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FREIDA McFADDEN

SHE'S YOUR
WORST
NIGHTMARE...



THE
SURROGATE
MOTHER

The Surrogate Mother

a novel by

FREIDA MCFADDEN

The Surrogate Mother

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For Melanie and Libby
(Or for Libby and Melanie, because I'm sure one day there will be an argument over the
significance of this ordering)

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Prologue

In the next twenty-four hours, I will be arrested for first-degree murder.

I don't know how this could be happening. I'm not the kind of person who goes to jail for murder. I'm *not*. I've never even gotten a speeding ticket. Hell, I've never even jaywalked before. I'm the most law-abiding citizen who ever was.

"They have a pretty solid case against you, Abby."

My lawyer, Robert Frisch, does not sugar coat things. I've only known him a short time, but I already know he's not about handholding and gumdrops and lollipops. He has spent the last twenty minutes enumerating all the police department's evidence against me. And when I hear it all laid out for me like that, it sounds bad. If I were some neutral third party listening to everything Frisch was saying, I'd be thinking to myself, *That woman is definitely guilty. Lock her up—throw away the key.*

The whole time I was listening to Frisch, my heart was thumping wildly in my chest. It actually made it a bit hard to hear him for stretches of time. To my right, my husband Sam is slumped in his chair, a glassy look in his eyes. Sam was the one who hired Frisch. *He's your best chance, Abby*, he told me.

So if he can't help me, that means I have no chance.

"It's all circumstantial evidence," I say, even though I'm not certain that's the case or even exactly what circumstantial evidence is. But I know one thing: "I didn't do it."

Frisch lets out an extended sigh and folds his arms across his chest. "You have to understand that if this goes to court, you're going to be convicted."

"If this goes to court?"

"I'd recommend a plea bargain," he says. "When they arrest you—"

I imagine the police showing up at my door, snapping metal cuffs on my wrists. Reading me my rights. *You have the right to remain silent*. Is that something they really say in real life? I don't want to find out.

"If they arrest me," I correct him.

Frisch gives me a look like I'm out of my mind. He's been a criminal attorney for nearly thirty years. One of the best. You can tell how successful he is by the leather sofa pushed up against the wall and the mahogany desk where he's got a photo of himself shaking the hand of Barack Obama. I've got money, but the length of a full trial might bleed us dry.

"Second-degree murder is fifteen years to life," Frisch says. "Whereas for Murder One, you could get life without possibility of parole. If you plea down to Murder Two—"

"Fifteen years!" I cry.

I don't want to go to jail for fifteen years. That's a lifetime. I don't want to go to jail for one day, but fifteen years is unthinkable. I can't wrap my head around it. I can't make a plea bargain that will guarantee me fifteen years of prison. I *can't*.

I look over at Sam, hoping for an equally indignant expression on his face. Instead, he still

has that glazed look on his face. He's staring at the wall behind Frisch, and even though I'm trying to catch his eye, he won't look at me.

Does he think I did it?

Does my own husband really believe I'm a murderer? He knows me better than anyone else in the world, so if he believes I'm guilty, what chance do I have with a jury?

But I'm not guilty. I didn't do it. I didn't kill anyone...

Did I?

Chapter 1

One Year Earlier

At this moment in time, my life is just about perfect.

A couple of years ago, I couldn't have said that. A couple of years ago, I would have rather slit my wrists than stood up in front of a room full of executives from Cuddles, "the new name in diapers," and presented them with a new ad campaign filled with dozens of pictures of cherubic babies with halos on their heads and the tagline: "Because your little angel is worth it." I would have done the presentation, of course, but the smile on my face wouldn't have been genuine, the way it is today.

But right now, everything is exactly the way I want it to be. Well, not *exactly*, but very close. I have the job I always wanted. I'm married to a wonderful man. And in a few short weeks (depending on the whims of the Labor Gods), I'm going to become a mother for the very first time.

You might say I have a glow about me.

"This new campaign," I say, as I gesture at the projected image on the screen, "has the potential to propel Cuddles into the same league as Huggies and Pampers."

I turn my gaze to Jed Cofield, the executive VP of marketing at Cuddles. Jed is in his forties with thick, chestnut hair, penetrating dark eyes, and a suit from Hugo Boss. Even though he wears a gold band on his left hand, in the two years I've worked with him, he always stands a bit closer than he needs to when we talk—close enough that I can accurately identify what he ate for his last meal. Even now—even with my impending motherhood—I notice his eyes traveling down the length of my body.

Back before I was promoted to my current position as Director of Content Strategy at Stewart Advertising, I learned a lot about how to appear confident. Eye contact is key. So I lock eyes with Jed, straighten my posture, and throw my shoulders back.

I have every reason to be confident. I know my campaign is fantastic. I worked my butt off making sure of that.

"How did this campaign perform with the twenty-five to thirty-four female demographic?" Cofield asks.

It's an excellent question. In the diaper market, twenty-five to thirty-four females are essentially *the* demographic, as far as Cuddles is concerned. Few sixty-year-old men buy diapers for babies, no matter how compelling our commercials are. Of course, I've aged out of this key demographic, yet I've got a package of newborn diapers stuffed in the closet, but no need to point that out.

Denise Holt, the Chief Marketing Officer and also my boss, opens her mouth to answer the question. Three years ago, I might have let her. But part of being confident is you don't let your boss answer questions for you.

"They love the campaign, Jed," I say before Denise can get a word out. I click on a button on my remote, bringing up a screen of data. "After viewing our campaign, they were fifty-three percent more likely to choose Cuddles over the other leading brands." I watch his eyebrows raise and add, "And in addition to your original target group, this campaign also resonated deeply with women aged thirty-five to forty-four. As you know, older mothers contribute at least thirty

percent to the diaper-purchasing market.”

Cofield nods, impressed. “Very true.

I make eye contact with him again. “We’re going to crush it.”

Cofield is smiling now, but Denise isn’t. I’ve known Denise Holt for a long time, and I know she doesn’t enjoy being upstaged. Denise was the one who hired me way back when—over a decade ago now. I still remember stumbling into her office and being terrified by her ice-blue eyes and blond hair swept back into a perfect French knot. I fiddled with my suit jacket collar as I fumbled through my rehearsed list of reasons why I wanted to work for Stewart Advertising and specifically for the infamous Denise Holt.

She hired me. Then she taught me everything I know, including how to tie my jet black hair into a French knot, which is apparently called a *chignon*. (Who knew?) It wasn’t until she found out I was trying for a baby that our relationship deteriorated.

“They love it, huh?” Cofield says.

I nod. “They do.”

His smile broadens. “Well, so do I. I love it. It’s brilliant.”

Outwardly, I remain calm, but inside, I’m doing cartwheels. *The VP of Cuddles loves my idea. He loves it! He says it’s brilliant!*

I can’t help but flash a triumphant smile at Denise, who has been nothing but negative during the entire time I’ve been working on this campaign. As recently as yesterday, she was urging me to postpone this meeting because “it’s not nearly ready.” When I insisted on going forward, she accused me of having “baby on the brain.”

Denise has chosen to remain free from maternal obligations. When I started out as her assistant, she drilled into me time and again that nothing wrecked a career faster than popping out a couple of rugrats. Denise’s career means everything to her, and she’s been extremely successful. Back then, I thought my career meant everything to me. Then Sam came along and convinced me otherwise.

I have no regrets. Everything is working out perfectly for me.

“Tell me, Abby.” Cofield raises his eyebrows at me. “Will you be purchasing Cuddles for your baby?”

“Of course,” I lie. “I want the best.”

Yeah, there’s no way I’m putting those shoddy diapers on my own child.

We iron out a few more details, then shake hands all around. Jed Cofield winks at me when we shake, and I squeeze his fingers firmly in the way Denise instructed me years ago. His warm fingers linger on mine for a beat longer than necessary. Cofield has been my biggest fan since I started working on the Cuddles campaign, so I won’t begrudge him a handshake that lasts a second or two longer than I’d like.

But if he thinks he’s getting anything more out of me, he’s sorely mistaken.

“Congratulations,” he tells me.

I’m not sure if he’s referring to my successful pitch or impending motherhood, but I simply smile and say, “Thank you.”

As Cofield and his associates clear out of the room, Denise and I are left alone. There was a time when I got a thrill out of any chance to be alone with my role model, but these days, I avoid it like the plague. Given how well everything went in the presentation, it would be appropriate for Denise to say something positive or even *complimentary*, but there’s a sour look on her face that tells me I will not be receiving any praise today.

“I’ve been meaning to speak with you, Abigail,” she says.

Denise is the only person at work who calls me “Abigail” rather than “Abby.” I used to like it—the name made me sound like an executive, rather than a girl at the playground with freckles and pigtails. (I used to have freckles and pigtails.) I tried to get everyone at work to call me Abigail for a while, but it didn’t stick. Now the sound of that name on her lips makes my skin crawl.

“What about?” I ask. I plaster on that fake smile I now use when I talk to my boss, although it gets harder every day. One day, I will be speaking to Denise and simply won’t be able to smile. It will be physically impossible.

Denise eyes my outfit. My suit jacket and skirt are from Armani. In the month I made the purchase, Sam came to me with the credit card statement and a horrified look on his face. “Someone stole our credit card, right?” he said. “We didn’t *actually* spend this much, right?”

I had to tell him that yes, we did. I absolutely did spend that much on a single outfit, and it was *worth it*. Sam claims his suits from Men’s Wearhouse look identical to anything he’d get at Armani or Prada, but he’s wrong. Maybe there’s no difference across a lecture hall, which is all that matters to him—but close up, anyone worth their salt can tell an expensive suit from a cheap knock-off. And the executives I pitch to respect someone who dresses well—in that sense, my clothes pay for themselves.

Another lesson I learned from Denise.

“How are you doing?” she asks.

“Good,” I say cautiously, because anything more positive than that is a cue for Denise to make my life worse.

“Wonderful, wonderful.” Denise taps a dark red manicured finger against her chin. “Remind me how long you’re planning to take for your family leave? Eight weeks?”

A muscle twitches in my jaw. “Twelve weeks.”

“Twelve weeks?” Denise’s eyes widen in astonishment, despite the fact that we’ve had this exact conversation nearly a dozen times. “That long?”

The muscle twitches again. I had my first migraine earlier this year following a particularly tense discussion with Denise—I can’t let her get to me.

“Twelve weeks is allowed as family leave,” I say.

“I realize that.” Denise’s ice-blue eyes narrow at me. “But that doesn’t mean you *must* take twelve weeks, does it? It seems like an awfully long time. Your clients will be disappointed.”

“I can do some of my work from home during the last month,” I say. That’s a compromise we’ve worked out. “Everyone is going to take on some of my workload. And of course, my assistant Monica will be around to help out.”

“*Monica will be around to help,*” she repeats in a vaguely mocking tone. She blinks a few times. “Well then, perhaps we should give *Monica* your position?”

If I slugged her in the face, I’d get fired. I have to remind myself of that. Again and again.

“I’m just kidding,” Denise says, even though she’s not smiling. “Of course, you are entitled to your twelve weeks, Abigail. I was just hoping you might reconsider.”

I will not reconsider. I love my career, but I have thought long and hard about my priorities. I will not rush back to work. I don’t care if Denise hates me because of it. And let’s face it—she wouldn’t hate me any less if I took four weeks.

“Anyway.” Denise pats her flawless chignon, which makes my hand go automatically to my own French knot. I feel a strand has come loose and I quickly tuck it behind my ear. Denise must

use a bottle of hairspray each day to keep hers intact, but it doesn't appear that way. Her hair looks silky and perfect. "I believe Shelley has planned some sort of... *party* for you in the break room."

I'm well aware that my best friend Shelley has scheduled a baby shower for me to follow this meeting—she would have preferred to surprise me, but given my tight schedule, that was impossible. It's sweet of her, but after fifteen minutes, I'll definitely have to make my excuses and slip away. My afternoon is packed—as it is, I won't get home till eight or nine tonight.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to make it," Denise tells me, which is no surprise. She's made no secret of the fact that she does not approve of events that "waste everyone's time" such as baby showers. "But please make sure you clear away all the trash from the room when you're done."

I bite my tongue to keep from reminding her that I am no longer her assistant, and she can't tell me to clean up garbage anymore. But I keep my mouth shut, because I'm happy. I've impressed the Cuddles people, and I'm about to go to a baby shower in my honor. A *baby shower*. For *me*.

In the time I have worked at Stewart Advertising, I have made an appearance at roughly two million baby showers. Okay, that could be a slight exaggeration. It's possible I've only been to one million baby showers. Maybe three-quarters of a million. Definitely no less than half a million.

But now, for the first time, the shower is for me. Not for Elsa in reception, who has had at least a dozen children in her time working here. Not for Shelley, who has had a more respectable two. This shower is for *me*. The finger sandwiches that will be piled in the corner will have been brought in *my* honor. The presents stacked neatly in the corner of the room will be for *me*. The first piece of chocolate hazelnut cake will be handed to *me*.

There's only one thing different about this baby shower from all other baby showers thrown for the other women in my company:

I'm not pregnant.

Chapter 2

“Here’s your bottle, Abby.”

Shelley is thrusting a baby bottle into my hand. It’s filled with... well, it’s not milk. Something amber-colored. “We’re going to start in another minute.”

I hold up the bottle to the light. “What’s in it?”

“Apple juice,” Shelley says, but then she winks, which makes me worry.

“I’m not drinking whiskey at work, Shelley,” I hiss at her.

“It’s *apple juice*.”

We’ve played this game... well, at least half a million times. Everyone gets a bottle of liquid, and we all chug it through the nipples. Whoever finishes first is the winner. It’s just one of several inane baby shower games we’ve devised and perfected over the years.

Back when I first started working at Stewart, I thought the games were a real hoot. Somewhere between my third and tenth negative pregnancy test, they stopped being so much fun. Around the twentieth negative test, it became a form of torture. When I saw those big, swollen bellies, I wanted to hide in a bathroom stall and sob, not celebrate by making little Franken-babies out of magazine clippings. Usually I stayed around five minutes before excusing myself due to my heavy workload—it was true that I had a ton of work, but it wasn’t the main reason I raced out of the room like it was on fire.

But today, I’m enjoying myself. Because after years of heartbreak, I am on the brink of motherhood. In about three weeks, I’m going to become the proud parent of a newborn boy, whose sixteen-year-old birth mother is currently living in Tucson, Arizona. I told Shelley I wasn’t sure if an adoption warranted a baby shower, but she was insistent I get the same treatment as all the ladies with the big bellies.

The door to the conference room swings open and in walks my assistant Monica, carrying a comically large diaper cake. It’s trimmed with blue ribbon, and has a blue teddy bear clinging to the side of it. Poor Monica’s arms are trembling with the effort of holding it, and I rush over to grab the other end before she drops the whole thing on the floor.

“A diaper cake from Cuddles,” she says breathlessly as we lower the monstrosity onto the banquet table. “It’s a bit... big.”

I smile to myself, imagining Jed Cofield telling his secretary to send over this giant cake. Is it terrible that I secretly hope the diapers in the diaper cake are any brand *other* than Cuddles?

I roll my eyes at Monica. “Next time, I’m going to request a diaper *cupcake*.”

Monica covers her mouth with her hand as she giggles. She’s been my assistant for the last six months, since my old assistant Gertie fell and broke her hip, and was not-so-gently pressured by the powers-that-be into an early retirement. And it’s been amazing having Monica. Not that I didn’t like Gertie, who made really incredible chocolate chip cookies, but she was just so *slow* at everything. Like, even watching her walk across the room was painful. And she didn’t know how to send documents to the printer from her computer. Even faxes were a little tricky for her—I think the fax machine hadn’t been invented yet when she started at Stewart. I’m not sure if phones had been invented yet. But they probably had fire and the wheel.

So yes, Monica is absolutely a breath of fresh air. She’s in her early twenties, a recent college graduate with a degree in art and math, and sharp as a tack. She soaks in everything like

a sponge. Having Monica as an assistant has increased my efficiency by at least... sixty-eight percent.

I knew immediately during our interview that she was going to be my new assistant. The way she looked reminded me so much of myself, from her jet black hair tied awkwardly in a bun behind her head to her ill-fitting suit to her overeager smile. And then instead of praising me for the Cuddles campaign like every other candidate I interviewed, Monica gushed in detail about a campaign I did years ago for a yogurt company—one that was less well-known but one I was particularly proud of. It showed the girl did her research.

And when I asked her what she wanted to get out of the position, she replied, “I want to learn everything you know.”

I hired her on the spot.

After Monica adjusts the diaper cake on the table, she frowns at a pile of baby-sized Yankee caps on the side. I laugh at the baffled look on her face. “Shelley wanted us to wear those, but she couldn’t get any takers. You’d make her day if you put one on.”

Monica smiles. “Oh, no. I grew up a Red Sox fan—I went to all their games when I was a kid. I could never put on a Yankees cap. They’d never let me come home!”

“Well, I’m a Yankees fan,” I say, “and yet I still don’t want to put on the cap.”

Shelley rushes over at that moment and thrusts a baby bottle into Monica’s hands. “Ten minutes till chug time,” Shelley warns.

“Oh.” Monica’s cheeks color and she glances at me. “I still need to type up the minutes from the meeting this morning and make copies for the—”

“No, you don’t.” I rest a hand on my assistant’s shoulder. “You’ve been working so hard, and Cuddles loved our pitch today. You’re allowed to take a break for a baby shower.”

“Well, at least let me clean up the—”

“No.” I give her a sharp look. “I want you to relax. Enjoy yourself for a bit. You deserve it as much as anyone.”

Shelley winks at Monica. “You’re lucky, Monica. Abby is too nice to her team. If you were my assistant, I’d have you picking up plastic cups from the floor right now.”

I survey the room, and... wow, there are a lot of plastic cups on the floor. The employees at Stewart are a bunch of slobs. Denise was right to mention the garbage situation. But we have a cleaning staff here—Monica is my personal *assistant*.

“I guess I could...” Monica glances around the room with her dark brown eyes. Sometimes when I look into her eyes, I really do feel like I’m looking into a mirror. Her jet black hair is like mine, although hers is ramrod straight while mine falls in random waves around my face. In any case, Monica and I do look somewhat similar, although she’s more than a decade younger than I am. Sometimes I appreciate when people remark on our likeness to each other, but not so much when Jack in the Creative department calls her Abby Two Point Oh. “I’ll stay, but just for a few minutes. Then I really should get back to work!”

Honestly, if it doesn’t work out with this baby, I might just adopt Monica.

“It’s so nice of Cuddles to send all those diapers,” Monica says. “I’ve heard diapers are actually very expensive.”

“Oh, Abby doesn’t have to worry about that,” Shelley giggles. “Her family is really rich. Her grandfather got in on an investment in this really big company on the ground floor.”

I sigh. I really dislike it when she brings up my family’s money—it’s embarrassing and tacky. “Shelley...”

“Abby doesn’t want me to tell you which company,” she says. “But I’ll give you a hint. You may have a product from this company in your purse right now.”

“Shelley...”

“Here’s another hint. It’s not an orange...”

“Shelley!”

Shelley laughs. “Don’t worry, Abby, I won’t blab your secret.” She grins at Monica. “But anyway, she’s got a big trust fund, so she doesn’t have to worry about the cost of diapers, believe me.”

She isn’t entirely wrong. I do have a small trust fund that’s gotten me through some tough times. But it’s not infinite money. I’m well-off, but not rich. That said, the cost of diapers is definitely not something I need to stress over.

Monica wanders off to grab a sandwich, but Shelley lingers by my side. She’s got an unreadable expression on her face. I’ve known Shelley ten years, since the two of us were both lowly assistants ourselves, but I still have trouble knowing what she’s thinking. “You getting nervous, Abby?” she asks me.

I give her a look. “What are you talking about? I nailed the Cuddles pitch.”

“That’s not what I mean. Are you nervous about the B-A-B-Y?”

I shake my head. “No. We’ll be fine.”

“How about Sam? How’s he holding up?”

I can’t suppress a grin. “He’s *really* excited. It’s adorable. He spent all of yesterday putting together the crib.”

“Oh right, I forgot—Sam’s perfect.”

“He’s not perfect...”

“Yes, he is.” Shelley takes a swig from her baby bottle. What is *in* those things? “He takes out the garbage, he cleans, he does laundry... he presumably changes the toilet paper roll more than once per millennium. He even cooks now...”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I say. In the last few months, buoyed by the excitement of the new baby coming, Sam decided he was going to learn how to cook. The results have been mixed. No, that’s kind. He’s horrible at it. You would think that just by following a recipe, he could achieve some level of competence, but no.

“Well, so what if he can’t cook?” she says. “Most importantly, he’s still desperately in love with you even though you’ve been married *forever*. And best of all, he’s still really hot. He hasn’t lost even one hair on his head, while Rick is practically *bald*.”

I almost laugh at the expression on my best friend’s face. “Rick isn’t bald.”

“No, I said he’s *practically* bald. Bald would be better! Instead, he’s pathetically clinging to those last few strands.” Her jaw tightens. “One day, I swear I’ll shave him in his sleep.”

“I’d think Sam was just as handsome even if he went bald.”

“Please stop, Abby. You’re going to make me vomit.”

“Well, sorry.”

Shelley always pretends to be jealous of me, but the truth is, her husband Rick is a really good guy too. He’s a great dad too, as far as I can tell. But yes, I have to admit, Sam is hotter and less bald. But that’s not all it’s cracked up to be. I like having an attractive husband, but it’s not so great when that attractive husband is a math professor who works with young undergrads.

Not that I think Sam would cheat or anything, but...

Well, he wouldn’t. But sometimes I wish he worked at an all-male university.

I feel my shoulders relax as Shelley and I chat. Maybe I can spend more than fifteen minutes here. I have done nothing but slave away for the last three months on the Cuddles campaign—I'm entitled to at least twenty minutes to enjoy a party held in my honor. How often do I get a baby shower?

I pick up the baby bottle in my hand and take a long swig from the nipple. And... damn—it really *is* apple juice. Okay, I guess I won't enjoy this party *that* much.

I'm about to suggest to Shelley we get drinks after work when the door to the conference room cracks open. My mouth falls open when the familiar face of my husband appears at the door. A warm feeling of joy fills my chest like it always does whenever I see Sam unexpectedly. I can't believe Shelley invited him! She's the best.

"Hey, it's the father!" Shelley calls out when she spies him at the door. "Sam! Come get a bottle!"

Sam smiles crookedly. Whenever he appears suddenly, I always get a jolt when I notice how handsome he is. A guy like him could easily have become a player, but he's actually somewhat shy and often seems mortified by the impact he has on the opposite sex—like when his students refer to him as Professor McHottie. He wears glasses because contacts are "pointless," he's never bought a bottle of hair gel in his life, nor has he ever even set foot in an Armani store. Yet in spite of all that, he still manages to turn heads on a regular basis.

"Hey," I say. I'm smiling so wide now that it's beginning to hurt. "I can't believe you made it here. Didn't you have a lecture this afternoon?"

"Uh, yeah." Sam scratches at the stubble on his chin because he only shaves every other day, even though he really needs to shave every day. He looks ridiculously sexy on non-shaving days. "Hey, um, Abby..."

Sam lifts his brown eyes to meet mine. Sam has really kind eyes. They say the eyes are the window to the soul, and if that's true, my husband has the best soul of anyone I've ever met. He has a lot of good qualities, but it's his kind eyes that made me fall in love with him.

And I know just from looking into those eyes that something horrible has happened.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him, even though I would bet the farm it's not.

He glances around the room, his ears turning red. "Abby, could we talk? Outside?"

The room goes instantly silent. This is really bad. I don't know what he's going to say to me and I don't want to know. I want to live in five minutes ago—when I was having a (relatively) great time at my first and only baby shower. Before my husband showed up and everything fell apart.

Chapter 3

Sam takes my hand the second I join him at the door. His warm, large hand envelopes mine, and he pulls down the hallway, past a large leafy plant and the water cooler.

“Sam,” I say. “What’s going on?”

“Let’s talk in your office.”

I pull my hand away from his and grab his elbow, yanking him into the nook by the copy machine. “No, let’s talk *here*.”

“Okay, but...” His eyes dart around. “Maybe we should get you a chair...”

He wants me to be sitting. Oh God. I think I’m going to throw up.

“Sam,” I say as patiently as I can. “Will you tell me what the hell is going on?”

Sam focuses his brown eyes back on my face. A deep crease forms between his eyebrows. “Janelle pulled out.”

“What?”

“I just got the call from Steve.” He rakes a hand through his light brown hair—his fingers are shaking. “He said Janelle changed her mind. She wants to keep the baby.”

“*What?*”

My legs feel rubbery. Sam was right—we should have gone to my office. Or I should have held out for a chair.

“Something about how her mother is going to help her or... I don’t know.” He sighs. “It all amounts to the same thing. She’s keeping him.”

“Is... is she allowed to do that?” I sputter. “Our contract says...”

“She’s allowed to back out.” Sam shuts his eyes for a moment, then when he opens them again, I notice for the first time they’re slightly bloodshot. “We can’t fight her in court for her baby. We’d never win.”

I’m starting to get tunnel vision. The whole world is disappearing and all I can see is Sam’s face in front of me. A lump forms in my throat, and I know I’m seconds away from bursting into tears.

“Abby?” His voice sounds far away. “Are... are you okay?”

“No,” I whisper. “I’m not.”

I fall into his arms, and even though there are still some people in their cubicles who could probably see us, I let the tears fall. Maybe “let” is the wrong word. I’m helpless to stop these tears.

At least Sam is here. When he got the news, he was all alone. I can’t imagine what that must have been like for him. He wanted this baby as badly as I did. I can see in his eyes how devastated he is.

“I’ll drive you home, okay?” he says. “I’ve got the car.”

Home. Where the nursery is all set up for the baby we’re not going to get. How can we go back there? I can’t bear it. Also...

“The baby shower...” The thought of going back to the room with the giant diaper cake is like being stabbed in the chest. “I need to tell them.”

“I’ll talk to them,” he says. “You wait here.”

Sam is such a wonderful husband.

It's all my fault we can't get pregnant. *He's* normal. Perfect sperm. All-star sperm. I'm the defective one.

"You don't have to..." I murmur.

"I'll talk to them," he says again, more firmly this time. "But don't leave without me. Promise?"

I nod mutely. I'm not going to argue with him.

"It's going to be okay," he says. "It will."

Except I'm not sure who he's trying to convince—me or himself.

Sam and I don't say one word to each other on the drive home. Even Sam's car is a depressing reminder of what we've lost. Ever since I met him, Sam had driven a 1997 Honda Civic. It was old when he bought it used, and it got to the point where he had to say a prayer every time he turned the key in the ignition. I begged him to trade it in for something safer and more reliable, insisting we had the money to get him any car he wanted, but he clung to that car like it was his first child.

Then when we found out we had a baby on the way for sure, without prompting, Sam got rid of his old Civic and got a brand new Toyota Highlander. It's a big, safe SUV that has a car seat strapped into the back which we will probably never use. Just looking at that car seat makes me want to burst into tears.

I should have taken the subway home.

By the time we get to our apartment, my eyes are swollen and my cheeks are sticky with tears. Sam lets me out at the front so he can park the car. He won't let me shell out the exorbitant fee for the parking garage below our building, so he spends half his time searching the neighborhood for open parking spots. He'll drag himself out of bed at six in the morning on his day off to move his car to avoid getting a ticket. I had planned to insist on paying for the parking garage once the baby came, but that won't be an issue anymore.

I feel a surge of resentment at Sam's stubbornness about the parking garage as I trek up to our apartment all alone. I don't want to face the open door to what would have been the baby's room all alone. I catch a glimpse of the light brown wood of the crib and the yellow paint on the wall before I pull the door shut with a resounding snap.

My phone buzzes inside my purse. There's no one I want to talk to right now, but I assume it's Shelley, trying to say something comforting. I fish out the phone and see the text message filling the screen. It's from none other than my favorite boss, Denise:

Sorry to hear about your situation. I assume I can cancel your family leave totaling 12 weeks? Also, please let me know ASAP if you will require a personal day tomorrow.

For God's sake, couldn't the woman let me grieve for one hour? Denise used to be the woman I respected most in the entire universe, but now I hate her. I *hate* Denise. No, "hate" isn't a strong enough word for what I feel for her. "Loathe" or "abhor" don't quite do it either. Someone needs to invent a new word to describe the way I feel right now about Denise Holt.

Except none of this is Denise's fault. And an hour ago, she was no more than an annoyance in my life, instead of the object of my seething hatred. So maybe I should hold off on answering her text right now, because I can't afford to tell off my boss. My job is all I have anymore.

I glance at my watch. How long does it take Sam to park a goddamn car?

The landline next to the couch starts ringing. I don't even know why we have the damn thing, because all important calls come on our cell phones. All we get on the landline are telemarketers. Then again, I wouldn't mind yelling at a telemarketer right now. It might make me feel better.

I walk across the living room to answer the phone, but before I can make it, I trip on something and bash my knee on the coffee table. Our coffee table is one of those heavy marble tables with zero give, and *damn*, that hurts. I rub my reddening knee, searching for the object that tripped me up.

It's a bassinet. The one that arrived this morning.

Of course.

I yank the receiver off the hook, ready to scream at the voice that comes on the line. AT&T? Verizon? Progressive Auto Insurance? I'm not picky—I'll yell at anyone right now.

Except the voice on the other line doesn't sound like a telemarketer. It's a young, female voice, slightly hesitant. "Hello?"

"Yes?" I say impatiently. My knee is starting to really throb. I should probably get an ice pack from the freezer to keep it from swelling too much—that is, if I can walk. "What is it?"

"Is this... Dr. Sam Adler's residence?"

I frown. "Yes..."

"Oh, great," the girl says. She lets out a giggle. "Um, my name is April and I'm in Dr. Adler's calculus class, and I had some questions about the exam on Friday. Is he... *available*?"

I shouldn't be surprised. A few years ago, we made our number unlisted because this would happen. Girls in Sam's classes would track down the phone number of their handsome professor and call him, hoping for... well, I don't know what they were hoping for exactly. He wears a wedding ring, so I guess they were hoping for a little something on the side. But then again, if that's what they wanted, why would they call him at *home*? College girls are dumb.

If the calls he gets here are any indication, I hate to think what goes on when he's on campus. Good thing I trust my husband.

"No, he's not available," I say tightly.

"Oh, too bad..." She giggles again. "Well, I could meet him somewhere to talk more. Like, maybe on Saturday night..."

Is this girl kidding me? This is far from the first time I've fielded a call from a lovestruck coed, and usually, it's funny. Sam and I laugh about it. But right now, I don't feel like laughing.

"Listen, *April*," I hiss into the phone. "This is Dr. Adler's *wife* and I would appreciate you not calling him at his home ever again."

"Oh." The girl's playful tone disappears. "Sorry, I didn't realize—"

The lock turns in the front door. Sam finally managed to park the damn car.

"And," I add, before he can come inside and stop me, "you are never, ever to bother Dr. Adler again. If I hear you have contacted him—either here or on campus—I will make sure you're reported to the dean for harassment. Understand?"

Sam walks into the apartment in the middle of that sentence. I'm not sure how much of my little tirade he heard, but his brown eyes go wide. Enough, I guess.

"Okay," the girl says softly. "I'm sorry."

"Good," I say. And then I slam down the receiver.

That's the best part about having a landline. You can slam it down. You don't get the joy of

slamming a phone down when you're on a cell phone. What can you do—press “end call” really angrily?

Sam runs a hand through his hair, but does the thing he always does where he stops midway through his scalp so that his hair stands up straight. “Uh, who was that?”

“One of your students.”

His mouth falls open. “You talked that way to my student?”

“Yep.”

I stare at him, daring him to scold me further. I don't want to fight with Sam right now, but I will. It would be only too easy.

But he doesn't take the bait. Instead, he crosses the room and plops down next to me on the sofa. He reaches for my hand, and just like that, all the anger drains out of me. And all that's left is sadness. And emptiness.

I can't believe we're not going to have our baby. I wanted it so badly. More than words can express.

Ironically, it was Sam who initially pushed for us to have a child while I resisted. Not that I didn't want children—I definitely did, but not until I was at least thirty-four, when my career was on solid footing. Denise had ranted long and hard about what motherhood would do to my prospects at Stewart, and it had left an imprint. I wanted to wait. *Thirty-five*, I told Sam when we got married. *Maybe thirty-four, depending on how things are going.*

Sam felt differently about it. His own father had been forty when he was born and then died suddenly of a heart attack when he was in high school. His dad never got to see him graduate high school or college, never got to see him become a professor, never got to be at his wedding. Although he's in much better physical condition than his father ever was, Sam was terrified of being an “old dad” and missing out on large chunks of his children's lives.

“I don't want to die when my kids are still in school,” he said, his voice breaking.

So right after we got married, he started gently pushing for us to try for a baby. I was only twenty-seven at the time and it felt inconceivable. But when Sam hit thirty, his pleas became more insistent. And then Shelley and Rick decided to start trying, so I finally gave in.

When I first stopped my birth control pills, I was some combination of nervous and excited. I joked with Sam that I hoped it took more than a month or two to conceive. Still, I was surprised when my first pregnancy test was negative. As a healthy twenty-nine-year-old woman, I had always assumed that the second I missed even a single pill, I'd be instantly knocked up. It was a reprieve though—one extra month without worrying about the responsibility of impending motherhood. Sam and I laughed it off, saying this way we got to have more fun trying.

After six months, we weren't laughing anymore.

Sam went to get his sperm checked. His boys were perfectly fine, and due to our relatively young age, my OB/GYN encouraged us to keep trying for another six months before we got too worried. Those six months went by, Shelley gave birth to her first child, and I still didn't have a positive pregnancy test. It was time to investigate further.

And that's when it all went downhill.

My doctor told me I probably had suffered some sort of infection that left deep scarring in my uterus and especially my fallopian tubes. Natural conception, she told me, would be impossible. We went straight for IVF, even though I was warned even that had a low chance of success given my “inhospitable uterus.” Sam gave me hormone injections at home to stimulate egg production, but when they retrieved my eggs, those too were deemed to be “poor quality.”