

## ABSTRACT

GALA, CHRISTA ANNE. *The Ally Girls: A Portrait of Contemporary Women*. (Under the direction of Dr. Elaine N. Orr.)

This thesis, a work of creative nonfiction, explores two subjects. One subject is an enduring friendship among four women that begins in childhood and continues into adulthood, examining the changes these relationships undergo as the women create their own families and allegiances and loyalties change. Comments and criticisms that were once easily accepted in childhood are taboo as these relationships progress. This group of women, *The Ally Girls*, navigates the changes and realizes each woman is ultimately on her own journey.

The second subject is the protagonist, myself, as I 'come of age' in the seven-year time span the piece covers, which culminates in my mid-thirties. During that time, I struggle to understand the end of my parents' marriage, my own obsessive compulsive tendencies, depression, pregnancy, childbirth and a chronic health diagnosis. Traditionally, young women come of age in their late teens to early twenties and many literary works document the experience. However, as a greater number of women attend college, pursue careers and marry and have children later in life, many contemporary women are not truly dealing with the full spectrum of conventional adult issues until much later. This thesis is an amalgam of the issues contemporary women face while underscoring the role female friendship plays in the discovery of self.

The Ally Girls: A Portrait of  
Contemporary Women

by  
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## DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to the two remaining Ally Girls who have helped me to weave a story around friendships conceived in middle school that are well-fed and ebullient still today. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.” It is truly a gift to be rich in authentic friendship, which does not allow one-upmanship, fake smiling or answers that in any way resemble, “I’m fine.” Disclosure, tears, cackles, anger, resentment and joy are what is wanted and, in fact, required. It takes a brave soul to open herself so fully, but the rewards are great.

And to the Ally Girl we lost: We’re here for you always.

## BIOGRAPHY

Christa Anne Gala grew up in Cary, North Carolina. She received a BA in Journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and worked for several years in public relations, technical writing and newspapers while living in Cincinnati, OH and Tallahassee, FL. Since 1999, she has worked as a freelance writer for the *Raleigh News & Observer*, *Cary News*, *Cary Living*, *Wine Maker*, *Meridian*, *Pinehurst Magazine*, *Midtown* and several regional and national trade publications. Gala married her high school sweetheart in 1997, and in 2003 the couple welcomed a son to the family. Gala is pursuing a Master of Arts in English with a concentration in Creative Writing at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC. She expects to graduate in the spring of 2008.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I embarked on the graduate school experience, I was 30 years old, married and childless. Within a few months I was pregnant, my husband started his own business, and things were never the same again. Unable to answer the dreaded question, “What will you do with this degree?”, I decided I simply wanted it for myself. I never would have been able to attend classes and write this thesis without the help of some very special people:

To my dear mother, Naomi Vess, for being ever-cheerful and willing to babysit my son at a moment’s notice and for encouraging me to keep going even when I wanted to quit because it was too hard. Thank you for encouraging me to read as a little girl and for always making me feel like I’m perfectly okay. What a gift.

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To my sister Caryl Webb, who threatened to ‘kick my ass’ if I quit and who makes me laugh harder than anyone. I’m glad you’re on my side.

To my son, Tyler, who hopefully will read this one day and realize that life is confusing for everyone and we are all flawed. A trusting and kind spirit ensures understanding will eventually be ours.

Finally, to The Ally Girls, our story is at times frivolous and other times meaningful and poignant. Thank you for allowing me to capture it.

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**The Ally Girls:  
A Portrait of Contemporary Women**



*A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of Nature.*  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

## **Prologue**

*October 1987*

I'd just gotten my driver's license, but I wasn't driving that night. Had I been, my cowardice would have been exposed pretty quickly. Instead I was in the bathroom and stumbled out upon the chaos in the parking lot.

"Lainey! Get in the car, get in the car," Tara yelled, running toward me and pushing me hastily toward the car and into the back seat. She threw herself in behind me and Courtney slammed the door. Parker McBraer and Suzanne Gelspar, two other girls from our high school, were enraged at our getaway, kicking the doors of Britt's car as we sped from the McDonald's, the congregation spot for highschoolers.

Of the four of us, Courtney and I had been friends the longest. I still have a picture of her at my birthday party in first grade, but we didn't really become good friends until we were twelve. Tara moved into the neighborhood that summer and we formed the perfect trifecta. Britt came much later, in high school, brought in by Tara.

"What happened?" I asked shakily.

"Where the hell were you?" Courtney yelled. "We almost had to leave you. Jesus, I can't believe that just happened."

Britt seethed. "That stupid bitch. Both of those girls—just alike. What is her deal? Saying I'm staring at her boyfriend in school? She's dreaming. And so what if I was; it's not like he's her property. Thank you for sticking up for me, Courtney. Are you okay?"

Courtney was trembling slightly. "I think so. My scalp hurts. They were pulling my hair, and I think Parker hit me."

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Why were they hitting you if they were mad at Britt?”

“Parker was yelling at Britt about the guy, and I was just staring at Suzanne,” Courtney explained. “Then Suzanne said, ‘What are looking at?’ And I said, ‘I guess I’m looking at you.’ And then she said, ‘Do you want to start something?’ And I said, ‘I think you should just leave my friend alone,’ and then they both pounced on me.”

Tara piped up: “I was trying to get in between them and calm things down...”

“Well that wasn’t working,” Britt interrupted, “so I just went and got the car and somehow Courtney got away and then we couldn’t find *you!*”

“I’m sorry,” I managed weakly.

This was big scary news in my world. Parker and Suzanne were seniors, known for having a mean streak and a reputation for fighting. They never went anywhere without each other. Quite frankly, they scared me.

Britt and Tara were juniors, and Courtney and I sophomores. But somehow we’d gotten away. They each played a part in the escape, while I nearly blew it.

Maybe God hid me in the bathroom because he knows I’m a big chicken. I’m a good friend, but not a very brave one. Courtney and Britt are the sort who have your back no matter what because they don’t care one bit what anyone thinks. Tara’s the mediator; she’s good at calming people down and looking at all sides of things. I like talking, trying to make people feel better with jokes and compliments. My life skills wouldn’t have worked well with Parker and Suzanne.

I reached in the front seat to touch Courtney’s shoulder.

“Girl, I hope you’re okay,” I said, half whispering since Tara and Britt were talking. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“It’s okay,” Courtney said, leaning back with a sigh.

## **Stress and Distress**

*April 2005*

“Lainey, we’re on our way to Rex Hospital, and Tara wanted me to call you. She’s too sick to talk.” It’s Tara’s mother, Roberta.

“What’s wrong? Why are you going to the hospital? What’s wrong?” I ask, like a parrot.

Most young women spend years trying *not* to get pregnant, thinking when they finally go off the pill, it will be easy have a child. That had not been true for Tara, who for three years had been trying to have a baby with her husband Dean.

To get to the root of her infertility, Tara scheduled a laparoscopy, which she had explained was a minimally invasive procedure that uses a camera to look at the ovaries, fallopian tubes and uterus. The camera, she said, was about as big around as a fountain pen and twice as long. “In other words, not a big deal,” Tara concluded one night the week before.

I was doubtful. In my personal experience doctors generally like cutting and exploring, while nearly always underestimating recovery time.

“If they tell you two weeks recovery, multiply that by five,” I told Tara.

But she brushed me off.

During her laparoscopy, the doctors found a large fibroid on Tara’s ovary and removed it. Roberta, who was something like a wine-drinking June Cleaver, flew in from Nashville to take care of Tara. Last I knew, her incision had gotten infected and the doctor had prescribed antibiotics.

“Roberta?” I ask again. I could tell she was distracted.

“Okay, Lainey, I’m here. The antibiotics weren’t working. Her fever never went away, so I called the doctor back this morning, and he admitted her. We’re on our way now.”

“I’ll meet you over there, Roberta.”

I called Courtney and left her a voicemail and, then, at the last minute, I left a message for Britt too. By the time I got there, Tara was in surgery. I felt I might get sick and swallowed in an effort to push my stomach back where it belonged.

“I don’t understand. Why is she in surgery again?” I asked Roberta in the waiting room.

“The skin is so badly infected they’re going to have to cut it out. It’s called Mersa,” Roberta said, brushing back a piece of her damp, honey-colored hair. Mersa? My mind was whirring. It made me want to wash my hands. Sometimes my compulsive need to have a handle on things serves well. Later, I googled “Mersa and staph” and learned Tara had an antibiotic-resistant strain of a staph infection called MRSA, pronounced *Mersa*, which is difficult to treat and is most commonly caught in hospitals and surgical centers.

“I’ve called Don. He’s driving in right now,” Roberta said, looking like she wanted a cigarette.

Don is Tara’s father—a short but powerfully-built man. I felt a little better to know he was on his way. Roberta agreed to call me as soon as Tara was out of surgery. “There’s nothing you can do,” she said. “Go on home and take care of your little one.”

That night Roberta called with news that Tara was doing fairly well, although the large incision was bothering her and she still had a fever. The next day I parked in the

deck and made my way again to the seventh floor, rushing past the folks who seemed to be waiting permanently in the lobby. Weren't they here yesterday? Taped to Tara's door was a sign: "Caution: intravenous antibiotics in use. No children allowed."

I slowly pushed open the door. Three doctors and Roberta stood around Tara's bed.

"Hi," I whispered. They looked at me and continued talking. I looked at one of the doctor's nametags; my eyes skimmed over his name and landed on "*infectious diseases specialist*." He was taking the bandage off of Tara's stomach. She was so sedated her eyes look like coin slots.

I've heard stories of people fainting or retching at the sight of blood, but I never thought it true. Seeing Tara's wound, however, at least seven inches across her abdomen, crossing right through her belly button, I turned my head sharply away and sucked in my breath. Her original surgery incision had been just a half-inch around the bellybutton to allow for the camera.

"I'll be back," I whispered and slipped quietly out of the room.

Although my original intention was to give Tara's mother some privacy with the doctors, I found myself by the elevators quietly falling apart. *She looked so...sick*. I stood looking out the window, wiping away tears, as the elevators rang their arrival and people filed in and out.

When I went back, Roberta was waiting outside the door to Tara's room.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

"Lainey, she's going to have to go back into surgery."

"But she just came out!"

“It’s the staph infection. It’s still spreading. They can’t get it under control.”

“Why not? What about antibiotics?”

“They’ve got her on so many antibiotics, even an intravenous line that runs right by her heart. They’re taking her back to take out another three inches.”

“Another three inches!” I said, nearly wringing my hands. “She’s not going to have any skin left.”

“Go in and talk to her; she’s really upset,” Roberta said. “I’ll leave you two alone; I need a bathroom break anyway.”

I took a deep breath. *I will not cry in front of Tara*, I told myself. *If she’s scared, then I will be her comfort. She has been mine so many times before.* I pushed open the door and put a smile on my face.

“Well, there you are! I checked the hotel gift shop first, knowing how you love to shop, but here you are just lying around.”

Tara looked at me and licked her lips. I sat down on the bed and held her hand. Her face was red and swollen, her hair matted with sweat.

“They’re taking me for more surgery,” she said, her mouth trembling.

“I know,” I said, fighting my own tremble. “It’s going to be okay. They’re good surgeons. You’re in the best place you can be.”

“This may be it, Lainey. They’re trying everything and it’s not working.”

“Tara, don’t say that!” I said, not successful any more at holding back the tears. “This will work. I know you’re scared. I would be too. But you can do this. You can do this again.”

“Promise me it’s going to be okay,” Tara said.

*Don't make promises you can't keep*, my brain chided.

“I promise. You’re going to okay, but you’ve got to do your part to help them make you well.”

Tears slid down Tara’s cheek, and I put my arms around her neck and shoulders, careful not to disturb her intravenous line. The door opened and Roberta came in with Tara’s husband, Dean, and two attendants. They busied themselves moving poles and wires and monitors and began wheeling Tara’s bed out of the room. They were taking her to surgery right then. I grabbed Tara’s hand and Dean grabbed the other.

“I love you, girl. I’m praying for you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Once she was a safe distance, my tears came faster. Roberta and I cried together for a while and she excused herself to take a call from Don, rubbing her eyes as she gave him the latest news. I settled into a hard bucket chair in the waiting room, the *Rosie O'Donnell* show blaring. I might as well stay. Roberta was clearly exhausted. At least Tyler, my two-year-old son, was in day care and, although I had work to do, I couldn’t imagine being able to concentrate on it under the circumstances. I tried calling Courtney, but got voicemail again. I thought of calling Britt again too, but found I didn’t really want to.

I sighed. How had things between the four of us changed so quickly? In high school, we were such a force of solidarity and then, it’s true, we went our separate ways after college. But it seemed so serendipitous that we all ended up living back in North Carolina and picked up right where we’d left off. I used to joke that in fifty years we’d all be bitching at each other on the drive over to Bingo, stopping on the way to eat at Golden

Corral. At the very least, I thought we'd continue our tradition of seeing each other—sans husbands and kids—weekly. But it wasn't working out that way at all. Six years before, I had been the one who'd brushed off the girls, but only momentarily. Now Britt seemed lost to us and I didn't think we'd ever get her back. Back then, Britt had been eager for the get-togethers. In fact, we had the first “Ally” meeting at her house. I smiled, thinking of how Ally had gotten started. It was Tara who had brought us together again.

## **Six years earlier**

### **The Road Home**

*January 1999*

What a crummy picture. It was humiliating enough to fail the N.C. Driver's License test—one of the milestones of my move back home—but now that I had finally passed it, I would carry this picture around for the next seven years. The expiration date under the mug shot: October 25, 2006. I would be thirty-five then. In other words, old. I held it up to the light, its hologram winking at me in the sun. In it, my honey-rinsed hair is pressed flat against the sides of my head, a goofy smile sits on my face, and one eye is open wider than the other, as always. It didn't matter. I was home—finally—and had been for about six weeks. Only a few months ago in Tallahassee, at age 27, I'd told my husband Jack that if something didn't happen soon to get us back home, I was going to drink myself to death.

I hadn't meant to rely on alcohol, really, but I'm an anxious person. It's a wonder I ever made the decision to leave North Carolina after college. It took me a year of pondering. In 1995, I decided to go and live with my long-time boyfriend, Jack, who had transferred to Cincinnati with a corporate job. We were both excited, and I was nervous. I didn't want to leave, but everyone seemed to be moving on with life except me. Courtney, in all her blonde glory, had gotten an offer right out of college to work in sales with Kodak, Tara had started real estate school, and Britt had a job with IBM in Raleigh. I had landed a job in Raleigh at an advertising agency as a media buyer, a job I hated so much I planned for months the day I would leave.

To Cincinnati I took a BA in Journalism from UNC-Chapel Hill and an old Eagle Premier that I financed for \$6,000. My father drove with me, towing a U-Haul loaded with secondhand furniture while I followed, crying until we reached the state line. It was ridiculous, but I couldn't stop. I would miss my mother the most.

"It's so sad," I said to her the morning of my departure, as she stood, still in her bathrobe, in the driveway of my childhood home, seeing us off.

"It's not sad," she said, tears in her eyes too. "It would be sad if you could never leave, never grow up. This is how things are supposed to work."

I had two large fears about moving away from home: leaving my friends and my parents and staying at home alone in Cincinnati. In his job, Jack traveled four nights a week—out on Monday morning, home Friday evening. The entire time I worked at the ad agency, I gave myself pep talks enriched with my own brand of determination: "You can do this. You can move away even if it kills you." And three years later, I had thought maybe it was killing me.

I had to call on those pep talks often because as brave as I can be sometimes (like the time I jumped passionately into a fight to defend Jack, much to his dismay, or applying to UNC-Chapel Hill even when my advisor discouraged me), deep down I'm a big old chicken-weenie, afraid of lots of little things. I cannot say where this comes from, exactly, but only that I was the kind of child who didn't like haunted houses or scary movies. When I was about six, my mother warned me not take candy from strangers, and for years I was convinced a strange man would be lurking on trails near my house waiting for me, perhaps even following me on my bike. Trying to scare me didn't take much effort, and my sensitivity transferred easily into being afraid to stay alone at night.

One time in middle school, I was baby-sitting and noticed that the mother had a list of sitters stuck on the fridge. Next to my name, she had written “Timid after dark.” How did she know that? I brought it up to Courtney, who always got more babysitting jobs than I. “Well, you are,” she clipped.

I was.

Another time, when I was about thirteen and home alone, I called my older brother to drive over and search the house for an intruder because I was afraid someone had gotten in while I was out. I remember he even checked in the dryer to make me feel better. I loved him for that, and would have been crushed had he refused.

The fear continued into high school. When my parents went to our beach house for the weekend, I would beg one of my girlfriends to spend the night. Even in college, when my roommate slept at her boyfriend’s, I stayed awake until three or four in the morning, often getting out of bed to peer through the blinds. The later it got, the safer I felt. By four or five a.m., I figured the paper was being delivered, and I would finally drift off to sleep. It’s a strange thing, this fear, but something Courtney, Tara and Britt accepted. We all had weaknesses.

Still, I have to take issue with that mommy’s assessment of me as “timid after dark.” Scared of the dark? Certainly. Definitely. But timid? I’m not a timid person. I’m non-confrontational, sometimes a little insecure, veering on the side of conservative when it comes to dressing or tattoos and piercings, but timid I am not. I talk too much and ask too many questions, laugh too loud, and have no qualms chatting up the person next to me in the cereal aisle at the supermarket. I’ve started a business on my own and applied

to graduate school in the hopes of mingling with some of the great writers and scholars in the state.

And yet, “timid after dark,” was my moniker among the neighborhood moms and probably stunted my ambition as a babysitter. I read recently that night-time anxiety such as mine can be a manifestation of obsessive compulsive disorder or OCD, which is actually the fourth most common neuropsychiatric illness in the country. I know this, because in my obsessive compulsive way, I tracked this information down after seeing an article on night-time anxiety that made me sit up and think “that’s me.”

I did move to Cincinnati to be with Jack and, six months later, he was transferred again—this time to Tallahassee, Florida. We had gotten engaged, but still weren’t married. The additional move and job change for me exacerbated the night-time anxiety I had feared. I missed my friends terribly as well as the familiar landscape of home. And Jack wasn’t home the majority of the time due to his travel schedule.

Desperate to turn off my brain, I developed a coping mechanism to sleep: drinking from six to nine beers a night. After that, I’d crash into bed, usually after throwing up, and I would be asleep for the night. Somehow I held interesting jobs, working either at newspapers or in public relations, but good friends were hard to make. I had lots of acquaintances, but few real friends and none like Courtney, Tara or Britt. Jack and I had gotten engaged in Cincinnati and started planning our wedding once we moved. It felt to me like finding a missing shoe I’d been looking for forever. I felt sturdier, more balanced, with him. But the novelty of playing house had worn off. As much as I loved him, I missed my old life.

In 1997, we traveled to Raleigh for our wedding: a predictable Southern one with white dress, wedding party, preacher, harpist, unity candle and scriptures. We drank, danced, and ate coconut shrimp and mini-quiches, though not many. It's true you don't eat at your own wedding.

After honeymooning in Jamaica, however, it was back to our regular lives. Jack went back to work, as did I, only with nothing to look forward to or to plan. In Tallahassee, my closest friend lived across the street and she was, to put it mildly, my drinking buddy. Angel made me look like a fundamentalist teetotaler. We often slammed beers and smoked cigarettes together in the sticky heat of the Florida Panhandle. After a few years of this, one morning in May, I told Jack I had to get out. As if God was listening, by October, Jack got an offer to be transferred to Charlotte.

"It's got to be Raleigh," I said.

"Come on, Charlotte is just as good."

"If they can do Charlotte, they can do Raleigh," I persisted. I wanted to go home.

In January 1999, we packed up and headed to North Carolina and our new home—me with the worst hangover I'd ever had—and a head-pounding ten-hour drive. Angel had insisted we drink together as a last hurrah. Sliding my new driver's license into my wallet I thought, "I'll never make that drive again."

## **Ally McBeal**

*March 1999*

Shortly after I moved back, Courtney did too. Tara hadn't left. She was a full-fledged Realtor who made more money than any of us. Now that I was back home, married and all, one would think I would've been keen on meeting the girls once a week without husbands or boyfriends, which was Tara's idea.

"I think we need to have an *Ally McBeal* night, where we get together once a week, eat dinner, watch the show, and talk," she urged.

"That is the dumbest show," I said. "We might as well watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."

"What's wrong with Buffy? I love that show," said Britt. "I'm for it. We can do it at my place first."

"Okay," Courtney chimed in. She was temporarily living in her mother's basement with her husband while he finished school. "We can do it here the next week."

"I can't believe you guys are going to watch that show," I said, rolling my eyes.

"You don't have to come, girlfriend, it's up to you," said Tara.

Damn right, it's up to me, I thought. And I didn't go, that first time. I sat on my back deck and read and drank a beer and smoked cigarettes as was my habit. My husband still had his travel job. Why wasn't I taking advantage of an invitation to hang out with my old friends? Maybe I was used to being alone. Old habits, even the ones you want to lose, sometimes die hard.

The next week I went. If you're a television snob, as I am, you're probably not familiar with *Ally McBeal*. Fox broadcast the comedy-drama from 1997 to 2002, and

Calista Flockhart played Ally, a young attorney working in Boston for Cage, Fish and Associates.

Much to my dismay, I actually began to like the show, or at least to follow it. Others did too. *Ally McBeal* basked in the limelight of popular culture and the show's popularity became controversial. Feminists thought the *Ally McBeal* character was degrading to women because of her flakiness and lack of legal knowledge. In fact, Calista Flockhart as Ally McBeal was on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1998 juxtaposed with the images of Betty Freidan, Susan B. Anthony and Gloria Steinem.

Ally was both dumb and smart at the same time, like a lot of people. A successful attorney, she pined over unavailable men or went out with losers. She was often left speechless when an injustice rained down upon her, thinking of the perfect thing to say after it was too late.

An ardent feminist Ally was not, but we identified with her. The plots drew us all in. We wondered if Ally would ever marry her childhood love, Billy, who was already married to Georgia. Of course they all worked at the same law firm. We identified with the dancing baby Ally often saw in her mind (a few of us already feeling the tick-tock of our biological clocks). And Elaine, how could you not love Elaine, the sexpot secretary who schemed and flirted but had a heart of gold?

Tara liked to say that Britt reminded her of Ally, which I thought was absurd. First, because it always bothers me when people make comparisons between their own lives and television dramas and, second, because part of me wanted Tara to think my life resembled something on television, not Britt's. I liked Britt, of course, but there had

never been any love lost between us, and I didn't want her to have the glory. The jealousies of girlhood friendships don't necessarily die with girlhood.

"Get inside, ya'll smokestacks!! It's starting," yelled Britt, her dark brown hair draped around one shoulder like a silky wrap. Tara and I were the occasional smokers in the group, claiming we only did it on Ally nights. For me, this was a huge improvement.

"Damn, it's cold. I hate winter," shivered Tara as we walked back in from Courtney's concrete mini-stoop, plopping down on the sofa wedged into her mother's basement.

On the screen, Georgia was giving Ally a superior glance as she slid her arm around husband Billy and they left the office for the night. It was Ally's birthday, and she contemplated the quality of her life, or lack thereof, and wondered what the next year would bring.

An hour later, I was glad to see the credits rolling because I had more I wanted to talk about. Before and after the show, we all talked, but once *Ally* started, Britt, especially, would shush you if you tried to continue.

"Okay, so, what I was trying to say before," I began.

"Wait a minute," said Courtney. "I need more wine."

I sighed, waiting patiently until everyone was settled. "If my parents are going to get divorced, what does that say about me, about my marriage?"

"Their divorce doesn't say anything about your marriage. You're grown," Courtney pointed out.

“But now I come from a broken home. You know how people always predict the success of marriages by looking at the marriages of the bride’s and groom’s parents.

What does their divorce say about me?”

My parents’ divorce was eating my soul. After nearly four years of being away from home, I had so looked forward to coming back and being with the family. But after forty-seven years, my parents were calling it quits and the break-up was fierce. I was their youngest child and, at twenty-eight, I was taking it a lot harder than my other siblings.

My maternal grandmother’s death was the catalyst. My mother had inherited some farmland, and my father wanted to sell it and use the money to start a business or maybe just to spend. That part was never clear. In his mind, he deserved it for supporting my mother and the family for so many years. But the land had been inherited jointly by my mother’s sister. To liquidate the asset, both parties had to agree to sell, and my aunt didn’t want to, nor did my mother. It was the beginning of the end. My mother’s inheritance turned my father into someone I’d never met.

Their breakup consumed me; if I could just find the right words, the whole family could get back to normal. This was my mission, and I had time for it since I hadn’t started a job. It was an obsessive responsibility.

Three pairs of eyes looked at me, rapt and sympathetic, but, like me, unable to think of the right words. I was on the verge of crying—again.

“I just can’t believe this is happening. There’s nothing left. It’s like I imagined the whole world I grew up in—the whole big family with four kids, the Williams clan. The relationship I thought my mother and father had was never genuine; my mother never

stood up for herself or claimed her place for more than forty years. And now that she's *finally* doing it, my father is just going to discard her, and us, because she won't do what he wants," I felt myself gasping for air. "She talks to me all the time about it, but I can't take it; it's too hard to hear all of these things."

"I know how hard it is to have a parent alone. Look at my mom. I worry about her all the time since my dad died," Courtney said, her eyes the color of stagnant water tonight, matching her grey wool sweater.

"It's not the same thing! Your dad *died*. Britt, your mom *died*. Neither of them deserted the other. Sometimes, I think this whole thing would be easier if my dad were dead!" Tears clouded my vision.

"You don't mean that," someone whispered.

"Yes, I do. I swear it. Then his leaving wouldn't be by choice. There wouldn't be all this hurt, these feelings of betrayal. Why can't he just be a better man?"

"He is what he is," said Tara. "That's the way he's always been. It's the way he'll always be. He's never been one to apologize and beg for anything from anyone. You want him to be something he's not, Lainey."

I sighed, spent. These discussions had been going on since I moved back two months earlier. I put on my coat and gloves, giving hugs all around. I knew the girls were tired of hearing about the divorce. I was tired of it too, but I couldn't stop. My brain chewed on the thoughts constantly, like a worn-out piece of gum. I had a strong suspicion these thoughts were replacing my obsessive night-time anxiety. The anxiety was still there, the source different.

Lately, the thing that haunted me was that I had no “home” anymore. In Florida, I’d wanted to come “home,” and now that I was here, there was nothing left. The house I grew up in had been sold. My mother lived in a new house, my dad in an apartment. Even family gatherings were different. My dad refused to come if my mom was there, and my older brothers and sister and I struggled to steer the conversation down neutral paths. Four of my five nieces were still rather young, and I don’t know what their parents explained to them, but I said nothing. No one ever explained why Paw-Paw was missing and the girls never asked me. I’m sure they knew. Kids are a lot smarter than we think.

At home, I took advantage of my new Internet connection, typing “The elderly and divorce,” and found a ton of information on older people who have to get divorced in order to qualify for long-term care. I found pages of information on how to have a “good” divorce and studies following children over a twenty-year period to see how they had fared. But that wasn’t me. I needed to find something on why people my parents’ age divorced. If I found an explanation, maybe I could find a solution.

The AARP came through with this: “Increasingly, men and women...who have spent decades with the same mate, are willing to forfeit marital security if their union has been an unhappy one. Experts say the number of people ending long-term marriages after age 50 is steadily increasing.”

An article called “The Divorce Dilemma” on the University of Texas website, made my heart beat a little faster: “Divorce seems to be the most traumatic on those children whose parents were not in a high-conflict marriage. The divorce catches them totally by surprise.”

True, my brothers and sister had been somewhat surprised but not completely shocked, as I had been. I remarked to my sister one night, older than me by ten years yet closer in age than my two brothers, “If you had asked me ten years ago if mom and dad would ever divorce, I’d have said you were crazy. No way.”

“Not me,” she had shrugged. Maybe it’s that she had ten years on me and could understand how my father’s my-way-or-the-highway attitude could have simply worn my mother out. My father wore on me too. As a child, I remember frequently tiptoeing around sensitive issues in an effort to pacify him, and we were always full of praise at his ideas or just in his presence. But we got to move away and my mother did not. At least not until now.

I crawled into bed. Jack was already asleep and had been for a while. Would our marriage work? We were so different. We didn’t share any hobbies; he lived for cycling and I loved reading. I woke early on a Saturday to go to yard sales, and he hadn’t been shopping in a decade. Still, we were both driven. We both had passion, or maybe it was ambition. And we talked easily about lots of things, including how the world worked and how we felt about it, although we completely and totally disagreed on politics. Still, we would be okay. Wouldn’t we?

I closed my eyes and forced some deep breaths. In for three, push out for five. I didn’t have the family I grew up with and everything had changed, but I did have the Ally girls, and Jack, and they were all witnesses to my past. They were “home” too, weren’t they? It’s not true that I was left with nothing. I couldn’t turn the thoughts off. Where was my mantra? It had to be here somewhere.

*Peace, calm, comfortable. Peace, calm, comfortable.*

There it was. Those are the three soothing words I'd chosen more than three years ago to help me sleep. That and the booze. If one didn't work, the other usually would. I'd always thought it was good to have a backup plan.

## **Road Trip**

*August 1999*

I thought about how much we had grown up. Tara's white Cadillac STS was plush. Creme leather seats enveloped me, and I fiddled with the climate control in the backseat. We were heading to Emerald Isle for what we still called a girl's weekend, though we considered ourselves mature. In the old days, it used to be Britt who drove, Tara riding shotgun, and Courtney and I were in the back. Tara and Britt had switched positions, but the rest was the same, except we had jobs and, for two of us, mortgages. Tara's upcoming marriage would bring our married numbers to three.

"So, anyway, do you think it should be Hansen & Black Realty or Black & Hansen?" asked Tara, who was thinking of launching her own real estate company with a fellow realtor and friend named Sarah Hansen. "Black" would be Tara's new last name when she married next month.

"What does Sarah think?"

"I haven't asked her yet. We're still in the planning stages."

"I think you should marry Dean first and then decide if your new last name should come first or second," I said, laughing. The last few months I had been immersed in helping plan the wedding. Since I was still looking for work, I rode around with Tara looking at china patterns (fine, casual or both?), cakes (buttercream or whipped?), and flowers (hand-tied or cascading?). We would all be in the wedding as attendants.

Britt had changed since I had moved back or maybe I was the one who'd changed. It was hard to tell. We'd already had quite a few *Ally* nights and she hardly said a word. It drove me crazy.

"Why does she even come?" I asked Tara once when Britt wasn't with us. "She acts like she doesn't want to be here." Tara had said, "She had a hard time when you guys were gone. Just give her time."

"God, Tara. You're such a pushover," Courtney had chided. Courtney was always on the opposite side of any argument. She had "devil's advocate" down pat. "My dad died. Lainey's parents are divorcing. Your dad had cancer. We've all had problems." Tara had just rolled her eyes. Britt was Tara's pet project.

It's true Britt's mother had died a few years earlier and a boy she professed to be her true love, although they never dated, had been shot in a hunting accident. But it was hard to come to *Ally* every week and watch her sit there tapping her foot and staring at the television, while the rest of us tried in earnest to get to know each other again. I thought her cold and impersonal. All she talked about was dieting and she didn't need to lose weight.

Britt had been a lot of fun in high school, always laughing and partying, but she was not the kind of person I would have been friends with if I'd just met her. Maybe I envied her, but she seemed artificial, with fake nails and enhanced breasts, and big tall shoes that she somehow managed to walk in without killing herself.

I looked over at Tara. She was still considering her company's name. I wondered how she would make it. She's often late and thoroughly disorganized, but the minute she walks into a room, her energy disperses through it and the atmosphere gets fizzy, her high

laugh floating, while she hugs all around, plump hands patting your back on her way to put her bottle of wine in the fridge. She had the personality for being a real estate broker, but not the promptness. So far, however, her clients had not minded; referrals came easily at the nationally known realty company where she worked currently. Unlike Britt, Tara really did have a weight problem. I wondered if prospective clients would be put off by it. Her father and her fiancé were always giving her grief. But she had been overweight for so long, the rest of us had forgotten about it.

Then there was Courtney, sitting next to me putting on a fresh coat of lipstick with the aid of a compact mirror. Since I've known her, she's always had a mirror close by. In junior high, she kept a mirror as thin as a credit card, with its own case, in the back pocket of her Jordache jeans. Aside from that, she's even-keeled and damn near normal, although she certainly had the toughest childhood of any us. Her father was an alcoholic who quit working before she was ten, leaving Courtney's mom to foot the bill for all the household expenses. Her parents fought a lot and her dad taped her phone calls. He drank vodka at the kitchen table all day long, spending most of his time entering contests and sweepstakes. He wasn't a mean drunk, however. Growing up, I liked him because he was always there, unlike my dad, and he bought boxes of Swiss Cake Rolls and made dinner each night for Courtney and her mother. He always had a meat, a starch and a vegetable. I thought that was very nice and said as much. "You don't have to live with him," Courtney would remind me.

Courtney worked all through high school and graduated eighth in our class. She was accepted at UNC-Chapel Hill and paid her way mostly on credit cards, working as a waitress and fundraiser for the alumni association to pay her rent and buy groceries. Her

mother gave her hair bows and belts for Christmas, which made me want to shake her. Courtney had to work so hard just to pay the bills. Fashion she could live without. Cash she needed.

“Here’s the bridge,” Courtney broke into my reverie as the car began to climb the steep incline. The view from the Emerald Isle Bridge was gorgeous, green-grey water winking at us, tidal grass waving. As we reached the crest of the bridge, I watched the boats underneath, wondering what their occupants were doing, who they were. They must all have different stories—surely the hardworking shrimpers would have a different take on life than the good old boys down for a weekend of catching king mackerel in their C-Hawks, Kencrafts and Grady Whites. The shrimpers fished for livelihood, the others for sport. The ocean was an equalizer between the working men and the privileged, but on land the privileged had the upper hand.

“God, I remember when we used to come down here in high school,” Tara said. “Do you remember all those nights we used to walk down to the Trav-L-Park and hang out with guys or even the Marines, remember that?”

“It’s amazing we weren’t raped or killed,” Courtney answered. “I swear, if I ever have a daughter and she’s anything like us, I’ll kill her.”

“Come on Courtney, we weren’t that bad.”

“Lainey, we drank, we skipped school, we smoked pot...”

“You guys smoked pot. I never did that.”

“Well, we used to take rides with guys we didn’t know and walk places in the pitch dark by ourselves.”

“Still, I don’t think we were that bad,” I argued. “We all did well in school. We didn’t do any serious drugs.”

“Just wait until you have kids,” Courtney said.

“Like you do,” I challenged.

“Actually, Todd and I have been thinking about it.”

“Are you serious? You guys are still living with your mother.”

“But we won’t be much longer. Todd is graduating in a few weeks, and Tara’s going to start showing us some houses.”

“You are?” I asked, perching myself in the middle of the backseat to peer at the side of Tara’s face. “I swear you guys never tell me anything at all, nada.”

“I thought I told you,” Courtney said. “And we do tell you now.”

“No you don’t. It’s some old throwback habit from high school.”

“Girl,” Tara laughed. “You just used to be so prudish. We’d go hook up with someone and you’d wrinkle your nose and ask why we couldn’t just find someone nice to date. Like it was that easy.”

“I was not that way,” I pouted. Just like that we had moved from adulthood back to adolescent banter.

“Yes, you were. You thought it was so easy to find a good guy because you found Jack so easily—when you were like, what, sixteen?”

“You were like that, Lainey,” Britt broke in.

“Ah, she speaks!”

“Shut up. I was just listening,” Britt smiled. “You were so into him and being in a serious relationship that anytime anyone else did anything but be in a serious relationship, you disapproved.”

I sighed. “Whatever. This whole thing is totally off topic.” I was trying to bring us back to adulthood. “Courtney, how can you think of starting a family when you don’t even have a house fixed up yet? And Todd hasn’t got a job yet. Don’t you want to, you know, take some time to get things settled?” I was big into getting things settled. I was still working on window treatments and furniture for my own house.

“Even if I got pregnant tomorrow, I’d still have nine months.”

“What brought this on anyway?” I asked, trying to conceal an annoyance bred from my own anxiety and hesitation on the subject.

“I don’t know. We’ve been married four years. And the other day we went to see Jenna in the hospital with her new baby,” Courtney said, referring to a friend she’d gone to college with. “Todd and I left just thinking how amazing it was, to create a living human being. We talked about it and thought, why not?”

I could think of plenty of reasons why not; in fact, most of them I had mulled over obsessively, especially at night when I was trying to fall asleep. You could have a baby with major health issues. The genetic possibilities for error were endless. You could regret having the baby because it took up too much of your time. It could hurt your marriage, you could never go back to the way life used to be....

“Thank God we’re finally here! My back is killing me. I need a cigarette,” Tara announced, interrupting my thoughts as she pulled into the driveway and began stretching.

I started gathering my bags and headed up the stairs, key in hand. This beach house, an old A-frame my family referred to as “The Chalet,” was all that was left of my family as it used to be.

I unlocked the door and pushed it open, breathing in the damp, humid beach smell. Everything was as I remembered. Big wrap-around bar in the kitchen, a glass bowl full of sea-shells on the coffee table, comfy old couches you could sit on with a wet bottom or sandy legs; it didn’t matter. The only difference was my mother didn’t come here anymore. I have so many pictures of her standing behind the bar at the stove boiling corn-on-the-cob or toasting bread, waiting for my father or brothers to bring in fish or burgers off the grill so we could all eat.

But she was not welcome anymore, and my father had cleaned out most signs of her a while back. In the bathroom, I sat down to pee and leaned over to the pantry to grab a roll of toilet paper. My mother’s straw beach hats used to hang there, but they were gone.

After unpacking, we went to dinner at Rucker John’s, a casual eatery within walking distance of the chalet. It’s the kind of place that serves beer and bar food and some surprisingly tasty specials. Afterward, I was ready to go home and sit on the deck and drink some beer and talk. Tara and Courtney wanted to go to a bar. Britt said she could go either way.

“Put your big-girl panties on and let’s go,” Tara said to me. “This is girls’ weekend, not geriatric, sit-around weekend. You can do that at home.”

I sighed. Drinking beer was great, but drinking beer on a full stomach and then dancing—not so great. My experience in bars always had made me thankful I didn't have to go to them anymore. I never got hit on, unlike the other three and, to be honest, this lack of public affection was a little embarrassing. It would be nice to be flirted with *sometimes*. It is hard to describe one's own appearance, but I consider myself fairly average—about 5-foot-4 and I-don't-know-how-many pounds exactly. I don't like to weigh. Even at the doctor's office, I face away from the scale and tell the sleeve of the white lab coat that I don't want to know, as if my weight is an ugly disease or a creditor calling to tell me what I owe. I'm not tall and not short, not fat and not thin. I exercise regularly and eat well, but I also like happy hour in good company and the snacks that come with it.

The nightclub was located in a strip mall across the street from the restaurant. It had been there for many years under different names such as Rudy's and Hunky Dory. Tonight it was Club Millennium. Courtney walked in first. "We've got four beautiful women here," she was saying to the guy at the door, trying to negotiate a lower cover charge for all of us. "We'll be good for business. Can we do a buy-one, get one free deal? We'll pay for two of us to get in and the other two get in free."

The bouncer, hair cut close to his homely head, pondered this. His muscled jaw jutted out unnaturally with chewing tobacco.

"I don't know. Not really supposed to," he said, looking at Courtney, his eyes scanning her lithe frame from top to bottom.

"But you can," she said winking, hand on her hip. "We won't tell."

The deal was made. He stamped our hands, and I readied myself for the “walk.” Tara and I always kidded Courtney about the “walk.” Actually we kidded both Britt and Courtney. We always let one of them go first. We could actually watch men twisting their necks and straining in their seats as they passed—to see Britt because of her long hair and dark, exotic looks and Courtney because of her bright blondness and cute, trim figure. Tara and I picked up the rear, her cottony hair bouncing around her shoulders, usually with a funky handbag or beaded sandals (“Jewelry for your feet”). I came last, decent I hoped, in Capris and an unremarkable top, hair straight and long, down past my shoulders. I watched people watch us.

The band, a group of five in their late twenties to early thirties, was called Sugar Daddy and they dispersed Sugar Daddy candy to the audience during the show. The songs were a tribute to the 70s and 80s with “Sweet Home Alabama” and “Pour Some Sugar on Me” thumping out of the speakers. Britt and Courtney were good dancers, while Tara and I just moved to the music, smiling at each other and making hand gestures to communicate because the music was always too loud.

The men started moving in. A shagging-type business man paired up with Courtney. Britt moved to dance by herself closer to the stage. A man who looked to be in his mid-60s was shimmying toward Tara and me. I pulled her head to my ear.

“Here’s your boyfriend. I’m going to get a drink,” I laughed.

“Don’t!” she yelled.

I waved my fingers at the man, who quickly occupied my spot.

I settled in at our booth to watch the untended purses, my job when I got tired of dancing, and drank my beer. Courtney was twisting to the music, Britt was still seducing

the stage, apparently eyeing the lead male singer, and Tara was leading the older guy to the bar, no doubt to buy us all a round of drinks. “Why pay if you can get them for free?” she liked to ask, laughing. Of course, this was all in fun—a tribute to the old days. Two of us were married, one soon-to-be, and Britt was still looking.

I motioned to Tara, pointing at the ladies’ room, and she brought the drinks and her guy to our table. On my way back, I stood for a minute watching Courtney. She could have fun in a mental hospital if it had a dance floor. She was careful not to get too close to her partner, but he couldn’t take his eyes off of her. Soon I felt a presence beside me. He was a young guy, maybe 22 or 23, with bad acne and a slight frame.

“It’s crowded here, isn’t it?” he said.

“Sure is,” I yelled. I felt a little sorry for him. When I was a teenager, I could have been the poster child for Accutane, a controversial drug that’s supposed to cure acne, except that I was in the small percentage of people that it didn’t actually cure, although it helped a lot.

“Do you want to dance?” the boy yelled, nudging me.

“Not really,” I said as his face fell.

“I’m just so tired, and my feet are killing me,” I added. “Let’s go sit down.”

We joined Tara and her old man at the table. I found out my guy, Patrick, worked for his dad at the marina, lived at home, and really liked flying model airplanes.

“How interesting,” I said, which made Tara smile over the old guy’s head. “How interesting” was my favorite public response. A polite response, underneath it could mean anything, that a subject was bizarre, disgusting, weird, hilarious or, well, interesting.

Finally, the bartender shouted “Last Call” and soon it was time to go. Courtney’s guy wanted to drive us home, but I shot her a threatening look. Britt had to be coerced into leaving Warren, the lead singer of Sugar Daddy, whom she’d been kissing since his last set. Agitated by our interruptions, once in the car, Britt let me have it.

“You are one nerd magnet, Lainey. I swear to God, when we walked in there, I pointed out that guy and told Tara, “You watch, Lainey will be talking to him in an hour. And you were! You do it every single time.” Tara and Courtney started chuckling.

“I know! I was totally cracking up when you brought him to the table,” Tara said.

“You guys, he was really nice,” I said seriously. “His name was Patrick and he asked me to dance. I didn’t want to, but I felt bad about it so we started talking.”

“Of course you felt bad about it,” Britt said. “You always do. You are the biggest wimp. Why didn’t you just say no and walk away. People do it all the time.”

“Because she’s Lainey,” Tara said, laughing.

I didn’t mind so much being teased about being a nerd magnet. It was a safe subject that didn’t bother me. We all had those subjects. We teased Tara about her shopping, Britt about her attitude, and Courtney about being the devil’s advocate. We were careful not to preach on sensitive subjects that were likely to stand the hair on end: my drinking, Courtney’s husband Todd (a Yankee transplant who didn’t mince words), and Tara’s weight. And Britt, well, she kept so many things under wraps we didn’t tease her much at all.

That night I lay in my bunk and thought about us “girls.” We were lucky to have found each other again. My sister thought so. My mother too. But did the girls think it?

Did they think they were lucky to have me? I'd been without close friends for so long, I was getting a little superstitious. What if our foursome didn't last?

## **The Agents of Bonding**

*September 2000*

*Ally McBeal* was getting weirder; there was no doubt about it. Ally's childhood love Billy walks around the law office with a posse of leggy models, looking a lot like Robert Palmer in a music video. And Ally herself is always running to her office and slamming the door when she can't think of anything to say. And sometimes, when Ally frowns, her nose whistles. My compadres thought these eccentric qualities were endearing, so I didn't complain.

As I lit a cigarette, inhaling that first deep puff that delivers a slight shiver of relaxation, I realized that the weirder Ally got, the weirder we were getting—or maybe it was that we were getting closer and more confessional. I couldn't tell.

"You guys will never believe what happened today," said Courtney, as Ally ended and we all went outside to sit on Tara's screened porch, a great place to smoke post-Ally.

"Well, it was first-thing this morning, and I had to poop."

"Gross! Too much information," I yelled.

"Just listen. So, I'm in that bathroom in the basement at my mom's, and I go and it's really big and it won't go down. It's stuck there, at the opening, you know."

"Courtney!" Tara shrieked. "That is so gross."

Courtney's laughing now. "So I open the window—since I'm in the basement the ground is right outside the window—and I find a stick and push it all the way down and flush again."

Britt's nose wrinkled into a cute button-like ball: "What in the hell are you eating?"

"What else was I supposed to do? I couldn't let Todd see it. He would never let me live that down."

"Britt's right," I said. "What are you eating? You have the weirdest bowel system. I remember in college you used to pass some terrible gas. Remember that time in the video store you did it and then walked away from me. When the smell was finally ripe, everyone thought I'd done it."

"You guys, I just eat lots of fiber. And I put a tablespoon of flaxseed on my cereal each morning."

"You're going to have to ask Todd to install one of those industrial toilets," said Tara. "Those things that go "whoosh" when you flush and if you're not careful it will suck your purse down the hole."

"Well, we have officially reached a new low," I said. "We are now literally talking shit."

"Oh, Lainey. Everybody has a poop story. It's just a bodily function. I don't know what you get so embarrassed about," Courtney said.

"Well, let's talk about something better," I offered, "Tara's bachelorette party in Charlotte."

We had all tried to talk Tara out of having her bachelorette party in Charlotte, where she went to college. More than once I'd grumbled that the bride was not supposed to tell the bridesmaids where she wanted the party. But Tara was nothing if not persuasive.

“I’ve got it all planned out you guys,” Tara said. “We’ll leave Saturday afternoon, stay at my friend Jennifer’s, and then hit the town that night.”

Britt, Courtney and I cast each other secret looks. Jennifer was not one of our favorite people. I think our main reason for not wanting to go to Charlotte was that we didn’t want to share Tara or include this outsider. Our Ally nights were bringing us back to the way we used to be.

“Well, who’s going to drive?” Britt asked. “I’m not taking my car; it’s a total gas hog.”

“I’ll drive,” sighed Tara. “It’s going to be fun. I wish I didn’t feel like I was twisting everybody’s arm to go.”

Silence.

“Of course it will be fun,” I blurted. “I can’t wait.”

On the way to Charlotte, sadly, the poop stories resurfaced, but the car ride cemented what had been a tentative start to the remaking of old friendships. As the miles slid under the tires, Tara told of taking laxatives to stay skinny, then racing to a rest room at the Taco Bell, barely making it in time. Britt told her story—it involved a rush to the rest room and a hastily discarded pair of pantyhose.

Of course I had a poop story too, but I couldn’t bear to tell it and I told them so.

“I haven’t even told Jack, you guys. It’s just too embarrassing. Hands down, it’s the most embarrassing thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Come on, girl! This is your chance to redeem yourself, to be something besides the Mother Hen. Just tell it!” Courtney said.

I sighed at the three expectant faces. What the hell, I thought.

“It happened when I was living in Tallahassee,” I started. “And I wanted to go out to lunch, so Jack and I went to Applebee’s, which was right by a Home Depot. We were always working on that house so afterward we stopped in there. We were in some bracket aisle and all of a sudden, I really had to go. You know those cramps you sometimes get that you can actually *hear*? Well, I heard those and they were coming pretty frequently, like contractions,” I laughed. “I told Jack, ‘I have to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back,’ and left him there. By the time I got to the end of the aisle I was practically running toward the back of the store. But the bathroom wasn’t there!! So I turned around and I power-walked up to a sales guy, asking, ‘Where’s your bathroom?’ He pointed to the front and I took off. But I couldn’t find it! The bathroom was missing. By this time, I was really almost crying and my stomach hurt so bad and I passed just a little bit of gas, only it wasn’t gas, it was liquid and it started coming down my leg and plopped onto the cement floor.”

“NO!” Courtney shrieked. “You pooped in the Home Depot!” Britt was laughing so hard, she was wiping tears away. Tara pulled off the road and we sat on the shoulder while I finished the story, which involved throwing away my shorts and thanking God I had on a really long t-shirt that day. The final strategy of that trip was to get out of the Home Depot without anyone, including my husband, detecting my mishap. It worked and I made a promise to myself, right there, to carry Immodium AD in my purse for the foreseeable future.

Getting closer to Charlotte, Tara interrupted our chatter. “Okay you guys, we’re almost here,” she said. “Now, listen, be nice to Jennifer. I know you’re not crazy about her, but she’s really nice.”

“Well, she’s never said much to me when I’ve been around her, but damn, Tara, she’s a little intimidating.” I winced, remembering her six-foot lithe frame, long blonde hair and blue eyes. Talking to her was like having a little chit-chat with Christie Brinkley.

Once we pulled into Jennifer’s driveway, the anticipation of the evening we’d planned for Tara overtook the apprehensions. After dinner, we all started getting ready. Tara was wearing her “Suck for a Buck” shirt that Britt had made for her, which consisted of a white T-shirt with lifesavers glued to the chest. The idea was that guys would suck off a lifesaver and pay a dollar for the privilege. Courtney, Britt and Jennifer had on hoochey-mama clothes: short skirts and big, tall shoes. I had brought an ultra-short black skirt with psychedelic daisies on it that I had borrowed from Tara. She had bought it a few years back when she had lost a lot of weight taking Phen-fen. I felt self-conscious and kept tugging on the back of it. It was feeling pretty breezy up there.

We went first to a male strip club, called Chippewa. I had never seen Courtney more excited.

“This is awesome! Why haven’t we ever come to one of these places before?”

“You are so funny,” I yelled over the throbbing music, ready to engage in a shouting match for the rest of the night because that’s the way it is in bars. “You and men. I can’t believe you get all hot and bothered by these greased-up steroid monsters. I think they’re kind of gross.”

We found a table around the dance floor, ordered drinks, and watched the guys perform. It went on this way for some time until I made a comment to Courtney about our waiter.

“Look at his thing,” I whispered to her when he set my Miller Lite in front of me. “It’s at half-mast and he’s not even excited. I bet it’s not real.”

Courtney grabbed his arm.

“Hey! My friend thinks your thing is a fake!” Courtney yelled over the music.

“No! I didn’t say...”

He turned to me. His penis, bathed in orange satin, was at my eye level and he pushed closer so that it was about three inches from my face.

“You don’t think it’s real?” he asked, sneering, pulling down his g-string. I saw a flash of skin, about half of his penis, the top half, which is a lot better than seeing the bottom half, if you ask me.

“Okay!” I shouted, turning away and covering my eyes. “I believe you, I believe you! Jesus.”

Courtney collapsed into laughter on the table, her blue eyes already looking bloodshot. She wasn’t a big drinker.

“Damn! Why the hell did you do that?” I asked.

“Lainey, you are so funny!” she breathed, doubled over. I sighed.

“Come on, girls, it’s time to go. Time to hit a new place.” Tara yelled to us, standing up, oblivious to our free peep show.

“Good, let’s go to a normal bar.”

“What? Why are we leaving,” Courtney asked, looking incredulous. “This place is awesome.”

“Come on,” Britt laughed. “You’re already drunk. It’s going to be a long night.”

I made \$26 off Tara’s chest, coaxing men to take her offer. That alone probably disqualifies me from ever considering myself a feminist. Of course it wasn’t my money, but I was in charge of collecting it because Courtney was too drunk. It’s pretty sad when they put the English major in charge of money. But that money paid for drinks, an utmost concern of mine at the time, since I still didn’t have a permanent job.

That night I bunked with Britt, and Tara and Courtney shared a bed. Jennifer slept in her own room.

“Don’t get all cuddly with me, Lainey,” Britt said laughing.

“Ha, Ha!” I said. “Don’t worry.”

But Britt’s remark put me on edge. I spent the rest of the night anxious that I might cuddle with Britt. It wasn’t the first time I had unfounded fears about my sexual orientation. It had happened in college too, but I was so disturbed by my fear that I didn’t discuss it. To me, the idea of discussing the fear would have made it true. And that thought fueled my obsession further, even though I never had any desire for women and dated men exclusively. My thoughts made me feel crazy. It is this kind of irrational fear that imprisons the mind of the OCD sufferer.

Later, I found out this fear of being gay is one of the most common themes in people with obsessive compulsive disorder and additionally a designated subset called H-OCD. For those who suffer from this subset of OCD, seeing a member of the same sex

can cause anxiety and triggers unwanted thoughts about being a homosexual. Just my luck.

## **Write On**

*October 2000*

Tara's wedding to Dean went off without a hitch. It was about that time that I became a freelance writer pretty much by accident. In Florida, I had held several jobs I wasn't crazy about, writing health benefits booklets and doing PR for the Public Service Commission. A year before we moved, I was hired at the *Tallahassee Democrat*, and I had loved that job. Leaving it was the only thing that made me sad about moving back to North Carolina.

Once here, I told Jack I wanted to take my time finding the right job and not just jump into something for the sake of being employed. The first job offer I turned down was from a PR agency. The next one was from a publication aimed at fire and rescue personnel. When the publisher called to offer me the position, I liked her so much, I almost felt badly about turning her down, but I wanted to keep my options open.

"I'm really sorry," I said, "but in learning more about it, I'm not sure it's a commitment I want to make right now."

"Well, will you freelance for us until you find something else?" she asked.

I agreed. A few weeks later I turned down another job and the same question was asked of me. I started thinking: If I could get a few more people who needed freelance work, that could be my job.

In Florida, I'd always thought it would be wonderful to work freelance—writing for different people, working from home, making my own schedule. But Jack was quick to interrupt my daydreams with "There'd be no money in it."

But maybe here there would be. Raleigh was a much bigger city than Tallahassee, with more businesses, universities, newspapers and magazines. I made a few calls to contacts from college internships. Armed with names of local editors, I established a game plan.

First, I would need a portfolio to showcase the work I'd done in Tallahassee. After a trip to Hungates in the mall and fifty bucks, I was all set. I started making calls.

"News & Observer."

"Carol Hamer, please." A lovely selection of Muzak began playing *Secret Lovers* by Atlantic Starr. I hummed along.

"This is Carol."

"Hi Carol," proudly, I didn't miss a beat. "My name is Lainey Garson. Mike Zlotney from the paper referred me to you. He said you might need freelance work for the Real Estate section."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I used to work for the *Tallahassee Democrat* Homes section designing the page and also occasionally writing stories. I was hoping we could meet for lunch."

"I think I could do that. What works for you?"

"Really?" I stammered. "Okay, well, what about tomorrow?"

"That's not going to work. What about next week? Wednesday. Noon. Is that good for you? Let's do Caffe Luna, downtown. You know where it is?"

"Of course," I said, having no idea. Confidence was very important at a time like this, I was sure of it. "I'll see you there."

Damn! This was awesome. Who else could I call? I tried my other contacts and convinced three others to meet with me for coffee or lunch—never mind that I didn't really have the money to be going out to all of these lunches. Jack and I have always kept separate accounts. We shared the household expenses, although he paid more because he made more. People look at me like I'm on the verge of divorce when I tell them we have separate accounts, but it works for us. The bills get paid, and we never fight about money. If he blows \$150 playing a round of golf, it doesn't bother me. At the same time, if I spend \$300 on a package of massages, I may or may not tell Jack, but neither of us feels we're being cheated since we're both contributing to the communal pot up front. I called him.

"Bear. Guess what? I just got a lunch appointment with the editor of the N&O's real estate section."

"That's great!"

"Maybe I can really make this work, you know, if I get enough clients."

"Just keep calling people. When you meet with her, be sure to get the payment amount up front and find out what the net is."

"What?"

"You know, net 30, net 60. That's how many days it will take them to pay you once you send the invoice."

"Oh." I had a lot to learn.

I told my mother and sister about my freelancing plan and they were dubious. "I don't know. Don't you think you should be looking for a real job?" Mom asked.

“This would be a real job,” I said, exasperated with trying to explain it all. “That’s the point—to get enough clients that it would take the place of a nine-to-five job.”

“Well, give it a good try,” my mom said. “And then you can always get a real job if it doesn’t pan out.”

“Why does everyone keep saying ‘real job?’” I asked, close to shouting. “Why is writing for money not a real job? I don’t understand that. I’m looking for support and encouragement.” My outburst wasn’t only about freelancing. My parents, still separated and estranged, had not yet signed the final papers for the divorce to be official. Despite the odds, my father had actually offered to go to counseling with her in an effort to discuss things, but my mother said it was “too little too late.” And that fanned the flames; he signed the papers the next day. Every child of divorced parents, no matter how old, has a little fantasy that their parents will get back together. My mother had ruined mine.

“Calm down, girl,” my sister said. “We are supportive. We’re just trying to be realistic too.” Sometimes I would like a little less reality in my life. This whole growing up thing is not nearly what it’s cracked up to be. Up at the same time every day, into the same office making a meager salary of which a third goes to taxes. On my first pay stub from the ad agency where I worked right out of college, I thought the accounting department had made a huge mistake. “Look how much money they’ve taken out here,” I had complained to my pre-divorce dad, still living at home at the time. “That’s for taxes,” he said. “Welcome to the real world.”

Now that I had arrived, I wondered why in the hell I was in such a hurry.

## **The Unofficial Race to Motherhood**

*March 2001*

Ally was at Tara's that night. Courtney walked in with a 40-ounce brown-bagged beer in her hand. It's the funniest thing to me. She doesn't drink much at all, but she thinks nothing of driving over here drinking a beer like it's bottled water. Once she arrives, she might have one more and she's through.

"You better pray you don't get pulled over one day, Courtney. You'll have a lot of explaining to do," I said.

"What, this? I love this. I stopped on the way over."

"For your big 40-ouncer of Schlitz Malt Liquor! That's what the brothers drink, girlfriend, or the construction workers," I laughed.

"So what? It's a good value. I buy two and I'm all set for the night."

The Ally girls were thrilled about my freelancing venture, but as Ally started I could tell they were ready for me to shut up about it. Ally was getting on my nerves.

Georgia and Billy (Ally's childhood love) were breaking up, but Billy had just found out he had a brain tumor. I sighed, but Tara, Courtney and Britt were glued to the set.

"It's always this way on TV," I said. "Why can't they just let them get together already?"

"Well how interesting would that be?" Courtney asked. "Then it would just be 'happily ever after.' That's not good TV. Plus, I doubt he's going to die. This will just give them a chance to do a bunch of hospital scenes and have a lot of tears."

“Well, I wish he would die. He was never good enough for her anyway,” Britt piped up.

“Britt!” the rest of us announced in unison.

“What? If he was stupid enough to marry Georgia instead of the girl he’s loved his whole life then he deserves to die.”

More and more Britt was having hostile outbursts. Her last boyfriend, Jeff, for Valentines Day had given her a bracelet. A fight ensued over whether she really liked it, and the next day he left a book on her doorstep: *Are You the One for Me? Knowing Who’s Right and Avoiding Who’s Wrong* by Barbara DeAngelis. Needless to say, that was the end of Jeff.

It was difficult to talk sense into Britt, to point out that her comment and attitude, even if it was about a fictional character, was cruel and heartless. None of us said anything else and continued watching. Ally and Elaine were having a conspiratorial chat at Elaine’s desk.

“Did I tell you I got a new writing contract yesterday?” I stage-whispered to Courtney, leaning toward her with eager eyebrows lifted.

“That’s great! Who’s it with?”

“God, hush!” Britt yelled. “Wait ‘til a commercial.”

...

The next week we met at a local Chili’s for drinks, forgoing the show because it was a re-run night and it was too cold outside to smoke.

Tara and Britt drank big frosty margaritas, Tara’s with salt and Britt’s without, and Courtney and I each had beers. Courtney and Todd had been trying to get pregnant

now for several months without luck. In a way, I was relieved, but I knew this was selfish.

I had just gone to the bathroom for the first time; we call it breaking the seal because once you go, you have to go a lot more often. At least I would. My nickname in high school among the girls used to be Lainey Pee-Soon, but thankfully it had been retired.

“Anyway,” Courtney was saying when I returned. “I’m starting to get frustrated. It’s been seven months. Maybe we can’t get pregnant. Todd and I were talking about the possibility of adopting.”

“Courtney, it takes a year before the doctors are even worried about it,” I said, although how I knew this I couldn’t remember. “I would probably adopt, though, if I ever had a problem.”

“Not me,” Tara said. “You don’t know what you’re getting.”

“Tara, you don’t know what you’re getting when you have your own baby, either. I mean, there could be deformities or problems. You just don’t know,” I said.

“Yeah, but at least you know you didn’t do drugs during your pregnancy or whether or not there’s any diseases or hereditary conditions.” We all looked at Britt.

“What about you, Britt? Would you adopt?” Tara asked her.

“I guess; I’ve never really thought about it.” This was odd because Britt, an only child, actually was adopted, something none of us found out until years after knowing her. She didn’t even tell us. Her mother did. We were in high school, and Britt’s family had taken us to the beach with them on a family trip. Britt’s mom mentioned it on the

beach during some discussion and at first I laughed. “There’s no way. She looks just like her dad.” And Mrs. Sutherlin said, “It’s very true.”

Britt never talked about it, not how she felt about it or what she knew. Her mother had died of cancer some years before, and we’d asked if she thought she’d ever try to find her real mother and she always said the same thing: “My mom was my real mother,” but never much more than that. Tonight was no exception.

Tara had an interesting family story too, one that made her reluctant to think about having children. Her biological mother had left her and her father when Tara was ten months old. And although she saw her over the years and had a lukewarm relationship with her, she has never gotten over being that little girl waiting for her mother to come and get her for the weekend and, sometimes, having to go back inside, disappointed, because her mother was a no-show. Her dad remarried. The new wife, Roberta, and Tara’s father are still married, and she has been a very good mother to Tara. In fact, Tara calls the wife “Mom” and her biological mother “Gail.”

“I just don’t know if I could be a mother,” Tara continued, taking a drink. “Dean has been bugging me about it because as he says, ‘he’s getting older.’ But he’s only 37, that’s not too old.”

“Why don’t you know if you could be a mother?” Courtney asked. “You’d be great.”

“Well, what about never being able to do what you wanted to do and having to get up in the middle of the night all the time? What about dealing with sickness and trying to travel with a baby? I’ve been making a list of pros and cons, and I’m just not sure I could do it.” Amen, sister, I thought.

“I imagine you just do it, Tara. You don’t even think about it,” Courtney said, her voice rising. I should say here that of all of us, Courtney and Tara butt heads most often. Courtney is a staunch Republican and Tara is her Democratic equal. One often irritates the other in discussions. I often try to moderate, and Britt usually picks a side. Sometimes Courtney yells at me and tells me to “quit being Switzerland.” Those are how our group arguments work.

“My own mother didn’t just do it, Courtney, so what if I can’t either?” Tara said, her voice wavering a little. “It’s just something I really need to think hard about. I wish Dean wouldn’t pressure me so much. Sometimes it would be such a relief if I couldn’t have children; then the whole issue wouldn’t be an issue.” Then her tears came.

“Court-ney,” Britt admonished in a look-what-you-did voice.

“Honey, I’m sorry,” Courtney said, getting off her bar stool to come to Tara’s chair and give her a hug. People were staring. “It’s just that sometimes I think you overanalyze things. You’d be a great mother. You’re so loving and kind and generous with everyone you know.”

I inserted my Switzerland self. “Tara, it’s okay if you need to take time to process everything or even if you decide not to,” I said, staring at Courtney pointedly. There’s no rush. It’s not a race.” At least not an openly acknowledged one.

## **Blooming and Wilting**

*May 2001*

I sat twisting in my new leather swivel chair admiring my new office. Although I'd worked here the past few months, today was the day Jack helped me hang my degree on the wall and moved some of his belongings out—his way of saying he believed my freelance business would succeed. He had quit his travel job and was working for a start-up company that offered him the chance to work at home. He surrendered the official office to me and we made a makeshift office for him in the living room. We had gone from hardly ever seeing each other to working at home together. I braced myself for insanity, but it never happened. Jack and I had enough separate interests and friends that we didn't hang onto each other.

The *News & Observer* work was panning out nicely, and I had also gotten some work with local magazines like the *New Home Guide* and *Triangle Newcomer*. Assignments I had, but money was something else entirely. Some publications paid within two weeks, others within thirty days and others took three months or longer. As a result of my poor cash flow, I'd started making purchases on my credit cards and that was something I knew Jack wouldn't approve of. Tara was my confidante. In the tricky world of real estate, she lived that way a lot. She was one of those people who, no matter how much money she made, she never had any.

But Jack was different, and he was the one I had to live with. In some ways, he raised me. Growing up, my parents had been permissive and indulgent. Well, my mother was permissive and my father was indulgent.

Jack was teaching me survival-related skills. Take, for instance, balancing a checkbook. I hate to admit this, but I used to rely on the ATM receipt for the balance in my account. After Jack and I got married, I bounced a \$300 check—my first ever. Jack was exasperated.

“Okay,” he sighed one night at our Tallahassee house, dragging his suitcases inside after being on the road all week for his job. “Bring me your checkbook.”

“Here it is,” I said, feebly. He flipped through the register.

“Where are the check numbers?”

“What?”

“The check numbers. Every time you write a check and record it in the register, you’re supposed to write the check number next to the amount so you can track it when your statement comes in.”

Silence.

“Bring me your bank statements from the last few months.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Lainey, Jesus Christ! The statements the bank sends each month. I need to see those.”

“Don’t yell,” I said. He was starting to remind me of my father. “I don’t have them.”

“Well. Where are they?”

“I threw them away.”

“Are you telling me you don’t balance your checkbook—that you don’t reconcile the statement with the register in your checkbook?” he asked, incredulously, his

eyebrows rising like an irate parent. “How do you know how much money is in the account?”

“Well,” I said, trying to work up some indignation and save my rapidly deteriorating image. “I definitely write down all the checks I send, and then I check the ATM slip to see what the balance is and keep track of it that way.”

“But you have no way of knowing if what you’re keeping track of is right or not? Or if you’ve forgotten to write down something, like teller withdrawals or something else?”

More silence. “Just go,” he said, pressing his thumbs against his temples. “Let me look at this.” After a few hours, Jack deemed my checkbook a lost cause and decided I would have to start over. He deposited a \$500 “buffer” to my account to get me back in the black. I had strict instructions that once my paycheck from the paper was deposited, that buffer was to become “invisible,” only there in case of emergency. And then, Jack pulled out his own bank statement and showed me how to reconcile it with the register.

After that tutorial, and a few others over the years, I became quite good at balancing my checkbook; only it’s not much of a task if you have no money to work with. That day, my checkbook register read \$17.39, and my credit card expenses were starting to pile up. I’ve always been proud of paying off my balance each month, and I was still trying to do that. But I wasn’t handling it right. As soon as I got any money from freelancing, I used most of it to pay towards the credit card, and then I didn’t have enough to live on, so I started using the card again. It was a terrible cycle. It felt so discouraging to get a paycheck because I was never ahead—the money always went right back out the door for some debt or another.

The night before, I'd had a big cry over the whole thing.

"Signature Publishing owes me \$750, but I just don't know when I'm going to get it," I cried, mostly out of frustration, but partly because I felt like a failure.

"Lainey, listen," Jack said. "I don't know how else to tell you this, but here it is: either you figure out how to make this a business, and figure out a way to get your money, or it's going to be time for you to get a real job. You're a good writer, but if you're going to make a living at it, you've got to become a businesswoman."

The thought of giving up all that I'd worked so hard for and going back to sitting in a cubicle made me feel like throwing up.

Jack continued, "You know why they're not paying you on time? Because they don't have to. They're paying all the squeaky wheels first. You've got to get firm about when your check will be cut before you turn the story in; does that make sense?"

I nodded, sniffing.

"Also, once your checks do come in, you've got to make sure you have enough to live on. Pay some on your credit cards, but stop using them in the meantime. It's okay to have some debt when you first start a business, but what you don't want to do is make it the way you live. You have to live within, and even under, your means while you're learning how to do this."

"It's worth it to me," I said. "I'll do anything. I just really want to make this work. I'd give anything to be able to make as a freelance writer what I could in a regular job. That would be so amazing."

"You can, but you've got to quit being scared about offending people. If they're not going to pay you in a timely manner, you don't want the business."

I was not going to give this dream up. It was something I had thought about for years and the fact that work had been fairly easy to come by was just a sign to me that God thought it was a good idea too. Even though I don't go to church regularly, I am still a very spiritual person. My feeling has always been that if God wants you to go down a certain path, He will make it accessible to you. But you have to do your part. God will not do for you what you can do for yourself.

I picked up the phone and the quote from Matthew 7:7, which was hanging in my new office, caught my eye: "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." I was going to have to get bold about what I needed and wanted. I certainly wasn't the best writer on earth, and I may not have had the best experience or the best schooling. But if I failed at this business, it damn sure wouldn't for lack of trying.

## **The Waiting**

*April 2005*

Someone is shaking me and for a moment I think I'm at home and it's my son, Tyler's, cries that are waking me. But it's Don, Tara's father.

"She's out of surgery, Lainey," he says. Roberta is by his side now, yawning.

"And? How did it go?" I ask, sitting up.

"They won't know for a few hours," he says, looking down. "What they're looking for is the fever to break. The doctors are limiting visitation until they're sure the infection isn't spreading. She's heavily sedated anyway."

"Okay. Well. So we just don't know? When might they know?"

"By this evening. If the fever has dropped, we should be in the clear."

"And if not?"

Don looked as solemn as I'd ever seen him. "More surgery, more antibiotics. Right now they're doing every thing they can do so it will just be more of the same." I nod. He doesn't want to elaborate. He adds: "Courtney's been calling. She called Roberta's line and I filled her in."

Shit, Courtney. I had called her, left a voicemail and then left the phone in the car. I was always doing that. Going to the car to retrieve my phone, I called her, already crying. I told her about the infectious disease specialists in Tara's room and the "Caution" sign on the door, of Tara's and my tears as they wheeled her out the door.

For once, Courtney doesn't think I'm exaggerating. I have a habit of relaying information in a dramatic way, but this time I am pretty accurate. There is no reason to pretend it's serious or dramatic. It already is. And it's scary.

Courtney and I meet at Target and pick out a variety of things we know will cheer Tara: a pink Igloo cooler and several bottles of gourmet juice we plan to ice down, mints, hand sanitizer, lip balm, chocolates, trail mix, and a few trashy magazines, including *People*, the *National Enquirer* and *Us*. I'm tempted to get her a pack of cigarettes, but Courtney shoots me a black look. "It's a *hospital*."

I go home to check email and pick up some reading homework for school, *The Modern Tradition, An Anthology of Short Stories*. If I'm going to wait at Rex, I might as well study.

Courtney promises to meet me back at the hospital as soon as she finishes her sales calls. I resume my position on the seventh floor with Roberta and she starts asking me about freelancing. She's genuinely interested. Most people think freelancing is code for "I don't work." But I make a pretty good living at it. "I have a good situation," I say, smiling at Roberta. "I love my work and the flexibility that comes with it. It allows me to stay home with Tyler some and work three days a week." She nods. Neither of us wants to have an in-depth conversation but we're trying to be polite. Actually, my work days are times of quiet productivity and sanity. I can't imagine not having them at all. Although I only have daycare three days a week, I work a lot at night after Tyler goes to bed, so in terms of the hours I put in, it's pretty close to a full-time job. I love being a mom, but I don't want to lose myself in the process. One day, Tyler will have his own friends and interests, and I'll have mine too. This sentiment is something I'd never share

with Roberta, however. She stayed home full-time with both Tara and Danny, her biological son, and even now she doesn't work outside the home. She doesn't have many friends either. They are too much work. Roberta had warned Tara after Courtney had her first child that we couldn't expect Courtney to keep the once-weekly commitment to Ally nights. But Courtney did. She took a few weeks off and then came trudging back with her infant in tow for as many weeks as the baby would sleep. Once the baby had more awake time, she would leave him at home with Todd. Tyler was such a fussy baby, I never brought him to Ally. Jack and I would do a hurried trade-off at the door. "Good luck," I'd shout, getting into the car. "Thank God!" I'd think as I drove away.

Thinking of Tyler made me remember Tara's struggle to get pregnant, and that struggle had led her here. Getting pregnant could be tough for some, but becoming a parent was hard for everyone. With an eye on the clock, I began to think about my own motherhood experience. It had all started with Courtney and, of course, my own conflicted desires.

## **Guess What?**

*July 2001*

The phone was ringing just as I stepped out of the shower. I love a hot shower. That, and a good night's sleep, and I'd just had both.

"Hello?"

"Lainey." It's Courtney. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing much."

"Well, guess what?"

"You're pregnant!" I blurted.

Courtney gasped. "How did you know? That is so weird; could you feel it?"

I knew because over the last few weeks I had started conversations with "Guess what?" and that was what the person always guessed. I'd really only been kidding; I didn't think Courtney would be.

"Courtney that's so awesome," I gushed, not quite believing she was actually pregnant. One of us was going to be a mom. It was unfathomable.

"I am *so* excited," breathed Courtney. "I didn't think it was ever going to happen."

I sighed. Was it out of wistfulness? Fear? Hard to tell. "You guys are going to be great parents."

I had begun *thinking* about having a baby. I had just turned 29, and I was becoming consumed with fears that I wouldn't be able to get pregnant. "Don't wait too long," my gynecologist said knowingly when I asked her "how old is too old?"

But Jack was having none of it. As the eldest of five, he felt as though he'd raised his kids already. "Lainey, all I remember growing up is dirty diapers soaking in a pail all day," he said. "Kids are expensive and they're so much work." This was going to be a battle.

"I just want *one*," I whined, angry that I was having to talk him into it.

"What's wrong with just the two of us?" he asked. "Aren't I enough?"

I slammed the door in response and went for a walk on the trails behind our house. What if he really never wanted kids? Could I leave him? No. What if I could talk him into it? But was talking someone into something as serious as having a baby a good idea? It didn't seem so.

## **‘Living at the Bottom of a Well’**

*February 2002*

Dr. Barnhill’s office stank like old rain or maybe it was mold; it was hard to tell. The carpeting was flattened and the walls paneled. I don’t know what I expected. Certainly not a chaise lounge, but perhaps more than This End Up furniture. Dr. Barnhill had excused himself and I waited now, taking in my surroundings. No family pictures on his desk. Maybe Barnhill had emotional problems himself. Jack always said that about shrinks—that they became what they themselves needed.

I surveyed Barnhill’s bookcase: *The Relaxation Response* by Herbert Benson, M.D. That sounded nice. Anne Sexton’s *The Complete Poems* and *Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway. Not bad.

“Lainey?” Dr. Barnhill said, interrupting my private book review, “I’m sorry I took so long. Now we were discussing the question: Why don’t you deserve to be happy?”

Oh yes. The question. It had taken me by surprise actually, tears nearly leaping to my eyes. Barnhill had excused himself to the restroom, encouraging me to think about it while he was gone.

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “I just...maybe I get it from my mother. I have the sense that I’m being too greedy. That if I’m too happy, something bad will happen.”

“Maybe that if you worry enough you can protect yourself,” Dr. Barnhill chimed in.

“Yes. But what I worry about. It’s ridiculous. I don’t even know that I’d call it worrying, just a thrumming anxiety about everything, obsessing over thoughts a regular person would dismiss. I don’t know where it comes from. It’s so frustrating.”

The beast was back—the depression, the desperation, the anxiety I had experienced in Tallahassee. Only now it wasn’t about homesickness or night-time anxiety. And this time, it was worse. I was too anxious to sleep and any time I put food in my mouth, it made me want to throw up. I had lost weight. I always look great when I’m depressed. People say, “You look amazing. Have you lost weight?” What I really want to tell them is that I’d give anything to be heavier and happy again.

It had become a colossal effort to focus or relax, to conduct an interview for work. Finally, one morning when Jack was home I started sobbing and couldn’t stop. I called my doctor—the basic physician I see when I have a sore throat—and cried over the phone to the receptionist while making the appointment.

“It’s urgent,” I sobbed. “I really need to see him.”

“What’s the problem,” she asked gently.

“I’m having....(what was I having?)...some emotional problems.”

Jack doesn’t have much patience for emotional problems. If your arm is broken or someone is cruel to you, he’s your man. He’ll give you a hug, stand up for you—whatever you need. He had tried for a week to encourage me to pull out of my depression.

“I know you can do this,” he’d said. “You’re so strong and successful. Look at what you’ve managed to do with your business. You’re actually making a living at it. Don’t let some bad mood bring you down.”

But my parents' divorce—final just a year ago—was taking its toll on me. The feeling of loss, of being homeless, persisted. And mine and Jack's discord over the baby issue had formed a disconnect between us. By my parents, I felt both neglected and used. My father and I had stopped talking completely, and my mother and I talked incessantly. I was her sounding board about what a narcissist he was and how he never loved her. I had to tell her I couldn't talk about it anymore. I actually said, "I can't handle this. It's damaging me." I didn't realize it was happening but, over time, the whole thing had unloosed some kind of dreadful fear and anxiety and, as I'd learned about OCD, it was impossible to let the thoughts go. That's the difference between a person with OCD and a typical person. Both might have similar thoughts, but the typical person will eventually let them go or at least put them into perspective. The OCD-prone person just keeps revisiting the thoughts.

My father had put the beach chalet up for sale. It sold in four days. It was the last thing, the last reminder I had of the past. There were so many good memories in that house, twenty years' worth. Now those memories seemed like someone else's life. They weren't mine anymore. I was mad at him for selling it, but too afraid to tell him.

I listened to *Crazy Baby* by Joan Osborne incessantly. It seemed to put into words my isolation and separation from what I considered the "real" me.

*Oh, my crazy baby, try to hold on tight.*

*Oh, my crazy baby, don't turn out the light.*

I think what finally made me call the doctor was when I realized I was thinking of the different ways I could die, as casually as one might consider a grocery list. At his office, the doctor listened to me carefully, prescribed Prozac, an antidepressant, and Klonopin, an

anti-anxiety drug, to use sparingly until the Prozac kicked in, which would take a few weeks. I hated talking about how I felt, even though the doctor was kind and understanding. I told him I felt as if I was going crazy and that people would think I was crazy. But he said crazy people didn't think about going crazy, they just did and didn't even realize it. That made me feel better. "Lainey, everyone has times like these that are difficult to get through—times when we feel hopeless." I appreciated that sentiment, but it just seemed as though I felt that way more than most other people. The doctor's condition for prescribing both meds was that I go see a counselor. Dr. Barnhill was covered by insurance, but he still wasn't cheap.

So, there we were, back to the question about why I didn't deserve happiness, why I felt fear and guilt so intently.

"I just don't know," I said, shaking my head. "I've never thought about it that way—that I don't deserve happiness. But sometimes, that's how I feel. Like I shouldn't get too comfortable enjoying life."

"Lainey, I want you to start doing some journaling. I think it would help you recognize your own thought processes," he said.

"I can do that," I said, squinting my eyes to get a closer look at Dr. Barnhill. What was he wearing? His pants looked suspiciously like leather, with a taupe sheen that reminded me of a Krispy Kreme.

"Even if you can't sleep at night," Barnhill continued, "start writing whatever you're feeling." Now how on earth could a man dispense serious advice wearing leather pants? The thought almost gave me the giggles. What guy wears leather pants? What girl wears leather pants? For the first time in a long time, I felt like laughing. I couldn't wait

to tell the Ally girls. I would make a big story about it and they would laugh hard. They would be glad. It had been a while since I'd laughed.

## **Lost in Sleeplessness**

*March 2002*

I peered over the mound that was Jack's body and squinted at the clock on his nightstand: 3:40 a.m. I felt like screaming. I couldn't sleep and it worried me because I knew I'd be tired, and I had several tough interviews the next day. I was doing a lot of writing for business trade magazines that required interviews with CEOs who made me nervous. Thank God the interviews weren't in person, but I still wanted to be fresh. The harder I tried to go to sleep, the more anxious and awake I became. I wished I was like Courtney, who slept like a rock. I wished I wasn't me. I wished I could be someone who didn't think about stuff so much—a person who didn't have a movie reel of thoughts running through her mind. I'd like to be a person who didn't think about much at all actually. I've met those people. They're kind of clueless and unambitious. Britt is kind of like that. Or she seems like that. But I think there's a lot more to her than she ever tells us. The other night at Ally I told her I thought she needed an anti-depressant too. Actually, when I told her, she was pretty receptive. I only mentioned it because she had been complaining she hardly sleeps at all at night, waking up at about two in the morning and watching TV until about five. I commiserated and she mentioned she had crying jags too at night, sometimes, where she just couldn't stop. She was gaining weight too, another sign of depression for some. From our Ally nights, I knew Britt was lonely. She felt like she was never going to find anyone. Beyond that, she wasn't open about her feelings. It frustrated me as it always had. Maybe I'd call Britt tomorrow and see if she wanted me to go to the doctor with her, for support. Even if she didn't open up to me, at least she'd know I was

there for her. Support is important to a depressed person. I told Jack last night that if he couldn't be supportive, he needed to get the hell out of my way so I could help myself get better. Yesterday Courtney had called me, letting me know SHE WAS PREGNANT AGAIN!! I couldn't believe it. Courtney and Todd were using natural conception where you look at the calendar and check your cervical fluid. Courtney found some book at the library about it. At Ally one night, she was telling us how it worked and that you had to take your temperature every morning and write it down on graph paper and once it dropped, you knew you'd already ovulated so you're safe (or maybe once it peaked you knew you'd ovulated. I really couldn't follow). Tara and Britt were arguing with her that she should go back on the pill. Tara, who's Irish, said, "Don't you know that's how people have Irish twins, trying to figure out birth control themselves?" And Britt was laughing too, which pissed Courtney off and she said "I know my body. I know my body." She got all huffy about it and the whole thing wore me out, really. My head was like a ping pong ball going from one to the other, watching, drinking my beer.

Then Courtney called me yesterday. Frankly, I was starting to get a little scared of her early morning phone calls, especially when they start with "Lainey, guess what?" I wasn't expecting her news because she'd just gone on about how she knew her body, so when she told me I said "Oh, shit, Courtney." Then I felt bad, but she didn't seem to notice my slip-up because she said, "I know; I can't believe it." Courtney was going to end up having two kids before I even had one.

## **Where *Do* Sitcom Stars Go to Die?**

*May 2002*

It was Ally's last season. Frankly, I was ready. Billy was dead. Ally had grieved and moved on, and now the Fox network was bringing in all kinds of guest stars to keep its Neilson ratings alive to the bitter end, including Christina Ricci as Liza Bump and Dame Edna Everage, who was really a male actor named Barry Humphries, but played Claire Otoms, a ridiculous character who was a woman, but obviously a man in drag. I was frustrated with Ally. Her time had come. She needed to take her neuroses (and I should talk) and her dancing baby and go wherever sitcom stars go to die.

We were at Britt's and it stank like cats and dogs. Britt was not that interested in keeping a clean house. Neither was Tara. Now, I didn't keep a neat house, but I didn't like to let things get grungy. It didn't seem to both Tara and Britt, but Courtney and I sometimes talked about this when it was just the two of us. We were bad about having one-on-ones when it wasn't Ally night.

Tara fished our cigarettes out of Britt's freezer, where we kept them so we wouldn't bring them home and smoke them, and the four of us gathered outside on Britt's small deck.

"So, what are we going to start watching when Ally goes off the air in a few weeks?" Tara asked.

"NOTHING," I said. "Why can't we just talk? God knows, we have plenty to talk about."

"Okay, then. Who's got gossip?" Tara countered.

Courtney sighed. “Well, I guess I do.” I looked at her, then down at the table. She was going to have to eat crow after her announcement.

“Well, believe it or not guys, I’m pregnant again.”

“WHAT?” Tara shrieked.

“But I thought you knew your body,” Britt yelled.

“Oh, yeah. Wasn’t it just last week? Two weeks ago? I know my body, blah, blah, blah,” mocked Tara, doing her best to imitate Courtney. “And what did I tell you about Irish twins? Oh God, I’m never going to let you live this down.”

“I told you, girl,” I said. “I knew they were going to be hard on you.”

“You knew?” Tara asked. “You told Lainey about it first?”

“Only because I called her about something else and she had just found out,” I put in.

“What did you call her about?” Tara asked me.

“What did I call you about, Courtney? I can’t remember now.”

“I see how ya’ll are,” Tara drawled, smiling. She was onto us.

...

The next day, I was on my way to the drugstore to pick up as many prescriptions as I could before our insurance coverage ran out. Jack had finally lost his job. We knew it was coming. He’d quit his travel job a while back and was hired by a start-up company. Enron was one of the start-up’s biggest clients, and once it fell, we knew his job wouldn’t be far behind. He’d been sending out his resume, but other ideas were starting to emerge.

“I’ve been thinking,” he had started the night before, as I was pouring a frozen bag of dinner into a skillet (I view cooking strictly as a necessity, no love involved).

“With all of these resumes I’ve been sending out, what if no one will hire me because I never finished school?”

“What are you talking about? Of course they’ll hire you,” I said, ever his champion. The Prozac was releasing the beast’s grip on my brain, and I was able to do at least some cheerleading now. “Look at all your sales experience—you have almost ten years.”

“Yeah, but these days most of the good companies won’t even consider you unless you have some type of degree. I guess I could always find a travel job again.”

Ugh. A travel job. The money had been good at his previous job, six figures, but he was never home, traveling four days a week. Home on Friday, out again on Monday. Plus, it was stressful. Not “my-job-is-driving-me-crazy stressful,” but “I-can’t-sleep-at-night-so-I think-I’ll reorganize-the-pots-and-pans-cupboard stressful.” I was the crazy person in this coupling, and it unnerved me greatly when he started acting like me.

The thing was, it wouldn’t take Jack long to finish school. He had nearly been finished with a two-year program in Automation and Robotics at Wake Tech when I was still in college, but he left to take a sales job.

“How many classes have you got left again?”

“Four. But they’re hard and two have labs. Still, I could finish in one semester, but it would mean not working.”

“Jack, I don’t know that I can make this house payment by myself. Or the car payment—and everything else.” Now I was starting to panic.

“No, listen,” he said. “I can collect unemployment, which will pay the car payment and other incidentals. I’ll still send out resumes, which you have to do to be eligible, but I’ll enroll in school full-time and finish my degree. Then, maybe by the time I’m done, I’ll have a job offer.”

“God, I’d have to make the whole house payment?” I asked, suddenly sympathizing with my mom, how she must have felt years ago when my father would get mad and quit a good-paying job. For the briefest moment, I was catapulted into her former life.

“Lainey. You know I’m not a slacker,” said Jack. “I’ve worked hard my entire life. I’m not above doing whatever it takes to make extra money.”

I knew Jack was right. Plus, with a degree maybe he would be considered for other positions that didn’t require constant travel. I was averse to all that traveling. I’d lived that way already for many years with Jack and, come to think of it, I had lived that existence the whole time I was growing up, with my father traveling. I never felt as if I knew him or that he was interested in what was going on in my life. Some jobs, no matter how good the pay, are just too expensive.

For the next few days, I thought a lot about Jack going back to school. It inspired me. I began to think about going to graduate school. I was bored with my work and wanted to branch out and learn more about what I considered my craft. I requested my transcripts and signed up to take the GREs with a hopeful heart, but a mind that still harbored the remnants of depression. When I got in, I couldn’t stop smiling.

## **Stinking Cigarettes**

*August 2002*

Ally was at my house that night. Courtney was already there, her hands folded on her newly pregnant, but already round, belly. Her second pregnancy was showing a lot faster.

“Hey!” Britt yelled as she opened the front door and stooped to pet Sister, my aging golden retriever mix who is definitely the sweetest dog in the whole world. I knew that when she died, I would need a truckload of antidepressants for at least a decade.

“Is Tara here yet?” Britt asked.

“Not yet,” I answered. “Open your wine. There are clean glasses in the cabinet over the stove.”

“I can’t. I’m too nervous. I met someone,” she said.

“You did? Who? Where?” Courtney asked.

“Ooohhh. Britt’s in love,” I teased. “Look at you; you’re all hot and bothered. Tell us all about it.”

“Not until Tara gets here; I don’t want to have to repeat everything.”

This was a big Ally rule: the heart-to-hearts cannot commence until everyone is present. It was kind of annoying, but I did the same thing because repeating big news was just no fun.

Luckily, Tara was not that late. I could hear her talking on her cell phone before she even closed the door. It practically grew out of her ear now that her real estate company was so well established. She wagged her fingers at us while we all made faces

to compel her to “hang up, dammit.” “*Okay, honey, that sounds good. Yep. I’ll fax that over first thing in the morning. I’ve got to run. Yep. That’s right. Okay,*” she rolled her eyes at us. “*Okay, bye.*”

“Hi ladies,” said Tara. “Sorry I’m late.”

“You and that phone,” I sighed. “I swear, I think you encourage it. You’re too damned friendly.”

“Helloooo,” Tara trilled. “People buy from people they like. Haven’t you ever heard that?”

“I still think you could wind it up a little faster when we’re all sitting here waiting for you...”

“YOU GUYS!!” Britt interrupted. “I have been waiting forever to tell you this. Quit arguing about Tara’s damn cell phone. Who the hell cares?”

“Britt’s right. She said she has exciting news,” Courtney said. “She met someone.”

“You did?” Tara asked. “Where? Who?”

“His name is Joey. Joey Keyes. Don’t you remember him from high school?”

Silence.

“Well, he was younger than us; by a year or two, but I always thought he was cute.”

“Where did you meet him again?” I asked.

“I was over at David Clark’s one night and Joey is his roommate. We started talking and really hit it off.”

“David Clark. Eww,” I said, making a face. “He’s such a...what is the word? I can’t even think of the word.”

“A player?” said Tara. “A player and a loser AND a moocher.”

“He is not,” said Britt. “How do you even know any of that? You haven’t seen him in years.”

“Well, he was in high school.”

“ANYWAY, after that night at David’s, he called and took me out to dinner. Then we went back to my place...”

“Oh, God, please don’t tell me you slept with him,” I interrupted.

“Mother Hen,” Britt smirked. “No! We sat on the back deck and had a few drinks and just talked. It was awesome. He’s really nice. You guys will like him. He has a dog, just like me, and so we talked about that a lot. And our jobs. He’s a surveyor with his dad; they work for the same company.” Just then Britt’s phone rang.

“Hello,” she said, smiling, indicating it was Joey on the phone. “Sure I can pick some up. Uh, well, I’m not sure when I’ll be leaving. I just got here. Okay, bye.”

“That was Joey,” she said, excitedly, while all of us nodded. “He wants me to come over after Ally.”

“What did he ask you to bring?” I asked.

“What?”

“He asked you to bring something. You said you’d pick it up.”

“Oh. Cigarettes.”

Cigarettes. Britt hated cigarettes. Hated when we smoked them or anyone else, including her dad. But she left about thirty minutes later to pick up Joey's cigarettes. It wouldn't be the last time she left early.

## **Guess What Again**

*September 2002*

It was 7:00, and I was just leaving class to head to Britt's for Ally. For Fall semester, I had decided to take two classes—and work full-time—which was insanity. I had a lot less money and less time as a graduate student than I did as an undergraduate, which was actually kind of pitiful. I was the last to arrive, and I burst in the door trying hard to ignore Britt's dog.

“Hey, I'm here!”

“How was class?”

“Turn on the light,” I said, indicating the round knob hanging from a chain that would turn on the ceiling fan light. They ignored me, picking up the conversation where I interrupted.

“Turn on the light. Turn on the light. TURN ON THE LIGHT.”

“Girl! What is the matter with you?” Courtney asked. “Jesus.”

“God, you guys! I want to show you something. I've been waiting all day.”

I reached into my backpack and pulled out the pee-stick pregnancy test.

“Look.” I commanded, turning on the light my damn self.

“Oh, my God. That's two lines,” Courtney said.

“Yeah, but they're faint.”

“It doesn't matter! You're pregnant! We're going to be pregnant together,”

Courtney said, reaching out to hug me. Tara reached over to hug me too and gave me a

squeeze. “You’re next,” I whispered, squeezing her shoulder. Britt was smiling, “Congratulations,” and leaned in to give me an air hug, our shoulders bumping.

I was excited about being pregnant, but really nervous and, frankly, not surprised. The sudden sore breasts, the momentary double-vision. I felt so strange and dizzy. Jack and I had been at the beach for the weekend and I lay in bed, knowing even before I knew. I decided I would take the test on Monday when we got back; I hadn’t even missed a period. If it wasn’t positive, then I was really sick with something else. It had only been three weeks since we’d decided to “see what happens.” Jack had finally agreed to that, and we had enjoyed each other, experiencing a little thrill at the thought of the possibility. But neither of us thought it would happen so fast. It had taken Courtney eight months and more than a year for many other women I knew.

“What did Jack say?” Courtney asked.

“He said, and I quote, ‘Oh, shit. Are you sure?’”

Jack’s response was hurtful. I’d wanted him to rub my belly and kiss me and tell me how happy he was, but the truth was he didn’t have a job and he was pretty damn scared. I knew all that intellectually, but it still hurt my feelings and I told him so. I relayed it to the Ally girls.

“Then he said, ‘It’s okay. We’ll figure it out,’ which wasn’t quite what I had in mind, but at least it didn’t include four-letter words,” I said.

Jack didn’t like change. He always adjusted well after the fact, but when it was introduced he sulked and constantly mentioned the negative aspects the new change would bring. He hadn’t started doing *that* yet, but it was only Day 1.

Although I was nervous, the whole thing felt serendipitous. I had had a little one-on-one with God about it a few weeks ago after Tara, Britt and I had gotten together at my house on a non-Ally night to party and talk. Courtney, being pregnant and having Nick, her first child, to take care of, hadn't come. We ran out of beer and went to the store to get more at midnight. Joey was out of town so Britt was being her old self, and Tara and I got carried away in the excitement of the way things used to be. The next morning I felt like Clydesdales had taken up residence in my head. Sitting down to pee, I said, "I'm ready whenever you are, God," referring to a baby. Not only did I journal to God, I also walked daily and sometimes talked to God in my head to relieve my depression and wear myself out. My conversation went something like this: *Is this the right time God? Would I be a good mother? Maybe not. You know best. But I'd really like to have a child one day. I think I'd be a good mother. I think if I don't have a child, I'll always have regrets. What do you think? But maybe I'm not ready. If it's a boy, I could name him Grant. Anne would be great for a girl or maybe Melissa.* I had a pretty good idea I was wearing God out.

## **Is There Something You Want to Tell Me?**

*November 2002*

The day I found out Jack was planning to start his own business, I thought I was going to have a panic attack and there wasn't a thing I could take for it. The plan had been for Jack to finish school and find a job, relieving me and my pregnant self of the pressure of paying the majority of the bills. That was my security blanket and it was unraveling. The only Plan B I could think of was to sit in what would one day be the baby's room and try to meditate. That was my incredibly weak plan. Earlier I had come home to find Jack and one of his best friends, Greg, at the kitchen table with all kinds of books and graphs and charts. Jack had been mentioning that he and Greg wanted to start an auto repair shop—Greg had worked in the business for years—but I just completely buried any notion that they were SERIOUS! Then I came home and saw them studying and talking and running numbers—with CALCULATORS—like we had any money at all. I gave Jack a look and Greg must have sensed the tension because he scurried away like a roach when you turn on the light.

“Is there something you'd like to tell me?” I asked Jack sarcastically, which I knew he hated, but I was pregnant and he was thinking of doing this? So he explained it all to me and how he'd run the numbers and we were in the perfect demographic and they may have even found a building, and I just wanted to put my fingers in my ears and sing “la la la la la I can't hear you.” Then he showed me all the research he'd done and how he planned to work the office and the books and the marketing and Greg would manage the shop. Jack used to work in auto repair right out of high school so they would both turn

wrenches at first, he reasoned. I went for a walk, fuming and terrified. After a while, I started thinking about how I got to do what I loved. It was my dream to freelance and Jack supported it; he never once shot me down even when I couldn't get the money part straight. We might not have a lot in common, but we'd always supported each other. And I started thinking about how I didn't want Jack to be sixty or seventy and look back and say, "I sure wish I'd tried to open my own auto shop; I always wanted to."

And before I could stop myself, I rushed back home and said, "Let's do it. I'm behind you." And I was, but I was also scared to death. But I also knew that if anyone could make it work, Greg and Jack could. They were the most hard-working people I'd ever met. Plus, Jack was so smart. Half the time I couldn't understand what he was talking about, but you could ask him a question—like how magnets work or why gas is so expensive—and he'd launch into a detailed explanation. Jack thought physics was fun and, in another life, thought he would have been a math teacher. I would shudder, half amazed and half repulsed at these revelations. Anyway, I trusted him, but I was scared that I trusted him. I kept telling myself: "We're young. If it doesn't work out, we'll start over. We can do it." Still, I found myself wanting to control everything about the business. When I had that urge, I heard a little voice say, "Let him do it." And it was odd. I'd never heard a voice like that. And it wasn't a crazy voice. Instead, it was an urging to let go, and I really tried to embrace it. I wasn't sure what would happen. I knew if we were really going to do it, we would have to borrow the money to retrofit the building to meet the town's zoning and building requirements and the guys would have to buy lifts, tools and diagnostic computers. Jack and Greg considered an SBA loan, but the SBA was often very picky about what businesses they'd fund. So we ended up taking a loan from

the bank and put up both of our homes as collateral. We borrowed about \$100,000, which also gave me a slight push toward the edge. Yet, when I tried to think of solutions for Jack, I just kept hearing the voice: Let him do it. And I thought: Maybe I will. For once in my life, maybe I would let someone else do it.

## **Doris**

*March 2003*

Once Jack's business opened in February 2003, I did a good job of letting him handle the worries involved, in large part because I had increasing worries of my own. My stomach was getting bigger and this baby was eventually going to come out. It was happening so fast and Jack had been less than supportive. What if he left? What if the labor and delivery left me damaged in some way? What if I somehow harmed the baby? I knew some of my fears were natural and some had an OCD stench—pervasive and irrational. I had gone off my antidepressant when I'd gotten pregnant and when the fears began to lead to trouble eating and sleeping, I called my former college roommate, Ann, a clinical psychologist prone to OCD-type worrying as well. She referred me to a therapist she had worked with a few years prior. Doris lived in Carrboro, but she was no leather-pants-wearing Krispy Kreme. She was worth the forty-minute drive, and I went once a week until the week before I had the baby. Jack complained that we couldn't afford it. I ignored him; I couldn't afford not to go. Doris listened to all of my fears—especially the irrational ones—and she helped me deal with the obsessive thoughts and the fallout of my emotions when those thoughts spiraled out of control.

Doris was a kind woman, but also blunt and very smart. She looked to be in her mid-sixties and had graying cropped hair and a full figure. Her office had comfortable couches, and she encouraged me to sit however I wanted. I chose Indian-style. I knew we didn't have much time for therapy before the baby was born, six or seven weeks at best, so I thought I'd better get to the point.

“With these fears and thoughts I have,” I started, “I just want to make it so that the anxiety doesn’t accompany them. I want to not feel the anxiety. Does that make sense?”

“You’re not ready for that,” Doris said. “You’re not there yet.

I was surprised.

“Lainey, you have to learn to accept the anxiety and acknowledge the thoughts you have, instead of simply wanting them to go away, which feeds the anxiety because you are running from something you can’t control.” I shook my head, my lips trembling. This didn’t sound like help to me. Once again, maybe I had not found the right words.

But Doris understood what I needed. She gave me a plan.

“Let’s say you can’t sleep and you start feeling anxious about it because you know you’re going to be tired the next day. Just say to yourself, “I can’t sleep and it’s okay. Even if I don’t sleep all night, at least I’m resting.” That way, the anxiety doesn’t get any fuel because you’re embracing it.”

When I had irrational fears during the week, Doris instructed me to write them down and give them a voice so that we could talk about them at the next session. This was helpful in that it made me feel better to unload my worries immediately and doing so assured me I had a time and place scheduled to work out my fears. Once in Doris’ office, we went over the items on my list, and Doris and I would play out entire scenarios until my fears seemed impossible, or at least inconsequential, even to me. Later at home, when the fears came back with sinister undertones, I would replay in my mind repeatedly the scene in Doris’ office. I learned later that this technique is called exposure and response prevention or ERP. When a patient is instructed to explore their cause of anxiety, they

eventually become desensitized to the stimulus. I realized this was something I had done with the sexual orientation obsession that started in college. I found that if I actually pictured myself in a homosexual act, it repulsed me. Then I would think of all the times I'd had conversations or relationships with men and how much I enjoyed them. This pattern of thinking eventually freed me from the anxiety these thoughts provoked. I still had the fear sometimes, but I had begun to understand that it was a trick my mind played on me.

The other thing I talked to Doris about was making the thoughts go away completely. This proved harder. But my physician had prescribed an antidepressant during those last weeks of my pregnancy and it helped with the intrusive thoughts. Sometimes I hated the way my mind worked and hated the idea that I might have to take SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), like Prozac, for the long-term. But sometimes I really liked my mind too. I was sensitive and compassionate and a good writer. Perhaps without the qualities I disliked, I wouldn't have the ones I admired either. It was kind of like wishing you were younger or older. If you'd been born later or earlier, you wouldn't have the same experiences, parents, children or friends. You wouldn't be—you. Without my neurosis, in all its ugliness, I wouldn't be me. And I was finding that I kind of liked me.

## **A Quiet Foreclosure**

*April 2003*

I was sitting on the floor rolling change when Courtney walked in. Things weren't desperate, but with me paying the mortgage, they were getting pretty tight. Freelance writers aren't high-rollers. I was hoping my change would total \$34—enough for the cable bill after we'd drastically cut our service. It's amazing how much you can live without: cell phones, dry cleaning, eating out, new clothes, Christmas presents. I tried canceling our bug service, but the spiders were a nightmare. The shop had been open for about two months and it was doing pretty well, but there were long hours and the sometimes-empty parking lot made Jack nervous.

Courtney had Michael with her, her second boy, born in December. She had had to go on bed rest because he threatened to come early, so Tara and I pitched in, helping her take care of Nick. Tara had done all of her holiday baking at Courtney's. When it finally came time for her to deliver, Courtney had Michael naturally. None of us could believe it. She didn't tell any of us beforehand because she thought we'd try to talk her out of it. She knows us well. Michael was such a good baby. I prayed for a good baby daily—that and for the rescue squad to sleep on the floor next to his crib so he wouldn't die of SIDS in the middle of the night. If you put a baby to sleep on his stomach, he could die of SIDS, according to all the books I'd been reading. If you put him on his back, he could choke if he threw up. What in the hell were you supposed to do, prop the baby up like a toy soldier and hope for the best? In January, we'd found out we were having a boy. We weren't surprised. When the O.B. said "It's a boy," Jack and I said, smiling,

“We know.” Jack went to all of my doctor’s appointments with me, but he had a Jekyll and Hyde attitude about the baby. He was thrilled to hear the heartbeat and helped me put away dishes and carry groceries, but he wasn’t excited about baby shower gifts or hanging pictures in the baby’s room. When I asked for help with those things, it was like I asked him to hang himself.

I sighed, just thinking about it. But I looked at Michael and he was so sweet and cute. Another friend of mine had just had a baby and all she could talk about was how wonderful it was.

Britt was there for once and of course Tara was too. I padded to the kitchen for a bag of M&M’s to pour in a candy dish. I missed drinking beer, but what I really wanted was a glass of wine. I’d gained about 30 pounds which was normal, but I had to admit I’d been having a party in my mouth. I should’ve been a little more careful. But there was SO much you couldn’t do when you were pregnant. No alcohol, caffeine, diet sodas, lunch meat, fish, and certain cheeses. No sleeping on your stomach or your back, no bike riding, no airplane riding, no sex (at that point it was too uncomfortable to even consider), and no antihistamines or any other drugs that might make you slightly comfortable. So if I wanted some M&Ms and a large Hardee’s roast beef sandwich, I dared somebody to say anything to me, with the exception of my obstetrician who had already counseled me on the evils of sugars—even those coming from oranges and grapes, which I thought was just wrong. My right foot was the size of a Smithfield ham because, apparently, “the baby was hanging out on the right side.” So although I was wearing men’s size 11 Birkenstock look-alikes from Wal-Mart and resembled a clown, my swollen foot and its five swollen digits at least gave Jack a chuckle, who called my

foot a big “sumbitch” when it was in full view resting on the ottoman. So much for support. He never said anything about my stomach or my weight gain, but my foot made him laugh like Richard Pryor doing stand-up.

“I have some news to tell ya’ll,” Britt announced. I looked up, concerned. It sounded suspiciously like a “Guess What” statement.

“I’m moving.”

We all babbled at once. “Why?” “You love that house.” “You made a great down payment on it.” “It’s so cute.”

“Well, the truth is. I have to move. The bank is foreclosing on it.”

For a moment, no one said anything.

“Britt, we haven’t seen you as much lately, but how could you not tell us you were in this kind of trouble?” Tara implored. “Why didn’t you at least tell *me*? I could have sold it for you before the bank foreclosed and you could have prevented this from going on your credit record. Do you have any idea how difficult it’s going to be to buy anything after this? What is going on?”

Britt bristled. Her face shut down, lips pressed together, dark eyes staring straight ahead and explained quickly, almost in a fury. She fell behind in payments because she’d gotten laid off and, then, when she found a new job, she called the bank and was ready to make the back payments. But the bank wanted all the money up front. Apparently, she was so far behind, the bank wasn’t willing to assume further risk. Finally, Britt consulted her father and they both agreed to let the house go.

Soon, Joey called and Britt was even more eager than usual to leave. Finished now with my change, I kicked back the recliner and helped myself to a handful of

M&Ms. Britt was changing. She was heavier, sure, but she was starting to look more uniform too. Gone were the days of tight jeans, low-cut shirts, big shoes and flashy jewelry. Britt's uniform now consisted of long black pants and a white tank with a black knit jacket over top or some other combination of black-and-white, long-and-non-revealing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her legs or her arms. To me, that was even more worrisome than her not telling us about the foreclosure. That was the difference between Britt and the rest of us. We spilled all when desperate, eager for comfort, advice, reassurance and even admonishment. But appearances were important to Britt.

## **The Hospital**

*May 12, 2003*

Tyler David Gala finally arrived and so did the Ally girls, even Britt. Once I finished with the breastfeeding lesson, I asked Jack to give us some space and he left gladly. I wanted to tell them the story. I felt like it would take a month of Ally's for me to wade through the last 24 hours and I needed them, wanted them, to know.

We didn't name Tyler for the first day because we were still trying to decide. Jack offered to let me have my pick because I had such a horrible delivery. I went with Tyler, his pick, for the first name and David, my pick, for the middle name. After his birth they took me to my room and I asked God, "Why was it so difficult? Why did you forsake me?" That's a phrase I never thought would leave my lips, but I was saying it over and over during the delivery and afterward. I still don't know what happened. But they told me to stop pushing and then couldn't find the doctor. After three hours of pushing and twelve hours of labor before that, I was so exhausted, my forehead wet, and Jack at my hip with a trashcan (okay that part made a good story), but then everything went black. When I saw light again, the nurse and Jack were peering into my face, asking "What happened?" I started panicking that the baby still wasn't out and it didn't help that the nurse was more nervous than I was. When the baby's heartbeat slowed, they gave me oxygen and that helped, but the electronic blood pressure cuff was cutting off my circulation. I remembered yelling, "This fucking thing is killing me." By the time Dr. Rogers got there, I was hysterical again. I just couldn't take the pain and pressure any longer. And then Tyler wouldn't come out. And the doctor got nervous and said, "We're

going to have this baby right now.” And he used the vacuum and the pain was deeper than anything I’d ever felt, like I was being turned inside out. And I remembered screaming and sitting up, lunging toward the doctor’s throat. Then I would remember why I was there and lie back down, but instinctively and uncontrollably I would lunge at him to get him away from my body because it hurt SO badly. “Lainey!” he yelled, “Look down,” and when I did I saw the huge mound that had been in my belly for nine months disappear. But then I heard nothing.

“How much does he weigh?” I kept asking, ridiculously. But no one answered me and no one put him on my belly like you hear about. After giving him oxygen, they put him under a warming light, naked, and his arms and legs were waving all around, and that’s when I started crying. But my tears were from relief—and desperation. I was just so glad that he was out and so exhausted and afraid by my experience. I did not feel the instant bonding that everyone talked about. And when I saw the back of Tyler’s head, I cried harder. It was like Jell-O, his hair and scalp soft, jiggling under my fingers. My mother thought he was deformed. But the pediatrician said it was a large and scary blood blister from the vacuum, one of the largest he’d ever seen. And then the nurses moved me to another room and forgot about me. With no pain medication or clean towels or even water, I cried to Jack, “Why did God forsake me? I was looking at the ceiling tiles the whole time I was trying not to push and I prayed and prayed and he never answered me.”

“He did answer you,” Jack said, “And he gave us Tyler.”

I sobbed back, “But look at him. Look at his head...” This exchange went on until I finally hit the nurse button and cried into the speaker. I’m sure they were laughing at me, but at last I got some Percocet for my pain, which was a lightning current in every

muscle in my body. Dr. Rogers had been a complete asshole. When he was stitching me up—he kept saying, irritated, “stay still!” The nurses said he was going through a divorce. But I didn’t think that was my problem. I was going through childbirth. The only thing he said to us before leaving was, “Congratulations.” It made me feel sad and afraid that I had done something wrong. Of course, I suppose he took offense at my trying to strangle him (and that part made me laugh after), but he is an OB; surely, I wasn’t his worst patient ever.

## **The Hard Truth**

*May 28, 2003*

I had missed two Ally nights and even though I hadn't slept more than two hours at a time since I got home, I had to get out and see the girls. Britt and Joey were renting a house, and I pulled up into the driveway and looked at my watch. I had roughly two hours before I had to get home and feed Tyler again. I thought I knew how a dairy cow must feel.

Britt, Tara and Courtney cheered my arrival, and I was grateful. I bummed a cigarette, and decided I'd have just one beer. "I can't stay long," I explained. "Tyler will be ready to eat again in two hours." Breastfeeding was like a prison sentence.

"Lainey, you can supplement, you know that, right?" Courtney asked.

"No, I didn't know that," I sighed. I had called Courtney at least four times a day every day to figure out breastfeeding. You need a Ph.D in mammary science to get it right. There were even *more* rules about what I couldn't eat after the baby was born than when I was pregnant—no tomatoes, onions, broccoli, alcohol, sugar, nothing acidic, blah, blah, blah. Baby fussy? Must be something you ate or maybe he didn't get enough milk. But you don't know whether he's getting enough milk or not, because a breast doesn't come with measuring marks. Plus, I always forgot which side I fed on the last time and my porn-star breasts hurt so bad, sometimes I wanted to wake Tyler up just to relieve the pressure. Giant breasts might sound fun and sexy, but they weren't. Both Jack and I were scared of my breasts. They were painful and leaky and unpredictable. I didn't feel the

tenderness I'd read I was supposed to feel when breastfeeding. It was just another thing I had to do that I wasn't getting right.

“Not only can you supplement with formula, Lainey, you can also express your milk and have Jack or someone else feed the baby,” continued Courtney.

“Yeah, well, about that. First of all, I tried expressing with the hand pump I have and it's like trying to get chocolate syrup from an M&M. And, second,” I said, hitting my stride, “why in the *hell* didn't someone tell me I could supplement before now?”

Courtney thought I knew already, like it was an intrinsic piece of information embedded in the brains of all women.

“Why didn't they tell me that in the hospital?”

“Oh, the nursing Nazis are never going to tell you that. You should have asked me,” Courtney said. I hated her for her experience and smugness, while I was so utterly hopeless.

“Well, I don't think I'm going to be lasting much longer with breastfeeding,” I confessed. “It's just too much to think about. I've cried every day since Tyler's been born and some days I don't even get a shower. Jack and Greg still haven't hired anyone at the shop so he's not getting home until 9 or 10 at night and yesterday morning, the toaster caught on fire and smoked up the place so bad, I took Tyler and stood in the driveway and cried until Jack got home and could turn the damn thing off. ”

“Oh, honey. I know how hard it is. This part just sucks. But I promise you it will get so much better,” said Courtney.

I had a lot of things working against me, but Tyler being a colicky baby and my unrelenting back and hip pain made me fragile. My mother helped when she could, but

her new boyfriend had had a pacemaker put in the day after I gave birth. I resented him. She should be helping me. Normally, that alone would have made me obsess about what a selfish daughter I was, but I was too tired to feel guilty. That was a first.

As each day passed, I kept thinking, “When is the real mother of this baby going to come and pick him up?” One night I cried to Jack, told him I thought we had made a mistake. “I can’t do this by myself,” I said. It had been so much easier when it was just us and the dog. Jack told me to look into hiring someone. I found a great lady, but she wanted \$12 an hour and that was too steep for us. Since Tyler came two weeks early, I had two more stories due. I tried to work when he was sleeping, but it was impossible because I was exhausted. I lost one new client as a result. I felt bad for a moment, but that was it. I was in self-preservation mode probably for the first time ever. Usually I’d just go ahead and destroy myself when things got tough, but I’d finally found something bigger than my own neuroses. I was just trying to survive motherhood and not screw things up.

## **Always a Bridesmaid**

*November 2003*

As I waited for Tara to pick me up on my front steps, I thought to myself: “I am finally hitting my stride with this baby thing.” Now that Tyler was six months old, he was so much better and we had a good routine down. I was doing it! Of course, as I waited, he was inside screaming, but it was Jack’s night to handle it. In addition to my attitude of letting him take care of things at the shop, I was also letting him take Tyler when it was his turn and not interfering with the way he did things. This was very hard for me, but it was a good strategy for letting go of control. By letting go, I had more freedom. By attempting to control, I felt like I had more power, even though I didn’t. I was finding I liked freedom better than the complicated frenzy of trying to control.

Jack was around a lot more lately. The guys finally had help at the shop and while money was still tight, things were much improved. When Tyler was about two months old, I decided that the only way I was going to survive early motherhood was to make fun of it. I started journaling and shared a few pieces with an editor at the *Cary News*. He loved the pieces and offered me a column called “Baby Makes Three.”

Ally was at Britt’s again that night. It had been there the week before too, but she wanted to have it again. If it was at her house we knew we’d get to see her. I was ready to indulge in a few beers tonight, so I arranged for Tara to pick me up. The breastfeeding experiment went down in flames before Tyler was a month old. I just decided I was done and wanted my body back. I figured there was a pill I could take to dry everything up, but when I called the La Leche league, they told me this was not true. They suggested I use

cabbage leaves inside my bra to relieve the pain and pressure while I “dried out.”

Whether this was a cruel joke or a true homeopathic remedy, I cannot say, but Jack quickly tired of coming home on his lunch hour to prepare a garden salad under my Ace bandage and trying to wind it around my chest without letting wilting cabbage leaves escape. I feared surely my breasts would look like olive pits when the whole debacle was finished.

I saw Tara’s headlights in the driveway, and I eased myself off the front porch. My back and left hip still hurt tremendously, but I finally had a diagnosis. Tara was on the phone and as I entered the car, she seemed not to see me.

When she finally got off the phone we were nearly at Britt’s.

“So what’s up with you?” she asked.

“I do have something to tell you guys, but I want to wait until everybody’s there.”

Again, the Ally rule: All parties must be present before a heart-to-heart or good gossip.

“Oh God, you’re not pregnant, are you?” Tara asked.

“Hell, no. God, I’m still crippled from Tyler. It’s only been in the last two months that I can convince Jack to come near me. He’s terrified I’ll get pregnant again, even on the pill, because someone at the shop told him that a woman is especially fertile after childbirth.”

“Ha. Well maybe that’s what I need to do. Give birth so I can get pregnant.”

I sighed because I was sad for Tara. She and Dean had been trying for several years now to have a baby to no avail. The doctor could find nothing wrong with either of them, but it just wasn’t happening. Four years ago Tara had wished she couldn’t have

children, so torn was she with making the decision to have one and now she couldn't. *Be careful what you wish for.*

“How's it going with the Clomid?” I asked.

“Terrible. It's making me crazy. I'm a nervous wreck—irritable one minute, crying the next. And the sex thing is so obligatory.”

“Well, at least you have a good sex life,” I said wistfully.

But I could see in her eyes it wasn't like that at all. Tara looked beaten down and defeated, on the verge of tears. I knew her infertility made her deeply unhappy, and while she talked about her procedures, she was hesitant to talk too much about her pain.

Courtney and I encouraged her to let it out and share with us at any time, but she told us she was afraid once she started crying about it, she'd never stop. Between us, Courtney and I had made a new Ally rule—just five minutes of kid talk at each Ally. After that, it was time to move on to other topics so we could all participate. Besides, Courtney was taking care of Tyler two days a week now while I went to class and worked, so we did all of our mom-chatting during pick-ups and drop-offs. I loved the arrangement.

Courtney was already at Britt's when we arrived. Joey was there, of course, and I could sense Britt had something she wanted to tell us. It didn't take long for her to pull her left hand from behind her back and show us the ring as Joey beamed proudly. Oh shit. She's actually going to marry him, I thought. And we're probably going to have to be bridesmaids, ugh. It was fun eight years ago, but I didn't relish the idea of squishing into an ugly dress that I'd never wear again. I knew exactly what Tara would say at my complaints: “She did it for us.”

It was almost December and Joey lit a fire in the fireplace for us and then went to bake cookies, like nothing delighted him more than entertaining us. Courtney, Tara and I exchanged glances.

“Lainey has something she wants to tell us,” Tara said “and she made me wait until we all got here.”

“Are you pregnant?” Courtney asked.

“No!” I groaned loudly, so sick was I of this question. “Remember last week after Ally when we all got up to leave, and I nearly fell down because the pain in my legs and back was so bad? Well, I have something called spondylolisthesis.”

“Spondy-what?” Courtney asked. I opened my purse and pulled out some information the doctor had given me, as well as information I’d found (of course) on the Internet. I told them spondylolisthesis was basically a really long name for a vertebra that’s broken away from the spinal column and slipped forward, impinging on nerve roots and causing pain and instability in the spine.

“It sounds serious,” Courtney said.

“Well, it is,” I said. “They have all of this conservative stuff that they want me to try first to get rid of the pain—like physical therapy and anti-inflammatory medication and heat. And if that doesn’t work, they can give me a series of these shots called epidural steroid injections, which are injected into the spinal nerve to provide pain relief.” Courtney flinched when I said “epidural.” The girl could tolerate natural childbirth twice, but the thought of a needle in her back was too much to bear, which, come to think of it, was probably why she opted for natural childbirth.

“God, Lainey, that sounds bad,” Tara said. “Can they fix it?”

“Yeah, with surgery. But I just can’t even consider something like that with Tyler being so little.”

“You’re taking it really well, Lainey,” Courtney offered. “I figured you’d be a lot more upset and stressed out.”

“The worst part is the nerve pain,” I said. “It’s just unrelenting. But now that I know what it is and what I can try for it, that makes me feel better—more in control.” Courtney and Tara looked at each other and started laughing. “*You* like to be in control? You’re kidding,” they whooped.

“You may not believe this, you guys,” I smiled. “But I’m actually getting better.” Britt smiled, too, but remained quiet, her eyes fixed on Joey in the kitchen.

## Going to the Chapel

*September 2004*

The year was awash with weddings. When I was pregnant, my father told me he had a surprise—a girlfriend named Pat. I hate surprises like that. They decided to marry, and my brothers and sister and I flew to St. Louis, then drove to Cape Girardeau, Missouri to attend the wedding, in a real-life and similarly ridiculous version of *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*.

Then my mother married her boyfriend (that sounds so strange—manfriend?) that same year in a small ceremony at the Wake County Courthouse in Raleigh. My claustrophobic sister, Caryl, was terrified to ride the elevator to the ninth floor and begged me with my hip and back problems to climb the stairs. I dumped her unceremoniously on the daughter of my mother’s new husband, who agreed to stair-climb with her. And I didn’t feel guilty about it. Caryl didn’t understand my obsessive tendencies and I didn’t understand her weirdness about tight spaces. As I rode the elevator with my other siblings, I chuckled at our family’s garden variety of neurotic tendencies.

As for my parents, watching them date had been weird and watching them remarry, weirder still. I was so thankful they hadn’t gotten divorced when I was young, which would have required me to refer to the new spouses as a stepdad or stepmom. Not only did I have the very good grace of not having to live with any step-parents, I could simply refer to them as “my father’s wife” and “my mother’s husband.” God was good.

I found a nice, wide parking spot at Lee Tailors for my new BMW. It wasn’t brand-new, but it was new to me. One of the perks—one of the *only* perks—of co-owning

an auto repair shop is that sometimes you get good deals on cars people don't have the money to fix. Jack bought the '98 BMW 740IL, fixed it, and was ready to sell. "Or," he said, "you can drive it for a while." Well. He didn't have to ask twice. The only problem was that I was a freelance writer driving a BMW, so it looked like I made way too much money.

I lugged the eggplant-colored monstrosity that was my bridesmaid dress from the car and twisted to unhook it from the backseat. My sciatic nerve throbbed. It was likely I was going to have to have another steroid injection. However, I was making headway in the weight loss department and with physical therapy, which was helping some.

Mr. Lee, presumably, or a close relative, greeted me and motioned me to the changing room when he eyed the eggplant draped in my arms. I put the dress on as best I could, unable to zip up the back, and met him outside.

"New dreh? Fo weddin?" He asked.

"Yes, I just need it hemmed," I said, and slipped on the only slightly less than orthotic dress pumps I managed to find.

"Yes. Les zip up dreh," he said. He tugged at the zipper. I sucked in. He tried again. And again, crouching a little to get leverage. This was very embarrassing. He gave it one last tug with his tiny fingers. Next to him in the mirror, I looked like the Fruit of the Loom grape. He was a smart and slender cinnamon stick.

"No fit," he said, finally. "This dreh no fit. You want me to take out?"

"No, I do not want you to take it out," I said, angry that this man I barely knew was staring at my naked back telling me I was too fat for a stupid dress I'd already spent

\$200 on and would probably drop another \$30 for hemming. There was *no way* I was spending any more money on this dress.

“I sawee. Your dreh no fit. What I do?”

“You just hem it,” I said, bending over and pointing (ow, my back) “to here. And I’ll take care of the rest. Don’t you worry about it. That’s my problem.”

“Yes,” he said, shaking his head. “That problem. When weddin?”

“In a few weeks,” I said, sighing.

“Okay,” he said, backing away from me, nodding. “I meet you up front.”

## **Divorce at a Wedding**

*October 2004*

In the end, all it took to fit me into that dress was a little fasting, a tube of Zipper Glide that my mother donated, and a nice tight corset bra, which was giving me that biscuits-in-a-can feeling. I didn't cry at the wedding, as I had at Tara's; all I kept thinking was that my hip was hurting from standing still for so long. Courtney had recently gone back to work full-time while Todd stayed home with the kids. She woke up so early now, I swear I saw her nod off during the ceremony. I almost laughed thinking of my crippled self bounding over to catch her mid-fall.

It was easy to see where Joey got his personality—only Joey had managed to spruce his up a bit. Joey's father was boorish, demanding, and condescending. Every time someone made a kind remark about the new couple, Joey's father would drawl sarcastically "Awww. Ain't that sweet?" Not surprisingly, he was divorced, the mother having left the family, kids and all, some years earlier. At least she saved herself.

Since her engagement, we had only seen Britt a few times at Ally and for a bridal shower or two. This fact had Courtney, especially, bellyaching about the cost of being a bridesmaid and about the fact that we were spending all of this money and were never going to see Britt again.

Britt and Tara occasionally had lunch together. If any of us wanted to see Britt, lunch was the only option. It was the only time she didn't have to account for her whereabouts to Joey. Tara went, but Courtney and I, disgusted, refused after a while. Maybe our absence would make her come to her senses.

Of course, the fact that she couldn't meet outside of lunch was never disclosed; nothing was ever disclosed. According to Britt, everything was just as it had been, only she couldn't come to Ally anymore (although she could sneak in a lunch meeting). We pressed the issue and asked many carefully planned questions (planned at Ally of course) but all we received were very creative excuses. Britt's excuses for not attending Ally were varied—Joey's mom was in town, her father was coming to dinner, she had to get up early in the morning, a friend popped by, they had to finish painting. Eventually the excuses stopped altogether. This made me livid. How could she just pretend nothing was going on? Or were we so unimportant to her now that she was relieved to break our 20-year friendship? I wanted to hear her thought process, how she justified it to herself. I railed about it all the time. *She was well educated; she was raised in a good home by loving parents. How could she let him dictate her life and control her? How? Where was her self-respect? How could she let him pull her away from us? This was, for God's sake, the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What was she thinking?*

Tara and Courtney had both dated controlling and abusive men when they were younger, so they understood. *You just get lost. You don't realize how wrong the behavior is. You love him so much.* "But you guys were just kids," I'd yell. "She's in her thirties. She should KNOW better!"

And on it went. More than anything, I wanted Britt to address it and open up to us, but she never would. I felt as I had when my parents were divorcing. If I could just find the right words myself, I could get her to open up, to explain, to realize. I felt a desperate need to know what was going on, like if I could compartmentalize the issue, I could fix it.

In addition to not attending Ally nights for the past year, Britt had also completely changed her career. After her last lay-off, Britt had decided not to apply to any more jobs in computer sales. At the time, she'd confessed Joey didn't like that she worked with so many men and that, on occasion, she was obliged to travel with them or share a meal. At his suggestion, she'd taken a job as an administrative assistant at the same company for which Joey's sister worked. It was a drastic cut in pay. We thought it a temporary solution and didn't want to judge her decision. After all, we all needed to earn money. But Britt stayed on, never inquiring about jobs in her field.

When we did ask questions, everything was met with "Fine." How are you and Joey? Fine. Do you guys go out a lot? Not really. How's work? It's fine. It was maddening. We were all afraid to push too hard when she did come to Ally—afraid that we'd give her a good reason never to come back.

In response to my frustration, Tara prattled on about "letting Britt know we're here for her." Courtney was disgusted but largely unaffected, ready to let Britt go, saying the wedding would be the 'final hand-washing' and we'd be all done. But I couldn't believe we were letting Britt go without a fight—or, at the very least, an explanation, an admission. I wanted answers. "After the wedding," Tara would say, trying to pacify me. "She's under too much stress right now to confront her with it."

"But this is exactly the time we should confront her with it," I said, exasperated, "*before* she marries him and is in it forever."

"Why do you care so much anyway?" asked Courtney. "We've hardly seen her at all in the past year. She never calls. It's her mistake, her life. She's almost 35. She's a big girl."

And now it was done. The guests were slowly filing out of the church. Tara, Courtney and I were gearing up for the post-wedding photography session.

Tara sighed loudly, her face flushed. “I don’t care if Jesus Christ himself gets married next. I am done with bridesmaid dresses. Done! We are too damn old.”

“Ta-ra,” Courtney admonished as a few guests looked at us disapprovingly.

“I’m serious,” she said. “If ya’ll ever get married again, go to the damn courthouse. New Ally rule: no bridesmaid dresses allowed for second weddings.” Courtney stifled a laugh.

“Would you shut up!” I hissed. “People are staring at us and you’re talking about divorce at a wedding.”

“Yeah, well, we can hope.”

## **Good News or Bad**

*April 2005*

The clock reads 3:30 when Roberta and I spied Tara's doctor and the infectious diseases specialist walking toward us. This was it: good news or bad.

As they got closer, we made eye contact with the doctor and he smiled, giving us the thumbs up. Roberta and I exhaled loudly.

"Her temp's been normal now for more than an hour," the doctor said, shaking Roberta's hand. "I've still got the antibiotics at full dosage, so we'll be monitoring her very closely for probably another week, maybe two. She's going to need a home healthcare nurse to change the vacuum bandage for the wound. But I think you'll see an improvement in how she feels. Let me take you guys back."

Roberta went first. I could hear her lilting voice complimenting Tara on how much better she looked, opening the curtains for the late afternoon sunlight to filter through. They talked for a while. I slid slowly down the wall, my knees pulled to my chest, finally allowing myself to relax in relief. Tara was going to be okay.

Finally, Roberta came out. "She's much better, Lainey. Go on in; I'm going down to the cafeteria to get some sodas and snacks."

The "Caution" sign was gone. I pushed open the door. Tara was sitting up. She looked better. Not as feverish. Not as drugged. Now she simply looked exhausted.

"Oh God," I said, tears spilling and hugging her gently. "Hey."

Tara looked at me and patted the mattress. They had taken another three inches from her stomach; her incision now measured 10 inches.

“Well, the good news is, I pretty much had a tummy tuck,” Tara joked. “I think I’ve lost about 20 pounds and the morphine’s not bad either.” I almost got down on my knees and gave thanks at her joke.

“With that fibroid gone, I’m betting pregnancy is going to come a lot easier. Of course, you’re going to have to heal,” I said gently, quietly. Thinking about her incision, I was scared of what a pregnancy might do to it. As if reading my negative thoughts, Tara’s face changed.

“I’m going to throw up. Get me something.”

I scurried around. What should I get? A cup? A trashcan? Surely they have something for vomiting. I handed her the only container I could find. Perspiration dotted Tara’s temples as she retched into the bowl.

“Press the nurse button...” she coughed.

I rang the button and fled the room to flag down a nurse. She turned on expert heels. What if the staph infection was coming back? This was horrible! Every muscle in my body was clenched. My head ached so badly, it felt like I was floating away from myself. Back in the room, the nurse looked at the container I had given Tara.

“Who gave you that?” she asked Tara.

“It was all I could find,” I answered quickly.

“Well, that’s a bedpan, so let’s get rid of it. You’re going to be all right, honey,” she said to Tara. “It’s just the medication. Your temperature is normal. I’ll call the doctor and see if we should reduce the pain meds,” she said, helping Tara and the poles to the bathroom before she left.

I stayed in the bathroom with Tara until the nausea passed and then wrung out a cold wet washcloth for her forehead.

“Thank you,” she sighed, closing her eyes, then slowly opened them again. “Look at you, you’re not here five minutes and you’ve got me puking in a bedpan. You’d better hope this writing gig works out.”

“Hey, I had the foresight to get the mints. Maybe I’m psychic,” I said, offering her the box of Altoids Courtney and I had bought. As I did, Tara reached up to give me a hug. She smelled medicinal and like dried sweat, but her skin was cool.

“I would hug you closer,” I joked. “But you’ve got puke breath.” I helped her back to the bed, dragging her pole, which she dubbed “Mabel” right then.

“Now, let’s delve into these celebrity rags,” I said. “Do you want me to read about Britney Spears or J.Lo?”

Tara thought. “They’re both terrible,” she said.

I sighed. We’re older now. I should have bought *Time* or *Newsweek* or even *Ladies Home Journal*.

## **Never at Peace**

*May 2005*

For once Tyler is sleeping in this morning. It's funny how that phrase has changed in my life. "Sleeping in" used to mean 11 am or noon. Now it's anything past 6 a.m. Not surprisingly, however, I am awake, so used am I to the 5:30 am wake-up call Tyler consistently gives me. I'm thinking about Tara. I flex my toes toward the ceiling and look at Jack's empty spot in the bed as he has already left for work. Tara will come home today after nearly two weeks in the hospital. Roberta will leave soon, and Courtney and I are going to take turns going over there to clean and let the dog out and make food. That's the plan. I can tell the recovery is wearing on Tara and Dean. Yesterday in the hospital, they were snapping at each other. Both are worried about money because Tara hasn't been able to work and will basically be out of commission for another six to eight weeks because the wound is so large and requires so much attention. She will only be able to sit and sleep a certain way and can't walk around much while it's healing. A home healthcare nurse will come three times a week to change her bandage. It's a vacuum-packed bandage that basically looks like a piece of packing tape, but with a tube under the tape that sucks out moisture to prevent any bacterial growth. It's like something out of a science fiction book.

Britt has been coming sporadically to the hospital on her lunch hour. But her dad, Rob, and his wife, Barbara, have come regularly, which I think is so wonderful. Tara told me that during one visit, Rob asked her if she thought Britt was happy. Had she been coming to Ally since the wedding? Tara told Rob that Britt hadn't been to Ally regularly

for about a year and a half. “Really?” he asked, obviously surprised, Tara said. “She has never mentioned that to me. That’s so strange. I know how she feels about you guys.”

We thought we knew her, too. We went to high school together. We always made time for each other during breaks from college. We were there when Britt’s mother died—Tara holding vigil with Britt at the bedside until she passed away from cancer. We gave each other Sweet Sixteen parties and hosted another round when we all turned thirty. And for six years, we had Ally night, every week, until Joey. Sometimes I think maybe we just don’t fit her life anymore, but she doesn’t know how to tell us. If she doesn’t want to come to Ally anymore, or be friends, that’s fine. I just want to know it, so I’m not sitting here worrying it’s Joey and she’s committed herself to a bad relationship.

“She’s never been at peace with herself,” Courtney pointed out one night, reminding me of all the artificial things Britt has employed over the years to feel good about herself and all the times she’d never felt comfortable talking intimately, even among those she knew loved her the most.

## **Caught on Film**

*July 2005*

Britt has called all of us and wants to host Ally at her house tonight. I'm immediately suspicious. The last time she invited us over was to announce her engagement and that was a year-and-a-half ago. I call Courtney.

"I bet she's pregnant," I say.

"Lainey, they just got married."

"So? It's been, what, nine months?"

"I think you're jumping to conclusions," Courtney sighs. I can hear her typing on the computer keyboard in the background.

"I hope so. Because it will make me more than a little irritated after everything Tara's been through—especially with you being pregnant again."

The typing stops. "What's that supposed to mean?" Courtney asks, indignantly.

"I don't mean that in a bad way, Court. But it's got to be hard on Tara seeing you pregnant with your third." I wish I could take back the words. Courtney felt a tremendous sense of guilt telling Tara she was pregnant a few weeks ago. She and her husband Todd had been conflicted about having another baby, but both decided they'd like to try for a girl.

"Courtney," I backpedal. "I don't mean it the way you're thinking. I've told you a million times, and Tara agrees, that we all share our lives together and this is a big part of your life. So don't feel guilty about it and don't hide your excitement or anything else."

"Then why would it make you so angry if Britt was pregnant?" Courtney asks.

“Because Britt hasn’t been sharing any of her life at all for the past eighteen months. And now, if Britt is pregnant, she has this great news that she has to share, regardless of how it will make Tara feel. It’s like she’s rubbing Tara’s nose in it. She shares all of her great news and nothing personal, never the hard times. It just cheapens the friendship.”

Although the creed of Ally is “no kids, no husbands,” Joey never complies. So it’s the Ally girls and Joey. Not exactly an environment that makes you feel safe about crying, complaining, or making jokes at your husband’s expense, which we sometimes do. But maybe that’s the point. Joey can keep an eye on us and our influence on Britt.

Tara and I ride together again and Courtney is late. Joey is kind and accommodating, giving us all hugs and announcing he’s going to go downstairs to give us some privacy.

Tara and I take our drinks into the living room, and I notice that Britt is not drinking. I always notice things like this. When I was still in college, it was how my older sister and sisters-in-law used to guess when one of them was pregnant. Tara comments on how nice Britt’s house looks. Britt and Joey are now renting his grandmother’s house since she’s in a nursing home. It’s a home in the older part of Cary, but Britt has done some nice things with the paint and decorating.

Courtney is talking about how the transition has been going back to work and how Todd is a lot harder on the boys than she is. Finally, I can’t stand it anymore.

“So Britt,” I drawl sweetly. “Do you have some news for us?”

She looks a little taken aback. “Well, yes, actually, I do.”

“Are you pregnant?” I ask, teasingly.

“Yeah,” she beams, unaware that I’ve ruined her surprise. I look at Tara and Courtney and both are smiling and then we’re all giving her hugs. “That was fast,” Courtney says. “When are you due?”

“April 13<sup>th</sup>.”

“Oh my God, I’m due March 26<sup>th</sup>,” says Courtney.

“You’re pregnant too? That’s great!” Britt gives Courtney another hug.

“That is really cool you guys are going to have kids the same age,” I say. Tara looks at me and I can tell what she’s thinking: *Those kids won’t ever see each other.*

I make my way to the kitchen to get another beer and notice a nice video camera on the counter. It’s folded up as tightly as a Rubik’s Cube. “Britt, this is a nice video camera,” I call from the kitchen. “Thanks,” she says. “My dad gave that to us for a wedding present.” It’s a Sony. I pick it up and turn it over. “I really need to get a camera so we can start filming Tyler,” I say, putting it back down and joining the group. Tara is still wearing her vacuum bandage, but she’s taking care of the wound herself now and is back working and generally herself. She’s taken the whole thing in stride really.

Concerning the baby issue, the doctors have advised her and Dean to try naturally for a few months now that the fibroid is gone and to allow Tara’s body to continue healing. After that, if nothing happens, it may be necessary to consider in-vitro fertilization.

I pet Britt’s sweet dog, Shelby, and look at my watch. Nearly 10 pm. Ally usually goes on for at least another hour or hour-and-a-half. But Britt is fidgeting, jiggling her leg in an agitated manner.

“Britt!” Joey yells, coming up from the basement. “I’m going on up to bed.”

“Okay. I’ll be up in a bit.”

After a while Tara announces she’s ready for a cigarette and we all plod through the dining room to the screened porch. Britt’s mother’s dining room furniture looks good in here. I remember it from high school when it was in Britt’s childhood home. On the top of the buffet I notice the video camera again. Only this time, it’s open and it’s recording. It’s been placed on two books and the camera arm is pointing onto the screened porch. Tara and I are bringing up the rear of the line. I grab her arm and point. She looks at me. “It wasn’t there before,” I whisper, shaking my head.

“Britt?” Tara calls. “Is this thing on? It looks like it’s recording.”

Britt comes back into the dining room from the screened porch.

“What? Well, that’s weird. Joey must have been filming earlier today and left it on,” Britt says, turning it off and folding it back up. I know this is untrue because I’d seen it just forty-five minutes ago in the kitchen in the off position. No doubt Joey knew we would head out here eventually and he wondered what we’d be talking about. The thought gives me the creeps, but I don’t say anything. I can’t even imagine what I would say: “Britt is your husband filming us? What else does he do? Why in the hell are you having a child with him? *What is going on?*”

When we leave Britt’s, Tara grabs Courtney’s arm and says “keep your phone on.” She and I get into her car, and we commence having a three-way conference on the way home. There was so little we knew about Britt and Joey’s relationship because on the surface it seemed so normal. But when we did catch glimpses, like tonight or when we talked with Britt’s dad, we were frightened.

I feel sorry for Britt, but at the same time I'm wondering what I'm so sorry about. Maybe she loves life with him. If she didn't, she could walk away. It's a free country. Her father could help her financially. But Tara and Courtney say it's not that easy. Then why can't we do something to get her out? Because it's a free country, Courtney says. I'm frustrated. It seems like there is nothing we can do unless she comes to us or her father for help. And then there is always the nagging thought in my mind that I mention to Courtney and Tara when we are having these discussions. "Maybe she doesn't want to leave. Maybe she and Joey are happy. Maybe she just got tired of us and we are completely fabricating that anything is going on."

Courtney and Tara have stopped responding to me when I say these things. They just sigh.

## **Whatever It Takes**

*July 2006*

As always, the gym smells like forgotten clothes in the washer. I don't know why I don't join a better gym, but this one is close and Tyler likes the daycare. Tyler. His sweet apple cheeks and big eyes, the color of the sea, swim at the edge of my mind's horizon. I am thinking about him today and also about my back. I'm feeling better and the gym is helping. At home I can never do the physical therapy exercises without Tyler crawling on me or the dog licking my face. Here, I spend thirty minutes on the elliptical trainer, and fifteen minutes each on core strengthening exercises and weights. It's working. The nerve pain is gone, and I'm not even taking anti-inflammatory medicine anymore. Plus, the gym is a great place for me to unplug my brain. Sometimes I close my eyes while I do the floor work. I don't want to talk to anybody; I just want to decompress. I want silence with no demands; I want to process my life. I can't believe Tyler is now three years old. Recently, Jack and I took our very first trip away from him to celebrate our ninth anniversary. It was heaven. I felt like I was nineteen again, and we both slept late and didn't have to worry about anything but being with each other. That same weekend, Courtney gave birth to Valerie, the most beautiful little girl. Of course, she did it naturally again. I told her I'm going to make a medal of honor for her—a purple heart for natural childbirth. And Britt had a son a few weeks later, Davis Joseph Keyes, named after Joey. She had pre-eclampsia and had to have an emergency C-section. I went to see her in the hospital after class one night, and she was so bloated it scared me. Joey was very nice and tried to take me to see the baby, but the visiting hours were over. Seeing Courtney's baby girl kind of makes me want to have another, because I would love a girl,

but the doctors have been very specific about the risks involved. I've had three opinions thus far and two have suggested I get a lumbar fusion immediately and definitely before I consider another pregnancy. But a lumbar fusion consists of having screws drilled into your vertebra to hold them into place, as well as a bone graft from your hip or a cadaver to secure it. Then, you wait for it to fuse, which takes months, sometimes up to a year (and that's what they're admitting to). I feel decent now and the pain is manageable, so I'm reluctant to volunteer for such a surgery. The third specialist is much more conservative on the topic of surgery. He told me to go ahead and have another child if I really wanted to, but to be ready for the possibility of some bad pain and damage that they won't be able to do anything about during the pregnancy. After the birth, however, I could get epidural injections if the pain was really bad. The thing is, I just don't know if I want to go through all of that again. Not that T wasn't worth it—because he was—I'm just afraid I'll lose *my* quality of life. Being a new mom requires stamina and energy. What if I was in so much pain, I couldn't do all the things I'd need to do? The first two years of Tyler's life were really difficult in that respect. Even, now, I still have a lot of pain at the end of the day. If Jack wanted more kids, I might feel differently. But he thinks we should let well enough alone.

Tyler is our shining star. He is the best, most wonderful thing I have ever created, so funny and smart. He has challenged me in many ways too. He has a speech delay, and it's profound so we've started him in speech therapy. I have spent the past few weeks beating myself up over this. How could I, a communications person, have a son with a speech delay? Maybe I don't read enough to him. Maybe I let him take the pacifier too long. I had to go to my mom's house one day and have a good cry about it because I

didn't want to cry around Tyler. I felt overwhelmed and a little desperate. But motherhood is a lot about feeling overwhelmed and desperate, I'm finding. This whole experience has got me thinking a lot about moms. I take Tyler to speech therapy at a rehabilitation center at Wake Med that also offers occupational and physical therapy to children. A woman I met in the waiting room the other day was there with her toddler daughter who hadn't yet started walking or crawling. She said the doctors thought her daughter might have cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy.

Another time I watched as a mother and her five-year-old son locked eyes, both of them smiling and laughing with joy as he walked to her for the first time, aided by a walker. I will never forget the love in her eyes as her boy came through the door.

For my column *Baby Makes Three*, I talk with other moms in passing, ready to strangle their teenage sons and daughters who don't listen and won't follow the rules. They despair over the crowds their kids want to hang out with, afraid their child might take a path that can't be reversed.

Regardless of kids and their ages, their abilities and disabilities, I'm learning that moms do whatever they need to do—no matter how costly, how tiring, how frustrating or how utterly devastating. Simply put, we do the best we can. Tyler's speech is something I can't control, but I can control how much I help him. It's going to mean doing a lot of extra writing because private speech therapy is one hundred dollars per half hour and he needs it twice weekly. Insurance won't cover it. But if I did fail him earlier, I'm sure not going to do it again. In the fall, he will be able to take speech with Wake County Public School's preschool services, which is free of charge, but until then it's going to cost us. And it will be worth every penny. It all makes sense. The gym is making me stronger.

And the stronger I am, the harder I can work. The harder I can work, the more I can help  
Tyler. That's my plan.

## **New and Improved**

*October 19, 2006*

Today I went to get my driver's license renewed. I will be thirty-five in six days. After I had the new one in my hand, I sat in my car and laughed, comparing the new license to the old one from 1999. I look a lot more grown-up. Tara and Courtney's plea to wax my eyebrows was definitely a good idea. Aside from that, I look more confident, less unsure.

Ally tonight is at Tara's. It's always at Tara's now. Courtney's three kids make it impossible for her to host. I used to put Tyler to bed and then have the girls over, but he's getting too savvy for that now. He hears the car doors slam and looks out his window, wailing that he wants to come down and say "Hi." After that, he needs his back scratched or a cup of water or Baby Tiger and finally I lose my cool and yell at him "Go to bed!" because I want to get downstairs to the Ally girls and see what I'm missing. And then I have to wonder aloud, so I won't dwell on it in my head, if I'm a good mother. I've changed, but not completely.

I show Courtney and Tara my license and they have a good laugh at my old caterpillar eyebrows. Then Tara says, "Well, I have some gossip."

"What?" Courtney and I ask. Tara takes a deep breath and spills.

Rob, Britt's father, had called Tara today, concerned again about Britt. He and his wife Barbara had agreed to watch Britt's son Davis while Joey and Britt painted the living room. Britt took Davis, now about six months old, over to her dad's and took him to the upstairs bedroom where Barbara was folding laundry. A few hours later, Britt came to pick up Davis and when she got home Joey noticed a pair of neatly folded boxer shorts wedged in the car seat carrier, underneath Davis.

“Joey went into a rage and Britt called Rob, crying, and said “Dad, you’ve got to tell him those are your underwear, that they fell in while Barbara was folding laundry,” Tara says.

“I don’t get it,” I say. “Why was Joey so mad?”

Courtney rolls her eyes. “Lainey, obviously Joey thought the underwear was another man’s.” Tara nods.

“What? That’s ridiculous. You mean he thought Britt stopped off on the way home from her dad’s to have a quickie with some other guy? When would she have the time in his eyes? He makes Britt call before she leaves anywhere.”

“Maybe he thinks she’s lying about where she is when she calls. Who knows?” says Tara. “Rob was really concerned, and I told him we were too, but what can we do about it?”

“Not a damn thing,” Courtney sighs, taking a sip of wine.

“You know, I was thinking, girls. Maybe we should see if Rob would like to meet us all for lunch,” I say.

“Why?” Courtney asks.

“So we can compare notes about Britt and see if what we think is going on is really going on.” Courtney and Tara look at each other.

“I don’t think so, Lainey. What good will it do? It will just be gossiping about her and if she ever found out, she’d be furious.”

“Yeah,” Courtney agrees. “It would be one thing if we knew she was ready to leave Joey, and we all wanted to meet to come up with an intervention or a plan, but she’s complacent and she’s not going anywhere.”

I sigh loudly. “You guys are so frustrating to me. I can’t believe you don’t want to get to the bottom of this and find out as much as we can from Rob.”

“Lainey, Britt is not ready to hear what we think about her marriage or how she’s given up her friendships and her identity,” Tara says firmly. “She’s not ready. If we try to force it, we’re going to push her away forever. All we can do is keep the door open and let her know we’re always here for her.”

“I’m sorry I just can’t let this go. I’m not like you guys. I need to figure out what’s going on. I want her to confide and admit, and then maybe she’ll realize how she sounds and then I, we, can change things,” I say, thinking I sound a lot like I did when my parents were divorcing.

“Lainey, it’s not about you!” Courtney says. “It’s not about what you need or want. It’s about Britt. This is her journey. And she’s got a kid with this guy and right now being with Joey is a lot more attractive than moving back home with her dad and admitting the whole thing was a mistake or a failure or whatever. They’re not just dating. She has a lot to lose, and she’s not going to be open about communicating with us until she’s ready.”

I am silent for a moment. “But that could be years.”

“It could,” Tara points out, rocking on my screened porch. “It took your mom forty-seven years.”

I look at Tara, then Courtney. It is not that I am trying to be controlling. But I feel if I say or do the right thing I can prevent someone I love from getting hurt or making a mistake. It is egotistical of me to think these things are my job—that I am powerful enough to influence hearts and minds in this way. But I don’t feel superior or

condescending at all; I just feel as if I'm being careful. It seems likely my wanting a happy ending for everyone—and feeling burdened by the responsibility to make it so—could definitely be another obsession. In fact, it could be *the* obsession. *Sometimes the hardest thing you can do is nothing*. I read this somewhere once, and I didn't understand it.

I look at Tara and Courtney and repeat it: *Sometimes the hardest thing you can do is nothing*. Tara smiles. "That's true," she says. "But it's all we can do. It's not our job to rescue Britt if she doesn't want rescuing." I rock slowly and think about Britt—about all the years she could lose figuring it out. I think about my mother saying she wished she'd left my father years before so she would have been younger when she started over.

But the only life I can control is my own and there are so many things about that I can't control either. The realization dawns on me, slowly. It is a simultaneous acceptance and a letting go of all the little pebbles that I can't coerce. I am almost sad to put these burdens down.

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## **Epilogue**

Lainey still freelances full-time. She will hopefully defend her master's thesis before the end of 2007.

Courtney continues to work full-time in sales for UPS, while her husband Todd stays at home with their three children.

Tara and her husband Dean are still battling infertility and plan to try in-vitro fertilization in 2008.

Britt is pregnant with her second child, a boy. She still does not come to Ally. The Ally girls still meet once a week sans husbands or kids. In 2007, for the first time since Tara's surgery, the remaining three Ally girls spent a weekend in Nashville, TN, hosted by Tara's mother, Roberta. On the plane ride back to Raleigh, amid fits of laughter, they produced the following:

## **ALLY GIRLS TOP TEN LIST**

### **You know you're getting old on a Girls' Weekend when....**

- Everyone's bathing suit has a skirt.
- Your "comfortable" shoes dictate your outfit.
- The doorman at the country music saloon gives you the "Kroger Card" discount (wink, wink.)
- You're concerned the music at the bar could damage your hearing.
- When a cute guy flirts with you, you pat his hand and assure him he and his fiancée will be back together tomorrow.
- The guys at the bar, who used to size you up, now point out your wedding band. (As if you need reminding).
- Everyone wants to be in charge (except Lainey).

- No one laughs when Roberta falls off the boat and into the Cumberland River.
- Your moles need a haircut.
- **AND THE NUMBER ONE REASON YOU KNOW YOU'RE GETTING OLD:** It takes twice as long to recover from the weekend as the weekend itself.

*\*The real names of the main characters in this story have been changed.*

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