

The Choice

I knew the hour was almost up although I refused to look at the clock on the wall, as if time would freeze if nobody was monitoring it. The door opened slowly and the peaceful feeling emanating from my soul—the feeling my newborn son evoked in me—evaporated, replaced by the weight of dread, pressing me down into the mattress, slowing my movements, dulling my senses. My social worker, Nancy, tiptoed over to the hospital bed where I sat clutching my baby to my chest, shaking my head, no.

"Jacob."

I whispered his name to him like a secret, wanting desperately to have something sacred between us. I picked the name Jacob not to be cute, naming the boy after his father, Jake. After all, this boy may never get to meet his father. It was more that, although Jake wasn't interested in laying eyes on his perfect, handsome baby, a part of him—his name—would be with his son anyway, whether he liked it or not.

What I couldn't understand was this: how would I make it through tomorrow? How would I wake up, my body void of the baby I was so used to sharing myself with, and start over without him? I had spent the last two hundred and sixty-eight days with Jacob. I talked to him. I held my hand over my belly constantly, hoping that he could feel love through my touch. I sang to him and played classical music for him each day simply because I had read somewhere that it could increase intelligence. I ate all the right foods and gave up caffeine and exercised every day just to make sure I was doing everything I could to send him into the world armed with a healthy

body and mind. After all, it was the only contribution I could make to his future. It would be up to his adoptive parents, if I went through with this, to take him the rest of the way.

Without Jacob, it would be as if arctic water was thrown over everything I knew to be true in life, dousing colors and smells, diluting emotions, distorting time. It would change not only the way the world looked and operated, but the way I processed things in my mind. Emotions such as happy or excited, surprise or love even—reactions I used to take for granted every day—would all blur into one monotone feeling of sedation where I knew I would reside for quite some time.

No. I couldn't do this.

“Miss Warren?” Nancy spoke softly, as if she knew that anything louder than a whisper would shatter the fragile façade I was clinging to like a shield.

I didn't answer. Maybe ignoring her would make her go away, or buy me some more time. Every second with my baby was precious. I needed to think this through.

“Lilly? I'm so sorry but, it's time.”

Nothing.

“Miss Warren? The adoptive parents have been waiting since you went into labor. I'm so sorry dear. I need to take him now.”

“No. I changed my mind. I can't do this.” I could hardly see through the tears streaming down my face, distorting my vision of Jacob, falling onto his swaddled body. I brought him up to my face, nuzzled his tiny neck, stroked his soft skin with my cheek, filled my lungs with his sweet scent. I listened to his grunts and squeaks with delight, savoring his voice, talking back to him in our own sweet language.

Nancy granted me a gift, a few more precious moments, without protest. She moved to the other side of the room, allowing me the space and privacy to decide our fate. I whispered again to Jacob, not wanting her to hear me pouring my heart out to him.

Because I too was adopted, I knew the questions that would plague him as time wore on—if I went through with it. The ones that would keep him up at night and surface in his mind over and over with age. I wanted to answer those uncertainties for him. “Jacob. I am your mother and I love you more than life. In fact, the word *love* seems too short and simple to explain the way I feel about you. I adore you. I cherish you. I treasure you. And because of that, I must do what’s best for you.” I ran my finger along the perimeter of his face, tracing every inch, reading his bones like Braille, burning his image into my brain.

What's best for him? I had considered that question from every conceivable angle for the past nine months. I had talked with family, pastors, my high school guidance counselor, Jake's family. Everyone felt that seventeen was too young to be a mother. And Jake, at eighteen years old, had just enlisted in the Marines. Jake and I were supposed to be the *good* kids. The kids that behave and excel in sports and earn scholarships to the best schools. We were supposed to graduate from high school and embark upon our next chapter of life, so full of promise and potential. For Jake, nothing changed. He was on his way to Paris Island and Jacob and I were fading from his rear view mirror. But for me? The pages of my next chapter, and maybe the entire novel of my life, already had a header and footer stamped on them: *Lilly is a Mother*.

And nothing was going to change that for me.

I knew what I had to do. Again, I whispered, “Jacob, one day you will wonder why I made the choice that I did. The word, ‘enough’ will circle through your mind. You weren’t good

enough. I didn't love you *enough*. You weren't important *enough*. But please Jacob, know this: it is me who isn't *enough* for you.”

I had more that I needed to tell him but the words were lodged in my throat, solidifying into a mass too heavy to move. Nancy knew it was time. I was letting go in the only way I could. She placed her hand on the top of my hand, a kind gesture that said she understood how difficult it must be to hand over my baby to a stranger, to another family, to another life, apart from me.

And so, I squeezed Jacob to my heart once more and did what I had to do.

I let him go.