

T H E  
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Anna Hogeland



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*for my family*

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## E l i z a b e t h

MY OLDER SISTER, Margot, called me and said, “You don’t need to say anything but I wanted to let you know I had a miscarriage. Just an early one,” she added quickly. “I’m fine now.”

I was more surprised than saddened; I didn’t know she was pregnant, or that she had been trying to get pregnant.

“The worst of it is over,” she said. “I’m relieved that I lost it when I did, before I was any further along. I only thought I was pregnant for a week. So as far as miscarriages go, this was about as easy as they get.” She and Nick had quickly conceived their son, Alex, now just over a year old, and there was no reason to believe they wouldn’t conceive quickly again. It was unlikely that a miscarriage would happen a second time—even though the odds were higher now than they were before—and she knew she was fertile and her body could carry a

healthy pregnancy to term. They just had to wait for one cycle to try to conceive again.

There wasn't anything more to say, she said, she'd just rather I hear it from her than from our mother. And she wanted to make sure that I would still feel able to talk to her about my pregnancy—I was nine weeks when she called—she had been hesitant to tell me any of this for fear that I would shield her from it, which was exactly what she didn't want.

"Truly," she said. "I only feel happiness for you. Please know that. How are you feeling, anyway? Any better at all?"

I wasn't sure if I should call her after that, if the miscarriage was something she wanted to talk more about, despite saying she did not. I was surprised she'd told me at all. We'd never been the kind of sisters who tell each other our most vulnerable secrets, and since this dynamic had always felt more like her choice than mine, I tried to honor it.

In the days following, I sent her texts saying, *how are you feeling?*; *please let me know if there's anything I can do*; and Isaac and I bought her a fifty-dollar gift certificate to Moose's Tooth Pizzeria. Her responses were curt: *doing OK today thanks*, or: *you're sweet but I'm fine*. Soon she only replied with an emoji of a flower bouquet or a yellow heart. When my last text, *just letting you know I'm thinking of you*, went unanswered, I decided to let her be the one to initiate contact next, whenever that would be.

Three weeks passed before she called again. I was walking back to my apartment from the library when I saw her name on my phone, and I felt a quick, sharp hope that she was calling to say she was pregnant, before realizing that she shouldn't be, not yet, not quite. But she had called to tell me about a conflict she was having with her friend



Elizabeth that had been causing her some distress; in the days following, what she told me came to dominate my thoughts as well.

"You sound out of breath," she said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm always out of breath now," I said, slowing my pace. "I'm seeing inclines I've never seen before."

"Just wait till it's pressing your lungs. And your bladder."

She was on her way to pick up Alex from day care, and she wanted to talk while she had some quiet. We were well, we told each other. I hadn't been writing much, finding it hard to focus on my novel while so exhausted and woozy, but teaching hadn't been too difficult to manage. Margot had just finished a stretch of long shifts at the hospital so her schedule would be lighter for the next few days. Husbands were well, Alex was well—he could stand on his own now, but he wouldn't yet take a step—and he was very into bananas and zippers. It was raining and cold in Anchorage, where she lived, and warm and lovely where I was, in Irvine, California.

A short silence fell between us. Her car blinker ticked, then turned off.

"Sorry," she said, though I wasn't sure why.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just—it's nothing real, not really. I don't want to bother you with this, but I'm not sure who else to talk to. It's about Elizabeth. Do you remember my friend Elizabeth?"

I'd only met Elizabeth once, at a barbecue at Margot's house in Anchorage the previous summer, when Isaac and I were there on our honeymoon. When Margot heard from our mother that Isaac and I were considering going to Alaska, she had insisted that we stay with them for several nights. They had a guest bedroom in the basement with its own full bathroom. The invitation surprised me, and I wasn't sure what to make of it; in the preceding several years we'd hardly

spoken beyond short, obligatory calls on our birthdays and major holidays.

“You’re living on a grad student stipend,” she’d said to convince me. “I know you can’t turn down a free place.”

Elizabeth and I didn’t talk much at that party; there were several other couples there, too, all with small children, and Elizabeth and her husband, Patrick, had spent most of the time trying and failing to quiet their four-month-old son’s wails. They arrived last and left first.

But Margot had told me a lot about Elizabeth. During that visit to Anchorage, Margot frequently brought her up in conversation; she talked about her much more than she usually talked about her friends. She revealed intimacies of Elizabeth’s life I knew were not meant for me to hear, and so I listened carefully. It was clear that Margot now had with Elizabeth the sort of female friendship I’d read about in novels and memoirs and I’d desired throughout my childhood and adolescence and even at present but had never found for myself, even for a short while—the sort of female friendship likened to sisterhood, but not a sisterhood like mine and Margot’s, which for much of our lives had been distant and cautious.

Margot was nearly four years older than me, an adolescent when I was a child, and then she was in college, away, and forever after an infrequent houseguest. In the years we had grown up together in a pleasant Boston suburb, I often felt cut with the small, ordinary wounds an older sister effortlessly causes a younger sister—an eye roll, an incisive comment, or the silence of indifference, would leave me hurting for days, and for years after, whenever remembered. And if we’d been twins, perhaps it wouldn’t have been so different. The world to her was an orderly and manageable place; her life was a set of small obstacles she could easily master. I felt always as if I were being sucked underwater, unsure if I was swimming toward the sand or the surface,

desperate for breath. So I'd cast myself as a listener, wanting to hear how others lived their lives with the hope that I might learn how to live my own.

"Don't be so quiet," Margot once said, still in high school, after her friends had come over for the *One Tree Hill* season finale. I'd watched with them, ceding the couch and sitting on a pillow on the floor. "It makes it seem like you're stupid."

We hadn't ever repaired the rift between us, to know each other when we were older, when four years was hardly anything at all. I waited for her to make a gesture—it was her gesture to make, as I was sure I'd never affected her as she'd affected me—a gesture to show I was no longer a child to her, I was her sister and my life was of interest. It never came, and so years passed until we were adults living in faraway states, sharing little more than hazel eyes and a childhood home.

Margot loved Elizabeth, that was easy to tell, even though she wasn't sure how well she knew her. I developed, over that trip, an intense envy and something short of a fixation on this woman I did not know, who had so quickly come to occupy the space in Margot's life that had until then remained vacant. If anyone were going to fill it, I had thought it would be me.

I realized then, in Alaska, and I realized again when Margot called, that only when Elizabeth herself was the subject of her thoughts, was I the one she wanted.

"I met her at the barbecue," I said. "And Patrick and their baby."

"Phin."

"Phin, right."

"That's what I thought. Elizabeth didn't remember meeting you or Isaac, but I could've sworn she was there." Margot paused again. The air was quiet behind her. I imagined her pulling into a parking space at the day care, looking at the mountains capped with snow, keeping the

car on and pressing her hands to the vents. I always imagined it cold there, but it was mid-October, and midafternoon, and so she may not have had the heat on. I crossed the intersection separating undergraduate housing and graduate housing, where I lived, trying to shield the sun from my eyes and the wind from my phone.

"I'm sorry to bother you with this," she said for the second time. "I think it's stupid but I just can't get it out of my head."

"What is it?"

"Elizabeth is pregnant again. Twelve weeks."

"Oh." I waited for her to speak but she was quiet. "I'm twelve weeks too."

"Already? Wow, I thought you were ten or eleven."

"Well, I'm almost twelve. I'll be twelve in three days."

She breathed into the phone. "So, yeah, she's pregnant again."

"That's great—I mean, that's great for her, I assume. But I'm sure it can't be easy for you, so soon after—"

"No, that's not it," she said. "Her pregnancy isn't bothering me. I mean, I'm genuinely happy for Elizabeth, like I'm genuinely happy for you. She planned it this way. She took out her IUD the week of Phin's first birthday and got pregnant right away. Didn't even have a period."

"Does she know what happened to you?"

"Yeah. I didn't really mean to tell her, but I was feeling so exhausted that I canceled our walk. She invited me and Nick over for dinner, but I wasn't up for that, either. I didn't want her to think I was upset with her so I told her. She was surprisingly sympathetic. She even left lentil soup on my doorstep the next day. I would've never expected her to do something like that."

"I'm glad I told her," she continued. "So it's not that. It's the way

she told me she was pregnant. It's been bothering me more than I think makes sense."

"What did she say?"

A child cried somewhere near her, then quieted.

"It's nothing she said, really. It's more what she didn't say, I think, that's been getting to me."

I nodded in response, waiting for her to continue, forgetting she couldn't see me. I tried to recall then, in a flurry of images and memories, all that Margot had ever told me about Elizabeth; but I had already forgotten what, exactly, Elizabeth had told Margot directly, what Margot had inferred from what Elizabeth did or did not say, and what I had embellished myself.

Here is what I thought I knew about Elizabeth the day Margot called me and asked, Do you remember my friend Elizabeth?, though this would all be recast in the coming weeks (when Margot would learn more about her friend and share her new knowledge with me), not as lies—no, not so simple and deceptive as that—but as an artful curation of vulnerabilities and facts and omissions that gave the effective illusion of a complete truth, the kind reserved only for a close female confidant.

. . .

Margot and Elizabeth met after Margot's college friend Claire texted her to say that her friend from med school was moving to Anchorage, where Margot and Nick had just moved a few months earlier. *I can put you two in touch!* Claire wrote, and Margot accepted the offer without hesitation. The idea of a potential friend in Anchorage was so exciting to Margot that it made her aware of how lonely and isolated

she'd already begun to feel in the small city enclosed by forests and cold salt water. Every time she'd moved in the past, it'd been for college (Hanover), med school (Ann Arbor), or residency (Philadelphia), and she'd been instantly and effortlessly surrounded with largely similarly minded people her age who were also new to their surroundings and looking for companionship. And though she didn't expect this community upon moving to Anchorage—hadn't she chosen to move there, of all places, precisely because of its detachment from everything she had ever known?—she was still disheartened when it failed to materialize.

Claire soon sent a group text introducing Margot and Elizabeth to each other, then sent Margot a text separately that read: *Elizabeth isn't the most warm and fuzzy. Don't know if you'll hit it off. But you should get together anyway and maybe you will!*

Margot was annoyed. She wished Claire had texted her this before the introduction text, so she could ask more of what she meant and determine if this woman was someone to whom she wanted to extend a gesture of friendship. Claire, Margot recalled with unease, was undiscerning in her affections, for both romantic and platonic relationships; she had chosen to live off campus her senior year with a clique of girls that Margot had found to be far more vapid and mean-spirited than Claire herself. But the introduction text had been sent, and now Margot felt an obligation, as the one who had been in Anchorage longer, to be the first to respond. So she texted Elizabeth separately to welcome her to town and to invite her and her husband over for dinner before she could think herself out of it.

To Margot's surprise, Elizabeth responded quickly, with two exclamation points and a smiling emoji, and the following Friday just after 7:00, Elizabeth and Patrick were at the door with pink tulips and a bottle of Malbec.

Soon after they stepped in, and Elizabeth removed her clogs without being asked—(Margot had the same ones, but in coffee rather than maroon and probably two full sizes smaller)—Elizabeth said, “Your home feels like a home already, it even smells like people really live here. In a good way, I mean. Our place smells like packing tape.”

“Thanks,” said Margot. “I don’t know, it has a ways to go.”

The house still felt bare to her, and her couch and bookshelves and lamps from college looked adolescent in the adult space.

“It’s true,” said Patrick. “We’re using our boxes as a coffee table.”

Though it was a small joke, maybe a true one, the laughter let Margot lighten a little. Soon they sat down for dinner, shakshuka with feta cheese and garlic bread, the plates already set on the fabric place mats Margot had bought at Target just hours before. They briefly talked about their respective connections to Claire. Elizabeth confessed that she didn’t know Claire well, they had just taken a few classes together, which made Margot feel at once relieved and more wary. Then Elizabeth turned quiet, and she remained the most soft-spoken of the four of them for the remainder of the evening, often wearing a neutral expression that was difficult for Margot to interpret. She was pretty, perhaps beautiful, with a strong build and defined features and green eyes and black hair and light brown skin, a dark olive complexion. Margot felt pale and short and plain and sensed that Elizabeth didn’t like her. As the dinner progressed, Margot watched Elizabeth’s features, her skin under the recessed kitchen light, and she found herself both frustrated and ashamed that she was trying and unable to identify her race.

Patrick, however, seemed comfortable telling stories that lasted a little longer than they might have needed to, and Margot was grateful for his ease with conversation and how he directed his attention to Margot and Nick both, rather than only to Nick. When Patrick told the story of the day they moved in—the coldest day of the year, negative

fifteen degrees, and he saw three figures in the dark that looked like monsters, and he thought he was losing his mind before realizing they were moose—Elizabeth added in a gentle interruption, “It was two cows and a calf, with no bull, not that I could see.” Margot realized then that perhaps Elizabeth was simply shy, not aloof.

From then on, whenever Elizabeth spoke that evening, Margot sensed that she wasn’t sure how much to ask, and how much to tell about herself, so she often elaborated on Patrick’s stories rather than venturing to tell any of her own. Her compliments on the home and food (“How did you get the bread’s crust so crispy and keep the middle so moist?”) seemed to be inspired by anxiety, as if she had become suddenly aware that she had not spoken in too long a time. Margot wasn’t sure if this meant the compliments were disingenuous, and she didn’t really mind either way.

Margot’s new theory of Elizabeth’s shyness was undermined when there was a short, depressed pause after Nick had been telling them about the thawing permafrost, and Elizabeth broke the silence by asking, “Are your floors insulated?” Margot and Nick shook their heads, and Elizabeth sighed, making no effort to conceal her judgment. “If you insulate your floors less heat goes into the ground, you know. I definitely wouldn’t buy a house without them, not here. It’s expensive, but you can do it yourself. You should really think about it.”

The dinner ended with Margot uncertain about her impression of Elizabeth, and even less certain of Elizabeth’s impression of her. In the days that followed, Margot told me, she found herself checking her phone more than once, half-expecting a thank-you-for-dinner text, or perhaps an invitation to their place. When none came, she noticed a small deflation of her spirits.

It was three weeks after the dinner, when Margot no longer expected to hear from her, that Elizabeth invited Margot on a walk. She



only invited Margot. *Are you free tomorrow?* Elizabeth texted. *There's a trail I've been meaning to try.* Margot accepted, elated and nervous to have a one-on-one with Elizabeth. It'd been several years since she had made a friend who wanted to see Margot solo, not Margot-and-Nick over for dinner. She hadn't realized how much she'd wanted a friend just for herself. There was nothing troublesome in her marriage that Margot wanted to discuss, but she liked the idea that she could talk to Elizabeth if there were. The date felt illicit, though also incredibly innocent, as if she were a child again.

On a trail outside of town, the edge of the wild, their eyes were fixed on the steep rocky path, not on each other, and this allowed them both to talk with more ease. Elizabeth spoke candidly about how she wasn't sure if she liked her new house, or her coworkers at the family medicine practice downtown, and as they hiked up the mountain, enjoying the illusion of the sharp peaks of Chugach Forest rising along with them, Margot spoke of the loneliness she'd been feeling now that the adrenaline of the move had worn off, and her feelings of ineptitude as she treated children at the hospital who had conditions she'd never heard of. By the end of the hike, their muscles warm and loose, they were speaking more comfortably and turning to look at each other for longer periods of time when the path was clear of roots and rocks. Though Margot was still not sure how to interpret all of Elizabeth's comments and pauses, she was more certain that she liked her, and that Elizabeth liked Margot in return.

Margot became pregnant that spring, and two months later, so did Elizabeth. Margot and Nick conceived after their second try—but Elizabeth and Patrick had been trying for eight months. Elizabeth had started to look into preliminary fertility treatments; her initial consult was scheduled for the day after her test was positive. When their friends from residency and med school announced pregnancies or

births via Facebook or a mass BCC email—there seemed to be another one every week, Claire among them, now that they were all out of residency and quickly approaching their late thirties—Elizabeth and Margot would speak abstractly about wanting to start trying sooner than later. But neither had confessed that they had, in fact, been trying already.

Once Margot started to show, she and Elizabeth went shopping together at the 5th Avenue Mall, the only shopping center with Motherhood Maternity in all of Alaska. They split the price of a nice dress, black satin, that they could each wear to their work holiday parties. Elizabeth was three inches taller than Margot, with wider hips and shoulders, but the dress was loose enough with a string-tie waist that it fell well on both of them.

Pregnancy was harder for Elizabeth, I remembered Margot telling me. She was sick for most of each day for the first twenty weeks. She was exhausted and unable to nap in the afternoon or to calm her mind to sleep at night, so she spent the early morning hours trying to eat Cheerios in the kitchen and knitting a yellow yarn blanket on a beginner's loom. In the summer and early fall, those morning hours were the only moments of respite from the sun that never seemed to fully rise or fully set. She stayed awake to see night. Around 7:00 a.m., she'd wake to Patrick's hand on her shoulder, having fallen asleep for what felt like just an instant.

The only thing that made Elizabeth feel better was walking. By late fall, into winter, when there were suddenly only a few hours of dim daylight, Margot often walked to Elizabeth's house and they walked from there to the pond. Since they'd been pregnant neither Margot nor Elizabeth wanted to walk on the steep valley trails outside of town as they used to. Now they preferred the pond, with its paved walkway, where they could still see the mountains and smell the salt

water and they would never be more than a twenty-minute walk from either of their homes or the hospital. Elizabeth brought a sleeve of sal-tines in case her stomach started to sour. The walking and the cold and the conversation made Elizabeth forget, for a little while, the nausea and how many days remained until her next ultrasound.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have a baby now,” Elizabeth said more than once. “Maybe I shouldn’t have a baby at all. This may be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

Margot was never quite sure what to say when Elizabeth spoke this way, so she said little, but she sometimes shared some of her anxieties about her own pregnancy, and exaggerated, just slightly, any distance she felt between herself and Nick and her fears of him losing some love for her after the baby was born.

In those months they were both pregnant, Elizabeth often spoke about her past with Patrick as they walked around the pond, as if searching in her own narrative for an answer to a question she couldn’t quite pose. Elizabeth and Patrick had seemed good together, to Margot—or not bad, at least. Patrick didn’t cut Elizabeth off when she spoke. Elizabeth corrected or clarified Patrick’s stories in a way that never felt like a challenge. They filled each other’s wineglasses before they filled their own. Margot listened for evidence of unseen rifts, but Elizabeth’s stories never revealed anything the least bit damning about either Patrick or their marriage.

Even so, when Margot called me that day and asked, “Do you remember my friend Elizabeth?” I immediately wondered if she was going to tell me that Patrick had left Elizabeth and the baby and he was not the decent man she thought he was. But if that was why Margot had called me—and it was not—I thought her voice would be different. Less harried, more saddened, heavy with concern for another but not for herself.