

Chapter Four

“They really trust us to take care of a baby?” Peter asked.

“People do this every day,” I said. “Girls half my age. Besides, we have my mother to help.”

Penny lay in my arms, asleep again. She looked like a cherub, pudgy cheeks and a button nose and gentle breaths that moved her chest up and down. Mom and Dad had brought preemie clothes, and the warm white of her pajamas made her skin glow.

It was Sunday night, only forty-eight hours after giving birth. I was sore, but Motrin eased the pain. I could walk, get dressed, take a shower. Penny’s body temperature was stable. At five pounds, her weight was stable too. She was small, and she had Down syndrome, but she was as healthy as could be. It was time to go home.

Penny slept through her introduction to our apartment. She didn’t stir as her aunts and grandparents gathered around. She didn’t notice when I picked up our cat, George, and let him study her face. The flash of the camera didn’t wake her when it captured our first family photo—Peter cradling Penny, me with George slung over my shoulder, three times her size.

Peter, Mom, and Dad moved toward the kitchen to work on dinner. My sisters followed me into Penny’s room. I scrolled through my memory, looking for a file marked *bedtime*. Penny had taken a bath at the hospital. She had a clean diaper. She was already wearing pajamas. It didn’t make any sense to read a book. A song. That was it. We would sing her a song.

As kids, Mom sang to us every night before we went to sleep. Each of us had our own lullaby, and I wanted to sing mine to Penny. We summoned Mom to lead us as none of us could remember the words. What I could remember was the comfort of Mom sitting next to me on the bed as a child, singing softly with the lights out, resting her hand upon my shoulder.

All four of us chimed in at parts as Mom sang, *Close your eyes, close your eyes, go to sleep now my darling . . .*

I kissed Penny’s forehead and placed her in a Moses basket. She lay still, bundled tight. I placed my hand on her chest once again, soothed by the steadiness of her breathing.

As we tiptoed out of the room, Kate said, “Of course, I’m not sure why we did that, since Pen was asleep the whole time.”

Kate giggled as soon as she said it, and I laughed out loud. Mom turned around with a smile, and pretty soon I was laughing the way I had as a little girl, when the four of us sat between Mom and Dad at family dinners and couldn’t contain our emotions. And just like those days when I was nine or ten, as soon as my laughter ebbed I looked at Kate, saw her nostrils flare as she tried to contain giggles, and lost it once again. I wiped tears from my eyes and took a deep breath.

Before joining the family in the kitchen, I peeked in on Penny once more.
Go to sleep now my darling.

A few hours later, Peter and I climbed into bed. I leaned back against a bank of pillows. My eyes wandered, resting on familiar objects as if to ensure I had truly made it home. Glimpses of our life together. The photo of Peter and me in front of the Louvre. The sturdy, weathered dresser that a friend had given us when we lived in Richmond. The framed poem Peter's college roommate had written for us when we got married. The quilt of fabrics from Peter's mother's wardrobe.

George jumped up and peered into Penny's basket, which we had placed on a table at the end of the bed. I moved onto my hands and knees to join him. There was our new addition. Our daughter.

For a moment, it all seemed so right. So easy. A mother and father come home with a beautiful, healthy baby girl. To the cheers of aunts and proud grandparents. To a jealous cat. To a yellow room with a cozy armchair and a stack of novels to read while nursing and blankets and toys and clothes and everything else a baby could ever want.

But we were also coming home to a dorm that housed thirty boys, thirty boys who would return from vacation the next day. We were coming home to Peter's colleagues, teachers, men and women with multiple advanced degrees, men and women like us who would cringe at the words *mental retardation*.

Peter had brought his laptop to bed. "I need to write a letter to the faculty," he said. "What are you going to tell them?"

"I'm going to tell them as much as we know. I don't want rumors. I don't want anyone to think we're in denial. I don't want anyone to think we're trying to hide."

"I hate the feeling that there's a caveat when we announce the birth of our daughter."

Peter started to type. I didn't lie down yet, but I closed my eyes.

Until that point, boarding school life had seemed normal. Peter and I had met at a boarding school, and now we lived at one—Lawrenceville. Students from across the country and around the globe came here, lived here, in order to receive the best education possible. They would all go to college, and many of them would go on to have distinguished careers in finance or medicine or the arts. *How does Penny fit in to this place?*

I glanced at Peter's letter.

Our daughter, Penny Becker, was born on Friday evening. Penny is a beautiful little girl and the apple of her father's eye.

A beautiful little girl.

She was beautiful. But she also looked different. Mom had seen it immediately. The doctors could list all her distinguishing features. Her beauty was unconventional. The type of beauty I had rarely been able to see.

When Peter and I were in school, everyone had taken a poll for the yearbook and voted on which senior girl was the best looking. A friend of mine held the honor. After she was announced the winner, she almost dropped out of school, almost didn't make it through the spring. I don't know what triggered it exactly, but she started losing weight in January and a few pounds became ten became twenty until her clothes hung off her body and the structure of her face became pronounced and her collarbones jutted out of her shoulders.

She wasn't alone. I spent those high school years saying that I didn't care how I looked. I didn't wear makeup or do anything to my hair, and I only took a shower when it seemed absolutely necessary. But the thought of gaining even one pound left me panicked. I found a journal from my sophomore year that recorded my eating patterns on a typical day: Apple. Salad. Frozen Yogurt. Apple. Diet Coke. It recorded exercise too: Three mile run. 90 minute soccer practice. 30 minutes on the stationary bike. 50 sit-ups. The same journal contained a vow I had written to myself: "I pledge that I will not eat more than 1000 calories per day." It was signed. And dated. A covenant with the gods of thinness, the currency of beauty.

The pledge to starve myself hadn't lasted very long. A few months, and then I went home for Christmas break and couldn't keep it up. Mom cooked dinner, so I had to either feign illness or eat. The odd thing was, when I started eating again my body rejected the food. I didn't make myself throw up. It just happened, as if the food had nowhere to go.

I told Mom about this strange sickness, and once the hubbub of Christmas had passed, we went to the doctor. A series of tests ensued until finally, six weeks later, after I had lost fifteen of my one hundred and two pounds, doctors diagnosed me with *gastro paresis*, paralysis of the stomach. It took six more years before I ate healthily again.

The girls at Lawrenceville reminded me of myself in high school. Lots of energy and drive. A willingness, even eagerness, to address serious intellectual issues. An ability to argue a point. Grades and SAT scores that were higher than the boys'. And a fixation on thinness. It was rare to see anyone on this campus who was overweight.

"No thanks, Mrs. Becker, I already ate dinner."

"I'm still full from lunch."

"I'd like the pizza without the cheese."

Just like those girls, I'd always valued thinness and conventional notions of beauty even though I told myself it was shallow, even though I had prayed over the years to be able to see the world differently. I remembered one week in college, in the midst of one of those prayer bouts, when I did see it differently. When I was able to look at Janet, a girl in my English class, and see that the sweetness of her spirit made her beautiful. Or Ashley, down the hall, with the short brown hair and pocked face and glasses. I noticed the gracefulness of her hands.

But it didn't last long, that ability to see.

And here at Lawrenceville looking good mattered just as much as it had when I was in high school. Penny already looked different. Almond-shaped eyes. Flat facial features. Tiny ears. Penny looked different, and she was beautiful. *Could Lawrenceville see it? Could Lawrenceville see her? Could I?*

"I'm going to ask Chris to read this to the faculty when they meet in the morning," Peter said, placing the laptop on my outstretched legs.

I read out loud:

Hi Lawrenceville friends,

Our daughter Penny was born on Friday evening. Penny is a beautiful little girl and the apple of her father's eye. But there is more to the story than we first thought. About two hours after Penny came into the world, the doctors told us she is going to have special needs related to a chromosomal abnormality, Down syndrome. Needless to say, this news was utterly shocking to us and we are still (and will be for a long time to come) adjusting to this new reality.

On the one hand, Penny is a beautiful baby who is very healthy, especially for an infant with Downs—her heart is strong, her intestines are working well, and she loves her mother’s milk. On the other hand, the future is going to look a lot different than we thought it would and there is very real grief associated with that. The Lawrenceville community has always comforted and supported us when we’ve needed it in the past, and we are so glad that this will be Penny’s home. Our hope and prayer is that she will be as much of a blessing to this community as we know you will be to her. We sincerely look forward to seeing you all and reentering life here, and we thank you in advance for your thoughts and prayers. It has been a real comfort to be surrounded by family and friends these last two days, so please don’t be strangers.

*Love,
Peter and Amy Julia*

“It’s perfect,” I said, handing back the laptop and pulling the covers to my chin. Peter had such faith in this place, these people. But there was so much in me that doubted. So much that feared.

Peter squeezed my leg. “They’re going to love her,” he said.

I kept my eyes closed for a minute, but then I pushed myself up. No words needed. Just a kiss goodnight and my cheek resting against his chest. And then sleep.

We had fun that night. Penny woke me with little grunts every two or three hours. I nudged Peter awake, and together we pulled back the comforter, lay a towel on the bed, and began the process of changing her diaper.

“Why did this look so easy in the hospital?” Peter asked, as his big fingers fumbled with the tabs.

“Because the nurses know what they’re doing,” I said.

As soon as he had the diaper secure, just as I was sliding Penny’s arms back into her pajamas, we heard it. Another diaper needed.

I was leaning over to get more supplies when I heard Peter cry out.

“What?”

“She peed on me.” At first he sounded puzzled, but soon his face spread into a smile. “And somehow, this little creature managed to pee on her pajamas and the towel too.”

I handed over the new diaper, shaking my head.

Penny blinked at us, serene.

This is good, I thought.

In fits and starts, we were settling into a rhythm of care. We were beginning to learn our daughter.

The next day was more of the same. Try to keep her awake while she nurses. Cycle through as many diapers as it takes to keep her clean and dry. Remember to take Motrin. But mostly, watch as people come to meet her. Peter’s brother Thomas and his wife Sarah spent the day with us, and Kate’s fiancé Frank drove down. Penny slept through it all, cuddled in the arms of one of her relatives, and even though she hardly opened her eyes, her presence brought peace. Lines on Thomas’ face softened with her in his arms. Dad’s shoulders relaxed. Somber tones became spirited, and by the afternoon, the joy in the apartment was palpable.

I still had so many questions, but I was able to hold them at bay. Or perhaps the presence of our family held them at bay. Carried us.

The day wore on, and we could hear doors slamming, feet trudging along the upstairs hallway. The rest of the house began to wake up as the boys returned. I usually welcomed those signs of their presence, but I didn't want to see them yet. I felt safe within the walls of our apartment, with only our family around. I couldn't imagine walking out that door with the eyes of sixteen-year-olds upon me. It would be like running through town barefoot, wearing only a towel. Exposed. Vulnerable.

At nine o'clock that night, Mom and I sat in the living room of our apartment with the door open. Peter had gathered the boys for a house meeting in the common room downstairs. I could envision them—a few propped against the pool table, some sitting on the floor, others lounging along the window seat. The jet-lagged ones from Korea and Japan blinking to keep their eyes open. The cool kids raising eyebrows at each other in subtle signs of hello from across the room. Complaining about being back. Happy to be back.

The room quieted, and just a few seconds later, Mom and I heard cheers. Whoops and hollers and applause. Peter had told them that Penny was here. But then the room settled down again. I could guess his next sentence: "Boys, there's more to the story." And I could picture him there—sitting on the arm of a chair so he could see them all, elbows on his knees, hands moving to illustrate his point. I could imagine him telling them all about it. About the doctors' words. About his own tears and fears. About Down syndrome. And then, about Penny. His love for her. The way her presence made him want to dance. He was inviting them into our story.

Thirty minutes passed, and then the cheers rose again, up the stairwell and into our living room, welcoming Penny into the world.