

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

JENNIFER WEINER



THE GRIFFIN SISTERS' GREATEST HITS

THE GRIFFIN SISTERS' GREATEST HITS

A NOVEL

Jennifer Weiner



WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

*For Phoebe,
my rock star*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

Part One
Chapter 1

Part Two
Chapter 2

Part Three
Chapter 3

Part Four
Chapter 4

Part Five
Chapter 5

Part Six
Chapter 6

Part Seven
Chapter 7

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Jennifer Weiner

Copyright

About the Publisher

Prologue

Detroit, 2004

“**I** never should have touched you,” Russell D’Angelo says to the empty room.

He twists the lock, toes off his cowboy boots, and leans his forehead against the hotel-room door, against the framed placard. He’s too close to read the emergency evacuation routes it details, even if his eyes weren’t blurry with tears. He pinches the bridge of his nose, hard. This is an emergency, the worst he’s ever been in, and knowing how to exit the building safely won’t help.

He is thinking about how she looked, about what he’d said.

I never meant for this to happen, he’d told her as she’d glared at him from the hallway, her face shocked and pale and heartbroken. He’d kept talking, hating the pleading sound of his voice. *I’m sorry*.

Russell shakes his head to stop the thoughts. Three paces bring him to the bar cart. He unscrews the cap of the whiskey bottle and lifts it to his mouth, welcoming the burn of the liquor. His eyes are closed, but he can still see them both. Two sets of eyes, two faces, turned toward his. Different faces, but with the same shape to their lips, the same slope of their cheeks. Two women, waiting for an answer Russell didn’t have.

“I’m an idiot,” he tells the room. And it’s true. He hadn’t even noticed what was happening until it was too late. It wasn’t until he was standing in front of an officiant, thirty of their closest friends, three hundred fellow celebrities, and a photographer from *People* magazine that he’d looked over his bride’s shoulder and caught her sister’s eyes, and the knowledge of the mistake that

he was making hit him like a punch to the breastbone, rattling his heart. “I do,” he’d said. *I’m fucked*, he’d thought. And from that moment on, a part of him has been waiting, counting down toward this place and this night.

You have to choose, she’d told him. Except there isn’t a choice here. Not really. Not at all.

Twenty minutes later, half the whiskey is gone, and Russell’s leaning heavily against the wall, looking blearily around the room. His eyes move from object to object without seeing. There’s the bed, still made. His suitcase, open on the luggage stand, clothes spilling out from its unzipped top—his jeans and tee shirt, the silly leather pants the stylist insists on because he’s the lead guitar player in what is, currently, one of the most successful bands in the country, and leather pants are what cute boys in hot bands are required to wear. There might even be a law about it.

“I never should have touched you,” Russell says again. He hums a handful of notes in a minor key and decides to write the words down. Moving carefully, deliberately in his inebriation, he locates the tiny pad of hotel stationery and a pen, and writes with care, imagining piano chords, a mournful twangy guitar. Maybe the words will be the backbone of a chorus, the way into a song, he thinks. And then remembers what he’s done, and how that door is closed. There will be no more songs for him.

He bends to collect his boots, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull them on before walking out into the hall. It’s the middle of the night. It’s quiet, and all the doors are closed. Nobody sees him as he walks through the lobby, bootheels clicking. Nobody sees as he pushes the heavy glass doors open and steps out into the cold and the dark.

Part One

Chapter 1

Cherry

Haddonfield, 2024

“Ten minutes,” Darren said, nodding at the dashboard clock.

“Ten minutes,” Cherry repeated, and opened the Prius’s passenger’s side door, stepping out of an atmosphere composed of equal parts pot, male body, and some kind of noxious spray cologne intended to obscure the first two things. “I’ve got my phone. Text me if you see anyone.”

Darren nodded again. Cherry hoped he was listening, that he wasn’t stoned. At eleven thirty in the morning, the house was empty, but Cherry wasn’t taking chances. Extra eyes would help.

She ran around to the back door, in case the Peraltas next door or the Murphys across the street were watching and wondering why she wasn’t in school. She’d left the house that morning at seven thirty, right on schedule, had endured half a day’s worth of classes: the close reading of a Philip Roth story in English; sine, cosine, and tangent in algebra; a review of the past perfect tense in French. Not one single thing she’d need where she was going.

She disabled the alarm and ran lightly up the stairs to her bedroom, with its cream-colored carpeting and the flower-and-butterfly-patterned wallpaper her mom had picked out when they’d moved to this house and redone her bedroom, changing it from a boy’s space to a girl’s. Or, Cherry thought, changing it from a boy’s space to a room for the kind of girl her

mom wanted: a pretty, easygoing girlie girl who would appreciate music boxes with ballerinas inside and butterflies on her wall.

The wallpaper was now almost completely obscured beneath layers of posters, most of them featuring women with guitars. Some of the posters were the bands and singers Cherry loved best—Fiona Apple and Liz Phair, Lana Del Rey and Mitski. Others advertised Cherry’s musical influences—the Breeders and Veruca Salt, Luscious Jackson and Hole. A Joan Jett poster had pride of place, a black-and-white photograph of the artist looking over her shoulder, with her guitar at her hip. Cherry’s corkboard was papered with printouts of concert tickets, going back all the way to the 2015 Taylor Swift show she’d attended on her tenth birthday, during that brief window when music was something she and her mother enjoyed together, not the thing that had come between them. Her bass and guitar rested on their metal stands; her amplifier, covered in stickers, squatted in the corner. The duffel bag she’d packed the night before was at the back of her closet, obscured by a layer of dirty laundry. She unearthed it, unzipped it, and stuffed in her notebooks full of lyrics, the toiletries and makeup she hadn’t wanted to pack the night before, in the event—unlikely, but not impossible—that her mother would notice their absence.

When the bag was full, Cherry slid her guitar into its padded case, the one she could wear like a backpack, and pulled the straps over her shoulders. She grabbed the duffel and hurried down the stairs, stopping in the kitchen, thinking she’d have just enough time to slap together a peanut butter sandwich for the road. She had just pulled the bread out of the bread box when she saw her stepbrother’s name on the oversized calendar on her mother’s desk. *Bix dentist* was written in the space for Wednesday of the next week. Cherry winced and found her gaze moving toward the basement, where her piano lived. A few months after they’d moved to this place, Cherry had sat down to practice. She’d smelled something sour, just as her feet touched the wet, sticky mess dripping from the piano’s body, pooling under the pedals. Bix had opened the instrument’s lid and dumped a glass of chocolate milk into the body, soaking the tuning pins, the felt-covered hammers, the strings and the soundboard. When Zoe, in her gentle stepmothering voice, had asked Bix what had happened, Bix had shrugged. “I think Cherry left her glass there,” he’d said, tapping the top of the piano with one long, somehow insectile fingertip. Like Cherry didn’t know any better. Like she’d ever bring anything like that near the piano; her good, old friend; the ancient, battered upright that had once been her aunt’s; the instrument she’d convinced her grandparents to give her. “Nobody ever plays it,” Cherry had said. Her Pop-pop had bit his lip, looking troubled, and

her Nana had actually left the room, which was when Cherry remembered that nobody was playing the piano now, but somebody had played it once. She'd opened her mouth to apologize when her grandfather had said, "You know what, kiddo? You're right. It's not doing anyone any good just sitting here." His voice was hoarse, but he'd given her a crooked smile. "We'll call it a housewarming present. Or an early Chanukah gift." Two days later, the movers had shown up in Haddonfield with the piano. Cherry had been thrilled. Her mother, not so much.

"Put it in the basement," Zoe had said, her face crinkling in distaste. Cherry hadn't cared. A piano in the basement was a hundred times better than no piano at all. And then Bix had ruined it. They'd had it cleaned and tuned, but it had never sounded the same, and that sour, spoiled-milk smell still lingered.

Cherry knew Bix had done what he'd done on purpose. But when she told her mother, Zoe had just sighed and said, "You need to get along with him, honey. You need to try harder." That was the pattern. Bix transgressed; Cherry got in trouble. Bix was believed; Cherry was not. Bix was coddled, excused, given second and third chances, and lots of extra help. Cherry was instructed to try harder, to make allowances; was reminded that Bix had lost his mother; was told that she should be his friend. It was hard, too, because most of what Bix did was so subtle it was almost impossible to describe. "What do you mean, he's looking at you?" Zoe would ask, her tone frustrated. Or, "Cherry, he's allowed to be on the couch at the same time you are." Cherry had tried to explain that it wasn't just that Bix was on the couch; it was that he was sitting too close to her, breathing too loudly, that when he looked at her it was always with a smirk curling his thin lips and a gaze that felt probing and invasive, like he was picturing her naked. "Is he touching you?" her mother would finally ask, her face very serious, and Cherry would always have to tell her mom that Bix wasn't, that he hadn't. She didn't know how to explain that it still felt like he was and he had.

Bix was nineteen now, a year older than Cherry. He should have been away, in college, but instead he was still living at home, attending classes at one of Penn State's satellite campuses, with the hope (vain, in Cherry's opinion) that he'd be admitted to the main campus someday. Meanwhile, he lived in a bedroom not ten yards from her own. And he was still, always, looking at her.

Not anymore, Cherry told herself, pressing her lips together tightly while spreading peanut butter on a slice of bread. She'd be free of Bix at last, far away from her mother and her mother's judgments. Free to follow her

destiny; free to chase her dreams; free to become the only thing she'd ever wanted to be: A singer. A musician. A star.

Cherry reached into her pocket and pulled out her new phone, the one she'd paid for herself, the one that wasn't on the family plan. She thumbed the screen into life and, for the hundredth time that morning, checked the email she'd received from the producers of *The Next Stage*—the one that began with the word *Congratulations* and included attachments to her plane ticket, her hotel reservation, details about when the next round of auditions would commence, and copies of the documents she'd signed. There was a release, allowing the show to broadcast footage of her, and an NDA full of stern warnings about not telling anyone—not friends, not relatives, not vocal coaches or bandmates or even parents—that she'd made it to the semifinals, with lots of threatening language about the millions of dollars she'd owe the production company if anyone she knew went public with that news and spoiled the show.

Cherry's audition for *The Next Stage* had been back in September. She'd arrived at the Philadelphia Convention Center at eight o'clock, a full twenty-five hours before auditions began, to ensure that she'd be toward the front of the line when the doors finally opened. The producers had divided people into groups of twenty, and so, just past nine A.M., Cherry and nineteen other wannabes had walked into the vast expanse of the auditorium. There were a dozen tables, each one manned by a pair of producers. One after another, the members of Cherry's group had stepped forward, to sing for approximately twenty seconds apiece. Cherry had sung the Black Crowes' "Hard to Handle" for a pair of bored-looking producers barely older than she was, who'd gotten gratifyingly less bored-looking as her allotted twenty seconds had unspooled. When she'd finished, one of the producers had gone trotting off, eventually reappearing with another, more senior-looking producer and a cameraman, and had Cherry sing again, this time with a camera filming her. The producer had tapped something on his iPad and sent Cherry off to the bleachers to wait some more. Eventually she'd been ushered into a featureless conference room, where there were more producers and another camera waiting.

They'd asked her for a different song, and so Cherry had performed Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone." Sometimes, when she was singing, she was completely in her head, thinking about the next note, the next phrase, the next breath she'd take, but that morning, she'd been able to hear herself, to become the audience as well as the performer. Objectively, she knew she sounded good. Her belt was full-throated and yearning, the chorus and the "yeah, yeahs," she'd sung sounded plaintive and so pained that she gave

herself goose bumps. She knew, even before the judges' nods, that she'd made it through, but she couldn't keep herself from jumping into the air, pumping her fist triumphantly, feeling gratified and thrilled, when they'd delivered the news.

"Come back tomorrow," they'd told her. "And make sure you look exactly the same." Same clothes, same hair, same everything. Cherry figured the plan was to edit everything together and make a two- or three-day process look like it had all happened in a single day. At home she'd ignored her mother when Zoe had complained about Cherry running the washing machine with just a single outfit inside. The next day she'd skipped school, again, and had gone back to the convention center, where she'd sung, for a third time, in front of one of the show's most senior producers. For that round, she'd gotten an entire sixty seconds to impress them: thirty seconds for the Black Crowes, thirty seconds for Kelly Clarkson.

"Very nice," the producer had said. She'd asked Cherry questions—how old was she? How long had she been singing? What kind of music did she like, what were her other hobbies, who were her favorite bands? Cherry answered everything, repeating the questions before giving her answers. She said she was eighteen, that she'd been singing as long as she could remember, that she liked all kinds of music, but singer-songwriters especially, that she played keyboard and guitar, that she had no other hobbies of note, and that her favorite band was the Griffin Sisters. By the end of the day, she'd gotten the good news. By the end of the week, the show's producers had sent her a plane ticket, instructing her to be in Los Angeles the first Monday in February. She could be sent home that same day . . . or, if she made it to the finals, she could be out there as long as four months, until the judges crowned the winner of *The Next Stage* and gave him or her one hundred thousand dollars and a recording contract.

In spite of the NDAs, Cherry had heard rumors that most teenage contestants ended up telling their parents. Cherry had not. She was legally an adult. She didn't need her mom's permission to compete, and she didn't want to have to deal with Zoe trying to stop her. She did not want to sit through another lecture about the terrible state of the music industry today, or all the ways the business would hurt her. "Men treat women like they're pieces of meat," Zoe would say, shaking her head. "I could tell you stories . . ."

I could tell you stories, Cherry would think, scowling. *I could tell you that there's already a man treating me like a piece of meat, and that the call is coming from inside the house. Only you don't want to hear it.*

She snagged a bottle of seltzer from the refrigerator and stood in the kitchen, taking in the suburban profusion, all the stuff her family owned. There was a blue ceramic bowl full of tangerines on the white marble counter; the wine refrigerator, humming underneath it; the tulips in a vase on the table in the corner; the silver-framed photographs of her little brothers, Noah and Schuyler, on the wall; all that cool, shining order. She could smell fabric softener and lemon Pledge, the ghost of cloves and amber from Zoe's Coco perfume; a leftover from her mom's rock-and-roll days, Cherry figured. Most of the ladies her mom knew, the ones from the book club and barre class and the PTA, stuck to barely there Jo Malone.

On her way out of the house, she allowed herself one last look toward the basement and saw that the door was open, just a crack. She knew if she opened the door all the way and looked down, she would see, hanging on the wall that faced the kitchen, a framed platinum album: the one relic from her previous life that her mother had kept.

It was strange. From what she'd read, people who'd won Emmys and Oscars and Tony Awards either gave their trophies pride of place or did something ironic. They'd set a Tony in the powder room or tuck an Oscar in with a bunch of random family photos on a side table. *Nothing to see here. No big deal*, such placement seemed to say.

Her mother was different. She actually seemed sincere in not wanting to put any evidence of her previous life on display. Cherry knew that it had been her stepfather's idea to hang the album, that he'd been the one to talk Zoe into pulling it out of storage. Zoe had consented, as long as she got to pick the location. *Really?* Cherry remembered him asking, when Zoe had pointed toward the basement. *That's where you want it?* She remembered his tone, curious and a little disappointed, and, above all, careful. Jordan, her stepfather, was always careful with her mother, especially on this topic. He treated her like she was a soufflé, or made of spun sugar, like she'd collapse if he looked at her too hard or shatter if he spoke to her too sharply. Cherry remembered her mother's tight-lipped smile. Yes, Zoe had said. *That's where I want it.*

Cherry didn't understand it, not any more than Jordan did. Maybe her mother didn't want to remind anyone of what she'd once been. Maybe she didn't like remembering herself. Zoe would never talk about her days in the band, no matter how much Cherry pestered and pleaded, or how many times she'd asked for details beyond what she could find online, on Subreddits and on the Griffin Sisters' Wikipedia page. Zoe wouldn't talk about the band, wouldn't talk about Cherry's actual, biological father. *Jordan's your father now. And he loves you. You're very lucky, Cherry. I hope you know that.*

Cherry did know. Her actual father might have died before she was born, and that was a bummer, but she'd hit the jackpot with Jordan. Jordan loved her and did the best he could. But Cherry was always aware that she was his adopted daughter, not his biological one; that she was in a different category than the boys. She'd have known it, even if, when she was six years old, Bix hadn't turned to her, when they'd both been on the couch, watching cartoons, and said, "He's not your father. Your father's dead." Jordan had offered, more than once, for Cherry to call him Dad, but she'd never been able to fit her mouth around the word.

Jordan loved her. But they'd never talked, just the two of them, about how Bix looked at her, or how his looks made her feel, about how he would hide her sheet music on the days she had piano lessons, or how he'd accidentally-on-purpose set her sixth-grade final-project diorama on fire, or how he'd put a dead mouse in her shoe, or how, once, when she was eleven, she'd woken up in the middle of the night to find him standing by the side of her bed, pale face looming over her like a moon made of rotten cheese. But Jordan must have known something, because Bix had been shipped off to boarding school when he turned fourteen. Cherry had never been as happy as she'd been that morning, watching the loaded Range Rover pulling out of the driveway. She thought he'd be gone forever, but Bix had turned out to be a classic failure-to-launch situation. After high school, he had boomeranged right back home and started tormenting Cherry again.

Time to go, she thought. She popped her sandwich into a plastic bag and hurried out of the kitchen, resetting the alarm and locking the back door behind her. After stowing her gear in the trunk, she climbed into Darren's car and clicked the seat belt into place with three minutes to spare.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Perfect," said Cherry. "Thank you."

Darren patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Gonna miss you," he said, and started driving toward the airport. Darren had been her bandmate since they'd met as sixth graders at the School of Rock. They'd played Stevie Wonder together, and they'd both been promoted to the house band in ninth grade. Darren played the drums, and Cherry played lead guitar, and keys, and she sang for as many songs as they'd let her. In tenth grade, she and Darren had formed their own band, StickyFingers (all one word). They'd learned the entire Rolling Stones catalogue and had performed on any stage that would have them—in clubs in New Jersey and across the river in Philadelphia, at all-ages nights at bars and street festivals, at open-mic nights and school talent shows.

At the curb underneath the American Airlines sign, Darren put the car in park and patted her shoulder again. "Break a leg," he said. "I'll be watching." "Don't just watch," she said. "You've got to vote, too."

"Early and often," Darren promised.

Cherry pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, gathered her bag and her guitar, and rechecked her phone for her ticket, reminding herself that she didn't need to keep looking over her shoulder. Her stepdad was at work. Her brothers and her stepbrother were at school. Her mother was at barre class or hot yoga—"maintaining my girlish figure," she'd say, straight-faced. Then she would be shopping or at lunch with her friends. No one would be home for hours. Cherry knew no one would notice she was gone for hours after that, maybe not until after dinner, maybe, if she got lucky, not even until the next morning. By the time they'd start to worry, she'd be in Los Angeles. The next time they saw her, or heard her voice, she would be on TV.

Janice

Philadelphia, 1982

No." Janice Edelman's feet were still in the stirrups when the doctor, balding and avuncular in his white coat, gave her the news. "I can't be."

"You can, and you are," Dr. Gaines announced, pulling off his gloves and tossing them into the trash can. "About twenty-two weeks, I'd say."

"Twenty-two . . ." Janice closed her eyes, struggling to reorder her thoughts. "I can't be," she repeated.

The doctor sat on his wheeled stool and used his heels to scoot himself over to her chart, spread out on the counter beside the sink. Zoe was in her stroller, snoozing peacefully, her rosebud lips parted, her hair curling and her cheeks adorably pink. Janice swallowed hard as Dr. Gaines scribbled something in her file. "Were you using birth control?" he asked.

"I'm still breastfeeding! I never even started my period again! I thought . . ." She pressed one hand to her forehead. The truth was, after her daughter's birth, just seven short months ago, it had never even occurred to her to go back on the pill. In those blurry, sleepless months, sex felt like something she'd done in another life, or possibly on a different planet. She'd gotten the go-ahead to resume marital relations at her six-week checkup, but

Sam, her big, brave, police-officer husband, had been too scared to touch her. Eventually, they'd managed to make careful, tentative love, an act repeated just a handful of times in the subsequent months, and Janice suspected she'd fallen asleep midway through a few of their intimate encounters. Even easy babies needed nighttime feedings, and when Janice was in bed, it was hard to stay awake, no matter what else was happening at the time.

"I understand that this is a surprise," said Dr. Gaines.

"A surprise," Janice repeated. She licked her lips and made herself ask, "Is it too late to . . . to terminate?"

"Yes," said Dr. Gaines, without meeting her eyes. "You're well over the cutoff, unless there's a danger to your health."

"Does my mental health count?" Janice asked, only mostly kidding. Twenty-two weeks meant she'd be having another baby in four and a half months. It barely seemed possible. She and Sam had been married for two years before they'd started trying. When she'd found out she was pregnant with Zoe, she'd been thrilled. She'd gone to Modell's to buy a tiny Eagles onesie, which she'd folded up and set at his place at the kitchen table. He'd stared at the green-and-silver garment when he'd come down for dinner, then whooped with happiness, scooping Janice in his arms, whirling her around, raining kisses on her cheeks and lips and forehead. "Our little family," he'd said softly.

And that was the thing: a little family was what they'd wanted. Sam had three brothers, Janice had two brothers and three sisters. Sam had grown up in a rowhouse in Olney, and Janice had lived in a ranch house in Somerton, a few miles away. They'd both shared bedrooms and bathrooms with their siblings. They'd both worn hand-me-downs throughout childhood. They'd both wanted things to be different for their children. *I want my kids to have their own bedrooms*, Janice had said, remembering how she'd yearned for privacy and a place that belonged to her alone. *I want them to have their own clothes*, said Sam, who had been eighteen before he'd owned a new winter coat. They'd both wanted a house that had been newly constructed, or at least recently renovated. No aluminum awning over the front stoop; no worn, grimed linoleum floors or cheap laminate countertops in the kitchen; no walls that had absorbed the scents of tens of thousands of meals and the energy of tens of thousands of fights.

One kid, they'd decided. Maybe two. And only two after they'd saved up for a down payment on a big-enough house, somewhere in the Great Northeast, because Philadelphia cops were required to live within the city

limits. Another baby, before Zoe's first birthday, was absolutely not part of the plan. There wasn't any room. There also wasn't any money.

But Janice was not prepared to discuss that with her gynecologist. At least, not until she'd put her underwear back on.

"How can I not have known?" she asked. "How could I have missed . . ." She waved at her doctor, then at her belly. "Everything?"

He pulled off his glasses, with their thick black plastic frames, and polished first one lens, then the other, on the hem of his white coat. "It happens more than you'd think."

Sure, Janice thought, putting her clothes on slowly once the doctor was gone. With fifteen-year-old airheads who gave birth in the school bathroom on prom night. But she wasn't fifteen. And she'd never thought of herself as stupid. Not until that afternoon.

"Congratulations," the nurse said, giving her a little wave as Janice made her way toward the reception desk, pushing Zoe, who was still sleeping in her stroller. Janice made herself smile back at the woman, and thought, *Maybe it won't be that bad. Maybe the next baby will be easy, like Zoe.*

It was just after three o'clock in the afternoon when Janice got into her thirdhand Honda and pulled out of the parking garage. She found herself driving south on Eighth Street, heading instinctively toward her aunt's house in South Philadelphia. Out of her four sisters, Janice's mother was the one who'd made it, married to a man who earned a good living, who could buy her a three-bedroom split-level ranch (a house they'd promptly stuffed with too much furniture and many children). Janice's mother's oldest sister, Bess, still lived in a Jewish neighborhood of South Philadelphia.

Janice found her aunt right where Bess spent most of her time, when the weather permitted: on a folding lawn chair on her stoop, wearing a flowered housedress with scuffed black Keds on her swollen feet. There was a pack of Marlboros in her hand, an empty Tastykake pie tin full of ashes on the table beside her, and a lit cigarette plugged into her lipsticked mouth. Aunt Bess had a blocky build, wide shoulders and hips without much of a waist between them. Her hair was cut short and dyed a brassy magenta, a color Janice's mother referred to, through pursed lips, as "a shade not found in nature." Bess's face was jowly, grooved with wrinkles, her eyes deep set in a net of crow's-feet . . . but she loved to laugh, and throw parties, and cook for a crowd, and she always had a five- or ten-dollar bill in her pocket, to press into the hands of any niece or nephew or, these days, great-niece or great-nephew or grandchild who came to visit.

Janice sat on her aunt's porch, handing Zoe over gratefully when Bess held out her arms for the baby. Janice gave her the news, as Bess listened,

considerately blowing her smoke away from Zoe's little face. "Hon, just tell him," she said in her raspy smoker's voice. "Even if he's surprised at first, he'll come around. Sammy's a good boy."

"We can't afford it."

Bess shrugged. "How much does a baby cost? You've already got your stroller and car seat and bottles and all. Zoe will grow out of things, and the new one can have her hand-me-downs."

At the word *hand-me-downs*, Janice winced. "It's not what I wanted for her," she said, low-voiced.

Bess gave Janice a kind look. "So maybe this is a little setback. Doesn't mean you won't get that nice new house in the end."

"Okay, but . . ." Janice took a deep breath, smelling cigarette smoke, hot tar (the Golds, two doors down, were having their roof repaired), and the ghosts of Shabbat dinner, fresh challah and chickens roasted in honey and lemon juice, emanating from Bess's kitchen. "What if I can't love another baby as much as I love Zoe?"

Bess smiled fondly. "I remember feeling that way, after I had Marjorie and got pregnant with Scott. I thought, *I love her so much, there's no way I'll ever be able to love a new baby even half this much*. But I surprised myself. You will too. I promise. And who knows?" She gave Janice a lipsticky smile and nodded toward her niece's belly. "Maybe this baby's going to be special. Maybe he's got something big to do in the world."

Janice doubted that. She kept her mouth shut as Bess got to her feet. "Sleep on it," she said to Janice, hugging her, and, Janice saw, slipping twenty dollars into the diaper bag. "I promise, things will look better in the morning."

Janice drove slowly, following Passyunk Avenue to Columbus Boulevard until she arrived at the house in Fishtown she and Sam were renting. *Just get on with it*, she thought, and unlocked the front door. She heard all the familiar sounds: Jim Gardner on Channel 6 broadcasting the evening's headlines, Sam snoring quietly in the bedroom. She let him sleep, waiting until he came to the kitchen, his hair sticking up in spikes around his head, and let him pour a cup of coffee before saying, "I have some news."

She ended up having to tell him twice, while he stood in front of the fridge, blank-faced, rubbing at his head and staring at her, looking slack-jawed and, she thought uncharitably, a little stupid. "Another baby?" he finally asked. Janice nodded. His face fell, and he said exactly what she'd thought when she'd learned: "Shit." And then, "What are we going to do?"

"Have another baby, I guess." Janice went to the living room where she half sat, half fell onto the sofa. After a minute, Sam sat down beside her. He