



Somewhere Out There: A Novel

By Amy Hatvany

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What happens when two sisters who were torn apart when their young mother abandoned them—and grew up in tragically different circumstances—reunite thirty-five years later to find her? For readers who love Jodi Picoult, acclaimed author Amy Hatvany fearlessly explores complex family issues in her gripping, provocative new novel.

Natalie Clark knew never to ask her sensitive adoptive mother questions about her past. She doesn't even know her birth mother's name—only that the young woman signed parental rights over to the state when Natalie was a baby. Now Natalie's own daughter must complete a family tree project for school, and Natalie is determined to unearth the truth about her roots.

Brooke Walker doesn't have a family. At least, that's what she tells herself after being separated from her mother and her little sister at age four. Having grown up in a state facility and countless foster homes, Brooke survives the only way she knows how, by relying on herself. So when she discovers she's pregnant, Brooke faces a heart-wrenching decision: give up her baby or raise the child completely on her own. Scared and confused, she feels lost until a surprise encounter gives her hope for the future.

How do our early experiences—the subtle and the traumatic—define us as adults? How do we build relationships when we've been deprived of real connection? Critically acclaimed author Amy Hatvany considers controversial and complicated questions about childhood through the lens of her finely crafted characters in this astute novel about mending wounds by diving into the truth of what first tore us apart.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Somewhere Out There*:

"It's no secret that Amy Hatvany is a master of creating compelling, beautiful, flawed characters. This time around, Hatvany has reached new levels of aching honesty and brilliant empathy. A daring, compassionate, and deeply human story, *Somewhere Out There* is Hatvany at her very best. The women of this book will open your mind, break your heart, and stay with you long after you've turned the last page." (Taylor Jenkins Reid, Author of *Maybe in Another Life*)

"Gripping and emotionally honest." (Stephanie Evanovich *New York Times* bestselling author)

"Hatvany brings readers a riveting, controversial story of how impactful our childhood experiences are in defining us as adults." (*YourTango*)

"Hatvany deals with topics a lot of us are too afraid to discuss. This will definitely get conversations going." (*Redbook*)

"Adoption and its aftermath can be messy; Hatvany gets that right in this novel, which will delight readers who enjoy stories of love and family complications." (*Library Journal*)

Praise for *Safe With Me*:

"SAFE WITH ME is a stirring portrait of two moms, linked by tragedy, who rescue each other in more ways than one." (*Good Housekeeping*)

"Hatvany does a marvelous job of not letting the plot get too maudlin or 'ripped from the headlines,' and her characters have warmth and depth. Readers will find themselves cheering for these women. A good pick for women's-fiction fans, particularly those who enjoy the realistic stories of Emily Giffin and Kristina Riggle." (*Booklist* on *SAFE WITH ME*)

"In Amy Hatvany's capable hands, richly drawn characters explore everything that is complex, difficult, powerful and poignant about being a mother, a daughter, a friend. *SAFE WITH ME* is an extraordinary look behind the curtain into the very private pains of women, and the hope that endures when you survive the unthinkable. It will remind you that the human spirit can triumph over all, and you will wish you could reach directly into these pages and hug the heroines." (Stacey Ballis *author of Off the Menu*)

"Amy Hatvany is a strong new voice in contemporary women's fiction. *SAFE WITH ME* is a compelling, thought-provoking novel about three women learning from each other as they navigate through a terrain filled with both tragedy and opportunity." (Kristin Hannah #1 *New York Times* bestselling author)

"Equally heartbreaking and heart-pounding, Amy Hatvany's *SAFE WITH ME* puts her in the very fine company of Jodi Picoult as an author who takes tender real-life moments and compels the reader to care until the very last page. A book that will stick with you for days." (Allison Winn Scotch *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Time of My Life*)

Praise for *Heart Like Mine*:

"The novel explores myriad themes sure to appeal to fans of women's fiction: love and loss, parenthood,

grief, friendship, and complex family dynamics. Hatvany's compassion for each female character is evident throughout, and readers will find their hearts, at times, breaking in three." (*Booklist*)

"The voices are so down-to-earth and familiar and the events so much like real life that readers will feel like they know the characters...An uplifting and heartwarming experience." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"By turns gripping and revelatory, *Heart Like Mine* is a sympathetic exploration of blended family dynamics. In her affecting new novel, Amy Hatvany pulls no punches; her characters grapple with life's big moments—marriage, parenthood, death—but she renders each of them with compassion and understanding. *Heart Like Mine* tells an honest, hopeful story that resonates in all the best ways." (Jillian Medoff *bestselling author of I Couldn't Love You More*)

"*Heart Like Mine* fearlessly explores men and women desperate to measure up to the rigors of parenthood, but still failing their children. Hatvany bring sympathy and compassion to the page, while never losing sight of the damage children suffer when their parents make bad decisions." (Randy Susan Meyers *bestselling author of The Murderer's Daughters*)

"A heartfelt, moving story about the lasting effects of grief amidst family bonds and breakups, and the healing powers of love, honesty, and acceptance. Hatvany writes with such wise compassion for every one of her characters." (Seré Prince Halverson *author of The Underside of Joy*)

"A palpable love story, emotional search for and acceptance of a lost parent, and a bittersweet ending make for an enveloping, heartfelt read." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Beautiful and deeply moving, Amy Hatvany writes about the tangled web of family in a way that makes you laugh, cry, cheer and ache. This book has so much heart." (Sarah Jio *New York Times bestselling author of Blackberry Winter*)

"There are no storybook perfect endings here, but this compelling novel raises the possibility of a hopeful way forward." (*The Seattle Times*)

"Will delight readers...vivid and written with a depth of feeling." (*Library Journal*)

"Compelling...a fascinating look at mental illness—the exuberance and self-loathing, creativity and destruction that then reverberate against the lives of family and loved ones." (Juliette Fay *Shelter Me*)

"Like a gorgeous dark jewel, Hatvany's novel explores the tragedy of a mind gone awry, a tangled bond of father and daughter, and the way hope and love sustain us. It does what the best fiction does: it makes us see and experience the world differently." (Caroline Leavitt *New York Times bestselling author of Pictures of You*)

"I'm telling everyone about *Best Kept Secret*. It's the realistic and ultimately hopeful story of Cadence, whose glass of wine at the end of the day becomes two...then...three...then a bottle. I love that Cadence feels so familiar, she could be my neighbor, my friend, or even my sister." (Jennifer Weiner #1 *New York Times bestselling author*)

"I was transfixed by Cadence and her heart-wrenching dilemma. The writing is visceral, the problems are real, and there are no clear solutions. You won't want to put it down." (Emily Giffin *New York Times bestselling author of Where We Belong*)

About the Author

Amy Hatvany is the author of *Best Kept Secret*, *Outside the Lines*, *The Language of Sisters*, *Heart Like Mine*, and *Safe with Me*. She lives in Seattle, Washington, with her family.

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Somewhere Out There

Jennifer

I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been desperate.

I knew what the stakes were. I knew I might get caught. But it was well past midnight and both my babies were hungry and crying—Brooke, who had just turned four, and Natalie, only six months. A siren sound emanated from Natalie's tiny lungs, and Brooke's choppy, hiccuping sobs felt like sandpaper being rubbed against the tips of my nerves.

We had no place left to go. I was out of friends and money and favors I could call in. I didn't have enough gas to keep driving, so I turned in to a Safeway's deserted parking lot, dreading what I was about to do. My insides felt jittery and loose, as though all my organs had somehow detached. Every cell in my body told me to get out of this car and run. Disappear. Pretend the last five years never happened. But I couldn't. I had the girls. If it wasn't for them, I'd be free.

Shut up, I told myself. Just shut the fuck up. I parked the powder-blue, 1970 Toyota Crown station wagon that Brooke's father had given me before he kicked us out. The car was ten years old and had served as our home for most of the last three-plus years. The air inside it was stale and dry. I inhaled the sharp, bitter scent of ammonia, remembering the plastic bag full of Natalie's soiled diapers sitting near the rear hatch. I'd forgotten to throw it out.

I gripped the steering wheel as tightly as I could to keep my body from shaking. With the engine still running, the radio played on, and in the midst of my children's cries, Casey Kasem announced that Blondie's new number one hit, "Call Me," was coming up next on his weekly countdown. I yanked the keys from the ignition and shoved them into my purse, the same two sentences repeating over and over inside my head: I can't do this anymore. I don't want to be here.

The kinds of thoughts a good mother wouldn't think.

Natalie shrieked even louder. I closed my eyes, clenched my jaw, and tried not to scream right along with her.

"Mama, what are we doing?" Brooke whimpered.

Letting go of the wheel, I turned and saw her clutching her worn purple blanket, her fingers frantically rubbing its edging. Her "soft side," she called the silky, lavender trim. Whenever she was upset, she'd say, "Where's my soft side? I need my soft side!" and couldn't be comforted until I delivered her blanket and she could feel the satiny fabric against her skin. Now, her black curls shot out from her head in thick, wild corkscrews, and her violet-blue eyes shone with tears. With her lush-fringe lashes, porcelain complexion, and red-bow lips, people were always saying how much she resembled a young Elizabeth Taylor. Which I took as a compliment, too, because Brooke looked almost exactly like me.

“I just have to get us some food,” I said, trying to swallow the sharp lump in my throat. “And then we’re going to go camping.”

At this point, Brooke had probably spent more nights of her life “camping” in our car than beneath an actual roof. I thought about the pale pink room where I’d slept my first fifteen years. It wasn’t fancy, or big, but I remembered the comfy twin bed, the white bookshelves, and a closet filled with clothes. I felt sick knowing if something didn’t change, I’d never be able to give my girls a room like that. I’d never be able to give them a home. I was only twenty. I didn’t graduate high school. I couldn’t work because I had no one to watch the girls. I did whatever I had to to survive. We bounced between staying at various friends’ houses or cheap motels and sleeping in the car. Standing with them on street corners at busy traffic lights, I scrounged just enough cash for us to get by. I held a cardboard sign that said, MY CHILDREN ARE HUNGRY. CAN’T WORK. PLEASE HELP. Every time someone rolled down their window and handed me money, shame oozed through me like black, sticky tar.

“Nooo, Mama! I don’t want to camp!” Brooke said. “I don’t! I don’t! I don’t!” With each “don’t,” she kicked the back of the driver’s seat.

“Please don’t do that,” I said, trying not to yell. I was already anxious; the last thing I needed was one of her tantrums to send me over the edge.

“No!” Brooke screamed, and kicked my seat again.

That was it. I lost it.

“Goddamn it, Brooke!” I growled. “Knock it off!” My molars ground against each other, fury spiking in my blood. I’d never experienced anything like that feeling before I had my girls; I loved them fiercely, but in my darker, more hopeless moments, I hated what they demanded of me just as much.

“Sorry,” Brooke said. Her tiny voice trembled. There was just enough light from the store windows to see the flash of fear on my little girl’s face before she buried her head in her blanket.

An aching remorse flooded my chest. “Oh, baby, I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have yelled.” She still wouldn’t look at me. “Sweetie, please.” I paused, waiting for her to peek up at me, which she did a moment later. “Want me to get you a treat?” I asked with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “Maybe some cookies?”

Brooke nodded, still covering most of her face with her blanket.

“Oreos?” I smiled, knowing they were her favorites. She nodded again. “Okay,” I said. “You stay right here with Natalie. I need you to be a good big sister and watch her for me.”

Brooke dropped her blanket to her lap and shook her head. “I don’t want to.” She hated it when I left her alone. I tried not to do it very often, but sometimes, I didn’t have a choice. There were certain things a little girl shouldn’t see her mother do.

“I’ll only be gone a few minutes,” I told her, and my stomach clenched. I pointed to the store. “I’m just going to head inside, grab a few things, and I’ll be right back.”

“I wanna go with you.”

I sighed. "Not this time. You need to stay here. Can you be my brave, big girl and watch your sister?"

Brooke looked to her right, lifted her blanket from her lap, and brushed its edge against her baby sister's cheek. Natalie, who had finally stopped crying, made a happy, gurgling sound; she loved her big sister so much. I'd hated being an only child; if I was grateful for anything, it was that they'd always have each other.

"Okay," Brooke squeaked, not looking at me.

"Thanks, sweetie. I promise to be quick." I slung my empty red backpack over my shoulder and got out of the car into the cold, dark night. At least it's not the middle of summer, I reasoned. At least I'm not leaving them to swelter in the heat. As though that distinction made any of this okay.

It was early October, and the air felt like it had teeth, nipping at my cheeks. Fat, cheerful-looking pumpkins rested in huge piles up against the building; scarlet leaves on the skinny maples lining the parking lot danced in each new gust of wind. I thought about what I might be doing if I was a normal twenty-year-old girl—I might be in college, planning what costume I would wear for Halloween. I might have a boyfriend who brought me flowers and took me to the movies; I might have a group of girlfriends I shopped with at the mall. I might be carefree and content instead of how I felt right now—how I almost always felt—tired, hungry, and scared.

Despite my apprehension, I waved and smiled at Brooke through the window. She waved back, tentatively, but as soon as I locked the doors, her bottom lip quivered, and I knew she was barely holding it together. When Natalie began to cry again, Brooke leaned over and patted her sister's small hand.

She'll be okay, I told myself as I spun around and walked away. They both will. I have to do this. I'll be back as fast as I can.

I jogged across the parking lot, trying to block out the sound of Natalie's cries as I entered the building. As the automatic doors shut with a whoosh behind me, I quickly surveyed the immediate area—there was no one else around. At this time of night I hoped there would only be a few employees—a couple of stockers and a cashier at most, a few other shoppers, and maybe a night manager working somewhere in the back. I had to be quick. Casual, but quick.

I strode past the enormous Halloween display, ignoring the bags of candy and decorative plastic skeletons. I grabbed a small cart, which I directed toward the produce section. I filled a clear plastic bag with six apples, carefully looking around before slipping four more into my backpack. I picked up two packages of baby carrots and put one in the cart, one in my bag.

So far, so good. I turned the corner, only to run right into a tall, skinny man with shaggy, shoulder-length blond hair and acne-pocked cheeks. He wore a white, short-sleeve shirt covered by a green apron and brown corduroy pants. He didn't look much older than me. A small, plastic tag pinned to his shirt said his name was Rick.

"Whoa," I said, giving him my best smile, even as my heart pounded against my rib cage. "Sorry. Wasn't looking where I was going."

Rick smiled, too, revealing slightly crooked, yellow teeth. "No worries." He surveyed the contents of my cart. "Finding everything all right?"

“Yep. Just picking up a few things I forgot to grab earlier.”

“Let me know if you need anything. I’m over on aisle four.”

“Thanks,” I said again, then pushed my cart past him with as much confidence as I could muster, making sure to head in the opposite direction from where he was working.

Just keep going and get the hell out of here, I thought. Luckily, the Oreos were on an end cap I passed, so I put one package in my basket and another in my backpack, then moved on toward the baby aisle. I dumped a dozen jars of baby food for Natalie on top of the cookies, along with a box of teething biscuits. The last two things I needed were a loaf of bread and peanut butter, so I made my way to the bakery, keeping my eyes open for other employees as I snuck those into my bag, too.

I told myself I was only taking enough to last us a few days—that I’d make better money at a different intersection tomorrow. I tried to believe that stealing food for my children wasn’t a crime. That it didn’t make me a bad person, but a good one. Don’t good mothers do anything necessary for their kids? If I’d had the cash, I would have paid for it all, but buying diapers and wipes and formula for Natalie had taken my last fifty bucks.

I was only a few feet away from the cash registers when I heard Rick call out behind me. “Hey!” His voice was hard. “Wait!”

Shit. I stopped and turned to face him. “Hey,” I said, giving him what I hoped was a charming smile. My stomach churned. “So, you won’t believe this, but I left my wallet at home.” I gestured toward the half-full cart. “I’ll have to come back.” I looked in the direction of the same doors I’d entered and was about to walk toward them when Rick spoke again.

“No.” He frowned at me and held out his hand. “I need to look in your backpack.”

“What?” I said. I tried to sound offended, but my shaking voice gave me away. “Why?”

Rick kept his arm outstretched. “My manager has you on tape,” he said with a stern look. “He saw everything.”

I thought about arguing, pretending I didn’t know what he was talking about, but realized if there was a tape, denial would be pointless. “Please, you don’t understand,” I said, tears flooding my eyes. “I never do this . . . I just . . . My kids are hungry and I ran out of money. We’re homeless. I didn’t know what else to do.” I glanced over his shoulder and saw a short, burly bald man striding toward us, his stubby arms swinging at his sides.

“Sorry,” Rick said. His expression softened. “But you still need to give me the bag.”

Reluctantly, I handed over my backpack, feeling the blood rush by my ears. All I could think about was the girls, outside, sitting alone and afraid in the dark. I would do anything it took to get back to them.

The manager approached us and snatched the backpack from Rick’s grasp. “Someone’s been busy,” he said, with a hint of disgust. He had tiny blue eyes and small hands; his name tag said STEVE.

“Look, this was a huge mistake,” I said, hoping I could plead my way out of this mess. I looked at Rick.

“Seriously, I’ve never done anything like it.” A lie, but one I hoped they might believe.

The manager stared at me. “Uh-huh.”

I stepped forward and put my hand on his thick forearm. “It’s the truth, I swear. I just needed to feed my kids. I couldn’t let them starve. Please, just let me go and I swear I’ll never come back.”

Steve hesitated, and I thought I might have gotten through to him until I saw a brief flash of red and blue lights outside the glass doors.

My blood ran cold. “You called the police?” I’d only been in the store for ten minutes, at most. The manager must have been watching me the entire time.

“It’s store policy,” Rick said, sounding a little sorry to relay the information.

“Wait, please,” I begged. “You can’t do this.”

“Yes, I can,” Steve said, pulling away from my touch.

The whoosh of the doors opening silenced me, and two police officers came in to stand beside me. “This is her?” the younger one asked, taking me by the arm. He was almost as tall as Rick, but with a bigger build. His black hair was shorn into a buzz cut and his blue shirt was tight around his biceps. He smelled like cologne and stale coffee.

“Yep,” Steven said. “Claims she was stealing to feed her kids.” He unzipped my backpack and rummaged through its contents, coming up with a jar of pureed squash. “Might be true.” He shrugged, like either way, it made no difference to him.

“It is true,” I said. My voice broke on the words. “Please. They’re still in my car.”

The older officer finally spoke. “You left your kids alone out there?” He squinted, then looked toward the parking lot.

“I’ll go check,” the younger officer said, letting go of my arm. “Keys?”

“Please, let me go with you,” I said, trying not to cry as I dug into my front pocket, then handed the keys to him. I imagined Brooke seeing the officer opening the car door, her screams as she realized it was anyone other than me. She had a real fear of strangers; for her own safety, living the way we did, I’d done my best to teach her not to trust anyone but me.

The young officer took off without a word, and I couldn’t help it—the tears I’d been holding back began to fall. “Please,” I said again, my entire body starting to shake. “Let me at least tell them it’s going to be okay.” Another lie, but one I hoped my little girl might believe.

“What’s your name, young lady?” the older officer asked. His voice was stern, unyielding. His thick, gray mustache reminded me of my grandfather who’d died of a heart attack when I was ten. The way my grandma had cried at his funeral sounded like a howling wolf; my mother, a woman whose idea of showing emotion was a pat on the back, had been mortified. Three years later, when my grandma passed away, too, my mother didn’t shed one tear.

My chin trembled. "Jennifer Walker."

"And what am I going to find when I punch your name into the system, Jennifer? Have you done this dance before?"

I held his gaze for a moment, thinking of all the decisions I'd made over the past four years, so many of them like tonight, knowing what the consequences might be, but still, thinking I knew best, deciding to take the risk.

"Yes," I told the officer, and then dropped my eyes to the floor. There was no sense trying to hide it; he would find out everything soon enough.

• • •

"This makes your fourth count of petty theft," my social worker, Gina Ortiz, said, looking at the thick file on the table between us. It was the morning after my arrest, and my public defender had left the small interview room in the police station just moments ago, after he informed me there was no way I was going to get out of spending at least a couple months in jail. "Up to two years," he'd said. "Maybe more, if things don't go your way."

But the girls, I wanted to scream. What about my girls? I'd been in trouble before; I'd even been put in a jail cell a time or two—only for a few hours, never overnight, and I'd always managed to get off with a warning or a fine. Now, here I was, contemplating the possibility that Natalie might learn to walk without me there to hold her hand.

The fact that I had children wasn't the lawyer's problem; it was Gina's. I'd met her two years ago, when CPS was called in after I'd been caught shoplifting for the first time, before I got pregnant with Natalie. She'd kept Brooke with her in the lobby while I went through processing at the police station, and then, when I was released with a warning because the store decided to not press charges, she told me I had to attend parenting classes, starting the following week. I'd blown them off, of course, and seeing her now, I felt a stinging pang of regret.

Gina was a heavier woman, thick around the middle with skinny legs, which I imagined probably made it difficult to find pants. Today, she wore a black pencil skirt and a red blouse with a big bow at the base of her neck. The color flattered her toffee-toned skin. "Not only that," she continued, "it's your second charge of child endangerment and neglect." She paused, and looked at me over the top of her glasses, which were perched on the tip of her slender nose. "Do you know what that means?"

I shook my head, pressing my lips together so I wouldn't cry. I dug the fingernails into my opposite arm until I drew blood; I'd already bitten my nails down to the quick. Could she really be talking about me, endangering my children? Sure, leaving them alone in the car wasn't the best decision I'd ever made, but it wasn't like I gave Brooke knives to play with while I was gone. I wasn't cooking crack in a kitchen while they sat on the floor.

"It means that while you go to jail, the girls go into foster care."

"No," I said. "Maybe the lawyer was wrong. Maybe the judge will understand I was just trying to feed them." A couple of fat tears rolled down my cheeks. I didn't bother wiping them away. "Please? Can you just wait and see what the judge says?"

Gina sighed, removed her glasses, and closed the folder in front of her. Her dark hair was pulled into a bun on top of her head with a few pieces hanging around her round face; she tucked the loose strands behind both her ears and looked at me. “It won’t make a difference. It’s almost certain you’ll be convicted of theft and abuse. The girls are being removed from your care. When you get out, we can talk about a plan to get them back, but at this point, I’m sorry, Jennifer. There’s nothing you can do.”

“I don’t abuse my children!” I cried, feeling as though she’d just hit my chest with a hammer; pain crackled along my ribs. “I’ve never even spanked Brooke! I just . . . made a mistake.”

“Not just one mistake,” Gina said. She gave me a pointed look. “And that doesn’t count the times you didn’t get caught.”

My cheeks flamed, and I couldn’t lift my eyes to hers. “I love them so much,” I said, unsure of how I could prove this to the woman who held the fate of my girls in her hands. I could tell her how much I knew about them—how Brooke slept with one corner of her “soft side” stuck in her ear; how she giggled when I burped my ABCs, and how she sang “Row, Row, Row Your Goat,” but I didn’t have the heart to tell her she was wrong. I could tell her how Natalie smiled when I kissed her belly, how she rolled over for the first time when she was only three months old and then started to cry, she was so scared by what she’d just done. I longed to show Gina that despite all I’d done wrong, there were at least a few things as a mother I’d done right.

“I know you do,” Gina said, gently. “But love isn’t enough to be a good parent. There’s so much more to it than that.”

It was the kindness in her voice that broke me—I realized she wasn’t judging me, she was only pointing out the situation for what it was. I let loose a low, keening cry from somewhere deep in my belly. The same two sentences from the previous night played on a constant track inside my head: I can’t do this anymore . . . I don’t want to be here.

“It’s so hard!” I sputtered. “I love them, but it’s so hard.”

I leaned forward, face in my hands, and began to rock back and forth in tiny, measured movements. I thought about my mother, the look on her face when I told her I was pregnant with Brooke and I refused to do as she said and get an abortion. I thought about how her face held that same look when I informed her I was not only keeping my baby but dropping out of school and moving in with Michael, my eighteen-year-old boyfriend, who had his own apartment and a job at Radio Shack.

“You will not,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You moved in with Dad when you were seventeen,” I said, thinking this fact more than justified my decision. My parents had met their senior year of high school, and when my mom discovered she was pregnant with me, they got married. He’d left us twelve years later, becoming someone I heard from maybe once or twice a year, then eventually, not at all, but I was certain that Michael and I loved each other too much to share that same fate.

“And look how well that worked out,” she said. Her eyes, the same color as mine, flashed. “I want something better for you, Jenny. Something more than I had.”

“I will have something better,” I assured her. “I’m just going to have it with Michael. We’re not getting

married right away. We're going to take it slow."

"Moving in with him and having a baby is not taking it slow." She shook her head and pressed her lips together before speaking again. "What kind of job do you think you can get without a diploma?"

"I don't have to work," I said. "Michael will take care of me."

"Like your father took care of us?" she shot back. "Trust me, you'll regret this. Even under the best of circumstances, being a mother is harder than it looks."

I hadn't cried then, the moment she told me if I left, I wouldn't be welcome back. I was so sure of myself, positive I was making the best choice for me and my baby. But now, sitting in the police station in a small room with Gina, I cried harder than I had in years. I cried because I'd been alone for so long. I cried because Michael had kicked us out when Brooke was only nine months old, telling me he never wanted to see either of us again. I cried because even knowing how hard it was raising Brooke on my own, I let myself get pregnant with Natalie. I cried because no matter how much I adored my babies, I was doing a shitty job taking care of them.

Mostly, though, I cried because my mother had been right.

"I know it's hard, honey," Gina said. She stood up and came around the table to put an arm around my shoulders. "It's the hardest job in the world."

I let her hug me and smooth my hair and rub circles on my back. I couldn't remember the last time someone had held me like that. It was always me, holding Brooke or Natalie. Or both of them at once. They were constantly on me, clinging to me, using my body for food or comfort, as though it was their property and not mine. And even though I was worried about them, even though I knew Brooke must be in full-on panic mode by now, surrounded by strangers, wondering why her mommy never came back like she'd promised she would, part of me was grateful to have a few hours where I wasn't responsible for feeding, washing, clothing, and entertaining them. I felt—right along with my guilt, terror, and shame—a tiny sliver of relief.

"I don't know what to do," I said, sniffling as I pulled away from Gina's touch. I looked up at her, distressed. "I just want what's best for them."

Gina squatted down next to me, staring me straight in the eye. "I believe you, Jennifer. I really do. I can hear how much you love them in your voice."

"Thank you," I whispered as I wiped both my cheeks with the bend of my wrist.

When Gina spoke again, it was with such tenderness, such compassion, it made me want to cry all over again. "I might be wrong," she began, "but it sounds like you might be saying that you're not sure if you can raise the girls on your own. That you're thinking of relinquishing custody." She paused, giving me a moment to digest what she'd said. "Is that right?"

"I don't know . . ." I said, the words stuttering out of me. Could I do that? Just hand my babies over to Gina and let her find them a good home? I remembered the vehemence with which I'd fought my mother against having an abortion or giving Brooke up for adoption. I remember believing in my bones that no one could do a better job of mothering my baby than me.

But that was before Michael kicked us out. Before I begged for money on a street corner; before I left Brooke alone in the car while I let a motel manager bend me over his dirty desk and use my body in exchange for two weeks' free rent in a dingy room. Before I threw up right after he finished; before the moment four months later when I finally realized I'd missed my period and was pregnant again. Before I stumbled into an ER, about to give birth to Natalie, already imagining what lies I'd have to tell her about who her father had been.

If I gave my girls up, could I forget all of this ever happened? Could I forget that that wasn't the last man I'd let use me so I could give my girls a warm room for the night? During the cold winter months, when I ran out of money, having sex with a stranger was often the only way I could find us a place to stay. Could I erase everything, move on, and start a brand-new kind of life? Was signing away my rights the best thing for the girls, or just the easiest thing for me?

I looked at Gina through glassy, swollen eyes. "I don't know," I said again, with an edge of desperation. There was nothing easy about any of this. A battle raged inside of me, an agonizing tug-of-war between what I wanted and what I knew was right.

And then it dawned on me—this wasn't about me. It was about my babies. About giving them a good home, the kind of life I just couldn't provide. I'd done my best, and it wasn't good enough.

"I love them so much." I kept repeating these words as though they might somehow erase the damage I'd already done. As though they might make everything okay.

Gina was silent, waiting for me to say something different. Something more.

I sighed and glanced at my reflection in the window of the room. I had lost so much weight, I'd had to punch two extra holes in my worn leather belt so my jeans wouldn't fall down. My dark hair was thin, greasy, and matted; my face was puffy and red. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt pretty, the last time I'd looked in the mirror and actually liked what I saw. Instead, I saw a failure—a stupid girl who kept making one bad choice after another. I saw a girl who could never do anything right.

Looking at Gina, I took in a deep breath and held it a moment before finally exhaling, then uttered the single most difficult sentence I'd ever said. "Maybe they'd be better off without me."

And the real tears came—hard, body-racking sobs that should have released my sorrow, but instead made me feel like I had only just begun to fall apart.

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