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PLAYING HOUSE

By
Tracey Bennett
B.A. Bellarmine University, 2000

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
Of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters in Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

December, 2008

PLAYING HOUSE

By: Tracey Bennett

A Thesis Approved by the following committee members:

(Director)

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters in Arts

On November 11, 2008

ABSTRACT:

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The role of mothers, the constitution of families, and the power of their stories are the bedrock of my thesis, which is the first 90 pages of a novel entitled Playing House. In it, I hope to investigate the denotation and connotation of the words *mother* and *family*, in order to investigate the tension between the two. I hope to complicate society's assumption that a womb makes a woman a mother, and the lack of one prohibits it. Many times, we are mothered by someone other than our biological mother—sometimes for the better and sometimes not. Sometimes to our liking and sometimes not. And all too often, women are considered “abnormal” or “inferior” because they are not a member of the elitist motherhood club.

In Jeff Skinner's creative writing seminar, he instructed fiction writers to ask themselves two questions: 1) Why this day? and 2) How can I raise the stakes?.

Recently, my best friend has joined the ranks of “infertile” women who will stop at no cost or inconvenience to conceive a child. And I thought, *perfect!* That would complicate Beth, the main character, wonderfully. She is surrounded by mothers in the novel who never let her forget that she is not one. How would she feel, how would she cope with the reality the scandalous evidence of her husband’s affair and subsequent child when she must face the loneliness of her infertility? It was not until I wrote the last words on the page that I knew the answer.

I am pleased with the characters and the conflict of my novel. I like the way I blurred the lines of what constitutes a mother or a family—it was my earliest intent. I recognize there is a great deal of work to be done and am energized by the challenge of combing through the novel with a clearer sense of purpose.

For the scope of my thesis, I expect to work through the initial 95 pages in order to accomplish the goals set forth in a meeting with my advisor. My first goal is to clarify the desires of my main characters: Beth and Michael. Generally, what do they want from each other? What do they want in each scene? What things do they desire, both tangible and intangible? Answering these questions will result in a better, fuller portrait of each character. Also, I plan on spending time visualizing the characters in order to make them more alive in my mind and therefore, more realistic on the page.

Secondly, I expect to condense or even eliminate the long, irrelevant sections of the main characters’ backstory and the secondary characters’ subplots. For example, the focus of the narrative should be Beth and Michael’s attempt to hold their marriage

together while adopting an unexpected child. Much to the dismay of an engaged reader, the narrative often strays faultily to Beth and Michael's college days or the extraneous marriages of John and Rachel, Trevor and Lauren, or Beth's mother and father.

I also intend to add physical and environmental details to the novel. I hope to flesh out my characters and their dialogue by providing more description of their physical actions and appearance. In addition, I hope to gain credibility as an author/observer by more vividly describing the environment. I tell my students "setting should be connected to conflict... it is not haphazard." Yet again, I am tasting my own medicine. So, providing the novel with a more detailed and relevant setting is of utmost priority to me.

Lastly, a change that I expect to make is Beth's profession-- from college professor to high school teacher. The fact that she is an educator and that she shares a campus with her husband is important to the themes and the conflict of the novel; however, the unlikelihood that a woman not yet 30 is already a college professor undermines the novel's credibility. Making Beth a high school teacher keeps the subtle theme of the tension between education and athletics intact. However, the conflict of the novel requires Beth and Michael to share a work environment, so the high school where Beth teaches will remain on the same campus as the college where Michael works.

Based on the discussion from my thesis defense, I have also made the following revisions: First, I softened the exchange with the mother and revealed more back story based on my explanation as to why the mother was so bitter, in that the grandparents

"wrote her off" essentially. That information comes into play as Beth now sympathizes with her mother, although she still swears to never become like her, and her mother gives her valuable advice about the need to move on from mistakes. Also, I narrated some of the dialogue that resembled dialogue in a drama, in that hopefully most of the dialogue included now is necessary to the advancement of plot and/or characterization and not the general, "Hello, how are you?" exchange. Next, I added some literary allusions to Beth's character that hopefully add to her realism as an English teacher. Lastly, I cleaned up a great deal of the wordiness and punctuation.

So, now that the first draft is done, the work of the thesis begins. I expect-- nay, I am excited for --the writing to change, but I also feel confident in that I have a clearer view of the work necessary to produce the crucial first chapter of my novel. And I am ready to begin.

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Chapter One

The elevator was packed. Everyone's destination was the same. "L and D, floor three, please," remarked a woman from behind me. A mother, sophisticated and self-assured, casually reminded me as to the whereabouts of the delivery rooms. As if I hadn't been there ever before. Of course, I had never been there as a *mother*. This visit marked the sixth birth I'd attended in the last two years. My husband and I stood in the sterile elevator and stared at our feet as it ascended. He fumbled in his pocket with his keys, as if their clinking could help diminish the tension between us.

"It's a boy, right?" he asked.

"Yes, it's a boy, Michael. Jeez. His name's been Mani for three months." A veteran grandma, carrying a plastic cup full of ice chips and a digital camera, chuckled at Michael.

"Mani, why? Whatever..." Michael mumbled as he leaned his broad shoulders against the elevator wall. Hopefully, he'd noticed in the process of shuffling his feet, he had scuffed the elevator's marble floor with his black soles.

"What is your deal? Cheer up. This is *exciting*, right? I mean, this is different than when John and Rachel had their kids," I said, rolling my eyes at the scuff mark and wiping it subtly with my moccasin.

“Yeah. At least we have no financial obligations in this one. I still say we should have discussed the guardianship thing. I can’t believe you agreed to that.”

“Shut up, Michael, we’re in an elevator, for god sake,” I snapped.

The flashing “3” signaled we had arrived at our destination. We knew where to take our post in the waiting room to the right of the vending machines but close to the T.V.. The lobby smelled of rubbing alcohol and carnations and the uniformed, striped wallpaper seemed to enclose the already small space even more. I noticed the framed close-ups of purple lilies beside a cross and thought to myself that the same person must decorate every hospital waiting room because they all looked the same.

“Michael! Beth! You made it, ohmigosh, Lauren is nine centimeters. I know you don’t know,” *though, I did*, “but that’s pretty far along. Little Mister Mani will be here within the hour, I just know it.” An old friend from college, Rachel was the mother hen when it came to our circle of friends and she was pacing from person to person in the waiting room, jumping at the chance to provide any new information to which they had not been privy. Though she thought she was being helpful, she had an air of condescension in the way she delivered the news as if she was more important because she had heard it first. Just nosier, I thought. Prior to today, she had created an e-mail tree to notify everyone as soon as Lauren’s cervix softened and had been documenting the entire experience on her new, Sony handycam which she got for Christmas, but didn’t know how to work.

“And do you think John knows how to work it? Of course not,” she whined. “We have been here since five a.m.. It’s been crazy, really. The baby’s oxygen has fluctuated all day and at one point, they really thought she was going to have a Caesarean. I was so

glad I was here and so was she, I'm sure--" She pulled her frizzy brown hair back into a ponytail as she debriefed me on Lauren's labor. Rachel was the queen of multi-tasking. Of course, "having two kids will do that to you, you know?" She had uttered that phrase to me countless times since the birth of her children. She never missed an opportunity to casually work that into our conversations.

"Rachel, your mom just called my cell phone," John interrupted her in the middle of her sentence, which was fine because I had stopped listening and was just politely nodding. "It's about the kids, you need to call her back."

"What about?" Rachel pressed, glaring at him for interrupting her.

"I dunno, here," he handed her his Blackberry. She immediately inserted the ear piece and voice dialed her mother, treading away from where Michael and I were standing. Glad to be free of her, John grabbed Michael by the arm and pulled him over near the TV. I took my seat on the flower printed sofa. The scene had perpetuated itself, in any variation of the aforementioned exchange, too many times to count.

Breathe deep, I told myself. Michael was approaching.

"Hey, you okay?" He came back with a bottle of water and offered me a drink.

"I'm fine, why?" I snapped sarcastically. Though it was nice of him to ask, the last thing I needed was more attention on me in this situation. He rolled his eyes in that "I can't win" way and walked off to rejoin John, who was by the C stairwell nagging Rachel to hang up with her mother. Suddenly, an update.

"Here comes Trevor everybody!" Rachel squealed as she flipped the phone off in the middle of a conversation. "Ohmigosh! What's going on back there?" Rachel rushed to Trevor's side, slid her arm under his, and drug him to the hungry and bored mob.

“She’s ready to push,” he announced. “I gotta get back in, but I wanted to update you guys. The next time I come out, we’ll have baby boy!” He turned to re-enter the security doors behind which his wife was being prepped for her first delivery. The countdown had started. I nervously tapped my feet and watched everyone else engaged in lighthearted discussion. I admonished my selfishness silently and even scolded myself for not at least feigning excitement for Michael and his family.

But the truth was I hated these places. Michael and I had been married for three years, barren for one and a half. It’s not like a baby wasn’t an option, but it wasn’t looking good. We were well into the second year of a fertility clinic that swore they “couldn’t find anything wrong but were optimistic about trying another round of treatment.” Each round of treatment was \$1250 a pop, which they forgot to mention on their website, and we’d had five “pops” so far. So we had created a formidable-sized debt in the process. Needless to say, on a day when a young mother naturally gave birth to a child, I cringed.

Baby Mani was born at 8:23 p.m. on Sunday, February 28th, 2007. He weighed 8 pounds and 3 ounces, which I’d heard was above average, and measured 21 inches long. Healthy kid. Good APGAR score. His skin was a little splotchy, his head was misshapen from his journey and his eyes were swollen closed, but other than that he was cute. Mommy was exhausted of course, but radiant in her triumph over childbirth. Edgy from the day’s events, Daddy felt better after a shot or two of Patron from the bottle his brother had stowed in his car. Everyone was laughing or crying or smiling when Michael and I entered their room.

“Hey guys,” I said, giving warning behind the thin curtain that the entering party was not in need of anyone’s blood or urine. “It’s Michael and Beth.”

“They know that Beth,” Michael hissed under his breath.

“Shut up,” I murmured as I stepped around the divider. “Hi Lauren, hello Trevor. And hello little Mani,” I said as I leaned over the plastic crib and stroked the infant’s cheek. I looked over at Lauren, who still looked radiant even with her tasseled hair and tear-streaked makeup. “Well, how was it?” I asked after taking a seat at the end of her bed.

“It is so hard to explain,” *which meant I would never understand*, “but it was just perfect. I mean, Trevor was perfect, my doctor was perfect, the nurses, Mani, of course. I mean, you just can’t imagine.” In my peripheral, I noticed Trevor mouth “pain-kill-ers” to Michael with a thumb-up, indicating the experience may have been anything but perfect for him.

“I’m sure I can’t, Lauren. Well, congratulations. Michael and I are really excited for you.” I darted Michael a *can-we-go?* glance and the laugh lines around his mouth disappeared. He handed me my jacket just as Rachel and John barged in.

“Here we are, Mani. In room 306 at Baptist Memorial Hospital in Louisville, KY. It is, let me check,” I assume this section of video is a bit shaky as Rachel consulted her watch, “9:48 in the evening. You are roughly one and a half hours old. Your uncle John and I—“

“Are they really calling themselves ‘uncle John’ and ‘aunt Rachel’?” I murmured under my breath to Michael. He shrugged. This annoyed me since I was more of an aunt

than she was. Though it was by marriage and not blood I was technically the aunt here, but of course Rachel took over.

“We are just getting ready to see your mommy...Lauren!” Rachel’s camcorder was directed right in the worn face of a woman who just exerted enough calories to constitute a marathon.

“Hi Rachel,” Lauren acquiesced to her sentimentality.

“Uh, hi Rachel? Try Hi Mani! This is totally for your little baby, silly. And there you are, you strapping young guy, Mister Mani Lewis Winters. We are so excited to have you. Your cousins, Jacob and Kelly, are at home, but they wanted to come so bad.

‘Please,’ they squealed, ‘please can we go see Baby Mani?’”

“Are they technically cousins?” Michael whispered to me in a half-joking, yet serious tone. I knew he was trying to get me to lighten up.

“Let’s go,” I begged. “Please.” And Michael saw in my pained eyes that I meant it so we stepped outside into the brightly lit hospital corridor and slid down the noisy hall before anyone noticed.

Chapter Two

“Beth,” Michael finally said as we pulled out of the parking garage. “Are you okay, really?”

“I guess,” I said without thinking. I didn’t know what to feel so I definitely didn’t want to talk about it. Talking always made it worse. It didn’t sound that bad in my head, but talking led to crying, which led to fighting. Though Michael claimed to understand the loneliness I felt by not being a mother, he always reminded me that since I had a successful career, which I *did*, and a successful marriage, which I *could*, that those should count for something. And though he was right, on nights like that, when one of my friends welcomed her first or second or even third child, I ached and I thought no one knew or cared-- especially him. I wrapped my arms tightly around my chest.

We drove several miles without talking. The radio drowned out our breathing but the tension in the car had settled like a fog. I cracked the window.

“You hot?” Michael asked.

“No,” I said. “Just...tight.” He reached over, rubbed my thigh and sympathized without a saying a word. I closed my eyes and rested my head on the seat, raking my hair away from my face. It was a habit of mine that Michael had adeptly recognized as a

sign of stress. He patted my leg a few more times and then put both hands back on the wheel. We rode home in silence.

Later that night during our nightly bathroom ritual, after the teeth-brushing and the face-washing, Michael waited for me as I lingered in the walk-in closet. I was wearing my red, chenille robe and I caught him watching as I searched through piles of t-shirts, camisoles, and socks to find my pajamas.

“Beth, come here.” His voice was shaky and I met his gaze. I walked hesitantly toward him.

“Let’s connect, tonight,” he said as he slid his arms around me, pulling me to him by the small of my back. “Let’s forget the last two years. Let’s just find a way to get on the same page tonight. And then tomorrow. And the next day, and it will all come natural again. Don’t you think?”

I stared in his eyes, silent for a moment, as I processed my next words. All of the pain, frustration, inadequacy, and dissatisfaction of the past two years had grown inside of me like a tumor. Threatening my life and filling my mind with poison. It’s interesting how the mind works. Human nature dictates negativity is the first instinct. Optimism must be fought for. However, tonight I wanted to rise above human nature.

“I’m sorry for acting like such a bitch tonight—“ I choked on the last word and tears welled in the corners of my eyes. It was futile to blink them back and soon they raced down my cheeks leaving salt stains in their wake. He pulled me onto his lap, stroking my back with one hand and dabbing at the tears with the other. I buried my head in the nape of his neck and wept.

“You’re not a bitch, Beth. The farthest thing from it. You’re a little too serious, sometimes. You put too much pressure on yourself to be perfect. But not a bitch, okay?”

“Okay,” I managed, though the word was muffled by his sweatshirt.

“I just wish we could have fun together. That you could lighten up a little. I don’t mean that to be mean, it’s just...” he paused. “Look, I don’t want to start a fight, please—“

“No, go on,” I said as I turned my face inward, felt my hot breath against his neck, and twisted my legs around his torso.

“It’s just that, sometimes I wonder where the old Beth is. Remember how much fun we had together in college? Remember the road trips? The all-nighters? It’s like, all that has been replaced with misery and we may not have a baby, I know, but you’ve still got me. Aren’t I enough?” He stopped rubbing my back and supported both of our weight with his long arms. I sat up.

My husband’s eyes reminded me of the sea at dusk. Their grayish blue tint could be so calming and cool yet at times so dark and stormy. In that moment, I considered the impact on him of watching his once beautiful and confident wife reduced to a needy and insecure child. I melted.

“I feel you, Michael. Our routine is not working lately. Everything is forced. Everything is pressured. Sometimes, I honestly feel like a weight has been placed on my chest. But-you and me...” At this point, the tears drained from both our eyes. “I’m so sorry, Michael.”

He kissed my neck and after each peck, I repeated my apology. Sliding my robe off my tight body, he continued kissing me though he moved from my neck to my

cheeks, to my lips, then my tears. For the first time in two years we only cared about each other. It was beautiful.

The next morning I felt like a new woman. Not just because of the physical sensations of lovemaking, but because of the emotional bond for which we'd both been longing for some time. I woke up first and slipped out of bed, giggling at the fact that I'd never neither found nor needed my pajamas. I got ready in the dark so he could sleep a little longer. I was downstairs reading the paper when I heard the familiar creak of the shower nozzle again.

He came downstairs wearing his slick grey pants and polo and his short brown hair was styled with gel. He winked at me and I laughed as he turned to fill up his coffee mug, I noticed his morning cow lick.

"Come here," I urged from my perch on the barstool, "you forget to look at the back of your hair again?" I uncrossed my legs and he backed into me. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I ran my fingers through his sticky hair. "If you go in like this, everyone'll know about last night," I joked.

"What makes you think I won't tell them, huh? You know how a man's gotta brag." He turned around to face me. "Did'ya fix it?"

"Perfect," I winked at him.

"Got your power color on today, huh, Red? Givin' a big lecture on—" he trailed.

"See you don't even know what I do, do you? No, I'm not giving a lecture, a test actually." I kept him captive in my legs' embrace.

"Unbutton a few of these," He nipped at my top two buttons to expose some cleavage. "Lighten up, I'm telling ya."

Buttoning them back, I reminded him of my pubescent audience at school. But I promised to unbutton them later for him.

“I love you Beth,” He kissed me on the cheek and checked his watch. “Gotta run.”

“I love you, too. Have a good day. I made you lunch,” I handed him the canvas lunch pack from the counter. Little did he know the bag was empty, except a note that read “I’m bringing you lunch...and a surprise.” Grabbing his cheeks, I planted a berry stained imprint of my lips on his forehead and then wiped it clean with my thumb.

“What time are you done today?” he called as he walked out the front door.

“One-thirty,” I laughed and prepared for his response. His schedule was not as flexible as mine.

“One-thirty?” he asked as he stopped in the door. His muscular arms stretched across the wide frame of the front door. “And you say ‘academics’ is hard?” He turned to leave and I smiled as I watched him stride quickly down the sidewalk.

Chapter Three

The high school where I taught was the first building opened when Eastwood University was founded in 1880. The aging stone building was archaic in design, with massive stone columns adorning the entrance and fifty granite steps climbing to its threshold. Towering oak trees dotted the great lawn out front and provided shade to the co-eds who nestled under the umbrage of leaves, leaned against the scratchy bark, and flung their backpacks in the soft, green moss.

The four morning classes passed in silent testing. I found myself staring out the tall, weathered windows in the direction of Michael's office. I was not in the mood to be Mrs. Winters. I wanted to be Beth, Michael's lover. I checked the clock every seven minutes or so to see how much time had elapsed. By fifth period, American Literature seminar, I was completely unfocused and rude to the pseudo-intellect who wasted class time attempting to convince everyone that Huck Finn and Jim were gay and in search of God and/or capital. Ignoring his argument, I lamented the day I'd assigned the classic because its themes were of little interest to me. Unfortunately, the State Department of Education chose the books I covered in class and I usually failed at making Huck interesting to modern teenagers, with the obvious exception of the student seated in the third row. Thankfully, fifth period dismissed and I was finally going to Michael's office.

I crossed campus in my Civic and parked at Warriors Hall. I ducked into a bathroom, stepped out of my boots, slipped off my pants, and hastily unbuttoned my red silk blouse. I buttoned my wool pea coat over my shivering body, while fluffing my auburn hair as I exited the stall. My heart was pounding. I had never done anything like this. Ignoring the student receptionist, I briskly pranced to Michael's office. Knocking on the door, I puffed out my chest and arched my back. After peering through the transparent door, I noticed he was on the phone and his forehead was wrinkled in confusion. Although I didn't want to interrupt, I also didn't want to stand naked in the hallway so I slithered in and mouthed "sorry". He bolted upright in his chair and began to stutter into the receiver.

"Slow down, you're going to have to forgive me, this is a little awkward. How do we know each other? Why are you calling? Actually, let's start with-- how did you get this number?" He fumbled the cord nervously and glanced from his desk to me several times. Immediately suspicious, I darted to the side of his desk and sat on the corner. His breathing was short; his face tensed. When he said "I don't remember you, Ma'am," I pressed the speakerphone button. He looked at me in horror when the squeaky voice on the other line said:

"Hnh...that's funny. I've actually researched my ass off to get your number. Let me ask you one question. Did you go to Mardi Gras in 2003 with two of your buddies?"

Michael and I exchanged glances confirming the visit. "Yes," he muttered.

"You and I met there. I went to LSU and you went to some small school, in Kentucky I think."

“Eastwood,” he acknowledged as he tried to pick up the receiver. I stopped his hand short of the phone and glared.

“Don’t touch.” I mouthed.

“Yeah, holy shit...is that what you said when you answered the phone?”

“Yes.”

“What do you do there?” she asked.

“I’m the Athletic Director.”

“Wow, is that right? That’s pretty hot, huh?”

“Why are you calling me, Miss- I don’t even know your name,” Beads of sweat bubbled out of Michael’s forehead.

“Oh yeah sorry. Natalie Hudson.” The name did not sound familiar to me. I crossed my legs tightly and leaned in closer to hear her muffled voice.

“And remind me why you’re calling. Does this have something to do with Eastwood?” he tried to steer the conversation back to its original purpose. I sensed that it had nothing to do with Eastwood.

“Well damn, I hate to get serious now, but I guess its time to get down to business. Well, when you were in New Orleans, so was I. We met at a club, God knows its name, and we ended up going back to my friend’s apartment. She went to Tulane and lived just north of the Quarter. Anyway, we hooked up that night and well, nine months later I had a child.”

“Wait! What?” Michael and I blurted out the lines in perfect unison. I jumped off the desk and glared at the phone.

“That was weird...it sounded like an echo. Anyway, I know it’s a bombshell. I probably should have told you earlier, but frankly for a long time I didn’t even know your last name. Which is my fault I know, but now I’m trying to make things good. Make things right, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. What the hell are you talking about?” Michael was standing now, his leather chair pushed back toward the window. I don’t think he was aware that he stood up.

Again, he reached for the extension and this time, I snapped, “don’t even think about it!”

“Are you watching TV? What is that? Listen, don’t freak out yet. You haven’t even heard the worst part yet.”

“You’re kidding,” he said raking his hands through his hair.

“No. I didn’t tell you about my son because I didn’t want you involved. I figured you’d be better off not knowing. Weren’t you engaged at the time?”

“Yes.” He looked at me. I didn’t even flinch. I was waiting to hear him deny everything. He didn’t move. The ticking of the office clock beside me kept rhythm with my pounding heart. For the first time, I remembered my nakedness and tugged at my coat to conceal my trembling body. I was careful not to utter a sound because I wanted to hear what she had to say and feared if she knew I was listening, she’d begin to censor her story. She continued.

“Yeah, I remember I decided not to tell you because of that. And the fact that I couldn’t find you. Or even remember whole parts of that evening.”

“What’s the ‘worst part’”? His monotone reply revealed his numbness. His secretary knocked on his door and we both shooed her away silently with our glares. She scurried like a cockroach.

“Man. This sucks. I know this is a lot to put on you in one day, but not only do we have a son, but I need you to take him.”

“Wh- What...the hell....are you talking about? You crazy—“ he alternated between stuttering and swearing.

“Don’t freak out!”

“Don’t freak out? Are you kidding? Seriously, what the hell did you say your name is? I am tracing your call by the way, and I can prosecute this, uh—this...slander. I have a wife, you know. You just can’t spread this about me.” He reached for me in a sign of solidarity against these claims, but I slowly backed away from him toward the door.

“I’m sorry. I never would have told you if...I never would have said anything if it weren’t for...” She sidestepped each word.

“For what? Damn!” He slammed his fist onto his desk, shattering the glass warrior I had given it to him when he got the job.

“For the fact that I’m dying okay? There, I said it. I have breast cancer, its aggressive, we have a kid, I can’t take care of him, no matter how much I want to, and I have *finally* found you, for whom I am pleading...begging you to listen to me, do the right thing.”

“The right thing? For who?”

“For our son! Look—I know this is too much. Damn, Michael—“

“Don’t call me Michael. You don’t know me. I don’t know you. You’re some fuckin con artist...”

“Is your wife’s name Beth?” My heart flipped at my name. It felt like my stomach dropped to the floor. Tears were now streaming down my face leaving behind streaks of the black mascara I had just reapplied in the bathroom.

“What?” Michael hoped that he had misunderstood.

“Your wife, is her name Beth?”

“Yes, why? Look this is starting to freak me out.”

“You talked about her that night. You told me about her. You were with some friends, John was one of the guy’s names. I know because he hooked up with my friend Kelly. We partied all night and ended up at her place. You and I couldn’t keep our hands off each other, everyone was fucked up. Anyway, we screwed on her roommate’s bed. I passed out and y’all were gone in the morning. John kept in touch with my friend Kelly for awhile and she helped me google you to figure out where you all live. We need to talk. This is serious. We have a kid and I am dying. Let’s do a paternity test or whatever, but we need to sort this out. I’ll call you back in a day or so when it’s had time to sink in and we’ll set something up then.”

Click.... Silence on the line and in the office. The clock seemed to taunt me now.

I stared at the burgundy carpet as my mind raced to process the information and sort out the dates. Soon the inevitable added up and sure enough four years ago I had been in Cincinnati shopping for bridesmaid’s dresses, when Michael and his friends snuck down to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Called it a “pre-bachelor party”. I had

never heard of that before. My initial reaction was to refuse, but since I was planning our wedding I decided to let it slide. Plus, I trusted Michael.

“Start over,” I said. “This is too much.” I was shaking. I took a deep breath, quelled the tears, and stammered, “Do you remember fucking her? I mean is this serious? Is this some crazy con-artist?”

“Well, I mean, I don’t know Beth ...damn. That trip was a long-ass time ago. About the only thing I remember is being really messed up.”

“Great! Great start—“ I could feel pressure rising inside my chest. My stomach twisted. Part of me wanted to burst into tears. Part of me wanted to puke. I finally turned my back to leave and when I did, I noticed the congregation of Michael’s co-workers who were watching from behind the glass paned door. “Are you kidding me?” I screamed, aware of my masked nudity under the coat and of the violation by voyeurs who crowded in the hall to watch the argument. They quickly dispersed to their workstations and I turned back around to face Michael.

He stared blank-faced. “Well, let’s have it out here, I guess. I’m sure as hell not gonna walk out of this office right now. I’ve got no fuckin’ clothes on under this jacket!” I unbuttoned the jacket and flashed him. “That’s what I was coming to do, surprise you for lunch. Here’s your damn sandwich,” I picked his lunch off the chair and threw the greasy bag on his desk.

“Beth, honey...”

“Don’t call me honey,” I yelled.

“Oh Beth, don’t go there,” He pleaded to keep this as calm and quiet as possible. I was not ready for either. What was I supposed to do, just small talk?

“Out with it, Michael. Seriously, let’s hear it. I want to hear all about her.”

“Can’t we just wait to find out if I’m the father?”

The Father. *Father*. I had forgotten about the damn child. I was so preoccupied with the affair that I had forgotten there was a child involved. Sometimes life is too much. So, I took a deep breath, double-knotted my belt, and sprinted out the door. Faces followed me like a tennis ball on Centre Court as I proceeded to the elevators and stormed out of Warriors Hall.

Chapter Four

I was so mad. I was furious. I climbed in my car and hit the road without having a clue where I was going. Hundreds of thoughts collided in my head as I questioned every time he was with his friends, late from work, out of town, or simply out of touch. I thought about how many times I called and he didn't even pick up. I thought about my apologies the night before and cringed at my vulnerability for taking the blame for everything gone wrong in the past two years of our marriage. Before I knew it, I had hit the county line and all I knew was that I just had to get out of town.

Michael called my phone five times in a row before I finally turned it off. No cell phone right now. In fact, no cell phone anymore. I rolled down the window, tossed it on the side of the interstate, and watched it skid across the pavement like a pebble. I stopped at a Gas Station for a bag of beef jerky and a Red Bull and then typed in "Days Inn/Music Row, Nashville, TN" on my GPS and headed south.

Before I knew it the skyline was in my windshield and I exited toward downtown. Michael and I partied often in Nashville, so I knew the area. I turned right toward West End Ave., which ran through Vanderbilt's campus. I pulled into the Days Inn and got a room, then asked for the number to a cab service. Once I was situated, I laid on the bed for a moment to think. I had no clothes. This was a problem. I could not go out in my

pink pea-coat for the evening. I also could not sit in a dank Days Inn on a night when my husband found out he may have fathered a child while we were engaged; and the worst part, I would not sit in on a night I realized that our fertility problems were, as I always suspected, my fault.

I was startled by the screech of the hotel phone on the dimly lit bedside table.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Your cab is here, Ma’am.”

“Oh, wow... that was fast. I’ll be right down,” I grabbed my handbag and slammed the door behind me. Climbing in the plastic-lined back seat, I said, “Take me to a clothing store. An expensive one please.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” said the driver as he merged onto the busy street. It was grey outside. The first week of March was always strange to me because it seemed like it should’ve been spring. I longed for warm air and spring growth. Green buds on trees, sprouting flowers in fresh mulch. But the first week of March feels like Winter. The hurried and blustery scene outside was littered with people who rushed from cars to storefronts and back. Like me, many were dressed in wool pea-coats, with the obvious exception.

“Here we are,” he stated as he pulled in front of a store called “Le’Michele’s”.

“Thanks,” I said, paying the fare and stepping onto the frozen sidewalk.

I purchased a pair of cowgirl boots and a hat, which I’d always wanted when we stayed in Nashville but Michael thought I’d look silly. After picking out a strapless dress with fringed bottom, I felt better about the evening. It hugged my muscular body perfectly and I twirled around the plush dressing room while the sales associates praised

the expensive purchase. After asking where the nearest bar was, the clerk laughed and directed me right next door.

“You may be a little over-dressed...and a little early,” she winked as I slipped on my pea-coat and walked outside. I checked my watch to find it was only a quarter after six. The nightlife would not climax for several more hours and I contemplated whether this was to my advantage or not. The sun was just beginning to set and the horizon exploded with hues of fuchsia and orange. The author in me always seemed to appreciate setting, though for some people this aestheticism was annoying. Some people, of course meant Michael, and I grimaced at my inability to think of anything other than him—albeit often in negative terms.

I heaved open the large oak door and the waning light from outside pierced the darkness of inside. I noticed from the sun’s last rays that the bar was not too crowded, but my eyes dilated when the door slammed shut and darkness reigned. I crept to the end of the bar and chose the stool that was closest to the stage. In college, we’d always flirt with the band to see if we were hot enough to throw them off a song. Turned out, we were about 50/50. Wonder what the odds would be now, some ten years later, squeezed into a dress tight enough to be a pair of pantyhose? I thought about those college days. Flirting with the band was about the craziest thing I’d done. I was always considered the good girl by my girlfriends who were prone to one-night stands, drunken orgies, keg stands, and drug use. But I had dated Michael since I was a freshman, so I had honestly not been laid by anyone else since my high school sweetheart. And who counts that? That’s not even sex it’s so lame and awkward.

But tonight, I'd had enough. Look where being a good girl had gotten me. I was always so afraid to break the rules and I feared if I did that my life would fall apart. Well, that didn't work so I figured it was my time to have let loose. I wanted to be a bad girl tonight. I pictured the girl Michael had screwed in New Orleans and vowed that I would behave as I had watched countless other loose women like her behave—recklessly.

It didn't take long to get attention.

"You want a drink?" some muscular man in a black cowboy hat asked.

"You know I do," I laughed and tucked my exposed bangs behind my hat. I hadn't lost it. While he ordered a round, I catalogued all of Michael's shortcomings. When he was in graduate school, every night that he had class he went out afterwards. Always working on some project, which consisted of "mandatory" meetings at bars until 2 am. We fought and I cried and we did everything but file for divorce in that first year of marriage and I threatened that on a nightly basis. I stayed home and spent hours buried myself in feminist literature—particularly *The Awakening*-- and ranting when he came home about my needs. He always dismissed my feelings and I'd call him a "typical Leonce" to which he'd roll his eyes and storm off to bed to pass out from the alcohol.

Then, the infertility. I figured out the healthiest diet to be on, quit drinking, and planned a schedule of sex that would ensure an addition to the family in just under a year. He didn't change at all. That was two years ago. That was over \$7,000 ago. That was over five hundred days with every-other-day scheduled sex sessions ago. It was easy to see how my barrenness perpetuated my bitterness. And vice versa.

So whereas the first year of our marriage had been spent arguing, the past two years were spent ejaculating and virtually ignoring each other. But, it seemed we had

turned a corner and I was ready to go with it. Until the phone call. Until the affair. Until the child. Tonight, was my night. The stranger returned with a glass of White Zinfandel and I thanked him on his intuitive choice. Surely he'd ordered it before.

The bar was sponsoring a Karaoke contest before the band was up. I had never been one to embarrass myself in front of a crowd, but I forced myself to pick a song and go for it. What more did I have to lose? My finger perused the titles in the binder, as I flipped through pages of song titles. All the while, my "date" scanned the crowd and paid little attention to my budding singing venture. As soon as my finger landed on "Before He Cheats," I jumped off the stool and flew over to the bar manager, binder in hand.

"Oooh, I jus' gotta do this one," I slurred as I thrust the song list back in his hands. He assured me that no one had reserved it and I would be up after the next performer. *Good thing*, I thought. My confidence was waning. I took the extra time to order another glass of wine and chugged it down pretty quickly as the man on stage wrapped up "Sweet Caroline" for an unimpressed crowd.

"Tough crowd," he joked as we passed each other on the steps. I laughed as he handed me the microphone and I took center stage. *If Michael could see me now*, I thought. I tipped my hat at my stranger and winked. Then, the music started.

"Right now," I belted out the first two words with an unexpected intensity. The crowd, who had tried to tune out the previous guy, jerked awake as I continued, "he's probably slow dancing with some bleach blonde tramp and she's probably getting frisky." A few whoops and hollers was all I needed to get louder and dance more. I was shaking my finger at the crowd and swinging my hips during the chorus, "And he don't

know...That I dug my key into the side of his pretty little souped up 4 wheel drive, carved my name into his leather seats...I took a Louisville slugger to both headlights, slashed a hole in all 4 tires...Maybe next time he'll think before he cheats," I spun around and smacked myself on the ass as the jeers and cat-calls from the audience drowned out the second verse.

I tripped over a few lines when I noticed the stranger who had bought me a drink talking to another woman at the bar, but I pictured Michael in my head and got back on script for the final line, belting out "Because the next times that he cheats, ohhh whoa, it won't be on me, Not on me..." The music faded and I took a bow. Some cheered, some booed, and most looked bored. My stranger was standing and clapping at the bottom of the stage. I fell into his opened arms and he groped my butt. Offended at first, I had to fight back that instinct and whispered "is that all you got?" in his ear.

Luckily, the next song up was "I Will Survive" and he drug me to the dance floor. After two more glasses of wine, I was ready to make my move. The emotion and alcohol were enough to corrupt my normally prudent decision-making and I decided I was going to be impulsive. Somewhere around the end of the third dance, he picked me up in the air like a child and his big-boned hips split my legs like scissors. It was on.

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"You, I'd hoped..." I quipped. But the look on my face told him I was not kidding.

"Is that right?" Either his tight Wranglers revealed his excitement at the offer or his oversized belt buckle was poking my abdomen. I was sure it was the former. "You've

got beautiful brown eyes,” he smoothly whispered in my ear, and the hair on my neck tingled.

“Thanks, but I assure you, I’m an easy win tonight.” We kept dancing and I pressed my pelvis tightly against his, “Listen, I’ve got a room at the Days Inn,” I whispered in his ear.

“No need. I live upstairs of the bar next door.”

“Nice.” At this point, he was inspecting my body not just with his gorgeous eyes, but with his strong hands. “Let’s go,” I purred and I meant it.

Within minutes, he had the door unlocked, candles lit, and music playing. To say I was nervous was an understatement. It had been about an hour from my last drink and I wanted to back out. I started thinking about Michael in bed, alone and worried about me. Meanwhile, the stranger tugged my dress above my navel, then slid it up my chest and over my head. Wearing only a thong, I continued to debate this decision. He sat down on the bed, and we fell backwards on top of each other. He reached for the remote to his iPod and changed the music to a Luther Vandross song.

“Sorry, I actually hate country music,” he said, turning up the volume and nibbling at the nape of my neck.

“Really? I like it okay, I guess...” I asked. I wanted this to slow down and I actually was starting to think of a way I could get out of it. An STD perhaps? Tell him I was pregnant? Yeah right. He unlatched his belt, and it snapped as it quickly unwound from his waist. He was awfully sexy and I remembered all the reasons I’d decided this was a good idea: *I’m tired of being a good girl*, I kept repeating in my mind. *Where has that gotten me?* This was working; I was regaining my nerve. I clawed at his shirt until

the buttons released and I ripped it off. I could hear people coming in and out of the apartments beside his and realized the walls were paper thin. He got up from the bed momentarily and left me lying awkwardly alone on top of his grey, stained comforter. I tried to slow my breathing and put my feet on the ground to keep from spinning. The combination of hormones and alcohol overwhelmed my emotions and I was about to bolt for the door some twenty paces away. He came back with two shots glasses.

“Tequila,” he said as he handed one to me. Quickly, he threw his down and dared me to do the same. I had never been one for taking shots, but I threw mine back just as quickly and tossed the glass on the floor. He laid on top of me and I was struggling to breathe under his weight.

“Wait--” I writhed under him, trying to get comfortable.

“Are we going to do this or what?” he pleaded.

“Slow down,” I said, “we have all night.” I pulled my pinned arms out from under his frame.

“I promise you, *slow* is the last thing on my mind,” he groaned and before I knew it, he was inside me.

Oh my God, oh my God, Oh my God was all I was thinking for the first minute. Not in a good way. He pounded my small frame and grunted awkwardly with each thrust. Sweat dripped from his chin into my eye, which burned and I grimaced. “You like that?” he asked after seeing my expression. “You’re a tight little bitch, huh?”

I was shaking at this point, scared to move. I lay underneath him, panting and trying to convince myself to enjoy it. It wasn’t working. He pulled out and flipped me over on my stomach, entering from behind. Tears flowed from my eyes as he shouted

obscurities at me, he began smacking my ass. I hung my head, gritted my teeth, and decided to keep quiet until he finished. I was powerless. I could feel welts rising on my skin as he continued slapping me. Then, he started pinching and squeezing chunks of flesh. I screamed out loud, which he must've mistook for pleasure, because he kept it up and taunted me, "you like that, do ya?" through breathless groans.

"It hurts," I sobbed. I buried my head in his pillow.

"I bet it does," he pounded.

After a few more thrusts, it was over. I collapsed on the bed in tears and grabbed my backside, which was burning.

He buttoned his jeans and turned on the TV before I could even process the scene. I groped around for my dress in the sheets and, with trembling hands, zipped it up and climbed off his bed.

"You out?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" I whimpered.

"You *leaving*?" he demanded rhetorically.

"Yes," I muttered weakly.

"Better put some ice on that ass," he laughed and never even looked up as I limped out into the musty corridor.

Chapter Five

The next morning my ride back to Louisville was tortuous. Turns out being the bad girl wasn't that great either. I felt used. Lost and hurt. *What have I done?* I kept repeating in my mind and even aloud. The farther I drove away from Nashville the more I began to panic. As soon as I'd gotten back to my motel, I showered for an hour to scrub his scent off my delicate skin. In the shower and in the car, I tried to rationalize my decision but too many obstacles were preventing it. I couldn't recall him wearing a condom. I couldn't remember parts of the evening because of the alcohol. And worst of all, I couldn't get Michael's face out of my head.

I pictured him in our king-sized bed. I turned up the radio to drown out the image, only to be greeted with "Before He Cheats," blaring from the speakers. I turned the radio off and rode in silence. Michael didn't seem so bad after last night. Relentlessly, I scolded myself over the stupidity of thinking sex with a stranger would make me feel better. After two hours of torture, I pulled our sloping driveway and took a deep breath. I had no idea what I would say even though I had been rehearsing the conversation all morning. My head ached from the excess of tears and booze and I felt nauseous from the nerves. I used the handrail to climb the few steps to get in the back door because I felt my knees would buckle under the pressure.

It was just after 7 a.m. The house was dark but he had left the porch light on. I stood in our small kitchen and heard him getting ready for work upstairs. The loud pipes and creaking wood of an old home can be a good thing or a bad thing. In this case, it gave me an advantage because I knew he was there, whereas he had no idea I was home.

A few minutes later, he was standing at the bottom of the steps and although he looked startled to see me, he rubbed his eyes and said good morning. He glanced at his watch.

“You gonna be late for work?” he mumbled. I just shook my head.

“Out today,” was all I muttered. Of course, no matter that the school year was several weeks old, he did not know my schedule. Whether I had school or not was of no consequence to his life. He had a funny way of forgetting me as soon as I left the room.

We fought the same fight as the day before; the pain was still fresh. There were moments when his betrayal was more than I could fathom and other times so painfully easy to understand given the events of the night before. I was convinced of her story given the details she provided and I told him the irony was unbearable. He had been with this girl on a whim and even had the nerve to tell her about me. He had no defense and mostly stammered through his turns to talk; I, however, screamed that he had become like a thousand chauvinist, eye popping, jaw dropping, only-think (and feel)-with-my-penis men. Like the one I’d met last night. Of course, I’d kept that part of the problem quiet as I continued pelting him with cruel rhetorical questions. What in the hell made me think he was different? *Really* in love with me? All he wanted was a full-time lay.

The fight turned vicious when he mentioned the child. All my pain and inadequacy that had festered in the previous two years exploded. I called him every

name imaginable and even hurled the cordless phone at his head when it rang and I didn't recognize the name on caller ID.

"Who're you expecting?" I screamed at the top of my lungs. He snagged the weapon mid-flight and set it back in its cradle. He was unusually composed. In normal fights, he was the one name-calling and yelling. He kept returning to the possibility that he may not be the father, and even argued himself into a corner when he stammered, "I mean, what kind of girl hooks up with only one guy, you know...if she's gonna hook up?" He seemed pleased with this version of the story.

"Hmmm. That's a great question. And I wonder for instance, what kind of guy just 'hooks up' with only one girl, ya know what I mean?" I smirked at his stupidity.

We continued to argue over details of which we were unsure. He threatened to leave. He would not argue with me anymore, he swore, and he vowed only to continue if we started talking about solutions and not problems. I mocked his rational approach to my raging emotions when he reminded me, in cliché fashion, "we were in this together." I had no intention of letting up.

"By together, do you mean that it is completely *your* fault and now it is *my* problem? Is that what you mean by together?" My voice cracked. "Do you have any clue as to the pain I am in, knowing that you have possibly fathered a child, with another woman, while we were engaged, and I am the one who is left humiliated and, sure let's say it—barren."

"Oh Beth," he cried, but I was relentless. Funny thing about human nature that makes us blood-hungry. I sensed fear in the water and I attacked.

“I mean let’s play this out. Let’s say hypothetically, this is true. Now, she claims to be dying so once paternity is confirmed, custody may change. And what? A four-year-old boy will come live with us the next day? And what about Eastwood? We should just write up a statement for the school paper about your Mardi Gras fling and subsequent child and everyone will nod as we pass and say, awkwardly, ‘*Congratulations?*’ ‘*Yeah, thanks,*’ I’ll beam, a proud, sterile mother of a four-year-old, ‘*Michael and I are just thrilled with the good news!*’ Is that what you want me to say?”

That was not going to happen. For the first time in my life, I felt like I didn’t know what would happen. Prior to that day, I had a plan. A path. Where was it facing? Towards success. How would I get there? By working hard, being honest, valuing family and education. And I thought that path led to a happy marriage, 2.5 kids, and a Cape Cod with a white picket fence. Wasn’t that the American Dream? Yet, here I was. Twenty-seven years old. Married three years to my college sweetheart. Well-educated. Honest choices and solid values had gotten me to a place where I stood looking at my husband without knowing him and then turning inward and questioning there, too.

He was sitting at the island now with his head buried in his hands. I was standing behind him when I blurted, “I fucked someone last night.” I couldn’t believe I’d said it but more shocking was my cruel tone. I wanted to hurt him. He sat up and spun around on the barstool, his face was a poster of disbelief.

“What?” he asked hesitantly.

“I did. I think all this is over. I’m so damn tired of always being the good girl. Look where that’s gotten me. You fuck up all the time and I stand by you and for once, for one night, I fucked up. And I think that means this—“ I motioned at him and the

house, “it’s over. Irreconcilable, I think is the official word.” His face reddened and I could see veins bulging from his neck. Still, he said nothing.

“Anyway,” I casually continued, “I’ve got to get out of here for awhile. Arrange the paternity test, take care of your business. When I’m ready to deal with all of this, I’ll call you and we’ll put a plan together. But at this point, the only way anything good will come of this is if we separate and reevaluate. I want to make a rational decision. I’m gonna go pack. I’m not even asking you to leave. I’ll find a place for awhile,” I briskly marched upstairs toward our bedroom.

“Beth—“ he yelled after me, his voice echoing in the empty kitchen.

“Don’t Michael, really,” I cried from the top of the stairs.

I had two goals: packing my bags and raiding our cash stashed in the underwear drawer. Once I loaded up, I ran down the stairs past Michael who was sitting in the same position. I bolted out the front door before I changed my mind.

Chapter Six

I needed a place to sleep where no one was home. Immediately, I thought of Lauren and Trevor's house because they were always gone during the day. I drove there, fiddling my key ring to make sure I'd kept a key to their trendy little house. Her family was stinking rich. She had attended college at Eastwood, in fact she was two years younger than me, but she had never graduated. It's hard to motivate yourself to attend classes when you're living on a trust fund. She just concentrated on looking good, being stylish, fitting in and standing out.

As I pulled into their tight driveway, I noticed her silver Volvo and his grey Land Rover in the open garage. Why were they home? Lauren saw me from the window and waved. "Hi?!" she mouthed awkwardly and motioned for me to come in. I wanted to back out and find somewhere else to go, but I'd been spotted and had to act like I was there for another reason.

"Damn," I said out loud in my car. Glancing back at my suitcases, I thought about the embarrassment. I would go in without them, obviously, but how would I hide my anxiety? I was shaking as I walked up the sidewalk and into the front door. Immediately, common sense rushed over me. *Holy shit*, I thought. They just got home from the hospital. As I entered I noticed the living room was a wreck, full of burp cloths

and rolled up diapers. Lauren was wrapped up in a robe, bloated and without makeup. Still a little swollen and not smiling much. Trevor was napping. Obviously, this whole thing had been tough on him. Mani was sleeping in the designer bassinette in the corner of their oversized living room. I had been so caught up in my situation that I had forgotten what happened before it. I thought about my suitcases and chuckled inside. I pretended like I was really there to visit, which is what they assumed.

“Well, how are you doing? Getting settled in?” I asked.

“Yeah, we are. It’s so crazy to see you!” Lauren stammered as she fumbled with the straps of her robe.

“Why so early?” Trevor said as he emerged from the bedroom, checking his watch. He still had his hospital ID bracelet on.

“When did you all get home?” I asked.

“Uh, let’s see,” Lauren checked the clock, “about forty five minutes ago.”

“Wow!” I said. “I hope I’m not intruding.”

“Of course not,” Lauren said as a scantily clad Trevor shot her a glare. All three of us threw stares around the circle, sensing the awkwardness until Lauren finally said, “Mani’s sleeping over here,” She pointed toward the bassinette by the window.

“Oh, the baby! Of course. I just couldn’t stand it, you all. Sorry I’m so early but I just couldn’t wait to see him.”

“You on your way to school?” Trevor asked. He was pulling on an Eastwood tee as he sat on the couch tying his running shoes. “I’m meeting the team on the track in twenty minutes, wanna ride?”

“To the soccer field? No thanks,” I managed to quip. “You know me, I’m in the old building on top of the hill.”

“Yeah, you intellectuals...you ought to be in the old building,” He smiled as he prided himself on his insult. We’d never gotten along even before Michael and I started dating.

“Yeah, and you athletes, you ought to be grazing fields. Pig!” I threw a pacifier in his direction.

“Shows how smart you are! Pigs live in mud. Right, Lauren?”

“Oh for God’s sake. Would you two shut up? Remember the rule-- you wake the baby, you take the baby! Don’t you have conditioning?” She stared through him.

“Yep! See ya little Mani,” he kissed the infant on the forehead. “Bye baby!” he called as he grabbed his bag and leapt out the front door, slamming it behind him. The baby jerked and after a delayed reaction began to squeal with fear. Lauren jumped out of the recliner, scooped him out of the bassinette, bounced him around the living room, and shushed in his tiny ear. Soon, he began to pacify and relax. I watched the precious mother-child bond and seethed with anger and jealousy. Not only for my sister-in-law, but for the son who my husband had allegedly fathered four years ago with some random tramp.

“Well, I was just stopping by on my way to work. I wanted to see him. He’s beautiful but I don’t want to bother him and I know you probably need your rest, too.”

“Right,” she said, affirming that she was as ready for me to leave as I was. She walked me to the door and I heard the lock turn as I stepped on the porch. *Great*, I thought. What do I do? Chance going home? I certainly did not want to see Michael

again, so I climbed in my car and headed to John and Rachel's. I prayed Rachel had some scheduled event and I could sneak in their house. I was desperate for a bed and aspirin after my road trip. Rachel kept a pretty tight itinerary for their two kids even though she was a stay-at-home mom.

Of course, she was home. The kids spotted me from the picture window and Rachel opened the front door before I could even downshift. As if her being home wasn't enough, she immediately sensed the weirdness of my presence there at 8 am on a weekday.

"Hey! What's up?" She yelled in an inquisitive tone. The thing I knew about Rachel was that she was more interested in gossip than anything.

I rolled down the window and searched for a way out. Nothing came to me.

"What's up? Come in," she pried. Surely, she noticed the bags under my eyes and my splotchy cheeks. Why would I be sitting in her driveway early one Thursday morning unless some story preceded it? She was primed for the kill. "Tell me what's going on," she soothed. It's amazing how gossipers like Rachel pretend as if they're doing you a favor by letting you vent. In reality, she was storing information away in her judgment database to reveal at the next function when everyone is quiet. Then, she'd feign surprise when I'd get embarrassed because she "didn't know she wasn't supposed to tell!" We'd been there before.

"Hey Rachel," my mind searched for a possible excuse to be there. "Nothing's up. I was just, uh, dropping by to ask about—"

"The party? Do you need something for Michael's birthday party? I kept thinking you might want us to take him out to dinner or something so you can get the surprise part

ready.” She eagerly awaited her role in the affair. I had, of course, also forgotten about the thirtieth surprise birthday party I was throwing for my husband this weekend. It was in Frazier Hall on campus and might as well have been an Eastwood Reunion with all the faculty, staff, and alumni that would be there. Plus, Michael’s mom and stepdad were flying in from Florida and staying at our house. They would arrive on Friday morning, so they would be landing in roughly 24 hours. It’s amazing how shock can lead to repression. The shock of Michael’s news left me unaware of the day after or before this one.

“Well-“ Rachel finally interrupted me from my revelation. “Are you dropping something off for the party?”

“Yeah...but you know what? I forgot it. Jeez...it just dawned on me—that’s what I was just trying to remember—what I wanted you to do. If I bring his gift by here in the morning will you take it up there? And get there a little early would ya? I’ll call you when we’re close,” I said from the driver’s seat.

“That’s fine. You could have called for that you know. No reason to drive over here to tell me that,” She still suspiciously awaited another reason.

“I’m so out of it,” I shrugged it off.

“You’re just a complete ditz! Totally kidding, I’d be stressed too if I was hosting a surprise party for 75 of my husband’s closest friends tomorrow.” A kid screamed from inside the house and Rachel’s ears perked like a puppy’s.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said and left her salivating on the front porch for the rest. She knew there was more to the story. But duty called in the form of a raving toddler and that provided the perfect reason to end the awkward conversation.

I thought of where to go next. Truthfully, I was exhausted—mentally and physically. I needed a nap and a clear head. I left Rachel's subdivision, stopped for a pack of cigarettes (my first in years) and headed back toward our house. Surely, Michael would be gone by now.

I smoked two cigarettes on the ride home and was pissed about the odor left in my new car. Why didn't I see that coming? I started smoking when I waited tables during college. They helped keep me awake when I closed the bar. Michael would usually hang out up there with his friends on the nights I worked. He hated to see me smoke, but he had enough bad habits of his own so he knew he couldn't say much. I had probably bought cigarettes subconsciously because I knew he'd hate it. That would probably have been Freud's take anyway.

I was right about Michael being gone and nothing made me happier to see the empty driveway when I pulled into our alley. It was one of the first sunny days between winter and spring that gets everyone excited about fresh air and sunshine. People were walking dogs, riding bikes, pulling weeds, or washing cars. Neighbors waved to each other and made small talk about the weather. "What a relief, huh?" I swear, as an English teacher, I have this theory about seasonal metaphors. Everyone thinks when there is a metaphor about winter turning to spring that it is a deeper message about change and its inevitability. I think the authors literally were happy about spring. People hate winter. It's cold. The natural world is dead. Everyone hibernates and complains about gas prices and achy joints. But on that first warm day everybody's excited again. I waved to a few friends and quickly jogged inside.

When I walked in the first thing I smelled was his cologne. I loved that scent. Light and musky like the sea. It reminded me of our honeymoon. I noticed a note on the counter but I didn't feel like thinking anymore at this point. I picked it up, thought better of it, and tucked it into my back pocket. My first step: bubble bath.

The hot water and bath salts did help loosen my tight body. I even purred as I sank into the warm foamy water that drowned out all sound. I exhaled slowly and relaxed for the first time since yesterday morning. I reflected on what had transpired in the last 24 hours. After meeting Michael for lunch in his office and trying to surprise him by being naked, I overheard the phone call from the Mardi Gras girl. Then, I stormed out, drove to Nashville, bought a new outfit (had he seen that purchase hit the account yet?), drank all night, committed adultery, and drove home—after stopping at Lauren's and Rachel's of course. Thank God for my bathroom.

It wasn't fifteen minutes into my bath that I noticed the phone was ringing incessantly. I saw my wrinkled toe sticking out above the white cloud of bubbles and figured it was time to get out anyway. I wrapped a towel around me and checked Caller ID. My mother-in-law. Great! Was not answering an option? I cringed at the voice mails I probably had. I could hear her now, "Michael? Beth? Where are you guys? I've been trying to get a hold of you since yesterday! You do know we're coming in tonight, I hope? I've emailed you our itinerary" (it was hanging on the fridge) "but I never heard if you got it. I assumed you did. I sure hope you're still expecting us!" As if we could forget about her visit. Well, I guess technically I had forgotten but its impossible to forget something that someone constantly reminds you about. I checked the computer and sure enough, there was their itinerary again. I forwarded it to Michael.

Damn, I thought, *what am I going to do about this party? And his mom?* For all I knew my marriage was over. I had two options as I saw it: pretend like nothing had happened or announce the separation. But I thought about my house. My bed. My family and friends. My job. I wasn't ready to leave. I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to think rationally.

Technically, Michael did not even know if this was his child. In fact, I still was not convinced that this was anything more than a con-artist. It wouldn't be that hard for someone to know my name and know he was in New Orleans that weekend. Many people in the Eastwood Circle had that knowledge. Maybe it was some stupid athlete who had a crush on him, which several did, and was just trying to get one over on me. Could be a possibility. And a strong one I thought. Michael had never admitted to the affair, he had said he didn't remember anything. We were all going on some stranger's claims. I smiled at the prospect of this alternative and even prayed for the first time in a few months that God would let it unfold like that.

I picked up the home phone and the sputtering dial tone alerted me to two new messages. One from Michael saying, "Call me if you get this, please" and one from his mother, of which I only heard, "Beth?" before I pushed three to delete it. I dialed Michael's cell.

"Hey," I uttered. I still didn't know what to think or feel or what to even call him.

"Beth?" he sounded surprised.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Shitty. You?"

“Uh, I don’t know. I feel a little better for some reason. I’m home. Took a hot bath and am laying in bed.”

“I’m glad you’re home. For good?”

“Doubt it.”

Silence for a moment. Wasted minutes.

“Where’d you go last night?” he asked. I imagined the curiosity was tormenting him.

“Well,” I searched for the right answer and finally just said, “Nashville.”

“I’m having a real hard time processing that, you know?” His voice lacked the normal bass that I was used to. He sounded like a small child to me. He sounded broken.

“I know. What I did was stupid, I know. I’m having a hard time processing it, too. I didn’t know what to do. Still don’t. Don’t feel like being here and don’t feel like be anywhere but here. God, I’m so confused.” I let the phone cord drape across my overheated body. My face was flushed red and I was short of breath because of the immense heat from the bath water. Wet ringlets soaked my pillow.

“I know, me too.”

“Did you get my e-mail? Your mom’s been calling here all day.”

“I know, God! She’s the last thing I need right now.”

“Me too.” We laughed for the first time. I rolled onto my side, while the cord coiled around my torso. “I assume you’re going to pick them up?”

“No other option. Will you be there?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided. I was thinking a minute ago. Remember when last year you had the sexual harassment incident filed on you. That whole thing turned

out to be a misunderstanding. I know you have a lot of young girls at school who would love their chance at you, you know? If they could get rid of me first.”

“Beth, it’s really not all that.”

“I’m just saying, any chance this phone call is some stupid prank like that? Someone trying to get us all worked up and pissed at each other. Some cute little golfer who wants to console you when I bail because of her silly prank.” I was mad at myself for overreacting when it was probably something like that scenario. I couldn’t believe that I had slept with a stranger last night. It made perfect sense at the time, but the regret was beginning to overwhelm me.

I heard someone talking inside his office. “Hey Beth, let me call you back in a minute, okay?” He hung up before I answered. I was dejected. It was the first time in 36 hours that our conversation felt natural and one of us didn’t end up in tears. Curiosity started infecting my mind. I contemplated the validity of the girl’s story as I walked into the spare bedroom that functioned as an office. After turning the computer on, I nervously typed “Natalie Hudson, LSU” into the Google search engine.

I noticed an “image” result and clicked on the thumbnail to enlarge it. It was her sorority picture dated 2003. She was cute, I had to admit. But immediately I pictured my husband wallowing in her long blonde hair. And when I say blonde, I only mean the top layer, as the hair around her neck was brownish red. Bleach blonde, imagine that. I seethed with jealousy. I ran my index finger over the screen and they kept coming back to the freckles that dotted her tanned face. Her round eyes and pug nose were littered with freckles, which exuded innocence. Of course, the dyed hair did the opposite.

After tracing her face both literally with my fingers and figuratively with my mind, I backed up to the Google list and clicked on the second link. My jaw dropped when I was routed to the Girls Gone Wild website and there she was flashing her perky breasts for the camera. I gawked at her perfectly round nipples and instinctually covered my less than perfect chest. I felt like I would puke. I backed out of that site quickly and stared at the Google screen. Why keep torturing myself? Hadn't I learned enough? I hadn't. Next link: her college graduation. Her hair, still two-toned, was pulled back into a low ponytail to accommodate her cap. She even made a cap and gown look good. Her patent-leather purple heels caught my eye as I grimaced at her audacity in showing up to a formal event dressed like a hooker. Still I stared at her freckles. That feature made her real to me, busting the image of stereotypical slut that all the other details had formed. She was a real person and not just the nightmare I had imagined. She couldn't have been more opposite than me and she seemed like the perfect, possibly even planned fling prior to taking the plunge with boring ole' me. The phone rang and startled me. Without thinking, I yanked the computer cord out of the wall and shut it down in mid-search.

"What?" I answered, knowing it was Michael.

"Sorry about that. Danny needed something. Where we were we? You were saying this may be some kind of prank."

"You'd better hope like hell it is. I just googled your girlfriend. She's a real piece of work. Found her on Girls Gone Wild, but something tells me you already knew that, huh?" I was breathing fire at this point.

"Why would you do that? Should I google your guy? What's his fucking name?"

“I don’t even know Michael. Isn’t that hilarious! No effin clue. Go ahead, though. Type “stranger with a big dick” in your computer and you should be able to find him.”

Click. He hung up. I was panting. I had run dry of tears but a small, searing pain in my thighs alerted me to the fact that I was digging my fingernails into my skin, forming tiny crescent imprints. I tried to slow my racing heart beat with a powerful inhale when the cordless beside me rang again. I thought about throwing that one out the window, too. At this point, I didn’t care if I never took another phone call. After seven rings, I yelled “What?” into the receiver.

“We need to talk. I didn’t get to finish,” he said. “She called me back this morning.”

“You’re kidding?” I sat up straight in bed.

“No, she gave me the number to a physician in Louisville who can take care of the paternity issue. She wants me to do it as soon as possible. She claims she is not far from Hospice at this point. No family, she said. Except the boy. Hasn’t talked to her parents in years. They don’t even know about the little boy.”

“Imagine that, lacks family values, huh?” I mocked.

“Said she hates them. She said she called me first, praying all the time that I was worth something.”

“Well, anything indicate she was a con-artist? Or a prank?”

“I don’t know Beth. She remembered what I looked like. She remembered John and Trevor were with me. She knew John was married. She thought Trevor was cool

and remembered he played soccer and I played tennis. Remembered I'd told her that you played tennis, too."

"How the hell long did you talk to her?"

"A little while. Twenty minutes maybe."

"Well, get to the point. I don't give a fuck about what she remembers or her childhood issues. What's the next step?"

"The paternity test. It's scheduled for Monday."

Click. Over. It was over. I was gone again.

Chapter Seven

The year was 2007. For the first time in American history a married woman was the minority. 51% of reporting females in the most current Census were single, divorced, or widowed. 49% claimed a spouse, and not even all of those were assumed male or necessarily living with their significant other. Staggering numbers of women decided that life was not easier with a man around. In fact, more often than not, women decided it was easier alone. Interesting survey. Provocative concept. It was time to play devil's advocate. Why was married life worth it? Did the advantages outweigh the disadvantages? All the women except the widows (and maybe some of them) found life to be worthwhile without a husband. Did I?

I dressed in comfy sweats and got back in my car. My suitcase still occupied the passenger's seat. Headed Northbound on I-71 this time. I had plenty of time to inventory all of Michael's shortcomings: his controlling behavior and unfair distribution of privileges. God's way, he'd argue, though he never went to church. Blame it on Eve and the Fall. Funny how people use religion when it works for them.

These days I brought in the same income and yet spent far less. He took more and more liberties on clothes, bar tabs, and gambling debts. Several of my sorority sisters got married right out of college and one of two things happened. Half of them couldn't

accept the submissive role they were supposed to play as wives and divorced in under a year. One year. 365 days of marriage was more than they could take. I always wondered what they had expected prior to getting married. The other half resolved to being the typical self-sacrificing woman that society expected, but they were bitter and overweight before turning 30. Spewing statements like “What was I thinking?” and waving their hands in disgust at a small home and unruly kids.

Michael and I seemed to have an implied arrangement. We silently knew our roles, played them, and felt good about our marriage. Three years in and we felt like worst days were behind us. The adjustments, the sacrifices, and the demands all required to make matrimonial bliss had been worked out quickly since we lived together all through college. Trust, respect, and honor are important, but until you investigate the practical meaning of them, they’re just words in the vows.

Of course, our marriage was apparently founded on the exact opposite of trust, respect, and honor. Betrayal, disgrace, and humiliation were the new words I was grappling with. I felt like Michael making that paternity appointment might as well have been a confession. He was a good man and he knew the right thing to do. He obviously remembered this girl and their night together and he was trying to make things right. I cringed when I thought about the trust he had given her story. Why hadn’t he fought more about it? Why hadn’t he demanded more solid evidence from her?

It hit me hard. The child. Maybe he was—secretly—excited about the prospect of a child, a son. I imagined him thinking: Fuck my wife (I can get another one of those), I might have a son. A little, baseball-throwing boy! I bet he pictured the boy to look just like him, wearing a uniform, smiling for his baseball card picture with his bat propped on

his scrawny, four-year-old shoulder. Of course, I could never provide him with that. I was collateral damage.

The old saying “misery loves company” couldn’t have applied more. I headed towards my mother’s who was always miserable. My father ran out on her when I was one and she had wandered through life restless and bitter every since that day. Of course it didn’t help that my grandparents effectually disowned her for getting pregnant out of wedlock. The sad circumstances of her life ensured that she was always the victim, at least in her mind. Well, as much as I had tried not to sink to that level, I figured, what the hell? Where else would I go? In about an hour, I started seeing the signs. I had no cell phone, so I stopped at a gas station in Northern Kentucky and dialed her up.

“Hello?” she snapped. She always sounded like she was being interrupted.

“Mom?” My hair whipped my face as the fierce wind foreshadowed an impending storm.

“Yeah? Beth?”

“Mom, I’m coming to stay with you for awhile.”

“Why?” she asked before she realized how it sounded.

“Gee Mom, thanks for the warm welcome. You know what-“ I immediately lamented the loss of both quarters I had spent on the call.

“Stop. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. What happened? Where are you?”

“I’m right outside of downtown. Can I come over?”

“Of course you can. What is the matter? Should I come get you?” As cold as my mother could be, she was still a mother.

“No,” I was crying by now. I sniffed hard and composed myself. “Be there in a minute.”

By the time I arrived ten minutes later, she was waiting outside on the front porch with a scowl on her face. Even though it was a semi-permanent expression, she changed it to fit different painful occasions; she could show hurt, fear, anger, or disappointment all with a twitch of her thin lips. She ushered me in the front door of her shotgun-style home, suitcase and all. I smelled the familiar scent of smoke and cats. One of them peaked around the corner to see who the intruder was.

I sat down on the wool couch and surveyed the house in which I spent the majority of my life. Not much had changed. It was still decorated in a 70s style, with pumpkin oranges, pea greens, and mustard yellows dominating the wood-paneling and linoleum. I was always so eager to leave it growing up there, but now as an adult and one in the situation in which I found myself, I felt somewhat content. Of course, that could have been because I was 180 miles from my problems.

“Well, what’s with the suitcase?” she shattered my thoughts like a windshield.

“Michael and I are separating. I need a place to stay for awhile.”

“How long?” She exhaled smoke in my direction.

“How do I know? Damn, don’t you even care what happened?”

“Of course I do. Don’t get pissy with me just because your husband—“

“Oh, this was a mistake. Goddamn, I don’t have a place to go. Can’t go home, can’t go to a friend’s, can’t come here!” As my voice escalated, I stood up and moved toward my suitcase.

“Stop. Sorry. Sit down and start over. What happened?” She ashed her cigarette on the shag carpet and extinguished it with her slipper.

As she sat down beside me, I looked at our profiles in the starburst mirror that hung in the foyer. The resemblance between the two of us was strong. Both of us had thin faces, thin frames. Our long brown hair both hung just below the shoulders and both of us had it pulled back in a pony tail. From here, age really did my mother a disservice. Years of smoking and stress had withered her skin and leathered her face. She slouched. I sat with my shoulders back. Even though I was hurting, I held my composure. My hair was still voluminous with chunks tucked behind my ears, and my skin glowed. The difference between 28 and 45 was astonishing; but the similarities were what really concerned me. Physically, I had become my mother. But more so than any physical similarities, the emotional similarities floored me. We were whiny, bossy, bitter, and depressed and blamed our problems on the people around us. I was horrified. I’d spent my entire life swearing I’d never turn into her and in one quick assessment I realized I’d failed.

As I told her the whole story, she never looked up.

“Tell your grandma yet?” She finally asked, to which I shook my head.

“Wow, you told me before your grandma?” She smiled and her tensed face relaxed. She patted my knee. My mom and my grandma never had a good relationship, so long as I’d been old enough to witness. Mamaw was so embarrassed by her pregnancy and then so disgusted with her lack of parenting—at least by her high standards—and she never kept her opinions about Mom to herself. Plus, my mother always hinted that she was jealous of Mamaw raising me. Felt like her mother had robbed her of being a

mother. I'd never sympathized with that dynamic until now, and I thought about all the times in life I'd treated my grandma as my mom and left my mom metaphorically in the wings of my life.

We spent the rest of the evening watching mom's favorite soap operas, which she still taped everyday. I asked her if she'd heard of Tivo, to which she replied "Is that a character on one of *your* soaps?" I chuckled to myself and dropped it. It was entertaining to watch someone else's drama for a while, although I was disgusted by the "deus ex machina" that always seemed to swoop in and solve everyone's problems. Although I loathed the device in literature, I secretly wished somehow this was all a nightmare from which I could still be aroused.

Mom thought it'd be nice if we went out for some ice cream and I was ready to turn off the melodrama of "Days of Our Lives," so I agreed. In the car, I coughed from the overwhelming stench of tobacco and opened the window to let in the cool March wind. We drove through the foothills that run along the shoreline of the Ohio, twisting and turning through streets lined with tall Oak trees and flanked by a charging river. I took a deep breath and appreciated the silence my mother was allowing me. It was the first time I began to feel okay again. Everything that had happened in the last 48 hours had played in my mind like a movie—it felt like it was happening to someone else. But finally, as I inhaled again, I felt like myself and I felt okay.

Bob Dylan played on the radio that night and he wailed his famous line:

*The answers my friend,
are blowing in the wind,
the answers are blowing in the wind.*

I had always told my students that Dylan was a far better poet than a singer and I couldn't have heard a more appropriate ballad about a problem that seemed to him at least, unsolvable.

My mom pulled the car into a space in front of Graeter's and I roused from my trance. She had still not said a word since when left her house.

As I grabbed for the door handle, she stopped me. "Let's talk."

In the front seat of her banged up Escort, she began, "I know I made some mistakes when I raised you Beth. I tried my hardest, did my best with what I had. I was so young. Seventeen. 'Still a baby yourself' my father said as he fumed when I told him the news. My mother sobbed and prayed out loud for thirty straight minutes. They were hard on me. Wouldn't help at all when you were a tiny newborn, crying all the time. Hell, I didn't know what to do." Her eyes never shifted from her grip on the steering wheel.

"Well, I was scared and they didn't care at all. So, your dad's parents said they would rent us an apartment if we agreed to get married quickly, before I was showing. And we pretended like we really got engaged and had a happy wedding. Well about five months into it, he started getting tired of it, too. The crying, the teething, the diapers.

"Is there any of this story where I'm not to blame?" I asked. I shifted in my seat and moved farther from her. She sensed this and after taking a deep breath, put her hand on my thigh. It was obvious she was reaching out to me and I was glad that I'd given her the chance to "mother" me.

“Sure, my hormones. His inadequacies. It suffocated us and we were young and stupid and one night I just lost it. I couldn’t take it anymore. He’d been out drinking with his brother’s friends. He came in, loud and drunk, and I jumped out of my bed screaming ‘Don’t wake the baby! Shut up, I said, don’t wake the fuckin baby!’ By this time, you were screaming and the whole house was hysterical. He charged up the steps towards me and in one instant I made a decision that changed everything. I threw myself down the stairs. I fell, bumped a time or two and landed hard on my side. Immediately, my cheek bone felt like it would burst. I got up and stared him in the eyes, he was still standing at the top of the steps in horror, and I picked up the phone and dialed 911. When the operator answered, I said with no emotion ‘Help! My husband threw me down the stairs.’”

“Are you kidding me?” I gripped the handle on the door so hard my knuckles blanched. Still, we avoided eye contact to cope with the awkwardness of the conversation.

“Within a few minutes, before your dad even knew what to do, three cop cars barreled into our yard and surrounded the house with guns drawn. All the time, your daddy never said a word. One of the officers pounded the door and he calmly walked down the stairs to answer it. Like he knew. Like he knew that this was how it had to end. I watched him walk down the steps, through the door, and into those handcuffs and flashing lights. Next day, the judge ordered him to not go more within 15 miles of our home. After that, he called a couple of times to check on you I assume, but I never answered.”

“Why are you telling me this? Do you know where he is? All my fucking life I’ve not had a dad and it’s your fault?” I screamed at her and the vibrations shook the cramped car. Her voice never cracked and her eyes never watered. Her apathy was overwhelming and I swore, right then and there, I’d spend the rest of my life being opposite of her. “Do you know where he is?” I wailed.

“Died in some freak accident—a factory explosion. About three or four years after all this. Mom sent me the newspaper clippings,” her voice was still so casual it was clear she had become numb to pain and yet dependent on it at the same time.

“Wow, this is officially the worst day of my life,” I lamented. “I just want to get the hell out of here,” I grabbed for the door handle.

“Wait, Beth,” she urged, her hands still on the wheel of the parked car. “I guess I’m telling you because, I think about that alot. All these years, I’ve blamed men for my problems, but I’ve come to realize all along it was my own damn doing. If there’s any silver lining to my stupid life, it’s that you control your own destiny. You can make you’re yourself or your can break yourself. God knows which one I chose and look where it’s gotten me. I’m miserable and can barely even carry on a relationship with my parents or my kids. I guess my advice is that you can’t undo decisions, believe me I wish ya could, but you can change your reaction to them. Hell, I’ve never moved on from that night. Never let go of that pain. Don’t do that to yourself Beth, please,” Her voice trailed like a thinning cloud of smoke into the night air and I although I winced at the fresh wound she’d ripped inside me, I needed the advice.

Chapter Eight

I lay in my old twin bed, still covered with the same hot pink comforter from the 80s, and I thought about that last line all night. “Don’t do that to yourself, Beth please.” My mom’s worldview was formed in one minute, one mistake that would alter the course of her life and mine. She never moved on from it or made up for it, until her speech in the car. I had a new appreciation for her because, for the first time, I admired her self-awareness and strength in revealing her pain to me, in an attempt to help me live without it.

It was easy for people like Dr. Phil talk about “deal-breakers”—you know, the things that are too far over the line that there is no going back. My mom was guilty of one, well according to my dad apparently. Was Michael? Was I? It wasn’t quite as easy as Dr. Phil preached. On one hand, I couldn’t get past the betrayal, but I also could not imagine putting our house up for sale, announcing to our shared friends and family that we were getting divorced, seeing each other on campus, and trying to avoid each other. I still loved Michael. The longer I stayed away from home, the more I felt the pangs of love. That was undeniable. But trust was another story.

My mother had offered some genuine advice, no matter however sick and twisted her story was to accept. I finally nodded off to sleep after hours of tossing and turning,

despite the traffic from the highway that ran 200 feet behind my mother's house and the traffic in my mind, which kept a fairly synonymous pace with the racing cars out back. The next morning I heard tires screech outside my window and I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. I decided it was time to stop having a pity party and go to my normal place for advice and comfort. It wanted to redirect my life before I had a story to tell like my mom's twenty years from now. I dialed the phone and waited for an answer.

"Hello?" my grandmother's soft voice answered.

"Mamaw? It's Beth."

"Hi Dear. What are you doing at your mother's?"

"What? Did she call you? How'd you know I was here?" My voice was already wavering.

"We got caller ID last week," she chuckled.

"They have caller ID in Prestonburg?" My grandparents lived in a small, factory town in the valley of a foothill between Louisville and Cincinnati. HP Asphalt was the epicenter of the town and every morning it belched a patch of dense, grey smog that situated itself like a cap on top of the valley. Around noon the sun would get hot enough to thin it down into passable clouds, but the odor of asphalt permeated the Prestonburg air perpetually.

"Yes, honey. We even have a Starbucks now."

"You're kidding? Where?" I appreciated the diversion from my unraveling life.

"By the Walmart, of course. How are you, honey? What are you doing in Cincinnati?" I could hear my grandpa hollering in the background to see who it was.

“Hush!” she hollered and I heard a door shut through the connection. “Okay, finally some peace and quiet. Go on.”

I didn’t want to get into the whole story on the phone, so I just asked if I could come visit, although her maternal intuition alerted her to a problem. She always solved problems the same way: prayer and home cooking. I needed a little of both and I told her I’d be there in an hour or two. At this point, I realized I would not be making it to Michael’s party and called Trevor to ask him to explain such to Michael.

As soon as I pulled my Civic down the gravel road leading to my grandparents’ old farmhouse house, I knew this was the best place for me to be. Prestonburg itself was a dank pit, but the comforts of my grandparents’ home were immeasurable. I surveyed the expanse of green grass that covered their five acres and drank in the crisp, dewy morning air. Their sprawling land was sprinkled with clovers and maples trees and the worn barn in the back reminded me of playing hide-and-seek with nearby friends. I closed my eyes to stop the tears, though eventually welcoming them once I realized they were finally tears of happiness. I was home.

I smelled the fire immediately when I stepped out of my car and smiled at my grandparents who were swinging on the front porch and waving. My papaw hobbled to the car to open the door and saw the luggage in the front seat.

“That comin in?” he asked with a smile on his face.

“Is that okay?” I asked.

He said nothing, but kissed me on the head and walked around the car to retrieve it despite his aging knees.

“Come on,” my grandmaw said, “get in here. Grandpa can get the rest of your stuff. Can you believe it’s still this cold in March? Something screwy is going on with this weather these days. When I was a little girl, the world was already in full bloom by March,” She opened the front door and my senses were overwhelmed— the roast baking in the oven, the cross hanging in the foyer, the noise from the weather channel TV. Nothing about this house ever changed. I had practically grown up here. After my dad left, my mom and I stayed here until I was in middle school before she moved us to Cincinnati for some guy who turned out to be married.

My grandpa followed behind with my bag and lugged it upstairs to my old bedroom. Everywhere I looked I saw some relic of the church: a cross, a Bible, framed pictures of Jesus. My grandparents were the typical old Baptist couple.

“I got to go get some work done in the garage,” my grandpa abruptly offered. My Mamaw shot him a “get gone” look and he scurried out the back door. Her gentle, brown eyes peered into mine.

“Well, I been worried enough, now. What’s the matter wid’cha, honey?” She grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the couch.

“Mamaw,” I cried, “I don’t even know where to start.”

“There, there, Sweetheart,” she rubbed my back with her frail, veined hands. Her white hair was twisted in a bun at the base of her neck and she had on her usual denim jumper with turtleneck and tennis shoes. “Take your time, Baby. I don’t have a thing to do today.”

I took a deep breath and composed myself. She didn’t even know half the story.

“Mamaw, did you know Michael and I couldn’t have kids?” My eyes, which had been focused on the chiming mahogany grandfather clock in the corner, looked back at her.

“Well,” she exhaled and shook her head, “yes, your mama mentioned it to us a year or so ago. We say a prayer everyday for you Beth, and we believe that the Lord will have His will in your life. And we hope that means a child because you would be a blessed mother. But the Lord’s will is not always the same as ours, you know.” She never missed a chance to speak about faith.

“Tell me about it.” I sniffed. “There’s more.”

“I figured. You don’t drive 100 miles to Cincinnati and then 45 back just to tell me something I already knew. What gives, Dear?”

“Well, Michael got this phone call the other day from a woman claiming he fathered her child four years ago. She says she’s dying and doesn’t have any family, so she wants him to take custody. And he’s getting a paternity test on Monday. And he might be a dad—“ I broke off into sobs and buried my face in my hands.

“Oh, Honey, Come here,” she pulled my head onto her lap and ran her hands through my hair as I cried. I propped my feet up on the armrest of the couch and lay in the folds of her dress like a child. Grandpa walked into the room until Mamaw noticed and shooed him away. She always tugged the reigns in their marriage, which I thought awkward given the Bible’s message of wifely submission. It certainly didn’t apply to her.

“I don’t know what to do. I didn’t know where to go.” I managed, though my voice was muffled by her jumper.

“Oh Honey, and you went to your mother’s? What were you thinking?” She continued to stroke my head, smiling.

“I don’t know,” I laughed and sat up. “Actually, in some weird way, she helped.”

“Yeah right,” she snickered. She never missed a chance to slight my mother. I felt sorry for both of them because of it.

“Look at me,” she grasped my cheeks firmly and locked eyes with me. “Listen to me Beth. You’re home now. We’ll get this all straightened out. You, me, Papaw, the Lord—you’re gonna be just fine. Papaw?” she yelled into the wall, which separated the house from the garage, “get in here!” I wondered how many times in his life he was directed one way and then another.

“Thanks Mamaw,” I smiled.

“I know just what you need, Darling,” and she patted my hands one more time before removing herself to the kitchen.

Supper is served promptly at 4:45 at my grandparents’ house. The three of us sat down, said grace, and ate a hearty meal of roast, mashed potatoes (my favorite, no coincidence), green beans, chicken and dumplings, and rolls. When we finished, Mamaw dished vanilla ice cream into fancy bowls and we all took them into living room and sat by the fire. My grandpa picked up the remote, but sat it down just as quickly when my Mamaw shot him another look.

“Dear,” she urged, “Beth didn’t come here to watch the evenin’ news.”

“Sorry,” he replied, replacing the remote on the armchair.

“Know what, Papaw? I’d love to watch it actually. I feel like all I do these days is cry and talk. It’d be nice to hear about other people’s problems for a while.” I folded my

legs, Indian-style, on the couch and thumbed through a Christian magazine sitting on the end table. My Mamaw sat beside me and my Papaw sat across the room in his old, navy recliner with the frayed edges and broken handle. I felt like a child again and I rather enjoyed it.

After another couple hours of small talk and TV shows, I kissed both my grandparents and climbed the familiar stairs to my old room. Once inside, I got undressed and slipped under the quilt and scratchy sheets. For the first time in three nights, I didn't have a headache. I felt safe and secure. I thought about my grandparents, who had been married for 54 years. It seemed like the most amazing accomplishment anyone could claim—to sacrifice and compromise enough necessary to maintain a solid, loving marriage for 54 years. Of course, it seemed like most of the compromising came from Papaw. Surely they'd encountered their fair share of difficulties, especially raising my mother. But it seemed like everybody in my generation got divorced at the first sign of trouble. It's like we really did fall for the fantasy we grew up watching in the Disney movies and were surprised when Prince Charming turned out to be an alcoholic, porn-addicted man.

I looked at the alarm clock sitting on a doily on top of the bedside table. It read 8:38. Michael and his mom were supposed to arrive at his surprise birthday party at 8:30. Wonder where he was? Did Trevor call him and, if so, did he go through with it? Wonder what he'd originally told his mom and if he had to change his story now? I noticed the rotary phone beside the clock and picked up the receiver.

It was like picking petals off a flower, playing "he loves me, he loves me not" to decide whether or not to call. I was still so confused. My heart ached to hear his voice

but my head warned me to leave him alone. I fingered the rotary dial and started with a 502-, then hung up. Picked it back up and got a little farther, 502-76, click. Damn rotary, took too long to dial. I didn't have time to think if I was going to do it. Whatever happened to just pressing 2 on my cell to reach him? The distance between us felt cosmic. On a whim, I picked up one more time and rushed through the ten digit number. One ring and I slammed the phone down, though I knew one ring was enough.

The ring of the phone beside me pierced the country silence. Before that, the only noise heard in the house was the chirping of the crickets outside. I glared at it. Ring. Ring. Ring. Don't they have an answering machine? How do you have caller ID and not an answering machine? Ring. Ring. And then, the inevitable, "Beth? Honey, the phone is for you," my papaw called from their bedroom across the hall.

"Thanks," I managed and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" I asked, pretending I had no clue who might be on the other line.

"Beth?"

"Yes, this is she." The game continued.

"It's Michael. You just called me?"

"Uh yes I did. I needed to ask you a question," I pretended to have a reason for calling.

"Are you in Prestonburg?"

"Yep," I said shortly. My face scowled as I realized I had nothing to say. I panicked, sat straight up in bed, and thought of my next line. "So, where are you?" I finally asked.

"Eastwood. Happy birthday to me, huh?"

“Oh Michael. I’m sorry it worked out like that. I just couldn’t- I just needed to get away. I needed some peace, you know?”

“I guess. Why didn’t you call me?”

“Did you hear me say ‘peace’?” I joked. He laughed.

“Your grandparents’, huh? Makes sense. How are you?”

“Better. I just got here this afternoon. Spent last night at Mom’s.”

“Why? Good God, how did that go?”

“Weird. You wouldn’t even believe,” I was pleased with how easily we were settling into small talk.

“Well, what’s your question?”

“Huh? Oh, I don’t know. I made that up. I just wanted to talk to you,” I softened, surprised that I revealed my hand so early.

“Really? Cool...” his voice trailed and in the distance I could hear the muffled sounds of the party.

“I don’t even know what I want to say. I just... I guess I just wanted to hear your voice,” I folded my legs in my lap and pulled the quilt over them.

“Very cool. Your grandparents know?”

“Yeah. They told me I needed the Lord.”

“Sure they did. Hell, probably wouldn’t hurt, huh?”

“Never does. What about your mom?” I asked.

“Well, last night I told her you were at a school function, but then that excuse ran out this morning when you didn’t come home. I tried to tell her some story about you going to a friend’s to visit, but she drug it out of me pretty quickly.”

“What’d she say?” I was curious to hear what she thought of her darling son now.

“Called me stupid. Cooked me dinner. That was pretty much it.”

“Are you at the party?”

“I already said yes.”

“Sorry,” I was more nervous than I realized.

“That’s okay.” All of the sudden the music and party noise were pretty loud and I heard John shouting in the background, “Dude...shots, who you talking to?”

“I should probably go,” I said abruptly, grasping the inconvenient time I had chosen to call.

“No, you don’t have to. He’s leaving,” I could hear some friction on the other end and overheard John saying “what’s your problem, dude? Is it Beth? Tell her I said, ‘Bi-atch!’”

“Fuck him!” I yelled into the phone. “Tell him I can hear him.” My grandpa called after me and I yelled back that I was fine.

“I gotta go. Forget this. Have fun,” I said and fumbled for the base of the phone in the darkness of the night.

“Beth, wait. He’s gone. And I do mean *gone*. Don’t hang up yet. I know you called for a reason. I miss you.”

“Yeah? I don’t know what to think,” I leaned against the oak headboard and took a deep breath.

Silence spoke for several minutes. Both of us wanted to say something but neither of us knew what.

“Look, I’ll be home Monday afternoon. We’ll figure it out then. But that doesn’t mean anything. I just think we owe it to each other to talk.”

“Sounds great. My appointment is right after work, so hopefully I’ll be home by five. Do you want to do dinner?”

“I’m not making any plans, Michael. We’ll see.”

“I’ll take that.”

We each hung up hesitantly, but I smiled again to myself and drifted into a deep sleep, lulled there by the sound of crickets chirping outside my window in the vast, starlit sky.

The next morning, I was up at 5 am to load my car in order to make it back in time for my first class. I stepped onto the front porch and my lungs expanded as the cool, dewy March air jolted my groggy mind. I heard the clanking chains of the porch swing and was startled to find Papaw reading the newspaper.

“Gosh, Papaw, you scared me!” I jumped, “I didn’t know you got up this early.”

“Oh, you know what they say, the early bird catches the worm. In this case, it’s the newspaper. Your Grandma throws it away before I can read it if I don’t get to it first,” he smiled. He put his feet down to stop the swing and motioned for me to join him.

“Oh, Papaw, I’ve got to hurry. I have to teach at 8.”

“I want to talk to ya, Beth. I promise, it won’t take long,” The swing still stayed motionless, expecting my arrival.

“You okay Papaw?” I asked, slowly sitting beside him. The yellow porch light shone on his wrinkled face.

“Beth, I know you’ve had a heckuva hard time lately and heard your fair share of stories and advice. Probably more information than you’d ever wanted to know. But I can’t let you leave here today without my story. I hope it’ll do ya some good, cuz it ain’t done nobody no good and there ain’t no use in goin’ through pain if you’re not gonna learn from it.” We resumed swinging and I focused on our synchronized feet propelling us back and forth.

“You know, it pains me to see your Momma and your Mamaw so wound up all the time. They both have the prettiest smiles—of course you’d never know it, because they rarely show it,” he began.

I smiled.

“There it is,” he nodded. “I wish I saw it more often. You know a long time ago something awful happened and I’ve lived most my life seeing the distress it’s caused your momma and your grandma. But I can’t bear to see another generation live like that.”

The sun was beginning to ascend the horizon and paint the morning sky with a brilliant shade of orange. “Is this about my dad? My mom told me—“ He patted my knee.

“No Dear. This is about your Grandma and me. And it’s something you need to hear even though I hate to have to tell you. You’ll keep it a secret, okay?” I agreed.

My grandpa went on to tell a story about a time right after he’d gotten back from Korea. He and grandma were just teenagers but were already engaged to be married when she found out she was pregnant. I thought of my mother as soon as he admitted the scandal and all the punishment she’d endured from the same woman who’d apparently committed the same mistake. Maybe they were more alike than Grandma would’ve liked

to admit. Papaw continued to tell the story of grandma's pregnancy, all the while never looking up from the weather wood of the porch. He admitted to a few mistakes himself, mainly of alcohol abuse and a temper. I tried to excuse them as normal for a soldier returning from war, but he quickly reminded me the danger of finding excuses for bad behavior. He described a winter day in which he and grandma were driving to, of all places a church service, when he accused her of getting pregnant by way of someone else. Grandma must've been arguing and they were in the middle of a "humdinger of a fight" when Papaw looked up and saw their car barreling for a semi-truck. Swerving to miss it, their car flipped several times as it tumbled down the side of the highway and landed upside-down in a cow field.

Grandma was left unconscious and he tried to pull her out, but after realizing it was futile he ran to the farmhouse to call 911. The ambulance arrived a few minutes later and resuscitated her, but the baby couldn't be saved. They were only 16 at the time. He finished his story, pulled a handkerchief out of his shirt pocket, and dabbed at his watering eyes.

The creaking swing was the only sound I could hear. To say I was shocked was inaccurate. Everything I thought I knew about marriage was obliterated with one story. My pious Grandma pregnant before marriage? My gentle Grandpa responsible for the death of a child? My mom vilified her whole life because of *her* mistake? Finally, he broke the tension.

"You know, I think about that all the time. It probably would've been for the best if we'd have just called off our engagement then. Sometimes, I've wished your grandma would've. But then, we'd never have you," he looked at me for the first time and smiled.

“But here’s what I want to tell you, Beth. Listen closely. Whatever you decide to do is fine. It’s up to you. But make sure you can live with your decision. If you’re gonna stay, commit to moving on from all this. If you don’t think you can, you need to leave. You know I’d never wish divorce on ya in a million years, but more importantly Dear, I’d never wish a miserable marriage on either of you. It’s just not worth it,” he shook his head, “just not worth it.”

“Grandpa, how can you say that? Are you and Mamaw miserable?” I was afraid of his answer.

“Well, you know, that’s a good question. I guess you could say we’re just... we’ll we’ve just learned to ignore each other. I try not to make a fuss. Our problem is we were so young, that we only worried about forgetting and never forgave. So like I said, if you’re going to stay married, that’s great, but make sure you can forgive Michael’s affair and not just forget it. You got to be gentle with the people you love, Beth. And that includes yourself,” His veined hand still rested on my knee and the swing continued its slow rocking. Now, I stared blankly at the porch although I could feel his eyes focused on me. “You better get a move on, huh?”

I twitched back into reality and jumped up from my seat, sending him swinging backward. He chuckled. I leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. It was the best advice I’d ever gotten.

Chapter Nine

I got to school about twenty minutes before class and the message light on my phone was blinking. I picked up and dialed the number to retrieve the message.

“You have 11 new voice messages,” announced the automated voice. “Press 1 to review.” *My gosh*, I thought, *I’ve only been gone the weekend*.

“Beth—its’ Rachel. Call me back. John told me everything. I’m so worried about—“ I pressed three to delete it before I listened to the rest.

“Beth- it’s Jan,” an EU staffer who was in my sorority in college, “we missed you at the party Friday night, just curious if everything was okay. I tried your cell, but it went straight to voice mail.” That’s because it was sitting on the side of a highway somewhere between here and Nashville, I laughed to myself.

“Beth- it’s Julie. Where were you Friday night? Michael said you weren’t feeling well, but Rachel said-“ I pressed three again. Easy to imagine how the other eight voice mails sounded. What is it about friends only calling when something’s the matter? I’d never heard from 11 people in one weekend my entire life, but now all the sudden when there’s drama, everyone wanted to be involved.

Thankfully, it was two minutes until eight and after remembering my class was waiting for me in the library, I prayed I could make it down the hall without running into

to anyone who cared about my weekend whereabouts. I grabbed my bag and glanced both ways in the hall before stepping out. It was a madhouse of students running to get to class on time, knocking into each other, and yelling expletives to their so-called friends. I figured I would blend into the mass of frenzied students.

“Beth!” a voice called just as I was about to open the door to the library. *Damn*, I thought, *so close!* I turned around and saw Trevor jogging to me.

“Thanks for the message, jeez. Next time why don’t you put your dirty work on someone else?” He oozed sympathy.

“Thanks for your concern, Trevor. I’m fine,” I snapped. “What do you want? What are you doing over here anyway? Get lost on the way to the soccer field?” I impatiently glanced at my watch and hoped he’d take the hint.

“Michael sent me. He wanted me to see if you showed up. You’re all he’s thinking about right now.” It was rare to see Trevor so sincere.

“I doubt that. Michael always thinks of himself first. I might have finally made it to second place, but look what it took to get there.”

He went on to explain that after the party, he and Michael had a serious talk about life and marriage. According to him, Michael rambled about all the things he’d done wrong in the past and wanted not only to own up to them, but to learn from them. Trevor reiterated that I was Michael’s only priority and, although I was skeptical, it was still nice to hear. I especially valued Trevor reaching out to me given our antagonistic relationship.

“Thanks Trevor. I appreciate it,” I patted his arm and remembered his own tumultuous life, “Hey, how’s Mani and Lauren?”

“Ugh, God that’s a whole ‘nother story. And you’re late or I’d have time to fill you in.” He jogged down the hall, realized he’d gone the wrong way, and turned around to come back towards me.

“Lost?” I asked. “Need a map to get back to the other side of campus?”

“See ya!” he laughed as he walked past me

I got back to the house after school and found it to be surprisingly well-kept, but then I remembered my mother-in-law had been there all weekend. I went to grab a snack and found nothing in its normal place. The plates had been moved to the cabinet over the dishwasher. I felt like a stranger in my own home. When I couldn’t find the granola bars, I decided to take jog.

I wasn’t halfway down the street when I saw Michael’s Explorer turn into our court. He pulled up beside me and rolled down the window.

“Going for a jog?” he asked.

“Yep,” I replied, as I looked down at my sweats and tennis shoes, “Sure am.”

“Gonna be long?” I knew he was ready to talk and I was sure he’d been planning his speech for three days. I, on the other hand, was still turning Grandpa’s advice over in my mind and utterly confused about any decision relating to the future.

“As long as it takes to run a few miles,” I replied and took off down the street.

“See ya in a little bit!” I yelled as my Nikes carried me further away. I needed time to decide whether I’d have the mettle to forgive him. I needed to figure out if I could forgive myself; but when my hamstrings started burning, I grew skeptical that these questions could be answered in a fifteen minute jog so I turned to go home. I would just muddle through it. I was always good at thinking on my feet as a teacher and student. However,

one thing was certain: If I was ever going to break my family's maternal legacy of bitterness, I'd have to find a way to be gentler on Michael and myself. This would not be easy.

I walked in the foyer, my perspiring muscles immediately contracted from the jog, and I noticed he was sitting on the couch flipping channels. He turned the TV off as soon as I walked in and stood up.

"Keep your seat," I breathed through winded lungs. "I'm gonna grab a shower," I said as I leapt the stairs two at a time.

He sat down and sulked at having to wait longer.

After thirty minutes of stalling upstairs, I decided enough was enough. I threw on his favorite jeans and a tight EU tee, and descended the stairs to find him in the same place as I'd left him. He stood up again, like some high school boy ready to take me out on date. It was amazing the way one phone call could erase nine years of comfort and make us act like a couple of nervous adolescents around each other. I walked over to him and immediately noticed the bags under his eyes and the worn expression on his face. He hugged me and at first I didn't reciprocate, but then he wouldn't let go so I reluctantly wrapped my arms around him and noticed he was trembling in the crease of my neck. I didn't say anything. At last, I pulled away and sat down on the couch and he quickly followed suit.

"Well, how did it go today?" I asked, genuinely concerned about his day.

"Fine I guess. I was only in there five minutes. All he did was swipe my cheek with a Q-Tip and sent it off to the lab," He was picking lint balls off the couch and

mindlessly throwing them on the carpet. I watched him mechanically pull three off at a time.

“When will you know something?” I asked.

“He said it would probably take 7-10 business days.”

“Jeez...that’s a long time. Pretty stressed?” I folded my legs on the couch and stretched them in the butterfly position.

“Yeah, I’m just so confused. I’m trying to do the right thing, but I don’t want to lose you. Our marriage is the most important thing to me right now,” He was looking down at his patent-leather shoes the whole time, his elbows propped on his knees, “Look,” he started with his pre-meditated outline, “I’ve got a lot to say.”

“Well, so do I,” I started.

“Do you want to go first?” he looked up with sincerity. I’d never seen him act so selfless.

“No, go ahead,” I said.

“I’m so sorry Beth. This whole thing is a mess and I can’t believe it myself. I can’t imagine how you’re coping and I feel like I’ll never be able to forgive myself for doing this to you. I know I’ve not always been the most attentive husband or anything, but I never wanted to hurt you like this.”

“I believe that Michael, I do. But unfortunately too many times in this marriage you’ve done what’s best for *you* without giving any thought to how it’d affect *me*,” I was talking to the top of his head since his face was pointed down. “Plus, we have some serious trust issues to work through. For *both* of us, now,” The thought of my affair pained me.

“Work through? Does that mean you’re staying?” His face bolted up and a wave of relief flooded his countenance.

“I’ve not decided,” I flatly stated. His head resumed its sunken position.

“Well, I’ve never been unfaithful to you since we’ve been married, and I know that’s gonna be hard for you to believe, but its true and its my own damn fault if you don’t believe it, I know. If you’re willing to stay my wife—“ his voice broke off because of the emotion, “I’ll spend the rest of my life taking care of you.” He composed himself enough to finish the last line and we sat there for a moment, engulfed in silence. I heard a lawnmower start up across the street and birds chirping in the branches of our oak tree out front. I purposely said nothing, so he continued, “It seemed like I had more to say, but seriously, I’d rather hear how bad you’re hurting and I’m just gonna sit here and take it because I need to hear it.”

“Look me in the eyes,” I directed and he complied. “First of all, you know how bad it’s hurt. We’ve already been through that. Secondly, your speech is great, believe me its compelling, but its nothing without the actions behind it. I love to hear about this new change you’re gonna make, but talk is cheap so I’m not convinced by your words, but give it time and I may be convinced by your actions.”

“Are you staying? Is that what that means?” He wanted so badly to know an answer to a question that I kept asking myself.

“I don’t know yet. I really don’t. I’m not trying to keep you in the dark or anything, but I honestly don’t know. I’ve made an awful mistake myself. I just don’t see how two people can put this kind of betrayal behind them and have any semblance of a happy marriage,” we both jumped at the sound of lawnmower backfiring. The adrenaline

coursed through my veins and I purposely tried to slow my heart rate. I wanted to appear calm and collected, but inside I was ransacked with anxiety.

“Are you waiting until we hear back from the lab?” he asked innocently.

“Not really. The truth is you and I both have problems that need to be addressed whether or not you have child.”

“What are your problems? Shit, Beth, you’re a great wife.” My look reminded him otherwise and he put his hand on my thigh, “I want you to know that I don’t blame you at all for that. I know that seems crazy, believe me I want to kill the guy, but I know you did it because of what I’d done. I have no reason to suspect you’d ever do that again...if we can work this out, that is.”

“Thanks, I guess. How can you not be mad at me, though? That doesn’t seem realistic to me,” I shrugged.

“I guess I understand how it could happen. My dad used to tell me that forgiveness grows out of understanding. Of course, he had his fair share of that in dealing with my mom,” he acknowledged.

“Maybe that’s what I’m struggling with. I don’t understand how you could’ve done that. I guess I always thought you were different than other guys who would’ve done something like that. And now, I can’t shake the fear that you’re not.” I arched my back to minimize the cramping muscles in my abdomen.

“Look Beth. Don’t let this sound like some callous excuse. But I’m much different now than I was then. Granted, in college maybe I was the “pig” women refer to. I was stupid. I had no long-term contemplation of the consequences. No awareness of how a stupid mistake in college would one day threaten everything I worked for in my

marriage. I guess if there's any way to understand it, it would just be that I was stupid, naïve, immature... whatever you want to call it. But I'm not that guy anymore. I'm not—" he was shaking his head and swallowing hard to choke back tears.

"I want to believe you. What you're saying makes sense. But aren't you afraid I'll do something stupid or irrational again? My stupid mistake happened even though I was *mature*. How do you get past that fear?"

"The only thing I fear right now," he grabbed both of my hands and pulled them to his chest, pressing our palms against his heart, "the only thing I fear is losing you," I laid my head on his chest and sobbed. It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me.

"You know in some small way, I'm glad this all happened because it made me think about whom I've become and who I want to be. Luckily, I'm still young enough to change the second part."

"We can do this Beth. We can get past this if try," he urged, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Papaw told me today we'd have to commit to forgiving and not just forgetting. He said there's a big difference between the two and that the latter might be easier, but it's more dangerous. Because it makes you think you've moved on, when really you're just ignoring the problem," I swiped at the tears rolling down my cheek.

"Well, your Papaw is one of the smartest people I know. I'm glad you went there...even if that means you stood me up for my birthday party," He smiled and stroked my hand.

I winked and stood up not only because my legs were hardening in their folded position but also because I was ready to move on from the conversation. “Want to grab a bite to eat?” he finally asked.

“Sure,” I said, “it’s a date.” And we both smiled.

Dinner was nice. We both talked about everything other than the problem, which was what made it nice. We hadn’t spent any quality time together since the night that Mani was born, which was almost a week ago. He was telling me funny stories of Lauren’s post-partum meltdowns and Trevor’s insensitivity in dealing with them. Apparently, Lauren wanted to get out of the house, so she set up a girls night with a couple of sorority sisters. She was so excited about it all day until it came time to get ready and she couldn’t fit into her size 4 jeans. She must have lost it, crying and cussing, and screaming at Trevor. His comment was, “The baby only weighed 8 lbs, where’d you think the other 30 pounds went?” At this, she ripped Mani out of his arms, called and canceled her girl’s night, and took off to her parents’ house for the night. That cheered me up a little. My Grandpa always said, “If you think you got problems, look around.” He was right. Michael and I may have to deal with infertility and infidelity, but John and Rachel had a non-existent sex life and John was a functioning alcoholic. So it was nice to think even Lauren, who seemed so perfect, had been struggling with self-image and confidence problems, too.

About a half an hour into dinner we heard the worst sound possible, “Michael? Beth? Is that you?” Rachel and John scurried across the restaurant to our table. Neither of us wanted to see them right now.

They walked over to our table and John pulled out a chair. Michael and I exchanged glances praying that they would not join us. Rachel either took the hint or had more social awareness and yanked her husband up by the collar of his jacket, “Honey, I’m sure they have like a million things to talk about. We missed you Saturday night, Beth.”

“Thanks,” was all I said. I didn’t want to say anything that would resemble a conversation-starter.

Their buzzer rang, which alerted them that their table was ready but as they crisscrossed through the crowded restaurant, John yelled back to us, “Maybe we’ll stop by later,” but they were out of range before Michael or I could tell them not to.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I said. I hadn’t thought about where I would stay that night but at this point, it seemed silly not to sleep at home.

Chapter Ten

I decided that I would make the guest bedroom my new residence. I wanted my own space and Michael didn't put up too much of a fight. He offered to stay there himself; when I refused, he offered to move all my stuff, but I refused again. "I got this," I said, as I lugged a mound of clothes from one room to the next. I made about ten trips from the master to the guest bedroom, while he sat on the edge of our king-sized bed looking somewhat pleased that I was staying, but somewhat confused that it was not in the same room. I felt comfortable with this arrangement and once I had moved all my stuff, I shut the door to the bedroom behind me.

I don't know how long he sat on our bed waiting for me to come out, but I spent way more time than necessary arranging the room the way I wanted it. I pictured his confused face from the next room as he listened to the sounds of furniture moving on the hardwood, while the Dixie Chicks blared "Hello, Mr. Heartache" on the CD player. I found my Pride and Prejudice framed poster in an old box of college stuff and hammered it over my headboard. I liked having a place of my own to decorate and the face of Elizabeth Bennett—one of my favorite female protagonists in literature—reminded me that love can grow even in the midst of embarrassment and misunderstanding.

After about an hour and a half I was done, so I put on my cotton pajamas and got out, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a book that I needed to review before tomorrow's class. I also thought I could learn a lesson about self-fashioning from Janie—coincidentally, my other favorite female protagonist. About ten minutes into the first chapter where Jody dies, I heard the doorbell ring downstairs. Muffled voices climbed the stairs but it didn't take long for me to discern them: John and Rachel had actually stopped by.

"Hold on, I'll get her," I heard Michael say as he walked up the steps. I cringed as he opened the door.

"Hey, John and Rachel are downstairs," he said as if he thought I hadn't heard.

"So?" I asked. I felt no responsibility to entertain them and couldn't believe they had the nerve to stop by. I knew Rachel was dying to talk to me and John always wanted to be anywhere where Rachel was focused on someone else.

"Are you coming down?" he asked.

"Probably not," I said, laying my book on my lap.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I have no desire to come down there. All she wants to do is hear our problems. She's gonna try to give me advice and I don't want it frankly. Sorry, tell them I said hi and thanks for stopping by, but I have class and am too busy to come down," I picked up my book again.

"Can't you come at least come say hello?" But he stopped his old line of thinking and quickly said, "no, you're right. That's fine, I'll tell them. Should I stop in and say good night before bed?" Neither of us had thought through this living arrangement.

“If you want,” I said. “Thanks Michael,” I picked up my highlighter and resumed reading as he went back downstairs.

About an hour later, I decided I was hungry and since I hadn’t heard voices in awhile, I figured it was safe to go down to the kitchen. Wearing my pajamas and peering into the refrigerator, I jumped when I heard Rachel enter through the back door. I now heard Trevor also, and they were all sitting on the deck playing cards.

“Hey Beth, thought you were getting some work done?” She was like a shark in the water and my problems were her blood.

“I was. Just wanted a snack. Excuse me,” I tried to walk past her, but she grabbed my arm and pulled me in for a hug. I stood with my arms at my side, as she stroked my hair and said, “poor thing” over and over.

“Actually Rachel, I’m okay,” I said as I backed away from her embrace.

“Oh, yeah right. I know better than that. But good for you pretending to be. Don’t let that asshole see you cry.”

“Wow, great advice. I think I’ll go back to bed.”

“What did I do to you? Don’t be mad at me, I’m not the one who slept around on you,” She tapped her acrylic fingernails on the countertops.

“Again, wow. You really know how to cheer someone up.”

“John told me everything,” I silently wondered if John’s version included the part about him hooking up with the roommate. “I was so mad at him. I told him what an awful friend he was for letting that happen. And I was none to pleased to hear he was in the next room the whole time, but he said he didn’t want to leave Michael alone with

some random girl, so I guess I can understand that.” Obviously, John’s version was a little censored. “So, what are you going to do?” she continued.

“About what?” I asked. Gossips like Rachel don’t know what to do when you act like something’s not as big of a deal as they’ve made it out to be.

“About what? What do you mean? Hello! About the little boy Michael has apparently fathered?”

“Test results won’t be back for 7-10 days, though I’m sure you knew that already. Might not be his, you know.”

“That’s true, that’s good. Focus on the positive. Good for you Beth, I’m proud of you. You seem to be handling this really well. Though Michael did say you totally freaked out the first night. Where’d you go? He said you charged like a thousand dollars on the credit card, you crazy thing,” She flashed her phony, whitened smile and poked me in the ribs.

“Michael told you that?” I was astounded that she already knew most of what I was unwilling to tell her.

“No, he told John at the party Saturday. By the way, that’s was awkward. Michael told everyone you were sick, but your mother-in-law-- I should say your *monster*-in-law-- told some people who questioned that story that you all were fighting and you didn’t show up.”

“Are you kidding me? Who did she tell?” I had fallen into Rachel’s trap. She just wanted to stoke the fire. I shook my head, “Never mind, I don’t even care.”

“I tried to call your cell, but Michael told John that you threw it out your car window. Is that true?”

“Yep.”

“God, I could not imagine life without my cell phone. What has that been like?”

“Devastating,” I shrugged. I realized she did not pick up on the sarcasm and added, “No, actually, it’s been kinda nice. Peaceful.”

“I could use a little peace and quiet, too. Maybe I’ll chuck mine out the window on the ride home. Kidding, of course, I could never do that because I have kiddos who need me.”

It always came back to that with Rachel. She always had some twisted way of working in the fact that she was a mother and I was not, always at the worst possible time, and always when I least expected it.

“Speaking of those needy kiddos, where are they now?” It was after ten on a Monday evening and she was on my back porch drinking.

“My mom keeps them on Mondays. I deserve one night a week, don’t I?”

“Sure. Alright, nice talking to you. I’m going to bed. Ya’ll enjoy yourself. Stay as long as you’d like.”

“Oh, come have a drink with us.”

“Nope, some of us have to work in the morning. None of you all have anything to do until noon.” I walked back upstairs and turned right to go to bed, but then remembered my new bedroom was to the left and turned back the other way. I knew she noticed and would quickly return to the poker game to find out why I veered left.

Michael knocked on the door around 11. I awoke to find my book spread open in my lap and my highlighter, with its top off, marking up my sheets. I feigned sleep as he entered but peaked as he gently picked up the book and pen, laid them on my table, and

turned the light off beside me. He kissed me on the head and I stirred in the sheets as I'd just awakened.

“Everybody leave?” I moaned.

“Yeah, just wanted to say good night,” he whispered, leaning over me.

“Good night. Hope you sleep well.” That was our standard last line of the night. I turned over and closed my eyes but it wasn't until several minutes later that I heard the door close behind him.

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