

A Memoir of Hearing Loss,
Hope, and Fighting
Against the Odds

The Deaf Girl

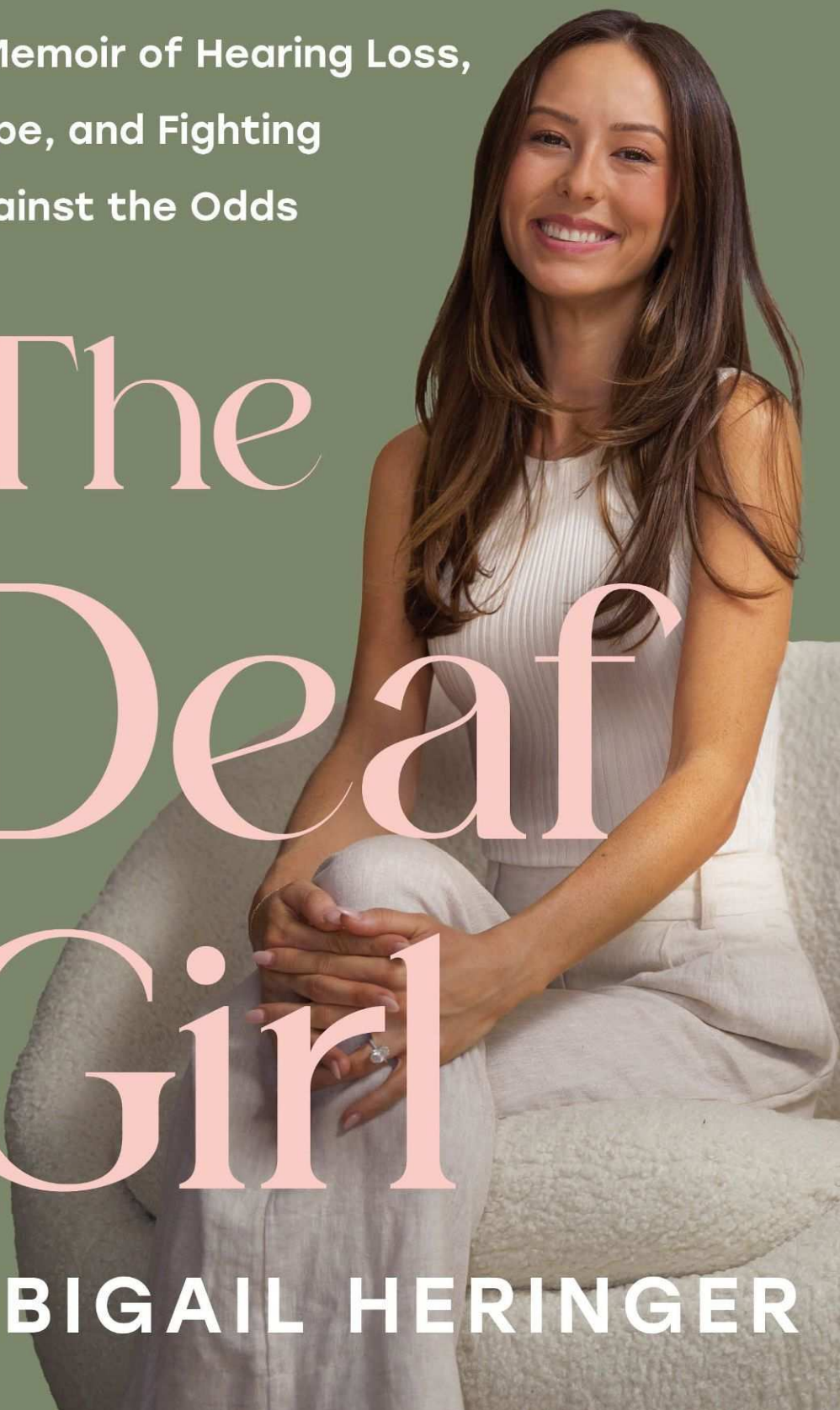
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This book is not intended as a substitute for medical advice from a qualified physician. The intent of this book is to provide accurate general information in regard to the subject matter covered. If medical advice or other expert help is needed, the services of an appropriate medical professional should be sought.

This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over a period of time. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

Published by Sourcebooks

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

sourcebooks.com

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

OceanofPDF.com

This book is dedicated to my mother, Suzie, who taught us that we all have a place in this world. Your unconditional love, support and encouragement has been my biggest blessing in my life. We are deeply grateful for every sacrifice you've made for our family.

I love you.

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Introduction

I sat in the limousine, surrounded by chatter I couldn't quite hear, staring at women that were supermodel gorgeous. If they were nervous, they didn't show it. When the limousine attendant offered everyone a glass of champagne, I was the only one who took him up on the offer. It probably wasn't true, but at the time, it seemed like I was the only one who needed some liquid courage to calm the nerves.

The more the other women talked among themselves, the less I was able to hear. Unable to join in the conversation, I focused instead on repeating in my head the line that I'd say when I met Matt on the steps of Nemaquin.

What on earth was I doing here? This wasn't something I'd ever imagined for myself. I'd been a longtime fan of *The Bachelor*, but I never actually pictured myself on the show. I applied mostly as a joke. Covid had taken over the world, I was laid off from my job, and I found the application for the show while I was searching for employment ads. But when I got the call that they wanted me on the show, I knew I couldn't say no.

Not just because Matt was a very handsome, seemingly down-to-earth guy (though he was, and I was so excited to get a chance to meet him). There was more to it than that. Because there was something about me that was different from every other woman in the limo. Different from every woman who had ever been on *The Bachelor*, actually.

I repeated my line in my head once more. “I’m going to be reading your lips a lot tonight, because I’m deaf. But thankfully, you’ve got beautiful lips, so I can’t complain.”

I was the first deaf contestant on *The Bachelor*. That’s why I couldn’t pass up this opportunity.

When I called to tell my mom, who is usually very private and reserved, about my invitation to go on *The Bachelor*, I thought she’d shut it down right away. We’d watched the show together, so she knew how crazy it could get. I figured she wouldn’t want me in the limelight like that. But what she said surprised me.

“I think that’s great. You could teach a lot of people about cochlear implants.”

How often did an opportunity like this come knocking? When was another woman with a cochlear implant going to be invited to the show? It could be years; it could be never.

I’d never seen someone like me on reality TV. So as hopeful as I was about meeting Matt, I knew I could do something good here.

So here I was—the quiet girl who didn’t like attention—going on an international television show. Not only that, but from the very start, I was going to have to step out of this limo and be forthcoming about my disability. Even in my normal dating life, that wasn’t something I’d mastered, choosing often to wait until a third or fourth date to talk about my cochlear implant.

I’d spent most of my life trying to blend in with the able-bodied crowd around me, never wanting to stand out as the “deaf girl.” For so many years, I was two people—the Abigail who was deaf and the Abigail who was just me.

But both versions of Abigail were always quiet, always unassuming, always blending into the background. So who was this person who decided

she was going to speak about her disability in the most public forum possible?

I was about to find out, and fast. The limousine was pulling up, all the women were waving, me included. I was the closest to the door, the first one in our vehicle who had to step out into the night to meet Matt.

I was so viscerally aware that I wasn't just meeting Matt; I was meeting the entire world. I wasn't just speaking to him but speaking to *everyone* about my disability and experience with cochlear implants.

But here's the thing, I have never been one to speak up. Finding my voice had been a journey up until this point. I thought I'd done it, thought that at the age of twenty-five, I'd worked out the little kinks of figuring out who I was and how to approach the world confidently as a disabled woman. *The Bachelor* was about to be a new journey, though. One that would challenge me in ways I couldn't even imagine and bring me into the life I have today. But to understand that journey, I first have to bring you on another one. The one that led me to be the woman who agreed to go on *The Bachelor*. And that journey, surprisingly, doesn't actually begin with me.

It begins with my sister.

Chapter 1

For most people, their life story begins the day they were born. That is when their legacy starts. But not mine. My life story precedes my birth. It's my sister Rachel who started my legacy. While I was still in my mother's womb, she introduced my family to the same medical condition that would invariably impact the rest of my life. There is no way for me to tell my story without first telling hers.

For the first twelve months of her life, Rachel appeared to be a perfectly healthy baby. My mom, Suzie, had her plan for motherhood well mapped out. She'd read all the baby books, including the classic *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, and had weekly Mommy and Me classes with Rachel where she connected with other first-time parents. Having a new baby is always stressful to some degree, but with my mother's type A personality, she was well prepared. It's crazy to think that she was younger than I am now as I write out the story of our lives, and yet parenting came so naturally for her. She was prepared in a way I'm not sure I would be. And that preparation had paid off. The first year of Rachel's life had gone really well. She was hitting all her milestones right on time.

Until she wasn't.

Mom was incredibly close to my grandparents, who lived only five minutes away. In my younger years, it was so natural for me to see my grandparents nearly every day. They were an integral part of our lives, though I wouldn't

know just how special that bond was until I was much older. While I'm pretty sure they would've been close to us regardless, what Mom was about to learn definitely pulled everyone closer together.

Grandpa retired the same year Rachel was born, and my granny had been a stay-at-home mom, so the both of them were always available to spend time with Rachel. Going to their house was a reprieve for Mom. It served as a place where she could relax and unwind while my grandparents doted on little Rachel.

On the day of Rachel's twelve-month pediatrician visit, Mom dropped by to have a cup of coffee before heading to the doctor's office. She sat Rachel in her high chair with some crackers, and Granny grabbed a Dr. Seuss book to read.

“I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-am,” she'd say in the heavy Scottish accent that I remember so fondly.

But I wasn't born with the ability to hear that accent, and neither was Rachel. Granny didn't notice that Rachel wasn't responding to *Green Eggs and Ham*. Babies aren't exactly known for their extended eye contact, so it was hard to tell.

Rachel loved seeing Granny though, and her excitement was the only thing Mom took note of as she sipped her cup of coffee at the round oak table that still had crayon markings from Rachel's previous visit. Based on my own experiences, I know that Rachel was feeding off Granny's infectious positive energy. It's funny, all I remember of my childhood is positive memories, despite all the scary audiologist appointments and surgeries that came my way. I don't remember being afraid before my cochlear implant surgery, I only remember having cake in my hotel room the night prior. It's mostly through writing this book with information from Mom that I'm learning of my own childhood struggles. Just goes to show how much children feed off the energy that the adults in their life provide

them, and my mom and grandparents were a source of peace for me. Similarly, for Rachel, there was a peace that coated that afternoon, the calm before the storm.

On the way out, Mom went to say goodbye to Grandpa, who was reading a newspaper on the living room couch. “Alright, we’re off to see Dr. Buzz.”

He paused, looking from Rachel to my mom. “When you see Dr. Buzz, ask him to check Rachel’s hearing.” He almost squinted at Rachel as he said the words.

From Mom’s perspective, this was nothing more than an offhand comment, but it would soon change the trajectory of Rachel’s life. To this day, my mom still isn’t sure what caused my grandpa to suggest this. He was a general surgeon and commented on these types of things often, so she didn’t even think to question him. It all just seemed commonplace at the time.

In retrospect, there were some signs that Rachel might be deaf, but they were easy to miss as a first-time mother. Rachel hadn’t spoken her first word yet by twelve months, and Mom was aware of this, but it didn’t worry her because Rachel had an extensive repertoire of babbling noises, a sign that she would start speaking soon.

Except they weren’t *really* babbling noises. Not having another baby to compare her behavior to, it was easy for Mom to mistake the guttural noises that Rachel made for babbling. But her noises were not mimicking the tones she heard the adults around her make. They were noises that Rachel could *feel*, that caused a rumbling in her throat and body. Even as someone who once made those same noises, I’m not even sure I could tell the difference between a baby copying the sounds they hear and a baby using noise to cause vibrations in their body. Because Rachel was making noises, Mom assumed she must be hearing fine.

At first, the appointment seemed to go off without a hitch. Nurse Dottie checked Rachel's height and weight, which were in the normal range. In the small exam room, Rachel sat in Mom's lap, happy as could be. Mom almost forgot entirely about what Grandpa had said.

"Everything looks great," Nurse Dottie comfortingly smiled down at Rachel. "Do you have any questions or concerns before I grab the doctor?"

Mom looked at Rachel, who once again started making little grunting noises. That's when Grandpa's words echoed in her mind.

"My dad did tell me to ask about her hearing." The words came out nonchalantly because that's how Mom felt.

But Nurse Dottie did not share Mom's casual attitude. She straightened up, her demeanor shifting ever so slightly. "Well, that's a very serious concern. I'll definitely speak to the doctor about it."

Dr. Buzz gave a referral to an audiologist straight away, which my mom saw as merely a precautionary measure rather than a sign something was wrong. Dr. Buzz didn't do any of the testing himself. While some pediatricians will administer rudimentary hearing tests by snapping their fingers near a baby and gauging their reaction, Dr. Buzz was wary of the often-inaccurate results. A baby could use their other senses to assess what was happening around them. Rachel might feel the small rush of air that came with a snap, or witness a hand moving in her peripheral vision, and those reactions would not be indicative of whether she could hear. A visit with the audiologist would give much clearer results.

Mom left with Rachel and continued with the rest of their day as planned. When my biological father came home, she told him about the referral, but he didn't see a reason to worry either. The appointment would happen during his work hours, so Mom didn't even ask him to go, fully expecting to find that Rachel was fine. Personally, I'm a bit of a worrier, someone

who is often imagining the worst-case scenario for any given situation. But even I wouldn't have imagined a deaf diagnosis if I was in my mom's shoes. I mean, Rachel was a healthy, responsive newborn. It's human nature for our minds to resist such a dramatic shift in what we know to be true, and what my parents knew to be true was that Rachel was a happy baby.

Finding out anything else would have shifted the state of their entire world. I don't think anyone is ever capable of imagining their life turning upside down, but it was especially difficult for my mom, who had such a clear-cut plan for motherhood.

That plan had to change significantly after Rachel's audiology appointment. They were brought back to a closet-size room with a door so heavy my mom could feel the airtight seal when it closed. I would later come to know these testing rooms well, so I can say with confidence that these rooms would be a nightmare for anyone with claustrophobia. They're a somber space, with absolutely no outside noise or white noise. For me, they're a comfort, because true silence is my natural state of being and something I crave if I've had my cochlear implant on too long. But for my mom, and anyone else who is used to hearing sound, they can be disconcerting. I'm sure it was especially bothersome for Mom because she didn't know yet that Rachel would've been comfortable in this closed-in echo chamber.

A small window allowed the test administrator to look in from the hallway and assess Rachel's reactions. On the left and right side of the room, behind glass, sat a toy monkey. Any time a noise was played, the toy would move, so the kids had an item to seek out as the source of any sound.

Besides the monkey, only a few toys sat in front of an empty chair. Too many toys could have distracted Rachel from the task at hand. My mom took her seat, setting Rachel down on the floor by her feet.

Rachel didn't have much of a reaction. She was comfortable in the quiet, unaware that she should be reacting at all. As the noises echoed from the left and right at various volumes, Rachel continued to fiddle with the wooden blocks in front of her. It was a red flag, but Mom didn't know that yet. She still expected that when they walked out of that small room, she'd learn Rachel had perfect hearing. I don't think she was in denial as much as she had just never even imagined a world where Rachel couldn't hear.

Mom walked out of the testing room with short-lived confidence.

"I am so sorry," the audiologist said gently after the soundproof door closed behind them. "Rachel didn't pass her screening."

"What?" Mom's heart sank as her mind struggled to process this, her entire body denying what it had just heard.

But the sympathy in the audiologist's voice could not be misunderstood. This was not good news.

"Rachel didn't hear any of those noises. A hearing child would've been startled by some of the sounds. Typically, they'd be turning their head to look for a person or musical toy to find the source of the noise."

Though my mom hadn't considered this in the booth, it made perfect sense. Rachel hadn't turned her head once.

In an instant, the concrete plans Mom had made for Rachel's life were cracking. Would the steady future she had hoped for her daughter still be possible? So many variables had suddenly come into play.

With hearing loss, it isn't just the ability to hear that a person loses; it's their ability to speak and understand those around them. If Rachel couldn't hear, she wouldn't be able to talk to anyone. How would she make friends? Or attend school? This could mean Rachel would have to rely on American Sign Language (ASL), and her choices of school and friendships would be limited to the Deaf community—which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it was a shock to my mom, whose community consisted of only hearing

people. Would Rachel ever belong to the community that my mom had built? There are so many small intricacies of hearing loss that have a far-reaching impact on a developing baby.

It was a tangled web Mom had to unravel bit by bit. She thought she'd already done a lot of research on child development, but no baby book could prepare her for this. Mom didn't even know another deaf person. And this was before the internet. Knowledge wasn't a simple click away.

The barrier of the unknown was a twelve-foot wall standing between my mom and Rachel's future. There was no easy ladder to get her over it, only a long steady climb. How was she going to help Rachel when she didn't even fully understand her condition?

As hard as hearing the news was, sharing it with others was even worse. My mom went straight from the audiologist to my grandparents' house.

When she walked in, she wasn't crying, and she hadn't cried at the audiologist's office either. She was in a state of shock, processing internally but not outwardly. This is something Mom and I have always had in common. I've never been a big crier, preferring not to wear my emotions on my sleeve.

So when she told me she had burst into tears after telling my grandparents that Rachel failed her screening, I knew how hard this must have been for her. I can probably count on one hand how many times I've seen my mom cry. But telling Granny and Grandpa made the news real, and that reality was hard to cope with.

Granny was equally stoic in nature, but she hugged my mom, suppressing her own tears.

As hard as this news was for Mom, it was compounded for my grandparents. In addition to their concern for Rachel, they had to watch their own child struggle with the news while they could do nothing to lift the burden. My grandfather, having worked in the medical field, had a

greater understanding than my mom did of how significantly this would impact Rachel's development.

When my mother would later share the news with friends, it was a bit easier because they didn't fully understand the extent of what hearing loss could mean for Rachel's life. At that age, Rachel was still an adorable baby whom they could all hold and cuddle. The future that Rachel might live in was a distant one. But my grandparents were acutely aware of how difficult hearing loss could be and how it would shape Rachel as she developed.

"Don't worry, Suzie. We're going to figure this out," Granny told her.

And she meant it. If there is one thing my family doesn't do, it's dwell. There was no sitting around to grieve. Everyone was focused on action. What was the next step they needed to take? What could they do for Rachel right now?

That's part of what made the diagnosis so difficult. Nobody really knew. More tests needed to be run, and my mom was referred to the Eugene Hearing and Speech Center. But answers were few and far between, leaving my mom with the heavy weight of uncertainty.

It wasn't the fact that Rachel would have a disability that bothered Mom. She'd always been a firm believer that everyone had a place in the world. She just hated not knowing what Rachel's future was going to look like.

One night, Mom was trying to balance her stress while laying Rachel down in her crib. Rachel was fussing, and Mom spun a rainbow mobile dotted with small cartoon animals in hopes it would calm her down. Then it hit her: Rachel couldn't even hear the mobile.

The gravity of it all pulled her down. She stared at Rachel, who was settling into her crib mattress in a navy onesie, and Mom allowed herself to fully grasp the reality of the situation for the first time.

Her poor baby. How hard was life going to be for her? What would her world look like now that she couldn't hear? The mobile couldn't calm her,