

The Space Between Dreaming

ALSO BY CHERIE BURBACH

Nonfiction

Painting the Psalms
Art and Faith: Mixed Media Art With a Faith-Filled
Message
...and more

Poetry

Belonging
Poima
Angel Toughness
My Soul Is From a Different Place
Father's Eyes
'The Difference Now
A New Dish
New and Selected Poems
Yes, You

The Space Between Dreaming

A novel

CHERIE BURBACH



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CONTENTS

ALSO BY CHERIE BURBACH.....	ii
PROLOGUE.....	1
CHAPTER 1 - GRACE	5
CHAPTER 2 - JANE.....	20
CHAPTER 3 - GRACE	33
CHAPTER 4 - JANE.....	41
CHAPTER 5 - GRACE	51
CHAPTER 6 - JANE.....	67
CHAPTER 7 - GRACE	81
CHAPTER 8 - JANE.....	92
CHAPTER 9 - GRACE	104
CHAPTER 10 - JANE	111
CHAPTER 11 - GRACE	121
CHAPTER 12 - JANE	134
CHAPTER 13 - GRACE	149
CHAPTER 14 - JANE	160
CHAPTER 15 - GRACE	171
CHAPTER 16 - JANE	174
CHAPTER 17 - GRACE	189
CHAPTER 18 - JANE	202
CHAPTER 19 - GRACE	210

CHAPTER 20 - JANE	218
CHAPTER 21 - GRACE	228
CHAPTER 22 - JANE	243
CHAPTER 23 - GRACE	255
CHAPTER 24 - JANE	268
CHAPTER 25 - GRACE	277
CHAPTER 26 - JANE	290
CHAPTER 27 - GRACE	301
CHAPTER 28 - JANE	309
CHAPTER 29 - GRACE	322
CHAPTER 30 - JANE	332
CHAPTER 31 - GRACE	343
CHAPTER 32 - JANE	352
CHAPTER 33 - GRACE	359
EPILOGUE	370
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	373
READER'S DISCUSSION GUIDE	374

PROLOGUE

What I felt was peace, like a child sitting snugly in her mother's arms. The feeling of safety. Of careful handling. The brushstrokes eased over me, flowing back and forth, until my eyes were opened. And suddenly, with varnish and paint smell all around, I felt very much aware. Awake.

It was only then that I saw him, my painter. He stepped back from his easel, the brush poised to add another piece, another line, reaching out to me like a father sweetly kissing good night on the cheek of his daughter as she drifted off to sleep.

He wanted to add more color, the bright blues in contrast to the dark room and stuffy wooden dressers that flanked the girl he painted. I became her, every inch of the bed where she slept, every hair painted on her head, and the look of confusion and anguish as she reached out into the darkness.

I felt his grief, the ache that tore his heart apart, the sadness that pulled him from one moment to the next, not wanting to give in to the depths of despair and yet not able

to acknowledge his future. He wanted to move forward but couldn't bring himself to tell her that his heart had healed, that he was ready to accept their life as it was. His paintbrush told me everything that he couldn't say to another soul.

I'd seen him pace for days before me, my blank canvas an invitation to create, to be wild, to think beyond the moment, and make up a new story. I'd felt his shame, his confusion, and finally, the resolve that he must face the truth. It was then that he stopped pacing and looking at me for answers and, finally, created answers of his own.

The light from the window shone on me, warming my surface and making me the one thing in the room that the painter could not ignore. He'd slept there in the past; after each heartache he'd spend days pacing and crying and shouting out to God, while she did the same in another room.

But this time, it was different. He didn't ask God why but just released his anger to him instead.

I tried to whisper to him, comfort him, but I wasn't finished yet. I needed him to find his soul before I could come alive. We needed each other, and so it is with a creator and the object that forms from his hands.

He stayed up all night working on me until sleep took the paintbrush from his hand and gently set him down on the couch in his studio. He dreamed darkly, tossing angrily until finally, he relaxed, allowing his dreams to take him where they may. I could see his mouth release the frown that held his smile captive and witnessed his mind go to happy places filled with possibilities.

He had fought against the bright dreams that could bring him joy, not just this night but for the years they had continued trying. The two of them a special kind of army that simply wanted to share their love with another little

person. Twenty years later, goodness had worn him down, and when he awoke, he looked relieved that I was still there waiting for him. I could read his thoughts, of what he had planned to add, layer by layer, to move me from blank canvas to masterpiece. Even then, I knew what it was I would become.

He moved the small table where he kept his paints nearer to where I stood, alone on his easel, and looked over my canvas with a new vision. He added the base, a mix of dark brown with shades of orange. Darkness that hinted at the light. The bed came next, a lighter wood that stood out against the night colors with a brilliant blue cover, shocking in its vibrancy, to protect the girl against her own dreams, the dark spirits that threatened to pull her out of this world.

Her red-gold hair and flowing curls softened the hard look of her face. She was sitting up, under the covers, looking out into her room, past the dressers that flanked the bed to the window outside. Was she seeing a nighttime visitor who had come into her room? A ghost that haunted her from the past? The painter asked these questions as he worked, dipping his brush into the mineral spirits and wiping it down with the old rag that had once been a pillowcase they'd bought for an unnamed, unformed soul they expected to share their life with in the years to come. He tore it into pieces the night before last, angry and desperate for answers. The pillow inside remained bare, stuffed in the corner of the room where he punched it each time he sat down to rest, a break from pouring his emotions out onto the canvas.

In six hours, he had the background completed, the bed where the girl sat upright under the blue cover, and the beginning of the darkness that would be her undoing. He took a break then, filling a cup with water and drinking it down without stopping, then doing the same with a second

cup. He was thirsty for relief and answers, and he needed a clear head before continuing.

The painter left me to dry, opening the small window so a gentle breeze would help with the fumes and drying, solidifying my colors and the outline that would become his greatest work. With a last glance at me, he left. I knew he was walking down the hall to comfort his wife, to hold her close, and try and ease her grief.

But this time, he would stand again and walk back to his painting room a different man. The path to healing had begun, slowly but gently, and now he would return with a new sense of purpose.

He worked on me for three days, waiting for layers to dry, pacing before me slowly this time, not with desperation but with patience. He knew he was doing something that was now bigger than himself, something that would reach into his heart and steal the dark memories away. He knew I was part of his healing. There were times when he painted with hurried assurance and other times when he tentatively stepped back, allowing the universe to move his brush where it needed to go. He had calmed enough to listen to what God was telling him and in doing so accepted the gift of his greatest work.

He called me *The Space Between Dreaming*.

CHAPTER 1 - GRACE

Grace sat on the bed with her laptop open in front of her. She was editing a children's book about overcoming disappointment. It was cheerful, and light, and she wondered how the illustrator would convey these elements through the imagery. It was fascinating to her how kids' books came together. First, a writer with an idea, then, an artist brings that idea visually to a page. What a wonderful combination.

She'd grown to adore children's books now, much more, she thought, than she ever had as a child. She loved the vibrant colors and the way even the heaviest of subjects could somehow be dealt with in a way that addressed them with hope and not defeatism. Although she supposed, the heaviest of subjects were perhaps saved for adulthood. Maybe that was why.

But no, she realized, her childhood hadn't exactly been light. She hated the sweet stories that kids' books offered her as a child. They were different then and had made her feel left out somehow, reminding her that she had been unwanted and still felt as if she had no real place in the

world.

She wondered if anyone would want to read a kids' book about an unwanted child who then grew up to be, somehow, an unwanted adult. She felt the tears well up in her eyes again, the now familiar occurrence of late, and quickly wiped them away with a ragged tissue she had dug out of her pocket. She looked at it and cringed at how long it must have been in her pocket. When was the last time she'd worn these jeans? And then she remembered, putting her hand instinctively on her belly.

No. She shook her head. She must not let herself worry. The past was the past. Just because the babies would not stay in her body before did not mean they would not now. No, this time, it'd be different.

She shook loose the thought of tragedy and put the laptop she'd been staring at on the coffee table beside her. She got up from the couch, tossed the tissue in the kitchen trash, and had a sudden flashback from several years before of John tossing a pregnancy test strip in the very same trash can. How they'd stood at the counter watching the clock, watching the time tick down until they were told whether they were pregnant or not, and for what seemed like the millionth time, having the pang of disappointment descend upon them like a thundercloud, making them shiver as if they'd been caught out in the worst of rainstorms without shelter. They'd clung to one another, trying to protect the other from the rainfall of disappointment, but every time they realized a third soul would not join them the entire house seemed to dim for days or weeks or months after.

At every negative test result, she felt unwanted again. Not from John, just the opposite. He seemed to think her more beautiful as each day came, and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what he was looking at. The unwanted feeling of her childhood met at the secret place

in her heart where she had stored her hope, and it taunted her again. Instead of her parents not wanting her, this time the world somehow did not wish her to be a mother.

She'd noticed a change in John after the last miscarriage. He refused to let her think she was anything other than special, and he encouraged her, but he didn't talk about a future with children any longer. As they both drifted quietly into their forties, he seemed content in their life together. Children would have been a bonus, he'd said, but there was nothing he would change about their life.

Why couldn't Grace accept it as easily? She wanted a child of her own. Growing up in foster care gave her a fear of hope. Each time she would get close to being adopted by her foster parents, her mother would come around, talking about her rights and about how Grace was her child and no one else's. The problem was, her mother went right back to drugs and men as soon as she'd get Grace back. Grace would go back into the system, and the whole process would start again.

Somehow, she couldn't handle the possibility of being a foster mother and loving a child and wanting to adopt that child and then not being able to. She couldn't dangle that kind of hope in front of a child, and she wasn't brave enough to forge ahead with confidence that it would be any different.

But she had been cautiously optimistic this time about her pregnancy. She had entered the fifth month, which was farther than she had made it before. She had allowed herself to think of the child this baby might become. Each time, she imagined a boy. She saw John's unruly hair and her eyes. They even talked about names casually, and Grace caught herself saying "Glenn's room," already picturing a little boy with that shrug and smirk that John always gave her in the face of a boy who was a combination of the two

of them. She felt hope for the first time in a long time.

She could tell John was trying to be positive on her behalf. He even agreed to paint the extra room a robin's-egg blue, as Grace requested. What each pregnancy had done to her body and emotions had seemed to hit him harder than it did her. Or perhaps he was the mirror to everything she was feeling. Marriage was like that, she supposed. Each one reflected the other, either positively or negatively. Each showed the other what they looked like, sounded like, and how they came off to the world.

John seemed to adore her, which made her wonder if she was as great as he made her feel or if this was just the benefit of a good and happy marriage. She was not used to people in her life treating her as if she was special. Growing up, in the homes that weren't so bad, she would be treated as a nice enough girl who was easy to be around, and that's how she'd always thought of herself, before John.



Her mother had essentially disowned her. Grace had sent a note to her when she graduated high school but never heard back. When Grace graduated college, she tried again, sending one note and then another as they kept coming back undeliverable. Finally, she was able to find her mother's current address, and she sent one more note asking her to call.

Instead, she got a text that said, "I'm fine, Grace. I wish you the best."

Looking back, the text was meant to tell Grace that her mother had written her off, but she couldn't accept it at the

time. She couldn't believe that her mother would refuse to raise her, refuse to allow someone else to adopt her, and yet also refuse to have a relationship with her. She clung to the idea that her mother would one day just embrace her and be interested in her life.

She had responded to her mother's text by saying, "I would really like to see you. I won't take up much of your time," hating that it sounded like she was making a sales pitch.

Reluctantly, her mother agreed, and they met at a greasy spoon in a suburb of Milwaukee. Grace had only been out of college for a few years. She'd been working long hours at a marketing firm, had no serious relationships to speak of, no close friends, and, since her grandmother had passed away, no family. She felt as if her life was in limbo. The morning she got ready to meet her mother, she changed her outfit twice and, for the first time in a while, thought about her appearance. She wanted to look nice for her mother, she realized. She wanted to make her mother see that she was worthy of love. Even if she hadn't felt it, she wanted her mother to see that in her.

What she remembered of her mother was that she was thin and often wore tight jeans and a T-shirt of some sort. Her mother had the same reddish-brown hair and green eyes that she did, and as Grace scanned the restaurant, she tried picturing an older version of that, still with the same features and body but, basically, similar to what she could call up from her childhood memories.

She glanced at a woman who was scowling at her. The woman was heavyset, with a flowing, red and yellow muumuu. Her gray hair was cropped short, emphasizing her puffy face. Grace saw her and continued scanning the place for her mother, and it wasn't until the woman turned on her heel and marched off to a table that she realized it

was, in fact, her mother. She had the same stomping walk she'd had when Grace was a child. She'd remembered that stomp very well. It usually preceded a slap across the face.

Without a word, she followed her to the table, watching the fat rolls jiggle on the woman's behind. Her change in appearance shocked Grace, but it had been fifteen years since she'd seen her, and she knew those were not easy years for either of them.

Her mother had slid into the booth already, and Grace debated leaning over to hug her, but her body language told her she just wasn't open to that. Instead, she slid into the other side of the booth. Her mother looked at her appraisingly.

"Well," she said with a sneer, "you cleaned up nice." Grace caught a slur in her words and noted with disappointment that her mother was tipsy.

"Thanks," she said. "I didn't recognize you at first. It's been a while, I guess." She smiled, wanting to reach her hand across the table and just break this woman's hard exterior. She'd forgotten how icy her mother could be when she wanted.

"Oh," she laughed nastily, "you think you're better than me because you're younger? I used to be pretty, too. You'll age. You'll see."

"I didn't mean that at all." *Mom*, she wanted to say. I didn't mean that, *Mom*. Can you just be kind, *Mom*? Can you smile at me, and tell me you love me, *Mom*? "I'm glad you decided to meet me. I've missed you," she said automatically, and wondered if it were true. She had missed having a mother; she just didn't know if it was the mother she'd been born to.

As her mother scowled at her now, Grace silently wondered why her mother seemed to hate her.

"Well,"—her mother picked up her drink, which Grace

noted was some kind of alcoholic mixture she could smell from across the table—"you were persistent." She drank the same way she always did, a hunger that sucked at the ice in the glass and made Grace shiver. She remembered the noise of ice clinking against a drinking glass as one of her least favorite sounds from childhood.

Grace had seen alcoholism affect families in her years as a foster child. She had been in a couple of foster families where the drinking with one of the parents was lighthearted but concerning. The person drank too much and genuinely wanted to quit, but couldn't seem to. For other families, the person was held hostage by the booze, and in those cases, the family seemed to fall into negative patterns right along with them.

She'd also talked to therapists while growing up, about her mother and her drinking. She was thankful for one of her foster families, in particular, who recognized Grace's pattern of just wanting to be a "good girl" to make everything perfect and had sent her to someone who understood the challenges of being outside a real family and dealing with an alcoholic parent. The therapist talked about boundaries, how Grace didn't need to work so hard to be loved, and how her mother had a disease that might never allow her to be a real mom until she decided to work on her drinking. Grace remembered the therapist saying that she could never help her mother quit drinking by "being good" because if that were the case, she would have done it already. This, the therapist stressed, was a little girl's belief that Grace needed to overcome to be a successful adult.

And yet, here she sat in front of a mother, who she once again chased down, once again begged to get love from.

"Mom," Grace said, "do you love me?"

"What a stupid question." She rolled her eyes. "I'm your

mother. And you know what? Not everything is about you. I don't want to hear about your childhood. Is that why you brought me here?"

Grace shivered at the sound of her mother's voice, haughty and slurring.

"I didn't bring you here," she countered. "I asked you to come. I don't understand why you act as if you hate me."

Her mother downed the last of her drink and waved her arm in the air wildly for another. The fat on her arm shook like a flag being waved in surrender. The waitress came right away with a replacement.

"Ready to order?" She smiled at them.

"Not quite," Grace said. The waitress left quickly, and as she did, her mother downed the drink in three large gulps. One after another.

"You know"—her mother wiped her mouth—"they told me not to come and see you. You"—she pointed at Grace with her index finger, the glass still in her hand—"are a trigger for me." She had slurred the word trigger, and Grace found herself swallowing hard. She braced herself for anything when it came to her mother, including nasty words followed by a slap that would send her to the floor.

Grace wondered who her mother meant by "they." Maybe it was her friends. Maybe it was a support group. Maybe it was just the people at the bar she liked to hang out with. Or maybe, she thought with sadness, it was a new family, complete with replacement children.

Grace remembered the last thing her therapist had told her and found her voice. "I love you, Mom."

She waited, but her mother did not say it back.

"I love you, even though you don't love me," Grace said calmly and not accusatory. The therapist had told her that forgiveness would set her free, and she didn't realize how

true that statement was until this moment.

“I didn’t say that,” her mother sneered, and Grace remembered how much her mother always enjoyed being cruel. She’d accuse Grace of something, and Grace would apologize to her over and over, begging her mom to forgive her, and all the while her mother would act hurt as if Grace were the problem, as if Grace were the adult. Now, Grace realized, she was the adult.

“I love you,” she said again, sliding out of the booth and placing enough money on the table for what she thought would cover the cost of her mother’s drinks, “and I forgive you. You have my number if you would like to contact me, Mom. But not with the booze.”

As Grace left the restaurant, she heard her mother shout, “If I have to choose booze or my daughter, I’ll happily choose booze!”



Grace had not heard from her mother since that day, twenty years before. While she had longed to follow up many times, she knew it would not help. If she hadn’t convinced her mother that she was worthy of love by now, she never would.

She had hoped that when she got married, she could finally be a part of a family. But John’s parents had already died years before when she had met him, and he wasn’t close to his extended family. She knew from the experience with her mother that if people didn’t love you enough to respect you, or want a genuine relationship, there was nothing you could do to convince them. The way someone

treated you was often more an indication of their own character than anything else.

She shook loose the thought from her mind, trying to clear it out as she'd seen one of her foster mother's do with the laundry. Grace remembered the woman shaking out a wet shirt with a snap and quickly placing it on the line to dry outside, airing their laundry for anyone to see and not caring about who commented on what. She hung it out, nodded hello to whoever happened to be passing by, walked back in the house, and went about her business. Her approach to everything, from the wash to the way she could manage the schedules of the four foster children, had always impressed Grace.

She looked out their bedroom window at the vibrant green of the trees. She adored the changing seasons Wisconsin offered. How beautiful life could be when change brought something new. The trees could show us that letting go of the way you thought life would always be could bring an unexpected yet pleasant gift in its place.

Grace took two steps outside and stopped, closing her eyes to the bright summer sun on her face. She opened her eyes, reached into the mailbox, and noted a thick envelope and some junk mail. She felt the edges of the envelope as she walked back indoors, thinking there seemed to be a book inside. A book she had edited? A publisher giving her an advanced copy?

She tossed the junk mail directly in the trash and opened the envelope. There was a letter of some sort. Two handwritten pages, front and back. The book's title said something about learning to be a better person. She frowned, looking at the envelope again. She didn't recognize the sender or the return address. She read the note, scrawled in blue ink on notebook paper.

Hello Grace,

I'm sending you the obituary notice for your mother. She died several weeks ago and was buried next to your grandmother.

I have been wanting to write you for a long time, even before your mother passed away. When she died, that was my sign to finally contact you. For years now, everywhere I turned, I saw signs that I should write. Each time I turned around, Grace Grace Grace.

There are many reasons why I am writing. I have known your mother for a long time, longer than you ever did. She was so disappointed that you didn't seem to want her in your life, and if you don't mind my saying, it is incredibly selfish. She was your MOTHER. You only have one, and now it is too late for you. It is a special relationship, and you gave her nothing but grief growing up and then blamed her for your lousy life after you became an adult. How dare you? Do you even know what a wonderfully sweet, loving, attentive, imaginative, creative, and sensitive lady she was? Do you even know what a kind and loving mother you had? And now, you will never know. I hope that pain causes you to rethink your life and your choices.

And to withhold your children from seeing their grandmother, for shame!

*Sincerely,
Susan Butterfield*

P.S. If you ever want to chat with me about your mother, I am open to that.

Her mother was dead? She told people that Grace didn't want her in her life? That she was withholding grandchildren? Grace knew, with everything she had, that if this woman, this Susan Butterfield, believed that, then it was because her mother was drinking and telling lies. So, her mother had assumed Grace must have kids by now. She assumed Grace was fine and didn't want to see her, even after she had shouted in a restaurant that booze was her first choice.

Grace had not ended the relationship, as Susan Butterfield believed. She had not been a kid that gave her mother "grief." She was a kid who just wanted to be loved.

No, her mother had ended the relationship. She had ended it when she refused to stop drinking, when she hit Grace so frequently that someone at school had called social services. She ended it when she "wished Grace the best" in a text and when she made Grace beg to see her. She ended it in that restaurant, and she ended it by never, not once, trying to contact Grace in the twenty years since she'd last seen her.

And worse, Grace thought, she terminated the relationship every time she stepped forward to refuse to allow someone else to adopt Grace.

Grace read the letter again, so shocked that someone would be this ignorant and arrogant to send something like this. Even if Susan Butterfield felt she knew the situation, even if she had listened to her mother rage on and on for years, how did that qualify this woman to write such filth and deliver it to Grace?

And oh, by the way, Grace thought as she paced, here's an obituary. Your mother is dead.

Your mother is dead.

Grace knew that everything Susan Butterfield believed were lies, spewed from her mother's mouth. The lies were

the start of why she lost Grace all those years before. She hit Grace and knocked her down, and when Grace got a black eye, she told the school her daughter was just clumsy. When an event at school needed a parent, she told Grace she would be there for her, and never was. When Grace's school started calling the social workers about Grace's injuries, she promised she would go to a rehab center to quit drinking so she could get her daughter back, and didn't.

When she drank, she lied. And obviously, she was lying about Grace.

She stopped pacing and read the obituary.

Katherine Langley passed lovingly from this world to the next on April 1st. She was born and raised in Milwaukee and loved the summer festivals, especially the ones where she could dance on a picnic table and enjoy free music. She enjoyed any event where she could meet new people, and all who knew her were inspired by her laugh, her sense of humor, and the kind way she sat and listened to each soul in need.

She was truly a remarkable woman who deserved better than she got in life, and she will be missed.

Grace read it once, then again. What an odd obituary, she thought. No cause of death and not much about her life. No mention of relationships. No mention of Grace. It was as if Grace mattered so little, no one even thought to acknowledge her.

She wondered if Susan Butterfield, whoever she was, wrote the obituary. It seemed like a possibility. She wondered why, if the woman knew who Grace was all this time, why she didn't get a call when her mother was sick or

dying, or had just died, instead of sending this letter and notice weeks after. Did her mother know where to reach her? Or did Susan Butterfield do some digging to find Grace and send this letter?

And who would send a missive like this, filled with incorrect assumptions, and then end it with a desire to “talk” if Grace wished? Why didn’t the woman just call Grace and talk? Why didn’t she try to have a real conversation, instead of sending a nasty letter by way of introduction, then thinking she and Grace would have lots to discuss after that?

The more Grace thought about the letter, the angrier she became. For this woman to try and shame her, to make such terrible assumptions... it made her wonder if the woman had influenced her mother in not contacting Grace sooner. She imagined her mother spouting these lies about Grace, and Susan Butterfield piling on the negativity.

There could have been a way for this Susan to support her mother and be a friend, to listen but try and encourage her mother to look at it from Grace’s perspective: as a child who was rejected by her mother. She could have said, “Imagine the pain Grace has had to live with,” but no, this woman must have enjoyed being the negative friend who would add fuel to the fire, with anger and hate, thinking she was some kind of hero to Grace’s mother, meanwhile making it worse.

But obviously, her mother had created this. All of it. This woman knew of Grace but had gotten the specifics of the relationship entirely wrong. Why was she chiding Grace when her mother had been the one to hit her and fail to pick her up at school? She had abused Grace and lost her, and no matter what, didn’t seem to want to do what was necessary to get her back. And worse, every time she had the chance to be adopted by a foster parent, her

mother would decide to step in, and Grace would go back to the endless wandering, the space where dreams can grow but never become reality.

Her mother had been absent. She and John had been alone all these years. Their lives had been about trying for a baby, trying to figure out this great mystery of married life, and trying to keep their sanity each time their hopes for a family vanished from her body. And they'd done it all without the support of family. They'd been alone, and she felt that loneliness very strongly now. Her legs felt weak and started to shake.

She sat on the chair by the door, still gripping the letter. Who was this woman? Why was she writing these hateful things, and perhaps most puzzling, why did she think it was okay to do this?

Grace pored over the words, the things her mother had said the last time they'd spoken: the slaps, the drunken rages, and then losing her. Being told about her this way with a nasty letter and a book, was too much. The stress of it all, this lifetime of not feeling wanted for doing nothing more than being born, it all weighed heavily upon Grace. She felt like she couldn't breathe.

This letter was the final seal on the envelope of hope she had foolishly kept open all this time, tucking in best wishes and good thoughts as if one day she could take them all out and show the world that she was worthy of love. That her mother had been wrong. What a fool she'd been. She felt sick then. She felt the hopes that had buoyed her descend on her like a thick fog. Tears formed quietly in her eyes, and her heart seemed to physically ache. The letter fell to the floor, along with the blood that gushed from her body, taunting her, letting her know that once more she wasn't going to be a mother.