

Andrea Cuthbert had been dreaming of this moment for a long time. It had been all she could think about for almost two years, tantalizing her with the possibility of her and Jesse bringing life into this world. At times, the desire to be pregnant had been so strong that she would find herself consciously fighting to hold back a sob.

At first, she hadn't dared broach the subject with her husband of three years, afraid that he would somehow be indifferent— or worse, hostile— to the idea of having his structured life so radically altered. But after much praying and deliberating with herself, Andrea decided that she had more to lose by not asking Jesse than simply telling him how she felt, so she hesitantly brought the subject up one night. Much to her surprise, he had agreed with her, saying that it was time to start a family.

So here she was, almost three months later, pregnant, standing in Saint Anne's Hospital with Jesse by her side, waiting for the results of her scan. She felt like a child anxiously awaiting her gifts on Christmas morning.

The door to the room creaked open, and a matronly woman stepped into the room, ultrasound photos and sheets of paper crammed between her arm and her ribs. Her ample belly practically filled the doorway. The nurse's name tag read "Evangeline."

Andrea stole a glance at her husband and watched his features twist into a little smile. She was about to jab him in the ribs for his lack of manners when he spoke up.

"Evangeline," he said. "A pretty name. It means 'bearer of good news.' Did you know that?"

The nurse appeared startled and more than a little curious. "Yes. How did you know?"

"My husband is an etymologist," Andrea quickly explained, trying to end the

conversation before Jesse could launch into a monologue about the meanings of various prefixes and suffixes. “Do you have the results?”

Now the woman began to look uncomfortable. “Ah, yes. About that. You see—”

“Are those the ultrasounds?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Oh, honey, aren’t you so excited?” Andrea murmured, peeking at her husband’s face.

Much to her consternation, Jesse’s face had swept itself clean of all emotion. “Is there more?”

At first Andrea thought he was talking to her, but then she quickly realized that he was addressing the *nurse*. Her heart sank so low she thought it had fallen out of her body.

“Uh, yes... there is.” Evangeline cleared her throat. “Mrs. Cuthbert, you have experienced what doctors call a missed miscarriage.”

Andrea felt the blood drain from her face. “Are you saying that we— that I— lost the baby? And that I didn’t know about it?”

“I’m very sorry for both of you,” Evangeline murmured. “I know this has to be devastating.”

“There must be some mistake,” Andrea insisted. “I studied health in high school. There’s usually some bleeding or abdominal pain, right?”

“In most cases, yes,” Evangeline said gently. “There are almost no signs to indicate a missed miscarriage.”

Finally, Andrea could hold the floodgates back no longer. She burst into tears and stumbled toward the nearest chair, nearly blinded with grief. Jesse followed her, albeit

more stiffly.

Evangeline glanced at Jesse as Andrea settled into the chair. “We need to prep your wife for surgery.”

“*Surgery?*” Andrea cried. “If you think—”

“Andrea,” Jesse interrupted quietly, laying a comforting hand on her head. “Let the doctors do what they think is best. You’re tired, upset, and in no frame of mind to think rationally. Please.”

Andrea looked up. Jesse’s face was drawn and pale, but his voice did not shake and there were no tears spilling down his cheeks in unending cascades. At that moment, she envied his emotional control.

Men had it so easy. They had no idea what it felt like to carry a baby around in their belly for almost three months, to feel that child grow and forge a sort of connection with them... and then to have that ripped away from them. No, he might be suffering and grieving, but she doubted he would ever feel the depth of loss that she did.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Do what you have to.”

“Close your eyes and try to relax, honey,” Evangeline instructed. “I’m just gonna give you a little injection to get you ready for the procedure. There you go...”

Dimly, Andrea felt her head loll back against the chair. In just a few seconds, she found herself adrift in that timeless black void between dreams and reality.

After an indeterminable amount of time, Andrea found herself groggily coming around.

“Ah, good,” a male voice said from somewhere on the other side of the room. “She’s coming around. Can you open your eyes, my dear?”

She found that she was able to open her eyes. She immediately recognized the speaker as Abel Rothman, one of the head doctors.

Doctor Rothman had always been a somber man, but today, he looked even more serious than usual. The bags under his watery, pink-rimmed eyes could have belonged to a ninety year old man.

“You might as well sit down,” the doctor said without preamble, gesturing for Jesse to take the chair next to Andrea’s bed. “What I have to say is not going to be easy for you two.”

Jesse leaned over and took Andrea’s hand, but she jerked it away. “What happened?” she demanded.

“The doctor in charge of your surgery made, um, a *mistake*. I’ll be blunt with you because I know you’re a woman who appreciates frankness. I seriously doubt you will ever be able to get pregnant. The procedure has left you, well, *barren*. I’m very sorry.”

Andrea could almost feel her heart breaking.

“You mean there aren’t any surgical options available for us— any fertility enhancements, anything?” Jesse asked.

“You don’t understand, Mr. Cuthbert. When we were removing the fetus, we scraped your wife’s uterus too deeply,” Rothman explained. “One of the unknowns in a surgery.”

Andrea was too heartbroken to speak, but Jesse— her rock, her heart, her *everything* now— asked the question that was on her mind. “Do we have *any* options at all?”

Doctor Rothman sighed. “There are a few high-risk options that you could consider,” he told them, “but they are extremely pricey and have a low chance of success.”

Andrea felt the tears welling up again, but she clamped down on her emotions with all the control she could muster. She would *not* fall apart again. Even though her body was weak at the moment, she would not allow her mind to falter.

Doctor Rothman seemed to sense her weakness. He rose and started toward the door. "I'll leave you two alone right now."

"We can get through this," Jesse assured Andrea once Rothman was out of earshot. "We'll help each other. Let's put our trust in God, okay?"

"You always know the right thing to say to a girl," Andrea said wryly. A loud groan sounded from the next room, causing her to jump in alarm. "What was that?"

"The woman next door just had a baby," Jesse explained. "I think there were complications."

Shakily, Andrea gripped the side of her bed and pulled her body toward the edge, only to have Jesse snag her arm before she could lower herself to the floor. "*What?*"

"Sweetheart, where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to see her."

"Who? The woman next door? Andrea, that's the worst idea you've had since offering to baby-sit the Johnson's three-year old."

Andrea winced at the memory but managed to free herself and slide off the bed. Jesse hurried around to help her, and she put a steadying hand around his shoulder.

"I need something to do," she said, twisting her lips into a pout. "Just help me over there."

"What if she doesn't want company?"

"Jesse, just please take me there."

He sighed, but without further protest, he guided her to the door, half-steadying her and half-dragging her the whole way. "You're as stubborn as a mule," he muttered, pulling her toward the next room. "But prettier, though."

She laughed.

Jesse stopped outside the woman's room. "I'll leave you here," he murmured. "I don't think it would be very appropriate if I went inside."

"No," Andrea agreed. "It's probably not appropriate for me to be here, either." She fluttered her eyelashes. "But as a very handsome man once told me, I'm very stubborn."

He kissed her gently on the nose. Andrea waited until he was gone before she pushed the door all the way open and hobbled inside the darkly-lit room.

A woman lay in a bed identical to the one Andrea had just vacated. She was a small woman, maybe a little bit over five feet, and she had dark hair that hung limply past her shoulders. Her face was pale, and her eyes were closed.

She was sleeping, Andrea realized.

As Andrea turned to leave, her attention was drawn to a picture frame that someone had propped next to the bed. She limped closer and picked it up to discover that it was a picture of the woman's baby.

It was a beautiful boy, with dark hair so wavy and downy that Andrea imagined she could feel it through the picture. His eyes were startling blue, and he had just a hint of a button nose. He seemed so bright and inquisitive that Andrea felt a pang shoot through her heart.

*That could have been my baby.* The thought came so suddenly that Andrea had no

chance to defend herself against it. Tears sprang to her eyes.

*It's not fair. I lost my baby, and the woman right next to me delivers the most beautiful child on the planet. Lord, why do You have to be so cruel?*

Immediately, her spirit felt chastised. She set the picture down and bowed her head. After taking a moment to compose herself, she began to pray.

*Dear Lord, please forgive me for being so petty. Even though I lost my baby, I promise to still be faithful to you and Jesse, no matter what the future holds for us. And even if I never get to raise a family, I will try to be content, because I know that this is Your will for me. Please give me the strength to—*

“You prayin’?” a raspy voice asked.

Andrea jerked back and opened her eyes. “What?”

The woman was awake and looking straight at her. “You had your eyes closed for an awfully long time. Were you talkin’ to God?”

“Yes,” Andrea stammered. “I’m sorry if I woke you. I know I shouldn’t be here...”

“So you’re a religious woman?” the lady continued, paying no attention to Andrea’s excuse. “What were you prayin’ about, if you don’t mind my asking? Dying women can be morbidly curious, you know.”

Despite the fact that she didn’t even know this woman, Andrea took an instant liking to her. “I was praying for a child.”

“Why?”

Andrea hesitated. She wasn’t prepared for a complete baring of her soul to a complete stranger. Yet somehow, the words poured out of her in a torrent that she had no control over.

“The doctors told me I will never be able to have a baby. I miscarried this morning.”

There was a brief pause. “Why do you say you’re dying?” Andrea asked.

“Because I am,” the woman said bluntly. “I’m Leah, by the way.”

“Andrea.”

“Well, Andrea, I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’m a religious woman, too. Been a Church of God member my whole life.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Andrea said.

“That’s not the secret, honey,” Leah said impatiently. “I was prayin’, just like you, only I was prayin’ for the right person to take care of my baby when I’m gone.”

Andrea was shocked to her core. “What about your family?”

Leah’s eyes misted up. “Ain’t got any,” she said. “At least, any that are worth mentioning. They’re all crackpot addicts. None of them know how to raise a baby.”

Leah swiped at her eyes. “Will you take care of my boy, Andrea? Raise him in the faith and mold him into a godly young man?”

Andrea felt as though the ability to form words had left her. She could only nod her head.

A hand tapped Andrea on the shoulder, startling her and nearly ruining the moment.

“Excuse me,” a patrician voice said, “but you’re not supposed to be here.”

Andrea whirled to find a nurse standing right behind her. Before Andrea could stammer an excuse, Leah spoke up.

“Excuse *me*,” she said, repeating the nurse’s words and raising her voice so she could be heard, “but I would like her to stay. Now, can you call the doctor? I think I need to

sign some papers.”

“Papers?” the nurse prodded.

“Adoption papers,” Leah said. “Now scoot. And don’t come back until you bring Doctor Rothman and the papers.”

The nurse excused herself from the room, promising to bring the doctor as quickly as possible.

Andrea and Leah chatted briefly, with Andrea explaining her background, religious convictions, and political beliefs. Mostly, Leah just listened and asked occasional questions. They must have talked like that for an hour before the door creaked open and Doctor Rothman came in.

“This nice lady’s gonna take care of my baby,” Leah announced. “Bring the adoption papers and tell me where to sign.” Rothman was visibly surprised but he did as Leah ordered. Leah waited until Rothman left the room before turning to Andrea. “So, what are you gonna name your boy?”

“I’m not going to name him,” Andrea said, “because *you* are.”

Leah managed a weak smile. “I was hoping you would say that. How about Nathaniel?”

“Oh, that’s a beautiful name,” Andrea said.

“Yes, it was the name of the pastor who brought me to Christ. It means ‘Gift of God’. Particularly apt in this case, doncha think? Now, I’d like you to have some say in this as well. You choose the middle name.”

“Lee,” Andrea said without hesitation. “Because I want to be able to remember you.”

Leah looked pleased. “That’s very kind. Nathaniel Lee Cuthbert. A fine name for a

fine boy.” Leah looked at the clock. “It’s getting late, Andrea. Why don’t you go back to your room? I’ll sign the papers when the doctor returns.”

“Thank you,” Andrea murmured. She stumbled back to her room and flopped onto the bed. Jesse had already nodded off in his chair; she would explain things to him when he woke up.

She hadn’t imagined, even in her wildest dreams, that she would walk away from all this with a child. She had gone from pregnant woman to barren wretch to overjoyed mother, all in a single day.

It was almost too much for her to handle.

She closed her eyes and whispered aloud the only words that crossed her mind:

“Thank you, God. Thank you.”