

“Jackson Hart”

“I feel like I’m gonna throw up.” Carl stares down at the baby, his complexion slightly green.

“I think you’re just nervous,” Mom says. She smiles at the little bundle, whose head rests in the crook of my brother’s arm. Carl lowers his head and hunches his shoulders, so he looks like a little cave hanging over our nephew. I remember holding Carl like that when he was born, my whole body trying to shield him. From what I don’t know. Now he’s nine, and every time I complain about how gross he is, Mom reminds me of how for weeks after he came home I bugged her to let me hold him.

I step toward Carl. “Give him to me, you’re gonna drop him.”

He tightens his arms and glares at me. “No I’m not! Right Mom?”

Mom sighs, but she’s not angry. She rubs my arm as she says, “You’re fine, Carl. Jamie, leave your brother alone.” Her fingers interlace with mine, her palm warm and smooth.

Carl smirks at me, but I can see my words rooting around in his head. Now he really does look sick and he shifts toward us. “Here Mom, you take him.” She removes her hand from mine and cradles the baby in her arms, pulling the little cap down around his ears. She gives Carl a kiss on the cheek.

“You did a good job.”

“Yeah I know, I just gotta go to the bathroom.” Mom calls Dad over as Carl bolts from the room. Dad gets up from his chair in the opposite corner, but stops a few feet from her. She nods toward the door.

“Go with him, he might actually throw up.”

Dad stares down at the floor, careful not to raise his eyes in case they accidentally rest on the little face under her chin. He doesn’t answer Mom, just walks out. I almost go after him, wanting to give him a hug or tell him everything’s going to be okay, like he’s supposed to tell me. Yesterday I asked him

why he won't hold the baby, why the only time he looks at him is through the window of the nursery. He shrugged and hit the vending machine a few times, punishment for holding his granola bar hostage. This morning Mom told me it's because he doesn't want to get attached. Because we're not bringing him home.

Mom and I laugh as his little tongue darts out, a flash of pink. The hospital sheets on Maggie's bed crinkle as she turns to face the wall and we look over at her. All she's done for the past three days is stare up at the ceiling, or watch TV. It's easy to forget she's even there. Mom glances at the baby and back at Maggie. Her coral lips part and I inwardly cringe, knowing what she's going to say. I mumble into her ear, "Mom, she doesn't want to." She ignores me and steps toward the bed.

"Maggie, do you wanna hold him?"

The baby's chest rises and falls as the silence stretches. I kind of wish Maggie would just say no, like the first few times Mom asked. But now she's taken to just not answering, leaving our mom standing there, still hopeful. I gently touch Mom's shoulders, trying to lead her back to her chair, but she shrugs them off. She steps closer to the bed. "Maggie?"

My sister pulls the covers up to her chin, her face blank. It makes my stomach twist. I liked it better when she yelled. Mom's face finally falls and she drops into her chair, letting her hair hang over her face. It's very thin on top and she hasn't bothered to dye it in months. I can see her white scalp through the faded brown, and her glistening eyes through the curtain of hair.

. . .

I don't think Carl understands exactly what's going on, or that when he says goodbye to the baby it's for the last time. He and Dad aren't going to be here tomorrow when the Harts come. I hear Mom in the hall with Dad, talking in that fast whisper she uses when she's trying not to yell. I think she

wants him to know it's his last chance to hold his grandson. But he won't do it and she shakes her head, her hand searching her pocket for a pack of Marlboro Lights. She drags Carl out the door with her, as my Dad stares at the floor. Maggie's in bed, pretending to be asleep. I've shared a room with her my whole life, watching her sleep from across the four foot gap between our beds. I think Dad is just going to shuffle out, but he raises his eyes and moves toward me. The baby rests against my chest, and Dad watches him for a couple of minutes before leaning over and very lightly kissing his forehead. As he pulls away he squeezes my shoulder, like he always does when he wants me to feel better. Like he did when my grandmother died and when Sarah Hanson invited everyone but me to her tenth birthday party. Mom always wanted him to do more, to say something to me, but I understood he couldn't say it.

I swallow the lump in my throat and smile, comforted by the familiar pressure on my arm. At the door he turns back, his eyes trained on the floor.

“He's got my nose, huh?”

I look down and realize he's right, but when I look back up to tell him, he's gone. I sit down and pretend not to see Maggie wiping her face with her covers. She turns over to look at me as the baby gurgles, his face momentarily scrunching before going slack. I watch him as she speaks.

“Mom hates me.”

Outside I can hear the nurses discussing dinner options. I rip a sliver of soft skin around my fingernail clean off, and look up. The purple shadows beneath Maggie's eyes don't make her any less beautiful to me.

“She doesn't hate you. No one hates you.”

Her doe eyes roll to the ceiling. “Yeah, as long as I do what she wants.”

“Well, what do *you* want?”

I look away as she fixes her gaze on me, but keep going. “Mom thinks you want to keep him, that you would if Joe said it was okay.”

She’s silent for a few moments, then pats her mattress. “Can you put him next to me?”

I look around, disappointed Mom is missing what is certainly a small victory. As I place the baby beside her she covers him with her blanket, her bruised arm encircling him.

She twists her wrist in circles. “The damn nurse couldn’t find a vein.”

“Maggie?”

“I might.” She continues to rub her arm. “I might keep him if Joe wanted to.”

“Why doesn’t he want to?”

She sighs, like when Mom asks what she considers stupid questions. “He can’t be a father right now, doesn’t anyone get that? He wants to go to college, *I* want to go to college.”

“Mom wants you to go to college.”

“Well how can I do that with a baby at home?” She’s getting angry, but as she stares me down I feel that she’s really asking, hoping that I might have an answer for her.

“Maybe you could still go to California-”

“It’s a six hour plane ride. I just go to school and let Mom raise my kid? See him on the holidays? I can’t do that.”

“Then stay.” I watch as blood begins to fill the edges of my fingernail. “You could get into a school around here, if you wanted.”

She seems to be turning something over and over again in her head. “Doesn’t it bother you? How Mom just keeps pushing until she gets what she wants. She never stops.”

“She’s trying to help you.” The baby’s chest rises and falls as Maggie runs a finger down the

bridge of his nose. I try not to smile at how perfect they look together. “If Joe loves you-”

“He does love me.” Her voice is starting to get that edge to it, the one that tells you to back off. But I can’t stop.

“Then he’ll let you do what you want.”

She struggles to raise herself up. “You don’t understand, you’re still a kid. No one...” Her voice drifts off, her eyes suddenly glassy. She looks so small.

“No one what?”

She sinks back into the sheets. “No one liked me before. No one even looked at me. Not until Joe did.”

“That doesn’t matter anymore-”

“It does matter! He loved me when no one else did, he told me I was beautiful. He made me happy.”

I feel like someone has punched me in the gut. “I loved you-”

Her face softens and she pats my hand. “I know, Jamie. But it’s different.”

“I always said you were beautiful.”

The baby shifts and she rubs his little fist, tucking it back under the blanket. Her fingers linger over his.

She shakes her head and tucks her hands under her arms. “We’re supposed to go to California together. I can’t just change that now. I can’t-”

“Why? Why can’t you?”

“Because it doesn’t work like that! You don’t just get to do whatever you want!”

“He doesn’t love you.”

I want to cry as she glares at me. How could I have let those words out?

“Get out.”

“I’m sorry, I-”

“Get out!”

I stand up and reach for the baby, but she pulls him closer.

“Leave him.”

I gnaw on my finger, the taste of metal filling my mouth as the door closes behind me.

. . .

I’m back in my chair, Mom standing propped against the wall next to me, staring at Maggie. I know that Mom’s starting to get desperate. She still thinks that maybe she could change Maggie’s mind, convince her to let us take care of him. Mom pushes herself off the wall and sits on Maggie’s bed. I can’t help but be nervous. For nine months mom and I have been so careful with our words, trying so hard not to say the wrong thing. But that’s over, and unlike me she’s ready to say whatever she wants. I run my finger over the skin where my nephew’s eyebrows should be. The first time I held him I couldn’t stop talking about it. “Where are his eyebrows?” I asked my mom. “I thought he’d have eyebrows. Is that normal?” Now I wonder how long it will take for them to grow in, but a dull ache in my chest reminds me that I’ll never know. The Harts will get to watch his eyebrows grow. I hate them for it.

Maggie’s watching some cooking show but mom grabs the remote and the TV goes black. She stares as my sister clenches her jaw and balls her blanket in her fists, refusing to look at our mother. Mom’s gaze doesn’t shift as she speaks. “Maggie, I know you’re not sure about this.” It is painfully still and silent. Mom continues. “I know you think Joe will leave you if-“

Maggie pounds the bed with her fists and glares at her. “Joe’s not making me do this! I want

to!” Mom’s eyes widen, surprised by the outburst. Then she moves closer to Maggie, and I can see the light in her eyes, the happiness at finally being able to fight with her.

“I don’t think so Maggie. I think you want to keep him more than anything. I think Joe and his screwed up family are pressuring you, and you love him so much you’re gonna make a big mistake!”

Maggie shakes her head and laughs bitterly. “His screwed up family? Look at you! You’re screwed up! You!”

I try tuning them out, picturing Joe in my mind. Tall and lean, with blue eyes and a jawline that make people look twice. He stopped by the hospital after the baby was born, and every night since. He’s always hopping from foot to foot and glancing out the window, like he can’t wait to leave. As for his family I never met them, but his mom called a few months back. She tried to convince our mother that giving the baby to the nuns at her church would be a good idea. She said we wouldn’t even have to know where he ended up; they’d take care of it. Like we were trying to get rid of an old refrigerator. Mom told her to go fuck herself. They didn’t really talk much after that.

Mom and Maggie get louder and louder until I can’t block them out like usual.

“So where is he? Where is Joe if he loves you so much?”

Maggie stares down at her feet, trying to sound confident in her answer. “He’s coming soon, he always does.”

“Yeah, for about an hour. Just long enough to make sure you’re gonna go through with it. And you can be sure he’ll be here tomorrow to watch you sign the papers.” Mom reaches for Maggie’s hand but she pulls it away and shoves it under her arms. She winces, the horizontal incision below her stomach still sore. Mom hesitates, but decides to keep going.

“Where was he for the ultrasound? The doctor’s appointments? Who took you to those?”

Maggie hugs herself, spitting out her words. “So what? You took me to the appointments. So what? So I owe you a baby?”

“Yes!”

Mom’s shoulders heave as she gulps air, rubbing the blotchy skin on her cheeks. Even she seems surprised by the volume of her voice, the honesty of her answer. Maggie’s hands stroke her pillow, and the viciousness leaves her face. She just looks sad. Mom gets up from the bed and puts her arm around me. When she finally speaks again her voice is very small.

“I’m not trying to hurt you. You know that, right?” Maggie stares out the window. “If you have to hate me right now, I’m okay with that. As long as you don’t hate me later for letting you do this. You don’t know these people. You’ve only been talking for a few weeks.”

Maggie looks at me now, maybe hoping for some reassurance. But I look away. She clears her throat. “They’re very nice.”

Mom strokes the baby’s chubby cheek with her thumb, not caring how nice Michael and Sarah Hart are. “Do you even know what they’re going to name him?”

Maggie doesn’t answer for a long time, either out of spite or because she really doesn’t know. I’m beginning to think it’s the latter when she makes an inaudible sound. We both crane our heads toward the bed.

“What?” Mom asks.

Maggie whispers, “Jackson.” And then a little louder, “They’re naming him Jackson.”

Mom looks confused for a second, and then wrinkles her nose. “Jackson Hart?” She looks at me. “That sounds like a bad country singer.” It’s almost funny, and a giggle dies in my throat.

I catch a flicker of a smile on Maggie’s face before she gives my mom a dirty look and sinks



down under her covers. She says, “I can’t think of anything better.”

Mom is quiet for a moment, and then says, “Benjamin.” The name settles in the air, drifting over us. Maggie’s face closes in on itself, so she pulls her blanket over her head and faces the wall. I smile at my nephew, thinking he looks just like a Ben. Mom runs her fingers through my hair as a nurse comes in to take him to the nursery. As I pass him to her I think about the name rattling around in my mother, running through her head each night for all these months. I think about how it must have hurt.

. . .

Mom’s in Maggie’s room, still trying to change her mind. I’m standing in front of the nursery, waiting for her to drive me home. Then she’ll drive back to the hospital and sit next to Maggie’s bed all night, only daring to hold her hand once she’s fallen asleep. I can see Ben in the nursery, in his plastic bin all snuggled up. I think about when I first saw him, how I knew that I loved him and thinking that was weird. It was a very nice feeling, but strange too. It scared me a little to love someone so much, even before I met him. Because I knew when I saw him, saw that he had Maggie’s long dark eyelashes, that I had loved him from the moment mom told me he was coming.

I don’t realize I’m crying until I feel my shirt stick to my chest. I feel guilty as an older woman walks down the hall. She’s got a reason to cry. I’ve seen her disappearing behind the doors of the NICU, where the sick babies are. Premature. Brain Damage. Tiny lungs trying to get enough air, and little hearts trying to beat hard enough to keep them alive. Dying babies. I look at the floor, waiting for the woman to pass. But a hand rests on my back, and I look up to see her smiling at me, teeth gleaming against her dark skin. She rubs my back and asks if I’m okay. I give her a watery smile and nod, wiping my tears away with the back of my hand. She looks in the nursery.

“Which one is yours?”

I point to Ben. “My nephew. Benjamin.”

Her smile widens. “Oh, he’s handsome. Gonna be a lady’s man.”

I laugh, refusing to feel bad for myself in front of her. We stand in silence, watching the healthy sleeping babies, their plump cheeks rosy.

“My daughter had a boy last week.” Her voice is thick, but I can tell there’s no danger of her crying. “He was only three pounds. Having some trouble breathing.”

I imagine Ben with tubes running through his body, his skin stretched over his bones. I don’t really know what to say. “Sorry” seems inadequate. Instead I ask what his name is, instantly regretting it. Maybe they didn’t want to, if it didn’t look like he was going to make it. But she grins and tells me, “Henry.” She watches a baby girl right in front of the window yawn. “I wish he was here with Benjamin.” A nurse comes into the nursery and picks the baby girl up, rubbing her back like my new friend rubs mine. I see my mom down the hall, closing the door the Maggie’s room behind her. I squeeze the woman’s hand.

“Thanks.”

She shakes her head. “Now no more tears, okay?”

I nod and squeeze her hand again before leaving. As Mom and I turn the corner the woman remains in front of the nursery, watching the babies. I realize I don’t know her name.

. . .

In the morning Mom walks down to the cafeteria, her hands bouncing against her sides. Joe will be here soon. I tell her I’ll be down in a few minutes and head to the bathroom. The mirror is cool against my forehead as I clutch the sink and lean forward. I think about Maggie’s graduation a month ago, a sweltering June day. The mothers whispering as she came onstage, her stomach jutting out

beneath her gown. Now she couldn't even blend in. I think about how excited I was to finally be in high school, where I could see Maggie in the hallways. Instead I mostly heard her name in the locker room.

“Slut.”

I splash water on my face and try to forget my cheeks burning hot as they laughed at her, smiling because they no longer had a reason to be jealous. No longer Joe Whitmore's girlfriend, but the girl who got knocked up. As I leave the bathroom I decide to check in on Maggie before going downstairs. Maybe I can fix what I said.

I pause outside her door, hearing Joe's voice rising. He's early.

“Maggie-”

“I could go to community college, my mom would help with Ben-”

“That's not his name-”

“We could visit each other, we could make it work.” I look down the hall, wanting my mom to suddenly appear, like a superhero.

“Joe, I can't give him up. I didn't know I'd feel like this-”

“We have scholarships. I'm not staying here, I told you-”

“You don't have to! I'll stay and you go. I know it's far, but-”

“We can't-”

“You should hold him, the nurse just-”

“Maggie!”

I jump at the sound, her name barked so viciously. For a few moments all I can hear is the sound of Maggie's shallow breathing, and then the creak of the bed.

“Maggie, I'm sorry.”

She replies with a deep sniff.

“I can’t be with you and be in California. And I can’t do this right now. I can’t-” He’s suddenly quiet, and I shift closer to the doorway.

“And my parents Maggie, you know what they’re like. They keep saying you’re trying to trap me here.”

I hear a horrible choking sound, a sob stuck in Maggie’s throat. “I’m not.”

“I know. But they want me to go, and I want to go. I want you to come with me.” He hesitates. “Don’t you want to come with me?”

She struggles to speak. “I-I do. I love you. But-” Her voice is thick with tears. “I want both of you.”

“The Harts are good people, and they really want a baby. They can be good parents. We can’t Maggie. You know we can’t.”

I step into the doorway, Maggie noticing me as she claws at her wet face. Joe turns around, and I see in his eyes that he’s just as lost as Maggie.

“Hey, Jamie.” He gets up from the bed, and leans down, kissing Maggie’s forehead. She reaches for his hand but he heads for the door. “Michael and Sarah should be here by twelve. I’m going to give them a call.” He looks at me. “Why don’t you let Maggie rest Jamie.” I move past him, sitting on the bed. Maggie looks behind me, biting her lip.

“Joe?”

“I’ll see you later.”

She flinches as the door closes, and her face shatters into a million pieces, tears and snot flowing down her chin.

“I love you” I grab her hand and squeeze it tight. “We love you.”

She gurgles like Ben. “Please go away Jamie.” But her hand remains in mine. “Please?”

I don’t move as she tries to get enough air in her lungs. I wonder if I should get a nurse, or run downstairs for Mom, when she wraps her arms around me, her whispered words tickling my ear.

“I don’t know what to do.”

I hug her back, her soft hair against my face. “You can keep Ben. And you don’t need Joe.”

The silence stretches as her arms relax and fall beside me, her head resting on my shoulder.

Later, I stand in the middle of Maggie’s room, watching my mom pace back and forth. After coming to look for me and finding Maggie and I propped up against each other, she’s spent the last few hours trying to get out of us what Joe said. He’ll be back here with the Harts in a matter of minutes. Mom sits on Maggie’s bed, no longer bothering to hide her tears. They slide down her cheeks in a constant flow, and she lets them drip off her jaw. There’s no more fighting. She’s begging Maggie now.

“I’ll take care of him-“

“Mom-“

“I mean it! You don’t have to do a thing. Just let me take him home.”

I sit on the other side of the bed, even though it seems to alarm Maggie, as if we’re closing in on her. She presses her fingers against her eyelids. I try to make my voice steady. “I will too. Me and Mom can do it. I want to.”

Mom smiles at me, but it’s sort of a sad smile, like I don’t know what I’m saying. I want to explain to her about loving him, about knowing, but I don’t think I could say it right and it must sound stupid. Instead, I just repeat, “I want to.”

Maggie keeps her eyes closed, her voice full of doubt. “How could I do that Mom? Just leave him behind.” She wipes her nose with her sleeve. “And if I stayed...”

“If you stayed?”

“I’d be leaving Joe behind. And he’d hate me Mom! I can’t just change my mind!”

Mom bounces on the bed, Maggie’s hand keeping her from jumping up and down. I can tell she feels it too, that electricity. “Of course you can!” She holds my sister’s face in her hands. “Maggie, listen now. He is your baby. You can take him home if you want.”

But now Joe’s here, with the Harts. A tiny woman with red hair. A tall man with glasses and a receding hairline. And it’s wrong, it’s all wrong, because Joe wraps his arms around Maggie, and she’s telling us she’s sorry, so sorry. He loves her. And I’m out, running down the hallway, running and running and I hear a woman wailing somewhere, and I think it must be the woman, Henry must have died. And then I’m in the bathroom, and I slam the stall door shut behind me and clap my hands over my mouth and scream and scream and scream, because of Jackson Hart and dead Henry.