

Lifeblood

by
Emma Cryar

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Emma Cryar

APPROVED:

Dr. Marion Hollings
Department of English

Stephen E. Severn
Department of English

Dr. Michael P. Federici
Department of Political Science

Dr. Philip E. Phillips
Associate Dean, University
Honors College

This book is dedicated to mothers everywhere,
with children both born and unborn.

Abstract

Abortion is one of the most controversial topics of the modern day (if not the most controversial). Of all the arguments made in favor of abortion, these are easily the two most common: 1. An unborn fetus isn't a human being until it's either viable or the mother decides that it's a human being; and 2. Regardless of whether an unborn fetus is a human being, the mother's right to choose to abort the fetus is the most important thing. This story is a combination of science and narrative meant to combat these two misconceptions. Each chapter begins with an epigraph directly or indirectly relating to pregnancy or abortion, followed by a paragraph of science explaining a baby's development week by week. The narrative portion tells the story of a young woman pregnant by an abusive boyfriend and her extensive struggle to choose between life and death for what she doesn't always believe are her unborn children.

Preface

During my first year at college as a graphic design major, I held the belief that the most important thing about a design was how pretty it looked. This belief was called into question in my sophomore year when one of my art professors pulled me aside after class and told me that my artwork was good but needed something more. It needed what he called my “personal voice,” which he then advised me to find somehow and start incorporating into my work. At first, being a realist, I almost completely disregarded his advice because I was only focused on one thing: creating realistic and visually appealing art. Nonetheless, there was enough urgency and insistence in his voice that I decided to try his advice for the final project of the semester.

For my final project, I forced myself to abandon most of the realistic approach that I usually used in order to focus instead on this suddenly far greater priority: my voice. Using colored pencil, I created something controversial. I drew a carefully arranged set of 9 box-shaped tables, each one holding a baby swaddled in a blanket, and each baby being of the approximate proportions that correspond to each of the 9 months of human pregnancy. There was a 10th box at the end, off of which was a young boy jumping and running out of the picture. The artwork was meant to illustrate the importance of human life—at all stages. It was meant to say what Dr. Seuss once said: “A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

The class critique was very one-sided, because all I received after giving my presentation was a set of blank stares and maybe one question at the end about how long it took me to complete or something. Whether my classmates were staring at me out of

astonishment, resentment, or just plain lack of knowledge about the abortion controversy, it didn't really matter. Either way I realized that the pro-life message wasn't a message being told very often by very many people—especially not people my age at liberal community colleges or universities in the 21st century. I knew it was a message that I wanted and needed to spread as thoroughly as I could through as many means as possible.

Thus, it was really no wonder I chose during the next semester to build my honors thesis around the abortion topic. What *else* would I have used the immensely powerful opportunity of an honors thesis to create? There was absolutely no mystery about it, even though so many of the people whom I talked to used to look at me—a graphic design major—in total confusion whenever they first heard what my thesis project was going to be about. And I knew that my predominantly liberal university would've welcomed and perhaps even preferred the idea of me designing a fancy magazine or creating a giant series of fine art or producing a collection of visually stunning photography over the idea of me following one of my deepest convictions and writing a piece of pro-life fiction. But sometimes we must do what we know is right rather than what we know is easy.

It is very important for me to note that I did not always hold a strictly pro-life view on the abortion controversy. During the summer between the end of high school and the beginning of college, I went to a 2-week Christian apologetics conference in Dayton, Tennessee called Summit. The conference featured a variety of speakers on a variety of topics—including abortion. I was a considerably new Christian at the time, and I had not truly considered the importance of the abortion issue enough to research it and determine my stance. As far as I knew, it was wrong with the exception of rape—but even then, I

wasn't exactly sure why so many Christians were so passionate about it being wrong because I wasn't sure when human life officially began within the womb.

One night at the conference, Summit's president Dr. Jeff Myers spoke. He took the stage and carefully dove into the abortion issue. He spoke of the immense numbers of abortions that were happening each year, the indubitable preciousness of human life, and the many amazing alternatives to abortion. My eyes started to open, but not enough. I still wouldn't have cried over it or anything. After all, how did we truly know that a human life at, say, just a few weeks is equally as human as a human life at birth? The concept felt fuzzy and forced to me. I didn't feel the urgency, partially because I didn't care near as much as I should have, but also partially because I just didn't know the facts.

That was when Dr. Myers very gently informed the audience that the following imagery about to be displayed onscreen was incredibly disturbing, and that those of us who didn't think we could handle gruesome images were welcome to turn away or close our eyes. I did not turn away and I did not close my eyes because I started to realize what he was going to show us...and I knew that I needed to see it. I knew it was time to see the truth.

He waited just a few more moments, and then the images began. It was a series of photos and video footage of aborted babies. If you have not seen an aborted baby before, I'm sure your mind can try to imagine what it might look like. But there is nothing like actually seeing it in full color, displayed on a large screen for an audience of several hundred adolescent thinkers who probably had no idea that this was ever the type of slideshow they would've been viewing at a summer camp.

At the very *least*, the abortion footage and statistics *bothered* me. But much deeper than that, they utterly disturbed every fiber of my being, because I finally realized what abortion truly is. Abortion is murder. The broken, fleshy, tiny little limbs...strewn out on a dissection tray. The tiny fingers...the closed eyes and curled-up legs...the intestines lying limp and exposed to the cold, sterile air. It was all there. All of it. It was a person. A tiny, helpless, murdered little human who didn't even get a chance to meet its own mother before its life was suddenly, viciously and yet ever so *easily* ripped from its powerless grasp.

After Summit, I sank myself deeper and deeper into abortion research. I couldn't stop because I didn't *want* to stop. I learned as much as I could about the biology, the psychology, the history, and even the politics of abortion. One of the most shocking things that I noticed throughout my research was the similarity between the cruelty with which the unborn are treated today and the cruelty that both the Jews and the African Americans experienced in history (and still often do experience today as well). However, what makes abortion especially horrifying is that the unborn literally don't have a voice at all to defend themselves. They don't even get to *try* to speak up, because they're killed far before they can.

One of the other most shocking things that I learned during my research was how very few of the pregnant women considering abortion are actually made aware of the facts that they would need to be aware of in order to make a truly informed decision about abortion. For example, a great many women don't even know what their baby looks like in the womb. A considerable number of women who view an ultrasound of

their baby actually end up changing their minds about getting an abortion. Also, a great many women don't know about the alternatives of adoption and foster care, and they don't realize how many couples exist who would consider it their absolute *joy* to take care of those unwanted babies. Also, a great many women aren't made aware of the psychological and even physical repercussions that can and often do occur in women due to abortion.

So many women are not comprehensively aware of the fact that the beings they are carrying inside of themselves are actually small children in need of just as much love and care as anyone else—if not even *more* so, considering how small and helpless they are. The absolute beauty of motherly compassion and tenderness has been shut down and utterly silenced in favor of this strange, twisted new idea of the apparent “freedom” that women could just obtain if they would only pretend their babies are not actually babies and then abort them. Thus, we have women victims everywhere—the women *mothers* are victims of the false mentality being fed to them, and the little women in the wombs are victims of the murder that results from that false mentality. And thus, for decades, it's been nothing short of a bloodbath.

Another incredibly significant thing about the abortion controversy that I eventually realized was that the phrase “pro-choice” is actually a phrase that pro-lifers can technically use to describe themselves as well. Since the law of the land currently dictates that it is up to the woman to choose between life and death for her unborn child, then the best thing pro-lifers can do (since we can't simply repeal the law) is work within the legal limitations and appeal to pro-choice women's ability to *choose life* rather than death for

their children. Thus, one could technically say that pro-lifers are pro-choicers who have permanently chosen life.

My realization of this incredible power of choice was one of the primary things that made me decide to build my entire honors thesis around the abortion controversy. My mission was to create a thesis that did two main things: 1. Present the science behind baby development and 2. Appeal in story form to the incredible power that women possess to choose life rather than death for their babies. And I can only hope to the good Lord that this thesis accomplishes my mission.

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CHAPTER I

He who sees things grow from beginning will have the finest view of them. – Aristotle

At the onset, 200-600 million sperm are released and begin the race, traveling 2 to 3 millimeters per minute. Only about 200 total sperm make it to the site of fertilization without degenerating or being absorbed by the female genital tract. Upon reaching the site of fertilization, each of the 200 or so remaining sperm attempts to penetrate the zona pellucida (the outer protective layer of the female's egg). However, with the help of a variety of enzymes, only one sperm succeeds in penetration, and the egg then makes itself impenetrable to all other sperm in a process known as the zona reaction. The moment of conception occurs within 24 hours of intercourse. As the sperm and egg finish fusing together and conceive the fertilized egg, their two sets of newly joined chromosomes instantaneously establish the entirety of the embryo's genetic identity, including its gender.¹

Love begins when a single path, which was once two, grows and develops as the one that it has now become. It becomes not an experience for the momentary impulses of selfish appetite, but a purposive and self-sacrificial journey for the entirety of a lifetime. It is a miraculous creation which creates little creations out of itself.

Hate begins fundamentally adverse. It has been proposed by many that the epitome of Hate isn't so much hating (which involves going through the trouble to actually hate) but instead apathy, or complete lack of care. Thus, Hate really has no beginning, because it has not the empathy enough to even begin.

Over time, selfish Hate—in order to feed the monster of itself—actually festers into an insanely premeditated pretense of Love. It knows, after all, that loving has earned a much greater reputation than hating ever has, and loving tends to receive the most trust...so it wears Love as a devious disguise. As soon as Hate outwardly looks like Love, the human subject who has become the object of Hate's hatred can sometimes be led to believe that the hatred it receives is somehow really just Love.

But Love is the angel that is needed not only to survive but also to live, because Love always brings Life. Love made...makes Life.

Hate bred breeds death—the destruction of any Life that Love made.

However, Hate is still capable of taking the human object of its hatred—and the fusion of the two can produce Life just the same. And this new Life is indeed a piece of legitimate existence which will one day grow up and live its life on its own. It is even capable of one day loving—unlike the Hate which was half responsible for spawning it.

But before this new Life can live on its own, it first relies on Love to take care of it. At first, without Love, it cannot grow on its own. Even worse—without Love, it knows nothing about loving without being shown.

This new Life also quite literally had nothing to do with any of Hate's wrongdoings—including the wrongdoing done to produce the Life in the first place.

Taking it just one thought further: this new Life would only ever logically be something that Hate hates, not something that Hate loves—and certainly not something that Love hates. Because Hate never loves, and Love never hates.

The decision for the next move in this ever-impending circumstance lies at the feet of Love, who carries the burden of the new, breathing, beloved little Life. And the decision is left lingering lonely in the air—floating, twisting, and swaying here and there.

Love must choose and decide where she stands, because the very fate of Life is resting in her hands.

The school bus dips into a huge pothole and the entire vehicle jolts me back into reality and I grab the seat in front of me for a moment.

I let go as the rest of the students start jabbering and laughing even more obnoxiously than they were before. I roll my eyes as I remember that it's now spring break and that their behavior is technically normal. But then I glance back down at the thing I've been reading. It's just a monologue from a book for English class. It's called *When Hate Killed Love*.

I hate it.

Who even gets to decide which books we read in high school English classes anyway? I wonder, almost seething. *Don't they know certain things might disturb certain people?*

Suddenly I shove the book into my backpack and try to think about nothing for the rest of the ride home.

But I can't stop thinking about it even when I get home.

And technically I'm not *allowed* to stop reading it. Because it's homework.

I shut my bedroom door and sit down, opening the book again:

A belly. A stomach. A gut. The middle.

It contains so much of a person—the stomach for eating, the lungs for breathing, the kidneys for filtering. But doesn't it also contain a womb?

The womb is a very important piece of a woman's anatomy. It contains the power and the potential not only to create new Life but also to nurture it.

It's just an ordinary belly, from the outside. Nothing but a few thin blonde hairs coating its skin surface and a belly button placed right in the center. It tans during summer, lightens in fall, pales in winter, and slowly regains hue in spring. It's just an ordinary belly...from the outside. But on the inside, aren't there extraordinary things happening?

She steps into the shower and washes clean. She sits in a rocking chair, sipping her tea. She watches the neighbor's dog as she crosses the street. She lies in bed resting, swinging her feet...and tapping her fingers on that belly, although not knowing....but can she sense?

She rides the school bus home, waiting. It's springtime so her belly shows under the hemline of her shirt, but it still looks like that same plain, ordinary belly. Nothing really shows. She takes a walk in the park, all alone...but is she?

A Life slowly forms.

One cell broke into two, two days before.

But now there are even more.

How many more?

Oh, so many.

But of course, “it’s only a cluster.”

After all, it’s only been one week and that belly still looks the same. Still looks like there’s been no real change. She self-conversates while music plays. She contemplates...

She knows she’s still a young girl. Too young, perhaps, for this to possibly happen. She has far too much life ahead.

But what about the Life that’s maybe now inside?

She understands that if the possibility comes true, and this Life does now exist within...she will not know for another month...and she does not want to check sooner as she easily could, because she believes that keeping it all unknown to her family would be good—or at least...better? Thus, she decides to find out naturally in a month’s time instead.

For now, because she has to wait to know, she’s not sure which specific direction to temporarily go—thus, she opts for everyday distractions.

She knows that there are plenty of those: walking, eating, bathing—always bathing. As if to wash away what happened...

I close the book again.

I can just find a summary of it online.

I spend the rest of the day alone in my room. But later at night all I can think about is that stupid, stupid book. It's 10 p.m. and the neighbor's dog won't shut up. And lately, sleep really matters to me because it's the only real escape I currently have.

Being an adult is strange, I think to myself. When we're kids, that's all we want to be. But then when we're adults we don't like all the responsibilities...

I shake my head for a second. *That stupid book's got me rhyming now. Wonderful.*

But suddenly I remember the conversation I once had that made me think of that. Some stranger at the bus stop was telling me on the day I turned 18, "You have choices when you're a kid, yeah. But now, as a mature adult, you have to take full responsibility for every single choice you make."

Every single choice...

It's good to have strangers to tell you what to do.

But in a split-second I remember the stupid book again.

That book was talking about choices, too.

Dang flabbit.

I feel myself reach over and grab it, then open it back up to some random part:

I understand now. I understand that if the possibility does in fact come true, and this new little Life does exist within, I must choose whether to hate the little Life as much as I was hated by Hate...or to instead love this little Life as separate, and to raise this Life new on Love's side—thus bringing Love to Life, instead of making this little Life die.

CHAPTER II

For all of its uncertainty, we cannot flee the future. – Barbara Jordan

By the first day of week 2 of development, the fertilized egg (now called the blastocyst) has grown from 1 cell to around 100. These cells are stem cells, each of which have the capacity to turn into 1 of over 200 different types of cell in the human body.² Having taken about a week to travel along the fallopian tube to the uterus, the blastocyst now reaches the uterus and is implanted into the uterine wall. As its outer ring of cells begins transforming into the placenta and its inner clump of cells begins transforming into the embryo and amniotic sac, it develops into the embryoblast. Later in the week, the embryoblast develops further into the bilaminar embryonic disc, which consists of the epiblast and the hypoblast. The epiblast develops into both the ectoderm (eventually the skin and nerves) and the mesoderm (eventually the bones, muscles, and blood), while the hypoblast develops into the endoderm (eventually the internal organs). At the end of week 2, a structure called the prechordal plate begins developing into what will soon become the brain.³

“Alaina,” Mom calls from the other room.

It actually takes me a second to consciously realize that’s my name.

Goodness.

I know I've felt my worth slipping away during the last two weeks, but have I really forgotten who I *am*? I resist the urge to slap myself correctively. *Don't be ridiculous. You still know who you are. What he did can't change that. No matter how worthless you feel, you must know that you're not. Surely you know.*

Knowing.

I suddenly remember I have two weeks left until I'll know. But I know it's gonna feel so much longer.

Hiding for two weeks straight is difficult.

Mom calls me again and I realize what time it is. I slowly peel myself up off the couch and drift into the kitchen.

"Hey, would you cut up the mushrooms and peel the crawfish?" she asks, turned away, rapidly chopping up carrots.

I mechanically begin, trying not to slip into a trance.

"Oh, Alaina, I almost forgot" Mom says, "Grandpa can't have mushrooms, he's allergic. Keep the mushrooms in a separate bowl."

I freeze, hoping Mom doesn't see the sudden flush in my cheeks.

I steady my voice and then ask her, "Grandpa's coming?"

"Of course! Everybody said they were able to make it tonight," she answers.

"Oh," I stammer, and then blurt, "I forgot, sorry."

But how could I have forgotten about family dinner?

I probably just wasn't paying attention whenever Mom mentioned it a couple days ago.

Grandpa is...he's a trip.

I love him, but he knows things. His piercing, perceptive eyes. The way he can read a mind just by looking at a person. The wisdom he holds from all his years. He senses things that nobody else can sense. And tonight isn't a good night for him to be sensing stuff.

I hear the front door slowly creak open.

I pause from chopping mushrooms, and hold my breath and listen.

But it's only Dad's footsteps. I exhale. His steps are always quiet. As if he's not really there. He's never been like Grandpa—perceptive. He's carrying his briefcase, talking to a coworker on the phone. He comes in, absentmindedly kisses Mom, and then retreats into the bedroom and quietly shuts the door.

It's not that he hates me—not at all. He just fails to love me sometimes. Or at least that's what I've gotten used to telling myself. And maybe telling myself that isn't even a coping mechanism anymore. Maybe it's just a simple fact of life now. I haven't really figured that out

Maybe it would be easier for him to love me if he had more than just one kid...or something...but I guess I'll never know.

For the next 10 minutes helping with the cooking I try to build up the mental capacity to deal with whatever Grandpa says or does.

But then the family arrives.

The big blue van pulls up into the tiny gravel driveway, and all 6 cousins tumble out. Grandpa, a spry man for his age, usually hops out of the van first to unload things and keep the younger cousins from running in the street.

Usually I go out and greet them.

It takes me a little longer this time, but eventually I slowly step towards the front door
Two of the cousins dart past me into the house.

“Davey! Kelly!” I bark. “*Watch* where you’re going!”

“Sorry Alaina!” they both say, and then go back to chasing each other.

I turn back to the front door again, and suddenly Grandpa’s shadow falls across my
face

I try to maintain a smile as I slowly look up at him, but my smile quickly fades.

“Ah, my beautiful Alaina!” he says, stooping in and hugging me.

I loosen up just a little, patting him on the back and realizing how truly much I am
dreading the rest of this night.

“How *are* you?” he asks, taking me by the shoulders and looking me so squarely yet
lovingly in the face that I almost have to look away.

I smile a little nervously, and try once again to maintain the smile as I open my mouth
to speak.

But nothing comes out.

He tilts his head a little, raises his eyebrows, and smiles at me, asking, “You’re not
sure today?”

“I’m,” I stammer, mentally scrambling for an excuse, “I’m a little under the
weather...”

I trail off as I experience the sudden urge to just tell him absolutely everything.

“But Alaina! This weather is *wonderful!*” he says cheerfully, then continues, “But
how about we get you some of that dinner and then I’ll ask you more about it.”

I smile up at him cordially, but then stop as soon as he turns away.

No matter what, he's not allowed to know.

Minutes later the whole family starts squeezing itself around the tiny table, and I glance over and see baby Milena struggling to crawl towards the dining room to join us.

She's just sitting there, all alone.

I pause.

So helpless and small. Why is nobody taking care of her?

She stops crawling and watches her siblings playing with a giant stuffed dog. Finally I can't help myself, and I drift over and scoop her up off the floor. I kiss her cheek and put her into the high chair.

I fill the cousins' bowls with food while listening to Aunt Joan and Mom talking loudly. Something about choosing kids over career.

Mom's always implied (though not plainly stated) that it's better to choose career. She probably wouldn't say that out loud to anyone. Especially not at the dinner table.

But I've always thought that Aunt Joan is such a strong woman. Nobody ever thought from looking at her that her choice to have six kids instead a lifelong career was a choice made out of weakness or even coercion by Uncle Angus because *he* definitely never forced her to make that choice.

It makes me wonder about Mom. It makes me wonder if that's why she decided to only have one kid.

Dad seems absentminded. He's reading the newspaper. Belle, having recently started walking, meanders over to him and places a tiny hand on his pantleg. For a second he doesn't notice, but when her hand slightly moves, he turns away from his reading long enough and picks her up. She sits on his lap stuffing bread into her mouth.

Davey and Kelly start running around the table.

I fix myself a bowl and sit down. The food obviously smells good. And because I didn't eat lunch I know I should be eating.

But I'm also starting to feel kind of sick.

And Grandpa has started noticing my silence.

That's it! I realize. I'll just eat slow until I can say I'm sick, and then I'll leave the table early and get out of talking to him.

I start executing the plan by taking my first bite like a sloth.

But then I look down at my bowl.

I see the tiny crawfish floating among the grains of rice.

They're so curled up and oddly flesh-colored...

I look at them a little closer for a second.

They look kind of...

I start to think.

They look a little like...

I hesitate to finish the thought.

A little bit like embryos.

As I start slipping into a trance, a piece of bay leaf gets caught in my throat and I'm flung into a coughing fit.

A few of the family members notice and stop talking.

Lovely.

“Alaina! Be *careful*, girl,” Mom says. I stop coughing as she suddenly says, “Oh, Alaina—I meant to ask you today—how is the college search going? Have you found anything?”

College has always been something I’ve wanted to pursue. I started researching universities two weeks ago.

Before it all happened.

I open my mouth to give some type of answer, but then slip back into the trance as I suddenly recall: *I may not be going to college anymore.*

I sit there frozen for a moment, until Grandpa breaks the silence, “Alaina?”

“Sorry,” I briefly shake my head and laugh for a second, “I thought I was going to sneeze.” Everyone looks convinced except Grandpa.

I continue, “I think I’ll just stick with Chattanooga State. It’s...the cheapest—free actually, because of the Tennessee Promise scholarship we talked about.”

I have to go to college. No matter what it takes.

I look back down at the bowl of embryo crawfish.

No matter what it takes?

I shut my mouth into a thin, straight line, staring at the table for a moment.

I feel myself flinch when Mom speaks up.

“Oh, honey,” she begins, “Was there a different college you would’ve wanted? I mean, community colleges aren’t all that bad and they are the cheapest ones right now...but that doesn’t mean we can’t make something else work instead.”

“It’s totally fine,” I reply, pretending to cough again. “I’ve thought about it a lot. I really have. And this is what I’ve decided.” I give a courteous smile.

I know Mom and Dad really aren't in the best financial situation anyway.

Dad briefly looks up from his newspaper and murmurs, "Let us know if you change your mind."

"Okay," I reply quietly.

Grandpa briefly catches my eye. He looks curious, but apparently he doesn't want to put me on the spot with direct questions. So he remains silent.

I realize I only have a few bites left, if I still want to leave the table early...but it doesn't feel right to waste the food *or* to leave Mom to do the kitchen by herself after dinner. I cancel my original plan and decide to just lie my way through any conversation with Grandpa.

Besides, I think, maybe Grandpa will just go into the living room with the cousins.

But he doesn't.

I force myself to finish eating and start helping with the dishes, and Grandpa starts helping too.

Mom pokes her head in, sees him, and says, "Daddy, get in here and play with your grandkids. You're too old to be doing dishes—me and Alaina will do it."

"Oh no, Rebecca," he answers with a smile, "It's my pleasure. Besides, I don't regret being old; it's a privilege denied to many! Let me visit with Alaina and *you* go play with your nieces and nephews. How about it?"

Please don't leave, Mom.

But she laughs and slips out of the room.

I start feeling more and more sick to my stomach...and then I just go quiet.

Of course—this *definitely* makes things worse. But I honestly don't know what else to do at this point.

Grandpa grabs a large pot and starts drying, then asks, "So what seems to be the problem?"

"Hm?" I try pretending.

He gently cuts in, "I know when my little girl is wrestling with something." He pauses. "What is it that you're wrestling with?"

This is the exact conversation I didn't want to have, and now we're having it.

"I'm just...feeling a little sick today," I pathetically mumble. "That's all."

"Oh? I'm so sorry," he says, then asks, "Are you sure you're just feeling sick?"

"Yeah," I answer quickly, nodding and not looking at him.

I can feel his eyes watching my face.

"That's no good," he says.

I wait for it.

He hesitates before suddenly saying, "I've never seen you eat when you're sick before."

He doesn't believe me.

I suddenly feel my cheeks blushing in hot frustration as I blurt out, "Well sometimes people *change*, Grandpa."

I turn and look right up at him.

He pauses, realizing he's hit a nerve with me.

He carefully looks into my eyes, pausing before gently replying, “If you don’t want to tell me any more about it, then I will not push you, Alaina. Just know that I am here for you.”

I feel myself softening as I look away and out the window.

But people do change, I think bitterly. Just look at Doyle.

I start washing a pan a little too furiously.

Of course that’s when Grandpa asks, “How is Doyle doing?”

He wears a soft smile, looking at the next pot as he lifts and dries it.

I actually did prepare a relatively believable lie about Doyle though. I even practiced it in the mirror several times this past week.

I open my mouth and recite the lie to Grandpa: “He’s out of town. With family.”

Grandpa actually believes me.

“Oh!” he replies. “Well that sounds like it would be good for him.” As I start to wonder what he really meant by that, he asks another question, “Where did they all go?”

I hesitate for a moment, think up a common springtime vacation spot, then blurt, “Florida.”

“That’s such a beautiful place,” he says with a cordial smile as he places the pot in the cabinet. “How long is their trip?”

I hesitate again, trying to come up with a lengthy yet reasonable amount of time, then say, “Two weeks.” I wait another moment, then add, “It’s for spring break, which is happening right now.”

Two weeks. That’s how long I have before I’ll know.

But then, without warning, a potent sense of dread creeps up my spine.

Doyle is coming back right as I find out.

“Well, what a fine vacation that is for them!” Grandpa says with a smile.

He decides not to ask me any more questions.

Eventually the dishes are done and I retreat into my room. Later, I hear the family start leaving, and Mom slowly shuts the door behind them. I draw my curtains closed and turn out the light before crawling nervously under the covers.

Okay, so obviously it was a relatively close call. But I can keep Grandpa from knowing for another two weeks. I know I can.

And I do.

Just two weeks.

I try closing my eyes and falling asleep...but it doesn't work. An hour later and my curiosity has peaked: I slip out of bed and go grab the stupid English book. I turn on my phone flashlight and read:

As of today, she knows that she's still safe. She hasn't gotten in trouble yet, and her family doesn't seem to be quite as much of a threat as she imagined. But now, to get through the next two weeks unnoticed is the true challenge. To get through the days without anybody knowing and before anything can really continue growing.

And then she'll finally know for sure. And her family members are really the only people to watch out for. She knows she'll have to try a little bit harder to actually successfully hide from them—to make herself seem more normal and less formal than she knows she has been.

But as the week slowly draws to a close, everyone remains absent and she's mostly alone. She takes another shower, and then quietly sits and whisperingly hums. she thinks about what she'll actually do when the time finally comes.

She knows there'll be nowhere else to run, and she'll have to make her final choice and be done. The future will arrive, putting a massive hold on her entire life, until she finally decides.

The night before the first day of the third week, she falls into a very restless and deeply disturbed sleep.

I close the book, and then I close my eyes. I also make a mental note for tomorrow maybe, to figure out why this weird book is almost exactly like my life.

CHAPTER III

Is this it? The point at which my life begins? Cognition switched on. Now there's food for thought. I am; therefore, I think. – Roger McGough

At the start of week 3, the previously formed prechordal plate develops first into the notochordal plate and then into the notochord, which is the early spinal cord. The bilaminar embryonic disk now transforms into the trilaminar embryonic disc during a process called gastrulation. This process begins with the formation of what's known as the primitive streak, which is the forerunner to the nervous system. Cells from the primitive streak start to convert the epiblast into the embryonic ectoderm and the hypoblast into the embryonic endoderm, as well as create a third cell group called the embryonic mesoderm. The embryonic ectoderm transforms first into the neural plate and then into the neural tube. The bottom of the neural tube is the spinal cord, and the top of it is the brain.⁴ At week 3, signals begin travelling rapidly through the neurons, and the brain sparks into activity.⁵

Thoughts. Ideas. Notions. A conception.

Neural activity has consumed my being. It has become what I am. I haven't gotten much further than that—one could still count every cell in my body. But I produce more cells each day, because my brain now commands my body to do it.

And I don't stop. More and more cells. My brain takes automatic command over everything else. There is much work to be done in me still.

But I myself am not still...I am moving. The synapses in me move, rippling across my entirety.

It seems I am helpless from the very beginning, too. I don't remember anything; I can't make memories yet. All that I am is the life that has been given to me. And even my body's growing is taking place by some scientific and entirely natural decree—it isn't happening because of me.

I don't know where I am. I just am. And I am safe, even though I don't yet know to care about a thing like safety. I would say it's dark where I am, but I don't yet know about darkness or light or any physical senses. The only sense I currently have is cognizance. I do exist. And if left to my own devices, one would think I would continue to grow. It would only make sense for that to be so.

Time is not yet a concept I can grasp. But in reality around me, a week does pass. My form continues to differentiate; my nervous system begins to take firmer shape. The brain that I am continues adding to my increasing complexity, and since I don't yet put physical effort into things, I'm technically doing all of this rather effortlessly.

If I could, I would wonder what I'll one day be. I would wonder what will become of me. What will I do? Who will I see? It could even be said that I am currently the earliest you, and you were once the current state of me.

We are much more alike than most people might think, you see.

I must admit, I don't yet know what people think, or what people say. Again, I haven't got senses to tell me those things anyway. But I am growing—I'm growing all the time. And so far, nothing seems to be going wrong. It is really quite sublime.

If I could contemplate deeper thoughts, perhaps I would also wonder more about what I am. Sometimes I feel like I'm just a clump, but is that really, truly me? Because I would think any clump is dead and can't keep growing from old to new. Can just a clump of cells operate the way that I now do? Can just a clump operate at all?

I float around in this strange new environment—although I say “strange,” that really isn't it. Because if I call the environment strange simply because it's new, I'm calling it strange without having anything to really compare it to.

What makes something truly strange if it isn't any stranger than anything else?

So I guess all this is rather normal, instead. My neurons begin to branch out and spread. I am further developing the most important part of my head; I am developing my brain. During all of these complex processes, I am becoming the epitome of “sane.”

• • •

School starts back today.

Spring break is obviously never long enough for anybody, but especially not for me.

I get dressed slowly. It's 7 a.m.

Senioritis. It definitely exists. I used to think it didn't. I think I just assumed it was an addicting exaggeration that people could overcome if they really wanted to. And I guess I could overcome it if I wanted, too.

But I honestly don't.

I lug on my backpack and quietly slip out the front door. I know that acting normal at school is gonna be a pain, but I prepared a plan the other night to just pull the “I’m sick” card if anybody starts asking me anything.

That excuse usually works with everybody except Grandpa.

Luckily Grandpa doesn’t go to my school.

I pull my hoodie up over my head and step onto the bus. The day goes by relatively well, and Elisabeth and Aura don’t really ask me a whole lot.

Until the end of the day.

“Alaina, are you okay?” Aura asks me.

“Hmm?” I ask, and then pretend to suddenly catch on. “Oh, the hoodie. Sorry. Yeah, I’m just sick.”

I don’t take the hoodie down off of my head.

“Ah, dang it. I’m sorry,” she answers.

“It’s all good,” I sigh, giving off a tired look with closed eyes and a weak thumbs-up.

“I mean, it’s not *good*...but hopefully it will be soon. Drink some tea, girl. Get better,” Elisabeth chimes in.

She’s got a knack for telling it like it is. Sometimes it annoys the crap out of me, but most of the time I know it’s endearing.

“Will do,” I say, not looking at them.

We start walking down the hallway towards the doors to the parking lot. Then I remember the thing I wanted to ask them. But I know I still need to catch the bus, so I also have to hurry.

“Hey, guys,” I begin emphatically.

“Yeah?” they both say.

“Have either of y’all ever heard of the book *When Hate Killed Love*?”

They both hesitate for a few moments.

Then Aura speaks up, “Sounds like a song or album title...I’ve never heard of it.”

Elisabelle looks at her and agrees, “Yeah, I don’t think I’ve heard of it either.”

“Why? What is it about?” Aura asks.

I hesitate for a moment...then answer, “It’s just—a book I’m reading for English. It’s weird. I guess just look it up or something, I can’t even explain it.” I wait another minute, then we reach the doors and I ask, “Seriously? Neither of y’all have ever heard of it?”

“Yeah, no, we haven’t,” Elisabeth says. “But I’ll look it up. I wanna know about it now.”

“Okay,” I reply hesitantly.

“Go get some rest,” Aura says.

“Okay,” I say, smiling a little.

I manage to front sickness after school for that entire week, and each day I leave right after Biology.

On Friday though, I get a fake doctor’s note and stay home.

What else would I do on the day I know Doyle is coming back to school?

On Friday, it’s 11 p.m. and I slip quietly into bed.

My head...somehow I can’t feel my head...

I reach for that stupid book again. I know I have to stop reading it. But somehow I can’t:

The curtains in her room have been closed for a week, but as she turns out the light that night to try and go to sleep...a sliver of moonlight falls down onto her nightgown sleeve. She looks up, alarmed at the sudden light slipping in. She sees a tiny crack in the joining of the two curtains, and she slowly gets up to fix it. But she suddenly feels very dizzy.

She lays back in bed for a moment, then glances and looks down. She sees the moonlight now falling onto the belly of her nightgown. She contemplates...she hesitates...but then slowly pulls her nightgown up. She puts her hand into the shape of a cup, and places it over her bare stomach. Her eyes instinctively close, and her mind dives into a vast pool of thought:

What if it is there?

She hesitates.

Is it normal to wonder how big it is? Or what it looks like?

She stops herself for a moment, feeling silly.

Why am I even thinking about this. There could be absolutely nothing there at all.

But suddenly she can't stop it.

I wonder if it's a boy or girl? Or has it even developed that far yet?

She pauses again...and starts remembering the nursery rhymes she's heard her sisters singing to her nieces and nephews as they're going to sleep. She wonders if her parents would hear her. But she knows their room is on the other end of the house. So, maybe...if she's really quiet...

She opens her mouth very slowly, closes her eyes, and softly sings,

"Baby sleep, go to sleep

Life is hard but love grows deep

Life will be, long for you

There's so much to see...

There is good to learn and know

Though the darkness comes and goes

Watch the breeze sway the seas,

And the moonlight glow..."

She stops, slowly opening her eyes. She wipes away her tears, and looks out the window at the sky.

She whispers quietly, "I wonder what it's like to be called Mother."

She slips under the covers and falls asleep.

I awake with a start the next morning.

I slowly sit myself up...and see the book still in my hand.

CHAPTER IV

Tears come from the heart and not from the brain. – Leonardo Da Vinci

During week 4 as the embryo begins folding into a C-shape, the process of organogenesis (differentiation of specific tissues and major systems) begins. Organogenesis lasts from weeks 4-8, but at week 4, the heart starts pumping as the first functioning organ.⁶ Until now, the heart has been a motionless collection of muscle cells which the embryo now needs to be pumping in order to ongoingly spread the nutrients necessary for the embryo to flourish. Thus, on day 22, a single cell spontaneously contracts, setting off a chain reaction until all heart cells are beating in unison.⁷ Organogenesis continues through weeks 4-8 until, by week 8, the three germ layers (ectoderm, mesoderm, and endoderm) have fully differentiated into the beginnings of all major organ systems. The appearance of the embryo greatly changes with the formation of its brain, heart, liver, limbs, eyes, ears, and nose.⁸ The embryo grows from the size of a poppy seed at week 4 to that of a kidney bean at week 8.⁹

A muscle. A contraction. A beat. The heart.

Many would say there's not a more important part of a being than the heart. But I wouldn't know. Mine only started just a moment ago. One moment my brain is working to create the rest of my body, and the next my heart is beating. Now it seems nothing can

stop me. I have long begun this trek up the mountainside of life, and now I have a thinking brain, a beating heart, and slowly forming organs on my side.

What have I to fear?

There's something exhilarating about feeling my blood pumping throughout my being...it makes me feel more awake, more alive—it's altogether freeing. The warm pulse of this blood; the red, raw, ever-flowing flood...the nutrients it gives...are quite corroborative to the reality that I do truly live. So far, I have survived. And not only that—I have truly begun to thrive.

But even more deeply, what does this new heart mean? Now that it's ever so zestfully entered the scene...

I mean, it is obviously not possible for just a cluster like me to make sense of all these things...but if I could make sense of them, perhaps I'd wonder if my heart has some connection to my innermost being. There's a difference between the heart and the brain, you see...the brain does take command over the movements of all other things, but the heart actually moves; the heart pumps; the heart beats.

The heart spreads energy. And this energy is more than just a physical entity, because it evokes something entirely different—something that overwhelms: it provides a pathway leading straight into the depths of the emotional realm. I myself cannot yet understand such a realm as this, as I've only just started living out the basic biology of cardiac kinesiology. But if I could, I would wonder what this emotional realm entails. What new possibilities for myself would emotions possibly unveil?

If I could wonder about emotions, I would wonder—and I would've wondered last night, I believe. If I had been able to hear that quiet, dim voice, singing in the night so

deep. Humming such a small, timid, sweet, sleepy tune—maybe it was something about a “moon”? Or maybe it was about something called moonlight. I’m not so sure I heard it right. But if I could feel, I would say it felt as if it was singing to me—no one else was meant to hear, and no one else was meant to see.

Mother. That is what I would have heard it call itself, if I had yet the power to hear. I would have heard it said so softly—again, as if really only for my ears.

And if it’s not too assuming of me, then I truly do believe...that I am very physically close to this being. If I could, I would wonder where exactly this being is in relation to me. And if I could feel the constant movements going on...if I could only see...

But I can’t.

But if I could, then maybe I would know this being is the thing that’s currently all around me—to the point that my resting place is actually within this being that I cannot yet physically see. And if I could have such a thing as faith, I know I would choose to believe that this being called Mother is the being responsible for me.

But I cannot yet see or feel or wonder. I know that I cannot yet know. All I can honestly do right now is continue to develop and grow.

• • •

It’s been 4 weeks since it happened.

And now my two weeks are up.

But I’m still waiting...

I catch myself waiting all the time, actually. I wait for the school bus to arrive; I wait for my food to heat up in the microwave; I wait for the neighbor's dog to stop yapping so I can go to sleep; but most of all, I wait for it to come.

My period.

And believe me, in all 18 of my years being alive on this planet, I have never wanted or waited for my period to come. But I most certainly wait for it now, because it's gonna tell me what I need to know.

I've decided to give it one more week to grace me with its presence before coming to my conclusion.

Also, now that I've spent the entirety of last week feigning sickness, I know it's time to stop. My friends aren't that dumb, and the questions will start coming eventually.

So I decide to try a new tactic: asking them to start giving me rides home each day.

And have a believable reason for it too so they won't suspect.

They'll be my bodyguards and they won't even know it.

At school, I manage to make it through the whole day unnoticed. It's days like this that I truly do wonder (since it's kind of impossible not to) where Doyle is.

Does he hide from me?

No, that takes effort. He doesn't care enough.

"Alaina!!"

I almost jump out of my skin. Aura comes running.

"Hey!" I stammer, sounding more frightened than excited. But maybe that will help...with the lie I'm about to tell...

Elisabelle skips over to me from her desk, “You’re *alive!!* And you look so, so much *better!*” She smiles, then pauses, asking, “Do you *feel* better though?”

“I...um...” I stutter.

I find that it hard to speak actual words sometimes when I know whatever I’m trying to say is a lie.

“I’m guessin’ that’s a *YES* ya flubber butt,” Aura blurts, then laughs for a second before asking, “No—hey, do you actually feel better? Because she’s right, you do look it.”

I chuckle as genuinely as I possibly can, then say, “Yes. I am feeling 100%.” I give a smug smile.

Lies taste bitter in my mouth.

A few minutes later Biology starts and then ends.

Time is going by way, way too quick.

But at least it’s finally time to ask them.

“Hey,” I say quietly, “I’ve got something to ask y’all. It’s going to sound incredibly weird, but I need y’all to hear me out.”

They both stop rustling their homework papers and look at me.

“What is it?” Aura asks.

“I can’t...” I begin, but then stop with the sudden realization of how bad I want to just tell them the truth. I shake my head frustratedly, then continue, “I saw something...on the news the other night.” I try to overcompensate with slight sarcasm, “And you know me—just like Mom, always worried and frantic about stuff,” I pause again and resume my seriousness, looking down. “So I’m just a little bit...paranoid? That it could happen to

any of us?" I shrug, saying, "I mean, obviously this isn't the *most* sketchy high school, but better safe than *sorry*, right?!"

I look back up at them.

At first they both stare in confusion, but then Elisabethelle speaks.

"Ohhh..." she says very slowly. "I know what you're talking about. I mean, it does make sense. It was absolutely awful."

"What? What?" Aura persists.

Elisabethelle answers her in a low voice, "Last week, a girl at a nearby high school got assaulted."

They look at each other for a moment.

"Oh my goodness," Aura says, shocked. "I hadn't even heard about that. This happened at a nearby high school?"

"A couple counties away," Elisabethelle clarifies. "Still in Chatt though." She blows a bubble with her gum and then pops it, staring into space. "It makes me want to castrate that guy. Whoever he is."

"Right there with ya," Aura says flatly.

I can feel myself slipping into a trance again...

"So you're just feeling nervous now after hearing about it?" Aura asks me.

I snap myself out of it, answering, "I'm...um...yeah." I look down. "I know it's probably pathetic, but it just really scared me because you really never know these days. So...I was thinking maybe instead of taking the long walk to the bus stop after school every day like I always do—until I get a car—maybe I could get a ride home with y'all? Just for a little while..."

“Oh, girl, I *got* you,” Aura interrupts. “That is *not* a problem. I usually give Elisabethe a ride home anyway. Now it’ll just be a party.” She smiles.

Elisabelle adds, “Plus there’s only a few weeks left of school, so we can do this for the rest of the year!”

They both look at me excitedly, and I feel a sudden, sweeping rush of relief.

I will be safe now. I will be safe after school each day.

Aura tosses a grape into her mouth and then asks, “Have you mentioned any of this to Doyle?”

It’s hard to explain just how cold my blood runs whenever I hear that name.

But before my spirit can freeze over, I steel myself and reach over and grab a grape. I casually gulp it down as I answer, “Yeah. He’s super tied up after school every day though. His mandatory Speech and Debate meetings. So he can’t drive me.”

“Oh, okay,” Elisabethe says, and I see Aura understandingly nodding.

Did they actually believe me?

“Well yay! I can’t wait for all of us to drive together!” Aura says.

I guess they did.

“Yeah!” I say, giving off a quick smile.

Smiles are such masquerades.

And I’m really learning to just hate them.

• • •

The minutes, the hours, the days pass.

And nothing happens.

None of the cramps from a period. And none of the anything else.

It doesn't come.

But the tears do. A wave of weeping that I've never experienced in my entire life.

It was actually all fine until I read another part of that stupid, stupid book:

She stands still in the shower at first...but then kneels down as she feels her eyes burst...into the sudden fountain of tears she's locked away...tears she knows she's been storing up for this very particular day. The day she realizes that the possibility has now come true: she does indeed possess something inside her entirely new...entirely a creature of her own kind...and a thing with which her life is very much entwined.

She tries to be kind and positive in her thoughts...but the kindness doesn't come...and the positivity is replaced with something negative and numb.

She wants it gone. Not the numbness—the thing; she wants the thing gone. After all what has she done to deserve it? It wasn't her fault, and it never will be. All it's done so far is fill her heart up with fear and confusion.

But even worse, it reminds her almost exactly of him.

Oh, so very much of him. The smell of him...the sounds he made...the way he treated his love for her almost like a game.

At first she thought his behavior was supposed to be sweet, and that it was obviously her destiny for them to meet.

But now it is not so, because after what he did to her, she now absolutely knows:

She is going to have his child.

She turns off the water, wiping away some of her tears. She realizes she's never felt this much pain in all 18 of her years.

And her family. What to do about her family. There is absolutely no doubt: they, of all people in her life, will be the first ones to find out.

She thinks some more, then realizes she can still hide.

Her belly still looks normal.

Her family doesn't have to know anything yet, if she makes sure to be very careful.

She tries to think of ways to act like nothing new or different has happened. For one thing, she knows that she needs to be careful if anyone asks her any questions about him...

But she won't.

She can't anymore, now that she knows what she knows.

She desperately wishes she had more time...just a few more days and nights...

Before she can decide.

I drag myself out of bed in angry tears. I get on my computer and search.

The closest clinic I find online is over two hours away.

I rack my brain for believable excuses for taking Mom's car for that long without anybody going with me.

But I can't think of any.

I lay down, feeling defeated.

Until I suddenly realize it: I can take the car in secret.

• • •

The growing happens a little bit faster now as I progress throughout each week. The process of organogenesis, you see, is not an easy feat. My body has broken into its three main sections, and continues to differentiate. As my fleshy tissue makes new connections, I'm getting closer and closer to week 8. This week I'm growing some new things—including limbs, eyes, ears, and nose. It would be nice to one day grow wings...I would really like a nice pair of those.

If I could contemplate ideas yet, there's one idea I know I would think. It's kind of a strange idea to have, perhaps, as I sit while my systems interlink. It's this idea that even though I've come so much further as of now, I'm still the same me that I was when I started—the same me that nature first allowed. Is there anyone that would think any different?

I mean, I would think people are entitled to their own opinions, but is this really just an opinion? Or is it a scientific fact? Now, I know I'm not yet developed enough to debate about science and all of that. But if I were intelligent enough to contemplate, I really don't think there'd be much room for debate. I could attest from the very moment I existed that I existed, and from there I started to grow. And this is something that it truly doesn't take a great deal of brainpower to know.

Take for a moment the example of a carrot—if I myself could know right now what a carrot actually is. A carrot is not any more of a feather, just because it is not as developed. A carrot once spawned is a carrot forever, and it continues to be so until

eaten. One doesn't take a bite of a feather, but a carrot This is true for all carrots and feathers at all stages and seasons.

And so the same goes for me, I suppose—as I grow I am no less a human simply because at first I perhaps grow slower or take longer to look less like a mutant.

Anyways, each week I keep adding new features, and if I could I would probably boast. I now have a brain, heart, liver, limbs, eyes, ears, and nose. Maybe my brain is what I would boast about the most? The brain is of course the main part, and it drives all the other parts. But as I think about it, I realize that maybe I'd boast slightly more about the heart.

There's something about this heart as it pumps blood throughout me each day. It seems to care a little more attentively—even more attentively than the brain. It seems to be more presently with me, and if I could physically feel it I would. The pumping, the beating, the rushing—I would probably even say it feels good. To know something automatic is taking care of me, outside my own will or control. But it also seems to be the something that has a direct connection to my soul...

My soul. If I could think of people yet, my soul would make me think of her: Mother. In fact, of all the things and people I would think about...I would think of almost no person other...than Mother. And I would eventually start calling her mine—*my* Mother—as I would imagine she doesn't belong to another. I would start to ask a whole lot of questions, too, as I grow from poppy seed to kidney bean. The questions would come in an eager succession: “Can you tell me who I am, Mother? Or tell me what all of this means?”

But of course I can't yet ask questions. I can't wonder, listen, or speak. But if I could, I would look forward with excitement to the day my Mother's face I can see. I would look forward to growing each week, until I one day reach my developmental peak. I would wonder what lies ahead for me, and I would hope for it to be very extraordinary.

• • •

Family dinner. Yet again.

I'm starting to believe I'm way too much for my family. Sometimes, if I go quiet enough, they just ignore me.

It's a good thing right now though. I'm actually very grateful and I wish they'd *all* do that.

But of course Grandpa doesn't.

I somehow get out of doing the dishes tonight. Mom just jumps on them and won't let me help.

I meander off quietly.

I enter the living room and all the cousins are either jumping or crawling all over the furniture. Then I look over and see baby Milena sitting on the floor. She's watching her siblings again.

I pick her up and read her a book in the rocking chair.

Soon enough, she falls asleep.

Aunt Joan comes in and hauls her off to bed.

I slip quickly into the kitchen for some water, hoping Grandpa won't be in there too.

He's not.

I quickly pour a glass of water.

But as I'm walking back down the hallway towards the living room, he's suddenly right there.

He accidentally bumps into me and then stops.

"Oh, Alaina," he laughs. "I'm sorry."

I say a little too nervously, "It's okay. I am too."

I avoid his gaze, trying to slip by him in the narrow hallway.

But he just keeps looking at me without moving.

I can't...slip...past...

"How are you doing this evening, my dear?" he asks gently.

The concern on his face is both alarming and disarming.

It makes me want to tell him absolutely everything...

But I can't.

I lie to him instead.

"I'm doing well. Just tired from a long day," I say.

He pauses and asks, "Yeah? What did you do today?"

Still such a concerned look on his face...

I look away for a moment.

Suddenly he says, "Here, walk with me, I'm going to fix hot chocolate for the kids."

I reluctantly follow him back down the hallway.

As we enter the kitchen, I try to get a sentence out, "School just felt like it went on for longer than usual today. I have senioritis."

“Senioritis?!” he suddenly barks, spinning around towards me and almost spilling the milk out of the carton in his hand.

“Careful!” I blurt frightfully, then smile for a split-second, shutting my eyes and exhaling before explaining, “Yes. Senioritis. Have you never heard of it before?”

He hesitates before replying, “Well, I have, yes. But I thought it meant arthritis for seniors?”

He stares at me, purely baffled.

For a second I’m stammering, “Oh. Uh...no, see, that’s actually—” I laugh for a second before continuing, “That does seem like it would make sense. But no, senioritis is when you are a senior in either high school or college, and you’re really sick of being there.”

“Ohh,” he replies, nodding. “Well that makes more sense, now doesn’t it.” He pours the milk into a pot and turns on the stove. “So what’s got you so sick of being in school?” he asks.

I hesitate.

Other than Doyle? Nothing.

“I just, um...” I hesitate again. “I’m just ready to move on to college. You know? It’s just very exhausting being surrounded every day by all these people who don’t care about anything...”

He pauses, thinking, then says, “It is exhausting. And although high school was different in my day, there were definitely people who did not care as much as they should have.” He pauses again, then looks at me disappointedly, “You also probably already know this, but there are unfortunately people like that in college too.”

“Yes,” I begin, looking down. “There are people like that everywhere. There aren’t enough people who care...about things...”

“Or about other *people!*” he adds.

“Yeah...” I trail off, slipping back into my trance as I slowly realize that we’re both describing Doyle.

“But really the only think you can do is to be different from those people. Be the one who cares.” He pauses and looks at me, smiling, “And you already know all these things, Alaina. But naturally I have to tell you them anyway because I love you and because I am your obnoxious grandfather.”

He kisses me on the forehead and chuckles happily.

I feel a slow smile slipping across my face as I close my eyes for a moment.

But I open them again as the smile fades.

Of course that’s when he asks me: “So how is Doyle? How was his family vacation?”

I am honestly not sure why I didn’t prepare an answer to this question.

Obviously it would make sense that Grandpa of all people would ask it. So why hadn’t I prepared an answer?

I don’t know. That’s why.

I visibly hesitate, trying to either think up a lie or remember a fact that I can quickly switch up and regurgitate to him.

But instead I hear myself saying, “Yeah! Um...Doyle is...he’s great. You know what, he’s just doing so...so incredibly *good*,” I pause.

I try again to think of something of substance to throw in.

But my anger is already building up and I continue, almost slurring, “He’s been busy though! Very, *very* busy... *a lot* of extracurricular activities...”

“Oh?” Grandpa says, trying to read me for a moment. He asks perceptively, “Is that why he hasn’t been by to pick you up on any dates this week? Hasn’t he gotten back from vacation?”

Everything in me wants to just grab the giant wooden cutting board on the counter in front of me and slam it into the wall.

Instead I answer curtly, “Yeah. That’s why.”

I break out of my trance and manage to smile up at him right as we both hear the milk start boiling.

Suddenly he catches my eye.

I start panicking.

But then he speaks, ever so carefully, “I hope you know, Alaina...that you can tell me absolutely any little thing. Good or bad. And my love for you will never change one bit. You can be *sure* of that, you know...”

He keeps looking me in the eye.

And this time I can’t look away.

My smiles fades.

He gives me a gentle hug, then turns off the stove and pours in the cocoa powder.

He asks, “So what are your plans for this week? Do you have any fun things?”

I pause, clearing my throat, saying, “I have a party tonight, actually. I need to go check when my friends are coming to get me.”

“Oh! Tonight?” he asks, surprised.

I guess it is a little late...

I reply evenly, "Yeah. But it'll be fun!"

I smile a little loosely.

He agrees, chuckling, "Well it's definitely important to have fun at parties."

"Yes, but not *too* much fun, as they say," I tell him, smirking with a strange sarcasm that's unnatural even for me.

He looks at me for an extra second.

I'm not acting like myself, and we both know it.

He starts to smile again, pausing, and says, "I love you, Alaina."

My smile starts fading again, and I suddenly look down.

I reply a little nervously, "I love you too, Grandpa."

I help carry the hot chocolate to the table and then slip away into my room.

This party better blow my socks off.

I start getting dressed and I'm ready in 20 minutes. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror...

I look like a supermodel.

I almost start to think I look ridiculous, actually, as I tilt my head and watch the lamplight catch my shimmery eyeshadow.

Usually the idea of looking good makes me uncomfortable.

But I've decided that it doesn't tonight.

As I sit down to put on my shoes, the book falls off of my nightstand.

I walk over to put it back, but for a second it slightly opens.

I hesitate, but then I start reading:

*Soon she's staring at what looks like herself in the mirror—but really only partly.
Makeup has transformed her entire face...because she knows she's going to a
different place.*

Just for tonight, she can embrace her flesh and do what's not exactly right.

*Tonight, she will leave her conscience sitting lonely on the shelf, and she will go
out with reckless abandon and serve entirely and only herself.*

Tonight, she is going to diligently see her own desires through.

Tonight, she's going to try doing some things that she wouldn't normally do.

Tonight, she's going to blur in her mind the difference between good and evil,

*Because tonight, she is choosing to be the person who doesn't care about other
people.*

The doorbell rings. I slam the book shut and stare into space for a moment.

I stand up very slowly, and then drift out of my room. I can't really hear my own footsteps as I walk across the living room past my little cousins who stare up at me amazed and confused. I don't even hear myself exchange dialogue with Mom when she asks where I'm running off to and I tell her a party and she tells me "don't do anything I wouldn't do" and the front door shuts behind me and I'm stepping out into the night and getting into a car with friends I don't know why I call friends and the music is blasting and we're all obnoxiously laughing and then we're arriving at the house party and the lights are flashing and the alcohol is seeping into my bloodstream and I'm partying and I'm drinking...and I can't fully remember but I think I also ended up smoking something.

When I zone back in I'm dancing on a glass table in the middle of a dim-lit room, still sipping that spiked fruit tea...when suddenly some guy I've never met in my life starts dancing right up next to me.

At first when I turn around I can't really see...but then a flash of strobe light touches his face.

It's not Doyle and I knew it wouldn't be.

I'd already made sure he wasn't coming to this party.

But no matter how long I keep staring at him, he won't even stop dancing long enough to just look at me.

I slowly turn back around, then step off the table, almost falling down.

I stagger my way into another room as I realize that it's time to leave. And soon.

I start heading towards wherever my friends are, almost tripping over a couple making out on the floor.

I spot one friend from across the room and I walk over to her, unsteadily slurring, "Hey, listen, I gotta head out."

"Hm?" she asks, turning and looking at me blankly.

A frown slowly forms on her face.

I clear my throat and speak even louder over the music, "I said I've gotta go."

I jerk a thumb towards the back door.

But of course she pretends not to understand.

"Why? The party only..." she looks over at our other friend, "...just got started..."

They both exchange knowing glances and then slowly, evilly start laughing.

Is there some type of inside joke?

“Where’s the punchline?” I ask, drunk but still maintaining potent annoyance.
“I’m...not sure exactly what’s funny. If y’all can’t give me a ride home, I’ll just call a cab. But you gotta let me know. Right now.”

I stare at her as straightly as I can.

“No, see—*you*” she puts an index finger on my sternum. “*You* have got to learn how to *relax*. That’s what all of this is for,” she makes a grand, sweeping gesture, and then opens her mouth and adds, “And that guy you were dancing with. Why doesn’t he just take you home? He obviously wanted to...”

Slowly both start laughing.

I suddenly reach over and upend her plastic cup of alcohol into her face.

She freezes and stares at me.

I stare at her and then walk away.

• • •

I wake up with an enormous headache.

I start asking myself questions but all the answers are fuzzy so I stop. I slowly sit up and start sliding out of bed.

But when my feet touch the floor and I try to stand up I feel myself start blacking out.

Wonderful.

What a stupid, stupid party.

I sit for a moment, trying to recover my strength. But I know I need a painkiller.

Which is in the kitchen.

I almost stumble out of my room, holding onto the walls for support...

And suddenly I'm in the kitchen and both Dad and Grandpa turn and look at me.
They're holding power tools and a ladder.

I just sort of lean on the doorpost and ask them what they're doing.

"We're fixing a leak. You alright, honey?" Dad asks.

I start to answer, "Yeah, I'm...um..." then look down.

I'm still wearing my dress.

I say slowly, "There was a party. But I'm back now."

"You *just* got back?!" Grandpa asks.

"NO!" I say, faking laughter. "Last night. I just...partied into my sleep. A little."

Dad chuckles briefly, then carries the ladder and toolkit off down the hall.

Bye, Dad...

I wish he wouldn't go away and leave me here alone. With Grandpa.

Grandpa says, "Well good morning, Alaina. How was your party sleep?"

"It was fine. Thank you," I answer, suddenly trying to maneuver around him towards
the medicine cabinet...

He turns to let me past, and then asks, "And what about the party itself?"

"I...it wasn't..." I start, then rephrase, "It had its ups and downs. We'll say that."

I find the painkiller and pour several out of the bottle.

I quickly swallow them and start gulping down water from the sink.

For the longest time he just watches me. He doesn't even say anything. He only
watches very attentively.

And yet I know without a doubt that he is only watching because he cares.

And he cares because he is Grandpa.

I start hoping he'll just stop looking.
But he doesn't.
I start to feel my tears returning.
And suddenly, out of nowhere, I realize that today is the day.
Today is the day Grandpa will find out.
Because today is the day I realize that I've lied all I can lie.
I actually realized it last night when I was on my way home from the party.
I take one more sip of water, and then I finally stop moving.
I lean forward onto the sink, and then I start shaking and crying.
“Alaina,” Grandpa moves across the kitchen to me, gently placing a hand on my back.
At first I pull away, but then stop, and I lean back down onto the sink.
He tries again, and gently puts an arm around me.
He takes the longest time to speak, “I’m going to ask you some more questions now, Alaina. I just want you to be warned. And I also want you to know that I am greatly concerned about you. Your well-being and your safety. And that is the only reason I am asking you any of these questions. Alright?”
I feel myself trying to nod.
He pauses for another moment, and then quietly begins, “Are you feeling sick because of the party, Alaina?”
I start to realize...
Does he already know?
I slowly shake my head, “No...well—I mean...”

I hesitate.

He waits.

I hesitate some more, and then I just admit it: “I did get drunk at the party, Grandpa.”

“Okay,” he answers gently. “But is there any other reason you’ve been feeling sick lately? The other week at dinner, and then later on when you missed a whole day of school?”

His voice is so sweet that I honestly don’t even feel threatened anymore.

I manage to croak, “Yes.”

Then something clicks inside my brain.

He can’t possibly know about Doyle. There is literally no way he knows what Doyle did...

Or he definitely would have told me and then reported it to authorities.

Wait.

I start to realize.

That means he only knows I’m pregnant.

I start crying even harder, with an intense surge of sudden relief.

He only knows I’m pregnant. He doesn’t know what really happened.

My breathing starts to steady.

I can still hide this.

“Do you think that you could tell me what the reason is?” he persists. “The reason you’ve been feeling sick? If you want, I can say it so you don’t have to.”

He waits patiently.

“I think I can just tell you, Grandpa” I say, pausing as I gather the courage.

He continues waiting, looking at me.

The words slip out ever so quietly: “Grandpa, I am pregnant.”

I wait for him to stop touching me. To move away in disgust.

But he doesn’t.

He keeps a steady hand on my back.

When I dare to look up at him, he’s smiling.

“Wait,” I say. “You’re not ashamed of me?”

He replies gently, “Not at all, Alaina. I am happy for you.”

His smile suddenly grows wider, and he stoops down and lovingly hugs me.

I frantically pull away as I realize, “Grandpa, you have to promise me you won’t tell Mom or Dad.” I look right up at him. “Promise me.”

He looks down at me, his smile fading.

“I will not tell them,” he tells me. “But Alaina, *you* must.”

I look down as I imagine doing that...

Then he suddenly warns me, “Just know that they’ll probably know who the father is.”

He looks carefully into my eyes.

Instantly I look away.

“Yeah...” I hesitate a little too long before saying, “I will tell them soon.”

He looks at me, starting to smile again, “You promise me?”

He waits.

I hesitate, put on a fake smile, and then lie to him: “I promise.”

• • •

It's the very last day of high school today.

Words can't really describe the level of relief I feel...

So I'm actually not even gonna try to describe it.

I leave the house at 7 a.m. for the last time. I ride the school bus to that big ugly building for the last time. I walk down the hallways and sit in all seven of my pointlessly primitive, 45-minute classes for the last time...

Until finally, one million years later, we all hear the very last bell ring.

"Schoooooooooool's OUT. FOR. THE SUMMER!!" Aura is screaming in my ear.

I cringe for a moment but then realize she isn't done.

"Schoooooooooool's OUT. FOR. EVER!!!" she finishes.

"Oh, wow, that's...just...that was just *lovely*, my dear. I'm not even sure what to *do* with that it was so lovely..." I say.

She bows and Elisabeth and I both clap quietly.

We start meandering down the hallway along with the entire rest of the school.

Elisabeth makes us stop by the water fountain.

When she finishes drinking, she wipes her mouth and says, "Alaina."

"Mm," I answer.

"You'll never guess what I *didn't find on the internet this week*," she says.

We all stop moving and she's staring straight at me.

"Lemme guess," I say, "A civil and intelligent YouTube comment thread?"

She frowns. “Well, yeah. Didn’t find that either. But no—what I didn’t find was that book you told me about!”

“Wait,” I say, “Which book?”

“*When Hate Killed Love?*” she answers. “It doesn’t exist. I looked everywhere.”

For a second I just stare at her, then slowly look down at the floor.

I start feeling a little dizzy...

“Are you sure?” I ask her.

“Absolutely,” she says, looking at me concerned.

My gaze slowly shifts back up to them, and I look back and forth between their faces.

I slip back into my trance and start racking my brain for a logical explanation.

I’m pretty sure both of them say my name at least once, but I honestly don’t really hear it.

“What book...” I finally ask them, “What book were y’all last reading for English...”

They both hesitate before Elisabeth slowly answers, “...We were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I think.”

I look into her eyes suddenly, losing my ability to blink.

“I think that’s what all of the classes were reading,” she says. “Alaina, are you okay?”

She reaches over and puts a hand on my shoulder as I slowly turn away.

I suddenly sink heavily into myself, now alienated, as I come to the sudden realization:

The book was never real.

They both continue staring into my emotionless face as I unresponsively stand there.

And for a moment I’m so entranced that I don’t really have the capacity to care...

But then I hear it.

“Alaina,” he says from down the hall.

It’s a strange sound, my name is, whenever he’s the one that’s saying it.

He actually makes me dislike my name—to the point that I actually hate it.

As I stand there for a split-second frozen, I realize I should’ve been more careful. I should’ve known much better than to stay even a moment late after school.

I also thought I had made a real plan to use if this day ever came.

I thought I’d be able to *move* more if my eyes ever spotted his frame.

But I can’t.

But my eyes do.

They turn just enough to see him approaching.

Why is he smiling?

I steel myself so I won’t run away.

“There’s my girl,” he says, pretentiously grinning, flirtatiously smirking, torturously—*looking*.

As if he even has the *right* to look at me.

I stop myself from lunging at him, and then pour all my strength into feigning a smile.

He finally reaches us, and Elisabeth and Aura are both laughing, disturbingly captivated by his counterfeit charm.

I feel the angry sweat gathering.

They don’t know.

I remind myself.

They don’t. Know. ANYTHING. Do NOT be mad at them.

I continue smiling through clenched teeth.

“Hey,” I manage to shakily say.

I can’t even speak his name.

He cruises over to where we stand, and then looks at Aura and Elisabeth, “You ladies doing alright? Haven’t seen y’all in a while.”

“We’re fine,” Aura says, smiling at him.

They’re both excitedly watching us.

I hesitate, trying to maintain my fake grin.

He suddenly says, still smiling, “Y’all mind if I borrow Alaina for a minute?”

No.

“Oh—by *all* means,” Aura says, and they both start laughing again.

Please.

He takes my hand and starts walking.

This is how it always was with him.

He went places.

I just followed.

Like a naïve lamb being led to the slaughter.

We round the corner into a dark hallway where I’ve never seen anyone go...

And I stop him.

I stop moving.

I start twisting my wrist out of his hand.

“Just...stop,” I say under my breath. “Whatever you want to say, you can say it right here but I’m not going any further.”

He releases me.

I hold my wrist, backing up a couple feet.

He stands there looking at me for such a long time...

I feel my mouth closing into a thin, straight line.

I don't dare look to the left or the right.

Or call out to any of the people passing by...

I just sit there. Waiting for his words. His command.

Because I know whatever it is, it's going to be a command.

He tilts his head as he looks at me, then lets on a very slight smile.

Then he speaks.

“Aren't you gonna ask me how my family vacation was?”

I stare up at him.

Who is he? I do not know him...

I try to move farther away, but he pulls me in even closer and I freeze.

As he leans in to kiss me, I turn and he almost kisses my cheek...and then stops.

I flash a glance up into his black eyes...and his expression grows completely serious.

He says it again.

“Alaina...”

“*Don't* call me that! DON'T call me that,” I snap at him...then start spitting words out under my breath, “My *parents* gave me that name, and *you* don't get to speak it—not now, not ever, and if you *ever* speak it again, I'll—”

“You'll do what?” he interrupts, moving in even closer and pressing a single finger to my lips. “What will you do?”

His black eyes start goring holes into my body as he slowly, irreverently looks at it.

He continues, “See, I *thought*...that we already talked about this.”

I resist the urge to pull myself away.

“You remember what we talked about?” I hear him say.

I start breathing again...and my palms start sweating while his fingers dig into my wrists...

“The deal was: you don’t say anything to anybody...and then nobody gets hurt. Simple as that.”

He looks and sees some people passing close by and suddenly releases me.

I shake my wrists out again, quickly hiding them behind my back.

He watches me for a moment.

But then he just crosses his arms and stressfully rubs his temple with two fingers.

I could run, I start to think...

But then he speaks again.

“Now, you *know* why I pulled you aside here today.”

He opens his eyes and looks at me, sliding his hands into his pockets.

“And it wasn’t just to look at your beautiful face...”

He reaches over and strokes a lock of my hair and I jolt.

He pauses and looks at me, gains my full attention again first, and then speaks, “I pulled you aside because I have a *very* specific little question...about a very specific little something. And I think you know what that specific little something is. Don’t you, Alaina.”

My heart burns with anger as he speaks my name yet again.

But my fear suddenly skyrockets as he reaches over...and places a hand on my stomach.

I look down at his fingers...then slowly back up at him...

And he's staring straight into my eyes.

Without a smile.

"I know," he begins, "That you would never lie to me about a little something like that. Would you, Alaina?"

His eyes continue to penetrate.

I try to look away again, but can't.

Instead I hear myself faintly whisper, "No, Doyle."

"What's that?" he asks, tilting his head.

"No, sir," I say respectfully. "I would never lie to you."

He straightens up a bit, then smiles.

He sighs, briefly turns away, and then turns and faces me again.

He's waiting for an answer.

He starts staring into my soul.

His eyes look like black holes...

Suddenly I can't move and I can't breathe, because suddenly for the first time ever...I feel the urge to protect what's inside of me.

I freeze.

He continues staring.

I try to open my mouth, but not a single thing comes out.

He pauses and suddenly cocks his head again.

He stares for one more second before prompting, “So? What *is* the answer...to my specific little question?”

He starts moving very slowly towards me.

I start to back up...

“Do we have a new problem to deal with, or don’t we?”

I keep backing up until I bump into the concrete wall.

He continues moving towards me...and his voice drops into a whisper.

“Alaina, do you hear me speaking to you?”

My hands are starting to quiver.

They frantically feel around on a square foot of the cold concrete wall behind me.

But finally his face is just inches away...and my hands impulsively close over my belly.

He looks down at it.

And so do I.

Then we both look back up at each other at the same time.

He speaks, “Well. Thank you for being so honest.”

I open my mouth so reply, but he puts up a finger again for silence.

“*Shhh*—shh shh,” he says. “Alaina, do you know what we do when we have problems?”

I exhale...and start to nod very, very slowly.

The tears have already started coming.

“That is correct, Alaina,” he says.

I look into his eyes.

“We fix them.”

A tear rolls down my cheek, but I don’t dare make a single move.

“And I think you know exactly how this problem can be fixed.”

I start to feel the familiar pain of emotional abuse.

Elisa and Aura suddenly appear around the corner, and Doyle moves in for a kiss.

He pulls away and feigns a smile again. I am finally dismissed.

I start to back away slowly...

I wipe the tears slowly off me, pretending they’re sweet or romantic...

And I steadily, firmly turn my back, smiling again at my two best friends.

“And don’t keep me waiting,” I hear him call.

I turn around and see him still smiling.

“I’ll be checking in to see how it goes.”

I stare at him, my smile dissolving.

He disappears as we all go around the corner.

At home I lock myself in the bathroom and scrub the kiss off of my lips.

I scrub them so hard that when I look in the mirror, I watch as the blood starts to drip.

CHAPTER V

Seeing is not always believing. – Martin Luther King Jr.

At the beginning of week 9, the embryo is now classified as a fetus, which is the Latin phrase for “offspring.” The placenta, now fully developed, works to supply the baby with food, water, and oxygen from the mother’s bloodstream and filter out diseases and viruses. At the end of week 9, the fetus has visibly differentiated into either a male or a female according to its original genetic makeup from the moment of conception. The fetus is capable of relatively complex muscle movement such as waving the arms and sucking the thumb. Week 10 is usually when mothers get their first ultrasound scan. At this point in development, the fetus’s head constitutes about half of its total size.¹⁰ The majority of the fetus’s vital organs (kidneys, liver, brain, and lungs) are functioning, and fingernails, toenails, and hair are now visible.¹¹ At week 11, the bones are beginning to harden and although the mother cannot yet feel it, the fetus has begun kicking.¹² At week 12, the fetus’s eyes move closer together and the ears have also moved closer to their proper places on either side of the head.¹³ At the end of week 12, the fetus enters the second trimester and has now grown from the size of a grape at week 9 to that of a lime at week 12.¹⁴

When I jolt awake, the bed is soaked in sweat.

I know I had nightmares. I just can't remember what they were.

Which is good because I know he was in them.

For a moment I lay stiff as I remember...as it all comes flooding back to my mind that it was just yesterday when those evil fingers were clutching me so tightly—so *possessively*. As if he owns me...

But he doesn't.

I wish I could show him that he doesn't.

But I can't dare entertain a thought like that. There's no reasoning with a person like him. I've always known that he's undefeatable.

Or at least I've always told myself he is.

I stop thinking about him long enough to push myself up out of bed. I had planned to go out and job hunt today, but I'm still ridiculously afraid.

He said he's left on a trip for several weeks, but my fear never really goes away. If I went out anywhere in public, I honestly wouldn't feel safe.

I end up job hunting online.

Later in the day, I consciously realize the symptoms have started. Intense sweating from last night. Intense thirst as I gulp down at least four glasses of water every two hours.

Considerable weight gain as I catch a sudden glimpse of myself in the mirror and then check myself on the scale in the bathroom.

After I realize I've been staring at myself in the mirror for seven minutes straight, I suddenly look away.

I need to get out of the house.

It's 5 p.m., and there's some time left before the sun goes down.

I decide to go hike.

I quickly yet casually persuade Mom to let me borrow the car, and soon I'm standing at the base of the most beautiful mountain in all of Chattanooga.

In my opinion.

As I climb the mountain, I'm slower than I usually am.

And I keep losing my breath.

I actually have to stop several times, to the point where I feel kind of pathetic and very incredibly grateful nobody else is here to witness me.

When I finally reach the peak, my tiredness becomes a distant memory. My gaze flows out over the open air, and I inhale every scent in the breeze.

It's moments like this.

I sink down slowly and sit, absentmindedly clutching at pebbles. My eyes catch the horizon as the sun slowly descends and I realize I have less than an hour before the park closes.

My eyes slowly wander off the edge of the cliff in front of me as I look down and see the giant drop...

But no, I don't even think about jumping. This isn't one of those days.

But I do start to think about the cost...

How much is it going to cost me if I don't say something soon?

And then I have an even worse thought: *What if my silence is costing others, too?*

After all, I don't absolutely *know* that he hasn't been doing this to other girls. Maybe he's been doing this to multiple people, but only hurts them one at a time so he doesn't get caught.

Get caught...

I hesitate on a sudden thought, but then quickly let it go.

Yeah, right, I internally scoff. *As If I would ever have the guts to get him in trouble.*

But the idea takes root. It starts growing in my mind.

It's still there the next day.

And the next.

And it doesn't leave for the entire rest of the week.

And one night it suddenly happens. It hasn't happened in many months, but I knew it would because he kind of said it would.

I get a text from him.

The phone buzzes and I see the name appear, and I freeze.

Just four words—a simple question.

But I know exactly what it means.

“How did it go?”

At first I wait to respond, since talking to him literally makes me feel sick.

But soon it's been over forty-five minutes...

I pace my bedroom floor, sweating again.

Even if I were to lie to him, would he even believe me?

If it's done right, yes. But I need more time to figure it out. I rack my brain for ideas.

Another fifteen minutes pass. It's now been one hour.

He's going to get suspicious...

I know. But I still need more time. I just need...

And then I suddenly have it: I remember reading somewhere that it usually takes *time* to actually schedule an abortion. It has to be scheduled two or more days in advance, and isn't something that can be done immediately.

Besides, if I were to go get one, I would need a car.

And I don't always have the car.

Mom uses it a lot.

Sometimes.

A little...okay not at all really—but it doesn't matter because Doyle doesn't know that.

I pick up the phone and type up an answer: "It's scheduled to happen in one week. It takes several days to get something scheduled and spring is their busiest season."

I hit send before re-reading...

Why did I give myself only one week?

Because he would be suspicious if I'd given myself more.

But that means I only have one more week to figure out my final decision.

Yes. Yes it does.

His reply doesn't come for fifteen whole minutes.

Why, oh why did he wait?

"Have you tried other locations?"

I should've known he would be this overbearing about it.

I reply immediately: “Yes. This location is the only one close enough to home for Mom not to be suspicious. And I have to take her car to go. The car isn’t available until Wednesday of next week, and that’s the day I scheduled.”

He waits five minutes, then replies: “Sounds good. Don’t keep me waiting. I’m excited to hear about it when I get back from my trip.”

The business trip he said he’s on. He should be gone for several more weeks...

And suddenly I have an awful realization.

What if he isn’t planning on letting me go? What if that’s why he wants me to do this—not just to cover his tracks, but also to pave the way for a continued future with me...

I watch myself reply to him: “Yes, sir.”

I pause for a few seconds, staring into space.

I turn of my phone and suddenly see a streak of moonlight falling on my nightgown again.

I slide out of bed and slowly move to the window, cracking the curtain and looking out.

There has to be something I can do about this.

I reach behind me and drag a blanket down off the bed and bury myself, still looking out the window. I reach up and put a hand on the glass. It’s cooler outside than usual.

What if I just told on him.

The thought comes yet again out of nowhere, and I start trying to forget I even had it.

I also try to shut down the avalanche of internal processing that soon follows.

But I can’t.

Because it all makes way too much sense.

He is the one who hurt *me*. The odds are in *my* favor, not his.

But how would I get away with telling on him?

Well, because he's shown he doesn't care about hurting me, if I told on him I'd have to go all in. I'd have to tell somebody trustworthy the whole truth about what happened...

Besides, I also have hard evidence.

An old text conversation he thinks I deleted.

He was drunk at the time...which means he was acting more himself. He said a few things to me that he knows authorities wouldn't be too proud of. The conversation is on my computer...

I suddenly feel my arm going numb from lack of circulation and slowly take my hand down from the window.

This has to work. It's got to. I deserve justice...and so does he.

Without really thinking I suddenly brush over my stomach with my hand and then stop.

I slowly look down...

My hands start mechanically feeling as my mind starts frantically racing and my legs nervously start bending and lifting until I'm standing and quickly moving to the point of almost running out of my room and into the bathroom until suddenly I'm sitting there staring at my belly in the mirror.

I slowly lift my nightgown and turn my body to the side.

The baby bump.

Right now it's only slight...but I can definitely see it.

And before long, others will be able to see it, too.

I take one last look in the mirror and then walk out of the bathroom.

As I shut my bedroom door firmly behind me and glance back outside at the moon, I realize what I'm going to do.

I'm going to tell on Doyle, and it's going to have to be soon.

But there's something else I have to do first.

• • •

The next day, Grandpa's over for the first time in almost a week.

Wow. He really did give me some space.

I honestly do feel grateful.

But now I need his help.

I move quickly out of my room and look outside the back window. I spot him working in our vegetable garden, and I slip out of the house and walk up to him.

"Grandpa," I say, probably a little too urgently.

He looks up from his work.

"Alaina!" he says, smiling. He gets up and hugs me very delicately.

I open my mouth to speak, but he's having a hard time containing himself.

"How is my great grandbaby?" he whispers excitedly. "And how are *you?*!" he adds without whispering.

"It's all fine," I hear myself say quietly, and then dive in: "Grandpa, I need you to do something for me."

He pauses in sudden concern, replying, “I will do anything for you, Alaina. Anything that is right. What do you need me to do?”

I pause, then lower my voice and just say it: “Grandpa, I need to see an ultrasound.”

I look right at him and give a quick nod to make sure he fully heard me.

He definitely heard me.

“Oh, *Alaina!*” he booms excitedly. “I would be absolutely delighted!”

I wave my arms in the air frantically, “Grandpa—*shh!* Mom and Dad still don’t know yet!”

He calms down and looks me in the eye, still smiling as he says, “Sorry, I’ll quiet down.” He asks, “When would you like to go?”

I hesitate, realizing I hadn’t figured out a day yet.

I only have one week...

I look up at him and say, “In the next few days, as soon as I can get one scheduled.”

He answers, “Wonderful. I should be here every day the next couple weeks helping your mother around the yard, so you just let me know when you’re ready and I’ll pretend we’re going somewhere for fun.”

He smiles down at me.

I suddenly release the breath I’d apparently been holding, and then whisper faintly, “Thank you, Grandpa.”

He replies so gently, “You’re welcome, my dear.”

He starts asking how I’m doing with the symptoms and I restlessly answer his questions until finally slipping back into the house and into my room. I slowly shut the door behind me.

I sit down at the foot of my bed, I take a very deep and distressed breath, and I dial the number of the pregnancy center I found online last night.

Seven minutes later I'm hanging up the phone.

The ultrasound is scheduled for three days out.

• • •

It's hard to know just where to begin, because so very many things have already happened. I have nails on my fingers and toes that were not there before, and every day the hair on my head is growing more and more. Not only do I have a set of beautiful, functioning organs—I can also now begin to make relatively complex muscular movements. I can move my legs and I can suck my thumb, and I can wave my arms...although I can't yet drum...on the walls of my Mother's womb.

My Mother. If I could yet wonder, I would wonder where she is. I would wonder what she does. I would venture into a curious case of analysis. And things would grow especially curious, I'm sure, if my ears were just developed enough to hear the strange humdrum of a van rolling...its wheels rapidly spinning to take my Mother wherever it is that she is going. I would have heard and felt the car doors slowly shutting, too. I would have heard the technician and physician voices meet and greet and ever so gently sooth.

I feel my Mother lay down flat on her back, and I feel a strange warm sensation. What is that? I wish it was something that I already knew. Or I at least wish somebody could tell me about this warm and comforting ultrasound goo, because I would listen. But for now it just sits curious and comforting on top of my Mother's belly—a clear, warm, squishy, soothing, and therapeutic medical jelly.

The next part throws my relaxed floating movements off the most—it's the part where the technician takes the ultrasound wand and starts to very gently probe. There's a pressing on my lower back...and the pressure slides around as the technician starts to slowly track, and although there's no way I would be able to see it, the machine screen that was once black now turns on and displays an image of something—someone.

And that someone, little do I know, is myself.

I squirm around unknowingly, and would wonder, if I could, what's going on. And because I'm in the most comfortable of comfort zones, maybe I'd hope this ultrasound doesn't go on for too long.

I would also wonder if Mother's okay, and whether those are her own fingers pressing me. And I'd be so distracted by this thought that I'd miss the squishy elbow jabbing itself into my squishy knee. Whose elbow was that? I would wonder. Surely it couldn't belong to me. I'd move my arms and legs and head to check—but both my own elbows I'd feel and see.

I'd stop squirming around so hard, maybe, and wonder if I could solve this mystery. If I could yet remember, I'd remember just a few days back into my history—I'd remember feeling another figure floating right next to my own floating body. And even though my eyes don't work yet, I know that if they could, there definitely would've been something there to see.

I feel around one last time with both my arms before coming to my final conclusion.

I'd conclude at last that my searching was not some vain pursuit of some vivid illusion.

I'd conclude that this entire time I have grown, there's always been someone growing right there with me,

Because the specific thing I'd conclude is that what's next to me is my twin baby sibling.

• • •

I try locking my hazel eyes on the road and focusing on the humdrum resonance surging up through the body of the big blue van as we drive back home down the highway.

Thinking got a lot harder today.

Decision-making suddenly became an impossibility from the very moment I saw that grainy grayscale image on that tiny ultrasound screen.

"It's twins!" the technician had said—so excitedly, too. As if she knew that surely I was as excited as she was.

What is it with people? Don't they realize that some people's lives and opinions aren't useless carbon copies of their own? That lady didn't even know anything about me.

But thinking got harder as soon as she'd spoken up again, saying, "You've got two little girls in here."

I remember how white my face had gotten.

They are girls. They are both girls. Both of them.

Now that I've learned this new information—that I'm pregnant with twin girls—I can't pretend I don't know it. I can't turn a blind eye or deaf ear, now that I've seen and heard it.

When I'd heard about the twins I'd started crying.

It was the first time I'd cried in front of anyone since I first told Grandpa I was pregnant.

Then of course when the technician and Grandpa asked me what was wrong, I'd simply pretended my tears were joyful.

And for a while it seemed Grandpa believed me...

Until we left the center.

And since we left I've been completely silent.

But then my silence comes screeching to a halt as Grandpa's gentle voice suddenly addresses me, "Alaina."

"Hmm?" I answer, far too casually.

He says, "So...it's been twenty minutes and you haven't spoken, and I wanted to give you that time to do some thinking for yourself. But because we only have ten minutes left, there are a few things I must tell you before we get back home."

I close my mouth firmly, looking down.

He always knows what to say.

I give him a slight nod and he begins.

"Alaina," he says, "A very long time ago, there was a young man who met a young woman in college and fell in love with her. Not very far into their relationship, they let themselves get carried away and they ended up pregnant. They were both deathly

afraid—*deathly* afraid—of telling both of their parents. They went for *weeks* knowing they were pregnant, and they could not figure out a safe way to tell them.” He pauses as we take an exit off the interstate, then continues, “Finally one day they sat down together and had a conversation that changed their outlook on the entire thing, to the point that they were able to tell both their parents not long after. And their parents actually didn’t even judge them, but instead felt honored that their children were telling them the truth. They were also expressly excited that they were going to have *grandbabies!* Can you guess what that conversation between them was about, Alaina?”

I look over at his face for a second, then quickly shake my head.

“It was about their love for one another,” he explains. “They knew that they’d made a considerably big mistake by making a baby so early in their relationship, especially since they weren’t nearly as financially ready to support children as they knew they should’ve been. But another thing they knew was that they truly loved each other. They loved each other so much, in fact, that the young man was willing to put in the work that it would take to prepare himself financially for a baby, and the young woman was willing to commit herself to motherhood as young as she was and raise that baby with that young man. They got married within months of telling their parents about the whole thing, and their parents even helped pay a little for some of their expenses.”

Grandpa pauses for a moment as we take another turn.

He suddenly says emphatically, “Alaina, I know that if you and Doyle truly love each other, you can *easily* tell *both* your parents in a heartbeat!”

I start to realize what he’s saying...

He goes on, “You can both take that risk and fight for your relationship. And you can both fight together for your babies.”

He truly doesn't understand, I start to realize. He thinks that Doyle loves me...

But then his tone shifts as he grows a little more serious, “Alaina, of course you know that you’ve never been obligated to answer any of my questions, but I would humbly ask that you answer one question in particular. It’s a question I’ve been meaning to ask you for quite some time, and I am so sorry it’s taken me so long to ask it.”

I suddenly feel my stomach start churning as I realize what the question is going to be.

He’s going to ask me what’s going on with Doyle.

And I’m going to have to lie about it.

Because I can’t give Doyle away. Not yet. I did not prepare and I’m not ready.

I sit there, frozen in silence and 100% uncomfortable.

But then he opens his mouth and says it in the most strangely direct way possible:

“Alaina, do you and Doyle love each other?”

I open my mouth to answer, *Of course!*

But then I zone out for a second.

I zone out for so long, in fact, that by the time I zone back in, *surely* he knows the answer.

But as I start fighting my way back to reality, it all happens in a single split-second:

I feel myself summon the mental strength enough to shove all momentary fears and impulses into the tiniest corner of my mind in the most focused and pinpointed way that I ever have in my entire life until absolutely all truth that I would so naturally desire to

spew is now compartmentalized and silenced enough that spewing lies instead has become the only protocol left.

Then, of course, I lie to him.

Because lying has become something I do best.

Because, little do I realize, I have no self-respect.

Because I'm more scared now than I've ever been of what Doyle would do to me if I were to tell on him.

I open my mouth and speak, "Doyle loves me, Grandpa."

Lie.

"And I love him."

Lie again.

I look up at Grandpa and add, "We've just been having a lot of trouble getting up the courage to tell both our parents. That's all."

Lie again.

He shoots several quick, perceptive glances in my direction while still trying to watch the road.

As I feel his eyes watching me I finally regurgitate a few more sentences that are at least partially true: "Doyle's also been on a long business trip since summer started. He's coming back soon though, and we're going to figure things out then. We're both very scared. This is the scariest thing we've ever been through. But I know it's all going to be okay."

We pull into the driveway and I start to unbuckle.

But then I notice Grandpa just staring at me with such a troubled look in his eye I suddenly wonder if maybe one of my lies failed...

So I try taking the edge off.

I laugh lightheartedly, "Don't *worry* about me so much, Grandpa. I know it doesn't always seem like it, but I am capable of making adult decisions."

I give him a sideways smile, but he barely even smiles back.

I push it further, "I want to thank you for taking me to the ultrasound. And for paying for it. And for talking with me and telling me that beautiful story."

He nods very subtly, smiling cordially for just a moment.

"Was that story..." I begin, then stop. I gather my words as I feign a playful curiosity, "Was it about you? And Grandma?"

But he keeps looking at me with such a faraway look in his eye I almost have to break eye contact and look away. Then he slowly unbuckles his seatbelt and opens his door. He looks at me knowingly and says, "I'll let you take a wild guess on that one, my dear."

I watch as he gets out of the car and walks around to open my door for me. He's always done that for as long as I can remember.

Doyle would never do something like that...

I get out and he gives me a hug before we go inside.

Mom asks us about the outing she thinks we went on, and Grandpa starts spouting some made-up story. I smile for the duration of the short, hollow conversation and somehow make it through family dinner that night without getting outwardly emotional.

But after doing the dishes I slip into my room, and the tears start inevitably falling. For a moment I just stand there, the door closed tightly behind me, unsure at first what to do.

I only have two more days. Two days until he contacts me if I don't contact him first.

I rack my brain for solutions.

What angle could I possibly take with this?

Who do I need I tell?

And when?

Grandpa is the most likely person, because he's the person I trust the most. Besides, now that Grandpa is even *slightly* suspicious of Doyle, half of the work is already done for me.

But when should I tell him?

Well, Doyle is getting home from his trip in just over a week. The day after my birthday, actually.

Wonderful.

Wait...that means I could...I could get him to come over. For my birthday. And tell on him then.

But how to convince him to come?

Maybe he already wants to come. Again, maybe he's not actually finished with me, but wants more. Maybe that's been his plan all along. To test me and see if I'm weak enough to be the kind of woman he can still control.

And so far I've passed every test. I've *always* been weak. I've *always* been easily influenced by him.

I slowly sit down at the foot of my bed as I realize: *that needs to change.*

I hesitate.

And it can.

I hesitate again.

And it will.

I suddenly stand up and move to my computer. Within minutes I've found a plethora of high-resolution abortion receipt documents online. To the absolute best of my non-artistic ability, I edit one of them to make it look like it's mine.

I even add my signature on the dotted line.

I quickly, nervously print it out and hide it in my closet.

It won't even matter if Doyle thinks I'm lying, because now I have all the proof he needs.

Two days later, my one week is up and it's time to send him the text.

I don't even wait until the afternoon.

At 10 a.m. I craft my message very carefully. I make it sound as positive as possible without also sounding fake, and then hit send: "Hey Doyle, how is your trip going?" He always wanted me to ask him about himself. "I wanted to let you know that it went very well. Mom and Dad didn't find out. Everything is fine now."

His reply comes in three minutes.

"And Grandpa?"

I wait for just one minute, then answer: "Yes. Grandpa has no idea."

He waits five minutes and then says what I'd expected him to say:

"You have the receipt as well?"

I answer: “Yes. I can show it to you in person if you’d rather me not text it.”

He replies in a couple of minutes.

“Yes, I’d like that.”

Now’s my chance.

I frame the question as believably as possible, and then hit send: “Don’t you get back in one week? We could go out for my birthday if you want to. It’s the day after you get back.”

He answers after five minutes.

“Of course.”

I feel a momentary shiver running up my spine as I force myself to reply: “Okay, thank you.”

He answers flatly.

“You’re welcome. I’ll text you that day to let you know when I’m coming.”

I finally send the last text: “Okay.”

I put my phone down and contemplate for over an hour, motionless.

How am I actually going to do this?

• • •

The following week drags by. I spend each night staring at myself sideways in the mirror.

Luckily the bump hasn’t gotten much bigger.

Grandpa is around, but he’s giving me plenty of space. I walk by one morning, glance outside, and see him working in the garden again.

The day before Doyle's supposed to come, Aura and Elisabeth start text bombing me.

I suddenly remember it's probably because they're going to try planning something for my birthday.

They always do.

For a second, I start trying to think up excuses before realizing I can just use the date with Doyle as my excuse.

And buy myself more time.

There's no telling what will come of tomorrow night, but whatever will happen, I don't imagine I'll feel like celebrating my birthday afterwards.

Of course the minute I text them about the date with him, they both freak out.

If only they knew the truth.

At family dinner, I make sure everyone knows he's coming tomorrow so they won't be enormously surprised the next day.

The next day, I wake up with a start.

I try to prepare by interacting more than usual with the family. I clean the house with Mom, read a book in a chair next to Dad, and even help Mom and Grandpa outside in the yard.

I get a sudden text from him.

He says he'll be here at 7.

There's something in the air that doesn't feel quite right, and at first I can't figure out what it is.

But as soon as I'm all dressed up for the date and staring at myself in the mirror, I realize it: *I don't actually know if I can do this.*

It only starts to getting worse when I suddenly realize I've completely forgotten my script. I literally wrote out what I was going to say as soon as Doyle got here, and exactly how I was going to say it. And I'd practiced it a few times in the mirror and thought by now that I surely knew it.

But the more I stare at myself in the mirror, just stare and stare at that bright red lipstick, the more I start to feel that I might've substantially overdone it.

I might've overestimated myself.

Still lost in thought, I start hearing muffled, excited voices talking out in the family room foyer.

It takes me a moment to break out of my trance and vaguely begin to register...

The strangeness. Of hearing his voice in my house again.

Greeting my mother...

That same voice I still remember, barking abusive orders at me. Telling me untrue things about myself. Telling me I wasn't worth a thing without him. Whispering manipulations into my ear just before whispering to me that he loved me.

It's all becoming clear.

He *does* have control over me.

He always has, really.

I start to feel myself go numb as I hear the voices drifting farther into the house.

I think I faintly hear Mom calling me.

It's time to go, I tell myself.

I feel my legs mechanically stand me up.

I clutch the fake abortion receipt in hand, before looking down and slowly stuffing it into my purse.

Where is he going to take me? I briefly wonder.

Then I realize it doesn't really matter.

My hand is suddenly clutching the doorknob, and I try to stop myself from opening...

But I can feel the force of fear pulling me, and I drift out of my room into the hallway.

I hear my footsteps walking, and I see the side of his arm around the corner.

He's just standing there talking with Mom and Dad.

Where is Grandpa? I slowly start to wonder.

As I enter the room, the frozen version of me suddenly takes completely over.

I smile as he turns and hugs me intimately, and I look at Mom and Dad over his shoulder.

Rescue me, a piece of me seems to call out without saying any real words aloud.

Then suddenly I barely hear Mom's voice saying, "Oh, you two, please let me take a picture!"

Dad stands by watching, quietly, as we position ourselves and then sit there.

I look at Dad.

Does he not even see that something is incredibly wrong with his very own daughter?

My daughters, I faintly think to myself.

My fake smile still plastered on my face.

I keep staring ahead as Mom takes her sweet time.

Why won't she just pick up the pace?

My eyes start looking around for a second, realizing I need to find Grandpa.

Surely he was here just a moment ago.

But suddenly, just as my mind awakes and my thoughts are starting to thaw...

Doyle touches my stomach.

And we both stop moving.

But keep smiling.

At first it was an accident...

But then his hand slides...and positions itself back onto my abdomen.

He does it subtly enough that Mom and Dad won't notice, but that I will.

And I do.

And he knows it, too.

He slowly turns, plastic smile still plastered, and looks me right in the eye.

At first I can't bring myself to look at him, but then realize this looks very impolite.

So I turn and slowly look, and feel my smile starting to bend and break.

But his fake smile doesn't change.

He stares into my face.

There is now no more doubt or confusion.

He knows.

He knows that I have lied to him.

And he is going to make me pay for it.

Suddenly Mom's rushing us out the door, and Dad waves goodbye at us alongside her.

I still have that smile pasted onto my face, and we both wave goodbye in a blur.

We drift outside and the front door closes, and I look down and see his strong hand gripping me. His face is turned away and I can't see...

I suddenly try to backtrack and say, "Oh Doyle, one second, I think I forgot something..."

But his fingers dig so deep into my wrists that I realize I have only one option left.

And that option is to scream.

Which is exactly what I do.

And to be completely honest, it's not pretty.

Because the thing I finally scream is the truth.

"Help! Help!" I sob suddenly. "Mom! Dad!"

I scream out loud the rape, I scream out loud the pregnancy, and I scream out loud that I never wanted to tell anyone any of these things.

I'm kicking and screaming and thrashing and punching as he for some dumb reason tries to stuff me into his car.

Mom and Dad come rushing. And sure enough, Grandpa isn't far behind them.

Before Doyle can shut the door on me, Grandpa grabs him from behind.

I lay trembling in the car, closing my eyes, covering my ears, and rocking back and forth.

Moments later I feel arms lifting me and I once again start going ballistic.

My eyes fly open and it's only Mom, and I hold onto her for just a second.

Dad whips out his phone and calls the police, and they arrive in under 7 minutes.

Soon, one of the policemen leaves, hauling Doyle away, while the other two ask me an hour of questions.

I show them the old texts I have from Doyle and then carefully explain to them what happened.

I don't remember all their questions, but I do remember the family sitting there for all of it.

Later as Mom helps me into bed, Grandpa comes and gently whispers encouragement: "You can lay your head down to rest now, Alaina. He's never going to hurt you again."

CHAPTER VI

*All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development
accorded the individual. – Albert Einstein*

As the second trimester officially begins at week 13, the fetus is now strong and developed enough that it is far less at risk of a miscarriage. The head-to-body ratio of the fetus has decreased so that the head now constitutes one third rather than one half of the fetus's total size. The fetus now has unique fingerprints, fully functional kidneys and urinary tract, and a thin, fine layer of hair on its skin known as lanugo.¹⁵ During week 14, the fetus's arms and legs lengthen as its body becomes more proportional as compared to that of a grown human. Increased brain development now enables the fetus to grimace, frown, and squint.¹⁶ At week 15, the fetus's skin has begun developing but is still relatively transparent. The ears and eyes have become more recognizable and have moved closer to their proper positions on the head.¹⁷ By week 16, the fetus's proportions and appearance have grown even more similar to those of a fully developed baby. The circulatory system is now functioning as well, pumping approximately 25 quarts of blood per day.¹⁸ The fetus has begun practicing a wider range of intricate movements referred to as quickening, and in some cases, mothers can start to feel it. The movements include kicking the legs, grabbing the face, and feeling the walls of the uterus. These types of motion are demonstrations of proprioception, which is the

intake and awareness of one's surrounding environment.¹⁹ The fetus grows from the size of a peapod at week 13 to that of an avocado at week 16.²⁰

"Hello," I would say if I could yet speak. "And who is it that you are?"

Maybe my twin would at first hesitate, finding the sound of my voice slightly bizarre.

But then she would decide to give talking a try, and would open her mouth and speak words: "I'm your twin baby sister. Am I the only one who finds this situation absurd?"

"What's so absurd about it?" I'd ask, at first a little confused.

She'd answer in slight hesitation again, "Well, you can't see me and I can't see you. Yet we're both sitting here in this same small, comforting little cocoon. Yet without being able to see each other at all, we both know the reality of each other is true."

I would think for a moment about it, before making up my mind to reply: "I guess since I'm just now really meeting you, I haven't really thought about that before."

"Oh," I hear her say in quiet, timid, suppressed surprise.

But I would add a little excitedly, "I'd very much like to think about that more."

"You would?" she'd answer, sounding genuinely eager.

"Why, yes," I'd answer back cheerfully. "This situation is rather peculiar." Then I'd dive into a sudden stream of consciousness, explaining to my sister my thoughts: "It does make sense that we can't yet see, as our eyes don't yet seem to work. But I have two arms and two feet, you see, and I can feel your arms wave and your legs jerk. That's exactly what made me discover your presence and start feeling around to confirm."

“Really?” she’d say, astonished. “That make sense—I felt your arms and legs too. I even felt you by me the other day—I think I felt you maybe kick or somehow move.”

“That’s lovely!” I’d say excitedly at first, and then rush in to carefully add, “I’m sorry if my kicking and moving bothered you, but I’m just so very glad now. I’m glad we’ve found each other at last!”

“Yes!” she’d answer, enthusiastic. “So what should we do now?”

I’d say, “Well I would think we should get to know each other and this comfy cocoon place—maybe feel around?”

“I like that idea,” she’d answer, giving positive feedback.

“Okay,” I’d reply, excited. “I’ll feel this way, and you feel that.”

“I can’t use my nose yet either,” she’d say as she’d turn her back.

I’d almost start to laugh, and then if I could I would ask, “What do you mean by that?”

She’d hesitate to answer, “I just know I surely need this nose for something. And it’s not big enough for what we’re now doing—just feeling.”

I’d say, “You’re right. Feeling is only one thing.”

She’d ask, “And what about my ears? Do you have two ears of your own?”

“Why, yes!” I’d answer excitedly. “I *do* have a nice pair of those! They’re on the side of my head right here!” I’d gesture. “I think they’re what allows me to hear. But I don’t know yet.”

“Yeah,” she’d absentmindedly say, and then add, “I can’t find anything on this side, by the way.”

“Me either,” I’d agree disappointedly. “But maybe we’ll find something else in here one day.”

We’d turn back towards each other, and then suddenly I’d remember: “Sister! Do you know anything about Mother?”

“Mother?” she’d say, sounding almost overwhelmed. “What does that even mean?”

“Why, Sister, it’s the thing all around us—it’s a being I know, but can’t see.”

She’d ask, “How do you know it’s there for certain?”

I’d answer, “Well, I know I can’t know yet, but I think I might’ve actually heard it.”

“When?” she’d ask, very curious.

“I’ve heard it several times before,” I’d answer. “I’ve heard it singing, talking, and crying—more crying than it used to, lately.”

“Oh, Sister,” she’d answer me suddenly, “I know the thing you mean—she is both of our Mother, and I think we are her babies.”

I’d ask, “Oh? So this is something you already knew?”

She’d answer, “I think I’ve heard her talking before—I think I’ve heard her crying, too.”

“I’m so glad you know about her!” I’d say. “Do you have any idea if we’ll get to see her?”

“I most certainly hope so!” she’d answer. “I hope that’s something that occurs.”

I’d hesitate in thought before saying, “You know, if I could yet love, I’d love Mother. But Sister, what about you?”

She’d wait politely before answering, “Absolutely. If I could yet love, I know that I’d love Mother too.”

• • •

For almost a week I don't even get out of bed. I miss a job interview I'd set up two weeks ago. I don't even so much as look at my phone. I barely even have the energy to journal. I mostly resort to just staring out the window.

I don't fully remember what happened for the rest of my birthday weekend. I think Aura and Elisabeth tried texting and then calling me or something, and when I didn't answer they switched to calling Mom instead. Mom didn't tell them anything except that me and Doyle broke up, and that I just need some time alone.

Such a lovely rendition of that story, Mom.

I actually am very grateful she sugar-coated it. Goodness knows I don't have the strength to anymore.

I do remember Grandpa sitting in the rocking chair next to my bed a few different times, reading a book. He didn't say anything. He must've known I didn't want to talk. Or maybe he did say things and I just can't remember what they were.

I wish I'd listened to his advice a week ago and just told Mom and Dad with his help when Doyle wasn't even there. I wish I'd had the courage.

I look down slowly and run a finger over the bruises on my wrists.

A couple more days pass and I briefly remember Mom talking to me. She told me how proud she was of me standing up to Doyle and reminded me he's no longer a threat. I'd thanked her and she'd quietly left so I could continue to rest.

The baby bump is clearly visible now. I saw it in the mirror last night after my shower.

It would only make sense. There are two of them in there.

I felt them moving the other day...

I slowly slide back into bed and try shutting my eyes, but then they reopen as I suddenly realize something that has only ever been in my subconscious: *It's not even the fact that I'm pregnant that I don't want Aura and Elisabethelle to know. It's not even that Doyle hurt me...although that is something that I need more time on, too.*

It isn't either of those things.

I run a nervous hand over my belly and admit it to myself in silence.

It's that I don't want people to know I've thought about abortion.

I don't want Grandpa to know. I don't want Mom or Dad to know. I don't want Aunt Joan or Uncle Angus or any of the cousins to know.

I just want the decision to be entirely my own.

And it is.

Then why is it so difficult?

I feel the darker side of me try to reason with myself.

Don't be ridiculous. It's difficult because you've never made this type of decision before.

But then the better side of me keeps talking. Of course.

Then why does this type of decision feel different? It's because you know it has different consequences...

Stop.

I swallow a sleeping pill and shut down all further thought.

Two more weeks pass by me as I soak in indecision.

The war within me begins to create a deep, unbreakable division.
For two more weeks, I sustain and endure my blatant self-isolation.
The killing of a conscience tends to take time and militant implementation.
Self-centered bitterness starts rotting my bones as I feel my good-naturedness buffering...

Two weeks later and I realize, *they must think I'm still just recovering.*
But as I feel my morality decaying...I realize I don't need to recover anymore.
Because I actually decided a week ago behind my tightly closed bedroom door.
I checked online and the nearest Planned Parenthood is less than two hours away...
I scheduled an abortion one week ago.
My abortion is scheduled for today.

• • •

An hour later and my bag is packed.
Mom and Grandpa mentioned this morning they'd be gone somewhere for a few hours today.
But I know they'll be back soon.
Dad should be the only one home right now. But of course he's locked away in his room.
I open my door and slip out. I move quickly and quietly down the hall.
I spot Mom's keys hanging next to the back door, and her car's still sitting outside.
They must've taken Grandpa's car.
I quietly take Mom's keys.

But as I'm just starting to open the back door, Dad steps randomly out of his room.
Of course.

Of all moments for him to come out of his room, this is without a doubt the absolute worst.

"Hey sweetie," he says gently, then sees my hand on the doorknob. He asks with more concern in his voice than I've ever heard, "Alaina, where are you going?"

"I'm, um..." I hear myself stammer.

Why did I not think this thing through?

"I'm..." I hesitate again.

What do I say.

I try something relatively believable: "I'm going to see Aura and Elisabethelle."

"Oh, okay..." he begins, still confused. "Did you let Mom know you're taking her car?"

He's just standing there staring at me, his daughter.

He has no idea he's staring for the last time at his granddaughters, too.

Shut up.

I can feel the remaining fibers of my conscience stretching to join with one another to recover the network they once fully comprised.

"She knows, yeah," I say as casually as I can. But I'm holding my breath.

And even Dad is perceptive enough this time...to know that I'm lying.

"Alaina," he begins, "How about we wait until Mom gets back before you leave. I know she had a few things to tell you and to give you—"

I cut him off, “I really would like to wait, you know, but Aura and Elisabeth are kind of anxious to talk to me since it’s been several weeks...” I trail off as I look over and see Grandpa’s blue van pulling into the driveway.

No.

But Dad’s already noticed my facial expression changing...and he reaches over and gently shuts the door I started opening.

“Alaina, do you understand that we’ve all been given very legitimate reason to be incredibly concerned for you during this time?” he asks, looking down at me.

And I slowly look up at him, wondering where this side of him has been hiding all these years.

Grandpa and Mom slowly walk in, pausing as they see me and Dad standing there. I start to wonder why they look so surprised but then remember I haven’t had a conversation with anyone outside my room in two weeks.

Mom and Grandpa come in slowly, and Grandpa shuts the door.

I suddenly realize I can’t lie to all three of them at once, because Grandpa already knows slightly more.

I also know that no matter which lie I tell, Grandpa will see right through it. He knows there’s a reason I’ve been so silent, and it’s not because I’m still somehow scared of Doyle who will literally never touch me again.

For a second, I awkwardly stand there, realizing my plan is now foiled.

Unless...I just tell all three of them the truth. And then leave no matter how they react.

I suddenly look at Mom.

I just blurt it: “Mom, I am going to get an abortion. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. It’s a decision I wanted to make on my own, but I need your car. I’ll drive straight there and then straight back, and I don’t need anyone to go with me.”

I just stand there after shutting my mouth.

I blink a few times, realizing what I just said.

In two seconds Mom reacts, “Oh, honey. You don’t ever have to tell me anything if it makes you feel uncomfortable. What makes you think I wouldn’t want to drive you there myself?”

I stand there, entirely shocked.

Is she not upset that I’m going to do this?

I voice my question: “You’re not upset with me?”

“Alaina,” she says. “Of *course* not.”

In my peripherals I see Dad suddenly look away.

What was that?

“Dad?” I ask, looking at him.

Mom takes my shoulders and tries to get my attention again. I’m suddenly caught up in her eyes staring into mine as she speaks, “Alaina, you know that you’re free to do whatever you want, right? We operate under freedom in this house. If you feel even the *slightest* need to go through with this, none of us would even *want* to stand in your way.” She gently releases my shoulders and looks briefly over at Dad and Grandpa, saying, “Right, y’all?”

I look at them.

Dad is still avoiding my eyes...

Mom turns back to me, about to continue, when suddenly Grandpa speaks.

“Rebecca,” he says, and Mom stops moving. “I think you know exactly where I stand and would want to stand, if Alaina is seriously considering this decision. And I would much appreciate it if you would not speak for your father on this particular issue when he can most certainly speak for himself.”

She slowly turns and looks up at him.

Dad looks at him slowly, too as a hush falls over the room.

He continues. “Alaina,” I look up at him, frozen. “You must forgive me. I didn’t know this was something you were considering. If I’d known sooner, this would not have been the first conversation we would have had about it.”

“Daddy,” Mom interrupts him, and he slowly turns and stares at her. “What if Alaina does not want to have a conversation about it?”

“The conversation has already begun,” he says to her, ignoring her disrespect before trying to continue.

But she interrupts again.

“Alaina,” she says, looking straight into my eyes. “You do *not* have to feel pressured to listen to a *single* word Grandpa says. Okay?”

I start confusedly nodding, but something doesn’t feel right...

That’s your own father you’re talking about, Mom. He’s standing right beside you.

She continues, “All you have to do is focus on what’s best for *you*. Okay?”

Grandpa chimes in measuredly: “And do you think an abortion would be what’s best for her, Rebecca?”

He stares very carefully into her eyes.

“I think the point is that I don’t get to *say* what’s best for her, Daddy,” she snaps at him.

I feel the tension starting to rise...

And suddenly I start to feel sick.

I should just take the car and go. I’m going to be late if I don’t...

“Alaina,” Mom takes me by the shoulders again. “Just say the word and we can go. Me and Dad can even help pay for it if you need us to.”

I start to look over at Dad again. He still won’t look into my eyes.

What’s going on...

“No, Mom, it’s fine. It’s probably going to be extra expensive...” I begin, and then stop, then look up and see Grandpa’s face.

We both look at each other and realize why I just brought up the price: *twins*.

“Are you going to tell them, or should I?” he asks me, staring more intently than I can stand.

“I...” I start to say it, but suddenly I can’t.

Because I realize that if I say it, it might completely ruin my plan.

“I have...” I try again, but the words don’t come.

There’s another 30 seconds of silence.

Until Grandpa just says it for me: “Alaina has twins.”

He looks at Mom.

Mom pauses for a solid seven seconds, open-mouthed, and then steamrolls in spite of her shock, “Alaina, it doesn’t cost any extra to have an abortion for twins. You have absolutely nothing to fear.”

She pauses for a moment, and I notice Grandpa still looking at her from the side.

She suddenly changes the subject, “I keep thinking back to all those times you’ve talked about your career, Alaina. Your dreams, your passions, everything you’ve planned to pursue in college—it would all be *gone*.” She looks at me, her face almost contorted with concern, and then adds on one last thing: “And you are so *young*, Alaina. Too young to have to carry such a burden.”

She finally stops and just stares at me. She gently starts rubbing my arm.

The whole time Dad remains silent, and even Grandpa hasn’t said a single word.

But then Grandpa does say something. He turns and speaks quietly to Mom, “Rebecca, I think the time has come now. I think Alaina deserves to know.”

For a second she refuses to look at him, and it takes her a moment to speak.

But even when she opens her mouth, I can hear her voice starting to shake: “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Daddy. Alaina deserves to make her own decision.”

“And maybe this will help her make her decision,” he cuts in. “Maybe you can help her fully understand...the ramifications...”

“Daddy, stop,” she interrupts him in anger, still refusing to look at him.

But suddenly I’m the one trying to catch her eye.

Wait.

“Mom...” I hear myself say.

I say her name a few more times.

But now she won’t look at me either.

I pause as I suddenly realize...

I think I know what’s going on here.

“I think she may already know, Rebecca,” Grandpa says. “But she should probably still hear it from you.”

Dad stands frozen in the corner of the room.

And for a moment I vaguely feel the babies kicking in my womb.

I look from Grandpa to Mom to Dad, and experience the greatest feeling of shock that I have ever had.

I look at my mother and start speaking, a nauseous feeling crawling over my skin.

“You had an abortion, didn’t you...” I hesitate. “You had an abortion...and it was twins.”

I look right at her for a moment, then slowly look away.

I see a single tear slowly falling from her face.

And then I feel myself falling into another delicate haze.

I could have been raised...with two other siblings.

There used to be two other people...growing in my mother’s womb...

I faintly hear Mom’s single tear spiral into a fit of hysterical weeping.

The haziness in my vision slowly blurs her out of view. I hear muffled voices as Dad and Grandpa pick her up and carry her carefully into her room.

I stare out the window at Mom’s car still parked, and for a second my decision doesn’t come through...

But as I slowly look down at the keys still in my hand, I realize exactly what I’m going to do.

CHAPTER VII

"The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it." – Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood

At week 17, the fetus's rate of growth slightly slows, although it is still growing incredibly fast. Quickening can now be felt more clearly by the mother. The fetus's skin is covered with a greasy material known as vernix caseosa which has the consistency of cheese, is made up of dead epidermal cells and a fatty secretion from fetal sebaceous glands, and is responsible for protecting the fetus's delicate skin from abrasions, chapping, and hardening from exposure to the amniotic fluid.²¹ The fetus has started gaining significant weight as fat begins filling out the fetus's presently thin features. The umbilical cord also thickens and becomes stronger.²² The fetus has now reached the size of a turnip.²³

I've been sleeping for so very long, but I suddenly wake to that familiar humdrum movement—the same movement I felt a few weeks ago.

I suddenly feel around for Sister and she wakes up too, and for a second we feel the movement start to slow.

"Where do you think we're going?" she asks me.

"I don't really know," I say. "I guess we'll have to see."

Eventually, the humdrum movement wavers until it finally comes to a complete stop.

Sister says, “I wish our ears worked already so we could hear—that way we could maybe eavesdrop.”

“You’re right, Sister!” I agree with her. “That would actually be very fun, I think.”

Suddenly we feel Mother walking and then pausing, and then we feel a sudden, slow sink.

“Where is Mother? What is she doing?” Sister wonders.

For a moment we both sit still and ponder.

“I think I might know where she is,” I say. “There’s was a strange probe thing poking my back the other day—or week. Mother was getting something called an ultrasound...but I think that feeling was just slightly more unique. This feels a little different. But maybe the ultrasound hasn’t started yet.”

“Okay,” I hear Sister happily say.

We both wait.

She says suddenly, “Do you think this could be the day?”

“What day?” I answer in an excited stutter.

She says, “Why, the day we finally get to meet Mother!”

“Well, goodness,” I start to answer. “I hadn’t even thought about that before!”

The idea of finally getting to see the Mother I so dearly adore.

“But wouldn’t we need to get out of here first?” Sister asks.

“Out of where?” I answer.

She says, “Out of this thing we’re in—this strange, squishy water sac!”

But suddenly we feel things starting to shift, and the force of gravity causes us to slowly drift.

I can feel Mother is now laying down, and we both continue floating around.

I gently squish into Sister clumsily and we both laugh, because we find it kind of funny.

Suddenly, a thin streak of light is visible, although we obviously aren't able to yet see this. But then just a few moments later, something sharp pokes the water sac and bursts it!

At first I'm afraid as we both jump and move and feel the surrounding water slowly draining. But in just a moment my calmness resumes, and I can feel my fear slowly fading.

"Did you feel what just happened, Sister?" I ask as my excitement heightens.

"They busted the water," she slowly answers.

Her voice sounds extremely frightened.

"Sister, what's wrong?" I ask with urgency. "Are you no longer excited to see Mother?"

But as she tries to answer, she's yanked sideways and her face is suddenly smothered.

"Sister!" I yell out for her as she starts to suppress an agonized scream.

I suddenly hear my own voice screaming as I suddenly glimpse a bright red bloodstream.

"What's hurting you! What's hurting you!" I frantically wail.

"It's grabbing me! Sister, help me!" she's screams out, too small and helpless to fight.

"What is it!" I shriek in horror—and then I suddenly see it in the light.

A huge pair of long, sharp metal claws—grabbing my sister by the legs.

I scream in horror as it dismembers her body into a flow of lifeless red.

“Sister! Sister! Sister!” I sob, and suddenly realize what will happen next.

“They’re coming for me too! Mother! Help me!”

The claws slowly crush my baby Sister’s head.

I start writhing in monumental horror, trying to scramble and get away.

But soon Sister’s body is cleared out, and the claws come for me without delay.

I kick and slash and scream and thrash, but the claws are much too strong.

As I wail in the witness of my own mutilation, I faintly remember my Mother’s song:

Baby sleep, go to sleep

Life is hard but love grows deep

Life will be, long for you

There’s so much to see...

There is good to learn and know

Though the darkness comes and goes

Watch the breeze sway the seas,

And the moonlight glow...

As I feel the claws grab me and start to crush my tiny skull,

I wonder in horrified confusion what life even means at all

If all it truly does is start and then come to a violent end;

If I don’t even get to see Mother before the black curtain of death descends.

CHAPTER VII

I do not consider myself a by-product of conception, a clump of tissue, or any other of the titles given to a child in the womb. I do not consider any person conceived to be any of those things. – Gianna Jessen, abortion survivor

At week 18, the baby continues to gain weight and the mother continues to feel the movements of the baby. Although it is more common for babies to begin opening and closing their eyes at 24 weeks, 4D ultrasound technology has recorded many instances of this occurring at 18 weeks. Although the eyes do not work, the baby is practicing the blinking reflex.²⁴ At 18 weeks, the fallopian tubes and uteri in female babies are already in their correct positions. At week 20, eyebrows and head hair are visible, and a substance known as brown fat forms in several areas of the baby's body for heat production. At week 22, babies may survive outside the womb with intensive care if born prematurely.²⁵ By week 24, all 5 of the baby's senses begin developing faster. The sense of sight is probably the least useful of the senses, considering that any light source shone towards the baby can only dimly penetrate the combined walls of the mother's belly and uterus. The sense of touch has developed enough that by now the baby will react if prodded from outside the womb. The senses of taste and smell develop to the point that babies begin to taste and smell their mother's cooking. Perhaps the most developed of the 5 senses is hearing, as babies are

capable of hearing low-register conversations, loud noises, and music. The bond between mother and baby is greatly strengthened during this time as the baby starts developing a recognition of its mother's voice.²⁶ The baby grows from the size of a turnip at week 17 to that of an ear of corn at week 24.²⁷

I hang Mom's keys back up on the hanger after getting up off of the floor.

I go quietly into my room and gently shut the door.

I take a deep breath and call Planned Parenthood. I calmly cancel my appointment.

Grandpa knocks carefully yet frantically on my door and I very calmly open it.

"Alaina, are you alright?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer, and realize that it's actually completely true.

I haven't felt this relieved in my entire life.

"Grandpa," I begin.

"Yes?" he asks, concern all over his face.

I look at him, "You were right, Grandpa." I see him pause. "About everything."

"What are you..." he starts to ask me, but then looks down and sees me holding the photos.

He looks back up at me.

"You found them," he says.

“Yes,” I answer. “I had a feeling you’d secretly taken them home. After the technician asked if I wanted them and I said no. I figured you also kept them with you in case I ever wanted to see, so I went snooping and there they were in your jacket pocket.”

I look down at them again. The ultrasound shots from our trip from almost two months ago. Grandpa had paid for a 4D ultrasound for me. The nicest kind. He’d wanted me to be able to see as much as I could possibly see.

“The most frustrating truth at the time was that the babies looked more like Doyle than like me,” I tell him slowly.

He waits, still not sure why I’m holding the photos or what I’m going to do.

“But the truth is, that logically shouldn’t have frustrated me, because I didn’t even care about the babies. What did it matter whether they looked more like me if I was just going to abort them anyway?” I say, shrugging, still staring at the pictures.

The can feel the tears start coming, but I don’t stop.

And Grandpa just keeps watching.

“I didn’t want Doyle’s footprint on my life, and I thought that having these babies would do that,” I start shaking my head as my eyes fill up with tears. “But nothing could be further from reality. The only thing that would leave Doyle’s footprint on my life...is me doing even worse to them than what Doyle did to me. Which is killing.”

I finally stare up at Grandpa, and for five minutes we both just sit there crying.

Dad finally bolts into the room, still having no idea what’s going on.

“Where’s Mom?” I ask Dad as I keep on looking at Grandpa.

“She’s in her room resting. Why, Aliana? What’s wrong?” I hear him breathlessly ask.

“Dad,” I slowly turn to him. “You can tell Mom. I want it to come from you. Tell her I canceled my appointment, and y’all are getting your first two grandbabies.”

He pauses and looks at me for a moment, as if making sure I’m not lying.

But then he puts a hand over his mouth, saying, “Oh, honey,” just before he starts silently crying.

In all my life, I’ve never seen Dad cry.

A moment later, we’re all hugging and crying, and celebrating this new life.

Dad asks me, “What are you going to do tonight?”

“I want to make Mom some dinner, and then I think I just need some good sleep,” I say.

Grandpa chimes in, “I was going to make dinner, actually. May I help you?”

“Yeah,” I answer.

“I think we need some groceries first,” he says. “I’ll go pick them up.”

“I’ll go with you,” I say, smiling. “Fresh air would be nice.”

A couple hours later and the dinner is prepared. Dad comes out of his bedroom and whispers, “I think she may need a little more time.”

I get done stuffing some bread in my mouth and tell him under my breath, “I was going to eat with y’all and then bring food in and talk to her.”

Dad looks at me, then at Grandpa. Grandpa smiles gently and nods.

We all sit down and eat for a few minutes.

I slowly drift into Mom’s room with a tray, slowly opening the door.

She’s laying in bed motionless, sleeping. I sit on the side of her bed and gently wake her up.

She wakes up suddenly and stares at me, aghast.

“Hey, Mom,” I say very softly. “I brought some food just for you.”

I don’t look at her yet. Just so she won’t feel threatened.

“Alaina,” she starts to speak, and then stops.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I offer. “You don’t have to say a thing. I just want to sit with you and tell you some things while you eat.”

She sits up in bed very slowly, but doesn’t eat. She just sits there staring nervously at me.

“Mom, you need to know that you are forgiven,” I begin. She looks away for a moment, but still listens. “I’m perfectly serious, Mom. You need to understand that I don’t hold any of your mistakes against you. Not even the one I learned about tonight.”

I look down, then slowly continue.

“Yes,” I tell her. “It hurts me. The fact that I know I once had two siblings.”

I can see her slowly start crying.

“But it also hurts me to see you hiding when you don’t have to.”

I wait, and she just leans her head back onto the headboard and stares up at the ceiling.

“And you’ve been hiding for so *long*, Mom,” I go on. “I used to wonder why you and Aunt Joan would get into so many arguments about kids versus career. But I don’t wonder why anymore. It’s because you felt guilty over what you did, and you felt compelled to justify it to yourself probably more than anyone else. But I’m here to tell you that there’s no need to justify it anymore. There’s no need to justify it to me, there’s no need to justify it to Dad, there’s no need to justify it to Grandpa, and there’s most

certainly no need to justify it to yourself. We all forgive you, Mom. The only thing you have to do now is try to forgive yourself.”

She’s looking at me now, still crying, and I wait before saying anything else.

“As Dad told you,” I start to say, “I canceled my abortion.”

She nods her head yes just slightly. Her tears continue flowing.

“After learning what I learned tonight, I realized we could all start over,” I pause, trying to word it just right. “These twins could be the very thing our family needs.”

Then I feel myself crying too as I suddenly look right at her.

“I love you, Mom,” I say. “And my babies are going to love you, too.”

I reach over and give her a long hug, and we’re both crying for several minutes straight.

“Now you eat this food, Mom,” I say, laughing, and then stand up and walk over to the door.

“Alaina,” I hear her say urgently behind me, and I turn around and face her once more...

She looks at me and suddenly speaks to me as her equal—in a way she’s never, ever done before.

“I cannot express how proud of you I am.”

• • •

The next day I realize I’m way overdue to tell Aura and Elisabeth.

I text them and invite them over. They’re ecstatic.

When they get there I'm wrapped up in a huge blanket, my belly hidden. They snuggle up in blankets too and we all fit ourselves onto my bed. It takes me a minute to get the words out, but I tell them pretty much all of the story. They both listen very carefully.

But as soon as I show them my baby bump they go absolutely crazy.

And I do mean crazy.

They start asking me all kinds of questions and speaking sweet words and making faces at my bare belly.

"Guys," I say. "The babies can't see anything you're doing."

But that doesn't really seem to stop them. I watch as they start to look back up at me and ask me an even longer list of questions.

But eventually things wind down.

"Where is Doyle now?" Elisabeth asks very quietly.

"Prison. He was successfully convicted," I say, then feel myself smiling slowly.

They both smile slowly as well, then Aura starts tearing up. They both reach for me and then we're all wrapped up in one big hug. They ask if they can come over and visit every week for the rest of the summer. I tell them absolutely yes.

"Guys," I start to remind them. "I can also come over to y'all..."

"Nope!" Aura says quickly, stopping me. "You are completely and 100% helpless, and we are going to treat you as such. Okay?"

"I...um..." I hesitate, then just give up and say okay.

They both laugh and pat me jokingly on the back.

The next several weeks consist of me trying to slowly piece my life back together. I set up interviews and get a job once I know Mom will let me take the car five days a week. Obviously I might have to quit the job soon, but I know it's better to have one while I can. Especially since I've already spent so much of my summer sitting around being technically a little lazy.

Elisabelle and Aura start bringing me food so often, I finally try telling them to stop. Of course it doesn't work, but it was definitely worth a try.

And it does give me an idea.

"Guys," I say one night, and they both turn and look at me. "Next time, bring ingredients, not food. Let's start cooking."

They both give me fake evil smiles.

At night I start singing the babies lullabies, since I read something in the baby book Grandpa gave me last week that babies can recognize songs they've been hearing and even jump in time to them by 32 weeks. I know they have a ways to go until then, but maybe I can help give them some of their very first subconscious memories.

I turn on the sound machine so nobody will hear me gently humming. I guess I'm still slightly too self-conscious to not care about that sort of thing.

Eventually one night I realize the babies are just a little bit too heavy, and it's time to start laying on my side now.

Oh well.

I roll onto my side and keep thinking.

I wonder all the ways my life is going to change...

Some would think that's a negative thought, but I know it doesn't have to be. The only potentially negative thought I've had would be the thought of losing my career. If I were going to college this fall, I would only have a month left of summer...

As of now though, I haven't signed up for any classes and I honestly wasn't going to.

But naturally I still think about it.

I try to imagine some way of doing both—going to school *and* being a mother.

But the more I think about it, the less possible it seems. No one would be willing to babysit that often for me. I would definitely need a long-term babysitter.

I know I can't afford that, and neither can Mom and Dad. Which is fine.

I fall into a deep sleep, thinking the issue surely won't cross my mind again.

But it does.

The next day I actually can't *stop* thinking about it.

I sit there at my desk, reading. Then I feel the babies starting to kick.

And suddenly I can't really help it.

I burst into tears.

Several minutes pass and I still can't stop crying.

Grandpa walks in, absentminded, carrying a big plate of food.

"Oh, Alaina!" he says, seeing me. "What's wrong?"

He bends down quickly and takes my hand.

I blow my nose with a hanky and look at him for a second.

"It's just that," I try not to sound so pathetic. "I've just been realizing there's no way for me to go to college. Classes start in one month..."

I trail off and start sobbing again.

Grandpa reaches up and kisses my forehead, then kneels back down beside me.

“Alaina,” he begins gently. “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t sure if that was something you really wanted to do. It was hard to tell whether it was just something Mom pinned on you. I should have asked you, I’m so sorry.”

I start to say, “No, it’s okay...”

But he gently interrupts me, “I know of a way you can go.”

“What?” I ask, bewildered. “How?”

“Well, for starters, this pregnancy couldn’t be timed more perfectly,” he says.

I start trying to understand...

He continues, “You’re due in December. Do you know what that means?”

I wait.

“It means it’s...going to be really cold outside?” I try.

“No—well, yes,” he says, laughing, then explains gently, “December is winter break for college.”

I start to make the connection.

“So,” he says, “You could start school in the fall semester. Then get on break just in time for the babies!”

I start to smile, but then I realize...

“Grandpa,” I say, “What about *after* the babies?” I look down, feeling worried. “Who would take care of them on days when I’d be gone? I can’t afford a nanny and Mom and Dad definitely can’t either. Aunt Joan is a supernanny already and I don’t want to add two more burdens to her.”

I just sit there with my eyes closed, my head stressfully resting in my hand.

“Aliana,” he says after watching me a few seconds. “Again, I should have already told you...”

I open my eyes and look at him.

He continues, “I’m selling my carpentry business within the next month. I’m not going to be working anymore. I’ve saved up enough money to retire, as well as some extra to help you with a car.”

“But, *Grandpa!*” I start to fuss at him, but he holds his hand up in the air.

“Wait, wait—I’m not finished,” he says. “I will not be spending time working, Alaina. Do you know what that entails?”

“No,” I start to answer, still pouting about the idea of him giving me his hard-earned money.

He says, “It means I will have all the time in the world, Alaina, to look after my two great-granddaughters.”

He looks at me.

I look at him.

“Oh, but *Grandpa,*” I begin again. “You don’t mean you’d be willing to—”

“I most certainly do!” he says. “I would be willing to be your supernanny, Alaina. That is what I am here for. You would go to college and earn your degree, and me and the rest of the available family would take care of the babies during the days whenever you aren’t around at the house.”

I just stare at him, slowly smiling.

“And of course, you know that even if I didn’t exist, there are adoption and foster care centers for this kind of thing. But fortunately, I *do* exist!” he says, pompously laughing.

I just reach over and hug him.

We both stand up and go talk to Mom and Dad about it. They agree without hesitation.

That night, I sit rubbing my belly with coconut oil and excitedly signing up for college classes.

I am such a weird pregnant woman.

• • •

Several more weeks start to pass by, and although we’re not yet capable of tracking time, our excitement every day is growing.

“We’ve been alive for 6 whole months now, Sister!” I say to her as she wakes up next to me, floating.

“I know! I can hardly believe it!” she says. “My senses are working so well.”

“Oh, yours too?” I ask in surprise. “I wish I could remember when I was just a single cell.”

And to think how much we’ve both truly grown, it’s a wonder. And we’ll continue to grow each day—we’re not getting any younger.

As time passes, new developments continue to spread. Now we each have a beautiful pair of eyebrows—and lovely thick hair on our heads! Then also of course our five senses have sharpened—all senses except that of sight. It actually is working, fortunately, but we

still can't see since there's no light. Occasionally we do think we spot a few things, a light shining so bright that it gets in. But mostly we just practice our blinking reflexes for the day when maybe real seeing begins.

Of course, we don't yet understand the idea of being born—but if we could, we'd think it means we get to see Mother. So much of our lives have to do with our Mother—and our ears can now hear her talking to others! We can hear the deep-voiced beings around Mother, and we can even occasionally hear music. We very much enjoy listening to the outside world, even though the sounds are muffled and muted.

Almost every night now we hear her singing, softly humming some sweet, gentle tune. Sometimes she sings to us in the morning, but mostly at night and in the afternoon.

We can also feel her pressing on us with her fingers sometimes from directly outside of the womb. And although we probably have some growing left, it feels like we're running out of room!

Some of the things we've enjoyed the most are the tastes and smells of Mother's cooking—the fruits, vegetables, meats, beans, breads, pastries, and puddings!

There is something that we love more, though, than any other thing. It's the sound of Mother's voice whenever she is talking, laughing, or singing. The sound of her voice is so sweet that it's becoming slowly ingrained into our memory. And the sound of her laughter each day is starting to become the very source of our energy.

And what's been even better lately is that Mother has been at such peace. And we know this because whenever Mother is relaxed, our own relaxedness tends to increase. When we feel that she is truly resting around us, our restless movement tends to cease.

We love our Mother very, very much.

But most of all we've become aware that she also very much loves us.

CHAPTER VIII

When you are a mother, you are never really alone in your thoughts. A mother has to think twice, once for herself and once for her child. – Sophia Loren

At week 25, as the baby's senses are sharpening, the baby develops the startle reflex, which is a self-protective jerking motion that the baby makes in reaction to loud sounds and sudden, jumpy movements made by the mother. At week 26, it is possible to hear the baby's heartbeat by pressing an ear up to the mother's belly. The mother's moods and emotions (such as chronic stress) are directly reflected by her heartrate and have a direct impact on the baby (including producing a tendency towards stress in the baby even after birth).²⁸ At week 27, the mother can usually feel the baby moving every day, whether it is kicking her or simply has the hiccups.²⁹ At week 28, the third trimester hits. The baby's lungs are considerably mature, and the brain has matured to the point that it can now direct rhythmic breathing, control body temperature, and create memory. The amount of white fat has reached about 3.5% of the baby's total body weight and has thus smoothed out many of the baby's wrinkles.³⁰ The baby is now swallowing up to half a liter of amniotic fluid every day in order to get nutrients, practice the swallowing reflex, and further develop its digestive system. Since week 10, the baby has been able to suck its thumb, but the baby does this more now than ever in order to develop its sucking reflex for use in breastfeeding after birth.³¹ The baby grows from the size of a rutabaga at week 25 to that of an eggplant at week 28.³²

“Goodness *gracious*, college gives so much more homework than high school,” I say, pouring all my assignment sheets out onto my bed.

“You can say *that* about eleven thousand more times,” Aura answers while rapidly typing on her computer.

I can already tell homework parties are going to become a very regular thing around here.

Elisabelle sets her computer down and looks up at me contemplatively, “How would you say your first week went?”

“You know,” I tell her, patting my big round belly, “It wasn’t too shabby.”

Aura starts to giggle.

“It turns out,” I continue, “Getting constant sideways glances from strangers can be kind of flattering.” I start to smile triumphantly, “Just kidding.”

I sit down into the heap of papers on my bed.

Elisabelle smiles and asks me, “But how are you, really? You doing alright?”

I smile back at her thoughtfully, “I am. And I honestly couldn’t care less what people think.”

She smiles even wider.

“Thanks for checking up on me,” I tell her.

“Mm hm,” she nods, eyeing me but still smiling.

A few nights later, after family dinner, I sit talking to Mom in the kitchen.

“Mom, I was born in a hospital, right?” I ask suddenly.

“*Oh yes,*” she turns to me while drying the dishes. “No home births for me—that was Joan’s territory. Why?”

She looks at me quizzically.

“Aunt Joan!” I yell into the other room.

She comes walking in with two children climbing all over her.

“Babies, babies—please,” she tells them. “Alaina’s trying to speak with me.”

She pulls them off and makes them go play in the other room.

“Sorry Alaina,” she says, and starts helping Mom dry the dishes. “Did you need something?”

“Aunt Joan,” I ask, “You’ve had a home birth before, right?”

She busts out laughing, and Mom just rolls her eyes.

I smile for a second, “Where’s the joke at?”

“Honey,” she tells me, still laughing, “I had home births for all six of my children.”

“*All six?!?*” I ask, genuinely shocked.

“Well yeah, girl!” she says to me, “If it works, it works! And it *definitely worked for us!* Right Angus?” She yells out to Uncle Angus in the other room. “He didn’t hear me. But yes, home births all the way for me. Your mama wasn’t the same—she chose the hospital. And believe me, I was tempted.”

“Why were you tempted?” I ask.

“One word: epidural,” she says, popping a cherry tomato into her mouth. “You can’t have epidurals at home.”

I start to realize.

Maybe the hospital would be better for me, too...

“Why did you do all home births?” I ask Aunt Joan.

“*Good question!!*” she says loudly, slapping Uncle Angus on the back as he suddenly walks in. “*This* guy made me have them all at home.”

“What did I make you have?” he asks suddenly, genuinely confused.

Aunt Joan laughs and sits down across the table from me, “I’m just being facetious. Your uncle didn’t make me do anything. I chose home births because I did research and found them more desirable. Less controlled. More personal. That sort of thing.”

I smile for a second, then look down at my belly.

I ask her a little hesitantly, “So...no epidurals for all six kids?”

She starts laughing for a second again, “Honey, I’m not going to lie to you and tell you it wasn’t the most physically painful thing in my life.” She takes my hands and then looks into my eyes, “But I would also be a terrible aunt if I didn’t also tell you this other thing: any pain you feel isn’t gonna mean *squat* the minute those twins are born. I can personally attest to that with all six of my lovely babies.”

For a second I almost tear up a little, but then stop myself.

“And by *all* means,” she tells me, “It doesn’t matter which one you do. We’re all gonna be right there with you either way.”

For some reason that makes me tear up even more...

I look down yet again.

I hear her whisper, “Alaina.”

I look up at her, a little nervous.

She stares right into my eyes and says, “I *know* that you can do this.”

• • •

The next two weeks slowly pass by in a daze as we get more and more acquainted with Mother and her wonderful, mysterious ways.

The way she laughs and the way she sings—the way she talks on the phone whenever it rings.

The kinds of foods she eats—the salts, the sours, and and the sweets.

We keep feeling ourselves drifting in and out of sleep—sometimes our sleep is light, but other times it is very, very deep.

We've both started gaining significant weight, and we're kicking now every single day. But I'm not so sure it's only kicking—there's something else our lungs are doing that's difficult to convey. It's something that causes a jerking sensation, and keeps our lungs snatching up sudden air. We've heard Mother calling it hiccups, and sometimes it gives us quite a scare.

The first time we both hiccupped loudly, we heard Mother burst out laughing! And this was what scared us and made us both jump—we could even hear our heartbeats thump!

Our heartbeats have also gotten louder—they're now audible from outside the womb! Eventually, we hear not just Mother but also others listening to them too...

• • •

“I wanna see!” Kelly squeals at me, trying to climb past Davey up onto the couch.

About ten minutes before family dinner, the older kids ask to see my belly.

I jokingly roll my eyes and then smile as I slowly pull up my T-shirt.

I watch as they carefully reach their hands over, and Grandpa kneels down next to me.

“Now Davey and Kelly, we want to be very careful,” he says.

They both look at him and slow down. They each place a tentative hand, then look back at Grandpa for approval.

He gently nods his head, then asks them, “Did y’all know that Alaina actually has *two* babies instead of *one*?!”

He holds up two fingers suddenly.

Their wide eyes get wider, and they look up at me excitedly.

“Two! Two babies!” Kelly says.

“Yes, Kelly!” I match her excitement. “And they’re both little girls—just like *you*!”

I poke her in the belly and she starts giggling.

“How big are the little babies?” Kelly asks me.

Grandpa gets her attention and tells her, “They’re both very small, Kelly – *only this big!*”

He holds up both hands to show her.

They both look at him and bashfully smile.

I look at them, “Did y’all know you can hear the babies’ *heartbeat*? Just press your heads up—very gently—and you can hear it.”

They both gently move in and press an ear to me, and for a second they’re quietly listening. But then Kelly hears it and accidentally screams really loud.

“Kelly!” Grandpa whispers at her, a finger over his mouth. “We don’t want to wake up the babies!”

She starts whispering an apology, and then puts her head back and keeps listening.

It’s all fun for about two more seconds.

Then Davey decides to ask, “Who’s the babies’ daddy?”

He looks up at me intently.

Kelly hears him and starts jumping up and down on the couch and suddenly they’re both frantically asking, “The babies’ daddy? Where is the babies’ daddy?”

Before I can really start crying, Grandpa suddenly gets their attention, “That’s enough questions for Alaina for tonight, kids. Let’s go help Aunt Becca set the table for dinner! Come, come!”

As they leave, he briefly looks at me and I look up and silently thank him.

I get up and move into my room.

Sometimes things are just going great, and then memories of Doyle are somehow thrown in my face.

Calm down. He’s locked away and he’s never coming back.

I remind myself of all the things I already know as I close the door gently behind me.

I glance over and see the sunset suddenly breaking through the window.

I lean onto the bedpost as I feel the babies again start kicking.

I press a gentle hand up to them.

You will both be born without a father.

I wish I could somehow warn them...

Then I hear Grandpa carefully knocking.

I open the door somewhat slowly.

“Are you alright?” he asks me.

I nod for a moment. He comes in and lightly cracks the door.

“I’m just realizing they won’t be born with a father,” I tell him quietly, almost ashamed. “And I already realized that before, but sometimes it just hits really hard.”

He gives me a kiss on the forehead and says, “They may not be born with a father, Alaina, but one day they will have one. Because one day you’ll meet someone—a fine man who really and truly loves you. A man who stays by your side through all things. And he will help you raise those babies—you just wait and see!”

He smiles cordially.

I smile just a moment too, and look off to the side.

Someone who really and truly loves me...who stays by my side through all things...

I wonder what that’s like. To love and be loved for a lifetime.

Maybe Grandpa knows.

“Grandpa,” I say suddenly. “There’s something I never asked you.”

“What is it?” he replies.

I speak softly, trying to word it just right, “How often do you find yourself missing Grandma?”

The question seems to catch him, and he takes a few moments to answer, “I miss your Grandma every single day of my life.”

He tears up and gives me a strong hug. He tells me that it’s very difficult, losing the person you love...

He says he understands if I need to stay in my room for family dinner.

I tell him that's nonsense and I'll be there; I just need a few minutes longer.

He leaves my room, cracking the door shut...and then the babies start to kick.

I feel myself slowly reaching up and putting a very careful hand to my stomach.

Five minutes pass by, and I smile to myself as I realize what I've resolutely decided:

Aunt Joan was right—without a single doubt, I know that I can do this.

CHAPTER IX

*Having children was a revelation – it’s like going through a doorway,
and everything is different forever. – Abraham Lincoln*

At week 29, the baby’s weight continues to increase, its head continues to grow as its brain continues to develop, and its lungs and muscles continue to mature.³³ At week 30, the baby develops the pupillary reflex, which is the ability to react to and follow light sources shining dimly into the womb.³⁴ At week 32, the baby’s brain is developing more quickly than ever before, making 2.5 million nerve cells per minute and now having a total of about 100 billion neurons with around 100 trillion connections. The brain has developed so extensively, in fact, that there is very little difference between its brain now and its brain on the day it will be born. The baby can now dream, and its memory has developed enough that it is even able to recognize a particular piece of music that it has heard repeatedly, as well as jump in time to it.³⁵ At week 34, a considerable amount of the amniotic fluid is reabsorbed by the mother’s body, thus leaving more room for the baby to move.³⁶ At week 35, the baby tends to drop further into the mother’s pelvis, thus decreasing the weight put on the mother’s diaphragm which results in easier breathing for the mother.³⁷ At week 36, the baby also usually shifts—if it hasn’t already—into the head-down position, which is ideal for giving birth.³⁸ At week 37, the mother’s cervix begins to dilate and become thinner while the baby’s rate of growth begins to slow.³⁹ Between weeks 38 and 40, the baby’s lungs mature to the point at which

they secrete a protein into the amniotic fluid that slows the release of the progesterone hormone and triggers the release of the oxytocin hormone, which kickstarts contractions in the uterine wall and thus sends the mother into labor.⁴⁰ The baby has grown from the size of a butternut squash at week 29 to that of a small pumpkin at week 40.⁴¹

In all of our growing and striving, we've never wanted to see Mother this much. Our bodies have grown and developed to the point that Mother can no longer function as our crutch.

We long to meet her.

It's been 40 weeks now since our conception, and we groan and we yearn for our birth. Each day and each week brings an entirely new wave of longings entirely too deep for words.

But we would still speak them.

There are a lot of things we would do if we could—if someone would be kind enough to let us. We would continue to grow and then be born and know how it finally feels to feel zealous—to first receive the blessing of life from our Mother and then spend our lives giving that same gift to others.

Because one day, we ourselves would also be mothers.

If allowed, we'll be born and then continue on the upward path of onward growing, and throughout our lives we'll built up a wealth of knowledge and sweet memories overflowing. We'll gain life experience through highs and lows, just like all other living

human beings do. And we'll know deep inside that it all started the very moment we were conceived in our Mother's womb.

Our lungs have matured much more now and have secreted a new and very special something—a protein. Before long, it causes contractions in Mother, which soon happen with less and less time in between.

We feel our Mother's strength.

And if we could, we'd feel devastated at causing her so much pain. But we would also be eternally grateful, because her pain has never, ever been in vain.

Through all the crying and pushing—she conquers, and all the long, hard hours have passed,

Because as soon as we open our eyes and behold her, that precious moment happens at last:

She stares deeply into the faces of her two children with joy and love unabashed,

And those children bask in this new life they've been given, and to this new life they hold firmly fast.

Because today is the day Love conquered Hate.

Epilogue

I can still remember when the idea for this thesis first popped into my head. It's been almost two years since that day. The weight of what this story means to me is slightly difficult to describe, because what the pro-life cause itself means to me is difficult to describe. Every once in a while, I'll still get flashbacks to the time in my life before I really cared about the abortion issue, and it's hard to believe that a time like that really existed.

Ideally, I wanted this story to mean something to everyone. But hopefully and perhaps most importantly, it will mean something to those who either take a pro-choice position on abortion or those who don't really care about the abortion issue at this current stage in their life. I want the story to touch the minds and hearts of people who think they have better things to do with their time than wake up and do some research about what's actually happening at Planned Parenthood centers and other abortion centers all over this country and all over this world.

Some people spend their time complaining or campaigning about climate change or the minimum wage—and believe me, those issues do matter. But I have continually noticed both online and in real, everyday conversation that whenever abortion is mentioned or described in its honest light, people turn away. They change the subject. There are still some people who think that the abortion issue is nothing compared to the civil rights issue of the 1960s, but I would ask people to think again. The two issues are no different. With one of them, African-Americans were being discriminated against on

the basis of skin color. With the other, infants in the womb (including African-American infants) are being discriminated against on the basis of size and level of development. History has repeated itself too many times with things like this. It's time for people to wake up.

It's also very important to note that this issue is entirely more urgent than a woman's right to choose. Nobody has ever heard any sane woman argue the right to put one of her *born* children to death if it suddenly becomes an inconvenience or even an emotional burden to her, because for the most part people know that children outside the womb are children. But for some unscientific reason, people have decided that children inside the womb just aren't.

There are several ways in which I've changed as a writer, artist, and human being during the process of having completed this thesis. One of the primary ways I've changed is that I've realized I need to more deeply internalize the scientific information that I have researched and put into this thesis. It is very important for people—especially pro-choice women—to understand every stage of infant development, because so many of these women are simply unaware.

Another thing that's changed since I began this thesis is my level of compassion for the unborn. It's hard to believe that I could've possibly ever felt more compassionate towards the unborn than I already felt which I first started this project, but it's true: my love for the unborn has indeed grown deeper. As I've been researching and pouring my heart into this project, I've learned more and more about the unborn. And as I've watched three new nieces be born into my family over the course of having worked on this project, I have learned to love children more and more. Some people hate children, and I

understand their reasoning because many children are not raised well and thus end up easier not to love. But to say that you hate kids is to essentially say that you hate yourself, because we have all been children before.

The third and perhaps most important thing I've learned is to plant the seed but to let God water. I am a Bible-believing Christian. I believe that the pro-life case is not only important on a scientifically logical and socially practical level, but most importantly on a spiritual level. Because I believe that every human is made in God's image and that Satan is the one seeking to destroy that image every chance he gets, I believe that preserving human life is very, very important. However, when exchanging dialogue with pro-choicers about the abortion issue, I have learned that it is incredibly important not to push them too prematurely or too firmly towards the spiritual aspect of abortion. People are usually very quick to ignore people that offend them or to shut down any conversation that makes them feel even slightly uncomfortable. In order to have a good conversation about abortion that actually glorifies God and lasts longer than two minutes, I have the responsibility as a Christian who loves people to be very gentle and to listen more than I speak.

A lot of the time, too, all a pro-choice person usually needs is to be asked the right types of questions that make them think and verbally process the falsity of their own opinions for themselves. People like to think and arrive at conclusions for themselves. This is actually vitally important—the power and gift of choice is vitally important.

Also, for me (as a Christian) to believe that I am responsible for both planting *and* watering the seed in people's lives (or that I am even *capable* of also watering and

causing the actual growth) would be for me to assume that I am as powerful as God Himself. And that assumption would obviously be pretty dangerous for me to make.

Altogether, I consider this thesis to be my baby (pun intended), and I am grateful for both the joys and the difficulties that the process of creating it brought about for me. I believe that Satan is very powerful in his work through abortion, but I also believe that God is far more powerful and that no weapon formed against Him or His children will ultimately prosper.

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