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Julia Chappell dreaded the phone call she'd been waiting for all morning. Lately, she'd had about all the turmoil she could take. Her older daughter—newly graduated from high school—lived on the edge of hysteria at the prospect of leaving her boyfriend when she headed for college. The other daughter, at sixteen, acted like she'd been chosen eternal queen of the universe. And Julia's husband, a youth minister for almost twenty years, suddenly wasn't sure he could relate to teens anymore. He was thinking about becoming a pastor. In a small town. In Wyoming. All that, on top of a surprise pregnancy, was almost more than Julia could handle. And now her doctor had ordered an ultrasound because something didn't seem right.

Julia set her cell phone on a tree stump, knelt, and dug her fingers deep into the soft dirt of her freshly spaded garden. Moisture seeped through the knees of her sweatpants as she carved a small hole in the soil. To Julia, gardens meant

flowers. And flowers meant life. Let the neighbors plant their tomatoes and cucumbers. Julia would have hot pink begonias, primrose yellow marigolds, purple petunias, bright red geraniums. No matter what turmoil life tried to hand her, Julia could always find serenity in her garden.

Slipping the root ball of an orange-pink lantana into the hole she had dug, Julia let her thoughts drift back to her childhood, a magical time when lantana blossoms made perfect wedding bouquets for her dolls. She and her little sister, Debbie, had each placed their Barbies—stiff-legged, half naked, and barefoot—along the edge of a tissue-box altar. And there they had vowed to love, cherish, and obey their barefoot Kens until death did them part.

Julia's own daughters had grown past the age when they played with Barbies. Down in the basement lay boxes of tiny shoes and wedding gowns—not to mention four versions of Ken, a camper with a swimming pool, and a pink-and-blue plastic mansion. Julia sighed as she set a second lantana into the ground and covered its roots with dirt. What on earth was she going to do?

Leaning back on her heels, she studied the rows of flowers she had planted this spring. The possibility that something might be wrong with the tiny life she carried had brought back, full force, all of her mixed emotions about being pregnant at all. She couldn't be pregnant, she'd thought when the possibility first presented itself. That was all there was to it. The grocery-store test with the little blue line just had to be wrong. Mike had been "snipped," as

he endearingly put it, and besides, she was too old to have another baby.

“Been there, done that,” as her younger daughter liked to say. Julia and Mike had married in college, and she had given birth to Jessica barely a year later. Heather followed in eighteen months, and Julia had dropped out of school to spend her time chasing toddlers. She had loved motherhood. Loved everything about it—her pregnancies and even the births of her babies. Tiny feet and reaching fingers delighted her. Years of baking cookies and sewing frilly little dresses and smooching sticky cheeks were heaven on earth.

But she did not want to be pregnant now. Not at thirty-seven, when she had almost raised her daughters. Not when Mike was wallowing hip-deep in a midlife crisis. Not when . . . Julia pushed back a wisp of hair with the heel of her hand. Could she really admit to herself why she didn’t want to have a baby? And if something was wrong with the child . . . it would just compound her guilt over not receiving the unexpected gift with the proper gratitude and anticipation.

Of course the doctor had been optimistic. His theory was that she was expecting twins. Twins. Right. Julia was so ambivalent about the idea of even one baby that she had yet to break down and buy any maternity clothes. Her big T-shirts and baggiest sweatpants were getting tight, she had to admit, but she wasn’t able to make that emotional leap yet. How could she possibly cope with the idea of having twins?

She wiped her hands on the thighs of her sweatpants

and stared at the cell phone. God already knew the innermost desires of her heart. So, why did she feel uncomfortable praying about this? Maybe because it seemed wrong not to want the precious new life that was growing inside her. Maybe because what she *did* want felt selfish and sinful.

Her whole life—from the time she was seven years old and sailing to Africa on a ship with her missionary parents—Julia had tried to do what was right and good. Even though she despaired at being sent away from home, she had attended boarding school without a complaint. As a teen, she had gone to the small Christian college her parents chose for her. And she had married a minister, of course.

Standing, Julia picked up her basket of garden tools. She loved Mike, and theirs was a strong marriage. But wasn't she ever going to get to do something just for *herself*?

"Okay," she said, dropping the basket and laying her hand on her stomach. "God, I know I haven't been too happy about this pregnancy. I don't want to be pregnant because I . . . okay, it's because I want to go back to college and get my nursing degree. There, I've said it. I don't want Mike to move us to Wyoming. And I don't want Jessica and Heather to be so . . . so difficult! And most of all, Lord, I just really—"

The phone's warbled tone cut off her words. She stared at it. Good news or bad? And what exactly would good news sound like at this point?

She picked up the phone. "Hello?" she said, and she could hear the quaver in her voice.

"Julia? You sound so far away! Is something wrong?"

“Mom—oh, it’s you.” She let out a breath. “No, I’m just . . . I’m out in the garden. I’ve been planting lantana.”

“Lantana! But that’s a weed, honey. We used to have such trouble with lantana. Snakes love to hide in there, you know.”

“Mom, lantana’s an annual flower here in Santa Fe. It doesn’t survive the winter. No problem with snakes.”

“Well, but it can be such a pest. It was all our garden boy could do to keep that bush cut back. The cobras were just thick in there.” Julia’s mother paused. “You do whatever you want, honey. I’m sure your garden will look very nice, even with lantana.”

Julia smiled. Her parents had retired to Missouri from the mission field two years ago, but sometimes it felt to Julia as though they were still living on another continent. Often, they seemed to be viewing the world from the window of their small corrugated tin house under a thorn tree in the African bush.

“You don’t usually call during the day, Mom,” Julia said. “Is Dad all right?”

“Oh, he’s fine. Busy as ever. But listen, this is about your sister.”

“Debbie? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing serious. Well, we don’t think it is. Anyway, the doctor felt she needed to be put in the hospital—just to keep an eye on her.”

“Why?”

“It’s her weight. Personally, I’ve always thought

Deborah was just the right size, so cute, and such a good athlete. But, anyway, yesterday after church she fainted, so they took her to the hospital. The doctor put a tube down into her stomach—”

“A tube? Mom, what’s going on?”

“He says she needs extra nourishment right now, until she can get back on her feet.”

“Did the doctor give you a diagnosis?”

“He called it . . . *anorectica*. Something like that. But you know, Deborah’s always been thin. All right, I’ll admit she was a little pudgy when she was a toddler, and she had that kind of fattish stage in high school. Then she lost her weight so nicely, and she’s really done well keeping it off. You know how most people’s weight just seesaws up and down? But Deborah’s always been trim and fit.”

“Anorexia? Mom, that’s a serious disease. People die from it.” Julia sat down on the stump and cradled her stomach.

“Well, they don’t really *die*, do they?”

“Yes, they do. Sometimes. I read about it in a magazine, or maybe I saw a TV program on it. Anyway, girls who have it think they’re too fat, so they starve themselves. Even when they start looking like those kids in Africa during the famine years, they think they’re too fat. Mom, how much does Debbie weigh?”

“Do you think I would ask her that? Really, Julia.” She hesitated. “Your father and I drove over to Bolivar to see her—”

“She’s not in Springfield?”

“I’m sure the hospital in Bolivar is perfectly capable of handling something like this, Julia. I wish you would calm down. There’s no need to get so agitated, honey.”

Letting out a breath, Julia shook her head. Mike liked to joke that her mom held the original patent on denial. No matter how bad things got, Olive Mossman put a smile on her face and blankly refused to admit there was a problem.

“Mom, is Dad there?” Julia asked. “Can I talk to him for a minute?”

“Your father is in his study preparing for the Vacation Bible School speaking engagement we have next week in Joplin. I really hate to disturb him. We have to make two presentations every single day, you know. This is a very large church, and they’ve done an amazing outreach program into the community, Julia. They’re expecting nearly a thousand children. Can you imagine that?”

“Wow.”

“Mike scheduled your church’s Vacation Bible School for August, didn’t he? I wonder how many he’s planning for. Maybe we could talk to the youth minister in Joplin and ask him what he did to increase their attendance so dramatically. What do you think? Would Mike be offended if we passed along some suggestions?”

“That would be fine, Mom.” Julia could just see Mike’s reaction. *The Meddling Mossmans are back in action*, he would say. “Listen, would you mind getting Dad for me? I’d really like to hear his opinion about Debbie’s condition.”

“He did ask me to make this call, Julia. And it is high rates. But if you insist.”

Julia could hear Olive calling her husband, and in a moment, Don Mossman’s gentle voice came on the line.

“Hello, Julia. Your mother says you wanted to talk to me about Deborah.” He cleared his throat. “Well, I have to tell you that your sister is looking very frail. I think she’s not feeling well at all. Her weight is a concern, and the doctor decided that a feeding tube had to be put in. It’s hard to see her that way, hooked up to the tubes, you know. There’s an IV in her arm, I think. Yes, I’m sure there is. But she was smiling at us. She looked very pretty, even though her hair has gotten kind of thin. Maybe she’s just taking after her ol’ dad. You know I’m awfully thin on top!”

A joke. Julia gave the appropriate chuckle. “What are they saying about Debbie getting better?”

“They’re going to run some tests. I think when you have this weight problem there’s a danger of bone density loss. The doctor told us the condition sometimes leads to osteoporosis, which we know about because your mother has a touch of it. And it seems Deborah’s hormones are a little out of whack.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well . . .” He was probably cleaning his glasses. When he was uncomfortable, he took them off, blew on the lenses, adjusted the earpieces, and put them back on. “Well . . . it’s her . . . female . . . cycle. The monthly cycle. It

stopped some time ago, and of course, she couldn't be pregnant."

Julia rubbed her hand across her own swelling stomach. No, of course not. Olive and Don Mossman would never believe their unmarried daughter could get pregnant. Even though Deborah had a longtime boyfriend and was thirty-four years old.

"So, the doctor wants to test her blood and take some X rays." Don rushed ahead now that the awkward part was over. "She's going to have to be in the hospital for a while, and they're planning to do several types of therapies. They've assured us if the situation worsens, they'll transfer her immediately to a hospital in Springfield."

"How could the situation worsen, Dad?"

"Well, you know Deborah doesn't have a lot of strength, and her immune system is down. There's a possibility of infection. They've got to get her to start eating again. For some reason, she just won't eat regular food. It's hard to understand, honey, but the doctor says your sister is quite sick. Mentally as well as physically."

The picture was becoming clear, and it wasn't good. How could this have happened without Julia's knowing anything about it? She and Debbie talked on the phone a couple of times a month, and they e-mailed each other regularly. But, of course, Debbie wouldn't have thought she had a problem, so why would she mention it?

The baby of the family, Debbie had always been adored. Her long blonde curls and the dimples in her cheeks

had stunned villagers in the remote part of Kenya where the Mossmans had lived and worked as missionaries for many years. Small children loved to touch her golden hair or stare in starstruck fixation at her blue eyes. Debbie had sailed through her teenage years without a blemish to mar her velvety skin. As an adult, she studied fashion design and became a buyer for a small chain of ladies' clothing stores in southwest Missouri. While Julia lived in her blue jeans and tennis shoes, Debbie wore the latest styles and loved to walk the edge of high fashion. Thin was in, and the thinner the better.

"Dad, when you say Debbie is mentally sick, what do you mean? Is she depressed?"

"I'm not sure what you'd call it. Let's just say she isn't talking much. Maybe she doesn't feel up to it. But the doctor told us that with this anorectica thing, there's a sort of distortion in the patient's mind."

"*Anorexia*, Dad."

"Oh. Are you sure? Your mother wrote it down in her schedule planner, and we thought the doctor called it *anorectica*. An-or-ec-ti-ca." He said it several times, as if learning a new word in one of the African languages he had studied.

"*Anorexia*," Julia corrected again. "Dad, do you think I should fly out there to see Debbie? Is she that bad?"

"Well, I'm sure she would love to see you. She mentioned Peter, too." He was blowing on his glasses again. "In fact, your mother and I were wondering if you could call Peter and let him know about this. We're trying to get ready

for this speaking engagement next week, and your mother has a large dinner scheduled tomorrow night for her Sunday school class. We're having about twenty people—"

"Twenty-five!" a voice sang out in the distance. "Three widows. And you're really running up the phone bill, Don. Why don't we let Julia call us back this evening when rates are down?"

"Your mother says—"

"It's fine," Julia cut in. "I'll call Peter. We'll decide what to do about Debbie."

"That's wonderful, honey. You know Peter just doesn't seem to—"

"Don! The phone bill!" Olive Mossman's voice was louder now, obliterating any chance that her husband might mention the strife that plagued their relationship with their son.

Julia shook her head. "Thanks for the call, Dad. I love you."

"Be sweet, honey!" Olive had taken the phone. "*Kwaheri—tutaonana!*"

Julia rolled her eyes at the Swahili farewell as she spotted Heather sashaying out of the house, her shorts slung low on her slender hips and her little tank top just this side of indecent.

"Here comes Heather, Mom. I'd better go." As her mother gave a final good-bye and the line went dead, Julia pressed the button to turn off the phone.

"Mom, have you been on the phone for, like, hours or

something?” Heather’s long brown hair was tied up in a messy ponytail. “People can’t get through to you, so they keep calling our line. And I’m waiting to hear from Ashley!”

Using more effort than she liked to acknowledge, Julia stood up from the stump. “Who phoned?”

“Dad, of course. He got a call from some mom whose son is acting really weird, so he’s going over there to talk to them. I bet it’s that Darren Whitlock—he’s so bizarre. He’s got those freaky little eyes.”

“Heather.”

“Well, his eyes give me the creeps. Yuck.” She shivered. “And some nurse called. She said their office was closing for the day, so she wanted me to give you the message that you don’t need to worry. They have good news for you, and they need to schedule an appointment with you, so, you’re supposed to call them in the morning. I don’t know why Ashley hasn’t called. We really need to go to the mall this afternoon, because that sale at The Gap is—”

“Wait a minute.” Julia held up her hand. “What did the nurse tell you?”

“It’s ‘good news.’ The doctor was right, whatever that means.”

“The doctor was right?” Julia sucked down a breath. “Are you sure that’s what she said? The doctor was right?”

“Wow, Mom, chill out. You’re acting like I’m some kind of idiot who can’t take a phone message. It was good news, okay?”

“Oh no.” Julia laid a hand on her stomach and sat back

down on the stump. “Call your dad. Get your dad on the phone. Here!”

Heather took the phone. “Mom, I told you. He’s at some lady’s house from the church. Dad never tells us who’s having trouble, you know that. What is with you? Gosh.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t use that kind of slang, Heather, and I mean it! It sounds like you’re taking God’s name in vain—”

“Mom, what is your problem?” Heather took a step toward her mother. “Are you all right? What kind of a test was it? Is something wrong with . . . you know, the baby?”

“I need to talk to your dad. Call Mrs. Moore at the church and find out where he went. Get her to page him.”

“Do you have like . . . cancer . . . or something?”

Julia hung her head. They would all know soon enough. But she needed time. Time to think it all through, time alone with Mike, time to figure out how she was going to cope.

“It’s not cancer, Heather.”

“Well, what is it? Mom, you’re freaking me out!”

“I’m . . . I’m going to have twins.” Julia lifted her head and met her daughter’s deep blue eyes. “I’m going to have two babies.”

“No way. You’re so old. I can’t even deal with the fact that you’re pregnant, Mom!”

“Thanks.” Julia studied her younger daughter and watched the reality settle in. Heather took another step closer and hunkered down beside her mother on the stump.

“Twins.” Heather’s voice grew soft. “Wow. I’ve got to call Ashley—”

“No you don’t!” Julia grabbed the phone from Heather’s hand. “Don’t tell anybody until I’ve talked to your dad. There are a lot of things we need to talk over—such as, I just found out your Aunt Debbie is sick.”

“What’s wrong? *She’s* not pregnant, is she? Grandma Mossman will have a heart attack!”

“She has anorexia.”

“I thought only teenagers got that. Like Jenny Lieberman in Jessica’s class who had to go away to some rehab center because she was so skinny she almost died. She weighed like eighty pounds or something. How much does Aunt Debbie weigh? She’s not going to die or anything, is she?”

“I hope not. I may need to fly to Missouri to see her.”

“You can’t go flying off, Mom! You’re pregnant! With *twins!*” She got to her feet. “Look, here comes Jessica. Can I tell her? I really want to tell her. She’s going to have a cow.”

Julia studied her older daughter as she pulled the compact car to a stop in front of the house and climbed out. Carrying her Wal-Mart uniform vest, her hair up in a pretty bun, her shoulders straight and high, she looked so mature. A young woman.

Heather hadn’t waited for her mom’s response. Like a colt, she was galloping across the lawn, all arms and legs. She grabbed Jessica’s hands and started jumping up and down. In

a moment, Jessica's jaw dropped, and she turned to stare at her mother.

"It's true! It's true!" Heather skipped beside her sister as the two of them hurried toward the flower garden. "Hey, Mom, I told her. She's in total shock!"

Jessica reached out to her mother and folded her in a warm hug. "Mom, congratulations!"

"Thanks." Julia tried to smile. "Surprise!"

"No kidding. Does Dad know?"

"Not yet. Maybe I ought to take him out to dinner."

"Maybe you ought to wait until he's lying down," Heather said. "He's going to faint. He was shocked enough at the idea of *one* baby."

"Mom, are you feeling okay?" Jessica asked.

"I'm fine. It's just something we'll all need to get used to."

"Wow." She studied her mother for a moment. Then she turned to Heather. "Has Danny called yet? We're supposed to go to the mall."

"The mall! Ashley and I are going there. Would you take us? We want to go to that sale at The Gap."

The girls, lost in a heated exchange, started for the house. "You can't ride with Danny and me. We hardly ever get to see each other. Get Ashley to drive!"

"I can't get ahold of Ashley. It's like her pager is off or something. But I have to go to that sale. It's not fair that you get the car all the time, Jess. If you had a halfway decent boyfriend, he'd have a car that wasn't always in the shop. . . ."

Julia watched them go and tried to imagine—again—starting all over. In eighteen years, she would be fifty-five. Fifty-five, and the mother of two teenagers? Her urge to scream was quickly replaced by the image of two tiny pink newborns with little pug noses and skin like eiderdown. *Cute*. Yes, the babies would be cute. And funny and precious and adorable. A surge of joy spilled through her chest, and she hugged herself.

Twins! As Jessica and Heather had said—*wow*. And maybe at least one of them would be a boy. Double wow-ers. What on earth was Mike going to say?

She had just begun to punch in the numbers for Mike's secretary at the church when she remembered her promise to call her brother. Peter . . . with his long hair and angry blue eyes and messed-up life. Peter . . . who hadn't finished college and at thirty-six still didn't know what he wanted to be when he grew up. Peter . . . whom she loved and agonized over and prayed for . . . but barely spoke with anymore. When had they grown apart? As kids they had been so close.

"Hi, Peter," she would say. "Debbie's dying of anorexia, and I'm having twins. Welcome to reality."

Julia turned the phone around in her hand, trying to decide whom to call first. Then she switched it off, set it on the stump, and went back to her lantanas. The crises could wait for another hour. Things were growing. Flowers and babies and teenagers. And things were wilting. Sisters and brothers and husbands. It was time to tend the garden.