



The
Best
We've
Been

a novel

BETH K. VOGT

PRAISE FOR BETH K. VOGT

“Vogts captivates us with the story of sisters, of family, in this third Thatcher Sisters novel. Themes of healing and hope prevail. I cheered for Johanna as she allowed love to heal her heart. This tale will leave you smiling and thinking of the characters long after you’ve read the last page.”

RACHEL HAUCK, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Vogt delivers her best book yet with this tearjerker of a series finale. *The Best We’ve Been* handles difficult topics with grace and sensitivity while avoiding pat answers in its pervasive themes of hope and forgiveness. I can’t recommend the Thatcher Sisters series enough!”

CARLA LAUREANO, RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE SOLID GROUNDS COFFEE COMPANY*

“Authentic and honest, *The Best We’ve Been* upends complicated relationship dynamics with a family as real as any I’ve found—the Thatcher sisters journey through the unexpected with depth and incredible heart in this third installment in the series. Beth K. Vogt is at the top of her game and this book is the treasure that proves it. It’s a memorable addition to any favorites shelf!”

KRISTY CAMBRON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE LOST CASTLE SERIES AND *THE BUTTERFLY AND THE VIOLIN*

“Beth Vogt never fails to impress me with the depth and emotion of her stories and characters. In *The Best We’ve Been*, she tackles sensitive topics with grace and truth while weaving a compelling story of sisterhood and second chances. Don’t miss this moving conclusion to her Thatcher Sisters series!”

MELISSA TAGG, CAROL AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *NOW AND THEN AND ALWAYS* AND THE WALKER FAMILY SERIES

“A fitting conclusion to our time with the Thatcher sisters. Again, Vogt handles sensitive topics such as infertility, betrayal, and faith with candor and grace. She reminds us that while we may not always like our sisters, we do love them with a depth that can surprise us, unnerve us, and often help heal us.”

KATHERINE REAY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE PRINTED LETTER BOOKSHOP*

“Few things in life can simultaneously afflict and heal the heart like family, and Beth Vogt delivers all this and more in her heartrending, moving grand finale of her Thatcher Sisters saga. . . . Readers are sure to discover the power of forgiveness—between family and for the self—in Vogt’s most insightful story yet.”

AMY K. SORRELLS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BEFORE I SAW YOU*

“A deeply satisfying end to the Thatcher Sisters series, *The Best We’ve Been* takes readers on a thought-provoking

journey with Beth Vogt's perfectly imperfect characters. Having read her other books, I truly wondered how Vogt would make oldest sister Johanna someone I could root for—and then she did it! Reading this story was a wonderful reminder that giving up control of our lives and trusting God to lead us will always have the best result, even if we cannot see that in the moment.”

LINDSAY HARREL, AUTHOR OF *THE JOY OF FALLING*

“In the last of the Thatcher Sisters trilogy, the overarching theme of grace, forgiveness, and second chances brings us to the satisfying conclusion to this wonderful series. Vogt's talent for evoking emotion stands out, several scenes needing a tissue or two. A lovely exploration of real-life circumstances and complicated relationships.”

CATHERINE WEST, CAROL AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *WHERE HOPE BEGINS*

“*The Best We've Been* is a beautiful story of what happens when life doesn't go as planned and how it can pull us closer together. . . . It is a beautiful story of how family can come together when the lies are replaced with truth and when the choice is made to trust and find common ground. I loved every page, couldn't wait to return to the characters, and felt every emotion. A wonderful addition to Beth Vogt's books.”

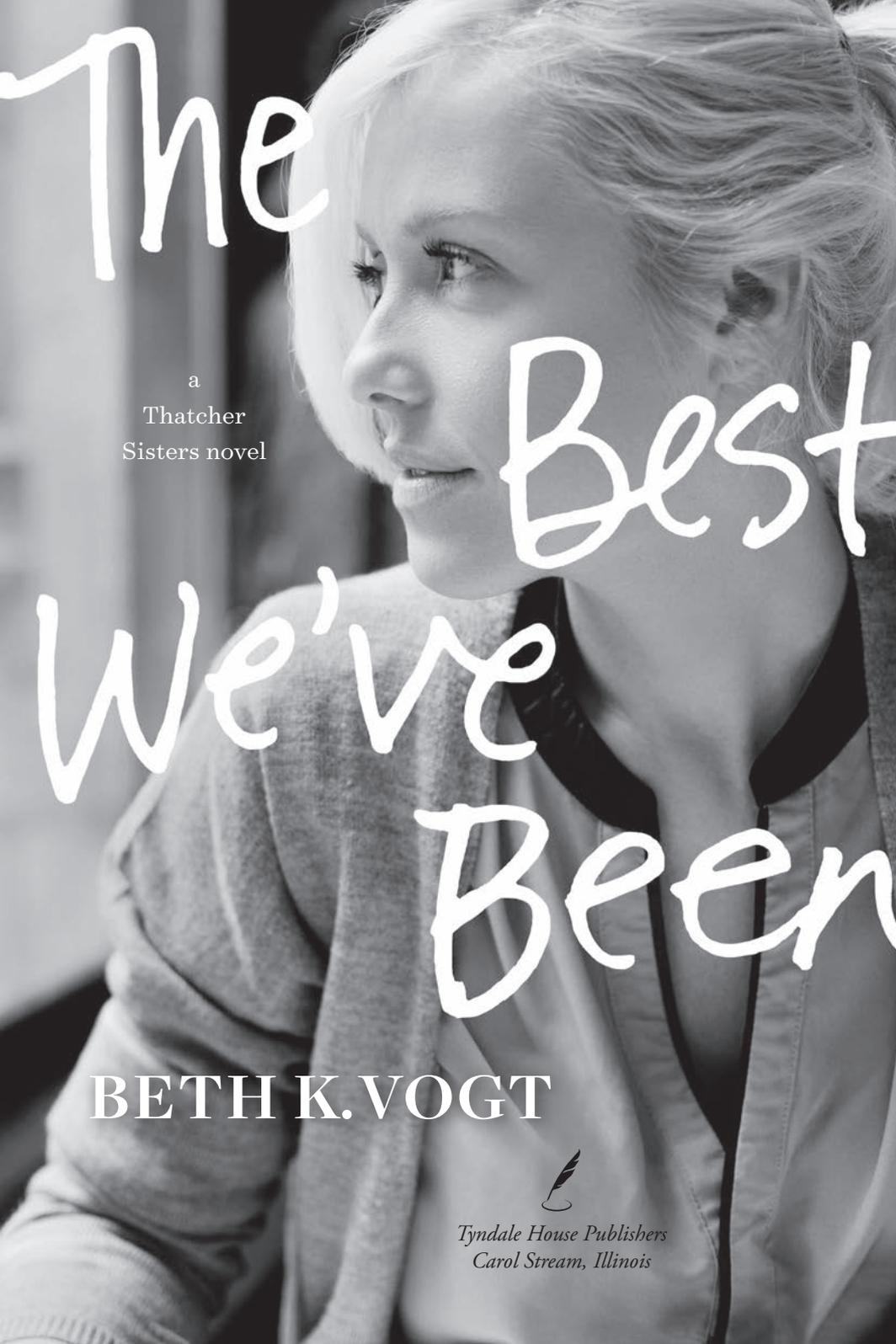
CARA PUTMAN, AWARD-WINNING, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *DELAYED JUSTICE* AND *SHADOWED BY GRACE*

“Beth Vogt has done a masterful job of wrapping up the Thatcher Sisters series with Johanna in *The Best We've Been*. Not only did I understand Johanna better, but I truly cared about her on a personal level. Very in-depth characterization. I didn't want it to end, and I'll continue to hope they find more sisters! I feel as if I've been adopted into the Thatcher family.”

HANNAH ALEXANDER, AUTHOR OF THE SACRED TRUST SERIES

“With her latest book, *The Best We've Been*, Beth Vogt has cemented her status as a master storyteller. She tackles difficult subjects with realism and unexpected twists. Her characters linger in my memory just like beloved friends. Written from a foundation of biblical truth, her books make my life better.”

EDIE MELSON, DIRECTOR OF THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS
CHRISTIAN WRITERS CONFERENCE



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*To Rachel Hauck and Susie May Warren,
my treasured mentors and friends:*

*Thank you for always reminding me that our journey along
the writing road is, first and foremost, a walk of faith.*

Your unwavering trust in God strengthens my faith.

PROLOGUE

APRIL 18, 1993

I was waiting. Again. She should be here by now. Where was she?

The auditorium was almost full, all the seats near the front taken. Everyone else's parents and grandparents clutched copies of the pale-blue programs, glancing through them to see the order of tonight's piano recital. All sorts of kids—some younger than me, some older—read books or played handheld video games or ran up and down the aisles. They probably wished they were anywhere but here on a Saturday afternoon.

I did, too.

I stood in the dim lighting backstage, pulling the maroon velvet curtain aside a bit more, trying to see if maybe, just maybe, Mom was sitting in one of the rows of padded wooden seats off to the side.

No.

I stepped back, letting the heavy curtain fall into place with a soft swish.

I couldn't do this. The air around me seemed stale, heavy with dust that danced beneath the stage lights.

I couldn't cross that stage. Couldn't sit on the padded bench positioned just so in front of the grand piano, its polished lid gleaming under the hot spotlights. Couldn't perform in front of all those strangers—everyone else's families and friends—when no one from my family cared enough to show up for me.

I shouldn't be surprised. I couldn't remember the last time Mom had come to a practice to listen to me play. Or even asked me what I was working on. Or stopped long enough to place a hand on my shoulder and say, "*That song is so pretty, Johanna.*"

So many different people praised me for years. Strangers. Family. Teachers.

"You're so special."

"It's amazing—the way you play."

"Your talent will take you so far."

And I'd believed them.

But I didn't care what anybody else said. And tonight, I didn't want to play for myself or a bunch of people I didn't know.

How special was I really if I could be overlooked by Mom?
Or worse, replaced?

I tugged at the high collar of my dress. The material bit at my neck and wrists, pinching at my waist. Of course there hadn't been time to go shopping for something new to wear for today's performance. There was never enough time for me anymore.

The sudden sting of tears burned my eyes, blurring my vision. I grasped the curtain again, the cloth soft beneath my fingertips. Maybe if I looked one more time—

“Come away from there, Johanna. It's almost time to start.” The sound of Miss Felicia's voice caused me to stiffen.

I couldn't do this tonight.

I wouldn't do this.

No one could make me play . . . not if I didn't want to.



IF WAITING WOULD GET ME what I wanted, then fine, I'd wait.

I could get frustrated about wasting my time. About the fact I'd driven through lousy Colorado weather—snowy, icy roads—to get to this appointment on time. About being forced to do nothing but stare at a framed print of the historic Crystal Mill surrounded by aspens because someone else couldn't manage their schedule. Better an out-of-season glimpse of autumn than the detailed poster of the female internal anatomy hanging on the opposite wall.

I would focus on the certainty that by the time this appointment was over, I'd have a resolution to my problem.

Besides, there was always some waiting before or even

during a doctor's appointment. It was part of the routine. And more than one of the doctors at Mount Columbia Medical Center had told me that they hated to run behind schedule just as much as their patients did—if not more.

Of course, I didn't know this particular doctor. The only way to ensure my privacy was to see a medical practitioner away from my workplace. Maybe running late for my appointment was some sort of sign she wasn't a good physician. Habitually late. Lousy bedside manner. Questionable billing practices.

I shifted in my seat, all the more thankful I hadn't changed into the white paper gown I'd left folded on the exam table, instead of following the instructions of the efficient medical assistant.

As I debated the possible character qualities of the unseen physician, the exam room door opened and a woman entered, glancing at a chart—and then at me. “Johanna Thatcher? I'm Dr. Hayden Gray.”

“Good morning.” Dr. Gray might not be punctual, but I could be pleasant.

“I see here that you were originally Dr. Grammerson's patient.” She set the chart on the small corner desk anchored to the wall beneath a set of cupboards, settling into the rolling cloth chair beside the desk.

“Yes, before she sold the practice to you. I didn't realize that until I tried to make an appointment. It's been a while.”

“I noticed that.” She leaned back, clasping her hands together in her lap. “You're not gowned. Do you have some questions before your exam?”

“I’m not here for an exam.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I came to see you because you took over this practice from my ob-gyn when she retired—”

“Right. And your records show it’s been—” she glanced at my chart again—“four years since your last well-woman exam. It’s noted in your chart under reason for visit as an annual exam.”

“I realize I’m overdue for my regular exam—and I’m happy to do that, too.” That was a slight exaggeration. No woman was *happy* about gynecological exams, and surely the woman sitting across from me, even as a physician, knew that. But I’d do what needed to be done, which was why I hadn’t argued with the receptionist when she’d assumed that was my reason for calling.

Dr. Gray eased open the laptop resting on the desk. She had long, lean hands, her fingernails cut short, similar to how Beckett kept his nails trimmed.

This was no time to think of *him*.

Professional. Not too personal.

“I’m here to discuss an abortion.”

Dr. Gray’s hand stilled on the keyboard, her gaze returning to me. “Discuss?”

“Well, no. Not discuss. To schedule an abortion.”

“Ah.” She typed something into the computer. “How many weeks pregnant are you, Ms. Thatcher?”

“Fourteen weeks.”

“You took an at-home pregnancy test?”

“Yes. I’m a pharmacist.” This was a good time to connect

both as medical professionals and as women. “We both know those are 99 percent accurate.”

“When was your last period?”

“November . . . November 23, to be exact. Although I do have irregular periods. And I spotted some in January, so at first, I thought I’d had a period. When I didn’t have a period in February, I just thought it was stress. Work. My sister’s wedding . . .” I let my voice trail off to avoid wandering too far into the personal zone again. I was talking to my medical provider, not a friend.

“Hmmm.” Again she tapped something into the computer, not looking at me.

I was losing control of this appointment. This was supposed to be simple. Easy. Come in and set up the needed procedure. No discussion. No “*Hmmm*” from a physician who should be supportive. Dr. Gray was a woman, too, after all. I caught myself rubbing the back of my hand, pressing the fingers of one hand against the other, just like my father did.

I flexed my fingers. This was not complicated. I knew what I needed to do. Dr. Gray might be the doctor, but I was the patient and she was here to help me—by scheduling the procedure.

“I think it’s best if we do a quick ultrasound to confirm your pregnancy, and then, if you’re pregnant—”

“*If* I’m pregnant?” The word *if* did not apply to my situation. “What do you mean?”

“Well, while at-home pregnancy tests are almost 100 percent accurate, there can be false positives. And you did say you had some spotting in January. You might have miscarried.”

“Miscarried?” I fisted my hands, sitting up straight. “I haven’t had another period.”

“You also said your periods are irregular. Even if you do go through with an abortion, you need to know how many weeks pregnant you are.”

There was the word *if* again. “How long will an ultrasound take?”

“Not long at all. I have a portable machine. If time is a concern, you don’t even need to change into a gown.” She motioned toward the exam table and then stood. “I’ll go and get the ultrasound machine. You can get comfortable.”

I could get comfortable. *Right*. This was like having prepared to play one piece of piano music for a recital and, at the last minute, being handed a new selection and told, “You’re performing this instead.”

I smoothed out the long sheet of white paper covering the length of the exam table. Sat down. My feet dangled off the end, not touching the floor, as if I were a little girl.

But little girls didn’t make doctor’s appointments for well-women visits . . . or any other reason.

By the time Dr. Gray returned with an assistant wheeling in the ultrasound machine and then plugging it into the wall so that a low mechanical hum filled the room, I’d stopped my feet from swinging. Taken several deep breaths. Relaxed my shoulders. I’d get the ultrasound done and schedule my next appointment, which would also be my last appointment.

I pretended to listen while Dr. Gray and her assistant set things up. “Why don’t you lie down here on the table? It takes a minute or two for the lights to come up. I need to

enter some information—your name, the date of your last menstrual period.”

The medical assistant helped me adjust my clothes, tucking a small towel inside the waistband of my pants, carefully lowering it until I seemed to be wearing hip huggers. “We’ll be using some gel down near your bladder, so this should protect your clothes.”

“Thank you.”

Again, I wanted to protest. I knew I was pregnant. I knew why I was here. None of this mattered to me—not in the long run. But if this was all part of the doctor’s routine, then I’d tolerate the inconvenient but necessary means to an end.

Within a few moments, Dr. Gray squirted a bluish gel onto my lower abdomen and then spread it around with the transducer handpiece.

I inhaled, tightening my core muscles—and then relaxed. “Not as cold as I expected.”

“We try not to make it more uncomfortable than it needs to be.” Dr. Gray’s glance switched back and forth from the screen to my face. “The warmer helps.”

“Right.”

With a few circular swipes of the ultrasound instrument, white-and-black lines appeared on the monitor screen.

“Here’s your bladder. It helps that it’s somewhat full.” Dr. Gray pointed lower on the screen. “Here’s your uterus . . . and the uterus does have a sac in it. . . .”

She was quiet for a few seconds, her hand moving in a slow, deliberate search pattern.

“What do you see?” Maybe I wasn’t pregnant. Maybe I had miscarried.

“I see the placenta, and it’s near your cervix, so that’s something we may have to watch.”

The next moment, Dr. Gray pushed a button on the ultrasound monitor and a rhythmic swooshing sound filled the room.

“That’s my heartbeat, right?”

“No, that’s about twice as fast as your heartbeat. That’s your baby’s heartbeat.” She pointed to a small white flicker. “See this? That’s your baby’s heart pumping.”

Undeniable proof positive that yes, I was right. I was pregnant.

For once, I would have been fine with being wrong.

“Let me take some measurements to confirm dates.” One of Dr. Gray’s hands rested on the ultrasound machine keyboard, while her right hand twisted the handpiece on my lower abdomen. “There’s the leg . . . and the baby’s foot. . . . We can get a good image of the baby’s face at this far along if you’re interested—”

“No.” I closed my eyes, turning my face away from the screen to stare at the aspens surrounding the old wooden mill perched on an outcrop above the Crystal River. “I’m not interested.”

Dr. Gray’s words, the vague black-and-white images she was determined to measure on the screen, were puzzle pieces slipping closer together so that the idea of my pregnancy was being framed into reality.

An unwanted reality.

Would the baby have my nose or Beckett's? Whose fingers? Whose eyes?

It didn't matter.

Couldn't matter.

"We're done here." Dr. Gray took a soft towel and wiped the gel off my skin, then switched off the machine, the silence in the room welcome. "We'll go store the machine, give you time to further clean up, and be back in just a moment, Ms. Thatcher. Then we'll finish up here."

"Fine."

At last I could get what I came for. I reclined on the exam table until they left the room, my stomach still lightly covered with gel, my fingers clutching the tissues the medical assistant had handed to me.

When Dr. Gray returned five minutes later, I was seated again, my feet on the ground.

"The dates on your ultrasound are consistent with your last menstrual period, which makes you fourteen weeks pregnant. That also means you'll start showing soon. Your due date is August 30."

Not that a due date mattered. "So when can I schedule the abortion?"

Dr. Gray swiveled to face me, hands clasped in her lap again. "I don't perform abortions."

I must have misheard her. "You don't . . ."

". . . perform abortions."

I blinked. Swallowed. "But that's the only reason I made this appointment."

“And as I said earlier, based on your phone call, my receptionist assumed you were coming in for a routine exam.”

“I thought all obstetricians did—”

“No. Not all. Performing abortions is against my beliefs.”

The conversation had taken a turn to the ridiculous. “Your . . . beliefs.”

“Yes.”

I resisted the urge to stand up. “This is my choice. You’re a woman. You know about choice, right?”

“I understand that—and I respect your . . . choice.” The woman sitting across from me offered a slight nod. “Not performing abortions is also my choice.”

“You could have told me this sooner, Dr. Gray.”

“Even if you decide to go through with the abortion, it’s wise to do an ultrasound and determine dates.”

“Fine. Then perhaps you could recommend another doctor who does perform abortions.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

“What?” I gripped the edges of my chair. Our conversation was nothing but a series of roadblocks. “Why not?”

“I choose not to perform abortions because they could be harmful to mothers-to-be, like you, and they are most definitely harmful to unborn children. Why, then, would I help you get one?”

“This is absurd. I should report you to the medical board—if you are even licensed to practice medicine in the state of Colorado.”

“I assure you that I am.” A glint of steel darkened Dr. Gray’s eyes. “I also assure you there’s no state law prohibiting

me from practicing in a way that supports my moral, ethical, and personal beliefs. My choices, as it were. And you are not prohibited from your choices, either.”

“Except by you.”

“Not prohibited. I’m just not the physician for you.”

“Dr. Gray, you’ve done nothing but waste my time.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

I stood, knocking the chair against the wall with a thud. This was some sort of lecture disguised as a doctor’s appointment, complete with a black-and-white slide presentation.

I shook my head, dismissing the images of a tiny leg. A tiny foot. The rasp and whoosh of a heartbeat.

This morning was merely a detour—not a dead end.



Dropping by each other’s homes wasn’t something the Thatcher sisters did. Ever. Payton wasn’t even sure Johanna was home. And if she was, Payton had no idea what Johanna would do when she opened her front door and saw her youngest sister. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been to Johanna’s house by herself.

Payton could only hope Johanna was home and wouldn’t leave her standing outside in the frigid March night air. Johanna was such a workaholic, it was possible she was still at the hospital.

And there was no way her sister could know the question Payton needed to ask her. The fear she battled . . .

She might as well knock and find out.

It took so long for Johanna to answer the door, Payton had given up, turning away to walk back to her car.

“Payton?” Johanna eased the door open, leaning against the doorjamb, head tilted to one side. Her feet were bare, and she wore leggings, a flowing black sweater, her platinum-blonde hair pulled back from her face in a halfhearted attempt at her usual sleek ponytail.

“Were you sleeping?”

“It’s only seven thirty. No, I wasn’t sleeping.”

Payton took a step forward. Paused. “Do you mind if I come in?”

“What? Oh, sure. Come in.” Johanna didn’t back her welcome up with a smile. “So what are you doing here?”

Payton would ignore how abrupt that sounded. She hadn’t expected a hug and an “I’m so glad to see you.”

“I, um, wanted to check on you.”

“Check on me? Why?”

“You seemed . . . off when we got together for the book club meeting on Saturday.” Not that Johanna ever enjoyed the monthly get-togethers when the two of them met with their middle sister, Jillian, and did very little discussing of books. Her older sister came, drank her French press, and complained.

Typical Johanna.

Except she also hadn’t been herself in January or February. She wasn’t drinking her coffee. She wasn’t eating much of anything at all—to the point that she’d gone from fashionably slender to gaunt.

She'd shut down. Withdrawn. It wasn't like Johanna not to voice her many opinions—even about a book she hadn't read.

Johanna trailed behind Payton into the living room. "I was fine then. I'm fine now."

That was a typical Johanna statement, designed to tell Payton that if anything was going on, it was none of her business.

She'd expected this. Trying to talk to Johanna over the phone—to get her to confirm or deny the dark suspicion Payton struggled to ignore—would have been more difficult. That's why she'd shown up in person, hoping Johanna would tell her straight to her face that nothing was wrong, instead of avoiding her.

Johanna collapsed on the couch. Pulled a blanket over her legs as she curled them underneath her. A bottle of water sat on the coffee table. *Water*. Not coffee. When—and why—had her sister become so fond of water?

Maybe she would drop the "Everything is fine" front if Payton kept pushing.

"Would you mind if I made some coffee for us? A jolt of caffeine would help me about now."

"I'm sorry. I don't have any fresh coffee beans in the house." Johanna's pale skin had turned even more white, and she seemed to have to force herself to even say the word *coffee*.

"What is going on with you, Johanna?" Payton launched the question, not sure she wanted to know. To have her fear confirmed.

"I haven't gotten to the store—"

"You didn't drink coffee at the book club the other day—"

Johanna gave a feeble laugh. “You know how I prefer my French press.”

“Exactly. And you didn’t bring your travel mug of your preferred coffee, either. Do you mean to tell me you’ve been out of beans for what? A week?”

“I’m busy, Payton.” Johanna’s words were a whisper of a protest.

“You’ve lost weight, too. I said the word *coffee* and thought you were going to throw up.” Payton forced a short laugh. “If I didn’t know better, I would think you were pregnant.”

Johanna pulled the blanket up around her shoulders, fixing it against her chest.

Payton fought to breathe. Whatever Johanna was hiding, the family would get through it. They’d gotten through so much in the past months.

“I am.”

She waited for Johanna to finish her sentence. Nothing. “You are . . . what?”

“I *am* pregnant.”

“Oh, thank God!” Payton stepped forward, rounding the coffee table and kneeling in front of Johanna.

Johanna clutched the blanket closer, pulling away. “What did you just say?”

“I said, ‘Thank God!’” Payton fought the urge to laugh. To cry. To hug her sister. “I’ve been so worried about you, Jo. I thought . . . I thought you had breast cancer like Jillian.”

Johanna stared at her. No smile. Her eyes clouded. “Well, I’m not thanking anyone, least of all an imaginary god, that I’m pregnant. And I would appreciate it if you didn’t either.”

"I'm sorry." Payton reached for her sister's hand and ended up with a fistful of cotton material. "I'm just so relieved it's not something more serious like cancer."

"You don't think my being pregnant is serious?"

"Being pregnant isn't going to kill you."

"It certainly screws up my life."

"How far along are you? Are you dealing with morning sickness? I would imagine it will stop soon."

The ice in Johanna's blue eyes was worse than the lethargy that had been there moments before. This was the all-too-familiar big-sister glare that could turn Payton into an insignificant speck in mere seconds. The air around them seemed frosted. What was she thinking, imagining she could come here and force a relationship with Johanna? Get her to talk about what she was dealing with? That she could somehow help her?

"I'm not going through with this pregnancy, Payton."

Payton rocked on her heels, her back colliding with the coffee table, tipping over the bottle of water. Liquid spread across the surface.

"Payton! Look what you've done!"

"I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry." Payton grabbed a couple of napkins and sopped up the water, tossing them into a trash can positioned near the couch. This pregnancy must be harder on Johanna than she admitted. "Johanna, let's talk about this for a minute . . ."

"I have no intention of being a single mother just because I made a mistake with a man who couldn't be trusted."

"Fine." Payton scrambled for arguments. Options. "You don't want to keep the baby. What about adoption?"

“I’m also not giving up nine months of my life for some altruistic endeavor that benefits another couple who wants a baby. I don’t care to have my life interrupted for that long.”

“Johanna—”

“You can either support me or you can be quiet.”

This . . . this was the kind of support her sister wanted from her.

“Is Jillian supporting you, too?” Payton moved to the far end of the couch.

“Jillian doesn’t know.”

“You’re going to keep your pregnancy a secret from Jillian?” Payton clasped her hands together to stop herself from reaching out to Johanna. Her sister might slap her hands away. “If we’ve learned nothing else in the past months, haven’t we learned secrets hurt our family?”

“She doesn’t need to know.” Johanna’s words were edged with frost. “No one else needs to know.”

Johanna wasn’t the only one who could dig her heels in and stand her ground. “I’m not going to be part of this.”

“You became part of this when you showed up here tonight and started asking questions.”

“I thought you had *cancer*.”

“Well, you were *wrong*. And this pregnancy is only a temporary issue. I don’t want to have to hash this out with Jillian—or Mom and Dad. I don’t welcome other people’s opinions about what I should do or not do right now. And I didn’t ask for yours, either.”

“I was concerned about you.” Payton gripped the side of the couch to stop from leaning forward, her voice trembling.

“Thank you for that, I guess. I’m fine. I’ll handle this.”

“I am not going to be a part of keeping this secret—”

“It’s not your secret to tell, Payton.”

With every word, Johanna twisted Payton’s attempted act of compassion into something unwelcome. Invasive. Turned her into an accomplice. Johanna was forcing her to side against not just Jillian, but their parents, too.

Payton fought to regain her footing. “Are you going to tell Beckett?”

“No.” Johanna’s eyes darkened as she pulled even farther away. “Why should I tell him?”

“He’s the baby’s father.”

“He’s no longer a part of my life. I make my own decisions. I always have.”

Payton shouldn’t have been surprised by anything Johanna said or did, but this . . . this was deliberate, unrepentant deceit.

“Nothing to say?”

“What am I supposed to say, Johanna?”

“You wanted to know what was wrong. If I had cancer.”

“I wasn’t just on a fact-gathering mission. I wanted to help you—”

“You can help me by doing what I asked. Don’t tell anyone. Everything else is up to me, and I’m dealing with it.”

“You really think you’ll be happier this way?”

“I’m always happier when things go my way, so yes.”

“And you don’t think Jillian—or Mom and Dad—will find out about this at some point? The baby is my niece or nephew. Mom and Dad’s grandchild . . .”

“*Stop. It.*” Johanna jerked up from the couch, the blanket slipping from her shoulders. “Don’t try to manipulate me by employing sentiment. You want to talk about Mom and Dad’s grandchildren, get pregnant yourself.”

Once again, Johanna was in charge, brushing past Payton as she paced to the front door, pulling it open. The wintry air filling the room was empty of her sister’s signature Coco perfume.

Payton struggled for words. For a way to reach her sister. “Johanna, can’t we—?”

“I’m sure no one will find out what we talked about, so long as you don’t say anything.” Johanna stepped back from the door, tilting her head toward the darkness outside. “Thank you for stopping by.”

The impromptu visit, and their conversation, was over. There was no sense in arguing with Johanna. As far as her older sister was concerned, she’d won before the discussion even started.

