

CHAPTER 1

The world around you moves on, as if your life was never shattered, and all you want the world to do is say that your baby mattered. AJ Clark-Coates

I haven't spoken to anyone in four days – wait – maybe five? Slowly walking out to the mailbox to retrieve the pastel-colored envelopes filled with messages of thoughts and prayers, I try to remember who I spoke to last, or even about what. Returning to the house, I pause to watch white fluffy clouds scatter across an almost blindingly blue sky. Dropping my gaze, my eyes need a moment to refocus. One envelope is inscribed with a computer-generated address made to resemble handwriting, looking like a personal letter, tempting the recipient to open rather than recycle it. The lettering reads, “The Whitcomb Family.” Oh, I wish I could see their faces; asking, for perhaps the 159th time, why? Not even why me, just *why*? My throat tightens. *Family*. Just who is that, anyway?

Later in the evening, my phone vibrates distantly against the kitchen counter top, still strewn with unopened mail. Moving to answer it is an immense, unwelcome effort. The leather-covered photo album in my lap weighs me down. Expending the energy to turn pages, minutes pass as I sometimes stop to gently touch a face with a single finger, to smile, or occasionally wipe away a tear. Who would have thought, months ago, that so much time could be spent just sitting, staring off into the distance, barely moving? That Larissa Whitcomb, Executive Director of Sales and Marketing for You First Medical Equipment, would sit in a lounge chair, turning pages at a painfully slow pace. No one would picture this. Few people ever knew how important family is to me. Oh shit, do I say *is* or *was*? It's bad enough to wrangle over every word I say to others, but I don't even know the right words to talk to myself anymore. Few knew how every day I rushed

through work and countless working-mother expectations just to get home to them, just to hear about their day and organize after school activities. As the soft rumble of the phone brings me back to the present, I glance at the clock and wonder if it has been minutes or hours since I sat down in this chair. Was it yesterday? Does it even matter?

I rise, dreading both the summons to respond and the inevitable platitudes. On one hand, I appreciate people reaching out to connect with me; on the other, there is nothing anyone can say to change things or make them better. I receive texts several times a day referring to time as the great predictor of how to feel. “It will get better every day,” or “Sending hugs to comfort you in your hour of grief.” The worst: “Time heals all things”—as if waiting is the magic antidote. Some unnamed amount of time and this gaping wound in my heart will heal, with sutures composed of minutes and hours. I doubt it.

The phone identifies Shirley as the caller. Shirley, my administrative assistant, often as protective as a big sister, rings every day. I reluctantly reach to answer and am relieved when it stops urging me to pick up. Another possible encounter avoided. So many calls, yet so few messages. Most are probably as relieved as I am when the connection does not happen. Who would be searching for words most uncomfortably – the caller or me? Maybe I’ll try harder to grab it next time, maybe not. I absent-mindedly scroll back in the voice mailbox to see the names of the brave ones who put a few words together to connect with me.

Scrolling past yesterday, last week, two weeks, and back even further, my heart races as I see a voice mail from Emma. This is startling, because she made it a point to never leave a voice mail – her premise was by the time the message is heard, it wouldn’t

make sense anymore. My finger hovers over the line with her name and number. Bittersweet memories engulf me. Memories of choosing a name that spoke to my heart, with its meaning of “universal” or “blessings,” of her complaints about having an “old-fashioned” name, and how hard it was in second grade to figure out how to write two Ms in a row, in cursive. Waves of nausea surge, the dark spots start to take over my vision, and I breathe deeply, trying to get past what the doctor terms *panic attacks*.

I went to the doctor a few weeks ago, thinking some type of virus had set in. When I described the spots, dizziness, and queasy stomach, he stopped his usual all-business recitation of medical evidence and touched my hand lightly – something he’d never done before. “Larissa, you do not have a virus or any other illness you may be imagining. You’re in grief, you’re having panic attacks from anxiety, and you’re exhausted - you need more sleep. And medication: Xanax, for the panic attacks related to depression and Klonopin to help you sleep.”

I shook my head, “Dr. Martinez, I don’t need prescriptions, I’m not afraid of anything – nothing to panic about. I don’t want to take pills to fall asleep. I want to be able to wake up if one of the kids calls or I need to catch a plane. And depressed? Are you freaking kidding me – *depression* doesn’t begin to touch how shitty I feel. This is not depression; it is pure hell.”

He explained that panic attacks don’t necessarily have to do with a specific or obvious fear, but rather, anxiety. “Anxiety and depression are closely related, especially after the types of experiences, trauma, that have hit you recently.” He bravely looks me in the eye and questions, “Kids?”

I gasped, realizing my mistake. I shook my head to clear away the gathering dark spots, remembering that *that* is not going to happen.

He gently reminded me I hadn't yet returned to work, so I didn't need to worry about being on time or catching a plane. "And I suspect the reason you don't want to take a sleep aid is that you can't stand being out of control."

It sounded preachy to me, but I listened to him respectfully. I accepted the three pieces of paper, stopped to take care of my co-pay on the way out, then crumpled up the scripts and threw them in my bottomless purse. Why is the solution from doctors always more medication? Not for me, not after all of the medications prescribed over the years for Emma. Dr. Martinez doesn't get it, doesn't get me. No one gets me – they didn't before, and they sure don't now. Trying to explain myself – impossible! And really, who *does* like when things are out of control? "Out of control" doesn't begin to describe this ordeal.

"Emma" remains lit on my phone. I reach to play her voice message, but before it even begins, I hit the "stop." I want to hear her so badly that it hurts, but I just can't. Maybe tomorrow?

Scrolling back to the top of "recents," I see that Shirley did leave a message. This one is longer than usual – 1 minute, 45 seconds according to the screen. That's odd – what's up? Listening, she says a few caring words and then asks, actually begs, me to call back. She wants me to think seriously about a project, just call her back and hear her out. One short trip is all it would take – maybe a way to start to do things again, stop staring at my own four walls and photo albums. She always thinks she knows best, and she's pretty darn persuasive. This proposal needs a little time to sink in. I resolve to let

the idea of a work trip marinate. Then again, maybe I just need to meditate. Eat. Drink.
Howl. *Something* to push back against this ungodly emptiness.