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C H A P T E R O N E

ELIZABETH BAXTER found the lump on March 7.

She was in the shower, and at first she brushed past it, figured it to be nothing more than a bit of fatty tissue or a knotted muscle or maybe even a figment of her imagination. But then she went over it with her fingertips again and again. And once more, until she knew.

No question—it was a lump.

And a lump of any kind meant getting an immediate check. This was a road she'd traveled before. If a breast-cancer survivor knew one thing it was the importance of self-checks. She stopped the water, dried off, and called her doctor while still wrapped in a towel.

The mammogram came three days later, and a biopsy was performed the day after that. Now, on a brilliantly sunny morning in mid-March, in the private office of Dr. Marc Steinman, Elizabeth sat stiff and straight next to John as they waited for the doctor to bring the results.

“It’s bad; I know it is.” Elizabeth leaned a few inches to the side and whispered, “He wouldn’t have called us in if it wasn’t bad.”

John did a soft sigh and met her eyes. “You don’t know that. It’s probably nothing.” But his tone lacked the usual confidence, and something wild and fearful flashed in his eyes. He tightened his grip on her hand. “It’s nothing.”

Elizabeth stared straight ahead. The wall held an oversized, framed and matted print of a pair of mallard ducks cutting a path across a glassy lake. *No, God, please . . . not more cancer. Please.* She closed her eyes and the ducks disappeared.

A parade of recent memories marched across her heart. Ashley and Luke sitting side by side at Luke and Reagan’s wedding reception, reconnected after so many years apart; Kari and Ryan exchanging vows at a wedding in the Baxter backyard; little Jessie taking her first steps; Maddie and Hayley holding hands for the first time after Hayley’s drowning accident.

They need me, God . . . they still need me. I still need them. Please, God . . . no more cancer.

Footsteps sounded in the hall outside, and Elizabeth’s eyes flew open. “Help me, John.” Her voice was pinched, panicked.

“It’s okay.” John leaned closer, letting her rest on him. “It’ll be okay.”

The doctor entered the room, a file clutched beneath his arm. He stopped, nodded, and sat at the desk opposite them. “Thanks for coming.” He opened the folder and pulled out the top sheet of paper. His eyes met first John’s, then Elizabeth’s. “I have the results of your biopsy.”

A pause followed, and John cleared his throat. “She’s fine, right?” John’s tone sounded forced, unnatural.

The doctor opened his mouth, but Elizabeth already knew. She knew the news would be bad, and in that instant she couldn’t think about surgery or radiation or how sick she was bound to get. Neither could she think the unthinkable—about regrets or do-overs or things she wished she hadn’t done. Instead only one question consumed her soul.

How in the world would her family live without her?



The idea of meeting with the birth mother gave Erin Hogan a bad feeling from the beginning.

Their adoption attorney had warned them against it, but with four weeks until their baby daughter's birth, Erin couldn't tell the woman no. Sam agreed. Whatever the outcome, they would meet the birth mother, hear what she had to say, and pray that nothing—absolutely nothing—would damage the dream of bringing home their daughter.

The meeting was set to take place in thirty minutes at a small park not far from Erin and Sam's Austin home, where they would spend an hour with the birth mother, Candy Santana, and her two children.

On the way out the door that day Erin's stomach hurt. "Sam?" She paused near the nursery door and gazed in.

"I know." He stopped at her side and ran his fingers over her arms. "You're worried."

"Yes." The nursery was entirely pink and white: pink walls and a white crib with pink bedding, and dresser topped with pink teddy bears. It smelled faintly of fresh paint and baby powder. Erin folded her arms and pressed her fist into her middle. "Everything's been going so well." Her eyes found Sam's. "Why now?"

"I don't know." He kissed the top of her head and studied the nursery. "Maybe she wants to see how excited we are."

The possibility seemed like a stretch. Despite the warm March Texas morning, Erin shivered and turned toward the front door. "Let's get it over with."

The short ride to the park was silent, mostly because Erin was afraid to talk, afraid to speculate about what might happen or why in the world the birth mother would want to meet them now. Without the social worker or attorney or anyone official. They parked the car and headed toward a picnic table.

Ten minutes later a young woman and two small girls headed

toward them. Next to her was a thin man with long hair and mean, dark eyes.

“Who’s he?” Erin whispered. They were sitting on top of the table, their feet on the bench as they waited.

Sam frowned. “Trouble.”

The approaching couple held hands. As they drew closer Erin felt the knot in her stomach grow. Candy was very pregnant, dressed in worn-out, dirty clothes and broken flip-flops. The man’s arms were splattered with tattoos. On one was a rooster with a full plume of feathers and the word *cock* in cursive beneath it. The other arm had the full naked figure of a woman framed on top by the name *Bonnie*.

Erin swallowed to keep from shuddering. She lowered her gaze to the girls, who were running a few feet in front of the adults. Candy’s youngest daughter was maybe two years old and wore only a droopy diaper. The other girl, not much older, had a runny nose. Both children had blonde matted hair, lifeless eyes, and vacant expressions. The look of neglect and emotional disconnect.

The same way Candy’s unborn child would look one day if something happened to the adoption process, or if Candy changed her—

No, God . . . don’t let me think like that. The couple was a few feet away now, and Erin could feel the color draining from her face. *Please . . . get us through this meeting.*

“Hi.” Candy gave them a look that fell short of a smile. The right side of her upper lip twitched, and she rubbed her thumb against it. “This is Dave. The baby’s dad.”

The baby’s dad? A thin wire of terror wrapped itself around Erin’s neck. “Uh . . .” She forced herself to smile. “Hello. I’m Erin.”

Next to her, Sam held out his hand to the tattooed man. “Hi.”

Dave shook Sam’s hand, but refused to look either Sam or Erin in the eyes. Instead he shifted his gaze from Candy to the girls, to the ground, and back to Candy again. He grunted something that might’ve been a greeting. Erin wasn’t sure.

For a moment no one said anything. Then Candy cleared her throat and glanced at her daughters. The youngest had picked a dandelion and was chewing on the stem. “Hey!” Candy pointed at the girl and let loose a string of expletives. “I told you a hundred times don’t be stupid, Clarisse, and I mean it. You ain’t a goat; take the flower outta your mouth.”

The girl lifted her eyes in Candy’s direction. “No!” She put the flower stem between her lips.

Candy mumbled something as she stomped over to the child and grabbed her arm. “Let it go!”

Fear filled the girl’s eyes. She dropped the flower and tried to back away from Candy. The woman released Clarisse’s arm and snarled at her. As she returned to the table she seemed to realize what she’d done, the way she’d behaved toward her daughter. A nervous look flashed in her eyes, and the lip twitched again. Candy managed a frustrated smile. “Crazy kids.”

Erin didn’t know what to say. She looked at her hands, at her wedding ring. *God . . . what’s this about?* She lifted her eyes and looked from Candy to Dave.

The tattooed man cleared his throat and gave Candy a pointed look.

Candy nodded and turned to Erin. “We, uh . . . we have something to talk to ya about.”

The knot in Erin’s stomach doubled. She felt Sam take her hand and give it a firm squeeze. “Okay.” Erin massaged her throat for a few seconds. “We’re . . . we’re very excited about the adoption. Nothing’s changed.”

“Has something changed for you, Candy?” Sam’s voice was even, but his words made Erin’s heart miss a beat.

Candy and Dave exchanged a look, and the twitching in Candy’s lip grew worse. “No, it’s just . . .” She looked at the ground for a moment. “We kinda ran into some money troubles, you know? Tough to get a job when you’re, you know, pregnant and everything.”

The instant Erin heard the word *money*, she relaxed. Was that

all this was about? Candy was short on rent and needed a few hundred dollars? Their attorney had warned them against giving Candy additional money. Her financial needs during the pregnancy had already been taken care of, and Candy had signed a paper agreeing not to ask for anything extra.

But if she needed more money, then so be it. A few hundred dollars and they could all move on like before. Erin's heart rate slowed some. Her baby's face came to mind, the smooth skin and fine features, the way she'd always pictured her. Amy Elizabeth, their first child. Everything would be okay after all. Everything.

Sam was nodding, looking at Candy. "That happens." A fine line of moisture gathered along his upper lip. "Money gets tight for everyone."

Dave shifted his weight to the opposite foot. He gripped the tattoo on his left arm. "What she's saying—" he cocked his head—"is we need more money."

There it was. Erin swallowed. In case they'd had any doubts, now the request—a request all of them knew was against the rules—was out in the open. She caught Sam's look and gave him a silent go-ahead.

He stared at Candy. "Have you talked to the lawyer? I believe we agreed on what you needed."

"It wasn't enough." Candy glared at Sam. "You try raising kids and being pregnant on that kind of money."

Raising kids? Erin gritted her teeth. Candy wasn't raising the girls; their pastor had confirmed that on several occasions. Candy's mother was taking care of them. The fact that they were here now was purely show.

"Here's the deal." Dave pressed the toe of his worn boot into the ground and dug his hands in his pockets. He grinned, and Erin could see a gold stud in the center of his tongue. "We need more."

For a while no one said anything. The girls were quiet, still playing a distance away. Finally Erin found her voice and directed her attention to Candy. "How much?"

Above them, a warm wind played in the trees that lined the park. Candy pursed her lips. “Five thousand.”

Erin had to grip Sam’s arm to keep from falling off the bench. *Five thousand?* The adoption had already cost them their entire savings; they could never come up with that much money before the baby was born.

Candy was saying something, trying to explain, but Erin couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t hear anything but the number.

Five thousand dollars?

The figure tore at the picture of the unborn baby, the picture Erin had created in her mind of a little girl cradled in her arms. She gasped for breath and turned toward her husband. “Sam . . .”

He covered her hand with his, his teeth clenched. The figure was still finding its way to the recesses of Erin’s mind when Dave delivered the final blow.

“Five thousand in twenty-four hours.” He flashed a smile that fell far short of his eyes. “Or the deal’s off.”



The blood test had been the doctor’s idea.

Not because he doubted whether she was HIV-positive. In fact, since he’d taken over Ashley’s case, the doctor had called the original lab and discovered that they had done two tests with the original blood sample. Both were positive. Rather, he wanted a complete panel on her, a breakdown of her enzymes and mineral levels and every other test that might determine how healthy she was, how compromised her immune system. And most of all, what method of treatment to take.

Ashley expected the results to come by phone, the way they had the last time, but this warm Friday morning stuck in the middle of a stack of mail was a thick envelope from the lab. Ashley studied it as she made her way back into the house.

Cole was inside, writing his alphabet on a piece of paper. He grinned at her from the dining-room table as she walked in. “Hi,

Mom.” His feet didn’t quite reach the floor, and he swung them under his seat. “I’m on *T* already.”

“Really?” Ashley’s eyes were back on the envelope. “That’s great, buddy. Tell me when you’re done so I can check it.”

She went into the kitchen and set the rest of the mail on a desk by the telephone. She stared at the thick envelope, slipped her thumb beneath the flap, and pulled out the stapled document.

Next to her name, the top sheet read “Lab Results.”

Ashley had no reason to feel nervous or strange about the results. She already knew she was HIV-positive; it was only a matter of how her blood was holding up under the compromise of HIV, and whether any sort of progression toward full-blown AIDS could be seen.

Her eyes darted over the page, anxious for the summary lines, the places where any untrained person could make sense of the numbers and calculations. Then, at the bottom of the first sheet she saw it. A simple few lines with only a few words that made Ashley’s heart skitter into a strange and unrecognizable beat.

She sucked in a quick breath and blinked hard.

It was impossible; she couldn’t believe it, wouldn’t believe it. Someone had to have made a mistake.

Her head began to spin, and she gripped the counter to keep from falling to the floor. She had to find Landon, had to tell him.

“Mommy . . . I’m all done!” Cole’s singsong voice called out to her from the adjacent room. “Come check.”

“Okay.” Ashley’s face was hot and tingling, the way she felt when she got too close to a campfire. “Just a minute.” She pressed her hands against her cheeks and jerked back. Her fingers were freezing. She found the results line again. They couldn’t be right, could they?

A chill made its way from the back of her head, down her spine, and into her feet. *God, is it true? Is it really true?* Then one last time she studied the lab results and began to imagine that maybe—just maybe—they were right. It wasn’t possible, but still . . . what if? What if she’d come this far, given up so much,

only to find out this? She wasn't sure whether to scream or shout or break down on the floor and cry.

But she was sure of one thing.

If the results were accurate, from this moment on, her life would never be the same again.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions for individual reflection or for discussion with a book club or other small group. They will help you not only understand some of the issues in *Reunion* but also integrate some of the book's messages into your own relationships.

Note: Those of you who have book clubs, please know that if you choose to read one of my books and would like me to “drop in” at your get-together, e-mail me at rtnbykk@aol.com. I will try my best to arrange a phone conversation with your group at a meeting time that works for all of us (on speakerphone, of course). Or I will e-mail a response that can be read aloud to your group.

1. How did you feel when you realized Elizabeth Baxter's cancer had come back? Explain.
2. Describe a time when you received bad news. How did you handle that news?
3. Describe how Elizabeth and John handled the news of her cancer. How did that response change as her disease progressed?
4. What emotional process did Erin and Sam go through as they yearned for a child, and then experienced a failed adoption?
5. Have you ever adopted or do you know someone who has? Why is it wonderful that certain women and girls put their babies up for adoption?
6. Describe the blessing of an adopted child. What are some of the issues that can make adoption both a source of joy and sorrow?
7. How did God lead Erin and Sam through the process of loss and unknown circumstances? What specifically did they do or decide to do that brought them peace and miraculous changes in their situation?
8. John Baxter has been strong through most of the Redemption series. Explain why he was afraid in *Reunion*.