

Salem State University
The Graduate School
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Borne: A Novel

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by

Patricia Callan

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*I was conceived on a Tuesday night in May.
Slipping easily from one plane of existence to another,
I settled into a routine of collecting cells and growing—
a briefly physical form.*

*Seven weeks later, the same day that my mother
sailed through the passenger side windshield of her car
and landed in a pile on the pavement, I slipped
just as effortlessly back into the everywhere,
unconcerned with the solidified self I had left behind.*

Chapter 1

Lynn woke up late the day of the accident. She'd set her alarm for "PM" instead of "AM" and was woken up by her four-year-old son jumping onto her stomach.

"Black beans! Black beans! Black beans, please!" Jamie had unconventional breakfast tastes.

"Ok, ok, Buddy. I'll get you some beans and how about some Cheerios—Crap! Is that what time it is?" Lynn's eyes widened, though her body remained immobile. Jamie sat beside her and kicked his feet while Lynn tried to catch up to his level of awake-ness. She put one of her pale and freckled hands against her son's soft brown foot, gave it a little squeeze. His left pinky toe curled slightly out, just like hers. Brad didn't know about her appointment. He was brushing his teeth in the next room as she raced room to room grabbing clean-ish pants and socks for herself and Jamie. He poked his head into their bedroom while she was in the process of trying to get Jamie's head out of the arm-hole of his shirt.

"Babe— can you meet me at the mechanic and then drop me off at the train today? I need someone to look at those brakes before I drive it any further."

Lynn sighed and rolled her eyes, but agreed and then tried to brush her own teeth while simultaneously opening a can of black beans and texting her brother to make sure he could still babysit that morning. Inky brine dribbled out of the can and onto her shoe as the smell of the beans reached her nose. Nausea landed hard and stayed put as she threw together her son's breakfast while he darted around the kitchen and "helped" by opening all the cabinets and placing mixing bowls on all the kitchen chairs.

"Mom! Mom! I set the table for *beffast!*"

“Oh! Thank you so much, Sweetie,” Lynn’s mouth was filling with sour saliva.

“That was very helpful of you. But we’re eating in the car today.”

“No! I want to have a *picnic!*”

“This will be a (*gulp*) a car picnic... Honey come here so we can put your pants on.”

Lynn managed to avoid vomiting until she had Jamie dressed and waiting at the front door, playing with her phone, while she escaped to the upstairs bathroom. She came downstairs to find Brad tying his tie in the reflection of the segmented glass windows of their front door, and Jamie struggling with the laces of his dad’s shoe. As much as she was a jeans-and-t-shirt girl herself, Lynn liked her husband in a suit. It reminded her of the night they met. Brad smiled at his wife, and for a second the laughter in his brown eyes and the sheer Rockwellian charm of the scene softened everything else about the morning, and she smiled back at him. The three of them rushed out the door together, completely forgetting the beans on the kitchen counter and having to buy an inconsolable Jamie a doughnut and milk at the drive-thru on the way to the mechanic.

Most of the day was ordinary. After Lynn’s appointment, she picked up Jamie at Fred’s house and they went grocery shopping. Freddy was Lynn’s older brother who lived a couple of towns away. He and Lynn were both bad on the phone and had trouble keeping in touch with anyone they didn’t see regularly, so he and his husband would come over every Thursday night for dinner. But this was an extra Uncle Freddy day for Jamie, and he could not stop babbling about his day there.

Jamie had recently decided he was old enough to walk through the store with his mom instead of riding in the carriage, which slowed down their shopping trips considerably. He proudly delivered a bunch of bananas to the cart before dropping three avocados on the floor and bawling for two minutes. The mechanic called while they were in the freezer section and told Lynn that they hadn't gotten to their car today and needed another day. Jamie spotted shelves and shelves of ice cream behind one of the freezer doors and started licking the glass.

In the cereal aisle, a handsome, blond twenty-something smiled at Lynn and then frowned when Jamie showed up 10 seconds behind her from around the corner. Flattery and protectiveness for her son weakened her defenses long enough for Jamie to convince her to let him get some sugary cereal with Elsa from *Frozen* on the front. He could hardly believe his luck and hugged the box to his chest, singing "Let It Go" for the rest of the trip.

"Mom, sing that part!" He always wanted to hear the right words to songs that he couldn't remember. She joined in quietly,

I know I've left a life behind, but I'm too relieved to grieve!

Let it go! Let it Go! Jamie belted out the chorus in line to pay, earning a sticker and "Wow! He's a natural!" from the cashier and a sour look and throat-clearing from the woman behind them in line. Lynn rolled her eyes. She'd learned since becoming a mom that kids aren't treated as people but as public property to be either fawned over or visibly detested. Toddlers in tutus are asked to smile and twirl by strangers, or scowled at for not yet having been succumbed to glum submission. Lynn knew, too, that her biracial son was subjected to much more public scrutiny than she had been as a little

kid. Jamie had his little cloud of hair touched by more uninvited hands in three years than had touched Lynn's in thirty-two. At least no one asked her if he was adopted this time.

They got home, had lunch, and then played around on the piano in the living room. Jamie was turning out to be pretty musical, like his mother, and he watched her hands carefully as she moved them up and down the keys. He wanted to hold his hands the same way and was frustrated whenever she'd gently remind him that they were still just too little. He eventually gave up, slid off the bench, and flopped down on the floor. He lay on his back and put his feet up on the bench where he'd just been sitting.

"Mama, can you play that one that sounds like a snowstorm?" Lynn smiled and grabbed the sheet music for Vivaldi's Four Seasons and played until Jamie got bored and started pulling books out.

Twenty minutes later they were both sound asleep on the couch, a pile of books on their laps. It had been a long day, and the one about the badger always made them sleepy. They woke up when their next-door neighbor sent a text message inviting Jamie over to play with her daughter before dinner. The last time he was there they'd spent the afternoon watching weird old VHS movies of marionettes acting out scenes from the Bible. Lynn didn't love marionettes *or* overt attempts at religious indoctrination of her kid, but the timing was perfect, so she heaved herself up off the couch and started getting things together for him to go over there while she picked up Brad. Even with the fridge full of groceries, it was definitely a pizza night, so she called it in and sliced up some carrots and celery. At least Jamie would have a vegetable with his dinner. They walked next door and Jamie hugged little Grace, and then they ran off to play.

“He’s already had his screen time today, so don’t let him trick you into watching any movies!” She figured it was worth a shot.

Lynn walked back to their driveway and climbed into driver’s seat and turned on the radio. She felt depleted. She closed her eyes and felt like the car was spinning, so she opened them again. She drove to the train station and tried to relax while she waited for Brad’s train to arrive, but her stomach was in knots, and she was feeling a little shivery. She unbuckled and switched herself over to the passenger side, strapping in and then adjusting her seat so she could lean back a little. Brad came into the car.

“Ugh that’s it, I’m quitting.”

“Sorry, Babe. Bad day?”

“Terrible. But it’s over now. Where’s Jamie?”

“Sunday School.”

“Ha. Why aren’t you driving?”

“I’m not feeling that great... just need some rest, I guess. You mind chauffeuring us to Gino’s first?”

“Mmmm definitely not. Sounds good.”

Lynn liked when Brad drove. He never went too fast or turned too quick. He never seemed nervous when tractor-trailers passed them too close. He got carsick as a passenger, so he always drove on longer trips, but even on short trips it was enough to make her feel secure for the length of the drive. Lynn kept her eyes closed and her window open as they drove, the sounds and smells from the town she’d grown up in keeping her just as aware of their location as she would have been if she’d been watching. She knew when they passed the ball field, could even picture the players’

uniforms. She smelled the sod at the Clancy's Garden Supply and felt the rumble of some unfinished pavement rattling the car. It startled her into enough alertness to realize she was a little cold.

Brad pulled onto the highway and she unbuckled to grab a blanket from the back seat. Suddenly he swore and swerved. If she had been facing forward, she would have seen an enormous chest of drawers slide out of the pick-up truck in front of them, landing just in front of their car. The drawers hadn't been emptied and tiny articles of children's clothing flew overhead as Brad drove into the guardrail instead of the rogue bureau. She felt herself being flung through the glass and had enough time in the air to feel the pain of her skin tearing on jagged glass, enough time to understand exactly what was happening and to be afraid before the impact of the pavement knocked her out.

She woke up briefly in the ambulance and saw with relief that her husband was sitting beside her, relatively unscathed. He was staring at her.

"She's awake! She's awake! Lynn, are you in a lot of pain? Oh my god I'm so sorry, Honey. You're going to be ok- we're on our way to the hospital." They were cutting away her pants, and she heard him gasp and ask why her underwear was so bloody. She heard a quickening beeping sound and the EMTs trying to quiet her husband before passing back out, knowing full well why she was bleeding. She knew I was gone.

The next morning, Lynn woke up in a sunny hospital room and saw Brad sleeping in the chair next to her, his arm in a sling and a small butterfly stitch above his

eyebrow. Her name was on the little white board on the wall, along with the date and a list of medications. She scanned the room for signs of Jamie, knowing that of course they would have kept him away, but wishing with all her heart that they hadn't. Then she tried to assess her own condition.

Her right leg was in a cast. The left was badly bruised, but bare. She wiggled her toes and saw that she could move them, thank God. She struggled to open her mouth and reached up to feel her swollen face and saw that her right hand was also in a cast. She had been reaching left for something in the back seat, that's why her seatbelt was off, that's why the bulk of the injuries were on the right side. She always wore her seatbelt. What had been important enough to remove it for? She was never able to remember that she had been reaching for a blanket- Jamie's fleece, train-printed one that he had left on his car seat. She was usually cold when the air conditioning in the car was running.

Her self-assessment was interrupted when Lynn's mother came into the room, looking worried but not terrified; this was indication enough to Lynn that she would be ok. Losing her only daughter was a fear that Pearl fought even when it was unfounded and bordered on irrational. For her to maintain any level of composure in this situation was reassuring. Pearl was in her pajamas- pink flannel pants and green t-shirt that were both too big for her small frame. Her hair was up, revealing the grey roots that outlined her usually auburn hair. She must have rushed out of her house and spent the night here. She was holding two cups of coffee, and Lynn found herself wishing she had a third. That was a good sign, too. People in mortal peril probably don't crave caffeine, no

matter how intense their addiction. She waved feebly and her mom smiled and sat down beside her on the bed and whispered, “Hey, Linnie.”

“Hey. Mom, I’m so sorry—this must have been a terrible night for you. Have you seen Jamie? Who’s with him?”

“He’s with your father right now. Dad sent a text said that they’ve been watching so much Curious George that he’s pretty sure Jamie will be speaking entirely in monkey by the time you get home. Beth next door is taking him this afternoon so Dad can come back and see you. How’re you feeling?”

“Sore, a little foggy. Not bad I guess. I’m okay? I mean... what did they say?”

“Yes, you are going to be just fine. No internal injuries. Pretty bad concussion in addition to the broken bones though, so you might be foggy for a while. And...”

“What happened to Brad? Is he alright?”

“Oh yeah, Hon. He is going to be just fine—as long as he doesn’t kill himself worrying about you. He feels so guilty. I told him you have no one to blame but yourself, not wearing a seatbelt. What the hell were you thinking?” This, too was encouraging—her mother’s harsh words meant that she wasn’t afraid that these would be the last ones they spoke to each other.

“Ugh, I know. I just took it off for a second. What did we hit?”

“Guardrail. Brad swerved to avoid some furniture that fell out of a truck. You don’t remember?”

“I didn’t see. I was reaching into the backseat.” She tried to remember the blanket and couldn’t, then started to remember something else- the blood in the ambulance.

“Did Brad say anything else about what happened? Or after?”

Pearl looked down. She braided her fingers together and breathed deeply.

“Well... the EMTs said you appeared to be having a miscarriage. Brad hasn't talked to the doctor about it. Sweetie, were you—”

A shift and a startled “Hey!” from Brad's chair interrupted them.

“You're awake! How are you feeling?”

“I'm ok, I think, although I'm in no hurry to look in the mirror.”

Brad's face relaxed in a way that it hadn't even when he was asleep. Lynn was awake. She was herself. They were all going to be okay. He squeezed Lynn's hand and then stood up and stretched a little. He was a lot sorer from the crash than he'd been the night before. He felt with his good hand in his pocket for the extra strength ibuprofen a nurse had snuck him and took one with his coffee. He was sad, he was sore and tired, but his nap in the chair had restored him enough to remember life outside this room. He looked at his mother-in-law,

“You heard from Will this morning? He and Jamie burn the house down yet?”

“Not yet, but it's early.”

“Early? Not for Jamie. That little maniac has been up for hours by now. I should probably get home and check on him, huh? He must be a little freaked— both of us gone.”

“Jamie? Ha! Fat chance. He knows who the keeper of the cupcakes is. You two are second class citizens compared to Gramps.”

“Oh, I miss him.” Lynn's yearning broke the brief moment of levity. She started to well up, and the tears stung the hundreds of tiny nicks around her eyes. Then she

shook her head, "Why don't you head to the house, Mom? Give Dad a break? Then I'll send Brad home to relieve you both."

"Ok, Linnie. Probably not a bad idea. And Lynn, can this be the last time I have to visit you in a hospital please?",

"I'm so sorry. I really hope so."

"Love you guys. I'll check in soon."

"Love you, Mom. Thanks."

"Bye, Pearl. Thanks for everything."

*I see what must be lived with—
claustrophobia,
internet trolls,
outliving your children,
papercuts.*

*I've heard there's a lot to live for—
the second sip of wine,
bubble wrap,
campfires,
the pause before a kiss.*

But you know so little, once you're born.

You give up so much.

Chapter 2

Pearl kissed her daughter on the top of her head—the one part of her that seemed unscathed. She maintained her facade of calm until she turned the corner out of the hospital room, then she let her shoulders relax and her head hang for a moment. All these years later, and Pearl still felt like she was always just inches away from losing her daughter. She'd got her safely out of the womb, out of childhood, through college. Why was it still so hard? Her heart rate increased, and her breath felt too fast as she waited for the elevator doors to open, so she reached into her gigantic purse and felt around for her Virgin Mary statuette. There she was, smooth and cool, floating around at the bottom of the bag with the little chip on the left side of her face. Pearl took a deep breath and stepped through the elevator doors.

Pearl had discovered the little statue thirty-two years earlier. On her way to pick up Freddy from school, she suddenly realized she was twenty minutes early. She'd set the VCR clock ahead the day before to fool her perpetually late husband into getting to a dinner party on time the night before and then forgot to fix it. It hadn't worked, anyway. Will never even looked at the clock when he got home from work, and by the time they got to the party half the group was into their second glasses of wine.

She spotted a yard sale sign on the street next to Fred's school and decided she would kill a little time excavating the remnants of someone else's life. Pearl loved yard sales. Her favorite thing to do was to pick up a box filled with unknown items and then offer the seller \$5 for the whole thing. She never looked inside until she got home, so she could only determine its worth by the top layer. She explored the book-covered tables and racks of old clothes, zeroing in on a box of some dazzlingly strange silk

scarves. There was one with single printed scene of a U.F.O landing in a desert with a little green Martian exiting the side door, and another covered with rows and rows of ears of corn. She hurriedly paid the bored woman with the cash box and headed off to Freddy's school. They drove home, where Fred watched cartoons while Pearl investigated the contents of her mysterious box. She tied the scarves onto her head and neck—bed bugs be damned—and began pulling out the rest of its contents.

Mary was lying on her back at the bottom of the box, surrounded by old magazines and college sweatshirts. Porcelain and about the size of a perfume bottle, her halo radiated from behind her blonde curls like a single McDonald's arch. Draped in a baby blue cloak and an inexplicable serenity, Mary was simply too beautiful to be a real mother. Pearl figured that even Jesus must have kept his mother up all night teething and left her with dark circles and spit-up covered robes. But maybe not. Maybe virgins get perfect babies that sleep twelve hours a night and never cry. She picked up the little statue and took a closer look at Mary's face. Peaches and cream, serene, with a little pink mouth, blue eyes and almost no nose at all. Pearl did not see much about her that smacked of a Middle Eastern teenager with an unexplainable baby- especially one that seemed to bring with him a fair amount of attention and trouble. She put the rest of the box's contents into the trash and put Mary on her mantle. Mary, who didn't even have to try to get pregnant. She looked good up there.

Will disagreed. He came home that night, stepped out of his boots next to the fireplace and stood eye-to-eye with the little statue, "Nope. Take it down, Pearl."

"What? Why?"

“Because I am not looking at a goddamn Jesus statue every night when I get home. It’s like being back on Windsor Ave again.” Will had grown up on the dingy dirt road. The only money his parents had was spent sending him and his sisters to St. Paul’s, where the nuns attempted to cure of him of being left-handed and stubborn and had failed on both counts.

“Oh Will, it was in one of my grab-bag boxes and I thought it might bring us some good luck. She *was* a mother, you know, whoever the father was. I really want this one to stick, Honey. I’m worried that it’s Freddy’s last chance for a sibling. I don’t want him to be alone.” Pearl was pregnant for the third time in just the past year. They’d lost five in total and Pearl had named them all. She believed in little baby Lynn. She had promised Will that if this baby didn’t make it to term, she’d let him get a vasectomy, finally. He wanted one after the first miscarriage. That first one alone had broken his heart in three places—once for Freddy, once for Pearl, and once for himself. He wasn’t as troubled about his unborn baby’s misfortune—he’d sort of figured the baby had gotten off pretty easy. After each miscarriage, Will wasn’t sure he had the stamina to go through that trauma again, but Pearl was so determined and so damned optimistic. She kept leaning on his inability to let his wife down, and Will kept getting Pearl pregnant despite all of his misgivings and all of their failures. He glared at the Mary statue like it was her fault.

“Alright, Pearl. I guess she can stay for now.”

*I happen to know that He
did— spit up, poop, cry, pee
on his mother and chew
on her nipples.*

*Original or not, his sins
were the same as all the
others— maddening,
involuntary, blameless.*

Just another little mammal.

*And his Mama, she
was a Baby herself,
as You all are.*

Chapter 3

After a long nap while Brad went home to check on Jamie, the two of them found themselves sitting silently in the hospital room, waiting for the doctor to check in. Lynn pulled down her blankets a little on Brad's side and winked at him, or tried to. She wasn't sure how swollen her eye was.

"Care to join me?" She wiggled her eyebrows. Brad smiled and shook his head.

"Tempting offer. You are looking super sexy right now. The whole multiple broken bones and possible traumatic-brain-injury thing really does it for me."

"Ha. You're just jealous because I make all this plaster look *good*." It made her ribs hurt, but laughing still felt good— it bridged some of the chasm that the situation had carved out between them. But she saw that his laughter was all surface.

"What's wrong, Babe?"

"You were bleeding, in the ambulance. Like you were having a period, but it was kind of a terrifying amount of blood... and... the EMT's said that it looked like you might be miscarrying. Lynn, I think you were pregnant." He paused and inhaled, having said all that in one breath. "You're not now. They did a test to see if they had to treat a fetus and it came back negative... but your hormone levels were all funky. Were you? Did you know?"

Lynn took a moment to consider her answer. She looked in her husband's guilt-filled eyes and decided to lie.

"No, no I didn't know."

He sighed. "So, I guess at least you're not disappointed in that way. I mean, you can't really miss the baby if you didn't know she was there, right? Or he? Oh God, I'm grasping at straws here, Lynn. I'm so sorry."

"No, yeah. You're absolutely right. I'm ok, Brad, really."

"I am so sorry, Lynn. It's all my fault. I— I think I killed our baby."

"Brad, that's ridiculous. We don't know anything, and in any case it's not your fault at all."

"No?"

"No! Even if the accident had caused the pregnancy to end, which you don't know it did, I am the one of took off my seatbelt. If I hadn't, we'd probably already be home from the hospital by now. And, as far as you know, it was a coincidence- the accident might not have caused it at all."

"That would be a pretty big coincidence, Lynn." She couldn't argue with that. It was a pretty big coincidence. He lay beside her on the bed after all, rested his head on her good shoulder. He felt a little better and she felt a little worse. Unburdening is like that—baggage has to be handed to someone else. Brad took out his phone and returned a few text messages to family members while Lynn sat in silence.

"When will I be able to go home? Or at least look normal enough for Jamie to visit me?"

Her husband smiled sympathetically, knowing how hard it must have been for her without Jamie. The two of them were nearly always together, bonded in a way that Brad might have been jealous of if it didn't make him so happy to see, and Lynn had certainly earned that connection to her son. She'd worked hard to have him.

It took them six months to get pregnant once they started trying—not long enough to cause concern but long enough to drive her nuts. Once pregnant, Lynn was nauseous 24 hours a day for months. She lived on crackers most of the time, struggling to keep down the water she knew they both needed. Her feet swelled, she got carpal tunnel, hairy toes, and heartburn. Every afternoon, she got home from work and watched old episodes of *Dawson's Creek*, unable to concentrate enough to follow new episodes of current television shows, yet unable to close her eyes without feeling queasy. And then, when she was almost done, the PUPPS.

Pruritic Urticarial Papules and Plaques of Pregnancy. A rare and unexplained pregnancy rash that creeps from the stretch marks on one's stomach to her arms, legs, and butt. In the last 4 or weeks of her pregnancy— it was not something that it had even occurred to Lynn to worry about, but it eclipsed all of her other pregnancy woes with its unrelenting torture. Her skin swelled and itched and burned constantly, like she was wearing a jumpsuit made of poison ivy. She couldn't sleep, couldn't wear clothes. She was up in the middle of the night (nights were the worst) giving herself ice cold baths for just a few minutes of relief. Her doctor could offer her no solutions other than reminding her that it was temporary and had no lasting consequences on her or her baby's health. Easy for her to say, Lynn would think resentfully as she fantasized about getting out of the tortuous clothes she'd been forced to put on to come to her appointments. The final twist of the knife was reading online that some researchers believed PUPPS to be a symptom of an incompatibility between the baby and mother's DNA. Were they to be incompatible in all ways?

The hives finally started to recede the week before Jamie was born. Lynn was perfectly happy, heartburn and all. Who knew that the absence of something could be so profoundly wonderful. She finally had the mental energy to concentrate on feeling excited about the baby again. She drew a few sketches for his nursery wall—one of a tree covered in blue leaves and another of an orange owl. She and Brad could have sex again, finally, without the touch of his hands and the heat of their bodies setting off an attack of itching that eclipsed any pleasure that could still be derived from the act in one's third trimester. They also reinstated their social life, trying to squeeze in a few more grown-up dinners with friends and family before their lives become covered in spit-up.

They had Brad's parents and sister, Alicia, over one night for Chinese food. Jim and Susan had taken some time off from work and were staying with their daughter as they waited for the baby to be born. Alicia kept pouring hot mustard onto Lynn's boneless spare ribs and fried rice. Someone at her job had eaten hot mustard the night that she went into labor two weeks early. Brad's mom, Susan, rolled her eyes at her daughter and poured Lynn more seltzer to wash down the spicy food.

"You're a nurse, Alicia! How can you believe something so ridiculous?" She turned her attention to Lynn, "How is your skin today, Sweetie? Still getting better?"

"Much better, thanks. I'm not even thinking about how much I hate wearing clothes right now." As connected as Lynn and her own mother were, she never got a lot of sympathy from Pearl about her PUPPS. Pearl's anxiety about losing her daughter didn't leave a lot of room to worry about discomforts that weren't life threatening. Lynn had really appreciated Susan's empathy throughout, as well as Alicia's humor. Alicia

was a little younger than Lynn, had no interest in being pregnant herself, but was fascinated by everything that Lynn was going through, and never failed to find a joke in it.

Alicia laughed a little and leaned back in her chair. "Well, don't keep your clothes on for our benefit! Although you might shock my dad when they come back out here."

"Honestly, if it was last week, I wouldn't even care. You guys would all have to just tolerate my nudity or leave. It was torture."

"Well, it's the first time that your skin has caused more trouble than ours, huh Mom?"

Susan was thoughtful for a minute.

"Have you thought about how people will act when you're out with the baby? About him not being white?"

"Yeah, I've thought about it a little. Mostly I've been thinking further ahead than that... when he's older and has to deal with that stuff himself. But I guess things will be different for me, too."

"Yes, they will. And he'll be watching you to see how he's supposed to react. And your job will be to keep him safe."

"Isn't that every parent's job?"

"Yes, of course! But it will be harder for you."

The three women were quiet for a minute. Despite herself, Lynn was reminded of the theoretical "incompatible DNA" that she'd found online while researching her PUPPS. She scratched her still itchy belly and wondered how big a chasm race could carve between her and her baby. In Brad's adolescent determination to fit into his

mostly-white community, he had always willfully ignored evidence of prejudice against him, and that performative naiveté eventually braided itself into his adult personality. Lynn wondered, for the first time, how much their marriage had depended upon that pretending— how much sidestepping Brad had to do so they could keep their footing feeling equal enough to walk together. Would her son have to make the same adjustments in order to relate to his mother? In order to survive?

Brad and his father interrupted the silence as they returned, laughing, from the nursery where they'd been setting up the baby monitor.

"The camera thing is cool, I admit it, but I feel like the baby will never have any privacy," Jim was saying to his son.

"Dad, he's a baby. You think we're trying to steal his credit card information?"

"Very funny. No, I'm just saying there's an indignity to never getting to really be alone, and—." Jim's response was interrupted by his children's laughter at the idea of a dignified baby.

"Dad wants the baby in a monocle and top-hat like a tiny brown Monopoly man."

"Dad, does he need a place to twirl his tiny fancy mustache in peace?"

"Oh no, no, Mother Dear. Please don't change my diaper out here. I'll have Jeeves deal with it in the proper time and place."

Jim laughed with his kids, and then sat down next to his daughter-in-law.

"I know what you mean, Jim," she said quietly, beneath the hilarity of Brad and Alicia's increasingly high pitched and absurd London accents. "You want the baby to be for himself and not for us all the time. That's what I want too." He smiled back at her, relieved to have found an ally.

“It’s not the gadgets I worry about, Lynn. I just think people need sometimes to be left alone in order to have some peace and growth.”

“I agree. I spent my whole childhood being my mother’s daughter, first and foremost. Being alone was sometimes like being off-the-clock, I’m ashamed to say.” She was ashamed to have said any of it now that the words were out of her mouth, and was grateful when Jim didn’t agree with her.

“Your mom did a good job, Lynn. You will too.”

Jamie was born a few days later. For three hours, Lynn pushed while the nurse directed her into dozens of different positions on the bed, the floor, a yoga ball- anything to get the baby out. During the third hour, everyone wearing scrubs began to share worried looks. Her doctor met with other obstetricians in the doorway of her delivery room and whispered about options. They settled on a cesarean section, and Lynn would have been terrified if she’d had any energy or focus left in her body. Brad was there, but she couldn’t really see him anymore. She could hardly even remember the baby at this point; she had sweat out everything that wasn’t pain, thirst, and exhaustion. Her needs were all feral now, and her desire to be out of pain, to sleep, to drink, had suffocated any remaining maternal instincts.

They sent Brad out to get his paper booties and gown on and wheeled Lynn into the operating room. There was a team of doctors and nurses readying themselves help Jamie and Lynn complete and survive the operation. It was bright compared to the dim delivery room. She noticed the brightness and the sight of her blood running in a tube from the other side of the curtain all the way over to a large tank on the opposite wall.

She was too tired to notice much else. The anesthesiologist kindly removed her pain and along with it all energy, drive, and connection to what was happening to her. She was numb as they cut and tugged her skin and womb apart, numb as they pulled out the baby and suctioned out his little lungs before cheering at his cries. She was numb when she watched her husband cut the cord and carry him over to her. She wouldn't hold him— her arms were tired and weak. She was afraid she'd drop him. But she tried her best to engage as the doctors spent the next 35 minutes putting the bottom half of her back together.

“He looks like your dad.” Lynn's voice was a whisper.

“Yeah.” Brad beamed down at the baby, and Lynn could see that he was already a little less concerned about his wife's comfort and health. No matter how much you love a person, you can never quite love them as much as your baby, and Brad's love had turned on like a switch. Underneath her numbness, Lynn resented that change. She was okay with her sudden demotion to second place, but she wanted to love the baby like that too. Why couldn't she feel anything? She spent the next couple of hours dozing and desperately requesting ice chips, half of which made her vomit. During the night she slept twice- for 45 minutes each. The rest of the night was spent trying to feed the baby or staring into his clear, plastic bassinet and straining to hear his breathing or her own heart.

Heartbeats
and breathing
and counting tiny
fingers. My
mother never
wavered in her
love for him,
my brother.

Chapter 4

In the first few days after Jamie's birth, Lynn gradually came to feel a bit more like herself, and closer to the way she had expected to feel toward her new baby. They named him James William, after his two grandfathers. Every hour that passed in the hospital was a little easier than the last- a little happier. By the day they went home, she felt confident that she would soon be the happy and healthy mother she wanted to be for him. And for the first three days, she was. The little family faced sleepless nights and piled up dishes, but they were very happy. She started to trust her body again. It was sore and bleeding, but it was whole and wasn't itching and it had successfully delivered this new little love of her life.

On her fourth day at home, Lynn was abruptly thrust into an intense panic that she couldn't control or name. Her heart was beating out a warning at full volume and she couldn't stop crying. Given Pearl's medical history, Lynn's doctor had warned her that post-partum depression and anxiety were genetically likely, so she knew what to do. She made an appointment with her obstetrician for that day. Her hands were shaking as she walked out of the waiting room where Jamie slept in his car seat facing Brad. The nurse talked to her about how common post-partum anxiety and depression are as she took her temperature. The symptoms sounded familiar as the kind woman in Hello Kitty scrubs described them to her, wrapping a blood pressure cuff around Lynn's bicep. She furrowed her brows at the reading.

"Do you normally have high blood pressure?"

"No."

The nurse took it again then called the doctor. Doctor Mattson took it once and then started speaking in an uncharacteristically calm voice. Her personality was usually bigger than life, every other sentence punctuated by a belly laugh. She gently instructed Lynn to lay on her left side, then sent the nurse out to fetch Brad. She felt Lynn's feet and ankles. Then she walked out to the nurse's station and made a phone call that she clearly thought Lynn would not be able to overhear.

"I'm going to need an ambulance right away at Family Obstetrics on Poplar Street. I have a 30-year-old woman here who is eight days postpartum with *extremely* high blood pressure. Two-ten over one-twenty. Yes, that's right. No, no history. No swelling." Pause. "Cesarian. No, she's been recovering well. She came in complaining of anxiety. Thank you."

Lynn thought that was a strange thing to say, that she'd been recovering well. She felt awful enough to return to the doctor's office, didn't she? She couldn't have been recovering that well. Dr. Mattson returned with Brad and little Jamie. She explained that Lynn's blood pressure was dangerously high and they would have to send her by ambulance to Manchester Memorial Hospital. Brad looked alarmed but was also still Brad, so he immediately began to talk through the logistics.

"Babe, I can't go in the ambulance with Jamie... I'll call your mom and have her meet us there? One of us can stay with you and the other with Jamie? Who do you want?"

"He's not coming with me?!? He can't be away from me, Brad! He has to eat."

“Honey, the ER is disgusting. You can’t bring a newborn in there with all those germs. It’s flu season. I’ll have your mom grab the breast pump from our house.” Lynn closed her eyes, tears dripping down over her nose and down her left cheek.

“I want you with the baby. He’s spent more time with you. I’ll be fine.” She meant it, but she was also angry at Brad for taking Jamie away from her, however valid his reasoning. And she wanted her mom, which she knew was selfish. Subjecting her perpetually terrified mother to the stress of being next to a daughter in actual mortal peril was selfish, but if she couldn’t have her baby, her mother would have to do. Brad called and Pearl was already at Lynn’s side by the time the nurses at the E.R. had stuck the last sticky heart sensor to her daughter’s skin. Those days had a deadly urgency that Lynn’s current hospital stay didn’t quite inflict on her, but she wanted her mom more than ever. She was happy when Brad could visit and thrilled to tears when little Jamie started stopping by, but it was her mom in the chair next to her that made her believe that life outside her hospital room was still out there waiting for her.

Friction is specific to being alive.

*Time glides around me without
the slightest pull or tug.*

I exist not in space, but among it.

*All these collisions and near misses— with sanity
or death*

or each other—

*do not look, to me, like life's interruptions,
but like life itself.*

Chapter 5

As a young woman, Pearl had never had much interest in children. After high school, she'd been a little aimless but happy and free in a way that her friends who got married or went to college weren't. She waited tables at a diner in town and did a little bartending on the weekends. She dated when presented with the opportunity but never sought out love or marriage, and certainly not kids. Her mother described her as a "free spirit," and looked at Pearl's life with a mixture of admiration, envy, and concern. Her father called her a flake, but did so with an indulgent smile. Pearl was so damn likeable, it didn't seem to matter what she did.

She met Will one night when she was tending bar at a private party for his co-worker— a retiring electrician with the longest beard she'd ever seen. Will was much younger than the other guests, kind of quiet, but friendly to everyone who stopped by his table to chat. He came over and ordered a vodka-tonic and smiled. Pearl grinned back involuntarily, the kind of broad, asymmetrical smile you give a friend who just said something you shouldn't laugh at but want to. Temporarily stupid, she forgot what vodka was. Tonic, too. She brought a few other people their beers and wine spritzers while she tried to collect herself. She wracked her brain for one of the witty one-liners or wry observations that were usually so obligingly available to her and came up empty. She brought him his drink, finally, and then said, "Sorry about the wait- I just don't seem to be at my best tonight."

"Well then, Miss, I'm relieved I met you tonight then, because otherwise I might have been too scared to talk to you, instead of just incredibly intimidated." A southern accent. It surprised her more than the complement.

“Intimidated by a girl who knows her way around the back of a bar, are you?”

“A bit, a bit. But sometimes it’s necessary to tackle your fears head on. My name is Will.” He reached out to shake her hand and she was positively giddy at the opportunity to touch him.

“I’m Pearl. It’s nice to meet you Will. How do you know the man of the hour? And his beard?”

“Oh, we’ve worked together for a few years now. He’s a nice guy. Glad he’s retiring- he’s been looking forward to it since I met him.”

“Working with you drove him right out the business, huh?’ Her heart was still beating at irregular intervals, but her brain was starting to retain function. Will chuckled,

“You might be right about that, Pearl. I am notoriously unpleasant to work with. I’m sure you don’t have that reputation.”

“Oh no, of course not. I’m just sparkles and sunshine every shift. That’s how I get the good tips.”

“I’m thinking those big blue eyes help you out with that, too.”

“They don’t hurt.” She tilted her head saucily. Will looked admiringly at her across the bar.

“No. They don’t hurt at all.”

They didn’t really date, just spent every free moment together three weeks before determining that since they were never going to sleep apart again, they might as well save on rent and get rid of Pearl’s apartment. Will owned a little house near the river and had plenty of room for her. A month before, Pearl slept diagonally on her queen-sized futon, basking in solitude on her mornings off as she drank coffee and read her

mystery novels. Now the idea of waking up alone unimaginable. Will was a little grumpy and Pearl was more than a little stubborn, so they fought sometimes—mostly about small things. But she loved him harder than she had known was even an option. Although it was unplanned, when Pearl got pregnant, she was excited. She couldn't quite picture the baby or herself as a mother, but anyone who was 50% Will Robbins was ok with her. She and Will got married at City Hall, then drove down to Florida for their honeymoon. Her pregnancy was easy; she was young and strong, and delivered a healthy baby boy the day before her 23rd birthday.

Freddy was just easy outside the womb as he had been inside, but so independent. He never seemed to need Pearl the way she'd thought a baby would. He was content in his swing or exploring the house, once he learned to crawl, but often squirmed in her arms if he wasn't nursing. She found motherhood a bit boring, lonely even, and yearned for a girl, convinced that a daughter would add a level of companionship to the caretaking. They waited a year then started trying again. And again. And again. Her miscarriages were often separated by long stretches of nothing. With each loss, she became more convinced that they needed more children in the house, that the family wasn't complete as it was.

"It's too quiet," she told Will, when he brought up the possibility that perhaps another baby wasn't meant to be. "Freddy shouldn't be alone." She did want a sibling for Freddy, but she also wanted a daughter for herself. She wasn't nearly as certain as she wanted him to believe she was, but finding that little Mary figurine in the third month gave her something to cling to when every twinge or cramp left her terrified. She gradually came to believe that everything could be ok, and in the ninth month of her

seventh pregnancy, she was confident enough to let Will paint the nursery—pink, pink pink. She shared with him the name she'd chosen the day she got the positive pregnancy test. And, right on time, her water broke. She sent up a little prayer to Miriam, Henry, Mary, Milton, and Patrick, believing in them more powerfully than any deity she'd ever heard of. She thought that it was up to them to usher their sister, Lynn, into the world safely. Then she called Will at work to drive her to the hospital, and her mom to pick up Freddy.

Maybe it had nothing to do with her being a girl, but Lynn proved to be exactly the child that Pearl was hoping for. She loved nothing more than snuggling with her mama, and her adorable babbling grew into sweet conversations that deepened every year. She also brought Freddy into a world outside of his own mind. He was suddenly engaged with his family- helping deliver diapers and teething toys, speculating about how to help her feel better when she cried, and hugging her all the time. Freddy, who scarcely hugged his parents, treated the baby like his own personal teddy bear. Will, meanwhile, saw Baby Lynn restore an equilibrium to their household that had not existed in years. He loved her for herself but also for being exactly what they had been missing. Maybe that kind of responsibility is too weighty to lay on a little baby, but Lynn bore it well. Like porcelain Mary's human baby, she seemed built to carry the happiness and pain of others. But, just as His did, Lynn's presence had its drawbacks.

All the strength and optimism that Pearl had embodied, or at least acted out, seemed to leave her after Lynn was born. Post-partum terror hit Pearl hard and stayed put. One day, when Lynn was a few weeks old, Will came home from work and found

his wife sawing the legs off of their coffee table. Baby Lynn was somehow sleeping through the entire ordeal in a little bassinet not three feet from her mother.

“What if it falls on her, Will?”

“Well I don’t see why it would, but if you’re so worried we could have just put it in the basement for a while. You didn’t have to destroy it. Where’s Fred?”

“He’s watching TV- he’s fine. At least I think he is. Oh my God, Will—I’m not sure when I even talked to him last.”

“Has he eaten? Have you? Pearl, you need to snap out of this. Do I need to call your doctor?” Will poked his head into the living room and saw his son happily watching Ninja Turtles, half-eaten bowl of cereal at his side.

“No, no! I don’t want anyone taking my babies away. They’ll think I’m crazy.” Will paused, considering something. Was he was trying to determine whether she was crazy or whether they could take away their kids? Pearl didn’t know what to hope for. For the first time, she took Mary off the mantle, rubbed her thumb along her tiny, perfect hairline and took a deep breath.

“I’m ok. I’m sorry about the table. Want me to make some spaghetti for dinner?” Will glanced with annoyance at Mary, but was comforted by Pearl’s sudden evening of tone.

“No, no, Honey. I’ll order some pizza. Go take a nap while Lynn is asleep. I’m sure she’ll be up looking for you in no time.” Pearl stared at her baby. When they weren’t touching, she felt gravity abandon her. If someone else held her, a voice in her mind repeated “give me the baby, give me the baby,” until she was back in Pearl’s arms. Lynn tethered her mother to reality while simultaneously crushing her with its

grimmest possibilities. What if the baby suffocated while she slept? What if there was an earthquake and she was crushed by the painting hanging on the wall or the wall itself? She felt her heartbeat speed back up. She walked over the mantle and stared at something on it for a minute, then took down the Mary statue and slipped it into her bathrobe pocket, and the weight of the tiny statuette was enough. She made her way upstairs and into bed.

As time went on, Pearl's anxiety settled into a much more ordinary version of itself, at least in terms of what was visible. Sure, she carried a tiny virgin in her purse, but she left the furniture alone. She became fun again, in fact in many ways she was exactly what a child's picture of what an ideal mother might be. She loved to play. When Lynn and Freddy acted out Star Wars in the back yard, Pearl didn't just watch from behind a magazine on the porch swing- she did a full-on Chewbacca impression. She didn't just drive Freddy to guitar lessons, she learned how to play too, so they could do duets. She finger-painted and rode her bike with them. She let them eat dessert first and planned surprise sleep-outs in the treehouse. But she would never let them sleep over a friend's house or do anything else that let them drift too far out of her realm, especially Lynn. She was a bit like a child—energetic and fun-loving, but often afraid. Her emotions were always visible. She cried a lot.

On Lynn's eighteenth birthday, Pearl took her out for breakfast and talked to her about the miscarriages for the first time.

"It was worth it, Linnie. It changed me for the worse, but it was worth it." Lynn looked at her plate.

“How come you never told me?”

“Well, at first you were too young, and then I didn’t want you to be like me. I’ve been afraid every day since I lost little Miriam, and terrified since the day you were born. I just love you so much, Sweetie.”

Lynn realized with a start that Pearl wasn’t afraid because she was irrational. Her fears were entirely within the realm of reason, and Lynn’s existence was what caused them. As close as they were, Lynn had always dismissed her mother as harmlessly crazy, maybe even a little weak. The waitress poured more coffee into each of their cups and put the check in the center of the table, directly between them.

“Why are you telling me now?”

“You’ll be off to college soon; maybe you’ll meet someone. You could get pregnant. I thought you should know what can happen.” Her mother was right that the fear of a pregnancy loss had never crossed Lynn’s mind, but the fear of pregnancy certainly had. She’d been on birth control for six months, having sex with her boyfriend. Maybe they didn’t know each other as well as they liked to think. Pearl finished her pancakes and paid the check, satisfied that—as always—she’d done everything she could to protect her child. Lynn felt very fragile, the shell between her and mortality now noticeably delicate. When they got back to the car, they hugged and cried a little. Then Pearl dropped her daughter off at school and went home to bake her birthday cake.

After that conversation, Lynn unconsciously began making room for her mother’s fear in her own life, hollowing out a spot for it to burrow into when the time came. Pearl’s fear lived in her mind, and in her fingers clenched around her virgin talisman. The space that Lynn’s fear had crawled into was in her blood vessels— in each heartbeat that

battered the inner walls of her arteries. That first E.R. visit after Jamie's birth saved her life, brought her blood pressure down to a number she could survive. She was checked into the hospital and hours became days as the doctors tried various medication combinations and tested her for some kind of root cause, repeatedly coming up empty. Lynn cried all the time. She cried when she was supposed to be sleeping. She cried as she pumped her milk to send home to Jamie. She cried when they checked her blood pressure every half hour. She finally stopped when they got her medication right. Like magic, her eyes lost their puffiness. Her shoulders relaxed. She actually felt calm enough to be tired. And it felt good— you have to be alive to be tired. On the fourth day she was discharged. Her mom rolled her out of her room and through hallways they both had hoped to never see again.

*There are always a lot of us
in hospitals, washed
out by the fluorescence
as we hover next to ourselves
right before or right after
our first or last breaths.*

*I was never going to
breathe, was years away
from any anatomy at all but I
stopped by that day to watch
her chest rise and fall.*

Chapter 6

In the years since Jamie's birth, Lynn had lived in dread of her blood pressure spiking again, of requiring another hospitalization or suffering from a stroke. She ate a low-salt diet, exercised, meditated, and took her medication religiously. She had done everything she could to not miss one second of life with her son, and yet here she was again, sleeping in a bed with a remote control attached to it and learning the names and ages of all her nurses' kids. She focused on their lives instead of her own. Her physical therapist was telling her about her 7-year-old son's dyslexia diagnosis between reps. She helped Lynn out of her wheelchair,

"Yeah, he's going to start getting all of these audiobooks to go along with whatever they're reading in class, so that should help him out. Poor kid. He hates doing something different from everyone else in class, but I'm just so happy to *know*, you know? It's like- now we can move forward."

"Oh, absolutely. Now you'll know how to help him."

Jessica adjusted Lynn's crutches to the correct height and then demonstrated on another pair the correct form.

"How old is your little one, again?"

"Four." Sigh. "I miss him so much."

"Let's do a slow lap around the room here. Have the doctors told you when you can go home?" They moved slowly around the perimeter of the physical therapy room, past a rainbow of different sized yoga balls, Pilates machines, and an old man in a hospital gown holding himself up on parallel bars as a young woman guided him forward, her hands on his hips.

“Yeah maybe the end of the week. I’ll have to come back for these physical therapy appointments.” A little out of breath, she stopped walking to adjust the crutches, which she already hated. “And I am still having some short-term memory problems from the concussion. Not sure if that plays a part in their decision. I’ll probably forget that whole story you just told me about your son. It’s so frustrating.”

“Well, it doesn’t bother me- I’ll just be happy to know I’m not boring you!” She directed Lynn through an exit and down a hallway.

“Yeah, between being stuck in the hospital and the memory loss, I’m a pretty easy audience, Jessica.. Feel free to reuse jokes, too.”

“Hmmm... I can only think of one joke right now, one that my kid told me last night. Why did the Cyclops stop teaching?”

“I don’t know, why?”

“Because he only had one pupil!” They groaned together, then Lynn sighed and tried to stop her eyes from welling up.

“He sounds like a great kid.” They slowly moved down to the mat to stretch out. Jessica smiled at her and squeezed her hand,

“You’ll be back together soon- hang in there.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Something else?”

“Can I tell you something in confidence?”

“Of course!”

“I was pregnant. Before the accident...”

“Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks, but I’m ok. Really, I am. But my husband thinks it’s his fault—that he killed the baby. But it’s really, *really* not.” Lynn locked eyes with Jessica to verify her comprehension. Jessica took a deep breath and nodded slowly.

“Then tell him that.”

“I tried, sort of. But I might have left out some key details when I made my case.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Jessica’s hand on Lynn’s ankle.

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?” Lynn smiled slightly.

“Anita.”

“Anita who?”

“Anita pencil. Can I borrow yours?” They both chuckled as Jessica helped Lynn back into her wheelchair. Then she looked in her eyes intently,

“Tell him.”

It wasn’t the first time someone had given her that marital advice. She hadn’t taken it last time and that knowledge had always tugged a little at her conscience. In the first few years of their marriage, Brad took a position at his data management company required a lot of travel. Lynn continued work at the hotel where she’d been a waitress and chambermaid during college, then—with her shiny new hospitality degree—as a concierge. She had a talent for making others feel comfortable and thrived in the job, but it was sometimes boring and after spending four years minoring in music, she realized she wasn’t quite ready to give it up. She started campaigning for a piano in the hotel lobby—pamphlets from piano shops on her boss’s desk, gorgeous sonatas over

the lobby's aging sound system, yelp reviews of upscale hotels and bars that featured pianists, printed out and taped on office walls. She even said she'd play for free to start.

Eventually, the piano arrived, and after her shift ended, Lynn sat down to play something from her favorite contemporary composer, Unsuk Chin, and something in her brain clicked on. She loved the way playing piano let her be two people at once— her left hand steady and confident while her right hand danced and flirted with every key, never quite as independent from the left as it believed itself to be. It wasn't Chin's weirdest piece by any stretch, but it wasn't quite right for this venue- most contemporary piano music was so full of overt tension, listening to it was like watching an X-Files episode at Carnegie Hall. Lynn was in her concierge clothes— a grey pencil skirt and white button-down top, heels, ponytail. It was her fanciest look, and she would only wear them for work. Brad sometimes swooped in unexpectedly to take her out on a date before she had the chance to run home and change out of the clothes he found so sexy. But now at this gorgeous piano she felt underdressed. She wanted something corseted and velvet or floral and twirly—clothes out of step with time. She dug around her bag for some sheet music and started playing a piece of her own, something she'd composed for her final project in level two composition class.

It was, in the way that only an instrumental piece can truly be, enigmatic. Lynn had called the piece *Conflicted* and it was. Always in danger of becoming something disjointed but never quite crossing that threshold, it was the best thing she'd ever written. Each note meant something to her personally, and although no one else could have known which measures the sexy ones were, her cheeks reddened at playing them in front of a crowd. When the last chord resolved, there was a round of applause and

she looked up to see a circle of guests and employees around her. She smiled and nodded and then flip through her sheet music for something more traditional, maybe a John Williams piece. People loved to recognize a movie soundtrack. It was then that Colin, who had just started working the front desk, sat down next to her on the piano bench, “Move over! We’ll do a duet!”

“A what?” she whispered back, trying to focus on the piece.

“A duet, you know— two musicians playing a song together?”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the concept. You play piano?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

Feeling like she had no choice in front of all those people, Lynn slid over to give him some room and he took over the left side of the keyboard. She played both hands of *Han Solo and the Princess* an octave higher than she had been, and he joined in with an expanded version of the left-handed part. Lynn kept glancing over at him, but he was focused on the music and his hands, which only touched hers twice during the whole song. She couldn’t remember her hands ever having been touched while she was performing before, and it was about as intimate a sensation as she’d ever felt. They finished the song to the applause and hoots of everyone in the lobby and Colin just smiled at Lynn and before sliding off the bench and heading back to the front desk.

She’d agreed to play two 30 minute sets that night, and after she had finished the first, Lynn approached the front desk smiling at Colin but with the narrow eyes of someone who has questions.

“Um, Colin? What was that? You were great!”

“Thanks! Yeah, I played a lot when I was a kid and I didn’t realize I missed it until I heard you over there.”

“I’ve never played beside someone like that, have you?”

“Oh yeah, I used to share a piano lesson with my neighbor and we started playing that way so that we wouldn’t have to take turns. You really caught on quick!”

“Thanks. It was fun. Like *really* fun.” She grinned stupidly for a minute. “Want to do it again?”

“Now?”

“No, well sure, now too if you want. But I meant like let’s work together on some pieces that we can do in tandem and do this more often.”

“Yeah, I’d love to.”

There was no way they could compose or practice out in the hotel lobby and neither of them had a piano in their apartments, so Lynn asked her parents if she and Colin could practice at the piano she had learned on, in the basement of their house. They met up for the first time that week, and kept it up for several months. For months they played and wrote next to dusty childhood Halloween costumes and snowboarding gear. They decided to write a series of short pieces all named for aspects of the hotel experience, figuring maybe that would make them more marketable to hotels with pianists if they ever decided to record. After they wrote *Check-In*, Lynn had the piano tuned. After *Turn Down Service*, she started shaving her legs on the mornings of their practice sessions.

Lynn and Colin never touched except by accident, when their fingers grazed on the keyboard. Lynn couldn’t remember Colin’s cat’s name and had no idea what college

he'd graduated from, but she could have drawn a map of the veins on the back of his hands, and he always commented whenever she had a new nail color on. On the rare occasions that they shared some piece of themselves that wasn't related to music or work, the knowledge carried a weight disproportionate to its size, and Lynn would replay it in her mind with different soundtracks and flashbacks until its intimacy outshone its triviality. She never felt conflicted about her love for Brad or whether she wanted to spend her life with him. She did. She just wanted this, too.

One afternoon, Colin brought subs and a six-pack celebrate a particularly well-received performance in the lobby the day before. They sat across from each other for the first time.

"This is delicious. Where is it from?" Lynn hated the conversation already.

"It's from Zola's. My dad's apartment is right above it, so we eat there a lot." Colin shifted his weight and finished his beer. "Hey what was that song you played the first day we got the piano at work?"

"Oh! That's mine, actually. I wrote it in college."

"I really like it."

"Thanks. Sometimes I think it's too weird."

"Oh, no way. It's great! Would you play it again?"

"Of course!"

They drank some more, played music on their phones and found a conversational groove to fall into, chatting later than they'd meant to. Colin looked at his watch and said,

“Ok, time’s up! Play me that song!” She sat on the right side of the bench out of habit, but Colin took it as an invitation. This time he sat back-to the piano, beside her but facing the opposite direction, shoulders touching. She started to play. Her hands did what they were supposed to, but the rest of her body was too soft, too ready to twist in his direction. She could feel him moving and the vulnerability of the moment eclipsed everything else– the song, the basement, the sound of her mother’s car door in the driveway. When she got to the third movement, he twisted back and moved his hand up to her right cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned into it but kept playing, then when his other hand touched her back she stopped, turned her head and kissed him in one motion. Two seconds into the kiss, the basement door opened and Lynn’s mother stuck her head through the door, “Oh! Oh! Sorry, um–” She closed the door and they heard her feet run back up the stairs to the kitchen.

“Shit. Oh my god. *Shit!*” Lynn frantically shuffled her sheet music into her portfolio while Colin stood up and sighed disappointedly. She instantly became aware of the asymmetry of their situations– he had nothing to lose– and felt an anger that she knew she had no right to.

“You have to leave, Colin. This whole thing is over. You ruined it.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? You kissed me, too, Lynn.” Her half-hearted attempt at indignation deflated. She nodded by way of apology and he started picking up empty bottles and piling up their napkins and paper plates with a bit more force than was required.

“Just leave that stuff– it doesn’t matter. Please just go.” Colin walked out the basement door and –at the end of his two-week’s notice– out of her life altogether.

Upstairs in the kitchen, Lynn's mom advised her to tell Brad what happened and then they could work through their problems together.

"Mom, we don't have any problems. I just screwed up. What good will it do Brad, or our relationship, for him to know. It was one kiss, and—" Lynn stopped short, struck by how casual her mother seemed on how this event would impact her marriage. Pearl never even stopped doing dishes while they talked. There wasn't judgement in her voice, but there wasn't any sympathy. Infidelity must be one of those survivable crises that just weren't that interesting to her mother.

"Well, it's up to you, obviously. I just know there have been times that I've been lied to and wished that I wasn't. Is it because Brad's been travelling so much?"

"No! I don't know. I mean, it's weird how much he seems to like being away from home... no! Really, Mom, there's no good reason. Just please don't tell anybody, ok?" She knew the request was unnecessary. Half of Pearl's life played out inside her own mind, so keeping secrets was second nature to her. Lynn never told anyone else about her almost-affair, and after years of absolute fidelity and repression, she hardly believed it happened herself anymore.

Yet today, when Jessica suggested she tell Brad the truth about the abortion, the memory of that other lie draped itself over this one. She spent the rest of the afternoon parsing out the differences between the two scenarios to the sound of studio audience applause from her roommate's television. There had been nothing to be gained for either of them by telling him about that kiss. It was that same thinking that led her to keeping her appointment secret in the first place. But this time Brad was saddled with

guilt that wasn't really his. Lynn had never viewed honesty as unequivocally virtuous. When she realized she was pregnant a second time, when she decided to end it, she never told Brad because she didn't want to see his disappointment in her, but now protecting herself came at the cost of Brad blaming himself.

Her nurse, Mark, came in to check her blood pressure,

"I have to tell him," she said aloud. Mark looked at her quizzically,

"Sorry, what?"

"Huh? Oh nothing. Thinking out loud. How are you, Mark? How's the puppy?"

"Oh, he's a little cutie. He's driving my wife crazy, though. She says we should have just said 'screw it' and had the baby." During his last shift, Mark had told Lynn how his wife told him that he thought that they should get a puppy before trying to get pregnant for practice.

She chuckled. "Yeah, I get that."

*I visit that piano sometimes.
The unborn are synesthetes. No ears
no eyes no fingertips to categorize
beauty with so we taste
every note like it's
sunshine.*

Chapter 7

That night, Brad put Jamie to bed and then came to visit Lynn at the hospital. She'd already eaten a hospital meal for dinner, but he brought a couple of sundaes for them to eat together. Her hands shook as she picked the walnuts off her whipped cream and listened to Brad talk about his day at work. He'd been busy trying to catch up with all he'd missed those first few days after the accident.

"Everyone has been really understanding, but I hate to slow everyone else down on their projects while they wait on me..."

"Brad, I have to tell you something. I'm not sure how you're going to react. I mean, we talked about it in the abstract, but I got the feeling that you never thought it would really happen and now I just... I don't know what you're going to think, but I can't keep letting you believe that it's your fault because it's not."

"Lynn, I'm trying but I can't find figure out what the subject line of this ramble is."

She looked at him again and paused. She couldn't do it. Maybe eventually, but not now. There wasn't any way to predict what precisely which cans of worms would be opened by a confession like this and it felt too risky.

"Nothing. There isn't one, really." She exhaled hard and took in a fresh breath. "I just want you to know how much I appreciate you and how much I hope you'll stop blaming yourself for all of this. Because I certainly don't blame you."

Brad sat down in bed next to her and wrapped his good arm tightly around her and put his nose to her collarbone. "This has been a bad week."

"Yeah. Do you think Jamie's doing okay with everything?"

"Yeah! He's been in to visit you every day, a sleepover at Uncle Fred's,

one night at your parents', and he'll be staying with mine tomorrow night. He's on a world tour of all the houses of all the people he knows who spoil him. It's like a vacation for him."

"Ha ha ha, thanks a lot."

"Seriously though, Babe. He's going to come through this just fine, and so are you." He picked up the remote and pulled her closer to him where they sat together on the bed. "Want to watch Seinfeld?"

"More than you could possibly know."

It was like their catchphrase; it was used sentimentally, humorously, grimly, when the occasion warranted. It originated the night they'd met. She'd been in a bar for only the second time in her life, a month after her 21st birthday. She was out with her two best friends since eighth grade, trying to figure out what a cool order was. John had a crush on the bartender and Lynn and Annie were trying to help him win his affections with the perfect drink order. It was early spring, and in New England tradition, everyone immediately had shifted from boots and jeans to sandals, t-shirts and sundresses—completely jumping the gun and spending half their time shivering and cursing themselves for leaving their jacket in the car.

Annie and John were still at the bar ordering ridiculous drinks, and Lynn was returning from the bathroom when Brad came in. He ordered his drink and sat down at the bar and before long, Lynn noticed that he was smiling at her. His smile was friendly and not explicitly flirtatious, but she knew better. She smiled back and then rushed over to her friends to giggle and speculate and strategize. They decided to send him a

drink— another of whatever he was drinking. He waved a “thank you” and Lynn picked up her glass of wine and headed over to the seat next to his. She sat down and kicked her feet as they dangled from the bar stool.

“Hi, I’m Brad.”

“Lynn.”

“Nice to meet you. Thanks for the beer! You overestimated how quickly I could drink the first one, though.”

“Well, you should always aspire to do more than you can now.”

“Wise words. Irresponsible and unhealthy in this case, but wise. Do you live around here?”

“Oh yeah, I grew up here. My friends over there and I go to the local college now. We’re straddling the line between co-eds and townies. You?”

“I actually just moved here. I got a job in Boston but I didn’t really want to live in the city, so this seemed like a reasonable distance. Plus I love the beach.”

“Who doesn’t love the beach? It would be un-American to not like the beach.”

“I’m supposed to meet a friend but he’s pretty late now. Would you like to join me for a plate of nachos?”

“More than you could possibly know.”

Lynn actually felt a little better just for having gone through the process of deciding to be honest, even if she had been unable to follow through in the end. And hiding the truth from her husband would actually help her keep it from Pearl, who must never find out. Lynn added it to the collection of truths that she’d withheld from her mother over the years— sometimes for Pearl’s sake, and sometimes for her own. Lynn

typically lied to spare them both from her mother's fear, and this time it would have been her anger, but the ritual would be the same.

As a little girl, Lynn instinctively knew to hold her mom's hand tightly and never balance on the curb of the sidewalk like a tightrope on a busy street. She didn't chase balls into traffic or ask for a trampoline. She was cautious for her mother's sake, but also for her own. But she did have one outlet. Every Sunday, Freddy had soccer practice, and after dropping him off, Lynn and her father walked to the park where she would immediately scramble up to the top of the jungle gym and stay there until her dad came over and lifted her down. The top of the play structure was rounded, with the bars intertwined closer together than at the sides, so it was harder for kids to fall through them. Lynn liked to lay on her back at the top, arms and legs spread out down the sides, like a starfish draped over a rock in a tide pool. The air beneath her body, between the woven pressure of the bars on her back, reminded her of feeling weightless on top of the waves at the beach. Then Lynn's father would play with her for a few minutes on the swings or slide, always ending the outing with the reminder- "Don't tell your mother how high up you were." And Lynn never did.

*I don't think much about
the things I've missed but
I imagine that it's nice
to have someone
to keep secrets from.*

Chapter 8

On the morning of Lynn's return from the hospital after her accident, Pearl slept late. Sunlight was already filling the guest room she and Will had been staying in for the past week when she opened her eyes. She had been a morning person in her youth, luxuriating in the free time she stole when she woke up before her family— both as a child and as a young mother. These days, she was slower to get out of bed, and Jamie was a lot of work. She checked the clock and then the monitor that her son-in-law was still reluctant to take out of Jamie's room and saw that her grandson was already up. Will must be with him. She pried herself out of the bed and headed to the kitchen in search of coffee.

“Forget all that ‘bunny ear’ bologna. You're not a baby.” Will and Jamie sat on the floor, each holding a tiny sneaker in their laps. “Tie the regular knot first. There you go. Now make two loops around your fingers in opposite directions, like this. Are you watching? This part is tough. You pinch them each with the opposite hands and.... Pull through. There. Faster, right? You master that and you'll be all set, Buddy.”

Jamie made Will show him three more times, then got back to work. Sometimes he would look like he was getting closer and then somehow it would all fall apart again. Pearl smiled and wished a “good morning” to the two of them. Will wasn't much of a housekeeper, couldn't remember bedtime or snack-time or where Lynn kept the Pull-Ups, but he never got bored with his grandson.

She was still amazed to see them so attached to one another now, because it had taken them such a long time to really become acquainted. Will had been sick with a persistent and contagious infection when Jamie was first born, and hadn't been able to

see him in person in the early weeks, or hold him for months. As a result, he wasn't quite comfortable with the little guy in the beginning. On the way to his first doctor-approved touching visit, he nervously reminded Pearl that he hadn't held a baby in a generation. Had the rules changed?

Pearl knew that there were people who thought an old southern hick like Will maybe had problems with Jamie's father, the baby's dark skin and kinky hair. She wasn't sure if Will knew that people made this assumption about him. He never brought it up with her. He did once mention that he worried about the way the world would treat his grandson, but they had all worried about that. It was disorienting to have the cushion of whiteness pulled out from under your family all at once. Actually, Will had been far better prepared for the change than Pearl was. A few years back, his partner on electrical jobs was black, and their reception in homes in even the bluest of blue-state neighborhood changed when Carl and Will knocked on the door instead of Will and one of his white co-workers. Each night at dinner, Will would talk about how they all seemed to find reasons to stay in the house while work was being done, moved medication and jewelry out of sight, stood protectively next to pretty daughters. This was soon after Brad and Lynn had started dating, and Pearl wasn't sure if the stories were meant to illustrate his righteous indignation or to serve as some kind of warning to her what she might be up against if she stayed with Brad.

Will grew up around a different kind of racism— everyone he knew growing up was poor, and although they were grounded in the same soil, the two versions of prejudice took root in different ways. Growing up, his white neighbors put down his black neighbors to ensure that there was always someone was lower on the food chain

than them. They weren't afraid, they were pragmatic, or at least believed themselves to be. It was different up here, he'd told Pearl— better in some ways, but not all. These suburban white northerners had mostly only ever seen black people on television, where they were all gangbangers or maids. Without experiences with actual human black people to counteract any of it, they were afraid at a more primal level than Will's confederate flag waving neighbors had ever been, although those same southern neighbors were perfectly happy to exploit that fear to keep black people in their "place." White northerners' fear was the carefully constructed result of a southern campaign to ensure that the civil war hadn't been entirely in vain.

No, Will had never been bothered by Brad's race, and although Pearl knew this to be true, she had been forced to examine that pretty explicitly a few years ago, when Will refused to attend little Jamie's christening. What would Brad's black parents think when her southern-drawling husband skipped out on their special day?

"I'm sorry, Pearl, but I just can't quite stomach it. The idea that that beautiful little baby is so full of sin that we need some guy in a dress to remove it? Do *you* think Jamie is unclean?"

"Of course not! It's just a tradition, Will. What's the big deal?"

The fact was, Pearl hadn't really thought about the purpose of the ritual at all until then, and as she'd stood there in the church, listening to that priest talk about exorcising evil from little Jamie, she felt her fingers ball into the same fists she'd seen Will's make earlier. Had she been wrong about the harmlessness of this event? She reached into her purse and fidgeted with Mary. What *would* Mary think of all this?

“Deliver this creature from the bondage of the enemy and join to him a lifetime a radiant angel, who will rescue him from every snare of the enemy, from evil encounters, from the demon of impurity.” The priest spoke in a kind of rhythmic monotone, standing in front of Brad and Lynn, who was holding Jamie and looking like she was trying to hold in a laugh.

“Drive out from him every evil and unclean spirit which may be hiding and lurking in his heart!” Lynn made eye contact with her mother and looked away quickly, lest their smirks burst into something more disruptive. As she watched the crying baby stripped down and dipped into what looked like a birdbath, Pearl wondered if she would have to tell Will that she thought he was right. But then the actual christening finally ended and she was surprised to discover that she kind of liked the rest of it— the little white outfit, the cake and balloons and handed-down heirloom medallions of St. Peter and engraved silver pocket-watches. It was nice. It didn’t hurt anyone.

Will was back at the house when everyone returned for the reception. Jim and Susan came in, beaming. Susan’s 84-year-old mother was there, sitting on the couch and chatting with Pearl’s last surviving uncle. Alicia brought her new boyfriend, a shy doctor who didn’t know what to do with himself or the bouquet of roses that he’d brought until Jim’s sisters cornered him in the kitchen with a laundry list of symptoms for him to diagnose. And little Jamie was passed from back and forth between the generations, even held by a sweet little second cousin in the frilliest dress Pearl had ever seen. Lynn’s hand nervously hovered under the arm of the little girl who held her cousin like she’d done it every day of her four years. It was just a party. Even Will eventually settled down and had a nice chat with Jim, who was an electrical engineer. The two men

always found some common ground in shop-talk, despite the fact that Jim's experiences with electricity were of the academic variety.

On the ride home, Pearl told him that now she kind of viewed the christening as kind of like packing an umbrella for a sunny day-trip— it couldn't hurt and, well, you never know. Will just scowled,

"I'm not surprised."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You carry that Mary statue around in her your purse just like my mother and her rosary beads."

"Oh, it's not the same thing at all. I don't believe babies are evil or anything like that. It's the opposite, actually. I like Mary because she knew how much babies are worth, even when they seem to come out of nowhere. Even when you lose them."

Will looked at her out of the corner of his eye and let out the extra air he'd held in his lungs all day. It had been a long time since he thought of his wife as the pretty pregnant waitress that he'd married in the nick of time, the wife he'd watched sacrifice her sanity in pursuit of their daughter. But she was still in there.

"Oh Pearl, I know that. I'm sorry."

Pearl reflected that it hadn't bothered Lynn that he skipped it. She had done it to please her husband, hadn't taken it personally when the priest, who looked like he'd never been a baby himself, took it upon himself to remove all traces of evil from hers. Brad and his family had been so excited to show off little Jamie at their church that they barely registered Will's absence. He'd lied about a work emergency and his presence at the party had been enough.

And he certainly wasn't absent now, giving Jamie his three-hundredth lesson on shoe-tying. Pearl refilled Will's coffee before pouring one for herself and smiled at him. She thought about all the misgivings he'd had about all the pregnancies in this family. With each birth they'd fallen away so easily and he could just enjoy his children, and now grandchild. He played and taught and snuggled while Pearl drowned in anxiety to the point where she sometimes had trouble accessing her love, so closely linked were the two feelings. A marriage of length is anything but consistent. The ease with which Will loved was something that today Pearl loved and admired in her husband but had just as often been the source of resentment and disconnect. She finished her coffee and began picking up the kitchen in preparation for Lynn's arrival home.

I suppose I heard my brother's voice.

We were eye-level for a time.

I don't really remember it.

But I remember when he was born

how he tickled the world,

and everything changed

except him—

so good that when they sprinkled him

the water was made holy on his skin.

Chapter 9

Lynn came home to balloons (leftovers from a couple of birthdays ago, they said “Happy 3rd Birthday” and were covered in Elmo faces) and a burrito from her favorite takeout restaurant. She was exhausted from the drive, but she put on a good show—admired the décor, exclaimed dramatically that Jamie looked three inches taller than he’d appeared at his last visit, and even took a few bites of her burrito. But first she leaned on one crutch and hugged her mom for a long time,

“Thank you, Mom. We would never have made it through all of this without you. Wow—the house looks great!” She let go and looked at her Dad standing beside the table. “Thank you, too, Dad. Jamie says you’ve been taking excellent care of him and hardly let him eat any cookies at breakfast.”

“You little tattle tale!” Will poked his grandson in the belly and he giggled.

“I told her you *didn’t* give me too many, just two!” Everyone laughed and Lynn said again,

“The house looks great, Mom! Thank you so much.” Pearl tilted her head slightly at the repetition and then Lynn shook her own head a little, “Oops, I already said that, didn’t I?”

“I cleaned too, Mommy! Look at the window!” Jamie proudly stood in front of a window that had a little step stool in front of it, rag and Windex placed on its bottom step. It was green with his name painted on it in white.

“Oh— that step stool is so cute! Where did it come from?”

Her parents dove into a long conversation about their trip to the flea market and the guy there who would paint your name or whatever you wanted on anything you bought there. She nodded along as Brad talked about what a clever idea that was, but she was too tired to concentrate on the details. She smiled and tried to quietly exit the conversation and the room. Everyone stopped and looked at her.

“Where are you going, Sweetie? Do you need a hand?”

“No I don’t think so, I just want to head over to the couch and lie down. Do you guys mind?”

“Oh no! Not at all! In fact, your dad and I will get out of your hair. We’re going to go home tonight and check in on the birds and water the plants, all that stuff.” While Pearl talked, she swooped around the room, grabbing her sweater and Will’s reading glasses—tossing items into a little tote bag. “Your dad has an appointment, but I’ll be back tomorrow, or just give us a call if you need us sooner!” The chatter continued but quieted as Pearl headed to the guestroom to pack up the rest of her things. She talked a lot when she was nervous.

Lynn was nervous too. She hadn’t realized how little resilience she would have to regular life once she got home from the hospital. Being with people, with Jamie, walking around. It was all really hard and really tiring.

As Lynn sat on the couch, semi-reclined, Jamie carried toys in and out of the living room. He reintroduced her to all of his stuffed animals from his bed, explaining that they’d all missed her but he had told them she’d be home soon.

“But it was a long time, Mama.” He stood up from his toys and rubbed her forearm for a few seconds. She smiled and put her hand on his face and then he

jumped back down into his game. Brad came in and set up the folding table and burrito in front of Lynn, encouraging her to eat as she'd barely touched her lunch in the hospital. She had a few more bites and then leaned back. By the time her parents left, Lynn was already asleep.

She was exhausted and forgetful, but Lynn's body was healing. After a day or two, they had all created a survivable rhythm that managed to keep the basic function of the family running, while letting some of the smaller details go. Lynn read to Jamie, or let him retell his books to her if reading gave her a headache, she went to physical therapy while he was at school, and then he watched extra television while she napped in the afternoon. Meanwhile her parents were there at least part of every day to make meals and pick up the piles of toys and clothes and other random items that Jamie managed to create everywhere he went. Either Will or Pearl was usually in the guest room overnight.

Pearl was a worker. She never seemed to stop cleaning while Lynn mostly sat or slept on the couch, leg elevated. When the two did talk, Pearl found herself perplexed by how little emotional energy Lynn was giving to the lost pregnancy. Lynn tended to be a little stoic, compared to her mom at least, but something was off. She sat down on the couch next to her daughter after loading the dishwasher for what felt like the fifth time that day and put her hand on her good ankle.

"How are you holding up, Linnie?" Lynn inched her body up a little to be closer to eye-level with her mother.

“I’m ok, Mom. My headache is a little worse today. I probably shouldn’t have watched that cartoon with Jamie.”

“I meant emotionally, though. You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’m ok, really. I feel lucky, to be honest. I’m so happy to be alive. But yeah, I feel guilty, too.”

“Guilty?”

“Like, I’m not being a very good mom to Jamie right now, which is what I was worried about in the first place. Plus, you and Dad are doing so much. I feel really useless.”

“That’s ridiculous, we’re fine. What do you mean that’s what you were worried about in the first place?”

Lynn’s froze for a second, Pearl watched her daughter’s face change as Lynn realized she’d revealed something she didn’t want to and then tried her best to cover it up.

I just mean after the accident. When I was in the hospital, I felt bad for being away from him, but now that I’m home I still can’t do anything for him.”

“Huh. Ok.” Pearl couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was, but something about that answer didn’t line up. “We haven’t really talked about the baby at all. You know, I had little memorials for the babies I lost. It might help you find closure.”

“Thanks, but I don’t really think that would help me. I just– I just don’t want to think about it more than I have to.”

“Well, get some rest, Lynn. I’m going to do a load of laundry.” She headed upstairs to grab the laundry basket from Jamie’s bedroom, puzzled. What could Lynn

possibly have to lie about regarding the accident? Pearl's thoughts were interrupted when Jamie burst into his bedroom.

"Gramps and me built a rocket! Want to see?"

"Sure, Sweetie, I'll be right out. Let your mama sleep, ok?"

Pearl announced that she was going to stay home that day for a couple of nights. She needed a break, she said, so she would send Will in the morning. Lynn felt bad leaning so hard on them, but what choice did they have? Brad's parents had flown out right after the accident, but were back home now and lived too far to come back and forth to help out now. His sister was in the middle of a recertification program that at least a four hour drive away, and Fred and Tim worked all the time. The next morning, Brad and Lynn were awake but both still in bed, Brad already online preparing for work that day.

"Your mom e-mailed me a link to some anti-abortion article. At two in the morning."

Brad's eyes were still on the screen, his laptop placed on the bedspread over his crossed legs.

"Huh. What's this one say?" Lynn's eye twitched. Pearl was a notorious e-mail forwarder— conspiracy theories and alien abductions were her favorite, but she hadn't sent them a political e-mail in a while. Her dinner table conservative talking points had sort of faded after Trump's election. She said he was just too hard to defend.

“It’s a link to an article– ‘Are Abortionists Implementing Genocide on Black Babies?’ It says abortion is only socially accepted because it’s “mostly” black babies being killed. Why is she sending me all this stuff?”

“I don’t know, she’s crazy.”

“This seems crazier than usual.”

“Yeah. Maybe the stress of the accident? I’ll tell her to stop.”

“Do you think that’s true? About that the black babies?”

“That it’s a *genocide*?”

“No, no. That most aborted babies are black. I never thought about that before.”

“I have no idea.” Lynn wanted to change the subject but found subjects of any kind pretty difficult to conjure up lately, like she was grasping at empty space. Brad closed his laptop.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to take a shower.” He got up and started slipping off his pajamas and put on his bathrobe. Lynn admired his lean muscles and sighed. He was so strong and she was so broken.

“Don’t pay attention to my mom’s emails, Brad. What’s the point?”

“Yeah, I guess. I just wonder where this is all coming from. Usually it’s just UFOs and stuff. I just hope she’s ok.” He headed into their bathroom and closed the door.

Chapter 10

Brad was already gone when Lynn got out of bed. She went into the kitchen and turned on the burner. She reached into a box of chamomile for a tea-bag but her hand shook violently in the small box and she accidentally dropped it on the floor. She left it there and grabbed her mug off the counter and put in the bag. Looking back at the stovetop, she saw the teapot on the back-left burner, and the front right burner glowing pointlessly red. She moved the pot onto the hot burner and leaned on the counter for a minute, breathing as quietly as she could. She wondered how her mother had figured out that she hadn't miscarried after all, wondered what direction Pearl would move this conversation next. She shuddered at her mother's implication that she'd aborted the baby because it was black, then sat with the implication for a minute. Who was the bigger hypocrite, her mother or herself? They were both picking and choosing which lives mattered.

Lynn waited until the water sounded hot and then poured it into her mug. She walked over the table, leaving her forgotten honey on the counter. She'd been obsessing about that e-mail from her mother all morning. Brad didn't deserve to be put here, in this confusing position, not that people typically get put where they deserve. Lynn considered the statistical breakdown of Brad's worst moments— at least half had to have been created by her. She wondered if that was the price you paid to get married. You tie yourself to someone forever, what do you expect? And then there was all the latent pain she'd created for him, the secrets she'd kept. This accident, her inability to give him more children, and now this— he'd had more than his share of marital strain. He didn't even know about Colin, that he and Lynn had kissed in her parents' basement all

those years ago, or that he'd re-entered her life only six weeks before the accident, all these years later.

Colin had left his job at their hotel pretty quickly after the basement-kissing incident, and Lynn was shocked to realize she missed him, and not just at the piano. In the years since, depending on what rung of the marital wheel she was on with Brad, she'd find herself replaying those moments before they'd kissed, imagining what might have happened next if they hadn't been interrupted. Sometimes she thought about it when Brad was away. He was away about half the time until Jamie was born. Later, when their lives took a detour into decidedly unsexy territory— through new parenthood and a c-section scar buried under the squishy fold of her belly— she used the memory as foreplay's foreplay. Part of the memory's power was its intoxicating blend of guilt and desire, and relative youth.

But part of it was Colin, himself. His relationship with the piano had been so light and unpretentious, with an utter lack of the prerequisite brooding that followed most musicians around. He laughed when their playing impressed themselves or each other, and soon Lynn was laughing too. And he and Lynn were smart in the same ways—not knowledgeable or analytical like Brad, but quick with an insight or interpretation to the situation in front of them. Their conversations bounced back and forth with ease without backstory or context. He was tall. Lynn had only ever been with short guys, including Brad. At only 5 feet tall, she preferred to dance with a man who could look in her eyes and not the top of her head, but Colin's 6'3" height worked great on a piano bench, and she envied his easy reach between keys for his enormous hands. Even now, she had trouble not flushing when she pictured the disparity of proportion between his elegant

fingers and her small arm when he ran his hand from her elbow to her neck before that kiss.

So when she had seen his friend request on Facebook seven weeks ago, she'd smiled back at the grin in his profile picture involuntarily before accepting. Brad had extended his business trip to Florida for a couple of extra days in order to go golfing with some friends from college. It had already been two weeks and the exhausted rage she felt upon learning that she would continue to be a single parent for another two nights had sapped any remaining consideration for her husband. She opened Skype on her laptop to use as a mirror and fixed her hair and put on some lip gloss. She flirted with her reflection for a moment and then opened Facebook again, opening her photos and skimming through the years of her life she imagined him catching himself up on. What would he think? He would think that motherhood was the entirety of her persona, for one thing. Ugh, she looked like an absolute troll in that Christmas morning picture. Why had she even posted it?

It suddenly occurred to her that he might be married now, too. She stopped the retrospective on her own page and clicked on his. Single, it looked like. And he was performing again— a regular Thursday gig at a bar in the next town over, tonight.

Lynn had been settling in for a night alone. Jamie was at her brother's house overnight and she wanted to listen to the new Beyoncé without having to mute the words she didn't want him repeating. She had planned to blow off laundry, walk the dog at whatever speed was natural to her instead of constantly adjusting to Jamie's gait, then come home and drink screwdrivers, paint her nails, and maybe binge watch some

old *Survivor* episodes. But there was no reason why she couldn't go out. She decided to just take herself out on a date.

She took a shower, hotter than was good for her, and shaved her legs. She wore jeans and tiny heels and a black beaded t-shirt that was believably casual but pretty. It was still early, so she still had time to walk the dog. She put on her sneakers before leaving her house but was still accused by three different neighbors of "looking nice" or "being all dolled up." Oh well. She came back home and painted her nails purple. Then she put on her wedding ring and stared at it for a minute. It was so pretty. She sat down at the table and sent a text to Brad, *Miss you.*

It was true. She did miss him, as angry as she was about him having extended his trip, life at home was homier when Brad was there. She waited for his response for a minute, but it never came. She called Jamie and Freddy's house to say goodnight.

"Having fun, Sweetie?"

"YES! Uncle Fred and Uncle Tim have *three* different kinds of ice cream and sprinkles. We're having a movie night."

"That sounds great, Buddy. What are you going to watch?"

"*Lady and the Tramp.*"

"I like that one. Especially the little puppies."

"Me too! And the beaver."

"Ok Jamie, I love you and I hope you have so much fun tonight. And be good for your uncles, ok? Tell Freddy to send me a picture of you, too. I miss you!"

"Love you! Bye!"

Lynn ended the call and ten seconds later a picture of a little ice-cream-covered Jamie appeared on her screen. He was in his airplane pajamas, which were really too small but he insisted on packing because Uncle Tim also loved air planes so he would really like them. She looked down at her wedding ring. It really was so pretty. She scanned up her ring finger to her sparkly purple nail and felt a little queasy. She thought that maybe she should stay in after all.

She walked into their home office and turned on the computer that Brad used, the one with all of their wedding pictures saved on it. Twitter loaded on the left side of the screen and then text message and e-mail alerts all started popping up as the operating system came to life. One e-mail alert in particular caught Lynn's eye. It was a message from a Marriot hotel in Carson City, Nevada, thanking Brad for checking in earlier that day. *Nevada?* Lynn opened the e-mail and saw that Brad was booked for two nights there, that he'd left Florida that morning. She scanned through the e-mails above for an explanation, but nothing else looked out of the ordinary.

Brad paid his own credit card bill, but for the most part, Lynn had taken over paying their bills and filing their taxes. Brad really didn't have time to do it, and she felt like it kept her mind sharp. She would have known if Brad had some secret gambling problem. So, why would he go to Nevada without telling her? A google search of Carson City didn't bring any clarity. Anything that Brad would want to do out there— go mountain biking, buy legal weed— were things that he could have done with Lynn, or at least could have told her about. The only thing that made sense to her was an affair, and she remembered that Brad's college girlfriend lived in California. Of course, he had a whole

life that didn't include her, travelling the world and making connections with people she never even heard of. It could be anyone.

She pulled off her sneakers and socks and flapped her t-shirt to cool herself off and started pacing. She pulled off her ring and threw it across the room, knocking a little play-doh duck that Jamie had made that day right off the desk. Then she took a big breath and walked back into the kitchen. Even amidst this rage, it occurred to her that she should check her blood pressure, that it was probably high. Her hands were shaking as she clasped the little buckle on her strappy heels. She picked up her blood pressure monitor, examining the worn Velcro on the cuff that she obsessively adjusted whenever she didn't like the reading, then she threw it across the room too. She put on her darkest lipstick, grabbed her purse and headed out the door.

Why do the living
draw such
specific and solid
lines between what is
forgivable and what is not?
And how did they
come to be in the business
of forgiving in the first place?

Chapter 11

On Monday, it was Will's turn to help out at the house. Brad was packing up his lunch when his father-in-law knocked on the door. He'd been sneaking looks at his wife, whose shoulders were slumped forward as she stared down into her coffee. He shook Will's hand and placed a grateful hand on his shoulder.

"How's she doing?"

"I can't quite put my finger on it, Will, but something isn't right."

The two of them looked over at Lynn. Aside from her cast and bruises, she looked like she always did in the morning— ponytail coming loose on top of her head, fuzzy blue bathrobe covered in clouds over the ever-present yoga pants, the Miss Piggy slippers her best friend had sent her last birthday as part of some inside joke. Frankly, she looked ridiculous, and Will grinned at his daughter kind of unconcernedly.

"She looks OK to me, Brad. I think you've been under too much stress."

Brad looked again. He usually found Lynn's disheveled morning look appealing, the intimacy of seeing her at her most comfortable, but today she just looked kind of melted. She looked both too young and too old, and he suddenly hated those slippers, like they were the reason his wife seemed to be sliding further away from herself and from him, too.

"Are you getting dressed today, or what?" Brad spoke sharply and startled Lynn, who looked like she would have felt hurt if she'd had the energy.

"Yes?" She seemed to be asking permission again, which Brad continued to find annoying.

"Is that a question or an answer, Lynn?"

“Um, yes. I’ll get dressed. I want to go sit outside with my dad and Jamie in the backyard, anyway.” That was encouraging. Brad deliberately softened his tone.

“Ok, Babe. Stay in the shade, ok? And don’t exert yourself.”

“Yep.”

Jamie came running in and asked if he could help Brad with his shoes.

“Yeah, Buddy! That would be great. Go grab the brown ones out of the closet.”

He checked his watch and saw he had ten minutes. That should be enough time to let his son practice tying for a little bit, so he sat down across from Lynn. Jamie ran in with the shoes and Brad put them on. Will came in from the living room to instruct, crouching down next to Jamie, and Lynn even perked up a bit. Jamie’s little fingers were dirty already, somehow, and Brad made him wipe them on a napkin before beginning his task.

“Make an X. Sneak one string under the x. Pull tight.” He stopped and took a little breath, then glanced up at Will.

“You got it, Kiddo. What’s next?”

“This is the hard part, Grampy. Two loops and cross them again.” It was hard. His little fingers struggled to maintain two separate loops and then manipulate them further. But he did it.

“Sneak the loop under the X and pull. I did it! Dad, look! I tied your shoes! Grampy, look!” Lynn smiled as she watched all three generations clap and cheer at Brad’s left shoe. Jamie ran over and hugged Lynn around the waist and beamed up.

“I’m so smart, Mama! I learned it!” Lynn’s eyes welled up.

“You are so smart, Baby. Are you pickle of yourse-” Lynn stopped when she heard her own mistake. Jamie laughed.

“Pickle?” Brad spoke sharply again.

“Proud! Sorry. Proud. Are you proud, Baby? I’m so proud of you.”

“Yes! Yes! I’m proud AND I’m a pickle! See? I’m in green and in a jar. I smell like pee! I’m a pickle and I smell like pee!”

“No potty-talk, Jamie.” Brad’s voice still had an edge to it, but he smiled a little. He thought pickles smelled like pee, too. Will spoke up,

“Well anyway, the Jamester here did something amazing, and I think we need pancakes to celebrate. Y’all have any Bisquick?”

Will and Jamie got to work on making a mess of the kitchen while Brad tied his other shoe and stood up.

“I’ll see you *all* tonight?” He made eye-contact with his father-in-law.

“Sure thing, Brad. I’ll be here.”

Brad got into his rental car and began his journey to the train station. By the time he was at the end of their road, all thoughts of Lynn and her health had been driven out of his mind. Driving to and from his train stop was not the mundane task that it had once been. He focused on keeping his breathing even as he drove the long way, his heart pounding as he crawled past a horse farm and endless antique shops, avoiding the short strip of highway that he usually took. It wasn’t because he wanted to avoid the place where they had crashed; he just didn’t trust his reflexes enough to drive at high speeds anymore. His once smooth turns were now jerky and reactionary. Everything

that Lynn admired about his driving (he hoped not everything she admired about him generally) depended upon his fearlessness on the road, although she would have never thought to describe it that way. Brad had reacted calmly on the road and off because he had never developed the kind of fight-or-flight instincts that motivated his wife. It was probably why no one had asked him how he felt about driving after the accident. In fact, he hadn't thought to be concerned himself until he sat behind the wheel in parking lot of the car rental place the previous week and found himself involuntarily afraid for the first time that he could remember.

Sitting in the parked rental car and shaking, Brad recognized the adrenaline rush right away. He looked at the key the rental agent had just handed him and realized that his unsteady hands would not permit him to put it into the ignition. Instead, he took out his phone and opened up his secret photo app, which was disguised to look like an ordinary calculator icon. It had been introduced to him by a coworker with boundary issues who needed a place to hide the many pictures of his own penis he apparently needed on hand at all times. Brad had never once been compelled to record evidence of his genitalia, but he'd found a use for the app nonetheless.

He tapped the icon and rows and rows of photos loaded. There were about a dozen blindingly white photos taken by the go-pro camera he'd strapped to his head while glade skiing a couple of years back. Then there were a couple of rows of vertically-striped thumbnails composed of blue and green landscapes behind the sheer grey cliffs that he'd BASE jumped off of in California. There were quite a few videos of him bungee-jumping in Nevada a couple of months ago. He'd told Lynn that he had

been golfing with his college buddies. Brad had never been on a golf course in his life, although he'd hang-glided over them on more than one occasion.

Brad had been chasing fear his entire life. The only thing he was every really afraid of was the fact that he wasn't. What did it say about him? Weren't people who didn't feel fear psychopaths? This was something Brad worried about. He cared about people, tried to have a positive impact on those around him. But without that most vital instinct to protect himself, he worried that something about him was fundamentally inhuman. His humanity had emerged now with a vengeance. At thirteen, Brad was riding his friend's dirt bike over narrow railway bridges. Now he was thirty-five, he was crying with relief over having survived the twelve-minute drive to the train station. He had enough time to calm down and make himself presentable in a convenience store bathroom next to the train station before catching his train to work.

All those times my
father stood at the
edge of living and
peered over it while
I stayed perched on
its rocky face and we
never met. We never
even saw each other.

Chapter 12

After Brad left, Lynn tried to ignore her dizziness as she ate pancakes with her father and son. Then she struggled into a clean shirt, not bothering to try to change out of her pajama pants. She grabbed her crutch and slid into some flip flops before following Jamie and her father out into the backyard. Her dad had set up a sturdy deck chair for her in the shade and she sunk into it as slowly as she could. Jamie was racing back and forth between their swing-set and a rope ladder that Will had tied from the branch that reached over the back fence into their yard. He ran up to his mom, brandishing a pool noodle, and called out an unfamiliar battle cry in her direction. He must be watching some new cartoons with his grandparents that she didn't know about. She shouted back

“Oh no!” which satisfied him, and he laughed before hitting the tree trunk with his make-shift sword and racing off again. He was amazing— kind and strong and smart and growing all the time. She tilted her own head back now and closed her eyes for a minute; even that slight strain on her neck created a twinge down her back. Her feet were the only parts of her body that were in the sun, and she flexed her toes, warm and whole, relaxed in a way that the rest of her battered body just couldn't. She had her bottle of muscle relaxers in her sweatshirt and she took one now. She could hear her son laughing. She wanted to be the one that he counted on again, to slice some cucumber for him and hug him with both arms. The mundanity of parenthood might be the worst of it—worse than the more classic complaints about sleepless nights and diapers— but being unable to perform those tasks was worse. Slowly, Lynn felt herself soften and her pain ease as the medication did its subtle work.

She texted a picture of the scene to Brad– Will pushing Jamie on the swings -----

-Having fun in the yard! Then she pulled her feet into the shade to avoid a sunburn and closed her eyes again. Soon she was asleep.

What felt like a minute later, a text message from her mom woke her up, and Lynn tried to read it as she forced herself awake.

-How are you feeling?

-Ok, tired. Napping in the yard.

-How's Dad?

-Good. He and Jamie must have gone inside.

-I was just talking to Fred. He says you had an appointment the day of the accident. What was that for?

Lynn read that text again. She started and stopped answering a few times, figured her mom was watching the “...” and knew she was floundering.

-It was just a regular checkup.

-And they didn't realize you were pregnant? No bloodwork?

More dots.

-Well it was for my blood pressure medication, so they didn't check anything else.

-Oh ok. Makes sense. Talk later.

-Ok love you.

-Love you too.

Lynn's face grew hot. She made her way inside to check in with Jamie and Will. She found them in the living room, snuggled up on the couch, surrounded by empty fruit

snacks wrappers and books. They were both asleep. She remembered a time that she woke up like that with her dad on their couch.

She was about five, and it was their first night home after a vacation to Disney World. Most of the trip had been great, she remembered. They had breakfast with Mickey and Minnie, watched 3-D movies, and stayed up for the fireworks almost every night. Freddy, in particular, really liked the fireworks.

That last day in Disney, her family left their hotel and headed to Epcot, where they stopped in “Morocco” to listen to some live music and watch a belly dancer. Lynn was spinning in front of the stage, dancing with a couple of other little kids wearing Donald Duck baseball hats just like hers. A man in a blue polo shirt and a Disney-branded clipboard walked up to Lynn and told her that she’d been chosen to appear on the Mickey Mouse Club show. Lynn looked around for her family.

“Lynn Robbins? Your parents are Pearl and Will, right? You’re staying at the All Star Sports hotel?”

“Yeah?”

“Your parents have already signed all the necessary forms and will meet us at the stage area. Here are your official Mickey ears. I can hold your hat for you.” Lynn looked around again but didn’t see her parents. She hesitated for a second and then took the Mickey ears and followed the man behind the stage and out of view of her parents.

Years later, Freddy told Lynn her that he remembered that he’d been watching her skirt fly out around her, her little light-up sneakers flashing with the music, when he suddenly realized Lynn wasn’t wearing light-up shoes that day. He’d even helped her

buckle her sandals that morning. His mother realized it at the same moment and made eye contact with Fred, then she grabbed Will's arm, her voice tight and quiet and terrified, as if someone hearing her ask the question would make it real.

"Where the hell is Lynn?" Will scanned the crowd. Freddy looked around too. She wasn't there. The three of them started yelling her name. Disney employees appeared out of nowhere with maps and walkie-talkies. They started an extremely organized search, getting a detailed description of Lynn and her outfit and then fanned out, leaving one worker and his walkie-talkie with the family as they waited on a bench near the stage in case Lynn was still nearby. Pearl paced frantically back and forth in front of the stage, talking to herself and shrugging Will and Freddy off of her if they put a hand on her shoulder or tried to get her to slow down. Fred was too scared to talk. Will couldn't stop talking. He kept asking the worker questions about the search process, asking if this happened a lot, if there was anything else he could do, if they should be announcing her name on the intercom.

This went on for over an hour, and as long as the minutes were for her family, Lynn's were longer. She followed the man out of earshot of her parents. He bought her an ice cream and then said that she had to take pictures of her for her costume fitting. She followed him into the handicapped stall in a men's room and let him take pictures of her in her underwear. He asked her to take those off but she said she didn't want to and he didn't push it. At this point Lynn was pretty sure that he had lied about the Mickey Mouse Club and that he was bad, but she didn't know how to get out of the situation now that she was in it. She felt guilty and embarrassed for being so stupid, but it never occurred to her to run away or yell. The man gave her a new "costume," a Cinderella

dress from a gift shop and then had her put the Mickey ears back on. She came out of the bathroom looking almost nothing like the description that her parents had given. He told her that they had time for some rides before her audition and brought her onto the Small World ride, where Lynn finally snapped out of her stupor and started screaming and crying, drawing the attention and scrutiny of the workers.

When she reunited with her family, Fred and Will hugged her and ran their hands over her arms and legs, as if that's where the trauma of her experience would have hit. Pearl grabbed her daughter's hands and sat on the ground cross-legged and pulled Lynn into her lap like a baby and they just sat there together crying until thirst and exhaustion forced them to move on. They gave statements, had a free fancy lunch, and flew home a day early. No one talked about what had happened. No one talked much at all, and when they got home that night, everyone collapsed into their beds.

Lynn woke up at around two the next morning absolutely *starving*. She put on a sweatshirt over her pajamas and walked quietly downstairs to pour herself a bowl of cereal, and was surprised to find her mom sitting at the table. Her mom didn't seem to see her at first. She was sitting at the table with a mug in front of her, doodling church steeples and mice all over the back of an envelope, instead of her usual moons with faces. Her shoulders drooped, but her eyes were bright and narrowed- too alert for two in the morning. Lynn cleared her little throat and Pearl looked up suddenly.

"Hey Sweetie. Hungry?"

"Yeah. I was going to have some cereal. Is that ok?"

"Yeah you could have cereal.... Or.... Want me to make you something else? Pancakes?"

Lynn giggled. "In the middle of the night?!? You're so funny, Mama."

"Well, do you want pancakes?"

"Yeah!" They mixed up the batter together and Lynn stood on a chair next to her mom as they poured them into a pan. She watched them bubble and brown, marveling at how they could start off as one single inedible bowl of goop, and then solidify into separate and individual servings.

"Lynn?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't scare me like that again."

"I know I'm not supposed to go with strangers. But he seemed so real."

"Oops, this pancake needs to be flipped." It was a little bit too brown on one side now. "Luckily, I like them extra crispy." Although she was right-handed, Pearl flipped with her left hand now so she could keep her arm around the shoulder of her little girl.

"I'm sure he did." Pearl's hand squeezed Lynn's shoulder a little too tight now, "but don't scare me like that again." Pearl scooped the pancake and then poured some new batter into the pan. Lynn watched the bubbles and tried not to recoil as her mother's fingers dug into her arm.

They made themselves some plates and brought them into the living room where Pearl popped a tape into the VCR—a copy of "The Worst Witch," that they'd recorded from the tv the year before. Soon they heard Freddy coming down the stairs. He got himself some pancakes, and then sat on the other side of his sister to watch the movie, pulling a bit of her blanket over his legs. Soon they were both asleep, Lynn's head on her brother's lap as he slept sitting up. When Lynn woke up in the early morning

sunlight, her mom had moved over to the other couch and was sleeping under her bedroom quilt. Her father and brother slept on either side of her like a pair of guard dogs.

Everyone thinks that

not knowing

is the worst,

until they know.

I've been enough flies on

enough walls to see that.

Chapter 13

The morning after Lynn discovered Brad's secret trip to Nevada, she stopped for a bagel before going to pick up Jamie at her brother's house. Tim answered the door in pajama-bottoms, a t-shirt, a suit jacket and a top-hat.

"Lynnie!" He scooped her up and swung her around.

"Wow! What a welcome. What's all this, Tim?" She gestured to his outfit.

"Oh well, *my boss* sent me on a business trip to Australia and so naturally I'm very surprised to find you here, *down unda*."

"Your boss, huh? Short guy? Velcro shoes?"

"Hey! I'm not short!" Jamie jumped out from behind the couch wearing a dress shirt that reached his ankles, a bow-tie, and mismatched adult-sized slippers.

"Oh, excuse me sir, please don't fire my brother-in-law."

"Ok, Lady-Person, I won't." Jamie shook both of their hands and went back into his office behind the couch.

"Come on into the kitchen. I'll get you a coffee." They walked around the front of the couch and found Fred sitting at the kitchen island reading the paper and wearing the mates of each of Jamie's slippers. He was wearing a tie over his pajamas.

"Jamie gave you both makeovers, huh?"

"Hey Lynn. How was your night?"

"Oh pretty good. Ran into an old friend, heard some live music. Thanks again for babysitting."

"Oh no problem! And don't be fooled. These costumes were all Tim's idea. When Jamie asked if we could play "work," Timmy went right to work making us all look like

deranged Brooks Brothers' models." Fred rolled his eyes and then smiled indulgently at his young husband. "I think he was excited to dress up like a grown-up."

"Jealous!" Tim playfully slapped Fred's shoulder.

"Of Saint Tim of Perpetual Grad School? No way, I hated college."

"Maybe so, but you're definitely jealous that I get to wear jeans every day, and that I look so good in them."

"He's right about the jeans, you know." Lynn grinned at her buttoned-up brother, whose life had been turned upside down by his adorable and dynamic husband, over a decade his junior.

"Yeah, I know." Fred smirked back. They'd become so much closer since he and Tim started dating. Fred had never bothered to come out to his family until then, although they had long suspected he was gay. Part of it was the dissolving of his secret that had been keeping them apart, but a lot of it was Tim, too. Tim was an only child and had no family in the area. As Tim got closer to his in-laws, Fred opened up more and more to the family that he already had, especially Lynn.

"How was he? Was he a good listener?"

"Jamie? He was so good, Lynn. Really, we had a blast."

"Oh good! He's a good little guy, isn't he?"

"He is. And very smart. Have you thought about that science camp I told you about?"

"Oh, no. Not really. He's kind of young for camp, isn't he?"

"It's not even overnight! And he could stay with me some of the nights if you didn't want to drive. I just think you should give it a chance. It's not all screens, they spend a lot of time outdoors."

"I'll think about it. How do you know so much about it?"

"My friend from work runs it. He quit last year to run programs like this."

"It sounds cool, it really does. It's just. He's my little guy, you know?"

"I know. Just think it over. Don't be like Mom."

"Ugh. Low-blow, Fred."

"Ok that's enough shop-talk, Ladies. I want to hear about Lynn's big night out! It's not every night you get to go out to a bar on your own!"

"It was nothing, really! I wore jeans and a t-shirt and I went to go see an old friend play piano."

"Oh! Was it that guy that you used to play with? What was his name? Kelvin?"

Fred rejoined the conversation from across the kitchen where he was fiddling with the toaster.

"Colin? Not it wasn't him." Lynn's voice was too high. "It was this girl from school."

Fred asked, "Speaking of stilts, that guy was tall. You would have loved him, Tim. He was cute. Whatever happened to him?"

"I'm not sure. It wasn't him, anyway." Why had she brought up piano at all?

"You know a lot of pianists."

"Um, hello! Music major!" Tim put his arm around Lynn's shoulder. "Not everyone is an accountant, Fred."

“You do know that I’m not an accountant, right?”

“Um... yes?” Tim and Lynn both started laughing. No one really understood Fred’s job, which involved programming and data-mining for one of those tech companies that no one has ever heard of but that secretly runs the world. Tim was working on a Ph.D. in political science and was intellectually every bit Fred’s equal, but he loved nothing more than to play the part of ditzy arm-candy.

“What’s so funny in here? Get back to work!” Jamie ran into the room in his “boss” outfit and Lynn started laughing harder. Jamie hugged her legs, embarrassed, and she apologized but she couldn’t stop. She continued to laugh until she was crying and then she was just crying. Everyone else got quiet and Jamie nervously started pulling on her pantleg. Fred told Jamie to go upstairs to pack up his stuff, which Jamie refused to do until Fred practically dragged him up. Tim sat next to his sister-in-law and pushed a glass of water in front of her.

“What’s going on, Lynn?”

“Nothing! I’m sorry. I guess I’m just overtired.”

“I’ll bet. How long has Brad been gone this time?”

“Two weeks.” She sighed and wiped her tears with her sleeve. “But it’s been ok. It was tough last week when he had that stomach bug, but mostly we’ve been fine.”

“Hmm. Anything else?”

“No. I’m sorry. Brad will be back on Sunday and then I’ll take a take a very long nap.”

“Ok, but if you need to leave Jamie here another night, that’s fine!”

“Thanks, but I’m just going to take him home.”

Jamie and Fred came downstairs with Jamie's suitcase and Fred peered around the corner and looked questioningly at his husband,

"You two ready for us?"

"Yes! Come on in, guys." Lynn hugged Jamie when he ran over to her and smiled sheepishly over his head at her brother. "I'm ok, really. I'm sorry for being a cry-baby."

"It's totally fine, Lynn. We were just worried about you. You can come over here and cry anytime you want."

Jamie patted his mom's hand and looked serious, "Yeah, Mom. I cried here last night because these guys didn't have any cones for my ice cream. It's normal."

They visited for another half hour and then Lynn got Jamie all strapped into his car seat and gave him an etch-a-sketch for the ride home. He fell asleep about forty-five seconds into the drive, his fingers curved around the little white dials. Lynn smiled at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. He must not have slept as well as his uncles had led her to believe. Her phone buzzed. She glanced down and saw Colin's name and what looked like kind of a long message. She felt equal parts nauseous and excited. She tilted the rearview toward her own face. She couldn't look at herself that closely while she was driving, so the lines around her eyes disappeared, and the mirror reflected tiny moments of pink lips and long lashes, still enhanced by last night's water-proof mascara. She kind of understood what he saw in her. She pushed her earbud into her right ear and played Colin's text to her. Her phone's robotic voice recited his words,

"I don't know if I'll ever see you again. I know you have a life, but I thought you should know that it wasn't nothing to me. I hope you'll call me."

She watched herself listen to Colin's words and then shifted the reflection to her sleeping son again before adjusting it back toward the road behind them. Siri asked Lynn if she wanted to respond and she ignored the question. She put her blinker on and eased the car off the highway toward home.

That day was on her mind now as Brad pulled into their rain-soaked driveway. She'd decided to tell him about the abortion tonight after Jamie went to bed, which should be any minute. He'd just been waiting up for his Dad to kiss him goodnight and show him the new rock collection Jamie had piled up on his bureau. Brad put a wet hand on Lynn's good shoulder and then went upstairs to marvel at Jamie's rock pile and tuck him into bed. Lynn felt a sharp pain behind her eyes and they welled up with tears unexpectedly.

"Don't panic, Lynn," she told herself and wiped the corner of her eyes with her sleeve. Brad came downstairs and heated up his dinner and sat down across from her at the kitchen table.

"How was your day, Lynn? Feeling any better?"

"Brad, I need to tell you something." She took a breath. "I had an abortion, the day of the accident. It wasn't a miscarriage from the crash, it was the abortion pill that I took that morning to end the pregnancy." She stopped, searching his face for a reaction but it was blank, stopped mid-chew. "To be honest, I wasn't ever going to tell you about it because I didn't want to lay it on you to live with it too. I know you're still a little Catholic and even though I told you I would never have another baby no matter what, I am just not sure how clearly you understood that." Still nothing. "I couldn't do it, Brad. I

had to be there for Jamie, and if having another pregnancy and baby didn't kill me, which I think it would have, it would have at least made me a terrible mother for a year or two. But then I ended up in the hospital anyway, so maybe it wouldn't have made any difference." There was another silence and this time she just let it sit there with them.

Brad pushed his chair back and stood up, breathing heavy.

"Who took you?"

"I... I drove myself. It wasn't like a surgery or anything. I wasn't very far along."

Brad picked up his keys and wallet off the counter and opened the back door, then stopped and looked back at Lynn, "I would have taken you, you know."

He walked out the door and closed it quietly behind him.

I would have held
my father's hand.

I would have
been dear to him.

Chapter 14

Pearl put down her iPad after rereading all the text messages from her conversation with her daughter that day and then walked into her kitchen to make a cup of coffee. She popped one of the little Keurig pods into the machine and pushed it down, satisfied as she always was by the resistance of the aluminum top right before it was punctured by the inner workings of the coffee maker. She waited at the counter as her mug filled and then added cream and sugar, stirring longer than necessary as she stared out the window. She couldn't see much through the rain, but she made out the headlights of her neighbor's car pulling into their driveway at 6:40, like they did every day. She had spent her whole life watching Lynn too carefully, and sometimes she had trouble turning it off. There was nothing about their conversation that day that should raise suspicion, no reason to doubt Lynn's safety or even her honesty, but at the same time there was something about it. Pearl always knew when Lynn had medical appointments. They spoke every day and if Pearl knew her daughter was at the doctor, she'd wait for the call or text letting her know what the doctor had said. Why didn't she know about this one?

She picked up her coffee and carried it back into the living room and sat on the couch. She picked up the iPad again. With everything else going on, they hadn't really stopped to consider how unexpected Lynn's pregnancy was in the first place. Pearl's understanding was that her daughter had no plans to have any more children after the difficulties of her first pregnancy. Suddenly she couldn't remember what Lynn said she used for birth control. She assumed the pill was out of the question with her daughter's hypertension. Pearl opened up the Planned Parenthood website and scanned it for

information about birth control options. She opened the page entitled “Get Care” and the first item that appeared was not a list of birth control services, but a link to different types of abortions. Without really thinking about it, she clicked on the link and read through that list. She lingered for a moment on “medical abortion” and then closed out the tab. She opened her messages app.

-How did you get pregnant? Weren't you on birth control?

She deleted the questions before she sent them and typed something else.

-I'll see you tomorrow. Get some rest tonight. Love you, Mom.

She closed the cover over the screen and then remembered something. She quickly opened the text chain with her son. They conversed far less often than she did with Lynn, so it didn't take long to scroll up to a conversation from six weeks earlier.

-How was Jamie's visit?

-Good! We had a great time. Poor Lynn needs a break.

-Is Brad back yet?

-I think tomorrow. At least she had a fun night out. Saw some piano player.

-Piano?

-Some girl from college I think.

Pearl looked up from her iPad. Lynn had commuted to school and didn't form many close friendships with her classmates. She was still friends with girls from high school and from the hotel, but...

Pearl typed colin+piano+thursday into her search engine. There he was, performing regularly at a club nearby. She snapped the cover down again and stood up quickly and called out to the next room, "Will?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going out!"

"Ok, Pearl. Be careful driving– it looks bad out there."

Pearl rolled her eyes. She'd been in one fender bender in 40 years,

"You be careful driving," she muttered as she gathered her things together and headed out the door.

First she drove to their old house and parked in front for a few minutes, shaking her head at the American flag out front being battered by the storm. Didn't they know enough to bring it inside? At least her garden was still in good shape. After a while she shifted the car back in to drive and moved slowly past three more houses before parking again in front of the home of her former best friend, Adelyn Squire. They hadn't spoken in fifteen years. The light was on in the kitchen and Pearl could see Addie sitting at the table with her laptop open in front of her. She opened the car door and headed up the wet walkway to the front door.

Sometimes I wonder if I should stop
lingering beside this boundary
between their existence and
mine. Their world is flatter, but it glows
like that screen she can't put down.

It's a cheap thrill, life is, and all that it
costs me is everything else.

Chapter 14

Lynn sat in the kitchen and looked around the room. Brad's dinner dishes were sitting on the table and Jamie had left some markers and coloring pages out. She got up and started hobbling around the kitchen, one hand using her crutch and while the other moved things into their places in the kitchen. She knew Brad would be back before long, that he'd want to talk about what she'd done. She was so tired and she didn't know if she could keep her eyes open while she waited for him, despite the burgeoning dread in her chest. The freeing of one secret starting tugging loose every lie she'd ever told Brad, fraying her remaining nerves. She kept cleaning as she replayed the secret that she'd been unable to tamp down these past six weeks.

She'd arrived at the bar and ordered a gin-and-tonic. She drank it too quickly with a thirst that she hadn't identified until her glass was nearly empty. She ordered dinner and another drink but remembered to ask for a water. Rage flushed Lynn's cheeks in a way that she knew was probably right on the line between alluring and unsettling. She took some slow breaths and looked around the room. Colin was performing, and he made eye contact with her and smiled. She saw that he was better looking than ever, having outgrown the residual goofiness of youth, leaving something behind that was more akin to charm. She reflected that it was so annoying the way men seemed to get more time than women before they succumbed to aging out of their attractiveness. Lynn pulled the waist of her jeans up over her belly and took another sip of her second drink. She must not look too bad. She certainly had the attention of the men in the room, and maybe one or two women, as well.

This was clearly a bar that skewed a little older than she and Colin were. The décor struck her as a little silly, like someone had typed “Rat Pack” into the search bar on Amazon and just bought the first thirty red and black items that popped up. There were oversized playing cards and light-up martini glasses, but it seemed to be working for them— the place was packed. Women at least fifteen years his senior were rapt and smiling suggestively at Colin as he played. Lynn chuckled. He certainly was playing beautifully. It wasn’t really Lynn’s style; since she’d arrived he’d played some Gershwin and a Sinatra tune, but he had really improved technically. She was jealous of the time he’d been able to devote to his music. Everything she played these days came out of the Disney Songbook.

By the end of Colin’s first set, Lynn had finished her meal and her second drink and was halfway through her third. He bowed and smiled at the hoots and applause and then crossed the room in about three steps and spun her around on her bar stool so she was facing him. She squealed and stood up and hugged him as if their goodbye six years ago hadn’t been awkward and fraught, and he pretended the same thing. He sat down beside her and ordered a drink, and they both spun to face the bar. It was reminiscent of their days spent parallel on one piano bench and Lynn’s stomach did a little flip. They caught up on each other’s lives, each carefully sidestepping any mention Brad and talking instead about Jamie, their mutual friends from the hotel, and Colin’s musical endeavors,

“Yeah, I’ve been bartending and playing here for a couple of years. We’ve had a few open-mics, too, but they weren’t very successful. I play keys for this band based out of Boston, too.”

“That’s great! It must be so fun getting to play out all the time.”

“Yeah, it’s been awesome. And I really owe it to you, Lynn. I hadn’t touched a piano in years before we started playing together.”

“Aw, well that’s nice of you to say but let’s be real. You would have stumbled upon a piano again one way or another.”

“Maybe, but really. Thanks.” He smiled and twisted his stool so that they were facing one another again and placed his foot on the rung of her barstool, sliding his leg a little bit between hers. She looked up at him and then down again at her drink. He took a breath, “Ok, well I have to go up there and finish my set. You’re sticking around?”

“Yep. I’m here for the duration.”

“Good.” And then he was gone, back at the piano. He played a couple of their songs, the ones they wrote together, and Lynn could feel the room lose interest. A smart performer, which Colin was, should have shifted back to the standards after the first one, but he just smiled at Lynn and started another one, even as the bartender glared at him and gestured toward the clock. Lynn was touched, although he never invited her up to come up and play with him, which she was itching to do, despite the fact that she was probably too drunk to play her best. By the end of his last set, Lynn’s whole body was buzzing with alcohol and the knowledge that she still had the capacity to fascinate. This time, when he came up to her spot, she spun toward him and let her heels slide off, her bare feet perched on the base of her barstool. She wiggled her toes and pouted, “I have no shoes!”

“That’s true, you don’t.” He grinned at her.

“My feet hurt.”

“Well, I’m guessing high heels can do that to a person.”

“Aren’t you going to rescue me?”

Colin sighed, still smiling but with the slightest hint of exasperation, “What do you want me to do Lynn? All you have to do is say it.”

Lynn sat in the kitchen, waiting for Brad to return, her eyes closing despite her nervousness about his reaction. He stomped into the bedroom and took off his soaking wet clothes.

“You should have told me, Lynn.”

“I know.”

“I mean, did you think I would want you to face something like that alone?”

“I just didn’t want to put you through it. I know you think it was a baby, like a real person, because you kept saying ‘I killed our baby’ after the accident. So, doesn’t that mean you feel like I killed our baby, now?”

“I don’t know, Lynn. Jesus. I mean, I’m sad about it. I think when I have a chance to think about it, I’ll be really sad. But I mean, I get it, Lynn. I was there last time. You went through hell with Jamie, and I was terrified those first couple of months when you were so sick. I still worry. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t tell you.”

“Me too. You could have told me. You should have.”

“I know.” Lynn pulled her bathrobe around herself.

“Do you think your mom might be starting to suspect something? Is that why she sent that e-mail?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, that’s not good.”

“No, it’s not.”

“What do you want me to say if she asks me about it?”

“I think we have to lie. To be honest, it kind of pisses me off because I don’t think I did anything wrong, but we really need her help right now. I can’t risk making her mad, right?” Lynn noticed Brad looking away from her.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. What happened, anyway?”

“Huh?”

“I mean how did you get pregnant?”

Lynn’s face felt hot for the second time that day. Her brain was foggy after the concentration that their conversation had required, and it took her a second to process the question.

“Oh! My IUD failed. I have no idea why. Just my luck, I guess. They took it out in the hospital. I suppose when I’m better I’ll have to get my tubes tied.”

After Jamie was born, Lynn asked Brad to get a vasectomy, but he said he couldn’t do it. He wasn’t sure if it was fear of pain or his religious background or some blind instinct to propagate the species that stopped him, but some part of him refused to end his reproductive years in such a permanent way. The IUD had been the second-best solution at the time, a distant second from Lynn’s point of view, but he either never understood how badly she wished he’d done it, or didn’t want to understand.

“Right. Wow. I thought those things lasted like five years?”

“Yeah, me too. They’re supposed to.” He finished his meal and then moved over to the seat next to her and covered her hand with his.

“Did you eat already? Do you need anything?”

“No, thanks, I’m fine. I think I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“Ok. Don’t forget to take your pills.”

“I won’t.” Lynn’s head was pounding and when she stood up her stomach dropped like she’d fallen off the edge of a mountain. She stumbled, and Brad grabbed her by the forearm.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, sorry. Just worn out. Can you just bring my pills in when you come to bed? I’m so tired.”

“Ok, Lynn. Get some rest.”