

University of Nevada, Reno

**Finding Agnes: a novel**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in  
English

by

Roxanne Piskel

Christopher J. Coake, MFA/Thesis Advisor

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## **Abstract**

Finding Agnes is the story of Agnes Porter, a mother who suffers from anxiety and depression following the birth of her daughter, Matilda. Agnes' mental illness is unaddressed and, for many reasons which become clear over the course of the novel, she ends up leaving her husband and daughter when Matilda is five years old. Matilda is then raised by her father, with help from his sister, Rosie, who moves in after Agnes's unexplained disappearance to help the family. The novel is told in alternating perspectives by Matilda as a young adult who discovers she is unexpectedly pregnant and contends with the decision to continue her pregnancy as well as her struggles growing up without her own mother, and by Agnes in a direct address to Matilda in her attempt to explain the choices and situations leading up to and following her decision to leave.

The novel has conflicted and complex characters who struggle with the consequences of their choices, as well as showing how choices reverberate throughout not only their lives but those of the people around them. Finding Agnes is a work of literary realism which explores parenthood, the meaning of family, and the societal pressure women in present-day America feel to achieve—and adapt naturally to—motherhood.

Dedicated to my monster; I love you more than sandwiches.

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# Chapter One

## Matilda

Sally Jessy Raphael changed my life.

Since it was just me and my dad when I was growing up, sick days were really difficult for him. When I turned nine, he declared I was finally old enough to stay home by myself if I was sick. He made sure I had all of the emergency numbers ready to go next to the phone, a portable television on my dresser within viewing distance of my bed, and cans of soup that needed only a couple minutes in the microwave to be ready. I wasn't sick a lot, but I still looked forward to those times when I was left to take care of myself.

Of course, I was sick, and I didn't perfect the art of faking it until into high school, so I didn't do much on those days. I mostly stayed in bed and watched daytime TV. My aunt's favorite was "Days of Our Lives," but I preferred talk shows with real-life drama. Sally Jessy was my favorite, with her thick red glasses. Sally Jessy was preferable to Jerry Springer because her guests didn't throw chairs at each other. Plus, I imprinted on her early enough that her voice is what comes to my mind when I tried to remember my mother.

Even now, at twenty-two and living with my boyfriend of two years, sick days always mean Sally Jessy and canned chicken noodle soup.

I was sick for a week and missed three days of work when I was finally awake during the day enough to find my familiar sick-day companion on TV. I was exhausted and nauseated and couldn't eat anything other than dry toast and saltines. Quinn's face



twisted in concern each time I shuffled into the bathroom to hang out by the toilet, willing myself to *just puke*. I was thinking about college, when I got really drunk at a party and felt like shit until I went home and vomited. It was a miracle cure every time, until the next morning's hangover. But expelling the crap from my body helped. I was certain it would help now.

But I couldn't do it. I'd sit in front of the toilet, the dingy linoleum a cool relief against my legs, and wonder when the last time the bathroom had been cleaned.

It's Friday, and after calling in for the third time, I stretch out on the couch with a wet washcloth on my forehead, a trash can nearby just in case, and ask the universe to help me feel better. I hate being sick, and I hate missing work. I especially hate seeing my paycheck suffer as a result, and needing to borrow money from dad to cover rent (again).

Sally's cherry spectacles soothe my soul.

Today she talks to a pregnant sixteen-year-old about her plans for finishing high school. The girl looks to the ground, cheeks crimson as Sally's frames, and admits she wants to drop out. Her dumpster of a sperm donor, an older man who was friends with her parents, convinced her she couldn't get pregnant if he pulled out, and then he left town when she told him the news. The girl cries as she tells Sally how difficult it was to tell her devout Christina parents, how they kicked her out of their house, how she's been living with a friend, how she's certain their parents are about to kick her out too.

As Sally's audience makes sympathetic sounds for the girl as she talks about the horrors of morning sickness, a thought creeps into my mind and buries itself like an earwig.

Could I be pregnant?

I consider my last period, but my cycle has always been irregular. It's common for me to miss a month or two in a row for no other reason than to annoy the shit out of me. I'm jealous of my friends who can predict their cycle down to the day.

My insides roil and I lean towards the trash can to dry heave for a moment.

It's a stomach flu. A bug that will be gone in a few more days if I continue to rest and take care of myself. I haven't had a fever, yet, but it's surely only a matter of time.

The commercial break interrupts my thoughts. An ad for Huggies comes on the air and my mouth goes dry.

I know I'm not going to get the thought out of my head until I take a pregnancy test. Just to be certain.

I haul myself off the couch and walk to the gas station on the corner, not bothering to change out of the grubby sweatpants and UNR sweatshirt I've worn for three days. Stale cigarettes permeate the five-minute walk. Inside the convenience store, I buy two boxes of pregnancy tests and a gallon of Sprite from a red-eyed undergrad who stinks of weed.

I leave before I have the chance to puke on him or his counter.

The weight of the innocuous pink and white cardboard boxes in the plastic bag pulls on my shoulder. I push down the reminder of what I hold in my hand, afraid if I think about the consequences enough, I'll have a panic attack.

I drown out the voice in my head with the reminder that it's just a stomach flu. I'll feel better in a few days. A car passes by and "Toxic" is stuck in my head for the rest of the walk home.

I return to the house I've rented with Quinn for the last year; the shitty brown paint has been peeling for probably a decade; the porch railing tilts to one side and I wouldn't be surprised to open the door one day to find the entire porch has imploded. But rent is cheap and it's close enough to work that I can ride my bike if it's not snowing. Quinn has his beat-up Civic handed down from his older brother that runs well enough to get him across town five days a week for his job. We've kept it looking nice inside as best we can, but the outside would be an eyesore if it didn't blend in so well with the other run-down houses on the block that cater mostly to poor college students.

Inside, I toss the bag on the kitchen table that wobbles, but Quinn found it on a curb shortly after we moved in with a FREE sign. Over the summer I sanded the pale maple and finished with a dark stain to make it look almost decent. I open the Sprite and take a large sip, the carbonation blowing fizz on my nose.

Sitting on the couch with my head in my hands, I allow myself to freak out about the possibility of parenthood even as I remind myself that it's not possible. Quinn and I have always been careful.; we got STD tests at the student health center when we first started dating and we almost always use condoms. I kept meaning to get on birth control before my student health insurance ran out after graduation ten months ago, but it's just another thing I felt was fine to procrastinate on as long as we were careful.

I imagine having to tell my dad I'm twenty-two, working part-time as a waitress, relying mostly on tips to pay the bills, and pregnant. I hypothetically tell my father, at least I finished college. And I've been exclusive with Quinn for two years. We both have jobs, and as soon as this recession is over, I'm sure the job market will improve, and we can get better-paying jobs using our expensive degrees. I can probably even work full-

time and get health insurance. I tell him this, and in my head he breaks down in tears because I've ruined my life before it's even started, but all of that is just to say I'm the one who feels like maybe this could ruin my life before it's even started.

I wipe my tears on the sleeve of my sweatshirt and stare at the blank TV screen. In fourteen days we won't even have cable anymore because the new customer discount will expire and we simply can't afford to keep it on. We both have movie collections we can rely on for entertainment, but for the most part I don't think I'll miss cable TV. We spend a lot of our evenings reading on the couch or playing board games. My favorite is Clue, but Quinn prefers Risk.

My mind transitions from the cost of cable to the cost of diapers and baby clothes and day care and I can feel my chest rising and falling faster than normal. I call Aunt Rosie, hoping to distract myself from the rising panic, but she's at work and I hang up when the answering machine picks up. My leg is vibrating with jitters, and I run my hand along the back of the couch, smoothing my fingers over the pilled surface. The feeling grounds me and I breath in through my nose as slowly as I can, and then exhale just as slowly. I speak into the quiet house, "I am going to be okay," and the bass of my voice reverberates against the white walls.

The attack doesn't hit, and my breathing slows. I take a few gulps of Sprite and take a seat at the table. I take one of the boxes out of the bag and open it. I'm not ready to use it quite yet, but I read through the instructions, printed on a small pamphlet in tiny text. I read it twice. My hands are shaking as I take one of the tests out of its wrapper. I drink more Sprite.

I don't have a lot of early memories of my mother, and I spent a lot of my middle and high school years convincing myself it didn't matter. My dad was always there for me, as well as Aunt Rosie, his younger sister. Even with Rosie around, especially right after my mom left and she moved in with us, I grew up feeling I could relate better to the boys in the neighborhood. I played soccer in middle school, and basketball for two years of high school. My Nana called me a tomboy and sent me mumsy floral Laura Ashley dresses for every birthday until she died when I was ten. She thought I didn't like them because they were dresses, but really it was because they were hideous.

Besides Sally Jessy, I really liked watching "Full House" because the Tanner kids didn't have a mother either. I thought they had it easier, their mother being dead, because at least then they didn't ever have hope that she might come back some day.

My earliest memory of my mother is more of a feeling paired with a yellowed photograph. I found the photo in a shoebox where my dad had a hodge-podge of pictures stored haphazardly. In it, my mother is sitting in a chair by the sugar maple in our backyard, though I only know it's her because I recognize two-year-old me on her lap. There's a dark smudge in the top corner I assume was my dad's finger over the viewfinder. She holds an indecipherable book in one hand and appears to be reading to me. She's not looking at the camera, but I can see her face more clearly here than any other photo I've seen. When I hold it between my fingers, I feel the chill of a breeze on my cheeks and a warmth where our bodies were connected. I feel the flutter of her kiss on my cheek, a nuzzle of her nose, her breath against my neck. I feel loved.

In another photo from the shoebox of memories, it is Halloween, and I am asleep on her gingham-strapped shoulder, covered in blue tulle so you can barely see my face. I

am a tiny Good Fairy to her Dorothy. My dad, the Wizard of Oz, stands next to her, his black top hat tilted to one side and his arm around her waist. He's looking at the camera, but she is distracted by something off camera, just out of frame. There is a furrow dug between her brows and her shoulders droop forward, curling her into a question mark. There is a shadow behind and below her eyes. Her smile is forced, and she holds me as an afterthought.

I am about the same age in both, but it's hard to believe she is the same woman. But this is my mother. I spent a long time over the years memorizing her face, the arc of her eyebrows, the point in her chin, the hint of a dimple in her cheeks. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

But without me, I wouldn't have recognized her.

The clock in the living area alerts me to the hour and I realize Quinn will be home from work soon. I want to get this done and over with. I down the rest of the Sprite and take the tests into the bathroom with me.

The bathroom has an adorable porcelain claw-foot tub I wish I could take with me if we ever leave this house. Or, rather, when. I know I can't live here forever. I certainly can't raise a child in this house on the verge of collapse and surrounded by college kids celebrating their first introduction to freedom. The ceiling fan in the living room shakes so much, when it's on I'm just waiting for it to come crashing down one summer. If the fan is on, I avoid walking under it.

Plus, we're close to downtown Reno. There are plans for revitalization to make a place known for gambling and legal prostitution more family-friendly and less like a mini-Vegas, but we certainly aren't there yet.

I stare at myself in the oval mirror above the sink. Twenty-two and maybe pregnant. I look too young to be a mother. I am too young to be a mother. I wouldn't know what to do with a baby. I couldn't quit working, from a purely financial standpoint, so I guess I'd have to find day care. Can babies go to daycare, or do you have to wait until they're potty-trained? Or at least when they stop breastfeeding? When does that happen? When do they stop needing diapers? Kids are expensive. I know it was a daily struggle for my dad, affording all the things that come with spawning a miniature human while working construction full-time. I had to have two rounds of braces.

And Quinn and I both have student loans we'll be paying back until we're covered in age spots and need new knees.

The burn of bile is in the back of my throat, so I sit in front of the toilet for a moment until the feeling passes. I think there might be some black mold behind the toilet, and we keep cleaning supplies under the sink in a cabinet with no doors.

If this isn't a stomach flu, we're going to need those baby proofing locks for everything, including the outlets so the baby doesn't stick a fork in them.

Maybe we'd switch to all-plastic utensils.

The gallon of Sprite is heavy in my bladder. I unwrap the first pregnancy test and pee on it as instructed. Some of the pee gets on my hand, which is gross, and while I'm washing my hands I picture being peed on by a baby. Even grosser. And then there's the poop.

I think for a moment I might be able to puke now.

I look at my watch. Three minutes for one line or two.

It's going to be one. This is a whole lot of anxiety for no reason. It's just a stomach flu. I'm on the mend and will be back to normal by Monday.

I climb in the tub. The edges are so high I can barely see over them when I'm sitting like this. I can't see the counter where I left the white stick. The porcelain echoes the ticking of my watch like a tinny drumbeat.

Or a heartbeat.

I close my eyes and think about when we first moved into this house, before our final year at the University. July in Northern Nevada is the worst time to be moving lots of heavy boxes from a car with no air conditioning into a house with no air conditioning. But my dad and a couple friends were still gracious enough to help. I paid everyone in greasy pepperoni pizza and cheap beer. After everyone left, and we'd set up Quinn's bed in our new bedroom, I ran a bath in this tub. I dumped too much Mr. Bubble into the hot water and sank into bubbles up to my chin. It felt like the height of luxury to be in a tub that covered my entire body, like a diva from a 60s movie lounging with a glass of champagne and a cigarette. The tub became my absolutely favorite place in the house to relax. Sometimes I would bring a book and read for an hour, refreshing the water every once in a while, to keep it hot.

When the three minutes are up, I give myself another 30 seconds of deep breathing in my porcelain cocoon before I extract myself and stand to face the counter. I look at myself in the mirror one more time. My hair is unwashed and my skin is almost



gray, but that might be the bad lighting. It's going to be okay. It's just a stomach flu. Everything is going to be fine and stay just the way it is.

I pick up the stick and see two little cotton candy pink lines. Crystal clear. Even though I read the instructions twice, I pick them up again and check. Just to be sure.

Two means pregnant.

## Chapter Two

### Agnes

I never wanted to be a mother. I didn't grow up pretending my dolls were my babies or picture myself as ever being a parent in any capacity.

My mother loved babies. She ended up having just me; a medical condition prevented her from getting pregnant again. By the time I was in high school, I knew my mother was looking forward to the day she would be a grandmother, or Noni as she hoped to be monikered. That's what we called her mother, before she died from breast cancer when I was twelve.

She wasn't exactly encouraging me to be a teen mom or anything; she was just excited about the future possibility of grandbabies. No matter how many times I told her I wasn't going to have children, she would shrug it off and say I'd change my mind when I was older. When she would tell me that my biological clock would start to tick eventually and I'd get baby fever, I loved to remind her about The Great Flour Baby Debacle of 1998.

Junior year, I enrolled in Home Economics because she was insistent I be more helpful around the house. She didn't have the patience to teach her angsty, sarcastic

teenage daughter, so it was Mrs. Dawson who taught me those important life skills during seventh period like how to make a pot of stew, set the dinner table properly, and how to bake a cake.

In late January, Mrs. Dawson announced we would be paired up with a classmate and given a “baby” to take care of for a week. By “baby,” of course, she meant a five-pound bag of flour. I was partnered with Shawn, a dark-haired boy with a gap between his two front teeth who wore tweed jackets over his band tees. When Mrs. Dawson offered the bag of flour to me with a smile, I kept my hands in my sweatshirt pocket as a silent mode of protest. Eventually, my co-parent took it from her.

I went to turn to return to my desk, but Shawn apparently thought I was turning toward him to take the bag, because the next thing I heard was the whack of the bag hitting the tile and a POOF as the bag split and white powder exploded everywhere. You can imagine the mess, and the looks of surprise on both mine and Shawn’s faces. The rest of the class erupted, and I joined them.

“Ms. Wharton...”

“I didn’t mean to.” It was hard to be taken seriously as I was laughing so hard.

While Mrs. Dawson handed out the rest of the babies, Shawn helped me sweep up the flour. We were given a new one and it was somehow decided I would take it home for the first night and we’d meet before school tomorrow to switch.

As I took the bag from Shawn, he was careful to make sure it was in my hands before letting go. I joked, “Sorry I murdered our first baby. It was an accident,” and then bit my tongue. I didn’t know Shawn very well and my mom always said my caustic sense of humor could come across as rude.

Luckily Shawn laughed. “Sudden flour death syndrome. We’ll do better with this one.”

I started to put the bag in my backpack, but he stopped me. He figured Mrs. Dawson wouldn’t want us keeping babies in backpacks.

“It might be safer here. What if I drop it?”

“You’ll be fine, just carry him. See you tomorrow.”

Shawn walked away in an annoyingly self-confident sort of way. I carried the bag of flour—my *baby*—out of the classroom and hid in the bathroom to stuff it behind my binder and books.

By the time I got home, the inside of my backpack was covered in a light dusting of flour. The bag had popped a hole. I patched it up with duct tape and set the bag on the coffee table while I worked on homework. When my mom got home from the grocery store, she told me about her own fake-baby assignment with an egg.

“You know, I named my egg Agnes. I always knew I’d name my baby girl after my grandmother. What’s your baby’s name?” I shrugged but she prodded me, insisting her grandbaby have a name. Something about pretending the flour was an actual human felt like I was a nurse in the mental ward reassuring her schizophrenic patient.

“Wallace.” I said the first name that popped into my head, and I took a small amount of pleasure in the disgust on her face.

“That’s the name of a fat, old bald man who yells at the wind. You should choose a name with meaning. What about naming him after grandpa Edwin?”

I wanted to retort, 'But grandpa was a fat, old man who yelled at everyone. But at sixteen I knew what lines I could cross, and when. And I would take no pleasure in reminding my mom about her deceased father.

“Okay, Edwin. Edwin Wharton.”

She clapped her hands before coming to a realization. “What about his dad?”

“Great grandpa?”

“No, your husband. When I took the class we were assigned husbands to raise them with.”

I knew she was teasing by the lilt in her voice, but I was still frustrated about having to do the assignment in the first place. She had admitted she and her friends had done a similar assignment, and I knew at least one of them had a baby out of wedlock at seventeen. Scandalous, but I felt it proved my point this was a ridiculous waste of time.

“He’s my co-parent, mom. And I hardly know the guy. Which really takes away from the reality of the situation, doesn’t it? Even a half-witted teenager who doesn’t know how to tell her loser boyfriend to wear a condom would have some say in who her co-parent is.”

“It’s just for fun Agnes. You don’t have to take it so seriously.” She went into the kitchen to finish putting the groceries away. “Can you and Edwin please get the last bag out of the trunk?”

I left Edwin on the coffee table while I went to the car.

Later, when my dad was home from work and we sat down for dinner, Edwin wasn’t even in the back of my mind. I listened to my parents talk about a news

conference where President Clinton had denied having sex with an intern, but they were interrupted by a tearing sound, a shriek from Reuben the cat, and then a thudding as he went careening down the hallway to hide under my bed.

The usually jet black Reuben was covered in white.

I burst into laughter. I was practically in tears as I went to investigate, my mother on my tail scolding me for leaving the bag of flour in reach of the cat. Sure, now it was a bag of flour and not a baby.

The coffee table and living room floor was covered. Edwin was decimated.

I could hardly stop laughing long enough to explain what happened to my dad. My mother picked up the torn bag and tossed it in the trash can. She demanded to know why this was so funny.

“That’s my second baby. The first one exploded on the classroom floor. This one was murdered by the cat. Face it, I’m a disaster and am not giving you grandbabies.”

“That is ridiculous Agnes. You cannot make a decision about the gift of motherhood based on this silly school assignment.”

“Well you can’t expect the school to give a bunch of dumb teenagers real babies.” Her eyes lowered and I thought she was getting ready for a retort, but instead she shook her head and walked off. She insisted my dad and I go back eating while she cleaned up the remains of Edwin herself. I thought about making a joke about her mourning the loss of flour, but the look on my dad’s face reminded me to read the room. My humor was not going to be appreciated right then.

When I met up with Shawn the next morning, he took a look at the small pillow I’d wrapped in a small blanket and must have decided not to mention it. We raised Edwin

the Third together, taking turns bringing him home, and met up for pizza after school one day as a family. Edwin survived, but I still did a great job forgetting him in classrooms, the library, the restroom, and even in the car overnight. I don't remember what grade I got on the assignment, but I felt that I'd failed as a parent.

I felt the experience solidified my decision to never be a mother.

So, later, when I got pregnant after being married less than a year, I thought the solution was easy.

My husband didn't agree.

Turns out there was a conversation we forgot to have prior to getting married.

## Chapter Three

### Matilda

Shortly after my mother left, when I was five, my aunt Rosie moved in with us. She was eighteen and a nursing student at the University. She planned her schedule around being able to help us and ended up taking an extra semester to finish her bachelor's because of it. She and Dad were born seven years apart and had a close relationship throughout their lives. They teased each other relentlessly but were always there for each other.

After I've taken all four pregnancy tests, buried them in the garbage under used tissues and empty toilet paper rolls, I climb into the tub to consider what to do next, but I'm distracted by my toes. The nails on the big ones have grown long; if I don't trim them soon they'll rub a hole in my socks. They are unpainted.

After Rosie moved in, I loved watching her paint her toenails. She sat on the counter in the bathroom, an act that seemed rebellious to me at five, with her feet in the sink as she swiped bold reds or dark greens across the nails. I sat across from her on the edge of the tub telling her stories from my day in kindergarten. One day a week, usually right after she'd picked me up from school, the two of us would sit in the cramped bathroom with the air drenched in pungent sweetness. It took her a couple weeks, but one day she finally popped the question I'd been hoping to hear since first propped her tush on the counter.

“Hey munchkin, want me to paint your nails?”

She lifted me onto the counter, her fingers tickling my ribs. She let me look through her two-toned caboodle filled with different colors of the small jars. I methodically examined each jar as if they were tiny treasures, finally choosing a bottle of rainbow glitter. I watched her shake the bottle and then roll it between her palms. She held my hand, the nubs of nails facing her, and swiped a layer of glitter on each fingernail. She told me to hold them up, fingers spread apart, to let them dry while she swiped the paint on my toenails.

When she was done, she left me on the counter and sat on the toilet seat as she painted her own fingers and toes in the same polish. I held my hands and feet as perfectly still as I could, determined not to mess up her beautiful work.

Once a week for four and a half years, Rosie and I sat in the bathroom while she painted our nails. She always let me pick the color, and always painted her own to match.

In a lot of ways Rosie acted like a surrogate mom, dropping me off at school before she headed to her own classes, picking me up at the end of the day. She taught me

to cook as she fixed dinner most nights. We'd sit together at the kitchen table and do homework together; early on my homework consisted of her giving me a coloring book but as I got a little older I used the time to complete worksheets sent home by my teachers. Sometimes she'd read sections of her textbooks aloud and I learned a lot about how the human body works. I could find most of my internal organs, and explain what they did, by the time I was six. In second grade, when a teacher caught me attempting to conduct health assessments, including breast exams for my seven-year-old friends, Rosie and Dad had to sit me down and talk about the appropriate time and place for health assessments. Namely, it was never appropriate for a seven-year-old to perform health assessments. Rosie said I'd have to wait until I went to school and became a nurse.

When I'd finish my coloring or my worksheet for the day, sometimes I'd go into my room or the backyard to play so she could get more of her own homework done. When Dad got off work, we'd all have dinner together, and then I spent time with him until bedtime. Rosie would retreat to her room to study or go hang out with her friends.

But Rosie was young, and she wasn't really replacing my mom. She was also my cool aunt. We took walks after school to get ice cream a lot, walking back with double scoop cones, the ice cream dripping onto our fingers. She taught me to ride a bike, attached ribbons to the handlebars, and showed me how to wedge playing cards through the spokes to make it sound like a motorcycle.

When I was in second grade, she dyed pink streaks into our hair one weekend. She wrapped gloopy chunks of hair in foil and painted our nails hot pink while we waited for the color to set. She had me wear my swimsuit in the shower as she washed the dye out. She had to keep reminding me to look up; I was mesmerized by the pink streaming



down my legs and swirling toward the drain. I was convinced she was washing all of the pink out. But after she blow-dried my hair and, with a dramatic reveal, let me look in the mirror, I giggled with delight. My neon-streaked hair matched hers. I looked at the two of us in the mirror, side by side, and looked for what else we had in common. I wanted to look just like her, down to the freckles across her nose, her deep blue eyes, the way her chin came to a point more than mine.

Dad wasn't thrilled; Rosie didn't ask permission. But if Dad got mad, they hid any argument from me. He was concerned I'd get in trouble at school, but Monday morning I walked into the classroom and Mrs. March told me my hair was beautiful. I loved the attention the pink hair brought me, but after the pink faded away there was no talk about doing it again. I assume Rosie was the only one who got in trouble.

Rosie graduated with her B.S. in nursing and got a job at Washoe Medical Center in the neonatal intensive care unit. After four years with us, she moved into her own apartment. We still had family dinners once every two or three weeks, and she took me to the movies, but the house wasn't the same without her energy. She could have been a good buffer when I was in my teens and picked fights with Dad about curfews and privacy.

I wiggle my unpainted toes; I'm losing feeling in my feet sitting with my butt against the hard porcelain. I haven't painted my nails in years. I had my fingers done for high school graduation, but only because it was a group activity with my best friend Paige and a couple girls we'd known since grade school. The hard red acrylic felt alien on my hands, and that night with the use of my nails, clippers, and acetone, I picked them all off.

I hear Quinn walk into the house. I lift myself out of the tub, and I stand my legs wobble; the prickles in my feet static rushing through my veins. I feel a seizure of panic in my chest. I'm not ready to tell him. I want to tell Rosie before anyone else. This feels like the sort of thing a young woman would take to her mother, and Rosie is the closest I've got.

I meet Rosie for lunch the next day at Grateful Gardens for lunch, although I can only nibble on a dry salad and sip water while she tells me about work. She still works at Washoe Med in the NICU. Since NICU babies are the ones who need lots of care and can often spend weeks there, Rosie gets to know a lot of them and their families. She loves telling me about their progress. She adores those little babies, although she's always said she doesn't want to have any of her own.

“So, Squish Face is this precious little girl, one of the bigger preemies. Five pounds at 33 weeks. She doesn't look big; she has chubby little chipmunk cheeks. Her mama teases that she looks like she's hiding acorns in there. Anyway, her parents roomed with her this weekend, and she finally went home yesterday morning. Her mama was so nervous, but I hear they're gonna be just fine. There's a lot of love in that family.” She tears up as she talks. “But as soon as they drove my little Squish away, I started bawling. Don't get me wrong; I am super happy for them. Having a NICU baby sucks, and she's come so far in a month. But I love that little girl. I hope they send me a picture for the grad board.”

When I was fourteen Rosie took me on a tour of the NICU. I couldn't go in to see the babies, but she showed me a giant bulletin board of the graduates. There were dozens

of pictures the families sent of their babies as they grew up. Some included a picture from when the baby was born, for comparison, and it was really amazing to see how much they changed in such a short amount of time. One baby on the board fit in his mother's palm at birth; the more current picture was him at age three, standing in front of the Truckee River downtown. Rosie said he was a little small for a three-year-old, but I thought he looked gigantic compared to the picture of him in the palm.

"I need to tell you something." I interrupt Rosie, hoping the nausea I feel stays only a feeling. She puts her fork down and gives me her full attention. I watch myself push a tomato across my plate, and when I look up Rosie is watching me with careful eyes, curious but not pushy. I allow myself a pause and a deep breath. "I think I'm pregnant."

Rosie's eyebrow twitches, but she maintains a look of composure. With the words out of my mouth, a lump rises in my throat, and I start to cry. Once it starts, I can't stop the flow of tears, even as I'm aware people at other tables are starting to look in our direction. Rosie pulls some bills out of her wallet, lays them on the table, and then ushers me outside into her Outback. She sits in the driver's seat but doesn't put the key in the ignition. Instead, she rubs my back and lets me cry.

I don't know how long we are in her car, but soon my sobs abate, and I am left with the occasional hiccup remnant of my breakdown. Rosie's hand is still on my back, a comfort I recall from other emotional moments over the years. I take a tissue from the box Rosie keeps in the glove compartment and blow my nose.

“Haven’t had a good cry in a while, huh?” Her voice is soft, and she smiles with a look of maternal concern I’ve imagined my mother having.

I shake my head. “I haven’t told anyone else yet. I just found out yesterday; I haven’t really had time to process it.”

“Are you still on the pill?”

When I was seventeen, it was Rosie who took me to Planned Parenthood to get me on birth control, even as I reminded her I wasn’t having sex with anyone. But Rosie wanted me to be prepared.

I shake my head and tell her about the mood swings, the teetering toward depression, the suggestion from a friend that the hormonal birth control might be negatively affecting me. I tell her I wanted to see a doctor about a different type of pill, or maybe an IUD, but I’d been procrastinating making an appointment since I didn’t have health insurance. When I was still a college student, I was on my dad’s plan through work, but now that I have graduated and only working part-time, health insurance was very unaffordable. I tell her Quinn and I were using condoms in order to prevent just this sort of thing happening.

“Okay, well I can see you’re upset about it, but what is going through your mind? Do you want to talk about options?”

With my elbows on my knees, I hold my head in my hands and shake it carefully. “I feel so stupid. I’m too young to be a mom, aren’t I?”

“I can’t tell you that, kiddo. Your mom and dad were your age. My parents were younger. All I can say is you have a choice. I marched to make sure you have a choice. It’s your body. I’m here to support you in whatever decision you make.”

“I don’t want to tell Dad. I don’t want to disappoint him.” I pick up my head and look at my aunt, her face unreadable. “I don’t know what to do.”

She takes my hand in hers and her face softens. “You don’t have to know right now. I doubt you’re far enough along that there’s a rush. I’m assuming you haven’t been to a doctor?”

I tell her about the four tests in the bathroom, and she recommends getting confirmation. She says she’ll go with me when I’m ready, if I’d like; she’ll be with me when I tell my dad and Quinn, if I want the support. We hug awkwardly across the center console, and I wonder if this is how my mother would have reacted. Would she be supportive, given she was also young when she was pregnant with me, or would she see our situations vastly different because she was married?

I have a flash of anger and resentment toward my mother, something that has happened occasionally over the years. Typically around milestones, like my first date or when I graduated high school, I would become abruptly furious about her abandonment.

The first time I remember it happening, I was thirteen and my stomach had hurt all day. I went home from school and found blood in my underpants. I knew I was menstruating, but I was unprepared and alone in the house. I called Rosie and asked her what to do. Thankfully she was getting off work and able to come to the house. She showed up with a few boxes of pads and a pint of New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream. She explained her mother had started her on pads because they seemed easiest, so that’s what she recommended to me.

“There are two sides of the pad. The sticky side goes against your panties, and there are two tabs on each side that get folded underneath to help it stay in place.” I

opened the small pink square of plastic, unfolded the oblong pad, and Rosie pointed to the tabs. “They’re called wings. You need to change your pad every couple of hours. I brought plenty for now, but we’ll get you more later so you always have them ready.”

I looked at the pad in my hand and asked, “Where’s the belt?”

“The what?”

My cheeks were on fire; I’d wished I kept my mouth shut.

“I read *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* last summer. When her mom shows her how to use the pads, there’s a belt.”

Rosie explained the book was dated, that sanitary belts used to be a thing, but now we had the adhesive and wings to hold it in place. Then she ushered me into the bathroom.

The pad felt bulky and uncomfortable. Despite what anyone said, I was certain other people would be able to tell. My frustration with what was supposed to be a momentous occasion itched at the back of my mind. In some cultures, I was a woman, and I wanted it to be my mother handing me a pad in the obnoxious pink package, showing me the wings and laughing kindly about the belt misunderstanding. It wasn’t an aunt’s responsibility. I didn’t even think it was my dad’s. He wouldn’t know what it’s like to have a period; would he have known about the adhesive and the wings? Would he have been confused about the missing belt too?

If my mother had been around, maybe after I read *Are You There God?* we could have talked about it, leading her to show me ahead of time what the pad looked like. I would have found a box of pads under the bathroom counter, waiting for me. The rage

boiled and my jaw hurt. My body shook and hot tears fell down my cheeks as I wanted to scream, *why aren't you here?*

Sitting in Rosie's truck in the Grateful Gardens parking lot, I feel the same rage boiling. My jaw hurts and I stop clenching my teeth. I sit on my hands so I won't punch the dashboard. My body shakes and hot tears are falling down my cheeks again. I want to find the woman and shake her by the shoulders, yell in her face, ask *Why did you leave me?*

But sitting in the parking lot with the same hot tears, it's not my mother who swoops in to calm me and rub circles on my back. It's not my mother who hands me tissue after tissue, taking each snotty, tear-soaked tissue without a thought to the grossness. Just like it wasn't my mother who knocked on the bathroom door that day I was thirteen and confused how something like a period suddenly made me a woman, handed me two small Tylenol with a plastic cup filled with water, and told me they would help the cramps. It wasn't my mother who handed me a heaping bowl of ice cream and spent the rest of the afternoon sitting with me in the backyard, making me laugh with stories from her own middle school experiences until the cramps—and the anger—went away.

## Chapter Four

### Matilda

I spent a lot of my childhood carrying around a bulky Polaroid One Step 600, getting a kick out of watching an image emerge as I shook it into existence. I took my first class in photography when I was in high school. Learning how to develop my own

pictures added another layer to my love of the camera's magic. In the darkroom, wrapped in the pungent metallic odor, I felt like a wizard, exposing the film to a controlled amount of light, and then dipping it in chemical baths. I thought the names of the chemicals sounded beautiful: hydroquinone, acetic acid, phenidone, ammonium thiosulfate. As the paper sat in the developer, I would become mesmerized by watching the lines and shadows work to form a moment captured forever.

My final project for that class was a portfolio containing images related to a theme of our choosing. I had a picture of Paige and her mom gardening, dirt under their nails and tulips blooming, a smudge of earth across her mom's forehead. I used that as my inspiration and took walks around town snapping pictures of random people. I had a picture of a mother and daughter on the sidewalk outside the library. The girl stuck her tongue out at the moment I closed the shutter. Her mom was distracted by a flier, but she held her daughter's small hand possessively, so none could separate them. In the darkroom I watched another image appear before me, the lines of a woman embracing her child. Two shining tears glistened off the girl's chubby cheeks, and her mother's lips blessed her forehead. I watched the trees and swing in the background come into view, the blur of another child running out of the frame.

I gathered these and more into a neat portfolio, titling it "Mother Hen." got an A on the project, and in the class, and Ms. Bedlington suggested I continue with Advanced Photography. By the time I was ready to enroll at the University, I had decided on an Art major with a concentration in photography. I wanted to take pictures for the rest of my life.



I took pictures for my friends for payments of Snickers bars and smoothies from Jamba Juice. I took an English class with a woman in her thirties with two kids; she paid me \$100 to take family photos for their holiday card. We trekked through the snow at Galena Creek Park and I took a few traditional pictures, and then had them play on the snow-covered playground. I captured their rosy cheeks, a snowball fight, and the crafting of a snowman. It was the first payment I received for taking pictures. My dad bought me a new camera for a graduation present, Rosie added to my set-up with a tripod and collapsible reflector. My grandpa sent me a water-resistant camera bag with lots of pockets.

Grandpa Pete is my last living grandparent, although I haven't seen him in a very long time. He's my mother's father and he lives in Florida, although at the time he was still living in Carson City which was less than an hour from Reno. Before my mom left, he'd come over for dinner occasionally, and he was always at our birthday and holiday parties. My mom was an only child, and her mother died when Mom was pregnant with me.

It took my dad several years to mourn and recover from his wife leaving him, longer than maybe it would have taken had he not needed to raise a kid at the same time. When I was in fifth grade, he and Grandpa got into an argument about whether they should have Mom declared deceased. I listened from my bedroom as they argued in the kitchen. Dad was considering it for legal reasons, like using her life insurance policy to pay off the house and put aside money for my college fund. Grandpa was opposed; he said he knew Agnes wasn't dead and wouldn't even think about saying so. At the time I thought Grandpa meant he knew *for a fact* my mom was alive, which angered me

because he hadn't told me where she was. Later I came to understand; she was his only child and with his wife gone too, he was alone. If they declared Agnes dead, it was giving up any chance of seeing her again.

Two months later, he announced he was moving to Florida to retire. He promised I could visit over the summer and he'd take me to Disneyworld. That visit never happened, but he still sends me birthday and Christmas cards every year, a five-dollar bill tucked inside. I'd sent him a graduation announcement and he sent me the camera bag. No note, just a generic "Congratulations" card with his signature tucked into one of the pockets.

While Quinn eats his dinner, I nibble on crackers and listen to him talk about some drama at work. I start to think about Grandpa Pete, and then my dad. If I were to leave Reno, it's my dad who I would miss the most. Rosie and Paige and my other friends would obviously be missed, but for 17 years he's been my one constant. He's been supportive and loving, critical when needed. He pushed me to do the best I could in everything, whether photography or soccer or the winter I spent practicing spinning at the ice rink because I wanted to be in the Olympics. Even if I needed to disappear from my life, I would never be able to abandon him.

Would Agnes have felt the same?

With Grandpa Pete so far away and out of contact, would she have kept in touch with him to let him know she was at least safe and alive? What if she had found him in Florida and they were living near to each other, spending holidays together and being a family without us? What if he knew where she was?

That night, before I climb into bed with Quinn, I find a Polaroid from my seventh birthday. I didn't take this one, my dad did. I'm seated on the couch in our living room, an ugly mustard-colored thing I finally got Dad to replace when I was in middle school. Grandpa Pete is beside me, his arm around me. His hair is thinning at the top, still dark brown with hints of gray, wrinkles forming where he smiles and looks at the camera with a cheesy grin matching my own. He's wearing the same brown slacks and green sweater vest he seemed to always wear. In dark Sharpie and my dad's handwriting, the Polaroid is captioned "Mattie & Pete, 7th b-day." I put the picture into an envelope, address it to Grandpa Pete, and drop it in the mailbox, flicking the red flag up.

He knows how to contact me; my dad has the same address and phone number he's had since he moved there with my mom. I have an address but no phone number for Pete. If I can just talk to him, maybe he can tell me where Agnes is. Or at least why she left me.

## Chapter Five

### Matilda

When I get home that evening, Quinn is sitting on the porch reading "Gone Baby Gone." I sit next to him and lay my head on his shoulder. He puts an arm around me but doesn't put the book down. We have an agreement when it comes to interrupting that we started when we were still in school. When he's finished the paragraph, the page, the chapter he's on, he'll put the book down and then we can talk. This always worked well when one of us was in the middle of writing a paper or studying for an exam, the

understanding that if we just sit quietly, eventually there will be a chance to talk. I've often been reading a book and noticed Quinn nearby, waiting patiently for me to come to a stopping point.

My dad had a similar rule when I was young. If he was talking to someone, whether face to face or on the phone, and I needed his attention, I only had to put my hand on his arm. This way I learned not to interrupt conversations, and still knew that he'd give me his attention as soon as he could.

As Quinn reads in the dim porchlight, I gaze at the street in front of our house. The sky is a swirl of pinks and oranges at the horizon above the mountains surrounding the valley; behind our house to the east, the sky is obsidian. Despite the darkening of the night, the area around our house is lit-up like a suburban neighborhood at Christmas. Between the streetlamps and the porchlights and the parking lot at the gas station, it's not difficult to see our surroundings even in the middle of the night. Off in the distance the lights from downtown Reno can be seen; the Silver Legacy usually glows like the Emerald City of Oz, but tonight the lights are blue in support of the Wolf Pack, UNR's football team, who are in Vegas playing the annual Battle for Nevada. Last year the game was played here; Quinn and I went to cheer on the Pack and celebrated with friends afterwards when UNR won 22-14. Based on the relative silence of the neighborhood, the game must not be over yet. If the Pack wins, people around here go bananas. I'm usually not one to care about football, but the energy around this game catches. There's no escape from showing pride for the Pack.

There isn't much vehicle traffic on our street right now, but there is a steady flow of college students coming from the University. Must be almost at the hour, a quarter till,

a common time for courses to end. They travel down the sidewalk in front of the house and across the street, some in the direction of Circus Circus, where students can park for free to avoid paying for on-campus parking. Others head towards the renovated cottage-style houses that house the fraternities and sororities. A few on bicycles ride by, cruising through the stop sign at the end of our street, a feat that never fails to turn Quinn into a ball of anger.

“Nobody likes bicyclists because too many don’t obey traffic laws,” he’s said on numerous occasions. “If you want to ride in the street, fine. But you have to follow traffic laws. It’s not that hard to stop for a moment. We’re not even on a hill.”

A breeze whistles down the street and the leaves in a row of giant elms bristle in the wind. I loop my arm under Quinn’s and snuggle closer. He smells of mint and pine and I bury my nose into the fleece of his sweatshirt. He closes the book, using an old receipt as a bookmark, and kisses my forehead.

“How’s Rosie?”

“Good. After lunch we went for a walk. How’s the book?”

We both watch another cyclist fly through the stop sign and I feel Quinn tense for a moment, but he doesn’t start his tirade.

“I think I know what’s going on. Have you read this one?” I shake my head. We are on different spectrums when it comes to the books we enjoy. Quinn loves his courtroom dramas, murder mysteries, spy thrillers. I prefer horror and science fiction, although I do sneak in the occasional romance for a change of pace. Mass market paperbacks from Harlequin bought last-minute as I stand in line at the grocery store are

some of my favorites, especially as a contrast from the fear and dread of a captivating horror novel.

The pedestrian traffic has calmed, and we can hear the rush of traffic on I-80, occasional horns and snippets of music blaring from rolled-down windows. The night is cool, a relief from the stifling heat of the month prior. A siren breaks the monotony as an ambulance rushes toward downtown. A late model sedan cruises by, pulls into the driveway two houses down. The screen door slams moments later and then the roar of a jet passes overhead.

“Ready?” Quinn asks, but I’m not. Going inside the house will mean cooking dinner together, eating together, reading beside each other on the couch, going to bed. Together. Going inside will be to pretend everything is normal, everything is okay. Going inside sounds exhausting. I tell him I’ll follow in a bit. He kisses my forehead again and goes into the house. I can hear him opening cabinets and taking a pot out from a cupboard.

I hear cheers from next door—game-winning cheers from the sound of it.

I met Quinn at the Battle for Nevada two years earlier, when we were sophomores. Paige and I had taken a road trip to Vegas with her roommate who was a UNR cheerleader and had grown up in Las Vegas so we could stay at her parents’ house. Paige was dating someone on the football team, and we met up with a bunch of other kids from UNR to cheer on the Wolf Pack. Quinn’s roommate was also on the team, and he’d come to the game. A group of us went to the Strip that night where we all drank too much and ended up passing out across the floor of someone’s hotel room. Quinn and I bonded the next morning at brunch, discovering we shared an appreciation of Hitchcock films

and hiking. We didn't see each other again until we ended up at the same Super Bowl party the following February. We started hanging out together, and by that summer he finally asked me out. We drove to Lake Tahoe for dinner overlooking the alpine lake, sat on the beach to watch the sun set, and then drove back over Mount Rose toward home. We were inseparable after that, and by the time we were seniors decided to move in together in the falling apart house where we currently live.

Over the years, we've talked about our futures and decided we both wanted to stay in Reno. We've talked about moving to south Reno, away from the college students and casinos, where it seems my dad and his construction company are always working on new housing developments.

Quinn grew up in a house full of people; he's the third of seven kids and his parents are still married. I think he sometimes misses the raucousness of life at his parents' house, but he visits quite often for dinner or family holidays. He complains a lot about feeling he was ignored a lot growing up and is pretty sure he doesn't want kids.

As early as middle school I started wondering if I really wanted to ever be a mom. Women learn to be mothers by watching their own, so for a long time I assumed that meant I would be a terrible mother. How would I know what to do, how to take care of a child? Without knowing why she left, I couldn't be certain I wouldn't end up doing the same.

I rarely discussed these feelings with other people after a negative experience with a teacher in a family life course my freshman year of high school. I mentioned my misgivings to Mrs. Harrison and she laughed—laughed!—with condescension. She said one could never judge their ability to mother before they'd had the opportunity.

Motherhood was something that came to “us” naturally, and “of course” I’d be a mother one day. It was the greatest experience of a woman’s life. So, being a testy teenager, I decided that if she meant I didn’t have a choice, I would choose to refuse. I proclaimed I would never be a mother.

Just before we moved in together, I mentioned to Quinn that I didn’t plan to have kids, and that if he really wanted them, we shouldn’t keep seeing each other. He said it wasn’t a deal breaker, so we moved in together and I took it to mean we’d be together forever.

When I go inside, Quinn is in the middle of the kitchen putting a pan of chicken and veggies into the oven.

“I’m pregnant.”

Like a record scratch at the pivotal scene in a high school drama, we are cocooned in the silence. I am frozen in the moment after the harsh consonant as I anticipate Quinn’s reaction. The cars on the interstate, the music from the frat house down the street, the cheers from next door, the sounds of the street are muffled by the pounding of blood behind my ears. Time has slowed indefinitely as I look at Quinn, to gauge the thoughts flashing through his mind. The lump that was released when I was with Rosie returns and forces its way from my chest into my throat. I want to swallow it down, choke and spit it out, allow myself to sob again.

Instead, I talk to fill the empty silence. “I mean, I’m not 100% sure because the tests can have false positives, I think. I mean, I don’t know how reliable they are. But I took like four of them. Mostly because I didn’t really believe it. But they make the lines



pretty clear so it's hard to misread. I don't know how to be 100% sure, but I should probably go to Planned Parenthood and have them confirm. I don't know if their tests are any different from the ones you get at the grocery store, or the convenience store since that's where I got these ones. I don't know if they're more accurate or whatever, but hearing it from a professional might make it a little more real, a little more sure, I guess."

I pause for a breath and in that moment Quinn slams the oven door closed, the floorboards creak beneath his unexpected movement. The panicked Morse code my fingers have been tapping on my leg halts.

"Are you serious? What the fuck, Matt? This isn't supposed to happen...right now...What are we going to do? We're too young to be parents. I suppose you'll just get an abortion. I could borrow the money from my parents. They might give it to me without questions when I tell them...shit...How could this fucking happen? Why now? Goddamnit..."

His anger confounds me.

"Is this why you've been sick? Fuck, man, you said it was just a stomach flu. You were supposed to get better. You're supposed to be feeling better so you can get back to work since..." His voice trails off and he stops mid-pace. I feel him watching me, but I can't look up.

"It's not my fault," I say in a small voice that betrays me. "It was an accident. I didn't plan...don't blame me, Quinn. I didn't get pregnant on my own." My voice rises, "It's not immaculate fucking conception."

"Get an abortion."

I freeze at the ice in his voice.

“I was fired today.”

His words fill the bedroom.

“Upper management is making cuts all across the board. IT lost three support positions, which means the last three hired are the first fired. That includes me and Damien.” He sits heavily at the table. “I was going to call my parents tomorrow to see if they could help cover rent while I look for another job. I wasn’t sure how I was going to tell you...” He lets his voice trail off and shakes his head.

“That’s awful. Did they give you notice, or do you just...”

“I just don’t show up for work tomorrow. I can go in next Friday to pick up my last paycheck. I’ll start the job hunt right away. I’ve heard there isn’t a lot out there right now.” He shakes his head, “We can’t afford a baby.”

“We have family that can help. And I’m sure you’ll find something soon.”

But he is adamant I should get an abortion. I tell him it’s not an easy decision and I still need to think about it. He tells me while I’m thinking, he’s going to stay at his parents’ house. I watch through tears as he packs a suitcase and drives away.

I was six when I met Jacob. He lived two doors down, in a two-story house with daffodils outside below the front windows. Rosie was teaching me to cartwheel on the front lawn; he was riding his bike up and down the street while his mom sat on their lawn reading a magazine. He stopped in front of our house and asked what we were doing.

“Turning cartwheels.”

“It looks silly.”

Rosie said it was; he stuck out his tongue at me and rode home.

We became friends after that. I introduced him to Paige, who I had known only a couple months longer, and he introduced me to his friends. We played together a lot throughout elementary school, spending recess pelting each other with playground balls in dodgeball and digging in dirt patches to find bugs. In middle school we drifted apart, but we still had similar friends, so we saw each other at birthday parties. We were on the soccer team together, but he dropped it in eighth grade after he broke his leg skiing.

When we entered high school, he joined the football team; I was on the basketball team. We were in the same freshman English class with Miss Raymond, and Spanish with Señora Ramirez. We were paired for a project in English and worked together awkwardly as if he hadn't been one of my classmates in first grade who I gave health assessments to, as if we hadn't seen each other naked the same year when we both became interested in showing off what was under our pants.

We had to do a presentation on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. After we each finished reading the book, he invited me over to watch the film version so we could do a comparison. When I showed up and knocked on the door of a house I used to be able to walk in without knocking, his mother answered and greeted me as if I were still a constant presence in her home and her life. She hugged me, asked after my dad and whether I was still playing soccer. She gave me a couple Cokes and let me head upstairs to Jacob's room.

The little boy's room once painted blue with a race car wallpaper trim was now white and covered in movie posters. The bunkbed with Power Ranger sheets where we had sleepovers was replaced by a full-size bed with light blue sheets and a blue plaid comforter tangled at the bottom. The bright red toy box where he'd kept his superhero

action figures and RC cars and Duplo blocks was gone. His dresser was covered with wrinkled clothing I hoped was at least clean, a deflated football, a helmet, and two sticks of deodorant.

We watched the movie sitting on his bed with our backs pressed against the wall, the TV on his desk surrounded by piles of papers and books and empty chip bags. Halfway through the movie, he put his hand on my leg. I turned toward him, thinking he was trying to get my attention, and he kissed me.

Stunned, I pushed him away and ran out of the room, saying I had to get home, and ran all the way home. The next day at school he apologized for catching me off guard and said he really liked me. He had since seventh grade. He asked if I would go on a date with him, and I said okay.

We dated for six months, with growing pressure from him for us to go all the way. When I finally told him that I didn't think I'd be ready for a long time, he broke up with me. He called me a prude and spread rumors that we had slept together; his story became that I was a slut and he dumped me for having an orgy with the boys' basketball team.

The day he broke up with me, I was devastated. I called Paige to tell her the news; she called him an asshole and said she'd be right over.

Paige came with a VHS of "Mars Attacks." She told me to imagine the Martians blowing up Jacob, and by the end of the movie we were both laughing. We had a sleepover where we asked the Ouija board spirits to curse him. As we lay in my bed, we talked in whispers so we wouldn't wake my dad. We had to stifle fits of giggles and, by morning, I didn't care about Jacob anymore. He could spread all the rumors he wanted; it wouldn't change the fact that I wouldn't have sex with him, and he was a tool.

When I call Paige to tell her about Quinn, she is at my house in less than fifteen minutes with her laptop, a DVD of “Mars Attacks,” and her worn Ouija board. She distracted me with stories from work; Paige had taken after Rosie and gotten her B.S. in nursing. She was working at Washoe Med, the same hospital as my aunt, but in orthopedics. She got a kick out of telling me the stories behind the broken bones, often waiting for me to cringe at the image of a bone poking out of an arm or a leg twisted horrifically.

We don’t curse Quinn, but we do watch “Mars Attacks” until two in the morning. Then we crawl into my bed teasing each other and cracking jokes. We are soon stifling giggles until we remember we are no longer sixteen in my dad’s house, and we laugh loudly and hysterically until our stomachs hurt.

When I wake at ten with Paige’s arm draped over my chest, I realize I no longer feel sick. I make chocolate chip pancakes in the shape of Mickey Mouse’s iconic head and wake my best friend with a fresh cup of coffee. We eat pancakes in bed, and she asks if I’m considering an abortion.

“I think so, but I don’t want to be pressured into it. And I’m not going to have one just to keep him. If he can’t support me no matter what I choose, then I don’t want to be with him.”

“I can’t believe you have a person growing inside you,” she says as she reaches back to braid her long black hair. “When are you going to tell your dad?”

I shake my head and put our empty plates on my nightstand. “I don’t want to tell him without knowing what my plan is.”

“Which way are you leaning?” She loosens her hair from the mess she’s created, “Can you help me?”

She turns her back to me and hands me a brush and a ponytail holder. I run the brush through her silky straight hair. “I don’t know. There’s too much to consider. But I think I’m going to hunt down Agnes.”

She looks back at me but I redirect her head so I can continue brushing.

“I need to know why she left. If she went crazy and followed voices in her head, I would need to know that. What if she’s like that mom on the news who believed demons had possessed her children, so she drowned them in the bathtub? Except she didn’t want to kill me, so she ran away. I wouldn’t want to go crazy on my kid, and I certainly don’t want to pass some kind of schizophrenia to them.” I put the brush down and comb my fingers through her hair. “You have such pretty hair.” Starting at the crown of her head, I begin to French braid her hair.

“How do you think you can find out?”

I tell her about sending the photograph to Grandpa Pete’s house. She’s surprised, since she knows the complicated history of his leaving. As I finish the braid and wrap the holder around the end, I ask if she is still in touch with Damian. Damian is Paige’s most recent ex, although they parted on good terms since he had come out as gay and she told him she wouldn’t take it personally. Damian graduated two years ahead of us with a bachelor’s in journalism. He works as a media analyst for a local news station.

“Do you think he’d use his research skills to help me?”

## Chapter Six

## Agnes

Growing up my family always went big on Halloween. My parents and I decorated the house with carved pumpkins and bats hanging from the trees in the front yard; when I was in middle school I started making a haunted graveyard on the front lawn. We turned our garage into a haunted house for the trick-or-treaters to go through. Each year we had a theme. Haunted hospital. Haunted school. Haunted laboratory. Lots of hauntings. I would guide the kids through while my dad found strategic spots to jump out and scare them. We were quite popular.

My mom was an English teacher; I don't know if you would know that. Each year she made me costumes of literary characters. In high school I helped her make me a Lady Macbeth dress to look like Jeanette Nolan. It made me feel regal, and I was proud to wear it to school, even if I was one of few kids to dress up for the school day. I was pretentious; I thought dressing like Lady Macbeth made me part of the literary elite.

I know my mom would have continued the tradition with you.

I tried my best, even though I wasn't a great seamstress. Thrift stores were my go-to, and I found things I could alter rather than starting from scratch like she did. By your third Halloween you were at an age where you could actually trick-or-treat, so I wanted to honor Mom with a literary costume. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one of my favorite books; I had the brilliant idea to make you a ham costume and parade you around with Atticus Finch, complete with a tie hanging from his collar. I bought wired fencing and tried papier mache, but I just ended up with a sticky mess in the garage. The ham looked like a pile of...well...shit. I trashed it and your dad suggested a different book. Something you would be familiar with.

Using my mother's old sewing machine, I added a tail and furry hood to a pair of white footie pajamas and painted a Burger King crown gold. You were an adorable Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Your dad and I were low-end Wild Things; we painted our faces, wore monster feet slippers, and he made us each a headband with horns hot-glued on top.

As we walked from house to house, you beamed with pride at each ooh and aah over your costume. You roared and showed your claws to the other children. You wouldn't knock on doors or ring doorbells; that was up to either me or your dad. If there were other children approaching a house, you would wait on the sidewalk until they collected their candy and left before you'd walk up. But as soon as the door opened, you were ready with a "trick-and-treat" called out loudly.

When your dad walked you up to the doors, he would hold your hand and point out the decorations. If he thought a house might be too scary for you, he'd position himself between you and the hanged skeleton or headless horseman or ghoulish ghost with entrails displayed; I think he was trying to distract you. For me, Halloween is meant to be scary. I wanted you to be comfortable with all the decorations so we could make our own haunted houses in the future. I don't know how much you were really blocked from seeing the terror, but he kept you laughing and wasn't your joy the point?

The sky faded to a deep purple as darkness came earlier than I expected. The time change with Daylight Savings was still messing with me. Despite scattered clouds, I could make out stars peeking through. I remember being able to see Andromeda and part of Cassiopeia. I probably pointed it out to your dad, making him proud I could still spot the constellations he'd introduced me to in high school.



The irony is not lost on me, how visible the daughter was and how the mother was concealed by the gray covers rolling in.

When your feet were so tired we had to carry you between houses, I suggested we head home. You were in my arms, your head rested on my shoulder. A curl of your hair stuck to my lips. David carried your pumpkin and bent crown. He was talking to me, but I've lost the conversation over the years. I trailed behind, feeling somehow comforted and confined by the warmth of your body against my chest. I could feel the beat of your heart against mine.

It was only a moment. Nothing special or out of the ordinary. I was following your dad one second, and then my vision started to pinhole. I caught a sob in my throat. You were heavy, as if you'd suddenly gained twenty pounds. All I could feel was you in my arms, you on my chest, your heart beating in a rhythm out of sync with my own until I wasn't sure my heart was still beating at all. I couldn't breathe; I was choking on the hot air expelled with each light breath from your mouth. I was certain at that moment I was dying, about to collapse in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Aggie?”

Your father's voice came through as the darkness advanced. Your hair was stuck to my lips, my cheeks, my face. I could feel tears falling from my eyes, the salt tangling your curls and gluing you to me. I heard his voice again, but I couldn't see past your blurry face. I was suffocating.

“Agnes?”

His voice was right by me and I felt the weight of you release as he took you into his arms. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I gasped, searching for air when I knew

there had to be plenty. I was bent over, hearing unfamiliar voices asking if we needed help, but he must have waved them away, said we were fine.

I was not fine.

“Agnes, what’s wrong?”

How could I tell him about the weight crushing my lungs, squeezing every molecule of oxygen from my body? I closed my eyes, afraid my vision would return and my last image would be his concerned face. I couldn’t face him knowing I was about to die, to leave him to raise our small helpless child on his own, that I was a failure as a mother. I would be utterly useless to both of you when I was buried deep in the soil.

And then I felt a small point of pressure on my back. Your father’s hand, rubbing small and slow circles. I focused on the space between his hand and my back, allowing him to guide my heart back into its rhythm. I sucked in and found the air, touched with a damp, earthy aroma that brought me back to where I stood. I slipped one foot out of its sweaty slippered cage and stepped onto the concrete, the cold zipping through my sole. Earth. Ground. I was grounded. I blew out the breath as slowly as I could, timing it with a circuit of seven hand-circles on my back.

A familiar rhythm. He had rubbed my back the same way when I was in labor with you. In for the count of seven hand-circles, out for seven. I did this until I could feel the beat of my heart behind my ribs, and then I opened my eyes to the ground. My single exposed foot on the pewter sidewalk, the toenails black with a gold ochre pumpkin painted on each big toe. I could breathe again, and I could feel the heat of my husband’s words on my neck.

“Agnes. Agnes. Come back to us.”

## Chapter Seven

### Matilda

The first time I went to Planned Parenthood with Rosie, the visit made me feel older than I was. I dressed for the occasion in slacks and a blazer; I felt they made me look more mature and responsible, although maybe the bright blue Converse took it down a notch. But I wanted to look how I felt, and I didn't want the doctor to judge me for being a silly little girl who wasn't ready for the responsibility of birth control.

This time, walking into the clinic makes me feel younger, too young to be on the verge of parenthood. I am too young to be liable for another human being's life; I basically feel like a child. How can I raise a child when I forgot to brush my teeth before bed last night? What if I don't brush the kid's teeth and they rot out of their skull before they're five? I'm not even completely sure it would matter; kids get a whole second set of teeth.

As I check in at the front desk, I am too aware that I look seventeen, as if I haven't even graduated high school and am already ruining my life. Waiting for my name, I count off the reasons I am too young to be a parent. I've barely been out of school a year. I've never been out of the country. I've never had a grown-up job. I've never filed taxes. I don't have a savings account or a 401(k), and I'm not sure what a 401(k) is or why the k is in parenthesis. I've never changed a diaper, prepared a bottle, or spent time with anyone under the age of six since I was in that category.

In the exam room waiting for the doctor to return with the result, I am in a dome, a low buzz like the cabin sounds in an airplane at thirty thousand feet reverberates behind

my ears. When a knock on the door jolts me into reality, an older woman with her hair pulled back in a long braid enters. I look at her wrinkled white coat, and it occurs to me she is possibly the same age as my mother.

My mother.

Did Agnes have doubts when she discovered she was pregnant? Was I unexpected, or did my parents make the conscious decision to have a baby? Did she consider her options; did she even know she had them? How long did she take to settle into the idea of being a mother? Did the idea never settle, as if written on a name badge in pencil, so easy to erase and start over as someone else? In the seconds before the confirmation of the fetus growing within her body, what did she close her eyes and ask the universe for?

I swallow the anger bubbling in my gut and listen to the doctor informing me that I am eight weeks pregnant.

Even as I knew the reliability of at-home pregnancy tests, the drop in my stomach is a violent reminder that my body still held some doubt. The nausea rises and there is a basin to catch my vomit without me having to say a word.

When my stomach is empty, the doctor hands me a paper towel and a cup of water. I let her words of mitigation wash over me, her warm hand on my shoulder holding me in this moment. The moment when I am handed a form confirming my pregnancy, a folder of pamphlets, and reassurances, I feel a tightening at the base of my skull. I am silent on the bus ride home and then I retreat to the bedroom, pulling the curtains to banish the noon sun, and I bury myself beneath the heavy comforter.

For six months after my mother left, I had terrible headaches. They happened two or three times a week; when my dad took me to my check-up, the dentist told him I was grinding my teeth too. As I fell into the routine of school and life with Rosie in the house, the headaches lessened until they were all but absent. Only on occasion did I wake up or come home from school with the familiar throbbing and intense light sensitivity. It was my dad who first realized they were more common around the anniversary of my mother's disappearance, and her birthday.

My dad bought blackout curtains for my room, and I spent those days in bed asleep. Her birthday was easy for him to accommodate since it was July, the peak of the desert summer when going outside was uncomfortable unless you were driving into the mountains where it was always ten degrees cooler. There was no school to call in my absence, and eventually I was old enough to stay home alone so he could go to work.

The anniversary of her disappearance was a little more difficult, since sometimes it fell on a weekend and some years it was in the middle of the school week. Dad would call the office to excuse my absence, accommodating my refusal to deal with the world on those specific dates in the same way he did his best to indulge me as a motherless child around Mother's Day when all the other kids were making presents and cards covered in flowers and glitter. Eventually it became just another part of our routine. There would be a morning when my alarm wouldn't go off and I would wake around noon with a note on my nightstand. I would read in bed if the auras allowed or watch soap operas on the small TV on my dresser. I spent the entire day in the warm cocoon of my comforter, and the next day I'd wake and go about the day as if the previous had disappeared off the calendar entirely.

The summer before my sophomore year of high school, after shooing my friends away when they came to see if I wanted to walk to the river with them, I woke later to the sound of the front door opening and the scent of pizza wafting down the hallway. I kept my eyes closed, hoping my dad would think I was still asleep and have dinner without me. The pizza smelled good, but I just wanted to fall back asleep until the day was gone.

Instead, I felt weight shift on my bed and opened my eyes to find Paige with a pizza box in her hands. She'd figured out my secret over the years, matching the knowledge of my mother's summer birthday with the pattern of my refusal to hang out no matter the activity. She said we didn't have to talk, I didn't have to get out of bed, but she didn't want me to be alone.

I opened the comforter and she sat next to me, my flowered blanket covering our legs. She picked up the remote and flipped through the channels until she found Cartoon Network. We ate pizza and watched Looney Toons on my bed, and she kept her word. We didn't talk. When my dad came home from work, he found us still there, my head on her shoulder and her arm around me. When she got up to leave, she kissed me on the cheek and said, "See you tomorrow."

When the anniversary of Agnes' disappearance came around, Paige showed up again with pizza. Somehow, she had convinced her mom to let her call in sick too. Because I needed her. Since then, twice a year, Paige and I would spend the day in my bed eating pizza and watching cartoons. Sometimes we'd fall asleep or watch a Disney movie. Or I'd sleep while she read or worked on homework. But she never let me go through those days alone ever again.

When I wake up to the bed moving, I assume it's Quinn and keep my eyes closed. I don't want to tell him about it. I don't want to make a decision. I want to stay under this blanket and sleep.

The smell of pizza brings me to open my eyes and find Paige sitting next to me, an open box of pepperoni and mushroom on her lap. I sit up and she hands me a slice. Then she turns on the laptop she brought from her house, and we watch videos on YouTube for a couple hours. When she shows me "Charlie the Unicorn," I can't stop laughing.

Paige closes the laptop and scootches down into the bed so we are lying face to face.

"Quinn called me. He's worried about you."

"I'm pregnant," I whisper. "Eight weeks. Quinn doesn't know. I don't know what to do."

"Have you told your dad?" I shake my head. "Rosie?" I nod. "Do you want to talk, or should I come back tomorrow? We could watch the OK Go video again."

"I'm too young to have a baby."

She nods and pushes a stray curl out of my eye, tucking it behind my ear. "What if your age doesn't matter?"

I think about this. "But it does. I don't have a real job. I live like a broke college student. I don't even have a real bookcase."

She follows my gaze to the corner of the room where Quinn and I fashioned bookshelves out of wood planks and bricks. "It's minimalism."

“It’s a safety hazard.” I laugh a little. “They aren’t secured to anything. One pull and that whole thing can crash down. Baby versus bricks, baby loses every time.”

“So we’ll get you a real bookcase. And your dad can make sure its anchored to the wall.” She pauses and looks at me. “If you want. Because if you don’t, I will be with you still. And you know Rosie will support any decision.”

“What about my dad?”

She shrugs. “I mean, if you get an abortion, you don’t need to tell him anything. But if you’re going to stay pregnant, we can all be there with you. I think Dave would be a good grandpa. Remember when he taught us card tricks in second grade? Kids love that shit.”

I smile and try to reconcile the image of my dad as a grandfather. Would he be a Pop-Pop, a Papa, a Gramps, a Nono?

We are both silent a moment. I can hear Quinn in the kitchen rinsing dishes and loading the dishwasher. When he stops making noise, I imagine he has moved to the couch and is reading. I feel guilty having this conversation with Paige instead of him.

“I can’t be a mom.”

“Can’t, or don’t want to?”

“Can’t. I don’t know how.” I feel the sting in my nose warning me I’m about to cry. “How can I be a mom if I didn’t have one?”

I let the silence settle between us for a moment before I come to a decision.

“I need to find my mom.”

Paige stays quiet, though I detect a slight nod as if she is giving me permission.



“I need to find her. I need to know why she left. She abandoned me, my dad. Disappeared, never bothering to check in, or at least tell us whether she’s okay. Even if she doesn’t want to talk to me, maybe I can at least find out what I did to drive her away.”

“You didn’t do anything, Matt. I don’t know why she left, but there is nothing a five-year-old child does to deserve what she did to you. It wasn’t your fault. You must know that.”

I look away from her gaze, shift my body toward the ceiling. There has always been that voice of reason, but then there always comes a needling, terrible little whisper of doubt in my ear. Maybe there was something I did wrong, some reason she couldn’t be around me any longer. Some reason I wasn’t worth the trouble of sticking around.

I don’t remember the exact day my mother left, but I do remember that for several days I thought she was on a trip. I was grouchy she hadn’t said good-bye, and Dad was really sad a lot. He would drop me off at Paige’s house early in the morning so he could get to work and her mom could take us both to school. Mother’s Day was coming up, and we made plaster replicas of our hands to paint and give as gifts to our mothers. I liked the gooey consistency of the plaster of Paris and told my dad so after he picked me up from Paige’s house one day after work.

“I hope Mama comes back in time for Mother’s Day. I have to give her my hand.”

By this time she had been gone two weeks. Rosie had made the suggestion to move in with us to help out, but she hadn’t moved in yet. I wasn’t aware of how my days were going to change, but Dad didn’t have much energy when he came home so most

days he stopped for takeout when he left work. I thought it was a special treat to eat so much pizza and fried rice.

My dad didn't answer me in the car, but when we got home and he put a bucket of fried chicken on the table, he said we needed to talk about Mama.

I don't remember the conversation. I do remember crying and thinking she was mad at me. I told Dad I would be better behaved and wouldn't leave the house by myself ever again, but he said that wasn't why she left. He didn't know why she left. I think up until then he had also thought she might come back, be home when he got off work and things could go back to normal. But this was our new normal, and we both had to accept that it was just the two of us now.

A few days later, Rosie moved in.

## Chapter Eight

### Agnes

Having you wasn't in my life plan. Having children wasn't something I wanted. There was no traumatic event or medical malady keeping me from procreating. I just didn't want them. It's as simple as that.

My mom wanted a house full of kids. After the first two miscarriages, she lowered her expectations. Two babies would be perfect. They could grow up as best friends, take care of each other as their parents grew old. I was born six years after their wedding. After two more miscarriages, the doctor told her she was all but barren. She had one little girl, and she should be grateful for her.

She was, without a doubt. She loved me hard. Her concern for my health and safety went too far, in the eyes of teenage me; I thought she was strict when she set my curfew at 8:30 and wouldn't allow me to date until I was sixteen. When she insisted on meeting the parents of any of my friends before I was allowed to go to their houses, I thought she was unfair and unreasonable. When she wouldn't let me get my driver's license until I got my grades up to a B average, I thought she was mean.

That's not to say our relationship was all arguments and misunderstanding each other. Since I was her only child, I got plenty of attention. We had Saturday mall dates where we'd share a Cinnabon cinnamon roll before a shopping excursion when I needed new clothes for school, or she needed a dress for a dinner with my dad's work colleagues. We shared a love of literature, and a trip to the library meant coming home with a bag filled with books we would both read before the due date two weeks later.

As much as I didn't want to be a parent, I found pregnancy fascinating. I watched my body change in increments. My breasts became more sensitive and grew quickly as if already filled with milk. I read a book detailing how the fetus grew, and each week I would fill your father in on what was developing. Eyelids, nose, arms, legs, fingers and toes. Heart, lungs, fingerprints.

At twenty weeks, I was awoken at two in the morning by a strange dropping sensation in my stomach. As I lay there, listening to your father snore beside me, I closed my eyes and put my hand on my stomach. I felt the foreign ripple of movement beneath my skin. I woke your father, took his hand, and put it on my belly. We lay like that for several minutes. He was almost asleep again when the flutter came and a grin spread across his face.

The movement was strange, both a part of me and completely separate. I thought about the pregnancy and the changes of my body more than the anticipation of the forthcoming infant.

At the ultrasound, as the technician smoothed a slippery wand across my stomach, I watched the small screen with an unfamiliar anticipation. As the image came into view, I couldn't tell what I was looking at and asked if the sonogram was working correctly. The tech laughed gently and then pointed out the arch of the spine. He moved the wand, digging into my skin, and the skull appeared. Then, fingers. The image moved and your dad asked him to go back. He did, pressed a button, and the image froze on the screen.

There, in the middle of the black abyss that was my uterus, curled a baby cast in gray. One hand waved, the other held its face. There was no mistake; there was a small human growing in my body.

We went to my parents' for dinner that night so they could see the ultrasound pictures. As I sat next to my mom, her gushing and cooing over the tiny almost-person, I put my hand on my belly and felt the flutter and kicks. The baby was becoming real. Mom had a bag full of baby clothes collected from her friends at work. We sat on the couch and sorted through the bag. I felt a spasm in my stomach; she felt them and told me the baby was hiccupping. We sat there a while, her holding me and my baby in one of her delicate hands.

“Were you nervous? When you were pregnant?”

With a secret smile, she told me, “I was mostly excited. But yes, there were some nerves.”

“How did you deal with it? How did you know everything would be okay?”

She set her hand on my cheek. “It’s all natural, love. As soon as the baby is born, your maternal instincts kick in. You’ll know what to do. And I’m always a phone call or a quick drive away.”

For the first time since my missed period, I felt a twinkle of confidence that I’d be a good mother—maybe not great, but good enough—as long as I had my mom to watch over us.

Two days later, my father called to say she was gone.

My father explained she hadn’t been feeling well for a while. Mom shrugged it off as acid reflux, something she ate, just a bit of indigestion. She chewed on Tums and said she was fine. He noticed she became short of breath when climbing stairs and he suggested she see the doctor. He thought whatever was wrong was getting worse, but she said it wasn’t a big deal. After some needling, she finally made an appointment, but the doctor was booked out a couple weeks.

Dad came home two days later to find her on the living room floor, unconscious. He called 9-1-1, but the doctor would later tell him by the time the ambulance arrived it was already too late. The heartburn, the discomfort, the doctor said, was chest pain. Because of a blockage, she wasn’t getting enough oxygen to her heart. She had a massive heart attack.

I broke down. I cried on and off for days. I refused to get out of bed and live in a world where my mother wasn’t. Your dad took some time off work to help mine make arrangements because I couldn’t do anything. I slept, memories of my mother invading my dreams. At the funeral, I stared into my mother’s coffin and listened to the sobs of the others behind me. She looked like she was asleep; I watched her eyes carefully, expecting

them to fly open at any moment. I bent over, squishing my pregnant belly into the casket, and kissed her on the cheek, but her skin didn't feel right. I stood beside her, staring at her hands and wishing they would move for so long my father came to my side and led me to my seat.

I don't remember the service or the drive to my parents' house. I remember being offered one of the dining room chairs; mom had reupholstered the worn burgundy cushions with cobalt covers only a month earlier. I remember the receiving line, empty offerings of platitudes as if she were in a better place than here with her family waiting for the arrival of her grandbaby. I tried to ignore the movement in my body, stretching and kicking as if the baby were in its own turmoil. When we arrived back at home, I went straight to bed and slept.

I couldn't imagine how to go on without my mother. How could I be a mother without her? It was unfair that a woman who loved babies so much was not given the chance to meet her own grandchild. I thought I might be better to simply waste away in my bed and die.

I felt alone, even when my husband brought me grilled cheese sandwiches or bowls of soup to make me eat. I knew my father would be the next to leave me, and then what if something happened to David? I would be left alone to raise a child. What if something happened to me? What if we all died and the child was left utterly alone in the world? I pictured a small version of myself in ragged clothing, hair a tangled rat's nest, eyes empty as she begged for food; she resembled a drawing of Oliver Twist from an abridged illustrated version I'd read as a child.

David tried to take care of me, as ill-equipped as he was at twenty to care for his grieving pregnant wife. Before he left for work each day, he left a muffin or banana or something small to eat on the nightstand, which was the only way I would eat until he was home for dinner. He put my sketchbook and several sharpened pencils there and encouraged me to draw.

Your dad had a list of names in a little notebook he kept in his jacket pocket. Every day he would add one or two, sometimes five. One day, he brought his notebook to me and read names to me, asking my opinion. At first, I would just shake my head or shrug; he would cross out names as we went.

It was the name Jeremiah that made me smile. Not because I liked it as a name, but it reminded me of my mother, washing dishes at the sink, her hips swaying as she sang along with the radio. For whatever reason, Three Dog Night was always playing in my memories.

Little by little, I got better. I started going for evening walks with your dad when he got home from work. At first, I didn't say much. He would talk about his day, tell me things he was looking forward to doing with our baby, and offer more name suggestions. Soon, I started offering my own, connecting names to the stories I had shared and loved with my mother. It was your dad who suggested we name you after her, but all I could think about was Jane Doe. Plain Jane. It was decided we would honor her memory, should the baby be female, by giving her Jane as her middle name.

There were times I forgot she was gone, like when my breasts started leaking and I wanted to call and ask her if I should be concerned. Or when I was painting a mural of

the Reno skyline in the nursery and wanted to invite her over to see my progress. Or when I saw an artist's exhibition coming up at the museum of art I thought she'd enjoy.

I was painting in the nursery one day, shading in the silhouette of Circus Circus and listening to Donna Summer when I went my water broke. I thought about calling my mom, even got so far as picking up the phone and dialing the first three numbers before hanging up in tears.

I was thirty-eight weeks, my back was always aching, and I delivered shortly after your dad rushed into the hospital room from work. When the nurse handed you to me, wrapped carefully in the hospital-issued blanket with the requisite blue and pink stripes, I thought you looked like a grumpy old man, not unlike Grandpa Edwin, namesake of my high school flour baby. Your eyes were closed tightly from the harsh fluorescent lights, your skin wrinkled and red, your head bald but for a sparse amount of fuzz so pale I could hardly tell it was there. After a moment, you opened your eyes, blinked, and looked at me suspiciously. I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

I handed you to your father and said, "Meet your daughter."

He cried. His face was an open book of joy as he took you into his arms and introduced himself as 'the baritone you've been hearing for months' and declared you were the most beautiful baby he'd ever seen. I settled into the sweat-drenched pillow and stared at the ceiling. I closed my eyes and listened to my husband already beginning to bond with his daughter. Even as he sat three feet away, talking to you, I felt separate from the moment. I was already being left out.

He looked up after a few minutes, enthralled and eyes shining, and offered you to me.



“I’m just so tired.” I wanted to fall asleep, but at the sound of my voice, your eyes darted around, looking for me. Even as I felt the immediate and total separation of you from my body, you were still drawn back to me. I had to give in. Maybe it was instinctual, maybe it was missing my mother, maybe it was for David. I reached out and took you into my arms.

## Chapter Ten

### Matilda

I have to go back to work, for the paycheck and tips but also for a way to ignore the choice I have in front of me. The next day, I call the owner, Janet, and let her know I’ll be at my shift that night. Cross my heart.

When I get to work, a few minutes early, Janet is at her desk surrounded by piles of paper. Her office always looks like a bomb went off, and yet she is very organized when it comes to setting our schedules. And she can find anything in that office in seconds. To the right of her desk, pinned to the wood-paneled wall, is a massive whiteboard where she keeps the schedule. Each employee has their own color, and in bright blue she tracks events at the University—like football games—when we know to expect more people. Behind her chair is a low bookshelf with a smattering of books and binders a matching mess to her desk, but the top is the only visually appealing thing in this office.

Janet keeps framed pictures of her graduates, everyone smiling from the grassy quad or posing in front of a brick and vine-lined building on campus or jumping in front

of Mackay Stadium decked in cap and gown. The shelf is crowded, but she always makes room when one of her employees brings in a glossy photo celebrating their graduation.

Towards the front and to the left is a blue and gray framed picture of me. In a black gown, with the mortar board pinned carefully atop my head of curls, I sit cross-legged on one of the stone benches that surround the quad. My favorite purple Converse high tops peek from under the gown, and a demure smile plays on my lips. I am surrounded by the perfectly manicured green lawn; the landscapers mark off the grass each spring in anticipation of a picture-perfect commencement.

Janet is happy to see me, relief painted in her eyes when I assure her I'm feeling well enough to work all my scheduled shifts moving forward.

I stop by the kitchen to say hello to the cooks, Ray and Frankie. Frankie chops vegetables on the long prep table while Ray flips burgers on the grill. Both stop long enough for a hug and then get back to working. There's a new kid loading the dishwasher, but he's wearing headphones and doesn't seem to notice anyone else is around.

The familiar scents of the McCarran Kitchen wrap around me and settle in my hair, my clothes. By the time I get home, I will smell like grease and onions. My stomach remains settled, for now, which is a relief. Frankie launches into a play-by-play of the UNR/UNLV game earlier in the week. Frankie played for the UNR Wolf Pack several years ago, a linebacker I think, and he looks like it. Frankie's in his early thirties with a wife and kid; he's worked at the Kitchen about ten years. He's loud and proud about his lifelong support of the Pack; I'm pretty sure his parents went to the University too.

Ray is quieter, and at least another decade older. He and Janet have been married a long time, and they keep the Kitchen running as seamlessly as possible. They don't have kids, but their two Alaskan Malamutes are lovely, friendly dogs. Ray and Janet have had me dog-sit a few times over the years while they go on trips to visit family on the east coast. I sleep in their guest room, with Finn and Gus on the floor all night as sentries.

Keisha, a sophomore at the university, is clocking out when I'm clocking in, and she looks wiped out. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a ponytail, but a mass of flyaways frame her small face. We haven't gotten to know each other very well since we tend to work opposite shifts, but I know she's pre-med and works a second job on campus. She tells me about the lunch rush and wishes me a calm evening, as she does whenever we cross paths.

Blythe is also on shift with me, which means she was able to find someone to watch her son in the evenings. Blythe is a third semester senior, and she says she's got at least another semester after this before she can graduate. She's been on the slow track, starting at the community college and transferring as a junior education major. Blythe has a six-year-old son, and every semester she has to balance planning her classes and shifting around childcare. I guess she was still in high school when she got pregnant, and I don't know what her family life is like, but she doesn't appear to have very much help. On multiple occasions I've heard her on the phone during her break arguing with someone about the cost of childcare.

A few months ago, she showed up for her shift with her son's hand in hers and her eyes puffy. She didn't have anyone to watch him, and she couldn't miss out on her shift. Janet let the boy hang out with her in the office, and then took him to a nearby park for a

little while. Blythe has had to do this two or three times since, and she apologizes every time, but it doesn't seem to bother Janet as much as Blythe thinks it might. I've heard Janet offer to watch him more often.

As we work in tandem, Blythe's situation makes me think about my own. I am lucky; I've already graduated and wouldn't need to finish a degree the way Blythe has. But I'm still not in a great situation for bringing a child into the world. I work unsteady and irregular hours; between Quinn and I we make enough to pay rent and keep the lights on. We ride bikes a lot to cut down on gas for his car, but we always have enough to eat. According to Blythe, she pays about the same in rent as childcare each month. At that rate, we certainly would not have enough income to cover childcare. Plus all the diapers and wipes and paraphernalia babies need.

I stuff three wrinkled bills into my apron pocket, an insult from the table of four who spent fifty dollars on burgers, fries and beers, and I feel a tension rise in my shoulders. If I'm going to have a baby, I need to find a better-paying job. Or maybe I should get a second one.

But what happens when the baby arrives and needs to be cared for?

At the tail end of the dinner rush, the new kid passes me with a full bus tub, and I make the mistake of looking in a bowl half-full of minestrone. The tomato pinches my nose and the mushy mess looks too much like vomit. My stomach heaves and I run towards the bathroom, calling out to Blythe that I'll be right back.

I turn on the sink and puke into the toilet bowl.

After a few minutes, I flush and am wiping my mouth with rough brown paper towels when I hear a light knock on the door.

“Matt? You okay?” It’s Blythe. I tell her I’ll be right out, then I rinse my mouth the best I can. Gargle, spit. Gargle, spit. I won’t be able to keep working with this taste in my mouth.

I open the door to find Blythe standing by with two packets of the crackers we hand out with soups, a slice of lightly toasted bread, and a glass of clear, bubbly liquid.

“How are you feeling?” She asks as she offers me the drink, which I sip and realize is ginger ale.

I take a bite of the proffered toast. “Sorry Bly, I’m fine. Maybe I’m not quite over the bug I had.”

Blythe glances out into the restaurant; only two tables remain, and they seem content for the time being. She looks back at me, squints, and smiles gently. She drops her voice to a whisper, “I don’t want to be rude, but are you pregnant?”

I look at her, and she must see it in my face. She nods and gestures to the glass, so I take another sip.

“I carried ginger ale with me everywhere for the first three months with Emory. Morning sickness, my ass. I was sick all day, every day. Might have been luck that it was at the end of the year so I was mostly sick over the summer. Missed graduation so I could worship the porcelain god.” We walk to the kitchen and she grabs a pitcher of water. I watch her visit both tables while I nibble on the toast and take another sip. The ginger ale masks the taste of vomit, and I can feel my stomach settling. Blythe checks on my table with a smile and returns to me.

“They’re fine for a bit. How are you feeling?”

“Better, thank you. Ginger ale is a miracle drug.”

She nods and smiles. “Like I said, carried it everywhere. So, how far along are you?”

“Eight weeks. Hard to pinpoint since my period is all erratic usually.”

She puts her hand on my shoulder. We’re the same height and close in age, but right now she feels like the older, wiser sister about to impart wisdom. “It’s none of my business, and you don’t need to tell me anything, but I want you to know I’m here for you. If you need to talk, or whatever.” She leans on the counter by the register and we’re both quiet as I finish the toast and empty the glass. Without a word, she takes the glass to the fountain and refills it.

“Thanks.” I take a sip. “This wasn’t planned. I don’t even know if I want to have a baby.” She nods, her eyes watching the tables but her mind somewhere else.

“I always wanted to be a mom. Not at eighteen mind you, but it was always a part of my dreams for my life.” Blythe is playing absentmindedly with a thin gold chain I’ve noticed she always wears. “I was a stupid teenager, believing my boyfriend that I wouldn’t get pregnant if he pulled out.” She shakes her head at the naivety of young Blythe. “You seem old enough to know better than that,” she says sardonically, and I roll my eyes.

“I was only stupid enough to trust the condom.”

She nods again, a dark-haired bobblehead, and just whispers, “Fuck.”

The two at my table are looking around with the expression that tells me they’re ready for the bill.

“Do I smell like puke?” I ask Blythe in a whisper. She sniffs and shakes her head.

“You’re good.”

I close out the table, thank the couple for coming, and take their plates to the back. When I come back, Blythe is closing out her table. It's nine-thirty and the restaurant is empty. As I wipe down tables, I can hear the radio Ray and Frankie keep on low in the kitchen playing some song popular in the seventies. Blythe collects the condiment trays from the tables onto the counter and we stand side-by-side refilling salt and pepper, ketchup and mustard, sugar shakes, until a party of three walk in at nine fifty-two.

We close at ten.

Blythe sighs and starts toward the girls, but I hold her back.

"I'll take them. You go home. Pick up Emory early."

"Are you sure? You might need the rest."

"I'll be fine, promise. Plus, I might need you to cover for me at some point in the future."

She thanks me and heads to the back. I approach the chattering girls with my best customer service smile, "Good evening; just the three of you?"

Rosie meets me at my house that night with several Chinese takeout boxes in her arms. While we eat kung pow chicken and fried rice, she asks if I'm interested in a photography job for another nurse she works with. I recognize Marilou's name from Rosie's NICU tales, but I haven't met her.

"We were talking the other day and I mentioned you were responsible for that picture of Alissa and I paddle-boarding at Tahoe. I keep it on my desk and brag about my

niece, the photographer, and she asked if I thought you'd take a freelance job to take some family photos for her holiday cards.

Rosie calling me a photographer sounds like a fraud; I'm a stand-in for an actual professional. I'm actually just a waitress with a fancy camera.

During college, I switched from candid photos of strangers to landscape, influenced primarily from growing up in the Great Basin. With the valleys and basins and lakes and mountains, there is so much flora and topography that grabs my eye. People tend to be ancillary, my focus on the mountain peak climbing behind someone's shoulder or the curve of a trunk as it reaches toward the clouds. I spent a large chunk of my time outside class and work riding my bike down Virginia Street, snapping away at the casinos and cars driving beneath the famous Reno arch. I took pictures of the capitol in Carson City and the Bucket of Blood Saloon in Virginia City. I visited every shore of Lake Tahoe, and took pictures in Tahoe City, Emerald Bay, Incline Village, South Lake. I hiked up Miner's Trail to the white block "N" on the hill and took pictures of the skyline. I went out to Pyramid Lake and the Black Rock Desert. Miss Reno Rodeo in June, fireworks over the Nugget for the fourth of July, and the shine of classic cars during Hot August Nights.

During my junior year at the University, I was required to complete an internship. My advisor set me up with a local freelance photographer who was looking for an assistant. I carried equipment, set up lights, held reflectors, and worked with her in the darkroom she'd created out of a half-bathroom in her house. Amina taught me the business aspects of working freelance, although at the time I felt it wasn't necessary. I was confident I'd get a professional position and wouldn't need to manage a business.



She'd been working in the area for fifteen years, photographing weddings and graduations and families and newborns.

Working with Amina gave me an appreciation for people-focused photography. She preferred to work outdoors, and she set a session fee rather than charging per hour so she could take her time getting to know her clients and helping them be comfortable with her. She could coax a smile out of a stubborn toddler or an indifferent teenager with equal ease and humor. After the internship ended, I offered free graduation pictures for my friends so I could practice what I'd learned from Amina.

Leading up to commencement, I looked for positions as a staff photographer with a local newspaper or magazine. I searched as far west as Sacramento, south to Las Vegas, north to Idaho and east to Utah. I didn't really want to leave Reno, but we were falling into a recession and jobs were hard to find. I didn't want to fall into a cubicle, stuck behind a computer under flickering fluorescent lights, so when I couldn't find anything relevant, I stayed at the McCarran Kitchen. I still look around every once in a while, but the unemployment rate is rocketing, and I know I'm lucky just to have a job. Plus, the tips make it possible to work part-time, even if it means I don't have health insurance.

I tell Rosie I'll do Marilou's family photo session and she agrees to be my assistant. She works tomorrow and says she'll connect with Marilou about scheduling. We finish dinner and she talks about a woman she met at the Pioneer Center when she went with a friend to see "Annie Get Your Gun." She and her friend stuck around after because her friend knew the actor who played Buffalo Bill; while they caught up, Rosie struck up a conversation with the woman who played Annie Oakley. She left with Annie's number, and they have a date this weekend. She laughs and says she didn't even

know the woman's name because Rosie kept calling her Annie. She had to look at the program.

“Her name is Nomi, and she's fucking gorgeous.”

Rosie never really “came out” to me, but she did tell me coming out to her parents was embarrassing. As long as I've known her, Rosie has dated people of any gender, so it was normal in our family. But when she came out to her parents, they didn't quite understand what she meant by “bisexual.”

“So, you're a lesbian?”

“No, I like women and men.”

“So, you can't make up your mind?”

She finally had to tell her parents that she would enjoy sex with both men and women, which then they took to mean she just wanted to have orgies and, at the age of fifteen, was unacceptable.

“Are you sexually active, Rosemary?”

She had to explain that she was half a lesbian, which when I was eleven thought was hilarious, and then they seemed to understand, as long as it meant she wasn't sexually active and saving herself for marriage.

“To a man,” she told me. “They still assumed I would eventually marry a man. Bisexuality just wasn't real.” She shrugged, “I'm still lucky. They're supportive in their own way. Mom used to tell people she had a lesbian daughter and a normal son. So, you know.”

But even from my earliest memories, my aunt Rosie has always been exactly who she is. She still likes keeping her nails polished and her favorite clothes are maxi-dresses that don't require a restrictive waistband. She goes rock climbing, snowboarding and paddle boarding. She volunteers at the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival every year, and she takes road trips with friends to climb mountains in Canada. She and an ex-girlfriend backpacked the Tahoe Rim Trail one summer. She brought a boyfriend over for dinner who wore his dark hair slicked back and rode a motorcycle to our house, and then a month later a woman with a buzz cut and dark, full lashes and bright red lips showed up at the house to pick her up for a date.

On my twenty-first birthday, Rosie, my dad, Paige and I went to the buffet inside the Atlantis Casino for dinner. Afterwards we went to the cocktail lounge where I ordered a sidecar, Paige and my dad had an old fashioned each, and Rosie a Tom Collins. After his drink, my dad went to play the slot machines for a little while. Rosie, Paige and I stayed behind for another round. As she finished her second drink, the bartender approached with a third she hadn't asked for. As if we were in a movie, he pointed to the other end of the bar and said it was compliments of "the gentleman." Rosie took her glass and walked over to the man decked in a suit as if he'd just come for the office. They talked, while Paige and I kept an eye on her the entire time, and she came back twenty minutes later with his phone number written on the back of a receipt. They went out a couple times but eventually Rosie said it wouldn't work out because he spent an awful lot of time hanging out in bars after work.

As she gets closer to 40, Rosie jokes about settling down in her old age, but I see no settling in sight. She seems to be having too much fun.

After Rosie heads home, I take my camera bag out of the closet where it's been sitting, unused, for months. The familiar weight in my hands is welcoming. With a small blower, I rid the camera of dust and debris. Then I take a microfiber cloth and begin to gently clean the lens. Once my camera and equipment are all clean and ready to go, I carefully pack everything back into the black canvas camera bag and return it to the shelf in the closet. In bed I recognize my excitement and let myself fall asleep thinking about photography.

## Chapter Eleven

### Agnes

You were obsessed with *Put Me in the Zoo* for weeks. I could recite the entire book by memory. I was honestly relieved because it replaced *Goodnight Moon* and *The Monster at the End of this Book*, although I knew sooner or later a new obsession would take its place. Your dad suggested taking you to the Sacramento Zoo to see the animals in real life. He was always trying to get us outside and in the fresh air. Even if that air stank of monkey feces and saccharine cotton candy.

He drove us to Sacramento two weeks before your first birthday, on a Friday night after he got off work. You were awake and singing songs in a language all your own for the first twenty minutes, but soon you had fallen asleep. I put The Bangles in the tape deck, keeping it low so the music wouldn't wake you. Your father and I talked a little, insignificant chit chat as if we'd forgotten how to talk to each other about anything that mattered. I watched the dark sky pass along the tree line and whispered the names of

constellations. Ursa Major was bright and easy to find. Cassiopeia and Andromeda and Pegasus and Delphinus close by.

We stayed at a chain hotel, your dad carefully transferring your sleeping body from the car seat to the king-sized bed. We all slept together that night, your foot deep in my spine. It reminded me of the first few weeks after we brought you home from the hospital. My father needed a few more days to finish the crib, and Rosie wasn't quite done with the sheets she was sewing. We slept with you between us, bookends to keep you from falling off the bed. I didn't sleep much then, for more reasons than just the fear of rolling over in the night and crushing your tiny body.

You woke us before seven, babbling in our ears until I finally dragged myself out of the warm bed and into the shower. By the time I stepped from the steam, your dad had you dressed and playing pat-a-cake on the bed. While he showered, I put you in the stroller and walked to a corner store where I bought donuts, apples, cups of coffee, and a small jug of milk. We ate and drank breakfast on the bed, and then we were out the door. Getting you buckled into your car seat was easier than usual when I reminded you we were going to the zoo to see all the animals.

We arrived just after opening and were only three out of maybe a dozen people meandering between exhibits. Sacramento in July is hot, even early in the morning, but there was a lot of shade. I pushed the stroller while you clapped and laughed at each animal we stopped to admire. Your dad would name the animal, and you were happy to deliver appropriate responses.

“Mattie, look at the owl. What does the owl say?”

“Who!”

“Mattie, can you roar like the lion?”

“Rrrroar!”

“Mattie, how do you sound like an elephant?”

And he laughed, head thrown back, as you screamed like a banshee, shaking your head, and blowing a sloppy wet raspberry.

According to you, the zebra neighed like a horse, the giraffe made the same throaty croak as the frogs, and the tiger purred like the neighbor’s calico cat.

Watching the two of you was like watching a rehearsed scene I hadn’t memorized the lines for. I felt left out, but there was something about watching him interact with you that made me smile. I thought about joining in, but ultimately my insecurity won over as I struggled to name an animal you hadn’t already imitated. *Hey Mattie, what does the depressed anxious mother say?*

I pushed the stroller along the walkway, my hands tingling from the vibrations running through the wheels to the handle. As you waved at the tiger, I listened as a yellow-shirted docent explained to a small group of kids how tigers used their tails to communicate. A woman in a pink tank top shoved past me, pinching my fingers against the stroller handle, and I wondered if my instinct to flip her off or shove back would manifest in my tiger tail as rapid side to side movement. I didn’t get a chance to do either because the group of kids, led by the docent in her stifling long sleeves, passed in front of me and at least two people stepped on my toes.

I asked your dad through grit teeth if he was ready to move on.

As we walked, the number of bodies alongside and opposite us was steadily increasing. My toes ached from another unaware foot-stomper. I lost count of how many

times my elbows were bumped, my shoulders brushed, and glares from those who found the stroller's width inconvenient.

It was close to noon when your dad asked what we should do for lunch. The sun was high and the beads of sweat on my forehead started to run south.

"That breeze feels nice," he said as I wiped my brow with the back of my hand and swiped the water bottle from the side pocket of the backpack he wore. I gulped four swallows of tepid water. "What's wrong Aggie?"

"I'm hot. And tired. And I have a headache. Is there any ibuprofen in the backpack?"

He swung the backpack onto the front of his body and fumbled through it. His face was red, but he didn't look as uncomfortable as I felt. The sweat dripped down my neck. My tank top stuck to my back, a feeling of claustrophobia sinking in.

I'd felt like this once before, although in the moment at the zoo I didn't recall the specific memory. I just needed to flee the crowd and the sun. The first time I felt claustrophobic was before you were born, after I met your dad. We were going to a concert in Wingfield Park, near the Truckee River. I borrowed my dad's car and parked it in one of the casino garages. It must have been a Friday or Saturday; the garage was so full I had to park on the top floor. I took the elevator down, and the damn thing got stuck between the fourth and third floor. It was just me in the elevator, and at first I thought if I waited a moment it would get started again. When it didn't, I pushed the call button. In the moment of static the walls seemed closer than before. I tried to slow my breathing, but my heart pounded and even though the man with a gruff voice on the other end of the call button said I would be fine, I was certain I was about to plummet to my death. It was

either that, or I would suffocate in the metal box and never see the sky again. When maintenance finally got the thing going, I rushed out and savored the fresh air filling my lungs. I avoided all elevators for quite some time after that. Even now, I prefer elevators that at least have windows looking outside.

At the zoo, it was different. My head and heart were pounding, my breathing was shaky, and I felt the crush of people around me. But I also knew I was in no immediate danger. My panicky feelings were so unreasonable, and I knew it, but that didn't make the feelings abate.

It felt like hours as your dad dug through the backpack, finally coming up empty of any medicine except a half-empty tube of Orajel.

"The gift shop will have Tylenol or something." Your dad looked around for a moment. "Maybe you're just dehydrated. I'll refill the water bottle."

"I'll do it. It's in the shade." I moved toward the metal fountain, an oasis from people.

I glanced back to see if David was following me, and I noticed the stroller was empty.

"Mattie!" I said, causing him to look at the stroller and then start scanning the crowd. You weren't quite walking yet. You could cruise around the coffee table at home, maybe take a step or two before landing on the cushioned pillow of your diaper. You would take that step, look at me in amazement, and then you'd be on the floor bewildered. You could climb in and out of the stroller but hadn't figured out the buckle. I had forgotten to buckle it several times, and as I looked for your face in the crowd, I knew I had forgotten again. It was an ongoing joke with your dad that you would learn



how to buckle your own seatbelt before I would remember to do it myself. Now I wouldn't need to remember. I had failed to protect you and you were gone.

All I could think about was the eerie and ominous male voices from years of watching *Unsolved Mysteries* and *America's Most Wanted*. One of the hosts had a son who was kidnapped. I couldn't remember if the boy's body had ever been found. I was certain I would never see you again, just like he never saw his son again. As I watched people pass and wondered if someone had taken you, I couldn't let go of the image of your lifeless body. My heart beat a hole in my chest.

“Matilda!”

I could hear your dad calling, and I was amazed at the calm in his voice. His hands were in his pockets. That seemed the most absurd thing at the time.

My vision went out of focus and something caught in my throat. My heart struggled to beat through the vise of panic. I knew you were already gone. I had pictured your disappearance too many times and willed it into reality. You weren't taken from the front porch when I left for a minute to refill a glass of lemonade. You weren't burned in a fire after I left you with the neighbor's fourteen-year-old daughter so your dad and I could selfishly have an adults-only dinner. It didn't happen when I left you in the car while I ran into the post office because I didn't want to wake you, but the brake disengaged and sent the car flying into the non-existent traffic. It wasn't at the grocery store when I turned for a second, or when I stopped the stroller and bent to tie my shoe while we walked the dog, or you choking on a rock found on the carpet while I was ignoring you to read on the couch nearby. It wasn't any of those times, but it was going to be this time. And it was completely my fault.

The vise tightened around my heart and I couldn't breathe. I gasped, searching my blurred vision for a glimpse of you, of your dad, of something or someone familiar who could help me. But everyone kept walking and he was looking for you and all I could hear was the drum of my heart in my ears and behind my eyes and shrieks of the monkeys.

Without warning, the edges of my vision cleared, a pinpoint appeared and I saw the back of your head in front of the monkey enclosure. Your dark hair stopped and curled just below your ears, reminding me of your dad's when he let his hair grow out. You were wearing the blue and pink striped dress I'd bought for family photos the month before because it matched both my favorite blouse and one of your dad's ties. The photos turned out beautiful; perfectly matched and poised as if we'd stepped out of the Stepford pamphlet. In the photos nobody would ever tell you had spent the entire morning red-faced, screaming because you spilled Cheerios and Atticus Finch had eaten them all. That damn dog was too quick and never too far when you were eating.

Those were the pictures they would have shown alongside our desperate pleas to return our kidnapped baby. Or alongside my mugshot when I was arrested for child neglect or abuse and sentenced to life behind bars.

I wanted to run and scoop you into my arms, never letting go. I wanted to pull you by the arm, scream about how dangerous it was to leave your parents. I wanted to cry and scream and kick myself for forgetting to buckle the stupid stroller belt. I wanted to crumple to the ground and pound my skull to pavement for putting you in danger. Instead, I was cemented. I couldn't move.

Your dad got to you first. Any worry etched on his face was gone in an instant as he crouched beside you and pointed to the monkeys. It occurred to me you had probably only been out of sight for a couple minutes, if that.

“Hey Mattie-Hattie, what does the monkey say?” It was his let’s-not-alarm-Matilda voice, one that would become familiar over the next few years as he brought it out during my ensuing panic attacks.

I was still trying to catch my breath, to slow the beating of my heart to temper the rage--at myself, at you, at a world growing more deadly as you found your way farther from me.

You turned then and looked right at me; you’d known where I was the entire time. You hadn’t lost sight of me. You walked straight toward me, grinning with pride the whole five steps until I bent down, opened my arms, and enveloped you.

## Chapter Twelve

### Matilda

Although Rosie and Paige offered to be with me when I tell my dad, I decide to meet him for lunch just the two of us. I’m an adult and should face him as such. Dad works mostly south of town, which is far for a bike ride, so Paige lets me borrow her car while she’s at work. We meet at a park down the street from where he’s working on a build. I get there first, with tuna sandwiches, potato chips, apples, and bottles of water, and find one of the picnic tables empty. There are a handful of kids nearby on the playground and I watch them as I wait.

The first time I remember having to deliver bad news to my dad, I was thirteen and had failed a test in science class. I had to get his signature on the test since I also hadn't turned in some homework assignments, which meant I had to come clean. I was devastated by his reaction; he yelled at me about being irresponsible, how I was going to have to work harder to make up for the F. I was grounded for a week and for the rest of the quarter I had to show him my homework, so he knew it was getting done. The yelling and the punishment were bad enough, but hearing him say in a resigned voice, "I'm so disappointed in you," was just about the worst feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I've broken the rules over the years. I skipped school, snuck into an R-rated movie, got caught in a lie. These were harmless, and although he'd be disappointed, a week would go by, and I'd feel forgiven.

This is different. My stomach aches as I watch my dad's pick-up enter the parking lot, my leg is moving uncontrollably under the park bench. I try to convince myself to not bring up the pregnancy, to just have a nice lunch with my dad. But I know I need to tell him. I don't keep secrets from my dad. It was just us for so long; I wasn't any good at lying to him. I always ended up spilling the details before long.

While we eat, dad tells me he's decided to start dating again. He says he feels awkward in his forties, with a grown daughter, and going on dates. While he remained single for most of my childhood, there was a small chunk of time when I was in middle school that he dated a couple women. For the most part he kept these women out of my life, not wanting me to form bonds in case it didn't work out between them. It didn't work out between any of them, so he gave up and turned his focus to being a caring and

present dad. He admits it was an excuse, but now that I'm grown, the house is awful lonely.

I tell him about my upcoming photo session with Marilou and her family, segue into the announcement that Quinn was laid off, and then I know I have to speak up. I wait until he's taken a bite of his apple.

"Dad, I'm pregnant."

His face is blank, frozen, as he finishes chewing and swallows. He stares at me as if trying to solve a complicated math problem in his head. I hate the way his face looks when it falls into disappointment, so I take a bite of my sandwich and look away, toward the children on the playground who have started a game of Tag.

"I thought I taught you better."

His words are clipped like a nail to the quick.

"How could you be so stupid and reckless?" His voice is low, unsettled. I don't try to hold back the tears as they rush from my eyes. "Irresponsible," he mutters as he stuffs the leftovers of his sandwich and apple core into the paper bag.

"It was an accident," I say through tears, my voice shaking. "We were careful, Quinn and I. It just—"

"Not careful enough." He stands, balling the sack in his hands. "I have to get back to work. I can't deal with this right now."

I scramble to stand beside him, transported to thirteen years old, desperate for his acceptance and love and forgiveness. "Dad, please—"

He looks directly in my eyes and shakes his head. "You're a child." His voice is cold. "You aren't anywhere near ready for the responsibility of caring for a baby. Having

a baby right now would be selfish.” He steps back, putting distance between us. “I need to get to work.”

I watch as he crosses the grass, throws the balled-up bag into a trash can, and walks to his truck. I want to run after him, beg him to talk to me, but I am frozen and tears water the grass beneath my feet in despair.

As his truck pulls out of the lot, I collapse to the ground and choke on my sobs. A voice appears behind me and look up to see a woman, not much older than me, standing a few feet away with unease on her face.

“Are you okay?”

It’s all I can do to nod and wipe my face with the sleeve of my sweater. I grab the remnants of the picnic and hurry away to the car. I throw the trash in the backseat and back out of the spot. The tuner is set to Paige’s favorite station and when “Sabotage” comes on, I turn it out to drown out my father’s voice, furious and disappointed.

*Stupid. Reckless. Irresponsible. Selfish.*

*Stupid. Reckless. Irresponsible. Selfish.*

I merge onto the freeway and head south. I push on the accelerator and pass the exit for home, past Rosie’s, Paige’s, and I keep going until I come to the exit for the Mount Rose highway. Without thinking, I pull the car to the right and race past the gas station where my dad always stopped for Slurpees when we were on our way home from a lake trip. Outside the attached convenience store is a statue of Mark Twain sitting on a bench, admiring the view of gas pumps, waiting for the next traveler to stop for refreshments or a fill-up. There are pictures of me at varying ages, some with Paige or Rosie, one with Quinn, sitting next to Mr. Twain and smiling as if we’ve just finished

catching up and he's told me his idea for a new story. I fly by housing developments in progress, a fire station, and am soon driving up the winding highway embraced by Jeffrey and Ponderosa pines until it opens up and the Washoe Valley dips below the mountain road. I slow for a sharp curve near the slope-roofed Reindeer Lodge, a dark wood-carved bear oversees the property littered with ancient tractors, fire trucks, and a row of trucks fitted with snowplows.

As I pass the ski resort, I roll the window down, "Bulls on Parade" vibrating my heart, and let the pine fill the car. The smell is intoxicating. At the next turn off I pull the car off the highway and throw it into Park. Outside, I stand at the railing and look out at the valley and mountains. I'm almost positive this is the same turn off where my dad used to take me stargazing with the telescope he bought when he was a teenager and first started to study the sky.

When he was in high school, my dad became interested in Roman mythology. This led him to a fascination with the night sky, locating constellations in particular. He saved up his allowance, mowed lawns, and shoveled snow in order to buy a telescope. He spent many nights looking up at the stars, memorizing the eighty-eight constellations and the myths they represented. He said he and Agnes took me stargazing when I was little, but the first time I remember going was when I was about six. Agnes would have been gone just about a year at that time. I remember my dad zipped me into my bib snow pants and a puffy snow jacket. It was late autumn, and he was worried I'd get too cold up on the mountain. My snow clothes were a warm hug that lulled me to a dozy sleep on the drive up the mountain.

While he set up the telescope by the bed of the truck, I sat with my back against the window and looked out into the darkness alighted from Reno below. The silhouetted mountains closing in our little valley watched over and protected us. My nose quickly grew cold, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want to leave.

My dad let me look through the telescope as he pointed it towards various portions of the ink-dark sky. He showed me the moon and I imagined bouncing across the cratered surface like I'd seen the astronauts do. We looked at Venus and he told me that a thick cloud covered the planet, which had acid rain and was punctuated with volcanoes. He taught me Venus was named after the Roman goddess of love and beauty; her son was Cupid, who I knew as the cherubic heart-tipped arrow-wielding boy on cards delivered for Valentine's Day. He traced Leo in the sky and told me the lion represented my zodiac sign; I was disappointed when he said we wouldn't be able to see his scorpion, but he promised to bring me back another time when it would be visible. Eventually, as I began to tire, we sat back together in the bed of the truck, and he told me the tale of Hercules defeating the Nemean Lion until I fell asleep under his arm.

I look up at the sky puffy with clouds. The stars aren't likely to be visible tonight. I lean on the railing in front of me and look down into the valley, a tension inside my gut I thought would disappear when I told my dad about the small human growing within my body. Instead, the knot twists and tightens until I can't stand in silence any longer. My tears are not enough. I lean back and scream into the echoing void.

## Chapter Thirteen



## Agnes

Ever since I've known him, David has had a fascination with the stars. We spent many nights lying in the bed of his pick-up staring at the faint lights like paint splattered across the sky. He'd point above and tell me the myths behind the constellations he could find, or he'd tell me about the naming of particular stars, galaxies, clusters...I didn't always know what he was talking about, but I liked the music of his voice and the warmth of his body near mine.

The first couple of times we went, I thought he was trying to be romantic. Stargazing, telling stories; it was like a scene out of a movie. The first time, the night ended when he said it was getting late and he drove me home. The second time, I used a tip from a friend and told him I was getting cold. I was hoping for cuddling, maybe our first magical kiss under the light of the moon; he handed me his sweatshirt and continued talking about a mythical creature stuck in the stars. By the third trip, after our first kiss and we'd had an awkward conversation confirming I was, in fact, his girlfriend, I knew star-gazing trips were something more than a gawky teenage boy's attempt at romance. They were special.

Many of our memories involved the stars. After he first said I love you, he told me Vega's blue color indicates a surface temperature 7,000 degrees hotter than our sun and that it's burning fuel faster and will run out in a half-billion years. He asked me to marry him on a hiking trip as we gazed up at a moonless sky over the Grand Canyon, the Milky Way glittering over the South Rim. For his twentieth birthday, I painted our constellations together, the crab and scorpion dancing together across a dark blue sky. One Christmas I named a star for him and framed the sky chart showing the location of

his star. Years later, long after we no longer knew each other, I learned what a scam naming stars was. Sometimes I wonder if he held onto the chart, or if he still knows where his star sits in the sky.

Less than a year and a half before I left, David wanted to take you up the mountain to star-gaze. It was November and I fear you would be too cold, that we should wait for the spring. But your dad said we'd only be out a little while, and we could bundle up. Before I took you out of the truck, I covered your pajamas in an extra layer, traded your shoes for wool socks and slippers, and tucked a hat over your ears. I pulled your winter coat over your arms and asked if you were toasty warm. You laughed and agreed you were toasted. I kissed your nose and lifted you out of the truck.

You held your father's hand as he pointed in the direction of the city and tried to explain that was where our house was, but you seemed skeptical. You wanted to watch and wave at the cars driving by instead. As the number of cars dwindled and the sky began to darken, I lifted you onto the bed of the truck and sat with you in my lap, tucking a blanket around us both. Your nose and cheeks were pink from the cool night's breeze. We shared a Thermos of hot chocolate that was really just sort of warm so it wouldn't burn your tongue, ate cookies, and waited for the moon to rise over the mountains.

When I noticed a star high and lonely, I pointed it out to you and we sang "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" together. I told you both to make a wish, and then closed my eyes tight to wish to be a better mother.

Your father stood at the tailgate after that and scanned the sky. The dark sky from that turnoff on the Mount Rose highway was littered with stars. To the northeast, the

lights of Reno reminded me that we were not far from home, but looking up was as if nothing existed besides the pin pricks above us.

“There,” he said after a moment and pointed towards a section of the sky.

“There’s Cassiopeia.”

I told him I couldn’t see where he was pointing, so he hefted himself into the truck bed and sat opposite you. He took my gloved hand in his and guided my arm out, tracing the sky with my pointed finger.

“You see the Big Dipper, and this is Polaris?” I knew I did; he’d taught me to find the North Star back in high school. “The Dipper and Cassiopeia are on opposite sides of Polaris. So you can draw an imaginary line through the North Star to find her. She looks like a stretched-out W.”

“I think I see her.”

“I see her,” you said, looking in the wrong direction. Your eyelids were already heavy. It was late and past your bedtime.

“Which one was Cassiopeia?”

And so, he told us the story of Queen Cassiopeia of Aethiopa who was beautiful but vain. She claimed her daughter, Andromeda, was more beautiful than the daughters of the sea god. Poseidon was angry and sent the sea monster Cetus to the coasts of Aethiopa. To appease the wrath of the sea god, Cassiopeia and King Cephus chained Andromeda to a rock near the sea as a sacrifice to Cetus. Perseus saved Andromeda, killed the beast, and married her. Poseidon was furious Cassiopeia was not punished, and so he tied her to a chair in the heavens, so she would revolve upside down half the year.

“Cassiopeia hangs in the sky with Andromeda and Perseus.” He took my hand again and guided me again to find the lovers. The world around us was silent but for our breath and the wind in the leaves. You had fallen asleep, your snores light like the breeze. We were illuminated by the lights of a passing car for a brief moment before it disappeared around a sharp curve in the road.

As he told the story of Andromeda’s mother sacrificing her to save the kingdom, I wondered if David was trying to send me a message. My mother told me I tended to read more into the things people said than they meant, but this seemed to be just a defect in my wiring. I didn’t know how to stop or control my thoughts, and she seemed to think it more annoying than damaging. By the end of the story, when Perseus saved Andromeda and she bore him seven sons and one daughter, I wasn’t sure what he was trying to tell me. Maybe he really was just telling one of his star stories.

My legs had fallen asleep with you. I was afraid to move, either to wake you or to feel the stabbing static in my legs as the blood would flow freely. I thought about the choice Cassiopeia made and felt frustrated. Why did she have to sacrifice her daughter? Weren’t we told as mothers that we were the ones who had to make self-sacrifices? We had to sacrifice ourselves for the good and protection of our daughters, our children. We were supposed to give up our bodies, our jobs, our selves. We were supposed to give up anything to provide for our children. Our suffering was supposed to save them. Cassiopeia should have chained herself to that rock to save Andromeda any pain.

Sacrifice was what being a good mother was.

Your father and I had been quiet for a while. I could hear him breathing on the other side of the truck bed, awake and probably contemplating the universe above us, wishing he could escape among the stars rather than be chained to me.

“Do you think she was a good mother?”

As if he expected the question, he responded right away in a quiet voice. “I think she did what she thought was right.”

How could I tell him I couldn't possibly trust myself with what I thought was right? I couldn't find the words to explain my inner turmoil and so my silence settled and thickened in the air like a fog between us.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Matilda

Two days pass without hearing from my father.

At work Blythe seems to sense something is amiss. We are working together the night after I tell my father, on a slow night when there is a hesitation of winter in the air. November is tricky, teetering between autumn and winter like it can't make up its mind to which season it belongs. The chill in the air at the tip of my nose when I take a bag out to the dumpster smells like the coming snowfall. Very few cars pass by; there is no one out and about on the sidewalks. There is a hush over the city as we wait to see if November will bring snow for Thanksgiving.

When I get back from the dumpster, the restaurant is empty and Blythe is perched in front of the register on the stool. She's holding a small paperback below the edge of the counter, out of view if anyone were to come in the front doors.

I lean on the counter a couple feet away and stare out the glass-paneled doors, the parking lot empty save Blythe's aging sedan, Janet and Ray's dark blue minivan, and a white Ford truck that's been there all day. Janet gets annoyed when college kids abandon their cars here all day, but she can't bring herself to have them towed if the parking lot isn't expected to fill. Ray thinks she's too soft and will get taken advantage of, but he doesn't go over her head to have any of them towed. My bike is chained to the rack near the door, next to Frankie's mountain bike. The 7-Eleven next door is lit up from within like a sun glare against the darkening night sky. They have a few more cars in their lot, people moving in and out of the convenience store for their cigarettes and bags of chips. I'm starting to crave a too-sweet cherry Slurpee when Blythe interrupts my woolgathering by setting a glass of ginger ale next to me. I hadn't noticed her get up from the stool, but now she's beside me with her own full glass, probably Dr. Pepper.

"How are you feeling?"

I shrug and sip at the drink. "I'm not really queasy, except when certain smells hit me. How are you and Emory?"

"Fine," she says, waving her hand dismissively. "Same shit, different day. Em's at a new day care. A home-based one with this woman I met through a friend. He's been there three times and loves her, and the other kids don't seem like jerks. She charges less than the centers which is a huge plus."

She looks at me sideways and I know she wants to ask questions, maybe isn't sure we are close enough that she can. I head her off. "I told my dad. Yesterday. He...didn't have the best reaction."

Blythe fiddles with a napkin, folding it into tiny triangles, unfolding, and then starting again. “Telling family is the hardest. I knew my parents would be disappointed, but I didn’t know they’d kick me out of the house.”

As we wait for closing time, Blythe tells me her story. She grew up in Sparks, just near Reno, met her first boyfriend junior year at Reed High, and got pregnant in the middle of senior year. She tells me he’s no longer in their lives, having moved to Oregon for school, but his parents try to help out. Emory spends one weekend a month with those grandparents, and they give her money to make up for the child support their son would never part with.

Blythe’s parents were another story. They were disappointed to find their oldest daughter was with child and, to keep her from being a bad influence on her younger sisters, they suggested that after graduation she find somewhere else to live. She graduated, missing the ceremony because of what she called all-day sickness. She moved into an apartment with friends, started working right away, and Emory was born three months later. They have since moved to another apartment, sharing the two-bedroom with one friend. She wants to teach high school math. Besides the Kitchen, she also works part-time tutoring at the Math Center on campus.

As she tells me her story, I am amazed at her resilience and positivity. There is no hardness in her voice as she talks about her parents, only a wistful longing when she mentions having not seen her sisters since she left.

“Delia will have graduated last spring. Kaylee is a senior this year. I keep holding Dell will have moved out, gone to college, and will reach out to reconnect. Same with Kay. If Em can’t know his grandparents, it’d be nice if he knew his aunties.”

Blythe absentmindedly tore her napkin into incrementally smaller squares until the counter is covered with confetti.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to dominate the conversation. Do you think your dad will come around?”

I think for a moment as I take the last sip of ginger ale and set the sweating glass in front of me. “I hope so. I mean, I think so. But right now, I just don’t know.”

“What about your mom?”

“She’s not around,” I say as Blythe sweeps the confetti into her hand and dumps it into the trash can. “She left when I was five.”

“Really? Where did she go?”

I shrug. “She just left. Didn’t say anything, leave a note. Neither my dad nor I have heard from her since.”

“Damn.” Blythe shakes her head. “I can’t imagine what that was like. Growing up without her. Do you think about her?”

“All the time lately.” I take our empty glasses from the counter and put them in the dish bin. She takes a rag and wipes the rings of condensation from the counter.

“I’m sorry.” Blythe tosses the rag into the same bin as the glasses.

We both move to start closing procedures. As I mop, I remember my decision to find my mother and mailing the picture with the hopes Grandpa would reach out. I hate the thought that I’ve upset an elderly man living alone who must be missing his family so much. To lose your wife and then your daughter. I can’t bear to think about how lonely and isolated he must be. I hope he has plenty of people around him in Florida. Maybe he’s even found love. Or maybe he sits alone in his little house watching “Jeopardy” and



“Wheel of Fortune,” and eating canned soup that goes cold too quickly. I try to picture him, but instead end up seeing Mr. Rogers, changing into his cardigan and smiling into the camera, the world his friend.

I don't realize I'm crying until Blythe hands me a tissue. I thank her.

“When I was pregnant, I cried all the time. Even silly things. Not that whatever you're crying about is silly, but it's exhausting. I cried at a Wendy's commercial.” She pats me on the back and, before heading to the register to count the drawer, says, “It'll be okay.”

I dip the mop back into the bucket of sudsy water, let the vines slap against the tile floor, and pull it back and forth. I want to believe it will be okay. I want to believe my dad will come back to me, that my grandfather will be happy, that I can raise a child and won't fuck it up. I want to believe, but it's so hard when I don't know what happened to my own mother. Why did she leave? If I knew, maybe I could be better prepared for what to expect. Maybe I can learn from her and avoid making the same mistakes. If I know why she left, I can be reassured that I won't leave.

After closing the restaurant, Blythe and I head outside to find a light dusting of snow across the parking lot. She offers me a ride home and helps me put my bike on the rack on the back of her car. As we wait for the car to warm up, I glance in the back and see Emory's booster seat. A faded stuffed dinosaur lays nearby, with a scattering of Cheerios and goldfish crackers across the seat and on the floor. There's a slight smell of spoiled milk and Blythe apologizes.

“There's a sippy cup back there somewhere that I keep forgetting to find and take into the house.”

She has to pick up Emory before taking me home because he has to be picked up by a certain time, which is fine with me. It's preferable to riding my bike with the icy air stinging my face. I wait in the car, and she leaves the engine running while she enters a one-story house with a lawn littered with children's bikes of varying sizes, a deflated rubber ball, and one of those small red cars with a yellow roof that every child seems to have at some point. I had one. I remember pushing it with my feet, Flintstone-style, down the sidewalk in front of the house I grew up in. I throw my fist against the steering wheel and yell a "honk" in place of an actual noise coming from the wheel. The car stops with a skid, and I get out to see a woman standing nearby. She smiles and waves at me. I haven't seen her in a while; she must have been at the store or somewhere. I run to her, and she lifts me toward the sky. She places a kiss on my cheek, nuzzles her face to mine. She smells like lavender and dryer sheets.

Blythe opens one of the back doors, interrupting this surprising memory. I turn to greet Emory as she helps him into his seat and pulls the belt across his lap.

"Ms. Nancy let us paint with our fingers!" He wiggles all ten of his little fingers and I see specks of red, blue and purple left behind. "It was *so* messy."

"Sounds fun. What did you paint?"

"A T-rex. He's stomping in the jungle looking for food. Did you know the T-rex eats other dinosaurs?" Emory keeps talking as his mom gets into the car and drives toward my house. "He's not a vet-a-garian like grandma. He's a car-vi-door."

Blythe smiles, her eyes focused on the road. "Ve-ge-tarian, remember? Like vegetables."

“Oh yeah. Ve-ge-garian. Matilda, did you know the stegosaurus is a ve-ge-garian?”

“That’s pretty cool.” I turn to look at him again. He flashes a grin and I notice a hole between his teeth. “Hey, did you lose something?”

“My tooth! I lost my tooth yesterday and today the tooth fairy gave me a DOLLAR. Mama says I’ll lose all my teeth but it’s okay.” He reassures me, “They’ll grow back. And then I’ll have enough money to buy a velociraptor and a pterodactyl.”

“He can say those names, but carnivore gives him trouble,” Blythe says under her breath. I laugh. “He kiddo, which dinosaur did you color in your book yesterday?” She glances at me, holding in a laugh.

“You mean the triceratops? Or the parasaurolophus,” he says without a hint of stumble or stutter, each syllable enunciated perfectly. “Did you know the parasaurolophus weighs more than Mama’s car? And he’s a veg-a-garian too.”

I watch Blythe chuckle and then listen as she prompts him to tell her about his day. He’s in the middle of describing lunch down to the last crumb when she pulls up to the curb in front of my house.

“Kiddo, stay put. I’m going to help Mattie get her bike out of the trunk.”

“Kay,” he says in a sing-song voice. “Bye Mattie!”

“Bye Emory,” I say as I get out of the car. I meet Blythe by the trunk, and we unmount my bike. “Thanks for the ride. I can’t believe how cold it’s gotten already.”

“Any time.” We set the bike on the sidewalk and Blythe starts to head to the driver’s door, but she doubles back and stands near the trunk again. “It’s tough, Mattie, don’t get me wrong. Some days are so hard I question whether I made the right choice.

But I did. That kiddo makes the struggle worth it, you know? Just...don't make a choice based on your dad's reaction, your mom disappearing, or whatever. The choice you make will be the right one. For you."

"Thanks," I start walking my bike toward the porch and then call back just before she opens the car door. "Hey, do you want to get together sometime? Outside of work. We could see a movie or something? You, me, and Emory."

Blythe smiles over the roof of the car. "Do you mind watching G-rated movies?"

"Not at all."

"Free this weekend?" I nod. "I'll call you tomorrow. Have a good night, Mattie."

"Night," I say; she gets in and drives away. After I put my bike away, I retrieve the mail from the box at the end of the porch steps. Inside there's a small pile of grocery advertisements, the power bill, the latest *Time* magazine, and a small manila envelope addressed to me. I toss everything on the table and crawl into bed without changing my clothes.

I haven't spoken to Quinn since he left for his parents' house. I'm angry with him and refuse to reach out first. I think about the baby and hold my stomach, wondering how long it would be until I will actually feel it moving around.

"It might just be you and me." My voice breaks the silence of the house and I feel more alone. Without my dad, without Quinn, I can't raise a baby. Blythe struggles every single day, and even if she thinks it's worth it, I think I would end up resenting the baby. Without Quinn, I have to move out. Rosie would take me in a heartbeat, but that's not a long-term solution. She doesn't need her niece and illegitimate baby crowding her lifestyle. Paige lives in a two-bedroom with a roommate; there's hardly couch space for a

third person. If my dad forgives me, he'll let me live at the house. There's my old bedroom and Rosie's so I wouldn't have to share with the baby. But what man in his forties and starting to date wants his poor pregnant daughter leeching off him?

It might be better, for me and this baby, to just get an abortion.

The thought catches in my throat and I cry. I curl into myself, my arms across my stomach, and wish my mother could tell me what to do.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Agnes

It had been weeks since I had a full night's sleep. I'd get an hour or two, but mostly I would lie in bed listening to David breathing, the wind whispering through the sycamore in the front yard, cars driving by. Sometimes I'd get up and clean. I did laundry, rearranged kitchen cupboards, dusted every surface. I pulled the ladder from the garage one night to clear the dust piled on the blades of the ceiling fan and the tops of the cabinets. I cleaned the windows, all except the ones in the bedrooms where my family slept, even using an old toothbrush to clean the grooves in the rails. I sorted through instruction manuals, tossing the ones for items we no longer owned and alphabetizing the others in a two-drawer filing cabinet in the third bedroom we used as an office.

Some nights I'd turn on the TV and stare at the screen until dawn. I hoped the music of the Weather Channel or QVC might lull me to sleep. But hours passed until I could see the sun start to peek over the hills through the living room window, reminding me the rest of the world was almost ready to wake up. Sometimes I'd put on your father's coat and my house shoes to go into the backyard and watch the sun rise. I'd lie on one of

the yellowed plastic lounge chairs handed down to us from my parents' backyard. Once the sky was light, I'd go inside, start a pot of coffee, and sit at the table to wait for the bedroom alarm to sound.

Exhaustion settled into my pores and affected my every action. The doctor's office called to ask about an appointment I missed; I apologized but was ashamed to admit I didn't know what day of the week it was. I watched you eating Cheerios and sliced bananas for breakfast and all I could see were signs I had failed you. Your hair was tangled and greasy; I couldn't remember the last time you had a bath. You'd worn the same pajamas for a week and your face was visibly dirty. Had I brushed your teeth the night before? If I had shirked my part of the bedtime routine, were your teeth slowly rotting in your skull?

One evening your dad got home from work and asked about dinner. I realized I hadn't even fed you lunch. You were sitting at the kitchen table, drawing while snacking on Goldfish crackers and sliced apples.

What kind of mother forgets to feed her child? A monster.

One Saturday you and your father went to Blockbuster to pick out a movie. I stayed home to try and paint in the garage, but instead I sprawled out on the couch and closed my eyes. My eyes burned from the lack of sleep, but still, for the hour and a half you were gone, I didn't sleep. We watched movies the rest of the day, ordering pizza for delivery. You cuddled between us on the couch and asked to stay up late to finish "The Land Before Time." Only twenty minutes were left, so we conceded. As the credits rolled, I looked over to find you struggling to keep your eyes open. In the bathroom, I brushed your teeth twice as long, in case I could make up the difference in my neglect. You squirmed the

entire time, but I had you stand between my legs while I sat on the toilet so I could hold you still. As I tucked you in, I wondered if letting you stay up past your bedtime was another way I was a terrible mother. My own never let me stay up past my bedtime, but this paled in comparison with the laundry list of things I'd done wrong for you. I tried to take your hug good night as forgiveness.

Back in the living room, "The Hunt for Red October" was in the VCR and your father had a bowl of fresh popcorn and glasses of wine waiting on the coffee table for a makeshift date night.

When I first told my mom I was pregnant, she was full of advice on how to be the best wife and mother. She stressed regular date nights, but it became easier and cheaper for us to stay up late to share a bottle of wine, something cheap and sweet from the grocery store, and watch a movie. After you were born, I didn't see a movie that wasn't rated G or PG in a theater until after I left. I sat in the dark theater amongst strangers, gorged myself on slippery, radioactive yellow popcorn, and watched a masked maniac hack teenagers to death. It was oddly delightful.

During the movie with your father, as I sat with my head on his shoulder watching Sean Connery order his crew to abandon ship, I glanced out the back door just in time to see a shadow pass the sliding glass.

I jumped up and told your father to call the police. Someone was outside, trying to find a way into the house. My heart was pounding. He paused the movie and turned on the backyard light. The light revealed nothing, and David told me it was probably a neighbor's cat or a squirrel.

"It was much larger than a squirrel."

He looked out at the yard, his hand moving to open the door. I jumped up and whisper-shouted for him to stop. He looked at me and it occurred in the back of my mind that he seemed more concerned with me than the figure in the yard.

“I saw a person.” I was indignant. “They’re waiting outside for you to open the door so they can attack you. Then they’ll get me and Mattie.” My voice trembled; a sickly flutter grew in my stomach. I was certain we were in danger. My hands shook.

He opened the door slowly and I picked up a heavy lamp to follow him, but I was too scared to go outside. While he disappeared from the safety of the light, I counted the seconds. If he was out of sight for more than 30 seconds, I would close and lock the door, call the police.

He was back in 22 seconds.

“There’s no one out there, Aggie. No one is going to hurt us.”

He locked the back door, turned off the light, took the lamp from me. As he replaced the lamp on the side table, I flipped the outside light on again and scanned the yard.

The backyard was surrounded by a plank wood fence so we could only see the tops of the neighbor’s house to the rear. Most of the yard was overgrown grass with a scattering of toys. The gray slate patio stretched to the right where David had built a fire pit cast in stone. There was a small garden in the far-left corner where I taught you to care for carrots, tomatoes, strawberries. The few trees on the fence line hardly reached the top of the fence; we’d only planted them two or three years earlier. I couldn’t see the side yards where we kept the trash bins and a small shed for gardening tools, but there was definitely nobody in the immediate vicinity of the backyard.



Still, I knew someone was out there waiting to get in.

As I shook, David turned the light off again and closed the blinds. “I promise, there is nobody out there. We are safe. Let’s go to bed, you look exhausted.”

“I can’t sleep.”

I hadn’t said anything aloud before, but he must have known. Months earlier, he had been the first to wake on weekdays. At the alarm he would get up, start the coffee, and shower. If I didn’t get up when he was showering, he’d coax me up after so we could have coffee together before he left for work. Those quiet mornings felt like stolen time together.

We hadn’t done that in a long time; I was up before him these days. I hadn’t had a cup of coffee in two weeks, afraid the caffeine was contributing to my insomnia.

That night, he asked how much sleep I was getting, and I said two or three hours. Maybe four. There was no way to know how long I slept; it always felt like nothing.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said. After we brushed our teeth and got into bed, he held me close and was asleep in minutes. I waited for a few minutes before I extracted myself from him and went to the living room. All I could think about was the person outside the house, trying to find a way in. I turned on the backyard light again, and the one in the kitchen, hoping interior lights might help deter the intruder. I wanted to open the blinds, but my hands shook too much, and I was certain I’d open them to find a murderous face staring back at me with a cleaver, ready to hack me into bits.

Instead, I sat in the middle of the floor, closed my eyes, and tried to regulate my breathing. In for four seconds, hold for seven, release for eight. In, hold, release. In, hold, release.

Before you were born, I taught drawing classes at the community center. I made friends with the other instructors. We took each other's classes, went to lunch a couple times a month, and became close over the summer. I learned how to sew pillowcases with Anne, conversational Spanish with Elena, how to develop photos with Pilar, and flower arranging with Fei. When we started Henri's yoga class, I was skeptical I'd be able to do any of the pretzel shapes I thought necessary.

But Henri taught many beginners and the flexibility challenged. He started the class on mats in sukhasana, which I was relieved to find was a simple cross-legged seated position. He walked us through a breathing technique for relaxation: breathe in slowly through your nose for four seconds, hold for seven, then out slowly from your mouth for eight seconds. Rinse, repeat.

Henri's class lasted six weeks, and then he moved to San Antonio and I never saw him again. I continued practicing the yoga poses I could remember each morning until I was seven months pregnant and no longer felt I could do it comfortably. I never picked it back up, but the breathing came to me in moments of great anxiety. Sometimes I would find my heart heavy in my chest, my breathing erratic, and I would remember Henri's voice walking me through the meditative breathing.

Minutes ticked by as I breathed; in, hold, release.

I heard a noise from the backyard and kept my eyes open as I continued. I focused on the back door, ready to jump at the first sound of entry.

There was another noise, a scuffling I knew was the murderer walking through the grass. I was about to get up when I heard another scuffling, coming from inside the house.

This noise was familiar. It was your feet on the hallway carpet. I turned to find you standing at the precipice between hallway and living room, near the arm of the couch, your thumb in your mouth even though you hadn't sucked your thumb since you were two.

"Hey Muppet." I opened my arms; you came to me and sat in my lap. "What's up, chicken butt?"

I felt your weight on my legs like an anchor.

"I can't sleep. The trees are loud."

I wrapped my hands around you and buried my nose in your neck until you giggled. "It's just the children of Aeolus." I combed my fingers through your hair.

"Who's Ow-lus?"

So I told you the story of Aeolus, the keeper of the winds. I told you how Aeolus gave Odysseus the gentle West Wind to bring his ship home, but also a bag containing the other winds. I told you how Odysseus's travel companions thought there was gold in the bag, so they opened it and the winds escaped.

"The winds blew their ship all around," I rocked you in my arms, "and kept Odysseus from getting home. It was a long time before he saw his wife and son again."

"Well, his winds are keeping me awake."

I looked into your eyes, hazel and so much like your father's. I rocked you and watched them grow heavy.

"Sing, mama. Please."

I relented and carried you to your bedroom. There, I could hear one of the trees in the side yard tapping on your window. I made a mental note to have the branches

trimmed so they wouldn't keep you up. I dropped you on your bed and pulled the My Little Pony covers over you. I sat on the edge of the bed and sang.

I have a terrible voice, but you loved to hear me sing. When you were born, I didn't know any nursery rhymes or lullabies, so I sang you regular songs at slower tempos. You preferred Diana Ross.

"Would you like to ride in my beautiful balloon?" The lyrics slow like a lullaby. "Would you like to glide in my beautiful balloon? We could flow among the stars, together you and I."

When you were asleep, I sat and watched you for a long time. Thoughts were bouncing around, from one to another. *I love you, little girl, my Muppet. I am failing you. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to be your mother.*

I cried and wondered if you'd be better off without me.

Days later, your dad woke early enough to find me on the lounge in the backyard, watching the last pinks and blues in the sky.

"You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep." I had tears on my cheeks.

He took you to run errands and play at the park, telling me that would give me some time to get some sleep. I wanted to tell him it wouldn't matter, but he was the perfect husband, the perfect father. He always seemed to know what to do. His patience for you was endless. Knowing you were safe with him, I convinced myself I'd be able to sleep.

After you left, I decided to run a bath, hoping the warm water would relieve the tension in my shoulders and the base of my spine. My eyes were dry and itchy; they still burned.

I woke in the tub, the skin of my fingers and toes like raisins, my lips tinged blue. I couldn't remember turning on the water or getting in the tub. Frantic energy pulsed in my temple. I dried myself off and wondered how much time had passed.

The house was silent. The bedside clock said two o'clock. I lay on the bed, not bothering to get dressed, and pulled the covers over my body. I had slept; maybe I could sleep more.

As I lay on the cool sheets, I thought about staying home from school in the seventh grade when I got the flu. I had a pounding headache, so my mother suggested I sit in the bath with the lights off. As I soaked in the dark, she went elsewhere in the house to wash dishes or read a book or do whatever it was she busied herself with when I was usually in school.

Warm and comforted by the dark of the bathroom, I fell asleep, and my mother lost track of time.

I woke at the sound of my mother calling my name; she was shaking my shoulder, her voice pitched with fear.

“Agnes Jane!”

The first thing I saw were the worry lines around her eyes, deepened to a panic.

“You can't sleep in the tub! What if you drowned? You should know better. It's not safe.” I didn't take a bath for a long time after that, worried I would become too relaxed, fall asleep, and drown in my own dirty water.

I watched the clock for forty-seven minutes until I heard the front door, followed by your father's voice.

"Mama might be sleeping, so let's be quiet."

I listened as the two of you moved between the house and the car, the rustling of plastic bags set on the linoleum, the front door finally closing for good. Then the pantry, the refrigerator, opening and closing, the freezer once or twice. As you moved around the kitchen, I could hear you whispering to your father, but I couldn't make out the words.

Then the sliding glass door opened, and the whispers stopped.

I thought about your father and his kindness, his patience. He'd taken to parenting as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Even as I confessed my concerns to him, he said my maternal instincts would kick in. He'd say I was doing just fine.

But I hadn't felt it yet. I didn't have those instincts. I couldn't hold my temper like he did. Like the time you used the wall in the living room as a canvas for your colorful crayon scribbles. Before I had a chance to yell, my hand ready to slap you on the butt, he got down on your level and explained why you shouldn't color on the wall. He got soap and water and showed you how to clean it up. He taped blank paper to the wall in your room so you could color there.

I asked him, once, why he had the instinct and I didn't. He said I was being silly. He said he lost his patience with you too, just like any parent. But I couldn't see it. I only saw my own failings. He thought I put him on a pedestal.

I thought you both might be better off if I had drowned in the bathtub.

After a time, I dragged myself out of bed, pulled on sweatpants and a tee-shirt, and joined you in the backyard. Your father was tracing your outline on the patio with chalk. When he finished, you took your time coloring your body in with every color we owned. I sat on a lounge to watch. David joined me, sitting on the edge in front of me and asked if I'd been able to nap.

“A little, but I'm still so tired.”

I leaned forward and put my arms over his shoulders; I pressed my cheek to his back until I could hear the steadiness of his heartbeat.

He held my hands to his chest.

“Maybe you should see the doctor.”

“Maybe.”

“We could ask Rosie to come hang out with Mattie a couple days a week if you think it'll help.”

I shook my head against his back. I didn't want to inconvenience Rosie; his little sister had just started college and needed to enjoy that time without being saddled with my kid.

“What about Mira? Paige's mom? The girls get along so well, I'm sure she'd be happy to have her come over.”

“I don't need a babysitter. That's why we decided I'd stay home, so I could watch her. I just need to sleep and stop neglecting Matilda.” I sobbed into his shirt. “I'm just so tired.”

I didn't say I was also tired of being this person.

I promised to call for an appointment with the doctor in the morning, although I wondered if he trusted me to do it. Sleeping wasn't impossible; I could sleep. I was certain I just needed to find the right conditions.

After dinner I took a warm shower and went to bed, earlier even than you, determined to sleep through the night. The night was filled with thoughts about how terrible I was at being your mother. It wasn't just those last few weeks. It had been since you were born. I thought about every panic attack, my helplessness in the moments I feared could bring you harm. What if you walked away from me at the zoo and your father wasn't there? What if someone kidnapped you from the grocery store as I stared at boxes of crackers, breathing through the tunnel vision? What if someone really was stalking our house, ready to attack the next time you and I were alone? What if...

In the morning after your father left for work and we ate Cheerios together, you asked to watch *Sesame Street*. I turned on the TV just as an animated blue gorilla was grunting on screen: *guh-guh-guh*. The sound was grating so I turned the volume down and went into the bedroom.

I sank onto the bed, feeling the exhaustion push me into the mattress. My eyes hurt and I feel a light knocking of a headache in my temples. The curtains are still closed, and I haven't turned off the light. The cool darkness of the room enveloped me, and soon I was asleep.

I didn't dream. One minute I was lying on the bed listening to your whispers along with the TV, and the next I opened my eyes to a surreal silence. I looked at the blank ceiling above me, momentarily thinking I'd gone deaf. I waited until I heard the



creak of the house, the roar of a car driving by, the ticking of the clock in the living room. I hadn't gone deaf, but the house is too silent.

My head was in that foggy state between asleep and awake as I lifted myself from the bed and stretched my arms. I turned towards the clock and saw that I'd been asleep for four hours. I walked into the living room to find the television screen dark and the couch empty. I couldn't figure out why the silence of the house was wrong. I thought I should not be able to hear a jet flying overhead or the buzz of the fluorescents in the kitchen. I looked at the couch again, squinting as if it would remind me of what I'd forgotten.

Then my mind cleared and I ran to your bedroom.

Your bed covers were bunched at the foot of the bed; I felt around to find no small body underneath. I checked the closet, the chest of toys. I checked both bathrooms, my bedroom, under the bed, in the closet. I ran to the kitchen to open every cabinet, even the ones you couldn't possibly reach. I couldn't call your name, couldn't choke out even a small cry for fear of bringing to life all the mistakes I'd made. I searched the backyard, the side yards, the garbage can to make sure you hadn't fallen inside. With each place you weren't, my heart pounded harder, threatening to leap out and kill me on the spot.

I stand in the living room with my panicked breath filling the silence of the house. All I could see was that empty couch where you should have been. Where you had been. The panic grew, the noise in my head was static. I hyperventilated. A car passed the house and I swung towards the front door.

I had missed the kitchen chair pushed in front of the door, the deadbolt twisted the wrong way, the missing pink sweater from the coat hooks.

At that moment, I knew what happened. You had taken the chair from the kitchen table, used it as a step stool to first get your sweater and then to reach over to twist the deadbolt from its place of safety. You'd walked out the front door, probably down the driveway and into the street, even though I'd reminded you time and again that you should never go into the street without holding an adult's hand. You walked several blocks, alone, before an inattentive driver struck you, killing you instantly. Your small body was splayed out on the pavement, blood draining and pooling around you. You were on your way to the morgue. Soon I would stand over your cold, pale corpse, identifying the body of my baby, my punishment for my crime of regret.

When I finally opened the door, you were standing in the flowerbed, your toes covered in mud, smelling the newly bloomed lilies. You turned to look at me and there was a scratch across your cheek. It couldn't have been too deep, the blood already dried against your skin. I fell to my knees in front of you and sobbed. I pulled you close to me, felt your hands on my back, warm through my thin shirt. I heard you sniff.

"Matilda Jane, why did you leave the house? You should never leave by yourself. What were you thinking? I was terrified...what happened to your face? Are you okay? Why did you leave?" My words spiraled and roiled; I choked and cried into your hair. Your hand on my back guided me through the tangle of emotions the way your father's hand has pulled me through panic attacks in the past. I held you tight as we both sat on the front step, sobbing.

I was hysterical; you were alive.

When I took you into the bathroom, both of us still sniffing, I cleaned and bandaged your cheek. You told me that you heard the ice cream truck's song. You

wanted to get us a treat, so you went to find rocket pops. You sat on the grass, where we usually waited for the ice cream truck to drive by our house, but the song faded and went away. You tell me you played with the flowers, and I imagined you walked on the edge of the flowerbed like it was a tightrope, something you had done before when I was pulling weeds and tending to the flowers. You slipped and must have scratched your cheek on one of the brick edges. You realized, with the front door closed, you couldn't reach the handle to come inside and find me. The lilies distracted you from your pain, as you knew I would be delighted to see them blooming.

I put you down for a nap and then sat in the doorway of your room to watch you sleep. I blamed myself for putting you in danger. I couldn't take care of you. My insomnia was proof I couldn't even take care of myself. I had failed you.

I had to leave. For you.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Matilda

I'm up early the next morning to work a breakfast shift. On my way out the door, I see the manila envelope addressed to me, so I toss it in my backpack. I ride to work with the promise to myself to go to my dad's house afterward.

I don't really look at the envelope until after work when I'm sitting at the counter eating lunch. Ray made me a cheeseburger, happy to hear I've gotten my appetite back. I run my finger under the flap of the envelope and tear it open. There's a stack of postcards rubber-banded together, a small white piece of paper on top. On the paper is the same shaky handwriting I've seen on my birthday cards every year.

It's from Grandpa Pete.

*These should have been yours. I'm sorry. I love you. -GP*

There is a dozen or so postcards, each showing a famous landmark. There's the Statue of Liberty holding her torch proudly, the Alamo against a bright blue sky, the Colorado River flowing through the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls illuminated in a rainbow of floodlights, Old Faithful erupting in Yellowstone, the Great Wall of China framed with rolling green grassy hills, and the Heart Shaped Reef in the Great Barrier Reef. As I shuffle through the pile, I notice the postmarks don't match up with the place shown; the dates span the last ten years. The back of each card has my grandfather's name and address printed neatly, and a short sentence or two in the same neat script.

*Happy birthday dad. I love you.*

*Hope you are happy. Wish you were here.*

*Remember our family vacation to Yellowstone? I miss you.*

They're from my mom. She's sent her father postcards for a decade.

I read through each card. After I've read them, I shuffle them into date order. The most recent is postmarked December of last year. The picture shows Mount Fuji topped with sparkling white snow, branches of cherry blossoms in the foreground. The postmark is Cheyenne, Wyoming.

*Merry Christmas. Till we meet again.*

When he answers the door to find me standing on his porch, my dad's face falls and for a moment I'm scared he's about to tell me to leave, that he's about to kick me out

of his life for good, and I'll be an orphan. I can't even try to stop the flood of tears, and my dad steps forward to hold me in his arms.

"I'm so sorry Mattie," he says.

When we are in the house, he gets himself a bottle of beer and I make myself tea in a light blue kettle that probably hasn't been used since I moved out. I sit on the couch in the living room with a steaming cup, and my dad takes his spot on the worn brown recliner. I remember many nights getting to stay up late to watch a movie with him, only to have him fall asleep in that recliner not fifteen minutes in. I saw several movies at home with his light snoring as background music.

"I'm sorry Mattie," he says again as he digs at a corner of the bottle's label with his thumbnail. "There's a lot that went on in my head when you told me you're pregnant, and I reacted horribly."

"I understand—" I start to say but he cuts me off by holding up his palm.

"Your mother and I were about your age when she got pregnant. I remember feeling so young, so unprepared. I was thrilled about being a dad, but she had reservations. There was so much we didn't know about life and ourselves. About each other, even." He pulls at the corner of the label, leaves it as a little curled flag, and starts at another corner. "When you were born, your mom had a tough time adjusting. Newborns are a lot of work, and she struggled. We didn't know this back then, but I think she had that postpartum depression. She stopped painting for a while, didn't read like she had. She used to finish a book or two a week; I don't remember seeing her hold a book during the first years after you were born. We set up an easel in the garage for her, but the canvases stayed blank. I felt bad, but what could I do? I had to go to work. I thought we'd

decided she would stay at home with you for a couple years, you know, because we thought that was the right thing to do. Someone had to stay home so we didn't have to pay for childcare, and I made more than her. Plus, you know, it's more normal for the mom to stay with the kid."

He pulls the entire label off, leaving bits of glue on the bottle. As he talks, he's mostly looking at the floor, glancing up every once in a while, as if to check that I'm still there. I sit forward in rapt attention. I can't remember the last time he talked so much about my mother.

"Come to think about it, I don't think we decided anything. I just assumed, since she stopped working towards the end of the pregnancy, that she just wouldn't go back. Maybe that was wrong, but, like I said, we were young. And we didn't have those conversations people should have before they get married. I knew she didn't want to have kids, but I did, and I was selfish. I pushed her and she wasn't ready. Maybe she never would have been, but these were the cards we were dealt. And, yeah, she left. It was too hard; she never forgave herself for the early struggles and just thought she was a bad mom. Thought she wasn't doing it right, whatever that means. So I had to make it work. I think I did okay, for the most part. But I really hate that your memory of telling me you're having a baby is me yelling at you."

I watch him put his head in his hands and wonder for a moment if he's crying. But he sniffs loudly and sits back up after a moment.

"I don't want it to be hard for you like it was for her."

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask and watch my dad raise his head to look directly at me. “Why didn’t you tell me how hard it was for her? It makes more sense why she’d leave.” I lower my voice. “I thought I’d done something wrong.”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t connect the dots right away. It felt like a tornado ripped through our lives; it was chaos trying to figure out what to do next. Whether to hope for her to come back. How to go on with the daily task of living. How to grieve someone who wasn’t dead. But I had more immediate concerns. I had to work and be your dad. It was years later I heard something about postpartum and thought about all that happened with your mom. The depression, her anxiety. She told me she didn’t feel like she was bonding with you, and I shrugged it aside. Figured she’d get there.

“Matt, I love you. I worry, and you’ll have to let me. But I am sorry.”

“I love you too, dad.” I stand and take three steps towards him. He stands to meet me, and we hug.

With my dad, I wonder if I can figure out this parent thing.

When we’re sitting again, I get up more courage and tell my dad that I’m trying to find Agnes. I pull the stack of postcards out of my backpack and watch as he shuffles through them. I tell him about getting them from Grandpa Pete, and he seems surprised to hear his name.

“I don’t understand, though. Why would she only contact him? Why not me? Or you? It’s not fair.” My voice cracks and I still have tears to shed.

My dad thinks for a moment and then holds up a finger. He leaves the room and returns with an envelope in his hand. When he sets it in my hand, I see my name on the

front with our address printed neatly below. The return address is missing but it's postmark is from Houston. The envelope is sealed.

"I never opened it," he says as he returns to his chair and I turn the envelope over in my hands. "It came just after your sixteenth birthday. It's her handwriting."

"You just kept it?"

He nods and picks up his beer bottle. "I thought about opening it, but that felt like an invasion of your privacy."

"Why didn't you give it to me?"

"At first I was afraid of what it might say, or what it might ask of you. I almost threw it away." He blows out a heavy breath. "Rosie told me to put it in the safe, and I kind of forgot about it. Until I was looking at those cards."

I brush my finger across my name, written in my mother's handwriting, for me. I want to lift it to my nose and smell, but I know it won't have her scent.

Dad and I talk for a while. I tell him about Quinn, and he encourages me to reach out. He promises he's always going to be here for me, and no matter what I always have a home with him.

When I turned sixteen, Rosie took Paige and I to see *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the B Street Theatre in Sacramento. I had my permit, so she let me drive there and back, but in the city, she took over. After the show we went to The Old Spaghetti Factory for dinner. They sang "Happy birthday" to me over spumoni ice cream at a table in the trolley car. Back at home the next day, on the morning of my birthday, my dad woke me with his traditional birthday pancakes (with rainbow sprinkles in the batter) and



gave me a new Canon camera. Then I spent the day wandering downtown with Paige, snapping photo after photo with my new camera with her as my primary model.

I think about my mother, at the same time this is happening in my life, living somewhere—maybe Houston—and writing to her estranged daughter. Estranged, I want to scoff. Abandoned. Did she feel regret? I always wondered if she thought about me after she left, and now I hold proof in my hands that she did—at least once.

I slide my finger beneath the flap and tear the envelope open. Inside is a single piece of paper folded in thirds. I take it out and am surprised at the lack of weight to the words my mother wished to tell me on my sixteenth birthday. I stare at the handwriting, more neat printing in blue ink, the left edge ragged as if the page were simply ripped out of a notebook and stuffed into the envelope. I wait for Paige and start to read.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Agnes

Once I accepted that I was not going back, I decided to become a flight attendant. I wanted to do something with my art, but thought traveling the world would bring in an income and inspiration. I could paint on the side. I'd felt claustrophobic in the valley amongst the Sierra Nevada mountains closing in on me. Growing up I always thought I'd leave Reno, but I also assumed I'd eventually come back. That's what happened to a lot of people in the area. They'd leave for college or work or exploration, and then they'd end up back in the Great Basin to live out their lives. I finally had the chance, and I was going to take advantage.

It took some time, though, since I was nervous about background checks. I didn't know if your father was looking for me, if there was a warrant out for my arrest (was leaving your family even illegal, I didn't know). I hitchhiked to a small town in Arizona and found a job waiting tables at a hole in the wall, getting paid under the table. The owner was super shady, but it worked out for me to hide out while I figured things out. I rented a room in a motel and offered to work there cleaning rooms on my days off for a reduced price. I did this for a year, saving money, living off ramen and leftovers from the restaurant, and then I filed for a name change. Got a new social security number, not under the most legal of circumstances, and then I applied for flight attendant training schools all over the country. Got into a program in New York. Packed up my few things, said good-byes, and bought a ticket.

It was almost too easy to forget my previous life when I was always on the go. I made friends with the other attendants, couch-hopped or stayed in hotels, and got to see a lot of the country. Then the world. I stayed with boyfriends when I had them. Fell in love with an Australian and lived with him for a year. When that ended, I was heartbroken and decided Paris was the place to mend my heart. Then I got homesick for the States and learned of a space for rent in a house in Houston with some other girls.

I almost never slipped up. Almost never told anyone that I had been a mom. The Australian found out. He wanted kids. Of course he did. We were drinking at a bar, toasting a promotion he'd just gotten. I admitted I didn't want to have kids, that we didn't have a future if he did. He thought he could change my mind. I told him I'd already been down that road and didn't want to again. He tried to ask questions, but I couldn't answer them. It physically hurt my chest. I left him two days later.

I told one of the girls I lived with in Texas. We were up late drinking wine, the only ones not on the job, and she'd told me she'd had a son when she was younger. She was probably twenty-five when I knew her; she didn't say how young she was back then. But she'd given up the boy for adoption. Closed deal: she didn't know anything about him. She said sometimes she thought about him and prayed his parents treated him well. That he was happy. She'd shared, so I felt compelled. I told her I had a daughter who lived with my ex-husband. Didn't mention abandonment or not having seen her for years. But the next day when I woke up hungover and decided to spend the rest of the day in bed, I found myself thinking about her. About you. It had been eleven years since I'd left Reno. Maybe it was some fucked up kind of fate, but it was late July. Five days until your sixteenth birthday. It felt like some sort of kismet, thinking about you and wondering what you were doing, what you were like, who you were, and it just happened to be so close to such a milestone birthday.

I got sentimental and laid in bed writing you a letter. I started and stopped a dozen times, tearing pages from the notebook, bunching them in my hands and tossing them at the trash can. When I finally thought I'd found something to say, something important I felt you needed to know, I put it in an envelope and carried that around in my purse for a couple days. I didn't know if I should send it, if you'd even get it. Your dad might intercept and throw it away. Or you might not care and toss it yourself. Maybe you'd burn it in some kind of cleansing ritual to rid yourself of me. Maybe you'd hope I would burn.

Maybe you had moved, and the letter would just get sent back anyway.

I'd just gotten back on a flight from Pennsylvania, digging through my purse for the house key when I saw the envelope. It was the second. The day before your birthday. Another coincidence. The fates aligning or something. I found a stamp in the house and put it in the mailbox with the flag up. I told myself to expect no response. My expectations were met, and that was another sign from the universe. You didn't need or want me. I believed we were all better off with me gone.

I didn't stop thinking about you. In fact, I might have thought about you more often after that. I kept thinking, *sixteen*. You were sixteen. You'd be driving and in high school, maybe thinking about college. You'd had your first period, had to have your dad buy you your first bra. You'd had your first school dance. You'd likely had your first boyfriend, your first kiss, maybe your first heartbreak. I wouldn't say I was regretful about missing these milestones, but it was hard to reconcile the image of five-year-old you with who you might be now.

In those moments, I tended to think about the times I'd messed up and remind myself it was good that I left. I'd remember the time when you were six months old, and I looked away for a new diaper and you fell off the changing table. I'd remember when you were two and you tripped over a tree root in the backyard, sliced your head open so it gushed with blood down your face, had four stitches but were up and running around like crazy the next day. I'd remember when you were three and I left you sleeping in the car while I ran into the store for a gallon of milk; I came outside and you were still sleeping, but a woman getting into a van full of kids berated me for leaving my child in such a state of danger. I'd remember the time you got lost at the zoo, the park, the grocery store, always wandering away if I took my eye off you for a moment but being found only a

few feet away. I'd remember that you hadn't been wanted, and that was the first and most significant of all the ways I'd transgressed against you.

I'd remind myself that you were better off with the parent who had always wanted you. Maybe he'd even found you another mother, one of those women to whom motherhood seemed to come so naturally and effortlessly.

Maybe.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Matilda

Rosie and I are waiting in the parking lot at Crystal Peak Park when Marilou and her family arrive. We agreed to meet at this park in Verdi, a small community just north of Reno, for their family photos. The Truckee River runs along the park and there are twin ponds nearby where my dad and I have gone fishing for trout. The ponds were once mill ponds when the Verdi Lumber Company owned this property and served as a storage place for the logs as they waited to be processed in the mill. Throughout the park is an interpretive trail, several placards dotted throughout describing the history of this spot on the Tahoe-Pyramid Trail.

Rosie makes the introductions. Marilou is a petite Latinx woman with dark hair and purple highlights that shine in the light. Her wife, Georgia, is a tall athletic Black woman with a shaved head and a deep laugh. The women shake my hand and Marilou thanks me effusively for meeting us for the photoshoot.

“We haven't had a proper family photo since Maria was in diapers, and all I want is the perfect photograph for our holiday cards,” she says as she grabs her younger

daughter's hand as Maria tries to run from us. The park is quiet and ours are the only cars in the small lot, but Marilou seems to take no risks when it comes to her girls' safety.

Georgia takes the older girl, Sabine's, hand as we head toward the short tunnel that will usher us from the parking lot and a large grassy area on one side beneath an overpass to enter the actual park.

"Babe, you know we wouldn't be doing this if Gen hadn't sent those cards last year." Georgia glances my way, "Her sister's holiday cards were ridiculous. She has three kids, two boys and a baby girl. She's not a baby now, but that woman had her entire family in matching plaid pajamas, as if that's the most natural thing in the world. Like any of them had ever worn those pjs before." Once we're in the tunnel, she lets go of her daughter's hand, but the older one doesn't rush off like her sister. She stays close to her mother while her sister lets her voice bounce off the walls. "I'm just glad I talked her out of all of us matching. I can admit it's cute with the kiddos. But me and Mari? We are grown-ass women..."

"Babe," Marilou flashes a warning look at her wife, "Rosie and Matilda don't need to hear this." She looks to me, "And I certainly don't need to hear it again."

Georgia blows her wife a kiss and calls out to Maria to join us on the other side of the tunnel. Maria is six and Sabine is eight, and except for the height difference they could be twins. The girls both have their long dark hair in pigtail braids, and they match in black polka dot dresses. Maria has navy blue leggings while her sister's legs are bare, and both are wearing black Mary Janes. They already look picture-perfect. Their mothers might not be matching, but they are certainly color-coordinated with Marilou in a navy-

blue blazer, black slacks and white collared shirt, and Georgia showing off her long legs in a navy-blue A-line dress.

It's early November and today we've been rewarded with sunshine and blue skies, although there is a sharp chill in the air that reminds us winter is around the corner. As we clear the short tunnel and walk into the park proper, the light expands, and I see the familiar picnic tables in a thicket of Ponderosa Pines where I've had several lunches with my dad after a morning of fishing. Marilou poses her family at one of the benches, with the adults sitting on one of the plank benches and the girls standing on either side of them. Rosie tunes into the girls' sense of humor and uses that to help keep them smiling. We head down the dirt path of the interpretive trail and I take candid shots of the family walking together. There's a large pine log just off the trail, so we take more photos there with the snow-capped mountains in the background.

Further down the path, I point to a thicket of dry coyote willow, their twiggy branches intertwining so we can't tell where one begins and the other ends, and ask the girls if they can see the witch's house. We follow the trail offshoot to the thicket and the girls are delighted to find a small stone structure that resembles a small one-room house, although in place of a roof is simply more overgrown willow branches. As I snap candid photos of the girls climbing in and out of the empty windows, I tell them how when I was young, I told my dad this was a witch's house. Dad, who read the placards thoroughly, told me that it was the only surviving structure from when the Verdi Lumber Company operated in the area. It's unknown what the structure was used for, but even as an adult I find it hard to imagine what it could have looked like in the early 1900s, surrounded by a bustling industrial center with a sawmill, railroad tracks, lumber storage facilities, and an

engine room. Sabine asks Georgia if she knows what it could be, but Maria won't let anyone speculate.

"It's a witch's house!" She picks up a small rock set just on the sill of one of the windows. "See, she even left us treasure to find." She holds the rock out, half the size of her palm and painted deep purple with a black heart in the center of the almost perfect oval face.

Maria is disappointed to find her dress has no pockets, but Rosie quickly becomes her best friend when she offers to hold it for her. By the end of our visit, she will add three more rocks, although the first is the only one painted, and a small pinecone to Rosie's hands.

Our small group continues along the interpretive trail, Marilou taking the lead on when and where to stop, what to use as background, and where each of her family members will sit or stand as I snap pictures. We approach the golden hour and I hope to capture the diffuse pink light of the valley. I position the setting sun just to the side of the family so the rim-lit glow surrounds them.

Further along the trail we find a massive, abandoned fireplace, all that remains of a stand-alone barbecue when the property was transformed to the Verdi Glen Resort, a grand recreation spot that opened in 1924 but was destroyed in one of many fires that plagued this area. The resort was only open for fourteen years. After the fire, the property was purchased by Guy Marsh who lived in a house he built on the original foundation of the resort's restaurant. After his death, his wife inherited the property and lived there until 1993 when she deeded it to Washoe County. A placard for The Marsh House sits further back on the trail in front of an expansive but brown field scattered with the remains of



fallen trees, dry brush, winter-bared pines, and a perfect view of a snowy mountain peak. I doubt this would be interesting to the girls, but I catch Georgia reading the placards as we walk by.

We take pictures by the fireplace and then near the concrete walls and foundation that were once the resort's swimming pool. The girls love the fountain and I take pictures of them pretending to swim around it, their arms circling wildly in exaggerated front crawls. They play Marco Polo with Rosie for a few minutes while I show Marilou and Georgia some of the pictures I've taken through the small camera screen, but we are interrupted by Sabine's frustrated scream.

"You cheated! I saw you open your eyes, Maria. You lose."

Maria meets her sister's scream with one of her own. "It's not fair Beany; you're bigger than me. An' I didn't want to hit the fountain." Maria kicks her sister in the shin and now they are both howling. Marilou and Georgia rush over to manage the girls and Rosie sneaks over to where I'm standing. I'm still looking through pictures, trying to block out their sounds.

"Feisty ones, huh?"

"How can they do that?" I ask. "They were playing together just fine and now they want to pull each other's hair out."

Rosie shrugs, "It's a sibling thing, I guess. Your dad and I were like that. We were a little farther apart in age, but we were still hot and cold with each other."

I wrinkle my nose in disapproval. "Do they really have to scream like that?"

Rosie chuckles. "How else will they get the attention they crave?"

But the piercing screams echo throughout the trees and it makes me want to rip my ears off. If this is parenting, maybe I'm not cut out for it. I'd rather get in the car and drive away than get closer to them like Marilou and Georgia.

It takes a while, but soon the girls are no longer screaming. Maria's eyes are still watery and both girls have somehow tangled their hair into rat's nests. Marilou apologizes and says we've probably got something good they can use. She wants to get the girls home.

"Thank you, Matilda. We really appreciate this. You have some beautiful pictures; such an eye."

"Thanks," I say, although I'm not so sure about this eye she says I have. "I'll go through them, touch them up a bit, and put them on a disk for you. I'm sure Rosie could get it to you."

We say our goodbyes and Georgia hands me a check that I promptly fold and put in my back pocket.

"I think you should keep doing that, Matt. I'm sure we could find more families needing pictures for holiday cards, or graduation photos, pictures of cats, or whatever." Rosie says as she pulls out of the parking lot.

I take the check out of my pocket and look at the numbers written in Georgia's careful script. Three hundred dollars.

"This is more than I thought we agreed on. Do you think she made a mistake?"

Rosie shakes her head, "Mari told me they looked at prices with other photographers and this seemed in line. She didn't want to short-change you."

Three hundred dollars. For only a couple hours snapping pictures. And some touch-ups, but that wouldn't take much more time. Plus, it was something I really enjoyed.

As Rosie drove us to her house for dinner, I started to think about doing more freelance photography on the side. When I wasn't at the Kitchen, I could make a couple hundred extra dollars a month. If I took what I learned from Amina, I thought I might actually be able to get back into doing what I loved, and make money from it. I still wouldn't make enough to rent the house on 8th Street without Quinn, but I could probably find something small that would fit my needs.

Over dinner Rosie asks me about Quinn. I haven't heard from him in a week since he left for his parents' house, and I tell her this has to mean the relationship is over. We talk for a while, and then she holds my hand as I finally get up the nerve to call him.

"It's been a week. Are you coming home?" The neediness drips from my voice into the receiver.

His voice is lackluster as he whispers, "Are you still pregnant?" He hasn't told his parents then.

"Will you only come home if I'm not?"

"I don't know, Matt. I don't have time for this. I've spent day after day sending my resume out, checking job boards everywhere, cold-calling companies with inhouse IT support. I can get unemployment, but it's not going to be enough for rent, bills, student loans..." His voice trails off. "There aren't any jobs."

I squeeze Rosie's hand and she squeezes back. "Can we talk? In person."

“Yeah. I think we need to.” His voice is defeated, and a stake in my heart tells me it will not end well. “Do you work tomorrow?”

I tell him I work the dinner shift, so we agree to meet in the morning. Brunch at Peg’s, as if bacon and eggs will make anything we have to say easier. Omelets to soften the edges of our destroyed relationship.

I loop the chain around my bike and the rack and buckle my helmet to my backpack. I look up to see Quinn through the windowpane of Peg’s Glorified Ham -n- Eggs. He’s reading the menu as if he’s not going to get Peg’s huevos ranchero. His glass of water is already sweating onto the table; there’s a second glass for me—no ice, my preference.

As he examines the menu, he’s resting his chin in one hand and his fingers curl around a single lock of hair just behind his ear. It’s his nervous tick. Around finals season, he always had that little lock of hair sticking out from twirling it into position.

Across the street from Peg’s I can see the dim gray building that houses the Nevada Museum of Art. The building is uneven, a cubist representation of a building, although its architecture was designed to replicate the landscape of the Black Rock Desert. It was still new when Quinn took me there on our first date.

When I glance back at the window, Quinn looks up and lifts his hand in a half-wave that I mirror. Swinging my backpack over one shoulder, I head into Peg’s.

Our mundane small talk is stilted and interrupted by the waitress taking our order: Joe’s Scramble for me, huevos ranchero for him.

On our first date, I couldn't stop talking. I hadn't been to the new museum's building yet and was excited to see the altered landscapes photography collection. I had written a paper on one of the artists and filled Quinn's head with all kinds of information he didn't need or want. But he listened and smiled, interjected when I took a breath, and held my hand as we admired a black and white image of a home half-constructed, perched between rolling hills, a silver of a moon in the background. Our first kiss was later, outside, as we stood on the sidewalk hemming and hawing, talking in circles so we didn't have to part but didn't know what to do next.

Now we struggle to find words to exchange.

Our food comes and Quinn comments on my returned appetite.

"Luckily I'm only a little nauseous in the mornings now. I found ginger ale helps a lot." I watch his lips as he chews and remember a million kisses. I take a bite of eggs to distract myself. "Turns out that wasn't a sustainable diet plan."

The joke falls flat and I want to disappear under the table.

After he kissed me in front of the museum, he asked if I wanted him to take me home or if I wanted to stay for a walk along the river. The Truckee River curls through the middle of Reno, carrying the clear waters of Lake Tahoe to Pyramid Lake. My dad and I used to go fishing for Lahontan cutthroat trout, and I rode the river rapids numerous times over numerous summers. He held my hand and we walked west to the Riverwalk, lit with twinkling yellow lights.

"I'm not ready to be a dad," Quinn says over my head. "I've thought about it a lot and, truthfully, I'm not sure I ever will be."

“I understand,” I swallow hard to keep my voice from shaking, “but I’m not as sure as you. I need time.”

“You always need time,” he says not unkindly. “When was the last time you made a decision without waffling back and forth, making pros and cons list, examining every possible iteration?” His smile is crooked, as if only part of him wants to hang onto our memories.

As we walked along the Truckee, a kayaker pushed through a small rapid. Quinn asked if I’d been kayaking, but I hadn’t. I ask if he had rafted.

“I worked as a shuttle driver the past two summers.” He laughed, “I guess that’s a yes.”

I look across the table as Quinn finishes the food on his plate. The waitress stops by and refills out water glasses. She asks if we’re ready for the check. I’ve only eaten about half my food. Quinn says yes and pulls his wallet out of his back pocket.

“I can get this,” I say but he holds his hand up and hands the woman his card.

“Are you going to stay at 8th?”

I shake my head, “You?” But his smile is crooked the wrong way and I know it was a stupid question. “We have to give thirty days’ notice.”

“My dad thinks he can get us out of that.” He starts to reach for a slice of my toast, old habits, and then his arm hangs in the air between us a moment. I nod, go ahead. He takes one of the triangles, paints it with boysenberry jam, and in one bite half the toast is gone. “If not, they can help cover my end and you can stay until the thirty days.”

He has everything ready to go. He’s thought it through, talked to his parents, made a plan. I’m still reaching halfway across the table like I’m not ready to let go.

“Did you tell them?” He shakes his head. “My dad knows. And Rosie. Paige.”

“I’ll tell them only if it becomes necessary.”

Quinn’s parents have always been kind and welcoming to me, but their absence won’t make a big difference in my life. Not like their son’s.

When we came to City Plaza, we sat in the grass and watched skateboarders practice their tricks and talked about the winters when the space was turned into an ice-skating rink. From our spot, I could see a glimpse of the iconic Reno arch, lit in all its glory, the Eldorado casting its pink glow over the streets.

There was a chill in the air as the sun ducked behind the old Riverside Hotel, which housed Dreamer’s Coffee House where Paige and I had spent many weekend afternoons drinking tea and reading on the large floral couches. Quinn put his arm around me and if by instinct I put my head on his shoulder. We sat like that for a while, just watching the city together in a peaceful silence.

With my leftovers packaged, the bill paid, and my heart broken, Quinn follows me outside.

“Let me know what you decide,” he says with a gesture in the general direction of my stomach, as if it were already obvious I was pregnant. “I’ll do what I can to help.”

“Okay,” I say as I turn from him and unlock my bike. “Thanks for brunch.”

“Let me give you a ride home.”

“Would you mind taking me to my dad’s instead? Save me a bus fare?”

He does and I walk my bike as I follow him into the parking garage. We mount the bike on the back of his Civic and he opens the car door for me.

After we walk back to the museum parking lot where his car waits, he drove me back to the residence hall. He said he wanted to walk me to my door, but the rules wouldn't let him go past the front desk that late at night. When he kissed me, I never wanted it to end.

As Quinn merges onto the highway, he has to slow the car to let a tractor-trailer pass before he can get up to speed. We follow behind the truck and I watch Topsy, the Circus Circus clown, spin his sparkling lolly pop.

Quinn glances over. "My mom and grandma both hated Circus Circus. It was always too crowded on the midway. When I was a kid, Boomtown was basically the only place we'd go when my grandma visited from LA. She'd buy me a wristband and give me twenty dollars in tokens to play games, but I spent most of my time on that Ferris wheel. Sometimes I'd even get her to go with me." He laughs at the memory. "She was basically the same size as a tall child, like barely five feet, so she fit in the small carriages just fine. But she was scared of heights, so she'd hold my hand the whole time. Never complained or declined to join me when I asked, but she'd hold my hand until the ride stopped at the bottom and the person running the thing opened the door for us."

"I only went there a couple times, for birthday parties. I liked the Rodeo Rider. You know, the one where they strap like five or six kids in a line, then raise you up to the ceiling and you all fall, over and over?"

He laughs. "Yep, and then it would go up and down, over and over, bouncing the whole way. That thing made me sick once and I puked."

"Gross!" I laugh with him. "Oh, those poor teenagers who had to clean up after you."



“I know, and grandma made me feel really bad about it. I don’t know that she meant to, but I felt guilty for days. I never went on Rodeo Rider again.”

A memory comes to me I don’t recognize. In a quiet voice, I say, “My mom took me on the carousel.”

“Really?” I feel him looking at me, but I’m watching the horizon, trying to hold onto the memory.

The carousel moves slowly in its circle. I’ve chosen a white horse with a blue bridle and a saddle colored in bright blues and purples and pinks. He is in mid-gallop, lifting me again and again. I named him Snowball for his white coat and mane. As the world spins dizzily around, my mother is smiling and laughing beside me. She’s not on an animal, but holding the pole attached to my horse with one hand, the other on my back. She holds me as if she doesn’t trust the limp belt strapped across my waist.

When the world stops spinning, she lifts me off Snowball’s back and kisses my cheek before putting me back on the ground to stumble off the ride and back to solid ground. She buys blue Slurpees and a bag of popcorn, which we enjoy while sitting on a bench and watch other children circle lazily on the Ferris wheel. She asks me again if I’m sure I don’t want to try it, but the height and the way the carriages rock is frightening. I watch the other children smiling as it goes around, and my mom looks so excited, so I finally say yes.

I climb into the carriage first and then she ducks so she can fit inside. I want to sit next to her, but she says we have to sit facing each other so it’s not unbalanced. As the carriage starts to move, I turn and look behind me, watching the carousel and the arcade games slowly drift away, then back. The ride stops once to let some kids off and we are at

the top, overlooking the Family Fun Center. I feel the carriage rocking and the unsteadiness terrifies me. I become certain it's going to come crashing down. I freeze in my seat, hoping if I don't move then the carriage will stop rocking.

My mother must see the wide terror in my eyes, because the next thing I know she is holding my hand across the space of the carriage; she whispers that everything is going to be okay. She squeezes my hand—once, twice—a gesture she's told me means “I love you.” I squeeze back.

I recall the memory to Quinn. As he looks at me interested in this new piece of information I had forgotten, his eyes are off the road for barely a second when a force from behind smashes into the car, our bodies thrown forward. I feel the seatbelt cut into my pelvis and the airbag quickly deploys, smashing into my face. I smell smoke and I'm swallowed by a fog of white as the car spins into the concrete median. I watch, dazed, as another car, or maybe the same one, heads straight toward my window.

## Chapter Nineteen

### David

The night before she leaves us, I come home to find my wife and daughter eating ice cream sundaes in the front yard. Matilda's face, sticky and covered in chocolate, has a Band-Aid the size of my finger across it. Agnes sits on the front porch, a bowl of half-melted ice cream in her hand and an indistinct expression on her face.

The silver trash can I use for grass clippings sits nearby, its lid on cock-eyed. The flower bed at the front of the house, where Agnes tended her lilies and pansies, was gone.

The bricks we used as edging were gone, and nothing but soil remained. The blossoms I'd seen just that morning were gone.

When Agnes and I first bought the house, the yards were plots of dirt. Excited about the blank slate, Agnes drew up blueprints for raised beds in the back for a vegetable garden with and shade trees to relax beneath. The front yard she wanted landscaped with river rock and cacti for the low maintenance aspect, but I wanted a lawn. She relented, but it would be my responsibility to mow and maintain because, living in the desert, it was going to need a lot of care. She added a flower bed against the house where she decided to keep lilies and pansies to bring color to the yard.

I mow the lawn twice a month, something I enjoy doing. The practice of walking up and down in rows is meditative. As I walk with the mower, follow up with the edge trimmer, sweep the clippings, and gather them into the silver trash can, I focus on the sounds of the neighborhood. I listen to the birds, trying to distinguish the different warblers and sparrows over the rumble of engines down the surrounding streets, a gas mower's deep grumble a few doors down. Some days the wind stands so still I imagine I hear the electricity crackling through the wires crisscrossed overhead.

On this day, which only stands out because of the day that followed, there is no comfort in the brightness of the green or the even lines I etched in the lawn the previous weekend. The purples and yellows are gone and our house is gray and dull. Lifeless. A lot like my wife's face.

When I ask Agnes what happened to the flower bed, her eyes look toward me, but she doesn't seem to see me. She shrugs and then stands to drag the trash can to the side

yard where it usually lives. I pick up Matilda and ask about the flowers and the Band-Aid on her cheek.

“I fell on the bricks, so Mama got rid of them. She doesn’t want them to hurt me anymore.”

“Is your cheek feeling okay?”

She smiles and nods, wiggles out of my arms and runs into the house. I wait for Agnes to come back from putting the can away. When she does, her expression has changed; she wears a small smile as she greets me and I kiss her. I ask her again about the flowers.

“Those bricks were too dangerous,” she says. “We have to keep Mattie safe.” And then she too goes into the house.

We eat leftover casserole for dinner. Agnes is disengaged and distracted. Matilda tells me, her mouth full of green beans, how she was not a good girl today when she was walking on the bricks, but it’s okay because they are gone now. I never heard the whole story, but in the days after Agnes leaves, the scratch heals and only the slightest hint of a scar remains near Matilda’s jawline.

Agnes hasn’t been sleeping well, but I’m at a loss of how to help her. She tells me she forgot to call the doctor’s office like I suggested, but with all the hard work tending the garden, she thinks she may have exhausted herself enough to sleep soundly. When we are done eating, she kisses us each good night and retires to bed at seven. Matilda’s bedtime is at eight, so we have an hour to play. We play Candyland twice (she wins once), Chutes and Ladders (no one wins after she decides she’s losing and doesn’t want to continue), and then she asks if we can color before story time.

Sprawled out on the living room floor, she is focused on coloring an image of Sleep Beauty, the dress a bright blue, and her tongue sticks part way out the side of her mouth as she gets close to the line and tries her best not to go over. I absent-mindedly color in the three fairies, watching Matilda more than anything.

I ask questions about her day, trying to prod more of the story about the front yard from her, but she is inconsistent and wants instead to tell me about a blue jay she saw in the backyard, the episode of *Sesame Street* Mama let her watch, and how she was in a circus at some point in the day. On her belly, legs in the air, she swings them carelessly and rests her non-dominant hand on her cheek for support. As she touches the bandage, there is no flinch or whine or grit of teeth through pain, and I think about how surprisingly resilient children are.

When Matilda was still a baby, I dropped her. Rather, I was responsible for her falling from the changing table to the floor. I had turned away from the table for mere seconds, grabbing the box of wipes I'd left by the crib, and a terrifying deep thud came from behind me. It was maybe three feet, but the way she screamed I was sure something was broken. I held her to my chest, bouncing gently, shushing and apologizing and promising to never let her get hurt again. Even though she'd stopped crying soon after I started bouncing her, we stayed like that for a long time; me holding her and whispering apologies and promises while she drooled on my shoulder.

I told Agnes about it later as the baby napped in her arms.

"I dropped her too," she admitted as we sat together on the couch with *Quantum Leap* on low volume. "I was sitting in the rocking chair, trying to get her back to sleep after the night feeding. It was just last month. I was rocking her and looking out the

window. I was distracted and she kind of lurched and fell on the floor. I felt like shit. I still do.”

“Me too.” I put my arm along the back of the couch and across her shoulder. “I guess we’re both pretty terrible parents,” I teased.

“At least one of us is,” she said in a low voice, as if unsure whether she wanted to be heard.

“Hey—” I started in defense, but I read her face and dropped the joke. “Aggie, you aren’t a terrible parent. We’re both doing fine.”

But she didn’t agree. She told me she’d been feeling unsure since the baby was born, questioning every step, every decision. I told her I’d had similar feelings, that I thought most first-time parents must have uncertainties.

“I mean, at least she won’t remember these early years, right? So that’s the time to screw up. She won’t remember being dropped, but maybe the memory of being comforted afterwards will stay with her.” I was talking out of my ass, as per usual, trying to make Agnes feel better, but I couldn’t tell if it was working. “In any case, look at her. She’s fine. No permanent damage.”

It happened like this a lot while Matilda was growing up. Shortly after she started crawling, she started climbing. A stepstool, a toy vacuum, the TV stand. She’d lift herself up and onto anything she could. Sometimes she’d fall, cry for a minute and then go right back to what she was doing. She fell a lot as she learned to walk, tripping over her own feet and bumps in the sidewalk. When she was three, she fell off a ladder I’d left in the living room after changing a lightbulb in the ceiling fan; she had a hairline fracture in her wrist that needed a cast. I blamed myself for not putting the ladder away when I was

done, but she was pretty proud of her bright blue cast that we let her draw on with markers. She still kissed me good night and said she loved me, so I forgave myself eventually. When she learned to ride a bike, she crashed a lot. Into the garage door, a tree along the sidewalk, a break in the pavement. Matilda always seemed to have scuffed knees, scratches on her arms and legs, holes in her pants from falling out of trees or while roller skating. And each time I was amazed how she'd get back up, dust herself off, and get back to what she was doing, usually with minimal to no tears.

So the scratch on her cheek didn't surprise or alarm me. It was Agnes's reaction. When Matilda fell off the ladder, we didn't get rid of the ladder. I talked to Matilda about safety around ladders later, but I also made sure to put it away immediately after using it from then on. Tearing up a garden Agnes had lovingly tended for so long was an overreaction.

When I told Matilda it was time for bed, she asked if she could say good night to Mama first. I followed her into my dark bedroom and stood in the doorway as she walked up to her mother's side of the bed, patting the lump under the covers. I saw Agnes's arm reach out from under the comforter and cup Matilda's cheek. They whispered to each other for a moment, then Matilda hugged her mother and walked out of the room.

With Matilda in bed, after an extra bedtime story and a round of kisses for each of the stuffed animals tucked into bed with her, I went back to my room.

Agnes's breathing was soft and even; assuming she was asleep, I returned to the living room to read for an hour before going to bed.

When I woke the next morning, Agnes was gone. I thought I'd find her in the backyard watching the sun rise, but she was nowhere to be found and there was no note

or clue as to where she'd gone or if she'd be back. There were a few uncertain weeks while I tried to figure out how to move through the days without her and figure out how to talk to my five-year-old about the newly missing piece of our lives. Matilda was resilient, and she learned quickly to move forward. I was a little slower, but having my daughter with me made the pain of loss just a little less prominent.

As I sat by her hospital bed, years later, seeing her bruised and broken from the car accident, I held her hand and found myself praying this, too, would be something she would easily bounce back from.

## Chapter Twenty

### Matilda

The first time I got behind the wheel of a car, I was fourteen and my dad had a sudden inspiration to start teaching me to drive. He drove us out to the commercial area in Sparks one Saturday and found a big empty parking lot. When I got into the driver's seat, I felt small. I had to move the seat forward and adjust the mirrors since my dad is six foot and I'm only five-four. He talked me through what all of the controls did, what steps to take before turning on the truck, and then handed me the keys.

After re-adjusting the mirrors, ensuring I could see from as many angles as possible, and asking him once more if he was sure, I put the truck in Drive. For a few minutes, we crawled through the parking lot at barely five miles an hour. The steering wheel was intimidating in my hands; I kept them white-knuckled at 10 and two like he showed me. When he suggested I give it more gas, I put my foot down and the truck leapt forward. Startled, I moved my foot to the brake and pushed down. The truck stopped so



suddenly my chest pushed against the seatbelt, and I saw my dad grab the “oh-shit” handle.

“Sorry.”

But he just laughed and let me try again. He said I’d need to get used to how much pressure to put on the pedals to get the truck up to certain speeds. I coaxed the truck completely around one building and then put it into Park. My heart was pounding with equal parts fear and exhilaration. I’d been in control of this massive piece of machinery, and I hadn’t even crashed it.

“What do you think?”

“It’s a lot more fun than I thought it would be. Still kind of scary though.”

He let me drive around the building a few more times, and then we switched seats again and went home. We did this about once a month, sometimes going to high school parking lots or other commercial areas where there weren’t likely to be other vehicles parked on the weekends. He taught me to park, bringing cones from when I used to play soccer to help guide me through parallel parking. By the time I was fifteen and a half and enrolling in Driver’s Ed, I felt comfortable behind the wheel of my dad’s pick-up.

At the first session, Mr. Simmons picked me to go first, while two other students buckled into the back seat. Lizeth was in my English class and made her own clothes. She wanted to go into fashion design and often complained about our readings since they would have no effect on her future career. Her project when we read “The Great Gatsby” was to draw outfits for each of the characters and then she talked about clothing from the 1920s. There was no way to tell whether she’d actually read the book, but the clothing designs were beautiful. Franklin Dandria was a senior who looked twenty and was on the

football team. I'd been in a math class with him freshman year, but we didn't really know each other.

I adjusted the seat, buckled myself, moved the mirrors around, and after glancing at the gear shift, I looked to Mr. Simmons.

"I don't know how to drive a shift."

To his credit, Mr. Simmons only smiled and didn't laugh at my mistake. I'm pretty sure Franklin did. Mr. Simmons explained that not all automatic transmissions have the gear shift coming from the steering column. Humiliated, I was determined not to screw up again. I wanted to show off that I was already ahead of the other kids. I knew how to drive.

At under fifteen miles an hour.

I crept along the residential streets near the school, vigilantly checking my mirrors and my blind spot, even though we were pretty much the only car on those roads at one o'clock in the afternoon on a Tuesday. Mr. Simmons helpfully reminded us that residential speed limits were typically 25, but 15 in a school zone. I stopped at a stop sign at the corner of one street, looked both ways, and figured Mr. Simmons' reminder was a hint for me to go faster.

I got up to twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, and then I heard Mr. Simmons telling me to slow down before I got us all in an accident. I tapped the brake until we were under fifteen again and he asked gruffly for me to pull up to the curb. He said it was Lizeth's turn, but I figure he was done with my inability to keep to one consistent speed.

I slowly became more comfortable with driving at regular speeds, and my dad let me practice on the weekends when we went to the grocery store or the library. Neither of

us was comfortable, nor looking forward to me driving on the freeway. I joked that I could just stick to residential streets.

“I can get pretty much anywhere just by taking McCarran Boulevard since it’s a loop.” But even McCarran, which gets to fifty in some spots, intimidated me. When the other cars flew by our little pick-up, I would grip the wheel and hold my breath until they passed, certain one of them was about to slam into us.

When Mr. Simmons announces its time for us to practice freeway driving, my stomach cramped, and I considered asking to go to the nurse’s office. The image of tractor-trailers and sports cars speeding by as I motored along was almost too much. I chewed the nail on my thumb as Franklin volunteered to go first.

Franklin drove fast. He smoothly merged onto the 395 freeway and quickly changed lanes until he was in the far-left lane. It was obviously not his first time. I watched from the backseat as the speedometer climbed to 75 before Mr. Simmons told him to watch his speed and get back into the right-hand lane.

“Don’t forget to signal this time,” he said in a tired voice.

Lizeth drove cautiously, with her seat as close to the steering wheel as possible and her back ramrod straight. Her hands sat primly at 10 and two as she checked her mirrors frequently and merged onto the freeway without driving into the side of a truck. She drove in the right-hand lane for two exits, merged off, and pulled into a gas station parking lot.

“That’s enough for today,” she said as she unbuckled and practically jumped out of the car.

I pulled away from the gas station, looked both ways, and brought the car back onto the street. Mr. Simmons directed me to the freeway entrance, but my heart was in my throat, and I drove past the entrance. I could feel the tension in his sigh as he told me to make a U-turn and try again.

As I pulled the car onto the freeway, I looked over my shoulder to check for oncoming traffic, but I looked for a little too long. I heard Mr. Simmons shout to watch out and my instinct was to slam my foot on the brake. I looked through the front windshield just in time to see the rear fender of the car in front of us only inches away but still moving forward.

I let out a large gasp of air, fought to keep myself from crying, and eased onto the accelerator to get the car up to speed. I kept the car at barely fifty-five for two exits and then, following in Lizeth's footsteps, exited the freeway. When I parked at the high school a few minutes later my hands were shaking and my stomach was heavy.

But as Lizeth and Franklin left, Mr. Simmons asked me to stay behind for a moment. I figured he wasn't going to wait for grading and report cards. I knew Mr. Simmons was going to fail me. I would never get my driver's license. I hoped my dad would be okay with driving me around for the rest of his life.

"Driving is a big responsibility. It can throw a lot of things at you all at once; it takes a lot of concentration. That's why we have you take this class, why you'll get a permit before a license, why there are restrictions until you've had plenty of practice."

"I know. I'm sorry—"

He shook his head, "You're not in trouble. I'm telling you to pay more attention. You can't just worry about what's behind you, but keep an eye on what's ahead. What

happened on the freeway, or what almost happened, is not entirely unexpected, especially with a novice driver. Don't let it discourage you. We'll practice again next week. Okay?"

We did practice the next week, and I remembered to glance over my shoulder for only a brief moment, turning quickly to see how far I was from the car in front of me. I was still shaky; it was a long time before I felt confident driving at freeway speeds. I took advantage of the side streets as much as possible.

I still do. The freeway with its higher speeds and massive tractor-trailers and everyone wanting to go even faster causes me a lot of anxiety. It's part of the reason that I am always happy to relinquish the driving to someone else, and stick to riding my bike locally. I just feel safer.

When I first regain consciousness, the vision of my right leg is unsettling. I can see my toes poking out at the end of a cast that reaches up to my mid-calf. My chest hurts with each intake of breath, and I see my right arm is also in a cast. I close my eyes and when I reopen them, I hope the view from the hospital bed will be replaced with my bed at home, the black dresser with silver handles I bought at a garage sale and refinished myself. I hope instead of a window view to the roof of another part of the hospital will be replaced with the view of my small backyard, the barest glimpse of the mountains in the backdrop dotted with white snow.

Instead, I am in a hospital room, alone, battered and broken, and I don't know where Quinn is. I think about the baby, and I start to cry. I hold my stomach with my free hand and know that I won't be able to feel anything. Whether it's still there or not. It's too early, too soon, too small. All I can do is lie there and cry.

A nurse comes to the room, probably alerted by my weeping.

“Good morning sunshine,” he says with a smile that lights up the room. He hands me a box of tissues from the bedside tray and takes my vitals. He asks me the last thing I remember.

“There was an accident. A car hit us, and then I saw it coming towards me.”

He clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Good thing ya’ll were wearing your seatbelts. You’ve got some bruised ribs and you’re a little broken, but you’re alive. You’re going to be just fine.” His fingers against my wrist as he takes my pulse is warm and his voice is calming.

“Do you know what happened? Are the people in the other car okay?” I open my eyes wide, “Is Quinn okay? Where is he? Do you know where Quinn is?”

“Quinn’s the one in the car with you? The driver?” I nod. “He’s just down the hall. He’s a little banged up, getting a CT to take a look at everything. He didn’t get the impact quite as bad as you.”

“And,” I swallow to pause but my voice cracks, “what about the baby?”

I expect the nurse to look surprised. I don’t look pregnant. There’s no indication that I am, and I don’t know emergency room procedures. Does anyone with a uterus get a pregnancy test, or is the only concern for the individual? Was Quinn awake and able to tell someone? I can’t stop the rush of thoughts in my head, and I can’t stop crying.

Instead of surprise, there is a note of softening as he takes my hand and assures me that there is a heartbeat, and an obstetrician is on their way to give me a full exam.

“There’s a heartbeat? You heard it?”

“Not personally, since I’m just getting on shift, but it’s right here in your chart. Strong, healthy heartbeat.”

I exhale slowly and close my eyes, grateful for this bit of good news. I don’t know what kind of damage could have been inflicted, but the heartbeat is a positive sign.

When the obstetrician arrives, she is quick to strap a monitor across my stomach and we listen together as a whooshing sound spills from the speakers and into the room. Another exhale and a positive sign. She asks if I have an OB she should call, but I don’t, I tell her, I’ve barely just found out and adjusted to the news that I’m pregnant. She says we need to do an ultrasound to check on the baby, and I decide I want Quinn to be there.

“Please, I need him with me. He’s a dad...the dad. He hasn’t even heard the heartbeat.”

A nurse brings Quinn in a wheelchair, and the moment he sees me there are tears in his eyes. He assures me the wheelchair is simply protocol and that he’s feeling fine. He rolls the chair next to my bed and takes my hand in his to kiss my palm. He says his chest is bruised from the seatbelt, and they’re waiting for scans on his back, but he’s in much better condition than I am. He tells me the hospital called my dad and his parents, and that they are all on their way.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d want them to call Rosie, but I’m sure your dad will talk to her.”

I have already noticed the ID around the nurse’s neck and know we’re at Washoe Med.

I look to the nurse who wheeled Quinn in. “Can we contact my aunt; she works here? Rosie Porter? She works in the NICU. Can you tell her I’m okay and to come visit when she’s off work?”

The nurse nods and leaves the room.

The obstetrician squirts a slimy jelly substance on my belly and slides the transducer along my stomach. She pulls a cart with a screen closer, and we watch as a grainy image appears looking more like something from a weather report than inside my body.

“Here we go,” she says as she points to the screen. “So, this here is your uterus and,” she runs her finger around a small peanut-shaped image in the black, “this is the fetus.” As she reached over to the keyboard, I stared at the shape on the screen that was supposedly going to grow into my baby. “What’s the date of your last period?”

Without taking my eyes off the screen, I tell her the date. “It’s always been really irregular though.”

After some keyboard clacking, she tells me the fetus is about 10 millimeters long. “I would estimate you’re about ten weeks along.”

“Is it going to be all right?” Quinn asks.

“Yes. Mommy and baby; I would recommend another ultrasound in two weeks to check in, but right now everything is looking good.” She looks at me, “You need to get an OB right away. If you experience any bleeding, you’ll need to call the doctor immediately.”

“Thank you doctor.”



“My pleasure.” She takes the wand off my stomach and the image on the screen disappears. I want to ask her to show me the baby again, to make sure it’s still there. To make sure it didn’t disappear with the grainy image. But I let her pack away her things and I use a small washcloth to wipe the jelly from my skin. I poke my stomach gently, but there is no sign of life from this end. I have to just trust the baby is there, growing and healthy and unbroken.

Not like me. I learn my ankle and wrist are both fractured. My ribs are bruised, and almost my entire right side is purple and blue. Most of the impact of the second car hit my right side. Quinn tells me the driver of the car that rear-ended us was distracted, talking on a cell phone. He hit us, causing our car to spin into the median. The second collision was another driver who had been speeding and couldn’t stop in time to avoid hitting us. The other drivers, and a passenger from the second car, were elsewhere in the hospital. Quinn didn’t know for sure, but it seemed as if I had endured the worst of the collision. And if the second car had stopped in time, I wouldn’t have broken anything.

I’m in the middle of a rant about selfish and irresponsible drivers when my dad walks into the room, his eyes panicked. He’s in his work coveralls and boots, dusty from the job site. I’m so happy to see him, I don’t even mind when he leans over to hug me and dust transfers onto my hospital gown and the sheets. I just wrap my arms around his neck and feel his hands on my back and his tears on my shoulder.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Agnes

I waited at the near-empty downtown station. It was four in the morning when an older man unlocked one of the buses and I could board. I took the bus to the opposite end of town and checked into a hotel somewhere between five stars and Motel 6. I handed over more than twice the rate, in cash, and asked the young woman at the front desk if I could stay two nights and they could hold onto the extra cash instead of taking a credit card or my ID. Maybe she saw the deep half-moons under my eyes, my desperation, my exhaustion, or maybe she just didn't care one way or the other. She took my money and my fake name and handed me a key.

Inside the room I stripped and stepped into the shower. I turned the water as hot as I could stand, maybe a little hotter as punishment for what I was doing and washed as if I were stripping off a layer of skin to begin anew. I hadn't admitted to myself that I was leaving permanently, telling myself I was just taking a break and then I'd be back. When my skin was bright red and I'd scrubbed myself clean, I dried off and used the hotel lotion on every inch of skin I could reach. It smelled like the lavender baby lotion I'd used on your skin when it was new and unblemished.

I pulled the blackout curtains across the wide window and used clips from the skirt hangers to ensure they remained closed. When the room was dark, my eyes not adjusted to the blackness so I couldn't see my feet, I laid down on the bed. I made a nest of pillows and wrapped myself in the fresh white sheet and cool down comforter. Before my eyes could find the merest light in the room and bring my vision back, I closed my eyes and focused on breathing. In for four. Hold for seven. Out for eight. In for four. Hold for seven. Out for eight.

When I woke, it was still dark, although I could catch some light slipping in between the clips and a steady dot of red from the TV. As I stared at the ceiling, I could sense the green glow from the clock on the nearby nightstand. I returned to my breathing for several minutes, wondering how long I had been able to sleep, wondering what David had done when he woke to find me gone, wondering what you were doing. The air conditioner kicked on in a violent rattle. I could hear someone in the room next door, the insulation and drywall muffling their words but not their angry tone. A vacuum roared to life somewhere down the hallway. A door slammed. I told myself it was time to get up.

The glowing green numbers read 10:23. I had only been asleep about four hours.

I still felt tired and thought I could fall back asleep easily. When I stood, I stretched every muscle in my aching body, to the ceiling and then to the carpet. My lower back popped, and then my knees, as if my body was putting itself back together.

I went to the bathroom and flipped the switch without thinking about how the sudden light would be blinding. I closed my eyes from the light but left it on; I would need my eyes to adjust. I sat on the toilet and peed for so long it felt like that ridiculous scene in Austin Powers after he's released from the cryogenic chamber. I laughed, the sound echoing off the walls of the small bathroom and into the room. My voice was hoarse like when I had bronchitis and ate nothing but soup and Jell-O for a week. David told me I sounded like I smoked a pack a day for twenty years.

When I opened the curtains, the Circus Circus clown rotated slowly in the distance. The lights were blurred, and I thought for a moment that I was crying, but it was raining. The sky was dark clouds, an ominous scene out of a horror movie, a post-apocalyptic future, the streets a glittery coal black. If I couldn't still hear the disagreeable

voice next door, I would have thought I was abandoned and alone in the biggest, loneliest city.

My stomach growled, and I wondered if this hotel was expensive enough to offer room service. I couldn't find a menu, only a Gideon Bible and the Yellow Pages, so I called reception only to find they didn't have room service but there was a small offering of chips, drinks and candy down by the front desk. No, the small feminine voice responded, they couldn't bring anything to my room. She was the only one working.

I put back on my discarded clothes and went downstairs to find something to settle my stomach.

The woman at the front desk was the same person who had checked me in. I grabbed two bags of Doritos, a Snickers bar, a bag of M&Ms, and two bottles of Coke. I thought I should leave and eat some real food at a restaurant, but I could feel the bed calling back to me. I wanted to curl up in my nest, eat junk food, and watch really terrible TV. Maybe I'd find a horror movie or some thriller that I never would have been able to watch with a kid around. I gave the woman more cash for the food, and as she counted back my change, I glanced at a calendar hanging on the wall to her left.

The picture of a soft white Persian kitten tucked into a basket of purple and pink irises reminded me of "Millions of Cats," a book carried over from my childhood that you had loved for several months when you were two. I could imagine hearing your voice, rhythmic along with mine as I read:

"Cats here, cats there, Cats and kittens everywhere. Hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, Millions and billions and trillions of cats."

I didn't want to hear your voice. I didn't want to be reminded of you. I shook my head and took my change.

"Have a good evening," the woman said.

"Gotta get through the day first, right?" I said with a laugh, but she just looked at me like I'd grown an extra head.

Back in my room, I dumped my goodies on the trashed covers and yanked the remote from the nightstand. I turned on the TV and flipped channels until I found the Weather Channel, two days of rain and clouds predicted until the sun would return. The date and time stood in the corner, staring me down as if a challenge, a threat, a joke taken too far.

I hadn't slept for only four hours. I had been asleep for sixteen. An entire day had passed since my husband had woken up alone in our bed. He would have had to go to work, find a last-minute sitter, only to return at the end of the day to find I was still not home. As I watched the meteorologist stand in front of a map of the Western states and explain the weather patterns coming, pixelated clouds rolling and re-rolling across Nevada and eastern California, I wondered what had happened as I slept.

I thought about calling right then. I thought about picking up the phone by the bed, dialing the house number, telling David that I was safe and coming home. I thought about how I would explain that I had only needed a break. That I needed to sleep. That I was feeling better and I was sorry for any worry I had caused.

I opened the bag of M&Ms and sat at the small desk beside the window. I emptied the candy onto the dark wood surface and began separating them into small piles based on their colors.

When I left, I told myself I was doing what was best for you and your father. I had already failed at being your mother and leaving you in his capable hands seemed the only option. I told myself it wasn't just the lack of sleep; I knew with certainty that you were better off without me. You were safer. You would have a better future without me there to mess everything up.

I still felt that way as I sat in that room, truly alone for the first time in so long, slowly moving the blue candies from the green, the yellow from the red. The piles grew until each color was segregated from the others. There were more reds than blues, more blues than yellows, and brown had the smallest pile of them all. I lined up each pile into a row, in order of the rainbow with brown at the far left, and looked at the small bar graph in front of me.

What had this morning been like for your father, for you, when he needed to go to work but also needed to have someone take care of you? Was he immediately concerned, or did he sort out the day, expecting I would be home by dinner? Did he call in sick and stay with you? Did he call the hospitals, or the police? Did he call my dad? Did he make dinner tonight with a forced smile so you wouldn't think to be worried that something was wrong? Were you aware that I was missing? Did you remember how angry I'd been, and then how we'd cried together, when I'd found you outside the house? Did you notice your daddy had to read you bedtime stories, or were you excited because he had the endless patience to read the same book three, four, five times in a row with the same enthusiasm? Did you ask for a bedtime song, performing a mangled version of "Part of Your World" where you didn't know "thingamabobs" and instead said "things in my box"?

I ate seven red M&M candies, and then systematically went through each color until the bar graph was even. Four candies of each color, in formation.

After you were in bed, did your father wait on the couch for me to come home? Was he still there, waiting, or had he given up and gone to bed? How did he feel in the moment before giving up? Was there a sense of relief that I was gone? Did he miss me? Would there come a time that he would mourn my absence?

When I was in high school, my mother and I watched a TV movie about a woman who killed her three children. Mom kept talking about how crazy the woman was, how there was obviously something wrong with her. Of course the woman ended up having schizophrenia or something, leading her to believe she was saving her children by drowning them in the bathtub. She had a real mental illness that went unchecked for years, and that terrified me. It seemed like another reason, in a long line of reasons, to not have children. What if I went crazy and seriously harmed, or murdered, them? What if that woman hadn't had children? Would she have still gone crazy; would she have harmed others? I wasn't as concerned about her access to mental health services, but how she could have avoided the whole issue completely had she simply chosen not to have kids.

My mother told me I didn't have anything to worry about. "That woman was crazy," she said, as if that woman weren't just a regular person who started her life the same way we did. She went to school, to college; she married a man she loved. She went to the grocery store, the library, museums and amusement parks. She was a regular person whose brain was just wired differently, and it betrayed her.

I ate the last of the M&Ms starting with the brown candies and then moved through the colors of the rainbow. I chewed each candy carefully, wanting to take my time as I wondered what my next step should be.

I was already gone. Nobody was knocking on the door, so they didn't know where I was. The initial feelings, whatever they might have been, were already in place. I knew your father would probably be concerned about my whereabouts but still try to maintain some level of normalcy. He wouldn't want to overreact, in case I was coming back. He wouldn't want to worry you, so he would try to make life as normal as possible. Just without me.

How long would that last? How much time would pass before he gave up thinking I was coming back, before he thought about reacting? Would he call the police to look for me? Had he called the credit card company yet, or did he know I took the cash from the safe? Whatever he'd done by now, he was already taking steps towards a life without me. Was I ready to take steps towards a life without him? Without you?

As I ate the last of the candies, I thought about going back home and felt my stomach twist in uneasiness. It could have been the candy, or the lack of a real breakfast, but I took it as a sign. The thought of going home made me queasy, so the right thing to do would be to leave.

I took a seat on the floor of the hotel room, in a sukhasana position like Henri had taught me, and closed my eyes.

I imagined walking out of the hotel, mapping the streets I would take to get to the bus station. I walked my imagined self into the station, bought a Greyhound ticket, and sat on a cold, steel bench until the bus arrived. I boarded, took a seat near the back, and



watched the city leave me behind. But I couldn't imagine what came next. I didn't know where the ticket went, what direction the bus drove in, or what my future looked like.

Then I imagined taking the bus home. I walked into the house, tomorrow so I could get another night's sleep first, and found you and your father waiting for me. You hugged me; your father swallowed his anger, or maybe he didn't. Maybe he waited until you were in bed to yell at me. Maybe he'd tell me I'd made the wrong choice. Maybe he'd tell me I should have stayed away.

I opened my eyes and moved to the bed, pulling the covers over my head as if I was still a child believing the simple protection of cheap polyester batting would shield me against whatever horrors might lurk beneath my bed or within my closet.

The only protection I could provide to ensure my daughter had a safe and happy childhood, was to leave. So that's what I did.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Matilda

I'm likely to be out of work for at least two months, so I'm forced to quit my job at McCarran Kitchen. My dad has me move in with him until I'm back on my feet and able to work. Leaving the 8th Street house is emotional, and I'm secretly glad I can't be there to pack it all up. Instead, I lie in bed in my old room while Quinn and Rosie take care of the packing in one weekend. The room around me slowly fills with boxes of things we'll need in the interim, with the rest going into a storage unit. Paige keeps me company on her days off, sometimes sitting with me while I read or sleep. She's decided to learn to crochet, and she's determined her first project will be a baby blanket.

I've decided to keep the baby. This is a point of contention between Quinn and I, but I refuse to back down. I tell him in no uncertain terms that he can be as much a part of the baby's life as he wants, but I am having the baby.

Blythe comes to visit and sits with me as she updates me on gossip from the Kitchen. Janet hired three part-time college students to fill my spot, but she said she'll hire me back in a second if I ever need it. Blythe paints my toes and reveals she's gone on two dates with a man she met through Emory's new day care provider. He's a single parent with a son about Emory's age. She said he's been divorced a year, so they're taking everything slow. Even though their children know each other, they don't know about their parents' dates. Blythe gushes about Oscar and not-so-subtly says she's falling for him. I tease her about not knowing the definition of taking things slow.

After the first week of healing in bed, Paige brings a wheelchair to the house. She says a friend had it lying around in a garage, so it's used, but in good shape. She helps me in, and we go for a walk around the block. She pushes the chair since my arm is still in a cast and it's too bulky to get a grip on the wheel. As she walks, Paige reminds me of the time I broke my wrist in gym class. I fell from the climbing rope, landed on my arm and had a hairline fracture in the wrist. I had a cast for a month. We laugh as she teases that I purposely broke my arm to get out of completing the Presidential Physical Fitness Test that year. I tell her my brilliant plan also involved getting the school to get rid of the ropes all together.

Back at the house, we decide to sit out on the grass in the front yard to enjoy the sunshine. I hop out of the chair on one leg and plop onto the grass.

“I have news,” she says. “Damian called me yesterday. He found an address and phone number that are likely your mom’s.”

I sit in stunned silence, so she keeps talking.

“It’s in Colorado under Jane Mitchell. From what Damian could find, Agnes Wharton-slash-Porter disappeared after she left and reappeared as Jane Mitchell a year or so after that.”

“That’s Agnes’s mom’s name. That’s why it’s my middle name. And hers.”

“She bought the place three years ago. Here,” she hands me a piece of paper with my mother’s contact information on it.

I rub my thumb over the letters that make up the street where my mother lives. Has been living. I think about three years ago.

Three years ago, my mother bought a house in Colorado. For at least three years, less than the time it took me to finish my degree, my mother and I have only been 1,000 miles apart.

Even when I was young, I always imagined my mother went somewhere exotic. Somewhere vastly different from Reno and Nevada. If I pictured her, she was usually in a vaguely Paris-of-the-movies location. She was strolling down a cobblestone road near the Colosseum in Rome, or drinking wine at a café by the Louvre. I figured she was relaxing on the black sand beaches of Santorini, or maybe on a safari down the Nile watching elephants drink from the river. When I learned she’d been an artist, I thought she could have gone to New York to sell paintings to a fancy gallery. But usually she was abroad, far away from the suburban street in Reno where I grew up.

Instead, she’s in Colorado. And I have her phone number.

“Are you going to call her?”

“No...maybe...I don’t know.” An ache in my ribs starts. “I guess I never really thought I’d get this far.”

When my dad gets home from work, I consider keeping my revelation a secret. But I break down at the dinner table.

“Colorado, huh? Interesting.” His voice is flat, and he puts another fork full of meatloaf in his mouth. I expect him to say something more, but when he’s done, he simply takes another bite. And another.

I want him to outwardly express the feelings I’m having trouble putting into words. The ache in my ribs went away with the pills, but it was replaced by a heaviness. It was as if all the grief I ever directed toward my mother had found its way into my rib cage and was pushing toward my uterus. I imagine the grief-ball traveling into my uterus and attaching itself to the baby busy growing. I want to stop this feeling from migrating, and so I let it out the only way I feel I can at the moment.

I think I am about to burst into desolate blubbering, ejecting the mourning from my body in the form of tears, but instead the howl released from my core is an infuriating rage that spews from my mouth in the form of an expletive-laden rant.

I drain every ounce of the anguish I’ve experienced over the years since Agnes deserted her family and rejected me. Angry tears scorch a path down my cheeks, and I am aware of the silence from my father echoing as I spit fire.

“She is cruel and selfish and a goddamn fucking bitch!” For good measure, I throw my plate and watch it shatter against the wall. I start to throw my water glass, but

my dad catches my hand in his. We look into each other's eyes and the gloom in his is almost too much to bear.

"She's been so close. This whole time," I tell him, and he nods. "This whole time."

Still holding my hand, my dad scoots his chair closer to me, the legs scratching against the linoleum. "It's okay for you to be upset, kiddo. I still get upset. Even after all this time."

"I don't want to be. I don't want to think about her anymore. Why can't I forget about her like she's forgotten me?"

"I guarantee she has not forgotten about you. She wrote that letter, didn't she?"

I look at the floor. "But it didn't even matter. It's just a piece of paper from a woman I don't know. I'm so tired of caring." I slump in the chair with my casted arm resting on the table. "And I'm scared."

"Of what?"

I can tell he already knows when I say, "Of being like her." I use my napkin to blow my nose. "What if I can't handle it, and I leave?"

"You won't," Dad says. He puts his hand over my casted hand and squeezes my fingers. With the relief of my grief-ball, the only pain left in my chest is from my bruised ribs.

Later that night, my dad knocks on the door frame of my room and takes a seat at the foot of the bed where I am propped against the headboard with my casted foot on a pillow. I put down the book I'm reading.

“Did I ever tell you that Agnes suffered from anxiety?” I shake my head. “She did. For years. I think even before I knew her. She had these panic attacks where she felt like she couldn’t breathe; she’d be frozen by sheer panic. It was terrifying for her, but also for me because I didn’t understand what she was going through. I felt like there was never anything I could do to help her.”

“What would she panic about?”

“It wasn’t always something specific. Sometimes it would come out of nowhere. The Halloween you were three, she had one in the middle of the sidewalk outside a neighbor’s house. We were walking along, ringing doorbells, admiring costumes, when she just stopped and bent over like she was going to vomit. Lasted a couple minutes, and I didn’t know what to do. So I made sure you were buckled into the stroller and rubbed her back until she could catch her breath. She went home to rest but insisted I keep taking you trick-or-treating.” He shakes his head at the memory. “Maybe we should have all gone home. Maybe I should have made her see a doctor. But I didn’t.”

“So she left because she had panic attacks?”

He shifts on the bed and fiddles with the comforter while he talks. “I think it was more than that. I think she never felt like she was being a good enough mom and maybe her anxiety added to that feeling. She thought you would be better off without her.” He looks at me and I see a wrinkle burying itself between his eyebrows. This simple little wrinkle reminds me how young he still is, how young he was when I was born. Considering how unprepared and young I feel about becoming a parent, I can only imagine how much worse it might have been for him. And for Agnes.

“Look, kiddo,” he says as he looks up from the comforter and takes my non-broken hand in his, “she struggled. A lot. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be a mom, but I really wanted to be a dad. Without meaning to, I think I pushed her into it. But being a parent just felt like the thing to do. Graduate high school, go to college or not, get married, have kids, work hard, retire. That’s how life was supposed to happen. That’s how I wanted my life to happen. I grew up believing that women were naturally maternal, that they all wanted to have babies. I’m a product of my parents. My dad worked and my mom stayed home to take care of me and Rosie. That’s just the way things were. How to be normal.”

“She didn’t want me.”

He shakes his head, “It wasn’t about you specifically. When you were born, it took a little while for her to bond, but she worked hard at it. She would sit with you in the rocking chair, talking to you and telling you stories. She would say she felt like being a mom came easier to other women, that she had to work hard at it, but it seemed like she was doing okay. After all these years, I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. Why she left.” He finds a loose thread in the comforter, and I watch as he twists it around his index finger. “It was a mixture of everything. She didn’t want to be a mom, and then when she was, she felt guilty about not wanting to. Her anxiety, and maybe depression, I don’t know, told her she wasn’t doing a good enough job. And then, after you fell on the bricks outside, something snapped.” He pulls the thread; we watch it break free wrapped around his finger. He rolls the dark blue thread between his index and thumb into a ball.

I think about what my dad has revealed, and the memory of falling on the bricks comes back to me. I was outside, but I don’t remember either of my parents being

around. There was a thrill in my chest as I explored the front yard, alone. I remember a cool breeze on my face, the pavement on the driveway was coarse against my bare feet. I turn somersaults in the dry grass, which reminds me of the circus performers I'd seen in a cartoon, and I walk along the bricks by mama's flowers like I'm on a tightrope. I walk one way, pivot on my toes, and walk the other way. I go to pivot again, but I lose my balance. My cheek hits brick and the sharp pain brings tears to my eyes. I don't sob, but I do sit on the brick for a moment in a daze. Now I want to go inside and find mama for her to comfort me, but I can't reach the door handle. Instead, I sit by the flowers mama has tended so carefully and tell the lilies I shouldn't have been outside by myself, but mama will come outside soon, and we'll have tuna for lunch. When mama does come out, she hugs and holds me tightly for a long time. She kisses my forehead and one cheek over and over and she's crying.

Then I am sitting in the grass again, except now I have one of the lilies clutched in my fist. I'm watching Mama ripping the flowers out of the dirt, making a pile of leaves and stems and petals. I've rescued one flower but, as she stuffs the dregs into the trash can, she sees my treasure and asks me to get rid of it. I do, sadly, but I don't argue. Mama knows best. One by one, she picks up a brick and tosses it in the silver can. She says they are too dangerous. With the final resounding crash of brick on metal, she dusts her hands on her pants and tells me, now you'll be safe.

I run my finger along the faint scar on my cheek. It's barely noticeable, less than an inch of skin paler than the rest, but I can feel the ridge.

“She was trying to keep me safe.”



My dad nods. “She was scared and didn’t know what she was doing. Neither of us did.”

I think about this. My dad stands and drops the ball of thread in the trash.

“I wish you had told me all this before.”

He hums in his throat. “I didn’t know how much I should say. I really thought it would be better to just forget her. Move on. Live our lives.”

“I know,” I say, “I understand. But now that I know, I want to talk to her.”

“I think you should,” he says. Then we say good night and he leaves for his own room.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Agnes

I’m somewhere above the Atlantic when you call. I don’t get home until three days later, but when I hear the voicemail, your voice on a machine that rarely gets use, I have to catch my breath. The timber of your voice surprises me; it doesn’t match with the image I have of you in my head at five years old. Of course you would sound different. You are twenty-two.

When I found out I was pregnant, I thought I knew what I would do. I planned on going to the clinic on Fifth Street one day after I taught the life drawing class on Thursdays. David would be at work, building a home for someone to raise a family in, and I would meet him back at home, not pregnant.

When I called to make an appointment, I was informed that I would need a counseling appointment first to discuss the procedure and other options available. I tried to tell the kind woman on the phone that I already knew my options, but she said we had to follow the rules. I called another clinic, this one in Carson, and they had the same rule. So I made a counseling appointment in Carson City, figuring the distance would keep my secret.

I wore my albatross for a week, floating through the days on autopilot, losing my train of thought mid-sentence. I became stupid and your father became concerned. I shrugged him off; I'm just not feeling well. I'll be fine.

But there was a stone in my gut, barely five weeks along, always sitting just in between us as we watched TV and ate dinner and went to bed. I lost my drive and turned away from you in bed. The stone sat there, heavy, dragging me down until I thought I would drown.

Halloween arrived and we donned the couples costume I'd spent months making. Frankenstein's monster and the Bride of Frankenstein. True to our tradition, we spent the night watching horror movies while getting up every few minutes to hand out candy to trick-or-treaters. We had to keep Atticus Finch in the backyard so he wouldn't mow over the kids every time we opened the door. David gushed over the kids in costumes in a way that reminded me of my mom when I was a kid. My mom would spend several hours never too far from the door so she could admire the costumes and hand out candy.

David would pretend to be scared of the monsters, bow dramatically for the princesses, call out "Shiver me timbers" to the pirates. He had something for everyone.

It was exhausting.

While we're watching "Night of the Living Dead," I tell him we should have a haunted house in our garage next year. "We did that at my house every year."

He considered this for a moment and then asked, "Wouldn't that be creepy? The childless couple luring children into their garage? Maybe after we have a kid it wouldn't be so weird."

He sounded so certain. "After we have a kid," you know, like we always planned. I tried to think back to see if he had ever mentioned wanting kids in the four years we've been together. I think there were vague references to having a family. He wanted a house with a yard, so we'd have space to run around and host parties. Of course that meant running around with children and hosting birthday parties. I wanted to smack myself for being so dense.

The stone in my gut chained me to the couch as the doorbell rang again.

I watched his face as he opened the door; it was like he literally lit up, even though it was just the glow of the porchlight. He was so good with the kids. They loved him. He joked around with them, complimented their costumes, let the little ones take as much as they could fit in their little hands.

It was the same everywhere we went, really. Walking Atticus Finch at the park, he'd watch kids on the playgrounds. He bought cookies from every Girl Scout who knocked on our door, and calendars from the Boy Scouts. He'd have to hand the calendars out to the guys at work because we ended up with so many. Every room of the house had a matching Boy Scout calendar. Thin Mints and Samoas were a staple in our pantry and freezer. Around Christmas time we have lots of wreaths from the Boy Scouts too.

When we went roller-skating, he gushed over the small skates and tried to watch the mini skaters without seeming *too* interested. When we met up with friends from high school, he held all the babies. If someone handed me one, assuming I wanted to coo in its face, I'd pass it along to David knowing he'd be delighted.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had been ignorant from the beginning. I had to admit three things.

David wanted to be a dad.

David assumed he would be a dad.

I had never told David I didn't want to be a mom.

Over the next two days, I worried over my upcoming appointment. My body, my choice; but David was an active participant, should he get a vote? Was I selfish if I got an abortion without talking to my husband? Would I be miserable and resentful if I had a baby just to make him happy?

I painted my frustrations, large swaths of bold colors across the canvas, confused and comingled shades, each screaming for attention. I hid the canvas behind the others; the abstraction was so different from my usual impressionism that I didn't want to attract questions. My pencil drawings didn't help when, during a long phone call with my mom, I looked at my sketchbook to see I had the faint outline of a visibly pregnant woman. I tore the page out, crumpled it into a ball, and stuffed it in my pocket. Later I would flush it down the toilet, although that might have been the cause of a later clog we had to deal with.

I didn't have anybody I could talk it out with. My parents would be ecstatic to hear about their coming grandchild. The women I knew through the community center

were all mothers, every one of them, and I considered them to be biased. The men didn't seem like they cared much about children and parenting at all.

I didn't have any close friends at the time. Most of them went to college, with a few going out of state. Getting married right out of high school had caused some distancing between the lives we each were living. They were going to classes and meeting people and going to parties. I was isolated, unable to reach out for fear they would scoff at my decision.

I should have gone to college too. I always meant to. But by the time I really thought about it, I had a newborn.

Life moves at different speeds for different folks, and I had taken a wrong exit while everyone else was still speeding along.

What else was I going to do with my life? I had a husband who loved me, a beautiful house, loving parents, a job I enjoyed doing something I loved.

If I was going to settle into the rote appointment of loving wife, why not give my husband what he wanted?

In the end, that was what made me cancel the appointment. That was what guided me through nine months of giving up my body and my sense of self. The thought of the devastation David would feel if he ever found out I'd taken away his chance to be a father.

In the end, I did it all for him. You were my gift to him. You were his. Through and through.

When the sound of your adult voice came over my answering machine, my first thought was of David. Did he know you'd called me?

I listened to your message, short as it was, a dozen times. More. I heard what you said, "Hi Agnes, this is Matilda. I would appreciate a chance to talk to you." And I heard what you didn't say. I wasn't Mama, you weren't my daughter. You wanted to talk, but it was all in my court now. I had stayed hidden long enough, and my curiosity got the best of me. I needed to come out of the shadows.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Matilda

I prepare to meet my mother as if I am preparing for a job interview. I curl my hair, pin it to the side with bobby pins, and put on mascara and lipstick. I change my outfit three times before deciding on a navy pencil skirt and a watermelon pink blouse. My body has begun making accommodations, so elastic waistbands have become my clothing of choice. I add my navy-blue blazer, pink Converse low tops and silver hoops in my ears.

I stand for a long time in front of the bathroom mirror, trying to see myself as she will. The last time she saw me, I was five years old, and my long hair was always tangled. I had to keep it in a ponytail just to keep it out of my face. In pictures my pants always have holes in the knees and my face is often dirty. I am no longer the girl my mother left, but the woman my father raised.

In the parking lot outside the coffee shop where I am meeting my mother, I sit with the radio on in my father's pick-up and stare at the building. Three songs play as I

work up the courage to get out of the truck. I am hyper aware of my body as my hand removes the cold metal key from the ignition, the weight in my shoulders as I push the door open, the warmth of the sun on my face, a twinge in my gut where I've stored nervous energy all week. Inside the coffee shop, I look around and see the cashier helping an elderly couple, a barista handing a mug of something steaming to a woman who is not my mother, and a group of college-aged women gathered around a table meant for three. Then I see another woman at a table for two, an empty chair facing her, her bouncing right leg causing her entire body to vibrate. She looked up as I walked in but has returned to staring at the mug between her hands.

My mother doesn't recognize me.

When I was small, in elementary school mostly, I envied the other girls their mothers. When I attended birthday parties for classmates, I'd find myself surrounded by children and their mothers. Fathers rarely seemed to attend children's birthday parties unless there was a barbeque involved. A stereotype, sure, but that was how I saw the world. I preferred the parties where parents dropped kids off, we'd play for a while, eat cake, watch presents get ripped open, and then we'd be picked up by various guardians, one by one. It seemed less obvious then that I was one of few, sometimes the only one, always picked up by my father.

At one of my birthday parties, Dad and Rosie decorated the backyard with streamers and tied balloons to trees. Adults were invited to stay for lunch and cake, and I noticed small groups of adults appear around the perimeter, catching up, drinking their adult drinks, and watching the kids run around. Rosie was the only adult without kids,

and she was the only one to join us in play. She started games of freeze tag and Red Rover and tried to teach us how to manage Double Dutch. She ran across the yard into Red Rover chains as if she were one of us. Hosting duties were left to Dad, which meant glimpses of him mingling with the small groups, refilling drinks and spending a few moments talking to everyone.

Later in the day, when kids were scattered on the lawn balancing large slices of chocolate cake on paper plates across our knees, I wondered where my mother would have fit in. Would she be in the groups, mingling with moms? Would you run across the yard, bare feet in the grass, slowing down when the kid who was It was close so she might be tagged? Would my dad be one of those that didn't go to birthday parties? Would Agnes join the PTA?

It always seemed the PTA moms were the ones who got to plan the most fun events at school: Halloween carnival, Christmas shop, Scholastic Book fairs. They were the ones who made treats for the bake sale, wrapping packs of three or four cookies in plastic wrap with a pretty little bow, or sneaking an extra cupcake to the kid who didn't quite have enough quarters. They were the ones who gathered in the library after school, folding themselves into child-sized chairs and still managing to look graceful.

Sometimes, when I waited for Rosie to pick me up, I would walk the aisles of the library and peek at the mothers—never fathers it seemed—and listen to them gossip. I made a game out of trying to pair a mother with a child I knew, from the shape of their mouth or the point of their chin, the shade of their hair or the status of their earlobes.

When I was in fifth grade, I learned about hereditary markers and the traits we inherit from our parents. Mrs. Desch showed us pictures of detached and attached



earlobes, and as a class we examined our own to determine which ones were similar. I went home and was disappointed to find his earlobes attached, because my own were not. Rosie's were also attached. In fact, I've never thought I looked much like my dad. We share hazel eyes, and we laugh the same. According to Rosie, I resembled Agnes more, with our matching round eyes, almond-colored curls, the careful slope of our noses. It wasn't until I was fifteen or sixteen that I started to notice the similarities between myself and Agnes in the photos I had. I chopped my hair off, buzzed within a few inches of my scalp, but still I saw my mom in the mirror.

The summer after fifth grade when a community pool opened up in our neighborhood, and my dad took me every weekend to swim for hours. Sometimes Paige went with us, or her mom brought us during the week when Dad worked. I spent a lot of time in the pool perfecting my swim skills and pretending to be a mermaid.

The community pool also gave me a lot of time to observe other mothers. Eventually places like the changing room would become awkward and dreaded, with its open changing area where my budding breasts and newly sprouted hair could be seen by strangers. But when it first opened, I was eleven and that room was interesting to a motherless girl. Because it was full of women.

The room was a mostly open space with benches lining the walls. There was a short hallway that led to two toilet stalls whose locks were always broken, and a shower to two faucets facing each other. When nobody else was showering, I liked to turn on both faucets and sit where the warm streams of water met.

As I dressed, I cataloged the women. There were always mothers of classmates, or women who worked at the grocery store down the street, the library, the shop where my

dad got his car fixed. Some were vaguely familiar, women who probably came to the pool often to escape the dry heat of the desert summer. Others were strangers, and those became the women I would watch surreptitiously to see if they resembled me how I imagined Agnes would still.

I started looking at earlobes. I didn't think I was going to find her in Reno, but I wanted to know what she would look like now—how much would we look alike? As I got older, would I resemble her more or less? Does Agnes have large breasts like Mrs. Belding from the library, or were they small mounds like Ms. Katya's from the community center? Does she wear her hair short now, dyed red, like the woman in the skimpy blue bikini, or does she still keep it long and wear it in braids like the woman who shows up in a suit before changing into a modest one piece? Does she wear jeans and tee-shirts every day, or does she prefer the elasticity of skirts like the woman who seems to always be in the lap pool?

Fourth and fifth grades are the height of my penchant for making up stories about where my mother was. I told many lies, making the story more interesting than I thought it was. My mother died often in the stories, usually in some dramatic fashion, but sometimes she was in witness protection, or she was a spy, or she was completely unknown and I was adopted by a caring bachelor or uncle, stories that sounded very similar to those of Little Orphan Annie or Mary Lennox in "The Secret Garden," which I had read recently. People responded with varying degrees of belief, with children more likely to openly doubt me. If and when adults did, they rarely mentioned it directly.

Sometimes I would pretend Rosie was my mother, especially when we went to run errands together. She never corrected people when they commented on her well-

behaved daughter at the grocery store, and we would laugh together afterwards when someone would say I was the “spitting image” of her. I wasn’t, at all. But when people see a woman and a girl together, they always assume they are mother and daughter. The brain convinces people of all kinds of silly things.

“Hello Agnes.”

When she looks at me, her leg stops; her body is so still it’s as if she’s been struck with spontaneous paralysis. Her hair is pulled into a bun at the back of her head, highlighted with silver in a few spots. Her eyes are shaped like mine, with long, dark lashes that seem to almost touch the lenses of the cat eye glasses she wears. Her lips are a bold red, her cheeks pale pink. She has changed out of her uniform into black capri pants, a white tee-shirt, and a forest green cardigan. Her face looks similar enough to my own, older than the one in my treasured photographs, that I believe I would have recognized her even if we hadn’t planned this meeting.

When she finally breathes and comes to life, she stands in black ballet flats. We are the same height. This is surprising; she has been so much a nebulous shape hanging over my life that always seemed so much larger than myself.

“Matilda. I...you’ve gotten big.”

There is an awkward silence, and she looks uncomfortable, her eyes taking me in, and I wonder again how she sees me, how she reconciles the image she has of the little girl she left with the young woman in front of her.

“Please, take a seat.” She nods toward the counter, “Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?”

“Green tea, thank you.”

She hurries to the cashier to order my drink, and I watch her. I am shocked by how young she looks. I imagine those who see us together might think us sisters rather than estranged mother and daughter. I am now older than she was when she had me.

When she returns, she places a steaming mug in front of me. She takes her seat, and I pick up the string that holds the teabag. I dunk the bag a few times and watch it appear, disappear. I feel my mother watching me as she takes a sip from her own mug, but neither of us speaks for a minute. The chatter from the other bodies in the shop and the soft jazz music fades into white noise as I look at her.

“Thank you for meeting me,” I say, and this breaks the silence that has cocooned around our table. The shop comes alive with distinct sounds again. The whirl of the espresso machine, the clink of spoons in cups, conversations between people who actually know each other.

“I was surprised when I first got your voicemail. I thought you would never want to speak to me.” Her tone betrays her uncertainty before her words do. “I had a dream last night that you never arrived. Which I would deserve.”

I shake off her self-pity and remove the teabag from my mug, set it on a napkin. “Maybe, but I don’t know if I agree yet.”

I wonder if my face betrays me as hers does. Her eyes are downcast, and she digs a thumbnail into a groove on the wood table. Her leg is shaking again, and it takes a lot for me to keep mine still. Our nervous energy manifests in a similar way.

I want to be angry with the woman in front of me, but I think she might be afraid of me.

“Where are you headed?”

“Seattle. And then Colorado. I have a little place in Red Feather Lakes, outside Fort Collins.”

“How long have you lived there?”

“Three years. Before that I shared a place in Houston with some of the other girls. That was home for six years.”

I take a sip and glance out the window by our table. From here I can see cars speeding down US 395, rushing north and south. A truck horn blares but I don't see the offender.

“What about before that?”

She shrugs. “Spent a year in Australia, a year in France. I moved around a lot.”

“Is that why you left us? To travel the world?”

A car honks from the parking lot. Someone walks into the shop and the bell alerts everyone of the arrival. Coffee beans are ground, the milk steamer whistles, lights hum, and a toilet flushes. The jazz arrangement ends and there is dead air a moment before the next starts. Every sound echoes in my mother's silence.

“People travel with children. You didn't have to leave me.” I cringe at the smallness of my voice.

My mother shrinks in her seat. “I didn't...I mean, I didn't mean to...leave...you.”

“But you did.” My voice is more substantial now. My gut is a knot, a heavy mass sitting in my pelvis. I swallow the inclination to cry and yell.

She folds her hands on the table and looks at me. “Matilda, I was scared. And young...so young. I was only twenty when I had you. You're...twenty-two? Could you

imagine suddenly becoming responsible for a helpless, tiny infant right now? Without any planning?”

I don't make any indication that I understand. I have imagined this. I am preparing for my own tiny infant, but I've already decided I won't share this part of me with her.

She plays with her fingers, fidgeting as she takes a deep breath. “I tried; I really did. But there was so much going against me, and I couldn't hold up against it all. I don't expect you to understand, and I certainly am not asking for forgiveness. But I want you to know. I thought I was doing what was best for you.” She looks to the floor, “I wasn't a good mother.”

“Leaving was best for me?” She nods. “You abandoned me. You left dad, but you abandoned me. I'm your child. Your daughter. Do you have any idea what you leaving meant? Do you know what it's like to grow up believing you were such a hateful, disobedient child that your own mother couldn't even stand to be around you? Do you know what it's like to not even know what happened? You left because you're selfish; you didn't care what effect your leaving had on me. Or Dad! Your husband. He was devastated, broken.”

I let the tears fall, using a napkin to wipe my cheeks that are scorching with my anger. My own anxiety chokes me until tears spill from my eyes. I am embarrassed by these tears. They are the tears of a desperate little girl who needed her mother to come back for her. The others in the shop are watching us, evaluating, coming up with their version of what our story might be. They could never understand. I swipe away the tears.

“Maybe it was what’s best. Better than being raised by a self-centered narcissist.”

Before she can respond, I push myself back from the table, stand, and walk heavily out of the coffee shop, the chime announcing my exit. I want to slam the door behind me, but the pneumatic door closer takes that poignant attempt at closure from me.

I don’t get very far before Agnes catches up.

“Matilda, please. Don’t leave angry.”

I spin around and we are face to face. “What were you expecting?”

She drops her head, her shoulders fall. “I didn’t think you’d show up. I couldn’t imagine a world where you would give me even a minute of your time.”

“But you still came.”

“Yes.” She nods once quickly. “The timing of your call felt like fate. I held onto a sliver of hope that I could make you understand why I did what I had to. Please, sit with me?” She gestures to a bench, and I follow her. We sit side by side. She smells like lavender and coffee. “Matilda, I’m sorry for leaving, for disappearing, for everything.”

Her apology does not give me the liberation I wanted, but it’s fine. They are only words, and she is only a woman.

“Why did you leave?” I ask as I watch cars drive by, one turns into the parking lot near where we sit.

“It was easier than staying, and the longer I was gone, the harder it became to come back.”

I watch the car pull into a spot and a young woman gets out of the driver’s seat. She opens the door to the back seat and holds her hand out. A boy of four or five takes

her hand and jumps to the ground. They enter the coffee shop, hand in hand. I hear the chime.

“Was I a terrible child?”

She shakes her head. “I was a terrible mother.” She pauses. “Or I thought I was. I thought I was doing it all wrong. And it came easier to Dav...your dad. I knew he’d do better without me in the way.”

Agnes goes on to tell me about my early years. I try not to interrupt, realizing how desperate I’ve been to hear her voice. And how certain I’d been that I’d never hear it.

When she tells me about panic attacks at the zoo, going trick-or-treating, standing in the middle of the kitchen while making dinner, her voice becomes disconnected and rote, as if she’s told these stories over and over again. She says she has pills now, that they help, but she can’t get the feeling of not being able to breathe out of her memory.

She tells me about the day before she left, filling in the blanks from my own memory of being outside alone, falling on the bricks, her manic desperation to rip them from the ground as if only that act would protect me. Hearing the terror she experienced when she couldn’t find me, I try to imagine myself in the same situation. I wonder what I could do to keep the same thing from happening to my own child. The deadbolt didn’t work. Would I have to nail chairs to the floor to make them immobile? Can I be sure I wouldn’t also fall asleep while my child plays in the room next door? I want to believe I’d do things differently, but I can’t plan for everything. I, too, will make mistakes.

I listen as my mother tells me about being hidden away in a hotel across town. I remember my father calling friends and family, even calling the police. I remember later hearing he was told he couldn’t file a missing persons report on an adult who was no



threat to themselves or others, especially after less than a day. I remember spending most of the day at Paige's house, eating ice cream and playing with her Barbies, watching *The Little Mermaid*, and having my first sleepover at her house. Her mom helped us build a fort in the living room and let us sleep there that night. I remember waking with Paige's hand in my face, our feet tangled under the blankets. Her mom made us strawberry pancakes for breakfast, adding a dollop of whipped cream right before passing the plates our way. I remember hearing my dad cry from behind his closed bedroom door, seeing my aunt Rosie comfort him one night after dinner, listening as he told me mama wasn't coming back. I remember I told my kindergarten teacher my mother had died, and later I would tell others the same when it seemed simpler than the truth.

My mother asks me to tell her about my life. I want to snap at her, "If you wanted to know, you should have been there," but I bite my tongue and instead walk her through recent history. I graduated high school, then college—BA in Art with an emphasis in photography. I met Quinn, fell in love.

My mother doesn't seem interested in my boyfriend, but she brightens at my art degree.

"I used to think I'd be a painter," she tells me. "But I mostly draw; it's easier to carry around a sketchbook than a canvas and easel. I like drawing people; sometimes on long flights I'll sketch passengers." She withdraws a book with a black cover, hands it to me. I carefully flip through line drawings of various people.

"I love landscape photography, especially around the Lake, but I'm getting into portraiture. I think there's more opportunity for work taking pictures of people." The last

drawing in her book is a small girl, curled pigtails and arms wrapped around a doll with matching pigtails, her eyes closed as she dozes next to the airplane window.

“What do you do for work?” She asks as I hand her the book and she returns it to her bag.

“I was out of work for a little while after a car accident, but now I’m getting into freelance photography. Family portraits, senior photos, newborns. That kind of stuff. Maybe when the economy recovers there will be more jobs for photographers.”

She asks and I tell her about the car accident, my convalescence, how my wrist still doesn’t feel quite right but at least now I’m ambidextrous when it comes to writing.

When she starts checking the watch on her wrist, an anxious note rises in her voice. “I’m going to have to get back to the airport soon,” she says as an apology.

“Unless...”

She looks at me and I am compelled to ask her to stay, to ask if she can leave tomorrow, or the next day. I am seized with a desperation to keep her talking, to hold onto her and not let her leave me again. I imagine telling her I’m pregnant, just to get her to stay a little longer. She failed at being a mother, but maybe I can entice her with the prospect of a grandchild.

I open my mouth to tell her. Instead, I hear myself ask if I’ll hear from her again. The want in my voice is mortifying, but she says, “I’d like that.”

When a cab arrives to take her back to the airport, we hug awkwardly as if uncertain how our bodies could fit next to each other. Right before she gets into the car, she doubles back and looks into the distance.

“Maybe you could come visit me. In Colorado. Some day.”

I can only say maybe, and she looks at me with a small smile. We say goodbye and when she closes the door, it feels like a window has opened.

As I watch the cab drive away, there is a twitch in my stomach. I put my palm on my abdomen and watch my mother disappear.

THE END