

ONE

{ August 15, 2000 — New York City }

RACHEL SHEPHERD BRACES A HAND AGAINST the mattress, and rolls onto her side in slow motion so as not to rock the boat of her bed and awaken her husband. She sips in air and waits out the ripple of achy pain across her lower abdomen, traces a knob of elbow or knee nudging her ribs. *Easy, champ, no kickboxing...* or spin class. There's no standing on her feet mixing drinks, that's for sure, but this is no vacation. Four months of wallowing in bed, not even a walk to Washington Square for a hot pretzel and to watch the acrobatic skateboard punks. She sits up. Another contraction, lower this time. They seem to come in pairs. But that's normal. 'Perfectly normal,' those were the ob-gyn's exact words. Bed rest is merely a precaution. Braxton-Hicks, not real labor. This isn't real.

"Get you something?" Mick mumbles into his pillow. Rachel waits a beat, but he doesn't reach out to her. He doesn't flip on the light.

Doesn't ask again.

"I'm fine, just need to pee." She dips a toe out of bed. Water, lots of water. According to *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, fluids may ease the contractions. But won't that make her have to pee again? Isn't she supposed to stay in bed? The doctor said she could walk around the apartment, but how often? Why didn't she think to ask? She swipes a baby book off the stack on the bedside table and holds it to her chest. Two weeks ago, she sat at her mom's bedside, brainstorming baby names, debating the best diapers (cloth, definitely cloth), comparing cravings, asking for advice on a million little things a mother should know. Who can she ask now?

Across the hall in the almost-nursery, Rachel blinks against walls stark with primer. A dozen shades of yellow paint chips are scattered at her feet like a field of daisies. Against the far wall, within arm's reach of a skeletal, half-assembled crib, is a flea-market-find desk with beveled edges. Her designated study space/future office. She eases into the Herman Miller chair with a wobbly arm, a cast-off from Mick's office, and pushes aside a dog-eared catalogue of fall courses at New York University. Mick's right, thirty-three is getting too old to keep bartender's hours, especially with a baby on the way. The beauty of her job, though, is the freedom. That, and the music. When she moved here from Jacksonville fourteen years ago, she couldn't believe someone would actually pay her to listen to up-and-coming bands—new wave and punk, and then grunge—while sliding bottles of beer across the bar.

Now, she shakes martinis at the Blue Note. The classic blues singers are her favorites: Ella, B.B., Etta, Buddy. These legends are from another era, before slam dancing and mosh pits, when music was more

sensual than sexed-up. The songs are real stories, told straight from the heart, of love and loss. Sometimes, she finds herself turning away from the stage—restocking the condiment tray or examining the rows of colorful bottles on glass shelves—her face flushed with a vulnerability she doesn't want exposed to customers sitting at the bar. There's a connection, not only with the singer's aching heart but also her own desire. After the song ends she turns back to taking orders for cocktails and making small talk, the desire gone.

The cardboard box wedged under the desk is heavier than she remembers. A nurse's aide packed up her mom's few belongings after she succumbed to a fifteen-year battle with liver cancer. Rachel winces at the scrape and thump of dragging the box out into the room, glances toward the door and then exhales a mixture of disappointment and relief: her dog, Louie, not her husband, pads in from the hallway. The collie mix gives the cardboard box an indifferent sniff. Rachel scratches his ear as she rereads the note that came with it in the mail last week: *Ms. Shepherd, you must have forgotten...* But, no, she hadn't forgotten to pick up these scraps of her mom's life after the funeral.

Nobody leaves. This was their pact. Just the two of them. She was angry that her mom broke it. She rummages through this hodgepodge of her mom's life: a pink silk scarf, a crystal rosebud vase that was a recent Mother's Day present, a plastic bag of glittering rhinestone jewelry, a few photos of the two of them that were taped to the fridge, and a manila envelope that probably holds personal documents. She removes a plastic Macy's bag, plump with the remnants of a half-finished green and blue afghan for the baby's crib. "I'll finish this before she's born," she promises, and then says to her stomach, "Your Gram would have loved teaching you to knit." Merilee would have showed

her granddaughter the right way to apply make-up, spoiled her with frilly dresses, the kind Rachel refused to wear, spent afternoons sharing her secret recipes for triple-fudge brownies and the crispiest fried chicken ever. She would have loved recruiting someone else into their “girls only” club.

There’s not much else in the box that’s worth saving. Rachel uses the scarf to wipe a snowy mantle of dust off a silver-framed photo. They look so formal, almost regal: Her father in a tuxedo, brown curls slicked back off his broad Slavic face. Merilee’s shiny dress the perfect shade of buffed pearl against alabaster skin, waves of auburn hair swept into an updo, her wedding veil a crown. The newlyweds gaze at each other like they’re the only two people in the room. It’s a little unsettling to see her parents looking as happy as she and Mick were, exchanging vows under the oak tree in his parents’ backyard at the foot of the Catskills. There were dozens of O’Sheas, members of their church, and neighbors. A small group of Mick’s friends and their wives, from his Wall Street office and racquetball club, who had become Rachel’s friends too, travelled to the quaint town in Upstate New York. Her mom walked her down the aisle.

Next, Rachel hooks a finger under the flap of the manila envelope; it seems to breathe open, exhaling a handful of yellow-edged photos onto the desk with a crumpled sigh. She vaguely recognizes the pictures her father shot as a photographer at *The St. Augustine Record*, his dream job after finishing high school. She lays them out side by side, and slots them into the photo album of her memory. Some of these images from the mid-sixties were displayed on the walls of her father’s office at the ad agency where he worked: Martin Luther King, Jr. behind a pulpit; several burly white policemen standing over a black woman curled up

in a ball on the street; John F. Kennedy on the steps of the Jacksonville City Hall; a young white boy helping an elderly black woman up the front steps of a bus. These photos always struck her as a montage of a different world where her father once lived, where he met a president and took photos of interesting—sometimes dangerous—people. After he left, she imagined him travelling back to this foreign land. Merilee told her the photos were lost; it followed that her father was lost, too. Of course, that's why he never wrote or called. She didn't want to upset her mom, bring on the darkness that sent Merilee to bed with the shades drawn for sometimes days, even before her father left. And so, for years Rachel worried silently: How would her father stay warm? Find stuff to eat? Find his way back to her.

The truth is, she envies the family stories Mick and his three sisters told at their wedding. She envies the way, every year, her husband looks forward to Christmas at his parents' house, with relatives coming from Baltimore and somewhere in Ohio. She envies Mick's easy smile as he strolls through his hometown, waves to neighbors. She never knows quite what to do, where to sit, in the white clapboard house where he still has a bedroom. It was just Rachel and her mom in the tomb-like house in suburban Jacksonville with not enough furniture. *This is still our home*, Merilee maintained stubbornly, sometimes working two secretarial jobs to make mortgage payments.

There's one photo stuck in the envelope, the thin, splintery wooden frame rough against Rachel's fingers as she coaxes it out. She props the timeworn image of a young black woman dressed in a navy suit with a Peter Pan collar on the desk beside the silver-framed happy newlyweds. Rachel studies the woman trapped under dull glass: she stands in a church, her hands braced against a pew, slivers of gold and

purple light from a stained glass window falling around her like an exploding meteor. Her expression is heartbreakingly sincere. In the distance is the blurred image of a preacher behind a pulpit. The date in the top corner of the *Life* magazine cover is April 4, 1968, the day Reverend King was assassinated. The bold-faced headline reads: *The End of a Dream*.

Rachel picks up the photo, remembers it in clear view when she used to sit in the leather chair at her father's desk. As a child, she was mesmerized by the young face with grown-up narrowed eyes, her chin jutted forward. The girl in the church window appeared downright fierce, defiant. Hopeful. Rachel came to regard hope as a weakness, a silly wish that couldn't possibly come true. When her parents fought, which was often, her mom called her father a dreamer—said it like a curse. When her father left, she felt guilty, as if she were betraying her mom by daydreaming about where he might be. How he might one day return. Eventually she stopped thinking of him altogether. By the time she moved to New York she stopped hoping for any kind of love to show up, settling instead for affairs with interchangeable men, slightly more hygienic versions of Kurt Cobain. Men who usually insisted on going to her place instead of their own, where Rachel suspected a wife or girlfriend was likely waiting.

One lazy Sunday morning, Mick O'Shea sat next to her on a bench in Battery Park to watch the ferries glide past Lady Liberty. She was impressed that he asked for permission. She said yes, although he wasn't her type: bristly blond hair and a ruddy face, handsome in a J. Crew catalogue sort of way. She was intrigued by this guy—this *man*—her age, but he came off much older, a little stiff and serious. Mick called to ask her out on actual dates, wore Calvin Klein suits

and had business cards that read *Junior Financial Planner*. He “courted” her for six years, half-joking that his persistence would eventually wear her down. Their courtship was a game and she enjoyed being thought of as a prize. Their wedding day, three years ago, was the happiest day of her life.

Rachel chips away at the crumbly wooden frame that holds the *Life* magazine cover, her eyes flitting to the silver-framed wedding photo of her parents. It occurs to her, not for the first time, that becoming pregnant has been another kind of game during the past three years, a challenge that bonded her and Mick. Finally, she can offer him a real prize. Their baby is what makes them not merely a couple, but a real family.

“Her name is Serena,” Rachel confided to her mom during their last visit at the Seaview Nursing Home. “It’s a secret, not even Mick knows.” It was nice to see a flush rise to Merilee’s pale face, cheeks that had held a young girl’s blush until recently. Her eyes, blue tinged with violet, like a rare gem, sparkled with the news.

“I won’t tell,” she promised between labored breaths, tapping a conspirator’s finger against coral-pink lips. It was the last secret they shared. She died two days later.

Now, Rachel looks out the pocket window between her desk and the crib. A fog of light emanates from the streetlamp. She cradles her stomach with both hands and makes a wish, aiming it toward where the North Star should be. *Serena*. It’s superstitious but she’s still afraid to say her daughter’s name aloud, afraid to somehow jinx her existence. Still. It’s been over a month since the end of the first trimester, when the doctor announced they were officially out of the danger zone. That night, after toasting their future astronaut or rock

star with bubbly cider, she and Mick made love on the living room rug for the first time since finding out she was pregnant. She imagined they were being transported back two years, before the pressure of thermometers, calendars, and positioning their bodies for optimum baby-making. Before the miscarriage at ten weeks last year. She bends over, a hand on her lower back, to pluck a paint chip from the floor. Bumblebee Yellow or Golden Wheat. They couldn't decide, went back and forth on what shade to paint the nursery like they had all the time in the world.

One side of the frame snaps in her hand, a sharp edge of glass slicing her palm. Rachel sucks at her wound and stares at the girl in the church window, shattered but still in one piece, on the floor. She picks icy slivers off the photo taped to cardboard, and then examines it more closely. On the back are several crossed-out phone numbers and an address in Atlanta. Why the hell did her father keep track of this woman? Maybe her mom had good reason to suspect he was having an affair. Did he leave them for her?

The laptop computer sputters as if it has been awakened from the deepest sleep when Rachel taps the "on" button. The dial-up connection groans. She drums her fingers on the desktop. What if Henry Shepherd is in Atlanta? Fucking Atlanta, not Timbuktu, only two hours by plane from Jacksonville. Serena stirs; Rachel's hand softens and floats onto her stomach. The other hand reaches for a snow globe from a shelf above her desk containing a tiny snow-capped mountain, above it bright green cursive script: *Merry Christmas from Mt. Kenya*. It's the one and only gift her father has sent to her in the past twenty-six years, the Christmas after he left. The computer screen flickers from black to blue, and she shakes the orb like a Magic 8-Ball. As a

girl, before she stopped hoping, she watched these papery flakes and glitter drift to the ground and imagined her father's footprints in the snow. Now, she sees two sets of footprints, one very small.

Alta Vista pops up on the screen and she types the address in Atlanta into the search engine box. The computer springs to life, awhirl with ticking sounds. Rachel leans in closer toward the screen. Maybe the photo her father took, an impression frozen in time, might lead her to him. Bring him back home. A name materializes on the screen along with the address: Lillian Carlson. She hasn't lived at that address since the late sixties. A small flare of hope lights up within Rachel as she scans a short list of website links, one with an email address that's definitely not in Atlanta.

TWO

{ September 15, 2000 - Mubaro, Rwanda }

N EARLY THIRTY YEARS, AND IT NEVER gets any easier when a child shows up on the front porch of Lillian Carlson's modest farm in the shadow of the Virunga Mountains. "How about some lunch, sugar?" she coaxes, offering the plate of plantain, rice and beans to the boy with dull-brown eyes, who is probably in his early teens, judging from his height. She resists the urge to reach out and hold him close, assure him everything's going to be okay. That's not true and she won't lie to these kids, not after all they've been through by the time they land here. The boy is so thin, practically swallowed up by her wicker rocker, as he considers his bare feet, toes digging into the bamboo mat.

"Well, I'll leave your lunch right here on the table while I check on those cookies you smell baking." Her new ward cuts a glance toward

her and she grabs the opening, leans a bit closer. “Personally, I’m torn between cocoa, peanut butter and cardamom,” she confides, “so I mix up all three in my secret recipe.” Lillian takes a minute to arrange a full set of silverware on a cloth napkin in front of the boy, pulls a few droopy petals off the vase of rainbow-colored wildflowers, and then wipes a powdery veneer of pollen off the mahogany tabletop and rubs a thumb across her fingers. Spring has finally come to the Rift Valley after a long, dry winter. This is her favorite time of year; filled with tiny miracles.

A knot of black-masked vervet monkeys perched in a nearby acacia tree chatter heartily as Lillian opens the screen door. “Don’t you worry about them, all talk and no action,” she says, waving a hand toward the little bandits who are too shy to come down and swipe the boy’s food. They’re more likely to give up in a few minutes and go raid the pea patch at the side of the house. She keeps watching the boy—nobody at the hospital could get him to reveal his name—from the front hallway, out of his sight. He keeps an eye on the monkeys, slides his chair closer to the plate and grabs handfuls of food, ignoring the silverware. Lillian smiles triumphantly. Sometimes that’s what it takes, her up and leaving, before a child trusts the bounty is actually for him, accepts that there are no strings attached.

Out of the corner of her eye, in the mirror above the coatrack, Lillian spies a flash of pink barrettes. She pretends to startle and then reaches behind to catch nimble fingers latching onto the back pocket of her dungarees. “Rosie, I swear,” she chides, “you’re quiet as a leopard cub. I’m going to hang bells around your neck so you won’t be able to slink up on me.” The culprit falls into her, a curtain of shoulder-length black braids cascading across her wren-like face, snorting laughter through her nose. Lillian pulls her gently into her arms. How can

this child who spent the last week in bed, so listless she couldn't lift a spoon to her mouth, now be so strong? Another miracle.

Rose cranes her neck over Lillian's shoulder and wriggles out of her arms. "Who is he?" she asks. Lillian wipes a dab of honey from a shiny, cocoa-colored cheek. Rose has sprouted up during the past year, but she still looks closer to age six than eight. Some days, all she'll eat is Mama Lilly's special super-power cookies, packed with protein, baked especially for her. She's always been a finicky eater, ever since she was an infant. Lillian suspects it's because she never had the opportunity to nurse at her mama's breast.

"What's his name?" Rose persists. "Did Tucker find him in the mountains?"

"Tucker brought him from the hospital in Kigali," Lillian says crisply, to short-circuit a surge of sadness. "His mama can't take care of him anymore." She doesn't like keeping the truth from the children, especially when it's her own emotions getting tangled up.

Daniel Tucker first appeared on her front porch with Rose seven years ago, dressed in filthy jeans and a bright yellow UCLA T-shirt, a red bandana slashing across his light brown forehead. African-American, but there was no mistaking that he was more of the latter. He could have been a young backpacker in need of a shower, stopping in Mubaro to get water before heading into the Virunga Mountains to track gorillas. But there was that squirming bundle he held to his chest, wrapped in a dirty pink blanket. And then, there were his meticulously squared nails rimmed with dirt-encrusted cuticles: the hands of a surgeon in a war zone.

Lillian held out her arms instead of asking questions. The first time she holds a child, the feel of their body, if they settle or squirm,

look up into her eyes or away, it's all-telling. The baby girl nestled into the crook of her elbow and sucked mightily on her pinky finger. Even with a film of dust on her brown fuzzy head, she still had a honey-and-milk baby smell. "You're a beauty," Lillian cooed, and then asked Tucker, "What's her name, son?" He shook his head as if confused, sadness pooling in his eyes. "We'll call her Rose for now," she said, guiding him inside her home. He's been staying here off and on ever since, providing medical care for the orphans as well as families who live in the mountain villages between Mubaro and the Uganda border, about fifty kilometers north as the crow flies, much longer by Jeep winding up and down dirt roads.

Lillian reaches out for Rose but the slip of a girl is too darned fast. "Sugar, wait!" The new boy doesn't need her asking his name, pestering him. Let him settle in for a bit first. But Rose is already on the front porch, introducing herself, talking to—no, wait, *with*—this child who Lillian hasn't been able to drag a blessed syllable out of during the past two hours. Within minutes, they're pointing at the monkeys still in the tree and giggling like old pals. Well, that's how it is with the kids she takes in, only three or four at a time now. They have an unspoken bond. They can reach each other when adults have done too much damage to be trusted.

A faint *ding-bleep-bleep-ding* becomes louder as Lillian heads toward the kitchen. Two brothers, Thomas and Zeke, are still in their school uniforms of khaki shorts and blue polo shirts, huddled at the table with Tucker. All three are mesmerized by the portable computer that was a birthday gift from Tucker a few months back. Lillian still can't get comfortable using it. She's gotten by with her Smith Corona for nearly forty years, a high school graduation present from her folks.

They worked hard to make sure their daughter was the first family member on either side to attend college. The look on their faces when she announced her intention to teach at an orphanage in Africa was nearly unbearable. To Mama's mind, Kenya may as well have been Jupiter. It wasn't the first time she had disappointed them. But it was the first time she didn't allow them to talk her out of *a terrible mistake*, Daddy's reference to most of the decisions she made on her own.

Lillian stands behind Tucker, who's hunched over the keyboard. "See?" he says to the brothers, tapping away. "This game's a cinch. Just keep your little dudes cruising through the maze, gobbling up dots to get points. The cherries are the real mother lode."

"Ten more minutes, then it's back to homework for a while," Lillian reminds all three of them, running her hand over the tightly cropped curls on Tucker's head. She sighs. Only thirty-two and already a smattering of gray.

It's this place, so beautiful and full of promise. Rwanda, the people and the land, draw you in, take everything you have and make you dig deep within your soul, willingly, to keep searching for more. Lillian squeezes Tucker's shoulder; it gives her such joy to see him cheering along with the boys as the blinking smiley-faces gobble up musical dots. The children nourish him. She could see that on the first day he arrived, his voice a monotone tenor as he reported that the Hutus had attacked the main hospital in Kigali, where he worked. The Hutu militia had been raiding Tutsi towns, burning homes and murdering entire communities since the Belgians left Rwanda in the late fifties. Nothing new there. But this was different: organized and premeditated. The terror spreading throughout the country was palpable, like the pulsing dots of color multiplying on the computer screen. Aid workers and