

## Chapter Twenty-One

On Christmas Eve, I was sick with stomach pains and a fever of 101 degrees that wouldn't drop. Chad had to work and I sent Wyatt to Andre's house to hopefully prevent him from catching my illness. I lay on the leather couch in our living room and stared at the ceiling. There was something so special about our house. Even when the three levels were empty of visitors, the structure bustled with fullness, alive with a comfortable energy. On that day, though, the house felt painfully vacant—so incredibly void of life that I swore I heard the lonesome structure weeping. Or maybe it was the winter sleet shower outside. Either way, we were alone. The house and me.

With my body hunched forward and my right hand cradling my stomach, I wearily climbed the stairs toward our bedroom and the comfort of our king-size bed. With each step, the house let out a croak of despair, and, like a rehearsed duo, I matched each note with a moan of my own. At the top of the stairs, I bypassed our bedroom and headed straight to Wyatt's room...Isabelle's room. I didn't even know what to call the room anymore. Isabelle's name still decorated the wall above the crib, along with Wyatt's name below, and a few pink accents helped to keep her memory alive without making the room appear too girly.

I shuffled across the wooden floor to the dresser and touched the small, silver jewelry box with Isabelle's name and baptism date engraved on the front. Inside I found the white plastic rings that were fastened around her newborn ankles the day we brought her home. I sniffed the plastic pieces and I smelled nothingness. Synthetic, man-made materials. Emptiness. Sadness. Definitely not the smell of Isabelle. These items of hers, they were just things. They couldn't coo or swat

at my earrings or fall asleep on my chest. They couldn't even smell like her, and that's what I needed, to be reminded of her smell. I gasped, horrified that I couldn't remember her scent. It had only been a year-and-a-half. Too soon to let even the tiniest detail slip away. The hot flash of fear sent me on a rampage throughout the house that—in the end—would be life changing.

The house's walls trembled with each of my sobs, and when I pushed open the pocket door to the upstairs closet where we kept a trio of pink bins that stored the evidence of Isabelle's four months of existence, the house seemed to bellow with me. Clothes. Toys. Baby bottles. No. 2 unused diapers. I pulled out a pink and white quilted baby blanket with the words "Some Bunny Loves You" on the front and a picture of a floppy-eared rabbit on the back. I held the blanket close to me, smelled it, but, again, no smell.

I turned quickly and moved into my office just down the hall, the door screeching before it hit the wall with a thud. I scooped up the three pictures of Isabelle I kept on my desk and carried them with the blanket to our bedroom.

"Please God," I whispered, pressing my eyes closed. "Please let me hold my baby again."

I reasoned that if I could just hold her one more time, rub my lips across her forehead, and take in her baby scent, I would commit that feeling and her smell to memory, maintain it somehow. I would never be so careless as to let my mind forget again.

I opened my eyes, but nothing happened. So I rushed to my closet, searched the top shelf with my fingertips, and pulled down the pair of ratty jeans I'd worn in the hospital. Then I found the black and white tank top and put that on, too. Chill bumps stood at attention on my arms. The house began to sway and the walls seemed to step forward, closing in around me. I melted like Silly Putty into a fetal position, then crawled into bed with my pictures and the blanket and I sobbed. I sobbed because I missed her. I sobbed because she would miss so much. I sobbed because her life was too short and the rest of my life was way too long.

Only the house knows when I fell asleep, but I awoke with a start an hour later. The walls of the house had realigned themselves and stood tall once again. The room was quiet and the pains in my stomach were gone. I touched my forehead and it was sweaty, but it wasn't hot anymore. I slid out of the tall bed, leaving the pictures and

the blanket tucked safely next to my pillow. Downstairs I found the energy to sweep the kitchen floor, and it was during that simple act of sweeping that the stack of holiday greeting cards on the counter caught my attention. Surreally, the room darkened, a projector kicked on inside my head, and my memory played the dream I'd had while sleeping.

*It was Christmas Eve and we celebrated at my father-in-law's heavily decorated rambler just down the street from our home. A white, cotton clothesline ran from the kitchen, through the dining room and into the living room where it was clipped to an eye hook just above the front door. All sizes of wrapped presents encircled with ribbons and brightly colored bows were fastened with wooden clips to the clothesline. Adults were laughing and children were running around, and one by one the gifts were unclipped from the clothesline and dispersed.*

*After all of the presents were opened and the "oohs" and "ahhs" subsided, I leaned over Chad's shoulder and whispered, "I didn't get a present."*

*Chad turned to me, his forehead wrinkled, then looked at the empty clothesline. "Hmmm. That's strange."*

*Wyatt was on Chad's shoulders and he pointed to the far wall in the kitchen. "There!" he shouted excitedly. "Mommy, you forgot one!"*

*I whirled around and zeroed in on a small, ivory-colored envelope clipped to the very top of the clothesline, half hidden by the cupboard. "Amy" was written on the front in a chicken-scratch print. With all eyes on me, I unclipped the card. I was embarrassed that Chad's family had witnessed my uneasiness over not receiving a gift, yet I was thankful I was not completely forgotten.*

*I tore open the envelope. The cover of the card was simple with a traditional wintertime scene reproduced on the same ivory paper as the envelope. A small, snow-covered house had smoke billowing from its chimney like puffs of happiness. Evergreen trees protectively encircled the perimeter. Outdoor lights illuminated a cobblestone path as a horse-drawn carriage rolled by. I opened the card and handwritten in black ink were the words, "Write that book. Love God and Isabelle."*

Yes. I had a book to write.