PINKY SWEAR

DANIELLE GIRARD

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For Danya Kukafka and Sarah Grill;

Lexi, Mara, and Cate couldn't have been in better hands

Of course I feel too much, I'm a universe of exploding stars.

—Sara Ajna

Prologue

1 day before due date

The hand that holds the knife is mine but feels like a stranger's.

Pinned between the soot-stained wall and a dumpster, its blue-painted exterior dented and streaked, the man is on his knees, hands raised in surrender. The blade touches his neck where the pale folds of his skin contrast with his tan face, like rings on a tree.

I am prepared to cut this man. To kill him. This is not me; I am not this person.

But here I am.

The smells of piss and garbage and stale alcohol mix with night air and the scent of rain. My fingers are unfamiliar, nails black with grime, palms scraped and sore and soiled with something that, in the dark, might be grease or dried blood.

I regain focus as the light of the caged bulb overhead flashes across the metal blade.

"Where is Mara?" I demand.

"I'm not lying, I swear. I don't know where she is."

I press harder and the tip of the knife dents his skin, its tension holding the blade on the surface. Any harder, the knife will slice through.

"You don't have to do this," the man says. "This ain't going to solve nothing."

"Where would she go?"

"I haven't seen her in years. I swear—" He starts to turn, twisting away from the blade.

"Don't move," I warn, shifting the long edge of the knife against his skin. "You knew her."

"I did. But it's been years since I seen her. Most peaceful years I ever spent." He inches farther from the blade, driving his shoulder into the dumpster.

"No," I snap. That's not Mara. My partner in the biggest undertaking of my life, Mara is my oldest and most loyal friend. *I would do anything for you, Lexi.* From the start of our friendship in middle school—the three of us. Together every lunch, huddled at the cafeteria table we'd claimed junior year. Friday night sleepovers. The notebook we passed between us with confessions about our crushes, dreaming of our futures. First drinks. Double dates. Whispered plans to attend the same college, to be roommates in the dorms.

The knife slips and I clench it tighter, drawing the point into his skin. He cries out as blood beads at the site, swelling into a fat droplet before rolling down his neck. I don't recognize myself, but I have no choice. Everything depends on finding her.

"Where did she work?" I ask.

"It's been years since—"

"Where?" I interrupt.

"Mostly at bars—she had jobs six, sometimes seven days a week, on and off." He motions down the darkened alley, toward the street. "She's worked at most of these places."

I'm focused on my next question, calculating how to unlock a memory from this man that will lead me to Mara when he grips my wrist and twists toward me, bending my arm until I cry out and release the weapon. He snatches it off the ground and wields it like an expert.

"You want to know about Mara Vannatta? She's a user. She used me like she used everyone." He talks so fast I can barely keep track of his words. The knife hovers in my face as he fires anger like darts. That blade makes it impossible to focus, to hear his words.

"Whatever she took, you're not getting it back." Spittle sprays from his lips and strikes my cheek. Lunging, he shoves me with his free hand, and I land hard on my tailbone. I expect him to turn away, but instead he swings around, swiping the blade at my chest, so close that I lurch backward and slam into the dumpster. He grabs a fistful of my hair and throws me down on the eroded asphalt, pebbles shredding my hands and knees. The impact expels the air from my lungs, and I struggle to inhale.

"Come to my club and fucking threaten me," he sneers and kicks hard into my ribs. "Get the fuck out of here."

Curled on my side, I wait for the next blow.

It doesn't come.

Something clatters to the ground, and I spot the discarded knife as the man slips back into the club.

A line of scalding heat burns across my chest, my own panic alongside something else. Still lying on the asphalt, I finger the damp fabric of my shirt, a tacky sensation. Blood. The knife sliced the skin. Tenderly, I tug the neckline away to see how much blood has soaked into the fabric.

I stretch to reach the knife, the motion sending a lancing pain where his shoe connected with my ribs. With

shallow breaths, I wipe the knife clean on my jeans and press the lever along its ridge to close the blade. I will have to learn to be better with it. Or get another weapon.

I am going to find Mara Vannatta if it kills me.

I touch the bloody cotton of my shirt and wonder if it might.

Chapter 1

16 days before due date

That first step is like entering an airport hangar, a line of plane engines roaring in my ears. I have to remind myself that it's just a baby store. Albeit a giant one.

I'm stopped, mouth agape at the oceanic expanse of baby supplies while people stroll past as though we're in a Target. But the reality of a baby—my baby—has me paralyzed and stunned to silence.

How long I've wanted this. How many times I've tried to be a mother and failed.

And now it's happening. Because of Mara.

And then she is beside me, parking a cart in front of us. "We could start with bottles."

"Bottles?"

She bumps my hip with hers. "You know, be like Tim Palmer and check out all the different nipple shapes," she says, referring to a boob-obsessed middle school classmate.

How she ever remembered his name is beyond me, and I can't help but laugh as she lets out a sigh.

"This place is huge."

"Massive," I agree. And a little scary. I meet the blue-button stares of two dozen teddy bears on a shelf, all of them peering at me in a way that suggests I'm ill-prepared to be a mother. They're not wrong.

I've never been pregnant longer than eleven weeks, never changed a diaper, never so much as held an infant—yet in two weeks' time, I will be a mother. A single mother, the *single* twitching in my spine with the shame of a teen pregnancy, though I am thirty-five. Instead, it's my best friend who carries my baby, stepping in when my body has failed what, to me at least, is its most crucial biological task.

Mara edges the shopping cart forward, the bulge of her pregnant belly—of my child—almost touching the handle. "You drive," she says, motioning to the cart.

I look around for something smaller, like a basket. The cart feels overwhelming. "Didn't you say all we need is a couple of outfits and some diapers?"

Mara laughs and links her arm through mine, shaking her head as though I'm making a joke. But the laid-back reaction punctures the swell of my worry, deflating it, if only temporarily. I won't be alone, Mara's presence reminds me. Mara has no plans to move out in the next few months, and even when she does, she'll still be in Denver.

And there's Henry… but my marriage is more complicated.

Mara has been urging me to come here, pick out onesies and bottles and pacifiers, but the experience of losing my every pregnancy sprouted a paralyzing fear that it would happen to Mara, too. Six times I allowed hope to plant its promise and grow, believing that I was on the path to motherhood. Six times, hope died—miscarriage, IVF procedures that didn't take, a surrogate who changed her mind.

Even seeing Mara every day since her procedure, being in the bathroom (facing the wall in terror) when she peed

on the first stick, attending every appointment, still I can't uproot the worry that something will go wrong and we'll lose the baby. *We.* As if *we* are pregnant. I used to roll my eyes at would-be fathers who talked about a pregnancy in ways that suggested *they*, along with their wives, carried their future child. One in particular, a young lawyer at the firm where I worked in Seattle, prattled on endlessly about how *the pregnancy is giving us a bit of heartburn.* And *our feet are swollen. We've had to get new shoes.* How ridiculous he sounded.

Sixteen days until the baby's due date and I'm finally daring to buy supplies. It isn't that I haven't planned. On the wall of the nursery, which is painted a light mossy green, hangs a three-foot-long needlepoint of animals that has taken me months to complete, squinting hunchbacked on the couch with a needle and a dozen colors of thread, trying to follow the pattern to perfection. In the center of the room is a round floral rug, where the baby and I will play. There is a rocking chair where I will hold her and inhale her sweet, milky scent. When she's older, we will stick glow-in-the-dark constellations on her ceiling. A small stack of books lines one shelf with my favorite on top—*Owl Babies*, the first story I remember loving as a child myself, the one I checked out from the kindergarten library and read until its pages frayed. While the little things are ready, I still haven't purchased a car seat to take her home from the hospital.

Every time I imagine the nursery filled with baby toys and clothes and diapers, I remember my brother Simon. I can still smell his room beside mine, fresh paint and wood shavings. The mobile over his crib, painted black and white after my parents researched what would best stimulate his young brain. Even at five years old, I sensed

the shift in attention away from me and toward the baby growing inside my mom. Dinner conversations revolved around articles about brain development in a baby's first year, ways to help a child foster a calm demeanor. Words exchanged over my head but with the occasional glance in my direction, divulging their meaning: The next baby would be superior to their first.

One Saturday, my parents invited me to go to the baby store, and I pictured rows of cribs with babies to choose from. *Go put on your nice clothes*, my mother had said, shooing me up the stairs. I donned my blue holiday dress, the nicest thing I owned, ready to make a good first impression on my baby brother. As I crept down the stairs, I heard my mother's voice.

"He's going to be perfect, Gil."

"He will," my dad agreed. "He'll be everything we wanted, our fresh start."

Every little girl dreams of being someone else—a princess or a rock star, an actress or her favorite teacher—but never was that desire so fierce and unwieldy as the moment I longed to be Simon.

Now, standing under the yellow glare of the big-box-store lights, I can't remember going to the baby store with my parents to shop for Simon. It's possible that I went, but just as likely that I'd broken down and cried, the very thing my parents most despised. A little girl unable to control my emotions, as my parents celebrated a child who would be a better version of me. When my mom went into labor, I stayed with Mrs. Lewis, a stooped, hook-nosed neighbor. The way my dad swung Mom's little gray suitcase, holding her elbow with the other hand, they might have been going on vacation.

My parents returned home a day later. My dad rounded the car, red-eyed and exhausted, and helped my mother onto the curb. Stony-faced and grim, she was tucked under his arm as the two struggled up the walkway, the suitcase like an anvil in his grip. With a firm palm on my shoulder, Mrs. Lewis stopped me from running to them. *You don't mention your brother*, she whispered. *Not ever.*

"Come on, this is going to be fun," Mara says now, giving me another little hip bump.

She leads and I follow, marveling at her determined optimism. In our trio of friends, she'd always been the dreamer, the one who could imagine the best outcome to any situation. With no children of her own, Mara is as clueless about this as I am, but she doesn't seem the least bit nervous.

I work to inject my own thoughts with the same energy by reminding myself how much I've learned as a stepmother—though Henry's boys were eight and ten when we met. We pass a couple in an aisle lined with high chairs and bouncy seats, the man at his wife's side while she asks Siri to recommend the best baby swing. Her husband is focused, his hand protective on her lower back. His gaze radiates reverence, and she glows with an unearthly light. His awe is obvious, the miracle of her body nothing short of magic. I share his awe, though it comes with the bitter aftertaste of envy.

Henry would know what to make of this place, how to navigate it, what to choose. At this moment, he is surely in his office, studying some spreadsheet. I could call; he would come.

My next inhale catches in my throat. I miss my husband.

A matronly woman, wearing slacks and a pink sweater, approaches as I take hold of the cart and inch it forward.

"Welcome to Everything Babies," the woman says. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Literally, we're here for everything babies," Mara responds with a chuckle.

My palm grows damp on the cart's plastic handle as I eye the immense store and imagine how many things I need, how much it will all cost. Six months after moving out, Henry still pays the bills, but I'm not sure how he'll react to purchases made for a child that isn't his. I have my inheritance. My parents were planners, and what they left will tide me over while the baby is little and I figure out what to do next.

"Is this your first?" the woman asks.

Can she tell I'm unprepared? I have no idea how to answer the simple question. *Yes, Mara and I were best friends in high school and she's agreed to carry the baby because I can't, but it isn't actually my husband's sperm because he has two grown boys and didn't want more kids.* The only people who know the situation in its entirety are me, Mara, Henry, and the doctor who implanted the sperm bank-fertilized eggs.

"It is," Mara says, grinning as she leans over to kiss my cheek. "This is our first baby."

Mara has always had a mischievous side, saying things for shock value or as a joke to laugh about later. "We met in high school, if you can believe it," she goes on, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "It was love at first sight."

I smile and shake my head at the antics. There's no stopping her; it's best to play along.

The woman claps her hands and grips them together as though in prayer. "Wonderful. And do you know what you're having?"

"A girl," Mara exclaims.

"You absolutely are," the woman says. "Look how high you're carrying. I know the first can be quite overwhelming—by the second, you'll be an old pro." She touches Mara's arm and adds, with a wink: "I've got four." Then, as though to banish the thought she has just planted, she waves a hand in the air and laughs. "No need to get ahead of ourselves," she continues, walking to the first checkout lane. "We have a starter list; it can be helpful to see the basics written out."

The woman ducks behind a register and returns with a trifold pamphlet in a cheery, gender-neutral yellow.

"First up, cribs. A lot of people start with something like this," she says, leading us to the aisle where a dozen cribs are set up and pausing at a blue net playpen. "This has a bassinet feature," she explains, stooping down to lift the base of the crib and clicking it in place below the top rail. "You can use it by the bed when the baby is brand-new and then, as she grows, it's a travel crib and a playpen." She waves with a flourish, like a magician completing a trick. "I'll leave you to it. Just holler if you need help."

Mara reaches out a hand as the saleswoman steps away. "Give me your phone."

"Who are you calling?" I ask.

"I'm taking your picture, Lexi. Stand next to it. Or better, pretend you're putting Goose down."

"Don't let people hear you calling the baby Goose," I whisper. "They'll think we're nuts."

"Come on," she says. "It's a cute nickname." She waves her hands at her massive bulge. "Here I am, the Goose Oven, at your service."

"I think I prefer Mother Goose," I say.

"I still like the original—Womb Auntie—though I'm happy to call her by her real name if you'd tell me what that is," Mara says, hiking up her eyebrows.

"I don't know her name yet," I insist. It's partially true. My parents called my brother Simon from the moment they knew he was a boy. Maybe it's superstitious, but I won't call my baby by her name until she's safely in this world. "I don't need a picture with a playpen."

"You don't have to post it. Save it for her baby book; it's a memory!"

I stand with one hand on the playpen and offer a barely tolerant smile. Mara isn't on social media, one of the things she abandoned when she left her abusive husband back in Philadelphia. From the moment she showed up on my front porch fifteen months ago, Mara has been vigilant about keeping her name and location out of the public domain. Even more so since the pregnancy. She rarely speaks about her marriage anymore, but whatever inconveniences she's suffered from staying off social media are surely a small price to pay for her safety.

Henry was hesitant to welcome her into our home; after all, she was a stranger to him. Though I'd told him about Mara, I rarely talked about high school, the period before I left home for Seattle. How to even explain the bizarre bond between teenage girls, the inseparability of me and Mara and Cate all those years ago. In the most general terms, Henry knew that I'd had two best friends in high school, and that Mara needed help.

His boys were grown, and the furnished coach house in the back sat empty. In a rare moment of persistence, I pushed and Henry conceded.

"This thing is a great idea," Mara tells me. "It's a playpen, a crib, and a changing table all in one, and it's a hundred bucks." She points to a beautiful wooden crib a few feet away. "That one is twelve hundred."

Reading my expression, she drapes an arm over my shoulder. "Goose doesn't need much. It's not like our mothers had all this stuff. Can you imagine? I probably slept on the floor for the first three years. I can't remember even seeing a picture of a crib."

"I'm sure you had one," I say, recalling a single photograph of me in a crib, my hands clenched on the top rail, my face crumpled. I was crying. *You cried all the time*, my mother once said when she found me looking at the few pictures she'd put in an album.

Mara and I load the Pack 'n Play box onto the cart, and the squeaking wheels take me back to high school trips to Walmart, where the three of us spent hours in the aisles horsing around, sharing a soft-serve ice cream or french fries, the store preferable to any of our houses. Hers, small and crowded when her parents were fighting, which was often; mine, cavernous and dismal; and Cate never wanted to be at her house, blaming it mostly on her younger twin sisters.

"Crib, check," Mara says, leaning across the handle of the cart to run her finger down the list. "Next is a car seat, then we definitely need one of those front pack things, so you can carry her around and still have your hands free."

Mara, rubbing her belly, admires a pink car seat with a leopard-print cover.

"Navy," I say, fighting the flare of envy as she strokes her baby bump. Ashamed of my reaction, I lift the navy car seat, averting my gaze. "It's much more practical."

"Screw practical," Mara says. "You're having a sweet baby girl. Let's spoil her." As I push the stroller down the aisle, Mara picks up a small stuffed tiger on a plastic clip and attaches it to the handle of the car seat. "From me," she says, and I know we're both thinking of Cate.

I sense Mara is about to say something when a little girl with blond curls runs up to the leopard-print car seat on display. "Mom, can we get this one? Please."

"We already have a car seat for the baby, Elsie, remember? It's the same one that you used," her mother says, taking her hand. "Come on."

As I watch her go, I imagine Goose as a toddler, chubby hand in mine as little feet stumble awkwardly across a floor in her new Mary Janes. Then, as a three- or four-year-old, tongue held between her teeth, as she focuses on putting a wooden puzzle piece in place. Five years old, gripping my hand tightly, tears brimming in big brown eyes, on the first day of school.

There is so much unknown ahead, and so much to look forward to.