my mom rushed toward us.

"How is she?" she asked.

I shut the door and made eyes toward Stella. I put her down and handed her her lunchbox.

"Go finish your lunch in the kitchen with Grandpa," I said. I waited until I was sure Stella wasn't going to turn back around and then turned to my mom. "She's not good."

"Is she in pain?" my mom asked, her face a mess of wrinkles I hadn't noticed a week ago.

"Not right now," I said. "I don't think," I added. "They gave her morphine. And some sort of sedative."

"Is that stick thing working?" my mom asked. "The lama-lami-whatever thing?"

"Laminaria," I said. "I don't know. It's only been a couple of hours." I rubbed my eyes. Lacy's doctor had put

the sticks in her cervix this morning and after a few hours they would have absorbed enough water to expand and make her cervix begin to dilate.

I sat down on the bench in the hallway. "The doctor said it could take anywhere between four and six hours."

"What is Lacy doing right now?"

"Sleeping," I said. "Well, when I left about half an hour ago."

"Then what?" My mom was treating me like an expert since I had been the one at the doctors' visits, the one to listen to all those specialists telling us one statistic after the other, one option or another. In reality, we had gotten more information from Google than we had from any of the doctors.

"I don't know, Mom," I said. "Her cervix is completely closed. The sticks are supposed to make it dilate, and then, I guess, she just has to ... you know—" I couldn't finish because I was picturing Lacy in the hospital with her legs in stirrups waiting and pushing and watching her dead son slip out from between her legs.

I started crying and my mom sat down beside me, sniffing too. She didn't put her arm around me, but I

didn't expect her to. She handed me a tissue from her pocket and grabbed one for herself.

She cleared her throat. "You should rest a little bit," she said. "You look exhausted. Dad can put Stella down for a nap and you can take a nap. I'll head over to Lacy's for awhile."

I shook my head. "Nathaniel—"

"He'll be fine," she said. "Dad can play with him when he wakes up. He takes the bottle great, you know." She stood up. "I'll get Stella her milk."

I watched her walk away then leaned my head back against the wall. I heard my mom moving around the kitchen opening the fridge, rummaging in cupboards, and talking to my dad. Normally when my mom took over like this, I resisted even the slightest help, even her opening a door for me when my hands were full. There was something about her way of helping that made me feel completely incompetent.

But I let it go and got up from the hallway bench feeling exhausted. I went in my room, shut the curtains and lay down on my bed, pulling the blankets up to my chin and curling into a ball before falling asleep.

Chapter 6

July 12, 2009

Tonight Lacy, Mom, and I were going to a tasting at the hotel where Paul and I were getting married. Apparently this was something you did a few months before your wedding. You, and anyone else getting married in the coming months, doled out a hundred dollars per person to try all the food the catering department of the hotel offered to decide what you wanted to serve.

"Do you want to go?" I had asked Paul after I had gotten off the phone with my mom, who had called to give me the details.

"Should I go?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I have no idea." My mom had been very specific about each step of the wedding and since Paul and I didn't care about venues, flowers or color combinations, she had swooped in and taken over. Our option of a destination wedding in Jamaica with just our closest friends had been immediately vetoed with a flick of her wrist.

"Oh, Sarah," she had said, not even looking up from the bridal magazine she and Lacy were tearing pages out of.

"I'll call Lacy," I told Paul. I squeezed his hand.
"You owe me."

We drove together in Mom's boxy Mercedes. There was champagne, wine, and craft beer at the tasting, which I figured could smooth over any rough spots of the evening, and Lacy would be the buffer Mom and I always needed between us. We drove past the dress shop on the way to the marina where the hotel was.

"I need to go in for another fitting," I said, mostly to myself.

"We can go tomorrow," Lacy said. "I don't have anything."

"I don't have anything either," Mom said. "It's about time I see the dress."

I bit my lip. She was still upset that I had picked out my wedding dress without her. I had been driving home from work one night and called Lacy to meet me at the shop. I didn't intend on finding my dress that day. Didn't know we were going to love the first dress I tried on.

"Sure," said Lacy, always the peacekeeper. "Let's get lunch and then go for the fitting."

"Maybe lunch after the fitting," I said, looking critically down at my stomach.

"Oh that's just baby fat," Mom said. "You'll lose that any day."

"I'm twenty-four, Mom," I said. "People don't still have baby fat in their twenties." I had been a chubby child and had never lost the feeling that I was always carrying around more weight than I should.

"You were always a late bloomer," Mom said. "Remember when you were afraid you were never going to get your period, and then, Presto!, you got it your sophomore year of high school." She pulled into the parking lot and drove up to the valet.

"Yes, Mom," I said. "Thanks for the reminder."

We followed Mom into the hotel like we were still little girls, her boisterous voice calling out for directions to the ballroom. The hotel had just been renovated the previous summer. A bouquet of purple fuchsias sat in a gigantic vase on the entry table. Succulents arranged in sand dangled in glass spheres from the alcoves on either side of the check-in desk.

"This brings back memories," Mom said. Mom and Dad had been married at this same hotel twenty-five years ago, when it was just a few bungalows and a surf shack.

I smiled at her. "It's going to be beautiful," I said, thinking of Paul, but knowing Mom was hoping I was being sentimental.

When we reached the ballroom, it was set up like it would be on the big day. Couples milled around with glasses of wine looking at flower arrangements and serving ware.

"Yeah, I'm glad I brought you instead of Paul," I said to Lacy as we stood in line to check in. "Look at that guy." He had bags from vendors piled onto each arm and was trying to maneuver through the packed room and drink a beer at the same time.

After we got our name tags, Mom went to the bathroom so Lacy and I walked to a table in the dessert area to kill time before we sat down to dinner. The big sign over the table said, *The Cakery*, in white letters, each letter sprinkled with multi-colored non-pareils. There was a happy face in the letter a, a tongue licking a dollop of frosting off the leg of the k adjacent.

I looked at Lacy, and she concentrated on ignoring me.

"Are you the bride?" the girl at the table asked Lacy. The girl had a cheerleader's face and a body that made me wonder if she ever sampled any of her desserts.

"No," she said. "My sister is."

The girl turned to me, and I could see her making the comparison. "I'm Kimmy, the owner of *The Cakery*," she said, handing me a business card. Underneath the shop's name was their slogan, scrawled in pink writing, made to look like frosting: *Because every cake has a story to tell.*

"When are you getting married?" Kimmy asked.

"In September," I said.

Cupcakes sat on stands all over the table. We walked around looking at them. Chocolate, red velvet, lemon, vanilla, carrot, orange, maple bacon, marble, banana, strawberry, pumpkin, and raspberry. Each stand featured a different type of frosting, each style labeled on a small card: flat, drop flower, closed star, French, plain round.

"Who knew there were this many choices?" I said.

Lacy pinched my arm.

"Do you see any you would like to try?" Kimmy asked.

"I'll try the chocolate," I said.

"I'll try lemon," Lacy said.

"Lemon?" I said. "Gross."

"It's actually one of our biggest sellers," Kimmy said. She handed each of us a cupcake and a napkin.

I took a bite of my chocolate cupcake that was frosted in the French style. The chocolate frosting didn't cover the entire cupcake, which seemed a little presumptuous to me. Maybe that was the French part.

"This is amazing," Lacy said, a little bit of *closed star* vanilla frosting on her lip. She held the cupcake out to me, and I backed away, wrinkling my nose. "And you call me dramatic?" she said.

"This is really good," I said, lifting my chocolate cupcake. "Do you have a book of designs?"

"No," Kimmy said. She laughed. "That's why I brought all these cupcakes. I think brides get a better idea of my cupcakes when they can actually feel and taste them." Her voice was bubbly and sweet, just as you would imagine someone's to be when they worked with sugar for a living.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "I meant your cakes. Do you have a book of cake designs?"

"I don't do cakes," she said. "Just the cupcakes." Her voice changed a little, like she'd said that line before. Numerous times before.

I looked up at the sign over the table. "Your name is *The Cakery*," I said.

She shrugged. "No one really wants wedding cakes anymore," she said. "Cakes are kind of passé."

"I have seen this at weddings," Lacy said. "You can even put the cupcakes together to make a cake, right?"

Kimmy's smile was still on her face, but losing its happiness. "I don't do cakes," she said.

Just then, Mom walked up. "These are be-you-ti-ful!" she said. "She's like an artist."

I used my napkin to wipe at my mouth, to make sure there were no chocolate remnants. I was a notoriously messy eater and all I needed was for Mom to bring this up in front of the cheerleader who clearly wondered how I was biologically related to the two tall blondes beside me.

"Would you like to try one?" Kimmy asked Mom.

"Yes," my mom said. "What one? What one? What one?" she crooned in singsong to herself. "Maple bacon!"

Mom turned to me. "Have you ever heard of a maple bacon cupcake before?"

"Yes," I said.

"Oh, you know everything," Mom said, taking the cupcake from Kimmy and biting into it. She practically had an orgasm, eyes closed and groaning. Not that I want to

picture my mom having an orgasm, but the image presented itself.

"This is delicious," Mom said. "We are definitely having these at the wedding."

"We'll see," I said, looking at Lacy, hoping she would read my mind like she usually did.

"They are delicious, Mom," she said. "But there are tons of other dessert tables. Let's go check them out too." Lacy tried to steer Mom away from *The Cakery*, which I was now mentally referring to as *The Cupcakery*.

"Let me get her card," Mom said, wiping *drop flower* maple frosting from her fingers before reaching out her hand.

"I have one," I said. I turned to Kimmy. "Thank you. These were really good."

Lacy and I angled Mom toward the next table.

"I think cupcakes are a fantastic idea," Mom said to me.

"I want a cake," I said.

"But your Aunt Marcia went to a wedding last year and they had cupcakes instead of a cake and she said everyone just *loved* it." Mom and her sister talked daily. Almost everything out of Mom's mouth had originally come out of

Marcia's. I wondered if that's how my cousins felt about their mom, only in the reverse.

"Yeah, Mom, *last year* that was a really cool thing to do," I said. "It's been played out. Everyone has cupcakes. It's kind of cliché."

We stopped near the next table, waiting behind another bride and her mother. "I want a wedding *cake*," I said. "There is no such thing as wedding *cupcakes*."

"Well, if you think *everybody* has cupcakes, what makes a cake so different?" she asked. "People have been having cake for centuries. Hell, even I had a cake at my wedding." She paused. "Maybe you could have wedding flan, or wedding mousse."

Lacy interrupted me before I could continue. "Why are you guys fighting over something so ridiculous?" she asked. "You two will fight over anything!" She edged up to the table as the women in front of us moved out of the way. "I've never seen two people who love to fight as much as you do."

I saw a waiter passing by and flagged him down. "We need alcohol," I said. "Lots and lots of alcohol."

Chapter 7

April 17, 2015

I woke up and stretched, my neck kinked from the awkward angle of my head during my nap. I stared up at the ceiling fan, wanting just a few minutes before coming back to reality. I didn't hear Stella or Nathaniel. I twisted on my side to look at the clock. I had been sleeping for over an hour. I rubbed my eyes and sat up knowing I couldn't hide forever. I got out of bed feeling like I had aged ten years since I had first lain down.

Once out in the hall, the only sound I heard was a murmur coming from the living room. I followed the sound and saw my dad sitting on the couch with his legs stretched out, Nathaniel lying face up on his lap.

I padded up behind them and watched Nathaniel's expressions as my dad made silly faces for him. Dad wiggled his fingers over Nathaniel's face and Nathaniel's mouth formed an O of excitement, his eyes widening at the miracle of Dad's magic. Neither of them had noticed me.

I went around to the front of the couch and sat down next to them. "Hi, Daddy," I said laying my head on his shoulder and snuggling in.

"Hi, Honey," he said, taking one hand off of Nathaniel and using it to pull my head closer to his face and giving me a kiss on my forehead.

Nathaniel saw me and let out a squeal, kicking his legs in excitement.

"Hey, buddy," I said, sitting up and pulling him off my dad's lap. I lifted him and gave him a kiss, inhaling his milky breath. I nuzzled his neck, feeling his tiny bones under his pajama sleeper. I thought of Ben no longer moving in Lacy's stomach, and it made me fully recognize Nathaniel's fragility for the first time.

I stretched out my legs and put Nathaniel on my lap, bicycling his little feet and watching his face light up.

"Did Mom call?" I asked.

"Not yet," my dad said. He shifted on the couch to look at me. "How's your sister?"

I busied myself with reaching out a finger for Nathaniel to grasp. "Groggy," I said. "I wish Mom would call."

"Are you going back over there?" he asked.

"I'll wait for Mom to get back," I said. I turned to him. "I think you should go. Mark is taking the nursery

apart. I tried to help him but—" I stopped. "I think you should go."

My dad turned away from me and nodded. He sighed and stood up. He started toward the door and then turned around.

"Are you going to be OK here?" he asked.

I nodded.

He came back to me, leaned down and kissed me again on the top of the head.

I gave him a little smile. "Bye, Daddy."

"We'll see you in a bit." He walked away, his gait that of a much older man.

I looked down at Nathaniel, his eyes open wide and his mouth full of spit bubbles. "How you doing, buddy?" I pulled the sleeve of my sweatshirt over my hand and used it to wipe the spit away. "You getting hungry?" I reached over and grabbed my nursing pillow, settling him down in the cozy fleece. I sat back and tried to think about nothing.

It was impossible. I smoothed Nathaniel's hair and felt the slight give of his soft spot, the literal exposure of his brain. His healthy brain, with all the connections made, every part in the right place, both sides linked.

Not for the first time, I thought about how we just took it for granted that it was going to go OK, that a mother's body knew what it was doing. How I had been jealously anticipating Ben being born because I, again, would be second place to Lacy. That Lacy's first born would take the space that me, Paul, Stella and Nathaniel had managed to carve out as our own in the small space left in my mom's heart.

"Mommy?" Stella said.

I jumped. I hadn't heard Stella's typical heavy tread.

"I'm in here," I called out softly, trying not to startle Nathaniel, who looked about two minutes away from knocking out.

Stella walked over to the couch, her hair in disarray. Lacy had once said Stella looked like a hungover prom queen a lot of the time, and it was unfortunately true. Her hair was a combination of tight curls with an overlay of stubborn straight pieces. This combo made it impossible to comb and she was a terror if you tried to clip it back in any way. However, her outfits of choice always consisted of tulle-skirts or dresses paired with whatever princess

shirt she happened to pull out of the drawer. Hence the comparison.

I reached my free hand out to Stella and pulled her onto the couch with me. "Can I watch a show?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "But let's be quiet. Your brother is sleeping."

Stella gave him a quick glance, and then looked away, unimpressed. "I always have to be quiet," she said.

I clicked on the TV and tried to pull Stella closer. Three months into Nathaniel's life, Stella still remained disappointed with him. He was just a lump of inconvenience as far as she was concerned, nothing like the exciting plaything we had promised her when he was in my belly.

"I want Dora," Stella said with a lisp, speaking over the two middle fingers she constantly sucked. She scooted away from me, back to her original spot.

"Please?" I said.

"Please," she lisped, automatically.

I rolled my eyes and whispered to Nathaniel, "You better be cuddly."

My phone vibrated on the table beside me and I picked it up quickly. It was my mom.

"Hey," I said quietly, maneuvering the phone between my shoulder and ear so I could get up to put Nathaniel in his crib. "What's going on?"

"She's starting to feel some pain, so Mark's calling Dr. Greene right now to see what to do."

I nudged Nathaniel's door open with my knee and went over to put him in his crib and patted him on the back a few times to make sure he wouldn't wake up. I had given up the attempt to put him on his back to sleep. He slept on his stomach—did not sleep on his back, forever twitching himself awake. He gave a little sigh as I walked away, his little lips moving like they were still sucking at my breast.

I pulled the phone away from my ear to look at the time and then brought it back. I shut the door to Nathaniel's room and walked to the kitchen.

"Are you there?" my mom asked.

"Yes, I was putting Nathaniel down," I said. "It's been about five hours." I took a breath. "Is she in a lot of pain?"

"She says she is. She has a little bit of a fever too, which is why I want Mark to call the doctor."

"Ok," I said. "Dad should be there any minute. Just send him back here. I'll come over."

"Let me check," my mom said. "Oh, he's here already. He's with Mark." I could hear her voice move away from the receiver as she talked to my dad.

"Mom," I said.

"Hold on a minute," she said into the receiver.

I rolled my eyes and sighed.

"Ok, Dad's coming back over. He wants to know if he should bring anything."

"No," I said. "Just tell him to hurry."

I hung up and threw my phone in my purse. As I walked by the hallway mirror I saw my reflection. I hadn't showered this morning and my hair was slicked back in a ponytail, roots that I hadn't had time to color since Nathaniel was born showing darker because of my oily hair. The evidence that I had been crying almost nonstop for the past week showed in the puffiness of my eyes and the dull pallor of my skin. I turned away from the mirror and walked back to the living room to sit with Stella while I waited for my dad. I was going to make her cuddle with me whether she liked it or not.

Chapter 8

January 10, 2015

Lacy and I were driving back from Pottery Barn Kids when I knew I was going to be sick.

"Pull over," I said.

Lacy looked at me and then jettied over to the curb causing somebody to honk at us and me to almost throw up. I had already vomited in Lacy's car once before and she never let me forget that she could still smell it every time she got in.

I unbuckled and shoved the door open. There wasn't time to get out so I just leaned out as far as I could and puked in the street. After I was done, I leaned back in the car and sat back against the seat.

I left the door open but told Lacy, "Pull forward a bit, please." I needed the air but I couldn't keep looking at my regurgitated breakfast on the asphalt.

"You OK?" she asked.

I nodded, keeping my eyes closed and waiting for the worst to pass. I would never feel good, but in a few minutes at least I wouldn't feel like this. I had known this was going to happen. We had spent twenty minutes too long in Pottery Barn. I should have eaten twenty minutes

ago, but Lacy had been looking for curtains for her new nursery. She had officially passed the three-month mark yesterday, so she and Mark had given each other the green light to begin shopping. We were supposed to be looking for crib sheets for my son, who was actually due any minute, but she had gotten sidetracked—again.

"I need to eat," I said.

"Do you want to pick up Stella first?" Lacy asked.

"No," I said. Stella was at my mom's house. She could wait another ten minutes. I couldn't.

"There's a McDonald's right there," I said, pointing across the street. "Just go there."

I knew what Lacy was thinking, with her one-ounce bag of almonds and tiny pack of raisins in her purse, but I didn't have the luxury of finding another restaurant. I needed food that could be served in the next five minutes.

I told Lacy my order and she repeated it into the speaker. I already knew the total and handed her some cash. We pulled around to the window and she grabbed the food and handed it to me. I grabbed a few fries and stuffed them in my mouth. I chewed while I opened the wrapper to my burger.

"Good?" she asked as she watched me stuff my face. She cracked her window and turned her air vent up toward her face as if even the smell of my processed food could harm the tiny, bean-shaped fetus in her stomach.

"Not particularly," I said while I waited for the food to kick in. I knew that I looked disgusting and the food I was eating was taboo, but I wished for once she could just understand.

I finished by the time we reached my mom's house. I balled up the wrapper to my burger and stuffed it in the bag. I grabbed my purse and the McDonald's bag and got out of the car feeling only slightly better.

Stella was in the portable high chair in my mom's kitchen eating meatballs, her face covered in sauce, her clothes nowhere in sight. "Mommy!" she shouted.

I walked over to her and gave her a kiss. "Hi, Baby," I said. "How's your lunch?"

"It smells good, Mom," Lacy said and walked over to Stella. She wiped off Stella's face and then gave her a kiss. She pretended to look shocked as she tickled Stella's armpits. "Hey! Where are your clothes?"

Stella laughed.

"Is there any left?" Lacy asked our mom.

"Tons," she said, going to the refrigerator. "You hungry too?" she asked me.

"No," I said.

"No?" she asked pretending to be shocked.

I rolled my eyes and walked over to the trashcan to throw away the McDonald's bag. The smell was starting to make me feel nauseous again.

"I ate," I said, throwing in the bag and letting the lid slam shut.

I walked back over to Stella and gave her another kiss. "Did you have fun with Grammy?" I asked.

"We did," my mom said. "Stella helped me weed the garden, didn't you? Then we painted some pictures." She pointed out the back door to the yard. "Her clothes are drying out there," she said to me. "They were a little muddy."

"Great. Thanks," I said, nuzzling the top of Stella's head. "I missed you," I told her.

"You better get used to it," my mom said. "Soon there's going to be another b-a-b-y you are going to be holding all day."

I ignored her like I always did when people gave me unhelpful advice. "Where's Dad?" I asked, to change the

subject. Just because my mom had been unable to share her heart equally between two kids, didn't mean I would be the same.

"He's at the hardware store getting the knobs for the dresser in your sister's nursery." She spooned meatballs onto a plate and walked over to the microwave.

"No!" Lacy shouted, making my mom jump.

"What?" she asked Lacy.

"I don't use the microwave," she said. "Here, give it to me. I'll put it on the stove." Lacy grabbed a saucepan from the cupboard and dumped half the meatballs into it. "Here," she said, handing the half-full plate back to my mom. "You gave me too much."

I shook my head. She had always been on the high-maintenance side, but this pregnancy was turning her into a mental case. She had read—by doing research on things I would never even think twice about—that a microwave could leak radiation. So of course, the first thing they did when she got pregnant was get rid of their microwave.

My mom smiled, but not the patronizing smile she reserved for me. It was the one that said, *Yes, Lacy is high-maintenance, but she's always got a good reason.*

"You're supposed to put on *some* weight during your pregnancy," Mom said, reaching over and rubbing Lacy's still-flat stomach.

I heaved myself out of the chair to get a washcloth to wipe Stella's face. *Yeah just not this much, right, Mom?* I thought.

"I'm gonna go," I said. "I've got to put Stella down for a nap."

"Just put her down here," Lacy said. "That way we can go get your car seat from Target." She put her finger in the pan to test the temperature of the meatballs and then turned the flame up. "You don't mind, right, Mom?"

"Of course not," my mom said, reaching for Stella and pulling her out of the high chair. "Do you want Grammy to put you to sleep?" she asked, nuzzling noses with Stella.

"Yes!" Stella shouted. "Books and milk?"

"Of course," my mom said. She walked over to the fridge and I sat down, heavily relieved not to have to battle Stella to leave, my back hurting from all the shopping that morning.

My mom poured some milk in a mug and put it in the microwave. "How long?" she asked me.

"Fifty seconds," I said.

"Hey, Mom, is that organic?" Lacy asked.

"No. Do you want some?"

Lacy shook her head.

My mom sat Stella up on the counter while she rummaged in the cupboard for a plastic sippy cup and lid. The microwave beeped and she added the milk into the sippy cup.

"Good night," I called to Stella as they walked out of the kitchen.

"Night," Stella said.

Lacy poured the meatballs onto a plate and got a fork.

"Can you get me some water?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "Ice?"

She brought my water to the table and sat down next to me. She took a bite of her lunch and then smoothed back the hair from my face. "You still not feeling good?"

I shook my head. "I just want this kid out of me," I said.

"Any day now," she said.

"Easy for you to say," I said.

"Hey, I still have to carry this one around for six more months," she said, rubbing her stomach. "Trade places?" she asked.

"Pshh. You'd never last a day in my pregnant body," I said, sitting back to relieve the pressure on my bladder. "You threw up once and put it on Facebook. Throw up every day, all day, for nine months—that's news-feed worthy."

She stuck her tongue out.

I stood up and walked out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Pee, of course," I said over my shoulder.

I waddled to the bathroom, my hips and back all out of whack from the almost nine months of carrying forty-plus extra pounds. I could hear my mom reading *The Little Engine That Could*. I peeked in the doorway of my old room and looked at them, snuggling in the rocker. Mom had covered my old bed with a Cinderella bedspread and had bought books and stacked them on a bookshelf with dolls and blocks. Whatever I thought about her as a mother had had to come second since Stella was born.

Not that it had been easy. My mom and I had been at odds with each other pretty much since my birth. I had been a terrible nurser, preferring to sleep instead of latch on. Then in junior high, I wrote for our school newspaper instead of choosing cheerleading like she and, later, Lacy had done. Leaving the South Bay bubble of

Redondo Beach to go to college in Oregon had been the only thing that salvaged any part of our relationship. Because she couldn't see me on a daily basis, her complaints about me waned and she actually started showing slight interest in the plans I was making. Stella had been the icebreaker we had needed. But who could not love that kid? Her crazy hair, her smile that changed her entire face, her laugh that erupted even when you just pretended to tickle her.

Thank God she was born first, I thought for the millionth time as I turned away to go to the bathroom. I didn't even want to imagine what life would have been like for my kids if Lacy had had her kids first. Thank God for small miracles.

Chapter 9

April 11, 2015

Lacy was on her computer when I came over, sitting at the kitchen table in her pajamas, an uneaten piece of toast on a plate beside her laptop. Mark was standing with a cup of coffee in his hand, leaning at an awkward angle against the stove and the counter, looking as if he had somehow tipped that way and was afraid moving would be a mistake.

I had let myself in with my key, not knowing what I was going to encounter. When I had left last night, Lacy had just gone into her room to shower, the Thai food I'd ordered in untouched. Mark had been in his home office the whole night, the door shut, his voice rising and falling in the silence. His three brothers and two sisters all lived in Davenport, Iowa, their hometown, all within blocks of the house they'd grown up in, and he was giving them the latest news. Which wasn't really news, but more hypothetical situations and "things to think about."

When we'd first arrived home from the doctor, Lacy had powered up her laptop and then slammed the computer shut less than five minutes into her search. I had done research last night and seen the same pictures of kids I'm

sure Lacy had seen. It wasn't surprising that she couldn't stomach it.

I had barely slept last night because I kept thinking I heard Stella or Nathaniel. Concerns I'd never had before, like SIDS and the need to put baby locks on cabinets had been consuming me since I'd gotten in bed. I jotted down all the dangers Paul and I had neglected to prepare for and what we needed to buy to keep our kids safe. I put Nathaniel to sleep on his back. The world was a hazardous place, I was realizing with each passing moment.

As I walked up behind Lacy now, I saw that her screen was a mess of browser windows and she had a Word document at the forefront that she was typing notes and questions in. I read the questions over her shoulder as she sat slumped at the table, leaning her chin on her palm.

Hydrocephalus. EXPLAIN!

What is a shunt? Put it in in utero? Surgery on a fetus? Deliver early?

Premature baby?

Lungs developed?

Brain damage? What is prognosis?

What is amnio testing?

How did this happen? What did I do? Maternal or paternal?

Options...

I didn't know what any of these medical terms were, but they sounded frightening. I imagined surgery on Stella or Nathaniel while they were in my stomach and the idea made the hairs stand up on my arms.

"Lacy?" I said, pulling a chair around to sit next to her.

Her eyes slid from the screen to mine. She blinked slowly but didn't answer.

"Is this a list for the doctor?" I asked.

She sat up and rubbed her fingers over her forehead. "One of Mark's clients got us in to see some sort of specialist today." She clicked one of the browser windows and a picture of a man appeared with his name underneath: Dr. Jim Williams, Pediatric Neurologist.

I looked over at Mark and he took a drink of coffee and looked away. His eyes were red, and he was wearing a pair of loose running shorts and an old Cal t-shirt.

I looked back at Lacy's uneaten breakfast. "Did you eat this morning?" I asked.

She motioned toward the plate.

I picked it up and walked over to the trashcan, dropping the cold piece of toast. I put another piece of bread in the toaster. "She needs to eat," I told Mark.

"I'm aware," he said.

I opened the fridge and got out a carton of orange juice. "What time is the appointment?"

"Eleven," said Lacy.

I looked up at the clock. It was nine. "Where is it?"

"Santa Monica."

Of course.

I buttered her toast and brought it over to her. I sat next to her and moved the computer out of the way.

"Eat this and then go shower."

She took a bite, but moved her computer back in front of her.

"Did your doctor call last night?" I asked.

Lacy nodded.

"What did she say?"

"That most likely it's hydrocephalus and that his ventricles are enlarged." She took another bite and chewed it slowly, like she was trying to force it down her throat. "She was gonna call this morning with a referral but then Mark told me that one of his clients is a doctor at Saint John's. I had him call her last night. She called someone who called someone." Lacy's voice never changed inflection. "They squeezed us in this morning."

"Well, that's good news at least," I said, pushing her plate closer to her, reminding her it was still there.

"Yeah, great news," Mark said, pushing himself away from the counter with a jolt. "Someone everyone wants to see when they're pregnant—a neurologist for their baby." He put his coffee cup down and walked out of the room.

Lacy closed her eyes and leaned her head forward to rest on her hands. She massaged her brow bones with her fingers and breathed heavily.

I scooted closer to her and put my arms around her. "It's gonna be OK," I said over and over, feeling her shoulders move up and down with the effort to keep from crying.

Chapter 10

April 17, 2015

I heard the front door open while I was heating up Stella's milk. I looked over my shoulder out the kitchen window and saw Dad's car in the driveway. I knew I should leave the cup on the counter and rush out to my car to drive over to Lacy's house, but I found myself watching the seconds on the microwave tick down instead.

"How is she?" I asked, when Dad made it into the kitchen, repeating the question that had become almost automatic.

"She just needed some more morphine," Dad said, taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"For Stella," I said, handing him the milk. "There are two bottles in the fridge for Nathaniel. Give him the one with four ounces in it when he wakes up."

He nodded and squeezed my arm when I walked past him. "She'll be OK," he said.

I nodded, but I couldn't see how. I walked over to Stella and picked her up off the couch. I pulled her fingers out of her mouth and gave her a kiss.

"I'll be back in a little bit."

"Where's my milk?" she asked, looking over my shoulder at the TV.

"Grandpa has it."

She turned around, surprised to see him. No big shocker. The entire cast of Mickey Mouse Clubhouse could have done a parade in the living room and she wouldn't have noticed it if the TV was on.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Aunt Lacy's."

"Can I come?"

"No."

"Why?"

"She's sick."

"And you don't want me to get sick?"

I leaned my forehead on hers and nuzzled her nose.

"Exactly," I said.

"I could wash my hands."

"No."

"What if I don't give her a kiss?"

"Dad," I said, looking over at him. "You wanna—"

He nodded. He put the milk on the coffee table and took Stella. "How about we drink your milk and then go look for worms?"

I handed Stella to my dad and walked outside, letting the door close on the sound of their voices making plans to create a worm zoo.

My mom was fluttering around the living room when I arrived. Had she been at my house, there would have been plenty of clutter to organize and put away, but we were at Lacy's house, so it was like being on the set of a Martha Stewart magazine layout. That left my always-fidgety mom in a jittery, uncomfortable near panic.

"The nursery is empty," she said in greeting.

"I know," I said, setting down my purse and breast pump on the couch. "Where's Mark?"

"I don't know," she said, looking around as if she expected him to be lurking in the doorway. "How did you know? Everything is in the garage. I looked."

"He was taking it apart when I was here earlier. I helped him."

"You *helped* him?" she asked, looking as if I had committed an unpardonable sin.

"He needed to do it. So I helped him."

She sat down on the couch, twisting her rings around and around her finger. "Your sister is going to freak out," she said.

God, I thought, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. "No she won't," I said, not knowing if that was the truth, but knowing it was the step to bringing the level of drama down a notch.

My mom started to talk again but I cut her off. "I'm gonna check on Lacy," I said.

My mom stood up. I needed to stop her. "Why don't you go make something to eat?" I said hurriedly. "For dinner. Mark's gonna need something. So are we. Just—" I turned away, "go," I finished quietly.

I walked down the hallway to Lacy's room and pushed the door open slowly. I didn't know where Mark was and didn't know if he was going to be in there. It took my eyes a few seconds to adjust, but all I saw was the lump of Lacy on the bed, the TV no longer on. When I came closer, I saw that her eyes were open.

"Where'd you go?" she asked.

"I had to get Stella."

"Oh, right. Is she here?"

"No, Dad's with her and Nathaniel."

"Mom said he took a bottle," Lacy said, a hint of lightness in her voice.

"Yeah," I said, relieved at the almost smile on her face.

The smile slipped away.

"You want me to open the blinds or anything?" I asked. It was too dark and quiet in her room.

She shrugged, but I went to open them anyway. I cracked a window too, so we could get some fresh air circulating in the heavy, unwashed-hair smell of the bedroom.

"Would you see him?" she asked while my back was still turned.

"Would I what?" I said, turning to face her and seeing her pale face, swollen eyes, and greasy hair in the light. This was not the sister I knew. The sister who even after pulling an all-nighter studying for finals would find time for a shower and makeup. Who, with the eye of an artist, could scan the contents of a closet and find a coordinating outfit in seconds, complete with scarf and earrings. Who, I knew, was going to be the mom at the park in jeggings and boots while I could only manage yoga pants.

"See him," she said. "See Ben. After he's out. If you were me, would you look at him?"

I took my eyes off her face and looked up, at the painting above their bed. Lacy had read a book called *Seven Ways to Feng Shui Your House* after they had finished the remodel, and their bedroom and the nursery had gotten the majority of the attention.

"The energy of your bedroom is directly related to the state of your health and your relationship," she had told me as we were perusing Home Goods for "bedroom art." She had chosen a painting of a single spread-open white calla lily on a black canvas backdrop. After she hung it, I told her it looked like the view between open legs and she wasn't amused. Paul and I had had a laugh over it, agreeing that we knew nothing about feng shui, but it probably got Mark in the mood.

In light of her current situation though, the painting had become darker and more sinister and seemed to have grown in size over what looked like the very small form of my curled up little sister.

I blew air slowly out of my mouth. "God, Lace, I don't know," I said, still not meeting her eyes. Her eyes that looked dead and glassy like the shark that Paul had caught last week while fishing in his kayak.

"The doctor said he might be deformed. His head."
She paused. "His head might be deformed. He could—we don't—they don't know." She closed her eyes. "They said we might not want to see him."

At the moment, I knew she had Googled it, and I wondered what she had seen. She could have seen anything.

I couldn't speak for a few moments, and I wondered if she had fallen asleep. If she was dreaming about those Googled babies. But she opened her eyes again.

"I can't imagine never holding him though," she said. "I try to imagine what it would be like if they take him away, and I never see what he looks like."

She stared at me, waiting for me to say something.

"It would be terrible," I said finally.

She nodded and closed her eyes again.

"What does Mark think?" I said.

"He doesn't want to see him," she said. "He wants us to pretend that it didn't happen. That none of this ever happened."

She reached over for something on the nightstand. It was an ultrasound picture. One that hadn't been there earlier when I had cleaned up her room and shoved every baby-related thing out of sight.

"It doesn't look like it though, right?" she said. She grunted as she heaved herself up on her side and clicked on the lamp. She peered at the picture. "It looks like he has a normal head, doesn't it?"

I nodded, recalling the horror of Stella's skeleton-faced ultrasound picture. The surreal grainy black and white blobs that represented vital pieces of your child's anatomy, but never matched up to the image your brain wanted to see.

She put the picture down beside her on the pillow and lay back down. "I just don't know what to do." She closed her eyes. "I just wish someone would tell me what to do."

I saw the bedroom door crack open out of the corner of my eye. Mark pushed it open slowly and walked in. He looked at Lacy lying with her eyes closed and glanced to me.

I shook my head. *She's not asleep*, I mouthed.

He walked over to her and bent down, giving her a kiss on her temple.

She opened her eyes. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," he said, smoothing her hair back and sitting on the bed next to her. She scooted a little to give him room. They stayed like that for a few moments longer, and

I felt like I should leave, but didn't want to remind them I was there by moving. It was the first moment of calm I had seen Lacy in days.

"Are you hungry?" Mark asked.

Lacy shook her head.

"You want some water?"

Lacy shook her head.

"Your mom's boiling a chicken," he said, as if telling a line from a joke they both knew, but it fell flat.

"Chicken soup heals all wounds," Lacy said, her voice low as she repeated our mother's mantra.

"I'm gonna," I murmured, taking a step toward the door, knowing I was intruding on an intimate moment.

Lacy's eyes moved toward me and she nodded, but Mark kept his gaze on Lacy, his large, football-player's hands stroking her hair.

On my way to the kitchen, I walked past the nursery. Other than imprints on the carpet from the heavy furniture, the room was empty, and I knew my mom was right. Lacy was going to freak out. When they drove their minivan home from the hospital and she wobbled into the house with empty arms and a body swollen and aching from labor, she would

have nothing left to remember him by. My breath caught in my throat when I realized the mistake Mark and I had made.

I leaned my head on the cool doorframe, trying to figure out what to do. Lacy would never have just torn apart my nursery while I was lying in bed in pain. She would have figured out the right thing to do. She would have Googled, she would have read a book, she would have asked my mom. She would have done anything other than help my husband haul away the only memories of a baby who would never live inside those four walls.

I stood up straight and when I turned to walk, I saw my mom at the other end of the hallway, standing there, just looking at me. I braced myself to walk right past her, but she surprised me by taking hold of my arm and pulling me close. She hugged me to her, and I let her.

After we pulled away from each other, she kept her arm around me as we walked to the kitchen, something that would have been strange in any other circumstance, but I think we were just so spent that comfort from any source was welcome.

She squeezed me a little before letting me go and heading to the stove. She picked up the lid to the pot of chicken and stirred the broth.

I walked over to the door that led to the garage and opened it. Mom turned around.

"I'll be right back. I need to get something," I said, letting the door shut behind me and flipping on the light. I walked down the stairs and over to the boxes Mark had piled beside their bikes. I pushed boxes out of the way until I found the one I wanted. Opening it up, I picked through to pull out the outfit Lacy had picked out to bring Ben home in. I closed the box again and pushed the boxes back together.

I would put it in the bag I took to the hospital with me when Lacy was giving birth. Maybe she would want it. Maybe she wouldn't. But at least it was something.

Chapter 11

April 13, 2015

Paul had come home while I was doing the dishes from the spaghetti dinner my mom had cooked for us while I had been at another doctor's appointment with Lacy and Mark.

He had just gotten off two twenty-fours, so he didn't know much about what was going on. We were saving to add a second story to our tiny house and to remodel our kitchen, so any time the chance came to pick up an extra lifeguarding shift, he took it. Normally I didn't mind the twenty-four hour shift because it meant he was closer to home. He typically worked the beaches in Malibu at a tower on the sand, but when he did the twenty-fours, he worked in the Redondo Beach Harbor on boat patrol. That meant we usually visited him there or he would take a quick break in the mornings and bring me coffee and take Stella for a doughnut. Plus, it meant that I could take it easy all day—sometimes never changing out of yoga pants and a tank top and putting the kids to bed early so I could eat popcorn for dinner while watching reality shows. But this wasn't a normal week. This week all I had needed was him.

He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my neck, resting his forehead on the top of my head.

"How are you?" he asked.

I stopped washing and turned around to hug him, almost the first contact we had had in forty-eight hours. I didn't say anything, but just rested in his arms, which smelled like beach and sand and sweat. His smell.

The moment was broken when my mom walked in. She always had impeccable timing.

"Stella's asleep," she said. She greeted Paul and gave him a warm hug after I reluctantly let him go.

"Thanks, Mom," I said. "For dinner and Stella and—" I gestured with my hand to encompass the past couple of days.

She nodded. "OK, well, Dad's waiting so I'm going to go unless you need anything?"

I shook my head.

"Do you need me tomorrow?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Lacy has that appointment at eleven. I have that meeting at school about extending my maternity leave so I can't go, so you should."

She nodded. She bit her lip and hesitated. "You've been a good sister."

I looked at her and waited, and she met my eyes but didn't say anything else as she turned to go.

I nodded my head toward Paul, indicating he should walk her out. He squeezed my arm and followed my mom out of the kitchen. I couldn't hear what they were saying as I walked back to the sink and turned on the water.

Paul came back in the kitchen a few minutes later and pulled a bottle of wine from the rack on the counter. "I think we need this," he said, grabbing two glasses from the cupboard.

"We do," I said. I took a deep breath and sat down at the kitchen table. "We definitely do."

Paul brought the bottle and the filled glasses over to the table and turned the baby monitor volume down. "So?" he asked. "What happened today?"

"His corpus callosum is missing," I said, moving my wine glass in circles on the table, listening to the scraping sound in the silence. "It's the part of the brain that connects the two sides." I kept my eyes on the table. "They did an MRI, and it's not there."

"Shit," Paul breathed out, sitting back in his chair and letting his legs sprawl out to the side. He was still in his red lifeguard shorts and white polo shirt, the outfit I'd fallen for the first time I'd seen him on the beach.

"Yeah," I said, picturing him the first time we'd met when he'd busted me and my friends for drinking on the beach. I had been visiting my parents the summer before my senior year of college, feeling free and invincible. Until we got busted.

"What does that mean?" he asked, the same question we all asked, one after the other to each doctor we'd seen in the past two days. The same question my mom had asked Lacy as soon as we got home from the doctor this afternoon.

I thought back to Lacy's face when the doctor had shown us the big black void in Ben's head. "They don't know."

I took a sip of wine and swallowed, buying time to put this new reality into words. "He could just have some learning difficulties. He could be physically deformed. He could die in the womb." I said these all slowly, my mouth not wanting to say what my sister was in for.

"Or, he could be born, live for, like, five days, and then just die. Or, be born dead. Or be born alive and die immediately." I leaned my head on my fist and looked at Paul sideways. "The doctor said Lacy could sign a DNR, which means if he's born and he's struggling, they won't

take any measures to save him. They will just watch him die."

I closed my eyes. "Or, they could try to save him, and fill him with tubes, and he could die anyway."

Paul rubbed his eyes. "Shit," he said.

We sipped our wine in silence for a few minutes, the only sound the white noise from the baby monitor on the other side of the table.

"What can they do?" Paul asked finally.

"She can get an abortion." I stopped. "Well, for five more days she can get an abortion. Somewhere like New Mexico or Colorado or something. There are, like, two clinics in the US that will do abortions this late." I rubbed my hands on my pants to steady them and wipe off the sweat.

Paul ran a hand through his hair. "How many months is she?"

"Six."

"That's a kid," he said. "That's a full kid."

I nodded.

"Is she thinking about it?" Paul asked. I noticed he said *she* and not *they*.

I shrugged. "I don't know. We just found out about it this afternoon." I bit on my thumbnail. "There's still a small chance they're wrong. Lacy went on some chat rooms when we got home and talked with one lady who was told her baby had the same thing and he was born totally normal. The doctors were wrong."

I took a drink of wine. "The doctors could be wrong. We don't know."

Paul put his hand on my leg to keep it from bouncing up and down. "They're probably not wrong, Babe," he said. He moved his arm to go around my shoulder and pull me closer.

I leaned my head on his shoulder. "I know," I said. "But they could be."

He poured more wine in our glasses and then pushed mine closer.

"What's their other option? Just wait and see?"

"Basically," I said. "They're seeing a geneticist tomorrow. Or, maybe that's later this week." I rubbed my eyes. "Maybe they're seeing her OB." I sat up. "I don't know. Someone."

We sat in silence while we finished the bottle of wine, looking out the window and watching the sky darken.

"Another?" Paul asked as he finally pulled away, cracking his neck and picking up the bottle.

I shook my head.

He opened the lid of the recycling bin and dropped the bottle in, making a crash that made me jump.

He stood there, thinking. "That's a kid," he said, shaking his head.

I pulled the rubber band out of my hair and massaged my scalp to ease the headache that was starting. "I'm gonna get some milk out of the freezer and put it in the fridge. I'll take tonight, but do you mind waking up with Nathaniel at five and giving him his morning bottle?"

"I don't mind," he said. He waited for me to stand up and then reached for my hand. "Let's go to bed."

"I'll meet you there," I said. "I'm just gonna finish up in here."

He walked out of the kitchen, and I knew he was thinking about our kids and wondering if he could visit that clinic under these circumstances. I knew he couldn't, but after this week, I knew it was unfair for him to feel that way.

When I got in the bedroom, he was already asleep, his snores almost drowning out the TV show he had been

watching. I turned off the lights and climbed into bed, turning on my lamp when I reached for my book. I grabbed the remote and was about to turn off the TV when I saw what he was watching. Five men were wrestling an enormous anaconda out of some murky water.

I turned up the volume. They were in a remote area of the Amazon in a place called the Floating Forest. For some reason, I couldn't turn it off. The leader of the expedition had fled society ten years ago and now lived full time in this near-uninhabitable area studying anacondas. They interviewed a local guide, and he said that five years prior, his father-in-law had been in this exact spot and had disappeared. One minute he had been at the water's edge, and the next minute he was gone. They were convinced a giant anaconda had eaten him.

I got up to pee after fifteen minutes of watching them trek through the forest, mud up to their ankles and mosquitoes in thick swarms around their faces. I wondered how inhospitable this place could be if the camera crew could capture their every move.

Before returning to bed, I looked down the hallway toward the kids' rooms. I hesitated, but then walked to Stella's room and pushed open the door. Her blankets were

off and she was splayed across her twin-sized bed in Rapunzel pajamas. Her lights were dimmed, and classical music played softly from the iHome on her dresser.

I walked over to her bed and covered her up, breaking my first rule of parenting of never disrupting a quiet child. Even something as simple as covering up a toddler can be disastrous and undo all the effort it took to get her to sleep in the first place. I'd even gotten to the point where I didn't check on them before I went to bed anymore because even a cracking knee joint could be enough to get them stirring on some nights. I turned to leave the room and then came back, giving her a kiss on the forehead, almost willing her to wake up, but being satisfied by the up and down movement of her chest underneath her nightgown.

Nathaniel was quiet in his crib when I moved into his room. His white noise machine and night light were on. I looked at the clock and realized he had been sleeping for four hours straight. I felt my breasts. They were hard as rocks. He had never slept four hours straight. I took a step closer to his crib. He was on his back, still swaddled—not even one hand had been freed. He was absolutely still. I stood over him and looked for any

movement of his chest. He was too still. I reached for him, panicked.

I grabbed him from the mattress, and his eyes popped open. I kissed his tiny, puckered mouth, and he started to cry. I shushed him as I walked over to the rocking chair. I latched him on and waited until I could hear him sucking and swallowing and sucking and swallowing before I let out the breath I had been holding.

I looked up, and Paul was standing in the doorway. "I heard noises on the monitor. Is everything OK?" he said, his voice low and concerned.

"I thought he was dead," I said. I rocked and rocked and tried to hold back the panic of realizing I was never going to be the same kind of mother again.

Chapter 12

April 17, 2015

I sat in the kitchen with my mom until Mark came out of Lacy's room.

"Is she asleep?" I asked.

He shook his head. "She wants some water."

"I'll get it," my mom said, pushing Mark toward a seat at the table. "You need to sit."

My mom poured two glasses of water and gave one to Mark. "You need your strength, too. Lacy's going to need you."

Mark sucked in his cheeks and let a deep breath out but said nothing. They had never gotten along very well, and I'm sure it had to do with my mom not thinking he was good enough for her super-special second born. He had been a quarterback at Cal, and my mom still considered him a jock even though he was a couple years away from being a partner at his firm. I had told him repeatedly in the past that no one could have filled the qualifications for the job of Lacy's husband so he might as well not even try. My mom's disappointment in me and Mark had been a running joke for the two of us the past couple of years.

"You need something?" I asked.

He shook his head.

I got up and stirred my mom's soup for something to do. I didn't want to ask him how he was feeling because I could see it on his face. Plus I knew how he was feeling. He had had his boy, his football player, his All-American. He had charted his college career already. Now he had nothing.

"Hey," he said. "I'm sorry."

I turned around to look at him.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "You know, for earlier, in the baby's room. Sorry."

I shook my head. "Don't—" I started. "It's OK." I walked over to my purse and pulled the outfit out of it. "I took this back out of the boxes."

I put it on the table next to him and he stared at it. He pulled it closer and rubbed the soft, green fabric with his large hands, the hands Lacy always called mitts.

Now, I couldn't tell what he was thinking as he sat there stroking it, his bottom teeth chewing on his top lip. I didn't know if he was going to be angry that I had gone through Ben's boxes, and I didn't know what I would do if he got rid of it. If he was so pissed at me that he threw it in the trash. I realized I had probably made a big

mistake giving it to him now. I should have given it straight to Lacy.

"It's the outfit Lacy wanted to bring him home in," I said, trying to make it better. "If you bury him, she might want to put it on him."

He nodded, his Adam's apple moving up and down in his throat.

I stared at him a moment longer, but he didn't say anything. "OK," I said. "I'm gonna go check on Lacy."

He didn't respond, and I left him sitting at the kitchen table, alone.

Mom was sitting on Lacy's bed when I walked in. They both looked up at the sound of the door.

"I was just telling Mom what a nightmare patient I must be for Dr. Greene," Lacy said.

Mom shook her head and patted Lacy's arm. "You are not," she said, to end the conversation.

"Come on, Sarah, back me up. This chick is my age, give or take. *And* she's pregnant. With a *boy*." Lacy's voice was high pitched. "She's stuffing these sticks into my vagina and then packing me with gauze like some trauma victim from *Grey's Anatomy*, and she can't even make eye

contact with me. She couldn't wait to get me out the door."

She pulled a sheet of paper out of her purse that was on the nightstand. "But first she had to give me this. Look at the last one."

I took the paper out of her hands. It was a checklist for what to expect and what to do after her procedure.

You may:

- *Eat normally until midnight*
- *Have a shower*
- *Take prescribed medications*
- *Have mild to moderate cramping*

You must not:

- *Eat or drink anything after midnight*
- *Have a tub bath / use a spa bath*
- *Douche*

"Dear God," I said, as I got to the last item on the list.

"What?" my mom asked.

I handed her the paper to read:

- *Have sexual intercourse*

"Right?" Lacy asked. "Like that's not the last thing on my mind right now." She met my eyes. "Remember when you were bleeding like crazy after Nathaniel came out and your doctor just kept stuffing and stuffing you with gauze and the blood just kept coming?"

I remembered the look on Lacy and Paul's faces while they stood near my legs, pushed aside by the team of nurses and my doctor who were talking in loud voices as they tried to repair a rip Nathaniel had made with his foot on his way out.

"But you stopped bleeding. Remember? And everything was alright?" She lay back on the pillow, but kept talking. "And then you got to bring Nathaniel home. And all we've heard for the last three months is what a nightmare he is." Her voice changed as she attempted to imitate me. "He doesn't sleep. He won't take a bottle."

"Lacy," Mom said.

I couldn't say anything. I had wondered when it was going to come out, and finally it had. I tried to tell myself that she didn't mean it, but I knew that she did.

My mom got off the bed and came toward me. "Sarah."

I shook her off. "No, it's OK. I'm gonna go."

"Sarah," Lacy said as I turned to go.

"No, it's OK." I walked out the door. "I'll call you later."

I walked out to the car wondering how Lacy had always been able to make me feel guilty and inferior. She was so good at it.

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