

OKAY

*OK?* I text my sister Cal.

*OK.* She texts back to confirm she's all right. We both know she's lying.

But it's easier to pretend she isn't. Cal hasn't been fully okay since she peed on the pregnancy test I bought for her a couple Thursdays ago. After knocking and waiting around a bit outside for an hour, I decided to go in. Thankfully Cal had already pulled her pants up by that point and she was sitting against the side of the tub holding the test. My heart beat faster as I walked toward her. I saw the little red plus sign and dread's heavy fist wedged itself between the walls of my sort-of-full stomach.

Black mascara trails grew on Cal's face, and her gray eyes stared at the test. I didn't know what else to do on that afternoon so I plopped down on the bathroom floor beside my sister, put my skinny arms around her, and let her cry onto my shoulder. The place smelled like piss but I didn't care. Cal was pregnant. My heart pounded out the words Cal's pregnant, Cal's pregnant, Cal's pregnant over and over again.

Dread's fist tightened in my gut. Its fingers got a little colder. We stayed like that for a while, until Pop came home from work with a cheesy, extra large pizza for dinner. He called it a treat for his magnificent girls and Cal plastered on one of her smiles that had a thousand pounds of sadness slipped beneath its surface. I almost felt like crying then, but I swallowed the tears with mouthfuls of greasy pizza. Cal's not okay, and I know it too. But we hold the lie above our heads like a banner in some kid's parade. We've got to keep the banner up high too, for Pop's sake.

*OK?* I text my sister Cal.

*OK.* She texts back to confirm she's all right.

When we were kids Cal always wanted to play house. She was the Mom and I was the sweet, thumb-sucking kid. We used to play near an abandoned house on the outskirts of town near our run down apartment building. Cal would pedal on her bicycle like crazy to get there and I sat on the handlebars, hanging on for dear life. The house was ancient and a miniature forest sprouted from the eavestroughs. Birds used it as their toilet and spiders made their nests in the crevices of the crumbling walls. But we didn't care. Cal and I loved every inch of it, and we would play for hours, or at least until we got hungry for dinner.

Now Cal wants nothing more than to get rid of her real-live baby growing inside her. But I'm trying to persuade her not to do it. I don't know why, it's not my baby, but I guess I sort of like the idea of being an aunt. I always thought it would come later though, maybe when Cal was thirty something with a nerdy but nice husband, a dog, and a house with a white picket fence. Her life would be like those movies with warm and happy endings that make you wish you could escape into them forever. Last night when Pop was dozing on the stained couch that came from the thrift store, I made Cal swear she wouldn't get rid of it without me there at least. I wanted to make her promise not to get rid of it at all, but I know my sister. She can't stand being told what to do. It's how this whole mess started in the first place.

*OK?*

*OK. Sort of.*

Cal's in trouble and without even thinking, I'm sprinting to catch the next bus outside the arena on William Street. I've got to get to the big hospital on Church Road. I've got to make sure Cal doesn't do anything stupid.

I'm running and running, and then I practically leap onto the bus before its doors shut with a familiar hiss. I use the last couple dollars in my pockets to get my precious ticket and then I find a seat near the back where nobody will try to talk at me.

The whole crappy mess started out as a tiny, supposed-to-be-harmless, unbearable lie. Cal was going out one night because she said she needed to buy tampons and then she was going over to a friend's house. But I knew better. I'd seen Cal with some older boy in the hallways, and I knew she was crazy about him and he could care less about her. She would've done anything to get him to love her, anything at all, she said. That's when I knew the love was turning dangerous, and that's when I knew Cal was going down the tubes. Cal used to be funny and smart, and didn't care about lipstick or if the popular girls thought of her. But after she met the boy, I saw my sister morph into a girl who sort of looked like my Cal, and sort of talked like my Cal, but didn't act like her at all. The new Cal was unsure of herself, and desperately wanted other people to like her; so much so that she stopped caring if I liked her.

I knew she was going to the boy's house that night but I wanted to protect her from heartbreak, and problems, and this. I wanted to save her one last time, like when she accidentally burned the macaroni and cheese for dinner and I just scraped off the burnt bit, or when I helped her study for her first science exam when she was in grade nine. I thought if I saved Cal again, she would come back to me and we'd be Cal and Sam again. She'd wipe the lipstick off, declare she could see the boy another time, and insist we watch reruns of Friends like we always used to on Friday nights. I was wrong.

The bus comes to a halt outside the hospital and I barrel down the steps before the driver wishes me a good day. My legs are moving as fast as the thoughts about Cal and the boy who left her when she needed him most.

I begged her not to go but she didn't listen. She shouted that I was telling her what to do, and then she stormed out of the apartment. We didn't talk about that fight and we still haven't brought it up in words between our lips. But I know Cal can sense like I do, hanging between us every time our eyes meet. And that was when I decided to text Cal.

*OK?*

*OK. Not really.*

I dash to the hospital doors, hoping I can save Cal and the kid inside her. "Can I help you with something?" a pretty-looking blonde lady asks behind me at the front desk. "I'm looking for Cal...I mean, Caroline Manning. I'm her sister, Samantha" I say and the lady starts searching through papers in a large binder, but quickly shakes her head. "But she must be here! Please, I don't know if someone forgot to..." I start to say, but then it dawns on me. If Cal felt like hell's garbage and fiery piss was raining down onto her head there was one place she would go.

I sprint out of the busy hospital and run like I've never run before. My tired feet carry me past hospitals and hedges, gigantic city blocks and strutting pigeons. Finally I get there. The abandoned house and neglected yard to match it blur into focus.

"Sam, is that you?" a weak voice asks.

Cal's sitting in the backyard with colourless tears falling down her face, and her thin jacket is pulled tighter around her rail-thin body. Her nail polish is chipped, her hair is greasy, and her stomach still looks sort of fat. For a beautiful moment I dare to hope. I walk over. I sit down. And wait.

"It was a girl, Sam. A lovely little girl," Cal chokes out. I wrap my skinny arms around my sister and she rests her head on my bony shoulder. Cal knows I wanted the baby to stay, she knows I liked it a lot-maybe even loved it. I know she felt trapped, scared, and desperate for her life to be all right again. But we say none of these things to each other as we sit among dead leaves, a run-down house, and a lonely chair.

"I'm sorry Sam. I'm so sorry," Cal whispers. She wipes her nose with the back of her hand, and I offer her an old Kleenex.

"It's okay, Cal. It's okay," I promise and we both know I'm telling the truth. I'm promising Cal everything is going to be okay because okay doesn't mean perfect, or beautiful, or amazing. It means we'll live to see another day.