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And So I Prayed: A Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
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in

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by

Sandra Jeanne Reinardy

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And So I Prayed: A Novel Excerpt

Synopsis

Shelby Grant meets her husband Kent Gannon while doing scientific research in Cape Town, South Africa, where they both get caught up in a movement against government denial of AIDS in the early 2000s. They return to their homes in the US, marry and have a child. Having always shared an atheistic worldview, their marriage is threatened when Shelby, racked by guilt over something she did in South Africa, turns to the Catholic Church to seek redemption.

Chapter 1

Chicago, 2011

I was a scientist and then I wasn't. Then I was again. I was also - by turns - a skeptic, an activist, an expert, an idiot, a novice, a coward and a hero. I have been very lost and very found. Now, well, I'm not sure what I am.

One thing I do know is that I am not "death-qualified". I would have thought that was one thing for which we are all equally eligible, but it turns out the term doesn't mean what it sounds like it means. According to the State of Illinois, being "death-qualified" means having the objectivity needed to impose a sentence of death on another human being, in accordance with the rule of law. It means you have no moral objection to ending someone's life on purpose, if they have ended the life of someone else. According to the State of Illinois, I suppose I am death unqualified. Well then.

The tricky part, of course, is that we humans can believe one thing and be perfectly capable of behaving in direct contrast to that belief. We're quite good at it, actually.

Crazy-making.

Being a sometimes-scientist means that I also know more than the average person about statistics. I know that while it is statistically possible that I could be summoned *randomly* for jury duty nine times in twenty-two years of adulthood, it seems unlikely. But I also know enough about government to have doubts about the purity of the system and a tiny part of me wonders if there isn't a file somewhere bearing my Social Security Number and a little flag indicating Pick Me.

But being summoned too often for jury duty is not an issue I have the time or energy to address. And I believe in fair, expedient trials so every time the flimsy little postcard lands in my mailbox, I show up willingly on the appointed date or I request a postponement until after the semester ends and I show up willingly then. I stand in a long line for building security - turns out the lines are universal, the same in Baltimore and Berkeley as they are in Chicago - and then settle in for a three-day stint in a large sleepy room of strangers. A couple of times I was called for the large pool of first-round jury selection, but both times the cases ended in settlement before we

finished the process.

That was the routine I expected when I made my way to the Jury Assembly room at the Richard J. Daley Center on a warm Tuesday in May of 2010. Late in the morning a young man barked my name along with several others called to report to courtroom number eight. At the courtroom entrance, a bulky bailiff directed us to throw away any food or drink and sit in some pew-like seats facing the trial area. Four attorneys - one woman and three men - sat with their backs to us at heavy wooden tables in front of an elevated wood paneled judge's bench. This room on the seventeenth floor of a classic Chicago steel and glass high-rise was much less elaborate than the historic rooms I'd seen in Baltimore, but I appreciated the utility of it. A clerk with perfectly set silvery hair was perched in a colorful sweater to the left of the judge's post, buffing her nails. The bailiff passed out questionnaires and short pencils and instructed us to be truthful. The questions are generally things you can answer off the top of your head - whether you've ever been accused of a crime or have any plans to take down the government - but people everywhere take a very long time filling them out, trying to decide how to

maximize their chances of being selected for the jury or disqualified, depending on their inclination. Those who want to go home are quick to draw a connection to a cousin in law enforcement while those who want to stay deny them.

I filled mine out (honestly) and twirled a pencil between my fingers until the bailiff collected them and handed them to the clerk. She counted the sheets and then counted us and left the room. She returned shortly with a stack of photocopied questionnaires for each of the attorneys and placed one set on the Judge's desk. We waited for fifteen minutes or so, while the attorneys rifled through the questionnaires and whispered to each other, separating the papers into piles.

In the pews, a young man with dark, gel-crystallized hair and a large gold necklace moaned that this was digging into our lunch hour. People shared war stories about friends and relatives selected for juries requiring two or three or eight weeks of their time. The disgruntled ones swapped complaints. *How do they expect people to work? I can't sit here all day with my arthritis. I'm supposed to be watching my grandson.*

Next to me, a very tall, well-toned man in faded jeans and

a plain white t-shirt had been sitting forward with his elbows on his thighs, looking at the floor between his feet. He shifted back against the bench and lifted one foot onto the other knee. He chewed on a small plastic straw like a toothpick and let out a long breath.

"Would you want to be on a jury?" he asked, staring at the back of the bench in front of us.

"Me?" I said. He nodded. I got the sense he'd been asking himself this question for awhile and was coming up short on his answer. "I like to think I'd be fair and capable of applying the rules they give us." He nodded again, slowly. He grabbed the straw from his mouth, rubbed his nose with the back of his hand and pulled his arms back behind his head.

"But what if it's not clear? What if, like, the lawyers don't have their shit together and you can see plain as day - you know, with common sense - you can see the guy's guilty, but they don't present a good case? You let him go?"

I laughed a little. "I'm a scientist," I said. "A conclusion has to be supported by evidence."

"So you wouldn't be bothered by the idea that you let someone who was guilty get away without punishment?"

"Oh, it would bother me. But I'd still have to follow the law. If the defense didn't present enough evidence..."

He blew air loudly out of his mouth and shook his head.

"The law can be messed up."

"Yeah. It's not perfect. But I've spent some time in places where it is much, much worse than this. I don't want to be the one to degrade what we have." I thought again about his question - how I'd feel if I let someone guilty go. "I'd feel worse if I was responsible for punishing someone who was innocent."

As soon as I'd said it, my stomach lurched and a little shiver ran through me. It was an odd sensation, and all of a sudden the day - and with it my mood - seemed to change direction. A door opened at the front of the room and the clerk put down her nail buff, moved some papers around on the desk, pulled a stenotype machine toward her and nodded to the bailiff.

"All rise," he said. "The Honorable Judge Thomas Carlson."

He looked to be about my age and his face suggested a bit

of bulk beneath the robe. He motioned for us to sit. After situating himself on the bench, he nodded to the clerk, who announced that we were now on the record for jury selection.

The judge thanked each of us for our service and began the process of ruling us out. He dismissed a handful of people who claimed hardship and then the crowd diminished by half based on a simple collective assertion that they could not be objective, the man to my right among them. The bailiff wrote down their juror numbers as they left and then read them off so that the attorneys, judge and clerk could remove those questionnaires from their piles. The attorneys began reviewing the remaining questionnaires in detail. Judge Carlson asked the rest of us to move forward to the front benches.

"Now we'll get to know each other a little better," he said. He commented on the weather and the Cubs poor performance in recent games. Eventually, one of the attorneys spoke up, letting the judge know they were ready to proceed. The attorneys took turns calling out jurors by number and asking follow-up questions. Some were excused and our numbers dwindled. When were down to a couple dozen,

the judge cleared his throat and became more serious.

“The trial for which you’re being considered is a capital case, meaning that the ultimate penalty for the crime could be death by lethal injection. You may be aware that the State of Illinois currently has a moratorium on carrying out executions while the process is under review, but there is nothing preventing prosecutors from seeking a sentence of death. In accordance with the law, we need to conduct an additional round of voir dire, which is the legal term for jury qualification. In this round, we will bring you one at a time into my chambers where you will be asked a series of questions to further inform our understanding of your ability to be objective and uphold the law’s requirements in this case.”

While I awaited my turn, I made a grocery list in what I now see as the few minutes of my life the way it used to be.

Chapter 2

When I entered the judge's chambers, Judge Carlson motioned for me to sit at one end of a small conference table, opposite him. On either side were two lawyers. I didn't know which was the defense and which was the prosecution. The judge gave a brief introduction of the process and started with some initial questions. How long had I lived in Chicago? Three and a half years. What did I do for a living? I'm a Biology professor at Northwestern. Did I have children? Yes, one daughter, Lydia - she's three. It was clear by his tone there would be no more chit chat about baseball or the weather. I'd already answered most of these questions on my form, so this felt like a test. Thankfully, I'd been honest. I got the sense we could be there a long time.

When he eventually paused, I snuck a peek at my watch and he offered the slightest of sympathetic smiles as he sat back in his chair and nodded to the attorney on my right. "We'll start with the prosecution."

The attorney had a slight build and thinning blond hair fanned out across a balding head. His eyes were deep brown

and very serious and the only physical feature that made him seem capable of punishing anyone. He introduced himself as Mr. Schmidt and then took his time reviewing my questionnaire and underlining each answer with a pen. Every few questions, he'd glance up at me briefly, as if to confirm I really looked like a person who had never been arrested. Finally, he sat up straight, folded his hands out in front of him and locked his gaze on me.

"Ms. Grant, have you ever been the victim of a violent crime?"

"No."

"Do you know any police officers?"

"Not really. Not in the U.S."

"What do you mean by 'not really'?"

"There's a traffic cop in my neighborhood who waves to my daughter and I every morning when we walk to her daycare. I think his name is Bill."

"Do you trust Bill?"

This question gave me pause. Truthfully, I don't have a deep trust of the police. But, he asked me if I trusted Bill, the kindly looking man with a bit of a belly who

smiled and nodded to my daughter and I each day and watched out for drivers who weren't watching out for us. I thought briefly about the fact that every day Lydia happily waved back and believed that policeman are all just nice men in busy intersections and picture books.

"Yes."

Mr. Schmidt seemed to note my hesitation, though it couldn't have been more than a few seconds, and stared at me a moment longer before going on, perhaps to give me the chance to revise my answer. But, I felt confident. Based on the information I had, I could say I trusted Bill. I could not recall a single close call at that intersection.

"What did you mean by 'not in the U.S.'?"

"I spent some time in South Africa. I knew some police officers there."

"Did you live there?"

"Yes."

"Did you trust those police officers?"

"Not all of them?"

"Why not?"

I flinched. Where was this going? I brought my hand to my face and rubbed my lips with the knuckle of my index finger, a reflex that buys me time when I feel the need to choose words or next steps carefully.

"Well," I started slowly. "I did some work there. Advocacy work for people living with AIDS. And, our work sometimes included protests. There was - at times - an adversarial relationship between us and the police. Sometimes they treated people badly. So, no, I can't say I trusted them."

Mr. Schmidt kept staring and I was wiggling my right foot up and down, my leg shaking. I took a breath and planted my foot flat on the ground. I glanced at the other attorneys, who were watching, but had blank looks, close to boredom.

"Okay," he went on, breaking his gaze for the first time in what felt like forever. "Let's skip ahead a little bit." He shifted back in his chair as if giving up. "Ms. Grant, do you have any conscientious objections to the death penalty when the defendant's guilt has been successfully established?"

"I think there are some problems with the system."

"That's not what I asked." He lowered his chin and raised

his eyebrows, like a father letting his child know that he is not messing around. "I asked if, in circumstances where guilt has been clearly proven, you have a conscientious objection to the imposition of the death penalty?"

I felt very hot. My hands started to shake and I clenched them into fists on my lap. I was surprised by my own reaction and thought back to my conversation with the man next to me earlier.

"If the evidence is clear..." My voice was breaking. I forced a breath. "If the evidence is clear, I understand it to be the law of the state that a death penalty sentence can be given."

"But do you object to that law?"

I just stared at him. I could feel sweat running down the center of my back and my muscles tensed from the irritation of wanting to wipe it away. When I didn't answer, he rephrased.

"Ms. Grant, do you, according to your conscience, have a problem with imposing death on a person who has committed a crime which the state deems to be a capital offense? With your conscience, do you believe that is an acceptable

punishment?"

I swallowed hard and thought for a moment I might throw up. My mind went blank and I struggled from the shock of having three minutes earlier been perfectly composed and now feeling as though I were falling, struggling to place myself back in this conversation. They waited, all eyes on me until Judge Carlson spoke.

"Ms. Grant, we need you to answer the question." I nodded.

"I don't know," I said softly. And then "I have to go."

Mr. Schmidt exchanged a look with his partner and turned back to the judge. "Your honor, we do not find this jury candidate to be death qualified and would move to dismiss Ms. Grant from consideration for the jury."

"Agreed. Ms. Grant, thank you for your service. You may go."

I thought the words *thank you* but couldn't get them out. The tension in my muscles softened almost immediately and my legs felt unstable as I got up from the table, collected my purse and made my way out the door opened for me by the bailiff. Once in the hall, I raced to the stairwell and went down two flights before I had to stop. I pressed my

face right up against the grimy pea green concrete block wall to feel its coolness. I'm not sure how long I stood there with my eyes closed before I heard a door open somewhere above and footsteps on the stairs. I pushed myself back and went home.

Chapter 3

In the days that followed, I found myself looking over my shoulder all the time, not able to shake the feeling of some sort of shadow - not my own - creeping along behind me wherever I went. I would step to the side in the hallway at work, pretending to look for something in my purse or backpack, hoping it would pass. I would go down an aisle in the grocery store and turn my cart around and go down it again, scrutinizing the faces of the people around me.

Unfortunately, the feeling eventually gave way to something else. To describe them as visions would give the wrong impression. I hesitate to call them hallucinations, exactly, but I can't think of a better term. Whatever they were, I began to see Unathi's face everywhere. It was in my head and I knew it, but it felt terribly, terribly real.

The first time, I was in the basement of our apartment building, doing laundry. After switching a load from the washer to the dryer, I turned to leave the room just as one of our neighbors walked in. He said hello and I said hello but when I looked at him, all I could see was the striking darkness of Unathi's eyes. The moment was over quickly and

I tried not to think about it, but the next day I was reading the newspaper and there was a photo of a ribbon cutting with a line of people in business suits and hard hats. Instead of their faces, I saw his, chilling grin bearing his teeth in all of their mouths. I folded the paper and put it back on the pile, refusing to panic. This was obviously crazy, I thought.

A few nights later, I tiptoed into Lydia's room to check on her before going to bed and I saw him in the rocking chair, hands folded in his lap with a calm cold look of a mobster who knows that a hit has been ordered.

I covered my mouth to keep from shrieking and dropped to my knees by Lydia's toddler bed. Her brown curls formed a frizzy little pillow for her head and she grasped the ear of her gray stuffed rabbit. I looked at the rocking chair and the image was gone. Shaking, I ran my hand down her back, needing to feel the warmth of her body, the tiny movement of her breath. I lay my head down on her mattress and tears slid down my cheeks. I stayed there all night. In the morning, I told Kent I had fallen asleep on her floor. After that, I began to avoid looking at people's faces. I clenched my jaw constantly and I was distracted and jumpy.

One night as we ate dinner, Kent asked if I was okay. I didn't answer. He raised his eyebrows.

"I don't know," I said. "Something is bothering me, but honestly I'm not sure what it is exactly. I'll be fine. Just a...just a thing, I guess."

"Well, okay then. If it's 'just a thing' I'm sure it'll go away on its own." He put a brussels sprout in his mouth and smiled a smile that could have been an eye-roll. It was his gentle way of signaling that he thought I was lying but we could wait to talk about it until I was ready. I loved him for that.

We lived in an airy apartment on the first floor of a three-flat in Rogers Park. As the northernmost lakefront neighborhood in Chicago, it was not convenient to much, but it was affordable and happened to be between our jobs. I taught just a few El stops north in Evanston and Kent was running a community outreach clinic a few stops south in Uptown. Lydia's babysitter, Hadley, lived a few blocks from us and I walked her there every morning. Our route took us past a hulking Catholic church built of smooth gray stone. If our morning routine was on schedule, church bells would

ring to signal the beginning of morning Mass just after we'd passed the church. Lydia's walk would change to a hop, a little leap from one foot to the other with each chime while she sang "Ding. Dong. Ding." She did this without fail, regardless of what were talking about or what kind of mood she was in. It seemed involuntary.

One day, a couple weeks after the incident in Lydia's room, I left Hadley's house and found myself slowing down as I approached the church. When I was right in front of it, I stopped on the sidewalk and turned to look at it straight on. Wrought iron railings formed pathways up a few stairs to three sets of point-topped wooden doors. Ornately chiseled stone framed the entry and an enormous rose window sat above like a full moon. Next to the church a large house - which I assumed to be the rectory - was set back further from the sidewalk, nicely surrounded by a little yard with lilac bushes and tulips. Four Victorian houses filled the rest of the block, but the church sat heavily on its corner, the walls and entrances blunt against the sidewalk.

I stared for a long time from my spot on the sidewalk, not thinking much of anything. I felt tired and heavy and just

didn't want to keep moving. Two decades had passed since I'd last been inside a church and I hadn't paid a lot of attention to this one. It had become just a peripheral part of our surroundings, a pace marker on our daily path to daycare and work and home again. I don't know how long I'd been standing there when the middle doors opened and five or six elderly men and women walked out and made their way carefully down the stairs. In a minute, they were all gone from the block and the church looked as it had before, cold and stony. I moved on.

Chapter 4

Berkeley, California, 1998

South Africa changed me in vast and small ways. South Africa. I say it like the country as a whole is a single experience and I have taken the entire thing in, devised an exhaustive report of the occurrences and their impacts, like Kenneth Starr. Hardly. Much of my three plus years there are a blur. But what I remember most clearly, even when I'd rather not, are a few specific days that by turns inspire, bewilder or haunt me even now.

The first was, of course, the day Maria told me I'd be going.

As a professor of Behavioral Biology at Berkeley, on track for tenure, I was pathetically single-minded. I was thirty-one and most of my friends were settling into their marriages, raising families. I was focused to the point of obsession on exploring the inner workings of the human immune system. I sometimes went weeks doing nothing but analyzing data and sleeping, ignoring voicemails from my mother, falling out of touch with friends. Fueled by naive ambition, I believed that the search for definitive, scientific truth was the only valid thing to do with one's

life.

Maria was the department chair. She had a stellar reputation in the field and an unusually ebullient nature for a scientist. She also had twenty years on me, though one would never guess based on her perpetually glowing skin and youthful mop of curly black hair. Maria practically bounced with ideas and energy. She could criticize your work with such a swirl of passionate feedback that you felt sure that a couple of strong edits would get you a Nobel. She came into my office one November day and I perked up, thinking she was going to commend me on my latest project. She sat in the chair across from my desk and ran her fingers through the tassels on the end of her scarf.

"I know you've been working your tail off. But I just read your recent abstract and I think you've gotten into a pattern that is too - how should I say? *Algebraic*. You've been conducting your work as though everything can be neatly nailed down if we just solve for x . But our work is so much more than that."

I was stunned. And a bit confused. I was known in the department for my dedication to impeccable accuracy. On occasion I needed to improve the way I presented my

findings to strengthen my arguments, but no one else held themselves to the standards I did for proof of reasoning.

"I'm not sure I understand," I told her.

"Our work isn't about things that exist in a vacuum. You've been increasingly focused on immunology, which isn't a bad thing, but you're not paying attention to who it's all for." She leaned forward, adding drama to her words. "Name someone you know who has cancer."

"What?"

"Who is someone you know that has cancer? You must know someone. Everyone knows someone."

It took me longer than it should have to think of a name.

"My mother's cousin has breast cancer."

"Okay. And how is she taking it?"

"She had a round of chemo, a mastectomy and now they're doing radiation."

Maria shook her head. "I didn't ask about her treatment plan. I asked how she is feeling about it. You've been drifting from the *behavior* part of behavioral biology. I think we need to bring it back."

She told me she'd been percolating an idea for a study

she'd like to do, in South Africa. She'd been there six months earlier, attended a conference and then stayed on for a vacation. She met a woman in a coffee shop who worked as a nurse and a midwife and after pestering her for an hour, Maria talked her into giving a tour of some clinics. I could just imagine Maria, unable to contain her curiosity, getting some stranger to give up her life story and more - and probably thanking Maria in the end. Maria was horrified to see the what was happening with the AIDS crisis there.

"I met a couple of women who were HIV positive and hadn't told anyone but their doctor. I was so sad for them. And now I've become consumed with the question of whether or not this secrecy is detrimental to their health. Does it change the way they raise their children?" She paused and when I didn't answer, she went on. "I would think it must. So, I've secured some funding for a study." She pulled a pair of glasses from the top of her head that had been all but invisible in the fluff of her hair. "I'd like you to help me."

She could arrange for me to teach a class at the University of Cape Town the following semester and wanted me to go do

some "preliminary study design." By that she meant recruiting participants and defining the factors we would measure.

"Can't you just work with researchers there to get that information?" I sounded like a teenager, which is what I felt like after her admonishment. "I mean, wouldn't that be more efficient?"

She put her glasses on, and then dropped her chin to look at me over the tops of the lenses. "I could. But I'm asking you. Go to South Africa and work with people. You need some work with *people*, Shelby. It makes our science better."

Chapter 5

Cape Town, South Africa, 1999

Kent was less than friendly toward me the first time we met. He was running a small clinic intended solely for treating people with HIV, but the services were free, so people showed up with everything from infected splinters to advanced dementia and Kent had a hard time turning them away.

The clinic was in Khayelitsha, a township on the eastern edge of Cape Town and I went there looking for a woman named Naledi, Maria's coffee shop friend. Maria had given me a list of people who would be helpful in recruiting participants for our study. Since my arrival two weeks earlier, I had met with a number of them - most of whom were other researchers or medical faculty at the university. They had been helpful, though somewhat guarded. They had their own work to do the most people were willing to do was contact women who had not qualified for their own research to let them know of an opportunity to participate in mine. There were thirteen more women on the list whom Maria said Naledi would know.

The waiting room had thick layers of turquoise paint and

thin windows along the tops of the walls. Long fluorescent lights hung unshaded from the ceiling, but none of them were on. Kent was squatting down and talking in a low voice to a little boy and an elderly woman on bright orange plastic chairs. He gave the boy a warm smile and patted his arm before standing up. When he saw me his smile fell away. Kent didn't trust Americans in South Africa - or Brits or Canadians or many South Africans for that matter. Cape Town was crawling with young idealists wanting to help poor starving Africans as long as they could do so in a place with such beautiful beaches and modern amenities. Upon finding that it was difficult to locate the swollen bellied children they remembered from the commercials of their childhood - not because Africa lacked them, but because it was physically and emotionally hard to do - they had to adjust their ideas of how to be heroes. That often meant that they got in Kent's way.

"Yes?" he said. From that one word, I couldn't tell where he was from.

"I'm looking for Naledi." He just stared. I'd been too blunt. "I'm a researcher. From Berkeley. She knows a colleague of mine and we think she might be of help to us."

I realized I was speaking extra loudly and slowly. How obnoxious. Kent's stiffness broke momentarily into a smirk.

"What are you studying?"

"We're looking into whether women who disclose their HIV positive status to their families have any differences in their health, compared to those who don't disclose."

"You have your work cut out for you." He walked past me to a metal reception desk, where he scribbled something on a piece of paper attached to a clipboard. "Naledi's not here right now."

"Do you know when she might be back?"

"Not really. Probably tomorrow," he said, without looking at me. He was American, I could tell now. He started down a hall behind the desk.

"What's your name?" I called out.

"Dr. G," he said without turning back.

"Okay. Well, thanks!" He just lifted his hand about hip height in a dismissive wave as he turned into a room down the hall.

I went back the next morning and the waiting room looked like the crowded boarding area of an airport when all the flights are delayed. I stepped around people seated on the cool floor, trying to find a spot to stand. I was the only white person in the room and I smiled awkwardly at anyone who looked at me. There was a sour-sweet smell in the air, a mixture of sweat and feet and something I couldn't identify. I felt horribly out of place, with a wave of yearning that was not exactly homesickness, just a desire to be someplace else.

There were no staff members in sight and I began to wonder if the clinic was even open, but the room was anything but quiet. People were chatting and some were laughing. Others looked dazed and tired. A few were visibly wincing and I could hear a moaning sound coming from behind a row of chairs. I strained to hear it until a woman with a whimpering toddler in her arms got up and moved away from that row, visibly irritated.

I moved to her spot on the floor, next to some children huddled in a half circle around the back of the chairs. There were eight of them, ranging in age from about three to fifteen or sixteen, I guessed. At first I thought they

were just seated in a circle, but I couldn't figure out where the painful sound was coming from. Then the groan swelled to a shrieky cry and they all seemed to move at once, revealing a man lying on the floor between them. He was on his side, with scrawny knees bent up toward his waist and bony arms shaking against his chest. One of the older girls grabbed a small pail and angled it near his face while another gently lifted his head. He gagged and yellowish vomit dribbled into the pail. They wiped his face with a dingy cloth, set the pail aside and all the children settled back into their spots, closing in their circle.

The smell of the bile was making me gag so I drained my water bottle quickly and then regretted it, thinking perhaps I should have offered it to them.

I am not proud of it, but in that moment, my curiosity was prevalent while my compassion was pale - which I suppose was Maria's whole point. The man had white sores on his head and neck and his feet were bare with callouses and bits of dried blood. I knew that the sores were common symptoms of the advanced stages of AIDS, but I assumed the callouses were from not wearing shoes. I had seen countless pictures in clinical journals of skin wounds and white

yeasty thrush in people's mouths. And I had seen AIDS patients in person, but only in pristine and sterile medical facilities, not lying on a grungy floor.

The kids sitting around him were mostly quiet. I tapped one of the girls on the shoulder and she turned to me with a weary stare.

"Is this your father?"

She bobbed her head slightly toward me, as though she hadn't quite heard, so I asked again. She looked at the boy next to her and they both shrugged. They didn't speak English. The boy then called out a name I didn't catch and a younger boy in bright pink shorts that went halfway down his shins came and stood near us, leaning down with his hands on his knees. The older boy said something to him and tipped his head in my direction.

"I am Dingani," the little boy said. "Can I help you?" He held out a hand and I shook it.

"My name is Shelby. I was just wondering if this man is your father."

"Wondering?" He scrunched his eyebrows.

I slowed down, gestured toward the man on the floor. "Is he

your father?"

"Oh! Yes. He is our father."

The girl pulled on Dingani's shirt and said something to him in their language. He nodded.

"Are you a nurse?"

"Oh, no. I'm not a nurse. I don't work here."

He translated and they all looked a little disappointed. Dingani held himself like a car salesman but had the playfully mischievous eyes of a boy. "Are you sick?"

"No. No. I'm just here..." I wasn't sure what to say. "I'm looking for a friend." Dingani beamed.

"I'll be your friend!" He reached over and patted my shoulder.

"Well thank you!" I laughed. We heard the man groaning loudly and we all turned back toward him just in time to see him retching again. Dingani pulled the collar of his tank top up over his nose and mouth and shut his eyes.

"Do you know what's wrong with him?" I asked.

Dingani shook his head. "Something make his spirit very angry."

That was not the answer I was expecting. I wasn't sure how to respond. "How did you get here?"

"We walked. Take turns carry him. I like to carry his feet. Easy for me."

"Where do you live?"

"Oh! Long way."

"Is your mother here?"

He clenched his jaw, didn't answer. The girl said something to him again and he replied, presumably telling her what I had asked. She shook her head at him. It looked like an order of silence rather than an answer.

I was trying to think of a way to backtrack when I felt someone touch my shoulder. "Ma'am?" I looked up to see a woman in faded scrubs with a smock that at one time must have been bright with neon colors. She had a round head with hair cropped short, and serious but not unfriendly eyes. "Ma'am, can I help you?"

I stood up. "I'm looking for a woman named Naledi."

A warm smile spread across her face. "I'm Naledi. Are you Shelby?" I nodded. "I've been waiting for you to come. Doctor Gannon told me you were here yesterday. It's so nice

to meet you." She tucked a clipboard under her arm and grabbed my hand with both of hers. Her voice was soft and rich with a beautiful accent. "But I'm afraid we're too busy here today. I can't really talk. Could we meet this evening? I can come to you."

"Okay." I don't know what I had been expecting, arriving at this woman's workplace wanting immediate attention, but my first reaction was irritation. I'd made two trips now, lost two days of work. But then I caught a glimpse of Dingani's family in my peripheral vision and wanted to slap my own hand. "Thank you. Let me give you my address." We worked out the details and she shook my hand again before moving back toward the front of the room and pulling up her clipboard.

I turned back to Dingani, who had returned to his seat a few feet away. He looked at me and just gave a tiny wave, the playfulness from earlier gone. Regretting my question about their mother, I waved back and stood awkwardly for a moment.

"It was nice meeting you," I said. He just nodded. I left.

I was munching trail mix and preparing for my first class session when Naledi knocked on the door to the university apartment I was staying in. She took a seat on the dorm-style wood-framed couch and I pulled a wobbly wooden dining chair from the table, always a little picky about personal space.

"So," she said, folding her hands in her lap. "What can I do to help?" She was earnest in a way that made me uneasy, as though if I weren't careful I would be the one letting her down.

"I know you've been in touch with Maria. Has she told you about our study?"

"We haven't connected for a while. I know you need to find women who are HIV positive and have children."

"Yes. In order to participate, they need to be willing to have monthly health assessments and answer questions about a range of things - everything from what they eat for breakfast to their sexual activity." We had stipend money for participants so we knew there would be many willing applicants, but we expected inconsistent follow-through. Depending on self-reported details from study participants always carries a high margin of error - people can be less

than forthcoming about their personal lives and even if they're honest, the science on the human tendency to misjudge one's own behavior is astonishing. So, we needed a large number of participants to guarantee enough good data for viable conclusions.

"We're hoping to enroll at least eight hundred women," I told her. She let out a little whistle and sat up straighter. "I have this list of people Maria said you already know. We'd like to ask all of them to help us find participants."

Unlike the academic people I'd already met with, the last thirteen people on the list were what Maria had termed "community connectors" - women who had some role in their neighborhoods or towns that would allow them to introduce us to others. Most of them ran community centers or clinics or support groups of some sort. I had called some of the phone numbers, but had not gotten through to anyone. I wasn't familiar with the locations that were listed and Maria thought it might be best that I work through Naledi to engage these women.

I explained the situation and handed Naledi the list. She looked it over, pensive lines appearing in her forehead.

"This isn't going to be easy," she said, her shoulders slumping. "Some of these women are having very hard times right now, sick or dealing with difficulty."

I wasn't sure what to say. "I'm sorry to hear that." I must have sounded ridiculous. Mercifully, she straightened up as if a reset button had been pushed.

"But, I will try. When do you need this?"

"As soon as you can. I'm starting to fall behind."

"Okay. I have to work at the clinic again tomorrow, but how about if I come back next week at this time?"

"Is there something I can do to help? Should I come with you?" She tilted her head and looked at me sideways, sizing me up. "Not just yet." I wanted her to explain, but she didn't offer anything further and it didn't seem like a good idea to press her. She picked up her purse and walked toward the door.

"Naledi?" She turned back toward me. "Those kids yesterday, in the waiting room? With the man on the floor?"

"Oh. Yes?"

"Where was their mother?"

She shrugged. "Probably at home."

"Why wouldn't she come with them?"

"I don't think she approves."

"Approves? Of what?"

"Of modern medicine. This is a very diverse country, Shelby. A lot of people outside of the big cities practice traditional spiritual healing. Some believe that going to a clinic like ours actually angers the gods and can make things worse."

I was aghast. Less by what she was telling me than by the fact that I had arrived here in this country not knowing this was the case. My impression of South Africa was that it was a fully developed nation, with a horrible past. I had had six weeks to prepare for this trip after Maria assigned it to me. What time I had after subletting my apartment (and my cat) and arranging to be gone for six months, I spent reading up on psychology of illness. I had picked up a Fodor's on South Africa, but didn't read anything about this.

"So, how did they decide to come? Was that the children's doing?"

"Yes and no. There are others in their town who come to Dr.

Gannon. One of them suggested it and the eldest son talked their father into it."

"Will you be able to do anything for him?"

She shrank a little. "Not really. It's too late. We gave him some morphine, some creams for his skin."

"What will happen to the kids?"

"It depends. If their mother blames them, it will be very hard for them going forward. If she becomes too afraid that they have angered the spirits, she may kick them all out. Best case, she gets past it and the older children will just keep working and the younger children can keep going to school."

"Keep working?"

"Yes. The boys help with construction and one is hoping to get a job in the mines. The girls clean houses."

"And the younger ones go to school. That's why Dingani was translating?"

"Yes."

I was quiet then, taking it in. Naledi sucked in a breath of air and blew it out again like she was preparing to run a sprint. She patted her purse where she'd put the list.

"I will do what I can with this, Shelby. Your work with Maria is very important and I want it to be a success. I will do what I can," she said again.

Chapter 6

Naledi had come to see me on a Thursday and I got restless waiting for her to return. I finished setting up the database we would use to track recruitment and then I spent two days exploring Cape Town like a tourist. I took the cableway up Table Mountain and walked through Company's Gardens. I made my way down to the Cape of Good Hope and saw the penguin colonies at Boulders. It was all very breathtaking - to use a guidebook word. But I kept thinking about Dingani and his siblings, sitting there on the floor of the clinic.

I knew that the final stages could be terribly and painfully drawn out, as the body shuts itself down in staggered little phases. I was deeply familiar with how the immune system's processes went haywire inside the body of someone with AIDS, but I was - I realized then - shamefully underexposed to how it looked from the outside, especially when left untreated. Moreover, I was embarrassed that I'd left this work of finding our contacts to Naledi. There wasn't any good reason for me not to be out finding more contacts myself, though I was experiencing more culture

shock than I had expected. Cape Town wasn't much different from any major American city but I kept freezing up, unsure of how to approach people, Maria's voice chiding me in my head. I decided to go back to Naledi's clinic. Dr. Gannon - as Naledi had called him - might be able to help me. He hadn't been thrilled to see me, but I felt familiar with his arrogant MD type. I could handle that.

The first two times I'd gone hurriedly, focused on finding Naledi and keeping my car on the left side of the road. This time, the route was more familiar and I was able to take in a bit more as I drove from my apartment near the university down past the airport. What I saw was the stark footprint of apartheid that is not as visible in the bustle of Cape Town. Khayelitsha was about the same size as Berkeley, but triple the population. Surrounded by empty swaths of desert-looking land, it was originally established as a segregated housing settlement. There were a couple neighborhoods with middle class families, but most of the three-hundred thousand people were black Africans, living in wood and corrugated metal shacks. The clinic was nestled among a set of them, next to a rickety convenience

store.

Like my previous visit, there was no one in the waiting room who worked there. I took a seat in the back and tried to look like I was just another patient. A little girl with wiry arms ran up to me, tapped my knee, giggled and ran away again. She did this several times and I played it up as though it surprised me every time. Her laughter grew louder until her mother spoke sharply to her in what I assumed to be Xhosa. She dropped her head, but lifted her eyes shyly up toward mine and I offered a gentle smile. I leaned forward and asked her name, but she just looked at me. I didn't know what to do or say after that, so I was grateful when I heard Kent's voice.

"You're back."

"I am." I stood up, held out my hand. A funny look crossed his face, as if to say *what's the point?* But he shook it firmly. "I was wondering if I might spend a little bit of time here. I need to get used to - I mean, I need to learn a little bit more about..." I stopped. Every thing I thought to say seemed offensive, which frustrated me. I wanted to do a good job and I did not have a lot of time to ramp up on local protocols, so I needed to learn quickly. I didn't

want this sound like an anthropological observation, but it kept coming out that way. Kent just stood silently, allowing me to squirm. I started again. "I need to learn more about patient care in South Africa. I don't want to make assumptions. I was hoping I might be able to observe your work for a day or two."

"This isn't a lab, Shelby."

"I know." I balled my fists at my sides, trying not to get angry. "Please?"

He scanned the room. "Alright. You can hang out here today and then we'll see where you're at. I will ask permission of every patient, and anyone says no, you leave without question."

"Of course."

"I mean it." He looked at me like I was a child. I opened my mouth to defend myself, a snide comment about doctors' egos ready to slide off my tongue, but stopped myself. He was helping me; I needed to be humble.

He walked to the metal desk in front of the hallway and looked down at the sign-up sheet. He kept moving his eyes from the list to the waiting crowd, trying to match names

to faces. He called out a name which I could see was third down on the list. A young woman came forward and followed him silently down the hall to the first room on the right. I followed her. The room had a stainless steel table in the center and a shabby wooden desk was up against the wall with one chair at the desk and one facing it. There were two concrete cinder blocks standing vertically near the end of the table that I appeared to function as step stools.

Kent sat down at the desk and the woman sat down in the other chair. I stood near the opposite wall. Kent tipped his head in my direction and said "This is a nurse. She is in training today. Is it okay with you if she stays?" The woman glanced at me and then narrowed her eyes at Kent, looking unsure. He repeated himself more slowly, then followed with a single word in Xhosa that I would later learn to be "nurse". The woman nodded, tentatively. Kent looked a little pained, frowned at me. She wasn't really understanding and I could see he was conflicted. I just stayed quiet.

He opened one of the desk drawers and took out a small bottle. He examined the handwritten label and then copied something into a notebook. He put the notebook in the

drawer and turned to the woman, handing her the bottle. She put it in a cloth knapsack that was slung diagonally across her body. She looked at him and he directed her slowly to use it the same as before. She nodded and placed a hand on his arm.

"Enkosi," she said firmly. *Thank you.* He nodded and she was gone. The whole thing was less than two minutes. I had questions, but he immediately got up and went back to the waiting room, called another name.

Later he explained that he had given her a round of AZT, which is just one of three types of drugs necessary to successfully stop HIV from becoming AIDS. What medications he had were from a USAID worker in Gugulethu. Kent was working alone, not as part of any larger aid organization or medical facility and this made it difficult to obtain supplies. He had befriended this man and a couple others and convinced them he was not a black market dealer but filling gaps not otherwise being covered. They slipped him medications and basic medical supplies when they could. The "woman" I'd seen was actually only fifteen. I was incredulous. Her height and the solemn way she carried herself had convinced me she was older. And he was not

optimistic - she was going to need the additional drugs soon or the AZT would start to wreak more havoc than it prevented. He wasn't sure when he would next be able to get his hands on some.

The second patient was a man, who conversely looked much younger than his thirty-seven years. He had a bright, charming smile and teased Kent when he approached him with a playful punch in the arm. Kent took him to another room further down the hall, this one with a tiny porcelain sink and a table with gloves and bandages and clean syringes. The man entered the room first and jumped up onto the stainless steel table in the center of the room, and then stiffened when he saw me follow Kent in. Kent explained who I was the same way he had to the woman and the man shook his head. "Where is Naledi?" he asked. Kent told her she was off that day and the man shook his head no, crossed his arms. "I don't want her here." Kent shot me a look and I left.

For rest of the morning, I was allowed to watch all of the female patient visits, which was the majority. Only four men were seen, but all refused my presence. The women - or

their children - seemed to have a variety of conditions, from sore throats to yeast infections to HIV. The cinder block step stools, it turned out, doubled as stirrups when needed. There was a shyness that permeated all of the appointments and Kent did not make any overt attempts to break it down, but somehow, he established a level of comfort. The more time the women spent in the exam rooms, the more relaxed they became. I noticed that, as with the first woman, he regularly called the names out of order and the appointments were increasingly lengthy as the day went on. He seemed to know which people would have short appointments and took them first to clear them out. The result was that most people's wait times were proportionate to the length of their visit with the doctor. It was not rocket science, and yet, as healthcare goes, it was brilliant.

Around one-thirty, he asked if I was hungry and I was. He told me to follow him. He locked the doors to the rooms in the hallway and we turned into a little supply room on the left. From there, a door led outside to a small space surrounded by scrappy wooden fencing. He brought out a small cooler and we sat on round knee-high tree stumps. He

took out a grapefruit and a few pieces of biltong, dried cured meat I had noticed everywhere and which I found I liked. He handed me a strip of it and began to peel the grapefruit with his hands.

"So, what do you think?" The question was so broad I wasn't sure where to start. I opted to answer with another question.

"Why did you tell them I'm a nurse?"

He shrugged. "It's just easier." I made a face, disapproving. "There are times when the truth is really important and times when it just slows things down. I've been here long enough to know the difference."

"How long is that?"

"Two years at this clinic and a year with Doctor's Without Borders before that."

"They seem to do good work. What made you stop?"

"I have an allergy to bureaucracy." *One of these guys, I thought, always have to be in charge.* He backtracked.

"They are good, don't get me wrong. But it's a big operation and they have to prioritize. I saw a need here that they couldn't fit in and I wanted to fill it."

"It's just you then?"

He nodded. "I have a few nurses that help out. A little inconsistent, but they do what they can." He had the peel removed from the grapefruit and split it into two chunks. He started to hand half to me and then pulled it back, meticulously picking off more of the pith.

"How are you funded?" I asked.

"Not very well. I do some consult work at the medical school, teach some short seminars now and then. Once in awhile a friend of mine will send a wealthy man with HIV my way and they pay me well to provide discreet treatment. I try to make the most of those opportunities." I took a bite of my biltong and was grateful for its chewiness while I tried to decide what to ask next. He wiped pieces of pith from his fingernails on a paper towel and handed me the fruit. The juicy sourness was a surprisingly pleasant chaser to the salty meat. When the silence became awkward, I gave in.

"I am feeling a little bewildered. I didn't expect to feel so new to this."

"The good news is, it doesn't take long to get past that.

Once you get going, the work takes over. Immersion happens fairly quickly." He stood up and poured some water on his hands. "Every once in awhile, though, I still have moments that creep up on me when I'm shocked that this is my life now and it's a whole world I knew nothing about for so long." He was staring at the fence, as if looking straight through it. We could hear a radio from nearby, kids playing.

"Have things improved, since you've been here?"

He laughed. "Quite the opposite. It's getting worse." I assumed he meant simply the numbers, the spread of the virus, the overwhelming challenge of treating all who were affected.

"What's Naledi's story?" I asked. He shrugged.

"She'll tell you when she's ready."

"She's been hard to pin down."

"Don't worry. Once she decides she can trust you, you'll never be short on attention from Naledi." He picked up the cooler and we went back inside. At the end of the day, he said I could come back the next day and by the end of that day, I was feeling more comfortable and calling names from

the sign-in sheet.

Chapter 7

Chicago

The images of Unathi's face that I was seeing gave way to a constant feeling of heaviness, as though I were walking through life with one of those x-ray vests they make you wear at the dentist. For a couple of weeks, this is how our evenings went: we'd make dinner together, as we always had, Lydia playing in the living room or coloring at the table and chatting with us. Kent would tell me about his day - patients with funny or sad stories, an ongoing conflict with ComEd, which kept screwing up the clinic's bill. I did my best to keep up and engage with him like a normal person, but I found myself constantly turning my attention to Lydia, no energy to talk about myself. I'd suggest we play Hi-Ho Cherry O or read books and I made sure I was the one to put her to bed every night. Then I'd lay in her room after she went to sleep, pretending to have fallen asleep also, coming out at ten or eleven and heading straight to our own bedroom.

This worked for awhile, but Kent is no dummy.

"Okay, what is going on with you?" he asked one night, as we were getting ready for bed. I was flossing my teeth and

thankful to have something to do with my hands. I shrugged.

"I'm not really sure."

"Are we okay?" I'm not sure I had ever seen him look more vulnerable.

"Yes! Oh my god, yes." Whatever I was feeling - guilt, fear, emptiness - was completely separate from my life at home. Though I knew I'd been acting weirdly, it hadn't really occurred to me he would feel there was a problem between us. It was a completely solitary thing in my mind.

"Can you talk about this?" he asked, rubbing my back. I shook my head. He was behind me and we were looking at each other in the bathroom mirror.

"I don't think so," I said. He looked scared, which startled me. I turned to him and wrapped my arms around his neck and everything in me wanted to make him feel better, but still I couldn't come up with any words.

On the first truly beautiful Saturday in June, we all walked to the playground near our house. They had turned on the fountain that sprayed streams of water into the air from alternating spouts in the ground. It was packed with

kids jumping and yelling and stomping on the spouts, some in swimsuits, some in shorts and t-shirts with permission not to waste the moment. The kids squealed in delight and their excitement spread straight into the parents, who stood happily by and engaged in conversation instead of sitting bored and impatient, as we would by mid-August.

The leaves on the trees rustled lightly, not yet dampened by the weeks of humidity that were sure to follow.

Laughing at a baby who kept running into and out of the water squinting her eyes in surprise each time she got near it, I realized I felt lighter, free of the cloud I'd been under. I grabbed Kent's hand and pulled him with me toward Lydia and we too got our clothes wet in the sprinklers. It was one of those moments - all the more precious for their rarity - that make you believe laughing with your little family is all you could ever want in the world. I picked Lydia up and was standing just outside the water spray, swinging her toward it and loving the delight in her kicking feet when I saw Kent looking at me with relief all over his face and I thought we were back on track and everything would be okay.

But then, I started apologizing. The park was enclosed by

a wrought iron fence, with a gate at the entrance to ensure no toddlers made their way to the street. When I opened the gate as we were leaving, I misjudged its weight and it swung out of my grasp for a moment, knocking into a stroller with a sleeping baby.

"I'm so sorry," I said to the mother.

"Not a problem," she said. The baby stirred briefly, but remained asleep. There really was no harm done, but I felt as though I had ruined their day.

"Really, I'm sorry about that," I said again. She looked perplexed and said everything was fine. Kent and Lydia were already a halfway up the block and I went to catch up with them, forcing a smile. We had a nice evening, barbecued chicken and watermelon on our patio, soaking up the long hours of daylight. But my mind kept jumping back to the baby in the stroller and I felt irrationally and overwhelmingly guilty. I kept thinking "What if she's woken up and been crabby for the rest of the night, ruining that family's evening? What if I'd hurt her?" It was ridiculous, and I knew it, but my mind just kept going there.

The next day it was a man on the El. It was a crowded

train, but I had found a seat. He got on at the stop after mine and had to stand. He looked to be in his seventies, starting to stoop a little, but he wore a suit and tie. He held onto the pole with one hand, but stumbled when the train hit a curve and I kept debating whether I should offer him my seat. I couldn't decide if that would be embarrassing or helpful to him, so I didn't do anything. The train cleared quite a bit at my stop and I saw from the platform that he took one of the many seats available then. For two days I kept thinking he was probably seething at me.

This went on for another week. I accidentally scratched Lydia's arm when I reached down to take her hand on the sidewalk one day. I forgot to return a library book on time. I was two minutes late for a staff meeting. All of these things took on exaggerated space in my head and began to make me nervous about everything.

Finally, after dropping Lydia off at daycare one morning, I found myself back in front of the church. I watched the small Mass crowd leave again. I watched the quiet old ladies and stoic old men as they made their ways up the block and around corner, wondering with skeptical awe about

what it was that must have drawn them all there day after day. I had been raised in a Catholic home, but I was never much of a believer. Only in my earliest childhood years did God have any substance to me, a neighbor to Santa Clause and the Easter Bunny in my understanding of the world.

I stared at the doors for a moment or two before going to the door furthest to the left. I pulled on the wrought iron handle, but it was locked. I moved to the center and found one that was open. The solid wood door was heavier than it looked, and I wondered how much weight was added by the decorative iron clasps outlining the hinges. I stepped into the vestibule and was stopped short by the familiarity of the ancient aroma of combined must and perfume. I looked in toward the nave just as the lights on the marble pillars lining the aisles went out like a row of dominoes. With the lights out, the stained glass windows brightened in the sunlight, sprinkling colorful shadows across the pews. A gray-haired woman in a pale yellow sundress was kneeling in a pew near the front and a broad-shouldered man sat very still halfway up on the other side. I stepped into the nave and glanced at the small holy water font, but

closed my eyes and turned away from it, fighting the reflex to dip my hand in. Even then, twenty years into a consciously agnostic life, it felt strange to carry out this little refusal - like fighting the impulse to help Lydia tie her shoe when she needed to learn to do it herself.

I went to the very back pew and sat down. There were two main sections of pews on either side of the center aisle and shorter pews, under a lower ceiling on the sides. Above my head, the ceiling swept up into soft points with peach-colored support buttresses. It looked like a quilt. Three low steps led up to the sanctuary, which had a chiseled marble lectern on one side and three ornately carved wooden chairs on the other, the Priest's chair tallest in the center. The altar was wood, cut simply. Behind the altar the walls were rounded with seven tall stained glass windows pointing toward a ceiling that rounded into a dome above them. The priest, in black pants and a black shirt, walked out into the sanctuary, adjusted the red ribbon bookmark in the lectionary, straightened up the altar and then disappeared into the back. It was silent inside except the muted din of traffic from the

street and occasional tapping of beads against a pew as the woman in front said her rosary.

I fidgeted with my hands. For a very long five minutes, I sat stiffly, my back touching but not resting against the back of the pew. Then I got up and rushed out the door, feeling claustrophobic and scared. I slumped onto the stone steps outside and dropped my face into my hands. I began to tick off symptoms of schizophrenia in my mind, wondering if I was beginning to dissociate with reality. I heard someone walking toward the stairs.

"Ma'am? Are you alright? Can I help you with something?" I looked up and saw a man perhaps a little younger than me, wearing khaki shorts, a short-sleeved plaid button-down and a look of genuine concern. I just shook my head, inhaled deeply. He sat down next to me. He had a red folder in his hands, which he put down on the step below. Pulled - at least momentarily - out of my knot of mental undoing, I now felt a mix of irritation and intrigue. It was odd, though not threatening, the way this man just let himself into my personal moment. I tried to look at him out of the corner of my eye, not wanting to engage.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked.

"What?"

"Sitting here?"

"I'm not ready to go in yet."

It hadn't actually occurred to me that he was going to the church - I thought he was just passing by.

"In the church?"

"Yes."

"Why are you here? I mean, if you're not ready. Did you do something bad?" This sounded presumptive and juvenile even as the words fell out of my mouth. It said more about me than him.

He laughed. "Haven't we all?"

I nodded, and then I wanted to get out of there. "Well," I said, standing up and brushing off the back of my pants.

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

Before long, I was stopping at the church every morning. It felt like an instinctual act or at least a physical one, the way the body knows its time to find a bathroom or seek

caloric intake. I stayed near the back and off to one side, out of the spotlight the stained glass windows cast nearer to the center. Different people stayed after Mass on different days, except for the one woman with the rosary near the front who was there every single day. I liked watching her. She had gently wrinkled skin and very straight posture as she knelt. I never saw her rosary - she held it in her hands and it draped down the pew in front of her, softly clicking as she rotated the beads in her fingers, which I imagined to be soft and warm. There was something so intent in the straight way she held her head facing the statue of Jesus behind the altar.

I sometimes imagined what she might be praying for. Most days, I was generous - prosperity for her children, that a sibling would make it safely through a bout of pneumonia. But other days, when I felt dirty or sick about being there, I thought nasty things, assumed she was praying that her son would no longer be gay, that her daughter would be forgiven for going on the pill.

Mostly though, I tried not to think at all. I told myself I was there for brief and quiet respite from the general noise of life. Going there was my meditation, my time for

deep breathing and that was all.

But it started to become a compulsion. Bored stiff at a weekly department meeting or making dinner while listening to more bad news about the economy, I found myself yearning for the enveloping calm and quiet of the air there. I also started to feel guilty. It seemed weird to go to a church nearly every day, but never go to Mass and never talk to anyone. It felt like stealing, though I couldn't say what.

Chapter 8

Cape Town

Naledi did what she said she would do for my study recruitment. Of the thirteen women on her list, she had convinced nine of them to help before coming back to my office a week later. One of the others, she said, had left Cape Town to go home and be with her mother near Johannesburg and two of the women she was unable to convince. The last one on the list she told me, would be a huge help to us, but Naledi was conflicted about asking her.

"Why?" I asked.

"Zika is a dear friend of mine. She recently left her husband and she is more or less in hiding."

"Hiding from what?"

"Her husband. He is HIV positive, but he is in denial and can be violent. He forces her to sleep with him, refuses to use protection."

"Has she tested positive?"

"Not yet. So, she's trying to get away from him."

"I don't want to put her in any danger."

Naledi shook her head. "If I know Zika, she is going crazy with nothing to do. I don't want to put her in any danger either, but this might be a good use of her time.

"Why do you think she'd be good for the study?"

"You'll see when you meet her."

We drove to a township northeast of the city, Naledi laughing at my jerky reactions to children running in the streets and cars speeding past me all around. We went to a little shack and Naledi knocked. A woman opened the door and jumped to give Naledi a long exuberant hug. Naledi introduced us - me as a professor and Abi as one of her oldest and most precious friends.

The shack had a dirt floor, a limp mattress on a makeshift wooden platform and a little kitchen area with a hot plate and a cooler. In the middle of the room was a small wood dining table, with pristine shine and a vase of flowers on it. Abi caught me looking at it and beamed.

"My grandmother made this table. I don't let anyone eat on it!"

Naledi laughed and squeezed her shoulders again. "Where is your sister?" Abi stiffened and shrugged. "Oh, come now

Abi, you know you can trust me." Abi went to the cooler and dug through it a little, then closed it.

"She was very clear. She said to tell no one."

"But Abi, it's me! I'm like an auntie to you both." Now Abi smiled slyly.

"That's not what I'm afraid of. I think you'll just encourage her in her new efforts and I'm afraid for her. She never knows when to stop."

"What are you talking about? Isn't she hiding from Ghubari?"

"Yes, but you know Zika. She cannot sit still." Abi sat down on the mattress.

"What is she doing?" Naledi gave Abi a look full of maternal expectation. Abi shook her head. I stood awkwardly near the door, feeling intrusive.

Abi sighed loudly and gave in. "She's out back, I'll go get her. You'll have to ask her the rest yourself." She put a hand firmly on Naledi's arm. "Please make sure she isn't trading one danger for another."

Abi went outside and returned with Zika, who was was stunning. She was tall and lean with perfect cheekbones

and the most beautifully toned arm muscles I'd ever seen. She was wearing a long bright African skirt and a tube top that revealed a stomach with subtle roundness that screamed health and confidence. She hugged Naledi tightly and then smacked her shoulder.

"What are you doing here?"

Naledi grinned. "I missed you, Z."

"Nonsense. I know you wouldn't chase me down just for that. What's going on? Who is this?" She nodded in my direction without looking at me, clearly not pleased that Naledi had brought someone else.

"Zika, this is Shelby. She's a professor, from the United States. She's doing some research and we think you can help." Zika gave my hand a brittle shake. Naledi explained the whole thing and Zika nodded, looking as though she was trying to work something out.

"I can see those wheels turning. What are you scheming?" Naledi asked. Zika raised one eyebrow.

"I might be interested. I can probably get people involved." She looked at me carefully, then back to Naledi - she wouldn't address me directly. "But maybe we

can help each other."

Naledi and Abi exchanged looks. "What is it you are into now?" Zika turned away from us and we all shuffled into a small living area.

"Oh, Abi has been telling on me," Zika said, flopping onto the mattress and dismissing Abi's concerns with a wave of her hand. "You do nothing but worry." Naledi gave her a stern look.

"And you, maybe not enough."

"I'm here aren't I? I didn't really want to leave my home, you know. It should have been Ghubari who left." There was fire in Zika's voice and Naledi backed down. I stepped in.

"I'd be happy to help you if I can. What do you need?" I saw a flash of something urgent and hopeful in Zika, but then she turned away, flicked a small beetle off of the blanket.

"Let's work on your study," she said. "Then we'll see."

With some additional prodding from Naledi, Zika came to my office a few days later. We had gone over the details of

our recruitment effort with her at Abi's house, and she had obviously given it some thought because she drilled me for an hour on what I would be asking of the participants. She was sharp and accusatory and it was clear she did not trust me but I wasn't sure if it was because I was white or American or she thought I was an ivory tower academic (and if I'm being honest, I was exactly that at that point) or if it was just her disposition to be guarded.

"How often will you need to meet with these women during the study?" she asked.

"Once a month."

"You should do it twice a month, weekly if you can."

When I asked why, she laughed like I was a naive child.

"For consistency. A month can be a long time in some of their lives, long enough for people to change their mind, forget the importance of this."

"You think this is important?" I was genuinely surprised, but surprise and sarcasm can sound the same.

"If it works."

"I don't know if we have the resources for weekly visits."

She just gave a disapproving look and moved on. "What time

of day will you go see them?"

"We'll want them to come to the office."

"Ha!" she clapped her hands three times in humiliating delight. "Forget it then. You can go home. That will not happen."

"Even if we arrange for transportation?"

"Who will watch their children? What if they have other sick relatives they are caring for? What if they are working? It can take two hours to get downtown by bus from the outer townships. These women do not have that kind of time."

"Do they need the money?"

"They don't have it now." She crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair.

It certainly complicated things to rethink how we'd design the study, but her feedback wasn't without merit. Her attitude though, was getting the better of me. "Look," I said. "If you don't want to help me, you don't have to."

"I *am* helping you."

"You're taking a lot of glee in what I don't know about a place I've been in for only a short time. Not by choice,

by the way."

Now she grinned. "Now we're getting down to it. You don't even want to be here. And you wonder why I give you a hard time. We don't need any more studies under someone's reluctant microscope. We need medications and better men and support from our own fucking government."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You shouldn't feel it."

"Look, I'm doing my best here. It's true that it wasn't my idea to come. But I don't dislike it. I get that there is a terrible need here and I do want to help. I have to do this study - it's my job. I can see that it has to be much more than that and if you really knew me, you'd know that I put everything I can into my job. I do appreciate your help. I just wish you would be a little less condescending about it."

Suddenly, her demeanor changed completely. Her lips broke into a wide smile and she patted me on the knee. "Alright, alright. Let's just get on with it." It was a strange approach, one through which she maintained the upper hand, which I think was all she wanted. She wanted me to beg.

We drove to a remote suburb that was further out than I had been yet. It was more rural, an outcropping of rondavels, organized into little mini subdivisions of six or seven homes forming loose circles with clotheslines and a scattering of toys between them. We pulled into an area between a couple of these cul de sacs, near a water pump. The air smelled fresher, less urban, less soiled with the mineral density of crowds and vehicles and urgency.

Zika led me to a cinderblock building that looked less like a hut anyone lived in and more like a commercial property of some sort. Inside, several women sat on mismatched wood and plastic chairs, sewing. Some of their faces brightened when we entered and they said hello to Zika. They all looked curiously at me. I waved shyly. In one corner was an old school desk with a vase of plastic flowers on it and a tiny little sign with hand painted lettering.

"What does that say?" I asked Zika.

She looked at it and a tiny flash of softness crossed her face. "It says *Welcome*." She sat in one of the chairs and gestured for me to join her. For several minutes she spoke casually in Zhusa to the women in a way that sounded like

they were just catching up. People nodded and shrugged, looked out the little windows, commenting on the weather. Eventually, she leaned forward in her chair, resting her forearms on her thighs and began to speak more seriously. The women all looked at her intently, some putting down their needles and thread.

I watched, trying to read their faces. One woman pursed her lips angrily and left. Others nodded with interest as Zika spoke, while some remained stone-faced and focused on their mending. Eventually, she took a piece of paper and a pen from her purse and passed it around. Eight women wrote their names down and Zika gave me a smug grin.

When we left she said "I bet some of the others would also sign up, if I go see them alone. Some people just won't do things for a white woman. Which I can understand."

I changed the subject. "What is that group about?"

"It's a support group, basically."

"For what?"

"Women."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What is it that they are supporting?"

"Each other."

"For what reason?"

Zika laughed. "Being women. Around here, that alone requires all the support you can get."

In the car on the way back to the city, Zika was quiet for a while and then surprised me with a question in a more humble tone. "Can you tell me again what's the point of your study?"

"We are hoping to understand whether it makes a difference in someone's health if they keep their illness secret from their families." Zika took a deep breath, but didn't say anything. "Our thinking is that keeping it a secret might negatively affect someone's health."

"You really think that my immune system cares whether or not I keep secrets?"

"Well, trying to keep it hidden might cause additional stress, which in turn can make it harder for a body to fight the illness."

Zika stared out her window. "I have a friend who is

positive and she hasn't told anyone but me. She seems okay. She doesn't have a lot of family around. But no one would ever guess that she's positive. She doesn't talk about it much. I don't know if she's scared or what."

"Right. That's what we want to understand more about. Does keeping it all inside make a difference in her ability to ward off AIDS? We don't know yet, but we think it might."

Zika nodded now and faced me. "And I know another woman who has four children and a husband and she hasn't told anyone else either. She has to sneak to the doctor and she hides what medications they can offer her. I don't think she always takes them because she doesn't have a lot of privacy."

"Exactly. That's another concern we have. If people are trying to keep it secret, it makes it harder for them to get treatment."

"Not that there's much treatment to get."

"Right."

We were both quiet for a minute and then Zika spoke more softly. "I don't really know why she told me. We're not

close. I don't know why I'm someone people tell."

"Well, they must see something in you they trust." I wanted to lighten the mood. "Which is weird," I said. For an instant Zika looked angry but then she saw my smirk and let out a bubbly laugh.

"Good thing you met me, because I'm not sure how else you'd ever get these people to talk to you."

Chapter 9

Cape Town

Zika and I arranged a series of "office hours" out at the community center she'd taken me to. We ran some heavy twine between two poles in the back and hung a bed sheet from it, to create an area that was screened off for private conversations.

Zika had told the women she knew best that we'd be there and said if the message was going to resonate at all, it would spread on its own. The first day, we set ourselves up by ten o'clock and at noon it was still just the two of us. Then, a heavysset woman walked in very slowly looking down to the floor. Zika greeted her in a gentler tone than I'd have thought she was capable of. The woman had her hair pulled back in a bandanna and when she lifted her head to face us, I was taken aback by her dark and terrified eyes. Zika waved her in, and then locked the front door. That hadn't been our plan, but it was a good move - the woman visibly relaxed. I said hello and she acknowledged me with the briefest of eye contact. I offered her a cookie and Zika asked her in Xhosa if she'd like to move to the back, that we could talk behind the curtain. She

nodded.

We all went back and sat ourselves in three folding chairs behind the curtain. We'd intentionally walled off an area that had no windows and it was darker than we were expecting. I made a mental note to bring a lamp next time. Zika asked if the woman spoke English and she shook her head. Zika and I each had a clipboard with a list of screening questions, written in both Xhosa and English.

1. *Name?*
2. *Address?*
3. *Phone number?*
4. *If phone number provided, may we call you? If yes, are there times we shouldn't?*
5. *Birth date?*
6. *Marital status?*
7. *Number of children?*
8. *Other living relatives?*
9. *Members of household?*
10. *Occupation?*
11. *Occupation of spouse?*

12. To your knowledge, are you HIV positive?

12a. If yes, do you know how you contracted it?

12b. If no, why are you here?

12c. If we arrange for a test, are you willing to be tested?

13. Who knows that you are HIV positive?

14. Do you plan to tell anyone else?

15. When you get sick, who do you go to for care?

16. Have you ever seen a medical doctor?

Zika seemed to talk for a long time at the beginning and it unnerved me that I couldn't tell what she was saying. This was not the protocol. At some point, the woman also began to speak and they engaged in a conversation. Eventually, Zika started to fill in answers on the form, but I couldn't get a grasp on her approach. I had expected that she would go through the questions in order, so that I could, at minimum, watch the woman's body language and get a sense about how she reacted to the questions. It was my job to be careful, to screen out people who might not be dependable or honest. This was not at all how one completes a study. I should have hired a professional

translator.

According to the form, the woman's name was Kholiwe. As the interview went on, Kholiwe became less tense and more talkative. At one point, she was quite animated, her hands flying all around her as she talked and Zika looked riveted. She leaned forward with wide eyes and moved her head slowly back and forth in what looked like disbelief. Eventually whatever the story was came to an end with both of them nodding slowly, the corners of their lips downturned in resignation of something they must have felt was beyond their control.

"What is she saying?" I asked. They both turned to me as if they'd forgotten I was there. Kholiwe snapped her mouth shut and Zika gave me a severe look, unhappy with my interruption. Out of frustration, I rolled my eyes and sat back heavily in my seat. Zika stood and then Kholiwe stood and Zika guided her out of the room with a gentle arm on her back. I heard Zika lock the door again after the woman left so I came out from behind our makeshift partition into the main room. Zika bounded back toward me with a fiery glare.

"Why would you do that?" she asked.

"Why would I do what?"

"Ruin that woman's confidence at that moment? I had her ready to sign up!"

"What do you mean? She's not going to sign up anymore?"

"Probably not. You've rattled her."

"Rattled her? How?"

"With you demanding question."

"Demanding question? I just wanted to know what that whole thing was about. You clearly weren't following the questionnaire. I had to make sure this was going to be a legitimate screening."

"Legitimate screening? You think I was doing something wrong? This woman has been through hell. If she was going to talk, I was going to listen."

"Screenings for research are not supposed to be therapy sessions, Zika. There need to be boundaries. And consistency. And measurable interactions."

"Measurable interactions?" Zika let out a sarcastic snarl of a laugh. "How in the hell do you expect to get women to participate? They don't have a lot of time for taking quizzes. Do you want honest answers or do you want to

follow your outline? You are in the wrong place if you only want the second one."

"So you do one interview and you think you're the expert?"

"No. I live here. I know these people. And I know how tightly they are clutching their secrets. I know how much this terrifies them." She reached out and patted my head.

"And it's going to take more than a pretty little white girl with a clipboard to get them to open up."

I jerked away from her and walked to the other end of the room. Not sure what to do, I stood awkwardly looking out the window. Across the road and between two houses, there was a water pump and I watched two young girls fill jugs. I noticed several women lined up near the door, looking through their handbags or not doing much of anything.

"They're here for you," Zika said, her voice softer now.

"I mean, because I asked them to come." She aimlessly moved some chairs around near the door. "We should invite them in or tell them they can go."

I turned to face Zika. "If they don't speak English, we need to have a conversation about each interview after it's done. You need to tell me everything they've said."

Everything.”

“Fine.”

We moved on through our day, making slow progress because every interview took both time to complete and time to discuss afterward. Only two of the fourteen women we interviewed spoke English, though some of the others had Zika ask me questions for them. Where was I from? What would I do with the information they shared? Was I finding a cure?

One woman only ever had sex with her husband - and therefore could only have contracted the disease from him - but he beat her almost to death when she told him and left her laying in a field. Her entire extended family disowned her and now she lived in a tent, which she had to keep moving to avoid being arrested. For awhile she'd lurk around her children's school, but once her ten-year-old daughter saw her and shouted that she was a whore. Another woman cried the entire time she spoke with us, having never discussed her diagnosis with anyone. She was one of the few who was receiving some treatment from a charitable doctor and she kept her medications in a rice bin until her toddler son dumped it out one day and she nearly passed out

with fear that he had eaten some.

Each woman's story was tragic in its own way, but they were all similar in this: almost all of them had lost hope. And they all expected to die a painful death within a year or two.

When the last woman left, Zika slumped into a chair leaning her head against the back and stretching her long legs out in front of her. She ran her hand across the top of her head and pulled stray hair behind her ears.

"This was good, I think," she said.

"Thank you for your help," I said quietly. I was exhausted. My neck and shoulders hurt from tensing them all afternoon. I kept whipping back and forth between worry that I'd never be able to defend Zika's methods and heartbreak for the people who spoke with us.

"You're welcome."

"Hey," I said. "I'm supposed to help you with something. Wasn't that our deal?"

"Yes." She stood up quickly and started pulling the bed sheet down off the twine. She folded it and threw it into

a corner and we pulled the chairs back into a circle. Zika stood with her hands on her hips and surveyed the room. "I think we can leave the twine up there for next time. This looks good."

"Aren't you going to tell me?" She looked at me, but did not speak. "About whatever it is you want help with?"

She grabbed her purse and motioned for me to follow her.

"Let's go find Naledi."

We found Naledi at home. It was a modest, but well-kept little square house on a street just inside the city limits. You could touch the house next door, from her window, but that was spacious compared to the shacks in Khayelitsha. She was balancing her checkbook with a glass of wine at the kitchen table. We sat down and she put her statements and receipts into a pile and got up to get two more glasses of wine. A gray cat jumped up onto her chair while she was up and when she returned she lifted it gently and put him on her lap.

"Tell me how your day went."

I looked at Zika, who was smirking at me. "It went really

well," I said. "I think we found several eligible women."

"That's wonderful!"

Zika put her hands down flat on the table and looked Naledi straight in the eye. "Naledi, it was completely exhausting." Then she broke down laughing and her shoulders fell forward as though the levee of her pride had finally burst. I was irritated that she couldn't have shared this little admission with me earlier, but I couldn't help laughing along with her. Naledi's presence was a comfort to both of us. She understood this was laughter-as-last-resort, and I wished she had been with us all day.

We told her all about the day, skipping the details of our own conflict, not wanting to drag her into it. Naledi was the kind of person who took on the pain everyone she met and it seemed as though each story we told pressed more weight down on her. When we'd tired of talking about it, she stared at the floor and said softly "This country is being crushed by AIDS."

Zika picked up the bottle of wine and began refilling our glasses. "It's worse than that. We're being punished by our own leaders."

"What do you mean?" Naledi asked.

"Our President. Mbeki is chumming with the pharmaceutical companies. He is doing backroom deals and such, taking kickbacks off of our suffering. They're saying he wants progress to be slow, so he can make more money from the drug sales."

"Mbeki?" Naledi looked incredulous. "No, that doesn't make any sense. He came up under Madiba. They worked on this. The government is supposed to be ready to ramp up its work."

"Well, he has a short memory." Zika folded her arms.

"It's a huge problem, Naledi. We need leaders that represent *us*. Not companies from America." She tilted her head subtly in my direction when she said it.

Naledi ignored her and instead stood up, grabbed the empty wine bottle and hurled it into a garbage bin. Then she paced.

Zika went on. "There is a group called ACT - the African Campaign for Treatment. It's starting right here in Cape Town and they're going to fight it - bring Madiba's vision back. We need to help."

Naledi came back to the table and stood leaning against the top of her chair, staring at Zika, ready to hear more. I was still quiet, trying to decide if I even believed Zika. On one hand, it made sense. This charge against the government helped explain why care seemed so primitive for a place that was otherwise quite advanced. But on the other, Zika seemed impetuous to me and it wasn't clear where she was getting her information. She turned to look straight at me.

"This is what I need your help with. This is how you can repay me."

I glanced at Naledi, hoping for a signal to validate either my doubt or Zika's claims, but her expression was earnest, almost to the point of desperation. "Okay," I said. "What do you need?"

Zika made a face. "I can tell you still aren't sure about me, Shelby." I felt myself blushing. It wasn't untrue, but I was embarrassed to hear her say it in front of Naledi.

"No," I said, reaching out and touching Zika's arm. "It's not that. I just - I'm never sure about these things. People believe a lot about their governments that isn't

always true."

She pulled away and rolled her eyes. "Fine. You pick and choose. I help you, but you pick and choose what's worthy."

"Zika!" Naledi gave her a stern look.

"No, she's right," I said. "I didn't mean to be dismissive. It's in my nature to be skeptical. What can I do?"

Zika kept her eyes on the table and spoke more quietly now.

"There's a demonstration on Friday. Naledi, I would love for you to be there. And Shelby, please come. We need bodies."

Naledi offered me a sympathetic glance. With some reluctance, I nodded and she spoke for both of us. "We will be there, Zika. We will be anxious to hear more. And if there is help to provide, we will provide it."

"Good." Zika took her glass to the sink and then went down the hall to the bathroom.

Naledi came over and put her hand on my shoulder. "She doesn't mean to be rude, Shelby."

I laughed. "I'm not so sure."

She sat down and spoke softly. "It's hard here. It's hard for a lot of people still. There is not a lot of trust."

"For white people? Is that what you mean?"

She nodded. I gave a loud sigh, full of frustration, and regretted it when I saw how steady she was, with a willingness to say what needed to be said.

"Is it hard for you?" I asked.

She took a deep breath. "It is not not hard."

"Okay," I said. I wanted to say more but couldn't. Zika came back and took a banana from a bowl on the counter.

"Alright, let's go. I need to get some sleep." She grabbed her purse and I exchanged a look with Naledi that I hoped conveyed some semblance of graciousness. She offered a weak smile and I knew neither of us was sure how things would go from there.

Zika turned on the radio in the car and sang along to a Madonna song. It was a strange mixing of my worlds in that moment and I pressed on the gas, feeling a desperate need to be alone for awhile. She sang the whole way back to Abi's house where I dropped her off. She got out of my car and then poked her head back in the passenger side window.

"I'll see you Friday," she said. It wasn't a question.

Chapter 10

I spent the next morning flipping the channels on my television, stopping only on American shows or broadcasts. Every time I heard a beautifully delicate African accent, I wanted to burrow a hole in the ground. I dialed Maria's number, ready to ask if I could switch my career focus, do something that required less strength of character, something more fitting for the oblivious xenophobe that I apparently was. Fortunately, it was the middle of the night in California when I called and I just got her office voicemail. I left a message, but only to say everything was fine and I was just checking in.

Sick of myself, I called Kent's clinic and left my name and number with the nurse who answered, grateful that it hadn't been Naledi. I jumped when the phone rang a couple hours later and then struggled to figure out what it was I wanted from him.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, after our initial greetings.

"Yes, yes. I just wanted to, I mean, I'm just feeling

really..."

"Yes?"

"Homesick, I guess." I covered my face with one hand, mortified to have just said something so needy to a colleague. It must not have been any less awkward for him because there was a long silence from the other end of the phone.

"Um..." he said.

"Could you meet me for coffee? I just really need to get out."

"Okay." His voice was flat, completely void of reaction.

"I should be done here in an hour or so. I could meet you - wait, where do you live?"

"Campus housing, Rondebosch."

"Fancy." I could practically hear the grin on his face and wished I had lied.

I went to the coffee shop early, ordered something decaf and sat near a window making a list of things I could talk about that wouldn't sound neurotic or foolish. I didn't end up needing them. Kent opened the conversation.

"Naledi says you're coming to the ACT demonstration on Friday," he said, putting the change from his coffee purchase neatly back into his wallet.

"Word gets around," I said. He laughed.

"I think it's great. They definitely need people."

"You're already involved?"

"Just. I only learned about the organization last week, but Lord knows it's necessary. I just hope there's substance to it."

"So you think it's true? Is Mbeki in bed with the pharmaceutical companies?"

Kent looked out the window, scratched his chin. "I'm not sure. Something is not going as planned. He was poised to start implementing strong roll-out programs. Namibia and Botswana are already conducting wide-reaching public health programs. We were supposed to be next, but something is stalling."

He explained Mandela had passed a law 1997 with a goal of reducing the cost of medications by overriding international patent laws and allowing imports of generic drugs. It was quickly challenged by several players -

including the US government - on the grounds that it violated treaties overseen by the World Trade Organization. There was grumbling that it was too little too late by Mandela, but most people were forgiving - he had had some heavy stuff on his plate. But he'd been vocal about the importance of gaining control of the situation. AIDS was going to be a major challenge for Mbeki's term, and Mandela had done what he could to pass a lit torch.

But since Mbeki had taken office, it seemed nothing was moving but arcane legal proceedings. In the absence of visible progress, people could only see the havoc the disease was causing and all sorts of ideas spread about what was really happening. The leading theory was that Mbeki was receiving financial offers from the drug companies in exchange for voiding the law.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I honestly don't know. I know that people can't afford their medications here, while in other places they can. I know that this disease is pummeling this country. But I can't pretend to know what happens in the halls of power."

His unwillingness to engage in speculation was a huge comfort to me. I had thought I was homesick for the

comfort and simplicity of my own little life, but it was actually the safety of skepticism - the understanding that facts, not assumptions, should be the basis of belief - that I had been missing. That was not an American thing, it was a personal worldview thing. Thinking versus feeling. There were lots of us like that in the world, I'd just not been around any lately.

My angst over Zika and Naledi was well-diluted by the time I left the coffee shop and I was actually excited for the demonstration.

Chapter 11

On Friday, I made my way to a plaza outside the central courthouse where I saw a cluster of people gathered near a large planter with bench seating. There were men and women, mostly black and mostly young. I spotted Naledi looking quiet and a little uncomfortable amid the buzz and made my way to her. A couple of girls were making posters on the ground with fat markers. *Patients not Profits* read some of them. *End AIDS now!* read another.

"You came!" Naledi said when I approached. Zika was standing nearby and she turned toward us and said the same thing.

"You didn't think I would?" I asked, feeling a little ashamed that they thought I would go back on my word. Zika laughed. I moved on.

"So, how is this going to work?"

"Well, many of us will have posters and I think we're going to march from here to that neighborhood of fine mansions over there." Zika pointed east toward an area that became more residential.

"What's over there?"

"I'm not sure if it's someone specific or just a general statement that medications should not be solely available to the wealthy." A tall lean man wearing a t-shirt that said *Access Now!* called us to attention with a megaphone.

"Hello everyone and thank you for coming!" This man was born to use a megaphone - his voice was clear and strong and warm all at the same time, compelling you to listen. He informed us of the plan, which Zika had correct, adding that we would be stopping for awhile outside the vacation home of an executive from Pfizer. At the end of his instruction he said "Remember, your presence here is essential and the work we are doing is critically important to millions of South Africans. But it is also peaceful work. We can be angry. We should be angry. But we will not be violent. Keep your heads high and stay firm in our footsteps. Onward!"

Everyone cheered and fell into line. I saw Naledi wave to someone and I followed her gaze to see Kent walking toward us. He greeted Naledi and she introduced him to Zika and then he turned to me with a tiny smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"Great to see you." We looked around at the crowd. "So, what do you think? Legitimate effort or just another touchy-feely grassrootsy thing?"

"Well he is certainly convincing," I said, nodding toward the megaphone guy.

"Yeah, that's Lonnie Deekman. He's behind this whole thing. And definitely amazing to watch." Someone came up to us and handed us each a sign. Mine said *Afordable Treatment Now!* I looked at my sign and looked pointedly at Kent and we all laughed. Naledi squeezed my arm.

"I think it is legitimate, Shelby. You'll see."

Zika made a face. "Naledi, why would I bring you into something I didn't think was real?"

"Not every movement has a center."

"Well this one does." There was some hurt in Zika's reaction, but mostly a pleading earnestness. I didn't even like her very much, but I was compelled. I wanted to believe her.

Then the singing started. As we stepped off the curb and into the street, the group of people that moments before had been scattered and random seemed to gel into one

cohesive line and then I heard a gentle beat from somewhere behind us that became a fervent swell of upraised voices all around me. They sang English verses set off by refrains in Xhosa. The melody seemed to drive us forward through the streets in one graceful motion, but the melody is not what sticks with me now. What I remember now was watching a couple hundred people meld into one powerful body as every individual set aside their vulnerability and their anger and channeled all their energy into asking for change. I held my up sign and let a tear slip out of my eye. Naledi smiled and gave me a little side hug. I was in.

At one point, I looked over at Kent and saw him joining in. "This is really something, isn't it?" he said.

We made our way down a street that had a tree-lined feeling because there was a canopy of branches over our heads, but the trees were all planted behind the eighteen-foot stucco walls that separated the street from the residences. There were no sidewalks. From the street where we marched, we could glimpse the roofs of some of the mansions, but mostly we couldn't see anything. It was an odd thing, the quiet of the street and the closed-off nature of the homes that

made it feel like we were protesting in a tunnel, with no one around to hear (and it's quite possible no one did). But the music created by the mingling of beautiful voices, powered by urgency and conviction, made it all seem like nothing more important could be happening anywhere on earth at that moment.

Afterward, Zika - high on the spirit of the thing, hugged all of us goodbye and went off with some of the friends she'd made, promising to meet me the next day for another round of screenings. Naledi, Kent and I went to a cafe, a bit giddy ourselves. After we sat down, a number of other people from the march came in and filled the tables next to ours.

While we waited for our food, Lonnie came over and shook hands with Kent. "Hey brother, I'm so glad you came out with us today. What a great turnout. Please introduce me to your friends here." He seemed so sincere in his enthusiasm that I couldn't tell if he knew Kent well or was one of those people who truly appreciates everyone. He asked both Naledi and I about our lives and occupations. We talked at length about some work being done at Berkeley

that he had been interested in. Then we asked about him.

He had grown up in Cape Town in one of the nicer black neighborhoods - which wasn't saying much. He had been raised by his mother who worked menial jobs. He had never met his father and though he was never told directly, he suspected that he was white and had ensured that they were taken care of. Lonnie had gone to college in the UK and then his mother passed away when he was in his twenties. He inherited the house and worked on and off as a journalist. He had a partner, Tommy, who lived with him. And he was HIV positive.

Now, he was focused on the massive need for treatment.

"So, is the government holding back progress?" I asked.

Lonnie made a face. "It's unclear. They're holding off on implementing the law while the legal challenges unfold. And in the mean time, the pharmaceuticals are price gouging and no one can legally sell lower-cost generics. It's unconscionable."

Kent dropped his head, ran his hand roughly through his hair. "How much do they charge?"

"I've heard as much as seventeen-hundred a month."

"Well, what are you paying?" Kent was not certainly not shy.

"I don't. I don't think I can lead this movement and ask people to help me when I have something they don't because of my relative privilege. And I can't really afford it anyway. I'd have to have a full time job and then I wouldn't have time to do this."

We all nodded, silently processing this information.

Naledi reached out, wrapped a hand gently around Lonnie's forearm. "People will help you. I know it. We can make something happen." Then her voice broke and she muttered "We have too."

It got quiet for a moment. Later, Kent and I would talk about that moment and how we had both been uncomfortable with Naledi's emotion but in awe of Lonnie's ability to accept her support and comfort her at the same time, without ever becoming riled himself. It was, we would learn, the key to his leadership, but it was also just who he was. He was someone people wanted to be around, wanted to help - including us.

Chapter 12

You could feel rain in the air when we left the cafe. Pent up and ready to burst down any moment, it condensed the smoky smell of braai all around us. We got to Naledi's car first and bid her a good evening and then Kent walked with me another block, quiet but jittery.

"This is a lot to take in," I said.

He rolled his head around on his neck, stretching. "I don't want to think about it right now."

"You? Really? There are times that you don't think about this?" I was genuinely surprised, but trying to sound playful. He smiled.

"Yes. You have to. That's one thing I've learned. You have to be able to take a break now and then or you'll never make it. It's too crushing." He picked up a soda bottle and tossed it into a trash can someone had placed outside their hut. "I'm wound up," he said.

"Aren't you tired?"

"I'm Exhausted. But I'm wound up." He kicked a small chunk of broken concrete like a soccer ball. "You wanna

come over? Have a beer?"

I almost suggested we go to a bar instead, but I was done with crowds for the day. My pants were sticking to the sweaty backs of my legs. "Do you have air conditioning?"

He laughed. "Yes."

"I'm in." His car was two spots in front of mine. He opened my door for me and a tiny quiver shot up my spine. "Follow me," he said, gently pushing it shut.

I had expected a cheap and dumpy bachelor apartment, but it turned out he lived in a lovely little home in Plumstead. It wasn't luxury living, but it was definitely suburban with a tidy fence and potted flowers lining a walkway to the front door.

"Not what you expected?" he asked.

"Well...no. This seems more..."

"Expensive?"

I laughed. "Yes."

"Yeah, it kind-of tarnishes my image. I don't pay for it though. I'm house-sitting. It belongs to a colleague who is in the UK for a couple years." He unlocked the door and we stepped into a cozy living room with wooden beams across

the ceiling and a big couch that was inviting, though too large for the room. It smelled like he'd cooked something with garlic the night before, which made me suddenly aware of how hungry I was.

Kent disappeared down a hallway off the kitchen and I sat down on the couch, which seemed to suck me right in. I had my head back and my eyes closed when he came back in wearing a clean pair of shorts and a polo shirt.

"Come on. I'll make you dinner." He held his hand out to help me get up and I wriggled out of the fluffy cushions. We went into the kitchen he opened two Peronis and I sat on a stool across the counter from him while he chopped peppers and onions.

We were quiet for several minutes, both grateful for a little retreat. He was neat with his cooking, carefully trimming the ends of the some sweet peas and disposing the scraps as he went. My neck was tense with charged fatigue. I sipped my beer and tried to take deep breaths to relax without Kent noticing. I thought he was making a stir fry, but to my delight he pulled a box of pasta from a cupboard. All of a sudden it seemed exactly the kind of comfort I wanted. He put a pot of water on the stove and sat down on

a stool next to me.

"The other day, you said you were homesick. What do you miss most right now?"

I hung my head and laughed, embarrassed again that I'd said that out loud. "It seems like weeks have passed since then." I ran my hand through the condensation on my beer glass and tried to give the question some thought anyway. "My life back home seems so different now, so...unremarkable. I miss my cat. And fluffer nutters. They don't sell Fluff here."

He snorted, trying not to spit out the swig of beer in his mouth. "No way."

"Yep." I smiled sheepishly. "My biggest weakness."

"Will wonders never cease?" he said and we grew quiet again.

"But I feel guilty missing anything."

"What would you be doing if you were home right now?"

I dropped my head onto my arm on the counter in embarrassment. "Oh god. Let's see, Friday night - I'd probably be in my office, reviewing work from my grad students."

Kent laughed. "Come on, really?"

"Yes. Sadly. If it was a really productive week, I'd be home, with Dateline or something stupid on TV and reading journals in bed."

"Oh man. No wonder you're over your homesickness." It was a playful jibe. I knew he wasn't beyond obsession himself. He got up from his chair and went back to the stove, again placing his hand gently on my back as he passed. He sauteed the vegetables in olive oil and garlic and when the pasta was done, tossed them together with a squeeze of lemon and some oregano. It was a simple meal, and exactly something I sometimes made for myself. Then, he pulled a container of Kraft parmesan cheese from the fridge and I almost got tears in my eyes.

"Where did you get that?"

"I made my brother send me some. It's so juvenile." On his face was perhaps the most carefree smile I'd ever seen cross his lips.

"But it's so good."

"Let's eat in the living room." He piled pasta and veggies onto two plates and I grabbed some paper towel and forks

and our beers and followed him. He set our plates down on the coffee table and flipped on the stereo, which was tuned to a pop music station.

We ate leaning back with our plates rested on our chests and the whole idea - eating comfort food exhausted on the couch - eventually became our Friday night ritual. We didn't talk much, just laughed at some of the radio commercials, and it was an easy comfortable silence, injected with a few tingles now and then alerting my brain that I really liked him.

When he took the dishes to the kitchen, I finished my beer and nosed through the built-in bookshelves that surrounded a fireplace and where the stereo was stationed. There was a shelf of records and I flipped through them. It was a random collection: some South African stuff I didn't recognize (and one I did, which made me very proud), Bruce Springsteen, Miles Davis, Herb Alpert. I pulled Alabama's Christmas album off the shelf and waved it around the corner.

"This yours?"

He shook his head, laughing. "I know. What the hell?" He finished loading the dishwasher and gave the counters a

wipe down. I felt relieved that who he was at home seemed consistent with the person I'd been getting to know in the clinic and the community. There was something in the way he took care of things professionally that felt particular without being finicky. Here he was still on top of things, but more at ease, now and then singing a little with the radio.

He joined me in the living room and stood close, both of use poking through the records. He pulled Van Morrison's Moondance off the shelf and lifted the cover to the record player. "And It Stoned Me" came through with beautifully grainy sound and Kent started doing a goofy little air drum, tapping the beat - the tentative movements of someone who never dances in front of other people, but no doubt lets loose in the shower. I swayed a bit, swinging my hips with exaggerated movements and soon we were dancing, badly and like children. He let the song play out, but then lifted the needle and moved it forward. The opening guitar strains of "Into the Mystic" fell out of the speakers and Kent nodded at the stereo, satisfied with his choice. He reached out and wound the volume knob high and as the rolling bass slid smoothly into the guitar line, he turned to me with a

look of contentment like I'd never seen. He reached out and slid his hand under mine and then quickly we were standing close, one of his arms around my waist and the other holding my hand up to his chest. I rested my cheek against his and we danced, barely moving as the music filled us and we seemed to fill each other.

That night, we fell asleep on the couch, my head on his chest, both of us sticky in the heat. We slept poorly but I woke up the next morning more refreshed than I'd been in years.

Chapter 13

Chicago

In early August, there was a fundraiser for Kent's clinic. It was a mid-range affair in a mid-range downtown hotel ballroom, without the pomp of the annual children's hospital gala, but definitely fancier than our normal Friday activities. A week before the event I pulled out the navy dress I'd worn the last three years, alternating scarves and shiny jewelry to make it look fresh. I held it up and racked my brain for a way to reinvent it yet again. I imagined the ladies from the event committee whispering and rolling their eyes after taking note. In the last year, Kent had really made strides with the clinic, stabilizing its relationship with some funders and partnerships with other organizations. It was transitioning from chaotic start-up to neighborhood bedrock, and the people they helped were thriving. A new dress was in order.

He walked into the bathroom on the night of the event just as I was zipping up a red sleeveless number that seemed to make my eyes pop. He whistled and I turned to see him in nice gray pants with a vest buttoned over a white shirt and

teal tie. He looked amazing. We looked amazing.

"We should do this more often," he said and then we just looked at each other and laughed, knowing that would never be us. But it was fun for a night anyway.

I'm not sure if it was the dress or the familiarity of the people after several years of this endeavor but I found the cocktail hour to be less torturous than it had been in the past. It had been six years since Kent opened the clinic and though there had been difficulty keeping people interested and focused at times, there were now people in the room I'd known longer than Lydia. Kent moved fluidly around the room, sometimes by my side and sometimes not. We were each other's touch points, but I was pleasantly surprised at how comfortable I had become with this group and conversations flowed easily, for the most part.

"Busy," was my standard reply when people asked how we were doing. It was a bland answer and inaccurate. Summer is always lighter for me at work and I hadn't been doing much at all lately, except trying to outrun my own bizarre behavior. I was more interested in hearing about other people's lives and for the night, and it was a great relief that most were more interested sharing.

Once we were seated for dinner, the event chair Judy Van Horne spoke from a dais in the front of the soft-lit room. She spoke highly of Kent and the successes of the previous year and I squeezed his knee under the table with genuine pride. Then she introduced a woman named Gloria to come and share her story with the crowd.

Gloria looked to be in her late thirties, with hair dyed deep red and blown out in a salon-set poof. She clutched at the papers she read from and her voice was a little shaky as she took the mike, but it grew strong as she described her background. She'd come to Chicago with her parents from Mexico as a baby and grown up poor in a neighborhood on the west side. She'd gotten into drugs and eventually began sleeping around in exchange for heroin. She'd found out she was HIV positive five years earlier.

"I lost my babies, my sweet sweet hijos, because I was not capable of taking care of them. Or myself. And I thought I was finished. I thought I was completely done when I walked into Dr. Gannon's clinic." She looked tenderly now in our direction and I saw Kent watching humbly, keeping his focus on her and not acknowledging all the admiring eyes turning toward him. "I went to the clinic that day to

ask for sleeping pills. I was going to take them all at once." She stopped, hung her head and laughed. It took her a moment to get control of her giggles and it was clear she was straying from her script. "Thinking about it now, I cannot believe I did that. I must have looked absurd - hair a snarled mess, track marks up and down my arms, filthy clothes. And I thought he was going to believe me when I said I was having trouble sleeping because of 'stress at work'." The whole crowd now laughed along, dabbing napkins at their eyes. She went on. "But my my my, thank *goodness* I decided to ask Dr. G for those pills. And by the grace of God, he said no. But he started me on a path of saying yes to so much else. I thank my dear Jesus Lord every single day for bringing that man into my life."

My heart jumped at the invocation. I glanced at Kent, who looked moved by her words, and unfazed by the religious reference. Of course, it wasn't as though he was going to roll his eyes in that setting. People said things about God all the time. The nonbeliever etiquette is typically to stay quiet. People who choose make noise about their disbelief come off condescending and scroogey. It wasn't

even something we talked about, it was just something that happened. When you are in the minority on something, you pretty much resign yourself to just having to go along with some things.

The meal went on and several more people spoke - including Kent - describing their work and requesting donations and the evening, it seemed, was a great success.

Kent was in high spirits when we left the hotel and stepped out into the weekend quiet of the Loop. We walked up Dearborn Street and across Wacker Drive to the river. We leaned against the rail for awhile, looking at the lights of the Tribune Tower to our right and the corn cob towers of Marina City directly across from us. It was still very warm, but there was a breeze coming off the lake and neither of us wanted to go home yet.

Kent had his arm across my shoulders and leaned his head sideways against mine and whispered "Thank you."

"For what?" I asked.

"For always supporting me in this. For not complaining about my late nights and going to events like this."

"I actually enjoyed it."

Kent grinned. "Really?"

I nodded. "I realized tonight that we've been through a lot with many of these people. I haven't enjoyed every aspect of it, but this work has connected us to them. It's formed a little community. And for better or worse, I like that."

"It's a bit like ACT in that way."

A chill ran straight through me at the mention of it. I turned away from Kent and stared at the water until I could bring focus back to the conversation. Instead of thinking of our friends in Cape Town who'd been inspiring and hardworking just like the people we'd seen at the event, my mind raced through images of Unathi and images of the church I'd been hiding out in every morning. I had to force myself back into the moment.

"When Gloria thanked God in her speech, did it bother you?" I asked.

Kent shrugged. "Not really. It's not like it's the first time."

"Yeah."

"I don't think about it a lot anymore. I guess there was a

time that I did, when I was young and cocky. Cockier, anyway."

A boat slid past below us and the sound of laughter and chatter rose up to where we were.

"It used to make me mad - especially with people like Gloria," Kent said. "I felt like she was failing to understand her own strength. She underestimated the enormity of what she accomplished and give all the credit to God." He shrugged. "But who am I to care what gets people out of bed in the morning?"

I am not sure what I had been expecting - from him or myself - but all of a sudden a felt tremendous relief. I put my arm around Kent and he squeezed me in close and kissed my head. We watched the lights of the city glimmer in the water for a little while longer before heading home.

Chapter 14

Cape Town

I'd been utterly depleted that afternoon, following a day of interviews with potential study candidates. I had never worked so hard to talk to people, to think before everything I said, making sure I was being as effective - and efficient - as possible. I'd spent nearly my entire life in school but doing those interviews I learned I knew next to nothing. I had no idea what it was like to endure real hardship. It pained me. I wanted to cry all the time, with a mixture of guilt and sorrow but I was not a crier, either.

At any rate, on that afternoon I wanted badly just to go back to my apartment and curl up with some wine and something terrible on television. But, I had promised Naledi I would go to that week's ACT meeting.

The building was small, the size of a corner convenience store at home, but I could hear a rumbling of clapping and singing as I neared the door. Inside it was packed tightly with a hundred people or more. There was a hip-hop beat bounding out of speakers that I couldn't see and everyone I could see was clapping out a steady rhythm, singing as they

went. *We can live today, we can live tomorrow. We can live for years to come. Treatment now!* At the far end of the room, Lonnie stood on a wooden box with a microphone leading the chant and waving an arm overhead.

I didn't see her approach, but suddenly Naledi was at my side, stepping to the beat and clapping her hands high above her head. When they got to the end of the refrain, she bopped her hip against mine and I laughed as I stumbled slightly. I had never seen Naledi so animated and as the song faded out and the beat was replaced by individual cheers and squeals, she clapped her hands at me as though I were the joke.

Lonnie waved both his hands over his head, signaling for people to quiet themselves. The building seemed to be one long room, with round poles supporting the ceiling like the ones that I had climbed in my basement as a child. Everyone in the center sat down on the floor, while people at the edges leaned against the wall where there was room.

"I thank you all for being here tonight," Lonnie called out like a sportscaster. "What a beautiful crowd. What a beautiful, beautiful crowd." He shook his head a little, taking it all in. He looked down for a reverent moment and

then raised his head with a big proud grin. "I love it!" Everyone cheered and Naledi raised her thumb and index finger to her lips and let out a shrill whistle. I couldn't keep from laughing at the bubbling energy coming off her in waves. Then, about twenty feet from us, leaning against the wall, I saw Kent, smiling in our direction, obviously delighting as I merged this new layer of Naledi's personality into the politely quiet and earnest image I had of her so far. Lonnie spoke again. "Showing up is the first step, and man oh man, do we ever have that down. But, we have lots to do tonight. Lots and lots. So, let's get underway."

He started with some quick announcements. There was a non-update update from the Healthy Ministry (ACT had requested clarification on when the Ministry would make a decision about whether to continue a mother-to-child transmission prevention program; the Health Ministry had responded "Not yet.") They had secured a notable co-presenter for an upcoming medical conference in Johannesburg. There would be a vigil that coming Saturday for a young man who had died earlier in the week. That announcement was followed by a moment of silence, which was broken when Lonnie spoke

softly into the microphone "And for you, our brother, we march on."

After that he brought up a wiry and energetic woman with her hair pulled back in a yellow bandanna to conduct a training session on outreach messaging. The crowd laughed when she demonstrated what not to do, slumping her shoulders and muttering sarcastic quips and everyone was rapt when she asked a young man from the crowd to role play with her. They pretended that she had just encountered him on the street and she convinced him - and all of us - of the importance of the fight for anti-retrovirals with earnest, but gentle eye-contact and an open stance. I was a little in awe.

Kent made his way over to where Naledi and I were sitting in the back center of the room and leaned in to me. "She's good, isn't she?" I nodded. I looked around the room and was mesmerized by the attentiveness of such a crowd, by the common expression of both sureness and fear that seemed to appear in some combination on every face. A middle-aged man with a squared jaw that said "Yes, I am doing this!" while a tiny furrow between his eyebrows resembled that of a boy before a little league championship game -

determined, but all too aware of the opposition.

I had an urge to pull out a notebook and take notes, my instinct to memorize the tips the presenter was giving and practice them in front of the mirror before I came to another meeting, but I didn't because everyone else seemed to be taking it right in. No need for notebooks, they absorbed both the tactics and the wisdom being offered right into their souls. The feeling for me was so unfamiliar. I tried to think of a time when I'd been in a room so full of earnest, committed energy and I came up short. Even the nerdiest of science conferences had nappers and dissidents. ACT had dissidents too, I learned, as the presentation concluded and Lonnie opened the floor for questions and comments, but even in disagreement, there seemed to be grace.

And then, the t-shirts. Lonnie nodded to a couple of people behind him and they retrieved boxes from a little closet in the back. They brought them forward and put them into stacks based on the letters S, M, L, written in marker on the sides of each box. Lonnie cleared his throat and placed one hand on a box.

"This group is so full of smart people. So full of good

ideas. Johanna," he held an arm out the woman in the yellow bandanna. "Your training is such an important source or strength for our work. Such an important component of our efforts, to talk to people, to engage them, to give them space to open their minds to new ideas. Wonderful. And now, tonight, I'm so happy that we will be able to make another idea a reality as well, another way of sharing our message: by giving face to the disease we are fighting, by standing up and saying 'it is *me* you are denying when you deny AIDS. It is *my* future you are trying to will away. I am not ashamed and I am not hiding. I am fighting for my life. I want to thank Genessee for making this suggestion a few meetings ago, and Darius for coming up with the design." There was a smattering of applause and some shoulder pats for a woman near the front. "So, without further delay, I would like to show you all our newest creation." He opened one of the boxes and pulled out a white t-shirt, set down his mike and pulled the shirt over his head. On his chest, in clear navy lettering that was neither too bold nor too thin, were the words "HIV Positive."

The room roared with applause and whoops and whistles.

People stood and clapped and song broke out that I did not understand. And then three people got up and stood one each beside the boxes and people formed lines. Many people sat down again watching and nodding and clapping occasionally as men and women - white and black and young and old - received a t-shirt and a hug and then slipped the shirt over their heads. The air swirled with something at once jubilant and solemn. As the lines moved forward people from the crowd would stand up and make their way forward to replenish them. One woman threw her hands up in the air as she moved, as though she'd been chosen as a contestant on The Price is Right, while a teenage boy wiped tears from his eyes while he ran his hand across the lettering on his chest.

My insides felt hollow as something seemed to shift into clarity in my brain: as though I was finally, more fully understanding how much bigger and crueller and more beautiful the world is than I had previously known. For weeks, I'd been experiencing it as a sort of dull fatigue, similar to but much stronger than what I felt every time I moved to a new town or apartment: before my hands knew where the faucet needed to be for hot water or how much

pressure was needed to close the front door. For weeks, I'd been exhausted from trying to get oriented and now it was as though I was snapping into place with the reality of my own surroundings.

Someone near one of the side walls had started patting out a beat on an overturned bucket and people began to hum along, a rolling tune of quiet strength. Naledi reached over and squeezed my forearm, smiled at me with apology in her eyes and then stood up and made her way to a line. This was my tipping point, the emotional equivalent of overfilling a glass. Tears welled and my throat knotted up and I squeaked out a little gasp while trying not to fully break down. But the idea that Naledi was HIV positive wasn't what got me - that seemed to click into place like something I'd already known - it was the look she gave me. She was sorry for not having told me. She was sorry because she'd been too embarrassed or ashamed. Something in her did not want me to know, was afraid of what I'd think. I wasn't sure if that said more about her, or about me. I watched her wait in the line, head up and chest heaving with deep breaths. When she got to the front, Lonnie's face warmed with pride. He bunched up the shirt and placed

it over her head. She seemed to stand up even straighter as she pulled the hem down to her waist. They hugged and rocked back and forth and he said something that made her laugh, tears rolling down her cheeks. As she made her way back to Kent and I, she reached down to grasp the hands of people in the crowd who held them up in congratulations. I stood and wrapped my arms around her and we held each other for a long time. I knew that she had been changed in that hour and she knew the same of me. It was the truest, warmest embrace of my life.

Chapter 15

Chicago

Buoyed by the Kent's words the night of the fundraiser, but not yet ready to disclose my growing compulsion toward the Church, I made up a lie on a Sunday morning and went to Mass.

We were finishing some waffles and having a silly conversation with Lydia about building skyscrapers out of pancakes when I pretended to remember something I had to do at work. I rushed to the shower and then tried on at least three different outfits before deciding on khaki pants, a nice shirt and some flats. Kent looked at me oddly on my way out the door.

"Why so dressed up?"

I shrugged, rifled through my purse so I didn't have to look at him. "I don't know. Just felt like it, I guess."

I got to the church about five minutes before Mass was due to start. With all of the lights on, I was struck by how inviting the space was. During the weekday forays, I always felt a bit intrusive when I first stepped in, as

though I were getting a way with something, but now the warm glow of the lights seemed to beckon me forward. It was not full, but there were more people there than I had expected. I was surprised at how normal everyone looked. I guess I'd been expecting everyone to be buttoned up, cardigans and pearls and Sunday best and all that, but everyone just looked like people from the neighborhood: aging hippy-types in flowy skirts and naturally graying hair, young couples in jeans and t-shirts, kids in jerseys ready to head straight to a soccer game from here.

From the high loft in the back, the choir - which sounded wonderful - was practicing an "Alleluia". I pretended not to see the holy water font again and went to my usual spot near the back on the left. I did not genuflect, but once in my pew, I did lower the kneeler and make my way onto my knees. I struggled to find a comfortable way to hold my hands, propping my forearms on the back of the pew in front of me and finally resting my head against my palms, which I had clasped together like someone doing an odd cheer. I closed my eyes, wanting to believe like children do that no one could see me if my eyes were shut. I became suddenly unnerved at the thought that in such a devout position, I

was now supposed to pray. In all the time I'd been coming, I had managed to dissociate the idea of actual prayer from the physical act of sitting in a church. Now, with my head laying against my hands, I panicked. There were no prayers I was willing to say. So, at a loss for what else to do, I began to count, my lips moving imperceptibly. "One. Two. Three. Four." At first I was racing through the numbers but gradually I slowed down and my heart calmed to a steady beat.

When I got to 90, I opened my eyes and figured that was probably sufficient for me to look like I had made my personal greeting to God. I sat back in my pew and pushed the kneeler up with my foot. I tried to be gentle, but it clattered loudly as it fell into place and I squinted with embarrassment. Fidgeting with my hands and picking lint off my pants, it felt like an hour before a woman came to a small lectern to the right of the altar, adjusted the microphone and welcomed us all to Mass.

"Today is the Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time. Our celebrant will be Father John McKenney. Please join in singing #482 in your music issue, "Gather Us In". The piano started and everyone stood up. The melody hit my

ears and caught in my throat, completely familiar after so many years. I took the hymnal from the little rack on the pew in front of me and tried to look like I was a regular. I couldn't bring myself to sing out loud, but I remembered more words than I would have expected and it was oddly comforting. As the priest passed, he looked mostly bored, though he sang loudly and somewhat off key. He had fuzzy white hair with a bald spot at the top of his head and he wore small wire-framed glasses, a little like John Lennon's. In front of him were a middle-aged man holding a large red Lectionary in the air in front of him, two altar servers - one boy and one girl - and five other people, dressed more formally than the rest of the congregation and singing brightly. One of them I recognized as the man who had sat next to me on the stairs outside the first day I'd gone into the Church.

As they approached the altar, they all stopped and bowed and then the first man took the Lectionary to the lectern and took a seat nearby. The five adults made their way into one of the front pews and the priest and the servers went up to the ornately carved chairs facing the congregation. The servers stood on either side of the

priest until the song ended and then one of them took a binder from a small table and held it open in front of the priest.

"Good morning," the priest said.

"Good morning, Father," the congregation muttered in unison.

The priest held a hand up toward the crowd and made a large cross in the air. "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Everyone crossed themselves. I did too.

After a few opening words, Father introduced the people who had processed in with him. "These men and women are this year's RCIA participants. They are all seeking a spiritual home within our Church, seeking to join in our faith and become followers of Christ." He asked them to stand and he made a blessing while I struggled to remember what RCIA stood for. It was the Rite of something. It was the process through which non-Catholic adults joined the Catholic Church - I remembered that much. It meant that they would receive three Sacraments - Baptism, Communion and Confirmation all at once during the Easter Vigil in the spring. Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults - that was it. Ich. *Initiation*. It sounded like a cult.

The priest made his way to the penitential act and I almost had to sit down. "As we do always, in preparation to truly hear God's word, we ask first for forgiveness. Lord have mercy."

"Lord have mercy," the congregation responded.

"Christ have mercy."

"Christ have mercy."

"Lord have mercy," this time with a down-note at the end, indicating a conclusion to this brief plea.

"Lord have mercy," I whispered along. That was why I was there. I'd been trying to avoid thinking about it, to avoid naming the reason I kept going back. I'd left the church clear-headed and without regret right after my own Confirmation as a junior in high school. My mother had wanted me to go that far, and then I'd insisted that if Confirmation meant being an adult in the church, I must be adult enough to reject it. The intervening years with the Church's many public failures and insistent denigration of women, had only reaffirmed my decision, but now here I was, trying not cry and asking a God I didn't think I believed in for mercy.

As the Mass proceeded and we listened to the readings, I sat with my jaw clenched, not caring any longer if I looked as though I belonged. I felt defeated, admitting to myself that perhaps my own will or principles had been wrong, that I had not been strong enough in my own convictions to carry on without this entity I had come to loathe. It was - more than anything - humiliating.

But something surprising happened as the priest finished the Gospel and began his homily. The tone in his voice wasn't the boredom I'd detected earlier but perhaps a subtle *sadness*? How odd. Of all the things I thought priests might be, sad wasn't usually one of them. But his voice, when speaking and not reading or reciting prayers, had a lilt to it and a sort-of distant yearning. At times it seemed he wasn't even really seeing us all there in front of him, but rather just speaking his thoughts out loud.

The Gospel reading that day was the story of Jesus teaching in the temple when he was only twelve. Father McKenney spoke thoughtfully about a painting of this scene that he had once seen, painted by a Jewish artist who was fascinated by Jesus' childhood and wondered what they had

in common. Jesus got in trouble with Mary and Joseph that day because he'd basically wandered off without them. There is a gap in the scriptures after that - the Gospels don't cover his teen years - and he's an adult and becoming a radical evangelist the next time we meet him. Father McKenney's sermon reflected on the idea that those same years are a blur for so many of us, such a mix of energy and emotion and a constant game of ping-pong between certainty and crushing self-consciousness. It's hard to imagine that Jesus didn't have teenage angst - it must have been crazy trying to navigate that natural quest for personal autonomy while being the actual embodiment of the world's creator.

I'd never heard a priest talk like this during a homily. It was hard to know exactly what point he was trying to make, but his riffing on this idea, talking about Jesus like a person and not just a caricature of perfection was fascinating to me. I knew that theologians did this - there's no shortage of scholarly work examining the historical facts of Jesus the man, the political context in which he challenged prevailing views, but I had never thought this examination might happen from the pulpit.

When the homily was over, we sat in silence for a minute and then Father stood and raised his arms, signaling the rest of us to stand. "Ever yearning for greater wholeness and less doubt, we pray together the profession of faith."

In unison the congregation began. *We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty.*

Again, I was shocked by the way the words came back to me instantly. Everything thing they said - I did not utter a word - followed a cadence that felt as deeply familiar as a nursery rhyme. The creed - this creed - had been instrumental in my final decision all those years ago that I wasn't just ambivalent about the church or lazy, but I felt like an impostor, felt shamefully dishonest showing up if I could not say that at least on some level I agreed with the words of that creed. Now, the words split through my ears more quickly than I could register the rush of doubt and fear and resistance and hopelessness that brought me to lie to my husband that morning, to walk through these doors.

What's more, we were careening toward the Eucharistic Liturgy - the part of the Mass where the priest blesses the communion hosts and the congregation utters Amen - "I

believe" - and the hosts are transubstantiated into the body of Christ. The creed reminded me of who I'd been at one time, how I'd made the decision I seemed to be questioning now. But communion was a whole different story. Communion was always something that required a certain suspension of belief, something I'd always thought so scientifically absurd that now there seemed a possibility that I could not only go back on my decision regarding the Creed but slip further into the believing something I had never even entertained. I was not sure who I was becoming, but I wasn't sure I could stop it from happening.

Another song I remembered played while we all took our seats and ushers made their ways down the aisles with collection baskets perched on the ends of short poles that they used to reach the baskets across the pews. I fished two dollars out of my purse and tossed them in, feeling cheap but conflicted at the same time. The usher smiled kindly, which I appreciated but then I realized I had just given financial support to an institution whose work I frequently questioned.

Then we were kneeling again and Father McKenney was holding

up a large wafer and the congregation sang about Jesus' death and resurrection. *Amen* they sang, boisterously with a pleasantly roiling piano tune. We stood again and recited the Our Father and it was time to exchange the sign of peace. There was a young couple in front of me who looked like the innocent do-gooder types and an older man behind me who I'm sure showed up purely out of habit. He shook my hand with a passing glance and was ready to move on. We had one last exchange with father before lowering ourselves again to our knees.

"This is the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world," Father said. "Blessed are those who are called to his supper."

"Lord, I am not worthy to receive you," we responded. "But only say the word and I shall be healed."

With those words, my eyes watered as I returned to my kneeler and buried my head in my hands. I did not go to Communion, of course, but let myself embrace the comfort of the song and the cantor's melodic voice as everyone else went forth.

Then we were done. We sang one more song and Father and his cadre walked back down the aisle and everyone gathered

themselves and made their way back to the street. A handful of people chatted in clusters on the sidewalk and Father stood on the sidewalk at the bottom of the stairs in his black pants and shirt, vestments already discarded and shook people's hands as they began their transition back to their lives.

"Have a gentle week," he said as he shook my hand. He seemed genuine in his interaction, though not overly interested in who I was. After I passed him, I looked around and for a moment was deeply envious of the people around me that were talking and laughing, making connections and plans. People who may or may not see each other in the neighborhood the rest of the week, but who - by virtue of coming here, every week year in and year out, to this building of brick and stone and glass - knew each other. They knew the names of children and grandchildren, ailments of loved ones, garden hobbies and book clubs. There was something here that bound them and I wanted to be part of it.

I was about to leave when Christopher stepped out of one such group and toward me. He held out his hand and I shook it.

"I'm Christopher," he said. "I think we met on these steps a few weeks ago."

"Yes. I'm Shelby. Nice to meet you." We both looked around, uncomfortably until I thought of something else to say. "So, you're doing the RCIA program?"

"Yes. Yep, it's time for me to make this real."

I nodded. I was thinking *That's an odd choice. What a weird time to join the church.* "Well...good for you."

He laughed. "You sound like my mother."

"It's probably better than sounding like mine." I looked around, now anxious to be gone from the little crowd. "I have to go."

"See you next week?"

I was startled by the thought. "Don't count on it." I tried to force a smile, but I could feel only a growing sense of panic. I turned and left and began speed-walking toward home, feeling as though I had just cheated on my husband - not by talking with Christopher, but by having snuck out of the house to go to church. And lying about it.

I stopped just around the corner from our apartment,

catching my breath and trying to slow my racing mind. When I felt calm and ready to carry on with the facade that I had just gone to the office, I went home.

Lydia was playing with Legos in the sun room and Kent was reading the paper. He smiled "Hey. Get done what you needed to get done?"

"I went to church." As soon as I said it, I closed my eyes and my mind went blank. Kent started laughing.

"What?"

I just shook my head. "Nothing."

"No, Shelby. What are you talking about?" He folded the paper in his hands and set it on the ottoman. It felt like an hour that I stood there, staring at the floor and completely unsure what to do next. I turned and went back into the kitchen, Kent followed. "What is going on with you?"

"I went to church."

He laughed again, a short nervous disbelieving laugh.

"Why?"

"I don't really know. It was..." It was all sorts of things: comforting, confusing, warm, familiar, odd,

terrifying, friendly, cult-like. "Strange."

"I should think so." Kent was staring at me now as if trying to decipher words on an ancient scroll. I turned away, grabbed a dishtowel and began drying the dishes from the sink. After a minute or so, Kent did the same. "I don't understand, Shelby," he said softly. "I mean, did you go there to pray?"

"Not really." I rubbed a towel hard across some spots that were already dried on the lid of a saucepan. "I don't remember how."

"But you want to?"

I shrugged. "I feel like I'm going crazy. And I need something. Being at the church calms me down."

"What do you mean 'being at the church'? Have you gone before?"

"I've been going in the mornings. Not to Mass, just to sit there."

"But you don't believe in God."

I looked straight at him now. I didn't say anything but suddenly I was mentally pleading with him to just take in the information that I wasn't sure about that anymore. I

didn't want to say it. It would sound so foolish, so pedestrian. So illogical. He looked back and we were silent for a moment.

"Huh," he said, more as a statement, a monosyllabic confirmation of the taking in of information, but not an indication of belief per se. He put a stack of clean plates in a cupboard and went back to the sunroom.

"Whatcha building, Lyd?"

We didn't talk much for the rest of the day. I hated it when we didn't speak, when the air of an argument hung over us and we operated out of sync. We weren't big fighters and those days always made me deeply sad. I wasn't sure if he was more angry with me for not telling him or for actually going to church. As we settled into bed, it became clear it was a bit of both.

"Hey, can we talk?" I asked.

"I've been asking you to talk for weeks now and you've wanted nothing to do with it. Now it's my turn to withdraw."

"I honestly didn't know exactly what was going on until

today. And even that isn't true - I still don't know exactly what's going on."

"So I'm supposed to jump now?"

"Well, you've wanted me to talk and now I'm ready to talk."

"Really? You don't even know what's going on, but now you're ready to talk?"

I didn't respond.

"You insinuate that all of a sudden, you might have religion when the whole time I've known you, that's been as remote a possibility as joining the circus? And I'm supposed to be ready to talk about it all with five minutes notice?"

"You're making more out of this than it is."

"Yeah?" His voice was a pool of sarcasm and disbelief; his glare was the megaphone. I nodded, wishing he was making more out of it than it was.

"Listen, I'm really struggling here. I can't say why I have been flipping out, but I can't deny that it's been happening. This has been as much of a surprise to me as it has been to you."

"'This'?" He seemed to relax the tiniest bit. I hoped he

was going in the direction of conversation.

"All of it. I don't know why I'm freaking out *now*. And I don't know why being there is helping."

"There." He sighed loudly. He was really struggling with the idea that I was going to a church. Of course he was. He got out of bed and went into the bathroom. I heard the water run for a moment and then he came back. He stood by the side of the bed and I could tell he was trying to force himself to be calm. "What do you mean it's 'helping'?"

I shrugged and regretted shrugging. It was a serious question and he was engaging with me, which I'd really wanted a few minutes earlier. "It's hard to explain," I started slowly. "I feel more relaxed when I'm there. And after I'm there. Until I get anxious about the fact that going there relaxed me."

"I just don't understand what it is that's bothering you? Why do you need this right now?"

My skin prickled and I froze. "I just need to," I said quietly. I could feel him looking at me, but I kept my gaze down at my hands. Kent walked around the bed and got in. "I can't talk about this any more tonight," he said.

He kissed my cheek mechanically and turned away from me, pulling the sheet up tight around his body.

I once heard a social psychologist say that fights between couples always start when the dynamic between them shifts from that of two adults to one adult and one child. We had found this to be true. Kent could become downright whiny after a long day and I was often bossy during times of stress. We were highly aware of how this worked and had become good at rolling with it, giving each other space to return to our better selves. I fell asleep that night hoping - irrationally - that that was all that had happened. That we'd wake up the next morning with a bit of awkward over-niceness, determined to quickly restore the vibe in our household to its natural rhythms. We didn't. It was several days before we had any substantive conversation at all. And when we did, it was because our hot water heater gave out. We'd been taking progressively shorter showers, and one morning I had just gotten the shampoo into my hair when chilled water hit my spine and I shrieked. Kent ran in to see what was the matter and I shut off the water and stood in shower with lather all

over.

"Jesus, Shelby. You scared the shit out of me."

"It was freezing."

He went to the sink and turned the water on to hot and held his hand under the stream. He shook his head.

"It's done," he said. Then he looked up at me and began to laugh and then I started to laugh and I threw a handful of suds at him. He came over to the shower and wrapped his arms around me tightly. "I'll go warm some water for you."

I didn't really want to wait that long to finish my shower, but I definitely did not want to turn down his peace offering either. He handed me a towel and I sat on the edge of the tub until he returned with a big pot of boiling water. I stepped out of the tub and filled it partway with cold water and he poured in the water from the pot. It was only lukewarm when I stepped back in and rinsed my hair, but it was enough.

I made some minor adjustments in my schedule that day so I could arrange to have a plumber out pronto. I researched a few models of water heater online and made the plumber

answer a long series of questions about the options he offered. I made a little chart of pros and cons and showed it to Kent that night, along with my recommendation. He smirked at my methodical approach.

"Now, *that's* the mind of the woman I love."

At first I was pleased, hearing only a comforting declaration of the word love again for the first time in a week. But then I bristled when the implication became clearer.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"No, Kent. That's a really weird thing to say."

"I'm not the one who has been weird lately." That wasn't untrue, but his earlier tone of concern over whatever was bothering me had vanished. Now he was accusing, or poking.

"You think I've lost my mind."

"I think you're being irrational."

"And heaven knows there's nothing worse than that!"

"What 'heaven knows' is your department, I guess."

"This is ridiculous," I said. I grabbed the sheet of paper

with the water heater inventory and walked away. "We can talk again when you want to be a grown up about this."